

Accel World Volume 6 - Shrine Maiden of the Purifying Flames

By Reki Kawahara

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アクセル・ワールド6
—炎の神子—

「無常観音」の暴行(オオノビュウ)とその理由を語っていたが、もはやとうとうと、謎の組織(加速研究会)とのバトル中、ハルニキは突如暴走した《炎の神子》の侵襲を受ける。彼はまた、その組織から逃れられなかった。

事態を重く見た(神子の七王)は、《加速世界》の最高意志決定機関である《七王会議》を開く。そこでシル・ハルニキに下された決定とは、《神子》と呼ばれる強化科医の完全解放を行うこと。比喩をすれば、残りの六王から資金者に指定され、事実上《加速世界》から追放となる。最も高度な解明コマンドである《浄化》。その鍵を握るアクセルは、《黒洞界アクセル》の意外な場所に捕縛されて...

《加速世界》では、致命的な危機を極めたハルニキ。なのだが、《現実世界》では創作者目黒伸樹に包み込まれた小学四年生の少女と、なぜかの交流が深まって...



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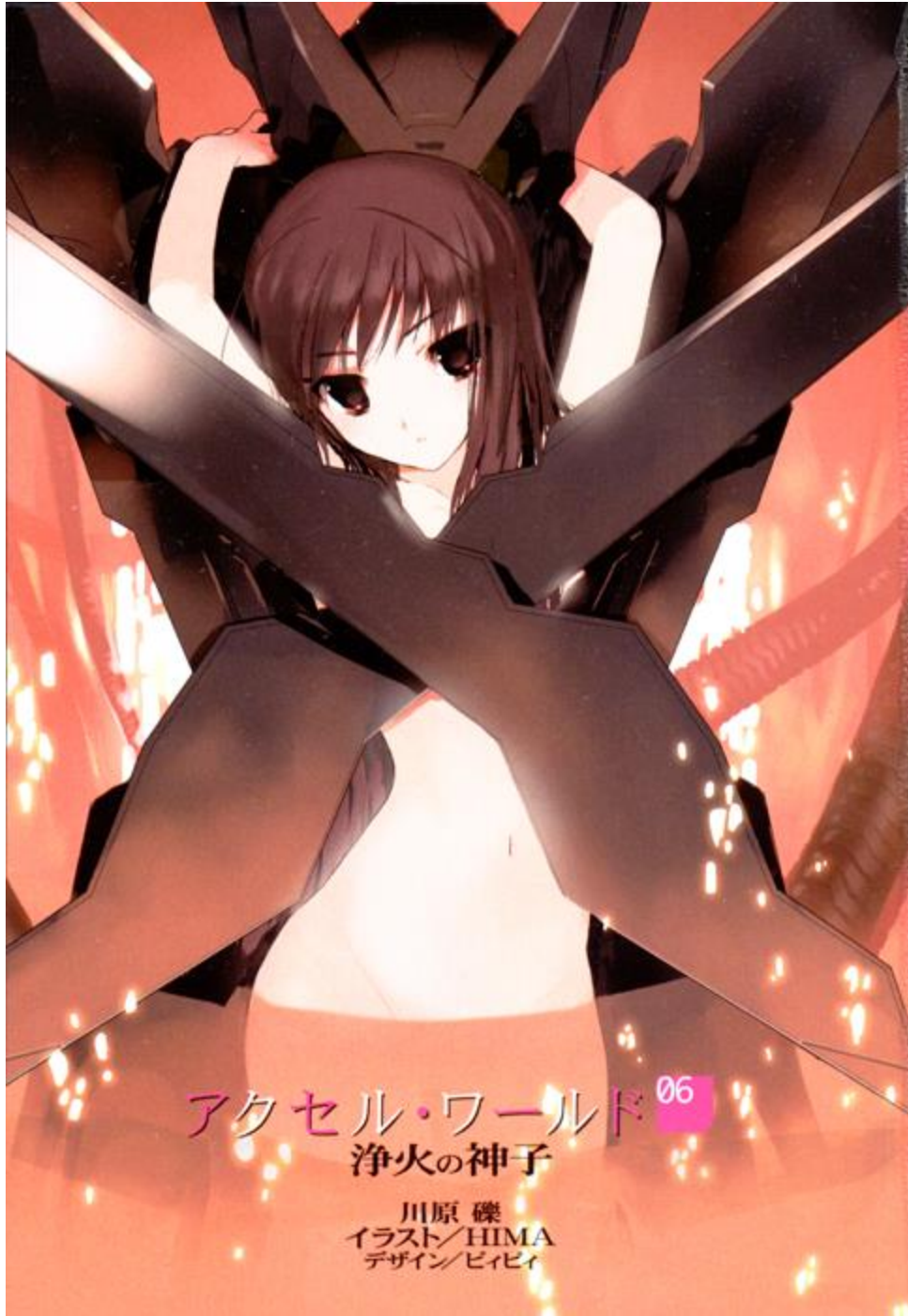
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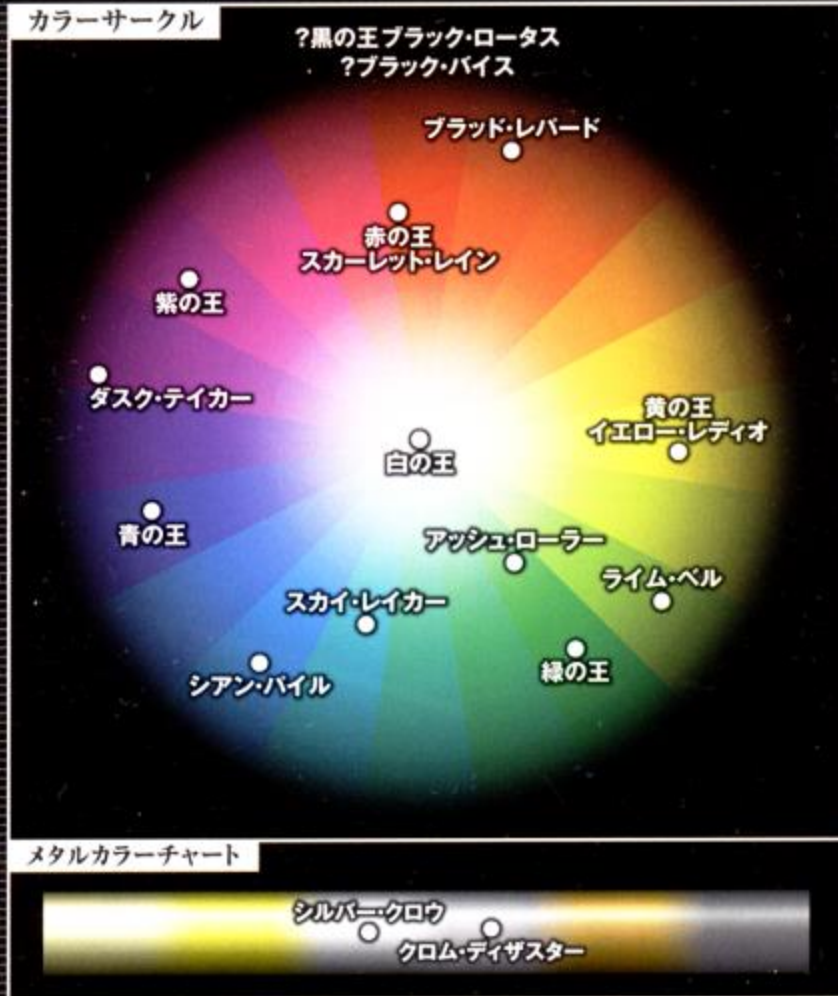
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毎日10分程度お読みいただけます。アクセル担当の心も読めるのでお楽しみください。このコミックは2009年10月20日発売のコミックです。キンドル版もご用意しております。ご購入の際は「アクセル」のタグを指定してください。

【登場人物】
アクセル・ワールド1 星野海斗
アクセル・ワールド2 秋の野郎
アクセル・ワールド3 夕顔の戦士
アクセル・ワールド4 赤いハルニキ
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アクセル・ワールド6 炎の神子
ソードアート・オンライン1 桐谷直樹
ソードアート・オンライン2 アスカ・ランダール
ソードアート・オンライン3 茅場フナエ
ソードアート・オンライン4 茅場フナエ
ソードアート・オンライン5 アスカ・ランダール

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＜ブレイン・バースト＞におけるデュエル・アバターとの＜相性＞



バーストリンカーに自動的に付与される英語名には、必ず色を示す単語が含まれている。その色によって、デュエル・アバターが持つ属性をおおよそ把握することができる。＜青系統＞は近距離直接攻撃、＜赤系統＞は遠距離直接攻撃、＜黄系統＞は間接攻撃、紫や緑のような中間色は、二つの系統にまたがった属性を持つ。

また、それらカラーサークルに分布する色とは別に金

属の名を冠した＜メタルカラー＞が存在する。チャートの左から、白金(プラチナ)～金(ゴールド)～銀(シルバー)～クロム～銅(ブロンズ)～鉄(アイアン)という分布である。これらのカラーは、攻撃ではなく防御能力に秀でた属性で、チャートの左にいくほど特殊攻撃防御が高く、右にいくほど対物理攻撃防御が高い。たとえばハルユキのアバター＜シルバークロウ＞は、切斷・貫通・炎熱・毒攻撃に耐性があるものの、腐食攻撃や打撃攻撃に弱いという特性を持つ。





「クーさん、一度だけでいいので、敵の攻撃を防いでください。」

私の心意技は発動にちよつと時間がかかるのです」

アーダー
メイデン

近接戦闘を得意とする
バーストリンカー





Prologue

«Brain Burst» is a FullDive-type online game focused on Duelling.

However, unlike similar games on the market, the Duel platform is not accessed by joining servers on the Global Net.

This standard was based on the current location of the player's, that is, the «Burst Linker's» physical body. People who are not within a Ward zone together in the real world cannot become Duel opponents. Those Ward zones are called «Battle Areas» in Brain Burst.

The sizes of Battle Areas vary between the those in the city center and those elsewhere, but out of the 23 Wards of Tokyo, one usually contains 2 to 4 battle areas. For example, the Suginami Ward is divided into three areas from «Suginami Battle Area 1» to «Suginami Battle Area 3». Each of those battle areas has one «Matching List», which displays all Burst Linkers currently in the area. This meant that each person could either pick a duel opponent from that list, or go into «Standby Mode» to wait for a Challenger.

Within the 23 Wards of Tokyo, there is an approximate total of 60 different battle areas.

Since most of the approximately 1000 total Burst Linkers live within central Tokyo, each Battle Area's matching list usually shows 10 to 20 people connected. Of course, it varies depending on the location and time period, and in the afternoon during weekends in Shinjuku and Akihabara, it's not rare to see over 100 people on the list.

With this number of people gathered in one spot, once in a while something unexpected is bound to happen. A Duel opponent randomly selected from the list may appear on the Stage very close to you, or you might spawn close to the Gallery.

Brain Burst's VR Duel Stages are made using footage from the ultra-high definition security surveillance camera network that has been placed in many places in the real world, the «Social Camera Net». That means that even though the Stage buildings and roads change to various shapes due to random «Attributes», it will still be similar to the real thing.

On that terrain, if Duel Avatars appear close to one another, that meant the Burst Linkers' real bodies were actually right in front of each other. This is a very awkward situation. No, it can even be dangerous. For a Burst Linker, exposing one's real face and name — that is, «Reality Intrusion», is one of the biggest taboos. If one's picture were taken, or one were tailed to find out their real name and address, then, in the real world, that person could be kidnapped, threatened, or robbed of all their Burst Points through other means.

There are few extreme individuals who are not afraid to use criminally violent and other drastic techniques in Accel World, but some do exist. They are known as Physical Knockers or «PK»; although the larger Legions take such people very seriously, sniffing them out is very difficult. Since the attacked Burst Linkers, almost without exception, lose all of their Points, their Brain Burst installations and all memories related to it are lost, and they can never return to Accel World.

Even if the chance of encountering such danger is very low, the risk still accompanies Weekend Duels, which burst with people.

In other words, it could be said that the chance of Reality Intrusion is greatly decreased in areas with a low number of Burst Linkers.

For the 23 Wards, the west portion of Setagaya Ward, the Ota Ward, and the Edogawa Ward could all be called highly underpopulated areas. Compared to their expansive sizes, there were usually very few people on the Matching List.

But surprisingly, the location with lowest chance of near miss danger in Tokyo was in the center of the whole areas - Chiyoda Ward.

Chiyoda Ward is the only Ward out of the total 23 that is not divided into Battle Areas. Other than the special, independent section that was Akihabara, all of its huge area is set as one Battle Area. Furthermore, there were almost no Burst Linkers who used that place as their base.

That is because about 20% of Chiyoda Ward's area consists of the Imperial Palace that normal people are forbidden to enter.

This rule is even in place in the Accel World. The Imperial Palace exists in different forms according to the current Duel Stage attribute, but a wall is set inside the moat that makes invasion impossible. With this huge forbidden zone in the center of a map that was already far too wide, it would be possible to win a Duel by launching a single long-range attack and hiding for 30 minutes.

With this kind of difficult-to-fight-in terrain, plus a holy ground for Duels with Akihabara to the northeast and Shinjuku to the west, there are not many people who still fight in Chiyoda Ward. This makes the Chiyoda area's matching list practically inactive. However, that does not make it a worthless area.

Even though Chiyoda is in the center of Tokyo, the risk of Burst Linkers' physical bodies inadvertently coming into contact is quite low. This feature has created an unexpected use for the area. That is, it is not a «Duel» area but a «Negotiation» area. For people in opposing forces, when they think of a place that could eliminate Reality Intrusion as much as possible during contact, the very wide and unpopulated Chiyoda Ward is the perfect place.

With the above reasons —.

Sunday, June 16, 2047, 1:45 pm.

The three members from «Nega Nebulas»: the Black King, «Black Lotus», her sub-commander «Sky Raker», and the low-ranking «Silver Crow», controlled by Kurovukihime, Kurasaki Fuuko, and Arita Haruyuki respectively, continued to wait for the start of the Negotiation in a small EV car parked in Tokyo City, Chiyoda Ward, Fujimi Nichome's coin parking lot.

No, judging by its scale, it was no longer just a simple negotiation between Legions.

After all, what was going to start this afternoon at 2PM was the second gathering of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» in Accel World's 8 years of history.

Chapter 1

“...Is this car master's personal property?”

Unable to withstand the tension of the impending «Seven King Conference», Haruyuki burst out with a question from the rear seat, which made the person in the driver's seat, his «Master», Fuuko shake her head in surprise.

“No way. It's my mother's, since I cannot buy an automobile with just a high school student's allowance, no matter what.”

“R-right.”

The EV had a round cute form, but the cheery creamy yellow interior had leather upholstery and the center of the steering wheel was stamped with a snake and cross-shaped emblem. Even Haruyuki was familiar with it, as it represented an established Italian automobile maker. Not even young members of society can easily afford that kind of price, let alone a university student.

“You seem to be very used to driving, so I thought that maybe it was yours. That license is your own... right?”

The answer to the cautious second question came not from Fuuko but instead from the person in the passenger seat, Kuroyukihime.

“Fufu, of course. Fuuko is 16 this year, so she is an adult who can obtain a driver's license and get married, unlike us.”

“...Sacchan, I don't like the way you said that...”

— An adult, huh.

After that moment of fleeting thought, Haruyuki shook his flabby head and revived.

The qualification for acquiring a driver's license was lowered from the normal 18 years old to 16 years old about 7 or 8 years ago. The official reason was the Social Camera Net's completion and vehicular control AI becoming mandatory, so the rate of traffic accidents was greatly reduced. That was the story, but there seem to be a hidden side.

2040's Japan was overcome with a fast declining birthrate and aging population, and the social security system was on the verge of collapse. The annual increase in health care, long term care and public pension expenditure had become unsupportable by the working generation. At that point, with the driver's license as representative, various qualification acquisition ages were lowered so as to increase the number of working young people- this was the government's intention. In fact, the Labor Standards Act was also amended, making it possible to hire 16 year olds as full-time company employees.

That meant Fuuko was already, legally, almost an adult. Kuroyukihime, who was currently 15, will be an adult next year. In just two years Haruyuki's time will also come.

Of course, graduating from middle school does not immediately mean having the need to find employment, and in fact one will continue to be a child, but even so, Haruyuki could not help but feel uneasy about it.

— How long will I be able to stay as my current self?

He smiled bitterly. Not wanting to be his current self and wanting to escape somewhere far away... this kind of longing was something that Haruyuki had felt for a long time.

That desire had not disappeared. He still hated his external form and he still could not like his middle school. However, if right now, some kind of God said to him, ‘I can change you into a different person living somewhere else’, then he would probably firmly reject the offer. «This Place» was, in the short term, the back seat of Fuuko’s car, and in the long term, being a Burst Linker in a corner of the Accelerated World. Putting it another way, with «Brain Burst» boasting enormous size and finesse, he would be a player of this game that offered him unlimited thrill and excitement. He did not wish for any more than that, not a thing.

But even that was probably not forever.

Brain Burst was a game. Games eventually end. Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime were fighting to reach that ending.

What the end of the game would look like, he didn’t know yet. When Kuroyukihime reached the Level 10 she wished for, would Brain Burst itself be cleared, would the «End of Childhood Time» kind of ending come, robbing them of their play rights without mercy, or will even some other kind of ending he could not imagine be visited upon them?

That was why right now, he should go all out.

Do his best to play, enjoy, and then protect. This world that he and the people he loved could be together in.

In the somewhat tight rear seat, he swore this in his heart and held his fist tight — then, he remembered the current circumstances, and blew out a deep sigh.

In fact, this was not a situation where he could say cool things like ‘I will protect you!’.

The agenda of the «Seven King’s Conference», which was to start in 10 minutes, was firstly a countermeasure against the mysterious destructive group, the «Acceleration Research Society», that had suddenly appeared in the Accelerated World. The second purpose was to figure out how to deal with the unbelievable revival of the Enhanced Armament, «Disaster Armor» and Chrome Disaster.

Just a week before, both agendas would have been way over the head of the level 4 Haruyuki. He would have been glad to stay an observer while the Kings and their aides argued.

However, Haruyuki no longer had that choice – he would be in the center of the stage.

After all, the one who revived the Disaster Armor and became the sixth generation Chrome Disaster was Silver Crow — Haruyuki himself.

“...No need to be so tense, Haruyuki-kun.”

With the arrival of calm words from the front seat, his face jerked up.

The owner of that voice suddenly pulled the navigation seat's reclining lever, and the backrest started to tilt. Right in front of Haruyuki, who panickedly dodged to the driver side, the seat fell all the way flat. Long black hair smoothly flowed, part of it touching Haruyuki's lap.

Today's Kuroyukihime was in unusually casual clothes. Above her grey slim jeans was a tight printed T-shirt. On top of that she wore a thin short-sleeved shirt made of laser-punched material. The color was, of course, black. This was in sharp contrast to the ivory-colored one piece and three-quarter length leggings that showed Fuuko's feminine side, but it did not diminish Kuroyukihime's "official" kind of beauty one bit.

Kuroyukihime, who was now laying down in front of Haruyuki, casually extended her right hand, grabbed Haruyuki's T-shirt collar with her fingertips and pulled. As his body leaned forward as if sucked in, a sweet scent different from the car air freshener tickled his nose, and Haruyuki's thinking rapidly decelerated.

"You don't need to be afraid of anything. It's ok, I will never let the Kings do anything to you. I'll protect you."

After that was whispered so close to him, his head became dizzier. After desperately putting his brain back in gear, Haruyuki answered.

"Th... thank you very much. But... all the Kings other than senpai will ask for punishment for Silver Crow, right? That means... the Legion Master's «Judgment Blow»..."

"Well, probably."

"If that... was refused, won't that be bad for senpai, how to say it, image-wise?"

What Haruyuki had experienced, was how unbelievably cruel the fact that «righteousness always belonged to the many» could become. The delinquent students, who bullied Haruyuki a lot during the first year, did not irrationally wield violence at the start. At the beginning they came by with friendly faces, then at the moment that Haruyuki refused their invitation and distanced himself, they used the pretext of «Betrayal of companionship» and showed their fangs.

This time, as for reason, he thought that the Kings have more of it than Kuroyukihime. The «Disaster Armor» was a curse that had a lot of victims since the beginning of accelerated world, and even Haruyuki thought that it needs to be erased. On the other hand, if he could erase it by his own operation, then he would have done it already.

If that was not possible, then he should be dealt with by all the Burst Linkers. If Kuroyukihime rejected that «Valid» opinion, then what kind of mental and physical pressure will the Kings shower upon them?

That, was only Haruyuki's worry — however.

"Hahaha, why are you saying that now?"

The sudden light laughter that flew by made him blink his eyes a few times.

Then Kuroyukihime's smile changed to a fearless one, and she declared in a slightly lower tone.

“I am already their enemy. I did not join their foolish «Mutual Nonaggression Treaty» either. If they have a problem, then the Six Kings can just come duel me. That is exactly what I wish for, right?”

“...Senpai...”

— Truey, what a strong, cool... and brave person.

While he was impressed within his chest, he of course did not have the ability to put it into words, so the least Haruyuki could do was look with all his heart into the shining deep black eyes at close range.

Doing so made Kuroyukihime’s sharp look soften, and she again kindly smiled as she accepted Haruyuki’s gaze. Her lips moving slightly, a barely audible whisper rippled the air.

“Thinking back, I had been protected by you a lot since the beginning...”

The lightly extended fingertip gently touched Haruyuki’s right cheek. Even while his heart pounded loudly, he somehow managed to answer hoarsely.

“No way... That’s not it... I had also...”

However, Kuroyukihime lightly poked Haruyuki’s cheek with her index finger to seal his objection.

“I am your «Parent». So I have the right to protect you any time. That’s why, at least during times like this, rely on me without saying anything.”

“...Sen... pai.”

With his chest quickly tightening, Haruyuki somehow managed to say just that, and continued to exchange gazes with Kuroyukihime. The sword King that returned a kind nod, as her fingertip stayed on Haruyuki’s cheek, once more whispered her words from a few seconds ago.

“I promise. I will protect you.”

“...Yes. Yes.. I believe yo-WHOOMP!”

— The end of his sentence was changed into an unknown sound.

The backrest of the driver’s seat suddenly reclined and squashed Haruyuki.

A hand thrust out from the seat’s edge grabbed hold of Haruyuki’s left ear; Fuuko’s face poked her, her cheeks puffed, and she said resentfully:

“Hey Saa-chan, Karasu-san! Getting excited in someone else’s car is forbidden, you hear!?”



The two people in the front pulled their seats up back to normal, and as Haruyuki fixed his own seat, it was already 3 minutes to 2 pm in the afternoon.

Looking out through the window, he saw moody light clouds covering the June sky, but spots of blue color showed their faces here and there. There did not seem to be any worry of a sudden thunderstorm disrupting their Neuro Linker connections.

Continuing after a slight cough, Kuroyukihime said tensely:

“This time’s conference is not a «Battle Royale Mode», where everyone connects and becomes fighting opponents, but instead, the host, «Blue King’s» two close aides will duel each other and other participants will automatically dive in the gallery. In other words, there is no need to worry about the danger of anyone attacking us.”

“Ah... Does that include the «Incarnate System» type of attacks too?”

Fuuko answered Haruyuki’s question.

“Yep, even if mind power is used, you can’t just attack the gallery in the normal Duel Stage, since the gallery doesn’t even have an HP gauge. During last week’s «Hermes Cord Traversing Race», the reason that the participants and audience were hurt by Rust Jigsaw’s mind power was that an HP gauge was set for everyone, but they were locked due to the special field status.”

“I see, it was that... Somehow... somehow, it was almost like...”

As Haruyuki murmured, Kuroyukihime added quietly:

“Somehow it was almost like there was an intentional possibility of sabotaging the race with mind power?”

“Ye... N-No, not that bad...”

He hurriedly shook his head. If he said that, then what came next would inevitably hold also true. That was — that destructive act by Rust Jigsaw, was approved by the developer of Brain Burst.

No way, it could not be that. That would be the only thing definitely wrong. The identity of the developer who managed Brain Burst for whatever goal was still a mystery, but as a gamer Haruyuki had already began to feel a deep respect for him or her. The person who built and maintained this much of a fun, exciting, and immersive game... no, «world», could not be helping some despicable jerk from the likes of the «Acceleration Research Society».

“Haruyuki-kun.”

As Haruyuki ground his teeth, Kuroyukihime’s said gently:

“Listen, just remember. Accel World’s main actors are each and everyone of the Burst Linkers. That includes you. Whatever form you commit to this world is completely up to you. No matter what the developer’s intent is.”

“...Yes!”

At the same time as his deep nod, the time display at the edge of his view showed that there were 10 seconds left before the appointed time.

“Good answer. — Now then, everyone, open a Global Connection.”

Under their Legion Master’s direction, the three of them pressed the Link button on each of their Neuro Linkers.

After the Global Net connection display lit up, followed by the connection status, and 2 seconds after that disappeared —

Bashiii! The sound of Acceleration echoed in Haruyuki's ears.

In the center of his vision, [A REGISTERED DUEL IS BEGINNING!] in flaming letters roared to life.

Chapter 2

An olivine glow flooded the sky. Blue-black tiles covered the ground. Tooth-shaped decorations shot up from the buildings, with thick fog flowing in between.

“... The «Demonic City» stage, huh. Well, I should say that this matches our objective today,” said the Black King Black Lotus, her sharp toes squeaking while stepping on the tile surface.

Haruyuki was enchanted by the streamlined, appealing but vigorous figure of his respected and loved Legion Master for a while, then he turned to stare at the sky-colored Avatar standing quietly to the side.

This one, comparatively, was an absolutely, elegant and beautiful form of standing. Behind her elaborate feminine body, slightly-deep blue hair hung straight down like wings. Her smoothly curved arms and legs were equipped with no weapons at all.

However, Haruyuki was very aware that her pair of slender feet being able to step firmly onto the ground was proof of the miracle that she --- Sky Raker initiated.

If Black Lotus could be described as Haruyuki's «Parent» and «Master», Raker was who Haruyuki would call his «Coach». For a very long period of time, she retreated from the front line of Accel World's Duels and lived as a recluse in a universally forgotten corner on top of the Old Tokyo Tower.

This was because she lost most of her fighting prowess two years ago after deciding to sever her two legs from below the knees. But when she met Haruyuki, who had also lost strength as she did --- in his case the «Flight Ability», her interest in Duelling was gradually rekindled by training Haruyuki for «Incarnate System», and she surpassed her own inner wounds during last week's «Hermes Cord Traversing Race», eventually regaining her two feet.

Haruyuki, who was once possessed by «Chrome Disaster», knew full well how difficult it was to break away from negative influence.

If he had not been saved by Chiyuri --- Lime Bell's «Avatar time-reversal» super-ability, Haruyuki would definitely have been engulfed by the Armor and his own hatred and indiscriminately attacked hundreds of people.

In just a few minutes, he had already been almost completely and irreversibly consumed by negative Incarnation. But Sky Raker had sliced apart the chains of horror and despair that had bound her for two and a half years. If this wasn't a miracle, then what was?

Haruyuki gazed at Raker's feet with deep emotion ---.

“Crow-san, do you really like my beautiful legs that much?”

A smiling voice floated over as Haruyuki frantically shook his head and hands.

“No, it’s not like that, although they’re very beautiful, but it’s not like *that*...”

“Hoh, so you have a foot fetish. I’m so sorry, but I don’t have heels or ankles,” Kuroyukihime said from aside, her eyes flashing violet-blue. Haruyuki immediately changed his face’s direction and began explaining.

“H-how can that be, I also like Senpai’s feet very much... Wah, that doesn’t mean I have a foot fetish...!”

Haruyuki felt that he was only sinking deeper and deeper into the quagmire, so he pointed his right arm southeast and raised his voice.

“C-c-c-compared to this, look, the Navigation Cursors are pointing that way! Let’s go, let’s go.”

As Haruyuki said, there were two gray triangular arrows in the middle of their sight, pointing silently towards the same direction. There should be two officers from the Blue Legion that way. Above the Navigation Cursors there were two HP Gauges side by side, with a Countdown in between them. Originally beginning at 1,800 seconds, it had already decreased to 1,750 seconds.

“Mm, now that you mention it, they told all of us to assemble within 100 seconds. Nothing we can do, let’s go.”

The three nodded to each other and began sprinting south towards the Demonic City streets.

Spectators of a normal Duel received the highest dexterity and jumping ability as compensation for being unable to destroy the environment. Haruyuki and company dashed up the wall of a building and pushed forward from rooftop to rooftop.

After they ran for 20 seconds, the fog that covered the path ahead of them instantly vanished.

At the scenery unfolding in front of him, Haruyuki could not help but gasp.

“Uwa... So, so big...”

It was the «City».

Southeast of the direction that the Cursors were pointing in, a gargantuan structure towered into view. With an iron spire glowing green, a castle made up of strange statues exuded a sense of being incomparable to all other objects in the Demonic City stage, enough for one to describe it as being divinely possessed. The city walls around it were surrounded by a thick moat; there was nothing that looked like an entrance.

Although Haruyuki had once caught a glance of the castle in the distant east rising into the sky in between the countless Duels they had fought in Sugunami and Shinjuku, it was his first time viewing it from such a close distance. Besides Haruyuki, who was deeply moved by the great city’s dignity, Kuroyukihime spoke in a low voice.

“That is where the «Imperial Palace» is in the real world. An area in Accel World that is inaccessible no matter the means that are taken.”

“You... You can’t even fly over there?”

The one who answered this question was Fuuko, who walked on the left.

“Indeed, you can’t. There are invisible barriers placed above and below the city wall. Flying over or digging under is out of the question. We really tried so many different methods in the beginning...”

“Yes. There are many rumors of super powerful Enhanced Armaments hidden inside. But in the end, there was no one who could enter that place. ---In the normal Duelling field, that is.”

Detecting something within Kuroyukihime’s words, Haruyuki asked,

“Hey... What does that mean?”

But before she could reply, Fuuko said sharply,

“I see them... On that hill!”

They looked in the direction of her pointing finger. On top of a small hill in front of them, there were two tiny silhouettes... No, three. In the real world, this should be where the ««East Gardens»» of the Imperial Palace were. Different from the Imperial Palace, they were open to the public; Haruyuki had been there before when he was younger with his Social Studies class.

Slowly decreasing their speed, they approached cautiously. Although he was attending as an undamageable spectator, Haruyuki couldn’t help but tremble when he remembered that he was about to meet the «Kings of Pure Color» that ruled over Accel World.

After crossing a wide bridge built over a waterway and a magnificent city gate, they climbed the steps on the side of the hill. Although the impenetrable «Demonic City» stood to their right, Haruyuki did not look over there and stared straight up the hill.

When they reached the top, the wide expanse of a paved stone path¹ unfolded before Haruyuki’s eyes.

In the real world, this should be the grassy field inside the main castle of Edo Castle, but there was no sprinkle of vegetation here: only one iron column after another, forming a circular structure.

But for some reason, one of the columns was much shorter than the others, only about fifty centimeters tall.

Also, there was a Duel Avatar sitting on it.

Blue. A deep, transparent blue that looked as though it wanted to suck you in. Not the color of the sky, nor the color of the sea. A full-body, pure blue incomparable to any existing material.

The shape of its armor was a classic Knight. It was nothing strange like the «Disaster Armor», but an austere posture resembling that of a fairy-tale hero. Under a Medieval-like helmet extended two objects that looked like dragon horns, while a huge longsword hung from its left waist.

¹ Ishidatami or ‘paving stones’ were laid down on rough patches of road, particularly over the mountain passes which were steep at the top and prone to erosion in the rainy season. Stones were laid carefully so that porters and carriers would have sure footing when they most needed it. More info: <http://www.nakasendoway.com/ishidatami/>

The blue Avatar's body, which propped its left foot on its right knee and hugged both ankles in a resting position, was not big at all. If it stood up, it should be about Takumu --- Cyan Pile's height. But the crushing repression it gave off, like a meteor descending from space, rendered Haruyuki, who was twenty or so meters away from him, unable to take another step forward.

"... That, that's..."

Haruyuki asked in a small voice, as Raker answered quietly besides him.

"Yes. That is the leader of the Legion «Leonids» that rules over Shinjuku and Bunkyo... a Level 9 Player with many titles such as the «Swordmaster» and the «Monster Hunter», the Blue King «Blue Knight»."

"Blue... Knight..."²

Although it was a simple name that would be as common as the weakest monsters in another game, hearing it in Accel World made it completely unique.

Feeling that immense aura of oppression, Haruyuki could not help but tremble as he finally remembered something. That knight was not his Duel opponent at all; just from this viewpoint, he could see that both of them were merely spectators. But even from the viewpoint of a spectator, without attack strength or HP, it could emanate such a crushing aura --- just the thought of taking it on one-on-one is pretty scary.

Just then, *ping*, a sound eased Haruyuki's stiffness.

It was the sound of Kuroyukihime's footsteps. The Black King Black Lotus shrugged off the Blue King's fighting intent as if it were a gentle breeze, and raised her right arm-sword.

"I dropped by to say hello today just because you're hosting today. --- You're still in that stuffy getup, Knight?"

Haruyuki moaned silently at Kuroyukihime's words: *Why do you have to go and taunt him!* Raker was actually snickering on the side, and he felt the the urge to run away as fast as he could.

Fortunately, the Blue King's avatar was faster, and let out the clear voice of a young boy.

"... Hey, that's no greeting, Lotus. You're as sharp as ever, even after we haven't seen each other for two and a half years."

The Blue King's shoulders sank, making his armor clank. The murderous intent that was instantly released was dissipated as quickly as though it had never been there.

Judging by the Blue King's tone, he's an amiable guy. I thought the King himself would be more serious since the Blue Legion comes to attack us every week, but that might not have been the case...

Just as Haruyuki relaxed.

² Haruyuki translates Blue Knight's name into Japanese.

Flanking the Blue King, from within the curling mist, two strikingly similar silhouettes walked forward.

--- *Warriors!*

Haruyuki instantly thought. Their lanky bodies were wrapped in horizontally overlapping golden Japanese-style armor. The avatar on the left was a deep blue. The one on the right was a bright green. They wore not helmets but *hachigane*³; their tied straight hair hung straight down behind them; judging by their physiques, they were both female.

The two female warrior avatars walked forward a few meters in an extraordinary fashion, akin to gliding, threateningly grabbed the hilts of their swords that hung on their left waists, and growled:

“If you dare to try and fool our Master, we won’t forgive you even if you are a King!”

“Traitor, thank your own fate that you’re able to stand here today!”

Murderous intent crackled and blazed to life in the air once again; Haruyuki shrunk his neck in panic.

As the apprentice of the Black King, he should be saying something cool to counter the opponents, but it felt like as soon as he opened his mouth, his head would be flying high in the sky, so he couldn’t muster the strength to speak. Because those two warriors were the Blue King’s --- the one who was hosting this stage --- right-hand-men, in other words, «Duelists», with the permission of both of them, the crowd watching the battle could immediately be excluded.

--- But just then.

“Ara, your tongues have gotten so sharp in such a short time, ladies.”

Sky Raker said with a smile. With the click-clack of her high heels, she came to Kuroyukihime’s side and wagged her index finger at the warriors.

“Want me to hang you beside each other from the top of the Government Building⁴, just like before?”

Wah, waaaaahhhh-----. Haruyuki let out a silent scream. *You’ve done that before, Master?!* Shrieking internally, Haruyuki also acknowledged that if it was this person who did such a thing, then it wouldn’t be that much of a surprise.

Fire erupted within the glass eyes of the slender armored duo as they simultaneously gripped the hilts of their swords.

““You bitch...””

³ A type of *hachimaki* (headband) traditionally worn by members of the Shinsengumi, a special police force organized by the *bakufu* (military government) during Japan’s Bakumatsu period in 1864. More info: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinsengumi>

⁴ The Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, which houses the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

The two screeched as one; the Blue King interrupted with a laugh from behind them.

“That’s enough, Cobalt, Mangan.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Both immediately bowed their heads and took a step back.

Haruyuki breathed a sigh of relief and looked again at the two HP Gauges in his upper field of view.

Below the HP value on the left, he could see «Cobalt Blade». On the left, «Mangan Blade»⁵ flashed. Since their names and appearances were so similar, these two would probably be similar people in the real world.

If they were twin sisters, since he managed to recruit them as bodyguards, the Blue King is pretty impressive, in many aspects... As these kinds of fantastic thoughts spun around in Haruyuki’s mind, Kuroyukihime shrugged lightly and spoke.

“Hey Knight, don’t just sit there, can you prepare some seats for us, too?”

“Ah, please excuse me.”

The Blue King waved a hand towards the armored warriors.

The warriors bent over and placed their hands on their sword hilts. Haruyuki didn’t even have a moment to shiver---

With a reverberating metallic noise, two bluish-white beams swept across the field.

Before Haruyuki’s wide eyes, two right arms flashed like rays of sunlight; the blades gleamed for a moment and returned into their scabbards. It took only 3 frames⁶ to complete the entire movement.

Then, thin cracks appeared in the dense fog; following the direction of the cracks were the two gigantic pillars that used to stand on both sides of the warriors: they were now each cut into 3 pieces to form a total of 6 pieces, and fell forward silently. They hit the ground, creating an impact that scattered countless pieces of metal in all directions. A «Severed Stone Column» as smooth as a mirror was all that was left.

“It... it... can’t be...”

Haruyuki murmured stupidly on the side.

This normal Duel Stage had to be the «Demonic City». Its very first characteristic was the extreme hardness of the terrain. Haruyuki had also been in the Demonic City during his Incarnate System training: in order to be able to scratch a centimeters-deep crack on that wall, he had underwent an entire week of hellish training.

⁵ “Mangan” is most likely short for manganese, an important industrial metal with a silvery color. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manganese>

⁶ Gaming term, referring to the frame rate of a game.

But Cobalt Blade and Mangan Blade had sliced the columns into thirds by swinging their swords just once. If Haruyuki had been standing there, no doubt he'd have been decapitated in one stroke.

--- *That was the strength of the highest elite within the Blue Legion. And the strength of the «King» would be far greater.*

--- *We... We're actually challenging people like them...*

Just as Haruyuki shuddered with intense fear, someone suddenly slapped his back.

Sky Raker's beautiful avatar, which wore no armor, whispered close to Haruyuki's ear.

"They're just cutting apart the immobile columns to theatrically show off, Karasu-san. If you're scared by an attack of that caliber, I'll need to properly discipline you from now on~."

Haruyuki curled up in fright.

Leaving Haruyuki who stood in one spot, the Black King and her ally walked calmly over; Kuroyukihime went to the nearest stone stump cut from the rightmost column and sat down, while Raker sat behind her. Compared with the warrior avatars' blades, Haruyuki was more afraid of Raker-sensei's teachings, so he could only jog up and stand straight as a board next to Raker.

The warriors stood slightly to the back on their own column; the silence that engulfed the stage in an instant was dispersed by Kuroyukihime's reluctant voice.

"... Okay, we've greeted the host, now isn't it time for you people to show yourself? 100 seconds have passed already."

Yes, the countdown was nearing 1600 seconds. But what did she mean by "show yourself"? There were only Blue and Black here for a total of six people...

Haruyuki scanned his entire surroundings; just then---

"What? I'm just being polite! What's with that tone, Lotus?"

A purely innocent yet unwaveringly strong voice floated by from somewhere, accompanying the *pitter patter* of soft footsteps.

In that direction, a silhouette appeared on top of a broken stone column about three meters to the right.

A maroon avatar that gave the impression of an upright carnivore. With sharp triangular ears and a long tail, one could tell that this was an officer of the Red Legion «Prominence» with the title «bloodstained kitten», «Blood Leopard».

And sitting to her right was who the voice just now belonged to: a tiny deep red avatar, with antennae on her head in the shape of twintails and two large eyes. Her arms and legs were composed out of glossy armor. Although she had a small stature, this girl, adorable as a ruby gemstone, was the leader of the legion that controlled the territories of Nerima and Nakano Ward, the Red King «Scarlet Rain».

Just as Haruyuki was about to greet the Red King, who was currently out of her immensely powerful cannon turret nicknamed the «Immobile Fortress», just as he was about to open his mouth and say “Rain, and Pard-san!”

The fighting intent that exuded from the two red Avatars, no different from that of the Blue King, quickly shut Haruyuki up.

This is different from the «Over-Ray» of the Incarnate System; this was just normal, invisible fighting intent.

«Being able to sense some kind of intent» had to be normal in Accel World, which logged into itself tens of thousands of things from the real world. Although he’d heard the theory - that «the amount of a Duel Avatar’s hidden battle experience will affect his or her pressure upon others», real elites can crush weaklings just with their presence. Just like how those two red ones intimidated Haruyuki.

The Red King, whose real name was Kouzuki Yuniko, or Niko for short, and Blood Leopard, Pard for short, were friends of Haruyuki in the real world, and because of a certain incident in the past that resulted in the two of them battling side by side, Prominence and Nega Nebulas had agreed on an infinite non-aggression pact.

But even so, it wasn’t a close relationship that allowed them to stick together in any situation, the duo’s profiles declared to Haruyuki. Haruyuki understood them, a sliver of loneliness passing over his heart. Because this was how Burst Linkers competed against each other to become stronger.

No---

Perhaps there’s another reason, something else as to why Niko can’t face Haruyuki.

The Enhanced Armament currently believed to be parasitizing Haruyuki should have been personally destroyed by Niko as the Legion King, along with the last-generation host, as his «Parent». In other words, according to a certain meaning, Niko should be motivated to execute Haruyuki...

