

43: Versus Magician

translated by
Falions

1

"That card," he said.
The wind blew, and the tree branches quivered.
"Place it horizontally right there."

2

Celestial City Dol Dona. A dazzling hilltop city.

"Hey, kiddo. Nice to meet you." Flugel said this with a laugh. "Well, more like nice to see you again. Do you remember? We met at the Pet Shop. Is it okay if I call you kiddo?"

"Whatever's fine" the other PC said nasally.

A teenage-looking male Blademaster. An average PC, to say the least. Nothing special equipped either. Stats were nominal. A newbie who had just started playing the game with nothing to be proud of, the antithesis of most MMORPG players. The PC itself seemed like it was disposable.

There was no one around them. The time was seven at night. Well, it was more like seven for Flugel, but a different time for the Blademaster. Tokyo and Los Angeles have a ten hour difference, after all.

It had been less than a minute since they met, but Flugel was able to deduce much about the Blademaster just from their short exchange – that he was a spoiled brat, for instance. That's why he gets bothered by condescending tones and blabbers without thinking; the follies of someone with no respect for the conditions of their birth.

His real name was Travis Bond. A 20-year-old Caucasian university student residing in Los Angeles.

"I was told to log in to the Japanese server and come here to talk to you. Apparently it would shorten my sentence or something?" he said. "But just what do you want to know about? Huh? If you want to know about the incident, then I've already said everything I can say about it. I don't know how many times I repeated that shit. If you want to know about it, just read the damn reports. Oh, wait, aren't you Japanese? Can you even read English? Hmm?"

He had a childish manner of speaking. Probably he had become tired and restless from being ceaselessly watched and interrogated by the authorities. Well, you reap what you sow, Flugel thought, but he couldn't exactly say that to him.

"I apologize for troubling you," he said lightly. "I simply thought we could have a nice chat, since you're so charming and all." Flugel kept his cool, as this was a golden chance – finally he would be able to speak to Travis Bond.

Once, in a hackers-only chatroom, Travis had been in an argument. Or, rather, he had cut himself into an ongoing argument between two other users. Travis hit it off with one of them. They became great friends and met up in The World. That was how Travis became involved with and carried out orders under the command of the PC named Geist. They had only met PC-to-PC once, but his

presence and clarity of mind had been so intoxicating that that single meeting was all that was required for him to become completely drunk under his influence.

"Yeah, right. What is it you want to know?"

"How to cause a catastrophe by intertwining the Net and real life, or how to destroy the world to save it – I thought we'd have a nice light chat about these sorts of things."

"Hah, I see."

Travis had become a puppet of Yuri Seto and established Pet Shop Chims under his guidance. Their philosophies had aligned, and Travis became more than happy to become an accomplice to his crime. He was a pitiful existence who was immediately cut down when his use had been fulfilled. But, it wasn't as if he was entirely innocent either. Judging by his tone, he hadn't come to realize the consequences of his own actions. In any case, Flugel wasn't here to impose a doctrine of repentance on this young man. Those kinds of matters should be left to more suitable adults. There was another purpose for their meeting today.

Flugel picked an item from his inventory and produced it in his right hand. A single photograph. He showed it to Travis.

"Is the person you met this PC?"

This photograph had been prepared by the NAB investigator David Steinberg. A screenshot that had been taken during the incident in Net Slum. A bust-up shot of Drain, the PC used by Yuri Seto.

"Yeah," said Travis with a small nod. "But when I met him he had a different costume on. Same face, though." Flugel sighed in relief upon hearing the answer. His cautiousness about this matter had paid off, and the feeling was welcome.

"You're absolutely sure? No two ways about it?" He pressed him more.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I don't know his name, though," said Travis. "I don't think Geist knew his name either. The guy never took on a name, said his name was irrelevant."

"Hold on a second." Flugel interrupted Travis' train of thought. "I'm confused. Is the man in this photograph Geist?" He looked at the photo and then looked back at Travis.

"Didn't I just tell you? The guy in the photograph never told me his name. You listening?" Travis was getting annoyed. "It was in the chatroom! This guy was arguing with Geist. I said that already, didn't I?! The guy in this picture. Then I joined in, and we became a trio! 2 + 1 is 3, dumbass! How do you not even know simple math?!" Suddenly he became silent. He had seen an indescribable look on Flugel's face.

