
REKI
KAWAHARA
ILLUSTRATION BY
HIMA
ACCEL·WORLD
01
KUROYUKIHIME'S RETURN

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KUROYUKIHIME'S RETURN



REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY HIMA

DESIGN BY bee-pee


"Don't you want to go further, boy…to accelerate?"
"That's…"
PINK PIG
Avatar of Haruyuki, a boy in the lowest school caste
KUROYUKIHIME
Avatar of Umesato Junior High School student council vice president


"I heard you were directing with Kuroyukihime in eighth grade. For real?"
"What?! Th-that's—"
CHIYURI
Haruyuki's childhood friend


!?
!?
"Mm....
To be blunt,
I told him
I liked him,
and he blew
me off."


"...What the—?!"
SILVER CROW
Haruyuki's duel avatar


"……"
CYAN PILE
Mysterious attacker
"I'll protect you.
I'll do whatever it
takes to protect you."

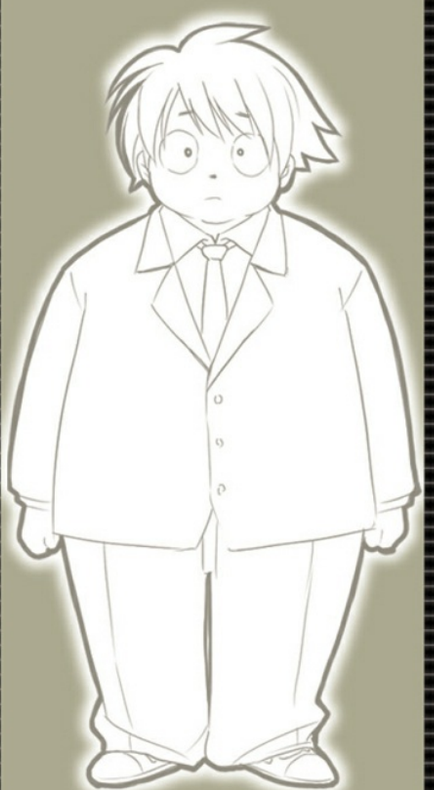
HARUYUKI is the…

"Pink Pig"
in the
Umesato Junior
High School's
Local Area
Network.



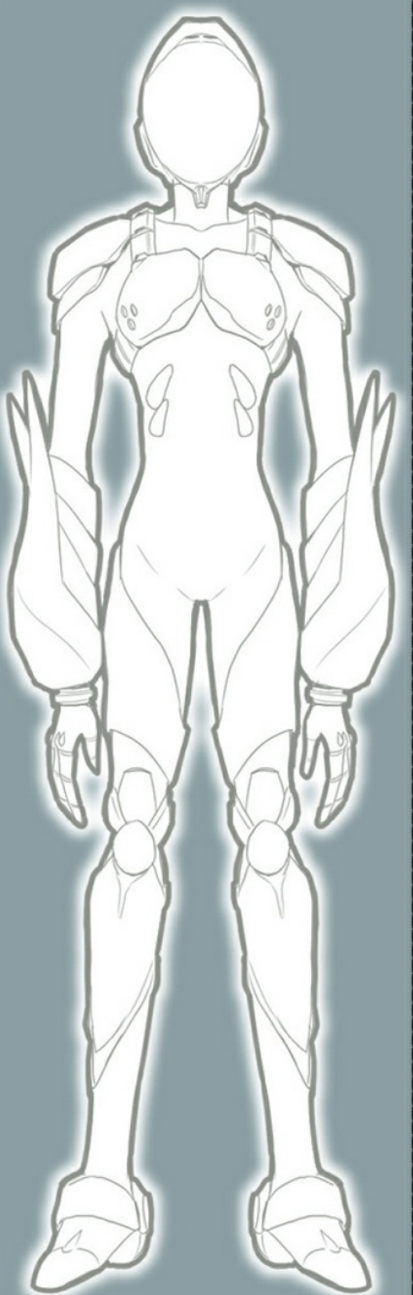
Haruyuki @
In-school local net
Pink Pig

"Haruyuki Arita"
in the
Real World.



Haruyuki @
Real World
Haruyuki Arita

"Silver Crow"
in the
Accelerated
World.



Haruyuki @
Accelerated World
Silver Crow

ACCEL•WORLD 01

KUROYUKIHIME'S RETURN

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



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NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 1

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyn Allen Cover art by HIMA

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

ACCEL WORLD

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Yen Newsletter

■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her in-school avatar is a spangled butterfly that she programmed herself.
■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Grade Seven at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig.
■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat.
■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. He currently attends a different school from Haruyuki and Chiyuri. Beautiful boy who belongs to the kendo team.
■ Araya = Umesato Junior High delinquent. Main bully to Haruyuki.

■ Neurolinker = Portable terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and supports all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.
■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.
■ In-school local net = Local area network established within Umesato Junior High School. Used during classes and to check attendance. Umesato students are required to always be connected to it.
■ Global connection = Connection with the worldwide net. Global connections are forbidden on Umesato Junior High School grounds, where the in-school local net is provided instead.

1

The yellow message light blinked in the top right corner of the virtual blackboard.

Haruyuki, who had drifted off during class, shifted the focus of both his eyes, pulling his neck back automatically. As he did, the deep green of the blackboard filling his field of vision faded suddenly to translucency, and the figure of the teacher standing beyond the orderly rows of student backs became clear.

The classroom, his classmates, and the teacher were all real, but the transparent blackboard and the closely packed equations on it were not. The Neurolinker around the back of Haruyuki's neck projected the numbers and symbols the teacher wrote in the air directly into his brain.

The math teacher, a man in his early forties, continued with his whispered explanation of one formula while running an empty hand along a blackboard only he could see in areas that seemed particularly difficult somehow. His voice was nowhere near loud enough to reach Haruyuki's ears as actual sound, but the Neurolinker twined around the teacher's neck amplified and clarified it, conveying it to Haruyuki.

When Haruyuki brought his gaze back in, the blackboard materialized once again, covered in even more equations than before. It seemed unlikely that the message he had received was a compressed file sent by the teacher packing up today's homework. And given that he was separated from the global net right now, that meant the sender had to be another student in his school.

In the six months since he'd started junior high, Haruyuki had long abandoned the hope that one of the girls might have broken school rules to send him a friendly message. He desperately wanted to drop the message unopened in the trash in the lower left corner of his eyeline, but if he did that, he'd have no idea

what was going to happen to him later.

Reluctantly, taking advantage of the teacher's turned back, he raised his right hand in the air (this action was real rather than virtual) and clicked on the mail icon with the tip of his finger.

In an instant, *bubibaborububiru*, a sound without any actual character, and graphics like a flood of primary colors assaulted Hiroyuki's senses. Then the real message played—not text, but voice.

Piggy, today's command order! (Several voices laughing gleefully in the background.) *Bring two yakisoba buns, one cream melon bun, and three strawberry yogurts to the roof five minutes after lunch starts! If you're late, it's pork bun punishment for you! And if you squeal, it's the pork roast punishment! Got it?!* (Another explosion of laughter.)

Haruyuki mustered every ounce of willpower to fix his neck in place and not look in the direction of the eyes he could feel burning a hole through his left cheek. He knew he'd only be even more humiliated by the sneers of Araya and his underlings A and B if he allowed himself a glance.

Since you obviously couldn't record messages like this during class or add in these kinds of visual and auditory effects, the message had to have been prepared in advance. Those guys had too much free time on their hands. And then that "command order" stuff! Totally redundant! Idiots! Complete morons!

Although he could curse them out in his head, Haruyuki couldn't even answer this message, much less utter his curses out loud. Because if Araya was an idiot the likes of a cockroach, indestructible no matter how the world moved forward, Haruyuki was an even bigger idiot for being bullied by him. If he possessed even the tiniest bit of courage or the ability to act, it'd be an easy thing to submit the several dozen messages he'd saved, including this one, to the school as evidence and get those guys in trouble.

But Haruyuki inevitably ended up thinking about what would come after that.

People could talk all they wanted about how half of our lives were lived in the virtual network now that Neurolinkers were so ubiquitous that basically everyone in the country had one, but in the end, human beings only existed according to the lowest common denominators chaining them to their flesh-

and-blood bodies. Three times a day, you get hungry; you go to the toilet; if you get hit, it hurts, and you cry as a consequence. It's all so miserable you could die.

Linker skills determining which school you went to and how far you made it in the world, these were nothing more than the enormous network industry's branding strategies. What determined the value of a human being at the end of the day were simply the primitive parameters of appearance and physical strength. This was the conclusion Haruyuki reached at the age of thirteen, having reached sixty kilos when he was in fifth grade and never having run a fifty-meter dash in less than ten seconds.

He was forced to spend the five hundred yen his mother charged to his Neurolinker in the morning for lunch money to buy buns and yogurt for Araya and the rest, and still he ran over budget. He had a little of the seven thousand yen saved up from his allowance, all the money he had in the world, but if he spent that now, he wouldn't be able to buy the Linker game coming out later that month.

Haruyuki's ample build got terrible mileage. If he skipped just one meal, he ended up dizzy with hunger. Even so, he had no choice but to suffer through it today. At least he still had one trick to get through the day, a full dive, only allowed during lunch.

Sucking in his round body as far as it would go, Haruyuki headed for the second school building, which held nothing but special classrooms. And because everything from science experiments to home ec cooking classes were conducted virtually now, the building no longer served any purpose, and few people went near it. Particularly during lunch, the place was devoid of students.

Haruyuki's special hiding place was the boys' washroom in one corner of the dusty hallway. Trudging into this refuge, he stopped with a sigh and looked at the mirror above the sink.

Staring back at him from the cloudy glass was the fat bullied kid, so hopelessly clichéd that if this were a TV show, people would roll their eyes at the stereotype. His hair had a strong will of its own, springing up here and there, and the curves of his cheeks held not even a hint of definition. His uniform tie

and silver Neurolinker were eaten up by his flabby neck as if they were a tightening noose.

There was a time when he'd tried to do something about his appearance, when he pushed himself hard, practically giving up eating and forcing himself to go running. But the result of that effort was that he collapsed during lunch from anemia and ended up with the lunches of several female students, a now-legendary story that haunted him. Ever since, Haruyuki had been determined to ignore his real self—at least while he was a student.

He yanked his eyes away from the mirror and moved farther into the washroom, entering the private stall at the end. He made sure the door was locked and sat on the toilet with the lid down. The creaking and squeaking of the plastic under his body were old friends. He leaned back against the tank, relaxed, and closed his eyes. He chanted the magical incantation to release his soul from this cumbrous form:

"Direct link."

Receiving his voice command, the Neurolinker moved up from audiovisual mode to full sensory mode on the quantum connection level, and the weight and the sense of hunger strangling his stomach disappeared from Haruyuki's body.

The hardness of the toilet seat and the tightness of his school uniform were also gone. The laughing voices of students echoing in the distant schoolyard, the scent of cleansers filling the washroom, and even the featureless door in front of him melted into inky darkness and disappeared. Full dive.

Even his sense of gravity was severed, and Haruyuki plunged into the darkness.

Soon, however, his entire body was enveloped by a gentle floating feeling and rainbow-colored lights. The avatar he used during full dives began forming from the tips of his hands and feet.

Black, hoof-shaped hands and feet. Plump limbs and a ball-like torso a vibrant peach-pink. He couldn't see them, but he should also have had a flat noise protruding from the center of his face and large ears hanging down. In short, he was a pink pig.

Wearing this ridiculous avatar, he dropped down with a *thud* in the middle of a fairy-tale forest in the Ministry of Education's recommended design.

Giant mushrooms grew everywhere, and in the center of a patch of grass framed in a circle of light from the particularly bright sun, a crystalline spring bubbled up from the ground. On its outer edge, enormous, hollow trees formed a circle and towered over the area. The inside of each tree was divided up into several levels you could use to chat or play, connected by stairs. This virtual space was the in-school local net for Umesato Junior High School, a private institution in Suginami City, Tokyo.

The majority of other figures passing through the forest or laughing in groups of twos and threes were, like Haruyuki, also not human. Roughly half were silly animals walking on two legs, while the rest were fairies with wings sprouting from their backs (although they couldn't actually fly), tin robots, or robed mages. All were avatars of Umesato Junior High students and teachers diving in the local net.

Students could choose from a wide selection of base avatar forms and customize them. If you had the patience, you could also construct a completely original avatar from scratch, taking advantage of the editor provided. The result was ultimately a combination of the technology available and taste of a junior high school student, but even so, the black knight avatar Haruyuki created and unveiled in April had garnered a lot of attention.

…The sad majesty of that avatar. Sighing, Haruyuki glanced down at his current form. In the blink of an eye, Araya had ripped off his black knight avatar and forced him to use this default pig.

Obviously, in terms of originality, this pink pig could not be beat. No one else would make such a deliberately masochistic choice. Desperately sucking in his round body just like he did in the real world, Haruyuki set his sights on a single tree and headed out at a trot.

As he did, he noticed an unusually large throng of people gathered beside the spring at the heart of the forest. Casting his eyes in that direction as he ran, Haruyuki slowed his pace unconsciously. In the middle of the ring of students, he spotted a marvelously rare avatar, the kind you hardly ever see.

It wasn’t pulled from the default settings. She wore a jet-black dress studded with transparent jewels. In her hand, a folded black parasol. On her back, the wings of a spangled butterfly shot through with rainbow-colored lines. With a face white like snow framed by long, straight hair, the avatar was so perfectly gorgeous, it was hard to believe it was handmade. The design skill involved was beyond anything Haruyuki could ever have hoped to achieve. It could easily have passed for a pro’s work.

Haruyuki knew the girl. Her slender body leaning casually against a giant mushroom, a weary expression on her face as she attended to the compliments of the avatars surrounding her, she was in eighth grade and the vice president of the student council. This shockingly beautiful form was for all intents and purposes a flawless recreation of her real-world body, thus her nickname: Kuroyukihime.

That a creature like this and someone like Haruyuki could share even the single commonality of both being students at Umesato seemed impossible to him. Just turning his virtual gaze on her, Haruyuki felt the awareness of his diminutive stature that tortured his consciousness swell unpleasantly, and he forced himself to focus the path in front of him again.

The destination he was barreling toward at full speed was a large tree with recreation rooms inside. It was basically an arcade, but naturally, there were absolutely no commercial games like RPGs or war games or such. It was all educational stuff, like quizzes or puzzles or wholesome sports games, but even so, a number of students gathered in groups in every corner, laughing and chatting.

All of them were on full dives from their own desks or the cafeteria. During the dive, their flesh-and-blood bodies were left defenseless, but messing with people in the middle of a dive was a clear violation of etiquette, so no one besides Haruyuki worried about it. He had returned to his classroom after a dive in the local net to find the pants on his uniform pulled down maybe a month or so after school started.

Hiding his flesh body in the toilet and wanting to avoid other eyes even in the virtual world, he started climbing the stairs carved into the tree that was his destination. The higher he climbed, the less popular the games. After passing

baseball, basketball, golf, and tennis, and even ignoring the Ping-Pong floor, he finally arrived at the virtual squash corner.

There wasn't a single student in the room. The reason for the floor's lack of popularity was clear. Squash is sort of like tennis, but you hit the ball with a racquet in a space enclosed from top to bottom and on all sides by hard walls. The ball bounces back, and the player silently returns it over and over. It was a thoroughly lonely sport.

In reality, Haruyuki liked first-person shooter games the best, the kind where players run around a battlefield carrying a machine gun, and in those games, he was good enough to hold his own against guys in the states (the home of the FPS). It was also a popular genre in Japan, of course, but there was no way something like that would be available on the school network. When he was in elementary school, Haruyuki had killed pretty much all of the guys in his class with a single handgun, and from the next day on, he had been bullied mercilessly. Ever since, Haruyuki had promised himself he would never again play the same games as the kids at school, no matter the genre.

He walked over to the right edge of the deserted court and held up the control panel with one hand. The panel accessed Haruyuki's student ID number and retrieved his saved level and high scores. Since the middle of the first term, he had been killing time here during his lunch hour, focusing exclusively on this game. As a result, he'd achieved a staggeringly high score. He was actually getting tired of squash, but it wasn't like he had anywhere else to go.

Haruyuki grabbed the racquet that popped up from the panel and held it firmly in his pink right hand with its black hoof. After the words GAME START appeared, a ball dropped down out of nowhere. He hit it with everything he had, pouring every ounce of today's misery into the racquet.

Thk! Leaving a momentary flash, the ball flew up like a laser and struck the floor and the forward wall before returning. Aided by reflex more than sight, Haruyuki returned the ball with a backhand, taking a step to the left in line with the optimal solution to which his brain automatically guided him.

The real Haruyuki obviously could not move like this. But this was an electronic world, free of the chains of meatspace. Watching the ball and moving

his body were just quantum signals traveling back and forth between his brain and the Neurolinker.

The ball abruptly lost its substance, leaving nothing but a faint trace of light on the court. The *thwack* it made sounded several times a second, echoing like a machine gun. Still, Haruyuki made his pig's body leap and dance and his racket sing in every direction.

Dammit, who needs reality anyway?

The scream of resentment pierced the back of his brain, unable to shut out his problems even while tackling the game at top speed.

Why do we need dumb stuff like a real classroom or a real school? People can live entirely virtually already. I mean, the world stinks with grown-ups actually doing just that. So much so that they even did those experiments way back when, where they turned a person's entire consciousness into quantum data and tried to build a real parallel universe.

And yet despite all that, they toss groups of us kids into real-life cages to learn group life and develop some kind of morals, or for whatever other idiotic reasons they have. All well and good for Araya and them, probably helps them relax a bit and save their allowances. But for me…I don't know what else I can do.

A bell sounded, and his game increased a level in the corner of his vision.

The ball accelerated abruptly. The angle of return was also irregular, and the ball came powering along, drawing an arc from an unexpected direction. Haruyuki's reaction time gradually started to lag.

Dammit! I have to accelerate, have to go faster. So fast I can break through every wall in the virtual world and even the real world and go somewhere without people! Fast!

The racquet cut through the air with a *whoosh*. The ball, now nothing more than a beam of light, grazed Haruyuki's cheek, passed behind him, and vanished. The words GAME OVER dropped down accompanied by a silly, sad trombone sound effect and bounced around on the court. Without glancing at his blinking high score, Haruyuki turned back to the panel to restart the game,

head hanging.

At that moment, a voice suddenly rocked Haruyuki's sacred hiding place.

"Oh!! So this is where you locked yourself up!!" The screech was so high-pitched it was like lightning bolts in his ears, or rather his brain. Stiffening his back with a start, Haruyuki turned around to find a student avatar in the same animal class as his.

Even so, it didn't have the slightest bit of the silliness of Haruyuki's pig. The slim, supple cat was covered in silver fur tinged with purple, with blue ribbons tied on one ear and the tip of her tail. It hadn't been put together from scratch right from polygons, but each of the parameters had clearly been tinkered with.

A touch of anger rose up in her golden eyes, and the cat opened wide her mouth with its small fangs and cried out again, "Lately, you've just disappeared the whole lunch hour, Haru, so I came looking for you! Games are great and all, but you don't have to play this kind of lame game, you know. You should come and play with the rest of us!"

"…I can do what I want. Leave me alone."

Haruyuki tried to leave it at that and return to the court, but the silver cat stretched her neck out and peered at the GAME OVER display. "Huh, what's that… level one fifty-two, score two million six hundred thirty thousand?! You're…," she shouted in an even higher voice—

Amazing!

Or at least that's what Haruyuki was briefly, faintly hoping for when the cat betrayed him abruptly.

"An idiot! What are you even doing, skipping lunch for this?! Come down right now!!"

"…I don't want to. There's still half an hour left for lunch. You go."

"Well, if you're going to be like that, I'll just have to use force."

"Go ahead if you can," Haruyuki answered under his breath and clenched his racquet tighter.

There was no "collision detection" in avatars in the school network. Under the

pretext of preventing improper behavior, students were not permitted to touch the avatars of other students. So naturally, forcing another person to log out was completely out of the question.

Sticking her slim tongue out as far as it would go, the cat avatar shouted, “Link out!”

She disappeared immediately, leaving a swirl of light and a ringing noise in her wake.

Once the pest had finally gone, Haruyuki blew a vague sadness out his nose in a short breath. That was when it happened.

An impact, a *thud*—no gentle love tap—struck his head, and the surrounding scene faded away. From the other side of the darkness, the real world returned, a point of light zooming up around him. Feeling his own weight pressing on him heavily, Haruyuki blinked frantically and tried to focus his eyes.

He was in the boys’ washroom stall where he’d started. But instead of the blue-gray door that should have been before him, Haruyuki saw something unexpected.

“You…Wha…?”

Standing, arms crossed and imposing, in front of him was a lone female student. The ribbon on her blazer was green, showing that she was in seventh grade just like him.

Her physique was small, weighing in at less than a third of Haruyuki’s mass. Her short bangs were pulled up to the right and held there with a blue pin. Her large, asymmetrical eyes—outlined by small, catlike lids—burned with anger, glaring at Haruyuki.

Her left hand held a small basket while her right was stretched out directly above Haruyuki’s head and clenched tightly in a fist. Seeing this, he finally understood why he had been suddenly yanked out of his full dive. She had punched him with that tiny fist, and the impact had activated the safety on his Neurolinker, which had then automatically disconnected.

Normally, the safety was activated when your shoulders were shaken or someone called out to you in a loud voice, and nervous girls would set it so that

they linked out the second anyone got within a meter of them. The fact that Haruyuki hadn't noticed the intruder until she hit him on the crown of his head was because he had hidden himself in the toilet stall and dropped the safety to the lowest level.

"Y-you!!" Haruyuki shouted, stunned, at the only girl in the school he could talk to without panicking. "What are you doing?! This is the boys' toilet! And I locked the door…Are you stupid or something?!"

"You're the stupid one," Chiyuri Kurashima, Haruyuki's childhood friend, strong enough to climb over the partition wall in the boys' toilet still in her skirt, shot back contemptuously as she slipped a hand behind her to unlock the door.

Bouncing out of the stall with a light movement, she finally smiled faintly at Haruyuki, who was squinting involuntarily at the sunlight slipping off her chestnut-colored hair. "Come on, come out already," she urged.

"…Fiiiiine." Swallowing a sigh, Haruyuki yanked himself up, causing the toilet lid to creak. He followed Chiyuri toward the door, asking the question nagging at him. "…How'd you know I was here?"

She didn't answer right away. "I was on the roof, too. So I followed you," she informed him briefly after sticking her head out of the boys' toilet and checking the situation outside before stealing into the hallway.

Which meant…

"…You saw?" Haruyuki mumbled, arresting the foot that was about to step out of the washroom.

Chiyuri looked down like she was trying to find the right words, leaned back against the interior wall, and then finally nodded sharply. "I won't butt in with them anymore. If that's what you want…I don't have much choice. But you should at least eat. It's bad for you not to." A somehow forced smile graced her face, and Chiyuri held out the basket in her left hand. "I made you a lunch. I can't guarantee it'll be good, though."

I'm pathetic, Haruyuki thought.

His own mind, always trying to find something other than pity in the things Chiyuri said and did, was deeply and unrepairably pathetic.

Because Chiyuri had a proper boyfriend. Another childhood friend, the opposite of Haruyuki in every way.

His mouth moved on its own, and Haruyuki heard himself say in a strangely flat voice, “Leftovers from the one you made for Taku?”

Chiyuri’s face clouded over abruptly. Unable to see her eyes under those tightly furrowed brows, Haruyuki dropped his gaze to the floor of the hallway.

“No. Taku eats the school lunch. This…it’s just sandwiches—ham and cheese—and potato salad. It’s your favorite, right?”

Haruyuki tried to gently push back the white basket entering his field of view. But his sluggish, real-world meat body knocked the basket out of Chiyuri’s hand in a sudden jerk far removed from his intention. The moment it hit the ground, the lid popped open, and from inside the light blue parchment paper, neatly triangular sandwiches flew out—one, two—and fell apart.

“Ah!”

Instinctively, he went to apologize, but inside his brain, it was suddenly hot, and the words he should have uttered refused to take shape. Unable to even lift his head, he stepped backward, still staring at the floor, and cried out as he turned aside, “N-no thanks!!”

He felt the acute desire to log out of this place right away, but that was clearly impossible. If only he could at least have fled desperately…but his real body was thick and good for nothing; he couldn’t even escape the small, sobbing voice behind him.

Lower than low, Haruyuki ignored his afternoon classes and the homeroom that followed, dashing out of the classroom as if fleeing the scene. Banishing from his mind the voice telling him that he should go wait for Chiyuri outside her classroom two doors down or at the school gates or somewhere along the road home, he made a break instead for his other hiding spot, the library.

Spaces like libraries had functionally ceased fulfilling their original roles long ago. However, there were some grown-ups who thought that, just like the school itself, paper media was essential to a child’s education, and the walls were lined with the spines of brand-new books set atop bookcases that could

only be considered a waste of space and resources.

But then, thanks to this attitude, he was guaranteed precious personal space within the school, so he couldn't complain. Carrying two or three books for camouflage, he locked himself up in one of the reading booths along the wall and stuffed his body into the narrow chair before executing the order for a full dive at a volume just barely loud enough for the Linker to catch.

Precisely because it had only been a few minutes since classes ended, the school net was deserted. He needed to hole himself up in his usual refuge while the net was still empty, and he cut through the grass at top speed to climb the tree building.

Naturally, the virtual squash corner was bare. To be honest, he would have preferred a bloodstained battle game to this simple racquet sport to banish the gloominess in his heart, even temporarily, but given that he couldn't connect to the global net, he was stuck with the school net and its limited selection of gaming apps.

Although his hunger was already more than he could bear, he didn't feel like going home straightaway. He had no idea what he should do, what he should say if he ran into Chiyuri on the way home. Well, first off, he should apologize, but he wasn't so sure he could make his mouth do what he wanted it to.

That day, it was just like this.

On the verge of remembering another time a long time ago when he had made Chiyuri cry like that, Haruyuki shut his eyes tightly. Keeping them closed, he brought his right hand up to the control panel and logged in.

Fumbling, he gripped his racquet, changed the orientation of his body, and faced the court before opening his eyes and trying to beat back the heaviness in his heart using the ball that dropped down when—

Haruyuki froze.

The primary colors of the 3-D font in the center of the court displayed a different number from the one he remembered.

"Level…one sixty-six?!"

More than ten levels higher than the one Haruyuki had achieved just a few hours earlier.

For a second, he wondered how this could have happened given that scores are managed by student ID, but he soon figured it out. Because Haruyuki had been forcibly logged out when Chiyuri hit him on the head, the game had been disengaged with him still logged in. So someone could have picked up where he left off and destroyed his score.

However…

Someone other than him getting a score like this?!

The one thing that had kept Haruyuki's pride from crumbling completely was his VR game technique in the full dive environment. Obviously, this didn't include quiz and board games, where winning depended on how smart you were, but when it came to shooters or action or racing games where what mattered was how fast your reflexes were, it was a point of pride for Haruyuki that there wasn't a soul in school who could best him.

But he never made a show of this. Since elementary school, he'd had it drummed into his head—often painfully—that nothing good came of making himself conspicuous. Up to now, he'd been of a mind that he didn't actually need to confirm his superiority, but…this awe-inspiring squash score…

Just then.

A voice behind him. Not Chiyuri's. It was a girl, but her voice was lower and sounded smooth like silk. "So you're the one who got that ridiculous score?"

Turning around trepidatiously, Haruyuki saw: a dress inlaid with silver in the darkness. An umbrella piercing the floor like a cane, a sword. Snow-white skin and inky black eyes. Kuroyukihime.

Even though she was an avatar, there was not even the faintest hint of digital about her appearance, almost a type of extreme beauty. The most popular person in school moved forward noiselessly. A faint smile playing across her red lips—the only part of her entire body with any color—Kuroyukihime continued, "Don't you want to go further, boy…to accelerate?"

If you do, come to the lounge at lunch tomorrow.

Leaving just these words to linger, Kuroyukihime abruptly logged out.

The time her avatar had existed in Haruyuki's field of vision was likely not even a full ten seconds. The event was just too impossible; he could even have believed it had been a bug on the local net server or an illusion, but the incredible score still floating above the court was real enough.

Unable to muster up the desire to try for a new high score, Haruyuki ended his dive and sat in the library reading booth, staring off into space. Three lines looped endless in his ears. Kuroyukihime's tone was not like that of a regular girl their age, but he didn't feel it was out of place in the slightest given her incredibly powerful presence. It actually made him see at least part of the reason she was so tremendously popular, not just with the boys but with the girls as well.

Haruyuki finally left the school on wobbly legs, his body essentially on autopilot as he made his way home. Had it not been for the traffic prediction display in the audiovisual mode of his Neurolinker, he likely would've been run over at least two or three times.

When he arrived at his deserted luxury condo in Koenji, Haruyuki immediately warmed up a frozen pizza, scarfing it down with a soda. His parents had gotten divorced ages ago, and though he lived with his mother now, she never got home before midnight. He only ever saw her when she gave him his lunch money just as he was about to leave for school.

His once-empty stomach now full of junk food, Haruyuki retreated to his room. Normally, he'd do his routine check on the global net, run around a battlefield in Europe for a few hours, and go to bed after giving his all to his homework, but today at least, he didn't feel like doing anything. Maybe because too many things had happened his brain felt heavy, as if it were swollen, and Haruyuki flopped down onto his bed after taking off his Neurolinker.

His sleep, though, was nothing particularly restful. The sneers of Araya and his gang, Chiyuri's tears, and Kuroyukihime's mysterious words played over and over in his head, turning up in his dreams, toying with him.

Don't you want to go further…to accelerate?

The Kuroyukihime in his dream was not her avatar but the actual vice president of the student council. Even though he had only ever seen her onstage at school assemblies with an aloof, expressionless look on her face, for some reason in his dream, a mischievous, almost inviting smile curled up at the corners of her lips, and she whispered in Haruyuki's ear. *Come here.*

2

Right, it was all a dream. Including the meeting on the local net yesterday, Haruyuki thought as he entered the classroom the next day (a Wednesday), having come to school with a glum face as always.

Araya and his thugs kept sending Haruyuki prank mails during a class that was more déjà-vu than anything else. Being shaken down for lunch two days in a row was a first; the order was the same yakisoba and cream melon buns as the previous day. *Do they really like them that much?* Haruyuki wondered, closing his mail and rising out of his seat as the lunch bell rang.

Sluggishly, he headed not for the rooftop where Araya had summoned him but the lounge next to the student cafeteria on the first floor of the school.

Unlike the closely packed, long, cheap tables that littered the cafeteria, refined, round white tables were arranged spaciously around the semicircular lounge. With its unbroken view of the trees in the courtyard dyed in autumn colors on the other side of its large window, the lounge was without a doubt the most elegant space at Umesato Junior High School.

Thus, it was an unwritten rule that grade-seven students were not allowed to use it. The ribbons and neckties of the students gathered around the tables were all blue (grade eight) or dark red (grade nine), with not a spot of green to be found.

Half of the students were laughing and chatting with cups of coffee or tea in one hand while the other half, eyes closed, had entrusted their bodies to the tall-backed chairs. They weren’t sleeping; they were on full dives in the school net.

Haruyuki first hid his large body awkwardly behind the decorative plant at the

entrance to the lounge and peered around the room. He half believed she would totally not be there because the thing yesterday was a dream…but…

"…She's here…"

He gulped down air unconsciously. At a table by the window in the very back of the lounge was gathered a particularly conspicuous group. Six students, grades eight and nine, comprised the assemblage, and when he really rubbed his eyes and looked, Haruyuki found that he knew all their faces. Likely all student council members. Each of them, boy and girl, was comely in a different way.

Among them, the one with the strongest presence was a girl with a blue ribbon wearily flipping the pages of a hardcover book. Her straight hair, nearly down to her waist, was a jet black rarely seen these days, while the legs peeking out from her dark gray pleated skirt were wrapped in similarly black tights. For some reason, even the open-collared shirt under her blazer was a brilliant black. No mistake, this was the most popular girl at Umesato Junior High: Kuroyukihime.

If you moved in a straight line, the table in the back was probably no more than twenty meters from the lounge entrance. But to Haruyuki, the distance might as well have been infinite. There was absolutely no way he could undertake the hazardous journey of cutting through the seniors to get there.

Do a right about-face and get out of here. Buy the bread and the yogurt at the cafeteria counter, and take it to Araya and them on the roof. Then hide out in the toilet in the second school building and kill some empty hours in a single-player game on the local net.

Shit. Dammit. I'll go.

Clenching his teeth, Haruyuki came out from behind the plant and stepped into the lounge.

It was no persecution complex; the eyes of the seniors gathered around the tables definitely held hints of reproach and displeasure. He might have gotten a pass if he had just started school or something, but halfway through the second term, he should have been fully aware of the rule that grade-sevens were not allowed.

Fortunately, no one raised their voice in reproach against him. He intently carried his heavy body forward on trembling legs, slipping through the tables, breathing becoming faint, until he finally arrived at the very back table the student council members were occupying.

The first to raise her face was an eighth-grade girl sitting in the very front. Tilting her head and causing ripples in her light hair, she turned a smiling, slightly puzzled face toward Haruyuki and said gently, “Oh…did you need something?”

Unable to get a *yes* out, Haruyuki mumbled, “Er…um…uh…”

At that moment, four of the other council members looked over at Haruyuki. Their faces contained no malice, but the displeased looks from around the table were hard to handle. Just when he was about to pass out from sheer nervousness, the final person at the table at last raised her face from her book.

Kuroyukihime’s face, which he was seeing for the first time up close and with his flesh-and-blood eyes, was orders of magnitude more beautiful than the avatar he had seen (supposedly) yesterday. Below sharply defined eyebrows under neatly trimmed bangs were eyes that looked black even as they shone brightly. If her avatar was a black rose, then she was a black narcissus. Although he didn’t know if anything like that even existed.

Haruyuki steeled himself for a look of *What is this ugly grade-seven?* to appear on this beautiful face. But, surprising him to the core of his being, Kuroyukihime brought that slight smile he remembered to her pale lips and said briefly, “Well, boy. You came.”



She closed the hardcover book with a *snap* and invited Haruyuki, still standing stiffly, to join her, as she glanced around at the other council members at the table.

“I’m the something. Sorry, can you vacate?”

The last part was directed at the ninth-grade boy sitting next to her. When the tall senior with short hair stood up with a bemused look on his face, she directed Haruyuki to the chair with the palm of her hand.

Mumbling his thanks, Haruyuki pulled his round body in as much as possible and lowered himself onto the seat. The slender chair creaked magnificently, but Kuroyukihime appeared not to notice at all and, after digging around in the left pocket of her blazer, pulled out something long and thin.

It was a cable. A thin, silver line, with small plugs at both ends of the shielded cord. After bringing her long hair around to the back with her left hand and inserting one plug into the terminal of the Neurolinker (naturally painted piano black) attached to her surprisingly thin neck, Kuroyukihime casually offered the other plug to Haruyuki. Now a large stir arose among the students in the lounge, all of whom had been carefully studying these events. Mixed in with the din were cries of something akin to distress: “No way!” and “She can’t be serious.”

Haruyuki was equally taken aback. Beads of sweat appeared suddenly on his face.

Direct wired transmission.

Kuroyukihime was inviting Haruyuki to “direct.” Normally, communication happened only through Neurolinkers wirelessly connected to that area’s network server, with several layers of security as intermediaries. Connecting directly with a wire, however, rendered 90 percent of these protective barriers useless. If you had the Linker skills, you could peek into the other user’s private memory and even set up a malevolent program.

Which is why, normally, directing was limited to people the user trusted implicitly: family, maybe lovers. Put another way, 99 percent of male/female couples directing in public were dating. Even the length of the cable reflected

this level of intimacy, in a custom that had no scientific foundation.

The XSB cable Kuroyukihime was currently holding out was about two meters long, so the problem in this case wasn't the length. Staring fixedly at the glittering silver terminal, Haruyuki managed somehow to squeeze his voice through his throat and ask, "Uh…um, what am I supposed to…"

"You can't do anything besides stick it in your neck, can you?" she asserted without missing a beat.

Very close to passing out now, Haruyuki took the plug with a shaky hand and fumbled to put it in his own Neurolinker. The moment he did, a warning flashed in front of his eyes: WIRED CONNECTION. As this message faded, only the figure of Kuroyukihime before him was alive against the backdrop of the lounge.

Although her lips, still toying with a faint smile, did not move a millimeter, her smooth voice sounded in Haruyuki's brain. *"Sorry to ask you to come all the way over here, Haruyuki Arita. Can you neurospeak?"*

The skill of having a conversation without moving your lips, going only through the Linker. Haruyuki nodded and replied, *"I can. Um…what exactly is this about? Some kind of elaborate…prank or something?"*

He thought she might get mad, but Kuroyukihime tilted her head slightly to the side and murmured softly, *"I suppose…in a certain sense, that's probably exactly it. Because right now, I am sending an application program to your Neurolinker. If you accept it, the world you have known until now will be completely and utterly destroyed and then rebuilt into something you can't even conceive."*

"M-my world…destroyed…?" Haruyuki repeated, dumbstruck.

Already, the student council members at the table were staring with deep interest in where this would go and the students making a fuss around them had essentially disappeared from his view. Only Kuroyukihime's words reverberated in his brain over and over.

The student clad in black smiled again at Haruyuki's confusion, raised her right hand, and quickly flicked the tip of her supple, pale finger.

Followed by a beeping sound.

And holo dialogue: OPEN BRAIN BURST2039.EXE? YES/NO

Despite the fact that this was supposedly his own familiar system display, Haruyuki almost felt like the window had its own secret, independent will and was pressing him for a decision.

In terms of common sense, opening an unknown app sent by a direct connection from a person you didn't know very well was the very definition of indiscretion. The obvious thing to do would be to yank out the cable right now. But Haruyuki couldn't do that for some reason. Instead, he looked down at his own body, wedged in tightly on the chair.

My world. My reality.

This dull body. Dull face. Endless bullying, escaping to the net. And more than anything else, me doing absolutely nothing to change any of it. My own self, giving up. I just tell myself it's fine this way and nothing's going to change anyway.

Haruyuki shifted his gaze and stared into Kuroyukihime's pitch-black eyes. And then after a five-second pause, he raised his right hand and poked the YES button with the tip of his finger. He saw her white face suddenly colored with a slight surprise, and a slight satisfaction dripped into his heart.

"Just what I was hoping for. As long as this world…breaks," he mumbled, while at nearly the same time, an enormous blaze leapt up to fill his field of vision. The wild flames that had engulfed him, causing him to stiffen up instinctively, finally focused in front of him to form a title logo. The design style was definitely nothing new, with a roughness that brought to mind a certain type of fighting game in fashion at the end of the last century.

The text that appeared: BRAIN BURST.

This was how Haruyuki and the program that would revolutionize the world he knew met.

The installation continued for nearly thirty seconds. For a Neurolinker app, it was pretty huge.

Haruyuki swallowed hard and stared as the indicator bar displayed below the burning title logo finally reached 100 percent. Kuroyukihime had said it would

destroy his world. What did that actually mean?

The indicator disappeared, and the logo vanished as if it had burnt itself up. The remaining orange flames produced text reading WELCOME TO THE ACCELERATED WORLD in a small English font, which quickly turned into sparks and scattered. What did that mean: *accelerated world*?

For ten seconds or so, Haruyuki sat and held his breath, waiting for something to happen. However, no sign or omen of the change to come appeared either in his body or in the scene around him. As usual, sweat was trickling down under his uniform, and the critical gazes inflicted on him from the surrounding tables seemed to grow even more intense.

Letting out a long, thin breath, he looked at Kuroyukihime suspiciously. *"Um… this Brain Burst program, what exactly…?"* he asked in neurospeak, and the black-clad senior murmured something far removed from Haruyuki's doubts, the smile on her lips never disappearing.

"So you've managed to install it. Although I was certain you had the aptitude for it."

"A-aptitude? For this program?"

"Mm. Brain Burst can't even be installed in people without high-level cerebral nerve reaction speed. For instance, high enough to get an absurd score in a virtual game. When you saw those phantom flames, the program was checking your brain's reactions. If you didn't have the aptitude, you wouldn't have even been able to see the title logo. But…still, you surprised me somewhat. After all, the old me hesitated for nearly two minutes about whether or not I should accept such a dubious program. I worked out a whole speech to persuade you, and it seems that I wasted my time."

"O-oh…I'm sorry. But, um, it…it doesn't seem like anything's happening. Is it an app you launch instead of a resident app?"

"Don't be impatient. You need to mentally prepare yourself a little first. We can get to the detailed explanations once you do. We have plenty of time."

Haruyuki glanced at the clock continuously displayed in the bottom right of his field of vision. Lunch break was already nearly half over. It didn't exactly

seem like they had so much time as all that.

Almost painfully aware of the way the room around him was a mix of curiosity and disgust, Haruyuki leaned forward. The chair beneath him groaned. It was a sound he was used to hearing, but it almost felt as if even the chair were laughing at how ugly and ridiculous he was, and he bit his lip. No one could possibly love him the way he was now. If he could change everything, he'd do it, no matter what the change ended up being.

"I'm already prepared. Please tell me what this program is—" He had gotten this far when the voice he least wanted to hear rang out from the lounge entrance behind him.

"Hey! Pi—Arita! You got a job to do!!"

Reflexively, he flinched and jumped out of his seat. He turned around to see Araya standing red-faced in front of him, even though he normally never came down from the roof before the end of lunch.

At the same time as the expression on Haruyuki's face shifted from shock to terror, Araya's shifted from rage to doubt. By standing up, Haruyuki had revealed the slender figure of Kuroyukihime, who had been completely hidden in his enormous shadow, along with the cable extending from her Linker and connecting to Haruyuki's.

Even frozen in place, Haruyuki was keenly sensitive to the nearly imperceptible shift in the mood of everyone around him except the members of the student council. They must have all instantly grasped the nature of the relationship between the large Araya wearing the same green necktie as Haruyuki, small vertically but big horizontally. But the mood of the students was of course not a reproach of Araya, but rather a sense of consensus, as if to say, *Oh, of course*.

Stop. Just stop now, Haruyuki fervently chanted to himself. He seriously hated the idea that Kuroyukihime would know he was being bullied. He offered a stiff smile to Araya with the intention of communicating that once his business here was finished, he would go right away to buy the buns and come up to the roof, so please just be quiet and wait a minute or two.

Upon seeing this, Araya's florid face grew even redder in fury. Haruyuki

shuddered as he watched Araya's lips move to form the word *pig* soundlessly. He had completely misunderstood the meaning of the smile on Haruyuki's lips as he directed with the most popular student in school.

