

Accel World Volume 7 – Disaster Armor

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アクセセル・ワールド7
—災禍の鎧—

黒雪姫率いる《ネガ・ネビュラス》は、シルバー・クロウを《浄化》するため、《アーダー・メイデン救出作戦》を発動した。

難度の高いミッションの中、決死の覚悟でシルバー・クロウはアーダー・メイデンと接触するも、《帝城》を守護するエネミー《スザク》の火炎プレスにより、禁断の不可侵領域——《帝城》内部に突入してしまう。絶体絶命の危機に陥ったハルユキだが、彼はそこで不思議な《夢》を見る。《クロム・ファルコン》と《サフラン・プロッサム》。二人のアバターが望み、砕け散ってしまった《災禍》の物語を——。



か-16-13



災禍の鎧
アクセセル・ワールド7

川原礫

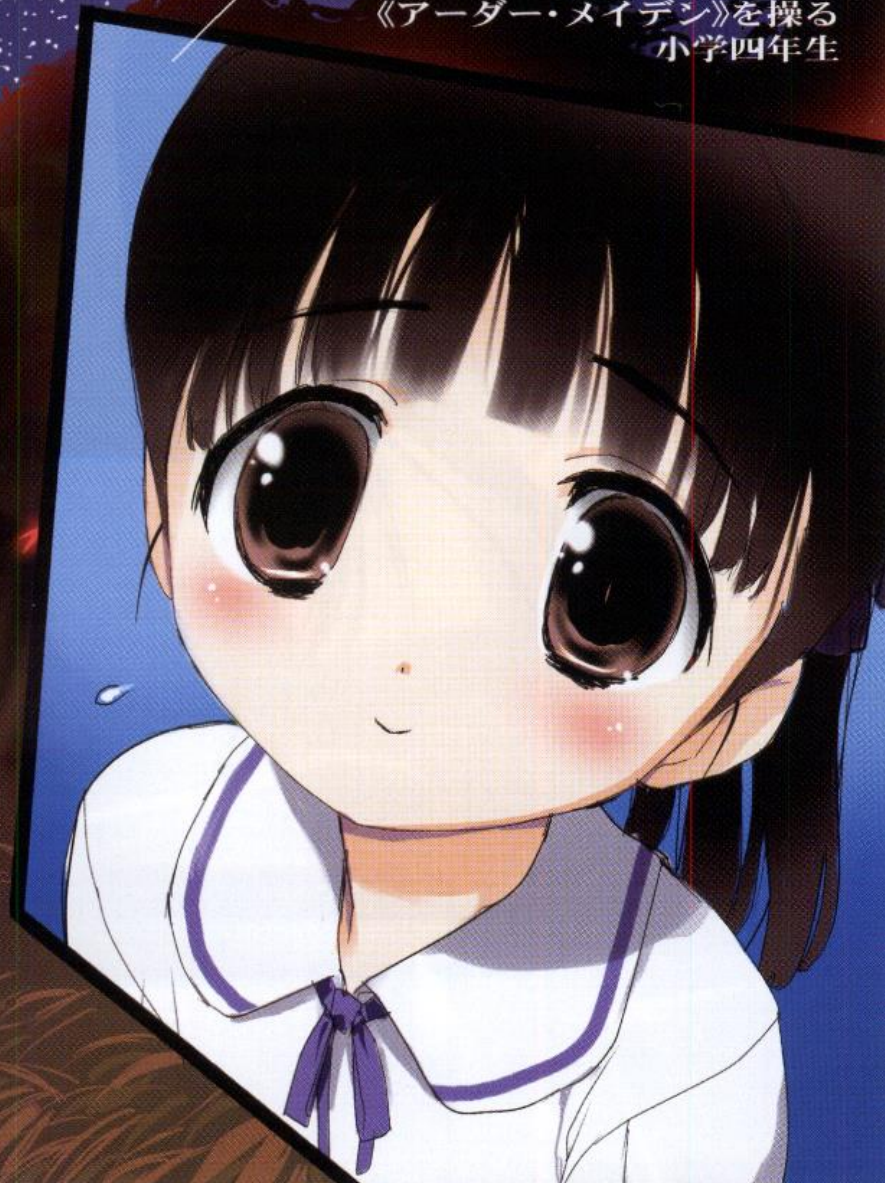
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シ ノ ミヤ ウタイ
四埜宮謡

旧《ネガ・ネビュラス》所属の
デュエルアバター
《アーダー・メイデン》を操る
小学四年生

「クーさん。言っただけはまずなんです。負けて、転んで、失敗しても、
それでも諦めずに前に進むことが本当の強さだと」





「……うん。きっと、どうにかしてみせる。生きて帰ろう……」
現実世界で待ってる、みんなのところに」

ハルユキ

《災禍の鎧》によって
汚染されてしまったアバター
《シルバー・クロウ》を操る
ミクニルカースト
中学内格差最底辺の少年







「ぼくはずっと、きみが羨ましかった。
余りにも純粹な願いを、希望を体現したその姿、
その力で、不可能を覆していくきみが……」

タクム

《ネガ・ネビュラス》所属の
デュエルアバター
《シアン・パイル》を操る
ハルユキの親友

「タク、オレはずっと、ずっと昔から、
お前みたいになりたかった。
だから……それを伝えるために、
オレはいま、お前と戦う」

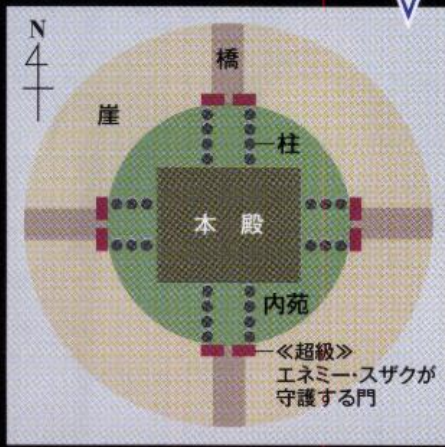


《加速世界》の《軍団》分布MAP



《帝城》

現実世界では「皇居」に位置する。加速世界が現れて以来、《バースト・リンカー》にその侵入を許したことがない《難攻不落の城》、と呼ばれている。《帝城》には、東西南北に一つずつ城門がそびえ、それ以外の城壁の上下方向には、不可視障壁が設定されていて侵入することはできない。四つの門は、最強中の最強と目される、四匹の《超級》エネミーにそれぞれ守護されている。《四神(しじん)》と呼ばれるそのエネミーたちは、《神獣(レジェンド)級》エネミーのさらに上をいく強さを誇る絶対的な存在で、彼らを四匹同時に倒す、ないしはその護りをくり抜けることができない限り、《帝城》への入城は不可能である。バーストリンカーたちが噂する、《ブレイン・バースト》のクリア条件の一つに、《レベル9バーストリンカー五人のポイントを全て奪い、レベル10になる》というものがある。《帝城の中心にたどり着く》ことも、その条件の一つではないかと言われている。



アクセル・ワールド ⁰⁷
災禍の鎧

川原 礫
イラスト/HIMA
デザイン/ビィピィ



■黒雪姫(クロユキヒメ)＝梅郷中学の副生徒会長。清楚伶俐なお嬢様。その素性は謎に包まれている。学内アバターは自作プログラムの『黒揚羽蝶』。デュエルアバターは《黒の王》『ブラック・ロータス』(レベル9)。

■ハルユキ＝有田春雪(アリタ・ハルユキ)。梅郷中学二年。いじめられっ子で太り気味。ゲームは得意だが、内向的。学内アバターは『ピンクのブタ』。デュエルアバターは『シルバー・クロウ』(レベル5)。

■チュリ＝倉嶋千百合(クラシマ・チュリ)。ハルユキの幼馴染。お節介焼きな元気娘。学内アバターは『銀色の猫』。デュエルアバターは『ライム・ベル』(レベル4)。

■タクム＝黛拓武(マズミ・タクム)。ハルユキ、チュリとは幼少期からの知り合い。剣道が得意。デュエルアバターは『シアン・パイル』(レベル5)。

■フーコ＝倉崎楓子(クラサキ・フウコ)。旧《ネガ・ネビュラス》に所属していたバーストリンカー。《四元素(エレメンツ)》の一人。とある事情により隠匿生活をおくっていたが、黒雪姫とハルユキの説得により戦線に復帰する。ハルユキに《心意》システムを授けた。デュエルアバターは『スカイ・レイカー』(レベル8)。

■ういうい＝四埜宮謡(シノミヤ・ウタイ)。旧《ネガ・ネビュラス》に所属していたバーストリンカー。《四元素(エレメンツ)》の一人。松乃木学園初等部四年生。高度な解呪コマンド《浄化》を扱えるだけでなく、遠距離攻撃も得意とする。デュエルアバターは『アダー・メイデン』(レベル7)。

■ニューロリンカー＝脳と量子無線接続し、映像や音声など、あらゆる五感をサポートする携帯端末。

■ブレイン・バースト＝黒雪姫からハルユキに転送されたニューロリンカー内のアプリケーション。

■デュエルアバター＝ブレイン・バースト内で対戦する際に操るプレイヤーの仮想体。

■軍団＝レギオン。複数のデュエルアバターで形成される、占領エリア拡大と利権確保を目的とする集団のこと。主要なレギオンは7つあり、それぞれ《純色の七王》がレギオンマスターを担っている。

■通常対戦フィールド＝ブレイン・バーストのノーマルバトル(1対1格闘)を行うフィールドのこと。現実さながらのスペックを持つが、システムはあくまで一昔前の格闘ゲームレベルのもの。

■無制限中立フィールド＝レベル4以上のデュエルアバターのみが許可されるハイ・プレイヤー向けのフィールド。《通常対戦フィールド》とは段違いのゲームシステムが構築されており、その自由度は次世代VRMMOにも全くひけを取らない。

■運動命令系＝アバターを制御するために扱うシステム。通常はすべてこのシステムによってアバターは操作される。

■イメージ制御系＝自身が強く想像(イメージ)することによってアバターを操作するシステム。通常の《運動命令系》とはメカニズムが大きく異なり、扱えるものはごく少数。《心意》システムの要諦。

■心意(インカーネイト)システム＝ブレイン・バースト・プログラムのイメージ制御系に干渉し、ゲームの枠を超えた現象を引き起こす技術。《事象の上書き(オーバーライド)》とも言う。

■加速研究会＝謎のバーストリンカー集団。《ブレイン・バースト》をただの対戦ゲームとしては考えておらず、何かを企む。《ブラック・バイス》、《ラスト・ジグソー》が所属している。

■災禍の鎧＝クロム・ディザスターと呼ばれる強化外装。装着すると、対象アバターのHPを吸い取る《体力吸収(ドレイン)》や、敵の攻撃を事前に演算・回避する《未来予測》など強力なアビリティが使用可能となる。しかしその所有者は、クロム・ディザスターに精神を汚染され、完全に支配される。

■ISSキット＝ISモード練習(スタディ)キットの略。ISモードとは《インカーネイト・システム・モード》のことで、このキットを使えば、どんなデュエルアバターでも《心意システム》が使用可能となる。使用中は、アバターのいずれかの部位に赤い《眼》が張り付き、《心意》の象徴である《過剰光(オーバーレイ)》が、黒いオーラとして放出される。

▶▶ accel World 07

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Chapter 1

Blackout.¹

Spotlight.

Gigantic round vermilion pillars, stripped of their former gloss, materialize out of the light. Backed against the arc of the pillar is a small figure. It is not a real person. The whole body is covered by heavy silver armor, the head covered with a helmet of the same color. The surroundings are weakly illuminated. Nighttime. Countless torches flicker soundlessly. The first pillar is not the only one – it is but the first in a seemingly-endless line of pillars extending into the distance. The ground is covered with pure white pebbles. At the edge of their vision, one is able to just glimpse the outline of a colossal citadel. The silver helmet turns to regard the citadel opposite it.

..... *Not really «Absolutely Inaccessible», now is it?*

Despite understanding how he brought this whole mess upon himself, he cannot help but complain.

Except, he can only complain in his head. He doesn't dare make a sound, and can hardly take a step out of fear of the sound of his own footsteps. The slightest of sounds can attract the fearsome Warrior-Formed Enemies wandering inside the citadel, causing them to attack him.

A Warrior Enemy can reach three meters high. The Beast Enemies that roamed the outside can be up to five times as tall. But the Warrior Enemies that patrolled the long corridors and citadel walls in groups of three or four emitted a pressure that surpassed Beast and even Legend Enemies. No, the pressure might be just as suffocating as the pressure emitted by the «Four Sacred Beasts» that guarded the citadel gates. Of course, the only time the citadel – the «Imperial City» that stood within the «Unlimited Neutral Field» – can be breached would be if, or when, the Four Beasts are overcome. But not a single Beast has yet been defeated. He slipped in when he spotted a chance – no, an accidental entry seems more likely.

Can't they at least prepare an escape Portal?

He grumbles and complains in his head once again, while trying to control the fear and anxiety he feels.

The metal-colored Avatar – his armor reflecting the torchlight – feels cold all over, his heart pounding inside the slightly-charred silver armor. This really is a pinch, the biggest he's been in since becoming a «BB Player».

But at the same time, he begins to feel excited from within the depths of his heart.

It has been eleven short months since the birth of the Accelerated World – when an unknown entity gave about a hundred first year elementary students living in central Tokyo copies of the Full Dive Fighting Combat Game «Brain Burst». In these eleven months, most players decided to challenge the colossal citadel that sat in the center of this world upon gaining the right to access the "Unlimited Neutral Field" when they reached level 4. Whether it's because it has the same position in the real world as the imperial residence, or because of the absolute-gravity chasms around the structure --- no matter how you looked at it, it is the place where the game will end – or as the children would call it, the «Last Boss Dungeon».

¹ The turning off of the stage lighting to separate scenes in a play or end a play.

However, every Burst Linker that has ever challenged it easily crumbled in the face of super Enemies with terrifying powers – the «Four Sacred Beasts».

Genbu of the North, Seiryuu of the East, Byakko of the West and Suzaku of the South. They are individual Enemy units, each with five bars of HP, and each of them possesses abilities to support and heal each other. The Beasts not engaged in combat could utilize these formidable abilities – for example, the ability to cast protective shields or recover HP for the ones engaged in combat at their respective gates. In other words, it is impossible to focus on just one of the Four Beasts. The players must divide into four teams and assault the Four Beasts simultaneously. Except, right now the total number of Burst Linkers is less than five hundred. They even formed smaller groups that contend with each other. If the players cannot stand united, then an operation of such scale is impossible. Among the Burst Linkers, there were some small parties who forced their way through to one of the gates, only to die at the end of the bridge and fall into the «Infinite Enemy Death» state – a term not conceived until this event occurred – until all points were lost.

Under such circumstances, even though the Four Sacred Beasts have not yet been defeated, to successfully infiltrate the Imperial City was nevertheless a source of excitement.

It must be that by continuing into the depths of the citadel, he could obtain the final game-clearing item – thus becoming the first person to clear Brain Burst, engraving his name in the history of the Accelerated World forever.

He possesses an ordinary ability, a plain metallic color and a name that does not stand out much---

«Chrome Falcon».

Although a Duel Avatar named after a falcon sounds pretty cool, it could also be said that both Chrome Falcon's ability and his appearance pale in comparison to his name. This is the opinion held not only by his opponents, but by himself as well.

The only similarity the Avatar has to the fierce bird of prey is the slightly sharp beak-like protrusion at the bottom of the mask. His eyeless face is completely silver – as such, the Avatar cannot help but give off an impression of a lackey. Slight of body with no weapons, and with nothing resembling wings on his back.

The only offensive abilities of this Avatar were punches and kicks – other than that, the only advantages were the speed allowed by the small build and the rigidity of the body. The only person who calls him 'cool' is his partner, «Saffron Blossom». Although he does not doubt her words, he would still like to be powerful enough to be worthy of her.

Blossom, as her name indicates, possesses the power to «Allow Flowers to Bloom». The small wand in her right hand can fire off many different types of seeds into the opponents' or allies' Avatars. The flowers that bloom from the seeds after a set time can leech their HP Gauge, Special Attack Gauge, or interfere with the opponents' movements. By the same token, the seeds have the power to cast buffs, erase debuffs and produce other beneficial effects. Some sarcastic players gave the power the uncomfortable name of a «Parasitic-Type Attack»; yet even amongst the indirect-attack Yellows, not many Avatars have that wide a range of abilities.

Of course, to possess such a powerful ability, other attributes must be sacrificed. For Blossom, her defensive power is low beyond imagination. That is why, to compensate for this weakness, she partnered with the defensive-type Falcon. That said, although they have fought together for half a year, he still feels uneasy – if someone with a higher defense were to invite Blossom to join their party, how would she react?

On the «Metallic Color Chart» – distinct to the «Base Color Circle» – Precious Metals such as platinum and gold are on the left, while Base Metals such as steel and iron are on the right. Although they are divided into Precious and Base, if the Avatars are at the same level, the potential would be the same for both sides. Precious Metals possess strong resistance to toxic, acidic, corrosive and other types of Special Attacks; Base Metals possess strong resistance to punches, slashes and various other Physical Attacks.

«Chrome» is a color close to the very center; it lacks the resistances of both Precious and Base Metals. Although few in number, there are metal colors with stronger armor than his. It would not be surprising if there are players more suited as meat shields amongst the highly defensive greens from the Base colors.

That meant, based on hardness of the Avatar alone, there is no knowing when Blossom might leave him for another player.

He cannot say for sure exactly why he feels the way he does right now. He is able to survive in the Accelerated World by making the harbor districts his base. As time passed, he was given the title «The Falcon of Black Silver». Yet as soon as he returns to the real world, he is just an eight-year-old kid – still in second grade. --- Except, he is just using that as an excuse. Less than a year may have passed for his body, but since he gained access to the Unlimited Neutral Field – the world that processes infinite time – five years have passed for his mind.

That's why... I think I can understand a bit now.

He reached Level Five and learned a certain ability, so he decided to come to the «Imperial City» to put his ideas into practice. After being lucky – or unlucky – enough to succeed in getting inside, he can now be surrounded by intimidating Enemy mobs at any moment. This is all due to the love and possessiveness he feels for Saffron Blossom.

--- I have to move fast, or otherwise, a Warrior Enemy will find me as it patrols the area, following its movement patterns.

Poking his head out from the shadow of a vermilion pillar, he quickly assesses the situation.

He is currently located in the Southern area of the «Imperial City» Inner Garden - which is one thousand five hundred meters in diameter - in the corner of the road that connects the «Suzaku Gate» to the Front Gate of the citadel proper. Each side of the entrance is guarded by a Warrior Enemy – each one strong and aggressive enough to be a Demon Enemy. It seems impossible to defeat them. That is why, in contrast, his target is a window upon the white walls. Because it is an improper route, there is a high chance that the window might not open from the outside – but as long as it is a real window, using it to enter should be possible.

From the back, the footsteps of the patrolling Warrior Enemy mob slowly approach. Inhaling deeply, he takes a step with his right foot while softly whispering out the ability name ---

«Flash Blink».

Even though the name is uttered in a barely audible voice, the Warrior Enemies' pace changes immediately.

But by then, the black-silver Avatar completely vanished from the shade of the pillar. He disappears after leaving behind a blue afterimage, then soundlessly materializes thirty meters away, beside the citadel wall.

This is Chrome Falcon's Level Five Special Ability, «Pseudo-Teleportation». “Pseudo” because it is just an expansion of «High Speed Straight Line Movement»-type abilities. Movement is only possible in areas where «one’s eyes can see the path» and «space is connected» – but the

moving Avatar turned into a particle with zero mass, nullifying both physical and gravitational type attacks.

He appears again backed to the white wall and observes the movement of the Warrior Enemies who arrive at his former hiding place. The invader whose attack mode was triggered is lost; the Warrior Enemies angrily glance left and right, then finally return to their original patrol path before resuming their former slow pace, as if forgetting anything had happened. *Huuuuu*, a deep breath. Despite the combat abilities of the Warrior Enemies, their AI settings appear to be much lower than that of the «Four Sacred Beasts».

He turns, raises his head to look upon the giant window on the wall behind him.

The field attribute is the long awaited Japanese style «Heian» Stage, and as expected, the windows are made of crisscrossing thin red strips of wood without inlaid glass panels, and the like. From what he can see, each little grid is just a three centimeter square in size – no Duel Avatar would be able to pass through it directly, but ---

Raising his eyes to take a look at his Special Attack Gauge, he sees that he only has 5 percent left. His HP Gauge has just 20 percent left, but even at full health, taking a strike from the Warrior Enemy's Tachi² means instant death.

He sets up his trajectory carefully, then kicks off the ground with his right foot and spends the last of his Special Attack Gauge on a final «Flash Blink».

Chrome Falcon's granulated body passes through the wooden window frame and finally enters the Imperial City.

This Ability is the very method that deceived the eyes of the «Four Sacred Beasts» and made possible the entrance into the Imperial City's impenetrable outskirts. It was extremely simple. He charged his Special Attack Gauge beforehand, circled around to the infinitely dark outskirts of the Imperial City rather than crossing the bridge guarded by the Four Sacred Beasts, and used «Blink» to cover the greatest possible distance. But even by using up all of his Special Attack Gauge, a hundred meters of movement is the maximum – barely enough to pass over the five-hundred-meter wide abyss.

That is why the initial trajectory was set to be slightly higher. The moment he appeared above the abyss, the Avatar, unable to resist the super gravity, was pulled into the chasm while the HP Gauge was drained. But as a result, the Special Attack Gauge was recharged – after a certain amount was replenished, «Blink» was used again diagonally upwards. The process was continuously repeated until he crossed the abyss.

--- Even if that all worked, he had only planned to scout --- or, rather, experiment --- today. If the cycle of Blink, recharge and Blink again was proven to be possible, he had planned to just fall to the bottom of the abyss and die. He would use the obtained data as a basis to tweak the plan after he revived in front of the abyss. Once he had ensured a greater possibility of success, he would start the real challenge.

Or that was what he intended. Instead, he recklessly charged in without a plan on the very first try, all due to the extreme fear he felt as he dropped into the abyss. Utterly unthinking after just the first drop, blindly using Blink in front of him, he did not realize what was happening until after he reached the outer walls of the Imperial City.

Of course, the desired result was achieved – but to accept what was learned and give up now is not possible.

² *Tachi* (太刀) is a type of Japanese sword that precedes the Katana.

Eleven months since the beginning of the battle in the Accelerated World, the children who became BB Players have been creating a history of rivalry, as well as a history of the struggle against the unknown game creator. The children poured tremendous enthusiasm into finding loopholes in the system – «ways to easily obtain Points» – but as soon as the methods are found, the creator would install a patch to close the loophole. The «Enemy Stacking»³ within the game, the «Seal Cheating» that relies on outside programs from the real world and other methods..... As long as the techniques are found to have the slightest trace of trickery, amendments to disable such techniques would be installed at a speed astonishingly faster than other web games. This reaction speed has led many players to believe that the creators and administrators of Brain Burst were not real people, but AI.

In any case, the mysterious creator strictly forbids opportunistic approaches to the game. To obtain something in the Accelerated World, the player must pay an equal price.

As such, flying over the obstacle instead of entering via the four directional gates into the absolutely inaccessible «Imperial City» – Chrome Falcon's method – would definitely not be recognised as proper. A patch would be released very soon, the super gravity of the abyss then being able to capture the originally physical and gravitational-nullifying Flash Blink. No, maybe the patch has already been released ---

That's why... this is my first and last chance.

To obtain something here, or to become stronger here and become a Burst Linker worthy of being Saffron Blossom's partner. To no longer fear to lose her, to allow her to feel content with choosing me.

And most importantly, to repay Blossom for reaching out and talking to me – since I am as introverted here as I am in the real world.

The area after passing through the window frame is a well-polished wooden corridor that looks brand-new. Gorgeously drawn sliding doors line the walls further along the corridor. Golden candle stands are equally spaced apart, their orange flames flickering silently. Any sign of Enemies --- so far, nothing.

He makes sure that there is a small golden bolt hanging off the window behind him. That bolt is not a meaningless ornament. He turns the bolt and lightly pushes; the vermilion window opens soundlessly outwards. At least by returning here, it is possible to escape from the Inner Imperial City.

But even if he does leave, there is no escape Portal. It is impossible to leave the same way he came in. He makes up his mind, coming to the conclusion that – as long as his mentality and luck hold out – progressing deeper in is the only way to go.

Holding his breath under the silver mask, the skinny Avatar advances forward, as if melting into the gloom of the corridor.

A few hours --- or was it closer to a few dozen?

Because he dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field right after elementary school ended, in theory it is possible for him to spend days or even months in this world. Truthfully, he once dived, no, «lived» with Blossom in this world for a full three months.

³ Written as 'Enemy Stage Entrap Hunting' (エネミー地形引つか狩り), read as 'Enemy Stacking'(エネミースタッキング).

That said, the difficulty of avoiding the Reaction Area of the Warrior and Shinto Priest Enemies --- which are much stronger than their counterparts in the Inner Garden --- is simply beyond imagination. If Falcon did not have such a small and lightweight body, then this act would probably have been impossible. At the same time, it would seem that the Citadel was built with the expectation that it would be assaulted by massive parties with hundreds of members. The road is surprisingly wide; the ceiling is also very high. He is able to avoid the patrolling Enemies and continue forward precisely because of this, but his concentration is approaching its limit.

He takes a deep breath. The icy air refreshes him once more as he hides behind a large round pillar, searching for his next route.

The Imperial City is one thousand and five hundred meters in diameter; the distance from the Suzaku Gate to the Front Gate guarded by the Demon Enemy is roughly four hundred meters. So the size of the Main Hall, the greatest distance from South to North, should only be about seven hundred meters across. He speculates that he has walked five hundred meters already since he broke in; therefore, he should be approaching the central area of the Main Hall.

Sure enough ---

A particularly broad space, its floor flickering with inconceivable radiance, appears in front of the road stretching northwards.

Two objects, standing side by side. Transparent cyan in color, rippling like the surface of water.

That color is very familiar. It is the radiance of the «Leave Points», also known as «Portals», set up within iconic buildings throughout the Unlimited Neutral Field.

He cannot help but feel relieved as he sighs – only to swallow this feeling mid-breath. If this is just a Leave Point connected to the real world, he would even take back some sort of proof of his successful trespass – much less the honor of clearing the game. For what reason did he challenge the abyss for so long, prepared to die while using «Blink» all that time, enduring the nervousness for dozens of hours as he sneaked through ---.....

--- No.

No, the original motivation behind this Individual Mission is not anything material. He only wants something akin to confidence. A certain pride that would allow him to continue to stand tall beside Saffron Blossom.

Then this is already enough. Sneaking into the most dangerous place in the Accelerated World, arriving at the innermost area and surviving. Even if I am the only one who knows what I have achieved, this fact will surely give me courage in the future. The fact that I did what even the strongest «Pure Colors» couldn't.

Thinking carefully about it, he realized that the system never plainly indicated exactly when this immense and mysterious game, Brain Burst, would be finally «cleared». The ideal outcome would involve having the name of the clearer declared to the entire Accelerated World, awards of Burst Points as prize money and Enhanced Armaments as prize items, before the game continues..... But there is also the possibility of an Ending Theme playing as credits roll, followed by the deletion of the game software from the BB players' Neuro Linkers as the word END appears. Since he never met Blossom in reality or exchanged contact methods, if that were to be the result... they would never meet each other again.

That's why, if I come across any item that seems like a Clear Item, I will not think about touching it. That's all. Surviving past the Portal... is the best reward I should expect from this quest.....

Yet, it is almost as if the noble thought of this ordinary Metal colored Duel Avatar... convinced the true god of the Accelerated World to take pity on him.

Because what awaits to demand his attention at the expense of his concentration and alertness focused on watching his surroundings... are not just ordinary Portals.

The ovals flickering with blue light sitting side by side are indistinguishable from countless other Portals that existed outside of the Imperial City. But an incredible object is placed in front of each oval.

Two gleaming black pillars – no, pedestals, each stands about one meter tall. Each one has an object placed on top of it. Treading lightly to minimize the sound of his own footsteps, he approaches the pedestal on his left.

Before him, slightly above his line of sight, sits a sword, or a katana, bathed in the radiance of the Portal. It cannot be properly distinguished because although the hilt and the guard are both Japanese in style, the sheath forms a straight line without any curve to it. Its mirror-like surface, forged from a silvery metal, is almost without any decoration.

The terrible power hidden within this straight katana can be seen from a glance. If it is an Enhanced Armament, then it must be of the highest rank – no, probably even above that. Just looking at it knocks the breath out of him with its pressure. It is as if he is being stared down at close range by Legend Enemies No, more like by the «Four Sacred Beasts» he saw.

Breaking his gaze from the straight katana with some effort, he looks at the black marble pedestal once again.

A rectangular metal nameplate is inlaid on its foreside; numerous images and characters are engraved on it.

At the very top are seven dots arranged like the letter 'P' leaning left, with a line connecting the dots. He once saw the same image during science class in elementary school, when they were learning about constellations. A quadrangle formed by four stars connected to a tail of three stars. The ladle-shaped «Big Dipper». Carefully looking at it, he sees that the center of the ladle handle - that is, the fifth star from the left, is larger than the rest of the stars.

Beneath the constellation are two Kanji characters rarely seen in the Accelerated World where English words are normally used – 【玉衝】⁴ – although he could read them, he cannot understand what they mean.

Below that is one more line of text, this time in English.

【THE INFINITY】 .

He remembers that it means «Infinite». Most likely, this is the name of the straight katana Enhanced Armament within the game. The silver masked Avatar rolls the words over his tongue repeatedly as he moved several steps to the right to look at the other pedestal. No matter how he looked at it, the item placed on top was a Western style protection gear ---

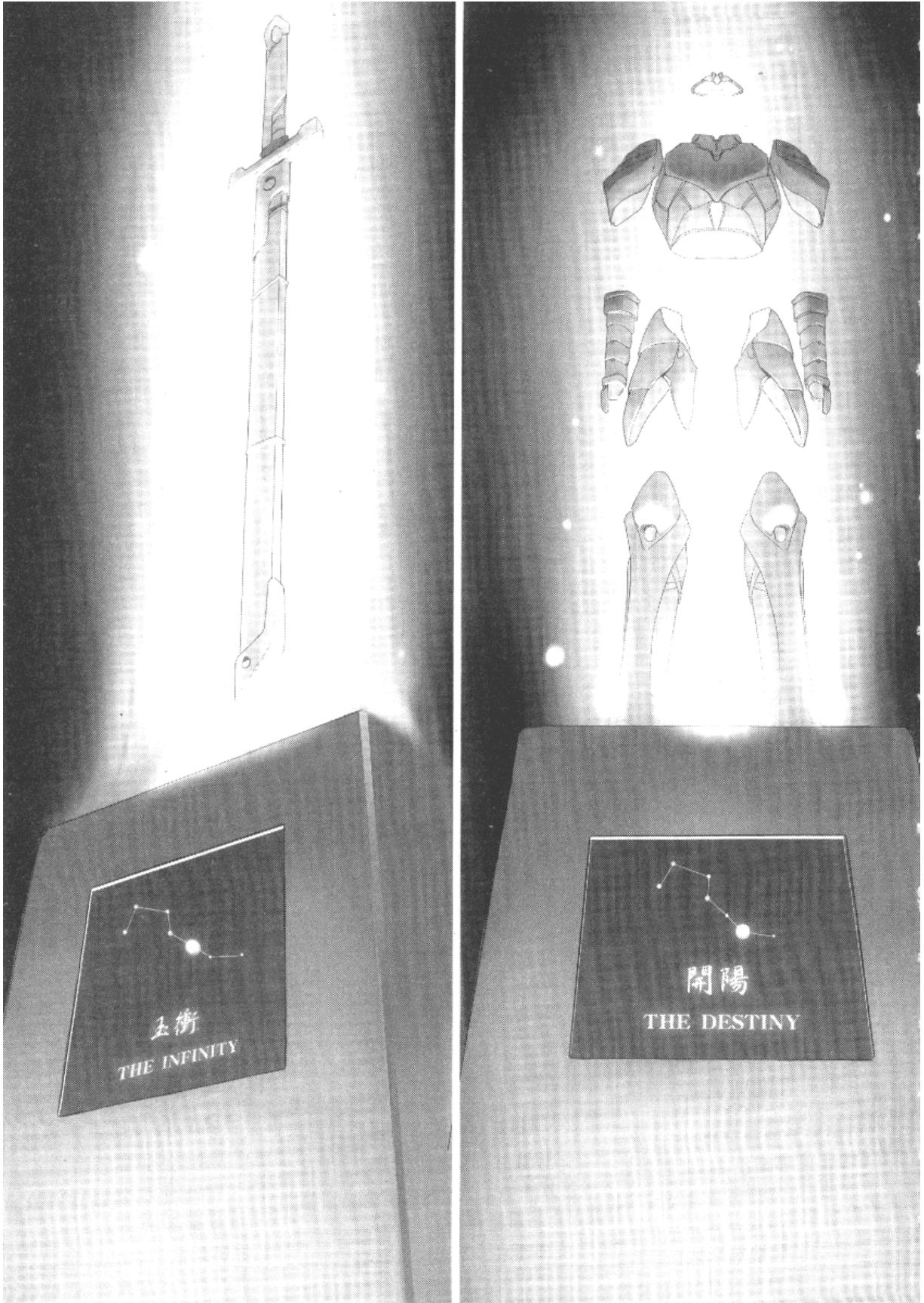
Armor.

Its form is not heavy or bulky. In normal VRMMORPGs⁵, it would be considered a light-armor type. The headpiece is round in shape; the chest, shoulder and wrist parts are reduced to the absolute minimum size. The lower portion consisted simply of boots that reached up to the knees. But it does not give the impression of a weak item at all. The armor – brilliant silver like

⁴ Kanji for “Alioth”.

⁵ Virtual Reality Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.

the sword – seems to contain within astounding data density – enough to block some attacks completely. Even the space around it seems to be distorted from its influence. Compared to it, the armor of the Metal-colored Chrome Falcon seems like some sort of simple toy.



Holding his breath, he checks the nameplate.

Its overall style is exactly the same as the one on the pedestal of the sword. At the top is the schematic view of the Big Dipper. But the larger star is now the sixth from the left instead. The Kanji characters read 【開陽】⁶. Sure enough, he still cannot understand the meaning.

And the English name at the very bottom ---

【THE DESTINY】. It should mean «Fate».

After he reads to this point, he cannot help but take a step back, this time exhaling heavily.

These two are perhaps the strongest ranked Enhanced Armaments within the Accelerated World. Sword and armor.

He could make them his own by simply reaching out and touching them. Throughout the Unlimited Neutral Field there are numerous «Dungeons», where – according to rumors – Enhanced Armaments on pedestals have also been found deep within.

However, the Portals wavering behind the pedestals need to be noted. They must be related to each other. Most likely, they will trigger and forcibly send him to the real world as soon as he touches and activates one of the items.

Also, if an item is activated, its matching Portal would become a single-use «One Time Portal» and seal off its corresponding pedestal. That is, a single person or group could only choose between either the sword or the armor at one time. A standard two-choice conundrum in games.

Although just a few minutes ago, he already fully considered the circumstance in which he directly enters the Portal and logs out, in the current situation he lacks the resolve to ignore either of the pedestals. His real age is only eight anyway – even if the accelerated portion is added on, he would still be no older than thirteen. Since everything has been set up like this, it is obvious that the Portals will only activate if he touches one of the pedestals.

So, which one?

It does not really matter whether he chose the sword or the armor – as long as he equips it, it would obviously make his ability parameters soar. But to enhance Chrome Falcon alone was meaningless. The first thing he should consider is how the choice would affect him as Saffron Blossom's partner. The only reason for Falcon's existence is to protect her. Should he choose the sword, then? He was already a defensive Metal color – to strengthen his armor again would just be redundant.

His foot that heads towards the pedestal of 【THE INFINITY】 --- suddenly stops. To protect Blossom. If that is the only requirement, then there is a better option. An option that can protect her despite her frail armor; an option that allows her to be unharmed even under harsh and concentrated attacks.

Clenching his right fist, he hammers his own chest to dispel his immature and selfish desires, and reaches out to the silver armor sitting to the right.

The instant his fingertip touches the item, a purple System Message pops out in front of him with a clear sound. «YOU GOT AN ENHANCED ARMAMENT 【THE DESTINY】».

The armor disappears into particles of light; at the same time, the Portal's blue light radiates out and envelops Chrome Falcon.

⁶ Kanji for “Mizar”.

Blackout.

Spotlight.

Although not spacious, a room that feels cozy materializes out of the light.

Both the wall and the floor have been heavily polished. A black cooking stove stands in the corner. Sizzling steam pours unceasingly out of a teapot sitting above it. Opposite it, next to the wall, is a large bed. Upon the pure white sheet sit two people, side by side.

They are not just humans. One of them is clad in deep-silver armor. The other's body is bright orange like the sun. The short hair and the well-conceived shoulder and waist design make her look just like a budding bloom.

Facing the silver Avatar who is bowing his head like a child being scolded, the orange Avatar gently raises her cute right fist.

“God --- are you an idiot!?”

Don. He does not know how many times he has taken a hit to the helmet already. Cringing out of reflex, he repeats the same excuse he had used.

“Li-like I said, I only planned to experiment a little at the start.”

“Then just use the same method to come back! Why did you just charge into the citadel without a care in the world!?”

'Be-, Because my HP had already dropped a lot – if I died on the inner side of the abyss while using «Blink», I may not have respawned again on the outside.”

“But even if you did respawn on the inside, your HP would have been completely restored by then – you could have just used 'Blink' to come back out!”

“Uuu..... th-, that is true, but.....”

There is no chance of him winning this kind of argument against his logical, cool-headed partner. Just as his shoulders droop in misery, he hears a loud sigh – and then, instead of a fist, a delicate palm pats him on the head.

“But..... the will to challenge the «Imperial City», and the mental strength to make it to the innermost area and come back out... are worthy of praise. You did well, Fal.”

He raises his head – that gentle voice makes his heart skip a beat. Just in front of him, a calm smile appears upon Saffron Blossom's cute face.

“Th-thank you, Fron.”

Staring into her light aqua-colored eyes as he murmurs, Blossom shrinks back her shoulders shyly and pulls her hand back from the top of Chrome Falcon's head.

“I'll go brew some tea. Oh, and we'll have a slice of cake to celebrate your safe return. I recently bought one from the «Food Shop» down in Ginza. It looks quite tasty.”

He watches the figure of his partner running hurriedly into the opposite kitchen – as his heart is once again filled with emotions, he is unable to make a sound.

The key to the small house – located in a corner of Minato Ward⁷ in the Unlimited Neutral Field, a location that corresponds to the artificial island of Odaiba⁸ in the real world – was purchased by the two of them with the points they had gathered from Enemy hunting over many years – albeit of Accelerated Time. To Falcon, the thought of using these points for levelling up or purchasing a strong Enhanced Armament had once crossed his mind. But seeing Blossom open the doors of the house for the first time blew away all those childish ideas in an instant.

After that, almost another year was spent collecting furniture for this home. To Falcon, this place feels more like home than where he lives in the real world. Compared to an empty home with no siblings where his parents leave early and come home late... there is this home, where Blossom is always by his side. Of course, sharing a bed is still embarrassing.

As to why she was so fixed upon the idea of buying a house back then... she told him the reason a month ago in real time.

Saffron Blossom has suffered from intracellular mitochondrial dysfunction, an incurable disease, since birth. Because it is a hereditary disease, even the most advanced nanomachine therapies show no results. Although the only symptoms she has so far are headaches and increased fatigue, her condition will continue to deteriorate, the symptoms worsening to convulsions and paralysis before the disease finally reaches her heart..... The doctors have already predicted that she is unlikely to reach adulthood. It seems that the other reason she had worn the Neuro Linker since birth – at that time, it had just gone on the market – was to have her condition and vital signs monitored at all times.

Blossom gives Falcon, who is sitting on the same bed staring at her, a bright smile.

---Don't make such a face, Fal. Even if some misfortune were to befall me, it won't be for another ten or fifteen years... Besides, we still have «Brain Burst». In this accelerated world, we can live for almost a lifetime. In this cute and beautiful home we bought, living with the person I love most, forever and ever.....

Facing Blossom as she says that while smiling shyly once again, he can't help but blurt out “You mean, me?” He instantly receives a punch in response.

So happy, but scared at the same time. Can I really do it? Do I, Chrome Falcon, really have the right to spend a «lifetime» with Blossom? The other reason he recklessly challenged the Imperial City yesterday was due to that fear within his heart.

That is why, looking at the side of his partner's face as she prepares tea and cake on the small table in front of him, he can no longer suppress the question that has been weighing heavy on his heart since surviving that citadel.

“Ah..... Fron. Why..... why me? I don't have any significant abilities. Even in the Metal color Chart, I'm nothing that special. Why did you choose me?”

Blossom immediately shows an expression of dazed astonishment, but quickly pouted.

“Aah, you forgot?! Fal, the one who first suggested that we form a party was you! With that super quiet voice you were using to talk to me among the spectators, I had to keep asking you to repeat the question!”

“Eeh..... Wa, was that how it happened?”

He quickly looks back through his memories, but that moment feels like it happened close to five years ago. Even so, according to his memories of that moment from the distant past, he was the

⁷ Minato (港区 - literally 'harbour area') is one of the 23 special wards of Tokyo.

⁸ Odaiba (お台場) is a large artificial island in Tokyo Bay.

one who first talked to Blossom – not the other way around. Surprised by his own courage, a nonexistent cold sweat begins to break out across his Avatar's body. Setting the teapot down, Blossom leans over and places her hands on his shoulders.

“Now, it's my turn to ask. Fal, why did you choose me? I didn't have any abilities back then, and I was always being trounced by the high power types – why me?”

--- Why? He had chosen her from the moment he first saw her.

But it seems that those feelings are impossible to hide from his long-time partner. With a gentle smile, the sunny Avatar wraps her delicate arms around Falcon's head and hugs him tightly.

“..... Me too. I thought so too. There is no other reason, and I haven't regretted it once Let's finish this tea. After that we'll go out and watch the sea. It's still the «Twilight Stage» outside – the sunset must be really pretty.”

Blackout.

Spotlight.

Two standing figures emerge out of the white halo, snuggling together. One dark-silver, the other orange.

Points of light spread across the distance. The quiet sea, and the sun sinking into the horizon. The water surface reflects the dazzling setting sun, and blends together with the colors of the two figures gazing at this sight.

The sunset view overlooking Tokyo Harbor from Akatsukifutou Park in the southwestern corner of Daiba⁹, is breathtaking to the point that it is hard to believe it is just 3D imagery produced from data taken by the security cameras.