"I've only one more question to ask you, kiddo," he said, keeping his voice down. "What kind of PC was Geist? If he's not the man in the photograph, I mean. What did he look like?"

"What?"

"For example... was there something on his face?"

"Wait. I remember now. A mask," Travis said nervously. "The right half of his face was covered by it. I remember it looking totally weird."

*

After Travis' PC had logged out as if to run away, Flugel stood at the top of the Dol Dona hill. His cell phone rang in real life. While staying logged in, he fumbled for his cell phone and brought it to his ear. This was his ultimate skill.

"Hello?"

A laugh came out of the receiver.

"It's an interesting sight, seeing an in-game character across the screen talk to no one in particular. Like a total schizo," said David Steinberg from Washington, D.C. "Did you ask all the questions you needed to?"

"Yes, I got what I needed."

Even though it was mostly separate from the rat incident, this loose end had troubled him. Why had Seto impersonated Geist? Surely one aspect of it was to make Yodogawa of CyberConnect Japan nervous. But was there any deeper meaning to it than that? He had thought Travis Bond held some sort of clue to that answer, and he was right. But he wasn't happy about it.

"That's great. I was watching the whole time, but I've got no clue what the meaning of any of that was. Yuri Kazcynski Seto used the name Geist to intimidate Yodogawa and control Travis Bond. I had originally thought it was nothing more than just a false identity, but does a PC named Geist really exist?"

"It sure seems that way, doesn't it?"

"Is this Geist a friend of yours?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you about him later, once I've figured this out."

Flugel only said what was necessary. As far as David understood it, Seto had simply used the name Geist. But he knew nothing of the actual Geist that existed as a member of Schicksal, or even that he had been an AI copy of Jyotaro Amagi. The investigative power of the NAB went no further than here, as impressive as it may be.

Flugel had no intention of telling him about this either. Above all else, that was his greatest secret.

"This is really troubling, Sogabe. If there's anything more you know about this situation I'd like to hear it," David inquired. "You're not thinking about going behind my back, are you?"

"No, nothing like that at all. I would never do that," said Flugel, and this was sincere. David reluctantly gave up the matter and sniffled.

"What exactly does it mean then, if this Geist actually exists?"

"Basically," said Flugel, "it might mean this case isn't exactly over."

3

Even though it was the afternoon, here it was always night. A nice ambiance, jukebox, darts, a fun atmosphere.

The Schicksal hideout, their former workplace.

"That's what I'm saying. Consider this advice on how to do your jobs right. Got it?"

Ringmaster Flugel continued to speak from his high horse. Seated across from him was the Beast Tamer, Cello. Next to Cello was the Dancing Girl, Klarinette. Both were listening intently to Flugel's words.

"The older you get, the harder it gets to sleep. You might think I'm lying, but this is the truth. And if you force yourself to sleep? Migraines ahoj. That's why you guys should get as much sleep as possible while you're still young. Just don't sleep your youth away! Enjoy every second that you have to sleep, but only when you absolutely have to. Otherwise it's a recipe for disaster."

Klarinette stared at him intently with an unchanging expression, but Cello immediately cut him down with one simple statement.

"What kind of lecture is this to get from your boss during a morning meeting?!" She got off the couch and took Klarinette's hand. "Enough already, we don't have time for this! Klarinette, you don't have to listen to this kind of nonsense. Let's go make our rounds!" They went outside together.

At the same time, the man seated at the counter, who had been typing away, suddenly stopped. The Knife Thrower Metronom stood up and made to exit the room without even looking at Flugel.

"And just where are you off to in such a hurry, Metronom?" Flugel called after him. "Sit and talk for a while. How about we air our grievances about Genius?" Upon saying the name of their employer, Metronom turned to give Flugel an icy stare.

"I'm busy. I have a lot of paperwork to get through."

"Paperwork? What for?"

"About what happened in Net Slum the other day. Net Slum is sacred... and you tarnished it. There's an unwritten rule, you know? No one is allowed to get it involved. It's a neutral place. But once again you ignored that rule and acted according to your own interests, creating more work for those around you."

Yesterday Flugel had called available members of Schicksal to Net Slum to shut down a shop that had been illegally selling account information, but it was more like they had completely destroyed it. This is what Metronom was talking about.

