
ACCEL WORLD
THE FLOATING STARLIGHT BRIDGE
05
REKI KAWAHARA
ILLUSTRATION BY
HIMA



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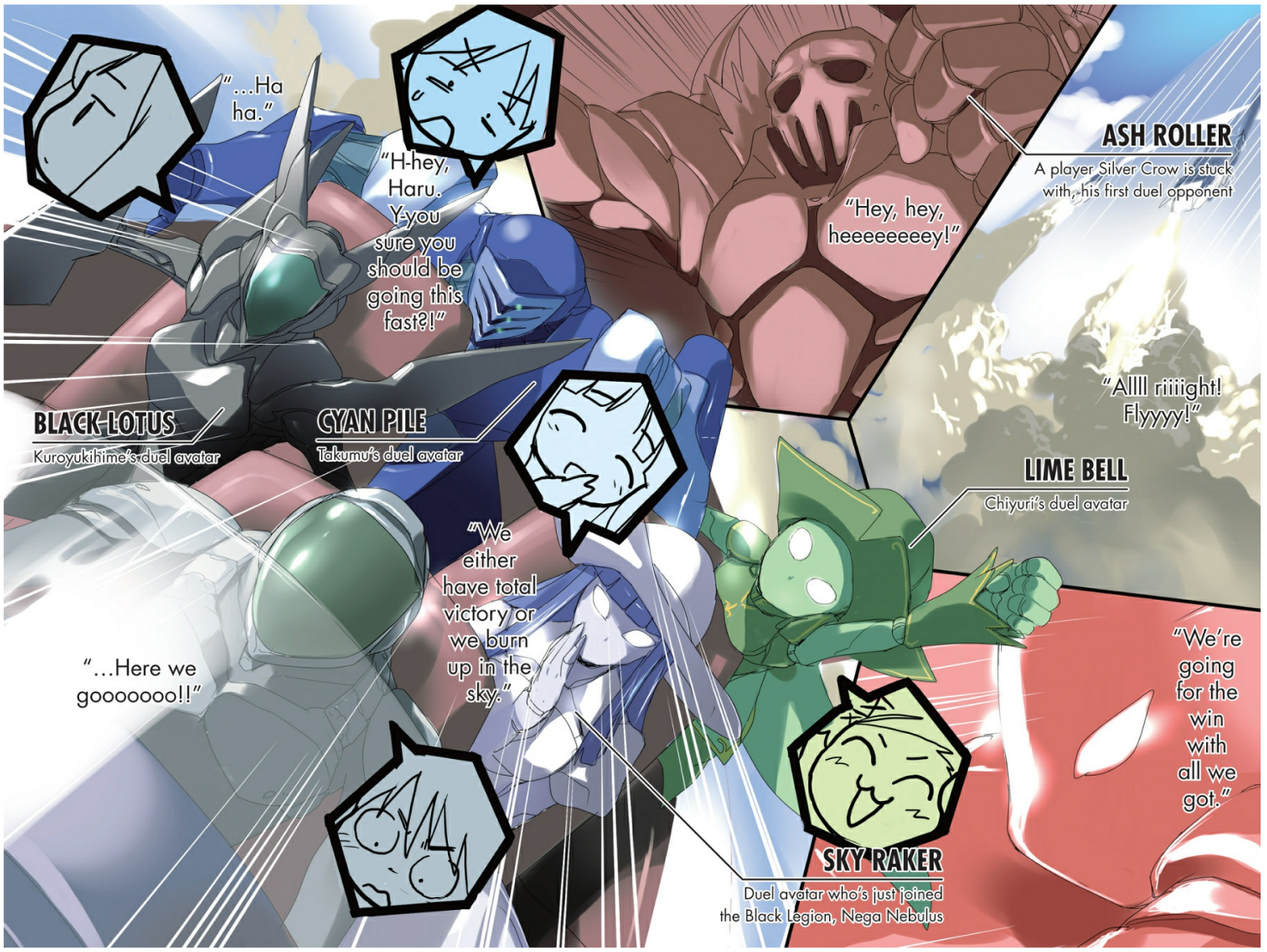
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"I've got it, Haru. Work out with me."
"H-Huh?! ...W-Work out... Where...How...?"
HARUYUKI
Boy in the lowest school caste
CHIYURI
Haruyuki's childhood friend


"P…P-P-P-P-Pard?! Wh-wh-what are you d-doing here?!"
SILVER CROW
Haruyuki's duel avatar
"Same reason you're here."
BLOOD LEOPARD
Mysterious maid clerk working at a cake shop


"Well then, I suppose I'll impose on your kindness."
"No, i-i-it's fine! My mom said she isn't c-c-c-coming home today!"
KUROYUKIHIME
The Black King
Vice president of the Umesato Junior High School student council, controlling Black Lotus

"Mmm...
mmm."
"¿!"


"...Ha ha."
"H-hey, Haru. Y-you sure you should be going this fast?!"
"Hey, hey, heeeeeeeey!"
ASH ROLLER
A player Silver Crow is stuck with, his first duel opponent
"Allll riiiight! Flyyyy!"
BLACK LOTUS
Kuroyukihime's duel avatar
CYAN PILE
Takumu's duel avatar
LIME BELL
Chiyuri's duel avatar
"We either have total victory or we burn up in the sky."
"...Here we goooooooo!!"
"We're going for the win with all we got."
SKY RAKER
Duel avatar who's just joined the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus

WHAT ARE THE LEGIONS THAT DIVIDE THE ACCELERATED WORLD INTO SEVEN TERRITORIES AND RULE OVER THEM?



ACCELERATED WORLD

Brain Burst, formally known as *Brain Burst 2039*, is a mysterious game program released seven years ago by an unknown producer, and it has already gone through several updates. Players—the number of whom is capped at approximately one thousand—become "duel avatars" and fight pitched battles, aiming to reach the pinnacle of the game, level ten.

Legions are groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights, the equivalent of a guild or a team in other online games.

There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color. These include the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus (with Kuroyukihime, aka Black Lotus, as its Legion Master) and the Red Legion, Prominence (helmed by Niko, aka Scarlet Rain). Haruyuki's Silver Crow and Takumu's Cyan Pile belong to Nega Nebulus.

Territory—the area controlled by a Legion. The system recognizes Territory when a Legion has an average win rate of more than 50 percent in Territory Battles against groups of the same size. These battles—available at any level—happen every Saturday night. In territories under the Legion's control, members of that Legion are given the right to refuse duels, even when their Neurolinkers are connected to the global net.

ACCEL WORLD 05

THE FLOATING STARLIGHT BRIDGE

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



YEN ON
New York

Copyright

ACCEL WORLD, Volume 5

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen Cover art by HIMA

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ACCEL WORLD

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).
■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High. Bullied; on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level five).
■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level four).
■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level five).
■ Sky Raker = Master Burst-Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. Lives as a recluse due to certain circumstances, but is persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the front line. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.
■ In-school local net = Local area network established within Umesato Junior High School. Used during classes and to check attendance; while on campus, Umesato students are required to be connected to it at all times.
■ 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.
■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.
■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.
■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.
■ Normal Duel Field = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.
■ Unlimited Neutral Field = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order from that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this Field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.

■ Movement control system = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.
■ Image control system = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal movement control system, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.
■ Incarnate System = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's image control system to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.

■ Acceleration Research Society = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.

1

They should just turn all of Tokyo into a covered shopping district already.

Haruyuki's racing thoughts had a desperate air to them as he walked home from school, kicking up the excess water that was not absorbed into the water-permeable paving tiles.

He had always hated the rain. The signal strength of his Neurolinker dropped (albeit by only the slightest margin); an umbrella blocked one of the hands he needed to operate his virtual desktop; and worse, his body, which already tended toward dampness, got even damper.

He stopped at a red light and looked out from under his umbrella. Even though it had been raining the whole day, the heavy, leaden color of the sky was unchanged; the clouds were still swollen with water. On the right edge of his field of view, alongside the news headlines, the chance of rain display was a line of numbers like "eighty" and "ninety" until the following morning. Apparently, the rainy season front had no intention of leaving the Kanto region any time soon.

How great it would feel to just leap up and shoot through to the other side of that gray expanse. No matter where he looked there would be a sea of white clouds spreading out endlessly against an ultramarine sky, watched over by the blazing sun. This was a sight he had seen countless times in Storm stages, but naturally, he had never experienced it in the real world.

He could imagine it, at least. Standing on his tiptoes, he flapped his virtual wings and—

"It's green, you know!"

Whap! A hand slapped his back, and Haruyuki practically fell onto the

crosswalk. He just barely managed to avoid face-planting into the ground and stepped forward at a brisk pace to hide his embarrassment.

"…Hey," he said, looking to his side.

"Hey." His interlocutor twirled a bright yellow-green umbrella. Chiyuri Kurashima. She splashed along in water-repellant sneakers, looking for all the world as if she not only did *not* feel a heavy gloom at the oppressively leaden sky but, in fact, actively enjoyed it.

"Did you get a new umbrella?"

When he asked about the unfamiliar object, his childhood friend blinked her catlike eyes awkwardly and nodded.

"Yeah…And you don't even need to start with me! I know what you're going to say! For some reason, I'm just really drawn to this color for little things like this. Because of my avatar, I think."

"Yeah, that happens. Before I knew it, my memory card case, my direct cables, they were all silver."

Two months earlier, in April, Chiyuri had become a Burst Linker, and the armor of her duel avatar Lime Bell was a lime green just like its name. She hadn't been very fond of the color at first, but before she knew it, more than a few of her possessions, including her trademark large hair clip, had been replaced with bright green counterparts.

"But don't go so far as your Neurolinker. Someone might end up outing you in the real because of it," he remarked, looking at the pale purple exterior of the VR device attached to her slender neck.

"Whatever, Haru!" Chiyuri popped her cheeks out. "You and Taku and Kuroyuki all have Neurolinkers the color of your avatars!"

"B-but I've been using this one since forever. The next time I change models, I'm going for a different color."

"Proooooobably piano black, I bet." She glared at him out of the corner of her eye, and his eyes unconsciously froze. His childhood friend laughed, rolling her eyes fondly, as she tilted her brand-new umbrella back and gazed up at the sky

from underneath it. “It sure is pouring, though, huh?”

“Yeah, it really is…Oh, hey. What about practice?” Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, belatedly realizing that normally he, a member of the go-home team, and Chiyuri, a member of the track and field team, never walked home at the same time.

Chiyuri shrugged. “Whenever it rains, we always stay in the gym doing strength training or we go swimming in the indoor pool,” she replied, as if the whole thing bored her. “But today, other teams are using both, so we ended up having to cancel practice. It’s not fair that Taku and the kendo team get their very own dojo…Aah, if I don’t get some exercise every day, I feel so gross, like all my muscles are fading away or something.”

“You do? Really?” Haruyuki said, a little admiringly, given that he himself boasted of being a version of humanity that was the polar opposite of an athlete.

Chiyuri blinked as if remembering something and abruptly took a step toward him, placing her hand on his arm. He grew flustered at the sudden contact, and under her sharp gaze to boot.

“I’ve got it, Haru,” she said. “Work out with me.”

“H-huh?!” His eyelids flew back, and his mouth flapped open and shut before he finally managed to ask, “W-work out…Where…How…”

“What’s that reaction about? O-ohh! You were thinking something perverted, weren’t you?!” Her stern glare poured down over him once more before she brought a teasing smile to her lips. “I was just thinking we could go and duel. Tag team–style. What else could I have possibly meant, hmm, Professor Arita?”

“Th-that’s totally what I was talking about. Obviously.” Haruyuki feigned a calm he didn’t feel and cleared his throat conspicuously before continuing. “What I meant was, what area and what kind of rules we should fight with.”

“Ohh, hmm, well.” Fortunately, she was apparently willing to bail him out here; a broad smile spread across her face as she pointed at the Chuo Line above the road ahead of them. “It’s still early. Let’s go to Shinjuku. Maybe we can get above the clouds if we’re on the observation deck at the government

office.”

“I seriously doubt that, but whatever, sounds good.” He shrugged and was aware once again of the weight of Chiyuri’s hand still resting on his right arm.

Fourteen years earlier, in 2033, Haruyuki Arita and Chiyuri Kurashima had been born in the same high-rise condo complex in north Koenji. Their apartments were also only two floors apart, so they had basically been raised like twins since infancy. Given how large the complex was, there were of course many other children their age in the building, but the only person, other than Chiyuri, Haruyuki had been friends with in that whole expanse of time was Takumu Mayuzumi, who lived in a different wing.

Takumu had gone to a different elementary school, so Haruyuki could forget his everyday worries when they were hanging out. And the sole reason his relationship with Chiyuri hadn’t changed, despite the fact that they went to the same school, was likely because of her strength and kindness.

When he started to be targeted by older bullies in elementary school, Haruyuki, not wanting Chiyuri to see him in such a pathetic state, had tried to put some distance between himself and her, but she had stubbornly refused to let him. He understood now just how much pressure she must have faced back then for remaining friends with a kid everyone else picked on. And yet, until they were in fifth grade, she had walked home to the condo with him every day and hung out until evening, inviting Takumu to join them to play video games or explorers. That time the three of them spent together after school was etched deep in Haruyuki’s memory with a golden hue.

Oh, hey, maybe it’s like that for Chiyuri, too.

Because the resource for the pseudo–healing ability of Chiyuri’s duel avatar, Lime Bell, was probably—

“Train’s here.” She jabbed him with an elbow, and he raised his head to see that the train was already pulling into the Chuo Line platform.

“Right,” he assented, watching the orange train car coming in from the west, and then adding in a small voice, “…Huh, Chiyu.”

“Huh? You say something?”

“N-no, nothing.” Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head, feeling his chest tighten for some reason at the sight of his childhood friend looking back at him, her short hair swinging. “Oh! We might be able to get seats!”

“Come on, it’s only two stations!” An exasperated voice he was only too familiar with chased after him as he flew into the train car.

After taking the pedestrian walkway that stretched out underground from Shinjuku Station’s west exit to the government building, they jumped onto the elevator that went directly to the observation deck on the top floor.

Vween. A brief sense of acceleration pushed down on them and then disappeared. The digital floor-number display on the wall changed with incredible speed, and the concrete wall soon turned to glass.

“Whoa,” Chiyuri cried out as they flew upward. “Amazing, this gray…”

“You can’t really see anything with the rain.”

He had expected this. Hindered by the curtain of ceaseless rain, they could see almost nothing of the vast evening metropolis that should have been unfolding before them to the south. And as they went higher, mist clung to the glass, blocking the city from view entirely. The elevator decelerated—making them feel like they were floating—and finally stopped, along with the announcement that they had arrived. Beyond the doors, the world was dyed a uniform white.

Rebuilt in the thirties, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building now rose up to a height of five hundred meters. The only building in Japan, never mind Tokyo, that was taller was Tokyo Skytree in Sumida Ward. But Skytree’s second observation deck was at an altitude of 450 meters, so the top floor of the government building was actually the point in central Tokyo closest to the sky.

Running out of the elevator, Chiyuri placed both hands on the expansive glass in front of her. “Whoa! Amazing, it’s totally white.”

“So basically, we’re in the mist now, instead of the rain.” Grinning wryly, Haruyuki came to stand next to Chiyuri. The other side of the window gleamed a milky color, as though it had been covered in thick cotton.

“Too bad, huh? We can’t see the sky at all,” he said.

Chiyuri, who had always been terrible at giving up, glared up at the sky, but then quickly looked back at him and smiled. “Well, whatever. Thanks to this, we have the whole place to ourselves.”

And indeed in the midst of this foul weather, on a weekday evening to boot, there weren’t too many idly curious city dwellers bothering to come up to the observation deck; not a soul was around.

“We came all this way! We make at least one round!” Chiyuri shouted, abruptly hooking her left arm through Haruyuki’s right and yanking him forward.

“R—! R-right.”

Somehow, Haruyuki generally managed to speak to Chiyuri normally in his real-world voice like he had when they were kids, but if she got the slightest bit cozy, the behavior of his mouth and tongue immediately became suspect. Giggling at his affected state, Chiyuri started walking clockwise around the outer passage of the observation deck.

Naturally, no matter how far they went, the scene outside did not change. White lumps of cloud simply twisted beyond the clinging droplets of water. Still, Chiyuri moved her feet rhythmically, without pulling even one dissatisfied face.

The current state of his relationship with his childhood friend was a little hard for him to grasp. Two months earlier, right after a particularly difficult and painful battle, Chiyuri had wrapped her arms around the necks of Haruyuki and Takumu and hugged them, shouting through her tears, “I love you both.” Ever since, she had been completely carefree and open with them and tried to have the three of them hang out as much as she could, in the very spirit of this declaration. It was almost like she was trying to rewind time, back to when they had played together every day until it got dark outside.

“That reminds me, Haru.”

“Wh-what?” Haruyuki abruptly lifted his face at hearing his name.

“We came to duel and everything. We might as well connect globally already. Then the tourist information tags will show up outside.”

“Ohh…Right.”

They were currently disconnected from the global net. Shinjuku Ward was the territory of the Blue Legion, Leonids, which meant that if they left their connection on, another Burst Linker could challenge them at any moment. Hypothetically, going into duel standby mode while on the road was dangerous, but up here on the deserted observation deck, they would have no problems if they were automatically accelerated without advance notice.

Haruyuki nodded and first opened his Brain Burst controls to team up with Lime Bell. This way, on the matching list, they would be clearly noted as a tag team, and their challengers would basically be limited to other two-person teams. Then, he and Chiyuri simultaneously connected their Neurolinkers to the global net.

Immediately, countless tiny holotags popped up to fill his field of view, the guidance display for all the famous spots and big buildings they would have been able to see if the sky had been clear. Among the names he could see were nearby Shinjuku Station and Southern Terrace, with Kabukicho beyond them both, so he assumed they were facing east.

“I guess looking at just the tags isn’t so interesting, after all.” As Chiyuri laughed wryly, the thick clouds momentarily opened up as if the weather gods were taking pity on them, and the heart of Tokyo in the evening light suddenly spread out before them. She flew over to the window with a cry of delight, and Haruyuki hurried to stand next to her.

Seen with the naked eye from an elevation of five hundred meters, the massive city presented a chaotic figure, a tapestry woven from five hundred years of history. Just when you noticed the cutting-edge layered structures glittering brilliantly around Shinjuku Station, the sites of Shinjuku Gyoen and Akasaka immediately beyond that sunk into a dim gloom, almost entirely unchanged from the previous century. And farther off in the east was an even darker space, vast, reminiscent of the large black hole at the center of the Milky Way—the Imperial Palace.

Obviously, in the real world, this was a place where the casual visitor was not permitted, but Burst Linkers like Haruyuki and his friends were also unable to touch images from inside the palace because—highly exceptional for modern-day Japan—the security system in that space was not connected to the social

camera network. Thus, the game was unable to reproduce the real structure from camera images as it did for other famous places, and so the Imperial Palace in the Unlimited Neutral Field of the Accelerated World was always an original, magic-castle-type structure.

But then, how would the opposite situation work?

Currently, the Brain Burst program hacked into the nationwide social camera net to create its Field. Its range included even Okinawa prefecture, which was not actually connected to the main island of Honshu; that fact allowed Kuroyukihime to run across the sea stretching out from Okinawa to Tokyo in the Unlimited Field. So what if there were also places *outside Japan* monitored by social cameras? Would Burst Linkers be able to "go" there…

"Hey, Chiyu?" Haruyuki said as he stared absently off into the east.

"Hmm? What?"

"Lately, okay? On the news, there was this story about exporting the social camera technology—"

Did you hear about it?

Haruyuki didn't get to finish his question.

Skreeeeee! A familiar screech assaulted his ears, and his vision went black. Automatic acceleration. In other words, some Burst Linkers in the Shinjuku area had found the Haruyuki/Chiyuri tag team on the matching list and immediately challenged them to a duel. In the center of the darkness burned red, flaming text: HERE COME NEW CHALLENGERS!!

The thought of only a millisecond earlier was at once swept away by his excitement at the duel, his first outside the Nega Nebulus area in a long time.

2

Legs enveloped in silver armor landed on a thick, mossy branch. When he lifted his head, the scene had completely changed from the rainy skyscrapers of a moment before. The sky was a bizarre mauve, and all the tall buildings had been transformed into enormous, rough, and bony trees. Several thick ropes of ivy hung down among these, with a few pterosaur-like silhouettes flying leisurely among them.

Haruyuki looked down on the dense forest below from a branch near the terrifyingly high peak of what had been the Shinjuku Government Building. “Ugh,” he grumbled. “A Primeval Forest stage. I’m bad at these.”

“Why?” a voice next to him replied immediately. “It’s so pretty. It’s way better than some brutal map like a Wasteland or a Century End.” The owner of these words was, of course, Lime Bell, clad in translucent emerald-green armor. Round, cute eyes glittered beneath the brim of her large, triangular hat.

“Well, sure, at first glance, it looks fun. But, like, there’s too much stuff in the way when I fly, and I can’t see the ground at all in this place.”

“Quit whining! You have to practice fighting on the ground sometimes, too, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Haruyuki nodded as she slapped him on the back with the bell of her left hand.

The characteristics of the Primeval Forest stage were extremely poor field of view due to the thick plant growth, and a ridiculous number of small animal objects known as “critters.” Enormous carnivorous beasts also existed in this stage, and although they were few in number, duelers still needed to factor in their possible intervention when putting together battle strategies.

Reviewing the stage attributes in the back of his mind, Haruyuki glanced up to the right and checked the two HP gauges lined up there.

A two-person tag team had challenged them to this duel: the level-five Frost Horn and the level-four Tourmaline Shell, both active members of the Blue Legion, Leonids, and whose names Haruyuki knew only too well. Since he was currently level five and Chiyuri level four, there was no difference in terms of the numbers, but their opponents had likely become Burst Linkers a fair bit before them. Taking a simplistic view of the situation, they might be assumed to be better than Haruyuki and Chiyuri, who had leveled up fairly quickly, but in truth, that was not the case.

This was how it worked: Burst Linkers were broken up into several types based on personality. For instance, there were the daredevils who took no account of win ratios and pushed whomever they could into a duel whenever they could, wherever they were, and the more conservative Linkers who carefully weighed advantages and disadvantages and aimed for the stars within reach with duels they could win. Even if Burst Linkers from two such disparate groups were at the same numerical level, they differed greatly in an invisible way: accumulated battle experience.

When Linkers challenged a higher-ranking avatar they had no hope of beating no matter how they struggled, or an opponent whose avatar attributes they were not compatible with and would inevitably lose to, the duel gave the Burst Linker experience separate from the numerical points they might have won: battle techniques, knowledge, and above all else the heart to stand firm in a tight spot.

Naturally, the play style of the daredevil group was less effective than that of the clever group. From time to time, they would be pushed into anxiety about burst points and would occasionally have to apply themselves to hunting Enemies in the Unlimited Neutral Field. But his teacher, Kuroyukihime, told him that in the end, it was this type who had the higher likelihood of making it to the top levels. Thus, Haruyuki made a conscious effort not to be choosy about his opponents once he had made up his mind to duel and gone out into the city; his aim was to maintain a style somewhere in between the daredevils and the clever kids, but…

The pair who had challenged them now, in particular Frost Horn, was well known as go-for-broke guys, with a daredevil level far above Haruyuki's. Which was exactly why they had not hesitated in the slightest to yank Haruyuki and Chiyuri into the Accelerated World immediately after they appeared on the matching list.

Noting from the movement of the guide cursor in the center of his vision that the enemy team was heading straight for the government building tree they were perched in, Haruyuki resolved to go along with his opponents' style.

"Chiyu, you wanna just get down from here and get this over with quick and dirty?"

"Sure." His partner grinned. "After all, if I can't see you, I can't heal you, and I've been practicing hand-to-hand combat lately, too!" She waved the bell of her left hand and smashed five or six of the hard-looking nuts hanging behind them.

Having been hit on the head by that bell in the past, Haruyuki unconsciously flinched before stretching a hand out to his partner. "All right, then how about we do a surprise attack from above!"

"Yeah!"

She offered her hand and he grabbed on to it before fearlessly stepping off the branch five hundred meters up in the air. They went into an upside-down free fall, aiming for the point indicated by the guide cursor, a spot in the hazy forest far below.

The cursor only gave a rough idea of the enemy's bearing, however. Thus, the opposing team wouldn't immediately realize that Haruyuki and Chiyuri were rapidly approaching directly above their heads. To make sure they used this bit of deception to their fullest advantage, Haruyuki delayed decelerating until the very last possible minute. The wind howled in his ears, and the ground approached with terrifying force. Although he was used to dives like this, he couldn't stop himself from holding his breath.

But Chiyuri, diving right next to him at the same speed, didn't even move her mouth to cry out; rather, her eyes shone with the thrill. She had some serious balls. Or maybe it wasn't okay to use that word to describe a girl…

“Found them!” A sharp whisper interrupted his meandering thoughts. “Below that huge red flower!”

He quickly shifted his gaze and glimpsed a big shadow and a small shadow racing through the dense growth of tall Rafflesia-like plants. The one on the right with light blue heavy armor and enormous horns growing from his forehead and both shoulders was Frost Horn. To the left, clad in sharp bluish-green armor, was Tourmaline Shell.

“I’ll take the one on the right, you get the left. Hit ’em with everything you got,” he said, and got a firm nod in response.

The enemy should have already guessed that Haruyuki and Chiyuri were either on the ground or somewhere in the government building tree. However, in mere seconds, both sides would come into close range, and the cursors would disappear. They had to decelerate and get ready to attack immediately before that happened. Haruyuki opened both eyes wide and focused his entire being on calculating that timing.

“Here we go. Five seconds to deceleration—three, two, one, zero!” He clutched Chiyuri’s hand tightly, and on zero, he fully deployed the wings on his back.

To make the enemy mistakenly believe they were on the ground, Silver Crow hadn’t dared charge up his special-attack gauge. Thus, no thrust came from his wings, but he was able to use them like a parachute. The metal fins caught on the air and put the brakes hard on their descent. Using the deceleration force to turn them around, he stretched out his left leg and assumed a diving-kick stance. Chiyuri did the same, tugging slightly on his hand, and adjusted her sights. The guide cursor then vanished from his field of view.

In that instant, the enemy tag team realized that Haruyuki and Chiyuri were unexpectedly close and stopped so abruptly that they dug grooves out of the earth. After quickly glancing around at their surroundings, they threw their heads back up at the sky.

But they were too late.

“Yaaaaaaah!”

“Hooooooo!”

Together with these battle cries, Haruyuki with his left foot and Chiyuri with her right kicked through the Rafflesia petals and plunged down onto their respective targets at an acute angle.

The timing was such that even these skilled fighters couldn’t evade the strike free of injury. Frost Horn and Tourmaline Shell both crossed their arms in front of their bodies and braced themselves to block. Nonetheless, they were concussed by dive kicks storing up the kinetic energy of a descent from a height of five hundred meters.

A splashy light effect and a crashing noise filled the stage, as if a special attack had hit its mark.

“Mngh!”

“Hrrnk!”

Cries slipped from Horn and Shell as they hunkered down and fought to deflect the blow. Their feet gouged into the green earth, carving out four deep ruts. But no matter how large they were, it was impossible to completely guard against such a powerful attack.

The struggle for supremacy broke in a mere second: Horn and his partner were simultaneously thrown backward. Still digging deeply into the ground, they skidded back, only to crash into a large tree trunk far, far away. The impact effect shook the stage once again, and the health gauges in the top right sank almost 30 percent.

Having succeeded in making the first strike, Haruyuki and Chiyuri landed on the ground via a backward somersault, and several voices cried out in the distance.

These shouts—“Oh, wow!” “You almost never see that kind of damage with a normal attack!”—were those of the Gallery, sitting in twos and threes in branches high above, looking down at the battle zone. Despite the fact that it was a weekday, there looked to be more than twenty people gathered there—unsurprising given Shinjuku’s status as a duel mecca.

As the excitement died down a little, Frost Horn and Tourmaline Shell—

knocked over backward, legs popping up out of the shrubbery—now leapt to their feet. They staggered slightly with the aftereffects of the damage they had taken, but they found their footing quickly enough and started shouting loudly in turn.

“Dammit! You were up on the observation deck! I bet you couldn’t see anything at all! I mean, raining like that!”

“That’s not the point, Horn! It’s a date, get it? These two were on a date, Hoooorn!”

“Wh-wh-what…So they figured on a date, might as well duel…?!”

“That’s exactly it, Horn! They think they’re gonna take us down and then be all hugs and kisses, Hooooooooooorn!!”

“U-unforgivable, Tori! Burst Linkers like this need to be wiped oooouuuut!”

This skit appeared for all intents and purposes to have been prepared in advance, and the Gallery around them flared to life once again. Mixed in with the explosions of laughter came one-sided comments like, “That’s right, that’s right,” and, “Show ’em what the loveless are made of.”

Listening to this exchange dazed Haruyuki, and he shook his head fiercely back and forth. “N-no, that’s not— I mean, a date or—”

“If you’re so butt-hurt about it, maybe you should team up with a girl, too!” Chiyuri cried out as if to pour fuel on the fire, drowning out Haruyuki’s stammered objections.

“Y-you don’t pull punches.” Frost Horn reeled back, unsteady once more.

“Yup, yup.” Hands on hips, Tourmaline Shell bobbed his head in agreement. “We don’t have a lot of girl Linkers in our Legion. I mean, just the idea of a group of close-range fighters stinks of sweat.”

“This isn’t the time for patting each other on the back! We’re all here; we gotta beat them back and make the road home for these two a little awkward at least!!”

“Whoa! That’s, like, seriously amazing, Hoooorn!”

“Shut up! We’ll show them how a real man lives! Here we go…”

As Haruyuki stared dumbly at their little sideshow, Frost Horn suddenly readied his thick arms at his sides. The hard horns growing from his forehead and shoulders took on an intense light.

“Frosted Circle!!” He shouted the name of the attack, causing rings of bluish-white light to race outward with a *whoosh*. They pushed through Haruyuki and Chiyuri, and then scattered off behind them.

The speed and range were such that they couldn’t evade the attack, but the light itself was harmless. Their gauges didn’t move a pixel.

However, Haruyuki braced himself anew and waited for the phenomenon that would follow. He had fought Frost Horn several times in the Territories, but this was the first time he had been hit with this special attack directly. He was pretty sure that rather than causing direct damage to the enemy, the attack changed the properties applied to the area.

Cling, cling! Accompanying the sharp sound, the plants around them started to take on a whitish hue. Particles of light glittered in the air—they were all Frost. Crystallized water adhered to any and all objects, clothing them in a costume of ice.

Silver Crow’s smooth, mirrored armor clouded at once. “Bell, I’ll take Horn,” Haruyuki said in a low voice as he watched a fairly thick layer of frost descend on his limbs and the extremities of his armor. “Keep Shell in check until I finish him off.”

“Okay.” Immediately after this short reply—

“Waa…aaaaah!”

A throaty roar echoed from the other side of the veil of frost, and an enormous shadow came charging straight at him. Frost Horn. Just like Haruyuki, his light blue armor was caked in frost. The horns on his forehead and shoulders appeared to be covered in an especially thick layer of ice.

He came at Haruyuki with a vicious shoulder tackle, right shoulder thrust far out. Haruyuki dropped his stance, opened his eyes wide, and watched for the moment to dodge and counterattack.

“Haah!” He flew to the right and to avoid being hit.

But his body was a fair bit heavier than usual because of the frost clinging to it, and his start was slow. It wasn't a direct hit, but the horn scraped him, and he felt the crunch of impact in his left shoulder. Gritting his teeth, Haruyuki held his ground, turned toward Horn as he slid past, and threw his right fist into his opponent's flank.

But this time, too, his timing was off because of the added weight. Covered in the dense frost, Haruyuki's short, straight punch would have caused greater damage than normal if it had hit the mark, but that force stopped at a mere light grazing of Horn's body.

This was the main effect of the special attack Frosted Circle. It increased the weight of the extremities of any duel avatar within range, interfering with small, swift attacks and serial attacks. Conversely, large, one-shot attacks became more powerful. It also had secondary effects: because Frosted Circle made it extremely difficult to see any distance, it effectively prevented getting distance for a sniper attack, and, because of the cold, it rendered thermal homing useless.

In other words, it forced nearly every type of avatar within the area into a fierce struggle, making it a fearsome ability in a variety of ways. Even if an avatar tried to move outside of the range of the effect, the frost was generated over a broad swath with Horn at its center, so running away was no easy feat.

Haruyuki glared at the shadow of Horn turning around in the distance and readying himself for another charge using his horns. *All right*, he murmured to himself. *I'll dance with you.*

While he was firming his fists and fighting spirit, he glanced over at the other pair of avatars facing off not far away.

His partner Lime Bell was similarly frozen white. The bell of her left hand, in particular, looked very heavy, with several icicles hanging off it.

But…

Tourmaline Shell didn't have a single particle of frost sticking to any part of him. The smooth, curved armor covering his slender body was unchanged from the start of the duel, glittering an almost wet bluish-green color. No—it actually *was* wet. The ice that tried to coil around him melted the instant it touched him

and turned into drops of water.

This was the reason Tourmaline Shell and Frost Horn liked teaming up together.

When struck by anything, that tourmaline gem-colored armor took on an electric charge and generated heat. And although there were many electric-and heat-type avatars, there weren't too many who continuously generated heat. Shell was one of a very few avatars on whom Horn's special attack had absolutely no effect.

Tourmaline Shell readied sword hands, thin sparks crackling as they crawled along his arms, and came after Lime Bell in a single fluid movement. He launched one close-range attack after another with flat-handed strikes straight out of Chinese kenpo. Bell was blocking solidly, her large bell raised up in place of a shield.

Being a fairly high-saturation green, Lime Bell had a defensive ability that blew metal colors out of the water. On top of that, the thick frost covering her arms seemed to be blocking almost all damage from Shell's Electric Heat Palm. As long as she focused on blocking, she would be able to essentially maintain her HP.

However, the enemy tag team was no doubt expecting exactly this.

Horn and his partner naturally knew that Lime Bell was a Healer, extremely rare in the Accelerated World. In a duel like this, where both teams had an identical total level, if one team used the healing ability even just once, the possibility of defeat for the other team spiked.

Thus, they had come up with the battle strategy of Shell, who was able to move around freely within the range of Frosted Circle, keeping Bell occupied with successive, cutting blows while Horn took care of Crow. Although Haruyuki and Chiyuri had succeeded in attacking first, the duel since they had descended had proceeded exactly according to the enemy's plan.

To break out of this deadlock, Haruyuki had no choice but to defeat Horn without backup. *But I knew that the minute I decided to fight a close-range battle on the ground!*

Haruyuki brought his transient thoughts to an end with this shout and focused his awareness on the shadow of Frost Horn charging.

In the earlier confusion, he had physically experienced the added weight of the frost sticking to him. He should be able to just barely dodge this next onslaught and offer up a counterattack.

Horn had his left shoulder forward this time, horn readied low like a battering ram. Haruyuki swallowed his fear and stood his ground as bait.

Now!

The instant he went to kick at the ground the slightest bit sooner than usual to avoid the hit, the tip of the sharp horn slammed into Haruyuki's left shoulder.

"Aaah!"

Crying out involuntarily, he went flying helplessly. Spinning, he crashed into the ground but didn't stop there; instead, he bounced back, high up. If he fell again from there, he'd take extra damage, and so Haruyuki somehow managed to pull off a landing on both feet to avoid that damage penalty, if nothing else.

That said, at just a single blow from the spike, Haruyuki's health gauge had been depleted by nearly 20 percent. A deep indentation had been gouged out of the armor of his left shoulder, and sparks snapped and cracked as they scattered. That particular pain of serious localized damage raced along his nerves, but more than that, Haruyuki felt an enormous surprise.

His timing should have been perfect. Why had the horn attack—which had to be much slower than a bullet—hit him so dead-on?

The answer was revealed by Frost Horn, standing imposingly a little ways off.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Surprised you, huh, birdman! You're always flying around up in the sky, so you wouldn't know, but you see these stylish horns little me's carrying around? The longer they're in the Frosted Circle, the longer they get! They stand all sturdy and tall, right!"

"…Wh-what…" Gaping, he stared hard and saw that the cone-shaped horns stretching out from the large blue avatar's shoulders and forehead, encased in a thick ice, were indeed a fair bit longer than they had been at the start of the

battle. And they were getting bigger with each passing second even at that moment. In other words, he could learn the timing after taking any number of tackle attacks, and it would still be pointless.

“Whaddya think?! This is! A real man’s! Weapon! Ah-ha-ha! Haaaa!”

At Horn’s high-pitched laughter, cheers of “Hear! Hear!” and interjections like “That’s just rude” poured down from the members of the surrounding Gallery.

Haruyuki took a deep breath and expelled it again as he listened to them.

I made a mistake somewhere along the way here.

Fighting recklessly without choosing my opponent looks kind of like tearing down my own style to push myself into a fight, but they’re not the same. Thinking I could win on my opponent’s turf without any kind of strategy at all is exactly the same as sneering at my opponent. When facing an enemy, I should be digging out everything I have and fighting for real right from the start. And if I don’t do that, there’s really no reason why I should have a chance of winning.

I’m going full throttle starting now!

Haruyuki made fists of both hands and thrust them out to deploy the wings on his back. With the damage they’d done at the start and the hits he’d taken, his special-attack gauge was nearly half full. He’d get Chiyuri to heal them and then they’d flee to the sky. They could wait there for the Frosted Circle to be released before attacking with another double super dive to crush Tourmaline Shell first—

“Geh!” In the middle of plotting out his strategy in his mind, something unexpected happened.

His wings didn’t open.

He immediately peered around at his back and saw the thick frost clinging to the metallic fins folded up there. It must have been acting as an adhesive to prevent them from deploying.

Hurriedly, he brought his hands around to his back and tried to rub the frost off, while Horn watched.

“Whoa! What?!” he cried. “Serious chance! Aaaawesome!” Dropping his hips,

he readied the remarkably large horn on his forehead and positioned himself for a dash forward.

With the shoulder tackle, Frost Horn had already shaved away 20 percent of Haruyuki's gauge. The forehead was apparently the main attraction; he absolutely could not get slammed with it. That said, if he abandoned the idea of a counterattack and just focused on running around, the situation would only get worse. He had to do something, something, anything—

"Heeeyah!!" A forceful battle cry echoed through the stage.

Glancing over, he took in the sight of Lime Bell catching Tourmaline Shell's chopping attack with her right hand and sending him flying with a magnificent one-armed throw.

Set free with a *pop*, Shell crashed on his back nearly ten meters away from her. However, frustratingly, in a stage like the Primeval Forest, where the ground below was grass or sand, throwing techniques had little effect. The bluish-green avatar sustained no significant damage and was ready to bounce back onto his feet right away.

But it seemed Chiyuri had had something else in mind with the one-armed throw.

She whirled around without so much as a glance at where her opponent had landed and brought the large bell of her left hand high up into the air while shouting, "Citron Caaaaaaall!!"

The bell came back down with a twirling flourish, and the lime green light that gushed from it, accompanied by a beautiful ringing, advanced in a straight line toward Haruyuki.

And passed immediately by his left arm to disappear futilely in the frost behind him.

"Wha…" Haruyuki's dumbfounded voice was overwritten by Frost Horn's high-pitched laughter.

"A-ha-ha! In the Circle, like, light techniques have a hit rate thirty percent lower, you know! If you're a real man! Fight! Mano a manoooooo!!"

Whk! White frost danced up around Horn's feet. He pushed off hard to plunge ferociously forward at Haruyuki. The long, large horn on his forehead glittered.

Haruyuki racked his brains frantically in that brief instant of the enemy closing in on him.

However poor her field of view might have been, had Chiyuri actually missed with her special attack there?

She was the serious type when it came to things like that. If she was going to use her healing ability, she would wait for a time until she was sure of success. And more than that, Haruyuki's health gauge was still down by only 20 percent. It was too soon to pull out Citron Call, given the poor mileage it got.



Which meant that Chiyuri had meant to miss, or rather she had been aiming at something that wasn't Silver Crow.

And the element other than the duelers that was able to move around in the battle in this Primeval Forest stage was…

The instant his thoughts reached this point, Haruyuki's eyelids flew back and he understood exactly what he had to do. He waited for Frost Horn's charge, dropping into a martial arts stance with one foot forward, and calculated the direction he should dodge in.

"Waa…Ngyaaah!"

Haruyuki pretended to be overawed at this throaty howl from Horn, turned, and ran with all his might to his left, perfectly tracing out the line Chiyuri's special attack had drawn earlier. From behind, a subterranean rumbling closed in on him, and he was bursting with the foreboding of damage ripping into his back.

After braking urgently and abruptly, he faced straight up and kicked at the ground with every ounce of his strength. He spread his arms out, bent his back, and flew past Horn in a backward somersault in order to come at him from behind.

His enemy believed Silver Crow couldn't use his wings. So he shouldn't be expecting Haruyuki to dodge upward. And sure enough, although he felt the sharp tip scrape the center of his back, Haruyuki danced through the air, taking no more of a hit than that.

The large avatar charged forward in a straight line in Haruyuki's reversed view of the world. Ahead, in the dancing curtain of white frost, an enormous elliptical shadow floated up.

"Whaaoo?!"

The cry came from Frost Horn. He flapped both hands and tried putting the brakes on his charge. But because his feet were half frozen, he wasn't able to stop immediately. Sending spectacular amounts of frost flying, he plunged

straight into the round shadow.

Krrshk! The dry and yet somehow wet sound of destruction rang through the air.

The enormous ellipse broke into large pieces, and a transparent viscous fluid poured out. The something that crawled out from inside gave an angry cry, a *greee* to send chills down the spine.

It was an enormous creature object, the sort you always had to be watching out for in a Primeval Forest stage. There were many different kinds—carnivorous beasts and dinosaurs and even predatory plants—but as a general rule, no matter what type of creature it was, it would attack any duel avatar who entered its sights without discrimination.

The sole exception to this was when its egg was broken.

Disturbed in its peaceful sleep inside the eggshell, the large creature would single-mindedly hunt the avatar who had done the deed for a full five hundred seconds, which was well over eight minutes. At that moment, an enormous long-horned beetle looked down on Frost Horn, its four eyes shining red as it clacked its large and sturdy jaw.

As exasperated voices from the Gallery—“Aah, now he’s done it”—rained down, Horn threw up both hands and started to talk to the carapaced creature.

“W-w-w-wait! If we just talk about this man-to-man, I know we can figure it out!”

“Gree gree greeee!!”

Unfortunately, it appeared to be female. Mowing down the surrounding Rafflesia with its large feelers, the long-horned beetle began to chase the avatar, which was half its size. As Horn shrieked and struggled with which way to flee, the large jaws snapped at the air above his head—*klak klak*—several times.

Naturally, the giant creature eggs that could spawn such terror didn’t exist just anywhere. Even if you wanted to incorporate them into your battle strategy, you could spend your whole time in the duel searching intently and never find even one.

But this one time at least, it wasn't by accident that the egg rolled along.

Chiyuri had made it. In the midst of the duel, she had noticed the shadow of the enormous insect moving on the other side of the frost. And then she had released her special attack, making it look like she was aiming at Haruyuki, but actually targeting the insect.

In truth, Citron Call was not a healing ability; it was the power to rewind time for its target. It recovered the health gauge as a sort of pseudohealing, but it would also cancel out things like changes in Enhanced Armaments, and if it hit any stage objects, it would set their status back as well. Destroyed items were returned to their original state; giant long-horned beetles reverted to eggs.

Obviously, in the normal course of things, Frost Horn would have realized something was up and never approached the egg. But the frost drifting thickly through the air blocked vision and hid Chiyuri's target. As a result, Frost Horn followed Haruyuki's invitation and charged right into the egg.

"Eeeeeaaaaaah!!"

The shrill scream of the man and the angry cry of the giant bug receded deep into the western woods, in the direction of Shinjuku Central Park. The Frosted Circle went with them, and their surroundings soon enough returned to the original brightness.

Tourmaline Shell stared dumbfounded at his partner's flight before turning back with a gasp and resting his eyes on Haruyuki and Chiyuri in turn. "I'll get vengeance on Horn's behalf! C-come and get meeeee!!"

And, of course, they did.

"Nice work!"

Beaming, Chiyuri thrust her right fist forward and Haruyuki bumped it with his own before sliding slowly onto one of the benches lined up in the hallway of the top floor of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building. He let out a long sigh and, after disconnecting from the global net for the time being, turned a dazed face out at space.

It wasn't as though anything other than burst points had been at stake; they had just finished a normal duel, but he was ridiculously tired somehow. It was

probably because he had pushed himself into intense hand-to-hand ground combat, a way of fighting so unlike his usual style.

Honestly, the stress of not being able to fly was like having no water in the desert, despite the fact that around the beginning of the first term there had been a period where he couldn't use his wings for more than a week. Yet that experience seemed to have just increased his yearning for flight all the more.

And that's how it was for Haruyuki, who was still only in his first year as a Burst Linker. So for *her*, having been in this world for more than six years, it was no wonder she burned with a nearly mad passion for the sky. Although it was impossible to even get a sense of this fire from her normal calm demeanor…

"Hey! What are you spacing out about?"

Bopped on the head, Haruyuki hurriedly blinked several times in quick succession.

Chiyuri, next to him on the bench, had her cheeks puffed out and was glaring at him sideways. Apparently, she had started talking to him, and he had just let it slip right by.

"S-sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked you if you wanna go one more time!"