But this is not the real world, since the constant airline arrivals and departures that should be taking place in Haneda Airport on the opposite shore are nowhere to be seen, and instead there are gigantic pterodactyl Enemies soaring carefree in the orange sky. Instead of whales, plesiosaurs cause massive waves in the shallows of the bay.

Every time he gazes into the distance with Blossom in the vast Unlimited Neutral Field, he can't help but ponder.

For what reason does this world exist? For what purpose are only young children allowed to step foot into this world?

The total cost to build as well as operate such an enormous system is completely beyond the imagination of an elementary school student. Not to mention that until this moment in time, not one BB Player has paid even a single cent in gaming fees. There are rumors saying it's a market research project carried out by big-budget gaming companies, others say it's a publicity stunt by advertising companies, however, if that is really the case, then way too few programs have been distributed.

Around a year ago, about one hundred children received the Client Package from an untraceable source. Of that number, only thirty percent managed to level up to Level 2 and become «Parents» who have the unlimited privilege to copy-and-install --- thirty people. From there, the game spread once again by being shared between children who like video games, yet although it

⁹ Daiba (台場) formally refers to one district of the island development in Minato Ward. Note that it is different from Odaiba.

has now reached five hundred players concentrated in the southern areas of the 23 wards¹⁰ as the hub, the scale is still incredibly small for it to be a corporate sales strategy.

The requirements to become a player for the game Brain Burst are way too strict in the first place. It is difficult to imagine many children at all who have worn a Neuro-Linker since birth and are experienced in FullDiving for extended periods of time. Although the BB program comes with a «Installation Aptitude Checker» module, which detects if the requirements are met via transferring a Trojan-like file through a Direct Link, Falcon has yet to find anyone close to him who can satisfy the requirements. As a result, although he has reached Level 5, he has completely given up on becoming a «Parent».

Why does it exist? For what reason does this alternate world with infinite space and time exist?

“Are you still thinking, Fal?”

Saffron Blossom, leaning against him, suddenly murmurs. Blinking several times under the silvery mask, he ceases his rambling thoughts.

“Ah, yeah. I don't really have any weird feelings about the normal Field, but every time I see the Unlimited Field, I feel really concerned. Whe... Where is this all leading, things like that.”

“Well... I can understand that same feeling. During my recent conversations with friends and family in the real world, from time to time, they would look at me really weirdly. Though I don't believe I've changed much at all, it seems I have been unconsciously using words and expressions that I've never used before.”

Blossom seemingly leans closer to him timidly, sensing that, Falcon tenses his shoulders to hug her tighter.

“That can't be helped. We have already spent... no, lived five years in this world. We have experienced so many sights, so many exchanges, so many thoughts. The age of our souls has long surpassed the standards of a sixth grade student. But every cloud has its silver lining. If it's the me from the past, I would unconsciously feel embarrassed just to stay in the same room with girls, let alone talk to them.”

“Ho, ho. It seems to me that you're still a kid, Falcon-san.”

Although Blossom smiles faintly, a look of grimness soon appears on her cute face.

“Hey... Fal. Have you ever heard about this...? What happens to players who lose all their Burst Points and have their BB program forcibly uninstalled...?”

The soft murmur causes his body to stiffen for a moment. However, he quickly relaxes and deliberately answers in a calm voice.

“Those are just rumors... *Players who had their programs uninstalled will lose all memories regarding the Accelerated World...* That just sounds so far-fetched, manipulating other's memories and stuff...”

“If that's so, then the technology to accelerate one's thought speed by one thousand times is just as unbelievable initially. To tell the truth, I still can't comprehend it all. That's why, perhaps «Memory Erasure» is also...”

At this point, Falcon, who is equally dubious about the base technology within Brain Burst, can't help but fall silent.

¹⁰ The 23 special wards of Tokyo.

Both of them are «First Generation BB Players» without «Parents», whose numbers have dwindled to just twenty people, both of them also do not have their own «Child». As a result, there has not been any chance for them to confirm whether or not players who lose the program really do lose their memories.

No, even if there is a chance, confirming the truth will not be easy. According to rumors, the people who retire from the Accelerated World, instead of losing all memories regarding the Accelerated World, could be more accurately described as having «lost interest in Brain Burst as well as the fine details regarding the game». A technique that does not create any memory blanks, thus minimizing the sense of discordance felt by the people around them, can best be described as a mental manipulation with a buffering characteristic.

Which is why this could be a technique more fearsome than simple complete memory erasure.

Buddies who have been always in the same Legion, or strongly bonded «Parents» and their «Children», one day they don't simply forget --- they lose all interest in each other. They see each other as one of those non-essential acquaintances they could do without. If this was truly the end result, it would be much better to become total strangers. Although slim, there would still be a chance to reacquaint and become friends again...

The inexplicable chill brought about by his own thoughts makes the Avatar shiver. At the same moment, a soft murmur reaches his ear.

“Fal, I really want a «Child» soon.”

“Eh...?”

The unexpected statement makes him stare at his partner. Blossom smiles shyly for an instant, but quickly changes her expression and quietly continues.

“Until this moment I did not dare to try it because I never had the confidence to protect my «Child», but recently my normal battle win ratio has stabilised, and I have also accumulated enough battle techniques for use against Enemies right? In the future, even if my Child's points fall below a safe level, I will still be able to bail them out to an extent. Even so, I won't just spoil them by doing that all the time. Once they reach Level 4, they can just pay me back by hunting Enemies.”

“Ha... ha, is that so...”

Falcon nods; if it's Blossom, then she will become a harsh yet gentle mother... no, «Parent». Taking her eyes off Falcon, Saffron Blossom turns her gaze past the Tokyo Bay to the distant Pacific Ocean and makes an even more surprising statement.

“After that, even if it is much further in the future, one day, I will start my own Legion.”

“Eh... You want to start participating in territory battles?”

He hurriedly asks so; the short bright-yellow hair shakes from side to side as a reply.

“No, no. The Daida area has always been an unclaimed land, so it's possible to initiate a territory declaration, but that would just be more of the same. My Legion won't be a warring Legion... How should I put it, it would be more of a Legion of mutual aid.”

“Mutual aid... as in helping one another?”

“Yeah, that's right. Providing points when the «Children» run low and being paid back in the future, isn't that like what I just described? But this will be larger in scale and more systematic.”

He frowns deeply as his partner's words have finally gone beyond his level of comprehension. Immediately, Blossom turns around, grabs both of Falcon's palms and continues with a serious expression.

“Hey... Fal. We've been a team since Level 1 right? Both of us lost ourselves in battle as we worked our way up to Level 2, then Level 3, then Level 4, by the time we noticed, we were already Level 5. But if we think about it right now, we are indeed very lucky. Though I am a little unwilling to think about it, all this time we've been levelling up, sometimes even because of our levelling up, many BB Players have lost all their Burst Points and retired from the Accelerated World.”

“.....”

That was indeed the case. Although, at this point, the moment when someone's Burst Points run out has only been witnessed a handful of times, the indisputable truth remains that four out of every five «First Generations» have been eliminated.

The seriousness of the topic robs him of his replies, as Blossom's two small hands rub back and forth around his wrists lightly, soothingly. At the same time, she softly murmurs.

“Sorry Fal. I don't regret anything. «Brain Burst» is a fighting game after all... there will always be winners as well as losers, that is an undeniable fact. But... But, the moment your points become zero, you will lose the program, lose the memories, lose everything and never be able to return to this world, that is just too cruel... I have seen too many people with only a few points left, I can't feel a hint of joy from them... If you can't enjoy it, then how can this still be called a game?”

--- *Perhaps, this cruelty is what the mysterious developer is hoping for.* That thought crosses his mind for an instant, but he chooses to remain silent. Instead he suddenly asks.

“That's why... you want to build a «Legion of Mutual Aid»...?”

“...Yeah. Collect a massive reservoir of points beforehand and lend them to those who have nearly exhausted theirs. After their points are back to a safe level, they can return the points by participating in Enemy hunts. Over the last five years, we've learned so many hunting techniques that I'm almost sick of them. With these techniques, the number of accidents during Enemy battles can be substantially reduced.”

“But... But...”

As he struggles to understand the goals behind Blossom's scheme, he asks her in a careful manner.

“If all the players join the mutual aid system... Then no one will ever lose all their points, all the players' «Acceleration» as well as levelling points has to be supported by the hunting of Enemies... Is that even possible...?”

“It is. It will be... It absolutely has to be this way.”

Saffron Blossom shows her most serious sparkle so far in her bright blue eyes that remind one of the spring sky as she reveals some new information.

“I... recently heard a rumor. Some of the Legions go to game shops and amusement parks just to look for children who have Acceleration compatibility, and once found, they give them the BB program straight away...”

“Tha... that is indeed somewhat informal, but isn't that a great way to increase members...?”

“No. Those people never saw the «Children» as partners at all... They don't teach the children anything about Brain Burst, instead they use the Direct Link or the Local Area Net to

continuously challenge the children to take all of their initial 100 Burst Points... causing the forced uninstall of the programs...”

“Wha...”

He catches his breath. This isn't even «Soliciting» anymore, it has turned into pure «Hunting». Not Enemy hunting --- Player hunting.

Blossom watches Falcon closely and, seeing he is unable to speak, continues in a strained tone.

“If that is the truth... then it must be wrong. Even if it is possible on the system, it is still wrong. Although I don't have that much power... I will do something about it. I'll try my hardest, even if it changes little. I don't know how long it will take, raising a «Child», testing the plan to loan points, building the Legion... One day, one day I will make sure that everyone in this world can enjoy this game...”

By the time he realizes, his arms are already tightly wrapped around Blossom.

To the small Avatar within his arms, he desperately whispers.

“... Let me help. Although I'm a good-for-nothing Metal color, I promise, for you, for this world, I will keep on doing my best. Brain Burst is a fighting game, and games you play should be enjoyed. I am really happy that I have always been able to fight with you, Fron. Ever since I have met you, every day, I have always happily looked forward to the next day. I want to share our happiness with the other players as well.”

“Yeah. Yes... it the same for me, I am so happy with Fal. From now on, for sure, we'll be happy forever. Let us spread this happiness. If it's the two of us, then it will be possible.”



Hugging Blossom tightly as she replies in a shaking voice, he lightly presses down on her shoulders.

Just a sec, raising a single finger as if saying that, he touches his own HP Bar to the upper-left of his sight to open the Menu Window. Searching through his Storage¹¹, he Objectifies an Item.

It's a Card with a silvery radiance like the surface of a mirror. The Items obtainable in the Unlimited Neutral Field probably all initially existed in Card form such as this. Enhanced Armaments are no exception, after obtaining them from Dungeons or as Enemy drops, they are sealed as Cards before being placed in Storage. The ownership settings are decided by who equips it for the first time.

Removing the Card from the Window, he passes it to Blossom.

The tiny characters carved onto the surface spell --- **【THE DESTINY】**. Obtained from the deepest part of the Imperial City, perhaps the strongest armor of white-silver in the world.

'Fron, this is for you. Your dream, will be realised for sure.'

Blossom carefully lifts her hands to take the Card.

Under this overwhelming power, both of their destinies will be distorted, but at this point of course, it is impossible for them to know...

Blackout.

Spotlight.

A delicate figure emerges out of the white halo.

The shading of her body remind others of the bright orange spring sunlight. But colors previously unseen on her body have now appeared. Her forehead, chest and all four limbs now shine with a mirror-like silver.

The short hair that looks like a budding flower is hanging down flatly. Both arms are spread out in opposite directions, her skinny legs stretching down powerlessly. The only reason she would remain motionless in such an unstable posture is because something restrains her from behind.

Thin and solid black, as if cut from a large uniform sheet --- a cross. The orange figure is firmly secured to the cross, making it unclear whether or not the cross exerts some attracting force.

The illumination continues to spread, finally allowing the surrounding area to be seen.

The ground emits a metallic-green luster. Strange bugs with the same metallic luster are wriggling everywhere. The cross has been stuck into the lowest part of the bowl-like depression in the ground. Close by her, a large fissure has been opened in the ground; the black fissure opening gives off a feeling of absolute terror. The sides of the fissure are coated with clear viscous slime.

The illumination spreads out further.

Around the edge of the thirty-meter-wide depression, several dozen figures stand in a circle. Not moving, not speaking, they are all silently observing the cross at the bottom of the depression. It's just like they know what's about to happen. Holding their breath, eyes wide open, fearing --- or anticipating --- something.

¹¹ Written as 'Personal Belongings Bar'(所持品欄), read as 'Storage'(ストレージ).

Among these figures, only one is lying upon the ground.

A small body with a dark-silver luster. Slim of limb and wearing a round helmet. He seems to be trying desperately to stand up, his sharp fingertips carving into the metallic ground. But all to no avail. Two pieces of thin black plates, very similar to the cross at the bottom of the depression, hold him on his left and right.

The metallic insects that have been slowly crawling around the depression suddenly flee the area in a great hurry. Diving into the gill-like folds spread across the ground, disappearing from view instantly.

Zuzuzu, zuzuzu, from the open fissure down in the depression, a barely audible sound of vibration reverberates out.

'Stop... stop, for the love of God, stop!!'

These same words are screamed out dozens, even hundreds of times, only for the sound to dissipate once again into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Countless scratches have been carved into the ground in front of him by his fingers. But, regardless of how much effort he put in, he is only able to move his forearms and hands. The jet-black plates which clamp his arms at his shoulders are thin beyond belief, but they have the overwhelming power to tightly bind Chrome Falcon like gigantic pliers.

What's even more unbelievable is that the player controlling the two plates is managing the cross at the bottom of the depression in the distance to bind Saffron Blossom at the exact same time.

Bowing her head feebly, it seems that Blossom doesn't have any strength left to move. It can't really be helped. All of the pain she has ever experienced in the Accelerated World can't even match that of what she has just experienced.

At the same time, the extreme rage and despair that are colliding within Falcon's consciousness are feelings that he has never experienced before in his life.

'Stop... stop, please stop...'

He desperately squeezes out a dry rasp through his clenched teeth. At the same time, his Avatar's fingertips carve out new parallel lines upon the hard ground of the «Purgatory» Stage. However, he is still unable to move. The sense of powerlessness only intensifies the despair he feels.

He can feel it with his body, that terrifying tremble. That thing is coming again.

In the centre of the depression, from the depths of the two-meter-wide fissure beside the cross that's restraining Blossom, it seems like something is about to crawl out of there. Ten feelers with sharp tips emerge first, waving about erratically. Then two parallel rows of red glowing orbs light up from the depth of the darkness. The orbs that impart a feeling of endless hunger are that thing's eyes. The moment the feelers sense Blossom close in front, countless eyes radiate a bright glare. Then...

Along with a slimy sound and the splashing of countless droplets of mucus, what emerges out of the fissure is a gargantuan worm-type monster. It is one of the strongest beings in the

Accelerated World apart from the «Four Sacred Beasts» that guard the four cardinal gates of the Forbidden City, Legend Rank Enemy --- Hell Worm «Jörmungandr»¹².

Even though it only appears in «Purgatory», «Disease», «Rotten Woods» and a small number of the organic stages, meeting it ensures death. But its nest is considered small for a Legend Rank Enemy, only a small round depression thirty meters in diameter; even if killed, it is still possible to escape after revival in an hour and the ten seconds or so before Jörmungandr appears again. That is, if nothing --- or no one, is deliberately interfering with escaping.

Jörmungandr's head slowly approaches Blossom, who is being restrained by the black cross and unable to move. Below the sixteen lens-like red eyes separated into two rows, is a round mouth surrounded by feelers, or rather, something like an acetabulum¹³. The bottomless jaw with numerous rings of saw-like teeth dripping with mucus closes in on the petite Avatar. Blossom shudders and hangs her head even lower.

'Stop... it....! Stoooooop!'

Falcon cries hoarsely from beneath his helmet, but Enemies are not people, so naturally, they will not obey any plea.

The meter-wide jaw of the long worm opens to its limits above Blossom's head. The secreted mucus continuously drips down, hissing and producing white smoke on contact with the bright orange armor. That liquid has the effect of dramatically decreasing the physical resistance of an Avatar. The silvery armor on her body instantly loses its glow. As if unwilling to wait any longer, Jörmungandr swallows the upper body of Blossom in a single go, along with the cross.

In the centre of his vision dyed red with his burning emotions, his longtime partner screams again and again.

Enhanced Armament «THE DESTINY»'s power greatly exceeded all original expectations.

Physical type attacks such as cutting, impact, piercing, shooting and explosions can all be nullified. Energy-type attacks such as lasers are reflected; the armor is highly resistant to freezing, heat and electric types as well. The only thing that it cannot defend against is the natural enemy of metallic armors, corrosive acids, but players who have these types of attacks are few and far between. Invincible. That is no exaggeration when describing such terrifying defensive capabilities.

But that is only natural; the armor is supposed to be only obtainable by the ones who have defeated the absolutely unbeatable Super Enemies, «Four Sacred Beasts», and reached the deepest area of the Imperial City; it could even be called the final Item of Brain Burst. But since it was obtained via chance and luck plus a system loophole in the dawning ages of the game, there is no wonder its power is overwhelming.

«THE DESTINY» is strong enough to completely break the game balance of Brain Burst, strong enough to render even the owner of the armor, Saffron Blossom, frightened. After all, in the past she would lose almost all her HP if she was hit by a Full Charge Attack¹⁴ from a red or a blue Avatar, whereas now those attacks barely do anything even if she takes them head-on. Just a few regular battles spread her name throughout the whole Accelerated World, accompanied soon

¹² In Norse mythology, Jörmungandr is a sea serpent so large that it was able to surround the earth and grasp his own tail.

¹³ The suckers on leeches and similar organisms.

¹⁴ Attacks that uses up the whole SP Gauge.

after by buying offers and invitations to join strong Legions. Of course, there were also accusations of underhandedness and cheating.

If Blossom was still her same old self who just wanted to team up with Falcon and keep on fighting, perhaps she would have sealed or sold the armor.

But now she has a yet unfulfilled dream of forming a «Legion of Mutual Aid» to prevent others from losing all their points, so as to remove the slaughters resulting from exploiting the Accelerated World's game mechanics and change it into a place where everyone can battle happily... no, live happily.

Perhaps this is just a silent protest from Blossom who was informed that she would never live until adulthood, but nevertheless has accepted such a fate. To spread countless seeds in the barren lands of the Accelerated World, and make this world bloom with countless flowers---. Perhaps since the instant she became a BB Player, that has always been her dream.

In order to make the core of the Legion of Mutual Aid, a «Burst Point Loan System», function practically, a sufficient point pool is necessary. As well as the fighting power needed to dissuade those malicious participants who never intended to pay back the points.

Needless to say, apart from standard battles, «THE DESTINY» also displays overwhelming power during Enemy hunts, so for Blossom, it is no doubt an express ticket to the fulfilment of her dream. Although equipping it significantly quelled challenges, there are still many brave fighters who wished for a battle, however, they were defeated by Blossom and Falcon without exception.

Although it was two on one, they even managed to narrowly defeat one of the strongest «Pure Colors», before Blossom finally announced her idea to the entire Accelerated World. When this occurred, applicants for the new Legion were numerous.

And yesterday, more than thirty BB Players sent a joint message, wishing to hear about the details.

The two of them were thrilled, but slightly uneasy at the same time. The place those people specified was the Unlimited Neutral Field. Although their justification of wanting to see if safe hunting of Enemies is possible was not unreasonable, it is still hard for anyone to predict what would happen in the Unlimited Neutral Field. In the worst-case scenario, it is not at all impossible for all thirty of them to attack at the same time.

Even if they were walking into an ambush, however, it was still hard to believe Blossom could be defeated by one hit when she had «THE DESTINY» equipped. The two of them chose a place very close to a Leave Point as an added precaution. If it was a trap, they only needed to dash to the Portal.

The plan was not without flaws, as it did not provide a contingency plan for abilities like Blossom's, that do not attack Duel Avatars directly but instead utilize hindering type abilities to impend movement or deprive vision, thus creating a chance that escape through the Portal could be prevented. The two of them still decided to ignore the risk because the list of names contained plenty of old acquaintances. They could not imagine, or want to imagine it to be a nasty trap set by all of those people.

The meeting place today is the equivalent of Shibaura Parking Area north of the Rainbow Bridge, just in case they checked from the distance. More than thirty have already gathered and they matched the names on the sent message.

As Blossom and Falcon walked reassured under the Daiba Route of the Shuto Expressway¹⁵, two plates suddenly appeared below them---

Instantly, an intense pressure restrained the two of them.

“Stop...Please stop it! Why... why are you doing this.....!!”

Staring at the worm that looks nothing like its «Legend» rank¹⁶ status sinking its countless teeth into his beloved partner, Chrome Falcon cries once again as he watches the scene unfold.

His question is aimed at the several dozen BB Players standing around the depression of the worm's nest.

He has recognised most of them, especially since several are chatting buddies when they watch battles. There are also those whom he has fought many battles against, where the win-loss ratio was about half-half. He can't think of any reason for a grudge that runs deep enough for them to set such a vicious trap.

But they are all keeping their silence, without even taking a glance at Falcon being restrained on the ground. Instead they are keeping their attention solely on the tragedy unfolding endlessly at the bottom of the depression. Their features reveal dread and horror. But it's not that simple, as behind all their fear, Falcon strongly senses another extremely unpleasant presence.

Unexpectedly, a deep yet fluid voice speaks out from behind him to the right.

“I'm sorry Falcon-kun. At least allow me to answer in their stead.”

Speaking in a tone just like a schoolteacher, the owner of the voice is the very same person who is also managing the two plates and the cross to restrain Falcon and Blossom. His name is unknown. Nor has he ever been seen before. The strange looking Avatar appeared as if black note papers have been placed vertically in the shape of a human after being cut into shape.

“That Enhanced Armament is much too different from the norm in this dawning world. I believe that you must have noticed this during your battles over the past few days, right?”

In the real world, even the oldest BB Player should still only be in the second year in elementary school, «to have worn the Neuro-Linker for extended periods of time since birth» is an essential condition for the installation of Brain Burst, while commercial Neuro-Linkers only appeared on the market the year «first generations» like Falcon were born.

But this black multilayered Avatar speaks in a tone that is anything but childish. It even sounds more mature than young teachers in their twenties in the real world. Resisting the pressure, Falcon squeezes out an answer.

“Then... sell the «armor» to the Shop. Can't we just divide the points received in return evenly... it's not necessary to go so far...!!”

“Unfortunately, that method would leave the Enhanced Armament in the Shop. That won't prevent someone from obtaining it again to disrupt the game balance. That armor has to go back to where it belongs. For that purpose, a power other than a player's is required to destroy the owner. This is the only way, Falcon-kun.”

As the tranquil voice finishes his report ---.

¹⁵ Metropolitan Expressway.

¹⁶ The Kanji for Legend (神) can also mean Holy.

Saffron Blossom's Avatar breaks apart into countless pieces inside Jörmungandr's mouth. An orange pillar of light shoots into the heavens, forming a momentary grave marker before disappearing.

The Hell Worm seems quite satisfied to have killed the intruder in just one bite, waving its feelers about as it crawls back into its nest. The black cross also soundlessly sinks into the dark shadows on the ground.

The only thing that remains is a mass of weak saffron-yellow light. According to the rules of the Unlimited Neutral Field, Blossom will remain in «Ghost Mode» for an hour before reviving in the same place. --- At least, that's how it normally happened.

To Falcon's left, coming from a position blocked from sight due to the black plates, is a gentle whisper.

“«Resurrect by Compassion».”

It is a sound pure and clear beyond any imaginable human voice, carrying with it countless points of light through the air down to the bottom of the depression. As the points of light touch the orange «Ember», a blinding pillar of white light descends from the sky condensing and materializing into an Avatar. Saffron Blossom who would normally revive in an hour's time has her descent arrested by the cross appearing below her just as her delicate body is about to drop onto the ground, securing her once again beside the nest of the worm.

The same thing has happened countless times already. The amount of points lost during battles against an Enemy is fixed at 10. The points gained during the recent wins can't be depleted so easily. Which has led to this cycle of cruel death and even crueler revival.

There have been cases where players lose all points due to death when they enter too deeply into the Territories of Legend Rank Enemies to escape. That phenomenon feared by all BB Players is known as «Infinite Enemy Death». But the group who have trapped Falcon and Blossom is deliberately causing this phenomenon using the black cross and the white light. This is no longer passive death but rather a form of active execution, «Infinite Enemy Kill».

..... *Please, no more.*

He can only silently pray under the silver mask as he longer has any strength left to plea aloud.

Inside the Unlimited Neutral Field, the amount of pain felt when damaged is raised to the point where it is equal to the real world. Every time Blossom is killed by Jörmungandr she should be feeling as if her entire body is being gnawed apart. Even if her body in the real world remains unscathed, the pain engraved upon her awareness --- her soul will not disappear.

No...

The true source of her pain is not the teeth of the monster, but perhaps the gaze of the several dozen players standing around the depression. Those who were once considered friends luring Blossom out with the fake message, making her fall into this trap and merely watching on as she is bitten again and again by the disgusting worm.

Horror and fear aren't the only things present on their facemasks, as also clearly showing is that hint of excitement. Just like «the scarier it is the more they want to see» mentality of children. It is the same principle as the group mentality of excluding the unfitting students in classes in the real world.

And at the same time.

Like watching from the safe zone as such a student is being excluded yet unable to do anything for that student, that is how Chrome Falcon feels.

If Falcon never entered the «Imperial City». If he never brought out «THE DESTINY». If he never gave it to Blossom, then none of this would be happening. The main culprit does not have to bear a single wound but is only able to watch as his beloved suffers.

Sensing the forcibly revived Blossom, the worm closes in again from the depth of the nest. *Doro, doro*, the ground shakes with the noise, yet the orange Avatar is unable to lift even one finger. She can only bow her head while on the jet black cross, facing yet another «death». Or perhaps the loss of all points after that death and the «end» that will cause her to lose all her memories.

..... *I.*

I made the same mistake, again.

I have already decided, never to pretend not to see. Never to ignore those who are hurt, rejected and have lost their place of belonging. Even though I have decided. Once again, I am unable to do anything but watch as my most treasured person.....

“..... No.”

The worn-out awareness squeezes out a voice.

“I have, had enough. I will never accept being left alone again.”

The amount of pressure being exerted by the two plates to hold the Avatar is as absolute as the world itself. Falcon knows very well that with all his power he won't even be able to move it one millimeter. But, there is another way for him to escape.

Breaking his own metallic armor instead of the jet-black plates.

'Uuu... Waa... Wa, ah, ARGHHHHH.....!'

With a cry of utmost power, he utilises all his remaining strength. His two hands pressing against the plates on the two sides, pushing them back.

Unable to stand the pressure, the chrome-silver armor starts to squeak. If he was still like his former self, he would have given up at this stage. But ignoring the feeling of being crushed, he exerts even more force.

“Just give up, Falcon-kun.”

The multilayered Avatar urges as if truly worried.

“We have no intention at all of eliminating you. After the job, we'll release you straight away. It should only be once or twice more, why don't you just obediently wait until then?”

“Shut... UP...!!”

He turns the defiance he feels after hearing that bullshit into more power to push against the plates. Fine cracks start to form on the armor around the wrists. Sparks of pain shoot up, but this is not enough, nowhere near enough.

'.....!!'

In that single moment, when he releases the utmost of his power with a silent roar.

The wrist armor sections shatter into pieces with a rigid metallic sound. Blood-like damage effects also spray out of the dark-grey interior, heart-stopping pain flows through his nerves. --- Accompanying the dramatic decrease in the HP Gauge, his Special Attack Gauge fills up by about twenty percent.

In a faint voice, he shouts.

“«Flash Blink»!!”

Chrome Falcon's Avatar changes into a formless particle and finally escapes from the plates. Charging forward at a speed that is almost like teleportation, he materializes again fifteen meters ahead.

In front of him is the ravaged Saffron Blossom and the head of Jörmungandr, just about to bite into her delicate body again.

Using the last of his strength, he kicks out at the gigantic worm with the sharp claws on his right foot. One of its many simple eyes¹⁷ bursts after spraying out a sticky liquid. The second bar of the Enemy's HP decreases by a despairingly small amount, but as if caught off guard by the surprise attack, the worm shakes its head while releasing Blossom.

¹⁷ Eyes found in some invertebrates, each individual eye is adapted for its own specific tasks.



Beneath the roaring Enemy, a weak voice pulses through the air.

“«Petal Shelter».”

Multiple gigantic green petals spring out from beneath the black cross, enclosing the two of them like a flower bud. This is Saffron Blossom's Level 5 Special Attack. Unyielding petals that block the inside from all outside interferences and attacks. Period of effectiveness --- thirty seconds.

In the sphere filled with calming green illumination, Falcon catches Blossom as she falls from the vanished cross with his armor-less arms. He just crouches there, desperately gazing into the face of his beloved partner. This thirty-second period, is the final moment the two of them can share. When the petals vanish, the cross will most likely appear again to restrain them. Jörmungandr will simply obey its instincts and slaughter the new prey as well.

He does not regret at all charging forward to his own demise. But Falcon is unable to find the words he should be speaking at the current time. Therefore, he can only clench his teeth to stifle his sobs, while continuing to gaze at the face of Blossom. In order to never forget this beautiful face and the aquamarine eyes even if she is to disappear from the Accelerated World.

“.....I'm sorry.”

Drip. The tears dripping out make a faint sound.

“I'm sorry Fal. I... have always relied upon your kindness. Because my future in the real world has already been taken away, I wanted to take it back in this world at least... Playing the game of pretending to be adults, and forcing it upon you as well. This end result... is all because of my impatience. I'm sorry...”

Clear points of light drop out from Blossom's eye-lens, dispersing into the air, then disappearing.

--- There is no such thing. No such thing.

Although wanting to say so, the words become a hot lump blocking his throat. In the end, he can only shake his head frantically. The slender fingertip softly brushes past his helmet.

“But you know.... please believe in just this one thing. I, really like you. I have liked you from the moment we met. Because I understood instantly. Your feelings of wanting to protect the weak me. Everyone else is trying to seize points from each other, but you... just you...”

Instead of finishing herself, Blossom just smiles.

Then, she lowers her right hand from Falcon's face, grabs hold of his right hand and guides it to the centre of her chest, horribly wounded by Jörmungandr's teeth.

“I have one last request. Fal, you will kill me.”

“... Ehh.....”

Blossom smiles at Falcon who has finally opened his mouth.

“My points, I only have 7 left. Instead of disappearing from this world when I get killed by that Enemy, I would much rather give them to you. This way, even if Brain Burst is forcibly uninstalled, I will still be able to remember you. Even if my memories disappear, just you, I will never forget.”

At this point, the effective time of the ability finally comes to an end, and the roof formed from the petals slowly opens up, the angry roar of the worm ripping apart the serenity on the inside of the sphere.

“.... Fron.”

There is just too little time to convert all of the overflowing feelings within his heart into words. Holding the sunny Avatar tightly with his left arm, Falcon murmurs softly with all his passion.

“Thank you.”

Thank you. For responding to me stretching out my hand to you. Thank you. For teaching me all sorts of things. And for expanding my insignificant world, thank you.

He stretches out, aims the fingers on his right hand. Placing claws as sharp as those of a raptor in the centre of Saffron Blossom's chest, directly above a fatal weakness, the heart.

“... I love you.”

Speaking those words, he has never before had the courage to speak, while at the same time stabbing into her body with his right hand.

His hand pierces right through «THE DESTINY», made useless due to Jörmungandr's teeth and digestive fluids.

... Farewell, Fal. I love you too.

Those words flow through his consciousness like a gentle sigh and disappear.

Saffron Blossom's Avatar is not bursting into countless pieces like before. Instead, the delicate silhouette disintegrates into countless ribbons sheltered in a warm spring sun-like aura and fly into the sky. These ribbons further disintegrate into smaller threads, dissolving into the air --- and disappearing.

«Final Elimination Phenomenon». The complete removal from the Accelerated World of those who have lost all points.

What he feels now upon his hands is complete emptiness.

The heavy sense of loss makes him feel like he has also disappeared himself. Behind him, Jörmungandr's countless teeth bite into his armor, producing high-pitch noises.

Just like that he is thrown up into the air. Orange sparks continuously burst out of the metallic armor. The Avatar is being pulled apart, the HP Gauge to the left of his field of vision is also decreasing rapidly. Pain that almost makes him pass out flares up at the same time.

But, there is no scream. He can't scream. This pain has been felt by Blossom countless times. Clenching his teeth, he continues to endure. Far away in his blurry vision, a group of players standing around in a circle emerges.

Their eyes show the same surprise --- and the same disdain. Laughing at the fool losing his life meaninglessly.

To escape from this situation is not at all impossible. He only needs to use «Blink» again by spending the Special Attacks Gauge charged up by the damage he took.

But, there is no need to escape... no, to live any more.

Saffron Blossom is gone. I'm alone again. Even if I escape from here, there's no point in going back to the mindless duels of a solo player. I'd rather be killed here by this worm just as Blossom was. Experience it all again and again just like her until that moment where all points have been depleted and I'm exiled from this world...

He suddenly notices something.

A tiny spot of light is flashing below the decreasing HP Gauge and the increasing Special Attacks Gauge. The spot of light moves as well if he moves his head, which makes it a... System Message. The rectangular cursor is trying to inform him of something.

When he focuses on the spot, a line of text soundlessly appears.

【YOU ACQUIRED AN ENHANCED ARMAMENT «THE DESTINY»】

He can't comprehend it.

It's a message about obtaining an Enhanced Armament. But instead of showing «GOT» which indicates when it has been obtained in card form, it's showing «ACQUIRED», which indicates a change in ownership. And the armament is --- the «armor». It's «THE DESTINY», which should have disappeared with Saffron Blossom.

But why? The methods to transfer an Enhanced Armament should only be limited to selling and buying at a «Shop» and transfers during Direct Linked battles, and those should be the only...

No, there is one more, a vague rumor from a long time ago. When an owner is eliminated from the Accelerated World, there is a very small chance the Enhanced Armament in that player's Storage would transfer over to the last attacker.

Whether or not Blossom wished for Falcon to obtain the armor by giving her the final blow will never be known.

But Falcon believes it's the final message she has left him.

Live. Live and fight.

Unconsciously below the silvery mask, he murmurs the default voice command to equip the Enhanced Armament.

“Equip... «THE DESTINY».”

Intense illumination like a small star dyes the world silver.

With sharp metallic noises, thick additional armors start to cover the limbs and the body of the Avatar. The design of the «armor» is drastically different from when it was equipped on Blossom. It goes without saying that Enhanced Armaments will adjust its size to suit the Duel Avatar, but the changes to this armor have gone beyond that. It has lost its grace and lithe, turning into a plate armor covered with edges.

Finally, the headpiece also changes from its round shape to that of an open type helmet¹⁸. With a loud *GAKIIN*, the armor that covers eighty percent of Falcon's body deflected all of Jörmungandr's teeth and prevents them from biting into the Avatar.

The Legend Rank Enemy roars angrily and attacks Falcon again, secreting large amounts of clear mucus from parotid glands between its teeth. This mucus drips on to the silver armor, trying to take away the strength of the armor with its corrosive properties.

For just a split second the silvery mirror surface lost its sheen, then just like peeling away a thin membrane, it blackens to a chrome-silver, completely refusing the erosion. The new coloring is the exact same as Falcon's original armor.

«Chrome», as a color is near the very center of the Metal Color Chart, Between Precious Metals and Base Metals. It lacks strong resistance to both physical and special attacks. It does, however, have a single special property, complete resistance to corrosive type attacks.

¹⁸ This refers to medieval knight helmets with a visor.

It's as if the supposedly mindless Enhanced Armament, «armor» has taken in its owner's attributes in order to combat the monster's mucus --- That is the only way to explain this phenomenon. But logical speculations are meaningless to Falcon now.

As if guided by something, he raises both of his arms to grab hold of the gigantic teeth attempting to pierce his chest which is constantly discharging sparks.

The depths of his heart suddenly flare up.

The yearning for Saffron Blossom and the despair he feels due to her death combines to form an emotion he has never felt since arriving in the Accelerated World eleven months ago, more than five years subjectively --- Rage.

'Uuu...UUAAAAHHH...'

A trembling roar of anger escapes from the depth of his throat.

Chrome Falcon is a child that never angers even in the real world. He listens to the word of the adults, acts according to other's complexions and generally holds himself back.

Even when a friend from kindergarten was a target of bullying when they entered the same elementary school, he left that friend instead of doing anything. He closed his eyes, plugged his ears, merely waited for someone else to come up with a solution. But before that someone could show up, the boy who used to be his friend had already gone away.

At least back then he should have been angry. Angry at those who bully others. Angry at the teachers who did nothing. Angry at himself also, for pretending not to notice. But he did nothing, he just compressed all his memories and feelings into a pebble and buried it deep in his heart.

'Uuu...aah...AAAHHHHHH.....!'

Now cracks are appearing on this pebble, spilling out burning emotions as Falcon continues to roar in a warped voice.

His ten digits become large claws with a sharp noise. The sharp tips cut into the teeth of Jörmungandr. From the wrists to the shoulders, the armor's edges become sharper and more voluminous.

He now understands why the thirty odd people sent the fake Legion participation message, and betrayed the two of them by setting a trap. It wasn't because of the absurdly strong game-breaking Enhanced Armament.

It's because Saffron Blossom was different from them. She had a dream and the strength necessary to carry it out.

“But... Aren't you people also...”

--- If you've become a BB Player, aren't you people also more or less treated as rejects in the real world. Rejected by others, you come to the Accelerated World with your mental traumas. Then why, are you also rejecting other people. Why do you throw rocks at those you deem different from yourselves?

“Fron... only ever wanted... to make a place... for people like you to belong...”

As he vents his anger, his hands also start to emit a faint glow.

No, it's not energy to illuminate something, rather a negative pulse that engulfs all light and heat.

An aura of darkness.

When continuous effects such as this happen to a Duel Avatar, it should be because the player is spending the Gauge to use a Special Attack. But right now, Falcon's Special Attacks Gauge is at Full Charge and shows no sign of dropping even a pixel dot.

But he fails to notice this and merely continues his stuttering words.

“So you people... could always play in this world..... to release you people from the horror of losing all your points..... Fron, she only..... only.....!”

Unknowingly, Jörmungandr's teeth, deeply scratched by his ten digits, have been pulled away completely from Falcon's body. The monster flashes its two rows of eyes and wriggles its gigantic body. But the arms of the Avatar surrounded by the dark aura do not move a single inch.

“She only..... ever wished for that !!”

A bloodcurdling roar.

Falcon is now hearing the emotion filled pebble break apart deep in his heart.

Rage. Ever since he started to understand things, he had always suppressed any anger he felt, except now all the anger has burst out, flowing inside the Avatar in a frenzy, emitting that dark aura outwards.

The dark pulses, as if possessing physical pressure, vibrate across the thick skin of the worm and cause it to crack. The Enemy roars and twists as a huge crack forms at the top of its jaw.

'Aah..... AAAAAHHHH..... AAAAGGGGGHHHHH-----!!'

Screaming in a distorted metallic voice, Falcon suddenly jerks the teeth in his hands in opposite directions.

With an unnatural sound, Jörmungandr's head is forcefully split apart. Many of the simple eyes burst from within, spraying out copious amounts of bodily fluids. He disregards this and reaches in further through the cracks, grabbing hold of the soft tissues within, ripping them apart again. And again.

When his feet touch the ground, almost half of the Hell Worm is split open. He grabs the right side of the worm, desperately trying to wriggle back into the nest in pain, with the claws on his hands and steps on the right side with his clawed feet to secure it. With all of his power --- he rips it apart from head to tail in one go.

The body of the Enemy, finally in two pieces, abruptly pauses in an unnatural form, and then bursts into thousands of pieces.

In the centre of the burst effect at the bottom of the depression, a long thin object materialises. In front of Falcon is a long sword with a clear crystal-white body. It's an Enemy-Drop Enhanced Armament. Seeing this sword that seems to hold a star like radiance within, he reaches out for the hilt without the slightest hesitation.

Instantly, the long sword transforms into a small card and disappears. A small System Message pops out at the top of his vision **【YOU GOT AN ENHANCED ARMAMENT «STAR CASTER»】** .

He murmurs in a hoarse voice.

“Equip, «STAR CASTER».”

The long sword with the holy form appears once again in his right hand. But the dark aura instantly wraps around the sword, distorting its color and shape. The crystal clarity changes to a chrome-silver color. The straight hilt curves ominously. The blade enlarges and thickens, several places of the edge also becoming saw tooth in form.

He holds the newly formed great sword directly in front of him.

The dark silver blade reflects a Duel Avatar. It is no longer the simple Chrome Falcon with his round helmet. Rather it's an object of destructive impulses with a heinous silhouette.

The only place where his original appearance can still be seen is the smooth face mask showing through the open type helmet. However, the aura of darkness is gathering at the forehead of the helmet, creating a visor large enough to completely cover his face.

He intuitively feels that he'll no longer be able to turn back if he pulls it down.

... If I ever change, Fron is sure to be sad.

... But, she is no longer part of this world.

Then at this moment, I'll discard the name of Chrome Falcon. Let it be buried here with Saffron Blossom, along with her ideals, her kindness, her care, let it all be buried here.

Because it's the stunned players around this depression who refused all these things. Instead of peaceful coexistence, they would prefer to have war. Instead of joining hands, they would prefer to fight to the death. If instead of love, they prefer fury and hatred, then ---.

I'll grant them to you.

Holding the sword high above himself with both hands, he lets the rage flowing from within him take control and roars again.

'Ooh...OOOOOOHHHH.....!'

The dark aura bursting forth all over his body produces black lightning, continuously striking through the metallic ground. Fissures constantly form and spread from beneath his feet, shaking the very earth. And he screams in a volume that almost resonates with the scream of the earth.

'Oooooohhh... OOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH ----- !!'

The rage gushing out endlessly becomes almost like a catalyst that could interfere with the world itself. As proof it is not just an illusion, the text in the HUD in the upper left of his vision flashes on and off continuously. The two lines showing the equipped Enhanced Armament, «THE DESTINY» and «STAR CASTER», begin to distort, break apart and combine together.

The two lines overlap and combine to form a new phrase.

«THE DISASTER».

'Gu... RU, AAAAAAAAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!!'

This is no longer a person's scream, but the roar of a hungry ferocious beast.

GAKI. With a sharp clatter, the visor on his forehead falls into place.

