REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY

HIMA



ACCEL·WORLD

10

ELEMENTS

ACCEL WORLD 10 ELEMENTS

REKI KAWAHARA
ILLUSTRATION BY HIMA
DESIGN BY bee-pee




"Hire the bouncer. Until your points are back in the safe range again."
"B-bouncer?!"
TAKUMU
Haruyuki's good friend.
Member of the new Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Cyan Pile.
HARUYUKI
Boy in the lowest school caste. Member of the new Nega Nebulus, led by Kuroyukihime.
Duel avatar: Silver Crow.

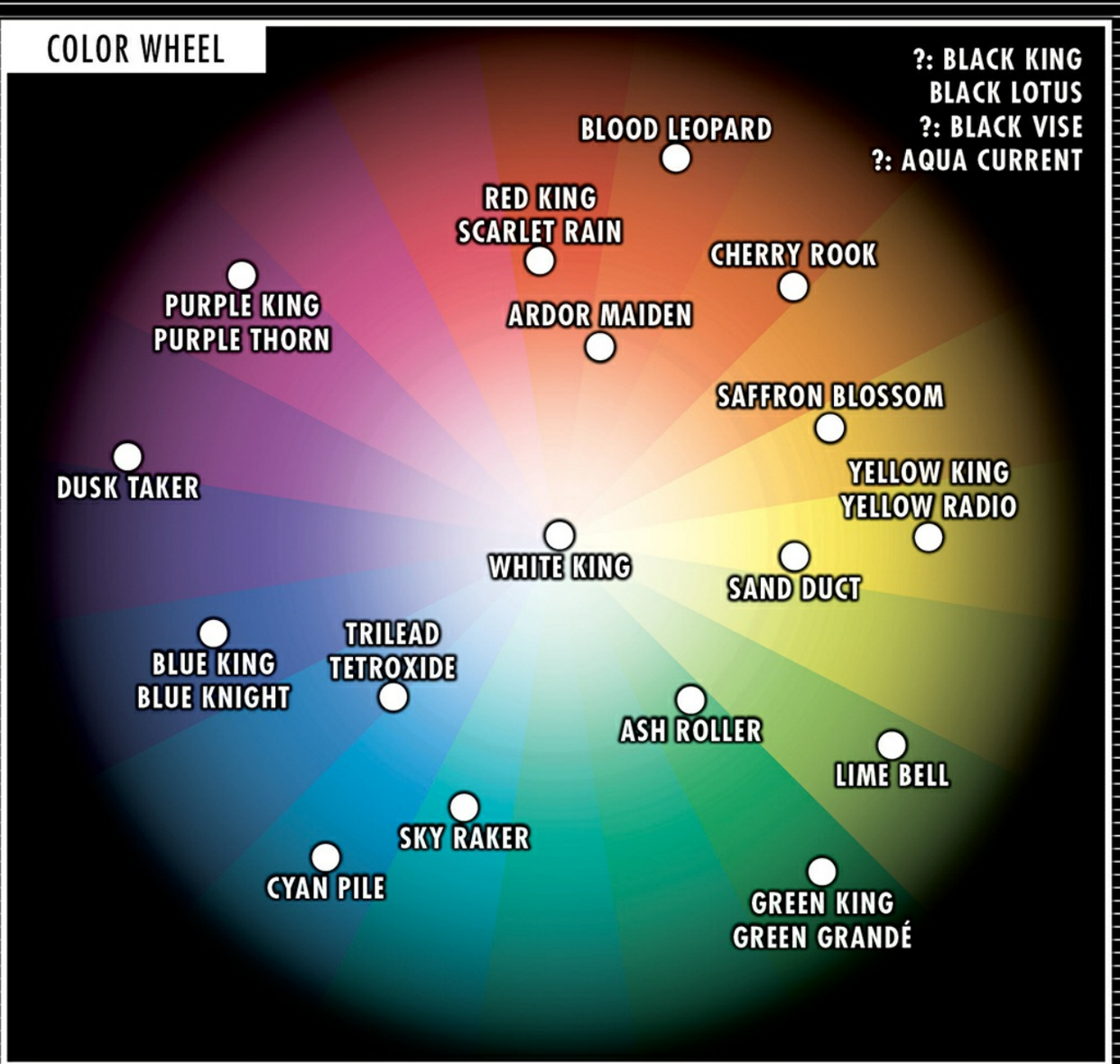

"Ngh...ngh..."
?????
Someone Haruyuki runs into at a café.
Thin with glasses. Haruyuki can't tell if they're
a boy or girl, but either way, this person has a
special air of mystery.

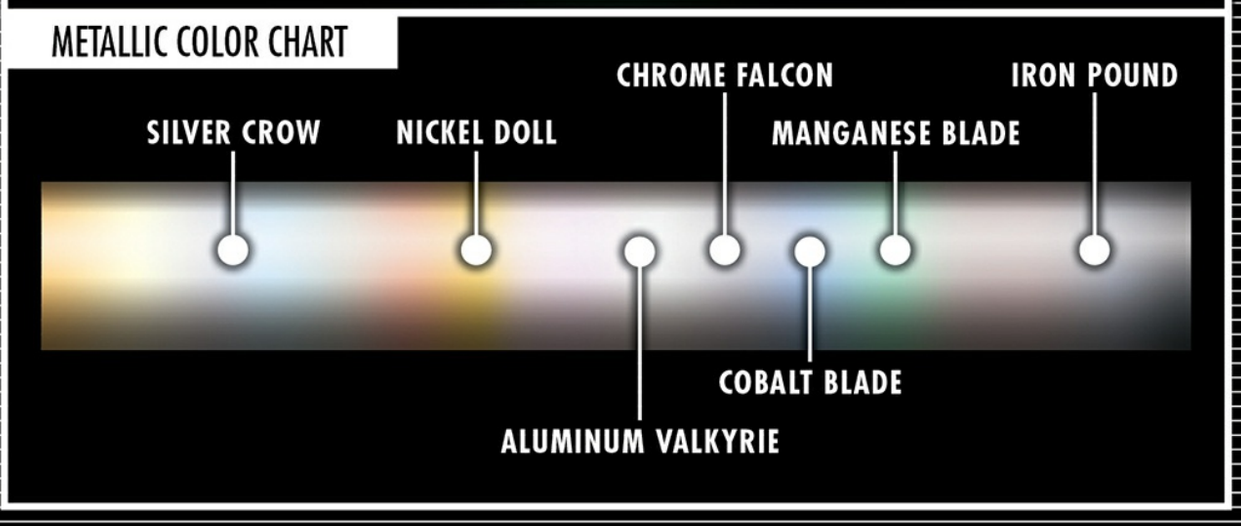

"M-M-M-Megumi! Wh-wh-what are you doing all of a sudden?!"
"It's just—I called you a bunch, Hime, but you didn't even notice me."
KUROYUKIHIME
Vice president of the Umesato Junior High student council. Controls the "Black King," Black Lotus.
MEGUMI WAKAMIYA
A member of the student council with Kuroyukihime. She is the secretary.


"Ah! W-wait, Ruka!"
"Furah. [Idiot.] Wahji de macho-keyo. [Wait up there.]"
CORAL MERROW
Duel avatar teamed up with Lagoon Dolphin.
LAGOON DOLPHIN
Okinawa-based Burst Linker who challenges Kuroyukihime to a duel.


"Hey, you... Silver Crow!"
KIRITO
Mysterious swordmaster avatar who appears out of nowhere on the local in-school net.
"Who are you?! How on earth did you connect to the Umesato local net?!"

DUEL AVATAR AFFINITIES IN BRAIN BURST





The English names given to Burst Linkers always include a word associated with color. Blues indicate close-range direct attacks; reds, long-distance direct attacks; and yellows, intermediate attacks. Mid-range colors such as purple and green signify affinities that straddle two different types of attack. Meanwhile, the avatars connected to metals exhibit superior defense abilities instead of offensive power.

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ELEMENTS

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



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New York

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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 School. 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).
■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances, but is persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefront. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).
■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ 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.
■ 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 than 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.
■ Armor of Catastrophe = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.
■ Star Caster = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.
■ ISS kit = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to make use of the Incarnate System. While using it, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.
■ Seven Arcs = The seven strongest Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World. They are the greatsword Impulse, the staff Tempest, the large shield Strife, the Luminary (form unknown), the straight sword Infinity, the full-body armor Destiny, and the Fluctuating Light (form unknown).

ACCEL・WORLD

ELEMENTS

THE SOUND OF WATER ON A DISTANT DAY

1

YOU WIN!

Haruyuki Arita held his breath and stared at the flaming letters that popped up in his field of view, followed by a display of burst points being added to his total.

It was a two-against-two tag team match, but since the total value of the player levels on each team was equal, he earned only the basic ten points. With the delightful metallic sound echoing through his ears—a sound that never failed to please him no matter how many times he heard it—he watched the number indicating his current total points climb. From 298 to 308, up it went.

Below this appeared a system message he had never seen before: YOU CAN NOW LEVEL UP.

“All…right!” Haruyuki thrust the arm of his avatar, Silver Crow, up into the air and unconsciously struck a victory pose.

Although they seemed somewhat irritated, the level-two and level-three players of the opposing team offered their congratulations.

“Hey, congrats!”

“Think carefully before you choose your level-up bonus!”

Haruyuki hurriedly bowed his head several times in their direction as the pair burst out together. The members of the Gallery occupying the surrounding buildings’ rooftops also clapped and shouted their congratulations before disappearing one after the other.

In the end, only his tag-team partner remained, level-four Cyan Pile, clad in blue heavy armor with his piercing-type Enhanced Armament. He, too, nodded his head deeply. “Congratulations, Haru. You’ve really fought hard these past

two weeks.”

“…Thanks, Taku.” This was the best he could do with his impoverished linguistic abilities, despite his desire to truly communicate all the feelings welling up in his heart. He repeated the sentiment in a louder voice: “Seriously, thanks.”

Over the past two weeks, Cyan Pile (aka Takumu Mayuzumi) had assisted Haruyuki with anything and everything in a way that was impossible to quantify. Duel avatars’ color characteristics and the attributes of duel fields, with strategies to handle each…places and times where duels were plenty, alongside the local rules and customs of each area…and he didn’t stop at sharing this sort of Brain Burst information, either: He even helped Haruyuki with real-world homework and school reports.

Even if Haruyuki—Silver Crow—was the first complete flying-type duel avatar to appear in the seven-hundred-year history of the Accelerated World, without Takumu’s kind assistance, he could never have saved up three hundred points in this short a period of time. In fact, without Takumu, he could easily have been attacked right out of the gate and lost all his points.

And that was because his parent Burst Linker, the one who would normally be giving him this kind of instruction, was currently in the hospital. Not only could she not duel, she couldn’t even connect to the net except for the briefest instant each day. This was only natural, given that patients in HCU were monitored at all hours. Haruyuki wanted her to avoid full dives and just rest quietly, but she grumbled and complained about it every day when she called him.

At any rate, given the situation, seeking instruction from his “parent,” Kuroyukihime—the Black King, Black Lotus—and meeting her in the Accelerated World was naturally impossible. She was supposed to be transferred to a general ward the following week, but she likely still wouldn’t be up to dueling for a while after that, either. Which was why Takumu withdrew from the Blue Legion, Leonids, transferred to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus, and took on the temporary role of instructor. Haruyuki couldn’t begin to express his gratitude, but he tried desperately to cram all his feelings on the matter into those two words.

Takumu laughed from beneath his edged face mask. “Okay, but seriously, this level of thing doesn’t even erase a single sliver of my crimes.”

“…Taku…”

Takumu averted his eyes from the mumbling Haruyuki and looked up at the full moon of the Ancient Castle stage. “And, like, Haru, if I hadn’t attacked Master—the Black King—all those times in such cowardly ways, I’m sure we wouldn’t have ended up like this. So it’s my responsibility, my duty, to help you on behalf of the king.”

It was true. Haruyuki definitely couldn’t say that Takumu had used honest means to continually challenge Kuroyukihime to duels within the Umesato Junior High local net after summer vacation had ended. He had set up a backdoor program in the Neurolinker of Chiyuri Kurashima, their childhood friend, and used that as a stepping-stone to one-sidedly challenge Kuroyukihime.

Having realized the trick, Haruyuki had fought Takumu to protect Kuroyukihime, in the hospital she had been taken to, while she was in a coma after sustaining serious injuries. In the ferocious battle, they had clashed with all the emotion and power they could muster, and at the end of it, Haruyuki awoke as a flying avatar and destroyed Takumu. But rather than striking the final blow, he forgave his friend.

In the end, Takumu hadn’t been able to steal a single point from Kuroyukihime. Her being in the hospital and Takumu’s attacks, directly or indirectly—

“Th-they’re not connected, Taku!” Haruyuki shouted, waving both hands earnestly. “Kuroyukihime was so seriously hurt because I was an idiot from start to finish! A-and think about it: If you hadn’t kept challenging her, she’d still be hiding in the local net. And she wouldn’t have tried to make a child or anything. So I wouldn’t have become a Burst Linker, right? So then, if we trace it back to the beginning, it’s also thanks to you that I’m here fighting in the Accelerated World right now.”

It was a little too heavy-handed to say that one followed from the other, but even so, Takumu’s shoulders relaxed just the tiniest bit as he stared up at the

pale moon. “Ha. Ha-ha! You never change, do you, Haru? Not a bit, not since elementary school.”

Haruyuki cocked his head questioningly. “So, I can take that as a compliment… right?”

“Ha-ha! Of course.” Takumu laughed briefly, shoulders shaking, and this time turned away completely. Haruyuki muttered “Thanks” once more to that broad back, so like Takumu’s in the real world, and checked the timer in the top center of his field of view.

They had settled the tag-team match unexpectedly fast, so the timer still had nearly two hundred seconds of the original 1,800. And once a duel was over, players had to use an extra burst point to play around with the Brain Burst menu. He still had three minutes left; that ought to be plenty.

This decided, Haruyuki reached a hand toward his own health gauge and opened the main menu—nicknamed “Instruct.” This strange name came from the fact that in the very distant past, the manual embedded at the top of the control panel of the large game cabinets at amusement shops (apparently known as “video game arcades” then) were called “instruction cards.”

With a light effect and sound, a holowindow, designed much like those found in commercial VRMMO-RPGs, opened in the center of his view. In the initial settings, a simplified silhouette of his duel avatar was displayed. If he touched a button on the same screen, that silhouette would move and teach him the motions for his normal and special attacks. But he only got depressed watching Silver Crow’s attacks, so he ignored it.

At the top was a row of tabs for moving to STORAGE or POINTS screens. He didn’t have a single item, so he ignored that tab, too, and moved to the POINTS screen.

As soon as he touched it, the number 308 was displayed in large type at the top center of the window. This, of course, was the number of points he currently possessed. No matter how many times he looked at it, the corners of his mouth curled up beneath his helmet. It made him even happier than the first time he’d saved up ten thousand yen in the real world—because he had literally earned these points with his own hands and feet (and sometimes wings).

I wonder if Kuroyukihime will be happy for me when I tell her I made it to level two…But nah, she'll definitely look at me calmly and say something like, "You're still a little chick."

As he thought about this, Haruyuki touched the button to use his points, and on the menu that appeared, he pressed the LEVEL UP button glittering brightly at the very top. An English confirmation dialog opened to ask if he was sure he wanted to use three hundred points and advance to level two. He thought this was strange, given how curt the basic user interface normally was in Brain Burst, but still Haruyuki stretched a finger toward the YES button.

Instantly, Cyan Pile, who had his head tilted back at the night sky a little ways off, whirled around, as if sensing his action. He caught sight of Haruyuki's gesture, a shudder raced through his entire body, and then he took a hasty step forward. "H-Haru!" he shouted. "You can't! Stop!!"

But by the time the desperate cry reached his ears, Haruyuki's finger was already pressing up against the three letters of YES.

The cool, thrilling melody of the level-up fanfare filled his ears. In the center of his field of view, a message announced that he had gone up to level two. And then finally, the total burst points he possessed changed from 308 to eight.

2

Only after Haruyuki woke up after the thirty minutes of duel time did he realize the mistake he had made. As he lay in a daze on the recliner, in the reading booth at the Shinjuku Tsunohazu Library he had used for the dive, the door of the booth was opened from the outside, and a hand darted in to yank his aluminum silver Neurolinker off his neck. The virtual desktop displayed in his field of view vanished immediately.

Forcibly removing someone else's Neurolinker was clearly a crime if done by a stranger, and even between the best of friends, it was the ultimate violation of manners. However, leaning forward into Haruyuki's booth, Takumu Mayuzumi had no choice but to do so at that moment, and with good reason. Haruyuki understood that reason so well it hurt.

He had only eight burst points now. If someone challenged him and he was defeated, the moment he lost those ten points, it would be total point loss, and Brain Burst would do a forced uninstall.

Having finally acknowledged this fact, Haruyuki opened his stunned eyes and simply stared up at Takumu in his blue-gray school uniform, its pert stand-up collar still intact.

His friend's lips trembled, and a hoarse voice escaped his throat. "I can't believe it…Sorry, I'm sorry, Haru. I can't believe I forgot to tell you the most important thing…Even if you get enough points to level up, you shouldn't do it right away. I'm supposed to be your teacher…Even if I forgot everything else, this is the one thing that I absolutely had to remember to tell you…"

Right. Rather than being a phenomenon that happened automatically once a set number of experience points was reached, as in other games, leveling up in the game Brain Burst was paid for with the points a player had earned. The

number of points required to go from level one to level two was three hundred. So if you selected the level-up operation with 308 points, you would obviously end up with only eight points left. Which was precisely why you couldn't level up right away. Players needed to ensure a margin within the safe zone after spending those points. That was an absolute requirement for leveling up itself.

Haruyuki looked up at his friend, who was biting his lip. "Taku," he said in a similarly hoarse voice. "I was an idiot. It's obvious, if only I'd thought about it for a second. Just getting to three hundred points, I was so excited. God, I'm an idiot."

Belatedly, he was keenly aware of the fact that his own life as a Burst Linker was now a flame in the face of a strong wind. In the two weeks since Kuroyukihime had given him the program, the lowest his points had been was seventy. And now they were at eight. If Takumu hadn't forcibly removed his Neurolinker and he had been challenged by someone immediately after the previous duel and lost, Haruyuki would have already lost Brain Burst.

The hands gripping the arm rests of the mesh chair trembled. *What am I going to do? What should I do?* These words alone chased around in his brain. The world was different now. He had thought that she had changed his world for him, that from now on, he himself would be able to change, bit by bit. He had finally, *almost* believed that, and now…

"Haru." A hand abruptly grabbed hold of Haruyuki's. Takumu leaned in through the sliding door on the side of the small reading booth, his normally cool eyes glittering with fire. "It's okay, Haru. It's not over yet. There's still a way to come back from this. First, let's go to your place."

"…Taku…"

After the battle at the hospital two weeks earlier, Takumu had left the Blue Legion and come to be Haruyuki's teacher, but he hadn't once visited Haruyuki's apartment like he always used to. Although Haruyuki had invited him any number of times, Takumu just shook his head, a smile on his face. Almost like he was saying he didn't have the right to say yes.

However, now, at the sudden turn into this state of emergency, all signs of that hesitation appeared to have vanished from Takumu's head.

“Y-yeah. Let’s go. We can’t really talk here, after all.” Bobbing his head up and down, he grabbed his school regulation bag from the hook on the wall as he stood up.

The Tsunohazu Library, which they used for duels after school, was an enormous facility with more than two hundred seats in the electronic document reading booths alone, where full dives were possible. After school, students from the neighboring elementary, junior high, and high schools all crowded in, so there was no danger of being outed in the real just from your appearance position in the duel field, making it a convenient place for them. But obviously, having a discussion about Brain Burst in their real voices was simply too reckless. And he hesitated a little at directing with Takumu in a place where there were so many people their age all around them.

It’s not that I care what anyone thinks of me or whatever, but Taku stands out. And if his friends from school saw him and they started some weird rumor, it would be embarrassing for him and all.

These thoughts rolling through his mind, Haruyuki chased after his more fleet-footed friend walking ahead of him, and the cold sweat on his back felt like it was finally dry. Even if he did only have eight points left, as long as Takumu said it was okay, then things would work out somehow. Repeating this to himself, Haruyuki slipped through the automatic doors and took a deep lungful of the slightly chilly November air outside.

They took a bus from Tochomae down the Oume Highway to their condo building in northern Koenji (in Suginami Ward), and by the time they were passing through the security gates that stood before the residential elevators, the sky had gotten quite dark.

Haruyuki had had his Neurolinker off the whole time, with Takumu even paying his bus fare for him, so he didn’t know the exact time. Of course, if he simply cut off the global connection before he put his Neurolinker on, he wouldn’t risk being challenged by other Burst Linkers. But when he thought about the worst-case scenario, he couldn’t muster up anywhere near enough courage to set the device on his neck again.

Normally, Takumu went home to the A wing on the other side, so it was the

first time in years they had ridden the elevator together. They got off on the twenty-third floor of B wing, and Haruyuki unlocked the door to his deserted apartment with the emergency fingerprint and retina confirmation built into the intercom.

“Thanks for having me over,” Takumu said as he stepped up into the apartment after Haruyuki, and then he smiled just a little, as though he had only finally realized that he was visiting the Arita house for the first time in a while. “This takes me back. It’s been a year and a half or so, I guess.”

“Huh? Has it been that long already?” Haruyuki’s hand stopped, slippers half pulled out, and he followed his own memories back. The last time Takumu had been to his house—or more precisely, when he *stopped coming over*—had been not long after he had started going out with Chiyuri, so that would have been in the spring of sixth grade. It was the fall of seventh grade now, so a year and a half had indeed passed.

“We still have these slippers, though,” Haruyuki jested as he set the pale yellow slippers that were a little too small now in front of Takumu’s feet. On the top of each slipper, the cute face of an elephant was embroidered in green thread. Although he normally didn’t bother with them, Haruyuki got out his own matching set. Embroidered on them were blue bears. Still on the rack were the pink rabbit slippers for Chiyuri, although those hadn’t been used for a year and a half, either.

The slippers were from Christmas in fourth grade, when the three of them had bought three identical sets of slippers each and then given them to each other as presents. So it wasn’t just at Haruyuki’s house; a slipper squad of green elephants, blue bears, and pink rabbits were also at the ready at Chiyuri’s and Takumu’s.

They had confirmed that the Kurashima squad was in good health two weeks earlier when they went over to apologize for the backdoor program incident. Takumu smiled again at Haruyuki’s words, and then, gracious as ever, pushed his feet into the tight-fitting slippers.

“My mom just went and threw out the ones at my house without even asking. That was probably the last time I cried in front of my parents.”

“She did? Then how about we go buy this slipper set again for Christmas this year?” Haruyuki said with a straight face.

“Ha-ha!” Takumu briefly laughed out loud. “Size-wise, we’d have some trouble with these, you know. If we’re going to match, how about mugs or something?”

“Ooh, Professor Mayuzumi, you do always say the stylish thing.”

Takumu slapped him on the back at this, and he made a show of stumbling exaggeratedly as he opened the door to his bedroom.

Haruyuki’s room was ten square meters, facing the southern balcony. The room had been used as a study by his father, who left ages ago after his parents got divorced, and the eastern wall was a built-in bookshelf, rarely seen these days. His father had kept his collection of last-century hardcover books there, but Haruyuki didn’t have a single such volume, of course.

What occupied the expensive natural wood shelves instead was old gaming hardware from before full dives were practical and game packages full of the optical discs and memory cards for use with these various consoles. Since he had snuck in among these some games that were rated Z at the time—meaning they had an excess of gore or skin or both—he definitely could never let Chiyuri or Kuroyukihime into this room. Chiyuri was one thing, but no matter how he looked at it, there was never going to be a situation in which Kuroyukihime would need to visit the Arita house.

Takumu approached the shelves with a fond look and traced out the spines of the game packages one by one with a fingertip. “On rainy days when we couldn’t play outside, we used to totally lose ourselves in these games, huh? Like this racing game…Oh! And this fighting game. Even though you were the best at pretty much all of them, for some reason, Chii was a total monster in this one. Even two against one, we could never manage to beat her.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. If she became a Burst Linker, she’d probably be super strong or something.”

The pair looked at each other and grinned, as if to say, *That’ll never happen*.

Naturally, three or four years earlier, back when they all had played together

every day, visual field projection or full dives using the Neurolinker were the norm when it came to games. But the content rating standards for things like anime, comics, and games had grown increasingly strict over the years, so that the new games elementary school kids were allowed to play were, almost without exception, educational or puzzle types, or maybe, if they were lucky, pastoral graphic adventures. Even if a child asked an adult to buy a game card for them, the game wouldn't load onto a child's Neurolinker.

Faced with this, Haruyuki took over his father's account, still open on the Arita home server—although the money was his own, saved up by making the most of what his mother gave him to buy lunch—and the older-generation games he bought and collected through mail order had wonderful specifications: Crashes and explosions were par for the course in racing games; in a fighter, you could punch, you could kick, you had laser beams; and when it came to RPGs, you slaughtered innocent creatures and divested them of their money and items. Even if the screen was 2-D, even if his fingers on the controller started to hurt, it didn't take much thought to see which was more fun—these old games, or the modern ones for kids.

Naturally, now that he was in junior high, he could play any number of Neurolinker games rated twelve and up where you could shoot and slash. He had actually vented the stress of school in brutal FPSs or thrilling racing games until two or so weeks earlier. But the launch icons for those games were gone from his virtual desktop now. He'd gotten a taste of the ultimate fighting game, a game that used another reality as its setting. And now that he had experienced the overwhelming amount of information of that world, the tactics of the almost painful battles, he could never go back. He had absolutely no desire to go back.

His thoughts finally caught up to his current critical situation, and Haruyuki sat heavily on the edge of his bed, heaving a sigh.

Noticing his dejection, Takumu turned his back to the bookshelves and walked over. He set his bag down and gracefully sat next to Haruyuki.

"Taku," Haruyuki said, ever so timidly, glancing at his friend's face in profile, "before, you said there was still a way to recover from this. Is there really a way other than fighting for my life in duels? I mean, I only have eight points left."

“Yeah, you’ll be fine. I’m not going to let you lose all your points.” Nodding deeply, Takumu asked, rather unexpectedly, “Haru, you have an XSB cable for directing, right?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah.” He nodded and pulled out a bundled silver cord from the drawer in the desk to his left.

Takumu accepted the two-meter-long cable, and as he inserted one end into his own blue Neurolinker, he said something even more surprising: “Right now, in a direct duel, I’m going to transfer half my reserve points to you. With this, you’ll at least be out of immediate danger. And then we’ll choose the time and place, fight each duel like our lives are on the line, and win some matches. We’ll get enough points to somehow get back into the safe zone.”

Unconsciously, Haruyuki held his breath. With a direct duel, there wasn’t the restriction of challenging the same opponent only once a day. So the idea was that if they dueled over and over, they could transfer as many points as they wanted. It was such a simple and immediately effective strategy to evade the crisis.

Haruyuki sat dumbfounded, and Takumu pushed the other end of the cable into his hand. “C’mon, Haru.”

Urged on by his friend, Haruyuki moved to insert the plug into the direct terminal on his Neurolinker. Immediately before he did, however, his hand froze.

Takumu, sitting only half a meter or so away, twisted up his face slightly, and then a smile like he was enduring something painful spread across his face. “Oh. Of course, this method assumes you can trust me. If I caught you off guard and defeated you, in that instance, you’d lose Brain Burst—”

“N-no. That’s not it. That’s not it at all, Taku.” Unconsciously, Haruyuki grabbed hold of Takumu’s shoulder. Beneath the fabric of his school uniform, Haruyuki could feel the strong muscles tensing as he continued earnestly, “I didn’t even think for a second that you would betray me. It’s not that; it’s the opposite. I just…I’m not sure if even I have the right to ask you to do something like this.”

“Wh-what are you even saying, Haru?!” Instantly, Takumu had turned his

whole body to face him, and he reached out to grab Haruyuki's shoulder. A single-minded determination came over his intellectual face. "Now isn't the time to be worrying about something like that! The next time you lose to an opponent at the same level as you and have those ten points taken from you, you'll end up having a forced uninstall of Brain Burst! And it'll be because I forgot to tell you something important! Which is why it's only natural for me to share my points with you right now."

"But you still don't really have the points to spare!" Haruyuki shouted back, with a force that, if seen from the outside, would resemble nothing other than a fight.

The original reason that Takumu had been relying on a cheat tool like a backdoor program was because he had overused acceleration and backed himself into a corner points-wise. He had recovered to some degree from this unstable position through the tag-team matches with Haruyuki over the previous two weeks, but even so, he had probably only just barely gotten back into the safe zone himself. If he handed over half his points to Haruyuki now, there was no doubt that he'd drop back down to the danger level once more.

But Takumu shot back in a tone that brooked no argument, "You don't need to worry about that. Once you have a little wiggle room, you can just give them back in a direct duel again. This is simply an emergency remedy. And have you thought about what an enormous shock it would be for Master in the hospital if you were to lose everything now?"

"…That's…"

It was true. It was just like Takumu said: Kuroyukihime, aka "Master," had been seriously injured two weeks earlier and was now undergoing micromachine treatment in the HCU. She looked forward every day to the growth of her "child," Haruyuki. If she learned that he had lost all his points immediately after going up to level two, her condition might even worsen from the shock of it.

"You said it yourself, didn't you, Haru?!" Takumu leaned forward and continued in an even more urgent tone. "Once you're level two, we'd announce that Suginami, a blank space all this time, was going to be the territory of Nega

Nebulus! You're the one who said that even after Master was out of the hospital, we'd make it so that she could connect to the global net safely!"

"Ngh!" Haruyuki clenched his teeth as he debated which course of action to take.

Finally, his voice slipped brokenly through trembling lips. "Taku. But…but, like — Brain Burst might have a 'draw' command, but there's no 'resign' command. So if we want to make one of us win, we'll either have to hit each other and then wait for thirty minutes to pass, or just keep up a one-sided attack until your HP gauge runs out. Or inflict mortal blows on our own selves. That…I don't want to do that."

"It's okay." Takumu loosened his grip on Haruyuki's shoulder and smiled slightly. "I'm not worried about that at all. It's to help a comrade—a friend. It's no big deal to take a blow in the Normal Duel Field. So come on—put the plug in, Haru."

There was nothing but simple compassion in Takumu's face and voice, which was exactly why Haruyuki couldn't reach out for the XSB cable on his knees.

Even now, two weeks after they had become comrades in the same Legion, Haruyuki could see Takumu's own desire to punish himself in everything he said. And given what his friend had done, it was no small wonder. But in the final battle at the hospital, he had gotten out all the feelings that had been building up in the depths of his heart all these years and exchanged blows with Haruyuki with all his might. After the fight, he had apologized to Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime, and left the Blue Legion. Takumu's crimes had been washed away now. Haruyuki believed that.

That was exactly why he couldn't cling to Takumu now. He and Takumu had to be forever equal friends and comrades. At the end of their battle, Haruyuki had been the one to declare that. If he let himself be babied now by Takumu's kindness only to drag his friend down with him into the danger zone, his own words would be a lie. And more than that, Haruyuki's gamer spirit simply would not allow a unilateral attack on an unresisting friend to accept—no, take—his points, whatever the circumstances.

"But…Kuroyukihime. I mean, the Black King, Black Lotus, like…" Haruyuki

stared into Takumu's light-colored eyes. "She saved me from the out-of-control car by using the 'physical full burst' command. Her points balance must be pretty precarious, too. But she never once told me to share my points with her. And even if I had said we should, I know she would've gotten super angry. When it comes to level, strength, or experience, I can't even begin to compare to her. But at least as a Burst Linker, I want to live like her."

Takumu said nothing for a few seconds. Then, finally, a smile stretched across his pale face, as if accepting surrender. "As always, you're so stubborn once you've decided something, Haru."

His grip on Haruyuki's shoulder slackening, he pulled his hand away and patted his friend's shoulder. Takumu pulled the plug from his own Neurolinker, and as he bundled the cord back up, he resumed his cool expression.

"It's true that even if I did transfer just the barest minimum of points, it wouldn't resolve the basic problem. The issue is that when your point balance is in danger, the pressure calls up an unconscious panic. If you panic, your field of view in duels gets narrower. Panic takes away your ability to deal with the situation. Before, I said we'll fight each and every duel like our lives were on the line, but that's really incredibly hard to do. The desire to win is important, but it's sort of a false friend to the desire not to lose your points. Like, honestly? When my point balance hit a hundred at the beginning of the fall, my average duel win rate was at thirty percent."

"Yeah, I get what you're saying. Even if I did take a huge gamble and duel right now, I have faith that I wouldn't be able to really move properly and I'd lose."

"That's a weird kind of faith." Takumu smiled wryly, and then his face grew serious again. "As for how to get out of this mess, there's only one other way."

"What?! There's still another way?!" Haruyuki's eyes flew open.

Takumu hesitated a moment before responding in a quiet voice, "Yeah. It's fairly risky. And there's a greater-than-zero possibility of having more than your points taken. But it's the only other thing I can think of."

Haruyuki continued to hold his breath. Takumu looked at him and uttered something entirely unexpected.

“Hire the bouncer. Until your points are back in the safe range again.”

3

A sunny Saturday, 12:50 PM.

Haruyuki rocked back and forth on a Chuo Line train. While the cars and motorcycles of road traffic had changed a fair bit compared with the beginning of the twenty-first century, the train had maintained the same basic structure for nearly a century. It was now entirely automatic, with driving entrusted to an AI, and considerable improvements had been made for rocking and noise, but the overall concept of stuffing many passengers into a box-shaped car hadn't changed at all.

Ahhh, this takes me back, Haruyuki murmured to himself as he stood next to Takumu, not too far from the door. To his eyes, Takumu in his street clothes was flawlessly cool. He was already 175 centimeters tall while still in seventh grade, and in his elegantly faded black jeans and baggy sweater, with a navy mod coat over that, he was getting glances from the many girls on the train with them.

But the instant they saw the squat, jiggly creature next to Takumu, their eyes were an abyss of misgivings. Exactly what was this combination? If their positions were reversed, Haruyuki would himself be thinking that. When they were in elementary school, he could hardly stand it; it made him want to dig a hole and crawl inside. But fortunately, it seemed that this year, he had acquired the mental fortitude that allowed him to even feel fondly nostalgic in that same situation. Besides, he didn't really have the mental energy to wilt under the eyes of strangers at the moment.

And that was because the continuation of his life as a Burst Linker was to be decided by the person he was on his way to meet. He was a torch before the wind.

An announcement was displayed in his field of view, indicating the train would soon be arriving at Ochanomizu.

Takumu tugged on the sleeve of Haruyuki's varsity jacket. "This is our stop."

"Oh, right." Haruyuki nodded and wiped the sweat from his palms on his baggy pants. The person he was meeting had instructed him to go to the café terrace of a large bookstore in Jimbocho. They would have to walk a little from Ochanomizu Station, but even still, it wouldn't take more than half an hour.

Naturally, given that this person was also a Burst Linker, they couldn't actually meet face-to-face. So then why did they need a meeting spot in the real world? It turned out that that was the sole compensation demanded by the only bouncer in the Accelerated World.

A Burst Linker's greatest taboo—exposing themselves in the real.

"B-bouncer?!" Haruyuki parroted back the previous day in his room, and then fell speechless.

Takumu nodded and began to quietly explain. "I've only ever seen him from the Gallery. I've never actually met or spoken with him. His avatar's named Aqua Current. Armor color: 'variable.'"

"Aqua…Current." Haruyuki had never heard the name before, which wasn't strange given that there were about a thousand Burst Linkers in the city of Tokyo, but the problem was what came after that. "Armor color…variable? What does *variable* mean?"

"You'd understand if you saw him…is what I want to say, but the more information you have, the better. So, right…how can I explain it…?" Unusually for Takumu, who normally had a logical explanation at the ready at all times, he hemmed and hawed for a few seconds before saying rather unexpectedly, "Haru. So water is not water-colored, right?"

"Huh?" Haruyuki made a stupid sound as he thought about it. If you were going to say a general color for water, it would obviously be blue. But it went without saying that water itself was colorless and transparent. So it was nothing more than just dependent on the situation, and sometimes, it looked blue. "So then, the color of this Aqua Current's armor isn't the blue of water, but the

color of water…Is that what you mean?”

“That’s exactly it. But I think you can’t understand it any better without actually seeing it. Anyway, more important than what he looks like is his play style.” Takumu stopped there and wet his throat with the grapefruit juice Haruyuki had brought in from the kitchen before they started talking. “He’s the only one in the Accelerated World in the bodyguard trade…or maybe I should say he’s role-playing. At any rate, he advocates that kind of style. And he only works for newbies. More specifically, he’s hired by Burst Linkers up to level two whose points are on the edge, and he works as his employer’s partner in tag-team matches until they’re out of the danger zone again. Rumor has it that none of his employers have ever lost all their points while he was on duty.”

“S-seriously?” Opening his eyes wide in amazement, Haruyuki tried earnestly to digest what Takumu was saying. “Let’s see. So in other words, this Aqua teams up with new people at level one or two who are on the verge of losing everything and keeps winning tag-team matches while completely protecting them?”