He looked at the clock display in the lower right of his field of view: Only a few minutes had passed since they'd come up to the observation deck. This was par for the course given that a Burst Linker duel ended in at most a mere 1.8 seconds in the real world, but Haruyuki thought about it for a moment before replying. "Hmm, I kinda think that if we stay here and wait for another fight, it's just gonna be Horn and Shell again, y'know? But I guess that's fine, too."

Rolling her cat-shaped eyes exaggeratedly, Chiyuri also shook her head. "Yeah, going up against the same team would be kinda boring. But, like, we came all this way together; it seems like a waste to just do solo fights."

If she had been in her in-school local net avatar, she would've been twitching her large cat ears. Or at least that was the look on her face as she fell into thought. "Oh! I've got it!" She abruptly clapped her hands together. "We're right here in Shinjuku—let's call my big sister! She's at a high school in Shibuya,

right? It’s just one station, maybe she’d come.”

Haruyuki was the tiniest bit surprised. Because the “big sister” Chiyuri was talking about was the same “her” who had popped into Haruyuki’s mind earlier.

Her name was Sky Raker. A senior Burst Linker and old friend of Kuroyukihime who had joined—or rather returned to—Nega Nebulus just two months before.

The reason why Chiyuri called this Burst Linker her “big sis” was exceedingly simple. Chiyuri’s last name was Kurashima, the “shima” of which meant “island,” while Raker’s real name was Fuko Kurasaki, the “saki” of which meant “peninsula.” When they exchanged name tags at their first face-to-face meeting in the real, Haruyuki had casually made the offhand comment, “Shima and saki together. You must be long-lost sisters, huh? Ha-ha-ha!” And that was where that started.

Without waiting for Haruyuki’s response, Chiyuri started typing out a mail to this elder “sister,” inviting her to join them. As his childhood friend pecked at her holokeyboard somewhat awkwardly, Haruyuki struggled with whether or not to tell her to stop. Because he had the feeling first and foremost that Raker would definitely decline the invitation.

Although she had in fact returned to the Legion, Sky Raker had not been released from the criminal consciousness that bound her. To that very day, she deeply regretted how, long, long ago, she had left the Legion in such a way as to abandon her leader, Kuroyukihime. Chiyuri, of course, also knew about all of this. She was most likely trying in her own way to knock on the locked door to Raker’s heart.

Which is why Haruyuki once again closed the mouth he had opened.

A few seconds later, when Chiyuri had finished typing out the mail, she connected her Neurolinker to the global net for an instant to send it. She disconnected again, waited for a bit, and then connected once more. After getting Raker’s reply and cutting free from the network one last time, she glanced over the text of it.

“…She says sorry,” Chiyuri murmured, lifting her face and smiling slightly, and Haruyuki offered the words he had readied.

“Raker’s in high school and all; she has to be superbusy on weekdays. She’s supposed to be in the Territories this weekend. We’ll see her then.”

“…Yeah, you’re right.” His childhood friend heaved a sigh before smiling broadly, as if changing emotional gears. She said in an abruptly spirited voice, “So, okay, how about we fight solo once apiece?”

“Hmm, I kinda feel satisfied with that fight before. But if you’re still wanting to go, I’ll totally join you, of course.”

At this response, Chiyuri nodded, a happy look coming to her face, this time from her heart. “Okay. We got to have a fun, cool win, so I’m good for today, too. Aah, that really did feel great!”

“Yeah, I guess.” He returned her smile and reflected on the earlier tag-team match.

He was quite pleased at simply having won in a contest of strength, avatar to avatar, but more exhilarating than that was that it had been a strategic victory, where they’d taken full advantage of the characteristics of the stage. Not to mention that that kind of upset victory—turning around a bad situation—almost never happened. The eruption of the Gallery when the battle had been decided was proof of that.

Of course, this did make the regret of the side taking the hit all that much worse.

Frost Horn somehow managed to shake free of the hot pursuit of the enormous long-horned beetle and return to the battlefield, only to face a concentrated attack in short order. And almost as if Chiyuri had also remembered Frost Horn’s magnificent parting words at the same time as Haruyuki, they both spurted with laughter.

“Pft, heh-heh! ‘Next time, we’ll be the ones dropping on you! From the top of Tokyo Skytree to kick you in the heads!’ We’d totally see it coming and step aside, and then they’d crash into the ground like that, game over.”

“But, no, wait, even before that, how’re they gonna get up there? It’s like two hundred meters from the observation deck to the antenna at the very top, and to begin with, are there even social cameras…that high up…” As he spoke, a

thought abruptly flashed up in the back of his mind and Haruyuki's mouth decelerated.

The thing he had been trying to remember right before they were challenged to the duel…The bit about the first export of the social camera technology outside of Japan. The memory of something he had caught only a glimpse of in the headline news finally came back to him.

Chiyuri cocked her head to one side at Haruyuki's sudden silence. "What's wrong, Haru?"

"Oh, uh, n-no, it's nothing." He shook his head vigorously, and Chiyuri shrugged before leaping to her feet.

"Okay, then! Let's get tea somewhere before heading home. It's all sunshine for you, huh, Professor Arita?! You're not stuck with me all awkward on the way home after losing pathetically!"

He could talk about games forever, but this type of line never failed to make his brain flicker.

"N-no, it'd be fine. I mean, I don't care about losing. It's fine. Really," he mumbled awkwardly.

Chiyuri had already started walking toward the elevator, and her laughter glided through the air to his ears. Sighing, he hurried to catch up with her.

Outside the windows, white clouds kept up their constant flow.

3

Having said good-bye to Chiyuri two floors below in the condo and returned alone to his deserted apartment, Haruyuki had no sooner changed out of his school uniform than he had plopped himself down on the living room sofa and started racing his fingers along his virtual desktop. He first opened a browser and entered the search words through voice command.

“Social camera export.”

At the very top of the list of results displayed immediately was the news item: *Japanese security system introduced to Hermes’ Cord.*

Security system. Obviously, the social camera technology.

And Hermes’ Cord was—

The name of the space elevator above the eastern Pacific Ocean.

He clicked on the link with a finger, and reading the text of the article, Haruyuki thought ardently about the whole thing.

In brief, what the article was saying was that the security system for the space elevator, an international facility, had adopted the same technology as the Japanese social camera network.

The Earth-side station for the space elevator was in the coastal waters of Christmas Island, vastly far away from Japan. If social cameras were set up in a place like that, then that place would be incorporated into the Brain Burst areas, wouldn’t it? Assuming that was the case, was there a way to dive there?

After cranking away in his head for half a minute or so, Haruyuki quickly abandoned the effort. He just didn’t know enough to figure out the answer. Not about Brain Burst, and not about the space elevator, either. Maybe this was the

time to turn to his leader for guidance. Right, she would know much more about both. He closed the browser, launched his mailer, and then hesitated briefly.

After examining the ratio of the degree of his desire to simply discuss it with her and his desire to talk big, he came to a conclusion of “Right! Sixty–forty!” and quickly typed out a text mail to make an appointment for a dive call. A dive call with this woman of letters who excelled in all subjects, one of the most senior Burst players, and the leader of Nega Nebulus, the Black King aka Kuroyukihime.

The time specified in the response that came right back to him was twenty minutes later. During this time, Haruyuki finished off a supper of frozen shrimp doria and oolong tea before going into a full dive a minute before the set time and switching the environment data of his home local net for the object set he had downloaded from a site overseas.

Previously, when he had similarly invited Kuroyukihime to his home net, the only sets he had were either very cold or stank of gunpowder, which had thrown him for quite the loop socially, so since then, he had been collecting things that would create a good atmosphere. Although his mother did complain that he needed to stop filling the home server storage capacity with junk.

He pushed the connection request button almost the instant he had everything set up and the appointed time came. After a few seconds of the call placement sound, an avatar appeared before his eyes.

Jet-black dress, silver trim glittering. Folded parasol the same dark color. Spangle butterfly wings on her back with a red pattern.

This fairy princess, with just the slightest bit more mystique than she had in the real world, looked first at Haruyuki’s pink pig avatar with a smile, and next at her surroundings. She then abruptly opened both eyes wide and let out a cry, clinging to the pole next to her with some force.

“Wh-whoa!”

“Huh?! Wh-what’s the matter?!”

“Wh-wh-what’s the matter? *This* is the matter! Wh-wh-what is this

environment data?!”

At her consternation, Haruyuki hurriedly took another look around.

Mountain ridges a hazy purple. An expansive forest and meadow, and a white stone city. The two of them were at the top of a very tall tower where they could see the entirety of this beautiful scene. There was no handrail or anything of the like on the very small watchtower—which was only three meters in diameter, with two chairs placed in the center along with a gas lamp—so the view was exceptional.

“Uh, um…I-isn’t it beautiful? I found this object set on a German site a while ago—”

“Before we get to that, exactly how tall is this skinny tower?!” she asked with a pale face, and Haruyuki peered over the edge, straight down. He felt like the distance from the ground was about the same as that of the observation deck at the government office, from which he had fallen in the duel that evening, and so he replied as such.

“Uh, let’s see…maybe about five hundred meters—”

“That’s too high, idiot! Or were you aiming for a suspension bridge sort of effect?!”

“H-huh? What do you mean?”

“The suspension bridge effect is, well…In a dangerous place like a suspension bridge high up, due to a misunderstanding of the feeling of fear…” Halfway through her explanation, Kuroyukihime stopped talking before lightly clearing her throat and glaring at Haruyuki. “At any rate, that sort of psychological issue has no effect on me! Although…it’s not a duel, so nothing will happen even if I do fall, but at least have the decency to give a little warning in advance at times like this…”

The end of her sentence lost to muttering, Kuroyukihime finally stood up and sat down in the chair next to him. Haruyuki had also sat down earlier, and he spoke now slightly dejectedly.

“Um, I’m sorry for scaring you. Should I change it to a different object set?”

“No, it’s fine. Regardless of how high up this is, you went and searched this set out for me.”

He saw a faint smile rise to her lustrous lips and breathed a sigh of relief. “Uh, um.” He scratched his head with the rounded hoof growing from his right arm and gave her a belated welcome. “Good evening, Kuroyukihime. I’m sorry for calling you out like this so abruptly.”

“Good evening, Haruyuki. I’m glad I could see you now since we didn’t get a chance to talk at school today.”

Umesato Junior High’s school festival was at the end of June, and because this was the last big event for the current student council, Kuroyukihime, being the vice president, was extremely busy every day. Remembering this, Haruyuki took this chance to ask a question that had occurred to him countless times before now.

“That reminds me. Why did you join the student council anyway? The president and vice president are decided in an election, so does that mean you campaigned for it?”

“Mmm. Well. Given how fixated I am on simply becoming a level-ten Burst Linker, your question of why is a very good one. The administrative things and conferences take time, leaving me no time for dueling.” Letting a meaningful smile slip across her lips, Kuroyukihime continued. “However, to answer honestly, the reason I became a council member was all for Brain Burst.”

“H-huh?!”

“Think about it. For a Burst Linker, the school that you attend is the closest to you, and thus, the most dangerous field. You could even say that having a grasp of all that information and firming up the ground beneath your feet is, in fact, essential. As a student council member, I have nearly full access to the school database. And from that perspective…” Here, Kuroyukihime grinned at him and gave voice to something entirely unexpected. “Speaking of which, there is the matter of after the student council elections next term at the start of the second term. How about it, Haruyuki? You could stand for president.”

“Wh…Wh-wh-wh-wha-wha-wha—” Jumping slightly in his seat, Haruyuki twitched his pig’s nose at high speed. “N-n-n-n-n-no way, no way! I-i-i-if I did,

that would be like giving the whole school a Supreme Court–mandated license to dump on me! Totally!”

“Mmm, in that case, it might work if I left Takumu to be president and you to be vice president—”

“That’s! Not! The problem!” Decisively firm in his refutation, speech slightly colored by Frost Horn’s tone, Haruyuki decided to force this train back onto its tracks. “Anyway, I fought a duel in Shinjuku today.”

“Mmm, I heard the talk. A hard fight against Leonids’ starting team.”

“N-news travels fast.” Haruyuki blinked rapidly and Kuroyukihime’s smile shifted to something a little more sarcastic.

“Of course I know about it. Apparently, you and Chiyuri are perfectly in tune with each other.”

“Oh no, that’s…I mean…ummm…”

“What’s the matter? I’m not reproaching you. As Legion members, the most important thing is for you to work well together, isn’t it?”

A cold sweat sprang up on his brow at the Kuroyukihime Smile special attack, and he once again reoriented the train. “Right around the end of that duel, our opponent said something like he was going to jump from Tokyo Skytree and kick us, and that’s when it suddenly hit me!”

Quickly opening his browser, he called up the article at hand and slid the window over to Kuroyukihime. “Um, Kuroyukihime, do you already know about this?”

“Japanese security system in Hermes’ Cord? Mmm, I feel like I caught a bit of this on the evening news.” She glanced at the holowindow before lifting her face and cocking her head to one side. “So what about this article?”

“Um, well…It really is just an idea…and maybe you’ll tell me I’m totally, way, way off base, but…I mean, I kinda feel bad for calling you here over something like this at all, but…” After setting up this mumbling guard at top speed, Haruyuki finally got to the heart of things. “That security system is the social camera technology, right? So then that means that the whole of the space

elevator in the Pacific Ocean comes within range of the cameras, doesn't it? So I was just thinking…Hermes' Cord would show up in the Accelerated World, too…"

Even after he trailed off there, Kuroyukihime's eyes were practically popping out of her head, so Haruyuki readied himself for her to burst out laughing at this totally idiotic idea or to get mad at him for calling her over for such a pointless matter.

However.

"Hmmmmmmm." Humming at length, Kuroyukihime placed the fingers of her right hand on her chin and stared down at the browser window one more time. Eventually, she lifted her head and shook it lightly. "What can I say…You really do let your thoughts roam, hmm? But it's…interesting. Mmm, it is a truly interesting idea."

"Uh, uh-huh," Haruyuki said idiotically, not knowing how he should react, while before him, Kuroyukihime made her avatar get up from the chair and begin pacing in the middle of the narrow observation tower, almost as if she had forgotten her fear of the five-hundred-meter height.

"Assuming social cameras had indeed been set up there…Normally, that would be a closed net…But I wonder if the Hermes' Cord central station has the extra space and power to accommodate that enormous image processing system? Either way, connecting with the SSSC in Japan with a satellite circuit and having them process the data would be much more efficient. And cheaper, too. In which case…there's a possibility that even the Brain Burst program could at least slip past the defenses…"

"Uh, um," he somehow managed to interject, moving both of his short hands intently. "I don't really get it."

Kuroyukihime stopped moving abruptly and waggled the index finger of her right hand as if she wasn't sure how to explain it. "Mmm. All of which is to say, Hermes' Cord is a low-Earth-orbit space elevator, so the design is incredibly pared down."

"What's low Earth orbit?"

“…That’s where I have to start?”

A small, wry grin crossed her lips, and Kuroyukihime sat down once again. She cleared her throat with a light cough and called up a blank window. On the bottom, she drew a circle with her finger and wrote “Earth” in the middle of it in a flowing hand.

“So then, let’s start with the basics. To put it simply, for a space elevator—also known as an orbiting elevator—you build an extremely tall tower from the surface of the Earth into space, and then you use an elevator that goes up and down this to move people and materials. The transport cost by weight is so low, launching a rocket or a round trip with a shuttle doesn’t begin to compare. However…” Kuroyukihime’s finger moved, and an enormous cylindrical tower shot up from the round Earth.

“Assuming the same construction methods as Tokyo Skytree, to build a tower that would reach up to space, the base area would have to be on a scale large enough to swallow up Japan entirely, like it is here. Constructing such a Tower of Babel is utterly and entirely impossible in practice. Here, we change our way of thinking.”

The tower immediately disappeared, and next, a small square was drawn in space, far away from the Earth.

“We build a station like this in stationary orbit thirty-six thousand kilometers away from the Earth. We then suspend from there a strong and lightweight cable toward the Earth. Since the speed of objects going around in geostationary orbit is basically perfectly synchronized with the rotation of the Earth, for all appearances, it never moves from that one spot in the sky above the Earth. Just as the name says, it’s stationary. Thus…” The line coming straight down from the square—the station in geostationary orbit—hit the Earth. “If you attach the end of the cable to the Earth, you get a tower like this. Or rather, a ladder that reaches from the Earth to space.”

“Oh! I get it!” Impressed, Haruyuki slapped his knee with the hoof that was his right hand. But he soon furrowed his brow and popped his head sideways.

“No, but…Hold on a minute. No matter how light the material is, if that cable is thirty-six thousand kilometers long *and* thick enough to set up an elevator in

it, the total weight has to be incredible, right? They don't pull that up and drop it on the Earth from the station in orbit, do they?"

"They do!" came Kuroyukihime's immediate reply, and he slid back in his chair.

"That's…"

"As to how they do it, here's how." This time, she had a line stretch out from the top of the station and circled with her finger to draw a dot at the end of it. "All you have to do is stretch out a cable from the top as well and attach a weight to act as the center of the station's load—its center of gravity, in other words. Once you do this, an upward vector is generated due to the centrifugal force of the rotating weight, and that balances the downward load the cable creates."

"Oh! I get it!" After being impressed once more, Haruyuki craned his neck yet again. "So where do they get this weight from?"

At this, a meaningful grin made its way across Kuroyukihime's lips, and some fairly unexpected words came out of her mouth. "The concept for this geostationary orbit space elevator actually was announced by NASA in the United States more than forty-seven years ago, in the year 2000. But at the time, it was projected for completion in 2062."

"Huh?! B-but that's still…way ahead?"

"Mmm. So why did they set a date so far in the future? Because in NASA's plan, they were going to *catch an asteroid passing close to the Earth* and attach that to the tip of the cable stretching out above the station in geostationary orbit and use it as the weight."

"What?! They were going to catch an asteroid?!"

"Exactly. The idea was that if they waited until '62, a reasonable-size asteroid would luckily be flying by, and they would have developed the technology to catch it by then."

"That's fifteen years from now, right?…Isn't that kind of impossible?"

"Mmm, it is."

Not understanding anything about anything, Haruyuki simply flapped his jaw open and shut. “B-but…The space elevator—Hermes’ Cord already exists, right! I’m pretty sure they finished it five years ago, so that would have been in 2042. So what changed?”

“Well, that…,” Kuroyukihime replied as she wiped away the illustration in the window with the palm of her hand. “Compared with the initial concept model for the geostationary orbit space elevator I just explained to you, Hermes’ Cord is a low-Earth-orbit space elevator, based on plans revamped from a more practical standpoint.”

“Low-Earth…orbit.”

“The basic idea is the same as geostationary orbit. But the scope is different. The central station for Hermes’ Cord is suspended much lower than geostationary orbit, two thousand kilometers above the ground…That said, it is still outside the atmosphere.”

“Uh, um. Geostationary orbit’s thirty-six thousand kilometers, so…that’s like crazy close, isn’t it?”

“It is. And because of that, the cable can be shorter and lighter, so you can get by without using an asteroid or something like that for balance.”

“O-ohhh…I get it…” Haruyuki nodded deeply before giving voice to the obvious question. “So then why didn’t they just use this low-Earth orbit right from the start?”

“Because this method has its own problems. In order for this man-made object inserted into low-Earth orbit—that is, two thousand kilometers above the ground—to gain the centrifugal force needed to balance against the pull of the Earth—which is much stronger than in geostationary orbit—it has to go around at a speed that far exceeds the Earth’s rotation. With geostationary orbit, the speed at which the station goes around is synchronized with the Earth’s rotation, so the end of the cable can be attached to the Earth, but that’s not possible with low-Earth orbit.”

As she spoke, Kuroyukihime stretched out a finger and made a small mark in a spot fairly close to the circle representing the Earth.

“This is the Hermes’ Cord central station, constructed in an orbit two thousand kilometers in the air. From this, a cable made from intertwined carbon nanotubes, or CNT, stretches out upward and downward to connect above with the top station and below with the bottom station, which act as weights.”

The bottom tip of the line stretching out from above and below the mark was just a little separated from the outline of the Earth. Kuroyukihime tapped this gap with a finger and continued.

“This bottom station hangs a hundred and fifty kilometers above the Earth’s surface. Any lower than that and the atmosphere becomes too thick, and the entire elevator would be pulled down because of the friction, eventually falling out of the sky.”

“Whoa…” Haruyuki expelled a long breath and tried to get his thoughts in order.

“So then,” he said, twitching his pig’s nose, “um, Hermes’ Cord is a four-thousand-meter-long man-made satellite made up of these three stations connected by carbon nanotubes…Is that it? And this goes around the Earth at a speed much faster than the Earth’s rotation…?”

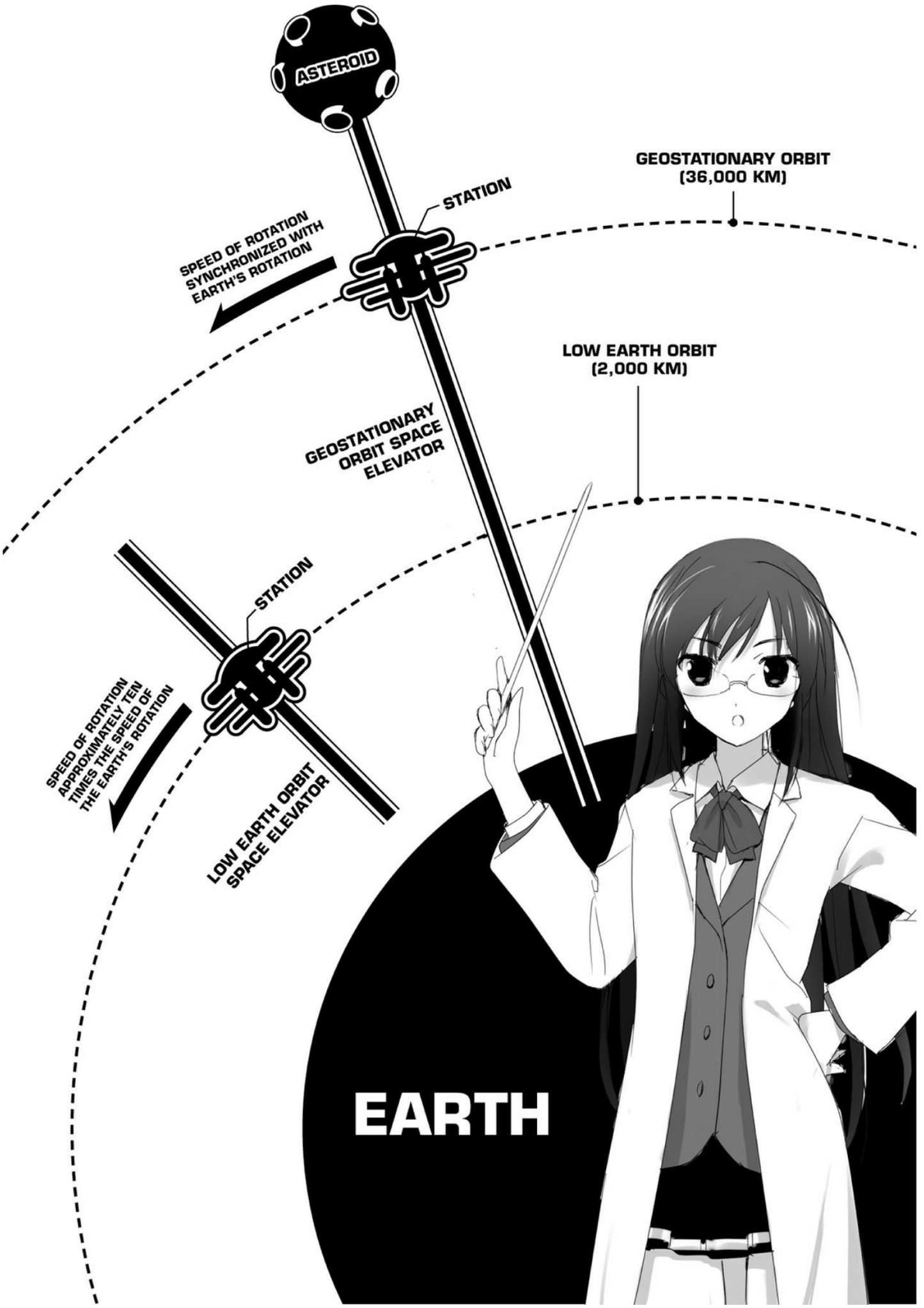
“That’s exactly it. The bottom station’s ground speed reaches Mach ten, so the low-Earth-orbit-type space elevator is also called a hypersonic skyhook.”

“But, in that case, what’s the thing they built on Christmas Island in the eastern Pacific Ocean? I remember seeing a huge man-made island on the news…I’m sure there was a long tower or something stretching out from it…”

“That island is the landing field for the space plane to take people and objects to the bottom station of Hermes’ Cord. The planes that take off from there rendezvous with the station a hundred and fifty kilometers up and deliver their cargo. This cargo is then taken to the top station four thousand kilometers up, using the elevator, before being loaded into a shuttle going back and forth between the Earth and a station in geostationary orbit or the international base on the surface of the moon. Incidentally, since the station in geostationary orbit is also directly above the landing field, it’s actually not incorrect to say that Hermes’ Cord is in the eastern Pacific.”

“Huh…” Haruyuki sighed several times and stared again at the illustration on the window before him. Since the diameter of the Earth was about 12,700 kilometers, a length of four thousand kilometers was probably the same proportion as an apple and its stem, but the idea that this thing was whizzing by above his head at Mach ten was a bit hard to swallow.

“Hmm, I dunno. Seems like a spring or something that could come falling down. It’s scary,” he said despite himself, and Kuroyukihime shrugged her shoulders lightly.


ASTEROID
GEOSTATIONARY ORBIT
(36,000 KM)
STATION
SPEED OF ROTATION
SYNCHRONIZED WITH
EARTH'S ROTATION
LOW EARTH ORBIT
(2,000 KM)
GEOSTATIONARY
ORBIT SPACE
ELEVATOR
STATION
SPEED OF ROTATION
APPROXIMATELY TEN
TIMES THE SPEED OF
THE EARTH'S ROTATION
LOW EARTH ORBIT
SPACE ELEVATOR
EARTH

“There was one that did almost fall, actually.”

“Wh-what?!”

“Hmm? You didn’t know about this? I’m pretty sure it was around the beginning of spring. There was that incident where terrorists mixed in with a group of tourists and tried to set up explosives on the central station. It’s because of that that they decided to enhance the security system for Hermes’ Cord. Japan took part in the international bidding for the system construction, leading to this news of the first export of the social camera technology.”

“Oh, wow, is that how it happened? Sorry, I should’ve done my homework on that.” Haruyuki pulled back into himself, just like when he was called on in class and didn’t know the answer.

Fortunately, Professor Kuroyukihime didn’t rebuke him further, but added an explanation with a wry smile. “Being a low-Earth-orbit space elevator, Hermes’ Cord has smaller stations and a lighter cable than the geostationary orbit type. The design is very tight. Which is why even a pocket-size bomb could do some serious damage depending on where it was placed. And there would be no extra in terms of power or space to adopt a large-scale monitoring system. I think that’s why Japan’s social camera technology was adopted…Aah, and now we’ve finally come back to the beginning of this story.”

She exhaled at length, and then waved the fingers of her right hand to pull up her VR operation menu. She materialized two drinking glasses and offered one of them to Haruyuki.

Ah, crap! I should have been ready to call these up, not her! he thought as he hurried to accept the glass and bring it to his lips. It seemed to be an original drink with countless fine-tuned flavor parameters; a refreshing, sweetly sour taste spread out in his mouth unlike any juice in the real world and yet with not a hint of anything unnatural about it.

“Th-this is good. Really good,” he said, and Kuroyukihime laughed lightly, waving her left hand with a flourish.

“Lately, I’ve been practicing with real ingredients…Work with no do-overs is honestly very frustrating. Did you know, Haruyuki? Light soy sauce is light in color alone! I mean, what is that, salty water?!”

“H-huh, I didn’t know that. But why are you suddenly working on your cooking—”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? Someday, I…” Here, her mouth snapped shut, and Kuroyukihime cleared her throat loudly. “I’m just fooling around. Anyway, I suppose this means we’ve finally come to the point.” Rather forcefully returning to the original topic, she continued her explanation at top speed.

“We were talking about the fact that Hermes’ Cord doesn’t have the leeway to equip an additional large-scale monitoring system. And so, that is where Japan’s social cameras come in. That system collects in one place all the images recorded with its countless cameras using an exclusive high-speed net, and detects signs of criminal activity by automatically analyzing these data with a high-spec supercomputer. For instance, if a gun is picked up on a camera somewhere, the system immediately analyzes who the person with the gun is and where they came from, and continues to track them to see where they’re going. The facility where this processing takes place, the Social Security Service Center, or SSSC, is somewhere in Japan, but not the slightest hint of where that place is has been made public.”

“What? You don’t know, either?” When Haruyuki asked her this in all seriousness, Kuroyukihime brought the wryest of wry smiles to her lips.

“Now look, what exactly do you think I am? I’m just a weak junior high school girl, you know. There’s no reason I should know that kind of top-level classified national information!…Although, well, I have my suspicions.”

“Wh-where is it?!”

“Not telling…More importantly, as I just explained to you, the automatic image analysis that’s the heart of the social camera system is concentrated at the SSSC. Which means you don’t need the essential items for normal monitoring cameras—enormous recording devices and human operators. If this lightness is the reason the system’s being used in Hermes’ Cord now…the cameras on the space elevator and the Japanese social camera network must

inevitably be connected.”

Haruyuki simply gaped as he took this all in, but since Kuroyukihime was blinking as if she was waiting for something, he finally remembered that this word “connected” was the chief objective of the sudden dive call.

“Oh!…Right, um. So they’re connected, which means, uh…” Flapping his short pig avatar arms, he shouted, “We can go there, then?! To the Accelerated World’s Hermes’ Cord?!”

“Mmm…Well, we’re still at the stage where the possibility is not zero.” With a playful smile creeping onto her lips, Kuroyukihime continued in a tone that was somehow probing.

“First of all, there is the question of whether or not Brain Burst, which is in the end a fighting game, will conscientiously expand the stages that far. And then, assuming that the station is in fact connected to the net, how do you intend to get there? As a general rule, we Burst Linkers dive in the place where our real bodies are. In other words, to get to Hermes’ Cord in the Accelerated World, we have to actually get into the space elevator on this side. They’ve started selling tour packages to the geostationary orbit station lately, but they’re expensive!”

“They’re superexpensive…” Haruyuki dropped his shoulders dejectedly.

He had the fleeting thought that Silver Crow and his wings could dive on the ground and then fly to the bottom station, but he rejected the idea before he even opened his mouth. Crow’s maximum range was at best fifteen hundred meters. In contrast, Hermes’ Cord was a hundred times that far away, floating some hundred and fifty thousand meters off in the distance. And even Christmas Island, where the space plane landing field was on the surface of the Earth, was completely impossible to get to on a junior high student’s allowance.

“So. What it comes down to basically is that, unless you’re super-rich, you can’t dive at Hermes’ Cord…”

“Or rather, I feel like if you could get to the real thing in this world, there would be no need to dive in the reconstructed article within the Accelerated World.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” Haruyuki sighed in disappointment this time, rather than

wonder, and looked up at the sky.

The virtual blue seemed endlessly far away even from the top of the five-hundred-meter tower. Or rather, in this level of VR object set available for free, the tower could have been ten times or a hundred times higher and it wouldn't have reached the sky. Because there was no "other side" for this blue sky. A closed world with just the light blue tint stretching out intently.

"…Haruyuki."

Hearing his name suddenly, he brought his face back, and his gaze met Kuroyukihime's calm and yet somehow still mysterious eyes.

"Why do you want to go to Hermes' Cord so badly? I mean, compared with how freely you can fly with your wings, the space elevator is just a man-made object that goes around in a set orbit, after all."

"Uh, ummm." At the unexpected question, Haruyuki needed several full seconds to put the hazy thoughts inside him into words. "Obviously, I just like high places, so there's that…but another reason is that if we could go to Hermes' Cord, I thought maybe we could make the tiniest part of Her wish come true. She's had…her eyes on the sky, no, the other side of the Accelerated World for so long…"

The instant Kuroyukihime heard this, her eyes opened just the tiniest bit wider, and her long eyebrows furrowed into each other. The words that eventually fell from her lips were serene, like thought itself.

"I see," she murmured distinctly, and turned her gaze to the pale blue sky. "I suppose so…Her passion for the sky indeed has not been quenched even now. She still wishes to reach the other side of that distant blue madly, as much I seek level ten—no, perhaps even more than that."

"Uh-huh." Bobbing his head, Haruyuki turned his face upward once again.

Her: Sky Raker, the level-eight Burst Linker, a core member of the first Nega Nebulus. Long living as a recluse in the Accelerated World in the old Tokyo Tower, it had been three months now since she rejoined Nega Nebulus, a Legion member again after three long years.

However, this was not quite the same as returning to full active duty. Just as

her refusal of Chiyuri's invitation that evening indicated, she was taking part only in the Territory Battles each weekend, without any involvement in normal duels. She didn't even come out to the front line in the Territories; she was always on standby in the rear, devoting herself to base defense.

Naturally, Haruyuki, and most likely Takumu and Kuroyukihime, too, were not in the least dissatisfied with this. Because as a general rule, Sky Raker, whose means of movement was a wheelchair, was not able to run anywhere other than paved roads and level surfaces. And when it came to defending their position, she got incredible results with her unique fighting style, freely maneuvering her wheelchair and trifling with the enemy while attacking repeatedly with sword hands. She was able to keep the healer Chiyuri almost perfectly safe when the enemy's main force was close-range types, to the point where adding just one attacker to the combination allowed them to fight more than adequately.

Compared with fall and winter of the previous year, when Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki, and Takumu had basically just barely managed to scrape by on their own for the hour of the Territories, the fighting power of Nega Nebulus now was growing at a ferocious pace. There was no doubt about that.

But there was one obvious truth that no one was giving voice to.

If Sky Raker removed the seal from her Enhanced Armament Gale Thruster and strapped it onto her back once again, her fighting power would dramatically increase to several times, several *dozens* of times greater than it currently was. Having previously dodged an enormous enemy with this equipment, Haruyuki could testify that even if she was still missing both legs, a midair sprint using the thrust of the boosters could generate serious attack power.

However, even after Haruyuki had returned Gale Thruster, Sky Raker never went to summon the Armament, even when they were in a losing battle. It was almost as if she was firmly rejecting the wings that her own heart had given birth to.

"…I…" Haruyuki clasped his hands firmly in front of his own rounded stomach. "It's not like I'm thinking the Legion would be stronger if she started flying again

or anything. I just…I want to let Raker know that if she doesn't believe in her own wings, she's wrong. I should know. I borrowed Gale Thruster once…That Enhanced Armament can't fly as long as Silver Crow's wings, it's true, and you can't go as high, but the instantaneous output is way more than the acceleration of any avatar…The truth is, there's a ton more power hidden in those boosters. That's what I think, anyway."

After thinking and thinking and delivering these earnest words, Haruyuki lifted his face and met Kuroyukihime's eyes, which were unusually kind and yet somehow brimming with mourning.

The spangle butterfly avatar nodded once slowly. "So if you take Raker to Hermes' Cord, you'll be able to communicate that to her," she said in a gentle voice. "Is that what you believe?"

"I do." Haruyuki dipped his head slightly, well aware of the fact that he was being far too starry-eyed. "If what I'm thinking is right, anyway."

"Honestly. How about once in a while being confident in your declarations?" The wry smile was soon tucked away, and after taking a deep breath, Kuroyukihime began speaking again.

"Just as I explained to you earlier, the real-world Hermes' Cord is going around the Earth a hundred and fifty kilometers up in the air. Thus, even if the newly deployed social camera net is connected to Japan's, I would expect that the Accelerated World's Hermes' Cord would naturally appear at the same height. Which is a distance that no duel avatar could possibly reach…But it's not necessarily the case that no means of transport exists."

"Wh-what?!" Haruyuki cried out in a high-pitched voice, leaning forward. Just as he was about to tumble off his chair, Kuroyukihime stopped him with the toe of a high heel against his flat nose.

"At best, it's simply a possibility. Calm down."

"R-right…"

"Listen. Despite how shrouded in mystery Brain Burst might be at its foundations, on the surface, it's a fighting game. In which case, don't you think a situation in which no fighter is able to go to a new stage is rather absurd?"

Grinning, she moved her index finger as if in invitation. “So then, it wouldn’t be at all strange if there were to appear somewhere secret in the Accelerated World a means of transportation that only those who thought long and hard and searched for it would be able to find.”

“Secret…huh?”

“That sort of thing often happens in regular RPGs, after all. A treasure that at first glance seems impossible to get, but then if you carefully examine the map and use your head, you find a route there. That sort of thing.”

“Oh, that’s true, that’s true. I love stuff like that.” He bobbed his head in agreement with Kuroyukihime’s example before staring hard at the illustration she had drawn.

The space elevator going around the Earth one hundred and fifty kilometers above it. The only way for him to get there was to use a space plane or a rocket. And the place where rockets were launched in Japan—

“Umm…Maybe Tanegashima Space Center?”

“No.” This idea was dismissed with a shake of her black hair. “Ninety-nine percent of Burst Linkers are in Tokyo. So the portal should also be in Tokyo.”

“B-but there’s no rocket launch pad in Tokyo!”

At this cry, Kuroyukihime allowed a broad grin to spread across her face. “Perhaps if our avatars were made of real-world stuff, a rocket would be required. But they’re not, are they? Our proxies in the virtual space are constructed of pure information. And in Tokyo, there is an information transmission facility with the largest output in all of Japan.”

“Oh.” Opening his eyes wide in amazement, Haruyuki continued, almost in a gasp, “T-Tokyo…Skytree…”

“Mmm. If Hermes’ Cord is indeed a new duel stage, I think there’s no way the portal there would appear anywhere other than Skytree. And the timing…That would be the moment after the social cameras have been deployed, when Hermes’ Cord is closest to Japan for the first time…”

She erased the illustration on the window and opened a browser, flicking her

fingers in quick manipulation. A screen filled with English was displayed, apparently the Hermes' Cord site. However, Kuroyukihime did not hesitate as she clicked on one link after another.

"It's sooner than I thought, the day after tomorrow," Kuroyukihime announced decisively, tracing a finger along the wavy line on a map of the world that eventually appeared. "June fifth, Wednesday. Five thirty-five PM."

4

Perhaps the rainy season decided it was time to take a little break finally, because that Wednesday was the first wonderfully clear day in some time.

Even after sixth period ended, there were still only a few fleecy clouds floating in the sky, and with the sun on his back as it started to set, Haruyuki raced toward Koenji Station by himself.

His destination was, of course, the opposite side of the city, the new Tokyo Tower at Oshiage in Sumida Ward, formally known as Tokyo Skytree. In approximately two hours, a portal to the space elevator Hermes' Cord would open on the special observation deck there…maybe.

It had all started with Haruyuki's fairly dreamy thought. He later slipped into the Galleries in Suginami and Shinjuku, but not a single Burst Linker was talking about Hermes' Cord. Even Kuroyukihime, the one who figured out the time and location of the portal opening, had added at the end of their dive call two days earlier, "Well, don't get too down if this ends up being a miss."

In which case, he at least wanted to incorporate the subtheme of a field trip to eastern Tokyo, a place where they normally never went, but unfortunately, Takumu and Chiyuri both had practice, and with the preparations for the school festival, Kuroyukihime had trouble getting away from the student council office these days. And so it fell to Haruyuki, the one who didn't have the guts to charge into solo duels in an unknown area.

"Whatever. If it's a miss, I can just go to that retro game shop in Akihabara." He offered those consoling words to his lonely self and got on the Chuo Line.

He changed to the Hanzomon Line at Kinshicho and by the time he got off at Oshiage station, the town was at last sinking into evening. He turned around

slowly on the sidewalk and heaved a sigh of relief the instant he spotted it in the sky.

Living in Tokyo, he almost never went to the city's famous places, so this was still only the second time he had been to Skytree. The enormous tower and its truss construction glittering gold in the western sun rose up sharply like a ladder to the heavens.

A total of six hundred and thirty-four meters high, each side of the base was seventy meters. It had already been thirty-five years since it was built, but this broadcast tower was still the tallest building in Japan. He stood stock-still and simply took in its majesty for a while before hurrying toward it.

He paid the student entry fee at the gate and got on the high-speed elevator. The cabin started its ascent with a grinding acceleration, and an exhilaration still different from vertical takeoff in the virtual world came over him. As he had two days earlier when they climbed the government office, he unconsciously pressed himself up against the glass wall. If Chiyuri had been there next to him, she would no doubt have said, in an exasperated way, "You really do like high places, huh?"

A minute or so later, the elevator arrived at the observation deck and ejected Haruyuki along with a few tourists.

Somehow keeping himself from immediately running to the window, he glanced around at his surroundings. It being a weekday evening, there were very few minors. And the few that were there were university students on what looked like dates or young children with their parents. He didn't see anyone in junior or senior high school loitering around without an obvious purpose—in other words, anyone likely to be a Burst Linker.

Naturally, he could have also just connected his Neurolinker to the facility's local net, accelerated, and checked the matching list, but doing so on a closed net carried the risk, albeit slight, of being outed in the real. And supposing he did anyway, the only thing he could do when he found another Burst Linker's name was duel, and that wasn't his goal on that particular day.

Thus, Haruyuki gave up on his visual scan of the spacious observation deck and walked over to the windows on the west side.

The absolute height itself was far greater than that of the government office in Shinjuku, and the view of the city spreading out below the clear night sky was the very definition of overwhelming. With large skyscrapers popping up here and there among tiny speck-like buildings jammed together, it was almost like an old-school circuit board. Moving his gaze beyond all this, he found the majestic figure of Mount Fuji lying hazily in the distance outside of the bewitching city. To the upper left, the setting sun, its rays shooting down onto the horizon, held a belt of black clouds, promising more rain the next day.

When he turned his face up even farther, the hues of the sky shifted from a madder red to a gentle violet. Jets flew in, wingtip lights blinking and winking. Sightseeing airships floated lazily overhead.

Right now, high above this sky, a man-made object four thousand kilometers long is coming toward us at the hypersonic speed of Mach ten. The instant the thought popped into his head, Haruyuki let out a gasp. *The world's so big. Vast. It's just way too macro.*

I'm sure the reason I love to look up at the sky is because I get this feeling. I'm fat and pathetic and short, but when everything else becomes relatively micro like this, it doesn't matter. That feeling. It's like a temporary escape or something.

And I know it's the same thing when I'm Silver Crow and out there flying. In those moments, I can feel with my whole body the absurd scale of the Accelerated World. Compared with the infinite nature of space and time there, even the mountain's worth of problems I have are nothing more than a momentary speck popping modestly up on the surface of the ground. It's only when I'm touching the sky that I can believe that.

…But…

Then why did You look to the sky? I mean, why do You still *look to the sky? It can't be that You want to experience that fleeting liberation the way I do. If that was your goal, then You have more than enough power in the Gale Thruster to make that happen. So why on earth…? What is it that You want in the sky…?*

These questions Haruyuki asked in his heart were naturally directed at his other teacher, Sky Raker.

He then came up with some kind of vague answer to them. Of course, he didn't know if he was right. Or rather, it wasn't a matter of right or wrong. Only when Raker flapped her wings of her own volition once more and raced through the sky would the answer appear.

Which was why Haruyuki being at the Skytree now and waiting for a portal to appear was probably a complete waste of time. If Raker shook her head with her usual gentle smile and told him she had no intention of going, that would be the end of it.

But, Haruyuki thought, *no matter how deep the wounds she carries, Sky Raker's still a Burst Linker.* Which meant that she shouldn't be able to sit there and not be excited once she learned about a new field in the Accelerated World, and one that was a bridge stretching out four thousand kilometers up into the sky at that.

Just like the excitement was building in Haruyuki's own heart at that very moment.

As he took in the view of evening in central Tokyo, his time display rolled around to half past five. The predicted time for the appearance of the portal that Kuroyukihime had calculated precisely was 5:34:42. At that moment, Hermes' Cord, soaring in a waveform orbit centered on the equator, would be closest to Tokyo.

He waited impatiently for the minutes to pass until there were only five seconds to go, and he connected his Neurolinker to the global net.

At three seconds to go, he took a deep breath. At two seconds, he squeezed both eyes shut. And then with one second left, Haruyuki shouted in a voice that only he could hear, "Burst Link!!"

Skreeeeee!!

The noise of acceleration crashed over his body.

Opening his eyes slowly, he saw the frozen blue of the initial accelerated space. Everything—the city unfolding outside the windows, the floor and pillars of the observation deck, the smattering of tourists—had turned to transparent crystal and was still. In the form of his pink pig avatar, Haruyuki gently stepped

away from his real-world body. After taking one, then two steps backward, he suddenly whirled around.

Normally, the café and merchandise shops sat in the center of the spacious observation deck, but at that moment, they had been completely wiped away; it was nothing more than deserted floor space now. However, no matter how hard he rubbed his eyes, there wasn't even a switch, much less a portal there. Haruyuki stood rooted to the spot for nearly ten seconds before heaving a sigh.

I guess the idea that a Space stage would show up was just a childish fantasy after all, he murmured to himself, and was about to plop down onto the expansive floor when—

Intense light mingled with vibration abruptly slammed into his entire body, sending him leaping upward. He lifted his face with a gasp; an enormous object was in the process of springing forth in the center of the flat space.

