

アクセル・ワールド4

蒼空への飛翔

日常で〈ブレイン・バースト〉を巧みに使いこなし、中学内格差の頂点に君臨する謎の新生・能美征二。ハルユキは、能美の狡猾な策略によって自身の〈翼〉を奪われ、完全敗北を喫した。

——しかし、ハルユキは、再び立ち上がる。

〈もう下を向いて歩かない〉と心に決めたハルユキは、親友・タクムと共に〈ダスク・テイカー〉へ反撃を開始する。キーとなるのは、〈心意システム〉、〈スカーレット・レイン〉、そして〈メイド服少女〉!?

最強のカタルシスを以てしておくる、次世代青春エンタテイメント!



04

蒼空への飛翔

川原 礫

イラスト/HIMA

accel World 04

電撃文庫

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れき まんが アクセル世界 ② れき



かわはら れき  
川原 礫

コタツから出たくないけど自宅では何も書けないというジレンマに苦しんでいます。ファミレスにコタツがあればいいのになあ……。あとテレビも。あとPS3も。

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド1 —黒雪姫の帰還—

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ソードアート・オンライン1 —インクラッド—

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ソードアート・オンライン3 —フェアリーダンス—

イラスト:HIMA

10月3日生まれ。挿絵は今シリーズが初のイラストレーター。「電撃萌王」小冊子への寄稿を見た文庫編集者が、今回の挿絵依頼をオファーしたことがきっかけ。本業仕事の合間を縫って、ブログやSNSサイトなどでイラストを発表している。

カバー/旭印刷



アクセル・ワールド 04  
蒼空への飛翔

川原 礫  
イラスト/HIMA  
デザイン/ピィピィ



……僕も、です」



「たった一週間が、これほど長く感じるのは初めてだ……。  
早く東京に帰つて、キミに会いたいよ」

## 黒雪姫

《黒の王》  
ブラック・ロータスを操る  
梅郷中学副生徒会長



「ひょろひょろら、

カレユキおにーちゃん。

相変わらず丸いね！

それとハカセもおひさ。

相変わらず暗いねー」

コウ ツキ ユ ニ コ  
**上月由仁子**

《純色の七王》の一人、  
赤の王《スカーレット・レイン》

「ついでに、おねえさん、ミルバー・クロウ」

# ブラッド・レパード

ケーキ屋に勤める  
謎のメイド店員さん

「え……」

「ハル。……どうすれば、解つてくれる？」

チユリ

ハルユキの  
幼馴染

ハルユキ

スクールカースト  
中学内格差  
最底辺の少年



「それなりに準備はしてきたみたいですね。  
これなら、ちよつとは楽しめるか……な？」



## ダスク・テイカー

ノウミセイジ  
能美征二が操る  
デュエルアバター

「うん」

## シアン・パイル

タクムが操る  
デュエルアバター



「……行くっ、タク」

## シルバー・クロウ

ハルユキが操る  
デュエルアバター

## ライム・ベル

チュリが操る  
デュエルアバター



「……」

# KUROYUKIHIME is the...

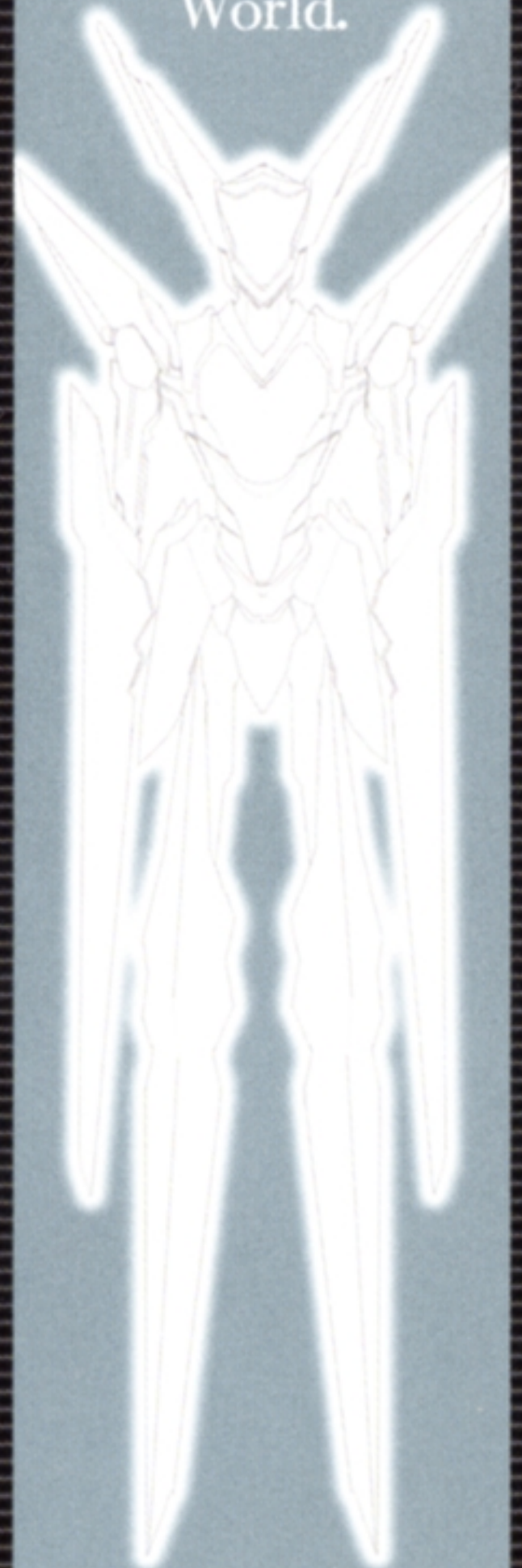
"Black Swallowtail  
Butterfly"  
in the  
Local Area  
Network.



"KUROYUKIHIME"  
in the  
Real World.



"Black Lotus"  
in the  
Accelerated  
World.





**ACCEL WORLD**  **04**  
*Flight Towards the Blue Sky*

*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".
- 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".
- 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".
- Takumu = Mayuzumi Takumu . An acquaintance of Haruyuki and Chiyuri since childhood. Skilled in Kendo. His duel avatar is "Cyan Pile".
- Noumi Seiji = A first-year student who newly entered Umesato Middle School. His background is a mystery, but he uses Brain Burst even in his school life, standing at the top of the Middle school caste. His duel avatar is "Dusk Taker".

- 
- Neuro Linker = A mobile terminal that establishes a wireless quantum connection to the brain, supporting the five senses, such as sight and hearing.
  - School's Local Net = A local area network constructed within Umesato Middle School. Used for taking attendance and lessons, it became a need for students of Umesato Middle School to connect to it.
  - Global Connect = The act of connecting to the Global Net. As connecting to the Global Net is prohibited within Umesato Middle School, the School's Local Net is provided as a replacement.
  - 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. Each of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» are tasked as 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.
  - Incarnate System = A technique that interferes with the Image Control System in the Brain Burst program, bringing about a phenomenon that exceeds the game's limit. Also called Writing Over (Overwrite).

# Chapter 1

“Wh...y?”

Haruyuki heard the cracked and crushed sound from his own throat.

“Why.....Chiyu?”

The cold wind of the «Purgatory» stage blew away the hollow question, and scattered it to the yellow sky above. But, there was no answer. Standing still on top of the school building’s roof, the bright green avatar «Lime Bell»—Kurashima Chiyuri hid her face in order to avoid Haruyuki’s gaze, and sat down with a scraping noise while grasping the roof railing with her right hand.

Instead, what responded to his question was a very low, warped laughter.

“Fu.....fu, fu.”

On the ground a little ways away, the lens-like mask of the dusk-colored avatar, which had thrown down its limbs and was lying on its back, was shaking bit by bit.

“Fufu...fu, amazing...how amazing...This is the «healing ability»...truly a miraculous power...fufu, hahaha...”

As he laughed quietly, the avatar’s severe gashes from only dozens of seconds before were healed as if they had never been, and his whole body glowed a glossy dark purple. The recovery phenomenon didn’t stop

at just the body, but even restored his right arm's flamethrower which should have been destroyed.

Haruyuki—«Silver Crow», and standing behind him, Takumu—«Cyan Pile», at the end of a hard-fought battle on the field of Umesato Middle School, had managed to crush the dusk avatar «Dusk Taker». Both of his arms had been blow off in an aerial battle with Haruyuki and had been pierced to the ground by Takumu's special technique, and all that was left was to go make his HP gauge run out completely with a single ordinary attack.

However, the one who interrupted that was Lime Bell, suddenly emerging from on top of the roof.

As soon as he was wrapped in a shower of light emitted from her right arm just now, Dusk Taker's HP had radically recovered, and even his right side was brilliantly glowing now.

"Why...Why, Chiyu!!"

Haruyuki looked up at the school building again, and screamed out as if tearing his throat.

Dusk Taker was the enemy. The first year student who controlled that avatar, Noumi Seiji didn't appear on the matching list even though he possessed «Brain Burst», and licentiously used his acceleration ability in kendo matches and real tests.

Not stopping there, he even cornered Haruyuki to just before the point of school expulsion by setting a trap, and had taken away Silver Crow's

wings in a match using his special technique «Demonic Commandeer». After somehow cheering up his heart that had been completely broken then and getting a new power at the end of a long struggle, Haruyuki had managed to grab victory despite becoming torn up in the process.

Now pushed past the edge of confusion, Haruyuki could do nothing but widen his eyes beneath his silver face and stare at Lime Bell.

Chiyuri didn't try to say anything, and just kept clenching the roof fence and hiding her face beneath the brim of her huge hat.

As soon as he saw her delicate shoulders trembling intensely as if enduring something—

—Why? It's obvious.

—Noumi. Noumi Seiji probably contacted Chiyuri during today's lunch break, and demanded that she obey him. Like he did with Haruyuki, he took advantage of some weakness and threatened her. That was the only possibility.

As Haruyuki's gaze turned back, while creakily laughing even further as he remained lying down, Dusk Taker opened up the black wings on his back fully.

The wings that seemed to cut through darkness struck the air slowly, and the slender avatar gradually stood up as if pulled by an invisible thread.

"Fufufu...ku, kukukuku..."

The volume of his gloating voice increased very fast. Inside his visor which had similar luster to the compound eyes of an insect, two reddish-purple eyes blinked intensely.

"Kuku, ha, hahaha. «Flying ability». And «healing ability». These two incredibly rare powers...are now both mine..."

Now completely standing up, the avatar stopped and simply floated about thirty centimeters above the ground. Energetically opening up his regenerated arms, Dusk Taker pointed his ten claw-like fingers towards the sky. A dusky-dark aura rushed out like mucus from those hands.

"Aah...What a wonderful feeling! This pleasant feeling of robbing! This almighty feeling of stealing and trampling on someone's dreams, their hopes, their potential...it's just so irresistible...!!"

That ugly joy coming from the voice of a young boy spread across the field as a physical pressure, and shook Haruyuki's badly-bruised avatar.

But, without being conscious of that, Haruyuki squeezed out a voice covered in the noise of various feelings from beneath his helmet.

".....Y, ou."

He took a single step toward the dusk-colored avatar that was floating at a slightly high place.

"Noumi...what did you do? What did you do to Chiyu?"

Hearing that, Dusk Taker slowly moved his face and looked down at Haruyuki.

Within that half-gross spherical surface, his two thin eyes slowly blinked once, and—

He formed a smile filled with the most venomous ridicule in silence.

Haruyuki's sight was suddenly dyed in the color of blood. All his confused feelings converged onto a single needle-like point. That is, onto overwhelming hatred for Noumi Seiji.

"Nou...mi..."

While muttering that, Haruyuki unconsciously gathered his remaining right hand's fingers into the shape of a sword. A high resonance 'IIIIIIIN' sound came out, and silver light flickered on his fingertips.

As if the swirling hatred had become noise and was the formation of his «silver sword» image, the light was quite unstable. Without caring about that, Haruyuki greatly brandished his right arm and tried to slice it towards Dusk Taker.

But, an instant earlier.

"U...aaaaa!!"

Along a cry that seemed to vomit blood, there was a blue shadow which passed by Haruyuki from the right.

It was Cyan Pile. His armor burned from the previous battle and still emitting smoke, the heavy weight-class avatar rushed forward while unleashing a rumbling sound over the ground.

"You made Chii-chan...cryyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

Takumu, who never lost his calm at any kind of time and should have been the one who held back Haruyuki's rampage, tried to recklessly jump at Noumi while yelling like a little kid.

Even in the face of the raging heavy tank-like charge, Dusk Taker didn't try to move away even a little.

He slowly raised his slender right hand and fully opened out his five sharp fingers. At the same time, he spat out a short sentence.

"Disappear already."

*\*BYUAAA!!\** Along with a different vibrating sound, his right hand was wrapped in a glistening purple wave of nothingness. It soon changed shape, and claws, no, sickles extended out longer and longer from the tip of all his fingers.

The five sickles casually wrapped around Cyan Pile's huge body from the front as he charged at him. The points of the curving long claws touched both sides of Cyan Pile's neck, his right side, his left shoulder and his left side, and then—

Immediately after, those claws closed together without any resistance.



".....!!"

Before the eyes of the silently gasping Haruyuki, the upper body of the blue heavy weight-class avatar was split into several parts.

His head and arms flew through the air while releasing a terrifying amount of sparks from their cut sections, and rolled onto the ground after brushing against Dusk Taker's body. Finally, his still charging lower body fell down with a grave sound.

Following a slight time lag, as if saying that **the system recognized the damage only after the phenomenon of being cutting apart**, Cyan Pile's HP gauge suddenly began to decrease. Changing to yellow as it reduced to half and dying red when it reached the remaining 20 percent, it continued decreasing in width, and then—

Reached zero.

The wreckage of the cut-apart avatar scattered into pieces of bluish-white polygons and disappeared. Before Haruyuki's eyes, a system message signifying that Dusk Taker had destroyed Cyan Pile appeared.

".....Ku...ku, ku, fu, ha."

Mincing laughter dripped out from the dusk-colored avatar's mouth.

"The ones known as loser...are always so comical. Without even trying to admit they were defeated, they struggle in an unseemly manner and in the end have even the last of their pride taken away. Though I thought Mayuzumi-senpai was more the intelligent-type, he completely

disappointed me. Well, after all, even with a brain, he has that muscular macho avatar, kukuku, fufu, hahahahaha!!”

Radiating a pronounced dark aura from both his arms, Dusk Taker laughed hysterically.

While being bathed in that voice, Haruyuki stared at the spot where Takumu had vanished several seconds ago, and then looked at Chiyuri, who was still crouching small on the roof of the school.

Standing stock-still, the sword of silver light on his right hand flickered little by little and then vanished.

He hadn't lost his fighting spirit. It was the opposite. Like a blazing flame, a brutal destructive urge coursed through the inside of his avatar, and was disturbing Haruyuki's mental concentration.

Hate. He wanted to destroy. He wanted to smash up the duel avatar called Dusk Taker—no, the mind of Noumi Seiji that was lodged inside it, to mince it apart, to tear it into shreds and trample over it.

The world already wasn't a virtual game field anymore, nor a battle where numerical points of damage were exchanged back and forth.

Until now, in every game he had played including «Brain Burst», Haruyuki, while feeling frustration towards enemies who defeated him, had felt no hatred towards the real-life players who controlled those avatars.

But, right now was different. The temperature of the dark hatred that flowed through the blood vessels of his entire body easily exceeded that of frustration.

—***Then, destroy.***

Suddenly, someone whispered from right behind him.

—***Destroy, eat. Devour his flesh, drain his blood, steal everything from him.***

It was a familiar voice. Haruyuki had definitely heard that warped low voice that was mixed with a metallic overtone at some point, somewhere.

But, before he could trace the memory, an intense cold feeling like a needle of ice thrusting into him formed in the center of his back. It pierced deeply between his shoulder blades, penetrated all the way to Haruyuki's heart, and from there released a liquid metal-like chill through his entire body.

The chilling hunger fused together with his burning hate, and at that instant—

His vision squeezed and contracted to the center.

The gold-green ground of the Purgatory field, the school building with an organism-like form, Lime Bell hanging her head on the roof, it all disappeared into the swaying darkness. The only thing he saw was the still high-pitched laughing Dusk Taker.

“Nou.....mi.”

A moan with the same metallic effect as the voice he had heard before leaked out from Haruyuki’s throat.

“Noumi...You...you.....”

All of his raging feelings flowed into the tip of his remaining right hand as if pulled there.

In order to activate the «Incarnate System»—the skill which intervened in the image control system of the Brain Burst program and caused a phenomenon that exceeded the limits of the game, absurdly deep concentration was needed. In truth, the «sword of light» that was given form due to Haruyuki’s mind had vanished the instant he was seized with hatred towards Noumi.

In spite of that.

Suddenly, a very long sword extended out from Silver Crow’s right hand along with a grave ‘ZUAAA!’ vibrating sound.

However, its color wasn’t the clear white of earlier.

As if drawing in and drowning out all light, a jet-black sword. It had a far deeper color of hungry darkness than the dark purple needles that Noumi had formed.

".....Hmm?"

Noticing Silver Crow's unusual phenomenon, Dusk Taker stopped laughing and gave a short mutter.

"Oya...Do you still intend to do something, Arita-senpai? Do you intend to follow your companion's lead and happily expose the same unsightly behavior?"

Haruyuki had no mental room to respond to that mocking. He felt his thoughts and feelings being sucked into his right hand's sword. Besides that, the only thing that existed in him was the extreme impulse that only wanted to destroy the enemy in front of him into minced pieces.

**—That's right. Eat. Devour.**

The brutal voice whispered in the center of his head.

As if urged on by that, he took a step forward with his right foot.

Immediately after, he kicked off the ground savagely.

"U...oaaaaa!!"

While howling, he raised the dark sword in his right hand high above his head. He placed the speed of his charge, the entire weight of his avatar, and all of his raging hatred into the sword edge, and aimed to cut down the face of the floating Dusk Taker.

It should have been impossible for the kendo player Noumi to not avoid the direct slash from Haruyuki who had no plan. But, the purple avatar didn't try to move even a little from where he was, and like he did to Cyan Pile, tried to catch the black blade with only his opened right hand.

The blade created by Haruyuki and the five sickles created by Noumi touched in midair.

In the previous battle, as soon as their two mentally-formed attacks touch, they had violently repelled and conflicted with each other.

But this time, the exact reverse phenomenon occurred. That is, the instant the jet-black blade and the dark-purplish sickles clashed, the darkness swirled onto a single focused point and tried to suck each other in.

"Muu....."

Dusk Taker let a small voice leak out.

"An attack of the same attribute...!? What's going on...?"

His eyes narrowed and seemed to fixedly observing the phenomenon. Facing him, Haruyuki no longer thought of anything, and just kept swinging forward his right hand and putting all his power into it.



"U...gu, ooh..."

He bared his teeth beneath his mask and shouted in a twisted voice.

"Disappear...disappear, Noumi! Disappear...from my siiiiiiiiight!!"

*\*BYUAAA!!\** His right hand's sword shook, and the swirling darkness increased in force at the contact point. The sickles extending from Noumi's fingers effortlessly crumbled from their tips and were swallowed in.

"Tch..."

Clicking his tongue, Noumi produced purple sickles on his left hand as well, and piled it on top of his right hand's sickles to grasp Haruyuki's sword. The darkness that looked like a small black hole swirled even more violently, and fragments of glimmering metal and other things were sucked in from the ground, leaving a momentary flash before disappearing.

"So insolent...!!"

Dusk Taker shouted and increased the force of the purple wave of energy from both his hands.

"Gu...ooooh...!!"

A beast-like roar also gushed out from Haruyuki's throat.

Perhaps as a result of the abnormal gravity being calculated in, even the thick low-hanging clouds slowly turned and were being pulled in like a funnel towards the ground. The school building's windows broke one



after another while scattering sharp light, and lightning-like sparks followed and radial cracks ran through the ground.

And then, several things occurred at the same time.

“Stop it...stop it already——!!”

Chiyuri’s scream mixed with crying resounded loudly through the stage.

“Disa...ppeeeeeeeeeear——!!”

Haruyuki’s yell pressed down and roared over it.

And the remaining time that was indicated in the upper part of his vision reached zero.

The characters of ‘TIME UP!!’ burst out in front of him and signaled the end of the duel.

When the accelerated state was released through the result screen of Battle Royal mode and he passed through rings of radial light and returned to the real world, let alone what Haruyuki had been doing before the start of the duel—he couldn’t immediately remember even where he was or what time it was now.

The sports-use track that was paved with auburn high-resistance material spread out straight in front of him. Many jersey-wearing male students were running in front of him.

And Haruyuki himself was also kicking off the ground noisily with both legs. His consciousness couldn't link up with the movements of his intolerably sluggish physical body, and he nearly fell down before waving both his hands and holding himself up somehow. The students who sat on the inner part of the track and the male students running parallel to Haruyuki's left suddenly laughed.

—Speaking of which, I'm in the middle of the measurement of the three thousand meter run. Right now it's Tuesday, fifth period...in the middle of phys-ed class...

After thinking that in dumb surprise, Haruyuki suddenly became aware of a feeling blowing out like magma from the bottom of his belly.

—Just what on earth am I doing?

—The phys-ed lesson? The long-distance running? Those are inconsequential! I have to...crush Noumi Seiji at all costs!!

"Uuu...!"

He let out a low, unrestrained growl. After clenching his teeth and staring at the goal line over there, Haruyuki put all his fury into his arms and legs. The pace of his heavy resounding footsteps increased. He naturally leaned his body forward.

Next to the measurement time shown in his lower sight, a red R characters blinked. It indicated that his pace had improved from his personal record. But without being conscious of that, Haruyuki ran the

remaining ninety meters at full power. He couldn't overtake the students who were ahead of him, but Haruyuki's last spurt as he clearly shortened the distance made a light stir among the boys of the class.

But Haruyuki didn't care at all about those voices, nor his new personal time which flashed in front of him as soon as he stepped over the goal line. Rather, he didn't even stop his feet and tried to run like that straight towards the entrance.

"Hey, where you going, Arita? The toilet?"

He heard the carefree voice of the phys-ed teacher and the laughter of the other students, but ignored them.

Of course, he wasn't aiming for the toilet. He was going to run up to the third floor of the school building and launch an attack on Noumi Seiji's classroom.

He would directly squeeze Noumi's real body, forcibly direct connect with him, and this time, make him completely submit. If that was impossible, he would instead yank of his Neuro Linker from his neck, trample over it, and destroy its core chip.

Was it necessary to give up on such brutality? Against an enemy that went as far as to use foul means to threaten Chiyuri and make her obey his will?

Every time his intense violent impulse welled up, a point on his back throbbed. No, it seemed like the impulse was being infinitely produced from there.

"Just wait...!"

Shouting as if spitting out, he tried to kick off the ground even more intensely—at that moment.

\*GASHI\* A strong hand held back Haruyuki's shoulder from behind.

"Stop it, Haru!"

At the same time as a stifled voice resounded in his ear, Haruyuki reflexively put on the brakes. Unable to stop coolly like his duel avatar, he nearly pitched forward and fell, until his arm was grasped and he righted himself.

While deeply hanging his head in that position, Haruyuki squeezed out a hoarse voice.

"...Taku, why are you stopping me!?"

Takumu—Mayuzumi Takumu answered back while strongly holding Haruyuki's left arm with his muscular right arm.

"If Haru causes an incident of violence here and gets suspended from school, things will just become even harder for Chii-chan!"

"...She's already having plenty of a hard time! Noumi...he threatened Chiyu and told her to obey what he said by force! I can't forgive that!"

For the first time, Haruyuki turned around here and saw Takumu's face.

He noticed that Takumu's always refreshing eyes were twisted by strong anguish on the other side of his sports-type glasses, and he held his breath.

That's right—It wasn't that Takumu couldn't feel anything. Inside his heart, he must have been more concerned about Chiyuri and more enraged at Noumi's actions than Haruyuki.

But his childhood friend was worried about Haruyuki at the same time. Even though Haruyuki himself was simply filled with rage and didn't try to think of Takumu at all.

His back still throbbed, but at the moment he made that storm-like violent drive go away. After taking a big breath of air and slowly letting it out from his trembling throat, Haruyuki undid the tension in his shoulders and spoke with a sigh.

".....Even though a short while ago you also jumped at Noumi before I did."

Then, Takumu revealed a brief bitter smile.

"Indeed. How many years has it been since I acted like that...?"

The day Noumi stole Haruyuki's wings, cruel things had been said between himself and Taku after they quarreled at his home, but Haruyuki felt that it all had suddenly melted away and disappeared. The two of them kept standing in a corner of the school grounds like that, but

eventually, it seemed that the time measurement for all the students at the track behind them had ended, and the teacher clapped his two hands together and called for everyone to gather.

"...Let's go back, Haru."

After slowly nodding at Takumu's words, Haruyuki added something in a low voice.

"Please go talk to Chiyu afterwards. Even if she was told something by Noumi, it isn't necessary in the slightest for her to obey that guy."

"Yeah, I know. I...no, we will protect Chii-chan."

Looking into each other's eyes for a moment, the two of them turned back.

Haruyuki stared at the third-floor section of the school building one last time, and muttered in the depths of his mind.

—Noumi, you did something you absolutely never should have done. From this moment on, my battle with you will be an endless death match. I'll see through the method you use to block yourself from accelerated duels no matter what, and keep fighting relentlessly until one of our Burst Points reaches zero.

Clenching his teeth hard, Haruyuki began to walk towards the gathering place alongside Takumu.

However, only ten minutes later.

The situation once again advanced in a direction that betrayed Haruyuki's expectations.

As soon as fifth-period ended, Haruyuki and Takumu dashed over to the gymnasium that was on the other side of the school building. They found Chiyuri just as she was coming out from a corridor, and they beckoned her from the shadow of a pillar.

Wearing a t-shirt and shorts, Chiyuri's face froze as soon as she saw the two of them. That was only natural, as she had just dived into the field of her first actual battle just several minutes ago, used «recovery» on Haruyuki and Takumu's enemy Dusk Taker, and healed him. As a result, Cyan Pile (Takumu) had lost from losing his entire HP gauge. Silver Crow (Haruyuki) had also lost due to the Time Up, and they both had points taken away by Noumi.

However, they put 'We didn't come to blame you for that' into their expression as much as they could, and Haruyuki continued waving his arm while giving an awkward smile. Chiyuri cast her eyes down and seemed to avoid their gaze, but eventually she approached Haruyuki and Takumu after saying something to her classmates in the locker room.

In spite of the fact that he had just been strenuously exercising, when Haruyuki saw Chiyuri's pale cheeks, intense rage towards Noumi welled up in his chest again. After Takumu beside him also clenched his fists tightly for an instant, Takumu took a big breath and opened his mouth.

"...Chii-chan. We already know why you did such a thing. That's why, we've come to tell you that it isn't necessary to obey him."

"Th...That's right."

Haruyuki energetically added his own words as well.

"He should also fear Chiyu's power now. With an ability that can heal not only HP, but even broken armor as well, we can fight against him plenty...no, we can beat him!"

As she listened to that, Chiyuri's eyebrows tightened for a moment. An action that showed she was considering something and hesitating.

Several seconds later—

"That's not it."

Those were the first words to quietly come out from Chiyuri's mouth.

"Eh...th-that's not it...?"

When Haruyuki dumbfoundedly repeated her words, Chiyuri's expression suddenly changed and her eyes released a strong light, and she said it again after looking from Haruyuki to Takumu in turn.

"That's not it. I'm not being forced to obey Noumi."

"Chii-chan...w-what...?"



This time it seemed that Takumu was also surprised and tried to take a step forward while blinking rapidly. Backing away as if to avoid him, Chiyuri quietly, but decisively answered.

"I asked Noumi. 'Make me your comrade. I'll become your exclusive healer, so supply me with points without fail.' It's not a big deal, since I haven't joined you and Haru's legion yet."

Taking yet another step away from the two of them as they stood stock-still in shock, Chiyuri continued speaking.

"**We** and «Nega Nebulas» will act without interfering with each other from now on. Since each side knows each other's real identities. Of course, the agreement between Noumi and Haru is a different story."

Even in the midst of his blank-filled mind that couldn't grasp the situation, Haruyuki could understand what the «agreement» that Chiyuri spoke of was. In other words, that was about how, if Haruyuki continued to pay ten burst points every week for two years to Noumi, he would get back his «flight ability».

They didn't intend to fight from now on. But, that wasn't related to Noumi extorting points from Haruyuki. That was what Chiyuri was saying.

That was also a shock, but before that, but the fact that Chiyuri referred to Noumi and herself as «we» had itself too enormous of an impact on Haruyuki. Among all the years until now, whenever Chiyuri said «we», only she, Haruyuki and Takumu were included in that.

Showing a profile of evading the eyes from the frozen two of them, Chiyuri then simply gave a short "See you later, then".

And then she quickly turned around and ran towards the locker room.

After that, only the sweet milk-like smell that they were so familiar with was left behind.

## Chapter 2

Something terrible had happened at school, and he returned home while gazing down with the feeling of being knocked down.

Such an experience was an everyday thing for Haruyuki. During the time he had been severely bullied by classmates last year, he had gone home while counting the tiles on the sidewalk beneath him almost every day.

However, for Takumu next to him—for **that** Mayuzumi Takumu, who was walking next to him and hanging his head and dragging his feet just like Haruyuki, this must have been his first time experiencing this in his life.

After silently walking along the path to their apartment building from Umesato Middle School alongside Takumu, who had skipped out on kendo club practice on the pretense of being sick, Haruyuki spoke in a whisper when they passed through the apartment's front gates.

"Come inside my place."

".....Sure."

He got on the elevator with Takumu who feebly nodded and got off on the twenty-third floor. After opening the door of his empty home and entering the living room, he threw his bag onto the floor and sat down on a chair at the dining table.

Takumu sat down on the other side as well, and the two of them remained silent like that for a while.

—We sat down opposite each other like this before as well.

Dimly thinking that, Haruyuki finally recalled that that incident that occurred only twenty-four hours ago—in other words, on Monday after school.

During the recess yesterday, Haruyuki had dueled Noumi Seiji for the first time, and had the silver wings on his back taken away by his special technique.

Takumu had been puzzled by the strange state of Haruyuki and Chiyuri, who had been present there, and had visited Haruyuki after club activities had ended and sat down in the exact same place. That time, Haruyuki had showered Takumu with cruel words while feeling self-torturous, and had been severely hit. Afterwards, he had gone out to Shinjuku to challenge anyone to an accelerated duel in despair, had had his lethargic attitude scolded by the familiar bike-user «Ash Roller», and had been forcibly brought by him to the Old Tokyo Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

There, he had been introduced to Ash Roller's Parent and former member of Nega Nebulas, «Sky Raker». She had taught Haruyuki about the existence of the ultimate power of Burst Linkers, the «Incarnate System», and had given him super Spartan-type intensive training to make him learn it.

Though Haruyuki had mastered the first step of the first step of Mind Power, he had actually needed one week in that world that was accelerated by one thousand times.

That's why, in a sense, it was natural for him to feel like the current situation of facing Takumu was such a long time since the last time.

Unconsciously raising his right hand, Haruyuki traced in his jaw where he had been hit by Noumi during yesterday's recess and then his right cheek where Takumu had hit him after school. Almost no marks were left anymore more on either of them, but he could still keenly feel the pain as it stiffened stingingly.

...No matter much I accelerate my minds and shut myself in a different world, the wounds of the flesh...in other words, real pain can't be healed.

While he thought that, Takumu, who paid attention to that action, gave a self-deprecatory smile and muttered.

"Haru. When I hit you, I said that I said that was fine with Chii-chan becoming happy no matter who her partner was, but...I take that back. I can't accept it at all. That...Chii-chan would become that Noumi Seiji's partner."

Dropping his hands on the table, Haruyuki also responded back with a hollow voice.

"Before accepting it...I can't believe it. Certainly, there are no rules in Brain Burst that say that real-world friends have to enter the same team,

but...For that Chiyu to betray us and join Noumi for the sake of getting points is..."

"Well, if you just think about earning points, it certainly is more efficient to join up with Noumi than us. Now that he's stolen Haru's wings, Dusk Taker's battle power is already at a foul play-like level...If he debuts in duels with that while paired with the «healer» Lime Bell, there would be no Burst Linkers within the middle range that could directly fight against them."

"What a calm conclusion while still being depressed, professor."

This time Haruyuki gave a wry smile, but then quickly swept it away with a sigh.

"But still, Taku...It's Chiyu we're talking about. Do you think Chiyu, who lacks any game sense and who is always useless in RPG event battles where she gets annihilated, would make a decision based on something like point efficiency?"

"T-That's...I don't think so, indeed..."

It was in a subdued tone, but Haruyuki's shock from Chiyuri declaration of parting finally eased down a little from taking with his best friend, and he stood up slowly and headed toward the kitchen.

He took out a box of frozen pizza from the large freezer and simply threw it into the microwave. He also took out a bottle of oolong tea and prepared two glasses. After the pizza finished thawing and heating in

only a few dozen seconds, he carried it all to the table and properly placed them down.

"...Thanks."

After pouring tea into Takumu's glass as he muttered that, Haruyuki opened the box and picked out a piece of sea-food pizza. Just as he pulled at the thin strands of cheese, he suddenly heard a voice in the back of his ear as he tried to take a bite.

'Aah, you're eating something like that again!'

'No other choice, I'll have to get Mama to make you something.'

But, of course, that was neither a real voice nor a PCM<sup>[1]</sup> file played by his Neuro Linker. Beginning to recall the taste of the lasagna that Chiyuri had brought over just a few days ago, Haruyuki emphatically bit at the mass-produced-type pizza in over to overwrite that taste.

Casting his eyes down, he chewed the strangely salty pizza, and heard a sniffing sound all the while as he did so. When he quietly raised only his gaze, he saw Takumu rubbing vigorously beneath his glasses while eating with the same downturned face as him.

Suddenly, a different pain than that until now pierced his chest throbbingly.

—Taku, he's always so calm and so clever that I'm no match for him...But, by no means is he someone who can stay strong in the face of all adversity.

—When I lost my wings and became careless, he tried to help me with all his strength. Then, it's my turn this time. It's my turn to encourage him and support his back.

Muttering that within his mind, Haruyuki closed both his eyes, and quickly made his pizza disappear with non-stop munching. He drank his entire glass of oolong tea, and returned it to the table with a bang.

"Taku!"

As he shouted that out, Takumu's shoulder's shook, and he lifted up his reddened eyes to look at him. Haruyuki looked straight at him and continued speaking.

"Taku, I believe in Chiyu! That's why, I don't believe what she said!"

"Eh...?"

"I said it before. Joining up with Noumi because she wants points? That's not like Chiyu at all. So that possibility is completely eliminated. Probably...no, definitely by at least 90%, our first guess was correct. Chiyuri was threatened by Noumi to partner with him, and was forced to give that explanation to us. You can understand and agree with that much, right?"

While tightly grasping his glasses, Takumu seemed to scrutinize the words that Haruyuki had vigorously lined up for a short while.

Eventually, he slowly responded with some calmness returned to his voice.





"Yeah...Certainly, that may be. But Haru, your explanation has a small inconsistency. You say «completely eliminate», yet you also say «90%»? In other words, the remaining 10% is that the possibility that Chii-chan voluntarily joined Noumi, right?"

"Yeah...but, for a different reason."

"Reason...? You mean there's some reason other than points that Chii-chan would become our enemy?"

After looking with upturned eyes at Takumu who tilted his head, Haruyuki spoke in a whisper while instinctively shrinking his shoulders.

"In other words, umm...because of the boss of our legion Nega Nebulas...**that person**..."

Takumu blinked several times just now as if he was caught off guard. Soon, the same kind of fear as Haruyuki was showing on his face appeared on his own face as well.

"I-I see...—A situation where Chii-chan is thinking 'No way!' to becoming master's...Kuroyukihime-senpai's (Black Lotus) subordinate..."

"Can we absolutely say that she would never do that?"

At Haruyuki's question, Takumu shook his head left and right with a complicated expression. Letting out a long continuous sigh, he then added with a groan.

“But, in that case, that’s all the most reason not to tell master about this and seek her assistance...If master found out that Chii-chan had betrayed us because of her...”

“She would take down both Dusk Taker and Lime Bell with a single stroke...”

They didn’t need to be reminded now of the severe nature of Kuroyukihime, the «Black King» that lead the legion «Nega Nebulas» and the one that controlled the Level 9 duel avatar «Black Lotus». Once she determined someone as an enemy, she would mercilessly cut them down with the swords on both her hands. It was very difficult—no, impossible to think that she wouldn’t apply that principle on only Chiyuri.

Haruyuki temporarily raised his gaze from looking down at the table with a jerk, and though he looked at Takumu’s face, he spoke as if telling himself as well.

“Senpai will return from the school trip on Saturday night, so we have four more days. We no choice but to settle things in that time.”

“Settle things, you say...how...?”

“Whether Chiyu is being threatened or is acting of her own volition, if we can defeat Noumi...if we can corner him until he loses Brain Burst, that will end everything. Right?”

After letting out a big breath at Haruyuki’s words, Takumu gave a faint smile.

"You say it so easily, Haru. Even if we expose the means that allows Noumi to not appear on the matching list, just how many times will we have to win in order to make that Dusk Taker lose all his points?"

"I wonder about that."

Muttering a little, Haruyuki spoke the continuation of all his thinking.

"Right now Noumi, who has just entered Umesato Middle School, must be consuming points at an incredible pace in order to build up his position through the ability tests and kendo matches. In particular, he uses that Physical Burst command which costs five points each time in kendo matches. Do you really think that he, a Level 5, still has that much accumulated points to spare?"

"...I see...Especially since right now he's not participating in ordinary duels either. The sources for supplying himself with points should be limited."

Takumu narrowed his eyes which had regained just a little of their sharpness behind his glasses and nodded as well. Then he suddenly looked back at Haruyuki and continued speaking quickly.

"But, Haru. In that case, it's a battle with a different time limit that has no relation to when master returns to Tokyo. Noumi, who has now obtained an exclusive «healer» in addition to «flight ability», should be debuting in duels which he has bided his time for until now. He won't be able to immediately fight that many times with the limitations of tag-matches, but even so he'll still win in almost all duels..."

"In other words, we have to sever his neck before he begins saving up points."

After exchanging a short gaze with Takumu, Haruyuki spoke decisively.

"Alright. I'll somehow investigate the means he uses to block himself from duels by myself."

"W-What are you saying? I'll also investigate with you..."

"No, there's something you have to do while I do that."

Tightly gripping both hands over the table, Haruyuki then lowered his voice a little—

"Taku, you remember the attack you directly received, right? That technique of Dusk Taker that let him scrape off and invalidate everything with his hands."

"Ah...yeah. I can't believe it even now."

As if doubting his memory, Takumu shook his head a little.

"The fact that his special technique gauge didn't decrease even though he was emitting such intense light...No, before that, leaving aside punches and kicks, he even sucked in my non-substance attack «Lightning Cyan Spike». Such an impossible degree of relative priority, just what on earth kind of ability was that...?"

"Umm...it's neither an ability prescribed by the system nor a special technique. How should I say it...I also can't explain it very well, but..."

While frowning and strenuously looking for the right words, Haruyuki tried to somehow convey the knowledge he had gotten just yesterday to Takumu.

“It’s a «super special technique» as it were, which turns the image power of Burst Linkers into an energy source. Its proper name is the «Incarnate System». Accel World’s strongest offensive power which takes form due to the power of one’s heart and will...”

It took nearly twenty minutes for him to explain without leaving anything out the gist of the Incarnate System he was taught by the Old Tokyo Tower’s recluse «Sky Raker» and how he acquired the Mind Power for the «sword of light» that he himself used.

While talking, Haruyuki was once more conscious of the fact that he still had many questions about that system himself as well.

From Sky Raker’s words, it could be thought of as a bug technique that poked through a hole in the game system, but then why wasn’t it dealt with by the game administrator? If it was purposefully left in the game, what was the goal of that?

Certainly, «Brain Burst» was an extremely player-unfriendly game as it had neither a manual nor any guide NPCs, but it felt like the game’s mysteriousness increased even more with the existence of the Incarnate System. Just «what» on earth is this application really...?

Even while thinking about such things, though, Haruyuki somehow explained as much as he knew.

After having finished listening and dumbfoundedly looking at Haruyuki who was drinking his oolong tea, Takumu finally muttered in a hoarse voice.

".....How to say it...—Haru, you really are the kind of guy that is popular with older women one after another."

"T-That's the first thing you comment on?"

"Well, because...frankly, I can't easily take in this whole 'Mind Power' thing. Changing something vague like image power into real offensive power...even if you say that, such a thing already exceeds the limits of a fighting game..."

"Well, that's true. I also can't explain how I make my sword come out..."

While staring at the fingers of his hands, Haruyuki voiced his still developing thoughts.

"...But, probably, Mind Power shouldn't be something rough like «if you imagine it, anything can be realized». The attributes of the avatar...and the nature of the Burst Linkers themselves...it may be closely related to such things. For example, I can emit a sword from my hand because Silver Crow's arm was originally shaped like that, that's what I feel."

"Hmm...Then for example, you mean that even if I do the same training as Haru, I may not be able to emit a sword of light the same way you do."

“Perhaps. But, if that’s the case, I think that there are other Mind Power shapes that are more suitable for Taku...for Cyan Pile. That means the problem is, through what kind of training can you acquire it...? When I think of it now, that person, Sky Raker, after seeing through a training method that was optimized for me right from the beginning, made me do wall-climbing. This is also just a guess, but maybe high-level Burst Linkers who have perfectly mastered the Incarnate System also know something like a method for that kind of Mind Power coaching...”

Takumu bit his lip lightly and seemed to be pondering something, but eventually he began to speak while lowering his gaze.

“So what it amounts to is that, even if I dive into the «Unlimited Neutral Field» and trained myself at random, the chances of me being able to grasp the Incarnate System is low. So it’s absolutely necessary to have the guidance and coaching of someone who thoroughly knows about the system.”

“Yeah...Sky Raker would also surely teach it to Taku, but the problem is that we have no way to contact her...”

When Haruyuki said that mixed with a sigh, Takumu also frowned and muttered “I see”.

“Since she’s not an NPC, we can’t meet that person just by climbing the Old Tokyo Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field. We have to set a time to dive after contacting her in the real world...”



“That’s right. We might meet her eventually by waiting at the top of the tower, but because the other side is accelerated by a thousand times, we have no idea how many months or even years that would take...If there was just one method, it would be to duel with Sky Raker’s «Child» Ash Roller in Shibuya and ask him to arrange an appointment with her there, but...you know?”

He paused in his speech there and rested his chin on both hands.

Then, Takumu immediately did a skillful imitation with a serious face.

“Hey Heeey, don’t depend on me like a spoiled kid, you sweets bastard’...is what he doubtlessly say.”

“T-That’s a strange skill you have...Well, he would certainly say that, yeah.”

In truth, Haruyuki already owed a huge debt to Ash Roller just for introducing him to Sky Raker yesterday. Besides, to ask a guy from an enemy legion for help had to be said to be too much of a weakness as a Burst Linker.

While taking another piece of the cooling pizza and emphatically taking a bite out of it, Haruyuki thought desperately.

If the situation were normal, they should just directly ask Kuroyukihime, who was both Haruyuki’s «Parent» and their Legion Master. If it was her, the Black King, she should also naturally be familiar with the Incarnate System, after all. But Kuroyukihime should have her own reasons for not teaching it to them herself until now, so he didn’t think she would teach

them right away if they asked her, and from the beginning there was no way to meet with her in Accel World while she was currently in Okinawa in the south.

In that case, perhaps Takumu's «Parent»—is what he'd like to say, but that guy, who had been an executive of the Blue Legion, had already exited from Accel World due to the «Judgement Blow» by the Blue King for being the mastermind of the «Backdoor Program incident» half a year ago.

The chances of there being another Burst Linker who was knowledgeable about the Incarnate System and furthermore had a reason to lend a hand to Haruyuki and Takumu was—

“...Ah...Aah.”

When he had thought that far, Haruyuki let his voice leak out without noticing a piece of shrimp fall out from his mouth.

“Yes...that's right. There is one, a super-high level player who owes a huge debt to us and whose theater of operations is nearby in the north.”

Just as he heard that, the edges of Takumu's mouth lightly twitched.

“O...Oioi, Haru. You couldn't be talking about...”

“There is only that person. The Legion Master of «Prominence», the Red King «Scarlet Rain». If it's her who's Level 9, she definitely should have mastered the Incarnate System...”

Even as he said that in a lowered voice, the form of the crimson avatar that occupied one corner of the Seven Kings of Pure Color was vividly recalled in Haruyuki's mind.

The Red King who burnt the field and all her enemies to nothing with the firepower of her enormous reinforcement armor that was several times the size of her body. If she could do that much even without the Incarnate System, she should have a power even further endlessly «beyond that», but after putting aside that far too terrifying imagination from his mind, Haruyuki continued speaking further.

"That's not all, Taku should also not have forgotten that we went through a terrible experience because of her request."

"I-I remember that, but."

Niko, or Kouduki Yuniko, had suddenly entered Haruyuki's home in her real body just three months ago.

Her goal had been to get Haruyuki's help in subduing the mad Burst Linker who came from her legion, «Chrome Disaster». Her request was based on the conclusion that the only one that could capture Disaster with his three-dimensional movement was Silver Crow with his wings.

Haruyuki had challenged the mission together with Takumu and Kuroyukihime, but it became a mess as an unforeseen life-or-death battle had unfolded with a large group from the Yellow Legion who had attacked them in the middle of their mission. No, in truth, Takumu had been taken out then together with a large enemy avatar.

"But, Haru. While we had both benefited by cooperating in subduing Chrome Disaster back then, what reason does Prominence have to help Nega Nebulas now? As the Red King, she won't just pay back the debt for that, you know?"

But because Takumu himself said it in a skeptical tone, Haruyuki puffed up his cheeks and retorted back.

"T-Then, I'll just repay the favor of curry with hashed meat!<sup>[2]</sup>"

"No, I don't quite understand that example..."

"In...In any case, there aren't any other high-level Burst Linkers that we can contact in real life. And if we're thinking about fighting Noumi, we at the very least need the power to defend against his Mind Power attack. So...we can only bet on Niko's whim..."

At the end of Haruyuki's sentence as he lost momentum, Takumu let out a big breath at the same time.

His tall best friend lowered his face and hid it within his long forelocks, and kept quiet for a while. When he clenched his right hand on the table, Haruyuki understood that he was now remembering his fierce fight against Noumi.

Eventually, Takumu lifted up his face, whose eyes now had a different strong light in them. The voice he let out also coldly resounded in the dim living room.

"Yeah, it's just as Haru says. I think I could fight equally against Dusk Taker until the middle stage of battle, but after he starts using Mind Power, I can't do anything, as frustrating as it is to admit. I felt the overwhelming difference in power. If we're going to beat him and take back Chii-chan, I can't afford to shrink back at a place like this."

"Taku..."

"Besides, Haru."

Temporarily pausing in his speech there, Takumu stared straight through his glasses at him.

"Your «sword of light» is also just as amazing...no, even more amazing than Dusk Taker's «purple wave surge». I also understand that Haru put in a serious effort in order to master that. You...told me when you fought me in the past. You can't win against me in the real world. I can't win against you in the virtual world. That's why we're the same, you said."

"Ah...n-no, that was..."

Stopping with his right hand Haruyuki who was about to say 'That was just something I said in the heat of battle', Takumu continued.

"But...But, you know, I don't think that's truly the «same». It's how we compete and accept things, in both the real and the virtual, that makes us what we are."

Suddenly, his childhood friend made an expression as if he was yearning for some past.

“...In elementary school, whenever I bought a new game, I would immediately look at the walkthrough site. Not just for action-types, but for RPGs as well, I would play while having the chart window opened next to it, because I was worried about taking risks. That’s why, it couldn’t be helped that I was anxious about «Brain Burst», which for the most part doesn’t even have a manual, let alone a walkthrough. I now think that may be why I depended on something like a Backdoor program. —But, I finally understand now. Something like the development of allotment doesn’t exist in this game. You have to face everything yourself, and cut your own way through. If the Incarnate System can be called a power that goes beyond even the limits of the program...I want to master it. In order to keep standing next to Haru...to Silver Crow.”

Even after Takumu closed his mouth, Haruyuki reflected upon his words in silence for a while.

For the past half-year, Takumu had kept showing self-deprecating behavior during every incident. Having lost his fear of losing «Brain Burst», he tormented himself over his crime of aiming at Kuroyukihime’s neck to the point where he put a virus in Chiyuri’s Neuro Linker, and so he had repeatedly acted at the risk of his own expense in various scenes.

While being like that, he had been struck by the huge impact of Chiyuri’s estrangement from them—even if her motives for it were unclear—and yet, he still tried to confront his weakness once again.

...As I thought, you're strong, Taku. More than me in every way. You say that, but in the real world, I can't stand next to you at all.

After pushing down that mutter and stopping it in the middle of his chest, Haruyuki finally gave a smile.

"You'll have to arrive at that. You'll master the technique to the point that Noumi's «wave surge» won't be a problem, and then we'll rush him and swiftly take Chiyu back. Though most likely, Niko's training will ten times more Spartan than Sky Raker's."

"...I-I'm prepared for that."

Looking away from Takumu, who returned a subtly twitching smile, Haruyuki glanced at the time indicator at the right edge of his vision. The strategy meeting around frozen pizza had gone on for a long time beyond his expectations, and it had reached 7 PM before he realized it.