A thin grey filter seems to be covering his vision. The resolution however is clearer many times over, such that even the expressions of the Duel Avatars standing in the circle can be seen clearly. Their expressions are of confusion, surprise and intense unease. But what they are feeling, what they are considering are no longer important to Falcon. They are merely targets for him to slaughter. The eyes beneath the helmets narrow, trying to seek out the first victim to hunt.

Focusing his attention on the circle, he can hear the faint sounds of a discussion as if they are being amplified by a highly directional microphone.

“... auge complete recovery confirmed. No usage of the Special Attacks Gauge. There's no mistake, it's because of the Imagination Circuit causing the Override Phenomenon in the «Main Visualiser».”

The owner of the voice is a small Avatar with four large twinkling eye-lens. Replying is the black multilayered Avatar who restrained Falcon and Blossom with the strange technique.

“As expected, an outburst of sentiments triggers the phenomenon much faster than concentration. Whether it can be controlled is another matter.”

The four-eyed Avatar also nods.

“That's right. That possessing a «Trauma Shell»¹⁹ greater than a certain intensity allows metal-colorization is already pretty much confirmed. But it's pretty tough to tell right now with just my «Analyze», whether that fusion phenomenon is an inherent power of the «Seven Star Armament», or simply because he is a metal color.”

“Hmm. If possible I would really want to spend some more time studying it...”

At that exact moment, a different voice comes from behind the two of them.

“Is capture possible, Vise?”

Clear and sweet as melting snow and without a hint of impurity, this is undoubtedly the player that forcefully revived Blossom endlessly. He focuses his eyes under the visor but an inconceivable illumination prevents him from seeing properly.

“Allow me to try.”

The multilayered Avatar nods his head, this head being made of several plates, and at the same time raises his left hand with the same design. The plates that make up his hand fall to the ground in order and vanish. Straight after, that black cross appears soundlessly behind Falcon, attempting to use its strange attractive force to restrain him.

But.

“Gu... ruahh!”

With a low growl, the sword in his right hand sweeps behind him, producing the sound and feeling of breaking glass, easily destroying the cross. Light from the damage effects bursts forth from the controller's left shoulder in the distance.

“Whoa there. That's pretty tough, normal abilities will not be able to hold him back.”

Falcon focuses his attention on the multilayered Avatar saying that.

Even if their conversation contains too many terms he can't understand, one point is clear – the whole situation is of their design. They are the bastards who called out Saffron Blossom and tortured her to death with the «Infinite Enemy Kill».

Then the first ones to be hunted down should be you people.

Holding the great sword with two hands, he raises it up heavily, disregarding the dozens of confused people on the side, before taking a step towards the jet black Avatar and soundlessly voicing the ability name.

--- *Flash Blink!*

¹⁹ Literally “Shell of Mental Trauma”.

The blade swinging down at the same time as the super speed teleportation does manage to cut off the remaining right arm of the jet black Avatar. But the faceless opponent remains unshaken; taking a step back, he breaks apart his armless body in an instant.

Changing into two large plates, the black Avatar picks up the quad-eyed Avatar and the person being surrounded by light from both sides. Defying logic, the plates close against each other into one single thin plate.

As the large jet black plate sinks into the shadows on the ground, Falcon makes a horizontal swipe with his sword. But he only manages to slice off a small diagonal portion at the top. Leaving a faint ripple upon the shadow, the mysterious trio's presence disappears from the Field.

“Guu... ruuruu.....”

He growls angrily in a low tone as a result of the opponents' escape, then, a few seconds after that...

GIIN! Something impacts on his right shoulder with a sharp metallic clatter.

Turning around slowly, he finds a medium sized blue Duel Avatar stand there. That Avatar wields with hands a large melee weapon that is a cross between a bokken²⁰ and a naginata²¹. He is a familiar face and a fine acquaintance. One of the very few «First Generations», a direct hit from that pole arm used to be able to shatter Chrome Falcon's armor.

But after checking the right shoulder, he can't find any trace of an impact; certainly no crack.

Without even bothering to remember the existence of the flabbergasted opponent, Falcon cleaves straight down with the great dark aura-cloaked sword.

DONG, a heavy bass thud vibrates through freezing air, the weapon of the blue Avatar splits into two from the middle, even as his own upper body also slowly slides apart and rolls on to the ground. Soon after, the lower body pauses mid-fall and bursts with the upper body. He leaves only a cluster of light the same color as the armor.

Of the thirty odd players, the one who clearly had highest level among them was killed with just one hit, and such a scene spread unease through the remaining people. *What's going on, it's not what they said was going on.* These words of panic start to spread, and the volume increases in proportion.

“This is not good... quick, run for it!!”

Not knowing who shouted that, the crowd moves in one single direction like a burst dam. They should be heading for the Shibaura Parking Area Leave Point to escape to the real world.

--- But.

Flash Blink.

Muttering in his heart, the black-silver armor disappears and reappears in front of the runaways. Another slash and three heads fall in unison.

'Uuu... Uwa... UWAAAAHHHHHHHHH!'

²⁰ A bokken (木剣) is a Japanese wooden sword used for training. It is usually the size and shape of a katana.

²¹ A naginata (なぎなた, 薙刀) is one of several varieties of traditionally made Japanese swords in the form of a pole weapon.

Howling. Screaming. Some still want to run, some try to find shelter in nearby buildings, some try to retaliate, but the dark blade hacks towards them without exception, wiping out their entire gauge with a single slash.

Falcon's drive is no longer rage, but a sublime determination that surpasses hatred and vengeance --- perhaps it's a curse.

A curse to destroy this world.

If the Burst Linkers a few years from now who understands the hidden logic behind Brain Burst are able to see Chrome Falcon right now, they'll most likely make one conclusion. That dark Over Ray is a display of pure negative mentality. A will of absolute denial that crushes all existence, the darkness of the Incarnation System itself.

After the slaughter that only lasted a few dozen seconds, all that remain around the depression are numerous silently wavering embers.

The destroyer of black-silver plants the great sword saturated with blood firmly into the ground and stops there.

In order to wait for their revival an hour later.

That day, more than thirty players vanished from the Accelerated World.

Only one person was lucky enough to make it through the Portal, trembling in fear as he told of the terrifying ordeal --- the dubious story of how all his companions were killed by Chrome Falcon wearing that heinous armor.

After all those who challenged Falcon to confirm this rumor were butchered by the great sword in one slash, no one could deny it any longer.

That after nearly a year of development, a horrible disaster had been born into the Accelerated World.

At one point in time, players stopped referring to this destroyer by his Avatar name. The second part of his name had been dubbed with the name of his Enhanced Armament --- That is how the name is called.

«Chrome Disaster».

Blackout.

Spotlight.

The white halo illuminates a knight covered by a dark-metal armor, carrying a heinous great sword.

His crouching body is hurt all over, cracks have spread everywhere, his blade has been dulled.

To force him into such a state, the strongest players in the Accelerated World have challenged him countless times, sometimes even in many-on-one Battle Royale Mode.

The destroyer has never refused a duel, rather, he has even removed the «one round per day» challenge limitation, fighting in any given condition. Normally, ten continuous standard battles will cause metal fatigue that results in dull movements, but his daily battles number in the hundreds, grinding away his soul.

Unknowingly, the aura around the sword has become thin, the armor losing its original lustre, yet even so the destroyer still fights. The win ratio continues to fall, the points constantly decrease, until finally in the last and largest battle in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he is driven to the point where he stands to lose all his points.

Multiple Avatars approach the crouching knight from all directions.

Presently all of them are the strongest aces. Several of the «Pure Colors» leading large Legions are among them.

The dying destroyer props himself up slowly with the sword.

A portion of the visor with the heinous design is missing, and the smooth curves of the helmet can be vaguely seen on the inside.

Through the mask he looks to the sky of the Accelerated World.

I --- the BB Player who used to be Chrome Falcon will disappear here today.

Memory Erasure, if the rumors regarding the thought operation treatment are true, I will forget all about the Accelerated World --- even my beloved Saffron Blossom, turning back into a normal elementary school second year who doesn't know any difficult words.

But, I'll leave behind my rage --- my sorrow --- and my despair.

Blossom and I never wished for power. A hegemony through the power of the «armor» to control the Accelerated World had never crossed our mind. We just wanted to be able to always live in this world with everyone, that would've been enough.

If on the mirror like surface of the «armor», domination and destruction, plunder and lust can be seen, then that is merely a reflection of the desires of those who look.

They are the ones who want power, it's them who killed Saffron Blossom again and again in that cruel manner.

Then I'll grant it to them.

My rage, Blossom's pain, will remain within this «armor» --- «THE DISASTER». From this moment forth, anyone who puts on this armor with desire for power will attack, destroy, devour all other Burst Linkers. Taking in the power of the devoured, infinitely growing stronger. Until the last person left. Until there is only one person in the barren lands of the Accelerated World, at the end of the game.

That is the hidden nature of the power you desire.

I will curse this world. Tarnish it. Even if I'm to disappear here, my rage and hatred will revive --- time and time again.

Blackout.

Chapter 2

Feeling the touch of delicate fingers brushing across his cheek, Arita Haruyuki slowly opened his eyes.

His blurred vision gradually improved as his eyes slowly refocused. He saw hands enclosed in pure white armor. Wrists draped in kimono sleeves of the same color. A charming face mask with beautiful ardor eye-lenses.

Through his white-silver helmet, Haruyuki saw the figure of Ardor Maiden --- the Level 7 Burst Linker and former member of Nega Nebulas' «Elements» --- processing the purification ability, reach out while kneeling over him.

A shining droplet of water hung from Maiden's delicate fingertip. She looked down with an expression of worry. Haruyuki tilted his head, puzzled, and only then realized that the droplet had actually come from tears flowing down his cheeks.

“Eh..... Ah.....”

He cried out hoarsely as he attempted to wipe away the tears with his right hand, closing the half open face mask at the same time. The Duel Avatar «Silver Crow» bowed his head under the silvery one-way mirror²² mask and anxiously attempted to explain.

“Ah, sorry. I'm fine..... It's just that when I was asleep, I felt like..... I had a really long dream.....”

Here he paused and frowned.

He had a --- dream.

In that long dream, Haruyuki was not Silver Crow. Though very similar, his Metal Color was slightly different. But that was all he could remember. Where he went, what he did, what happened in the end, all these details had been seemingly covered by a layer of white and soft floss silk, completely preventing him from remembering.

The sense of having a hole opened up deep in his heart, however, was still fresh. This piercing pain in the void was..... a sense of loss?

..... *I... love you.....*

A seemingly unfamiliar voice flowed through his mind, and would have caused another outbreak of tears if not for him holding them back with all his might. He shook his head as he gulped down the freezing air to clear this intriguing sorrow, then he began to survey the surroundings.

The sky has already darkened without him noticing. Above them was a sea of stars, unattainable in real world Tokyo. The reason they were able to see the sky was because they were not inside a building but rather a place akin to a courtyard.

²² A mirror that is partially reflective and partially transparent. When one side of the mirror is brightly lit and the other is dark, it allows viewing from the darkened side but not vice versa.

He sat with his legs stretched out, his back against a pillar roughly a meter in diameter. To his right was a set of walls rising to touch the heavens.

The terrain was unchanged from before he went to sleep, but a final inspection between his legs made him realize that the ground had changed from a layer of thick ice to white pebbles, which was quite puzzling. He turned around hastily. The pillar behind him was no longer one of pale-blue ice, now it was a wooden one painted vermillion.

“Huh..... Had a «Transition» occurred while I was asleep?”

He asked Ardor Maiden in front of him softly. The red-white dual colored Avatar nodded her head. She replied softly as well, in a tender yet firm voice.

“That seems to be the case. But I was also asleep next to Kuu-san²³, so I didn't notice.”

The so-called «Transition» was the periodic field attribute shift phenomenon of this world --- the «Unlimited Neutral Field» created by the Brain Burst program. When Silver Crow and Ardor Maiden had fallen asleep here, it had been the fully-frozen «Ice and Snow» Stage, but every trace of ice and snow had now vanished.

It was as if the seasons had suddenly run backwards. The red leaves hung from the tree branches, the pillars were also wooden and the walls were painted white. Purely Japanese in style, the field attribute that best fit that description was.....

“It appears to be the «Heian» Stage.”

As she said so, Ardor Maiden spread out her crimson armor skirt in order to sit straight²⁴. She matched the surroundings so perfectly, it was as if the scene was a piece of art. He couldn't help but gawk in wonder. The delicate maiden lowered her head in embarrassment, and his seeing this made him avert his gaze.

The one who controlled this lovable yet fiery Duel Avatar, was a girl four years the junior of Haruyuki --- Haruyuki being a second year high school student --- Shinomiya Utai. A fourth year in Umesato High's sister school --- Matsunogi Elementary School --- she was well and truly a proper young lady²⁵ who probably never had the experience of being stared at intently by a boy who was much older. Upon realizing this, he turned his gaze onto the surroundings.

Endless vermillion pillars ran parallel from south to north. A road paved with stones travelled further in. Countless orange bonfires flickered and swayed. To the north was the grand silhouette of a gigantic citadel.

This location couldn't fit the «Heian» Stage better.

²³ Kuu-san is Ardor Maiden's nickname for Silver Crow.

²⁴ Ardor Maiden is sitting in the traditional seiza (正座) style. Any mention of Maiden's seated position throughout the chapter refers to seiza.

²⁵ Ojou-sama (嬢様), a phrase that usually describes young ladies of refined upbringing.

Because here in the real world was Chiyoda Ward, Chiyoda Ichibancho²⁶, the Imperial Residence, which is in the center of the Accelerated World --- within the impenetrable «Imperial City».

Today --- 2047, June 18th, Tuesday, 7:20 PM --- the members of Haruyuki's Legion, «Nega Nebulas», began the largest mission they had ever attempted since the current team was assembled.

This ultra-difficult operation was to rescue Ardor Maiden, sealed at the altar of the Super Enemy that guarded the south gate of the Imperial City, «Sacred Beast Suzaku». However, the means to do so was extremely simple.

The vanguard, Kuroyukihime/Black Lotus, with her long distance attacks, would make herself the target of Suzaku, supported by Chiyuri/Lime Bell who possessed the Psuedo-Healing Ability. As Suzaku advanced across the bridge that extended from the south gate, Haruyuki/Silver Crow would fly over it at top speed with Fuuko/Sky Raker as a booster, and Takumu/Cyan Pile would give the signal to synch Utai/Ardor Maiden's dive so that she could be retrieved the moment she appeared, before a one-eighty turn over the bridge to escape ---.

The operation was on the verge of success.

But something beyond their initial expectations occurred at the very end. Although Haruyuki had done absolutely nothing, Suzaku changed its attack target from Black Lotus to Silver Crow and subsequently unleashed a torrent of super powerful flame breath behind him.

The intense flames were almost upon him when Haruyuki picked up Ardor Maiden. Unable to turn, he could only charge straight ahead. Desperately, he decided to kill himself in a collision with the south gate of the Imperial City --- a gate that couldn't be opened unless Suzaku was defeated --- yet for some reason, a gap opened up at that exact moment in time. Left with no other option, Haruyuki and Utai could only charge straight through.

Falling as he heard the sound of the gate shutting behind him, starting to black out, holding Utai closely in his arms, he asked her one thing.

“Um..... Are we, still alive.....?”

The shock from hearing Utai's response echoed in his head even now.

“.....We are still alive. Although....., ahhh, but.....”

“..... This..... this place is the interior of the «Imperial City».”

“..... Even now, I still can't believe it. That we are within that «Imperial City».....”

Haruyuki moaned as he leaned against the round pillar. Utai, who was sitting in front of him, nodded as well.

“Coming inside is surprising enough, but surviving for more than six hours is even more so.”

²⁶ Wards in Japan are further split into plots of land, bancho (番), referred to by a number. In this case, the first plot.

“Eh..... I, I slept for that long? It's this dark here not because of a field characteristic but because it's already night.....?”

He asked in a panic. While it was possible to bring up the menu window in the Unlimited Neutral Field and find out one's accumulated play time, there were relatively few ways to find the correct inner time --- that was to say «exactly what hour and what minute it was in this world». Supposedly there was a great clock somewhere in this field that had started spinning with the birth of this world, but that thing would be rather creepy to behold. That thing would have recorded a thousand times seven years of time, meaning that more than seven thousand years of history should be shown on it.

Utai nodded her head slightly and pointed towards the night sky above with her small hand.

“The stars can be seen in the «Heian» Stage. From the positions of the constellations, it should be close to midnight.”

“Ha, hahaha..... I see.....”

Haruyuki murmured as he lifted his head to gaze upon the sky.

About six hours ago --- in accelerated time of course --- the two of them landed in a corner of the courtyard close to the south gate. They held tightly to each other as they clenched their teeth to stifle their shock and feelings, yet were unable to remain like this for long. The reason being that the northward road from the south gate, the citadel sitting further in and the Enemy mobs moving slowly along the road were now all within their sight.

These Enemies were around three meters in height at most, relatively small compared to the «Sacred Beasts», they all wore Sengoku period warrior-esque heavy armor, carried great long tachi. Their form exerted a force that made Haruyuki shiver. Moreover, they all moved in groups of at least three.

Along the outdoor corridor inside the south gate citadel wall, more figures of these Warrior Enemies could be seen. The clattering of their armor heralded their gradual approach and called for immediate action. That said, to clash with them was much too reckless a move. Suzaku's flames had already roasted Haruyuki down to half his HP; Utai too did not lack injury.

That's why the two of them had left the road and corridor for now and hid in the middle of the maze-like courtyard area, where they found a place of rest under the shades of a seemingly safe round pillar. As the sun set, despite being concerned about how worried Kuroyukihime and the others might be on the other side of the gate, the mental strain caused him to lean back against the pillar and just doze off --- which led to the current situation.

When they had found this safe haven, the twilight had dyed the cloudy sky of the «Snow and Ice» Stage purple. Now even the purple had disappeared, leaving only the radiance of the cluster of stars upon the pitch black dome.

As Utai had said, these stars perfectly re-enacted the constellation arrangements he had seen during full dive lessons. Leaning against the pillar, he looked to the east where an especially bright and purely white star caught his eyes. That one, should be.....

“Lyra's..... Vega²⁷?”

Utai heard him speaking to himself and nodded as she continued to gaze upon the sky while sitting.

“That's correct. In Japan, it's also called Orihime.”

Knowledge learnt from school that was once considered utterly useless became unexpectedly useful here, Haruyuki couldn't help but feel pleased as he pointed at the starry sky and continued on.

“That means, to the lower right that should be Aquila's A..... Altair²⁸and to the lower left should be Cygnus' Deneb²⁹. Uh..... where is Hikoboshi.....”

Utai laughed slightly and pointed up with her shrine maiden formed arm.

“That would be Altair. These three form the Summer Triangle³⁰. Since it's only June, their positions are somewhat lower.”

“I see. That means the constellations are modelled off the seasons in the real world.”

Haruyuki kept looking up at the sky completely awestruck, forgetting the fact that he was still in the midst of a perilous situation.

To have used the social camera network to reconstruct the terrain may perhaps be meaningful for tactical and strategic elements in the game. The night sky however, couldn't be anything other than just background decoration. No player would complain even if it was just a still print with randomly generated points of light on top.

Nevertheless, the stellar arrangements had replicated the real world so perfectly, even the seasonal adjustments were recreated. There must be a goal behind all this. Perhaps to emphasize that --- this is not just the game, nor just a virtual world.....

“The earliest group of Burst Linkers..... those who were once called «BB Players», they too.....”

Utai suddenly placed her hands on her knees and began to recount softly.

“The night sky in the Accelerated World is a perfect match to the real world's..... no, the artificial lighting in real world Tokyo outshines the starry sky. They must have felt that when they saw these beautiful stars so clearly. That is why the main Legions all have names associated with the universe.”

“Eh... are there really so many names associated with the universe.....?”

²⁷ Vega is the brightest star in the constellation Lyra, the fifth brightest star in the night sky and the second brightest star in the northern celestial hemisphere, after Arcturus. It's also one of the vertices of the Summer Triangle.

²⁸ Altair is the brightest star in the constellation Aquila and the twelfth brightest star in the night sky and is one of the vertices of the Summer Triangle. In Japan it's also called Hikoboshi.

²⁹ Deneb is the brightest star in the constellation Cygnus and one of the vertices of the Summer Triangle.

³⁰ The Summer Triangle is an astronomical asterism involving an imaginary triangle drawn on the northern hemisphere's celestial sphere, with its defining vertices at Altair, Deneb, and Vega, the brightest stars in the three constellations of Aquila, Cygnus, and Lyra, respectively.

The young maiden revealed a wry smile on her affectionate face mask as she watched Haruyuki tilt his head in puzzlement.

“All of the Seven Kings' Legions are named so. Our «Nega Nebulas», Ankoku Seiun³¹..... Strictly speaking, it should be Dark Nebulas in English, and it was named after that. The Red Legion's «Prominence» represents solar flares. The Blue Legion's «Leonids» are the meteor showers from Leo.”

“Oh..... oh..... indeed.....”

--- *Chiyu and Taku must have known from the start and just kept quiet. It's great that I learnt this before I got asked “You didn't know that!?”*

Haruyuki secretly sighed in relief and asked again.

“In other words, the White Legion..... Uh, so «Oscillatory Universe» doesn't have anything to do with the Legion Master named Shiratori³², it's also a name associated with the universe?”

His question made Utai put on that slightly stunned smile again, though she quickly regained her composure. She then lowered her head and answered in a strained voice.

“Yes, «Oscillatory Universe» means..... trembling universe. But I haven't learnt this much in school yet. I'm not too sure about the correct meaning.”

“Trem..... bling, universe.....”

--- *The universe shouldn't sway or tremble, should it?*

Haruyuki tilted his head from side to side while in thought. He was a second year high school student and yet he also had no recollection of hearing this word in science class, so it was very likely that this word was beyond the compulsory education level. He made a mental note to search it up later if he could still remember it and raised his head towards the sky once more.

Above the Summer Triangle, close to the pinnacle hovered a group of stars radiating weakly. Those should be the ones that made up Hercules. To the left was Draco, the likeness of the hundred headed dragon Ladon, which had been slain by the hero Hercules, soaring into the sky.³³

Lined up even further to the left was a group of stars comparable to the Triangle in radiance.

It was Ursa Major, with the tail portion especially bright. He was taught during lessons that that was why in ancient China those especially bright stars were treated as a separate constellation.

The shape of a ladle with a long handle.

The Big Dipper.

--- *Dokun*, his heart unexpectedly skipped a beat. He felt as if a spark was continuously flaring up deep in his head. His eyes were oddly attracted to the star closest to the center out of the

³¹ 暗黒星雲 in Kanji.

³² Oscillatory, pronounced in Japanese as Oshiratori (御白鳥), contains Shiratori (白鳥), a common Japanese surname.

³³ Kawahara Reki got the dragon and the hydra mixed up. Though both were slain by Hercules, it was the hydra that was supposed to have a hundred heads.

three stars of the handle. Only that nameless star seemed to continue to pulsate at the same frequency as the spark in his head.

Every flare caused a wave of pain in the core of his brain that passed along the central nervous system, down through his neck and shoulders to the center of his back, between the left and right scapula --- *Stab. Pain. Stab. Stab.* His body was in pain, yet it also felt like a foreign object being buried in his body.....

“..... -san, Kuu-san.”

Haruyuki suddenly lifted his head when he felt someone shaking his right hand.

Beside him, Ardor Maiden's crimson eye-lenses revealed worry. He shook his head in a panic and answered hesitantly.

“So.....sorry, must have dazed off.....”

“Is..... that so. Then..... It must have been my mistake. Sorry, but Kuu-san's body..... for a moment, it seemed as if it was engulfed by shadows.....”

“.....”

It seemed as if he had heard those exact words somewhere before. And not so long ago, during the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race» a week ago, when the shuttle was in the warp zone..... Sky Raker had pointed out the same thing.....

“..... It, it must've been your mistake. I, I didn't do anything.”

He basically gave the same response as last time. Haruyuki deliberately shook off that overflowing feeling of worry and continued on.

“Rather than that..... we should consider our next step. Remaining in this safe area is not an option.”

“..... Yes, that..... is true.”

Utai too, as if to shake off her doubts, nodded her head firmly and looked to the surroundings.

The two of them were hidden at a place fifty meters north-east of the Imperial City south gate inner courtyard right now. Directly across the rows of vermilion pillars to the west, was the stone road that connected north and south. To the east was a sizable maze that carried Japanese style garden vibes. The round corridor that ran alongside the wall was to the south.

Super-menacing Warrior Enemies constantly patrolled the wide road and the corridor. To sneak past them was no easy feat. Loud splashes and the sound of heavy objects moving came from garden to the east from time to time. The possibility of entering it could basically be ruled out.

The only viable route would be the narrow strip of space between the rows of pillars and the garden maze, hiding in the shade of the round pillars while following the one way course northward. There was no exit to the north, only the palace that was the main body of the Imperial City. Going by the logic of the «Heian» Stage that made the area seem like a gigantic shrine, that place should be called the inner shrine. It was very likely that there were Enemies more fearsome than these Warrior Enemies wandering inside. Their target was not to clear the Imperial City but to find a Portal and survive with Utai --- Ardor Maiden. Approaching the palace carelessly only to fall into the «Infinite EK» state must be avoided.

“.....Perhaps.....”

Utai returned her attention from the surroundings back onto Haruyuki. She maintained her seated position and continued talking as she pondered.

“Lotus and Raker should have already returned back to the real world via the Portal at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Headquarters. If separated from companions in the Unlimited Neutral Field during battle, standard practice is to not take the risk of staying still and logout if possible.”

“Yeah..... that is, true.”

Haruyuki nodded, the young girl kept going with her tender yet clear tone.

“If a «Safety»³⁴ has already been set, those who had left earlier can activate it so everyone can return back to the real world long enough to clarify the situation. So if we just wait for the disconnection, we will return back to Haruyuki-san's apartment..... I think.....”

A «safety» was when the Neuro Linker would make a global connection using a wired home server or a mobile server instead of a wireless connection. By doing so, even if one was unable to reach a Portal in the Unlimited Neutral Field, companions who were able to leave in advance can activate the device acting as the circuit breaker, allowing a temporary logout.

Right now, Haruyuki and Utai, as well as Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Takumu and Chiyuri, were assembled in Haruyuki's living room, connected to each other's Neuro Linker in a daisy chain³⁵. Kuroyukihime and the others, who have returned via the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Headquarters Portal close to the Imperial City south bridge, would only need to pull out the XSB line connecting Haruyuki's Neuro Linker and the Haruyuki family's home server. The next moment Haruyuki and Utai would automatically Burst Out.

But Utai kept speaking while still in thought.

“..... Although the current situation is rather special, Lotus and the others are most likely to hesitate. In any case, Kuu-san and I broke through Suzaku's guard, due to that miraculous one-in-ten-thousand chance. This is our only chance to explore the insides of the Imperial City. We most likely won't have another one.”

“We won't have..... another one? If we use the same tactics to charge through the door, perhaps we can do it again.....”

He was purely discussing the feasibility, there was no way Haruyuki would want to try that again. Utai raised her left hand to point towards the south-west, past Haruyuki's shoulders.

“Kuu-san, please take a look there. The back of the south gate.”

“O, oh.”

He turned and sneaked a peek at the large citadel gate standing fifty meters away from the shades of the round pillar that was behind him.

³⁴ Written as “Emergency Route Breaker” (緊急回線切断), read as “Safety” (セーフティ).

³⁵ In electrical and electronic engineering, a daisy chain is a wiring scheme in which multiple devices are wired together in sequence or in a ring.

The gate, comprised of two large panels, completely divided the inside and the outside of the Imperial City with its unbelievable mass and density. It was hard to believe that six hours ago, a gap several dozen centimeters wide had appeared, allowing their passage.

Utai was pointing at the dead center of the gate. He concentrated hard at it, using the bonfires on the ground as illumination. There was indeed something large on there.

It was a relief³⁶. A metallic square plaque three meters on each side tightly held the two gate panels together. Intricate carvings had been made across the surface, but the thickness of the object made it clear that it was intended for a purpose other than pure decoration.

“..... Ah.....”

He stared at it intently for a while and the image on the relief suddenly emerged in his head.

An enormous bird with wings spread out on each side, a long neck and a sharp beak opened wide. It was in the form of «Sacred Beast Suzaku».

“The gate's..... seal.....?”

Haruyuki felt Utai nod her head after he involuntarily blurted that out.

“I too think that is the case. Kuu-san, I'm not sure if you noticed it..... That seal had been destroyed by someone before we charged through the gate.”

“Eh..... Ehhhhh!?”

He covered his own mouth after that accidental exclamation. He lowered his voice and asked again quickly.

“De, destroyed.....!? It wasn't originally able to open like that..... it was damaged?”

“That's how I see it. It wasn't split apart vertically straight down the middle. Rather, it was cut twice by a massive blade, forming a crooked cross.”

As if to re-enact the scene, Ardor Maiden straightened her fingers and made a cross in the air with her right hand³⁷. She kept on speaking in an even lower voice after she lowered her hand.

“However, a few seconds after we came in here and the gate closed, the seal completely regenerated to form what you see here. --- In this world, keys and seals are all systematic metaphors. As long as that seal is still present, the gate will never open unless «Suzaku» is defeated. That is to say..... something, or someone sliced apart the seal from the inside, allowing the gate to open for that instance when we approached it..... That's what I believe..... “

“Bu.....but, wait a minute, that..... means.....”

³⁶ A piece of sculpture that use the method of moulding, carving, or stamping in which the design stands out from the surface, to a greater or lesser extent.

³⁷ Kawahara Reki was being playful here: instead of using 'Cross' in either Japanese or katakana, he decided to use “*Batten*”, a word that best translates to “demerit cross”. Moreover, he used the katakana version (バツテ) instead of the kanji version (罰点).

Haruyuki stared at the faraway metallic relief, watching it reflect the radiant light of the bonfires. He opened and closed his mouth over and over under the silver mask. He uttered a question after he finally organized his thoughts.

“That means there was a Burst Linker who had managed to infiltrate the «Imperial City» before us..... and to facilitate anyone who may come afterwards, they destroyed the seal, is that right.....?”

“..... Yes, that's right.”

'Bu..... but Sacred Beast Suzaku is still active. Then how did this Burst Linker manage to come in? Mai-san³⁸, if what you saw about the seal recovering after the gate closed was real, the seal can't have been destroyed like that since the start of the Accelerated World either..... There shouldn't have been a way for that person to enter unless they defeated Suzaku..... Right.....?’

Utai placed her hands upon her knees again and slightly shook her head.

“I'm not sure either. --- To find out more, I fear..... we may have to enter the Imperial City's inner shrine.....”

Her words faded to a whisper at the end, Haruyuki turned his gaze to the north --- to the inner shrine's black silhouette blocking the starry skies.

--- Enter there, the center of the Accelerated World..... the center of the center.....?

Impossible. A task this big is completely impossible. More importantly, there are bound to be Enemies more fearsome than those scary Armored Warriors guarding the front entrance of the inner shrine. How in the world am I going to be able to break through.....

He scrunched his shoulders as his thoughts continued to drift off pessimistically --- and right at that moment.

It was as if there was a screen deep in his mind and an unbelievable scene unfolded upon it.

His own Avatar should be seated on the pebbles, yet he saw another *him* stand up and proceed north cautiously. *He* hid in the shadows of the round pillars to avoid the gaze of the Warrior Enemies as they patrolled the road. With a vigilant but nevertheless steady pace, *he* approached the inner shrine. *His* destination was not the heavily guarded front entrance, but a window on the white wall a few dozen meters to the east.....

“--- The issue with the seal can wait, I think we have to move now.”

Utai's voice reached Haruyuki's ears and broke him out of his vivid vision. He opened his eyes wide in shock and then blinked several times. Utai did not seem to have noticed Haruyuki's abnormality. She continued to speak while looking at the distant inner shrine.

“Sooner or later, Lotus is going to forcibly Burst Out Kuu-san and me if we just wait like this. But even if we do go back to the real world, the next time we use the «Unlimited Burst» command, we are still going to appear in this Imperial City inner garden. There is no big difference between that and the «Infinite EK» state.....”

³⁸ Haruyuki's nickname for Utai's Avatar form. Pronounced like 'May'.

“Ah..... Yea, yeah, that's true.....”

Haruyuki responded after he reorganised his thoughts.

“Unless Shinomi..... no, Mai-san and I return properly via a Portal, this mission can't be considered complete. Other than exiting after reopening that gate, dodging Suzaku's attacks and heading for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Headquarters on the other side of the bridge..... Our only other option is to find a new Portal within the Imperial City.....”

“Yes, that's..... all there is to it.”

Ardor Maiden nodded. Haruyuki stared into her crimson eyes and took a big breath as he slowly spoke.

“Mai-san. Even though this is a baseless and uncertain suggestion..... I, want to try the Imperial City inner shrine. I don't know why..... but I feel like we can make it.”

He stared at the young maiden as she tilted her head. His Avatar, which had been sitting on the pebbles with crossed legs, had now unconsciously sat up straight. He balled his fists on his knees, straightened his back and continued on.

“Of course, I understand that if we get killed by those Warriors or some stronger Enemies, we would fall into the absolute worst «Inside Imperial City Infinite EK» state. I also understand that we shouldn't take the risk because of some half-baked gut feeling. But, even then, I still feel like going..... no, I feel..... like I have to go.....”

To Haruyuki, these words were ones in which he placed considerable effort, although as always, they ended in mumbles. At that exact moment, when he dropped his shoulders, feeling it was impossible to persuade a forerunning Burst Linker two levels above him.

“I understand.”

Utai nodded her head, which was met by Haruyuki's “Eh!?”. The maiden smiled as she moved skillfully while keeping her kneeling position until their knees touched. She reached out with her right hand while in this position and placed it upon Haruyuki's tightly clenched fists.

“Kuu-san. Back then, when you were being chased by Suzaku's flames, you disobeyed Lotus' retreat order to save me when I appeared at the altar. That instant, I realized. I can believe in you..... You are someone I can rely on. No..... actually, I have known that since the first time we met..... in Umesato High School's garden, when you frantically cleaning the pet house by yourself.....”

“No.....that's not true. So..... someone like me, can't, be.....”

Haruyuki's mumble came in a burst as he bowed his head deeply.

“I, always do things without considering..... always fail..... that time I was cleaning too, I splashed water all over you.....”

As if recalling that incident, Utai laughed slightly and gripped Haruyuki's hands tighter.

“I have said so before. Losing, falling, failing..... true strength means to press on even after experiencing these. Even if we are killed on the way into the inner shrine, I'm sure you will be able to do something about it.”

Those words were gentle while harsh at the same time. Haruyuki looked up into Utai's extremely close and gleaming eyes, and nodded heavily.

“..... Yes. I'm sure I can. We will return alive..... back to the real world, where everyone is waiting for us.”

Chapter 3

The stone road that ran from the «Imperial City» south gate --- the «Suzaku Gate» to the front entrance of the inner shrine spanned about three hundred meters.

To either side stood round pillars painted vermilion, each about eight meters apart.

The pillars were two meters in diameter, and between each pillar lay six meters of space. The Warrior Enemies patrolling the road seemed to have not noticed the motionless intruders within the shades of the pillars, needless to say, it's not hard to imagine that they will attack the instant they spot the silhouette of the intruders on the move or hear the sound of their footsteps on the pebbles.

That's why, in order for Haruyuki and Utai to reach the Imperial City's Inner Shrine, they can only progress forward pillar-by-pillar while hiding within the shades beneath the thirty-five pillars to escape the detection radius of the Warriors. Of course, the method of using the wings on his back to fly over had been brought up at first, but both of them were concerned about the flock of hawk-like birds flying leisurely in the night sky. It's one story if they are harmless creature objects allocated as a part of the stage features, quite another if they are sentinel type Enemies.

Luckily the wings were not without use.

About a dozen pillars in, Haruyuki picked up the delicate body of Ardor Maiden, listening with all his might for the perfect timing. On the road five meters to the left, the Warriors progressed southward with their clanking footsteps.

At the very instant the heavy footsteps approached the pillar, passes right through then faints into the distance.

Utai nodded with the faintest of movements in his arms. At the same time Haruyuki exerted the barest amount of forces to vibrate the metallic wings on his back, flying gently and soundlessly, no, it's more of a long jump. He landed on his tiptoes eight meters ahead, in the shade of a pillar. The Warriors did not notice the intruders and headed off with unchanging pace.

“Huu.....”

Haruyuki halted himself mid-sigh, as Utai gazed toward him worriedly. Looking at the ruby-like eye-lenses, Haruyuki nodded to signal that he was alright.

Although he already had a certain amount of experience of battling with Enemies in the Unlimited Neutral Field, this was the first time carrying out a covert operation with such a level of nerve strain. After spending twenty minutes, they had moved forward a mere hundred meters. But he must not feel anxious. He concentrated and carefully executed each jump.

It was indeed a dire situation, but there was not without advantages. Firstly, Haruyuki's «Flight» was not a special attack that required voice activation, but a permanently active ability. That was why there was no fear of being heard by the Warriors.

The other stroke of luck lies in the fact that sneaking while hiding his presence is an extremely proficient act for Haruyuki in the real world. There is not one other person in the entire three hundred and sixty students of Umesato Middle School who has polished the «skill of not

standing out» to Haruyuki's degree. The trick lies in being «blatantly sneaky», even if that expression is somewhat contradictory. During the first year, Haruyuki was overly concerned about the looks in other students' eyes, so much so that it stimulated the sadism of the delinquents. Too much water drowned the millers as the saying goes.

Yes, it was necessary to be alert but not needlessly afraid, to go naturally with the flow --- and make it to the next jump.

There was around sixty percent left of the precious Special Attack Gauge charged when taking damage from Suzaku's flames. This amount should be sufficient if used sparingly. Not worrying about it and steadily jumping from one pillar to the next, the goal will be reached in the end. That is what he learned when cleaning that breeding shed.

A new group of Warriors approached them, then passed by one the other side of the pillars. Utai signaled with a nod, Haruyuki answering in kind and vibrating his wings. *Jump*.

Forty minutes later, Haruyuki finally arrived beneath the last of the round pillars, finally letting out a long sigh this time.

It seemed that the patrolling Warriors will not pass near this particular pillar. In his arms, Ardor Maiden confirmed that there was no Enemy presence nearby yet still spoke in the softest manner possible.

“You've worked hard, Kuu-san.”

“Yeah... you too Mai-san.”

After answering, Haruyuki set the delicate Avatar down on the pebble road. Standing side-by-side, they carefully peered forward from within the shade of the pillar.

Standing five meters ahead was the «Imperial City Inner Shrine»--- the center's center of the Unlimited Neutral Field, the true Accelerated World.

As it was the Japanese styled «Heian»³⁹ stage, the designs of the building bore remarkable similarity to the replication model of Heian-kyō Daigokuden they had full-dived into during Japanese history lessons. The scale was however much larger.

The tiles upon the roof are pitch black. The walls are painted in white, the pillars and the lattice windows in vermilion.

There was a front entrance to the left, where it met the middle of the road. But to enter from there, perhaps --- No, it's absolutely impossible. Because on either sides of the gate, Enemies so much larger than the Warriors that they can be described as Demon --- or Nio⁴⁰, were standing guard over the gate as per their namesake.

“..... Kuu-san, I might as well ask..... Are you planning to challenge those two?”

³⁹ Heian-kyō (平安京) is the old name of Kyoto during the Heian period. Daigokuden (大極殿) is the Great Audience Hall of the emperor.

⁴⁰ Nio (仁王) or Kongourikishi (金剛力士) are two wrath-filled and muscular guardians of the Buddha standing today at the entrance of many Buddhist temples in the form of frightening statues.

Utai asked in a tiny voice; Haruyuki's helmet responded with a set of back and forth high-speed linear horizontal movements.

“W-w-w-w-w-hhat, i-i-i-i-i-mmmpossible. I don't even want to be one centimeter closer.....”

“..... Me neither. But..... what are we supposed to do then? I don't think we can find a Portal without entering that Inner Shrine.....”

“..... That's.....”

For a moment he bit his lip underneath the helmet.

The basis for the next set of steps, even if he was to say it out loud, there was no guarantee it would be taken seriously. But Haruyuki did not wish to make any lies to this young, innocent girl who had faced immense pressure for so many years. That was why he stated the truth.

“Just then, when resting in the shades of the pillar to the south I had a dream. Someone like me, yet not me..... following the same path as us, entered the Inner Shrine.....”

He hadn't remembered all of the contents of the dream. A moment earlier, the illusion of a silvery Avatar advancing along the pebble road vaguely awakened the subsequent imagery in his mind.

Haruyuki placed his hand on her right waist and stood up together as Ardor Maiden stared at him in incredulity. Hugging her tightly, his gaze shifted right and left to ensure their safety. Using up the last of the Gauge, he made the final jump.

The target was not the entrance to the left, but to the right --- one of the lattice windows on the white wall, fifth from the left.

Haruyuki landed in front of the window made of crisscrossed vermilion beams, Utai took a step forward, turned and shook her head.

“I don't think..... it can be opened. Not even destroyed. Windows of this type are basically all locked by the system as indestructible objects.”

Her words were completely right. Differing from fields of the normal battle fighting game stage, the Unlimited Neutral Field generated by the Brain Burst program also features elements of exploration and adventures found in role-playing games. Most building structures can be destroyed in the normal fields yet it is a different story for the Unlimited fields. Just like locked «doors» can't be unlocked without the corresponding «keys» in standalone FullDive RPGs, in this world also, it is absolutely impossible to enter enclosed areas without a «reason» for entry.

Haruyuki however, nodded at Utai then raised his head to look at the lattice window.

Reaching out and grasping the thin crosspiece, Haruyuki pulled forward while uttering a prayer.

And --- with the central crosspiece as the axis, the lattice window silently turned.

“.....!”

Utai couldn't help gasping in surprise. Her ardor eyes widen with disbelief.

It was perfectly natural to be surprised. The stout golden barrel bolt lock was twinkling at the bottom of the inside of the lattice window. The lock bolt however, was completely retracted inside the barrel meaning that this window was in the unlocked status on the system.

Wordlessly, Ardor Maiden shuffled along a few steps and reached out on tiptoes towards the next lattice window. She tried to open it in the same manner but the vermilion crosspiece held fast to the window frame and showed no signs of budging. Clearly, only the fifth window had been unlocked from the inside by someone.

“..... Did you see it in the dream too..... that this window can be opened?”

Utai returned and quietly asked; Haruyuki nodded slightly.

“Yes..... In that dream someone went through..... and unlocked it.”

“Is it the same person who destroyed the seal on the south gate?”