"You're so mean... I worked so hard to clean that place up, too. I can't believe I'm being insulted by my own subordinate."

"There is a process to these things. A notice, a warning, perhaps a meeting, various steps that need to be followed before we come to a decision, but you simply ignore all these and run off on your own."

"I get it. I'll help with the paperwork. What do you need me to sign? Here? The dotted line?"

"Stop making more of a mess! All you'll do is create more work for me!" As if biting at him, Metronom gathered his things and left the room. The only person left in the Schicksal hideout was Flugel.

The other members – Fire Eater Orgel, The Clown Posaune, and Strongman Trommel – were off-duty. The remaining Flugel simply stared up at the ceiling before deciding to play cards by himself, and set them up on the table.

The game was called Babel.

You place cards over each other slowly without much care for any set of rules. The goal was to create a tower of cards as tall as possible, like the one in the Bible. He did this silently for a while, but was suddenly interrupted by a voice.

"Place that card horizontally there."

Flugel raised his head. Someone was standing by the pinball machine in the distance. The PC of a young man. Just when did he enter the room?

"Oh, that's a good move. I didn't notice. If I keep lining them up like that, maybe it'll work!" Flugel said this to fill the air. "Thanks for your advice. You saved me!"

"You're welcome," said the mysterious young man across the room. His voice was as young as his appearance. Flugel could only see the left side of his face, as a strange mask covered the other side.

"By the way..." Flugel said while cleaning up the cards. "Who are you exactly? I can't see your face."

"Oh, I'm sorry. How impolite of me." He moved closer. His back was completely straight, and he gave an overexaggerated bow like a stage performer.

"My name is Geist. The Magician." He lifted his face, and its left half laughed. "The eighth member of Schicksal. Nice to meet you, Ringmaster."

Sogabe opened the official The World BBS on his palm PC and found himself lost in thought. A thread was open on his screen.

"From Fate to the Magician. I request contact. Please e-mail me."

"From Fate to the Magician. I would like to speak to you about the extermination of the rats. I request contact. Please e-mail me."

"From the Magician to Fate. In the lake, only silence remains. Nothing will be left behind."

Sogabe opened his keyboard and began typing a new text post.

"From Fate to the Magician. I have business with you. Please e-mail me."

He pressed the Enter key and sent off the message. He read it over, and then added another sentence.

"The Master is coming."

5

The official NAB request David had prepared had worked with immense success. It had allowed him full access to the facilities. The proceedings went even faster than when he had a letter of introduction in hand from CyberConnect. It was as if he had brought in a tiger with him.

"I've said it before, but please don't get the wrong idea." It had been two months since he last visited this place, and the bitter white-robed attendant was not pleased to see him again. "Allowing interviews with outsiders is not a normal practice here."

"I understand, I understand." Sogabe said this as sweetly as lemon cake. "Is Mr. Amagi in the garden?"

Jyotaro Amagi was indeed in the garden, sitting on a bench whilst reading a book. As Sogabe approached him, he raised his head and met his gaze.

"Hi there. Nice weather, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. It has been cold until recently, however. I am glad it has passed now." As he said this the eyes behind his glasses ran all across Sogabe's suit, scanning him.

"You're not an employee here?"

"Do you remember me?"

A small laugh left Amagi's lips.

"I'm sorry. My memory has been somewhat funny lately..."

"My name is Sogabe. Ryuuji Sogabe."

"I am Jyotaro Amagi." He closed the book and placed it next to him.

"Actually, there's something I'm here to ask you about, Mr. Amagi." Sogabe said this casually. "Does the name 'Geist' mean anything to you?"

"Geist, hm? It means 'spirit' in German, doesn't it?" This was his second time saying this. "I seem to remember it coming up in some philosophical text or the other... Oh, you mentioned it was a name. I remember a famous European landscape painter who went by that name."

Sogabe adjusted his tie with his right hand.

"Think more about that meaning: spirit. Imagine you could see your spirit right in front of you."

"Hm?"

"If you were to imagine that kind of Geist, what would you say to him?"

"I'm not sure I understand your question."

"I want to hear you talk to him, that spirit. I want it to hear your feelings."

"Well... what should I say?"

"Think about it like this. Is there anything you'd like to say to your past self? Imagine him standing before you."