Eyes glittering as he raised them, Araya slipped without a word through the hedges separating the cafeteria from the lounge. He approached in a straight line, stepping on the heels of his indoor shoes and making a scuffing sound. Subordinates A and B trailed after him, slightly nervous looks on their faces.

It's all over, Haruyuki thought, taking a step backward.

Araya was so tall and sculpted of solid muscle from karate that it was hard to believe he was also thirteen. On this body, he wore a too-short blazer and a light purple shirt that was conversely way too long, and his pants too were sloppily wide. His hair, dyed a nearly white gold, stood up in points like the flower holders in flower arrangements, and with his very thin eyebrows, piercings decorating both ears, and his almond eyes, he was the very definition of danger.

Umesato Junior High School was a high-level private school focused on getting kids into university, but in this era of extremely low birth rates, almost no junior high schools still had entrance examinations. Thus, martial artists like Araya sometimes signed up with the idea of an easy ride.

Having been easily taken down by this type since his first day of school, Haruyuki flinched and stared up at Araya standing in front of him, practically leaning against the smaller boy as he glowered down at him.

"You making fun of me?" As these words issued between lips twisted into a sneer, Kuroyukihime's clear real-world voice resonated crisply and clearly before Haruyuki could try to force some menial apology from his mouth.

"You're Araya, yes?"

After a moment's surprise flitted across his face, Araya smiled flirtatiously. Even a guy like this could apparently be pleased that *the* Kuroyukihime had remembered his name. But the words that followed astonished not only Araya but Haruyuki as well.

"I heard about you from Arita. That you might have been sent to junior high

school from the zoo.”

Araya’s jaw dropped suddenly, and Haruyuki stared in dazed amazement at how it trembled. “Wh-wh-wha—” The sound Araya was making was exactly what Haruyuki wanted to scream.

Wh-what are you talking about?!

However, he had no chance to give voice to that thought. Araya emitted a fierce, angry bellow. “What the hell?! That’s it! You are so dead, piiiiig!!”

Haruyuki froze with a start while Araya tightened his right hand into a fist and raised it up high. At the same moment, a sharp voice within his brain gave Haruyuki an order. *“Now! Shout it! ‘Burst link’!”*

Haruyuki couldn’t tell if he shouted the short command with his real voice or in neurospeak. But the sound became a vibration that seeped into every corner of his body.

“Burst link!!”

The sound of a screeching impact shook his world.

All color instantly disappeared, leaving only a transparent blue spreading out before him. The lounge, the students watching events play out with suspicious eyes, and even Araya in front of him—all were dyed a monochromatic blue.

And everything was frozen.

Haruyuki stared dumbfounded at Araya’s fist, which should have been striking him in another second, suspended a few dozen centimeters in front of him.

“Wh-whoa!!” he cried out involuntarily, leaping a step back. As a result, Haruyuki saw something even more incredible.

His own back. His own rounded back, now the same pure blue as Araya, was unnaturally frozen in a ridiculous flinching posture. It was almost like his soul alone had escaped his flesh.

In which case, what was he now?! When, shocked, he looked down, and he saw there his familiar pink pig. There was no mistake, it was the avatar Haruyuki used on the local net. No longer understanding anything about anything, he turned around unsteadily.

Where he saw yet another strange sight.

On the lounge chair, Kuroyukihime was sitting gracefully, knees neatly pressed together, back straight. However, her body and the cable stretching out from her neck, all of it was colored a transparent blue, like a crystal.

And standing next to her was her avatar, clad in the black dress with the swallowtail butterfly wings and parasol folded into it, a mysterious smile on her lips.

“Wh-what’s going on here?!” Haruyuki yelled at her, unable to hold back. “Full dive?! Or…an out-of-body experience?!”

“Ha, neither,” Kuroyukihime’s avatar informed him cheerfully. “Right now, we are operating in the Brain Burst program. We’re accelerated.”

“A…accelerated…?”

“Exactly. Everything around us looks like it has stopped, but in fact, it hasn’t. Our consciousnesses are moving at extremely high speeds.”

Kuroyukihime took a few steps, causing the silver gems decorating the hem of her dress to glint, and stopped beside the real Haruyuki and Araya, frozen and blue. With the tip of her parasol, she indicated Araya’s fist in a right straight punch trajectory. “This fist, although we can’t see it, is moving very slowly, crawling forward. Like the hour hand of a clock. If we waited like this for quite some time, it would eventually traverse these eighty centimeters, and we would be able to watch it sink slowly into your cheek here.”

“Y-you’re kidding…No, wait, I mean…J-just hold on a minute.” Haruyuki cradled his head in his pig hands and desperately tried to make sense of this information. “S-so, uh…then this means our souls haven’t actually left our bodies, right? Then all of this is just thinking happening in our heads basically?”

“You learn fast. That’s exactly it.”

“But that’s crazy! If you’re saying that just our thinking and our impressions are accelerated, then this…There’s no way I should be able to move around like some out-of-body experience and see my own back or even stand here and have a conversation with you!”

“Mm, that’s a very natural concern, Haruyuki.” Nodding professorially, Kuroyukihime swung her black hair, twisted into a long roll over her shoulder, and moved to the side of the table. “This blue world we see is the real-time world, but we are not viewing it optically. Go ahead and take a look under the table.”

“O-okay…” Haruyuki crouched down with the body of his pig, smaller than his real-world body, and peered under the blue table. “Th-that’s…”

Strange. The table was wood, and the top was shot through with a fine wood grain. But the underside was smooth like plastic, without the slightest hint of texture.

“What is this…It’s like it’s a polygon…?”

Kuroyukihime nodded casually at Haruyuki as he brought his face back up. “Exactly. This blue world is a 3-D image reconstructed from images captured by several social cameras in the lounge, and our brains are seeing it through our Neurolinkers. Areas that are blind spots for the cameras are supplemented by estimates. Which is why there is no point in trying to look up the skirt of that girl there.”

“Social cameras” were officially “social security surveillance cameras,” and the whole of Japan was covered with them, the goal the maintenance of public order. Guarded by the secure protective wall of the government’s image monitoring network, there was no way at all for the general population to sneak a look through them—or that was how it was supposed to be.

As this tidbit popped into his head, Haruyuki’s eyes reflexively followed the legs of the female student council member as they stretched out under the table, confirming that the graceful lines disappeared at the edge of her skirt.

Kuroyukihime glanced over at Haruyuki hurrying to stand up. “Don’t look at my legs. They’re in the view of the cameras.”

“I—I won’t.” Working hard to fix his gaze in one place, Haruyuki shook his head. “A-anyway, I basically get the logic of what we’re seeing. It’s a 3-D movie of the real world in real time…Using our avatars as proxies, we’re looking at stuff around us and talking via the direct connection, right?”

“Right. Your school local net avatar is being used here as a stopgap.”

“I’d rather have something else,” he mumbled, sighing heavily. He shook the pig head, got his thoughts sorted, and looked at Kuroyukihime’s avatar once again. “But…that’s only the start of it. What I really want to know…What exactly is *accelerated*? I’ve never heard of Neurolinkers equipped with a function that stops time like this!”

“Of course you haven’t. Only people with the Brain Burst program can call up the acceleration function hidden in the Neurolinkers,” Kuroyukihime said, almost under her breath, raising her left hand and gently nudging the extra-large Neurolinker wrapped around the neck of the frozen real Haruyuki. “Do you know the principle behind the operation of the Neurolinker, Haruyuki?”

Haruyuki nodded as he watched her touch “her” neck with a slim finger, giving him a start for some reason. “Y-yes…I don’t know all the details, but I know it connects wirelessly with your brain cells at the quantum level to send in images, sound, and sensations while simultaneously canceling out the reality of your own senses.”

“Right. In other words, the principle behind it is fundamentally different from the headgear-style virtual reality machines of the twenty-twenties or the implants of the thirties. A quantum connection is not a physiological mechanism. Thus, you don’t have the burden on the brain cells, and you get this unexpected excess…or so a certain person out there realized.”

“What do you mean…excess?”

Kuroyukihime responded with another question, as if Haruyuki’s query was slightly off the mark. “Have you ever touched a computer from the twenties?”

“Y-yeah, sure. We have one at my house.”

“Then you probably know what they called the basic operating frequency of the computers.”

“The…base clock?”

Kuroyukihime nodded with satisfaction. “Yes. Depending on the set scale, you overclocked the signal, which carved up time like a pendulum on the motherboard, to run the CPU. And human brains, our consciousness works the

same way.”

“What?!” Haruyuki’s eyes widened, breath shooting out of his large pig’s nose. “N-no way! Where is this pendulum inside us, then?”

“Here,” Kuroyukihime replied immediately. Embracing the real, blue Haruyuki from the front, she poked the center of his back with her right hand, eyes upturned as if playing a joke.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Right now, your clock is a little faster. You probably get it already. It’s your heart! Your heart’s not merely a pump to send out blood. The beating of your heart makes it a basic clock generator determining the driving speed of your thoughts.”

Swallowing hard, Haruyuki pressed on the chest of his pig body. Kuroyukihime continued, still touching the area above his heart, almost as if she was teasing him.

“For instance, when you try to stop your body, your heartbeat will speed up depending on the situation. Like a race-car driver’s. Why? It’s because you need to *accelerate* your thoughts—your awareness of the situation, your judgment. Or like a pair of lovers touching each other. You accelerate to more deeply experience each minute, each second.”

Kuroyukihime slowly dragged the tip of the finger on Haruyuki’s chest upward, stopping at his neck. “With each beat of your heart, the quantum pulse signal generated is sent back to your central nervous system, driving your brain—that is, your thoughts. So what do you think happens when the Neurolinker around your neck captures that signal and overclocks you?”

Haruyuki felt a shudder run up his back. “Your thoughts…are accelerated?”

“Exactly. And the Neurolinker lets you do that. Without any kind of negative impact on your body or your brain cells. Right now, in this exact moment, our Neurolinkers are overclocking the signal generated by a single heartbeat, riding the wireless quantum signal and sending information to our brains. In fact, it’s doing so at a rate of more than a thousand times the norm!”

“A thousand…times…” Haruyuki could no longer do anything other than

repeat the words fed to him, dumbfounded. In his almost drugged awareness, Kuroyukihime's smooth voice made even more of an impact.

"Your thoughts are accelerated a thousandfold. Which means one second of reality is a thousand seconds. Do the math and you're experiencing sixteen minutes and forty seconds."

This was more than F1 racers. This was basically more magic to stop time than it was technology.

However, before Haruyuki could start to wonder what specifically would be possible if he were to make full use of this marvelous phenomenon, Kuroyukihime muttered, "Oh!" as if just realizing something.

"…?"

"No, sorry. I got caught up in explaining things, and I ended up using a bit too much time. I completely forgot that the real you is about to be sent flying."

"Hah…" Haruyuki hurried to his feet and went around to the other side of his frozen blue self.

Araya's punch had definitely moved quite a bit during the five minutes or so (or the point-three seconds) they had spent talking. It was now only less than fifty centimeters from the real Haruyuki's round cheeks.

Araya's face was reproduced so perfectly, lips twisting to expose his brutal excitement, that it was hard to believe it was created using images from the social cameras hidden in the ceiling.

What exactly about this is fun? No, it's probably fun. I mean, me standing there aimlessly in front of his fist with that blank look on my face. I'm basically a bit player in his story.

Haruyuki turned back to Kuroyukihime, depressing thoughts rolling around in his brain. "So…how long does this acceleration last?"

"In theory, forever. But due to the limits of the Brain Burst program, the longest you can stay accelerated is thirty felt minutes, or one-point-eight real seconds."

At Kuroyukihime's cool response, Haruyuki widened his round, pink pig eyes.

If his real-world self had been frozen like this for nearly two seconds, then Araya's punch would travel the remaining distance and smash in the bridge of his nose in no time.

"H-he's going to hit me, isn't he?" Haruyuki cried, imagining himself being sent flying frame by frame.

But Kuroyukihime laughed lightly and added by way of explanation, "Ha-ha! Don't worry. Of course, you can stop the accelerated state when you want to."

"O-oh…you can? Then I better go back to reality and avoid this punch…"

"Simple. Ha-ha, this way of using acceleration is the easiest to understand. You carefully watch the situation with a reaction speed not possible in flesh and blood, and after careful deliberation, you release the acceleration and leisurely take action."

Just as she noted, accelerated, he now understood what needed to be done given the trajectory and aim of Araya's punch, which due to his terror he hadn't even been able to analyze—much less avoid—the many times he had been hit before now.

Once he released the acceleration, it would be enough to move about fifteen centimeters to the left. Swallowing hard, he carved the thought into his head and looked at Kuroyukihime for the command to release the acceleration.

But before he could speak, the beautiful girl in black dropped a bomb in a light tone. "But don't avoid it. He's actually daring to hit you here, Haruyuki."

"Wh—" Haruyuki's pig nose twitched before he shouted, "I—I don't want to! It's going to hurt!"

"Hurt what?"

"Huh…? What do you mean 'what'?"

"I'm asking you whether it's going to hurt your body or your mind."

The smile disappeared from Kuroyukihime's avatar. Without waiting for Haruyuki's response, she put a black high heel forward sharply.

Her slim form, nearly half a meter taller than Haruyuki's pig body, crouched down, and Kuroyukihime stared into his eyes well within his personal space. He

swallowed and stood bolt upright.

“This isn’t the first time you have been punched by this student, Araya.”

“N-no.” For some reason, Haruyuki nodded even though he had so desperately wanted her not to find out about the bullying.

“So then there are two reasons why he has not been dealt with before now. One is, of course, that you have just meekly accepted his behavior. And the other is that Araya has cleverly set the scene of his violence and extortion beyond the view of the social cameras.”

It was true that any direct bullying that happened to Haruyuki was always in places where students didn’t go, like the shadow of the ventilation units on the roof or behind the school. So that was to avoid not the eyes of other people but the cameras?

The expression on Kuroyukihime’s face was complicated, and she stretched herself upright smoothly. “Unfortunately, while they are few, there are students like him even among the eighth and ninth graders. They have their own sort of network, and apparently, an illegal app that warns them when they are in view of the social cameras is quite popular with their crowd. That lot would never give themselves away in front of the cameras. Even as a new student, he would surely have had that drilled into him.”

Glancing at Araya’s dyed blue face with eyes like ice, Kuroyukihime continued in a quiet, strong voice. “But he is still a child, after all. At my earlier provocation, he forgot himself and is lashing out violently here in front of all these cameras. Understand? This is your chance, Haruyuki. It would be easy to dodge this punch, but if you do, Araya will come to his senses and run off. Your opportunity to punish him as he deserves will again recede ever further from view.”

And then Araya would inflict further pain on Haruyuki. He could only too easily imagine that Araya’s revenge would make everything up to now look like a game. A shudder ran down his spine as Haruyuki looked at his real self and Araya’s fist approaching that face.

The thug’s bony right hand tapered to rough points, and if it hit him, it would hurt enough to make him cry. It was a pain he had become disgustingly familiar

with over these last six months. But—

What had really been bleeding was not his body but his heart. His pride, which had been steadily shredded.

“Um.” Haltingly, Haruyuki asked Kuroyukihime, “If I managed to master Brain Burst, would I be able to beat him in a fight?”

All expression disappeared from her beautiful face, and she stared directly at Haruyuki. “You probably could. You’re already a Burst Linker, which means you have a power greatly exceeding that of the unaccelerated. If you were so inclined, you wouldn’t have to settle for just one punch; you could beat him for as long as you wanted.”

I am so inclined. Is there some reason I wouldn’t be?

I’ll neatly dodge Araya’s karate and make him into something even uglier than a pig. I’ll smash his nose, knock out all his front teeth, pull out every single one of those precious golden hairs from his head when he’s bowed down before me, weeping.

Clenching his teeth with a crunch, he sighed heavily and told Kuroyukihime in a shaking voice. “…No, I won’t do it. I’ll get hit like a good boy. I won’t get the chance again, after all.”

“Mm.” Smiling with satisfaction somehow, Kuroyukihime nodded slowly. “A wise choice. Now, let’s try to minimize the damage while maximizing the effect, hmm? Once the acceleration runs out, you leap back to the right with everything you’ve got. Don’t forget to turn your head to the right as his fist hits you.”

“O-okay.” Moving directly behind his real self, Haruyuki checked the trajectory of Araya’s punch. She was right, if he leapt while turning his face, he could mitigate most of the bite from Araya’s karate technique.

Nodding, he looked to see exactly what he’d be leaping into. There was a table to the left, but a large space opened up behind him to the right, with no obstacles before the big window looking out onto the courtyard. Except for one person.

“Oh no…I can’t. If I jump from here to there, I’ll end up slamming into you.”

There was only about a meter between Haruyuki standing and the real Kuroyukihime sitting on the chair. If he hit her slim form with his enormous bulk, he couldn't be sure what would happen to her.

However, the avatar in the black dress merely shrugged lightly. "It's not a problem; this way is more effective. Don't worry, I'll make sure to dodge. I won't get hurt."

"…O-okay." It was certainly possible to do if you knew in advance what was going to happen. He was forced to nod.

"We're very nearly out of time here. Hurry and line up with your real self."

She poked his back and Haruyuki took a step forward to align his pig avatar with his blue self. Kuroyukihime seemed to have sat on the chair behind him; the position of her voice was lower.

"All right. Now I'm going to teach you the command to release the acceleration. Be strong. 'Burst out'!"

"Burst out!"

Haruyuki took a deep breath and put everything he had behind the shout.

A jetlike roar approached from a distance, shattering the surrounding silence. The blue world gradually took on its former color. In the left of his field of vision, Araya's static fist began to move, bit by tiny bit. From a sluggish snail's pace, it gradually sped up and drew nearer to Haruyuki's cheek.

As he prepared to leap back to the right as instructed, pushing off with both legs, he twisted his head earnestly to the right. The punch chugging toward him touched his skin, sinking in slightly.

And then the world returned.

As the noise around him rushed in, Haruyuki felt the fist digging into his left cheek. He felt his teeth driven into the inside of his cheek, his lip splitting. It was probably bleeding a little, but the pain was definitely about half that of the other karate punches he had suffered through however many times before this.

At the same time, his large body flew spectacularly through the air action-movie style. Fervently hoping she would manage to jump clear of him, Haruyuki

collided with the chair behind him. For a brief moment, he smelled something good, felt her soft hair.

The chair clattering to the floor was followed immediately by an ominous *thud*.

His back slamming into the floor, Haruyuki stopped breathing momentarily. Even as he gasped for air, he was yanking his head around to check on Kuroyukihime. She was supposed to have dodged, but what his widening eyes saw was her slender figure, limbs splayed out like a broken doll, eyes closed, head up against the lounge window.

Below the disheveled bangs, a single trail of blood ran down a cheek so white it was nearly translucent.

“Ah…ah!” Swallowing a scream, Haruyuki tried to stand up. But at that moment—

“Don’t move!!”

Kuroyukihime’s think voice hit his brain through his still directly connected Linker. Freezing instinctively faceup on the floor, Haruyuki responded. *“B-but you’re bleeding!!”*

“Don’t worry. It’s just a little cut. I told you, aim to maximize the effect. After this, you’ll never have to deal with Araya again.”

Staying still as instructed, Haruyuki moved just his eyes from left to right.

Araya, right fist still stuck out in front of him, looked down at Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime, mouth agape. The blood slowly drained from his face, and his thin lips trembled a few times, as if spasming.

The total silence that descended on the lounge was shattered by the terrible screams of the girls at the surrounding tables.

“Aaaaaaah!!”

Araya and subordinates AB put up almost no resistance when they were thrown out by the male council members. The three of them, white as ghosts, knees knocking, were half dragged away by the teachers who had come running, faces red with anger, and Kuroyukihime was taken straight to the

hospital, held by another female council member.

Haruyuki himself just got a little bandaging in the health room, and as the school doctor's hand disinfected and patched him up, the words Kuroyukihime had uttered immediately before the direct cable was pulled reverberated in his ears.

"Oops, I forgot to tell you. Do not take off your Neurolinker before you come to school tomorrow. And you can't make a global connection, not even for a second. Got it? Under no circumstances. Promise."

He couldn't even begin to guess at the intent behind these instructions. The entire two hours he spent in the health room, his whole body was enveloped in a strange feeling of detachment. He had no idea how he was supposed to process and digest all of the things that had happened to him in just these past two days.

But at the very least, it seemed like he wouldn't need to worry anymore about things like his shoes disappearing from his shoe locker or weird stuff being put in the shoes if they stayed there. Mechanically, he changed out of his school shoes into his street shoes, and when he was about to leave school grounds, he did as instructed and disconnected his Neurolinker from the net. Wondering once again what the point was, he turned toward the school gates and started walking.

"Haru!"

A small voice reached his ears, and his legs stopped short.

When he looked around, he noticed a small figure casting a shadow on the school wall, colored in the evening light. Aware of his face stiffening up involuntarily, Haruyuki said her name. "…Chiyu."

It wasn't that he'd forgotten. He'd forcefully chased the events of the previous day out of his head, and now they instantly replayed in the back of his brain. *Ah! What should I do? Okay, I have to apologize, first things first.*

As he panicked, Chiyuri Kurashima approached with a difficult look on her face, sinking slightly on the soft synthetic surface of the schoolyard.

"Uh…um…yesterday, I—"

“Haru, I heard about what happened at lunch,” Chiyuri said, cutting through Haruyuki’s flustered incoherence.

“Huh? Lunch…oh, oh!”

“I heard he hit you and you seriously went flying! Are you hurt? Are you okay?” Pulling her thick eyebrows together tightly, Chiyuri brought her face in closer, and Haruyuki unconsciously brought his left hand up to cover the bandage on his mouth. There was no way he could tell her that he was actually the one who had sent himself flying so spectacularly.

“Y-yeah, I’m okay. I just cut my lip a bit. I’m not hurt anywhere else.”

“You’re not? Oh good.”

A faint smile crossing her still terribly stiff face, Chiyuri glanced around. Apparently due to this one incident at lunch, Haruyuki had immediately become a topic of conversation at school, and the students heading home around them were all staring openly.

“Anyway, it’s good to walk home together sometimes,” Chiyuri said in a hard voice, and she started walking without waiting for an answer.

Sometimes? We haven’t done that once since we started junior high, Haruyuki thought, but if he shouted out in protest and ran off, it would just be a repeat of his stupidity yesterday. Whatever else happened, he had to apologize for that stuff.

Jogging after Chiyuri, who stalked forward in long strides unsuited to her stature, Haruyuki put a slight distance between them to walk alongside her. In this manner, they passed through the school gate and walked along the large road with only the sound of the in-wheel motors of passenger vehicles breaking the silence.

Normally as soon as Haruyuki left school, the people, bicycles, and cars moving around him were automatically marked as colored symbols in his vision, allowing him to walk even with his eyes closed, but he couldn’t use the navigation while disconnected from the global net. Just as he started to wonder again why exactly Kuroyukihime had given him an instruction like that, Chiyuri to his right casually mentioned that very name and nearly made him jump.

“I heard you were directing with Kuroyukihime in grade eight. For real?”

“What?! Th-that’s…” He was about to ask how she knew that, but, thinking better of it, realized that was about right. More than Araya and his fist, the directing probably made the bigger splash at school. “Yeah, well…”

Without even looking at him nodding, Chiyuri stuck out her small lips and started walking even faster. Haruyuki knew only too well from long experience that this was an expression of her very worst mood and wondered again why she was in such a state. To which he was again quick to tell himself that that was about right. If some idiot who had knocked over and dumped out her homemade lunch was doing weird things with some other girl without so much as an apology, it wasn’t just Chiyuri. Anyone would obviously be mad.

“B-but it wasn’t anything special. It was…I just copied an app from her.” Haruyuki tried to explain it away, an unpleasant sweat running down his back even though it was October. However, the look on Chiyuri’s face did not soften, and he began to intently put together a dialogue in his head, even more certain of the need to apologize for the sandwich incident.

“A-anyway, about…about yesterday…” He had finally gotten this much out of his mouth when they heard a voice ringing out ahead of them, and Haruyuki swallowed the rest.

“Heey! Haru! Chiii! What a coincidence. You headed home now?”

Chiyuri’s legs stopped on a dime, and Haruyuki lifted his face. He saw a boy the same age as them smiling broadly with a hand raised on the escalator leading to Kannana Ring Road.

His blue-gray uniform had a raised collar, unlike that of Umesato Junior. In his right hand, he held a refined, old-fashioned black schoolbag, and a kendo bamboo sword case was slung over his shoulder. His longish hair was parted cleanly in the middle, and the face below it was beautiful, clear—best and most aptly described as “fresh.”

“Oh…Taku.” Blinking rapidly several times, Chiyuri smiled.

Even though she was in such a bad mood. After thinking this, Haruyuki muttered his third *That’s about right* in his head. *I mean, she did just run into*

her boyfriend while walking along with an annoying jerk who dropped her sandwiches.

As Haruyuki and Chiyuri's childhood friend Takumu Mayuzumi jogged toward them, bamboo sword case bouncing, he turned a cheerful, open smile toward Haruyuki.

"Hey, Haru! It's been ages!"

"Hey, Taku. Has it been that long?" Haruyuki asked, glancing up at Takumu's face, ten centimeters higher than his own.

"It has. I haven't seen you in two weeks already in meatspace. You never come to the condo events."

"Like I'd show up at a sports meet," he returned, screwing up his face, and Takumu laughed as if to say, *You never change*.

The three of them had all been born the same year in a skyscraper condo complex in Kita-Koenji. However, Haruyuki probably wouldn't have become such good friends with this boy who had everything he didn't based solely on that coincidence.

Ironically, it was because Takumu was so good at his studies and managed to get into a famous K–12 school in Shinjuku that Haruyuki was able to hang out with him without fear. Takumu had never had to see Haruyuki's pathetic self targeted for bullying the second he had started at the local public elementary school.

Haruyuki had forced (or rather begged) Chiyuri, who had gone to that same elementary school, never to tell Takumu about the bullying. If he found out, Takumu might have tried to help him, calling out the gang of brats and taking them down with his bamboo sword.

But Haruyuki had the feeling that even if he stopped getting bullied, he wouldn't be able to keep being friends with Takumu.

"That reminds me." Haruyuki was first to open his mouth while the three of them walked side by side, something he almost never did at school. "I saw the videos of the city tournament on the net the other day. You're amazing, Tak; only in seventh grade and already winning."



“I was just lucky. I was super lucky,” Takumu said as he laughed, scratching his head. “The guys who would’ve given me trouble got knocked out in the prelims. And then there was Chi here coming to cheer me on.”

“What? Me?!” Chiyuri cried from the other side of Takumu, eyes wide. “I—I mean, I was just watching from the corner, that’s it.”

“Ha-ha-ha! What are you talking about? You were really hollering! Stuff like *Kick his teeth in!*” Takumu raised his laughing voice cheerfully. “And on top of that, you even told me you wouldn’t give me lunch if I lost. And you looked serious, too, Chi.”

“Oh, come on! I’m not listening to you anymore!”

Watching Chiyuri increase her pace while covering both ears, Haruyuki nudged Takumu with his left elbow. “So that’s what all that screaming about the final match was.”

“Well, you know. Ha-ha-ha!”

He laughed with Takumu.

It’s definitely better this way, Haruyuki thought.

His choice two years ago hadn’t been a mistake. After all, the three of them were able to talk like this now, just like they used to. He didn’t want to ruin this relationship.

At that moment, Takumu said lightly, almost like a counterattack: “So Haru, you got to have the Chi special for lunch yesterday, huh?”

“Huh? Oh, that’s, well…” Seeing Chiyuri’s back suddenly stiffen, Haruyuki was slightly panicked. *Crap, I still haven’t apologized. What should I do? Should I apologize now? Or maybe e-mail her once I get home—*

No, wait.

How did Takumu know that?

Haruyuki’s legs became tangled, and Takumu caught him with a “Whoa!” as he was about to fall. He was unaware even of this as his thoughts raced feverishly.

Chiyuri had made those sandwiches because she knew that Araya and his gang were stealing his lunch money. She definitely wasn't one for cooking, so he had wondered why…but could it be that she had actually done it on Takumu's advice?

In which case, that meant that Chiyuri had talked to Takumu. About the fact that Haruyuki was being bullied. If she hadn't, he wouldn't have said that just now.

The inside of his head suddenly went incandescent, and unconsciously, Haruyuki pushed away Takumu's hand on his right elbow.

"H-hey! Haru?" Takumu inquired doubtfully, but Haruyuki couldn't bring himself to look up at that face.

Letting his gaze roam around, Haruyuki's eyes met Chiyuri's, an almost-frozen expression on her face. Her lips moved, and she looked as if she was about to say something. Before she got the chance, though, Haruyuki shouted, "Ah! Sorry, there's just this show I want to watch! I'm gonna run ahead! See you, Taku!"

He took off running. His legs insisted on getting tangled up, and he nearly fell more than once, but Haruyuki didn't stop.

The two of them were probably going to talk about him again. About how they could help Haruyuki. Just imagining the conversation, he was overcome with a sensation like the top of his heart was being twisted off. It was too ironic that just when Araya was finally disappearing through a seriously miraculous turn of events, he found out Takumu had already known all about it.

He kept running, legs constantly in motion, until he passed through the entrance to his condo building and dove into an elevator.

The dream Haruyuki had that night was probably at the top of the list of his all-time worst bad dreams.

The bad kids from his elementary school, Araya and subordinates AB, and some outlaw students he didn't know kept tagging one another out to square off against Haruyuki and knock him around. A slight distance away, Chiyuri and Takumu held hands and watched. More than the pain all over his body, it was

their pitying expressions that he had the most trouble enduring.

As the dream progressed, the number of spectators increased. His mother appeared next to the couple (Chiyuri and Takumu), and then even his father—who had left them a long time ago—showed up. The residents of his condo and his classmates joined as well, forming a circle and looking down at Haruyuki as he crawled along the ground.

Now it wasn't just pity on their faces but scorn. Too many people to count pointed their fingers at ugly, miserable Haruyuki and laughed.

I hate this. I hate it here.

With this thought in mind, he looked up at the remote, dark sky and saw a shadow there. A single bird, wings blacker than the night, spread its wings, soaring lightly.

I want to be up there, too. Higher. Farther.

I want to fly.

To the other side.

"Is that your wish?"

3

Haruyuki opened his eyes with a start.

When he looked at his clock by the white light coming in through the window, the display said six thirty in the morning. Which meant he had been asleep nearly twelve hours.

His entire body was drenched in sleep sweat, a slimy coating on his skin composed of the vestiges of his nightmare. Despite this, he couldn't remember the details of the dream.

Kuroyukihime's final words to him the day before came dimly to mind. Could the instruction not to remove his Neurolinker all night have had some connection with his dream?

Wondering about this vaguely as he showered and changed into his uniform, Haruyuki ate a breakfast of cereal and orange juice alone in the kitchen, put his dishes in the dishwasher, and, to complete his set of predeparture rituals, knocked on his mother's bedroom door.

"I'm leaving for school," he called into the dim light inside her room, whereupon he heard an unintelligible croaking from the bed. Apparently, she'd had quite a bit to drink the night before.

His mother took her terminal in hand, and he waited for her to charge five hundred yen to his Neurolinker. "Haruyuki, your Linker's disconnected." Her voice was unexpectedly tinged with annoyance.

Oh crap. He hurriedly put a hand to his neck. After he connected to the global net, all the while feeling like he had forgotten something, his electronic balance quickly increased with a ring denoting the transaction.

"I'm leaving, then," he said again but with no response this time. Quietly

closing the bedroom door, he put on his sneakers in the foyer and left the apartment, taking the elevator to the first floor and making his way through the lobby, muttering “Good morning” to other residents of the building whose faces he barely remembered.

Just three seconds after he slipped out through the automatic doors to step into the condo courtyard, an intense shrieking noise echoed in his brain, and the world blacked out around him. In an instant, the town, sparkling in the morning sun, sank into the darkness of night.

What the—?! Acceleration?! But…why? All by itself?!

He held his breath as letters in the familiar flaming font arranged themselves before his eyes: HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!!

He felt like he had seen this sentence somewhere before. But before he could follow the memory trail, the flaming text blinked out, and something even more mysterious appeared atop of his field of vision.

First, in the center, the number 1800. Then, to the left and right, blue bars stretched out abruptly, with a somewhat thin green bar growing below them.

Finally, the flaming text in the center of his view: FIGHT!!

The number changed to 1799.

Not knowing what to do, Haruyuki simply stared at the four-digit number as it counted down. Eighteen hundred seconds. Thirty minutes. It was a number he had heard somewhere. Right, wasn’t this the time limit for acceleration that Kuroyukihime had mentioned?

But this time, Haruyuki hadn’t even said the *B* of the “burst link” command to start the acceleration. Also, the color of the world—it wasn’t blue, it was full-dive. And he basically had no idea what all the *challenger* and *fight* stuff was about. He looked around, desperately trying to get even the most tenuous grasp on the situation before quickly realizing something.

The crisp October morning had vanished without a trace, but the space around him was still the same area in front of his building that had been burned into his memory. On one side, the familiar two-lane road, and on the other, convenience stores and office buildings. When he turned around, the high-rise

condo from which he had just emerged pierced the darkness, towering above him.

However, the jam of cars that should have been bumper-to-bumper on the road toward Shinjuku and the school-bound students filling the sidewalks were gone. Instead, the road was cracked and caving in everywhere, guardrails and signs were twisted, and the buildings' windows were very obviously broken.

Bricks were piled up at the intersection a little way away, almost like a barricade, and flames of something burning licked up at the sky from a metal drum. Traces of destruction also marred Haruyuki's condo, which was in a terrible state, with crumbling concrete pillars and large holes in the exterior walls.

Struck by the urge to run back inside and check the state of his own apartment, Haruyuki staggered around a few steps and peered into the entrance through the bricks. He then opened his eyes wide in silent amazement. The interior of the building was just a flat gray surface spreading out boxlike, almost like the time he'd poked his head into a polygon building in a game.

No. Not almost *like.* Exactly *like.*

This was reality and also not reality. Haruyuki was currently in a full dive on the virtual net using the accelerated function, and the scene around him was a 3-D movie reconstructed from social camera images. Just like the frozen, blue world he'd seen in the lounge the day before. But he had never experienced this level of detail in a virtual space. It was impossible for him to pick out the pixel pitch. Even the lone pebble rolling by his feet was inscribed with a level of crispness that was overwhelming.

So then what body did he have? Haruyuki looked down, expecting to find his familiar pink pig avatar. "…Wh-what is this…" Dumbfounded, his voice slipped out involuntarily.

Legs, torso, arms—his whole body was polished silver and thin like wire. Almost like a robot, but far removed from a game or anime fighting robot.

Panicking and bringing his hands to his head, the tips of his fingers merely slipped over the smooth helmetlike curves and found nothing like a nose or a

mouth. He looked around for a moment and, seeing the cracked windows in the wall of the mixed residential building across the road from his building, he ran over, feet clanking against the pavement.

The figure the large window reflected back at him was clearly a metal robot, from tip to toe. His body was very thin and small, only the streamlined head was awkwardly large. In a word, a total small fry.

If I at least had some horns on my forehead…or both my eyes shone gold like beacons. As Haruyuki silently grumbled at the unknown avatar designer, he saw several human shapes squirming behind his reflection in the glass on the other side of the road.

Metal body cowering, Haruyuki turned around with a gasp. He didn't know when they had shown up, but looking his way were exactly three figures standing in the shadow of the ruined local convenience store. Under cover of darkness as they were, he could only make out their silhouettes, which were all much larger than his own.

The shadows huddled together as if discussing something. Unconsciously, Haruyuki strained his ears.

"…too, but he looks like the jumpy type."

"And I don't have his name in memory. Maybe a newbie?"

"But he's metallic. That's gotta mean something."

They're—They're not NPCs. Haruyuki felt it instinctively. Their demeanor, their tone—he was sure they weren't the creation of some program; they were real, live people. But this was the accelerated virtual net. Which meant they had also installed Brain Burst, just like Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime.

In which case, they probably knew what this was all about. *I'll just go and ask them*, Haruyuki thought, and he stepped nervously into the road, advancing to the white center line. Abruptly, he felt a new pair of eyes on him. He stopped moving and ran his gaze quickly over the scene.

There they were. Never mind the group of three down there. He didn't know where they had appeared from, but on the roofs of the abandoned buildings, on top of piles of bricks, strange silhouettes were staring down at Haruyuki

from all directions. However, they didn't come any closer, and…they seemed to be waiting for something.

At a loss, Haruyuki, in the middle of the road, shifted just his gaze. In seemingly no time, the count in the top of his field of view had gotten down to 1620. There was no change in the two bars stretching out to the right and left of the numbers. And he hadn't noticed until now, but underneath the bars were small English letters.

The text on the left side read SILVER CROW, and on the right was ASH ROLLER.

I know this screen configuration. I totally know this screen, Haruyuki thought, hit by a powerful sense of déjà vu.

It wasn't anything new. This kind of game program had swept through the arcades of Japan more than thirty years before Haruyuki was born, at the end of the 1900s. And just recently, too, he felt like he had seen something like this. It was—

Standing stock-still, searching his memory, he jumped at the sound of a sudden explosion behind him. He tried to turn around, lost his balance, and fell on his backside with a *thump*. A remarkably large silhouette towered above him.

A motorcycle. And not the motor-drive type he was used to seeing. It was saddled with something like the guts of the internal combustion engines that had been outlawed ages ago, and those guts were roaring and rumbling. The front fork was ridiculously long, and the tire wedged between it was also so thick as to be a joke. A faint burning scent wafted up from the rough gray treads.

Haruyuki turned his eyes upward and timidly took in the rider straddling the leather seat on the other side of the exaggeratedly bent handle bars. Body encased in studded black leather, boots on each firmly planted foot, arms crossed over the chest. His head was tucked inside a helmet, also black, but the visor was a flashy thing with a skeleton design.

Haruyuki listened, dumbstruck at the creaking voice coming from within. "The Century End stage! It's been forever. Allllllll riiiiiiiight!" From one of the folded arms, an index finger popped up into the air and waggled left to right. "And as a

special bonus, my opponent is a shiny newb. Super all riiiiiiiight!”

Bringing up his right boot, the skeleton rider laid it on the handle bar and rubbed it dexterously. As he did, a thunderous, booming roar sent Haruyuki flying once more.

No matter which way he looked at it, this guy didn’t seem brimming with warm friendlies. More importantly, if Haruyki’s memory served, this was a battle stage. So then this rider was…

“Wh-whoa…” Haruyuki retreated slowly and turned around. “Whoaaaaa!” He started running in earnest, thin robot legs clanking.

Behind him, the engine roared once again, and the sound of the tires squealing against the pavement threatened to pierce his eardrums. A mere second later, he felt an incredible impact and a sharp pain in the middle of his back before he was flying high up into the night sky. At the same time, the blue SILVER CROW bar in the top right of his view shrank abruptly.

Spinning around in space, Haruyuki thought, *I* knew *it. So then this is a fighting game, I’m a newbie who doesn’t know his left from his right, and my opponent is a veteran player who figured that out five minutes ago.*

There’s no way I’m going to win.

“Ha-ha-ha! So you’re already being hunted? That’s because you broke your promise to me, boy.”

Lunch break.

Kuroyukihime, directly connected to Haruyuki in the lounge again just like the day before, laughed smoothly at the mere thought, shaking her head, bandaged under her bangs to encourage healing. Although awful to look at because of the bleeding, her injury was apparently nothing more than a cut. She had stopped every word of gratitude and apology he had in his vocabulary with a wave of her right hand.

“I-it’s not funny. I thought I was going to die. I mean, I know it’s my fault for accidentally connecting to the global net, but…”

Watching with amusement as Haruyuki stuttered, Kuroyukihime lifted her

teacup from the table and brought it to her lips. Next to the saucer was a shrimp gratin with steam rising from it, untouched just like the large plate of pork curry in front of Haruyuki.

The student council members sitting at the table with them had already begun moving their chopsticks and spoons, and Haruyuki's stomach made a slight, pathetic sound. However, Kuroyukihime's lecture or explanation or whatever it was didn't seem like it was likely to end anytime soon.

"But, well, I suppose it's saved me the trouble of having to explain it all to you. The cost of the lesson was somewhat high, but you do understand now, yes?"

"Understand…what?"

"The truth about the Brain Burst program. It's no sweeping conspiracy or mystery, it's just—"

Haruyuki nodded sharply and mentally articulated the end of Kuroyukihime's cutoff sentence. *"It's just a fighting game. Encounters using the real world as a stage. It's crazy."*

"Ha-ha, it certainly is quite crazy, something to really make people talk."

"I mean, think about what you could do with this amazing of acceleration technology! And you go with a fighter?! The genre was already obsolete thirty years ago!"

At this, Kuroyukihime tilted her head slightly as if thinking, a sarcastic-looking smile slipping out from somewhere. *"Hmm, I think you need to phrase it slightly differently. Better to say that we Burst Linkers are accelerated to play fighting games. Conversely, we fight so that we can continue to be accelerated. We must. This is the one unpleasant part of this program."*

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Mm…I should probably explain the rest to you in the field. Go ahead and accelerate."

"O-okay…"

Haruyuki let go of his unfinished business with the large plate of curry in front of him and shouted the "acceleration" command as instructed after

straightening up on his chair.

“Burst link!”

A clang slapped his body and his consciousness, and the students around him stopped moving instantly. At the same time, all color vanished, only to be replaced with that transparent blue.

Kuroyukihime in front of him was also static, but her avatar in its bewitching black dress soon stepped out of her neat, uniformed figure, a soul escaping the body. Haruyuki slipped off his chair in his pink pig body and stepped forward so that he wouldn’t have to see the rotund real-life self he was leaving behind.

“So…what are we doing?”

“You have a new icon in the left of your field of vision, yes?”

Shifting his gaze as instructed, he realized that there was, in fact, now a burning *B* mark among the app start-up icons lined up there. He raised his left hand and clicked on it.

“That’s the menu for the fighting game software Brain Burst. You can see your own status and battle results and look for Burst Linkers around you to challenge them. Try pressing the DUELING button.”

Nodding, Haruyuki clicked the bottom-most button on the menu. Immediately, a new window opened, and after a momentary search display, a list of names appeared.

That said, there were only two names on it. Silver Crow, the name he had seen that morning, which probably referred to Haruyuki himself, and one more. Black Lotus.

He had absolutely no doubt that this was Kuroyukihime’s Burst Linker name, but he lifted his head briefly to confirm. As expected, the black swallowtail avatar nodded lightly.

“Right now, because we’re cut off from the global net and only connected to the school’s local net, there’s just you and me on the list. Or at least there *should* just be us.”