“That’s basically it.”

“Th-that’s kinda amazing and stuff. He has to be some kind of super-high-level veteran, huh? Like level seven or eight, practically a king…”

Takumu smiled faintly at Haruyuki’s tone of admiration and shook his head lightly before announcing the most surprising thing of the day. “No. One of Aqua Current’s nicknames is The One. He’s…level one.”

Heading south for fifteen minutes or so down Meidai Street as he mulled over the previous day’s conversation, Haruyuki saw a large intersection come into view ahead of him. This region that bumped up against Yasukuni Street was Kanda Jimbocho, the largest book neighborhood in the world, an area in existence since the previous century.

It went without saying that in the present day of 2046, *book* was a word that indicated electronic Neurolinker publications. Everything had been shifted online, from publishing to selling, and the act of reading the books purchased by readers, using a special viewer on their virtual desktops, had of course been made into a book culture of “full dives in a preferred environment and within a

preferred format” for the reader’s enjoyment.

However, there were still many people who insisted that a book was not digital data, but something that must actually exist printed on real paper and bound. Haruyuki did feel a longing for the beautifully bound hardcover books like the ones that Kuroyukihime often read in the school lounge, and he remembered fondly the large encyclopedias in the collection of his father, whose face he could no longer clearly see in his mind.

The bookstores that existed in the real world had seemed unable to overcome the relentless shift to e-books and had been faced with extinction, but they had survived by specializing to meet the needs of these peculiar customers. Rather than selling books, they now created them: They printed onto paper and bound the e-books their customers brought in. In other words, “bookstores” did business functioning like the old printers, along with selling new releases of the few paper media and old books that existed, and even now they were concentrated in Kanda Jimbocho.

Haruyuki and Takumu were headed toward a large bookstore facing the Suruga Daishita intersection. On the roof of the building, perhaps out of the stubbornness of a standard bearer for paper culture, the advertisement featuring a character from a book for younger people was printed out on a large panel of actual paper (rather than being AR), and was proudly enshrined on the top of the building. Since they had both cut off their connection to the global net, the only commercial advertisement in their field of view was this billboard.

In response to the job details Haruyuki had sent the previous night to the mail address that was his official contact point, the mysterious bouncer Aqua Current had designated as the place of their first meeting the cafeteria that shared the top floor of the bookstore building. As Takumu took the lead and started to cross the street to that bookstore, Haruyuki tugged lightly on his sleeve.

“You can wait here, Taku.”

“Huh? But…” His childhood friend shook his head.

Haruyuki lowered his voice as he said firmly, “Being exposed in the real is the biggest taboo. Once your real identity is out there, you never know when you’ll

be PKed, right? I don't have any choice but to pay that price, given that I'm on the verge of losing everything. But there's no need for you to be exposed to that danger, too. It'd just be senseless obstinacy."

"…Okay." Fortunately, Takumu nodded, even while the look on his face said he wasn't completely convinced, and he indicated a nearby burger place with his eyes. "Then I'll wait over there. And I'll be hoping for good news." He took a step back, and then it was Takumu grabbing hold of Haruyuki's arm tightly. "Good luck, Haru. Everything's just barely started."

If, hypothetically, there was a tag-team match right after he met the bouncer to recover his points, it was possible that he would have the misfortune to lose in the first duel and then lose Brain Burst. Haruyuki nodded deeply, trembling slightly.

"Yeah, I know. I don't plan on getting off the train here, though. Don't worry. I'm gonna do everything I can to earn points. And then I'll be back."

"That sounds like something the hero of, like, a con game movie or something would say as he goes off to do some dangerous job and score a huge payoff." Takumu's face switched from nervous tension to a broad grin all at once. There was no doubt he was trying to ease Haruyuki's own tension.

…Even though, in movies like that, the hero's plan never actually went off without a hitch.

But Haruyuki grinned, silently grateful for his friend's thoughtfulness, and returned in the sunniest voice possible, "It's very similar in a way, you know. But those movies always have a happy ending, right…? Okay, I'm off!"

He took a step back and lifted a hand in a wave before running across the street just as the light turned green.

The smell of paper, evoking a vague fondness in him, wafted through the large bookstore. The first and second floors were for sales of new releases. The third and fourth floors were used books. The fifth and sixth were on-demand printing and binding of e-books, and the seventh floor was the cafeteria, where readers could delve into those newly printed books.

Haruyuki took the elevator straight up to the seventh floor and looked around

the large space from the entrance. About two-thirds of the thirty or so tables were full, and the majority of customers had a drink in one hand as they turned paper pages. Surprisingly, there were more than a few younger people of about junior and senior high school age. Groups of three or four brought their heads together over thin booklets, and people read pocket-size paperbacks alone. It was impossible to identify which one was Aqua Current. And it was possible Aqua Current wasn't even *in* the cafeteria.

However, having come this far, all he could do was accept his fate. The instant the time display in the lower right of his vision showed the appointed one thirty PM, he stepped into the cafeteria and told the older waiter at the counter exactly what he had been instructed to in the mail. "Um…I'm meeting someone at table seventeen."

With a quick "Right this way," he was shown to an empty table; whether that was good or bad, he didn't know. Sitting on the natural wood tabletop was a still-steaming cup of coffee and a small shopping bag. At any rate, he sat down in one of the two chairs, and after glancing at the paper menu the waitress handed him, he ordered an orange juice.

Exhaling loudly, Haruyuki checked his surroundings once more. The table was next to the window, so to his immediate right on the other side of the organically variable light window was a view of Jimbocho. The customers at the tables in front of him and to his left were both adults. He didn't feel anyone looking at him, but Aqua Current had to be checking him out from somewhere.

He had gotten that far when a faint electronic beeping tickled his eardrums. And then again a few seconds later. That was when he realized the source of the sound was inside the white shopping bag on the table.

After the beeping went off a third time, he hesitantly stuck a hand in the bag, and his fingertips grazed a thin, panel-shaped object. Gingerly pulling it out, he saw that it was a black tablet device, a type of multi-use portable terminal that had been in widespread use before Neurolinkers became practical. On the seven-inch EL monitor, a single window and a software keyboard were displayed. In the window was nothing but the single line of text: ENTER YOUR NAME.

Reflexively, he typed ARITA and then hurriedly pushed the backspace button

before moving his fingers once more. The text he input was, of course, SILVER CROW. He had no sooner touched the ENTER key than the screen changed completely. At the same time, he heard a small electronic *beep*, different in tone from before. Haruyuki looked at what appeared on-screen next and gasped.

A boy with hair that just wouldn't lie flat, weakly angled eyebrows, round eyes, and pudgy cheeks—none other than Haruyuki himself. His picture had been taken by the small camera built into the upper part of the device. The photo disappeared, immediately replaced by the next window popping up.

PAYMENT HAS BEEN RECEIVED. REQUESTED SERVICE WILL BEGIN AT 1:40 PM. PREPARE AND WAIT AS YOU ARE.

This new text also disappeared in a mere ten seconds. The device turned itself off, and the monitor went black.

As he automatically returned the tablet to its original home in the shopping bag, Haruyuki couldn't stop himself from belatedly rethinking the whole thing. *Why? Why is the bouncer Burst Linker Aqua Current…doing something like this?*

His orange juice arrived, and he drank half of it down in one go; his brain used the fuel to rev back up to full throttle. It was true that a Burst Linker's real name and photo were information with a very real weight in the Accelerated World. Once they got out, it was all over. Outlaws known as Physical Knockers, or PKs for short, would attack you in the real and steal every last one of your burst points. As long as there were buyers, you could probably sell the information for a pretty penny.

But Aqua Current's clients were without exception on the verge of losing all their points, and newbies at level one or two on top of that. Such Linkers wouldn't be prey for real attacks. But maybe he collected once the players had grown or something? He got a player's photo and then got their points back into the safe range before flying off to sell the info to some PK, months later?

But the night before, Takumu had said that not a single one of the people Aqua Current protected were victims of real attacks, then or later. Put another way, if there ever *had* been even *one* case like that, Aqua Current's ratings would drop through the floor, and people would stop hiring him.

In short, the questions of why he persisted in this bodyguard play style and

why he demanded real information in payment were still the same enormous mysteries as before.

By the time Haruyuki reached this conclusion, the clock was coming up on 1:35. He felt a wave of nervousness rising up from his stomach, along with another signal from a nearby region.

“Yikes.” Haruyuki hurriedly looked around the cafeteria and stood up once he noted the washroom sign. During duels, the physical desires of your real-world body were basically cut off, but taking care of what could be taken care of beforehand was something like Burst Linker etiquette.

He hung his jacket on the back of his chair and then walked briskly toward the washrooms. *Honestly. The world’s advanced with computerization to this extent, why can’t they make it so that you can take care of expelling unnecessary fluid online or something…*

Perhaps because his mind was taken up with such pointless thoughts; or perhaps because he was walking hunched over, facedown, as was his wont; or perhaps because his Neurolinker was cut off from the global net; or maybe thanks to all these factors—when he started down the hallway with the washroom sign, Haruyuki was just the tiniest bit delayed in noticing the existence of someone coming from around the corner.

That person had stopped about a meter back, so if Haruyuki had actually been watching where he was going, he could have avoided a collision. But with his head hanging and his mind racing, he only finally understood the situation when brown short boots entered his field of view.

“Ah!” he cried out in a tiny voice, and hurried to put on his emergency brakes. But his real-world body was too dull, and he couldn’t completely control the amount of inertia he had.

Seeing Haruyuki staggering forward, the other person quickly took a step to the left. So if he had simply continued on the way he was, it would have ended with him alone tripping a little. Or it should have.

But at the same time as the other person moved, Haruyuki foolishly tried to change course in the same direction. Breathing faster in shallow panic, he tried to return to his original course. But that movement was catastrophic; the left

foot that should have gone out before him got caught on his right foot. After that, all he could do was fly forward like the physical attack of a blue-type duel avatar.

Along with a series of sensations that he would have written out as *wham boing fwump thud*, Haruyuki dragged the other person along with him as he tumbled heavily to the floor.

At least, at the very least, please let this not be one of the following people: (1) a senior citizen, (2) a girl or woman, or (3) a scary person.

"Ngh…ngh…"

From the voice uttered from extremely nearby, it was clear that Haruyuki's single-minded prayers had not been heard; the person was obviously (2). All he could do then was pray that (3) was not also a condition met. He rolled his body, which was pressed up against the other person, off to the left, and picked himself up, pressing his back against the wall, as he apologized in an almost soundless voice, "I—I'm—I'm—I'm sorr—"

In the center of his field of view blurred by sweat or tears, the person Haruyuki had bodychecked finally sat up. Given that she had been stopped, the blame for not paying attention/going too fast/taking his eyes off the road was 100 percent his. And on top of that, no matter how he looked at it, the other person was a girl his own age—in other words, the type of person Haruyuki was most likely to find himself unable to communicate with.

Her physique was fairly slender, and she was wearing a gray peacoat with skinny jeans. Her hair was short, the ends turned neatly inward. And on her fine-featured face were glasses, rarely seen these days, with red plastic frames. She very much looked the part of a girl who liked books, and hardcovers in particular.

It didn't look like (3) applied, for which he felt the slightest sense of relief, as he bowed his head deeply once again. "Uh, I really am so sorry. I wasn't really watching where I was going."

"It's fine," the girl in glasses said briefly, as she stood up. Looking around, she reached a hand out to a spot on the floor near Haruyuki. He saw a small shoulder bag lying there and reflexively reached out to pick it up.

“Oh! Don’t…,” the girl said quietly.

“Huh?” Surprised, Haruyuki piled on yet another mistake. He lifted the bag up from the bottom, the flap fell open, and a small panel-shaped something tumbled out.

“So—Sorry!” The third apology caught in his throat like a hiccup as he reached out for the thing that had fallen on the floor.

The girl inhaled sharply and quickly leaned over at the same time. But Haruyuki, sitting on the floor, was just the tiniest bit faster. He picked up the portable net terminal, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand and unusual for this day and age, and went to return the device to the bag. That was when he caught a glimpse of the terminal’s monitor.

“Huh?” The half-formed question slipped from his mouth.

Maybe because the impact of the fall had been detected with a motion sensor and woken the device from sleep, the monitor was flashed on. That was fine. The problem was the photo displayed on the screen. He brought his face in close and stared hard.

“Please give that back,” the girl said quietly, and tried to grab the terminal.

But Haruyuki unconsciously retracted his hand to prevent her from doing so. Because what the monitor was showing him was the unappealing face of a boy with ruffled hair, round eyes, plump cheeks. No matter which angle he looked at it from, there was no way it could be anyone other than Haruyuki Arita.

“What…is this…? How…?” Holding the terminal reverently with both hands, Haruyuki looked up, dumbfounded, at the girl in glasses.

Her small face stiffened, and the corners of her eyes twitched as she plucked the terminal from his hands, but she made no motion to leave.

It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that this girl had fallen in love with Haruyuki at first sight and secretly taken his picture. It wasn’t impossible, but the probability was pretty close to that of an enormous meteorite falling to the ground and destroying the earth the following day. In other words, the chances were that—no, it was definite that…

While this bookish girl was, according to his previous classification, (2) a girl, she was also (4) a Burst Linker. With this portable terminal, she had operated Haruyuki's matching tablet from the women's washroom. The photo his tablet's camera had taken had been sent to her portable terminal, and then she had collided with him on the way out of the washroom.

If that was the case, then this girl before him was the bouncer meant to save him, the legendary Burst Linker nicknamed "The One."

"Aqua Current?"

At this, the bespectacled girl turned her face up to the ceiling and slumped back against the wall.

4

At any rate, Haruyuki took care of his business. When he came out of the boys' washroom, the girl in glasses accompanied him silently to the table he had been at before. They sat down across from each other, and she stared at him wordlessly.

Very much unable to meet her eyes, Haruyuki shrank into himself as far as he could and checked her out with upward glances. Looking at her again in this bright area, he found that, while she was conservative in her clothing and hairstyle, including the glasses, there was also an air of mystery about her that made him hold his breath. Her eyes were "dark"—he wasn't sure if that was the right word, but they made him feel like their depths were not visible to him; there was something fathomless to them. A certain kind of pressure that faintly reminded him of someone else…

Abruptly, the girl—although, that said, she was probably a year or two older than him—reached a hand into her bag and pulled out a disc-shaped object, two silver plugs sticking out from the sides. An XSB cable with a cord reel. She pulled out one plug, lifted her turned-under short hair, and inserted the plug into her white, semitransparent Neurolinker. She then pulled out the other plug and slid it across the table toward Haruyuki.

"Huh? Um…" Unable to move his hand, Haruyuki moved his eyes back and forth between the plug and the girl. He felt like he had no choice but to insert the plug into his own Neurolinker. But that would mean a direct, wired connection, and directing in a public place was basically a declaration that the relationship between the two parties was far from casual.

It had been over spring break of fifth grade, and he would never forget it. One of the clownier members of his class had played the prank of suddenly

connecting his Neurolinker to that of the most beautiful girl in class, who was sitting with her back to him, and the girl had burst into tears. It had been the absolute worst. Directing meant *that* sort of thing, and basically the only person Haruyuki was daring enough to direct with in public was the Black King.

Right. She reminds me of Kuroyukihime somehow. Not in looks, but like attitude? Or that intensity? The moment this thought crossed his mind, Haruyuki reached out and grabbed the plug. *This'll probably be the last time I direct with someone other than Kuroyukihime, huh?* he thought as he pushed it into the connector on his Neurolinker.

The wired connection warning flashed in red in his view and disappeared. A second later, a delicate, sweet—and yet firm—neurospeak voice echoed inside his brain. *"Right now, I am considering two possibilities. You are an impostor who is an extremely good actor, and you deliberately ran into me in order to crack me in the real…or you are a genuine klutz."*

"Uh." After an initial stupid utterance, Haruyuki hurriedly followed up with actual words. *"The second one, without a doubt. But I can't really think of how to prove that to you…"*

When he thought about it, saying that was already pretty klutzy. Since a person couldn't be deliberately clumsy, knocking over his glass of orange juice or something at that moment would only serve to deepen his interlocutor's suspicion and wouldn't be proof of any kind. He pushed the tips of his index fingers together and frantically racked his brain until finally it output the following words.

"Let's see. I don't have any proof of this, either, but the reason my point balance is in serious danger is because I kinda lost it when my points reached three hundred, and I sort of hit the level-up button in some kind of trance."

He glanced at the girl's face once more. For a while, the expression on the face of the person who was probably Aqua Current didn't flicker, but then she finally nodded lightly.

"If that's true, I can understand to a certain extent. Silver Crow's kicked out an average win rate of seventy percent or more these last two weeks. I thought it was strange that you'd suddenly be in a near-death state."

“Y-you know me?!” Unconsciously, he leaned forward, and his stomach hit the edge of the table, causing the glass with a third or so of juice still left in it to rock back and forth from the impact.

The girl, of course, reached out a hand to catch it. *“The only one in the Accelerated World who hasn’t heard the rumors about you is you.”*

“Huh? Th-th-that’s— I’m not really that…” Haruyuki scratched his head bashfully.

The cute neurospeak voice continued to flow into his hearing: *“The only flying avatar. Looks like the brainy type, loses his cool surprisingly easily. Bad at close-range fights with female-shaped duel avatars. Uses sly methods, but not actually all that together.”* Haruyuki stiffened, the corners of his mouth still turned up, and the girl glanced at him as she lifted the cup of Darjeeling tea she had ordered. *“In any case, you do seem exactly like the rumors, so I’ve decided the incident before was true clumsiness.”*

So is this a happy thing? Yeah, I’m sure it is, he told himself, even as his eyes blurred with sweat for some reason.

The bespectacled girl set her cup down with a *klak*, and without seeming to pay any mind to Haruyuki’s internal strife, she straightened up the tiniest bit. *“The situation’s become quite irregular, but I should still introduce myself. I’m Aqua Current. As per the contract, I will guard you until your point balance recovers to the minimum safe zone—fifty points.”*



“Oh! O-okay! Thank you! I’m Silver Crow.” He bowed his head. The scene probably looked fairly strange from the outside—some junior high and high school boys and girls were indeed glancing at them intermittently—but he didn’t have the mental leeway to worry about that. For Haruyuki, this mysterious girl was his last lifeline. The sole bouncer in the Accelerated World, an incredible bodyguard with a job failure rate of zero.

“Huh? Oh. Wait.” Here, Haruyuki was struck by a contradiction he should have noticed first thing. *“Um, I’ve actually heard the rumors about you, too, Aqua Current. But—”*

“You can call me Curren.”

“Th-then call me Crow— No, that’s not what I meant. I totally believed you were a guy…and the friend who told me about you, I guess he thought that, too…”

Right. Takumu had used the pronoun *he* for Aqua Current. And even before then, when Haruyuki had been told there was this capable bodyguard, he had pictured a macho guy in a flashy suit—although there weren’t exactly any junior high students like that. He had certainly never imagined a girl in glasses who would fit right in at a bookstore.

However, Aqua Current aka Curren shrugged lightly, as if to say it was no big deal. *“It’s hard to tell from its appearance whether my duel avatar is male or female. And I still haven’t said a single word about me being a girl.”*

“Huh? Wh-what does that mean?” Mouth and eyes gaping, Haruyuki stared hard at Curren’s small face first and then in an extremely rude gesture, at a spot twenty centimeters or so below it. However, she was still cloaked in the stiff fabric of the peacoat, so he couldn’t say either way from just the visual information.

No, wait. A few minutes ago, I slammed into her head-on. If I just replay the sensation of that, I’ll have the answer. Remember. Come back to me, memory.

It wasn’t as though these nasty thoughts were being transmitted through the cable, but Curren’s gaze got a fair bit cooler as she spoke again. *“It’s five minutes past the scheduled time, but at any rate, we’ll begin the tag-team*

match now. If you can reach the target number of points here in the Chiyoda area, then that's that. If we run out of opponents, we'll move to the neighboring Akihabara area and continue. Do you have any questions?"

"No, th-th-that's fine. Th-th-th-thank you!!"

"Well, then first we'll register each other's avatars for tag matches. Connect to the global net and accelerate right away."

"O-o-o-okay!" Bobbing his head up and down, Haruyuki first opened the Brain Burst console screen and then registered Aqua Current as a tag-team partner. He saw Curren nod, and then he held down the button to connect to the global net. The connecting display flashed, and the instant it changed to the icon indicating a connection to the world, he shouted in a voice only he could hear, "Burst Link!"

Finally, the moment of truth, the final battle between life and death. And yet the instant the world froze blue, what occupied Haruyuki's thoughts was the deeply nagging question, *Is this person a boy? A girl?*

There existed two methods of starting a duel. Accelerate while connected to the global net or a local net, open the matching list, select an arbitrary opponent from the list of Burst Linkers connected to the same net, and press the DUEL button. That was one way. The second was to go on standby while registered on the matching list and wait for some other Burst Linker to come along and pick a fight with you. Put simply, it was challenge or be challenged.

The former had the advantage of allowing the player to select an opponent they were likely to beat, in terms of affinity and personality. But since you had to use one burst point to accelerate first, then naturally if you lost, but even with a draw, the result was a point loss. To make an analogy with the partner fighting games in arcades in the olden days, you were the one to pay the hundred yen, and you lost on top of that.

In contrast, the latter allowed the player to enjoy the duel without using up any points, but in principle, your opponent was challenging you after deciding that they had a good chance at winning. It was in fact exhilarating when you could upset that expectation, but in reality, that was fairly hard. In the duels Haruyuki had been in these last two weeks, his win rate when he was the

challenger was nearly 80 percent, while it was about 60 percent when he was on standby. Although these were excellent and outstanding numbers for a newbie, the fact that he had Cyan Pile as his partner, with all his experience and knowledge, and the fact that his opponents couldn't quite manage to deal with his flying ability, the first of its kind in the Accelerated World, played a large part in this. In fact, now that his duel opponents had more or less gotten used to Silver Crow's wings, his win rate was on the decline.

For these reasons, Aqua Current's decision to spend a point and select their first opponent was something Haruyuki could understand. Because he absolutely could not lose this fight. If he lost to an opponent at the same level as he was, the instant those ten points were taken from him, Haruyuki would lose his life as a Burst Linker. Thus, he assumed they would scrutinize the matching list and pick the opponent who offered even a slightly better chance at victory before challenging anyone.

But when Curren appeared in the blue world of the initial accelerated space, as a glasses-wearing otter avatar that also didn't allow for a clear identification of gender, she took no notice of Haruyuki's pink pig avatar as she glanced at the list before casually reaching a hand out to somewhere around the middle of the list. At that point, both avatars were those set for any full dive, so there was no way of finding out the other person's gender or any other information.

"Huh?! Um! H-h-hold oooo—" Haruyuki waved black-hooved hands to interrupt.

Fortunately, the otter's hand stopped on the verge of touching the window and turned red-framed glasses on him that looked a lot like the ones she wore in real life.

"Uh, um, the matching list's in order of level, right? D-d-didn't you just go to select an opponent right in the middle?"

"I did. Is that a problem?"

"I-i-it's just, aren't the ones in the middle, like, level three or four and kind of strong?"

Curren shrugged and replied evenly, "There's no advantage in choosing an opponent on the same level now. You're level two and I'm level one, so for a

tag-team match, we should choose opponents with a total level of six, minimum. If we do that, even if we do end up losing, your points won't end up at zero."

"Th-that does make sense, I guess," Haruyuki murmured, stunned, as he remembered what Takumu had said: the amazingly capable bouncer Aqua Current. Also known as the One. The reason for that was because she was at level one, even though she was quite the veteran.

But when he thought about it, was that actually possible? Like she was actually strong enough to protect any client who came along, even though she was only at level one? So why one, then? When you went up levels, your HP also increased, and you could pick whatever bonuses you wanted, like special attacks and abilities, weapons, and ability enhancements. As long as you were careful to leave enough points in your balance, there should have been no disadvantage to going up levels.

Here, Haruyuki finally realized something, and he opened both eyes wide with a gasp. "So, um, is the reason why you're at level one to lower the total level for tag-teaming, Curren? When you team up with someone for a tag match, the higher your level is, the fewer points you can get when you win, and the more points you lose when you're defeated. To avoid that—in other words, for total newbies you don't even know on the verge of losing everything, you just stay at level one?" Haruyuki asked, in a hoarse voice.

"That's half the reason." The expression on the face of the bespectacled otter did not change in the slightest as she brought her shoulders up and down. "Someday, the time will come to tell you the other half. Perhaps. Or maybe it won't. At the very least, if you lose all your points today, it will never come."

"I—I guess so." As his nose twitched at the nervous tension that welled up within him again, Curren reached out to the list again.

"At the present moment, our names are already registered on the matching list. It's a matter of milliseconds, but even so, someone could have accelerated at the same time and will come along to challenge us. In that case, you will have just wasted a precious point."

"Oh. R-right. That's true."

“This tag match is level three and four, but I know them both quite well. They’re not the red, long-range sniper types you’re bad with. And they have a fair bit of leeway with points, so they should come out to fight head-on. If you can just relax and actually use the power you’ve got, we definitely won’t lose… probably.”

This person really does know me. And on top of that, she’s trying to help me for real. Why is she level one? Why does she want your real identity as payment? And to begin with, what motivates her to even do *this bouncer thing? I don’t know anything about her, but I have to trust her now. I’ll trust her and fight as hard as I can.*

He’d do it so that he wouldn’t have any regrets even if they lost, even if he lost Brain Burst. At the eleventh hour, Haruyuki finally felt a readiness, albeit meager and tightly condensed, being born within him.

He took a deep breath, clenched both hoofs of his avatar, and nodded. “I’ll fight hard.”

“Just do it as you would normally. This is a fight you can’t afford to lose, but more important than winning is—”

“Having fun,” Haruyuki interrupted, and Curren’s eyes widened just a little behind her glasses. Rubbing his nose as if to hide his embarrassment, he added, “My ‘parent’ taught me that. She says to have fun in all your duels.”

“Yes. That’s right.” Nodding slowly, for a brief instant, Aqua Current got a strange look on her face—maybe it was his imagination, but she looked somehow nostalgic for the past—before she touched the matching list.

“We’re starting,” she said briefly, and pressed the DUEL START button.

The two animal avatars and the frozen blue world melted into the light and disappeared. Haruyuki’s consciousness was whisked off to some unknown duel stage.

5

Aqua: water.

Current: flow.

The name given to a Burst Linker often expressed the special characteristics of an avatar's appearance, but Haruyuki couldn't help thinking examples this straightforward were rare.

He had no sooner descended to stand on the stage as the silver-winged avatar Silver Crow when his eyes caught next to him a slender figure, unremarkable in terms of silhouette. Maybe a little taller than Crow. Sleek arms and legs, nothing resembling a weapon on the torso. Or perhaps, it could be said that the *entire body* featured special equipment.

From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, Aqua Current was completely wrapped in a layer of fast-flowing water. The liquid that soundlessly flowed from shoulder to hand, from chest to hips to feet, became thin cables of water at her digits and then rose up, carving out large arcs to the rear to envelop the avatar from the back of the head once more. Simply put, Curren's armor was water itself, flowing in an eternal loop.

Although the water was probably only two or three centimeters deep, no matter how he strained his eyes, he couldn't manage to see through to the avatar body beneath it. In the greenish ambient light of the Corrosive Forest stage, the water glittered a faint green. It really was just as Takumu said: Aqua Current was the color of water, but no single color. And from the physique, it was hard to tell whether the avatar was a male or female type.

Haruyuki observed this much in the two seconds or so before Curren said in a low voice, "Approximately two minutes until contact. The enemy tag team is

coming south from Ochanomizu Station on Meidai Street.” Her voice also didn’t offer any hint about gender due to the strong filter effect. Plus, the slightly stilted way of speaking of the real-world Aqua Current had disappeared. If he hadn’t slammed right into her in front of the washrooms in an accidental real attack, he wouldn’t have had a single reason to suspect that Curren was a girl.

Haruyuki nodded. “O-okay. They’re coming straight at us, aren’t they?” As he switched mental gears, he stared at the light blue triangle in the center of his field of view, the guide cursor.

At that moment, they were standing above an enormous tree that was once the large bookstore on the southwest corner of the Suruga Daishita intersection in Jimbocho. He called it a tree, but unlike the powerful broad-leafed trees of the Primeval Forest stage, it was an ill-formed silhouette, thin branches stretching out apologetically from a half-rotted trunk.

The intersection far below was large—the place where the east-west Yasukuni Street crossed the north-south Meidai Street—but the ground was 80 percent covered by an odious, viscous purple fluid that burped up bubbles from time to time. A poison bog. The Corrosive Forest stage had the very irritating feature of eating up your health gauge if you so much as set foot in one of its poisonous bog zones.

Since it was a tag-team fight, there were two guide cursors, but they were basically on top of each other as they pointed north. Their opponents were probably coming south in a straight line down the gentle slope of Meidai Street from Ochanomizu. A sickly baobab-like tree was in the way, so he couldn’t see them, but the singular direction of the team seemed to indicate that they were coming in a dash, roughly avoiding the poison bogs but not worrying too much about it. One of the two opposing team health gauges in the upper right of his view was dropping slightly, in tiny increments.

“I-it really is like a head-on fight, huh?” he murmured, and finally checked his opponents’ names. The level four was Nickel Doll; the level three was Sand Duct. He had never seen either of them before.

He figured the basic idea here was that they would first take advantage of their position high up to gather information or use it for a surprise attack, but

then Curren spoke and upended this theory.

“We’ll go down.”

“O-okay.” He followed her, unable to disagree.

Given that they had been on the seventh floor of a building, it looked to be more than twenty meters from the top of the tree to the surface of the ground, but the water-covered avatar moved casually forward and “flowed” down, as if perfectly adhered to the side of the vertical trunk. After watching for a moment with wide eyes, Haruyuki hurriedly stepped out into the air himself.

His special-attack gauge was at zero, so he couldn’t fly, but if he spread his wings, it was possible for him to glide. He descended, carving out a spiral in the air, and reached the ground at basically the same time as Curren. He selected a place free of poison bog to set his feet down.

Turning his face toward the upward slope of Meidai Street, it wasn’t even ten seconds before he heard the sound of weighty footsteps. It appeared that at least one of their opponents was fairly heavyweight. But for some reason, he didn’t hear a second set of footfalls, even though both guide cursors were pointing in the same direction.

He learned the reason for that soon enough.

From behind a rotting baobab that was once a sporting goods store, the super-large avatar he had been expecting came flying out, nearly two meters tall, with a super-tiny avatar perched neatly on his left shoulder.

“Sorry to keep you waaaaaaiting!” the one on the shoulder cried out in the voice of an adorable little girl. She was just barely a meter tall. Her body was a fairly whitish silver, and while her armor didn’t have quite the mirror finish of Silver Crow’s, the green light of the stage still reflected off it neatly. With her long hair parts and the armor skirt that flared out around her, she was basically a doll. There was no doubt that this was the level-four Nickel Doll.

The silver doll waited a second after her initial shout before continuing in a slightly dissatisfied tone. “Or that’s what I’d like to say, buuuuut! You’re the ones who barged in on us, and then you wait for us to move. It’s totally nooooo fair! I mean, you just wasted two whole minutes here!”

“I-I’m sorry…I’m not used to the terrain around here, so…,” Haruyuki apologized unconsciously, rubbing the back of his head with one hand.

The giant that served as the doll’s perch laughed ponderously. “Hmph! Apologies aren’t gonna cut it. While you were standing around scratching your butts, we were building up our object destruction bonuses.”

“Urk!” Hurriedly looking up at the enemy gauges, Haruyuki saw their blue special-attack gauges had indeed reached almost 30 percent full without his noticing. That was a big advantage.

The giant, the level-three Sand Duct, wore rough armor the color of sand, just like his name. Haruyuki’s eyes were immediately drawn to the square holes on the tops of both wrists. If those were air ducts as the avatar name implied, then they probably had the ability to either produce or suck air. Either way, he needed to be careful.

As he carved this into his mind, Curren had come to stand behind him at some point. “I’ll take Duct,” she said quietly. “You get Doll. She generates an electric current with her hands. Be careful you don’t get caught in it.”

“Aaaah! You’re giving him spoilers!” Curren’s voice should have been too quiet to be heard by their enemies, but the sharp-eared Nickel Doll erupted in indignation.

“As expected of the bouncer.” The foundation beneath her, Sand Duct, heavily raised his massive right arm. “You’ve got info if nothing else. Sorry, but we’ll have to break up your little strategy time now.”

Krrrr. A low rumbling. Immediately after, Haruyuki thought he felt air blowing out at them.

“Sand Blast!!” As the giant roared the name of the technique, a sandy vortex of wind shot out of the air duct of his right hand. Although Haruyuki leapt immediately to the right, he had to be careful of the poison bog, and he was a little slow off the line. His left arm was momentarily swallowed up to the elbow by the vortex.

“Aaah! Hot!” Assaulted by the sensation of being stabbed with countless needles, he cried out, unable to stand it. When he finally freed his arm from the

wind, part of the shining mirrored surface was clouded over, as if worked over by fine sandpaper. The wind probably included fine sand particles, which could damage even the metallic armor of a metal color. In that instant, his health gauge was cut down 3 percent or so.

Wondering if Aqua Current, behind him and off to one side, had managed to make it into the clear, he turned his gaze in that direction—only to cry out again in surprise. “Huh?”

Although Curren had adopted a defensive stance with both arms crossed, she was simply standing upright in the middle of the sandstorm. But her health gauge wasn’t moving a pixel. He looked more closely and saw that the sand particles, the source of damage in Sand Duct’s technique, were swallowed up by the water flowing over and simply cycled around, never reaching the main body of the avatar.

When the giant’s special-attack gauge was finally exhausted and the sandstorm stopped, Curren dropped her arms as if nothing had happened. “Particle-type attacks don’t work on me,” she said. “You can have it back.”

She casually raised her right hand, and the sand particles in her water armor concentrated there. When she abruptly dropped her hand, sandy water formed a slender lance and flew from her fingertips toward Sand Duct’s shoulder, where Nickel Doll was sitting.

“Eeeek!” Cute up to the last moment—or maybe she deliberately yelped adorably—Doll leapt down from Duct’s shoulder. A second and then a third sand lance targeted the tiny avatar. Screaming “Ah!” and “Heeey!” Doll dodged them with a surprising nimbleness and bounced around the islands of ground in the poison bog.

Haruyuki watched in mute amazement and then suddenly gasped. Curren was deliberately limiting the range of her attack in order to separate the enemy tag team. Which meant that his job was to follow up on the attack on Doll.

I can kick and cry, but that won’t fix anything. Forget that you only have seven points left, and fight with everything you’ve got. Just like always, duel with all your might.

“Aaaaah!” he shouted, and dashed fiercely toward Nickel Doll, fifteen meters

ahead of him. He kept his eyes laser-focused on his nemesis, careful not to touch the poison ground. To his left, Curren had also closed in on Sand Duct and started fighting hand-to-hand.

Abruptly, from the sky above, the cheers of dozens of people rained down on them. The Gallery. It was basic etiquette that duel spectators not shout out during the back-and-forth between the duelers before the real fight began, so they had probably been holding back until that moment. In among the cheering voices, he could hear shouts of “Crooow!” and “Flyyyy!” It seemed people knew him even here in Jimbocho, far from his home of Suginami.

As if spurred on by those cries, Haruyuki launched a right roundhouse kick as soon as he landed on the island where Nickel Doll was waiting for him. “Yah!”

The barely meter-high doll avatar crouched down and dodged the kick. But having anticipated this, Haruyuki changed the trajectory of his kick in midair to lead into a downward heel drop. Doll tried to dodge this as well, rather spectacularly, but the attack caught the right edge of the armor skirt spread out around her, and her health gauge dropped with a show of dazzling sparks characteristic of each of their metal colors.

“How mean!” She sounded very much like a game character Haruyuki had liked a long time ago, and he had never really been able to handle anyone yelling at him like that, but he was in no position to falter now. His opponent was level four, after all. A warrior who had overcome what his teacher Kuroyukihime called the “first wall.”

“I’m sorry!” Even as he apologized, he continued his relentless rush with both hands and both feet. Silver Crow had no particular attacks other than the wings on his back, but he had learned over the last two weeks that with the speed he gained from his light weight, his hands and feet, covered in hard armor, were actually impressive weapons.

That said, Nickel Doll was exactly the same: small, lightweight, and made of metal armor. Although he sent magnificent sparks scattering with a glancing attack from time to time, the damage wasn’t anything to speak of. If he didn’t throw his all into some move, he really couldn’t hope for a clean hit. The moment this thought crossed his mind, Nickel Doll leapt at him, as if seeing his

panic. Her slender left hand neatly caught hold of his right, and her right his left.

Too easy! I still have my head butt! He started to counter with his head wrapped in its tough armor, but just as he was on the verge of letting fly, Curren's voice came back to life in his ears.

Electric current from her hands…

"Ngh!!" He immediately canceled his head butt and threw everything he had into a backward leap. At almost the same time as his hands pulled away from hers, a fierce spark jetted out of the round parts visible in the center of her palms. He felt the faintest electric shock, and a momentary jolt raced through his body.