"But my memories—"

"It's fine if it's just a vague memory or image of yourself. As long as it's you."

Sogabe persisted, hoping Amagi would offer anything at all.

"Hm, let's see..." said Amagi. "I have this feeling—a feeling that a long time ago, I was trying too hard. I don't remember it clearly, but it's like I had succumbed to an intense impatience... I think. Now... now I've released that feeling. Or maybe I've resigned myself to irresponsibility..." He continued to speak while he shook his head. "However, I don't think my current condition is one to be pitied. It's like... hm. I feel like that past self has been through a lot of trouble, so I would tell him..." Amagi closed his mouth for a moment, and then spoke:

"You should follow your own path."

6

Mac Anu. The colour of the twilight sky dyed the town.

A gentle breeze passed through, and the roadside trees' branches swayed.

The cafe terrace was crowded with people. Flugel took a seat at the edge of the area and took out some cards and began playing alone. He began lining up the cards to play Babel.

A strong wind blew and shook the branches more. When he looked up, a PC was standing straight up in front of him.

"That card," he said.

The wind blew, and the tree branches quivered.

"Place it horizontally right there."

"Thanks for that." Flugel looked back down at the table. "I'll be done playing soon. Can you wait until then?"

"Of course. Go ahead and take your time," said Geist, and then sat down at the table. He stared at Flugel. "Hmm. I thought you would be more surprised."

"No. No, it's not that, no. I just don't know what to say." Flugel shook his head. "Of course I'm surprised. I didn't think I'd ever see you again. I thought you were destroyed three years ago."

Geist, the AI copy of Jyotaro Amagi.

During 2020's Immortal Dusk, he worked behind the scenes to restore Jyotaro Amagi's consciousness. He failed, however, as Amagi succumbed to Outer Dependency Syndrome and transformed into a monster that smashed his PC into pieces. Not a fragment remained. It was a most cruel recompense for such a loyal servant who exhausted all means necessary to save his master. Flugel had seen it with his own eyes. That was why he had met Yodogawa's information that Geist was still alive with healthy skepticism—after all, it couldn't have been possible.

Geist was a man who had already died.

"Has it really been three years already?" He said this with a laugh. "Yes, I was most definitely destroyed by Jyotaro Amagi. However, at that time, his ODS had still not fully set, and his limbs were not strong enough to kill me. I took a large amount of damage, yes, but it was not fatal. It was quite good, actually, since his body acted as a buffer to protect me from the collapsing area data. After that, I was taken in by the song of Aura—and from there I was swiftly and safely revived."

"Dr. Amagi is still alive. He returned safely to the real world. Although... it was not a full recovery." Flugel placed another card down. "That's why he's not here right now. He's in no condition to speak to you. I'm sorry, but I simply used him as a pretext to summon you."

The Master is coming.

"However, I do have a message from Dr. Amagi. Will you receive it?" Flugel produced an IC recorder and played back the voice file of Amagi. His voice began to play, and Geist's eyes widened ever so slightly. No other change in his expression could be seen. Not even a little.

"You should follow your own path."

"I see. You are very kind." He looked up and met Flugel's gaze. "And quite cruel indeed. You want to know my true motives, don't you? That's why you brought Jyotaro Amagi's voice here with you. Am I simply a harmless AI...? Or perhaps, am I a dangerous terrorist? You came here to ascertain which of these is true, didn't you?" Flugel pulled his hand back to put the cards away, and Geist misconstrued the action with an aggressive one, raising his fists in defense. "Hold on there now. Wait a minute. Just wait one minute. You're not thinking of using that gun here, are you? I bear no ill will towards you."

"Don't get it twisted. I'm just done playing with the cards." Geist stood up and looked down across the table to confirm.

"Oh, it seems you were being truthful. You messed up the way it was placed. It's game over."

"I should've placed the 5 of spades here."

"You should've placed a Joker instead of a heart there. That was your fatal mistake. You seem distracted."

Flugel put the cards away.

"Now then, let's move on to the main topic." He looked at Geist. "I only have one question for you." He emphasized this with his right index finger. "Just what exactly was your role in this incident?"

"This incident?" Geist tilted his head to one side and put a finger to his mouth playfully. "What do you mean by 'this incident?'"

Flugel did not answer his question.