“Yes…Black Lotus.” He wanted to say something like *What a pretty name* or *It*

suits you perfectly, but, of course, there was no way lines like that would flow out of his mouth all smooth and cool. Haruyuki's pig nose simply twitched.

"All right, then. Now click on my name and ask to fight me."

"Wh-what?!"

"I'm not saying we're going to fight for real. We'll just let the time run out and end in a draw." With a faintly wry smile, Kuroyukihime made a small, encouraging noise.

Haruyuki lightly clicked her name on the list, all the while wondering at the fact that here he was playing one-on-one in a day and age when massive battle games with tens of thousands of people connecting on the same field were not uncommon. He selected DUEL from the pop-up menu that appeared and subsequently YES from the YES/NO dialogue that followed.

In an instant, the world changed again.

All the students disappeared instantly from the frozen blue lounge. Color returned to the pillars and tables, which decayed as if weathered, and a thick layer of dust clung to the windows. The sky was dyed a deep orange, and a dry wind blew up from somewhere, stirring grasses he didn't know the names of sprouting up from the floor.

The familiar 1800 was carved out in the top of his line of sight. Blue bars stretched out on both sides, followed finally by the flaming text FIGHT!!

"Hmm…a Twilight stage? You pulled a rare one." Kuroyukihime's voice echoed beside Haruyuki, whose eyeballs rolled in his head as he took in the scene. "The properties of this stage are burns well, collapses soon, and unexpectedly dark."

"U-uh-huh…" Nodding, Haruyuki took a look at his body and saw that at some point, his pink pig frame had transformed into the thin silver robot. He shifted his gaze, wondering what form Kuroyukihime had taken, but standing before him was the same black dress avatar, not even slightly altered.

"That's your duel avatar, hm? Silver Crow, good name. Good color. I like the form, too." Kuroyukihime's hand stretched out to stroke the smooth silver head.

The definite sensation of being touched made Haruyuki realize all over again that this was a real virtual reality, a place where the childish no-touching code—ostensibly for protection—did not exist.

“Th-thanks. It’s kind of wimpy, but I can’t redo it. Right? So who came up with the design and the name? But wait—duel avatar?”

“Just like the name, an avatar for fighting. The design is by the Brain Burst program and you yourself. Last night, you had a very long, scary dream, didn’t you?”

“…I did.” He couldn’t remember the details, just intuitively felt that it was an incredible nightmare. Unconsciously, he rubbed his thin robot arms with his hard palms.

“That was because the program was accessing your deep images. Brain Burst carves up and filters the player’s desires, fears, and obsessions to compose your duel avatar.”

“My…images. Fears and…desires,” Haruyuki mumbled, looking down at his body again. “This…this tiny, weak, smooth body is what I wished for? I mean sure, it’s true I’m always thinking it’d be better if I lost some weight…even so, a little more hero-like—”

“Ha-ha-ha! It’s not as simple as that. What the program reads is not your ideal image but your feelings of inferiority. In your case, you should probably just count yourself lucky you didn’t end up with that pink pig as is as your duel avatar. Although I like that one, too.”

“P-please don’t say that. I hate it.” He quickly considered putting together a new black knight avatar for the school’s local net as he asked, “But then does that mean that Brain Burst also made your school avatar? That’s the image of your inferiority complex? But it’s so beautiful…”

“No.” Eyes darkening slightly, Kuroyukihime lowered her face. “This is one I put together myself with an editor. I…For my own reasons, I’ve sealed off my actual duel avatar. I’ll tell you the reason one of these days, when the time comes.”

“Sealed…?”

“Unfortunately, my duel avatar is ugly. The epitome of hideous. Although that’s not the reason I’ve sealed it away…Anyway, enough about me.”

Kuroyukihime shrugged, and her face quickly found its usual mysterious expression. She petted Haruyuki’s helmet head once again with a pale hand. “This morning you were thrust into a fight with another Burst Linker through the global net. You fought with this brand-new avatar. And you were thoroughly defeated. Correct?”

“Uh, well, pretty much. He crushed me.” Haruyuki reluctantly remembered the fight stage he had been abruptly pulled into before school. He had been smashed, rammed, and sent flying by the rude rider in the skeleton helmet straddling the bike in the dark ruins, and his health gauge had dropped to nothing in the blink of an eye.

Together with a pathetic sound effect, the text YOU LOSE had appeared in front of him, and then…“I’m pretty sure…It showed my name and level one, and then some weird number. Burst…points, I think? That went from ninety-nine to eighty-nine.”

“Good, it’s good you remembered. Burst points! Those are the very things that send us into this merciless battlefield.” Nearly shouting, Kuroyukihime took a few steps toward the window and whirled around. She thrust the parasol she held in both hands down onto the floor with a sharp *snap*, and a small shard of the cracked pavement flew off. “Burst points are, simply put, the number of times we can accelerate. Accelerate one time, lose one point. The initial value immediately after installation is one hundred, but because you accelerated once in the lounge yesterday, you used up a point. And then you ended up using another point earlier.”

“Gah…s-so how do we pay for them? Are we actually charged real money?”

“No,” Kuroyukihime countered crisply. “There’s only one way to increase your burst points: win Duels. If you win, your points go up ten for a same-level battle. However, your points drop ten if you lose. Like you did this morning.”

Turning her face sharply to the twilight sky on the other side of the window, Kuroyukihime continued, almost murmuring. “Acceleration is extremely powerful. It goes without saying that winning fights means earning a perfect

score on a test or winning big at certain types of gambling or sports becomes child's play. The freshman player who broke the record for home runs at the big Koshien tournament this summer was a high-level Burst Linker."

"Wh—"

"Therefore." She cast the baffled Haruyuki a somehow sad glance. "Once we've tasted this forbidden nectar, we have no choice but to keep accelerating forever. And to earn the burst points that permit us to do so, we have no choice but to keep fighting forever."

"J-just wait a minute." *That talented heavy hitter was a Burst Linker? No, that's not the issue. Isn't there something off about Kuroyukihime's story?* Haruyuki thought hard and then opened his mouth. "Uh…um, before, you said if you win in a Duel, you get ten points, and if you lose, you drop ten points, right? Then that means…since you use points accelerating, the points all Burst Linkers share only go down. So people who aren't good at fighting naturally lose all their points…What happens then?"

"You really do catch on quickly. It's simple. You lose Brain Burst." Her dark eyes almost burning, Kuroyukihime stared directly at Haruyuki. "The program is automatically uninstalled and can never be reinstalled. There's no point in changing Neurolinker models, either. It recognizes you by your unique brain waves. People who have lost all their points can never accelerate again." After relaying this in a bleak tone, she added, "Although it's not the case that the total pool only diminishes because new people join in the fight, like you. That said, right now, the trend is a slight decline."

But Haruyuki barely heard this last part. "You lose…Brain Burst."

Even though he had only tasted the power of acceleration two or three times, his back seized up at the mere thought. And it wasn't just that he wouldn't be able to accelerate. For Haruyuki, there was also the fact that he would lose his one point of contact with Kuroyukihime, who lived in a totally separate world. Once again, he felt the weight of those ten points taken from him by that skull rider.

"Now then. What are you going to do, Haruyuki?"

Faced with this nearly whispered question, Haruyuki lifted his head. "What do

you mean?”

“At this point, you can still go back. To the regular world, without acceleration or fighting. You won’t see those idiots who were bullying again, I guarantee it as a student council member.”

“I—I…” *I don’t care about acceleration or Brain Burst or whatever. I just don’t want to be away from you.* Of course, he couldn’t say anything like that. Instead, he clenched his silver fist and replied, “I still have to repay you.”

“Oh?”

“You gave me Brain Burst and pulled me out of that hell. I can at least see that you didn’t do it to steal my initial hundred points. If you had, you could’ve told me anything; you had millions of options. So there must be something you want me to do. Some objective that was worth taking the time to check my squash game score and lecture me from square one about acceleration. Am I right?”

“Hmm. An astute inference.”

Through his silver mask, Haruyuki stared squarely at the beautiful avatar with her faint smile. “I…I’m actually not the type of person who gets to talk to you like this. I’m not cool. I’m a blob, a crybaby, I hold grudges, I get jealous of the only two friends I have, I run away at the drop of a hat. I really am a waste of skin. I’m basically the worst.”

What am I saying? he thought, but the words poured out of him and he couldn’t stop talking. His expressionless, mirror-like avatar was some consolation, at least. “Even so, you reached out to me, you directed with me, and I know it’s just because I was kinda good at that game, I know you didn’t have any other reason, but I—I wouldn’t even, I mean.”

Seriously, what am I saying here? Get it together before you talk. Aah, this is exactly the kind of time you need to accelerate. Except you’re already accelerated.

Spiraling deeper into panic, Haruyuki felt compelled to bare everything in his heart. “So…so I want to live up to your expectations. I want to properly repay the…m-mercy you showed me. I don’t know what I can do, but if you’re having some trouble, I want to do anything and everything to help. So I…I won’t

uninstall Brain Burst. I'll fight…as a Burst Linker."

What the—? I should've just said that last part! How could I have said all that other stuff?

Having finished vomiting words, Haruyuki made his thin avatar even smaller and stared down, acutely embarrassed. He braced himself for the fact that there was no doubt she was thinking that Mr. Self-Conscious here had gotten the wrong idea about things somehow when the staccato pace of her response shook his sense of hearing.

"*Mercy?* Don't use words like that."

Lifting his eyes slightly in shock, he saw her face twisted with more obvious emotion than he had witnessed in her these few days. "I'm nothing but a foolish, helpless junior high student. I'm a human being, the same as you, standing in the same place, breathing the same air. To say nothing of the fact that at this stage, we are both Burst Linkers, exactly equal. You're the one creating a distance. Do these two virtual meters feel that far to you?" Silently, she extended her pale right hand.

They do, Haruyuki murmured to himself. *You have no idea how terrifying it is for someone like me to even be seen by someone like you, who has everything. I'm happy to be your servant. Just being a pawn to be moved on your orders is an unexpected happiness. If I take your hand now, you'll end up with expectations of me you shouldn't have. Poisonous expectations you'll definitely end up regretting several times over.*

It's the same with Chiyuri and Takumu. I'm satisfied being their happy, fat friend. If they would just quit pitying me and sympathizing with me, I couldn't ask for anything better.

The voice that came out of Haruyuki's mouth was dry, like the trees in the virtual twilight. "You rescued me from hell. That's…For me, that's a life's worth of happiness. I don't need anything else. Nothing at all."

"Is that so?" Kuroyukihime murmured, lowering her hand. A hard, heavy silence ruled the stage for a brief while. It was her voice that broke the tension, smooth as if nothing had changed at all. "I gratefully accept your aid. It is true that I currently have the tiniest, troublesome problem. I'd like your assistance in

resolving the matter.”

Haruyuki nodded, holding his breath momentarily. “I’ll do whatever I can. What do you need?”

“First of all, I need you to learn how Duels work. Go ahead and click on your name displayed below your health gauge. Open ‘Help’ and check what all the normal and special attack commands are for your duel avatar.”

“S-special attack?” he parroted, staying the hand about to reach up.

“Mm. When the program creates your duel avatar, it allocates your already fixed potential according to your attributes. Some excel at attacking, others have solid defenses, and peaky types aim to settle battles in a single move with a special attack. But the overarching principle is that the general potential of duel avatars at the same level is exactly equal. You were crushed in your first fight, but it’s not because your opponent was stronger. You simply didn’t know how to fight.”

That bike guy (Ash Roller) was level one just like Haruyuki. Did he really have the same battle ability as Silver Crow, even though he had seemed so overwhelming? If he did, then this small, slender robot avatar definitely had to have an incredible special attack. Heart pounding, Haruyuki stretched out a silver finger and clicked on his name.

A semitransparent window popped open.

The movement of his body was depicted by a simple, human-shaped animation with the name of the technique displayed to its right.

First up, a motion readying the right fist against the upper thigh before being thrust forward. Normal attack: Punch.

Next. A motion pulling in the right leg and jamming it forward. Normal attack: Kick.

And finally, the special attack. Cross both arms, open them to the left and right, and thrust the head out. This one was called Head Butt.

That was it. There was nothing else.

“Um,” Haruyuki muttered, dazed. “Normal attacks, Punch and Kick…and all I

have for a special attack is a Head Butt.”

“Oh?” Hearing this, Kuroyukihime put the fingers of her right hand to her lower jaw and tilted her head. Her expression didn’t seem to change, but, unable to face her any longer, Haruyuki quickly hung his head. Just imagining a tinge of disappointment floating up in those black eyes made his whole body suddenly hot.

Before he knew it, his mouth was opening on its own. “No, it’s fine. I mean, I expected this. Take one look at this avatar, and you can clearly see it’s no good. I’m sorry I can’t live up to your expectations. It’s fine if you kinda leave me be. Just think of me as a lottery you didn’t win.”

“You…idiot!!”

Haruyuki lifted his face, his whole body shaking with a start. Before he knew it, Kuroyukihime was standing in front of him, beautiful eyebrows raised, looking down at him with eyes like raging fires.

“I won’t tell you how to live your life; as junior high students, we’re on the same level. However, when it comes to Brain Burst, I have more than six years more experience than you. Were you not listening? When I told you that all the duel avatars have equal potential? Or have you already forgotten?”

“B-but it’s just that my only attacks are Punch, Kick, and Head Butt…”

“In which case, you most certainly have some strength somewhere to compensate.” Her gaze softening slightly, Kuroyukihime continued as if admonishing him. “It was your heart that gave birth to this duel avatar. If you don’t believe in it, then what does that say?”

“That the person who is least able to believe in me is me,” Haruyuki murmured to himself as he nodded. “I’m sorry. I believe…maybe not in myself, but at least in what you say.”

As she listened, Kuroyukihime’s face opened up slightly—although just into a bitter smile—and Haruyuki’s shoulders relaxed a little.

“It seems you need to learn something else before how to fight. Strength—” For a brief moment, the bitter smile became faintly melancholy. “*Strength* is by no means simply a word indicating victory. I spent a fair bit of time learning this.

And by the time I learned the lesson, it was already too late.”

Haruyuki couldn’t understand the meaning behind the words she quietly spun out. He tilted his head and started to ask, but she didn’t give him the chance, suddenly changing tracks.

“Time’s almost up.”

Looking, he saw that the counter with its original 1800 had just barely twenty seconds left.

“So shall we make the next lecture a hands-on lesson?”

“Y…es? What do you…?”

Haruyuki stared, puzzled, and Kuroyukihime flashed him a bold smile.

“Of course, you’ll go and get them back. Your ten points.”

At the time that the Duel ended with a draw screen, the acceleration released.

The moment they returned to the real-world lounge, Kuroyukihime yanked out the direct cable without giving Haruyuki a chance to say anything. “Now then! Let’s eat, Arita. It’ll get cold on us.” She grinned and picked up her small spoon off the table.

Having no other choice, Haruyuki reached out to the plate of curry rice in front of him. In his perceived timeline, he’d brought it over from the counter more than thirty minutes ago, but as it was still steaming hot, his stomach clenched.

The same critical looks from the surrounding tables that he’d gotten the day before shone a spotlight on Haruyuki, and he wanted to abscond with his curry to some corner of the cafeteria. But he couldn’t combat his empty stomach. He’d shoveled three quick bites into his mouth when he heard one of the seniors at the same table start talking to Kuroyukihime, and his throat clamped shut.

“Kuro, isn’t it about time you told us? We’re seriously dying of curiosity here. We really want to understand exactly what your relationship is with the young man here.”

Haruyuki lifted his head with a start to recognize the fluffy-haired student council member he'd seen there yesterday. He was pretty sure she was the eighth-grade clerk.

"Mm." Kuroyukihime placed her spoon beside the gratin dish and gracefully lifted her teacup, looking rather thoughtful. The students around her fell instantly silent. "To be blunt, I told him I liked him, and he blew me off."

The world was full of shrieks and cries of surprise.

Spoon in mouth, curry in hand, Haruyuki fled.

"Uh…um, the thing is!!"

After spending the two remaining hours of the afternoon under laser-like scrutiny, Haruyuki diagonally behind Kuroyukihime objected somewhat awkwardly as they headed toward the school gates. "What were you thinking?! Everyone's going to pick on me now!! They will totally be picking on me!!"

"It was a proud declaration." After a quiet laugh, Kuroyukihime continued, her expression composed. "I didn't go so far as to tell the truth, did I? And I don't think you were as displeased as you'd have me believe."

As she spoke, she swiftly gestured over her virtual desktop, allowing the flicking of her fingers to be seen. A file promptly arrived through the local net, and an icon started blinking in Haruyuki's field of view. Clicking on it, a large image opened up in front of his eyes.

It was a picture of himself, curry spoon in mouth, exposing his idiotic, gaping face.

"Gaaah!" he shouted, seeing it and immediately throwing the file in the trash. "Wh-wh-wh-when did you take this camera screenshot?! Even speed has its limits!!"

"What? It was just to commemorate."

While they were having this back and forth, eyes seemingly capable of actual murder and maiming bore holes through Haruyuki. Too late, he pulled his shoulders in but couldn't completely hide himself in the shadow of Kuroyukihime's slim body.

“Stand up a little taller. Not that many boys in this school have blown me off. You are, in fact, the only one.”

“But exactly when did I do that?!”

“You’re so harsh. You’ll hurt me all over again…Anyway.” With a single word, she put the issue on hold, and, recovering her center, she said in a low voice: “Once you leave the school gates, your Neurolinker will be connected globally. Which means that any Burst Linkers in Suginami area number three, which includes here, will be able to force you to fight. Before someone jumps you, accelerate, find Ash Roller in the matching list, and challenge him.”

“A-area? Does that mean that there are limits on the range where you can fight?”

Kuroyukihime dipped her head slightly at his question. “There are. You might start a Duel with someone on the opposite side of Tokyo, but thirty minutes will pass before you can even meet them. At any rate, you might one day set foot on a group field where any number of people can connect without limits, but that won’t be until you get past level four. Right now, focus on the battles in front of you.” She brought the lecture to a close in a slightly sharper voice. “I’ll just say this: If you lose, you can’t ask for a rematch right then and there. You can only fight the same opponent once a day. I’ll be in the Gallery, but unfortunately, I won’t be able to help you…Don’t look so disheartened. If you just fight like I outlined in the mail I sent you, you won’t lose.”

“O-okay.” His throat issued a gulping sound, and he nodded. He copied and pasted the content of the text she had sent him during sixth period to his brain.

“This is your real debut battle, Silver Crow. Good luck.”

She pushed his back lightly, and Haruyuki stepped out onto the road leading to the battlefield.

4

The battlefield was a Century End stage again, dotted with a nightscape of abandoned buildings lit up by fires. Haruyuki made his small avatar even smaller and concealed himself on the pedestrian bridge running over Kannana.

During the previous fight, he had been too freaked out, so he hadn't noticed that in addition to the remaining time and the health gauge, a small light blue triangle was displayed in his field of vision. It was a guide cursor roughly indicating the direction of the enemy.

The triangle merely wavered as it hovered due north Haruyuki's position along the wide road. Even so, Haruyuki knew his enemy, Ash Roller, was definitely not just twiddling his thumbs somewhere off over the horizon. He was most likely making a beeline right for him. The cursor didn't go so far as to tell him the distance.

In his head, he went over the walkthrough Kuroyukihime had sent.

After going over the information you gave me, I've determined that Ash Roller has two significant weak points. The first is that he makes a great deal of noise when he moves.

That was definitely true. If he had been paying proper attention to his surroundings last time, he would've been able to hear the enormous roar of the gasoline engine from a ways off. He couldn't make that mistake again. He held his breath and strained his ears.

There it was!

An overbearing, thunderous sound made its way into his head, although the cursor still didn't waver. Ash Roller sounded like he was racing down deserted Kannana Road with the engine open full throttle. No doubt he was enjoying

himself. If he rode a bike in real life, too, it was probably a low-powered electric scooter that crawled forward in the usual heavy traffic on this road. And if his challenger happened to be the newb he had completely crushed that same morning, all the better.

But this time, you at least won't get a perfect win. Because the first attack is mine.

Haruyuki gritted his teeth and glared at the blue cursor.

As before, it was still pointing due south, but he could tell how close his enemy was by the sound of the engine. However, his opponent shouldn't have been able to do the same. Given that he was approaching at a high speed in a straight line, the direction of Haruyuki's cursor would only change the instant they were already entangled.

Flat on his stomach against the pedestrian bridge, Haruyuki stared intently at the hill leading down toward Koenji Station. The explosive noise gradually grew louder until he could feel it shaking his body.

And then Haruyuki saw him.

The bike's headlight was off, of course, but he was sure he saw the red reflection of the bonfire flames shimmer across the chrome. Fifteen—no, ten seconds until he made it to the intersection at the top of the hill.

Haruyuki would only have this one chance for a surprise attack. But the only weapons he had were his normal Punch and Kick attacks. Which meant he had no choice but to jump from the bridge and slam his entire body into the rider.

Too scary. I can't actually do that. Haruyuki cursed in his heart the version of himself who allowed this thought to flicker through his head. *Don't be stupid. The me right now isn't overweight, thirteen-year-old Haruyuki Arita; I'm the Burst Linker Silver Crow. And this isn't the real world, it's a virtual game field. I've given this world everything, all my time, my passion. To the point where this basically* is *reality for me. In which case, I can't lose. Better—this time, the easy win'll be mine, you stupid skullhead!*

"Aaaaaah!" Haruyuki screamed and yanked himself to his feet, taking the iron rail in one step to leap over the edge.

The task of jumping from high up and landing a kick on the rider of a motorbike flying along at more than a hundred kilometers an hour was next to impossible, probably even more impossible than Haruyuki thought.

But given that Haruyuki had spent so much time so focused on hitting a nearly invisible ball in virtual squash, Ash Roller's skull helmet was too big a target to miss. Thrusting his right leg out into the air and controlling his posture with his arms splayed, Haruyuki became a silver arrow, shooting forward.

"Ohwaa?!"

He thought he heard a faint voice beneath the helmet's visor, but at that moment, Haruyuki's silver-armored heel slammed into its mark, right in the center of the skull.

Crrrrrrunch!! With an incredible detonation, cracks pierced the center of the visor shooting outward. The rider's head snapped back, and Haruyuki slid over his face before crashing into the asphalt and tumbling forward. His head spun momentarily, but he was quick to raise his eyes and check the damage behind him.

The motorbike careened off diagonally to the right, large sparks flying from the front and rear brake rotors, before finally crashing to a stop in a pile of rubble on the shoulder. The rider's body slammed into the tank, while the engine shut off with a pathetic clicking noise.

"…I—I did it," Haruyuki murmured, clenching his fist before checking their health gauges.

Silver Crow's was down about 5 percent, appropriate damage for a drop from high up. In contrast, Ash Roller was naturally seriously hurt; with both the flying kick and the crash, it looked like he had taken considerable damage. More than 20 percent had been shaved off his gauge, which was now slightly purple.

His first attack was basically a total success. But this wasn't the time to sit and bathe in the lingering sweetness of the critical hit.

Standing up, he set his sights on the five-story building on the left side of the road that he had scoped out in advance, and he started running. According to Kuroyukihime, since the road was the main field in the Century End stage, you

couldn’t enter the buildings. But that didn’t mean you couldn’t use a building’s external stairs.

The half-ruined stairs seemed to have been attached to the wall as almost an afterthought. Leaping onto them, Haruyuki sped up to the roof in one go.

Ash Roller’s second weak point. The majority of his avatar’s potential is tied up in the bike. The rider’s battle power should be essentially zero. Which is why, after you strike in your initial attack, you move to the roof of a building his bike can’t climb.

This was the battle strategy Kuroyukihime had given Haruyuki.

If he climbed the stairs while ahead damage-wise, all he had to do was wait for the time to be up and he’d win. Even if the rider got off his bike and came up, he could easily beat him up with Punch and Kick. Depending on your point of view, this was perhaps a cowardly strategy. But the truth was, Haruyuki loved this style of winning, the clever assault at an opponent’s weak points. In fact, he even thought that this path to victory was the true nature of gaming.

Haruyuki moved to the edge of the rooftop as he plotted and tried to pay back in spades the sneering laughter Ash Roller had dealt him that morning. Peering down, he saw that the rider had finally managed to restart the engine of the crashed bike. The machine, idling raspily as if out of breath, pulled itself out from the rubble.

As he wondered what sort of challenge he should issue, Haruyuki heard a voice whispering somewhere, “Wow, he can play after all, that little guy.”

“Totally different from this morning, huh? Wonder who his ‘parent’ is.”

Turning his eyes, he saw silhouettes sitting a little ways off on the roofs of buildings around him, on the edge of an enormous water tank, looking down at him. The Gallery.

Because Burst Linker fights lasted at most a mere one-point-eight seconds in the real world, you wouldn’t make it in time if you accelerated once a fight had begun. So the game allowed you to register the names of friends and Burst Linkers you were interested in, so that when any of those people started to fight, you would also automatically accelerate and dive into the battlefield,

where you could watch. In this case, none of your points were consumed.

Looking around, Haruyuki could make out figures who had come to loiter on rooftops and the road here and there while his attention had been on Ash Roller. Since there was no reason for them to have marked Haruyuki, they were likely Linkers who had registered his opponent's name. However, there should have been one person among them in the Gallery who had checked Silver Crow's name. Black Lotus, i.e., Kuroyukihime.

Whirling his head around, wondering where she was, Haruyuki saw one of the two sitting on the tank wave a hand lightly at him.

"If you win this Duel, I'll put you on my list, too. Good luck, kid!"

"Well, I don't think it's going to be as easy as all that."

To the other person, Haruyuki responded in his heart, *Sorry, but you're not going to get any more big-show stuff. We'll prob'ly just time out.* With that thought, he shrugged lightly and refocused his attention on the road.

And froze in astonishment.

In no time at all, Ash Roller's bike, which had been nothing more than a speck in the distance below him, had its front wheel up against the building wall.

Hey…what do you think you're doing?

The reply was a shrill cry of rage. "You really think you're something, huh, baldy!! I'll make you dance to the sound of my V-twin!!" The engine roared furiously, and puffs of exhaust rose from the chrome muffler. The enormous American bike then began to storm straight up the wall.

"Gah…"

Widening his eyes beneath his silver mask, Haruyuki pulled back a step. A scant two seconds. The bike flew past the iron rail, so close he could practically touch it if he reached out, bringing the roaring and the smell of burning with it. The engine raced, growling thunderously, and the bike, having flown up nearly two meters past the top of the roof, turned to aim at Haruyuki and started to drop.

"Aaaah!!" Panicking, he dashed a few more steps backward.

The rear tire hit the concrete roof with a tremendous *crash*. Cracks spread out radially from the impact, and several shards flew up and hit Haruyuki's armor. Instantly, his health gauge dropped, although by a mere dot, and Haruyuki was surprised again.

In an ordinary fighting game, damage could occur only in ways prescribed by the system. Brain Burst really wasn't any ordinary game. There was a degree of realism in the high-level graphics and sound, and the persistence of the effects, to the point where you couldn't really distinguish it from reality.

This had to be the key to winning fights in this world.

Burning this into his mind, Haruyuki looked up at his enemy, who had far more experience than he did.

Standing the bike up deftly, Ash Roller glanced down at Haruyuki and started to talk in a high-pitched, metallic voice. "Tell you what, kid, taking you down this morning finally pushed my awesomeness over three hundred points. Made it to level two."

The skull visor on the gunmetal helmet had been smashed in, revealing part of his bare face. Haruyuki had thought whatever face was under that skull would have to be terrifying, but it was more science-club style, the thin lines of a boy's face.

The duel avatar is a manifestation of your inferiority complex. Kuroyukihime's words flickered to life in the back of his mind.

Ash Roller, stiffening his thin lips into something approximating a smile, revved the engine once before continuing. "And I was having suuuuuch trouble deciding on my level-up bonus, you know? In the end, I ditched the bonuses to my special attack and my riding speed and went with the ability to drive up walls, get it? And damn, I was so right!" He took his hands off the handlebars and pointed both index fingers sharply at Haruyuki. "And yoooouuu are hella unlucky!"

Haruyuki cursed in his head, but he wasn't simply standing there listening quietly to his enemy. He was staring intently at his surroundings, remembering the mail Kuroyukihime had sent, and using every bit of knowledge he had to try and find some way out of this situation.

If your initial attack and escape fails, and you have to fight Ash Roller on his bike face-to-face, I'm sorry to say your chances of winning are quite small. Because—

Kuroyukihime had followed that with an explanation of duel avatar "compatibility."

The English names automatically given to the Burst Linkers always included a color word. This color offered a rough grasp of the features of the particular duel avatar.

Blues were short-distance direct attacks, reds were long-distance direct attacks, yellows were intermediate attacks. Intermediate colors like purple or green had characteristics straddling two color types. In addition to colors on the color wheel were the metallic colors, set aside with metal names, which excelled in defensive abilities rather than attacks.

The metallic colors, including your silver, are fairly rare, but are also a strong color line. They have the ability to endure amputation, piercing, fire, and poison attacks, and given their hard bodies, their abilities in terms of close-range attack are certainly not insignificant. But, of course, they have weak points. Corrosion attacks are their natural enemy, with another weakness being strike attacks.

Kuroyukihime, analyzing Silver Crow's attributes, also went on to list the characteristics of Ash Roller, who she had presumably never seen.

In contrast, the "ash" in Ash Roller is a color belonging more to blue than green on the color circle. The low saturation indicates the peculiarity of his attack. Since his tires are not an obvious weapon, it's hard to tell, but most likely, his attribute is a close-range strike type. In other words, your armor is very nearly useless against Ash Roller's charge. So there's just one response in the event you end up in a face-to-face battle.

Run for your life for the entire remaining time.

Easier said.

Despairingly, Haruyuki checked the size of the building. Both width-and height-wise, it was no more than twenty meters. Kuroyukihime's evasion strategy was based naturally enough on a battle on the wide, deserted Kannana

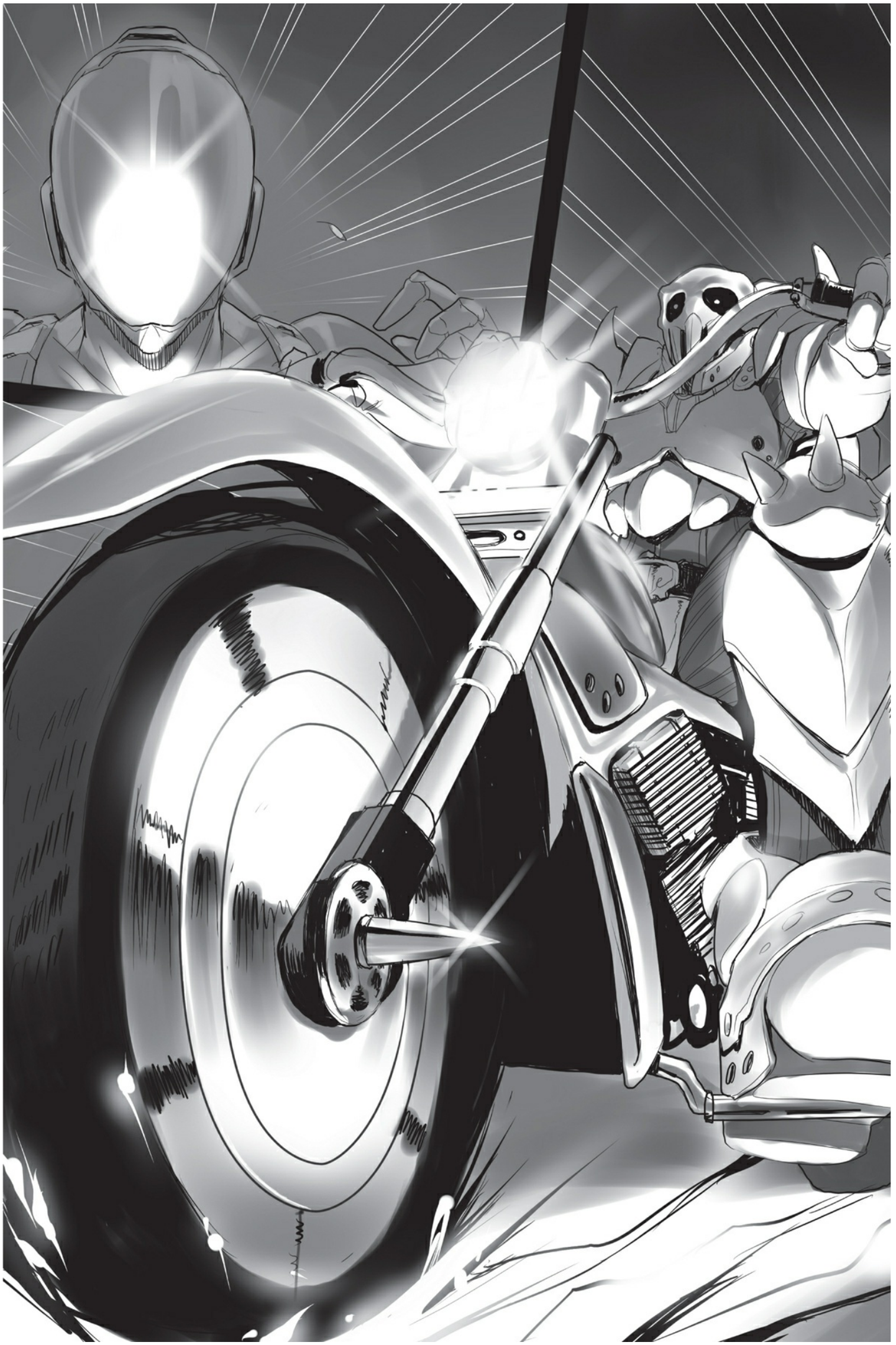
and didn’t take into account a scenario where the motorcycle climbed walls.

All of which meant that Haruyuki had inadvertently fled to a disadvantageous position all on his own.

Given the bike’s thrust, running for the emergency stairs was pointless. Should he jump from the roof and just take the damage? But if his gauge dipped lower than Ash Roller’s, everything up to now would have been for nothing.

A triumphant mounted knight, his opponent laughed ringingly at Haruyuki rooted in place, unable to think of a way out. “Ha-ha-ha-ha! No fight left in you, baldy boy? Well then, allow me!!”

The internal combustion machine screamed and blue smoke rose up from the racing rear tire. The front tire made contact with the ground with a *thud*, and the enormous bike charged, the rider’s sights set on Haruyuki.



“Aaah!” he screamed, leaping to the right, but there was just too little distance between them. The tire grazed the tip of his foot, and his health gauge dropped abruptly. Simultaneous with the shock of the impact, an instant pain danced across Haruyuki’s nerves.

But re-creating the sensation of pain in a virtual game had supposedly been prohibited by law ages ago. This really wasn’t just a bit of fun. The battle was virtual, but real at the same time.

The bike turned on a dime about three meters away, screeching deafeningly, preparing to charge again.

Anything! There has to be something! Some secret trick to totally turn the tables, to come back from the dead—

Right, the special attack!

Even if it was called the prosaic *Head Butt*, it might have the power to crush rocks or something. Haruyuki allowed himself this sliver of hope and quickly crossed both arms in front of his body exactly like the silhouette in the instructions. Next, he opened his arms wide and threw his upper body back as hard as he could.

Along with a vaguely dull *vroom*ing sound effect, Haruyuki was conscious of the fact that his shiny head was starting to glow with a white radiance. Impressed murmurs rose up from the surrounding Gallery.

You can do this!!

Confident, Haruyuki glared at the enormous bike headed right for him. “Aaaaaah!!” Screaming, he aimed his shining head at the bike headlight and thrust.

Long before he could hit his mark, he was struck by the tough tire and knocked on his back, opening up a human-shaped hole in the concrete. The light effect on his head disappeared into space and his special-attack gauge alone dropped to empty.

A burst of laughter from the Gallery shook the stage. Amidst the laughter, the murmuring of one person reached his ears. “Too bad, looks like this is the end.”

Haruyuki's entire being was wrapped tightly in the familiar warmth of humiliation.

Dammit. Damn. I'm supposed to be the hero in virtual games. My character's too weak. I mean, a special attack that's just some Head Butt that doesn't even hit the target! I'm done for.

He managed to stand but crumpled again abruptly. As he moved to sit down, he saw off in the distance, on the roof of a remarkably tall building, a silhouette standing tall and staring right at him. Hair in thick rolls swaying in the night wind. Soft dress. Almost-transparent butterfly wings.

He couldn't see the expression on this shadow's face, the size of a grain of rice. However, Haruyuki felt its fierce energy.

No. You can't give up. If you have to lose, then struggle, fight, make it ugly. If you can't do at least that much, you can't even be her pawn.

Brushing aside his humiliation, Haruyuki mobilized every bit of knowledge and experience he had and thought intently.

Virtual while real. That was Brain Burst's major feature. Overwhelming detail and reality. In which case, Ash Roller's bike wasn't just a bunch of polygons. There had to be a weak point in that meticulous reproduction.

The bike. The main bit, the gasoline engine from the last century—what's that about? Noisy. Stinks like gas. Those would be weak points before you actually ran into it, but they don't matter now.

It can't move when it runs out of gas. If I made a hole in the tank—No, I can't pull off that kind of pinpointed attack.

Isn't there anything else? Anything—

The bike, whirling around and leaving a trail of burnt rubber under the rear tire, turned its shining yellow eye on Haruyuki for the third time.

In that instant, Haruyuki swallowed sharply. *Got it. That's it. The main feature of an internal combustion engine bike and its weak point.*

"Yeaaaaah! Ha-ha-ha-ha!! Dance for me!!" Screaming, the iron horse began to run.

Just one time is enough. Move, Silver Crow. Faster than that guy. Haruyuki clenched his teeth and glared at the charging bike. *Right. No matter how fast he goes, it's not going to be so fast I can't see him. I'll make a show of trying to avoid him, just barely dodge him.*

Gathering his powers of concentration, Haruyuki slid a mere fifty centimeters to the right when he was on the verge of being sent flying again. The tip of the handlebar brushed against him, and Ash Roller passed in front of him.

Instantly, Haruyuki stretched out both hands and, bracing himself for damage, grabbed the edge of the black fender covering the bike's rear tire. The shock threatened to rip his fingers loose, while sparks flew from every joint in his arms, and his health gauge dipped lightly.

The bike slowed a little. Haruyuki didn't let the chance slip by, digging both legs into the floor, putting all his energy into throwing his body backward. His steel feet crunched as they shaved concrete off the ground, and his gauge continued to drop.

"Whoo-hoo!!" Looking over his shoulder, Ash Roller let loose with a loud laugh. "Stuuuuuupid!! As if an insect like you could stop my monster machine!!"

The rider's boots kicked the foot pedal hard. Black leather gloves twisted the throttle. The engine screamed and roared, and flames shot out of the muffler. The impressive torque of the American bike worked its magic, and the machine started to accelerate again, dragging Haruyuki along.

"Zoooooowwwwww!!" As he listened to the incredibly abrasive sound of the bottoms of his own feet screeching along, Haruyuki let out a scream, overcome with pain and heat almost like his feet were being shaved off with a rough file; no, it was exactly like that.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! You don't let go soon, you're gonna be at zero in no time!!" Over Ash Roller's triumphant voice was a grating metallic noise. Both of Haruyuki's feet were completely red, overheating, and his health gauge was dropping so fast, it was scary.

But he didn't let go. Gritting his teeth under his silver mask and fighting to endure the painful heat, he continued to simply dangle from the tail of the bike.

If it were the surface of Kannana Road below them, Silver Crow's small body might have become scrap iron and turned to dust soon enough, just as Ash Roller said. But in the limited space of the abandoned building's roof, Ash Roller couldn't run in a straight line forever.

The low railing drew near before his eyes, and the skull rider leaned on the bike with a strange whoop before entering a spin turn. Sparks flew from the brake rotors, and white smoke rose up from the fat tires.

"Ngaaah!" Haruyuki tried desperately to hold on as he was nearly thrown in the centrifugal force.

Just a little more. In half a second, my first and last chance is going to come.

The engine rpm dropped, and the bike ended the spin and went to commence its mad dash anew. Immediately before it could, for the tiniest sliver of time, the soles of Silver Crow's feet gripped the ground solidly.

"Aaaaaaah!!" Haruyuki screamed. At the same time, he dug deep for every bit of strength he could muster and yanked the fender he was gripping with both hands straight up into the air. His knees, elbows, and shoulders all sparked, and his health gauge, which had dropped to about 20 percent, was eaten down to its last 10 percent, but his thin arms bore the enormous load, stretched out in front of him.

A tenth of a second later, the fat rear tire raced fiercely, but the kinetic energy could not be transformed into propulsive force. Because, although just barely, the tread had been separated from the ground.

"Uh…uh?!" Ash Roller cried, straddling the seat with his back to Haruyuki. Apparently flustered, he jerked his right arm two, then three times. Each time, the engine roared and the rear wheel raced frantically. But the steel machine didn't move a centimeter.

This was the weak point Haruyuki had picked up on. Unlike electric motorcycles, which were equipped with motors in the front and rear wheels, the internal combustion engine motorcycles of the previous era only drove the rear wheel using a chain connected to the engine. It would have been absolutely impossible for him to lift the entire bike, but stiffening his metallic robot avatar and just bringing up the rear a tiny bit was something he could do

for at least an hour.

“Y-you! Come on!! Drop it, stupid!!”

Haruyuki looked up at Ash Roller, twisting his body and yelling over his shoulder. And then, even though his opponent likely couldn’t see, he smiled complacently. “Nah. If you’re really stuck, try making your front wheel turn.”

Having returned to the unaccelerated world, Haruyuki inhaled deeply in the afternoon sun before exhaling slowly. Given that the fight had been decided with the counter still at 600, he calculated that no more than a second or so had gone by in the real world. But the palms of his hands were dripping with sweat and cold to the point of being numb.

As he pushed the button on his Neurolinker to disconnect from the global net with a stiff finger, he was suddenly hit sharply on his back.

“Hey! You did it, Silver Crow! To be honest, I thought you were done for.”

Turning around, he found Kuroyukihime’s pretty face, complete with a rare, bright smile. It was only natural, since they had accelerated standing next to each other outside the school gate, but in the stage, she had been watching the battle from the roof of a building in the distance, so he was slightly confused.

That was the real distance between us. Don’t go getting any ideas, he told himself as he returned her smile awkwardly. “I—I thought I was done for, too.”

“Don’t be modest. That was an amazing win. I hadn’t given any thought to the internal structure of Ash Roller’s bike at all. That was probably the first time that weak point had been attacked, thanks to that burst of power from your avatar. In any case, you certainly did get your points back.”

“I got more than that. Twenty points were added to my total; he was at level two.”

Kuroyukihime blinked in surprise, the smile on her face quickly becoming even wider, and she hit Haruyuki on the shoulder again. “Ha-ha-ha! He was? So that’s why he could ride up the wall like that.”