Checking that the hit to his health gauge was kept under 5 percent this time, Haruyuki touched down on the neighboring tiny island. "That was close," he muttered to himself.

"Awww!" Doll began to scream, stomping her feet in adorable frustration. "No fair running away! I was all set to give you such a tight, shocking hug!"

"I-I'll pass, thanks!" He shook his head back and forth, and checked both of their health gauges again. Haruyuki still had 90 percent left, and Doll had dropped to about 80 percent. Sand Duct, fighting off to the side, was also around 80 percent, while Aqua Current basically had a full tank. He deeply wanted to watch the legendary bodyguard in action, but at that moment, he needed to focus on the enemy before him.

Nickel Doll swung her silver ringlets and snorted. But then a coquettish smile rose up on her small face mask. "Heeeey? You're him, aren't you? That flying avatar who showed up in Shinjuku recently."

"Y-yeah, well…" His guard up, Haruyuki nodded.

The avatar, so like a silver Western-style doll, smiled even more alluringly. "Why are you teamed up with the bouncer? Are you maybe in some trouble points-wise? Then, look—how about you join us? If you do, I'll lend you however many points you neeeed."

"What?!" Haruyuki unconsciously stiffened, and Doll jumped, skirt fluttering, moving to the island he was on.

“And look, we’ve even got the same color skin.” She walked briskly toward him as she continued in a sweet voice. “We join up, and we’ll be, like, the talk of the Accelerated World, you know? And the truth is, I don’t like that sand dude. I mean, he’s super scrapey and all. But look—like, your skin’s all smooth and soft. ♡”

Before he knew it, Nickel Doll was standing right there in front of him, the index finger of her left hand up against his chest tracing out lazy circles. The ticklish sensation stopped his thoughts. Something moved on the left edge of his field of view, now dyed a hazy pale pink. Doll’s right hand. Her index finger flicked out to gently touch his left hip.

“Whoa!”



Barely coming to his senses in time, Haruyuki sprang back at basically the same time as powerful sparks shot out of Doll's fingers. A momentary shock shook him once more, whisking away 5 percent of his gauge.

"N-no fair with surprise attacks!" Haruyuki shouted angrily at having his pure male heart toyed with, moving to an island farther back.

The silver doll cackled loudly. "Awww! Did I hurt your big, manly feelings? I'm sorrrry. But if I let someone like you join up, my Legion Master would be suuuuuper angry at me!"

That was probably true, because the Legion Master for Nega Nebulus, which Haruyuki belonged to, was the Black King, the most wanted person in the Accelerated World. But for Haruyuki, this was Doll's big mistake. He jabbed his index finger in her direction and shouted, "I didn't even want to join up with you! And you didn't hurt my feelings or whatever! Definitely not!"

If he was thinking more coolly, he could see how this could come off as a boy whose feelings had indeed been hurt, but he forced his brain to switch gears and leapt forward. Perhaps seeing that they were done messing around, the look on Nickel Doll's face changed, and her electric hands snapped into a ready position. Most likely, the right hand was the positive terminal and the left the negative. He assumed that if she caught hold of him with both hands, electric current would flow through his avatar and do some serious damage.

At a speed an order of magnitude greater than anything she'd shown so far, Doll's hands darted out to capture Haruyuki. But he feigned dodging to the right, and then sprang in the direction his opponent was not expecting—to the left, the middle of the poisonous purple bog. Both legs were swallowed up to the knee. Doll was completely taken off guard, her back turned to Haruyuki.

Still sunken into the mire, Haruyuki reached toward the small avatar a meter ahead of him and grabbed hold of her narrow waist before doing something like a German suplex–turned-throw to toss her, full strength, into the bog behind him.

"Aieeeeeee!" This time, her scream seemed real, and she plunged headfirst into the poisonous bog. An unpleasantly colored smoke rose up, and her health gauge ticked slowly downward.

Nickel Doll vaulted to her feet immediately, and after confirming that the only nearby island was behind Haruyuki, she shouted sharply, “Are you trying for a draw or something?! Well, let me tell you one thing! When it comes to HP, I have way more at level four than you do at level two…” She abruptly fell silent. She had finally noticed the fact that Haruyuki’s health gauge was basically not going down at all, even though he had been sunken in the bog this whole time.

Drawing a little on Aqua Current’s line earlier, Haruyuki snapped his index fingers at her. “I’m silver. Poison doesn’t work on me!”

The members of the Gallery way up on the tops of the baobab trees erupted instantly.

Exactly. Although they were both metal colors, the particular characteristics differed slightly depending on the type of metal. Generally speaking, precious metals like gold and silver were strong against special attacks, while base metals like steel and iron were strong against physical attacks. But even among these, Haruyuki’s silver had an absolute resistance to poison attacks. Even in the real world, silver ions were used for sterilization because of their powerful antibacterial properties.

Even during this short standoff, Nickel Doll’s health gauge was gradually decreasing. She would also have had some poison resistance due to her metal color, but taken along with her slight armor, it wouldn’t have been perfect. If they went into hand-to-hand combat in the swamp, it was obvious that Doll would exhaust her resources sooner, even if their blows were equal.

“Hmph…I get it. The reason you were avoiding the swamp this whole time was to put me off guard and drag me into a situation like this, huh?” Doll glanced down at the purple mush that had swallowed her nearly up to her waist. “And you are way over on the left end of the metal chart, too. But, like, treating nickel like fake silver, it doesn’t work like that. There are a lot of different ways to use it. You know? Like mixing in hydrogen and generating electricity, right?”

The moment he heard those words, something flickered in the back of Haruyuki’s mind.

In the present day of 2046, nearly all the EVs and electric scooters racing

along the roads of the town—but also of course mobile devices like Neurolinkers—used lightweight, large-capacity silicon nanowire batteries. However, he had learned in science class that until twenty or so years earlier, there had been a secondary battery with an emphasis on safety. He was pretty sure it had been called a nickel hydrogen battery. This was the backbone to Nickel Doll's electrical abilities.

The silver Western-style doll smiled faintly, seemingly paying no attention to her HP being steadily shaved away by the quagmire. "And, like, silver also has a bunch of properties other than antibacterial. I'll teach you about them right now."

The words had no sooner left her mouth than she was thrusting both hands into the swamp water. Her health gauge began to drop even faster, but her special-attack gauge was simultaneously charged, and the instant it had passed 70 percent, the call of the special attack name rang out.

"Anode Cathode!!"

Pale sparks shot out in circles on the surface of the bog, some too quick for Haruyuki to escape.

Zzzt! He was hit with a brutal shock. His field of view basically whited out. He couldn't even cry out with the pain.

"Ngh!!" Instinctively, he tried to leap up onto the island behind him, but for some reason, his avatar had stiffened in place and wouldn't obey him. In the top left of his white-hot field of view, he saw his own health gauge being rapidly eaten away. Trapped in position, Haruyuki realized for the first time the immense risk that had been hidden in his own strategy to bring the fight to hand-to-hand combat.

It might have been a bog of poison, but it was essentially water. And the more impurities water had, the better an electrical conductor it was. Leaping into the bog meant that he'd deliberately connected a circuit between himself and his opponent.

However.

Nickel Doll was also waist deep in the bog herself, so she shouldn't have been

able to escape from the electrical damage, either. Although it was rare for a full-dive fighting game, Brain Burst allowed self-attacks, meaning that it was possible to attack your own self, and, depending on the situation, you could also be dragged into the range of an attack. Maybe Doll thought she could make it out alive even if she was taking damage at the same time, based on the difference in their total HP, but if the damage she was taking from the swamp was added in, she was the one whose gauge would run out first.

Making this instantaneous judgment, Haruyuki endured the ongoing electrical shock as he turned his eyes to his opponent's health gauge. And then he got another shock.

Her gauge was clearly dropping more slowly than Haruyuki's.

"Heh-heh-heh. You finally noticed?" Doll's voice sounded slightly pained, but was still quite clear. "Even exposed to the same electrical current, you're the one getting more damaged. I mean, at normal temperatures, the electrical resistance of silver is only one-fourth that of nickel. Silver's, like, the most electrically conductive of all the metals!"

Gah?! So does that mean that of all the metal colors, I'm the weakest to electrical attacks?! We haven't learned that in science yet! So then, it's not my fault, it's the Ministry of Education's! Wait, this isn't the time to be thinking about that. Something, something, I have to do something…!

Unable to speak or lift a single finger, Haruyuki earnestly racked his brain. No special attack lasted forever. If he just waited, her electricity attack would end at some point, but his HP gauge would be almost completely whisked away by then. And by bathing herself in her own electricity, Doll was also recharging her depleted special-attack gauge. If she activated it again the instant this attack ended, he'd be out of options.

Haruyuki's HP gauge had dropped to 50 percent, dyeing the bar yellow. The instant he saw that his special-attack gauge below this was basically fully charged, he finally figured out his next move. Even if his whole body was numb from the electric shock, Silver Crow was equipped with one organ that could be operated through willpower alone.

"Flyyyyyy!" he cried thinly, from between clenched teeth.

Kachak! The comforting sound of metal rang out, and the ten fins folded up on his back deployed at once.

“Ah!” At the same time as Nickel Doll cried out, the wings extending from Haruyuki’s back flapped powerfully, and the wind pressure they generated pushed aside the water surface around him.

Silver Crow shot up into the sky with the force of a rocket. He shook off even the sparks attempting to chase after him and danced up higher and higher.

“Ooooh!” A gasp rose up from the members of the Gallery who were seeing his flying ability for the first time.

Haruyuki cut through the drifting fog and the green phosphorescence of the Corroded Forest stage and flew. He ascended ever higher, almost brushing against the members of the Gallery clustered together on the rotting baobab trees. Finally, he broke free of the miasma of the forest, and everything around him changed to blue skies.

Now that he had flown to this altitude, he could no longer be completely seen from the ground. Bathed in sunlight, his entire body glittered silver as he did a one-eighty turn. At once, he shifted to a sudden descent.

Haruyuki stretched out his sharply tapered right foot, let gravity join the propulsive power of his wings, and shot forward like an arrow or a laser. The compressed air crackled and burned the tips of his toes, sending orange particles shooting off on all sides. In the blink of an eye, he had plunged into the green miasma, passed the baobabs, almost brushing the treetops once more, and was shooting toward his target on the other side of the guide cursor.

Nickel Doll had climbed up onto a small island and was staring dumbfounded up at the sky when she seemed to come back to herself and tried to leap back and out of the way. But Haruyuki made a slight adjustment to his trajectory with his arms and wings.

“Hnngaaaaah!” With a forceful battle cry, the tips of his toes made perfect contact with the shoulder of the tiny enemy avatar.

A flash of light and vibration, an enormous explosion, rocked the entire stage.

The five-meter-diameter island was instantly transformed into a crater. Nickel

Doll flew back helplessly, twirling in the air, a high-pitched cry trailing after her. The 60 percent she had left in her health gauge was devoured, sending her into the red zone of less than 20 percent.

This was Silver Crow's best technique at the moment. This Dive Attack could decide a battle in a single blow, so if his enemy did manage to dodge, he would be damaged himself and be frozen for a few seconds. But for a Burst Linker seeing it for the first time, getting out of the way was nearly impossible since he was attacking in a straight line from directly overhead. The reason he had been able to hammer out an average win ratio of 70 percent over the last two weeks was solely because he had this technique.

On one knee in the middle of the crater he had created, Haruyuki lifted his head. Given the force that had sent her flying, Nickel Doll should have taken another big hit when she landed. One that might even decide the battle.

However.

The little avatar—about to plunge headfirst into the center of the Suruga Daishita intersection—was caught and held fast by two massive hands.

Sand Duct. He had temporarily abandoned his fight with Aqua Current and run over to prevent Doll's fatal fall. A cheer rose up from the Gallery at the unexpectedly knightly act.

Duct's health gauge was also already down below 50 percent in the yellow zone. Curren, who had been fighting one-on-one with him, however, was still at over 90 percent somehow. Either their compatibility was indeed very unilateral, or the difference in their technique was.

Aqua Current came gliding around from the south of the intersection, avoiding the poison bog, and stopped next to Haruyuki. As he stood up, he heard her low murmur: "That was a good hit back there."

"Th-thanks." Unconsciously, he shrank into himself.

"But it's not over yet," Curren continued. "Those two must have some reason for joining up with each other. They've definitely got something up their sleeve. Don't let your guard down."

"O-okay!" Haruyuki nodded.

“Oh, come oooooon!” Nickel Doll shouted in indignation from on top of Sand Duct’s shoulder standing some ten or so meters away from them. “Now I’m mad! Flying ability’s totally no faaaiiir!!”

“Y-you can say that, but…” Without thinking, he started to argue with her, but Doll jabbed the index finger of her right hand at him as if to say she would brook no argument.

“Shut up! Shut uuuuup! If this is how things are, then we’re gonna let you both really have it with our super-gorgeous, super-special attack and send you into next week!”

“S-super…”

Is there even a system like that in Brain Burst? There’s not, is there? He had a silent conversation with himself, but he was sure that what was coming next was the “up their sleeve” that Curren had mentioned. Haruyuki still had about 40 percent left in his health gauge, so depending on the scope of the technique, it was even possible that a single blow could kill him. And because he had used up his special-attack gauge in the earlier dive attack, he couldn’t fly and dodge it this time. He dropped his hips and concentrated on his enemy’s movements.

Nickel Doll struck a daunting pose on Sand Duct’s shoulders, her right foot on his right shoulder, left on left, and then shouted sharply, “Do it, Sandy!”

“Roger!” the sand giant responded in a weighty tone and raised the massive air ducts on his hands, then slammed them loudly together.

“Aaaaaah! Take this! Turbo Molecular!!”

He shouted the name of the special attack, and the turbine propellers inside the ducts in his hands began to rotate at high speed. But they were facing the wrong way. The right duct seemed to be the exhaust, while the left had the power of intake.

“I see,” Curren said. “The reason they were able to hear our private conversation before the fight started was because that left hand was secretly sucking in the air, hmm?”

Haruyuki nodded in agreement. Even during this exchange, the air was moving stormily between Sand Duct’s hands.

“But…blowing on the right and sucking on the left, is he telling us to come get them…or what’s it mean?” Haruyuki cocked his head.

In that moment, Duct threw his hands out, and Haruyuki thought he could see a strange heat haze. The thought had no sooner crossed his mind than his entire body was caught by an intense suction.

“Whoa! I-I’m being sucked in!” He hurried to dig his feet into the ground, but he was essentially powerless to resist. Carving out ruts in the little island with his feet, he was dragged toward Sand Duct, ten meters ahead of him. Next to him, Aqua Current, too, was moving forward bit by bit, the water covering her body half ripped off.

“Heh-heh, soooo? What do you think of Sandy’s Turbo Molecular Pump?” The triumphant voice of Nickel Doll reached them against the direction of the sudden squall. The wind had captured only Haruyuki and Curren with surprising precision.

“I…see. With the turbines on both arms, he sends air molecules flying and creates a vacuum region.” Even as they were pulled inexorably forward, Curren was coolly analyzing the situation.

Haruyuki panicked automatically. “Th-th-this isn’t the time to admire it! I-i-if we don’t do something, w-w-we’ll be sucked in!!”

Now that I’m thinking about it, there was a scene like this in that full-dive picture book Journey to the West *I read when I was a kid. Wait, that scene where he gets sucked in was super scary. I cried so hard, and Chiyu laughed at me.*

Haruyuki’s thoughts abruptly ran down an escapist tract, while, in contrast, Curren spoke as if she wasn’t disturbed in the slightest.

“No need to be afraid. There’s no attack power in the wind itself. Once we’re dragged in, it’ll just be a close-range fight.”

“Huh.” Unconsciously, he let his gaze wander through space and then bobbed his head up and down.

It was true that although they were exposed to the gale, their health gauges hadn’t budged a pixel. This technique was probably to bring in mid-and long-

range avatars, in order to turn the fight into close-range combat. But Haruyuki was a complete close-range type, and Curren hadn't been unskilled enough to be taken down in one-on-one combat with Duct. Getting closer was actually exactly what Haruyuki's team wanted.

Okay! Then I can use this wind and go flying in. Haruyuki started to make a plan in his head, looking for the right timing, when his eyes caught sight of something unexpected:

A smirk slashing across the face of Nickel Doll as she stood on Sand Duct's shoulder, even as his hands continued to generate the vacuum. It was the exact same look she had given him immediately before she caught him in the electric trap in the swamp.

Doll bent forward abruptly and touched both hands to her partner's vacuum region. At the same time, the technique name call: "Anode Cathode!!"

Crack! Crack! Fierce sparks snapped to life in the space between her small hands. But this technique had an effective range of zero, and without some kind of conductor, she wouldn't be able to do any damage to distant enemies. So what on earth—?

It was then that Haruyuki witnessed an unbelievable scene.

From Duct's hands, a stormy spark vortex climbed backward through the vacuous region, reaching out to Haruyuki and Curren.

"Unh…Aah?!" All Haruyuki could manage was a hoarse cry. His avatar, unable to move from being sucked into the wind, was enveloped in a dazzling electric light. The shock made his head spin. His body froze; he couldn't even speak.

The remaining 40 percent of his health gauge was mercilessly ripped away by the storm of current. His special-attack gauge was charged by the same measure, but it was nowhere near enough for him to fight this wind and take to the skies.

"Glow discharge," Aqua Current announced abruptly. "In pressures close to vacuum lows, the insulation between the electrodes is destroyed, and the current flows through the air."

"Heh-heh, you really know your stuff, bouncer!" Nickel Doll smiled sweetly,

fiery sparks shooting from her hands. “It’s me and Sandy’s ultra-gorgeous combo attack. First public appearance in this place. Whaddaya think? It might not be on the same level as that old purple lady’s super-high-voltage arc discharge, but our thing still works pretty good, huh?”

Old purple lady? Who’s that? The thought flickered through his mind, but the raging storm of sparks sent it flying.

The terrifying part of a combination attack like this was that while they were subject to the damaging power of the electrical current and the sudden wind that kept them from moving, the rate of consumption of the special-attack gauges was overwhelmingly low, despite the very showy nature of the attack. If this were one person’s technique, the attack would have barely lasted five seconds even from a full gauge. But there was enough left in the special-attack gauges of both Doll and Duct to burn through all of Haruyuki’s little remaining HP with change left over.

Here, Haruyuki finally felt a chill run up his back. *Am I going to lose? Lose, and have my points taken?*

Faced with a terror so powerful that it made him want to give up everything and crumple into a ball on the ground, Haruyuki gritted his teeth and fought back.

Even if I’m going to lose, I’m going to charge ahead and go down fighting. That’s the only thing I can do right now. Even if I can’t fly up, I can fly forward.

He still had enough HP to break through this electrical storm and strike one blow. So then he’d fly. *She* would definitely do the same thing. *Okay…*

Fly! Haruyuki called out in his mind, and the wings on his back trembled faintly, spread out, and—

“You’re fine.” A calm voice washed over him. A hand was placed on his left shoulder. From the palm, a transparent stream of water flowed over Haruyuki’s entire body, completely covering his armor. Smooth, sleek. The world was suddenly blanketed by a babbling murmur that was somehow calming, reminiscent of something warm and long gone.

Poof! All the pain disappeared.

At first, he thought the enemy combo attack had ended. But that wasn't it. The glowing discharge sparks still filled the vortex of the vacuum, raging and storming. And yet none of the current made it to his body. The veneer of water completely cut it off, so that all it did was crawl harmlessly around on the surface.

But…but this…

"Impossible!" Sand Duct called out, the vacuum still streaming from both hands. "Water's a conductor! Why…why would it deflect the current?!"

"In my water, there is not a single impurity," Aqua Current replied coolly. "The pure water of theory."

"Huh? Ah?!" Nickel groaned, as if intuiting something.

Curren nodded. "Water with zero impurities is essentially a perfect insulator. Electric attacks do not work on me."

Haruyuki's eyes snapped up to check the health gauges in the top left of his view. Although Silver Crow's had dropped below 20 percent into the red, Curren's gauge was still green with 90 percent left in it. Even this terrifying combination attack of Doll and Duct didn't do the slightest bit of damage to the bouncer.

So strong. This kind of strength at level one…

There was no way she was a newbie. Most likely, she had fought her way through the Accelerated World for many long years, so many years that Haruyuki couldn't even begin to imagine it. The vast battle experience and the unwavering confidence in the water that was her own attribute produced a power that easily blew away any difference in levels.

Finally, the special-attack gauges of both Doll and Duct ran out, essentially simultaneously.

"You've shown me what I needed to see." After collecting the defensive membrane of water from Haruyuki, Aqua Current took a step forward, accompanied by a *splash*. "That's a nice trick, Doll, Duct."

"Ngh! Eeeeeee!!" Nickel Doll shrieked piercingly. Kicking and screaming on

top of Sand Duct, she shot the index fingers of both hands straight out at Haruyuki and Curren. “If this is the way it is, then it’s on! For real! No tricks! We’re going to corner you and then show you what we’re really made of!”

“Roger!”

The large and small avatars snapped their fists up into a ready position at the same time and charged in a straight line.

“Just what we were hoping for!” Aqua Current shouted back, cycling the streaming water armor of her entire body even more swiftly. “Let’s go, Crow!”

“O-okay!” Haruyuki kicked at the ground to follow her.

Perhaps seeing that this was the final climax, the Gallery members around them cried out in excitement. Bathed in their cheers, the four avatars collided in a dazzling display of light and sound, and everything melted away into the white-hot vortex produced by the passion and excitement of the duel.

6

Challenging twice, challenged twice. After winning a total of four tag-team matches, Haruyuki's burst points had been brought back up to seventy, well within the safe zone.

"And with that, my job is complete." The neurospeak voice was clear in Haruyuki's mind as he returned to the real world.

The girl in the red glasses sitting across the table from him reached out to her white, semitransparent Neurolinker. Following her lead, Haruyuki cut off his connection to the global net at the same time. The earth-shaped icon disappeared from the right edge of his virtual desktop. And with that, their names were erased from the Chiyoda area matching list.

"Phew." Shifting his gaze to the XSB cable dangling between them, Haruyuki let out a long breath. A mere thirty seconds had passed on his clock display since the start of their first duel. But those thirty seconds had been dense, concentrated in a way he had experienced only a few times in these last two weeks fighting as a Burst Linker. The aftershocks of hitting and being hit mercilessly still reverberated within him.

After a lethargic five seconds or so, Haruyuki lifted his face with a gasp and looked at the real girl behind Aqua Current, the bouncer who had saved him.

A mysterious light still shone in the eyes on the other side of her glasses, while he could make out no clear expression on her lips. He felt like he actually had more questions he wanted to ask her now than he did before the duel started. But at that moment, there was something he needed to do before anything else.

Unusually for him, Haruyuki held the gaze of the girl for more than a second

as he transmitted all his thoughts through the direct cable: *“Thank you so much. Really…Thank you.”* He blinked over and over to hold back the tears that blurred his vision, unbidden.

Curren looked at Haruyuki, and a very faint smile crossed her lips. *“I had fun as well. And thanks to you fighting so hard, I got to see the trump cards of more than a few Burst Linkers.”*

Indeed, in their first duel, with Nickel Doll and Sand Duct, after getting them to show off their so-called super-special attack, Aqua Current had crushed it before immediately bringing the fight into close-range combat and finishing both of them off with a blade of flowing water. The next three duels followed similar trajectories, so he felt like there had always been at least one tight spot. Naturally, as a bodyguard, Curren likely had had a strategy every time. She had no doubt been confident she could completely protect him if it came down to that.

Recalling the thrilling fights, Haruyuki blurted, *“If I had to say, I actually prefer settling things before the trump cards are played.”*

“That’s boring.” The slightly boyish girl smiled even more mysteriously.

When he thought about this combined with the fact that she knew all about Silver Crow’s abilities beforehand, and above all else, the fact that she wanted his real information as payment for the job, it was obvious that she was collecting a wide range of information on all the Burst Linkers. However, what the purpose of that might have been, he couldn’t begin to imagine. And the answer to the question of whether or not she was actually a “she” was still as unclear as ever.

The sense of relief at escaping his state of near death and his interest in the many mysteries of Aqua Current mixed together in his heart, causing Haruyuki to sigh once more. It seemed like no matter what they talked about, he would just butt up against these core questions one after another, so he tried tossing out a question that seemed harmless enough.

“Um, speaking of which, I heard from a friend that this Chiyoda Ward area is always depopulated. Because on top of it being very large, there’s a no-entry zone right in the middle, which makes it hard to fight in.”

“That’s essentially it.” Curren nodded, sending the turned-in ends of her short hair swinging, and took a sip of her still-steaming Darjeeling tea. *“But there are a lot of schools from Ochanomizu to Jimbocho, and there are a number of Burst Linkers who call this place home as well. Everyone prefers to fight at home, so on Saturday afternoons, it’s customary for people to gather in this neighborhood to duel.”*

“W-wow…So then, is your home around here, too, Curren?” Haruyuki asked without thinking, but Curren naturally did not reply. Instead, she continued to explain in quiet neurospeak.

“But I chose this place today because in the worst-case scenario, I could have you flee to the other side of the no-entry zone.”

“O-oh! I get it.” He was deeply impressed and let out another long breath. In other words, for an experienced Burst Linker like Curren, the fight started from the selection of the area.

Just because I escaped from a bad situation doesn’t mean I can sit back and be happy with that. I still have so much more to learn. My road as a Burst Linker is still only just beginning. First, as soon as possible, I have to get up to level four, where my partner—Taku—is waiting…

When this thought crossed his mind, Haruyuki finally remembered that Takumu was physically waiting for him in the hamburger shop. It had already been over twenty minutes since they separated on the other side of the intersection. No doubt he was fretting about whether Haruyuki managed to recover his points safely or if he had lost everything.

He hadn’t yet asked Curren anything about what he really wanted to know, but he had to report to Takumu first. He was sure to meet Curren again. And the next time, it wouldn’t be as client and bouncer, it would be as Burst Linkers.

With this in mind, Haruyuki took a deep breath and lowered his head once more. *“Um, I have a friend waiting nearby. I’m sure he’s worried, so I should maybe get going. Curren, really, thank you for today.”*

“You’re welcome. But…” A grin larger than anything he’d seen since he slammed into her in front of the washrooms spread across her lips. Pulled along by her good humor, his own lips started to turn up at the edges, and then she

continued, *“There’s still one more thing I have to get from you.”*

“Huh? S-sure, what’s that?” He set himself back down in his chair and blinked in surprise.

Aqua Current’s eyes glittered on the other side of her red glasses. *“The rest of my compensation.”* And then her lips moved slightly as she soundlessly shouted the acceleration command.

Skreeeee! The sound of impact slammed into Haruyuki’s consciousness. The lights went down in his field of view, and then he saw a familiar font blazing red:

HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!

The duel field on his fifth time that day was a Moonlight stage, pale light streaming down to the ground. Haruyuki stood stock-still on the roof of a palace-shaped building, dyed a color reminiscent of bones.

There was no one in the Gallery around them. Because this was a direct duel, the field was closed and disallowed entry to anyone other than the combatants.

A little ways off, the incarnation of water stood quietly, a pale gold in the moonlight. The only sound was the faint babbling of the four streams of water spilling off hands and feet and carving an arc in the air almost like wings on its return to her fountainhead.



When the numbers of the timer, which started at 1,800, had reached 1,770, Haruyuki finally opened his mouth and uttered timidly, “Uh. Um, what is the rest of your compensation? Why go to all the trouble of a duel?”

Eyes that shone blue beyond the flowing water blinked once, slowly. “To take all the points you have now as payment…Isn’t that what you’re thinking?”

Her voice had lost nearly all of the strong filter applied to it in the four battles up to that point; it sounded very much like Curren’s real-world voice.

Considering this, Haruyuki slowly cocked his head.

“My…points? No, but that’s—you just replenished them.”

“At the same time as I replenished them, I collected information. Now that I’ve thoroughly analyzed your fighting abilities, I’ll take your points. This way is many more times effective than fighting solo to earn points.”

Splrsh.

The avatar took a step forward, accompanied by the light sound of water. But all Haruyuki could do was give voice to his next question, still standing stiff as a board.

“You say that, but…you can’t exactly take seventy points in one duel.”

“The scary thing about direct duels is that you can’t get the cable out right away. After the duel is over, you return to the real world, you move your real arm, you pull the cable out of your Neurolinker. But way before you can do all that, your opponent’s accelerated again.”

Splrsh. Another step forward.

“B-but I was told that there wasn’t a single Burst Linker who you had failed to protect, who had lost all their points.”

“More correctly, it would be no one’s ever lost all their points in a normal duel with a Gallery. Can you really say that there are no Burst Linkers who didn’t disappear in a direct duel after that, without anyone knowing?” The words sent a shiver up his spine, and the water racing around her body sped up ever so slightly. “Now. Get ready. Show me everything you have.”

A fierce intensity pushed at him from the slim avatar, and his breath stopped.

Haruyuki had only felt this kind of pressure once before. On the roof of that hospital, the first time he set eyes on Black Lotus, the avatar of his teacher and parent, Kuroyukihime. Just that one time.

Overawed, Haruyuki raised his arms and moved to ready them in front of and behind him. But he quickly dropped them again.

“Do you give up?” Aqua Current asked, still emitting that same aura.

Haruyuki slowly shook his head. “Um. Not quite.”

Even now in this situation, his mind was quiet for some reason. He wasn’t giving up, but it wasn’t like he’d decided that everything Aqua Current had said had been a lie. It was just something modest yet important inside of him that lowered his hands.

“Um. Since the first tag match I fought with you, Curren—no, since before that, when I bumped into you in front of the washroom, I’ve—I don’t know. I trusted you. Like, this is a good person; this person will definitely save me.”

Beneath the flowing water, the blue eyes blinked once more. Staring at their light head-on, Haruyuki continued speaking.

“It’s like, even if you betrayed that feeling, I don’t want to fight you with hatred. A little while ago, I fought with the friend who’s waiting for me downstairs. We fought for real. We threw all our feelings—all the anger and resentment we’d been carrying around for years—at each other. But at the end of that fight, I trusted him, and he trusted me. I decided then. Once I trust someone, I’m always going to trust them. Because…that’s the same as trusting yourself.” He took a deep breath, and smiling faintly beneath his mirror surface, he finished up, “And I…I dunno. I like you. And stuff. Girl or boy.”

Hearing this, Aqua Current blinked once more, and the incredible pressure emanating from her entire body disappeared. She pulled both arms in, joining them to the water flow of her body.

“I’m sorry. That was a lie.”

The instant he heard this, even though he had believed that it was, Haruyuki

did indeed stagger a little. He managed to brace himself, and after staring vacantly at Curren for a moment, he asked, “H-huh? Why would you do that?”

“Because you directed so defenselessly. I wanted to scare you a little. But that didn’t work too well.”

“Well, inside, I was super freaked-out.”

Curren looked at Haruyuki, and smiled gently on the other side of her veil of water. Or at least, he felt like she did.

Accompanied by the splashing of water as she approached him, she turned around at his side and looked up at the enormous moon hanging in the night sky. Haruyuki’s own gaze followed, and then a quiet voice reached his ears.

“That friend…I want you to treasure him.”

“Yeah…I’m going to.”

“…A long, long time ago, I also had a lot of companions—friends. And a master who I trusted and loved more than anyone.”

Her quiet voice rode the gentle babbling of the flowing water and flowed toward him. The sound made Haruyuki feel the long, long flow of time.

“But something happened, and my companions all went different ways. My master disappeared from the Accelerated World. And my friends went far away, one after another. But I still believe that we’ll all come together again… that there will be a time when we can walk together, looking up at a beautiful night sky like this again.”

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt like he saw a vision.

A group of avatars marching along beneath the beautiful starry sky. Chatting excitedly, laughing together, they walked along to some distant land.

“Yeah. I’m sure that time will come,” he said.

Curren placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. She moved around from his left to stand in front of him and set her other hand on his other shoulder. This close up, Haruyuki met her gaze and felt like he briefly spied the true face of the water avatar.

Aqua Current stared firmly into Haruyuki's eyes and said with a smile, "What I said before was mostly a lie, but one thing was true."

"Huh? What?"

"I need to receive the rest of my compensation, which only you can give me."

Haruyuki stared at her blankly.

"It's the me that's inside you," Curren murmured. "Memories of me."

"M-memories?"

"Yes. It's still a little early for you and me to be meeting. You have to support your master and walk with her one step at a time, hand in hand, down that long, long road. Until then, we Elements should not intervene."

Haruyuki didn't understand the meaning of most of what Aqua Current was saying. His eyes wide open, the majority of his view was filled with the flow of transparent water and the glitter of those blue eyes.

"Later on, as she starts to move forward on her own feet with her sword of faith drawn again, I'm sure we will meet once more. So right now, I'm going to erase the me within you."

"B-but, I mean, erasing memories…how…?"

What Aqua Current was speaking of was absurd. Even though he knew that somewhere in his head, the gentle babbling of the streams and the flickering light itself blanketed his consciousness, washing away all thought.

"I…I'm the only one who can. 'People are a circuit filled with water—all knowledge and memory flowing is water itself.'…This is my will."

"W…ill…," Haruyuki murmured absently, and Curren gently pressed her forehead up against his.

The whole world was enveloped in water. From somewhere far away, he heard a voice.

"Now. We part ways temporarily. We'll meet again, Silver Crow. Someday at the end of the path that your wings guide you down…"

Pssh pssh. Pssh pssh. The water had at some point started flowing into

Haruyuki. It filled his consciousness, his thoughts, his memories, and passed through.

“Memory Leak.”

From very, very far away, he felt like he heard a voice. The white light of the babbling brook washed it all away—everything grew distant.

Finally, there was the sound of someone’s gentle voice.

Count to fifty and open your eyes.

7

…Forty-five, forty six, forty-seven… Eyes closed, he counted innocently. *Forty-eight, forty-nine…fifty.*

He slowly opened his eyes.

Round white table. It looked a lot like the ones in the lounge at school. On the table was a glass of orange juice with a third or so of the juice left. On the other side, an empty chair.

He blinked rapidly and absently surveyed his surroundings. A cafeteria. At the other tables, young people his age and older customers were enjoying a brief afternoon respite, paper media in hand.

I…I came here to duel. To replenish my few remaining burst points…I asked for the protection of the bouncer and fought together as a tag team…and we won. Right, we won. We got my points back up to seventy. Now I don't have to be freaked about total loss anymore.

The details of the fight were strangely hazy. In fact, it was like the memory flowed away along the edge when he tried to recall it. However, rather than thinking this strange, Haruyuki clenched both hands and held them up in a pose of determination.

"I'm totally never leveling up by accident again!" he said in a quiet voice, and he hurriedly dropped his head at the doubtful stares he got from the people around him. Perhaps because of his immense relief, he was suddenly starving, and though he drained the remaining juice in the glass in a single gulp, it was still very much not enough.

I'll have a hamburger or something when I report to Takumu on the mission's success.

With this thought, Haruyuki threw himself to his feet. Befitting a cafeteria run by a bookstore, a paper bill had been inserted into the glass cylinder on the table. He pulled it out and checked it, but all it said, of course, was one orange juice at 380 yen.

He settled up at the register—although this at least was through his Neurolinker—and rode the elevator down to the first floor. He passed the new releases display and headed outside. Pulling his head in at the chilly November wind, he crossed the road at the Suruga Daishita intersection just as the light turned green.

Takumu was waiting in a fast-food place immediately on the other side. He snaked through the crowd and went to slip through the large automatic door. There was a woman coming out of the shop at the same time, so he stepped to one side and let her pass. Her inward-curling hair shook a dozen centimeters or so to the side, and a faint fragrance drifted up.

Pssh. Pssh pssh.

Abruptly, he felt like he heard the light babbling of a stream, and Haruyuki stopped in front of the automatic door.

“Huh?” He looked back, but of course, there was no water flowing there. The sun was shining, and the tiles of the sidewalk were dry.

He thought that maybe someone had spilled a bottle of some drink, but there was no sign of anything like that. An older person carrying a bag with the logo of the bookstore on it, a group of foreigners who looked like tourists visiting the bookstore district that was Jimbocho, a girl in a peacoat moving away at a brisk pace—no one appeared to have heard the sound.

Guess I imagined it.

Turning around, Haruyuki forgot about the water and hurried through the automatic door of the hamburger shop. When he looked around, the sight of his friend waving his left hand wildly from a seat near the window leapt into view.

He had apparently already guessed that the mission had gone well from the look on Haruyuki’s face. Even still, Haruyuki popped up the thumb on his right

hand.

He made a beeline for Takumu, whose fine features were wrinkled up in laughter almost to the point of tears.

ACCEL・WORLD

ELEMENTS

ROAR OF THE SEA AT THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

The Story Thus Far

April 2047. Haruyuki Arita, Takumu Mayuzumi, and Chiyuri Kurashima have advanced to eighth grade at Umesato Junior High School and been placed in the same class. A few days earlier, Chiyuri succeeded in installing Brain Burst as Takumu's "child," and the three of them vowed to go forward hand in hand, not only as childhood friends, but also as comrades in the Legion Nega Nebulus.

However, the appearance of a new enemy, in the form of new kendo team member Seiji Nomi, utterly destroyed the bond between the three. He beat down Takumu in kendo matches, he grasped Haruyuki's weakness, he threatened Chiyuri—and he stole from Haruyuki the greatest strength of his duel avatar Silver Crow: the ability to fly.