"I know that you were an acquaintance of Yuri Seto. But is it true that you did nothing to help him in his plan? You, who are usually such a showman, left behind absolutely no traces." Flugel continued the conversation. "However, you must have influenced Seto in some way. Otherwise Seto would never have used your name as cover."

At the end of it all, Yuri Seto had used the name Drain for himself. Even though he had once said "names are irrelevant," he had made a great fuss over making sure his was known. He made sure that it was a meaningful and appropriate one, even if it was only a cover.

"Yuri Seto, hm? What I know about him is quite next to nothing. A pathetic little martyr." Geist said this in a small, mumbling voice. "But if you think about it, aren't we all just pathetic little martyrs? You're no exception either, Ringmaster Flugel."

"I'm sick of these vague and hazy lines people keep saying to me."

"Perhaps I learned that habit from you. Maybe I should explain in more detail... After Immortal Dusk, I left the Japanese server. A journey of self-discovery, perhaps. I recall this being around the year 2021? Or was it 2022? I don't remember the specifics too well. I transferred from one server to another, wandering on a never ending journey, and then I met Seto's PC. I was surprised that I had gone to the ends of the earth and run into another Schicksal PC. He seemed to be a kind and sensible person, and with time he opened up to me about his own hardships. I listened to him very intently, and in return I told him about my own past as well. However, that's all."

"And then you met Travis, correct?"

"Travis? Who's that?"

"Travis Bond. A hacker from Los Angeles."

"Hm? I don't remember anybody like that."

Geist had a look of confusion on his face.

"However, I do remember Seto disappearing suddenly. He went away somewhere. That's the extent of my relationship with him."

"How much did you know about Yuri Seto's plans?"

"Hey, come on now. That's not fair. You said you only had one question." Geist said this mockingly. "Well, I have no reason to hide things from you. How about we continue playing the game? Let's take out the cards again."

"Game?"

"You just got a lot out of me, didn't you? Well, to be honest, I wanted to see your true feelings too. That's why I'm here. I have no desire to meet Jyotaro Amagi again. I only wanted to see you." Geist said this with a little laugh. "How about we decide who gets to learn what over a game? Whoever wins can ask anything he wants of the loser. How about it? Interesting stakes, no?"

Flugel felt his jaw tighten.

"I don't get it. Why do we have to be so roundabout about this?"

"I have something I want to say to you—something I came here to tell you. But I don't think it's the information you're interested in hearing. Nevertheless, I want to tell you, and I wanted to tell it to you face-to-face, eye-to-eye. Do you understand?"

"Sorry, but I don't get it at all," said Flugel. "And if I lose, then what? What do you want to know?"

"I wonder." Geist pretended to think. Or rather, he made a performance of it. "How about you tell me about your dead wife?"

Flugel felt the blood drain from his body. Geist continued to speak. "Hey, don't look at me like that. I have no desire to fight or insult you. It's simple curiosity."

"I see—I see! This is the same way Yuri Seto got under my skin." Flugel said this calmly and clearly. "Intimidating your opponent by serving them some insanely personal detail they should have no way of knowing to instill emotional shock. For what purpose?"

"Well, if you win the game, I'll tell you," replied Geist. A worried look crossed his face. "Perhaps you hate me now? Maybe we should stop?"

"No. Let's do it." Flugel said this and took out the cards. He needed the information. What exactly was it that Geist knew? What was it he had to say? The rules had been decided.

The game was poker.

The cards would be dealt once. There was no way of cheating it. Typically poker is a game of bargaining, but this was a match to the death. They decided who would go first by drawing cards. Ryuuji revealed his own: seven of diamonds. Geist turned over a card as well. Ace of clubs.

"You go first. Don't try and cheat me with your magic."

"I could say the same about you. Don't go pulling that gun of yours out when you get upset over losing."

Geist shuffled the cards with a careful hand. Flugel cut the deck, and then Geist dealt the cards with a swift motion. They both gazed at their hands. Flugel, internally, clicked his tongue.

Three of a kind. Not a good hand, to say the least. He looked at Geist only to see he was looking straight back at him. It was as if he had no interest in the cards in his hand, as he was just staring intently at Flugel's face. Flugel exchanged two cards and was left with one pair. Geist also exchanged two cards without looking.

"So?"