“It’s not funny. I was totally terrified.”

“Hee-hee-hee, no, I’m sorry. But, well, that did allow you to win in an

interesting, cool way, didn't it? I overheard members of the Gallery talking, and apparently, you're the first one to attack Ash Roller like that. It was a magnificent win."

"U-uh-huh."

After spending about five minutes stubbornly yelling and screaming from on top of his bike, drive wheel up in the air and going nowhere, Ash Roller finally climbed down.

Haruyuki leapt forward immediately, as if the chance might slip away, and shifted the conflict to an intimate hand-to-hand combat, swinging his fists, silver like his name, to win handily.

"Punch and Kick are starting to look better and better somehow. As for Head Butt, at any rate, with a more orthodox hand-to-hand-type opponent, you won't have to deal with that delay. But how long are we going to stand here talking?"

At Kuroyukihime's question, he looked around again and discovered students on their way home walking along or stopping and staring openly and curiously at the two of them in front of the school gates.

Shrinking his body with a start, as if to hide himself in his own shadow, Haruyuki saw Chiyuri's face in the circle of people and stopped breathing. Reflexively, he turned his face away abruptly.

The memory of fleeing from Chiyuri and Takumu the day before was still fresh. After going and doing that, even though he still hadn't apologized for the sandwich thing, he didn't have the slightest idea how he was even supposed to start trying to fix things.

No. It's not my fault. It's Chiyuri's fault. I mean, I told her I don't know how many times to keep it quiet, and she went and told Takumu anyway. I didn't ask them to pity me or feel sorry for me.

"What should we do?" Kuroyukihime said somewhat doubtfully to Haruyuki as he cast his eyes downward obstinately. "If we're going to go somewhere else, there's that cafe over there. Hm? You—"

"What do you want with Haru?"

Haruyuki jumped at Chiyuri's voice, suddenly so close. Lifting his face with a start, his eyes flew to his childhood friend arching her small body fiercely and confronting Kuroyukihime. Thick eyebrows fixed at an angle that only Haruyuki knew indicated maximum competitiveness, Chiyuri continued argumentatively in a low voice, "The reason Haru got into that fight yesterday was because of your meddling, wasn't it? And yet here you are again, making a spectacle of him like this. What do you want? Is this fun for you?"

Eeep. What is this, what is going on, what am I supposed to do here?

His entire body paralyzed, the situation having surpassed his capacity to deal with it, Haruyuki tried to move his frozen mouth. "H-hey, Chiyu—"

"Shut up, Haru!!" She shot him a look that had been carved into his memory since infancy, and Haruyuki had no choice but to stand at attention and stay silent as her former subordinate.

Even faced with the superheated Chiyuri beam, Kuroyukihime showed her usual composure and tilted her head ever so slightly, cool smile on her lips. "Hmm. I don't quite understand. Are you saying that I am playing around, that I am doing something Arita is not happy with?"

"Aren't you? Haru hates this kind of thing, standing out so much, being stared at. He's been seriously bothered this whole time, although I suppose you can't tell."

"Hmm, I see. It's true that I may have placed Arita in a situation not entirely to his liking. However, I believe that choosing or not choosing is up to him. I wonder if you have any right to be saying anything here?"

"I do. I've been friends with Haru longer than anyone at this school."

"My! Friends…hm?" Hearing Chiyuri's proclamation, the chilliest Kuroyukihime smile rose up on her beautifully pale face. "In that case, I rank somewhat higher. You may have heard the rumors, but I confessed my crush to him and am currently awaiting a reply. We were just about to go on a short date."

Gaaaah. I can't can't, this is the end of the world, no choice but to change schools tomorrow.

Chiyuri and everyone around them froze almost like when he was accelerated. Haruyuki also froze in an unnatural position, just his sweat in motion, pouring off his face.

In the silence, Kuroyukihime pulled a snow-white handkerchief from her uniform pocket. “He’s a strange one. Almost winter and yet…” After wiping away Haruyuki’s sweat, she hooked her arm tightly through his right elbow. “Now then, farewell, Miss Friend.”

And she began walking forward through the students to their left and right, almost as if walking a red carpet, dragging Haruyuki’s large body with her.

Dragged along and facing backward, Haruyuki watched in terror as the face of his childhood companion changed from dumbfounded shock to the brink of detonation, anger gauge three times above capacity.



*

“I—I—I know I’m repeating myself, but…wh-what are you thinking?!” Haruyuki shouted and finally ripped his arm free of Kuroyukihime after they had left the main road and entered a brick-paved back lane. “L-l-l-let me just tell you, there are some things in this world that can’t be fixed by acceleration!!”

“A-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Kuroyukihime laughed delightedly from her belly. “Ha-ha-ha! And you’ve already arrived at the very heart of the Burst Linker! Isn’t that lovely?”

“It’s not! Not at all! If I stop coming to school, it’s all your fault!”

“Now, now, you didn’t look entirely displeased, you know. I also managed to get the perfect screenshot this time, too. Want to see?”

“I do not! Please throw it away!!”

“Hee-hee-hee…” Kuroyukihime continued laughing for a while, shoulders shaking slightly, as the heels of her loafers hit the wear-resistant brick surface of the road with a biting sound. Finally, she recomposed her face, exhaling softly, and continued. “I’m a little concerned. Or rather, there’s something I’d like to confirm.”

“Huh? Concerned? You mean, about Chiyuri?”

“Oh? You’re on a first-name basis?”

“Oh! Uh, no, it’s Kurashima, Chiyuri Kurashima, grade seven, class one.”

“I know. Although this is the first time I’ve heard about her being your best friend. What I really want to know, though, is…are you really just plain old friends?”

Bathed in her suspicious gaze, Haruyuki bounced his head fiercely up and down. “We are. Childhood friends, stuck-with-each-other kind of thing…I mean, she has a boyfriend.”

“Oh? Even still…no…mm. Hmmmm.”

“What’s ‘hmmmm’?”

“Oh, nothing. I just saw again the depths of the real world.”

“Uh…uh-huh.” Not understanding, he swallowed a sigh and asked something that had been bugging him for a while. “Um…before, did you say you already knew Chiyuri’s name?”

“Yes, I did. Quite coincidentally, I’ve been paying attention to her for different reasons than I have been you.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“I can’t explain it in just a few words. It’s directly connected to why I came to invite you to the accelerated world. Anyway, let’s discuss it at length over tea. It’s my treat, a celebration of your victory,” Kuroyukihime said as she changed direction, stepping toward the branch of a coffee-shop chain, which was apparently the destination she’d had in mind right from the start.

Maybe because the afternoon was still young, fortunately, the shop had only a smattering of customers. As soon as Kuroyukihime stepped through the door, though, Haruyuki felt those few gazes locked onto them. It made him afraid to keep going.

Even at the best of times, Haruyuki had never done anything even remotely close to having tea alone with a girl on his way home from school. Indeed, he had never done anything like this in his life, and his brain immediately overloaded. He ordered a large, sweet drink almost automatically, quietly allowed himself to let her pay, and staggered to a table in the back. As he inserted the cable she produced, he thought, *Whoa! What’s going on? This is almost like a real date—*

Prob’ly doesn’t look like that, though. I mean, the two of us? Older sister, little brother? No, mistress and flunky?

“I know what you’re thinking, you know.” She scowled lightly, and he hurriedly sipped at his sweet, caramel-flavored concoction.

“N-no. It’s nothing. Anyway, before…The reason you invited me to the accelerated world—”

“Don’t be in such a hurry. It’s…a long story.” After gracefully raising her not-very-sweet-looking drink to her lips, Kuroyukihime rested her chin in her hand with a short sigh.

In the pale yellow light coming in through the window, she looked like something out of some old foreign movie while nevertheless remaining a uniformed junior high school student, and Haruyuki was unconsciously struck dumb. It was almost like he was sitting in front of an old projector screen with a direct cable stretching out from it. He'd been spacing out like this for who knew how long when Kuroyukihime suddenly rapped his right hand on the table, and he nearly flew out of his seat.

"Anyway, you really did great back there. Let me congratulate you on your victory once again, Haruyuki."

"Uh, thanks. Thank you. It's because of all your advice."

"No, it was your own resourcefulness. If you keep it up, you'll be level two in no time. You might even make it up to three before the end of the year."

"Uh…uh. Honestly, I can't even imagine that…" He had only just barely snatched up his first victory. The idea of having to win dozens more fights like that in the future made his mind go blank.

The smile disappeared abruptly from Kuroyukihime's face, and she nodded as if reading Haruyuki's thoughts. *"Mm. In fact, the road ahead is unimaginably long. Of the estimated thousand Burst Linkers, the number of those who have been raised to level four is fairly limited. Getting to five or six is nearly impossible in solo play. And it's no mistake to assume that level-seven and -eight Burst Linkers are all commanders of enormous groups."*

"G-groups?"

"Like the guilds or teams you often see in other online games. We are army corps. Called Legions*. The current accelerated world is split into and ruled by six enormous Legions. And commanding these are the only six Burst Linkers who have reached level nine. Named Blue, Red, Yellow, Green, Purple, and White, they are the Six Kings of Pure Color!"* Her voice, suddenly sharp like a knife, echoed in his brain, and Haruyuki opened his eyes wide. Conscious of his gaze, Kuroyukihime fluttered her eyelids briefly and gave a faintly bitter smile. *"I'm sorry for yelling."*

"It's fine…but, so, six people?" He was surprised there were even as many as a thousand Burst Linkers, but he could only be baffled that so few had made it to

level nine. *“I’ve played a lot of different net games, but I’ve never heard of so few players reaching the level cap.”*

“Must feel incredible,” Haruyuki murmured jealously, and Kuroyukihime, listening to him, raised a single eyebrow and shook her head.

“I didn’t say that level nine was the limit.”

“Huh? Th-then there’s a level ten, too? How many people…?”

Her response was another dismissive gesture. Kuroyukihime took another sip of coffee, her seat back making a faint noise as she turned her attention out to space. Pulling at her motion, the direct cable shook, shining silver between them.

“Brain Burst…Formally titled Brain Burst 2039, the program was released seven years ago by an unknown maker and has already been updated several times. However, despite the fact that so much time has passed, there is not a single Burst Linker who has reached level ten. The sole reason is…the severity of the dictated rules.”

“Do you mean you have to win an incredible amount of fights? Like a thousand or…ten thousand?”

“No, just five is sufficient.” A slightly dangerous smile flitted across the lips pronouncing this unexpected revelation. *“However, for this purpose, you may only fight another level nine Linker. And if you lose once in a level-nine battle, you instantly lose all your points, and Brain Burst is forcefully uninstalled.”* Kuroyukihime turned her pitch-black eyes on her speechless companion. *“Haruyuki. Don’t you think it’s strange that Brain Burst, which makes possible the marvelous phenomenon of accelerated thought, has been able to stay hidden from the general public for the last seven years?”*

Haruyuki was bewildered by the sudden question, but now that she mentioned it, it was seriously weird. If there were a thousand Burst Linkers, the secret should have leaked out from somewhere long ago and amazed the world.

“It stays a secret because of how strict the requirements are for compatibility with Brain Burst.”

“Requirements? Like being good at games or something?”

Kuroyukihime smiled bitterly at Haruyuki’s question and replied, *“Nothing as ambiguous as that. The most serious requirement is having ‘continuously worn a quantum connection Neurolinker terminal from shortly after birth.’ The first-generation Neurolinkers went on the market fifteen years ago. Which means”*—Kuroyukihime paused before continuing slowly—“*there are no adult Burst Linkers. The oldest are a meager fifteen years old, mere children. And because they are children, while they are Burst Linkers, they will try to protect that privilege at all costs. And after the program is forcefully uninstalled, they wouldn’t be believed even if they were to say anything to an adult.”*

For a brief moment, an ironic smile crossed her glossy lips.

“And because they are children, they share the same sweet fantasies. In summer two years ago, the young kings all reached level nine at very nearly the same time. A system message then informed them of the brutal requirements to reach level ten. Did they, as a result, plunge into bloody dispute? No. What the kings chose was eternal stagnation. Rather than move forward, they prioritized maintaining their own tiny gardens. In other words…they decided to divide and rule over the accelerated world in Legions and concluded agreements to prevent the invasion of other territories. It’s honestly a total farce. This, even though we had hunted countless Linkers to reach level nine.”

Haruyuki swallowed hard. A pain raced down his dry throat, and after taking a large sip of his melted caramel frappe, he put forth his thoughts timidly. *“So you’re saying your objective is to challenge these Six Kings of Pure Color…?”*

Hearing this, Kuroyukihime allowed a mysterious smile onto her lips. *“No, I already did that.”*

“Wha…?!”

“The Six Kings…they used to be the Seven Kings of Pure Color. Seven boys and girls, who, although rivals, were bound by strong ties. They fought one another countless times, winning and losing nearly the same amount but never holding even a shred of resentment. The Black King betrayed them all and tried to hunt them. Until that night two years ago.”

Black…King.

*Which means that avatar name…ruled Black…*Haruyuki opened his eyes wide and gulped his breath back.

Kuroyukihime nodded slowly. *“Yes…It was me. The Black King, Black Lotus, was the only one of those who had reached level nine who spoke out against choosing peace. I threw away everything—ties, friendship, respect—and insisted that we should throw ourselves into fighting, wagering our accumulated points. And when they refused to listen, I dyed the round table of our meeting with fresh blood.”*

“Wh-what did you do?”

“The last night the Seven Kings met in one building—although, of course, we have never met in the real world. Burst Linkers must do their utmost to hide their real names and faces.”

Haruyuki was about to ask why, but he quickly deduced the reason. If other Burst Linkers found out your name or what you looked like, in the worst-case scenario, they could attack you in the real world. People pressed into a desperate situation, people who needed to earn points no matter what, would probably go to such lengths.

Kuroyukihime nodded slightly, as if reading Haruyuki’s mind, and continued. *“The meeting that night took place in Battle Royale mode, connecting all seven of us as fighters on the same field. I…The Red King appeared before me, preaching friendship and insisting we stop fighting. He caught me off guard…”*

The pale face beneath her shining bangs collapsed. Fixing her empty eyes on a single point, Kuroyukihime recounted the rest mechanically. *“I cut his head off. A perfect critical hit…He instantly lost all the health in his gauge and, under the new rules, all his points as well, finally losing Brain Burst itself as a result. The current Red King is the second one. After that…all hell broke loose. Ha-ha! Purple, who had been in love with Red, screamed and wept; Blue went crazy with rage; and we all began to try and kill one another—no honor, no respect. We knew it was our first and last chance, you see…We struggled desperately to take the other five heads, we were so reckless.”*

Her lightly colored lips twisted and a laugh slipped out of her actual mouth. *“The ability to make rational judgments went out the window. Stirred up by*

madness, I fought, and although I couldn't take another king, I was also not defeated, and before I knew it, thirty minutes had passed and I was linked out. In the two years since, I've focused on running and hiding. Right now, I am the biggest traitor in the accelerated world, I have the largest bounty on my head, and I am the worst coward."

"…Why…" Haruyuki's thoughts were half paralyzed by the gruesomeness of this near-monologue, and even simple questions escaped his consciousness. *"Why would you…"*

"Because I put it far above friendship, above honor…becoming level ten. You could even say that alone is what I lived for. The system message also told us this. That Burst Linkers reaching level ten would have the chance to meet the program creator and would be told the true meaning behind the existence of Brain Burst, as well as its ultimate goal. I…I want to know. Whatever it takes, I have to know." Propping her elbows up on the table and hiding her face in tightly clasped hands, Kuroyukihime whispered to Haruyuki, in neurospeak so leaden it was as if it were echoing up from an infinite abyss. *"Accelerating your thinking, you can get money, grades, fame. Is this really the meaning behind our Duels? Is this the compensation we seek, the limit we can reach? Isn't…isn't there something beyond this? This…shell called a human being…outside…something more…"*

Aah.

A little, honestly just a tiny bit…I get it. Like being on the ground, where it's hard to hold on, and looking up at the distant sky.

Almost as if even this fleeting thought had been communicated to her, Kuroyukihime slowly lifted her face and stared at Haruyuki with eyes glowing urgently.

But that, too, was fleeting, and the beautiful senior, both arms flopped down on the table, smiled dryly and murmured, *"So? Are you shocked? Or maybe you hate me, Haruyuki. Perhaps I'll sacrifice even you at some point for my objective. It's fine if you say you can't help me anymore. I won't try to stop you. I won't try to take your Brain Burst."*

After thinking for approximately two seconds, Haruyuki nervously reached his

right hand out and stopped about a centimeter in front of Kuroyukihime's fingertips. *"Er, well…,"* he said. *"In any game, some people want to forget about seeing the ending, and they just roam around the map right before the end forever. They're obviously idiots. It's only natural to try for higher levels, if there are any. I mean, that's why Brain Burst exists, right?"*

This wasn't just a lie to suck up to Kuroyukihime. As a hardcore gamer from before he could remember, he sincerely believed this from the bottom of his heart.

Kuroyukihime's eyes widened in surprise, and then she laughed lightly and brilliantly a few seconds later. *"Pft, ha-ha-ha! How did this happen? You're already more of a Burst Linker than I am. I get it…Only natural to aim for it; that's where we are, is it…"*

"I-it's nothing to laugh at." Slightly hurt, Haruyuki pursed his lips, and then sat up straighter before continuing. *"A-anyway, that's why I'll keep helping you. I mean, I want to get there one day, too…to level ten."*

Kuroyukihime's left hand suddenly moved over the tabletop to grab Haruyuki's right hand. *"Thank you."* Her thought, free of the empty undertone it had held only recently, poured warmly into a flustered Haruyuki. *"Thank you, Haruyuki. I knew…I knew I made the right decision. I'm so glad from the bottom of my heart that I chose you."*

Here was where he should squeeze her hand back and meet her eyes. But there was absolutely no way Haruyuki could do anything like that.

Instead, instinctively, he pulled his hand back, drew his shoulders in turtle-like, and mumbled in tight neurospeak, *"N-no, it's—You won't really be able to get a lot of use out of me…A-anyway, to get to the main part of it, you…What am I supposed to do?"*

In the short silence that followed, was it pity that floated up in those still eyes regarding him?

Finally, after a quiet sigh, Kuroyukihime uttered softly, *"Right. The introductory bit ended up going long. But let's get to the heart of it. I told you before I managed to survive these last two years, yes?"*

Haruyuki released the long breath he had been holding as he lifted his face and nodded with a gulp at Kuroyukihime, whose expression had returned to its normal complacency.

“That doesn’t mean that I’ve won out in challenges from the blood-crazed kings themselves or assassins they’ve dispatched. Rather…these two years, I haven’t once connected my Neurolinker to the global net. If your name isn’t on the matching list, you won’t get any challenges, you see?”

“Guh…a-are you serious?” he groaned unconsciously. For Haruyuki, taking in information from the global net was as necessary as drinking water and breathing air. This wasn’t just a metaphor; he had no doubt he would wither and die without it.

“Very serious. With the fixed-panel terminal, you can still view sites and read your mail. Although the 2-D screen does make my eyes tired. You can get used to anything. But even if I’m cut off from the global net, there is just one net I absolutely must connect with every day, because of my position in society.”

“Y-your position…? You mean, a rich girl—I mean, a princess?”

“Idiot!”

Shot down by that cool voice, he finally started to realize the person before him was just a junior high student like him. *“O-oh, right. The Umesato Junior High local net. So, so, w-wait a minute. You can’t mean…”*

“I do mean.” Kuroyukihime drank down the last of her coffee and crushed the cup. *“Two months ago, the very day summer vacation ended, I was challenged to a Duel through the in-school local net. By someone at Umesato, just like us.”*

The words that followed further baffled an already dumbfounded Haruyuki.

“Then the worst thing…Back then, I changed my original duel avatar to a dummy spectator avatar.”

“Dummy…There’s a function like that?”

“Mm. There are many times when it’s preferable to hide who you really are and watch from the Gallery. Naturally, the dummy avatar has no battle capacity. However, that’s not the problem…When I think about it now, I realize I

was extremely careless. I used my avatar for the local school net as my dummy as well. I certainly didn't expect a Burst Linker to show up all of a sudden at our school."

After a moment's confusion, Haruyuki jumped up lightly, sending his chair clattering back. *"Huh? You mean that black swallowtail…?!"* The bewitching avatar that popping up in the back of Haruyuki's mind projected perfectly onto the graceful uniformed figure in front of him. *"Your enemy saw it…on the school net? Which means…Then that's…"*

"Good guess. That's right, this person knows"—Kuroyukihime released the cup onto the tray and pressed her right hand firmly against her chest—"*that the real me here is Black Lotus. A Burst Linker's greatest taboo: outed in the real world. I was afraid of real attacks by assassins sent by the Six Kings."*

Attacks…in the real world.

Haruyuki had already guessed at the terror hidden in those words. If you could pinpoint someone's identity in the real world, then at the extreme end of the spectrum, it was possible to kidnap, confine, beat, or threaten that person and steal every last point they had.

Of course, this would be a serious crime. But even in "normal games," problems between players had been known to develop into deadly incidents in the real world. And Brain Burst was not just a game.

Haruyuki held his breath and waited for Kuroyukihime to continue. But…

"That said, there haven't been any, not one. Not even a vague sense of contact, much less an attack."

"What…?"

"I was deeply perplexed, but—This is all I can think. My enemy…intends to monopolize me. With the good fortune of having discovered me, whoever it is wants to gradually run me down, big-game bounty that I am, and take every single one of my points for themselves, without telling the Legion they belong to."

"Run you down…?"

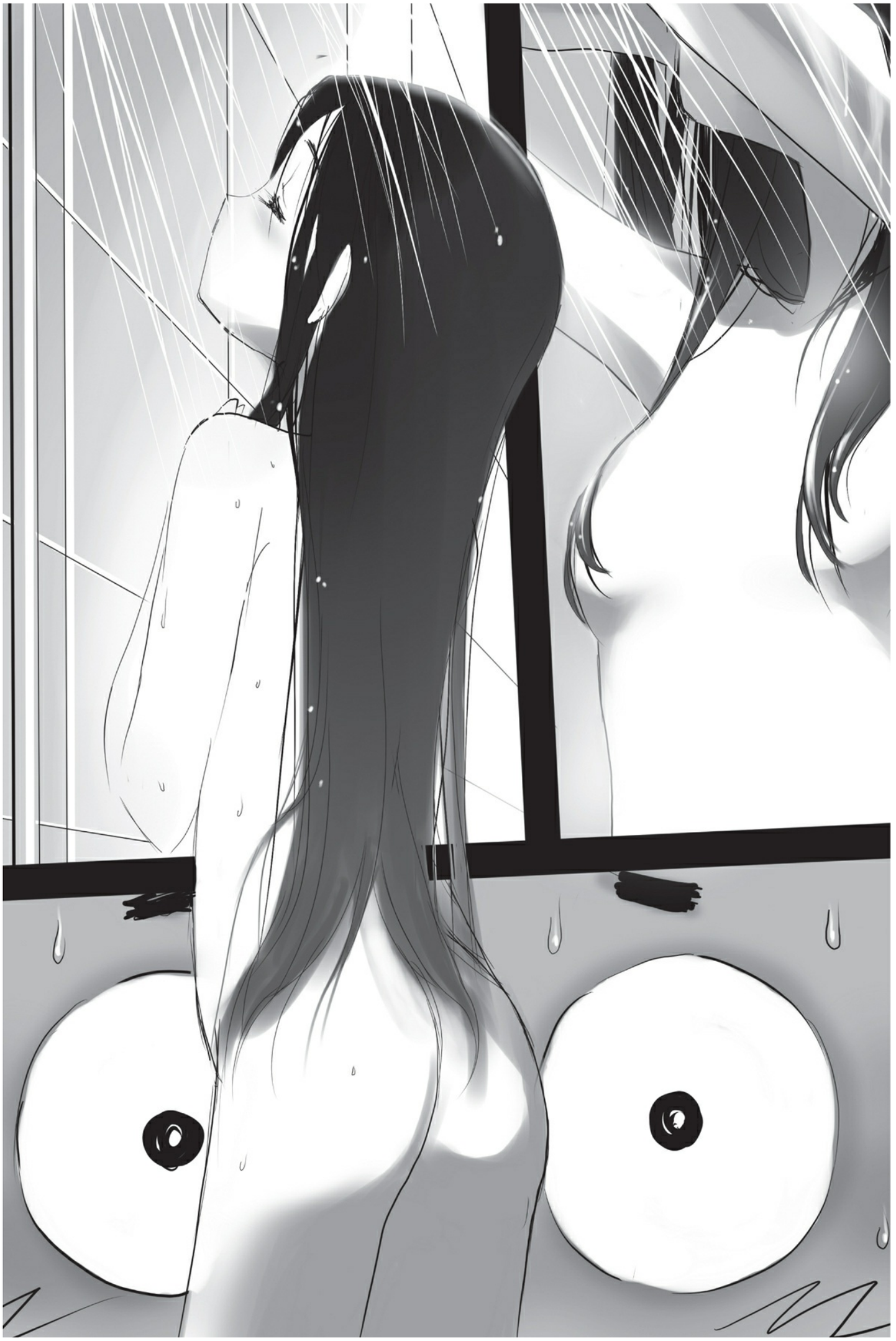
Staring intently at Haruyuki tilting his head, Kuroyukihime coughed and began making a list as if it were obvious. *“In the toilet. While I’m changing. In the shower. There are plenty of moments where I’m emotionally defenseless at school. If someone pinpointed these times and challenged me to a fight, I certainly wouldn’t be able to respond at the top of my game.”*

“In the…shower…” Unthinkingly, he imagined the whole scene, and betrayed by his voice, Haruyuki was once again the recipient of an icy glare. Fortunately, however, Kuroyukihime didn’t press any further and continued with a sigh. *“The truth is, in these last two months, I’ve been attacked more than a dozen times. The timing has always been less than ideal, although I’ve managed to get away with draws so far.”*

“I—I get it. So basically, this guy’s, like, seriously greedy, then…but in a sense, that’s the silver lining, I guess…”

“Well, better than an attack in the real world, anyway. But that being said, I can’t exactly trade in my dummy avatar for my original duel avatar and beat him down. My enemy might end up thinking his plan isn’t going to work and give up on my points, then strike a bargain to give my head to the Six Kings for some meager bounty.”

“O-oh…right…uh-huh.” Haruyuki nodded unconsciously. This was basically the definition of *cornered. “Okay, but what are you going to do? You can’t run, and you can’t even get them before they get you.”*



“This I know. There’s only one way to break free. I find out the player’s real identity. Just who is this unknown Burst Linker—what grade, what class?”

Haruyuki was suddenly overcome with the urge to slap his knee. If they both knew the other’s identity, they would naturally be forced to a cease-fire to protect their own Brain Burst. *“Right, of course. Then your enemy would be totally blocked. And, I mean, that’s fairly simple, right? Like at morning assembly or something, when all the students are together in the auditorium, you just accelerate and challenge whoever it is to a fight. You can figure out their class and student number from where they appear.”*

“Oh, aren’t you something? It took me a full day to come up with that idea.”

“So…you’ve already tried that?”

“I have. And…I was shocked. It’s been quite a while since I was that surprised.”

“Wh-who was it?”

“No one was there.” Kuroyukihime’s response was something Haruyuki had not expected. *“My name was the only one on the matching list. Listen, we both know Umesato students are not allowed to disconnect from the school net for even a second while they’re at school, because attendance and the lessons themselves happen via the net. So if you were to disconnect, there would immediately be a school-wide warning broadcast. This is exactly the reason I can’t avoid my enemy’s attacks. And yet…whoever it is wasn’t on the list!”*

“M-maybe they were home sick or something.”

Kuroyukihime stared at Haruyuki and sniffed lightly. *“I checked. Everyone came to school that day. And moreover, once, immediately after I was attacked and barely managed a draw before escaping, my opponent’s name was not on the list. In other words…it’s hard to believe, but this player can block, by some means or other. They can challenge people to all the fights they want, but not a single Burst Linker can trespass on them. A tremendous privilege, and one that erases the great underlying principle of the accelerated world. Someone able to do that…You’d have to be a super hacker, so much so that you could change the Brain Burst program itself, a program which is supposedly impregnable, or—someone with some connection with the program creator…”*

Her only purpose in life was to meet the creator and learn the meaning of Brain Burst. That's what she had said only moments ago. In which case, discovering the true identity of this mysterious opponent was for her more essential than protecting herself.

Having guessed this, Haruyuki felt an inexplicable throbbing in his chest as he murmured softly, *"So then…what you want me to do…You want me to help you find out the true identity of your enemy, right?"*

Not to protect the princess from evil.

Well, it's only natural. Don't think such stupid things. I'm just a hunting dog chasing prey, a pig sniffing out mushrooms in the earth.

"Hmm…well, that's about it, yes." Seemingly unaware of his momentary internal conflict, Kuroyukihime nodded slightly. *"To be honest, I've obtained a fair bit of information already. To list everything I know now, let's see…First, my enemy's name. The duel avatar is called Cyan Pile. Level four."*

"Cyan…Pile…"

That's kind of…cool. And sounds strong. No, but Kuroyukihime also said that level four is the first barrier. Which meant Cyan Pile was *strong.*

"Affiliation is a fairly pure close-range blue. I've seen this Linker punch right through the thin walls of the stage several times. Conversely, he or she doesn't seem to have any flying equipment. Which is why I've been able to escape somehow up to now, but…to be honest, I'm coming up against my limit. My powers of concentration are essentially shot."

They must have been. Not knowing when you would be attacked from the moment you came to school until the second you left. Haruyuki probably wouldn't have been able to make it three days. However, Kuroyukihime continued speaking in clear thoughts without a hint of exhaustion. *"And, this is at best a guess, but…it's not just me. Whoever it is, he or she is backed into a corner, too. I get that feeling somehow."*

"What? By what?"

"The fear of losing acceleration. Most likely, from being on the verge of running out of burst points. People with points to spare normally try to have

more fun with the Duels as fights. Like that Ash Roller you fought."

"O-oh, yeah. He was definitely having a seriously great time."

"However, my assailant doesn't have a drop of wiggle room. Silent, not giving a thought to appearance, Cyan Pile comes at me half insane. That feeling, that's the sign of a Burst Linker afraid of losing everything. So afraid that the stingy prize the kings have put up for me isn't enough. All the points I've accumulated is the goal. But just understanding this desperation doesn't get me anywhere."

"I…guess not. I mean, we can't make all the students get a psychological checkup or anything. Is that all you know?" Haruyuki asked casually, but he got the impression that Kuroyukihime's thoughts abruptly froze.

Huh, he thought.

Before he could voice the question, Kuroyukihime shook her head and said, *"No. I have one other important piece of information…the guide cursor."*

"Huh? That blue arrow?"

"Exactly. It points in the direction of your enemy from the moment the Duel starts. So even if I can't see the exact moment when Cyan Pile appears, as long as I remember the direction the cursor is pointing when the fight starts, the real body of my enemy must be somewhere along that straight-line trajectory. That's my theory."

"Oh…oh! Right, of course. The stages are the real world landscape as is, so you can at least see which direction in the school Cyan Pile is hiding!"

"Exactly. I've memorized the direction of the guide cursor each of the dozens of times I've been attacked up to now, made a list of the students in those parts of the real-world Umesato, and pulled out the duplicate names. As a result, I've reached a conclusion about which student is most likely to be Cyan Pile. But I have absolutely no solid proof. A single straight line in a place so densely packed with people is simply not enough. There are always dozens of students on any given trajectory. Haruyuki, I want you to watch the next attack on me and memorize the direction of the cursor pointing out Cyan Pile to the Gallery."

"If there are…two cursors, then…" Haruyuki mumbled, dazed, and Kuroyukihime nodded, the expression on her face hardening.

“Exactly. If we have two, then the intersection will give us a single point. And then, the student in that place…I can settle this once and for all. The true identity of Cyan Pile.” Pursing her lips tightly, Kuroyukihime traced a nimble finger in the air, manipulating the virtual desktop only she could see. Just as she was about to slide the file she had called up toward Haruyuki, her finger stopped abruptly.

“What’s wrong? Who is it, this suspect of yours?” Haruyuki leaned forward, swallowing hard to wet his throat, dry despite the fact that he had just finished drinking that enormous frappe, because he was worked up.

Kuroyukihime still seemed to be hesitating, but finally, muttering as if making excuses, she flicked the file and sent it over. *“Listen. I prepared this file a week before I found the third acceleration-compatible person I was looking for at Umesato—which is to say, you—in that game corner.”*

Not understanding at all why she would tack on such a disclaimer, Haruyuki accepted the file, brow knitted. He didn’t hesitate to stab the icon displayed on his virtual desktop with the tip of his finger.

Which opened into a single image. A portrait from the neck up, probably taken from the school register.

“…Huh…? This…? Why…?”

The fiercely short hair. The blue hairpin. The big eyes, somehow catlike. It wasn’t just a face he had seen before. It was the only face in this world he had seen more of than his mother’s.

“Ch-Chiyuri? She’s…a Burst Linker…?” After a full five seconds of muttering and wondering, Haruyuki turned toward Kuroyukihime again, perplexed. *“No… that’s not possible! She’s super terrible at games and stuff. Doesn’t matter what kind, she’s just bad, bad…There’s no way she’d be Burst Linker material. She’s so slow…and everything shows up on her face…She can’t be the person who’s targeting you with such relentless focus.”*

“You know her pretty well, hm?” Kuroyukihime said without meeting his eyes, her voice the slightest bit harder.

“That’s…I mean, we’ve been friends since we were kids…”

“When she came up to us at the gates before, inside, I was surprised. If she is Cyan Pile, she should obviously know I’m Black Lotus. I suspected it was some kind of strategy.”

“Um, but that—she doesn’t have that kind of skill; she’s not that kind of person. I mean, she’s super awkward. Everything she’s thinking shows on her face and in her attitude.”

The more Haruyuki protested, the sharper the angle Kuroyukihime’s eyebrows formed, and she returned in an even chillier voice, *“Don’t you think in that case it’s even more natural to think she is Cyan Pile? You saw the obvious hostility she—Kurashima—has toward me.”*

“No, that was just, it wasn’t like that. It was just you and I are directing and stuff…”

“Why would she get mad about that? Kurashima has a proper boyfriend, doesn’t she? In which case, she doesn’t have any reason to complain if I direct or link arms with you, does she?”

“I…I…That’s true, but…,” Haruyuki stammered, wanting to hold his head in his hands and wondering how they had gotten to this point. *Chiyuri definitely has the perfect boyfriend in Takumu, but besides that, it’s—I’m her—*

Subordinate? Possession? Under exclusive ownership?

Several words he couldn’t quite bring himself to say flitted through his mind, and as he struggled with the nuances, Kuroyukihime hit him with a merciless final blow. *“Isn’t that exactly what her attitude says? Kurashima has been a Burst Linker for some time, and she was intending to make you her ‘child.’ And yet here I come out of the blue and snatch you up. Furious and unable to stand it, she then comes after me. Hmm?”*

He was completely unable to process Kuroyukihime’s thinking, sounding so much like a petulant child, and her persuasive, impossible logic…and yet before he even realized it, he had given himself over to it, declaring, *“I—I understand! I’ll check directly with her!”*

“You will?” Kuroyukihime’s voice was hard as a lone eyebrow snapped up. *“But what do you intend to do exactly? I’m sure you understand that you can’t*

simply go up to her and ask if she's a Burst Linker. And it's no use accelerating and trying to fight, to get a visual confirmation of Cyan Pile. Whoever it is has no problem blocking Duels. Which is exactly why I've been working so hard. I have no way of confirming any of this. Honestly, I need you to think things through."

"I—I am thinking things through!" Haruyuki returned sharply, his tit-for-tat reflex triggered. *"It's fine. I'll go and direct with her. She can block the Duels, but if I look in her memory directly through her Neurolinker, I should be able to check if she has the Brain Burst program or not. That should satisfy you, right?"*

5

Why? How?

His shoulders fell dejectedly, and Haruyuki repeated these two words over and over in his mind as he trudged along the twilit road home.

Why is this happening? I just wanted to be Kuroyukihime's faithful pawn, and now here I am, headed home after practically flying out of that café and away from that "discussion," which was really more like an argument.

Please! Just let me rewind the last thirty minutes! Haruyuki wished desperately, but even in Brain Burst, where you could basically stop real time, going back in time was not an option.

And even if he could reload the scene like in some adventure game, he was still going to have a hard time quietly agreeing with the idea that Chiyuri was Cyan Pile. He couldn't even believe it was possible for her to be a Burst Linker, much less that she'd kept it from him for such a long time.

No. It wasn't that he couldn't. It was that he didn't want to.

To be honest, he had no objective basis for being certain Chiyuri wasn't a Burst Linker. Things had been different when they were little, but this past year or two, he'd hardly ever had deep conversations with Chiyuri. She might not have been in the same league as Kuroyukihime, but the mere fact that Chiyuri was a girl almost made her too mysterious for Haruyuki.

And if he needed to refute the idea that she wouldn't hide things from him, he could do that, too. Despite the fact that Haruyuki had repeatedly asked her not to discuss the bullying with Takumu, she had clearly done it anyway, all the while covering up her indiscretion.

Now that Haruyuki thought about it, before asking Chiyuri some big favor like

directing with him, he had to at least apologize for the sandwich-flipping thing. In order to do that, he had to accept the fact that Chiyuri and Takumu had been talking about him behind his back.

That would take at least a week. Or rather, he just didn't want to think about it. Maybe he should forget this whole investigation. But if he did, he'd basically be forced to accept the supposition that Chiyuri was Cyan Pile.

What exactly do I want? What do I want to happen with Chiyuri and Takumu, and with Kuroyukihime?

As heavy feet carried Haruyuki through the entrance of his building, his brain smoldered in plumes of smoke accompanied by a burning stench, overloaded as it was with thoughts that were too oppressive for him to handle. He glanced at the clock display at the edge of his vision: 5:30 PM.

Chiyuri was already home, but as Takumu had kendo practice, he was probably still at school. Which meant the two of them wouldn't be together at one of their apartments chatting privately or anything.

In the elevator, Haruyuki agonized long enough that a warning bell finally sounded. He then pressed the button for the twenty-third floor, where his own apartment was located.

Halfway to his destination, he pressed the button two floors below.

"Goodness! Haru, I haven't seen you in so long!" Chiyuri's mother cried the moment she opened the door, beaming, and Haruyuki muttered a vague apology for not stopping by more.

"You've gotten so big. How old are you again? Oh, thirteen, of course, just like Chiyuri. You haven't come to see us at all since you started junior high. I've missed you! You can stay awhile today, can't you? Stay for supper. That girl of mine barely eats anything at all these days, so it's hardly worth the trouble of making something. And I was just thinking I'd make curry rice, and I know it's your favorite, Haru. I'll whip up a whole pile of it, so you make sure and ask for seconds. I'm sure Chiyuri will be delighted, too. She's always moaning about how you never come over anymore."

Chiyuri's mother seemed like she could go on chattering forever, but a sharp

voice echoing at the end of the hallway cut her off. “Mom!!”

Looking up, Haruyuki saw Chiyuri—or rather, just her head poking out from the living room—glaring in their direction, her face ablaze. “Quit blabbing!!”

“Yes, yes. This rebellious period, I just hate it. Haru, you make yourself at home.”

Haruyuki watched Chiyuri’s grinning mother wave as she disappeared through the kitchen door halfway down the hall, and then he smiled stiffly. “H-hey.”

Chiyuri glanced at him and jerked her small chin up in a *come in* sort of way before disappearing back into the living room. Exhaling with a long sigh, Haruyuki took off his shoes and muttered quietly, “Okay, I’m coming in.”

Up until he’d been in the third or fourth grade in elementary school, Haruyuki had just said, “I’m home!” as he stepped up into this foyer. The Kurashimas’ was the first place he’d come home to, covered in sweat after playing outside with Chiyuri and Takumu until it got dark. He took a bath, had supper, and even stayed to watch TV before staggering back to his empty apartment two floors up. For Haruyuki, who was already being bullied at school even then, these evenings were the only time he could relax and have fun.

However, that all ended two years earlier. When Takumu told Chiyuri he liked her and Chiyuri talked to Haruyuki about it.

Haruyuki’s blue bear-face slippers were still in the slipper stand in the entryway. He slipped on the faded footwear and timidly pulled open the living room door, but Chiyuri wasn’t there. He wiped his sweaty palms on the pants of his uniform, passed through the apartment, the layout of which he was only too familiar with, and knocked quietly on the door farthest back. Chiyuri’s.

After a brief pause, he heard her short response. “Come in.”

Gulping, he turned the knob.

Stepping into Chiyuri’s room for the first time in two years, he saw that it was still simply decorated, basically the same as it stood in his memory. The desk and the bed were adorned with black and white keynotes, and the curtains were also monotone. It looked a lot like Haruyuki’s room.

However, there were a few changes. First off, something smelled amazing. Also different were the clothes Chiyuri was wearing as she sat on her bed making an ugly face. Naturally, she wasn't still in her uniform. However, despite the fact that she had always had a boyish look in elementary school, she now wore some kind of soft white sweater with a fluttering pink skirt.

That's gotta be…like when she goes on a date with Takumu, Haruyuki was thinking absentmindedly when he was unexpectedly, preemptively attacked.

"I called you a million times yesterday."

"Huh?" Haruyuki uttered idiotically as she glared up at him.

Yesterday? Oh, right. I ran away from Chiyuri and Takumu, and that was that. Whoa! Before I apologize for the sandwich thing, I better apologize for that.

"O-oh, sorry. I had my Neurolinker disconnected the whole day—"

"You could've at least e-mailed me. Thanks to you, I went to bed super late!"

"S-sorry…" Apologizing to Chiyuri as she puffed out her cheeks, Haruyuki muttered to himself, *I knew it couldn't be her.*

No matter how he looked at it, there was just no way. *Her? The Burst Linker Cyan Pile and a level-four warrior to boot? As if. And the icing on the cake, she's a super hacker who managed to change the Brain Burst program, something no one else has been able to do? No way!*

However, that said, it wasn't going to be easy getting proof. The only way would be to direct with her Neurolinker and search her memory, just like Kuroyukihime had insisted, but how was he supposed to ask her to do something like that with things between them the way they were?

No. Wait, hold up a sec. A thought fluttered through the back of his brain suddenly, and Haruyuki quickly seized on it.

Couldn't he ask her precisely *because* things between them were like this? It was a jerkish thing to do to Chiyuri, but it wasn't like he'd be tricking her. He'd be apologizing wholeheartedly and taking the opportunity to just poke around a little in her memory at the same time.