Forcing himself not to think further, Haruyuki turned his head back just as Blood Leopard spoke in a low voice.

“We are the only two representing Prominence, so let us cut to the chase.”

Niko jumped down from her hand and sat onto the metal column; Blood Leopard stood behind her master with her hands on her hips.

Like this, three of the seven Kings arrived. The seven columns were arranged in a half-moon shape: the centermost one was the Blue King, the one to the right was the Black King, the next one on the right was the Red King. Just as Haruyuki was wondering where the next one would appear from---

The sound that floated from the fog across was not footsteps, but cackling one kept pressed in his throat.

“Ku, ku, ku, ku...”

He had heard this clearly mocking and condescending laughter before, but was unsure of where it was coming from. No matter where he looked, it always felt as if the sound were coming from behind him.

“Kuku... «Kings», huh? If my memory serves me correctly, “The Kings” is short for «The Seven Kings of *Pure Color*», right? If we call the short stuff over there “red”, then don’t you think that’s way too cheap of a color...?”

The words coming from everywhere were clearly humiliating Scarlet Rain.

Niko was the only «Second Generation» within the Kings that ruled the Seven Great Legions. The previous generation Red King «Red Rider» was beheaded two years ago by the Black King, and in accordance with the sudden death rule among Level 9s, was permanently removed from Accel World. Niko, who revitalized Prominence, which had erred on the edge of collapse, now known as the Second Generation leader, had an avatar that was not truly red, but a brighter ruby red, but that couldn’t be the reason for her to be a false king. Because---

“It-it’s got nothing to do with the color! Rain’s strength has already reached Level 9, isn’t that already the mark of a King?!”

---It should be that way.

This time, Haruyuki had shouted out what was in his mind, which Raker snickered at, and caused Niko herself who sat not far away to reply with a bitter smile:

“...The Crow over there’s already said what I wanted to say, but let me add something else. ---If we’re talking whose color is lighter, I think I can go up against your banana-yellow color. We don’t have much time anyway, show yourself already.”

The Red King spoke as she raised her right finger and pointed directly to the middle of three columns across from them.

Haruyuki hurriedly gazed towards that direction and finally saw a puppet-like object standing on a short column he’d previously thought empty; Haruyuki tilted his head and thought for a second before he finally noticed it.

That was a «Battle Spectator Avatar», used by Kuroyukihime in the past, when she was in hiding from assassins sent by the Kings, to gather intelligence in Accel World. The Yellow King put his attribute as a spectator to good use, ensuring that he was not as conspicuous as he usually he was.

In front of Haruyuki, white smoke billowed out from the center of the paper puppet.

As a slight breeze blew the smoke away, a bone-thin clown Avatar with a bright yellow - or a poisonous yellow - colored outfit stood on a cylindrical column.

Harshly curved horns lined the edge of its hat. It wore a mask with eyes as thin as smiling faces and a leering mouth. Broad shoulders and waist seemed to stand out, contrasting with long, thin limbs.

The clown stroked his chin with needle-like hands while his cackle continued to leak out.

“Ku, ku, calling me banana-yellow just won’t do. Personally, I prefer being compared to uranium, see? But whatever, what’re you gonna do. Of course, monkeys and little children love bananas, kukuku...”

The clown that laughed while shaking his head was the «Yellow King» who lured Kuroyukihime and Niko into a trap, commanded the three areas of Taito, Arakawa, and Adachi, and ruled over the legion «Crypt Cosmic Circus» that ruled over Akihabara --- «Yellow Radio».

Although the same intimidation that the other Kings gave off could not be said for his floaty attitude and twisted tongue, he was an adversary not to be trifled with, and to Haruyuki, who had once witnessed close-quarters combat between him and Kuroyukihime, he had greatly understood the terror of Yellow Radio.

Radio was a pure yellow, in other words, a typical «indirect attack type», but could match Black Lotus in close-quarters combat.

It seemed that the Yellow King had come without a personal aide. He wrapped up his laughter, bowed with his right hand on his chest, and sat on top of the column.

---And then there were four.

“...So, the ones who aren’t here yet are...”

As Haruyuki was muttering to himself, firm footsteps entered his ear.

Boom boom, rigid and heavy tremors that came from behind shook the entire stage. Just as Haruyuki whirled around, the giant Avatar that parted the fog appeared in front of the group.

It was tall but not really gigantic: just in terms of length, it wasn’t much bigger than the core of the Blue Legion «Frost Horn», let alone Niko’s fully expanded Enhanced Armament.

But Haruyuki had never directly come face-to-face with such an absolutely, crushingly intimidating Avatar.

With its helmet, shoulders, and lower body, it was an Avatar that made you think it was entirely composed of heavy plates. Its very slim, yet very strong waist did not seem clumsy at all. Although its right hand was empty, its left hand clutched a shield that looked abnormally heavy.

And the color that enveloped the entire suit of armor was a pure green, brighter and deeper than jade.

“..... The Green King...”

Haruyuki murmured, recalling the Avatar he had seen in a video a while ago. Beside him, Raker nodded and added:

“Indeed. That is the leader of the legion «Great Wall» that controls Shibuya and Outa, «Green Grande», nicknamed «Absolute Defense».”

“I remember; his HP-gauge has never fallen past yellow...”

Haruyuki sighed; in Duels with players of the same level, his own health would often fall to red, even if it was his victory. Seeing him like this, Kuroyukihime, who sat in front of him, snorted.

“But that guy’s number of actual Duels is pretty low to begin with. He pretty much soloed Monsters to save up Points and get up to Level 9. But just doing that is already a pretty impressive feat...”

“Hah...”

Haruyuki sighed again. Among the roaming monster «Enemies» in the Unlimited Neutral Field, even the weaker ones were extraordinarily strong, and the Points gained after a painstaking victory were very little. Even Haruyuki, who enjoyed slowly grinding at monsters in normal RPGs, wouldn’t touch them even if he kept losing in normal player Duels.

It was impossible to tell if this «Level Grinder», the Green King, had noticed that Haruyuki was gazing at him respectfully; if he did notice, he did not react. He steadily ambled over to the column between Niko and the Blue King, and sat down with a *clunk*. Like the Yellow King, he had no aide with him.

If he could sit over there without saying anything, and have no one think it strange, he was probably a pretty introverted person in real life.

Haruyuki looked forward again and took a deep breath.

With the strongest Kings showing up one after another, Haruyuki was slowly getting used to the pressure. His previously trembling calves were now standing stock-still, and the freezing numbness from his hands had disappeared.

--- Yeah, there’s nothing to be afraid of. I work under Black Lotus... No, I’m her «Child». I should straighten my back like Raker.

As Haruyuki was thinking, just before he straightened his back.

“.....!?!”

A sudden chill struck him, as if his heart was being seized by ice-hold hands. Haruyuki recoiled in fear.

--- What’s going on... This...

--- Killing intent...? No, not just that. There’s a clearer sense of... rejection. They want to sentence me, banish me from Accel World... An unspoken declaration...

Clack, clack.

High-pitched footsteps echoed from somewhere.

His entire body rigid, Haruyuki frantically perked up his ears to confirm the direction the noise was coming from: north. It was coming from directly across the Kings who sat in the semicircle of columns. The footsteps grew closer. With effort, Haruyuki lifted his face to look in that direction.

A person’s shape appeared.

Just from the silhouette he could tell that it was a female Avatar. A long hair component and skirt-shaped armor wavered back and forth. Her waist was slim beyond belief, and her feet looked like needles.

Clack, clack, clack. Were the high notes that sounded like swords striking the ground the result of high heels even taller than Sky Raker's?

Just as she entered the circular formation, the thick fog that still remained dissipated, as though it couldn't withstand her killing intent.

The Avatar finally revealed her true form; if one word were used to describe it --- «King», or rather, «Queen», would be the only suitable term.

The stuff on her head that looked like hair was actually silk armor that extended from her crown. Her beautiful visor gave others a feeling of sharpness; the plated armor on her shoulders and chest had very feminine characteristics, but at the same time was extremely intimidating. Between the gaps in the armored skirt that extended from her waist, the part connected to her feet were barely visible.

Haruyuki had never seen an Avatar so fitting for the word «pretty». But this kind of beauty was of an unapproachable sort. Including the flowery gemstones on her head, her entire body was covered with razor-sharp rose-shaped accessories.

On top of the 1.5-meter-long khakkhara⁷ in her right hand shined a decorative rose. Her armor's color was a mysterious violet that floated about in light like an illusion.

“She's finally come out...”

Sky Raker murmured, staring through narrowed eyes at the Queen Avatar that walked towards them. **Clack, clack.**

“I'm afraid that out of all of the Kings present today, she is the one who will be the most antagonistic to us. She's the leader of the Legion «Aurora Oval», which rules over Ginza to the Gulf Region. The Purple King with the title «Empress Voltage», «Purple Thorn». And that khakkhara she's holding is one of the «Seven Legendary Instruments», «The Tempest».

“Ehh... Legendary Instrument?”

Haruyuki parroted reflexively, having never heard of this term before; Raker quickly began to explain:

“There are an estimated total of seven highest-level Enhanced Armaments in Accel World. We can currently confirm the existences of that staff, the Blue King's giant sword «The Impulse», and the third one is...”

Just then, Raker seemed to feel something and abruptly stopped speaking, without allowing Haruyuki to ask any further.

This was because the Purple King stopped walking towards the center of the semicircle of columns besides the toppled rightmost column, which was in front of where Kuroyukihime was sitting; the Purple King struck the ground with her khakkhara, making a vibrating noise.

⁷ Buddhist staff primarily used in prayer or as a weapon, originating from India. Has small rings hanging from it that clatter to intimidate or to warn nearby allies. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khakkhara>

Her thin shawl waved as her mask turned towards Kuroyukihime. Her sharp eyes held within them a quiet, icy purple gaze.

Haruyuki had already recoiled in fright from this Queen who indiscriminately radiated pressure, and when this pressure was concentrated onto the three members of Nega Nebulas, Haruyuki felt like fainting.

If this was clear hatred or rage, he would be able to deal with it; after all, Haruyuki had been a Burst Linker for 8 months now, and he'd fought against raging opponents several times now.

But the Purple King was not exuding a simple emotion. There existed no room for discussion; it was an absolute denial. This opponent was going to struggle with them until the very end, no matter of changes in circumstances from here on out, right until the end of Accel World. Haruyuki's instinct was telling him this.



The Purple King Purple Thorn looked down and gazed at Black Lotus for two seconds, then quietly spoke:

“It has really been such a long time, Lotus. I did not expect the day to come when I would have the opportunity to speak with you again.”

Although there was nothing piercing in her tone, it was ice. If it shattered, there would be countless sharp fragments raining down on them. Haruyuki held his breath.

Within this girl's stern voice, he recognized an innocent voice he had heard somewhere before. He figured it out after a moment. Haruyuki had indeed heard her voice once, but not directly. A scene once played from a flashback in the Unlimited Neutral Field had recorded the Purple King's Voice. Now that voice floated up from the bottom of Haruyuki's memories.

---Rider, you can't just accept what's they said just now!

---Wait, wait!

A young girl's cry that held both resentment and naivete.

In his memories, this was the moment when the Black King Black Lotus had wrapped her arms around Rider's head, so the Purple King, who was quite close with the Red King, had shouted in a voice that sounded close to exploding.

But from then on—

Black Lotus's twin-arm-swords closed together like a gigantic vise, slicing Red Rider's head and body in two.

In the instant that a Level 9 Burst Linker is defeated by another Level 9 Burst Linker, according to the rules, he or she will lose all Points; in other words, in that instant, the Red King had retreated from Accel World, forever.

The last thing recorded in the flashback video was Purple Thorn's heart-breaking shriek.

As Haruyuki had heard it, Kuroyukihime had then fought ferociously with the remaining five Kings, without defeating anyone or being defeated herself, until she had stalled the entire 30 minutes of battle time. From then on, Kuroyukihime cut off her connection to the Global Net and remained hidden in the Local Network of Umesato Middle School for two years. Right until autumn of last year, when Cyan Pile's attack and the birth of Silver Crow served as the turning point for Kuroyukihime to reenter Accel World.

In the heavy passing of those few seconds, the two Kings' gazes and aura collided. Deep down, Haruyuki worried whether Kuroyukihime was succumbing to her own guilt. Kuroyukihime had always regretted her decision to ambush Red Rider and forever go into hiding. Even if the Red King didn't remember that he was once a Burst Linker.

---But.

The black crystal Avatar that faced the sharp mask showed no sign of relenting, only quietly, continually meeting the Queen's stare.

Finally, Kuroyukihime's placid voice sounded in the stage permeated by velvety fog.

“Likewise, Thorn. I believed that the next time we meet, one of us would have our head cut off.”

At the words that showed no sign of yielding, the Purple King's eyes slowly began to shine. Was it Haruyuki's imagination that the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees?

“... Or, rather, it would be like this? For example, everyone here agreeing to change from «Normal Duel» to «Battle Royale Mode»... There's a chance of that happening, right?”

Gulp---, Haruyuki swallowed his saliva as he resisted the urge to shout “Are you joking, I’d absolutely never agree to that!”

But Kuroyukihime gave a slight laugh and replied calmly:

“That would simplify matters. I’d be able to beat Brain Burst today with no need for troublesome conferences.”

Haruyuki was petrified again. Those words were almost like a declaration of intent to kill off the four remaining Kings and reach Level 10... that was the only possible meaning. Haruyuki was incredulous that Sky Raker could stand beside him so calmly.

The Purple King tilted her head, as though she were returning the Black King’s compliment.

Then she slammed her khakkhara onto the stone floor.

At the sharp **ting**, Haruyuki’s heart was about to be frozen beyond repair. From the direction where the Purple King appeared came synchronized footsteps, and the figures of eight Burst Linkers materialized.

Their colors and armor all differed from one another, but it was instantly clear that every one of them were elites of exceptional levels. It seemed that they represented a large portion of the Purple Legion’s strongest members.

Purple Thorn smiled for the first time and spoke:

“It would really be inconvenient if this were all a joke. I’ve come prepared, of course. If this turns into a battle with you, I’ve no intention of letting you escape.”

This was neither bluffing nor showing off; it was sincere. This person’s heart was sealed with intense emotions unfathomable by someone ordinary.

Feeling this suffocating pressure, Haruyuki’s right foot unconsciously took a step backward.

But Kuroyukihime’s attitude did not change at all. In fact, in this situation, she actually began to laugh: “Heh, heh, heh...”

“Heh heh... As expected, I’ve really made an error of judgment. But Thorn, if you really want my head, shouldn’t you be making them secretly lie in wait on the edge of the Sensing Zone? Take a leaf out of Radio’s book.”

Eh? Haruyuki looked towards the sedentary Yellow Radio. The Yellow King shrugged but said nothing; indeed, it seemed that if the conference were to descend into chaos, even if there were only 0.001% chance of that happening, the Yellow King wouldn’t have come alone.

The one who reacted to Kuroyukihime’s words was not the Purple King, but a female Avatar who stepped out of the eight Avatars.

The color of her armor was a reddish-violet similar to grape wine. With a wide-rim cap and her armor dividing into two at her thighs, it looked like a military uniform. However, the thing on her waist was not a gun, but a coiled whip.

The female soldier Avatar walked up behind the Purple King and spoke in an ice-cold tone.

“Your bluffing to this degree is quite comical, King of the Hidey-Hole. Although you appear to be worming your way on the ground from here to there, don’t forget that your pathetic little excuse for a territory can easily be flattened by the mere whim of the Six Kings.”

Haruyuki ground his teeth at this humiliating jab.

Unfortunately, it was as the soldier Avatar had said. Currently, although Nega Nebulas controlled the entirety of Suginami, 70% of the opponents during territory battles every weekend were medium to small-scale legions: the «Leonids» would send about one to two teams; «Green Grande» from the south would occasionally fight guerilla warfare. Also, the challengers would be Level 4 to 5 on average; higher Levels above 7 had never appeared even once.

To the five-member Nega Nebulas, defending its territory was not an easy task. If the six big Legion armies concentrated their power onto them in one battle, they would be unable to win even half of a defensive fight, and the black flag would completely disappear from the map of Accel World.

In other words, the six --- no, excluding Niko, currently in armistice, the five King’s «bystander» stance had created the stage for Haruyuki and company to be able to continue defending Suginami.

Although he wanted to retort something to the female soldier Avatar, Haruyuki couldn’t think of anything and could only hang his head.

But just before he could stare at his feet, a cold voice came from his right and Haruyuki looked up again.

“Talking so confidently about something that you can’t do in the first place, «Aster Vine».”

It was Sky Raker. As Kuroyukihime’s vice officer, she displayed no fear at the soldier Avatar’s scare tactics and straightened her chest with resolve.

The whip-wielding Aster Vine’s eyes flashed sharply under her cap as she replied in a frozen voice:

“You dare claim... that we cannot do it? Has your head rusted to the point during your time in endless hiding where you can no longer correctly gauge fighting strength?”

“No, that would be you. Having not seen us for a while, you’ve developed cataracts that apparently obscure reality.”

Haruyuki could only stand stupidly and listen through the alternating currents of electricity in the atmosphere.

What did the «reality» that Sky Raker mentioned mean? He couldn’t make anything of it. If Nega Nebulas were to go up against the other five Legions excepting Red, there would be a despairing gap in number and Level, so what is Raker trying to say..?

This question was answered personally by Raker a moment later.

“--- Because if you think that it was the Kings’ kindness that allowed Nega Nebulas’s continued existence, then it’s either your slowness of mind or others’ distrust in you. If they could have

flattened us, they would have done it long ago. The reason that they cannot is... Although they are «Kings» they know that they don't possess the ability to absolutely dominate.”

“... What did... you say?”

Aster Vine said through her teeth in extreme anger, but in contrast, the Purple King kept silent. It was impossible to guess what hid within the glow that shined through those eyes. In this demonic stage that chilled to the bone, Raker's calm voice fell incessantly on all ears.

“Are you listening? Although there are six great Legions, there are a grand total of 600 people, and on the other hand, there are over 1000 Burst Linkers living in the Tokyo city center, and if the territory map includes this Chiyoda district, about 40% is a gray neutral area.”

“... So what? Any legions outside of the Six Kings of Pure Color are all worthless excuses for organizations that are extinguished with one puff. Of course, that includes your lot's unmentionable little territory.”

“Yes, no matter which legion, they're all quite small... But including neutral Burst Linkers, 400 people will have common ground. That is, the quality of «not being part of the six great Legions».”

Following a brief pause, Sky Raker spoke again intensely as though she herself were one of the Level 9ers.

“Therefore, they consciously made the decision to go solo. Because they are annoyed by the stagnant Kings in Accel World bound about by the «Mutual Non-Aggression Treaty», they are now paying close attention to the movements of the reborn King Black Lotus and her Black Legion. Whether their «will to rebel» is real or false, they are watching closely now. If the Legions of the Six Kings all attack us together, what do you think will happen? Indeed, our flag will vanish from our territories for a while. But it's not as if the Black King will disappear from Accel World, the Legion itself will still exist. And then the small Legions will change from observation to action. If they unite together, can you still call them worthless excuses for organizations...?”

Now Haruyuki finally understood what Raker was trying to say.

In that crowd of more than 500 gathered at the tracks of the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race» last week, even when the traitor Black King appeared, there were no curses, but quite the opposite: she had received passionate support. From that, it was clear that they wanted evidence of the Black King «breaking the status quo».

If that power was concentrated into one force, even the Six Kings couldn't ignore them... No, it would be declared a threat.

Towards the now-silent Aster Vine, Sky Raker softly waved her right hand.

“Understand? The current Accel World is in a tense state far out of your imagination, and within this seemingly stagnant situation there are several great waves moving around.”

In this quiet stage, her clear voice traveled around and disappeared.

What broke the silence, **clack**, were the sound of high heels quickly walking back to the Purple King.

Seemingly treating Raker's explanation as useless drivel, she walked away from Haruyuki and company.

Aster Vine threw them a murderous look and walked along with the Purple King, as the remaining seven followed them.

Out of the seven columns in a semicircle, the Purple King selected the one between the Blue and Yellow King and sat down.

The eight Burst Linkers behind her arranged themselves in a V-formation; the dignity and pressure exuding from them clarified that they were the largest Legion assembly present.

--- It's really lucky that «Aurora Oval»'s territory, Ginza and other districts, are far away from Suginami, Haruyuki couldn't help but think as he hurriedly straightened his back; if the two beside him detected a sliver of weakness, he didn't even know what would happen to him afterwards. Just to get it over with, Haruyuki whispered.

"Now... That's six people. There's another one, it's..."

Currently gathered were the strength of the Black, Blue, Red, Green, Yellow, and Purple. In other words, there was another one, the---

Before Haruyuki could say it, Kuroyukihime spoke in a low voice.

"No, not coming."

"Eh...?"

"The last person won't appear in this stage. A representative is going to be sent."

How do you know? Haruyuki wanted to ask.

Then, he noticed something strange in the corner of his vision. Haruyuki shut his mouth and looked around jerkily in his line of sight.

But nothing had changed: the main ruins of the East Garden seemed to be permeated with fog as before. The columns in a circular formations had seven cut in half, and sat on their seats were the seven representatives of the great Legions that dominated Accel World---

"Eh?"

In the instant that he noticed, Haruyuki felt a shiver run through his entire body.

The seventh column that had been transformed into a seat should be empty, since there were Six Kings present. But it had been occupied, right in front of Haruyuki's eyes. No, it was impossible. Even if Haruyuki had been briefly nervous and missed it, it wouldn't be possible for Raker and Kuroyukihime to miss it as well.

This was because the seat that was supposed to be empty was directly across from the three people of the Black Legion, not beside it, so if someone came in and sat down on the column in front of them, they would definitely be seen. But now, a Burst Linker had come at an indeterminate time and sat down on the column just 10 meters away from them.

A seemingly extremely frail and thin body was covered by a very simplified yet secure armor, without carrying anything that looked like a weapon. Its only characteristic was its long, thin

and sharp head. Zigzag lines carved onto the front were mixed with branching lines, rendering it impossible to determine where the mouth or eyes were. It sat straight-backed with its arms and legs together on the edge of the column, unlike an Avatar and more like a decoration. Its entire body was a bright yet mild ivory color, like pottery.

It was unbelievably difficult to detect its presence. There was no sign of the intimidation that the other Kings let out. *No, that's actually a decoration, right? That can't be it, did I miss that statue earlier...?*

Just as Haruyuki was absentmindedly deliberating.

With its hands on its knees, the ivory Avatar bent over and bowed. After rising back up, it said in what could only be a completely featureless male voice:

“I, your humble servant, am «Ivory Tower» of the Legion «Oscillatory Universe», and I have the fortune of attending this conference as a full-authority representative of the White King. Please take care of me.”

It was an intensely businesslike greeting, as though their location had changed from a Duel Stage in Accel World into an enterprise meeting room.

Hearing this, the other Kings and their officers appeared to be clearly holding back their discomfort. They probably didn't notice Ivory Tower's appearance either. Especially the Yellow King beside them, who was stomping his foot non-stop in frustration.

But this uncomfortable atmosphere only remained for a few seconds.

The Blue King in the middle seat stood up, his armor clanking sharply.

“All right, everyone has arrived. First, I would like to express my gratitude that all seven Legions are attending. Thank you all for your troubles.”

“Compared to the Seven Kings Conference last year, we've got two different people.”

Of course it would be Yellow Radio who would say something unnecessary like that. It was sarcasm directed towards the second generation Red King and the White King representative, but everyone ignored him. The Blue King smiled bitterly and continued.

“We don't have much time, so let's get right to the point. ---Because everyone already knows about it, I'll keep it simple: during the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race» last week, there was an incident that involved revealing the existence of the «Incarnate System» in front of hundreds of people. The first topic today is how we should resolve this situation. Even if I say that, I can only think of one or two plans. Either we keep the Incarnate System a complete secret as we have done before, or give it up and tell all Burst Linkers.”

“How the hell are we supposed to reveal that?”

Like he was reprimanding an idiot, Yellow Radio piped up. He threw out his thin hands and his shoulders shrugged exaggeratedly.

“The Incarnate System's like nuclear power, eh? If we don't control it securely it will bring catastrophic damage to Accel World. Haven't we agreed on this?”

His horned jester hat was skewed slightly. To his left, the Purple King immediately disagreed.

“We are in this situation *because* that control has been broken, Radio. If we are using nuclear power as an analogy, then currently the raw nuclear material has been distributed around the entire world. How are we supposed to take it back in these circumstances?”

“Even so, it’s not like we’re actually teaching them how to make the missiles, are we? The majority of Burst Linkers don’t even know what the Incarnate System is! Wouldn’t it be easier just to say that it was all part of the show and be done with it?”

Before the Purple King could counter the Yellow King again, another voice rose.

“Excuse me, may I speak?”

On the left side of the semicircle, Ivory Tower, representative of the White King, politely raised his hand. After everyone turned their eyes towards him, he lowered his hand and continued:

“Instead of discussing counter-plans, should we not be discussing *why* this happened? About the Burst Linker who released the «Space Corrosion» Incarnation and sucked the audience in. Who and where he is from, and what was his motive?”

Silence fell on the entire stage.

The name and allegiance of the Burst Linker who created this problem. Haruyuki knew.

But should he say it here? If he mentioned the name of that secret organization, he would have to mention the «Vice President» Burst Linker of that organization, but that guy’s color was the same as Haruyuki’s beloved master --- «Pure Black». If they realize this, the other Kings would definitely suspect some kind of connection between them...

“«Rust Jigsaw» of the «Acceleration Research Society» is the name of the Burst Linker who carried out the Incarnate attack during the event.”

“.....?!”

In the instant that the refined voice sounded in the stage, Haruyuki held his breath.

It was Kuroyukihime. The Black King Black Lotus spoke steadily without fearing others’ suspicion of herself.

“The complete nature of the organization is unclear; it is not a Legion and calls itself an «Organization». Other confirmed members are «Dusk Taker», who has already left Accel World, and another person...”

“Wait a moment, Lotus.”

Just before that name was revealed, a piercing voice interjected.

It was the Red King, Scarlet Rain, who sat to Haruyuki’s right. With her arms crossed in front of her chest, she projected a frightening aura completely disproportionate to her small body.

Niko’s come to help us, Haruyuki thought, relaxing his rigid shoulders.

She shot them a glance filled with a heated air. Haruyuki held his breath again.

“...Before that, let’s solve another discussion point. I certainly don’t want to stay here any longer. We already have someone here who doesn’t deserve to talk about the dangers of the Incarnate

System. It's the «Cursed Power» that wasn't completely destroyed, that guy over there, who's hiding the ultimate negative Incarnation.”

Chapter 3

“Hey, everyone, return to your seats already. Long homeroom's starting.”

After their homeroom teacher clapped his hands, a group of students began to complain.

“Well, the bell hasn't rung yet. There's still time.”

“Then the people who haven't sat down by the time it rings get extra homework! Hey, it's going to ring, going to ring, three, two, one...”

Haruyuki heard the ringing echo of the sixth period bell and the sounds of students' frantic clattering as they hurried to sit while he sat with his face on his hand.

Outside the window, the usual drizzle painted the streets grey. It was predicted that the rainy season would clear up in two weeks, but since final exams were coming soon, he was not looking forward to it.

Of course, after surviving the exams, summer vacation would come, but he didn't have the discipline to look forward to a longer period of relaxation. The attacks that would come during the coming week's classes (especially physical education) and homework (especially during essays), made him sigh just thinking about them.

Well, even if he took his time and put off his homework, he could rely on the strong-arm tactic of spending one Burst Point right before his homework was due. Haruyuki's ability to speed through his homework during the last 30 minutes of «Acceleration» made even Takumu, who had excellent grades, amazed with remarks such as, ‘Why isn't that level of concentration displayed normally?’

However, the daily classes from morning till evening were something that he could not use acceleration to concentrate and process. On the other hand, when he was running out of breath on the track during P.E., he felt as if a ‘deceleration’ function was being used. No, that might actually be the case. The operating principle of Brain Burst was to increase the user's heartbeat to accelerate the brain's thinking speed, therefore causing one to perceive that time was passing more slowly. That meant if he could train his heart not to beat so fast even while running, would P.E. class feel shorter than it did now? Next time he should download a FullDive Chinese martial arts training app and try training inner chakra, he thought.

While he was staring out the window without seeing anything and repeatedly thinking such absurd thoughts, the homeroom teacher's voice passed through Haruyuki's ears.

“...It's been two months since the class became like this. This is about the time when your minds begin slacking off. This chart here shows the amount of tardy incidents and lost items....”

Usually, the ending of homeroom was an important time for polishing after-school «Dueling» plans. Which area to go to, what tactic to try out, who to fight, or whose battle gallery to join. For Haruyuki who loved simulations, even not at the level of actual Duels, it was still very enjoyable

for him. Normally, homeroom would have ended by the time he realized it, but today was moving forward quite slowly.

The reason for that was clear.

Right now, Haruyuki was forced into a situation in which he didn't have the luxury to plan Duels. In a certain sense, it could be said to be tenser than two months ago, when his «Flight Ability» was stolen.

That was ——— the question of whether or not he could remain a Burst Linker.

Yesterday, Sunday, after the end of the «Seven Kings Conference», Haruyuki rode home in Fuuko's car.

He somehow managed to smile at Kuroyukihime and Fuuko's encouragement, but as he stumbled on the Seventh Ring road heading home, he looked down and counted the pavement tiles.

He entered the elevator with head still bowed, and took the ride to the 23rd floor. He walked in the silent hallway, and when the door to his home appeared in his view, he went to touch the unlock button —

Right before that, Haruyuki noticed a small shadow crouching by the door's edge, and stopped cold.

A flashy logo T-shirt and tight cut jeans. Feet clad in faded sneakers. Even with that rough appearance, he could immediately tell that was not a guy. Red hair that was tied on either side and seem to burn, and freshly shone even under the dim lighting.

“...Ni-Niko?”

After a dumbfounded Haruyuki said her name, the small girl looked up slowly, and grinned fearlessly, but tiredly.

“...You're so late. We should have both left Chiyoda Ward at the same time, but you still made me wait ten minutes.”

“S-sorry.”

After he apologized involuntarily, the girl's sharp shoulders shrugged lightly.

“Well, I rode on Pard's bike, so of course that's faster.”

“Th.. that's not possible to beat. Ah, anyway...”

Blinking fiercely, Haruyuki asked.

“Why... here?”

Hearing that, Niko looked around momentarily, then snorted.

“Long story. Are you planning on listening to the whole thing in this hallway?”

“O-oh, sorry.”

Haruyuki hurriedly touched the unlock button. He opened the door to his usually-empty home, said welcome to her, then Niko breathed out a small long breath, and stood up with hands on knees.

After leading the sudden visitor to the living room, Haruyuki belatedly tilted his head as he returned from the kitchen holding two glasses of orange juice.

Sitting on the sofa, the younger girl looking at cloudy weather outside the window, no matter how many times he looked, was Niko, Kouzuki Yuniko — that is, the Red King controlling legion «Prominence», «Scarlet Rain» herself.

Why, though? Not only did they exchange anonymous email addresses, they had also exchanged phone numbers, so there were many ways to contact each other. And then more than anything, holding her knees and waiting next to the door of someone she wanted to meet with to come home was an act contrary to Niko's image. While he was placing one glass of juice onto the glass table, Haruyuki stole another look at the small profile.

Within Niko's lightly freckled face, her normal shining vigor could not be seen. On the other hand, it even had a somewhat worried look. It was very hard to think that this was the same person as the Red King who had proclaimed flaming words at the conference. Inside Haruyuki's brain, the sharp sound awoke.

— *We already have someone here who doesn't deserve to talk about the dangers of the Incarnate System.*

As he remembered the fierce heat of the accusation, akin to roaring flames, Niko whispered in front of him as if she were reading Haruyuki's mind.

"...Sorry about that, the way I said that."

"What... N-no, it's okay."

Raising his waist that had sunk the sofa, Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head.

"A-At first I was surprised, but Senpai and Raker-san explained that why you went after me there... No, you brought up the «Disaster Armor» that lives in my Duel Avatar like a parasite, so that other Kings, especially the Yellow King, wouldn't take the lead on that topic."

Niko blinked twice, then her large hazel eyes that looked green in the low light squinted as she smiled wryly.

"Damn, I was seen through, huh. Geesh, what an uncool bunch..."

She sank into the sofa, crossed her surprisingly slender legs and slippered feet.

Relaxing a little, Haruyuki tilted his head slightly and asked.

"Huh, has Niko met Raker-san before?"

"No, that was the first time we met. I'd heard a lot of stories about her from Pard though."

"St-stories... you said? What kind...?"

Hearing that, Niko smiled knowingly and responded with her own question.

“Do you know why Raker is nicknamed «ICBM»?”

“Err... her wheelchair is like a missile, right...?”

“That’s right, but it’s not all. Actually, it originated from a battle tactic that the old Nega Nebulas used to use in large scale territory battles occasionally. They deliberately let the enemy team push the front line forward, and after their force was split, then either Raker by herself, or carrying a support type - as a buffer - would boost jump to the enemy’s rear. As the rear usually only has paper-thin armor, long range attack types, that was equal to a strategic missile in large damage.”

“...I-I see.”

Even though it was a story about his ally, Haruyuki nodded in a cold sweat. Niko’s expression softened, and she continued speaking as if remembering her own things.

“...As you know, Pard’s a speed demon. She’s usually the first to return to the rear after eating that missile tactic head on, so she fought hard against Raker many times. Geesh, even though we’re in a ceasefire, with Raker being the enemy Legion’s main attacker, Pard’s so happy that Raker returned to the front line... Crow, d’you know why Pard is still Level 6 even though she’s a very senior Linker?”

Niko stopped talking there, so Haruyuki moved on from that. That question was something that he had thought about often before.

“Le-Level 6 because...?”

“...I’m not telling. Ask her yourself later.”

She grinned, said “Thanks for the drink”, and took the glass from the table.

She seemed to be very thirsty, and the girl that was drinking juice in big gulps no longer appeared to have that strange tiredness. Was it his imagination? While thinking that, Haruyuki said in return.

“Even if I ask, I feel like she won’t tell me... Well, that, let’s set that aside... Then, Niko, you came here just to apologize for that thing at the conference?”

“What’s with that troubled way that you’re saying it?”

After being glared at over the glass, Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head.

“N-no, I’m not troubled at all! It was a bit unexpected from someone like you, ah, no, that’s not what I meant, it’s just that, I always thought that I should be the one who need to apologize...”

Unable to stop once he began to speak, and as he tried to properly convey what he felt, his speech became increasingly awkward.

“Si-since that «Armor» that should have been destroyed after so much hard work in Ikebukuro has survived due to my careless mistake, and the previous host «Cherry Rook» suffering Niko’s «Judgement», yet I’m still a Burst Linker...”

Niko listened with unexpected seriousness to Haruyuki’s mostly pointless speech.

However, eventually she lightly shook her head to interrupt his words. Putting down the glass, then again crossing her legs and sinking deep into the sofa, the young King whispered.

“No... I’m not really holding a grudge on you for that. The reason that I used Judgement on Cherry was not that he was the owner of that «Armor». It was because Cherry gave himself up to the Armor’s control and attacked many Burst Linkers - no, he ate them. On the other hand, if Cherry had conquered and controlled that Armor with his own power, then I would have protected him. No matter what the other Kings had said... see...”

Niko’s voice stopped suddenly. Haruyuki blinked, and gazed at her lowered white face.

Her large, deep green eyes had that dark shadow from the outside hallway. This time, Haruyuki realized what was hidden behind that expression.

Fear. Fear mixed with anger at herself for being afraid, and slightly, giving up. This must be the expression on his face when he had been hugging his knees, powerless where he was.

“Ni... Niko...”

After her name was called in a strangled sound, the little girl momentarily looked up, smiled weakly and lowered her head again.

“... If I had chosen to protect Cherry, I would have had the power to do so. In the past half year, I always believed that. But...”

Her two arms that poked out of her shirt sleeves suddenly hugged her body. Despite the humid June heat, she seemed to be assailed by a fierce cold.

“...Crow. During that conference, didn’t you feel it?”

“Wha, what...?”

After Haruyuki fearfully asked in return, Niko — the second generation Red King, «Immobile Fortress», Scarlet Rain, moaned in a cracked voice.

“There were true monsters among that group of «Kings». The pressure of that information... That was unbelievable... — I really did want to protect you. Since... I owe you for helping me save Cherry... During today’s conference, we managed to reach a compromise somehow. But... if those guys had been serious about enforcing punishment, then I...”

There she closed her mouth and hugged her knees closer on the sofa, while Haruyuki was at a loss for words.

It was very hard to believe, or more like he could not understand. That Niko would call other Burst Linkers monsters, and would show such a fearful expression.

To Haruyuki, the Red King Scarlet Rain was an existence on an entire different level from his own. If they dueled under the same conditions, he truly believed that he would lose 100 times out of 100 fights. When her full armament was fully deployed, her super Dreadnaught-like long range artillery was without doubt one of the most dangerous offensive weapons in Accel World. To illustrate, one blast from her main cannon was enough to blow away half of the Shinjuku government building.

No, even as the small-built avatar equipped with just one gun, Niko possessed hidden, unfathomable strength. During the Seven Kings conference, Haruyuki should have felt huge pressure from her that was no different from other Kings.

After shaking his head, Haruyuki responded hoarsely.

“No, no way... — Sure, for me, everyone at that place was up in the sky, but I don’t think they were so strong that Niko should just dismiss it like that. S-since Niko is Level 9, just like those people, right? «Same level, same potential» is one of Accel World’s major principles, right...?”

Hearing that, the redheaded little girl glanced at Haruyuki from above her small knees, then smiled dryly and shook her head slowly.

“...There are exceptions to any principle. Listen, Level 9 is actually Brain Burst’s level ceiling, since no matter how many points you earn from there, you will not Level up. The path to Level 10 is to defeat five other Level 9 Burst Linkers... which means five other people losing all of their Burst Points. To put it another way...”

Lowering her eyes again, Niko whispered in a clandestine manner.

“...After becoming Level 9, no matter how much time one were to spend in Accel World to gain experience, no one else would know about it. In that respect I don’t think I’ll lose to the other Kings. Thinking of gaining enough power to prevent something lost in the real world from being taken again in Accel World. But... I was too naive. Those guys... the «Originators», have all overcome long ago the scars I’m still clinging to. That... if they aren’t monsters, I don’t know what they are...”

“...O-Origi...?”

Dumbfounded, Haruyuki repeated the unfamiliar word. But Niko said nothing and buried her face into her knees.

Silence fell upon the living room, interrupted only by the soft drone of the A/C. Outside, the cloudy sky was slowly thickening to the color of lead, and on the ground, EV cars running on Seven Ring gradually switched on their headlights.

For Niko, who went to a boarding elementary school, it should be about time for her curfew, but her curled up body did not seem to want to move. Even her side-knotted hair was hanging loosely, as though it had lost its usual vigor.

— *Right now, I should be saying something.* Haruyuki desperately searched for words.

Thinking about that, it did not seem likely that Niko would personally come to Suginami just to apologize for what she said at the conference. Maybe right now, only members in the Red Legion... maybe even only the closest to her, Pard-san, had seen her current expression before, beneath her bangs.

“...”

He could not think of anything appropriate to say, but he should still say something, so Haruyuki took a deep breath.

But faster than that, Niko’s head snapped up. She was grinning unbelievably radiantly. Her lips moved, and spoke with a tone completely different from before.

“Sorry for suddenly saying strange things, Onii-chan.”

“...Uh, n-no, that.”

At this point he could only roll his eyes. Niko’s shady «Angel Mode» was something that she used to make fun of, or confuse him. Even knowing that trick, Haruyuki, who had been an only child since birth, became uncontrollably flustered when he was called ‘Onii-chan’ with a smile.

“Forget everything we talked about! Ah, I should be heading home now! Thanks for the juice!”

While continually shooting off various sentences that should end with star effects in a cute voice, Niko jumped off the sofa. Just like that, she jogged out of the living room.

At that point Haruyuki was also able to push away the distraction and stand up, then called at her back.

“Wa-wait a minute, Niko. Something... something else, wasn’t there more you wanted to talk about...?”

Hearing that, the slender little girl stopped right before the door. She hesitated for a second, then spun around. The words that followed after another smile were something that Haruyuki did not expect.

“Hey, Haruyuki onii-chan. If either of us... or maybe both of us were to lose Brain Burst, we’d forget everything about each other, right?”

“Wha...”

— «Complete erasure of related memories». Haruyuki found out just two months ago, that was the last rule applied to people who lost Brain Burst. Even Kuroyukihime, who at the time had heard only rumors, and Niko, seemed to have learned this truth somehow.

After peeking at Haruyuki who swallowed, Niko suddenly thrust out her right hand, extending a surprisingly small pinkie.

“That’s why, let’s make a promise. If we see an unknown name in the Neuro Linker address book, send out one email before erasing that data. Then, maybe, once more...”



“...rita. Arita! Hey, are you listening?”

The thick voice calling his family name pulled Haruyuki back from memories of a day ago.

He desperately tried to swallow the pain that was welling up in his chest. After breathing deeply, he somehow managed to switch gears in his brain.

“Y-Yes!”

While hurriedly answering, he stood up half by reflex and his legs banged into the reinforced plastic desk and chair, making a clattering noise. At that point, he finally realized that this was not his home living room, but the Year 2-C group classroom.

As he looked around fearfully, he saw that his homeroom teacher Sugeno was looking smugly at him from over the podium, and the surrounding students were snickering at his overreaction.