"I raise."

Geist took something out of his pocket and placed it on the table. It had the graphical shape of a disk. Even its plastic case had been recreated in the game.

"What is that?"

"I call it the 13th disk. A cool-sounding name, isn't it?"

Geist flipped a card and pointed at it.

"The final recording left behind by Jun Bansyoya. The Thirteenth Bansyoya File."

"What?"

An unbelievable name had just appeared: Jun Bansyoya. The programmer who had worked side-by-side with Jyotaro Amagi on a top secret project—the second team leader. He had left behind twelve ultra secret files pertaining to The World in his stead. Flugel had never heard of a thirteenth file existing.

"Why do you have that?"

"It's my property. You could say it's part of my inheritance from Jyotaro Amagi. This is just one piece of that inheritance."

It sounded plausible enough.

"I have no interest in it personally, so I have never seen its contents."

That's a lie, thought Flugel.

"And what exactly do you want me to bet for that disk?"

"Let's see. How about you tell me about your dead wife and daughter?" said Geist, very kindly. "Why exactly did they have to die? I want to hear your thoughts on it."

As soon as he said this, a bullet passed through his forehead. Then below his nose. Into his mouth. Into his collarbone. Into his stomach. He was shot. He was shot. He was shot. He was shot. He was shot. The Magician's PC Data was pulverized. He turned into fragments, and his short life's knowledge scattered across the table.

It was no use.

Flugel buried the image of killing Geist deep into his brain and held his composure. He couldn't shoot him. Geist was planning something. Why did he hide whether he was dead or alive for three years and then choose today to show up in front of Flugel? He had some kind of expectation. Something he needed to know. It was just like Babel, but he couldn't end the game by simply wiping away the cards. There was a long silence.

Between the hustle of the town surrounding them, they both stayed silent. Flugel said nothing. Geist said nothing, and only stared at his face. It was like he was looking for something deep in his expression.

Finally, Flugel spoke.

"Fine."

"Then let's flip the cards."



Flugel flipped the cards. Three of a kind.

Geist flipped his cards. Flugel's eyes widened. A spade flush. Much stronger than a three of a kind. Actually, that was wrong, one club was mixed in. It wasn't a flush. It wouldn't have any effect.

"Did you think it was a flush? Too bad." said Geist, mockingly. "A high card. Nice work. It's your win, Ringmaster Flugel." Flugel was silent.

"Now what?" he said.

"You know, I've always thought about why it was that I was left alive. What exactly is my destiny in this world? Things like this—things I've been thinking about ever since 2020." The harbor wind grazed the two of them. Geist closed his eyes. "Jyotaro Amagi just now told me to choose my own path. However, I have no idea how to live other than being Jyotaro Amagi's AI copy. All I can do is imitate him." He opened his eyes and looked at Flugel. "I wanted to know. I wanted to know why Jyotaro Amagi planned Immortal Dusk. He was infatuated with his aunt. He began studying Real Digitalize for the person he loved. You're the same, aren't you? You share this quality. It's an emotion I can't understand, and that's why it's something I'm deeply interested in." Geist said this, and then took out a piece of parchment from his pocket and placed it upon the disk.

"What's this?"

"Medical records. I stole copies from the Schwabing Police Department Hospital. I did it for you."

No way, thought Flugel.

"Are they Kaya's?"

Geist shook his head.

"Your daughter's. Sascha's medical records. The legally-ordered autopsy's results are written in it. Here, take a look. 'Possible valvular heart disease.' Do you understand what this means?"

Suddenly, he became dizzy. Sogabe felt as if he was looking at Jyotaro Amagi's double. Geist noticed Flugel's strange condition.

"It seems your daughter had a heart condition nobody knew about. While you were gone, she suddenly had an attack, or so it seems."

Kaya was scared that her daughter had inherited her disease. When their daughter had gone into cardiovascular shock, Kaya had gone mad misconstruing it for symptoms of her disease, and she knew more than anyone else how painful it was. Perhaps she had taken the girl into the car, in an attempt to rush to the hospital. But in her rush, she lost control, the car slipped, and—

"I don't think your wife willingly threw herself into that lake. There is another possible explanation: that it was not a tragic double suicide, but a freak accident. Perhaps, in concern for her daughter's health, she had forgotten to break while trying to look her over."