"Uh, uh, uh, um, Ch-Chiyuri!" Haruyuki shouted with an authentic, violent

stutter.

"Wh-what?"

"Uh…I—I…There's all…The sandwiches and the thing at the gate…I came to apologize. B-b-but, it's, I have a hard time actually saying stuff like this, so…d-d-direct with me for a minute."

It wasn't an act. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and Chiyuri's mouth dropped open as she stared. The angle of her thick eyebrows passed from surprise to doubt and rose still higher.

No go? I was too pushy. Haruyuki braced himself for a reprimand, but a strange, challenging look came over the face of his childhood friend. This…It was the look he used to see way back when whenever Chiyuri fought with a boy, the look that said, *If you think you can take me, go on and try*.

"Did you bring a cable?" she asked abruptly, her voice hard, and Haruyuki said, *Crap!* to himself as he shook his head. "Hmm. Well, fine, all I have is this."

Bending over, Chiyuri opened the drawer under her bed and pulled out an off-white XSB cable a mere thirty centimeters or so long.

"Th-that's short! You…So you and Taku always…?" he asked unthinkingly, and as soon as the words were out, she started yelling.

"Y-you jerk!! Taku has one that's a meter long. This is the one that came with my Neurolinker when I bought it, the one to connect to a computer!!"

"O-oh…"

Because the super-high-speed transfer protocol extra serial bus required a high-grade cable with serious shielding, the cables that came with the devices were, without exception, short. Even so, thirty centimeters was a bit much. This manufacturer was exceptionally stingy.

Thoughts of escape ran through his mind as Chiyuri pushed the cable, about as long as a cat's tail, at him.

She snorted lightly and rolled her small body over on the bed. "If you wanna do it, do it." She snapped her eyes shut and turned her face away.

The cable in his hand was like a live wire, and Haruyuki said nervously, "Uh,

um…if it’s okay, maybe you could sit on that chair and not turn around…?”

No answer. Sprawled on the sheets, Chiyuri didn’t look like she planned on budging any time soon.

Again, he seriously considered just fleeing, but he had already done that with Kuroyukihime today. If he ran away again now, the situation would be irreparable.

“O-okay.”

Haruyuki mustered his courage and shuffled over to the bed, where Chiyuri was stretched out, and then took off his slippers. Ever so gently, he rested a knee upon the white and gray striped sheets. The sturdy pipe frame squealed in protest at the extra weight, which was several times greater than its usual load.

On all fours, seventy centimeters to Chiyuri’s right, Haruyuki first plugged one end of the cable into the external connection terminal on the back right-hand side of his own Neurolinker. Then, tilting his head at an unnatural angle, he grabbed the other end and stretched it out. However, the Neurolinker terminal on Chiyuri, lying there with her eyes closed, was still about a light-year away.

Aaaugh, crap. I should’ve come up from the left. Should I pull back and go around? No, I don’t have that much left in me, he told himself. But there was absolutely no way he could go over Chiyuri to get to the other side of her.

About to descend into full-blown panic mode, Haruyuki moved just his upper body into an extremely unbalanced position and tried to force their necks closer together. A smell like milk wafted up from Chiyuri’s body, and his equilibrium became suspect.

His left knee slipped abruptly. On the verge of crushing Chiyuri’s slim body with his enormous bulk, his left hand shot out and just barely broke his fall.

Now, however, he was on the brink of crisis. His left knee was in between Chiyuri’s legs, which were sprawled out, his left hand had made contact right next to her cheek, and he was just barely holding himself up. *Whooaaaaaa! Whaaaaat!* The needle on his panic meter swung over into the red zone when Chiyuri’s eyes popped open, too close, not more than ten centimeters away.

Haruyuki couldn’t read the emotion in her large brown eyes. Of course, there

was anger and annoyance. But it seemed more like something she had been holding back for a very long time than a consequence of Haruyuki's current rude conduct.

Unable to face those eyes any longer, Haruyuki moved his right hand and inserted the plug into her neck. The direct-connect warning that appeared hid her face momentarily, which gave him a mere second, but he managed somehow to compose his thoughts. He blinked several times, shifted his eyes from her face, and fixed his gaze on the thin collarbone peeking out from the neck of her white sweater.

"Uh…I…I came because I have to apologize for the day before yesterday." Although there was some awkwardness in the words he put together in neurospeak, they were both able to hear his think speech without any problems. *"I ruined that lunch you went to the trouble of making me…I'm really sorry."*



And while he was sincerely apologizing, Haruyuki moved a finger on his right hand outside Chiyuri's field of view and opened the storage icon. In the window that opened up, which covered nearly half of Chiyuri's actual face, there was a folder with Chiyuri's ID name on it, next to the folder showing the physical memory area of his own Neurolinker.

At this point, he could say that the possibility that Chiyuri was Cyan Pile was essentially zero. If she was, then she would have already known that Haruyuki was Kuroyukihime's subordinate, Silver Crow, and she wouldn't have let him direct with her in the first place.

Or maybe she'd lain down on the bed like that on purpose, a strategy to get Haruyuki to give up on directing on his own? Maybe right now, Chiyuri was surprised and panicking inside.

Ashamed of himself for suspecting this girl he had been friends with for more than ten years, Haruyuki gently nudged his cursor to the physical memory folder in Chiyuri's Neurolinker.

"B-but I was just kinda shocked." The words came pouring out, perhaps to cover up his feelings of guilt. *"You and Takumu…When I imagine you talking about those guys, I can't even handle it. I know you're always thinking of stuff for me, but…but I—"*

I wanted at least you and Takumu to not pity me. Because we're friends. The three of us, at least…I wanted us to be in the same place.

Although it's probably already too late for that.

Haruyuki stiffened his finger and clicked the folder.

At the same time that a differently colored, semitransparent window popped open, Chiyuri's voice resonated in both his head and his ears. *"Haru…you're misunderstanding."*

Her speech was clumsy, like she hadn't used neurospeak before. The small lips in front of him moved, and she continued, *"I didn't say anything to Taku. How could I? I promised you I'd stay quiet about it. All Taku knew about the sandwiches was that I was talking about maybe making a lunch for you, too, when I went to his kendo tournament that time."*

“What…”

Haruyuki automatically turned eyes that were preoccupied with checking the new window to meet Chiyuri’s. The fierceness there suddenly softened, and her eyelashes lowered almost as if somehow yearning for something long gone.

“How many years has it been since you shared this much about yourself, Haru…?” She turned her gaze away from Haruyuki, who was speechless, and murmured, *“I’m…I’m terrible, too. I’m a coward. You’re…For a long time, such a long time, things have been so terrible for you, but the only thing I did was pretend I didn’t see, even though I did. The truth is, if I had wanted to, there were so many things I could’ve done. I could’ve told the teacher, I could’ve written to the student council, I could’ve gone and asked Taku and he would’ve taken them all on. But I couldn’t…I thought you would get mad at me and hate me…I was scared we’d stop being us.”*

Haruyuki held his breath and stared as drops of clear water built up on the long eyelashes along the edges of her sharp, single-lined eyelids. Even though he had only two days earlier knocked her sandwiches away and made her cry—and they had fought and cried and made each other cry countless times up to that point—he felt like these tears were somehow different from all the others that he’d seen before.

“But Haru, you’re terrible, too.” Closing her eyes tightly, Chiyuri continued with trembling lips. *“You said nothing would ever change. That we would still be friends. Two years ago…when I talked to you about Taku…you said that if I said no, Taku wouldn’t hang out with us anymore. But you promised that even if Taku and I were dating, you would always be our friend. I…I just didn’t want anything to change. I wanted it always to be the three of us…”*

Me, too. Haruyuki very nearly gave voice to this thought but managed to hold it back.

But almost as if she had heard it anyway, Chiyuri popped her eyes open, and she looked directly at Haruyuki as she wiped away the droplets. *“That’s it…so why?! Why are you leaning on her now?! You tell me not to do anything, so why are you fawning all over her and getting her to help you?! You’re terrible…It’s so frustrating. I spent all these years worrying about what to do, and she—In a*

single day, she goes and fixes everything. And almost like you're…like you're hers…"

Her. Kuroyukihime.

Having her come up now so unexpectedly, Haruyuki practically forgot about peeking inside Chiyuri's memory and shook his head as if convulsing. *"N-no, that's not it. It's not like I asked her. She's the vice president of the student council, so she just took care of the bullying for me—"*

"Then why is she parading you around like you're her pet or something?! And why are you all small behind her like you're her servant?!"

"No…it's not like that!" Shaking his head fiercely once again, Haruyuki found himself wanting to ask what on earth he was trying to do here.

When Kuroyukihime had insisted Chiyuri was Cyan Pile, he'd stubbornly fought her, and now Chiyuri was blaming Kuroyukihime and he was earnestly denying that. The situation was like a jigsaw puzzle stirred up in a mixer, and he had no idea what piece to put where anymore. Lowering his voice, he repeated, *"It's not like that. I mean, I…I don't hate it or anything—"*

"Well, I do!!" Chiyuri interrupted, shouting so loudly she could probably be heard on the other side of her door. *"Ever since we started junior high, you've been so cold, Haru. You never walk home with me, you give me this annoyed look whenever I talk to you at school, and, I mean, you never come over anymore. That never happened when we were in elementary school."*

"That's…that's just how it is. You already—I mean, you have a boyfriend."

"And you're the one who told me to get him! You're the one who said that that way, you and Taku and I could always be together!! Was that a lie?!"

"It wasn't a lie! It wasn't a lie, but…we can't be little kids forever!!" Haruyuki yelled, clutching the sheets on either side of Chiyuri's face. *"Back then, it didn't bother me, walking together with you and Taku. Going to get a burger together was totally no big deal! But…I can't anymore. It's too hard! Taku gets cooler and cooler, and you…you're cute, and then standing there next to you guys is me looking like this! Just being in the same place as you guys makes me want to dig a hole and crawl right into it!"*

He had never before confessed his own inferiority complex so honestly to Chiyuri—no, to *anyone*. Although he was certain he would regret it and the mere memory would make him squirm so hard, he'd bore a hole into the ground. Haruyuki couldn't manage to stop his thoughts.

If he were to try and say the same things using his mouth, the words would probably get stuck and never make it out. But they were directing and using neurospeak, and Haruyuki's thoughts were a raging stream pouring into Chiyuri's brain.

"I mean, it's the same for you! Taku gets to walk along holding hands with you, but I don't! Really, you're the one who chose Taku! What I said had nothing to do with that!!"

Twenty centimeters below Haruyuki, Chiyuri opened her eyes wide as she took in this monologue.

A film of saline once again covered her light eyes. Screwing up her face, lips trembling violently, a voice like a whisper slipped out of her. *"Do you really think that? Do you really believe someone's value is totally decided by how they look? You always do this. You always just decide things on your own like this. Why do you hate yourself so much? Why do you have to be so critical of yourself?"*

"Of course I hate myself," Haruyuki replied, almost groaning. *"And if I were someone else, I'd definitely hate me, too. I'm fat, I sweat all the time, I'm spineless…There isn't a single thing about me a person could like. Being with me…just looking at me, I hate it."*

"But there are things. I know so many things to like about you. I know so many good things I can't even count them using both hands!" Chiyuri continued, heaving with sobs just like when they were kids. *"When it was snack time, you always gave me the biggest one, and that time I lost the charm I had on my backpack, you stayed out late looking for it for me, and you always fix my Neurolinker for me right away whenever it does something weird, and you have all these great things about you that no one else has. It doesn't matter how you look. I-if that time two years ago, you had…"* Chiyuri looked like she was swallowing something back suddenly and then smiled sadly. *"I'm sorry. I*

shouldn't say that, should I? I…I was afraid it wouldn't just be the kids at school you pulled away from, it would be me and Taku, too. So I just did like you said."

Haruyuki felt the back of his throat close up tightly but managed somehow to squeeze out a thought. *"You didn't actually…for me…? So that Taku and I could stay friends…?"*

"Because you always looked like you were having the most fun when you were fooling around with Taku. And I used to have the most fun watching the two of you. I didn't want that time together to change. That's all I was thinking. But…I guess it's impossible, huh? Everything changes; you can't stop people's feelings." Chiyuri suddenly lifted both arms and wrapped them around Haruyuki's large body, squeezing tightly.

Frozen, Haruyuki was confronted with an extremely close, tearstained, smiling face.

"You're already somewhere I can't reach, aren't you? To be honest, when I saw you and Kuroyukihime at the gates before, I thought maybe…you were hers then. And I hated it. Because I know that I know you a million times better than she does. But…if she has the power to change you…"

Caught up in a serious maelstrom of confusion, Haruyuki could only listen to what Chiyuri was saying. Her body pressed up against his hadn't changed at all from those long, long ago days, still small and warm.

"But please, quit with the attitude. Quit acting like her follower. If you're going to do it, then do it. Be her boyfriend. And give everyone at school a heart attack."

If I hugged Chiyuri back right now, what would happen?

For just a moment, Haruyuki seriously entertained the idea. Of course, he didn't actually move his body, but the fingers on his right hand twitched, betraying his thoughts.

The holo cursor moved in sync with this movement and happened to hit the icon for the installed applications folder in the window showing the contents of the internal memory in Chiyuri's Neurolinker. After the tiniest lag, a new window opened silently.

Unconsciously checking each of the apps shown one by one, Haruyuki murmured in his physical voice just as unconsciously, “I’m sorry…I’m sorry, Chiyu. I…I didn’t even think that you would be worrying about stuff or struggling. Which is exactly why I’m no good.”

“That’s right. I do worry, and Taku has stuff he worries about, too, and probably…even her…She does, too. Everyone’s the same; no one’s any different from you, Haru.” He felt the warmth of Chiyuri’s voice and her small hands in his bones.

What is wrong with me? Haruyuki wondered in his head. *Suspecting for even an instant that she was a Burst Linker and hiding it from me.*

He saw at a glance that, in fact, there was no icon patterned after that flaming *B* in her application folder. Just in case, he went through each of her installed programs, but they were all things like off-the-shelf mail programs and media players, and simple games. He didn’t find a single thing that came from anywhere suspicious.

So Chiyuri’s not Cyan Pile or anything after all, he said to himself as he opened the properties on a few of her apps, when suddenly something felt off. The program wasn’t the problem. It was—The reaction time as he clicked and moved around the screen was slightly slower than before.

If it were a wireless signal through their cheap home server, that’d be one thing, but he was directing with Chiyuri’s Neurolinker through a high-grade (although short) cable. There shouldn’t have been a response lag he could feel. The only reason for such a lag to occur would be if a large part of Chiyuri’s Neurolinker transmission bandwidth was being monopolized by some other circuit.

Increasingly suspicious, Haruyuki opened a network status window.

Chiyuri’s Neurolinker was currently connected to three routes: the global net, the Kurashimas’ home net, and the direct link with Haruyuki. The only one of these that should have been having this kind of packet exchange was the one with Haruyuki.

But when he checked the routes, he very nearly cried out loud. A large quantity of packets was being sent on the global net. The local sender was an

unknown program installed incredibly deep in the folder. The receiver on the global side was unknown. That would mean—

There's a back door!!

Someone had hacked Chiyuri's Neurolinker and was secretly connecting to the outside. And more than that, that someone was right now, this very instant, stealing information from Chiyuri's vision and hearing.

That bastard!!

Very close to screaming, Haruyuki moved his finger to try and delete the problem app. But he stopped on the verge of dropping the icon he had dragged over into the trash.

The someone connected through this back door right now was Cyan Pile. Whoever Cyan Pile was, he or she hadn't managed to change Brain Burst; using Chiyuri's Neurolinker as a stepladder would, without a doubt, make it possible to erase one's existence from the matching list.

In other words, if he identified where the packets were going, he could discover Cyan Pile's true identity. But to pursue whoever it was without making that player suspicious would be nearly impossible. The only time it would be even remotely doable was during a fight. In which case, he had to hide the fact that someone had noticed this back door until the next attack came.

Exhaling quietly, Haruyuki closed all the windows. "Thanks, Chiyu," he murmured, and he gently pulled his body away.

The quietly sobbing Chiyuri also lowered her arms and nodded, smiling.

Returning her smile awkwardly, Haruyuki reached out with his left hand and pulled the plug from Chiyuri's Neurolinker.

6

Friday.

Haruyuki trudged forlornly down the road to school alongside students whose shining faces were full of excitement at the thought of the approaching end of the long week's studies; soon they would be free for two whole days.

"I…A guy like me…," he groaned to himself, having been overtaken first thing that morning by the deepest self-hatred.

If the dream he had the night he installed Brain Burst was the worst of his life, then the one last night would have to be said to be the lowest low point in his life. If it had been only Kuroyukihime performing acts he knew only virtually, it might have instead been the best dream of his life. But in the space of a heartbeat, the one person had become two, and on top of that—

"Ah! Aaaaaah…" He desperately resisted the urge to run off with his head in his hands.

Currently, Neurolinker companies were in ruthless competition to develop an app to record dreams, an idea that was itself almost dreamlike. He was deeply relieved technology hadn't yet materialized. Well, a not-insignificant part of him had to admit that this was slightly regrettable, but—

"Oh! Good morning, boy!"

Haruyuki jumped at the sudden, chipper voice and corresponding pat on his shoulder. Turning and seeing the beautiful girl in black standing there, he jumped again. "Hyaho?!"

"Is that some kind of hip hello?"

Haruyuki shook his head back and forth at Kuroyukihime and the doubtful

look on her face. “No! Uh! It’s nothing!! Um, g-good morning!”

“Mm.” Tilting her head even farther to the side, Kuroyukihime coughed lightly and continued. “Hmm. Oh. Yesterday…I apologize. That was childish of me.”

“N-no, not at all. I’m sorry, too…I barely even said good-bye before I left.”

On either side of the pair as they stood talking, students wearing the same uniform gradually came to a halt. Not only seventh graders, but eighth and ninth graders as well, looking on longingly and trying to say good morning to Kuroyukihime. Before they knew it, a line had formed behind them.

Seeing this, Kuroyukihime addressed the issue with a collective shout at the assemblage. “Oh! Morning, everyone!” She slapped Haruyuki on the back and started walking quickly. Haruyuki hurried after her, whispered conversations in hushed voices still reaching his ears.

“No. It’s completely understandable that you would want to leave. After all, your close…friend was accused of being a cowardly assailant. And on top of that, I made you say there’s no way you could direct with her to check it out. I am so sorry.”

“Huh? Uh…um. I did, though…direct.”

Kuroyukihime’s profile stiffened. “What?” Faster than the warning bells telling him something was off again somehow: “Where?”

Pinioned by that sharp voice, Haruyuki had no choice but to answer her honestly. “W-well, at her house…”

“Where in her house?”

“H-her…bedroom.”

“I see.”

For some reason, Kuroyukihime’s pace gradually started to increase. Her stride already a fair bit longer than his own, Haruyuki chased after her, sweat popping up on his forehead. In a few seconds, he was walking alongside her again, attempting to resume their conversation.

“I peeked into her physical memory. And her Neurolinker, it’s—”

“How long was the cable?” Kuroyukihime’s aura was piercing as she cross-examined him.

“Th…irty centimeters,” Haruyuki answered fearfully.

“Mm.”

Tak tak tak tak tak tak tak tak.

Dumbfounded, Haruyuki watched Kuroyukihime’s long hair swinging as she approached the school gates, now visible before them, at an incredible pace.

I don’t get it. This world is nothing but stuff I don’t get.

Haruyuki listened earnestly during morning classes, in an escapist kind of way, taking extensive notes, and when he heard the light chimes that signaled the lunch break, he had a hard time bringing himself to move.

If he’d thought about it rationally, he should have gone to see Kuroyukihime, who was likely in the lounge, to inform her immediately about the back door Cyan Pile had set up in Chiyuri’s Neurolinker and to discuss a means to follow the packets. But unless he figured out the reason for Kuroyukihime’s strangely foul mood before then, he wouldn’t be able to concentrate on their conversation at all.

The truth was he often made people around him uncomfortable. Overweight guy, sweating like a greasy waterfall, talking nervously in a quiet voice; it was rare to find people who weren’t annoyed by him. Then the looks on their faces would just prompt Haruyuki to shrink further, lower his voice to its bare minimum, making it even harder to hear anything he said.

Kuroyukihime must have secretly been putting up with him until now. Maybe she had finally reached her limit.

In which case, it might have been better to just give up entirely on having a face-to-face conversation with her in the real world. If he did a full dive and they talked as avatars, at least he wouldn’t be sweating and the volume of his voice would be automatically adjusted. If everything would go more smoothly that way and proceed in a more businesslike fashion, then that should have been what he wanted.

Dejected, eyes on his desk, Haruyuki was in the middle of hashing out this debate with himself when suddenly he was loudly interrupted by an unfamiliar voice above him.

“Hello! You’re Haruyuki Arita from grade seven’s class C, right?”

Haruyuki lifted his head with a start. Standing before him were two female students he had never seen before. They wore eighth-grade ribbons, and both had holo tags displayed on their shoulders indicating that they were on club business. *Newspaper club.*

Throwing his head back with a grunt, Haruyuki saw a new icon flashing in his view: SREC. This was to let him know that the Neurolinker of the person with whom he was speaking was recording their conversation. Of course, this wasn’t permitted for just any conversation, and within the school, it was only allowed in a handful of situations.

For instance, reporting for the school newspaper.

Without even noticing the students around them watching, ears perking with interest, Haruyuki got ready to run as fast as he could, not caring how it looked. However, he saw that his interlocutors clearly had experience in this type of situation, as one of them had slipped in behind him to block his retreat.

As he sat paralyzed in a half-standing position, a pair of hands popped out to rest atop a holo keyboard, and after a quick glance over at the recording icon flashing brightly, the newspaper club’s hard-nosed investigative journalist let fly with a question that hit too close to the heart of things.

“We’re working on the column ‘Heart of the Rumor: Head Shot’ for the *Umesato Real Times*! Let’s clear this up once and for all: Is the rumor that you and Kuroyukihime are dating actually true?!”

Haruyuki mustered all his mental strength and responded in a voice that could almost have been called calm. “It’s a lie. It’s a rumor. No basis in fact.”

Ten fingers tapped away in front of him at the invisible keyboard while the owner of those fingers attacked again. “But according to the information we have obtained, you and Kuroyukihime have directed on two occasions in the lounge. Not only that, but the two of you even went on a direct date at a café

within the school district!!”

“Wh…”

The girl looked down at Haruyuki, who was stunned they knew that, and the light caught the lens of her glasses, which appeared to be real.

This is bad. This is super bad. If I get the answer wrong now, there’s no coming back.

In the back of his mind, several sensational headlines flashed past. He could hear somewhere the battle cries of the members of the Kuroyukihime fan club seeing them and calling for blood.

One cheek spasming and twitching, Haruyuki set his brain to work—three times more accelerated than when he’d been fighting Ash Roller—deriving a response that wasn’t entirely inoffensive.

“Uh, th-th-that was…okay. I—I—I just know a bit about her Neurolinker OS, so uh, her Neurolinker was weird in this one place, and she asked me to fix it. That’s all. The café thing was nothing more than her thanking me. That’s it. Nothing more. Not in the slightest.” With a tight smile on his face, he shook his head briskly.

The newspaper club girl stopped typing and knitted her eyebrows.

There shouldn’t have been any way that she could check whether people directing were having a conversation in neurospeak or whether they were just operating their Neurolinkers. As an excuse, it strained credulity, but she shouldn’t have been able to find anything to disprove his story.

Relieved, Haruyuki added new bricks to further build on the wall he had created. “I—I mean, if you saw how she is when she’s with me, you could tell. When we talk, she gets into a bad mood pretty quickly. So there’s, like, no way we could be dating or anything.”

And that should be the end of this interview.

Or so he thought, but the girl tilted her head and returned doubtfully, “Bad mood? It didn’t look like that at all, though.”

“I-it’s true! I mean, this morning, she got mad and stormed off. She always

gets like that when Chiyu, I mean Kurashima, comes up.”

“Kurashima…? I’m sure she and Kuroyukihime talked about something in front of the school gates.” After blinking rapidly several times behind her glasses, the theatrical journalist disappeared from the newspaper club girl’s demeanor, and her fingers raced. The recording icon disappeared from Haruyuki’s view.

“Is the interview over?”

“Oh. Yeah. Or rather…,” she mumbled in a strange tone. After exchanging a glance with her partner behind Haruyuki, she started talking in a normal tone. “Okay, look. The truth is, we weren’t actually buying into that rumor at all. To be blunt, we figured it was some kind of mistake, which is why we came to interview you.”

“Huh?”

Bringing her face in close, the girl whispered so that only Haruyuki could hear. “Hey, Arita. I mean, it’s kind of crazy, but…maybe Kuroyukihime and you are really…you know?”

“Huh?!”

“I mean, look. You’re close with Kurashima, and whenever you talk about her with Kuroyukihime, she gets in a bad mood. That’s, well…you know?”

The other club member, who had come around to the side again, picked up where her associate had left off. “Yeah. I mean, no matter how you look at it…”

Then they both whispered at Haruyuki like shrine maidens uttering an oracle. “She’s jealous, right?”

When he came to, Haruyuki was in his usual stall in the boys’ washroom. Which meant that he had run away again, but he didn’t have a drop of energy to spend regretting his actions.

Jealous? How do you write that character? Ugh, too hard, I don’t know.

In an attempt to allow his thoughts escape, too, he was already drawing possible characters, one line at a time, in stark red like a brand.

Kuroyukihime has that sour look every time we talk about Chiyuri because… she’s jealous.

That's what they had said.

Jealous. Envious. In other words, Kuroyukihime wasn't putting on a show or joking around, she really—

"No way," Haruyuki muttered, his thoughts racing ahead. *There's no way. Maybe that could happen to someone else, but it could never happen to me, not to Haruyuki Arita. Don't even think it. Don't hope. You're obviously just going to be squirming with double, no, triple the regret later.*

Hitting the back of his head against the water tank, Haruyuki spoke aloud again. "No way…No way." But the more he said it, the more the many things Kuroyukihime had said and done, the many faces she had shown him up to then broke into an infinite number of pieces and played back like a slide show in his mind.

That time…and that time, and that time, she was seriously—

"No way!!" He slammed his right hand against the stall wall and held his head.

Thinking about all this was just making him crazy; he needed to get even farther away. Just as he was about to give the command for a full dive, the insanely high score Kuroyukihime had managed jumped back at him from his memory.

He would never be able to beat that score. Which meant that he couldn't use the game as an escape from reality anymore.

"…Why?" In a slightly louder voice, he shouted again, "Why?! Why me?!"

You have everything. Looks, ability, popularity. And even the one thing I was proud of—reaction time in a virtual game. And me, I'm nothing but a loser with a dumb face and a squishy, sweaty body. I lose to you in every single possible way.

"And yet despite all that…how am I supposed to believe…"

It's true Haruyuki had the aptitude for Brain Burst that Kuroyukihime was looking for. But that didn't mean anything other than there were only three such people at their school.

And Haruyuki's Silver Crow was totally good for nothing, an enormous helmet

head plopped onto a gangly wire body that could only punch, kick, and head butt. With a duel avatar like that, about the only thing he could do was help her unearth the true identity of her enemy, Cyan Pile. So he wished she would treat him that way. He wanted her to just give him cool, dispassionate orders, like she would any servant.

He didn't want anything more than that. He was absolutely not deluding himself into thinking he could have anything else. And yet…why did Kuroyukihime take that attitude, get that expression on her face, look at him with those eyes?

Finally, wanting only to ease his mind, Haruyuki latched on to a single conclusion. He couldn't come up with any other reason for her behavior.

Haruyuki missed lunch again even though he didn't have anyone taking his lunch money anymore, but he wasn't even aware of his empty stomach as he sat disinterestedly through afternoon classes.

In homeroom, their teacher had apparently said something to Araya and his gang, but he missed that, too, and when the last bell rang, he sluggishly stood, bag in hand, after his classmates had flown out of the classroom, full of anticipation for the weekend. He headed for the entrance slowly, changed to his outside shoes, and left the school.

Even though it was still only just after three, the late autumn sun was already fading and shone on the school gates at a steep angle. Seeing a black silhouette standing as if transformed into one of the pillars, Haruyuki dragged his feet as he approached.

"Hey."

Kuroyukihime's hands—which were busy typing on a holo keyboard—stopped, and she raised one hand slightly, a faint, hard smile on her face. She had probably deliberately come to stand out here in the cold even though what she was doing could've been taken care of in the student council office.

Haruyuki could only dip his head silently in response.

An awkward silence ensued. A chilly wind rustled the fallen leaves at their feet and then passed on.

He kept his head down, and Kuroyukihime started speaking after lightly clearing her throat. “Can we talk while we walk?”

“Yeah.” Haruyuki accompanied this brief reply with a nod.

She started to walk silently, and he took a position to her left and a step behind as they passed through the gates.

They had been walking silently for a couple minutes when Kuroyukihime cleared her throat again and began speaking. “Look. I’m sorry about this morning. I was being weird.”

“No, it’s fine. I wasn’t upset. I’m sorry I didn’t come during lunch.”

Kuroyukihime seemed to tilt her head slightly at this unusually smooth response but then nodded. “It’s fine. But. Even I wonder what I’m doing, but… when it comes to Cyan Pile, I just can’t seem to stay calm—”

Kuroyukihime sounded somewhat rushed, keeping her eyes forward as she spoke, and Haruyuki cut her off in a dry voice. “About that…I know the connection between Kurashima and Cyan Pile.”

“What? Oh…r-right. Then let’s talk about that over direct. It wouldn’t do to have someone overhear the names,” Kuroyukihime said quickly and reached into the bag hanging from her right hand instead of her pocket.

She pulled out a small paper bag stamped with the name of the Umesato student shop. After tearing the tape off sharply, she pulled a brand-new XSB cable out of the bag. “I accidentally burnt out the one we’ve been using so far. And…they didn’t have much stock, so I had to buy this one.” She sounded almost as if she was making excuses as she pulled out the one-meter cable—the shortest they sold in the student shop—and Haruyuki tried not to think about what was going on in her head.

Without meeting her eyes, he silently accepted one of the plug ends and inserted it into his Neurolinker.

Kuroyukihime looked like she was waiting for him to say something, but finally, she put the other plug into her own Neurolinker. The wired-connection warning appeared, and as it disappeared, Haruyuki sent dry thoughts at the girl on the other end of the wire.

“Kurashima isn’t Cyan Pile. It looks like Cyan Pile actually set up a virus in her Neurolinker to make a back door. Which is why they show up from wherever Kurashima is in the school.”

Kuroyukihime didn’t immediately respond to Haruyuki’s torrent of words, but when she finally did, the voice in his brain sounded doubtful. Or just a little scared.

“What…what’s going on with you? Since before…you’ve been kind of weird.”

“Nothing. Nothing’s going on,” Haruyuki responded, obstinately refusing to turn and look at Kuroyukihime walking next to him, a meter away.

“But…are you maybe mad? Because I was weird this morning. And yesterday.”

“As if. There’s no way I could be angry with you. Don’t worry about me; we have more important things to talk about, don’t we?”

Once again, only silence passed along the thin cable.

On the road as dusk approached, because of the group of buildings standing along the left side of the path, people passing along it sank into black shadows in the dim light. No eyes fell on Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime walking together and directing, making it seem almost as if the two of them alone had somehow wandered into a country of flat shadows.

“Do you have proof?” Changing suddenly, the voice in his head was cold. *“Did you get proof that Kurashima is not Cyan Pile?”*

“No. If I reached out to the virus, Cyan Pile might have noticed, so I just looked.”

“I see. A calm decision, but at the same time, not very persuasive. Even I have never heard anything about a virus that connects you to the Brain Burst matching server through a back door. How exactly am I supposed to believe what you’re telling me?”

The sharpness in her thoughts seemed to swell with each word enunciated. Haruyuki clenched his teeth and sent an even flatter voice through the cable. *“So you’re saying I made up the virus story. Are you actually trying to say I’ve gone over to Kurashima-slash-Cyan Pile’s side? If that’s the case, then proof or*

whatever doesn't matter. You're just going to have to decide what you believe."

"I'm not saying that. You're leaping to conclusions."

Haruyuki stubbornly refused to respond to Kuroyukihime's slightly shaken words.

"Are you saying this because you really believe it?" Her legs stopped in place suddenly, and her voice, which had gotten even colder, sounded hard. Haruyuki stopped, too, before the cable went taut. *"The moment I conclude that you've aligned with Cyan Pile, I will hunt you. I will take your meager burst points, and I will press you toward a forceful uninstallation of Brain Burst. You will lose the ability to accelerate forever. Are you fully aware of this as you tell me this now?"*

"I understand. You're free to do what you will. I'm just a pawn, just a tool. Throw me away when you don't need me anymore."

"You." She lightly took hold of Haruyuki's left shoulder. When he lifted his eyes, Kuroyukihime's face, strained like carved ice, was very near. However, her pitch-black eyes alone reflected the feelings inside, burning almost white hot.

"I knew you were angry. And it's true, I'm to blame. I apologize. But…" Lips trembling almost imperceptibly, she pushed out a voice that sounded like she was forcing it under control. *"It's not as if I can freely control all of my emotions. I get annoyed, I get uneasy. And when it comes to you and…Kurashima…"* Her gaze dropped momentarily, and, pale cheeks stiffening, Kuroyukihime continued. *"Look, if you want me to tell you why, I will. I—"*

Before that thought could travel down the cable, Haruyuki turned to the side and cut in. *"It's fine. Let's just forget it."*

"Ah. Wh-what?"

"Watching this is hard, too. It's just sad."

"What are you talking about? What do you mean?"

Fixing his gaze on a single paving stone to his lower right, Haruyuki finally gave voice to the "only conclusion" he was able to reach that afternoon. *"You…you hate yourself, don't you?"*

The sound of a sharp intake of air.

Haruyuki was suddenly self-conscious about the words he had loosed, words he couldn't take back. In the depths of his ears, the encouragement Chiyuri had given him the night before played like a refrain, but he could no longer stop the thoughts being uttered.

"You hate yourself, the you who's too perfect in every single way. Which is why you're trying to lower yourself. That's it, isn't it?"

Kuroyukihime's fingers, resting on his left shoulder, stiffened, turned to steel. Thinking that would likely be the last time she ever touched him, Haruyuki unleashed his final words, which were sure to destroy everything. *"You, me… Talking to me, a fat, clumsy loser, touching me, showing me something like… something like kindness—it's just you trying to dirty yourself. You don't need to do all that; I'll still do what you want. I don't want anything. I don't need any compensation. I'm just a sacrificial pawn, a tool to be ordered around. A guy like me, you should know exactly what the proper way to handle me is!!"*

The pale hand slipped slowly, slowly from his shoulder.

This was how it had to be.

Never touching him again, never meeting his eyes.

As long as you make me your tool, we don't even ever have to meet in the real world. Haruyuki didn't know if this thought reached her as neurospeak or not.

Good-bye.

As he went to murmur this final word, a sharp sensation snapped across his left cheek. Haruyuki lifted his face in shock, cheek burning.

"Idiot!" The voice burst forth with real sound from the light-colored lips.

Haruyuki stared baffled at the waterfall of tears flowing down that beautiful face, distorted to the point of violence.

Her right hand still high in the air, Kuroyukihime's entire demeanor crumpled like a child's, and tears streamed down her face.

"You idiot…idiot…" The word repeated now sounded almost entirely different from the *fool* paired with a wry grown-up smile that he had gotten from her so many times before.

Kuroyukihime cursed Haruyuki over and over and over, age-appropriately, like a fourteen-year-old girl.

And Haruyuki simply stood, eyes wide open, unable to think of a single one of the several reactions he should have had as a thirteen-year-old boy. With his words, he had deeply hurt the person before him. That much he understood.

But when it came to Kuroyukihime, when it came to this person who was so perfect in every way, who had an ability to think and reason greater than any adult, he thought she was just disgusted with Haruyuki. She had exhausted her social graces; her heart was just being pulled away.

But crying this much. And she looks so fragile. This—this isn't how it was supposed to…

Haruyuki opened his mouth as if to speak.

Kuroyukihime wiped away flowing tears with both hands.

For a moment, only the wind passed over them as they stood there stationary together on the road in the deepening twilight.

And then a terrible sound like metal scraping against metal hit Haruyuki's ears.

At first, he thought it was a quantum noise through his Neurolinker, the sound was that strange. Baffled and heart pounding, he swiveled his head and torso around to the right.

And had a terrifying spectacle leap into his field of view.

A white passenger car was plunging straight at them, removing in the process the guardrail separating the sidewalk from the road with the right front fender.

An accident?! No! There's no brake noise. The series of ideas flashed through his mind in less than one tenth of a second.

His mouth moved basically on automatic, and a single phrase surged out. And at the same time, the exact same words echoed in the back of his brain in a different voice via the direct cable.

"Burst link!!"

With a cracking noise like lightning, the world stopped.

Blue.

The landscape frozen, clear and blue as far as the eye could see.

But Haruyuki quickly understood that this didn't mean everything had stopped completely.

The tires of the large sedan filling his view were turning bit by tiny bit as if fighting the freezing, biting into the road surface and closing the distance.

"Wha?!" Haruyuki cried out finally, and jumped out of the way. Instantly, the car disappeared. Hiding it was his own round back clad in the uniform of Umesato Junior High.

This blue world was just the real landscape, recreated as a polygonal pseudo-reality by the Brain Burst program hacking into the images from the social security cameras, placed in great numbers around the city. Dropping his gaze, he saw his body had changed into the pink pig. He moved the familiar virtual avatar to cut around his own real-world back and looked again at the white sedan.

The vehicle, charging diagonally from the lane and aiming for the gap in the guardrail, was not even three meters away from him. Roughly calculating the speed that allowed it to keep moving forward, however gradually, he realized they would come into contact in less than ten minutes, even in this accelerated world.

This is—Why?! Confused, Haruyuki tried desperately to think.

Normally, a car could not leave its lane. The second an abnormal route was detected, the AI controlling the vehicle would take control from the driver and automatically correct the vehicle's course, decelerate, and stop.

Which meant either the control AI in this car was broken or that it had been temporarily turned off by the driver.

He quickly deduced that it was most likely the latter, because he had heard nothing like the screeching of tires skidding against the road surface during full braking. The driver wasn't stepping on the brakes. On the contrary, he was

pushing forward with the accelerator all the way to the floor.

This was deliberate. It was the attack by a Burst Linker on the real side that Kuroyukihime had hinted at before.

Coming to these conclusions more or less instantaneously, Haruyuki took another few steps forward and tried to make out the face of the driver behind the windscreen. Was their assailant an unknown Burst Linker belonging to one of the king's Legions? Or Cyan Pile, possibly someone at Umesato?

The majority of the social cameras in the area were apparently not capturing images from inside the car as he couldn't really see through the window. Haruyuki changed his angle, strained his eyes, and finally found a position that allowed him to see inside. Stretching out his short pig avatar as far as possible to finally reach up over the hood, he saw the driver—

"Wha…?!" Haruyuki let slip another surprised, scream-like cry the moment he saw the driver. It was the face of a classmate he was utterly familiar with, a face he had hoped never to see again.

"A…Araya…?! Wh…why…"

Why is he here?

Hadn't he just been arrested—no question, no fight—after hurting us at school? And then they found out pretty quickly from his Neurolinker that he had the social camera evasion app installed, along with a bunch of illegally copied games and images, and then on top of that, digital drugs? He should've been tossed in juvie or reform school. For the time being, at least—he shouldn't be back at school while I'm still there!

Unable to believe his own eyes, Haruyuki blinked over and over, staring at the face of the icy blue driver. But the hair pointed straight up like the needles on a flower-arranging stand; the thin, arched eyebrows; the pinhole pupils; the lips twisted in cruel excitement; the feeling of terror these features elicited in Haruyuki whether he liked it or not, all these things told him that the boy in front of his eyes was Araya in the flesh.

"He was bailed out this morning," a grave voice noted beside him abruptly, and Haruyuki quickly whirled around.

Standing there was Kuroyukihime, wrapped in her black swallowtail, fairy-princess avatar, biting hard on her lip. “I heard he was sentenced in family court at the beginning of the week and that he’d be locked up for at least a year. So I thought there was no need to trouble myself about him anymore. But…I can’t believe he’d…” Having murmured this much in a strangled voice, Kuroyukihime lowered her eyelashes and shook her head slowly. “No, I should’ve had an idea, been on guard. For one person to assault another, you don’t need the power of acceleration, after all. I thought I knew that as long as you have a knife, a car, it’s more than enough, but it seems that I hadn’t truly understood.”

As she related this information in her usual tone, Haruyuki could see no trace of the childlike weeping from moments ago. *No, that’s just what I want to think*, Haruyuki immediately corrected himself. He could clearly see the keen regret and something like resolve in eyes that should have been nothing more than a creation of the avatar.

Kuroyukihime slowly closed those eyes, took a deep breath, and said in a near whisper, “This…this is payback, then. For me. Not knowing how people might feel, not even trying to know, and yet, I play with those feelings however I want.”

“Wh-what…what are you talking about?” Haruyuki finally managed.

Not responding immediately, Kuroyukihime turned to Haruyuki and had her avatar, nearly twice as tall as his, kneel down soundlessly. The black dress spread out, and the eyes, lowered to the same height as Haruyuki’s, met his straight on. “Arita…Haruyuki.”

This voice calling to him caressed his ears more gently, more calmly than any other sound in his memory.

“I’m sorry. I’m the one who brought this on. But I won’t let you get hurt. I will do whatever it takes to protect you.”

“Huh? Wh-what—” Dumbfounded, Haruyuki could only repeat himself.

There was nothing they could at this point do once the acceleration was released. The moment they returned to reality, the sedan in front of them would cover the remaining distance at an incredible speed and send first Haruyuki himself and then Kuroyukihime behind him flying.

He was glad it would be in that order. If he acted as a cushion, there was a chance, although slight, that Kuroyukihime would get out of this without major injuries. This thought had already occurred to Haruyuki earlier.

However, Kuroyukihime surprised him, declaring in a tone that hid a strong resolve, “I will save you at least. I still haven’t told you about it: Brain Burst’s… the best and final power of acceleration.”

“Huh?!”

Save…? You, the hero; me, nothing more than a tool…?

Haruyuki swallowed hard and shook his head violently from side to side. “N-no!! You can’t do that! If that kind of power exists, I should be the one to use it! And then I can protect you! I’m your servant, after all. I’m the one who has to protect you!!” he shouted desperately, stretching both of his short arms out. “Please tell me! What is this final power? What command do I need to use it?!”

“Impossible. You can’t use the command unless you’re at least level nine, and it uses ninety-nine percent of your accumulated points. And more importantly, I’m your ‘parent.’ And what would the world be like if parents didn’t protect their children?”

“B-b-b-but!!”