The sounds of their laughter, compared to the echo of mockery in his first year — even though there were some elements of it — were not that kind of laughter. This class's Haruyuki, even though he at the bottom of the totem pole, had somehow managed to obtain a position of «the harmless round guy». Of course, he was not unsatisfied with that position. On the other hand it could be described as ideal.

That's why easy mistakes like this one that got him useless attention were situations that he tried to avoid with all his might. The fact that the class' hidden delinquents might use this as an excuse to bully him for some light stress relief was something that he did not want to think about.

That was why Haruyuki made a shy smile suitable for someone who was flattered and began to sit down.

However, somehow from the surrounding, he felt something was expected of him, and that made him stop. All the expressions from students, seemed to be 'Come on, come on?' kind of waiting for Haruyuki to say something.

— *Wh-what is this atmosphere? What should I be doing here? Did I forget something? Did I start an ultra-high difficulty mission like trying to make people laugh by telling a joke?*

As he was thinking at high speed in his brain, and was going to leak buckets of cold sweat —.

“Oh, Arita. Since you stood up, is it okay to infer that you are considering becoming a candidate?”

That was an unthinkable remark from Sugeno.

— *A candidate? For what?*

Since he had missed all of the homeroom teacher's speech until now, he had utterly no idea what was going on. This unexpected development made him freeze, so he focused on whatever was behind the teacher. But there was nothing written on the virtual blackboard.

— *Don't panic, think. The role you are invited to during long homeroom should be... that's right, the duty of reading a school announcement. It should be that 99 percent of the time.*

At the moment that Haruyuki thought of that, his view returned to his virtual desktop. Then he saw that there was a document file in the newly received area.

Reading with his real voice, was something he was not good at. However, in Japanese and English classes it occasionally happened, and it was a lot better than saying what he thought up. In this situation, instead of saying 'That's not it' and sitting down to a chilly atmosphere, it would be a more peaceful choice to accept and do a goofy reading.

Haruyuki who had the above train of thought and finished deciding his action, raised his head to meet Sugeno in the eyes, and replied “Y-yes, I will do it!” in a clear voice.

Then — suddenly, sounds of ‘OHH!’ filled the class, and thunderous applause followed.

“...Yes?”

Wh-what was this response? Why were they clapping like this just for a reading candidate?

In front of Haruyuki who froze up again, Sugeno nodded, hummed approvingly, and said.

“Sensei has always believed that Arita is someone who is willing to do something when he needs to! Classes A and B will probably be drawing straws, but this member from class C volunteering makes me truly happy!”

Suddenly having a very bad premonition, Haruyuki finally clicked the newly received file.

The document that opened up with a faint sound effect was —.

[Announcement from the new Caretaker Committee: One person is to be selected from each of the three second year classes for Caretaker Committee duties.] In bold font.

“...Ca-caretaker!?”

Haruyuki’s moan was easily drowned out by the class’ applause.

— *Caretaker... Meaning the duty to take care of animals?*

As he looked around the classroom while thinking about what took him a moment to realize, he glimpsed Chiyuri who was shaking her head in amazement, and Takumu who had a ‘good grief’ smile.

“...Hey Haru, I knew that you always space out...”

After school, during the short time before club activities.

His childhood friend, Kurashima Chiyuri said to him with a clammy look, coming in the front of the desk that Haruyuki lay limply on.

“If you didn’t know the situation, you should have at least opened the file that was sent out to us! Why did you charge ahead making mad predictions?!”

“There, there, Chi-chan. It’s not the first time that Haru thought he was in an FPS.”

That was from Mayuzumi Takumu, who stood beside Chiyuri. Haru did not think that helped, but he couldn’t muster a retort with his body slowly sliding from the chair, he moaned weakly:

“It’s okay already. I’ll do it, whatever the job is.”

“...If it was forced on you, then I would also have said something. But volunteering yourself like that, there was nothing I could do.”

Chiyuri sighed, then suddenly changed her expression. Seriousness reflected on her catlike eyes, and her head drew close, light reflecting off her large hairpin.

“But do you actually have extra time for committee activities? Since Haru has one week to...”

Takumu, also bent over, finished her sentence in a whisper:

“...«Purify» that parasite, no matter what.”

— *That’s right.*

This week, Monday, June 17, through Sunday the 23rd, was Haruyuki — Silver Crow’s «Probation Period».

Two things were decided at the [Seven Kings Conference] that was held yesterday.

First, the policy on the mysterious Acceleration Research Society was to «continue collecting information». That was something that Haruyuki resented as being too lukewarm, but since that organization was so unknown that they couldn’t attack even if they wanted to, there was nothing they could do.

And then, to complement that lukewarm decision was a strict verdict set down for Silver Crow, who had transformed into Chrome Disaster earlier.

If, in seven days, including today, the parasite that was the Disaster Armor, Chrome Disaster, could not be completely removed, then Haruyuki’s head would have a very high bounty set upon it by Five Kings. Furthermore, the large amount of Burst Points earned as a reward would be split according to the number of wins against Silver Crow.

If that happened, waves of high-level Burst Linkers would attack him the moment he took one step out of Suginami area, and Haruyuki’s points would dry up in no time. Since there would be a just cause of «Destroying the Armor», there would be no need to hesitate before sending a large group after one person.

Of course, he could do the same thing as Kuroyukihime, who had a similar price on her head. He could stay in hiding in Suginami, where he could refuse Duels even if he were to connect to the Global Net, but doing that would mean he could no longer hunt for Points. No longer being able to level up was about the same as a Burst Linker slowly dying.

In truth, the «Kings’ kill order» was essentially a death sentence. The reason that Kuroyukihime was able to remain alive for two years was, of course, due to her iron-like willpower to disconnect from even the GlobalNet, but the fact that she «already reached Level 9» was also important. For Haruyuki, the latter was impossible, and the first might also be missing.

“...One week, huh...”

Muttering, Haruyuki looked down at his hands on the desk.

Even without concentrating, he could see shining white silver armor over his arms. Silver Crow was someone that he could change to at any time; another self. It seemed surreal to think that he could no longer transform — no longer a Burst Linker.

No, am I feeling like this because this is the real world? For me, is “real” already limited to that world...? If that’s the case, if I lose Brain Burst, where else can I go...?

At the moment he thought of those things, a chill ran down Haruyuki’s back. The crystal clear voice of a little girl rang in his ears.

— Let's make a promise. If we see an unknown name in the Neuro Linker address book, send out one email before erasing that data...

Haruyuki did not know how serious Niko was, given that she was in her Angel Mode. After that, Niko crossed her pinkie with Haruyuki's, then ran back home.

There was no way he would forget. Even if his memories of the Accel World were erased, he would absolutely not forget people in the real world with whom he had bonded. With that assertion, his chest ached with sharp uneasiness. If he lost his sense of reality in the real world... if his memories that were tagged with «Reality» disappeared without him noticing...

He clenched his fists and hung his head even lower, but a small hand appeared in his view and covered Haruyuki's own.

“It's okay, Haru.”

When he raised his head at the gentle voice, Chiyuri's usual smile was there.

“That's right. Everything's going to be all right soon.”

Takumu said firmly, standing on Haruyuki's other side; he extended the hand holding his shinai⁸ and bumped Haruyuki's right fist. His two childhood friends exchanged looks, nodded, and turned to Haruyuki.

“Also, Haru. We've decided together. Even if one more week passes and Haru is held by the reward, Takkun and I will give our points to Haru so we can level up at the same pace. That's why you don't need to worry about anything, Haru.”

Haruyuki stared at Chiyuri. Then he jumped from his chair and shook his head fiercely.

Lowering his voice, Haruyuki half-shouted:

“N... no! If you do that, then they'll come after you two as well! Those guys are waiting for an excuse to come after all of us!”

“Hey, hey, Haru, I have more experience as a Burst Linker than you. I know many secret ways to shuffle stuff around.”

Snickering as he touched the bridge of his glasses, Takumu looked to the lower right of his vision, then stood up as if to stop Haruyuki's retort.

“Oops, I should be heading to my club activities. Haru, if your caretaker activity takes too long, give me a shout, and I will help with what I can. Anyway, this week, we will put master's formulated «Purification Plan» as our top priority.”

“...Ah, sorry, Taku.”

Haruyuki swallowed his words and nodded.

The Disaster Armor purification plan. After the Seven Kings Conference decided how to deal with Silver Crow, Kuroyukihime, still bitter, had come up with a plan to erase the problem of

⁸ A shinai is a wooden practice sword used for kendo.

Chrome Disaster. It seemed to consist of three steps, but they were not fully explained to Haruyuki and the others. While he raising his head, he spoke, half talking to himself.

“I don’t know the details, but... anyway, right now we can only do our best...”

“Yes, I will also give my full cooperation. Bye, see you later.”

Takumu bumped his fist on Haruyuki’s right elbow, then turned around and jogged to the kendo arena. While seeing him off, Chiyuri also quickly whispered.

“I also have to go to club activities, but don’t be afraid to tell me if anything happens. We are... let’s see... friends, or is it... comrades, not that... let’s see...”

— Family. Isn’t that right?

Haruyuki’s voice from his heart stopped Chiyuri’s words as if she heard it spoken aloud, but then she grinned. Just like that, she clenched her fist and left the classroom.

Alone, Haruyuki whispered to himself, as he slung his bag over his shoulders.

Real or virtual, it’s not that simple of a problem. Taku and I, Chiyuri and I, Senpai and Raker-san and I, and then Niko. Pard-san, and many other people, what we fostered together is always «here» — in my heart.

I will protect that. I don’t want to lose it. For Arita Haruyuki — and for Silver Crow.

Glancing at the time, Haruyuki noticed that there was only five minutes left until he was supposed to meet the other committee students.

As he ran down the stairs to the first floor, Haruyuki made a new decision.

This one week’s probation was important time that Kuroyukihime and Niko had desperately bargained for from the Yellow and Purple Kings, who insisted instead on immediate execution by Judgement. He would absolutely not waste it. He was going to an unexpected committee activity that he carelessly became a candidate for, but there should be some kind of hint even in that. Right now, all he could do was to try his best in everything.

“All right!”

With that small shout, when he went outside, he noticed that the rain seemed to have stopped.

Chapter 4

Umesato Private Middle School sits at the intersection of Oume Street and Itsukaichi Street, on the east side of Tokyo’s Suginami Ward.

It is small in that it only has three classes per year, but the campus is quite large. North of the 300-meter running track on the grounds is the three-story first school building which extends east and west, with the central section connected to the sports building on the north side. On the opposite side is the second school building, again extending to the east and west. Thus, the school forms the katakana ㄩ when viewed from above.

The student cafeteria and classrooms were all in the new first school building. On the other hand, the relatively old second school building contained staff rooms, the principal's office and the student counseling room on the first floor, with the second and third floor taken over by storage rooms and various specialized classrooms that were mostly unused at the moment. Thus, almost no students are ever found there. This was why Haruyuki used the second school building's third floor male toilet as a «Shelter» during his first year.

However, there was a place even less likely to have students, or perhaps most were simply unaware of its existence. On the north side of the second school building is a small but long space squeezed between concrete walls and the high fence wall.

Haruyuki, as the newest member of the caretaker committee, went through that damp gap in the northwest corner, to meet at the corner of corners of Umesato Middle School.

“...So our school has one of these, huh...”

While looking at **that building**, Haruyuki muttered.

It was way too small for a building. The floor was at most 4 meters in both length and width, and 2.5 meters tall. The left, right, and inside walls were built with natural wood planks even in this age, and the roof was probably slate thatched.

The front side was all formed by wire mesh with holes three centimeters in diameter. This was certainly a cage. Of course, it wasn't something for locking up students that needed punishment - it was a small rearing pen for taking care of animals.

However, no matter how close to the mesh he got and how much he narrowed his eyes, he couldn't see anything in the small pen. All that could be seen were thick piles of fallen leaves that poked through gaps in the mesh. Without a doubt, a mountain of microorganisms lived under that, but the students couldn't be expected to be taking care of those.

“There's a caretaker and an animal pen, but we're missing the crucial animals...”

Tilting his head, he muttered to himself yet again. Even if the animals were to be moved in later, he could not understand why they were gone now.

As he thought this, he heard multiple sets of feet crunching on gravel behind him. When he turned around in surprise, he saw two students closing in from direction of the front yard. It was one boy and one girl. Their neckties and ribbons were the same blue color as Haruyuki's, but as he didn't recognize their faces, they were probably from a different class. This meant that they were the same as Haruyuki, newly appointed caretakers and his new colleagues.

Haruyuki took a step forward to greet them, but the male student shouted loudly before Haruyuki could say anything.

“Eww, the heck? This is sooo dirty! Leaves are, like, piled up every-freaking-where!”

Agreeing with him, the girl voiced her opinions.

“Laaaame. What's the point of cleaning **this**? Real lame.”

From the way they were speaking, these two people must have been selected by lottery instead of candidacy. Even saying so, Haruyuki wasn't that much different, since he stood up for it on mistaken momentum.

No matter how it came about, since he got here, he would have to carry out committee activities with these two people on friendly terms. Taking a big, but still weak breath, Haruyuki called out.

“Ah... we should appoint positions, at least.”

Reading the document file sent to him after he became a member, he found out that there were two activities for today. First, they were to select a president, and second, they were to clean the rearing pen. Until both of those were finished and the committee members signed the diary and sent it to the school system server, they were not allowed to return home.

Just by looking at that disaster of a pen, Haruyuki could tell cleaning would be very troublesome, so he would like to at least finish appointing positions quickly. Haruyuki waited a few moments, hoping one of them would say ‘I’ll do it’. Committee activities added points to their academic performance, and can influence admission to high school, so there were students who would actively like to have a history of being president of a committee or club.

— However, at this point no one volunteered, so he understood that no one was going after those few points. After confirming that by waiting yet another five seconds during which they remained silent, Haruyuki spoke up, smiling weakly.

“...Then, do you guys mind if I become the president?”

While Haruyuki was annoyed at himself for not saying that in a more confident tone, he waited for a response. The dark-skinned boy and the ringlet-haired girl quickly relaxed and nodded simultaneously.

“Sure.” “Fine by me.”

The three of them ran their fingers on their virtual desktop at the same time, opening the New Committee Activities tab, and in the Positions column they selected Haruyuki's name, then touched the confirmation button. With this, Haruyuki would be recorded in the local school network as the caretaker committee's president.

He also checked the remaining two people's names, and learned the boy was called Hamajima, and the girl Izeki. Since it was a committee of only three people, there was no need for a vice president and below.

— *If so, I should have signed up to help with the library at the start of the school term.*

With that earnest thought, he waved his right hand to dismiss the window. Anyway, that was one job done. However the problem was the other job, cleaning the rearing pen.

With another look at the pen, even though the walls were dirty, he thought that the leaves piled up on the floor would actually be more troublesome. With certain places that were over five centimeters deep, they were unable to accomplish anything without proper tools. According to

the document, they were allowed to use tools from the storage room in the central courtyard where cleaning equipment was kept.

“Then, I’ll go get a broom and dustpan... Be right back.”

After mumbling that, he jogged towards the central courtyard sandwiched on the opposite side of the second school building. Compared to when he was a first year going to buy bread, and from behind him came ‘You need to run, run!’, the absence of that voice was somewhat better, which, along with other things, occupied Haruyuki’s mind.

When they actually tried it, the rearing pen cleaning job was far more troublesome than they thought.

If the pile of leaves was dry, they could probably quickly sweep it out with brooms, but this was the rainy season even if there was no rain right now. Furthermore, it seemed to have piled up over many years, with bottom part mostly becoming muck that stuck to the floor. Old bamboo brooms — as expected the materials were not natural, but hard plastic fibers similar to bamboo — could only scrape the surface, and were not able to scrub away that which stuck to the floor.

Still, after about twenty minutes of wrestling with it, the girl called Izeki finally complained.

“Ahhhh — enough —, my hands and back really hurt—!”

“Hahaha, just like an old lady.”

When the boy called Hamajima piped up, he was glared at imposingly. Haruyuki was also given a look that turned him into a statue.

“Ugh, you’re so annoying. Hey, are you only cleaning the same spot?”

When questioned by Izeki’s half angry tone, Hamajima let out an outburst.

“Shut up, dammit. Aren’t you just moving away the leaves that we piled up? Don’t make it easy just for yourself!”

“Huh? I just don’t get it. That’s mean, isn’t it?”

During his colleagues’ increasingly threatening conversation, Haruyuki could only sweat as he moved his broom with high speed. Before a real fight started, he should intervene and work it out, but far from being able to open his mouth, he couldn’t even raise his head.

— No. No matter what the process was, I became a candidate for caretaker, and volunteered to become president. I should say something awesome to calm them down. Isn’t that my responsibility?

“...H-Hey!”

With that decision driving his body, Haruyuki made a sound. With only one spark left to ignite both Izeki and Hamajima, they turned at the same time to glare at him instead.

“...H, hey...”

With a large breath of air, and steeling his lower stomach, Haruyuki forcefully said:

“... We won’t get this done before the time limit to leave school anyway... So, um, just sign the diary and you can go home now... I’ll stay here just for appearances’ sake...”

One minute later.

Leaving with their pure smiles and thanks, his colleagues escaped at high speed, leaving him alone in the small backyard; Haruyuki sighed deeply.

To be honest—

He would have preferred the other two members to be kind hearted animal-loving girls, which would lead to unbelievably heartwarming committee activities. But when he thought about it, if those kind of students existed, a caretaker committee would have been formed way earlier, and this situation would not have occurred. No, in the worst case, the two other members could have been the delinquents that had bullied him during his first year. If he thought about it that way, he was thankful for being so fortunate.

While comforting himself with those things, Haruyuki took another look at the rearing pen. Not even half of the pile of leaves had been removed. The clock on his view’s lower right said the time was 4:15 PM. Since the deadline to leave school was at 6:00 PM, it could be said that he had time left, but taking on the thick black layer of almost-dirt with only a bamboo broom would be futile. He really did want this pen to look pretty, but...

“...Well, this doesn’t really have to be finished in one day. There aren’t any animals anyway...”

Muttering, Haruyuki threw the broom to the ground. Afterward he could just kill time with random games until it was time to leave school, making it look like he worked hard but could not finish, and would continue tomorrow. With that thought, he was going to sit down on the steps at base of the outer fence, but before that.

— *She’s still here.*

That thought flashed, stopping Haruyuki.

Kuroyukihime shouldn’t have returned home yet. In the far away student council room, she must be completing tasks related to the school festival at the end of the month with undivided attention. No, Chiyuri and Takumu were also like that. Each of them, either on the ground or in the kendo arena, would be working hard.

“...So everyday, everyone does this kind of thing after school, huh...”

While leaking out a raspy sighing sound, he stared down at his dirty hands. Working hard here will not get him praise by anyone, or get him anything. Then why, for what reason would someone do after class activities?

Before, Kuroyukihime had said that she had student council activities so she could control the school local network as a Burst Linker, but he felt that was not all of it. That's right, for sure, Kuroyukihime, Takumu, and Chiyuri also, wanted to continually prove something to themselves. Yet, Haruyuki who had decided to take everything seriously just a few tens of minutes ago, was dangerously close to dropping it.

“...Geesh, what a guy I am...”

After blowing out a deep breath, Haruyuki bent over and picked up the bamboo broom from the ground.

With about five minutes' work, Haruyuki cleared whatever fallen leaves he could from the pen, then stopped to think for a bit.

In terms of efficiency, this was basically still slacking off. In order to deal with the muck layer before leaving school, better tools and method would be necessary. He thought that washing it with a large amount of water would be best, but the closest water supply was what looked like a tiny faucet set beside the pen used for animal drinking water only.

He twisted the faucet, and as expected, it produced only a slow dribble that would take forever to fill a single bucket. After thinking hard, he finally remembered that presidents of a committee were given higher privileges in the Local Net than normal students.

Haruyuki called out the school map on his virtual desktop, selected the water pipeline from the infrastructure information and displayed it as an overlay. There was only one very tiny blue line leading to the rearing pen, but there seemed to be a much bigger pipe with a valve buried underground nearby. When he touched that spot and looked around, an augmented-reality down arrow pointed to side of the school building three meters away.

“The water pipe's over there... so...”

Muttering, he reset the map, then selected a 5-meter long hose from the school supply list and brought up its position information. Doing that showed him that there was one located in a tools locker, in the male toilet on the first floor of the second school building in front of him. He clicked it, and applied for usage permission from the pop-up window. Normal students were not allowed to touch supplies outside of their access privileges, but one second later, he obtained an approval response from the system, which made Haruyuki speak aloud involuntarily.

“Ooh... it's great to be the committee president. All right, what else...”

He scrolled the supply list. He selected a large shovel, which was in the central courtyard storage, so there would be no problem with permission. Finally, he searched for a deck brush. He found it in the front courtyard storage for tile cleaning use and obtained permission.

“This should be all. Well, let's DO THAT AGAIN!”

If a certain someone had heard that, he would have angrily replied ‘Don't imitate me!’. Haruyuki first jogged out to the front courtyard.

Attacking fallen leaves on the floor of the rearing pen with high-pressure water from the hose connected to the supply valve attachment was unexpectedly fun, which made Haruyuki think, “*Red-type long range skills probably feel like this.*”

However, the strict school system did not give him permission to use an unlimited amount of water, so the “Allowed Amount” indicator slowly decreased on the edge of his view. With careful aim, he cut away the dried gunk little by little. Since he had to save some water for a final rinse, Haruyuki turned off the faucet when the water fell to 20%.

The floor of the rearing pen was now covered with wet old leaves, making Haruyuki think that the situation become even worse than before he began. He had one moment of regret, but with grim determination, he dropped the hose, picked up the shovel, and stepped into the animal pen.

Fortunately for him, since it was the rainy season, he was wearing high cut sneakers made with waterproof materials, so his feet were kept dry from the muddy water. Of course, he would have to wash them thoroughly once he got home, but he would worry about that later.

“Heave...ho!”

Shouting, he thrust the shovel into the muck, and the tip plunged through to the ground with almost no resistance. He scraped the floor and scooped up a great deal of black mud. Even with the weight making him stumble, he managed to carry it outside and flipped it onto the ground.

Although he had only uncovered a space that was twenty by forty centimeters, Haruyuki gazed at the original appearance of the floor.

An inexplicable feeling covered his body. This was different from when he completed difficult homework, or beat a boss that had killed him many times; he physically felt the heavy challenge. He frantically shook his head to stop himself being moved to tears. It was way too early to revel in success.

Gripping the shovel tightly, he scooped more mud and dropped it off again. And again. Another step, another shovelful.

Just that was enough to hurt his shoulders and back, but as if driven by something, Haruyuki continued his work. After shoveling out one mound, he felt a loss of strength, but over time he learned how to use his waist while he wielded the shovel, so he became more and more efficient.

While repeating his steady task, he felt a sharp prick in his memories. Had he done something like this, a long time ago? But ever since childhood, he almost never touched real dirt, and house cleaning was left to the housekeeping service hired by his mother that came once a week.

As he forgot his back pain and dug earnestly, recalling his memory, he finally realized after about five minutes.

It was not a real world memory. In the Accel World — even deeper than that, the «Unlimited Neutral Field».

Two months ago, he was pushed off the old Tokyo Tower when he met Sky Raker for the first time, and began his steady training so he could climb the 300-meter skyscraper with his bare hands. Imagining his hands as swords, he thrust them into the steel wall tens of thousands of times. That was when he tasted the power of the «Incarnate System» — Brain Burst’s hidden ultimate power.

“...?”

Suddenly —.

His thought, somehow, he felt momentarily close to something very important, which made Haruyuki wrinkle his eyebrows.

Even while moving the shovel around, he wanted to grab hold of that thought.

The Incarnate System. Using the great power of imagination to bend the rules of the Accel World and override reality.

That power was tremendous. A Incarnate master’s mind power could overcome the boundaries of the game rules, splitting the earth and cracking the skies. Of course, that was a supernatural power that should not exist in the real world.

— But.

But, the real base of that. A cause had a result, which was the basic principle. In that case...

Clang. The shovel banged into a wall, numbing Haruyuki’s hands.

“Ow...!”

He hurriedly blew on his hands, then raised his head up as the pain went away.

After some time, the old piles of leaves had mostly disappeared from the pen. In exchange, there was a small mountain that appeared on the other side of the metal mesh, which Haruyuki could barely believe he had made himself with just one shovel.

“...When I actually try, I can do it!”

With the previous thought blown away somewhere, Haruyuki stretched as he thought. His tense back creaked, but even pain was exhilarating to him. Lying down like that would feel nice, but to do that, he had to complete another task. There were still leaves and dirt that he had not scooped up yet.

Haruyuki emerged from the pen and changed his right-handed weapon from the shovel to the deck brush. Then he grabbed the hose with his left hand. All that remained was to use a bit of water while scrubbing with the brush, and everything would look much better. The time was past 5:00 already, but since it was close to the summer solstice, there was still plenty of light left. It was completely possible to finish working before he was forced to leave school at 6 o’clock.

As he returned to the animal pen in high spirits — Haruyuki realized something.

To turn the hose on or off, the valve at its base must be controlled. But going back and forth to that faucet would be very inefficient. That said, if he left the water running, he would soon use up his allowed amount.

“...Hmm...”

He racked his brains while looking back and forth between the pen and the hose base, but for once, he could not think of a smart way to solve this. *If you are going to monitor water usage, you should make it so that the valve can be opened and closed remotely!*

If so, he would have no choice but to go back and forth between the pen and the base even if it took more time... With that determination, Haruyuki stumbled towards the doorway. Going around the dirt mound, he took a few steps forward — just then.

In the center of his view, a yellow radio-wave icon blinked. Under it, words that read [AD HOC CONNECTION REQUEST] were displayed.

Ad-Hoc Connection was a function to connect wirelessly between multiple Neuro Linker users without going through a server. However, it was mostly unused inside the school. Its connection speed and security were worse than that of a Wired Connection, and more than anything, it was a useless function once one logged into the school local net.

Wondering who would make this kind of request, Haruyuki looked left and right, then finally turned around to look behind him.

For a moment, he could not comprehend what he saw.

Haruyuki saw a child. There was no problem with that. It was a girl. That was not too rare either.

However, it was a face that, for the first time, he saw on someone who was clearly not a student of this school, who couldn't even be a middle school student, and above everything else, was dressed in a pure white PE uniform from top to bottom — this was a situation in which it was no wonder that Haruyuki was unsure that his eyes were working properly.

He rapidly blinked and shook his head, but even so, the girl in front of his eyes did not disappear. Left with no choice, Haruyuki lifted his right hand that was holding the brush, and touched to confirm the Ad Hoc connection icon.

Instantly, the radio wave mark and line of words disappeared, and were replaced by a larger window with a blinking cursor. It was a chat window for text instead of voice messaging.

The little girl, who was clearly younger than Niko and looked to be less than ten years old, quickly lifted up both hands after she connected to Haruyuki's Neuro Linker. Ten very small and very thin fingers slowly extended and stopped in space. Haruyuki recognized her setting up the home position on a holographic keyboard, and in the next instant —.

All her fingers flashed with blinding speed, and bright pink letters rapidly appeared in Haruyuki's chat window.

[UI> Nice to meet you, good afternoon. You are Umesato Middle School’s caretaker, yes? I am Shinomiya Utai, a fourth year at Matsunogi Academy, Elementary Branch. Thank you very much for accepting my emergency request. I am sorry for causing you this trouble. It is a bit late, but I want to help with the cleaning.]

“...!?”

Shocked, Haruyuki stood still. It wasn’t from what was in the text.

— *That was fast!!*

That was incredible typing skill. Such a large number of words were input in just four seconds. If he hadn’t just seen her typing, he would have to think she had merely copied and pasted something previously written.

Secretly, Haruyuki had been under the impression that he was the the fastest, no, second fastest typist, just behind Kuroyukihime. At the very least, on the mock typing test in his information processing class, he was by far at the top of the class. — Of course, he didn’t earn a single ounce of respect for that due to his self-esteem issues.

However, in front of him, the little girl’s typing speed was clearly more than twice Haruyuki’s. He gaped at her, wondering what kind of training was needed to obtain that kind of technique.

The little girl called Shinomiya, no matter how he looked at her, did not seem to be a Linker skill master.

She had a small build even for a fourth year primary student. The limbs extending from her short-sleeve sports jersey and shorts were worryingly small. Her facial features were purely Japanese, with single fold eyes and nose, and a mouth like a cool fixture sculpted by a master woodcarver in one sitting. Her dark bangs were cleanly cut in a line under her eyebrows, and the rest was tied in a high ponytail. She wore a sensible brown leather book bag on her back and grasped the straps of a larger sports bag in her left hand.

Her refreshing shape that made him look at her in a daze for a while, forgetting about the rainy season’s humid heat; then Haruyuki finally noticed the questioning look on her face. Right, he hadn’t responded to her greeting.

At least, he should say hello, but he thought that he should reply using the chat box. He wanted to quickly call up the holo keyboard to type a reply, but since he was still holding a brush and hose, he hurriedly put them on the ground. As soon as he brought up both hands again, words flowed into the window.

[UI> You can just speak aloud.]

“Ah... I, I see...”

He had subtly raised his wrists; he broke the silence sheepishly.

Somehow, there were many things he did not understand. Why was this little girl using chat software to talk? What was the «Emergency Request» that she spoke of? Why was a student

from another school, let alone an elementary school, here, in the first place? All he could guess was that the [UI>] letters placed in front of her words in the chat window, were shorthand for her name Utai, using UI as a nickname.

While scratching his head with his right hand that he didn't know what to do with, Haruyuki spoke confusedly.

“Ah, umm... N-nice to meet you. I am Arita Haruyuki... Umesato Middle School second year, the caretaker committee president for the time being... well, that's starting from today though...”

Then immediately:

[UI> Yes, I know that your caretaker committee was established today.]

A sentence shot out at high speed.

“Wha... really? How did you know? And why did you come from your school, just to help out...?”

[UI> Because your committee was started by a request for cooperation from Matsunogi Elementary.]

“Ehhh?! Really!?”

Contrasting with the astonished Haruyuki, the calm little girl explained how this situation came about in an easy to understand way, her fingers striking key after key.

Umesato Middle School, located in Tokyo's Suginami Ward, was a private school that included graduation. However, it was not managed by the local educational board, but by an educational business that headquartered in Shinjuku. Besides Umesato Middle School, the company also owned a special elementary-middle-high girls' school in Suginami. That was the Matsunogi Academy that Shinomiya Utai attended.

Umesato Middle School had nearly 30 years of history, but it could not compare to Matsunogi, who was celebrating the 95th anniversary of its founding this year. It was, in a manner of speaking, a «Rich Girl School». However, it was unable to avoid the low birth rate plaguing the entire nation and was sold to the current owners ten years ago due to financial troubles. Soon after, many rationalizations were made, and as a drastic measure, part of its site was finally sold this summer and the profits were used to build a new campus for the elementary and middle school students.

Since it was a traditional school, many directors raised voices of opposition, but the administration was a corporation. Eventually, the decision was not overturned, and the elementary branch's current school building will be demolished after the end of the first school term.

Although, most students actually welcomed a change in buildings. The new school building would start with a high-specification VR local network, which will lead into a state-of-the-art electronic education environment that was currently being developed in Umesato middle school. However, since the area of the school itself had shrunk, there were also many facilities that

could not be moved to the new school building. One of those was the old rearing pen built beside Matsunogi elementary branch.

[UI> Of course, I protested to the teachers and the administration company. The caretaker committee doesn't only belong to students, but also to the animals that we took care of. Students could just transfer into other committees, but animals cannot do that. But the company just said repeatedly: "Animals that were taken care of will be dealt with according to laws and regulations" as a reply. That refers to euthanization.]

Reading the matter-of-fact text, Haruyuki reflexively shouted "No way!"

Although it was the mission of public companies to maximize their profits, it was too much for them to kill animals that no longer have their habitat. It would probably be too much of a shock for children, who would have taken care of them for a long time. It would have been better just to... just to...

Haruyuki's angry thoughts bumped into a wall and stalled.

When they reached a point that they needed to shrink the school site due to budget cutting, building a new rearing pen would be difficult, which he could also imagine from the company's point of view. He felt that then they could let animals be taken into student's homes, but caring for an animal was not possible without a proper environment and a lot of passion. And yet, releasing them into the wild was out of the question, and also illegal.

Seeing Haruyuki silent as he bit his lip, the little girl looked slightly troubled. Then her fingers moved again, dictating text at high speed.

[UI> Not to worry. No animals have been disposed of yet.]

"R-really? That's good..."

He breathed a sigh of relief. Utai's fingers continued her explanation, as if in a dance.

[UI> Seven bantams⁹ that we were caring for were taken in by a farm in Sayama who raise chickens in their yard. Two rabbits were found by a reliable caretaker within the Ward. It's just that... one baby rabbit is still homeless because we can't search for a caretaker due to some special circumstances."

"It's not that you couldn't find a caretaker, but you can't even look... for one?"

Utai nodded. Her hair, tied with white ribbons, swayed above her shoulders. The cut was beautifully lined up, so instead of a ponytail, she gave one the impression of a samurai's daughter, straight out of a period drama.

After that pure Japanese face thought for a moment, the elementary student ran her fingers across the holo keyboard. A long time had passed since the start of this strange conversation, but she had not made a single typo, and her language was very mature.

⁹ A bantam is a special breed of chicken or duck that is smaller than normal.

[UI> The baby has complex circumstances. If it doesn't come from my hand, it won't eat anything. Once, to get it used to other caretakers, I let them do the feeding, but its weight went down, since it refused to eat... I will explain in more detail tomorrow when I bring it here, but in this kind of situation, there is a necessity to find a new rearing place within my daily walking distance.]

“I... I see...”

Finally understanding the situation, Haruyuki spoke with his voice, which was three times slower than Utai's typing.

“With that, the group's Umesato Middle School's unused rearing pen was provided, a caretaker committee was created here, but with the main work being cleaning instead of caring, only three people were gathered... is that how it is?”

[UI> Exactly as you said. I'm sorry to have troubled you.]

“No, it's fine, this kind of thing... But I'm surprised that my school cooperated that quickly. This is just my opinion, but the administration is pretty unfriendly... or I feel that they don't like doing any extra work...”

Even though it is the same corporation, if it is willing to take care of other school's raised animals, shouldn't it take more care of me when I was being severely bullied in my first year? When that which he could not say repeated in his mind, as if she were reading it, Utai said — no, wrote:

[UI> Sorry, actually there is a situation related to that... I know someone in the student council here, which made it easier for me.]

“Ah, I see.”

No wonder; he was convinced. Matsunogi Elementary Branch's students graduated directly to their middle and high branch, but for households who took to exam preparation enthusiastically, he heard before that their children have transferred to Umesato middle school before. Then, it would not be strange for Utai to know someone who was enrolled in this school.

After hearing — no, reading Utai's explanation up to this point — Haruyuki finally understood why he suddenly became a caretaker. It was mostly because the caretaker committee of the same corporation's Matsunogi was abolished to streamline management, which was needed because of the low birth rate, which meant it was ultimately «society's fault». Of course, becoming a caretaker and cleaning by himself was Haruyuki's own fault.

“I see... that's impressive, Shinomiya-san. Just for animals that had lost their homes, you protested to the company, searched for adopters, and came all the way to another school like this. When I was in elementary fourth year, all I thought about everyday were things like games, manga, anime, and snacks...”

After Haruyuki spoke earnestly, Utai shook her head with a serious expression, then as she set her book bag on the ground, she skillfully tapped on her keyboard.

[UI> Well, I play games too... Now that Arita-san understands the situation, I want to help clean the pen...]

“Ah, really...”

He finally remembered that he was still in the middle of his committee activities, so he hurriedly picked up the hose and deck brush at his feet.

He could not see a goal while he was cleaning by himself, but with various situations explained to him, and understanding that there was an actual animal moving in, it meant that he should get into fighting spirit for this work. *Alright, I will do it!* Reaffirming his decision, he turned towards the animal pen, which was a short distance away.

The cleaning would be finished with a light rinse to clear off the remaining leaves and dirt stuck to the floor, but he worried how he was going to turn the faucet itself on or off. He was very thankful to have a helper appear.

“Then, can I leave it to you to turn that valve on and off?”

After Haruyuki pointed to the base of the hose, Utai tilted her head as if confused.

[UI> Should I really only be doing that job? I put on PE clothing that can get dirty, no problem.]

— After reading her reply, Haruyuki turned to look at Utai — who wore a pure white short sleeve shirt with a school badge on her chest, and shorts of the same white color that tightly covered her slim legs — then hurriedly averted his eyes.

Other than Umesato middle school’s PE shorts being navy blue, they were all the same, and he should be used to seeing regular female students wearing those in school every day, but when the opponent was a Matsunogi rich girl, he somehow felt that it would be improper to look. — If Chiyuri ever found out that he was thinking like that, she would undoubtedly fire superpowered beams from her eyes.

“Yeah, uh, all that’s left is to scrub the floor with the brush! When I give the word, please turn on that valve three quarters of the way!”

After saying that in a high voice, Haruyuki jumped heavily into the rearing pen. Deciding to start from the innermost area, he held the hose and brush ready, then gave another shout.

“Go, go ahead!”

[UI> I’m turning it on.]

The textual response came instantly, and right after, a controlled flow erupted from the hose. While checking the “tsremaining water” meter in his peripheral vision, he splashed a meter-wide area, then shouted “Turn it off!” He heard the valve screech from behind in reply.

As he roughly scrubbed the floor, the mixture of dirt and leaves was easily removed, and ceramic tiles peeked out from below. Fortunately, they seemed to be coated with some sort of anti-

corrosion material, so there were no holes or cracks even after being covered by leaves for years. If that was the case, one day of air-drying should return the floor to its original shape.

Haruyuki skillfully repeated the action of soaking with water and scrubbing with the brush. If he was opening and closing the valve by himself, he would be much less efficient, and before that, just thinking of working with someone who had the same seriousness somehow raised his motivation. While he was working with Hamajima and Izeki, who were not enthusiastic at all, Haruyuki could not help but feel fatigued as well.

“...All right! Now we only need to finish up...”

Haruyuki said twenty minutes later, after he had finished scrubbing the floor and stretched. He turned around to Shinomiya Utai who was crouched near the valve.

“And lastly, we need to rinse the floor, so please turn the faucet on all the way!”

Hearing that, instead of nodding, Utai rapidly tapped the air with her fingers. Pink letters appeared in Haruyuki’s view, spelled out somewhat reservedly.

[UI> Um, if it’s not too much trouble, can I help? It will be more efficient to wash and brush at the same time, and I also feel like working...”

“Nah, you’ve already worked a lot... but, if Shinomiya-san insists...”

After Haruyuki mumbled in response, he raised the hand holding his brush. Utai looked a little happier, nodded, then as her right hand held the valve, she skillfully typed with her left hand.

[UI> Well then, I’m going in.]

“Please!”

Screech screech, the valve was fully opened, and the hose vibrated. As if she were chasing the water flowing inside, Utai took off running.

The little girl flew into the pen immediately after the high pressure water spurted out, took the brush from Haruyuki, then began to push the water on the floor out of the wire screen. Matching her rhythmic movement, Haruyuki gripped the thrashing hose and sprayed the pen from the inside to its outside. The remaining water meter inched from 20% towards zero, but Utai brushed hard, making a *shaa shaa* noise, the ceramic tiles reverted to their beautiful khaki color.

Utai deftly maneuvered the brush, making full use of her back strength. She was probably used to this kind of work. This was to be expected of her rich girls’ school, and as he looked on with a strange admiration, Haruyuki also moved his hose in the same motion so that he would not fall behind.

In just a few minutes, the floor surface was unrecognizably shiny, and simultaneously, they had used up almost all of their allowed water. *Not bad*, Haruyuki thought as he looked at Utai with a smile, and was about to say “Now the valve...”, when the words dried up inside his mouth.

His comrade, who was supposed to be opening and closing the valve, was inside the pen right now, unable to reach the valve. Furthermore, even if the meter was used up, the valve was not just going to automatically shut off. In that case, half a minute later they would be over their allowed usage.

Of course, if that happened he would not be arrested or sent to a detention center, but a «Minor Violation» would be recorded for Haruyuki's student data in the local net, and later, something roughly on par with a talk-with-the-teacher would happen.

“Oh no...”

Haruyuki tightly clamped down on the hose. The blocked water flow trembled as though it were dissatisfied, but miraculously, the meter stopped. Detecting the situation, Utai dropped the brush without even bothering to type, then turned around and ran towards the valve.

A tremendous disaster happened right at that moment.

Haruyuki's thumb slipped, relieving the pressure on the hose and the pressurized water erupted with overwhelming power like a charged long range attack —

Straight towards the PE-uniformed Utai, hitting its target directly with a *splash!*

Compared to Haruyuki, whose brain had overloaded from the severity of the situation and froze to the spot, the much younger elementary student stood still for a moment with a surprised expression, then continued running outside. She crouched at the main valve three meters away, and quickly turned it off.

The water meter narrowly overusage with 0.2% remaining, but Haruyuki failed to notice: he was still frozen with his right hand in the air still clutching the hose.

Utai returned with a small trot and typed as water dripped from her body.

[UI> Please don't worry about it. I changed to PE clothes before coming to prepare for this kind of situation.]

Then, without changing her expression, she held up the hem of her shirt, which had absorbed the most amount of water and was sticking to her skin and wrang it with both hands.

With that defenseless gesture, a few portions of Utai's white skin inadvertently crossed into Haruyuki's field of vision, which gave his idle brain a jolt that returned it to proper function. Its engine gauge immediately spun to the red zone, and finally, recovering with increased perspiration, a reddening face and heart palpitations, Haruyuki stood jerked upright and shouted in a panicked voice:

“S-s-sorry, I'm sorry!! I-I am v-very s-sorry!! That was a-absolutely not on purpose, my ha-hand slipped and w-water splashed.”