The Red King Niko, while being one of the strongest Level 9 Burst Linkers, was still a sixth-year elementary school student in the real world, and moreover went to a school with a dormitory system. To call her out now, when she was severely restricted in going out at night, would be unfortunately difficult.

"...After school ends tomorrow, we'll contact her right away and go to Nerima. Taku, are you okay even if you're absent from club activities for two consecutive days?"

“Yeah, because I no longer do kendo for the sake of getting good results at tournaments. Even if I’m watched by the advisor and club president a little, it’s no big deal.”

“I see. Then, it’s decided.”

They looked at each other in the eye and nodded once again.

As they stood up from their seats at the same time and head to the front door, Haruyuki suddenly opened his mouth to ask a different question.

—Taku, just before the end of today’s duel, did you hear a strange voice?

But, the words didn’t come out from his open mouth. He shook his head at Taku who looked at him with questioning eyes, and muttered in his chest “See you school tomorrow” while waving his hand.

—It was just my imagination. There weren’t any others in the gallery nor other opponents in that field. So something like hearing someone else’s voice was impossible.

When the door closed after seeing off Takumu towards the elevator, the interior of the house was wrapped in deep silence after the ‘click’ of the door automatically locking. After being suddenly struck by illusion that someone was standing behind him, Haruyuki pressed his back hard against the door once, and then returned to the living room at a half-run in order to clean-up.



## Chapter 3

April 17th, Wednesday.

Before the dawn of the day when the Umesato Middle School field trip for new third-year students would finally be halfway done, Haruyuki saw a dream of Kuroyukihime who he hadn't seen in so long.

However, it wasn't the kind of dream that he'd seen countless times until now which he regretted not being able to record<sup>[3]</sup>. Rather, it could be called the exact opposite.

In the dream, Kuroyukihime wasn't in her true form, but in her school avatar form with black swallowtail butterfly wings on her back. The lace-decorated hem of her likewise black dress fluttered, and she dashed lightly between the trees within a deep forest.

Haruyuki was also in his pink pig avatar form, and moved his short feet desperately as he chased after the black butterfly. The fairy princess gradually went further and further away from him while softly half-flying, even while extending out her right hand as if beckoning to him.

—Senpai!

Haruyuki's shouting voice was tinged with a strange echo that resounded through the bottom of the forest.

—Please wait, senpai!

But Kuroyukihime's feet didn't stop. Sometimes she would look over her shoulder and give a mysterious smile on her red lips, but her form would quickly be obstructed by a large moss-covered trunk. Eventually, Haruyuki could only see the ruby-colored pattern that colored her jet-black wings. That radiance which flickered like a blaze also melted into the dim light very quickly.

—Please don't leave me. Please...Please don't abandon me.

Though he cried that out, there was no response.

—Because my wings disappeared. That's why you're abandoning me? You don't need me anymore?

No response.

Suddenly, a point on his back hurt with a sting. It quickly gained substance and squirmed intensely.

*\*ZURURI\** He felt something pierce through his avatar from the inside. It wasn't wings. Something like a darkened, long and narrow tail grew out from his back. It surged into the air, raised its snaky-form over his shoulders—and then extended straight ahead like a spear.

A damp and heavy sound resounded within the forest.

Haruyuki unsteadily continued walking as he chased after his tail.

After he went around the knot of trees, that scene spread out before his eyes. On the rough and bony surface of a remarkably thick trunk, the

black swallowtail butterfly was being kept in place by a thin pin. The wire-like tail that had extended out from Haruyuki's back had pierced through one of Kuroyukihime's large wings, and fixed her there like a crucifixion.

Guided by strangely obstructed thoughts, Haruyuki stood in front of the butterfly and looked up. On that beautiful and ephemeral white face, there was nothing like an expression. She simply frowned a little, and motionlessly looked back at Haruyuki.

—Because you have those wings.

From his own mouth, Haruyuki heard a dark and warped voice leak out.

—Because of those wings, you fly as you please.

He involuntarily lifted his right hand. That hand, before he had realized it, was no longer the comical hoof of his pig avatar, but had changed into blackish silver claws. His sinisterly shining and sharp fingertips grasped the edge of one of her powerless and fluttering jet-black wings.

With just a light squeeze, he cut off from the base one the lower-right of the four wings. It at once changed into dry black sand and spilled down from Haruyuki's hand.

Another wing.

And another wing again.

Unnoticed, Kuroyukihime turned her face down deeply, and hanged her limbs languidly. While extending his hand to the last wing, Haruyuki spoke.

—With this, you can't go anywhere anymore. You'll be locked up on this dark ground eternally. Together with me. Just like me.

As soon as he cut off the last remaining wing, Kuroyukihime's thin body fell into Haruyuki's arms.

Haruyuki strongly embraced her body with his dark silver claws.

But one second later, even her body within his arms became ink-black particles and dissolved away. It flowed down while making noise, and became a pile of small sand at his feet—.....

".....aaAH!"

Haruyuki jumped up in bed along with a blurred voice.

Inside his chest, his heart was ringing like an alarm bell. His whole body was covered in cold sweat, and yet his mouth was parched and dry.

He blinked his blurred eyes many times, and desperately looked at both his hands within the gray light shining through the curtains. Of course, there weren't any ominous claws there, but just ten swollen fingers. He clenched them tightly, and pushed them against his forehead.

Unlike the night half a year ago where he first received Brain Burst, his memory of this nightmare was vivid right to every nook and cranny. Still frightened from before, Haruyuki slept without wearing his Neuro Linker. In other words, the dream right now wasn't due to the intervention of the program. It was purely spun from Haruyuki's memories and feelings.

While slowly shaking his head, Haruyuki muttered in a hoarse voice.

"Senpai...I, don't want to do such a thing to you...I, I just..."

I just want to be with you forever.

Haruyuki impulsively grabbed his Neuro Linker from the bed's tabletop, and attached it to his neck. It was 6:15 AM, much earlier than his usual wake-up time, but there was no fragment of sleepiness left in him. Exhausting his whole body, he spoke the Full Dive command.

"Direct Link."

The view of his dimly-lit room vanished, and darkness spread out from the other side of radial lights. Haruyuki was pulled down by virtual gravity, and soon alighted down on a cold and gray level surface. Many semi-transparent windows with tags like «Participation in public utility rates» and «apartment management association» emerged around him with clear sound effects. This space that was completely devoted to pure function was the main console of the Arita family's home network.

After looking at the roundish right hand of his pink pig avatar for a while, Haruyuki spoke a voice command with a murmur.

“Command, Dive Call, Number Zero-One.”

Before his eyes, a holo-dialogue appeared that read [Transmitting full-sensory telephone call to registered address 01. Is this okay?]. He shook off a moment of hesitation and pressed the Yes button.

There are several modes of two-way communication using Neuro Linkers.

The mode that is most used is the sound call that communicates using only voice like old cellular phones. The next most popular method is the video call, where you detach the camera part from the tip of the Neuro Linker and talk while projecting your face.

Compared to those methods, the full-sensory call, where the two parties talk using their avatars in a virtual space, isn't used in as many situations. The reason was, simply, because the person being called may not be able to Full Dive immediately at the place they were at. At the very least, it was required to make an appointment through mail or voice call beforehand, so that ordinary tasks could be satisfied by the time of the conversation.

Therefore, that Haruyuki would be requesting a Dive Call right now to the other person so early in the morning, and moreover without warning, could be said to be a considerably thoughtless act. Even so, Haruyuki wanted to meet with that person right now no matter what. Not just through voice or a 2D video, he wanted to touch her with all five senses. If he didn't do that, it felt like a part of him would change into something different.

The Ming-cho font<sup>[4]</sup> of [Currently Sending] blinked eight, nine times, and just before it switched over to voice message, it changed into [Received].

All the surrounding windows vanished with a whoosh. A grain of white light appeared in the cold gray space. It quickly increased in numbers, changed form, and created a single avatar.

The front tips of her high-heel shoes touched the floor with a ka-thunk. After slowly blinking twice, three times, the fairy princess with black swallowtail wings on her back noticed the pig-type avatar standing a little away from her and smiled gently.

“Hey, good morning, Haruyuki-kun.”

Even after having being greeted like that by that smooth silky voice, Haruyuki couldn't say anything for a while. He was frightened by the feeling that the slender form in front of him would collapse into sand, and so just stared at her fixedly.

But of course, no matter how many seconds passed, her avatar didn't disappear. Suddenly coming to his senses, Haruyuki started talking in a rush.

“U-Umm, go...good morning, Kuroyukihime-senpai. Err...s-sorry, for suddenly requesting a Full Dive Call at this hour...”

“No, I had just opened my eyes and I was hesitating whether to fall back asleep.”

Smiling once again, Kuroyukihime then looked around at their surroundings.

"...In any case, this is quite a simple place. Such a light maximum preference of data, well, it is like you..."

"Ah, n-no, that's not."

In the initial configuration setup, Dive Calls would summon the person being called to the VR space where the caller was. Because Haruyuki called without moving from the main area of his apartment's home network, Kuroyukihime had been invited to this world without even a single chair.

"S-Sorry, I'll change the location immediately!"

He quickly took out the menu window and tried to call out object sets that he had made and stored himself, but all of them were places that had no emotions or feelings, like ruined battlefields or the deck of a battleship.

As Haruyuki continued scrolling through the list while sweating greatly, Kuroyukihime watched him with a wry smile, but eventually clapped her hands and spoke.

"If it's like that, though it may be a bit slow, may I load my own set? I'd like to try the one I bought yesterday."

"Ah, yes, please do, please do, please do!"



After Haruyuki nodded as if jumping up and down, Kuroyukihime moved her right hand after smiling once again. She manipulated her menu with high-speed finger movements as if playing a piano.

In front of Haruyuki, a progress bar appeared with a 'PON'. An object set was being sent over via the Global Net from Kuroyukihime's Neuro Linker in Okinawa.

Though she said it would be slow, it needed only five seconds to be received, and two seconds to decompress and unfold. At the same time as the bar vanished, intense lighting, no, sunlight poured down from overhead and made the surrounding cold nothingness disappear.

What appeared was a tropical landscape with colors that woke up his eyes. They were at what appeared to be a Shinto shrine, and moss-covered Okinawan lion stone statues were enshrined on both sides of the short path to the shrine. There were surrounded by trees to the left and right, and at the end of the shrine path, down-slope stone steps and in the background the blue sea could be seen.

When he turned around, there was a small shrine painted deep scarlet. Standing next to him, Kuroyukihime opened her parasol with a tapping sound, and held it over both her and Haruyuki's heads. Then, as if that acted as a switch, countless cricket chirping surged forth from around them, and Haruyuki deeply breathed in the sun-scented air into his chest.

"Let's sit down over there and talk."

Kuroyukihime pointed at the small stairs arranged in front of the shrine. After nodding with a “Yes” and moving while stepping on the gravel, Haruyuki lowered his avatar’s waist alongside Kuroyukihime. For a short while, he was satisfied by the exotic though somehow nostalgic scenery spread out right before him.

This was of course a VR space built through digital data, but it wasn’t simply arranged from ready-made polygons. All the objects such as the see-saw images or hemp palm trees were generated based on a real landscape that had been photographed with great time and effort using a personal high-resolution camera. An object set that reproduced a scenic area in such minute detail was currently a standard item for travel souvenirs.

Having foolishly never left Honshu<sup>[5]</sup> to go to Okinawa, Haruyuki also forgot this was a call on his own, and continued gazing at the scenery as if he had become senile. Kuroyukihime was patiently letting him do that and following his example, but finally she gave a small cough.

“Umm, I have no objection at all to just looking at the scenery with you like this, but...”

Once she said that, Haruyuki, after blankly looking up at the lovely face of the fairy princess next to him, finally remembered that this situation continued from his ridiculous early-morning Dive Call.

“Hauah...s-so, sorry!”

"No, there's no need to apologize. I just thought that you might have some urgent business with me."

He stared at the patiently smiling Kuroyukihime, and—

Haruyuki realized another terrible fact. That is, he had no real reason that could be called business.

That's right, I simply saw a dream right before dawn, a very scary dream...

Suddenly recalling in his hands the feeling tearing off Kuroyukihime's wings from her back within the dream, Haruyuki's face became distorted. He tightly clenched his fists, and turned down his gaze.

The words that came out of his mouth next resounded quietly as if the Neuro Linker wasn't taking it from his brain's language field, but from the bottom of his deeper soul.

"Umm...umm, I, was lonely."

While not being clearly conscious of what he was saying, Haruyuki continued letting his facsimile body mutter.

"That I can't meet with senpai...that you've gone somewhere so far away, it's tough, and so..."

It felt like the virtual forest was silent. Whether the sound effects of the crickets had actually stopped, or his brain was blocking off the environmental sound information, Haruyuki didn't know.

At the end of the following long silence, a short reply was given with a sigh.

"Me too."

The shoulders of the pig avatar trembled slightly, and before his cautiously upturned gaze, there was a distorted white face.

"I'm also lonely, Haruyuki-kun."

Without trying to suppress her tearfully smiling expression, Kuroyukihime lifted her hands and strongly tucked Haruyuki's cheeks between them.

"It's the first time that a single week has felt so long to me...Even though I've dived continuously in Accel World many times...I want to return to Tokyo quickly and meet you."

Somehow, just by mentioned that just now, Kuroyukihime bit her lip intensely, and suddenly hugged Haruyuki's head to her chest within her arms.

Unlike in the Umesato Middle School local network, where the sensation of contact for avatars was impossible because it was diluted to the limit, her clear warmth, softness and fragrance coursed through Haruyuki's nervous system. Despite it being a situation where he would normally panic and stiffen up, just now only Haruyuki was stirred by an overwhelming longing, and in a daze he reach out his hands and clung to Kuroyukihime's slender body as well.

—Please come back.

He wanted to say it. To say, 'Please come back, and save me like you always do.'

At this instant, Haruyuki was clearly aware of just how far he was cornered in a deep abyss right now. No matter how much he desperately resisted, the enemy—Dusk Taker, who kept clocking his way as if laughing at his effort, was like a wall of deep black steel. The wish of piercing a hole in that wall with Silver Crow's slender fist and overcoming it didn't seem like it would come true.

But, he couldn't say it.

It wasn't just for Chiyuri's sake. For his own sake as well, he had to fight that enemy with his own power till the very end. If he lost to despair here and clung to Kuroyukihime who was in the middle of a school trip, that would be an act essentially no different than what he had done in that dream.

".....We'll meet again soon, just three more days."

Haruyuki somehow muttered that with a hoarse voice.

"Yeah...that's right."

Kuroyukihime also responded, and after putting all her strength in her arms around him one more time, she released her embrace. With those black pupils that shined as if wet, she looked fixedly at Haruyuki's eyes from close-range, and—

"Haruyuki-kun..."

As if sensing something from him, she called his name in an anxious-sounding voice.

Haruyuki mustered all his mental power to force a smile, and spoke before Kuroyukihime could say anything further,

“Umm, please enjoy the remainder of your trip. Sorry for suddenly calling you.”

“No, if you hadn’t called, I would have. I’m happy that we could meet, even if only as avatars. I’ll be buying a gift for you as a souvenir, so please look forward to it.”

Smiling pleasantly, Kuroyukihime stood up and got off onto the gravel. She spun and closed her parasol, and then called out the menu window.

Even when she pressed the disconnect button and her figure vanished into grains of light, Haruyuki kept standing there for a while. The voices of the crickets, which had increased once again, washed away the lingering memory of the nightmare that remained in Haruyuki’s mind.

After Haruyuki finished a breakfast of cereal and milk, said “I’m heading out” to his mother in her bedroom and opened the front door to his home, Haruyuki was greeted by a dull and cloudy lead-colored sky.

He focused his gaze on the icon to the left of his virtual desktop and pressed on the shortcut for the weather forecast. The chance of rain was

70% from 12:40 PM onwards. He went down a step and took out a light grey umbrella from next to the shoebox and then went outside.

This tool known as an umbrella was one of the articles of daily life whose basic structure hadn't changed for the longest time. It had only changed in that it was now made of the best cloth from undegrading water-repelling material, and its frame was now made of hymonet joule carbon.

While thinking that if it had had an automatic folding gimmick like the parasol used by Kuroyukihime's avatar a raining day might also be a little fun, Haruyuki walked along the hallway and got onto the elevator.

When the lift, which had begun to descend towards the ground, stopped a little two floors down, Haruyuki held a certain prediction that was close to conviction.

The one who stood on the other side of the door as it slid open was, as he expected, Kurashima Chiyuri.

When their gazes met each other directly, Chiyuri's big cat-like eyes shook as if hesitating. Though she should have just given her usual "Ossu!" and cheerfully jumped in, her black shoes didn't move while she collected herself.

The instant the door tried to close after several seconds passed, Haruyuki reflexively pressed the «Open» button with his right hand. He kept looking obstinately looking at Chiyuri's face as he held the button.

Just before the alarm rang, Chiyuri turned down her eyes and quietly boarded the lift.

"...Thanks. Good morning."

While she spoke in a low voice, Haruyuki released his hand from the button.

Within the moving elevator, he responded absently while casting a side-glance at Chiyuri's left hand holding a pink umbrella, as she stood with a little more space between them than usual.

"...Ossu."

The words he should have said after that flooded his mind one after another.

No matter what she had been told by Noumi Seiji, there was no need to obey him. Even if she had been threatened by him and the basis was the peeping video in front of the shower room, Noumi couldn't actually use that. Because the instant he ruined Haruyuki with that video, there was the possibility that Haruyuki would also distribute Noumi's «real world information» in Accel World and take him down along with him.

However, it was also clear that Chiyuri didn't understand that kind of «nuclear deterrent due to mutually assured destruction»-type talk. If there existed even the slightest chance of Haruyuki being expelled—or at worst, arrested due to an extremely shameful crime, Chiyuri would do all she could to avoid that. Even if she was, for example, forced to become



Dusk Taker's exclusive healer and face Haruyuki and Takumu as enemies in Accel World.

Because they were friends. Because there were childhood friends who had spent a long, long time together in this real world. To Chiyuri that was the most important thing to be protected above anything else.

"...Chiyu."

In a voice so small that it almost vanished in the faint driving sound of the descending elevator, Haruyuki called out his childhood friend's name.

Chiyuri's small shoulders trembled with a twitch, but her lips were still obstinately pulled tight. Turning his gaze to Chiyuri's left hand which was tightly the handle of the umbrella, Haruyuki began to lift his own right hand as if to grasp that hand and make her face him.

But, the words he should have said after that became a crumpled hot lump and remained jammed in his throat.

Unable to move any further and standing stock-still, Haruyuki's body was wrapped in a gentle feeling of deceleration. Without looking behind her, Chiyuri briskly stepped forward towards the entrance.

Separating in the blink of an eye from his childhood friend who belonged to the track-and-field club, Haruyuki walked to school while looking down the same way as he had on the way home yesterday. On Wednesdays, he always bought the package-version of a comics

magazine he loved at a convenience store, but today he simply passed by the store without stopping.

After following the route to school, which had a population density of a third less than usual with the absence of the new third-year students, and while alternatively feeling joy at having had a Dive Call with Kuroyukihime and regret at having said nothing to Chiyuri, Haruyuki stepped into the gates of Umesato Middle School that he eventually saw while curling up his back. Once he connected to the local network within the school, things like the log of the time he arrived at school, today's schedule and messages from the school were listed on the right side of his vision.

At the end of those, Haruyuki saw a sentence that read «Important Transmitted Matter: Addressed as Personal», making his face twist.

After changing to indoor shoes at the entrance, he touched that string of characters with his finger while biting back an unpleasant feeling.

*\*SHUU\** The message text opened and words in grim Ming-cho font were lined up in Haruyuki's visions.

[To 2nd Year Class-C, School Register Number 460017, Arita Haruyuki: As soon as you arrive at school, you are to promptly present yourself at the career-counseling room on the first floor of the general education building: From the teacher in charge of 2nd Year Class-C, Sugeno Kouji]

Instantly, his heart shrank with a start. He thought that Noumi really had submitted that video to the school authorities. But he quickly noticed that the sender of the message was his homeroom teacher Sugeno. If

they had gotten that much clear evidence, it should have been handled by the administrative department without it ending at the level of an interview with his teacher. Most likely, he was being summoned based on Sugeno's personal prediction.

Even though it was just a guess in his head, Haruyuki passed by the stairs up and headed towards the career counseling room on the first floor inside the school building while sweating plentifully within his clenched hands. While walking, he opened the student-exclusive database of the local network in his browser and uselessly searched for something like a «manual for when you're summoned by the teacher», which likely didn't exist.

Then, he actually found it within a school newspaper from a few years ago, and Haruyuki read it thankfully while amazed.

When he arrived in front of the counseling room, he immediately followed the first thing within the manual and confirmed left and right that no students were in sight just in case. He took a single big, deep breath in front of the gray door, and then pressed the room enter button indicated within his vision. Student authentication was performed, and the lock was released with a click.

When he pulled open the as expected non-automatic door and peeked inside, he saw that Sugeno was already within the not very wide room. Sitting down on the window-side seat behind a long desk, Sugeno had

his arms crossed in front of his chest as if displaying the thickness of his arms.

"So you came. Come in."

The first words from the young Japanese History teacher weren't that friendly. Suppressing the urge to just close the door, Haruyuki stepped into the room quietly and greeted him in an indistinct voice.

"...Good morning."

Sugeno sucked in a breath as if he was going to voice a complaint just then, but he seemed to reconsider as he closed his mouth for a moment, and then spoke once again.

"Good morning. Please sit down there."

Though the seat he indicated was only one seat away from Sugeno, Haruyuki couldn't say "No, I'll stand here" and so reluctantly obeyed by sitting down.

The teacher had carved a single line of deep wrinkles on his often-tanned forehead and seemed to be staring directly at Haruyuki with more of a «looking» than «scowling» gaze, but suddenly the corners of his mouth finally lifted up.

"Arita. Though I may not look like it, the truth is, I was also not very popular during middle and high school."

"Hah...?"

"I'm not kidding. Because I was in the judo club, I was jealous of the soccer club guys who played around with girls instead."

While looking dumfounded at Sugeno who was nodding with a 'Uh-huh', Haruyuki muttered in his mind.

—There were at least four improper points in those words just now. Suggesting that you're good-looking, saying that all the members of the judo club were unpopular, saying that all the soccer club members were playboys, and in addition arbitrarily determining that I'm unpopular.

While Haruyuki added to himself that he couldn't help but agree with that last point, Sugeno's monologue continued.

"That's why, I understand that boys your age have a lot of things you don't know how to deal with. I understand very well...Hey, Arita."

Here, the teacher gave off a «leave everything to me»-type vibe around his thick eyebrows, and gave a single big nod.

"If there's anything you want to tell me...anything you have to tell me, please say it right here and now. I promise that I'm your ally. So, how about it?"

"....."

Haruyuki stared at his face for a few seconds while becoming even more dumfounded.

Eventually, he somehow reorganized his thoughts and opened his mouth.

".....U-Umm."

"Ooh, what it is? Please tell me anything!"

"Errr...Before that, I'm first going to record this conversation..."

That had been the second thing that the manual said to "definitely do", but Haruyuki regretted it intensely as soon as he said it. Sugeno's gaping and wide-eyed face quickly turned red from his neck to his cheek to the border of his hair. Haruyuki even felt like he heard a 'clunk' sound when the reliable older brother-like expression Sugeno had worn until now fell away.

"What's that supposed to mean, Arita! You're saying you don't believe in me!?"

Raising his eyebrows and shouting with an angry look, Sugeno's neck shrunk. But Haruyuki didn't drive him away anymore more after that and answered back with a mumble.

"No, umm, it's not that I don't believe in you...It's recognized by the law that a student has the right to record a one-on-one interview with a teacher..."

"What law!? What right!?"

Letting out a loud yell that little improper for a teacher, Sugeno hit the long desk with a bang.

“Don’t you understand that I’m thinking about your sake here!? If you wait until later to talk, your position will only get worse! As it is now, there’s a possibility that it will become a police matter.”

His speech was suddenly interrupted as Haruyuki desperately operated his virtual desktop and activated recording mode. Haruyuki wasn’t in the newspaper club, so the other person’s acceptance was needed for a recording of the conversation. Right now in Sugeno’s vision, a ‘Yes or No’ button for allowing the recording should have appeared.

If he pressed the ‘No’ button, then the log would record that that he had refused a legitimate request. Sugeno scowled at a point in space with an expression that he couldn’t bear the indignation, but in the end he lifted his finger and stabbed it through the air with a jerk.

A [SREC] icon along with a ‘recording starting’ message blinked in Haruyuki’s vision. Even so, Haruyuki didn’t have the nerve to think “it’s over” with this, and earnestly shrunk his neck, while Sugeno spoke in a low voice which had increased in hardness.

“Arita, I’ll...I will only ask you once. On Sunday the 14th, why did you...you<sup>[6]</sup>, who doesn’t participate in club activities, come to school?”

—It seemed that the conversation recording had had more of an effect than he’d thought.

“I was meeting a friend from the kendo club.”

When Haruyuki answered feebly yet instantaneously, Sugeno kept silent. Sugeno should also have known that Haruyuki was close with Takumu of the kendo club, and furthermore it was recorded in the local network that Takumu had come to school on Sunday. Haruyuki had actually gone to school in order to talk with Takumu that day in the first place.

But Sugeno persisted in his attack while the temple of his forehead twitched.

“Is that really all? Can you affirm that there were no other reasons at all? Please look at me in the eyes and answer.”

—Well, he’s not a bad person, probably. We just don’t seem to be able to understand each other.

While thinking that, Haruyuki looked directly at Sugeno’s clear eyes with an upward glance and responded.

“That really is all. I can affirm it.”

“.....I see, I understand. Then, you can go back now.”

After letting out a long sigh that sounded like the sound from a large cooling fan, Sugeno told him that, so Haruyuki quickly stood up. He responded with a “Excuse me!” with largest volume after visiting this room, and then headed towards the door over the shortest distance, pulled it open as minimally as possible and left.

Escaping into the hallway, Haruyuki stopped the recording mode after deeply inhaling with all his strength, and headed towards the classroom



at a fast pace while confirming that the voice file was saved normally. With this, unless new material came out, Haruyuki's innocence was now officially acknowledged. Nonetheless, with the exchange just now, Sugeno's impression of him would have fairly worsened. There was not a single benefit by antagonizing a teacher and it wasn't Haruyuki's hobby either to do so, but even so it was out of the question to admit to a peeping crime he didn't commit just for the sake of getting on Sugeno's good side.

—'Even so.' Haruyuki thought while climbing up the stairs.

Even if that fatal video hadn't been used, the trap that Noumi had set seemed to be slowly displaying effects like a weak poison. The reason was that Noumi himself had committed a crime and hid a miniature camera in the female shower room.

As a result, a real peeping attempt incident had been produced, and Haruyuki who had gone to school despite not being in a club was suspected. Had Noumi predicted things this far? No—He couldn't have.

Shaking his head, Haruyuki opened the door of his classroom one minute before the first bell rang.

Just then, an uncomfortable feeling formed. He felt like the volume of the chatting that filled the classroom went down.

".....?"

He looked around in puzzlement, but the classroom hadn't changed at all from any other morning. He weaved his way between the students who were gathered in small group and were animatedly talking about a net show or a sports game, and sat down in his seat.

At the same time as he hung his bag on his desk and let out a sigh, an incoming Voice Call icon flashed in the center of his vision. The caller was—Takumu.

Barely resisting from looking back at him who should have been sitting in the back of the classroom, Haruyuki pushed the icon.

'Haru, something bad has happened.'

At those sudden first words, Haruyuki responded with thought-speech, though he almost moved his mouth.

'Hah? Wh...what is it, all of a sudden?'

'A strange rumor is going around. About you.'

At that point, the communication was cut off without notice. At the same time, the sound of a light chime filled his hearing. The first bell rang, and now real-time communication between students was prohibited. The next time they could call each other was at lunchtime and it was possible to send text messages as an exception, but school regulations prohibited them from exchanging contents that were unrelated to schoolwork through these.

He thought of just standing up and going directly to Takumu's seat to hear the rest, but then homeroom teacher Sugeno came in from the door, so he had to give up on that. He was very interested in what Takumu had been talking about, but the only means to communicate no matter what right now was to talk in an «accelerated duel». Since he wouldn't go that far, there shouldn't be a serious problem even if he waited until the next break.

But—immediately after the end of that lesson.

As Haruyuki began to move his hand in order to mail Takumu, two male students blocked the way in front of his desk.

He lifted his head with a start as his body reflexively stiffened. They were both his classmates, but he could only remember the name of the boy to the right. He should have been a regular player in the boys' basketball club, called Ishio if he remembered right.

With a tall figure which didn't seem to be of the same age as Haruyuki, Ishio spoke while moving his mature yet troubled face to the left.

"Arita, sorry, but please come with me for a bit."

Haruyuki then noticed that it had become deathly silent at some point in the classroom. But there was almost no feeling of surprise in that silence. Rather, there was a hint of understanding and consent, as if this was an expected scene.

Facing Haruyuki who couldn't understand the situation and was gathering himself, Ishio continued in a low voice that broke towards the end.

"I don't want to have a disagreeable talk in a place like this. Even you feel the same as well, right, Arita?"

At the same time as he heard that, Haruyuki felt a feeling as if his stomach was being squeezed.

A disagreeable talk. The only subject that came to mind when he thought of that was the peeping attempt incident.

—In other words, before he had noticed it, Ishio and the guy next to him, no, the entire class had come to believe with considerable certainty that Haruyuki was the perpetrator of that incident.

"Ah...I-I, didn't..."

While muttering that in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki turned his gaze diagonally to the left in front of him—to Chiyuri's seat with a feeling of wanting to cling to someone.

Over there, he saw the form of his childhood friend looking down deeply, firmly closing her eyes and clenching her hands on top her desk as if enduring something.

As soon as he saw that, Haruyuki thought despite the crisis he was in.

—Right this instant, the one that is causing Chiyuri pain isn't Noumi, but me. My foolish actions brought upon this situation. If I show pitiful behavior here, I'll just be making even tougher concerns for Chiyuri. Then, at the very least, I have to deal with the situation with resolution right now.

Even if it's just bravado on my part.

Taking a deep breath, Haruyuki pushed back his chair with a bang and stood up.

"Very well, let's go."

After Haruyuki gave his short reply, one of Ishio's eyebrows twitched. But he nodded without changing expression and began to walk away.

As Haruyuki followed after him, the other boy went along with them from behind Haruyuki. While Haruyuki thought 'It's like I'm a prisoner being escorted', a student stood up slowly at the back of the classroom. It was Takumu.

His childhood friend whose height rivaled Ishio's sharply narrowed his eyes behind his glasses and tried to take a step forward.

Holding him back with his right hand, Haruyuki quickly shook his head left and right.

—I'll be fine. I can get through it by myself.

It wasn't a Voice Call, so those thoughts couldn't simply be communicated, but even so Takumu gritted his teeth firmly and sat back down. Ishio forcefully pulled open the door to the dead silent classroom, making a loud sound as he did so.

The place that Haruyuki was brought to was somewhere he was quite familiar with—the western edge of the rooftop. First period had only just ended, so there were no other students there.

During his first year here, Haruyuki would make a delivery of bread and juice to delinquent students at this place practically every day. While clearly remembering those times, Haruyuki tried to go over to the antenna tower where the acts of bullying had happened. But, Ishio stopped him where he was and spoke.

"Here should be fine."

Haruyuki blinked, and talked back.

"...But, we're still within sight of the social security cameras here."

"It doesn't matter."

Spitting that out, Ishio stuffed his hands into the pockets of his uniform and continued while leaning his back against the tall stainless fence.

"...Arita, you were summoned by that Sugeno, right?"

—Just like Haruyuki expected, that incident was already known within the class. This was the «strange rumor» that Takumu had mentioned in the

Voice Call. He'd been careful, but had he been seen by other students when he entered into the counseling room? But still, it was too fast for this information to have spread like this...

While reconsidering that this wasn't the time or place to think of unnecessary things like that, Haruyuki nodded slightly after staring fixedly at Ishio and the other boy standing a little ways away from him.

"...Yeah."

"Then, it was you. You were the one that planted that camera in the female shower room."

"No!"

His response was immediate. Looking down from high above at Haruyuki who was vehemently shaking his head, Ishio just rubbed his close-cropped short hair, but the other boy spoke out for the first time here.

"Well, we can't say for sure that you did it, Arita. But, I don't think the school would summon a student at this hour without any basis. If done poorly, it would lead to complaints instead."

That hot-blooded Sugeno is the exception to that! That guy who said 'what rights, what laws!?!'

Since Haruyuki was certain they wouldn't believe that even if he claimed that, he had no choice but to remain silent. Then, Ishio took one, two steps towards Haruyuki, and spoke in a whisper.

“Being released after being receiving a summons is suspicious, but I don’t feel like there’s any evidence. But, I can’t leave it alone like this just because there’s no evidence.”

Suddenly Ishio grabbed Haruyuki’s necktie with his left hand and pulled him towards him tightly. He struck a burning gaze of anger at him from close range.

“Listen, when that camera was found, my girlfriend was also in the shower room. She received an incredible shock, and hasn’t come to school yesterday and today!”

At this point, Ishio’s actions were in clear violation of school regulations. But, the regular player of the basketball club shook off the other boy’s attempt to restrain him and swung his right fist far back.

“I can’t forgive you, Arita. No matter what, I have to do this!!”

And then, he swung his brandished fist with an inexperienced movement and—

There was a possibility that Haruyuki could avoid it. Ishio’s motions, which was nothing compared to the brawl-practiced punches of the students who had bullied Haruyuki before, were awkward. No, more than that, if Haruyuki used the physical acceleration command—«Physical Burst», he might be able to even reverse the situation and beat up Ishio here. Ishio’s face was greatly warped simply because it indicated that it was his first time hitting someone.



But of course, Haruyuki neither dodged nor fought back, and simply received the punch on his left cheek. Something like winning in a brawl with the power of acceleration was the lowest act, which was even mentioned in the laws of the Black Legion. A high-pitched sound resounded, and at the same time the impact itself pushed Haruyuki's body back several steps.

If it was the Haruyuki of half a year ago, his heart might have broken at this point and he would be servilely begging.

However, the staggering but still standing Haruyuki sternly looked back at Ishio even while feeling a hot ache in his cheek, and shouted.

"I'll say it as many times as I need to, I didn't do it!!"

Then, Ishio clenched his teeth and began to make a fist again, but eventually he loosened it and responded back.

"...If that's proven to be true, you can hit me as many times as you like. But..."

Thrusting forward his index finger instead of a fist and the basketball member with close-cropped hair declared it clearly.

"If you're proven to be the culprit, I'll break your Neuro Linker, so you can't look at pictures or videos or anything else."

Then, Ishio turned his body around, and walked towards the stairs with a long stride while rubbing his right hand with his left hand as if trying to

wipe away the remaining sensation in it. The other boy also followed after him, leaving Haruyuki alone on the rooftop.

The scene just now should have been clearly recorded by the numerous social security cameras. If Haruyuki lodged a complaint of receiving an act of violence, despite the circumstances Ishio would be suspended from school at the very least, and would also lose his place as a regular in the basketball club.

But of course, Haruyuki had no intention of doing that. Ishio was just another person that had gotten dragged into this. Into a whirlpool of nothingness without light or warmth that was created by the cruel plunderer known as Noumi Seiji.

After tracing his cheek and confirming that he wasn't bleeding, Haruyuki wearily headed towards the stairs and typed a mail on the way, in order to send a short message to Takumu.

After writing [It wasn't anything serious, I'll explain the situation after school, sorry for worrying you] and sending it, he continued and started to send a message to Chiyuri's address too.

But, he stopped his hand just before he did it. It was no longer possible to erase Chiyuri's concerns with just words. There was no way to take her back but to destroy the root of it all, Noumi.

Takumu immediately responded back with just a word of [Understood]. Feeling the worry of his best friend in that concise message, Haruyuki

finally let out the tension in his shoulders and headed towards the classroom at a half-run in order to be in time for the next class.

Lunch break.

As soon as the chime rang, Haruyuki headed towards the school cafeteria alone.

With the third-year students absent, the dining hall was also naturally quite uncrowded compared to usually. Having no intention to eat on the rooftop where something unpleasant had just happened, Haruyuki lined up at the self-service counter. From the menu displayed in his vision, he selected okra<sup>[7]</sup> toppings with eggplant in his pork curry, and confirmed that the holo-tag appeared in front of him.

The obaa-chan in the kitchen filled up the curry at super-speed, and when she put the okra out onto the counter, an exact 'CHARIIN' sound rang out.

Haruyuki's gaze naturally moved towards the lounge at the east end of the cafeteria. But, he didn't have the courage to burst into that place with white circular tables surrounded by decorative plants and with a clearly different atmosphere, and instead sat down at in the corner of one of many long tables that were lined up.

While picking up his spoon, he looked around his surroundings a little. All the students were enjoying their meals while making a lot of noise. No one was looking at Haruyuki—they shouldn't be.

But Haruyuki couldn't help but feel that all the people here were talking about "The peeping-camera perpetrator has come" with a telepathy-like communication method. 'No, impossible' is what he said to himself as he tried to deny it, but the unpleasant atmosphere that wasn't quite outspoken when he entered Class-2C this morning had deeply permeated his skin.

He stuffed down the curry in order to drive that feeling away, but though he usually became unconditionally happy with just that, the lump that was blocking his throat wouldn't go away at all.

If—

If at this rate, the belief that «Arita of 2C was the perpetrator of the peeping camera incident» took hold of all of the school's students even without any evidence.

Overturing that might be difficult for even Kuroyukihime, the vice-president of the student council. Conversely, Kuroyukihime might also lose her current position in the school if she got dragged down with Haruyuki. Even if that happened for argument's sake, he didn't think that that person would ever abandon him, but—What if, in the worst case, Kuroyukihime was also looked at with cold eyes because of him? What if that person was alienated within the school like himself last year, and at worst was harassed in some way...?

Haruyuki felt the skin of his entire body shiver due to his thoughts.

His spoon dropped down onto his plate with a clang, and when he clutched his arms strongly with both hands—

Suddenly feeling a presence, Haruyuki looked up.

A group of four, five people that were walking somewhere much further away entered his vision.

In the Umesato Private Middle School, there exists a scholarship student system for athletic clubs just in case. This wasn't a prestigious sports school, so the system was only to the degree of reducing school expenses for club members who put in good results beyond the municipal tournament, but even so it was apparent that there was a clear division for the so-called «scholarship students».

The group that held Haruyuki's eyes were indeed those few athletic club elites. They were regular players of the female softball club and the hopes of the male swimming club, and standing among them and chatting with them while smiling was a small-built student—

That was without a doubt, the first-year student of the kendo club, Noumi Seiji.

The Umesato Middle School kendo club was certainly strong, but Noumi who had just entered the club this month had no regular game participation experience. Even though it should naturally take until the second half of the school year at the fastest for him to obtain scholarship student qualifications, for him to already be encroaching on that kind of group after only winning last week's club tournament was shocking.

—But, you didn't obtain that victory with your own power!

Haruyuki unconsciously bit his lip hard. At that moment, as if feeling the gaze that Haruyuki was shooting at him from a corner of a long table far away, Noumi fleetingly turned his eyes in his direction with a casual action.

Haruyuki saw the innocent smile that was on his girl-like well-proportioned face transform in an instant.

What appeared from under that mask that came off was a sadistically joyful smile that was cold like a razor that was thinly sharpened to the utmost limit.

—How is it Arita-senpai, the feeling of being covered in mud and slipping off a hill no matter how far you climb? The feeling of having your precious things stolen and broken one by one...?

And then Noumi returned his face to the front, and while turning his previous innocent smiling face to the senior students, unhesitatingly entered the lounge that was overflowing in dazzling light.

Even after his view of him was obstructed by the decorative plants and he couldn't see him anymore, Haruyuki continued staring at the place where Noumi was.

It seemed there was no longer any doubt. Noumi was the one who secretly made it so that talk of Haruyuki being summoned by the homeroom teacher was spread around the class so quickly. No, possibly,

he was also the one who informed the school authorities that Haruyuki had gone to school on Sunday.

As a huge anger and a fear that surpassed it welled up from the bottom of his body suddenly, Haruyuki desperately suppressed the urge to hit the table.

No. I can't let my heart break here. If I do, I'll just return to the servile me from half a year ago. That's not all. If I get crushed here and sink all the way down into the bottomless hole that Noumi made, I'll drag Takumu, Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime down along with me as well.

—I'll crawl up from here.

Haruyuki muttered in his mind while clenching his spoon with all his strength.

—I've faced this kind of adversity many times. I'll crawl up from here once again. No, I'll get up no matter how many times it takes. I have already stopped walking towards only the bottom.

He stuffed a heap load of curry into his wide-opened mouth, and chewed it forcefully. The first-year female student sitting diagonally across from him gazed open-mouthed at Haruyuki as he emptied his plate at a staggering speed.

## Chapter 4

Up until the clock hand reached 2 PM, Haruyuki felt like he was sitting on seat that as sharp as a horseradish grater. It could be said that he was slightly lucky that, thanks to Ishio of the basketball club confronting Haruyuki directly, there was an atmosphere of reserve from interacting with him any further than that.

Even so, the gazes of the girls were 30% colder than usual, and certain boys seemed be in the middle of deliberating over what nickname to give to Haruyuki right away. Before they could finish deciding between the last two choices of «Cameari<sup>[8]</sup>» and «Papayuki<sup>[9]</sup>», Haruyuki grabbed his bag and umbrella and escaped from the classroom.

He came out into the front yard where it was blackly pouring rain that had begun to fall since the afternoon just as forecasted, and let out a deep breath after stepping across the school gate. After he was cut off from local network while also receiving a message of «Please be careful heading home», all kinds of online messages from the Global Net appeared in front of him in exchange, and he quickly felt his heart soothed by that feeling of connection.

While he was attentively looking at the headline news along with the BGM sound of rain hitting his umbrella as he stood next to a wall about twenty meters from the school gate, familiar footsteps approached at last.

“Wait up, Haru.”



As Takumu suddenly lifted up a navy-blue umbrella, Haruyuki also moved his hand slightly. They lined up with each and began to walk along the sidewalk towards the east.

A few dozen seconds later, Haruyuki began to speak first.

"Is it really okay for you to be absent from club activities for two days in a row?"

"It's fine, it's fine. The club president and advisor don't think anything of me who only joined halfway through while they're in a daze over the genius rookie."

"...That's also a complicated talk, huh. Well, thanks to that Noumi attracting attention to himself, Taku is on the other hand able to move easily, is what you mean, right...?"

They both gave bittersweet smiles, and returned to walking in silence for about a minute.

Once they saw the intersection where the Oume highway crossed with the Loop 7<sup>[10]</sup>, Haruyuki finally began to talk on his own again.

"Today, I was summoned by Sugeno for the matter of the peeping camera incident ...Of course, I'm not the culprit."

"Obviously. That Sugeno, to summon you without any evidence..."

Stopping Takumu as he began to speak in an angry tone, Haruyuki added something else as if groaning.

“But, I’m in a position where I could easily be the culprit. That entire incident was a trap that Noumi Seiji put together. And I completely fell into it...”

It unexpectedly took a long time to explain the whole story of Noumi’s trap.

Several minutes later after they boarded the EV bus of the Loop 7’s outer circumference and sat next to each other on the back-most seats, Haruyuki had finally finished recounting almost the entire situation he had gotten caught in. The only two points he didn’t speak of were the source of the visual masking program that had been prepared by Noumi, and how he had run into Chiyuri stark naked in the shower room.

However, it seemed that the turning power of the wheels in Takumu’s head perfectly displayed itself this time as well and he instantly deduced the source of the program. Almost immediately after Haruyuki closed his mouth, his best friend took off his blue glasses and pressed hard against the friend with his hand.

“.....I see.”

The voice he let out was terribly smashed up due to strong self-reproach.

“It was that photo, wasn’t it? The group photo of the new kendo club students...So there was a virus attached to it. I’m sorry, Haru, I was negligent in checking it...”

"N-No, it's not your fault."

Haruyuki frantically shook his head many times.

"Most likely, that virus was set to self-destruct the instant the picture was read by the system with the kendo club's enrollments tags. Even if you noticed it, I was the only target. Because from the beginning he was aiming at not Taku, but me..."

"No, I should have thought it was suspicious that the file size was so large. Despite that, I barged into your house when you were suffering and said such awful things to you...Moreover, I even hit you!"

Suddenly, Takumu put back on his glasses and lifted up Haruyuki's right hand with both his hands.

"Uwah, hey, what are you?"

"Haru, hit me. If you don't hit me, I won't be able to forgive myself."

"No, it's fine, it's fine, really!"

Haruyuki was flustered and switched his gaze between Takumu's face and the front of the bus. The housewives and students that were riding along with them were looking at the two of them at the back while either wide-eyed or giggling. Since they couldn't hear their conversation, how on earth did they interpret this situation where the tall and handsome Takumu is bending over and clasping the hand of the small and fat Haruyuki?

However, Takumu kept slowly bringing his face even closer without worrying about the eyes around them at all, so Haruyuki whispered reluctantly.

"Wait, wait a minute, Taku, umm, I too...I too deserve to be hit by you."

"Eh...? What is it?"

Looking at Takumu doubtful and frowning eyes, Haruyuki whispered "Sorry, Chiyu!" in his mind. She had told him to never talk about it, but Haruyuki didn't want to close his mouth and act as if he were looking down on Takumu ever again.

"Umm...When I was tricked by the visual masking and intruded into the female shower room...I ran into Chiyu there."

He needed another two minutes to explain about that matter.

Returning his back to his seat with a thump, Takumu squeezed his brow with his fingers and made a comment that was mixed with a sigh.

"I see...So that's how Chii-chan was related to this..."

"...That's right..."

While suddenly changing and giving a fixed sidelong glance, Takumu raised one finger.

"...For now, I won't ask what you specifically saw, Haru. For Chii-chan's sake as well."

"Ooh...you really are a gentleman, Taku."

"Thank you. —In any case, if that happened, then it would be good to think that that's the contents of Noumi's threat. The video of Haru peeping would certainly be effective against Chii-chan as well."

"Yeah. Rather, it would be even more effective against Chiyu than me...If he saw through that and threatened Chiyu, Noumi really must be a genius in attacking the weak points of others."

Lightly hitting Haruyuki's knee as he let out a sigh, Takumu muttered in a voice that was slightly sharper than before.

"But, that's where his weak point is as well."

"Eh...?"

"Isn't that so? Even if he steals, threatens and makes other people do as he says, that's not the true meaning of having comrades. Even if he temporarily makes Chii-chan...«Lime Bell» obey him, Noumi, «Dusk Taker» is essentially alone."

".....Yeah, that's right."

This time Haruyuki grasped Takumu's hand that was still placed on top of his knee. Its cool and bony texture was indescribably reliable, and Haruyuki was thankful from the bottom of his head that Takumu—«Cyan Pile» was next to him right now.

As soon as they crossed beyond the New Oume Highway and entered the Nerima district, the two of them got off the bus.

They opened their umbrellas, and looked at the line of cars flowing by in front of them for a short while. On the other side of those cars that passed by while emitting low driving sounds from their motors and hydrogen-engines, was the territory ruled over by the Red Legion «Prominence». Currently, though they were in a ceasefire with the Black Legion «Nega Nebulas», that was only in relation to the weekend territory battles, so if the two of them crossed that intersection right now while having their Neuro Linkers connected globally, they would without a doubt be challenged to a duel before even five minutes passed.

After Haruyuki and Takumu nodded at each other, Haruyuki took a deep breath and spoke a voice command.

“Command, Voice Call, Number Zero-Five.”

As he listening to the ringing, sweat slowly spread over his hands.

‘Calm down’, is what he thought to himself, but he couldn’t suppress his nervousness. After all, the person he was calling was a Level Niner who controlled Accel World’s strongest long range-type duel avatar, a crying child that was also the silent «Immobile Fortress», the Red King «Scarlet Rain»—

‘Long time no see, Haruyuki-oniichan♪’

Completely surprised by that high voice in his brain, Haruyuki’s knees jerked down. He somehow remained standing, and then responded out loud instead of with his thoughts for the sake of Takumu next to him.

"Ah, w-we haven't talked in a while, Yuniko-cha..."

'Just Niko is fine, geez-. So, what's wrong, for you to be calling all of a sudden-?'

The Red King Niko only responded to Haruyuki in her «angel-mode» like this on a whim when she was in a good mood. But she was certainly easier to talk to like this, so Haruyuki replied back while speaking fast in order not to miss this chance.

"Eh, umm, there's something we want to talk about...rather, we want to consult with you on something, Niko...If we could possibly meet with you today, right now and talk, that is...u-umm, of course we'll go to Nerima ourselves."

'Hmm16:01, 30 September 2012 (CDT)~. In the rain? Ah, but, I do feel like eating a little cake, one with lots of strawberries on top.'

"I-I'll treat you, I'll treat you. How many should I treat you to?"

'Yay-! In that case, I'll meet you at this store.'

Along with those words, a map opened up in his vision with a whoosh. The flashing dot on it was in the vicinity of the Sakuradai station on the Seibu subway line, which was fairly close to Haruyuki and Takumu's current location.

"S-Sure, I think we can get there in about fifteen minutes from here."

'OK, then see ya later-.'