“Don’t make that face. I…In this situation, there’s only one saving grace.”

“S-saving grace?”

“Mm. Given that these are my last words to you, you’ll believe me, won’t you?”

Kuroyukihime raised both hands gently and placed her open palms against each other, bringing them to her chest. Her eyes closed, and a smile like flowers blooming appeared on her lips. “Haruyuki. I like you.” From below the raised eyebrows, her black eyes stared at Haruyuki, concealing an infinite radiance. “This is the first time in my life I’ve felt like this. Unable to control it, totally confused. At school, at home in bed, I’m always thinking of you, and I’m happy and I’m sad. So this is love…It’s wonderful. It’s a miracle.” She gripped her hands together tightly in front of her chest and grinned.

That smile was warm, gentle, good. But it pierced Haruyuki's chest as if ripping him apart. *I want to believe. I want to believe.*

I want to believe—

The effect of the tears welling up in his avatar's eyes was too strong, distorting Haruyuki's vision. Wiping them away roughly, he stared back at her eyes so close to his own and asked hoarsely, "Why…? Why me? Me…A guy like me, why?"

"Mm. The reason? I can't even count all the reasons. But, no, I don't think love needs a reason. So I'll just tell how it happened." Smiling, Kuroyukihime stretched out her hands and placed them on Haruyuki's shoulders. "Haruyuki. Do you remember the first time we met?"

"Yeah. Of course, of course I remember. On the local net…you said to me in the virtual squash room, 'Don't you want to go further?' "

"I did. The high score I got in that game…" Her smile changed into something slightly mischievous. "I used acceleration."

"Wh-what?!"

"I could never have gotten a score like that if I hadn't. I thought it would pique your interest and make it easier to persuade you; I felt like I had to beat your score. I—" Kuroyukihime cut herself off and turned her gaze up to the sky of the accelerated world. "I became a Burst Linker six years ago, when I was just eight. Ever since then, I've craved nothing but strength and speed, cutting down countless enemies to become level nine, and still not satisfied with that—these hands are stained with the blood of friends. Even someone like me couldn't possibly beat that high score you recorded."

She recomposed her expression and directed her strong eyes straight at Haruyuki before continuing. "Listen, Haruyuki. You're fast. You can become faster than anyone else. Faster even than me, faster than the other kings. And speed is a Burst Linker's greatest strength. One day, your name will be known far and wide as the fastest Linker in the accelerated world. You'll defeat the kings, beat the other levels, and reach the source of Brain Burst. Then you'll know. The ultimate potential hidden in a person's…in our brains and souls."

Nodding slowly, Kuroyukihime went on. “I…I shook when I saw you playing that game. I shivered in a way I never had before. I was moved. At the fact that a person could become that fast. In my heart, I shouted, ‘Eureka! I finally found him, the true king to accelerate against a stagnant world.’ ”

Haruyuki was so dumbfounded all he could do was let her words wash over him. *Me, faster than anyone…?*

It was too incredible all of a sudden. But given the situation, Kuroyukihime’s words did not permit even a shred of doubt. He could not doubt her; that was the one thing he couldn’t do.

“But although you conceal such strength and potential, in reality, you are very fragile…so pitiful it’s sad. It was like my heart was being ripped apart. I want to kneel before the future king. But at the same time, I want to protect you, wrap you up and keep you safe. These conflicting feelings rapidly swelled up in me, and before I knew it, you were the only thing I could see. I fell in love with you. I finally realized it yesterday.”

“Yesterday?”

“Mm. When you were talking about Kurashima. How can I say it? It was the first time in my life I had ever been jealous; I couldn’t control myself. Which is why I took that attitude with you. And this morning as well. I was too slow to realize it…Well, I was slow, but not *too* slow, I suppose. Here, like this.”

Tightening her grip on Haruyuki’s shoulders ever so slightly, Kuroyukihime brought her face closer and smiled broadly. “I got to tell you everything. Although if I had had my way, I would’ve liked to have faced you properly and told you in the real world.” Tears like jewels welled up in her sparkling jet-black eyes, forming drops and collecting in the corners of her eyes. “So…it’s about time to say good-bye.”

“Wh-what are you going to do? I don’t—Good-bye, it’s not…”

Facing Haruyuki, swallowing hard and shaking his head, Kuroyukihime spoke her final words like a warning. “Please. Become strong. And become fast. Defeat the kings on my behalf, climb to the top, and see for me what I wanted to see.”

“No…no!!” Haruyuki shouted in a voice that resembled a wail. “That’s not how it is! That’s—You can’t be the only one to go!! I’ll protect you! And if I can’t, we’ll both go together! Please don’t leave me…I—I still haven’t…For you… I…”

A voice mixed with sobs surged out of Haruyuki’s open mouth.

Leaning in softly, Kuroyukihime’s lips closed it.

Even though they were both virtual avatars, the sensation was softer than anything, warmer than anything, gentler than anything.

After a kiss lasting a few thousandths of a second in the real world, and essentially an eternity from Haruyuki’s perspective, Kuroyukihime slowly pulled her lips away and whispered, “Another time…We’ll definitely meet again.” Her tears falling joined together in a silver radiance following the lines of her body as she stood up.

There was an almost-terrifying purpose in Kuroyukihime’s back as she faced the approaching car with her legs out resolutely, and Haruyuki couldn’t even speak, much less move.

Spreading her arms out wide, she straightened her back with a snap and called out in a clear voice: “Physical Full Burst!!”

Kuroyukihime’s avatar disappeared, enveloped in a blinding white light.

What the—? What happened?

Caught in an explosion of confusion and uneasiness and an emotion overwhelming both of these he couldn’t put a name to, Haruyuki screamed at the top of his lungs. “Kuroyukihime!!” His tears spilled over onto his cheeks, distorting his vision, and he lost his sense of balance, staggering a few steps backward.

And then Haruyuki saw something incredible.

Kuroyukihime—the body of Kuroyukihime in the real world, transparent and blue—was moving.

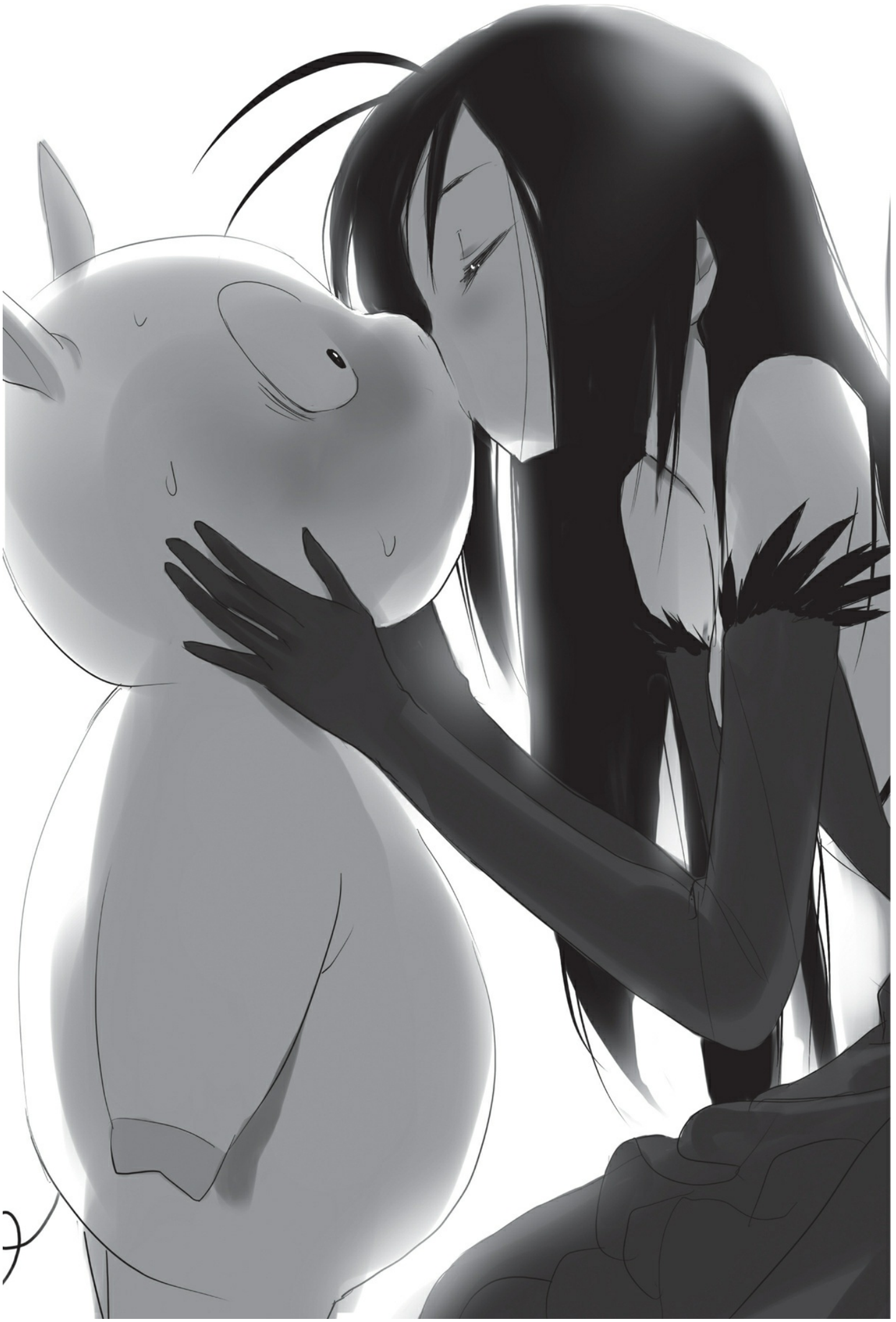
Kuroyukihime, who should’ve been standing back, with Haruyuki wedged in between her and the passenger vehicle barreling down on them, was definitely

moving in the real world, albeit at a speed about one-tenth that of the car, successively putting one foot in front of the other, kicking the ground and moving forward.

This can't—There's no way this can be happening!!

The Brain Burst program overclocked the quantum signal generated by the heart rate a thousand times and accelerated only the user's consciousness. In other words, the process had absolutely no effect on the physical body. Thus, even accelerated, the body was unable to even shift its gaze. That was why the program sent the user's consciousness into a full dive at the same time as it accelerated, cutting it off from the physical body and connecting it to a copy of reality produced by the social cameras.

And yet, right now, the real-life Kuroyukihime was moving her physical body at a speed that accelerated Haruyuki could clearly see. Was the occasional blurring here and there on her ice-blue body because she was exceeding the filming speed of the social cameras? Which meant she was dashing around in the real world at the super speed of more than a hundred times that of a normal person!



Was this the best and final power of Brain Burst? A forbidden command to overclock not just the consciousness but the entire body?

There was no way the body could come out of something like that okay.

As she charged ahead, Kuroyukihime's expression was full of firm determination and something else, a stiffness like she was enduring something with every fiber of her being.

A something that was probably intense pain. She would no doubt have been unable to stop the screaming of muscles and joints being driven at a speed that was essentially impossible. But she herself did not stop. In one, two, three steps, she was standing to the left of the real-world Haruyuki.

The front bumper of the car Araya was driving was already a scant eighty centimeters from Haruyuki.

Kuroyukihime raised both hands and placed them gently on Haruyuki's body, as if she were about to embrace him. She applied the smallest amount of force onto his side, and his body began to move.

At the same time, he felt an incredible impact in every part of his body, and his vision faded to black.

Kuroyukihime had been gentle, but her push was equivalent to being slammed into at high speed in the real world. The impact activated the safety on his Neurolinker, which automatically canceled the full dive. As the center of his vision sank into darkness, the original colors of the real world stretched out radially.

Instantly, Haruyuki returned from his avatar to his flesh-and-blood body. He hit the pavement with his back and started choking. Forgetting to even breathe again, he opened his eyes and saw in front of him Kuroyukihime, both hands still stretched out, smiling somehow.

Immediately, the white car plunging savagely onto the sidewalk caught Kuroyukihime's slim body, lifting her up onto the hood, both legs flying up as if saved somehow by the bumper. She hit the front windscreen and flew even higher.

Her long black hair flowed through the air, tracing an arc.

Shining orange in the evening sun.

On one side, the disconnected direct cable danced whitely.

7

In Haruyuki's fragmented consciousness, his memories of the events that followed existed only as three-color images.

Black—the slender figure twisted unnaturally on the paving stones of the sidewalk.

Red—the terrifyingly large amount of blood spreading out underneath her.

White—closed eyelids, cheeks that had lost all color.

In the blink of an eye, his own hands and the necktie he used to stop the bleeding were also dyed red.

Araya's clothing was red too as he crawled, laughing loudly, out from the driver's seat of the white car, which had smashed into the wall of a shop.

Police cars rushed to the scene, red lights flashing, and someone shoved the still-laughing Araya into a backseat.

Then the white ambulance arrived, rotating light on top the same bright red, and the men in white who got out fixed Kuroyukihime to a stretcher. Haruyuki also got in the ambulance at their prompting, and the vehicle started moving at high speed.

And now, he was staring up at the ER's red surgery lamp in the corner of an entirely white hallway.

He had no room in his brain to think about what was going to happen now. He could only replay every single moment of the last four days since he'd met Kuroyukihime.

That time. And that time, that time, too…Haruyuki should've done something different. If he had, then they wouldn't be here now.

Why couldn't he just trust the hand Kuroyukihime offered him, the feelings she had for him? If he had just accepted it, if he hadn't fought it, if he hadn't so obstinately turned his face away, they wouldn't have had a quarrel like that on the road, and they would've noticed the car approaching.

Of all the many mistakes I've made in my life up to now, this is the biggest one of all, and I can't ever take it back.

In each and every one of the shards of his fragmented consciousness, Haruyuki went back to all of the branching points and tried to move forward into a different future, but even Brain Burst couldn't change the past.

How long had he been thinking like this and staring at that lamp?

It was still on, indicating that surgery was in progress, but the door slid open unexpectedly, and a single female nurse stepped out. Haruyuki simply stared at the white-clad figure approaching him.

She was young, as if she had only recently finished nursing school. The expression on the face under her neatly arranged bangs was strained as Haruyuki turned to her, words coming out of his mouth essentially on their own.

"How…how is she?"

"The doctors and everyone in there are doing absolutely everything they can." The nurse's voice was slightly husky and tense. "But…she suffered a lot of damage to her internal organs. To treat her injuries, we've done a full insertion of nanomachines, and we've managed to prevent her condition from worsening. And…well, we'd like to contact her family, but she didn't have any emergency contact information in her Neurolinker."

"What…" Haruyuki didn't know what to say.

The nurse sat down next to him, crouched forward, and continued. "I was wondering if you knew her telephone number. You're…her…?"

She let the end trail off as if to ask a question, but Haruyuki didn't have any answers.

I'm her what? Pawn, servant. I don't want to use words like that anymore. But

friend, classmate—that's not right, either.

Mumbling to himself, Haruyuki lifted his head involuntarily at the nurse's next words. "Her boyfriend, aren't you?"

"Uh! Wh-why?"

Just going by Kuroyukihime's beautiful face, miraculously unscathed, and Haruyuki's physical appearance, there should have been nothing to even suggest such an idea.

He shrank his body reflexively as she gently handed him a small notebook. It was an Umesato Junior High student agenda, the blue synthetic leather embossed with an emblem in gold.

"When I was checking her personal effects for a telephone number, I found this. I'm sorry." The slightest of smiles crossed her tense face, and the nurse opened the student notebook to the last page.

In the clear pocket on the left was Kuroyukihime's student ID with her picture. And on the right was a familiar round face.

Taking the notebook with trembling hands, Haruyuki gazed at the photo of himself wearing a stupid expression. That time, there was no doubt. The photo was a printout of the view capture she had taken when she first told him that she liked him in the lounge. A drop of water fell with a *plop* on the front of the notebook.

It took Haruyuki a while to realize it was overflow from his own eyes.

"She…Kuroyukihime." His hushed voice trembled with emotion. It didn't take long for the tremble to explode into the heavy sobbing of a child. "Unh…aaah! Aaahaaaaah!!"

Clutching the notebook to his chest, bending over, Haruyuki cried.

The tears poured out of his eyes and slid over his cheeks, falling to the floor. In the pain hollowing out his chest, Haruyuki finally and for the first time understood what his own true feelings were.

The surgery took nearly five hours.

During the time the clock display in the corner of his vision moved from

evening to the middle of the night, Haruyuki sent a single text message to his mother, saying that a friend had been in an accident, so he was going to be late that night or he might not come home at all. Then he simply continued to sit resolutely in his chair.

Apparently, the hospital had gotten in touch with Kuroyukihime's family through the school, but surprisingly, rather than anyone from her family, a man calling himself the family lawyer appeared on his own.

The middle-aged lawyer, equipped with a large Neurolinker and looking like a machine himself, simply took care of the paperwork in a businesslike fashion and departed a mere fifteen minutes later without even glancing at Haruyuki.

A long, long time passed, and it was approaching ten when the red lamp finally went off.

A young doctor emerged looking exhausted and seemed slightly confused at finding Haruyuki alone in the hallway but still sat down and carefully explained Kuroyukihime's condition.

Explained that they had succeeded in stopping the bleeding, but as there was extensive damage to her organs, she could drop into a state of shock at any time. That the synthetic protein nanomachines were doing everything they could to repair and assimilate the tissues, but in the end, it depended on the strength of the patient herself.

"All said and done, I have to tell you she's currently in serious condition. The next twelve hours are going to be the worst of it. Please keep that in mind." Finishing with a severe expression, the doctor headed off down the white hallway with the rest of the operating team.

The only person left was the female nurse from before.

Glancing at the student agenda Haruyuki still clutched, the nurse spoke to him in a kind voice. "You, too. You should go home and get some rest. Someone from her family is supposed to come tomorrow."

"Tomorrow…that's too late," Haruyuki answered stubbornly. He had no desire to move even a step from this spot. "The doctor said the next twelve hours are going to be the worst. And no one here with her even though she's in there

fighting…It’s too awful.”

“…Right. I guess you’re right. Did you call home and let your family know where you are?”

“Yes. And anyway, my mom won’t get home until one or so.”

“All right. Well, I’ll bring you a blanket, then. Just hold on a minute.” She marched to the nurses’ station at the end of the hallway and returned quickly, handing Haruyuki a thin blanket and nodding firmly. “It’ll be fine. I’m sure she’ll pull through. She’s so pretty. And she has such a wonderful boyfriend. The two of you still have a lot of fun ahead, I’m sure.”

We do. Much more than you think; everything’s still ahead of us. We’re going to defeat Cyan Pile, destroy the kings’ Legions one by one, and get to where she’s been working so hard to go. I’ll be with her every step of the way.

Thoughts like these flitting through his mind, Haruyuki said, “Th-thank you. Um…when can I see her?”

“Not right now. The nanomachine operation room has an air seal. But you can see video of her at least, via the hospital net. Just right now, special for you.”

The nurse smiled and made a finger dance in the air. At the same time she flicked at something, an access gate was displayed in Haruyuki’s vision.

He was a bit surprised to be getting a wireless transmission from the nurse’s Neurolinker, since he was disconnected from the global net, but he quickly realized that it must have come over the hospital’s local net.

He clicked for access, and a video window opened. The image was dim and hazy, but when he strained his eyes, he saw a strangely shaped bed in the center.

It was like a capsule with only the top half open. The inside was filled with a semitransparent fluid, and he could make out the white body immersed in it to somewhere just below the shoulders. The tubes connected to both arms and her mouth were painful to look at. Her closed eyelids didn’t even twitch.

“Kuroyukihime…” Haruyuki unconsciously murmured her name, calling out to her.

Right now inside that slender body, countless nanites were allying with her own will to live to battle her severe injuries. And in this battle alone, Haruyuki could offer no assistance. All he could do was pray.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure she’ll make it,” the nurse repeated, patting Haruyuki’s head before getting up. “We’re monitoring her condition very closely. I’ll come let you know if anything changes. You just try and get a little rest.”

“Okay. Uh, um, thank you.” Haruyuki thanked the nurse standing before him and bowed his head.

That was when he unexpectedly remembered something strange in the window displayed in the right of his field of view. His instincts, honed through his enormous experience with virtual games, whispered to him about things he should notice, things he should consider.

What? What did I see just now?

Kuroyukihime’s naked body, exposed to the shoulders. But there was something on her. He couldn’t really make it out, given that she was immersed in semitransparent fluid, but finally he saw it, a black thing around the back of her neck. Her Neurolinker. A single thin cable stretched out from the bed in line with the oxygen tube and connected it to a large machine beside her.

“O-oh, um, excuse me.”

Stopped by his hurried call, the nurse turned, head tilted to the side. “Yes? ”

“No, it’s just…You left her Neurolinker on?”

“We did. It’s monitoring her brain waves.”

“Then, um, the machine the cable’s connected to, it’s not a stand-alone…”

“Oh no, it’s connected to the hospital net.”

What?!

Haruyuki swallowed hard, and watching him with a doubtful look, the nurse smiled reassuringly. “What’s wrong? Are you worried about security? It’s fine. The treatment level of the hospital net is behind a very thorough wall. There isn’t a hacker out there who could hurt her.”

Waving a hand in farewell, the nurse disappeared into the nurses' station, and Haruyuki replied in his head, almost groaning, *That's probably true normally. But this isn't normal.* It *can sneak into the social camera net and steal images in real time with zero trouble, and that net's supposed to have the nation's strongest walls.*

Brain Burst.

Alone in the hallway, Haruyuki set himself down on the bench with a *thud*, holding the blanket in his left hand.

Kuroyukihime's Neurolinker was completely disconnected from the global net. But it was connected to the hospital net via direct so she could be treated. Which meant…

Haruyuki murmured in a trembling voice, "Burst link."

Immediately, the world froze, accompanied by the usual thunder.

Haruyuki, in his pig avatar, staggered to his feet and, with a feeling akin to prayer, clicked on the flaring *B* mark among the icons lined up on the left side of his virtual desktop, launching the Brain Burst console. He opened the matching list.

After a moment of searching, the name Silver Crow was displayed at the top of the list.

And then, barely a beat later, "Black Lotus."

"N-no way," Haruyuki moaned.

If he clicked around in his Neurolinker and disconnected from the hospital net, he could make himself disappear from the matching list. But Kuroyukihime, currently having her brain waves monitored, could not.

Obviously she wasn't connected to the global net, so there wouldn't be endless trespassing from outside. But if there was a Burst Linker in this hospital, and if that person launched Brain Burst, and if they found Black Lotus and challenged her to a fight…

Unconscious, Kuroyukihime would simply be hunted.

No, that was too perfect. There was no way another Burst Linker would be in

the same hospital at the same time. And this late at night, there really shouldn't have been anyone coming or going. If any Burst Linkers other than Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime connected to the hospital net, their names would have to show up on the list.

So there was no need to panic.

Haruyuki tried to calm himself. But the sensation of sweat soaking the round hands of his avatar didn't go anywhere.

That's not it. Not yet. I'm missing something.

What if…what if there's some Burst Linker in a position to find out that Black Lotus—the biggest bounty in the accelerated world—was seriously injured and in the hospital, and even which hospital she was in?

He tried to force his thoughts to conclude, *There's no way someone like that exists*, but his eyes widened with a fearful shudder.

There is, though. Just one person, one enemy like that. Cyan Pile.

The mysterious enemy who had gone so far as to infect Chiyuri's Neurolinker with a virus, whose real identity they hadn't been able to figure out. At this stage, all he could say was that it was someone at Umesato.

And the school had already been informed of Kuroyukihime's accident. Adding in the fact that the cause of the accident was Araya driving without a license and assaulting her with a car immediately after making bail, it was sure to be big news already. Right about now, it was no doubt spreading like wildfire through the students at Umesato.

The hospital itself probably hadn't been identified yet. If one of the girls who worshipped her in the lower grades or a member of her fan club had found out the name of the hospital, there would already have been hundreds of them pushing through the doors.

But…the teachers would know already. In which case, it was only a matter of time before it got out to the students. Tons of visitors would show up, and if Cyan Pile happened to be among them, he or she would be nearly impossible to pick out.

So…that's that, then.

He slumped crestfallen and sat down next to his frozen, blue real-life self.

Kuroyukihime was fighting for her life. No matter how you looked at it, it was a fact that this was not the time for a Duel.

Fortunately, the same opponent could only challenge you to one Duel per day. Until Kuroyukihime's condition improved, she'd just have to get beaten by Cyan Pile a couple times and lose some points.

No! I'm an idiot!! What did Kuroyukihime say before the accident?! Haruyuki clenched both fists and stood up abruptly.

The final command she had used to save Haruyuki: physical full dive.

That the price for this transcendental effect of accelerating not just your consciousness but your physical body as well was losing 99 percent of your burst points.

Kuroyukihime's points were currently on the verge of being wiped out. So depleted, in fact, that if she were to lose even once to the much-lower-ranking Cyan Pile, her points would no doubt drop to zero quickly enough. And in that instant, her Brain Burst would forcefully uninstall.

For her, that would be…For Kuroyukihime, who had been fighting all this time to reach level ten, it would basically be the same as dying. That couldn't happen; that absolutely could not happen. He couldn't let Cyan Pile go up against Kuroyukihime even once.

Kuroyukihime risked her life to save me.

So now I have to save her. That half of her.

I will monitor the hospital entrance. I will not sleep a wink. I will be ready to spend every one of my points and accelerate each time a student from Umesato shows up. I will find and challenge Cyan Pile. And then I will defeat him or her. I will beat Cyan Pile over and over until my enemy's points are nearly exhausted and I will banish Cyan Pile from the accelerated world.

"I'll protect you. I'll do whatever it takes to protect you." Haruyuki spoke out loud, the sole inhabitant of the blue world around him. "Because…I—I have

something I have to tell you. When I see you again. So I'll fight," he declared firmly, turning his eyes toward Kuroyukihime, supposedly lying down on the other side of the blue wall.

Returning to reality with the "burst out" command, Haruyuki wrapped his arms around his knees, faced sideways on the bench, wrapped the blanket around his body, and fixed his gaze on the entrance to the left down the hall.

There were other ways into the hospital, but to connect to the hospital net, you had to authenticate your Neurolinker at the entrance. So Cyan Pile would have to come in there.

The time was ten thirty.

It wasn't very likely that Cyan Pile would show up at this time of night when visiting hours were long over, but his enemy was also cornered. If Cyan Pile was going to target Kuroyukihime while she was known to be unconscious, it was possible he or she would come and attack after finding out the name of the hospital.

Haruyuki set the alarm in his Neurolinker to the loudest volume. This way, if he got sleepy, a bell so noisy it would practically ring the life out of him would force him back awake.

Time had never in his life moved as slowly as it did that night. However, he didn't feel bored, much less sleepy. For the most part, he continued to face the dim entrance with eyes wide open, once in a while glancing over at the minimized ER video window.

Kuroyukihime's white body in the capsule bed didn't move in the slightest, but Haruyuki felt keenly that a desperate battle was currently playing out there.

Fight. Fight, he pleaded each time he looked at the video. They were connected through their Neurolinkers and the hospital net, and through the Brain Burst program. So these pleas of encouragement had to be getting to her. Haruyuki believed this firmly; there was no room for doubt.

Around two in the morning, the worried-looking nurse came to check on him, a paper cup of coffee in one hand. He refused the milk and sugar, and his first-ever cup of black coffee tasted so bitter, it nearly pierced his tongue.

At five in the morning, the first light of dawn pushed faintly through the entrance. After hesitating briefly, Haruyuki dashed to the washroom and, taking care of business faster than he ever had in his life, rushed back out to curl up on the bench again.

Six AM. The number of employees coming and going in twos and threes started to increase, and Haruyuki pushed his vigilance up a level.

Seven AM. The night staff, having finished their work, started trickling out, the nurse along with them. She handed Haruyuki a second cup of coffee and a sandwich and spoke to him encouragingly before she, too, departed.

Eight thirty AM.

The automatic doors of the hospital's main entrance were opened, taking over from the night reception. As if waiting for that moment, several people, mostly older patients, came in. Haruyuki, feeling even more alert, opened both eyes wide and stared intently at the flow of people.

Given that it had only been six months since he'd started at the school, there was no way he could actually remember the face of every student at Umesato Junior High, no matter how small the school might be, with just three classes for each grade. When he saw the face of a young person he wasn't sure about, he had to instantly accelerate and check the matching list.

He had strained his powers of concentration very close to their limit, but the digital clock display in the corner of his vision changed numbers slowly, so slowly it was as if the display were laughing at him.

Thirty-five minutes. Forty minutes.

Kuroyukihime probably still wasn't out of the woods yet. Of the twelve hours the doctor had cited, more than ten had already passed.

Hurry and wake up. And then cut off the brain monitoring, Haruyuki prayed with all his heart.

One more time. Once more. He wanted to meet her in the accelerated world, just the two of them.

And this time he would tell her how he felt. He would hold nothing back.

Eight forty-five.

Haruyuki finally saw the first familiar face appear in his alert eyes. He caught his breath for an instant, and then expelled it in a long sigh.

It wasn't just familiar. It was one of the two faces he knew best in this world. The tall, slender form was packaged in a grown-up velour jacket and chino pants. The airy hair shone brown, catching the morning light.

You came…

Haruyuki relaxed his shoulders, and his face split into a smile. "Heeey, Taku! Over here!"

The moment Haruyuki's salutation, a little too loud for inside a hospital, reached the entrance from the hallway, Takumu—Takumu Mayuzumi—froze in midstep. He didn't seem to have spotted Haruyuki. Scanning left to right, he finally turned straight toward the hallway farthest from the entrance, leading to the emergency room.

Haruyuki got up from the bench and waved again. Meeting his eyes, Takumu tilted his head slightly and blinked rapidly several times before his usual relaxed and bright smile spread out across his face. After tossing his navy-blue-jacketed right arm up in a wave, he poked at his blue Neurolinker with a fingertip.

Haruyuki quickly understood that he had to wait until he was authenticated on the hospital net and smiled slightly wryly at Takumu's usual methodical style.

Regardless of whether you were at the hospital for a checkup or to visit someone, to go past the entrance, the common rule at all hospitals across the country was to either sign in to the hospital net with your Neurolinker or to show your ID at the reception desk to get a visitor's pass.

However, it didn't really matter if you stood and waited in the entrance for the mere thirty seconds it took for the strict authentication or moved while it was authenticating to save time. When Haruyuki had come last night, he'd run straight to the ER without stopping for even a second, so the authentication had finished after Kuroyukihime had disappeared onto the other side of those doors.

However, Takumu was apparently not interested in committing even this

trivial violation of the rules. He turned his eyes toward Haruyuki, and with an irritated look on his face, he stood in the middle of the entrance hall and waited for the sign-in to be complete. Then, suddenly, as if noticing something, Takumu turned to the side. His eyes ran off in the direction of the automatic doors, and he brought his left hand to his mouth, the way you do when you call out to someone in a loud voice.

Haruyuki wondered if maybe Chiyuri had come and tried to see beyond the front entrance himself.

The moment his eyes left Takumu, it hit him: a faint sense of wrongness.

Would the irreproachable (unlike Haruyuki) Takumu shout in a hospital?

Cupping his mouth like a megaphone. Almost as if he were trying to hide from Haruyuki the words being uttered.

In an instant, his feeling of wrongness turned to shivers, and an arrow of ice pierced Haruyuki's spinal cord. Opening his eyes, standing stiff as a board, several thoughts flashed simultaneously through his brain.

I—Why did I assume Cyan Pile had to be someone at Umesato?

Obviously because Chiyuri's Neurolinker was infected with that virus. Because someone was using Chiyuri as a stepping-stone to attack Kuroyukihime from somewhere in the school net like a ghost.

But. If that back door was made for access from the global net? In that case, the suspect didn't have to be at Umesato Junior High; he or she could be anywhere in the country.

As his brain worked in overdrive, his thoughts were overlaid with a new filter to narrow things down.

Why Chiyuri? Because she was easy to contact.

Someone outside school, closer to Chiyuri than anyone else. Someone with her, so close they could direct. Only one person met these conditions. And he was standing a mere twenty meters away from Haruyuki at this very moment.

The instant his thoughts reached this point, Haruyuki's mouth moved automatically and the command surged out.

“Burst link!!”

The boy who was Chiyuri’s childhood friend and boyfriend. Takumu.

Boooom!

The cold, dry thunder froze the world. The Takumu before his eyes was frozen in blue, left hand still raised to his mouth.

But he wasn’t frozen, in fact. Takumu had shouted the command into that hand at the same time. And his consciousness was accelerated in a different frozen space from Haruyuki’s.

You. It was you. I can’t believe it. No way. Why? Why?

Confused screams echoing in the back of Haruyuki’s mind, the right arm of his avatar began flashing over his virtual desktop as fast as possible.

Right now, Takumu would be doing the exact same thing. Launching the Brain Burst console, waiting for the matching list to update. And then clicking on the name Black Lotus when it drops down in the results and requesting a Duel.

Haruyuki had to get Cyan Pile into a Duel before that.

He clenched his teeth, opened his eyes wide, and stared at the matching list search display.

Pop! His own name at the top of the list. Silver Crow.

Then the person he loved, the person he had to protect. Black Lotus.

And finally, the name of the enemy he had to defeat appeared before Haruyuki’s eyes for the first time. Cyan Pile.

Be in time!!

Screaming with every fiber of his being, Haruyuki clicked on the name impossibly quickly and hit the “duel” command in the window that popped up.

8

Skree! Skree! Skree! Skree!

The world shook unnaturally for a moment, innumerable masses of metals grating against one another.

The fresh morning light that had been shining in from the entrance became an unsettling yellow. Rusty, metallic, slimy gills grew up like some monstrous creature from Haruyuki's feet to cover the floor and walls around him. The pillars twisted and became ridged like the stomach of an insect, while several protrusions resembling strange eyeballs popped out from the ceiling. In seconds, the interior of the cutting-edge hospital, which had been so clean, was enveloped in an organic, metallic pollution, the nightmare of an old Cyberpunk author.

As Haruyuki held his breath, standing stock-still, shining silver armor reached down from the tips of his limbs to encase his body, which stretched out and narrowed like wire. Hips to stomach, and then up to his chest, he was transformed into smooth silver, and then finally, his head was sealed in a rounded helmet.

Almost simultaneous with the change from pink pig to Silver Crow duel avatar, two health gauges snapped out to the sides in the top of his vision. Between the gauges, the number 1800. Finally, in the center, flames rose up, and the word FIGHT! appeared within the flames, flaring bright red before bursting and scattering.

Glancing at the counter as it started its countdown, Haruyuki breathed a sigh of relief; he had made it. He looked over to where Takumu had been at the end of the slimy hall. Incredibly, standing in the same place, facing the side, was the unexpected form of Takumu's duel avatar.

That's…Takumu?! That's Cyan Pile?!

Unconsciously, Haruyuki pulled his right leg back a half step in shock.

He was enormous. No, he wasn't as tall as that. The avatar was just another five centimeters taller than Takumu, who was already 175 centimeters in seventh grade. But from Silver Crow's perspective at barely 155 centimeters, it was enough for him to have to look up.

However, the most overwhelming thing was the sheer immense girth of Cyan Pile's body. Which wasn't to say he was fat. Four limbs and a trunk with muscles bulging like a pro wrestler's, wrapped in close-fitting, metallic blue, bodysuit-type armor. On his feet, rugged dark blue boots. On his left hand, an enormous glove in the same color. He looked like the macho hero from some American comic, a full one hundred eighty degrees from slim, lithe Takumu.

Awestruck, Haruyuki was rooted in place.

Cyan Pile slowly turned to the left and stared down at Haruyuki. His head was covered by a stylish teardrop mask. Several thin slit-shaped gaps opened up horizontally on his face, with a single brace piercing them vertically in the center. Depending on how you looked at it, it was almost reminiscent of a kendo mask.

Behind one of the slits, two bluish-white eyes sparkled in a sharp shape with a sudden snap. The left foot came up slowly and fell to the floor heavily. The slime that had built up there whizzed to both sides.

As Haruyuki pulled his left leg back to take another step, his eyes were drawn to Cyan Pile's bare right arm. What was that?!

Not a glove like on his left hand. A thick pipe connected at his elbow. The pipe was probably fifteen centimeters around and a meter long. The tip of the metal pole apparently equipped inside protruded from the opening and emitted a dangerous, dazzling radiance.

From the color of the armor covering his entire body, Cyan Pile's attribute was close-range blue. But it was infinitesimally close to the pure blue Kuroyukihime had told him about. In which case, that sharp pole shouldn't have been a flying weapon.

Even as he had this thought, Haruyuki felt compelled to take another step back.

As if to torment the slender, motionless Silver Crow, Cyan Pile took one slow step, then another, down the organic metal hallway. Then he stopped abruptly.

The mask with its lines of slits turned to survey the environment. Coming out of the mask was…It was twisted gloomily, but it was still definitely the clear voice of his good friend Takumu he had heard so much over so many years.

“Huh. So we got a Purgatory stage. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen one of these. What were the attributes again?”

As the carefree voice spoke, Haruyuki unconsciously opened his mouth. “T-Taku…”

Skkkkrrrk!

Suddenly, the iron rod, driven by Cyan Pile’s right arm, bit into the metal wall of the hallway, tearing it open horribly. Slime and pieces of steel were sent flying and tiny, crushed, peculiar insects he didn’t know the names for dropped to the floor.

Haruyuki swallowed his words and flinched, cowering.

Glancing at him, Cyan Pile continued in an even more cheerful voice, “It’s definitely solid. Might be a little hard to destroy this stage.”

Thud. He started walking again, and the large blue frame drew near, as if bending over. “Haru…Haru. You always were fast on the virtual desktop. I was literally about to push the duel button, but right before I could, you sucked me in.”

“Ta…kumu…”



Is it really you? Why? Since when?

Since when are you a Burst Linker?

Before Haruyuki could voice the questions swirling around in his heart, Cyan Pile made a further utterance. “Honestly, you being a Burst Linker…I have to say I’m surprised. You have no idea how hard it was to keep my calm yesterday. I mean, betrayed by my best friend like that, huh, Haru?”

“T-Takumu…It’s not like that. It’s…” The words Haruyuki blurted hoarsely were drowned out by the iron rod slamming into the wall again.

“How’d it feel, Haru? Directing on Chi’s bed? How’d it feel to be held by her? Did you enjoy Chi’s body, touching her while you thought about me?”

You’re not Takumu! Haruyuki screamed voicelessly. *This isn’t the Taku I know. Taku would never say things like that. He’s always cheerful and bright and absolutely never negative. That’s the real Takumu. Cyan Pile is someone else. He probably built a back door in Takumu’s Neurolinker, too, and is connecting from someplace far off.*

Haruyuki tried desperately to make himself believe this.

But there was the aura he had felt then.

Haruyuki was keenly conscious of the fact that the exact same aura he had felt when he was directing with Chiyuri and discovered the virus in her Neurolinker—that shadow of someone hiding back there, eyes and ears wide open—was radiating off the blue duel avatar in front of him.

And maybe it was the same shadow he had felt since way back when, since the three of them were kids, when Takumu would sometimes turn glancingly at Haruyuki and Chiyuri when they were fooling around.

“Taku…is this you?” The words Haruyuki uttered from under his silver mask echoed so sharply and clearly that they surprised even himself. “You infected Chiyu’s Neurolinker with that virus? You hid from Chiyu and connected to her, making her senses your own private peep show?!”

“I’d rather you didn’t call it a virus.”

The enormous avatar, stopping a mere five meters away, opened up its left

hand nimbly, a smart gesture that alone was like Takumu. “Chi’s my girlfriend. So of course I direct with her. And directing means offering up your Neurolinker to your partner. It means circumventing password authentication, laying bare the depths of your local memory, and accepting whatever happens, whether it’s some file getting looked at or some program getting installed. Am I wrong? Haru, I mean, you…” Inside the slits cutting across Cyan Pile’s mask, Haruyuki could feel a sneer sliding across the face he couldn’t see. “You directed with Chi and dug through her memory without her knowing, right? And you’re not even her boyfriend or anything. Aren’t you the one who took advantage of Chi’s kindness to do something dirty?”

“Th-that—”

“You’ve always been like that, Haru.” As Cyan Pile spoke in a calm voice, a large, strangely shaped metal insect scuttled by on the wall to his right. He casually raised the enormous needle in his right hand and lightly pierced the insect’s back. Pinned to the wall and squealing, the insect moved its countless legs frantically, trying to get away. “Ever since forever, with Chi, you’ve been all, *Poor me. Pathetic me. Be nice to sad little me. Hang out with me more.* That’s all you’ve ever said to her. Not in words, but with your attitude, the look in your eyes—with your entire existence, actually.”

The rod sank deeper into the insect’s carapace, making a wet sound. Green liquid splashed out, and the virtual insect began to writhe even more frantically.

“Girls, they don’t get it. Chi always looks like she had so much more fun dragging you along by the hand, complaining the whole time, than she does when I’m the one holding her hand. Ever since we were kids, she looks so happy watching out for you, taking care of you. Did you know? Wherever she goes, Chi always brings a big handkerchief. For sweaty you.”

Clang!!

With a terrifying noise, the insect was pulverized, and the dark green shell and limbs shot out with the slime from the wall.

Half bewildered, Haruyuki asked Cyan Pile, insect fluids still dripping from the needle, “So that’s why…? That’s why you told Chiyu you liked her two years ago? Like that…like you were in a hurry?”

“Not *like* I was in a hurry. I *was* hurrying. I was sure if things kept up like that, Chi’d try to spend the rest of her life watching out for you. Like those ancient manga you keep an archive of. She’d end up all, *You can’t live without me, so I’ll marry you*. Ooh, or maybe your strategy was to lead Chi there? Ha-ha-ha!” Cyan Pile laughed brightly, but with a distorted echo that made a shiver run down Haruyuki’s spine.

No. No.

Takumu, you’re wrong. Chiyuri definitely did not have fun looking after sad-sack me. She’s been seriously worried. She doesn’t know what to do about me.

But Haruyuki didn’t know how to say these things so that they would reach Takumu. Because on a superficial level, there was a certain truth in what Takumu was saying.

Turning to Haruyuki still standing there, Cyan Pile took another step. “I was pretty happy two years ago when Chi picked me. I thought she finally understood that she was better off being happy with me than working so hard to look out for you. I suppose…it was a practical decision?”

“Practical?”

“ ‘We can’t be little kids forever,’ right?”

The words Haruyuki had said to Chiyuri the day before.

Cyan Pile raised the tip of the metal needle, dyed green, up into the air as if seeking agreement. “I mean, Chi’s a girl—well, a woman. She’ll realize someday that she’ll be way happier with a boyfriend she can brag to her friends about, a nice marriage, a satisfying life. So I tried my best. I studied so much it nearly killed me and got into the school I’m at now. I run every day to train my body while you play your dumb video games and sleep like a little baby, Haru.”