Haruyuki fell into an unprecedented abyss of despair. And on top of all this, their Legion Master, Kuroyukihime, was in far-flung Okinawa on a school trip. As Haruyuki tried to bear up and face this total adversity, he received a long-distance call one spring day from Kuroyukihime…

1

“I have to go. Okay, I’m hanging up now. Bye!”

Kuroyukihime finished the call rather hurriedly and stopped waving her hand long enough to press the DISCONNECT button on her virtual desktop.

A window was displayed in the center of her field of view, featuring the roundly plump face of the pink pig avatar. She gulped hard when it disappeared, pushing back the sadness that immediately rose up.

She took a few steps onto the burning sand of the beach, only to slip under the shade of an anti-UV/IR beach parasol. There, she picked up a small movie camera from the table mounted on the pole of the parasol. In the current day and age, when nearly all Neurolinkers were equipped with a lens, the device belonged to another era, but given that it was specialized to its task, the quality was remarkably good. Even if it did mean a bit of added weight in her luggage, she deeply wanted to send high-definition video back to the boy in Tokyo’s Suginami Ward.

She turned the camera off and tucked it away in a small pouch, then returned the whole thing to the table, where she sat down in a deck chair under the umbrella. As she did so, a faint sigh slipped out of her.

This is no good. He wouldn’t want me to be to be depressed on this trip. Okay, on the count of three, I cheer up. One, two—

But Kuroyukihime didn’t make it to three. Because at some point, two hands reached out from behind to press down tightly on her bathing suit—or more precisely, to massage her chest.

“Hnggaaah?!” She leapt out of the deck chair, spun around in the air, and landed facing a girl in a one-piece swimsuit.

Her short, fluffy hair matched perfectly with her gentle appearance, her face with its unceasing gentle smile. Her name was Megumi Wakamiya. Like Kuroyukihime, she was a member of the student council at the private Umesato Junior High School. She was the secretary.

“M-M-M-Megumi! Wh-wh-what are you doing all of a sudden?!”

“It’s just—I called you a bunch, Hime, but you didn’t even notice me. It’s time to meet for the sea kayak tour.”

“O-oh…right…” She sat down in the deck chair again, and after thinking for about two seconds, she shook her head slightly. “Sorry, I’m skipping the tour. Because…How about we say I don’t feel well?”

She pressed the SCHOOL TRIP SCHEDULE shortcut icon on her virtual desktop and clicked on the sea kayak tour set for one PM in the plan that day. Kuroyukihime quickly pressed the CANCEL button in the dialog box that popped up and was about to type some trumped-up excuse into the reason box.

“If you put it’s ‘because you’re not feeling well,’ they’ll want follow-up info, which’ll be a hassle, Hime. I’d go with ‘school council business,’ maybe,” Megumi said, grinning.

“I get it.” Kuroyukihime’s own lips turned up at the ends unconsciously. “After they worked us so hard to get everything ready, we should at least be allowed this much of a perk.”

She typed in exactly what she had been told and then dismissed the window with a wave of her right hand. She leaned back in the deck chair and exhaled lightly before turning her face to see her friend off.

But Megumi, who had ostensibly come to fetch Kuroyukihime for the optional tour, lowered herself into the other deck chair to the right of the umbrella pole, and Kuroyukihime blinked unthinkingly a few times.

Feeling her friend’s gaze upon her, the student council secretary winked. “I’m passing on the sea kayak, too. It’s a family rule handed down by my ancestors to never get on a boat that doesn’t have a lifeboat.”

“Were your ancestors on a luxury ship that was in a shipwreck?” Grinning wryly, she reached out to the cooler on the sand and pulled out two bottles of

shequasar, a lemon juice native to Okinawa, handing one to Megumi.

They both opened their mouths at the same time, both made sour faces at the same time, and both set the bottles down on the table at the same time before looking at each other once more and laughing briefly in tandem.

Tuesday, April 16, 2047.

The 120 new ninth graders at Umesato Junior High, including Kuroyukihime and Megumi, were in Okinawa for a six-night, seven-day school trip. It was still just the third day, which meant that the following day would finally be the turning point.

They had needed to choose their itineraries in advance from two plans, and Kuroyukihime and Megumi had registered for the Naha-Henoko–Yoron Island–Naha course. The white beach and the emerald-green sea spreading out before their eyes at the moment was Henoko Beach, in the center of the southern part of Okinawa's main island. Thirty years or so earlier, there had apparently been a huge uproar about whether to move the American military base in Futenma here, but in the end, a super-large-scale semisubmersible megafloat had been built in Kin Bay, a little ways off, and the matter had been settled with a proposal to move the majority of airfield functions there.

The silver shadows that cut across the blue sky from time to time were likely American military planes taking off from that base. Compared with the new Self-Defense Force unmanned battle craft they normally saw in the sky in Tokyo, these were relatively large, but because they were at such high altitudes, the noise was barely noticeable. It seemed that their Umesato classmates, who had been frolicking on the beach until earlier, had left on the sea kayak tour, so now only the sound of the waves coming and going reached their ears between pockets of silence.

Kuroyukihime took another sip of her flat lemon juice, flicked away a drop that fell on the top of her black bikini, and sighed quietly. *Four more days.*

It wasn't that the trip was particularly boring, or that she hadn't wanted to come. She understood the objective fact that your junior high school class trip was a once-in-a-lifetime event, and in light of her slightly complicated family situation, she wouldn't be able to go on a real trip again for some time. If things

went badly, she might not even get to go on her high school trip.

Which was why she should be working hard to make every possible memory and fill up all the photo and video space on her Neurolinker so that she would regret nothing later—in her head, she knew that, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't throw herself wholeheartedly into trip mode. The reason was obvious. Because at minimum, twice a day, she couldn't stop herself from thinking, *I want to hurry back to Tokyo. I want to go home and talk with* him *like we always do.*

And it was also clear that Megumi Wakamiya, in the deck chair to the right with her eyes shut and a pleased look on her face, had seen right through to this inner turmoil.

Kuroyukihime slowly inhaled air that smelled of ocean and flowers and then offered quietly, "Megumi."

Her friend's eyelids slid upward, and she cocked her head in a questioning way.

"Sorry." She dipped her head lightly. "Making you look out for me. You actually wanted to go out in the kayak, didn't you?"

"Totally fine. This is my job, too, after all."

"Y-your job?"

"It's right there in the Umesato student council regulations. The job of the secretary is, one: create meeting minutes; and, two: look out for the moody vice president."

"N-no way. You're lying." She pursed her lips tightly.

Megumi laughed delightedly before turning her eyes out toward the horizon. "Honestly, it's fine. I love being luxurious with time, all laid-back like this. I mean, you know that, Hime."

She *did* often sprawl on the sofa in the student council office and stare out into the courtyard, but that wasn't so much her being laid-back as her racking her brains for work to put in the literature club magazine, which she was also a member of. Which meant that Megumi had friends in clubs other than

Kuroyukihime, and yet she had shut them out completely to stay by Kuroyukihime's side during the whole trip.

"Sorry. Thanks, Megumi," she murmured once more, in a voice that was almost soundless. Inwardly, she added, *From the bottom of my heart, I'm so grateful that I have a friend like you waiting for me in a place unconnected with* that world.

She had long been aware that she had an intensely melancholic side.

Back when the first Nega Nebulus had been still around, she had always had so many friends close to her, starting with Fuko Kurashima (Sky Raker) and Utai Shinomiya (Ardor Maiden). When she suddenly wanted to talk to someone in the middle of the night, if she dived into the closed net for the Legion that Graphite Edge, one of the Four Elements, had set up, she would definitely run across someone's avatar—and then they would do a normal duel, or join a Gallery, or head over to the Unlimited Neutral Field and hunt Enemies, or do some quest or another; she had plenty of ways to forget her sadness.

But in the week that started with that blood-soaked night and leading up to the tragic events at the Castle a little over two years earlier, she had lost everything.

She had been able to stay disconnected from the global net for two long years in order to hide herself from the waves of assassins sent by the Six Kings (although to be more accurate, the seat of the Red King had been vacant for a while after the incident) not so much due to her positive will that she would restart things again one day, but rather, due in large part to the fact that she was afraid those old bonds had been severed completely. However, even in her last stronghold, the Umesato local net, late last summer, a mysterious hunter named Cyan Pile had appeared and forced her hand.

Should she release the seal on her duel avatar Black Lotus and counterattack with all her might? Or should she use the final card remaining to her and exercise her copy/install right to seek out a new bond?

If she had chosen the former, it would have been an easy thing to cut down Cyan Pile in a single blow. But if, as a result, Pile abandoned the hunt himself, she feared that might bring about the worst-case scenario in which he sold her

real information to the kings.

Thus, Kuroyukihime had wagered on a one-in-a-million miracle. She would seek out a student at Umesato Junior High who might have the compatibility to install Brain Burst, make them her first and last “child,” and together they’d crack Pile in the real.

The task had been extremely difficult. With her privileges as student council vice president, she had accessed the school database and scrutinized the records of all the students in the school, but there was no way she could know affinity as a Burst Linker from grades and gym class results.

However, one day, for no real reason, she had opened the high score list for the game corner in the local net and discovered a number that stunned her. A score that stuck out from all the other games—literally, an order of magnitude greater. Half doubting its reality, she had tried the virtual squash game herself, but she couldn’t score even half of the 2,630,000 that “nickname: HAL” had produced.

She had half forgotten her initial purpose as she wondered just who this student could be and started monitoring the local net. Two days later, the person who had shown up in the squash corner—deserted even at lunchtime—was a very round, pink pig-shaped avatar. *Impossible. It can’t be.* Kuroyukihime had watched from behind an object, while before her eyes, the pink pig had gripped the racket and hit the ball as if trying to banish some gloom.

After witnessing him beat his own high score a few minutes later, she had murmured without realizing it, *Eureka. I found you.*

The pink pig HAL, aka the boy Haruyuki Arita, cleared the compatibility check for Brain Burst just as Kuroyukihime had believed he would, and the silver duel avatar Silver Crow was generated from deep within his heart.

In the beginning, all she wanted him to do was check the direction of the guide cursor when Cyan Pile attacked, but he displayed ability and possibility far greater than anything she had expected. Or maybe that was inevitable. Because the boy Arita had a reaction speed that left Kuroyukihime, with all her vast combat experience in the Accelerated World, unceremoniously in the lurch even before he became a Burst Linker.

Now, he was not only her lone child and the first member of the new Nega Nebulus, but also an incredibly precious person. In proportion with his abilities, he was hurt extremely easily, and her desire to protect and soothe him was always mixed with the desire to serve him, given that he would likely reach such great heights one day as to surpass even her and the other kings. Something deep within her throbbed painfully. If that was dependence, then so be it. Because he had put a stop to the cold drops of sadness that had fallen endlessly on the surface of her heart these last two years.

However, because of this, Kuroyukihime was left unable to fully enjoy a weeklong school trip. Naturally, if she video-called like she had earlier, she could see his face whenever she wanted, and on a dive call, it was even possible for their avatars to touch, but she couldn't help but feel an inexplicable forlornness at their physical separation—1,600 kilometers in the real world. Wasn't he struggling all on his own when she wasn't there, he who was so easily hurt and yet so obstinate? She always ended up thinking like this.

"I haven't seen that look on your face in a while, Hime." A voice sounded abruptly, followed by a slender finger gently stroking the hair on her forehead.

When she opened her eyes, which she had closed at some point, Megumi was leaning forward out of the neighboring deck chair. Her gentle smile was right there next to Kuroyukihime.

"And what look is that?" she asked in return.

There was a slight pause before an unexpected answer came: "That look that says you want to go back. Not to Tokyo…but to some world that's not here."

Kuroyukihime involuntarily gasped. "Megumi."

She had confirmed that Megumi Wakamiya was not a Burst Linker two years earlier when they met as new students. In fact, one major factor in her decision to go to Umesato Junior High was because there were no Burst Linkers in the student body or among the students taking the entrance exam. Otherwise, it would not have fulfilled its role as a "cocoon" to hide her from the assassins of the Six Kings.

Staring into Kuroyukihime's wide-open eyes from a mere fifteen centimeters away, Megumi announced even more surprisingly, "I know you have another

world that I can't see. And that maybe the real Hime is there on the other side."

"The real…me."

"Yup. I mean, ever since we met, you've had this look on your face like you're a little lost kid. Until last fall…until you met him."

At this, Kuroyukihime's face grew hot. Unconsciously, she brought the lemon-juice bottle she held up to her cheek.

"Me too, you know," Megumi said, chin in hands next to her, her own eyes growing hazy. "I get that feeling, a little."

"…You do?"

"Yeah. There was this book I loved when I was really, really little. I read it over and over every day, and I still never got tired of it. Every time I went to the world of that book, I would meet someone new or have new adventures. But… at some point, the book disappeared. And now, I can't remember its title or what it said—nothing." Here, she closed her mouth for a moment, and her eyes met Kuroyukihime's as she smiled a little. "Maybe the reason I joined the literature club was so I could re-create the book myself."

"Re-create…Do you think you could?"

"Not a chance." She shook her head and laughed out loud. It was Megumi's usual kind laughter, but for the first time, Kuroyukihime realized there was a touch of sadness within it.

"Sometimes…I try to write down the images in the fragments that come back to me every so often, but when I do, it's not right. The only thing I remember properly is that on the first page, there was a spell to keep reading the rest. I just know that as long as I can't remember that spell, I won't be able to get to the world of the book."

"Megumi…" Unsure of what to say in response, Kuroyukihime simply hesitated. The words *You'll remember someday* would have been easy. But she suddenly wondered if she had any right to offer such platitudes when, in fact, she could readily access her ethereal world and Megumi could not.

The silence was broken after a mere three seconds. Grinning her usual bright

smile this time, Megumi leaned forward with some force. “This is no good! I’m supposed to be watching out for you, but this is just the opposite. It’s because we’re in this dark shadow.” She reached out and pressed a button on the umbrella pole. The silver screen rotated to wind itself up.

The blazing sun that poured down on them instantly dazzled Kuroyukihime’s eyes, and Megumi took the opportunity to flip her with both hands.

“Ah! Wh-what are you doing?!”

“Come on! Don’t fight me. I’m going to rub some oil on your back, Hime.”

“I—I can do that myself!” She kicked and slapped, but Megumi’s fingers pressed down on an acupuncture point or a pressure point or something, and she couldn’t get away.

“And look, the stimulation might make you grow.”

“Wh-where?!”

“Ha-ha-ha! It’s obvious.”

As Megumi spoke, a viscous liquid dribbled down onto Kuroyukihime’s back, followed by the merciless onslaught of Megumi’s hands. With absolutely zero experience in having another person apply sunscreen for her, the sensation was so new that Kuroyukihime involuntarily cried out, “Neeyaaah!”

A shriek that Arita would never, ever be allowed to hear rang out across Henoko Beach.


UV

2

Three PM.

Kuroyukihime and Megumi joined up with the students returning from kayaking and headed back to their hotel. In their shared twin room, they took turns showering and then changed into their street clothes. With Kuroyukihime in a black camisole and three-quarter-length leggings, and Megumi in a pale-yellow dress, they headed out for a walk and perhaps some shopping along the way before supper.

Camp Schwab, the American military base formerly in Henoko, had been downsized a couple decades earlier, and the area it once occupied had been redeveloped as a large-scale marine resort. Both sides of the street from the hotel to the beach were lined with colorful shops, offering a taste of the unfettered chaos of a southern country. In the previous century, junior high students on a school trip would never have been permitted to walk around without a guide in a place like this, but the power of the social camera network that blanketed the area ensured a high level of public order.

Given the low latitude, the sky was already colored a deep blue even at this hour. Kuroyukihime stared out over the exotic area, ambling along.

Occasionally, she spotted Umesato students among the bright colors of the souvenirs for sale. They looked like they were having fun as they squealed, weighing their budgets and the items before them, but Kuroyukihime lived alone even though she was still in junior high and had no need to buy souvenirs for her family. Although she did intend to choose a joint gift from her and Megumi to the current seventh-grade representative on the council, that was the only purchase she really had to make.

Thus, she was ready to put all her powers of search and judgment, along with

her entire budget, into a souvenir for her lone nonobligatory souvenir receiver—Arita, of course—but he had requested a *sata andagi* (an Okinawan doughnut) thirty centimeters round…a request whose parameters she was unsure were extremely difficult or not difficult at all. Walking down the street, she peeked into the *andagi* shops she spotted along the way, but of course, none of them were selling the item in question.

As she wondered whether she would have no choice but to do a search on the global net, even though the "found it myself" sense of being a hard-won prize would go down slightly, and how long the cake would keep anyway, she looked to one side and locked eyes with the grinning Megumi.

Unconsciously, she pressed a hand to her chest and nearly took a step back before clearing her throat lightly. "Megumi, don't you have to pick out some souvenirs?"

"Nah. I mean, I'm gonna buy something for my family at the airport on the last day, and unfortunately, I don't have a little lord awaiting my return to Tokyo."

"R-right. So then…Hmm. Right, how about we do this? Why don't we buy each other something, and then give them to each other once we're back at school?" she proposed airily.

But Megumi's face abruptly lit up. "That's a pretty good idea, for you, Hime."

"'For me'?" The phrase caught Kuroyukihime, but Megumi seemed to pay it no mind as she continued.

"But, Hime, that's basically a surprise present, right? So then, we can't make that happen shopping together like this. How about we go our separate ways for now and meet up at the entrance to the hotel in half an hour, at four?"

"R-right. Okay, let's do that." Kuroyukihime nodded.

Megumi quickly disappeared into the hustle and bustle, with a grin and the words, "I'm gonna find something that'll surprise you more than anything else this year!"

After a moment or two of standing frozen at the slightly unexpected reaction of her friend, Kuroyukihime started walking slowly again.

If she excluded the relationships she had formed in the Accelerated World, Megumi Wakamiya was without a doubt the person she was closest with at Umesato Junior High. Ever since the day two years earlier when they began school and Megumi started talking with her, they had never once fought. And although she did dislike how overly physically affectionate Megumi was, they had always had a good relationship.

But maybe that was because she had never once tried to get inside Megumi's head, Kuroyukihime realized belatedly. She did call her in the evenings sometimes, and they occasionally hung out on weekends, but they had never visited each other's houses. In Kuroyukihime's case, this was because she didn't want to discuss why she lived alone in a town house in Asagaya. But now that she was thinking about it, Megumi had never invited Kuroyukihime to her own house over the last two years. In fact, she basically never brought up the subject of her family at all. About all that Kuroyukihime knew was that Megumi lived in Honcho, Nakano Ward, and that she had a father, a mother, and an older sister, a family structure that closely resembled Kuroyukihime's own.

At the end of the second term of sixth grade, Kuroyukihime had caused an incident far beyond the level of a child's tantrum and had been expelled from her family home in Shirokanedai, Minato Ward. Her parents set a consulting lawyer as her sole supervisor and seemed to think that fulfilled their obligations as her guardians, given that they had essentially cut off all contact with her.

She had all this baggage, so she had been imagining—with absolutely no basis in reality—that Megumi lived happily and warmly with her close-knit family, but there wasn't a family in the world that didn't have any problems. Even Arita, whom she had discovered last fall and made her child, had divorced parents, and his mother, who had custody of him, didn't come home until late at night, leaving him to spend every evening alone.

So perhaps what lay beneath Megumi's constant smile was a kept secret all this time. As Kuroyukihime mulled this over, she peeked into a shop with a small showcase of shell work accessories on the left side of the road.

It was in that instant. *Skreeeee!!* The sharp sound of dry thunder assaulted Kuroyukihime's mind.

It was a sound she was used to hearing, the noise of the BB program installed in her Neurolinker accelerating her consciousness automatically a thousand times faster than reality. In other words, someone was challenging Kuroyukihime—the Burst Linker Black Lotus.

If this were in Tokyo, Kuroyukihime's mind would have switched over to duel mode without even a tenth of a second of lag, thanks to instincts honed through enormous battle experience, but now she couldn't help stiffening up just a little.

Whatever else, this was Okinawa. The edge of the edge of the social camera network. The literal borderland.

Given that currently, 99 percent of all Burst Linkers were concentrated in the twenty-three wards of Tokyo, there shouldn't have been any challengers showing up here. Or at least, that was her expectation before leaving for the trip. Even so, just in case, she had accelerated and checked the matching list when they landed at the airport in Naha and again passing through the city of Nago on the bus, but she had been the only one in the area. After that, she had relaxed her guard and left her Neurolinker connected to the global net, but here she was now, challenged in Henoko, not even close to being a large town.

Precisely because Kuroyukihime was a veteran, she was stunned by this development. But by the time the text HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER flamed up in her field of view and the world around her began to change, she had completely switched mental modes.

First, the tourists and shop clerks filling the street disappeared all at once. Then the shops on both sides turned into walls, piles of gray rocks. The walls were not new; they were crumbling in places and covered in moss and vines. At her feet, the earth was covered in a fine layer of white sand mixed with gravel.

At the same time as the stage finished generating, the word FIGHT!! bounced up in front of her eyes in flaming letters and then disappeared.

Before glancing down at her own transformation into her jet-black duel avatar, Kuroyukihime checked the level of her opponent in the upper right of her field of view. The number there was five.

She breathed a sigh of unconscious relief. If the number engraved there had

been nine, it would have been an ugly all-out war to survive, with no regard for appearances. She would have had to throw out everything she had, even her sealed special attacks. Getting control of her shallow breathing, she confirmed the feel of the sand-covered ground with the tips of her sharp swords.

“This is…the Ancient Castle stage? But something’s different. Maybe a change particular to the Okinawa area,” she murmured.

“This ain’t an Ancient Castle! It’s the Okinawan Fortress stage!” As if her monologue had been overheard, a powerful shout came from above her and off to one side.

Looking up, she spotted two human shapes—avatars standing on the gray castle wall with their backs to the evening sky. The one in front wore armor reminiscent of the sea, a blue tinged with green. The one standing to the rear was a vivid coral color. Both were female-type avatars with designs that emphasized curves.

Since it didn’t seem that her opponent was going to come charging in at her right away, Kuroyukihime glanced at the corner of her display. The avatar name beneath the enemy health gauge read: Lagoon Dolphin Level 5, probably the name of the sea-colored avatar. Since it was a one-on-one duel, the coral avatar would have been the Gallery. At the moment, there was no way of learning her name or level, but Kuroyukihime could tell one thing at the very least. Normally, the Gallery couldn’t come within a ten-meter circle of the duelers, but since the coral one was obviously quite close to the sea color, they were either parent and child, or Legion members, or both.

“Hmm.” When Kuroyukihime let this slip quietly, the sea-colored Lagoon Dolphin leapt down rather forcefully from the top of the castle wall. It was over five meters tall, so there was the risk of taking fall damage if she bungled it, but she easily absorbed the impact, the joints of her avatar bending the bare minimum.

“Ah! W-wait, Ruka!” the coral one still on top of the wall cried out somewhat pathetically, and then hesitated several times on the very edge of the wall before jumping down with a *hup!* She landed hard on her butt, but since she was just a spectator, she didn’t have a health gauge to begin with.

“*Furah.* [Idiot.]” Dolphin looked at the coral girl brushing herself off as she stood up and shook her head. “*Wahji de machokeyo.* [Wait up there.]”

“B-but! You always do that kind of reckless stuff, Ruka—”

“*Kashimashii! Kakidamishi ya sa! Atehmehteh!* [Shut up! I’m testing her, right! Duh!]”

In contrast with the coral avatar, who used standard Japanese, albeit with a southern intonation, Dolphin’s words were fairly hardcore Okinawan dialect; what she was saying was a total mystery to Kuroyukihime.

The coral put a hand on Dolphin’s shoulder and dropped her voice significantly. “And, Ruka, if you keep using *Uchinaguchi*, this person’s not going to get anything. And our real objective is—”

“Ahhh, fine. I get it!” Dolphin shouted, and took a large step into the sandy road, snapped the index finger of her right hand out at Kuroyukihime, and finally uttered something intelligible. “You’re one of the students staying at that hotel on a school trip, yeah!”

Kuroyukihime glanced behind her to see that the resort hotel where the Umesato Junior High students were staying had been transformed into massive stone ruins. She turned to face Dolphin once more and nodded before responding with a question. “And you two are not tourists. So then you’re Burst Linkers who live in this area?”

“*Atehme*—I mean, o’course! I’m real *Uchinachu*, going back generations!”

“Oh! I—I basically am, too.” The coral girl behind Dolphin popped her right hand up into the air, and Kuroyukihime sank into thought.

Brain Burst 2039, the program required to become a Burst Linker, had been distributed to a hundred elementary school students living in the city of Tokyo eight years earlier, in the year 2039, just as the name implied. Since the requisite for copying and installing was a wired connection, the children obtaining the program were necessarily limited to those who lived within the twenty-three wards. Kuroyukihime, with seven years of play experience, didn’t know of a single Burst Linker living outside of the city.

However, to speak of the possibility, it could happen that someone who

became a Burst Linker moved out of Tokyo to Hokkaido or even Okinawa. No matter how high-level a warrior a Burst Linker might have been, in the real world, they were just elementary and middle school kids who couldn't live on their own. They were powerless to refuse to move because of a parent's job transfer or a divorce. And Burst Linkers who left for the borderlands of the Accelerated World in this way faced without exception nothing other than a gentle annihilation.

Or that was what Kuroyukihime had always assumed. With no one around to be your opponent in a duel, even if you had reached level four and could dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, you certainly wouldn't be able to hunt Enemies alone in any reliable way. And if you couldn't replenish your points, then it was obvious that at some point, you would use up the stock you'd brought from Tokyo and end up with a forced uninstall.

However, the sea-and coral-colored duel avatars standing before her now said they were born and raised in Okinawa. There were two theories that could explain their existence. A Burst Linker who moved from Tokyo to Okinawa created a child in this area and helped them grow by giving them their own points until they were at a level where they could hunt Enemies. Or Tokyo wasn't the only place the BB program was distributed in 2039. Either way, she couldn't help but have her curiosity piqued.

"Interesting." The word tumbled from Kuroyukihime's lips, and Lagoon Dolphin seemed to misinterpret the meaning behind it.

"Oh! You're into it! Wohkay! So I'll ask ya to go one round with us!"

Gesturing to the coral kid behind her with a wave, she spread her legs apart, lowered her stance, and readied her hands in front of her. From the daring form, apparently a striking-style blue type, a gust of fighting spirit blew up like the roar of the ocean wind.

Kuroyukihime unconsciously smiled beneath her mirrored goggles. *Interesting*, she repeated soundlessly to herself, with a different meaning than before.

She herself had no set "ready stance" for the start of a duel, but to match her opponent, she brought the sword of her left hand up in front and that of her

right down at her hip as she leaned forward.

Perhaps sensing something, from over ten meters away, the coral girl held both hands to her mouth and shouted, “B-be careful, Ruka! Your opponent’s level nine, you know!”

“Heh! That’s no big deal! Just two different from Master!”

This exchange set Kuroyukihime thinking once more. It appeared that these girls did not know what level nine meant in the Accelerated World. It was not simply two higher than level seven. They were prisoners with the name King, bound by the cruel rule of sudden death.

She took a breath and brought her tangential thoughts back in line. Once she had set foot in the stage, there was only the intensity of the duel.

“Right, levels are just numbers. Show no fear. Come at me with all your might!” she shouted sharply.

Lagoon Dolphin’s eye lens, all smooth flowing lines, glittered fiercely. “No need to tell me!”

Her feet kicked hard against the ground, white sand shooting up into the air. She instantly closed the nearly seven meters between them with a movement that was almost like sliding. She wouldn’t have been able to produce that kind of propulsive force with a single step from just her original avatar specs. Kuroyukihime also saw clear evidence of training in the attack that flowed smoothly out from the dash.

“Haah!” With a cry, her right arm shot out at chest level. The strain energy transmitted from hip to shoulder, to elbow, to fist created an almost-visible vortex in the air. In terms of speed alone, it didn’t quite beat the punch of Kuroyukihime’s child and beloved student Silver Crow, but it was slightly better in terms of weight.

However…

For Kuroyukihime, it was a simple matter to dodge the straight punch and simultaneously deal real damage to her opponent. She had only to place the sword of her left hand in the punch’s trajectory. The swords of the four limbs of the duel avatar Black Lotus, the embodiment of the attribute of absolute

severing, could slice through the hardest armor simply by touching it. The only ones who had ever managed to repel Lotus's swords without weapons or defensive tools and only the body of their avatar were the "Anomaly," Graphite Edge, one of the Four Elements of the former Nega Nebulus; the legendary berserker, the Armor of Catastrophe; and the invincible Green Grandé.

If Lagoon Dolphin's right straight collided with Kuroyukihime's sword, that fist would be easily cut in two, and she would probably lose her right arm up to the shoulder.

But rather than doing that, Kuroyukihime caught the tough thrust with the flat side of her left hand blade. Although the four swords of her avatar were furnished with absolute cutting power on the blade edge, as payment for that, the flat area was brittle. When she had been at lower levels, any number of enemies aimed for the wide center of her blades to beat and break them. The technique she had devised through long training in the Unlimited Neutral Field in her youthful days to compensate for that weak point was to catch the opponent's attack in a spiraling movement, reverse the power vector, and then release them—a reversal technique. She had named it the Way of the Flexible.

Dolphin's straight punch only caused a few meager sparks to shoot off when it came into contact with the sword before being swallowed up by a black vortex.

"Hunh!" Together with Kuroyukihime's short cry, the attack was repelled 180 degrees, to the rear. Unable to stay on her feet in that spot, the small, lightweight avatar flew over five meters through the air and slammed into the road on her back.

"*Agah!* [Ow!]" Although a small cry slipped out, she immediately shot her legs up into the air and got to her feet through the reaction; she seemed fairly strong against hits. Her HP gauge had decreased more than 10 percent, but she didn't seem to pay that any mind as she charged once more.

"*Sehaah!*"

An even more intense cry preceded a straight thrust with her right fist. To repeat the same technique that had already been perfectly evaded once, only with a different hand, Kuroyukihime wondered if perhaps she had overestimated this girl a little as she moved to catch the fist with the Way of the

Flexible once more.

And then Dolphin's entire body sank down, and she had no sooner spun around like a drill on the axis of her body than she was launching a super-low roundhouse kick that used the momentum of that spin with her right foot.

A surface-skimming kick after a punch, to create a feint. If she had used this attack after judging that Black Lotus's body balance must be weak from her unusual form, then she had fairly good instincts. There was no time to evade the kick closing in as it shot white sand into the air. That said, if the sword of Kuroyukihime's left foot were hit directly, even if the blow wasn't strong enough to break it, there was still the possibility of a fall. And unfortunately, she was still in the process of studying the Way of the Flexible in regard to her feet.

If she twisted her left leg a mere ninety degrees to the outside, Dolphin's shin would crash into Black Lotus's sword limb—known by another name as the passive ability "Terminate Sword"—and would be sliced clean through like butter from the force of her own technique. However, Kuroyukihime chose not to dodge.

"Hunh!" she cried sharply, plunging the sword of her left foot straight down. She felt hard resistance as she rammed her sword through the stage's ground, almost up to her knee.

Dolphin's surface-skimming kick then crashed into the outside of Kuroyukihime's left calf, generating an intense impact, and the fine sand piled up on the Okinawan Fortress stage shot out over a radius of three meters.

Lagoon Dolphin's kick held impressive force, but it couldn't even move Kuroyukihime's leg a mere centimeter, much less break it. Buried deep in the ground, the sword became an immovable spike and dispersed all the force of the kick into the earth.

"*Yukushiyassa.* [No way.]" Opening her water-blue eye lenses in amazement, Dolphin pulled back her leg and steadily retreated. "She made a hole in the ground of the duel field."

Kuroyukihime looked up to see that the coral avatar watching from a distance was also expressing her shock, reeling back, both hands up at her mouth.

There was a reason why the girls were so surprised at her simply stabbing her leg into the ground. It was possible to destroy most of the terrain objects—buildings, nature, decorations—in the Normal Duel Field, and this meant they were basically bonus items to charge an avatar's special-attack gauge, but the ground alone was the exception to this. Destruction of the ground was too large of an interference with the field—it could even stop the duel itself from happening—so except for the attributes of a few specific stages, this sort of destruction was basically impossible. Those few possibilities were, for example, melting the ice covering the ground of the Ice stage with a fire attack, or evaporating the poison bogs of the Corroded Forest stage, but the earth itself beneath that ice or bog was impermeable. In this Okinawan Fortress stage, a player might send the three centimeters of white sand blanketing the ground flying, but the stone surface that appeared beneath it was indestructible.

Or it should have been, but Kuroyukihime had simply applied a light pressure to the sword of her left leg in a standing position, and it had pierced the stone layer over fifty centimeters. This was the true power of the attribute of absolute severing that the Black King Black Lotus embodied, and none of the veteran Burst Linkers in Tokyo would have been surprised by it at this late date. But these two, who said they had grown up in Okinawa, probably didn't even know who Kuroyukihime was. Dolphin and the coral one behind her stared in a daze at the jet-black avatar as she pulled her leg soundlessly from the earth and stood up properly once more.

"Now, then. I'll attack next, but I wonder if you still intend to continue? Or are you ready to make it a draw here?"

It was the coral who responded first, turning the hands around her mouth into a megaphone to shout, "Th-that's enough, Ruka! Let's just ask her!"

The nickname for the blue-type female-shaped avatar was likely a shortened form of the Japanese word for dolphin, *iruka*, and this dolphin avatar stood stock-still for another few seconds, before finally shaking her head and stamping her foot on the ground as hard as she could.

"…Not yet, no way! *Uchina warrior makirararen Yamato samurai!* [As if an Okinawan warrior could lose to a mainland samurai!]" The cry was forceful but half-unintelligible.

Kuroyukihime cocked her head slightly. “What’s the difference between a warrior and a samurai?”

“It’s obvious! A warrior fights with her hands!” And then Dolphin came charging for the third time, but coral’s interpretation reached Kuroyukihime first.

“Um, what she means by *hands* is actually karate!”

“Is that so? I see. Your technique is karate, is it?” Kuroyukihime leaned forward, ready to take the blow. There was still plenty of time left and both of their health gauges had ample leeway, but her instincts whispered that this was the climax of the duel.

Pressing in, kicking up sand, Dolphin yanked both arms back into her body. Her tightly clenched fists emitted a vivid marine-blue light. She dropped her hips low when she was still over a meter away from the range of her attacks up to that point and thrust out her chest.

“Tidal Wave!!” As she called the name of the special attack, she launched her right and left fists in alternating succession.

The speed and strength of this series of blows was like a double-barrel cannon. The punches covered in a sea-colored light effect came at a rate of more than five per second, flooding in from a distance double that of her normal attack. It was a good technique containing a stubborn fighting spirit to smash any enemy, any armor with those two fists.

However, Kuroyukihime started moving before the first blow could reach her. She raised her right knee up high and turned her entire body to the left, resting on the tip of her left leg. She fell so that her upper body was parallel with the ground, and turned the sword of her right leg toward her duel opponent.

Shf! As she extended her right leg, she called out the technique name, “Death By Barraging!”

It might have looked to her opponent as a single side kick with no speed or power. But in the next instant, the whole sword of her right leg glittered a biting blue violet, and then disappeared. Or rather, it didn’t disappear, but split up into countless hazy parts. The tips of blurry swords spreading out in a cone

formation resembled a shotgun of swords. Black Lotus's level-four special attack Death By Barraging was a technique that shot off a hundred side kicks per second for three seconds with either her left or right sword leg. Anyone caught in its range would see an infinity of swords raining down on them in a terrifying concentration.

That said, Lagoon Dolphin, having already activated her special attack, had no time to stop now and dodge, nor did she have any intention of doing so.

"Kee…aaaah!!" In her battle cry, the innocence of a girl and the fighting spirit of a warrior coexisted without contradiction. She charged into the range of Kuroyukihime's blades as her fists repeatedly shot out—Left! Right! Left! Right! —at top speed.

The instant the fists, coated in greenish blue, touched the swords blanketed in ultraviolet, collision after collision produced flash after flash of pure white light.

If it had been one sword blow against one fist blow, Dolphin might have come out on top. Unlike her level-five special attack Death By Piercing, or her level-eight special attack Death By Embracing, Lotus's Death By Bashing was not a single-blow attack, but rather a barrage-type attack focusing on range and number.

However, the number of successive blows was just too different. Even after compensating for the marine-blue fists, the dozens of swords that remained caught the entire body of the karate user charging in from head-on.

"Aaaaaah!" Leaving a scream and a very showy sound of impact, Dolphin danced up high into the air. She reached the zenith of her parabola, orange sparks scattering from the many places she'd been hit, and then fell into a tailspin. Her health gauge at once dropped dramatically to less than 10 percent, and the rest threatened to be blown away casually if her head ended up stuck in the ground. Having judged this, Kuroyukihime had no sooner pulled her right foot in than she was making a dash.

She thrust the sword of her left hand toward the point where Dolphin was falling. The instant the leveled side of her blade touched the flowing lines of Dolphin's head, she used the Way of the Flexible to kill the force of the other girl's fall. At the same time, Kuroyukihime flipped her around 180 degrees and

brought her to the ground with a *thud* on her feet.