And then the communication was cut. Raising his head while blowing out a breath at having broken through their first barrier for now, Takumu spoke with a meek expression.

"...I'll take care of the tip."

"...No, it's fine if we split the bill."

"No, today we're meeting with her for my sake, after all..."

The next bus arrived as they argued over it, so they stopped and got on. As soon as they sat down, the two of them severed their Neuro Linkers from the Global Net together.

As it began to move forward with the spinning of its large motor, the bus crossed the New Oume Highway and intruded into the Nerima battlefield where the Red Legion reigned.

The designated store was a cute cake shop that stood within a small-scale shopping area. Seats and tables were placed in one half of the store, and it also seemed like you could eat-in here.

As they closed up their umbrellas in front of the store and brushed off the drops of water, the splashing sound of someone cheerfully stepping in puddles approached them from behind. As Haruyuki turned around, a small fist plunged into his round stomach without giving him any time to avoid it.

"Ugu..."



The one that looked up at the groaning Haruyuki from beneath a bright red umbrella while grinning was a cute girl with large green eyes that twinkled on her small and freckled face. Her soft-looking red hair was thinly tied up on both sides of her head, and she carried a school bag on her back over her deep-blue school uniform. The Neuro Linker attached to her neck was a jewel-like transparent red color.

The girl took a step back and spoke while spinning her umbrella.

“Long time no see, Haruyuki-oniichan. You’re as fat as usual! And...”

She turned her face to the left.

“Long time no see as well, professor. You’re as gloomy as usual-.”

Haruyuki and Takumu both gave stiff smiles and greeted her with a slight bow.

“L-Long time no see. Sorry Niko, for calling you out like this...”

“It’s fine already! More importantly, let’s quickly get to the cake, the cake!”

The two of them hurriedly chased after this girl—the ruler of the Nerima battlefield, the Red King Koudzuki Yuniko, as she snugly threw her folded umbrella into the umbrella stand and rushed into the store.

After they sat down at the back-most table and a cake called the «Strawberry Labyrinth» that was prepared with a dreadful amount of strawberries was placed on their table along with a milk and two coffees, Niko immediately picked up her fork. She stabbed at one of the glossy

and glittering strawberries that were placed at the top of it, and stuffed it in her mouth with a single bite while smiling in apparent happiness.

Looking at Haruyuki who was unconsciously moving his mouth in envy, Niko gave a pure smile and spoke.

"You can't have any!"

"...I-It's fine."

"Aah, just joking, just joking! Come on, say 'aah'."

She stabbed another one with her fork and held it out right in front of Haruyuki's eyes, so he reflexively opened his mouth. However, the strawberry was moved back in full reverse along with the heartless words of "Just joking~", and Haruyuki's teeth only chewed air.

Haruyuki came to his sense thanks to a forced cough from Takumu who saw the scene from next to him, and straightened his back as this was not the time for this kind of thing.

"S...So, Niko. About today's main subject...we called you out in real life like this because, umm, we have a small favour to ask..."

"A svishh? \*SWALLOW\* Shall I listen in exchange for ten strawberries?"

"I'm not sure that's a fair trade, but..."

After briefly looking at Takumu, Haruyuki scratched his head and cut right to the main topic of this conversation.

“Err, I’d like for you to teach the professor here...no, rather, Takumu. Umm...about how to use the «Incarnate System»”

As soon as she heard that—

Niko’s movements suddenly stopped as she was trying to bite into her sixth strawberry.

Her dark green eyes blinked incessantly. She tilted her head slightly and put her fork that was still holding the strawberry back down on the plate, and leaned back against her seat.

In an instant, Haruyuki felt like he heard the ‘GACCHIIIN!’ sound of her circuit switching over. That is, the sound of Niko’s «angel mode» ending.

As her innocent smile of a sixth grade elementary school student vanished and her eyes suddenly narrowed, she spoke shortly in a dangerous voice as if tinged with flames.

“.....you what?”

After shutting up Haruyuki with a single finger as he tried to explain the situation while sweating all over, Niko stood up and spoke to the shop employee that was standing at the counter a little further away.

“We’re borrowing the back room for a while.”

The young female employee who was wearing a grape-colored apron dress silently nodded, and then Niko started briskly walking with the

plate of half-eaten cake in her right hand and her glass of milk in her left hand. Haruyuki and Takumu stared at each other, and reluctantly ran after her while similarly holding their coffee cups.

A narrow corridor extended out from behind the eat-in corner, and halfway down there was a massive door with a tag reading 'PRIVATE' hanging down from it. Naturally it seemed to be locked, but when Niko hit a spot in the air with the hand holding her glass, an unlocking sound rang out.

On the other side of the door was a chic western-style room 6 tatami mats wide. The walls and floor were made of black-colored wooden boarding, a large sofa set was placed in the center, and a door to what appeared to be a toilet could be seen.

After quietly putting her plate and glass onto the low table and operating her virtual desktop in order to check something, Niko suddenly turned around to face Haruyuki and Takumu and shouted.

"Are you idiots!! You don't blurt out about something like the «Incarnate System» all of a sudden in a public space!!"

"Hah, s-sorry!"

Niko glared with eyes that seemed to let out heat rays at Haruyuki and Takumu who were standing bolt upright for a while, but eventually she threw her small body down onto the sofa with a grand sigh and crossed her legs high.

"...Well, you can ease up now. Sit down."

"Y-Yes."

They similarly put their coffee down and sat down next to each other on the sofa facing hers. After picking up another strawberry with the fingers of her right hand, Niko spoke in a slightly lower tone of voice.

"This room is safe 'cause it's sealed. First of all, where did you guys here about the Incarnate System? It wasn't from that woman...Black Lotus, right? It's still too soon for you to have learned about it directly from Lotus. Much too soon."

Before answering that question, there was something that Haruyuki wanted to ask as well. That is, what on earth was this store, and why was there a radio wave-insulated room in a downtown cake shop?

But Niko's expression didn't seem like it would permit him diverting the topic at all. Haruyuki reluctantly shelved the question, took one big deep breath, and began to tell the truth straight to the Red King's face.

"Err...It's a bit of a long story, but...The beginning of the matter started when a Burst Linker entered the Umesato Middle School that we attend as a new first-year student..."

While making an effort to summarize the main points as concisely as possible, Haruyuki continued to explain.

How the new student «Dusk Taker» wasn't registered on the BB matching list even though he was connected to the school's local network.

How he used various schemes in the real world and cornered Haruyuki and the others, and furthermore stole Haruyuki's wings using his special technique «Demonic Commandeer» in Accel World.

How Haruyuki trained for a long time in the Unlimited Neutral Field in order to oppose this strong enemy, and mastered how to use «mind power». How, even though they were just a step away from cornering Dusk Taker thanks to that power, they lost in a reversal of events due to the sudden betrayal of «Lime Bell».

And finally, how the Black King «Black Lotus» was absent on a school trip until next Saturday.

The only things that he didn't mention were Lime Bell's «healing» ability and Dusk Taker's real information—that is, his real name Noumi Seiji.

Even when Haruyuki's explanation ended after nearly fifteen minutes, Niko didn't speak right away. She stuffed her cheeks with the last piece of the cake she had been slowly eating while listening, and after spending time gulping it down, she finally gave a single snort.

"...I see. Dusk Taker...A duel avatar with a robbing ability. If he can use mind power in addition to that, he certainly is beyond your power to deal with."

"Unfortunately, it's just as you say."

Takumu muttered quietly.

“Even though the situation should have been favorable to me in an indoor close-combat fight, I couldn’t oppose him at all after he began to use the Incarnate System. As it is, I’m nothing more than burdensome baggage. That...I don’t like at all.”

Looking at Takumu with a sharp gaze as he pushed his clenched hands against his forehead, Niko let out another sigh.

“So the reason you two personally came out all the way out to Nerima...was for the sake of asking me to teach Pile here how to use the Incarnate System, right?”

“Precisely, Red King.”

When Takumu deeply nodded, Niko skillfully twirled her fork around her finger once and pointed its handle at the two of them in turn.

“Well, I also sympathize with your situation. But...frankly, it’s the trouble of another legion and moreover the legion of another «King». Instead, wouldn’t letting the ostracized «Nega Nebulas» collapse like this and decreasing the number of future troubles be one of the logical decision here?”

Unable to endure this, Haruyuki tried to get a word in edgewise. But Niko’s speech still continued.

“...Let’s assume I said that. Then next, Crow next to you would say this. ‘Even if you say that, didn’t you request for us to help settle the trouble in

your own legion? I think you still owe us a large debt for that.' Or something like that. That's the outline of it, right?"

As he was indeed going to say exactly that, Haruyuki was beaten to the punch and gaped at her.

Niko returned her right hand to her plate and pushed it to a corner of the table, and then put her legs with her rain boots removed on top of the table with a stomp and put her arms behind her head.

"Geez, I thought that such a development would come some day! Even so, to want a lecture on the Incarnate System, that's taking a lot of high interest for payback..."

After staring fixedly at Niko's face as she sighed, Haruyuki unconsciously leaned his body forward.

"Eh, t-then, you'll do it?"

"Can't be helped. If I don't, it'll be a cause of offence that'll make it seem like I go back on my debts. Damn, if I'd known it'd be like this, I would have ordered a «Royal Palace» instead of a «Strawberry Labyrinth»."

Though he heard such abusive language, Haruyuki couldn't suppress the hot thing that spread within his chest.

As he thought, Accel World didn't exist simply to fight everyone else as «duel opponents». Even if they were in the position of enemies, there was definitely something more important than that. That's right—the bonds of friendship.



Not knowing how to express his overflowing feelings, Haruyuki threw himself down onto the table before him and tightly hugged the feet wrapped in white socks there in a daze. As soon as he did so—

“Gyaah!! Hey, why do you always grab my feet, you hentai!”

Her other foot kick out as she angrily said that and buried itself into Haruyuki’s cheek.

The first order from the instructor Niko who had steam coming out of her head was [Take out the plug underneath the table and connect it to your Neuro Linkers].

While tilting his head in puzzlement, he groped with his hands, and there were indeed several XSB plugs sticking out from a hub-like device with a winding mechanism there. For the time being, he pulled one out at the same time as Takumu, but he felt a little resistance towards connecting to an unidentified circuit.

But Niko spoke while casually inserting a plug as well.

“There’s nothing much I can simply teach you. Since this is sealed off from radio waves, we have no choice to but use a direct cable to connect globally!”

She was angry, so they hurriedly followed her example. A connection warning appeared in Haruyuki’s vision, and then vanished.

After running the fingers of both her hands in the air for a while, Niko looked at Haruyuki and Takumu in turn, and spoke in a stern tone.

"Alright, it's almost 5 PM. I have to return to my dormitory at 6 o'clock, so the amount of time I can stay with you guys is about thirty minutes until 5:30, which is five hundred hours in Accel world...about twenty days. You'll have to acquire the technique to use mind power only in actual combat. If that isn't possible, I won't be able to look after you any further than that."

Takumu immediately responded to the Red King's cool-headed words.

"No...just one week in internal time. That will be enough."

"Ho-oh. You talk big, professor. I'll properly test to see if that resolution is the real thing."

Grinning, Niko leaned her delicate body that was wrapped in a blue jacket and pleated skirt against the sofa.

"Then, we'll dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field at the count of zero. Ready?"

Haruyuki and Takumu fixed their backs and heads against the sofa just as she did, and answered "Yes".

"Here we go. Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

Haruyuki closed his eyelids and took a deep breath, and then—

One second after he heard Nico's count reach one, they shouted in a loud voice the command to fly into the true accelerated world.

## Chapter 5

The first thing he felt was a merciless chill, as if the season had reversed to three months back.

He timidly opened his eyes, and only colors that went from white to blue expanded out across his entire vision.

It was snow—and ice. All of the surrounding terrain was formed out of thick ice, and pure white snow thinly covered it all. The whole sky was filled with milk-colored clouds.

“The «Ice and Snow» stage, huh. I don’t like this one.”

After Haruyuki looked to his right where the voice came from, a girl-type avatar with ruby-like vivid crimson armor stood there while shaking the long antennas on her head.

Her size was slightly smaller than that of Silver Crow. Whether it was her face-mask with sparkling round and cute lenses or her body which had almost no sharp edges, she could only be seen as a harmless mascot character.

But this duel avatar was the body of the long-distance firepower demon that silences even crying children, the boss of the legion «Prominence», Scarlet Rain.

The Red King looked up at Haruyuki and spoke in a seemingly dissatisfied voice.

"Hey Crow, is that metal armor cold resistant?"

"Y-Yes, on the whole..."

Nodding and shouting "Unfair!!", she suddenly scooped up some snow at her feet into her hands and struck it against Haruyuki's back.

"Uhyarue!"

"Come on, make this body rust! Come on, come on!"

"Hyoguu! W-When I say resistant, it's only in terms of numerical damage, the c-cold itself is still the same!"

As he hopped away to escape from the cold-feeling attack, a magnificent cough was heard from a little ways away. As he turned to look in that direction at the same time as Niko, a large avatar with dark blue armor was standing there with his arms folded. Of course, it was Takumu—Cyan Pile.

"O-Oh, that's right, that's right."

Scarlet Rain moved away from Haruyuki while seeming a little embarrassed, and also coughed.

"For the time being, I'll say welcome to our Nerima area. If it weren't for this kind of situation, you'd be immediately attacked and driven out, though!"

She quickly spread her arms wide, so Haruyuki looked around at his surroundings once again.

The first thing he felt was that the wideness of the sky. He immediately understood the reason for that feeling. The three of them were currently standing in a not very wide space that stood at an intersection of frozen roads, but almost no large geographical objects that could obstruct their vision were within sight.

Only, he could see a slightly tall ice palace that was a little ways away from them to the northwest. When he compared it to a map of the real world in his mind, it was probably the Nerima District Government Office. In addition, he noticed a huge tower that grew hazier as if melting the higher it went, far away in the sky to the east. That was probably the Sunshine City in Ikebukuro within the Toshima district, where they had fought «Chrome Disaster». There were also no «Enemies» or other Burst Linkers within sight.

Haruyuki sucked a deep breath of cold air into his chest and then spoke.

“This is a spacious and comfortable area, isn’t it!”

Just then, a howling flying snowball hit Silver Crow’s helmet right in the center.

“S-Sorry that there isn’t anything here! We don’t have anything like your Suginami!!”

Shouting with her antennas standing on end, Niko turned away in another direction and continued.

"Ah geez, the preface is over! We're quickly starting the class! You guys sit down over there!"

Sensing that his words had pressed the anger switch of Nerima residents, Haruyuki looked at Takumu and then they both hurriedly sat down in the center of the intersection.

As she folded her arms and raised herself up to her full height while briskly walking in front of the two of them, Scarlet Rain's presence—suddenly changed.

The childishness she had been given off until now evaporated without a trace. The light within her lenses became sharper, and it felt like her avatar's body itself became bigger.

"I'll say this first."

The voice she let out also had a tone that was clearer and more frigid than the stage's cold wind.

"Before I teach you about the «Incarnate System», you have to promise me one thing."

Looking one by one at Haruyuki and Takumu as they gulped, Niko declared clearly.

"You must never use an Incarnate technique outside of a situation where you are attacked with an Incarnate technique. Promise that you will uphold this on your pride as Burst Linkers!"

".....U-Umm, is that because it's cowardly to use it otherwise?"

When Haruyuki unconsciously asked that, Niko immediately denied it.

"No. It's because, in this game, your true enemy is yourself. Because ultimately, mind power exists not just to defeat enemies, but to confront your own weakness."

Haruyuki and Takumu couldn't press the issue and say no. Besides, they by no means wanted to learn about the Incarnate System in order to win duels by using it. They just wanted to fight against the mind power-user Dusk Taker.

Haruyuki and Takumu looked at each other for an instant, and then cried out "Yes!" at the same time.

"Alright. If you break this promise, I'll make you experience a horrifying day in order to take responsibility for it, after all."

After nodding his head many times at high speed, Haruyuki cautiously asked an additional question.

"...U-Umm, but. I think it's difficult to distinguish between the appearance of a normal technique and an Incarnate technique...I feel that I can't tell if I'm not hit by it..."

"Hey, you've already learned the bare basics, haven't you?"

Niko let out an amazed voice, and struck out the index finger of her right hand with a snap.



"Listen well, Incarnate techniques have two big differences with special techniques...First, even if you use it, the special technique gauge doesn't decrease!"

"Ah...yeah, c-certainly, that's true..."

Haruyuki nodded once, but then immediately the next question gushed forth in him.

"...But then, what do you do if you're in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where the opponent's gauge can't be seen?"

Then Niko stuck out a second finger and—

"That is the second difference! It shines!"

"S-Shines?"

Haruyuki shouted back that far too vague word. Certainly, when mentioned it, Haruyuki's «sword of light» shined white as its name suggested and Noumi's «wave surge of nothingness» also emitted a purple light, but was that a system-like phenomenon that was common to all Incarnate techniques?

Hearing Haruyuki's uncertain voice, Niko gave a thin smile.

"It isn't something vague like «determination» or «fighting spirit». Listen well, when using Incarnate techniques, our consciousness and duel avatars are connected to an «image control system». When an excess of imagination passes through the circuit, the system overflows and the

irregular signals are processed as a particle-like effect without substance—in other words, as light. Specifically...like this.”

Niko tightly clenched her still struck-out right hand.

Suddenly, her arm from her fist to near her elbow burst into red flames, no, it wasn't exactly flames. It was a crimson light covering and shaking over her arm.

“...It also depends on the strength of your mind power, but if it's a strong image that can be used in battle, it will definitely shine like this. We call this «Over-Ray<sup>[11]</sup>». Listen well, the phenomenon of an avatar continuously emitting light like this never occurs except when activating the Incarnate System. Since even if special techniques emit light, it's only for an instant.”

Abruptly putting out the flames, Niko spoke to sum it up.

“In other words, if an enemy avatar shines with an aura like just now and moreover their gauge doesn't decrease, that's an Incarnate technique. But...even in such a situation, if you can run away, then run away. Fight back with mind power only in battles that you can't concede no matter what. Understood!?”

—Naturally, they had the question of ‘why does it have to be restricted so strongly?’. But, Niko, who was waiting for their reply, was surrounded by an intense intimidating air that was truly like that of a King, so Haruyuki didn't question it any further.

"...Yes, understood!"

He shouted that out in a single voice along with Takumu, and the Red King finally seemed satisfied and nodded.

"Good. Then, with this the preface is over."

Folding her arms in front of her flat chest, she gave a single cough and then—

Niko suddenly said some unexpected words.

"Right now, you guys should be thinking this. 'Since its use is so insistently restricted, the «Incarnate System» must possess a terrible power and if mastered anything can be done.' But, that's a big mistake."

"...Eh.....?"

Feeling far more surprised at the contents of her words than the Red King's intimidating air, Haruyuki unconsciously raised his voice.

"N-No way. Mind power should be able to make the impossible possible..."

"No. Listen well, mind power is never an almighty power. Drive this into your brains first."

After declaring that in a tone that made one think of hot flames, Niko gave an imperceptible smile over her mouth and continued.

"You seem dissatisfied, Crow. You don't agree?"

Swallowing his saliva, Haruyuki nervously nodded.

"Y...Yes. Because, I...experienced just how amazing mind power is with my own body. Both by being hit by that power and by attacking with it myself."

"Hmph, you seem rather confident. Okay, stand up."

Obedying her raised index finger, he timidly stood up. While feeling Takumu's gaze, he took several steps forward.

"Now then, show us that power of yours."

Those were the words Haruyuki had expected, so he had already been prepared for it the moment he stood up. After answering with just "All right", he stepped up to one of the blocks of ice scattered about close by.

'My Incarnate technique will surely be nothing special when seen by the King Niko, but—let's show her something a step above her expectations', such thoughts and feelings also existed within Haruyuki. The «sword of light», which Haruyuki had mastered by facing off against the cliff that exceeded the 300 meters of the Old Tokyo Tower over the course of a week, had also certainly been able to pierce through the «wave surge of nothingness» of the formidable enemy Dusk Taker.

Stopping one meter in front of a transparent blue block of ice that was about the same size as himself, Haruyuki lowered his waist. It was a suitable distance that absolutely could not be reached if he threw out an ordinary punch.

He folded his right hand's thumb into his palm and straightened together his remaining four fingers. While twisting his upper body to the right, he prepared his blade-shaped hand sword at his side.

—My hand is a sword. A sword that pierces through everything at the speed of light.

The sound of the cold wind blowing through the stage went off far away and disappeared. The surrounding scenery also sank into dimness, and only the center point of the blue block of ice stood out clearly in his vision.

*\*iiiiIIN\** Minute vibrations were transmitted through his body, and a white light, what Niko called «Over-Ray», appeared on the tip of his piercing hand. It soon spread from his wrist almost all the way to his elbow.

".....Shi!!"

With a momentary fervor, Haruyuki made his waist rotate and then stick out his hand sword straight forward.

*\*SHUKIIIN!!\** Along with a high and clear sound, a sharp white light was sent out from his extended right arm, and sunk into the middle of the block of ice.

A beat passed by after the light vanished, and the ice let out a cracking sound—And then the huge block split apart right and left from a vertical crack in the middle and fell down. With a solemn impact, thinly-piled snow went flying through the air.

As he let out a breath and raised his body back up, Haruyuki was greeted by Niko's applause when he turned around. Takumu wholeheartedly banged together his left hand and right arm's «Pile Driver», and Niko also clapped her hands without reserve.

"Heh, that was a more decent technique than I expected. Impressive."

As Haruyuki scratched his head and said "Oh no, I wouldn't go that far" in response to the Red King's comment, his movements were stopped as her words continued.

"—For the first step of the first step, that is."

".....F-First step?"

"Of course! What you used just now was one of the four basic types of Incarnate techniques, «Attack Range Expansion<sup>[12]</sup>»."

".....B-Basic?"

After beckoning at the dumbfounded Haruyuki who was repeating her words and making him sit in his original place, Niko coughed and then continued.

"Listen well, it may be called by the exaggerated name «mind power», but in the end this is only a single logic that operates within the Brain Burst program...In other words, it is an operation that functions according to the Diver's image power. To put it another way, due to one's intense subjective impression, this world's God...the system mistakenly believes it to be reality."

After taking a short pause to breathe there, the scarlet avatar spoke slowly in order to engrave her words into the minds of her two students.

“But, in order to actually cause this phenomenon, an image that is strong enough to deceive even yourself is needed before the system can be deceived. A «belief» that surpasses the level of imagination power. And two things are needed in order to conceive that belief in your heart. «Experience» that has been instilled over an overwhelming amount of time, and a «desire» whose source is an absolute lack of something. An image that isn't backed by these two things will never become reality.”

“.....Experience, and a desire.....”

Nodding slightly at Haruyuki as he mumbled that in a hoarse voice, Niko stepped back several steps and spoke while loosely hanging her arms at her sides.

“—This is a huge service. I'll demonstrate it just once, so look carefully.”

The instant they heard that, Haruyuki and Takumu corrected their sitting postures with a jolt while sitting in seiza<sup>[13]</sup> position. In order to miss nothing, they opened their eyes so wide that they were practically spilling out from their helmets.

The smallest-sized female avatar turned her body towards the south side of the intersection and—

Suddenly, a pale red flame-like aura appeared on her left fist just as it did a while ago.

“This is the first of the four types of basic techniques, «Attack Range Expansion».”

With a voice empty of fighting spirit, she threw forward her left arm at such a fast speed that it became hazy. The air resounded like a whip, and a long straight line of flames was etched into the air.

Immediately after, a wall of ice that was 30 meters away spouted out pure white vapor into the air with a ‘BOSHUU’ sound. When that vapor had scattered to the winds, a huge hole of a size that a single person could slip through was visible in the middle of the wall. The color of the smooth inner wall had changed from blue to black, and it was impossible to tell just how deep the hole went.

The still-speaking voice reached the ears of the two dumbfounded boys whose eyes had peeled.

“And this is the second basic technique, «Movement Ability Expansion<sup>[14]</sup>».”

The aura of flames wrapped around her small legs this time. Her avatar quickly sank its body, and then her form suddenly disappeared.

No, Haruyuki’s eyes could just barely see a hazy silhouette. She was behind him. When he quickly turned in that direction, Niko was standing there with her hands against her hips. She had easily moved 30 meters from where she originally stood. When looking closely, a thin track that was melting and raising pale white smoke was etched into the icy road surface. Without giving them the time to catch their breaths, Niko’s figure





disappeared a second time leaving only a 'SHUWAH!' sound. She surrounded Haruyuki and Takumu with a circular white track and then returned to her original position.

It was overwhelming.

The range of her long-distance attack endlessly exceeded that of Silver Crow's «sword of light», and moreover the speed of her side-dash easily surpassed the charge of Ash Roller's bike.

While clenching both his hands in order to hold down his enormous shock, Haruyuki didn't overlook a thing and waited for the next demonstration.

—But.

The scarlet avatar nimbly spread out her hands and spoke.

"That's all."

"B-But."

The one who raised his voice was Takumu.

"You said before that there were four kinds of basic techniques..."

"There are. The third is «Attack Power Expansion<sup>[15]</sup>». And the fourth is «Armor Density Expansion<sup>[16]</sup>». But...**I can't use either of those.**"

"Y-You can't use them!? Can't use a basic technique...a King like Niko can't!?"

Glaring at Haruyuki who had reflexively shouted that, but without raising her tone, Niko explained.

“That’s right. That’s because...I myself know that I’m not that strong. That is the «scar of the heart» that was used as the source of this avatar...of Scarlet Rain.”

Her cute mask turned straight up towards the snowy sky. The Red King, who was one of the strongest people that ruled over Accel World and who possessed terrifying long-distance firepower, spoke in a monologue with a voice that somehow felt lonely.

“.....I’m scared of the world. The closer I get to it, the more it hurts me in every way possible. Brain Burst consumed my craving to keep the world away from me, and produced this avatar. Scarlet Rain’s long-distance firepower is like the spines of a hedgehog. The me inside it is just a weak brat without any power...That’s why I cannot strengthen the offensive power or defense power of this avatar’s body through mind power. Do you understand, Crow, Pile? That is the absolute limit of the Incarnate System.”

For a while, only the sound of the cold wintry wing thinly flowed through this world of ice and snow.

Haruyuki cast his eyes down deeply and reflected upon the Red King’s words in his mind.

In the real world, he couldn’t say that he knew very much about Niko—Koudzuki Yuniko. Without knowing the faces of her real parents, she went

to an elementary boarding school that served as a shelter institution. That was all that he had been told. But, her early life had surely wounded Niko so severely that Haruyuki couldn't imagine it. To the point that, even if she was disguised in an avatar of the virtual world, it was impossible for her to believe in her own strength.

'In that case, I.' Haruyuki continued to think.

—It's all too clear that this avatar of mine is a projection of my longing of «wanting to escape from this place». A hand for seeking what I can't reach. Wings for escaping to a place where no one else can go. That's why I was able to master «Attack Range Expansion» mind power and recharge the gauge of «Gale Thruster» with «Movement Ability Expansion» mind power. And for the same reason, I probably can't use «Armor Density Expansion» that raises defensive power.

—But. Even if that's how it is. I want to believe...in the words that that person repeatedly told me, 'You can change'...

"...In other words, it's something like this."

The quiet mutter that Takumu let out broke the persistently long silence. Haruyuki raised his head with a start and looked at Cyan Pile next to him.

"...The type of mind power that one can learn is restricted to what complies with the nature of each duel avatar. Conversely speaking, even if one masters mind power, things that one cannot do simply cannot be done."

“That’s right.”

Giving that short affirmation, Niko then turned to look at Haruyuki.

“For example, even the «Attack Range Expansion» that Crow performed earlier is originally an unnecessary technique for Silver Crow since he had speed and flight ability from the start. Well, it is the optimal training for mastering how to use the image control circuit. The same can be said for the technique I just showed you. It showily opened up a big hole in the ice like that, but even if I didn’t use any image concentration, with this thing...”

She tapped the gun holster on her waist.

“If I used this, I could much more easily make a much bigger hole. Then, why are Incarnate techniques necessary?”

Staring at Niko as her words cut off, Haruyuki tilted his head and wracked his brain for an answer. But, perhaps as expected, Takumu answered clearly while sitting upright in seiza position.

“That’s because an Incarnate attack can only be defended by an Incarnate attack, right?”

“Exactly. It’s because the image control system determines the outcome of attack and defense faster than the motion command system can order the game’s system. It’s like the enemy having a laser rifle even though you yourself only have a leather shield and a club. If it’s the Professor here who received such an Incarnate attack from Dusk Taker without

knowing anything, you should understand the unreasonableness of it very well.”

“...That fact really did strike home to me. That attack of Dusk Taker’s that could scrape off anything with his claws was probably an «Attack Power Expansion»-type, but it felt as he could beat an edged tool with just his bare fist...”

Letting out a snort, Niko put both her hands on her hips and spoke.

“In short, if you’re going to seriously fight with Dusk Taker, you absolutely need to at least learn either «attack» or «defense»...Although we just dived into here and finally arrived at the main objective...”

Then, the Red King gained a rare tone of slight hesitation in her words.

“...Just as you said before, there is almost no hope of mastering a type of mind power that is contrary to the attributes of your avatar, no matter how much you train. So, there is something I have to ask here no matter what. —Pile, does your avatar have the attribute of «close range» or «long range»?”

“Heh!?”

The one who raised his voice wildly like that was Haruyuki. After looking at both Niko and Takumu, he spoke in a dumfounded voice.

“I-It’s already decided that he’s close-range...right? After all, such a vivid «close-range blue» avatar is not easily seen even in the Shinjuku area.”

"I also think that, but even so, there's that Enhanced Armament of his..."

"Ah....."

Saying that, Haruyuki once again stared at the huge «Pile Driver» that wrapped around Cyan Pile's right arm from the tip to the elbow.

This Enhanced Armament shot out a built-in 1-meter long strong steel stake at a violent speed. Its piercing power was so great it had once torn apart the metal-color Silver Crow with just one attack in the past.

It could still be just barely thought of as a close-range armament up to that point, but the problem was Cyan Pile's strongest special technique «Lightning Cyan Spike». That technique changed the stake into a beam of light and fired it. Its range easily exceeded 50 meters, and it was clearly classified as a long-range attack.

After staring at it unconsciously for several seconds—

Haruyuki raised his face up with a start, and subsequently turned his eyes away greatly.

A duel avatar was created with the scars of the heart as a source. Cyan Pile's appearance and his right arm's Enhanced Armament should represent the fears and desires that Takumu held. Haruyuki had decided in his heart that it was something that shouldn't be inquired into.

However—

"It's all right, Haru."

Takumu said that in a quiet voice, so Haruyuki timidly raised his head.

"...T-Taku..."

"Since the moment I heard of the Incarnate System from you last night, I somehow expected it. That in order to master it, I would have to directly face my scars..."

"T-Then, I'll leave here now."

"No, I want you to hear it too. Because it's something I really should have said much, much earlier..."

Precisely correcting his sitting posture, Takumu looked first straight at Haruyuki and then Niko, and then spoke.

"—I think that this Cyan Pile is essentially a close range-type, as expected. Then, why was it created with a long range-type initial equipment...? That is most likely because my fear is embodied here."

"...Fear...?"

Just what on earth did Takumu—Mayuzumi Takumi, who seemed to have looks, ability and everything else, fear?

Facing Haruyuki who was listening attentively while dumbfounded, Takumu spoke the following words.

"From third to fifth grade in elementary school, I was severely bullied. I also thought of jumping down from the roof of our apartment building more than once or twice."



".....!!"

Haruyuki's entire body froze with a start. 'No way, impossible, for that Takumu to be bullied'...such thoughts whirled around violently in his brain. As if consoling Haruyuki instead, Takumu continued in a quiet voice.

"It's understandable that you didn't notice either. I was bullied neither at school nor at our apartment building, but at the kendo class that I attended at that time. I...although it may be immodest of me to say it, I believe that I had fairly good aptitude in kendo. I seemed to rapidly master the techniques from when I started learning in the spring of third grade. My rank also quickly rose, and I reached the point where I won against the older kids. But...it was when the second semester ended. When the teacher was absent from the dojo, a group of older students suggested practicing their thrust technique."

"T-Thrust, you say, but..."

"Of course, that's prohibited until high school. I said no to them. But, the practice was just an excuse. They bound my arms from behind my back and they thrust a bamboo sword into my throat over, and over, and over again. I was horribly afraid...I cried out 'Stop, release me' from beneath my face guard. Before long my voice also stopped coming out...When they finally let me go, I had a terrible bruise even beneath my protector. Even now..."

Cyan Pile raised his right hand and traced the left side of his neck with a jerk.

"...There remains a scar here that won't disappear. There were similar incidents repeatedly after that. But I didn't quit the class. No, I couldn't quit. I couldn't say it at all to my parents...nor Haru and Chii-chan either. That I quit because I was bullied."

".....Taku...I didn't...notice at all..."

With a squeezed-out voice, Haruyuki somehow managed to say just that. But, Takumu lightly shook his head as if to say 'It's fine'.

"Naturally there was also the choice of consulting with my parents and the teacher. But since there were no social cameras in that dojo and our Neuro Linkers were removed according to the teacher's policy, there was no proof...No, before that, I think I had lost even the energy to resist them. Along the road to the dojo, I would wish countless times to just disappear...The bullying continued until the guy that was the principal offender became a junior high student and left the class. When that guy was no longer there, I was so glad..."

Those words that were issued along with a sigh were something that Haruyuki was able to sympathize with as if it were himself.

However, Takumu's story didn't end there. What continued after a muttered "But" was an unexpected confession.

“But, as soon as I entered sixth grade, I noticed that I had certain habit. Even though I was fine when I practiced, when it was a match, I would reflexively protect myself with my bamboo sword when the opponent’s sword was pointed at my throat. It was a fatal gap in my actions. I persistently tried to cure it, but the more I concentrated on the match, the more that habit came out...I was deeply ingrained with the fear of receiving those terrible thrusts on my throat from that day. Even so, since thrusting is still forbidden in the rules, I’ve been able to somehow hide it until now, but when I become a high school student, I probably won’t be able to keep doing so in direct matches. I surely can’t endure receiving thrusts and using them myself.”

After cutting off his words there and looking one by one at the completely silent Niko, at Haruyuki next to him, and finally at the Enhanced Armament on his right arm, Takumu calmly brought his story to a finish.

“This «Pile Driver» is the manifestation of my fear...and also anger towards thrusting. I wanted to line up those guys that bullied me back then and pierce their throats with this steel stake one after another...That’s why my duel avatar, even though it’s a close range-type, was created not with a sword but with a piercing weapon, Red King.”

His last words were aimed at the silently standing scarlet avatar.

Finished with listening to this long monologue, Niko finally nodded once and spoke.

"I clearly heard your «scar». So the reason the majority of your potential was poured into the an Enhanced Armament that has the opposite attribute of your avatar was because of something like that...In that case, Pile, what opposes you is your own stake. If you can overcome that fear, you will be able to conceive an «Attack Power Expansion» mind power in your avatar as a true close range-type."

After declaring that in a severe tone, Niko turned to Haruyuki and asked him.

"...So then, me and the Professor will enter into practical training, but...what will you do, Crow? Will you stay here with us?"

"Eh...umm."

After Haruyuki intensely blinked away tears underneath his silver helmet at having understood these two, he answered.

"...No, I think it would probably be better if I left you two here. The reason is...I can't say it very well, but..."

"Thank you, Haru."

Takumu said that and nodded, so Haruyuki stood up after awkwardly laughing. He looked at Niko and added one more thing.

"Also, I think I'll try investigating a little by myself after this. Into the mechanism that lets Dusk Taker not appear on the Matching List."

“Certainly, that’s something that can’t be ignored either. If you think about it, it’s an even bigger problem than his Incarnate attacks. Also, I feel like I’ve heard a similar story recently...”

“Eh...R-Really!?”

As Haruyuki sidled up to Niko without thinking, the Red King forced back Haruyuki with a jerk and shouted.

“Like I said, why do you keep approaching me like that!? It’s just a rumor, a rumor! Since there’s someone who knows more about it than me, ask that person!”

“Heh? Wh...Where?”

He unconsciously looked around at their surroundings, but of course no one else was there.

“You’ll understand when you log out. The log-out portal is on the first floor of the Nerima District Government Office.”

“Y-Yes...”

Niko coldly shook her hands at him now that his business here was done, so Haruyuki started to walk away—but.

“Oops, wait a minute!”

He was called to a stop like that, and he turned around once more.

“Y-Yes?”

"Ah, about that «Attack Range Expansion» Incarnate technique you used before. Does it have a name?"

"N-Name!?"

Haruyuki exclaimed in a high-pitched voice at that unexpected question. Then, Niko thrust her index finger at him and shouted rapidly.

"It isn't for a childish reason like being cool! It's guts and spirit that hardens the image and determines how strong an Incarnate technique is. The ideal is to be able to naturally let it out just like an original ability you have or a special technique. Earlier, it took about three seconds from when you started preparing to when you activated it. That's way too slow! That's why you first name the technique, turning the name into a trigger when you speak it and condensing the image. Come on, name it, name it now!!"

\*GA——H!\* Shouting that, Haruyuki considered it in a panic while looking at his hands.

"Err...blade...sword...light...T-Then."

Raising his eyes back up, he said,

"La...«Laser Sword<sup>[17]</sup>», then."

"Puh, lame."

As she laughed at the name that Haruyuki had desperately thought of and was super-cool by his standards, he reflexively retorted back.

"T-Then what about those names «Range» and «Movement» that you used before!"

"That was for teaching, idiot."

Hearing a familiar cough echo here, Haruyuki hastily looked at Takumu and scratched his head.

"No, umm. Err...Taku, uh...do your best!"

As Haruyuki awkwardly raised up his right thumb, Cyan Pile stood up and returned the same gesture as he spoke.

"You too, Haru. But, try not to do too much reckless behaviour."

"I know. I'll report back against tonight."

As they nodded to each other, Haruyuki ran several steps towards the Nerima District Government Office this time, before turning around just one last time and shouting.

"Niko! ...Thank you!!"

The voice that came back to him was the same healthily abusive voice as always.

"Shut up, just leave already!!"

## Chapter 6

From the log-out portal point that was installed in the lobby of the Nerima Public Office, Haruyuki returned to the real world.

After taking a deep breath, he raised his body from the sofa. Looking beside him while unplugging the XSB cable, he saw Takumu there with his eyes closed beneath his glasses and breathing softly.

Right now, the consciousness of his friend should be doing nothing but desperate training within a different time-rate from Haruyuki. No, it couldn't be described with simple words like training. Takumu was directly facing his heart's scars that had been pressed down to the bottom of his heart for many years and was trying to overcome them.

"...Taku, do your best."

Haruyuki mumbled that with the lowest volume and then stood up.

On the opposite side of the table, the girl that was dressed in an elementary school uniform there wasn't actually sleeping with an innocent sleeping face, but—he looked over at her. Haruyuki said "Thank you" inside his mind to that figure which seemed like a true angel only when like this, and then opened the massive door and went out into the hallway from the radio-wave isolated room.

—At that moment.

"This way. Hurry."



A voice came down from above his head, and he raised his eyes with a start.

Standing there was, without a doubt, the shop employee that had carried the drinks and cake to the table of Haruyuki and the others a while ago.

Dark cherry-colored long skirt and coat that swelled out at the shoulders. Over that, a snow-white apron that was decorated with moderate lace. A white Katyusha<sup>[18]</sup> on her head, and a thin ribbon over her chest that was of a brighter crimson red than her clothes.

In short dressed in the so-called maid uniform, the shop employee was younger than he had thought when he had seen her from a distance. Though she was quite tall, she was probably a high school student. Her bangs were exactly divided at the middle and her hair was braided all the way to the bottom of her shoulders behind her head. Her features were sharp, and her eyes that were thinly turned up increased the sharpness of her impression by two-fold.

...Is it because I came out early? Will Niko and Taku be okay like this?

Even as Haruyuki thought that, he simply nodded for the time being and tried to escape to the interior of the shop from the hallway. But.

"Not that way."

As she said that, she caught the back collar of his blazer with a jerk and his head was thrown back suddenly.

The shock of 'What was with this poor treatment by a shop employee of a cake shop and who moreover looked like a maid-san!?' that he felt was amplified dozens of times by her next words.

"We're going out from the back. Follow me, **Silver Crow.**"

".....Wha...!?"

While screaming "This is bad I've been discovered in real life eeeeeeeeeee" in his mind, Haruyuki reflexively tried to run away, but because his collar was being held tight it only strangled his neck further. Despite her slender figure, she had a frightful grip.

"You don't have to escape, and it's too late even if you run away now."

As she said that with a thinly-pitched husky voice, Haruyuki reluctantly gave up on escaping and turned around.

The maid-san stared down at Haruyuki while completely expressionless, and then after finally letting go of the collar of his blazer, she spoke in a completely casual tone.

"Scarlet Rain told me to cooperate in your investigation. My name is «Blood Leopard». When addressing me, call me Leopard not Blood. If you shorten it, use Pard not Leopa."

"Wai...t, plea...se wait a moment."

Haruyuki somehow managed to get just those words out and tried hard to understand the situation.

—Ask the person who knows more about it.

The Red King Niko had certainly said that to Haruyuki just before he logged out. But, Haruyuki had naturally assumed that he would only meet that person in Accel World.

But, it seemed that the maid-san here that had exposed her real form before him in the real world was the Burst Linker belonging to the Red Legion that was the «knowledgeable person» that Niko had spoken of and moreover was a shop employee here at the same time, so in other words, this place was not only a cake shop but also something like the base of «Prominence»...

As he somehow thinking up to that point, the maid-san that was changed to being called «Blood Leopard» which was abbreviated to «Pard-san» spoke as if growing impatient.

“I waited two seconds. Think about the rest while moving.”

Then, her long skirt softly waved as she turned around and began to walk unflinching towards the door that was visible at the end of the dark hallway.

Haruyuki no longer had any other choice but to follow the command of the mysterious older woman.

The door seemed to be a back entrance, and it came out next to a garage that was built at the back of the cake shop.

The maid-san operated something with her fingers in the air, and the shutters that faced the road began to open automatically. «Blood Leopard» seemed to be quite a hasty character, and she stuck out one finger at Haruyuki as if the time to wait was also precious.

“The only information that I’ve heard from master is this. There is a Burst Linker who connects to a local network yet doesn’t appear on the Matching List. You want to see through the method he uses to do that. That’s how it is, K<sup>[19]</sup>?”

As she asked for confirmation using a shortened phrase that reduced the already short word «OK» by half, he nodded in response.

“Ye...Yeah, that’s exactly it.”

“Although this is my first time hearing of list interception, I’ve also recently heard a rumor about a «Local Net Troll».”

When the maid-san suddenly said that, Haruyuki reflexively leaned forward and asked impatiently.

“L-Local Net Troll...? What kind of person is that?”

“I don’t know much about it. It seems that, in a certain network, a Burst Linker that intrudes into there but disappears before anyone can think of challenging him to a rematch has appeared.”

“W-Where is that «certain network»!?”

“Akihabara<sup>[20]</sup>.”

This time he pulled his body backward when he heard that brief response that was returned immediately.

"...A-Akihabara is, if I remember right, the territory of the Yellow Legion..."

"Yes."

Looking at the maid-san who nodded as if it were nothing, he gulped deeply.

It was three months ago that the Red King Niko had fallen into an instant predicament due to the vicious plot of the Yellow King that controlled the Legion «Crypt Cosmic Circus», «Yellow Radio». Haruyuki and the others of Nega Nebulas who had been accompanying her had also been dragged into the ambush by dozens of other players and went through a tough time, so you could say that currently Nega Nebulas was strongly opposed to the Yellow Legion the most out of the six great legions.

Although he very much wanted to go collect information, Haruyuki also lacked a little of the courage to enter the territory of such an enemy, and so he bit his lip.

—But, this isn't a situation where I can afford to be scared here. It's also fortunate that I was told that there is a clue in Akihabara. Besides, if I go into the gallery of an ordinary duel there and indirectly heard about that rumor, I may not have to encounter such a scary sight...

While thinking that, Haruyuki tried to muster a tiny amount of courage.

Then, Blood Leopard, who has been silent for several seconds, said a short sentence.

"K. We're going now."

"Heh?"

...By "going", did she mean to Akihabara? This person is also coming along? Surely not with that appearance...?

Once again grabbing the nape of the surprised and blinking Haruyuki's neck and saying nothing as if to say she didn't intend to say anything further here, the maid-san walked into the garage as her half-boots resounded on the ground.

Enshrined within there while releasing an overwhelming presence was—

A huge electric motorbike whose full length was more than two meters.

It could only be thought of as «something» completely different from an electric scooter that ran about peacefully. Its entire body was wrapped in a glossy black and red cowl, and the front and back wheels with their own in-built motors were astonishingly thick. Even though the active suspension arms were already so rugged that the armor could be seen, its whole form was so smooth and low that it seemed to crawl on the ground.

"Ama...zing....."

As Haruyuki unconsciously spoke out in awe, Pard-san threw something round at him from a rack on the wall. The thing he reflexively caught and looked down at was a red open-type helmet.

".....Yes?"

Staring fixedly at him and approaching at a brisk pace as he didn't understand the meaning of this, Blood Leopard picked the helmet up again from him.

\*GAPO\* She put the helmet on Haruyuki's head. Continuing, she skillfully fastened the harness under his jaw with a single hand.

After also putting on her own black full-face helmet over her Katyusha and shaking out her overflowing braid, she once again grabbed the nape of Haruyuki's neck and made him sit down on the large bike's tandem seat with a thump.

...Impossible. No way. Wait. Wait a minute.

Soon after he shouted that out in his mind, the maid-san straddled the bike while still in her maid clothes and grabbed the rough handles with delicate hands that had leather gloves on them.

"Starting."

As she seemingly muttered a voice command, the bike's meter panel dimly lit up. The suspension arms that extended out the front and back preloaded.

As Haruyuki's Neuro Linker was also connected to the bike's CPU, the speed and battery meter windows opened up in his vision. At the same time, he heard Blood Leopard's voice, not through speech but through wireless communication.

'Grab on.'

'Eh, umm, no, but.'

Immediately after he thought about it, her two hands extended from in front of him and grabbed onto Haruyuki's arms. His arms were then pulled and made to wrap around her thin waist over her apron. This woman seemed to follow the principle of never repeating the same command twice.

Though he had already halfway given up as escape from here appeared impossible, Haruyuki still persisted.

'Ah...umm, are you going to drive with that appearance?'

'Taking time to change clothes is pointless.'

'Al...Also, will the shop be okay?'

'My shift is till 5:00. If you have any other questions, say them all at once.'

'.....I don't have any more.'

'K.'

And then, the maid-san casually opened up the throttle.



*\*RYUUN\** Along with a motor sound which felt like a bottomless torque within the silence, the huge bike easily slid out from the cake shop's garage.

The time display at the lower right of his vision read 5:08 PM. The rain had stopped without him noticing it and the gaps between the clouds that flowed towards the west were dyed in a magnificent orange.

Ah, I left my umbrella in the store. Well, Taku will collect it later.

As Haruyuki faintly thought of that in an escapist manner, the electric bike they were riding smoothly came out from the Sakuradai town area at a nearly silent low speed pace. It seemed that Blood Leopard drove safely despite appearing to be an impatient person—

Just when he let the tension out of his shoulders, the bike turned right at the larger intersection and went onto the Loop 7.

*\*KYUIAAAAA!!\** The in-built motors of the front and back wheels roared out, and the needle of the holo-meter suddenly jumped upwards.

*\*BATABATA\** Her long skirt fluttered at the edge of his field of view. The wind pressure beat into his face over his helmet's shield.

"...Ah————!!"

Haruyuki screamed out using his real voice.

The large motorbike that was carrying a rider in maid clothes and a

middle school student in a school uniform entered Mejiro Street from the Loop 7 and was flat-out speeding determinedly towards the east.

—Be that as it may, in this era, cases of bikes and automobiles breaking the legal speed limit didn't occur. This was because the vehicle's control system automatically places a limiter at the road's maximum speed. If you wanted to break that limit, you would have to illegally remodel the system, or you would have to order it to enter emergency mode and temporarily stop and suspend the control AI. Of course, since it was also illegal to suspend the AI without a justifiable reason, you would have to be prepared for a policeman's handcuffs either way.

The bike that Blood Leopard drove naturally had not been modified through either method and its limiter was placed at 80 km/h which was the exact legal speed limit of Mejiro Street, but the time it had taken to reach the maximum speed from initially 0 km/h was uncommonly short. Inevitably, huge Gs that he had never experienced before in the real world were pushing down Haruyuki's round body and his screams rose each time, but in addition the slender body of Pard-san who he was clinging to was being pressed 'GUNI——' against his stomach, so he was already at his wit's end.

...Thank goodness I'm sitting in the back. If our positions were reversed, I'd be feeling her front instead of her back. No, isn't the reverse fundamentally impossible in the first place?

Which he considered such things with his dizzy-feeling head, the bike entered Sotobori Street in Iidabashi<sup>[21]</sup>. The little road they were on right in the middle of the city during the evening was filled with traffic, and the drivers of the surrounding electric automobiles and scoters were noticing the Pard-san's and Haruyuki's bike and widening their eyes while blinking.

That was only natural, as a dazzling maid in a snow-white apron was driving during dusk on a huge sports-bike that people almost never saw these days. Moreover, there was a fat middle school student sitting snugly behind her.