“I'm..... not sure. It's just that in the dream there's no such scene..... the silhouette I saw didn't seem to carry something like a blade.....”

Haruyuki answered vaguely even as he frantically shifted through his memories as it was a thing he saw in his dream after all. The imagery was in chaotic pieces that couldn't even be chronologically sorted. It's another story if he had a «dream recording application» being researched by various Neuro Linker carriers, but only in the «basic acceleration fields» could external programs be utilized.

No, before that --- was it really a dream?

Dreams are mostly derived from one's own memories. That is why it's not possible for something unknown to appear in a dream. Naturally this is the first time that Haruyuki had entered the Imperial City. Where then, did the memory of the window being unlocked come from.....?

As he pondered, faint noises came from the east, and Haruyuki immediately turned his sight towards there.

Clanking sounds gradually approached from the path between the endless white wall and the garden filled with red-leaved trees. That was undoubtedly a Warrior Enemy mob. This path seemed to be included in the patrol route as well, albeit with less frequency. The two of them would have to move right away.

Haruyuki and Utai nodded at the same time after exchanging a half-second look. How can they back out now after coming this far. Haruyuki stuck his head in first, through the window unlocked by the unknown person, to make sure that there were no signs of Enemies along the wide corridor inside. Quickly leaping in, he pulled Ardor Maiden through as well with both hands. He immediately closed the window as they crouched side by side underneath it.

Heavy footsteps passed by the pebble path outside, turning around close to the front entrance and passing by again and progresses eastward.

“Huu.....”

Sighing for the umpteenth time, the two of them exchanged another look, bumping fists and smiling.

Finally ---

Step by step, they had penetrated not only the «Imperial City», hailed as absolutely inaccessible, but even its Inner Shrine as well. The two of them were now infinitely closing in on the core of the Accelerated World.

That said, it was disappointing a Burst Linker has been here before Haruyuki and Utai is basically proven fact. And if the one who destroyed the Suzaku seal on the south gate was not the same person as the one who unlocked the lattice window, then there have been as many as two intruders already.

In order to know who these two people were, the only choice was to progress deeper into the Inner Shrine. The guard Enemy numbers and formidability would definitely be on a whole other level compared to the outside, but there were no second options.

Haruyuki blinked his eyes then softly asked Utai.

“Um..... how long has it been in the real world since we dived in here.....?”

“It's been about seven hours, inside time, which would be one thousandth of twenty-five thousand and two hundred seconds..... about twenty-five seconds.”

“Is that so..... then, Senpai and the others have been back around twenty seconds or so. How long will it be until they pull our cable?”

“If they are quick about it then I think they'll forcibly unplug us in thirty seconds. We have ten seconds left in real time..... two hours and forty-five minutes over here.”

As expected of a veteran Burst Linker, Utai answered without a delay, leaving Haruyuki, who was still unfamiliar with the mental calculation of the acceleration time, only able to continue nodding.

“Whether we live to reach the inside or die midway..... either way this is plenty of time. Come on Mai-san, perhaps it is safer to go by the right hand side.”

Haruyuki got up on one knee and reached out with his left hand ---

Utai stared intently at Haruyuki for a while with sparkling ardor eye-lenses under her pure white facemask.

“.....?”

Seeing Haruyuki tilt his head, Utai answered with a smile

'It's just, after coming here Kuu-san is becoming more dependable. Just like..... onii-sama.'

Being told so right out of the blue, Haruyuki's anxiety meter shot up through the roof, he asked in an off-tone voice as his sight wandered.

“Eh, eh, Mai-san, you have a brother? Which grade?”

But Utai did not answer, only grasping Haruyuki's hand to stand up. She spoke once again with a faint smile --- but with a slight sign of loneliness.

“All right, let's go. Dead or alive..... my life is in your hands Kuu-san.”

“... All right.”

Keeping further questions to himself, Haruyuki nodded hard.

As the one who asserted they should head for the Inner Shrine, he had to do everything within his powers to protect Utai. Although as a Burst Linker, Utai was overwhelmingly more powerful, but that's another thing altogether. He would absolutely prevent Utai falling into the «Infinite EK» state again even if he had to lay his body on the line.....

As Haruyuki secretly musters his determination and begins forward along the cool floored corridor, a tiny voice stirs from the depth of his ears.

--- Haruyuki onii-chan. If one of us..... or both of us were to lose Brain Burst.....

--- Then we will definitely forget all about each other.....

This was not a clip of that incredible dream. It was something said by the second generation Red King «Scarlet Rain» --- Kouzuki Yuniko, two days ago in real world time on Sunday the sixteenth of June, after suddenly appearing in Haruyuki's home after the «Seven Kings Conference» held in the normal field of the Imperial Palace East Garden.

Back then, Haruyuki felt she might be afraid. No, if actually said “lose Brain Burst”, then she must really be terrified of something.

But what could it be? Did something that can strike fear into Niko, a Level Niner, one of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» who dominated the Accelerated World even exist? She has that terrifying firepower of her Enhanced Armament and can utilize the Incarnation of «Range Augmentation» and «Movement Augmentation», most likely she can escape by herself even from within the territory of the Sacred Beast Suzaku.

..... Alas, even as a King, Niko in the real world was no more than a girl with her own share of worries in the sixth grade of elementary school. Also in the «Disaster Armor» incident half a year ago, she personally Judged her own Parent Linker, «Cherry Rook», who had become the Fifth Generation «Chrome Disaster». Rook is one of the very few friends Niko had in her real world boarding school. He however, lost all memories of Brain Burst and transferred away to a distant place, it would be strange if she wasn't feeling lonely.

“..... Um, Mai-san.”

Haruyuki involuntarily asked as they progress down the long corridor.

“What is it?”

The young shrine maiden raised her head to look at him, Haruyuki hesitantly thought for a while before speaking again.

“After finding a Portal and escaping here..... and solving all the problems, I have a friend I want to introduce you to.”

“A..... friend? In the real world?”

“Yeah. She older than you by two years, Mai-san..... in sixth grade right now. She can be a bit cocky and a little violent..... but she is a good person. If it's not too much trouble..... if possible, Mai-san too can become her friend.....”

All of a sudden ---

A feeling akin to pain erupts from within his chest. Haruyuki stops his breath, eyes wide open.

This is..... a premonition? What he just said most likely won't come to pass..... because a terrifying and tragic end will happen before that.....

----- How can that be allowed!

I will protect my world. I will not let anyone be met with misfortune nor grief. Senpai, Master, Chiyu, Taku, Shinomiya-san..... and Pard-san, Niko as well of course. I will protect this his humble circle of bonds that is more genial than anything else. Definitely protect it at all costs.

“Kuu-san.”

Suddenly called by a voice filled with tension, Haruyuki swiftly opened his eyes. Looking to his side, the young shrine maiden was staring intently at the corridor before them.

Haruyuki's gaze was also pulled to the front and discovered multiple gigantic presences appearing in the gloom before them. The creak of heavy movement reached his ears without a single pause.

“As I thought, there are also Enemies on the inside.”

Hearing Utai's murmur, Haruyuki nodded swiftly and surveyed either side. To the right, the wall was lined with vermilion lattice windows; it does become possible to exit by unlocking the bolt but the previous Warrior Enemies might also be right outside.

There was no wall to the left, replaced instead by sliding screens painted with extravagant murals. There appeared to have no locking mechanisms and should open with a pull, but which one to open among the ones lined along here.....

At that moment, the incredible illusion appeared again. The faint silhouette opened the screen two meters in front and slid in.

“..... That way.”

Haruyuki chased after the ghostly Avatar with no sign of doubt. Pulling open the screen without hesitation, the corridor inside was flooded too. This time there are screens on both sides. The two of them entered the space extending north and closed the screen behind them.

Without a break to even catch a breath, numerous creaking noises of heavy movement on the floorboard came from the front again. Haruyuki immediately moved on with the spectre that looked similar to himself, it opened the screen to the right and disappeared within.

Who is that spectre? Why was only himself able to see it? Questions piled up like a mountain but the only thing to do now was to believe and chase after it.

Haruyuki swallowed down the remnants of the pain in his chest, forcing back his full concentration he opened the next screen while holding onto Utai's hand.

Warrior and Priest Enemy mobs roamed everywhere on the inside map of the Imperial City Inner Shine; it will definitely take more than one day to traverse the inside while avoiding all of them alone.

The path was quite wide; there's no shortage of pillars and statues objects to conceal one's self behind too, but the patrol pattern of the Enemies was very complex, and a mere few minutes of observation is nowhere near enough to understand it. Moreover, the endlessly similar corridors and sliding screens made it especially easy for someone to get lost, given that there is no such thing as an auto-mapping function, it would not take long for someone to lose their bearings.

Traversing through a maze of such complexity in just over an hour was all thanks to the aid of the strange silhouette in Haruyuki's vision.

The small nameless Duel Avatar leading Haruyuki and Utai snuck into patrolling Enemies' dead angles with pinpoint timing precision, opening one after another featureless screen. Clearly, this was much more than a simple dream or illusion.

It was most likely --- «Memories». Through some unknown logic, the memories of this Burst Linker who had infiltrated this Imperial City were now being played back in Haruyuki's mind. No other theory can explain this phenomenon. But if that was the case, that somebody should have successfully reached the innermost point of the Imperial City and survived it to leave his memories behind in a medium of some sort.

That's why a Portal connecting to the real world must exist at the destination of the hazy silhouette.

Believing so, Haruyuki chased the shade from the memories with Ardor Maiden in toll.

Despite several relatively close calls, the two of them reached the hall entrance to the destination without being targeted by Enemies even once for over an hour.

“..... This is.....”

Utai mused as she put more force into the hand she gripped Haruyuki's with.

“Great Temple” would be most appropriate for describing this gigantic space. Vermilion pillars held up the towering ceiling, the walls on all sides decorated with extremely extravagant murals. It was a room very fitting as the «Last Boss Room», but there was not a hint of an Enemy presence.

Alas, something instinctively suffocating hung heavy in the atmosphere of this great hall. Haruyuki returned Utai's grip as his eyes frantically looked around beneath his silvery mask.

The silhouette in the memory that led them here slowly stepped into the great hall and continued towards the murky depths. Haruyuki made up his mind to follow right behind it.

The spectre slid in between towering round pillars ---

And disappeared without a sound when it reaches a place.

“Ah.....”

An exclamation escaped Haruyuki's mouth as he hastened his pace. The spectre from the memory disappearing would mean a Portal was definitely there. But there was only gloom and freezing air at the back of the great hall and no sign at all of the wavering blue light. How can that be --- reaching here and seeing no exit, how can that possibly.....

Half running the last ten meters, he couldn't help but realize his worries had become reality.

There was something there, but clearly not a Portal.

Lining both sides with two meters between them were quadrangular marble pillars radiating black light. Their height reached up to about Haruyuki's chest. They were set with thin plates of a different colour scheme making it seem that they are not simple pillars rather pedestals for displaying something.

But..... The two pedestals, both sides were vacant.

Even if something has once been placed there, both sides had been taken. The grey spectre that led them here must have taken both or at least one of the two. And that item should have been the key to return to the real world, a «One Time Portal» that could only be activated once.

“How can this be..... after coming all this way.....”

A massive wave of disappointment washed over him as Haruyuki drooped his shoulders --- at that exact moment.

His left hand was being gripped with such force that it almost creaked under the pressure.

“.....!?”

Quickly looking to his side, the young shrine maiden who had never once lost her cool, her ardor eye-lenses blazing as she stared at the right pedestal with a sense of desperation. With her facemask trembling, a small hoarse voice escaped her lips.

“..... The plate of «Seven Stars».”

“Eh..... eh.....?”

Confused by the expression he has never heard before, Haruyuki too returned his gaze to the pedestal. He discovered a smaller metallic plate inlaid upon it, unnoticed before due to lack of attention. Haruyuki takes a step closer to have a better look. Apart from several characters, it was also engraved with curious shapes.

Seven dots and six lines connecting the points. The shape formed by the points and lines had been seen somewhere before. Yes, that was two hours ago, the celestial shapes he gazed upon while in the Imperial City Inner Garden.

The tail of Ursa Major. The Big Dipper.

..... *Ouch!*

Once again, pain exploded out from a spot on his back, the intensity of the pain steadily increasing from before. Lightly shaking his head, Haruyuki forced the pain down with his will and quietly asks.

“«Seven Stars», as in the Big Dipper, engraved here? What exactly is this pedestal.....?”

Utai finally raised her head and explained in the smallest voice possible.

“What was placed on this pedestal was an Enhanced Armament. But it's not any normal weapon or gear. It's renowned in legends as the strongest weapons set in all of the Accelerated World..... «Armament of Seven Stars», also known as the «Seven Arcs»⁴¹.”

“Seven..... Arcs.....”

He had heard of that name before.

It was not something that can be forgotten, something Haruyuki's master, Sky Raker, told him the day before yesterday during the «Seven Kings Conference». The staff owned by the Purple King, Purple Thorn --- «The Tempest». The great sword possessed by the Blue King, Blue Knight --- «The Impulse». The large shield held by the Green King, Green Grande --- «The Strife». The aforementioned Armaments were collectively known as the «Seven Arcs».

Back then Raker had said something about the Seven Arcs being speculated to exist in the Accelerated World but the existence of only four had been verified. The basis for that «speculation» most likely came from the inlaid plates on these pedestals. Through careful observation it's not hard to see the relief of the Big Dipper carved on the plate with the sixth star from the left being larger. These should mean that every star corresponded to an Arc.

“..... That means, the Arcs carried by the Blue King and the others were all placed upon pedestals like this one.....?”

Haruyuki asked to spare himself further thought; Utai nodded:

“Yes. The Arcs obtained by «Vanquish» and the rest were enshrined in the deepest parts of the «Four Great Dungeons» beneath the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, Shiba Park, Tokyo Dome and the Tokyo Station of the Unlimited Field. I have only ever seen one of them, the pedestal for «The Impulse» and the design is exactly the same as this one. Kuu-san, please have a look here.”

As she spoke, Utai pointed to one place on the plate. Two kanji were engraved in solemn script under the form of the seven stars. It read 【開陽】; the meaning however was lost to him.

“This, ‘Kaiyou’, is the Chinese name for the sixth star of the Big Dipper. On the pedestal of the great sword Impulse I once saw had been engraved with the Chinese name of the Alpha star «天枢 - Tensuu». Similarly, it has been said that the pedestal of the staff, Tempest, had been engraved with the Chinese name of the Beta star «天璇 - Tensen» and the pedestal of the large shield, Strife, with the Chinese name of the Gamma star «天璣 - Tenki».”

“..... Is that so.....”

Desperately cramming one proper noun after another into his head, Haruyuki fervently nodded his head.

The Four Great Dungeons placed to the four cardinal directions of the Imperial City in the Unlimited Neutral Field. The four Enhanced Armaments sealed deep within each. Their

⁴¹ Written in Kanji as “Seven Divine Instruments”, subtitled with furigana “Seven Arcs”.

respective pedestals engraved with the Chinese names of the Big Dipper's four stars that make up the ladle shape's hollow portion.

If that is the case, then the hardcore veteran Burst Linkers who discovered them have every reason to believe that «these are just four among seven of the strongest Enhanced Armaments».

--- Ah geez, why didn't I become a Burst Linker sooner. The exploration of the Four Great Dungeons, conquering the big boss at their depth, obtaining the strongest of Armaments, all these exciting things have already been done.

Thoughts of disappointment flashes by inside his head and just as soon he coped with the facts. Didn't Master Sky Raker say “everything is only just beginning”? If he was a pioneering Burst Linker, then right now he could very well belong to an opposing force to Nega Nebulas..... by extension Kuroyukihime. There nothing more fortunate than to have become that person's «Child».

Haruyuki hung his head while reflecting upon his thoughts, at the same time asking Utai.

'By the way, I didn't see it during the Seven Kings Conference, what is the last of the «Four Confirmed Arcs» called? It should have been hidden in the Four Great Dungeons just like the other three, who got to it?'

'That's..... The pedestal that held the Delta star «天権 - Tenken» has been confirmed to be empty in the lowest level of the Shiba Park Great Maze.....'

Utai paused for a second and with an expression signaling she had yet to figure it out herself, she continued her explanation.

“As to who exactly obtained the Arc known as «The Luminary» that should have been placed there is something yet to be found. At least within the scopes of what I know, there's no record of it being used in a battle.”

“Wha.....”

It was beyond surprising. Why not use it after going through all that effort to obtain one of the strongest Enhanced Armaments in the world? Perhaps it is out of fear of attracting a barrage of attacks by standing out too much, but shouldn't openly stating the name of the possessor of the Arc be better if they had the prowess to defeat the Great Dungeon?

Other unacceptable facts also remained. Haruyuki turned his head to ask again.

“..... But, Master Raker did say that «only four Arcs are verified». Does «The Luminary» count as a verified Arc even if only the pedestal has been found?”

“No.....”

Utai shakes her head, the hair parts of her Avatar sways along. For some reason she seemed to be hesitating, and with lowered head she spoke in the smallest voice possible.

“«Luminary» is treated as unverified. The last of the four Arcs that have appeared thus far in the Accelerated World..... is «The Destiny» that should have once been placed on this «開陽 - Kaiyou» pedestal.”

'..... Des..... tiny.....'

Rolling the name over his tongue repeatedly, Haruyuki's attention was attracted to the plate in front of the pedestal. A relief of the Big Dipper with a larger sixth star, below the two kanji of the Theta star's Chinese name, several English letters were carved. 【THE DESTINY】 .

A name he had never heard of before. Or at least it should have been so.

A strange sensation once again flowed through Haruyuki's body. *Stab. Stab.* A place deep in his soul was in pain. This pulsation reached his central nervous system and somewhere on his back a small spark flared up.

Inadvertently, his visions swayed. No, the only thing collapsing were the letters on the plate Haruyuki had focused his attention on. The seven letters of DESTINY were trembling, warping, changing into similar but different letters.....

“Kuu-san.”

Haruyuki opened his eyes feeling his left hand being tightly gripped again.

The illusion gone, the letters on the metallic plate returned to as they once were. The pain from his back had also disappeared. Haruyuki blinked several times, remembering the talk just then, he apologized to Utai in a slightly hoarse voice.

“Ah..... so, sorry, just a little..... dazed. That means there is really a Burst Linker who arrived here before us and obtained «The Destiny» on this pedestal and used it in battles right? What is their name? Is it really one of the Kings.....?”

Utai shook her head slightly to Haruyuki's question.

“..... I'm sorry, I too haven't personally witnessed it..... I have just heard it was events that occurred a long time before I became a Burst Linker.....”

“Is that so.....”

Holding back his anxiety, Haruyuki nodded. If Utai, who can be considered quite a veteran, is ignorant of it then it is naturally impossible for Haruyuki, who has only been a Burst Linker for eight months, to find any sort of connection. That's why the anxiety in his head must be a trick of the mind, that feeling of knowing it but just unable to place his finger on it.

Just like trying to instinctively remove the name of «Destiny» from his field of vision, Haruyuki moved to the left a few paces while holding Utai's hand to study the pedestal on the other side.

This side also had an inlaid metallic plate on it that's almost exactly the same. The relief of the Big Dipper is unchanged except the larger star if fifth from the left this time. The engraved kanji was 【玉衝】 .

“Gyoku..... shou.....?”

“Yes. That's the Chinese name of the Epsilon star. The name of the Arc is.....”

Both Haruyuki and Utai moved their faces closer to the line of spelling 【THE INFINITY】 . At the same time, they read out the name The Infinity.

“This is first time I have heard of this name as well. The pedestal is vacant like the next one meaning that someone..... Perhaps the same person took it..... If that's the case, then it too, like «The Luminary», is an unverified Arc never been used before.”

“Yes..... I see.”

Haruyuki nodded while secretly sighing.

Before the Seven Kings Conference the day before yesterday, when overlooking the meeting place by the towering Imperial City in the Chiyoda Area, Kuroyukihime had said that according to rumor, super incredible Enhanced Armaments were hidden in the deepest part of the Imperial City Inner Shrine.

Technically this was correct. Also they were most likely of an even higher rank than the Arcs held by the Blue, Green and Purple Kings. But only the pedestals have been found here, the items in question has long been taken by god knows who. Such a reality was crushingly disappointing to Haruyuki, not only as a Burst Linker but a hardcore heavy gamer as well.

“.....Infinity.....What kind of awesome equipment could it be..... If only I can see a glimpse of it.....”

During the split second he murmured in dissatisfaction.

Haruyuki noticed something and all of a sudden raised his head.

Four Arcs spread over the Four Great Dungeons in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Two Arcs in the very center of the Field, the deepest part of the Imperial City Inner Shrine. The sum is six. But there are seven stars engraved on the pedestal. Didn't Utai say they are call the Seven Star Armaments precisely because of that? That --- would mean.

“Missing..... one.....?”

Unintentionally letting his thoughts slip, Utai also nodded at his side.

“I...am thinking about it as well. There's only two Arc pedestals in the hall that should be the epicenter of the Accelerated World..... Then..... the Eta star of the Big Dipper, the Military Breaking star Alkaid (TL Note:):..... where could it be.....”

The two gazed at each other as they sank into silence ---.

'That question, please allow me to answer it.'

A teenager's voice, refreshing as the fall breeze, reached them.

Chapter 4

The moment he heard the voice, Haruyuki couldn't help but turn towards the source of the sound on impulse --- past the two pedestals to the north.

But Shinomiya Utai's reaction was vastly different. Releasing his hands that she has been constantly holding on to, she pushed Haruyuki back a step with her palm. She herself however, stepped forth, her side in front and her left hand slightly raised towards the dark depth of the great hall.

The body of the delicate shrine maiden Avatar became covered with a veil of orange glow. Over Ray --- the proof of the Incarnate System's activation. But Utai, formerly one of the «Elements» of Nega Nebulas, should not have been unaware of the first principle of never using Incarnation unless attacked by an Incarnation attack first.

Activating the ultimate power of a Burst Linker before sighting the figure of the other party, this act represented her fierce determination to protect Haruyuki even if she was to commit a taboo. Also, the pressure emanating from Ardor Maiden, seemingly able to roast the very air itself, spoke loudly of the clear difference in power between her and Haruyuki.

If it really turned out into a battle of this level, I would definitely be a hindrance. Even if he clearly understood that, Haruyuki raised both hands and starts to focus on the mental image a skip behind. His digits forming the likeness of blades, the silver Over Ray radiating out barely covered the front half of his forearms.

Both of them took position, completely in their battle stances. The unknown person called out again to them both.

“I apologize for my discourtesy. But please do believe me, I have no intention to engage in battle with you.”

The voice, still cool in such circumstances, did not convey any hint of hostility. Utai however, did not drop her guard in the slightest.

“If that is so, please show yourself first.”

Utai answered back firmly, her Over Ray increasing in intensity as if to dispel the murky depth. He recalled, with a catch in his breath, this wavering halo of the red spectrum transforming into a conflagration that razed the entire field accompanying the dance of the shrine maiden.

“I understand. I will show myself now.”

The owner of the voice responded back, the loud clack of footsteps followed the response.

The seemingly deliberate sound of footsteps on the floorboards approached slowly from the depth of the great hall. Although there was no breeze, the flames on the candle stands from both sides of the wall started to sway.

Clack. Clack. The approaching footsteps were no more than fifteen meters from them now. For a long-range or high mobility type Duel Avatar, this is well within their effective range. The unknown party's footsteps drew near without slowing amidst the tense atmosphere.

Finally --- a figure emerged from the glow of the candles.

Blue.

Like the bottomless lake, or the vault of heaven seen from above the clouds, a clear and pristine azure.

Like the voice which gave off a boyish image, the Duel Avatar was also on the short side, just slightly taller than Ardor Maiden. In contrast, his build was far from delicate.

His limbs were equipped with heavy armor plates in the likeness of kimono sode and hakama⁴², a piece not unlike tied hair extended from the back of the head all the way to the waist. The facemask under his fringe parts was youthful yet dignified in appearance. Overall, he gave off a traditional Japanese impression, if Ardor Maiden was a shrine maiden then he was most definitely a «young samurai».

Nothing backed up that description better than the close quarters Enhanced Armament beside his left hip.

Its guard was oval in shape with a slim sheath. Perhaps it is better to call it a katana than a sword, even if there is almost no curvature to the blade at all. It was a mirror-like silver overall, reflecting the blue of the Avatar, countless spots of luminance swayed within it as if the infinite starry skies have been condensed into the form of a blade.

The young samurai stopped ten meters out from the two of them and placed his left hand on the sheath. Utai's hand twitched a little, at which point he removed the Enhanced Armament along with its sheath with a crisp metallic clink. Placing the katana directly by his feet, the unarmed samurai raised both hands as a gesture to them. Once more, he softly called out.

“As you can see, I have no intention to do battle.”

If the boy dwelling within that Duel Avatar had a personality just like his outward swordsman appearance, then by placing the katana, which represents the soul of the swordsman, on the ground means that he will under no circumstances fight them.

As Haruyuki pondered this, Utai slowly lowered her left hand, the Over Ray around her body instantly dissolving into the air.

“I believe you.”

Utai's swift response nearly caused Haruyuki to go “Eh?” behind her, nonetheless Haruyuki disengaged both hands' stance hurriedly. He felt it too back when fighting with Bush Utan, this girl can be quite decisive when it comes to trusting others or not.

The cool pristine blue glow from the eye lens of the young samurai Avatar softened a touch as he softly breathed out a sigh of relief. He responded back with a somewhat more composed voice.

“Thank goodness..... I was panicking terribly over what to do if it really turned into a battle.”

“Eh?”

Haruyuki finally expressed his astonishment aloud before speaking his slightly blunt thoughts.

'Some, someone who is able to enter here, still acts..... like a newbie.....'

⁴² The sleeves of kimono and the loose fitting garment for the legs that are worn with the kimono.

Whereupon the young samurai stated something even more startling with a smile.

“No, I am a complete novice. Since becoming a Burst Linker, I have never engaged in a single normal battle.”

Picking the katana off the floor and securing it back on his hip, the azure young samurai led Utai and Haruyuki to one of the candle stands at the left wall.

Shaking both sides of the candle, massive horizontal wooden beams in the shape of benches extend out from the wall. The samurai took one while the two of them takes the other as they sunk into a short silence.

Mumbling a quick “excuse me”, Haruyuki touched his own HP Bar to bring out the main menu. His continued dive time has reached more than seven hours already. It has been an hour and a half since entering the Imperial City Inner Shrine, if Kuroyukihime and the others in the real world had waited for thirty seconds before cutting their global connection, then they should have an hour at best.

As he closed the window, the young samurai Avatar sitting in front of him shook his head and spoke.

“To be honest..... it is still unbelievable. The day when I meet someone in this palace actually came.....”

Haruyuki was in just as much shock. But there's just too many things he wanted the other party to explain, and he couldn't figure out where to start. *Who are you? How did you enter the Imperial City and this great hall, and with that kind of power why haven't you ever battled before.....*

As countless thoughts swirled around in his head, to his side, Utai bowed her head unexpectedly.

'I belong to the Legion «Nega Nebulas», my name is Ardor Maiden.'

Ah, right, introductions first. Haruyuki hastily bowed as well.

“A, also of «Nega Nebulas», I'm Silver Crow.”

The young samurai blinked and softly muttered.

“Nega Nebulas”

Musing over the name with a tone as if hearing it for the first time, he then straightened back up while stammering slightly. As Haruyuki is about to tilt his head in puzzlement, the other party swiftly bowed in reply and said his name.

“Ah, I apologise for the late self-introduction..... My name is..... «Trilead Tetroxide». If possible, please do call me Lead⁴³.”

“Trilead.....”

⁴³ Trilead Tetraoxide or Lead (II, IV) oxide have the chemical formula. It's more often called minium or red lead, or alternatively triplumbic tetroxide. *Plumbic* here from *plumbum*, the Latin word for lead, Kawahara Reki most likely made an error here.

Haruyuki rolled it over his tongue even as he remained unsure. With the naming convention of Duel Avatars, this should be a word that indicates the armor color, but is there such an expression for blue or azure?

Sneaking a peek at Utai at his side, she too seemed to be pondering something, nevertheless she immediately nodded.

“Then please allow me to call you Lead-san.”

After a pause ---

“Lead-san. It was you who destroyed the South Gate's «Suzaku Seal» from within the Imperial City wasn't it?”

The shrine maiden asking such an important question in such an off-handed manner caused Haruyuki to bend back with surprise.

The young samurai who referred to himself as Trilead expressed the same look of surprise. His deep blue eye lens flickered a few times before he quietly inquired back with his eyes looking up in a somewhat shy fashion.

“Why..... would you think so?”

“To destroy an object of such high durability with only two strokes, other than the techniques of the user, an Enhanced Armament of the corresponding high level is necessary. Like say, the «Seven Arc» at your hip, Lead-san.”

“Ehhhhhh!?”

Haruyuki at last was unable to withhold his exclamation, while he swiftly closed his mouth, his eye fixated upon the mirror-silver straight katana at Trilead's left hip. Although he considered it quite extraordinary when he first saw it, he never imagined that it was one of the strongest Enhanced Armaments.

“That..... that is an, Arc.....? That means, the thing on the pedestal over there, by you.....?”

Haruyuki looked back and forth between the straight katana and the empty pedestal standing in the darkness a dozen or so meters to the right. As soon as he finished, the young samurai lowers his head in embarrassment and quietly answered.

“Y..... yes. I'm sorry, in fact someone like me doesn't even have the right to possess this blade..... But, I couldn't stop myself reaching out when I first laid eyes on it.....”



Seeing a boy most likely younger than himself apologize with their entire bodily posture, Haruyuki quickly shook both his right hand and his head.

“Ah, no, there's no need to apologize. It's natural for it to be first come first serve. I'm sorry that I used a strange way of phrasing that.”

In the end he too bowed his head, Lead too cautiously raised his head and crossed eyes with Haruyuki. The instant when he saw the shy smile on the refreshing face mask, an emotion Haruyuki rarely experienced erupted out from within.

--- *This guy, is not a bad person.*

In the past, the only people he felt a sense of equivalent kinship with were his childhood friends Mayuzumi Takumu and Kurashima Chiyuri. The young samurai who called himself Trilead, even if he was a mysterious Burst Linker who appeared during unnatural circumstances, Haruyuki felt that they can get along very well even if they were to reveal themselves in the real world.

Feeling eyes upon himself, Haruyuki stole a glance to the left to meet the smiling gaze of Ardor Maiden. Haruyuki, feeling slightly embarrassed, glossed it over with a trivial question.

“Ah, um, Lead.....kun, which pedestal was that blade on? I think the left one is the fifth star of the Big Dipper and the sixth is on the right.....”

“Just ‘Lead’ is fine, Crow-san.”

As Trilead pointed out with a smile, Haruyuki quickly added a “Then, just call me Crow.” himself. But Trilead stated “I believe I am the junior here.” with a bowed head and started explaining before Haruyuki could find a chance to discuss the matter further⁴⁴.

“This katana is from the left, the pedestal of the Epsilon Star «玉衝- Gyokushou». Its name is «THE INFINITY».”

Seeing Haruyuki and Utai move their line of sight toward the direction of the center of the great hall, Trilead followed suit and continued.

“By the way, by the time I found this katana, the pedestal of the Zeta Star «開陽 - Kaiyou» next to it was already empty.”

“Oh.....”

As Haruyuki nodded, Utai asked from his side.

“The time period when the Arc «THE DESTINY» appeared in the Accelerated World is very early..... Not even a year after Brain Burst was distributed to the first generation Burst Linkers according to rumors.”

“Eh, that long ago.....Then, the Burst Linker who got «THE DESTINY» is..... probably the first one to enter the «Imperial City». And Lead is the second.....”

⁴⁴ It's more natural for the younger party of a conversation to address their seniors with an honorific attached in Japanese culture. First name basis is usually for extremely close relationships.

Haruyuki barely registered that he has already naturally neglected honorifics as he continued to count off on his right hand digits.

“Mai-san and I are the third and fourth people. How should I say this..... quite a few people have entered the absolutely inaccessible.....”

Looking at each other, the three of them let out giggles at the same time.

Although Lead swiftly fixed his expression and stated in a seemingly apologetic tone with sagging shoulders.

“I am quite honored to be included..... But I'm sorry, I didn't enter proudly from the «Four Cardinal Gates».”

“Eh..... that.....? Then, you went over the outer moat and the walls.....?”

Haruyuki tilted his head in puzzlement, but before he can find out the truth of Lead's words, Utai spoke up.

“Going by your logic, Kuu-san and I too are only able to enter here thanks to you slicing open the seal on the south gate. Most likely, the purpose for the placement of that seal is so that in the situation like when Nega Nebulas split into four teams to take on the Four Sacred Beasts simultaneously in the past, it becomes possible to let in the other teams if one of the gates was successfully breached. That is to say, if the seal is still intact then the gate won't open, we would have been roasted by Suzaku without a doubt.”

“Ah..... I see, so that's how it is.....”

Haruyuki shivered as he recalled the superheated flames pressing in from behind and profoundly nodded at the same time. Overlooking his previous question, he then asked the young samurai another.

“So Lead, you destroyed the seal to escape the Imperial City.....?”

“No..... that is..... not the case.”

For some reason, Lead denied it with a voice seeping a slight hint of loneliness and answered with a shy smile.

“Rather, it's precisely..... the opposite. I thought that if the seal is destroyed then perhaps one day, someone will come in from that gate.....”

“Come in.....?”

Lead should also be an intruder, but the strange way he phrased himself was as if he had given up on escaping. Blinking under his silver mask, Haruyuki pressed on with his question.

“But Lead, if you're in this Imperial City Inner Shrine then you should be in a semi-«Infinite EK» state just like us..... In other words, stuck here? Ah, no wait.....”

Haruyuki's gaze dropped to the straight katana shining in silvery brilliance at the young samurai's hip, failing to notice the expression of wanting to hide something that flashed across Trilead's features as he heard those words.

“That Arc..... «INFINITY», shouldn't it turn into a single use «Portal» upon acquiring? When you got it shouldn't you have been able to naturally leave here.....?”

The question had no hidden meaning and was intended to be taken at face value. Alas, Lead kept his head low in embarrassment. As Haruyuki silently gazed at him, Utai placed a delicate hand upon Haruyuki's left knee.

“Even if there is a Portal, it's not possible to always escape smoothly Kuu-san.”

Hearing Utai's words, Haruyuki sensed that his tone seemed reproaching of Lead's actions, he deeply bowed his head on reflex.

“Ah..... so, sorry Lead, I'm not blaming you or anything. I've had some similar experiences as well..... In the end, us being here is also the consequence of acting outside of the plan.....”

After Haruyuki tried his hardest to explain, the young samurai finally raised his head. Placing both hands upon his hakama-like legs, he bowed once again.

“I deeply apologize Crow-san, Maiden-san. One day..... when the time comes, I will explain. Explain why it is that I am I this place.....”

Lead's tone and expression --- even his whole posture showed astounding etiquette. Utai, who was of comparative good deportment, returned the bow in place of Haruyuki, who was lost for words.

“I understand Lead-san. In that case, we'll talk about our circumstances. About why we stepped within the territory of the Sacred Beast Suzaku and charged into the Imperial City from the South Gate.”

In the subsequent five minutes, Haruyuki and Utai concisely explained the issues.

The challenge and collapse of the Legion «Nega Nebulas» two and a half years ago.

The sealed state Ardor Maiden fell into in front of the South Gate to allow other members to escape.

The rescue mission the current members mounted to allow her Avatar to escape alive and its results ---

Lost in thought with wide eyes as he listened, Trilead took a long sigh after the two of them stopped and murmured to himself.

“So..... that kind of events had happened..... There exists people who attempt to challenge the «Four Sacred Beasts»..... and take them down.....”

Haruyuki's eyes widened in shock as he sensed a hint of admiration from the depth of Lead's voice. That feeling resonated with something from the depth of his soul and Haruyuki wished to turn that resonation into sound and vocalize it.

--- *You too?*

Although he wants to say it, he shut himself up a split second before he could. This is because he didn't know how to continue on from that point.

Lead showed a faint smile, perhaps noticing Haruyuki's gesture and calmly spoke again.

“If that was what has transpired, please allow me to aid you in your escape from the Palace.”

“Eh..... Th, Thank you.....”

Bowing his head in thanks first of all, Haruyuki then leaned his body forward and asked eagerly.

“Do you know a standard way of leaving here!? Is there a functional Portal somewhere..... !?”

“I use a timer type automatic breaker to leave and there is only one confirmed Portal. But.....”

Although nodding, Lead seemed to be deep in thought, pausing halfway through his words. He suddenly raises his head however, looked at Haruyuki and Utai in turn and spoke.

“..... It's best if you can go and see it directly for yourself. At the same time, I will be able to fulfill my initial promise.”

“Wha..... What was that again?”

Haruyuki tilts his head and the young azure Avatar smoothly replies.

“The promise to tell you the location of the seventh star..... the last of what you called the «Arcs».”

Trilead rose from the beams replacing benches and guided Haruyuki and Utai to the dark area to the north of the great hall where he first appeared.

Candlelight barely reached the extremity, although it too was composed of vermilion pillars and white walls like the two sides, at its very center is something that has escaped notice until now.

A doorway, or perhaps an entrance. A black gaping void opened between pillars making up the shape of a small torii⁴⁵, and chilling air whooshed out from within.

Haruyuki subconsciously cringed and whispered.

“Is this great hall..... not the deepest part of the Imperial City.....?”

“That is correct. This is the last of the Ninefold Gates. Through it is the Shrine of the Eight Gods. Let's go.”

Trilead quietly spoke as he lifted his left foot under the hakama-like armor and stepped into the murky darkness. Utai went after him without a hint of hesitation, Haruyuki made up his mind and followed.

Through the torii was a glimmer of light unlike the total pitch darkness initially presumed. The corridor quickly gave way to a flight of stairs leading underground from where the light seemed to lead. Lead began walking down in habitual paces and the two of them followed after.

As they progressed, Haruyuki felt a pressure different from any other he has ever felt so far surround his Avatar. It was unlike the intimidation emitting out of Sacred Beast Suzaku or the armored Warrior Enemies, rather this feeling was as if the very air carried some sort of spiritual energy.

⁴⁵ A torii is a traditional Japanese gate most commonly found at the entrance of or within a Shinto shrine, where it symbolically marks the transition from the profane to the sacred.

No. It's way too inappropriate to use words like «spiritual» in the Accelerated World.

After all, this is a VR world generated by the Brain Burst program, all information received by the five senses having been converted to digital data. Niko once used «Data Pressure» to describe the pressure felt from other Burst Linkers. If that was to be used as an example, then does that mean in this place even the air carries some sort of data. Not temperature or scent nor outward information like air flow --- time, no, «history» should be the right expression, a continuation of something with an endless existence.....

Thirty steps down the ebony-textured stairs, it turned backwards a hundred and eighty degrees and continued down further. Just as he was no longer able to figure out how far down they've walked---

The stairwell came to an end with a room laid with floorboards lying in front. Comparing it to the great hall with two pedestals on the level above, it was but a fraction of the size.

'Eh..... that is, the final room of the Imperial City? It's surprisingly cramped..... more like there's nothing there.....'

Haruyuki's thoughts spilled out carelessly; Trilead who was walking down the steps in front turned around and faintly smiled at that remark and answers.

“No, you will be able to see it once you are at the bottom.”

Thinking of asking him what that was, Haruyuki nonetheless quickened his own pace. He entered the floored room a few seconds after Lead and a second even bigger torii came into his sight.

The vermilion gate stood at the front end of the floored room, connecting with the walls on both sides and the ceiling. The two pillars however, were connected by something not found on the torii on the previous level. An extremely thin reel of pure white rope. That was --- shimenawa⁴⁶, the boundary that separates this world and the divine domain.

Swallowing down his saliva, Haruyuki approached a few steps towards the gate signifying absolute separation in order to see past the darkness on the other side.

“..... So big.....”

He breathlessly muttered.

Two rows of small swaying bonfires led from both sides of the torii into the distances but the walls of the three other sides were completely out of sight. The lattice ceiling too was barely visible. The floor was polished stone paving yet it covers an area much greater than the gymnasium of Umesato High, it was thus impossible to see how far and how wide it is.

Feeling that it was far from vacant when it's clearly so vast, cold and quiet is a memorable sensation that requires little thinking to recall. The great bridge that extended out from the Imperial City South Gate --- It was the tranquility fraught with great omens that fills that space before «Sacred Beast Suzaku» appears.

⁴⁶ Shimenawa are lengths of laid rice straw rope used for ritual purification in the Shinto religion. A space bound by shimenawa often indicates a sacred or pure space, such as that of a Shinto shrine.

Trilead wordlessly passed by between Haruyuki who stood in a mute daze and the silent Utai. He raised his right arm to point at the other side of the rows of flames.

“There.”

Turning his attention toward that direction, there was indeed a source of light in front with a wavelength different from the swaying flames. He holds his breath and focuses his sight further. The darkness peeled away slightly, revealing what had been hidden within.

A pedestal chiseled out of black stone.

Just like the two side-by-side in the great hall above, there was also an inlaid metallic plate at its front side, but the distance is too far to make out the characters. The upper section was bathed in the blue radiance of the Portal, a warm golden glow slowly pulsated out. Like a murmur. Like a beckoning.

As Haruyuki unconsciously edged a step closer towards the shimenawa, his shoulder was held back by Lead's right hand.

“No, it's too dangerous to move forward.”

“Bu..... but.....”

Replacing Haruyuki, too filled with anxiety or an emotion similar to longing to respond, Utai asked instead.

“Lead-san, that is the final «Arc»..... the Eta Star of the Big Dipper right?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

Lead nodded, still keeping his hand on Haruyuki's left shoulder, he faced forward and spoke in his refined voice.

“Alas, just to reach the point close enough to read the characters on the pedestal plate would take a period of time close to being infinite. The name of that glow is ---”

“--- The Chinese name is «瑶光- Youkou». As an Arc, it is named «THE FLUCTUATING LIGHT».”

“Fluctuating..... Light.....”

Haruyuki repeated that name without thinking.

He held no memories regarding that term. He didn't even know of the existence of the Arcs to begin with until he took part in the Seven Kings Council.

Even so, his chest was being filled by an emotion which should most accurately be described as «nostalgia» that came pouring out from the depth of his heart.

“..... I..... I.....”

Still unaware of himself, Haruyuki continued talking.

“I, have seen that glow before.....”

'.....!!'

The delicate duo gasped sharply to Haruyuki's left. Receiving the inquisitive gazes, Haruyuki desperately searched his memories to form his words.