Stairs drawing broad arcs gradually rose up one at a time from the floor. On top of these a circular stage appeared, spinning, and then six slender pillars soared upward, carving out a regular hexagon. The transparent pillars held a pulsating blue light inside. As if in sync with this, shimmering particles rose up vertically from the centers of the pillars, stretching out almost to the ceiling, glittering beautifully.

"…This…It's the portal to Hermes' Cord…," Haruyuki muttered hoarsely, and stood up. The despair he had felt only a moment earlier was completely forgotten, and he clenched the right fist of his pig avatar tightly. So his guess hadn't been wrong. Who was it, again, who'd called it "childish fantasy"?

He raced over to the stairs, and without even a moment's concern or hesitation, he raced up the staircase on hoofed legs. *Vmm, vmm.* He slipped toward the center of the circle through gaps in the six pillars, which hummed the low song of that omnipresent vibration. For the final step, he brought his feet together and jumped. But those feet did not come back into contact with the floor.

"Whoa?!" Haruyuki yelped as he watched his own pig avatar be broken down into countless particles of light. It was actually more like returning to his origins than being broken down. As proof that his virtual proxy was being returned to

essential information, the white particles were made up of minute chunks of digital code.

Immediately after he noticed this, Haruyuki felt his consciousness ascend vertically at an incredible speed. But there were absolutely no Gs accompanying the takeoff. He simply became massless light, shot through the upper structures of the Skytree, and flew off into the sky.

And there his view was completely whited out.

The cessation of sensation lasted only a few seconds.

First, Haruyuki heard the hard *clack* of his own feet touching the ground. Weight abruptly returned to his body and he involuntarily fell to one knee. In this crouching posture, he ever-so-tentatively opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the HP gauge in the top left of his field of view. *Huh?* he thought and stuck out both hands to stare at them. There, he found five sharp fingers on each, glittering silver. There was no doubt, these were the familiar arms of Silver Crow.

He panicked at the fact he was his duel avatar even though no duel had started, wondering if this was the lawless Unlimited Neutral Field, but he soon noticed that in the center of his green HP gauge, the English word LOCKED was displayed. Unable to immediately grasp the meaning of this, he twisted his head around for a while before deciding to put the question off for the time being. He took a deep breath, and here finally lifted his head to face forward.

“Wh-whoaaaaaa?!” he shouted and fell back onto his butt from the force of jerking his head back. Heedless of the awkward pose this put him in, he simply stared at the scene before his eyes.

The metal floor Haruyuki was sitting on ended a mere meter ahead of him. Beyond that was…sky. And clouds. The surface of the Earth below.

It should have been a familiar sight, considering that he could fly. But this was on an entirely different scale. It was so high up. Several times—no, maybe ten or more times the fifteen hundred meters that was the upper limit for the altitude Silver Crow could reach. The sky was dyed a deep ultramarine, and the clouds formed thin streaks or enormous vortexes far below, while the sea was

indigo, and the land was hazy brown and green. If he fell from a place like this, he would probably be burned up from the friction with the atmosphere before he took any damage from the crashing descent.

Unconsciously, he inched backward, and once he was three or so meters from the edge and its lack of railings, he finally expelled the breath he was holding. He stood up from his prone position and at last looked around to both sides.

The gray metal terrace appeared to be in the shape of a large circle. Following the line of it, he naturally looked back. And…

In the center of the ring-shaped terrace was a curved wall.

No, not a wall. A pillar. An extremely thick pillar, looking to be about a hundred meters in diameter, stretched up vertically. Haruyuki was standing on the broad floor at its flange base.

“Is this…Hermes’ Cord?” Haruyuki’s voice was barely a whisper as he stared dumbfounded at the structure, an enormous tower, a would-be residence for the gods. The metal glittered sharply like stainless steel and stretched up endlessly toward the other side of a sky that changed from ultramarine to a deep indigo, the top of the structure melting into the vanishing point, completely invisible.

The space elevator in the real world was composed of several cables made from intertwined carbon nanotubes bunched together. It was barely two meters thick, more accurately referred to as a “rope” rather than a “pillar.”

But the object re-created in the Accelerated World that towered now before Haruyuki’s eyes was nothing other than a pillar. It was a tower floating high up in the sky on a superhuge scale, several thousands of meters tall and a hundred meters in diameter. Why on earth would it have been expanded to this size?

He could think about it all day long and still not come to any answers, but he felt like all this was merely the details. The key point here was that there really was a Space stage. No, he probably should say that the place he was standing now was a High Altitude stage. In which case, if he climbed this enormous tower, a true space environment likely awaited…

“This is way bigger than I thought it’d be.”

Haruyuki nodded firmly at the voice on his right. “Yeah. Compared with this, Skytree’s a toothpick.”

“Instead, though, there’re almost no details on the surface. I wonder if there’s an interior structure.”

“But I don’t see anything that looks anything like a door…Uh.”

Gulp.

His entire body stiffened. Haruyuki jumped up adroitly and whirled ninety degrees to his right, shouting, “Gah?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-who-who-who-wh-wh-wh-wh-when-when—”

Who are you?! When did you get here?!

That’s what he intended to cry out as a sharp challenge, but nothing more than a series of strange noises came from his mouth. The silhouette looking down on him expressionlessly from extremely close up as he did was—

Slender, dark red body. Sturdy thighs and forearms. Hands with sharp claws extended. Sleek tail flicking.

And from the mask with pointed ears sticking up from toward the back of the head and eyes shining silver, there was no doubt that this was a close-range duel avatar, one of the strongest Haruyuki had come across.

“P…P-P-P-P-Pard?! Wh-wh-what are you d-doing here?!”

“Pard,” aka Blood Leopard, level-six Burst Linker belonging to the Red Legion, Prominence, popped her shoulders up and replied, “Same reason you’re here.”

“Huh…”

His interlocutor was quite calm, so Haruyuki also finally calmed down a little and belatedly got ahold of the situation.

Traveling to this place most certainly wasn’t a privilege that had been given to Haruyuki alone. Any Burst Linker who learned of the news of the placement of the social cameras in Hermes’ Cord could consider the possibility of a new stage being added to the Accelerated World, and then guess that the time and location of the portal’s appearance would be here, and then be able to arrive as he had.

He was a little happy that another player had had the same foolhardy thought as he had and actually come all the way to Skytree like this, and a grin broke out across his face. But he soon arrived at another thought and his whole body froze.

And that was that it wouldn't have been at all strange for one new avatar after another to appear there at that moment. He whirled his head around hurriedly at their surroundings, but he didn't get any sense that a third person was about to show up.

As Haruyuki freaked out that it was too late to do anything, Pard spoke to him in a voice that was the tiniest bit exasperated.

"The reason you came through the portal first is because you dared to accelerate right there on the observation deck. I dove in the toilet on the first floor, so I was a little late. I'm pretty sure anyone else is going to be putting priority on keeping from being outed in the real, so we should have a few minutes' leeway still."

"O-oh. You did? Oh, right, I guess…" Feeling a belated terror at his own recklessness, Haruyuki now greeted Pard properly. "H-hello. Good to see you."

He bowed his head at Leopard, who waved her right hand dismissively and continued. "I am forever in your debt. I can only offer my apologies for communicating via nothing but mail after events took place…"

These words were in thanks for how very much Pard had helped in resolving the enormous predicament Haruyuki had been trapped in two months earlier. The leopard-headed avatar shrugged her shoulders and responded at unusual length.

"NP. You really helped me out that time, too. The info you gave me was really useful in finding the security hole at Akiba BG. But right now"—she patted Haruyuki on the back, urging him to move—"we should use this advantage, since we have it. Let's take a look around the pillar."

"O-okay!"

As he walked, Haruyuki felt a keen relief at the fact that Blood Leopard was the avatar who had shown up after he did, since they shared such a history.

They might have been members of different Legions, but they could still get along. If it had been Frost Horn, he would no doubt have grabbed Haruyuki from behind without saying a word and tossed him down to the Earth below.

They cut across the flange, about twenty meters wide, approached the pillar of Hermes' Cord itself, and even touched it, but the glittering alloy-like surface was unmoved. Despite details like seams in steel plating, there were no handholds that would allow a person to scale it.

Pard scratched at the pillar with her razor-like claws and discovered that it was too hard for her to make a mark on. Curious, she walked around to the right, with Haruyuki trailing along behind her. The pillar diameter was at least a hundred meters, so following the curved surface all the way around was no mean feat. When the backside of the transport device finally came into sight, Haruyuki noticed something and cried out.

"Ah! There's something there!"

He raced over, footfalls clacking.

At first glance, the objects appeared to be cars or boats. The streamlined vehicles, six or so meters in length, sat neatly in a line on an angled platform at the base of the pillar, glaring up at the peak of Hermes' Cord. Ten of them.

The vehicles had no roofs; the seating area was completely open. At the very front was an operator's seat for one person behind a transparent windshield. Behind that were two rows of two-person seats. Instead of tires, the vehicles were equipped with four large discs on the bottom, which seemed to be some kind of propulsive device. The smooth lines of the slender bodies created a form that hearkened back to the original meaning of the word *shuttle*.

"Wh-what is this…" Muttering, Haruyuki climbed up to the platform and approached the vehicle on the left end with a "1" painted on its side. The blunt iron body was cold and silent, no sign of fire in the engine. He stretched out a timid hand, poked at the smooth line of the door area, and instantly:

Beebong. A purple holowindow popped up. After a moment's surprise, he peered at it. Pard, beside him, also brought her face in.

At the very top of the window sat a row of text in an inorganic font: 3D 18H 25M

18s (JST). These numbers, indicating a day, hour, minute, and second, were obviously some kind of timer.

“Hmm. So if this is a countdown, then it’ll reach zero three days, eighteen hours, and twenty-five minutes from now…so at noon sharp on Sunday.”

After Blood Leopard spoke, Haruyuki followed with the thought, “And then what will happen…?”

But instead of replying, Pard pointed at the lower part of the window with a finger very like the toe on a feline’s paw. A short sentence was also displayed there: WILL YOU DRIVE ME? And below that, there was only a YES button. He understood the meaning of the simple English question, but even so, Haruyuki hesitated about what he should do.

“If you don’t push it, I will,” Pard, ever quick to impatience, whispered in his ear.

“Oh! I-I’m pushing it!” he replied, flustered. He raised his right hand, resolved himself, and touched the YES button.

Instantly, a short fanfare effect rang out, and the English text changed: YOU ARE MY DRIVER.

A few seconds later, the row of characters changed shape once more, leaving behind only the lone word RESERVED. At the same time, an object appeared, as if oozing out of the surface of the window.

It was a transparent blue card. In addition to the mark “1,” it showed the same countdown as in the window. The instant Haruyuki took it, the next, and final, phenomenon occurred.

The streamlined machine transformed from a body color of dull iron to dazzling silver, making a noise as it did so. Haruyuki quickly realized that the shade, almost that of a mirror, was exactly the same as his—that is to say, Silver Crow’s—armor.

“I get it,” Pard said, as if satisfied, and stepped over to the shuttle with “2” painted on it. She touched the body, the window popped up, and she clicked the YES button without hesitation. When she deftly snatched up between two fingers the card that appeared, the vehicle body this time turned a deep red,

dyed to match the color of Blood Leopard's armor.

Haruyuki walked over to Pard, still holding his card, and asked his question anew: "Uh, um…So you and I are registered as the drivers of these cars or boats or whatever they are…I basically get that. But what's this countdown? There're still more than three days left on it."

"Obvious. These shuttles won't move until the timer reaches zero at exactly noon on Sunday."

He nodded in an accepting way at this clear response before his next question popped up.

"R-right…B-but why such a long time…"

Here, Pard, rather unusually, opened the mouth hidden in the lower part of her bullet-shaped mask and laughed, sharp fangs glinting. "That's obvious, too. The three and a half days we're being given are a grace period to get a driver and four crew members ready for each of the ten shuttles. At noon on Sunday, we're going to slam our feet down on the accelerators and head for the top of this pillar. In other words…" She pointed with her uplifted right hand in the direction of the distant peak, and then the crimson leopard-headed avatar said, almost singing:

"We obtained the right to participate in the Hermes' Cord Race."

It took a full five seconds or so before Haruyuki understood the meaning of those words.

"Then…that means…the finish line is the top of this tower, which means…s-s-space?!" he cried, his voice practically turned inside out, and Pard nodded.

"Of course."

But before she could say anything further, they heard the sound of transit coming from the opposite side of the pillar. The Burst Linkers who had accelerated in the basement had likely reached the portal of the observation deck.

After a swish of her long tail, Pard touched Haruyuki's back and whispered, "It would be best if we disappeared before they found us."

Indeed, since there were only ten shuttles, the limit for the number of people who could still register as drivers was eight. Having those who would inevitably be left out come along saying the privilege should be decided in a duel would be nothing more than a hassle.

“I—I guess so.” Haruyuki agreed for now, pushing back the surprise in his heart, and her next utterance came flying into his ears.

“Once you release the acceleration, wait at the door to the parking lot on the ground floor. I’ll take you to Suginami on my bike.”

“Eee!” He froze up again. In the back of his mind, the violent power of the large electric bike Leopard rode sprang vividly back to life.

However, naturally unable to say, *No, that’s fine, I’m good,* or anything like that, Haruyuki simply bobbed his head. “Th-th-thank you; that would be great.”

“NP.”

And then the pair shouted the command together.

“Burst Out!”

Meeting Pard in the real again after such a long time, she was fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—not in the maid’s uniform of the cake shop, but a tight-fitting T-shirt and slim jeans.

His eyes involuntarily strayed to the unexpected volume pushing out against the tight fabric, a volume imperceptible when she was wearing the billowing apron. Still with no expression on her face, Pard pulled an extra helmet out of the under-seat compartment, plopped it on Haruyuki’s head, and straddled the motorcycle. After fastening the buckle himself this time, he hurriedly climbed up onto the seat behind her and timidly wrapped his arms around the slim waist before him.

At first, he restrained himself to the utmost in terms of the strength he put into those arms, but the instant the in-wheel motors roared to life in the bike as it left the Skytree parking:

“Aaaaaah!”

Just as he had before, Haruyuki couldn’t help but cry out and cling to Pard as

hard as he could. That said, it was all he could do to endure the extreme stops and starts at each and every red light, and he didn't really have the mental breathing space to pay attention to any sensations other than the ones that let him know he was still holding on.

They passed from Sumida Ward through Okachimachi and Ochanomizu, and right around when they were coming out of Iidabashi, Pard's voice reached Haruyuki's ears.

"It's five till six right now. You got time?"

"Uh, y-yeah."

The curfew set by Haruyuki's mother was nine o'clock, so he still had time. He couldn't say anything about whether she allowed him, still in junior high, to be out until that somewhat inappropriate hour because she had faith in him as her son or because it was too much of a hassle to enforce an earlier curfew. If he broke curfew once in a big way, he would probably find out the answer to whether she would get mad at him or not, but he didn't quite have the courage for that, and so he replied, *"I've got about two hours."*

Pard then said, so very casually, *"If I had tea for that long of a time, I'd melt away."*

Huh? T-tea?

He didn't even have time to really have that thought before the large bike pulled into a fast-food place along the road, turn signal flashing.

In the last eight months, Haruyuki had gone into this restaurant more than twelve times with Kuroyukihime and once with Sky Raker. Nonetheless, he had not the slightest air of being used to such a situation and broke into a cold sweat, anxious about the spotlight of *What is even up with such a mismatched couple?* most certainly being shone on him.

Telling himself that he was being too self-conscious, that no one was even paying attention to them at all, he sat down facing Blood Leopard in a booth and tried to block out the other customers from his mind by focusing on the teriyaki burger meal Blood Leopard had treated him to.

For a brief moment, he thought he might succeed somehow.

And then Pard pulled a red XSB cable from a pouch on her belt, leaned forward, and stabbed one end of it into Haruyuki's Neurolinker. With no expression on her face, she jammed the other end into her own.

Not able to hide from the wired connection warning that appeared in his field of view or the sight of the junior and senior high students in the shop very obviously staring at him and whispering to one another, Haruyuki ended up shrinking into himself, a total mess, cold sweat dripping down his face and all over his body.

It was clear that Pard paid absolutely no attention to customs such as the length of a couple's direct-connect cable being an indication of their progress in dating, and Haruyuki, unable to liberate himself from such concerns, asked in neurospeak that was almost a shriek, *"Oh! Uh, uh, um, wh-wh-why direct?"*

Her reply was quick and simple.

"So we can talk while we eat."

"…Right" was the only reply Haruyuki could give.

Pard displayed some serious technique in talking via the cable while digging into her hamburger as advertised. This seemed easy in principle, but there was a real risk of biting your tongue if you accidentally tried to speak with your mouth.

"Do you know how to dive into the stage for the race on Sunday?"

"Huh?" Haruyuki stopped chewing the fry in his mouth to answer the abrupt question. *"We don't just use the portal at Skytree again?"*



“No need. The card you got when you registered as a driver is an item called a Transporter. It’ll simultaneously move a maximum of ten directing Burst Linkers.”

“W-wow…So then, we just get together in Suginami and use this, and we can go straight to Hermes’ Cord?”

“Yes.”

This was a huge relief. Because if, hypothetically, Kuroyukihime ended up taking part in the race, it was just too big of a risk for her to connect even for an instant to an external net in distant Sumida Ward, bound as she was by the sudden-death rules as a level niner.

After breathing a sigh of relief and biting into his hamburger, Haruyuki felt a rudimentary question rise belatedly to the surface. Ever since he had jumped into the portal at Skytree, he had been drifting along where the current took him, but the real issue—

“The real issue here is why are we suddenly racing? Those machines were prepared not by any player but by the system, which means the admin side of Brain Burst. It’s been eight months already since I became a Burst Linker, but I don’t think I’ve seen a single game master event like this.”

At Haruyuki’s inquiry, Pard thought for approximately half a second before replying, *“It’s true that the BB admin normally never makes you feel their presence. But when there’s a large-scale update in the Accelerated World, there’re sometimes one-off events like this one. Like the year before last, when Tokyo Grand Castle opened…”*

Grand Castle was a large theme park in the Bay Area. It ended up being a hot topic, this fortress city like something out of medieval Europe built with actual rocks, daring to take up the theme of “reality” during the heyday of full-dive technology.

“The day the social camera net started operating there, there was this event in the Accelerated World where you had to fight through swarms of monsters in

the city and try to get the throne in the castle. My team was so close when we rubbed up against a large gang from the blue team and we all went down. If that jerk Horn shows up this time, I'm going to let him have it."

Flames roared to life in Pard's eyes, and Haruyuki unconsciously shrank into himself before managing to get a reply out.

"R-right, I get it. So then this race is…like an event to celebrate the addition of a new stage? Which means that the race only happens once…?"

"Pretty much."

In that case, he was incredibly lucky to have been able to reserve one of only ten machines. After shouting, *Mega lucky!* in his heart, Haruyuki hurriedly banished that thought. He definitely hadn't gone to Hermes' Cord to obtain the right to participate in an open event. He had set his sights on the pinnacle of the space elevator because he had something he really needed to tell *Her*, Sky Raker.

Well, there is that.

Thinking there were other things he should at least know as basic knowledge, Haruyuki timidly let a question flow through the direct circuit. *"Um…Pard. So like in the race, uh, if you come in first or second or whatever, is there some kind of—"*

"Of course there is." Blood Leopard nodded readily, not letting him get to the end of the question. *"Probably some burst points. Or an Enhanced Armament or some other item. Should be some kind of prize."*

"W-wow, really?"

Although he tried to feign calm, the huge gulping motion he made with his throat apparently gave him away, and Pard grinned. Neatly folding up the paper wrapper of the hamburger she had finished in no time flat, she said with utter calm, *"Best not to get your hopes too high. It definitely won't be enough points to disrupt the power balance between the Legions. And more than that…"* Here, she paused for a moment before she, the senior member of Prominence, shook the plait hanging down from her head and asked, *"Will all five members of your Legion be in the race?"*

“Huh?…Ummm, the shuttle holds five people, so…” Haruyuki, about to nod his agreement, forced his head to halt.

No matter how well they got along, or how she gave him rides on her motorcycle and treated him to hamburgers, Pard was, in the end, not on his side. She was a key member of the Red Legion, which might one day come up against the Black Legion. What was he doing carelessly telling someone like this about the movements of Kuroyukihime, who was bound by the rules of sudden death?

Perhaps having immediately seen through this hesitation on the part of Haruyuki, Pard quickly shook her head lightly. *“I’m not thinking of using this opportunity to take the Black King’s head or anything. And HP gauges are locked during the event, so, I mean, that’s not even possible.”*

“L-locked…?” Repeating the word, Haruyuki finally remembered. When he had been sent to Hermes’ Cord earlier, the lone word LOCKED had indeed been clearly stamped on his own HP gauge. *“Uh, umm…So that means that no one can take damage or give damage during the event?”*

Although Pard did make a show of thinking about this question momentarily, she soon nodded. *“Yes.”*

“Then why do we need four people for the shuttle crew? I figured we needed them to attack the other teams or defend or whatever…”

“Yes to that, too. The shuttle itself’ll probably have an HP gauge, and once that drops to zero, you’re destroyed. It was like that at the Grand Castle event. A game where each team carried an orb they were given, up to the throne on the top floor of the castle. The idea was that the players didn’t die, but the orb lost HP in attacks by the monsters or other teams.”

Haruyuki nodded at Blood Leopard’s words, impressed. With that setup, even in the rather lukewarm situation where their HP gauges were protected, the race could end up being very hot indeed.

“I get it…So that’s how it works. If that’s it, then I think all five members of our Legion will be in the race. But…why do you ask?”

Haruyuki turned a puzzled look on Pard, and in an extremely rare occurrence,

she seemed to be struggling with what to say.

But the hesitation disappeared in a mere second.

“There are two people who are very important to me in the Accelerated World.” The quiet thought came through the red cable. *“One is the king I serve. Someone I want to protect no matter what happens. And the other is my eternal rival. We became Burst Linkers at basically the same time, and we’ve fought countless duels. ‘Strato Shooter,’ ‘ICBM’…”*

Haruyuki instantly grasped who those two names referred to. *“…Sky Raker…?”* he murmured, and Blood Leopard nodded gently.

“I was so happy when I heard she’d come back. But she’s only participating in the battles to defend Territories, so I haven’t seen her yet.”

“Oh…You haven’t? Right, you haven’t.”

Currently, the Red Legion, Prominence, and the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus, were in the middle of a cease-fire of an indefinite term. Thus, Pard, a senior Red member, would have no reason to take part in an attack on the Suginami area.

Haruyuki took a deep breath and, in a move that was unusual for him, looked straight into the eyes of his conversation partner before saying, *“The truth is, I want to bring Sky Raker to Hermes’ Cord somehow, for my own reasons. Even if she’s not onboard with the whole thing, I’m going to try hard to persuade her to come. I’m sure you’ll be able to see her on Sunday.”*

“That so?” Her response was brief, but a faint smile rose up on Blood Leopard’s lips, and she slowly, deeply nodded. *“Thanks, Silver Crow. I’m glad we could talk like this…Maybe it won’t just be the two of us, maybe all three.”*

Unfortunately, Haruyuki had no idea what she meant by that. Thus, like an idiot, he just asked. But…

“S-sorry? What…Who would that be?”

Not telling.

Instead of those words, it seemed, Pard yanked the direct cable out.

Back on the bike, she saw him to Suginami, and after Haruyuki watched her fade into the night until her taillights disappeared, he started thinking absently.

There were about a thousand Burst Linkers in total. And nearly all of them lived in the metropolis of Tokyo. It was a number that very much did not allow you to remember all of their names, and the majority of them had a relationship that consisted of single-mindedly taking points from one another. And yet if you fought for long enough, at some point, relationships other than “enemy” started to develop. When he thought about it now, the first time he met his now-priceless tag team partner Takumu—Cyan Pile—it had been as genuine enemies…

In the back of his mind, the faces rose up and disappeared again: those of his Legion companions, starting with Kuroyukihime; then friends like Niko and Pard, his rival Ash Roller; and even Frost Horn and that gang.

Aiming for level ten as a Burst Linker was essentially equal to continually kicking down other Burst Linkers. Most likely, this was exactly the thing the mysterious developer was aiming for: Make a thousand young people fight among themselves, and select just one perfected player.

But even if that were so, even the developer couldn’t exactly stop them from developing feelings for one another rather than hatred during the process. The fact that Blood Leopard could care about Sky Raker like that, a Burst Linker she had never been on the same team with, was proof of that.

I want to be like that, too. The feeling swept over Haruyuki as he walked toward his house. *No matter how badly beaten I get, even if I’m so frustrated I could cry, I still won’t hate my opponent. Because I love this game and the Accelerated World. Because I think I’m happier than anyone that I get to be a Burst Linker.*

Really? Is that really *all?*

A voice abruptly questioned him.

At the same time, several shadows quickly flashed across the screen in the back of his mind. A rust-colored avatar like a steel framework. A layered avatar, thin jet-black planks lined up. And the no-longer-extant dusk-colored avatar with the spherical visor and long talons. The members of the Acceleration Research Society, a group that saw Brain Burst not as a fighting game, but rather as a tool for thought acceleration, and focused only on the acquisition

and use of points.

Over these last two months, any activities they might have carried out had been entirely under the radar. But there was no way that they had simply vanished. They were almost certainly lying in wait somewhere in the Accelerated World watching vigilantly, hostilely, waiting for the chance to invade again.

ARE YOU GOING TO LET THEM? CAN YOU FORGET THE TERRIBLE PAIN THEY CAUSED YOU, YOUR FRIENDS, THE HATRED IN YOUR HEART FOR THEM, AND HOW THEY MADE YOU SUFFER?

Haruyuki didn't notice that the voice echoing in the back of his mind had at some point stopped being his own and taken on a dark, warped metallic quality. Scowling at the throbbing sensation in the center of his back, he stepped briskly onto the site of his condo building.

IT'S ONLY NATURAL TO HATE GUYS LIKE THAT. IT'S ONLY NATURAL TO STRIKE THEM DOWN WITH THAT HATE. RELEASE ALL THE RAGE, THE RESENTMENT, THE HATRED, AND DESTROY THEM. YOU HAVE THE POWER TO DO IT. THE POWER TO TEAR OFF THEIR LIMBS, DEVOUR THEIR FLESH, DRINK THEM DRY OF BLOOD. THAT'S RIGHT.

EAT THEM. EAT THEM. EAT THEM. EAT THEM. EAT—

"Shut up!!" he cried in a strangled voice, hanging his head low. He stopped in front of the main entrance to the shopping mall, and residents of the buildings and various shoppers went around him as if he were just another obstacle.

Among the countless pairs of shoes flowing to both sides, he felt like he saw talons glittering the purple of dusk and squeezed both eyes shut tight. In his head, he told himself firmly, *If they show up again, I'll fight them. But it won't be because I hate them. It'll be because I love the Accelerated World and because I believe in bonds other than hostility there. I'll fight to protect that.*

REALLY?

The voice left this word like a creaking laugh before receding. The throbbing in his back finally faded and disappeared.

He let out a long breath and rubbed palms soaked with sweat along his trousers before he set out with heavy feet, head still hanging, for his deserted condo.

5

“Hey, hey, heeeeeey!!”

The shout echoed throughout the battlefield, accompanied by the throaty roar of the V-twin engine. A high-pitched squeal, then another shout. “Cheap wall like this’ll never stop a master like me!!”

“No way?!” Haruyuki looked around, panicked. The discolored buildings characteristic of a Weathered stage crumbled here and there, and a barricade had been made of the rubble. He and Takumu—who was now fighting a little ways off—had brought the buildings down. Taking advantage of the extremely brittle nature of the terrain particular to this stage, they had focused on smashing buildings and blocking whatever roads there were.

Their objective was to reduce the mobility of the motorcycle-using Ash Roller, a member of the attacking team in the Territories. They had succeeded; there was no longer a way to get from here on the front line to the base Sky Raker was protecting in the rear—or at least, there shouldn’t have been.

“Wh-where are you riding?!” Haruyuki searched desperately for the origin of the burbling roar of the engine. A few seconds later, he found it. But unable to move immediately, he simply stood bolt upright, mouth gaping, totally open.

The gunmetal American motorcycle was moving from right to left on the opposite side of the four-lane main road. But he was going far too slowly. And it wasn’t to avoid the rubble blocking the road—given that the rubble was piled nearly two meters high, avoiding it was impossible right from the get-go—but rather because *it was being carried*.

The enormous bike, complete with rider, was up on the right shoulder of a small avatar only half its size, laboriously stepping over the rubble-pile

barricades. Ash Roller straddled the seat of the bike swaying on that shoulder and simply raced the engine.

“Th-there’s no point in racing the engine!!” After throwing everything he had into this unconscious rejoinder, Haruyuki finally realized that this was not the time for staring. Their aim was the base beyond the mountain of rubble. If they occupied that, things would get annoying.

“A-as if I’d let you!!” he muttered and charged toward the opposite side of the main road. When he did, the small avatar bearing the motorcycle shot a glance at him and—

“My brother Ash! Go on without meeeee!” Spitting out this ridiculously cool line, he heaved the bike forward. For his size, his strength was incredible.

The large American bike bearing Ash Roller, who had apparently at some point gotten a younger-brother-type companion, soared over the pinnacle of the barricade, the high-pitched sound of the exhaust ringing out remarkably loudly.

“Your heart’s giga-buuuuuurning, yo!!” He hit the asphalt with his usual nonsensical shouting and took off at high speed, white smoke rising up from the rear wheel.

Saturday, June 8, five thirty PM. They were in the middle of a three-on-three team battle to defend Suginami area number three. Kuroyukihime and Chiyuri were taking a break, so on the Nega Nebulus side, it was Haruyuki, Takumu, and Sky Raker. Against them on the attacking side was a three-person team from the Green Legion Great Wall, led by Ash Roller.

There was a difference in the level makeup, with eight, five, and five for Haruyuki’s team, and five, five, and three for the enemy, but Brain Burst was the type of game where if you let your guard down even just one time with this kind of gap, the whole situation could easily be upended. Gritting his teeth and vowing that Ash breaking through the barricade would be the man’s only triumph this match, Haruyuki went to chase after the speeding bike. However…

“Ain’t gonna let mew get through here!!”

Accompanied by this shout—which Haruyuki couldn’t decide was an attempt

at creating a character or the kid's actual voice—a shadow flew down before him. The avatar who had been carrying Ash Roller's motorcycle.

His name was Bush Utan. Level three with dark grass-colored armor. He was a few centimeters shorter than Silver Crow, but he had a toughness about him that kept you from really noticing that. The reason for this was his abnormally developed arms. They were so long that if he was leaning forward, his hands very nearly scraped along the surface of the ground, making his overall silhouette reminiscent of a type of primate, but still, he was definitely not an opponent to take lightly.

"Anyone who says something like that obviously doesn't have it in him to stop me!" Haruyuki replied, glaring cautiously at the large arms turned toward him. He bent forward, aiming for a decisive, super-low-altitude dash.

Bush Utan had poured all his potential into those enormous arms. He was an avatar that specialized in brute strength. If Haruyuki took a punch from him, the damage would be enough to blow away the two-level difference between them, but Utan didn't have much in the way of speed. And anyway, he had no intention of fighting here.

Racing along, nearly scraping the ground himself as he closed the gap in an instant, Haruyuki brought his enemy's focus downward before leaping up with all his might. He vibrated his wings for a mere instant to preserve his special-attack gauge, so that rather than flying, he soared over his enemy's head in a long jump.

Utan hurriedly stretched both arms up above his head, but Haruyuki was far beyond his grasp. *You should've closed in on me yourself to reduce the number of options I had*, Haruyuki remarked tangentially in his head. The distance between opponents wasn't something you had, it was something you actively controlled—

"Hng! Wha?!" The cry of shock slipping out of Silver Crow's mouth was drowned out by a thick battle cry.

"Ooh ho ho hoooo! I'm not letting mew gooooo!!"

In some incomprehensible turn, Bush Utan had stretched his arms out. He hadn't dislocated his joints or anything like that; no, he had in fact elastically

extended his arms to nearly three times their original length, and now grabbed tightly on to Haruyuki's ankles with his enormous palms.

"Hnngaaaaah!"

Utan was about to slam Haruyuki down onto the ground as hard as he could, so Haruyuki deployed his wings fully in the opposite direction and released every bit of propulsive force he had.

"Nnngh!"

The state of equilibrium was momentary. No matter how great Utan's physical strength might have been, weight-wise, he was in the light class. With the primate-type avatar dangling from both legs, Haruyuki ascended blindly. As he thought about how he would just carry the other avatar like this and take out Ash Roller—

"Ooh ho?! Mew're scaring me!!"

He heard a pathetic scream, and his flight speed dropped with a jerk. Hurriedly looking down, he saw that Utan had removed just his left hand from Haruyuki's feet and was using that hand to grab on to a building's roof railing instead. His arms were now stretched out to the limit, so it was almost like an avatar had been fastened to the middle of a long rope.

"Hey! L-let go!"

"N-no mway!"

Haruyuki flapped his wings fervently, but the power with which his left ankle was being held didn't appear to slacken in the least. Takumu's Pile perhaps could have cut him free of Utan's arm, but he seemed to be still in the middle of a pitched battle against the third member of the enemy team a little ways off, judging from the clashes Haruyuki could hear.

With no other choice, Haruyuki continued with the midair tug-of-war as he raced his eyes over the area, looking to the west side of the main road. Instantly and unconsciously, he opened his mouth. "Crap…!"

The large American motorcycle had already raced ahead a hundred meters or more and was charging right at the small plaza at the end of the street. In that

plaza stood a tall flagpole in the center of a circle emitting a violet light. The black of the flag there was the proof that this was Haruyuki's team's base.

The base was a spot existing in each Territory Duel Field where members of the team occupying the base could recharge their special-attack gauges over and over within the circle. Which was to say, the Brain Burst Territory Battle was nothing more than a fight in which teams pushed the front line forward while occupying base after base and taking down their opponents' bases.

The base Ash Roller was aiming for was currently being guarded by no one but Sky Raker. As a level eighter, her power was obviously the real deal, but because of her strange fighting style, there was a big difference in whether she had the advantage or not depending on the enemy's affinities.

And from where Haruyuki was standing, he was forced to conclude that because wheelchair-user Sky Raker and motorcycle-user Ash Roller were of the same lineage, Sky Raker would be at a disadvantage here. When it came to performance as a vehicular Enhanced Armament, the motorcycle was obviously superior in each and every way.

The motorcycle faced the sleek silver wheelchair plopped down in the front of the plaza and the graceful female-shaped avatar occupying it, and then it charged, roaring thunderously.

"Masterrrrrrr!" The skull-headed rider's cry was for some reason mixed with tears. "I!…Today for sure! I'm going to go…beyond you, Master…!!"

Up in the air, Haruyuki's jaw dropped. Sky Raker was indeed Ash's teacher and his "parent," but a line like that was something you only shouted after numerous twists and turns, in the final moments of battle. Although today was actually already the third time Ash Roller's team had taken part in the Territory attack, this would be the first time that parent and child faced off in direct contest.

Raker in her wheelchair grinned beneath her wide-brimmed hat and shook her long sky-blue hair. "You still have so much to learn, Ash."

And then she stretched her left hand straight out in front of her, turned her palm toward the sky, and curled a finger up in invitation. *Come.*

To this Ash replied with a sharp “Hyaaah!” He jumped up vertically from his seat and stood with his right foot on the handlebars and his left on the back end of the seat. He rode the motorcycle almost like a surfboard; the name of this unique technique was V-Twin Punch, so named by the rider himself.

Sky Raker didn’t appear to panic in the slightest seeing this, but Haruyuki was already grinding his teeth once again. This was a bad situation for her, wasn’t it? Because given that she couldn’t stand up from her wheelchair, Sky Raker’s hands could no longer reach Ash Roller’s body. And if she attacked the bike with her bare hands, she’d be the one taking the damage.

“Master! Giga thanks for everythiiiiiiing!!”

The sole of his boot opened the throttle all the way, and the motorcycle jumped into a final acceleration, spewing flames from the muffler. The instant the massive gray front tire was about to deal a serious blow to the wheelchair—

Raker’s left hand caressed the silver wheel beneath it so fast it was nearly blurred. Sparks flew up from the ground, and the wheelchair shot backward with intense force.

Impossible! You won’t be able to get away! Haruyuki shouted in his heart at Sky Raker, who was a teacher to himself as well. The wheels had to be turned by hand to make the chair move, and while the power it held for sprints was incredible indeed due to its extremely light weight, it could continue at that pace for only a moment. Once she had fallen back, the bike would quickly catch up with her and send her flying.

Or so Haruyuki expected as he caught his breath. But at the same time—

Sky Raker stretched her entire body forward with wonderful abandon, avoiding the front tire, and pressed her right hand onto the bike’s handlebar. She grabbed only the brake lever.

It looked like such a casual gesture, but the power it contained was apparently very much more than that, and a flood of sparks gushed from the front rotor disc. And what would happen to the motorcycle when only the front brake was locked with this kind of force?

“Oh! Whoa?!”

Even before Ash Roller managed to cry out, he was rising up at the force of the sudden deceleration and flying through the air along with his bike, wheels racing meaninglessly, before crashing into the wall of a distant building.

This impact seemed to be more than the Enhanced Armament of the motorcycle could endure, and the whole thing burst into fierce flames with a *whoosh* before exploding into pieces.

However, Ash Roller himself had, perhaps fortunately, been standing in the seat, and was not caught up in the explosion, but rather thrown high into the air.

“Noooooooooooo!” Screaming, he reached the peak of his parabola, stopped for a moment, and then started to drop back down—with Sky Raker pushing her wheelchair into a sprint once more, aiming to stop directly below him.

“So very much to learn.”

Grinning as she rendered this assessment, she thrust the palm of her left hand up perpendicularly with such force as to practically scorch the air. This open-handed punch beautifully caught the back of the rider’s black leather jacket, causing such an impact that it reached even Haruyuki, up in the far-off sky.

In addition to the damage from falling from so high up, he had also taken a critical hit to the center of his body, the combination of which easily knocked Ash Roller’s HP gauge down to nothing.

“You are the master…Mercy, Tera-nothing.” Leaving these mysterious words behind, the skull rider avatar exploded and scattered.

Watching Sky Raker as she brushed her hands off, Haruyuki and Bush Utan murmured at the same time.

“S-so strong…”

“Meah’s too strong…”

They gasped as their eyes met. Sky Raker had so wonderfully repelled Ash and guarded the base, so there was no longer any real point in continuing this midair tug-of-war.

Haruyuki said nothing as he flapped his wings forcefully, abruptly using up the

remainder of his special-attack gauge. The upward force he generated made both of Utan's arms creak alarmingly.

"N-no meoway! Burn, biceeeeeps!"

The left arm hanging onto the railing of the building and the right holding Haruyuki's ankle swelled up and pulled with terrifying brute strength, bringing Haruyuki back down.

In that instant, Haruyuki changed the orientation of his silver wings by one hundred eighty degrees and readied himself for a sudden dive. Inevitably, Utan ended up being yanked toward Silver Crow with the strength of his own arms.

"W-wait, meo—!"

The *w* disappeared in the sound of a ferocious dive kick hitting its mark.

The two avatars fused into a single lump and crashed to the Earth. Utan released Haruyuki's ankle from its imprisonment with the impact, and in the close-range fight that necessarily followed—the zero-range fight, to be precise—he was no match yet for Haruyuki.

Having had his HP shaved away in the scrum, Utan disappeared from the battle, leaving a parting threat like the lead in a gangster movie. "I-I'll get you back for this tomeowrrooooooooow!!"

…Tomorrow?

Haruyuki had a bad feeling about that somehow, but he tossed it up on a shelf for the time being and rushed to the front line to offer Takumu backup.

Fifteen minutes later, real-world time.

The five members of Nega Nebulus gathered in the center of the field that served as the setting for their last battle and commended one another on their hard work. They had once again managed to thoroughly safeguard Suginami areas one through three for the week.

Sitting on a nearby lump of concrete, Haruyuki felt a pleasant exhaustion as he exhaled deeply. In time, he spoke to Sky Raker, who was next to him. "But still…I never even thought of that sort of attack strategy with Ash Roller's bike."

In the past, Haruyuki had met victory against Ash Roller by lifting the rear

wheel of the motorcycle and thus removing its propulsive force, but grabbing on to the brake lever while the bike was in motion, and thereby sending it flying, was way more stylish, speedy, and, more than anything, totally cool.

But Raker shook her head as she laughed quietly. “Unfortunately, you can only use that technique when Ash is standing on the bike.”

“Oh…R-right…”

Indeed, the rider’s hands normally would not leave the handlebars. He hummed his understanding, and this time, Kuroyukihime uttered with a rueful laugh, “Before that, though, to lay a hand on a bike that is accelerating full throttle, you have to synchronize yourself with its speed using a power sprint like Raker, or else you’ll end up the one damaged instead.”

“Oh…R-right…I guess…” Haruyuki dropped his head and Chiyuri and Takumu raised their voices in unrestrained laughter.

The jet-black avatar laughed briefly once more before adding, “But, well…It could be that you flying at full speed can do the same thing as Raker’s dash. Check into it.”

“Right!” Haruyuki assented enthusiastically, and his Legion leader looked around at her subordinates.

“If there’s nothing else that needs consideration, let’s discuss tomorrow,” she said. “I believe a text message from Haruyuki outlining the general concept has already gone around, but perhaps we could have the explanation from him again here.”

“U-understood.” Hurrying to his feet, Haruyuki stepped out in front of the four sitting avatars and began to give an overview of the big event on Sunday—the Hermes’ Cord Race—first of all talking about how there was no need to go all the way to Skytree. If they got together at Haruyuki’s and directed, he said, the transporter card item would take them all to the bottom station of the space elevator.

Second, he described how Silver Crow had registered as the driver of the first shuttle, and since he was unable to change this, the other four would have to be the crew. In other words, they would be staffing the shuttle to guard it or to

attack rival teams.

Finally, he spoke to how their HP gauges would be locked during the race, so there would be no risk for the level-nine Black Lotus.

After he had somehow managed to get this far, albeit stammering the whole time, Haruyuki suddenly hesitated. He couldn't decide whether or not he should tell them about the fact that Blood Leopard from Prominence had registered with the second shuttle and that she had said she was eager to see Sky Raker again. He quickly came to the conclusion that he would stay quiet about it for now, since the only ones who could understand the way things worked between Leopard and Raker were Leopard and Raker.

Thus, Haruyuki expelled a deep breath and finished up with, "That's all!"

"Nice work," Kuroyukihime responded quickly, and stood up again after Haruyuki sat back down. "This was also touched on in Haruyuki's mail. There was the Grand Castle Attack race event the year before last. I know Raker understands this, but…" The Black King stopped speaking momentarily and made the blade of her right hand sing through the air. "At that time, I was in hiding from the assassins of the other kings and not connecting to the global net at all, so I was unable to take part, which…I do deeply regret."

"Absolutely. I know I sent waves of resentment from the top of Old Tokyo Tower all the way to the Grand Castle." Sky Raker laughed gracefully, and Kuroyukihime nodded firmly, while the remaining three Legion members sat up straighter with a start. Not one of them would have been surprised if Scary Master Raker's ire had actually managed to take down several duel avatars.

"At any rate, all of this is to say: I want to completely wipe away my regrets from two years ago in tomorrow's race. Takumu and Chiyuri have both good-naturedly agreed to take part, and it was Haruyuki who realized that a new stage might appear and went all the way to distant Skytree to get the right for us to take part. It would be a true shame if we were to waste this gift."

"N-no, that's—" Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head and hands. "It was just this idea that sorta popped into my head…You were the one who guessed all the stuff about when and where the portal would appear…"

"That idea popping up was key. Those ten spots filled up quickly, and the

majority of the registered teams apparently bought the information at a high price from NPC shops in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Only you, and maybe one or two others, realized the possibility on your own.”

“H-huh…Is that what happened…”

Perhaps the expected timing of the portal appearance in the NPC information was slightly delayed, and that was why Haruyuki, who had figured things out from zero, and Pard, who probably had, too, were the first to reach Hermes’ Cord.

So then really, he should be thanking Chiyuri for inviting him to go to the Shinjuku government office the day before. And also, of course, Kuroyukihime for talking the whole thing over with him in the dive call. Having friends really was pretty great…

As Haruyuki let these thoughts wander through his mind—

“Lotus, may I?” Sky Raker raised a light hand and advanced her wheelchair with a *creak*. She turned around in a fluid movement and looked at the faces assembled there. “I’m also very much looking forward to the event. After rejecting any contact with the Accelerated World for so long, I am grateful every single day that I’m able to fight in the Legion, the reborn Nega Nebulus, again like this—alongside my companions. If it were possible, I would so much love to combine forces with you all and set our sights for the finish line in the race. But…”

She cut herself off for a moment and dropped her gaze to her own legs, covered by her long white dress.

“From what Crow’s said, there are only four seats for the crew in the shuttle and no real space for anything else. In which case, I’ll be without my wheelchair and simply glued to that seat. Which means that this avatar will become a mere object. If I’m just going to pointlessly increase the load the shuttle carries and dull its speed, then it’s better if I don’t even get in in the first place.”

“B-but you—!” Haruyuki cried out reflexively, trying to deny Sky Raker’s words.