“A-are you serious?” Haruyuki shouted almost mechanically, unable to collect his thoughts. “Do you really think Chiyu chose you because of some calculating self-interest?!”

“I don’t like that phrase, *calculating self-interest*. It’s just a fair way of looking at things.” Cyan Pile laughed again. “Chi has the right to be happy. The right to date me—best student in my grade, kendo champion—and be happy.”

Haruyuki inhaled sharply.

This isn't Takumu.

He couldn't believe that this was Takumu's true self. He didn't want to believe it. Something had warped Takumu.

Part of it was probably Haruyuki and Chiyuri's relationship. Chiyuri continued to care about Haruyuki while dating Takumu. He probably felt driven to the wall by that in a way. But more than that, what had changed Takumu was probably…

"This isn't you, Taku." Haruyuki raised his silver mask and stared directly into Cyan Pile's sharp eyes. "Being the best in your grade, the championship, that's not you. It's Brain Burst; it's the acceleration. When? When did you become a Burst Linker?"

For a moment, the Purgatory stage was shrouded in silence.

A group of small insects skittered past his feet, and occasionally vapor like a living creature spewed from the gills in the walls. Two hundred seconds had already passed on the counter, which had started at 1800. As the hundreds position on the counter clicked down to five, Cyan Pile spoke.

"It is me." The needle on his right hand pointed at Haruyuki. "Acceleration is me. I was the one with brain-training software crammed down my throat through my Neurolinker from the time I was just a baby until I was totally sick of it. I cultivated the aptitude! And it's only been a year since I became a Burst Linker. My kendo team captain is my parent, a close associate of the Blue King. He's got high hopes for me. I'm a cadet in the royal guard. And yet—"

Ka-chaaaank!!

His right hand, gesturing broadly, ripped several enormous scars in the wall. "Now!! Now you're a Burst Linker?! And you think you're my equal, Haru?! The ability to accelerate's given you confidence, so you're trying to take Chi back?! Is that it?! It's no good, Haru. You can't beat me. In grades, in sports, in Chi's heart. And, naturally, not in the accelerated world. I'll help you understand. My power…I'll teach that pathetic duel avatar of yours." A brilliant light burst forth from Cyan Pile's eyes.

He's serious. Takumu is seriously planning to fight me.

Haruyuki still felt like he could make Takumu understand if he just found the right words. He wanted to explain Chiyuri's—and his own—true feelings. He didn't want to fight like this.

But if Haruyuki lost here…

Cyan Pile would try to fight Black Lotus again. And then he would hunt her while she was unconscious. In an instant, Kuroyukihime would lose all her points and, with them, the power of acceleration.

Just that. No matter what else happened, he had to prevent at least that.

"Taku. You really are amazing. You're good at school and sports; you're cool, too. You have everything I don't," Haruyuki murmured in a stifled voice, looking down. Then he jerked his face up at Cyan Pile and shouted sharply, "But you're an idiot. A super idiot!"

"What was that? I'm an idiot?"

"Yeah. Which is why you can't beat me! Did you forget? Have you ever in your life beaten me at any game?"

"…Haru. Haru." A voice mixed with laughter and echoes of violence. "In that case, you're about to lose the very last thing you can be proud of!!"

Cyan Pile's boots kicked hard against the floor, and the enormous body, nearly two meters tall, began to close the distance between them at an incredible speed belying his form.

But he was still slower than the charge of Ash Roller's bike.

Slip by him. Then move to a bigger area. The entrance hall—no, the roof.

Haruyuki focused on Cyan Pile's right hand. His opponent was a close-range fighter; as long as he didn't come within striking distance of that needle, he wouldn't take any damage.

After watching Cyan Pile move, right arm drawn back as far as it would go, Haruyuki dashed forward, intending to slip through on the opposite side.

Silver Crow's speed, essentially his only redeeming feature, appeared to take his opponent off guard. Seeming faintly surprised, Cyan Pile thrust his right arm forward, carving out an arc.

You can dodge this!

Predicting the trajectory of the attack, Haruyuki dropped down and tried to break through alongside Cyan Pile's left arm.

Krsshk!

An unexpected sound rang through the air.

Eyes open wide, Haruyuki saw in his periphery flames shooting from the end of the fat pipe that was Cyan Pile's right arm. The dazzling, thick iron rod shot out so fast he could hardly see it.

It may not have been a flying weapon, but it did stretch out to nearly double its length, and the range was more than sufficient to grab hold of Silver Crow. Haruyuki heard an unpleasant shrieking pass through his own body concurrent with the impact. And then a sharp, numbing pain.

The tip of the rod had pierced his left elbow, and Haruyuki watched as his arm separated in that spot. He remembered belatedly that *pile* could also mean *stake*.

The arm, carving out a trail of sparks as it fell to the floor, immediately smashed into a thousand tiny pieces and disappeared. The health gauge in the upper left of his vision dropped abruptly, nearly a third with just the one blow.

But Haruyuki didn't have the time to feel sorry about taking such serious damage right at the start of the fight. Even as he crumpled and his back scraped along the hallway wall, trying to regain his balance, he saw the evil iron rod in Cyan Pile's right arm, still extended—or rather, he saw it being pulled in again.

It was clear that the instant the stake was reloaded, he would again have to face that terrifying attack.

The attack attribute was probably "piercing" and Silver Crow's metal color should have meant he was resistant to it. So his arm being torn off in one blow meant it hit him in exactly the wrong place. This was the difference three levels could make, or simply, Cyan Pile was really strong.

Considering this momentarily, Haruyuki picked himself up again and jumped hard, gaining some distance. Without looking back, he dashed for the entrance

hall as fast as he could.

“Ha-ha-ha! What? Running away so soon, Haru?”

The sneering laughter echoed up from behind him almost as if urging him on, and Haruyuki ran his eyes quickly over his surroundings.

The long benches in the waiting area had been transformed into cast iron, spikes sprouting up everywhere like some torture device from the Middle Ages, and the reception counter to his right was entwined with rusted barbed wire. Naturally, there weren’t any people. And on the other side of the counter was the thing he was looking for: the elevator doors.

In the Century End stage, the elevators were naturally not likely to have been functioning because entry into the buildings themselves was not permitted, but in this Purgatory stage, with the interior reconstructed in such detail, they just might be working.

Running over, Haruyuki smashed the skull-shaped button beside the door—now mesh like a cage—with a prayer in his heart. Sure enough, the mesh opened to the left and right, accompanied by a grinding, metallic noise. He clenched his right hand in victory.

From behind him, the sound of Cyan Pile’s thudding footsteps grew closer moment by moment.

He leapt into the solitary-confinement cell of an elevator, and his right hand repeatedly punched the button with an *R* carved into it. *Hurry. Hurry up and move.*

The instant the lattice closed at a speed so sluggish it seemed designed to irritate, something slammed into the door. Poking its face through a gap of about five centimeters in the mesh was the iron rod’s shining, dazzlingly sharp tip.

Haruyuki stifled the urge to shriek and jumped away, pressing his back against the wall.

Skreeeee!

The iron stake shot forward, bending the lattice slightly, before finally

stopping mere millimeters from Silver Crow's thin abdomen. As its malignant radiance retracted, the elevator finally trembled and rattled, beginning its ascent.

"Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Haruyuki stomped his right leg against the floor, banishing the sticky, sneering laughter chasing up from below him.

Tumbling out onto the roof, Haruyuki scanned his surroundings, breathing heavily. Involuntarily, his eyes grew wider.

The sky in the Purgatory stage was filled with an unsettling yellow light, and dark clouds wound through the sky like living creatures. The buildings around him, the heart of Suginami ward, had been changed into bizarre forms bearing a distant resemblance to something living and shone slimily with a reddish-black rusty color. He supposed the lancelike spires he could see in the distance were the Shinjuku Government Building and the surrounding skyscrapers.

Just as he started to wonder exactly how far the stage reached, Haruyuki noticed something with a start and gasped.

There was someone there.

Well, if by *someone*, he meant a strikingly eccentric silhouette. From the roofs of buildings around him that were taller than the hospital, groups of twos and threes were looking down on Haruyuki. Unknown Burst Linkers. Spectators.

Momentarily bewildered, Haruyuki finally hit on it.

He might have been cut off from the global net, but the other fighter, Takumu, probably connected globally right before the match started. Why he would have done that and taken the risk of someone else calling him out was unclear, but in any case, because he had, this stage was open to the outside, and the Burst Linkers registered for the automatic Gallery for Cyan Pile and Silver Crow had appeared. Although it made no real difference to his situation if there was a Gallery or not.

The light blue, arrow-shaped cursor displayed in his field of view slowly started to change direction, vibrating slightly. Cyan Pile had also gotten in an elevator and was headed for the roof.

After moving about ten meters across the expansive roof, Haruyuki turned and faced the elevator. Up here, he had plenty of space for evasive moves, unlike in the hallway.

And he now understood from firsthand experience the reach of Cyan Pile's metal stake. As long as he paid attention to the position of Cyan Pile's right arm, Haruyuki should be able to avoid it. *Don't be afraid. You have no choice but to do this.* As he told himself this, the elevator lurched to a stop in front of him and the doors slowly pulled open.

Cyan Pile's enormous body was stuffed into the elevator, taking up every bit of space. Scraping along the walls, he stepped out onto the roof, and the eyes in the depths of the slits lit up faintly. "Oh, I get it. Up here, you can dart in and hit and then dart back out again, huh, Haru—I mean, Silver Crow."

"It's just that down there, you looked cramped, like you were having a hard time."

"A-ha-ha! I can't believe you're saying something like that to me." Still chuckling, Cyan Pile started to advance mechanically.

Haruyuki crouched and measured the distance between them. *He shouldn't fully understand how fast Silver Crow is yet. That's my only chance of winning. Before he gets used to my speed, I have to do something and win.*

A heavy-looking boot took its fourth step, and just as it was on the verge of making contact with the ground, Haruyuki kicked off as hard as he could.

The sky rang out shrilly, and the enormous blue body approached instantaneously. Haruyuki plunged forward in a straight line, and Cyan Pile's right arm followed, targeting him.

Right here!!

He abruptly took off on his left leg and started running to the right. With an enormous roar, the metal spike shot out at an extremely high speed. Reacting after seeing the spike launched was basically impossible, but if he could anticipate where it would go and make the right call, he could pull this off.

Haruyuki traced an arc over the surface of Cyan Pile's left arm and darted in, the tip of the metal spike stopping just in front of his left cheek. Feeling a

scorching heat there, Haruyuki kicked his right leg at the floor with all his strength.

"Nngaaah!" He beat into the defenseless flank with his right fist. *Thunk.* Serious resistance. The big frame shuddered.

I can still do this!

As if chasing Cyan Pile's back as he tried to turn his body around, Haruyuki dashed forward another step and landed a right roundhouse kick on his enemy's left calf. As Cyan Pile lost his balance with a jolt, Haruyuki brought a final blow, a left knee strike toward the center of that enormous back.

Wham! Serious impact. The hulking body bent over into a sideways *V*.

Cyan Pile, staggering to put distance between them, roared hatefully, "Rrrgh! I—I guess you really are good at games, Haru. But little tricks like that are useless!!"

Haruyuki just barely managed to dodge the left fist thrown at him, used the inertia to spin his body around, and buried his right heel in the nape of the neck presenting itself defenselessly.

"Nnngaaaaah!"

Haruyuki closed his ears to the broken shrieking in Takumu's voice and continued his rush. Using not just both legs and his right fist, but even his severed left arm, he delivered combo after combo without a break. At some point, half-screamed shouts began to tumble from his mouth. "You…idiot! You stupid idiot! Chiyu! Chiyu isn't asking you to be number one in your grade or the kendo champion or anything!"

In desperation, he used a leg kicked out in front as a step ladder to jump up high, grab Cyan Pile's mask, and smash his own silver-armored helmet into it with everything he had. Part of the blue mask cracked loudly and caved in.

Cyan Pile lost his balance, falling back onto the floor, and Haruyuki jumped on his chest to continue battering him with his right fist. "Chiyu just wants you to be you! You're the one making her look back at the past, making her want to go back to when we were kids, Takumu! The only one of us who's changed is you!" Mind blank, he simply screamed.

However, at the sound of Haruyuki's voice, Cyan Pile's eyes shone from beneath the cracked slits with a light strong and cold enough to send shivers down spines. "D…on't…" He crossed his thick arms abruptly as if to protect himself. "Don't get so carried awaaaaaaaay!!" He flung his arms out wide to reveal the sharp tips of at least ten stakes that rose up with a grinding noise from the chest to the stomach of his body suit.

What the—?! This is bad. Gotta dodge—

But the instant Haruyuki tried to kick down on the ground with both legs and send himself flying backward: "Splash Stingerrrrrrr!"

Thk thk thk thk thk thk!! Sounding like a heavy machine gun, the multitudinous stakes shot toward Haruyuki at point-blank range.

"Gaaaah!!"

Haruyuki somehow managed to avoid the stakes flying straight for his head and chest. But he then took serious hits to his left shoulder, his left flank, and his right knee, which sent him flying high in the air like a hunk of scrap, landing on his back against the roof.

"Nngaah!!" The breath knocked out of him mixed with a cry from deep in his throat. His vision flickered, and a sharp, intense pain ran through his entire body. He couldn't believe this was virtual damage from the Neurolinker.

What was that?!

Haruyuki braced his right arm and somehow managed to raise his upper body to watch Cyan Pile sluggishly get up a step ahead of him.

"Hnn…Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!" Short bursts of laughter leaked out from beneath the blue mask as if a screw had come loose somewhere. "Heh-heh-heh-heh! You really…got a lot of energetic poking in there, huh? You surprised me a little. But in the end, you're just an annoying little bug. And you even went out of your way to build up my special-attack gauge."

"Special…attack…" Haruyuki muttered as he checked the gauges at the top of his vision.

Cyan Pile's thick health gauge stretching out on one side was at 60 percent.

He had taken more damage in Haruyuki's rush than he was letting on. But Haruyuki, having been caught directly by the random stake shooting, only had about 30 percent health left.

And below each of the health bars, a thin green gauge stretched out. Cyan Pile's was glowing brightly at around 70 percent. In contrast, Haruyuki's was basically full.

"Now, now, don't talk like it's the first time you've heard the words, Silver Crow." Cackling, Cyan Pile started to advance slowly. "The give-and-take of special attacks is the best part of any Duel. That Splash Stinger before's my level-two special attack. Perfect for knocking down annoying insects, huh? Oh, that reminds me. Your gauge looks like it's full up already. Go ahead, come on. Use whatever you'd like."

Haruyuki clenched his teeth grindingly. The special attack given to Silver Crow was just Head Butt, which basically had no reach at all and could definitely not stand up against Cyan Pile's long range. And the motion was long and very obvious, so using it was basically like saying *Shoot me* while you were getting ready to act.

Dammit. I don't need a special attack or anything. I have my fists and my feet. And speed. Once his shaky vision settled, Haruyuki quickly rose and focused his strength in his right leg.

But.

He heard a repulsive breaking noise, like a snap. And then the metallic sound of his own body collapsing to the ground again with a *crack*. Hurriedly turning his eyes downward, he saw that he had been pierced with one of the shotgun stakes, and his thin silver leg, smashed from the knee—

"A-ha! A-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!" Cyan Pile's piercing, loud laughter. "I got it! Your leg!! You're so brittle!! And you're supposed to be a metal color?!"

Haruyuki was oblivious to this sneering voice. *Crap. Crap!! I lost my leg, which means I can't run anymore. Forget avoiding him, forget running; I don't think I can even move.*

The sense of panic sneaking in chilled him to the depths of his bones.

This is bad. I can't, there's no way I can lose here. I have to protect her; I have to.

Crack.

The boot, stomping down uncomfortably close, smashed Haruyuki's severed leg as if it were glass.

The corners of the bluish-white eyes Haruyuki could see in the distance turned up sharply. "So this is how it ends, Haru." A faint whisper of a voice. "You here, like this: it suits you. And you even managed to get a lot of stuff off your chest back there, huh? Almost like you're the only person who understands Chi?"

"I do, you know. At least better than you do, anyway."

"Then what about me? Have you thought about me at all? Have you ever thought about how I feel when I'm alone with Chi and she gets this sad look on her face all of a sudden…and I know it's because she's thinking about you? Huh, Haru?" He cut himself off and brought his face in close. Cyan Pile—Takumu—gave voice to the decisive phrase. "It's because you're like this."

There was almost a gentleness somewhere in his tone, but his words dug a deep hole in Haruyuki's chest, an enormous iron stake.

"It's because you're like this that me and Chi and you are totally caught in this muddy swamp and can't get out. Just disappear already, Haru. Set me and Chi free."

Crack.

This step caught the bottom of Haruyuki's foot on his good leg.

Cyan Pile, drawing himself up abruptly, raising the launcher in his right arm high, drew a complicated trajectory with the tip in the air. As he did, the launcher was wrapped to his shoulder in a crisp blue light.

Suddenly, the launcher expanded to three times its size with a thick noise. From within, something akin to an enormous hammer popped its head out, front face flattened. The striking surface of the hammer turned sharply toward Haruyuki, who was unable to think, much less move.

“Now. Shall we put an end to this, Haru? All of it.” *This Duel and the pretense of our friendship.* Cyan Pile’s eyes communicated this message loud and clear.

The end of the hammer began to emit an intense light. “Spiral Gravity Driver!”

Skrrrrk!

Haruyuki tried desperately to avoid the hammer as it struck while still rotating, making a mechanical noise like countless gears catching. However, Cyan Pile had a firm hold on the bottom of his lone leg, and he couldn’t escape. The massive hunk of steel came crushing down on Haruyuki’s chest, followed by a duet between the high-pitched shriek of his silver armor being pulverized and the deep rumble of the floor beneath him being crushed.

Unable to even cry out, Haruyuki was beaten down a level along with the rooftop below him, slamming into the floor below in the hospital. But the hammer didn’t stop there, smashing Haruyuki right through that floor as well.

Thump! Thud! Thump!!

The sound of destruction ringing in the air, Haruyuki plunged through all five levels of the hospital and finally stopped moving after becoming embedded in the ground floor.

Flash. Flash.

In the obscure darkness, something red was blinking in the top left of his vision. It took Haruyuki a few seconds to realize that it was his own health gauge reduced to just under 10 percent.

As if regretting the fact that it hadn’t beaten his gauge down entirely, Cyan Pile’s hammer stayed wedged in Haruyuki’s chest for a while but eventually rose up, grindingly, rotating in the opposite direction.

Once the hammer had been lifted causing debris to rain down, all that was left in front of Haruyuki was a tiny hole leading up to the distant roof. Through it, he heard Cyan Pile’s voice echoing weakly.

“Aaah, you still have a little health left. Well, whatever. We only have five or six minutes; it’ll be time up before I can come find you and finish you off. And once I’m done here, I can get to my real mission, the boss battle. So!” His tone

of voice changed, tinged with pride or perhaps fawning. “I hope you saw, all of you watching! Especially all of you in the Blue Legion!! I can still be of great use! I mean, I can definitely fight in the unlimited field above this! You must be regretting tossing me aside just because I used a few too many points? Right?!”

Taku…Takumu…You…

A broken doll at the bottom of a dark hole, Haruyuki felt hot fluid running along his cheeks. His tears. But he didn’t quite know what he was crying about. He was probably shedding these tears for something that broke without him noticing it, something important he had completely lost.

But he couldn’t afford to lose this Duel. He absolutely had to win—for himself, for Takumu, for Chiyuri. And for Kuroyukihime. And yet…

Carrying the pain of his tremendous regret, Haruyuki pulled himself up slowly. From all over his body, pieces of his cracked armor fell like rain and scattered. There was no more point in standing up anymore. He should just accept his decisive defeat and go back to the him before he knew Brain Burst. Haruyuki clutched his knees and decided to wait for the timer to reach zero.

Just before his eyes closed.

In the corner of a dim room.

She floated up like an illusion.

The bed was braided out of black wild roses. The slender figure lay as if enclosed by the inky black petals of countless flowers in full bloom.

A dress blacker than night. Silver edging. Parasol resting close by. And the shiny black hair fanning out over shining skin whiter than snow in the dim light. Her long eyelashes peacefully shut.

Am I hallucinating?

As he wondered this, Haruyuki approached the black rose bed slowly, very slowly, dragging what was left of the right leg he had lost. But no matter how close he got, Kuroyukihime’s avatar showed no signs of disappearing.

Thrusting his right hand onto the edge of the bed as if to catch himself before he fell, Haruyuki finally understood. This, this place was the nanomachine room

in the ER where the real Kuroyukihime was being treated. And Kuroyukihime's Neurolinker was connected to the hospital net. So the instant Haruyuki initiated the accelerated fight, her automatic spectator mode was activated, and she was also brought onto this stage.

"…Kuroyukihime," Haruyuki murmured hoarsely, stretching out his battered right arm to stroke her cheek softly. The words came tumbling out, one after another, as if the dam had broken. At the same time, more tears. "I—I couldn't save you. I couldn't protect your dream, your hopes. I couldn't live up to your expectations."

The tears trickling from the cracks in his half-shattered helmet fell in drops on Kuroyukihime's cheek, caught the minimal light, and shone before disappearing.

"I can change…That's what I thought. With your words, your kindness, your love, I could change…But I couldn't. It's not my avatar's fault…This avatar was probably created to reflect my 'resignation.' I'm the one who made him, who made Silver Crow like this. Me, never trying to look up, eyes always on the ground, living my life on my hands and knees." Haruyuki bent over slowly and clung to Kuroyukihime's shoulder. "I wanted to go there. Where you were…High up in the sky, where you were lightly flapping your wings. High up…far away…escaping the swamp of the real world…with you…"

With a sob, Haruyuki squeezed the last words out.

"I wanted to—fly."

Thump.

Almost as if in response to his voice, he heard a faint sound.

Thump. Thump.

The source was Kuroyukihime's chest against Haruyuki's cheek. A small, faint, but definite rhythm being carved out. Her heartbeat.

Here in the accelerated world, there was no way he should have been able to hear the sound of her heart beating in the real world. But it couldn't have been a hallucination. He strained his ears and listened, and suddenly, Haruyuki understood.

This was the echo of Kuroyukihime's will. Right now, Kuroyukihime was fighting desperately. On the border between life and death, she was fiercely fighting to hold her ground. Her strong will became a heartbeat, echoing in the virtual battleground.

"Right," Haruyuki murmured. At the same time, new tears spilled out and trickled down warmly. In his ears, something Kuroyukihime had once told him echoed faintly.

In the end, strength doesn't mean winning.

It's like I never knew the meaning of the word strong*. And not knowing, I was jealous, and I gave up.*

"Strength isn't just winning…"

Even if it was ugly. Even if it was funny. Even if you lost in the end, fell to the ground, and ended up covered in mud.

After surviving the death match of the kings, Kuroyukihime—Black Lotus had held her breath in a tiny net and stayed hidden for two years. But it wasn't because she was sneaky or cowardly. It was because she hadn't given up. It was because she refused to hang her head in shame.

"Just fighting itself. Falling down and still looking up at the sky…That's the proof of strength. That's right, isn't it…Kuroyukihime."

He got no answer.

But he felt a powerful heartbeat being born deep inside his own chest. The pulsing of his heart became a signal to drive his brain. And then his spirit, his will, and the nerve to face adversity, all of it accelerated.

As long as this sound echoed in his chest…

"I'm still standing…I can still fight!" he screamed to himself and to Kuroyukihime.

Gripping the edge of the bed with his right hand, he put his strength into his left leg and stood up, staggering. Tiny shards glittered as they fluttered down from all over his body. However, the heat generated from within his chest reached to the tips of his four battered limbs, and he shivered fiercely.

Suddenly.

Several rays of intense white light shot out from the cracks in his armor.

At the same time, the armor on his back cracked wide open, and he had the sensation of it being blown off. Haruyuki opened his eyes wide and threw his head back.

On the wall not far in front of him hung a large mirror. It was probably the two-way mirror leading to the monitoring room next door in the real world. Now it was an enormous full-length mirror edged in the same black cast-iron roses as the bed. Reflected in its center were the rose bed, Kuroyukihime lying in it, and Silver Crow standing there.

The armor all over his body was in a terrible state. His left arm and his right leg were half torn off, and deep cracks radiated outward across his chest. The fractures also wrapped around to his back, which was the source of the cracking sound. Each time a tiny spark flew up, a piece of his smashed armor scattered.

Haruyuki stared dumbfounded as something white and shining started to very slowly spread out on each side of his back. Thin, sharply triangular shards of metal. Swords?

The moment he had this thought, the two pieces of metal stopped crawling out and expanded into semicircles with a cold, clanging noise. Perhaps ten thin metal fins folded up on either side were deployed, the tips of those initial sword-shaped protrusions as fulcrums.

This…this isn't a weapon…

They're wings.

Haruyuki stood dazed for less than a second.

Hot!

At the intense heat running through his body from the center of his back, Haruyuki snapped to attention. Writhing in agony, he retreated a few steps on his knees and drew his body in, cradling his shoulders in his arms. More than the temperature, he felt as though a ball of pure energy was sealed up in his back and was whirling around like a vortex, seeking a way out.

I can’t. I can’t stand it anymore.

Arching his body back like a bow, Haruyuki turned to look straight up.

There he saw the enormous hole he’d torn through the building only seconds earlier. A small yellow light alone up there in the deep, black sky. A corridor leading to the distant heavens.

It was calling to him.



In an unconscious motion, Haruyuki raised his shattered left arm high and pressed his uninjured right arm to his side. He felt the raging energy at the tips of his shoulder blades increase in intensity suddenly and then contract.

Bringing his eyes back down for just a moment, he saw the figure of his beloved lying there.

He looked up again.

“Goooooooo!!” He thrust his right arm straight out with a cry.

Fwoomp!!

With a half crash, half explosion, a silver light ripped through the darkness. Instantly, Haruyuki’s body shot up in a straight line like an arrow released from its bow.

The air roared in his ears each time he passed a floor of the hospital.

Piercing the dark path in mere seconds, his silver avatar flew out through the large hole drilled through the roof and soared higher, ever higher. The metal fins on his back shook at high speed. The energy accelerated his small body with an overwhelming power, and he easily cut his ties to any virtual gravity. Haruyuki pushed up, up, endlessly up.

Soon enough, a swirling black cloud drew near. The moment his raised right fist came into contact with the thick lump, the round cloud was shoved aside with a *thud*, shooting through the black tunnel and ascending even farther. Haruyuki’s field of vision was filled with a blinding, pale yellow light.

After passing through the sea of clouds, Haruyuki spread out his arms and legs and eased his acceleration. The high-pitched shuddering noise dropped in pitch, and a soft sensation of floating came over him, like being in a plane after takeoff.

Hovering gently, Haruyuki rolled over. “Aaah…,” he half sighed. An unimaginable scene spread out below him. From the breaks in the sea of clouds twisting as they flowed along, he could make out the sharp colors of the enormous city sprawling endlessly. The building on the other side of the city subcenter of Shinjuku transformed into twisted spires, and the deep wood

beyond was probably the Imperial Palace, looking like a soaring, magical castle.

In the opposite direction, the city extended off into the distance from Suginami to Mitaka and on into Hachioji, with the Okutama Mountains beyond that. The steep mountain peak piercing the sea of clouds and towering high above them was probably Mount Fuji.

Finally, turning his gaze to the south, Haruyuki caught sight of a gray, flat plane glittering. *The sea. That's Tokyo Bay. And, extending limitlessly, the Pacific Ocean.*

Infinity.

"This world…it's infinite…" Haruyuki gasped as he started to descend ever so slowly.

Sinking into the clouds on his back, he slipped through to the bottom and approached the earth's surface. When he had dropped to an altitude where he could once more see the details of the city, he made the fins vibrate fiercely to hover again.

Directly below him as he straightened out was the roof of the hospital, a mere thirty meters away. After seeing the immensity of the Duel field, the roof looked small enough to pick up in both hands. Standing stock-still on the edge of the large hole piercing the center of the roof, a large blue figure looked up at him.

Cyan Pile stared up at Haruyuki for a full three seconds as if his soul had been ripped out. He raised his left hand slightly and said hoarsely, "H-Haru—"

But his words were erased abruptly in a sudden roar.

Voices. The members of the Gallery watching the Duel between Silver Crow and Cyan Pile encamped on the roofs of the buildings surrounding the hospital shouted out all at once.

"He's not…he's not falling?! He's perfectly still!!"

"It's not a jump…He's flying?! No way!!"

"He has the ability to fly…It's finally showing up! Check out those wings!! It's a flying avatar!!"

Haruyuki didn't understand why the members of the Gallery were making such a huge fuss. As he stared down in mute amazement, some of the several dozen duel avatars were moving, aiming for ground higher, while others were running their fingers along consoles.

"Isn't there any info on him?! Who the hell is this guy?! His Legion…Who's his guardian?!"

"Wh-whatever! We need to contact the head office! You, drop and tell them!!"

"You gotta be kidding! You think I'm gonna miss this?!"

Quelling the beehive-like commotion was an abrupt, fierce scream.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!!" Cyan Pile howled, spreading out his arms and legs. The vibrations of his scream ripped the atmosphere, reaching Haruyuki in the sky far above like an electric shock. "No! No no no no no nooooooooo!!"

With a mechanical *crack*, the launcher in his right arm turned toward Haruyuki. "You!! You!! On me!! You don't look down on meeeeeeee!!" A cry like vomiting blood.

At the same time, a jarring screech echoed through the air, and the loaded stake sent out several rays of light. As he adopted a posture with both legs spread out, hips dropped, and launcher readied in his left hand, the remaining 40 percent of Cyan Pile's special-attack gauge dropped abruptly all at once.

In the sights of what was most likely Cyan Pile's final attack, Haruyuki, still hovering in one spot, raised his right hand lightly and closed it tightly into a solid fist. He finally understood what the special attack he had been given was.

Punch. And then Kick. While these were his normal attacks, they were also his special super attacks.

He pulled his tight fist back and expanded all his fins as far as they would go to change direction. Toward Cyan Pile, directly below him.

"G-goooooo! Lightning Twin Spikes!" As he screamed the name of the attack, a steel needle, transformed into a beam of light, shot forward from Cyan Pile's right arm.

Faced with this, Haruyuki simply readied his fist and released the propulsive power from both wings.

“Unh! Aaaaaaah!”

Silver Crow’s body became a bullet of light, a rocket engine igniting, and charged.

In the left corner of his vision, his green special-attack gauge started to drop all at once. At the same time, the radiance of the white light enveloping his right fist increased endlessly.

“Haruuuuuuuuu!” Takumu screamed.

“Taaaaaaaku!” Haruyuki cried.

Skreeeee!

A feeling of super acceleration, greater than the acceleration of Brain Burst, rushed over Haruyuki from his back, enveloping him.

The color of the world changed.

He saw Cyan Pile’s blue lance rushing up from the ground, the glint of the tip. The line of fire he had anticipated rose up in his vision like a phantom. The blow, like the lightning bolt of its name, was far surpassed by the speed of Haruyuki’s spirit. The power of one truly accelerated, who Kuroyukihime had found and believed in.

I can see it…I can see it, Kuroyukihime!! Haruyuki cried in his heart.

The lance slowed.

Before it, Silver Crow increased his speed limitlessly, as if his very existence had become light itself.

At the moment the two approached and blended, Haruyuki slid his charging trajectory slightly to the right.

Skrrrrk!

The lance scraped the left side of his helmet and passed by, releasing an intense shower of sparks.

Then…

Haruyuki's punch penetrated deeply, ever deeper into the center of Cyan Pile's chest. Carving out a gaping rut in the floor of the roof with a shrieking roar, the two bodies became one and went flying.

Crashing into and pulverizing the railing of iron lances, sending bits in every direction, Haruyuki sprang out into the sky. "Aaaaah!!" he howled, flapping his metal fins.

A powerful, dynamic lift enveloped his body with a start. His right arm still buried up to the shoulder in Cyan Pile, Haruyuki turned upward and ascended ever higher. In a few seconds, he had pierced the sea of clouds and sailed out into the yellow sky.

When he eased up on the acceleration and shifted to hovering, Cyan Pile, who had apparently lost consciousness in the collision, made a coughing sound from under the mask riding on Haruyuki's shoulder. "Keh…Hrk…" The enormous body twitched and shuddered, and he gradually lifted his face.

An action that was immediately followed by a faint cry that seemed almost unreal after the previous angry roars of deep resentment. "Wh-wha—?! I-I'm flying…?!" Mask shaking from side to side, he shouted again. "Stop! Haru! D-don't drop me!! If I fall now, I'll…I'll lose!!"

Both of their health gauges were dyed red and had dropped so that they were no more than a hair's width. Cyan Pile stiffened as if fearing he'd be dropped if he moved, and his tone changed to one of supplication.

"I-if I lose…if I lose to you, and you're level one, my points will drop to zero! Y-you'll be fine. I mean, you'll only lose four or five points! Please! Let me have this one, Haru! I can't lose Brain Burst now!!"

"Taku…Takumu…" Half groaning, half muttering the name, Haruyuki firmly clenched his right fist, still piercing Cyan Pile.

Now? Now?! You tried to take all of Kuroyukihime's points…You tried to erase her Brain Burst, her only desire!

All he had to do was change the angle of his arm slightly, and Cyan Pile's enormous body would lose its support and go crashing into the ground far below. Takumu would lose forty points, and Brain Burst would be forcefully

uninstalled. And then…he would never again be able to come after Kuroyukihime from outside the local net.

Haruyuki gritted his teeth hard enough to break them. His entire body shook, and a momentary impulse ran from head to foot before disappearing. The voice he pushed out from between his clenched teeth was so cracked, it didn't even sound like his own. "Do you concede, Taku?"

"Wh-what?"

"That you totally cannot beat me in this accelerated world. Do you concede, Taku?!"

A moment's silence.

The words returned through the body pressed against him were quiet, deflated somehow. "…Yeah. I do…I guess I can't beat you, after all. Just like way back when we used to play all those games together…"

Haruyuki inhaled deeply and exhaled. And then he said in the same quiet voice, "Then…we're equals."

"Huh?! What…?!"

"In the real world, there's not a single thing I can beat you at. But in this world, you can't beat me. We're equals. So…so—" Cutting himself off and staring at the bluish-white eyes under Cyan Pile's mask, Haruyuki continued. "So you…be…be my ally, Taku. My friend. Fight as her servant from now on, like me."

Speechless, Takumu gasped sharply. After a while, a hoarse moan slipped out from the thin slits. "…Idiot. You have to know this, too, Haru. I know you do. Your guardian…Black Lotus…I've been hunting her in secret from my own Legion. She's the biggest traitor in the accelerated world! I mean…to fight on her side…"

"You're right, she is. She took down the Six Kings of Pure Color. You can say it. It's fine. And I'll tell you something really good…Look, that's how games are supposed to be."

Takumu reacted to the words Haruyuki uttered with a long silence.

His response a few seconds later was tinged somehow with a masochistic laugh. “Haru, would you really trust me? Like, if I said yeah right now, what reason would you have at this point to trust what I say? After I broke my Legion’s rules, broke the rules of Brain Burst, and even betrayed both of my friends?”

“We’re going to go and tell Chiyu everything.” The second Haruyuki came back with this, Takumu gasped in shock again for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“What?!”

“Brain Burst, us fighting, and…all the feelings you and I have been hiding. We tell her everything.” Haruyuki turned his gaze off into the infinite sky and continued slowly. “We probably have to start there. The three of us have been hiding things we shouldn’t have. We’ve been suspicious of stuff we didn’t have to be. Somewhere…we have to start over.”

“…Start over…You really think we can, Haru? I…Chi’s Neurolinker…” Takumu’s voice shook as he spoke, and Haruyuki lightly patted his back with the stub of his left arm.

“She’ll probably be so mad, she’ll kill us. She’ll yell and get mad…but she’ll forgive us in the end. That’s how she is,” Haruyuki said with a smile as he started to slowly descend.

Having returned to the hospital roof and been released from Silver Crow’s right arm, Cyan Pile sank down to the ground with a *thud* after a few staggering steps.

Haruyuki glanced up to check the remaining time. In a little more than two minutes, the long fight would be over. Just in case, he checked his gauge, but the remaining health was exactly the same number for both of them. If they timed out like this, the result would be a draw, and no points would be transferred either way.

Haruyuki looked over again at Cyan Pile, motionless, head hanging between raised knees, and thought to himself, *I…Did I make a mistake? Should I have shown no mercy and dropped Takumu into the ground back there to make completely sure he couldn’t break his promise after this fight and come after*

Kuroyukihime?

No. No, I can't. Suspecting people, trusting people, it means suspecting yourself, trusting yourself.

I trust the me who Kuroyukihime told she likes.

I trust the me who decided to believe Takumu.

That's enough.

Immediately after he told himself this, the elevator doors opened behind him, and a heavy metallic noise reverberated through the air.

His whole body stiffened with a start, and in the instant before he spun around, Haruyuki guessed who he would see before him and was then certain of it.

It couldn't possibly be a new enemy. Because the only people who could attack and be attacked in this stage were Haruyuki and Takumu. And it wouldn't be an unfamiliar duel avatar. There was no reason for an unconnected spectator to appear from within the hospital.

However, the moment he actually confirmed his hunch with his own eyes, Haruyuki stopped breathing, his chest was full of something hot, and tears spilled out of both eyes.

A pure black, as if a distillation of the essence of darkness. Edges gilded in a dazzling silver. The cold wind blowing past made the long rolls of hair and the hem of the skirt flutter, and the bells decorating the parasol rang softly.

"Kuro…yukihime…" His wrung-out voice trembled faintly like a small child's.

Watching Haruyuki dragging his shattered leg, taking one step, then another, Kuroyukihime's face twisted up and broke into a grin at the same time.

"Kuroyukihime!!" Finally able to cry out in a proper voice, Haruyuki ran as fast as he could, making an irregular metallic noise.

Kuroyukihime also ran toward him, high heels ringing out sharply.

Both stretching arms out straight ahead, neither showed the slightest hesitation or timidity in leaping into the open arms of the other.

Hugging her sweet, softly scented body with all his might, Haruyuki cried, almost groaning, “You…you’re awake!! I’m so glad…I knew it, I knew it. I knew you’d make it…I’m so glad…so glad…”

Kuroyukihime, holding onto Haruyuki as if wrapping him up, snuggled against his cheek silently for a moment. “In the darkness, no heaven, no earth…All I heard was your voice. I…You saved me. And got hurt so badly…” The whispered voice that finally echoed in his ear was similarly wet.

Her right hand gently stroked Silver Crow’s broken body. “You’re shattered… Thank you. Thank you, Haruyuki.”

“No…you’re the one who saved me. Because you told me…to believe in myself, so…I could fly.”

Nodding silently several times, Kuroyukihime stretched a hand out to trace the edge of a thin wing extending from Haruyuki’s back. “They’re beautiful…This is your power, the potential hiding in Silver Crow. Until now…there’s never been a duel avatar realizing the ability of pure flight. I knew my prediction wasn’t mistaken. You really are the one who’s going to change this world.”

Kuroyukihime gently brought Silver Crow’s small body down to the ground with both hands. Tilting her head to the side and smiling, she looked down at him, and the ephemeral silhouette of the fairy princess spoke in a slightly forceful tone. “It seems the time has come…the time when I must also emerge from my safe cocoon and aim for the sky again.”

She glanced behind her. Cyan Pile, seated a ways off, head still hanging, had raised his eyes only slightly to watch the two of them.

“You as well…I’ve wronged you, eh, Cyan Pile?” The words Kuroyukihime uttered were unexpected. “On more than one occasion, I sullied Duels with you, Duels that should have been full of honor. Shall I show you now? My true form. And if you wish it, I will engage you with all my might.” She raised her right hand to quickly move her virtual cursor.

Suddenly, the fairy princess avatar was shrouded in repeated surges of black lightning.

Her silhouette, engulfed in a bluish-purple light before Haruyuki, who hurried

to take a few steps back, began to change shape slowly, bit by bit. The skirt that reached nearly to the floor shortened all at once and split into sharp notches. Hands and feet snapped out into perfectly straight lines, tips converged into needles. The long hair dissolved and disappeared in the light, and in its place, a mask appeared in the shape of a bird of prey, wings stretching out to the back. Finally, one last, terrible bolt of lightning struck, and all the effects disappeared.

Standing before them was a beautiful—extraordinarily beautiful, as if carved out of a black crystal—duel avatar.

Her overall form resembled Silver Crow somehow. But she was much taller, more than 170 centimeters. Her body, encased in flowing, seemingly transparent black armor with a straight line at its core, was slender like a doll's and connected to an armor skirt resembling a black lotus around her hips.

More than anything else, the limbs were her main feature. Both arms and both legs were long, sharp swords, enough to send a chill up the spine. The bright, glittering edges that looked as though they could immediately bisect anything touching them rang out crisply in the slight wind of the stage. The front surface of the angular head, with a *V* reaching out behind it, was a pair of goggles like an inky black mirror. Inside, two bluish-purple eyes shone with a humming, vibrating sound.

Haruyuki just stood there for a moment as if the wind had been knocked out of him. Farther off, he sensed Cyan Pile, similarly speechless. Both were overwhelmed at the almost violent beauty of this figure and the boundless potential seeming to radiate from the slender, pitch-black body.

Haruyuki was convinced that if he found himself in a Duel with her, he wouldn't have to wait more than a second before he was sliced into thin pieces and eliminated. Finally, he pushed a voice somehow resembling a sigh from his chest. "You're beautiful…so beautiful…Before, you said you were ugly, but… you're not at all…"

"Mm. I wonder…" Only the voice was the original Kuroyukihime's. "I don't even have any hands to hold someone else's—" She didn't get to finish.

Cries of surprise filled the air all at once at an incredible volume from the surrounding buildings.

“Whoooaaa! Oooooh?!”

“That’s…That duel avatar…!”

“Black Lotus!! The Black King!! She’s alive!!”

The shouts from the Gallery were clearly several times louder than at the appearance of the flying Silver Crow.

Kuroyukihime glanced around and shrugged lightly before saying, “Well then…Silver Crow. Perhaps you could fly away with me?”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

No matter how great her potential, she didn’t actually weigh any more than Cyan Pile. But however willing he was to fly off with her, there was still the question of how.

In front of Haruyuki in his confusion, Kuroyukihime hovered with a faint vibration noise and turned to her right casually before raising both arms and dropping her hips. Almost as if she was urging him to pick her up and carry her across an unknown threshold.