“It was..... That's right, it was..... definitely in the Unlimited Neutral Field..... Training in the «Incarnate System» for the first time. I was pushed off the top of the old Tokyo Tower by Master Raker..... and was told to climb back up barehanded.....”

Upon hearing that, Utai sighed a little. As someone who has also been through much at the hands of Sky Raker, she must have thought “As expected”. But this is no time to be making speculations regarding her feelings, Haruyuki continues speaking in a hoarse voice.

“..... At first, I couldn't even make a dent on the walls. But day after day, as I endlessly practiced nukite, I was slowly able to pierce through with my fingertips..... then a few fingers..... a week later I was able to climb the tower. I was ecstatic, alternating between both hands to thrust, spending hours upon hours to climb the wall..... and sometimes..... that glow..... But it didn't feel like an object to me..... it's..... that golden glow is.....”

At this instance, Haruyuki finally turned his eyes towards Lead and Utai. Haruyuki makes his final statement to the two listening with wide eyes in a trembling voice.

“--- It's, someone. Calling out to me.”

Only silence remained in the air for a brief period of time.

What broke it was not anyone's words --- rather it was a line of crimson text filling up Haruyuki's field of vision. **【DISCONNECTION WARNING】**. The disconnection warning. It had been thirty seconds since Kuroyukihime and the others Burst Out back into the real world and they were now unplugging Haruyuki's direct link cable.

Neuro Linkers utilize waterproof, non-contact type terminals as their direct link connectors. That's why data link is still maintained for a short amount of time even after pulling out the XSB cable. Of course, this is only for few hundredth of a second. But in the Accelerated World, a delay of several dozen seconds still exists after the warning appears.

“Ah..... right.....”

Once again Utai calmly spoke up for Haruyuki, capable of doing nothing but endlessly opening and closing his mouth after being dragged back from the beyond of his memories.

“Lead-san, our friends in the real world have activated the route breaker safety. I am very sorry, but we are about to Burst Out.”

“O..... okay, I understand.”

Facing the nodding young samurai, the shrine maiden cut in with her next words.

“As this is a forced external disconnection, the next time we dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field we will still appear at these coordinates. As such, even if this may be presumptuous of me to ask, I would still like to meet again here if possible. When will you dive in next time in terms of real world time?”

“Let me see.....”

Thinking for just an instance, Lead replied straight away.

“Then, how about in two days' time..... Thursday, the twentieth of June, at seven PM?”

“I understand. Thank you for your help, thank you very much.”

Utai politely bowed her head, Haruyuki finally managed to speak after bowing as well.

“Ah, um, Lead, I also want to thank you, for teaching me all sorts of things. But..... I still have things I want to say and things I want to ask. That's why..... I look forward to meeting you again.”

The disconnection warning in his field of vision began to blink rapidly. The XSB cable should be at the instant where it has been completely removed from the Neuro Linker. Hearing those earnest words, the young azure samurai blinked and gave a vague smile with many emotions mixed within.

“Me too --- I am delighted to have been able to talk with Crow-san and Maiden-san. It's a promise. At here once again the day after tomorrow, I would like to talk a lot more with both of you.”

And then, Trilead Tetroxide, the young boy with the strange Avatar name took a step back before looking at Utai and Haruyuki in turn.

The standing figure, cool as the fall wind, was at last shrouded by the darkness and disappeared.

Chapter 5

The first thing that Haruyuki noticed upon returning to the real world, was not the weight of his physical body sinking into the sofa, or the warm air under the air conditioner --- but a soft fingertip touching his cheek.

His eyes snapped open.

At an extremely close distance, the beautiful starry sky over the inner garden of the «Imperial City» was there. No, that's wasn't right. It was the pitch-black pupils of two eyes, containing within it a speck of light, like stardust.

Those two eyes blinked slowly, and tiny droplets of water leapt from long eyelashes, scattering in the air. At the same time, an indistinct whisper was heard.

“... You've returned, Haruyuki-kun.”

Gazing at the beauty of his most respected sword master, the leader of the Legion «Nega Nebulas», the Black King «Black Lotus» --- Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki responded in a hoarse voice.

“Yeah, senpai. ... I'm back now.”

Haruyuki had opened his eyes in Unit 2305 on the twenty-third floor of a skyscraper apartment complex in North Koenji of Suginami Ward, the Arita residence.

In front of Haruyuki, who sat in the middle of a group of sofas near the southern windows, Kuroyukihime reached her left arm behind the sofa and leaned forward, her right fingertip softly caressing Haruyuki's cheek. An XSB cable jack was gripped in her hand, its silver line extending all the way to a connection port on the wall.

The port was for wired connections with the Arita home server. This time, Haruyuki and the others had Dived not wirelessly, but through a wired connection into the home server and connected to the internet through there. Since Kuroyukihime had unplugged that cable from Haruyuki's Neuro Linker, Haruyuki and Utai had returned to the real world without using a «Portal».

Kuroyukihime kept caressing Haruyuki's face with her fingertip and said in a low voice.

“... What a long thirty seconds. In this time, whether you and Utai were killed by an enemy in the «Imperial City» or not... or whether you had lived, died, and repeated that cycle countless times or not, you don't have to worry about that anymore.”

The instant he detected that her voice was slightly trembling, Haruyuki felt a deep impulse in his chest.

He straightened up, took a deep breath, and began to speak.

“Senpai... Back then... when I began to move as «Suzaku»'s target, I disobeyed your command to retreat, I'm really sorry. But... But I, no matter what...”

After that, he was clearly determined to express a proper apology upon returning to the real world, but when the situation arrived, his verbal skills seemed to fail him. He repeatedly clamped his lips shut, opened then, then clamped them shut again.



Then, Kuroyukihime moved her left hand away from the soft, tossed the cable in her right hand away, and hugged Haruyuki's shoulders with both arms. A smile was on her light yet beautiful lips, like a blooming water lily.

"It's all right, Haruyuki-kun. I trust you with my Legion's future because you are like this. You were even able to wave away Suzaku's flames, and fly forward without fear. How could I blame this courage of yours..."

"... Sen, pai....."

Suppressing his welling emotion, Haruyuki could only stare into Kuroyukihime's eyes. He clenched his fists, trying desperately to put his overflowing emotion into words.

"... Senpai. I... I'm able to fly, because Senpai has allowed me to fly countless times ---"

--- And, the ending of a precious sentence is completely jumbled up.

Two hands coming from both sides pinched Haruyuki's cheeks, and pulled forcefully.

"Hey! How long do you two ---"

Chiyuri yelled as she pulled on Haruyuki's left cheek, and Fuuko who pulled on his right cheek continued.

"--- plan to keep this up!"

Three minutes later.

With the location changing from the sofa to the dinner table, on the southern side were Haruyuki and Utai, across them were Takumu and Chiyuri, on the left was Kuroyukihime, and on the right was Fuuko. Everyone sat in this order at the table, confirming the current time.

7:35 PM.

From the beginning of the «Ardor Maiden Rescue Mission» until now, barely ten minutes had passed. Furthermore, it seemed like they had experienced a very long dream in their sleep. Not just six hours, several days... No, it was like they had traced their memories as long as several years...

"--- First, everyone's worked hard."

Kuroyukihime's words interrupted Haruyuki's train of thought. He hurriedly replied, "You too!"

Taking a sip of the French coffee that Chiyuri brewed, Kuroyukihime looked at every one of them before continuing.

"The second stage of the «Disaster Armor Purification Plan», the «Ardor Maiden Rescue Mission», was unfortunately not a complete success. All responsibility falls on me, for not being able to remain the target of the «Sacred Beast Suzaku». --- I sincerely apologize."

At the apologetic Legion leader bowing her head deeply, her five subordinates shouted at the same time, "That didn't happen!"

Immediately afterwards, the sub-leader of the Legion, Kurasaki Fuuko --- Sky Raker spoke as their representative.

“Saa-chan, Suzaku changed targets to Karasu-san when he hadn’t even attacked him at all. No one could have predicted that action. I’m afraid, to someone whose maximum damage is much greater than what they give themselves, a person who trespasses deep into their territory would greatly add to their Hatred Value...”

Hearing this, Kuroyukihime lowered her head again, closed her eyes and began to think.

The short silence was broken by Haruyuki tentatively raising his right hand.

“Um... Master. Just then, about adding to the Hatred...”

The so-called «Hatred Value» was a term used to describe an Enemy’s numerical logic used when selecting an opponent. Other than Burst Linkers who directly attack them, Defense types that use indirect attacks, or Burst Linkers that aided others in doing so would add to its Hatred, and an Enemy would attack then attack the opponent with the greatest value. --- Normally, that was how their evaluation.

Suzaku was the same, even if it was extraordinary, and under the condition that the Four Gods were not players but Enemies, they should select targets based on the Hatred theory. This time, Suzaku had switched targets from Kuroyukihime to Haruyuki because compared to someone who directly attacked it, those who approached the Southern Gate of the Imperial City would generate more Hatred for Suzaku. That was what Fuuko meant.

“What’s wrong, Karasu-san?”

Fuuko tilted her head and her long, soft hair began to ripple; Haruyuki stuttered as he asked:

“Could it be possible that Suzaku... no, the «Four Gods», including Suzaku, had moved according to an AI more advanced than other Enemies? No, not AI, how should I put it... Um...”

Just as Haruyuki kept opening and closing his mouth, dismayed at his inability to organize his words ---

On the seat to his right, Shinomiya Utai, the only one who held a glass of warm milk, placed the glass on the table and began to wave her hands in the air.

A translucent window opened in the lower half of Haruyuki’s vision, and pink letters began appearing with astonishing speed.

[UI> What Arita-san wants to say, is probably true. About whether the Four Gods might have surpassed AI and now possess true willpower.]

“Ye... Yes! Exactly!”

Rapidly nodding his head, Haruyuki just realized the absurdity of his own opinion, and hurriedly retracted his head, preparing to endure the incredulous stares of everyone around him.

--- But, unexpectedly, not one of his friends around the table ridiculed or sighed at him. Even Takumu, who did not get to see Suzaku, narrowed his eyes in thought behind his lensless glasses.

In the quiet, Utai’s ten fingers softly began typing again.

[UI> At least, it is definitely confirmed that Suzaku's action calculations have changed from the «Four Gods Raid» that destroyed the first generation Nega Nebulas. Two and a half years ago, Suzaku had unquestionably prioritized the opponent who damaged it the most. What about «Byakko», who Saa-chan and Fuu-nee faced at the Western Gate?]

“... Just like Uiui says.”

Fuuko nodded and said in a low voice.

“Byakko was also like that, I remember in our previous battle that he only targeted the main attacker's team, without fail.”

“Ah... that's right. That's why I used myself as bait to allow everyone else to retreat.”

Kuroyukihime replied from across Fuuko; her eyes narrowed sharply as she continued.

“But... Suzaku's actions definitely make me feel that he wasn't merely obeying what decreased his Hatred... Although, it didn't feel like there was anyone controlling him from afar, nor did it feel like a simple miscalculation...”

Then, Takumu spoke from across Haruyuki, with his right hand on his chin.

“But Master, doesn't that mean... Suzaku saw through the fact that we weren't aiming to destroy him, but rather, save Shinomiya-san? If that's the case, then that would be beyond an AI program... Like Haru said, that would mean it possesses insight... called «intelligence»...”

Another silence for several seconds.

Kuroyukihime quickly smiled slightly. Then she spoke even in an even lower voice.

“... We don't have a way to answer that question now. But there's something else. The instant it reacted to my Incarnate attack, when Suzaku changed its target to Haruyuki-kun... I think I saw it too. That bird, opened its mouth as if it were laughing at me...”

--- Yes.

Haruyuki had seemed to hear it too. When it had breathed fire, Suzaku had emitted a voice that was not a voice. *Little one, burn into ash*, like that.

“--- Um, but!”

The first one to raise her head, Chiyuri said simply:

“Even if that bird has willpower or intelligence, no, even if it were a god, we didn't get flattened, did we! Although the mission wasn't a huge success, it wasn't a complete failure, wasn't it, Kuroyuki-senpai. Because... Haru and Ui-chan survived. They survived, and flew through the gate. --- Right, Haru?”

Her catlike eyes flashing, Chiyuri shouted, claspng her hands together and leaning over the table.

“I can't take it anymore! What's it like inside the «Imperial City»?! What's inside?! Come on, tell me, from start to finish!”

Haruyuki's head went dizzy at the sudden questioning, and Kuroyukihime laughed on his left.

“Ha... Chiyuri-kun is direct as always. I think that even if you charged Burst Linkers ten... no, even a hundred Points to hear this, there would still be crowds and crowds of them, I’m a little worried.”

“Fufu, that’s right. Whenever I think of that fact that there are Burst Linkers who successfully entered the absolutely impenetrable «Imperial City», and successfully brings information out from within, my own heart can’t help but beat nonstop.”

Fuuko looked towards them, exaggeratedly pressing down on her chest.

A complicated smile curled the right side of Haruyuki’s face, and he first exchanged looks with Utai beside him. The face of the fourth grade elementary school student, yet a member of the «Four Elements» of the old Nega Nebulas, had a look that said, *I’ll leave it to you.*

If he thought about it carefully, conversationally telling everyone what had happened in the «Imperial City» would warrant a painstakingly typed essay that cramped up his hands. *I’ll just have to try my best!* Haruyuki tightened his stomach and glanced at the clock before beginning.

“Um... To tell you guys everything from the very beginning, I think it’ll take a very long time... Will you guys be okay with your curfews?”

Although the time was already 8:00 PM on a Tuesday, not a single person shook their heads, including the elementary school student Utai.

The stone-paved path extending directly north from the Southern Gate of the Imperial city, and the fearsome Warrior Enemies patrolling the path.

The giant «Inner Shrine» with numerous sliding doors decorated with lavish brocades. The great hall at its center, and the two pedestals installed there. The two names carved into the Big Dipper nameplates, «The Destiny» and «The Infinity».

When Haruyuki reached this part, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko seemed to exchange a short look. But neither of them interrupted, because the next part was the most important; Haruyuki continued his description without stopping.

The young azure warrior avatar that had suddenly spoken to them in the hall.

The expansive underground space down the stairs he had led them along.

And the wavering, golden light across. The Seventh Arc, «The Fluctuating Light» ---

Right up until they finally left the Unlimited Neutral Field because the connection was cut, when he finally finished his description occasionally supplemented with Utai’s explanations, more than thirty minutes had passed.

No one spoke as Haruyuki exhaled and drained his second mug of his coffee drink. Seconds after he set the mug down on the table, Kuroyukihime finally murmured.

“... The user of the Fifth Arc «Infinity»... «Trilead Tetraoxide»... --- Fuuko, have you heard of this name before?”

Fuuko, who was one of the earliest Burst Linkers alongside Kuroyukihime, answered this question without hesitation.

“No. Whether it’s the Enhanced Armament, or the Burst Linker, this is my first time hearing about them. Furthermore, I don’t recognize the English words «Trilead» or «Tetraoxide». How should I put it... It sounds like a chemical formula...”

Words that even the only high school student didn’t recognize of course flew over the heads of the other five middle school students.

“Let’s look it up.”

Takumu pushed up his glasses as he moved his finger along his virtual desktop. Within ten seconds he located the target words using that amazing search function, looked up and nodded.

“Raker-san is correct. This is a chemical formula... it means «Lead (II, IV) oxide»⁴⁷.”

--- Although he said that, it was hard to imagine what kind of substance that might be. Haruyuki gently furrowed his brow and faced Takumu across him to ask.

“Taku, lead is, um, a metal... right?”

His friend smiled warmly and nodded: “Yep.” Haruyuki coughed lightly to drive away the embarrassment of such an idiotic question, and put on a serious expression.

“But, that person... Trilead didn’t look metallic at all. Should I call it a pretty, clear blue, or azure... Including his armor, he looked like a pure blue type...”

Haruyuki shook his head, the image of the majestic young warrior in his mind, and to his left, Kuroyukihime folded her hands together on the table, and said, “No matter what.”

“--- Our most immediate mission is not to unravel the mystery of the «Imperial City», but the escape of Utai and Haruyuki-kun. Until next Sunday, if we don’t purify the «Disaster Armor» from Silver Crow’s body, Haruyuki-kun will become the second most wanted in the Accelerated World.”

Kuroyukihime glanced at Haruyuki, and flashed him a smile.

“... Of course, if it comes to that, I won’t easily let you be hunted.”

“..... Senpai...”

Just before they were about to enter staring mode again, Chiyuri clapped her hands together.

“All right, stop, stop! ... Say, Kuroyuki-senpai, I have a question about that most wanted thing...”

“Y-Yes, Chiyuri-kun?”

“In any case, if the «Disaster Armor» living in Haru’s body isn’t completely cleaned away, how would the Six Kings verify that? You can’t see someone else’s inventory anyway, and doesn’t the «Armor» not show up in your inventory in the first place?”

“Ah... W-Well...”

⁴⁷ Since they mean the same thing in English, trilead tetraoxide is expressed in a different form here. It is also known as “triplumbic tetraoxide”, using the old Latin name for lead.

Haruyuki suddenly spoke. This was his business, yet the fact that he had not noticed this basic question was not a matter of simple absent-mindedness.

Kuroyukihime smiled bitterly at Haruyuki, then immediately reverted to a serious expression and began to speak.

“I’m afraid that when we meet on Sunday, a Burst Linker with the ability to «see someone else’s status» will appear. The Kings will probably ask that person to verify Silver Crow’s purification.”

“... Really...”

Fuuko nodded slowly from across. Her normally amiable eyes suddenly looked sharp.

“--- «Quadeyes Analyst». We’ll be able to see her long-awaited appearance, I think.”

That was not a Burst Linker’s but a nickname, probably. The instant he heard this name ---

Piri. Something pulled at the center of his brain.

This was undoubtedly the first time he was hearing it. He hadn’t heard this name before, and even the ability to «see someone else’s status» was foreign to him. But, he felt a piercing pain deep within his memories. This feeling seeped from his central nervous system, travelled along his spine to a single point on his back.

Zukin. Zukin. Accompanied with delayed pain, from far away --- someone’s voice.

..... *Destroy*.....

..... *Destroy them, and eat them... Release... my... rage*.....

His right hand was clenched so hard that his fingernails were about to pierce his own skin, but suddenly it touched something soft.

Looking over, Utai had reached over and grasped Haruyuki’s fist under the table. Within her eyes was dark fear.

Haruyuki hurriedly opened both of his hands and nodded as though saying, *it’s okay*. Luckily, the other four were still talking about verifying his «purification», seemingly unaware of Haruyuki’s abnormal behavior.

“... In the worst case scenario, we’ll have Ardor Maiden «purify» Silver Crow inside the Imperial City to meet Sunday’s deadline, how about that?”

At Takumu’s words, Utai took away her hands to type on her keyboard.

[UI> Although I don’t think it’s completely impossible, but if we can, I would like to avoid using large-scale Incarnate techniques in the Imperial City. The shockwaves from overly powerful Incarnation has the risk of attracting high-level Enemies.]

“Hm... Enemies above Giant and Legendary levels find it more and more difficult to use Incarnate techniques, but at the same time, they will be more powerful against Incarnate technique users. I’m afraid that the load from the local anomaly created by the Incarnate System might add irregularly to their Hatred Values... We should consider that the patrol Enemies in the Imperial City might react more intensely to that.”

Kuroyukihime explained as she straightened up in her chair, then looked over each of the people present.

“--- So it seems that Silver Crow and Ardor Maiden must escape the Imperial City before Sunday. I think that, to achieve this, and even if we can't confirm his identity, it would be more prudent to enlist the help of the Burst Linker «Trilead Tetraoxide». Utai, Haruyuki-kun, when you meet again with that person on Thursday, please give him the appropriate remuneration in the name of the Black King and Nega Nebulas.”

It was now ten minutes to 9:00 PM, finishing with a last “That's the end of today's mission” from Kuroyukihime.

In order for Fuuko to drive Utai and Kuroyukihime home on her own way back, the three of them took an elevator down to the parking garage. Next, Chiyuri took her plate full of sandwiches and clattered down two floors to her own apartment, leaving Haruyuki and Takumu alone in the twenty-third floor hallway.

“Well Haru, I'll see you at school tomorrow.”

Finishing like that, Takumu headed towards the walkway that connected to the other buildings in the complex ---

“Taku... Do you still... have time?”

Haruyuki suddenly called in a small voice.

He spoke tentatively to his childhood friend, who turned his head to look at him.

“Um... Since the start of this week, how many times have you «Duelled»?”

“Eh...? Well, I Duel two to three times when I'm free... Probably no more than ten times in total...”

Replying like this, Takumu blinked, seeming to catch onto something, and continued in a low voice.

“Ah... if you're worrying about what Chii-chan and I talked about yesterday, don't worry about us providing Haru points if you have a bounty placed on you. My winning rate is the same as always, but Chii-chan's techniques have clearly improved. If I dawdle any more, she'll surpass my Level.”

Takumu smiled sheepishly, but Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head.

“No, not that, it's not that. Um... Taku, in the ten Duels you fought this week... Have you noticed anything strange...?”

At Haruyuki's vague question, Takumu suddenly looked surprised, but immediately changed to a bitter smile.

“That's a very strange question. Even if I say something that's strange, I don't know what you mean.”

“Ah... yeah, that's right...”

Scratching his head, Haruyuki momentarily smiled embarrassedly.

Haruyuki wanted to ask if any of «the opponent Burst Linkers had used an ability or power that surpassed normal Duelling». Specifically, «whether they had used a close-range or long-range Incarnate attack that involved black fog surrounding them».

After school last Monday, Haruyuki and Shinomiya Utai had engaged in a Team Duel in Suginami Second Area.

Their opponents were a team from the Green Legion, «Bush Utan» and «Olive Glove». Utan's opponent Haruyuki had used the «Resilient Technique»⁴⁸ directly learned from Kuroyukihime -- «Guard Reversal», making his combat more effective.

But in the middle of the battle. Utan had summoned a strange Enhanced Armament, completely turning the tables. He had used two Incarnate techniques: «Dark Blow», an attack that involved punching with fists surrounded by black fog, and «Dark Shoot», which involved firing a ray of light from his palm to force Haruyuki helplessly into a corner. If it were not for Utai, he might have been defeated then and there.

Utan said that the black eyeball-shaped Enhanced Armament equipped in his chest, the «ISS Kit» --- or, the «Incarnate System Study Kit» had been given to him by someone.

As long as he equipped it, he could immediately use the Incarnate System that normally took a long of training to awaken, creating a fundamental disturbance in the Accelerated World. With this in his mind, Haruyuki had explained this to the bike user «Ash Roller», Utan's big brother, in a Closed Duel. Then, Ash had told Haruyuki in an uncharacteristically serious voice.

If that «ISS Kit» were allowed to multiply endlessly, it might be too late. Maybe it was already copied to an unmanageable number through rapid exchange.

Therefore, in a certain sense, it could be said that the ISS Kit was more severe than the «Disaster Armor» living in Haruyuki's body. Maybe during the meeting yesterday before the «Ardor Maiden Rescue Mission», Haruyuki should have brought up the Kit. No, even if it were when Kuroyukihime had declared the end of their meeting minutes ago, he could have raised his hand to speak.

But Haruyuki hadn't done it. He felt that everyone needed to focus on the rescue mission.

But that wasn't all he felt. He didn't want to let the others know that the matter of the ISS Kit was also on his mind.

Maybe it was the guilt of not saying what he should have said that drove Haruyuki to stop Takumu.

What about Takumu? What about the friend whom he had sincerely quarreled with before, seriously fought, and endured the cruel battle together with during the «Dusk Taker» incident? He didn't know when he started to have the impression that Takumu could bear this burden along with him as well --- But.

Under the dim public hallway, as he gazed up into the face of his tall childhood friend, and just as he was about to completely explain everything again, Haruyuki felt something stopping his mouth from moving.

⁴⁸ Referred to in Volume 6 as "Soft Act". Retconned here to make it sound better.

... Why? Why do I hesitate?

... This is Taku. My one-of-a-kind bosom friend, and a comrade alongside me as the vanguard of the Legion. My best partner who always calmly helps me without hesitation. Isn't Taku the best person to talk to first about the ISS Kit?

--- But, why am I this nervous?

Haruyuki lifted his head to stare into Takumu's surprised face, and took a deep breath to suppress his unknown anxiety.

"To be honest..."

Just as he said that, he already felt his tongue begin to tie up in knots, and a piercing pain in his throat. Desperately ignoring these feelings, Haruyuki continued.

"To be honest, Taku, the strange things happening right now in the Accelerated World... I can't say for sure. It's a long story, I'll tell it for a moment at my place."

After the two of them returned to Haruyuki's living room, wet their throats with the leftover coffee in the filtration machine, and began to talk seriously, the strange anxiety finally disappeared.

Bush Utan. The ISS Kit. And the Incarnate attack surrounded by black waves.

After he heard this, Takumu placed both hands on his forehead, lowered his head and sank into silence. Just as the slightly long silence began to stir up Haruyuki's anxiety again, Takumu finally looked up.

A familiar rational glow shone within the eyes behind his glasses. Haruyuki unexpectedly hesitated before asking, "What do you think?"

"... Well... To be honest, this is pretty hard to believe all at once..."

Takumu murmured, and took a sip of his cold coffee.

I understand the difficulty it takes to awaken the «Incarnate System» through my training with the Red King. Back then, just to grab my own spike, I don't know how many holes were opened in my left hand."

The Incarnate technique of Takumu's avatar «Cyan Pile», named «Cyan Blade», was a technique that involved press down with his left hand on the metal spike of the Enhanced Armament «Pile Driver» equipped in his right hand, and pull it out as it transformed into a sword of light. In order to withstand the spike that represented the wounds in his heart, he must have needed to simply practice over and over, and face his painful memories directly.

"Yeah... Same here, before I could pierce the wall of the Old Tokyo Tower, I needed to practice so many times that I pushed my consciousness far away. I kept repeating, speed, speed..."

Haruyuki recalled as the two of them gazed into the distance briefly. That was because although the one who passed on the Incarnate System to Takumu was the leader of the Legion «Prominence», the Red King «Scarlet Rain», her Spartan training and Haruyuki's Incarnate teacher, Sky Raker were probably the same.

Through such suffering, Haruyuki and Takumu each were finally able to learn one of two basic Incarnate techniques, «Range Augmentation» and «Strength Augmentation».

“... But, one could simply equip that ISS Kit to simultaneously use a Strength Augmentation technique «Dark Blow» and a Range Augmentation technique «Dark Shoot»... Right?”

Saying that in a hoarse voice, Takumu’s eyes fell to his own left hand, and a dark smile that Haruyuki had never seen before curled up his mouth.

“... Something that I can’t touch, and I definitely can’t earn no matter how hard I try. That’s a central principle of Brain Burst... That’s how I’ve always thought. Using a nearly cruel method to express one’s absolute limit. That’s why this game is another reality, right...”

“..... Taku...?”

Takumu’s sudden words made Haruyuki tilt his head, and Takumu hurriedly looked up. His mouth had reverted to his normal rational smile.

“Ah, sorry. Please don’t worry about it. --- It sure would be scary if that Enhanced Armament were to spread around. The balance of «Duels» and «Territory Battles» would be completely upset.”

“Ye... ah.”

Haruyuki nodded, and continued after suppressing his unreasonable apprehension again.

“Just being able to use Incarnate techniques in normal battles is already amazing, so that power is way too overwhelming. Honestly... Incarnate newbies like us have no way of going up against them. Although during yesterday’s «Seven Kings Conference», the topic of whether we should reveal the existence of the Incarnate System to all Burst Linkers depending on the situation came up... If the ISS Kit becomes common, I don’t know whether it makes sense to start training the Incarnate System from scratch again... That would be like...”

“Like they forestalled us, right?”

Takumu supplemented the word that Haruyuki was looking for, and pushed up his glasses with a pained look.

“But Haru, if you say that, it would mean this: the guys who showed the power of the Incarnate System to the huge audience at the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race», would also be the ones behind this first exposure of the ISS Kit... Right?”

“Ah.....!”

Not having considered this possibility at all, Haruyuki noisily stood up from his chair. His eyes widened, and he murmured the name of the organization that Takumu was talking about.

“... The «Acceleration Research Society»...?”

“Think about it from the beginning. The first time that group of people showed up was April of this year. Both of them opportunistically and illegally using Brain Implant Chips, «Dusk Taker» who attacked the local network of Umesato Middle School, and «Rust Jigsaw» who attacked the Akihabara Battle Ground. There could be other closed networks that have been ravaged by this method.”

At the mention of this example, Haruyuki recalled the power of the «Predator» who had immediately brought Haruyuki and the others to complete surrender, and he nodded after shuddering. But once he recalled it like this, a question that he had not noticed at the time came to mind.

“But... Taku, if you think closely it becomes really weird. In April, those two guys didn’t start using Incarnate techniques by themselves. Dusk Taker began using those violet waves after Taku forced him into a corner in the Duel... and Rust Jigsaw seemed to wait until the end to finally use it. If it was those guys, it wouldn’t be strange for them to start attacking all-out with Incarnate techniques...”

“Maybe we should consider that they were prevented from doing so. But I think that reason is different from what the Red King and Raker-san told us, that «abusing Incarnation has the risk of pulling yourself into darkness».”

Haruyuki nodded deeply at Takumu’s words.

The Incarnate System’s power was like an XY plane, with four quadrants.

The X-axis was the width of one’s imagination --- in other words, whether that person faced the individual or faced the world, and the Y-axis was the light or darkness of that imagination --- in other words, whether it came from hope or despair; the upper right quadrant was «positive Incarnation that faced one’s surroundings», the upper left quadrant was «positive Incarnation that faced the individual», the lower left quadrant was «negative Incarnation that faced the individual», and the last, lower right quadrant was «negative Incarnation that faced one’s surroundings».

Attack-type Incarnation like Haruyuki’s «Laser Sword» and Takumu’s «Cyan Blade», along with Kuroyukhime’s far, far higher level «Vorpel Strike» were categorized in the second quadrant, because these originated from «hope within one’s heart». After all, the source of Incarnation was merely «wounds of the heart», and whether one extracted hope from that deep hole, or fell into the darkness of despair, depended on personal choice.

There were also exceedingly rare Burst Linkers who could use first quadrant Incarnation. Protecting herself and her partners around her, Fuuko’s «Wind Veil» was a classic example, and the Utai’s large-scale crimson lotus flames that burned everything around her should be the same, although Haruyuki didn’t know its name. As to why, Bush Utan had not felt any pain when he was burnt by that flame. That was a «Purifying Flame» that cleansed all pain.

But not all Incarnation displayed that kind of positive power.

For example, Dusk Taker’s nameless «violet waves». A technique that sliced everything to pieces and consumed them into the void, belonging to the third quadrant --- dark attack strength that transformed inner despair into power.

And Rust Jigsaw’s «Rust Order».

Summoning a storm of reddish rust, a hundred meters in diameter, that corroded and destroyed everything within its range, that kind of power could only belong to the fourth quadrant. Terminal imagination that originated from despair towards the world.

In any case, those two people from the Acceleration Research Society likely had negative Incarnation from the very beginning. Their masters also had no reason to care for the fact that they had sunk into darkness.

“... In other words, there’s... a more specific reason that they restricted their Incarnation...”

Takumu nodded at Haruyuki’s murmur.

“Yes, probably. --- But last week, Rust Jigsaw began using Incarnation as soon as he burst into the Hermes Cord Traversing Race. No, that’s no longer just ‘using’... it was sucking in hundreds of people including those from other teams and the audience, and engraving the horror of the Incarnate attack into their bones. Furthermore, «Black Vise», the self-proclaimed vice-chair of the «Acceleration Research Society» was also present. So that large-scale attack was probably planned by the organization itself.”

“B-But, even so, wouldn’t such a change of plans be too great in just two months. They were still hidden in April, but completely turned that around in June...”

Haruyuki said, waving his hands on the table; Takumu paused before replying calmly.

“In other words, they completed their preparations in these two months --- probably.”

“P-Preparations? For what?”

“... Preparations to reveal the «ISS Kit».”

“---!!”

This time, Haruyuki knocked the chair with a *gatan*.

The two of them looked at each other for a few seconds. Takumu’s face was paler than usual, and Haruyuki thought that his own face must look worse than Takumu’s.

After a while, Takumu drained the last of his cold coffee, and began to speak.

“If our hypothesis is correct, then we can only call them clever. Planning out their next action before making their move --- showing the unreasonable power of the Incarnate System through a large-scale attack on the Hermes Cord to a large audience, and exposing the ISS Kit afterwards that allowed «easy access to Incarnation by equipping it». If this is true, veteran Burst Linkers who should feel apprehensive towards such a suspicious Enhanced Armament would probably succumb to their anxiety and take action as well...”

Bush Utan’s broken voice resounded in Haruyuki’s mind once more.

--- «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...

Utan’s words not only concealed fear and anxiety, but also intense dislike towards the people who kept the Incarnate System hidden --- of course, including Haruyuki. With this emotion, the willingness to accept that fearsome-looking «black eyeball» must have greatly increased.

His mouth still frozen, Haruyuki tentatively asked his friend.

“... Then, Taku, is the final goal of those guys to let the ISS Kit spread in the Accelerated World...? Or is it...”

“There’s probably a «next step», isn’t there?”

Takumu muttered, gazing at his empty coffee cup and nodding.

“We don’t have enough information to decide that. If I haven’t personally seen the ISS Kit...”

“.....”

When Haruyuki couldn’t think of a response, Takumu glanced at the clock in the lower right portion of his vision and stood up.

“Haru, it’s about time for your mom to come back, right? Let’s stop here for today.”

“Ah...”

With that, he realized that it had already gotten close to 10:00 PM. Haruyuki’s mother, who worked at a foreign investment bank would go to work late and consequently leave work late, so she could return at any time and it wouldn’t be strange. Although his mother would not be angry at Takumu’s delayed leave, they couldn’t just continue discussing Brain Burst without reservation.

Following Takumu who was preparing to leave the living room, Haruyuki mentioned his last question quietly.

“Um, Taku. Just then... wouldn’t it be... good to talk to Kuroyukihime-senpai and the others about this?”

“..... Yes, of course.”

Takumu turned from the door threshold to reply, and on his face was a normal, rational expression. Therefore, Haruyuki early forgot the long silence that had transpired before Takumu responded, and nodded softly.

“Yeah. Then... I’ll tell Senpai tomorrow. Luckily, we don’t Dive back into the Imperial City again until Thursday, and I don’t have anything to do tomorrow.”

“...”

Again, Takumu kept silent and squinted his eyes as though something were too bright. Just as Haruyuki raised an eyebrow, Takumu laughed.

“Because Haru mentioned «Diving into the Imperial City» so easily. You’re still your old self, flying straight to wherever you want to go.”

“N-No, I’m not like that...”

“Hahaha, that wasn’t a compliment.”

Patting Haruyuki’s shoulder with his right hand, Takumu slipped his shoes on. He added something else after retracting his expression.

“--- I’ll try to gather a bit of information on the ISS Kit on my side as well.”

“... O-Okay, please do. But... don’t do anything too rash.”

At this, Haruyuki was a little incredulous at his own words. Over the years, Haruyuki had always been the rash one, and it was up to Takumu to stop him.

As though he were thinking of the same thing, Takumu smiled again and nodded.

“Yeah, I know. --- See you at school tomorrow.”

“Ah... see you.”

Haruyuki lifted his hand slightly to wave, as his best friend opened the door, and walked towards into dim public hallway.

Hearing the door close and the automatic lock engage, Haruyuki detected that feeling in his heart once again.

--- Don't want to say it. Shouldn't say it. Like that.

It was a misgiving, and he was right to discuss it. He had realized the possibility of the ISS Kit originating from the «Acceleration Research Society» because had discussed it with Takumu. The rest was to pass on this information to Kuroyukihime after school tomorrow; that person would be able to point out the right direction no matter when.

He wrung his hands together, and after forcefully concluding his thoughts, Haruyuki returned to the living room and began to wash the cups in the kitchen.

Chapter 6

The next day, Tuesday June 19.

Softly pushing open the door to his mother's bedroom and saying, "I'm going," Haruyuki received 500 yen for lunch money on his Neuro Linker, then rode the elevator down, and walked towards the sidewalk on the Seventh Ring Highway⁴⁹ south of his apartment building.

In a social studies class, Haruyuki had had the opportunity to view an ancient film that recorded the history of the Suginami cityscape where he and his friends lived. Rumor has it that it was recorded during the turn of the century --- the year 2010, a normal flat motion picture different from a 3D image that one could FullDive into. But the chaotic streets from that time left a deep impression on the students.

But it was still different from the mayhem in modern Akihabara, nearly half of which was constructed with digital technology. Endlessly accumulating history blended into the daily lives of the residents, creating a bare-bones lifestyle. Even if you were on the Seventh Ring Highway located on the largest arterial road in downtown, you would still be able to sight some small-scale individually owned shops and even humble homes.

Of course, if you walked into an alley nowadays, you would be able to discover certain detached houses or small apartments. But at least main arterial roads like the Seventh Ring and Ome Road were now widened by almost twice the width they were forty years ago, allowing large scale businesses and residential complexes to populate it, as well as small, neat green spaces. Koenji Station and its surroundings were no longer as bustling and crowded, and was now a multistoried building connected with skybridges and surrounding structures.

Then, there was something else. Haruyuki discovered an inconspicuous but nonetheless important change.

It was something he could see during the day, in various locations outside his home. They were black hemispheres, or spheres, roughly five centimeters in diameter, which no one noticed due to their staggering number. They were «Social Cameras», and not a single one of them were present in the old documentaries recording the past.

He had learned in class that the fully automatic surveillance camera network began use sometime after 2030. Since then, crime rates in public areas began to vastly decrease. It was also reasonable to consider the frightening features of the surveillance cameras. Because as long as they discovered illegal activities within its observational range, it would automatically detect them, simultaneously reporting it to local police and pursue the perpetrator without end. Although of course, not every light offense would indiscriminately warrant arrest and prosecution, if you were to litter cigarette butts or empty drink containers in the vicinity of a

⁴⁹ Tokyo Prefectural Route 318, also known as the Kannana, abbreviation for the "Seventh Ring Highway". A metropolitan road connecting Heiwajima 6-chome in Ota Ward and Rinkai-cho 4-chome in Edogawa Ward.

Social Camera, on the very next day you would receive a warning letter from the authorities, and the fine would be automatically deducted from your bank account at the end of the month.

As to where exactly such highly advanced and complex image processing was done, or how such a system was created, that became a national secret of the most confidential variety, never to be publicly disclosed. The only publicly known one was the «Social Security Surveillance Center», or «SSSC» for short. Even Kuroyukihime supposedly could only wager a guess at the approximate location of the system headquarters, which of course was something that Haruyuki was incapable of.

He turned right at the overpass of the central train line and stepped onto a road that lead to his school, permeated with the unbroken sound of electric vehicles.

On his way, he suddenly became aware of his surroundings: from the telephone poles and street lights, the traffic signals and signs, and various other places, he was being stared down upon by Social Cameras. Honestly, he couldn't help but feel somewhat uncomfortable, but to Haruyuki now, the purpose of that system was no longer something as simple as security.

Without doubt, it was «Brain Burst».

The BB Program effortlessly infiltrated what was supposedly under the protection of the most advanced defense systems, the Social Camera Net, and with extremely precise images, created a realistic 3D landscape that rivalled the real world. To the Burst Linkers, their other selves as Duel Avatars being able to attain such realism in the Accelerated World, was principally indivisible from the staggering amount of information in Duel Stages.

But to the players, this utopian system also presented a problem.

When Haruyuki was in his first year of middle school, he was savagely bullied by three fellow students from his class. Almost every day, he was forced to use his own 500 yen lunch money to buy bread and drinks for those three, and bring the food to their territory in a corner of the building roof. With refusal out of the question, even after he purchased their indicated breads, he would be mercilessly beaten, kicked, and forced upon his face in the cement as he was prostrated before them.

Those three students were able to continue such blatant breaking of school rules or even the law for half a year; they were certainly aided by Haruyuki's weakness, and his homeroom's teacher and the school leaders' blind eyes, but the most important reason was that their territory was situated in the shadow of ventilation equipment on the western side of the rooftop of the second school building, just out of sight of the Social Camera. The rumor was that a map was circulated among unruly students that detailed Social Camera blind spots, meticulously picked and known as so-called «Safe Zones», where they could continuously bully other students. This not only circulated among the students, but even among the adults for their misdemeanors.

But the installation location of the Social Cameras could not always stay the same; the school was a bit slow at updating them in public locations, yet the cameras in the alleys of busy streets

were added to and replaced at extremely rapid speeds, so that even a real criminal could not remain in constant knowledge of their positions.

But here, existed those who could perfectly identify camera blind spots in any environment, within a second.

They were Burst Linkers. With a shout of «Burst Link», they could FullDive into the transparent blue «Basic Accelerated Field».

In that world, everything in the Social Cameras' view would reappear in their real-world forms, and objects outside of their view would undergo the system's «Estimated Supplementation». They would be replaced with very simplistic models lacking in detail, so it was quite easy to spot which areas were outside of the Cameras' view.

This could be understood as a «privilege» highly unreachable even to leaders of large terrorist organizations, which caused a number of Burst Linkers to turn to crime.

They were the «Physical Knockers», PK for short. Burst Linkers who collectively stalked other Burst Linkers and exposed their real identities, and attacked them out of sight of the Social Cameras. At first they only did in the shadows, but recently it had expanded to kidnapping and trapping victims in cars, then initiating Direct Connect Duels by threatening violence. Different from normal Global Net Duels, Direct Connect were not under the «One Round Per Day Restriction», and the victim could only repeatedly suffer defeat. In mere seconds of real-world time, a great deal of their Points would be stolen away, with all of them gone moments later, causing forced uninstallation of Brain Burst. This could be seen as even crueler than «Infinite EK» in the Unlimited Neutral Field, undoubtedly signifying «death» for Burst Linkers.

That was why Kuroyukihime had exhorted Haruyuki to be extremely careful of areas out of sight of the Social Cameras. Although he was slightly discontent at that, as long as he could see those black spheres around him, that meant he was safe.

Furthermore, on mornings like this, he would be utterly surrounded by students and commuters, so a real-world attack shouldn't be that likely. He yawned widely, found today's schedule from his virtual desktop, and tried to confirm whether he had forgotten any textbooks or homework at home ---

Suddenly, from the left side of the sidewalk, a hand reached out from the shadows under the overpass and seized Haruyuki's collar from behind.

“Hiii...?!”

A-A-A «PK»?! Such a blatant real world attack on such a busy street, and within the view of the Social Cameras?