However…

If Sky Raker had been a long-distance avatar, then she could have more than adequately fulfilled an attacking role while glued to a seat. But just as her fresh sky-blue color indicated, she was a fairly pure close-range type. Most likely, for close-range types to take on an attacking role in the race, an action like jumping over to the other shuttles would be required. For Sky Raker and the wheelchair that took over for her legs, this was, of course, impossible.

Seeing Haruyuki grinding his teeth tightly, Raker said gently, “Corvus, don’t worry about it. Even if I’m not there, if it’s you, Lotus, Pile, and Bell, I honestly believe you’ll end up on top when crossing the finish line.”

No. No, that’s not it.

I…I wanted to bring you *especially to that pillar stretching up into the sky. In that world ahead where we’ll be shooting up the four-thousand-kilometer space elevator, there’s something I want to tell you. On the ground, I’m held back by gravity and I can’t get it out. This particular thought…*

“Raker.” Kuroyukihime’s voice sounded like she was also enduring a kind of pain, similar to Haruyuki’s and this prayer in his heart. “Your avatar likely weighs less than Crow’s. Whether you are on the shuttle or not, the power-to-weight ratio will not differ that much. And even if you can’t move from the seat, it’s enough for you to stand on guard duty—”

“I can’t go, Lotus,” Sky Raker said curtly. “As a fundamental principle, you… and Nega Nebulus must move to strike at the other kings to bring you to level ten. If you come in first in the race tomorrow, you’ll be given a quantity of burst points worthy of the feat. And that will bring you that much closer to your end objective. In which case, you shouldn’t be concerned about me, which would reduce your chances of winning, however slightly…Isn’t that right?”

Her argument was more than sound, and thus even sad. Most likely, in her heart, Sky Raker had clearly determined her role as someone whose range of movement was severely limited. She would expend every effort in ways she was able to help the Legion. But conversely, she would absolutely not take part in battles where it seemed like she might become a burden.

So all of that came down to this.

Sky Raker had already given up on her own game, her own Brain Burst. She

had agreed to Kuroyukihime's request and come back to the Legion, but her motivation was solely to help Kuroyukihime. She had strictly prohibited herself from the thrills and excitement of the duel, the joy of talking with others through her fists. Almost as if it were a punishment she should continue to receive forever.

That's not it, Haruyuki murmured once more in his heart.

Getting his Legion Master Kuroyukihime to level ten was also Haruyuki's own personal objective. He constantly prayed that until that time came, he could be a knight worthy of closely guarding his King. He put nothing before this goal, but there was one thing that *was* on the same level:

Playing. Having fun with this fighting game known as Brain Burst.

The duels couldn't just be painful. They couldn't be just mechanisms for earning points. At the end of those roads was nothing but darkness, a heavy shadow falling even on the real world, as embodied in the Acceleration Research Society.

Naturally, Haruyuki didn't think that Sky Raker would fall into that darkness. But if she had yet to forgive herself even now, then she most certainly was not happy. But he didn't have the ability to communicate those thoughts and feelings at the moment. Kuroyukihime and Takumu seemed to feel the same way, both of them stiffening up like rocks and simply hanging their heads.

A silence blanketed everything other than the timer, which noted that they had ten minutes left until the field disappeared. It was a silence Sky Raker broke with a gentle, short laugh. But a moment before that—

"Sister Raker." Chiyuri started talking, using the strange seminickname that had at some point stuck for her.

"What is it, Bell?"

"I…I've been thinking about this for a long time," Chiyuri said as Lime Bell stood up, using an almost-hesitant voice that somehow could still make its listeners feel the resoluteness of her will. She took a few steps to stand before Raker. After she took a deep breath, an unusually serious air came over her mask. "As long as it's okay with you, big sis, I'd like to try something. To see

whether or not I can bring your legs back with my power.”

Haruyuki’s eyelids flew back. Chiyuri’s—Lime Bell’s power was, in other words, the special attack Citron Call, the result of which was a reversal of time. Any avatar or object subjected to it had time rewound.

In a normal duel, this technique was used as a pseudo–healing ability to recover the HP gauges of allies. But the fact that its effectiveness did not stop there had been proven the other day in the fight against Frost Horn and Tourmaline Shell. Since it was possible to dodge the technique, it was fairly difficult to use against enemies, but if it succeeded, it could even forcefully eliminate Enhanced Armament summoned by an enemy. And in this sense, Citron Call was a special attack even rarer than a healing ability.

However.

“B-but, Chiyu,” Haruyuki reflexively interjected, “I’m pretty sure Master Raker lost her legs more than three years ago. Can you actually rewind time so far back?”

“Okay, um…” Chiyuri cocked her pointed, witchy hat and waved her index finger, as if to confirm her own thinking. “My Citron Call has two modes. The first one uses up half my special-attack gauge and rewinds the in-game time in units of seconds for the status of the target duel avatar. That’s the one I use to heal HP.”

The number of fingers increased to two as she continued. “And then, mode two uses all of my fully charged gauge and rewinds the avatar’s status, except for level increases…like in units of fixed changes due to external causes. One by one, it cancels out changes like buying Enhanced Armament with points or stealing techniques and parts from other avatars. That’s the one I got Haru’s wings back with.”

“So fixed changes…are undone?”

It was Kuroyukihime who murmured this. “Mmm,” she hummed quietly and, still sitting, brought the ridge of the sword of her right hand up to her mask. “Easy to say, but when I think about it, that’s quite the power. The natural enemy of—or perhaps, divine retribution for—those with theft abilities.”

“But I can’t interfere negatively with the status data of anyone other than the target, so I can’t get back items someone else owns. Which is why I couldn’t get back Haru’s wings when I used my power on him. It’s pretty easy to run away from the technique itself, so it’s hard to use it on an enemy during battle, Lotus.”

As Haruyuki worked hard to digest the rules for the somewhat complicated technique, Takumu opened his mouth.

“Chi, with that Citron Call mode two, how many steps back can you cancel out these fixed changes? What’s the maximum?”

“Um, let’s see. I haven’t actually tested it out, but judging from how my gauge decreases, I’d say I could go three steps, max.”

“Three…hmm? Raker, since you lost your legs, have you had any other status changes?”

The sky-blue avatar paused for a moment at Takumu’s question. “There was the exchange of Enhanced Armament with Corvus…If that counts as two changes, then the loss of my legs would be the third.”

“U-um, Master. What about the wheelchair…?” Haruyuki asked reflexively the instant he heard these words. The silver wheelchair in which Sky Raker sat was an Enhanced Armament item, the same as Ash Roller’s motorcycle, and Haruyuki wondered if getting it also counted as one fixed change.

Raker shook her head lightly, stroking the wheels gently. “I acquired this immediately before I cast off my legs.”

She sounded nonchalant, but the meaning hidden in her words was significant. At the point in time when Sky Raker asked Black Lotus to cut off her legs, she had anticipated that the amputation damage might be permanent, or she had been prepared for it to be. In other words, the injury she had suffered didn’t stop within the framework of the normal game system; there was a greater logic at work: *that* system.

“Bell.” Sky Raker’s voice calling out interrupted Haruyuki’s thoughts. The Burst Linker in the middle of their collective stares, who even now lived half as a recluse, announced in an endlessly kind tone, “Thank you. I gratefully accept

your feelings…But even if it doesn't work, you mustn't blame yourself. The causes and effects here are all within me."

To Haruyuki, it seemed that the latter part of that statement had been directed to Black Lotus as well as Lime Bell. The black crystal avatar stiffened momentarily and lowered her face slightly.

"I understand, big sister Raker." Chiyuri's determined voice broke the silence that fell over the stage. "But I'm definitely going to bring your legs back. Oh, and Haru?" Her gaze swung around to Haruyuki, and she flicked a finger at him as he blinked in confusion. "I think you'll get a message saying you got some Enhanced Armament while I'm using the technique, but you have to cancel. Otherwise, it'll be a big hassle later!"

"R-right, got it."

When Haruyuki nodded, Chiyuri glanced up to her left. She was probably checking that her special-attack gauge was still full, charged up at the base during the Territories. She brought her face back down and put a foot forward.

In sync with Lime Bell, as she stepped forward, Kuroyukihime, Takumu, and Haruyuki fell back.

The freshly green avatar stood about two meters in front of the wheelchair and pointed the enormous bell attached to her left arm directly up at the sky. She tilted her pointed, broad-brimmed hat backward and took a deep breath, throwing her slender torso back.

"Okay, here we go…Citron…"

At the same time as she started to call out the technique name, she rotated the bell in a large counterclockwise circle. *Ring gong.* A magnificent sound washed over the field. Normally, when she was healing Haruyuki and their team's HP, she rotated the bell twice, but Chiyuri drew another two circles after that and—

"…Call!!"

With the loud cry, she brought her left hand straight down in front of her.

A ribbon of yellow-green light and chords like something played by an

orchestra of angels cascaded from the large bell and enveloped Sky Raker. Her long sky-blue hair and the hem of her white dress flapped back, exposing hidden legs. Below the round knees, almost as if they had been designed that way from the start, there existed absolutely nothing.

Sky Raker closed her deep-red eye lenses and clasped her hands in front of her chest as her entire body flashed lime green once. At the same time, in the center of Haruyuki's vision, a system message popped up.

DO YOU ACCEPT THE ENHANCED ARMAMENT GALE THRUSTER?

Haruyuki quickly pushed the NO button in the window, which flashed erratically, quite unlike a normal window. He felt something returning to Sky Raker, and her body flashed brightly once more. This was likely Chiyuri's ability rewinding the two item exchanges that had taken place between her and Haruyuki.

This really is nuts. Haruyuki was impressed anew. Normally, canceling a transaction of money or items in a net game, it went without saying, was something solely at the discretion of the game master. And because of this overwhelming authority, the GM was occasionally likened to a god. However, since there was no so-called GM in Brain Burst, you could say that Chiyuri was, in the Accelerated World, the only one other than the mysterious developer who had the power of a god—even if just a part of that power…

A third flash sent these thoughts rolling around in Haruyuki's head flying.

"…!!" The three witnesses held their breath and opened their eyes wider.

In the writhing green light, they could definitely see tiny particles of light blue radiance settling on Sky Raker's thighs. As the number of these particles increased before their eyes, they extended downward. They clumped together into tapered cylinders, grew denser, and began to draw out the hazy shape of legs—

Fwsh!

They vanished like particles of ice melting in the sun.

Instantly, the green light faded as the sound of the bell grew distant and disappeared.

In the center of the now-silent field, Lime Bell staggered as though she had used up all of her energy. Black Lotus was immediately at her side to catch her.

The yellow-green avatar hung there, no strength left in her legs. “…Why… why,” she muttered hoarsely. “How come…they’re not coming back…?”

“It’s not your fault, Bell.” The answer came from Sky Raker, gently rearranging the hem of her dress. She moved her head slightly with a comforting smile. “This result proves that in the termination of my legs, a logic of higher priority than the normal game system is at work. The image control system…in other words, the Incarnate System.”

Haruyuki took a sharp breath. In a larger gesture, Black Lotus, still holding Lime Bell, pulled her right foot back. She turned her V-shaped mask away.

Sky Raker began to speak calmly at Chiyuri, who was rooted to the spot, and, by extension, Kuroyukihime.

“But you’ve only heard the broadest outline of the Incarnate System, Bell, so perhaps this is hard for you to understand…Three years ago, I tried to increase the maximum altitude I could fly with the power of my will. In exchange for the sacrifice of my legs, it let me reach the sky; that was the deal I made with god—no, the devil. My wish was heard, or rather the tiniest bit of it was. My maximum altitude reached a mere hundred meters higher…and my legs have never come back, no matter how many times I dive into the field. Keeping my legs away is my own will. I no longer know how to undo this. Which is why it’s not your fault you couldn’t bring them back…and it’s not your fault, either, Lotus.”

When you chase after that power, you absolutely lose something as payment.

The Red Legion’s Blood Leopard had told him this. Maybe Leopard, too, had had an image of Sky Raker in the back of her mind at the time.

To those words, Haruyuki had this response: *I want to believe. I want to believe in the Incarnate System, in Brain Burst itself.*

He couldn’t make a lie of that. Absolutely not. And to that end as well, Haruyuki had to take Sky Raker to the pinnacle of Hermes’ Cord.

“Raker,” Haruyuki called to her, quietly but in a voice that pulled together

every ounce of determination he had. He stared directly into her deep-red eye lenses and moved his mouth. “I don’t think that the fighting ability of our avatars is what decides the strength of our team, of our companions. Like observation and judgment—no, before that, I think the feeling of being able to fight even harder because we’re together is more important than anything. You give us support, Raker. Just having you with us, we are so, so much stronger. So…So.”

With his limited linguistic competence, Haruyuki could only manage to get this much out. Still, trying to communicate what was in his heart, he clenched his hands tightly, and abruptly, Cyan Pile’s large hand slapped him on the shoulder from behind.

“It’s just like Haru says. Raker, you’re a priceless part of the battle potential of this Legion.”

“That’s right, sis!” Chiyuri bobbed her head up and down. “We’re strongest when the five of us are together!”

And then finally, Kuroyukihime took a step forward. “Exactly, Raker. It’s as everyone is saying.” The leader of Nega Nebulus spoke in a tone that was calm, though the pain hidden at the core of it was palpable.

“I told you this before as well. I need you. At any and all times…Let’s make this simple. If you are not in tomorrow’s race, the four of us won’t be able to fight with everything we have. Just this alone is reason enough for you to take part in the event.” She sounded fairly overbearing, but it was that overbearing tone that gave her words the power to get right to the heart of the matter.

Sky Raker’s eyes flew open, and then a faint wry smile crossed her lips. She shook her white hat as if to say, *Honestly*.

“Lotus, that way of speaking you have hasn’t changed at all since the first time I met you.” She hung her head and lightly stroked her knees with her hands. “There are some things you lose and never get back. But I know that there are also things that keep shining, without ever being damaged…Perhaps the right at least to believe that—or rather, to wish for it to be true—still remains for me…”

Her quiet murmuring, making almost no noise, flowed softly from below her

hat. At the same time, Haruyuki felt as though he saw the glint of a single drop falling into space. However, when she lifted her face, the same gentle smile as always was playing around Sky Raker's mouth.

"Thank you, Lotus, Pile, Bell…Crow. I suppose I can allow myself to be swayed by your kind words. But…" Her expression became playful. "You'll need to get rid of any sugary ideas of aiming for second or third because I'm taking part. We either have total victory or we burn up in the sky."



Eep!

Haruyuki jumped up to stand a little straighter, and Takumu and Chiyuri raised their voices in easy laughter.

You guys don't know! The truth is she's really, really scary!

Shouting this in his heart, Haruyuki finally was able to put a sincere—albeit slightly stiff—smile on his own face.

6

After bursting out to the real world from the Territory battlefield, Haruyuki hesitated to open his eyes for a while, feeling the pull of gravity on his entire body. He sat like this for nearly ten seconds, but finally, slowly, he lifted his face.

The living room at six o'clock in the evening had fallen back into a silence so deep that he could almost believe that the conversation and laughter exchanged only moments before on the other side had been a hallucination.

The lights were low, so it was fairly dim. The evening sky he could see through the narrow gap in the curtains had sunk into a dull, leaden color. The only movement in his field of view was the apathetic march of the thin second hand of the analog clock hung on the wall, essentially serving nothing more than a decorative purpose.

Sighing lightly from his position on the sofa, Haruyuki flopped over onto his side.

They did try insofar as it was possible to meet in the real before diving for the Territories each Saturday. But when they didn't have that luxury, they joined in the battles from their various locations, such as individually in their houses or from other parts of town. Although a single fight in Brain Burst was over in a mere 1.8 seconds in the real, defense of a Territory took a succession of ten battles at minimum, so it took up nearly ten minutes, breaks in between fights and the like included. Today, Kuroyukihime hadn't really been able to get away from the student council office, and so she ended up diving separately. And, of course, given that her house was very near the border with Shibuya Ward, Sky Raker took part from a distance nearly every week.

Haruyuki couldn't seem to come to terms with fighting in the Territories by

himself from his house. The reason was simple: He would make it through ten or more successive and heated battles as if in a dream, and then share the thrill of victory or the bitterness of defeat with his companions, only to burst out and wake up suddenly alone in an empty house; it made him feel a pitiless loneliness.

Until he met Kuroyukihime in the fall of last year and received the Brain Burst program, he had never felt lonely being alone. On the contrary, he had felt more comfortable that way. Every day, almost before classes were over, he was flying out the school gates as if to escape when heading home, where he would hole up in his room and throw himself into the world of games and anime and comics. Having a conversation with someone in the real world—just being in the same place as someone else was agony. Even if that someone else was Chiyuri or Takumu.

A mere eight months.

That's still all the time that had gone by since he became a Burst Linker. And yet now, Haruyuki felt from the bottom of his heart that he wanted to see his friends from the Legion he had only just said good-bye to. And it didn't matter if it was Niko or Pard or Ash Roller or even Frost Horn. He wanted to exchange blows in a duel, to clamor with criticism over a battle as a member of the Gallery, to meet someone in the real and talk about nothing.

"What happened to me?" he muttered, burying his face in a cushion.

At that moment, a window of some kind started to open in the center of his vision, together with the default sound effect of his home net, and he slapped the confirm button, without bothering to look at what the window said. After all, it was probably just the usual message from his mother about how she was going to be late that night. He promptly forgot about it as words in this vein continued to pop up in his mind.

Have I gotten stronger? Or weaker?

He supposed you could say that the fact that his fear of other people had decreased meant he was stronger. But at the same time, his dependence on other people had also increased.

Back when he was alone every day, he had nothing to lose. But now, Haruyuki

was deeply terrified of destroying the modest personal relationships he had managed to develop over the last eight months. In particular, the lone thread of black silk tied tightest in the depths of his heart that stretched straight up, glittering all the while—

Even though he knew this line of thinking was dangerous, he couldn't stop. Lying facedown on the sofa in the dim living room, he squeezed his eyes shut and kept thinking, bringing his arms up around his head.

Naturally, the end of that thread was connected to the person who had saved him, his "parent," Kuroyukihime.

She was currently in ninth grade at Umesato Junior High. And the first term of that school year was already half over. Which meant there were just ten months left. Once a mere three hundred days passed, Kuroyukihime would graduate from Umesato. He hadn't asked her anything about where she would go to high school. He was afraid to ask.

Real-world time, passing bit by tiny bit in that moment as well, felt to Haruyuki like a raging river flowing at a speed a thousand times faster than normal. If it were possible, he wanted to spend all of their remaining ten months together in the Accelerated World. By a rough calculation, an amount of time equivalent to the infinity of eight hundred and twenty years would pass on the other side, but he felt that even that would most certainly not be enough.

"Kuroyukihime," he murmured out loud, squeezing the edge of the cushion.

"Hmm? What?"

He felt like he heard a voice coming from right beside him. Still facedown, Haruyuki repeated her name in an attempt to hear once again the reply of the phantom girl.

"Kuroyukihime."

"And I said 'what,' Haruyuki?"

That voice included a gentleness and a doubt that was simply too real. Haruyuki, realizing that he had pushed himself to the limits of his own delusional imagination, rolled over toward the left.

And found before his eyes, a mere fifty centimeters or so away from the sofa, two legs wrapped in black stockings.

His eyes fluttered open and shut before he vacantly lifted his gaze. Skirt at the perfect above-knee length. Jet-black short-sleeved shirt with a soft brilliance. A deep red ribbon. From the slender neck equipped with a piano-black Neurolinker to the silky, flowing lengths of hair to the pale face possessing a somehow inhuman beauty, currently cocked to one side, a vision with overwhelming reality filled Haruyuki's field of view.

*Man, I really can't underestimate my imagination. I mean, a vision so clear like this. Maybe I put it together with image data in my memory without realizing it. But do I have a full-body shot with this kind of high resolution…*Haruyuki nonchalantly stretched out his right hand, grabbed the hem of the pleated skirt, and tugged at it.

Even the unbearably real sensations of the texture of the fabric and the mass and flexibility of the person beyond it were communicated to his fingers, and just as he started to wonder—

"Whaaa?!" He heard a cry of that nature and his hand was slapped away. Followed by: "Wh-wh-what are you doing, you idiot?!"

The roared rebuke poured down over him, and at the same time, a slender hand reached out and grabbed his cheek with three fingers to demonstrate their merciless pulling power.

"Hya…Haah?!" As he uttered this squeal/cry of surprise, Haruyuki understood.

She was real. She was not a hallucination, nor a photo, nor a 3-D artificial reality image. The genuine article, Kuroyukihime herself, had suddenly appeared in Haruyuki's own living room, her beautiful eyebrows arched into a *V*. But why? How? Maybe she'd teleported? Electron coherence—?

Half a minute later, Kuroyukihime, having stretched out Haruyuki's cheek to a point where she was satisfied, flopped back onto the opposite sofa and revealed her secrets.

"Look here! I very clearly rang the bell and everything! And then you—without even saying so much as the *h* of *hello*—unlocked the door, so having no

other choice, I simply showed myself in. I called out in my actual voice from the entryway, you know!”

“Oh!”

A window had in fact opened up while he was thinking about the stuff with his face buried in the pillow and his ears blocked by his arms. He had just assumed it was a mail from his mother and pressed the confirmation button without even looking at the text. But that window had actually been to notify him of the intercom call.

It was his own fault for leaving the messaging noise set to its default, which sounded very similar to the intercom buzzer, and after making a note to himself in his internal memory not to forget to change that, Haruyuki sat up straight and opened his mouth again.

“Uh, ummm. I-it’s good to see you.”

“Mmm. Here I am,” Kuroyukihime replied, her lips still slightly pointed as she tugged down the hem of her skirt. It was a good thing he had pulled it toward him earlier. If he had tried to flip it up or something, he had no doubt he would definitely not have gotten off as lightly as a stretched-out cheek.

After this thought drifted through his head, Haruyuki realized that the gears of his brain had once again wandered into strange territory. And that wasn’t the issue anyway, it wasn’t about how Kuroyukihime had gotten into the house. The fundamental issue to be clarified straightaway—

“R-right, anyway, um. Why did you come all of a sudden?” He timidly gave voice to the question.

Judging from the fact that she was still in her school uniform and her school-specified bag was on the floor, Kuroyukihime had apparently come directly from Umesato JH. If she had something she needed to tell him, she could have done so in the meeting earlier where they reflected on how the Territories had gone. She could’ve mailed or called, too. So it was something for which none of that would suffice.

“It’s something that requires an incredibly high level of security…Is that it?” he added, attempting to get a jump on the situation, but Kuroyukihime cocked

her head slightly and shrugged.

“No, not particularly…What? I don’t have the right to ever-so-occasionally come and hang out? Even though it appears that Takumu and Chiyuri visit rather frequently?”

She started to puff her cheeks out once more, so Haruyuki moved his head back and forth in the horizontal direction at top speed.

“N-no, no, no, no, not at all! I-I-I-I’m really happy. Superhappy. I wouldn’t say anything if you were here every day, or even if you went ahead and moved right in. Oh! R-r-right, I’m sorry, I should offer you something! I’ll make some coffee right away; please sit down. Or I guess you’re already sitting down! Sorry!”

If he kept chattering like this, he was bound to say something he couldn’t take back, so he practically fell off the sofa onto his feet and escaped in a dash to the kitchen. A “No need to bother” mixed with an exasperated-seeming smile chased him, and his nervousness abated slightly.

It wasn’t any top secret Legion thing; she had just stopped by to hang out on her way home from school. As a regular junior high student, doing the sort of thing classmates often did.

The moment this thought crossed his mind, a laugh threatened to slip out of his mouth, and he had to work hard to keep it in as he pulled out the most expensive-looking bag of coffee beans from his mother’s collection in the cupboard and poured them into the percolator.

During the time that the cloudy sky beyond the window went from the color of lead to the black ink of night, Haruyuki chatted away as if in a dream. About the Territories that day. About recent events in the Accelerated World. About the race the next day.

And he didn’t leave it at topics related to Brain Burst; he chattered and talked and babbled about happenings and rumors at school, local Suginami issues, and even the 2047 summer models announced by the various Neurolinker companies.

“…But I think the large, high-performance Neurolinkers lately have gotten things essentially backward, you know? Like, they should be machines

developed with wearability in mind, to the point where you can forget you even have one on. And yet the new Hitasu models coming out, I mean, an external unit for carrying around comes with them, standard!”

“Heh-heh, I understand how you feel. But I wonder if you can actually say that after seeing the specs. According to rumor, by moving the connection and slots to the external unit, they’ve managed to equip those Linkers with a console-line CPU, you know.”

“Oh!…N-no, but no matter how great the CPU is, it’s not like it’ll give you an advantage or anything in Brain Burst, right?”

“Mmm, now that you mention it, I suppose not. But I have heard that using the latest Linkers makes the effects processing just a little more gorgeous.”

“Seriously?! No fair, that’s no fair!”

“What? It’s not as if a beautiful appearance raises your win rate. Incidentally, I’m planning to switch to the new Rekto model next month.”

“Whoa! No fair! That’s way unfair! K-Kuroyukihime, let me try it—”

“Come come, you can’t use another person’s Linker. And even if you could, I feel like it wouldn’t fit your neck anyway. Ha-ha-ha…”

It was fun.

Just thinking about having Kuroyukihime all to himself, sitting on the sofa across from him, coffee cup in one hand, talking, nodding, and laughing, Haruyuki experienced a delight such that he nearly ascended to Heaven.

A face-to-face conversation in the real world with real voices was quite the luxury in the current age, and Haruyuki relished this style of communication, which half a year earlier he would have been too nervous to carry out satisfactorily. Which is why he didn’t realize a certain something: the fact that every so often, the faintest hint of sorrow would bleed into Kuroyukihime’s eyes.

Approximately two hours later:

Interrupting this time, which he wished could go on forever, was a low rumbling from Haruyuki’s stomach area.

“Whoops! Is it already that time? I’ve stayed far too long. It’s already suppertime.”

“N-no!” Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head back and forth. “It’s totally fine! I’m not even hungry yet—”

Grr.

His flesh emitted a hungry growl, once again betraying his heart. *And this is why I’m sick of physical bodies!* He restrained his stomach with both arms, but it was to the point where he could do nothing against the involuntary movements of his own innards.

“Heh-heh, no need to fight it. You were incredibly busy in the Territories today; you must have used up the majority of your energy. Make sure to fully replenish yourself for tomorrow.” Smiling, Kuroyukihime stood up.

He wanted so much to say, *Well, in that case, how about you at least stay for dinner?* but the only thing he could make was frozen pizza or frozen doria or frozen *chahan* rice. Very few would say any of these was the sort of menu one invited guests to enjoy.

Even as Haruyuki agonized about it, Kuroyukihime was picking up her bag from the floor, cutting across the living room, and walking away.

That pace—

For an instant, he felt it was the slightest bit heavier than her usual spirited step. A sharp insight pierced Haruyuki.

Maybe the truth is she actually had something else she wanted to talk about? And there I was blabbing about all my own stuff, using up all our time? I was just in my own world, so happy, so fun, and I didn’t pick up on something important…?

Forgetting the intensity of his hunger, Haruyuki opened his mouth.

But no words came out. In this situation, it would seem almost like an afterthought; how could he ask her if she was worried about something or anything like that? He should’ve picked up on this an hour ago. Or at least half an hour ago. He would just have to shut his mouth now and wait for her to say

something.

Staring at her back as she moved down the hallway toward the glass door, Haruyuki prayed, *God, please give me just one chance here somehow.*

It was at that moment a low noise, like the Earth rumbling, came from the distance.

Naturally, the source of the sound was not Haruyuki's stomach. It was lightning. Tossing his gaze toward the living room window, he saw white flash twice, then three times, deep within the thick clouds that weakly reflected the lights of the city. The flare was followed by thunder, slightly louder and closer this time.

Immediately, droplets of water began to tap against the window, and as he watched the neon colors bleed, Haruyuki said hoarsely, "Um, Kuroyukihime. This rain's pretty crazy."

Kuroyukihime also stopped. "The weather report said there was a less than ten percent chance until midnight," she replied, her face to him in profile. "It's rare for them to be this far off the mark."

"Uh, um. Do you have an umbrella?"

"Unfortunately, I am as you see. Sorry, but…" She spread empty hands, and Haruyuki wholeheartedly expected her to continue with something about waiting the rain out here. But… "…perhaps you could lend me one?"

"Uh…Yeah, right, of course." Nodding firmly, he had no choice but to head toward the entryway when a second phenomenon stopped his feet.

A window popped up in the right side of his vision with a yellow warning mark.

"Oh…There's a lightning strike advisory and a network damage report for Suginami and Setagaya."

"So it seems. I can't honestly believe that I would draw down a direct strike, but…I hate the idea of net lag on the way," she said, furrowing her brow.

During the time you were coming and going, AR information—from local traffic bulletins, a navigation line to your destination, the distance you'd

traveled to how many calories you'd burned—was quite handily displayed all over your visual field through the Neurolinker. But when the net wasn't working properly and lags were frequent, it conversely made walking very difficult.

"Hmm. But the time is still the time, after all." The normally immediately and incredibly decisive Kuroyukihime displayed a rare moment of indecision as she looked at the clock. Haruyuki followed her example and shifted his own gaze to the bottom right of his virtual desktop. 8:07 PM. The sort of time that couldn't really be said to be early anymore but wasn't particularly late, either.

The quiet sound of rain and thunder came to them from the other side of the window, and the two continued to stand awkwardly in the living room in unsettled postures.

Haruyuki breathed in and out several times before opening his mouth. But no matter how he tried, those final words would not come out. There was no real need for him to feel any kind of pressure, though. It *would* be better for her to wait until the rain stopped, or at least until the lightning storm had passed. It was a completely inoffensive thing to suggest, a thing that was, in fact, only natural. So then why was his heart rate soaring suddenly?

He couldn't pick up the expression on her face, in profile two meters away from him. Hesitant, weary, somehow nervous, or maybe just waiting for something?

Pee-pong.

The default beep suddenly sounded, and Haruyuki froze with a gasp.

The window that appeared in the center of his vision this time was a text message through his home server. Sender: His mother. Subject: *By tomorrow night.* Main text: *I won't be home, so take care of things.*

A third miracle. Although really, it was nothing so exaggerated as that. Practically every other weekend, Haruyuki's mother came home on a different day from the one she had left on, and the rest of the weekends, she didn't come home at all. However, for Haruyuki, this was the best and perhaps the ultimate timing. He closed the window and pushed a voice from his closed throat.

“Uh, uh, umm…It wouldn’t be any b-b-bother or anything at all. Th-that, umm, uh…” Haruyuki wrestled with whether or not to let her know the details of his mother’s mail and that there weren’t any kind of obstacles.

Kuroyukihime went ahead and got right to the heart of it. “No, your mother should be coming home pretty soon. It would no doubt be a bother. I’ll just…”

The instant he heard that, several of the safety valves in Haruyuki’s heart blew out, and the words flew out of his mouth on their own. “No, i-i-it’s fine! My mom said she isn’t c-c-c-coming home today!”

Crap! That’s way too blunt! I was just supposed to say I wanted her to wait out the rain. Haruyuki fell even further into panic. But…

Kuroyukihime merely twitched her upper body a nearly indiscernible amount. Finally, after rolling her eyes halfway around in the opposite direction from Haruyuki, still in profile, she said distinctly, “Is that so? Well then, I suppose I’ll impose on your kindness.”

“P-p-p-p-p-please d-d-d-d-do!” Bobbing his head up and down, in the back of his mind, Haruyuki was grateful for his mother’s principle of extreme laissez-faire. He could only pray now for the lightning above his head to tie things up for even a few seconds longer. If possible, an hour, no, at least thirty minutes…

Kuroyukihime started to walk again as her mouth moved at a fairly high speed. “Now that I’m thinking about it, we’re all meeting here at your house again tomorrow, and if I go home now, it’d just be twice the hassle.”

“Th-that’s true. It’s completely inefficient—”

—Huh?

It’s annoying to go home, since she’ll be here again tomorrow? What does that mean?

As Haruyuki stood frozen in place, stance unnatural and look baffled, before his eyes, Kuroyukihime placed her bag on a chair at the dining table and said: “So then, I’ll just duck into the mall downstairs.”

The words lingered in the air as she stepped out the door.

Supposedly, Haruyuki had made the expensive and fancy frozen margherita

pizza he had secreted away in the depths of the freezer for supper, put more coffee on, and watched the evening news with Kuroyukihime on the sofa, but he had almost no memory of this time.

When he came to, he was alone in the living room.

However, the faint sound of a hair dryer coming from the bathroom down the hallway led him to believe that the whole thing had not, in fact, been a hallucination.

Here, finally, the transmission of his brain, which had been racing idly for more than two hours, managed to get into first gear, and Haruyuki recommenced his interrupted thoughts.

A hassle to go home. So then, was it okay to interpret those words to mean that she would not go home before the time of the race the next day? In which case, didn't that inevitably lead to a situation in which Kuroyukihime remained in his house the whole night? In other words, wasn't that "staying over"? Was such a situation legally and theoretically permitted to happen, despite the fact that they were in junior high? But there was no other way to interpret it.

Keep it together! Even if that's what's happening, you gotta deal with it calmly! I mean, it's not the first time or anything. I mean, that time, too, she just sort of ended up staying. But that time Niko was here, too, and we had that big retro game playoff and then it just ended up us sleeping in the living room and all…

"Thanks for letting me use the bath."

The door to the living room abruptly opened, and Haruyuki sprang to attention, looking over at the owner of the voice with such force that his vertebrae threatened to shoot out of his spine.

She was clad top and bottom in simple, warm gray pajamas that she had probably bought before at the shopping mall on the ground floor. "Somehow, I keep getting new pajamas," Kuroyukihime said with a faint, wry smile, pulling her hair back with a hair tie.

"Ha—yeah…You can leave those here if you—" His mouth ran on automatic up to that point before he belatedly realized what he was saying. "I-I-I didn't

mean it like that! T-t-t-today's just because of the lightning and it's not like I'm totally thinking I want you to stay over again or anythi— I—I—I—I mean, it's not like I would hate that at all or anything, so, uh, um, ummmm."

Haruyuki gesticulated wildly with both head and hands while Kuroyukihime's smile grew broader until she finally offered him a life raft.

"Maybe you should use the bath, too, before the water gets cold?"

"Right! I'll do that!" He practically rolled off the sofa and escaped from the living room at top speed.

A bundle of confusion once more in the still-steamy bathroom, he hopped in and out of the bath, and while he changed into the sweats that served as his pajamas, Haruyuki gave his full attention to the actions he had to select from now.

And the answer he came up with as a result was slightly—no, fairly pathetic:

"Please use my mom's bedroom! It's the door at the end of the hallway! O-o-o-okay, then, good night!" he chattered/shouted from the entrance to the living room, locked himself up in his room, and yanked his duvet over his head.

He had vaguely guessed that Kuroyukihime had come over because she wanted to talk about something. But in circumstances like this, Haruyuki simply could not believe that he was able to stay calm face-to-face, what with her in her pajamas. He had no doubt that, just like before, once his brain overheated, he would end up spitting out all kinds of things that would be a hundred times better kept to himself. He wouldn't even be surprised if he just collapsed from hyperventilation or dehydration or arrhythmia before he even got the chance to say something stupid.

And if that was where this was going, it was better to hide in his bed. At the very least, he'd be able to make it through the night without forever saving in his brain a memory that made him cry out "gaaah" or "ugh" every time he remembered it later.

But having activated full backward-looking-psychological-shut-in mode for the first time in a long time, Haruyuki gritted his teeth with self-loathing. The thought that he had grown stronger was nothing but wishful thinking, and he

curled up into a tight ball.

Which is why, ten or so minutes later, when he heard a light knocking on the door and a voice asking, “Can we talk a minute?” he was deeply surprised that he didn’t pretend to be asleep.

Instead, he sat up in bed and took a deep breath. With the air pressure, he chased the worm of weakness from his body and replied in a clear, if hoarse, voice, “Sure.”

Once she soundlessly opened the door and came in, he saw that Kuroyukihime was inexplicably holding one of the large cushions from the sofa in both arms. She looked around the room before briskly stepping over to the edge of the bed and sitting down.

“I thought you’d tell me no,” she said in a small voice, her back toward him.

“…I thought I would, too,” he replied distinctly.

“So why’d you change your mind?”

“Hmm…uh…”

He was surprisingly calm. Despite being in this rather earth-shattering situation, Haruyuki felt composed and relaxed, perhaps because of his relief at having made it to this moment without committing any egregious errors.

“Because I was pretty sure you actually had something important you wanted to talk about.”

“What? You managed to see through me that far and yet you take the superspeedy sleep strategy?”

“I-I’m sorry.” He scratched his head as he apologized to the thin back, snapped straight before him.

“…Well, you did let me into your room now, so I’ll forgive you.” Kuroyukihime relaxed her shoulders, shifted slightly on the bed, and looked at Haruyuki sitting in the center of it. Her expression was kind, but, of course, the sorrow that had shaken her that whole day had still not disappeared from her eyes.

She lifted a slender finger and stroked the piano-black Neurolinker attached to her neck. At the same time, she murmured, “‘Those who lose all their points

and have Brain Burst forcefully uninstalled lose all related memories.’”

Haruyuki gasped. This was the system to maintain the confidentiality of the Brain Burst program, the existence of which had been proven to them a mere two months earlier. It was absolute salvation for the defeated, and at the same time, an extremely merciless punishment.

Kuroyukihime brought her hand down as a faint smile with all kinds of emotion rose to her lips. “I was terrified when that final rule, a rule I had only heard rumors of before, was made so undeniably explicit. Because if I ever lose to another King just once, in that instant, I will forget who I have been. But, well, Haruyuki, at the same time, I…I was also relieved.”

Unable to instantly grasp her meaning, Haruyuki was confused. Kuroyukihime squeezed the cushion on her lap, hung her head low, and continued.

“Two and a half years ago, I forever banished one of the Kings from the Accelerated World with a surprise attack during a meeting. Ever since, I’ve been afraid in the depths of my heart. I thought he…the boy who was the first Red King, Red Rider, was out there somewhere in Tokyo nursing a deep grudge toward me.”

Haruyuki took a sharp breath.

She had told him this story countless times up to now. He had even seen a video file with a recording of that scene. So he had thought he understood the size of the scar this incident had left on her heart, but at the same time, he had foolishly thought that she had already overcome that pain.

“B-but…” Instinctively, he leaned toward Kuroyukihime, sitting on the right side of the bed, and started speaking in a daze. “Even if it was a surprise attack…wasn’t that still a just attack according to the rules? And he was the leader of an opposing Legion, plus back then, you didn’t have the non-ggression pact, right? So then there’s nothing to hold a grudge about—”

“That’s not it, Haruyuki.” Kuroyukihime interrupted his desperate words, shaking her head gently but firmly.

“Huh…What do you mean…?”

“I used my level-eight special attack Death By Embracing when I took off Red

Rider's head. The range is a mere seventy centimeters, but in exchange, it has a very high attack power. That said, it shouldn't have been enough to kill Rider in a single blow. After all, he was the same level and a very pure fighting type, with a very high defensive capability, third after green and blue. Yes…you likely see it now. At that time, I activated the Incarnate System. That prohibited power that all seven Kings vowed not to use after the subjugation of the fourth Chrome Disaster."

This time, Haruyuki was at a complete loss for words.

The image control system was a high-level interface hidden within Brain Burst. Deliberately using this system to go beyond the boundaries of the game was the so-called Incarnate System. Its power was tremendous, but at the same time, it held a terrifying dark side. Those who sought the power of the Incarnate had their hearts swallowed up by darkness; this was the consensus of the high-ranking Linkers Haruyuki knew. Kuroyukihime before him was no exception.

The slim back curled up even farther and from the depths, a dry voice resounded.

"Rider has the right to resent me and the way I broke that vow. I don't regret choosing the path of fighting the other Kings, but the sensation of that single blow alone stains my arms…And that's why, Haruyuki. For a long time, I firmly refused to believe the rumors that former Burst Linkers lost their memories of the Accelerated World. Because I couldn't allow myself to cling to such rumors, to let them ease my burden. But, two months ago, when we finally got proof that the rumors of memory loss were true…I was relieved. It confirmed that Rider no longer remembered that he had been the Red King or that he had been chased out because of my betrayal. I truly did heave a sigh of relief from the bottom of my heart. Honestly…I'm such a hopeless coward…Ha-ha-ha…"

The figure of the pajama-clad Kuroyukihime laughing softly looked unusually weak and fragile. Haruyuki mustered up his minimal courage and shifted another five centimeters toward her.

But, of course, he couldn't actually touch her hand or anything like that; instead, he simply spoke in all earnestness. "K-Kuroyukihime. I think that knowing that this sort of memory-loss treatment is lying in wait, and yet still

going out there and fighting, puts an incredible amount of pressure on us. B-but we went and found out about it. We have to just accept that fact and keep fighting. In which case, getting a little relief from that in exchange, there's nothing cowardly about that. Maybe the opposite. I think it's only right."

Kuroyukihime lifted her face a bit and glanced at Haruyuki. A pained, gentle smile bled onto her pale lips. "I see. That's so like you, such a logical opinion. Right, you should be fighting with that kind of faith…However, I probably don't have that right."

"Wh-why not?!"

"Well, you see…Rider's not the only Burst Linker who's suffered an irreversible loss because of my Incarnate attack."

"That's…" Haruyuki blinked several times and furrowed his brow. "Do you mean the fourth Chrome Disaster? B-but you didn't have any choice there."

"No, that's not it." Kuroyukihime shook her head despondently, bound hair swinging. A few seconds later, she announced in a voice that was practically a sigh, "My…old friend. Before I made you my 'child,' she was the only person I was bound to by friendship in the real world as well…Fuko. Or rather, Sky Raker."

"…Huh…?"

"The reason Chiyuri couldn't recover Raker's legs even with Citron Call after the Territories today was not because *her* will is at work. Mine is. Most likely, my will is even now eating into Raker's scars and blocking any regrowth. Like a poison…Like a curse."

"That's—! That's not true!!" Haruyuki cried out in a trance. He shook his head fiercely and leaned forward as he argued vehemently. "Raker herself says that she basically forced you into it. Right up to the end, you tried to change her mind, but Raker wouldn't listen no matter what you said, so you had no choice: You cut her legs off…Isn't that what happened?!"

"That's exactly it, on the surface at least…" She buried her face in the cushion she was holding. "But…I was twelve at the time, even younger and more foolish than I am now. Rather than the path of fighting alongside me as Legion

Submaster, she chose her longing for the sky…I couldn't understand how she felt, how she was forced to that choice. In the end, once I grasped that Raker was never going to change her mind, my sadness…my anger…I put all these feelings into the blade of my right hand and amputated Raker's legs. And in my heart at that time was most certainly the will that if that was how she wanted it, then she could lose her legs for the rest of time. That turned out to be a curse, one that lingers even now. It's the same as the malice of the first Disaster that gave birth to the Armor of Catastrophe…"

She put all the strength in her arms into squeezing the cushion. Her cracking voice flowed quietly in the dim bedroom.

"Raker's—and your—will is the materialization of hope. But mine's not. Just the opposite. I overwrite with the power of rage, of resentment, of despair. Not building anything, not creating anything, just cutting things off, causing loss. As symbolized by the form of my ugly-in-the-extreme avatar…If you all keep fighting alongside me in the reborn Nega Nebulus—no, the Nega Nebulus that you all *revived*, I know you will…"

The latter half of her speech faded into obscurity, and Haruyuki felt almost as if he were listening to Kuroyukihime's soundless self-recrimination.

No. No. You're totally wrong.

There's no way despair and loss are your essential nature. Because you saved me. You offered me a sincere hand and pulled me up from the bottom of the blackest bog. You offered me the most overwhelming salvation!

He shouted all this in his mind, but his ability to turn this vortex of emotion into words was decisively lacking. Haruyuki clenched his teeth and thought intently about how he could let her know just how she and Brain Burst itself had saved him.

The answer he came up with after about five seconds was:

"Kuroyukihime," he said, pulled something out from a corner of the headboard, and gently offered it to her. It was an XSB cable covered in silver wire. With one plug in his left hand, he held the other in his outstretched right.

"Kuroyukihime, please duel with me. If you do, I'm sure you'll understand…

how…how much you…” Haruyuki was unable to hold back the emotions rising up in him, and tears spilled out of his eyes. Sniffling, he took a deep breath and continued in a shaky voice. “…how truly important you are to me.”

Kuroyukihime turned more than half her face to him now, eyes opened wide. A mixture of surprise, hesitation, and fear flitted across her face until it settled on a weak smile tinged with pain.

“You do always surprise me,” she murmured, accepting the plug. However, instead of plugging it into her own Neurolinker, Kuroyukihime crossed the bed to sit on her knees, directly in front of Haruyuki. The scent of soap and shampoo wafted up, sending his awareness flying off, despite the current situation. She placed her left hand on his head and gently pulled his head toward her.

“Now that I think about it, a one-on-one fight with you, this would be…” As she spoke, she fitted the plug into the terminal on his Neurolinker.

“…Th-the first time,” he replied as he stretched out the hand with the plug toward Kuroyukihime’s Neurolinker, trying to keep it from trembling too much. He faced her, met her eyes, and at the same time, jacked in. In his vision, the wired connection warning flashed.

The sensation that more than just the digital signals—that both of their consciousnesses were linked together—settled over him, and Haruyuki slowly called out the command.

“Burst Link.”

Thin legs covered in silver armor stepped down onto a cracked marble floor. The condo Haruyuki lived in had been transformed into a chalky temple. The walls dividing each house and each wall had all disappeared, and the entire floor had become a spacious atrium. The high ceiling was supported here and there by Greek-style pillars. A faint, pale yellow sun shone in through the external openings.