Hearing that, Utai blinked and tilted her head, and her fingers flashed once more.

[UI> I'm fine. I also brought a change of clothes, so there is no problem.]

“B-but, getting hit by that much water, Ne... Ne...”

Your Neuro Linker will get water damage.

Haruyuki’s words faltered as he gazed at Utai’s slender neck.

The Neuro Linker, a wearable device, would naturally have some degree of waterproofing regardless of model, but the Direct Connect jack and the camera lens were potential weak points, so complete water immersion or high pressure spray risked damaging it. Haruyuki was worried about that — but.

No matter how many times he stared at Utai’s neck, which was covered with a wide ponytail, nothing was there. With only a few wet strands of hair, there was absolutely no sign of any kind of device.

“Wha...”

A different kind of shock hit him, and Haruyuki stuttered.

Shinomiya Utai was not wearing a Neuro Linker. But that was not possible. Just a while ago, she had Ad-Hoc connected to Haruyuki’s Neuro Linker, and they had carried out a conversation over a chat tool, hadn’t they?

Then, Haruyuki finally arrived at a question that he should have been asking much earlier.

Why chat? Her fearsome typing speed allowed for no lag in conversation so he accepted it for what it was, but as he thought about it, after Utai appeared, she did not use her real voice even once. There should be some kind of reason or circumstance for that...

Utai seemed to guess the meaning of Haruyuki’s stare.

Haruyuki saw slightly reddish irises looking straight at him, and the little girl’s right fingertip slid something his way. At that moment, a vertical rectangle floated into his view.

It was a name tag. Front and center was the name [Shinomiya Utai], and slightly smaller below it, [Matsunogi Academy Elementary Branch Fourth Year - Violet Group], [Born September 15 2037]. However, the usually horizontal residence-network information was displayed vertically, for an unexpected reason.

Below Utai’s name, an unfamiliar certificate was included. The letters on it, in a stern Mincho font were — [Medical Usage Permit for Intradural Indwelling Communications Device]. To the lower right was the certification seal for the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

The line of kanji that was difficult to understand all at once; Haruyuki squinted his eyes and tried to make sense of it by reading it backwards.

Indwelling communications device... a type of microchip that was buried inside one’s body. And intradural is probably... inside the skull... that is, the membrane that covers the brain. A communications chip that is buried in the brain... that is, that meant —

A Brain Implant Chip. «BIC» for short.

“Ah...”

Haruyuki desperately resisted the urge to jerk back.

Just two months ago, appearing in front of Haruyuki right at the start of the new school term, was a first year student who forcefully took many things from Haruyuki through devious scheming. He also, had a BIC in his brain. After many long and painful fights, that student— «Dusk Taker» forever left Accel World, but the organization that he had belonged to still remained today. In fact, during the previous week’s Hermes Cord Traversing Race, a second would-be assassin «Rust Jigsaw» suddenly intruded and unleashed an Incarnate ranged attack forcefully supercharged with the BIC, destroying the entire race itself.

It was not difficult to image that the organization that Jigsaw belonged to, the «Acceleration Research Society», would be intensifying their attacks on Accel World from now on. That was why Haruyuki could not help but be cautious against this BIC user, Shinomiya Utai, whom he had just met. However, before he could look alert, his eyes finally rested on words in the header of the permit.

«Medical Use».

The Acceleration Research Society members Dusk Taker, Rust Jigsaw, and Black Vise, had their BIC implanted through illegal surgery. Of course, they would not have any sort of permit from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Even if they faked one, the complex certification seal shining on the surface of the tag could not be recreated by any hacker. In the past Kuroyukihime had showed Haruyuki and the others a name tag with a different name, but that was not creating a tag from scratch, it was only rewriting coded name data. Just that undoubtedly required an extremely high level of skill.

That meant, according to Utai’s permit, she legally owned a BIC for medical reasons. Then, what would that «Medical» thing be—?

As he thought of that, Utai read his expression and touched her holo keyboard while looking calm.

[UI> Sorry for the late explanation. Since Arita-san chatted so naturally with me, I forgot to mention... I have expressive aphasia, which means that I cannot speak with my mouth. That is why I use my BIC for conversation.]

“E... Expressive?”

He mostly understood what «aphasia» was, but could not fathom the meaning of the word before it. Immediately, Utai’s typed explanation came flowing.

[UI> Aphasia, broadly speaking, is divided into expressive and sensory types. Sensory aphasia is the condition of having difficulty comprehending language itself, so in that case communication through chat won’t work either. On the other hand, expressive aphasia is the condition of one’s vocal organs being inhibited. Since language is still understood, reading and writing is possible.]

After reading and re-reading her explanation, Haruyuki finally understood the difference and hesitantly voiced a sudden thought.

“Well... Instead of the BIC, with the Neuro Linker Direct Connect thought-voice, how... about that?”

As if Utai had already expected that question, she immediately input her answer.

[UI> One’s telepathic voice from the Neuro Linker is actually not the thought itself, but instead they are movement signals from the mouth, tongue and face, which are read by the Neuro Linker to reconstruct the voice. That is a possible solution for people with slight expressive aphasia, but for my brain, the signal for my voice is completely cut off somewhere along the neurons. Like this.”

At that point Utai stopped typing and moved her right index finger towards her mouth. As Haruyuki stared intently, small pink lips parted slowly. In between small, pearl-like teeth, the tip of her tongue peeked out. She sucked in a large breath, ready to release it as sound.

Crunch! Utai’s teeth clamped together. Thin tendons trembled in her throat; she was applying tremendous force to her jaw. Her clenched teeth creaked, and pain tainted Utai’s clean face.

“S-Sorry, enough, that’s enough!!”

Haruyuki shouted, and took a step forward. He extended a hand towards her small stiff shoulder, but hesitated to touch her, so he stopped halfway.

However, just a few seconds after, Utai released from her tense condition. After a moment of unsteadiness, she exhaled, and the little girl lifted up her head and typed in a hesitant manner.

[UI> Sorry to have worried you. I was not seriously trying to speak, but maybe, I thought maybe I could speak, so... There was no way I could, and I did something stupid. I am very sorry.]

“No, you don’t have to apologize.”

Haruyuki shook his head fiercely. A minute earlier, he had doubted Utai for having a BIC, which he now strongly regretted, so he desperately continued to speak.

“I... I am the one who’s really sorry for asking that question just because I was curious. Everyone should have known how thought-voice works... and I should have understood if I thought about it, so the stupid one should be me...”

Unable to look at Utai’s face any longer, he bowed his head, as the evening light shone onto the floor tiles of the rearing pen. Pink words flowed into his vision.

[UI> Thank you very much. I don’t mind at all, so Arita-san doesn’t need to worry about it either. Well, let’s put away our tools. If the rearing pen is this clean, I think we’ve done enough work. That little guy will be happy for sure.]

Haruyuki lifted his head up, and looked apprehensively at Utai's small face. In accordance with her words, there was no sign of unhappiness, so he finally relaxed his shoulders and nodded.

“...Okay. I'll take care of everything, so you can go ahead and change. There is an emergency exit on that side of the school building, enter the hallway from there and there'll be a toilet just ahead to the left...”

Then Haruyuki picked up the brush, but a refutation came rather quickly.

[UI> I am fine. Please let me help until the end. I will put the hose ba]

The words cut off there as Utai suddenly inhaled sharply —

Then, *hekuchii*-- A cute sneeze.

That was the first physical sound Haruyuki heard from Shinomiya Utai.

At 5:45 PM, having completely finished the tasks of cleaning the rearing pen and putting away the tools he had used to do so, Haruyuki opened the file for the Caretaker Committee's activities diary, and under the other two's already saved verification tags, he added his own name, and sent it into the school system.

“Fuu...”

After exhaling deeply, he glanced at the clean rearing pen.

There were still small puddles of water here and there, but the khaki-colored ceramic tiles were completely unrecognizable compared to the dirt-covered floor before they began working. The stainless steel mesh and wood board walls were still dusty, but tomorrow, with a simple brush scrub, they, too, would look immaculately clean.

Of course, as they had emptied the interior, the leaves and dirt had piled into a small mountain in front of the pen, but after they dried up, they could be stuffed into garbage bags and thrown away. Fortunately, the weather forecast didn't show any rain for the next few days.

“When I put my mind to it, I can actually do it...”

Haruyuki murmured. Finished with changing, Shinomiya Utai typed as she came:

[UI> Actually, I came to see this pen yesterday. I predicted that it would take three or four days before it would be useable, but if this goes on, I can bring the little guy over here tomorrow. The administration was in quite a hurry so this really helped. Thank you very much, Arita-san.]

“No, not really... If I had been more committed...”

— *and not let those two other members leave early*, he wanted to say, but Haruyuki mumbled something else:

“...We would have finished the whole thing even earlier. But aside from that... what exactly is the animal that is going to be raised here? I’m very curious...”

Utai’s reddish eyes flashed brightly and she typed rhythmically with her right index finger.

[UI> That - is - a - secret.]

“I-is that so... I’ll be looking forward to it tomorrow, then...”

Haruyuki murmured, looking away.

The summer uniform of Matsunogi Academy Elementary Branch was a white one piece with a sailor collar. High above its waist were two wide creases, giving it a somewhat old hakama¹⁰-style look. Haruyuki stared at this unfamiliar uniform for a few seconds, then hurriedly said:

“W-We have to leave school in about ten minutes, because of the deadline... Thank you for your help today.”

[UI> Me too. I look forward to working with you tomorrow as well.]

But Utai typed another unexpected line.

[UI> I need to greet someone in the student council room, so Arita-san, please leave school first.]

“Wha...”

Haruyuki immediately turned and looked at Utai intently.

She did say earlier that she knew an acquaintance in the Umesato student council, but that still meant going to an unfamiliar student council room alone, which was surprisingly bold for an elementary fourth year student. Utai looked at Haruyuki rather strangely, then typed:

[UI> Then, if you will excuse me. Goodbye, Arita-san.]

As she turned around, and briskly walked towards the main entrance, Haruyuki shouted after her half on reflex.

“Uh, umm, I’ll go with you too! I also have an acquaintance in the student council...”

He did not know how many members were still in the student council room, deep in the first floor of first school building, but there was a very high chance that Kuroyukihime was there. Kuroyukihime might also have the same doubt that Haruyuki had regarding Utai’s BIC. Utai who didn’t even wear a Neuro Linker, could be an assassin from the «Acceleration Research Society», and it was necessary for him to quickly make that known.

Looking at Haruyuki, who began to jog alongside her, Utai’s face flashed briefly with a mystified expression, but without saying anything, no, typing anything, she nodded.

¹⁰ Loose-fitting pants worn over kimono. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hakama>

After he entered the school building from the front stairs and was changing from his muddy sneakers into slippers, a warning announcement from the school system floated right into eyes and ears. *If he did not leave school within five minutes, a third degree rule infraction would be recorded into his file*, said the synthesized voice, and that made him frown. Even the authority of a committee president couldn't bend this rule. The only ones who could request an extension were student council members.

He would have to somehow beg Kuroyukihime for the extension, but would she allow for this seemingly impolite behavior? As Haruyuki walked nervously through the Building 1 hallway, he glanced besides him and saw that Shinomiya Utai had her usual calm face.

— *When I was in my fourth year of elementary, I couldn't help but faint after taking one step into a different middle school.*

With those somewhat miserable thoughts going through his head, he saw the west corridor come to an end. The door in the right wall led to the student council room. If he thought about it, he had not enter it even once in his one year and three months of attending this school.

After Haruyuki arrived in front of the white sliding door and hesitated, Utai raised her right hand and tapped the air. She expanded a holographic window and pressed the entry button.

A few seconds later, the lock clicked. Utai's expression remained the same as she pulled the door open, and entered with a slight bow.

— *Um, umm, what should I do...*

Even now, Haruyuki was still fretting as he stood in the hallway, when that person's familiar sound reached his ears.

“Sorry, Utai. There's bit of lingering work here. The pen cleaning hasn't finished, has it? I'll go help right now...”

— *What?*

That voice right now was Kuroyukihime's, no doubt. But she had very naturally used «Utai» as an address. That would mean — the «Umesato Middle School student council acquaintance» that Shinomiya Utai mentioned was vice president Kuroyukihime herself... could that be it? But what would these two people be meeting for?

Haruyuki stood still, highly confused, as new words flowed into the chat window that was still in his view. Somehow Utai seemed to have also Ad-Hoc connected to Kuroyukihime.

[UI> The cleaning is finished. This person worked hard by himself to finish it.]

“...This person? Where is he?”

At Kuroyukihime's doubtful voice, he thought that he could no longer hide in the hallway, so Haruyuki unstuck himself from the wall and entered the room in awkward steps. He closed the door behind him while looking down, then fearfully lifted up his head.

The Umesato middle school student council room was a lot wider than he expected, seeing it for the first time. In the center was an oval conference table, beside the inner window there was a long office desk, and the walls were furnished with a lattice of wooden racks.

All furnishings were made of a comfortable dark brown wood; a thick beige carpet covered the floor, and a large sofa set was situated just left of the entrance, which made it look unlike a room in a middle school. In fact, this was more luxurious than the Principal's Office he peeked into once.

Utai stood beside the conference table at the front, while Kuroyukihime was near the sofa set. There was no sign of anyone else there. Somehow Kuroyukihime had remained to work overtime by herself, but the unexpected thing was how she was dressed.

“Se... senpai, why are you dressed like that?”

Haruyuki asked, instantly forgetting his question about her relationship with Utai. Kuroyukihime quickly covered the front of her body, which was clad in a tight-fitting black short-sleeve T-shirt and navy blue shorts — her PE clothing. As her face reddened and lips thinned, she said loudly:

“N-no, this is, well... I thought this would be more suitable for dirty work while cleaning that animal pen... Anyway, why are you here, Haruyuki-kun?”

“Why, you say... That is... Let's see... What was it again?”

Haruyuki mumbled, his memory choosing that particular moment to fail him. Exasperated words from Utai lined up in the chat window.

[UI> Arita-san is the caretaker committee president. He helped clean the animal pen. When I said I want to go to the student council room for a greeting, he came along, but I don't know why.]

— *Seriously, why did I come...?*

As Haruyuki thought belatedly, his ears were filled with Kuroyukihime's exclamation of surprise and amazement.

“Y-you, became a caretaker!? Why again... no, I see, you drew straws... Geesh, you are always so lucky during critical moments like this, Haruyuki-kun...”

I became a candidate by accident. If he had said something like that, the situation would probably have become complicated, so for now he just said “No, not really”, smiling shyly. When he looked again, Kuroyukihime was wearing PE clothes and radiating a different kind of charm than her normal gracefully uniformed disposition. It was probably because her hair was also tied up in a ponytail like Utai, so he looked dazedly at her for a while, feeling revitalized; then Haruyuki voiced his first question in a while.

“... S-so, why was senpai going to clean the rearing pen again? You can't be a student council member and be on the caretaker committee at the same time... it can't be that, right?”

“Ah, about that...”

At that point Kuroyukihime interrupted herself, seemed to realize something, and quickly manipulated her virtual desktop. In Haruyuki’s view, a message appeared, informing him that the deadline for him to leave school had been extended. When he looked at the clock, there were only seven seconds left before 6:00. Haruyuki began to thank her but Kuroyukihime dismissed it with a wave as she continued:

“...There were only going to be three people, and furthermore, they would be caretakers probably decided by drawing straws, so I predicted it would be impossible to finish cleaning the animal pen in a short period of time. I had promised Utai to have the pen usable as fast as possible. I was thinking of helping with cleaning until the extended deadline... but then you became a caretaker, and in less than two hours, you making that miserable pen beautiful was something that took me completely by surprise. You worked hard, Haruyuki-kun...”

Her kind smile and deep nod hit Haruyuki with a squeeze inside his chest. Not knowing how to reply, he stood still and looked into Kuroyukihime’s eyes.

— *The truth is that I was going to slack off. But I thought that you would for sure be working hard on your job, which made me also work hard. Still, even you... after finishing your own work, were thinking of going to clean that animal pen...*

He did not know how far his mind’s voice reached, but Kuroyukihime slowly nodded again.

What interrupted that magical moment was the quick flow of pink letters into the chat window.

[UI> I apologize for interrupting your passionate gazes, but could you please tell me already? Are Arita-san and Saa-chan friends?]

Kuroyukihime blinked rapidly and looked at Utai, who was standing to Haruyuki’s right, and said “Ah, I see”.

“Oh no, sorry. I see, Uiui still doesn’t know. I was careless.”

— *Saa-chan? Uiui?*

As Haruyuki looked from one to another while speechless, Kuroyukihime’s brief explanation echoed in his ears.

“He — Arita Haruyuki-kun, is the vanguard of my legion, and my «Child», Uiui.”

“...!?!?!?”

— *Wha-wha-what are you doing!?*

Haruyuki screamed silently; Utai’s reply was clear:

[UI> Ah, so that is the case. Arita-san, is that «Silver Crow», right?]

“!!!??!!!!?!”

— S-s-someone else I don't know knows my real identity! Agaaaaain!

He instinctively made a run for it, but the door was locked so no matter how much he rattled it, it would not open. Kuroyukihime's utterly amazed voice traveled towards Haruyuki's back.

“...Hey, Haruyuki-kun. I think that you should be able to tell where we are going with this. She—
— Shinomiya Utai, is a Burst Linker like us, and furthermore, she was also a first generation member of Nega Nebulas.”

Chapter 5

— *I'll never trust anyone. Never again.*

Haruyuki recalled the scene from a long-ago manga in which the dark anti-hero had said that while lowering his weapon with one hand and covering his wounds with another.

Crouching at one side of the sofa set, he held a cup of red tea with both hands. It was an expensive looking Darjeeling tea that Kuroyukihime had personally brewed, but he had not recovered from his shock enough to enjoy its fragrant aroma.

— *Never trusting anyone ever again might be a bit much, but I will at least start to doubt everyone. Those who suddenly appear and somehow calmly treat me as a real person, are all, without exception, Burst Linkers. Moreover, high level veteran Linkers. Without doubt.*

With that decision, he took a glance at the other side of the sofa, and saw that Shinomiya Utai was pouring milk into her teacup with a serious face. She seemed to put in the proper amount, placed the pitcher down after nodding, then carefully stirred with a spoon.

As he looked at that childish gesture, there was still something hard to understand. Utai was a fourth year student of the affiliated Matsunogi Academy's Elementary Branch, and she was born in September 2037, which meant that she was just nine years and nine months old. That was two years younger than the Red King Niko.

The first generation Nega Nebulas had ceased to exist due to that incident between Kuroyukihime and the Four Elements two and half years ago, so Utai should be only 7 years old at that time. Then, how old was she when she first became a Burst Linker?

As Haruyuki sipped his tea with many questions on his mind, Kuroyukihime who sat to his left returned her teacup to its saucer and began the conversation with somewhat unexpected words.

“...Yesterday, you didn't use the Neuro Linker either, so do you normally leave it off, Utai?”
To that question, as Utai drank her milk tea with her right hand, she skillfully answered with just her left hand. The impressive thing was that her speed did not drop by much.

[UI> Yeah. If I wear it, I would want to go to that world very badly.]

“Then you should just go. Unlike me, you don’t have a bounty on your head. Even if your name is on the matching list, there shouldn’t be anyone troublesome coming to attack you one after another.”

[UI> Once or twice a month I go for solo duels in the Setagaya neutral field. That is enough for me. I won’t allow myself to have more than that, since most of the responsibility for destroying the old Nega Nebulas is mine.]

“Whatt...!?”

Haruyuki gasped.

He read the chat window again and again, but Utai’s words, no matter how he read them, could not mean anything else.

— *The destruction of Nega Nebulas.*

Those words were repeated by Kuroyukihime many times before.

The Black King, Black Lotus, during the Seven Kings Conference two and half years ago, took the head of the Red King, Red Rider who had been advocating peace among Level Niners, and sealed her fate among the most wanted. As a result, the first generation Nega Nebulas that she led was also destroyed without much discussion, which Haruyuki understood up to that point — but.

When he looked to his side to seek an explanation, Kuroyukihime, still in exercise clothes, was looking down at her teacup with sorrowful eyes, and did not open her mouth. Utai, with her left hand resting on top of the holo keyboard, also continued to remain silent.

In the heavy silence, the light streaming in from north side window slowly grew thicker. It was soon to be midsummer, but after 6:30 PM, the sky began to dim. The latest time which student council members were allowed to leave was 7pm. Haruyuki was worried about that, but he was also interested in where these two people’s conversation was heading, so he bit his lip. He could not wait for an explanation that would allow him to easily understand everything, but Haruyuki was originally an uninvited guest to this place. So he hesitated about showing a forward attitude.

Fortunately, the two veteran Burst Linkers seemed to have reached a kind of taciturn understanding. Kuroyukihime to his side whispered with a small sigh.

“...Right now I still am avoiding, consciously or not, speaking about the first generation Nega Nebulas. As if the act of clinging to something that was lost was something that I could not face the current hardworking members of Haruyuki-kun’s group with, I believed... more than anything, that I did not have the courage to face my crime... — However, Raker returned, and I’ve met Uiui like this after two years. The time to face the past has come... would this be the case...?”

Across from Haruyuki who held his breath listening to those words, this time Utai’s hands flashed.

[UI> If you say that it was a crime, then I also have committed it. Looking away from each of our past, and continuing to hide in the edge of Accel World for a long time, what made I, Saa-chin, and Fuu-nee able to face ourselves once more, is absolutely because of the hard work of the new Nega Nebulas members. Arita-san has the right to know what mistakes the former NN made, and why we had to disappear from the front line.]

“Ah... that’s right. Exactly as you said.”

Kuroyukihime finished reading the cherry-pink text and turned towards Haruyuki.

Within her deep black eyes, the same wavering light from before when she talked about her past was there, but right now there was not only that. Right in middle of the iris, a small star shone resolutely.

She spoke after a slight pause, her voice had an elegant echo tinged with pain, but she continued anyway as if she were trying to overcome it.

“...Haruyuki-kun. As you already know, in the past I pretended to accept the ceasefire from the first generation Red King, Red Rider and took his head. Then I fought with other five Kings, and after surviving to Burst Out, I cut myself off from the Global Net for two years... I said that, but in truth, the next day after the fight with the Six Kings, I dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field. In order to apologize to first generation Nega Nebulas members, and to give them a large portion of points that I had gathered.”

[UI> There was no way we would have accepted such a thing.]

After Utai inserted words in, Kuroyukihime smiled wryly.

“But I did not have anything else to give. I took the risk of changing points to items at a «Shop», and you guys were still angry when you heard it...”

[UI> Of course. Remembering it right now also upsets me a bit.]

“Sorry about that.”

With another laugh, Kuroyukihime continued after shrugging her shoulders.

“...However, the story did not end there. I confessed what I did, and announced my decision to retire after appointing the next leader, but Utai’s group of «Elements» gave an outrageous proposal in exchange.”

“E... Elements...?”

After Haruyuki whispered by parroting, Utai typed with a very slightly red face.

[UI> At that time, four Burst Linkers that served as Nega Nebulas’ sub leaders, were somehow attached with that exaggerated nickname. The reason was, their avatar’s attributes were split into Earth, Water, Fire and Wind.]

“«Wind» is of course Sky Raker. What Uuii’s attribute is, I’ll leave it for you to find out later.”

Kuroyukihime added that with a smile, and Utai's slightly embarrassed grin, made Haruyuki look at them from one to another.

Four sub leaders who were given the nickname of «Elements». That would mean, he could probably take it to be an existence following the «Four Heavenly Kings» of ancient warring state feudal lords. It took some imagination, but this small little girl was strong enough to stand beside **that** Sky Raker. If she is this strong, and also lives in Suginami, why had Kuroyukihime not contacted her earlier, and invited her back to the legion? Even though there seem to be some kind of circumstance, if she could at least help with territory wars, they could defend much easier.

— Haruyuki thought about those and other different kinds of small things, but Kuroyukihime changed her expression after a cough, so he also hurriedly sat upright. Calmness flowed in the student council room at dusk.

“— The proposal by the «Elements» to counter my retirement announcement, was also totally unexpected to me. They... said that there may be another method to clear «Brain Burst», other than reaching level 10...”

“What...!?”

Those words, also gave Haruyuki a huge shock.

A way to clear the online fighting game «Brain Burst». The fact that there was something besides the harsh condition of «reaching Level 10», which was something he believed without doubt until now.

Would it be a similarly difficult goal? For example, control all territory? No, that would be too unrealistic. Most of Burst Linkers are concentrated in central Tokyo, but the battle area is spread throughout Japan.

Unable to guess further, Haruyuki sat on the edge of his seat and asking agitatedly:

“Wha... what is it? The other method for clearing!?”

“You have seen it more than once, Haruyuki-kun.”

Looking at Kuroyukihime, who suddenly shifted the conversation to Haruyuki with a mysterious tone, he opened his eyes wide.

“Seen it... you say? What exactly have I seen?”

“The magical castle that has always existed at the centre of Accel World; and no matter how many tried, no one has been able to break into it... It's the tremendously majestic form of the place that you've seen.”

At that moment —.

In his brain, the scene he saw just yesterday vividly floated up.

The «Demonic City» stage in deep fog. In the distance from the sharply lined up city, were black towers standing to reach dark clouds. Even though it rejected everyone, it was a somehow inviting solid and lustrous silhouette.

“...I-Imperial palace...?”

To Haruyuki who murmured that with a shaking sound, Kuroyukihime and Utai lightly nodded in silence. After blinking restlessly, he hurriedly retorted.

“B-but! Didn’t senpai say it yesterday! The imperial palace is «a place that cannot be entered, even in Accel World», didn’t you?”

“I forgot to mention that the inability to enter the palace only applies in the «normal duel field».”

“Th, that... would mean, umm... if it is a place not in the normal duel field, then...”

After a swallowing sound from his throat, he fearfully continued.

“...If it’s the higher rank «Unlimited Neutral Field», there will be a way in, is that right?”

It took a few seconds before the answer came.

Kuroyukihime and Utai glanced at each other, and somehow their eyebrows lowered momentarily. However, they soon raised their heads, and nodded like earlier. This time, they answered through Utai’s chat tool.

[UI> At the very least, we confirmed what looked like a route. Unlimited Field’s imperial palace... we call it the «Emperor’s Castle», since that place does not have the normal field’s Chiyoda area imperial palace, with four castle gates existing instead.]

“...Those are... the entrances to the Emperor’s Castle...?”

“Yeah. 30-meter high gates standing at the castle’s east, west, south, and north side. Other than those, invisible walls surround the top and bottom of the castle walls.”

Kuroyukihime’s words, made Haruyuki think of the layout of the real world’s imperial palace in his mind. To be sure, the real thing should also have east, west, south and north gates, some of which had underground subway stations named after them. The south side was «Sakuradamon Gate», and the west side was «Hanzomon Gate». He could not remember the north and east side, but since Accel World’s geography was based on the real world, it should be natural to think that «Emperor’s Castle» would have gates.

“...Those doors... Can they be opened...?”

As he inquired with excitement in his heart, Kuroyukihime crossed her arms and nodded.

“Doors that cannot be opened would be same as walls. If a gate exists, it would be more reasonable to think that it can be opened. — If you can reach it, and can push on the door, that is...”

[UI> That’s right, even if there is a door, you might not reach it, since the four doors are all guarded by four super-class Enemies, the strongest of the strongest of the Unlimited Neutral Field.]

“.....!”

Finally, able to see where this story was heading, Haruyuki took a sharp breath. An «Enemy» was a general name for monsters living in the unlimited neutral field. They are automatically controlled by a system similar to normal MMORPGs, with most of them fiercely attacking Burst Linkers that have entered their reaction area. If you can defeat them, then you can gain Burst Points instead of experience points, but on top of lowest class Enemy being fearfully strong, the points you gain are also insignificant. If you think about seriously hunting Enemies, then you would have to make a party with many people, and camp in the unlimited field for a few days to over a week, and that struggle is not an easy task. Even for Haruyuki who does not dislike [grinding], he did not feel like proactively wanting to join those.

After wetting his dry throat with some of the cooled red tea —.

“Strongest... you said, how strong is that...?”

That question, made Kuroyukihime thought deeply with a long ‘Hmm’.

“Mm... Honestly, it’s a feeling that cannot be explained... — About that, Haruyuki-kun, for sure you once... that was when we were heading to Ikebukuro with the Red King, you saw a party of around twenty people hunting an Enemy right?”

“Ye... yeah. About a building in height; what an incredible one. So... That’s one of those «Super-class enemies» that Shinomiya-san talked about?”

After Haruyuki timidly said that, the two veteran Linkers smiled wryly at the same time. Utai’s fingers flashed, and pink letters appeared with cute sound effects.

[UI> Enemies hunted by around twenty people are usually ranked «Beast-class». Those about ten times stronger than these are «Legend-class», they are rarely encountered, and it’s almost certainly fatal if you run into one without making any preparations.]

“T-ten times... that...!?”

Haruyuki moaned as his back shook. The Enemy he saw on Yamate Street when they were on way to Ikebukuro was something he was sure spelled instant death for him if he met that on one. Honestly, Haruyuki’s senses could not even imagine something like legend class kind of strength.

— However.

What Kuroyukihime said smoothly afterwards, was something that Haruyuki could not react to by shaking or anything else.

“And then, the Enemies protecting four gates of emperor’s castle, make even [Legend] class Enemies seem about as strong as a chihuahua. They are called «Super-class», because you cannot even guess their status. Also known as the «Four Gods», they are no longer beasts as that name suggested, and should be recognized as the real gods who reign over Accel World...”

Accel World’s — gods.

Until now, Haruyuki had believed without doubt that the strongest ones in game space created by Brain Burst were «Seven Kings of Pure Color». No matter how the large Enemies were said to be strong, he thought that Kings including Kuroyukihime and Niko would be able to match them one on one.

No, probably the «Beast-class» and if circumstances allowed, up to «Legend class», could probably be defeated under certain prepared conditions. Certainly, the Blue King should have a nickname of «Legend Slayer». That meant, it was without doubt the proof of him solo killing a Legend class once. And it was such an accomplishment that it became his honorific title.

However, right now Kuroyukihime’s sounds, he believed that it had a hint of fear mixed in it.

Haruyuki’s sound sank, and fearfully asked.

“Umm... Between «King» and «God», which is stronger...?”

“A King is just a human. On the other hand, a «God» is an existence far beyond the range of humans. If it is a serious head to head fight, even if you concentrated all the power of the seven Kings, that would not even be equal to one of the «Four Gods».”

“...Are you... serious? Then, that, that kind of monster... no, God-class enemy protected doors, won’t be able to be broken through then...”

After he dumbfoundedly whispered, Utai nodded with her shoulder length ponytail swaying, and typed.

[UI> That’s right, it is tremendously difficult. With that kind of difficulty, it gave us an idea. Getting past the «Four Gods», opening the gate and reaching the center of «Emperor’s Castle», might be a second winning condition for Brain Burst.]

“Ah... I, I see...!”

Haruyuki involuntarily said out loud.

The already known «Taking all the points from five level 9 Burst Linkers other than yourself to become level 10» kind of condition is very difficult, however in a certain sense, could be said to be possible to achieve right now. If five people from the current seven Kings decided to sacrifice themselves, and give their head to one King then it could be done. At that moment the first level 10 Burst Linker will be born, and something will happen in Accel World.

Of course however, that kind of thing is not realistically possible. Burst Linkers fight in order to strengthen themselves. When they reach level 9 after putting in a huge amount of time and passion, they would not be able to readily throw that all away.

On the other hand, the «Defeat the Four Gods and reach the center of Emperor’s Castle» kind of problem, is just a matter of numbers. For example, if one large legion members are all «King» class veterans, it might be possible to break through. This was also unrealistic, but it does not require the spirit of self-sacrifice.

That is, two conditions of «Level 10» and «Emperor’s Castle attack», their difficulty vector is different. The former, strength of heart, and latter, strength of body, were needed. Thinking about that comparison, if they successfully reach the center of the Emperor’s castle, something will happen in the world for sure— conceivably, Brain Burst itself might be cleared, which might make you think like that. Sufficiently. Anyway, «Undefeatable castle existing in the center of world map» is set to be the final chapter stage for any kind of game since ancient times, right?

While tasting the heavy gamer gut feeling tingling stimulus, Haruyuki leaned out and lightly nod.

“Yea... it’s possible, that is possible! If it is protected by that outrageous kind of monsters, the imperial palace... no, the emperor’s castle, is the so-called «Last Dungeon»! If you enter it then for sure something incredible... something incredible will...”

[UI> Conceivably, there might be a last boss even more incredible than the four gods. In any case, two and half years ago, we, Nega Nebulas members, proposed the same explanation right now to Saa-chin who announced retirement. If the first clear condition is cut off, challenge the second one. Against this, the blockhead Saa-chin...]

“Stopped it. Of course I stopped it. I was screaming at the top of my lungs, ‘No way’, ‘I won’t allow’, ‘Give it up’.”

While smiling wryly, Kuroyukihime responded with that.

That expression was calm, and tone was also light. However, a very faint color of pain floated in her black eyes, and when he saw that, Haruyuki had a slight prediction for how this episode would end.

His previous excitement went away, and instead, a cold tension settled on his heart, as Haruyuki waited quietly for following words.

“...However, not only the «Elements», but every member of the first generation Nega Nebulas were also blockheads, so... not only did they refuse their master’s command, they went as far as to request that I use «Judgement» on all of them if I wanted to stop them. Eventually, I got real angry and sat down on the spot, so they left me there and started to slowly head towards the emperor’s castle, and that was how it ended.”

[UI> Naturally. For the same reasons that we are followers, we are also Saa-chin’s protectors.]

“Hey Uiui, at that time you had just entered elementary school! Really... each and everyone...”

The ending of those words, melted into space as they shook. Haruyuki could only silently watch Kuroyukihime’s white throat tremble as she tightly closed her eyes.

When they opened again, her eyelids were faintly wet, but Kuroyukihime quietly continued her recollection without any tears.

“...Left without a choice, I also headed towards the emperor’s castle with everyone. At that time, the field attribute was a rare «Aurora Stage», so... On one side of the night sky, a beautiful aurora was wavering... From Suginami, that walk to emperor’s castle using Shinjuku street was... just like a midnight picnic...”

[UI> It was fun, all right. For me, that time talking about everything with everyone in our legion while walking, remains my most important memory even now. I got to ride on Graph-san’s shoulders... Aqua-san was pushing Raker-san’s wheelchair... it’s just like it happened yesterday.

“We reached the emperor’s castle so quickly, that it made us want to tour around Tokyo. No, Graph had probably said that aloud... However of course that proposal was rejected, and in front of Hanzomon gate, we held our last council of war on top of Kojimachi hill.”

Her long eyebrows lowered, and her pupils wavered as if looking at a faraway place. From slightly open lips, quiet recollection was spun.

“— Since the «Four Gods» have a united relationship, it is necessary to fight them at the same time, so our legion was also divided into four squads to place at east, west, south and north. Before we split up, everyone was given Utai’s support buff so they were full of courage, and with that boost in morale, we united to challenge the emperor’s castle protectors...”

“— And, and then... what happened...?”

Unable to withstand the just one second of silence, Haruyuki inquired with a raspy sound. Kuroyukihime sat upright, placed her hands on top of her lined up knees, and quietly said.

“About 120 seconds after attack started, the final person was killed. The first generation Nega Nebulas did not cease to exist by an unusual dissolution. Rather, it was destroyed by the hand of God in that very moment.”

Their talk was to be continued tomorrow, with Takumu-kun and Chiyuri-kun present as well.

Haruyuki who relaxed after Kuroyukihime said that, downed all of his cold red tea.

He honestly still wanted to ask many things. What exactly did «Destroyed» mean? Those members, where are they right now and what are they doing? Why are they maintaining silence, and have not contacted Kuroyukihime? And then why did one of those people, Shinomiya Utai, after two and half years suddenly appear in front of Haruyuki’s group?

However, that conversation would be a subject that current members Takumu and Chiyuri should also hear about. And then more than anything, the chic analog clock hanging on the wall, would point to the seven o’clock extension in a few minutes.

Quickly cleaning up the tea set, Kuroyukihime picked up her school regulation bag beside the sofa, said “Then, let’s go home” to the other two people, and started walking towards the door. Her poise, Haruyuki believed, did not seem any different from usual.

Meeting Haruyuki in last Autumn, throwing away her dummy avatar cover and returning to the Accel World, at that time she was afraid to even face her past memories. In fact, when the Yellow King thrust that video replay at her in the battlefield, she lost her fighting spirit and became unable to move due to the «Zero Fill¹¹ condition».

That meant, even for Kuroyukihime who has absolute fighting ability, she has to continually battle daily with her weakness.

‘— I don’t have time to be anxious either.’

Standing up, as he followed after Kuroyukihime towards the door, Haruyuki renewed his resolve in his heart.

As a member of the reborn Nega Nebulas, he had to become much much stronger. He had to force out the «Disaster Armor» parasite somewhere on his Duel Avatar in a few days instead of a week, and join the Saturday territory battle with his chest held high. He did not know what kind of thing the «Purification Operation» that Kuroyukihime came up with was, but he will show them that he can endure any kind of special training or penance he was commanded to do.

Haruyuki clenched his right fist, at that time —.

Words continued from the chat window still in his view, showing that even Kuroyukihime was troubled.

[UI> Asking just in case, is Saa-chin planning to leave school in that outfit?]

As he wondered ‘*What?*’ he looked at Kuroyukihime diagonally in front of him. On the other side of the long hair flowing down her back was a glossy quick-dry material T-shirt. The lower half of her body was in tight-fit shorts, and out of them extended slender legs. Haruyuki had completely forgotten, that during the long conversation, Kuroyukihime was still wearing exercise clothes that she changed into for cleaning purpose.

“Uwa-- oh no. Please wait a minute.”

Kuroyukihime made a rare panicked noise and spun around. She went between the round eyed Haruyuki, and somewhat amazed Utai, reaching the front of lockers at the southwest corner, then —

Dropping her bag on the floor, she held the T-shirt’s hem with both hands, and removed her top in one motion without any hesitation.

At the moment her pure white back, and black lace underwear strap burned his retina.

11. See Volume 2. Zero Fill is when a Burst Linker is unable to move their avatar when they lose their fighting spirit.

“Whatdablargh!?”

Was that mysterious sound leaking out, a huge mistake, or a slightly correct answer? Anyway, at the moment Kuroyukihime heard that, she hurriedly turned around once more, and quickly covered her chest with both arms on seeing Haruyuki standing rigid there. While seeing her face getting redder and redder, Haruyuki earnestly thought.

— I am glad this is the real world. If this was the Accel World, then my head would have been blown up by the highest class Incarnate attack.

Right after, the black T-shirt that came flying with a woosh scored a direct hit on Haruyuki’s face, and all of his view blacked out along with an incredibly nice scent.



Following after Kuroyukihime who quickly changed clothes after chasing Haruyuki from the student council room, and Utai who looked astounded, they exited the school gate, recording leaving time at a dangerously close 20 seconds to 7:00.

Without even time for a relaxing breath, a sharp voice struck the top of his head.

“Haruyuki-kun, it’s already dark, so you can escort Utai! Tomorrow, depending on when the caretaker committee activity ends, gather in the student council room! You can tell Takumu-kun and Chiyuri-kun about that! That’s all! Goodbye!”

Kuroyukihime barked those commands and a farewell, turned around, and strode away from the school gate towards Asagaya. After the *clop-clop* sounds of her loafers sound died down, and watching her swaying black hair melt into darkness, Haruyuki finally blew out the air in his chest.

“...I, it wasn’t really my fault...”

After his mumble, Utai beside him lightly moved her fingers.

[UI> Saa-chin is still a clumsy girl in hiding as she was before.]

“...Yeah, I knew that somehow...”

After nodding, he lightly shook his head left and right, and reorganized his thoughts. It was a Monday after school with too many things that happened, but he had not completely finished his mission yet. By Kuroyukihime’s command, he still had the task of escorting Utai home.

With a quick glance to the sky, he could see that the evening colors had mostly gone away, with city center street lights dimly lighting up the bottoms of clouds.

Even with various roads covered by social camera web surveillance, an elementary fourth year student walking alone at this hour is certainly dangerous. No, before that —.

“Ah... Shinomiya-san. It’s already past seven, is your curfew or whatever okay?”

At his inquiry, Utai’s fingers moved with no change at all in her expression.

[UI> No problem. I am a Burst Linker too; you know?]

Understanding the meaning of those words, Haruyuki pinched his mouth involuntarily.

Almost all Burst Linkers, have one scar in common. In the words of Haruyuki’s «Master», Sky Raker, when they were babies, they were given the Neuro Linker in exchange of their parents’ care. Children who were raised that way would definitely not be yelled at, was what Utai wanted to say.

The answer to that was, even if she returned home after nine, there would not be any adult at home to do the yelling, which Haruyuki understood very well.

“...I see. Well, it’s better to go home quickly. Since we worked hard cleaning, we will be hungry.”

At the moment he said that, from Haruyuki’s own digestive system, a loud low rumble was released. Utai grinned and nodded with her tied up hair swaying.

[UI> That seems to be true. I will go home by myself, so Arita-san, please return home as well. Well then, good night.]

After a bow, as Utai turned around with her white skirt hem flying and walked south, Haruyuki hurriedly chased after.

“No, I will escort you! It’s already dark, and if I return home like this, tomorrow Kuroyukihime-senpai will be really mad...”