As he screamed in his mind, he began wildly flailing his arms and legs, but a certain voice he had just heard not long ago was softly uttered.

“Hi.”

The shortest possible word out of various greetings, a single syllable, made him stop his panic. He tentatively twisted his head around, and saw a slightly older, very quiet --- yet very full of the «feeling that this was not a normal person» --- female face.

“... Pa-Pard-san?”

He blustered, but she did not reply. That sort of natural inquiry needed no response, of course. Like always, she implemented the idea that all conversation, regardless of circumstance, must be done and over with in the shortest possible time.

In any case, putting aside his question of why someone like her would be here, Haruyuki greeted her, maintaining his position of being grabbed.

“G... Good morning.”

She immediately nodded softly and released him, allowing his slightly suspended feet to return to the earth. Exhaling in relief, he turned around and took her entire body into view.

Black hair parted at her forehead like always, pulled into a plain, single braid behind her head, but her outfit was unlike the maid attire Haruyuki had first seen her in at the cake store in Sakuradai of Nerima Ward, and also unlike the casual T-shirt and jeans she had appeared in at the Tokyo Skytree. A deep green shirt with a pure white collar, with a triangular scarf, and a modest skirt of the same color --- a sailor uniform.

It was not a strange outfit at all. He glanced around and saw many other students walking towards the station in the same uniform.

But her waist that was covered with a neat skirt was currently sitting on the seat of a large electric motorcycle that resembled a carnivorous beast with a savage expression on its face. It was so unsettling that passersby around them occasionally cast it frightened looks.

The motorcycle was currently parked at the entrance of an alley extending from the road Haruyuki took to school, under the overpass and southwards. To avoid attention, Haruyuki took a step into the shadowy alley, trying to think of what to say.

Haruyuki did not know the name of this suddenly appearing sailor uniformed rider. The appellation «Pard-san» he had just shouted without thinking was not a name to be used in this sort of public area. That was because it was the shortened form of her Duel Avatar’s name.



«Blood Leopard». The sub-leader of the Red Legion «Prominence», which ruled over the area from northern Nakano to Nerima, a Level 6 Burst Linker with the nickname «Bloody Kitty». One of the strongest of the strong, she had once killed Rust Jigsaw of the «Acceleration Research Society» in one bite right in front of Haruyuki.

Come to think of it, her very sudden appearances in the past had surprised Haruyuki, but this time was too much. Haruyuki's mouth struggled to come up with something for two and a half seconds, pronouncing the end of his question time, and Pard-san rose from the seat of the motorcycle, then thrust out her left hand.

Pinched between her fingertips was one end of a red data cable --- a Direct Connect XSB cable. *Uwa*, Haruyuki was taken aback, but if he hesitated here, she would definitely insert it into his Neuro Linker for him, so he could only frantically accept it and plug the mercifully two-meter-long data cable into his own device. The warning for Direct Connect popped up in his vision, and after it disappeared, a slightly low, hoarse voice resounded in his head.

“I did not contact you via email beforehand, because I have some news that I only want you to know.”

She immediately answered the first question that had popped into Haruyuki's head. Looking up again at her, who was holding her arm and leaning against the motorcycle, Haruyuki racked his brains and spoke telepathically.

“... You mean that Pard-san does not want the other members of Nega Nebulas to know that you're meeting with me?”

“By the looks of it, yes. But, this does not mean I distrust your partners. It is just that I am leaving it up to you as to how you wish to pass this on to them.”

“.....?”

Haruyuki was unable to immediately understand Leopard's meaning, and tilted his head a bit. The thin cable connecting the two's Neuro Linkers swayed, and a sliver of light reflected off of its protective layer.

Although they were in a narrow alley under an overpass, they were still perfectly visible from the northern sidewalk. Haruyuki felt it a bit improper for a female high school student in a sailor uniform leaning against a huge motorcycle, and a short and chubby male middle school student to be Direct Connecting and gazing at each other this early in the morning. Passersby, young and old, male and female, threw strange looks at them, and scarily enough, there were several among them in Umesato uniforms. But Leopard's next few words carried with them an impact that sent Haruyuki's various worries flying.

“Silver Crow. Your immediate elimination seems to have been intentionally entrusted to a «PK» group.”

“Eh.....”

Haruyuki could not help but utter his surprise aloud.

He was disturbed for a moment, but quickly calmed down again. Yet he still felt that the ground beneath him was swimming. Seeing Haruyuki like that, Pard-san slightly cocked her eyebrows and extended her right hand. She placed it on Haruyuki's shoulder, pulled him to her right, and sat him onto the motorcycle's front seat.

The large motorcycle, supported by a thick kickstand, did not move an inch even under Haruyuki's full weight. He felt a bit calmer after coming into contact with a familiar transportation device, and Haruyuki finally transmitted his thoughts over the cable.

“Elimination... It's about the «Disaster Armor»... isn't it? But I was promised a week's worth of time at the Seven Kings Conference...”

“Yes. But the ones overreacting, are not the Kings. It would be a portion of the core Burst Linkers under the Kings. They think that... you are the source of the «dark power» infection spreading nonstop recently in the Accelerated World.”

Even Pard-san seemed to hesitate before telling him this.

A second involuntary, louder scream lodged itself in Haruyuki's throat.

“.....!! How... It's... It's not...”

He reflexively looked up at Leopard to his left, madly shaking his head.

“It's not, that's not me! I've never done... I've never done anything like that...”

But just as he was explaining himself, another voice came from deep within his head.

What Ash Roller had told him yesterday morning, in the Closed Duel on the Seventh Ring Highway just beside them.

--- I've heard rumors that you're the next one. Utan and Olive's «strange skills»... were copied from those of «Chrome Disaster»...

Indeed, the dark aura exuding from ISS Kit users greatly resembled the black waves of Silver Crow when he had equipped the «Disaster Armor». Those who have witnessed both could very well conclude that they came from the same source. But even so, this «lie» had spread alarmingly fast in the Accelerated World, warranting the elimination of Silver Crow in just a day.

But even then, Haruyuki understood that this was not impossible, either.

To Burst Linkers, a mere 1.8 seconds in the real world equated to thirty minutes. During the endless Duels in Shinjuku, Shibuya, and Akihabara, one only needed to spread the lie among the

audiences, and in just one night, a few players with radical attitudes would surface. But Haruyuki still felt it hard to accept.

Haruyuki opened his eyes, his head still shaking softly from side to side, and saw a slight, but definite smile still on Pard-san's face. Her right hand that had grabbed his collar was now softly comforting his back.

“K, I understand. The Red King and I will not believe those lies. But the situation does not look good. That is why I passed on this information to you.”

“.....”

He couldn't speak for a while. But the warmth from her hand passing through his shirt briefly took Haruyuki away from the shock and horror.

The Red Legion «Prominence» and the one that Haruyuki belonged to, «Nega Nebulas», were merely at a ceasefire, and had never formed an alliance. Haruyuki had once encountered the Red Legion Master Niko, who had contacted him in the real world, and forced him to help her Judge the fifth generation «Chrome Disaster», but he had gotten even with her during the «Dusk Taker» incident. They did not owe each other anything now.

That was why Prominence were not obligated to defy the other five great Legions to preserve their ceasefire with Nega Nebulas. No, it wouldn't be difficult to imagine that there would be some within the Legion who had already suggested that they restart weekend Territory Battles.

But Niko and Pard-san not only maintained the armistice, they even risked the danger of meeting Haruyuki in the real world just to notify him. Maybe --- Definitely, they saw him as a «friend».

“..... Thank you, very much.”

Haruyuki spoke without thinking. He forcefully wiped his unceasing tears with the back of his hand, and rearranged his thoughts. In order to return Pard-san's amiability, he couldn't remain in such a pitiful state, and should instead calmly control the situation and come up with the best solution. He took a deep breath, and switched to a contemplative voice.

“--- But, even for «PK», this wouldn't be that easy, would it? They need to find my real world identity first.”

“Yes. The PK group does not have infinite Points after all, so they would not do something as ludicrous as Rain.”

“... I guess so.”

Before, Niko had used her elementary school student identity in the real world to apply by herself to transfer into a Suginami middle school, obtained a temporary account that connected

to the school's Local Net, confirmed the Duelling search list, and found the school that Silver Crow was attending. Then, she had waited somewhere where she could watch the school gates, and at the instant that a student walked out of school, she would repeatedly «Accelerate» and search the Duelling List, eventually discovering Silver Crow's real identity. That long process had not expended a mere one or two hundred Points. It was a method that only a King who didn't need to painstakingly accumulate Points to level up could use.

What kind of methods would those radical people use to make the «PKers» attack Haruyuki, then?

Watching Haruyuki furrow his brow, Pard-san also put on a pondering expression and said softly:

“The only Burst Linkers currently aware of your real identity, excluding all of Nega Nebulas are myself and Niko, correct?”

“Yeah... That should be it.”

He nodded after a moment's hesitation. Strictly speaking, there should be another one who «once knew him». Appearing this year as a new student in Umesato Middle School, a thief who took advantage of Kuroyukihime's absence to bully Haruyuki and the others, «Dusk Taker». But he had lost to Haruyuki and Takumu in a final battle in the Unlimited Neutral Field, lost all of his Points, and eventually underwent forced uninstallation of Brain Burst. All of his memories having to do with the Accelerated World were completely erased, and all memories he had left of Haruyuki was «someone he used to play online games with».

Of course, he could not exclude the possibility that it was the «Acceleration Research Society» that had provided Dusk Taker with Haruyuki and the others' real identities. But if that were the case, it would twist Dusk Taker himself into danger as well. To him, who completely rejected the value of «partners» and «bonds», he would definitely not have trusted the other members of that organization.

At Haruyuki's reply, Leopard nodded softly.

“Niko and I can only ask you to trust us; we will not easily divulge your real identity to those extremists. As long as you can complete the purification of the «Armor» before this Sunday's Seven Kings Conference, and confirm the completion to the Kings, the calls for your elimination will also lose their basis. --- There is just, something else...”

Pard-san interrupted herself --- an extremely rare occurrence --- turned towards Haruyuki, and spoke to him in a voice filled with fear.

“There is a power, you must be especially careful of.”

“Power...?”

“Physical Knockers, are estimated to be divided into several factions, but their members are unknown. In another sense, once they’re found, they’d soon be purged by every Burst Linker, and lose all of their Points very quickly.”

Haruyuki nodded quickly. Sky Raker, Haruyuki’s coach, had once told him while laughing about how she confined a verified PK player into the deepest territory of a Legendary Monster. For Raker, who was so kind (probably), to resort to such a severe method, that meant that PKers were despised existences.

But if that were the case, then would it even be possible to entrust the matter of Haruyuki’s elimination to those guys in the first place? First of all, how would one contact them?

Leopard answered Haruyuki’s question in an extremely low thought-voice.

“... There is a PK group calling themselves the «Executioners», who are the only ones that make their name public... The cruelest, most despicable Physical Knockers. They are called «Supernova Remnant», «Remnant» for short.”

“Supernova Remnant...”

He repeated, like a parrot learning a new word. It would be «Supernova Remnant» in Japanese⁵⁰.

A sinister crease appeared between Leopard’s crisp eyebrows as she continued.

“Those guys take real money, not Burst Points, as compensation for fulfilling a request, control large amounts of «Reality Intrusion» information of Burst Linkers rumored to have an elimination order on them, and forcibly, mercilessly PK all of them out of Brain Burst. To them, Brain Burst is not a game, but a money making tool.”

“Wh.....”

Yet again, Haruyuki exclaimed aloud without thinking.

Feeling a chill down his spine, he racked his brains to ignore it.

“Why... do we let those guys go? If we’re talking about elimination, then they deserve it more than I do.”

“Of course, there have been those with this opinion. But it has always proven impossible to pinpoint any information on any of the members, and the only way to submit a request to them is to provide one’s bank account information and intelligence on victim in an anonymous message box. Perhaps those guys do not Duel normally at all, instead relying solely on PK to

⁵⁰ Pard-san says the name in English, and Haruyuki translates it to Japanese in his head.

level up. If that were the case, then no one would know their names at all, as if they were completely unknown as Burst Linkers.”

“H-How... It’s like they’re ghosts... No, like reapers...”

Haruyuki moaned telepathically on top of the electric motorcycle seat. Leopard fell silent, in assent. Then she caressed his back again.

“--- This, is still a guess. There is no need to be overly afraid. The most worrisome aspect of Reality Intrusion is whether your information will leak from your «Parent» or «Child». You do not have a «Child» yet ---”

You don’t, do you? Leopard glanced at him sideways, and Haruyuki shook his head frantically.

“--- and your Parent is in your Legion, and furthermore, she is a battle-worn «King». She would never accidentally let it slip or betray you. So even if it were those self-proclaimed Executioners, they would not be able to get ahold of your real identity very quickly.”

The telepathic voice transmitted over the cable stopped there. But Haruyuki could infer what Pard-san meant when she intentionally left out the rest.

She thought that Reality Intrusion was impossible. Or that was what she meant. But then, there would be no need for her to come and warn Haruyuki. Yet Pard-san had stopped herself to keep him calm.

Understanding her intentions, Haruyuki looked up at the older female leaning to his left, thought hard, and answered.

“--- I got it. But just to make sure, I’ll be extra careful when going to and leaving school.”

“K. Especially when you come home late, it would be best to go along with someone else. Also, try to stay away from areas outside of the Social Cameras’ view.”

After Leopard finished, she indicated the end of their conversation by unplugging the XSB cable connecting her and Haruyuki’s Neuro Linkers, quickly coiled it up, and stuffed it into her skirt pocket.

“Uh, um, really... Thank you very...”

But his sentence was forcibly cut short for an unexpected reason.

Pard-san retrieved a backup helmet from the motorcycle trunk, and jammed it onto Haruyuki’s head. She then secured its chin strap, grabbed the full-sized helmet hanging on the handlebar, and crammed it on her own head.

... *Eh?*

Before Haruyuki could open his eyes, the female high school student reached around him as if engulfing him onto the motorcycle handlebars, and softly uttered a “Start” vocal command. The motorcycle instrument panel connected to her Neuro Linker and lit up, and the vehicle suspension slowly rose higher from the ground, like a cheetah locking onto its prey.

“Uh, uh, um ---”

A joke. No. You can't. Not ready. As these thoughts raced through his mind, Haruyuki heard a low voice coming from his helmet's speaker.

“I took up a lot of your time, so I will take you to the school gates.”

“I-i-i-i-it's okay, y-y-y-you don't need to.”

“NP.”

She slightly twisted the handle, and the motorcycle proceeded along the overpass road. The vehicle leaned left to turn, and just as the front wheel faced the train station. Twin high-powered engines roared ferociously ---.

“..... AHHH ----- !!”

As he desperately held onto the bike and screamed, the students on the sidewalk to their left all turned to watch in a great Doppler effect.

If the one were to combine the electric motorcycle that could only be described as «Super Ultra Great Cool» to a middle school boy's sense of value with being able to ride alongside a female high school student in a sailor uniform, when Pard-san waved goodbye and rode towards the Seventh Ring Highway, Haruyuki activated his long-awaited killer move, «Escape by Dashing», and fled towards the entrance stairs.

He clumsily changed into his indoor shoes, sprinted towards the central staircase in School Building 1, finally arrived at Classroom 2-C, and let out a deep breath. Pretending not to know what happened, he sat down at his desk, opened his virtual desktop, and began to manipulate it ---.

Pon, someone suddenly slapped his back, and he heard a familiar voice.

“Good morning, Haru.”

His shoulders instantly froze, and he twisted his head around stupidly to reply.

“Go... Good morning, Chiyu.”

Kurashima Chiyuri, whom he had known since birth, saw Haruyuki's face and immediately changed her expression from «astonished» to «stare---».

“... Your face says ‘Oh no’.”

“N-Nope. This is my face when I'm really annoyed that we have PE first period.”

“That's tomorrow. We have Math first period today.”

“Ah, um, then, it's my face when I'm really annoyed that we have Math.”

Then her face changed from «stare---» to «really now», and she sighed. Chiyuri, who had arrived in the classroom before him, could not have known how Haruyuki had come to school, so even if she would find out later it's better to temporarily fool his way through. He tried his best to look straight ahead at the back of the classroom, and opened his mouth.

“Uh... Oh, right, where's Taku? He's almost never late.”

There were only five minutes left before the bell, so Haruyuki had changed the subject to the fact that he had noticed that his other best friend's desk was empty. But a worried crease appeared between Chiyuri's eyebrows, causing Haruyuki to feel surprised this time.

Chiyuri turned her head slightly to glance behind her, and said in a quiet voice.

“Um, Haru. Ta-kun... has a cold today.”

“Eh.....”

His finger moved on reflex across his virtual desktop, opened the student register on school's Local Net, found Student Number 31, and saw an “Ill” icon beside Mayuzumi Takumu's name. He tapped it, and a simple description [Cold with fever] popped up.

“... That's weird, he actually caught a cold...”

Haruyuki murmured to himself, his eyebrows furrowed. Takumu, who had practiced kendo from a young age, was much fitter than Haruyuki. In the years that Haruyuki had known him, it was extremely rare for Takumu to stay at home sick, and those incidents were all during winter.

Astonished as well, Chiyuri suddenly brought her face close to him, and said in an even softer voice.

“Also... He didn't look like he had a cold at all last night, could he have had a fever right after that?”

“Ah ---... Now that you mention it... Also, even if he actually did catch a cold, he would be very careful not to pass it on to us.”

Takumu was the sort of person who would not even let that past him. At Haruyuki’s response, Chiyuri nodded deeply. Then he had suddenly come down with a cold after going home last night at 10:00 PM after all...

--- No.

Suddenly, he felt as though something seized the back of his head, and Haruyuki’s eyes swam.

The things that Haruyuki had revealed to Takumu yesterday, and the information that Pard-san had brought to him this morning.

Combining the two, he felt a new sense of danger. Deep in the dark where the sun couldn’t reach, something was ready to make trouble. Even now, things were proceeding, bit by bit, towards an irreversible situation. This nerve-wracking, anxious premonition...

“... What’s wrong? Haru?”

As though infected by Haruyuki’s anxiety, Chiyuri asked with her brows furrowed. He immediately recovered, and shook his head softly.

“No, no... It’s nothing. Oh, when school’s over, let’s go visit him. Remember to send me a message when your club activities are done.”

Immediately afterwards, Chiyuri’s eyes widened, as though seeing right through Haruyuki’s inner thoughts, and finally nodded.

“Okay... Yeah. Haru has to work on the animal raising committee, right? Let me know when you finish.”

“Ahh, I got it.”

Just as the bell rang, Chiyuri waved and returned to her seat. Haruyuki stared at the class register and resisted the impulse to contact Takumu immediately. Right now, the entire student body, including Haruyuki, were forcibly shut out of the Global Net, and it would be impossible to contact Takumu lying in bed at home.

--- Everything’s fine, it’s all my mistake. Right now, I am the only one who needs to face my great deal of problems in Brain Burst. Whether it’s the «Disaster Armor» or the «ISS Kit» or

«Remnant», it's got nothing to do with Taku. If I visit him along with his favorite matcha⁵¹ ice cream, he'll smile at me embarrassedly like always.

He comforted himself and closed the window with his right hand. Just after, his homeroom teacher slid the classroom door open, and the listless command of the student on duty⁵² resounded.

⁵¹ Finely ground green tea powder. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matcha>

⁵² Student leader in charge that day (*nitchoku*), saying a word of command (*goure*), most likely for all students to "Stand up!" (*kiritsu!*) and greet the teacher with a bow. More info here: http://www.tjf.or.jp/deai/contents/teacher/mini_en/html/han.html

Chapter 7

As he digested the morning's four lessons as he usually did, that feeling of mysterious unease seemed to slowly dissipate.

Haruyuki, wondering where all the time before lunch break seemed to have went, stood up. He creased his eyebrows, and wondered if he should quickly have a bun and packet drink to fill his stomach, or to enjoy a plate of pork cutlet curry at the school canteen.

It was a shame that he would not be able to have lunch with Kuroyukihime in the school lounge before the end of the summer festival that was held at the end of June. As it was the last big event that the current student council had to organize, even for Kuroyukihime who had joined the council only because of Brain Burst, it was still something she had to oversee.

--- While Senpai's busy, it'd be rude to go enjoy by myself. I'll just put up with it for now and just have a pork cutlet sandwich and milk... No, maybe it's okay if I throw in some crackers...

Just as he thought that while approaching the classroom's back door.

It slid open noisily and someone walked in from the corridor.

A pair of slender legs covered in tights. While the skirt was the same gray as the rest of the students, the blouse this student wore was a deep black. A third year's deep red ribbon hung in two parts from her collar, and a head of jet black silky hair billowed in the air.

Umesato Middle School's school uniform regulations dictated one's shirt thusly: «a plain colored shirt following the prescribed design». If one entered «plain» into a dictionary tool, the explanation «the monochrome spectrum from white to black» would be returned. That was to say, gray or black-colored shirts were technically not against the rules, but as the school designated their own supplier and their online store only supplied white shirts, the students could only buy that type --- the single exception involving one going to the manufacturer directly to order a bespoke black-based shirt.

There was only one person in Umesato Middle School's thirty-year history who would go so far as to spend that much effort and face the rightfully indignant teachers with school rules as their defense.

This “one person” now stood two meters from Haruyuki, her hands on her hips, chest puffed out, displaying a serene but strict expression --- Kuroyukihime.

Just as Class 2-C's students all fell silent, the student council vice president took a deep breath, and projected her high, clear voice across the classroom.

“Would the selected president of the animal raising committee from this class please immediately report to the student council room?”

A second later, accompanied by a low hubbub, the gazes of ten or so people fixated on Haruyuki. Through fair and equal election - actually a blunder on Haruyuki's part --- he had been

appointed to the post, a memory still fresh in everyone’s mind. The surrounding students had “Wow, he screwed up that fast?” written on their faces, but Haruyuki had no memory whatsoever of doing so.

In any case, he took a step forward, and asked timidly:

“Um... wh-where...?”

Seeing that, Kuroyukihime glared sharply at him.

“It’s you, hm? Come with me, then.”

--- What do you mean, “it’s you”, Senpai should know that I’m head of that committee, and before that, I’m your «Child» and I’m in your legion too...

As that jumble of thoughts swam in Haruyuki’s mind, Kuroyukihime had already spun around with a swish of her skirt, walking down the corridor with the strange clip-clop of the rubber soles of her indoor shoes. Since Haruyuki had stood stupefied for about a second and a half, he could only run frantically after her.

As Haruyuki walked down the stairs and proceeded west along the first floor corridor, Kuroyukihime never turned her head. They passed the third year classrooms, and reached the student council room at the deepest point in the first school building. With a wave of her slender hand, the door lock clicked open heavily. The student council vice-president then disappeared through the doorway.

Swallowing, Haruyuki stepped over the door rail. The door slid shut behind him and locked automatically.

When he was here yesterday, the orange-red sunset had given the room a cozy glow, but now during the overcast midday, the gray light made even the air feel cold. Kuroyukihime walked to the middle of the dim room, then finally turned around, staring straight at him with a strict expression.

“..... Uh, um.....”

Haruyuki mumbled weakly, preparing to show a cowardly smile, but hurriedly pinched his mouth shut.

Putting aside the time after school, Kuroyukihime was not the type of person who would use the student council room for personal business during the lunch break. That was to say, she was using her position as student council vice president to conduct official business with the head of the animal raising committee. That must mean that he must have unknowingly screwed up somewhere at his job on the committee.

In that case, then he should accept his punishment more appropriately. Steeling his determination, Haruyuki waited for Kuroyukihime’s words.

A few seconds later ---

Kuroyukihime bit her lip hard, and her cheeks puffed up. Simultaneously, she spoke in a petulant tone.

“I heard Haruyuki-kun was escorted to school today by a pretty lady on a motorcycle?”

“..... Hah?”

Seeing Haruyuki’s eyes, mouth, and even his nostrils growing round in disbelief, Kuroyukihime cheeks went even redder.

“Still trying to hide something from me? I should tell you, I have the authority to check the security camera footage for that moment. Or were you even under the impression that I wouldn’t check that kind of thing...”

“Ah, n-no, please hold on a second!”

Haruyuki blustered desperately, his face and arms waving horizontally. Then, he plucked up the courage to ask:

“... Um, what were you going to discuss with the president of the animal raising committee...?”

Hearing that, Kuroyukihime’s cheeks flushed slightly, and she flung her face to the side and replied.

“Of course, that was just an excuse I came up with to talk to you.”



--- *Wow, talk about splitting personal and official business.*

Haruyuki staggered, then finally managed to stand properly and spoke again:

“Uh... Um, about the motorcycle... Senpai might have not met her in the real world yet, but she’s just the Red Legion, Prominence’s officer, «Blood Leopard»-san.”

“..... Oh?”

Haruyuki dodged the Extreme Cold Kuroyuki Smile, and hastily explained,

Haruyuki surreptitiously confirmed the expression of Kuroyukihime, whose eyebrow twitched, and hastily explained.

“Today, on the way to school, she came to tell me... or should I say, to pass me some information... and she spent quite some time doing that, she just gave me a lift to school, um, of course, I did try to say no, but she’s an impulsive person...”

As Haruyuki explained, Kuroyukihime’s face went through several subtle transitions before she finally pouted and said something unexpected.

“..... How cunning.”

“... Hah?”

“Haruyuki-kun, the last time we were alone together was ten days ago! Since then, while I was enduring that time due to student council and other things, you and Uiui have been raising animals, exploring the Imperial Palace, and, with girls from other legions...”

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

Although unsure of what he was apologizing for, Haruyuki reflexively looked at the ground. Kuroyukihime kept a displeased look as she approached him, stopped in front of him, and said in a low voice:

“If you are, then make it up to me with one Burst Point and 1.8 seconds of your real world time.”

“Eh? Sure... sure.”

Haruyuki nodded dumbly. Then Kuroyukihime’s hands flashed, and a black XSB cable that suddenly appeared in her hand at lightning speed was plugged into both their Neuro Linkers.

For the second time that day, a Wired Connection warning appeared in Haruyuki’s vision. The command recited by those glossy red lips was unconsciously mirrored by Haruyuki’s own mouth.

““Burst Link.””

With a familiar “*Bashii --- !*” sound effect, the world was frozen azure blue.

Haruyuki's pink pig virtual avatar that was proportionally smaller than his real world body stepped forward with a *plop*.

Bringing his vision upwards, he saw the black swallowtail butterfly princess avatar standing quietly before him. That unfamiliarly textured yet beautifully familiar face still seemed as though it held traces of displeasure, yet just as Haruyuki looked uneasily up at her, her expression slowly changed into a warm smile.

Hu; he let out a deep breath, but that only lasted for a moment --- Kuroyukihime approached him without a sound, bent down while extending her two gloved hands, and placed them under Haruyuki's armpits.

Without the time to exclaim "Uwaa?!", Haruyuki was lifted up, and tightly pulled into her warm embrace.

"Ah, ah, uhmmm, S-S-S-S-Senpai!"

Hearing his shriek, Kuroyukihime smiled and whispered into his ear:

"--- Of course, doing this in the real world student council room is out of the question, maybe even in the Local Network VR space too since it's clearly against school rules, but those boring rules can't apply to this world. Or, would you prefer that we used our Duel Avatars?"

Haruyuki fantasized for a split second, then shook his head without stopping. Before, the Black King Black Lotus had hugged Silver Crow much like she was now, and had activated her killer Level 8 technique two seconds later, «Death by Embracing», which had caused a lot of pain for Haruyuki.

Kuroyukihime giggled, and her arms grew stronger.

"--- Actually, since the «Seven King Conference» on Sunday, I've been wanting to do this all this time. I wanted to tell you that you don't have anything to fear..."

At this, Haruyuki exhaled softly, and squeezed out a hoarse voice:

"No... I... I..."

--- *Will be fine*. He wanted to add that, but somehow he found his avatar shaking uncontrollably, preventing him from speaking normally.

At the same time, Haruyuki realized the immense pressure on him surrounding Silver Crow's current situation, and the fact that he had unconsciously pushed away his fear of "being unable to remain a Burst Linker" to the back of his mind.

Kuroyukihime hugged Haruyuki, who shook more and more violently, whispering kindly in his ear:

“It’s okay, you’re not alone. You have me, our partners in the Legion, Rain and Leopard from the Red Legion, Ash Roller from the Green Legion, Frost Horn from the Blue Legion, and so many other Burst Linkers who are eagerly awaiting your return.”

“... Yeah. Yeah...”

Haruyuki nodded quickly, discovering that at some point, he had begun to return Kuroyukihime’s embrace with his stout arms and legs. But he wasn’t embarrassed to do that anymore. The two of them, in a world in which the speed of thought proceeded at 1,000 times the speed of the real world, where they synchronized and combined, where even emotions could be shared; in that moment, only that feeling of unity existed.

As those miraculous seconds passed, eventually Kuroyukihime softly left Haruyuki’s body. Her expression became more serious, a few flecks of sincerity entering those starry pupils. What she said next was completely beyond Haruyuki’s expectations.

“--- So, Haruyuki-kun. don’t let those strange rumors get to you. The «ISS Kit» slowly spreading around the Accelerated World right now is definitely not your fault.”

“.....!!”

Haruyuki violently gasped virtual air, then asked in a small voice:

“... You already know about the «Kit»?”

“Yeah. Uiui mentioned it when Fuuko was driving us home yesterday.”

“Ah... I see. I’m sorry for keeping that from you...”

“No, the fault lies with me for not finding out earlier. After I got back home yesterday, I frantically searched for intel... Judging by the method and timing, I suspect this must have something to do with those guys. The ones who sabotaged the Hermes Cord Traversing Race, the «Acceleration Research Society».”

As Kuroyukihime said that, she moved to a blue ice block where the sofa was, gestured for Haruyuki to sit down, then sat down next to him.

Haruyuki sat down awkwardly, nodding nonstop and opening his mouth:

“Yeah... Taku and I came up with that conclusion yesterday too. And afterwards he said he would go and do a little research on it himself... but he called in sick today...”

“What?”

Kuroyukihime furrowed her brow and mused for a moment. While looking at her, the baseless unease from earlier came back to Haruyuki’s heart.

--- I’ll look up information on the ISS Kit using my own methods.

Taku had said that before heading home yesterday. Using his own methods; did that refer to the connection that only he had within Nega Nebulas --- the Blue Legion he once belonged to, «Leonids»?

At that point, something Blood Leopard had told him this morning resounded in his ear.

--- The most dangerous factor towards Reality Intrusion right now, is that it can leak from the bond between «Parent» and «Child».

“Ah...!”

Kuroyukihime jerked towards Haruyuki in surprise, as he had suddenly shouted. He stared at her, while attempting to transcribe his anxiety into words.

“... Um... Senpai, Taku’s «Parent», that Blue Legion guy who had a very high position, wasn’t he removed from the Accelerated World with «Judgment Blow»?”

“Ah, hm... Weren’t you the one who reported that to me? ‘He was Judged by the Blue King Blue Knight for distributing the «Backdoor Program» that Takumu used’. Knight is very meticulous about this, so I was under the same impression that he would do that...”

“Yes... that’s right. But, I remember that we didn’t really find out the guy behind the backdoor in the first place. Therefore, he might still be in the Accelerated World.”

Haruyuki suddenly stopped, wringing his black pig trotters together, then continued.

“The question is... The person who made the backdoor, in the process of giving it to Taku’s Parent, might have looked up his Parent’s real world information. And if that’s the case... Taku, who goes to the same school and the same kendo club, might have had his personal information touched by them.....”

“There... might be a possibility, but it’s been eight months since all of that happened. If they wanted to look up Takumu-kun’s real world information, wouldn’t they have made a move earlier?”

Kuroyukihime’s reply was very reasonable.

But Haruyuki shook his head, and revealed information that not even Kuroyukihime knew in a shaking voice.

“... This morning, Pard-san came to see me, to give me a warning. She says that there’s an extremely cruel PK group called «Supernova Remnant» that seems to be out for my head...”

“Say what...?!”

Haruyuki held on to a wide-eyed Kuroyukihime’s hands, and moved his own frozen mouth.

“If... if Taku’s skipping school by faking illness, and ran off to Shinjuku... If those Remnant guys found him there, and ambushed him away from the Cameras or something...”

Haruyuki blinked fiercely and continued:

“... Senpai, I need to leave school early to go look for Taku! Even if he got forced into a Direct Connect duel, there’s still time before he loses all of his Points. If... even if he was PK attacked, there should still be time...”

“No!”

Haruyuki stood up, about to chant the «Burst Out» command. Kuroyukihime pressed down hard on his shoulders.

“If you leave school too, that’s too dangerous!”

“B... But, Taku! What if he’s forced to lose Brain Burst, I... I...”

“Calm down, Haruyuki-kun! First confirm the situation! What if he’s actually sick at home, resting?!”

“But... we would need to leave the school’s Local Network to confirm that...”

“Not a problem. As long as we send a request, the fixed terminal here in the student council room can connect to the Global Net. We’ll use that first to contact Takumu-kun. If we can’t find him... then I’ll go to Shinjuku. If I ask nicely, Knight might lend me some people to help out.”

Listening to Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki was so shocked that his avatar froze.

Rumor has it that the Blue King, Blue Knight, had been a close ally of the first Red King, Red Rider. Supposedly, he had shown frightening rage when the Black King, Black Lotus had cut off that Red King’s head. Despite his calm and collected attitude at the Seven Kings Conference the day before, deep down, he must have borne plenty of ill will towards Kuroyukihime.

Faced with this type of person, it was obviously extremely difficult for Kuroyukihime to request his help by “asking nicely”. There must be a price to pay. Reading between the lines, it would seem that Kuroyukihime understood that too.

Realizing that, Haruyuki hastily suppressed his mindless thought to just run off like that. In this sort of situation, he must keep his cool. Loosening his tension while keeping Kuroyukihime’s hands on his shoulders, he nodded.

“I... I understand. We’ll try contacting him, then.”

“Okay. In that case, let’s temporarily stop the acceleration.”

They faced each other, and recited «Burst Out» at the same time. The instant they returned to their real-world bodies, Kuroyukihime removed her cable and dashed towards the extended desk in the student council room. She touched the thin tablet screen, her fingers flying like wind. With a swipe, she grabbed the cable that still dangled from Haruyuki’s Neuro Linker, who was right behind her, and inserted the cable into a port on the desk. Then, a prompt that confirmed that he was connected to the Global Net appeared in Haruyuki’s vision.

“Great.”

Haruyuki heard Kuroyukihime’s voice, nodded, and moved his mouth as quickly as it could manage.

“Command, Voice Call, Number Zero Three⁵³.”

A call icon blinked in his vision. At least Takumu’s Neuro Linker was still online. If he was accelerated, the voice message box mode would have replied, which meant that either he had not been PK attacked yet --- or it was already all over.

Hands full of sweat, Haruyuki stared at the pulsating icon. The icon blinked five, six... seven times, and then changed to “Connected”.

“T... Taku... ?”

As Haruyuki called his name in a hoarse voice, he felt nearly consumed by fear. The day he had talked «Dusk Taker» Noumi Seiji after the latter had lost Brain Burst resurfaced in his mind. At the time, the very first expression Noumi had given Haruyuki was “Who is this guy again...?” or something like that. When he had lost all Burst Points, he had also lost all memories relating to Brain Burst, and was unable to immediately recall the interactions with Haruyuki in the Accelerated World.

Of course, Haruyuki and Takumu were childhood friends, so they knew each other way before becoming Burst Linkers. Hence, even if Takumu lost all Accelerated World related memories, he shouldn’t completely forget Haruyuki.

But even so, Haruyuki couldn’t *not* feel scared. Takumu’s reply came two short seconds later, but they seemed to feel like an eternity to Haruyuki.

“... Is this Haru? What’s wrong?”

“Ah... Um.....”

His close friend’s usual carefree and relaxed tone resounded in his mind, causing Haruyuki to instantly relax and almost fell over. Supporting himself on the table with one hand, he replied stupidly.

“Uh, um, Taku, it seems rare for you to take sick leave, so I was thinking of checking up on you...”

“... Sorry to worry you. It’s nothing... nothing to be worried about.”

Listening closely, Haruyuki noticed that Takumu’s reply seemed a bit listless. Well, he was sick after all, so that should probably be normal. Haruyuki continued to ask, worried about his friend’s condition.

⁵³ Said in English.

“Do you have a fever? You need to stay in one place and not get into trouble. Are you... at home now?”

“Haha, of course I am. I’m not like you, I take my medications and sleep like a good boy. How could I forget the time when you had the flu, a fever of 39 degrees, and when Chii-chan went to visit, she found you pretending to sleep and actually playing FullDive games?”

“You, you should probably forget that.”

Haruyuki retorted. Just to be safe, he added one more thing.

“... Don’t get in any «Duels» for now, just take good care of yourself. There’s still important Legion business tomorrow.”

A moment later ---

“Okay... I know. I’ll get better by tomorrow. --- Is it lunch break over there? Help me thank Master for allowing you to connect to the Global Net.”

The person Takumu whom addressed as «Master» was none other than Kuroyukihime, leader of the Legion Nega Nebulas. In other words, Haruyuki could now confirm that Takumu had not lost his memories of the Accelerated World. He exhaled, and replied:

“Ah, well, I’ve been seen through. Got it, I’ll pass it on. ... Then, I’ll see you tomorrow. Take good care of yourself.”

He did not want to further disrupt Takumu’s rest, and ended the call. Lifting his face, he turned towards Kuroyukihime, and smiled awkwardly.

“W-Well... It seems like Taku really has a cold. I’m sorry, I was too rash...”

Kuroyukihime shook her head with a warm smile.

“Don’t be, it’s good that he’s all right... But...”

Pausing here, her facial expression turned serious. Removing the cable that linked Haruyuki to the desktop terminal, she continued,

“... We still can’t overlook the fact that the guys from «Remnant» could be making a move right now. Although, within Suginami at least, they should be unable to track down our real-world information. But just to be safe, stop accepting all Duel requests for now. If you decide to challenge opponents, try to look for less dangerous targets. It’s entirely possible that someone could track us down from where our avatars appear from...”

“Okay... I’ll inform Taku and Chiyu.”

“Please. --- Shall we have lunch, then? It might not be a bad idea to eat together in the lounge once in a while.”

Kuroyukihime patted his shoulder, and Haruyuki relaxed his expression, nodding. Kuroyukihime smiled pleasantly, and added matter-of-factly:

“--- We should also thank «Blood Leopard» for the information. Since we have to meet anyway, we should do it in the real world. Make arrangements when you have time.”

“Ye, yes..... Eh, eh?”

Nodding unconsciously, Haruyuki only just realized what sort of atmosphere that meeting would have. His upper body jerked.

“No, n-no, that’s probably not a good idea.”

Haruyuki said in a high voice as he chased after Kuroyukihime who had already left the room.

Just as they were talking, Haruyuki had felt a strange unease, which had not yet dissipated.

Maybe it was because Takumu had sounded differently than usual. It was to be expected, seeing as he was sick and likely feeling under the weather. But then again, the heaviness in his voice indicated more of a mental strain than a physical one. That’s right - it must be that sort of unease that came up when one thought of Takumu from a certain period ago.

--- It must be my imagination. Takumu is now the calm and collected supporting pillar of the Legion.

Haruyuki told himself, wiping his slightly sweaty hands on his uniform trousers, and following Kuroyukihime out of the student council room. The noise of lunch break, and the scent of food from the canteen, put him at ease.

But ---

Haruyuki found out three hours later that his sense of premonition had been correct, in a sense.

But he had miscalculated the magnitude. The situation had already far exceeded what Haruyuki, and even Kuroyukihime, were prepared for.

The bringer of this news was the person who came to Umesato Middle School daily after school to feed the African scops owl, Hou-san; the youngest member of the Legion --- Shinomiya Utai.

After a curry lunch that he spent with Kuroyukihime, and sitting through the afternoon’s two lessons, then telling Chiyuri “I’ll message you later!” as she prepared to head for her club activities, Haruyuki left the school building. Last week, he would have run out as fast as he could, connected to the Global Net, then gobbled up as much information as he could get in place of snacks, but he now had a responsibility as president of the animal raising committee, and so he could no longer do that. Though, somehow, he had never thought of that as a burden. In fact, he enjoyed the work he did in that committee.

The sky was overcast. Fortunately, there was no rain forecast for today, so it was probably a good day to bag up and throw away the fallen leaves that had piled up in the animal shed.

Going around the second school building, he walked to the north garden, stepping on the mossy ground towards the small shed made of natural wood that stood in the northwest corner. There was little sunlight here, but as there were no buildings south of the shed but only a few small trees, some sunlight could reach here through the iron-linked fence.

There were no other students around. Other than Haruyuki, the animal raising committee had two other members who had been chosen by drawing straws: a boy in the same year named Hamajima and a girl named Izeki, but Haruyuki had registered their participation as “voluntary”. This was because he had decided that getting them to participate of their own volition was better than forcing them, but there would be a long wait before that could happen.

Once Haruyuki reached the small shed, he watched as Hou (which sounded like a name given offhandedly) the screech owl bathed himself in the metal basin on the floor.

It spread its wings, and maintaining this posture immersed itself headfirst into the shallow water. Then it stood back up, raised its wet, droopy feathers, and gently shook them. Watching how human-like its way of bathing was, Haruyuki couldn't help but laugh.

“Haha... You look pretty comfortable, huh?”

As though in response, Hou spun its head around to face him, showing a seemingly awkward expression. It shook its entire body, sending droplets of water flying, and then flew up from the surface of the water. It flew a few rounds in the small shed, then perched on a branch towards the left. It then began adjusting the feathers around its chest.

Inside that branch were pressure sensors used to determine Hou's weight. Haruyuki operated his virtual desktop, opening the committee logbook bookmarked in his special Local Network browser, and entered the values from the sensors that were displayed.

At that point, an ad-hoc connection request window appeared. Haruyuki looked to his right and saw a small girl, in a white dress-like school uniform and carrying a brown book bag, smiling at him.

“Ah... Hello, Mai-... No, Shinomiya-san.”

It was interesting that Haruyuki found himself accidentally using her Duel Avatar's name in the real world, and vice versa. Haruyuki was about to say «Mai-san», short for «Ardor Maiden», but after correcting himself, he scratched his head with his left hand while using his right hand to press the “Yes” button on the request.

A chat window opened automatically, and with her usual extremely high speed, Utai typed in the window.

[UI> Hello, Arita-san. How is Hou-san's weight?]

“Ah, erm... Seems to be fine, just a bit on the low side?”

[UI> That's to be expected, as his surroundings just changed, which might stress him a bit. I brought a bit more food today, would you like to see me feed him up close?]