A Twilight stage, the very stage in which Haruyuki had received his first lecture from Kuroyukihime.

Finishing his check of his surroundings, he turned his gaze straight ahead to find a bewitching, elegant, obsidian avatar standing quietly some twenty meters

away. Both hands, both feet, were long swords. An armor skirt resembling a flower petal encircled her slim waist, and both sides of her face mask glittered sharply.

Rather than in an attack posture, the traitor of the Accelerated World, the Black King Black Lotus, had both hands by her sides, her head hanging slightly. However, the slender standing figure was emitting an intense pressure, making him feel as though he were standing below an enormous guillotine, and Haruyuki involuntarily sent a shiver running through Silver Crow's slim body.

No! This is not the time to lose your nerve! he shouted at himself beneath the silver mask.

The reason why Haruyuki had asked for a duel with Kuroyukihime was extremely simple. He just wanted to let her know the faith he had in her as the Burst Linker who supported him.

Brain Burst was, in essence, an online fighting game. And games were meant for having fun: the thrill, the excitement, the emotion of playing. And in the case of net games, the competition, the solidarity of fighting together. Players far and wide had the right to enjoy these. Games definitely did not exist to make people suffer.

The sole method Haruyuki had of communicating this belief to Kuroyukihime was to muster everything he had and fight here and now like this. He had to challenge her using all his power, convinced as she was that her avatar and her Incarnate reflected despair, that she dragged any opponent she crossed blades with into that despair. And he had to make her remember the fun of the duel.

And that's why I—

"I'm not holding back, Kuroyukihime!!" Shouting, Haruyuki kicked at the ground ferociously.

Black Lotus did not move. However, without the slightest easing of the threatening presence emanating from her, she instantly raced a distance of twenty meters and pushed deep into the cracking marble.

His first blow was the thing he was best at: a right straight punch. He rotated his hips and shoulders forward as far as possible, but at the last possible

second, Kuroyukihime lightly ducked the blow. It aimed for the center of her body, and she dodged it by bending in half.

Although she had accepted Haruyuki's challenge, she was still held back by her own uncertainty. She wasn't her usual top-notch self. She came back with a counterattack of a thrust with her right sword, but Haruyuki could clearly see the tip of it coming.

He lined up the fingers of his right hand, stretched out before him. Bending his arm like a whip, he went to meet Kuroyukihime's thrust with a sword-hand.

Even though he hadn't ever fought a direct duel with her, having fought alongside her in the Territories for the last six months, Haruyuki had noticed an extremely modest weak point in Kuroyukihime's close-range fighting.

The swords of Black Lotus's limbs were fearsome weapons for both offense and defense, but because they were, in the end, swords, there was a directionality to that power. Specifically, the attack power was concentrated exclusively in the edge, and the flat of the sword was even fragile, in fact. Of course, they weren't likely to snap at a single blow, but he could pile on the damage there. And if he was looking for a chance of winning in a close-range fight, that was the only place he was going to find it.

"Hngah!"

With a cry, Haruyuki hit the side of the blade plunging toward him with a stiff chop of his right hand. Or at least tried to.

But the impact he anticipated didn't happen. Instead: Soft…was the only way to describe the gentle response he felt, and Haruyuki was floored.

The long jet-black sword caught Haruyuki's chopping hand with a small circular motion from the outside. It couldn't be, but to Haruyuki's eyes, it looked like the sword had transformed into some flexible material and was capturing his arm in a spiral. But this was only a fleeting sensation—

"Hah!" Here, Kuroyukihime allowed a brief exhalation and shook her right arm sharply as she took a step forward.

Instantly, an explosive backlash slammed into Haruyuki's arm, up to his shoulder and chest.

“Wha—?!”

By the time he cried out, he was already being sent flying backward helplessly. Unable to get control over his posture, he crashed into a round pillar off in the distance. The pillar collapsed with a rumble, and still unable to stop, Haruyuki tumbled along on the floor before finally halting, arms and legs splayed.

He stared at the stars flickering before his eyes for more than a second before shaking his head and leaping to his feet. He managed somehow to keep himself from staggering, lifted his face, and shouted, “Wh-what was that just now?!”

Kuroyukihime leisurely hovered closer from afar and shrugged lightly. “The way of the firm against the way of the flexible,” she replied. “I suppose we could call it something like that. One of these days, I’ll tell you about when I trained in the Chinatown area of Yokohama. Anyway, Haruyuki, didn’t you have something you wanted to tell me?”

Her voice was calm, but Haruyuki was keenly aware of the single drop of desolation buried within it.

So Kuroyukihime was currently caught up in emotions she normally kept buried. Her duels generated only a negative energy. There was not a single thing she could give to her opponent, not the excitement of battle, not the solidarity of fighting together. Or so she was firmly convinced.

But you’re wrong! I am at maximum thrill right now! I’m not afraid. I’m shaking all over with real emotion, that someone as strong as you exists in this world…and that this person would fight with me.

Haruyuki kept himself from shouting out and clenched his hands into fists. He was sure this wasn’t something he could communicate with words. Which was why he wanted to fight. He couldn’t shrink now just because she sent him flying once. He couldn’t be done here unless he put forward everything he had in him.

“I’ll tell you with my fists!!” he yelled, and went into another dash.

The attack that had knocked him on his back had also eaten nearly 20 percent of his health gauge. But in exchange, his special-attack gauge had also been charged. As he ran, he gradually deployed the metallic fins on his back.

He abandoned his aim of trying to counter Black Lotus's swords from the side and bet everything on a 3-D rush attack at zero distance, something he had been practicing in secret for a long time.

"Unh…aaah!"

Howling, he went for another long punch with his right hand. Kuroyukihime similarly came at him with a right thrust. With the difference in reach, he would get hit first if nothing changed.

The glittering sword tip drew nearer, closed in, and the instant it was about to touch his helmet, Haruyuki vibrated just his left wing hard, once. With no advance warning, Silver Crow's body slid to the right, and the sword passed by, sparks scattering from the side of his helmet.

"…!"

The sound of Kuroyukihime inhaling sharply. But with no sign of stopping, she whirled her body around, using the sword tip of her left leg as a pivot, and tried to dodge Haruyuki's punch. He shook his right wing. His trajectory was once again corrected to the inside and—

Clang! The modest and yet definite sound of impact was joined by sparks bouncing off Black Lotus's left shoulder pauldron. And the health gauge in the upper right of his vision did indeed decrease, though by the smallest increment: a mere dot.

Now!

"Heeyaah!"

Haruyuki let loose a battle cry and waved his left leg high. Common sense would have it that a high kick would never hit its target in this kind of close-quarters situation. This was because such a kick required a certain amount of distance from the end of the left leg, which was the axis of revolution, and the end of the right leg, which was in the position to generate damage.

Perhaps surmising this, Kuroyukihime set herself up not to take the blow or to avoid it, but to counter with an elbow strike.

But here again, Haruyuki momentarily turned the thrust in his left wing all the

way up. With his forward-leaning body as an axis, the high kick sang through the air with a minimal turning radius that would normally be impossible.

Kuroyukihime immediately canceled her elbow strike and threw her upper body back, but Silver Crow's sharp toes scraped the left side of Black Lotus's mask. Once again, sparks and minimal damage.

Normally, after pulling out a fancy move, Haruyuki inevitably stiffened up. But now, he used his left leg to kick off the ground while the force of his right leg swung around. Kuroyukihime, on the other hand, sank down in preparation to jump backward, perhaps disliking the close contact.

Another moment of thrust with his right wing. He jumped on the centripetal force generated and threw out a roundhouse kick from the left rear.

Kuroyukihime blocked with a bent left arm. Fierce impact. The orange flash effect colored the armor of both avatars and the surrounding marble.

Noticing the gauge in his upper right drop by two dots on the edge of his vision, Haruyuki this time put all the reactive force of the kick into the thrust of his left wing. His body spun suddenly in the opposite direction, and using this energy, he sent his left spear hand shooting out over and over. His fingertips dug shallowly into Kuroyukihime's right shoulder.

When they were facing each other, he threw open both wings. A double-knee kick was just barely blocked by her right arm, and the biggest impact up to that point shook the stage. Damage: three dots.

This kind of uninterrupted rush, which took advantage of the instantaneous thrust of his wings, was the secondary use for his flying ability that Haruyuki had spent hours and hours training to use in his special bullet-dodging training room. Name: Aerial Combo. Compared with the primary use, Dive Attack, it seemed rather staid at first glance, and he couldn't hope to do much damage with it, but in addition to the fact that he could use it indoors, he could also activate it with just 20 percent in his special-attack gauge. And, most importantly, it was nearly impossible to handle when you were seeing it for the first time!

"Aaaaah!"

Pushing his whole body into an acceleration that made his nerves shiver and sing, Haruyuki increased the speed of his rush even more. Maintaining close quarters, he continued to shoot out attacks, his limbs almost never touching the ground. Black Lotus managed to just barely dodge or block all of them, but even still, the damage he carved out steadily whittled down her gauge.

As he flitted about, totally absorbed in the battle, Haruyuki shouted in his mind, *This is me now, Kuroyukihime. This is the full power of me, the person you pulled up from the swamps and gave wings. If your true nature is despair, if it's loss that cuts everything away…then what is this fight now?!*

At some point, the figure of Silver Crow had transformed into a congregation of silver light glittering in the air. He had thrown the door open for his reaction speed in a full-dive environment, a speed he had trained and built up in the virtual squash game in the Umesato local net, where he'd first caught the attention of Kuroyukihime way back when, and Haruyuki kept throwing out his midair combos. He wasn't certain exactly how many dozens of times he had attacked, but he still had not landed a single clean blow. Kuroyukihime silently and thoroughly defended, single-mindedly evading or blocking Haruyuki's rush, when his movements should have in theory been impossible to predict.

Although they exchanged no words, at a certain point, Haruyuki became aware of a deep, rich emotion being communicated between the two of them whenever their avatars touched.

Admiration. Haruyuki at Kuroyukihime's defense techniques. And most likely, Kuroyukihime at Haruyuki's midair rush. Both of their hearts were filled with an incredibly deep emotion.

Abruptly, he felt like he could hear her voice.

Ohh, I see…Was that it, then?

This is the duel. Forget everything and simply become one with your duel avatar; move as you wish. Even if it is a world that disappears in a mere 1.8 seconds, even if it is a contact that ends in 1.8 seconds…a mindful duel surely leaves something behind. It gives us something…

Rider and me. The countless battles Raker and I have fought since childhood, too, they must…Something precious has come from them…and even now, that

something lingers in both of our hearts…

Haruyuki didn't know whether he had actually heard these thoughts or not.

Because that voice came to him in the moment his right fist, thrust out for the hundredth time, touched Kuroyukihime's left blade and was drawn into it, a moment almost outside of time.

In the next instant, that mysterious gravity once again violently swallowed up Haruyuki's fist.

…Ah! The "way of the flexible"…!

Gritting his teeth, Haruyuki got ready to resist the explosive reactive force.

But it didn't come. Instead, his body was pulled into her chest, both arms held firmly and brought to a stop.

"Huh…"

At this deeply unexpected development, Haruyuki stiffened up, unable to decide what he should do, and in his ear, her actual voice this time came whispering.

"That was wonderful, Haruyuki."

Huh? The duel's over? But both of our gauges are still pretty full. And we've got tons of time left…

In the moment that he glanced up at both of their health gauges, bewildered, Haruyuki understood something serious.

Because of the ceaseless, instantaneous thrusting with his wings, Silver Crow's special-attack gauge had been used up from its full state, and only 10 percent remained.

In contrast, Black Lotus's special-attack gauge was completely charged from the countless blocks, and glittered a full bright blue.

"It's been two and a half years since I used this technique. Thank you, Silver Crow. Nice fight." As she murmured, Black Lotus's arms encircled Haruyuki under his own. Circled around his back, they flashed an intense violet.

"Death By Embracing."

Following her utterance of the attack name, a light *snip*. Before the echoes of this had died away, Silver Crow's health gauge turned entirely red, sliding into nothingness from the right end—to zero.

…Damn, that is some serious power.

This final, great admiration swelled up within him at about the same time the flaming text YOU LOSE popped up before his eyes. Fortunately, Haruyuki's whole being emitted a silver light before the sensation of the top and bottom of his duel avatar separating came over him, and he exploded and scattered.

Passing through the darkness replete with the sensation of floating, he returned to the real world.

On his bed, Haruyuki opened his eyes and, after blinking several times, took a look at the face of Kuroyukihime, which should have been right there in front of him.

That was not to be, however. Because Kuroyukihime had in the blink of an eye pressed herself up against him, placed her head on his left shoulder, and wrapped both arms around him.

"Uh! Um! Hey—"

The black hair tickling his cheek and the scent of shampoo slammed into his brain, and Haruyuki tried to leap up while still sitting. But there was no way he could do something as agile as that, so instead, he abruptly lost his balance and fell backward. He hurriedly tried to recover himself with the thrust of his wings, but naturally, there was nothing of the sort on his flesh-and-blood back.

Thump! He fell onto the mattress, and, after a slight delay, the slender body of Kuroyukihime came in for a gentle landing on his stomach.

The faint rasp of the air conditioner in his ears, Haruyuki froze completely and utterly, both eyes wide open. *Okay, just calm down! Make a calm decision before you do anything!* Although that thought was in his head, he simply could not begin to grasp what was happening, much less act.



At eleven at night, he was lying on his bed in his usual sweats. He was fine up to that point. No problems there. But Kuroyukihime was in her pajamas on top of him, both hands wrapped around his back, squeezing even more tightly now—this situation, was it actually, really reality? And why was this even happening to start with? This whole thing had to be the doings of some kind of virus, start to finish?

"You surprised me." Her real-world voice poured directly into his ears, and Haruyuki cut off his confused-to-the-extreme thoughts. "You…At some point along the way, you got that strong…"

Her murmuring voice was filled with emotion, and while Haruyuki was still unable to process a single thought, his mouth managed to move on its own.

"B-but the result was basically a perfect win for you…"

"That's just a reflection of the difference in our levels. It was a much more equal fight than you think. When you kept on rushing me in midair like that, you really forced me to block, and desperately, for the first time in an incredibly long time."

"R-really?" he said, half believing her, half not. In Haruyuki's experience, the difference between his ability and that of the Black King was, to be honest, from the bottom of the space elevator up to the peak—no, out to geostationary orbit.

However, Kuroyukihime brought her head up a bit and stared into his eyes from extremely close up, smiling faintly. "Really. Aah, I wish I could let you know just how happy I am right now, how full of emotion I am!"

In the depths of her large black eyes, a light like stardust swirled, glittering. Just seeing that, his brain threatened to leap out of his head once again. Haruyuki didn't know which of their hearts was creating the powerful heartbeat he felt on the border between their bodies, closer than they had ever been before.

They were so close, their noses were almost touching. They exchanged

glances—

Kuroyukihime announced her next words calmly. “At the very least, I’ve decided to trust in the path I’ve walked this far. I’ll have many regrets, but… even so, the colossal amount of time I’ve spent in the Accelerated World and the countless duels I’ve played through were not in vain. Because as a result of this path, I found you and I was able to bring you in.” The five fingers of her right hand moved up from his back to caress his cheek.

“Haruyuki, I’m proud of you.”

The instant he heard this, all of the shock and confusion inside him evaporated and was replaced with something hot filling both eyes and flowing down the sides of his face and onto the sheets. The liquid kept coming, falling without stopping.

He blinked hard several times, and as he rubbed his face with the back of his right hand, Haruyuki began to excuse himself in a hoarse voice. “Oh…Um, I-I’m sorry. I…It’s…I—I—” But for some incredible reason, even his voice turned into heaving sobs, and in between words, he bawled like a child. Trying desperately to get this under some kind of control, he continued to speak. “I— That’s the first time in my life…a-anyone’s ever told me they’re p-proud of me. And—” Unwilling to expose his ugly sobbing face any more than that, Haruyuki tried to turn away.

But Kuroyukihime held him back with her whole body and stroked his head gently as she pressed her own face up against his slick cheek. “Well then, I will say fourteen years’ worth of it. You are the lone child of me—of the Black King, Black Lotus, and I am more proud of you than I am of anyone else in this world, my perfect partner.”

It felt like each time she patted his head softly, the thing blocking his chest eased pleasantly. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The faintest of voices reached his ears. “No, you’re not just that. The real-world you, Haruyuki Arita, too…and me…Kuro…”

But he didn’t get to hear the rest.

Because here, Haruyuki had probably made the biggest of that night’s

blunders.



Coupled with the exhaustion from mustering all his strength for the duel, the sweet pain of the overflowing emotions melting away, the sensation of her kind hand, and the warmth of their bodies touching, his consciousness had been smoothly sucked into the darkness.

In other words, he fell asleep. Like a log. In this especially, like a child.

He felt like the last thing he heard was mixed with a wry smile.

Good night, Haruyuki.

7

Ding-dong.

A light chiming sound echoed inside his brain, disturbing his deep sleep.

Wha? he thought, with a head that was at best 10 percent awake. It wasn't the sound of the alarm clock he always used. And in any case, that clock sat on the headboard, so he should be hearing the noise from above. But the sensation of sound delivered directly to his consciousness, without it going through his ears— *Oh, that's right, I fell asleep without taking my Neurolinker off. I hope the shell didn't get cracked or anything…*

Ding-dong.

The chime again. He finally realized that the sound was not an alarm to wake up. It wasn't the sound of mail or a call arriving. The ringing was the intercom to let him know someone was at the door. Reluctantly, he half opened his eyes and looked at the clock hanging on the wall to the right of his bed. Nine in the morning.

His mother wouldn't be home until the middle of the night. Maybe it was a courier with a morning delivery? He thought about just pretending he didn't hear the bell and having them leave it in the delivery box, but it was time for him to get up anyway. Takumu and the gang were coming at eleven.

After closing his eyes tightly one final time, Haruyuki got up.

Instantly, he felt a slight tugging resistance on the right side of his neck. He turned his gaze to find a silver XSB cable stretching out from the external connection terminal of his Neurolinker. Glinting in the light of the sun coming in through the gap in the curtains, it disappeared beneath a thin blanket—

Where the tiniest part of a head of silky black hair popped out.

“…Unh.”

Waaaaah?! He very nearly shrieked before clapping his hands over his mouth to desperately hold the cry in. In the moment of this shock, as if all circulation of blood in his body had suddenly reversed direction, he was entirely awake. Blinking repeatedly at top speed, he stared doubtfully, but the small head didn’t disappear. Just the opposite, the distinct outline of a slender body lying there appeared under the blanket. He could doubt it no longer: Someone was sleeping in Haruyuki’s bed, fifty centimeters away, back turned to him.

“Mmm…mmm.”

This someone, perhaps sensing Haruyuki moving, rolled over and let out a small sigh. The blanket slid off and the hidden face was revealed.

“……Ku—”

Ro-ro-ro-ro-ro?! He managed somehow to suppress scream number two. That beautiful face—a beauty he was very familiar with and yet never felt even slightly used to—belonged without a doubt to Kuroyukihime.

Why the hell is this—?! He shrieked in the back of his mind before finally remembering the details of how the previous night had ended. Kuroyukihime had come to his room late, they’d talked for a while, and then they’d had a direct duel. After that, he didn’t know what had happened or how, but when all was said and done, Kuroyukihime had ended up falling asleep like that in this bed, and Haruyuki seemed to have no recollection of the process leading up to this result. Serious misstep. Serious situation.

Still frozen like a stone statue, he mustered every ounce of willpower not to look at the rumpled sleeping figure, pajama top noticeably flipped up—*Don’t look don’t look don’t look—*

Ding…dong.

Once again, the chime, longer than before now, echoed in his auditory system. With the thought that that was one seriously patient courier, he glanced at the visitor window in the right of his vision; it seemed that they hadn’t just come to the entrance on the first floor, but all the way up to the twenty-third floor already. Having little choice, he decided to put off the

situation before him for the time being and gently plucked the direct cable out before carefully stepping down to the floor. He tiptoed out of the room, closed the door, and sprinted to the entryway, replying in a hush, “Okay, okay, I’m coming!”

“Sorry to make you wait so—”

Haruyuki swallowed the “long.”

On the other side of the opened door was not a cheerful young courier standing there grinning.

Snow-white, wide-brimmed hat. Shrug of the same color. Light blue chiffon dress. Thigh-high socks with a border pattern on slender legs peeking out from the skirt hem. Long, full hair reaching down her back, a small bag dangling from both hands. This visitor was clearly—

“M-Master?! I mean, Raker?!” Haruyuki cried out, stunned, and the woman bowed lightly at him. She responded in a voice even more clear and gentle than it sounded through the net.

“Good morning, Corvus. When we meet in the real, you can just call me Fuko.”

At these words from the second-in-command of the Legion Nega Nebulus, level-eight Burst Linker Sky Raker, real name Fuko Kurasaki, a girl two years older than himself, Haruyuki quickly bowed again.

“Oh! R-right! Good morning, Fuko. Oh! Uh, excuse me! Please come in!”

“Thank you. That would be lovely.” She closed the door and, as she took her sandals off, he got some slippers ready for her.

“A-although…you’re pretty early,” he said, still somewhat spaced out. “There’s still ages until we’re supposed to meet.”

“Hee-hee-hee, I’m sorry. I wondered if it might be a bother, but it’s the first time for me to come over to your house and I’m afraid I couldn’t wait. At any rate, I did send a mail very early this morning…”

“I-I’m sorry! The truth is I was asleep until just a minute ago.” As he spoke with an embarrassed laugh, Haruyuki finally realized that the current situation

was very much not one in which he should be laughing.

At that very moment, on Haruyuki's bed only seconds away down the hall, the Legion Master aka Kuroyukihime was fast asleep! Clad in perfect pajama top and bottom!

Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what am I gonna do! No, now's not the time for doing. Think, think! Right, first, I'll show Raker to the living room. And then I'll secretly get Kuroyukihime's stuff, and she can change in my room, and we can work it out so she comes in from outside again. That's it; that's the only option.

As Haruyuki instantly came up with this secret operation, Sky Raker politely lined her sandals up before stepping into the slippers set out. She no sooner had them on than Haruyuki was showing her the way to the living room.

"P-please, this way, p-p-please…Straight ahead, please!"

"R-right. Thank you." She smiled, puzzled, but then began to walk next to Haruyuki. She spoke in a singsong voice. "The truth is, I came early because there's something I wanted to talk about, just you and me, Corvus. It's been a while since just we two talked. Lately, the only chance we get to meet is in the Territories…I wanted to thank you properly…once…"

Her words suddenly dropped away and the reason for the abrupt interruption was clear. However, he did not have the extra brain space to come around to that insight. Because at that point in time, Haruyuki had again frozen solid, one foot in the air, about to take another step.

The French-gray-pajama-clad figure that appeared shuffling from around the corner two or so meters ahead of them in the hallway looked first at Haruyuki and then at Fuko with a dazed expression. She batted long eyelashes. She moved her lips and the voice of someone freshly awake came out.

"Morning, Haruyuki."

Followed by.

"Morning, Fuko."

Reflexively, Haruyuki dipped his head with a "Good morning," and as if pulled along, Sky Raker also replied, "M-morning, Sacchi."

“Mmm.” Still 80 percent asleep, Sacchi aka Kuroyukihime nodded once before facing forward again. She cut across their view, walking in a fashion similar to the hovering of her avatar, and disappeared to the left. A few seconds later, they heard the sound of the door to the washroom opening and closing.

Silence.

It was not a voice that broke this heavy blanket of quiet, but a movement. A pale hand extending from the right pinched Haruyuki’s ear and yanked on it hard.

His whole body stiffening, he allowed himself to be pulled around to confront a smile he had rarely seen on Sky Raker’s face. He wondered, almost as a means to escape, where he had seen that expression before, and it soon hit him: It was the very smile that her duel avatar had given him in training, when she pushed him off the top of the old Tokyo Tower in the Accelerated World’s Unlimited Neutral Field.

Eeee! Haruyuki shrank into himself.

“Corvus,” Raker said gently. “What is the meaning of this?”

“…I-it’s not like that.” Haruyuki could think of no other option than to immediately shake his head vigorously.

About ten minutes later:

Fuko faced Kuroyukihime, back in her Umesato uniform now, and Haruyuki, also changed into daytime clothing, sitting together on the sofa, and silently brought her teacup to her lips.

Chak! She returned it to the saucer and lifted her face. The same tranquil smile as always was on her face, but Haruyuki was convinced that if this had been a VR world, she would have had a little anger emoticon flashing near her forehead.

“Well, I do understand the circumstances here. And the heavy rain last night was indeed not in the forecast? And there were malfunctions in the network in the west of the twenty-three wards? You probably would’ve encountered some difficulty in returning home, wouldn’t you?”

“E-exactly. The rain was really quite something, Fuko. And the lightning, it was just like that time when Purple lost it…”

Kuroyukihime acted her story out with her body and her hands, earning a bright smile from Fuko. However, that smile held an attack power on par with the special attack Ultimate Chill Kuroyuki Smile. Attribute: Terrifying wind. Right, maybe he could call this one Vacuum Smashing Raker Smile. He was so glad that Chiyu wasn’t here, too. If this smile were combined with the Superheated Chiyuri Beam, they would annihilate each other and bring down this room—no, the entire condo…

As he escaped into his thoughts, Fuko’s next attack reached his ears.

“Which is why I’ll be understanding of this. But if, as you say, Lotus, nothing untoward happened, then there’s no real reason for me to help you conceal the incident, is there? If Bell and Pile knew, they would certainly be moved at the closeness of their Legion Master and Silver Crow—”

“Th-tha-that’s just—!”

Haruyuki laid his own cry over Kuroyukihime’s stammering.

“A-ah! M-M-Master, please, it’s just that—”

“Well then, how about we do this?” Once again, the glittering Raker Smile. “Please invite me to a sleepover as well sometime this month. Under that condition, I would be delighted to keep this quiet.”

“Wh—! Wh-wh-what are you talking about, Fuko?!”

“Goodness! I did have Corvus stay at my house once, you know? Complete with dinner?”

“Wh—! Wh-wh-wh-what is she talking about, Haruyuki?”

“N-n-n-no, not like that, not in the real, in the Accelerated World! And I slept on the floor!”

Whipping his head back and forth at top speed, Haruyuki thought to himself, *I don’t know if I’ve ever seen Sky Raker enjoying herself so much or Kuroyukihime so on the defensive. These two really are connected on some deep, spiritual level.* As only honestly good friends, who shared a different history than they

did with Haruyuki, could be.

That bond was cut once by inescapable fate. And then three years later, guided by the same fate, they met again and now were completely restored. That's what he wanted to believe. He wanted to believe it, but…

Haruyuki had spent his time since the fall of last year staring intently at and adoring Kuroyukihime, and he knew. No matter how many walls they might try to take down, in the depths of Kuroyukihime's eyes, there was a pain that was not completely melted away. An equal measure of self-recrimination likely lay in the shadow of Sky Raker's smiling face as well.

The Incarnate System required those players seeking to master it to confront their own mental scars. Because powerful imagination was only born from a powerful wish, and a wish was nothing other than the flip side of a lacking. Unless you turned toward and occasionally entered the emotional holes that made up the core of your duel avatar, holes so dark you wanted to forget they were even there, you would never be able to obtain sufficient power to produce a large overwrite.

That's what Sky Raker did three years earlier. She cut both legs off of her avatar to purify this lacking within herself, and then used the Incarnate System to increase the power of Boost Jump she'd been given by the original system to the point where it was Flight. If he were to seek more power than any of his basic attacks, then Haruyuki, too, would likely have to tear open the scar in his heart that he had now finally managed to start walling over and let the blood flow again. His own scar, his psychic wound, was his hatred of himself. Hatred of his ugly, fat, bad-at-talking, bad-at-sports, bad-at-school self.

No, maybe the truth is it's not really that. I mean, back then, I wasn't as fat as I am now. The me back then who stood on the other side of that living room door and eavesdropped on the conversation inside. And yet…the people fighting in whispers, about me…No, that's not it. That's not it. It's because I'm fat. It's because I'm always flinching. That's why they, I mean someone like me—

"…yuki. Haruyuki!"

A sudden slap on his left arm and Haruyuki lifted his face with a gasp, only to meet the suspicious eyes of Kuroyukihime. Reflexively, he dropped his head

again.

“What’s wrong? You stopped talking all of a sudden.”

“You don’t…look so good, Corvus,” Sky Raker said, and Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head.

“N-no, it’s nothing at all! I—I was just…thinking about the Incarnate System…”

After his mouth had heedlessly raced this far, he realized it was not the most appropriate subject to bring up in the current situation and clamped his lips shut, but he couldn’t cancel out the words that had already been released. Kuroyukihime and Fuko both opened their eyes wide for a moment, and then after a few seconds of silence, smiles of a similar nature spread across both of their faces.

“…I see. Was there something you wanted to ask?” Kuroyukihime brushed his hand lightly as if she had read his mind. Her fingertips, normally comfortably cool to the touch, were now the slightest bit warm, and Haruyuki exhaled shortly. The gaze Fuko had turned on him was full of a gentle light again, and at some point, words started to fall from his lips.

“Uh, umm, well…I was just thinking. About the structure of the Incarnate System…In the end, the bigger the lack at the core of the Burst Linker, the more…I mean, the more unhappy you are in the real world, the stronger it is. Like, is it something like that—”

“No.”

“That’s not how it works.”

Their answers were instantaneous. They exchanged glancing looks, almost as if to determine who would speak next, and Kuroyukihime to his right turned to face him directly.

“Those mental scars are in the end nothing more than a key deciding the attributes of the duel avatar. There are much stronger powers than that in the Accelerated World, so strong as to be unlimited. The knowledge to put together battle strategies and techniques, battle abilities cultivated through training and experience, and the bonds of friends and companions and rivals. Even in an Incarnate battle, the predominance of these powers is not in the least bit

shaken. So really, it's the exact opposite of this idea you have. Which is that those who drag their real-world unhappiness into the fight become stronger than those who simply enjoy the duel, isn't it?"

"Y-yeah…I guess it is."

"That idea is absolutely correct. Do not doubt it even a little. What we say now has that as the foundation." When Kuroyukihime closed her mouth here, Sky Raker smoothly picked up where she had left off.

"At the same time, there exists still another reality, Corvus."

"R-reality…?"

"Yes. To other people, you may look like you are simply and earnestly enjoying the duels. But it's very nearly impossible to be completely satisfied in the real world as long as you are a Burst Linker, even for instance, a Burst Linker like my 'child' Ash Roller. Because the essential requirements for the installation of Brain Burst—to have been equipped with a Neurolinker from shortly after birth and to possess a high-level aptitude for the quantum connection—are elements that run counter to real-world happiness."

The moment he heard this, Haruyuki gulped his breath back.

When it came right down to it, 90 percent of the time, the reason for putting a Neurolinker on an infant was to cut down on the amount of work involved in child-rearing. With the Neurolinker, you could always monitor temperature, heart rate, and breathing, so you could step away from the child, and you could automatically execute a variety of educational programs instead of talking to them. And when the baby started crying in the night, you could even force it into a full dive. However, no academic or education critic could assert definitively that the baby was happy like this.

Similarly, the requirement for a high-level aptitude for the quantum connection might seem like a superior talent that only chosen children possessed, but the truth was not so. This aptitude, or rather this affinity with the Neurolinker, was determined by how many long hours you had spent since childhood in high-density full dives; put another way, how much time you had thrown away in the real world and locked yourself up in a virtual world. Like the way Haruyuki had always escaped with single-minded focus into the virtual

squash game of the Umesato local net.

As if reading his thoughts, Kuroyukihime began to speak again quietly. “Perhaps this is an uncomfortable way of phrasing it, but…in the majority of cases, those able to meet the conditions required to become a Burst Linker are children raised without enough love from their parents. Conversely, children raised from infancy always watched over by their parents, touched by them, having conversations in their real voices, don’t need Neurolinkers or any virtual world. However, young me needed these, as did Raker.”

Haruyuki dipped his head lifelessly and mumbled, “Of course, I needed them, too. When I was little…I was always alone in this house, even at night, and it was so scary.”

The pale fingertips once again touched the back of Haruyuki’s hand, and she continued almost soothingly, “All of which is to say, well…nearly all Burst Linkers have a single common lack: real love between parent and child. That’s the reality Fuko mentioned earlier. And those who become Burst Linkers, when they exercise their right as a ‘parent’ to copy and install that one time, they instinctively try to select someone who bears the scent of the same scars as themselves to be their ‘child.’ As a result, we are intensely dependent on this second parent-child relationship we’ve obtained; we cling to it. To gain what we were unable to get in the real world…In other words, we cling to the Accelerated World itself. To maintain these new bonds, we try to preserve the stability and the concealed nature of the Accelerated World. Honestly. It’s quite the well-made system. You really have to hand it to the developer.”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

At Kuroyukihime’s chuckling, a slightly reproachful smile came across Fuko’s face.

“Sacchi, you’re as cynical as ever, hmm? Corvus, I know I said ‘unhappy reality’ earlier, but that wasn’t to say that the thing itself is unhappy.”

“H-huh?”

Haruyuki fluttered his eyelids, and Sky Raker turned a gaze on him that was the very definition of the word *affection*.

“What I’m trying to say is this: The Incarnate System does indeed use as its energy source those mental scars, that is to say, your trauma. Which is why in a way, it might be true that the more unhappy you are, the greater the power you can manifest. But, well…all Burst Linkers in the depths of their hearts bear the huge, enormous scar of being given a Neurolinker instead of their parents’ hand soon after they were born. It’s just not reflected in their avatar or their Incarnate because they don’t really remember it. So then it’s futile, isn’t it, to compare this with any unhappiness accumulated after this one that is so vast? Better is to compare the size of your hope. The power of the Incarnate System isn’t decided by the depth of the holes in your heart alone. It’s also determined by the height of the trees rooted and budding there.”

Here, Fuko’s voice shook momentarily. She slowly lowered her gaze to the glass table.

“A long time ago, I tried to force those trees to grow and ended up cutting them down at the root, so perhaps I have no right to…to speak now…” Regret and even more than that, a deep resignation colored her words.

Kuroyukihime stretched out a hand toward the now-silent Sky Raker. “Come here, Fuko.”

Raker stood up from the sofa opposite and detoured around the table to set herself down to the left of Haruyuki. The girls, now forcibly wedged into a two-person sofa with Haruyuki in between them, acted in a completely and utterly unexpected way.

They stretched out their arms from both sides of him and squeezed each other tightly—and Haruyuki in the process. Naturally, all of the serious conversation they had been having up to that point flew out of his head, and, dumbfounded, he curled up into himself.

However, for some reason, the panic that honestly should have kept up forever rapidly melted away just this one day, like ice in the sun. Instead, a warmth he couldn’t really put a name to spread out in his chest. It was something still different from the sweet, painful warmth when Kuroyukihime had held him on the bed the previous night.

Eventually, he heard Fuko above his head. “Hee-hee-hee…We’re like a pack of

kittens whose mother hasn't come home, huddling together in the nest."

"It's a happy thing to have someone to huddle together with." Kuroyukihime's response came swiftly. "The night ends sooner that way. And then you can tumble around and play in the sun once more."

"You're right. Play in earnest, play seriously. Whatever the expectations of the developer of the BB system might be, this alone we can never forget."

The two of them sat there still for a while, but finally, their bodies pulled apart, neither one initiating it. Kuroyukihime placed a hand on Haruyuki's still-dazed head.

"First, today's race! This is Brain Burst, after all, so there'll no doubt be no manual or tutorial as there would be with a normal race, so it might be rough going, but we're counting on you, Driver!"

"R-right." Haruyuki nodded hurriedly, and now Sky Raker was patting his back.

"Exactly. I deeply despise things like putting up a good fight or losing by a narrow margin. And I also hate the word *ambivalent*. If you get ambivalent about your promise to invite me to a sleepover, I will push you off of old Tokyo Tower once again."

"Wh-whaaaat?! B-b-b-but th-th-th-that's—"

"H-h-h-he's right, Fuko! No one's even said anything about a promise—"

"A-ha-ha! You're too late. You've already signed the contract in your soul!"

Listening to Sky Raker laughing delightedly, Haruyuki resolved himself anew in his heart.

They absolutely had to win the race event that day. At the very least, they would somehow, someway reach the top. And not for the victory or the prizes. To extend a long, long vine from the past and cut the thorns of regret that held these two even then in its curse. If they climbed those four thousand kilometers to an altitude where the gravity of the surface didn't reach, he was sure they could do it.

And just then, the high-pitched visitor chime rang for the second time that day. When he looked at the clock, he saw that the hands had arrived at eleven

before he knew it.

“Oh! Looks like Taku and Chiyu are here.” He stood up and took a few steps before timidly offering a reminder. “Um, Master, the two of them, I mean.”

“Don’t worry. I made a promise. I’ll keep your secret.” After Sky Raker nodded with a grin, she winked in a deeply meaningful way. “But secrets bring about new secrets, you know.”

Aah! She’s serious.

He tucked the thought away for the time being and raced toward the entryway before impatient Chiyuri rang the bell a second time.

“Bow down! Give thanks!”

Chiyuri raised up the basket in her hands as she spoke. And as usual, the starving fell prostrate with glee before the divine object—or, more accurately, the bewitching scent drifting out from it—and they ended up first taking care of the business of defeating their hunger.

Pulled from the basket was tagliatelle with seafood tomato sauce, offering ample demonstration once again of the skill of Chiyuri’s mother. She had prepared enough for five people—even more than that, actually, with plenty left for Takumu and Haruyuki to have seconds. She had apparently no sooner finished making it than Chiyuri and Takumu were dashing up the two floors to the Arita residence, since hot steam was still rising up from the flat pasta when they measured it out from the deep dish. The five of them seated around the dining table scrambled to plunge their forks into their plates.

“Mmm, what wonderful skill.”

“This really is incredibly delicious.”

Kuroyukihime and Fuko raised their voices in admiration at their first taste of Chiyuri’s mother’s cooking, and Chiyuri ducked her head, as if embarrassed.

“Heh-heh-heh. My mom seemed all excited, too…this many people coming over to Haru’s place for, like, the first time ever—”

“H-hey, Chiyu! You don’t need to make a big announcement!” Haruyuki reflexively interrupted her, but he himself knew best just how true this actually

was. He also glared at a giggling Takumu before devoting himself to scarfing down pasta.

“Now that I’m thinking about it,” Kuroyukihime said, somewhat apologetically, still smiling, “ever since the mission sometime back to subjugate the Armor, Haruyuki’s house has ended up being our sortie base for every little thing. I really should put together a proper Legion headquarters.”

“N-no, we can use my house; it’s totally fine! I mean, my mom hardly ever comes home on the weekends anyway,” he hurried to respond before realizing that talk about parents was still a somewhat sensitive topic, and abruptly added, “Now that you mention it, what did you do during the era of the first Nega Nebulus? For a headquarters, I mean.”

Kuroyukihime and Fuko, sitting next to each other across from Haruyuki, exchanged glances, and then nostalgic looks came over both faces. It was Fuko who replied in a gentle tone.

“At the time, there were a great many more members than there are now, but almost none of them had a relationship that allowed meeting in the real. To be specific, it was Lotus, me, and one other. Nega Nebulus was a Legion united by strong feelings toward the aloof flower Black Lotus, rather than by relationships between its members. Longing, worship. Or feelings of protectiveness.”

“F-feelings of protectiveness?” Takumu asked. Haruyuki and Chiyuri also opened their eyes wider.

“Yes.” Sky Raker smiled even more delightedly. “When the Legion formed, Lotus was still only nine in real-world years. Although naturally that sort of real information was not made public, you could tell to a certain extent from her bearing and attitude. While boasting overwhelming fighting prowess, she was nonetheless childish and easily hurt. Many Burst Linkers no doubt squealed and cooed over her and joined the Legion.”

“C-come now! It’s true I was a child, but I refuse to consent to the idea that I was easily hurt, Raker!”

“Oh? Well then, shall I also tell them about how we ended up meeting in the real?”

“N-no! You can’t; I forbid it! I absolutely forbid it! If you tell them, it’s the Judgment for you!” she shrieked as she began to intently peel a shrimp, and Haruyuki involuntarily burst out laughing. Kuroyukihime hung her head even farther and muttered, “Even though you older lot were all only ten or eleven anyway…”

Fuko’s shoulders shook for a minute with laughter. “That was how it was,” she continued. “So back then, there was nothing so large-scale as a headquarters. I suppose that’s basically the same situation with the other Kings’ Legions. The King and their executive court had the possibility of enormous danger if they exposed their real information, even to other Legion members.”

“Mmm. Although it’s a different story if you’re confident you have a perfect grasp on the entire Legion,” Kuroyukihime said after finishing the shrimp as she abruptly wiped the previous expression off her face.

Haruyuki cocked his head to one side. The Legion Masters may have had the privilege of the Judgment Blow, but it would be hard to bind all the members of a large Legion with the fear of that alone. The effective period of Judgment was for a month after leaving the Legion, so as long as you were prepared to keep running during that time, betrayal was possible.

However, Kuroyukihime’s tone suggested that there was in fact a King actually achieving this sort of perfect grasp. He wanted to ask her about it, but before he could, she set her fork down with a clatter and said in her usual tone, seemingly satisfied, “Aah, that was truly delicious! Thank you, Chiyuri. Please thank your mother as well.”

“Oh! Sure! I was a little worried about whether or not you’d like it. I’m glad you did!” Chiyuri grinned happily, and Kuroyukihime turned a wry smile on her as she wiped her fingers.

“Come come, my usual fare is incredibly slapdash. I could give Haruyuki a run for his money.”

“Whaaaat? That’s not good for you!” Chiyuri screwed her face up.

“Well then,” Sky Raker said with a composed look. “Perhaps Corvus and Lotus both had the same frozen pizza last night.”

Puzzled looks from Chiyuri and Takumu. Contrasted with the deer in the headlights from Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime.

“F-frozen pizza lately’s pretty good with the whole CAS freezing technology! Do you know about this? Basically, they use supercooling so that they don’t destroy the cells when they freeze stuff…”

Blathering away in a desperate bid to change the subject, Haruyuki had the abrupt thought, *Wait, there is one, isn’t there? A Legion that’s under perfect control.*

The second Nega Nebulus now was exactly that—or rather something more than that. Because all the members exposed their real information to one another and even came together to eat like this. None of them doubting any other, they were bound by real trust. Almost as if they were a family.

This absolutely could not scale up to a large Legion with more than forty or fifty members, but Haruyuki felt that these bonds themselves were their greatest weapon to fight the other Kings going forward. At the same time as this feeling hit him, in the depths of his heart, he prayed resolutely that they would be bound like this forever. He closed his eyes for a moment, quickly opened them again, and involuntarily smiled wryly without letting it onto his face. In his ears, Kuroyukihime’s words came back to life.

To maintain these new bonds, we try to maintain the stability and the concealed nature of the Accelerated World.

That sentence summarized everything in his mind at that moment.

*But…*Haruyuki took a step forward in his thinking. *Even if the movements of my heart put me onto the exact trajectory the developer intended, that wouldn’t decrease the value of these bonds even the tiniest bit.*

Right. Whether or not there’s some hidden objective somewhere in Brain Burst…

I will protect this family.

A few minutes later, once they had all finished eating and everything was cleaned up, they moved to the living room sofas. The U-shaped set was for five people, and they sat down in such a way as to allow them all to daisy-chain.

After they quickly connected using four XSB cables of various colors, Haruyuki looked around at everyone assembled. “Umm,” he said. “Once you accelerate and show up in the initial accelerated space, please stay on standby there. I’ll use the transporter card in my menu, and then we should all be instantly taken to the bottom station of Hermes’ Cord.”

The others nodded. The details of the race had already been outlined in that earlier mail, so all that was left now was to wait for the time. They stared not at the analog clock on the wall, but the digital clocks in the bottom right of their virtual desktops, which constantly displayed the precise Japan Standard Time. Two minutes and three seconds until noon.

Real-world time normally felt like it raced by, the surging waves of swift currents, but at times like this, each and every second seemed so long as to be vexing. Still, the digits did indeed continue to decrease until at long last, there were just twenty seconds left.

“Now then, everyone,” Kuroyukihime uttered in a light, clear voice. “Let’s enjoy every minute of the Hermes’ Cord Race! I’ll start the countdown! Ten, nine, eight, seven…”

The five leaned back deeply into the sofa as they closed their eyes. *Six, five, four.*

They took a deep breath. *Three, two, one.*

They shouted.

“Burst Link!!”

8

During the time he raced up the tunnel of light leading to the empty sky 150 kilometers above the Earth, Haruyuki transformed from his pink pig avatar to his duel avatar, Silver Crow. He slipped through one particularly dazzling ring and landed on metallic ground with a *clang*.

Which was immediately followed by four sets of footfalls from his companions echoing through the space. He straightened up from his hunched posture and opened his closed eyes.

“Whoa! A King! The Black King’s heeeeeeere!!”

“Now things are getting exciting! Negabu’s the beeeeeest!!”

Showered on all sides with welcoming cries, Haruyuki jumped a little.

“Wha…?!” He hurriedly looked around and was rooted to the spot at the scene before him.

The flat metallic ring stage. The steel tower soaring up from the center. The surrounding dark blue sky and the herds of hovering white clouds. This was indeed the majestic Hermes’ Cord, the space elevator in the Accelerated World he had visited a few days earlier.