Unable to bare the numerous looks that were concentrated on them as they waited at a red light, Haruyuki spoke with thought-speech while ducking his head down.

'...U-Umm, it's amazing, how much we stand out.'

'Yes.'

Without being disheartened by Pard-san's reply that seemed to say it was inconsequential, no, that she really thought it was inconsequential, Haruyuki continued.

'...I-It seems a little dangerous to plunge into the headquarters of the CCC<sup>[22]</sup> like this.'

This time her words were a little longer.

'NP<sup>[23]</sup>. Conversely, we're not conspicuous.'

'Heh?'

But she didn't answer any further, and when the light turned blue<sup>[24]</sup>, she fully opened up the throttle. The motor short them out like lightning. Haruyuki choked.

He understood the meaning of her words after the bike entered into a multi-level parking lot that was adjacent to the westernmost edge of the Akihabara district and they walked on foot for several minutes.

As soon as they went into the main street that pierced through the electronics district from north to south, at least three maids jumped into Haruyuki's sight. Of course, even if one said that, they weren't actual maids, though speaking of which Blood Leopard wasn't a real maid either, but anyway—they were handing out holo-papers that seemed to advertise a shop somewhere to those that passed by while smiling. Certainly, the only outward difference between those girls and Pard-san was their smiling faces.

"...I see..."

Deeply understanding it, Haruyuki looked up once again at the majestic appearance of the Sleepless Town, Akihabara.

This district, due to redevelopments at the beginning of the 2000s, seemed to be have been reorganized thoroughly as an intelligent-looking street. But after that, the price of land fell into decline while the center of consumer electronics sales shifted to Ikebukuro and Shinjuku, the banks that became strength-deficient during the depression of those

times quickly backed out, the landowners were sub-divided, and chaos covered this district in the 2020s once again just like back in the last century.

And so, in the current year 2047, innumerable small scale shops of every industry related to electricity, networks and sub-culture were crowded together in this district. Since self-indulgent neon lights shined along all the windows of the buildings that lined down the street, there was no uniformity of color, and it was like standing in the middle of a galaxy where stars of pure color were crowded together.

If Haruyuki connected to the Global Net right now and moreover accepted advertisement information without restrictions, bargain holo-leaflets like custom parts for Neuro Linkers or deferment PCs and various applications softwares would flood his vision and prevent him from seeing anything.

"How nice..."

As he let his mouth slack in bliss at the chaos of information that could no longer be thought of as reality but as the virtual world, his nape was suddenly grasped hard.

"This way."

Blood Leopard, who did not seem to have any especially strong emotions, began to walk northwards along the sidewalk that was overflowing with shoppers while dragging along Haruyuki.

The place she led him to was a particularly noisy building that was built at a place where you had to enter it a little towards the back from the main street.

He didn't really understand what kind of shop it was at first glance. A neon sign that read «QUADTOWER» blinked on and off at the entrance, and the interior was dim with narrow lighting. Also, countless electronic sounds of great volume overlapped and leaked out from within.

"...Quadtower? What is this shop...?"

The slightly scared Haruyuki asked that,

"A ga-cen."

With that short answer, Pard-san unflaggingly headed towards the interior of the shop without any hesitation. While thinking 'Ga-cen, what's that?', Haruyuki went after her at a trot.

The meaning of those words became clear the instant he went down the short stairs and stepped into a dark floor.

The things that were tightly lined up on the naked concrete floor were prehistoric game machines, which were embedded with outdated CRT monitors and stick-type control panels on huge units. Striking sounds, explosions and BGMs were being discharged into the air from each speaker without reservation, and the players that were sitting on oblong chairs were absorbedly striking their panels with 'GACHAGACHA' and 'PASHIPASHI' sounds.

As he watched dumbfounded from next to the wall, a player gave a victory pose on one side of two units that were lined up back to back, and the gallery people in the back suddenly sprang forward in a commotion. On the opposite side, a mortified-looking young man stood up. It seemed that they had battled each other through the two machines.

One of the gallery people immediately sat down at the vacated machine. That girl, who also had a showy appearance like an actual game character, took out a silver 100-yen coin from her pocket and dropped it into the slot in the center of the panel.

"I...I see."

Haruyuki mumbled with a parched mouth.

"Ga-cen means game center...Those machines are the old-fashioned so-called «arcade games», aren't they!"

He continued speaking excitedly, but Blood Leopard merely answered "Yes" as usual and began to walk forward again.

Although he understood the importance of the situation surrounding him and his goal in coming to this district, Haruyuki himself could not help but want to sit down at that battle machine while thinking 'Just once is fine'. He hadn't touched one of those large-type controllers before, but he had played 2D hand-to-hand combat games that were controlled with a pad on a household machine at his home so many times he was tired of it.

However, most regrettably, he didn't have any old-fashioned material money like 100-yen coins in either his pockets or his backpack. He might find an electronic money change machine somewhere if he looked around the shop, but if he got separated from Pard-san in this dark and large shop, it might turn out terrible—rather than that, he'd probably be scolded, so he tearfully gave up on that.

While the far too late question 'In the first place, why did this person bring me here?' finally went through his mind, he chased after the swaying braid on the back of her maid clothes, and they eventually arrived at an elevator on the wall that was the farthest back inside the shop.

The scarily old-fashioned lift carried the two of them and went upwards while rattling. It stopped on the fourth floor.

What was on the other side of the opening door was completely different from the basement floor and was as silent as the grave. What were lined up here weren't game machines, but narrow booths that were divided by solid-looking panels. Next to the right wall, there were drink vendors set up in a row.

Haruyuki also recognized a place like this. A so-called «Dive Café», a shop that cheaply offered private rooms for Diving while in the town. Since the booths could be locked, the security was quite higher than leaving one's real body in an open space like a family restaurant or coffee shop.



Nonetheless, there had certainly been plenty of Dive Cafes closer to the parking lot where they had left the bike. He wondered why they had expressly come to this far away building, but Pard-san quickly finished up with the receipt at the unmanned counter in front and then briskly walked further inside the place. Haruyuki reluctantly followed.

However—

“Enter.”

What Blood Leopard indicated at was to all appearances a single person-use booth and she furthermore entered inside following after Haruyuki as if it were natural, so Haruyuki couldn't help but question her this time.

“U-Umm, there's only one chair.”

“There were no two-person booths vacant. If we cram in together, we'll fit.”

As she replied with that expressionlessly, she shut the slide-type door and the sturdy-looking lock resounded out with a 'GACHINGACHIN'. While collecting together her long skirt, she sat down sideways on the reclining chair.

When she brought her slender body near the edge, there was certainly about 40 cm of space left on the chair. But even so the fat Haruyuki would just barely fit if he sat there. Rather, he would be squeezed in.

“.....Um.”

As Haruyuki tried to continue to say 'I'll reserve another room for myself', the maid-san beat him to the punch and spoke.

"NP. I don't care about sticking close to a child."

—But I care about it a lot!! Or rather, if you think about the first condition for being a Burst Linker, you can't be more than three years older than me!!

Although he cried that all out in his mind, Haruyuki was already in a mental state of being used to this, and so sat down next to Blood Leopard while mumbling "P-P-P-Please excuse me then". Although he tried to lean as far as possible towards the armrest, there was still only about a 2 mm gap between the nose of Haruyuki's head and the chest covered by a pure white apron.

He felt faint as soon as he noticed a sweet fragrance that drifted softly in the air and that smelt of cream and strawberries, but he somehow endured it, and then a whisper came from so close by that he could feel the breath on his brow.

"First, you must set up a Full Dive-use avatar that cannot be connected to your real life self."

"...Ah, y-yes."

He somehow reorganized his decelerated thoughts, quickly operated his virtual desktop, and changed his avatar from the pink pig that he used on



the Umesato Middle local network to a green lizard he had never used before.

"I-It's done."

"Then, when you Full Dive, pass into the access gate that has the shining tag «Akihabara BG»."

"U-Understood."

"K. Counting down. One, zero."

...One usually starts from three at least!

At the same time as he thought that, the same command came out from both of their mouths.

""Direct Link.""

*\*SHUWAH!\** Along with that sound, Haruyuki's consciousness and real body separated, and he fell into darkness.

A few Access Gates approached from below. Since Haruyuki was cut off from the Global Net, they all should have been local networks administered by this building «Quadtower». Among the sparkling characters that read «Read as much as you like!» and «Online Game Free Play», there was indeed an inconspicuous tag that read «Akihabara BG».

When he extended an invisible hand towards it, it drew closer within his field of vision. The moment he was sucked in by that circular gate, there

was a slight lag. A sign that some kind of authentication was being performed.

But the feeling of movement quickly came on him again, and finally the soles of Haruyuki's feet landed on the ground with a hard metallic sound.

When he lifted up his turned-down head, he saw that he was in a place that could be called either a huge bar or a club.

All the walls and floor were made of rusty steel plates and wire-mesh. The rectangular space in the center looked like an atrium, and on the floor of the first floor that was created as if to surround it and the floor of the second floor, there were rough tables made of just bare iron plates lined up at equal intervals.

At the same time, many avatars that seemed to have also Dived into this bar could be seen seated at these gloomy tables. They were sunken in shadow, but the instant he saw their silhouettes, he got a shuddering feeling.

This place was not in Accel world, but in a normal virtual space. Even so, Haruyuki understood. They were all Burst Linkers. In other words, this network known as «Akihabara BG» was a place where only those that had Brain Burst in their Neuro Linkers could connect to.

After gulping with his green lizard avatar's throat, he looked around further.

The next thing he noticed was a large four-sided monitor that was hanging from the ceiling with a chain in the center of this large space. Since the shop was dimly-lit, the characters projected on the virtual screen could be clearly seen.

Displayed at the top was [TODAY'S BATTLE] in Gothic font.

Beneath that was [18:00], most likely the current time.

The next line [«Frost Horn Lv5» 1.57 VS «Slate Bolt Lv4» 3.22] were without a doubt the announcement of a duel. But he didn't understand what the numbers with a decimal point that was written after the level were supposed to be.

".....Umm, this place is..."

When Haruyuki finally stopped looking around at his surroundings, he spoke in a low voice to Blood Leopard who was standing right next to him.

Her avatar, perhaps naturally or as expected, wasn't wearing a maid dress anymore. Her entire body was tightly covered with a black leather rider suit. However, what was on top wasn't a human head. A beast of the feline family with beautiful dark red fur. For the first time, Haruyuki remembered that «Leopard» meant leopard<sup>[25]</sup>.

The female rider with a leopard head glanced down at Haruyuki's lizard avatar with her shining ash-gold eyes, and spoke.

"«Akihabara Battle Ground». The holy place of duels for Burst Linkers."

"H-Holy place...?"

After repeating her words, Haruyuki suddenly thought of something and asked.

"Akihabara, that means, is this the base of the Yellow Legion or something?"

"No. This is the only absolutely neutral place within the Akihabara area...Follow me."

Her boots made a clacking sound as she started to walk, so for the time being he followed after her.

At the very back of the bar, there was as expected a counter that was made from iron plates. Blood Leopard smoothly sat down on the center stool with a supple movement. Haruyuki also made his small lizard body climb onto the stool next to hers with a heave-ho.

"Good evening, «Matchmaker»."

Looking at the avatar on the other side of the counter that suddenly raised its face in response to Pard-san's quiet voice, Haruyuki at once thought 'A dwarf!'

A shaggy beard along with a short and stout stature. He wore metal-rimmed glasses over round, sunken eyes, and a huge butterfly necktie was tied around his neck. Rather, it was stranger that he wasn't holding an axe in his rough hands.

The dwarf-type avatar first looked at Pard-san's leopard head and raised one of his eyebrows, then looked at Haruyuki's lizard head and made a 'hmm' sound, and then turned back to Pard-san and grinned.

"Why if it isn't a rare customer. How many months has it been, leopard?"

It was a completely dwarf-like tone, complete with baritone. But, since he was connected to this network, the one moving this avatar should also be a Burst Linker, so in other words he shouldn't be older than 17-years-old.

However, to worry about such a thing would be dumb and boorish. Pard-san shrugged her shoulders slightly, and gave a short response of "Eight months". The dwarf that was appropriately named «Matchmaker» laughed again as his mustache twitched, and then spoke.

"Have you missed having a real fight here? Or are you here to earn more pocket money?"

"Sorry, but I didn't come here today to duel, nor to gamble."

Hearing those words, Haruyuki reflexively raised his voice.

"G-Gam...ble!?"

Then, the dwarf raised his eyebrows and pointed at the huge center monitor with the tip of his beard.

"Look at those numbers there. Those show nothing except the odds."

"Odds..."



Now that he mentioned it, it was exactly as he said. The numbers of 1.57 and 3.33 that followed after the names of the announced fighters could only be the rates of betting.

In other words, this place managed gambling for «duels» between Burst Linkers.

“...J-Just what on earth do you bet? I-I-It can’t be Burst Points, can it?”

When he asked that in a hoarse voice, the dwarf let out a grand snort.

“Idiot, if we betted something like points, hot-headed idiots would have their Brain Burst forcefully uninstalled one after another. Of course the bets are real money.”

“R-Real money...”

That was also plenty bad enough, or rather private gambling was a completely illegal act. As Haruyuki flapped his mouth open and shut, Matchmaker suddenly gave a satisfied smile.

“You, don’t you know just how much this leopard-head onee-san has earned here?”

“Don’t say things that will cause misunderstandings. You can’t earn anything by betting with just fight money, and in the first place you only get five hundred yen per game even if you win. It is much lower than a part-time job’s hourly pay.”

“.....F-Five hundred yen...”

Haruyuki once again mumbled, aghast. Hearing him say that, the dwarf laughed pleasantly.

"Well, that's how it is. The maximum you can gamble is 300 yen per game. That's the limit with the pocket money of middle and high school students."

".....I-I see..."

As the tension finally left Haruyuki's shoulders just a little, Blood Leopard's voice mentally strained him once again.

"Let's end the greetings here, and head into the main subject."

"You're an impatient leopard as always. If you're here neither to battle nor to gamble, what did you come here for?"

"I came to meet with you as an informer today. What I want to know is information about the «Local Net Troll»...the Burst Linker who can intercept the Matching List without being connected to the network."

His reaction to that was striking.

The instant he heard Pard-san's question, the dwarf gained a sharp glint in his eyes in shock, and quickly looked left and right over the counter. After checking that there weren't any other Divers without hearing range, he squeezed out an even lower voice.

"...I've heard of the talk about list interception somewhere. The rumors that are flowing about right now shouldn't be that detailed."

This time Blood Leopard was the one who raised the eyebrows of her leopard head.

"The one that's asking is me."

"Muh...that's true. Then, since an information fee concerning this topic is not needed, please tell me what you know as well in exchange."

"K, to the extent that I can talk about it."

Matchmaker nodded, then leaned his body over the counter and started speaking in a voice that seemed to twist from inside his beard.

"...The Burst Linker that intercepts the Matching List...That is the big problem that is secretly shaking this Akihabara BG right now."

It's nice to be young.

The dwarf said that to Haruyuki who was visiting here for the first time.

Akihabara BG was a local network that can also be connected to within the game center «Quadtower». Burst Linker that wished to appear in betting matches here would visit this bard first and register as players at the counter. Then the system selected the most suitable duel opponents based on level and affinity, and the match time and odds were displayed on the central monitor.

Those that wanted to bet money would bet up to 300 yen up until the deadline time. After that, one of the players would accelerate just before

the game time started, and the opponent would be chosen from the Matching List and the «duel» would begin. The fundamental structure of it was just that. Simple, no?

The greatest rule in this local network was one must not «duel» against anyone except the players chosen by the Matchmaker. Anyone that broke this rule and picked a duel against a betting visitor or another player that was more convenient for them would be beaten up by the strong-armed bodyguards—of course, in a duel—and would be kicked out from the local network. This was a holy place for duelers that not even the «Yellow King» that ruled Akihabara could lay his hands on.

“However, then.”

Matchmaker continued after some liquid inside of a tumbler that had appeared on the counter without notice.

“About one week ago, an insolent person appeared that didn’t register as a player and started a duel against one of two fighters right before their announced match began. Because of the mechanism that automatically registers IDs for everyone that Dives into Akiba BG when they connect for the first time, the bodyguards accelerated the instant he appeared again the next day in order to beat him up. However. Even though he was definitely connected to the local network...his name wasn’t on the Matching List.”

“.....!”

Haruyuki sucked in a sharp breath.

The situation that Matchmaker recounted. It was exactly the same as the situation occurring at the Umesato Middle School's local network right now.

The dwarf drank up the amber-colored liquid, and then struck the tumbler against the iron-plating of the counter.

"That day as well, that guy intruded into a match, took down the opposing player, and then calmly logged out. And the next day as well, and then the day after that too. At present, we've explained to the players and visitors that it's the fault of the game registration system, but that's also already at the limit. Rumors of a «Local Net Troll» are also flowing around. At this rate, if that guy's rampage is allowed to continue, it will also affect the continuation of Akiba BG itself."

After gulping, Haruyuki timidly asked.

"U-Umm...That is, what is the name of the Burst Linker that doesn't appear on the list...?"

The name that the dwarf spitefully spoke was—

"«Rust Jigsaw»."

—It's different.

Haruyuki unconsciously let out a breath of relief, but it being someone different was also a problem. Because it meant that there existed multiple

Burst Linkers that had the Matching List interception ability. Within the system of Brain Burst, that privilege was just too huge.

Matchmaker also voiced in a subdued tone the same kind of misgivings.

“«One cannot choose one’s duel opponent as one likes». That is the great general rule of Accel World. Even if you only choose and fight convenient opponents, there is no way to tell when those kinds of opponents will appear on the list. While waiting for them to appear, you can also conversely be challenged to a duel by someone you’re weak against. Therefore, Burst Linkers desperately try hard to polish their own special techniques and conquer their weak points as well.”

“...It’s exactly as you say.”

“But, «Rust Jigsaw» is now using the system of Akiba BG and is freely choosing the duel opponents he wants. If you look at that monitor, it’s very clear which Burst Linkers are connected at any given time. After that, he just has to choose opponents he will certainly win against and intrude just before the start of a match. That guy has already earned over 100 points here just through duels. Not only as the Matchmaker...but as a Burst Linker, I absolutely cannot forgive him.”

Finishing speaking those unpleasant words, the dwarf stared intensely at Haruyuki, and then Blood Leopard from behind his round glasses.

“My story ends here. Now then, this time it’s your turn to talk. Although currently only myself and the bodyguards here should know about «Rust

Jigsaw» intercepting the Matching List, just where on earth did you hear about it?”

Haruyuki glanced up at Pard-san to his left, then moved his lizard’s mouth with a mumble.

“...Umm, I didn’t hear about the case happening here. Another Burst Linker who possesses the exact same ability appeared at a certain local network that I usually connect to...So, I thought that there would be someone from Akihabara who knows something about it...”

“What!?! Another one, at the same time...!? That’s inexcusable...”

- NUUN\* After growling, the dwarf naturally asked the next question.

“Where is that local network?”

“I-I’m sorry. It has to do with my real life information...”

“What, then it’s almost as if I’m the only one that talked!”

—Then.

Here, Pard-san at last spoke in a quiet voice.

“Matchmaker. What is the level and type of that Rust Jigsaw?”

“Hmm? His level is 6, the same as yours. His color is just as his name says, an iron-rust color. This also bears a strong resemblance to you, but his fighting style is different. That guy’s specialty is to hunt close-range types while remaining in the middle/long range, so a mainly close-range type like you would have honestly bad affinity with him.”

...Pard-san is a close-range type? Even though she belongs to the Red Legion, and the 'blood' in her name is reddish?

These questions that Haruyuki momentarily had were blown away by Blood Leopard's next words.

"K. Then, I'll carry out the information fee like this. Register me and this kid as tag-team players, and set up a long-range type team as our opponents. In addition, if you cancel all the remaining games, Rust Jigsaw who has no other opponents to attack should choose us as his prey for today."

"...W-W-Wha!?"

As Haruyuki fell down from his stool and then held onto the counter in a panic, the dwarf turned suspicious-looking eyes at him once again.

"...Leopard, although your name has circulated around plenty enough for you to act as a lure...in the first place, who is this newcomer here?"

Then, Pard-san gave the hint of a smile, though it was very faint, and whispered towards the dwarf's ear.

"His name may be even more famous than mine. This kid is the «silver crow<sup>[26]</sup>» of the revived Nega Nebulas."

*\*PYUU\**

What echoed out then was a low whistle that the Matchmaker let out from within his beard.



Haruyuki and Blood Leopard opened their respective Brain Burst option menus and registered each other as a tag team. With this, if either of them were challenged to a «duel», both of them would be automatically connected to the stage.

When Burst Linkers teamed up as a tag team, it was indicated at the top of the Matching List, and it was possible for solo linkers to challenge a tag team, but conversely, duel requests from a tag team to a solo linker naturally couldn't be done.

The floor stirred up for an instant when the names «Blood Leopard» and «Silver Crow» appeared as a team on the bar's large central monitor. Things like "Hey, the «leopard» of Promi<sup>[27]</sup> is fighting!" and "Why is she teaming up with the «crow» of NN<sup>[28]</sup>!?" were shouted here and there, and the numerals for the odds instantly began to move.

While moving from the counter to a seat at a gloomy table in the corner and waiting for the match to start, Haruyuki decided to ask some questions.

"...Umm, why are we fighting as a tag? Since the Rust Jigsaw in question is a solo, he wouldn't intrude against two opponents, right...?"

"That's not correct either."

After touching a cocktail glass to her leopard mouth, Pard-san shook her head a little.

“Since the level difference is calculated not from the tag team’s average but the sum total of their levels instead, in the case of being challenged by a solo, his points will barely decrease if he loses, and if he wins he’ll get quite a lot. Since Rust Jigsaw seems to be tenacious about points, there is a high probability that he will think of us as delicious prey. Since I have had my name circulated around as a close-range type and Jigsaw seems to specialize in hunting close-range types, he won’t have a disadvantage when it comes to affinity either. Also...”

There, she glanced at Haruyuki with her golden pupils, and after closing her mouth once, she continued.

“...The rumor that you have become unable to fly has already spread around considerably. If Rust Jigsaw knows about it, the chances of him attacking increase even further.”

Feeling both pained and happy at Blood Leopard showing consideration just for an instant towards him about the fact that he had lost his wings, Haruyuki quickly continued the conversation.

“I see...if he can take me down instantly, he’ll just have to face you normally one-on-one after that.”

After nodding slightly, Haruyuki imitated Pard-san as she carried her glass to her mouth again, and also gulped down his own virtual cocktail. As he frowned at the strange taste, he thought.

If, for argument's sake, that Rust Jigsaw was connected to Dusk Taker and managed to acquire information on Silver Crow from him, then Haruyuki

should naturally be cautious. Because Dusk was the perpetrator who had taken Silver Crow's wings and made him become weak.

He checked that the start of the match still wouldn't occur for a while, and then voiced his next question.

"Next...concerning the story about the duels earlier...Although he said that Rust Jigsaw does not come out on the Matching List, since he connects to this local network, he must always be somewhere within the Quadtower building in the real world, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, can't we find his real body somehow?"

Then, Pard-san lightly shrugged her shoulders within her leather suit.

"This building is a ga-cen from the first basement level to the third floor, and a Dive Cafe from the fourth to sixth floors. Since there are hundreds of visitors crowded together here at the same time right now, finding someone particular is difficult. But."

"B-But?"

"There might be a way."

"H-How!?"

"I'll explain after. More importantly."

Pard-san's body that was sitting on the sofa next to him moved flexibly, and brought her mouth close to the ear of Haruyuki's lizard avatar. With

the lowest volume that would absolutely not reach any of the other Divers here, she whispered the following words.

“Unless the enemy uses it, you must not use the «Incarnate System».”

Though his body shrunk down with a jerk and he nodded at once, Haruyuki could not help but add something else.

“Ye...Yes. The Red King also told me that. But...But, why? Certainly, I think that it’s not fair if only one side uses that overly strong power. But, if it’s against an opponent that breaks the rules of Brain Burst...”

“That’s not it, it’s not for the opponent’s sake. It’s for your own.”

“Eh.....?”

‘—Speaking of which, Niko also said the same thing’, as Haruyuki thought that.

Pard-san brought her body even closer, and whispered while looking into Haruyuki’s eyes at point-blank range.

“«Mind power» is a power born from a hole within the heart. When power is pulled out from there, you also draw closer little by little to that hole. If you one day lose that tug of war, you will be swallowed up by the darkness at the bottom of that hole.”

“D-Darkness...?”

“What produced that curse of the «Disaster Armor» you fought against was the reckless rampaging use of mind power by the first-generation

Chrome Disaster. Because they knew that, the Kings have hidden the existence of the Incarnate System for many years.”

“.....!!”

Haruyuki’s body stiffened once again.

What produced mind power was a desire born from an absolute lack of something—. The Red King Niko had also certainly said it. That acquiring it was impossible if you didn’t face the scars within your heart.

“...But.”

Haruyuki mumbled, as if trying to persuade not Blood Leopard, but himself.

“The person that first introduced mind power to me said this. That what produces mind power is the power of a «wish». That the reverse side of the heart's scars is «hope».”

The crimson leopard that heard that let out a quiet sigh, and responded with a whisper.

“...I also believe that is the truth as well. But, like Brain Burst itself, there are two sides to the Incarnate System. On the back side of «hope», there is «despair». If that power is pursued, something will definitely be lost as compensation. Most likely, your teacher isn’t an exception to that either.”

For an instant, the figure of Sky Raker sitting on her silver wheelchair appeared in Haruyuki's mind. Her legs that had been lost, and would never return.

After rapidly blinking the eyes of his avatar, Haruyuki spoke the words that contained his half-formed thoughts.

"...Even so, I want to believe. In «mind power»...in the power of «wishes». No...in this Brain Burst that saved me."

"....."

Blood Leopard, unusually for her, kept silent for a long time while starting to say something.

Finally, her fierce eyes softened, and she whispered while placing her mouth next to Haruyuki's ear.

"I see. It's just as Rain said. You are...you just might, to this Accel World..."

But, he didn't heard what she said beyond that.

One minute before the formal match time that was announced on the monitor came, the dry sound of thunder struck Haruyuki's hearing. Next, the string of characters that announced the appearance of a challenger blazed red across his entire vision.

## Chapter 7

Haruyuki, as the duel avatar «Silver Crow», landed on top of a water storage tank that jutted out from the roof of a building.

The rows of stores that spread out in all directions on the streets below were colored with countless neon signs just like the scenery he had seen before he Dived. Numerous lights and laser illuminations shined from below up onto the clouds that hung low in the night sky. A blimp that was shining with a huge advertisement panel on it soared above their heads, and commercials in a strange language were being emitted from all the streets.

But this, of course, wasn't the real world Akihabara. This was a 3D field that was reconstructed from the images captured by the Social Camera network. The attribute here was «Shopping District».

Haruyuki quickly bended over his body and first checked the HP gauges in the upper corners of his vision.

To the upper left was his own gauge. The smaller gauge of his tag partner, Blood Leopard, was visible right beneath it.

And the gauge that was shining in the upper right corner had, just as expected, the name «Rust Jigsaw» attached to it. Haruyuki's breath caught beneath his silver helmet, and he glared at the small light blue cursor that had appeared in the center of his vision. The enemy should be in that direction. Fortunately or unfortunately, since the Shopping District

stage prohibited entry into building just like the End of the Century stage, it seemed that they had been relocated some distance away from their original position.

Now then, first I have to link up with Pard-san—

Immediately as Haruyuki thought that, he heard a quiet voice from behind him and he turned around with a start.

“K. He’s taken the bait.”

Although he hadn’t heard any footsteps or sensed her presence, a tall and lean avatar now stood quietly behind him before he noticed it.

Her whole form bore a strong resemblance to the leopard-headed rider avatar she had used at the bar. But, she no longer had a leather suit, but instead non-glossy dark red armor that covered her entire body. Since her mask had a form which sharpened to a point like a bullet shell at the front and tapered into ear-like points at the back left and right tips, she resembled a savage beast of the feline family.

Within her long and slim silhouette, she had greatly swelled-out thighs that were extremely conspicuous. This truly nimble-looking avatar sat down next to Haruyuki, and the Level 6 Burst Linker belonging to «Prominence», «Blood Leopard», continued speaking in a whisper.

“You and I are close range types, while the enemy we’re facing is a mid-to-long range type. He will first try to split us up with long-range attacks





and then take you down. Therefore, you mustn't irrationally try to counterattack, but instead give priority only to not separating from me."

"...R-Roger."

Haruyuki nodded, and then a half-second later.

*\*J!!!!!!\** As a jarring vibrating sound quickly approached from the direction the cursor was pointing towards, Haruyuki jumped aside reflexively.

A short time lag passed, and then the water storage tank that they had been standing until then was cut apart into two equal pieces. The water that flowed out with a splash spread out across the rooftop. Trying not to step on it, Haruyuki hurried over next to Leopard, who had already jumped much further away than Haruyuki and had her back against a ventilation duct.

"That just now should have been that guy's long range technique, «Wheel Saw»."

While remembering Rust Jigsaw's abilities that they had heard about beforehand from Matchmaker, Haruyuki also responded back as fast as possible to Pard-san's staggeringly fast-paced commentary.

"A technique that shoots out a jigsaw ring. But in this darkness, we can't see the saw's form at all."

"We'll have to make do with sound. Since it seems he can't shoot them in rapid-fire, we'll move closer after dodging the next attack."

“K-K<sup>[29]</sup>.”

Without the time for him to nod, another spinning ‘JIII!’ sound approached.

He looked, no, listened for the source of the sound, and then jumped forward diagonally to the right. The high-speed rotating super-thin ring passed by to his left, where his body has just been. The ventilation duct was cut apart and fell down behind him.

But Haruyuki didn’t look back at it and instead desperately ran after Blood Leopard who was running right in front of him.

The speed of the deep crimson avatar wasn’t just average, as expected. Seeming to leap and jump rather than run, she reached the end of the building in only a few steps—and then jumped into the air without any hesitation.

It was a simple 20 meters from the building they were on to the building that faced it on the other side of the wide road. Leopard easily flew across that empty space colored by neon lights.

...I also have to jump!?

—Don’t waver, jump!!

Putting that instantaneous thought into his right leg, Haruyuki also jumped across with all his strength. The air rang in his ears with a ‘BYUUU!’ sound, and the rooftop of the next building rapidly approached.

Haruyuki's legs landed at a point ten centimeters away from the edge of the concrete. But there was no time for him to let out a sigh of relief. Because, on the rooftop of the next building over that was connected to theirs, the enemy's figure could at last be seen. An upright silhouette which stood out with its rust color among the stage's illuminating lights.

—Rust Jigsaw!

Haruyuki cried out sharply in his mind.

—Are you Noumi's...Dusk Taker's ally!? Do you use the same method to intercept the list!? Just what the hell is the truth of that secret!?

As if ridiculing Haruyuki's impatience, Rust Jigsaw spread out his arms wide and then nimbly turned his body around. He then retreated to the next building at an unexpected high speed.

"...Think you can escape!?"

Haruyuki shouted that out in a low tone and fiercely dashed forward. Even if he had no wings, for him to fall behind in speed against a long-range type was...

"Stop."

If Haruyuki hadn't slowed down his speed slightly in response to that sharp order, his head might have gone flying.

Suddenly, a violent impact hit his throat. A feeling of something thin eating into it. A 'BIIIIIN!' vibration attacked his throat, and orange sparks

scattered about just like blood. At the same time, his HP gauge grinded down along with his neck's armor.

"Guh..."

While gritting his teeth, Haruyuki shook his body with all his strength and escaped from the thing that was eating into his neck. As he was in the midst of falling down backwards, he certainly saw it. In the air—was a super thin thread that was floating horizontally at the position where Rust Jigsaw had spread out his hands several seconds ago. A jigsaw.

As Haruyuki lay collapsed on the rooftop, Blood Leopard's hand grasped his arm from behind. Immediately after she pulled him up with all her strength, a circular saw that came flying at them from the other building torn apart the spot where he has just been laying.

After dragging Haruyuki to the shade of a huge signboard, Leopard spoke as if amazed.

"Good thing you're a metal color."

"I...I'm sorry, I forgot...about that guy's other technique that we were told about before..."

"«Still Saw». A technique that places a jigsaw on a fixed location in the air."

Narrowing her golden eyes sharply from inside her tapered mask, Leopard continued.

“Close-range attacks are stopped by the fixed saw, and he continues his long-range attacks with the circular saw. Certainly, he is a natural enemy to close-range types.”

“...W-What should we do?”

Thinking for just an instant, Leopard spoke.

“Let me have your special technique gauge.”

Then, without giving time for Haruyuki to react, she suddenly opened up her mouth hidden beneath her mask and bit into Silver Crow’s shoulder with sharp fangs.

“Hi!!?”

Crying out, Haruyuki was further surprised by the phenomenon that happened next. Haruyuki’s special technique gauge, which had filled up to 30% due to the damage taken just now, started to vanish, and Blood Leopard’s gauge increased at the same pace.

Once she had taken his entire gauge, Leopard detached her mouth and shouted.

“«Shape Change»!!”

Putting her hands down on the concrete ground, her avatar shined crimson for an instant, and then—

She instantaneously changed from a «person crawling on all fours» to a «perfect four-legged beast». Her back extended out long and slender, her

shoulders swelled strongly, and her hind legs folded into the shape of the letter 'Z', holding huge power.

".....Wh-Wha..."

As Haruyuki became shocked for the third time, Blood Leopard spoke to him in a voice whose effect intensity had increased.

"Get on."

At any rate, it was certain that if he remained gaping like a fool here, he would only get bitten again, so Haruyuki climbed onto the huge leopard's back while still in a daze. Bending her body low, Leopard next jumped to the side in order to avoid a «Wheel Saw» that came flying at them, and then jumped into the neon-sparkling night air in a straight line.

".....Kuu!"

Haruyuki unconsciously cried out at the back of his throat as they dashed out at a speed that couldn't simply be called 'fast'.

With just a single jump, they certainly crossed 10 meters. Countless neon lights melted into a thin line and flowed by on both sides of his vision.

All at once, the silhouette of Rust Jigsaw, who was running on the roofs of several buildings ahead, stood out blackly. He was running while repeatedly carrying out the action of opening up his arms countless times without looking back. In the spaces he went through while doing that action, there should be a lethal saw thread suspended in the air there, but by moving at this fast speed Haruyuki couldn't see them at all—

Just as Haruyuki was having misgivings, Leopard jumped far diagonally to the right.

She landed on her hands and feet on the back side of an advertising signboard that was illuminated by spotlights, and then jumped towards the left. She kicked off the neon-lit tower there and went towards the right once again. Although she avoided the spaces where the «Still Saws» probably were with great zigzagging jumps, she was definitely shortening the distance between themselves and the enemy who was running in a straight line.

When caught up after three, no, two more jumps, Rust Jigsaw turned around and displayed an action that was different from what he had done until then.

After drawing a big circle in the art with his right hand, he swung it straight at Haruyuki and Leopard.

*\*J!!!!\** That vibrating sound. It was a «Wheel Saw». But Blood Leopard, who was in the middle of a jump, could not avoid it—

“I leave it to you.”

Hearing that from the body below him, Haruyuki reflexively responded with a “K”.

The cutting power of the circular saw was overwhelming, but even so it had a blind spot. That is, since what was flying towards Silver Crow’s neck right now was a jigsaw in the form of a ring, the inside of the ring should



not have a jagged edge. And most importantly, it was slower than a bullet.

Of course, if he couldn't see the motion of the projectile, he probably wouldn't be able to get the timing right. But, Haruyuki's eyes caught the super-thin line at the last moment as it crossed the color-filled nightscape. Just before it touched Blood Leopard's right shoulder—he stuck out his right hand with all his strength into the inner portion of the ring from the side.

*\*CHUII!\** A sharp sound resounded, and sparks flashed from his fingers. But, without cutting his thin fingers, he caught the ring that was probably fifty centimeters in diameter, changed its trajectory and parried it off to behind him. A hint of slight shaking and agitation spread through Rust Jigsaw at having his great technique parried away at hitting distance.

"GJ<sup>[30]</sup>."

Giving just that brief comment, Blood Leopard then gave one last jump through the air.

She pounced on Rust Jigsaw from the front as he was spreading out his arms in order to set another jigsaw in the air, and then—

She opened her jaw wide and deeply embedded it into his shoulder.

Thrown off from Blood Leopard's back from the shock of the crash, Haruyuki watched dumbfounded at the spectacle of the battle, or rather hunt, that was unfolding before his eyes as he lay on his backside.

"Guh....."

While letting out a low groan from his avatar whose form was joined together with its steel frame, Rust Jigsaw desperately pummeled the deep crimson Leopard bending over him with his left fist. However, the huge fangs that were deeply eating into his right shoulder firmly dug into him like a vise and wouldn't let go.

If Jigsaw were a close-range type, he might have been able to reverse this situation as well. Leopard's HP bar also definitely decreased whenever his punches hit their mark, but the pace at which Jigsaw's HP was disappearing was far faster. A damage-generated light effect was periodically emitted from his bitten shoulder, looking red like real blood. Even when Jigsaw forcibly twisted his body and escaped from her fangs, Leopard, as if having already decided that on no account would she let him escape, immediately jumped forward and thrust her fangs back into the exact same place.

Immediately after receiving the biting attack for the nth time—

"U...GUA!!"

That cry of pain was emitted from Rust Jigsaw's mask, as if he could no longer hold it back.

At the same time, a terrible metallic 'BAKIIN!' sound resounded, and Jigsaw's right arm was torn off from his shoulder and rolled onto the floor.

His HP gauge itself was also blown away from that body-part loss damage. Along with a familiar sound effect like breaking glass, Rust Jigsaw's avatar turned into countless fragments and disintegrated. Even as the flaming characters of [YOU WIN!!] blazed up in the center of his vision, Haruyuki was not able to stand up.

...Too strong!!

That was the only thought that whirled through his numbed mind. The huge leopard that had slaughtered the enemy with a single bite quickly raised her head, look at Haruyuki with her golden eyes, and spoke a brief comment.

"GG<sup>[31]</sup>."

And then, the accelerated world ended.

Even when the momentary dizziness passed and the sensation of his entire body returned, Haruyuki was not able to immediately remember where his real self was or what he was doing.

Therefore, right before he tried opening his eyelids, he was unable to guess what on earth the sensation that was rich in elasticity and was squished against his face actually was. Reflexively closing his eyes once again, he stiffened his body as he thought 'What was that just now?', and then the nape of his neck was pulled back along with a sharp voice.

"Get up."

He immediately jumped up and found himself, of course, on top of the reclining chair in the single-person booth within the Dive Café on the fourth floor of the Quadtower. Since Brain Burst, in its default settings, also canceled the Full Dive along with the acceleration once a duel ended, they had naturally returned to the real world instead of the Akihabara BG's bar.

The girl in the maid outfit that had Dived in the same seat as him had already stood up and disengaged the booth's lock. As soon as the door opened, she poked her head out slightly and quickly checked left and right outside.

Getting off from the chair while thinking 'What is she doing?', Haruyuki felt his consciousness go cold at once as he heard her next words.

"We're leaving the store. If it's now, we may be able to identify him."

Identify. Identify who? —Of course, it's **Rust Jigsaw's real self**.

But, he shelved aside the question 'How on earth do we do that?' and followed after the braid which swayed on the back of her maid outfit.

Blood Leopard headed towards the elevator at a fast walk while paying close attention to their surroundings. As soon as she pushed the Down button and they got into the lift, she talked on rapidly in a low voice.

"Earlier, I inflicted continuous damage to the right side of Jigsaw's neck. When the sensation of pain has been stimulated on a single point for such a long time, its effect will remain for a long time even after doing

Burst Out. We're looking for a person who is displaying behavior that indicates such pain in the vicinity of the shop's entrance."

".....U-Understood."

That was a very terrifying marking method. But certainly, that may be the only possible method to strike some kind of mark onto an enemy's real body while within Accel world.

Once the elevator stopped on the first floor, Haruyuki walked out while gulping among the boys and girls amusing themselves with realistic battles on arcade machines. His gaze flew left and right with minimum motion, but he didn't see any such behavior. Everyone was engrossed as they stared at the old-fashioned screen monitors.

Haruyuki and Pard-san escaped from this floor, and stepped outside of the building into the busy congestion of people on the street. After quickly exchanging glances, they silently separated left and right.

Heading left down the street, Haruyuki concentrated all of his nerves on the dozens of people passing by in his field of vision.

A woman distributing holo-leaflets and dressed up as a game character. Three young men stopping at the roadside and absorbed in their chatting. A man carrying many multi-colored paper backs and walking hurriedly—

Haruyuki's eyes were drawn to the back of a boy that was visible just for a moment on the other side of the crowd.

The reason for that was because he could see the boy's white neck without a Neuro Linker equipped to it. As Haruyuki focused his eyes on him with a start, the boy strongly pressed his raised left hand down on the right side of his neck.

—Is that him!?

Quickening his pace, Haruyuki ran after the boy who was receding away from him. A gray stadium jacket. Faded-colored jeans. A leather cap on his head. Overflowing hair that was a dark brown.

The boy was hanging his head downwards and heading in the direction of the station at a quick pace. While applying his left hand to his neck, he suddenly swiped out his right hand through the air in order to push aside a passerby.

Haruyuki looked over his shoulder for an instant in order to call out to Blood Leopard, but her maid outfit was blocked by the crowd and couldn't be seen. The instant he reluctantly turned to look forward again—

“Please come to our shop<sup>[32]</sup>!”

Along with that cute-sounding voice, a palm was thrust out right before his eyes and his path was obstructed. As he raised his head with a start, he saw in front of him an onee-san wearing a full-blown smile who was advertising a shop somewhere. She was probably distributing holo-leaflets, but Haruyuki couldn't see any of them since he wasn't connected to the Global Net.

Haruyuki shook his head with a 'No thank you', and pushed forward in order to avoid her palm. However.

"Ah...Huh...?"

He couldn't see him. The back of that gray stadium jacket had disappeared.

He picked up his pace while biting his lip with the thought of 'Damn it!' going through his mind, and desperately ran his gaze in every direction. But, the boy appeared to have turned down some corner, and no matter how far Haruyuki went, he couldn't see him. He retraced his steps in a panic and this time looked down the narrow alleyways on either side, but he couldn't find him as expected.

"....."

As Haruyuki reluctantly stopped and bit his lip, the passerbys pushed him aside as if he was in the way. But their expressions didn't register in Haruyuki's eyes either. Only the self-reproach and regret of having lost the clue that he had finally grasped spread bitterly through his chest.

"It's still a good job even if you only saw his back."

Although Blood Leopard told him that once they joined up together, Haruyuki was not able to raise his face for a while as he leaned against the wall of a building.

"...I'm sorry, after all that hard work...even though you did so much, Leopard-san....."

Self-loathing over not being useful at all during both the duel and the subsequent pursuit weighed heavily on Haruyuki's shoulders.

Then, Haruyuki felt a hand get placed on top of his ruffled hair.

"You also worked hard."

"...Eh..."

As he unconsciously raised his head, this older woman, who had worn a perfectly expressionless face until now, gave something similar to a very slight smile on her face, and whispered to him.

"That was a splendid battle...I'll tell the characteristics of the person whose back you saw to the Matchmaker. If we can identify his real self when he comes next time, we may be also to find out the secret of the list interception through surveillance of him after that. Once we confirm the logic of how it works, I'll immediately send the information to you as well."

"...Y-Yes..."

If I consider it like that, a ray of hope has been connected...Is it okay to think that?

While comforting himself in this way, Haruyuki also finally returned a smile, though it was perfectly pitiful. Pard-san moved her hand from



Haruyuki's head to his shoulder, and then returned his expression and added something else.

"Jigsaw will definitely not appear again today. Besides, it's time for children to go home soon."

Though she said that, Pard-san also had to be in the eleventh grade at the most, but he still obediently nodded.

"Yes."

Then, Blood Leopard brought this night's adventure to a finish with her usual abbreviated way of speaking.

"K, let's return."

The time had reached 8 PM, and after they left the electronics district which getting increasingly bustling and got onto the bike in the parking lot, the two of them headed west along the same route they had taken coming here.

After suddenly returning to the Loop 7 from Mejiro Street with her usual dynamic driving, Pard-san then took him all the way to Suginami.

After he got her to let him off by saying "Here is fine" once they could see the overhead structure of the Chuo Line<sup>[33]</sup> and he returned the helmet to her, Haruyuki once again bowed deeply.

“Umm...Thank you very much, really...I made you come with me this far for the problem of another legion...”

Then, Blood Leopard similarly removed her own helmet, and lightly shook her head.

“Since Akihabara BG is an important place to me, this is already my problem as well. Also...”

After she stopped speaking and looked away for an instant, the Burst Linker wearing a maid outfit continued with a somehow shy-looking expression.

“...I wanted to give my thanks to you at least once. For protecting Rain during the Chrome Disaster incident...for protecting my «King», thank you...”

“Eh.....”

“I want you to always stay as her friend from now on as well.”

And then, Blood Leopard gave a clear smile for the first time since they met, before quickly covering herself with her helmet. As the motor groaned with a ‘KYUIII!’, the large bike suddenly made a U-turn to the opposite lane and left towards the north with a frightful energy and vigor.

After seeing her off until her bike’s taillight was indistinguishable from the other cars, Haruyuki bit his lip hard with a welled-up feeling that had been delayed by a time lag, and once more bowed very, very deeply.

When he returned to his empty home, Haruyuki dropped his bag on the floor of his room and laid down on the bed as if throwing himself down.

—I wonder how things went on Taku's side.

As he thought that, he considered moving his right hand to make a call, but moving it was also tough. The physical and mental fatigue that was gushing through him heavily weighed down on his back.

He remained motionlessly like that for a while, but his eyelids were becoming heavier and heavier, so he shook his head hard and got up. He couldn't sleep here. He needed to talk with Takumu while memories from Akihabara were still clear, and the homework he'd been given today was completely untouched as well.

For the time being, after removing his uniform and taking a shower while he was at it, he warmed up a frozen seafood casserole in the microwave. While waiting for it to cook, he connected his Neuro Linker to the Global Net, and made a Voice Call to Takumu.

'Hey, Haru.'

The voice that replied back was no different from usual, so Haruyuki let out a relieved breath for the time being.

'Hi...Are you okay? Did perfectly learn and acquire the thing today?'

When he timidly asked that with thought speech, a hint of a bitter smile flowed through the connection.

'Hey, hey, whatever the circumstances may be, I couldn't Dive there for such a long time. Although I say that, I did stay there for a full week, though...'

'T-Then, did you successfully acquire mind power...?'

'Hmm.'

A short mumble.

'It's still far from enough to use in actual battle, is what the Red King said. Even so, I've grasped the gist of it.'

'I see. Since you follow the principle of perfection, you would probably dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field alone and self-train for many years!'

Haruyuki said that while letting out a sigh of relief, and Takumu also smiled again.

'I really don't have that kind of energy left. More importantly, what about on your end? Did you manage to grasp something about the secret of Dusk Taker's list interception?'

'There was kind of an unexpected development on that...'

Haruyuki recounted the series of events that occurred after he left the cake shop's radio-wave interception room, while summarizing the portion concerning Blood Leopard as simply as possible. Even so,

'.....Hm-mm. So while I was training all by my lonesome, you were once again on a date with an older woman.'

After Takumu said that as his first words, Haruyuki protested agitatedly.

'It wasn't like that at all! B-Besides, even you were together with Niko for an entire week...'

'Sorry, but she only coached me at the beginning and the end, and after making me go through great pain, she told me to earn points by hunting the Enemy and then disappeared on me.'

'Is...Is that so...'

Before the conversation went in an even stranger direction, Haruyuki forcibly returned to the subject at hand.

'More importantly, back to the topic of the list interception. Since I blundered in those circumstances and missed seeing the real form of «Rust Jigsaw», now we can only wait for information from «Akihabara BG»'s manager.'

'The holy place of duels...huh. I've heard rumors about it, but it really exists, that underground playing field.'

'Neither the amount of money nor the fight money are at very high underground prices, though.'

'If it weren't for this situation, I'd also like to go there and fight, but...'

Pausing a little, Takumu then sent over a sympathetic voice.

'Regardless of the result, I think you did well, Haru. Good job today. Now, we just have to hope that the manager over there will identify the method Jigsaw uses soon.'

'That's...right. Thank you.'

'Since I brought Haru's umbrella home with me, right? Then, see you at school tomorrow.'

Letting out a sigh as the communication was cut, Haruyuki took out the casserole that had finished heating and ate it by himself.

He then tidied up the table and began doing his homework in his room, but as usual he wasn't able to concentrate on it right away.

After having defeated Noumi's list interception system in a single day yesterday and then dueled right away the next day, he was completely crushed and exhausted along with Takumu who had mastered mind power. He had expected—no, anticipated such a development somewhere in his heart.

However, regrettably, taking time to rest was impossible. If he neglected the situation for a single day, just that would increase the time that Noumi was connected with Chiyuri. It was unbearable for him to imagine those two conversing with each other, even if it were only a conversation of a few words.

Haruyuki shook his head repeatedly and tried to focus his mind on only the holo-window in front of him. But, as he translated the English words

with great pain and trouble, the thing that was weighing heavily on his heart wouldn't go away.