For a moment, Lagoon Dolphin seemed unable to grasp why she was still alive, but finally she shook her head and stared straight at Kuroyukihime before her. She dropped to one knee in the sand with a *crunch* and set her fists down on the ground as well. “Dammit!”

Unconsciously smiling an honest grin rarely seen on her face in the Tokyo duel scene, Kuroyukihime nodded. “Mmm. Nice fight. That kick of your second attack was particularly good. It would be even better if you could connect it a little more smoothly to the feint.”

“Yeah! I’ll train and fix it, Sis!” she shouted, and stood up before crossing both arms in front of her and bowing. Without giving Kuroyukihime the time to cock her head at the “*Sis*, she took a few steps and raised her fist to deliver the final blow to her own chest.

“Ah! W-wait, Ruka! We still haven’t actually talked about the real thing yet!” The shout came from ten meters to the rear, and Lagoon Dolphin froze in place.

She looked back over her shoulder at the coral avatar and then turned to face Kuroyukihime once more, before hitting herself lightly on the head with the fist raised up in the air. “*Aitsu!* [Whoops!] I totally forgot!”

Even more dumbfounded, Kuroyukihime remembered that right from the start of this duel, the coral one had been saying some rather strange things. “Our real objective,” “let’s just ask her,” and now “the real thing.” In other words, the two girls hadn’t challenged her simply looking for a new fight, but they instead had some hidden purpose other than dueling.

Hmm. As she watched over them, Lagoon Dolphin dropped to one knee on the ground once more and looked straight up at Kuroyukihime with her water-colored eye lenses.

“Sis!” she shouted. “Having seen your power, we got a request! Please listen to what we got to say!”

“That’s…Well, if you ask me to listen, I’ll listen, but…” She glanced up at the timer in the upper part of her field of view and saw there were still nearly twenty minutes left, because the duel itself had ended with a mere three

attacks. Most likely, that was plenty of time to talk.

But the two challengers had a different idea.

"*Nifuehdehbiru!* [Thank you so much!]" Lagoon Dolphin shouted, and then she continued, "Okay then, Sis. There's a café called Sabani on the corner of this shopping street, so when we get back over there, let's meet at the table in front in one minute!"

"…Wh…a…?"

More baffled now than she had been during the entire duel, Kuroyukihime watched Lagoon Dolphin raise her right fist once again and bring it down hard and without hesitation on her own head. The tiny bit remaining in her health gauge was blown away, and the avatar became a cloud of blue sea mist and disappeared.

It was actually a spectacular way of scattering, but without even looking at the flaming YOU WIN!!, Kuroyukihime opened her mouth once more. "Meet…in the real?"

"That's riiight!" the coral avatar responded from a ways off, waving her hand, on the verge of disappearing. "See you there, Sister!"

And then the duel ended.

3

Returning to the real world, Kuroyukihime continued to stare into the showcase of the accessory shop she had been peeking at before the start of the duel. But she wasn't taking in any of the cute earrings and pendants made of colorful shells. She was turning all her brainpower to the question of whether or not this was an elaborate trap.

The greatest taboo for a Burst Linker, it went without saying, was cracking in the real. Another Burst Linker finding out personal information like your real face, name, home, and school risked bringing about the worst-case scenario of a real attack by PKers at some point. No matter how skilled the Burst Linker, in their real bodies, they were almost all powerless elementary and middle school students, so they couldn't really fight back against threats backed by actual violence. Kuroyukihime had considered the idea that perhaps the ultimate acceleration command "physical full burst" given only to level-nine Burst Linkers bound by the sudden-death rule was a means of fighting back against real attacks.

At any rate, for a Burst Linker, real information was protected insofar as possible—or it was supposed to be, anyway. But a few minutes earlier, Lagoon Dolphin and the coral avatar whose name she still didn't know had suggested meeting up in the real world in the most casual way. Almost like they had never even heard the phrase "cracked in the real" before.

Was it possible that everything the two said and did, including during the duel, was a clever performance? To crack her real information, knowing that Kuroyukihime was the Black King? Her instincts told her that the girls were naïve Burst Linkers with no ulterior motives, simply gamers taking pleasure in the duel. And she deeply wanted to believe those instincts.

However, Kuroyukihime's current position meant she simply could not lose all her points and be retired from the game due to some foolish misstep. Although the Legion was still modest in scale, she had relaunched Nega Nebulus, and she had risen up in revolt against the Six Kings of Pure Color.

And more than anything else, there was the boy she had discovered in a corner of the Umesato local net and made her first and last child. She couldn't stand being separated from him halfway along this path. Someday, he would spread his dazzling silver wings and fly to heights that even she and the other kings could not reach. She had to stay with him.

Racked with a fierce indecision as she was, an involuntary tremor raced through her body until she suddenly felt a gentle hand on her right shoulder. At the same time, she heard a faint, faraway murmur:

Kuroyukihime, trust your instincts. I mean, it was you who taught me the importance of believing in yourself, wasn't it?

"Hah…I suppose so, Haruyuki," she murmured to herself, and pressed down firmly with her left hand on her right shoulder before straightening her back and turning around.

She saw right away the place Dolphin had specified. At the intersection the sea-colored avatar had pointed toward in the duel stage, Kuroyukihime spotted an open café with the boat-shaped sign. Still preserving the barest minimum of her guard, she approached from the opposite side of the street. The name painted on a sign did indeed read "Sabani." She was pretty sure that meant "small boat" in the Okinawan dialect.

Hiding herself in the front of a souvenir shop on the opposite corner, Kuroyukihime looked out at the open patio. Two of the three tables were empty, while the remaining table had two girls sitting at it.

"So they're there." Sighing unconsciously, she did one final check to make doubly sure. If this series of incidents was, hypothetically, an elaborate trap, then naturally, the two girls sitting there were not Burst Linkers but "bait," and the real Burst Linkers were hidden somewhere nearby, watching the patio. And in that case, the real Burst Linkers would naturally have disconnected from the global net. If they were out in the open on the matching list, they wouldn't have

been able to avoid Kuroyukihime accelerating and counterattacking the instant she realized the two at the café were bait.

"Burst Link." She voiced the acceleration command quietly, and the surrounding buildings and shoppers froze blue. She strolled along in the blue world of the initial acceleration space in her spangle butterfly avatar as she opened the BB console from the icon on her virtual desktop to pull up the matching list. The avatar names there were…three. In addition to her own Black Lotus, she could see the names of level-five Lagoon Dolphin and level-four Coral Merrow.

"A mermaid of the coral reefs, then. I see." She was certain from the name that this was the coral avatar who had been in the Gallery before and called Dolphin "Ruka." Which meant that, in fact, these two had left themselves on the matching list long after the duel was over.

"So all that's left now…is to trust them, hmm." Kuroyukihime quietly gave the "burst out" command.

When she climbed the steps up to the patio of Sabani and moved toward the table farthest in, the low heels of her mules clacking, the two girls with straws in their mouths abruptly lifted their heads.

They were probably one or two years younger than Kuroyukihime. Gaping expressions rose up on both of their deeply tanned faces, traces of childhood still lingering in them. Since they stayed frozen like this for some time, Kuroyukihime was forced to go and sit across from them herself.

And of course, a waitress came flying out of the shop with a hearty "*Mensohreh!*" and placed a cool cloth on the table for her to wipe her hands with. At the same time, a menu window was displayed through an ad hoc connection, so she ordered fresh pineapple juice. The waitress shouted a hearty "One fresh pine!" and from inside the shop came the response, "Fresh pine!" The throaty whine of an old mixer started, the juice was poured into a glass with an exaggerated gesture, and this was brought to the table, followed by the *ching* of 280 yen getting deducted from Kuroyukihime's Neurolinker as payment. Throughout the entire sequence, the two girls stared intently with gaping mouths and wide eyes.

Kuroyukihime put her lips to the straw and took a sip of the fresh pineapple juice before saying deliberately, “I believe it was you who called me.”

Instantly, the pair were blinking at top speed and bobbing their heads up and down after a brief “Oh!” There the synchronized movement ended, as the slightly taller girl on the right scratched her reddish-brown hair roughly.

“*Wassaibiin.* [I’m sorry.] Um, Sis, you’re just too *churakahgi*.”

And there, finally, the girl with the ponytail to the left opened her mouth. “Uh, um, *churakahgi* means *beautiful*.”

“I reckoned all the *Naichah* [mainland] Burst Linkers were just like Master, so I’m *ippehshikannda* [super surprised].”

At this entirely open attitude, Kuroyukihime, still with a few percent of her guard raised, couldn’t help but also smile lightly. The grin playing on her lips, she first said to the darkly tanned girl with the short hair, “You’re Lagoon Dolphin, yes?”

“Oh! Y-yes!”

Then to the ponytailed girl with skin the color of cocoa, “And you’re Coral Merrow.”

“Y-yes, I am…b-but I haven’t actually told you my name yet?” There was genuine surprise on Merrow’s face, and when Kuroyukihime revealed, “I looked at the matching list before I came,” the girl oohed, and then said a strange thing. “I understand! I totally thought you were born *Sahdakaumari*.”

“*S-Sahdaka?*” Kuroyukihime asked, blinking.

“Means *Yuta* blood,” Lagoon Dolphin interpreted. “She’s *Sahdaka*.”

Kuroyukihime had read the word *Yuta* somewhere before in the Okinawa guidebook she’d flipped through on the plane. She was pretty sure it meant a folk shaman. Naturally, she did not have any such power, but if she were to believe what Dolphin said, then Merrow had that particular talent.

After staring hard at the ponytailed girl sitting diagonally to the left, she hurried to rein in her thoughts. The “master” of these girls, in other words, their “parent,” was a mainlander—a Burst Linker who moved there from Tokyo. He’d

made a child in a place where there were no other duelers and raised her to level four or five. So then it had to have been a veteran in possession of a fairly large number of points. However innocent these two might have been, she still needed to keep her guard up against this master.

As Kuroyukihime took another sip of her juice, the two girls seemed to finally regain their composure, and they glanced at each other and nodded. Their spines snapping straight, Lagoon Dolphin, sitting to the right from Kuroyukihime's perspective, opened her mouth first.

"Uh, um…I'm in eighth grade, class two, at Kube Junior High—Ruka Asato!"

Coral Merrow followed: "I-I'm in seventh grade, class three, at the same junior high. Mana Itosu!"

And then they both bowed their heads with a "Nice to meet you!"

Kuroyukihime spit out the tiny amount of juice left in her mouth. Wiping her lips, she hurried to interrupt the pair. "W-wait, wait. Just wait a moment!"

"Yes?" Dolphin's large black eyes opened wide in curiosity.

"Just now, those are your real names?" she checked, thinking all the while that they actually couldn't be.



“Of course they are!” a similarly stunned Merrow responded.

Kuroyukihime put the tips of her fingers to her forehead, and timidly asked, “So then, in the duel before…the nickname Merrow used for Dolphin, Ruka, was not a shortened form of *dolphin—iruka*—but actually just her real name?”

“O’course, o’couuuurse. By the way, Ruka calls me ‘Mana.’ I was only ‘born’ three months ago, so I’m totally shaking at this incredible Sister in front of us!”

As soon as she had gotten that far, Dolphin (Ruka) poked Merrow (Mana) lightly near the base of her ponytail. “Agah!” she yelped quietly, and turned vengeful eyes on Ruka, who paid her no mind and drank her rich juice like nothing had happened.

Wanting once again to laugh at their antics, Kuroyukihime hurriedly pulled herself together, clearing her throat. “So then, well…your master, somehow, you…I believe your master would have told you several promises related to Brain Burst.”

She actually wanted the conversation from that point on to take place via a direct cable. But she had some doubts about whether or not these two could use neurospeak, and she had left her XSB cable at the hotel. Thus, they would just have to keep their voices as low as possible, but apparently, these girls had not even been told the reason for that.

Although Ruka and Mana looked stunned momentarily, they quickly nodded. They looked at each other, counted out, “One! Two!” to sync themselves, and then they started to chant fairly loudly, “Ooooone! Don’t use acceleration to do anything bad! Twooooo! Don’t blab about acceleration!”

Kuroyukihime hurriedly tried to get them to lower their voices, but before she could, they snapped their mouths shut. Still leaning onto the table, she gawked in dumbfounded amazement. “That’s all?”

“Yes! That’s everything!”

Kuroyukihime wordlessly leaned back in her chair and took another sip of her pineapple juice before sighing through her nose.

In short, their “master,” the experienced Burst Linker from Tokyo, had told

them basically nothing about the many risks Brain Burst brought about. Even that most basic principle, which the newest of newbies at level one would have known in Tokyo: Don't use real names in the duel stages to avoid being cracked in the real.

"So then…your 'master' or whatever, it seems that we need to have a word or two," Kuroyukihime murmured, almost unconsciously.

For some reason, Ruka and Mana glanced at each other, and dazzling grins spread across their faces.

"R-really, Sis?! *Urissan.* [I'm so happy.] Wasn't sure how we could ask you!"

"Wh-what?" She recoiled unconsciously at Ruka's unexpected exclamation.

Mana explained, also beaming from ear to ear, "We wanted you to meet our master, Sister!"

Over the course of the next five minutes, Kuroyukihime managed to pull the following information from the two girls.

First, there were three Burst Linkers in Okinawa—or more precisely, the Nago/Henoko area: the master, who had moved there from Tokyo just as Kuroyukihime had assumed; his child, Lagoon Dolphin aka Ruka Asato; and then her child, Coral Merrow aka Mana Itosu. Mana apparently had not yet exercised her copy/install right.

This could be said to be a bit of a miracle. The requirements for becoming a Burst Linker were fairly strict, and it wasn't possible to check in advance if someone met them. If you failed when trying to give someone the BB program, you didn't get a second chance. The link from the master to Ruka to Mana being unbroken was actually a relatively unlikely occurrence. As long as Mana chose someone, and then that someone did the same…and the chain continued without failing, an acceleration community outside of Tokyo, something Kuroyukihime had thought impossible in reality, might even have a chance here in Okinawa.

Or at least that had been the dream of Ruka and the other two until recently.

An incident to crush this dream—the trouble started this year. The master had tried to stand up to the nightmare at first, but now after a few months of

struggle, he had given up completely, choosing to essentially ignore the issue. Ruka and Mana were taking advantage of the fact that it was school trip season to find a Burst Linker among the junior high and high school students who came from Tokyo to the Henoko resort. They were challenging the Burst Linkers they found to scrutinize their true abilities in their search for a warrior to snap open the eyes of their master, who had lost the will to continue.

Having heard this much, Kuroyukihime nodded. “So how many before me?”

“Three people! Ruka didn’t even talk with the two before you, she just beat them black and blue.”

“I—I had to! If they’re not strong, that master of ours won’t listen to ’em.”

As Ruka made this excuse to Mana, Kuroyukihime looked at her hands and noticed hard calluses that seemed out of place on a girl. Most likely, the real-world girl had been training in karate since she was small. And her duel avatar was also a relatively pure-blue close-range type—and a strike-fighting type on top of that—so it was fair to say she was basically a perfect match. With the sharpness of her technique, fighting back against the weight of a single blow of hers would have been quite difficult for avatars in the midlevel range.

“Mmm. At any rate, I understand the situation, but…what exactly is this ‘trouble’ you mentioned?”

Remarkably, the pair began to hem and haw over Kuroyukihime’s question.

After a few seconds, Mana replied in a quiet voice, “That’s…I don’t know how to put it. It’s too complicated. To be honest, we don’t really understand ourselves. Master says there’s a *majimun*, a monster.”

“In other words, I have to ask this master for details. Is that it?” After contemplating this for three seconds or so, Kuroyukihime nodded. “Very well. I’ll see him, this master of yours.”

Instantly, the two younger girls lit up once more.

“That’s great! I guess it’s just like Mana said!”

“L-like Mana said? Which means?”

“Mana said it, okay? She said the person we met here today would help us!”

Ruka's words basically implied that the other girl had predicted their meeting, and Kuroyukihime unconsciously looked over at her, but she just had the same bright smile as usual on her face.

While Kuroyukihime considered how she should interpret this as the power of a Yuta, the two girls stood up abruptly with a *clatter*.

"Okay, let's hurry up and go to my house—"

"W-wait! Stop!" Kuroyukihime hurriedly held up both hands to sit them back down. "I said I would meet him, but I'd hold off on doing that on this side. If he came from Tokyo, then that means he might be someone I've run into in the Accelerated World in the past."

"Oh, is that it? Yeah, over there's prob'ly better…If Master saw a *churakahgi* like you, Sis, *dehjayassah* [it'd be serious]."

Mana laughed out loud, and Kuroyukihime grew slightly uncomfortable, but at any rate, it was too late to pull back now. Since she was out of time that day, she promised to meet them there again the next day during her free time in the afternoon. She glanced at the clock display in the lower right of her field of view, and the instant she saw that it was three minutes before four, she froze.

"O-oh, no" slipped out of her mouth, and, leaving a quick "See you tomorrow!" for a baffled Ruka and Mana, Kuroyukihime raced down off the patio of Sabani.

Kuroyukihime dashed north through the shopping street and sprinted down the brick-paved sidewalk that led to the resort hotel, so that when she arrived at the front entrance, it was only two minutes and thirty seconds past four. She spotted a girl in a dress leaning back against the white stone gatepost, bathed in the concentrated red of the setting sun. Slowing down, Kuroyukihime walked over.

Noticing the sound of footsteps approaching, Megumi Wakamiya lifted her face and smiled when she saw her friend. Kuroyukihime felt like she saw something a little different in the depths of Megumi's usual kind and gentle smile, and her breath caught in her throat.

In Megumi's left hand was a small purple paper bag that had not been there

when they left the hotel. The moment she set eyes on it, Kuroyukihime stopped a meter away and bowed her head. “Sorry I’m late.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Hime. I mean, it’s only two minutes,” Megumi said, and smiled again, but a hue that wasn’t normally there bled into both her voice and her face. Probably sadness—or something like that. The reason for that was surely the fact that, unlike Megumi’s, Kuroyukihime’s hands were empty.

“Oh. I have to apologize for one more thing. Sorry, Megumi. I couldn’t decide on a present.”

Right. Half an hour earlier, Kuroyukihime and Megumi had split up to choose a souvenir for each other and decided to meet back up here. But Kuroyukihime had gotten into the duel immediately after they’d gone their separate ways, and then her attention had been completely absorbed by the discussion in the real that followed, which used up all of her time.

Kuroyukihime bowed her head, and Megumi lightly tapped her arm. “It’s fine, Hime,” she said brightly. “We still have time on this trip and all. I mean, we have tons of time to look for souvenirs and stuff. But…” Her voice wavered, and she cut herself off.

Kuroyukihime lifted her face with a gasp. At basically the same time, two trails of tears slid down Megumi’s cheeks, illuminated by the setting sun, and dropped to the ground. Glittering like orange jewels, the tears bounced one after another off the bricks underfoot and disappeared.

“Megumi,” Kuroyukihime said hoarsely.

Megumi took a step back and wiped at her eyes with her right hand. “H-huh? What’s wrong…I didn’t mean to…I’m sorry, Hime. I really…it’s nothing. Just…,” she said, and grinned broadly, but her tears did not stop. Finally, as if she had given up, she turned her back and announced in a trembling voice, “I’m sorry. I’m going back to our room ahead of you. Just relax until it’s time for dinner, Hime.”

And then she ran off, leaving Kuroyukihime to stare at her friend’s receding back. After standing stock-still for nearly ten seconds, she leaned against the side of the gatepost and let out a long breath.

“I…am an idiot.” The voice she mustered as her lungs were almost empty of air was so thin it surprised her. “Even as I instruct Haruyuki and Takumu from up on high that they must not get so involved in the Accelerated World that they neglect the real world…this happens.”

Closing her eyes, several faces popped up against the screen of her eyelids, made slightly transparent by the red of the setting sun. Long, chestnut hair fluttering in the wind, gracefully smiling Fuko Kurasaki—Sky Raker. Putting on a childish yet resolute smile beneath a black fringe trimmed tidily was Utai Shinomiya—Ardor Maiden.

Although she’d never met them in the real, Aqua Current, the avatar whose entire body was wrapped in clear water, and Graphite Edge, tinged with the glittering of soft, lustrous carbon, were next. And then so many duel avatars appeared and disappeared one after the other. They were all members of the first Nega Nebulus, the Legion destroyed two and a half years earlier. The afterimage of the bonds that had been lost, never to be regained due to the tragedy brought about by Kuroyukihime’s mistake.

“Honestly. I have no right to seek a connection with anyone,” she murmured, and stared at her right hand with the eye of her heart. Her slender white fingers shuddered and disappeared, to be replaced by a jet-black sword. A blade of rejection that could cut through everything and thus never touch anything.

At that moment, a pudgy hand reached out from ahead of her and gently gripped the sharp blade floating against a background of darkness.

Instantly, the sword turned back into her original five fingers. She squeezed the hand back, almost clinging to it, and lifted her face. Standing there with a round face was a boy a year younger than her. With a bashful, encouraging smile, the boy pronounced clearly, “*You’re the one who reached out a hand to me, Kuroyukihime*.”

“Oh, that’s right, Haruyuki,” she replied, and her eyes snapped open, as she clenched her right hand tightly. She brought that hand to her chest for a moment before she started to run into the hotel after Megumi.

4

The sea was green, with a shine tinged by gold. Rippling with countless rows of waves in the western wind, this, however, was not water. It was a tall, pliable grass. The sea of grass continued in all directions as far as the eye could see, on a scale that could not exist in the real Okinawa, Japan.

There was no trace of man-made buildings. In fact, there were basically no large trees or rocks to be seen anywhere. The only thing that broke up the unending flatland was gentle hills with a narrow stream flowing between them. The sole protrusion from this terrain so devoid of ups and downs was a half-spherical body in motion, popping up from the sea of grass.

Carving out a gentle ellipse, the major axis of the semisphere exceeded four meters. On its upper surface, regular hexagon-shaped panels—armor plating—were seamlessly arranged, colored a grayish green with a metallic luster and seemingly quite hard.

Set in the bottom of the semisphere were a total of six openings, and from four of these, short, thick, sturdy organs for support and movement—“legs”—stretched out. From the hole in the rear, a “tail” that tapered sharply at the end. And stretching out from the hole in front was a “head,” the form of which was somehow reminiscent of a dinosaur. With several massive cone-shaped fangs, it mowed down the grass before it and chewed loudly.

Viewed as a whole, the enormous creature was a turtle; perhaps a type of tortoise. But like the grassy plain itself, a turtle of this size could not possibly have existed in modern Japan. In fact, even *Stupendemys geographicus*, the largest turtle on earth, which went extinct five million years earlier, had a maximum shell length of only two and a half meters.

This grassland was not in the real main island of Okinawa in Japan, and this

turtle was not a real creature. It was another Japan generated by the mysterious game program Brain Burst 2039 called the Accelerated World, a high-level hidden VR world layer. This endless sea of grass was known as the Unlimited Neutral Field, and the massive tortoise with a shell over four meters long was a moving object that lived in this field. The fixed species name was Wild class Enemy, Armor-Clad Tortoise.

Just as the common nickname “Enemy” indicated, the inhabitants of this world, including the massive turtle, were the enemies of the people who visited this world—the Burst Linkers. No matter how small or how harmless-seeming the individual Enemy, they would without exception start attacking unrelentingly if a Burst Linker entered their aggro range. And they were strong. Outrageously strong. For a level-four Linker who had only just gained the privilege of diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field, it was basically 99 percent impossible to defeat a Wild class or even a lesser-class Enemy solo. And the Beast and Legend classes above these were the equivalent of natural disasters, best evaded the second their shadow was spotted on the distant horizon.

These Enemies were indeed fearsome, but in the space-time where the Burst Linker intruders didn’t exist, they were nothing more than creatures who lived in the field, just like wildlife in the real world. Except, in a certain sense, they were far more peaceful than their counterparts in reality, because Enemies did not fight each other. Enemies of the same class each had their own particular territory, so they almost never came into contact, and they were uninterested in individuals above or below them. They walked around, slept, and ate as they pleased in the vast world. Just like the massive Armor-Clad Tortoise was lazily chewing grass at that moment.

—But…

A wind blew over the peaceful plain, carrying the scent of unrest. The tortoise absently lifted its head, stretched its long neck, and stared off toward the south for a while.

Suddenly, in a total change from its movement up to that point, it turned quickly to the north and started running. In the distance, turtles of the same species and larger Enemies with a form that resembled elephants all began to move at once in the same direction, almost as if they were fleeing something

terrifying.

A few seconds later, *it* appeared on the horizon to the south.

The flowing lines of a silhouette that was easily over five times the total length of the giant turtle. Twisting the sharp form of its torso, like a kind of shell or blade, it charged forward at high speed, as if swimming through the sea of grass. The massive body was twenty meters long, propelled by four legs growing from the bottom of the torso. The legs were short, but the bulging, tough muscles indicated it was far stronger than the tortoise. Thick, sharp claws dug firmly into the earth and flew up again, sending the giant shooting forward. The long tail stretching out behind it barely seemed to touch the ground.

The snout tapered like a lance, with emotionless, lens-like eyes shining red on either side. Beneath these, an enormous mouth slowly opened and closed. Each time its jaw moved, countless white fangs—each one a large sword—came into view before being hidden again.

Although its general form was close to a crocodile, it was obviously different. This creature was better called a dinosaur. Naturally, it was an Enemy like the tortoises running around trying to escape, but its size and its sense of presence were orders of magnitude different. There was no doubt that this was one of the strongest despots in the Accelerated World, beyond even the Beast class: Legend class.

An armor of scales completely covered the massive frame, glittering blue-black as the dinosaur charged through the grassland with terrifying speed. In a flash, it drew in closer to the herd of desperately fleeing Armor-Clad Tortoises, and then leapt up high when it was on the verge of a rear-end collision. In the air, it opened wide its maw lined with sinister fangs and dived down at an extreme angle. When it landed, an incredible impact rang out through the stage, and from the middle of the dust that puffed up thick like smoke, its tapered muzzle appeared.

Trapped in its enormous mouth was a miserable tortoise, held fast by its shell, so that no matter how it kicked its legs, it couldn’t escape. The eyes of the dinosaur glittered a deep red, and the muscles around its jaw twisted. The fangs piercing the metallic shell of the turtle sent a waterfall of orange sparks flying.

Krrrk. A sharp, dry sound. At the same time, the tortoise's movements stopped. One, then two fine cracks raced out over its thick shell. These immediately covered the turtle's entire body, and a pale blue light spilled out from inside.

In the next instant, the Wild Enemy Armor-Clad Tortoise, in the maw of the predator, transformed into thousands of shards of glass, burst apart, and scattered into the void.

Its teeth came down with a *klak*, and the corners of the mouth of the enormous dinosaur twisted slightly before it started racing across the plain once more. The starved red eyes picked out its next prey from among the herd of lower-level Enemies fleeing in the grass. As it gradually gained speed, a dorsal fin like the sail of a yacht popped up high on its enormous back. In front of the fin, there was another, smaller projection.

This was not an original organ of the dinosaur. The foreign object was another species of moving object. However, it wasn't another Enemy parasitizing it. The figure, a total of a meter and a couple dozen centimeters tall with only two legs, was clearly a person—in other words, a duel avatar. This rode on the head of the Enemy it should have clashed with, as the dinosaur swam through the sea of grass, not even attempting to shrug the small person off.

The duel avatar's hands hung loosely, gripping a thin chain that stretched out for a few meters on both sides, linking the zone from the dinosaur's jaw to the top of its head. The sight was almost that of a rider on a horse holding the reins. With the mysterious Burst Linker on its back, the enormous dinosaur charged forward toward the horizon in search of more slaughter.

A minute or so later, when the sea of grass returned once more to silence, a small figure slowly rose up from its depths. This was also a duel avatar. The design was simple, with a basic theme of straight lines, but the armor was a deep red. It should have been conspicuous in the green grass; there must have been a reason why the dinosaur missed seeing it.

The avatar stared for a while with fierce eyes in the direction the dinosaur had gone. But finally, it let out a small sigh and turned around. Once he or she walked off in the opposite direction from the dinosaur, the world was once

again filled with only the quiet sound of the wind. Nothing further appeared to disturb it.

5

Of the 120 Umesato Junior High eighth graders, the sixty-one who had chosen the Henoko/Yoron Island plan were staying in a large resort hotel with over four hundred guest rooms. Built facing the wide, shallow beach of the cape that was once known as Camp Schwab, the northern windows had a view of the deep green of the peak of Henoko, while the southern windows looked out over the far-reaching Pacific Ocean.

However, stepping out of the elevator, Kuroyukihime moved briskly down the hallway without so much as a glance at the windows. As she approached 728, the room she had been allocated, a window to lock and unlock the door was displayed on her virtual desktop. The icon blinking to the right of the window indicated that the person she shared the room with was inside.

She stopped in front of the thick natural-wood door and took a deep breath before knocking twice. “Megumi. It’s me. I’m coming in,” she said to the intercom window that opened automatically, and without waiting for a reply, she unlocked the door, turned the knob, and opened it.

The ocean-view room, slightly luxurious for junior high students on a school trip, was dim. All the lights were off, and only the gold of the sea melting in the evening sun pushed through the lace curtain on the southern window.

The room ran long from north to south, with two beds lined up against the western wall. In a pile, blankets decorated the bed farther in. On the side cabinet, there was a small purple paper bag.

Kuroyukihime stepped onto the carpet in bare feet and crossed the room, coming to sit on the edge of the nearer bed.

Curled up like a child beneath the blanket, Megumi was apparently not

asleep; Kuroyukihime could feel the twitch of her body pulling back through the mattress. At this, so like a young child who had been hurt, Kuroyukihime's heart throbbed sharply once more.

I really know nothing about her. And I've never even tried to learn.

Gritting her teeth with the pain of this awareness, Kuroyukihime opened her mouth. "I'm sorry, Megumi. I was a fool."

"That's not it." The response came from beneath the pile fabric sooner than she expected. "You didn't do anything wrong, Hime. I…I just sort of assumed. I thought during this trip…for just these seven days, I could…have you all to myself."

After a moment of silence, Megumi tugged the edge of the blanket and pulled herself into an even smaller ball. "Ah, ha-ha-ha! What am I even talking about? I'm sorry, Hime. I always say this weird stuff. Just forget it. Forget the whole thing. It's okay. I just need a minute and I'll be back to my usual self…so…" Contrary to her words, the end of her sentence shook fiercely, as if it was dampened by tears.

Kuroyukihime bit her lip hard, and, resolving herself, she turned around, got on top of the sheets, and placed her right hand gently on Megumi's back. She softly stroked the slender, trembling body and murmured through the blanket, "Megumi. I want you to listen."

Changing her tone, she announced firmly, "What you said on the beach this afternoon was true. I…have another world where time flows differently from this real world."

Her friend was silent.

"The first time I visited that world was seven years ago, when I was eight. I spent half—no, more than half of every day in that land. So much time that I started losing track of which one was the real reality." Involuntarily, a small sigh slipped out of her.

Without even noticing that Megumi's body had stopped shaking at some point, Kuroyukihime continued her soliloquy, a story she had never revealed to anyone before. "And then, after I left my family home when I started junior

high, it was unclear to me where I belonged, or what this existence of mine even was. Megumi, before, I said I was able to find my path once more because I met Arita last fall. But that was half-right and half-wrong. Because, just like me, he is a resident of *that* world."

Perhaps she shouldn't have been telling this to a non–Burst Linker like Megumi. But Kuroyukihime didn't hesitate. Because she was certain that if *he* had been there, he would have said that she should speak everything in her heart.

She took a deep breath and continued more briskly. "Megumi. The one who rescued me when I was simply lost and drifting right after starting at Umesato was you. Ever since you called out to me after the entrance ceremony and said we should have lunch together, you've kept me firmly connected to this real world. I lost many bonds with that world as intermediary, but I'm trying to bring them back to life a little at a time. The bond that connects me to this world, a friend, there's only you, Megumi."

These words were all true, containing everything in her heart, but she didn't know how much of it Megumi would understand, not knowing any of the details of the Accelerated World. In a certain sense, the words were selfish, good for her and herself alone. Because what she had just said basically meant that she was split between two worlds, and the bond with Megumi, the connection through friendship, was only with half of herself.

However, precisely because they were such close friends, Kuroyukihime didn't want to lie to Megumi. It was hard to brush away the bonds in the Accelerated World that she had lost in the past—the feelings inside her of wanting to again see Fuko Kurasaki and Utai Shinomiya and her many other comrades, of wanting to fight alongside them again. But those emotions, and the love she held, for Megumi Wakamiya were falsely similar. Because Kuroyukihime wanted Megumi not as the traitor of the Accelerated World, the Black King, but as a totally average middle school girl.

Trying to communicate all this through their skin touching through the blanket, Kuroyukihime put all of her feelings into the palm of her right hand—what would perhaps be called her "will" in the Accelerated World.

Finally, Megumi wriggled around, changed orientation, and exposed from beneath the white blanket a head of fluffy short hair. With the blanket wrapped around her like some kind of cloak, Megumi slowly sat up and faced Kuroyukihime. Kuroyukihime noticed that her eyes were wet and redly swollen and started to bite her lip.

“Thanks, Hime. What you said just now makes me super happy. But…but…I’m sorry.” Her voice was once again mixed with tears to come.

Kuroyukihime wrapped an arm around her slender body. “Why are you apologizing? There’s nothing you have to apologize for. I’m the one who forgot our promise—”

“It’s not that.” Megumi shook her head quickly from side to side on Kuroyukihime’s shoulder. “It’s not about the souvenir. I…Honestly, for a long, long time now, there’s been something I needed to apologize to you for.”

Two hands stretched out from beneath the blanket and gently wrapped around Kuroyukihime’s shoulders. Megumi pulled her face from her friend’s shoulder, and her eyes, filled with tears, blinked. The drops of water that spilled out fell onto the sheets, painting gray spots.

“Actually, that time…I…” But before Megumi could get the rest out, an inorganic alarm blotted out all other sound. Simultaneously, a window calling the school trip executive committee to convene obscured the other’s face. The regular meeting with the teachers before supper was to be held in five minutes. The two members of the student council were also on the executive committee.

Megumi squeezed Kuroyukihime’s shoulders hard once, and then relaxed her hands and pulled her body away. Taking a tissue from the sideboard, she wiped her eyes as she spoke. “Of course, we can’t skip this one, right, Hime? Just hold on a sec. I’ll be ready soon.” Her tone had basically returned to the usual voice of the student council secretary.

Before Kuroyukihime could say anything to stop her, Megumi had slid off the bed and disappeared into the washroom. “Megumi,” she murmured as she turned her gaze to the sheets, where the stains from tears shed mere seconds earlier had already dried up and disappeared.

When the buffet-style dinner started in the hotel restaurant, which they had

rented out for an hour, Megumi was watching over Kuroyukihime with her usual care.

Because Kuroyukihime's staple food was the individual frozen dinners sold by a restaurant she liked in the house where she lived by herself, her diet was somewhat unbalanced. It wasn't that she disliked any particular foods, she was simply not good with meals when she didn't really know what something was. And there were more than a few unidentifiable objects of that nature in Okinawan cuisine, so caution was required.

But Megumi took it upon herself to pile food up on Kuroyukihime's plate, offering up explanations like "this is *fu chanpuru*, fried with eggs" or "it's soup with *nabera*, sponge cucumber," so Kuroyukihime ended up feeling bad if she didn't at least put some of it in her mouth. But when she took her timid bites, everything was delicious, so before she knew it, she was eating heartily of all the dishes.

The bath time after that followed the same pattern, all "I'll shampoo your hair" or "I'll wash your back" as if she were a child, to the point where Megumi even blow-dried her hair for her, and Kuroyukihime returned to their room, feeling slightly dizzy. She sat down on her own bed, and the instant she let out a sigh of relief, a bottle of mineral water was thrust before her.

"Here, Hime."

"Th-thanks," she said, accepting it. After taking three gulps of the nicely chilled water, Kuroyukihime was unable to contain the brief laughter that slipped out. "Ha-ha-ha! I feel like I'm back to being a little kid who can't do anything."

"Well, that's nice sometimes, isn't it? At school, everything's always so crazy with your work as vice president. Just rest your bones for the school trip at least."

"You say that, Megumi, but your work as secretary is just as crazy."

They looked at each other and grinned.

Elections for the Umesato student council members were held every October, and Kuroyukihime and Megumi had taken part in the executive branch that

took care of routine tasks in the second semester of their first year. Since Megumi had basically joined to keep her company, Kuroyukihime couldn't help but feel ashamed deep down for keeping her true motives a secret all this time.

She had no particular desire to serve the students at school as a member of the student council; she had simply wanted high-level access privileges for the in-school local net. In order to make Umesato a stronghold to protect her from the assassins of the Six Kings, a grasp of the in-school system was essential—that was it. Of course, she had no intention of neglecting her work as a member, but having said that, she had no lofty ideals.

She would have to apologize to Megumi at some point—the instant this thought crossed her mind, the events of a few hours earlier came back to life in her mind, as though by association.