However, three enormous things he didn’t remember seeing the last time sat there, encircling the tower.

No matter how he looked at them, they were clearly audience seating. The tiered stands fifty or so meters long floated in the sky slightly above the stage on which Haruyuki and his friends stood. The four rows of seating were jam-packed with avatars of a variety of colors. Putting all three spectator stands together, these audience avatars likely numbered more than five hundred. In other words, half or more of all the Burst Linkers in existence were occupying

this field now.

“This…is turning into a real thing, huh…”

“Seriously. I’ve never seen this many people at once before.”

Next to him, Cyan Pile (Takumu) and Lime Bell (Chiyuri) murmured, stunned. Naturally, Black Lotus (Kuroyukihime) and Sky Raker (Fuko) were their usual calm selves, but even still, they likely each had their own strong emotions welling up. They looked up at the sky soundlessly.

“…How did that Gallery even dive here…,” Haruyuki unconsciously murmured.

“Spectator transporter cards were given out,” someone from immediately behind him replied right away.

“O-oh, that makes sense…Huh, the system even does nice stuff sometimes… Wait, what?!” Gasping, he whirled around.

Standing there was a slim duel avatar with a dark red body who had approached him without his realizing it. He didn’t need to see the triangular ears popping up from the mask or the long tail to know that it was Blood Leopard, nicknamed Pard, member of the Red Legion, Prominence. A little ways off stood four avatars, likely her team members, conversing quietly. They were all veteran Linkers he had seen countless times before, but the figure of the crimson girl avatar was not among them.

“H-hello, nice to see you, Pard.”

“’Sup.”

“Um, Niko didn’t come?” Haruyuki asked quietly after exchanging greetings with the ever-abbreviated leopard-headed avatar.

“She super wanted to, but the six Legion mutual nonaggression pact prohibits fighting among Kings, even in an event. I have a message from her instead: ‘Aim for second. Good luck.’”

“Oh…R-right.” The corners of his mouth tugged unconsciously upward at the image of Niko’s frustrated face, and an equally frustrated tone popped up in his mind, and Haruyuki followed up with another question. “So then, um…Is the Red team fighting with us until we’re close to the finish line?”

But Blood Leopard did not reply. She shifted her gaze from Haruyuki and began to walk soundlessly. She slipped between Takumu and Chiyuri and passed in front of Kuroyukihime, toward the light blue avatar sitting in the silver wheelchair.

The two Burst Linkers, who had in the past been opponents in countless fierce battles, stared silently at each other. There was no hostility there, but rather, a hard, wizened air spread out, and the surrounding chatter and bustle receded temporarily.

A few seconds later, Pard took a step back and glanced at all of the members of the Black team before turning back to Sky Raker once more.

“We’re going for the win with all we’ve got,” she said.

It was a declaration. They might be friendly Legions, but they wouldn’t be working together. Haruyuki actually felt there was likely more meaning to the statement than that. Now that Sky Raker had sealed away Gale Thruster and continued not to take part in normal duels, the day when these two could go back to their old friendly rivalry was not coming. Which was why, at least today, Pard was without a doubt wanting to fight for real.

Likely having grasped this, Sky Raker nodded deeply. “Just what I was hoping for,” she replied.

The leopard-headed avatar returned the nod lightly and pivoted her lithe body, heading back to her own team members. The five from Prominence then headed toward the shuttles parked at the base of the elevator tower.

Looking up, Haruyuki saw huge digital numbers counting down. They were carved into the upper part of the sloped starting grid, where the multicolored shuttles were lined up. There was still ten minutes before the start of the race.

“All right, we should head over, too. That silver one on the left edge, that’s us, number one, hmm?”

Urged on by Kuroyukihime, the five members of the Black team also started toward their shuttle. As they did, another shadow approached them from the right. Until Haruyuki heard the voice, he had no idea who this avatar was, running with heavy feet in sturdy boots.

“Hey, heeeeeeeey! Here you are, all set to be a lazy loser dog—no, loser crow!”

“Huh? What? Ash?!”

“…H-hey! Who else d’you think this megacooooool star’d be!”

The cocky skull-helmeted head obviously belonged to Ash Roller, whom he had fought just the day before. When he looked away, behind the avatar running toward him, he saw a bright ash-gray shuttle. Apparently, the century-end rider had somehow succeeded in registering as a driver for the race.

Thinking the very rude thought that if Ash Roller had figured out the appearance of the portal on his own, then he was way more intellectual than anything about his character suggested, Haruyuki began excusing himself. “S-sorry. You’re not on your bike, so I wasn’t sure who it was—”

“C-come on, you! Treating me like an accessory to my bike, that’s bullshit!”

“That’s rude, Ash.”

The instant that voice sounded from behind Haruyuki, the century-end–style avatar leapt to uncharacteristic and ill-fitting attention and offered a respectful bow. “H-hello, Master! And Miss Lotus, p-pleasure to see ya!”

After offering up this marble-mouthed greeting, Ash Roller lifted his face as though he had just remembered something and abruptly brought his skull face up to Haruyuki. “R-right, this totally ain’t the time for dissing each other! Crow, I got somethin’ I wanna ask you.”

“S-sure, what is it?”

“You signed up as the driver for machine number one here, so that means when you got to this stage, you were the first?”

Stunned at the unexpected question, Haruyuki recovered quickly. “Yeah, that’s right. But it was at basically the same time as Blood Leopard. She was second.”

“So then, that shuttle was like that when you guys got here? Or did you see the dude who registered for it?”

Unable to comprehend what Ash Roller was talking about, Haruyuki craned

his neck around. The skull-headed avatar grew impatient and placed an arm around Haruyuki's neck and started running, cutting across the row of shuttles.

"Hey! Uh! Where are we—?!"

"You'll totes get it once you check it!…See? The tenth shuttle. So? Was it like that at the start?"

Haruyuki didn't even hear the majority of the latter half of the question. Because the instant *that* came into view, surprise slammed into the crown of his head.

The tenth of the shuttles lined up two meters apart on the starting grid, the machine enshrined on the right end—

Was decayed.

Almost as if it had been left exposed to a sea breeze for several years, the entire body was covered in rust. In contrast with the other nine machines, all shining brand-new, the same color as the bodies of their registered drivers, the tenth shuttle had completely lost all brilliance and was rusted a reddish brown. It wasn't just the body that was weathered; the wear extended to the seats and the driving discs under the machine body. The idea that this shuttle could run seemed utterly improbable.

Haruyuki unconsciously stretched out a hand and lightly clicked the way he had when he registered for machine number one a few days earlier. *Pwan!* A system window popped up. He read out loud the word displayed there.

"Re-reserved? So someone's taken it…in this condition?!"

"Man, you understand zero or what? By the time the other Legion mems and I got here at five thirty on Wednesday, it was already like this."

"What? That's weird!" Haruyuki's eyelids flew back as he protested. "Pard and I took off pretty quickly after we registered for shuttles one and two, but before we did, we could already hear a ton of people running over. There probably wasn't even ten seconds between the time we disappeared and the time you guys got here. There's no way anyone could have registered without me or you seeing them…and even before that." He closed his eyes for a moment and called the distinct memory up before saying decisively, "When we left, number

ten here was not rusted. It was a clean steel gray, the same as the other machines!”

“F-for real serious? So then…that means it just went and rotted on its own in those ten seconds?…Or some dude hiding somewhere did it…”

“No way. That’s impossible. There’s nowhere to hide. And even if I didn’t notice them, Pard absolutely would have…”

They each cradled their heads. As they struggled to reach a logical answer, a loud buzzer sounded, and cheers several times louder shook the stage. Lifting his face with a gasp, he saw they were down to three minutes left.

“Welp, totes sucks ass, but nothing to do but leave this thing be. Doesn’t look like the driver’s here anyway.”

“I guess so. If it’s some kind of system thing, we’ll probably see during the race at some point.”

“That’s totes it. Aaaaanyway, we both gotta get out there and do it for real.”

“Right! Let’s give it everything we have!”

Haruyuki and Ash Roller dipped their heads at each other and ran back to their own machines. As they separated, the usual venom came flying his way.

“Let me tell you now, though! Long as it’s got tires—tricycle, tanker truck, whatever—it’s giga welcome to supercool me!”

“These shuttles don’t have tires!” Haruyuki retorted. When he reached shuttle number one, his four crew members were already sitting in the rear seats.

“Huuuurry up!” Chiyuri shouted, waving her right hand. “What are you doing?!”

“A-ah! Sorry!” Hurriedly leaping into the driver’s seat, he grabbed on to the steering wheel. On the small windshield, the text HELLO, MY DRIVER popped up, followed by a display of various indicators. That said, it was nothing complicated. Just a speedometer, a trip meter, and an endurance meter.

Kuroyukihime leaned forward from the front row of the crew seating, next to Sky Raker, who had unequipped her wheelchair. “Crow,” she whispered. “I did a

quick look-over of the other participants, and they're basically all top fighters, including members of the six main Legions. Still, at any rate, this is the first time any of the drivers has operated a shuttle. Proceed cautiously until you get used to driving it. We'll keep a tight guard against any attacks from the other teams, so don't worry about that."

"Totally!" Chiyuri, sitting in the back row, continued. "And if we take a teensy bit of damage, I'll just rewind!"

"Hmm. Bell, I don't think our special-attack gauges will charge that much, since our avatar HP gauges are locked," Takumu pointed out, and Chiyuri cried, "What is that even?!" while Kuroyukihime and Fuko laughed.

Glancing over his shoulder at the picture his companions were painting, Haruyuki murmured in his heart, *I'm counting on you, Kuroyukihime. Let's do it, Taku, Chiyu…and Raker. I am definitely going to take you to the finish line. That's why I'm here right now, after all.*

"Okay! One minute! Everybody, hang on tight!" Haruyuki shouted as the shining digital numbers above his head dropped down to the last two digits, and then turned to zero.

The enthusiastic cries pouring down from the three floating spectator stands once again shook the Earth. Tightly gripping the wheel, he lightly pressed down on the accelerator with his right foot. The shuttle engine area howled reassuringly, and the vibration enveloped the vehicle. The digital meter displaying the total race distance of four thousand kilometers glittered brightly.

Staring up at the majesty of the Hermes' Cord re-created in the Accelerated World, a metal pillar piercing the sky, one hundred meters in diameter, Haruyuki had an abrupt thought.

Right about now, in the real-world elevator, too, rich tourists are ascending toward space, right? And they're not even thinking about this. That in another world produced by the social cameras placed in every nook and cranny of the elevator, dozens of children are about to race up alongside them right now.

Of course, the Accelerated World is, in the end, not real, just a fabrication of our Neurolinkers. But even if there's no physicality here, it really does exist. Because—

I am right here burning up with real excitement!

“Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!”

The chanting of the Gallery drowned out the sound of the red signal lights coming on. Points of crimson light formed a line in the sky above, shining down on the ten shuttles. At that moment, one of the spectator stands precisely blocked the sun hanging high in the air, and the stage was blanketed by a thick shadow. A second buzzer sounded as the signal lights shone red on the vehicles. The roaring of each engine increased all at once. Dazzling lightning gushed from the four driving discs in place of tires and bounced off the steel surface below.

“…Here we goooooooo!!”

The instant the countdown hit zero and the lights turned green, Haruyuki slammed the accelerator to the floor.

Tremendous torque kicked the machine into the air. Ten shuttles raced up the short incline in the blink of an eye and began a vertical sprint. Along the gently curving surface of the enormous metal pillar they flew, all in direct violation of the law of gravity. Some sort of attractive force seemed to be at work between the pillar and the machines, and even when the angle of elevation reached ninety degrees, the physical sensation was essentially no different from driving along a straight road.

Foot stuck to the accelerator, Haruyuki glanced over at the speedometer. The vivid digital numbers told him that in a mere ten seconds, he had sped up to more than two hundred kilometers per hour, and he was still climbing dizzyingly fast.

“H-hey, Haru. Y-you sure you should be going this fast?!”

At Takumu’s concerned voice from the rear seats, Haruyuki half shouted in reply, “Trust me! I’ve played a ton of racing games and crashed thousands of times!”

“…Th-that’s…”

“Allll riiiight! Flyyyy!”

Chiyuri’s cheer drowned out Takumu’s hoarse voice.

Glancing at the reflection of the rear in the upper part of the window, Haruyuki saw Kuroyukihime and Fuko sitting with cool expressions on their faces. Encouraged, he put even more force into his right foot. Two hundred fifty kilometers per hour. Three hundred. If he were driving a real-world race car, it would be reaching its limit right now, but the virtual linear-drive shuttle howled at an increasingly higher pitch and kept pulling itself up to endlessly faster speeds. The details carved into the steel below melted into ripples and the lumps of clouds that appeared occasionally flew back behind them in the time it took to blink.

A few seconds later, when the red-tinged digital meter began to flash the MAX icon, they had reached five hundred kilometers per hour. Apparently, this was the shuttle's top speed. He exhaled all at once the breath he'd been holding and now finally took a look outside the vehicle.

Silver shuttle number one, containing the Nega Nebulus team, was as before racing at the left end of the line of vehicles. To their right, about ten meters or so away, the red team's machine, led by Blood Leopard, glittered with deep crimson sparks.

Beyond that was the machine carrying the four members of the Blue Legion, Leonids. The driver was Tourmaline Shell. The enormous figure taking up one of the rear seats was Frost Horn. Even farther to the right, Ash Roller, who belonged to the Green Legion, Great Wall, was yelling, "Hey, heeeey!"

These four machines, essentially lined up in a row, were fighting for the lead. Slightly behind them, pulling up a tight rear, was the team from the Yellow Legion, Crypt Cosmic Circus. Naturally, the Yellow King was not among them, but he saw a few faces he had gone up against in battle more than once mixed in there.

Be careful of those guys! He carved the warning into his brain and looked closely once more. It seemed that the only Legion team with a King was their own, and the four machines running along in the rear in a single lump seemed to be from midsize Legions—that said, all of them had far more members than Nega Nebulus.

The shuttles running were the total of nine he noted. Which meant that, in

the end, that super-rusted shuttle didn't actually start. The unresolved question caused him momentary discomfort, but he quickly banished it from his mind. Regardless of who had turned the shuttle into that corroded mess, they couldn't have any impact on the race anymore.

Having gotten a grasp on the situation, Haruyuki was about to turn his gaze back to the front when he spotted an enormous shadow in the sky behind them, which surprised him a little. The three floating spectator stands crammed with the total of six hundred members of the Gallery were automatically chasing the shuttles. Only now did he notice that the tumult of mad cheering was coming to him alongside the howl of the linear engine.

"Hee-hee, it does seem that they've placed a few bets."

Sky Raker nodded at Kuroyukihime's words. "Mm-hmm. I saw the Matchmaker running around looking quite busy."

The Matchmaker was a mysterious Burst Linker who ran the gambling/tournament hall Akihabara Battle Ground. And he seemed to have shown up at this race as well.

"H-huh. Have you been to Akiba BG, too, Raker?" Haruyuki asked as he made incremental adjustments with the steering wheel, and he got a reply in the form of a wry smile from Kuroyukihime, rather than Sky Raker herself.

"She has, she has. Raker used to—"

But he didn't get to hear what came next. The cheers of the Gallery abruptly doubled in volume, overlaid with a series of sounds that practically pierced his eardrums. Haruyuki immediately looked to his right. His face stiffened. "Whoa! Pard's already starting!"

The sounds were originating from the weapons readied by the four Burst Linkers sitting in the back of the red team shuttle. It seemed that the only close-range type was the driver Blood Leopard, with the other four solidly in the long-distance camp. A battery of machine guns and rifles sent out a barrage of light bullets.

Their target was the blue team shuttle racing along to the right of the red team. The blue team, in contrast, was apparently all close-range types, and

Frost Horn plus one other avatar with thick armor leaned forward to defend against the hail of bullets. Avatar HP gauges were locked, so no matter how many bullets rained down on them, they wouldn't die, but there seemed to be a recoil effect at work. From time to time, their bodies would bounce back, and in that opening, the shots would hit the mark on the shuttle body.

"Waah, you guys! Unforgivable! Serious! Tori, hit that machine!!"

With an "Okay, Hoooooorn!" in reply to Frost Horn's shouting, Tourmaline Shell turned the steering wheel to the left. The blue team shuttle zoomed in on the red team. Apparently, they were planning to bring down their opponent's shuttle by throwing themselves at it.

That's the kind of pira–e-style fighting Frost Horn loves. Haruyuki watched excitedly as the scene played out. The Gallery crowds following from the rear on the floating stands also got even more worked up: "Slam 'em!" "Noooo!"

As the two machines grew closer, the accuracy of the hail of bullets naturally increased. Countless tiny holes were gouged out of the left flank of the blue shuttle as sparks crackled and scattered. But its endurance was apparently fairly high; the shuttle didn't show the slightest sign of slowing down.

"Oh! Okay! Take this! A real man's! Spirit punch!!" Shrieking, Frost Horn stood and brandished his right fist.

Instantly, Blood Leopard spun the steering wheel of the red shuttle so fast it blurred. The linear wheel squealed and the machine whirled around. The shaken right rear slammed into the side of the blue shuttle. The impact knocked Frost Horn—standing and ready to swing a superpunch—helplessly off his feet.

"Wha! At! Whaaaaaaat?!"

With a shriek, he tumbled and fell outside the vehicle, which was speeding along at an intense five hundred kilometers an hour. The instant he touched the surface of the tower, he bounced back high up with a tremendous *wham*, scattering showy sparks. A throaty scream accompanied the enormous body as it bounded along, receding in the blink of an eye behind them. After a few seconds, it disappeared from sight entirely.

Meanwhile, Pard stabilized the vehicle as though nothing had happened and

slid away to get some distance. The projectile barrage started up again. The blue team tried another daring close-range attack, but it seemed that here, the shuttle had finally reached the limits of its endurance. Abruptly, the two linear wheels on the left spurted flames, and the six-meter machine began to spin like a top. Amid the rising and falling cries of the remaining three crew members, the engine whined higher and higher—

Explosion. On a massive scale.

As the cheers and shrieks of the Gallery washed over them, the charred machine and the three avatars disappeared from sight, just like Horn before them. Watching this, Haruyuki shrank into himself with an inner shriek. Kuroyukihime and Fuko made almost admiring comments.

“I see. If you fall from the shuttle, that’s the end of the line, then. Either way, that was quite the attack by Prominence.”

“It was. Just like Leopard. From the selection of her teammates to her handling of the machine, her unparalleled skills haven’t grown the slightest bit dull.”

“S-s-sis, is now really the time for admiration! They’ll be after us next!” Chiyuri shouted at essentially the same time that the four shooters of the red team, having finished reloading, repositioned themselves facing left. The muzzles of their guns aimed perfectly at number one—or, more precisely, taking into consideration the curvature of the bullet’s path, a little ahead of their machine’s nose.

“Gah!” Haruyuki shouted, and hurriedly pulled the wheel to the left. But Pard, through some wonderful maneuvering, managed to maintain the same positional relationship. A cheer rose up from the Gallery at the two machines drawing lovely parallel lines above the column a hundred meters in diameter—in other words, three hundred and fourteen meters around—but unlike a car commercial, this game of tag was life or death. The instant one of the shooters gave the command, the four guns erupted in flames all at once.

“……!”

We can’t escape! Haruyuki instinctively pulled his head back, but the sound he heard was not that of bullets hitting them, but rather a high-pitched

reverberation. Hurriedly shifting his gaze to the right, his eyes beheld a totally unexpected sight.

Leaning out from the starboard side somehow, Black Lotus was repelling nearly all of the bullets falling in a curtain of rain upon them, the swords of her hands glittering at incredible speed. Cyan Pile, in the rear, was also thoroughly guarding the machine, using the enormous Pile Driver of his right hand in place of a shield.

Only a tiny few bullets slipped through their guard to hit the body, and the endurance indicator dropped hardly at all, but there was no doubt the situation would only gradually get worse. Even if he got close to them aiming to use their own shuttle as a weapon, he couldn't hope to beat Pard when it came to driving technique; they were more likely to have a precious crew member knocked out of the vehicle instead, just like the blue team.

"Ah, come on! Just 'cause we don't have any reds on our team, they think they can just shoot us up all they want!" Chiyuri shouted indignantly from the left rear. And indeed, this lack of any long-distance types had been Nega Nebulus's biggest weak point since its reformation. When they lost in the Territories, most times, the opponent included a powerful red type.

However, lamenting this fact here and now would get them nowhere. Haruyuki steadied himself to challenge Pard to a dog fight with their machines and was about to call out to the backseat. But a second before he could—

"I'm getting out," Sky Raker announced quietly.

"Huh? Master, what?!"

"This is simple addition and subtraction. The Promi team has five people, and four of those are large, heavy guns. If I get out of the shuttle, there'll be four of you, and you should be able to shake them off with speed."

"Y-you can't do that, sis!" Chiyuri's half shriek was covered up by Raker's cool words.

"I told you, you know, that if I was to participate, we would put everything into the top spot. And getting out here is my 'everything.' If I don't, you won't be able to respond to Leopard! She's not holding back, you know!" And then,

the sky-blue avatar grabbed on to the side of the ship with her left hand and unhesitatingly went to send herself flying.

Instantly, Haruyuki yanked the wheel hard to the right. The machine went into a half spin, and Raker was thrown back into her seat.

“No…No, Master!!” As he focused all his mental energy on operating the steering wheel and the accelerator to desperately try and restabilize the machine, Haruyuki squeezed a voice out from his throat. “Getting out yourself isn’t ‘everything,’ not even close! We have to fight on the same stage or we communicate nothing!!”

“Crow’s exactly right, Raker!” Kuroyukihime shouted as she continued her awesomely precise defense. “We are a team! All five of us fight, and all five of us win!”

“But…But I have—!” Fuko’s half-shrieked rebuttal rang out. “I have no means of fighting! I can’t even stand up and defend, much less attack! I can’t do anything other than sit here like some object…!”

“You can, too!” The words, almost a cry of desperation, gushed from Haruyuki’s throat. “You have…the wings you produced, the wings you made strong!!”

He hesitated about whether or not he should say anything here. Sky Raker had her own reasons and feelings for firmly locking away that power after rejoining the Legion and keeping it locked away. Haruyuki didn’t want to do anything to force her into facing them. Which was why he was trying to take Sky Raker to the pinnacle of Hermes’ Cord, which he believed for various reasons was the lone place where he could actually be allowed to say this.

But if Raker got out of the shuttle at that moment, that opportunity would be lost forever. Thus, Haruyuki could only shout and pray that his words reached her.

“Our special-attack gauges basically won’t charge in this field…so I can’t fly. But your wings are different. Immediately after you equip them, the gauge is fully charged. Which means you *can* fly!” Looking back from the cockpit, he stared directly into Raker’s eyes. “Please. Lend this shuttle—no, lend us the power of your wings! If you do, we should be able to escape from Promi’s

sights!!”

Instant silence.

Haruyuki’s ears picked up none of the howl of gunfire showering them, or the sound of Kuroyukihime and Takumu repelling those bullets, or the cheers pouring down from the audience in the sky. He simply and earnestly turned those ears toward Sky Raker’s thin breathing and the echoes of struggle it contained.

“…I hurt Sacchi.”

“…With my words, with my attitude, and with my heart, I hurt her. The fuel for my wings contains each and every tear Sacchi shed back then. Which is why… Which is why I can never again—”

“That’s not true, Raker!!” Kuroyukihime’s dancing hands came to a sudden stop as she whirled around.

Immediately, the gunfire began to gouge into the side of the machine and mercilessly pound against Black Lotus’s back. Even as her slim body shook and staggered with the impact, Kuroyukihime’s words were firm.

“I…I was foolish! I didn’t even try to understand the enormity of what you carried around with you! I simply wanted you to do everything for me and I was convinced you betrayed that. I was irrationally angry; I resented you! I have no right to seek anything from you…but!” Here, her voice finally began to shake with the force of the emotion bleeding into it. Behind the jet-black mirrored goggles, beams of violet-blue light poured from her eyes, almost like tears. “But the time to fly is now! Not for me, and not for the Legion…For you. Fly, Raker!”

At the same time as this impassioned cry, a bullet that came flying from a large rifle caught Black Lotus squarely, violently in the back. Sky Raker leaned forward to prop up the small body staggering toward her. The thin arms trembled as if hesitating to draw any closer.

Master—No, Fuko. Haruyuki started talking deep in his heart as he put his physical efforts into driving the shuttle. *Two months ago, on the roof of Shinjuku Southern Terrace, Kuroyukihime took a step forward. So right now, you…please pull Kuroyukihime toward you with your own hand. I can’t close that final*

distance; no one else can. It's something only you can do!

There was no way those words could have reached her. But the next instant, Fuko's trembling stopped. The arms that supported Kuroyukihime's body slowly bent and folded, and her hands circled round to the other girl's back, embracing her tightly.

"Thank you, Lotus." In the midst of the innumerable bullets whizzing past them, her words came quietly but with a certainty. "Now, now I finally see it. My wings…They're not full of tears, but rather your hope, your kindness, and your love." Here, she pushed Kuroyukihime back down into the seat to the right and nodded definitively. "So there was no need for me to be afraid…I can fly. Now, I'm sure I can fly again…!"

Instantly, Haruyuki finally understood.

Sky Raker hadn't given up or anything like it. She had been afraid. She was afraid that even if she did equip her Enhanced Armament, she wouldn't be able to fly like she used to—that in the same way her legs continued to be lost, her own negative will would also inactivate the Armament.

However, there was no fear in the way she threw her chest out now and reached both arms out into the sky. In those deep-red eyes, he glimpsed a nearly infinite sky.

As if singing, Sky Raker cried out the "preset equip" phrase loudly.

"Calling Gale!!"

In the endless ultramarine of the empty sky the machine hurtled toward, Haruyuki saw the twinkling of a vivid light blue star.

This turned into two laser beams pouring down, which pinpointed Sky Raker immediately, despite the fact that the shuttle was racing ahead at maximum speed. The light enveloped her entire body before quickly concentrating on her back and materializing as the streamlined silhouette of the boosters of the Enhanced Armament Gale Thruster. Perhaps because they interfered with the equipment, the white hat and dress melted into light and disappeared, revealing the slender main body of the avatar.

"Raker…"

“Master!”

“Sis!”

“Sky Raker!”

The four other Legion members all cried out at the same time, and Sky Raker nodded forcefully before dancing up from her seat. Of course, this wasn’t because she had thrown herself from the vehicle. Taking Lime Bell’s hand, she moved to the rear of the shuttle and grabbed tightly ahold of the small rear spoiler.

“Crow! Stabilize the ship dead ahead!”

Haruyuki jumped to follow Raker’s instruction. The red team in number two had likely guessed number one’s intention and began to shower them with an even heavier hail of bullets, but Kuroyukihime once again knocked each and every one of them aside.

“I’m going! Three seconds to boost! Two, one, zero!!”

Krrrrr!! An extraordinary roar was generated, and at the same time, Haruyuki’s entire body was pushed forcefully back into his seat as he clenched his teeth.

This acceleration. Desperately struggling to keep the machine under control, he peeked at the rearview window. There reflected he saw two jets of flames erupting from Raker’s back and stretching out endlessly, like the tail of a comet. The output was far and away greater than when Haruyuki had used Gale Thruster. There was no abnormal light effect coming from the booster itself—i.e., they were not emitting any overlay—so this power boost wasn’t due to the Incarnate System. It was the crystallization of effort, the vast quantities of burst points poured into the Armament over who knew how many years.

Bringing his gaze back to the front, he saw that the speedometer in the right edge of the windshield had smashed through the limit, and that they were reaching 650 kilometers an hour. The curtain of fire from number two had already been cut off, and the red team reflected in the starboard mirror grew smaller and smaller before his eyes.

Haruyuki suppressed the wave of emotion trying to fill his heart and focused

on driving the shuttle. If their orientation were disturbed even the slightest bit at this speed, the machine would no doubt crash immediately. Up to now, there had been no obstacles at all on Hermes' Cord, but he couldn't let them get tripped up by a tiny gap or anything now.

A mere half second later, Haruyuki saw that his misgivings were realized.

A curious object appeared ahead of them. A line of broadly spaced rainbow rings glittering on the surface of the pillar. The diameter of each ring was at least three meters. If they kept charging ahead like this, they would smash into the one in their path.

"E-evasive action! Raker, get back in your seat!" Haruyuki shouted hurriedly, but before he could finish speaking, Kuroyukihime gave an unexpected instruction:

"No! Charge on like this, Crow!"

"Huh…B-but?!"

"It's fine! Just go!"

Either way, it seemed that Gale Thruster's energy gauge was exhausted, and Sky Raker once again borrowed Chiyuri's hand to return to her original seat. After seeing that, Haruyuki readied himself and tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"U-understood! We charge! Everyone, hold on tight!"

A mere two seconds later, still at the same insane speed, shuttle number one plunged into one of the rainbow rings.

9

The flash of the light, the impact, the enormous explosion—did not happen.

Instead, a strange phenomenon enveloped the machine. The dark blue sky spreading out around them vanished, and a light the same rainbow color as the mysterious rings radiated outward. At the same time, the howling of the linear wheels ceased, and the space was filled with only a high-pitched sound of resonance.

The roar and vibration of the race disappeared abruptly, and feeling a curious sensation in his ears, Haruyuki hesitantly opened his mouth. “Uh, umm, Kuroyukihime, what is this…?”

“Warp zone.”

He whirled around at Kuroyukihime’s immediate and decisive reply. *Huh?!*

“W-warp?! Something like that in the race?!”

“I get it. Actually, it’s only natural that there would be, Haru.” This time, it was Takumu nodding. A single finger popped up, and he entered full-on professor mode to explain. “I mean, think about it. The total length of Hermes’ Cord is four thousand kilometers, right? And this shuttle’s maximum speed is five hundred kilometers an hour. Which means even if you kept the accelerator floored, it would take eight hours to reach the finish line. And that ends up being an endurance race. It’s basically impossible for one driver to drive the whole way.”

“O-ohh…Yeah, now that you mention it…”

Totally satisfied with this explanation, Haruyuki checked the meter with the distance remaining and saw that the four digits were dropping at a bewildering pace. Somehow, they seemed to be taking a shortcut through this space to a

point about a thousand kilometers away from their goal.

“So then, like, anyone who *doesn’t* go into the rings there is gonna be in serious trouble, right?” Chiyuri said, her pointed hat shaking.

“Come come, Bell!” Kuroyukihime’s response was mixed with laughter. “You’d just need to make a U-turn at that point.”

“Oh! I guess! Hmm. But I kinda get the impression that if you play this sort of game cautiously, you’re gonna lose!”

“Well, I wholeheartedly agree with that.”

Their little back-and-forth made everyone laugh briefly, and just as that laughter was subsiding, Kuroyukihime, still seated, turned to Fuko, who was sitting to her left, and began to talk quietly.

“Raker, thank you. And…I’m sorry. You suffering for such a long time was solely due to my own cowardice.” Just as she was about to bow her head deeply along with this apology, Sky Raker gently stretched out her right hand and stopped her.

“Lotus. I, too…There are so many things I need for apologize to you for as well. But we won’t be able to completely communicate our feelings in words alone. So when I’m able to fight you once again at full strength, let’s talk, and talk at length, then.”

“Mmm, I suppose so…I suppose you’re right…,” Kuroyukihime murmured in response, and closed her eyes briefly before continuing with a faint smile. “Indeed, our total duel results are one thousand, two hundred and thirteen wins for me…and how many losses, I wonder?”

“Oh! You only forget the number that’s inconvenient for you!”

Once again, a tranquil laughter spread out through the warp zone, and, bathed in these gentle reverberations, Haruyuki murmured in his heart, *Maybe I didn’t need to butt in after all. These two are definitely connected in a deep place in their souls. Right…They must have been able to build that connection precisely because of their time here in the Accelerated World, where time flows a thousand times faster…*He closed his eyes and tried to thoroughly process his own thoughts when—

Thmm. The center of his back throbbed. At the same time, cold words were born in the back of his mind, in his own voice and yet somehow not his own voice.

In that case, the opposite must be true, too. Don't you think?

There has to exist in the Accelerated World an ugly, swollen hatred nurtured through time moving a thousand times faster than outside. Perhaps inside me.

RIGHT. THE SEED OF A HATRED YOU CAN'T GET RID OF HAS TAKEN ROOT IN YOU. IT WAITS FOR THE TIME TO BUD AND BLOOM.

HAVE YOU ALREADY FORGOTTEN THOSE WHO ONCE TORTURED YOU? HAVE YOU INDEED FORGOTTEN ALREADY THE PAIN OF THE WOUNDS THEY INFLICTED ON YOU WITH THEIR IRRATIONAL VIOLENCE AND MALICE? MALICE WITH MALICE. POWER WITH POWER. THAT IS THE RESPONSE. THE SEED TO THAT END IS ALWAYS WITHIN YOU.

As the darkly twisted voice whispered, several faces floated up on the backs of his tightly closed eyelids.

The malicious classmates who had teased Haruyuki in elementary school. The delinquents who rained violence down upon him, bluntly demanding money and more once he started junior high school. When their faces disappeared, the masks of duel avatars sprang up in their place. Although they were few, the Burst Linkers he had hated unreservedly in the Accelerated World looked down on Haruyuki from on high, grinning.

You intend to understand even them? Be connected? No. It is impossible.

Aah, that's exactly it. I mean, I've already banished one of them forever. So I can't be connected to him anymore. But that's…I had no choice. That's the natural thing to do with a guy like that!

Accompanying this shout like a howl, the throbbing in his back gradually grew stronger. However, curiously, that pain was no longer simply uncomfortable. The larger it grew, the more he could imagine the pleasure when it was released. The voice continued, irritated, inviting.

THAT'S RIGHT. IT'S NATURAL TO CRUSH THEM. YOU ALREADY HAVE THE POWER TO DO EXACTLY THAT. YOU JUST HAVE TO SAY IT, THAT NAME. JUST THAT AND YOU CAN BEAT THEM ALL DOWN SO THAT NOT ONE REMAINS. CUT THEM UP, TEAR THEM TO PIECES, EAT THEM UP. EAT THEM. EAT THEM. EAT—

"C-Corvus?!"

The sharp cry was accompanied by a hand grabbing his left shoulder firmly, and Haruyuki opened his eyes with a gasp. He froze momentarily before awkwardly looking back.

Sky Raker, sitting on the left of the middle row, was the one stretching a hand out. The deep red of her eye lenses shone intently as she stared hard at Haruyuki. A dry, thin voice slipped from between her lips.

“Corvus…What did you do just now…?”

“Huh…Wh-what…I didn’t…” Haruyuki shook his head firmly, feeling guilty at the turbulent thoughts racing around in the back of his mind. But he wasn’t actually lying. His body was simply sitting in the driver’s seat and gripping the steering wheel. He really *was* doing nothing.

“…I…saw it, too. For just a moment…an Incarnate overlay on your body…?!”

“Hngh…?!” This time, he groaned, shocked to his core.

He had absolutely not been using the Incarnate System. That alone he could declare with certainty. To begin with, at his level of training, there was no way he would be able to unconsciously do anything to activate an overwrite.

“Th-there was not! I wasn’t using Incarnate or anything! Honestly!!” he shouted as he continued to shake his head fiercely.

Fuko’s hold on Haruyuki’s shoulder grew even tighter, but eventually, she let go, exhaling softly. “Yes. There’s…no way. Your overlay *is* silver. But…the light before…”

Fuko’s voice faded away and Kuroyukihime picked up where she left off. “So we saw wrong. Most likely, some change in the surrounding light effects was reflected in Crow’s mirrored body…Sorry for scaring you. But, you know, it’s your fault, too, for being that color.”

Her words, her tone 70 percent back to its usual coloring, lightened the mood in the cabin in the middle of the super-high-speed warp. Chiyuri and Takumu, together in the backseat, let out long breaths.

“Honestly! Don’t scare us, sis! Although it’s true Haru’s avatar can sometimes make your eyes all wonky.”

“Seriously. Oh, I got it! How about you smoke yourself with some sulfur and oxidize that steel?”

“A-ha-ha! That’s a good one, Taku!”

A wry smile unconsciously came across Haruyuki’s face at the conversation between his childhood friends. Instantly, he felt the release of the power tensing up his entire body, but that something cold that had seeped into the depths of his heart didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

That voice he’d been hearing every so often these last few months…Haruyuki had thought all this time that the voice with the metallic effect applied was being uttered by his own interior self. That it was another self born from accumulated feelings of negativity. Haruyuki had spent a great deal of time by himself from the time he was a child, so he did have this sort of habit of having conversations in his head.

But…what if it wasn’t? What if it wasn’t just a metaphor, but there really was something other than Haruyuki producing this voice?

However, in that case, the owner of the voice would have to exist not in the Accelerated World, but inside Haruyuki’s Neurolinker. Because the voice would also, on exceedingly rare occasions, whisper to him when he wasn’t in a dive. Which meant that it was some kind of virus or AI program? Or…the consciousness of a real human being was lurking in his memory somewhere…? Was something like that even possible…?

He felt like someone somewhere far away was suppressing a laugh, and he closed his eyes tightly to try and banish the thoughts from his mind. This was no time for uncertainty. They were about to plunge into the climax of the Hermes’ Cord Race and they had to win, no matter what.

At the very moment he opened his eyes wide, a ring of blue light came into sight ahead of the machine. Most likely, the warp-zone exit.

“Everyone!” He took a deep breath and shouted. “We’re coming back out onto the course! Hold on!”

Four crisp shouts of assent came back to him.

Holding tight to the steering wheel, Haruyuki pointed the nose of the shuttle

toward the center of the blue ring. The exit grew closer before his eyes, filling his vision, and the instant the machine touched it, it became a vortex of light, swallowing everything.

“Waaah!!” Chiyuri was the first to shout.

And then all of them, including Haruyuki, raised admiring voices.

The sky before them was a perfect obsidian black. Against this backdrop, countless particles of light came together to draw a beautiful line. It was the river of the heavens: the Milky Way. However, it was almost entirely different from the night sky they would look up at in a Moonlight stage or a Desert stage, in terms of the number of stars and the brightness of them. It was as if they could hear the clear melody played by the stars like the ringing of bells, despite the cold, still world they found themselves in.

Hermes’ Cord, the orbiting space elevator, the enormous steel pillar, pierced this starry plane and stretched upward in a straight line. A fierce sun shone from the left of the gently curved surface. The light also fell on the body of the shuttle speeding along, making it glint silver and creating a thick shadow to the right of the vehicle.

“…Space…,” Kuroyukihime murmured, pointing the sword of her right hand straight out at the Milky Way. She continued in a still voice. “Is this scene a digital painting done by the BB servers?…Or…”

“…They’re probably using images of the real thing captured by the social cameras. The position of the stars is just too accurate…,” Fuko responded, also in a near whisper.

Of course, even if the image was the real thing, coming at them through cameras and networks and Neurolinkers as it did, it was probably different from the sight the astronauts and tourists were seeing with their naked eyes. Still, Haruyuki, and likely his four companions, too, continued to drink in the galaxy before them, each of them with their own strong emotions spilling into their hearts.

I could stay and admire this silent, cold, and yet busy world forever if it were possible—Although that wish sprang up in Haruyuki, the majestic moment did not continue for long.

The roaring of several engines came at them from behind. Naturally, if this were the real outer space, they wouldn't have been able to hear any noise at all, but in the Accelerated World, some measure of user-friendliness was given priority. Hurriedly looking back, he saw machines of a variety of colors come shooting out of the warp-zone exit.

In the lead was the red shuttle, driven by Blood Leopard. Slightly behind that, the gunmetal shuttle containing Ash Roller's team. Followed by the Yellow Legion shuttle.

After a bit of an interval, two of the midsize Legion shuttles appeared. Apparently, there were only six teams left, including Haruyuki's. Excluding the one that was decrepit right from the start, two more teams had joined Frost Horn's in dropping out.

The incredible echoing of each machine howling ever louder shook space. Above his head, the three enormous spectator stands warped out, and six hundred Burst Linkers raised their hands and stamped their feet. Taking in the cheers showering over them, the six shuttles formed a line and raced on.

"Good! Only five rival machines left!" Kuroyukihime shouted in a crisp tone, switching gears abruptly. "They're all strong enemies, but we're the ones who're going to win this! Listen, we're going to tear them all apart!!"

"Yeah!" Haruyuki and the others thrust their fists into the air. He checked the meter: just under a thousand kilometers to the finish line. If they flew full throttle at five hundred kilometers an hour, it would take two hours, but with the Territory battles on the weekend, the total time was double that. They were so absorbed in the race that two hours would be an instant.

All right! I can't make a single mistake now! No way I'm letting Pard and her team use us as a shooting range again! he shouted in his heart, adjusting his grip on the steering wheel as he glared ahead into the distance for any complex terrain, any kind of obstacle zone.

However…

Immediately to their right, the unexpected, the seemingly impossible happened.

A bizarre something rose up from the center of the concentrated shadow of the shuttle, which was produced by intense sunlight, and accompanied by a slight splashing sound.

A single thin, large panel. Rectangular, about the same length and height as the shuttles, it ran silently parallel to number one, about two meters away. Even though it was supposedly moving along at five hundred kilometers an hour, it produced not a single vibration, not a single sound. The matte black seemed to swallow all light.

The nature of the object sent a jolt through Haruyuki's memory. He didn't have to work at recalling why.

The mysterious Burst Linker who had jumped into the "final battle" in the Unlimited Neutral Field at Umesato Junior High School two months earlier, just after the start of the new school year. There was no doubt that before them now was that avatar with the ability to change his own body into thin panels and slip into any and all shadows to move about. But what was he doing here now?

The impact and the question burst from Haruyuki's throat in the form of a name. "Black Vise…!!"

Almost as if responding to his cry, the enormous panel peeled back soundlessly to both sides, to become two thin membranes. They spread out before quickly disappearing, as if melting into the vacuum.

The object that then appeared from between those thin membranes stunned Haruyuki all over again.

A shuttle. It was exactly the same shape as the one the Nega Nebulus team rode in, but the color was different. A powdery reddish brown, as if tiny speckles had bled out—in other words, the color of rust. This was very clearly shuttle number ten, which had sat rotting quietly at the right end of the starting platform. But this machine, which had seemed to be out of the action, now had brilliant lightning gushing from its four linear wheels and was zooming along at top speed.

Which meant that shuttle number ten had not been destroyed by corrosion, but rather that the color was nothing more than a re-creation of that of the

registered driver.

Struck with a certain conviction, Haruyuki shifted his gaze the tiniest bit and looked over at the cockpit of this tenth shuttle. Sitting there, silently gripping the steering wheel, was—

The thin body, reminiscent of a riveted steel frame, of a duel avatar the same rust color as the machine. And this was not Haruyuki's first encounter with him, either. Two months earlier, he had fought this opponent just once at Akihabara Battle Ground, the underground arena set up within the local net of an arcade in Akihabara.

"Rust Jigsaw…" Haruyuki uttered the second name at a lower volume than his previous cry.



However, even when his name was called, the rust-colored avatar remained silent, not even turning his head. He sank intently into the seat, as if he had become one with the shuttle.

Looking at the rear seating area for the four-person crew, he saw only one person there. Or rather, it would be better to say “one panel.” Because there in the back row was just a shadow with no thickness. The strange shape—black paper arranged in human form—could be none other than Black Vise, just as he had thought.

Both Burst Linkers belonged to a group that called itself the Acceleration Research Society. The scope of this organization and the members that made it up were unknown. The one thing Haruyuki did know was that they all had illegal VR devices—brain implant chips, aka BICs—in their skulls and that, using this power, they maneuvered to avoid the limitations of Brain Burst.

Which was why, for Haruyuki, the fact that these two would show up at an event so festive as the Hermes’ Cord Race was wholly unanticipated. Unable to rouse himself from the shock of it, he could only gape as countless voices rose up suddenly from the sky above.

“H-hey, whoa! Where’d that shuttle come from?!”

“Number ten didn’t drop out, after all?!”

“If that thing wins, what happens to our bets?!”

The Gallery was also apparently stunned at this unexpected development. The wave of commotion contained much more of the element of surprise than of excitement.

Haruyuki listened to the quiet conversation happening on shuttle number ten among the shouts.

“…I guess this is where my work ends?” The calm voice sounding like a teacher belonged to Black Vise.

“Yeah, you’re good.” The purposefully low voice of a boy, cracking with adolescence, replied. “Go home.”

“Well then, I’ll take my leave of you here, Jigsaw…Good-bye, Black King. And the ladies and gentlemen of Nega Nebulus.”

“…You,” Kuroyukihime muttered. But by the time she made a small movement with her right hand, the human-shaped shadow in the rear seat was already dancing upward. It slipped into the ink of the starry sky and receded in the blink of an eye, vanishing.

With things having come this far, Haruyuki finally managed a hazy guess as to why number ten had abruptly appeared from the shadow of number one.

Possessing many curious abilities as he did, Black Vise was likely able to lock up not only himself, but also other people and objects within his black panels, and then sink into the shadows with them. When the portal had opened at five thirty on Wednesday afternoon on the top floor of Skytree, Haruyuki and Pard hadn’t been alone in being the first to visit the top of Hermes’ Cord. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw had also, in fact, been there. The pair must have concealed themselves in the shadow of the tower and registered to drive the tenth shuttle the instant Haruyuki and Blood Leopard had burst out. Which was why none of them—not Haruyuki, not Pard, and not Ash Roller and the others who came running in immediately after—noticed the shadowy duo.