As if mocking Haruyuki's impatience—

That day, on the evening of April 17th, the tag team of «Dusk Taker» and «Lime Bell» achieved their full-fledged debut in Accel World. Haruyuki was told about it the next day by Takumu.

The two of them had suddenly launched an attack not in Suginami, but instead in the Shinjuku area, the mecca of «duels» in western Tokyo. This tag team, which added Lime Bell's «healing ability» to Dusk Taker who possessed the ultimate combo technique of «flight ability» and «long-range firepower», was literally invincible and crushed all types of duelers one after another.

Noumi's tactics were the logical type that actively used Chiyuri who was inferior in offensive power as bait and then the enemies that approached to take her down first were slaughtered by his flamethrower. There were no blind spots in his cold-heartedness as he didn't mind dragging his partner into his wide-range attacks sometimes either, and the Burst Linkers that first dueled them were all burned out without being able to do a single thing.

After two of the main force members of the Blue Legion that challenged them last were also defeated as a tag team, Dusk Taker's name became

famous in Accel World with a shock that exceeded the appearance of Silver Crow half a year ago.



## Chapter 8

"One...One hundred percent winning rate!?"

Lunch break the next day, Thursday the 18th.

Haruyuki shouted in a shocked voice on top of bench on the rooftop of Umesato Middle School.

"That...isn't just a figure of speech, but they really didn't lose even once...?"

Sitting next to him, Takumu nodded while placing the sandwich he bought at the cafeteria on his knees.

"Yeah, I heard it from an acquaintance of mine in the Shinjuku area. Since he seems to have watched it all of Noumi and Chii-chan's duels starting from their first one, appears to be true...He said that, once Dusk Taker's gauge fills up and he starts flying, no duel avatars are able to do anything to him no matter what type they are."

"....."

After looking dumbfounded at his partially-eaten hamburger for a while, Haruyuki nodded.

"...I see, so that's how it is...Close-range types aren't able to approach him from the beginning, and it's also impossible for long-range types to make Dusk Taker fall down in a firefight using firepower since he has a healer."

"Yeah. —I don't mean to put you down, Haru, but originally your «flight ability» was such a strong power that it couldn't be embodied in an avatar unless all other potentials were thrown away. But by stealing it from you, Noumi has made it compatible with long-range techniques. Right now, that guy has boundlessly deviated from the «general rule of same level, same potential». Furthermore, there are tactically no blind spots in Noumi either..."

While mechanically tearing the film around his sandwich in half, Takumu added more in a heavy voice.

"Since the Level 7 and 8 rankers seemed to still be following a wait-and-see strategy regarding Noumi yesterday, there is no telling what will happen when they come out to face him, but...if Noumi still continues to win against them, then the situation is far more serious than I imagined."

"W-What do you mean...?"

".....Haru, somewhere in our hearts, we have probably been thinking something like this. 'No matter how strong Noumi becomes, when master...when Black Lotus returns, that person will solve the situation in a single stroke', right? But..."

The moment he heard those words, Haruyuki almost dropped his hamburger. Without noticing how he reflexively grasped it with all his strength and how the overflowing sauce from within was falling on his hands, he shouted in a hoarse voice.

"T-Taku...Are you saying she'd lose!? Senpai, against Noumi!?"

"I don't want to consider it either! ...But, at the very least, we have to admit that Noumi does intend to do that."

Haruyuki noticed how Takumu's hand was minutely trembling as he tried to tear off the sandwich's film. Turning even paler, his best friend spoke as if groaning.

"Yes...Noumi probably planned to do so from the beginning. Corner and put the three of us at a disadvantage during the week that master is absent, and gather only the trump cards that can let him oppose master. No, not just oppose her. That guy...**intends to hunt the Black King, Black Lotus.**"

"Hu...Hunt...?"

"Yeah. —In the past, I felt inclined to target the Black King just because she didn't possess any fighting power in her dummy avatar form. Even so, I only intended to go as far as taken some of her points. But Noumi is different. He without a doubt is thinking of taking down Black Lotus in her original form and taking over this school...no, taking her seat as a King..."

Haruyuki shook his head strongly as if to negate the cold feeling that was crawling down his back.

"Impossible...As if, as if senpai would lose to a bastard like him!"

To Haruyuki, that beautiful jet-black avatar was the only absolute existence in Accel World. No matter what kind of Burst Linker she faced,

even if her opponent was another «King», he believed that there was no way she could lose.

It was impossible for that «Black King» to lose against a rule-breaking «Acceleration User» like Noumi. It was impossible, but—

...If I were to hold her back.

If this idiot that was tricked by a virus, was caught on video, and even lost his wings, were to dull that person's sword.

Or if the worst case situation were to become reality as well...

“—Haru.”

Takumu suddenly grasped Haruyuki's shoulders strongly.

“Haru, no matter what Noumi's intentions are, there is one thing we have to do. We must do everything we can do until this Saturday.”

“What we can do...but what's that? We're absolutely helpless as long as that guy is intercepting the Matching List.”

After mumbling that in a hollow voice, Haruyuki's face strongly twisted and he continued.

“Or else, are you saying we should also go to Shinjuku? Do you plan for the two of us to intrude onto Noumi's team and take down Chiyu...?”

This time, Takumu became silent for a long while.

Eventually, he removed his hand from Haruyuki's shoulder, shut his eyes behind his glasses and answered back quietly.

"—Please don't say that to me."

"...Sorry."

After hanging his head as well and letting out a long breath, Haruyuki apologized.

"Senpai and Chiyu can't be compared, after all...For now, let's believe. That the people of Akihabara BG and Blood Leopard will solve the mystery of the list interception..."

Those words were closer to a prayer to God than hoping for something, but it was also a fact that there didn't remain any other methods. Even if they went to Akihabara again, that would only be like walking blindly down the road.

While Haruyuki vigorously gnawed at his crushed hamburger and moved his mouth to chew, he stared up at the slightly cloudy sky.

Once the clock struck 2 PM, Haruyuki slipped out in order to escape from the classroom's usual cold atmosphere, and then changed his shoes and left the school grounds at his fastest dash.

He connected his Neuro Linker to the Global Net with a feeling of praying and check the anonymous mail box he had told to Blood Leopard, but—

".....Still nothing, huh..."

He understood that it wasn't such a simple matter, but Haruyuki was still struck by huge disappointment and dropped his shoulders.

Kuroyukihime was already going to return from Okinawa the day after tomorrow, on Saturday night. Although it was a moment he had been looking forward to, now he also wished that she would remain longer in safe Okinawa for at least one more day.

In the interval of 48 hours until then, they had to uncover Noumi's secret, eliminate the video evidence, and also get back Chiyuri. But right now, he couldn't do anything else besides patiently waiting for information.

Tormented by burning impatience, Haruyuki hung his head downward as far as possible and walked down the path towards his home alone.

Takumu had, as expected, not gone home with him and instead had gone to club activities today, since he had skipped for three days in a row.

He trudged toward his apartment home under the sky that seemed on the verge of rain, and at the moment when he went into the large entrance and looked up.

The back of a female student who was standing in front of one of the two elevators on the far-off wall at the end and was wearing the same Umesato Middle School uniform as him came into his view.

Short hair that came to her shoulders. A sports bag she carried slanted. Even just by seeing her from behind, Haruyuki immediately realized that it was Chiyuri. —However, why was she here, at a time like this?

Chiyuri was part of the track-and-field club, and ran around the track everyday right until it was time to leave school. The time when she returned home should have been two hours later than Haruyuki who was part of the going-home club. When he saw her in the classroom today, he didn't see any signs that she had caught a cold either.

After that familiar back vanished into the elevator and the door closed, Haruyuki finally realized.

She was skipping club activities on Noumi's instructions. In order to «duel» from the evening in Shinjuku, just like yesterday. In order to use her avatar as bait and attract the enemy, while continuing to heal Dusk Taker who hovered above in the safety of the sky.

".....Chiyu."

While mumbling that, he unconsciously gripped both his fists tightly. Haruyuki didn't understand this feeling that pushed up from the bottom of his stomach and that had the heat and density of melted metal. But, when he pricked that heat and moved, Haruyuki walked to the elevator, jumped in right as the door opened, and on impulse pushed as if jabbing the button for the floor two levels below his—the 21st floor.

After he stepped out from the lift and started walking again, he stopped in front of the door of the Kurashima household. He pushed the

displayed chime button without hesitation, and a sound effect chimed lightly.

Chiyuri should also have already learned via the home server that the visitor was Haruyuki.

After stubbornly standing there waiting, he finally heard the click of unlocking and the door opened.

Perhaps aunty had gone shopping, since the one who stood in the apartment's entranceway was Chiyuri herself. It seemed she had been in the middle of changing clothes, for she had removed her blazer and her undone blue ribbon hung down from the neck of her shirt.

Chiyuri slightly tilted her outwardly calm-looking face, and spoke only a single word.

"...What?"

"I came, to talk."

Haruyuki immediately answered. Truth be told, he hadn't entirely thought of what he should talk about, but even so his mouth still moved almost automatically.

"...I see."

Giving a short answer again, Chiyuri then turned around and returned inside. Haruyuki held his breath, then went through the door, took off his shoes and followed after her.



Half a year ago as well, Haruyuki had been driven by a similar impulse and visited Chiyuri's room.

The reason for that visit had been to directly connect with her and confirm whether Chiyuri was the unidentified Burst Linker «Cyan Pile» who had been making attacks in the Umesato local network back then.

The visit this time as well was similarly related to Brain Burst. However, the situations differed greatly as much as they were similar. Chiyuri was definitely the Burst Linker «Lime Bell» now, and on the surface had turned against Haruyuki and Takumu due to her own will.

After sitting down on the bed with a thump and holding one of her big stuffed animal cushions that were lying around in large numbers—probably some kind of sea creature on top on her knees, Chiyuri spoke once again.

“What do you want to talk about?”

While standing near the door, Haruyuki let out the words as he moved his mouth.

“...You skipped your club activities, didn't you?”

“Yeah.”

When Chiyuri gave only that minimal answer, he unusually locked gazes with her firmly, and asked another question.

“Is that part of Noumi's instructions?”

"...If it is?"

"If that's so, then stop. It's wrong to give priority to Brain Burst in real life."

Then, Chiyuri's expression changed for the first time here, and her eyebrows furrowed slightly and her sharp voice returned.

"Speak for yourself. Haru, how many times until now have you thought of nothing but Brain Burst?"

"Th...That's not true. I'm not in any clubs, and I've never carelessly forgotten about my homework because of it."

"And in exchange, you pour in all your other time into it..."

In that instant, Chiyuri shut her mouth.

And she suddenly cracked a smile.

"Let's stop. It's just a game. Let's not become so serious about it."

She was brightly smiling, but Haruyuki, who had seen Chiyuri's face for such a long time even more than his own, clearly grasped the very faint awkwardness that was hiding in that expression. But Chiyuri smiled even wider and gave a V-sign with her right hand.

"...It's amazing, you know? I only started yesterday and I've already gone up two levels. The people in the gallery said that going from Level 1 to 3 in a single day might be the fastest record in the history of Brain Burst. I can't even count the number of legion invitations I've gotten."

".....Chiyu."

Calling out her name in a voice that seemed to catch in his throat, he took a step forward.

"I'm only skipping club for the time being, so you don't have to worry. Since my pace will drop once I stabilize and can fight even as a solo. I've already gotten the knack of dueling..."

"Chiyu!!"

He said it again in a half-cry, and words burst forth from Haruyuki's throat like a stream.

"Chiyu, you're obeying Noumi because of that video, right!? He told you that he would submit the video of me peeping to the school, right!? In that case, you don't have to worry about such a threat! Noumi can't use it, because even he understands that if he did, I would release his real world information to other Burst Linkers. That thing...That video can only be used to threaten not me, but you, so stop worrying about it already!"

—'It's useless even if I say this', even though he should have understood those words intellectually.

If Noumi exposed that video, Haruyuki would almost certainly be expelled. On the contrary, it was quite possible that he would be arrested and, as result of a trial in family court, be sent to Juvenile Hall.

As long as that possibility existed at all, Chiyuri would continue to obey Noumi. That was because—she was Chiyuri. Because she was his childhood friend who always tried to protect Haruyuki since long ago.

"....."

After turning down her gaze and becoming silent for a long while, Chiyuri smiled once again.

"That's not how it is, Haru. I just want to collect points quickly and raise my level. I said this before the other day as well."

"That's...That's not like you at all!"

Haruyuki shouted as tears flowed down from his eyes without him being aware of it.

"I'm the one, I'm the one that's completely at fault here! I let him manipulate me just like he wanted and let him take hold of my various weaknesses, and on top of that...if even you are stolen away by him, I don't know what to do..."

As Haruyuki slumped to the floor and hanged his head downwards, in his ears—

The similar tearful voice of Chiyuri reached him.

When he raised his head up with a start, his childhood friend was still giving an unchanged smile, but there were two thin lines of tears quietly falling down her suntanned cheeks.

".....You don't understand. Haru, you don't understand me at all."

"Eh.....?"

"Even though you don't understand anything...anything at all!!"

Suddenly shouting in a teary voice, Chiyuri then did an unexpected action.

With the fingers of her trembling hands, she started to undo the buttons of her white shirt from the top one after another.

In front of the Haruyuki's eyes as his breath caught and he froze, Chiyuri, after showing a momentary hesitation, took off her shirt in one go. Her upper body, which only had a simple bra covering it, was exposed to Haruyuki's eyes without anything obstructing it.

Several days ago, Haruyuki had been tricked by a visual marker and entered into the female shower room, and as a result had seen her stark naked form, but for some reason, seeing her figure right in front of him like this now was accompanied by overwhelmingly huge implications and knocked down Haruyuki's consciousness.

".....If I do this, do you understand?"

Chiyuri whispered in a trembling voice.

"Even if my avatar in Accel World obeys Noumi, the me here in the real world...is in a place where you could touch me if you wanted to, Haru. Do you still not understand with this? I haven't been stolen away or anything like that."

Gazing at Haruyuki with eyes that shined intensely despite being wet with tears, Chiyuri spoke as if to engrave every word upon him.

"I act according to my own will. Both until now, and from now on."

Haruyuki—

Couldn't understand.

Chiyuri was acting according to her own will. What was that supposed to mean? Did she mean that, just as she had said until now, she had judged that, as a Burst Linker, it was more advantageous to join with Noumi rather than Haruyuki and the others, and was cooperating with him in order to get more points?

Suddenly, Haruyuki understood that the feeling that had been squirming and burning inside him since he saw her at the entrance was jealousy. It seemed that, even though he liked Kuroyukihime and wanted Takumu and Chiyuri to turn out well together, that black feeling hadn't been exhausted and had sprung up from the bottom of his chest just from thinking that Chiyuri was on Noumi's side.

However, Haruyuki shook off that feeling, and merely looked down deeply and spoke.

".....Sorry. Please put your clothes back on."

He didn't understand Chiyuri's aim and intentions.

But, he decided he would believe. Chiyuri was also probably fighting. She was trying to eliminate this crisis with her own power. He had to believe just that. If he couldn't believe what she had said until now, he was already unqualified to be her friend.

After getting up and turning towards the door in order not to look at Chiyuri who still didn't move, Haruyuki spoke one final time in a firm voice.

"...I believe in you. That's why, please believe in me as well. I won't lose to someone like Noumi. I will definitely regain everything that he took away."

Then, Haruyuki opened the door and began walking with a long stride in order to return to his own apartment.

After going out onto the veranda from his apartment's living room, Haruyuki put both his arms on the handrail and looked out at the Shinjuku high-rise complex rising in the sky to the east.

The clusters of high-rise buildings including the more than 500 meters tall Tokyo Government Office glittered brightly in the slanted sunlight. At this very instant as well, a «duel» should be enthusiastically taking place at that skyscraper's stage.

Right now, there was nothing he could do about Dusk Taker steadily increasing his battle power and making his fame grow.

However, unable to give up here, Haruyuki strongly gripped the handrail and mumbled.

"...There is something even I can still do."

That something was, thinking.

To scrutinize, consider and make conjecture from all the information.

Just any kind of plunderer couldn't steal that kind of weapon. While letting the cold wind that blew through the 23rd floor breeze through his uniform, Haruyuki began to remember in detail all the occurrences that had happened since the cause of all this—Noumi Seiji entered school eight days ago.

After it became late at night, Haruyuki learned from Takumu that the place that Dusk Taker had appeared today wasn't at Shinjuku but instead Shibuya.

But although the area was different, what happened was completely the same as yesterday. Burst Linkers that could oppose Noumi, who had the possibly strongest hand of «flight», «healing» and «long-range firepower», when they fought for the first time did not exist in the middle range.

This tag team, which had recorded a 100% rate of victory continuing for two days, had obtained a vast quantity of points once again. As a result, Dusk Taker was at Level 6. Lime Bell had reached Level 4.

It wasn't a phenomenon that fit inside the frame of «duels» anymore.

It was already something was more appropriately called an «invasion» into the existing Accel World.



As the sky in Shibuya was blazing red like the fire of battle, Haruyuki continued thinking intently while leaning against the veranda's handrail.

The playback of his memories passed through his desperate struggle with Noumi on Tuesday, and came to the scene at Akihabara yesterday.

The mysterious Burst Linker «Rust Jigsaw». Just like Noumi was doing, he was invading the existing system. Using the privilege of list interception, he was making a killing on points within the Akihabara BG's local network.

Looking at it like that, it wasn't necessarily far-fetched to think that there was some kind of connection between Rust Jigsaw and Dusk Taker either. At the very least, the possibility that they were using the same logic to intercept the list was high. That he had missed clearly seeing Rust Jigsaw's real form in the bustle of the crowd was tremendously regretful.

While once again tasting the bitterness he had felt so many times since yesterday, Haruyuki recalled in his mind the sight of Jigsaw's back that he had seen for an instant.

A gray stadium jacket. A white neck that was distinctly tanned-marked from wearing a Neuro Linker all the time. He had walked away at a fast pace while rubbing that place with his right hand as if it were in pain.

Just before he disappeared from sight, that boy had suddenly swept out his right hand at the passerby in front of him, although they hadn't really been in his way—

His memory playback stopped exactly on that scene.

He rewinded back several frames.

The boy quickly cleared away the space to his right that was at about the height of his chest, with his right hand that had his fingers extended.

Why did this scene bother him so much?

Haruyuki tightly grasped the veranda's handrail with his hands, and strained all his thinking power. The feeling that faintly bit into the center of his head when he touched upon the beginning to answer in a riddle-solving-type game intermittently struck him.

Think. Think.

While repeatedly playing back the sight of the boy's back, Haruyuki unconsciously performed the same movement as well.

He raised his right hand and quickly waved it to the right.

He felt as if that movement was strangely familiar to his arm as well.

Quickly waving his right hand. Waving his right hand. Waving.

This was—this wasn't the gesture of moving aside someone in front of you.

Wasn't this the motion of erasing windows on a virtual desktop?

But that time, the boy hadn't been wearing a Neuro Linker. Then, was it some kind of retinal projection-type wearable device? No, according to

the image in Haruyuki's memory, he hadn't had any such apparatus on him at all.

Had he been looking at a holo-window without using a Neuro Linker nor any other device?

...Impossible. As far as Haruyuki knew, devices like contact lens-type miniscule monitors had yet to be developed, and a device that was embedded in one's eyeball shouldn't exist either.

'Maybe I'm mistaken', just as he abandoned that line of thought, he suddenly recalled the words he had once heard from Noumi.

'...Do you think that the Neuro Linker is the only portable device in the world?'

Those were the words he had said while pointing at the small digital camera he had used in order to take a secret recording of Haruyuki in front of the Umesato Middle School shower rooms. He couldn't find any further meaning to his words than that. Yet, why did it bother him so much now?

"Devices...Devices other than the Neuro Linker..."

Haruyuki mumbled that while touching the aluminum-silver Neuro Linker that was attached to his own neck.

A VR device that wasn't a Neuro Linker. They certainly existed. In the 2020s before Haruyuki was born, there should have been huge headgears that were equipped to the head. But, the machines of those days were

only for Full Diving, and the Neuro Linker should have been the first device that had an AR (Augmented Reality) function which allowed for a virtual desktop to be operated while moving around in the real world.....

"...No."

Haruyuki suddenly frowned.

"No, that's not it. The first device that implemented AR, if I remember right, was..."

His mumbling stopped, and his gaze wandered through the air. Within his uncertain memories, there was something stuck that was prickling at him. Between the early headgear-type and the present Neuro Linker, another kind of device should have existed.

After wavering for a while, Haruyuki quietly moved his fingers and struck the Drive icon on his virtual desktop.

He rapidly passed through the endless number of data folders that existed in his Neuro Linker's local memory. Eventually, at an absurdly deep level, a folder with only the title [F] appeared.

F was the F for 'father'. There, all the information, no, memories that were connected to his real father, who he hadn't gotten in touch with once since he left their family long ago, were stored. There were only a few photographs. Voice files. Text memos. And the data folders related to his father's work, which he had duplicated from the home server just before his mother completely erased them all.

His father had worked as a business manager in a company related to the backbone of the network. Even if his father had hardly come back to the house and had only stayed at home for an occasional rest, the data of his work spread out wide in Haruyuki's vision, and he wasn't even looking at the other files there besides that.

Having remembered that things like the history of VR device development should have been among the documents his father had left in the server, Haruyuki desperately went through the folder while shaking off the prickling feeling piercing his chest. Finally, he found the target file and opened it. He scrolled with his finger through the string of characters that summarized in chronological format.

The first headgear-type VR machine that implemented Full Dive technology was marketed in May 2022.

The first generation device of the present Neuro Linker was put on the market in April 2031.

The moment when his gaze was drawn to the name of a certain device that described in small script between them.

His heart jumped with a 'DOKUN', and his breathing stopped. While feeling his skin grow rapidly cold across his entire body, Haruyuki grasped the handrail tightly with his hands.

—No way. That can't be. It's impossible. But.

—It’s possible. If this was used. One could also see a virtual desktop without having a Neuro Linker. And, one could also connect to a local network without using a Neuro Linker.

His lips trembled, and released a single phrase into the air with a hoarse voice.

“...Brain...Implant Chip.....”

Brain Implant Chip. Abbreviation, BIC.

It had existed for only a short time in the history of wearable VR machines, a ‘demon child’ as it were.

The body of the device was a small neuro-electronic chip that was implanted between the surface of the cerebrum and the dura mater. By laying out a self-growing terminal port around the sensory area of the brain’s surface, the possessor was able to use the AR display of a virtual desktop and Full Dive without equipping any external devices. In a certain sense, you could call it the ultimate VR machine, even more so than the Neuro Linker.

It was developed and marketed in 2029. However, its use was forbidden within this country only a few years later.

The reason for this was because, unlike the Neuro Linker, the BIC couldn’t be unequipped, not to mention being unable to have its power

disconnected. In the case where one received malicious hacking for example, opposing it would be accompanied by extraordinary difficulty.

Conversely, if the possessor used it with malicious intent, there were various ways to evade the law as well. An extreme example of that would be using it during the entrance exam of a high school or university, or during various kinds of qualification exams. Since the Neuro Linker didn't yet exist in those days, carrying VR machines during entrance exams was prohibited in principle, but if one had the BIC implanted in them, full marks could easily be taken on memorization-type subjects. Since it wasn't any different from carrying all the dictionaries and reference books with you.

Inevitably, cases where parents made their test-taking children implant the BIC in them occurred frequently throughout the whole country, and moreover it reached the point where the same thing occurred in bar examinations and national examinations for the licenses of government officials as well, and so the government had no choice but to make laws about the manufacture and use of BICs.

That's right—in the current year 2047, the BIC was an illegal VR device.

That was exactly why Haruyuki had not even considered examining that possibility since the beginning, when Noumi entered the school. However, he already thought that there was no other conclusion than this now. Although the general use of the BIC was regulated, he had heard that its

manufacture itself was continued for special uses and that there were also hospitals which performed implantations of the illegal chips that were sold through the black market. He couldn't imagine how a middle-school student could get their hands on something like that, but he could certainly believe that Noumi of all people could have done it.

Noumi Seiji/Dusk Taker, and probably Rust Jigsaw as well, possessed a second VR machine in his brain.

Noumi wasn't intercepting the Matching List while connected to Umesato Middle School's local network. From the beginning, his Neuro Linker in which Brain Burst existed was not connected to the network.

In other words, it was like this. His Neuro Linker was usually operating in stand-alone mode. By doing so, he avoided «unavoidable duels» that were a risk that came along with the privilege of a Burst Linker's «acceleration ability», and furthermore could still connect to the network as well due to the BIC.

For example, in the kendo match against Takumu. That time, Noumi was connected to the local network within the school by using the BIC in his cranium on the one hand, and activated physical acceleration using his Neuro Linker in its unconnected state on the other, letting his easily avoid Takumu's shinaï<sup>[34]</sup>. Even if one looked at the Matching List, his name naturally wouldn't be there.



Only, in order to get a high score in his social studies test using «acceleration», he had to connect to the examination application with his Neuro Linker instead of his BIC, but if you excluded that instant—

“So...that’s how it is.....”

After getting rid of all the countless windows that were displayed in his vision with a sweep of his hand, Haruyuki squeezed out the words in a hoarse voice.

At last. —At last, he had finally arrived at it. The only correct answer.

What’s more, this information was fatal to Noumi Seiji. The existence of a BIC could be determined with an X linear scanner. And if the chip was discovered in Noumi’s brain, his entry into Umesato Middle School would certainly be revoked.

If he used this card, he would drag out Noumi into the same place as him. Into a battlefield without special privileges. Then, after that, there would be only one thing to do. «Duel», fight with all his strength—and win.

Staring out at the evening sky in the center of Tokyo where Noumi should be flying right now, Haruyuki said a short sentence, as if firing a bullet from a rifle.

“Noumi...This time, I’m going to settle this.”

## Chapter 9

April 19th.

Friday.

On the lunch of this day which was just a day away from Kuroyukihime's return to Tokyo, Haruyuki went to the school cafeteria, cut through the long lines of tables and headed straight to the very back of the room.

The place he was heading towards was the lounge. In this place where, in addition to the unwritten rule that only second and third year students could use it, there were also many tables for the exclusive-use of some committees and outstanding clubs, Haruyuki hadn't never once set foot inside here until now when Kuroyukihime wasn't present.

However, just this once, he mustered his courage and went under the white gate, stepping up to a circular table there. The students that were sitting there and eating lunch while pleasantly chatting raised their heads as they noticed Haruyuki approach.

Among these prodigies of the swimming club and softball club who were staring at this out-of-place student stepping up to them, Haruyuki walked up to the short first-year who was the only one with his back to him, and called out to him in a low voice.

"Noumi. I have something to tell you. Please come to the place where we talked for the first time."

And then, he turned around and left without waiting for an answer.

While waiting for Noumi to arrive underneath the dense grove of trees that was at the back of the courtyard and outside of the range of the Social Cameras, Haruyuki recalled back to the day he had first met that first year student here.

The underclassman who had a pretty-looking appearance like a girl had declared to Haruyuki that the battle was over using a cheerful voice while smiling. Just as he had said, Haruyuki's situation had worsened thereafter the more he struggled.

He had hit Noumi and conversely been knocked down himself, his flight ability had been stolen in a Direct Connect duel after he was trampled on by him, and although he had grasped a come-from-behind win in their second battle after learning the Incarnate System in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he had been further defeated because of the unexpected intrusion of Chiyuri.

Noumi's attacks hadn't stopped there, and in the real world he had spread rumours that Haruyuki was the peeping camera perpetrator in the real world in order to corner Haruyuki, while in Accel World he had earned a vast amount of points using his wings and Chiyuri, and further leveled up.

At this rate, Noumi's objective, the Black King Black Lotus, would be exposed to danger just as Takumu predicted.

—However.

This is as far as you go, Noumi.

Hearing a twig snap from being firmly stepped on and footsteps approaching from behind him, Haruyuki slowly turned around.

Haruyuki saw the pure yet crafty smile on the face of the underclassman as he appeared from the shadow of the thick trunk of the big oak tree—and then he spoke.

“Game Over, Noumi Seiji...No, Dusk Taker.”

“.....What was that?”

Still smiling, Noumi tilted his head.

“In other words, are you saying that you completely accept defeat this time? Meaning like ‘I give up, so please don’t bully me anymore?’”

“...No. It means that bargaining things over with you is already over.”

Haruyuki replied in a low voice, putting all his strength into his eyes while taking the sneering gaze from his opponent.

Noumi’s smile gradually faded. A detestable wrinkle was faintly etched between his brows.

“...Senpai, you’re also someone who’s bad at understanding things, aren’t you? Although I recognize your efforts in acquiring a stingy incarnate

technique and picking up a fireworks-like Enhanced Armament, isn't it already obvious that you can't stand up to me no matter what kind of hand you have? You and Mayuzumi-senpai can only hold your thumbs in your mouths and watch. I will take down the Black King, and rule over this school...no, over all of the Suginami area."

Haruyuki shook his head strongly and brushed off those words that were released in a knife-like cold voice.

"No. That won't happen."

Haruyuki took one step forward—

And spoke in a clear voice.

"The reason you don't appear on the Matching List is because you have a second VR machine within your head...in other words, a Brain Implant Chip."

Instantly.

The sudden change that struck Noumi's expression confirmed the correctness of Haruyuki's guess.

Both his eyes widened greatly for a moment, and then narrowed grimly. His bared teeth grated, and several thin lines of wrinkles ran down to the bridge of his nose.

"....."

Facing Noumi as he said nothing, Haruyuki attacked even deeper.

"If I'm wrong, remove and show me your Neuro Linker right now. Your school register tag that's displayed in my vision shouldn't disappear even if you do that."

Both Noumi and Haruyuki were aware that there was no meaning in feigning ignorance by saying something like 'I have no obligation to do such a thing'. Because, if Haruyuki anonymously conveyed his suspicions to the school authorities, Noumi would receive a head scan at the hospital with staff members of the School Management Department present, and falsifying the results of that scan were completely impossible. Noumi would then be accused of illegally passing his entrance exams, and in addition to being expelled from school he would be forced to receive treatment to have his BIC deactivated.

The damage from that would be equal to or greater than the punishment Haruyuki would receive as the perpetrator of the peeping camera.

Noumi glared at Haruyuki without trying to hide his fury, and spit out words in a hoarse voice.

"...I thought you were a pig, but to think you were actually a rat. Always darting about, sneakily sniffing around..."

"In that case, you should have crushed me from the beginning. Not doing so was your mistake."

In response to Haruyuki's retort, Noumi gradually brought his expression of anger under control and gave a contemptuous smile once again.

"Well, I'll recognize that. So? What do you intend to do? Do you wish to exchange missiles between us and be destroyed together? ...Both me and senpai will be expelled from school. I'll go to the hospital, you'll be sent to juvenile hall. Furthermore, we'll both eventually receive real world attacks and then lose Brain Burst...That can't be the ending that you wish for, right, senpai?"

"If forced to, I'm not afraid to do so, but."

Tightly clenching his cold and sweating fist, Haruyuki spoke the method to put an end to things that he had thought about overnight.

"—Noumi. We each have our respective trump cards, with you having the video of me, and me knowing your secret. Supposing that there is a way to settle things without using those and mutually destroying each other in the real world...the only way is to «duel»."

"Duel...?"

"That's right, since you and I are both Burst Linkers. From now on, you will connect to the local network using your Neuro Linker instead of your BIC. In addition, you will cancel your once-per-day restriction and do nothing but continue to duel against me. Until one of us either accepts defeat or loses all our Burst Points...Although, I have no intention to surrender, not until the last point is lost."

—And then, even if I were to lose, after that will be Takumu. And then Kuroyukihime-senpai will fight you.

Noumi must have also heard those words that he added within his heart.

Once again, Noumi Seiji let his deep anger and irritation appear on his face for only a very short time.

".....Dueling. Burst Linker. Both of those are words that I hate. No, it's the mentality itself of seriously using those words that I find truly detestable. But...If that is senpai's wish, it can't be helped."

Changing his expression back to his usual thin smile, Noumi leaned his back against the trunk of an oak tree, and nimbly raised one finger.

"But, if we're going to do things like that, I also have a proposal."

"...Proposal?"

"Yes. Don't you think it's ridiculous for us to repeat acceleration duels dozens or worse hundreds of times until either me or senpai loses all our points? Also, even if one of us surrenders, how we will be secure in the veracity of those words?"

"Then, what would you have us do?"

"Let's finish it in one go. With Arita-senpai's favorite «duel<sup>[35]</sup>»

Noumi spoke with a gruesome smile etched onto his face.

"In the Unlimited Neutral Field, there is a method for betting all of both side's Burst Points in a single match. Two or more duelers charge all the points they have into an item, and when there is only one person left





standing, it becomes winner takes all. How about it, don't you think that we can settle things smartly like this?"

"....."

After staring intently at Noumi's smiling face for several seconds, Haruyuki shook his head slightly.

"...Unfortunately, Noumi, I cannot trust you that much anymore. I'm not really surprised, though. If it's in the Unlimited Neutral Field, there's no way to eliminate the possibility that you will make a comrade of yours lie in ambush at the location of the duel."

Then, Noumi spread out his hands as if to say 'Good grief'.

"I think that there is also such a danger for my side as well, though! ...In that case, let's attach too guarantees. First, you may take Cyan Pile...Mayuzumi-senpai with you. You two will fight me in turns. And secondly, you may postpone the time of the duel as many times and for as long as you want right up until its starts. If it's like this, it's realistically impossible for someone to lie in ambush."

"....."

Haruyuki held his breath, and quickly thought.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, time flowed 1000 times faster than in the real world. For example, if he specified to Dive in at 5 PM at first and then postponed it enough until several seconds after that, a timespan of one week would pass by inside the field during that interval. If this

postponement was repeated several times, the elapsed time inside would become huge, and it would be impossible to continue waiting with normal nerves.

However, if gradual Dives and log-outs were repeated one after another instead, one would have to consume 10 Burst Points for each time. One couldn't withstand that even if they were a «King»-class.

Speaking of an ambush in the Unlimited Neutral Field, Haruyuki recalled the case where the Yellow Legion had laid a trap for the Red King Niko during the Chrome Disaster incident three months ago, but he didn't know when they appeared there and they did not necessarily wait many months inside there for Niko. The real world identity of «Cherry Rook», Disaster's true form, had already been discovered by them due to the process of the Enhanced Armament transfer by Direct Connect, and as such he had likely been under surveillance and the time when he Dived was predicted.

Since even that kind of method couldn't be used here, it was surely impossible to set an ambush in the Unlimited Neutral Field—or so he thought.

However, Haruyuki was aware that his knowledge regarding Accel World was still far from complete, so of course he didn't give an immediate answer.

"...In that case, may I consult with Takumu?"

"Of course, go right ahead! Please consult with each other for as long as you like."

Smiling, Noumi stepped back.

"When you come to a conclusion, please inform me at this address. Since I also want time to prepare myself."

He sent over an anonymous mail address to Haruyuki with a flick.

Haruyuki held his breath and watched Noumi's back as he then simply turned around and walked away.

He had an unpleasant feeling. When Haruyuki had said the words 'BIC' to Noumi, he had assumed that they would rush into a duel right away just like that. Now, he felt like the pace had once again been taken away from him by taking time between them here.

After confirming that Noumi had disappeared from the school building, Haruyuki leaned against the trunk of a nearby tree and spoke with thought-speech.

'...What do you think, Taku?'

'...It's dangerous.'

Takumu, who been listening to the entire conversation with Noumi online, immediately gave that response.

Haruyuki had already told Takumu last night about the matter of the BIC that he realized. In addition, he had also told him how he had decided to

settle things with Noumi Seiji. That is, by first having Haruyuki, then Takumu determinedly continue to challenge Noumi to local network duels until Noumi had no more Burst Points.

Of course, they had considered the possibility of both of them losing all their points against the Level 6 Dusk Taker. But, if they lost a normal match—that just meant that was as far as they went, right? «When you Dive into the battlefield once, there is nothing but battle». That was the teaching of their master, Kuroyukihime.

However, Noumi's proposal was something that they had not expected. Takumu once again repeated his words with tense thoughts.

'It's too dangerous, Haru. In the Unlimited Neutral Field, there is no telling what may happen. Even more so if the opponent is that Noumi.'

'Then, shall we reject his proposal?'

'.....'

Here, Takumu also became silent. Eventually, his voice resounded again in Haruyuki's mind in a lowered tone.

'...But, just as Noumi said, it is certainly true that there is no way to guarantee things even if he surrenders...Since there remains the possibility of him devising a new trap against us again someday...'

'Hey, Taku. Do you think there is a way to avoid the constraints of the «unfixed extension of the designated time» that Noumi spoke of and make an ambush ahead of time...?'

After sinking into silence again for several seconds, Takumu slowly answered.

'Either by having a huge amount of burst points...or a huge amount of patience. There shouldn't be any other ways besides those. The problem is whether Noumi has a comrade who would agree to pay such a huge sacrifice...'

This time Haruyuki thought for a while, and then answered.

'Hmm...—I think that the possibility of him belonging to some kind of organization is high. In addition, the other members would be people who have undergone the BIC implantation operation as well. Rust Jigsaw, who I fought in Akihabara, is also probably a member. Though, since there's no tag attached to the names of either of their avatars, it's probably different from a legion...'

'So they're guys who earn Burst Points efficiently with the Brain Chip and then use them earnestly in the real world. They really are «Acceleration Users» just as Noumi said before.'

'Yeah...Would guys like that cooperate to the point where they would almost infinitely waste points or time for the sake of Noumi's personal circumstances...?'

Suddenly biting his lips, Haruyuki immediately continued.

'No, I don't think so. Considering Noumi's words about there being no 'free of charge' friends, that must be true for him. Conversely speaking, if

he had such a comrade, I think that Noumi...would surely have become a proper Burst Linker.'

There was no basis for Haruyuki's words, but Takumu immediately responded with thoughts of agreement.

'Yeah. Yes...That's exactly it. This is a battle between us Burst Linkers and the Acceleration User Noumi. That is our pride that lets us stand up...That's right...'

For a moment, both of their unified intentions flowed through the circuit of the Voice Call as a white flash.

Haruyuki nodded his head and strongly transmitted his thoughts.

'Alright, I'll accept the proposal. I'll send Noumi the first designated time after you and him finished club activities and return home...let's say at 8 PM. We'll extend the time by 10 minutes at the lowest and a total of one hour at the highest, so the possibility of an ambush will be lost.'

'Roger.'

Letting out a little of the tension in his shoulders after hearing that striking-like answer, Haruyuki added more.

'...Besides, a one-shot match is honestly much more welcome.'

'Fufu, Haru is the overconcentration-type after all. You always expect to decided things in one go.'

'You who spent so much trouble training in mind power are just as bad, though.'

After giving a short laugh at each other and saying they'd meet against after school, Haruyuki cut the connection.

—I'm glad that Takumu is next to me.

After sincerely thinking that, Haruyuki thanked from the bottom of his heart that, half a year ago when he had first fought Cyan Pile, he had decided not to deliver the finishing blow to his friend.

After school. 7:30 at night.

While he was tidying up his home's living room and taking out a box from the freezer in order to heat up the usual frozen pizza, his doorbell chime rang.

After quickly confirming Takumu's face in a holo-window, he ran to the entranceway. He pressed the unlock button, and headed to the opening door.

"Hey. Right on ti..."

Immediately after he ended in '-me', Haruyuki was taken aback as he opened his mouth wide.

Another familiar face was there to the side behind Takumu who was standing there with a grave face.



"...C-Chiyu...!?"

Why did you come here now?

Without giving him the time to voice that question, the plain clothes-wearing Chiyuri mumbled an expressionless 'Sorry for intruding<sup>[36]</sup>', and entered into the hallway. She quickly passed by Haruyuki and walked into the living room.

After watching the sight of her back while dumbfounded, Haruyuki turned around to face Takumu and questioned him.

"...W-Why?"

"I didn't call her here. She came with me inside the elevator."

Takumu mumbled that, seeming like he also was having trouble understanding. After letting out a thin breath and closing the door, he tilted his head in doubt to ask whether it was okay to enter.

After deeply nodding, Haruyuki returned to the hallway along with Takumu.

Standing not in the living room but in the kitchen, Chiyuri lifted up the box of frozen pizza which he had left in the sink, made a small smile and spoke.

"...As usual, you eat things like this."

And then she returned it to the freezer and lifted up a paper bag she seemed to have brought with her.

"I got Mama to make lasagna again. Let's eat it the three of us together."

She paused for a moment.

"...Don't worry, I didn't put anything like poison into it."

As soon as he heard that joke, a sharp pain pierced through the center of his chest, and Haruyuki's face became distorted.

—Why did we have to become like this?

That thought ran through his mind. Turning his gaze away, he saw that Takumu's eyes had also stiffened behind his glasses.

Unable to look at the two of them like that anymore, Chiyuri quickly took out a heat-resistant container and divided its contents onto three plates. She skillfully carried one plate in her left hand and two in her right hand, and walked into the living room.

"Come on, sit down."

Smiling, she placed a plate with a slightly large serving in front of Haruyuki, and placed the other two plates with similar amounts in front of Takumu and herself. She took out forks from a cutlery basket that was placed on the middle of dining room table and held them out to the two of them.

When compared to Chiyuri's behaviour over the last week, each of those separate actions were important as they weaved together as if in an

unseen thread, to the point where Haruyuki couldn't watch anymore. He accepted the form, fixed his gaze on his plate, and spoke in a low voice.

"...Thank you. Itadakimasu<sup>[37]</sup>."

"...Itadakimasu."

Takumu also said it, and with Chiyuri words of "Go ahead" as the signal, the three of them began to eat in silence the lasagna that was specially made by Chiyuri's mama.

It was delicious. Its taste was far greater than the thing they had eaten as a meal a week ago. But within that deliciousness, there was still clearly that pain which dwelled in Haruyuki's chest. Since he would probably start crying if he stopped chewing, Haruyuki made sure to hold the plate and earnestly continued eating.

Their three plates became empty in fifteen minutes. Chiyuri, after cleaning the dishes and coming back, sat down at the table once again.

After remaining silent for a while, it was 7:50 when Chiyuri finally opened her mouth.

".....Noumi told me to come. To the location of the duel."

"Wha..."

"Eh..."

Haruyuki raised their voices at the same time as Takumu.

Following a momentary pause, his thoughts began turning at high speed.

"I...I see. You're already at Level 4 after all...so you're also entering the Unlimited Neutral Field..."

Foolishly, Haruyuki hadn't considered at all the possibility that Chiyuri would appear. But, certainly, since it's Noumi, he would have no hesitation in using Lime Bell as part of an ambush.

"B-But...how does Noumi intend to transmit the designated time to you, Chii-chan...?"

Takumu's question was quite natural. He and Haruyuki would be arbitrarily changing the designated time, in order to eliminate the chances of Burst Linkers lying in ambush for them. Chiyuri wasn't an exception to that either.

Chiyuri turned down her face so as to escape from the looks directed at her from the two of them, and then mumbled.

"...Noumi instructed me like this. Meet directly with Haru and Takkun, and tell them that I've betrayed him. Do that so that they trust me, and Dive at the same time as them...and then once the duel start, heal him."

".....Wh...at...?"

Haruyuki clenched his teeth hard.

—Just how much foul play does he intend to do!

At the same time as that fury pierced through his brain, Haruyuki was even more confused by Chiyuri's intentions in confessing those instructions to him and Takumu.

As if sensing that, Chiyuri continued in a thin voice.

"...But, that's impossible. Even if I said such a thing now, it wouldn't be persuasive at all. That's why, I...thought that I would tell you two the truth and ask you two."

"Ask us, you say....."

Looking at first Haruyuki and then Takumu with wide eyes wet with pale tears, Chiyuri clearly spoke.

"Please take me there. I have to go. If you say it's impossible...if you say that, it can't be helped, so instead I'll Dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field right here and now, and wait on the other side until you two come. No matter how many months or years it takes, I'll wait."

"...Chiyu, you....."

Those words were squeezed out from his blocked throat. Chiyuri may have declared that, but he felt a deep shock at hearing words like the «Unlimited Neutral Field» coming out smoothly from the mouth of a girl who should have been a beginner that didn't know the basics of Brain Burst only a week ago.

Haruyuki had held dozen, hundreds of questions within his chest since this incident began.

—Why!

—Chiyu, just what on earth are you going so far for! For what purpose are you continuing to so insistently and foolishly earn points in the Brain Burst that you denied until now!!

Yes, Haruyuki wasn't able to stop himself from thinking even this.

What if even Chiyuri's words now are a trap? What if this is a strategy where she betrays us two-fold, interrupts during the duel and steals away the points of me and Takumu?

Honestly, although it was a battle against Dusk Taker where they didn't know what would happen in the match even if it's one-on-one, their chances of victory would almost entirely disappear if Lime Bell's healing ability was added to the mix. It would become just like the battle on Tuesday.

Haruyuki couldn't understand. He couldn't grasp Chiyuri's true intentions at all.

The one that broke the heavy silence was Takumu's quiet voice.

"...I understand, Chii-chan. We'll go together."

"T-Taku..."

Takumu turned towards Haruyuki, smiled quietly and spoke.

"Haru. Half a year ago, you saved me during our first battle in that hospital. You surely wavered about it, right? There was plenty of

possibility that my pleading was just lip-service and that I would try to hunt the comatose Black Lotus immediately after our duel finished. But...you forgave me. No, you believed in me. I will never forget that time.....That's why."

Taking a deep breath through his trembling throat, Takumu resolutely declared.

"I will also believe in Chii-chan. It's frustrating that I can't understand Chii-chan's real intentions no matter how I think about it...But, whatever may happen due to Chii-chan's actions, I will accept it."

Within the silence that once again filled the room, Haruyuki saw Chiyuri's lips move silently.

It was a minute movement like the shaking of a tree, but the clear words reached his ears.

...Thank you, Takkun.

The instant he heard that, Haruyuki shut his eyes tightly. On the screen of his eyelids, the tears that he had seen Chiyuri shed yesterday in her room were recalled.

I'm acting according to my own will.

Chiyuri had said that while crying. In that case, the small details of the situation already didn't matter. Just as Takumu had said, it was about believing, or not believing. The problem was only that. And the answer to

that was decided. Since many years ago, since the time when Chiyuri and Haruyuki could satisfyingly talk to each other, it was already decided.

"Alright."

Haruyuki also nodded.

"Let's go together. The three of us."

At the same time as it reached 8 PM, Haruyuki sent the first typed email to Noumi. The specified Dive time was 8:30. The location was in front Kouenji Station within the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Of course, these would both be changed from now on again and again. Since they would only send the new directions a few seconds before the arrival of the previous designated time, even if Noumi had someone set up in ambush, it was impossible for Noumi to transmit a postponement to them. Only, there was a danger of Noumi and his ambush accomplice Diving at the same time if they met up with each other in the real world like Haruyuki and the others, but Haruyuki didn't believe that Noumi had a comrade he trusted that much. Furthermore, Haruyuki and Takumu had also considered the idea that the accomplice would Dive after also meeting with Noumi on this side in order to eliminate that possibility, but they dismissed they because it was even more dangerous to leave one's unconscious body in front of Noumi.

While randomly changing the time and location, Haruyuki continued to send mail after mail.



The feeling of tension while on standby was unpleasant like when being left alone for a long time in the waiting room of a dentist's office. But, thinking that the irritation that Noumi must be feeling right now was incomparable to his nervousness made him able to endure it. On Noumi's side, he wasn't able to predict just how long and how many times they were going to extend this.

9:12 PM.

After amply repeating the extension more than 15 times, Haruyuki finally spoke.

"All right...We'll Dive in one minute."

"Roger."

Takumu gave that answer, while Chiyuri also nodded.

The one-match battle which bet all the points of three people. Despite how long it had been prolonged, it would start in one hour. In other words, everything would be over after only three to six seconds in the real world.

Within his heart, Haruyuki called out 'Senpai' to Kuroyukihime who was in the far away Okinawa.

...Senpai, if I lose, you'll probably be extremely angry, and also sad. But, I believe that you'll definitely understand in the end. It is exactly because I aim to be your knight that I have to do this.

Five seconds before 9:13.

Haruyuki pressed the transmit button for the last email.

The contents were—[Location: Umesato Middle School grounds. Time: Now.]

“Let’s go!!”

Right after Haruyuki shouted that out, the three of them gathered their voices together and cried out the command.

“““Unlimited Burst!!”””

## Chapter 10

Night.

A huge pale disc shone brightly in the black sky.

The ground, the buildings, everything was a white stripped of color. It wasn't colorlessness, but the color of dry bone. Square houses casted distinct shadows over the wide road. Over there, the Shinjuku sub-center, which had changed into a spiral-formed chalk spire, rose so high it seemed to pierce the sky.

"...The «Moonlight» stage, huh."

Takumu—Cyan Pile murmured that after looking around at this virtual world's Western Tokyo.

Haruyuki also quickly listed the features of this stage that he remembered.

"It's bright, but you can see almost nothing within the shadows. Sound carries over a far distance. There are few Enemies. Trap-type terrain effects also don't exist..."

"In open spaces, unexpected attacks from hiding places are almost impossible. Using the school campus was a correct choice after all."

After nodding to each other, they glanced behind them.

In this empty white space whose was basis the living room of the Arita home, the vivid emerald and shining «Lime Bell» stood silently as well beneath the moonlight.

There was no change in her outward appearance since they had seen her on Tuesday. However, by doing an enormous number of duels over only two days and winning completely in all of them, she had already reached the same Level 4 as Haruyuki and Takumu.