After his said that with a quick mumble, Utai tilted her head slightly while walking and answered.

[UI> That might also be true. Well then, do you mind going with me to Oomiya?]

And then with a slight adjustment of her course to the left, she lined up at Haruyuki’s side.

That was indeed an indescribably strange walk.

Haruyuki was an only child so naturally he did not have a younger brother or sister, and his mother alienated her relatives, so he had almost no memory of playing with younger kids. If he really had to give an example, his cousin Saitou Tomoko-chan should be living in the neighboring Nakano ward, which he met five or six years ago at his mother’s family home.

No —, for younger friend, it could be said that he had Niko, who had faked being that Tomoko-chan and barged into his home. But she was the Red King who led the big legion «Prominence». It was very difficult to think of her as a small kid. On the other hand, if he actually treated her like one, he would be burnt to a crisp with one shot from her main canon.

So walking beside Shinomiya Utai wearing a leather satchel and with a sports bag hanging down her right hand, like an older brother, was something very refreshing for Haruyuki.

“Ah, d-do you want me to hold your bag?”

After walking over 100 meters, he finally noticed that and said it, then Utai handed it to him after a bow of thanks. He accepted it, and with exaggerated motions, swung it to his left hand.

— *Does protecting someone feel like this?*

While adjusting his strides to walk down the residential street path lit by LED street lights, Haruyuki thought in a daze.

He had not even imagined it till now, but eventually in the distant future, the time to use his right to copy and install Brain Burst would come. That meant, as a «Parent» Burst Linker, picking someone to be his «Child». To protect and raise a know-nothing Level 1 novice.

— *If, for example, one in a million chance, that person is like Shinomiya Utai walking beside me, a younger weak girl. No, moving my imagination a step forward, what if Utai was my «Child»? Would I be able to behave like a proper «Parent»? Sometimes strict, yet gentle; would I be able to protect and guide Utai?*

‘— I can do it. I should be able to do it. Since I can properly say “Can I hold your bag”, and I am matching her walking speed perfectly. Ah, it would be nice if we really were «Parent & Child».’

With that and many airy imaginations, no, fantasies going around his head, Haruyuki completely forgot the important fact he was told a few tens of minutes ago.

What reminded him of that carelessness, was Utai who was walking beside him silently, suddenly moved both hands, and reservedly typed a few sentences.

[UI> My home is close to there. Therefore, with this opportunity, I have a little request for Arita-san.]

As Haruyuki blinked and read those words, he nodded while still having pseudo-parental feelings.

“S-sure, anything!”

[UI> On top of being escorted, to cause you trouble again and again...]

“It’s fine, it’s fine! Don’t hold back!”

[UI> Thank you very much. Then, I will accept the kindness of your words.]

“O-Okay, wh... what is it?”

[UI> Please let me see your true strength. Before following Saa-chin’s plan, I want to see for myself if the «Silver Crow» is truly someone worthy of being Nega Nebulas’ spearhead.]

“...Yes?”

Click.

In front of Haruyuki who froze in that unnatural position and expression, Utai took off the satchel from her shoulders, opened the flap and took something out. it was similarly small, had an unglazed texture, a matted off white — Neuro Linker.

As he watched her left hand lift up her ponytail to place the quantum device on her delicate neck, Haruyuki finally remembered the fact that he had completely forgotten.

Shinomiya Utai was a first generation Nega Nebulas member, and furthermore, she was one of the core members known as the [Four Elements], which meant that she held the same rank as that Sky Raker. That meant that, far from being a Level 1 novice, she was probably far, far stronger and much more highly ranked than Haruyuki —

Pulling the still frozen Haruyuki’s shirt around his waist area, Utai guided him to a bench placed at regular intervals along the path. After Haruyuki sat down half on automatic, she again searched her satchel, then took out something.

A white vinyl covered XSB cable meant for direct connection.

While handing one plug to Haruyuki, Utai skillfully typed with just her left hand.

[UI> One on one fight with me? Or make a tag group, for two on two against other teams?]

Tag please.

Haruyuki's reply came in half of a second.

The bench that Haruyuki and Utai sat on was located in the real world residential district of Oomiya Itchome in Suginami Ward, and was also part of the «Suginami Second Battle Area» in Accel World.

With Shinjuku to the east, and Shibuya to the southeast, this area was comparatively devoid of Burst Linkers. However, as 6:00 - 8:00 PM was the most popular time of day to duel, and there were many large dive cafes along the nearby Seven Ring Road, it should be possible to find at least 20 people in the matching list at this time.

Haruyuki direct connected to Utai with a 1.5-meter-long XSB cable, and after the Wired Connection warning showed up and disappeared, he straightened his back and placed his hands on his knees as he stared. The little girl five years younger than him, as if with no change in expression, was manipulating her virtual desktop with relaxed movements. She had probably started up her BB console, and set Haruyuki — «Silver Crow» as her tag partner.

[UI> Well then, I will pick a suitable duel opponent tag team. I will just be on support for the opening part, so Arita-san, please fight as you see fit. If you're ready, I will start.]

“Ye, yes, go ahead!”

After he replied with his dried mouth, Haruyuki gazed at Utai's glossy lips. Of course that was not an act of harassment, it was so that he could match Utai's acceleration command.

However, right after, Haruyuki arrived at a question that he had not thought about till now.

Shinomiya Utai had expressive aphasia. She could not speak with an actual voice. In that situation, how is she going to convey her command to the Brain Burst program?

The answer was simple.

Utai suddenly closed her eyes, and carved a narrow valley between her eyebrows. Her slightly parted lips, shook as if in convulsions. Inside that, her teeth creaked against one another. One and two drops of sweat floated up on her forehead.

It was brute force. The sound that would not come out was to be forced out by punishing her own body.

Stop it, Haruyuki desperately swallowed his shout. Since Utai was a high enough rank to be part of what is called the «Four Elements» of old Nega Nebulas, she should have experienced innumerable duels to reach that point. She couldn't rely on only «waiting to be challenged».

That meant this little girl had repeated this tremendously painful looking act so many times that it could not be counted.

It probably took less than five seconds, but the result of this struggle that felt many times longer, was that Utai's lips opened about two centimeters. Continuing, it narrowed, and opened sidewise again. Finally, they pursed together again.

Bu.. rst... Lin.. k.

It was almost soundless, but those syllables were definitely carved by Utai's real mouth. At the same time Haruyuki also, with unusually awkward movements, whispered those same words.

Chapter 6

Like a mirage that vanished without a trace, the warm moist air brought on by the monsoon rains disappeared, and cool breeze caressing his body took its place.

Under his duel avatar's mirrored helmet, Haruyuki excitedly opened both his eyes. No matter how many time he battled, immense joy always filled him the instant he confirms the stage setting.

However, this time, there was something more important than the stage that mystified him, and thus with a single glance at the fire-red sunset with cool breeze rustling the sea of golden grass, Haruyuki confirmed it was the «Grassland» stage, and immediately turned around.

Just as the object of his immense curiosity – the duel avatar Shinomiya Utai controlled – came into his vision, and in that instant, Haruyuki inhaled sharply.

As Haruyuki had expected, her body was small, yet it possessed a thickness that couldn't be called 'small' at all. The reason was embodied in the long shields draped from both her hands, and the layer of protective skirt armour she wore, which covered from her upper waist to her feet, widening at the bottom. Putting these two components together, it practically looks like a set of white clothes with a red skirt – it resembles olden Japanese apparel.

But the deepest impression this duel avatar made was that its upper and lower halves were of completely different colours.

The colour of her torso and arms are a moist, watery, pale white, very similar to her Neuro Linker. However, the lower body's clothing armour is a deep, vibrant, pure red in contrast. It's completely different from the vibrant red of Red Rider, the first-generation Red King, nor does it elicit the transparency of Scarlet Rain, the second generation King. This particular colour, combined with her avatar gives a distinct Japanese feeling – it should be called «Vermilion».

The head bore an astounding resemblance to Utai real self. In front of her forehead, fringe-like armour plates cover her white mask, while a considerably long head of 'hair' extended from the back of her head. Combined with her skirt and eye lenses dyed in the same vermilion colour, it was both cute and yet appeared firm and unwavering.

Haruyuki has never ever seen such an avatar with two colours separated like this. Silver Crow's body was coloured entirely silver, of course, and this was also the case for the legionnaires of Nega Nebulas who all possessed a single colour. Even though there are duel avatars that do have more than two colours, they were different shades of the same colour, as '*the duel avatar's colour name = duel avatar's affinity = the colour of its body.*' Since the colour name of a duel avatar's name is one word, there should only be one hue of colour being expressed – or that's how it should be.

But before Haruyuki's eyes, the lower half of Utai's slender and elegant avatar is very close to the «Red of ranged Combat», while the upper half similarly is dyed in the «White of Special Character». What colour name might then possibly encompass both colours despite their clearly dissimilar properties?

Haruyuki became fully aware of his gaze, captivated by the powerful attraction of the Japanese-style avatar, and looked away to the two Health Gauges in the upper left corner of his vision. He focused on the names tagged to the Gauge:

[Ardor Maiden]. This is the name of Shinomiya Utai's avatar.

Maiden can be understood and interpreted as 'young woman.' There's no other name besides this that fits Utai better.

But the crucial point is the colour word, the English word '*ardor*,' which Haruyuki momentarily couldn't translate. Had this been the real world, a translation bubble would be called up just by focusing on the word in question. Regrettably, no such function existed in Brain Burst. Even if he felt that he has come across this word before, all the English materials up until 2nd year middle school level at least definitely did not cover this word.

Asking Utai for the meaning of her name would really be quite going off-topic, so Haruyuki could only give up and check his tag partner's Level. It was Level 7 – as expected: considerably high.

Haruyuki spent another three seconds to finish gathering his information, and then spoke to her while bowing:

“Then...then, please take care of me¹². I won't disappoint you.”

Raising his head after speaking, he suddenly realised there was a problem. Brain Burst does not provide automatic translation capabilities nor textual chatting functions. How on earth would they communicate then? Sign language? Eye contact?

Immediately afterwards, Utai replied in such a way that made Haruyuki doubt his eyes – or rather, his ears:

“Take care of me too. And *Kuu-san*, there is no need to speak so politely all of a sudden.”

¹² When Haruyuki first says 'Please take care of me,' it's in polite speech. The later reply by Maiden is a shorter, more casual form.

–Kuu-san? Is this referring to me? Is this ‘kuu’ from ‘crow?’

No, this is not the question. I definitely didn’t mishear– she actually spoke. The mouth sections of Utai’s duel avatar’s mask had definitely moved, and afterwards a voice had been heard.

“May...may...may I ask? Shi...Shi...Shi...no, um, how should I address you...”

“Anything besides ‘Denden’ is fine. Previously, I was called ‘Mei.’”

–is it the first half of ‘Maiden?’ No, this still isn’t the important thing now.

“...then, then...Mei-san, this...just now, you...spoke...”

Extremely shocked, Haruyuki’s words were more than a little rash, but Utai didn’t seem to mind and nodded:

“I may only speak like this during Acceleration. You could say that it’s the only reason why I continue to come to this world.”

Her voice seemed to carry a piercing, unyielding tenacity underneath its innocent and pure tone. While Haruyuki’s poor speaking skills are a perfect reflection of his real self, Utai’s voice was overwhelmingly smooth with a rich inflection to her words; every word could be heard clearly, as though she had taken speaking classes.

“But...but, to talk in this world, isn’t the theory that speech signals originate from conscious thought and the Neuro Linker processes them...?”

“I myself am not so sure of the specifics. But in the past, Black Lotus said that this is because the depth of quantum consciousness connection is never the same for everyone.”

“Oh, oh...I don’t understand either...”

Tilting his head to the side in deep thought, Haruyuki resumed his close examination of the entirety of Utai’s avatar.



Exquisite as the combination of pure white and vermilion was, the Japanese-style apparel, a white shirt and red skirt, almost made him feel like his very soul was being captured. No – perhaps there’s a reason for this appearance. The arrangement of these colours and this appearance reminded him of a certain event in the real world. He remembered that long ago, he had seen it *there*...remembering that it was before his parents divorced, and the three of them were together for New Year’s...

“Kuu-san, I don’t mind even if you stare at me all day...”

“...and there, we went to a huge shrine...to pray for New Year’s...”

“I wouldn’t mind if you want to come pray in June for New Year either...”

“After praying, then we went for a divination...and then I remember drawing ‘Greatly Inauspicious’...”

“But the Guide Cursor has been moving nonstop till now.”

“It was written on the top that my interaction with others would greatly suffer...wait, what?”

When Utai’s words had finally reached his consciousness, Haruyuki hurriedly looked at the dull blue cursor in the center of his vision. Indeed, the cursor was circling from left to right speedily, and the opponents were surely where the arrow pointed.

This picturesque grassland after all is a battleground provided by Brain Burst, not a virtual space to chit-chat.

“No good...they’ve gotten a lot closer!”

Quickly grasping the situation, Haruyuki checked on the opposing tag team information in the upper right corner of his vision.

One of them was a Level 4, «Olive Glove», who should be a Green Legionnaire whom Haruyuki had never seen before.

However, he was quite surprised upon checking the other name.

It’s «Bush Utan». A Level 3, he’s also a Green Legionnaire whom Haruyuki battled numerous times before. But whenever he appeared in the Suginami Ward, it was always in a Tag Team with the person he called ‘Big Bro,’ the motorcycle rider Ash Roller.

Despite his misgivings, it wasn’t as though he teamed up with his pal to battle more than half the time, so Haruyuki set his feelings of uneasiness aside. There was a more pressing question before him: going by the Guide Cursor, the enemy should have closed in within twenty metres and logically the battling will begin soon, but—

“...where are they?”

Tiptoeing, Haruyuki desperately scanned in the direction of the Cursor, but all he saw was the absurdly tall grass being blown by the wind. Not even the silhouettes of the opponents’ avatar could be seen. They surely should be keeping a low profile as though swimming through the grass.

While Haruyuki looked all around, Utai softly spoke to him:

“Kuu-san, it seems that the opponents have split themselves into front and rear vanguards. I will take care of the rear and leave the front to you. Please let me see your true strength.”

She leisurely walked towards the back after saying that.

From Utai's manner of speech before the battle, she should be related to Kuroyukihime's «Disaster Armour Purification Plan» for her, a rural resident, to even appear before Haruyuki. And it is almost as though she is judging on whether to take part or not based on the outcome of this battle.

As such, a meaningful victory should be desired; a quick win is out of the question. But it is useless to talk about winning when the enemy can't be found at this very moment! From the opponent's constant movement to the left, coming closer in a spiral pattern, he would soon approach within 10 metres of Haruyuki, and at that point the Guide Cursor will vanish. With increasing desperation, he searched high and low for his opponent to no avail, unable to distinguish between the occasional rustling of the wind and the sound of an opponent's footsteps.

–that's right, listen!

He abruptly shut his eyes and directed all his concentration to his ears. He needed to listen for the differences in the sound: when an opponent tramples the grass as he advances, and the rustling of grass and leaves when the wind blows. There's a minute difference between the two that should be heard.

A few seconds passed--

“...there's absolutely nothing!”

Feeling extremely irritated, Haruyuki opened his eyes again. No matter how he listens, there seems to be zero variation of the *shashasha* sound coming from all directions. Usually there will be small differences between the two players, but to perceive this aural difference might possibly require anti-detection training.

His eyes and ears were useless in this situation. Haruyuki might be able to find the opponent if he was able to fly with his wings, but his Special Gauge was still empty, and there were no breakable objects in the surroundings.

On the edge of grinding his teeth in worry, the Guide Cursor in Haruyuki's vision finally disappeared. Strictly speaking, there was still one more Cursor, albeit pale-coloured, but it points towards the rear vanguard opponent instead, and as such is irrelevant to the circumstances.

He doesn't know if the front vanguard is Bush Utan or Olive Glove, but that guy, having come within a radius of 10 metres, should be waiting for an opportunity to strike and dish out punishment to Silver Crow. Of course, Haruyuki could simply copy the same strategy and lie low among the grass, but doing so will sacrifice the biggest advantage of Silver Crow: its speed. And in doing so, the duel would become a fistfight on the ground.

Had this been a regular battle, Haruyuki would have abandoned all thoughts by this time; make preparations beforehand to attack the weak spots, steadily fill his Special Gauge, and bet on aerial combat from the middle of the fight onwards. This could be said to be the default fighting

style of Haruyuki. It's because Silver Crow is not very durable and his attack range is short, therefore it isn't suited for grappling combat on the ground. There's a definite loss of advantages while not flying—

Because that's what he has always believed in his heart.

But, Shinomiya Utai had asked to see Haruyuki's true strength.

This true strength could be said as «One's true power». And as for 'true,' it would mean that no reservation nor excuse is acceptable. Most importantly, this battle definitely has a direct connection to the success or failure of the «Purification Plan».

—Is there no way out anymore? Have I no cards left to deal with this situation?

As he wondered, a thought seemed to flash in his heart.

What if it's her? Even if the Black King, Black Lotus, is only strong in close-quarters combat, what would she do if in the same situation as Haruyuki? Of course she wouldn't be frantically looking around like he is; she'd definitely stay in that one spot leisurely until the enemy shows himself to attack, betting on that one instant to counter. Indeed, she'd do this. Since the enemy is a close-combat type, he certainly won't be standing in the grass the instant he strikes.

Naturally, Haruyuki will be the one slower to react in this course of action. He can't preemptively strike even if he sees the enemy. But in the Direct Connect duel last week, she told him that a skill to switch from defense to offense exists. He can't replicate it exactly, but even if he tries and fails, it's a hundred times better than not thinking and blankly standing there.

Relaxing his entire body, Haruyuki half-closed his eyes.

The image of Black Lotus during last week's duel appeared in his mind.

Silver Crow's fastest, most powerful right-hand punch was still slow in comparison to the speed at which the Black King had intercepted it. Her movement was not so much *fast* as it was «without excess movement». It wasn't merely repelling the enemy strike as much as it was pulling it in and diverting its vector to push it away. This technique as named by the Black King is «Soft Act», or also known as «Guard Reversal»¹³.

A high-pitched '*rüing*' sound can be heard in his consciousness, blotting out all sound in the background while keeping perfectly still. This is the Accelerated Sense, which Haruyuki only experiences after surpassing a certain level of concentration, although this is his first time doing so when keeping still in a relaxed state.

After an indeterminable amount of time, Haruyuki finally felt the direction of the opponent's first strike; not by seeing nor hearing, **but by the slight tremors of footsteps.**

—the back-right!

¹³ 受け返し (*uke kaeshi*) in Japanese, 四两拨千斤 (*sìliǎngbōqiānjīn*) in Chinese. It's «Give & Take» and «Skillful Deflection» respectively.

Haruyuki turned his body and raised his right hand simultaneously; at the same moment, his opponent emerged from the grass, his fist thrusting forward; a small, grassy-green avatar that blended into the surroundings: Bush Utan.

His mask resembled that of a primate. His body was hunched over with small feet, but his arms were long and thick. It would seem that he had not run through the grass, but instead depended on his muscular arms to ‘swim’ through, which explains the lack of footsteps.

There was a distinct advantage for the short-statured in this kind of terrain. To Haruyuki, this first strike is a surprise attack. By the time he had determined his opponent’s identity, the huge right fist was no more than ten centimetres away from his face. Combined with the fact that his footing was less than ideal, it is impossible to dodge this hit.

“–Hohh!”

Certain that his first hit would connect, Utan shouted loudly. Soundlessly, Haruyuki intercepted the enemy’s fist with his open palm.

The blazing power from the enemy’s right hook was transferred to the palm. In this moment, any attempt to withstand and block would certainly end with the arms being deflected instantly and the face bearing the brunt of the strike. Rather than doggedly resisting, it is to adjust one’s movements to match the enemy’s action; not to reject his strength *but to change his vector*. The key point is a «Circular motion». It’s similar to how he played the virtual squash game daily in the past: the speed of the ball will rise infinitely if power hits are always used to return it, so it became necessary to lower its speed by moving the racket’s face in a circular ‘wrapping’ motion.

Recalling the action, Haruyuki twisted his opponent’s fist in an anti-clockwise direction with his palm. It wasn’t possible for him to fully absorb the power of this strike: his right wrist armour creaked from the stress applied, but at the same time he felt the fist’s trajectory being altered. At this stage, Kuroyukihime could already redirect the attack a hundred and eighty degrees to throw Haruyuki backwards completely. Naturally, Haruyuki didn’t have such proficiency, but a deflection of about ten degrees was all that was needed here, such that it would not be a direct hit at least. Clenching his teeth and holding his breath, Haruyuki carefully redirected Utan’s fist into a circular motion.

CHII! A small scraping sound sounded as a sharp, burning, sensation assailed his left cheek. A few dots were shaved off from his HP Gauge. However, the huge fist merely glanced off Haruyuki’s helmet for an instant and continued on past; Utan lost his upper body balance. It would probably be a result of only his arms and shoulders being exceptionally developed, hence raising his centre of gravity too high whenever he strikes.

Realising in that instant, Haruyuki involuntarily swept out his right leg towards Utan’s short legs.

“Uwoah?!”

The grassy green avatar yelped and somersaulted uncontrollably, landing on his back with a *wham!* Although the tall grass might have cushioned the fall and reduced the damage, Utan’s HP Gauge nevertheless fell by a few percentage points.

—*I did it! That looked like Guard Reversal!*

Much as he was elated with himself, it was too early to celebrate. Utan disappeared into the grass with audible rustling sounds again, probably to attempt another sneak attack. Haruyuki crouched slowly and devoted his full attention to his perception.

The next attempt came quickly; within seconds, the ground shook with the vibrations of footsteps from directly behind. Moving faster than his eye could see, Haruyuki's right hand shot out, and in the instant he felt it catch something, immediately guided it into a circular motion again.

When his vision caught up to his action, it was the sight of the deflected left straight and Utan having lost his balance again that greeted his eyes. Utan had attempted to forcibly correct his attack's trajectory - at the cost of raising his centre of gravity when his left leg was fully straightened; Haruyuki reflexive catching of Utan's fist with his palm therefore resulted with his arm hitting Utan's shoulder.

“Hah!”

With that single shout, Haruyuki put in all his strength to deflect Utan, flipping him end-over-end higher in the air before landing on his face. It seemed that the natural cushion of grass wasn't enough to absorb the fall damage: accompanying the injury effect was a 10% decrease in his Health Gauge.

Stuck in that disastrous position with his legs waving in the air for a moment, Bush Utan jumped up explosively with his arm strength to spin a hundred and eighty degrees, landing on his feet. Instead of tunneling back into the grass, he merely retreated a few steps and pointed at Haruyuki:

“Hohoho, as expected of Ash-bro's longtime rival!”

Not expecting this kind of response, Haruyuki could only blink and sputter incoherently: “Eh... It... It is?” But Utan merely continued his rant without paying attention to him:

“To think you'd use such an extraordinarily clever defense technique! This is the first time I wasn't able to get the **FA**¹⁴ on the Grassland Stage! But if you think you've won already, don't get a head of yourself! I would truly be undefeatable if I gave up direct attacking and went for sneak attacks instead!”

“Ugh...”

He wasn't wrong at all. Although he understood Kuroyukihime's tactic of «technique beating strength» with great difficulty, it was fundamentally ineffective against throwing and grappling skills. If both his legs were to be grabbed by Utan's massive hands below the grass, he would end up in a one-sided battle without a doubt.

However, Utan merely waved his right index finger at Haruyuki, who was slowly panicking:

¹⁴ **F**irst **A**ttack.

“But if we used grappling skills here, the audience here would be super-disatisfied, right? That way, they wouldn’t see anything at all!”

Upon hearing this, Haruyuki scanned his surroundings and discovered that besides Shinomiya Utai — «Ardor Maiden», who was watching him from a distance, and the other opponent «Olive Glove», who had yet to make his appearance, everyone else was observing by standing among the grass. Utan was quite correct: no matter how fiercely Haruyuki and Utan tussle on the ground, they would not be seen by anybody.

“...so, what do you plan? Eh, I just wanna clarify, I absolutely won’t agree to using brute strength to decide the winner!”

When Haruyuki had blurted out as such, Utan replied just as he slapped his right fist into the palm of his left:

“Hoho, that’s a pretty good idea! But too bad, those skinny arms of yours that look like bamboo are no match for mine full of power. That’s why, this time I’m going to bring out my newly acquired skill!”

“N...New skill?”

This made Haruyuki tense up. As far as he knew, Bush Utan’s only two weapons are 1) The strength contained within his huge arms, and 2) The ability to extend them by up to three times their length by depleting his Special Gauge. Since he was a Level 3 in the duel last week, it naturally couldn’t be that he had obtained a new Special Move or ability. If that was the case, then he might have used his Burst Points to purchase an Enhanced Armament, or he had perhaps developed a new battle technique. No matter which one it was, he needed to be extra careful.

Haruyuki crouched low and tightened his mind and body. Utan, on the other hand, walked closer without a care in the world and spoke deeply and provocatively:

“Hohoho, if you challenged me thinking that you could win just as easily as you did in last week’s Territorial Battle, then you’ll surely regret this! I’m not the polite me from then anymore, so watch closely... This is my new power!!”

Coming to a stop, he crossed his arms over his chest in a hugely exaggerated action, and after a moment, fiercely uncrossed them while shouting:

“«IS Mode» activate!! Come on!!”

I...IS Mode?

Hearing that unheard-of skill name being called out, Haruyuki braced his senses, preparing to dodge anything – even a long-ranged skill.

But what happened next completely surpassed his predictions.

From the centre of Bush Utan's grass-green chest, a strange object emerged with a *'kacha'* sound. It was a small hemisphere approximately 5 centimetres in diameter with a heavy lustre, but not the metallic type. It looked like plastic; no, it should be best described as a moist texture like an organic form.

The following things immediately confirmed this observation. The hemisphere's surface opened up like a human eye, splitting in half. Below this 'eye' leaked a blood red glow, and the eye stared directly at Haruyuki.

And then-

Bush Utan released a dreadful pressure, flattening the grass all around. Black light was released from the eye in his chest, covering his entire body and radiating loudly. Despite being about ten metres away from Utan, an inexplicable sensation of pain was felt even through Haruyuki's armour.

An abnormal thirst in his eyes, Utan shouted out an unheard-of skill name, raising his right fist as he charged forwards:

“Hohh... «Dark Blow»!”

Gaining the likeness of an enormous steel bullet, the shadow thickened around his fist and gave off a heavy, low vibration as it hurtled towards Haruyuki.

“Ugh...”

If he wanted to, surely Haruyuki could grasp this chance to use Guard Reversal again, but an indescribably frigid killing intent shut down that thought. Driven by fear, he jumped with all his might to the left to dodge.

What happened thereafter blew away Haruyuki's thoughts, even forgetting to counterattack.

Utan's straight landed at his feet, and in an instant **blew away the grassy field like a meteor strike.**

The stage floor possesses different properties from objects and rock, and should not be so easily shattered. Such power to effortlessly carve out such a crater was highly uncommon. Had he attempted to deflect that punch with Guard Reversal, he would have been single-handedly trying to bear such huge strength.

–What was that!? A Special Move...that can't be right, an Enhanced Armament?

At a loss for words, Haruyuki reflexively checked the gauge displayed below Utan's HP, a slim, green line displaying the amount of Special Gauge remaining.

Upon seeing it, he was shocked and left gasping for air.

The gauge hadn't even decreased by a hair. Or rather, it hadn't even been used from the start. And yet, Utan's entire body was constantly radiating a dark aura with flickers of red.

Constant emission of light without depleting the Special Gauge. Only one word in the Accelerated World exists to explain this phenomenon:

«Over-Ray». Besides the Movement Command system most commonly used, there's another way to control a duel avatar: the Image Control System. When a strongly imagined action passes through this system, excess signals are treated and rendered as photons – visible light.

At this point, Haruyuki finally understood what Utan had meant by 'IS Mode.'

It had to be an abbreviation for 'Incarnate System Mode,' or the more commonly used term, 'Incarnate System.' The dark aura enveloping Utan was proof that he had activated the forbidden Incarnate System.

But why did he do this? Whenever high-rankers pass on the knowledge of IS, they would surely warn their students that the Incarnate System is to not be used in normal duels. And besides that, just what was that black eyeball in his chest? Incarnation is purely from the imagination of its user, so no objects nor equipment need to be equipped.

Deeply confused, though Haruyuki was fully aware that Utan, draped in inky blackness, had begun to attack; he thus was unable to react immediately.

“Vuu...hohh!”

Utan yelled out in a distorted voice as he raised his fist high. Haruyuki finally blinked and opened his eyes wide; but it was too late to dodge. Despite knowing the danger of doing so, all he was able to do was to raise his left hand, preparing to apply Soft Act in response-

“Hohh...«Dark Blow»!”

Calling out the same skill name as before, Utan threw an explosive punch.

Haruyuki brought his palm up to bear against the Over-ray emitted by the fist.

For a split second, he felt a bone-chilling sensation in his hand—

With a high-pitched shattering sound, Silver Crow's left hand instantly fragmented into countless shards of silver.

“GUAHHH!”

Even in the regular field with a reduced pain threshold, Haruyuki was unable to hold back his scream from the pain, feeling as though someone had literally ripped out a piece from his mind. And yet Utan's fist didn't stop there and continued on towards his face.

Haruyuki desperately craned his neck away to evade, but couldn't stop the corner of Utan's large, rough thumb from grazing the left edge of his helmet. Feeling as though his cheek had been cauterised, an enormous pressure then knocked him off his feet and onto his back, crumpling heavily into the grass.

Haruyuki rolled on the ground in agony. All of his left arm from the elbow downwards had disappeared without a trace, and at the side of his helmet a deep scar ran, emitting sparks. Utan looked down on him, and withdrew his right hand with heavy movements. He then thrust his left fist into the air.

There was no trace left of the original Bush Utan from last week's duel in the light of his slanted, comma-like eyes behind his humourous mask. No, it could already be seen just ten seconds ago, with none of the passion for duelling. Now, those eyes only held a thirst, a longing beyond hurting and breaking Haruyuki, until he surrendered to Utan's delight.

For the third time, Utan's left fist, cloaked in the sticky black aura, was brought down to strike. Haruyuki propped up his back for dear life and unfurled his wings from this position, extending ten metal fins with all his strength.

Utan's fist deeply pierced the ground where Haruyuki was a mere 0.1 seconds before. His blood ran cold at the mere sight of this, and he climbed as high and fast as he could until he was more than twenty metres above, and only then did he halt.

He couldn't understand it at all, or rather, he refused to believe it. With great difficulty, he eased open his locked jaw, and squeezed out a few words:

"...U, Utan...why...your skill, what the..."

And the reply he received was-

Utan raised a massive hand and faced Haruyuki, floating in the air. A voice crushed low to the point of a rumble issued from his mask:

"...flying away is just as useless..."

A black aura gathered in the center of his palm, five fingers spread outwards. In a slightly distorted voice, he shouted:

"«Dark Shot»!"

A jet-black beam of light erupted from Utan's palm with a heavy sound.

Haruyuki's mind was long past the point of surprise, and all he could do was stare at the black beam streaking right for him. He unconsciously vibrated his wings and slipped sideways, attempting to move out of the beam's way, but of course, it was too late...

Boom!

A huge hole was punched through the centre of his left wing, scattering silver fins much like the feathers of a bird when shot. Consequently, Haruyuki's thrust was unbalanced and he dropped like a stone with no time to react; he crashed into the ground.

If the ground hadn't been thick grass, his Health Gauge would surely have turned red by now. Instead, after a glance at his Gauge that had come dangerously close to fifty percent, even if he

trembled before the fearsome power of Utan’s Incarnate skills, Haruyuki still dragged himself back up.

Trampling the grass with swishing noises, Bust Utan walked up to Haruyuki and broke into a huge sneer:

“...How does my new skill’s power feel like, eh? Ain’t it cool? Nobody could hope to match it, yeah~!”

Light continuously throbbed and emanated from the ‘eyeball’ in the center of his chest. In a soft, stuttering voice, Hauryuki fought against Utan’s bloodthirsty gaze.

“Wh-Why...Just, how did you...get this power...?!”

The answer came just as soon as he thought of it – it could only be that someone taught him how to use the Incarnation System. Just like how Sky Raker had taught him, and Scarlet Rain to Takumu. But there was still something he couldn’t understand:

Niko had said that there were four basic types of Incarnate techniques: «Range», «Movement», «Offense», and «Defense». And, any person can only learn Incarnate techniques that are compatible with their duel avatar’s colour type. But right before his eyes, Bush Utan had shot him out from the sky with a «Range Expansion» technique: the affinity belonging to the Red spectrum in the Colour Circle, and completely opposite of a green avatar’s defensive properties. And prior to that, Utan too had used an «Offensive Expansion» technique to strike Haruyuki. It’s impossible for these Incarnation techniques to exist together; even Niko, herself a high-level Incarnate System user, admitted her inability to use either Offensive or Defensive Expansion techniques given her avatar type.

Faced with a problem far surpassing his comprehension, all Haruyuki could do was to sit down, shell-shocked and gazing blankly.

Across from him, Bush Utan lowered his long, burly arms loosely by his sides while the «Eye» in his chest gazed around. Moving his mouth as little as possible like a child revealing his secrets, Utan spoke with a crazed fervor:

“...Didn’t I say? I...got this from someone who gave it to me. This «IS Mode Study Kit»...or simply ISS Kit.”

“Gave... You? Someone...gave you the ISS Kit?”

He murmured in a daze at this revelation.

Haruyuki was familiar with the words ‘study kit’; there are numerous companies marketing a wide variety of educational kits for young children: Piano, Gymnastics, Bicycle riding, just to name a few study kits. After downloading the kit into the Neuro Linker, either FullDive or Augmented Reality learning could take place under the guidance of a virtual instructor. He himself had used such a kit, ‘Speaking Practice Kit,’ but he didn’t wish to let others know of this fact.

But such companies in the real world couldn't possibly create and sell an 'Incarnate System Study Kit.' And logically speaking, the power of the Incarnate System couldn't possibly be learnt from these quick fixes. Lastly, Utan had said that he did not purchase this, but obtained it from an acquaintance, most probably another Burst Linker who told Utan, 'With this study kit, you can learn the Incarnate System,' and thus passed to him that black eyeball.

So who on earth gave it to him? It couldn't be... It couldn't be...

"This...someone who gave you the 'ISS Kit,' is he... Ash Roller?"

For a moment, a bemused look crossed Utan's face while Haruyuki trembled in fear. Utan then shook his head and replied:

"...Nah, it wasn't. This thing... I would never tell Big Bro Ash about it. 'Cos Big Bro, he... probably wouldn't like this too much, yeah..."

Upon hearing this, Haruyuki secretly exhaled in relief. Ash Roller had already been taught the basics of the Incarnate System by their master, Sky Raker, and therefore shouldn't have to experiment with such suspicious tools like the ISS Kit.

But he couldn't let his guard down just yet. Bush Utan leaned in closer towards Haruyuki, and whispered feverishly:

"...But, as long as I use this kit to become stronger, Crow-san, don't you agree that Big Bro will definitely be happy for me? If he knew that even though Crow-San beat me up just a week ago, and that now I've scored a flawless victory with the ISS kit, Big Bro's gonna be happy, ain't it? He'd say I'm 'GIGA COOL~,' ain't that right?"

"...!"

Seeing Utan's insatiable thirst in his eyes up close, Haruyuki gasped sharply and involuntarily shook his head as he replied:

"...N-No, it wouldn't be. The power of IS Mode... I mean, the Incarnate System shouldn't be learnt from a kit like this. You have to first face your own «trauma», and understand the source from which that power originates... You have to begin from there, or you'd be swallowed up by your heart's darkness..."

"The fuck you sayin'?"

Utan shut Haruyuki up on the spot with his angry retort. Their masks were almost touching each other, the formerly cheerful and lively Burst Linker now spoke in a gravelly tone:

"...Crow. From that tone of yours, it's as though you know a little about this «power» But in that race last week, you should have personally experienced it: the immense power of the shuttle No. 10's «IS Mode» that ran amok and in an instant, rusted away the shuttles of several hundred Gallery members to smithereens. «IS Mode» is such an extraordinary power, an ultimate power that can break every last rule of Brain Burst. There are all those filthy fellows who have been hiding it from everyone else all this time, so is there any purpose in caring about what that

power signifies now? No, or rather... Maybe even you've been using that power in your fights every now and then, winning them in your own little sneaky way?"

Like a huge snake, Utan's right hand snaked forwards and grabbed Haruyuki by his throat, and with his extreme strength lifted him to his feet. From this close proximity, Haruyuki could see into the depths of Utan's eyes, which should have been leafy green in colour, flickering with a black-red light. And – the frequency of this light's pulsing and the eyeball of the ISS Kit stuck in his chest was completely in synchrony.

"If I ain't stronger, there ain't no point to it. If I ain't stronger, my winrate won't be good and all I'll ever be in the legion is merely an underling. It wouldn't be long before I lost all my points, and nobody in Accel World will even know they just lost another small player. But of course, people like you who had rare abilities like «Aviation» from the start wouldn't understand, or maybe there's just no way for guys like you to understand us."

—I understand. I can understand it better than anyone. I've never thought of myself as a winner, not in the real world, not even in Accel World.

That was what he wished to say, but Bush Utan beat him to it. In a hoarse voice, he continued on:

"...But, with this «ISS Kit», even losers can become strong. No... Losers will never have to feel like a loser ever again with its strength. You saw it too, right? In the three days I've had this Kit, I've been able to master «IS Mode» to this extent. As long as I've got this power, I won't ever lose to melee nor ranged attackers ever. Those idiot legionnaires too, who look down on me, and... Even Big Bro – I mean, I can even beat Ash Roller! I'm strong, that's right, I'm stronger!"

His voice wasn't hoarse anymore; at some unknown point, his tone and even his volume had drastically changed.

Bush Utan lifted Haruyuki off the ground with just his right hand gripping Silver Crow's throat, yelling out loud:

"I'm the strongest... I'm stronger than anyone! I don't even need a Tag Partner anymore! 'Olive Glove!' Let's have a duel after this! Let's see who's got the better skill at IS Mode! Where are you, Olive! Watch me finish this guy off!"

With Bush Utan's complete turnaround in character, and Haruyuki's comprehensive ability long overloaded, all he could think in a daze, unable to keep up with the situation anymore.

'Olive Glove' was the name of Utan's tag partner in this battle. He should be his buddy from the Green Legion, but from the way Utan had referred to him, he seemed to have also obtained the ISS Kit. In other words, Olive too should be capable of wielding the terrifying power of «all types of Incarnation»¹⁵. If that was the case, then how had Shinomiya Utai fared as his opponent? She shouldn't have gone down in one hit just like he had...

¹⁵ Very iffy: the term 全属性心念 is used here, which is literally 'All-affinity Incarnation,' 'Universal Incarnation,' etc. It conveys the idea that the ISS Kit grants skills of all affinities from the Colour Circle: ranged & melee offense, defensive, and indirect. Whether all of these are demonstrated remains to be seen.

Just when Haruyuki looked up to check the Health Gauges in the upper corner of his vision, he heard footsteps from his right, and immediately turned to face it.

A chilling wind parted the swaying grass and an unknown duel avatar stepped out, slowly walking towards them.

His armour colour was just like his namesake, a dark brown – Olive. His body was slim like a branch, but his arms were disproportionately large. And, another black hemisphere was stuck in his chest just like Utan.

But the eyelids of this eyeball were nearly shut, save for a tiny exposed sliver of the «Eye». Red light flickered irregularly from it, as though it would go out at any moment.

Upon a closer look, just to keep moving forwards, Olive Glove's avatar itself had to readjust every step he took with great haste, as though... As though he was fleeing.

“...Olive?”

Upon hearing Utan's voice of surprise, this lean avatar raised its head stiffly. Beneath rows of vertical slits, his eyes opened as wide as saucers.

“...Utan...hel... Help me...”

His hoarse voice suddenly cut off mid-sentence as he abruptly turned his head back and raised his right hand out of fright. A thin layer of shadow gathered, wrapping around his hand that resembled the branch of a tree.

“Da...«Dark Sho-»...”

‘THUMP’

A soft sound interrupted Olive mid-word.

It had come from a long, thin object wrapped in flames that had appeared from nowhere, piercing straight through Olive Glove's left chest – a ‘fire arrow.’

The entire duel avatar instantly disintegrated and dispersed; his Health Gauge had been reduced to zero. Haruyuki reflexively checked the four – no, only three bars were left in the corners of his vision.

Bush Utan's Gauge still had 80% left, while Silver Crow's was just less than half full. But Haruyuki's tag partner Shinomiya Utai – Ardor Maiden – her Gauge hadn't decreased even a single dot since the beginning of the battle.

The «Eye» – the «ISS Kit» that Utan had referred to, had already appeared on Olive Glove's chest, so Maiden should also have encountered an Incarnation attack as her opponent's first strike. In Olive's last moments, he had tried to use the same long-ranged skill Utan had utilised, «Dark Shot». That couldn't have been his first Incarnate attack against her, and yet Maiden hadn't even suffered a scratch. How on earth was that so?

Haruyuki momentarily forgot to breathe as his gaze slowly rose from the spot Olive had vanished.

About twenty metres away, the silhouette of a diminutive duel avatar appeared, clad in a white robe and red hakama¹⁶. All of her armour shone brightly without a single imperfection, save for an object she held in her slender left hand that hadn't been there before. It was a long, thin object nearly as tall as she was, gently curving backwards above and below her grip, with a thin line strung between the ends. It was – a bow.