“Yeah, yeah, definitely!”

Answering thus, Haruyuki checked the committee activities book before closing the browser. Today’s assigned task was just the usual cleaning, and only one person was required to do it. Furthermore, next to Hamajima and Izeki’s names, the words [Left School] were displayed, as expected.

Swallowing a sigh, Haruyuki watched Utai undo the large electronic lock. With a swipe of her small hand, the large bolt slid aside with a ding. Utai confirmed that Hou was perched on his branch, then waved Haruyuki over. They opened fence door as little as possible, and slipped in together.

Closing the door, Utai locked the sliding bolt from inside, then put down her bag. From within, she retrieved a pair of tea-brown armbraces --- no, gloves. She then pulled one glove on her left hand, which almost reached her elbows, then stuck her hand back into her bag.

She pulled out a small insulated cooler box. She used her right hand to open the box, which contained what looked like finely-cut raw meat.

--- Ohh, as expected of a bird of prey.

As Haruyuki marveled, Utai stood and raised her left hand towards the branch. Then as if understanding through telepathy or something like that, Hou opened his wings and flew over, perching on Utai’s arm. It stared at her with golden eyes as if saying “Hurry up!”

Watching Utai about to bend down to retrieve the cooler box on the ground, Haruyuki lifted it up for her with both hands. With a smile, Utai picked up a piece of red meat with her right hand.

She held it near Hou’s face, which quickly snatched the meat from her with its beak and devoured it as if it had swallowed the piece whole. This was completely different from feeding a chicken or pigeon. Just as Haruyuki was about to go “Oh --- ” again, Utai fed the meat to the bird continuously, and Hou swallowed them even quicker. Haruyuki was about to think what sort of meat that was, but as he had never studied any sort of cuisine before, he couldn’t tell just by looking.

The cooler box that had been used to hold food for Hou, who seemed to eat much more than his twenty centimeter or so physique, was emptied in the blink of an eye. Utai stroked its head, with an expression that seemed to say “That’s how you do it”; the bird contentedly shook its neck, then flew back up again, returning to its branch.

Removing her gloves, Utai took the cooler box back from Haruyuki, left the small shed, and began to clean the water channel on its side. During that, Haruyuki went to change the synthetic paper that lay around the shed. When the daily news was still being published on a paper medium, it seemed that one would use old newspapers for purposes like this, but now, paper made of natural wood fiber were rare and commanded high prices in the market. He and Utai took turns cleaning the papers that Hou-san had dirtied, then hung them on a small clothes rack.

After they finished that, Haruyuki asked the question he had been itching to ask.

“Erm, Shinomiya-san, what was the meat you just gave Hou?”

The young girl four years his junior gave a very small smile as her hands danced in the air.

[UI> Guess.]

“Uh... um... ch-chicken?”

Utai tapped a button in her vision, and Haruyuki could hear a *pupu* buzzer, signifying that he had answered incorrectly. This was a function installed on the chat tool.

“Th-then, pork.” *Pupu*. “Eh---? Is it beef?” *Pupu*. “L-lamb?” *Pupu*. “Is it a type of fish?” *Pupu*.

Haruyuki raised his arms in defeat. Seeing that, Utai let out a rather odd smile, and added some unexpected words to the chat box.

[UI> That, how about I show you everything, starting when I’m cutting the meat? You might be a bit emotionally scarred, so please prepare yourself mentally.]

“Hah... C-Cutting the meat?”

[UI> Okay, let’s clear up the leaves while it’s still early. It looks like we are almost done.]

Seeing her small smile, Haruyuki felt that he shouldn’t pursue the matter anymore, and nodded.

“Oh, okay. I’ll go get a trash bag, then.”

As Haruyuki ran to the tool storeroom in the courtyard, he took a quick glance at Hou in his shed. The screech owl, having filled its stomach, retracted its ear tufts perched on the branch with one foot, closing its eyes as if it were sleepy.

The translucent plastic bags that had never changed in decades were filled with dead leaves after thirty minutes of hard work. Haruyuki thought that he could just set fire to the pile of leaves, and roast potatoes over the resulting bonfire --- as he had seen in old movies and manga --- he could get rid of the mess while filling his stomach, which sounded quite good, but a fire was detected in the school, the fire alarms would go off, emergency services would race to his location, and he would be arrested, without exaggeration. It was also quite difficult for those who had not yet turned of age to purchase things like lighters. This was why people like the bullies who had tormented Haruyuki the year before did not dare to smoke or do something similarly legendarily bad in school.

The two of them thus had no choice but to drag eight bags of dead leaves to a collection area in the front courtyard of the school. By the time they were done, it was 4:20 PM.

“Whoo... Finally... done...”

[UI> You’ve worked hard.]

They looked at each other, and let out relieved smiles, then took turns washing hands. Today’s work ended here. They had made arrangements with Chiyuri to go see Takumu afterwards.

However, Chiyuri's club activities ended around five, so there was still some time left. Just as Haruyuki was wondering what to do ---

Utai, who had cleaned her hands with a white handkerchief, tilted her head and tapped the air. Using her right hand to operate a window on her virtual desktop, she delicately typed out a reply with her left hand.

[UI> I received a message from Fuu-nee. It's marked «urgent», so please excuse me, I must immediately read it.]

The «Fuu-nee» whom she was referring to was Kurasaki Fuuko, or Sky Raker. She studied in a Shibuya high school, and Haruyuki immediately understood why Utai was able to receive her message. His Neuro Linker, once connected to the Umesato Middle School Local Network, would automatically disconnect from the Global Net, but Utai was viewed as a guest, and not subject to this restriction. Furthermore, she mainly used her «Brain Implant Chip» to connect to the internet, so she was always connected to the Global Net, and would not show up on Brain Burst's battle matching lists.

“S-Sure, please do.”

Utai saw Haruyuki nod, and opened the message, reading it quickly.

Suddenly, her large, slightly red eyes widened to their fullest extent. Her lips trembled uncontrollably, as though she were hyperventilating.

“Eh... Wh-What?!”

Haruyuki was utterly shocked, and moved closer to Utai.

She clumsily moved her hands from her virtual desktop to the keyboard to type out a reply.

[UI> Arita-san, do you know of a PK group regarded as extremely cruel, called «Supernova Remnant»?]

“.....!!”

--- He did. Technically, he had just heard about it this morning, but for the past eight hours, the name and the fear it represented had etched itself deeply into his mind.

“...Y-Yeah. What... did they do?”

He asked hoarsely, an unbearable sense of dread climbing up his spine.

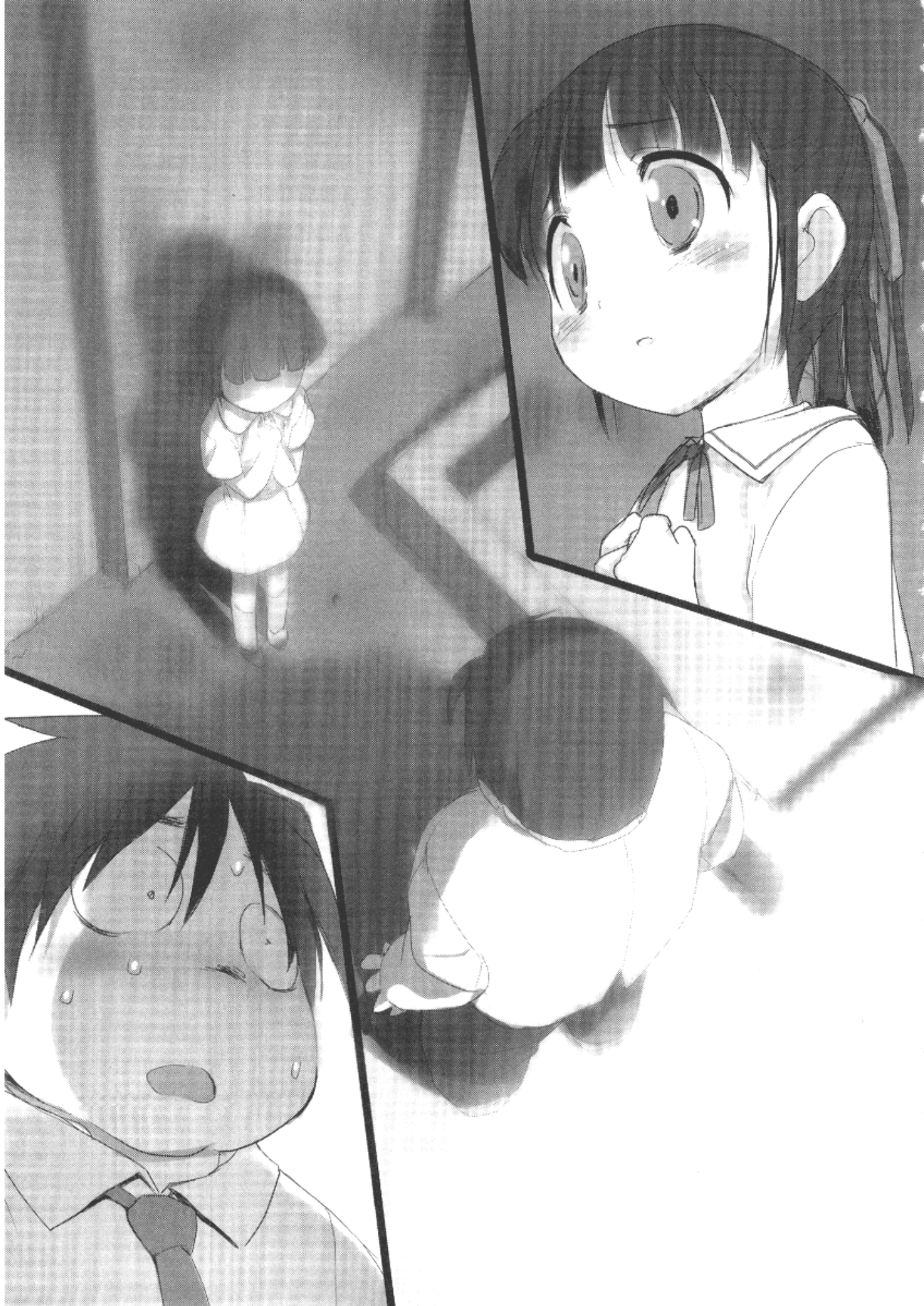
[UI> This morning, four high-level Burst Linkers, suspected to be members of «Remnant», attacked a Burst Linker in Shinjuku in the Unlimited Neutral Field...]

Haruyuki stared at the pink characters that flowed into the chat window, his face contorting.

“It’s a lie”, “How can it be”; thoughts like those whirled in his head. --- *Definitely not Taku. Taku had answered my call during lunch break. And he remembered me and Kuroyukihime perfectly well.*

But in the next instant, the few words that appeared in his vision brought a tidal wave of impact and chaos to Haruyuki.

[UI> ... But it seems that, they themselves were completely destroyed.]



“Eh... Completely...destroyed.....?”

Haruyuki could not immediately understand that sentence, and could only ask numbly.

“Completely destroyed... meaning, the PK group «Remnant» that’s been called the cruelest... was taken out by one person?”

[UI> That seems to be the case. During that time, there was a Legion who had set up a long-term camp for hunting Enemies nearby... Apparently, they spotted the battle effects from a very intense fight and went to investigate. What they saw was apparently four attackers being finished off one by one, and it looked like «final destruction». In other words, the four of them and their opponent bet all their Points on a «Sudden Death Duel Card».]

“Th-That... What does that mean? Four guys from Remnant attacked some guy, threatened him to fight in a Sudden Death Duel... and were completely defeated by that person and lost all of their Points...?”

[UI> That’s what Fuu-nee thinks too.]

“B... But who would that person be... Was it one of the «Kings»...? One of the «Kings» put themselves out as bait to lure Remnant out, then completely disposed of them...?”

That was the limit of Haruyuki’s speculation. But Utai shook her head with a frozen expression, and robotically moved her fingers.

[UI> No. What the Enemy-hunting Legion saw was «one person» in water-colored armor, a strength-class Avatar. Its right arm was equipped with a piercing-type Enhanced Armament. He used a stake-driver on his right arm to impale the last remaining battle group member, which he identified to the onlookers as someone from «Supernova Remnant», then killed him, and left through a Portal. Fuu-nee thinks that he...]

After some hesitation, more words slowly flowed into Haruyuki’s vision.

[UI> He might be «Cyan Pile».]

Chapter 8

Haruyuki ran.

He sprinted out of the school gates, onto Ome Road behind the school, and turned east. His usual route home was straight along Tokyo Ring 7, but as time was of the essence now, he rushed diagonally through the residential area, running against the route he took to school.

The distance from his apartment to Umesato Middle School was about 1.5 kilometers by the shortest route, so for Haruyuki, it was a very painful chore to run the entire journey without stopping to take a break. But he could hardly feel the excruciating torture-like suffering he felt when he was required to do long-distance running in PE class. Driven by his crippling anxiety, forcing gulp after gulp of air into his lungs, Haruyuki kicked his feet against the ground.

Mere seconds after Shinomiya Utai had informed him of what Kurasaki Fuuko's emergency message had said, Haruyuki took action. He first submitted the committee activities logbook to the school system. Then he sent a message to Kurashima Chiyuri, who was still in club activities: "I'm leaving first to visit Takumu." Afterward, he asked Utai to inform Kuroyukihime in the student council room of the news, and flew out of the school gate.

"..... Taku..... Why..... What....."

He wheezed, gasping between words. Sweat poured down his forehead into his eyes; Haruyuki rubbed at them with his fist.

Fuuko's information was not fatally damaging at all. Why? Because Takumu --- Cyan Pile --- had managed to emerge victorious from a many-on-one situation, and escape to safety. His response to Haruyuki during lunch break was proof enough.

But what had happened «before» that? There was no error in this. How did Takumu, who was bedridden and sick, end up battling a PK group in Shinjuku? That was already strange enough. There was another question, which Haruyuki didn't want to face, but was a dilemma he couldn't ignore.

How did he win?

Cyan Pile, like Silver Crow, stood at Level 5. While he could not be called a beginner, he could not be deemed an expert either. In contrast, the Remnant members were said to be «higher-levelers», and were probably all at least Level 6. Simultaneously battling four people like that, and even emerging victorious in the reckless Unlimited Neutral Field, was something Haruyuki thought absolutely impossible.

Of course, Takumu already had high physical attack power, and Haruyuki couldn't hold a candle to his calmness and strategic intelligence. Even so, it should have been impossible for him to dispose of four Burst Linkers at once, who were of a higher level than him. Even Kuroyukihime, had talked about the time when she had faced five same-level «Kings» and could not defeat even one of them.

«There was something». There must be «something» twisting the rules of the game beyond Haruyuki's imagination. And it was definitely still in existence. Takumu's tone of voice over the

phone during lunch break had seemed a bit hollow. That probably was not because he had a fever...

“..... Taku.....”

Walking down the pathway built next to the Chuo Line tracks and turning left along Tokyo Ring 7, the tall and familiar apartment complex came into view. As Haruyuki desperately dragged his aching feet, he called his friend’s name in a hoarse voice.

--- Close friend. At least, that bond should not have been destroyed.

As he thought that, Haruyuki finally, inevitably understood. He was running so frantically because he was subconsciously aware that even this remaining bond could be in danger.

The apartment that Haruyuki, Chiyuri and Takumu lived in was a complex facility that housed a rather large shopping center from the basement all the way to the third floor.

It housed various shops that sold food, groceries, clothes, electronics, and more. There was even a medium-sized cinema, and the provided amenities in the shopping center increased the housing value of its apartments. Of course, it was not only the tenants who used the shopping mall. Hence, there were strict security checkpoints at the borders separating the apartments from the shopping center. Not just guests, but even the tenants were subject to security screenings via their Neuro Linkers before being allowed to pass through.

In the elevator lobby, during the few seconds that it took the indicator light in his vision to change to blue, Haruyuki felt extremely anxious. Right as the iron barrier lifted up, he charged through, using his body to prevent the doors on an elevator about to depart from closing. A woman who probably lived here frowned, but Haruyuki greeted her slightly before turning to face the doors again.

Haruyuki’s home was on the 23rd floor of B block on the east side, Chiyuri’s was on the 21st floor of B block, but Takumu was the only one who lived in A block to the west, on the 19th floor. Haruyuki, on board the A block’s lift, heard a slightly different motor sound, and anxiously watched the floor indicator increase.

When he was younger, after school every day, Haruyuki would rush back home to drop his bag off, then run out and meet Chiyuri and Takumu to play somewhere, either in the entertainment area of the complex or at a nearby park until nightfall. Then hungry, they would split up and return to their own apartments: Haruyuki and Chiyuri walking towards B block to the right, and Takumu towards A block to the left.

If Takumu turned around at the security gate, he would just be able to see the silhouettes of Haruyuki and Chiyuri as they ran towards the elevators back to their homes.

During then, how would he have felt?

Was that the feeling that caused something to continually accumulate in Takumu’s heart, leading to his decision to confess his love for Chiyuri in fifth grade of elementary school?

... That was a bitterly cold night, when the first snow of the year had just begun to dance in the air with rain.

Their usual outside play had to be suspended, and so Haruyuki was home alone playing games. The doorbell had rung, cutting Haruyuki off from FullDive, and when he opened the front door with a stiff face, he found Chiyuri standing there.

Haruyuki felt that something was a little off about Chiyuri's mood, but let her into his room anyway. She sat by the window, kept quiet for a while, then spoke in a weak voice.

Takumu had asked her out. And she didn't know what to do.

Of course, that was beyond the comprehension of the then eleven-year-old Haruyuki. Equal shock and confusion assaulted him simultaneously, and he could stare dumbfounded at Chiyuri's profile, yet there was one thing he was confident of.

If she had rejected Takumu, he would probably leave. The golden time they had spent together every day after school would be forever lost, never to return.

Gazing at the uneasy Chiyuri, who had asked him, "Haru, what should I do?", he had replied, half on reflex.

--- You and Taku are a perfect match for each other. Even if you two start going out, I will still be your friend.

Chiyuri had lowered her head, wiping the corners of her eyes. Then looked back up and smiled, saying: "Yeah, I understand."

But in the end, Haruyuki's words became lies. He began to keep his distance from Chiyuri and Takumu, who were now dating. By summer break of sixth grade, the three friends no longer played together as a group.

When they graduated elementary school, Takumu seemingly asked Chiyuri to apply to the same middle school in Shinjuku as him, but she had long decided to attend Umesato Middle School, which was closer to home.

Chiyuri did so in order to preserve their friendship dynamic, which had begun to collapse. However, it made Takumu desperate. Thus, Takumu resorted to «Brain Burst», which his former kendo club president had given to him, in an attempt for the power to keep Chiyuri by his side. Through «acceleration», he made it to the top in his year and became the winner of the kendo club competition, but in the process, he had exhausted his supply of Burst Points, making him fall for the temptation of a forbidden cheating tool --- the «Backdoor Program».

Through Direct Connection, Takumu installed the backdoor into Chiyuri's Neuro Linker, and used her as a launchpad to infiltrate the Umesato Middle School Local Network, in search of the most wanted criminal of the Accelerated World «Black Lotus», tried to hunt her, and...

The lift slowed to a stop, and Haruyuki looked up from the floor.

The lift doors, emblazoned with an augmented reality tag of 19, opened. Haruyuki's legs, which had run as fast as he could to come here, suddenly felt like lead for some reason. The woman behind him coughed as if to rush him, and Haruyuki stepped out of the lift into the public hallway just before the doors closed.

While Haruyuki knew that Takumu resided in Unit 1909, he could count the number of times he had been here on one hand. This was because Takumu’s parents were very concerned for his education, and disapproved of things like having friends over to play.

At the start of the year, Takumu had apparently raised quite the ruckus over his intention to transfer from the prestigious Shinjuku prep school to Umesato Middle School. They now bore even more animosity towards Haruyuki, whom they assumed had misled and lied to their son as the ringleader. Fortunately, (or should he even be thinking that), both of Takumu’s parents were at work, and they would not be returning anytime soon.

A few dozens of steps later, the nameplate [Mayuzumi] appeared earlier than he had expected.

Standing in front a door that was a different color than the ones in B block, Haruyuki’s recollection that had just been interrupted pulled back into focus.

--- A lot of things have happened since then, and we’ve made plenty of mistakes. But Taku and I, in that battle on the «Purgatory Stage», put our honest words into fists for the first time and launched them at each other. And roughly at that point, we finally managed to become true friends. No matter what happened, that reality will never change.

Haruyuki took a deep breath, raised his right hand, and pressed the augmented reality doorbell that appeared in his vision.

After a slightly long wait, the one who answered was neither of his parents, but Takumu himself.

“... Please come in... Excuse me, but just come straight to my room.”

Haruyuki didn’t know if Takumu had checked his identity through the camera in the door, but he spoke as though he were expecting a visitor, and unlocked the door. Haruyuki pulled the door handle, said a soft “Please excuse the disturbance”⁵⁴, and stepped into the entryway.

Removing his shoes and arranging them nearby, Haruyuki stepped onto the corridor. Going by faraway memories, he knocked on the second door to the right. Hearing a second “Please come in” from Takumu’s real voice, he turned the handle.

The lights were off, with the only illumination being the weak sunlight from the west-facing window.

Takumu, clothed in a shirt and jeans, was sitting on the bed. He turned his barely visible form towards Haruyuki, his dark face showing a small smile.

“Hey, Haru. --- Don’t stand, have a seat.”

“Ah... Okay.”

Haruyuki nodded and clumsily stepped into the room. He remembered some of the furnishings inside from their elementary school days, but some had changed too. However, compared to

⁵⁴ *Ojamashimasu*, literally “Excuse me for bothering”, a polite phrase used when entering someone else’s home.

Haruyuki's room, there were massively fewer things laying around, and everything had been organized as tidily as he remembered them. He passed the blue-gray bedspread, placed his backpack down on top of it, then sat down somewhere around eighty centimeters from Takumu's right. The foldable bed creaked and half of the high-tension mattress sagged downwards.

Although Haruyuki had rushed here with all his might, now he didn't know how to begin.

Takumu, who lowered his head and folded his left hand over his right arm on his knee, looked slightly different than he had when saying goodbye to Haruyuki last night. That much was confirmed. However, due to an overload of conflicting information, Haruyuki was completely unable to grasp what sort of situation Takumu was in now.

After remaining silent for a few seconds, Haruyuki finally remembered that he originally came to visit Takumu as he was sick, and spoke.

“Uh...um. You called in sick today... How do you feel?”

“Mm... Yeah, that's right.”

Takumu chuckled, shrugged and continued.

“I really did have a fever this morning. Otherwise my parents definitely would not have called in sick for me. But it's okay, my fever broke after I took the medicine I got from the hospital this morning.”

“You... went to the hospital?”

--- *Then, was it all a misunderstanding?*

No, the PK group «Supernova Remnant» really were destroyed by a solitary Burst Linker earlier this morning. But that might just have been an avatar that resembled Cyan Pile. Because Takumu was receiving treatment at a hospital, and couldn't possibly have been attacked in Shinjuku...

“Yeah. There's a hospital in Shinjuku that accepts my father's medical insurance policy. He drove me there this morning.”

--- Takumu's words obscured Haruyuki's half-hopeful thoughts.

“Shin... Shinjuku...?”

Takumu's inconceivably calm voice resounded stiffly in Haruyuki's ears.

“... The checkup itself was over quickly. The cold didn't seem like anything major, so I planned on collecting some information in Shinjuku, since I hadn't been there for a while... So I messaged an old friend from the Blue Legion. Of course, we weren't so close as to meet in the real world. We arranged to meet in the Local Network of a small entertainment center near the station... But I couldn't have guessed that the bastard sold me out to a PK group...”

Haruyuki stared numbly at Takumu, who laughed “Heh, heh”, his profile covered in shadow.

He bent over, gripping his right arm more tightly, his voice slowly deepening as he continued to his bosom friend.

“Looks like those PKers managed to get ahold of my old «Parent»’s real world information, and based on that, managed to find out a student who seemed to control Cyan Pile. The group pushed me into the entertainment center and into a Dive Cafe, and they looked like those four guys too, they waved a small knife that looked like a toy, and asked me to choose. Did I want to have my Points slowly shaved away through Direct Connect Duels, or fight to the death in the Unlimited Neutral Field? I wonder, had I resisted, if they actually had the guts to use that knife...”

Fufu, fufufu. Takumu laughed, his shoulders shaking. His voice held within it a distorted quality that Haruyuki had heard somewhere before.

“Of course, I chose the more unstable option of the Unlimited Neutral Field. ... But as expected of the «cruellest PKers», they were all above me, whether it was fighting technique or fighting power. They played plenty of games with me as I tried to resist, planning to have as much fun as they could until I was a goner...”

Unable to bear listening to that monologue, Haruyuki trembled as he interrupted in a raspy voice:

“... Incarnate? Did you use the «Incarnate System» to defeat them? No, no, I wouldn’t blame you. In that sort of situation, I probably would use it without hesitation too...”

But Takumu slowly shook his head.

“I started out by using it. But they were all practiced Incarnation users. My novice strength augmentation skill «Cyan Blade» was completely useless against their negative Incarnation.”

“Then... what in the world happened...? How did you destroy all of «Supernova Remnant».....?”

Haruyuki’s question fell heavily and sank into the six-tatami room, as dusk fell.

The answer he got in return after a long silence, was a dry explanation that was not a direct response.

“... The reason I caught a cold was that, last night I lied to my parents that I was “going out to visit graduation cram schools” and went out on my own. My parents don’t really believe in FullDive long-distance tutoring, and have been telling me to go to a real cram school from a long time ago. I actually went to the so-called «sparsely populated area» in southern Setagaya, and it just happened to start raining there...”

At Takumu’s answer, Haruyuki, who had been listening in a daze, suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

“... Setagaya’s, sparsely populated area...?”

He repeated hoarsely. He had just heard about that from someone. That’s right --- yesterday morning, «Ash Roller» from the Green Legion had said so during their closed battle. He had

said that his junior Bush Utan and his friend Olive Glove had been using some sort of suspicious power to win battles in the sparsely populated areas of Setagaya and Ota.

And the person who had told Takumu that, was Haruyuki himself.

Last night, after all the Legion members had gone home, Haruyuki had asked Takumu to stay behind to discuss the mysterious Enhanced Armament that had silently begun to spread in the Accelerated World --- the «ISS Kit». At the same time, he had also mentioned that the ISS Kit had mainly infected the Setagaya, Ota and Edogawa Wards.

Then, after Takumu had gone home, had he left alone to investigate in Setagaya? He did mention at their parting that “I’ll use my own methods to investigate”. But, why would he do something so rash and put himself in a dangerous area like that...

Haruyuki turned left, and stared wide-eyed at Takumu. As if he were avoiding eye contact, Takumu lowered his head even more.

Silence. But it was soon interrupted by a low, reserved voice that fell from his mouth, obscured by his sharp, fit shoulders.

“... I just wanted to see for myself. What the Red King Scarlet Rain told me, a core principle of the Accelerated World... «one may not learn a skill that is counter to one’s avatar type», and that there was an Enhanced Armament that was able to overcome this limitation, and whether it really existed...”

“..... Taku...”

“Haru, you’re the only one who I can tell this to. My Duel Avatar, «Cyan Pile», unfortunately, is crippled. To use the terms of the MMORPGs you used to play, it’s a so-called «Build Error».”

Listening to those self-deprecating words, Haruyuki itched to say something. But Takumu left hand moved slightly, sealing Haruyuki’s retort.

“I’m not complaining at all. Pile’s current state is the result of my own choices. --- That avatar that was supposed to be close-range in nature had more than half of its potential put into a long-range type Enhanced Armament. In the past, I used to justify it in the way that I was a kendo player yet scared of suddenly being attacked with sudden stabbing motions... But, no, that’s probably not it.”

As he talked uncontrollably, Takumu’s profile had sunk deeper down, obscuring his expression and leaving only his silhouette. While it was only just June, the air in the room felt cold and dry, which irritated one’s throat. Takumu’s voice became lower and hoarser.

“... This is just a fantasy of mine. The «mental scar» that molds every Duel Avatar, or rather, the strongest memories and emotions combined together, if they are indifferent towards the entire world, that person would be a Red type... Yet those who hold these feelings strongly towards another person are more likely to get a Green type, and that’s how I feel. For example, Cyan Pile’s original form definitely holds the vengeful feelings I bore towards the high schoolers who would bully me in the kendo classroom during elementary school. But then, at that point, I had people who were much more important. That’s right... those people were you, Haru, and Chii-chan. My feelings for you guys are without doubt, part of the creation of my Duel Avatar...”

Just then, Haruyuki finally managed to dislodge the words that had been stuck in his parched throat.

“This... I’m the same way. My... Silver Crow is full of my feelings for you and Chiyu.”

“Yeah. I think so too, Haru. But... unlike you, who didn’t have any weapons when you were created, I was equipped with that sharp metal stake driver ever since I was born... that «Pile Driver». A close range type, with a conflicting long range power... In other words, I hold conflicted emotions towards you guys. As to what that is... I don’t want to mention it now. But...”

Takumu straightened his body, and the face that was obscured by darkness now faced Haruyuki again.

“But these emotions are the reason that I confessed to Chii-chan three years ago. It’s as though I was testing you two. No... Not just that. Last year, when I installed that «Backdoor Program» in Chii-chan’s Neuro Linker... I was able to do that because of my inner feelings. Half of me wants to preserve the friendship between the three of us, and the other half wants to destroy those bonds. This sort of conflict that resides within me, distorted my Duel Avatar.”

“.....Ta, Taku.....”

Listening to his friend’s confession that was like spitting blood, Haruyuki could only repeat his name.

With a half-crying, half-laughing expression, Takumu’s croaky voice continued to speak.

“Haru, have you ever thought about why Chii-chan’s «Lime Bell» got such a power... such a rare «time reversal» ability? That’s... that’s probably because, somewhere deep down in Chii-chan’s heart, she wants us to go back to the way we were. Go back to the old days where we played together until sunset. Twice, I’ve shattered her dream of the three of us staying together forever.”

Takumu turned his entire body right, and edged closer to Haruyuki who sat on the bed.

Haruyuki could only watch as the eyes of his bosom friend grew wet behind lensless glasses.

“... I thought I could atone for my sins. I always thought that by supporting and protecting this newly, miraculously formed bond of «Nega Nebulas» to the best of my ability, I could atone for the last of my sins. But... unlike the pure «hope» that created yours’ and Chii-chan’s avatars, the «distorted» Cyan Pile... that will eventually, inevitably become the Legion’s weakest link. No, it’s already beginning to look like that. So... I thought... that it would be better for me to disappear before that happened.”

“..... So, that’s why you.....?”

Haruyuki could no longer just sit and listen to Takumu’s knifelike words, and opened his mouth. In a thin voice, he asked to confirm a guess in his mind that was extremely close to being confirmed:

“That’s why you... went in search of the «ISS Kit».....?”

Seconds later, Takumu gave a small, helpless smile and nodded silently.

“..... Yeah. A Burst Linker I ran into in the Setagaya Third Battle Area who had been awaiting a battle for a very long time... switched to a «Closed Battle» and told me this. ‘If you wish, I can give power to you.’ However, I was not in search of just power. The «ISS Kit» is similar to most unused Enhanced Armaments; it’s sealed into an equipment card before it’s used. So I thought I’d just keep it in my inventory like that then have Master take a look at it next Legion Meeting. But... This morning, when I was attacked in reality by those «Supernova Remnant» guys... In the Unlimited Neutral Field, when I was helpless against those four guys... I thought I had already accepted my fate...”

A miserable expression flashed across Takumu’s proper face. His trembling lips forced out a hoarse voice mixed with self-deprecating laughter.

“... When I came to my senses, I had already shouted the ISS Kit activation command that guy had given me. And after that... Honestly, I don’t really remember. But... the only thing I can be sure of, is that I didn’t simply defeat them. I dealt with them in far more vicious, cruel ways than even I had suffered before... I tortured them, ridiculed them, and toyed with them dozens of times until they were all dead. I kept the last guy within an inch of his death, then dragged him in front of the Enemy-hunting group that was watching, made him spit out all the information he had on the PKers, then ended his life... Though, compared to «Remnant», I guess the audience was more scared of me.”

Fufu; Takumu laughed weakly as he edged even closer to Haruyuki.

His laughter suddenly distorted. A voice that did not sound like a voice entered Haruyuki’s ears from a very close proximity.

“... Haru. I’ve sinned again. I just... I just wanted to protect Chii-chan’s smile for as long as I could... That’s what I wanted...”

“Wh... What are you saying, Taku. You only... used the Kit once. As long as you don’t equip it again... or if you just sell it at a «Shop», then it’ll...”

Haruyuki said frantically, but Takumu shook his head nonstop, and moaned:

“I can’t. As soon as I equipped that thing, it disappeared from my inventory, and fused with my avatar. No, not just that... It... It’s practically entered my real world body.....”

Suddenly, Taku stopping talking, stuck out his left hand, and tightly grasped Haruyuki’s right shoulder.

“T-Taku.....?”

Haruyuki called hoarsely, but his friend remained silent, his grip tightening.

Haruyuki was unable to withstand Takumu’s weight and feel backward onto the bed. But the hand on his right shoulder would not let go. His eyes opened wide, and he tried to get up, but to Haruyuki, in this sort of position he could definitely not push the more muscular Takumu back.

Directly above him, as if pushing Haruyuki down on the bed, Takumu croaked in the weakest, feeblest voice that Haruyuki had ever heard:

“Haru, destroy me.”

“Eh.....?”

“I beg you... With your hands, destroy me completely. Otherwise, I’ve already... What I desire for... What I wish for has already been forgotten.....”

Takumu’s right hand gripped a black cable he had taken out at some point.

A roughly meter-long --- XSB cable.

Holding down Haruyuki’s right shoulder with his left hand, Takumu first inserted the plug into his own blue Neuro Linker.

Then, sliding the cable through his strong but slender fingers, he gripped the other plug, and moved it towards the Direct Connect port on Haruyuki’s Neuro Linker.

With a certain pressure, a crimson Wired Connection warning appeared in his vision, and vanished.

Takumu’s trembling lips took a deep breath to recite the acceleration command.

Before a tear fell from his left eye onto Haruyuki’s cheek, the thunderous roar of acceleration came --- and the world was plunged into darkness.

Chapter 9

Although it depended the properties of the stage, even if the Duellists were in direct contact with each other in the real world, at the beginning of a Duel, Brain Burst would place them at least ten meters away from each other.

Therefore, when Haruyuki descended into the virtual stage as the silvery-armored Duel Avatar «Silver Crow», his bosom friend was nowhere to be seen.

Beneath his feet lay scorched, cracked cement. The apartment walls had completely vanished, leaving only giant charred columns supporting the building. The outside world was completely visible behind him: a blackened north Koenji street, which looked as though it had once been consumed by superheated flames.

This was the «Burnt» stage. Its entire geography was more brittle than the «Twilight» stage, but if one were to destroy it, their Special Attack Gauge would not increase by much. Not even mobile objects or small animals that could potentially enter the battle were present; it was simply a no-man's land.

According to a Burst Linker's basic instinct, despite first confirming the stage properties in this situation, Haruyuki turned frontwards.

About ten meters away, a giant with drooping arms and bowed head stood, immobile. Light blue armor wrapped around its strong limbs. Its visor was crisscrossed with numerous thin gaps. On its right wrist, starting from its elbow, was equipped a cannon-like Enhanced Armament exposing a metallic glow --- «Pile Driver».

This was the silhouette of a very familiar person who had started out as his enemy, then joined him on a two-man vanguard of their Legion. But Haruyuki could not help but feel the intense pressure emanating from the heavyweight avatar with renewed trepidation.

If he only went by body time, starting with «Frost Horn» of the Leonids at the top, there must be plenty of Duel Avatars larger than Takumu. But he still felt that Takumu's high-density strength still ranked above them. He could basically feel none of what Takumu just described himself as, the conflicting nature his body and outfit properties brought.

Haruyuki took a deep breath under his silver visor, steeled his determination, and took a step towards Takumu --- «Cyan Pile».

“Taku.”

In the dueling stage, calling one's opponent by their real name, even if it was a nickname, was a taboo. But this was a Direct Connect duel, and there was no audience. That was why Haruyuki dared to address Takumu as he did in the real world, projecting his still chaotic state of mind towards him.

“Taku. Why... Why must we decide this through violence? I'm the one who's most aware of your strength. Now, what's the use of confirming that by doing this...”

But Takumu, standing in a shadow far off, shook his head slowly and interrupted Haruyuki.

“No, Haru. The thing you’re most aware of is not my strength, but my limits... Whether it was the «Battle Against Suzaku» yesterday... the fight against «Dusk Taker»... or even the «Disaster Armor Campaign», haven’t I never been able to stand by your side until the very end?” That was a voice completely devoid of self-criticism. But Haruyuki could faintly detect an intensely trembling emotion, suppressed and craving release.

“--- As things stand now, I don’t plan to deny the «Same Level Same Potential Principle». Haru and I have been the same level for nearly half a year now. So the abilities of our avatars shouldn’t differ too much. What I lack is... not in terms of my avatar, but strength of the Burst Linker’s mind. The strength that enables me to grit my teeth and tough it out no matter what situation I’m in, no matter how much of a gap there is between my power and the opponent’s power... That’s what I don’t have. Okay... I admit it. I’ve always envied you. Your body that represents true hope and desire, your power, your ability to make the impossible possible...”

Takumu’s left hand moved and grasped the Enhanced Armament on his right hand. This moment was too similar to the one he had made on his real world bed minutes ago. Next came a low, suppressed voice.

“That «darkness»... the «ISS Kit» will enter that gap in your soul and spread its roots. It’s not a simple Enhanced Armament. It’s the embodiment of pure «negative Incarnation» produced through some means. It will corrupt and obscure its wearer’s heart. Then it will grow and reproduce by devouring negative emotions... Haru, I’ve already... This type of black feeling is already my... Many have been misled by it, and even I... can no longer distinguish between...” Takumu stopped his moaning voice, and instantly he was covered in thin shadow-like waves, which even Haruyuki could see through the darkness.

Clenching his fists, Haruyuki took another step forward.

This was no longer an illusion; Haruyuki could feel the extreme, ice-cold pressure emanating from the avatar before him. Cyan Pile had never released this kind of atmosphere before. In other words, Takumu was no longer the Takumu he had once been.

Although he realized that, Haruyuki still spoke the most honest feelings he could to the same-age young boy before him, his bosom friend.

“Taku... I’m sorry.”

Without thinking, Haruyuki had poured his emotions into words and spoken them. At least this was not a lie nor misleading.

“I’ve never attempted to understand what you’re thinking... why you suffer. I’ve always assumed that you’ve always been calm and collected... You’ve always been so stoic and supportive of me. But... maybe that was a fantasy of mine. I really knew... even if it’s you, you would have your own wishes and desires...”

He stopped here, and Haruyuki pointed his fist at Takumu.

“--- But, I want to explain one thing to you. Taku, you... you are my model, my target. From a very, very long time ago, I’ve striven to become like you. Although you just said you lost to the temptation of the ISS Kit because you lack power, that’s absolutely not true. I believe, if it’s you, no matter what situation you’re in, you can endure it with your own strength.”

Breathing deeply, Haruyuki infused all of his emotions into his eyes and his fist ---

“That’s why... to tell you this, I, want to battle you now. I will try my hardest, and fight you fair and square.”

Yes.

Once someone «accelerated» into the battlefield, they could only «duel» with all their might. All of the answers were hidden within.

This was the first lesson that Haruyuki was giving his most respected person.

As though he felt the heat from Haruyuki’s fist, Takumu lifted his head. Deep within the gaps on his visor, two sharp eyes flashed bluish-white.

Haruyuki’s clenched fist slowly unclenched. His five sharp fingers drew a long, straight line, like a sword.

With a clear, metallic vibration, the sword’s gleam was bathed in a silver glow. Light extended about 15 centimeters from his fingertips, shaking the virtual air. This was Haruyuki’s Incarnate technique «Laser Sword».

“Full steam from the beginning. Taku, do your best as well!”

As though in response to Haruyuki’s shout, Takumu silently raised the Enhanced Armament on his right wrist.

Takumu slid the left hand near his shoulder, gripping the tip of the metal spike at the edge of the barrel. A faint skill activation command followed.

“... «Cyan Blade».”

Gashu! With a whooshing impact noise, the metal spike suddenly shot out. Takumu’s left hand grabbed the sudden lightning-like bolt, and drew a bluish-white arc in the air. At the same time, the Enhanced Armament on his right wrist split open, and the right hand that was released also gripped that light, stopping in the very middle. What emerged from scattering sparks was a large melee weapon with a blue blade, surrounded by a gleam of the same color. This was the Incarnate sword that Takumu had created during his training with the Red King. On the blackened apartment floor bathed in blood-red sunset, the two temporarily gazed at each other.

The countdown above their field of vision had already decreased from 1,800 seconds to 1,500 seconds. They had 25 minutes left. But both of them had started out with Incarnate techniques, so the outcome of the battle would likely be decided in half that time.

Looking exactly the same as he did gripping a shinai in the dojo, Takumu held the sword from his middle in a majestic and proper position. There seemed not to be a single gap in his style. But Haruyuki had decided that he would be the one to strike first. With Silver Crow's abilities, the theoretical strategy was to fight defensively for the first half, saving up his Special Attack Gauge, and activate a crippling attack in the second half. But this fight had no need for those exact calculations. This was not to gain Burst Points or to even out his win-loss ratio. This largest decisive battle only needed to ignite the flame in their hearts, and fight with all their might; that was the soul of a Burst Linker. *To hell with the specifics*, that person had bravely declared before.

He slowly bent down, and pulled the Laser Sword on his right arm behind him. The anxiety in the air intensified, sparks flew up, and in that instant ---

“... RAAHH!”

Haruyuki kicked off the ground with full strength and instantly closed the ten-meter distance between them. Concentrating the sprinting force and flexibility of his entire body onto his right arm, his thoughts overlapped at the speed of light.



Shiyukiin! With a clear sound, the «Laser Sword» extended one meter and headed straight for Cyan Pile's left shoulder. Haruyuki's ability was of the «Range Augmentation» type in the four basic Incarnate abilities, with the property of high-speed extension during attack and defense.

That's why, during confrontations, his opponent would find it very difficult to grasp his effective range. Even «Dusk Taker» was unable to avoid his blade upon his first time seeing it.

--- But.

Haruyuki's irregular upward diagonal slash was matched and caught by a slight change in angle of Takumu's two-handed sword blade.