And it wasn’t just during registration that Vise showed off his powers of concealment.

The instant the race started that day, the starting platform had been completely swallowed up by the shadow produced by the enormous spectator seating. Vise and Jigsaw had slipped through this to get into their shuttle before concealing the machine itself immediately after the race started. From there, they moved into number one’s shadow without attracting anyone’s notice, and then they had held their breath right up next to Haruyuki and his friends until that moment. All of which was Vise’s ability: to move or stop with total freedom as long as he was in the shadows.

While Haruyuki was running this speculation down in his head, Rust Jigsaw, the sole remaining avatar in shuttle number ten, fell silent once more and gripped the steering wheel tightly.

“Rust Jigsaw.” Unable to completely grasp the current situation, and also

feeling an incomprehensible discomfort, Haruyuki began to toss out words at the rust-colored avatar. “Why are you showing up here now? If you wanted to, you could have stayed hidden in our shadow all the way to right before the finish line and then flown out and snatched the win.”

Jigsaw didn’t even blink, much less answer. But Haruyuki squelched his physical unease and continued.

“But leaving the shadows now at this stage instead of doing that…you feel like racing us for real? That suits us just fine! A fair and square fight for the remaining thousand kilometers—”

“Silence.” The lone word cut Haruyuki off. Hearing Rust Jigsaw’s voice for the first time, he found it cold and dry, and yet tinged somehow with heaving emotion, almost boiling.

“Huh…?”

“Don’t talk. Don’t make me listen to bullshit about races and fights.” After this languid utterance, Rust Jigsaw moved for the first time to glance over at Haruyuki and his team. His eyes were a penetratingly cold red, set beneath a face mask that had a design like an assemblage of thin iron pieces. His only memory of that face from the duel before at Akiba BG was of Jigsaw, at wits’ end, losing to Blood Leopard’s literal bite, but the ice residing in the gaze of the rust avatar now was enough to wipe that helplessness away.

Jigsaw narrowed those eyes and said—practically ordered: “Have some shame. Be ashamed of how you all continue to avert your eyes from the true nature of Brain Burst.”

“Oh?” Having stayed silent until that point, Kuroyukihime spoke up now, her voice containing a dangerous edge. “Then I ask you. What is this true nature?”

Even when faced with this question almost like a sword itself, Rust Jigsaw showed no signs of agitation. “Recognize,” he spat, slowly turning his face forward. “Brain Burst is simply a slightly dirty life-hack tool.”

“Life…hack…?!” The voice, heavy with indignation, belonged to Takumu. The large blue avatar started to lean over the side of the ship, and the yellow-green avatar next to him pulled him back.

“Look, you!” Having stretched out instead of Takumu, Chiyuri offered her own rejoinder point-blank, without a hint of fear. “That’s a matter of personal opinion! Even if it is just a tool for cheating for you, it’s not like that for us! Our Brain Burst is a superamazing fighting game, got it!”

“That’s exactly right.” Sky Raker picked up Chiyuri’s thread. “And you contradict yourself. If it’s simply a tool, then why are you taking part in this event? Why did you show yourself halfway through the course? If you have the desire to fight, to compete, then that’s proof that your Brain Burst is not a tool but rather a game.”

At this pointed remark, Rust Jigsaw curled up tightly in the cockpit.

Haruyuki thought he might be trying to endure something with that movement. And then several conjectures popped up in his mind.

What if Jigsaw himself wanted to repudiate his own words? Didn’t he want to fight properly as a Burst Linker, to taste the thrill and excitement of the duel and, through that, feel a connection with someone? In other words, was he hoping to leave the organization that bound him…the Acceleration Research Society…?

The instant he remembered how the twilight-colored marauder—who had belonged to the same organization—had not made that choice, or perhaps had been unable to make that choice even while he had the option to, Haruyuki instinctively called out, “Y-you…The truth is, you wanted to come *here*, didn’t you…?”

Silence.

After a fairly long pause, Rust Jigsaw slowly lifted the face he had hidden in the steering wheel and looked at Haruyuki once more.

In that moment, Haruyuki understood that his guess had been inescapably wrong.

What Jigsaw had been enduring was anger. A confused rage boiled, wholly unconnected with sharpness or genuineness. A diffuse hatred that simply spread in all directions, unable to converge on a precise target. An enormous rusty saw brandished wildly, so to speak.

“Regret,” Rust Jigsaw commanded in a creaking voice. He then took his right hand off the wheel and clenched those five fingers around his forehead. The movement was one of enduring extreme pain, but the words he uttered gradually grew colored with an insane heat, rose in pitch, and changed to a shriek. “Regret your own softness for not attacking the instant you saw me. And pay the price. Scream in the midst of overwhelming terror! Your foolish sport ends today! And then the era of desire and competition, destruction and slaughter will arrive! Precisely now…this time!!”

And then Haruyuki saw it.

Shafts of dull red light rising up in all directions from all over Rust Jigsaw’s body.

At once, the light began to swirl and writhe like a myriad of snakes. High-frequency vibrations began to shake the shuttle, and then the enormous body of the space elevator. The steel surface, the two shuttles, and even inky black space blazed red.

It wasn’t a special attack. Because HP gauges were locked for this race event, their special-attack gauges wouldn’t charge. Thus, this light was born from Jigsaw’s will, his imagination…

“He can’t—! Overlay!” Kuroyukihime was the first to shout out. “Get us out of here, Crow! An Incarnate attack is coming!!”

Haruyuki was already yanking the steering wheel to the left as hard as he could. At a steering angle that was just barely above dropping into a spin, the shuttle tried to get some distance from machine number ten.

“Behold, imbeciles!!” They heard the voice as if it were chasing the machine escaping to the backside of the tower. “This is the true form of Brain Buuuuurst!!”

In the rearview mirror, Rust Jigsaw stood up in the cockpit and threw both arms high into the air.

He howled.

“Rust Order!!”

The world trembled.

…*That* was overlay?!

Haruyuki shuddered as he jammed on the accelerator like he was trying to push it through the floor. The vortex of red light centered on shuttle number ten swelled up to the scale of a small star, zooming in on shuttle number one.

“H-hold on!” Shouting, Haruyuki pulled back a little on the steering wheel. The explosion of light was a force to swallow up the entire hundred-meter diameter of Hermes’ Cord. Running at an angle, they wouldn’t be able to get clear of it. The light chased after them insistently, several centimeters behind the rear of the shuttle, now back on a straight trajectory.

Holding the wheel steady as he looked back over his shoulder, Haruyuki gasped hard at the sight behind them.

The surface of the elevator, which had until mere moments before shone a lustrous steel gray, was decaying with incredible force!

Almost as if he were watching a video on fast-forward of a piece of steel left on the beach, spots of red rust popped up one after another, anywhere the light touched it. These grew enormous before his eyes and soon merged to completely cover the elevator. Eventually, cracks grew up here and there, and chunks of the tower caved in, scattering blood-colored rust. Several craters formed, as if the tower were being showered with invisible meteors.

“Th…that’s…crazy…” A hoarse voice slipped from his throat, and Haruyuki shook his head from side to side. “I mean, an Incarnate attack’s one thing, but this…Pard’s claws didn’t even leave a scratch on the elevator…A-and even before that, the scope’s just too large…!”

As far as Haruyuki knew, for all Incarnate attacks, the effect target was limited by the person. For instance, even with a long-distance attack, you first had to expand your own attack power with your will and then release that at the enemy.

But the will of Rust Jigsaw raging before his eyes now was causing unlimited destruction over a broad swath. In principle, this should have been impossible. The energy source for Incarnate techniques was the wielder’s mental scars…in

other words, the imagination that belonged to the wielder, and no one else.

Kuroyukihime, similarly looking behind them, replied to Haruyuki's question in a low voice. "Space Corrosion…"

"The antithesis of will, with hope as its source…" Sky Raker explained the unfamiliar term. "The ultimate form of a hateful will. A powerfully strong hatred of the world causes an overwrite of the field itself…But to bind this amount of imagination, even a King-class player would require very long hours of mental concentration."

Kuroyukihime narrowed both eyes sharply and nodded. "Hiding in our shadow that whole while was likely to buy that time. But even so, it's too far beyond the norm. He's surely forcibly boosting the depth of his mental concentration with a BIC function…?"

"He can't be. That's…It would place too large of a burden on a living brain…"

Even as the two talked, the rust storm Jigsaw had summoned continued its destructive march.

Several of the other team shuttles trailing behind ended up prey to the corrosion. Blood Leopard and Ash Roller had apparently managed to take advantage of their excellent control to evade the storm by decelerating, but still, their shuttles were instantly half coated in rust, significantly slowing them down. Even if they had escaped total destruction, looking the way they did, there was no way those shuttles were going to make it to the finish line.

But that was nothing compared with the damage to the Yellow Legion and the two midsize teams. They had charged headlong into the range of effect, and the cries of a dozen people rang out all at once.

Immediately, the three shuttles were covered with a thick coating of rust. And it didn't stop there. The armor of the crews in the vehicles also corroded before their eyes, parts and equipment crumbling and scattering to the rear. Finally, the damage reached the avatars' forms beneath the armor, and they collapsed and spilled out, falling into the darkness behind them.

"What's going on?! Our HP gauges are supposed to be locked!" Takumu's groan was overlaid with Chiyuri's heartbroken cry.

“This…This is too awful! The race is in shambles!!”

“Heh-heh-heh.” Almost as if he had heard them, Rust Jigsaw’s laughter caught up with them from behind. “Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! Despair!! Lament!! And feel remorse!! This is the retribution for your deception!! This world does, after all, have the same roots as reality!! Impossible to avoid the corrosion of everything in existeeeeeeeence!!”

The raging red light practically erupted upward as though these words themselves were Incarnate. The vortex of energy captured one of the floating spectator stands.

No way. Haruyuki’s eyes flew open as even the audience seating—an object that should have been completely protected by the system—was blanketed in red rust, accompanied by an unpleasant *zrr zrr zrr zrr* sound. Several cracks immediately appeared in the once-smooth bottom, and the outer panels fell off one after another. And then a few seconds later, the enormous structure simply crumbled in the sky above the tower.

More than a hundred people from the Gallery crammed in there were thrown into the void, an avalanche of avatars. Cries rose up from all over. Some were completely corroded, while others crashed into the surface of the elevator. Either way, they were all forcibly ejected from the Accelerated World with a momentary flash.

“I-insanity…,” Kuroyukihime moaned, her upper body thrown back as though the scene itself were pressing into her. “Going this far…The Gallery will most certainly realize it, too. That this phenomenon transcends the framework of the normal system…”

At these words, Haruyuki was conscious all over again of the madness of the situation.

The senior Burst Linkers, including the Seven Kings of Pure Color, had been doing everything within their power to conceal the existence of the Incarnate System. For instance, even when the need arose for a guide to give instruction in how to use the techniques, those guides were resolute, making the initiate swear to use Incarnate only when attacked with Incarnate. The reason for this was solely because of the enormous dark side the Incarnate System contained.

Those who reached a hand into the holes in their own hearts, seeking even greater power, were at the same time pulled into those depths. You were swallowed up by the negative feelings once sublimated as your duel avatar. The worst of these cases was the Armor of Catastrophe, Chrome Disaster, which formerly brought about enormous chaos in the Accelerated World. To prevent the same thing from ever happening again, the Kings had strictly controlled information related to the Incarnate System. Even the cunning Yellow King, Yellow Radio, had chosen the path of retreat in front of many subordinates, rather than use Incarnate.

Now, however, at the climax of the grand event Hermes' Cord Race, Rust Jigsaw had released an Incarnate technique before the eyes of more than five hundred Burst Linkers, providing the members of the Gallery obvious confirmation of the phenomenon through their own senses. Confirmation of the irrationality of the supposedly protected audience seating collapsing, supposedly locked HP gauges being blown away. Of the existence of an abnormal power overwriting the normal system.

"Why…would he…," Sky Raker murmured helplessly, shaking her head slowly. Haruyuki understood how she felt so much it hurt.

She, of all the Burst Linkers, believed most strongly in the light side of the Incarnate System. She believed that hope, rather than hatred or fear, was the greatest power in the Accelerated World. For Raker, the sight of a power materialized through the ultimate hatred injuring so many Burst Linkers must have been hard to bear.

"Master…" When he turned around to speak to her, Haruyuki noticed something on the edge of his vision and hurriedly faced front again.

Ahead of the shuttle, which was just barely outracing the effective range of Jigsaw's enormous Rust Order attack, several protrusions stretched up from the surface of the elevator. Probably obstacles to make the race more exciting. If the situation were not what it was, this would be the place where he would be eager to show off his skill, but as it was, Haruyuki felt only astonishment. Charging full speed ahead through the antennae and tanks in close proximity was out of the question, but if they slowed down even a little, they'd be caught in Jigsaw's Incarnate.

As he gritted his teeth, the enormous reverberation of the collapse of the second floating spectator stand reached his ears, along with countless screams.

“Dammit…Dammit!!” Haruyuki shouted involuntarily. The tears springing to his eyes blurred the world into a rainbow.

This was supposed to be the best, most exciting race. I was supposed to team up with my best friends and fight my heart out with my best rivals. And more than anything…Just a little more, only the tiniest bit farther, and I would’ve been able to take Raker to the “end of the sky” she’s wished so hard for!!

“As if…I’m gonna lose heeeeeere!!” Haruyuki screamed, brushing away his tears and glaring straight ahead. He couldn’t accept that the race was going to be destroyed by a hateful will. He would fight to the end. He would resist.

The only way to keep moving forward while evading the Incarnate attack was to make it through this obstacle zone without slowing down at all. The load Jigsaw was carrying in number ten was far and away the lighter, but perhaps because he was trying to keep the accelerator pressed down while he released his enormous attack, his speed was essentially the same as that of Haruyuki and his team in number one. If he could just continue to keep this gap between them, they should be able to fly through the finish line first, without getting caught in the rust storm.

Almost as if he were becoming one with the machine, Haruyuki concentrated all his mental strength into his hands upon the steering wheel, his right foot upon the accelerator pedal, and the seat beneath him.

A few seconds later, the sprinting shuttle flew right into the middle of the antennae covering the tower surface at irregular intervals.

“Hng…ah!” As a cry slipped from beneath his clenched teeth, he dodged to the right and left the steel poles that came flying at them one after another. Because he couldn’t ease up on the accelerator, if he slipped up even once, that would be the end of it. Over and over, he just barely managed these corners. The magnetic force generated by the linear wheels was on the verge of losing its grip on the steel surface.

It seemed that the four in the rear seats had picked up on Haruyuki’s determination. Each time the machine threatened to angle up into a dangerous

incline from his wild cornering, they shifted the load on the opposite side without saying a word. With this desperate, cooperative play, shuttle number one continued to flee unwaveringly, scant centimeters in front of the Incarnate storm chasing them.

In contrast, shuttle number ten did not deviate from its path a single millimeter, even as it plunged into the obstacle zone. All the antennae and tanks before it transformed into lumps of rust from the top down and were blown away. Despite the fact that it had already been five minutes since Rust Order was activated, the raging Incarnate light showed no signs of weakening.

If he could sustain such a large-scale overwrite for so long, the strength of his imagination was truly terrifying. Yet at the same time Haruyuki shuddered at the depth of that hatred, he felt a touch of doubt.

This wasn't the first time he had gone up against Rust Jigsaw. Two months earlier, he and Blood Leopard had teamed up to fight Rust Jigsaw on the duel stage at Akihabara Battle Ground, and they had won.

But back then, Jigsaw hadn't even tried to use any kind of Incarnate attack. And, judging from everything he had said and done today, if he could have used one, he definitely would have. Haruyuki could think of two reasons for that. Either the only Incarnate attack Jigsaw had was this Space Corrosion, which took a long time to activate and carried an element of risk for his brain, or the previous time they met, he had been forbidden by his superiors to use any kind of Incarnate.

If it was the latter, that would mean that during these last two months, there had been a significant policy shift within the mysterious Acceleration Research Society. Because Rust Jigsaw's actions—his rampage—today had to be happening with the approval of that organization. The fact that Black Vise, who had identified himself as the vice president, had helped him was proof of that. What on earth could the objective of the Acceleration Research Society be, to launch destruction like this on such an enormous scale…?

Haruyuki was able to start churning these thoughts around in his brain—albeit only in one corner of it—once he had memorized to some degree the pattern of the obstacles' appearance. It was complicated, but the antennae were placed

following a fixed set of rules. All he had to do after figuring it out was continue to dodge to the sides without making a mistake. And this was the sort of action he had mastered more than a few times up to now in the countless racing games he had played—

But, in a flash, Haruyuki understood that the pattern was itself the area's biggest obstacle. The instant he became accustomed to the placement of the antennas and had a little mental leeway, the rule for that placement changed entirely.

"Hng!" Groaning, he devoted himself to steering. The sides of the machine scraped up against obstacles he couldn't dodge completely as the shuttle swung left and right, sending vivid sparks scattering.

Then, a few seconds later, as if sneering at Haruyuki struggling, a group of antennae lined up in front of them blocked the way forward entirely. There wasn't enough space to slip between them. The only thing he could do was dodge wide to the right or the left. But at this speed, the instant he turned the wheel, they would roll.

By the time he made that judgment, his right foot was already reflexively pulling back from the accelerator and stepping on the brake. *Skree!* The magnetic force lines howled, and the shuttle pitched forward into a left turn.

The storm chasing them didn't let the opportunity presented by this slight deceleration get away.

"Haruuuu!!" Takumu shouted as a rusty red swallowed the rear of the machine.

An abnormal vibration came to him through the steering wheel. Even without looking in the mirror, he knew that the beautiful silver body was rapidly corroding, peeling back, and falling away. Mastering his fear, Haruyuki tried to accelerate once again, now that they had pulled out of the turn. But the acceleration that had been so reliable until just a moment ago did not return.

It wasn't just the body; the linear wheels in the back had also rusted. Shuttle number one tried earnestly to sprint away with just the magnetic power generated by the discs in the front, but these produced only half the output.

“Ngh!”

“Aaah?!”

Immediately after he heard Takumu and Chiyuri crying out, the maw of the red storm came down on Kuroyukihime and Fuko in the seats ahead of them and even on Haruyuki in the driver’s seat.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Corrode! Degrade! Decay!!”

Jigsaw’s shrieking laughter came to him from a distance. But Haruyuki had no time for listening to it.

So hot! A fierce pain, as though his entire body were being showered with boiling water, enveloped him. When he looked down, the smooth, glittering silver armor of Silver Crow was clouded white all over and pocked with tiny holes. Simultaneous with this phenomenon, the HP gauge in the top left of his field of view was rapidly ripped away as if mocking the LOCKED displayed above it.

Enduring the agony, Haruyuki looked back. And reflexively twisted his face. Similarly having every bit of the armor of their duel avatars eaten away, the four members of his crew were curled up, trying to withstand the fierce pain. A metallic color to start with, Silver Crow was weak against corrosion attacks, but to see even the regular colors of Kuroyukihime and his friends being devoured —Jigsaw’s Incarnate was not the simple idea of “rusting.” It was, just as the attacker himself had shouted earlier, a more fundamental “degradation,” “decay.”

“Ah…Ah!” As if unable to withstand the pain, a thin cry escaped Chiyuri. Hearing it, Takumu tried to shield her with his own body, but the red light penetrated every nook and cranny, and the fresh green of Lime Bell withered cruelly.

“Bell…!” Sky Raker called, and then dropped her eyes, as if hesitating.

But the next instant, she jerked her face up and reached her slender right hand up high into the sky.

“Raker—” Kuroyukihime started to speak, but Raker stopped her with a wave of her hand.

A vivid sky-blue light gushed from Fuko's outstretched palm.

Overlay. The light of an unshakeable will released from deep in her heart.

"Wind Veil!!"

The high cry of the technique name was followed by wind. A whirlwind, tinged with a hazy light blue color, appeared, centered on Raker, and enveloped the entire shuttle. Instantly, the corrosive pain torturing Haruyuki's entire body faded away as if it had never even happened. A web of sparks bounced up where the red light and the blue wind came into contact, showing the two imaginations clashing.

There was no mistake, this was an Incarnate technique activated by Sky Raker. Not an attack, but a defensive image. And it covered not only herself, but also everything within a radius of three meters.

If…

A positive Incarnate targeting the individual was *hope*.

And a negative Incarnate targeting a range was *hatred*.

Then what to call a positive Incarnate protecting five people?

These feelings flitting through Haruyuki's heart were fleeting. Wrapped in the blue veil, machine number one had slowed down, and number ten with Rust Jigsaw inside was closing in on them at high speed from twenty or so meters away. The rust-colored avatar rising up from the cockpit thrust both hands up at the sky, malice turning to loud laughter and scattering.

"Ha-ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

The antennae ahead of him snapped one after the other, while the surface of the tower behind him split into deep fissures as the shuttle quickly grew distant. The very person who had so thoroughly destroyed the Hermes' Cord Race sped upward, alone, to the finish line awaiting the winner in distant space.

"Dammmmmmit!" Haruyuki shouted involuntarily. He couldn't let this happen. It was already impossible for the half-destroyed number one to overtake number ten, but at the very least, there was absolutely no way he was going to allow Jigsaw to be the winner. That would be defeat for all the teams

taking part in this race—no, for everyone, including the more than five hundred people in the Gallery.

That said, there was still one thing Haruyuki could do…

No.

There was. Even if he couldn't race anymore, there was still one lone method of stopping Jigsaw.

The shuttle finally slipped out of the effect range of Rust Order. Raker reined in her sky-blue wind and slumped into her seat, spent. Kuroyukihime held her shoulders, looking worried. After watching this scene, Haruyuki brought his eyes back to the front. The shuttle's speed had been cut in half, but he should still have the two linear wheels in the front.

Completely forgetting the emotions carved into his heart only moments ago at Sky Raker's Incarnate technique, Haruyuki gritted his teeth. He could drive the machine like this, but he had no chance of catching up with Jigsaw anymore. Which was why there was just one method left now. Right. Not with the machine, Haruyuki alone.

"Haru, what should we do? If we go ahead and keep a safe distance like this, we could probably be second, but…," Takumu said from the rear seats.

"Mmm," Kuroyukihime replied in a strangled voice. "If that's the only prize we're going to pick up, we might as well leave the machine here…"

Their conversation barely registered in Haruyuki's consciousness. He saw only the receding rust storm as he staggered to his feet in the driver's seat.

"Crow?" Kuroyukihime called, as if suspecting something.

"Kuroyukihime, watch out for everyone," he replied curtly without looking back.

"Wh-what are you going to do?!"

Instead of answering, Haruyuki smashed the accelerator to the floor, still standing. The half-ruined machine squealed in protest. Lightning gushed from the rusted linear discs like the throes of death.

Haruyuki confirmed that the digital meter was once again increasing as he

leaned forward with a grunt. He threw both hands ahead. Drew them back forcefully. In sync with this action, the thin metal fins folded up on his back deployed on both sides.

The damage from the Incarnate attack that had ignored the system's protection had taken more than 30 percent of his health gauge. To compensate for that, his special-attack meter had been charged to more than half full.

In other words, he could fly. Right now.

"Y-you can't! Stop, Crow!" Kuroyukihime shouted, guessing his intention. "You can't fight a hateful will with hate! There's no longer any meaning for you to fight here and now!!"

"But…I…I!" Haruyuki squeezed a cracked voice from between clenched teeth. "I can't let him do this!!"

Whatever means he had to resort to, he would stop Jigsaw. No, crush him.

Immediately after he added this in his heart, the right linear disc released dazzling sparks and abruptly exploded. Seconds before it did, Haruyuki bent forward and leapt into the sky with all his might.

To support his body, the rear of which threatened to blow off, he vibrated his spread wings only lightly. But he stared ahead, as if devouring the scene before him, and in the center of his field of view caught sight of number ten racing in the distance.

"Go!!"

With a sharp cry, he released the full thrust of both wings. Deserting number one as it went into a spin before coming to a stop, Haruyuki flew upward alone.

The maximum speed of Silver Crow, the lone duel avatar in the Accelerated World with the ability to fly, was roughly three hundred kilometers. In contrast, shuttle number ten was racing along at a speed of more than four hundred kilometers. Thus, starting from zero, there was no way he would have been able to catch up, but if he shot himself forward, using a shuttle going the same speed as a catapult, the supplement should give him a tiny chance.

Channeling every ounce of his mental strength and his special-attack gauge

into flying power, Haruyuki plunged forward, a beam of light.

He soon charged into Rust Order's effective range, and the armor covering his body began to cloud over. The surface foamed as if boiling, became minute particles, and melted off behind him.

The fiery pain once again danced around his nervous system, but the size of his anger won out. He pierced the raging rust storm in a straight line and closed in on the shuttle. The corrosion reached the wings on his back, and one by one the ten metallic fins on each side peeled away from the base, but he paid no attention and kept charging.

He lost both momentum and thrust rapidly, and his speed dropped. Six hundred kilometers an hour. Five hundred. If he didn't catch up with the shuttle before his speed dropped below the four hundred kilometers an hour the shuttle was doing, he would never get another chance to catch it.

He drew nearer rusty number ten…nearer…but his forward momentum was growing duller—

"Unh…Ah!" As he pushed everything he had into a battle cry, Haruyuki touched the rear wing of the shuttle with the fingertips of his left hand, fell back again, touched it again—and dug solidly into it.

"Aaaah!!"

Howling, he finally yanked his body forward with nothing but the strength of his arms and flew into the rear seat of the shuttle. In the cockpit, Rust Jigsaw looked back with a gasp. The slightest hint of surprise raced across his naked framework face.

At this distance, almost like the eye of a typhoon, there seemed to be almost no corrosion effect. Still, during the time he was charging through the Incarnate storm, Silver Crow's body had become covered with rust, worn-out. Thirty-five percent left in his HP gauge. Pieces of armor dropping, Haruyuki drew in his right hand, lined up his fingers, and focused the last of his mental strength there.

He sharpened his imagination. Generated an overlay, concentrated this on his fingertips, and made it converge into the shape of a sword.

“……Laser Sword!!”

Haruyuki released the sole Incarnate attack he had learned, squarely at the center of Rust Jigsaw’s chest.

Along with a metallic squeal, silver light stretched out from the hand he thrust forward. He reached the rust-colored armor, grazed it—

But here, Silver Crow’s right arm itself quietly crumbled from the elbow. The silver light diffused vainly into space, and Haruyuki’s first and last attack ended in carving merely a single dot off of Jigsaw’s HP gauge.

Having exhausted every ounce of strength, he was on the verge of collapsing on the shuttle floor when a thin line, extending from the outside of Rust Jigsaw’s right arm, caught Crow under his left arm to support him.

“Heh. Heh-heh-heh.” Chuckling leaked from the rust-red avatar as he turned completely around to face the rear. He took his foot off the accelerator, and the shuttle gently decelerated.

But even if Haruyuki had succeeded in stopping number ten here momentarily, it meant nothing to what was left of number ten and the totally destroyed machines driven by Blood Leopard and Ash Roller.

As number ten came to a complete stop, the Incarnate storm gradually subsided, and space returned to its original color and stillness. The cold light of the stars and the fierce light of the sun poured down on them.

“Recognize.” Rust Jigsaw dangled Haruyuki on a thin line about two meters long, stretching out from his right arm. “This is the limit of you who blindly believe that this world is a game.”

Abruptly, the fine black line began to vibrate repeatedly. A dense row of minute triangular blades popped up from the top of it. A saw. This was clearly his main weapon, the jigsaw that had given Haruyuki and Blood Leopard so much grief during the duel in Akihabara.

“And understand. This is the price for your foolishness.”

The vibrations of the jigsaw suddenly doubled. At the same time, a weak overlay enveloped the entire saw. He was inactivating the stage’s HP protection

rule at the same time that he enhanced his cutting power with Incarnate.

Immediately, a metallic shriek came up from under Haruyuki's left arm, followed by an incandescent pain.

"Unh…Aaaaah!" Screaming, Haruyuki tried to jump back. But his body wasn't obeying his commands.

Silver Crow's own weight hanging down gradually pulled the jigsaw into the base of his left arm. A few seconds later, a stream of sparks came gushing out, and his arm was effortlessly removed. His health gauge, dyed a bright red, was cut down to 10 percent.

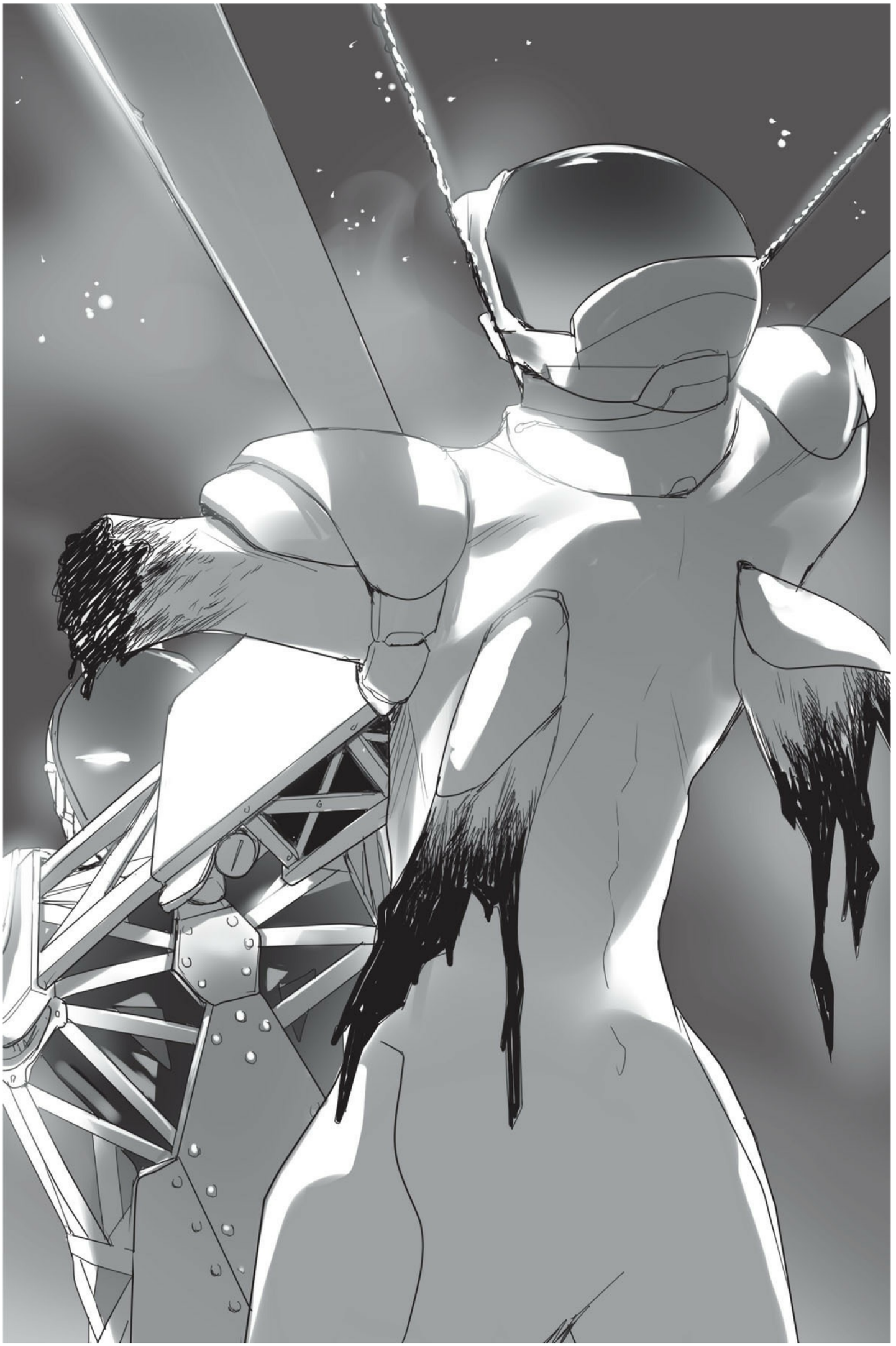
Having lost both arms now, Haruyuki collapsed to the shuttle floor like a broken doll, and Jigsaw tossed off words again, tinged with cold laughter.

"Heh-heh. Lament. That if you had to be a metallic color, you could not be gold or platinum, resistant to corrosion, or at least stainless steel."

And then Jigsaw extended the saw from his left arm, crossed it with the one from his right, and clasped them around Haruyuki's neck, yanking him up high in the air.

Crucified, head helplessly thrown back, Haruyuki caught sight of the last remaining spectator stand.

The hundred or so members of the Gallery were still clamoring with confusion and doubt. However, even in the midst of that, a pronounced disappointment wafted through the air at Silver Crow, who, after making such a daring and bold attack, was now dangling helplessly without even getting to strike a single blow. "What'd this guy even come for?" "This is what we got all excited for…?" The countless voices pierced Haruyuki's ears.



I don't need you guys telling me that. I'm the one most disappointed in me, okay? Haruyuki murmured in his heart, waiting for the jigsaw around his throat to bare its teeth. *I was soft. Too ignorant. I never even dreamed that Incarnate born with hatred as its source could be this incredibly powerful…*

Someone from inside his head responded to this thought.

Naturally. Did you really believe this thing called hope *could be greater than malice in terms of attack power?*

He closed his eyes and replied, *Well, how was I supposed to know? I mean, I can't use that kind of power.*

Once again, someone rebutted. *Not true. You knew. That power's been sleeping in you for a very long time. A power even purer than hatred. A malice accumulating inside, never dispersing to the outside world, single-mindedly honed and whetted.*

That is: anger. The Incarnate of rage has existed within you from the distant past, waiting for the time it would be released.

Thmp.

Suddenly, the center of his back began to throb coldly. *Thmp. Thmp.* This pulsing, almost a heartbeat, cycled a frozen fluid, like mercury, through Haruyuki's veins.

Well.

WELL!!

NOW IS THE TIME! CALL MY NAME!! RELEASE ME!! I WILL CHANGE YOUR ANGER INTO POWER!!

"Unh…Aah…!"

The chill filling his entire body abruptly became flames, and he was overwhelmed with a burning sensation. Haruyuki opened his eyes.

And then he saw it: the fluctuation of a thick aura rising up from his own battered body—overlay. But it wasn't silver. It was a gray pressing up against the boundary between gray and black, a color of darkness he was sure he'd

seen somewhere before.

Something terrifying was happening. Instantly, he was choking on fear, but the moment he looked at Rust Jigsaw dangling his body in the air, that fear vanished.

The conversation with whomever it was had apparently taken place in the mere twinkling of the eye while Jigsaw pulled Haruyuki's body up and began to whirl the saws. A discordant sound came from his throat, and the minute teeth ate into his thin armor.

But Haruyuki had forgotten his terror of having his head cut off. "I…won't let you," he muttered, staring intently at Rust Jigsaw. "You alone…I will totally not let you."

"Heh. Heh-heh. Resign yourself. There's no longer anything you can do."

"I won't let you…I won't let you…," Haruyuki returned, almost delirious, his core cold as ice. It stirred up his overwhelming rage, as if to surround ice with scorching heat.

Rust Jigsaw no longer existed there as himself. He was the symbol of all the irrational malice that had tortured Haruyuki for the better part of the fourteen years of his life.

If, in that place, there had been even just one friend connected to his heart, perhaps Haruyuki might have been able to stop himself. The way he had in that decisive battle in the Unlimited Neutral Field two months earlier.

But now, he had left the stalled shuttle number one, together with Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Takumu, and Chiyuri, who had all been deeply injured by Jigsaw's Incarnate attack, off in the distance behind him. This fact only served to increase Haruyuki's anger all the more, and there was nothing to hold him back.

"You…You…" In a voice that resonated metallically, Haruyuki released his final roar. "As if I could ever…let yooooooouuuuu!!"

Instantly.

The heat of his rage finally crossed a certain threshold.

Haruyuki felt something break through the armor of his back and stretch out,

writhing. He brandished whatever this was in place of his lost arms, and beat at the two saws binding his neck, breaking them.

“Mmng!” Jigsaw groaned while Haruyuki leapt back, putting some distance between them.

After landing outside of the parked shuttle, he plunged the thing stretching out from his back into the surface of the tower. Brilliant sparks flew everywhere, together with an enormous *crash*.

It was a sinister tail, countless blackened silver segments connecting, a sharp, sword-shaped protuberance at the tip. The black silver tail swaying like a snake, Haruyuki took the deepest breath he could, threw his head back, and howled, “Unh…ah…aaaaaaaaah!!”

An aura of darkness cascaded from his entire body, and shock waves rippled through the stage. The Gallery in the air began to shout and holler in earnest. But their voices no longer reached Haruyuki’s ears. Instead, a single sharp command slammed into the center of his brain.

NOW THEN! CALL MY NAME!!

Striking a daunting pose, thrusting his tail into the vertical wall to support his body, Haruyuki called the name that flashed in the back of his mind.

“Chrome…Disasteeeeerrrrrrrr!!”

10

The Gallery, Rust Jigsaw, even the stars fell silent.

In the stillness, a black lightning poured down from out of nowhere to strike Haruyuki, and in the upper right of his field of view, a purple system message glittered.

You equipped the Enhanced Armament…

The cursor at the end blinked twice, three times. Almost as if the Brain Burst system itself were afraid to note the name. However, after flashing for a fourth time, the cursor flowed to the right and carved out a single row of text.

…The Disaster.

The darkness overflowed.

A muddy black/dark-gray aura spurted out in several lines from the base of the tail to wrap thickly around his entire body. These immediately condensed, grew thicker, and wiped away the silver of Silver Crow.

Finally, a glassy metallic luster appeared on the surface of the concentrated darkness. A shining dark metal, blackened like the tail. A myriad of armor parts, all with sharp edges, materialized at high speed from his back out to his extremities. These covered his chest, his stomach, his legs, and even the two arms he had supposedly lost, leaving no gaps, creating a perfect blackish-silver full-body armor. At the same time as his arms regenerated inside the armor, his HP gauge was completely restored. Finally, there came a heavy metallic clanking, and a thick helmet covered his head from the rear.

His field of view changed color. A light gray layer was added to everything, leaving only the figure of Rust Jigsaw in the center to stand out vividly.

Haruyuki slowly raised his arms and looked at the ten talon-fingers glittering brutally at the ends of them. Worlds away from the slender hands of Silver Crow, even if they could hold nothing, he was easily convinced that the talons alone would be fearsome weapons.

And it wasn't just his hands. It was also the torso covered by the thick armor. And the legs, drawing out sturdy, supple lines. And the three enormous claws on his feet.

His entire avatar had turned into a crystal of pure power.

Unable to bear the force racing through his entire body, Haruyuki clenched both hands ferociously, turned his head back to the sky, and—

Howled.

"Gng…Yuroooooooooo!!"

Released from his throat was the metallic roar of a beast.

Standing in the shuttle a little ways off, Rust Jigsaw reeled for a moment before quickly recovering himself. Even Jigsaw couldn't have anticipated this scenario, but the voice he spoke in was filled with the same cool contempt as it had been up to now.

"Heh-heh, interesting. The Armor of Catastrophe? Fine. Recognize that this so-called most evil power is, in the end, an embellished pretense."

This utterance also felt to Haruyuki like nothing more than a single drop of water falling into incandescent flames. Emotional thoughts were completely blocked. Only a high-speed, calculating logic filled his consciousness—in other words, the question of how to most efficiently render inactive the enemy before his eyes.

He could no longer hear the voice that had whispered to him so many times before now, nor did he feel the anger the voice had led him to. The reason for this was clear. Haruyuki himself had now become completely one with them.

So that's it?

I'm already…the sixth Chrome Disaster.

I'm sorry, Kuroyukihime. I'm sorry, Master. Sorry, Taku, Chiyu…

These thoughts created a tiny ripple on the surface of his consciousness and disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a purified bloodlust.

Rust Jigsaw moved first.

On top of the parked shuttle, he raised a leisurely right hand and spread out five angular fingers. The hand was wrapped in a dull red light.

Instantly, something strange happened in Haruyuki's field of view. Several English words were displayed at high speed in the newly added gray layer. From what he could understand: PREDICTED ATTACK/INCARNATE ATTACK; RANGE/POWER ENHANCEMENT/CORROSION TYPE; THREAT LEVEL/ZERO.

"Rust Touch!"

Following the attack name, Jigsaw's hand released an enormous phantom hand, which grabbed tightly on to Haruyuki's body. Armor that glittered a dark gray immediately began to cloud over—however…

"Gaaar!!"

With a short roar, Haruyuki flung his arms out. He casually ripped the phantom hand off, and it dissipated into the void. The chrome silver armor also immediately regained its original, almost wet luster.

He took a heavy step toward the cockpit and laughed curtly. "Heh-heh…You said before I should be stainless steel." His voice was tinged with a metallic edge and twisted strangely. "You were wrong. The reason stainless steel doesn't rust is because the *chrome* it contains is passive. It's the chrome that doesn't rust." Once again, a suppressed laugh slipped out. "Your Incarnate is useless against me now." As he made this sneering declaration, Haruyuki pushed off with both legs like an animal.

In the air, he spread the wings on his back with a *flap*. They bore not the slightest resemblance to the original simple metal fins. His wings had transformed into something with a weapon-like silhouette, and Haruyuki shook them with all his might.

He simply raised his right hand, and without having to particularly focus his mental energies, a dark overlay spilled out, almost overflowing. This immediately concentrated into the shape of a dagger, like the katar used by

Middle Eastern soldiers, as he closed in on Jigsaw.

To meet this, Jigsaw extended a long saw tinged with the red of his overlay from his right arm and went to meet the dagger. Instantly, detailed information raced across Haruyuki's field of view. PREDICTED ATTACK/INCARNATE ATTACK; POWER ENHANCEMENT/AMPUTATION TYPE; THREAT LEVEL/20. This time, the information even included the trajectory the jigsaw would likely carve out.

"Yurooo!" Haruyuki barked and slid his body about fifty centimeters to the right in midair.

The jigsaw, having the longer reach, attacked first. However, the tip was tracing with incredible fidelity the predicted line Haruyuki had been shown. As a result, he was able to dodge it, despite the fact that normally, even without the relative power difference, the strike was precise down to the millimeter and should have been impossible to evade. He immediately thrust the black katar into Jigsaw's left shoulder.

Skrrinng! A painful ringing filled the air, and Jigsaw's body was sent flying from the top of the shuttle. However, displaying impressive control, he was able to tuck into a roll and land on his feet on the surface of the tower.

His body tilted back toward the Earth. A sort of pseudogravity in the direction of the Hermes' Cord pillar was at work on the interior of the shuttles, but the instant any avatar stepped outside, the ground was no longer the ground, but rather a precipice continuing vertically for several thousand kilometers.

Jigsaw instantly stabbed the saw in his right hand into the surface of the tower to support his body and keep from falling.

Touching down right in front of him, Haruyuki similarly pierced the tower with the talons of his feet and assumed an imposing stance.

"Heh-heh-heh. What kind of acrobatics are you going to show me next?"

Here, finally, concentrated hatred came from Rust Jigsaw's eyes. "You……ret. Gret. Regret. Regret. Regret regret regret regret!!" The muttered order turned into a scream, and as if guided by that hatred, his left arm began to shine with the largest overlay he had mustered so far.

Shiink! The jigsaw came flying. Red light streamed off it, countless teeth

glinting. His arm drew a circle, fast like smoke, and the jigsaw transformed into a giant ring. He then fired it off somewhere; the saw whined as it flew away. It was Rust Jigsaw's long-distance attack, Wheel Saw. This technique, which involved throwing a rotating saw with extreme cutting power, had previously caused Haruyuki no small amount of grief.

However, it wasn't moving in a straight line now. The saw completely disappeared from Haruyuki's view and came at him along a curve like a boomerang. At first glance, he shouldn't have been able to handle it.

But the detailed information in his field of view appeared once more. Predicted attack/Incarnate attack; Range/Power/Movement expansion; Threat level/40. And then an estimate line stretching from the top of Jigsaw's left hand, flying over Haruyuki, and coming around again from behind.

Without even looking over his shoulder, Haruyuki waved the tail attached to his back, once, broadly.

Cliiiink! The earsplitting sound of impact rang out, and the rotating saw of the special attack bounced harmlessly away, disappearing into the starry sky.



Haruyuki vaguely understood what the various information displayed in the gray layer was. It was a prediction of the future calculated from vast battle experience accumulated by the Enhanced Armament The Disaster, which was the true form of the Armor of Catastrophe. He couldn't even begin to imagine how many duels this armor—born at the dawn of the Accelerated World, inherited by five Burst Linkers—had passed through. That data, essentially infinite, were being used to predict with terrifying accuracy every attack from his enemy.

"How? Explain. What is this power?" Rust Jigsaw moaned hoarsely.

Haruyuki glanced at him through his thick visor. "Are we done already? Then disappear." And he attacked, artlessly, dead-on.

This was not a *duel* on which the pride of Burst Linkers rested. Nor was it even a simple *battle*. It was better called a *slaughter*—no, *work*.

Unable to use his right hand, Jigsaw went to greet Haruyuki with the saw in his left arm wrapped in Incarnate and kicks from both legs. However, Haruyuki completely saw through each and every one of these attacks with the predictions of the Enhanced Armament and his own inspiration. He moved only the bare minimum distance with his wings and tail as he simply slashed at the enemy avatar.

In a certain sense, this fight was perhaps the perfected form of the Aerial Combo Haruyuki had worked so hard on. Yet there was not one speck of excitement or beauty or pride in it. It was simply nothing more than an ugly atrocity unfolding in the empty sky three thousand five hundred kilometers above the Earth.