Though, because there had been an interminably long time since they had become Level 4, there was probably a wide difference in total point acquisition between the two of them who would soon reach Level 5 and Chiyuri, but her potential at least must be equivalent to theirs.

While catching up that close to them in a short period of time, Chiyuri who served as Noumi's healer/bait had surely been exposed to all kinds of attacks from countless Burst Linkers. Haruyuki also understood just how painful those harsh, difficult experiences must have been.

However, Chiyuri stood right in front of the two of them with movements that didn't betray her fatigue at all, and she spoke only a short sentence.

"Let's go."

And then, without hesitating, she jumped down from the high terrace that corresponded to the 23rd floor of the original apartment building. She descended from slightly lower terraces and decorated scaffolds to the ground. There was not a fragment of newbie awkwardness in her movements either.

Haruyuki and Takumu looked at each other once again, and after reflexively smiling bitterly, they also jumped down in the same way.

The three of them avoided the main road they usually used when commuting to school, and instead went by back roads at a half-run. While paying attention to their surroundings, Haruyuki and Takumu destroyed suitable objects and filled up their special technique gauges.

They didn't go straight into the school, but first came out onto the roof of the family restaurant on the other side of Oume Street, and confirmed the status of the dual location from behind cover.

Umesato Middle School had changed into a form like a European palace from the Middle Ages. In what could be described as Gothic-style, huge pillars were placed in a row in the front, and many statues of angels or demons protruded out from the surface of the walls.

After concentrating his eyes to see that there were no other duel avatars there and confirming that everything there was made of stone, Haruyuki looked at the schoolyard once again.

The large grounds had become a garden intricately covered with small tiles. There were no objects there at all, and only a spear-like tower that stood at the southern end—originally the support pole of a ball fence had a long and thin shadow that stretched over the ground.

"...There doesn't seem to be anyone hidden there."

Haruyuki murmured that, and Takumu nodded.

"Yeah...But, Noumi isn't there either...His Dive should only have been delayed by half a second..."

"If he doesn't come after five minutes, let's temporarily retreat away from Koenji Station...No, wait."

At that moment, a very faint wind noise reached Haruyuki's ears. Since the stage was completely still, something must be moving the air. A flying-type Enemy—or, a flying-type avatar.

As Haruyuki quickly looked up to the sky in the southwest, his whole body hardened the instant he looked.

A silhouette was approaching in the night sky filled with small twinkling stars while being palely illuminated by the moonlight.

A thin body. Claws on his hands. And devilish wings extending out on his back.

"Nou...mi..."

As Haruyuki groaned that name out unconsciously, the avatar started descending as if being pulled by his voice. He folded his arms, drew a graceful spiral through the air and alighted down in the center of the schoolyard.

His landing was almost silent. Just by seeing that manner and posture, Haruyuki could tell that Noumi had already completely mastered the operation of flight ability.

This avatar with the attribute of «robbing» slowly folded his wings and stopped moving there.

Once again, complete silence filled the world.

Haruyuki's sense couldn't grasp any changes either. No movements of stealthy approach, no footsteps creeping in at a blind spot, nothing.

After waiting more than a full minute, Haruyuki whispered.

"...Let's go."

After Takumu nodded next to him, they rose at the same time and jumped down to the road. Hearing their footsteps, Dusk Taker quickly turned his face towards them.

While he gazed right at them, Haruyuki and the others entered the grounds of Umesato Middle School through the gate, and then went around the end of the school building and headed towards the schoolyard.

The footsteps of the three of them make a hard sound on the tiles. The moonlight clearly etched their shadows into the ground.

Chiyuri did not go into the schoolyard, but instead walked along the southern wall of the school building and then stood quietly within its

shadow. Haruyuki and Takumu headed straight towards the center of the wide space.

Stopping about 20 meters away from Dusk Taker who was standing in the center, Haruyuki threw a silent look at him.

After taking that look for a few seconds, Noumi unfolded his arms in front of his chest and lightly spread them out left and right.

"...Just like I said you could extend the time as many times as you wished, I'm definitely the only one here!"

The boy's voice, which was tinged with a metallic effect, resounded lightly through the pale world.

"I didn't think you would prolong it so long, senpai! Is that being cautious, or distrustful, I wonder...?"

"It's because we've already learned that we can never be careful enough against you."

After letting out a short 'Kukuku' laugh at Haruyuki's retort, Nomi stuck out his right hand in front of him.

There was a card in between his fingertips. It looked similar to the item that the Yellow King, Yellow Radio had used before to replay a video of the past, but this one was red like blood. Haruyuki had heard that the special items sold at the «shops» within the Unlimited Neutral Field were mostly in the form of cards like that.



Noumi showed it to Haruyuki and Takumu, and then spoke.

"This is, just as its names says, a «Sudden Death Duel Card». It cost a fairly high price, but consider it my treat."

He gave another 'Kuku' laugh.

"...First, I charge all of the points I have into this. The remaining two dueler frames are set as a team, so you two need to bet your respective points as well. If both of you have survived by the time my HP gauge reaches zero, all of the points charged into it will be equally distributed to you two. If only one of you remains, the winner takes it all. And when I beat the two of you, I'll get all your points."

"In other words, in the case that the two of us survive together, we won't have to fight each other, right?"

"Exactly. Well, this is a little bit of consideration. It's important..."

Noumi brandished the card around once again, and spoke.

"This duel won't end until someone dies. And those that die will definitely lose Brain Burst. There is no exception to this at all. I'll say this now, but if you «retreat» through a portal, it will be treated as your loss at that moment. At the same time as you return to reality, the forced uninstall will activate."

"...I see."

Nodding, Haruyuki looked at Takumu.

Cyan Pile's eyes shined strongly behind the slits on his mask for a moment, and he firmly nodded his head.

"All right, that's fine."

Noumi slowly nodded to Haruyuki's words, and then touched the card with the fingertip of his left hand. After he operated it a bit, the card shined a bright crimson for a moment.

He then threw the card to Takumu, who caught it and touched it the same as Noumi had done, causing it to shine again.

Takumu threw the card to Haruyuki, who then held it between the fingers of his right hand.

After taking a big breath, he clicked on it with his left hand. A holo-window was displayed in the center, and he touched the charge button.

After the explanation of the Sudden Death rules in a blunt font flowed down the screen, a confirmation dialog of Yes/No appeared. Yes.

When the exceedingly blunt Brain Burst system then once again asked the usual 'Is this really okay?', Haruyuki finally understood the reality that this was the edge of the edge of the point of death. Though he should have been detached from his real body, his back quickly grew cold. At the same time as his limbs became numb, virtual adrenaline was released into his blood vessels.

However, of course, he chose Yes.

The card shined an even more dazzling blood-like color and—it lifted up from Haruyuki's hand and floated up to a slightly higher position.

The digital numbers of a countdown slowly rotated around it.

If this duel was made widely known in Accel World, an amazing number of gallery viewers would surely gather here. Although half a year had passed since Haruyuki had become a Burst Linker, he hadn't heard any talk about something like a Sudden Death Duel where you betted all your points.

—No.

That's not right. He had heard of it.

The king of swords who Haruyuki respected and admired more than anyone else, The Black King «Black Lotus». As part of the special rule that was imposed only on Level 9 Burst Linkers, she was always fighting while carrying the possibility of sudden death. That's right, for example, in the weekly territory battles, if the other kings were to arrange meticulous preparations and appear there. If she were to lose to one of them. That person would immediately undergo the permanent loss of Brain Burst.

.....Senpai. You must always be living under this kind of pressure.

One second after he murmured that within himself—

The countdown reached zero.

The blazing letters that flared up said 'Duel Start'.

Dusk Taker widely hoisted up the claws of his hands.

Haruyuki also lowered his waist and prepared his hand-swords in front and behind him.

Noumi's wings remained folded, and he didn't show any signs of taking out his purple wave motion attack. He must first wish to have a ground battle of incarnate techniques.

—That's just fine with me!

Crying that out within his mind, Haruyuki then kicked off the ground.

He dashed fiercely in order to close the 20-meter distance between them at once. The enemy's silhouette in the center of his vision rapidly became larger.

He crossed over the shadows of the poles that stretched over the white courtyard. One pole, two poles—

When he stepped on the shadow of the third pole, it happened.

From the darkness of a thin shadow no more than 10 cm wide which shouldn't have been able to hide anything, something sprang up as if gushing out and approached Haruyuki from his left and right.

They were square plates that seemed to be about 1 meter long on each side. These two dim deep black plates rose up like springs the moment that Haruyuki had stepped on the shadow of the pole, and squeezed him between them from both sides with a tremendous force.

Even with Silver Crow's speed, he was not able to avoid them. He could only spread out his hands and press them against the surface of the plates with all his strength.

*\*GAAN!\** A metallic sound resounded, and sparks flew from the joints of Haruyuki's arms. The HP gauge, which was the only thing he could see, decreased slightly.

"Guh..."

He involuntarily cried out from the sharp pain. Although they were ultra-thin plates that were less than a few millimeters thick, they had a frightful pressure that pressed hard on him in a huge vise. He couldn't extend his arms out at all, so he adjusted the position of his hands and desperately resisted with the armor of his elbows and hands. However, the plates instantly crammed Haruyuki into a 50 cm wide gap, and then finally stopped in that position.

*\*GISHI, GISHI\** While hearing the sound of his avatar creaking, Haruyuki forcibly shook off his shock and thought.

—There are no traps in the «Moonlight» stage. Then, is this an unknown special technique of Dusk Taker!? No, if it were, there would definitely have been some kind of motion or voice command on his part in order to activate it. Besides, if he had such a powerful technique, he would have used it in our last duel. In that case——

This jet-black board was not Noumi's technique. Of course, it wasn't Lime Bell's either.

In other words, there was someone else on this battlefield...

No, that's impossible. There shouldn't be anyone who could have performed an ambush in this duel that was repeatedly postponed so many times until just before it began.

When his instantaneous thoughts had reached that far, as if to betray his thoughts all too quickly, Haruyuki sensed a very faint presence.

His gaze was drawn to the left, in the direction of the school building.

The northernmost end of the white schoolyard was sunken darkly in the shadow produced by the 4-storied school building. The figure of Lime Bell who was crouched down alongside the wall looked small in comparison.

Haruyuki, and Takumu as well behind him, watched without speaking as a fifth avatar silently appeared right in front of her from the nearly-pointed tip section of the school building's shadow.

Strange.

That was the only word to describe its appearance. Haruyuki had never once a duel avatar that had a stranger form than this in Accel World.

Its whole body was made out of thin plates arranged perpendicularly. It was as if many sheets of rectangular clipped paper had been piled in the form of body parts. Since gaps of approximately 1 cm existed between each plate, although its silhouette could be seen distinctly from the side, it only looked like thin vertical lines placed perpendicularly from the front.

Also, all of the dozens of plates that constituted the avatar were dyed a dim black as if they were smeared in ink.

To Haruyuki, he didn't know if it was the avatar's modeling or its color that was more shocking.

The laminated plate avatar was completely black no matter how he looked at it. It wasn't like the «blackish» avatars he had seen before—not silver like Chrome Disaster, nor purplish like Dusk Taker. It was a perfect black which absorbed the light of all wavelengths and refused to be dyed.

“.....You.”

Haruyuki murmured that in a hoarse voice.

However, the avatar didn't respond, but instead tilted its square head and stared at Haruyuki from inside its many gaps. In that instant, the pressure of the two plates on each of side of Haruyuki increased the pressure on his body. Silver Crow's armor made an unpleasant sound and creaked.

At this point, Haruyuki finally noticed that the right arm of the laminated avatar didn't exist at all. Instead, a hazy grey light trembled at the end of its shoulder.

Haruyuki didn't understand what kind of logic it used, but it was clear that its right arm was the two plates currently restraining him, considering both their color and form.

And there was one more thing that was clear.





This black avatar was an ambusher that Noumi had prepared. An ambush that should have been carefully eliminated after Haruyuki and Takumu examined all the possibilities.

"...Why...How...It should have been possible for the time to have been specified..."

Takumu, who had remained standing behind him, cried that out like a groan.

Even after he said that, the laminated avatar remained silent. Instead, the one that let out a short 'Kuku' laugh and spoke was Dusk Taker, who was standing several meters in front of Haruyuki.

"Fu, fu. Geez, you people make me enjoy myself time and time again. It's nice, that astonished-manner of yours. So much that it makes me want to pay a viewing fee...Speaking of which, what did you say a little while ago? 'We've already learned that we can never be careful enough against you'? Unfortunately, it seems that your diligence wasn't enough, haha, HAHAAHA!!"

After letting out another short bout of loud laughter, he suddenly spread out his hands.

"...Though I say that, since the two of you are in the position where you'll be losing all your points soon, it's meaningless no matter what you get at this point. At the very least, I'll let you in on the secret as a farewell gift. —It isn't because I predicted the time you specified, but neither is it

because the person over there waited on this side for months before we appeared here, of course.”

He further moved the talons of his right hand and tapped his head which had a lens-type visor fitted to it.

“The two of you already know that **we** have a Brain Implant Chip here. The BIC, that is to say a growth-type terminal is connected to the sensory area of our brains as a bio-electronic interface, but...depending on the programming, it is possible for it to reach the deepest parts of the brain.”

“De...Deepest parts...?”

As Haruyuki muttered that, Noumi nodded his head in an exaggerated manner.

“Yes. Naturally, it’s extremely dangerous. Even I haven’t gone that far. But, the person over there is quite daring despite his appearance. His terminal extends all the way to the thought clock control center of his brain.”

Thought clock.

Those were the words that formed the basis of the super-technology which realized the «acceleration» of Burst Linkers. The Brain Burst program accelerates the user’s thoughts by increasing the base clock inside the brain, which uses the person’s heartbeat as the basis, by 1000 times. Whether it was Diving into the usual duel field or the Unlimited Neutral Field, that multiplication rate was fixed and couldn’t be manipulated at all.

In other words, since Haruyuki and Takumu had postponed the time of the duel for more than an hour, nearly two months of subjective time had passed in this world. Noumi shouldn't have a comrade that would help him by intently endure such a length of time and waiting in ambush—that was how it was supposed to be. However.

"I'll say it one more time. He dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field at 8 PM in real world time. However, he never had to wait so many months inside here. Listen well...By deactivating his brain's thought clock control center by using the BIC, he can arbitrarily stop the acceleration of his thoughts. He's, in other words, **the only «Deceleration Ability User» in all of Accel World!**"

"...Deceleration...Ability..."

Haruyuki didn't know whether those repeated words came out of his or Takumu's mouth.

As Haruyuki couldn't find any other words to say, a new voice finally reached his ears.

"...Good grief."

It was the quiet voice of a youth, which seemed genial somehow even under the electronic effect that was characteristic of duel avatars. Haruyuki felt like it bore a strong resemblance to the voice of a young glasses-wearing male teacher that had been his only favorite homeroom teacher in his elementary school days.

While still restraining Haruyuki with tremendous pressure, the laminated avatar spoke for the first time in a soft voice without any strain in it at all.

“Hey, Taker-kun. I can’t help but feel that that talkativeness of yours was what bounced you around and drove you into a Sudden Death Duel situation like this.”

“Haha, that is merely a difference of opinion. Like you consider silence as a weapon, I only consider eloquence as a weapon. So, how about their shocked faces? Doesn’t it look like they’ve already lost the will to fight in the face of our technological capabilities?”

“I don’t know about that. That small kid there is still doing his very best to hang on. I can’t crush him any harder than this.”

“Hee, even if he’s weakened, he’s still a metal color after all.”

As Noumi let out a ‘Fufufu’ laugh, the laminated avatar signaled Noumi with a small movement of his left hand.

“Under these circumstances, my hands are full with pinning him in place. It would be helpful if you could tidy up the big one back there a little early than planned.”

“Roger, roger. I don’t plan to make you work more than the remuneration I paid you. Just give me three minutes...no, thirty seconds.”

Those words of contempt by Noumi—

Finally relit Haruyuki’s fighting spirit.

—Just thirty seconds? You, who has never won an honest match against Taku, in just thirty seconds!?

Gritting his teeth hard, he ran his gaze over the plates on either side of him for a moment.

—This isn't a situation where I can remain restrained forever by such flimsy plates. If the enemy is two, our side is also two. I'll leave Noumi to Taku, and I'll take down...this guy!

Haruyuki concentrated all of his consciousness that contained those thoughts into one point on his brow.

Suddenly, a metallic high frequency sound was produced out of nowhere and Silver Crow's body shook. The feeling that his consciousness was connecting to the imagination circuit hidden within the Brain Burst program.

The laminated avatar that was constantly restraining Haruyuki had a grey aura around his right shoulder. Niko had said that the phenomenon of continuously emitted light, in other words «Over-Ray», was proof of the Incarnate System being in use. In other words, these plates were the incarnate technique of that avatar. In that case, he also had to muster all his strength and fight back.

A white light was lit on Silver Crow's sharp fingertips.

It quickly covered all the way from his wrist to the vicinity of his elbow in a pale light.

Haruyuki sucked in a big breath—and shouted out loudly the name of the incarnate technique that he had just recently named.

“«Laser...Sword»!!”

Then, he crossed his arms, and thrustured the fingertips of his right hand at the left plate and the fingertips of his left hand at the right plate.

\*GYAAAAAN!\* Along with a high-pitched sound, his swords of elongated light crashed into the jet-black plates and threw off dazzling sparks.

The parts that the swords ate into instantly became red hot as if they had been showered with the flames of a plasma arc. A glow rapidly spread over the surface of the thin plates, and they vibrated violently.

—At this rate, I’ll break through them!!

The moment he cried that out inside his mind and strained all of his image power.

“Oops...my, my, this is serious.”

A calm voice was heard. Then,

“«Static Pressure<sup>[38]</sup>».”

The call of a technique name.

Suddenly the two plates rumbled with a ‘GOGON!’.

The thickness of the plates, which had only been a few millimeters, rapidly increased. Exceeding 5 cm, then 10 cm, they changed into something that would better called «lumps» than plates.

The two huge cuboids, which had a texture that felt like it could cut darkness itself, poured pressure that easily exceeded the pressure from before onto Haruyuki.

“Gu...uh!”

While groaning like that, he mustered as much mind power as possible and resisted with his Laser Swords. However, even though it had looked on the verge of melting just a moment ago, the red hot portions were reduced by half the instant the thickness increased.

An even stronger gray aura was being released from the laminated avatar’s shoulder. It was already definite that this technique was not a special technique regulated by the system, but a incarnate technique derived from the image power of the enemy avatar.

Through the imagination output of the two sides fighting each other, Haruyuki felt himself touch what filled the inside of the laminated avatar.

Darkness.

Unlike Noumi’s mind power, it wasn’t a hungry nothingness that sought to swallow everything. Although it certainly existed there, it didn’t possess any kind of energy, and therefore did not give nor take, but instead rejected all interference. No, it wasn’t even an active rejection. It

was «isolation». An absolute detachment that couldn't consider the state of people's hearts at all.

The instant he felt that, Haruyuki reflexively feared coming into contact with it through mind power.

His hand's Laser Swords weakened in that short instant and flickered.

That was enough. Becoming tremendously heavy, the hard objects dug into Haruyuki's shoulders, and Haruyuki's movements were completely confined. Once again, he heard the voice of the laminated avatar.

"Hey, you. If you could, please remain quiet and still like that. The work I've been contracted to do only involves temporarily pinning you in place. I have no intention of fighting."

—What...kind of selfish thing are you saying!

Shouting that out sharply within his mind, Haruyuki once again raised the output of his Laser Swords. However, it took all his strength just to reduce the pressure of the black lumps slightly, and he couldn't push them back much more than that.

While he was completely restrained and unable to move, the figures of two avatars slowly stepping up to each other came into Haruyuki's vision.

From the west, with his slightly longer arms compared to his short-statured body hanging loosely at his sides, was Dusk Taker.



From the east, with the top of his right arm's «pile driver» shining sharply, was Cyan Pile.

Both of them took a little distance and faced each other in the middle of the white schoolyard.

An atmosphere of fighting spirit that was rapidly increasing filled the field and pushed up the density of the air. In this feeling of tension that trembled violently, Haruyuki could neither speak out nor pray for anything.

".....Heh."

Suddenly, Noumi spoke while idly waving his wrists.

"It seems you've made your own preparations. In that case, I should be able to enjoy myself a little...right?"

He then raised his hands and made his fingertips touch the front of his chest. A distorted 'IIIIIN' vibrating was produced, and suddenly, a pulsating purple light gushed out strongly. It was Noumi's incarnate technique which Haruyuki and the others called the «wave surge of nothingness». Haruyuki thought that he would immediately fly up and attack with long-range firepower, but it seemed like he intended to fight a ground battle, perhaps in order to mock Cyan Pile.

"Does that technique have a name?"

Takumu asked that in a calm voice. In response, Noumi answered with a laugh that made it seem like he was letting out a great breath.

“Hah, I don’t have any reason to give names to my techniques. Although having no name for it seems to make the activation somewhat slower, I decline doing that kind of game-like behavior! ...Besides...”

He spread out his hands wide. The wave surge light left a hazy trail behind it in the air.

“Is there any reason in you asking something like that? When you’ll be losing Brain Burst in just a few minutes?”

“There is a reason, of course. Because I want to remember, at least for a little while, the details about the opponent for whom I’ll be performing their last rites over their corpse.”

Coldly retorting like that, Takumu moved his right arm’s Enhanced Armament in a stance sideways in front of his chest.

Haruyuki also knew that Takumu had done mind power training under the Red King Niko’s coaching over a period of one week. However, he hadn’t heard what kind of technique Takumu had obtained, nor even whether he had reached the level where he could use it in real battle.

Despite being in a situation where he was stuck between two lumps and his avatar was screeching, Haruyuki wasn’t able to stop himself from pouring his gaze intently on Takumu.

Next, Cyan Pile lifted up his left arm as well, and—

He did an action that Haruyuki didn’t expect.

With the fingers of his left hand, he strongly grasped the steel stake that stuck out from his Enhanced Armament.

...Taku, what the heck are you doing!?

Haruyuki's eyes widened. That stake was the scar within Takumu's heart—born out of his memories of the cruel bullying he had received in kendo class when he was an elementary school student. It was the bamboo sword that had repeatedly poked his throat, and also a lethal weapon for the sake of piercing the throats of the guys who had bullied him.

So why was he grasping its pointed tip himself?

Takumu answered Haruyuki's question with his actions.

"—«Cyan Blade»!!"

Following that shouted technique name call.

*\*GASHUN!\** The steel stake shot out. Haruyuki compulsorily expected the spectacle of the pointed end to blowing off Takumu's left hand. But.

The thing that was blown away and scattered was the right arm's «pile driver» itself. Only the stake remained as a pale light while being grasped in his left hand. Takumu drew a big semi-circle with it and put it up above his head, and then brought up his now free right hand to hold it as well and swung it down in front of him.

The light scattered, and what appeared out of it was.

Namely, a sword.

The blade extended up to one meter and a half. It was single-edged, but was completely straight, with a single deep indigo line running through it up to its point. The color of the blade was pale blue, and a faint glow of the same color was wrapped around the entire sword.

Holding that beautiful weapon in stance, Cyan Pile was now, coupled with the color of his armor, nothing else except a complete close range-type duel avatar. No, it was a completed figure that could already be a «swordsmen».

.....Taku.

Haruyuki whispered that in a voice that didn't form into a real voice.

As if heading his thoughts, Takumu looked at Haruyuki for an instant and nodded. Then, he once again turned to the front and directly put his right leg forward. He positioned his sword halfway up with the expert motion of a kendo fighter.

A much more intense fighting spirit was blown out violently from that step, and the aura in Noumi's hands flickered.

"...I see."

Even after receiving that fighting spirit, Noumi muttered in a voice from which not much agitation could be externally seen. He then immediately let out a contemptuous laugh.

"Fufu, I see. It's because losing to me in a match was very mortifying, is that it? So you embodied those feelings into that kind of shoddy sword.

But well, if it's a sword match that you wish...it can't be helped, I'll go along with you for a little while."

And then Noumi also made the gesture of grasping something with his hands, and took the exact same halfway up stance.

Haruyuki watched feeling half-surprised and half-comprehending as the purple wave surge stretched out and took the form of a long sword. Noumi had once changed that wave surge into the form of long claws before. If it was a close-range weapon, it probably could change into various forms according to the image in his mind.

Although having the outward appearances of their duel avatars, the two of them faced each other in the exact same stances as during the final match in the kendo club inner tournament last week. However, there was no referee here. Nor any protective armor. What hung in the balance was their very life as Burst Linkers.

*\*JIRI\** Both tiptoed forward and began to close the distance between them.

In the space between their two sword points, actual minute white sparks burst out and burned the air.

The battle had already started. Takumu and Noumi were fighting an «Override<sup>[39]</sup>» battle between them to see which had the stronger imagination.

—Taku, believe in yourself!!

Haruyuki shouted that out in his mind, and at that instant.

“—SEEAAAAAH!!”

“—CHEEEEEEE!!”

Two spirited cries resounded loudly on the moonlit night battlefield, and the two of them kicked forward off the ground simultaneously.

Blue and purple trails were brightly drawn through the air, and their two swords crossed each other from the front.

*\*GAKIIIIIN!\** An intense impact sound. Takumu's mind power which embodied the true nature of a sword, «cutting power», hit away Noumi's mind power that tried to shave off everything. These swords that greatly repelled each other swung down at the same time. Again, a thunderous sound and sparks occurred. And again once more.

Then, the two of them took distance from each other and confronted each other while taking up their halfway up stances again.

From Dusk Taker's mask, a mocking voice leaked out.

“My, my, this is surprising. You're really doing your best to use that hastily improvised sword, haven't you?”

“Of course. When it's a kendo match without cheating, I'm stronger than you after all.”

Noumi laughed in a 'Kukuku' throaty voice in response to Takumu's retort.

"I wonder about that, senpai. Do you think I wouldn't notice? It's obvious no matter how you try to hide it! You...have a fatal habit!!"

While shouting that out, Noumi sharply stepped forward. The length of the purple sword grasped in his hand increased and extended with a 'SUUUU'.

Taking into account the force of the momentum from the lengthening of the blade—Dusk Taker savagely shot out a thrust, aiming at Cyan Pile's throat.

"CHEIIIIIN!"

Takumu's arms sprang up as if convulsing and tried to protect his throat with his blue sword's blade. But at that instant, Noumi's sword moved like a fencing fleuret and changed the trajectory of its thrust.

*\*BYUUH!\** An ear-hurting vibrating sound resounded, and the tip of the purple sword mowed down through the empty space on Cyan Pile's right side.

Noumi cut his way forward like that. As if chasing that trajectory, a single pale spark flowed from Takumu's wound.

"Guh..."

Immediately returning to his body immediately despite the groan, Takumu chased after Noumi. He let out a series of unstoppable attacks at Noumi's forearm, other forearm, face and eyes. But the purple sword twisted like a living thing and precisely repelled the attacks.

“Come on, come on, is it really all right, not protecting your neck like that?”

Once again, a ‘BYUO’ roar was emitted and Noumi’s sword thrust out. It didn’t miss the moment when Takumu’s movements hardened for an instant, and this time the left side of his abdomen was cut up.

—Taku, hang in there!!

Haruyuki shouted that out within himself while fighting desperately against the black vise he was in.

The scars of Takumu’s heart. That was the memory of bullying he received in his kendo class as an elementary school student. Having been used as a practice stand for thrusting while having his arms bound behind his back had been humiliating to him, and more than that produced an overwhelming fear in him.

However, Takumu did not give up kendo. Takumu himself had said that it was because he didn’t have the willpower to give it up, but that wasn’t it. He continued it because he liked kendo. His love for it exceeded his fear. Those feelings...

Believe in those feelings, Taku!!

He couldn’t have heard Haruyuki’s voice. However, Takumu readjusted his staggering body and—

He lifted up the sword in his hands. Higher than his neck, and far above his head.



A blue aura even bluer than the moonlight wrapped around not only the sword that was positioned above his head, but also all the way from his arms to his shoulders.

Noumi glared from below at Takumu as his mind power's «Over-Ray» wavered and he took a firm stance.

".....What a transparent bluff. Very well, if you want to leave your windpipe wide open, then..."

A dark purple Over-Ray gushed out with a 'ZUAA' from Noumi's sword and arms.

".....Just as you wish, I'll pierce it!!"

Dusk Taker's charge was faster than Haruyuki's eyes could follow. After stepping forward like a blur, he suddenly fired a thrust at Takumu's throat that wasn't a feint this time.

Takumu—neither avoided it nor protected himself.

Instead, he moved forward. He received the point of the sword which hid a certain-kill power in it with his thick left shoulder. A deep hole was dug into his armor and thin pale sparks flew.

"Guh..."

A low pain-enduring voice leaked out from under his mask. However, immediately after.

"ZEAAAAAH!!"

With a force that shook the air, the «Cyan Blade» was swung straight down.

Noumi dodged to the right in an expected reaction, but he couldn't completely avoid it and received the sword tip through the left side of his chest. Although it was slightly shallow, red-purple sparks still shot out dazzlingly.

"Tch...!"

As Noumi tried to get some distance away while clicking his tongue, Takumu showered him with even more attacks. Just before the blue blade touched his mask, his purple blade unfortunately blocked it.

Like that, the two of them shifted to a battle of locking swords. Sparks flew spewed out like a waterfall from the point their swords crossed, and brightly illuminated their masks.

This state of equilibrium lasted only for an instant. Possessing a better physique and physical strength, Cyan Pile pushed his sword forward with a jerk. The Incarnate System had nothing to do with this result. It was purely the power difference between a close range-type and an overall distance balance-type coming out here.

Eventually, Dusk Taker faltered as his right knee hit the ground.

His blade slipped, and Takumu's «Cyan Blade» approached Noumi's left shoulder. Due to the huge pressure, a fine crack ran through the white-

tilted schoolyard. Their two masks approached each other just short of touching.

Suddenly, a certain premonition ran through Haruyuki's mind with a shiver.

'—Taku, dodge!' An instant before he could shout that out.

Noumi let out a sharp voice.

"«Demonic Commandeer!!»"

\**SUBA!*\* Along with that sound, a darkness with density was emitted from Dusk Taker's lens-type visor in a whirl.

It hit Cyan Pile's mask from the front and, as if it were also some kind of living thing, it invaded inside him while shuddering. The blue avatar's upper body bent back and stopped for an instant.

«Demonic Commandeer».

That was the only inherent special technique that Dusk Taker had. Its effect, which consumed his entire full gauge in order to activate, stole a single ability belonging to the targeted duel avatar, like their special techniques or an Enhanced Armament. The fact that Noumi hadn't used his wings and had instead done a close-quarters battle from the front until now was a trap aiming for this.

Cyan Pile did not have a system-like ability<sup>[40]</sup>. And even two of his three special techniques were derived from his Enhanced Armament. In other

words, in the case that he received the «Demonic Commandeer», he would likely have both his «Pile Driver» and special techniques stolen all together with a probability of 75%.

If that happened—that «Cyan Blade», which was reconstructed from his steel stake due to mind power, would also disappear.

The momentary still state that covered the field felt like it was forever to Haruyuki.

The darkness which should have flowed backwards from Cyan Pile's mask and returned to Dusk Taker—

Didn't occur.

Instead.

"...OOOOH!"

With a war cry, Takumu swung the sword grasped by his hands down in a straight line.

Noumi's left arm was cut off from under the shoulder and scattered into purple light before disappearing. At the same time, his avatar itself was also struck to the ground, bounded violently and rolled backwards by almost 10 meters.

As one would expect, he immediately got up and repositioned his blade of nothingness with only his right hand. However, as if displaying the agitation within his heart, the point of his sword trembled minutely.

Pointing his brilliantly shining blue blade at Noumi, Cyan Pile spoke.

"You really are too greedy, whatever the circumstances are."

Haruyuki did not grasp the meaning of those words immediately. Although he probably didn't plan on explaining, Takumu continued speaking calmly.

"—I've always thought it was strange. Why you didn't take Lime Bell's healing ability. Even though if you did, you would have all three abilities of «flight», «firepower» and «healing», and become an absolute person that could surpass even the kings. The reason for that is—"

As the eyes within his slits brightened with a 'PIKA', Takumu declared it.

**"Because your capacity is insufficient.** It shouldn't be possible for an overly powerful special technique like «stealing the abilities of others» to have no restrictions. Your «Demonic Commandeer» has a maximum limit to the number and general potential of the abilities you steal and retain. Because of that, you lack the capacity to take two rare abilities like «flight» and «healing» at once, even if you were to delete all the other powers you have. Isn't that right?"

Pressing down on the cut-off section of his left arm with his right hand, Dusk Taker remained silent. Right now, Noumi should be tormented by an intense pain that was double what was experienced in the usual duel field. Was it that he couldn't move—or was he feeling so much anger that he forgot about the pain?

While carefully pointing his sword at him, Takumu slowly closed the distance between them little by little. His calm voice flowed through the field once again.

“—The person who coached me in mind power said this. That most of Cyan Pile’s potential is comprised of this «pile driver». You surely estimated that you could always get rid of your current free space as well if you stole my Enhanced Armament, but...unfortunately, you judged the value of my «pile driver» incorrectly.”

“.....Fufufu, I see.”

Although Dusk Taker finally let out his usual contemptuous laughter, his voice was tinged with a gloomy and distorted effect, as if reflecting his true feelings.

“I see. Although I said it before, that stick was made using very painful memories of yours as a resource, right? That...is a metaphor for a bamboo sword, right? Was it from something painful in the kendo club? Could it be that such a cool senpai like you was bullied in an unsightly manner? Haha, no way! You’re not like that pig over there!!”

...Taku, those words are another of Noumi’s traps! Don’t listen!

Even though he was desperately resisting against the jet black vise that was mercilessly pressing hard on him, Haruyuki shouted that out within his mind.

Perhaps because of anger produced within Takumu, the light covering his sword wavered slightly. However, he quickly regained control and responded in a calm voice.

“—My own memories don’t amount to much. Not when compared to the scars that made Dusk Taker, your avatar appear. The reason you’re a «plunderer» is because you have nothing left inside you. You steal everything because you’re an empty hole. You also have probably already realized it. Even if you take away the powers of others...no, their hopes, their friendships and love, the real reason you do that is because you can never have them yourself.”

Once again, silence.

The dark-colored avatar turned down his face deeply beneath the blue moonlight pouring down.

Eventually, he rose up while feebly staggering. While pressing down on his left shoulder, he slowly turned his face upward. His entire body minutely trembled, which then quickly changed to intense shaking.

“...Kukuku.”

What leaked out from behind his spherical visor was thin and creepy laughter.

“Kuku, fufufu...Hahaha, aha...AHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

His whole body bending far backwards, Dusk Taker let out a burst high-pitched loud laughter.

“AHAHAHAHAHA!! Nothing inside me!? Empty!? Hahaha, that...that describes that guy instead!!”

After laughing for a while, he began to talk like a dam had burst within him.

“Since you people are clever, you must have already guessed after looking over the graduation album, right? Yes, my «Parent» is my real three-year-older brother. That guy was the real plunderer. Using his slightly large body and violence, he stole sweats and toys from me during our childhood, and when he got a little bigger he stole my pocket money and New Years’ money...and finally he even stole the only girl I got along with. A completely splendid style of plundering, fufufu.”

He shook his head left and right two, three times, and laughed as if amazed. His sad and gloomy monologue continued.

“...The first thing that that guy gave to me...it was of course «Brain Burst». I was foolishly glad and even excited. That’s why, just as his first lecture finished, I felt disappointed when he said ‘Earn ten points every week’. But I would go through terrible experiences of real life violence if I refused. I would desperately «duel» by going to depopulated areas and supply the points I gathered honestly to my brother. I was completely like a dog. Yes, that guy even took my one final thing from me in the process. My «pride» as a human.”

...No. I don’t want to listen.



Haruyuki held his breath, and tried to shut out from his consciousness Noumi's words, which brought with them a pain just by listening to them, as if there were some kind of attacking power in the words themselves.

...I don't want to hear such a story. No, I don't need to hear it.

—Taku, deliver the finishing blow already. Make it end. We don't need to go along with a story whose veracity is not certain. No, it's surely a lie. A strategy to unsettle us.

However, Haruyuki couldn't help but understand.

That Noumi's story was the truth. And that Takumu could not cut him down in this situation.

Dusk Taker continued speaking to Cyan Pile who had stopped moving.

"...But, even in that kind of situation, I collected points little by little for myself and raised my level. And one day, I finally obtained my first special technique in this avatar that didn't possess any significant power. That was «Demonic Commandeer»...During the same time period, I soon after got two other great powers. Namely, the BIC and knowledge of the Incarnate System. My mind power training was harsh...my coach told me countless times that it was a waste of time. But, I stuck to my hatred towards my brother as sustenance. Yes, that time finally came at last. The time when I took back everything that that guy...that my brother had stolen from me."

Kukukuku.

That chuckle tinged with the sound of resentment dripped through the field.

“—I called my brother to the Unlimited Neutral Field, and first took his ability. After doing that, I tortured my shocked brother to death with mind power. Since his HP disappeared a little too quickly for my taste, I thought more on how to do it the **second time**. After one hour passed and he revived, I was more skillful in how I killed him. The excitement and pleasure I felt then can't be described in words! The way he cried when his points finally ran out and he lost Brain Burst last of all...just remembering it makes me laugh even now...kuku, fufufu, AHAHAHAHAHA!”

After grasping his stomach for a while, Noumi raised his head up and shouted.

“Nothing inside me!? An empty hole!? The one that's like that isn't me, but that guy now!! An ex-Acceleration Ability User that has lost Brain Burst. There is no other existence sadder and more pitiable than that! I'm different...I will obtain everything. Both in Accel World, and the real world. Even the illusions like friendship and bonds that you people believe in...”

The eyes within his visor glowed strongly.

“—I won't be left behind, but steal and rise up!!”

Along with that shout, Noumi shook off his right hand with a big swing.

On his left shoulder, there was something that shot out from the cut-off section of his arm at a violent speed like black snakes. It was the three tentacles Enhanced Armament that he had equipped when he first dueled with Haruyuki. He must have secretly recited the equip command and had been waiting for it to regenerate.

The tentacles that could extend anywhere let out a roar and pounced, but it wasn't towards Cyan Pile who was standing in front of him. Furthermore, it wasn't towards Silver Crow who was squeezed within a vise either.

It was towards Chiyuri—Lime Bell, who had been sinking her body underneath the shadow of the distant school building and had not tried to speak a word until now.

"Wha..."

Although he leaked out a short voice of astonishment, Takumu still reacted and raised his sword up to cut away the tentacles.

However, one moment before he could do that.

The tentacles, which quickly contracted like rubber, coiled around the leaf-colored avatar and hoisted her beneath his blade.

*\*GISHI\** Cyan Pile's whole body jarred, and he stopped his slash. The sword edge slightly touched the brim of Lime Bell's pointy hat, and let out a single spark.

The three tentacles instantly coiled around Chiyuri's entire body and mercilessly constricted her.

".....!"

The delicate avatar bent backwards and leaked out a pained gasp. Added on to that gasp was Noumi's snickering.

"Fu, fufufu. Did you think I merely called her here just for the role of healing me? No way! I'm already aware that Lime Bell is a weak point of yours. You have to effectively use any thing that can be used...That is the secret of «duels», right!"

"...You, bastard..."

As Takumu's sword edge trembled and he let out that low growl, Chiyuri tried to say something to him. However, the tentacles instantly coiled around her mouth several times over and halted Lime Bell's words.

"Now then, please throw away that sword and cancel your Enhanced Armament as well."

After Noumi gave those cold directions, Takumu responded in a grating voice.

"...Lime Bell isn't participating in our «Sudden Death Duel». You can't make her a hostage."

"Heh? Is that really so?"

Dusk Taker tilted his head.

And casually grasped around Lime Bell's right elbow with his right hand that was trickling with purple wave surge.

*\*GOGIN\**.

And then a very, very unpleasant sounded resounded. It was the sound of her thin yellow-green arm being cut off from her elbow joint.

".....————!!"

Lime Bell's whole body convulsed and she let out a silent scream. Her back bent backwards as far as it could two, three times. Each time, huge amounts of green sparks gushed out from the cut-off section of her arm.

Haruyuki's vision was suddenly dyed a blazing red. An overwhelming fury blew violently through him, and he frantically struggled to escape.

However, the black vise didn't so much as shake slightly, as if mocking his anger. On the contrary, the moment the output of his Laser Swords that had been resisting the pressure until now were disturbed due to his anger, they pressed against his shoulders even more strongly.

"You...bastaaaaaaard!!"

Instead, the one that shouted was Takumu. There was something which struck against his large avatar's chest with a whack as he took a step forward. It was Lime Bell's arm. After rebounding off him and flying through the air, it became countless polygons and disappeared.

"...You understand now, don't you, senpai? She is Diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field for the first time. In this world where we receive twice as much pain than in the lower order field."

He didn't need to say that. Right now, Chiyuri should be feeling pain that was equivalent to having her body's arm cut off in the real world. Perhaps because of how big the shock was, the slender avatar continued convulsing bit by bit.

Before the eyes of the frozen Cyan Pile, Noumi raised his right hand again.

"...Also, if I keep doing this, her special technique gauge for healing me will also fill up."

Just as he said that, he pierced the tip of his sharp index finger into Chiyuri's flank.

Once again, her avatar sprang up greatly. Even from beneath the tentacles coiled several times around her mouth, a thin scream could be clearly heard coming from her.

Stab. Again. And then—again.

Just before the fourth hole was stabbed into her.

".....Stop it!!"

Takumu shouted in a low and broken voice.

His whole body trembled. The Over-Ray covering his sword and arms flickered irregularly like a bad contact lighting.

'—Don't do it, Taku', is what Haruyuki wanted to shout out. But he couldn't speak.

".....Please, just stop..."

He spoke as if moaning. The «Cyan Blade» fell from his hands and rolled onto the ground with a clear metallic sound.

It then immediately dispersed into light. The light flowed through the air and was sucked into his avatar's right arm, before returning to the original pile driver.

Takumu murmured the unequip command, and then the Enhanced Armament also disappeared. Immediately after confirming that, Dusk Taker swung his left arm widely and threw away Chiyuri towards a location far away.

He no longer paid any more attention the body-bent and pain-enduring Lime Bell.

The dark-colored avatar charged straight at Cyan Pile and embedded his right claws into his robust abdomen.

\*DOBAH\* There was a wet set, and his black arm stuck out from Cyan Pile's back.

A rapid stream of pale blue sparks came out as he drew his arm back out. Takumu staggered, pressed against his knees to hold himself up from collapsing, and stopped moving while hanging his head.

"It's because you believe in a lie like «bonds»."

Quietly—as if seriously having pity for Takumu, Noumi's voice resounded.

"No, it's because you act as if you believe in it, that you lost. If you really had faith in each other, you would have cut me along with her. Am I wrong?"

—You're wrong...you're wrong, you're wrong!!

Haruyuki fiercely struggled. As he tried to escape from the vise and go save Takumu, sparks flew out from the joints of his arms in resistance. As he fought against it, he cried out in an unspoken voice.

—What do you understand!! There's no way you could understand just how much Taku feels for Chiyu!! If he had cut down Chiyu as well there, that wouldn't be faith, but just cold calculation!!

But, the black lumps on either side of him coldly applied pressure on him as if trying to crush even his anger.

—Why can't I move? Why can't I even let out my voice? Right now, if I don't move right now, then what was the point of everything I did until now...

"Sorry, boy."



From behind him, Haruyuki heard a quiet whisper. It was the voice of the laminated avatar who had been completely quiet until now.

"This technique stops your speaking as well as your movement. Therefore, you can't speak nor use any voice commands. I would have liked to at least let you say words of farewell to your friend, but...Sorry."

Hearing those words that sounded like a serious apology, Haruyuki's anger became even more inflamed and raged through the inside of his avatar.

*\*ZUKIN\** His back hurt.

*\*ZUKIN, ZUKIN\** A lightning-like pain periodically spread out from the middle of his shoulder blades.

He felt like he could hear some kind of voice. However, as if it too were being obstructed by the vise, it didn't reach Haruyuki's consciousness.

If he couldn't talk, he could only resist with mind power—with his «Laser Swords». He knew that, but his pounding anger disturbed his concentration.

In the schoolyard, Dusk Taker raised his right hand while facing Cyan Pile who was on his knees.

The wave surge of nothingness once again changed into a thin sword. Making a 'BYUBYUN' sound, he cut down twice.

With a heavy sound, both of Cyan Pile's arms were severed from the joints and fell to the ground. A mass of lightning gushed out from his shoulders like a waterfall.

Haruyuki heard a voice,

...Haru, I'm sorry.

...I can't fight anymore. I'm truly sorry...

The tears that overflowed beneath Haruyuki's mask blurred his vision. Within his distorted screen, he could see Dusk Taker raising his sword high in order to deliver the finishing blow.

—Here.

Is it going to end here? This is the ending of my...and also Takumu's «Brain Burst»?

Those thoughts fell down with a plop within his mind.

As if that was also a drop at the freezing point of absolute zero, the flames of his anger became frost and dissolved. His limbs suddenly grew cold. The lights on his hands flickered, and vanished. All sensation in his body went far away. The feeling he had experienced several times before, the premonition of the phenomenon where an avatar stops in a standstill.

...Ah, I see. «Zero File<sup>[41]</sup>». So this is also an act caused by the Incarnate System. The Minus imagination negates the heat of the heart, and changes an avatar into a cold lump.

...Even if I noticed such a thing, there's no longer any meaning to it.

...No, that's not right.

If «Zero-fication» was the «Minus mind power» that all Burst Linkers could use, the opposite must also be true. An avatar that couldn't move should be able to move through Plus imagination. Even if—he was in a situation like this where he was trapped in a vise of absolute strength.

Like that time once before, where he had spurred himself on with his tattered body while next to that person who had been sleeping on a bed of black thorns, and rose back up once again.

With a 'PO' sound, a small fire was lit in Haruyuki's chest.

It wasn't the flame of black anger that he had felt many times until now towards Noumi. It was what could be called 'will'. The pure power of the heart that Kuroyukihime, Niko, Blood Leopard, and Sky Raker had taught him.

The small heat began to melt the ice binding his entire body. The connection to his limbs was restored.

A blue radiance that also resembled a hot flame—«Over-Ray» was suddenly released from the thin seams and joints of Silver Crow's mirror-like armor.

However, without even being conscious of this light, Haruyuki tightly applied both his palms to the vise on either side of him.

"Gu...uh..."

A low voice leaked out from his throat. He mustered all his power, and tried to widen the gap. His avatar creaked and groaned, and sharp pain burst through his elbows and shoulders.

Many shrill metallic sounds resounded consecutively. It was the sound of fine cracks running through the armor of his arms. A blue light radiated in thin streaks from within them as well.

"U...o...oh...!"

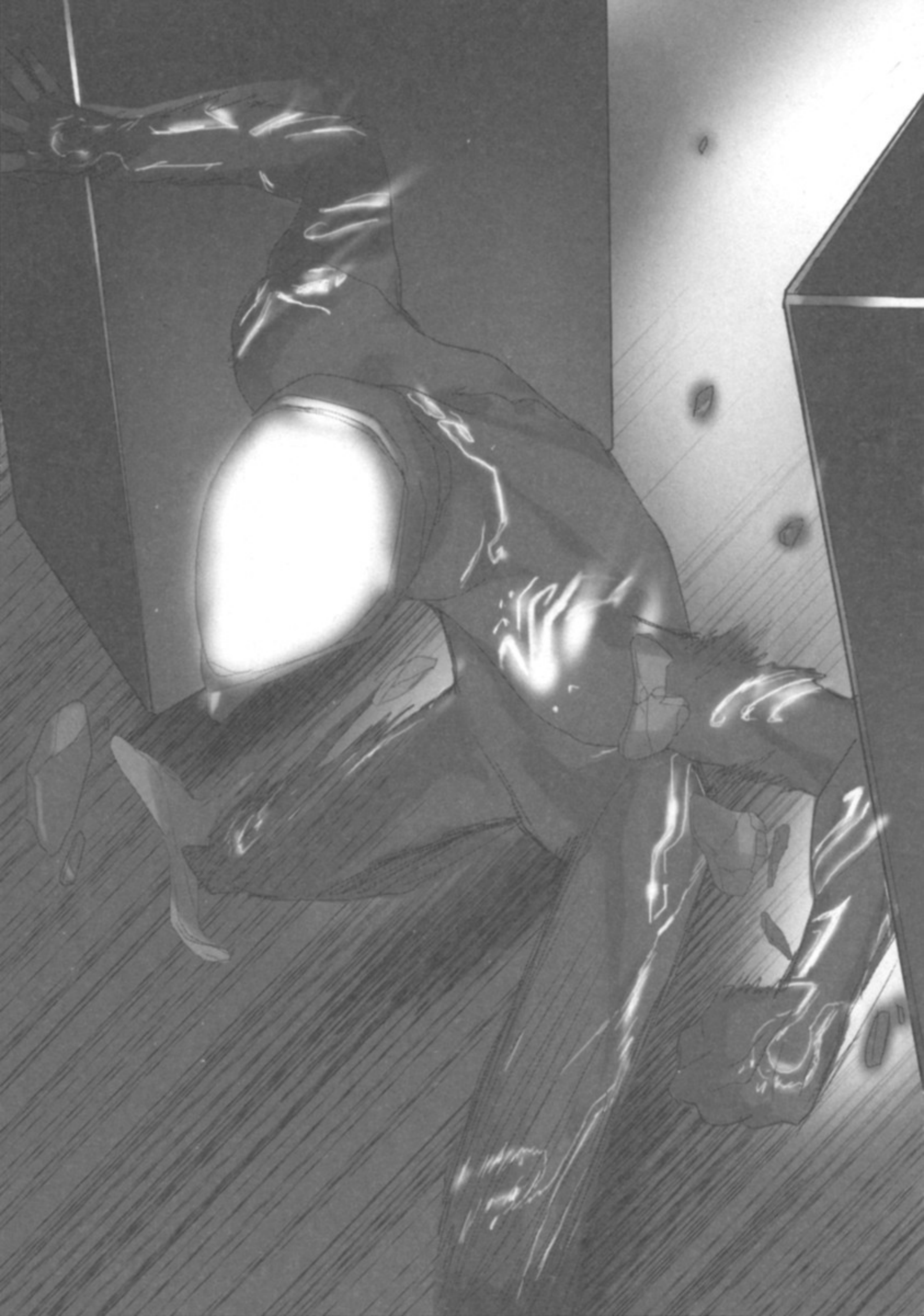
Lumps of pure pain exploded everywhere in his nervous system and dyed his consciousness white. But, Haruyuki continued putting forth his strength. Some of his broken armor tore off and scattered at his feet. His slightly exposed dark grey body was surrounded like flames by a blue aura.