Although he wondered at this, he could definitely not run away here, not at this point. Sweat dripped across the surface of his silver helmet—or rather, he had that illusion as he awkwardly stuck out both arms and fastened them around Kuroyukihime’s waist.

“Please and thank you,” she said, sounding somehow excited, before leaning back into his arms with a slight *thump*.

As Takumu, seated, gave them a slightly teasing look that he could well have been imagining, Haruyuki readied himself and lifted the black crystal avatar. Fortunately, she turned out not to be so heavy, and he made the fins on his back vibrate fiercely before kicking off with one foot. Accelerating moderately, he aimed for the sky.

Against his chest, Kuroyukihime craned her neck to look out at the city below them and cried out in a subdued voice, “This is…amazing! I could get addicted to this…The next time we direct and have a Duel, I want to spend the whole thirty minutes flying…Oh, here’s good.”

“Okay.” Nodding, Haruyuki switched to hovering.

They weren’t so high up. Below them, they could clearly make out the countless duel avatars looking up at them from the roofs of the buildings, still yelling and shouting.

Kuroyukihime drew in a deep breath and shouted in a crisp voice that seemed to reach all the way to the distant horizon. “Hear me!!”

In an instant, the entire stage fell into silence.

“Hear me! You Burst Linkers before me, Legions of the Six Kings! My name is Black Lotus! I am the one who fought against the rule of the usurper kings!”

The twisting black clouds grew shorter and even the blowing wind held its breath. The only thing still moving in his field of view was the timer with ten seconds left on the clock. In the quiet, the ringing proclamation echoed endlessly.

“I and my Legion Nega Nebulus come forth from behind the veil of obscurity to destroy this false peace! Take out your swords! Call up your flames! The time to fight…has come!!”

9

Indian summer.

What month is that again? Haruyuki wondered as he walked along the road to the now–completely familiar hospital. The rhythm the soles of his shoes tapped out on the paving stones increased unconsciously. *If I keep speeding up, I'll be covered in sweat by the time I get there*, he thought, but even so, he couldn't hold back.

Today was the day Kuroyukihime would finally be moved from the ICU to a general ward.

Since visits were naturally not permitted in the ICU, it had in fact been three weeks since they'd actually seen each other face-to-face. So he really couldn't help it if he was a little lighter on his feet today.

The instant classes were over, he'd dashed out of school, so the sun was still high, and the light, warm for October, beat down on his back. At the school gates, the newspaper club shock troops who had somehow managed to get wind of the news were standing waiting, but he'd activated his now-rusty run-and-escape skill and had managed to break away beyond the reach of the local net.

The fact that he was so lighthearted was also partly because yesterday, Sunday, he had hung out with his oldest friends for the first time in a very long time.

Except for when they went up the new Tokyo Tower and Haruyuki accidentally connected to the sightseeing guide net and ended up getting challenged to a Duel (with the super-high-altitude local advantage, he just barely won), it was a very problem-free, fun day off.

The day of the fight three weeks earlier, Haruyuki and Takumu had gone together to Chiyuri's house and confessed everything in Chiyuri's bedroom, all of it: the reason Takumu told Chiyuri he liked her two years before, why Takumu had been gradually pressed against a wall since then, and why now, all of a sudden, Haruyuki and Takumu had pitted themselves against each other in battle.

Chiyuri had a hard time believing that Brain Burst actually existed. They finally managed to get her to accept it after they accelerated and took care of all the homework Chiyuri had been given that day in one-point-eight seconds, but the biggest hurdle was still ahead.

When Takumu told Chiyuri about the back-door virus he got from his guardian, the Blue Burst Linker who served as his kendo team captain, that he had used to infect her, Chiyuri exploded many times more fiercely than Haruyuki had predicted, chasing them both out of her apartment, screaming all the while that she hated them and they were through forever.

The following week, Chiyuri wouldn't talk to them, but over time, she made allowances in her own way for Takumu's feelings, and she forgave them—almost like she wondered if she was part of the reason Takumu felt forced to that extreme—on the condition that they treat her to all the finest parfaits she could eat.

The truth of the matter was that Chiyuri and Takumu were still somehow awkward together, even now. But Haruyuki believed that time would fix that, too.

Because it had taken ten years, but Haruyuki and Takumu finally had the relationship Chiyuri wanted. They really were best friends.

In fact, they were probably more than that.

Silver Crow and Cyan Pile were now a tag team fighting side by side in Kuroyukihime's Legion.

Smiling and saying hello to the female nurse whose face he had at this point memorized, Haruyuki signed into the hospital net and set his sights on the hospital's top floor at the limits of permissible speed. He got out of the elevator he had used in the Duel and arrived at the navigation line leading to the room

number he had sent by mail.

In the middle of the bouquet of pink baby's breath and the tropical water lilies in his right hand was a bud that was as close to black as possible. Since it was out of season, it had cost more than he had expected, and he had ended up spending what little money he'd been saving up for a new game on it, but he had somehow lost the desire to buy new games anyway. No game in the world could possibly be as stimulating as Brain Burst.

After he had taken just a few steps, the navigation line abruptly disappeared from sight. In front of him was the sliding door of a private room in the southeast corner of the top floor.

"Ummmm." Haruyuki swallowed with a gulp and rehearsed in his mind what he should say. *Congratulations…That's good, right? No, wait, it's not like she's been discharged from the hospital yet. Maybe that's kinda weird. Good job… That's obviously wrong. It's been a while…Something like that? But we see each other every day on the net. Um, aah, I don't know.*

Shmp.

The door in front of him abruptly slid open, and Haruyuki, flustered, jumped back.

As he did, a scolding voice came from inside. "Look, you. Just how long do you intend to make me wait? Hurry up and get in here!"

"Uh, okay!" he cried in a pitiable voice, and, pulling his shoulders in as far as they would go, Haruyuki took an exaggerated step over the threshold. Once he heard the door close behind him, he timidly raised his face.

In that instant, the large room, the scene outside the window, even the large bed disappeared from view. Haruyuki's eyes took in only this girl he hadn't seen in three weeks, wearing a black cardigan over cute pink pajamas.

She was a little thinner, maybe. Her skin, already pale, had lost even more color so that it was almost translucent. The normally free-flowing, silky hair was tied up tightly in braids, and her right leg was completely covered in a large cast.

But…

Those eyes. Those large, pitch-black eyes alone shone exactly as they always had, as if they had stars locked up inside them, welcoming Haruyuki.

Kuroyukihime smiled like a flower opening up and said in a slightly hoarse voice, “Hey…it’s been a while, Haruyuki.”

“Uh…uh-huh.”

All the lines he had thought up flew out of his head, and Haruyuki simply nodded sharply, blinking several times.

After they had stared at each other like this for nearly ten seconds, Haruyuki finally returned to his senses and took a few steps forward to offer up the modest bouquet. “Uh…um, here. It’s small, but…”

“Thanks.” Kuroyukihime grinned, taking them from him. She brought them to her face and inhaled their scent. “Black lotus, hm? I look forward to it blooming. There’s a vase over there. Could you put them in water for me?”

“Okay!”

Haruyuki took the small vase from the sideboard, filled it with water in the sink in a corner of the room, put the flowers in it, and returned.

Once again, silence.

It was Kuroyukihime who untangled their eyes glancing past each other. The expression on her face became suddenly severe and, clearing her throat lightly, she said in an increasingly hard tone, “Now then…shall I hear you report on that matter? Sit in the chair there.”

“Oh…O-okay.”

Right, this is no time to be giddy. Feeling a tinge of sadness at the thought, Haruyuki gently lowered his body into the guest chair.

Flicking around on his virtual desktop, he slid the report he had put together over to Kuroyukihime. “Ummm…so, for the back-door program that Taku’s guardian had several of his subordinates test in absolute secrecy, a patch for the matching server came out last week, and it’s completely unusable now. This guardian was ‘executed’ within the Blue Legion. I mean, it looks like he had all of his points taken away from him. But he still didn’t spill the beans about who

the program's creator was."

"Hm, I see." Kuroyukihime exhaled shortly and rested her head on intertwined fingers. "Most likely, a yellow, expert at exploiting weaknesses, was the originator. Especially given that whoever it was had it tested out on the top brass of an enemy Legion. Well, one of these days, I'll yank that black curtain up." Muttering this dangerous line as she moved the tips of the fingers of her right hand like a sword, Kuroyukihime recomposed her expression and looked at Haruyuki. "So how is it? My Legion."

"Right…well, I have to say it's bit by bit, but we're slowly getting control of Suginami Area numbers three and four."

"Ha-ha-ha!" Kuroyukihime's shoulders shook lightly as she laughed. "A modest territory. But it's wonderful. Just right for a Legion made up of three people."

The Black Legion, Nega Nebulus, was once an enormous group, ranked alongside the Legions of the six kings, but with the events two years earlier, it had apparently gone the way of dissolution and disappearance. Her spectacular proclamation of the Legion's return was fine as far as it went, but as of now, the only three members were Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki, and Takumu. And Black Lotus, as the world's most powerful traitor, wouldn't be able to appear in any Duels for the time being. They had their hands full just protecting the field around Umesato Junior High.

As if reading Haruyuki's mind, Kuroyukihime said, smiling, "Don't be so down. There's no need to hurry. We'll gain companions gradually and slowly expand our area."

"R-right." Haruyuki nodded.

When he went to wipe away the slight sweat beading on his face because of this first real-life meeting in some time, he stuck his hand in the pocket of his uniform, where his fingers struck something other than his handkerchief. He pulled the completely forgotten item out. The student agenda with the blue cover that had never been used for its original purpose. Kuroyukihime's.

"Oh…right. I was hanging on to this for you. Here." Not thinking too hard about what he said, he offered her the agenda.

Seeing it, Kuroyukihime blinked with surprise and opened her mouth slightly before her cheeks suddenly flushed bloodred. Snatching the agenda away from him, she pressed it to her chest and turned her face downward. “Did you look inside?” A question uttered in a voice that was almost disappearing.

Haruyuki finally grasped the reason for Kuroyukihime’s reaction. “Oh! No! Yes! No, uh, well…I—I did…”

Silence.

Abruptly, a short phrase cut through the extremely dense, frozen air. “Forget it.”

“…Huh?”

“Erase it from your memory and never speak of it again. And if you mention this in the future, you’ll learn exactly what someone with level-nine special attacks can do.”

Eeaah?!

Swallowing this cry, Haruyuki shook his head vehemently. “I won’t say anything! I won’t remember it! Oh, I’ve forgotten, I’ve already completely forgotten it!”

She glared sideways at Haruyuki dripping with sweat, standing at attention, and a chastising smile rose up on her face. “Honestly. Even though the name Silver Crow is known across the accelerated world at this point, you’re still the same old you, aren’t you, Haruyuki?”

Slightly releasing the tension in his shoulders, Haruyuki returned, “A-and this scary part of you hasn’t changed at all, either…Black Lotus.”



“Well, that’s unexpected. I’m always so kind…Anyway, Haruyuki.” She cleared her throat with a cough and sat up straight again before continuing with a gentle smile, “Maybe it’s time for you to get it together and just call me by my name, instead of my nickname.”

“Oh!…R-right.” Nodding sharply, Haruyuki realized with a start a single preposterous fact. “Uh…um.”

“Hm?”

“I…I…Your real name…I don’t…know it…”

Snap.

The world froze again almost like when he was accelerated—no, harder and thicker than that.

But Kuroyukihime’s laughter mixed with a sigh melted it soon enough. “You…I thought you looked in my agenda?”

“Oh! I…I just glanced in it once, at the start…”

“Ha-ha. Of course. That’s very you, Haruyuki. Well then, let’s introduce ourselves anew, shall we? That said, it’s not that different from my nickname.”

A gentle breeze blew in through the slightly open window, gently diffusing the scent of the black lotus. Stretching her thin body up straight, she clasped both hands in front of her chest.

The beautiful older student and rebel Black King said in a clear voice, “My name is…”

END

AFTERWORD

I’m not sure when it started exactly, but whenever I’m faced with something, I always end up preparing for disappointment and discouragement.

Always expecting and preparing for the worst is not such a great thing as all that. The only thing is that if you give up right from the start, you at least can get away with using less energy when you do really end up failing.

When I started writing this story in October 2007, I was pretty sure I wasn’t actually going to finish it or anything. And when I did finish it, I was convinced I wouldn’t get all the deletions and revisions done to meet the guidelines of the Dengeki Prize. I continued to tell myself, as a matter of course, even after I sent my submission in, that there was no way I was going to make it through all the stages of judging.

Thus, on the occasion of winning the prize and being published, I was obviously not prepared to do things like write an afterword like this, and as of this moment, I am still at a total loss. I want to write something rich with brilliant insight and style, along with a wafting of sad pathos in the midst of vital humor, but since not one of these things is popping into my head, I’ll simply write down what I’m feeling at this point in time.

For me, it’s already a miracle that I managed to write this story.

Because as I write this afterword for the pocket book edition, an extension of the writing of the story, I can’t even guess at how minuscule the likelihood that it would have become a reality.

Haruyuki, the protagonist of *Accel World*, is also someone who tries not to hope for too much. But where he is decisively different from me is that

Haruyuki will squeeze out every last drop of energy he has to keep running away. He's incredibly dedicated to his pessimism.

This is just my thinking, but whatever trajectory it might take, as long as you at least have the energy, something is bound to happen at some point. Haruyuki's dedication can't be beat, but if there is a reason I won this prize other than miracles and luck, I think it might be the meager energy I stored up being pessimistic.

For my rough manuscript submission to become a proper book like this, I was honored to have the invaluable assistance of so many people.

Minoru Kawakami, not only for taking time out of his busy schedule to write the commentary, but also for his many suggestions for important parts of the action scenes. The *Accel World: Kawakami Edition* he wrote for this book is one of my most cherished treasures.

Hima, who drew so wonderfully my protagonist whose visualization I had expected to be fraught with difficulty. The other characters, too, are so vibrant that I almost think that this is how they always were; my own image of them has changed.

My supervising editor, Kazuma Miki, who always gave me guidance with such patience and careful kindness when I definitely could not be said to be obedient, despite the fact that I was a newbie who didn't know left from right. If I can always have this fountain of editorial power with me, I will continue to tap away at these keys with everything I've got.

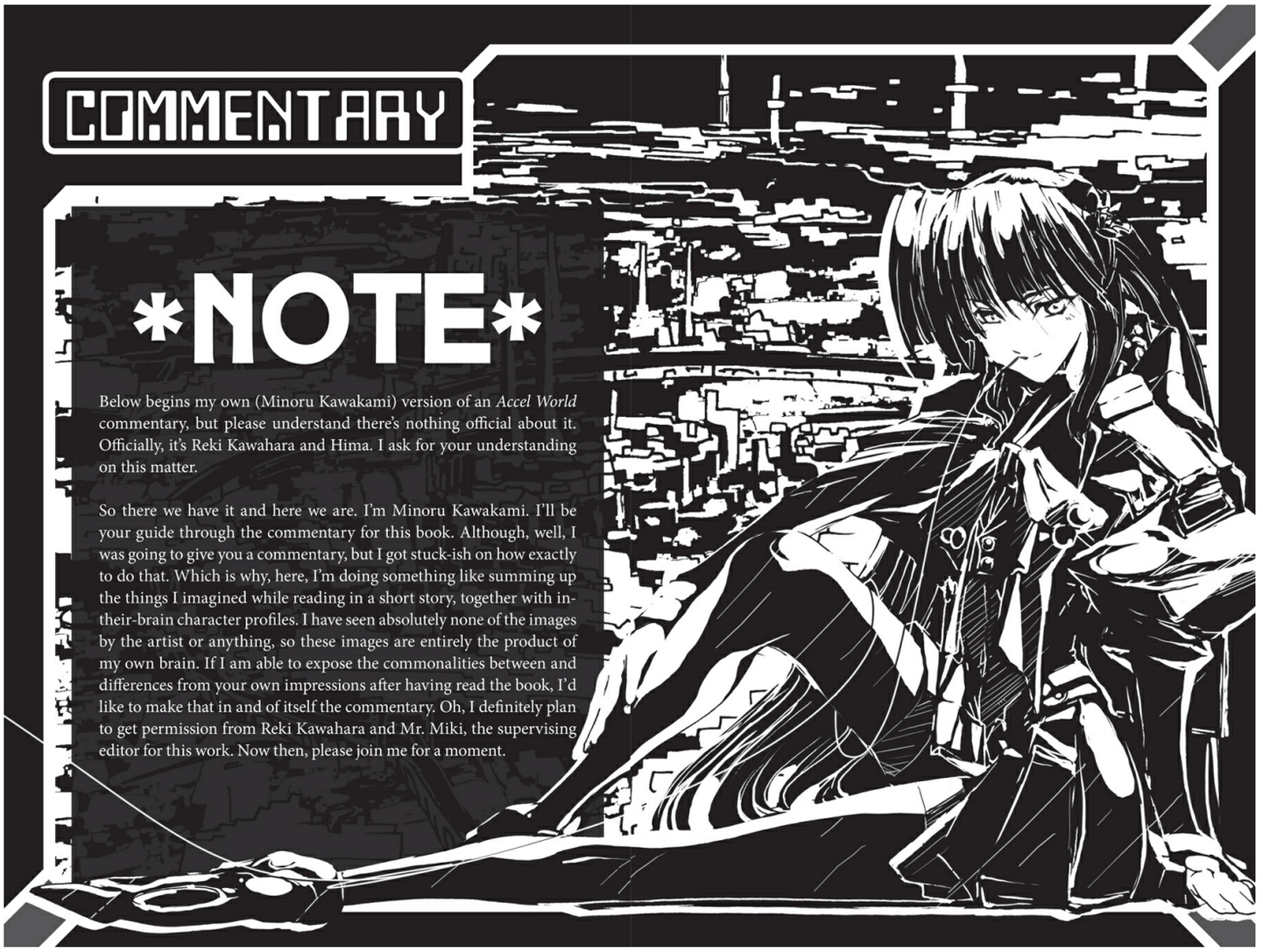
And the many people who have been supporting me these last seven years on the global net. It was precisely because of all of your support that I am here now.

Finally, my greatest gratitude to you for reading this far. Thank you so much.

November 28, 2008

Reki Kawahara

COMMENTARY



NOTE

Below begins my own (Minoru Kawakami) version of an *Accel World* commentary, but please understand there's nothing official about it. Officially, it's Reki Kawahara and Hima. I ask for your understanding on this matter.

So there we have it and here we are. I'm Minoru Kawakami. I'll be your guide through the commentary for this book. Although, well, I was going to give you a commentary, but I got stuck-ish on how exactly to do that. Which is why, here, I'm doing something like summing up the things I imagined while reading in a short story, together with in-their-brain character profiles. I have seen absolutely none of the images by the artist or anything, so these images are entirely the product of my own brain. If I am able to expose the commonalities between and differences from your own impressions after having read the book, I'd like to make that in and of itself the commentary. Oh, I definitely plan to get permission from Reki Kawahara and Mr. Miki, the supervising editor for this work. Now then, please join me for a moment.

Well, hello there, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Kawakami; I'm a second-year junior high school student with a duel avatar called "White Turnip." I have an old-looking face, and there are times when I seem to be more than thirty, and a little girl who sat in front of me on the train uttered the terrible words, "Mama, it's a murderer," but I am, in fact, a junior high student.

Like all of you, I'm also just another Burst Linker, but I'm not anything close to a fight freak like you. Things like that, that's the realm of children —Eep, sorry. I said too much. Let's see, to go back to who I am; I'm a programmer working to create improvement mods for Burst Linking.

For the Brain Burst world, a programmer like me is only there to provide elements of abundance or of bad health. But as long as we don't put together various types of the latter or as long as these combinations don't leak if they are put together, programmers are basically protected from every faction as contributors to the Brain Burst world. Which is to say, we're exempt from Duels and protected from unfair Duels. And if we're taken in by a faction, we get the burst points of those punished, so we level up quickly.

I also work under the patronage of a certain faction, but I make programs that are shared by all Burst Linkers. With the programs I make, first of all, the faction I belong to buys it with burst points, and then the faction's Blocker sells it to people in the Duel Gallery, in effect making the program a faction asset. There's competition and the commotion of changing teams for programmers like myself, and life gets quite busy, even though we essentially have an indoor job.

And now I'm making—you could almost call it my specialty at this point —a forwarder to send information from meatspace to an avatar in the Burst Link world. This forwarder will tell you what meatspace you is sensing and feeling while you are in the Brain Burst world, compressed a thousandfold.

…You say we don't really need something like that? That you're sped up over a thousand times, so even if you don't go back and check on your

body, it’s less than two seconds anyway?

I wonder. One: Let me first talk about something only the guys will understand.

Okay?

It takes point-three seconds for your mother to open the door behind you and come into your room.

Get it?

If you’re watching porn videos or in the middle of playing an erotic game, and you end up wanting to Burst Link because that stuff is just not getting you hard enough and you need more, and this slight return time lag might leave a stain on the memory of your boyhood years…When you think of it like that, the alarm to warn you that your mother’s in the room (abbreviated to “mother room”) in the forwarder I’m making becomes an essential item.

Oh, I don’t know about women. Hmm, that’s one unknown set of unknowns to work out.

However, currently, we’ve moved past version seven, and we only take burst points at updates, but I suppose this, too, is the style of a long unbroken line of programmers. My grandfather was an erotic-game programmer from the eight-bit era; he apparently fired a barrage of empty dialogue into the empty sky even as he was dying. He really was a model man. Although it’s a mystery as to how he ever got married.

And then the grandson of this remarkable man, me, also developed a taste for the X-rated games at the age of thirteen, and now I spend my days in the real world earning small change by unlocking the hardware on my friends’ Neurolinkers and making them region free. Heh-heh-heh, you guys, the text in the erotic games you all are playing now is a remake of the hot text my grandpa came up with sixty years ago. But Grandpa had Beast attributes. Can’t fight your blood. Oh, but I do wonder what kind of impressions he would’ve had if Grandpa had managed to live to the present day and age. No, forget it. I mean, Grandpa was a 2-D kind of guy, a world where polygons are useless. The one time I brought it up, we got

into a fight in the bath. You can't push your values on a kid. You gotta leave it to genetics.

In any case, I'm now testing version eight of the current program, and I seem to be plunging into some incredible areas as I do. I've come to understand the Brain Burst system, and I'm finally able to not just raise an alarm with the information from meatspace, but to forward the actual experience itself.

It may be stretched out a thousand times, but you can bring your five senses from the real world over to this side. You probably think there's no point in this. Because when you stretch out sound or whatever a thousand times, it simply gets stretched out, and that's that.

But right now, the truth is, meatspace me is in the middle of dinner. And I'm testing version eight.

Do you get what I mean?

Exactly. In my meatspace mouth right now is curry on a spoon.

Right, you get it, don't you?

My mouth is already closed, and the heat of the curry is pressed up against the roof of my mouth; the soft grains of rice are spilling over onto my tongue; the spicy sweetness slipping up my nose is the very essence of the Vermont curry. Medium-spicy for a junior high student…!

Because this is prolonged a thousand times, the heat of this spoonful of curry and rice will continue to sit in my mouth and on my teeth for thirty minutes. For the next thirty minutes, whatever I do, whether I go for a walk, look up at the sky, look down, sit in the Gallery, get in a Duel, go to sleep, the curry will be with me the whole time!

How about that?

Even if you were to lose a Duel, if you had curry the whole thirty minutes, don't you think you'd be glad you leapt into this Burst world?!

However…when you return to meatspace, you eat the rest! That is the curry that is a thousand times plus one!

But! But it doesn’t stop there. Human beings have more darkness in them than that.

Yes. If you get the timing right in meatspace, you can make every pleasure continue a thousand times longer in the Burst world.

Whoa.

Get it? Taking things simply in the erotic direction is a junior high–level reaction, isn’t it? Oh, I’m a junior high student, so I already did that. No, i-it’s a test, okay? A test! A test!! Well, I did give a midterm exam to my erotic-game partner in my house, but apparently, after crying out sharply in a strange voice for about five minutes on the floor of the other world, there was some kind of feedback in my flesh-and-blood body and meatspace me had a heart attack and nearly died. On the Burst side, too, you are utterly defenseless faced with your male destiny because you are completely impotent at fighting.

But that was a close one. I’d be in serious trouble if I died and the parent who found me at the scene misunderstood. Father, Mother, your son is not the kind of man who would die playing older-sister-type erotic games. That is precisely because he is one thousand times faster. If it was the blond, big-tit type, I’d probably die at five times.

Which is why that time the “winged one” that everyone’s talking about who somehow managed to start up a Duel with me was apparently looking for me and loitering around outside, but he would never even dream I was in my house, tossing my head back, pounding away, happily crying out, “Eeeaaah! Kawakami sweat’s comiiiiiiing!” throwing away my life and my caste. I don’t want to think about it, either.

But the worst damage might be the problems of the life and future production plans for the prosperity of my descendants, but that’s the forward on the visual side. My luck being bad, leaving me staring at my face for thirty minutes in that instant, reflected in the window, scarred psychologically, and it really is regrettable. The next time I do it, I’ll close the curtains, but I’ll also do it when I’m fed up with everything and I die. It’s actually kind of a tough thing.

But all you young men thinking you can't use this program. If that's the case, please listen carefully. This thousand-times forward, there are other ways to use it than just for sex.

That's right. Peeing.

The idea popped into my head the other day when I was standing there letting loose in the bathroom at school, and I went ahead and Burst Linked, but to be honest, I couldn't handle thirty minutes of letting it go. Also, it would be amazing if you could use your senses and make the opening like an anti-warship beam! It's like that thing, you know: how many pop bottles you can fill. Let's see, to put it into words, it was something like *E-everything in me is coming out…*Unconsciously, I went pigeon-toed, and during the thirty minutes I spent shaking like a Burst coward, the "staker" everyone's been talking about lately was apparently running around the halls looking for me, but he would never dream that my main battleground was the bathroom. I didn't really want to dream it, either.

In any case, you might think that version eight, with its greater destructive power, would probably bring about a rapid reform in the Brain Burst world, but that won't happen, since those guys who got wind of it early on kept complaining. I'll look into it a little more, and let's see, th-this is a test? A test, well, that's what I'd like to do, but those guys targeting the top brass of my faction come along, trying to find fault, all *You planning to sell to other factions?* Honestly, all of them, every single one, are perverted junior high students, which is seriously problematic. These guys who Burst Link those times they find a porn magazine on the roadside and pretend to pass by while looking them over a thousand times faster noodle around and feint each other out in the Burst world—all I can think is *You guys, okay*. I feel sorry for them, so I decide to pick it up in meatspace and flip through every page at high speed to show these Bursted guys. I get a lot of thank-you mails for these godlike actions, with my consciousness in both worlds, but you know, you should do good deeds. Although when I folded the magazine up halfway through and took it home, the number of Duel request appointments was greater than four digits.

I've gotten a little off topic, but in any case, with this forward, my boss is targeting me, and it's super annoying.

Like the other day, just when I was shooting off a huge one in my main battlefield, and I was testing the program with the thousandfold pleasure of getting it out into the world, that idiot comes riding along—No, I can't call my boss an idiot, but he's an idiot. However, this idiot—No, no, he's my boss, so (omitted). In any case, that time, I prolonged a thousand times the information on "the sensation of the moment you stick your finger in your nose" that I had previously saved, and forwarded that to his ass, earning a trip to the hospital, but there's a limit to how many times I'll be able to pull through that. I've been thinking it's getting to be about time I left the faction and struck out on my own, and today, I'm planning to go and take some temporary measures.

That's why I'm going to sell this forward, and, well, I'm deciding where to sell it. At the very least, it probably wouldn't be so great to let it be used for things like drawing out the pain of torture a thousand times or something.

I mean, Burst Linkers get hurt or sick in meatspace, too. Even if they can Burst Link in their hospital room, life in the hospital is pretty boring. However, if you have this program, you can stretch out the flavor of the snacks people bring you a thousand times. If you're limited to taste and smell, you don't just get the taste, you can also stop a flower or a moment in the season. Lately, there's also a faction of Burst Linkers who are taking care of hospital-related stuff and watching over people, so I have no doubt they'd pay big money for this thing.

But I'm also a heartless man. Yeah, I'll put this up for sale. As for payment, right. It'll be the price I feel like at the time, and you get to shake in your boots about when I'll come after you for some enormous sum after you've gotten your pleasure.

Now then, once I've eaten dinner, I guess I'll go and see those guys who've gotten some kind of clue. Oh, but I have to go to the bathroom first. It's nothing strange, gentlemen. It's the term-end test.

So something like that, I guess. The truth is this short story is something I sort of sent in after I accepted the job writing the commentary and dashed it off once my ideas solidified while chatting with Miki, the editor, immediately after I read the book. However, we did agree that this would be used as a bit of help in understanding the text; it really took it out of me, this job. Anyway, at the very least, all of you having finished reading the book no doubt had the sense of looking at the world outside and feeling that someone over there was fighting at a thousand times the speed. I think it's a novel that really has an appeal like a tool to stimulate the imaginations of a wide variety of readers…Oh, I didn't mean stimulates like Kawakami sweat or anything like that. On a larger scale, like (omitted).

On the next few pages are drawings of the characters and their avatars like I see them in my head and miscellaneous impressions. The artist's drawings are the official ones, so this is just me playing around, and I'd just be happy if they were a stimulation for you.

HARUYUKI



commentary

Maybe he tilted his head back. With Haruyuki, I'm sort of worried about the distance from his mom. Thinking about the structure of his house in the text, his mom did give Haruyuki the room with the windows and took the inner room for herself. Just wondering how Haruyuki understands this parent-child relationship. There's a lot of fun you can have with this protagonist.



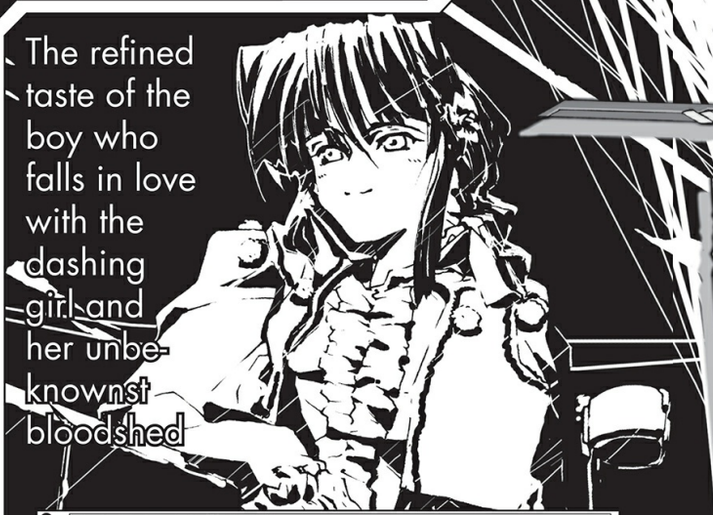
Haruyuki and Silver Crow, my style. Wondering what it would be like if the drive system and armor programs and data were depicted in parts. For the enhancements, it would be easy to have stabilized external parts for a Cyan-like body type, and internal improvements for a Crow-like mechanical type, but stability would be tough, maybe. Just blue skying here.



Silver Crow/Haruyuki

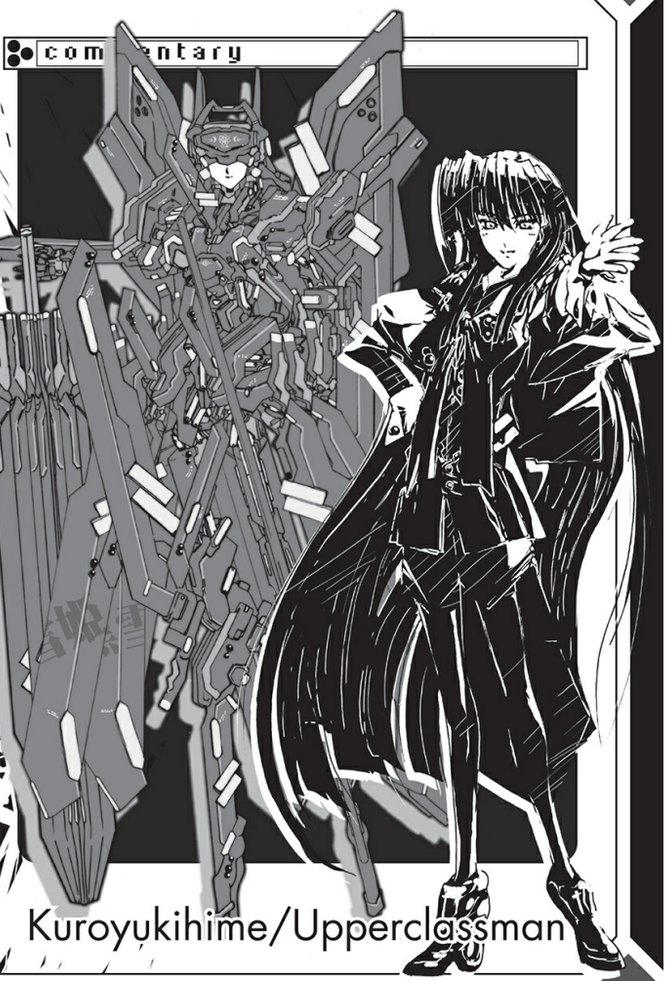
KUROYUKIHIME

The refined taste of the boy who falls in love with the dashing girl and her unbeknownst bloodshed



commentary

An upperclassman like me, Kuroyukihime... Get out of here, you!
The most fun person in life for no reason at all.
If Kuroyukihime was in disguise, she'd be in a skirt or something and the whole thing would be a sword covered by swords, and the parasol would be made of swords on top of one another and you could make it into a super sword or something. Just by squeezing her lower arms and below her knees in a vise, she'd end up like one of those round Daruma dolls.
The swords coming from her chest are a manifestation of her caution with her own self, but in front of someone with whom she can let down her guard, the front is left out and it's a throbbing blade or something.



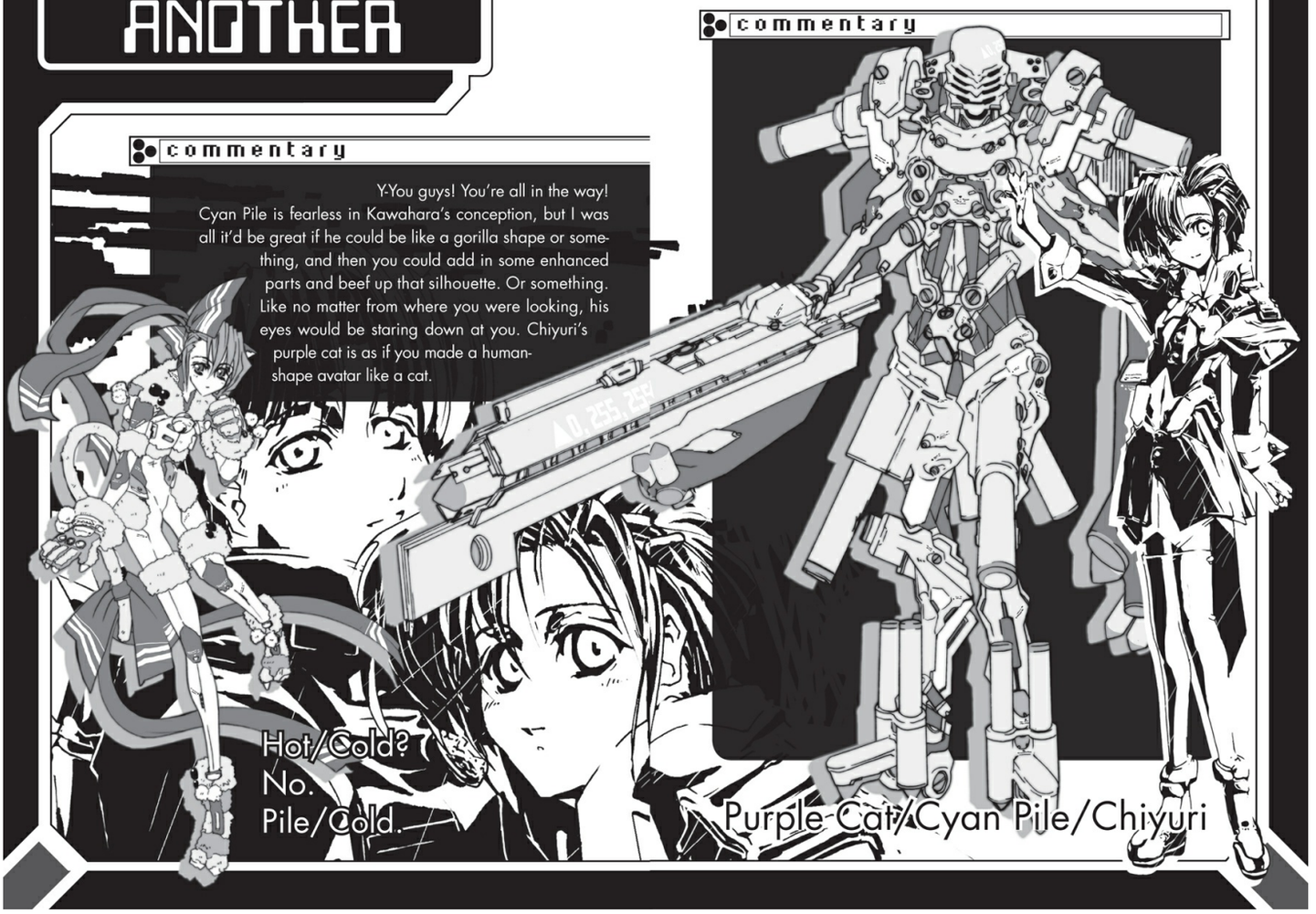
commentary

Kuroyukihime/Upperclassman

ANOTHER

commentary

Y-You guys! You're all in the way! Cyan Pile is fearless in Kawahara's conception, but I was all it'd be great if he could be like a gorilla shape or something, and then you could add in some enhanced parts and beef up that silhouette. Or something. Like no matter from where you were looking, his eyes would be staring down at you. Chiyuri's purple cat is as if you made a human-shape avatar like a cat.

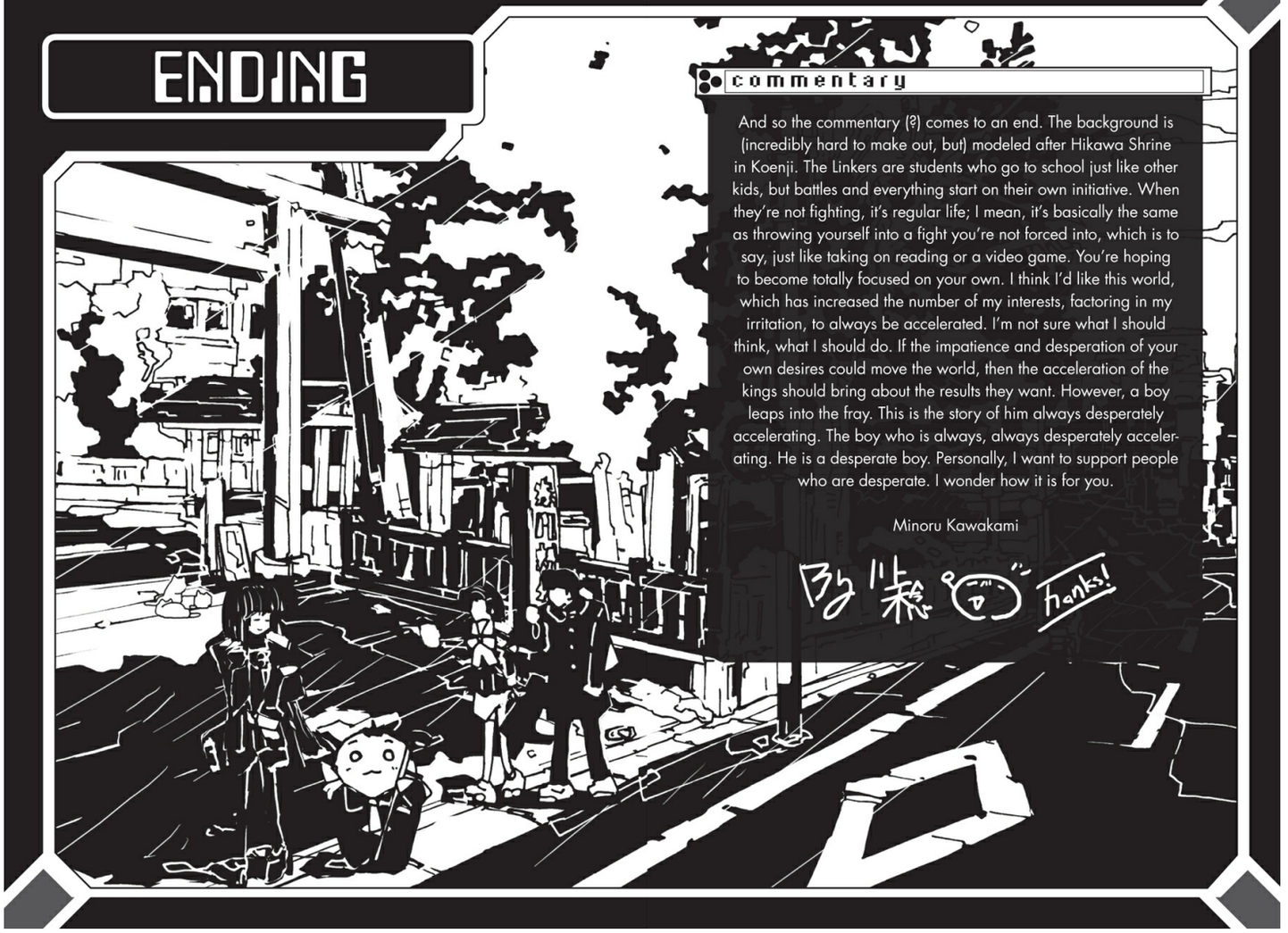


Hot/Cold?
No.
Pile/Cold.

commentary

Purple Cat/Cyan Pile/Chiyuri

ENDING



commentary

And so the commentary (?) comes to an end. The background is (incredibly hard to make out, but) modeled after Hikawa Shrine in Koenji. The Linkers are students who go to school just like other kids, but battles and everything start on their own initiative. When they're not fighting, it's regular life; I mean, it's basically the same as throwing yourself into a fight you're not forced into, which is to say, just like taking on reading or a video game. You're hoping to become totally focused on your own. I think I'd like this world, which has increased the number of my interests, factoring in my irritation, to always be accelerated. I'm not sure what I should think, what I should do. If the impatience and desperation of your own desires could move the world, then the acceleration of the kings should bring about the results they want. However, a boy leaps into the fray. This is the story of him always desperately accelerating. The boy who is always, always desperately accelerating. He is a desperate boy. Personally, I want to support people who are desperate. I wonder how it is for you.

Minoru Kawakami

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