Ardor Maiden nonchalantly glanced at Silver Crow, less a whole arm and one of his wings, and Bush Utan who had him by the throat and off the ground.

There had been nothing else in the space between her hands. But suddenly, a fiery-red line appeared – an arrow of fire. Utai straightened her back, raised her right hand high, and in a beautifully smooth motion, gently pulled on the string.

Time seemed to stop in that moment of silence. Her right hand shimmered, and she simultaneously released the string.

With a gale-force wind the arrow flew, deeply piercing through Bush Utan's right lower arm.

“Uuh...”

Groaning in pain, Utan dumped Haruyuki onto the ground and pulled out the flaming arrow with his left. The arrow dissipated into thin air afterwards. But just from this one shot, Utan's Health Gauge had already been reduced by ten percent.

Though her arrow's damage was high and her accuracy amazing, it was the dignified manner in which Ardor Maiden carried herself which truly frightened Haruyuki – and probably Bush Utan too – rooting him to the spot. The Japanese-style avatar seemed to glide through the sea of grass, murmuring in the wind, as she came closer. If only avatar size is considered, then she's smaller than any other player, yet a scorching aura about her chased away all such feeling. In Niko's words, she exerted an «Unbelievable Information Pressure».

Ardor Maiden came to a stop before Haruyuki and Bush Utan, holding her bow horizontally with both hands before her. In the same dignified manner that belied her innocent tone, she spoke: “This has been an unforeseen matter. I merely wished to restrain Olive-san before a victor could be decided on your side of the duel, but unfortunately that couldn't be the case.”

She shook her head lightly, as though her flawless victory had in fact been a grave mistake. She then proceeded to speak her train of thought aloud in a short monologue:

“The «ISS Kit»... If this was to be spread uncontrollably, it will be quite difficult to resolve the situation. And if the distributor's identity cannot be found quickly...”

Utai raised her head and fixed Utan with a severe gaze. She spoke bluntly:

“Bush Utan, who gave to you this?”

¹⁶ The *haori* and *hakama* are the two most prominent articles of clothing in a shrine maiden's attire.

As though intimidated, the grassy-green avatar retreated two steps. The «Eye» in his chest began to flicker irregularly, as though in pace with his own state of mind. The form of the dark aura surrounding him, too, had begun to sway violently.

Utan shook his head repeatedly, and in a hoarse voice, he croaked in reply:

“I, I can’t tell you... Nope... I promised, not to tell...”

“Is that the case? Well then, there’s no other choice since you’ve made a promise.”

Utai acknowledged with a blunt nod of her head, continuing to fix Utan with an iron stare as she delivered her next question:

“I will daresay that this power will do more harm than good for you. Bush Utan, the «Flames» of my avatar type has the ability to purify your body of that parasitic object if you wish so for it. There is still time for it now. It is regrettable that Olive-san turned me down... But what about you?”

The full implications of her words’ meaning couldn’t be immediately grasped by Haruyuki.

But after a second or so had passed, his eyes grew wide with realisation.

Utai had definitely said *‘The «Flames» of my avatar type has the ability to purify your body of that parasitic object.* ‘But, wasn’t such an ability extremely rare? Hadn’t Kuroyukihime and Fuuko talked about it in the past; parasites and other object of similar types could only be removed by users with the rare «Purifying Ability»?’

Then – Shinomiya Utai, Ardor Maiden, has to be one such user with a Purifying Ability. She is the keystone to the ‘Disaster Armour Purification Plan’ as outlined by Kuroyukihime, which will cleanse Chrome Disaster’s seed from Haruyuki.

As the realisation glued him to the spot, Haruyuki momentarily forgot about the pain from his missing left hand and wing; Utai nodded at Utan, as though urging him to answer.

Standing few metres away, the black aura surrounding his body seemed to become increasingly pale and weak. His voice seemed to have lost all strength as he croaked:

“I... I... I only...wished to become strong...as strong as...-Big Bro...”

He took a single step forwards. His hands dropped to his sides, and his head shivered continuously, as though he was about to nod. But then-

The Eye in his chest suddenly blinked and opened wide and the dull red light it emitted strongly pulsed. At the same time, Bush Utan’s own eyes too, lit up together and the same red light shone from them. Haruyuki got the feeling that it was actually the Eyeball that was interfering with Bush Utan’s state of mind.

“...No... This power is mine... My power... My strength...”

A tinge of distortion overcame his voice, deepening it greatly. The aura surrounding him began to regenerate, and his outstretched hands slowly clenched to form fists.

“I won’t just hand this over... Or let it be stolen... Don’t even think about taking this from me... No. Not at all...”

In a low voice, Utan seemed to ramble to himself, when he abruptly stood straight up forcefully. From his eyes and the Eyeball in his chest, a thin ray of dark red light was emitted like a spear.

“This is my power; this is my «IS Mode»! If you want to take it away... then I’ll show you!”

He thrust his right fist high into the air; a thick black aura had covered it completely--

“Oooh... «Dark Blow»!”

Bush Utan wanted to beat the smaller Ardor Maiden to a pulp from above.

“Ah!”

Haruyuki’s instinct was block with his own fist, but Utai raised her left hand, gesturing for him to stop.

In the same action, she brought forth her right to face Utan. Compared to his fist, massive like a boulder, Utai’s five slim fingers resembled newly-bloomed rose buds. *‘There’s no way she could stop it,’* Haruyuki thought.

But then-

Utai’s palm lit up with a gentle orange light – flames. A clear layer of translucent flame covered her hand in a fraction of a second.

Just as Utan’s fist was about to crush Utai’s comparatively tiny palm – a resounding **BANG!** erupted. The shockwave spread, fiercely shaking Haruyuki and the surrounding grass all around. But all he did was to stare blankly at the scene before him, as though oblivious to everything else.

Utan’s and Maiden’s hands were not touching: a space of five centimetres separated them, and within that space Utan’s black aura could be seen tussling viciously with the semitransparent flame from Utai, emitting dazzling sparks everywhere. This was their respective imaginations clashing to create the «Overwrite» phenomenon – in other words, Maiden was defending against Utan’s Incarnate attack with her own Incarnation.

But the difference between their expressions couldn’t be greater: Utan’s face was twisted with undisguised hate and killing intent, but Utai just kept her hand raised quietly. Her expression looked a little sad, even.

Utai abruptly spoke up, her words reinforcing Haruyuki’s impression.

“Bush Utan, this is where you’re wrong. The power of Incarnation... Or ‘IS Mode’ as you call it, isn’t a power to be bestowed upon you nor a power to be taken from someone. It is born from your heart, from your inner self.”

“...Shut up, shut up shut up!”

Utan bellowed and brandished his left fist.

But even before he had struck, the flame surrounding her right hand strengthened by a tiny amount.

And then the balance of opposing forces between them was instantly dispersed. A tremendous force blew away Utan’s fist, flipping him into the grass behind.

The disparity in their strength was absolute. Utai had probably employed a ‘Defensive Expansion’ Incarnation technique, and despite the fact that her red-type duel avatar should not be able to use such a skill, and even when it should be inefficient, she only had but to use Over-Ray to deflect the opposing fist. All the more, she was no ordinary player.

Bush Utan, too, seemed to have sensed Ardor Maiden’s incredible power, and rather than continue head-on, dived back into the grass. ‘*Shashahsa*’... The sound of rustling grass quickly surrounded them, accompanied with the rustle of the wind. He had not fled, in fact, but most probably was preparing to launch the same long-range dark beam attack that had felled Haruyuki earlier.

“...Ut- Sorry, Mei-san, he’s planning to use a ranged attack!” Haruyuki cried out hurriedly. Utai nodded slightly. Walking a few steps closer to Haruyuki, she turned around to scan the surroundings, and with a dignified voice stepped towards the fields of grass.

“Bush Utan, there’s one more thing which you do not know of. If you attack with Incarnation techniques, you mustn’t forget this. The opponent may also counterattack with Incarnation as well.”

With that, Utai glanced at Haruyuki for a moment before nonchalantly speaking:

“Kuu-san, just once will suffice; please block Utan-san’s attack. My Incarnation technique requires a short period to activate.”

“O-Ok...wait, what?”

Answering without thinking, Haruyuki realised too late that he had just set himself up. It was going to be no easy task to deflect a ranged attack from possibly anywhere – it may well be impossible.

But Utai had already moved out of Haruyuki’s line of sight and began to concentrate. Spreading her feet apart slightly, she shut her eyes, and a layer of Overflow resembling genteel flames enveloped her whole frame.

And then her duel avatar abruptly underwent an unexpected change.

With a loud **clank!**, armour from her fringes slid out and covered her entire face. These pure white surfaces with gentle curves only bore 2 curved lines for eyes, like a false appearance – no, it's actually a mask.

The eyes drawn on this mask appear soft, but to put it another way, they gave off a cold appearance, or there was not the slightest trace of innocence, to say the least.

Following which, another transformation began with the Japanese bow she held in her left.

The entire length of the flaming bow was instantly shrunk into a small rod, merely a fraction of its original size. Utai then transferred this object, still wrapped in flames, into her right hand, holding it outwards like a brush. Haruyuki speculated that that should be some sort of weapon, but in the next moment-

Pah!

With a crisp sound, the rod unfolded from her hand into a thin, sector-shaped object: a «Fan». *Let alone a firearm, it's not even a weapon; why go to the trouble to change the bow into a fan!* No matter how much Haruyuki wanted to yell that at Utai, he couldn't break her concentration just yet.

Unable to do anything else, Haruyuki could only prepare himself to defend against Utan's attack at all costs, and scanned their surroundings.

If Utan's Over-Ray was his original avatar's colour, it might have been possible to spot him through the grass which wouldn't completely conceal him; but the black aura he gave off blended into the shadows created by the evening sun, making it impossible to see where Utan was. And it was just as impossible to hear even the slightest sound of footsteps; given these circumstances, predicting the source of his next shot was more difficult than detecting a punch by several orders of magnitude.

— *Wrong*. Even if he has a way to conceal his footsteps, Utan still has to make a sound before he attacks: «Calling out the Skill Name». Incarnate techniques aren't like normal Special Moves: it was not impossible to activate it without calling out the skill's name. Yet, instant activation without any voice imagination trigger was quite a high-level technique, and for Utan who had only possessed the «ISS Kit» for a few days, he shouldn't have had attained that level of proficiency.

Haruyuki stretched out and brought his fingers together, gathering his entire concentration unto his sense of hearing.

The blowing of wind, the rustling of leaves, all other noises were eliminated from his consciousness, single-mindedly waiting for the one and only sound inscribed into his memory by Utan a few minutes earlier.

When an eternity passed in a few seconds' time, Haruyuki's senses were finally triggered.

“«Dar-»”

His eyes opened in an instant and he shouted:

“«Laser Sword»!!” “«-ark Shot»!!”

The two Incarnate attacks’ names were called out simultaneously.

A black beam shot out from behind Ardor Maiden’s right, and Haruyuki slashed up with his right hand. A silver aura from his fingers elongated into the length of a sword, and its point rushed towards the inky black darkness—



CRAASSHH! With a shrill collision, the laser deviated from its path, barely missing Utai's shoulder and vanishing into the twilight sky. A distance away, an expression of shock momentarily crossed Utan's face as he stood, but his avatar immediately ducked back into the grass, leaving neither sound nor shadow as he fled.

Utai's request «to protect her once» was fulfilled. But Incarnate attacks wouldn't deplete the Special Gauge. Strictly speaking, it requires «mental strength» to attack, but Utan's fighting

spirit was probably in no way weakened. Another Dark Shot was sure to follow in the next few seconds.

Not knowing what to do next, Haruyuki turned back to look at Ardor Maiden.

The diminutive masked avatar slowly waved the hand fan in her right hand, almost as though she was dancing.

This sight suddenly awoke a long-forgotten recollection within Haruyuki's memories:

Hadn't he witnessed this scene before? Yes he had: on a performing stage when he was much younger, he had been brought along by his parents for a New Year's shrine visit. In the midst of mysterious music, a girl dressed in white with a red hakama danced with a fan in one hand just like Utai was now, though there were differences. The performer was not masked like Ardor Maiden is, and her movements were not as dynamic as Utai's. Her changes in tempo were enormous, from a climax to freezing in place noiselessly. There were no other words that came to mind to describe this other than 'superb.'

Haruyuki had long forgotten about the battle just in front of him, and continued to admire the dancing of Ardor Maiden.

Without warning, from the mouth of her mask, a bright, clear voice resounded. She wasn't shouting, and yet her voice clearly carried to every corner of the stage. It was an outstanding «singing» with incredible strength within.

少し涼しき三熱の、
Sukoshi suzushiki san'netsu no

Suddenly, the grassy fields covering the entire stage shuddered. A heat haze? Wrong, it was flames. Flames surrounded Utai and spread far away to the edges of the stage. That was the indication of an Incarnate System Skill, the «Over-Ray», or excess light, that was covering the entire stage. It spread to the point of surpassing even the erosion-type Incarnate System skill employed by Rust Jigsaw, «Rust Order», which had been used during the Hermes Vertical Cord Race last week.

苦しみを免るそれのみか。
*Kurushimi wo manugaru soreno mika.*¹⁷

The world ignited in a blaze.

¹⁷ This line is taken from a Noh play with a poetic structure to it: a faithful translation is beyond our combined abilities. The best I can give is a direct translation:

*Worries and pain, they are
Freed now, and there is more by far*

The phrase 'more by far' should be taken to mean that more than just one's worries & pain can be freed / cleansed / relieved.

Lotus-like red flames rose into the sky in all directions, completely scorching the grassy plains. The whole stage was dyed red, with countless embers dotting the sky like stars.

A two-meter circle of space around Utai was untouched, with naught an ember inside this space. But the illusion of being completely untouched by those flames was enough to rob Haruyuki of breath.

Ardor Maiden gracefully waved her fan. The violently raging flames spread, burning the grass and even the ground to ash.

Between the curtains of fire, a vague shadow could be seen.

That was Bush Utan, whose entire body had been engulfed in flames. His two arms had long ago been incinerated.

And yet unbelievably, his face had no expression of pain whatsoever, only an unreadable expression. He merely looked down on his own body which had just been toasted into a pillar of flame. Haruyuki reflexively checked their HP gauges; Bush Utan's gauge was dropping at an alarming speed. It dropped below 30% in the blink of an eye, as though the flames itself was burning the gauge away. 20%–10%–zero.

With a flash of light and a sound effect, the avatar-shaped pillar of flame disappeared. Even so, the short avatar continued with her dance. While watching her in silence, Haruyuki finally felt all the puzzle pieces fall into place, and understood:

The meaning of «Maiden» does not only refer to a young lady. It also could refer to a priestess of God.

Isn't this very form just that of a shrine maiden, and therefore the first image that is invoked by the red and white armour?

And, «Ardor»'s meaning is 'Blaze.' Hotter than «Fire», more ferocious than «Flames», to the point of an apocalyptic conflagration.

Ardor Maiden.

In other words, «Shrine Maiden of the Destructive Flames».

Chapter 7

Finishing his breakfast of cornflakes with milk in big bites, Haruyuki hurried out of his home after informing his mother in her room that he was going to school.

Although today is a rare sunny day, it is still quite humid, immediately increasing his unhappiness index early in the day; the tiniest amount of exertion is enough to cover one's entire body with sweat, but Haruyuki persisted with a jogging pace towards the main road to the front of the large building.

He isn't running late. His intended destination is not his school, but a location en route to where he normally traveled. Reaching the side of Seven Rings Road, he continued to walk south along the wide pedestrian path, deviating from his usual route of turning right at the turn.

Entering the central flyover and climbing the gentle slope, he soon reached the junction of Seven Rings and Aoume Avenue. Getting on the skybridge escalator, Haruyuki stopped at the center of Seven Rings Line and checked the time in the lower right corner of his vision. It was now 7.45am.

Switching his gaze to the lines of EVs¹⁸ underneath him, Haruyuki softly uttered:

"Burst Link."

'*BASHIII!*' With that sound effect, the world was silenced and dyed blue. This is the Initial Accelerated Space, which the Brain Burst program created by amplifying the quantum clock pulses of Haruyuki's heart and accelerating his thoughts by a thousand times.

At first glance, the EV traffic, dyed a uniform, vivid blue, seems to have completely stopped, but a closer examination would reveal that these cars are in fact moving forwards by about a centimetre every second. Against this strange backdrop, Haruyuki moved the hands of his pink pig avatar and opened the Matching List Option in Brain Burst. Locating the name he was looking for from a long list of familiar names, he exhaled a virtual sigh. Without hesitation, he selected it and pressed "DUEL" on the resulting popup.

The world changed again. From its outer edges inwards, the sky turned an inky black. Scars appeared on the walls of tall buildings and convenience stores on either side of the road. Every car vanished and countless broken walls spawned by the roads, including potholes and rusting gasoline barrels.

The «End Of Century» stage was still a considerably windy environment, and Haruyuki couldn't help but crack a smile. It wasn't that he particularly liked this stage, but there was no stage more suitable than the current one. That's because the opponent Haruyuki had chosen mere seconds ago had fought in this particular stage for his first «Duel», and furthermore, it was when Haruyuki - Silver Crow had made his debut as a Burst Linker.

Tilting his ear attentively, it wasn't long before Haruyuki picked up on the characteristic sound of a revving internal combustion engine coming from the wide, open northern main road. He should be joyriding towards Haruyuki's position straight as an arrow with the engine at full throttle, since the water-coloured Guide Cursor is practically motionless. Within his heart, Haruyuki was lured for an instant to audaciously attempt the same trick as he had on a similar footbridge in the past: waiting for the opponent and jumping down to deal a full-force flying kick just before he passed directly underneath the bridge.

But Haruyuki stuck to his original plan, and before he could even see the silhouette of his opponent, jumped down from the handrails of the footbridge. Opening his wings to slow his descent, he landed on the road surface gently.

"Eh?"

¹⁸ Electric Vehicles.

"Crow-kun has gone down already? Why?"

This chatter came from the gaggles of Gallery Members gathered on the rooftops of various buildings. It was probably jaw-dropping for them to see Haruyuki squander such a rare advantage; but contrary to what they believed, Haruyuki had not «Accelerated» this time for the sake of a duel.

Putting his hands on his waist, it wasn't long before Haruyuki could make out a shining headlamp from the darkness and the sound of a roaring V-twin engine. It appears that the opponent too, had noticed Haruyuki and had changed gears, preparing to charge straight in; however, he had instead, raised his hands high rather than assume a combative stance to attack first, indicating his lack of intention to fight.

Fortunately, the opponent seemed to have understood his intent. Emerging from the darkness, the front and rear brake rotors of the steel ride emitted sparks from the deceleration, with their orange light reflected in the chrome plating of the upper half of the bike. The rear wheel was skidded and the bike came to a stop before Haruyuki, and the rider removed his hand from the handlebars to shake a finger while clicking his tongue:

"*So Bad*, you challenged me but surrender before we start?"

Facing the devilish scarface mask of the avatar who is probably Accel World's one and only motorbike rider Ash Roller, Haruyuki bowed his head and replied:

"I'm sorry, but today I have something I want to discuss with you, Ash-san..."

Ash Roller belonged to the Green Legion «Great Wall», whose territory was the area of Shibuya to the south, so their main duelling territory was of course Shibuya. Yet for unknown reasons, Ash Roller can be found on the Matching List on normal days in the morning and evening for a short period of time in Suginami. Perhaps it was because he takes a bus that passes through the Kannana road to get to and back from school, so this period of time is considered a «Neighboring Excursion». And if this was truly the case, it was certainly very daring on his part; since it was possible to determine from the duel avatar's spawn location the position of the bus that he rode on, it would be difficult to protect himself from «Reality Intrusion» incidents occurring.

Yet upon a second thought, there were no other Burst Linkers who could be appropriately described with 'daring' and 'rough,' and therefore Haruyuki made his decision to interrupt his thoughts and walked closer to the bike. Lowering his voice, he spoke:

"And, I'd be happy if we can talk in «Closed»..."

«Closed Mode», as it implies, is closed --- completely excluding Gallery members from spectating the fight. It can be initiated with the consent of both sides, but doing so might lead the Gallery to think that the fighters are petty about being seen. Furthermore, «expressing in view of everybody» was the reason why Burst Linkers throw themselves into a fight wholeheartedly, so almost nobody ever uses this mode.

Ash Roller too huffed with dissatisfaction, but agreed in a small voice of 'I got it,' given the serious tone Haruyuki had used.

Facing the four directions of the stage in turn, the motorbike rider shouted in a loud and clear voice:

"Hey HEY! Boyz an' Girlz in the Gallery! You guys can't see Ore-sama win today, SO SORRY, but juz for this fight, everyone, take it that NOTHING happened at all!"

Thunderous protests immediately erupted from every direction above on the rooftops.

"Whaaat? Boooriiing!"

"I haven't seen Ash vs Crow for such a long time now, you guys really should have a go!"

But no matter how fiercely the Gallery opposed him, when Ash added an unnecessary line:

"What can I do? It's this Crow who wants to confess to Ore-sama!"

With this astounding line he said, the roar of protest immediately changed to rapturous applause in a single breath.

Hearing the waves of clapping and whistling, Haruyuki was utterly flustered and shouted "Wait, no..." But if this carrot hadn't been given, more than half the Gallery would have refused to leave the duel. While wondering if Ash planned this seriously or was he just trying to be funny, Haruyuki inevitably bowed to the Gallery.

Hence, he reached and touched his name in the upper left corner of his vision, opening the «Install Menu». From the 'Change Duel Type; menu, he selected «Closed Mode» and pressed OK. A [YES/NO] option window must have appeared in Ash Roller's vision too; his hand moved just a little and every cheer and whisper from the audience immediately disappeared in a flash of light.

A silence settled in over the stage as though the 'mute' button had been pressed, save for the low rumble of the gasoline engine of the V-Twin bike; it was exempt from the rule. Ash Roller reached out with his right hand to toggle the ignition and cut the engine.

"...Alrighty, whaddya wanna say now? Your wings missing again? ...Doesn't seem like it, eh."

"Uhh... Yeah... Well..."

At a loss for the words he should use to explain the situation, Haruyuki decided to simply recount the truth as it had happened, and began:

"Yesterday, I, entered into a duel with « Bush Utan » from Great Wall..."

But that was all he got to when Ash Roller responded in a completely unexpected way:

"What... the heck!?"

The masked rider with a fierce appearance dismounted his bike, his skull-like face mask nearly touching Haruyuki's, shouting:

"Where?! When did this happen?!"

The two of them found a suitably-sized chunk of concrete and sat down facing each other, while Haruyuki related the previous night's duel in detail:

How he had found Bush Utan and Olive Glove in Suginami Battle Area 2 at seven-thirty yesterday evening in a tag team battle,

Bush Utan's repeated use of '-deyansu'¹⁹ in his speech, followed by his equipping of the ISS Kit, and how his attitude drastically changed instantly,

And how Utan had said that this kit 'was given to him three days earlier.'

The only part he had left out was Ardor Maiden's name and her power. The rest of the story would make its way to Ash sooner or later from the spectators present during the duel; the principle was to not spill out information about your own teammates' information anyway, and Ash didn't ask about anything as such.

After listening for about ten minutes, with his hand on his thickly armoured kneecap and his body hunched forwards, Ash let out a deep sigh.

"You said, this is called the 'IS Mode Studying Kit'....."

After saying that in a low voice, he glanced down to meet Haruyuki's eyes and asked simply:

"This IS Mode, it's that so-called 'Incarnation System?'"

"Y... Yeah, I guess it's the same thing. So, Ash-san, about the Incarnation System, you've already...?"

With that question leaving out a great deal of information, the skull-like helmet slowly shook from side to side:

"I've only heard the name from Master. Not quite long ago, when I hit a wall in developing the V-Twin Fist, Master did tell me there's such thing, but I never practised it seriously. How should I say it... I just chickened out. After hearing about the dangers of falling into one's own darkness, I got really scared... And, now since Master has rejoined Nega Nebulas, I can't say the same of her teaching me."

The 'Master' Ash referred to was his Parent, and the same Master who taught Haruyuki Incarnation: Sky Raker. In April this year, she had formally returned to her old home, the Black Legion Nega Nebulas. Hence, she became rivals with Ash Roller, who belonged to Great Wall. While they naturally did not appear to give much thought to this and continued to fight fiercely

¹⁹ This was something untranslatable in Chapter 6; Bush Utan, as opposed to ending sentences with the formal '-desu,' instead ended a great deal of his sentences with '-deyansu' to emphasise himself.

during Territorial Battles, it would seem that Ash could not rid his heart of his unease about being unable to depend on his Parent.

While they had deviated considerably from the question, Haruyuki took the opportunity to ask a question he had been curious about, and opened his mouth:

"Just to ask... Why did you join Great Wall, Ash-san?"

"What's that, all of a sudden? Hmm, actually I just thought it's a fucking big Legion at first. And my house was in its territory, the guys who brought me along weren't all that bad either... After I got in, I found Great Wall feels way freer than Blue or Purple, so no regrets here. And the Legion Master has never said anythin' like an order or rule of any kind."

The Legion Master of Great Wall would obviously be the Green King. Thinking about the Seven Kings' summit a few days ago, when he witnessed the extremely quiet demeanor of « Green Grande », Haruyuki had to agree. After a moment, he finally took a stab at the real question:

"Then, about Bush Utan... He can't be Ash-san's «Child», right?"

As though it was completely out of the blue for Ash Roller, he jerked his head back in surprise and shook his head vigorously:

"Nope. I'm not that good enough to have a 'Child', you know? And lil' Utan's Parent... He ain't around anymore. He lost all his Points earlier this year..."

Hearing this, a shiver ran up Haruyuki's back as Utan's monologue from yesterday seemed to sound in his ears afresh.

---It's useless if I can't get stronger. It means my win rate will remain poor, I'll always be low-ranked in the legion, and lose my Points before long. Nobody will even hear of this small avatar if it disappears from Accel World...

While Haruyuki had fallen silent, Ash Roller deeply sighed and then did something completely unexpected: all that could be seen was his right hand reaching up to touch the jaw of his skull helmet, then a 'kachink' sound was heard and the whole face was flicked up towards the back of his head.

Startled, Haruyuki's back snapped straight up; with his «True Face», Ash Roller made a surprised expression upon seeing this.

The look his true face gave him resembled a science student, with his pointed face plates and his slender, pale green eye lenses; completely different from the normally loudmouthed, guffawing end-of-the-century rider. And the voice even sounded different; its tone had become tender beyond expectations.

"...What?"

"N-Nothing, never mind."

"...Then, back to the main topic. Utan was just a Level 1 when he lost his Parent. And well, I gotta take care of him after a lot of things, just kinda naturally. "Though it didn't seem like what I'd do, I just couldn't leave him like that..."

"Certainly not... You're really good as an older brother, you know?"

"Who knows... In the end, perhaps I really couldn't tell what he was thinking. I do feel that Utan's come up with some conclusion, though...I was busy with a lot of things, and that always came afterwards... Then about two days ago, I couldn't get in touch with him at all. No matter when I connected to the Global Net, he never appeared on the Matching List in Shibuya at all, and he never replied my messages... At that time, I started to hear some weird rumours..."

"Rumours...?"

Haruyuki leaned forwards as Ash Roller hung his shoulders and downheartedly replied:

"Something like, Utan hadcTag-Teamed with Olive Glove, and won over and over in those low-pop areas like Setagaya and Oota with some weird skills. So yesterday, I made a detour 'round those areas, but I didn't think he'd show up all of a sudden in Suginami... And I never thought the «strange skill» was some brilliantly awful thing like that! An Item that just lets anyone use the Incarnation System... You can even pass it to someone else? Gimme a break..."

"Ash-san, would you know which Burst Linker could have given Utan the «ISS Kit»?"

After he squeezed a question into that pause in a very humble manner, Ash's helmet with its visor flicked upwards was shook horizontally.

"...I've no way of knowing who gave it to him. If I were to list everyone I know who has good relations with Utan, I could do it... But Crow, even if we did find who gave it to Utan, it might not matter anymore."

"What? ... Why wouldn't it? That thing is too dangerous, we should at least stop someone from distributing it...!"

Haruyuki hurriedly retorted. "To find the Burst Linker who gave Utan the ISS Kit" was his actual intention of requesting to talk in the closed mode. Even if he couldn't immediately figure the culprit out, as long as he went through the people who had interacted with Utan, he should be able to find out the source.

However, this optimistic theory Haruyuki had was immediately smashed as Ash Roller continued:

"It just bugs me that you said the ISS Kit looked like some living organism. Anything biological-looking in the Accelerated World have some characteristics in common. Like, they can repair themselves... **or split up as time goes by**. What if... What if the Kit can copy itself infinitely?"

"Ah...!"

Haruyuki had not thought of this, and he cried out.

Bush Utan had said that someone else gave him the ISS Kit. Haruyuki had suspicions that only one Burst Linker was distributing it, but there was no basis for this on further analysis. Ash Roller was right, if that black eyeball had the ability to [self-replicate], and thus could give the Kit to any person, especially if that act would bring around some sort of reward... it may be too late.

Even as they were talking, the ISS Kit was already being spread around, and more and more Burst Linkers were being exposed to the dark Incarnate power the system gave them... And furthermore, if there wasn't anyone to teach them what exactly the Incarnate System was, of course they wouldn't know the greatest principle of said system - «only use an Incarnate attack if your opponent uses it first», and would use it repeatedly in battles. That would amount to the collapse of the Brain Burst game. The skills of battle, and the opportunity to show off one's skill would disappear, replaced with constant usage of «Dark Shot» from afar, or «Dark Blow» in close quarters.

That sort of future made Haruyuki shiver.

He tried to find a way to prove this prediction wrong, but Ash Roller spoke up:

“Actually, this sort of story, it's not just Utan and Olive, I've heard about two or three others too, and one of them especially came from Edogawa Ward. According to your account, the reason why I thought there was more than one source of the ISS Kits was because of these rumours.”

“Edogawa Ward?” Haruyuki asked. From Utan's legion's base in Shibuya and Setagaya wards, Edogawa was very far, at the other end of Tokyo. In this case, the chance of the ISS Kits being distributed en masse had just increased tremendously.

- *Who? And why?*

Haruyuki swallowed the questions he had been thinking of since the previous night.

Of course he couldn't get the answer. He lowered his head, and saw his shadow beneath the fuel tank. Ash Roller said, “We've talked for so long, 30 minutes seems so short, huh?”

Haruyuki looked up at the countdown timer in his vision. The timer that had started from the count of 1800 was now only around 300. Of course they could duel again from the Matching List, but if they continued, it was just unproven speculation.

Haruyuki decided to thank Ash for the conversation, in order to bring it to an end, and lowered his head. But Ash had put back on the helmet, and spoke extra-fast, “Crow, a few more things.”

“Uh? What?”

“Um... actually, I shouldn't be raising this topic, but there's no time, so I'll get to the point. Last Sunday, did you notice anything else that was odd? Aside from Utan.”

“Hmm? What was odd?” Haruyuki began scrubbing through his memory, but he couldn't find anything abnormal. Including the territory battle of three days ago, he had been in around twenty battles in the past week. But yesterday, Utan's fight had left him with quite a strong

impact, and he couldn't remember even the result of the other battles. Haruyuki asked, not understanding why this was suddenly raised,

“No... every one of my battles seemed normal to me. What do you mean by ‘odd’?”

Ash Roller made a curious expression and answered, “That is, it's only odd if it's ‘normal’.”

“Odd if it's normal? No... sorry... From the end of the race last week I had a lot of things to worry about, and hadn't been doing a fair amount of battles...”

What he had to worry about, was of course the «Seven King Conference» held the day before, and one of the items on the agenda at that conference was [how to deal with Silver Crow]. If he was unable to «purify» himself of the Disaster Armor within a week, he would be effectively forced out of the Accelerated World. That's right, on further thought, he would not be able to see the chaos the ISS Kit would bring...

At this point, Haruyuki realized what Ash Roller was talking about.

«The ordinary being strange», that's right. Haruyuki should be in a state where he's unable to fight normal battles, because a week ago, in the «Hermes Cord Climbing Race», Silver Crow had, in front of over a hundred people, become the sixth generation «Chrome Disaster», and news of that should have spread all over the Accel World. Having a duel request rejected or getting cussed at was not abnormal.

But the Linkers who had battled him over the last week, including Bush Utan yesterday, seemed to have no idea of this. This should not have happened normally...

“That's right, that's right. Strange... that no one mentioned this during the fight...” said Haruyuki in a scratchy voice. Ash Roller hastily gave him the answer. “This was because, when the gallery saw that small metal kid fight, they had reached an agreement before Linking Out.”

“Eh? An agreement? What agreement?” Haruyuki asked.

Ash Roller thus explained, “That is, «do not blame Silver Crow for equipping the Disaster Armor during the Hermes Cord Climbing Race».”

“Eh...”

“The reason was simple. Because you saved the competition. There should have been no way to continue after what that guy did, but at the end of it you helped everyone take it back from him. Even without someone's suggestion, everyone reached a consensus, that they should keep that single transformation under wraps, and not think about how you acquired the «Disaster Armor» ... or so I heard. That's why no one in the past week mentioned even the ‘D’ of ‘Disaster’.”

“ ... ”

Overcome by emotion, Haryuki could only open his eyes wide in amazement.

The over 100 spectators of the fight between Silver Crow and Rust Jigsaw, of which many were probably among the six colour legions, would probably have regarded Haruyuki as an enemy. They should have delivered judgement on Haruyuki, who had called out the «Disaster Armor», but they, they...

“We may not be in the same Legion, but what matters is that we’re Burst Linkers. That’s probably what’s going on.” said Ash Roller, as he looked at Haruyuki, and continued.

“Crow, it’s because of this, that people have gone light on the animosity towards you. I also heard from senior Linkers at Great Wall about the «Seven King Conference» judgement, and there are some people who think it’s too strict. I want you to understand this, and then listen to me.”

Ash Roller lowered his voice. Haruyuki felt that whatever he had to say was not good, and so also lowered his voice, “

”What is it?”

“I also heard rumours that Utan and Olive’s «strange skills»... **Were copied from those of «Chrome Disaster».**”

Haruyuki ended the closed duel with Ash Roller that took half an hour, and was back on Seventh Loop Avenue. He crossed the overhead bridge and headed south towards the school. Even as he walked west along Ome-dori Street, entered the school gate, and reached his classroom, the shock and suspicion in his head never subsided.

The skills Bush Utan used through the ISS Kit were reproduced from Chrome Disaster’s skills.

This sort of thing shouldn't happen. He had never heard of anyone being able to reproduce abilities, and placing it in a parasitic object. In fact, the concepts of «parasites» and «purification» were only things that Haruyuki had just recently heard of. It was not unthinkable that there were things Haruyuki did not know of.

Also, «Dark Shot» and «Dark Blow» gave off an aura similar to that of Chrome Disaster...

Haruyuki froze on the hard seat made of plastic. Firstly, if these rumours were true - if it spread further, and the ISS Kit spread along with it, those who were devoted towards the Accelerated World would definitely come after Haruyuki, the sixth generation Chrome Disaster, with anger. They may even violate the agreement set down after the Hermes Cord Race. No, these people may have felt betrayed by Haruyuki, and go after him regardless.

“... How did things get to this point...” Haruyuki muttered to himself as the bell rang. How did he even get into this sort of dangerous situation? Besides the judgement at the Seven King Conference, there was also an unseen force backing Haruyuki into a corner. Could there be someone pulling the strings, instead of things being a mere coincidence?

If it were the latter, then he felt that the greatest suspect, probably the architect of this nefarious plot, was a certain someone who had entered Umesato Middle as a first year, the «plunderer» who had appeared in front of Haruyuki.

He looked up at the first-year classrooms above, and shook his head.

This person couldn't be up to anything anymore. For if any Burst Linker had lost all his Burst Points, Brain Burst would be forcibly uninstalled from that person's Neuro Linker, taking with it all the memories of the accelerated world. Haruyuki had talked with that person the day after that decisive battle, and witnessed for himself this rule in effect.

But what if he had learned it from someone else? What if his «Master» decided to show their hand?

“Haru.”

Someone tapped him on his right shoulder, causing Haru to jump up in shock. He turned around and saw his good friend looking at him through blue-framed glasses.

“... Taku.”

“What's up? We're changing classrooms.”

On hearing what the friend he had had since childhood, along with his fellow legion member, Mayuzumi Takumu, said, Haruyuki hastily looked around. Somehow or rather the morning classes had ended and the students were heading out of the classroom. The first class on Tuesdays was music, and it was necessary to go to the soundproofed music classroom for that.

“Oh, oh, oh right.” Haruyuki hastily stood up. Seeing that, Takumu creased his eyebrow, and bent down to whisper in Haruyuki's ear”

“Haru, if you're still worried about the bounty, as I said yesterday, you don't have to. Chiyu, I, Kurasaki-senpai, even master will protect you.”

“Un, un... I should apologize for worrying you all. Haruyuki forced a smile and began walking, while thinking.

Taku probably wouldn't know about the ISS Kit, nor would he know about the Chrome Disaster rumours surrounding it. So in the regular battles after school, they would probably hear about it. It would be best for Haruyuki to explain things first. That's right, not just Takumu, but everyone else too.

Haruyuki exited the classroom onto the corridor, and edged Takumu's arm, saying in a low voice:

“Well, after legion activities, do you mind coming to my place? I have things I wish to discuss with you, which there may not be enough time for in school.

“Okay.” Haruyuki silently thanked Takumu for not prying, and added, “Could you also inform Chiyu? I'll send a mail to senpai and Kurasaki-senpai.”

“Time?” “Let me see... Six-thirty?”

“Okay.” Haruyuki felt the burden in his heart melt away. He clenched his fist and thought to himself.

I’m not giving up; I have such trustworthy partners. Even if someone is planning something, no matter what comes up, it will not affect me. Never.

Taku added something that shattered Haruyuki’s resolve.

“Haru, did you remember to prepare for the solo performance in music class?”

Chapter 8

It was after school.

In the first lesson, music, Haruyuki sang a solo performance. Adding on top of that, in the fifth lesson, PE, he was forced to play softball that he found it very hard. Taking huge damage both physically and mentally in this way, he weakly plodded towards the cabin in the backyard.

For the cleaning of the cabin was finished, missions conducted on today’s diary file was those to be done alone by Haruyuki, the President himself. He was slightly expecting for warm, grateful and appreciative words from Hamajima and Izeki, his colleagues who went home yesterday at lightning speed. But to his disappointment, what he got a moment ago at a staircase entrance were just simple phrases like “Well done, Prez.” and “Thanks”.

“... Fine, fine. A man doesn’t demand gratitude...”

While muttering with a tone that could hardly be called hard-boiled, he walked by the back of the old campus, shaded from the sun, heading to the rearing pen's front.

Exposed to sunshine all day, the cabin’s floor tiles were dried completely. In front of the wire-net gate, the enormous pile of long-ignored leaves were also dried. At this rate, they could be trashed in bags by tomorrow.

Haruyuki stood still there admiring the cabin, feeling on cloud nine as he inspected his handiwork.

Therefore, when an ad-hoc connection request window suddenly popped out in the middle of his vision, he was as surprised as he did yesterday. After jumping back for an instant, he looked around, and recognised a little silhouette standing a bit distant from him.

The hair covering its forehead was cut to align perfectly in length, and behind its head was a tightly strapped pony-tail. On the back of its one-piece uniform was a tea-coloured satchel. This was Shinomiya Utai, a fourth year student of the Matsunogi Academy Elementary Branch, a corporate ally of Umesato Middle School.

“Uh, g... good afternoon.”

As he greeted, he hurried to touch the OK button on the request window. On the chatting window that automatically opened at once, lines of text were flowing out at breakneck speed.

[UI> Good afternoon, Arita-san. Sorry for being late. I requested for equipment acceptance and data registration to the administrator here, therefore it took me some time to get here.]

The typing was as non-human quick as always. Reading twice the passage that was inputted too fast for his eyes to follow, but still did not fully understand it even doing so, Haruyuki lifted up his face and enquired.

“Um... E-Equipment acceptance? What’s... that...?”

Right after saying that, he realized that a pretty big carrying case was set next to the feet of Utai. Its content could not be seen as it was made of some tough-looking plastic, but it must have been quite a hard duty for Utai to take that around if she did it with bare hands.

“Oh, is that the one? If you’re taking it out from that, I can help.”

Meanwhile, Haruyuki stepped closer to the case. For some reason, however, Utai immediately raised her right arm, and typed only with her left hand at the same time.

[UI> No, this is something else. It may sound rude, but I prefer you not to come close to this case for now. I’ll explain the reason later. The equipment... just arrived, as it seems.]

Just as what she said, no, typed, crunchy noise of stepping onto the ground reached the ears of Haruyuki. When he turned his eyes to its source, he saw that it was a young man wearing a home delivery company uniform who was walking. On each of his shoulders, he was carrying an object somewhat looked like a narrow, long log.

“Is the destination here, of the delivery?”

Said the worker; Utai rapidly reacted by moving both her hands. It seemed that she was ad-hoc connected with him as well.

[UI> Yes, it is. It might be a little troublesome, but would you please carry it into the cabin over there? One at the left-inner corner, one at the right-inner corner. Thank you.]

“Gotcha!”

Along with his spirituous reply, Haruyuki watched the worker gradually step forward. What was being carried on his shoulders, something that each had a trunk about 1 metre and 80 centimetres long and a few narrow branches grew twisted, which looked like trees --- no, they were actually trees. There were no leaves on the branches; there were a heavy-looking stands installed at their bottoms. These were more like manufactured than natural.