"This is..." but Flugel's voice could not come out any more. "Why are you telling me all this? What purpose do you have in this?"

"None in particular. I just wanted to tell you. The only important part is your reaction to it. I was simply interested in how you would react. Because you won the game, I'm telling you this. Or perhaps it's the other way around now? Anyway, I wanted to use it as reference. For the time when *she* wakes up."

"She? Who?"

"You see, Jyotaro Amagi created an apparition of the person he loved most." Geist said this as if speaking a soliloquy. "That's why I, who was created as Jyotaro Amagi's AI copy, naturally want to live alongside her. It's a strange, natural desire to want to be with her. It seems like this was always what was meant to be from the beginning." It seemed as if he was saying this to convince himself of it. "Now then, Ringmaster Flugel. It was fun seeing you again after all this time." He said this like a performer at the end of his show. "It's time for my final trick." He raised his face and gave a bright smile. It was as bright as the Indian summer. Like a warm sunny day in the middle of winter. Nothing like the fake smiles he had given up to this point.

Flugel knew this was his first time seeing Geist's real smile.

"Wait, Geist. We're not done here." As soon as he said that, the trees along the road sang in the wind. Their rustling grew louder, and the breeze knocked the cards off the table. It was only a moment that he looked away, but when he looked back, Geist was gone. A fitting exit for a magician.

By the time he logged out, it was already late at night.

His reunion with Geist had felt like a dream. Was it even real?

However, Sogabe had proof of their meeting.

He took his HMD off, and loaded the data he received from Geist carefully into his computer.

He had no reason to believe Geist. He needed empirical evidence.

He wanted to believe that Kaya did not choose death. Even though her mind had been marred by the inhumane campaign run by ALTIMIT all those years ago, there was the possibility that she wanted to live despite her pain.

That she had wanted to live for Sascha.

That she had wanted to live for the three of them.

Sogabe was dazed as he thought about that possibility, and then shook his head. This wasn't the time to be thinking about those things. There was no meaning in indulging them. Kaya and Sascha were dead. That was reality. That was the truth. That's all there was to it.

Sogabe knew this. And then, when he went to the bathroom to wash his face, he stared at himself in the mirror and realized something incredible. Something he couldn't believe.

He was crying.

When he realized this, his voice leaked out of his throat, and the tears couldn't stop flowing.

END

Afterword

I remember the year being 2008.

I was asked to help create a new game entry in the .hack series that encompassed the entire series' plot. In other words: .hack//Link.

I had a meeting with the project leader and the lead planner where I was briefed on the main characters: Tokio Kuryuu, and the antagonists who opposed him: Schicksal. After that I received illustrations of these main characters from Kikuya Megane.

That was the first time Flugel and I met.

My first impression was that of a mischievous little comedian, the kind of guy who tells a lot of jokes. It was in that same moment that I had already begun to see his deeply complicated backstory unfold before my eyes.

After that I spent my days writing the main scenario for the game. Of course, most of my time was spent writing and empathizing with the game's main character Tokio, with Flugel being his antithesis, the last boss that must be struck down.

It took about six months to complete.

Naturally, that wasn't the end of it. After the main scenario was finished we began work on the sub-scenarios.

Up to that point I had written everything from Tokio's perspective, but for the sub-scenarios we had the freedom to put other characters at the center of the story. One such character was Flugel.

And I realized then that the scope of .hack//Link was not large enough to bring his character to terms with himself.

In the earlier stages of the project we had planned to explain and deal with his back story as one of these sub-scenarios, but we quickly realized this would be impossible. The size of these scenarios was simply too small, and the details of his past were too dark to include in a game like this.

In the end, all I could do for him within the game was to mutter something open-ended about his job in response to Tokio's innocent question about what he does for a living.

This sense of unfulfillment became the driving force behind the conceptualization of .hack//bullet.

Even before I decided to write .hack//bullet, I had been toying with the idea of planning a .hack project with a hard-boiled theme. The genre has largely failed to adapt to the 21st century, even if it had become a literary classic. However, by applying the setting of the internet to that kind of story, I saw the possibility for a new kind of permutation in the genre—this was what I approached .hack//bullet with.

A hard-boiled novel is a novel in which the protagonist is hard-boiled because they're holding onto something deep within them that maintains that nature (please keep this definition in mind).