Crying the first tears Kuroyukihime had ever seen from her, Megumi had said that there was something that she had needed to apologize for from way back. But she couldn't think of a single thing that fit that bill. If it was something that was going to bother both of them like this, however, then she thought she had best ask right here, right now, and she recomposed her face, preparing to open her mouth.

But. Almost as if guessing her mood, Megumi moved nimbly to her own bed and turned around to say, "'Kay, we've got lots to do tomorrow, so let's just call it a day."

"Oh, uh…I guess so." Kuroyukihime nodded, and Megumi ran a finger across her virtual desktop to lower the lights.

Through the southern window, with the curtains still open, the light of the moon spilled in, far brighter than it ever was in Tokyo, and dyed the room a pale blue. Perhaps the moonlight of the southern land included a kind of magical wavelength, because her eyelids suddenly grew heavy.

She fell back into bed as a strange sensation came over her, like her consciousness was being sucked directly downward. When she closed her eyes, a blanket gently covered her body, and a faint voice whispered in her ear, "Good night, Hime."

6

The following day, Wednesday, April 17, was also lovely.

Henoko Beach had only opened for the season at the beginning of that month, but the temperature was already up above thirty Celsius before noon, which meant that the majority of the Umesato students had immediately jumped into the ocean. They all seemed to be having fun in their own ways, some riding swimming rings, others splashing each other with water, but as for Kuroyukihime, she was focused on relaxing beneath the beach umbrella just like she had been the previous day.

“Ahhhh.” She let out a long sigh and picked up the glass of coconut milk from the table next to her, taking a sip. She nimbly recrossed the legs stretching out from her black swimsuit and pushed up her sunglasses as they started to slide down.

“You totally don’t look like a middle schooler, Hime,” Megumi said, rolling her eyes in the deck chair next to her.

“If this were a real piña colada”—Kuroyukihime flicked the large glass with a grin—“it would be perfect. We’re outside the view of the social cameras, though. How about we try ordering one?”

“Then I’ll have a frozen margarita, thank you very much.”

“Oh, we better give it up. It’s still too soon for margaritas.” She cleared her throat and glanced at her virtual desktop, noting that the time was only twelve thirty PM.

The schedule for that morning had been very interesting, but rather hard. What with a trip to the Okinawa National Institute of Technology and a hike up to Henoko Dam, her health gauge had been fairly depleted. And that was not

the only thing making her body heavier. At basically the same time she opened her eyes at the early hour of six, she got a dive call from Haruyuki Arita in Tokyo.

In the VR space Kuroyukihime loaded, he first apologized for the sudden call before explaining that the reason for it was because it was hard to be so far away from her. Sensing a sadness in those words that pierced into her heart, Kuroyukihime had a hunch that this was not the only reason. She was sure that something was happening at the distant Umesato Junior High, sixteen hundred kilometers away. Something that was making the boy Arita suffer, backing him into a corner—probably something brought about by the Accelerated World.

But Kuroyukihime didn't press him about it. Although the words "something's wrong" were dangerously close to leaving her mouth, she desperately restrained herself. The fact that he wasn't saying anything about it himself meant that he was trying to take care of the issue on his own. If, hypothetically, he had asked for help, she would have immediately made up a reason to fly back from Okinawa, but right now was still a time to trust him, her sole child, and let him handle it.

She had decided this inwardly, but that didn't mean she could forget her unease. She pushed back the sense of crisis weighing heavily on her shoulders and murmured to herself, *Fight hard, Haruyuki. I will also do what I should as a Burst Linker here in this land.*

"What I should do" was, at any rate, the mission requested of her by the two Okinawan girls who had abruptly contacted her the day before, but she still had no idea what the details were. They had told her there was some kind of trouble in the Accelerated World in this area, and that they wanted her to meet their master in connection with that. And although she had agreed to it, when she thought about it, Kuroyukihime was leaving Henoko the following morning for far-off Yoron Island. It was fine as long as this was a problem that could resolved before then. At any rate, she would hear everything from this "master."

She sat up, took off her sunglasses, and spoke to her friend who had her eyes closed in the neighboring deck chair. "Megumi?"

Megumi opened her eyes and cocked her head slightly.

Kuroyukihime dipped her head. “I really am sorry about yesterday. Today, I’m definitely going to get you a proper souvenir. I am going to walk from one end of the shopping street to the other and find the perfect present for you.”

Megumi blinked rapidly and moved to open her mouth. But she shut it again, took a deep breath, and nodded with a broad grin.

“’Kay. I’m looking forward to it, Hime.”

After lazing around on the beach until two o’clock, Kuroyukihime left Megumi and headed back to the hotel first.

Her meeting with Ruka and Mana was at three PM in the same café as the day before. It was painful to use buying Megumi a surprise present as an excuse for going off by herself, but she couldn’t exactly bring her along. Hiding an ever-increasing number of things from real-world friends was one of the many curses on the Burst Linker’s head. But such was the price of the power of acceleration. The BB program takes as much as it gives—or so the veteran Linkers often said, but Kuroyukihime thought that the balance in the end might be in the red.

Because someday, when you used up all your points and caused Brain Burst to force an uninstall, all you were left with was an enormous sense of loss and a hollow reality. There was a terrifying rumor in the Accelerated World that the banished Burst Linkers lost all memories connected with Brain Burst, but if that was true, she couldn’t not think that it would be as much of a blessing as it would be a punishment.

Letting these thoughts race through her mind, Kuroyukihime changed from her swimsuit to her street clothes, and once she stepped outside of the hotel, she stopped for a moment to soak up sunlight so bright that it was hard to believe it was April.

“Okay!” she shouted quietly, to change gears, and set out for the front gate at a brisk pace. It was still only 2:10; she had plenty of time to keep her promise to Megumi. *Don’t get so involved in the Accelerated World that you neglect the real world*—that was the first rule of the Legion Nega Nebulus.

The short heels of her mules steady on the brick paving, Kuroyukihime hurried

into the shopping district adjacent to the resort.

Carefully tucking away in her tote bag the souvenir she had taken forty minutes to select, Kuroyukihime approached Sabani and flinched involuntarily at the loud voice that rained down on her from the patio.

“Heeeey! Siiiiis! Over here!”

When she looked, Ruka Asato (aka Lagoon Dolphin), with whom she had battled the previous day, and her child, Coral Merrow (aka Mana Itosu), were at a table, waving at her wildly. That day, they were both in sailor-style clothes, the uniform of a junior high school. Now that she thought about it, it was the middle of a weekday afternoon. To make it in time for a rendezvous thirty minutes earlier than the previous day, they would have had to come straight from school.

She had absolutely no complaints about that, but on the shopping street full of tourists—more than a few of them foreigners—the snowy white sailor uniforms stood out even more. As a Burst Linker sneaking through the world, Kuroyukihime made herself smaller as she trotted up onto the patio and sat down, breathing a sigh of relief as she did. She ordered guava juice that day, which arrived quickly, and after taking a sip, she looked again at the girls before her.

They had said that Ruka was in eighth grade while Mana was in seventh, and that they were three months apart in age, so Ruka had been born first, and Mana later. Both of them should have been somewhere around thirteen years old, but she couldn’t help thinking that they somehow looked a little younger than that. Normally, Burst Linkers tended to look older than their actual age, and that tendency was marked in higher-level players. There had to be a reason why these two, magnificent veterans at levels four and five, had not a trace of this about them.

These thoughts flitting through her mind, Kuroyukihime stared absently as Ruka and Mana pulled worn Neurolinkers from their school bags and affixed them on their deeply tanned necks. Those necks had unexpectedly sharp “Linker tans,” but the students at the Okinawan school they visited in the morning had said that VR lessons had been introduced in only a very few public

schools in Naha. Which meant that these girls had been wearing Neurolinkers from the time they were little for a reason other than education.

“All right, then, Sister. We’re going *up* today,” Mana said abruptly, lifting her face, and Kuroyukihime furrowed her brow with a *Hmm?* The pair didn’t seem to notice as they took a deep breath.

“Here we go! Three, two, one! Unlimited Bu—”

Pft! Spitting out a bit of her second sip of guava juice, Kuroyukihime hurriedly reached out her hands to slap them over the girls’ mouths.

“W-wait. Wait, wait, wait!”

“Nnph nnph?!”

“You two aren’t actually going to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field from here, are you?!”

“Mmph mmph!”

“Y-you can’t! That is definitely not okay!! Doing something like that without a disconnection safety, what are you going to do if you can’t make it to a portal?!”

“M-mmph…mmph mmph…”

Here, their faces grew slightly paler, so she nervously removed her hands. Ruka and Mana took a deep breath, and after confirming that they weren’t going to shout the command a second time, Kuroyukihime stood up. She went around behind them and grabbed on to the collars of their sailor uniforms before saying in her scariest voice, “I will choose the dive location. No complaints, yes?”

Dangling like kittens, the girls shook their heads vigorously from side to side.

Then Kuroyukihime led—or rather dragged—Ruka and Mana to the full-dive space set up in the resort hotel where she was staying. The safest thing would have been to use her room on the seventh floor, but if it got out that she had brought guests in, both the school and the hotel would have been angry with her.

Apparently, although both girls saw the hotel from the outside on a daily

basis, they had never been inside, and they stared in awe at the chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings and the interior of the cafeteria on the first floor. Ruka and Mana both seemed to want to take in more of the sights, but Kuroyukihime pushed their backs, climbed the stairs to the second floor, and paid the additional fee for the two of them at the reception for the full-dive space, which looked like an expensive café at first glance. Kuroyukihime was a guest of the hotel, so it was free for her to use.

Shoved into a four-person booth, the junior high girls were still muttering things like "*Tehgeh* [whatever], fine" and "No worries. Push comes to shove, the staff would've yanked our Neurolinkers off," but faced with what the boy Arita secretly called the "ultimate cool Kuroyukihime smile" (which of course she knew about), they quickly fell quiet.

Kuroyukihime took three XSB cables from the rack provided and inserted them one after another into the router for wired connections built into the low table in front of the sofa. After making the two girls turn off their wireless global connection, she pushed the plugs on the opposite ends of the wired connectors in, whether they liked it or not.

When they were connected, Ruka and Mana blushed, saying "Oh!" and "Ooh!" but since she begrudged the time to comment on that, she let it pass and set the automatic disconnection timer on the router for five minutes later. Even still, the time inside until the safety activated was five thousand minutes—just over eighty-three hours would pass. If the problem was something that couldn't be resolved with that much time, then the assistance of Kuroyukihime alone was not enough to begin with.

Finally, she connected the last XSB cable to her own Neurolinker, and turned to the girls sitting across from her. "Listen. I will meet your master as promised, but I can't make any guarantees about what will happen after that. In the worst case, we may end up fighting. Make sure you're ready for that."

"Okay!" The pair energetically raised their hands together, so even as she worried about whether or not they really understood, Kuroyukihime opened her mouth to begin the countdown.

"Now then, we dive on the count of five. Five, four, three—"

“Oh! Sis, wait!” Ruka said suddenly, sounding surprised, and this time, it was her covering Kuroyukihime’s mouth.

“Wh-what?” She turned her head, and saw that Ruka had a finger to her lips as she indicated with her eyes Mana sitting to her left.

The girl, who until a few seconds earlier had been full of energy waiting for the dive timing, had changed dramatically. Hair pulled back into a swinging ponytail, she was slowly moving her upper body back and forth. It was hard to tell where her hazily clouded eyes were looking, and it sounded like she was saying something, but extremely quietly. Kuroyukihime couldn’t catch what it was.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” Kuroyukihime leaned forward.

Ruka restrained her again and brought her face closer. “*Kandahlee*…Her Yuta blood’s coming out.”

As Kuroyukihime watched over the girl, dumbfounded and dubious, Mana’s unusual behavior stopped as abruptly as it had started. She blinked several times, and when she turned her face to the right, the expression on it had returned to normal. The girl looked at Kuroyukihime with eyes a color reminiscent of the depths of the ocean, and said innocently, “Sister, one more!”

“…One more what?”

“This. This string.” She grabbed on to the XSB cable connecting her Neurolinker to the router.

Unconsciously, Kuroyukihime looked around the small booth, but there was no one there, of course, besides the three of them. The door was locked with Kuroyukihime’s electronic key, so no one else should have been able to come inside.

But in Mana’s eyes was a conviction she could not deny. When she reached out a hand as if to guide Kuroyukihime, the older girl took the fourth XSB cable from the rack next to the sofa and plugged one terminal into the router. With this, both cables and all connectors were used.

“So where is this plug going?”

At the question, Mana smiled. “Please just leave it there!”

She had no idea what was going on, but as a practical issue, there was nothing to do but that. Kuroyukihime set the plug on the table, and after puzzling over it one final time, she opened her mouth again. “Now, then. This time for sure, we go on the count of five.”

She waited for Ruka and Mana to nod, and then began the countdown. “Five, four, three, two, one. Unlimited Burst!”

The incantation to open the door to the true Accelerated World, the Unlimited Neutral Field, spilled from three sets of lips. Enveloped in a rainbow of light to cut her consciousness free of reality and carry it away, Kuroyukihime murmured, “My, my,” to herself.

In the twenty-three wards of Tokyo, she was the Black King Black Lotus, known to all as the destroyer of order, the betrayer of the Six Kings, but since the previous day, these two girls had been yanking her around. At the same time, however, there was something refreshing and nostalgic about this feeling. Almost like those days long, long ago, right after she first became a Burst Linker, when she was yanked around here and there, wherever the pioneers told her.

Carried away by nostalgia, Kuroyukihime didn’t realize that her guard, normally so solid, had slackened as she lost herself in leading the girls. Specifically, she hadn’t noticed a pair of eyes staring hard at her own back from behind a pillar as she led the two girls into the dive space.

The owner of those eyes stepped out from the shadows immediately after they entered the booth and started walking briskly toward the dive space.

7

Hovering out of the resort hotel, Kuroyukihime looked back through the goggles of her duel avatar at the half-crumbling building. The bared steel frame was rusted red, and the concrete worn and cracked, but the overall structure and terrain were basically a perfect copy of the original hotel. Even for Okinawa, Henoko was not a large town, but it seemed that the social camera net reached every corner even here. Which meant, in other words, that the Unlimited Neutral Field existed unbroken from Tokyo sixteen hundred kilometers away all the way to this place.

Feeling once more the expansiveness of the Accelerated World, Kuroyukihime surveyed again the desolate scene around her. “A Weathered stage, then.”

This time, Lagoon Dolphin and Coral Merrow, standing to the rear, didn’t correct her.

The names given to the various attributes of the duel field—Century End, Demon City, Purgatory—were not originally set by the BB system. The early Burst Linkers thought up fitting names from the appearance of the field, and they stuck. With the Ancient Castle of the previous day as well, their master had likely told them the name, but Okinawan natives Ruka and Mana had replaced it with Okinawan Fortress, a phrase their ears were more accustomed to.

Given that, she imagined that the Sacred Ground stage would be Nirai Kanai, the Okinawan paradise, but the conversation promised to be long if she took the trouble to confirm, so Kuroyukihime simply turned around again and said, “Where is your master, then?”

“This way!” Dolphin shouted, enthusiastic as always, and turned around. The blue avatar, short finlike protrusions all over the streamlined armor, started running, and the coral avatar with fins of a similar design, but longer and more

delicate, chased after her with a “Wait up!”

In the real world, the courtyard of the hotel had a variant of cockspur coral trees, red flowers blooming, but at the moment, as with the hotel itself, there was nothing there but concrete crumbling and the rusted steel frame, a remarkably dreary scene. The ground was covered in a haze of reddish-brown sand, and from time to time, the wind swept it up into the air in a cloud of dust, but the two girls seemed to pay that no mind as they ran excitedly. Kuroyukihime leaned forward slightly and accelerated her hovering to a run.

After they moved along the cracked road for a few minutes, a cluster of small buildings came into view ahead of them. In the real world, this was probably the street where Kuroyukihime and Megumi had gone shopping. But, of course, there were no tourists nor any store clerks inviting them inside. Only the dry wind blew through buildings with rusting steel frames exposed.

Or not.

In the center of the shopping street, perhaps in the same position as Sabani, was a lone store with a seedy neon sign flashing. The letters blinked on and off irregularly, in a strange font that might have spelled out BAR.

“Oh-ho, a shop in a place like this,” Kuroyukihime murmured unconsciously to herself.

Shops were the so-called NPC stores that dotted the Unlimited Neutral Field. There were all sorts of shops, and you could buy everything from special-effect card items to Enhanced Armaments, clothing, food and drink, and even houses. In Tokyo, they were mainly clustered in the shopping districts of Ikebukuro, Shinjuku, and Akihabara, but some were also doing business plopped down in the middle of nowhere. There were some Burst Linkers who specialized in finding—or rather made it their hobby to find—these “hidden shops,” but even they certainly wouldn’t come all the way out to Henoko in far-flung Okinawa.

As they approached the shop, she saw that the sign did say BAR, so it was probably a drinking spot. In the real world, this was the sort of place a middle schooler couldn’t even go into, much less place an order at, but Dolphin and Merrow charged into the establishment without the slightest hesitation, calling out loudly, “Master! *Haitai!* [Hello!]”

A few generous seconds later, a somewhat lifeless male voice came from inside. “Yeah…*Haitai*…”

“Come on! That’s wrong! Boys say *haisai*!” Ruka corrected.

“Y-yeah…*Haisaaai*…”

Kuroyukihime heard the voice correct itself, and cocked her head doubtfully. She stopped in front of the store and checked on the situation inside from beyond the crumbling walls.

“Aaah, you’ve already drunk this much in the middle of the day. This is the only thing about you that’s totally Uchina *ohji*, you know,” Mana said, exasperated.

“Not *ohji*, right…I’m still a tenth-grade *yaibiin*,” came the grumbled response. “Barkeep, gimme another three-hundred-year-old *awamori*!”

“□✻Δ÷○”

There was an unintelligible electronic noise in response, and then a completely metallic robot walked jerkily out from behind the counter. This machine, so falsely similar in design to a duel avatar, was the NPC shop clerk, known as a “drone.” Like the Enemies, they were residents of this world, making the BB system go.

The drone, with an appearance like randomly connected steel pipes, set a crude tin cup down on the table and said “$×£+¥” before returning to the back. A hand reached across the table to grab the cup, and a gulping sound filled the air.

“Come on! I’m telling you, today’s not a day for drinking! Master, we brought her, the person who’s gonna save us!” Dolphin shouted, hands on her hips.

After a period of silence, Kuroyukihime heard a voice that was indeed deeply uninterested. “Whut? You really street duel? I tol’ you that was a waste of time!”

At that moment, Kuroyukihime was convinced of one thing, and she stepped soundlessly into the bar. She slipped between tables that were nothing more than sheets of rusted steel and made her way toward the back.

The girls' master was sprawled on a couch hidden behind the table at the end of the room. Given the angle, she still couldn't see him, nor he her.

"Waste of time!" he shouted, as he took another swig of the virtual alcohol, seemingly unaware of Kuroyukihime's approach. "Big ol' waste of time, 'kaaaay! That monster's not gonna be all 'whatever' just 'cos you brought one or two people to help!"

"Hey. You there."

"They called me the Strongest in Tokyo. I'm level seven, and no matter how amazing I am, I can't do nothing against that thing. To take it down, even level eight's not enough! No way! You gotta bring me a level-nine king at least!"

"You there. Show me your face."

"Nah, nah. Even with a king, it'd still be dangerous! Like maybe Vanquish, specialized in physical attacks, or like the even stronger World End."

"I said, 'Hey.'"

"The hell? You been up in it here! Lemme just tell you—unless you drag the Black King or something in here, I'm not moving…from this…" Speaking sharply and forcefully, the master abruptly sat up on the couch and got a look at Kuroyukihime with drunken eyes, causing his words to gradually slow down… until he finally fell into complete silence.

In contrast, Kuroyukihime crossed the swords of both arms with a *clang* and cried, "So it's you! This takes me back. How many years has it been, Crikin?!"

"Huh…No way…Yikes…Hold on a…," the Burst Linker, whose entire body was covered with a deep red armor, muttered in dumb amazement as he moved his yellow eye lenses up and down over and over. "Th-that form…those legs…and actually calling me Crikin…Y-y-y-y-you can't be the real thing? The for-real Black King? Bla…? Lo…? Tus…?" The avatar gave voice to Kuroyukihime's name with strange breaks, and the tin mug fell from his right hand onto the table with a sad *clank*.

The master sat up properly, wedged in between Dolphin and Merrow on the left and right, and Kuroyukihime lowered herself onto the couch across from them. This was the Accelerated World, so even if you didn't order a drink in a

bar, the bartender wouldn't get mad at you.

"Even still, I can't believe you moved to Okinawa." She looked once more at Crikin's upper body.

He was a duel avatar with a fairly distinctive form. He had a part in the shape of a flat hexagonal pillar on his head like a hat, and the face beneath that was a perfect cylinder. His torso was basically the same width as his head, and his arms were halved cylinders. What drew the eye more than anything else were the zigzagging notches carved in detail over the surface of his armor.

His elliptical eye lenses blinking intermittently, Crikin nodded once. "It's been just over three years already, huh? Ahhh, my mom and dad suddenly got divorced, you know? They asked me who I wanted to go with, and I flipped a coin and picked my dad, but I never thought he'd suddenly be all 'We're going to Okinawa'! So I said, 'Actually, Mom,' but too late, y'know? So he dragged me all the way out here to Henoko, and here we are. Basically."

"I see. I was convinced you had been attacked in the real by a PK and lost all your points."

"Well, it's about the same level of a problem, you know? And I expected it, but of course not here in Henoko, but even when I went to Naha and Nago, there's not even the *B* of a Burst Linker here!" He laughed loudly, his crimson body shaking.

Three years or more ago—back when the first Nega Nebulus had been alive and well—he had belonged to the rival Legion, Aurora Oval. He was a fairly old hand, and Kuroyukihime had been in duels and Territory battles countless times with him since she was low-level, had hunted Enemies with him over and over—a so-called comrade in arms.

At that time three years earlier, he had already reached level seven, and when a high ranker like that suddenly disappears, the only reasons that seem plausible are a physical knock in the real world or unlimited Enemy Kill in the Accelerated World. So it was a sad memory in its way from that time, but being forced to move to Okinawa was also its own adverse situation.

"I'm impressed you managed to stay a Burst Linker until now," Kuroyukihime said unthinkingly.

“Heh-heh.” Crikin twirled the hexagon on his head as if embarrassed. “Well, it was mostly just seeing how things went, though. This one”—he jerked his thumb at Lagoon Dolphin sitting to his right—“she’s my dad’s…which means she’s my distant relative. We ended up staying at her place, y’know? And I placed my bet: I’d install Brain Burst in her, and if it worked, then I’d pour basically all the burst points I had at the time into her and yank her up to level four. You can’t really hunt even lesser Enemies solo, but you’re fairly solid as a tag team, y’know.”

“I see. So you won the bet.”

“More than that. Her grandpa’s been teaching her karate since she was little. So she turns out to be this perfect blue-type close-range fighter. So strong, strong as hell.”

Lagoon Dolphin—Ruka—who had until that point listened to them talk with a strange look on her face, laughed happily here for the first time. But she quickly composed herself and shook her head rapidly. “Nah, still got a lot of training to do, you know? I couldn’t even touch you, Sis.”

“’Course not, Roo! This girl, intimidating as hell, she’s one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color—,” Crikin started to say, and Kuroyukihime smiled as she interrupted him sharply.

“No, that’s all in the past now. I’d rather hear more about you. You succeeded in making Dolphin your child, and after raising her up to level four, the two of you spent all that time hunting Enemies?”

“Oh. Yeah. That said, we hunted basically the lesser classes, or sometimes when the conditions were good, we’d aim for a Wild class. Slow and steady, we earned points together, and then we took the next gamble. Roo brought along Mah—they do karate together—and tried the copy/install on her. I figured we had an eighty percent chance of failing, though.”

“Heeey! What is that supposed to mean, Master?!” Mah aka Mana aka Coral Merrow objected with a sullen look.

Crikin laughed loudly once more to avoid answering and continued his explanation. “Anyway, miraculously, that worked, too, and we yanked Mah up to level four with the points we’d earned hunting. And then here we are now.

That's basically it."

"I get it. You've really been working hard here in Okinawa these last three years, hmm, Crikin?" Kuroyukihime said seriously.

Crikin puffed his chest out with a proud "Well, you know!"

"Um, Sister?" Merrow thrust her hand into the air. "There's something I actually wanted to ask you."

"Hmm? What?"

"Uh, Master often boasts that they called him the Strongest in Tokyo, but is that really true?"

"Oh! I wanna know that, too!"

In contrast with Dolphin leaning forward, Crikin shrank back and cried out in a high voice, "N-n-nah, I mean, that was…um…the teensiest exaggeration…or, like, maybe an arbitrary interpretation of the facts—"

"Oh, I believe so." Kuroyukihime nodded evenly, and all three froze in position.

Crikin stayed frozen, but Dolphin and Merrow cried out in unison, "Whaaaaaat?!"

Kuroyukihime affirmed his statement, but she omitted the latter half of Crikin's nickname: "the Strongest."

His formal avatar name was Crimson Kingbolt. Which sounded strong. At the time he appeared on the duel scene, before his form or his abilities, his name alone first raced around the Accelerated World, and the majority of the Burst Linkers who made their strongholds in the neighboring Areas began to shake at what kind of warrior would come charging in at them.

However, this was only until they learned of his actual form. Crikin's true nature was not "king" but "bolt"—a screw. Kuroyukihime looked it up later in a dictionary app and learned that *kingbolt* was a single English word referring to a particular screw used in the fields of construction and engineering.

Once that fact became widely known, the Burst Linkers presented him with a nickname. Strongest Name—he had only told his students the first half, and

who on earth could blame him for that?

The legend was passed down even now that the reason Crikin joined the Purple Legion, Aurora Oval, was because Purple Thorn, the Purple King (also known as Empress Voltage), had jumped to the incorrect conclusion that the name Kingbolt meant a super-powerful electricity user, and she had hurried to recruit him.

Locking away this information in her own heart, Kuroyukihime solemnly recounted to Ruka and Mana, “When the Burst Linkers of Tokyo heard the name of your master, Crimson Kingbolt, they all trembled like baby bunnies. After all, he was the Strongest.”

“W-wow! Master, you’re not just a *sakijougu* [old drunk], are you?!”

“I-I’m so surprised! I thought you were just a *gachiyamah* [glutton]!”

Rather strange words to express respect for their master, but Crikin threw his head back even more fiercely and laughed hard. “Ha—ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! That’s right, my students! Make sure you pay me the proper respect in the future and offer me up a side dish each at mealtimes! Oh, except for *nabera*! And I’m not too into island leeks—” He didn’t get to finish.

An incredible earthquake suddenly shook the bar. Having thrown his chest out as far as possible, Crikin tumbled helplessly onto the floor, while Kuroyukihime, Ruka, and Mana abruptly rose up out of their seats.

A second later, they were assaulted by the next impact. Kuroyukihime immediately switched gears and sharpened all five senses to search for the source of the earthquake. It wasn’t the field itself that was shaking. Some enormous destructive phenomenon was occurring very close by.

“Outside!” she barked, and dashed out of the bar, onto the street out front. Carving out a deep circle in the ground with the sword tip of her left leg, she turned to the west, and *it* immediately leapt into view.

Two of the large buildings that should have been towering over the end of the long and narrow shopping street had collapsed completely. However low the endurance of terrain objects of the Weathered stage, it was no small feat to destroy an entire building in this short a time. She held her breath and strained

her eyes beneath mirrored goggles.

Beyond the clouds of red dust puffing up from the ground, there was some kind of silhouette moving slowly. Big. A size that was not possible for a Burst Linker.

“That’s…” Kuroyukihime’s voice slipped out of her.

“Oh, that’s it, Sis,” Ruka, who had run out next to her, responded. “The *magiimajimun* [big monster]. That thing eats everyone.”

“E-eats?”

“Other Enemies. But it’s only shown up in faraway hunting grounds until now,” Mana said in a trembling voice from the other side of Ruka.

It was no wonder she was scared. The shadow wriggling in the distance was five meters to the top of its head, and she couldn’t tell from here how long the thing was. If it was an Enemy, then it was Beast—but wait, if she got this wrong…

“C-crap! Why’s it in town— No, this isn’t the time for that. Please, Lotus! Take Roo and Mah and escape right now through the leave point in the hotel!” Crikin shouted, the last one to race out of the bar.

Kuroyukihime glanced at the small avatar. “Immediate escape? Is it really necessary to go that far?”

“Yeah! If it catches us here, there’s a danger that we—or Roo and Mah, at any rate—will fall into unlimited EK!”

“But this is a town. It can’t possibly be an Enemy’s territory! And unlimited EK’s not possible outside a territory.”

“No, Lotus. That thing’s no ordinary Enemy.” He stopped for a moment, and then Crimson Kingbolt squeezed out in a low, hoarse voice, as though it was hard for him to admit, “That…that Legend class Enemy is tamed.”

8

The taming of an Enemy.

Kuroyukihime knew there were ways to do this, but only through secondhand knowledge. There were two methods: Either the Burst Linker used their own special taming ability—although she had never once met anyone with that rare ability—or they used a special item. With the latter, although she had just once seen something along those lines appear in a treasure box in a dungeon a long, long time ago, she lost the dice roll, and it was taken by someone in her party then; she had no idea if it had been used after that.

Her knowledge was extremely vague, but even so, there was just one thing she could say with certainty. It was impossible to tame Legend-class Enemies—because they were so absolutely powerful. They could even be said to be the rulers of the Accelerated World. They could instantly kill a midlevel duel avatar with a single blow, and with a special attack, these Enemies could easily send even a group of high-level players flying.

Additionally, whether you used an ability or an item, you needed to first pare away the Enemy's health gauge until it was on the verge of being completely exhausted in order to succeed in the taming. Which meant that you had to attempt to break a Legend-class opponent running wild from being on the verge of death. It was simply suicide, an act that sent chills up her spine just thinking about it.

With these thoughts racing through her mind in the blink of an eye, Kuroyukihime turned to Crikin beside her and began automatically questioning him. "Who is it? What is the name of the person who managed this?"

But the answer was even more surprising. "Dunno."

“What?! If you checked the matching list, in a second…”

“That— No matter how many times we look at the list, there’s no name there,” Mana murmured. The slender coral avatar stood rooted to the spot, her long hair parts shaking.

Squeezing her friend’s shoulders tightly, Ruka said quietly, “That’s why we say the one riding it is *majimun* [a monster]. *Gunah majimun.* [Small monster.]”

At about the same time these words reached Kuroyukihime’s ears, the sound of an incredible impact roared through the stage for the third time.

Two ruins standing in the west of the cluster had been smashed together. The distance between them and the destroyer had been already cut to a hundred meters. Should she retreat immediately like Crikin said, or should she stand her ground and carefully examine the true form of this “monster”? After a moment’s hesitation, Kuroyukihime made her decision.

“Crikin, Ruka, Mana, and I dived after setting a disconnection timer.”

“How long?”

“Inside, eighty-three hours.”

“In that case, it won’t get to them both before losing all their points. But that means, Lotus, you…you want to fight.”

“Retreating before I’ve seen the face of my enemy doesn’t sit well with me. That said, I don’t mind if the three of you leave before me.”

“You never change, huh, World End? Okay, then maybe I’ll join you. No matter how much of a monster it is, we got a king right here; we’ll *nankurunaisa* [make something happen].”

Ruka and Mana watched over this quick exchange, hugging each other, but finally, as if overcome by emotion, they shouted, “S-so cool!”

“Sister and Master, you’re both wonderful!”

“Huh? Y-you think? Nah, ah, dang. But I actually prefer older ladies, so…” Crikin remarked, self-satisfied at a time like this, and Kuroyukihime jabbed him in the side with her right elbow.

“Here it comes!!”

The final building separating them from the destroyer vanished completely as if it had exploded.

“A—a dinosaur?!” Kuroyukihime blurted as soon as she spotted what appeared through the cloud of dust.

The tapered snout. Enormous jaw. Eyeballs shining red to either side. Thick, short legs supporting a cannonball body and a long tail. It all resembled the carnivorous beasts of antiquity she had seen in full-dive lessons in biology.

“Its official name is Nidhogg. I just call it Nick, though.”

Abruptly, a voice came down at her, and Kuroyukihime quickly shifted her gaze upward. She saw on the back of the enormous dinosaur a fin like the sail of a yacht. It stuck out sharply, and standing right in front of it was a small human figure—a duel avatar. This was no doubt the *gunah majimun* Ruka had mentioned: the Burst Linker who did not appear on the matching list.

“You. Who are you?!”

At Kuroyukihime’s challenge, the knight on the giant dinosaur moved his right hand lightly. The slender chain in that hand shook, glittering silver. When she looked very closely, she saw that the chain was connected to a band of leather wrapped around the dinosaur’s snout. If this was the bridle it appeared to be, then it was very likely the item that tamed the legendary Nidhogg.

“Thou shalt not needlessly name thyself; that’s our society’s rule, but…” He cut himself off, his voice excessively bright, and after shrugging his shoulders, the knight continued. “I never dreamed I’d come across a fish as big as you way out here at the end of the world. Nick caught the scent of some huge prey, so I came to check it out just in case. Clearly, the right choice. At the very least, I must introduce myself.”

Kuroyukihime quickly analyzed the information contained in these words.

Of course, this was also hearsay, but tamed Enemies supposedly demonstrated various abilities for the sake of their masters. This dinosaur Nidhogg was likely equipped with a radar-type ability to search out the position of targets from a long distance. In other words, what had called the Legend-

class Enemy and its knight to the little town was none other than Kuroyukihime herself.

“It’s not your fault,” Crikin whispered, as if reading her mind. “I mean, you could actually call this a good opportunity. In the sense of my particular abilities.”

“I’m counting on you,” Kuroyukihime returned briefly, as the mysterious Burst Linker on the dinosaur’s back bowed neatly.

“A pleasure to meet you, Black King. And greetings, people of the region. My name is Sulfur Pot. I look forward to knowing you better.”

“Strange. So you finally name yourself. I’ve been waiting for this day for the last three months, ever since you appeared! Listen. The mighty power before you is known as…” Crikin braced his simple legs in the shape of cylinders cut in half lengthwise and moved to proudly call back his own name.

“Oh, it’s fine. You don’t need to tell me. There’s no point, and anyway, you’ll be at total point loss soon enough,” came the humiliating reply, and the Strongest Name ended in a misfire.

Crikin trembled with rage, and Kuroyukihime held him back with a gesture before launching her thoughts into high gear once more. She had never heard the avatar name Sulfur Pot before. Which meant that he had become a Burst Linker during the two and a half years she had been in a state of semiretirement. But the swaggering way he carried himself was that of a veteran, and a major feat like the taming a Legend-class Enemy was impossible for a mid-ranking Linker, much less a newbie. He had either an incredibly rich history of battle experience, or the backing of a large Legion.

The instant her thoughts made it to this point, the thing that she should have remembered straightaway finally sparked to life in the core of her brain.

“*Gunah majimun*”—small monster. That’s what Ruka had called Sulfur Pot, because he didn’t appear on the matching list. Normally, this was completely impossible. A major principle of Brain Burst was that connected Burst Linkers would always be registered on the matching list given that they had to connect to the global net to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

However, the previous fall, Kuroyukihime had suffered greatly because of an enemy who managed to skirt this principle. Takumu Mayuzumi—Cyan Pile—currently teamed up with Silver Crow as a trustworthy member of Nega Nebulus. He had used a program given to him by his parent Burst Linker to disappear and reappear in the Umesato local net like a ghost. The situation now was very similar. She might even say it was exactly the same.

She took a sharp breath and called out to the avatar lording over all present from five meters up in the air, “Backdoor program.”

Sulfur Pot’s shoulders twitched. “Now, what exactly is that?” His voice preserved its calm, but his upper body leaned forward slightly. Through this movement, the avatar, who had been in the shadow of the dinosaur’s dorsal fin, was exposed to the sunlight of the Weathered stage, revealing his color and form.

Sulfur—befitting the name, his armor was a fairly vivid yellow, but somewhat paler than Yellow Radio, Yellow King, and one of the Kings of Pure Color. Sulfur’s slender body had an orthodox form, but large holes in his shoulders, chest, and hips drew the eye.

Staring hard at her enemy’s face, designed to look as though he were wearing a mask and goggles, Kuroyukihime offered a few more words. “No, wait. If I remember right, that program can’t be used anymore with the server update, hmm? But I have no doubt you’re using a similar cheat technique. Which means, Sulfur Pot, you’re not in Okinawa, but rather diving at a distance from Tokyo, hmm?!”

The first to respond to this were the three members of the Okinawan group from Crikin down.

“Wh-wh-what?!”

“*Akisamiyo!!*”

“No! Way! No faaaair!”

At the three cries in succession, Sulfur Pot didn’t so much as flinch. Finally, he slowly leaned back and said, almost in a murmur, “I see, I get it. You may have withdrawn to your little nest for a few years, but you still have teeth. Well,

that's that, then. I didn't have this on my schedule, but I'll have you disappear here, Black King. Everyone'll be so disappointed if our farming sees a setback here."