Efficiently putting the two long trees into the cabin through its opening left opened, the worker looked back after sitting them down away from the shadowy corner. Utai typed to indicate adjustments to their positions:

[UI> About 20cm more to the right for that one... Yes, that would do.]

On the holographic tag receipt presented by the worker who just came out of the cabin, Utai digitally signed. The worker hurried away with a “Thank you!” yell, leaving Haruyuki, Utai, the bizarre trees and the mysterious case behind.

Through the metal net door, Haruyuki vaguely looked up to the tall trees that were just fitted into the cabin.

Both of them should have a diameter of about 7 to 8 cm at the trunk. Their surface was grinded to become shining slick, but they were definitely not new. Most likely, these were things to be used by the animal that would be living here onwards, but to think of it, Haruyuki had not yet been told about what specie did the animal belong to.

To say of breeding society at school, rabbits and chickens are the most commonly seen animals. However, if trees such big are necessary... A monkey? Or could it be a chameleon? It can't be a sloth, can it?

Next to Haruyuki, who was swallowing hard, Utai typed briefly:

[UI> Alright, now let's take the little guy into the cabin. I guess he'll be flying around for quite a while, so please shut the door well after I get in.]

Reflexively, he glanced at the huge carrying case. In this case, what inside is the very animal to be raised. And if it flies around, that can only mean --- it's a bird. What just brought into the cabin were 'perches'.

Thinking about it, there is no way for the breeding society of a primary school to raise monkeys or chameleons. It should be parakeets, mynahs or at most parrots, being the largest.

While feeling a little voice say, 'What could it be?' in his heart, Haruyuki watched Utai as she carefully moved the case. At the moment she went through the door, he suddenly asked:

"Um... Shinomiya-san, may I come in as well?"

Then Utai showed a puzzled face for an instant, and nodded her head.

[UI> I guess it's fine. But it would be bad to scare him, so please stay still and quiet. This little guy is a little shy.]

"Y-Yeah, okay."

Following Utai into the cabin, Haruyuki gently closed the metal net door, then firmly shut it with the slide lock inside.

Confirming this for herself, Utai set the carrying case onto the floor, and laid down her satchel. From it, she took out something unusual. That was a tough, long, leather glove. She familiarly put her left hand through it, and grabbed for two or three times.

After that, crouching to the case, she gently unfastened the slide lock, which was set at the side. Into the darkness, she carefully stuck her left hand inside. The hand was fixed with something that looked like a 'laser glove' that warrior class players in an RPG would likely to equip. No, it was better to say this was exactly the same thing.

A parakeet? No, it's more like a parrot if a glove that strong is needed. Or is it...? While being excited in such way, Haruyuki watched the actions of Utai. She was peeping into the case, and it

seemed like she was talking to the animal. Certainly there was no voice to be heard and her lips did not move at all, but to Haruyuki, he felt like hearing a tender, whispery call.

Seconds later, the left arm started to be cautiously pulled back. Her wrist appeared, her hand's back could be seen, at last her stretched fingers relaxed, and the pair of legs firmly holding onto them came clear to vision. As expected, it is a bird. The color of its feather is a gray close to white. Big, but not huge. Should be a little more than 20 cm tall. If so, that's after all---

Not a parrot.

While Utai was gradually standing up, at the moment when he met eye to eye with the bird standing on her left hand, Haruyuki was about to cry out a 'Hiii!?', though he held it back with all his might.

It had a roundly puffed face. It had a beak exaggeratedly curved downwards, and feathers that stuck out like a pair of ears from both sides of its head. What was more, it had a pair of bronze-glowing, perfect-circle eyes.

This is an owl, a horned one. In other words, a bird of prey. A badass that's carnivorous, hunter-like, and stronger than crows in a fight.

Of course, this was not the first time for him to see this kind of bird. A long time ago, when he went to the Ueno Zoo, there should have been larger owls and even eagles larger than that. However, in a place without any isolation, and to come face to face with it at a right-in-front distance of about 1 meter and a half, it was a different matter. Wasn't it going to fly this way and suck Haruyuki's face in place of its snack?

Trapped in such imagination, as he turned rigid out to his fingertips and stayed his eyes on the huge ones of the owl---

On the chat window in the lower part of his sight, words spelt in a sakura pink font:

[UI> You don't have to be so afraid. In fact, this little guy is more frightened than you are.]

"Huh?... I-Is he?"

Mumbling in a very small voice, he relieved his shoulder for a bit. Right then, the owl as well slightly eased its eyes, tilting its round head like a click. That movement was unexpectedly lovely, and so Haruyuki unconsciously relaxed his mouth.

"That's... an owl, right? What is he called for his kind?"

Enquiring in a quiet voice, the answer appeared right away.

[UI> They're called northern white-faced owls. It's not a local species, but one imported or artificially bred to be pets.]

"Wow... So, did the breeding society at Matsunogi buy him?"

So a rich girl's school does have a different taste on choosing what animals to be pets. To Haruyuki's question asked with such thoughts behind, though, Utai softly shook her head.

[UI> It isn't like that. Sort of, there has been something complicated. It would be long, so I'll leave the explanation for another day.]

Presenting a silent 'sure' by nodding his head, Haruyuki looked to the owl once again. Its movement of bouncing its eyes around did somehow seem anxious. But to think of it, to be taken away from where one gets used to living all of a sudden, to a place completely unfamiliar, maybe it was inevitable to be frightened.

Haruyuki had never bred anything called a 'pet'. What's more, his memories about touching animals raised in other's homes could almost be counted as none. Therefore, to consider what the animal in front of him was feeling, this was his first experience.

"... You don't have to be afraid."

At some time, a small voice broke out of his mouth.

"This is your new home. Shinomiya-san and I have cleaned up this place with all our mights. As long as you're here, no one's going to treat you badly."

To be stripped off from the safe place to be. Haruyuki knew well of how suffering and frightening that was. In the worst days last year, the safest places for Haruyuki in this school had only been the cabin in the male toilet on the third floor of the old wing campus in the real world, and the virtual squash corner on the local network in the virtual world.

However, one day someone suddenly appeared in front of Haruyuki, flapping a pair of spangled wings, and pulled him out from the bottom of this deep hole. From that moment, everything in Haruyuki's daily life had been changed. Knowing an astonishingly huge new world, getting to meet astonishingly plenty of people, and obtaining an astonishingly important place to be.

The horned owl, or white-faced owl, in front of his eyes also had his home taken down for some cold business principles. Not only that, it was almost executed. But with Utai's best efforts, it could find a new place to live like this. This time for sure, you'll live happily forever in this cabin. For that, I want to help even though there's not much I can do --- although Haruyuki thought so, it was uncertain whether the owl understood that.

Unexpectedly spreading its wings, the owl vigorously lifted off from Utai's right hand. In the four meters wide square cabin, it flew round and round in a circle. Its figure, flapping its wings while bathing its white-and-grey feathers in the sunset, was breathtakingly beautiful. Even though that was just a matter of seconds, Haruyuki felt that his body became lighter, as if he was flying with it as well. Eventually, the owl grabbed onto one of the branches of the left tree with its powerful feet, then quietly settled its body down after flapping its wing two or three times.

The big, copper eyes gradually narrowed. The ear-like feathers flicked down, the right leg was held up. Right after it stood on one leg, it stayed still in that position as though it slept.

[UI> As it seems, he likes this place quite well.]

To Utai's words, Haruyuki softly whispered:

"D-Does he?... That's good..."

[UI> It's likely thanks to your kind words, Arita-san. Thank you.]

After typing so, she flicked her head down, making her pony-tail swing. Haruyuki rushed to shake his head and hands in a small but frequent movement.

“I-I helped nothing! It's because you did everything, Shinomiya-san. A... Anyway, well, the owl, what's his name?”

As he asked, Utai lifted her face, blinked for a few times and brightly smiled.

[UI> Oh, that's right, I haven't told you the important things. This little guy is called Hou. It was decided by a whole school voting. Male, probably three years old.]

Calling him Hou just because he's an owl? If so, that's quite a direct-sensed naming. But do white-faced owls also make the 'ho-ho-' sound? Before that, what are the differences between owls born in Japan and northern white-faced owls?

Since he was scrolling through these questions in his head, Haruyuki did not immediately spot something that was more important to notice from Utai's explanation. When he felt a 'Hmm?' Utai was already heading towards the exit with the carrying case embraced. Haruyuki had no choice but to follow her.

Cautiously opening and closing the door to avoid Hou, the northern white-faced owl, flying out of the cabin, and stepping outside, Utai took out a tiny plastic container from the bottom of the carrying case, filled in some water from the tap and went in again. Settling it down on the trunk of the perch tree, she came back out.

[UI> That's all, so it's fine to lock the door for today. We'll set up a bath pool and weight monitoring sensors tomorrow.]

“Wh... What about his food? We don't have to feed him?”

[UI> For today, I've already given him the food in the old cabin before moving him out of there. It's once a day basically, so I'll be visiting here every day after school for the feeding.]

To say of it, yesterday, Utai explained: ‘Since something happened, he stopped eating any food other than that given with my hand’. He was wondering what could have happened, and at the same time, the faint suspicion he felt a moment ago came back to life. Haruyuki scrolled on the chat window, and checked again of what Utai said. At the end of the passage that indicated Hou's name and gender, it was actually written like this: ‘probably three years old.’

Is it possible for the age of an animal bred at school to remain unknown? While he was tilting his head like this in his mind, Haruyuki decided to return to finishing his mission today anyway as the breeding society President.

Opening his own bag, he took out what he received from the office on the first floor of the second campus. It was a brand new stainless steel U-shaped digital lock. Switching it on and connecting it with his Neuro Linker, he then inputted the unlock code that was only distributed to members of the breeding society. The lock unfastened with a ‘*kachin.*’

He put the U-shaped part through the door's metal rod and pushed it back into the main body, then the lock fastened again automatically. Confirming that it was firmly locked by pulling it, he turned back to Utai.

“Well then, I'll give you the password as well, Shinomiya-san.”

[UI> Yes, please. Thank you.]

From the lock's menu window, he copied the code and sent it to Utai. This meant, Utai may feed Hou even when Haruyuki was absent. The society's activities for today was finished by then. Signing on the diary file, he submitted it to the school.

Once more at last, Haruyuki turned his eyes to the northern white-faced owl that stood calmly in the cabin's slight of darkness. Those big eyes looked at Haruyuki for an instant, and were closed again.

--- From now on, I'll be taking care of Hou as well. I have the responsibility to do my best, make sure he can live here happily and without anxiety.

As he had this thought, he felt a body-tensing nervousness, and at the same time, a miraculous warmth appeared in his chest.

In the vision of the standing-still Haruyuki, holding his hands tight, words in sakura pink flowed out.

[UI> Now, shall we head for the next duty, Arita-san?]

“Huh?... The next duty? But isn't all activities at the society for today already...”

[UI> It's not duties of a breeding society member. It's about what to do with the ISS Kit and the Disaster Armor.]

“.....Hah?”

While wavering his thoughts for an instant by the suddenly drastically altered topic, he looked at Shinomiya Utai's short figure in uniform.

To say of it, yeah. This child was not just an animal-loving girl younger than himself --- she was actually one of the core members of the first generation Nega Nebulas, the Elements, and a level 7 burstlinker, The Inferno Shrine Maiden/Ardor Maiden, whose wide-ranged attack power was terrifyingly powerful.

Even after returning to Suginami Ward in reality, finishing the tag duel yesterday, Haruyuki had still been absent-minded. Haruyuki vaguely watched Utai naturally pulling out the direct connection cable from both Neuro Linkers and putting it away into the satchel. Afterwards, he had eventually regained awareness, and immediately asked about what he had been bothered since the middle of the duel.

‘Shinomiya-san, do you have the «purifying ability»? Can you remove parasitic objects!?’

However, her reply was not anything clear.

[UI> Even if I can, that's very time consuming. It would take me at least thirty minutes for tiny objects, like what you just saw. For stronger parasites, there simply isn't enough time in a normal duelling field. I'll tell you the details tomorrow.]

Then Utai stood up, bowing her head very low as she typed [My home is quite nearby, so here is fine.] and disappeared into the residential area.

While he was trying hard to match the shrine maiden figure, which moderately and elegantly danced in the middle of a flame-raging grass plain, with the delicate girl in sight, Haruyuki somehow opened his mouth.

“W-well, um... Y-yeah, there's a lot to discuss about that matter today... It probably won't finish until seven if we talk here at school, so my home will be the place... That's how it turned out, and I've contacted Kuroyukihime-senpai and everyone though... Are you fine with that, Shinomiya-san?”

As he said this, Utai twitched her eyebrows for some reason, and typed a little slowly.

[UI> If that's the case, I would like to visit your home as well, but...]

“Oh... So actually, it's difficult for you to go home late...?”

[UI> No, that shouldn't be a problem... Will every current member be there in the gathering? In particular, will Fuu-nee be there as well...?]

Fuu-nee was in fact Kurasaki Fuuko, or as known as Sky Raker. As for her, he had asked Kuroyukihime to contact and invite. The result had been a quick yes. When Haruyuki said a silent 'Of course' by nodding, Utai faced downwards with an even more difficult expression.

--- She's not used to this, maybe...? It didn't particularly feel like that when I heard the conversation in the Student Union President room yesterday, though...

While Haruyuki was sorting out his speech, thinking like this, Utai held up both her hands with an oddly determined face, and hit her fingers on the hologram keyboard.

[UI> Understood. Since I've come here at Saa-chin's call, this is inevitable anyways. Now, let's go.]

Then, Utai waved her arm to Hou in the cabin, started walking while hugging the carrying case; Haruyuki followed her in a panic. He took over the big case with a call of “I'll take it for you,” and said in a quiet voice:

“Umm... If, there's anything that bothers you, please tell me before it happens...”

But Utai just shook her head and did not answer.

Why was Shinomiya Utai so frightened of Fuuko Kurasaki?

The answer was shown in a form that cannot be clearer twenty-five minutes later, in the living room of Arita’s home, which exists on the twenty-third floor of the complex tall apartment building in Northern Kōenji.

“U... Uiui~~~~~!!”

This scream-like call was the first voice to be heard from Fuuko, who arrived last out of the six gathered this day.

Throwing her bag onto the living room’s ground, fluttering her uniform skirt, she dashed at maximum speed towards Utai. She covered the face-palm Utai as though she was tackling her, and continued yelling while hugging very, very tight to her breasts:

“Uiui--- I’ve missed you so much, Uiui-----!!”

A right hand stuck out under Fuuko’s body tapped the air in a spasm-like movement.

[UI> wsit, stop, fuu-nee, i cam’t breayh]

“Why did you grow so big without my permission... Hmph! But that’s fine, I’ll love you and treat you as before... Hmph!!”

[UI> znyone, hekp]

“Aanh, Uiui... Uiui-----!!”

... This is the first time I’ve seen Shinomiya-san make typos.

Standing still on the floor near the kitchen, Haruyuki fuzzily thought this. To his left, Takumu and Chiyuri opened their eyes wide as if saying ‘I’m dumbstruck’; to his right, Kuroyukihime shook her head as though muttering ‘Oh, my goodness, there she goes’.



The battle happening on the sofa did not seem to finish soon, so Haruyuki shook his head to refresh his mind, and started a conversation with Kuroyukihime in a small voice:

“... Umm, Senpai. Didn’t you mention before that in the members of first generation Nega Nebulas, there was only Fuuko-san and one more person you turned out to meet in the real world? I suppose that was Shinomiya-san?”

“Mm... You have a good memory. That’s right.”

“But Senpai, you’ve also said Fuuko-san used to be the only person that you created friendship with in the real world. I thought the statements conflicts a bit with each other, so I’m bothered... Does it mean... this... sight had been...”

To Haruyuki’s words, Kuroyukihime nodded while wryly laughed.

“Yeah, well... That’s how it is. Although I think of myself as a comrade of Utai, she’s on top of that to Fuuko... How should I put it...?”

After making a small halt to her speech, she turned right to Haruyuki and the other two, and continued with a narrative tone.

“You guys already know why was Fuuko called «ICBM» in the past, right?”

“Uh, yes, I heard it from Niko. The reason was, in Territory Wars, she had used a tactic that carries one of the buffers to strike the opponent team’s back end. That’s was she said.”

“She’s right. It had been very effective at moments such as the opponent’s frontline was pushing near, but the buffer who stuck with Raker must’ve experienced lots of hardship. Dropped onto the points that needed help from high up in the air, or chased by a large group of enemies, sometimes even thrown into the middle of the enemy’s territory as a missile head, and so... You guys might’ve figured it out, but I’m telling you that Utai had been that buffer. She was the «Raker-only option».”

“... O-option...”

Tensing his face, Haruyuki repeated. When he looked at the sofa’s direction again, Utai’s arm that was stretching into the air for help just fell with a ‘pat’.

--- About three minutes later.

Kuroyukihime was sitting at the host’s position of the dining table. To her right was Chiyuri and Takumu. To her left was Fuuko and Utai. And with Haruyuki sitting opposite, everyone sat down once more at the same time in this position. On the table, there were cups of tea that Haruyuki made, and big plates of Chiyuri’s-mom’s-handmade sandwiches brought here by Chiyuri from her home.

There were ham sandwiches stuffed with lettuce and pastrami, veggie cheese sandwiches that mixed cheddar cheese with salad rocket and asparagus, dark rye bread sandwiches that put smoked salmon and avocado in between, and so on. They were piled up so high that it was just spectacular. Even Utai, who had been sick for a moment because of the passionate welcome from Fuuko, was staring at the food with her eyes opened wide.

“It’s always been too kind of you, Chiyuri-kun. I know I’m saying this over and over, but please tell your mother that we thank her very much.”

“No sweat, mom is happy that Haruyuki made such a lot more friends!”

Kuroyukihime bowed, Chiyuri replied cheerfully and Haruyuki made a complicated face. When this sequence of ‘formality’ ended, a unison of ‘Let’s eat!’ came first. To the hill of triangle-cut sandwiches, six hands stretched together.

After Utai finished the sandwiches with not one missing, she danced her fingers faster than she normally would.

[UI> They were very delicious. If what Saa-chin said a while ago was right, does your mother fashion these delicate gourmet every time before our legion meeting starts, Kurashima-san?]

“C’mon, just call me Chiyuri!”

Saying that in front, Chiyuri nodded with a slightly shy smile. As she was told at Utai’s self-introduction about the fact that she could not speak because of expressive aphasia, Chiyuri did not hesitate to continue her speech.

“I was invited into Nega Nebulas about two months ago, so it’s not like that I’ve joined many of the meetings. But, every time when Tak-kun and I were gathering here at Haruyuki’s home, mom had always prepared food for three. Just now, when I told her ‘For six, please!’, she was shocked and went like ‘That’s a double of the old days!’.”

[UI> Now that you say that, I remember that Chiyuri-san was a good friend with Mayuzumi-san and Arita-san since you were a little child.]

Halting her fingers once at this point, Utai stared one by one at the three who were sitting on the other side of the table, then extended the line of words.

[UI> Three people who were best friends since they were children, all became Burst Linkers, and all are fighting together for the same legion on top of that. This is truly a miracle. The bond that you create in reality possesses enormous power. I, too, had built connections in the real world with Saa-chin and Fuu-nee, but that required a long, long time to result in that. And I’m afraid it was too late.]

While the message was read, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko each made a short call. “Utai...” “Uiui...” Utai scrolled her eyes between the two and showed a peaceful --- but somehow sorrowful smile.

[UI> We failed to understand each other, not the fear that cornered Saa-chin, not the deepness or size of Fuu-nee’s dream. Because of that, Saa-chin has been chased after by the six rulers (kings and queens), and Fuu-nee lost her avatar’s legs... And eventually, the legion itself collapsed. If not just three of us, more of the members had made connection in the real world earlier, we could’ve had a different way to go. Until today, I’m still regretting this.]

Utai’s hands abruptly stopped --- Fuuko held them softly from the seat next to her. That action was so different from a moment ago, gentle and kind, seeming full of sympathy.

“But, because of it, we’ve met again, Uiui,”

She whispered, then grinned. Utai opened her eyes wide as though she was startled.

“Two and a half years of time have passed... But Saa-chan and I were both taught by Mr. Little Crow sitting there: there’s been nothing gone too far whatsoever. Saa-chan’s stood up again in the Accelerated World as a Queen, and I’ve took my legs back once more. So...”

“--- We have much confidence,”

Like this, Kuroyukihime took over the line. Wiping her own mouth with a paper napkin, the Black Queen straightened up her back and said in a vigorous tone:

“Utai, we can certainly retrieve your true form that’s sealed in the Unlimited Neutral Field... Even if our opponent will be an invincible god.”

Chapter 9

Finishing the large pile of sandwiches on the table, they kept the plates, refilled the oolong tea, and Haruyuki couldn’t stop himself from asking:

“May I ask... Senpai mentioned that Shinomiya-san’s Avatar was sealed within the Unlimited Neutral Field, how did that happen? Yesterday I tag-teamed with her perfectly fine in a normal Duel Field... or, did she run into some problem within the Unlimited Field?”

To his right, Chiyuri also tilted her head out of curiosity. Takumu thought of something, and trepidately asked to confirm, “Master, the situation you described... don’t tell me it’s «Infinite EK»?”

“As expected of the Professor, indeed. Yes, you are correct.” Kuroyukihime replied with a nod of her head, and Haruyuki didn’t understand what was going on at all.

“Infinite, infinite EK? Taku, what’s that?”

Takumu pushed up the bridge of his glasses, and replied to Haruyuki’s query with one of his own. “Haru, you know of the various means where a Burst Linker can be exiled from the Accelerated World - that is, losing all points and Brain Burst being forcibly uninstalled?”

“Yeah, that’s why we have to win battles...” He replied reflexively, but then recalled the incident two months ago where that nearly happened to him. Thus, he added, “No, there’s also the «Sudden Death Duel», where each party charges all their points into the Sudden Death Duel Card, and the winner takes all... Yeah, speaking of winner-takes-all, there’s also the special rule applying to Level 9s...”

“That’s three. Some more?”

This time Chiyuri added, her facial expression as if the oolong tea in her mouth had suddenly turned to salt water. “And then there’s that, that «Reality Intrusion», whereby you attack the other player in the Real World, trap him on a vehicle or something, then through Direct-Connect duels take all his points. An unforgivable act.”

Takumu’s expression became stern, and he added, “This April, he did force us to take extremes, maybe that counts as a mass PK too? Anyway, let’s get back on topic. So that’s the fourth one. Fifth is, what I just mentioned, «Infinite EK», or ‘Infinite Enemy Kill’ in full.

“Enemy Killing, that is, not killing Enemies, but using Enemies to deal with your opponent?”

“That’s right.”

At this point, Kuroyukihime opened her mouth, and thus the three of them stopped talking and looked in her direction. The black-clothed Legion Master sipped some of her tea, then continued in a quiet voice:

“Within the Unlimited Neutral Field are «Giant-class» Enemies and «Legend-class» Enemies, which among other Enemies have some of the most powerful attacks. Haruyuki should have learnt this from me yesterday. However, there are Enemies more powerful than that, far more intimidating too. They also do not journey around, but rather stay in their designated territories. So as long as you don’t get close, you’ll be safe. Let’s look at it from another angle though. If you even step foot into their territories and get killed, it will be quite difficult to get yourself out.”

“Um... um...” Haruyuki’s vision wandered, trying to remember the rules of the Unlimited Neutral Field. In that world, even though you will still die if your HP hits zero, you will not be sent back to the real world. Rather, your vision will turn grayscale and you’ll enter the “Ghost State”, remaining at the point where you died. After one hour, the Duel Avatar will respawn.

Also, the “Burst Out” command was unavailable in the Unlimited Field. The only way to return to the real world of your own will, that is to say, to exit the FullDive virtual reality game, was to use a «Leave Point» situated in train stations or notable landmarks.

With these two rules in mind, Haruyuki tried to think through what Kuroyukihime said again.

Say someone accidentally got into the territory guarded by these giant Enemies, got targeted by them, took a very large hit and died on the spot. Then, they would be shown a «You are dead» message, and enter the ghost mode where you have no avatar and are limited to a set area, waiting for respawn. After an hour, they regain the ability to move - but they are still within the targeting area of the Enemy. Thus, the Avatar would be immediately attacked, killed, respawn, only to die again...

“Won’t it go on forever?” Haruyuki yelled, and Kuroyukihime nodded her head.

“That’s right, there’s a reason why the word ‘Infinite’ is used. ‘Infinite EK’ is the intentional creation of such a situation... If you wanted someone to lose all their Burst Points, you bring that person to the territory of these Enemies, and let them get killed once an hour. Of course, it is possible to escape, by using the split second between respawn and getting killed again to move a bit, and the next time you respawn, you’ll do so at this new spot, getting away slowly but surely. It may be possible to one day get out. But the problem is, you lose 10 points every time you die. So it’s 100 points for 10 deaths, 1000 points for a hundred deaths. Nobody would be able to take that.”

Haruyuki tried to imagine himself falling into this sort of situation and shuddered. His back froze, and he asked in a scratchy voice: “That’s right, especially if you just leveled up, or bought a really expensive item, you would already have spent a large amount of points to begin with...”

He then remembered something, and asked.

“But, but, this ‘Infinite EK’ ... if someone were to try this tactic, wouldn’t they themselves be taking a large amount of risk? They may die themselves before getting the opponent into a dangerous enough area...”

“That’s right, that’s why common means are to either push the opponent in from outside, or use an explosive-type attack to blast them in.”

The one who replied was Fuuko, who said all that with a serene expression. However, what she added on was quite a shock. “I have had the opportunity to dispose of some PKers back then, so I’d use «Gale Thruster» to throw them in from above. Of course, if ‘Infinite EK’ happens under this sort of situation, it’s hard to get really inside the Enemies’ territory. So if one really tries, there is a way to get out. Of course, if you want to use such a method, you have to take plenty of risks too, and it becomes easier to escape.

The three juniors nodded their heads at the same time. Utai, who had remained silent all this while, started moving her fingers.

[UI> Of course, there are exceptions to every rule.]

This elementary school fourth grader, who had a secretive air around her, looked at some distant point, then slowly continued.

[UI> I had died within the territory of one of Accel World’s strongest Enemies, and am among the three who can never return... Of course, I can enter normal duels, but I am no longer able to enter the Unlimited Neutral Field.]

Haruyuki had already told Takumu and Chiyuri about the story of the first Nega Nebulas that he had heard yesterday in the student council room.

Within the centre of the Unlimited Field, there was the impregnable «Forbidden City». Each of the four gates of this structure had a Super-class Enemy, the «Four Gods», guarding it. The first Nega Nebulas, thinking that being able to breach the Forbidden City was the second condition to clearing Brain Burst, thus attacked the Forbidden City, trying to pass the Four Gods. However, it ended with the annihilation of that Legion.

Haruyuki had only heard of the story until this point, but the key question of why «one major defeat resulted in the destruction of the Legion», he did not know. But after hearing the story of Infinite EK being told, he could already guess. Taking a deep breath, he looked at Kuroyukihime, Fuko and Utai in sequence, then asked. “That is to say, two and a half years ago, Shinomiya-san died within the territory of the Four Gods, and has been unable to escape?”

Utai nodded, and typed on the invisible keyboard.

[UI> Yes. As I specialized in high-power heat attacks, I was asked to face the fire bird «Suzaku» of the South gate. It was able to spray fire for long distances, and could use its claws to do physical damage. It also had an area-of-effect heat damaging skill, and truly was a difficult opponent. We knew that back then, and thus managed to get through to a point where we could see the gate... But at this point, Suzaku changed its attack style. We were unable to withstand its charging attack while wrapping itself with fire, and the squad was decimated. My attack was

unable to even hold a candle to it. Back then I planned to help my comrades escape, and thus lured Suzaku to the innermost point. However, I died there.]

“«Seiryuu» at the East gate and «Genbu» of the North gate likewise switched tactics during the battle.” added Kuroyukihime, and she continued,

“Raker and I, dealing with «Byakko» at the West gate, encountered the same thing. At first we thought we could be stuck there forever, but then she used the last of her strength to fly me out.”

“Back then I had already given up my legs, and was thus useless on the battlefield.” Fuuko added with the same pained expression. “At that point, I flew with all I could, all I wanted then was to make sure Sacchan got out alive. Even now I still dream about Byakko’s teeth biting right behind me... Of course, being the only member of the Four Elements that made it out alive, this is probably the lightest punishment I can have...”

[UI> I don’t this it’s just me, Aqua and Graph must be very thankful for Fuu-nee’s actions back then too.]

“That’s right, Raker, had you and I also been sealed within the gates, we wouldn’t have had the idea of having «Children», and Silver Crow and his good friend Ash Roller would also probably never have been born, not the establishment of the second Nega Nebulas... We would probably not have been able to reunite like that. With your flying, you saved our future.” Kuroyukihime’s words of determination had Fuuko looking up again and she nodded her head.

Looking at this scene, Haruyuki had a warm feeling in his chest, but a question sprouted too. Thus, he asked, “Senpai, I understand the circumstances behind why Shinomiya-san’s avatar was trapped in the south gate. But... Yesterday she and I... Ardor Maiden and I were able to participate in a tag-team battle, that is to say, she is still a Burst Linker, and didn’t lose all her points two and a half years ago, didn’t she? May I ask, how did you guys keep your points even under the Infinite EK state?”

“Good question,” said Kuroyukihime, then she turned to Takumu. “Could I call upon the famed Professor of our legion to explain to everyone? I believe Takumu-kun would have already figured it out.”

Takumu had mixed feelings at showing his ‘Professor Mode’ to Utai, a girl he just met, but nevertheless, he agreed. “Yes, Master,” and turned to everyone.

“Haru, I have a question for you. Do you know how many ways are there to get out of the Unlimited Field?” Haruyuki, on seeing how his childhood friend was pushing up his glasses, pouted and stared at him.

“Hey, even though I know so little about Accel World, I also know about this sort of thing! Also, this is common knowledge. Isn’t the answer just one? The only way to leave the Unlimited Field is to use a Leave Portal. It’s because of this principle that the concept of Infinite EK exists.”

“Eh? Wrong!” This time it was Chiyuri who said that. The other childhood friend made a prankish cat face from behind Takumu, and raised three fingers at Haruyuki. “The answer is three.”

“Eh? How, how? Three, so many? What sort of item? Or skill?” Seeing Haruyuki panic, Chiyuri mimed a “wrong” action with her mouth, and explain, raising one finger at a time.

“Two, «disconnecting the Neuro Linker from the Global Net», and three, «removing the Neuro Linker from the neck of the user».”

“Well...”

The answer was beyond Haruyuki’s comprehension, and he was speechless for a while, finally managing to restart his brain. He then complained, “This, this is cheating! No, I wouldn’t say ‘cheating’, but aren’t they real-world methods?”

“Eh, Taku didn’t specify «only within the Accel World».”

“Yeah... yeah. But how are you going to take off your Neuro Linker while you’re in the Accel World?”

“Eh, Taku didn’t say it had to be something you could do alone!”

Haruyuki and Chiyuri had been bickering like this for god-knows-how-many times since they were young - suddenly, a laugh came from the left. Looking in that direction, not only were Kuroyukihime and Fuuko laughing, a soundless laugh was also coming from Utai.

After about ten seconds, Kuroyukihime then started talking: “Haha, you three really know what you’re talking about. Chiyuri-kun is right. If we restrict ourselves to «leaving the Unlimited Field voluntarily», then yes, there is only one way. But, if we use «forced disconnection in the real world», then that no longer applies.”

She cleared her throat and switched to a more official tone. “Two and a half years ago, the foolhardy members of the first generation Nega Nebulas did try to attack the Imperial Palace, but of course we were not trying to commit group suicide. So we set up some insurance beforehand. We did not connect our Neuro Linkers to the Global Net directly using the usual wireless method. Rather, we used a cable, connecting through a home server or a personal computer, which served as a relay.”

“Relay?” Haruyuki ventured, and Utai added on,

[UI> So we setup the relay to disconnect automatically from the Global Net when a certain message was received. If the entire Legion was defeated, even if one person made it out alive, they could send the disconnection message, and thus everyone would disconnect and leave the Unlimited Field. That is to say, even if someone fell into Infinite EK, they would be able to avoid losing all points.]

“Ah, ah, I see...”

Haruyuki sighed. He never thought such methods could be used to get out of the Unlimited Field.

But then thinking about it, two months ago when he was in that cake shop in Nerima, having requested the Red King Niko to teach Takumu the Incarnate System, they did not use a wireless

connection as well. They used a wired connection to get onto the Global Net. Probably in the room there was also such a device with such a protection set in place.

While Haruyuki was thinking about how there were more of such things he didn't know, Takumu had already raised his hand and asked, "Excuse me, master, I am not very certain of what happens in the event of disconnection... May I ask, under this sort of scenario, what would happen to the Duel Avatar?"

"Yeah... this complicates the situation somewhat. If a method of force-disconnection that is against the rules is used, the Duel Avatar will likewise despawn from the Unlimited Field. Then, it is still possible to participate in normal duels... but the next time one enters the Unlimited Field, they will not appear at where they were in the real world, but where they were previously."

"Eh, eh, this...?" Haruyuki was unable to digest that answer, and thus indicated his confusion. Fuuko raised a finger and continued: "Karasu-san, remember how I stayed for a very long time in that house on top of the Old Tokyo Tower?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course I remember, how could I not... Then, Raker-san pushed me off from there..."

"I already forgot. Anyway, back on topic. In the real world, my residence is in the southern part of Suginami ward, which is quite a distance from the Old Tokyo Tower in Minato ward, right? But however, every time I want to go there, I don't have to travel from Suginami all over again. Rather, I set a timer, which disconnects me automatically. As such, my avatar's positioning data remains at the top of that tower, and I'll appear there next time I dive."

"Ah, so, I see..." Haruyuki his head and resumed his train of thought.

Shinomiya Utai - Ardor Maiden, two years ago, died at the hands of the Super-class Enemy Suzaku within his territory. Originally, she was supposed to respawn infinitely every hour only to get killed again, eventually losing all Burst Points. However, relying on the «message-triggered disconnection» protection system, she was able to leave before losing all points and return to the real world. That was how she was able to have a normal tag duel with Haruyuki.

But there is a price to pay for using such methods. The Unlimited Field is the ultimate battleground for Burst Linkers. However, should she recite the 'Unlimited Burst' command for entering this space, she will not spawn at where she was in the real world, but in front of the Super-class Enemy Suzaku that was guarding the south gate of the Imperial Palace. Of course, then she would be attacked and killed, and once again fall into the Infinite EK state...

"So that's what you mean by [sealing], huh... Getting out of this situation would probably require someone to run past Suzaku and save the Avatar that just dived in...." Haruyuki thought of this point, and said so in a scratchy voice.

Utai nodded, and typed out some more words:

[UI> No, not just me. Seiryuu of the East gate and Genbu of the North gate are also sealing members of the [Four Elements], Aqua Current and Graphite Edge. In order to let everyone else get out, the three of us, no, including Saa-chin and Fuu-nee, did all we could to have the Four Gods target us. Fortunately, no one else got Infinite EK'ed and managed to get out. However,

plenty of people died, and we lost quite a large number of points, and could no longer defend our territory. We had no choice but to give it all up, and thus the Legion was forced to disband. This is how the first Nega Nebulas collapsed. But really, it's nobody's fault, so you can't blame us...]

Reaching this point, Utai clasped her hands together - or at least that's what Haruyuki thought. He suddenly noticed something. The originally expressionless Utai had wrinkled up her face and was biting her tongue. Then, she raised her fingers again, and using force strong enough to tear the air apart, she continued:

[UI> No, there is one person to blame. That person... who lied to Saa-chin, forcing her to take risks and then betraying her in the end.]

“Utai!” “Uiui!”

These two shouts interrupted the flowing line of text. Utai's two hands held the virtual keyboard tightly, and she lowered her head. Fuuko, who was beside her, gently held her shoulder.

Kuroyukihime, who sat on a seat further away, looked at them with a tolerant expression, and kept quiet for a while before she began talking:

“Utai, if you want to blame anyone, blame me. The responsibility for the collapse of the first Nega Nebulas lies with me. Regardless of whether it was my rash actions that led to everything happening in the first place, or the emotional battering I took that caused me to shut myself in the Local Net for two years, it is all my responsibility. But then I met him... that is, Haruyuki, and from him I regained the strength to stand up again. I won't be scared of the past as I was before. Leaving that aside, I will also deal with that other person once and for all. In order to do that, Utai, I will have to undo your «seal». I want you to come back, Utai. To the new Nega Nebulas.”

Haruyuki didn't completely understand their conversation. He didn't know who was [that person] Utai mentioned was, nor did he know what happened to Kuroyukihime, but he felt now wasn't the time to be asking that sort of question, so he asked,

“Shinomiya-san, I would also like to make a request. I think you already know that my Duel Avatar is currently under the parasitic influence of an Enhanced Armament called [Chrome Disaster]. If it's not purified in a week, the Six Kings will place a reward on my head, making me unable to participate in normal battles. I... have to get stronger. In order to keep up with Kuroyukihime-senpai and everyone else in the legion, I have to keep going. Please... help me.”

If this was the Haruyuki of a while ago, he wouldn't have been able to say that due to his broken self-esteem. But after many hard battles, Haruyuki had at least learned the meaning of fighting side by side with your comrades. While there were times where it was necessary to work hard and persevere, if overdone to the extent where one person could not bear the burden alone, it became stupidity. Unknowingly, everyone in this world was being helped by somebody else.

Utai lowered her head, seemingly unable to take what Haruyuki was saying. After thinking for a while, she hesitantly raised her fingers and began typing.

[UI> The reason why I cut off all contact from Saa-chin, Fuu-nee and everyone else in the legion was because I was scared of hearing this... scared of hearing the words «undoing the seal». The

Four Gods have unbelievable strength and power, so if someone tried to save my avatar, there's a very big chance that they may fall into Infinite EK as well. The fact that only three people are imprisoned within the four gates is already very fortunate in itself. I don't want to let any more people sacrifice themselves, I... believe Graph and Aqua also think this way, that's why I cut off all contact with everyone. Actually, I...]

At this point, her fingers stopped moving -

Utai lightly moved the lips that should have been incapable of making a sound. Haruyuki caught what came next not from his ears, but from his other senses.

“- wanted to see everyone.”



Two teardrops rolled down her pale face. Next to her, Fuuko was also sobbing hard, and had tightly hugged Utai's small body.

This time, she did not resist, burying her head in Fuuko's chest. On hearing the small and soft cries that came, Haruyuki, Chiyuri and Takumu who only just knew what happened back then began blinking.

After a full thirty seconds, Fuuko let go of her, taking a handkerchief from her pocket and helping Utai wipe her face. She felt very embarrassed, and lowered her head and continued typing:

[UI> Sorry, allow me to continue. I actually did not plan on contacting the new Nega Nebulas, thinking that I was content enough to watch everyone fight from the corner of the accelerated world. But because of the disbanding of the animal care committee of my school, and the fact that we couldn't find a place for that animal... So I thought about it for a long time, and finally sent out the mail to Umesato Middle where Saa-chin was, hoping she wouldn't recognize my name, but deep down inside, I always wanted her to.]

“Of course I would, the name ‘Shinomiya Utai’ is rather rare.” Kuroyukihime said with a smile, and Utai carried on, her eyes still red.

[UI> I didn't pick that name myself... Anyway, on seeing that the reply did not come from the school administration, but rather the student council vice president, I hesitated for a while. But then I told myself it was for the sake of that animal. Thus, I dive-called Saa-chin, and the first thing she said was...]

“We'll make a deal. I'll persuade the school administration to prepare the rearing pen, but you have to come.” was what Kuroyukihime said, causing everyone to react with shock. That soon changed to dumbfounded smiles, and Utai continued typing while smiling:

[UI> Saa-chin hasn't changed one bit, still as impatient, rough and likes boasting as much as always, as for me who was still hesitating about this and that, I looked like a fool. So she just cut in like that, and without understanding the situation I replied ‘I'll hear you out before I decide.’ So then I simply got led on, and thus forced to meet in the real world.]

Haruyuki, on reading what Utai said, remembered the day Kuroyukihime invited him to the accelerated world.

At that time, she had suddenly appeared in the virtual squash court, and the first thing she said was, “Do you want to accelerate further, boy?” He had wanted to know what that meant, so he went to the student lounge, was told to direct-connect and was sent the Brain Burst Program, without being given any time to think.

Although, he thought, had she not used such forceful methods with him, he would definitely have said no. She was impatient and forceful, but that was because she dedicated her all to everything. Even so, in this «Disaster Armor Purification Plan», she must be supporting him from behind...

At this point, Haruyuki had a question, and raised his hand to ask Kuroyukihime, “Senpai, I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“Um... after last week's competition, after we got together to discuss how to deal with the Disaster Armor, back then senpai mentioned someone with the «purification ability», would that person be Shinomiya-san?”

“Yes.” She affirmed it with a nod, and Haruyuki continued.

“But then, how would senpai contact her? Shinomiya-san just said that she cut off contact for two years...”

[UI> Arita-san is right. I had already closed the email account I was using back then, Saa-chin should have no method of contacting me. Had I not sent a mail to Umesato Middle regarding the feeding pen, what were you planning on doing?]

Added Utai. Kuroyukihime smiled and answered, “Well... Even if you closed the email account, I knew which school you were in and which year. All I had to do would be to go to Matsunogi’s elementary division, and look through the fourth year classrooms, am I right?”

On hearing that answer, Utai’s face turned green, and she replied,

[UI> Back then I was thinking hard if I should approach Umesato Middle regarding the feeding pen, then I heard a voice telling me to do so, that must be God’s will.]