The characters in .hack are all enduring something.

Elementary school kids, junior high students, high school-aged teenagers, university students, office workers, freelancers, novelists, housewives, graphic designers, debuggers, system administrators, and so on are all holding on to and enduring something while they play the online game The World, where they act out and role play their ideal forms.

In the game, real life becomes irrelevant. The PC they control becomes a vessel with a mind of its own that obscures the user's pain, suffering, and grief from the real world while they're logged in. For them, "role play" means exchanging that thing they're holding on to deep inside for something else entirely.

The antagonist of this story, Yuri Kaczynski Seto, also known as Drain, holds something intensely painful deep inside. He's self-righteous, sacrificing those around him without care in the name of his own ideology, and something of a hedonist—but he cannot escape that perpetual endurance

of his own pain. Rather, Seto actively embraces his pain and glorifies the act of endurance. He always says “I was chosen, this is a trial, I will overcome it,” doesn’t he?

On the other hand, what about Flugel, or Ryuuji Sogabe?

Although the story is written in third person, it’s essentially no different than if it were written in first person, as the story only unfolds from within his own subjective perspective.

However, as the story went on, I specifically made sure to diminish the role of that subjectivity as a means to an end.

If you’ve read the novel all the way through, then the end I’m talking about is probably quite obvious to you, but some people like to read afterwords as if they were forewords for some reason, so I won’t describe it here.

I think more than any other .hack character, Sogabe is the one who endures the most personal pain and therefore is the most hard-boiled, which is why he is the protagonist of this story. It’s not something I was conscious of while writing it, but I realized that .hack//bullet is a story about a contest of endurance between Ryuuji Sogabe and Yuri Seto—who can endure the most pain?

What exactly does one gain by enduring pain? Salvation? Destruction? Silence? Perhaps silence is salvation—perhaps the opposite.

Of course, this is only my opinion. An author’s delusion in the afterword of a work, and perhaps my own misreading of the plot. When the novel was still being written, I was only trying my best to shape it into a classically hard-boiled tale about a man bringing justice to evil, balanced with a back-and-forth of flirtation with a beautiful woman. Above all else, I hope it was entertaining.

There are many people who helped me during the serialization of .hack//bullet and encouraged its creation.

Mr. Tsukita of Bandai Namco Entertainment, Inc.

Mr. Matsuyama, the president of CyberConnect2, Inc.

All the artists who contributed their illustrations.

The mangaka Kikuya Megane.

And everyone else who helped me along the way.

Finally, I would like to thank Ryuuji Sogabe. It’s been more than ten years since we first met during the production of .hack//Link. I never dreamed that I would have to put up with such a depressing man for so damn long.

And by depressing, I mean it was depressing for myself, the writer, too. I would be busy writing the plot and suddenly he—Ryuuji—would tell me “This part’s way too boring,” or “I wouldn’t do something like that”—annoying things like this.

As the projects I was working on at the time* began to overlap with the deadlines for .hack//bullet, I would often feel like simply scrapping the entire thing and forgetting about the annoying old man named Ryuuji Sogabe. I was often so disgusted with him that I found myself sympathizing with the information dealer who had his @HOME destroyed in the story.

However, I know in my heart of hearts that it was because I was attached to this character that I was able to continue writing to the end. He and I finished this story while carrying each other over the finish line.

With this, the past of Ryuuji Sogabe has finally been put to rest. What comes next is the story of the future. Just what kind of role will Ryuuji play in the future of .hack’s chronology? I want to continue watching over him with great expectations.

Thanks for putting up with me all these years.

Ryuuji, I’m sick of playing with you!

Yano Masayuki, 2021

Game scenario writer. Former CC2 staff, now working as a freelancer.

Written works:

- .hack//G.U.
- .hack//Link
- .hack//Versus
- Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle
- Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Eyes of Heaven
- .hack//bullet
- New Novel .hack

*As Yano was also the scenario writer of .hack//Versus, he was also writing it around the same time Bullet first began its serialization. While the novel was originally planned to be finished within six months (probably with it being fully written in advance), it took five years, finally ending in February of 2017. This chapter was written for the official ebook release, which you can support by buying [here](#). (An easy way of supporting .hack in 2021, especially considering you're reading this for free!)