"What? Farming?" Kuroyukihime murmured. In addition to the "crop cultivation" and "animal husbandry" listed in the dictionary, the word *farming* Sulfur Pot used also had meaning as a net game term: quick turnover in monster hunting to earn large amounts of money and experience points. That was precisely what he had been doing in Okinawa using the massive Nidhogg.

Putting it all together, she ended up with something like this.

Three months earlier, Sulfur Pot had visited Okinawa, probably on a school trip like Kuroyukihime, and set up some kind of cheat tool in the vicinity of Henoko at that time. After he returned to Tokyo, he dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field in Okinawa from a distance, together with the Nidhogg he had tamed in advance, and mowed down the Wild and lesser–class Enemies that lived there. Thus, he was protected by the same logic as Cyan Pile had once been, and no matter how many times Crikin and his team checked the matching list, his name was not there. If he did the same thing in Tokyo, he would become a target for subjugation by the major Legions in the blink of an eye, but that wasn't a concern in distant Okinawa. If Ruka and Mana hadn't risked their lives and tried contacting her while Kuroyukihime was there, she would never have even thought about diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

"I'm the one presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity here, Sulfur Pot. I happen to have a personal grudge against all kinds of cheat tools. So I'll make sure to expose your petty little secret here and make it so you can never use that tool again."

Clang! Flinging out the sword of her right hand, Kuroyukihime called out clearly, "Don't think the nickname Legend Slayer has been patented by the Blue King! Come! I will fillet you and your steed!!"

Her sharp tongue descended on him like a conflagration, and Sulfur Pot's demeanor changed in response. His eyes, beneath round goggles, burned, and he responded in a low voice, "Now you've gone and said it. Even my own parent has never spoken to me like that. I don't think any of the usual ways of killing

you will do here. Let's see if you can still puff out your chest like that when Nick has smashed a leg and an arm."

The air in the field immediately became tense, and the temperature rose. Even the gusting-wind characteristic of the Weathered stage held its breath, as if sensing the impending clash.

Kuroyukihime glanced over at Crikin, prepared for battle next to her, and murmured quickly, "Crikin, we're doing *that*."

"Roger. Understood," the crimson avatar responded briefly, his manner entirely different from when they had first arrived in the field. Briskly, he gave instructions to Ruka and Mana, standing to the rear. "Students, in the opening of this battle, my fine self and Lotus will be that giant's opponent. When you fight something this large, the surrounding buildings are destroyed one after another and turned to rubble. What you two are going to do is gather up any metal objects from that rubble and bring it to this intersection."

"What? We'll fight, too—" Ruka started to raise her voice in protest, but Mana quickly blocked it.

"Understood, Master! We're picking up scrap metal, right? Leave it to us!"

"Go all out. The amount of steel you collect will decide the battle! Here we go!"

"Haah!" With a battle cry, Sulfur Pot snapped the reins he clutched in both hands. On standby until that point, the dinosaur-shaped Enemy's eyes gleamed a dull red, and it opened wide a maw lined with sinister teeth.

"Graaaaaaar!!" It had no sooner released the earth-shaking roar than the massive, twenty-meter-long dinosaur started to charge ferociously.

9

First, by way of greeting, clash with all your might!

Having resolved herself, Kuroyukihime crouched down before the enormous Nidhogg charging them in a straight line and took on a position ready to draw her blades.

Of course, even the level-nine Kuroyukihime would be knocked aside when body-checked head-on by a Legend-class Enemy. And to begin with, Black Lotus was specialized in attacking; defense had basically been jettisoned to that end. So rather than crashing into it in a foolishly honest way, she would dodge with the bare minimum of movement, pulling aside at the very last second, and bring down a counterattack on that snout. Nidhogg's charge was powerful, but the speed itself was not that different from a Beast. She should be able to see it.

What disturbed these calculations of Kuroyukihime was not the enemy, but Crikin, in position beside her.

"That jerk! Take this, why don'tcha!" With a powerful cry, he thrust his left arm straight out and called out the technique name.

"Tapping Screeeeeew!!"

Whk whk whk whk whuk! His five fingers shot off from his hand. Just like his torso, they were covered in a side-winding, fine zigzag—fingers with screw threads carved into them suddenly transformed into tapping pieces with tapered tips. They flew through the air like missiles, flames jetting out of the cross-shaped holes on the back ends, all of them hitting their target of the beast's head.

If the precision of his aim was a marvel, his wariness was also something to be applauded. She had assumed that all he did was get drunk at the bar, but he

had properly charged his special-attack gauge immediately after diving.

However…

The five screws continued to rotate at high speed after digging into Nidhogg's sharklike head, and after sending a shower of sparks flying for a few seconds, they soon enough tumbled and fell to the ground. The only trace they left was the slightest of indentations.

"*Oryo?*" By the time Crikin murmured this, the dinosaur was already right in front of them, and Kuroyukihime lost her chance for counterattack.

Nidhogg galloped between Kuroyukihime and Crikin, and then Ruka and Mana, to smash into the ruins at the rear of the intersection and come to a stop.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, the shops run by drones were, as a general rule, indestructible, but at this rate, it looked like every building but that one would be destroyed. When taking on large Enemies, the basic theory was to take advantage of complex terrain to hide, so she would have preferred to settle this before the region became an empty lot, but it seemed like they wouldn't be able to manage that.

However, Kuroyukihime had put together her strategy taking into account that the buildings would be destroyed one after another. And the fact that the keystone Crikin was alive. But…

"Look! There's no way some half-assed flying tools would work on a heavy armor–type Legend!" she grumbled.

"I-it's just…," Crikin muttered back, kneading his hands together. The five fingers of his left hand, which he had sent flying, were charged up with new screws from the base. "It's been three years since I was in a real fight and all."

"Then sit still and be quiet! Once we've piled up plenty of steel, I'll make sure to give you your chance in the spotlight!" Kuroyukihime shifted her gaze and called out in a low voice to Ruka and Mana, who were already racing around. "I'm counting on you!!"

The girls popped their thumbs up and ran over to the ruins on the north side destroyed by Nidhogg earlier. The terrain objects of the Weathered stage were

half-rotting concrete and half-rusted steel framing. A Factory or Steel stage would have been best, littered as they were with metal on the ground and in the buildings, but they could've also ended up with a Wasteland or a Primeval Forest, where there was zero metal, so she couldn't complain.

After confirming that Ruka and Mana were pulling enormous chunks of steel from beneath the rubble with superhuman strength that seemed at odds with their slender avatars, Kuroyukihime turned back to Nidhogg.

The massive dinosaur had just finished changing its orientation. Due to its massive size, its turning speed was indeed slow. In which case, she was inclined to think that its rear was a weak point, but that long, spiky tail was incredibly suspicious. Just as she initially planned, the way to handle this was to get counterattack damage little by little while sidestepping the heavy charges.

As the dinosaur prepared itself to charge once more, Sulfur Pot, on the beast's back, shouted with plenty of swagger, "Don't hold back. You can go ahead and use whatever special attacks you want, Black King. Well, according to our data, I feel like all of your attacks are short range, though. I just know it'll be interesting to see if you can return Nick's attacks."

Our? The word caught her attention momentarily, but she quickly banished it to the back of her brain. She could analyze the information all she wanted after they had won this.

However, what Sulfur said was painfully true. All the special attacks Black Lotus had learned were basically for close-range fighting; even her nominal long-range attack, Death By Piercing, only just barely spanned a distance of five meters. And at that range, even if she did manage to deal the dinosaur some damage, it would charge hard while she was frozen after the technique.

Of course, it was different if she used *that*. A certain logic hidden in the Accelerated World. The strongest ultimate power that interfered with the way of the world with the power of an image and overwrote it—the Incarnate system.

It depended on her mental state, but with her Incarnate attack Vorpal Strike, Kuroyukihime could realize a maximum distance of nearly fifty meters, a length that compared favorably even with the ranged attack of a red-type avatar. If

she used that, it was plenty possible to pierce the dinosaur from a distance where she could comfortably evade the charge attack.

However, she must not use it. There was one absolute law for the Incarnate system: Incarnate must not be used unless you were first attacked with Incarnate. This wasn't simply a matter of cowardice or idealism or something. When you broke this rule—the promise with yourself and your companions—and attacked with Incarnate first, the user's mind was, without exception, pulled to the dark side of the Incarnate. The result waiting there was inevitable tragedy. Beginning with the fifth Chrome Disaster, who she had fought a mere three months earlier, Kuroyukihime had seen more than a few Burst Linkers swallowed up by a dark will to bring about irreparable destruction to themselves and the people they loved. She absolutely could not go down that same path.

Thus, Kuroyukihime glared at Sulfur Pot, smirking on high, and said, "I'll use my special attacks once I beat you down from that place. You can look forward to experiencing them firsthand."

"Ha-ha-ha! Of course a king would say something that cool! Well then, just as you wish, I'll have Nick crush you and end this!!" Sulfur yanked the reins again, and the dinosaur stamped fiercely at the ground with its front legs.

Faced with this, Kuroyukihime crossed the swords of her arms in front of her body as she adjusted her position ever so slightly, such that the large building was directly behind her.

She had no intention of using Incarnate techniques. But her opponent had an overly powerful assistant in the form of a Legend-class Enemy. Which was why…

"That's just about enough! Aaaah!" With a battle cry, she focused her mind and shouted, "Overdrive! Mode Green!!" Instantly, the armor partition lines running across Black Lotus's entire body emitted a vivid green light.

The "overdrive" command was also not a technique or ability prescribed by the system. Having said that, it wasn't an Incarnate attack, either. It was a so-called positive autosuggestion, following the same logic as Overflow, the phenomenon of a negative image run wild, and Zero Fill, the phenomenon of an empty image run wild. Basically, it was a type of battle cry, but Kuroyukihime

had added a trick to it. Taking advantage of the characteristic of her own body of possessing no color affiliation, she had set three modes. Mode Red pushed her avatar's performance diagram toward the long range, Mode Blue brought it to the close range, and Mode Green changed it to a defensive type. Naturally, this did not have the absolute attack power of only being avoidable with Incarnate, the greatest characteristic of an Incarnate attack, but it should prove helpful at any rate. And anyway, the effect of Incarnate attacks on Enemies was relatively weak.

Sulfur Pot watched the modest change that came over Black Lotus and laughed again. "Ha-ha-ha! Your little tricks are useless before this guy! Go, Nick!!"

Kuroyukihime stared wordlessly at the snout of the massive dinosaur charging toward her with the force of a huge trailer. This time, Crikin dropped obediently into an evasive posture. But the dinosaur's trajectory did not deviate. Its target was the Black King alone.

She gritted her teeth and pulled the fierce charge in, a charge that would likely carry away more than half her health gauge if she was directly hit. *Not yet…Not yet…Now!!*

"Sheeah!" Leaping diagonally to the left and forward, Kuroyukihime launched the sword of her right foot in something like a roundhouse kick.

In midair, the tip of her sword collided with one of the massive teeth in Nidhogg's mouth. Her leg squealed from knee to hip at the fearsome stress. However, perhaps thanks to the autosuggestion of Mode Green, she endured it without her sword breaking. *Ting!* Her sword came around to the front, and Nidhogg slammed past her on the right, to plunge into the building behind her.

Broken and sailing through the air was the white tooth of the dinosaur. Noting that the top bar of the three-tiered gauge of the Enemy displayed in the top of her field of view decreased just a little, Kuroyukihime did an easy backward somersault in the air and landed on the ground.

For the next three minutes and thirty seconds, the battle developed along similar lines.

Kuroyukihime dodged Nidhogg's charge at the very last second, and in the

instant they crossed paths, she dealt a minuscule amount of damage. She got the beast to charge into the building behind her, and while it was turning around, she took up her next position. Naturally, she didn't escape unharmed every time. Teeth or scale would touch her, and Kuroyukihime's health gauge was steadily shaved away. The pace of damage was slower than her enemy's, but the absolute value was totally different. If she kept using the same strategy, the gauge that would be exhausted first would belong to Black Lotus.

Perhaps because he was aware of this, Sulfur Pot didn't move to change this artless charging strategy, either. He had more than enough attitude to spare, but he was very much aware that the opponent he was facing was a king. He was on guard against the possibility that if he did anything interesting or tried any small tricks, like coming down from his mount momentarily to use his own techniques, she would take advantage of the opening, and he would be instantly killed by her close-range special attacks. In other words, Sulfur's artlessness was also a display of wisdom.

…It's strange, Kuroyukihime couldn't help thinking, even as she continued the very tight battle. During her two years in seclusion, she had used a dummy avatar to watch fights and gather as much information as possible. If there had been a Burst Linker this clever, equipped with enough knowledge and actual ability to tame a Legend class, at the *very* least, his name would have reached her ears. What might explain this mystery was the "our" he had mentioned earlier. There existed some powerful organization behind Sulfur, and it was more than likely not a Legion of the Six Kings.

Her mind racing along these lines, Kuroyukihime succeeded in her dozenth counterattack and landed lightly on the ground. Behind her, there was a massive collision, followed by a shaking of the ground to inform her of the rubble collapsing.

Turning, she saw that the ruins located on the eastern edge of the small town that stretched out east-west had been destroyed. Beyond that, the reddish-brown road extended and continued toward the large hotel in the distance. With that, the buildings of the town were mostly destroyed. Which meant the battle was shifting to the next phase.

"Crikin! Go!!" Kuroyukihime said in a low voice, and the crimson avatar, who

had been loitering nearby the entire time, nodded quickly.

“I was getting tired of waiting,” he said, and dashed off to the rear.

Still glaring at the giant dinosaur, Kuroyukihime started a slow retreat, as if to follow after her partner.

On the back of the dinosaur as it finished turning around, Sulfur Pot called out in his bright voice, “My, my, my. Things have been tidied up rather nicely, hmm? Nick and I both prefer an open plaza, so now we can really fight with pleasure.”

“How lovely. But it’s also easier for me to fight now, too, you know? Nothing around to get in my way anymore, and greater freedom in dodging. I’m sick of your strategy of glancing damage.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Glancing damage—you make it sound so awful! I mean, I hate this fussy sort of method myself. But, you see, I have my own circumstances to consider. At any rate, it really takes forever for Nick’s special-attack gauge to charge up!”

Kuroyukihime took a sharp breath at this, unable to contain her surprise. “Special-attack…gauge?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Well, normally you wouldn’t know, right? Tamed high-level Enemies have their own individual special-attack gauges. Unfortunately, only its master—in other words, me—can see the gauge. After smashing that many buildings, it’s finally fully charged now. So then, what happens next…I’m sure you know that much at least, Black King!!”

Sulfur Pot ceased to speak and raised up his hands, and the silver reins they held, into the air. As he yanked them fiercely down, he shouted in the loudest voice he had used since the start of the battle, “Go, Nick!! Scorching Inferno!!”

The enormous dinosaur opened its maw wide, probably two meters in diameter. From the black depths of its throat, Kuroyukihime saw the flickering of an orange light. At the same time, the stench of sulfur filled the area—the smell of flammable gas. Instantly, she whirled around and entered a mad dash.

A half second later, from behind, she was assaulted by an orange glow. Followed by heat. After a slight lag, a roar. The enormous dinosaur Nidhogg was

firing the so-called dragon breath.

Black Lotus's semitransparent, obsidian-like armor crackled, almost like the sound of an empty frying pan being heated. Actually, as a phenomenon, it was exactly the same. However much her defensive ability was increased by Overdrive Mode Green, that was limited to physical attacks and had no effect against fire damage. Flames started to lick the edges of her field of view, while her health gauge was literally burned away. From over 90 percent remaining, the gauge was cut down to 80 percent in the blink of an eye and was approaching 70. If she was swallowed up by the inferno, it would take her at once down to the danger zone.

"Lotus! Over heeeeere!!"

Kuroyukihime lifted her head with a gasp.

Ahead of her, in front of the intersection where the bar was, Crikin stood, arms crossed, in an imposing stance. And then behind him, piled up in a heap, a truly jaw-dropping mountain of scrap iron. At the foot of this were Lagoon Dolphin and Curren, looking exhausted.

At once, she forgot the tight spot she was in and silently murmured, *Nice work, Ruka, Mana! Now watch. Your hard work is going to flip this battle on its head.*

Kuroyukihime mustered all her focus and increased the speed of her dash even further. The fire breath that chased after her receded again. A hundred meters until the intersection.

Standing there, Crikin had no sooner bent his short legs than he jumped straight up into the air, to an almost impossible height.

Once he was high enough to easily cross the mountain behind him, he spread out his arms and legs and shouted the technique name. "Metal friends, be dyed my glorious color!! Here! We! Go! Mega Machine Awakeniiiiiiiiing!"

His small body was shrouded in a red light effect, and then the transformation began. He drew his protruding chest plate in so that it was flush with his head, and similarly tucked his arms into his body. The cylinder cross-sections of his legs rotated ninety degrees to the outside and became one with a *kashhk*.

Finally, he turned tapered feet directly downward, and what remained was no longer a human-shaped duel avatar, but rather a single red screw.

Most likely, this was the first time his two students had seen this technique. As the girls gaped, dumbfounded, the screw began to rotate clockwise at high speed. Once it was spinning so fast Kuroyukihime could no longer see the two eye lenses on the ridged surface of the screw, it dropped directly downward. *Skreeeenk!!* It plunged halfway down into the mountain of scrap metal, and sparks went flying as it continued to dive inside and disappear.

Behind Kuroyukihime, still racing toward the foot of the mountain, Sulfur Pot's shout rang out. "Too late for the small fry to do anything now! I'll burn him up with you, Black King!!"

At the same time, the intensity of the flames pursuing her increased. The massive Nidhogg was starting to advance while it spat out the flame breath. Like this, Ruka and Mana, standing stock-still in the intersection, would be swallowed up in the inferno.

But Kuroyukihime didn't call out to them to run away—because she believed. In the true power of the level-seven Burst Linker known as the Strongest Name, Crimson Kingbolt.

The entire mountain of scrap metal was lit up in crimson. Almost as if that region alone had lost its gravity, countless steel bars and plates rose up into the air. They came together, joined up, and almost as if they were parts planned for this from the very start, produced an enormous object.

First, two thick legs, followed by hips to connect them. A cylindrical stomach and a boxy chest. Long, sturdy arms connected to shoulders on the right and left. And finally, a head that closely resembled Crikin's original head was produced, and the phenomenon was complete.

The towering, gigantic red mech reached a height of eight meters at the top of its head. It then raised its hands farther and struck a pose with a mysterious *ka-kyoon* sound. The impact was powerful; it was as if the world had changed to an entirely different game.

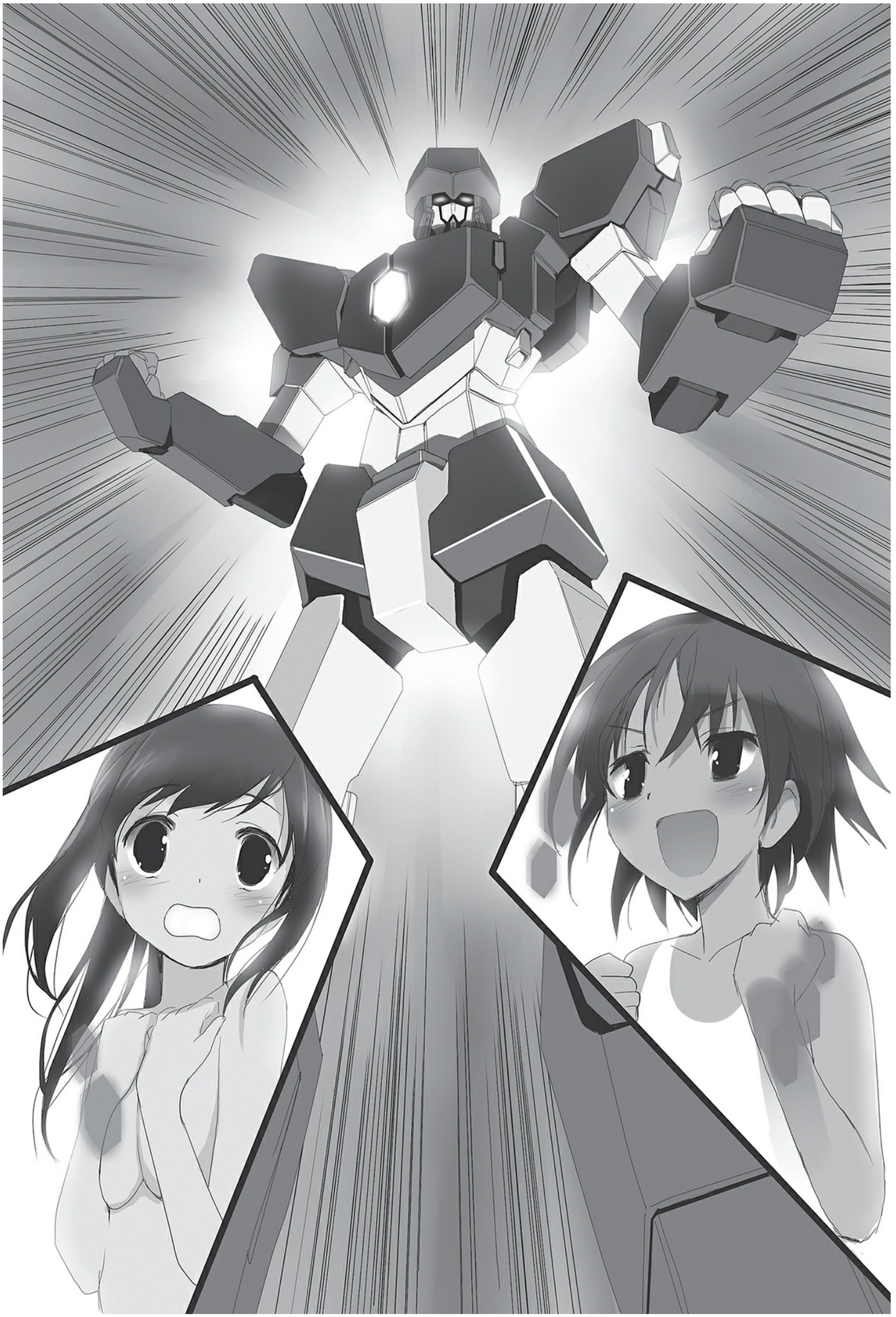
"*I-i-ippenmahgii!* [It's huge!]"

“So Master is an *amanchu* [giant]!”

With the voices of Ruka and Mana at his back, the colossal robot flashed its eyes and jumped, making the earth shake. In midair, he passed Kuroyukihime dashing the other way and landed directly in front of Nidhogg. However, that happened to be in the middle of the fire breath still shooting from the dinosaur’s mouth.

The blazing torrent and the robot’s massive body collided violently, generating a pillar of flames that threatened to burn even the sky. Kuroyukihime checked that her own heat damage had stopped and, carving an arc out in the surface of the ground, made a U-turn and stopped.

What she saw was the silhouette of the robot flickering in the center of the blaze and Nidhogg beyond that, motionless but spitting out even more flames. The dinosaur had already been continually using the breath attack for nearly thirty seconds. To last that long, its special-attack gauge must have been huge, but its teeth, also exposed to the flames for such a long time, were heated bright red, and the dinosaur itself seemed to be suffering.



However, the knight on its back showed absolutely no intention of putting a stop to the attack. Making the reins jangle constantly, he called out, unable to hide his irritation for the first time since the start of the fight. “This papier-mâché toy! I’ll burn you until there’s nothing left! Nick, more! More firepower!”

Having received its orders, Nidhogg opened its maw as far as it could, and an even more intense blaze jetted out. Several of its teeth shattered, seeming unable to withstand the high temperature, and the corners of its mouth were carbonized black. As proof that this was not simply the appearance of damage, the dinosaur’s health gauge decreased, albeit just barely.

A few seconds later, Nidhogg’s seemingly infinite special-attack gauge was exhausted. When the breath weakened and stopped a moment later, the vortex of the pillar of flame melted into the atmosphere and disappeared.

Appearing from within the blaze was a steel-framed mech crouching with its arms crossed. Although it hadn’t been burned away, its entire body was blackened, and part of it had melted and now hung down like icicles.

“Sister, the *amanchu* is dead!” Mana raised a sad voice from behind her.

“He’s fine,” Kuroyukihime said crisply. “Crikin won’t be done in by something like that.”

And as if he had heard her, the robot’s eyes flashed yellow. The massive, charred body then began to move, creaking as it did. Crikin opened up his arms in front of his body, stretched out five fingers, and turned them straight at Nidhogg.

From the tips of his fingers, a total of ten firing lines shot out. Shell cases were ejected one after another from his wrists, and fell to the ground. Countless sparks bounced off the area from the face to the shoulders of the giant dinosaur, and the Enemy retreated, howling as it went.

“Wh-what?!” Sulfur Pot cried in surprise as he crouched down on the dinosaur’s back. Perhaps he was unable to control the Enemy in that position; the dinosaur only retreated gradually. In contrast, the giant robot deployed the armor from both shoulders, firing the machine guns of its fingers, and launched the three rows of missiles that appeared from within all at once. The armor on

its chest then opened up to produce a large-diameter cannon, and this, too, erupted in flames with a roar.

In the blink of an eye, Nidhogg was swallowed up in countless fireballs, and its health gauge started to visibly decrease. To be able to do this kind of damage to a heavy armor Legend-class Enemy indicated incredible attack power, but that was to be expected. Before the Red King Scarlet Rain, aka the Immobile Fortress, showed up, Crimson Kingbolt had been well known as the Burst Linker with the greatest long-distance firepower in the Accelerated World.

Any group battle he was in inevitably ended up a matter of how big a pile of metal objects could be collected or whether the collection could be interfered with. That is, once Crikin transformed into a giant robot, the enemy was basically at checkmate; nothing else could be done.

When he had said, “You could actually call this a good opportunity. In the sense of my particular abilities,” immediately before the battle started, he was referring to the fact that they could draw the enemy into a town where a fair amount of metal existed around them.

The full fire of the giant robot continued for a total of fifteen seconds, halving Nidhogg’s health gauge. If the dinosaur had still been wild, Crikin could never have done such great damage to it. The beast would have moved to dodge at high speed or counterattacked; it would never have sat and simply been showered by gunfire. However, it had been tamed by the item, putting it in a state where it was unable to move without its master’s order, and thus the dinosaur was severely wounded.

Sulfur Pot must have realized the irony of this in the middle of the barrage. As he stood up slowly on his steed’s back, there was no trace of his previous swagger. A hateful light glittered in his goggle-shaped eye lenses and he said, low, “You really, you really…I mean, hurting Nick like this…”

True to his words, the dinosaur’s scales were scorched, broken, dripping with purple blood. If the beast were showered in the same full fire one more time, its health gauge would probably be completely cut away. That said, it would take a decent amount of time for the robot’s weapons all to recharge. To earn that time, she would have to at least create a distraction, Kuroyukihime

thought, and started to advance.

“Nick! One more time!!” Sulfur Pot shouted, and yanked on the reins. The dinosaur slowly lifted its head and opened the mouth damaged in the earlier continuous flame emission.

He was apparently going to attack with the flame breath again, but it was a proven fact that fire attacks did not work on the giant robot. In fact, while it was enduring the flames, its guns could recharge, so the dragon breath was actually almost to the robot’s advantage. With Crikin likely thinking the same thing, the robot lowered its stance once more and took on a guard posture, arms crossed in front.

As the dinosaur was on the verge of once again spewing its incandescent flames, Sulfur Pot thrust both hands forward and called out a different attack name. “Charcoal Smoke!!”

From the large holes in his hands, clouds of inky black smoke shot out and immediately enveloped the giant robot. The smoke soon made its way over to Kuroyukihime as well, coloring her field of view with a gloomy haze.

Reflexively, she moved to leap back, but her health gauge wasn’t moving a pixel, and there was no sensation or change in her armor. Which meant that this black smoke was just as the name implied, a smokescreen. In that case, she could actually use it and set up a distraction attack—

No.

“This odor,” Kuroyukihime said quietly, and focused on her sense of smell, which was normally not given a lot of weight in the Accelerated World. The faint scent that reached her nose, the smell of sulfur—

“This is bad! Run, Crikin!! The smoke is—” Kuroyukihime’s cry overlapped with the second attack name Sulfur Pot called out.

“Scorching Inferno!!”

“—gunpowder!!”

Flames jetted from the mouth of the dinosaur, and the instant the tip of it touched the black smoke…

A flash of light. A roar. The world shook.

It was as if she had been smacked by a giant. But even as she was sent flying helplessly by the impact, Kuroyukihime intently peeled her eyes open to confirm the scene. Several pillars of flame shot up along the inside of the giant robot, and immediately after that, the steel body was ripped into pieces and scattered. These were soon blanketed in crimson flames and disappeared from view. She heard Ruka and Mana screaming from somewhere.

Having been jostled in the air to the point where she no longer knew up from down, Kuroyukihime hit the ground on her back. The initial explosion and her subsequent fall had together brought her health gauge down over 30 percent, coloring it yellow.

The second shot of flame breath seemed to have ended in a mere one or two seconds, but that was plenty. The flames weakened, and when the gray smoke was cleared away by the wind of the stage, what appeared was a gruesome scene that could be described as nothing other than “ground zero.” The remains of the robot were scattered in the center of the charred earth, and the majority of the surrounding rubble had been blown away.

In the nearby intersection, Lagoon Dolphin and Coral Merrow had collapsed next to each other, while Kuroyukihime was still unable to stand because of the aftershock of the incredibly large impact.

“Crikin.” She pushed a hoarse voice from her throat, and something fell whistling from the sky. It landed a few meters to her left and tumbled along the ground—a large screw, or rather Crikin, ejected from the center of the robot. His eyes blinked irregularly, and he didn’t look like he would be moving for the time being, either.

The destruction was breathtaking, making even the full fire of the giant robot before seem like a child’s trick.

Sulfur Pot’s special attack—shooting black gunpowder as smoke—and Nidhogg’s special attack—emitting flames over a wide radius—were a terrifying combo, and that combo had uprooted and flipped the battle status.

“Heh! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

At the maniacal laughter, Kuroyukihime turned her gaze upward, her avatar creaking, and saw a massive shadow approaching, black plumes of smoke still wafting upward.

“I never thought I’d use that in a place like this. Although I don’t really like to use it, because I don’t make it out scot-free, either, you know.”

Just as he said, the dinosaur and its knight appearing from the smoke had fresh wounds all over. Because they were in the Unlimited Neutral Field, she couldn’t see Sulfur Pot’s health gauge, but the second tier of Nidhogg’s was basically exhausted.

“But now you understand, don’t you? That it was inevitable I was chosen as Nick’s master. That the two of us become one, the best partners, one heart, one mind.”

“Hmph. I…wonder,” Kuroyukihime responded in a low voice, enduring pain from her entire body to get to her feet. The sensation of pain in the Unlimited Neutral Field was raised to twice that of the Normal Duel Field, but perhaps because she had been slammed with heat and impact damage at the same time, it felt like double that again. But she stood upright, managing somehow not to stagger, and turned toward Sulfur Pot. “That dinosaur seems like it has something it wants to say to you, you know. ‘If you’re going to call yourself my master…at least ride me better.’”

“Heh…heh-heh. How like a king. Top rate at sour grapes. I’m looking forward to it, you know: you in tears, begging for your life. And just to let you know, Nick’s special-attack gauge still has a little left in it.” He yanked on the reins, and the dinosaur roared as it opened its mouth.

If she were showered in that flame breath again, even without the combination with the black gunpowder, she wouldn’t last ten seconds. If she escaped in a full-powered dash, it might have been possible for her to last until the portal in the hotel, but abandoning the still-collapsed Crikin, Dolphin, and Merrow was out of the question. Her only choice was to somehow stand her ground there and find a way to survive, nipping in and out at top speed to attack without taking any damage.

Kuroyukihime was about to brace herself, her confidence in her success fairly

low, when in that instant, she felt an inexpressible something and quickly looked up. There was no change in the reddish sky of the Weathered stage. But she definitely felt something. Something accumulating high-density information and trying to overwrite the world. An enemy attack? Or backup?

“It’s all right, Sister.” A small voice rang out behind her.

She looked back, and Mana—Coral Merrow, who had sat up at some point—was staring straight up into the sky. But she seemed strange. The color of her eye lens also seemed slightly different. Just like when she had asked Kuroyukihime for the fourth XSB cable right before they dived.

“She’s coming,” Mana said, and then loosely held her right hand up to the sky.

10

To go back approximately sixty minutes in Accelerated World time—or a few seconds in real-world time—the person who had watched Kuroyukihime, Ruka, and Mana heading up to the dive space on the second floor of the resort hotel, from the shadow of a pillar in a corner of the elevator lobby, had started chasing after them the second the three entered the booth.

The reception was automated online and set up so that users selected an empty spot from the booth layout displayed in their field of view. However, their pursuer confirmed the position of the sole four-person booth and headed that way without hesitation.

The door to the booth deep in the dive space was closed and locked, naturally. No voices could be heard from inside. The three users were likely already in full dives. The pursuer touched the door, and a dialog box appeared, requesting the input of the electronic key.

A pale finger popped out from the sleeve of the thin hoodie and pressed the OPEN button of the dialog. Normally, the door would not open, but now it was unlocked with a faint sound. That same finger pulled the sliding door open, and the slender body attached to it slipped into the booth. In the end, the door was soon closed and locked once more.

The electronic key to this dive space was the same as the key used for the rooms in the hotel. Thus, strictly speaking, there was only one person other than Kuroyukihime who possessed the same key: the Umesato Junior High student council secretary sharing her room, Megumi Wakamiya.

What Megumi saw after stepping into the booth was three girls, bodies totally relaxed, eyes closed, on the reclining sofas opposite each other. The one sitting alone on the left was, of course, Kuroyukihime. On the right were two girls who

seemed a bit younger. She had never seen their deeply tanned faces before, and they were wearing an unfamiliar design of sailor uniform, so they were probably not Umesato students, but rather attended a local school in Henoko.

The instant she recognized this, Megumi's face twisted up and she bit her lip hard. The Kuroyukihime that Megumi knew seemed sociable, but the walls around her heart were actually tall and thick. She never let her guard down around people on first meeting, so that the number of people who knew her true face, sarcastic and childish, hidden in the depths of her incredible beauty, was seriously limited.

And yet that very girl was on a full dive with local girls she had likely only just met, on a direct connection no less, albeit through a router. Megumi could come up with only one reason for that: the other world.

A different land, where half of Kuroyukihime lived, hiding on the other side of reality. These two girls were residents of that world, and most likely, at that moment, they were visiting that place with Kuroyukihime. A world Megumi had never seen, much less set foot in. A world whose name she wasn't even permitted to know. And accessed using the time set aside for picking a souvenir for her.

Her left hand trembled and pulled itself up, moving toward Kuroyukihime's Neurolinker. The tips of her fingers touched the XSB cable stretching out from the piano-black exterior shell and grabbed hold of it tightly.

If I pull this out, she'll come home to me. She'll probably lose something precious forever, but she'll come back to this place where I can reach her.

"You can't." Abruptly, she heard someone's voice echo inside her head.

She blinked with a gasp and looked at the three faces, but they were all still on their full dives. Their eyelids were shut tight, and their lips didn't so much as twitch. The router built into the low table indicated that the three cables were all currently transmitting to the global net.

Megumi finally noticed it then. There weren't three cables. A fourth XSB cable stretched out from the router, but the opposite end was still lying on the table.

"It's a…door. A door to invite you just once more to a distant land. Now,

then…”

Guided by the childlike yet strangely commanding voice, Megumi took her hand off Kuroyukihime’s cable and reached out to the coffee table. She picked up the fourth XSB cable and brought the plug to her own neck.

Directly connecting with an unknown circuit was, in terms of security, a deeply risky thing to do. Although Megumi knew as much, just that minute, she didn’t feel even a touch of hesitation. She connected the plug to her floral pink Neurolinker, and the wired connection warning popped up.

And then Megumi had a vision of a book appearing soundlessly on the table before her. There wasn’t a real book with physical substance or even a 3-D object, but it was definitely there.

“Oh.” A faint breath escaped her lips. This…this was it, the book she had loved so long ago. The book she had read over and over so many times, and yet couldn’t remember the story of at all. She had lost it at some point and never found it again, that precious book.

She sat down next to Kuroyukihime, and gently reached out to the large hardback book. There was no title on the cover. Just countless colors joined together in an arabesque pattern. Timidly, she opened it.

On the first page, there was only a single line of English text. Written in black ink was a spell. The magic word to visit the world of the book. Megumi took a deep breath and then uttered the two words of the phrase like a song, like a prayer:

“Unlimited Burst.”

11

At the words “She’s coming” from Mana, Kuroyukihime stared intently up at the sky of the Weathered stage once more.

But all she saw were countless scattered clouds flowing past one after another; there was indeed no one there. And there was no reason there should have been. In that moment, the only Burst Linkers in Henoko were Kuroyukihime, Ruka, Mana, and Crikin. The invader Sulfur Pot was using some trick to dive long-distance from Tokyo, but she couldn’t believe that other Burst Linkers were able to freely use this same setup. Which meant that even if, hypothetically, someone did appear, they would be Sulfur’s comrade, and the situation would be that much worse.

Suddenly, she saw a light.