On reading those lines, not only the three of them, Fuuko also laughed. She lightly patted the back of the scared Utai and added, “That’s right, Uiui, this means that it’s time for you to come back. I was also like that, the day an injured Crow came to the garden on top of the Old Tokyo Tower, I felt that too, like as if the stagnant world would come to life again...”

“Fuuko is right, Utai, I am impatient, but not as foolish as before. It’s because I think we have the ability to get you out that I would ask you to come back.” Kuroyukihime looked at Utai with her pair of deep black eyes, and Utai looked back at her, eyes burning with colour:

[UI> I also want to have the seal undone, not only for myself, but to purify Arita-san’s avatar as well. Seeing as whatever needs to be purified is the mighty armour, «The Disaster», half an hour is not enough. That’s why we can’t use a normal duel field, but must use the Unlimited Neutral Field. Yesterday I tag-teamed with Arita-san, and have witnessed his abilities firsthand. We can’t stop just because the other Kings are plotting against us.]

Haruyuki read that and immediately tried to correct her. “But, eh, eh, yesterday I fought like rubbish... attacks were completely all over the place....”

Hearing that, Utai asked Haruyuki with a benevolent expression,

[UI> Arita-san, your «Laser Sword» skill... did Saa-chin teach you that?]

“What?” Kuroyukihime creased her eyebrows. Haruyuki looked at her, shrugged and tried to explain,

“Eh, no, erm, well, not exactly ‘taught’. More like she just showed me once, so I thought I’d train it more...”

[UI> Ah, I see. Because even though you and Saa-chin are doing the same moves, the action is completely different. Yesterday, from my battles with Arita-san, I had a feeling as if he were trying to reach for a faraway goal, that is, even if he loses today, he won’t give up, and will still

try and fight tomorrow. A shame that a few Burst Linkers would forget that after reaching level 5, would forget this simple principle.]

“Eh... no, this... I, didn’t think of that...” Haruyuki was not used to being praised, and thus lowered his head. He could hear Chiyuri laughing:

“Well, Haru is like a snail, slowly edging forward! He’s been like that since we were young, regardless of what we were playing he’d always be worse than Taku and me at first, but then suddenly he’d be very good at it! A shame this only applies in games!”

Haruyuki, while thankful that his childhood friend was helping him steer clear of danger, immediately shot back a retort: “Not, not just games! Remember that ‘who can eat the corn cleanest’ competition, at the end, I...”

“Haru, both are somewhat the same. In terms of usefulness - not very much.” Taku’s cool sentence brought some laughter to everyone. After that subsided, Utai straightened her back, looked at everyone in order, and took a bow.

[UI> Inside, I’m still lost, scared and afraid, But if I don’t take a step out now, be it the accelerated or real world, I’ll stay at the same place forever. The Avatar and reality are like Yin and Yang, they are both sides of the same person. As long as my Duel Avatar is still frozen, the real me isn’t going to go anywhere.]

“That’s true...” agreed Fuuko who was sitting by Utai’s side.

“During that time where I lived in the Old Tokyo Tower, unknowingly even in the real world, I starting being over-cautious. The two months after Karasu-san appeared felt to me as longer than the two years that had passed in the real world before.”

Hearing that, Kuroyukihime nodded in agreement, and it seemed as if stars were shining within her deep black eyes: “Fuuko, thinking like that is natural. Because even without Brain Burst, when working together towards a common goal with like-minded teammates, that also counts as being in the Accelerated state: It’ll feel as if your heart is beating faster, and your senses become so much sharper.”

Lastly, Utai added, [UI> I was also that excited too. I want to continue chasing the dream we once abandoned. With Saa-chin, Fuu-nee, Chiyuri-san, Mayuzumi-san and Arita-san...]

The thin and slender fingers broke the awkward silence.

[UI> Please, I ask of everyone, could everyone please help me... please save my avatar, Ardor Maiden, from within the seal of Suzaku.]

Chapter 10

Kuroyukihime’s ‘Disaster Armor Purification Plan’ consisted of three parts.

The first, to contact Shinomiya Utai in the real world, and find a way to bring her to the negotiating table.

Second, to convince her to participate in a rescue mission from the state of 'Infinite EK' she was in.

Third, to use her purification ability to destroy the fragment of Chrome Disaster that resided in Silver Crow's avatar.

June 18th, Tuesday, 7.20pm, after hearing Fuuko's question on when the second phase would start, Kuroyukihime, without hesitation, answered, "Now, of course."

The group moved to the sofa, and they sat in relaxed positions, taking out 5 XSB cables and using them to connect each other's Neuro Linkers together like a daisy-chain. This was actually not needed to enter the Unlimited Neutral Field, but seeing as there was a need to prepare the Disconnect protection, everyone else disconnected their Neuro Linkers from the Global Net, and control was passed to Haruyuki, who had connected to the Arita family network, and through there to the Global Net. With this sort of protection, even if anyone fell into the state of Infinite EK, whoever made it back to the real world through a Leave Point could disconnect everyone else by disconnecting from the network.

Of course, that was the worst case scenario, where not only could Utai not be saved, but the master and soldiers were also sacrificed, but everyone was beyond that level of fear. The one thing that could be done now was to make preparations, believe in the success of the plan, moving resolutely forward – this was the last word Kuroyukihime had said in the meeting in the real world.

[UI> Then, I'll be in your care, everyone.]

Reading the message, she sent, Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Haruyuki, Takumu and Chiyuri all nodded in unison. The plan called for them to dive in first, after all of them were in place, then Utai would dive in.

The five of them closed their eyes, and took a deep breath.

Kuroyukihime began the countdown from 10 seconds, while everyone else got ready, and together they said the command that only level 4 and above Burst Linkers could use, the one to enter the true Accelerated World.

"Unlimited Burst!"

The long-unseen Unlimited Neutral Field they entered was covered in a sea of white.

This was the «Ice Stage». Dark clouds filled the sky, and small snowflakes blew about by the cold wind, giving off scattered reflections.

"Good, this is a good sign."

Kuroyukihime – the Black King, Black Lotus, said this and stabbed her blade-like leg into the icy ground.

“Of course, the best ones would be «Fog» or «Storm», but if that were the case, long-distance visibility would be hindered – for plans that require precision like ours, maybe the Ice Stage is best.”

“Yes, just this amount of rain and snow wouldn’t disrupt our field of vision.”

Sky Raker, who stood by her side, added, shaking her sky-blue hair.

Haruyuki did not understand what the two of them were talking about, and tilted Silver Crow’s round helmet, and asked with trepidation:

“May I ask, why are the Ice and Fog Stages beneficial for us?”

“Because the Fire element of the Four Gods, Suzaku, would be weaker in such conditions, wouldn’t it?” The one who answered was the large battle avatar standing to Haruyuki’s right, Cyan Pile – that is, Takumu.

And further to the right, the Duel Avatar with a yellowish-green pointed hat, a large hand bell equipped on the left hand, Lime Bell, added, “Then we’ll just have to hurry before a «Transition» comes, won’t we?”

The considerably more experienced Takumu, and Chiyuri who had only been a Burst Linker for more than two months but had a better sense of the situation that Haruyuki, gave him quite some pressure. He hastily suggested, “Why not use my wings and fly over? I should be able to carry 4 people...”

Before he could finish, Kuroyukihime interjected with a shake of her mask:

“No, that will decrease our chances of success. I don’t wish to be disturbed by other Burst Linkers. While the chances of other Burst Linkers also being in the area is lower, we’ll increase our visibility by flying. Let’s just run to Chiyoda Ward.”

“Ah, well, so...”

Just as Haruyuki was about to bow his head in shame, Kuroyukihime had already walked over and added a few words of encouragement. “And even so, the main character in today’s battle is you. Before the battle begins, we can’t tire out your wings.”

“Oh, OK, I understand.” “Me? The main character?” thought Haruyuki. Fuuko gently patted his shoulder.

“Karasu-san, please keep up the good work. Don’t worry, you can do it.”

“Yeah, Haru, with your skills, you can defeat any opponent in the sky!” “Just finish the job beautifully, Haru.” Takumu and Chiyuri added, and thus the other four nodded and walked towards the outer wall of the apartment building, which had become a tower of ice.

... What does the lead do? Don't tell me, no, it can't be, they want me to go in solo against that impenetrable territory?

As Haruyuki's metal avatar gave off beads of cold sweat, he recalled that this had happened before, and began digging through his memories in search of that. Half a year ago, from his house, where they had set off to execute the Fifth Chrome Disaster Subjugation Plan, he was also designated as the point guard. While he thought that his abilities had improved since then, he couldn't help but wonder why he was always so unfortunate.

Haruyuki spent a few seconds thinking such defeatist thoughts, then snapped back to reality.

When he managed to catch up to his comrades, the four of them had already jumped from the ice balcony. Before he made the jump, he said a few words of encouragement to himself.

“Even if they're called the Four Gods, isn't it just a bird? I just got close to an owl in the real world. No, it was a snowy owl. No, it's a white-faced Northern owl. I was just in proximity to a bird of prey in a wooden hut and I was fine. Furthermore, this is the virtual world, there's no need to be scared. I'm not looking for victory either, I just need to get it off my tail, rescue Shinomiya-san's avatar, and get out of there. It's simple.”

“Fine, let's do it for everyone to see.”

Under his mask, Haruyuki said this as he landed on the ground, and ran south with everyone else along the snow-covered valleys of buildings.

The distance between Setagaya and Chiyoda wards is about 10 kilometers. Running this distance in the real world without taking breaks was impossible. However, for Duel Avatars, as long as you didn't do any extraneous movements you wouldn't feel tired. With Black Lotus, who hovered on a small cushion of air, in the lead, the five of them ran at high speed in a wedge formation, along the 7th then 4th route of the expressway that passed through Shinjuku.

Along the way, they saw the shadows of large Enemies, but took detours around them. The Ice Stage was different from the «Origin Forest» or «Factory» Stages, as there were no obstacles in the way. Hence, the dense network of roads in Tokyo could all be used. This however meant that there were fewer objects to destroy, thus as long as they saw a block of ice that could be damaged, they did not hesitate to fill up their special attack gauge.

Forty minutes later –

Haruyuki completed the ascending path of Shinjuku-dori from Yotsuya, and in front of his eyes lay quite the scene.

He couldn't think of words to describe what he saw.

A cluster of towers, like spears used by the gods, pierced the sky. These towers surrounded an exquisite and beautiful castle. Around the towers was a high and thick wall, and around that wall, a high and wide cliff.

The walls and pillars were constructed out of deep blue ice blocks. Inside were countless red lights, and even though they could see nothing inside, this was not a dump or a lost city. From within the Palace, there was something, or rather someone, that gave off an authoritative presence.

That was the Imperial Palace in the Unlimited Field, or rather –

“The Forbidden City...”

Haruyuki slowed his pace, and said that with a trembling voice. In front, Kuroyukihime, also slowed down, and braked to reply him, leaving behind marks on the ground:

“That’s right. The other world within the centre of the Imperial Palace, where Nega Nebulas attacked with all we had but were annihilated within two minutes. That is truly a palace that is impossible to attack...”

Hearing that, Haruyuki froze and he took another look.

The approximately 30-metre-high castle wall formed an almost round enclosure. If this was about the same size as the real world’s Imperial Palace, it should be about 1500 meters in diameter.

The street they were on connected to a bridge of ice, which ended at the top of the cliff, and extended into the castle. And on this roughly 500-metre-long bridge, which was about 30 metres wide, connected to a large pair of doors. Those doors were tightly shut, preventing access to anyone.

“Master, this is the real world’s Hanzomon Gate, or the West Gate, isn’t it?”

Kuroyukihime replied with a nod to Takumu’s question. Chiyuri then tiptoed to see around the castle, and asked in a curious voice, “But senpai, aren’t the Four Gods supposed to be here? I don’t see any large Enemies...”

“Look over there, Bell.” Fuuko came to Chiyuri’s side, and gestured at the large plaza outside the gate with her left hand. A square platform stood there, surrounded by pillars at its four corners. That platform gave off a very official feel, as if it was some sort of altar.

“Once someone goes onto this bridge, the Four Gods will spawn from there. That is to say, their territory is this entire 500-metre-long, 30-metre-wide bridge. Every other place has an unnatural gravity. Even my Gale Thruster can’t make the jump. Once you fly over the abyss, you’ll immediately be pulled down to your death at the dark bottom. Fortunately, I respawned on the outside of it.”

Haruyuki, Chiyuri and Takumu were speechless at the thought. Kuroyukihime added, “Two and a half years ago, the squad Raker and I led attacked the West gate and its guardian, Byakko. Before, we had used roughly the same amount of people to defeat Legend-class Enemies a few times, so we thought we were undefeatable, and could defeat any sort of Super-class enemies. Well... you know what happened after that. To be frank, standing here and looking at the gate... my legs are turning to jelly.”

“S.. Senpai...” Haruyuki couldn’t help but call out to her. She then shook the black helmet and added: “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. Of course, I don’t intend to retreat here, but there’s something I want you to remember. The Four Gods cannot be defeated by the average Burst Linker. Regardless of reason, do not pick a fight with it. When I give the command, or you guys

think you may be in unplanned circumstances, immediately retreat towards the outside of the bridge.”

“That’s what I intend to do, senpai...”

Haruyuki was about to nod his head, when Kuroyukihime glared at him through her helmet, and added with an even more serious tone: “A suggestion is not enough. This is an «Order». Listen here, when I say ‘run,’ you run, even if Raker or I, or both of us, are in danger of getting killed by Suzaku.”

Haruyuki took a deep breath, and rebutted, “How can this be? The person invading the bridge is me, isn’t it? Wasn’t that what Raker-senpai said?”

Hearing that, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko looked at each other, and gave a smile which was warm enough to permeate through their Avatars, and from Haruyuki’s left and right, said, “Haha, you’re too dumb, Crow, how could I let you risk your life alone?”

“That’s right, Karasu-san. If we did that sort of thing, imagine the scolding we’d get from Bell and Pile...”

“We’ll distract Suzaku, so it won’t be targeting you at all.” “Just think of a way to save Ardor Maiden.”

In fact, Haruyuki had wanted to follow through on what he had said to himself when he jumped off the apartment building, saying that he’d go alone. However, he couldn’t think of a way to challenge the legendary Four Gods that even the mighty Kuroyukihime was scared of. Haruyuki couldn’t compare in terms of strength to them, so he felt that he was only trying to act like a tough person.

The only thing he could do was fly at full speed. That was the limit of the power that Haruyuki had.

Haruyuki kept his mouth shut and lowered his head. Chiyuri, who was standing beside him, gently patted him on the shoulder, and said, “Sorry Nee-san! I really thought the plan was for Crow to face Suzaku alone, and everyone else would be cheering him on from behind! Well, but I’m not angry, so...”

On hearing that, Haruyuki’s knees turned to jelly, and he shot back, "H... Hey, come on! At least give me some healing support!"

"Nooo waaay. That builds up Enemies' aggro factor by a lot."

Takumu, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko laughed at this scene.

--- *That’s right. There’s still something I can do.*

--- *That is to believe. Believe in the strength of my comrades, believe in our friendship, believe that this is enough to create a miracle.*

That's what Haruyuki thought in his head. He grasped his hands tightly, and then saw Kuroyukihime point her right sword-arm at the sky, saying, "Alright, let's run right along Uchibori-dori Street over there, that way we'll reach the south gate where Suzaku and Ardor Maiden are."

A few minutes' run along the road, seeing the sights of the imposing figure of the Imperial City to the left, and the ice towers of the Kasumigaseki government district to the right, brought them to yet another bridge. This size of this bridge was identical to the one at the west gate – 500 meters long, 30 meters wide, a square altar at the far end, and the large castle gate behind it. These were all the same.

This was the south gate of the Imperial City, the «Sakuradamon Gate» in real life, protected by Suzaku of the Four Gods, the Phoenix of Fire.

They hadn't run into any obstacles along the journey, and thus reached the front of the ice bridge, slowing down as they approached.

Uchibori-dori Street stretched to the east and west, and formed a T-shape junction with Sakurada-dori Street that led south. Not far to the southwest stood a tall tower. In the real world, this was the police headquarters, nicknamed Sakuradamon because it stood near the eponymous gate. Of course, no police officers could be seen in the Accelerated World.

Kuroyukihime stood in the centre of the T-junction, pulled out her system menu, and checked the time. "It's been an hour since we dove in, everything is going along to plan."

That was to say, only 3.6 seconds had passed in the Arita household's living room in the real world. Utai had not dived in, but instead was waiting in the real world. While she would have only taken 2 breaths in the real world, she must have felt that those 3.6 seconds were probably a few tens of times longer.

Kuroyukihime turned around, looked at the faces of her comrades, and declared, "Then, phase two of the Disaster Armor Purification Plan, the Rescue of Ardor Maiden, shall begin!"

"Yes, sir!" replied the other four. The Black King, in the strict tone befitting of a King, continued, "Let's revise the plan one more time. To begin, I, Black Lotus, will wait just outside the bridge. Behind me will be Lime Bell and Cyan Pile, and 200 metres behind us along the street, will be Sky Raker and Silver Crow."

Kuroyukihime waited for everyone to picture the plan in their minds, and continued, "During the battle, I will push towards the center of the bridge, and trigger Suzaku's spawning. At the same time as this completes, Sky Raker will carry Silver Crow, and using Gale Thruster to fly at a height of 30 meters, fly towards the castle gate at full throttle. In the meantime, I will execute a close-range Incarnate attack at Suzaku, getting its focus on me. Immediately after that, I will begin to retreat. Does anyone have any questions at this point?"

"No!" replied the four. Kuroyukihime nodded again, and this time, told Fuuko and Haruyuki:

"At the same time as when I begin to retreat, Raker will release Crow. With the power of his own wings, Crow will fly at max speed past Suzaku, and push towards the South gate. Raker will land at my position, and use defense-type Incarnate skills to block Suzaku's flame attack, retreating

at the same time. If all goes according to plan, we should be able to maintain at least 100 metres distance between us and Suzaku, so we shouldn't be killed. But should we have to take large casualties, then we'll have to rely on Bell's Citron Call from behind to heal. After Raker and I have completed our retreat, Crow should be at the Altar in front of the gate, by which Ardor Maiden will appear at the middle of the altar. You are to hold on to her and fly straight up, then make a 180 degree turn and head south, out of Suzaku's territory. That is all."

Haruyuki let out a sigh of relief after hearing those instructions. When planning the battle, they had taken into account the situation and battle power of each person, and accommodated them as best as possible. The plan was simple and this no communication would be required.

However, there was 'someone' and 'something' left out. The 'something' that was left out, was how to closely match Utai's dive into the Unlimited Field with the time where Haruyuki would make his charge. Also, a name in particular was not mentioned.

He thought of that, but was too timid to ask. As though Kuroyukihime was able to read his mind, she replied;

"I guess everyone has noticed. We will need to match the time when Utai dives into the Unlimited Field down to the second. In order to do this, the only way will be to send someone out of this space, to let her know when to dive. I will entrust you with this, Cyan Pile."

Takumu replied. "Yes, master." Haruyuki noticed a delay in his response that was not natural. The job Takumu was assigned was as critical as all the others' jobs. However, no one could deny that Takumu was picked because he was «the last one remaining». He understood that, probably earlier than Haruyuki did. Probably when Kuroyukihime was explaining the battle plan, he had already sensed that he would be the only person left out of the battle against the Super-class Enemy.

Haruyuki didn't know what to say. That was because he felt that whatever he did would only hurt Takumu's self esteem. Even Fuuko, and Chiyuri, who usually would liven up the mood, remained silent.

Takumu broke the silence himself. "Since the opponent this time is capable of flying, I as a close-range type Avatar would not be able to take it on. Hence, I accept the role. However, Master, should there be an opportunity to face Byakko or Genbu, may I request that I have an opportunity to take on the Enemy too?"

Kuroyukihime nodded. "Alright. When the time comes, I will nominate Pile as leader of the attack. Since I have a good impression of you... Better yourself, become strong enough that you can kick their asses."

"Alright, I will. Definitely." Takumu replied in a silent voice, as if he were talking to himself. Kuroyukihime turned back to the rest, took a deep breath, and said, "Alright, then – is there any more things to say? Any more questions? Anything is fine, what we have is time. I told Maiden the most she'd have to wait is 5 minutes, so if everyone wants to chat, even just chatting for three days is fine."

“Eh? If we let Mei-san wait for so long, won’t she be so pitiful, senpai?” yelled Chiyuri. Looks like she already decided on this nickname within the Accelerated World for Utai. She’ll definitely think of something else for her in the real world.

“- Alright. I think I’d better stop using “Shinomiya-san” as well, and use her name instead. Like Niko is ‘Niko’, would ‘Utai’ be fine? Will she get mad...”

Or so Haruyuki thought, but quickly dispelled the notion. There was something he should clear with the rest first. This seemed more important than the Disaster Armor Purification Plan, far worse – this, of course, was the «ISS Kit» that was quietly and slowly starting to spread within the Accelerated World.

But after thinking about it, Haruyuki decided it would be best not to mention it. Now what had to be done, was to have everyone do their best to save Ardor Maiden. It would be better not to talk about completely unrelated topics, so that everyone can focus on the task at hand.

And Haruyuki was not the only one to have witnessed the ISS Kit at work = Utai had furthermore used an Incarnate attack on the Kit user Bush Utan, and thus she would understand more about the nature of that parasitic item, so Haruyuki thought. If that were the case, better to wait until after saving Ardor Maiden, then discuss the topic after she has officially returned to Nega Nebulas.

Despite thinking about all of this, Haruyuki remained silent. So did Chiyuri, Takumu and Fuuko.

Kuroyukihime glanced over each of them slowly, then said, “... Okay. Since everyone has already made preparations. In that case, before the battle begins, I have one more task for Lime Bell. Should anything untoward happen, and everyone on the bridge falls into a state of Infinite EK, you are not to attempt to save us, but to head back to the real world from the nearest [Exit Portal], and immediately disconnect Crow’s Neuro Linker from the home server. Got it?”

This was the last-resort plan. Because if this had to be used, that would mean not just Utai, but Kuroyukihime, Fuuko and Haruyuki had also fallen into the Infinite EK state.

Nevertheless, Chiyuri raised the brim of her three-pointed hat, and nodded her head. “Understood, senpai.”

“Then we’ll leave it to you. Let’s go.”

Kuroyukihime’s tone was considerably relaxed, like as if today’s event was just a weekly territory battle. She gave one last instruction to Takumu:

“So, Pile, inside the main door of the police headquarters building is an Exit Portal. Before you leave, could you fire a «Lightning Cyan Spike» towards the sky, as a signal to begin the battle? Once Utai sees you waking up, she will dive in. This exchange of places will take about a second, that is, 16 minutes and 40 seconds over here. In that time, Crow and Raker will get into position 200 metres behind, whereas I will step onto the bridge a minute before Utai appears. Once Suzaku appears, Raker will take off, and then things will go as planned.”

“Understood, master. In that case, Raker-nee-san, Bell, Crow, I leave it to you.”

Haruyuki reached out his right fist, and Takumu hit it roughly with his left fist. Then he turned, and the blue avatar ran into the lobby of the police headquarters building without looking back. A few seconds later, a ray of lightning burst through the sky. Due to the fact that opposite from the police headquarters were the skyscrapers housing the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, and the further out, the Tokyo High Court, only Haruyuki's group should be able to see this ray of light. In that case, 16 minutes and 40 seconds later, Shinomiya Utai – Ardor Maiden would appear at the other end of the bridge. Haruyuki would have to find a way to grab hold of her, and bring her back to this side of the bridge.

“In that case, Crow, let's move. Bell, Lotus, we'll leave it to you.” Fuuko tapped Haruyuki's shoulder as she finished her sentence.

“Alright, alright... Senpai! This... erm... I will do my best!” Haruyuki could only squeeze out these words from his throat, which had knotted together. Kuroyukihime's bluish-purple visor was facing straight at Haruyuki. “I believe in you.”

The next 15 minutes felt like an eternity, but yet felt like it passed so soon.

Haruyuki stood next to Sky Raker, who had equipped her Gale Thruster, and was trying to gather his concentration, but even he didn't know whether he was already concentrating, or his mind was in a mess. The snow flying about in the air of the Unlimited Neutral Field was quiet, as though time itself had also become frozen.

The large castle gate, built at the north end of Sakurada-dori Street, was 700 metres away from here, including the bridge. However, the sense of pressure was still the same. The gate was so imposing, it seemed to block away the whole world, obscuring Haruyuki's sight.

“Two and a half years ago... master, you all tried to breach that gate...” Haruyuki said absentmindedly. Fuuko laughed, and corrected him. “Well, not just the gate, we wanted to get inside the main keep too.”

“Oh, oh, oh, right.”

Seems like the first generation Nega Nebulas was an even scarier group. Haruyuki thought of that fact, sighed. He suddenly remembered something else, and asked:

“But in the battle then, why did you have to fight all Four Gods at the same time? Yesterday senpai said that the Four Gods were of one mind, but there are four gates, so why didn't the entire Legion just target one?”

“Someone thought of that too, so they tried it. And what they found out was, the [Four Gods] are all connected. If you attack only one, the other three will come to heal relentlessly, and there is no way you can win. Of course, today we're not here to win, so we don't need to worry about that.”

“Ah, so, I see...” What Haruyuki thought was his own idea, someone had already thought of before. He nodded his head, and asked: “Right, so... a long time ago, wouldn't more Legions try to attack the Imperial Palace. No, not just that, there would have been people who would go to adventure in unexplored areas, or discover all sorts of fighting skills... maybe I should have been a Burst Linker earlier...”

“Eh, eh, Karasu-san, what are you saying?” Fuuko interrupted Haruyuki with a smile, and suddenly hugged him from behind with two hands. Haruyuki screamed out loud, his body froze, and from beside his ears came words that were said with a playful tone, “Your life as a Burst Linker is only just beginning; everything is just about to begin. Or maybe, even the same applies to me and Lotus – we thought we were reaching the end. Actually we found out that there were no limits in the Accelerated World. The person who showed us that was you.”

The hands which had moved to his back applied more force, and the voice became more passionate, to one which could melt ice: “Your silver wings have the power to open up the power of this world, and your future will become more boundless. I want to see with my own eyes to where you can fly. Me, and Lotus, and Maiden – we probably all think like that.”

“Alright, let’s go pick Maiden up.”

She let go of Haruyuki. His spirit had suddenly become clear, and only a strong will remained. That was the will to fly. Fly with no worries. Because, for the Duel Avatar Silver Crow that had been created from Haruyuki’s spirit, flying was the best way to prove himself.

“Alright!”

Haruyuki nodded his head with all he could. Sky Raker kneeled down, back towards him. Haruyuki placed his right knee in the centre of the two rocket propellers – the Enhanced Armament, Gale Thruster – and held on to her shoulder tightly.

“Preparations OK!”

Hearing Haruyuki say that, Fuuko nodded her head, and directed her vision at the large bridge. Two small figures stood at the end, which were Black Lotus and Lime Bell. Ten seconds later, Lotus raised her right sword-arm – and swung it down to the ground with force.

Chapter 11

The Black King, Black Lotus, led the assault alone.

She stepped foot on the 500-meter long bridge connecting from the south gate of the Imperial City], sloping her arms wide behind her and leaning forward as much as she could, skating forward as if she were an ice skater on ice.

At her destination, that is to say the altar at the other end, a red pillar of fire erupted. The fire burned and tossed, becoming more intensive. The twenty-metre long altar turned into a sea of fire. Then, an object, no, a large, scary being began to materialize.

On seeing this, Fuuko, who carried Haruyuki on her back, yelled, “We’re going!”

From below Haruyuki, the Enhanced Armament Gale Thruster began emitting a loud roar. Blue flames illuminated the area, the the ice on the ground had been immediately turned into vapour. A sudden force pushed the two Avatars forward, as if they had been placed on a catapult.

As the wind howled past his ears, Haruyuki stuck himself as close to Fuuko's back as possible in order to reduce the air resistance. The towers on both sides blurred into pale blue lines, and the noises made by Gale Thruster became louder and louder.

In the blink of an eye, they were at the end of their 200-metre runway. The two of them passed Lime Bell, who had equipped her Enhanced Armament, and took off, reaching maximum speed at around 30 metres from the ground. From the sea of fire, a visible shape appeared.

First, a giant pair of wings spread out to the right and left, and appeared as if they were covered in liquid gold. The wings seem as wide as the bridge, each feather appearing as if it were as large as a sword of flame. The snowflakes near it had already begun to vaporize.

Then between the pair of wings appeared a rather well-built body, followed by a long neck. It raised its neck, and the head began to materialize.

The crown of feathers atop was like long, sharp spikes, it had a long and sharp mouth, the light coming out of its two eyes burned brighter than fire, more red than rubies.

This giant bird that had covered itself in flame - a protector of the Forbidden City, Suzaku of the Four Gods - opened its mouth and let out a bloodcurdling cry.

This sound, like as if it were thunder striking the ground, shook the entire world. In this moment, Haruyuki saw that the clouds which had originally blanketed the sky had started trembling, and then they parted, as if a laser had been shot through them.

--What is that? What the hell is going on? That sort of thing is an Enemy, controlled by the Brain Burst Program, with no soul to speak of?

--No, that... that phoenix is alive. It's pissed off because we interrupted its sleep, so pissed off that it wants to roast the invaders of its territory to a crisp, as if the defense of its territory by attacking was its very purpose. That's right, as if it were just a bunch of ideas given form. That is the will to destroy.

Realizing this, Haruyuki felt that the will to fly that had formed in his heart was starting to waver. He couldn't resist but freeze. The Super-class Enemy Suzaku gave off more pressure than he had ever faced in the accelerated world - even more than the Six Kings that had given him so much fear. This absolute power filled Haruyuki's five senses, and he stopped breathing for a while.

"No... I can't... I can't get near that thing..." This thought pierced Haruyuki's consciousness effortlessly.

However, Sky Raker's flight never stopped. The acceleration noise from the Gale Thruster continued increasing, blue flames stretching on forever like a shooting star. Far away, the great bird flapped its wings and began pushing forward from the altar. Under the influence of acceleration, the distance to the enemy was dropping quickly.

Haruyuki's hands were shaking at this point, and unknowingly he nearly wanted to let go of Raker's shoulder - but. Mere tens of metres away from him, the avatar of Black Lotus, who had

stopped at that point, was covered in rays of light. The Over-Ray, which signified the activation of an Incarnate System skill, was a brilliant red comparable to Suzaku's.

Kuroyukihime's scream of "RAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!" shook the playing field. That increased the effect of the skill, and the Avatar glowed a colour that shined like a star. Two more screams followed. "«Overdrive»! «Mode Red»!"

Haruyuki had never heard of these two commands before, and what they did was also unknown to him.

Red lines appeared all over Black Lotus' mask. The sword on the right arm also changed, its length increased by over five times, and tapered at one end. It was of a long sharp design, and probably could be considered a spear, not a sword.

Kuroyukihime thrust her transformed right arm back, then carved a cross-shape into Suzaku's belly that was right in front of her. The Over-Ray that enveloped her entire body converged at the tip of the arm that had been transformed. She yelled the name of a skill, and a sense of «Absolute Piercing» was directed towards the great bird Suzaku. "«Vorpal Strike»!"

That spike of killing intent shot towards the great bird with a loud banging noise, and it seems as though the great spear, enveloped in red-hot light, covered the hundred-metre distance in a split second - and hit straight into the middle of Suzaku's chest. The flames on the body of the giant bird Enemy flew up into the sky like blood.

Then Haruyuki saw it. The HP gauge in his vision, so massive it had to be split up into five parts, had decreased by a little bit.

- *Senpai. Kuroyukihime-senpai. Why do you... why do you have to be so strong...?* As this thought flashed through Haruyuki's mind, a sense of denial came up.

- *Is she strong? No, I already know that she's not. She just «tried to be strong». For herself, for everyone else, more so for the important things she treasures. That goes for me as well. Even though I still lack strength and wisdom, I can still take a step forward every day. That's the power everyone has from day one. Face forward, push out your chest, take a deep breath, and yell...*

Then Haruyuki screamed "GOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

"Fly on!" came Fuuko's reply.

"I'm going!" as Haruyuki said this, the wings on his back opened, and he placed every single ounce of energy into flying forward. The air howling past his ears formed into a speed barrier. Haruyuki put his hands forward, activating an Incarnate skill to blast past this barrier. The pressure disappeared, and the silver streak of light that was Haruyuki sped forward.

The large bird was starting to close in on him, and the scorching heat began to affect the Duel Avatar. But Haruyuki was not afraid because he knew that he wasn't alone; Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Chiyuri, and even Takumu was supporting him from behind. And in that moment, the young girl who was about to return to the Unlimited Field that she had been exiled from for two and a half years, was also supporting him.

Even though he had only known her for two days, Shinomiya Utai had already left quite an impression on Haruyuki. Not just because of her Purification ability that could rid him of the Disaster Armor, not just because of her Avatar's raw battle power, but that he hoped she could join the rebuilt Nega Nebulas as a new friend.

In order to fulfill this wish, he had to fly, without fear, without wanting to retreat. *Fly forward, with one mind.* Silver Crow turned into a single white arrow, and as he flew past the great bird Suzaku from thirty metres up, some sparks could be seen.



The giant bird headed towards Kuroyukihime, its target, and Fuuko who should be already by her King's side. Next, they should be luring Suzaku to the other end of the bridge far from where Haruyuki was. All he had to do was believe in them, and entrust his safety to them.

As Haruyuki flew forward, a red light appeared on the still flaming altar. Utai - Ardor Maiden was here. Perfect timing. Takumu did his job well.

The Avatar in the red and white miko outfit continued its spawn sequence, and there was less than a hundred metres to go. As Haruyuki prepared to descend and take Utai away -

“Haruyuki!”

A yell filled with fear and despair reached his ears. Using real names in the Accelerated World was a big taboo, but there had to be an emergency.

“Run! Run now!”

“...?” Haruyuki didn’t understand what was going on. Looking over his shoulder, he immediately spotted it--

The giant bird’s wings had turned towards the left, its neck twisted towards the back. Ruby-red eyes were targeting the other side of the bridge.

To Haruyuki, to be precise.

It had changed its target. But why? Kuroyukihime’s «Vorpals Strike» attack was still in effect, hitting Suzaku’s chest. And Haruyuki had not touched it at all; there was no reason why this could happen...

As Haruyuki’s brain processed these thoughts, he thought he heard something.

This sound came from the direction of the Enemy that was supposed to have no will of its own. Was it anger, or mocking him?

...Little one, you trespass upon my domain?

Suffer the price of your folly. With one breathe...

I shall smite you.

Suzaku’s enormous mouth opened. From the darkness within, flames could be seen rising. Should it hit Haruyuki, he would surely die in an instant.

“Run, Haruyuki-kun!” Kuroyukihime’s panicked yell came again.

In that moment, where even a blink of an eye seemed like eternity, Haruyuki hesitated.

If he flew straight up, maybe he might be able to avoid the flame breath attack. Then all he had to do was reach Silver Crow’s maximum height of 1500 metres, maybe Suzaku would not follow him. But, if this...

Under his helmet, Haruyuki bit his teeth. And he made a decision.

There was to be no retreating, no more running way. Because if he ran away, Shinomiya Utai who was a few tens of metres before him would die from Suzaku’s attack.

Even if things had gotten to this, she wouldn't blame Haruyuki when he returned to the real world. She would just, with her usual high speed typing, reassure Haruyuki with a [it can't be helped].

But actually there was a choice. Haruyuki could pick which he wanted to do. He had been given a pair of wings, so he had to take the chance of saving Utai with that pair of wings, no matter how much odds were stacked against him.

“Whoooooaaaaa.....”

Haruyuki charged towards the altar. “Whoooooaaaaaaa!!!!!!!”

And he squeezed out his willpower, which had almost been burnt to a crisp, to move his wings.

The fingers which were pointing straight forward let out a light which spread across his entire body. Invoking his oft-used Incarnate skill, Laser Sword, he charged forward. He could feel a burst of power coming from his back: The flames which could vaporize anything were coming towards him from Suzaku's mouth.

“Haruyuki!”

“Karasu-san!”

“Haru!”

Three voices tried to call out to him. He ignored them, focused on turning himself into a streak of light, and flew.

- Senpai, I'm sorry. I didn't run as you told me to. I'll apologise to you later. But I have to do this if I want to continue being who I am.

This thought disappeared from Haruyuki's head as quickly as it formed, leaving only the will to go forward.

The altar was not far ahead. Ardor Maiden, who was in the middle, remained unclear of the situation, and dumbly stood in the middle. Haruyuki looked at her, and yelled, “Give me your hand!”

On hearing that instruction, Ardor Maiden raised her hands. Haruyuki, who had descended to a meter above, also reached out his hand. The two hands interlocked - and Haruyuki pulled Utai's Avatar up and carried her. “Hold on!”

Haruyuki yelled again, and Utai put her hands on his neck, and they prepared to ascend, turning 180 degrees around and preparing to get out -

Then the surrounding colour changed, to a shocking red, the colour of fire. The Avatars started making popping sounds. That was Suzaku's flame attack which had caught up to them. Even though they had not physically touched the flames, their HP bars still declined at a fearsome rate.

--No, we can't even go up now. The only way is to slow down and get devoured by the flames. The only way is forward, into the giant castle gate.

Which would be better, actually, smashing into the gate or getting killed by Suzaku? Well, we've already reached this stage, how can we commit suicide? I want to live, I want to live with Utai, I want to bring her back to everyone.

“Open!”

Even though the Avatars had already been roasted, Haruyuki still yelled thus. Utai, who was in his arms, also yelled, “Open!”

But yet, the gate, covered in a layer of ice, remained shut, as if it were mocking them -

No.

A sliver of light...

From between the two halves of the door...

...a tiny beam of white light shone brightly.

Chapter 12

Silence.

Cold, and hard.

His body was lying his upon the frigid ground.

He couldn't move his arms at all, as though he had frozen over entirely.

But an inconceivable warmth filled his arms somehow. **Thump**, **thump**, it faintly pulses.

This is–

“...it hurts a little.”

He suddenly heard that voice.

With a start, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide like saucers. Round, scarlet eye lenses entered his vision.

“Ahh...”

Raising his voice, he loosened his numb arms with considerable difficulty, and pulled back slightly from the dainty face mask of Maiden.

“...Shi, Shinomi...sorry, Mei-san...?”

As he whispered in a wavering voice, the mask nodded. A pristine voice softly resounded.

“Yes. You were the one who saved me, Kuu-san.”

Haruyuki’s body trembled upon hearing those words.

He couldn’t recall clearly what happened. He only remembered himself retrieving Ardor Maiden from the altar... Frantically escaping Suzaku’s flame breath... And escaping towards the locked gates of the Imperial Palace...

And then what had happened? Have they died? Are they presently in the «Ghost State»?

–*No, it can’t be.* Had that been the case, their entire vision would have been dyed in monotone shades. In fact, the ruby-red eyelenses of Utai’s avatar can be clearly seen, brightly glittering.

But Haruyuki still couldn’t believe that they have indeed escaped that dreadful vortex of flames, and asked in a quavering voice:

“Um...are we, alive?”

Maiden nodded, and replied:

“...We are indeed alive. But...uh, but...”

As her voice trailed off, it blurred, trembled, and faded, disappearing in the cold air.

Ardor Maiden turned her line of sight around to observe the cold, dim surroundings.

In a faint whisper, she informed Haruyuki:

“...This is...**this place is the interior of the Imperial Palace.**”

(To be continued...)

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Kawahara Reki, having brought to you [Accel World Volume 6: Shrine Maiden of Purifying Flames]. This is probably the volume that I spent the most time writing among the published ones. Have you enjoyed the book...?

I find that I lack many qualities a writer should have (like passion, ambition, the ability to work at home, etc...), and the thing I think I lack the most, is [the ability to properly end a good story]. To be honest, including the time I spent writing web novels, I have already been writing stories for eight years, but none of them have had a proper ending! Like my really long debut piece *Sword Art Online*, as well as the first draft of *Accel World*, all end with "Our battle is about to begin!" (A bit too late perhaps, but I'm actually anxiously sweating for winning prizes with such writing...)

Of course, I'm not saying that this series is going to end soon. Though, after writing so much of *Accel World*, I can't help but sometimes think like "How's this story going to end?" The problem is, I can't even think of an answer at all (LOL). I can make fantasies of how the story continues, but I don't see how to wrap it up. As a novel writer, I just can't stop thinking "This is bad".

However, when I put myself in the perspective of the reader, I tend to prefer 'open endings'. Certainly, it's good for stories to have chronicle-style endings, describing the futures of the main characters in detail, but I should say that I still want something like "Their story will go on from then on" ... Even while playing RPGs, I love things like "the world after killing the boss" very much (LOL). If there were a day where I got to design a game, after the finale, I'd start an epilogue that would probably be three times as rich as the main plot! By the way, someone please make a game like that!

I'm going off topic. For this reason, I have a strong feeling that this *Accel World* series will end with some sort of "Our true battle is about to begi..." thing, if there will be an ending. So, I apologize in advance! Sorry, everyone!

Lastly, to thank my illustrator HiMA, the delays on this volume were worse than the previous one, which is now probably causing you quite a lot of trouble, but yet you managed to deliver breathtakingly beautiful illustrations; and my editor Miki-san, who so graciously lent me 300 yen when I forgot to bring out my wallet, thanks to both of you for your help! And for the readers who have read all the way here, I'm so sorry that this volume ended once again with a "to be continued" notice! The next one will have a proper ending! Perhaps! Tak-kun will also be very active! Perhaps!

A certain day in August 2010

Kawahara Reki