First, he cut Jigsaw's right arm off. Then his right leg. His left leg. And finally, only the left arm supported the avatar.

A minute or so later, having dissected his enemy, Haruyuki grabbed tightly on to the head and torso of the ruins of the avatar that had been Rust Jigsaw, now a lump about to fall to Earth, and yanked them upward.

He should have been feeling absurd levels of pain, but Jigsaw still maintained the energy to smile thinly. “Heh-heh…heh. Praise yourself now. But…my objective’s already been achieved.”

Haruyuki had almost no interest in this, but still he cocked his head and listened to what Jigsaw had to say.

“And in a certain sense, we benefit even from the restoration of the Armor. Tremble with fear. From this moment, this world you believe in will begin to transform. It will lose this show of order, and the original confusion will cover everything. Before the revolution we bring about, despa—”

Gashhuk.

Without bothering to listen to the end, Haruyuki crushed Rust Jigsaw’s head. The avatar threw off a red light and scattered; the Burst Linker who had ruined the Hermes’ Cord Race departed from the Accelerated World for the time being.

No.

Maybe the destroyer in the truest sense was already Haruyuki himself. This race that he had wanted so desperately to save only a few minutes earlier no longer mattered either way to him.

It’s not enough. Something like this, it’s totally not enough.

Muttering in his heart, Haruyuki swiveled his head around. Naturally, there was no one. But the energy like a vortex throughout his body and the destructive urge, rather than subsiding, seemed to burn even more brightly.

I want to fight. I want to beat down more enemies, more and more, one after another, with this power.

He threw his head back, seeking new enemies, and the last remaining spectator stand jumped into his field of view.

The hundred or so members of the Gallery leaning forward in their seats wore uniform expressions of bewilderment. Whispered conversations flew back and forth through space.

“Isn’t that…the Armor of Catastrophe…?”

“No way. I heard it was completely annihilated a little while ago.”

“But, you know…That kind of crazy performance, the Armor’s the only thing that could do that…?”

“But, come on, the look’s totally different from when I saw it in the Unlimited Neutral Field…”

If you want to know so badly. Confirm the truth of it with your bodies. The truth of the legendary berserker, the overwhelming power of Chrome Disaster.

A mad smile bled onto Haruyuki’s face below the visor. He slowly deployed his wings. The long tail folded up into an *S* and concealed itself in his body. As he was on the verge of kicking off the ground and heading toward the myriad prey there—

Something gently touched the wings on his back.

It was a memory. The memory of the countless duels that had permeated the metallic fins that were supposed to be mere propulsive devices. In particular, the wings, colored with darkness, flashed back for the merest of moments to the memory of the lone fight against the Black King Black Lotus, which had taken place the previous night in Haruyuki’s bedroom.

Far, far away, a fleeting voice was revived within him.

…I’m proud of you…

Abruptly, the talons on his feet held firmly on to the iron plate in an unconscious movement. His body, so ready to soar up into the sky, was yanked heavily back down.

…I.

A single thought trickled down like a drop of clear water in the middle of that consciousness seething for battle.

The strength I’m looking for…shouldn’t be…this blind slaughter…

The white ripple spread out in his head. Instantly, a part of his blackly lit armor shook unstably.

DO NOT FIGHT IT. DO NOT FEAR. THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT YOU SOUGHT, SOMEONE SAID IN THE BACK OF HIS MIND,

SOUNDING IRRITATED. NOW, RELEASE EVEN MORE OF THAT ANGER. DESTROY EVERYTHING BEFORE YOU. AND THEN EAT IT. EAT IT ALL. IF YOU DO, YOU WILL OBTAIN MORE, MORE, MORE, UNLIMITED STRENGTH.

Eat? I…I don't want that…I don't want to be strong…for myself. It's for the people I love…To protect my meager but still warm family…And for that person more important to me than anyone, to keep chasing after the same dream, I…

Abruptly, several hazy faces popped up before his eyes. Smiling faces, with their gentle gazes, began to paint over the black waves crowding in on him from all sides.

IN THAT CASE, EAT THEM, TOO. EAT THEM AND MAKE THEM YOUR POWER. NO NEED FOR ANYONE ELSE. DESTROY. SMASH. I AM THE PERSONIFICATION OF CALAMITY. I AM A SYMBOL OF TERROR. I AM THE TRUE CHROME DISASTER!!

This voice echoing like a broken bell.

Haruyuki mustered all the mental strength he could and shouted in return, *No! No!! I…I…!!*

"I am Silver Croooooow!!"

The instant the cry burst forth from under his visor—

The heavy armor over his body lost its hardness, like liquid metal. *Drip, drip.* It flowed toward the bottom of his feet, revealing Silver Crow's original helmet. The dark metal did not disappear, however. It coiled around the silver plating and tried to return.

"Unh…Ah! Aaaaah!"

Clenching his hands so tightly they threatened to break, Haruyuki resisted it. He worked with every fiber of his being to distance himself from the dark fluctuation trying to take control of both his avatar and his consciousness. But after only a few seconds, his resistance proved to be in vain; the evil shining began to return from the tips of his limbs.

This power of control far surpassed the domain of a simple item, stepping even into the realm of a true curse. Not some digital code written by the server, someone's consciousness itself. And it was trying to fuse with Haruyuki's own.

He had absolutely no idea what kind of logic would allow this sort of

phenomenon to occur, but in fact, although it had only been a few minutes, Haruyuki's own thoughts were already encountering serious interference. While fighting Rust Jigsaw, Haruyuki had been more than half not-Haruyuki. If he fell into that state again, he might very well turn this fearsome power on his companions, on that someone most precious to him.

Exactly. Just like Cherry Rook, the fifth Chrome Disaster, who had tried to hunt his own "child," Scarlet Rain.

"Go away…Go away…Go awaaaaaaaay!" He pushed a desperate voice from between gritted teeth. But the Armor had already restored itself to his arms and up to his knees. It didn't seem that he would be able to stop this force.

In that case, there's one thing I can still do.

Sharp claws glittering, he raised his right hand and turned the tips of those talons toward the center of his own chest. Five fingers dripping with dull black Incarnate aura, he went to pierce the heart area, the most critical point of a duel avatar—

"Haruuuuuuu!!"

He heard his name in the distance. Jerking his head up with a gasp, he looked down along the space elevator and found there an unexpected sight.

A fresh green avatar with her right hand stretched out toward him as far as it would go. Lime Bell. Carrying her, the sky-blue avatar Sky Raker, flying toward him in a straight line, glittering flames jetting out of her booster. And then far behind, shuttle number one, running along intently on its lone remaining linear wheel.

"S-stay away! Bell! Raker! You can't come any closer!!" Haruyuki shouted in a daze. Instantly, his mental focus weakened, and the armor increased the pace of its reclamation of his body.

"Run! I…I can't…hold it back…anymore…!!"

Pwaah! A dark aura erupted from his entire body.

A sharp metallic sound echoed and reverberated as the Armor of Catastrophe climbed up his chest from his shoulders and covered his stomach. All that was

left were his neck and head. The heavy metal collected there in the blink of an eye, and began to build back its sinister headpiece. A light gray film lowered itself over his field of view. If the visor of this helmet came down, Silver Crow would without a doubt completely disappear.

However, Sky Raker's charge did not waver. She began to go even faster, flying straight at Haruyuki.

On her back, Lime Bell lifted her left hand straight up. She spun the enormous bell, dazzling in the sunlight, around once, twice, counterclockwise. Three times. And then a fourth time.

Finally, she brought it down, pointing it straight at Haruyuki, and shouted loudly, clearer than the din of the stars.

"Citron Caaaaaaaaall!!"

Majestic bells, an orchestra of angels, echoed throughout the space. Riding the beautiful sound, a ribbon of light shining a clear green flowed toward him.

Text flickering irregularly popped up in the thin added layer covering his field of view. PREDICTED ATTACK/NORMAL SPECIAL ATTACK; RANGE UNKNOWN/POWER UNKNOWN/EFFECT UNKNOWN; THREAT LEVEL/100.

Haruyuki's left arm moved on its own to release a dark fluctuation on the ribbon. However, Haruyuki mustered whatever willpower he had left, so much so that it felt like his brain would catch fire, grabbed his left arm with his right, and pushed it back down.

Immediately after that, the clean lime-green light wrapped around Haruyuki's body.

As if sliced up by the ribbon of light, the dark armor broke into parts all over. The heavy metal once again melted into a fluid, and the tail on his back was even pulled in at the base. The power of Chiyuri's special attack Citron Call mode two, to forcibly rewind the status of an avatar, was trying to cancel out the equipping of the Enhanced Armament.

Geh…Yuroooooo!

The ferocious howling of a beast filled his head. Echoes of overwhelming

anger and frustration. And then in the middle of that—the tiniest bit of fear.

Go away! Go away! I don't need you! I'm going to get stronger; I'm always going to have the right power now! So…you have to go awaaaaaaay!!

As if repelled by Haruyuki's cries, the metal abruptly disappeared, leaving only the tail that had appeared first. In the fresh green light, Haruyuki raised his now-freed arms, grabbed hold of the tail extending from his own back, and then put every drop of strength he had into ripping it off.

His entire avatar creaked, and a terrifying pain pierced his back. But he didn't let up. *Skrrk, skrrk.* The unpleasant sound of destruction filled the air, and the thick tail in his hands flailed as though it were a separate living creature.

FOOL.

The weakened voice whispered as his back.

IN YOUR HEART, YOU DO WANT TO FUSE AND BECOME ONE WITH ME AND MY POWER. BECAUSE YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE, OTHER THAN MY CREATOR, WITH WHOM I HAVE BEEN IN SUCH POWERFUL ALIGNMENT.

Haruyuki replied firmly to the voice. *Even still. Even if that's true, I reject you. I refuse you. And I do this for the people who gave me the power to be able to do it!!*

At the same time, he concentrated the remainder of his will into the hands, gripping the tail. Haruyuki changed that to light and released it.

"Laser…Sword!!"

A clear metallic *clang* filled the space, like the clashing of pure silver swords.

The snow-white swords of light gushed forth, crossed each other, and sliced halfway through the heavy metal tail. The raging cry of an animal rang out just one final time, and then in the top left of his field of view, a system message flashed: YOU DISARMED THE DISASTER.

The final remaining fragments of the tail melted and crumbled away into nothing, as if wiped out by the light of the sun.

Having used up all his energy, Haruyuki slowly began to fall toward the Earth, but four arms belonging to the flying Chiyuri and Fuko gently caught him.

Apparently, he was out for longer than he thought.

When Haruyuki opened heavy lids, the jet-black mirrored visor of the Black King, Black Lotus, was before his eyes.

“Kuro…yukihime…” Murmuring, he lifted his head. He was in the front row of the crew seats of shuttle number one, parked now. They had laid him down on the bench seat, with his upper body resting on Lotus’s lap.

When Kuroyukihime realized Haruyuki had regained consciousness again, she nodded once slowly. A gentle voice trembled slightly as it came out from her mask. “You came back to us, Crow. Well done…You really…came back to us…”

“Kuro…yukihime…” Haruyuki’s voice began to shake implacably. “I…I’m sorry…I…I…”

“Don’t talk now. You used all your strength and fought an opponent who needed to be fought. That’s enough for now…”

“That’s right, Corvus.” Sky Raker looked back from the cockpit and stretched out a hand to stroke Haruyuki’s helmet tenderly. “You saved the race from its would-be destroyer. No one in Nega Nebulus—no, in the Accelerated World, would reproach you for that fight.”

“……” His heart was suddenly full and he started to drop his head when Takumu spoke to him from the rear seat, his tone his usual one.

“Exactly, Crow. And I’ve known forever that you snap and do crazy stuff. When you went flying after shuttle number ten, it was more like, *Ah, here we go again*.”

“A-ha-ha! It’s so true! And then it’s always us cleaning up after you!” Chiyuri, next to Takumu, laughed delightedly.

Haruyuki felt he had to stand up for himself. “W-well, I never asked you to clean up or anything!”

“Oh, ohhh. So that’s your story? And after big sister Raker and I worked so hard, that’s all you have to say for yourself!”

“Unh…S-sorry…You really helped me out…”

His four teammates laughed at once at the back-and-forth. After a slight

delay, Haruyuki added his own laughter to the mix.

They chatted harmoniously for a while, and then Chiyuri whirled her head to look around the shuttle.

“Aaah. But it totally sucks we can’t make it to the finish line after you worked so hard for us, Haru! And it’s just a little farther, too.”

At this, Haruyuki pulled himself up from Kuroyukihime’s lap and checked the condition of shuttle number one. It was just as Chiyuri said; the machine didn’t look like it was going anywhere anytime soon. The rear, which had taken the full force of Rust Jigsaw’s Incarnate attack, was rusted and crumbling, while the right linear wheel in the front had blown off completely, and the left had crackling sparks popping out of it. It was actually a wonder they had managed to get from where Haruyuki had flown off from to where he had fought Jigsaw.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it.” Kuroyukihime waved the sword of her right hand. “We should simply be glad that the victory was not carried off by that villain…At any rate, after this, it probably won’t be the time or place for any further events in the Accelerated World…”

She trailed off, and Haruyuki opened his mouth to ask her what she meant.

At that moment, a shout rang up from below them on the tower.

“Hey, hey, heeeeeeeeey! Too early for the giving of it up, meeeeeeeen!!”

“Waah?!” Haruyuki cried out, turning around. There in his sights were two shuttles laboriously climbing the tower, weak sparks shooting from the linear wheels. There was no mistake, these were the machines of the green and red teams he had assumed dropped out long ago.

Ash Roller sat in the cockpit of the machine, which was in the lead. But Haruyuki could see neither hide nor hair of Bush Utan and the other Green Legion members, who should have been riding in the rear.

And driving the shuttle behind Ash was the deep crimson, leopard-headed avatar, Blood Leopard. But she, too, was alone; there was no sign of the shooting squad.

The extent of damage on both machines was not much different from that of

number one. As Haruyuki and his companions watched, stunned, the two machines staggered toward them and came to an awkward stop alongside them. Instantly, all the linear wheels on both shuttles flew off with a pathetic noise.

"Ah. Aaaah. Mega-solid work getting this far." Ash Roller patted the side of his shuttle, and Pard, too, gently stroked her steering wheel and murmured, "GJ." And then they both lifted their faces and looked at the five members of Nega Nebulus.

Cocking her head to one side, Kuroyukihime spoke for all of them. "Well, I suppose I should first say, 'Well done'…How on earth did you manage to chase after us, even after losing your team members? It's definitely no longer possible to continue the race."

"Oh, yeah, right. I kinda just talked with Miss Panther Head here for, like, a minute, right?" Ash Roller said, scratching the back of his skull helmet. "So then the whole team dropped out, yeah? Just took the hits too hard, you know—"

"You talk too much. And I'm not a panther, I'm a leopard," Pard interjected curtly and picked up the explanation. "Currently, none of the shuttles is drivable. But if our three teams work together, there's a very small possibility we could reach the finish line."

"Wh-what do you mean, Leopard?" Sky Raker leaned forward and Pard met her gaze.

"One step outside of the shuttle and you're on a vertical cliff. But my Beast Mode and Bike Guy's motorcycle can run up walls."

"B-bike guy…," Ash Roller muttered in a complicated tone, but was ignored as the unfaltering explanation continued.

"But that will deplete both of our special-attack gauges. So Bike Guy and I run to that limit carrying Crow and Raker. Then Crow carries Raker on his back and flies to his limit. Finally, Raker flies as far as she can with the energy remaining in Gale Thruster. Although I don't know whether or not she'll be able to make it to the finish line." Pard spread both hands as if to say, *Only the gods know that*.

At the unexpected proposal, Haruyuki and his friends fell into a dumbfounded

silence. The first to break this quiet was Kuroyukihime.

“I see. Interesting. There’s merit in trying. But…naturally, you aren’t offering your help free of charge?”

“That is totally of coooooourse! The prize points for coming in first get cut up three ways! And you guys nick ’em all and it’ll totally giga suck—”

“That’s rude, Ash.”

On behalf of Ash Roller, who fell instantly silent at Raker’s voice, Pard cocked her head slightly to the side. “So?”

“Of course we accept,” Kuroyukihime replied immediately, and the leopard-headed avatar responded with her usual “K” and smiled faintly.

After Blood Leopard transformed into a beautiful four-limbed beast with the Shape Change command, the lightweight Sky Raker climbed onto her back, and then Haruyuki sat himself on the back of the American chopper that Ash Roller summoned.

“Well then, I wish you godspeed. We will be cheering you on from here.”

Takumu and Chiyuri nodded at Kuroyukihime’s words.

“It’s up to you now, guys. Give this event a happy ending for all of us!”

“You can do it, Crow, big sister Raker! And you, too, Leopard, and bike person!”

After dropping his head momentarily, Ash Roller shouted with his usual enthusiasm, “Okay, here we goooooo! Grab on and hold! Me! Tight! Corvus, man! Aaaah, I’d rather be saying that to Master!” The roar of the engine partially drowned out this somewhat pathetic line. Ash Roller spun the rear wheel exaggeratedly before sending, almost shooting, the motorcycle sprinting up the vertical wall.

Following them, making almost no noise, Pard started to run with Raker on her back. The large paws of the cat beast stuck firmly to the surface of the tower, looking for all the world like a cat running up the trunk of a tree.

After they started to move, a loud sound abruptly and wholly unexpectedly poured down from above their collective heads. Cheering. The multicolored

avatars of the last remaining floating spectator stand were raising their voices all at once.

“All riiiiiight! Show us that Burst Linker spirit!”

“You can do iiiiiit, Leopaaaaard!”

“Crow! You totally kicked butt back there!”

Some of the cheers were directed at Silver Crow, and Haruyuki unconsciously looked up. They had to have seen him summon the forbidden Enhanced Armament, the Armor of Catastrophe. And he had even thought, just once, of massacring the more than one hundred members of the Gallery with that power. But he heard no voices of reproach. Maybe it was just that they still hadn’t realized the truth of the matter. Either way, the cheers they flung down on them brought a warmth to Haruyuki’s heart.

Apparently, the ascension of the spectator stands was synced to the lead shuttle; the Gallery did not chase after them. In the blink of an eye, the enormous stand and the figures of Kuroyukihime, Takumu, and Chiyuri waving below it grew distant, finally melting into the exterior panels of the gleaming silver elevator and disappearing.

The throaty roar of the engine and the faint footfalls echoed through the space three thousand and some hundreds of kilometers above the Earth. Almost as if the massive destruction only moments earlier had never happened, the silver Hermes’ Cord stretched out endlessly, beautifully, and continued up toward the Milky Way, where the rivers of stars flowed.

No one spoke, and there was no need to. The four headed for the peak of the tower with their own emotions and a single shared thought in their hearts. That’s what Haruyuki believed as he sat quietly, entrusting his body to the bike’s vibrations.

Immediately before he had been discharged from this world, Rust Jigsaw had talked about a “revolution.” So that no doubt indicated that the next large-scale act of destruction would be carried out with the clear intent of his organization, the Acceleration Research Society. But no matter what kind of changes they brought about in the Accelerated World, there were definitely precious things in this world that would never change. Because here and now, the members of

three enemy Legions were combining forces and aiming for a single goal.

“As long as I keep this fact in mind, I’ll never give in to the temptation of the Armor again,” Haruyuki murmured, and no voice came back in response.

How far did they race like this?

Eventually, ahead of them, a row of tiny lights that were not stars popped up, creating a beautiful, shining blue ring that wrapped around Hermes’ Cord and disappeared into inky black space.

“Guess that’s the finish line, the top station,” Ash Roller said, slackening his cruising speed. “Managed to run a fair way thanks to the weak gravity, but this is the end of the line for this cool dude. How ’bout you, Miss Leopard?”

“Me, too.”

The two nodded at each other lightly and looked back over their shoulders at their respective passengers.

“It’s up to you now, Crow,” Ash Roller said awkwardly. “And, y’know, however the chips fell back there, you had extreme guts in the battle against that rust dude. Maybe things’re gonna get for-real serious later, but don’t go getting all bummed out, got it?”

Haruyuki nodded deeply and somehow managed to squeeze out a reply. “Th-thank you.”

“Yup. And you better not forget our share, Corvus man!”

“Raker.” To their right, Blood Leopard offered a very brief farewell to Sky Raker. “One thing…Welcome back, ICBM.”

Raker stroked her back gently and replied, equally briefly, “I’m home, Bloody Kitty.”

Once their respective farewells were finished, Haruyuki deployed the wings on his back. Thanks to the Incarnate battle with Jigsaw, his special-attack gauge was nearly charged to the maximum. He flapped his fins lightly and soundlessly rose up from the passenger seat of the motorcycle. He reached out his hand and grabbed tightly on to the outstretched hand of Raker. At this, the lightweight avatar was pulled up from Leopard’s back and drawn close to

Haruyuki.

Here, finally, the special-attack gauges of the bike and the leopard appeared to be spent; they both began to slow down rapidly. Haruyuki turned to fly backward and see them off.

“Okay, then! You make sure you get Master there, Crow!”

“CU.”

Tires and legs stopped and rested momentarily on the wall before gently peeling away. Pulled by the gravity of the Earth spreading out blue far below them, Ash Roller and Blood Leopard began to drop leisurely. If this had been the real world, there would have been absolutely no air this high up, but the Accelerated World was apparently set to inflict damage from friction with the atmosphere, and an orange light encased the two avatars. Their silhouettes receded, drawing out vivid tails like falling stars, until finally they released a powerful burst of light and vanished.

“…Thank you.” Haruyuki bowed his head deeply toward the two avatars, who had returned to the real world and once again set course for the peak of Hermes’ Cord.

There was still a fair ways to go before the top station, colored by its blue rings. It was right on the edge of how far they could reach by combining both of their flying abilities. However, Haruyuki felt that making it to the finish line was no longer the key part of this. Three teams had joined forces and done their utmost to reach a difficult goal. That was the most valuable part of this race.

“Let’s get going. Master, maybe on my back,” he said to the sky-blue avatar whose hand he held, and Fuko smiled quietly.

“If that’s how it is, then please hold me in front. We are finally alone, after all.”

“Huh?…R-right.” Flustered, he nodded and brought both arms around the back with the boosters equipped and the thin legs amputated from the knee down. Raker held on as well, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“O-okay, here we go!” he announced to hide his embarrassment and vibrated the wings on his back.

To curb the depletion of his special-attack gauge, he stopped at the bare minimum–strength thrust. Furthermore, there weren't any other opponents to fight. The two avatars began a gentle ascent, leaving a hazy trail of silver light.

They flew through the silent world, watched over only by the countless stars. Perhaps it was just his imagination, but it seemed like the light from the sun shining above them, off to the left, was gentler than it had been before. Only their small shadow raced along the smoothly curving surface of Hermes' Cord.

For a while, neither of them said anything.

However, eventually, Fuko, her forehead buried in the right side of Haruyuki's chest, murmured, deep-red eye lenses half closed, "This sight…I've seen it for so long in my dreams…But at the same time, I've come to fear it somewhere in my heart…"

The infinitely rarified atmosphere still managed to bring about a bit of a breeze, ruffling her bluish-silver hair. She gently brushed away her fringe with the fingers of her right hand and continued.

"The other side of the sky was an impossible dream. And to make that dream come true, I sacrificed anything and everything. My fighting power…responsibility as the deputy head of Nega Nebulus…and Sacchi's friendship. I threw everything away, committed an enormous crime, and still my hand did not reach the sky…When I understood this…perhaps I was just a little relieved. With that, I was freed from the deep delusion that had moved me. All that was left for me was to sit secreted away at the top of a tower, forgotten by everyone, and gaze out at the changes in the Accelerated World."

A faint smile spread across her lips, and she closed her eyes. Her expression was perfectly calm, but Haruyuki saw in the corner of her eye a very tiny particle of light, glittering like a diamond—a tear welling up.

"My dream was too heavy for my shoulders. But even after I dropped it, unable to completely bear that weight, I could not entirely abandon it. This dream that I held in both hands like I was shielding the embers of a flame about to die out…When one day, a little crow appeared in my garden and took it over for me…You have no idea how happy I was…Now, here, I will say the *thank you* that I haven't been able to all this time. Thank you, Crow—no, Haruyuki."

Fuko opened her eyes and lightly caressed Haruyuki's cheek with an outstretched hand before abruptly declaring in a clipped tone, "You've gone to the trouble of holding me in your arms to carry me all this way, but…I don't have the right to visit the real other side of the sky at the finish line of this race. We'll switch places. I'll carry you as far as I can fly. From there, please head to the finish line yourself. This is my duty after giving up on my dream, and your right as the one who has always sought the sky, with so much more strength and so much more seriously than I did…Now, Corvus. Let me down here."

"No." At this instruction, Haruyuki shook his head in a gentle yet definite motion. "You're wrong, Raker."

"What…?"

"You haven't given up on your dream. The sky you aimed for is so much higher, much, much higher than mine. I'll prove it to you now. I…I came to this place now, to the top of Hermes' Cord, just to tell you this." Saying only that, Haruyuki suddenly flapped his wings with all his strength.

The ten fins on each side were wrapped in a dazzling white light. The high-pitched ring of resonance echoed in their ears, and an intense propulsive power enveloped them. The stars on either side became long lines and flowed by. But…

This full-power charge only lasted a few seconds.

The sound of his wings vibrating rapidly faded, and the light also disappeared. It wasn't that his gauge had been exhausted. Despite the fact that the fins were still fluttering fiercely, they were not generating any thrust. Finally, even their forward momentum vanished.

"My wings can't fly any farther than this," Haruyuki said to the woman in his arms once they stopped ascending, grinning as he did. "The air's too thin. My flying ability propels me forward through the vibration of those fins beating at the air. So this high up, I can wiggle them all I want, but I won't move forward. This game really does get a little too hung up on the details, doesn't it…"

Fuko opened her eyes wide and listened without saying anything. Staring at her beautiful rose-red eyes, Haruyuki finally turned into sound the words he had kept warm in his heart a long, long time, all this time.

“But…But your wings are Gale Thruster, a booster, a jet pack. In this world without air, even you…only you can fly. So why the booster…That’s because right from the start, you saw not the sky, but only something beyond that. Higher than the clouds, than the stratosphere, and higher still…You’ve been wanting the world of this star. You, this avatar…” Here, he closed his mouth for a moment, and after taking a deep breath beneath his helmet, Haruyuki told her in a shaky but clear voice, “You were born to fly in this world. Sky Raker, the one who looks out on the sky. You’ve always been a duel avatar meant to fight in space.”

This sentence spread out in the rarified atmosphere, melted, and disappeared.

Fuko opened her glittering red eyes even wider. But, saying nothing, she simply held tight to Haruyuki’s gaze with her own. Finally, she lightly shifted her head and looked down at her legs. Haruyuki moved his own gaze in the same direction.

A massive blue planet sprawled there, as if supporting the steel pillar soaring up endlessly—Hermes’ Cord.

The Earth. Illuminated by the sun from the right, it was colored with a beautiful gradation, moving from blue to indigo before sinking into black. Against this backdrop, snowy white clouds drew out complicated patterns, while the continents carved out complex edges around them.

Fuko raised her right hand lightly and pointed at the border between the right half of the lazy arc of the planet and the inky black of space.

Straining his eyes, Haruyuki saw a thin light blue veil there, wrapping up the Earth’s surface as if to protect it from the chill of space. Compared with the scale of the planet and space, this glittering was extremely modest.

“…That ephemeral sky-blue line…” Fuko’s whisper caressed Haruyuki’s consciousness like thought itself. “That’s all of it, the sky that I’ve aimed for, dreamt of, occasionally hated…and then given up on…”

This time, a large tear really did spill from her sunset eyes, falling to drift idly in empty space. Eventually, that drop of water was pulled down by the minuscule tug of gravity, to return to the blue oceans of the planet it came

from.



Fuko looked up at Haruyuki again, raised her left hand, wrapped both her arms around Silver Crow's neck, and squeezed tightly, fiercely. Words played in his ear, engraving themselves into his mind.

"Thank you, Corvus. It's so wonderful that I could come here…that I could see this sight. I finally understand it now: The reason my legs remain gone…is not because of my attachment, but rather my fear. I was afraid that if I knew the size of the sky…my dream would end. But there's no need for that to happen. Because…"

Unconsciously, Haruyuki also gave voice to the words that came next.

"This world is infinite."

Fuko laughed softly in his ear and abruptly planted her lips on the side of his helmet. Like this, she slid over to his mouth before pulling away slowly.

"Huh! Ah! Um!" Forcefully enough to ruin the whole moment, Haruyuki shook his head frantically, and Raker's smile changed into something playful.

"It was through your helmet, so I'm sure Sacchi will forgive it." Regaining her usual cool, she said firmly, "Really, thank you, Corvus. I'm…going now."

"Right!!" Nodding decisively, Haruyuki supported her body with both hands, letting it flow gently in space. Raker stretched out a finger to stroke his arm, touch his hand, and pull away. They nodded at each other wordlessly, and then the sky-blue avatar turned her face to the peak.

The blue rings coloring the top station of Hermes' Cord, now only a scant distance away, could be seen perfectly clearly now. Along with the artificial lights glittering faintly beyond it. There was no doubt that it was the station in geostationary orbit, floating off thirty-six thousand kilometers in the distance.

Fuko brought her slim hands down to her sides and lit a tiny flame in the jet opening of the streamlined Enhanced Armament attached to her back, Gale Thruster. Due to the almost total lack of gravity here, even with this hint of thrust, her avatar began to slowly ascend. Without looking back, Sky Raker gradually picked up speed. Growing distant. And more distant.

And then, Haruyuki was sure he saw it.

Particles of blue light collecting, condensing, and drawing out a beautiful line at the ends of Raker's legs, where they had been amputated. This surface, transparent like glass, gradually took on the same color as the main body of the avatar from the knees down. Modest calves, long and slender shins stretching out. Heels equipped with wedge lifts and pointed toes. All of this shone and sparkled in the sun.

"…Ah, ah…" A quiet voice escaped from Haruyuki's throat. At the same time, a hot liquid filled his eyes.

In the center of his vision, blurred, too, with the light of the stars, Sky Raker, now returned to her original form finally, after three years—no, after many times that in the Accelerated World—pierced the inky dark and flew forward. As if she were dancing, as if she were swimming, she soared endlessly upward, graceful in her acceleration.

Here, finally, the energy that had allowed Haruyuki to continue hovering against the pull of gravity was exhausted.

Fighting against the virtual gravity that tried to pull his avatar gently downward, Haruyuki reached his right hand out as far as he could. Between his outstretched fingers, the light of the thrusters became a large blue star, drawing out the shape of a cross.

11

“The previous Chrome Disaster’s…‘wire’…?”

The glass that was halfway to her mouth stopped moving abruptly, and Kuroyukihime repeated Haruyuki’s words, taken aback.

“Yeah…That’s all I can think of anymore…” Haruyuki nodded, almost hanging his head, after looking in turn at the equally speechless Fuko, Takumu, and Chiyuri.

Sunday, June 9, 12:15 PM. Not even ten minutes had passed since the five of them had all returned to the real world at slightly different times on the sofa set in the Arita living room.

Naturally, first off, they had all grabbed one another’s hands with delight at having overcome so many difficulties to so wonderfully win the Hermes’ Cord Race—although they did have to split the prize points three ways with the red and green teams. They had all praised one another’s fighting prowess and raised a toast with glasses of oolong tea.

However, after some chatter about their victory, inevitably, they were forced to address the elephant in the room: Silver Crow’s transformation into Chrome Disaster.

That said, none of them reproached him for having summoned the Armor. Kuroyukihime was the first to acknowledge that in that situation, if possible, she might have done the same herself. But there was one point at least that had to be clarified. And that was the mystery of how on earth the Armor had appeared, or rather, returned.

Five months earlier, Haruyuki, Takumu, and Kuroyukihime had accepted the Red King Scarlet Rain’s request and fought the fifth Chrome Disaster in the

Unlimited Neutral Field. As a result of the fierce battle, the Armor had finally been destroyed, and Cherry Rook, who had summoned it, was Judged by the hand of the Red King.

After it was all over, immediately before they returned to the real world through the leave point in Sunshine City in Ikebukuro, every one of them had then and there opened their own item storage and confirmed that the Armor of Catastrophe had not been transferred to them. And, of course, Haruyuki also had a vivid memory of seeing absolutely nothing in the open window.

So there should have been no way that Silver Crow could summon Chrome Disaster at this late date. However, in reality, Haruyuki had dispatched the formidable enemy Rust Jigsaw in an instant with the fearsome power of the Armor.

In trying to explain this seeming contradiction, Haruyuki miraculously remembered, in the middle of the conversation, a single insignificant event in the intense fighting in Ikebukuro, something he had paid absolutely no attention to before now.

“Ummm…I thought you’d remember, Kuroyukihime, since you fought the fifth Disaster yourself.” Clutching his glass of now–thoroughly lukewarm oolong tea, Haruyuki haltingly put his thoughts into words. “He had the ability to use those superfine hooked wires he shot out from his hands to pull opponents or objects toward him. Or the opposite: to affix the wires to some surface and pull himself along, like a fake flying ability. And you totally couldn’t see it coming…I had no other choice. To stop him from escaping through the portal, I deliberately caught that wire on my own back.”

As he spoke, Haruyuki remembered the shock and metallic *krnch* when the wire hit his back, and even the sensation of the cold, sharp hook.

“Once we were connected by the wire, I yanked Chrome Disaster up high and then finished him off with a dive kick. And I’m pretty sure that’s when Disaster’s main body was destroyed. The wire was cut in the impact. And one end of it somehow…stayed in my back? When I came back through the portal, I didn’t check what happened to it.”

Haruyuki clamped his mouth shut there, and Kuroyukihime murmured,

dumbfounded, “The previous Chrome Disaster’s…‘wire’…?”

“Yeah…That’s all I can think of anymore…” He hung his head, and Takumu’s voice crept into his ears, edged with the same shock.

“B-but, Haru…Is it even possible for some part to drop off one duel avatar and stick to another one, staying with you even after you burst out?”

“I-I’ve never heard of anything like that, either.” Chiyuri shook her head, scowling so hard, she nearly pulled her face into itself. “I used to end duels with a broken sword or lance or whatever stuck in me all the time, but they were all gone by the time I went into my next duel!”

“But…there’s no other explanation. A-and when I summoned Disaster before, the first thing was that long tail growing out of my back. And it grew basically from the same place where the hooked wire got me.”

And when the mysterious voice had spoken to him those many times over the last few months, he had always felt a throbbing in the same place on his back.

This thought alone he did not give voice to. It was just too terrifying. If that throbbing was indeed the wire Chrome Disaster had left behind, then that meant…wounds he got in the Accelerated World continued to have an impact on his flesh-and-blood body. No matter how he thought about it, that at least had to be impossible. It defied all logic.

The three childhood friends sank into silence, staring at one another, and it was Fuko, silent until that point, who opened her mouth hesitatingly.

“Actually…residual foreign objects straddling duels is a phenomenon that’s possible system-wise.”

“Huh?”

Three sets of eyes were turned on her abruptly. Raker met each in turn and explained. “In other words, an attack with a parasitic attribute. It’s exceedingly rare, but there have apparently been cases of obtaining this attribute, a power that goes beyond curse types. However, I only know of abilities that would allow you to parasitize small animal objects and steal their vision and voice, or to get into explosives and blow them up using some kind of trigger…”

Kuroyukihime picked up where she left off in a quiet voice. “An Enhanced Armament making part of itself a parasite to escape destruction…I’ve never heard of anything like it. But if what Haruyuki’s telling us is true, then that explains part of the Disaster legend.” The Black King set her glass down, clasped her fingers above crossed legs, and connected the dots. “With a probability of one hundred percent, the Armor of Catastrophe moves to the storage of the person who banished its owner. This rate is impossible under the normal rules for transfer of ownership, but those times when it can’t move as an item, it makes part of itself a parasite and lives on…Thinking about it like this, it’s not unconvincing.”

“R-right, that’s true.”

Parasite. A shiver running up his body at the disgusting images the word brought to mind, Haruyuki nodded. Something else popped into his mind then, and he hurried to ask, “B-but if the parasite is a system ability, there has to be a way to get rid of it, right?”

“Mmm, there is. A normal parasite attack will disappear after a length of time has passed, but it should also be possible to cancel it with a purification ability. However, the ability level has to be the same or higher…And a master who could purify a parasite that’s able to regenerate an entire body from the broken end of a wire…”

Here, Kuroyukihime and Fuko glanced at each other, their mouths stiffening in sync. Their faces soon returned to normal, however, and Kuroyukihime said in a clear tone, “All right, then. I’ll handle this. Give me a little time.”

“Thinking about it now…” Fuko opened her mouth next. “That time Corvus stayed at my house—”

Immediately, Kuroyukihime, Takumu, and Chiyuri all had the same question in reply. “Stayed?”

“This was in the Unlimited Neutral Field. When I stroked Corvus’s back there—”

“Stroked?”

“This was with our avatars. Honestly, you have to let me tell the story. That

time, I felt it, too, faintly. Something abnormal in one spot on his back. If we investigated that more closely—”

“C-come now, Raker! What do you propose when you say *investigate*?” Kuroyukihime’s right cheek twitched, and Fuko grinned.

“Well, that’s obviously a secret.”

At this exchange, the mood in the room finally lightened, and Haruyuki exhaled heavily. He lifted his face and announced in a firm voice, “Uh, I know I did give in to that temptation once here, but the Armor disappeared thanks to Chiyu’s power…and even if it’s still parasitizing me right now, all I have to do is not call it again. Of course, I want to be ‘purified’ sooner rather than later, but…”

“Mmm, that’s right. I believe in you. Naturally, you were assisted by Chiyuri’s ability, but at the same time, you yourself rejected the armor with your own will. And that’s something that none of the others the Armor took over was able to do,” Kuroyukihime said with a smile, before her face clouded intently in the next instant.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Kuroyukihime?”

“Mmm…It’s just…This might end up being not just our problem. Haruyuki, more than a hundred members of the Gallery watched from the stands as you summoned the Armor and fought Jigsaw, yes?”

“Y-yes…”

“In which case, regardless of the fact that it was only one battle, word that Silver Crow of Nega Nebulus is the owner of the sixth Chrome Disaster has likely already spread throughout the Accelerated World. From now on, we’ll likely have people expressing strong opinions coming forward.”

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘strong opinions’?” Chiyuri cocked her head to one side, and Takumu explained quietly.

“People saying Haru should be Judged or punished.”

“What?! Th-that’s crazy, though!! I mean, Haru didn’t even do anything wrong!!” Chiyuri shouted indignantly, and Fuko sitting next to her gave her a

gentle pat.

“Bell, all of us here believe that. But, well…in the Accelerated World, there are many forces that have a very hostile view of Nega Nebulus.”

“But, I mean, that’s just awful.” Chiyuri furrowed her brow tightly, as if saddened to her core.

Haruyuki flashed her his best smile, feeling something welling up in his heart. “It’s fine, Chiyu. I mean, we’ve been up against the Kings other than Promi up to now anyway. This now is basically just another log on the fire.”

“Mmm, that’s precisely it.” Kuroyukihime nodded firmly and stood up fluidly.

Smoothing the skirt of her school uniform, she moved over to the large southern window. She turned around and looked at each of her four subordinates in turn with glittering eyes before the Black King announced resolutely, “Most likely, in the coming days, a meeting of the Seven Kings will be called for the first time in two and a half years. The first item on the agenda should be countermeasures for the fact that efforts to keep the Incarnate System concealed have been utterly ruined by Rust Jigsaw and the Acceleration Research Society, but there is no doubt in my mind that the topic of Haruyuki’s transformation into Disaster will be brought up, likely by Radio, the Yellow King. But regardless of the demands they might make of me, I will protect you, Haruyuki. All-out war is what I seek, after all. Are there any objections to this policy?”

“None!” Fuko, Takumu, and Chiyuri sang immediately.

Haruyuki could only murmur in a trembling voice, “Thanks.”

I’m so glad I can be here now. And I’m definitely going to protect this place, these friends. I’ll protect them from any enemy, in the face of any adversity.

It was then as he etched these words into his heart. Chiyuri’s curious voice found its way into his ears.

“Anyway, Kuroyukihime. Why are you wearing your uniform when it’s Sunday?”

Gulp.

Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime froze.

“That’s,” Fuko said, the usual Fuko Smile popped onto her lips after she shot off a Raker Wink attack, “because Sacchi’s closet is crammed with nothing but uniforms.”

After that, they replenished their supplies of snacks and drinks at the shopping center on the ground floor and held a formal victory party. By the time they had laughed and chatted and all finished cleaning up together, the hands of the clock had rolled around to six PM.

Takumu and Chiyuri, with their early curfews, were the first to head home, and a few minutes later, Kuroyukihime, with Fuko in tow, turned toward the entryway.

“Sacchi,” Fuko said in a quiet voice, just as Kuroyukihime was bending down to put on her shoes.

“Mmm?” She stretched out and looked back, black hair swinging. “What is it, Fuko?”

Fuko took a step forward from Haruyuki’s side, who had come to see them off, and clasped her hands in front of her, as though she were looking for the right words.

After a moment, she began to speak hesitantly, in a tone with an unusually childish edge to it, almost as though they had gone back to being elementary school students. “Um…Um. At first, I was thinking I’d stay quiet until the next duel and then I’d surprise you, but…then I figured I should really tell you right away, so…” She took a deep breath.

The girl who had spent such a long time as the recluse of the Accelerated World lovingly enunciated each of the words that announced the end of those days.

“Um. My legs came back.”

Obsidian eyes jumped up. From between slightly parted lips, a short breath slipped out. This surprise transformed into an expression that was half sob, half smile.

“I see,” Kuroyukihime murmured and nodded. “I see…So you found it again. What you lost that day.”

“Mm-hmm.” Dipping her head lightly, Fuko took a step, then another, toward Kuroyukihime. She stretched out her arms, pulled her frozen friend toward her, and hugged her gently.

Unlike the time they had hugged at Shinjuku Southern Terrace two months earlier, the pair said nothing more than this. They simply, silently, warmly, held each other. Haruyuki felt that they were no doubt having a deeper spiritual exchange than even connecting their Neurolinkers directly with a cable. He could hear the glass wall that had been separating them break and crumble away.

Finally, Kuroyukihime slowly raised her head, looked straight at Haruyuki with damp eyes, and smiled. “The size of this miracle you have brought about…I can’t even begin to express it in words. Thank you, Haruyuki.”

Fuko looked back and grinned broadly, trails of tears glistening on her cheeks. “Corvus. You found the road to Hermes’ Cord, you invited me, and then you took me to the other side of the sky…I will never forget this.”

At their words, Haruyuki pulled into himself and shook his head fiercely. “No. I mean, I…It was just this thought that popped into my head…It was everyone in the Legion and Ash and Pard, too, who made it actually happen,” he mumbled in a voice that was hard even for him to hear as he tried to sink into the wall behind him. *Gah, I’m ruining everything.*

Kuroyukihime and Fuko exchanged looks and grinned at the same time before suddenly walking toward him.

“Huh? Uh, um!”

He looked up at each of their faces in turn and tested his wall-walking skills again, but before he could succeed in that endeavor, Kuroyukihime’s right arm and Fuko’s left snaked out to wrap around him from both sides—

He had no memory of anything after that.

AFTERWORD

Reki Kawahara here. Thank you for picking up *Accel World 5: The Floating Starlight Bridge*.

First off, I have a confession. At the beginning of book three, I noted that there already existed a space elevator in the setting of *Accel World*, but my apologies! At that time, I hadn't done any kind of technical investigation into this. I simply wrote it because I got carried away with the vague idea that of course they would have space elevators at least in 2047, but then I thought that I should get around to making that the setting for this volume, and when I belatedly checked it out…I was fairly stunned and sort of stuck…

In fact, the so-called space elevator still hasn't left the realm of a thought experiment, and it definitely doesn't look like it will become a reality in the next thirty or so years. The details for this are explained by Kuroyukihime in the novel, so I'll omit them here, but I'll say that I did retort "An asteroid for a counterweight!" to the NASA person and grew quite pale.

Fortunately, there are some researchers who have put forth somewhat more practical ideas, and Hermes' Cord appearing in this volume is modeled on those. However, there is also apparently a huge problem with the hypersonic skyhook I used as a model…but what the problem is is not written in the book. So I'm going to act like I didn't notice it.

At any rate, this was a valuable lesson in "when you write about something, first check it out!" In the next book, a fairly young new character will probably show up, so I'm going to work hard, check into a bunch of things, and discuss with my esteemed friend A-yama-sensei.

I'm writing this afterword on April 10, that is, the deadline for the

seventeenth Dengeki Prize. Which means a full two years have passed since I brought the envelope (well, it was actually an ExPack) with the first *Accel World* manuscript in it to the post office.

To be honest, at the time I submitted it, I thought if I won some kind of prize, that would be the finish line. I never thought that it would actually be a new starting point and that I would keep churning out manuscripts after that…Of course, I am super, super luckyyyyyy to be able to write these, but I can't help but be sort of baffled sometimes. Exactly where is the finish line on this Thunder Road?

And to my editor, Miki, who has been so kind as to guide little lost me with the deepest patience; my illustrator, HIMA, whom I am always messing with with my many troublesome requests; the manga artist Tatsuya Kurusu, who was kind enough to take on the design of the new avatars; and to you for sticking with me this far, giga thank you!!

Reki Kawahara

April 10, 2010

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