A sharp impact resounded, and silver and blue light burst in all directions. Then, *gyari!* The blade intersection slid slightly; Haruyuki's sword, which was supposed to be on top, was instantly pressed downwards.

“Urgh...”

Under frightening pressure, his left hand bounced up on reflex. It also produced a Laser Sword, crossing over his right hand sword and forming an X, attempting to balance out Takumu's two-handed sword.

But that was only maintained for about half a second. The blue halo covering the two handed sword expanded to Takumu's sturdy wrists, and the weight against Haruyuki doubled in an instant. During kendo club practice and competitions, Takumu endless repetitions of his sword handling intensified his imagination. Faced with surprising weight, Silver Crow's elbows and joints began to creak in protest, spitting orange sparks.

In one move, Haruyuki expended the entirety of his Special Attack Gauge that had been painstakingly exchanged from his HP Gauge, and immediately shook the wings on his back. The resulting thrust pushed the blue blade back slightly, and he used that counterforce to launch himself backwards. Haruyuki put considerable distance between himself and Takumu again.

Takumu, who had not made a single move by himself all this time, placed his two-handed sword at his middle and spoke in a low voice.

“Haru, if we properly compete by strength, you have no chance of winning. I don't wish for this kind of battle.”

“... Ah, I know.”

Haruyuki nodded, slowly raising the Laser Sword on his right arm.

“I was just greeting you then. Now, I will show you my «strength» and «skill» at the same time.”

Although they were slightly exaggerated words, he was fanning his own flame as well.

Takumu was able to be confident in his own swordsmanship through roughly six years of training kendo and his own body. Not just in terms of gripping a shinai in the real world, even sword-to-sword combat in the Accelerated World left Haruyuki inferior.

But the Haruyuki today had a technique to transform superior opponents' attacks into his own strength.

The «resilient technique» taught to him personally by Kuroyukihime that he had trained hard on his own --- «Guard Reversal», was that technique. Not rigidly taking his opponent's strike, then launching a counterattack, but an advanced technique that involved incorporating the strike into his own movements, then molding and releasing it.

Interestingly, Haruyuki surmised that this technique, to a certain extent, was driven by the Incarnate System. Although there were no visible halos associated with it, or strength of «Over-Ray», it was controlled through imagination, manipulating the path and strength of the attack.

If that were true, then the trick was to *believe*.

If he was wrong, believing in his enemy's attack, accepting it, and relying only on his enemy's determination to do that, no molding would occur. Not a solid deflection, but a soft intimacy. That was why it was called the «resilient technique».

Since Haruyuki began learning this technique, about ten days had passed. Including the earlier battle against Bush Utan, he had only used it a few times for experience. It was his first time trying it along with a bladed opponent in an Incarnate battle, of course. But Haruyuki and Takumu had promised each other to go all out. Thus, any reservations or excuses were not allowed.

After taking a deep breath, Haruyuki diminished the Laser Sword in his right hand into small Over-Rays that only covered his five fingers.

Takumu's eyes narrowed into a straight line under his visor. But he seemed to understand that Haruyuki was not giving up at all, as the halo around Haruyuki's right hand actually compressed together and intensified.

“... I'm coming, Taku!”

At Haruyuki's shout, Taku responded in a half-taunting manner.

“Come at me, Haru!”

Bending his body down, Haruyuki kicked off the floor and shot forward a second time. This time, Takumu assumed a ready stance. There were many Blue-type Burst Linkers who possessed sword-type Enhanced Armaments, but there were almost none with kendo experience. Their attack speed was completely different from Takumu's.

It was the same for throwing punches in boxing, but truly practiced tactics did not have exaggerated readying motions. Different from the other Burst Linkers who made a show of raising it over their head and heavily swinging it down, while others were still only aware of a small movement of his sword, Takumu's blade would have already closed in. If this were in the

real world, Haruyuki would probably have been beaten to a pulp before he realized what was going on.

However, his instinct and reaction speed in a FullDive environment was Haruyuki's only ability worthy of praise.

Haruyuki used his invisible senses, or rather, instinct, to detect the «Cyan Blade» that was about to cleave his visor forehead in two as it approached with ridiculous speed.

Riiiiin. A sound rang from far away. The world changed colors. With «super-accelerated senses», the speed of the sword slowed by just, *just* a little.

--- *Here!*

Haruyuki softly placed his right fingertip on the side of the deadly blade, damaging the weaker «sword body».

If it had not been protected by Over-Rays, even if he had struck the sword body, Haruyuki's hand would be deflected away without leaving a trace. That was the power of Incarnation, which surpassed all physical laws in the game. But the «light speed» phenomenon engulfing his hand right now had defended against Takumu's «cleaving» imagination.

Even so, if he had taken the sword's attack with his hand, it would have been cut off. This was due to the contrast between Haruyuki's «Range Augmentation» Incarnation and Takumu's «Strength Augmentation» Incarnation. Taku had declared earlier, “*If we properly compete by strength, you have no chance of winning*”, and this was the reason. Therefore, Haruyuki had decided to try the resilient technique to defend and counterattack.

Of course, Takumu's steely, proper sword was not easily bent. Like Kuroyukihime had demonstrated to him, turning the attack 180 degrees against his opponent or whatever was definitely not possible. But in Haruyuki's previous battle with Bush Utan, he had merely upset the other side's strength to avoid a fatal blow, and learned that interferences smaller than what he imagined were still useful.

Haruyuki stealthily, softly, injected power into the fingertip that was touching the sword body. Both sides' Over-Ray contact spots were compressed, sparks flying. He could not deflect it here. Haruyuki's mind recalled the time when Ardor Maiden had withstood and repelled Bush Utan's «Dark Blow» with the palm of her hand. Although that hadn't been the «resilient technique», Maiden's fiery determination had exposed no hint of animosity or malice. He could only feel her will to accept, calm, and heal others' disturbed hearts. Although Haruyuki had not trained to her level, there was absolutely no trace of enmity towards Takumu in his heart. He only --- wanted to tell him.

How he, Arita Haruyuki, truly believed in Mayuzumi Takumu.

The halo wrapped around the blue blade seemed to be filled with Takumu's confusion, fear, regret, and desire.

Although wanting to be closer to these emotions, Haruyuki pressed his whole hand onto the sword --- his mind drawing him in, his actions bringing him closer.

Kyariiin! Haruyuki heard a noise that sounded like precious metal being hewn from a rough surface as countless trails of orange sparks flew across his vision. The two-handed sword's edge retreated, grazing the left side of Silver Crow's visor as it went.

Haruyuki immediately struck out with his right arm that had pressed on the sword, from fingertips to elbow.

Unexpectedly, his Chinese boxing style elbowing motion caught Cyan Pile on his left shoulder and exploded. A heavy *don* responded to his hand. Takumu, his upper body shaking, struggled to pull back his sword.

Unfortunately, any more «Guard Reversals» he pulled were unlikely to be as successful as that one. Takumu would have predicted Haruyuki's actions, even figuring out the logic behind them, and readied himself based on that. That was why he could not pass up this opportunity right now. Maintaining his close proximity --- strike!

“Uwo... OOO!!”

Haruyuki let out a short roar, expending the Special Attack Gauge he had just accumulated from that beautiful strike, and pumped his left metallic wing with all his might. Explosive thrust propelled his body that had moved left forcefully rightwards. Using this momentum, Haruyuki sent a left knee kick at Takumu's floating, weakly defended right abdomen. Another heavy blow.

“Ugh...”

Takumu grunted, but he did not stop moving because of that, and tried to use the hilt of his sword to deliver a blow to Haruyuki's helmet. This attack was not taught in kendo, of course, but seemed to have a place in iaijutsu⁵⁵.

He was unable to duck left or right; what good timing. But Haruyuki intentionally slid his right supporting foot and let his entire body fall downwards. The two-handed sword hilt nearly grazed between his eyebrows dangerously, and retreated.

Haruyuki's literal “falling evasion” seemed to make Takumu hesitate for a moment. There were basically no instances of downward attacks in kendo. Even so, if Haruyuki fell onto the ground like this, he would definitely be immobilized for a moment. It was unclear whether Takumu planned to hold Haruyuki down like that, as he raised his right foot.

But Haruyuki, falling backward, right before he hit the ground, both of his wings pumped above him. As though an invisible rope were pulling his feet, he slid forward with a jerk. By the time Cyan Pile's right foot stomped the ground with a *don*, Haruyuki did a backflip before jumping up from the ground. Then, taking advantage of his opponent's relatively weaker back armor, he launched a «midair attack» with his right foot. Combining the momentum generated from his right wing and his sprinting strength, Haruyuki finally closed on a dead angle on a staggering Takumu's back, striking out with his right hand.

⁵⁵ The Japanese art of drawing one's sword quickly. More info: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/iai_jutsu

His hand that was imbued with the light of Incarnation struck a dead blow on Cyan Pile's left shoulder, and his thick armor was cleaved open, as if it were made of paper.

Utilizing the three-dimensional physical momentum generated by thrust from both of his wings, Haruyuki had launched the other technique he had been training --- «Aerial Combo». His Special Attack Gauge had filled to a point ready for usage, and as long as his attacks kept connecting, he could string together endless combos. His movements were also very irregular, and were basically indefensible at first sight. Before, even the Black King had been forced to defend for a full ten seconds.

“Uwo... OOOOH!”

With an unbreakable determination, Haruyuki sped up his attacks.

As expected of a nearly pure Blue type, although Cyan Pile continuously took these beautiful attacks, his HP Gauge still showed more than 70 percent left. Silver Crow was still at maximum health, but whether he could keep up these fast attacks remained to be seen. But Haruyuki was already determined to lose all trickery in this battle. From start to finish, he had to go all out. Things that must be transferred this way definitely existed in the Accelerated World.

As the gears in his brain turned with increasing speed, Silver Crow's movements were also accelerating. His small body danced chaotically in the air, all four of his limbs drawing countless lines. Occasionally «Laser Sword» and «Cyan Blade» would strike violently, sending a giant shockwave across the stage, but Haruyuki managed to avoid a direct hit.

Takumu also slowly began to counter Haruyuki's Aerial Combo, but was unable to evade all of his attacks, strikes, and cuts at various points on his large body. His HP Gauge was falling continuously, eventually dropping below 50 percent, turning yellow.

In the highest climax of the intense battle, Haruyuki heard personal words resounding in his head.

... Ahh... Haru...

... Beautiful. Your fighting, is indescribably beautiful...

Deep within the gouged gap in Cyan Pile's visor, Takumu's eyes narrowed into a thin line. Bluish-white light flashed erratically.

..... But. That beauty... is really, too dangerous. It makes my heart, very uneasy.

..... Defeat me, with a deadlier violence. Otherwise, I will...

Want to destroy you.

Pika!! Takumu's eyes flashed fiercely.

From the numerous holes covering Cyan Pile's chestplate, sharp bullets appeared with rough sounds.

“.....!!”

Haruyuki instantly wanted to slide right. But whether he had already see through Haruyuki’s evasive nature, Takumu also spun his body ---

“«Splash Stinger»!!”

With the sound of the technique activating, before Haruyuki’s eyes, countless needlelike missiles launched. Since he was too close to them, it would be impossible to dodge them all. Haruyuki retreated backwards at full speed, using the Laser Swords on both hands to slice each missile in half, one by one. Takumu’s technique was not Incarnation; the missiles themselves were unable to break through Haruyuki’s halos of light, but there were too many of them. Just as he finally struck down the last of the homing missiles, Haruyuki had pulled another 15 meters away from Takumu.

The black smoke from the explosions was suddenly blown away by the stage’s wind. The Cyan Pile standing before Haruyuki now was just like the one at the beginning of the battle, both wrists drooping lifelessly, and his head lowered. The halo of light covering the «Cyan Blade» in his right hand flashed erratically, meaning that it was about to slowly dissipate.

--- Then.

Haruyuki noticed the presence of a phenomenon different from before.

The entire body of the bluish-gray avatar, which wrapped in something that looked like a thin shadow, stood upwards towards the sky. Haruyuki was familiar with this hue. Yes, it was unmistakable, this was the «dark wave» encircling Bush Utan’s body in yesterday’s battle. In other words --- it was finally awakening. The Enhanced Armament dormant on Cyan Pile’s body that had given him the power to massacre the four members of «Supernova Remnant». Haruyuki inhaled deeply, and spoke emphatically.

“All right, Taku. Use it!”

Takumu looked up silently. Haruyuki stared into his face, and continued.

“Use all of it. It’s like that, right? That’s already your own power now. If you don’t go all out against me, this battle will never end. Come on... Use the «ISS Kit»!”

At Haruyuki’s shout, Takumu seemed to show traces of a smile.

Haruyuki nodded forcefully, muttering the words he could not say aloud.

--- Taku, I believe in you. No matter how this battle ends, I believe that you can break through that dark power.

Takumu seemed to hear these thoughts, and nodded as well.

The slender two-handed sword in his right hand, formed from «Positive Incarnation of the Second Type», vanished. Blue light wrapped around his wrist again, restoring his original Enhanced Armament, the «Pile Driver».

Takumu raised that wrist high above him --- and quietly, yet with determination, chanted. “«IS Mode», activate.”

Darkness in all directions.

Chapter 10

The mysterious Enhanced Armament «ISS Kit» looked extremely small in size, compared to the scale of its terrifying power.

It was a black semi-sphere about five centimeters in diameter. It slightly resembled a Social Security Camera. Bush Utan and Olive Glove had installed in the middle of their chests. But, in response to Takumu's activation command, the semi-sphere floated up from the «Pile Driver»'s gauntlet on his right hand.

A thin line protruded from the Kit's middle. The semi-sphere was split there into two upper and lower parts, where another sphere appeared from within the gap between, giving the impression of a biological eyeball. It was soaked in a light that glowed deep, blood red ---

Then, under Cyan Pile's feet, a frighteningly complex and large-scale Over-Ray seeped out, and formed a vortex. No, that was not a ray of light. It was dyed a thick jet black. This was no longer the hazy «shadow» that had encircled Bush Utan. This was a pure dark wave.

Haruyuki desperately struggled with his legs, which wanted to fall to their knees.

The atmosphere of these waves were completely incomparable to Utan's. Not only did its light effect provide proof, where Takumu stood, the floorboards quickly split radially.

..... *Taku*.....

Whether he had heard Haruyuki's unconscious shout or not, Takumu replied calmly.

“Haru.”

Taku pointed at the floors above and below them as he spoke. But his voice was very different from before his summoning of the Kit. It was a darkly textured, distorted, metallic growl.

“... If you keep staying in a cramped space like this, you won't be able to show your full power.”

“Ah... yeah. Should we change to a different place, outside...?”

It looked like Takumu had not been affected mentally as Utan and company had. Haruyuki replied while making this evaluation and exhaling in relief.

But ---

“No need, no need for all that trouble.”

Takumu muttered, and pointed the ISS Kit-borne Pile Driver at the floor below him without hesitation. Then, a calm, utterly undisturbed command activation followed.

“«Dark Shoot».”

In place of the metal stake, rays of darkness shot out. The rays instantly pierced the floor, carving a hole roughly ten centimeters across, and disappeared below.

One second, two seconds... three seconds later.

Haruyuki felt a tremendous tremor coming up to him from below. Without leaving him time to breathe, the floor cracked into pieces. From the gaps in the floor, an energy that could only be described as black flames spewed.

“.....!!”

Haruyuki gasped and opened his wings in reflex, flying straight backwards. He flipped in midair, extended both hands for maximum speed, and shot straight outside the apartment. The storm closing in behind him shook his body, and Haruyuki just managed to get into the air, flying in a straight line in the sky of the «Burnt» stage. After confirming that he had pulled himself away far enough, Haruyuki turned his body around and looked ---

“Wha.....”

Haruyuki gasped in shock.

Before his eyes, the 30 floor A block skyscraper of his home apartment in the real world began to shatter from the bottom up and collapse.

The geographical material of the «Burnt» stage was very easily destroyed. But there should be a limitation. In order to destroy gigantic structures like this one, and topple the «Duel» strategy from the bottom up, one needed to put in a great amount of time and effort. As far as Haruyuki knew, the only Burst Linker able to «destroy a giant building in one strike» was the «Immobile Fortress» with Enhanced Armament fully deployed, the Red King «Scarlet Rain».

Haruyuki blinked repeatedly, unable to accept the scene unfolding before him. But the apartment completely crumbled in mere seconds, becoming a huge mound of rubble.

As though he were being attracted forwards, Haruyuki confirmed Cyan Pile’s HP Gauge at the top right corner of his vision.

He had clearly been trapped in that huge collapse, yet the remaining HP was only a little less than the 40 percent remaining after Haruyuki’s «Vertical Combo». Furthermore, this was the «Burnt» stage, where rewards for environmental destruction were little, but his Special Attack Gauge had filled to the brim in an instant.

Turning back towards the mountain of rubble, Haruyuki saw that the topmost point of the pyramidal rubble mound was blown straight upwards.

Emerging from within the powdery debris was Cyan Pile, the dark waves surrounding him burning even blacker.

“..... Taku.”

Haruyuki croaked. But he was unable to say anything more.

This was a spectacle that rendered him only able to put aside all shock and trepidation. Bush Utan's strength had also skyrocketed after he had activated his «IS Mode», but Takumu's change far exceeded his. In other words --- he had always concealed deep, maddening distress within his heart.

This meant even more that he could not lose now.

If Haruyuki lost easily to the power of the ISS Kit, the dark power clinging tightly to Takumu would intensify even more. Takumu might step into the dark side of Incarnation, the bottomless «hole in his heart» that Kuroyukihime, Sky Raker, Niko, and Blood Leopard had repeatedly warned against.

Since the «Backdoor Program» incident, Takumu had desperately tried to restore himself. He had transferred from the most advanced information studies school in Shinjuku to Umesato Middle School, where many things were still analog, and at his own pace, had walked step by step until today. He could not have his way blocked by certain people trying to transmit malice to him. Haruyuki must take action, pull him out of the turmoil of the Kit, and cut off its dominance over him. For that ---

He would win this battle. That was the only thing.

Achieve victory, and show him the power of «Positive Incarnation». Show him what is concealed within, smaller but brighter than anything else: the light of hope.

Haruyuki hovered 70 meters above the ground, and formed «Laser Swords» with both arms. Below him, Takumu stood on top of the rubble as he slowly raised his «Pile Driver» that contained the ISS Kit, and pointed it directly at Haruyuki.

Before, the «Dark Shoot» that the barrel had shot out demonstrated surprising strength. He might not be able to deflect it with his Laser Sword like he had Bush Utan's. But if he could estimate the correct trajectory and timing, he should be able to deal with it. He only needed to dodge it *just* before it hit him, then counter with a fast downwards strike.

Haruyuki held his virtual breath, and concentrated his focus entirely on the barrel of Cyan Pile's raised Enhanced Armament.

--- That was why it was too late by the time he realized. With Takumu's quiet command, his Special Attack Gauge that was not supposed to be used at all with an Incarnate attack, was completely expended from his full state.

“... «Lightning Dark Spike».”

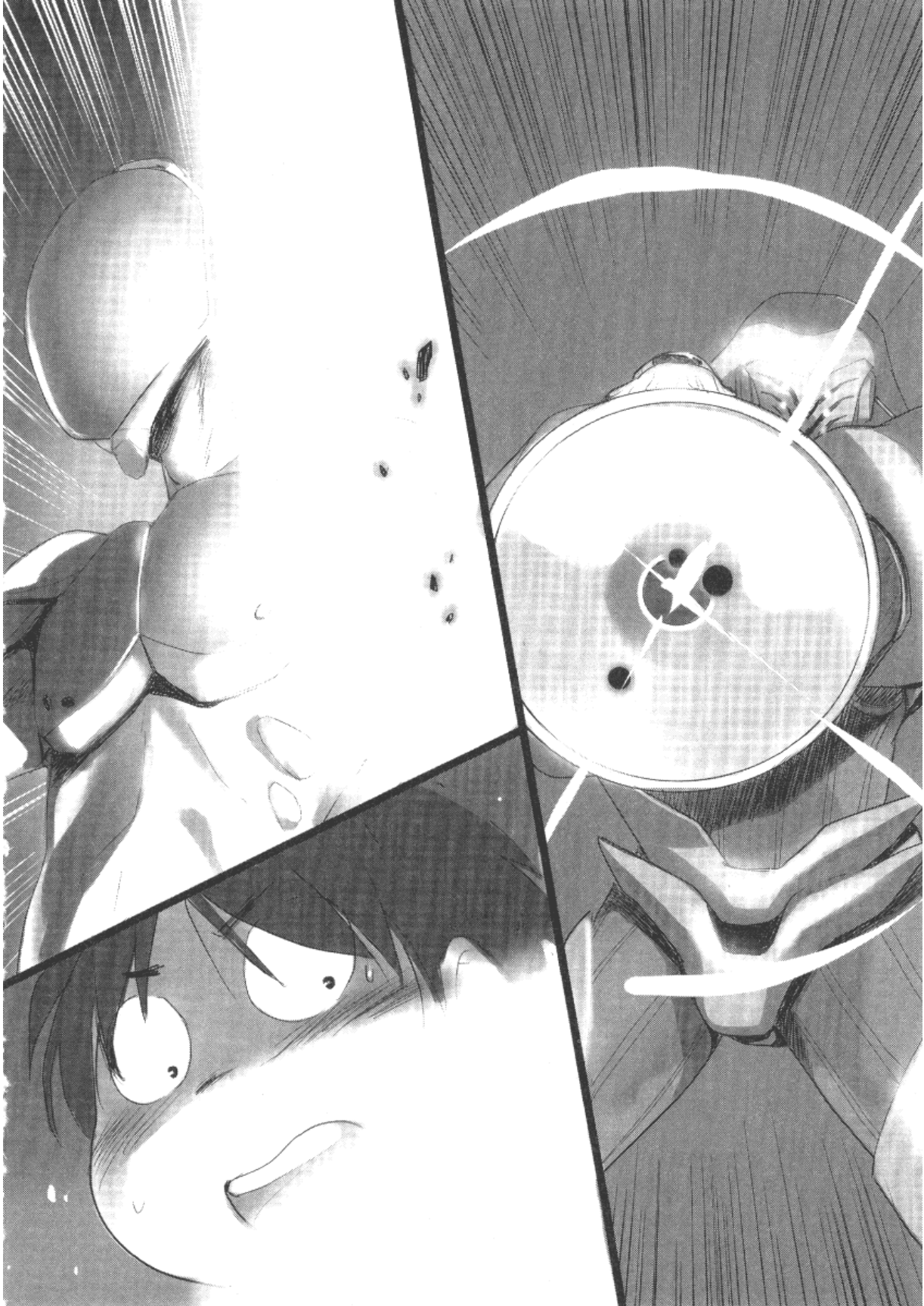
With a skill name that Haruyuki had never heard before, a jet of black light flashed across the barrel of the Pile Driver.

And that was it. The huge burst, roar, and impact that had destroyed the apartment did not occur. The dry wind of the Burnt stage blew by, and a cold feeling neared his left shoulder...

“.....?”

Haruyuki discovered that his body was involuntarily trembling. At the same time, several small dots of light flew past the bottom of his vision. Turning, he saw strange objects land on the ground. It was a silver rod and a thin, panel like object. Haruyuki gazed at it ---

“.....?!”



When Haruyuki realized the shape of those objects, he could only widen his eyes and inhale sharply. That was --- a hand. And *wings*.

He slowly glanced at his left shoulder. A smooth, mirror-like gleaming surface seemed to be added there. Silver Crow's left hand and left metallic wing had been completely cut off at their roots.

His body suddenly tilted at a great angle. Haruyuki unconsciously pumped his right wing harder, trying to maintain altitude, but his form was completely disrupted, and he fell into a spiraling dive. Just like a tree leaf, he plummeted towards the ground, turning corkscrews as he went.

The instant before he hit the ground, Haruyuki recovered from his confused state, and pumped his right wing backwards to slow down his rotation, landing himself feet-first on the ground. Even so, he did not manage to completely absorb the impact, and the joints at his knees and ankles spat sparks in protest. Haruyuki suddenly fell to his knees powerlessly, and it was too late, but he still checked his HP Gauge. He had lost a great deal from his left arm and wing; his HP Gauge had fallen below 50 percent, and was dyed yellow.

But compared to his injuries, the very fact that he *was* injured dealt an even greater blow to Haruyuki.

--- He had not seen it at all.

The barrel of the Pile Driver had fired a black, cross-shaped flash; he was barely able to notice that. But as to how it traveled a 70-meter distance and attacked his body, he was completely unaware.

Haruyuki had once engaged in ridiculous training with a self-made VR program that involved «dodging a bullet fired at close range». Having worked hard, the Haruyuki now, as long as he could see the gunner, even if they were sniping with a large rifle, there was a very large chance that he would be able to evade their attacks. On the other hand, if he was unable to do that, there was no way he would be able to fly in a sky full of obstacles. Yet --- if he couldn't even recognize the projectile path, let alone dodge it, that was unbelievable...

Haruyuki felt a great blow to his mentality, but he only spent half a second remaining confused on the ground.

Being able to immediately re-organize one's thoughts and make their next move, no matter what surprising circumstance they encountered, was the most important skill a Burst Linker could have. Haruyuki temporarily suppressed his shock and attempted to construct his next strategy under the pretense of basically losing his ability to fly. Even so, he could only revert back to intimate contact, and since he only had one hand and wing, he could only look for an opportunity for victory in the middle of close-quarters combat by combining «Guard Reversal» and «Aerial Combo».

First --- he needed to move!

Shaking himself like that, Haruyuki stood in the lobby of the collapsed apartment building, attempting to run towards the B block building.

But then, an unexpected thing happened.

Gon! With an impact, the ground shook, preventing Haruyuki from fleeing. Haruyuki staggered and turned towards the sound; only ten meters away, the giant avatar had landed. Takumu was supposed to still be on top of the rubble mountain, but he had jumped and landed in the lobby.

Weight-based avatars such as Cyan Pile and Frost Horn could generate shockwaves by stamping on the ground, impeding the movement of lightweight avatars. But this tremor or shaking could even be categorized as a severe earthquake. Haruyuki's foot sank into a horizontally branching crack, and Takumu ran at an inordinately high speed from behind him, catching up with Haruyuki, and standing at a close distance.

As though Takumu's Duel Avatar had actually enlarged, the presence of his pressure froze Haruyuki to the spot.

Deep within the slits on Takumu's visor, a low noise seeped out, and both eyes flashed. But the color of his eyes had changed from their normal light blue to a dark violet.

Takumu silently looked down upon Haruyuki, who stood uneasily.

A distorted voice leaked out from Takumu's mouth.

“Sorry... Haru.”

“..... Taku.....”

Taku took a step towards Haruyuki, who had called his name in a nearly inaudible voice.

“... Sorry. I... Things have become like this... I knew that things would turn out like this. But I still forced you to fight me. Now... even if you think I only want to knock you down, I can't help it...”

Don. Takumu took another step, and Cyan Pile's huge physique was right in front of Haruyuki. Pitch-black halos of light poured endlessly from the rock-like avatar, shooting straight up into the air. Takumu glanced down at the source of the black halos, the black eyeball implanted into the Enhanced Armament on his right wrist.

“... I heard that, the deeper the darkness in my heart becomes, the more terrifying the power this «ISS Kit» can produce. That means... this is who I am. When I used this power to brutally kill those four PKers, I had already realized that. No... maybe I realized that from the very beginning. Getting good grades, winning competitions, forcefully maintaining Chii-chan's feelings, because I only became a Burst Linker for all this...”

“Taku..... Taku.”

No. No. No no no no!!

A single word pulsed in Haruyuki's heart. But he did not know how to express it properly in words.

His vision danced, wet, in a spectrum of multiple colors. Haruyuki later realized that it was due to the tears behind his visor.

In Takumu's eyes staring down at him, a small particle of light also dropped down, and immediately evaporated.

“Thank you, Haru.”

The kind voice of his bosom friend reached Haruyuki's ear.

“I'm so grateful that the opponent in my last «Duel» is you... Thank you.”

“..... L-Last...? Wh... What do you mean...”

To Haruyuki's shaking question, Takumu replied calmly.

“After this battle ends, I will infiltrate the «Acceleration Research Society».”

“..... Eh.....”

“Those guys who created and are distributed this horrifying Enhanced Armament. I never thought I could defeat their leader. But if I follow the route of infection of this Kit, I think that I should be able to find that guy, wherever he is. I'll find a way to lure him into the Unlimited Neutral Field, and grab more information... And even if...”

He paused for a moment, then continued with more determination.

“... Even if I lose all my Burst Points there, and my Brain Burst is uninstalled... I will tell you everything I know. That's why, from then on, it's up to you to stop them, Haru. This... bewitching power that jumps through the «scar in the hearts» of all Burst Linkers, should not exist. Because the Accelerated World is a place that was created for people like you, Chii-chan, and Master who can transform their wounds into hope and continue on...”

“... Taku... You... Even you, also...”

Haruyuki was furious at his disability to form proper sentences in this situation.

But his bosom friend of ten years seemed to understand Haruyuki's feelings. A soft *heh* came from his mask.

“Haru, there's another thing, that I need to thank you for.”

In contrast to the violent halo of darkness emanating from his entire body, Takumu's voice had always remained steady.

“Back then... when we first fought against each other, thank you for forgiving me. Ever since then until today, the eight months that I’ve been able to fight as a member of the reborn «Nega Nebulas» have been a dreamlike happiness. Thank you, Haru. In your «Purification» mission, although I regret very much that I have to give up halfway on this Legion’s road... Please thank Master, Raker, and Maiden for me. Afterwards... apologize to Chii-chan for me.”

“--- Stop it! Don’t say things like that, Taku!!”

Pushing back the splitting pain in his heart, Haruyuki screamed.

Clenching his remaining right fist, he desperately gathered the light of his Incarnation. That Over-Ray reflected Haruyuki’s intensely wavering emotions as it flickered irregularly, but it still dampened the dark hue swirling around the two avatars.

“If you leave the Legion, Chiyu will cry! She will definitely cry! Do you want to make Chiyu cry, Taku?!!”

At this shout, Takumu also bowed his head. Finally, he spoke in his normal calm voice.

“... Yes, she probably will. But... I believe that as long as she can dry her tears, she will be able to go forward. Because the one who Chii-chan has always hoped would return, is me. Haru, I leave Chii-chan to you...”

Smiling, Takumu clenched his left fist in front of Haruyuki.

The compressed light of darkness roared violently. A darkness like that of a black hole easily surpassed the feeble silver light on Haruyuki’s right hand.

“Come on, let’s finish this battle, Haru. Don’t make such a sad face like that for me. This darkness has existed in my heart from the very beginning. So you can make a different choice than what you did eight months ago. I will let you do that...”

Whether he had compressed too much power or not, Takumu began to pull back his left fist that spat out countless sparks.

The sound of the skill name came kindly, as if it were comforting, encouraging Haruyuki.

“«Dark Blow».”

With a power like a giant meteorite descending from the Universe, Takumu swung his fist, and Haruyuki attempted to defend with the silver light in his right hand.

But then, his entire body felt an impact he had never felt before, like the world itself had exploded. Although it was feeble, had he not defended with Incarnation, his avatar would likely have shattered instantly.

Although he had avoided direct destruction, he could not stand no matter what, and Haruyuki was flung backwards towards the B block apartment building behind him with terrifying speed. He flew parallel to the ground for roughly half a second, and then struck the outer wall of the building. His body crashed into a large hole on the charred cement, but did not stop inside the

building either. After crashing through one wall, and another, and another, and another, his momentum was finally canceled out, and after bouncing off the floor of a giant room, he crumpled spread-eagled on the ground.

In the top left corner of his darkened vision, probably due to the magnitude of the impact, something red blinked repeatedly.

Although his thought process had nearly halted, Haruyuki still managed to realize that it was his now single-digit HP Gauge.

A despairing disparity in strength. Yes, now was the first time that Haruyuki's heart filled with despair.

Making Takumu give it his all, then winning against him and saving him; what an unrealistic, arrogant thought I had. Takumu's strength clearly surpassed Haruyuki's by lightyears, in all aspects. That's why he admired him. That's why he was his goal.

What else could Haruyuki, who had cornered himself with no other option, determined, with his wings, his sole source of strength, taken away, do...

He felt a heavy tremor from far away. Takumu punched through the wall of the apartment and walked in a straight line towards Haruyuki, to end this battle.

Under his cracked visor, Haruyuki felt tears flowing down again.

--- I never expected that it would end like this. I believed that Chiyuri, Takumu and I, could have played together forever. I clearly believed that Brain Burst and the Accelerated World existed for this....

『 Yes, they do. 』

A certain voice resounded in his head unconsciously.

Haruyuki's eyes snapped open. Against the background of the charred scenery, an inexplicable scene unfolded.

From within the body of Silver Crow lying on the ground, a silhouette shot out and stood up silently.

A hazily transparent, dreamlike silhouette. Haruyuki didn't know who it was.

It was a slender female Duel Avatar. The flower petal themed artwork on its shoulders and waist were, in some ways, similar to Chiyuri's «Lime Bell». But its short hair curling up and the color of its armor were completely different from Chiyuri.

It was a warm gold, like spring sunshine ---

That nameless person sat down on a piece of rubble besides Haruyuki, and spoke again.

『It is just as you believed. Brain Burst does not exist not just for hate, and battling against each other. We were also able to join hands and form bonds through it. 』

“..... Who are, you...? Why did you come here...? This is a Direct Connect battleground...”

Haruyuki asked it dumbly. The dreamlike transparent person chuckled softly and spoke.

『I am... a memory. I am a miniscule fragment of consciousness, recorded by the central system, and stored in a corner of a giant informational unit that formed a certain object. 』

“... Memory.....”

As he murmured, Haruyuki suddenly felt that a certain part of his own memories was slightly agitated.

--- I know her. Although we've never met, nor do I know her name, I know this person...

As though confirming Haruyuki's thoughts, the golden avatar nodded softly.

『Because you projected your past memories in the «Imperial City», the central system and its circuitry temporarily activated, and that's why I'm able to speak with you right now. But it definitely won't be for long.』

Pausing, the girl raised her voice, and told Haruyuki something surprising.

『There is still a way to save your friend.』

“Eh.....?”

Haruyuki's eyes widened. Pushing off the ground with his shattered right hand, he tried to sit up as he asked.

“Wh, what is it.....? You said that, I can, still do something...?”

『There should still remain a «power» inside your body. The only power that can combat the heavy darkness that your friend has stepped into...』

The golden avatar's smile faded as she spoke. After being confused for a moment, Haruyuki instinctively realized what she was referring to.

He shook his head on reflex.

“No... I can't, I can't use «that». If I call it out again, I won't be able to look back...”

«That». Living deep within Silver Crow, but restored to a seed state with Lime Bell's «Citron Call Mode II», the cursed Enhanced Armament.

--- «Disaster Armor».

At Haruyuki's words, the golden girl smiled somewhat sadly.

『 ... That armor was not born with the title of «Disaster». Many, many sad things happened for the armor to become distorted like that. 』

“Become... distorted...”

『 I have always waited in a corner of that armor. Every time it changed users, I prayed that this time, there would definitely be someone who could unlock the curse. I have always waited for the one who could heal the rage and pain of «that person»... 』

The girl slowly stood from the piece of rubble, knelt in front of Haruyuki, and softly caressed his broken silver avatar with her slender right hand.

『 If it is you, you, who are very similar to «that person», can definitely do it. It might take a very long time, but one day, you can definitely... --- That's why, you should not give up here. For your friend, once more, stand up... 』

The girl became more transparent. It turned into a hazy shadow, and returned to Haruyuki's body.

In his mind, a last voice came from far, far away.

『 ... Come, remember, call that name... the name of the armor before it twisted into the «disaster»... because you, should know... that name..... 』

--- Unconsciously, a light floated into his memory.

The pedestal of the «Seven Arcs» discovered in the «Imperial City». The metallic nameplate emblazoned with «開陽»⁵⁶, the sixth star in the Big Dipper.

The letters carved at the very bottom. When he saw those letters, he definitely felt a slightly pain deep within his soul. Just like memories of pain from long, long ago had been awakened.

Don. A heavy tremor came from the ground, and Haruyuki looked up.

Takumu seemed to have already arrived in the room adjacent to the wall in front of him. Whatever attack Haruyuki suffered next, his remaining single-digit HP Gauge would be easily depleted.

--- Can I stop Taku with how I am now? What kind of words can convince that guy who has fallen so much, to look back?

But Haruyuki clenched his teeth, and flung away the icy despair that was about to fill him up again.

⁵⁶ *Kaiyou*, kanji for “Mizar”. Refer to Chapter 1.

--- *Not with words.*

--- *With emotions. With a fist filled with emotion. Taku and I are both Burst Linkers. Then, there is only one way to convey the proper information.*

“... Decisively battle each other, with all of our power. In the beginning, we did that, Taku...”

Haruyuki murmured, and desperately pushed his shattered avatar into a standing position. The fragments from his cracked armor dropped to the floor, piece by piece.

His fear and cowardice, were gone.

Haruyuki gazed deep within the large hole on the wall, and quietly spoke the name that awoke beyond his memories.

“Equip... «The Destiny».”

(To be continued)

Afterword

I'm Kawahara Reki, and I present to you my first published book of 2011, «Accel World Volume 7: Disaster Armor».

When I think back, for the past two years, I've always found myself apologizing in my afterwords. So I decided that I would “try not to apologize in the Afterword” this year. Or at least, that was the plan... I'm sorry, please allow me to express my apologies... How should I put this? I guess I've already thrown aside that goal by apologizing like this... (LOL)

Ah, things have dragged on to the next volume again! I'm very sorry! With the sort of cliffhanger ending we got in Volume 6, I thought that I'd “end it with a bang in Volume 7”. So I actually did some slightly complex planning, just like I planned! Or at least, that's what I wanted... But Takumu-kun tried a lot harder than expected... (LOL)

B-But, for Takumu, who never really appeared much in Volumes 5 and 6 to suddenly become so active, as the author, I can relax. Since the story's progressed to this point, we can't say “just let the plot advance on its own”, so we'll have to continue on based on the characters' actions. As I write this Afterword, although I've already begun working on the next volume, during this unfinished battle, how Haruyuki and Takumu will decide victory or defeat even leaves me banging on my keyboard in excitement. Please wait a while before I deliver the next volume!

Next, I'll just share my hopes for the year 2011.

My first goal of “not apologizing” instantly failed (LOL), but at least my second resolution doesn't involve “keep writing” ... yet it seems to have manifested... I just thought indifferently that the best skill a writer engaging in this type of career would be, “even if I don't want to, I still have to continue writing”. In bike racing, for example, there's no point wasting all your energy; just keep your eye on the next hill, the next leg of the journey, save your stamina and just coast.... But, of course, we must also have the final sprint at the end. I'll won't miss that opportunity, and for the rest of this year, I will still pedal as hard as I can.

Volume 6⁵⁷ was finished on a very tight schedule, and as always, to Miki-san and illustrator HiMA-san whom I always bother, I hope to work harder in 2011 and keep more tightly to my deadlines, so please take care of me!

And to the readers attacked by the “To be continued” yet again in this new year's book, I once again seek your generous understanding to continue with me on this journey!!

A certain day in 2010⁵⁸, though it already feels like 2011,
Kawahara Reki

⁵⁷ This is a typo - It should be Volume 7.

⁵⁸ It's very likely that Kawahara wrote this volume towards the end of 2010, though this volume was published in February 2011.



遊びではない

天才プログラマー・茅場晶彦

オンライン

コミック
ソードアート・
オンライン 作画 / 中村貯子
原作 / 川原 礫 キャラクターデザイン / abec



&

コミック
ソードアート☆
おんらいん。 作画 / 南十字星



「電撃文庫MAGAZINE」(偶数月10日)にて連載中!

「これは、ゲームであっても

クリアするまで脱出不可能。
ゲームオーバーはプレイヤーの“死”を意味する——。
一万人ものプレイヤーが、
その禁断のデスバトルMMO
「ソードアート・オンライン」に
閉じこめられた。
しかしその悪夢も、
孤高のソロプレイヤー・
《黒の剣士》キリトによって、
ついに終止符が打たれる。

キリトとシノンが巻き込まれた
《死銃(デス・ガン)》事件から数週間。
妖精アバターによる次世代飛行系VRMMO
《アルヴヘイム・オンライン》に、奇妙な騒動が起こる。
数ヶ月前、史上最大規模のアップデートと共に実装された新マップ
《浮遊城アインクラッド》、
その第24層主街区北部の大木の根元で、毎日午後三時になると現われる謎のアバター。
自身の持つ十一連撃の《オリジナル・ソードスキル》を賭け、
訪れた相手と1体1の対戦(デュエル)を挑み、すべてを蹴散らし続けているという。
なんと謎のアバターは、凄腕プレイヤーのリーファだけでなく、
あの《黒の剣士》たるキリトすらも打ち負かしていた。
数多のプレイヤーを倒す《絶対無敵の剣》。
いつしか謎のアバターは《絶剣》と呼ばれるようになる。
リズベットからその一部始終を聞いたアスナも、
果敢に《絶剣》へ決闘を挑むのだが、結果、紙一重の差で敗北してしまう。
しかし、そのデュエルが終わるやいなや、《絶剣》はアスナを自身のギルドに誘うのだった。
天真爛漫な勧誘に、ただただ困惑するアスナ。
《絶剣》と呼ばれるほどの剣の冴え。そこには、とある秘密があった——。

『マザーズ・ロザリオ』編、登場!

電撃文庫 個人ウェブサイトながらも、
閲覧数650万PVオーバーを記録した伝説の小説!

ソードアート・

最新第⑦巻は、電撃文庫にて

イラスト/abec

2011年4月10日発売——!

特報!!! 『アクセル・ワールド8』は
2011年初秋頃発売予定!!!

●川原 礫著作リスト

- 「アクセル・ワールド1―黒雪姫の帰還―」(電撃文庫)
「アクセル・ワールド2―紅の暴風姫―」(同)
「アクセル・ワールド3―夕闇の略奪者―」(同)
「アクセル・ワールド4―蒼空への飛翔―」(同)
「アクセル・ワールド5―星影の浮き橋―」(同)
「アクセル・ワールド6―浄火の神子―」(同)
「ソードアート・オンライン1―アインクラッド―」(同)
「ソードアート・オンライン2―アインクラッド―」(同)
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電撃文庫

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かわはら れき
川原 礫

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か-16-9	1953	か-16-7	1899	か-16-5	1834	か-16-3	1775	か-16-1	1716

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か-16-6	1862	か-16-4	1804	か-16-2	1746	か-16-13	2082	か-16-11	2018

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