Even after this, the absolute hardness and pressure of the black lumps didn't loosen completely. But, Haruyuki believed.

Not in his own power.

He believed that the power of the people who didn't think of Accel World as just a tool, and the power of the people who had supported and guided him this far would not yield.

"Oh...oh, ooooooh!!"



At the same time as he yelled, all of his upper body's armor other than his helmet broke and was blown off him.

A blue flash condensed, exploded, and dyed the world.

Haruyuki felt it. That the restraint of the black vise weakened for just an instant.

He kicked off the through with all his power. His shoulders chafed against the surface of the walls, and his HP gauge changed and scattered into sparks. Putting all his energy into running across the distance of a single step that seemed infinite, Haruyuki finally escaped from the restraint.

He rolled over the ground. After turning over once, he stood up. While running with the momentum from that, he drew his right hand to his side. He concentrated his mind power.

He cried out.

"U...aaah!!"

As Dusk Taker's arm stopped while in the middle of trying to cut off Cyan Pile's neck and he turned around to look with a hint of surprise, Haruyuki mustered all of the will power he had left and fired a «Laser Sword» at him.

*\*SHUKIIIN!\** The sword point of light that flew more than 5 meters through the air—

Cut off two of the three tentacles from Noumi's left arm.

That was the limit.

As all his body's strength faded and his legs got tangled together, Haruyuki collapsed flat to the ground and rolled over face-up.

Perhaps because he had mustered the image too strongly, Noumi's voice sounded distant when it reached his flickering consciousness.

"Oops, please don't startle me, senpai."

He paused a little there.

"...Letting your prey slip out from your vise, didn't you slack off a little too much?"

And then the laminated avatar responded from far away.

"How cruel, I was going full-out there, you know? You should praise that boy instead, he really is an incredibly tenacious person. Though, it seems he's already reached his limit."

And then—Haruyuki watched blankly as thin plates once again stretched up on both sides of his body.

He moved his gaze, and in the middle of his vision that had turned upside down, he saw Dusk Taker raise his purple sword high in order to properly finish off Takumu this time.

He couldn't think of anything anymore. Haruyuki's soul was exhausted to the point that he couldn't even feel despair.

"Then...Goodbye, Cyan Pile."

The purple blade dropped down through the air.

Leaving behind many afterimages in a semi-circular descent, it headed towards the blue avatar's neck—

Just before Haruyuki tried to close his eyes and cut off his consciousness.

*\*KIN\**.

A clear sound.

Just as it was going to touch Takumu's neck right then, Noumi's sword was severed from its base and disappeared as if dissolving away.

—Mind power cannot be cut except by mind power.

It wasn't by Haruyuki. Furthermore, the laminated avatar that was restraining Haruyuki shouldn't have interfered with Noumi either.

In other words, there a new Burst Linker that had arrived on this battlefield.

Haruyuki opened his eyes wide, raised his head as if guided by something, and looked up at the night sky in front of him.

The magnificent grey palace that stood completely still. In the middle, on top of the spire that had originally been the staircase section of Umesato Middle School.



There was a single silhouette, with the enormous blue full moon in the background behind it.

Impossible.

A sturdy black horse stood there with its long mane fluttering in the wind. Its eyes shined a pale blue, and its four hooves were also wrapped in blue flames.

And on its back, a slender rider gallantly straddled it.

Black quartz armor that reflected the moonlight bewitchingly. A sharp V-shaped mask. A black lotus-shaped skirt that surrounded a delicate body.

Both arms were sharp long swords. Both legs were also—swords. That clever radiance, that seemed to cut apart even the pouring moonlight.

“...Aah.”

A quiet voice similar to a sigh fell out from Haruyuki’s mouth. And then once again.

“.....Aah...”

He felt that, if he said anything more than that, the horse and its rider would become an illusion and vanish.

However, the rider bowed her head slightly just now, as if having heard Haruyuki's whispers from where he lay far away on the ground, and lightly kicked the belly of the black horse with her right leg.

The horse raised its forelegs high in the air, sputtered out blue flames from its nostrils and neighed furiously, and then started running through the air as its hoofs resounded with a 'DOKA'. As the duel avatars on the ground watched while unable to speak, the ridden horse drew a pale blue trail through the night sky, reached right above the schoolyard—

And there, the rider jumped off nimbly.

She spread out her long arms and approached the ground as if gliding. Just before landing, she kicked out one of her legs a little right beneath her.

*\*KIN\** A sharp sound resounded, and the avatar alighted down to the white ground on the tip of her right leg.

The black horse still in the air then drew an arc through the air, and immediately after starting to dash towards the southwest sky, it disappeared as if dissolving away.

After seeing it off, the jet-black avatar gazed straight at Haruyuki. She nodded once again. And then to Cyan Pile who had raised his head. Her gaze also moved in turn to the laminated avatar further way, and to Lime Bell who remained fallen on the ground.

And then lastly, she gazed straight at Dusk Taker.

Within her reflective mask, both her violet blue eyes made a noise and shone.

".....It, can't be."

The one that let out a hoarse voice was Noumi.

"It can't be. Why...How, here. How can you be here?"

That astonishment and question existed similarly in Haruyuki as well. However, an overwhelming and deep emotion which exceeded that filled Haruyuki's chest to the brim, and he was unable to say anything. While he was collapsed there, the black quartz avatar merely gazed at him hard.

Noumi groaned again.

"It can't be...Did you return by yourself from Okinawa just for this duel? No, even if you did, you shouldn't have been able to arrive in time. Impossible...Why, how can you be here! Black King...Black Lotus!!"

Yes, the jet-black avatar couldn't be anyone else besides that person, the Black King who served as the leader of the legion «Nega Nebulas» and held a seat among the «Seven Kings of Pure Color», «Black Lotus».

However, the one who held that displayed figure, the Umesato Middle School third-year student and student council vice-president, Kuroyukihime, should have been staying in Okinawa, the destination of the current school trip. And also, the time for this duel between Noumi and Haruyuki's group had been decided just a little less than an hour ago in the real world. Even if she knew about the duel through some means,

she shouldn't have been able to return to Tokyo from Okinawa and come here in time.

As Noumi showered his shouts on her, Kuroyukihime shook her mask coolly, and spoke for the first time.

"So you're «Dusk Taker». It seems like you pride yourself on your ingenuity, but...you're still far too naïve. In Accel World, there exists infinite ways of fighting that you could never think of."

Though she had a smooth and beautiful voice like silk, those words cut the virtual air into pieces with a sharp edge. Noumi took a half-step back.

"I did not return to Tokyo, and neither did I need to...Let me remind you of one of Brain Burst's basic rules. In the «Normal Duel Field», there is a time restriction of 1800 seconds and a movement restriction within an area boundary. However, in the «Unlimited Neutral Field», neither of those restrictions applies. That's why it's «unlimited». Listen carefully..."

*\*HYUU\** Cutting in front of her with her right hand's sword, Kuroyukihime declared awe-inspiringly.

**"In this world, Okinawa and Tokyo are connected to each other! ...It seems you've finally realized. That's right, I Dived into this field from Okinawa, and ran all the way to Tokyo.** Although it took 15 hours for me to tame that Divine Beast-class Enemy from just now and come all the way to here. Even so, in the real world, it was only just under a minute at the most."

".....Wh, at...?"

As Noumi gasped in astonishment, Haruyuki's own shock also increased.

—Certainly, during the many times I've visited the Unlimited Neutral field until now, I always thought about how far this world must extend. I never thought of trying confirming it with just a vague question either, but the answer is actually simple. That is, it «extends to the limits of the Social Camera Network», which acts as the medium for Accel World. In other words, it extends across all of Japan. From Hokkaido in the north, to Okinawa in the south.

But, who on earth would think of traveling across that vast world with their body alone? This wasn't a VR world used for safe sightseeing. It was a place of death where huge Enemies strode about, with just one of them capable of kicking about dozens of Burst Linkers at once.

Yes, all except for this one person.

".....Sen, pa...i."

Haruyuki leaked out a blurred whisper. Hot tears spread and spilled out beneath his cracked silver face.

Kuroyukihime turned her gaze once again towards Haruyuki, and revealed the hint of a smile for the first time. However, it quickly disappeared and she then turned to look at the master of the vise that was restraining Silver Crow—the laminated avatar.

*\*KIN!\** A sharp metallic sound. At the same time, white sparks flashed in the dark night.

After the black plates restraining him disappeared, Haruyuki realized a little late what had happened just now.

Without moving her avatar at all, Kuroyukihime had fired a long-range attack with mind power just by cladding only her right arm in a faint light. The laminated avatar had similarly intercepted it with mind power. Therefore, the image of the vise that was restraining Haruyuki had been cancelled and vanished.

*\*KIN, KIKIN!!\** Three more flashes burst through the air. The visual phenomenon itself was small and meager, but the hugeness of the fired attack's power was displayed as Haruyuki felt the field under his body shake heavily.

While gulping down a breath as he felt that power, he felt no surprise that Kuroyukihime, a king, could use incarnate techniques. Because a technique of such terrifying power had already been demonstrated to him by Niko, whose career as a Burst Linker was overwhelmingly shorter than hers despite also being the same Level 9.

However, there was something bottomless about the laminated avatar as well, who was directly fighting against that Kuroyukihime's technique.

Black Lotus stopped her attack as if she had just finished a greeting, and then asked a short question.

“What is your name?”

From a location about 20 meters away from her, the laminated avatar titled its head composed of parallel plates as if puzzled. Just as until now, a quiet voice similar to his elementary teacher’s flowed out.

“...There is no meaning in giving my name here. But, a king like you has gone through all the trouble of coming here from far away, after all. It would be rude if I didn’t at least give a self-introduction, wouldn’t it?”

Making a ‘HYUHYU’ sound, many black plates rose up from the shadows at the avatar’s feet, and arranged themselves in the form of his right arm that had been missing until now. That was without a doubt the vise that had been restraining Haruyuki up until now.

The avatar placed that right arm over his chest, bended his waist and bowed. Again, his voice resounded.

“I am the vice-president of the circle<sup>[42]</sup> «Acceleration Research Society»...known as «Black Vise». I look forward to being acquainted with you from now on.”

—Since the moment he had seen that color, Haruyuki had possibly expected it slightly.

However, when he actually heard his name, he still felt a huge shock, as expected.

Black. «Black of Pure Color».

It was a color that he had believed and never once doubted until now that it was entitled to only Black Lotus. No, before that, Haruyuki had never once heard of a color name, which all Burst Linkers were given, repeating with more than one person within Accel World.

In opposition to Haruyuki who was widening his eyes in astonishment, Kuroyukihime herself did not display any agitation. She just let out a light breath, and spoke.

"Hmph, so it's not a legion, but a «circle». That gives off quite sense of care."

"I'm sorry, it's what you would call the policy of our club."

"I can't stand the name as well, of course, but...more than that, what I must really repay you for is how you've been harshly tormenting my legion members. Of course, I'll return it to you twofold."

Her bluish-purple eyes let out an intense light. An aura of the same color clad the swords of both her arms.

In response, the laminated avatar—Black Vise spread out his arms in a movement that lacked any feeling of tension.

"How troublesome. The one that mainly wounded your comrades wasn't me but Taker-kun, though. But well, I guess I'm not in a position where I can tell you to overlook it...right?"



One of his leisurely lowered arms became clad in a thin ink-colored aura, and immediately after many of the plates that composed it silently came apart and sank down into the shadows at his feet as if sliding.

"Se..."

'It's dangerous!' Haruyuki shouted out. However, by then, two plates had already jumped out at Kuroyukihime's feet and stuck her between them on her left and right at a speed that eyes couldn't follow.

*\*GAAN!\** The plates crashed into her arms. The thin plates then immediately increased their volume and changed into huge lumps. This was Black Vise's incarnate technique, «Static Pressure». Having harshly tasted that fearful pressure which completely stops the movements and voice of the avatar caught in it, Haruyuki forgot the pain going through his own body as well and tried to shout out again. However, before he could do that.

*\*PIKIN\** A clear sound resounded.

And then blue lines crossed through the two jet-black lumps.

Haruyuki watched dumbfounded as the lumps slide apart to the left and right from their middle, and fell onto the ground gravely. Appearing from inside that, Kuroyukihime spoke as if nothing had happened with her arms spread out slightly.

"Unfortunately, physical restraints aren't effective against me."

The cut-apart cuboids returned to being plates and sank down into the ground. Then, the sword of Kuroyukihime's right arm spouted red flames.

She drew back her arm casually, and then—

“«Vorpal Strike<sup>[43]</sup>»!!”

Along with that coldly shouted name technique, she released a violent thrust.

The motion bore a strong resemblance to Kuroyukihime's special technique «Death By Piercing». However, the range was in a completely different class. A crimson spear sent out from the sword charged at Black Vise standing far away along with a roaring sound accompanied by a metallic resonance.

In response, the laminated avatar that was dyed a lusterless black put up his left arm right in front of him as it became clad in a grey aura.

“«Layered Armor<sup>[44]</sup>».”

The plates of his arm came apart with a rattle and each turned into a big square. About ten plates lined up sideways in the space that separated him from Kuroyukihime, and blocked the path of the crimson spear in order to protect the main avatar.

\*GAAAAAN!!\* A dreadful crashing sound roared out, and the world shook.

The spear penetrated 90% of the defensive plates that acted as layers, and then stopped there. But, it didn't disappear. While it didn't pierce

through the remaining plate, it jarred the surrounding space itself and shone strongly.

The two Burst Linkers that both had the name of black fought against each other with their mutual mind power, while standing with their right and left hands respectively stuck out.

While in this extreme situation, Kuroyukihime glanced at Haruyuki—and ordered him in a voice that was severe, and also gentle.

“Now then, stand up, Silver Crow. I've restrained this guy. You must defeat your own enemy...Dusk Taker.”

A second ago, Haruyuki had thought that he didn't have any power left to fight inside him.

However, the words of the king of swords penetrated Haruyuki's chest, as if even that was a kind of mind power, and relit the flames that had disappeared within him.

“...Yes.”

Although hoarse, he responded in a clear voice.

Haruyuki then bent the legs of his battered avatar, hit his fist into the ground, and stood up despite being unsteady. His remaining HP gauge was a little more than 30%.

After confirming that, he turned his face towards Dusk Taker who was standing a little further away from him, and Cyan Pile next to him.

Takumu, who had been pierced through the belly and had lost both his arms, was still hanging his head deeply as if his consciousness was being obstructed by pain. There were no eye lights within his mask. However, he was still there. He was alive.

And then, as if finally awakening from his shock, Dusk Taker slowly raised his right hand and used it to cover his face's visor.

".....Fu, fu, fufu."

From between those fingers, a derisive laugh that Haruyuki had heard many times until now thinly leaked out.

"Fufu. Really...you people are so repeatedly disgusting. Just how long do you intend to continue playing make-believe with things like 'friends' and 'bonds'? You say you ran here from Okinawa? Fufu, that's an insane sentence, good grief."

*\*BUN\** He shook off his hand. A faint wave surge coiled around his claws.

"But well, this saves me time—is what I should be saying. If I can crush this lifeless doll and the small insect over there, there will be only Black Lotus left. You might call yourself a king, but even you can't fight against the two of us. Rather, this is a unique golden opportunity...Just like I did with that guy, I'll challenge and kill you once every hour. Until you lose all your points. Fufu, kukukuku."

Haruyuki didn't hear most of those sneering words. His consciousness was only turned to Takumu who was deeply wounded, and Chiyuri who was still lying fallen farther away.

The spectacles of Noumi violating those two flashed through his mind's screen. Chiyuri, who had had her arm cut off and screamed. Takumu, who had had his belly gouged and collapsed. What those two had felt wasn't just virtual pain. It was the pain of having their friendship, their love being used and trampled over. The despair of having their most important thing soiled and destroyed.

Turning towards Haruyuki who was tightly clenching his fists and whose entire body was shaking, Noumi whispered in a consoling-like tone.

"But, please don't worry. Because I'll spare only her...Lime Bell. And it isn't because I can't steal her healing ability like that lifeless doll there triumphantly said. It's because of **Chiyuri's** loyalty. Her way of dedication is very praiseworthy, after all. I'll treat her with as much love as possible from now on as well, hahahaha."

"....."

From between his teeth that were clenched to the point of shattering, Haruyuki squeezed out words.

".....Noumi. You're mistaken."

"About what? Since when?"

Gazing at that darkness-colored avatar as he tilted his head, Haruyuki calmly told him.

"About everything, since the beginning. When you entered Umesato Middle School...If you had challenged any one of us to a normal duel and said 'Nice to meet you', that would have been fine. If you had said you wanted to enter our legion, that would have also been fine. If you had done that, you would have gotten the things you really wanted. Friends, friendship, and bonds."

In that instant.

Dusk Taker suddenly stopped moving. His voice, having underwent a complete change and now low and hoarse, came out from beneath his visor.

"...What, did you say? I? Want friends?"

"That's right. You're the same as me and Taku. You were oppressed, carried scars in your heart, and became a Burst Linker. In Accel World, you must have learned about it through duels. That in this world, there exist the genuine bonds that we wished for. Why weren't you able to believe in that? Why did you depend on a fake power like the BIC? Even though you must have had the opposite of those choices available to you as well."

Several seconds of silence passed.

Noumi suddenly gushed out a dreadful aura from his entire avatar. Haruyuki understood that it was a wave surge of unbelievable anger, and also that its source was the feelings confined in the depths of his heart.

".....In other words, you're saying something like this?"

Noumi asked that in a voice that shouldn't be a voice.

"I forgive you.' I pity you, so I'll become your friend.' I'm deeply compassionate, so I'll hold out my hand to help you.' Is that what you mean?"

"No."

Haruyuki immediately shook his head.

"I have no intention of doing something like that. It's already too late for you and me to ever understand each other. Let's end this, Noumi Seiji."

Anger towards Noumi existed in Haruyuki too, of course. However, another feeling that was far stronger than anger became a super-hot blue flame and filled his entire body. It was determination. The resolute will to end everything here. That flame was too hot and burned so steadily, that it felt like it was in a still state instead. Like a star that shined quietly, coldly in the night sky.

In response, Noumi let out another short laugh, while still radiating anger like a raging hurricane from his entire body.

"...Fufu. I'm relieved to hear that. Even if I narrowly disposed of your avatar here, I would still never be able to forgive even the pathetic you in the real world...Very well, let's settle things, Arita Haruyuki. There doesn't need to be two flyers in this world."

And then, he raised his right hand, clenched his fist, and suddenly pulled it back.

Synchronized with that movement, the black wings that had been always folded on his back until now spread out wide with a flap.

In response, Haruyuki also raised his right hand high in the air, opened up his palm, and recited.

"Equip, «Gale Thruster»."

*\*CHIKA\** A sky-blue star flickered in the night sky. It poured down to the ground as two lasers, and collided with Haruyuki's back. It stopped there while shining, acquired form, and finally produced a beautiful Enhanced Armament.

Dusk Taker spread his wings further and bent them strongly with a clench.

The booster on Silver Crow's back began to make a loud driving sound.

The only existing two flight-type duel avatars in Accel World locked gazes for a single instant and stood still.

The one that kicked off the ground just slightly before the other was Noumi. He drew back his one remaining tentacle on his left arm like a tail,



rang his membrane wings, and rose straight up with a silhouette that was clearly that of a demon.

After ascertaining Noumi's trajectory and dropping his waist far down, Haruyuki—

"...Go!!"

Released all of his booster's energy along with a sharp voice.

Blue jet exhaust flames burned the white ground. The amazingly powerful propulsion thrust made his small avatar take-off like a snap. He was immediately hot on the heels of the darkness-colored silhouette ahead of him.

Noumi glanced down, and flapped just one of his wings strongly. While rapidly swiveling around, he brandished his right hand.

"CHEEEEEEE!!"

With a shrill yell, his purple wave surge became five long claws, and drew five long arcs through the air with them as the claws approached Haruyuki.

Haruyuki also brought together the five fingers of his right hand and shouted.

"Laser...Sword!!"

A sword of white light met and crashed into the purple claws from below.

The mixture was instant. The point of the light sword and the tips of the claws were both cut into parts, but both attacks still headed towards their targets like that with their remaining mind power and struck them.

A thick straight line cut appeared on Dusk Taker's chest. And five thin cuts were engraved into Silver Crow's chest, and scattered sparks of two colors. While gritting his teeth in sharp pain, Haruyuki continued ascending like that, and then spread out both his hands and went into free-fall when the energy gauge of his booster was emptied.

In exchange for possessing overwhelming propulsion thrust, the Enhanced Armament «Gale Thruster» that he had received from Sky Raker would consume its entire gauge once ignited. Dividing it into several take-offs or hovering by adjusting the propulsive force were also impossible. When he reached the peak of an upward trajectory, the only thing he could do after that was control the direction of the fall with the stabilizer equipped to the booster. And then about ten minutes were needed in order to refill the gauge.

But, through the use of «Movement Ability Expansion» mind power, Haruyuki could perform an override on the system with the thought of 'I can fly'. Of course, he was nowhere near the level where he could actually fly just by thinking that. But now, when he has the Gale Thruster on his back, the system would shorten the gauge's charging time in order to conform with the interruption caused by his imagination.

In other words, though he was still far from mastering the Incarnate System, Haruyuki could fly by combining the two powers of the «image of flying» that had been ingrained into his body through his experiences until now, and of the «Gale Thruster» which was a propulsion power prescribed by the system.

The problem was—that it takes about five seconds to activate the mind power for restoring the gauge.

And Noumi, who had already seen his mind power charge in their last duel, also knew that.

While falling, Haruyuki spread out both his hands wide and firmly visualized the image of flapping wings on his back into the sky.

Following Niko's advice, he had considered naming this mind power as well in order to shorten the activation time. However, Haruyuki felt a strong reluctance to giving a «technique name» to the feeling of wishing for the sky and fixating that image.

That was because that wish was something that Haruyuki had continued to hide within the depths of his heart for a long, long time, and was also the core that the avatar Silver Crow had been born from. The only other thing that it could be called was a «hope».

Therefore, Haruyuki just silently prayed. That 'I can fly'. That 'Even if my wings were taken, even if I was hurt so much and made to crawl on the ground so many times, I still aim towards the sky'.

That prayer, however, was only a big chance to Noumi.

"As if I'd let you!!"

Shouting sharply, Dusk Taker flapped his black wings violently and rushed straight at him.

Haruyuki disregarded the ominous flying sound as he mustered all his force of will and completed the image.

A clear sky-blue color spread out within his chest. That Over-Ray was released as phantom wings from his back, flowed into the booster attached there, and changed into the fuel known as 'will'.

*\*SUGA!\** An intense shock was produced, and five claws gouged deeply into Haruyuki's chest, intersecting with the cuts from earlier.

"Guh..."

Even as a great mass of sparks scattered out along with his groan, Haruyuki suddenly opened his eyes wide and grasped the tentacle attached to Dusk Taker's left arm as he tried to fly away.

The wings that materialized «flight ability», when compared to his booster, certainly had a higher degree of endless freedom and flexibility. However, it still had a weak point. In compensation for its high mobility power, it lacked stability.

As his tentacle was pulled back by Haruyuki, Noumi lost his balance and fell halfway into a tailspin. Haruyuki used that momentum as well, swung

with all his strength and instantly cut off the tentacle with his light sword. As the centrifugal force piled onto his propulsive power, Dusk Taker was blown away horizontally with violent force.

“Chiii!”

Leaking out an angry voice, he violently moved his wings in order to regain balance. But his control didn’t return so easily.

After facing his body towards him and sucking in a big breath—  
Haruyuki shouted.

“Fl...yyyyyyy!!”

The Gale Thruster responded with an intense combustion noise.

Within the night’s darkness, Haruyuki became a blue shooting star and rushed upwards. The lights on the ground, the stars in the sky, they all dissolved radially, until only the figure of Dusk Taker was caught distinctly within his field of vision.

He drew aside his right hand. He arranged his fingertips.

Voicing the technique name was no longer necessary. The pure intention to pierce dwelled in his hand as light, trembling violently.

“O...oooooh——!!”

Sending out a yell, Haruyuki aimed the core of the radiated light and released the silver radiance.

“CHE...EEAAAH——!!”

Noumi, who had restored his posture just before that, met the attack with his right hand's claws along with a shout.

A shrill resonance sound and exploding shock wave roared through the world.

The tip of the light sword was held back from five directions by the claws of nothingness and stopped. From the point of contact, intense heat and vibrations were emitted, and as they fought each other in the mutual stance of extending their right arms, their two masks were scorched.

“Uu, oh, oh!!”

Haruyuki gushed out all of the energy could from the booster, and tried to break through Noumi's defense. The driving sound on his back increased endlessly. The flames that extended out so far from his back dyed the sky blue.

—A little more. It will reach if I push back a little bit more. My sword will reach this ultimate enemy. A little further...just a little bit further...!!

Even as he was within that accelerated sensation, he saw the energy gauge in the upper left corner of his vision rapidly decrease.

If this gauge was depleted, Noumi wouldn't give Haruyuki the time to charge his mind power again, and would immediately cut him apart with his claws.

Before that could happen—pierce him!

“O...ooh...!!”

His overheated consciousness burned off his vision in white. However, Haruyuki mustered still more of his imagination and tried to pierce through the barrier before him.

The silver light firmly pushed into the nothingness. His gauge was mercilessly consumed.

Perhaps because he was concentrating too densely on high attack power, the field itself made a ripple-like effect and swayed. His sword of light pushed through the center of that little by little, little by little.

It reached. The point of his sword finally touched the palm of Noumi himself—

Immediately before that.

The last pixel that lit up his energy gauge vanished.

The combustion noise of the booster trembled, and the jet flames flickered intermittently.

Dusk Taker gave an insane smile beneath his visor.

At that moment—

‘.....Come now, Karasu<sup>[45]</sup>-san. Just a little more.’

He heard someone's voice, and a white hand was placed on Haruyuki's right arm.

'.....Come on, keep at it. It's just a bit further.'

A different voice resounded, and someone pushed Haruyuki's shoulder.

"U...a...aaaaa——!!"

Gathering all the power he had left into a single point in his right hand, Haruyuki roared. Although it was only for an instant, huge flames gushed out from the booster whose gauge should have been depleted.

It pushed him up with the last of its propulsive power, and then his light sword finally broke through the barrier of nothingness. The five claws scattered into purple light and evaporated.

"What..."

As if to erase Noumi's gasp just then.

*\*SHUKIIIIIIIN!!\**

A loud sound resounded, and the sword of light that had had extended far tore apart Dusk Taker's right arm in half, and shattered it into countless fragments.

"...Raaah!!"

Haruyuki's consciousness was so exhausted that it was a wonder that he could still move. Even so, before falling down from that high altitude, his



body moved half-automatically and he pierced using his entire strength the enemy's chest with a left hand thrust.

The light of his mind power was so weak that it almost couldn't be seen, but his arm still pierced the darkness-colored avatar along with a heavy feedback, and came out slightly from Dusk Taker's back.

"Guh...guuuh...!"

Noumi groaned as red-purple sparks scattered out from him, and he threw his head back.

—Just one more blow!!

If he received another heavy attack, Dusk Taker's HP gauge would probably be depleted.

However, at that moment, Haruyuki would also certainly die as well.

That was because he had foolishly recharged his Gale Thruster again, and so he had no more power left to control his descent. His remaining HP was negligible, so if he crashed into the ground from this high altitude, the remainder would vanish all too quickly.

—But, still, that's fine.

—If it becomes a draw between us and all the points get awarded to Cyan Pike. If I let Takumu take over my dream. My battle is pointless.

Spurring on his consciousness that would likely blow out any moment now, Haruyuki raised his right hand high to strike.

The final attack against the black visor of the enemy that had similarly almost fainted now—

The moment he tried to strike,

He heard a voice.

“Citron Call!!”

The voice that he had heard the most in the world, probably even longer than that of his parents. The voice that he would laugh with, play with, and sometimes fight with, but then quickly reconcile—

As if attracted by it, Haruyuki looked at the ground.

A pillar of beautiful emerald light rose up from the bright green colored avatar standing quietly in the schoolyard, and enveloped Dusk Taker.

The sound of countless bells spread through the night sky.

As if it were an angel’s blessing, it healed the twilight-colored avatar. His cracked and scorched armor regained its gloss. His lost arms regenerated.

A momentary but far too deep despair enveloped Haruyuki.

Behind the black spherical visor, red-purple eyes blinked, and then became strongly relit.

“...Ku, kuha, hahaha.”

A high-pitched laugh.

“Hahaha! Ahahahahahaha!!”

At some point extending out his regenerated arms extremely high, Dusk Taker shouted.

“Look, isn’t this truly pure loyalty!? How is it...This, is power! This is how one rules others!! Friendship!? Bonds!? As if I need things like that!!

Controlling by robbing!! That is the only absolute power!!

Hahaha...Hahahahahahaha!!”

That loud and twisted laughter radiated from him as an aura, and dispatched purple electricity through the air.

“Now then...it’s time...to end this————!!”

From his ten ominously sharp fingers, a wave surge of nothingness extended far out.

Just as they tried to cut apart Haruyuki’s body—

At that instant.

The phenomenon occurred.

*\*PAH\** An intense flash.

What was shining was the devil wings extending out from either side of Dusk Taker’s back.

The wings cracked as if they had changed into ultra-thin glass. With a cracking sound, they crumbled apart.

And disappeared.

“Wha.....”

Noumi widened his eyes and gasped.

“Wh...y...Why are my wings disappe...”

Just before he finished speaking, the two avatars shook with a ‘GAKUN’. The flying power that had kept the two of them in the air until now was extinguished, and they began to fall while entangled with each other.

However, Haruyuki immediately felt something trying to restore him.

It was heat. A small heat that dwelled and gasped in both sides of his back and on the points of his shoulder blades.

Only Silver Crow’s falling speed slowed, and his left hand that had been piercing through Dusk Taker came back out.

The twilight avatar fell headlong towards the ground with both his arms spread out in astonishment.

In comparison, Haruyuki’s fall became even slower, until finally he felt like he was floating and stopped.

It wasn’t the Gale Thruster. With its gauge completely depleted, the Enhanced Armament was still silent.

That's right—this sensation. This longing so great he wanted to cry, and this exaltation.

".....Ah, ah..."

At the same time as his voice leaked out, actual tears flowed down from his eyes.

The heat that dwelled in his shoulder blades rapidly increased in temperature. The energy swelled, and swirled in search of somewhere to go. As if two bones inside him had awakened the memories of the organ they were equipped with.

Guided by something, Haruyuki put up his hands and crossed them in front of his body.

He clenched his fists. He put his strength into them.

".....Welcome back. Thank you."

Giving that short whisper, he suddenly opened up his arms left and right.

*\*SHARAAAAN!!\**

A noise more beautiful than any other sound was produced, and spread through the night sky.

Even without directly seeing it, Haruyuki knew. That ten metal fins that all reflected the moonlight and shone silver were unfolding out from his back and from either side of his booster.



Silver wings. The soaring power that served as the proof of Silver Crow's existence.

He had finally returned. To his true form. To Accel World's only flight-type duel avatar that had had been born from the scars in Haruyuki's heart.

The instant that firm belief and feeling filled up his chest to the brim, another phenomenon occurred.

The gauge of the Gale Thruster, which had fused with his wings, shined as if they were linked together and automatically refilled itself.

'Fly', is what it felt like it was telling him.

Haruyuki nodded, drew back his right hand to his chest, and turned his body downwards.

Dusk Taker's silhouette, which was still in the midst of falling, looked small over the center of the white field which spread out endlessly.

Although he had lost his wings, his HP gauge itself should have recovered due to the power of «Citron Call». His HP might be equivalent to the damage he would take from falling from such a high altitude.

—But, I'll finish it before that.

Haruyuki spread out his silver wings as far as possible.

The fins began to vibrate minutely. A nostalgic propulsive power wrapped around his body.

At the same time, the Gale Thruster also lit up. Its blue flames were reflected by the silver wings, shining beautifully.

After firmly holding his breath back along with the energy that was increasing at a terrifying rate, Haruyuki shouted.

"Go...ooooooooo——!!"

A silver aura spread out from his wings. Blue exhaust flames gushed far out.

*\*DOH!!\** Shooting through the wall of air in an instant, Haruyuki flew.

It was probably a movement speed that no other avatar had attained since the beginning of Accel World. Adding the virtual gravity to the propulsive power of his wings and booster, Haruyuki rushed downwards as a streak of lightning.

Even with Haruyuki's accelerated senses, it all happened in an instant.

Having changed into an arrow of light with his right hand, clad in a sword of mind power, at the tip, Silver Crow approached the falling Dusk Taker, touched him—and pierced through him.

*\*PAH\** The twilight-colored avatar disintegrated out in a circle fashion from the center of his body.

Running through the mixture point without even touching any of those polygons, Haruyuki controlled his posture with his wings and turned his booster towards below him.



The propulsive power offset the momentum of his fall, decelerated it, and finally stopped him.

Immediately after, the bottoms of his feet touched the ground.

As Haruyuki then knelt down as if collapsing, a slightly late and heavy falling sound reached his ears.

He resisted the feeling of fatigue that was suddenly assaulting him, and raised his head.

There was the Umesato Middle School schoolyard, near the place where he had taken off from. A black lump was rolling on the ground a little ways away from him.

It was Dusk Taker. However, all that was left of him was just his head, his chest, and the short tentacles that were regenerating from his left shoulder. Behind his visor, his eyes were very weak and were flickering irregularly. Even if he had some HP gauge left, it had to be less than 10%.

Haruyuki got up in order to drag along his body.

After walking one, two steps, he heard a voice.

".....Wh, y...Why...did my wings, disappear..."

Noumi groaned that out as if that were more enormous shock than having his body blown away.

The one that answered him wasn't Haruyuki.

"It's because...my power isn't «healing»."

Turning his face with a start, he saw Chiyuri—Lime Bell standing there. She was covering her flank that had a hole dug in it with her severed right arm.

And Cyan Pile was also standing next to her, still missing both his arms. Furthermore, Black Lotus and Black Vise could also be seen, still facing off against each other. They were standing on guard without any sign of inattention, but it seemed that they had both stopped their mind power attacks.

“Wh...at?”

Noumi muttered in a hoarse voice.

“If it isn’t...healing ability, then what are you saying it is?”

After staying silent for a while, Chiyuri replied quietly.

“...I always felt it was strange ever since I became a Burst Linker. Why was I given a power like «healing»? But...at fifth period on Tuesday, after I healed you for the first time, I realized it when I talked with Haru and Takkun. That time, Haru told me that when I healed you, I didn’t just restore your avatar’s wounds and HP, but also the mechanism of your right hand. I thought that was odd. That wasn’t healing, but repairing. And then...I realized and understood.”

After sucking in a big breath, the avatar of the color of new green leaves spoke clearly.

“My power isn’t «healing». It’s the «power to turn back time». I can turn back the time of the avatar I use my technique on. That’s why...I thought. **‘If I use this power, I can surely take back Haru’s wings.** I can turn back Dusk Taker’s time all the way to before he stole Silver Crow’s ability’.”

——So that’s, how it was.

The instant he thought that, the inside of Haruyuki’s chest hurt strongly with a ‘ZUKIN’. Tears built up in his eyes once again.

—And yet, I doubted Chiyu once. I didn’t believe in my childhood friend, who was doing her best for my sake. I’m an idiot. A complete and utter idiot.

As Haruyuki hanged his head deeply in shame, a voice of resounding resentment reached his ears from the ground at his feet.

“.....What...you betrayed me? You betrayed me, Lime Bell?”

While in a state where he had lost his body and was dying, Noumi shouted out as if his anger gave his power.

“Me, who made you win so much...me, who gave you such a vast quantity of points, you betrayed me!!”

“You’re wrong, I didn’t betray you.”

Chiyuri also responded in a voice that had regained just a little of its usual unyielding spirit.

"I healed you the first time because you threatened with that video. I obeyed you after that in order to level up my special technique and increase the amount of time I can turn back...And also to aim for this one chance today. I never once became your comrade!"

Once again, there was silence for a while.

The wrecked body of twilight-colored avatar trembled, and he suddenly gave a low laugh.

".....Fu, fufufu. Good grief...every single one of you people are just idiots. It's disgusting just looking at your faces. I'm going back. I'll distribute all of your real life information and leave the clean-up to someone else. I'll transfer to another school and make my kingdom again there. —Now then, what are you doing, Vise? Quickly take me away and let's retreat."

The instant he heard that, Haruyuki quickly raised his head and looked over at the laminated avatar who was confronting Black Lotus over there.

The jet-black avatar slowly tilted his head—

And spoke quietly.

"That's a problem. No matter what you might say, doing that is difficult in this situation, Taker-kun."

"...Then put in some effort. If a main force member like me is gone, the «Research Society» will be troubled too. I may even leak information about the BIC."

“No, I don't think I have to worry about that. Our BIC has been customized so that, if Brain Burst is lost, it will automatically deactivate the instant it detects that and then soon after dissolve into the cerebrospinal fluids and vanish, so tracing it is impossible. Besides...Taker-kun, you of all people should know. That an ex-Acceleration Ability User cannot interfere in any way with this world anymore.”

Haruyuki couldn't grasp the meaning of Black Vise's words at all.

However, Noumi raised his face with a start, and then glared at the full moon above—and suddenly shouted.

“Shit. Shit! Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!”

He yelled for a while, and scattered out even more words.

“I won't accept it! I won't allow such a development! Someone, anyone, come here! Save me! If you do, I'll give you points!!”

—I've had enough.

The instant Haruyuki thought that, Takumu also looked at Haruyuki and spoke.

“...Let's end it, Haru.”

“...Yeah.”

Nodding, Haruyuki started walking. In order to bring about a conclusion to everything.

Dusk Taker shouted out in a high voice the instant he saw Silver Crow approaching him.

“St...Stop! I know, from now on, I’ll supply points to you people! It’s not a bad deal! I’ll even join your legion if you want!!”

Haruyuki raised his right hand while walking. A white glow extended out from his straightened fingers.

“Stop, don’t do it, I don’t want to lose it! My power! My «acceleration»!! Don’t, don’t...doooooooooooooooooon’t!!”

Dusk Taker sprang and turned over his over that consisted of only the top-half, and tried to get away by scratching the ground with his short tentacles.

Freezing his heart, Haruyuki held up his sword of light high, and—  
Brandished it without hesitation.

*\*KAH\** The air trembled, a thin line of light ran and extended to the white pavement tiles, and caught the crawling Dusk Taker.

The twilight-colored avatar was cut in half left and right down his exact center without a sound .

And immediately after, a huge red-purple column of flame spurted. Countless ribbons of light was released from the center of the flames into the sky, dissolved in the air and then vanished. All the ribbons were weaved with detailed digital code. It was nothing other than the final

disappearance phenomenon of a Burst Linker that Haruyuki had only seen once before.

At this moment, the «plunderer» that had reigned over Umesato Middle School and trampled over Haruyuki and the others with overwhelming power, exited from Accel World forever.

The system font that declared the conclusion of the Sudden Death Duel shined red in the vision of Haruyuki, who was standing stock-still. A massive amount of Burst Points was added to his, and it continued with a message that said that rising to Level 5 was now possible.

However, neither the joy of victory nor a sense of accomplishment was born in Haruyuki's chest.

Only the recognition that everything was over spread quietly through him and filled his entire body.

When he dragged along his ragged body and moved several steps over to Chiyuri and Takumu, he heard a resolute voice.

“—Now then.”

It was the voice of Kuroyukihime, who had been perfectly restraining the mysteriously Burst Linker «Black Vise» in a mind power battle until now.

“There are a mountain of things I'd like to ask you, but you probably don't plan on talking. In that case, let's settle this quickly.”

In response to that, the laminated avatar shook his head slightly.

"No, I've come to unpleasantly understand the true power of a king in these last few minutes. I can't win at all, so I will be quietly exiting here."

It was a quiet voice that showed how he didn't think anything of how his comrade had been completely annihilated before his eyes. Kuroyukihime quickly raised her right hand's sword and whispered in an increasingly-sharp voice.

"I also don't have the obligation to overlook you saying that. I'll cut you down first, and then slowly consider how to deal with you for the hour until you revive."

"Scary, scary."

Shrugging his shoulders, Black Vise continued speaking in an even more aloof manner.

"—But, my greatest ability is «running away», you know. Ah, one more thing before that. I know absolutely nothing concerning you people of the Black Legion. Even though I came here, it was only because I was requested to with a prepayment from Taker-kun. Naturally, I didn't receive any information of your real life information at all from him, and if possible I don't want to ever have anything more to do with you from now on."

"Too late."



Retorting back coldly, Kuroyukihime wrapped a red aura around her right hand's sword and a blue aura around her left hand's sword.

Just after she took one step forward—

Suddenly, a strange phenomenon occurred.

Black Vise gathered the countless thin plates that constituted his entire body and collected them into a single plate in the middle with a 'PATATATA'.

The only thing that existed there now was a single black plate—no, it was just a shadow. It looked it just barely had a form from Haruyuki's position, but when it turned to the front, it was hardly possible to see it at all.

"Then, I bid you farewell."

Immediately after hearing that voice, the thin shadow sank as if melting into the shadow of the school building that spread out beneath him. A 'HYUU' moving sound receded away at a high speed.

"—HAH!!"

Kuroyukihime swung her wight arm up with a yell.

A crimson line ran over the ground, collided with the school building, ran up it, and—

"Uah!?"

Haruyuki let out a voice of astonishment as he watched as the southwest corner of the chalk-like royal palace, which in the real world would have

been a corner of the staffroom or principal's office, was cut off and collapsed hugely.

Mixed in among the countless smashed white objects, a single small black plate was blown high up and away, pierced the ground further away in the schoolyard—and transformed into a single arm and rolled over the ground.

But, nothing else happened. The arm also immediately turned into countless polygons, dispersed and vanished.

"...So he got away, huh."

Muttering that, Kuroyukihime lowered her sword.

After gazing at that far too beautiful, heroic, and also transient form for a while.

Haruyuki shouted out a single word and started running.

".....Senpai!!"

He desperately ran with his avatar whose upper body armor had been blown away and furthermore had countless wounds running through it. Hearing his footsteps, Kuroyukihime turned around.

Stopping right in front of her, Haruyuki grasped both his hands tightly.

"Senpai...senpai...I..I....."

He couldn't say anything more than that.

Kuroyukihime gazed at the shining Gale Thruster that was fused with his wings on Haruyuki's back for a while.

Her violet-blue eyes blinked, and she nodded her head deeply. She then lifted her right hand's sword, clapped Haruyuki's shoulder with its ridge, and spoke.

"—You really did you best. I'll have a detailed talk with you after I return to Tokyo tomorrow. For now, take a good rest."

And then her gaze move to behind Haruyuki's back. There, Cyan Pile and Lime Bell also stood together.

"You also fought well, Takumu-kun. Thank you for all your efforts today. And also...Kurashima-kun, no, Chiyuri-kun."

There, Kuroyukihime did an unexpected action. She suddenly bowed her head to Lime Bell.

"—Truly, thank you. If you hadn't told me about this, I wouldn't have been able to run here."

"Wha....."

"What!?"

Haruyuki and Takumu both cried out at the same time.

"T-Told you...wait, Chiyu, you!? Told Kuroyukihime-senpai!?"

"That's right!"

Brandishing her left hand's bell, Chiyuri shouted in her usual spirited voice.

"You guys probably wondered for what purpose I expressly came to see you. It was of course in order wait for you to specify the true duel time and then send it to Kuroyuki<sup>[46]</sup>-senpai!"

"Eh...eeh...w-wait a minute..."

While sputtering that out, Haruyuki desperately turned the wheels in his already tired brain.

Immediately before Diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field, and after sending Noumi the last of the postponement messages, Haruyuki had certainly said it. 'All right, we'll Dive in one minute.'

The instant Chiyuri had heard that, she had pushed the transmit button for a message addressed to Kuroyukihime, which she had maintained in her virtual desktop beforehand. Having received the message in Okinawa, Kuroyukihime had Dived immediately into the Unlimited Neutral Field, captured a flying horse Enemy, and dashed intently towards Tokyo for 15 hours—or so is what must have happened.

As Haruyuki and Takumu looked at each other dumbfoundedly, Chiyuri's voice continued showering them.

"Because I was anxious entrusting things to you obstinate boys, I sent an email to senpai the moment you guys decided to do this duel, and told her about everything that happened until now. Then, I got a reply saying

'I'll run there through the field, so specify the exact time'. It was really irritating waiting at Haru's house, wondering when you'd finally decide the time!!"

"So...Sorry..."

After murmuring that, Haruyuki did a big shake of his head once—

And then first turned towards Kuroyukihime, and bowed his head very, very deeply.

"Thank you very much, senpai. To have traveled as long as 15 hours to come save us...When I saw senpai on the roof, I was extremely moved...and happy."

"I think I was tried to show off a little too much there."

As Kuroyukihime shrugged her shoulders, Haruyuki responded with a smile while holding back tears.

Next, he looked at Chiyuri, and bowed his head once again.

".....Thank you, Chiyuri. If only me and Taku had been here, we would have definitely lost. Truly...thank you."

His throat was blocked and his voice trembled.

"...Geez."

Chiyuri's voice as she responded was also quietly wet. However, his childhood friend continued in a brighter tone.

"I'll get very anxious from now on if it's only the two of you, so...I guess I'll have to join Nega Nebulas as well."

"Eh."

"C-Chii-chan."

Now ignoring the two boys as they raised their voices, Chiyuri turned around to face Kuroyukihime, and tilted her head as if shy.

In response to that, Kuroyukihime also nodded, and then quickly operated her BB console.

Chiyuri didn't hesitate at all as she pressed the 'legion joining' request that was probably displayed in her field of vision.

And then, the jet-black and bright green female-type avatars each took a step forward—

And made their sword and bell bump together with a loud pitch.

As Haruyuki merely watched that spectacle silently, a whisper from Takumu standing next to him reached his ears.

"...It seems we were worried about nothing."

"...You got that right. But...I'm glad. I'm so glad...really..."

Haruyuki also unconsciously extended his arm, and firmly held Cyan Pile's shoulder.

While receiving Accel World's blue moonlight, the four Burst Linkers remained standing there like that for a while.

However, eventually, Kuroyukihime raised her head, and ordered her subordinates in a refreshed voice.

"Now then...Let's go back. To the real world."

After withdrawing from the Unlimited Neutral Field through Koenji Station's portal, Haruyuki returned to his home's living room in the real world.

Although the duel had followed unexpected developments one after another, the total time that had passed wasn't even an hour. In other words, on this side, it had been an event that had lasted a mere three seconds.

However, the instant he returned to his real body, Haruyuki felt like so immensely fatigue that he was on the verge of falling prostrate over the table. He endured it, and raised his head.

Once he readjusted the focus of his blurred vision, he saw Chiyuri's face there, also blinking her eyes incessantly in the same manner.

The two of them locked gazes for just a moment. Just that made something hot well up in his chest and made his eyes nearly wet, so Haruyuki opened his mouth hurriedly.

".....It would have been fine if you told us."

Then, next to him, Takumu also spoke while shaking his head slightly.

"That's right. About getting in touch with master...no, before that, if you have told us that you had joined forces with Noumi for the sake of getting back Haru's wings, we wouldn't have needed to worry like that."

As the two boys used a reproachful tone because of their own self-reproach over doubting their childhood friend, Chiyuri made a show of giving a big sigh, and then responded in an amazed voice.

"Hey, I told you before! I only had once chance to turn back Dusk Taker's time with «Citron Call»! Even if the chances of it were one in ten thousand, I couldn't afford for Noumi to notice. I didn't think it was possible, but if Noumi had placed something like a bug-tapping application or device on me, he would find out the instant I explained it to you!"

After the two boys gulped and looked at each other, Haruyuki mumbled dumbfoundedly.

"Y-You thought that far...Even though you're Chiyu..."

"Wait, what's that supposed to mean!!"

Shouting and getting up from her chair with a 'GATA', Chiyuri went around the table in order to jab Haruyuki.

But then, she collapsed to the floor as if dizzy, so Haruyuki and Takumu also hurriedly stood up and knelt down in front of Chiyuri.



"C-Chii-chan, are you okay!?"

In response to Takumu's question, she nodded her head lightly while still hanging her head—

And then Chiyuri suddenly whispered in a delicately trembling voice.

".....I did my best."

*\*POTA\** A single drop of water made a sound on the flooring carpet as it fell down.

".....It was very tough, but...I did my best. I really did my best, so....."

*\*POTAPOTA\** The drops that fell one after another shone beautifully like jewels on top of the floor.

Haruyuki felt his chest prick, and this time spoke quietly in a voice that was trembling deeply.

"Yeah...Thank you. Truly, thank you, Chiyu."

Heaving one great sob, Chiyuri raised her face that was overflowing with tears and suddenly jumped at their two necks with a 'GABA'. She strongly drew close Takumu with her left hand and Haruyuki with her right hand, and shouted while pressing all three of their heads together strongly.

"I love you...I love you both!!"

And then, Haruyuki also firmly held his childhood friend's back as she started sobbing like a child.

Unable to hold it back any longer, his own tears flowed out. Takumu also followed as something shined on his cheeks from under his glasses.

These three, who had been born in the same year and grew up in the same place, continued shedding their respective tears like that for a long time.

## Chapter 11

"A win ratio of 100%!"

After firmly clenching his right hand, Haruyuki dropped his shoulders and continued.

"...Is how it should have been, but we lost that last battle..."

The next day April 20th, Saturday evening. The location was the same as yesterday, the living room of the Arita home.

The territory battles between legions, composed of the best within the fighting game «Brain Burst», were performed every week at this time. The legion that Haruyuki and the others belonged to, «Nega Nebulas», had expected a hard fight this week with their master Black Lotus not present, but once it started the results had been mostly complete victories by them.

The reason for this was because Lime Bell, who had just joined their legion yesterday, had immediately participated in the battles.

Although her «healing ability» was actually a «time-reversing ability», it could certainly be used as a means of pseudo-HP-healing. The only problem was that, when they were repeatedly healed, then shot, and then healed again, they returned all the way to their previous damaged state if their time was turned back too much, but that problem could also be covered by the ability-user's intuition.

Therefore, Haruyuki and the others used the tactic of having either Silver Crow or Cyan Pile always protecting Lime Bell, and meanwhile having the other one of the two perform a kamikaze attack and then return to their base and get healed. This method functioned well, and they thought that they could score victories in all of their territory battles—but.

The long range-type three-person team that challenged them last didn't approach the base of Haruyuki's group at all, but instead used the strategy of showering concentrated firepower on the person that performed the kamikaze attack. As a result, the remaining two members of their group had had no choice but to advance forward gradually, and then received the fortified attacks of special techniques when they reached the place where the three opponents had gathered, and so quickly got annihilated.

"Well, it can't be helped. It's enough that we were able to win this much with this hastily constructed team."

As Takumu said that and sipped his L-sized drink, Haruyuki pouted his lips.

"Yeah, but still. In the end, our weak point of having no long-range firepower was struck at and we lost."

"That weak point won't change even once Master returns, after all..."

"That's if we omit her mind power, though."

The two of them remembered at the same time Kuroyukihime's long-range technique that had cut apart the distant Umesato school building with one blow, and their backs shuddered.

Perhaps because she was embarrassed about her huge sobbing fit yesterday, Chiyuri had said she would Dive from her own home and didn't come to Haruyuki's place, so it was only the two of them together right now. After throwing into his mouth one of the fries from the hamburger set that he had bought at the shopping mall on the first floor, Haruyuki gave a cough and changed the subject.

"In any case, that's enough about the territory battles. So next...Taku. Umm...have you gotten any kind of contact?"

It was a question that omitted the last words 'from Noumi Seiji' at the end, but Takumu gave a small shake of his head.

"No...not at all. I'm also worried about it, though...Even if it was a duel proposed by him, I can't believe that Noumi would immediately give up after losing."

"Me too."

They both sunk into silence at the same time as the atmosphere suddenly became heavy.

While taking another fry and chewing its tip, Haruyuki mumbled.

".....The avatar called «Black Vise» that appeared there. He said something strange. That ex-Acceleration Ability Users who have lost Brain

Burst cannot interfere with Accel World in any way. Just what did he mean by that...?"

"Eh...? Didn't he simply mean that, since they can't accelerate, they also can't duel?"

"I also thought that was what he meant back then. But he didn't say it like that...I feel like there's something he purposely wasn't saying. —Hey, Taku. What I'm about to ask may be unpleasant to you, but."

Looking at Takumu who was sitting down on the sofa next to him, Haruyuki asked.

"Your «Parent»...the kendo club captain in your previous school, he underwent the forced uninstalling of his Brain Burst from the Blue King's «Judgement Blow», right?"

"...Yeah, so I heard."

"After that, did you talk to him? About Brain Burst."

Then, Takumu knit his nicely shaped eyebrows, and looked as if he was thinking about it a little.

"—I had hurriedly transferred to another school after that, so...Although I went to the kendo club to give my greetings and farewells, there were other club members there on that occasion, so naturally I didn't talk about Brain Burst with him. Besides, somehow, he seemed unexpectedly unbounded by something, so I also didn't dare to bring it up again with him."

“Unbounded, you say...”

After murmuring that, Haruyuki thought a little about having heard something similar somewhere before. He immediately realized. It was the Red King Niko’s Parent, «Cherry Rook». After using the Armor of Catastrophe, Chrome Disaster, and rampaging through Accel World, he had received the Judgement Blow by Niko’s hand, and had lost Brain Burst.

Niko had spoken about him after that. Saying that he had returned to his original self and that the two of them had properly talked. That, even if he was moving away, they planned to continue playing other net games together. Somehow, it was similar to Takumu’s story.

However, he couldn’t believe at all that the examples of these two could be applied to Noumi as well. Noumi’s shout of resentment just before he left Accel World still rang through his ears even now. Very probably, Noumi was determined to achieve revenge against them—and yet. He still hadn’t contacted Haruyuki, Takumu or Chiyuri yet.

“...On Monday, we’ll have no choice but to talk to him directly.”

Takumu said that with a sigh, so Haruyuki also gave a small nod.

“I suppose so...There’s also the matter of the video...”

If they thought that what Noumi Seiji would do now that he wasn’t a Burst Linker and had nothing to lose in Accel World anymore, it was possible that he would expose that peeping video for the sake of revenge

and distribute the real life information of Haruyuki and the others to other Burst Linkers. The only hand they had that could oppose him was the Brain Implant Chip that Noumi had in his head, but Black Vise had also said something worrisome about that as well.

If Brain Burst is lost, the BIC also automatically ceases functioning, and will dissolve away like that.

The real form of the BIC was an aggregation of synthetic protein micro-machines. Since it was also possible for them to separate and dissolve depending on their programming, they couldn't be detected with a scanner anymore if that happened. In other words, it couldn't be used as a reason to make Noumi drop out of school.

Therefore, Haruyuki and the others couldn't cut off contact with Noumi like this. They had no choice but to carry out direct negotiations one more time and make sure the video was erased. It was a topic that was truly heavy on their minds.

Finishing his drink, Takumu spoke after throwing away the ice inside it in the kitchen, washing the recycled material cup and throwing it away in a cup-exclusive bag.

"Then, see you at school on Monday. When you go meet with Noumi, should I also go with you?"

"No, I'll be fine. I'll go by myself, but thank you. Good work today."



Seeing Takumu off at the door and then returning to the living room to clean up, Haruyuki let out a sigh.

He looked at the clock of his virtual desktop, and then gazed out at the evening sky outside the window.

—Is that person still on the airplane? Or has she already arrived at the airport?

After thinking that absentmindedly, he shook his head and changed his feelings. He would meet her at school on Monday. He had endured for a week, so he could last another day and a half.

Therefore, when the door chime rang immediately after he firmly held down his feelings, he believed that Takumu had come to get something he forgot and so did not suspect a thing.

He decided not to take the time and effort to open the interphone's window, and returned to the door. He canceled the lock while saying 'Yes, coming'.

"Just what did you for—"

The last syllable of '-get' got stuck in his throat, and his breathing stopped. However, without being conscious of it, Haruyuki widened his eyes as he just stared at what was before him.

Standing there was a female student in an Umesato Middle School uniform, with a paper bag hanging from her right hand and a carry-on bag with a motor assist hanging from her left hand. Her dark-red ribbon

and long black hair swayed in the blowing gentle breeze, and he faintly smelled the scent of the south drifting from her.

"...For how many seconds do you intend to remain frozen?"

As she said that, Haruyuki's brain finally rebooted. After repeatedly releasing several rough gasps, Haruyuki squeezed out a hoarse voice.

".....S-S-Sen, sepa...senpai!? W-W-What are you...?"

"How rude. Even though I came here directly from Haneda<sup>[47]</sup> to deliver your souvenir."

*\*PUKU\** As his upperclassman—Kuroyukihime puffed up her cheeks cutely, Haruyuki stood straight at attention when he saw her expression. He made his hand go back and forth at high speed as if he were a traffic control robot, and spoke.

"Ah, c-come, come in! Please enter!"

"Thank you. Sorry for intruding."

Nodding, Kuroyukihime stepped through the door, put down her shoes and carry-on bag, and entered the hallway. She quickly passed by Haruyuki and went into the living room.

Chasing after her while his feet got tangled together, Haruyuki looked all around his home without knowing what to do anymore, and then spoke.

"...U-Umm, my parent never comes back until late."

"I know. That's why I came."

"I-I see. Err, umm...I-I know, I'll prepare some t-t-tea."

As Haruyuki headed to the kitchen while telling himself 'First calm down! Deal with the situation calmly!', Kuroyukihime said 'Ah, that's right' and put her hand into the paper bag.

"Then, why don't you warm this up as well in the microwave?"

What she took out was a huge dark-reddish brown sphere. Haruyuki received the 15 cm-diameter sphere with both his hands and stared at it intently.

The characters printed in truly Okinawa-looking font on the transparent packaging read as «Bomb Andagi».

".....T-This is...sata andagi<sup>[48]</sup>?"

"Yes. Your request was that you wanted to eat something 30 cm in diameter, right? As expected, there wasn't anything that big, so please make do with that."

"N-No, this is already huge enough. I'm surprised at its size."

"Right? I was also surprised when I saw it."

Staring at Kuroyukihime as she gave a 'Fufufu' laugh, Haruyuki finally felt his tension drain away. At the same time as that, his eyes grew moist of their own accord, so he hurriedly turned around and retreated to the kitchen.

He picked out the huge Okinawa-style donut from the bag and warmed it in the microwave. He carried a bottle of Oolong tea and two glasses to the table, placed the andagi that had finished heating on a plate, and, after considering it a little, brought a petit knife to go with it.

Kuroyukihime, who was already sitting at the dining room table, took the knife from the plate and cut the andagi into two equal pieces while expertly handling the edged tool as expected. She held out to Haruyuki one of the halves that had steam warmly rising from its golden section.

"I...Itadakimasu."

He accepted the offered portion and took a big bite out of its end. He enjoyed both its crunchy surface and its moist interior, and thought to himself 'I see, this size also had a meaning to it'.

"I-It's very delicious."

"I see, that's good."

Here, Haruyuki finally arrived at the question of 'In the first place, why did I request only something like a huge andagi?'

As he desperately tried to remember his actions from back then while munching and chewing, Kuroyukihime, who was smiling on the other side of the table, gave an even wider smile on her daffodil-like beautiful face—and spoke.

"Now then, Haruyuki-kun."

"Y-Yes."

"I'm going to inform you of what I'm feeling right now."

"Ye...Yes."

"49% of me wants to praise you for doing so well. And 50% of me wants to give you a good whaling."

...And the remaining 1% is?

There wasn't the room for him to ask something like that, and so he straightened his back with a 'HII'. A large fragment of food blocked his throat, and after he swallowed it down somehow, Haruyuki bowed his head down at full speed.

"I...I'm sorry! It's all my responsibility. Even though I decided not to give trouble to senpai while on your trip, I depended on you in the end...And you even ran for 15 hours from Okinawa..."

"Hey, you."

Suddenly changing her smile into a dangerous expression, Kuroyukihime spoke in an extremely displeased voice.

"I'm not getting angry with you because I had to fight. It's the opposite. Why didn't you call me from the beginning? If you had explained the situations in just a few words, I would have immediately flown from Okinawa and returned!"

"T-That's...because, it was your only school field trip in your whole life..."

"I didn't have that much fun there anyway! Will you not understand unless I also explain the reason for that as well!?"

Saying that with such force that she would have definitely cut the table in half with just her sword spirit if she had been in her duel avatar form, Kuroyukihime gave a sullen look with a 'MUUU'. However, she fortunately breathed out immediately after, and dropped her tone a little as she continued.

".....Well, it's fine. In any case, I'll have you tell me about it. From the beginning to the end, without leaving out even 1 byte of information!"

And so Haruyuki recounted everything that had happened while munching on the huge andagi. The long, long story, which went from Noumi Seiji's first appearance, to the first battle with Dusk Taker, to the training in the Unlimited Neutral Field—and finally to yesterday's duel.

After she finished listening to the explanation that took about an hour, Kuroyukihime turned down her long eyelashes, and gave a thin sigh.

The words that came out of her mouth after several seconds were—

"...Haruyuki-kun. When you summoned that Enhanced Armament...«Gale Thruster», I thought my heart would stop."

Drinking his Oolong tea, Haruyuki raised his face with a start. However, no words came out from his mouth.

Accel World's recluse who had given Haruyuki the «Gale Thruster», Sky Raker. She had been a main member of the first «Nega Nebulas» in the past, and furthermore had been Kuroyukihime's friend as well.

Having foolishly sought the sky, Sky Raker had asked Kuroyukihime to cut off her legs. Kuroyukihime had complied with her request—and after that, had thrown herself into a desperate and bloody battle with the other kings.

But right now, only a gentle, and also somehow sad, smile was shown on Kuroyukihime's face.

"I can't believe it...That the one to introduce the «Incarnate System» to you would be her..."

".....I'm sorry. I did something selfish without obtaining senpai's permission..."

As Haruyuki apologized, Kuroyukihime gently shook her head.

"No. She would have been more qualified for it than me. Since Raker is probably the one that believes the most in the possibilities of that system among the high-level Burst Linkers that have mastered mind power. Besides...unlike her, I would not be able to completely turn into a demon when training you."

She showed a smile, and Haruyuki also gave a big nod.

"Sh...She really was dreadful. She pushed me off from the top of the Old Tokyo Tower, after all."

"Hahaha, that sounds like her."

After laughing nostalgically for a bit, Kuroyukihime suddenly sank into silence.

Her gaze dropped down to a point on the table, but eventually she made her chair lightly screech on the floor and she stood up. She moved over to stand in front of the big window on the south side of the apartment, and stared into the night sky outside in silence.

Haruyuki looked at her back with her long black hair flowing over it for a while, but then he made up his mind and also stood up. He walked over to stand next to Kuroyukihime, and similarly looked outside.

"...The power of the Incarnate System is too enormous."

She let out those words after several seconds.

"Therefore, all those who touch it become entranced by it. They reach into the deepest depths of its power, and plunge forward as if it belongs to them. But...I thought this. If it's just a program bug, the administrator of the game should not have left it alone without dealing with it. Therefore, that power isn't some irregular system that was created accidentally...instead, isn't it a certain kind of trap that was prepared in Brain Burst from the beginning?"

"A-A trap...?"

"Yes. For the sake of tempting us Burst Linkers and drawing out our souls to another dimension somewhere..."



The meaning of those words was a complete mystery to Haruyuki. Even so, he furrowed his eyebrows in order to try to understand somehow, and then Kuroyukihime glanced at Haruyuki and gently placed her left hand on Haruyuki's cheek.

"No, don't worry about it. You should merely progress straight ahead as you're doing now. Yes...if it's you...Only you may be able to overcome that deep darkness, and approach the truth light of the heart..."

Smiling softly, Kuroyukihime faced him directly, and also put her right hand on Haruyuki's face,

She then changed her expression and tone, and—

"Now then. With that out of the way, I'll now tell you the remaining 1% of my feelings."

*\*HII\** Haruyuki's entire body stiffened. Was it on the side of «giving him a good whaling»!? In other words, a judo foot technique!? No, a submission technique!?

As Haruyuki's uselessly spun around in that way, Kuroyukihime put her arms around Haruyuki's neck and drew him to her chest with all her strength.

*\*MUGYUUUU\** Held by that intense strength, Haruyuki's consciousness over-revved up too quickly from that all-directional pressure and the sensation of direct contact with what was in front of his face, and the gears in his head screeched.

Her voice reached his left ear, which was probably blazing crimson, so close that her lips touched it.

“—I wanted to do this. Since the time when I learned from Chiyuri-kun’s email that you had lost your wings...and yet were still doing your best to face your enemy, I always, always wanted to do this.”

Hugging Haruyuki even tighter with a strength that made him think ‘Just how far will I be absorbed by this thin body?’, Kuroyukihime whispered in a trembling voice.

“You truly did your very best. Under such painful circumstances...—At such a time, I wasn’t at your side and could do nothing for you. I...am a failure of a «Parent»...”

A hot drop touched his left cheek with a drip.

Haruyuki widened his eyes. The beautiful hair that swayed in his vision got mixed with the light of the room and blurred.

Unconsciously raising both his arms, Haruyuki also put his hands around her thing waist and squeezed out a trembling voice.

“I...I’m sorry for making you worry.”

At that instant—

“I was worried. I was so worried. Thinking that, if you were no longer here, what would I do...I was scared. I was so scared!”

Saying that as it turned into a shout halfway through, Kuroyukihime's shoulders trembled slightly.

His throat blocked, Haruyuki didn't say anything else. Therefore, he continued desperately praying inside his heart. 'I'm right here. I'll always be by your side. I definitely will not disappear.'

Kuroyukihime leaked out thin sobs like that for several dozens of seconds, but eventually she sucked in a big breath, and finally loosened her hug slightly.

"...I have to give you a prize."

When she suddenly said that, Haruyuki blinked in surprise.

"Eh, a pri...?"

"You defended splendidly in the territory battles, didn't you? Like I said, if you defend Suginami to the last, I'll listen and give you one prize you ask for, no matter what it is."

As she whispered such a thing into his ear, Haruyuki's consciousness once again rushed into the red zone.

—However.

The insolent ideas of a Direct Connect with a 30-cm cable or a swimsuit photo of her were instantly swept away in his mind.

Being like this right here, right now.

Besides having this person here in this world right now, what more could he possibly wish for?

...I will become much, much stronger, and become a knight who can protect you from any enemies someday. So, please always remain by my side until then, watching over me and guiding me.

The instant he wished that, his mouth moved half-automatically.

"...Then, please stay by my side."

With a feeling boiling up from inside his chest, Haruyuki spoke in a hoarse voice.

"Please always, always stay by my side. That...is my only wish."

Even once you graduate. As my senpai. As my legion master. And as my «Parent».

Haruyuki added those words in his mind—is what he intended, but.

The body of Kuroyukihime who had been loosely holding Haruyuki's head intensely stiffened with a 'BIKUUN'.

Suddenly releasing her hug, she back-dashed about two meters with a 'SHUBAH', collided with the sofa and fell down on it. Even though her face just been quite serious with tears, the person herself widened her eyes as if she had forgotten that, and flapped her mouth open and closed.

Eventually, she rapidly reddened from her neck to her forehead. Her voice, turned inside out, resounded in a high tone.



"W-W-Wha...W-W-What are you saying!!"

"Heh? Umm, eh...? I-I just, umm, meant nothing in particular."

Not understanding the situation, he similarly opened and closed his mouth at high-speed, and after a full ten seconds passed, Kuroyukihime's face began to return to its original whiteness from top to bottom. While letting out an unbelievably long sigh, she shook her head left and right many times.

".....I understand."

Suddenly, Kuroyukihime muttered that.

Standing up, she walked over to Haruyuki once again and placed her right hand on his head with a plop.

"I promise. I'll stay by your side. Always. For eternity."

While disheveling his hair, Kuroyukihime gave the highest grade smile, and said that.

## Chapter 12

"...Arita, hit me!! Please, hit me!!"

As those words were said over and over again, a shaven head stuck out in front of Haruyuki.

The owner of that voice was Ishio of the basketball club. He was the student who had called Haruyuki to the roof several days ago and given him a single punch there.

"N-No, it's fine already. Since you understand now."

While also repeating the same phrase over and over again, Haruyuki desperately looked for a way to escape.

However, with the location in front of the Class-2C podium, the time at Monday morning homeroom, and forty students approaching on his right side, there was no path of retreat. Furthermore, his homeroom teacher Sugeno was standing opposite Ishio, and had his arms folded with a meek face. He was cornered like this.

Ishio brought his face even closer, and argued vehemently with him while moving his eyebrows in the shape of the character 八.

"No, until you hit me, I can't agree!! Even though there was no proof, I arbitrarily decided that you were the culprit of the peeping video attempt...What's more, I punched you...If it's true, then it wouldn't be

strange even if I was punished for that! Yet, you didn't say anything to the teachers. As things stand, I cannot forgive myself!!"

...Then please hit yourself with your own hands!

While screaming that out inside his mind, Haruyuki looked over at Chiyuri and then Takumu in search of help. However, the two of them were merely grinning. They were enjoying the situation from the bottom of their hearts.

—The reason the «peeping camera attempt incident», where a small digital camera was discovered in the locker room of the female shower room last week, had taken such a sudden reversal of events was all due to Kuroyukihime's ability.

Her plan, which she had executed with a skill and idea that could only make one think of a Network Witch, was actually very simple and immediately effective. Kuroyukihime had completely changed the records of the peeping camera's maker, model number and serial number into being the exact same as a camera that she had found on the school's Lost Equipment List.

Haruyuki had naturally asked 'Is it really all right to do something like that', but Kuroyukihime had answered easily, saying, 'The camera that was unrelated to you from the beginning will simply become even more unrelated'.

If even the serial number was made to match it, there was no room to suspect the fact that that camera was an item that had already been lost



two years ago. And Haruyuki hadn't been attending this school two years ago. Thus, the suspicions that had been laid against him disappeared instantly, and the instant Sugeno had reported that in homeroom, Ishio had stood up and dragged Haruyuki over to the podium—and so it became this scene.

“Come on, hit me, please!”

Gazing at Ishio as he shouted that again, Haruyuki murmured in his mind.

—Even if you say that, there are Social Cameras right in this classroom as well. As if I'm going to make new proof of violating the school regulations again. Rather, Sugeno-sensei, you should be the one to stop this! Why have you been looking at me with such a strange face!?

However, Ishio, who wouldn't stop unless he received a punch, seemed determined not to budge.

Swallowing down a sigh, Haruyuki responded in a whisper.

“...T-Then, I'll do it if it's to the belly instead of the face.”

He inwardly added, ‘And if it's a body blow from this angle, it won't be captured by the cameras’.

Ishio gave a huge smile as if happy about something, and raised his body along with a ‘Alright, bring it!’.

While carefully calculating the cameras' field of vision, Haruyuki clenched his right hand.

When he launched a punch with an awkward motion, his round fist collided with trained abs, and rebounded back with a 'POYON'.

Showing a seemingly dissatisfied face for a moment, Ishio then immediately grinned, said 'You really are a good guy', and returned to his seat.

...It wasn't that I held back, rather, I really did put all my strength into it.

Although he was dejected inside his heart, Haruyuki let out a sigh of relief, and also tried to return to his seat.

Then, he heard Sugeno's solemn voice from behind him.

"...Arita. I am truly sorry. I don't mind, so please hit sensei too!!"

—Please give me a break!!

Haruyuki let out that unvoiced scream.

Nonetheless.

He still couldn't say that everything was settled with this. There was still a big and also far too mentally heavy mission awaiting Haruyuki.

That is, the negotiations with Noumi Seiji. If he couldn't get him to dispose of the peeping video from in front of the shower room that he should have saved, Haruyuki wouldn't be able to go to school with peace of mind.

As soon as lunch break came, Haruyuki went to the third floor where the first-year classrooms were.

He waited near the stairs, and after several minutes, he saw the moderately long hair that he remembered within a group heading towards the lounge.

Noumi Seiji was walking while chatting cheerfully with several of his classmates. As the distance between them shortened, Haruyuki's hand sweated and his heartbeat sped up.

—Three days ago, I fought a battle with him where we threw all our hate at each other to the utmost limit.

—And then I mercilessly took away his Brain Burst. I completely annihilated his acceleration ability, the only thing he persisted in.

Even while Haruyuki thought that, Noumi rapidly approached. His girl-like long eyelashes blinked, and his eyes caught Haruyuki standing in a corner of the hallway—

And then, his eyes passed over him.

".....!?"

Haruyuki's breath was taken away. To be ignored, even though he had expected a glare or insults.

No, it was also different from ignoring him either.

It was as if Noumi didn't know him from the beginning. As if Haruyuki were only just another of the hundreds of students that attended the same school as him.

Haruyuki unconsciously took a step forward, and called out to Noumi as he was about to pass by in front of him.

"U-Umm!"

After stopping and looking at Haruyuki once again, Noumi merely tilted his head with a puzzled-looking face.

"Umm...you're Noumi...-kun, right?"

"Yes. Did you need me for something?"

What is this? What's happened to you?

Swallowing down his confusion with difficulty, Haruyuki moved his stiffened mouth.

"Umm, I just want...to t-talk."

Noumi once again put on a face that seemed suspicious, and then he turned to his friends and told them to go on ahead to the cafeteria without him.

He looked at Haruyuki again, and—

"What is it?"

"Eh...err..."

The short-statured first-year student before Haruyuki, who he didn't think was putting on an act, merely looked in curiosity at this second-year student that had called out to him. There wasn't any other emotion on his well-featured face at all.

Could this be a different person? Some kind of twin brother or something?

While thinking that, Haruyuki gave his name for the time being.

"Umm, I'm Arita. Arita Haruyuki, in second year..."

Then, Noumi's eyebrows twitched. He frowned, and seemed to be trying to remember something.

"...Arita, senpai...Ah, yeah, that's right. You played a net game with me..."

"...T-That's...right, but..."

Strange. Something is unbelievably strange here.

Looking at the stock-still Haruyuki, Noumi Seiji, while making an expression of searching through his memories even harder—

Spoke.

"Err...That game...**what was its name again...**?"

The intense fear and dread that Haruyuki felt at this moment was without a doubt the greatest since he had become a Burst Linker. A shudder,

colder than the time he stood face-to-face again the Armor of Catastrophe, Chrome Disaster, or the time that his wings had been stolen by Dusk Taker, crawled violently down his back.

**—His memories have been suppressed!**

There was no other way to think of it than that.

Noumi Seiji had had most of his memories related to Brain Burst erased through some kind of means.

He didn't remember anymore. That he had been the «plunderer» Dusk Taker. That a death match had unfolded between himself and Haruyuki's group. And even the existence of Accel World.

Perhaps grasping whatever expression was on Haruyuki's face, Noumi smiled as if troubled.

"Ah, did you possibly come here to invite me to play? But...I'm sorry, I'm not that interested in net games anymore..."

Haruyuki merely gazed this underclassmen, who was making an earnestly apologizing face.

Just before a puzzled expression appeared on Noumi's face again, Haruyuki moved his mouth into the form of a smile with difficulty.

"Is...Is that so? Then...it's fine. Umm...also. About the video of me..."

"Eh, video...? I'm sorry, what is that?"

".....No, sorry, it's nothing."

After shaking his head a little, Noumi smiled again and quickly bowed his head.

“Is that so? Then, I’ll be going now.”

And then, the boy who had once been called by the name of Dusk Taker turned around, went down the stairs at a fast pace, and disappeared from Haruyuki’s view.

Stumbling back several steps and leaning his sweat-covered back on the hallway’s wall, Haruyuki shut his eyes strongly.

**Ex-Acceleration Ability Users cannot interfere with Accel World in any way.**

Now, Haruyuki finally understood the meaning of those words from the mysterious avatar Black Vise.

Burst Linkers who lost Brain Burst lost all memories related to Accel World. Therefore, they couldn’t do anything. They wouldn’t try to do anything.

Noumi Seiji must have also known the truth from having driven his «Parent», his real life older brother, into going through the forced uninstallation. Yes, he recognized it at the moment his avatar was dispersing in the Moonlight Field. That his memories were being erased. That, in that moment of self-awareness, he was already becoming an «ex-Burst Linker».

“That...That’s just...”

As Haruyuki mumbled that while wearing a pale face in front of the first-year student classrooms, the other students looked at him strangely.

After school.

At the usual table in the student's dining lounge, Haruyuki explained what he had learned to Takumu and Kuroyukihime. There were no students in their vicinity at all.

He could still feel his fear and dread even as he explained it. Because he feared that the Brain Burst program was possibly monitoring all his speech, and would also erase Haruyuki's memories the instant it detected keywords such as «uninstall», «memory», and «erase».

Therefore, after making all of them remove their Neuro Linkers, Haruyuki had started talking rapidly.

Even after they finished hearing everything, the other two did not speak for a while.

After being silent for a full thirty seconds, Kuroyukihime picked up her cup of black tea, and after moistening her lips, she spoke in a whisper.

"...You two must have always wondered about it. About why Accel World's existence had continued to be completely hidden over the span of seven years."

".....Yeah."



Haruyuki nodded.

"If it were me and I lost Brain Burst, I would become desperate and be liable to expose everything about it on the net or the mass media, in order to take down Accel World along with me..."

"Hey, hey, are you talking about me?"

Kuroyukihime gave a faint wry smile, put her cup down, and continued.

"But, well...there would always be those who think like that...and those who would put those thoughts into action. But various reasons for why that doesn't happen have been conjectured. Because a child won't be believed by the mass media no matter what they say without proof. Because a system that deletes all information about Brain Burst is encroached into all networks. And there is one more conjectured reason...I also heard about it on the rumor level."

Her black pupils narrowed sharply. A voice that was even quieter flowed out from her.

"...That Brain Burst, when it vanishes, takes along with it the memories of it as well. But...I didn't believe it unless I could see it with my own eyes, no, I didn't want to believe it. However, to think that it really is...the truth."

Once again, silence.

Takumu, who was wearing his kendo clothes as he was in the middle of a rest time in the kendo club's activities, asked in a stifled voice.

"However, master. In the first place, is it even possible? That...one application could erase the user's, no, people's memories..."

"—Theoretically, it's not impossible, or so I've heard."

Kuroyukihime answered while gazing at their three devices placed on top of the table.

"The Neuro Linker<sup>[49]</sup>, strictly speaking, does not access brain as a biological organ."

"Eh...t-then, how does it connect to it...?"

She turned her gaze towards the frowning Haruyuki, and looked straight into his eyes with her jet-black pupils.

"I don't understand it perfectly either, but. In our brain cells, there are something called Microtubules<sup>[50]</sup>, and the quantum light that is the essence of human consciousness is confined in there. The Neuro Linker reads and rewrites the data itself that is preserved by the spin and vector of those quantum lights. At that level, sensory information and memory information are no different than a form of data."

".....In other words, the Neuro Linker reads and rewrites our memories in the same way as it lets us see and touch the virtual world...is what you mean."

When Haruyuki said that as if groaning, Kuroyukihime shook her head strongly.

"It's all hypothetical. Besides, I cannot believe, even if it is theoretically possible, that such a function would be equipped into the Neuro Linker, which is a commercial device. —I can't believe it, but..."

—Noumi Seiji has actually lost his memories.

No one voiced it out loud, but the three of them were certainly thinking that.

After another span of silence, Kuroyukihime spoke decisively.

"It's pointless to discuss this any further. If we want to know the answer, we have no choice but to reach Level 10 and ask the developer of Brain Burst."

"...That's true. That was our goal from the beginning, after all..."

After nodding, Haruyuki then timidly asked Takumu.

"...So, how does Noumi seem...?"

"He's a completely ordinary first-year club member now. Like an evil spirit has come out of him...is the best way I can describe it. Though he was also bright and cheerful on the surface until now, so no one besides us may be able to notice the difference..."

Taking a short pause, Takumu muttered in a hoarse voice.

"Haru, I can't help but wonder. Between Noumi now and us, which is normal, and which is abnormal...?"

"It's already decided. We're the abnormal ones."

The one that made that snap declaration was Kuroyukihime.

Her next actions of leaning her body on the back of her chair and nimbly crossing her legs that were wrapped in black stockings, made her completely regain her usual dignity.

The Black King looked at each of her subordinates in turn, and added with a fearless smile.

"However, it's the path that we chose ourselves. Isn't that right?"

After blinking, Takumu also gave a small smile.

"...That's exactly right, master. Oops, then I'll be going back now. Err...about conveying the contents of this talk to Chii-chan..."

"Yeah. For the time being, we'll conceal it from her."

Bowing his head, Takumu stood up from his seat, picked up his blue Neuro Linker on the table, and walked away at a trot as his black hakama swayed.

Once he couldn't be seen anymore, Kuroyukihime looked intently at Haruyuki, and whispered in a small voice by starting with an 'Also'.

"—Even if I were to lose Brain Burst and all my memories of Accel World disappeared...I wouldn't forget about you. I definitely wouldn't forget."

While feeling the sensation of something digging firmly inside his chest, Haruyuki earnestly answered back.

"Yes. Me too... Me too. I won't forget about just you, senpai."

"Yes, I believe you."

Smiling, Kuroyukihime nodded greatly once, and spoke.

"Then, with this, would you say that this series of incidents is over for the present?"

In response to that question, Haruyuki hesitated for a while, and then shook his head slowly.

"No...There's still just one more promise I have to take care of."

"Hoh, what is it?"

Facing Kuroyukihime as she tilted her head.

Haruyuki spoke while bowing his head greatly.

"—I have a favour to ask. Please come with me to meet the person that lent me her wings...Sky Raker."

5 PM.

Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime came out from the Umesato Middle School gate together.

They walked down Oume Highway in silence, and turned north on the way. They followed a narrow road and headed towards Kouenji Station.

After Kuroyukihime had sent a typed mail after much hesitation, the reply that they got ten minutes after consisted only of two lines of text that specified the time and location.

In order to head to the meeting place, the terrace of the south entrance of the Shinjuku Station, the two of them rode on the Chuo Line from the station.

Kuroyukihime remained in complete silence the entire time. Haruyuki had no way to guess what kind of thoughts were passing through her mind.

Since he had regained his flight ability, he had to return the Enhanced Armament «Gale Thruster» to Sky Raker. That was the promise he had made to her.

However, Haruyuki had also carelessly forgotten to ask her for her contact information in the real world. Therefore, he asked Kuroyukihime, who probably knew an anonymous address to contact her.

Strictly speaking, there was also the method of once again asking Sky Raker's «Child», Ash Roller. However, Haruyuki dared to choose to rely on Kuroyukihime. In addition, he said something even more unreasonable to her, suggesting that they return home together, and got her to follow him to the meeting place.

Haruyuki didn't know whether what he was doing was right or not.

However, the momentary expression that Sky Raker had shown the morning she had transferred her Enhanced Armament to Haruyuki was strongly imprinted on his memories.

I was foolish, and therefore lost a friendship.

Accel World's recluse had said that to Haruyuki.

Haruyuki, who knew nothing of what had occurred between her and Kuroyukihime, may not have had the right to say nor do anything.

'But', thought Haruyuki. Even if that friendship was truly lost, was there any reason not to regain it once again? After all, both of them still remembered each other. They had carved their many memories, and the times they fought together, deep into their minds.

Yes—those memories surely still connected the two of them together.

When the train gently slid into the platform and they blended in among the many passengers, Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime went up the elevator and came out from the southern entrance that opened widely at the front.

The Shinjuku Southern Terrace was a shopping mall in the form of a huge pyramid-type layered structure. Passing between the crowded shoppers, the two of them rode the central escalator.

Kuroyukihime still remained silent.

Though he thought 'Maybe I should say something, yeah I should', Haruyuki also said nothing.

The huge automatic stairs went between lively advertising panels, and carried the two of them past them. Eventually, they arrived at the top of the pyramid.

The open terrace on the top floor reached 100 meters above the ground. Of course, it couldn't compare with the surrounding high-rise buildings, but it still commanded an unbroken view of the Shinjuku Station terminal, the countless train tracks, and the various trains that kept coming and going in each direction. The evening was still chilly, and there were very few silhouettes standing in this wind-blown place.

Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime walked all the way to the handrail of the northernmost tip, and waited for the appointed time while staring side by side at the evening landscape below them.

5:30 PM.

Small clicking footsteps that were approaching from behind reached Haruyuki's ears.

He sucked in a big breath—and turned around. Kuroyukihime did too, a little delayed after him.

Against the background of red-purple clouds, that person stood there while smiling.

Her soft-looking long hair swayed in the breeze. The skirt of her uniform fluttered, and her white hand was pressed down over it.



She made her legs wrapped in over-knee tights move another step forward, and—

The recluse that lived on the Old Tokyo Tower, the member of the first Nega Nebulas, «Sky Raker» first spoke to Haruyuki.

“Good evening, Karasu-san.”

And then, her gaze turned towards Kuroyukihime next to him. Changing the appearance of her smile slightly, she spoke once again.

“...Good evening, Lotus.”

As a lot of feelings got stuck in his chest, Haruyuki could only bow his head down deeply. However, Kuroyukihime gave a smile just like Sky Raker’s, and spoke.

“It’s been a long time, Raker.”

“...Yes, it truly has. In the real world, it’s been two years. In Accel World...I don’t know how long it’s been anymore.”

“Indeed.”

They let out a ‘Fufu’ laugh at the same time, but the two of them didn’t try to approach each other any further.

Haruyuki clenched his teeth tightly, took several steps forward, and then bowed once again.

“Umm...Raker-san. I’ll be returning them now...your wings.”

Sky Raker nodded gently with a kind smile.

“So you got them back. Your silver wings...no, your hope.”

“Yes. It’s all thanks to you.”

And then Haruyuki took out from his pocket a XSB cable he had prepared, inserted own of its two ports into his Neuro Linker, and held out the other end.

Sky Raker accepted it, and connected it to her own Neuro Linker without hesitation.

The re-transfer of the Enhanced Armament through a Direct Connect duel was done quickly without any conversation at all. After issuing the transfer request window, accepting it, issuing the draw request, and also accepting that, they Burst Out.

When they returned to the real world the next instant, the «Gale Thruster» had already returned to its proper owner. After detaching the cable and returning it to Haruyuki, Sky Raker smiled once again.

“I definitely received it.....Then, I’ll be going now.”

And then she looked at Kuroyukihime—and lightly bowed.

Taking one, two steps back along with a faint servo sound, Sky Raker moved her lips slightly.

“...Karasu-san. If it’s you, you’ll surely fly to the heights that I couldn’t reach. I’ll be cheering for you...do your best.”

She smiled and turned around after leaving a light wink. Then, she walked away with firm steps.

But, Haruyuki definitely saw it.

The small grains of light that fell from her blinking eyes and drew a silver trail through the air.

Hanging her bag behind her back, Sky Raker walked far away with unslackening footsteps.

Under the evening sky, the sight of her back gradually changed into a silhouette.

Suddenly, Kuroyukihime, who had remained completely silent until now, took several steps forward with staggering footsteps.

But, she stopped a little ahead of Haruyuki, and tightly clenched her hands as if enduring something.

—Senpai.

——Senpai!!

Haruyuki shouted within his mind.

Please, Kuroyukihime-senpai. That person is waiting for your words. Waiting for your hand. So, come on.....

Come on!

Haruyuki strained all of his mind power and pushed Kuroyukihime's back right in front of him without moving his hand.

At that instant.

*\*TATA\** She ran several more steps forward.

And Kuroyukihime shouted in a dignified voice.

"Raker!!"

That receding back trembled, and stopped. Kuroyukihime sucked in a big breath as both her shoulder shook, and she shouted once again.

"...Come back, Fuuko! I need you!!"

The instant she heard those words, Sky Raker hanged her head down deeply.

Her left leg took another step forward—

It tried to, but stopped. As if the CPU that controlled her artificial leg resisted the command of its owner. As if it was following the true feelings being outputted from her soul.

Little by little, little by little, she pulled back her leg.

Sky Raker slowly, slowly turned around.

Her lips moved, and released a very faint voice.

"...Sacchan<sup>[51]</sup>."

And then, a silent question.

—Is it okay?

Kuroyukihime nodded greatly, and called her name once again.

“...Fuuko.”

Immediately after, the two girls started running towards each other.

They threw away their bags at the same time. Running at a speed that was slightly faster than Kuroyukihime’s, Sky Raker opened her arms to catch her.

Holding the girl with black hair just a little shorter than hers to her chest, the face of girl called Yuuko became distorted.

Large tears rolled down her cheeks.

“U...uaaan.....”

As if she had been always bearing it since she appeared on this terrace—

No, since the time she had started to live in seclusion on the Old Tokyo Tower, Sky Raker buried her face in Kuroyukihime’s hair, and released her feelings.

“Aaan...Waaaaaan!”

The still Kuroyukihime’s own sobbing also mixed in with that crying voice, and reached Haruyuki’s ears.

Unable to keep watching that too beautiful and too precious scene any longer, Haruyuki turned his head upwards, so that tears of his own didn't roll down.

In the middle of the sky which persistently continued changing from blue to dark red, an airplane that was pulling through thin white clouds and flying to an even high place shone and flashed silver.

(END)

## Author's Notes

Kawahara Reki here. Thank you picking up my first book of this year.

Even so, it's 2010 now...I really dumbfounded by how the future has passed by so much. Although their existence is natural now, when I was a child, things like SD memory cards, Blu-Ray discs and touch panel mobile phones were completely SF gadgets. Incidentally, the HDD that I first bought had a capacity of 20 megabytes, but it seems this spring they're going to release SD cards with a capacity of 64 gigabytes...

These days I feel like I soon won't be able to keep with the progress of technology, but since there are no signs of a Full Dive-type VR machine appearing for the time being, I will do my best until then! So is what I thought. My dream is to become a net addict in my old age, so I will be looking to working with you at that time. →To all distinguished maker companies.

Now then, here is as usual the 'Sorry' Corner...

I'm sorry that the last volume "Dusk Robber" ended with a far too severe jerk of an ending!

The greatest reason for why I ended it like that was «because it isn't simply ending», but if I said that there was a another part that I was aiming for just slightly, it would be true.

For a long time, I've felt an undefinable dissatisfaction with «book pages». When you read and advance through them, the remaining pages rapidly decrease, but that phenomenon compulsorily gives information called «If I keep reading this much, the rest will be finished». If you use movies as a comparison, it's like the bar of remaining time is always displayed in the lower right of the screen! ...Rather, getting caught in such a natural thing might because I have always been a reader/writer of online novels. Because I don't physically understand with my body's senses that it will end eventually (Laugh).

In any case, in order to avoid spoiler information on account of these paper books, I think that at least the «written characters should become smaller and smaller» and «the paper should become thinner and thinner», but I feel that even if I said this to editor-san, he probably would say «Impossible» with a smiling face and end it there, so the next thing to do, if I compared it to them, was adopting the realistic method of «not finishing it».

Most likely, those who read Volume 3 without earlier information felt some surprise too along with their angry exclamation "What the hell is this!" when they reached the last page. If so, then my goal has been achieved. Of course, since composing a top-down volume without a prior announcement is certainly a kind of betrayal, I therefore apologize with all my power for it. I'm truly sorry! Forgive me! I probably won't do it again!



And after writing this far, I realized that this afterword wouldn't fit in the usual two pages. So, I will be defiant and continue the Excuses Corner.

The description of the "quantum lights within the brain's «Microtubules» produces human consciousness" came out in this last volume, but this is completely a literary creation that I received the words for from a «quantum brain theory» that actually exists. The real quantum brain theory is a completely different thing and is endlessly difficult to understand, and I cannot understand it at all either. For those who got interested in it, a person called Roger Penrose is writing a book on it, so please read that. And also, please simplify and teach it to me secretly afterwards (Laugh).

And one more thing...A new female character will be appearing again, but all of you have already given up and resigned yourself to this kind of thing happening, right! Right! I have also given up, and Kuroyukihime has also surely given up about it as well...

I am indebted to the illustrator HIMA-san this time as well, who always has at least one new girl character designed every time we pile up a volume! Also, I once again made serious trouble for my editor Miki-san, as I was late from delays for the manuscript this time...During our meeting the other day, Miki-san came with a neatly-trimmed head, so when I said "So you got a haircut", he said "Since the time for cutting it finally came" and was moved to tears. I look forward to working with you

this year too. (Although I've also exceeded the deadline for this afterword by 10 minutes at present...)

And although last, I also hope that everyone who has read my books to continue from last year and stay with me this year as well!

May the year 2010 become a greater year for every one of you as well.

2009 December 15th, Kawahara Reki

## References

1. ↑ **Pulse-code modulation** (PCM): the standard format for digital-audio recordings
2. ↑ In case anyone is wondering, he is making an unclear and likely spontaneous metaphor using food. There is (probably) no deep meaning to it.
3. ↑ Reference to dream mentioned in Volume 1 Chapter 6.
4. ↑ A text typeface, like Arial or Times New Roman.
5. ↑ Honshu: Main and largest island of Japan.
6. ↑ Here Sugeno starts saying the informal you "omae", but switches to the formal you "kimi".
7. ↑ Edible herb otherwise known as gumbo.
8. ↑ Nickname combining "Camera" and "Arita".
9. ↑ Nickname combining "Paparazzi" and "Haruyuki".
10. ↑ The name of a street in Tokyo.
11. ↑ "Over-Ray" is the English pronunciation the author uses. The kanji used is 過剩光, which translates as "excess light".
12. ↑ Kanji: 射程距離拡張

13. ↑ Seiza: Traditional Japanese sitting position where you are kneeling while sitting on top of your feet. Having a straight back and hands on your knees is also common.
14. ↑ Kanji: 移動能力拡張
15. ↑ Kanji: 攻撃威力拡張
16. ↑ Kanji: 装甲強度拡張
17. ↑ English pronunciation used by author. Kanji is 光線剣, translated as "light ray blade".
18. ↑ Otherwise known as an Alice band, it is the white and lacy hair band you often see maids wear in anime.
19. ↑ Blood Leopard uses a lot of abbreviated initials for certain words. (In fact, her entire speech is very minimalist, which is difficult to convey when translating.)
20. ↑ A district in Tokyo that is famous in anime and manga as a major shopping area for electronics and otaku goods.
21. ↑ A district in Chiyoda, Tokyo.
22. ↑ Crypt Cosmic Circus
23. ↑ No Problem
24. ↑ Traffic lights in Japan used blue instead of green.

25. ↑ Here, the leopard with a capital "L" is written in English, which the small "l" is in Japanese. From now on, "leopard" written with a small "l" indicates that it is in Japanese.
26. ↑ Once again, this is written in the original Japanese, hence no capital letters.
27. ↑ Prominence
28. ↑ Nega Nebulas
29. ↑ Here Haruyuki stutters over the "K" abbreviation, which he copies from Pard-san.
30. ↑ Good Job
31. ↑ Good Game
32. ↑ What she actually says here is よろしくお願ひしまーす!, but I changed the meaning a little so that it makes more sense in English.
33. ↑ One of the major railway lines in Japan.
34. ↑ Bamboo sword, used in kendo.
35. ↑ The kanji used here is different from the usual 対戦 for acceleration duels. Instead, he uses 決闘, which basically means the more classical kind of honorable one-on-one match or shoot-out.

36. ↑ She says おじゃまします, which is a common greeting when entering someone else's home.
37. ↑ Common phrase spoken before one eats.
38. ↑ The kanji beneath the English phrasing furigana is 静止重圧, literally meaning "still heavy pressure".
39. ↑ "Override" is the English term given in furigana, while the kanji is 事象を上書き, which translates as "overwrite the phenomenon".
40. ↑ The kanji below the English word "ability" in furigana is basically just "special ability".
41. ↑ The kanji beneath the English pronunciation "Zero File" reads as "zero-fication phenomenon".
42. ↑ Circle: Basically means a 'club', often unofficial/unregistered.
43. ↑ The kanji below the English pronunciation "Vorpal Strike" is "奪命撃", which reads as "stealing life attack". Also, note that this is the same name as a one-handed Sword Skill attack in Kawahara Reki's other light novel, Sword Art Online.
44. ↑ The kanji below the English pronunciation "Layered Armor" is "複層装甲", which reads as "multi-layered armor".
45. ↑ Karasu: Japanese for "crow". What Sky Raker calls Haruyuki.
46. ↑ Chiyuri shortens the nickname "Kuroyukihime" to just "Kuroyuki", leaving out the "princess" (hime) part.

47. ↑ Referring to Haneda Airport.
48. ↑ Sata andagi: deep-dried buns similar to doughnuts that are native to Okinawa
49. ↑ Here Kuroyukihime uses the kanji 量子通信機器 for “Neuro Linker” beneath its English pronunciation, which literally translates as “quantum communication device”.
50. ↑ Microtubules is the English word given in furigana, while the kanji beneath it reads as "microtubular structures". Also, the same term is used in Volume 9 of Sword Art Online, when describing "Fluctlights".
51. ↑ Here, Fuuko is presumably calling Kuroyukihime by a nickname based on her currently unknown real name. Following the pattern of Chiyuri's nickname for Takumu "Takkun", it most likely combines the beginning of her name which starts with "Sach-" with the suffix "chan".

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