At a single point in the sky, a small glow, the color of cherry blossoms, appeared and spiraled downward, almost like a flower petal fluttering on the whirlwinds of spring. The pale pink vortex immediately expanded in scale to fill Kuroyukihime’s field of view with dancing flowers.

From the center, two legs descended silently. High heels transparent like glass glinted in the light, followed by a broad, pale-pink armor skirt spreading out. The waist pulled in tightly, and a large ribbon adorned the back. The shoulders of the dress were round and puffed out, and slender arms carried a single lovely scepter. The face mask was the height of elegance, while the long, clear silver hair parts fluttered in the faint breeze, ringing crisply.

It was a duel avatar Kuroyukihime had never before set eyes on. However, at the same time, she was struck by a single firm conviction: *I know her.*

The light-pink, female-type avatar came fluttering down slowly from an

altitude of several dozen meters, as if free of gravity, until its glass heels touched the ground in front of Kuroyukihime. The gentle mask smiled, and then *that voice* uttered *the words*:

"Hime. I…I'm here."

"I-it can't be…M-Megumi?"

The greatest taboo in the Accelerated World was to give voice to someone's real name, but the shock was enough to make her forget even that. This was the first time she had ever seen the elegant duel avatar before her, but there could be absolutely no doubt about the voice and, more than that, the gentle aura radiating from her entire body. This Burst Linker was Kuroyukihime's close friend, Megumi Wakamiya.

But that was logically impossible. The fact that Megumi did not have the Brain Burst program was proven when she did not appear on the matching list of the Umesato local net. And it was also unthinkable that she had become a Burst Linker on this school trip. Because to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, a player needed to have reached level four, and that was absolutely impossible to do in a mere day or two.

Having thought this far, Kuroyukihime noticed that the Megumi-like duel avatar's entire body was slightly transparent. And the hem of her skirt and the tips of her long hair parts were shimmering almost like a heat haze. The instant she confirmed this, a single insight visited her, like divine inspiration.

The past?

Had Megumi been a Burst Linker in the distant past? Before Kuroyukihime had formed her Legion, back when she was training in the Minato Ward area, had Megumi left the Accelerated World, lost Brain Burst, and now, through some logic, had she been invited to this world once more?

She didn't get the chance to put this supposition into words because, from behind her, riding an enormous wave of anger and vexation, a voice rang out like a cracked bell.

"What is this?! What is going on with you guys?! No more! I'm not letting any other weirdos get in my way!"

Whirling around, Kuroyukihime saw Sulfur Pot standing tall on the back of the dinosaur Nidhogg. The color of hatred boiled in his round eye lenses, and he glared down on the five people—Kuroyukihime, Crikin, Ruka, Mana, and Megumi—in the intersection.

“I’ll wipe you all out together. Burn you to tiny crisps,” he spat in a creaking voice. Holding the reins, he stretched out his arms straight ahead, and a thin smoke started to leak out from not just the two holes in his palms, but also the holes on his shoulders, chest, and hips. “Charcoal Storm.”

Immediately after he called out the technique name, clouds of black smoke erupted from the yellow avatar’s entire body, on a scale several times larger than the earlier attack. Without waiting for directions, the smoke spiraled up to blanket a thick region in the area. Apparently, this time, he intended to send the whole town up in flames.

“Y-you can’t!” Staggering, Kuroyukihime moved to take a step forward. However, a slender hand on her shoulder gently restrained her.

“It’s okay. I…I’ll protect you, Hime,” Megumi said gently but resolutely, and brandished the scepter she held in her left hand.

The large gem embedded in the tip of the staff shone a dazzling rainbow color. The glittering immediately enveloped her avatar’s entire body and soared up into the sky. With a light inflection, Megumi called out as if in song:

“Paradigm Revolution.”

Instantly, an immense light soared up and ever higher. When the pillar of light shimmering across the spectrum of seven colors pierced the distant sky, it puffed out into a ring. Fluttering almost like a curtain, it flowed in all directions.

Although it was the first time she had seen this technique, Kuroyukihime had witnessed a phenomenon that almost perfectly resembled it any number of times in the Unlimited Neutral Field. A seven-colored aurora that always appeared when the field attributes switched—no, when the world was reborn. In other words, that meant this technique…

“A…forced…Change!!” Kuroyukihime shouted in a trembling voice.

The Change. The superhuman feat of universally overwriting the state of the

Accelerated World. It was incredibly hard to believe that a single Burst Linker could bring that about through her own will, but that was the only way to explain the phenomenon occurring before her eyes.

Because on the inside of the aurora ring spreading out endlessly, even the color of the sky was changing. From the dark clouds of the Weathered stage into a clear blue sky. The dusty gusting wind shifted to the dry, gentle breeze of a southern country.

“Wha—?! What is—?!” Sulfur Pot shouted from Nidhogg’s back, as the eruption of gunpowder stopped, and he changed his grip on the reins.

“Nick, ignition! Blow them all away!! Scorching—”

But that instruction was not carried out.

Abruptly, the ground disappeared. More precisely, it didn’t exactly vanish. The sand-covered wasteland at once transformed into the blue surface of water. Kuroyukihime, Ruka, Mana, and Crikin, still on his back, along with the enormous dinosaur Nidhogg and its knight, were helplessly swallowed up by the water.

Quickly throwing out her arms to stop her sinking, Kuroyukihime popped her head above the water’s surface and looked around, but she could no longer see a hint of land. The world was covered in water all the way to the horizon in all directions, with only a smattering of small rocks and islands off in the distance. This was the ultimate nature-type, water-attribute stage—the Ocean stage.

“Hime.”

Kuroyukihime quickly moved her head and saw something entirely unexpected.

The duel avatar that was supposedly Megumi was not even close to submerged. Her glass heels barely touched the water surface, and she smiled gently. “The magic hour is ending, so I have to go home. Hime, keep going straight ahead on your path, okay? And I’m not going to look back anymore, either.”

Kuroyukihime didn’t feel like she could understand the full meaning of those words in that very moment. But she nodded deeply and replied, “Mmm.

Thanks, Megumi.”

Megumi dipped her head gently and began to ascend. Kuroyukihime stared motionless at the cherry-blossom avatar returning to the sky and silently murmured “Thanks” once more, before taking a breath and letting her entire body sink into the sea.

The emerald-blue ocean water was abnormally clear, so she could easily make out the situation.

The enormous Nidhogg was kicking its short legs a little ways off. Its rider Sulfur Pot was intently yanking on the reins, apparently trying to get the dinosaur to float up somehow, but from its form, the Enemy was clearly not adapted to water. Countless bubbles burbled up from its mouth, and it didn’t seem to have the leeway to release its breath. The mist of black gunpowder that Sulfur had released earlier had also disappeared neatly and completely.

Very close to Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana were looking around goggle-eyed as they swam smoothly in a standing position. It seemed that they couldn’t yet digest exactly what had happened. And then at their feet was Crikin, also kicking and flailing. A voice—or rather a cry with a burbling effect applied to it—reached her ears.

“H-h-h-heeelp! Precious me is no good in the waaaaater!!”

Just as he said, his screw avatar, which must have had a fairly high specific gravity, was gradually sinking. But in the Ocean stage, there were very few metal objects that Crikin might have been able to use. At the bottom of the ocean, there was the incredibly rare sunken ship, but they didn’t have time to go looking for anything like that right then.

“Sorry, you’ll have to sink for a while, Crikin. That was nice work back there,” Kuroyukihime said coolly.

Ruka and Mana waved. “*Njichahbira* [good-bye], Master!”

“All right. Dolphin, Merrow. This is where the battle is decided. Before he can escape to some island somewhere, we’ll finish this in one go!”

“Okaaay!!”

“I’ll charge in first and handle the dinosaur somehow, so you two attack from the sides, being careful not to let it target you,” Kuroyukihime instructed, and Ruka and Mana looked at each other, grinning broadly.

“Don’t worry, Sis! I mean, it’s the ocean!”

“You just leave the water stuff to us!” they said, and before she had the chance to stop them, they had started swimming. Their movements were smooth, befitting the dolphin and mermaid that ruled their names, but Kuroyukihime worried that, in a battle with an Enemy, that alone…

But in the next moment, Dolphin and Merrow spun around once in the water and cried out with one voice, “One, two! Shape Change!! Marine Mode!!”

Their bodies were wrapped in a blue and a coral light. The small fin-shaped parts that protruded from Lagoon Dolphin’s elbows to her hips quickly grew in size. Her legs changed to a smooth, flowing shape, and her feet were also equipped with large fins.

The change that came over Coral Merrow was even more dramatic. Her two legs fused into one, turning into a fish’s tail. The pointed tail fins flicked, and her body wriggling around in the water was very much that of a mermaid.

Having changed into forms perfectly adapted to the water, the pair nodded at each other once more, and then began to swim in a straight line.

Their speed was incredible, obviously faster than when they were running on land. They easily pierced the dense ocean water and closed in on the enormous Nidhogg like torpedoes.

Sulfur Pot finally seemed to notice the two approaching him. “Small fry, huh!!” he spat and yanked the reins back as hard as he could. The dinosaur changed the direction its head was facing, looking pained all the while, and turned its maw lined with sinister teeth toward Ruka and Mana.

Just as it looked like they were on the verge of being swallowed up by the jaws flung open wide, the two nimbly turned. When they came up directly above the dinosaur, they began to rotate at high speed, as if to surround Sulfur Pot. Instantly, the water began to swirl and soon became an enormous tornado.

“Whoa! Y-you—! What are—?!” Sulfur Pot shouted from the center of the

vortex, as his body gently rose up from the dinosaur's back. Here, finally, Kuroyukihime understood Ruka and Mana's intention. They were trying to separate knight from Enemy with the force of the vortex's rotation and suction.

"Ngh! Ngaaah!" Sulfur tried intently to pull on the reins, but the current was not something that could be fought by a yellow avatar with fundamentally low arm strength. After a brief tug of war, his hands finally came away from the reins, and Sulfur Pot was sent flying up near the water surface, spinning in the waterspout.

"Aaaaah!"

As a high-pitched cry escaped the avatar, Dolphin and Merrow stopped their breakneck-speed turns and chased after him. They likely intended to finish him off, but what about the Enemy? In the moment Kuroyukihime wondered this, Mana looked back for a second and shouted, "Sister! Cut the dinosaur's bridle!"

"Understood. Leave it to me!!"

The side giving the orders and the side getting orders had completely flipped, but Kuroyukihime responded immediately. This was the middle of the ocean, the world of these girls who had been born and raised on the Okinawan coast.

She couldn't match the two of them for speed, but she plunged through the water using the swords of her legs as fins. Soon enough, she closed in on the Legend-class Enemy, the enormous dinosaur Nidhogg, flailing helplessly.

Having lost its knight, the dinosaur was apparently still not free to move on its own. If she attacked its likely weak points, the throat and the eyes, with all her might now, it might have been possible to defeat it, but Kuroyukihime didn't even consider that option. She simply glared at the leather strap wrapped around the beast's snout.

Ten meters away, eight, six meters—once she had gotten this close, she righted herself and pulled back the sword of her right arm as far as she could.

"Aaaagh! Death By Piercing!!"

Bluish-purple blades extended outward, glittering in the ocean water, to neatly and unerringly slice through just the bridle of the beast. The leather split to the sides, and the reins finally fell from the monster's mouth. Even freed

from the item that had controlled it, the Enemy only moved its limbs slowly for a while. But then, abruptly, its eyes shone with a sinister red gleam.

Although Kuroyukihime immediately readied herself for battle, she soon realized the truth: The dinosaur didn't have its sights set on Black Lotus. Its tapered snout jerked and pointed straight up. It twisted its long tail furiously, paddled powerfully at the water with all four limbs, and started to ascend with a nimbleness that called into question its awkward movement up to that point.

In its line of sight were Sulfur Pot, drifting near the surface of the ocean, and Dolphin and Merrow, spinning at high speed around him to prevent him from moving.

"N-Nick!" Sulfur called out in a high-pitched voice, seeing the approaching Nidhogg. "Right, over here!! Rip these two bratty small fries to pieces!!"

Ruka and Mana didn't make a move to flee even when they saw the Enemy charging toward them. It was almost as if they knew what was going to happen next.

Released from the taming, the massive dinosaur ascended with the force of a large submarine toward the person who had been its master until a minute or so earlier.

"How do you like this, small fry?!" Sulfur Pot cried exultantly, both hands spread out as if to welcome the Enemy. "Even without those reins, Nick knows that I—and I alone—am his master! See! Soon enough, you'll all be ripped to pieces, fish food—"

But Sulfur Pot abruptly slowed down midspeech.

He thrust his open arms out ahead of him and quickly shook his head. "That's…No way—it can't be. Why…Nick, why would you…?"

The enormous dinosaur passed between Dolphin and Merrow without as much as a glance at either of them. It popped its mouth open and turned rows of ominously sharp teeth toward Sulfur.

"No way! No way! Nick, I'm your master! No way! Stop! Stoooo—!!"

The scream was abruptly interrupted there. The enormous maw came down

on Sulfur Pot's head. The countless teeth bit into the yellow torso. The armor resisted the pressure for a mere instant. Fine cracks popped up all over the avatar's body, and then the body turned into thousands of fragments and scattered. It was a quick and cruel death.

Kuroyukihime, Ruka, and Mana wordlessly stared at the enormous Legend-class Enemy. The dinosaur turned its head absently and considered the two girls nearby, and then Black Lotus floating a little ways off.

Then, abruptly, it moved its head once more and began to swim east near the ocean surface. With the swiftness of an actual marine dinosaur, it receded before their eyes. The large ripples spread out behind it, faded, and finally disappeared, until they could no longer see the Enemy.

Kuroyukihime gently moved her legs and ascended until she was beside the girls. "You did good, Dolphin, Merrow," she said. "That was some wonderful fighting."

Suddenly, both girls stretched out their hands and clung to Kuroyukihime. The small avatars were trembling. Most likely, this was the first real battle both Ruka and Mana had had with not an Enemy, but a Burst Linker. The tension of the passionate battle was gradually starting to release.

She held them both gently and ascended farther. When she popped her head out above the water, she spied a rainbow curtain in the perfectly blue sky, approaching from the distance. The effective time for the forced change Megumi's avatar had brought about in the field was over, and the world was attempting to return to normal.

"Sis," Ruka said slowly in her ear.

"Hmm?" She shifted her gaze in that direction. "What is it?"

"So, um…I'm gonna get stronger. I'm gonna train more and study more and get stronger. And then…and then someday…"

Here, she shut her mouth tightly, and Kuroyukihime gently stroked the face of the young Burst Linker with the flat of her sword.

"Mmm, get strong. I'll be waiting. For the time when we can meet again in this world."

“Aah, no fair! Sister, me too!” Mana shouted, and Kuroyukihime patted her head with her other sword. The aurora was finally almost there, and the clear blue of the Ocean stage was returning to the original reddish brown of the Weathered stage.

“Still, I feel like we’re forgetting something.” Kuroyukihime cocked her head, but she soon shrugged as if to say *Oh well* and waited for the moment when the ocean would disappear.

She remembered what she’d been forgetting as soon as she spotted the screw-shaped avatar tumbling along the ground immediately after she touched down on the floor of the Weathered stage.

Forgotten not only by Kuroyukihime, but even by his beloved students, Crikin had no sooner returned to the bar than he was ordering a giant mug of aged *awamori* and getting drunk again. “S’fine, s’fine. This great me’s just a screw and all.”

Suppressing a wry smile, Kuroyukihime apologized before bringing her ear close to his head and murmuring, “Sorry, but would you send Dolphin and Merrow home through the portal first? I don’t want to show them an ugly part of this world.”

With just that, Crikin seemed to understand Kuroyukihime’s intention. Nodding, he drained his cup before standing up. “Come on, then. We’re going home, my students…Oh, right—before we do, Lotus, here.”

She caught the object he flicked at her with the tip of her sword: a card.

“It sank down to the bottom of the ocean, so I picked it up. But I got no way to use it, so I’ll give it to you as thanks for this.”

“Oh?” Casting her eyes to the surface of the card shining with silver light, she saw the text Enhanced Armament: Mystical Reins carved in small letters.

“Enhanced Armament Mystical Reins?” she murmured, and then she finally understood what it was. It had to be the reins that controlled the Legend-class Enemy, the massive dinosaur Nidhogg. After Kuroyukihime severed the bridle, the Enhanced Armament went into a field drop state, and because the user Sulfur Pot had died after that, it returned to a sealed card state, free of

ownership.

“Mmm. You can give it to me, but as for a use—”

“Well, don’t say that. In the north of the Okinawa area, there’s all kinds of interesting Enemies, like a horse that can fly and stuff.”

“Hmm. Well, if you want to give it to me, then I will gratefully accept it.”

When Kuroyukihime opened her storage and tucked the item away, Crikin smiled, seemingly satisfied. “Wohkay! Come on, get up, Roo! Mah! You fall asleep here, and you won’t be able to sleep tonight!”

At some point, Ruka and Mana had fallen asleep in a corner of the bar, and Crikin yanked them to their feet before walking outside the bar. Kuroyukihime raised the sword of her right hand lightly at the girls, who were rubbing tired eyes, and then murmured quietly, “Now, then.”

The battle was over, but there was still something left that needed to be done. When she stood up and left the shop herself, she checked that Crikin and the girls had headed off to the hotel and then moved a hundred meters or so to the west.

There, on the surface of the ground, was a small, flickering yellow light. Naturally, it was the marker of Sulfur Pot’s death after he was eaten by Nidhogg.

Kuroyukihime began to speak quietly at Sulfur, who should have been in a ghost state near the marker and watching her. “Sulfur Pot, if, when you next regenerate, you tell me everything you know about the cheat tool you’re using for the long-distance dive from Tokyo, I will let you go today. However, if you don’t tell me…” She lowered her voice slightly. “…I will continue to kill you until you feel like talking. For however many hours, however many days.”

12

“Siiiiis! Come back to Uchina agaaaaaaain!!”

“Sister, taaaaaaake caaaare!”

The two girls waved their arms so wildly in front of the main gates of the resort hotel that they threatened to fly off, until they got themselves in unison with a “One, two.”

“*Njichahbiraaaaaaa!!* [Good-bye!!]” they yelled.

Kuroyukihime waved back at them from the window of the bus, then leaned back in her seat once they disappeared from sight. Hidden beyond the marbadigo trees, she let out a long sigh. She thought that perhaps the high school–aged boy tilting a can of flat lemon juice (probably) on a bench a little ways off from the girls had maybe been Crikin in the real, but she decided not to pursue it.

“Making such adorable fans like that on a trip—that’s so like you, Hime,” Megumi said, smiling in the seat next to her.

She cleared her throat and rebutted, “Th-they’re not fans or anything. I suppose you could call it an academic exchange—”

“Yeah, yeah. Then I’ll just make a note of that in the student council log.”

“Uh! No, that’s a little…”

Thursday, April 18, 10:00 AM.

The Umesato Junior High ninth graders had been split up onto two large EV buses and were heading from Henoko to Yoron Island. They were scheduled to return to Tokyo Saturday evening, so the school trip was at last in the final stages. The other students seemed to be even more excited, building toward

the climax of the trip, but for Kuroyukihime, she was of a mind to spend that day at least relaxing lazily. She had, after all, taken part in the very unexpected optional tour of a battle with a Legend-class Enemy in the Henoko area.

Megumi Wakamiya sitting to her left should have been the same, but she was grinning the same as always and flipping through the Yoron Island virtual guide. Apparently, not only did Megumi not remember the events of the Unlimited Neutral Field, she had no memory of visiting the dive booth where Kuroyukihime, Ruka, and Mana had been.

The evening before, having fulfilled her objective and burst out, Kuroyukihime discovered that in the place of Ruka and Mana, who had disappeared, Megumi sat with her eyes closed on the sofa next to her. When Kuroyukihime shook her shoulders, Megumi opened her eyes right away and said curiously, with a baffled look on her face, “What am I doing here?”

After that, they went back to their room, changed their clothes, ate supper, got in the bath, and went to bed, and although Megumi didn’t say a single word about the Accelerated World, Kuroyukihime sensed a modest change had come over her. The shadow that had clouded her eyes ever since the previous night had disappeared.

When they went back to their room after supper, Kuroyukihime directed with Megumi’s Neurolinker under the pretext of syncing key student council files, and secretly checked her local memory. But the BB program was not there. In the end, she still didn’t know if Megumi had really been a Burst Linker in the past, or even if she had, through what logic she had managed to open the door to the Accelerated World once more.

However, Kuroyukihime felt like that was all right. That chance meeting was certainly a momentary miracle given to them by this mysterious island of Okinawa.

Breaking into this reverie was the text mail icon flashing in the upper part of her field of view. When she opened it, she saw that the sender was Crikin, and the message noted that he had found the object Kuroyukihime had given him information on, located in a desolate dive café on the outskirts of town.

A Neurolinker illegally modified so that it could start up and connect globally

without being equipped—Sulfur Pot confessed that when he visited Henoko on a school trip in January, he had hidden the Neurolinker given to him by the upper echelons of his “organization” in a sofa at the dive café. Most likely, the Neurolinker was equipped with the backdoor program. The program was supposed to be unusable now that the BB central server had applied a patch, but assuming the patch checked if the BB program was in the Neurolinker, there was only one way to get around it.

That was to install the backdoor not only in the Neurolinker, but the real Brain Burst itself as well.

It was very daring, a method so terrible it sent chills up her spine. Because the only ways to get a Neurolinker with the BB program on it were to seize it in an attack in the real…or make a child without telling them anything and then immediately take their Neurolinker.

Despite the fact that Sulfur Pot had told her about the mechanism for the long-distance dive, he didn’t spill a word about the “organization” he belonged to. She thought briefly about continuing to kill him, but she also had the automatic disconnect safety set, so she let him go there.

Crikin’s mail also noted that the personless Neurolinker had been powered off when he found it, and the memory had physically self-destructed. It truly was a daring and deeply cautious organization. Someday, the time would likely come when they clashed head-on.

Well, when it does, we’ll beat them down without mercy, she thought, closing her mailer, when a steaming cup was offered from beside her. From the scent, it appeared to be tea with some kind of citrus flavor. She gratefully accepted and said, “Thanks, Megumi.”

“You’re welcome.” The smile on the face of her good friend changed slightly, and she continued in a quiet voice, “Hey, Hime?”

“Mmm?”

“When we get back to Tokyo, I’m thinking about writing a story set in Okinawa. A story about the ocean and a dinosaur and a mermaid…and a knight in black. Like yesterday? I had a dream about it.”

“You did?” Kuroyukihime smiled and gently placed her own hand on Megumi’s. “Naturally, you’ll let me be your first reader?”

“Ha-ha! Okay, be ready for it, then. Seems like it’s going to be a bit of a long one.”

“Mm-hmm, I’m looking forward to it. And also to the souvenir you got for me. I wonder what you picked out. Hmm, according to my cosmic instincts—”

“Ah! You can’t, Hime! What if you actually guess it?!”

“Mm-hmm-hmm. I can see it! Well, this—”

“I said, stop it! We’re going to have a real fight if you say anything else!”

On the luggage rack above the heads of the two girls as they play-fought and generally had fun, two small suitcases were lined up next to each other.

Inside Kuroyukihime’s bag was a necklace of pink shells arranged in the shape of cherry blossoms.

And in Megumi’s bag, there was a necklace of black-lip oyster pearls worked into a black spangle butterfly.

It was a few days later when they exchanged their presents in the student council office and they were greatly surprised at the wonderful match, grins spreading across both faces.

ACCEL・WORLD

ELEMENTS

VERSUS

“Whoa. So this is the fourth-generation full-dive test machine?” I said, as I stared up at the massive 3-D rectangle enshrined before my eyes.

The exterior panels of unpolished aluminum shone dully, and several large cooling fans whined. One side of the box was connected with a gel bed, and jutting out over it like a headrest was a rough helmet-shaped brain interface.

“It’s huge. It looks even bigger than the early arcade consoles, Higa,” I said, turning around. The male operator turned toward the control console lifted his face and shrugged, sporting a hint of regret.

“Even so, it’s much more compact than my initial estimation, Kirigaya. And the difference in specs between this and the first-generation machines in the old arcades is like a Nintendo and a Drecap captureboard!”

“…I’ve never actually seen either of those.”

“What?! You’re missing out on life! Come over to my place and we’ll have a retro game training camp…”

Going on and on about weird things like this was Takeru Higa, a senior engineer who had developed the most cutting-edge VR machines in the world, but you’d never guess that from the way he looked. With hair that stood up in sharp, thin spikes; excessively large, round glasses; and a T-shirt with a game character on it, he would have been a hundred times more at home in the shops of Akihabara than in the dim high-tech room.

But you could say the same thing about me, still in my school uniform since I’d stopped in on my way home from school. The reason why I, Kazuto Kirigaya, was here—the laboratory of a start-up in Roppongi, Minato Ward—was simple. It was just a part-time job.

Full-dive devices, evolving from the first generation of large amusement machines, into the second generation of NerveGear and AmuSphere, and then into the third generation of the medical device Medicuboid, obviously did not choose their users, but there was a certain level of so-called compatibility with

them. In other words, it was a matter of how effectively the brain could connect with the machine. There was some native aptitude, but this could also be improved through long hours of dive experience.

And the people in Japan—no, the entire world—who currently had the most dive hours were without a doubt the survivors of the *SAO* Incident of a year and a half ago.

In this fourth-generation machine developed under the lead of Takeru Higa, the level of precision in the connection with the brain was overwhelmingly greater than any previous machine, but apparently, those high specs had brought about unexpected issues. Because the amount of information exchanged between the brain and the machine was so large, when the entire staff, including Higa, did test dives to try and get data, they couldn't move sufficiently inside because of "VR sickness."

Thus, Higa used a certain line to hire me, one of the survivors, to work part-time as a test diver, and blinded by the rate of hourly pay, I came out here to Roppongi.

"So anyway, I do a full dive and then just move around all over inside. Is that it?" I confirmed, stroking the cool aluminum exterior.

"Right, exactly." Higa bobbed his head up and down in agreement. "It's pathetic, but the instant we see the graphics inside, we're practically barfing. We're developing a structure right now to regulate the depth of the connection in line with the diver's aptitude, but to make that, someone has to dive and get data, you know? Ha-ha-ha!"

"Well, you're paying me, so I'll do whatever you want. But before I do, let me just make sure of one thing." I glanced at the imposing headgear interface before continuing. "Um, diving with this is not actually dangerous…right?"

"Of course not! Of course it's not! Of course not!" Higa said three times, and nodded deeply. "You're an *SAO* survivor, Kirigaya, so I totally get that you're worried. It's fine. The danger posed by the machine I developed is only the tiniest, seriously tiniest, bit!"

"It is? That makes me feel bet—" I swallowed the end of my sentence and looked at Higa again. "'Only the seriously tiniest bit'?"

“No, no, no! It’s fine! Totally fine! It’s seriously fine!” After saying each part three times more, Higa continued quickly in a low voice, “It’s just, if the power suddenly goes out when you’re in the dive, it’s a little…you know…”

“What do you mean, ‘you know’?”

“No, no, no problem! We’re all set up with two types of backup power supply and an emergency battery!”

“What comes after ‘you know’?”

“No, no, no, no problem! No real damage! It’s just, well, a little, like…” Higa’s eyes darted around behind his round glasses, and I took a step toward him and stared hard. “Like, it’s, well, a little nondigital phenomenon…”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Basically, not logical…or maybe not natural…To put it bluntly, *this*,” Higa said, and dangled both hands loosely in front of his chest.

With this gesture, I finally got what the scientist in front of me was saying. “Huh…? Gh-ghosts…?”

Faced with a gaze that said, *What is this guy on about?* Higa shook his head quickly once again. “No, seriously—for serious, Kirigaya! I totally saw one, clear as day! Listen. As you can see, this test machine is still the only one in existence in this world. And the number of people who can dive at the same time is one. And yet…staff members who’ve dived into the test field saw a hazy human shadow more than once inside,” Higa said, with a look on his face like, if this were a manga, there would have been small queasiness effect lines on his forehead.

A smile rose up onto my own face, interfering with my brief foray into seriousness, and I shrugged exaggeratedly. “Couldn’t it have just been that they saw some kind of light effect because of the VR sickness? Or maybe there’s a bug in the shader—”

“*Non!* There’s no way any program put together by the *génie* Higa would have such a pathetic bug!”

I ignored the sudden slip into a foreign language and moved my shoulders

once more. “I mean, okay, if they’re showing up in this room, that’s one thing, but ghosts appearing in a VR world—I’ve never…Okay, I *have* heard of that, but when I tried to verify rumors like this in Aincrad, it wasn’t a ghost or anything, it was an NPC.”

This, of course, was Yui, the top-down AI existing even now as my and Asuna’s “daughter.” Although if I told her that we first went looking for a ghost or something, she’d probably get mad.

“In other words, everything you can see on the other side is digital code, so their existence should be properly noted somewhere in the memory address. If you look into the time logs, you should be able to find out soon enough what the test divers saw,” I pointed out.

Higa pursed his lips like a child. “Of course; I checked those. But there was *rien* in the logs. In other words, it’s a fact that this phenomenon is *not* an object generated by the hardware or the software of the test machine. So it’s really a ghost…or…”

“Or?”

“…Look, this is something I shouldn’t actually be telling you. So I’d like you to pretend you never heard it.” After this showy preamble, Higa lowered his voice and continued, “The heart of this test machine incorporates quantum calculation circuits. In other words, a quantum computer.”

“…Did you make that, too, Higa?”

“I’d like to say *oui*, but unfortunately, the basic theory was crunched out by Kayaba. Well, at any rate, it’s been said for a long time that a quantum computer might possibly interact with parallel worlds. In the world of science fiction.”

“P-parallel worlds?! You seriously believe in that?” His way of speaking was slipping into my speech.

Higa moved his head in an unreadable motion that was half-assenting, half-negating. “Only on the level that something like that would be great! But, you know, if it is true, that would explain the ghost problem. In other words, if this test machine interfaced with another quantum computer in another time

stream…the past or the future or a parallel world, you'd be able to see the shadow of a diver who shouldn't be there."

"There's not too much difference between that story and a real ghost, you know." I shrugged again before glancing up at the clock on the wall. "Well, I guess I'll see if there's a ghost or not when I dive. My little sister's apparently cooking something today. If I don't make it home for dinner, she'll knock me into next week, so let's just do this—"

"What? You have a little sister? H-how old is she now?!"

Feeling a curious déjà-vu at Higa's reaction, I ignored the question and sat down on the bed of the test machine. I aligned my body with the indentations, and slid my head beneath the headgear. "Okay, I'm ready anytime."

I urged Higa, who had a thwarted look on his face, and closed my eyes. Over the sound of the motor lowering the headgear, the final explanation reached my ears.

"Okay, I'm starting the connection. Your avatar'll be generated automatically from your self-image, Kirigaya, so you shouldn't feel any weirdness."

"Got it."

I raised the thumb of my left hand, and as if in response to that, the test machine behind me started to hum quietly.

⁂

There it is again.

Sensing his world shake strangely, Haruyuki Arita narrowed the eyes of his pink pig avatar.

The world was frozen a uniform transparent blue. The initial acceleration space, a blue holding-zone world where he could dive with the "burst link" command. In the depths of his Neurolinker—a quantum communication device equipped on the neck of the Haruyuki in the real world—the mysterious application named Brain Burst had been installed. In response to Haruyuki's command, the BB program accelerated his thoughts by a thousand and made him do a full dive into this field dyed blue.

The blue world existed so that players could search the matching list to find a

duel opponent or to launch external apps and do all kinds of tasks. The reason Haruyuki was currently accelerated was the latter. In other words, to finish up the homework that was due to be submitted that day. More precisely, his remaining extension was only another fifteen minutes in real-world time. Not only did the report homework given in fifth period Japanese History slip out of the realm of memory in his brain, he had even forgotten to mark it in his schedule app.

If it had been math or English, he would have had the last-resort option of asking Takumu or Chiyuri to let him copy—although they would certainly make him pay them back double later—but that wouldn't work with an essay-style report. Thus, he had used a precious burst point to accelerate and was single-mindedly typing at his holokeyboard.

But when he sensed a strange aura and lifted his head, it seemed like the center of the blue classroom projected in his vision, devoid of people, flickered lazily.

"What was that?" He got up from his seat in his avatar body. When he took a few steps forward among the rows of desks and strained his eyes, he saw a faint ripple again on part of the blackboard. Right, it was almost like there was a transparent something between Haruyuki and the blackboard.

In truth, this was not the first time he had come upon a phenomenon like this. Lately, for the last month or so, when he was on a full dive, he would see something shimmering strangely in his field of view sometimes. And never in the normal VR world; it was only when he was accelerated.

But the phenomenon that day was clearer than ever. Haruyuki forgot about his homework and focused his entire mind on what he was seeing.

When he did, he quickly realized something. "A person?"

Right. The shimmering produced at one point in the classroom looked somehow like a human silhouette. It was almost as if a completely transparent human being was standing there.

But there was no way that could be. The blue basic acceleration space was, as a general rule, the world of only the person who had shouted the "burst link" command. In order for two or more people to dive into the same space, in

addition to having their Neurolinkers directly connected, they had to execute the acceleration command at the same time. But, of course, Haruyuki was not directing with anyone at the moment.

Which meant: “A—a ghost?” He accidentally murmured the word and scared himself into a gradual retreat toward the back of the classroom.

But the transparent shadow slid toward him by exactly the same amount.

“Eeeeee!!” he shrieked, and dashed backward at top speed. Unconsciously, he started to call out the command to end the acceleration. “B-B-B-B-Burst ou—”

But he stopped there.

This wasn’t the real world; it was a VR space his Neurolinker had generated from images via the social cameras. Everything his eyes were seeing was digital data that could be substituted with code. Thus, there had to be a reason for the presence of that shadow. There were no ghosts. Ghosts were just made-up.

Hiding behind the desks in the last row, Haruyuki racked his brain. There had to be a way to determine exactly what that human form was. Assuming it was another person, this “someone” had to be a Burst Linker like him, because this wasn’t a regular VR space, but an accelerated space. And if there was a Burst Linker connected to the same net…

“R-right. Th-th-there should be a name, then. On the matching list,” he muttered quickly with a dry mouth, and immediately tapped the *B* icon displayed in the upper left of his virtual desktop. The Brain Burst console screen popped open. He shifted tabs and opened the matching list.

At the very top was his own name. Below that were Takumu (Cyan Pile) and Chiyuri (Lime Bell), both in the same class with him. And then Kuroyukihime (Black Lotus), probably in the lounge. There should have been only these four Burst Linkers at Umesato Junior High.

And yet.

A collection of dots like bleeding ink rose up in the fifth row and squirmed. These points of light didn’t immediately take on the form of letters for some reason. Haruyuki held his breath and watched as they shook fiercely, blinked,

and then finally transformed into several letters of the alphabet.

However, the row of letters did not have the standard form of “color, name” that was the template for duel avatar names. A mere six letters were lined up there. There was also no level displayed.

“*K-i-r-i…t-o*?”

Kirito? Who’s that?

As if guided by this curiosity, Haruyuki’s right hand moved automatically. He tapped the name of this mysterious Burst Linker Kirito and selected DUEL from the pop-up window. He touched YES in the confirmation dialog.

The blue classroom vanished, as if melting away.

While he was passing through the dim space, Haruyuki’s pig avatar was wrapped in light and transformed—into his silver duel avatar with its round helmet and slender limbs, the Burst Linker Silver Crow.

Two green health gauges stretched out on both sides of the upper part of his field of view. In the center, a timer with 1,800 on it was inscribed. And then finally, the flaming text FIGHT! blazed up and exploded.

At the same time as his metallic feet touched the battlefield grounds, Haruyuki lifted his face with a gasp.

Directly in front of him, a little ways off, someone was standing there. Someone that didn’t seem like a duel avatar.

As far as Haruyuki knew, the avatars of all Burst Linkers had hard, robot-like exteriors. There were some players among them in clothing, but by and large, their faces were not those of their real selves.

However, the person standing before him at that moment clearly had taken a human form. It was a boy. Longish hair, and his sharp eyes were jet-black. He was maybe a little older than Haruyuki. He had on a long coat that appeared to be leather, fingerless gloves on his hands, and boots on his feet. And two long items hanging across each other on his back.

“Swords?!” Haruyuki muttered hoarsely, and slowly put some distance between them.

There was no doubt. They were so-called longswords, so familiar in fantasy-type games. The hilts were black and silver. Although they would have been polygons, the way they shone with real weight made him vividly feel the existence of real swords tucked away within those sheaths.

This was not a Brain Burst duel avatar. That said, it didn't seem like a harmless full-dive avatar, either.

Cautiously scrutinizing his opponent, Haruyuki took a deep breath and shouted, "Who are you?! How on earth did you connect to the Umesato local net?!"

Despite the fact that his voice, tinged with effects, rang out loudly through the field, the black swordsman didn't so much as twitch. But he wasn't being ignored. It was more like his voice never reached the other player to begin with.

When he looked very carefully, the outline of the swordsman avatar was hazy like smoke. Haruyuki wondered if he wasn't real—if only an image was being sent in from somewhere. He took a step forward to check.

In that moment, the swordsman moved as well. The lustrous boots moved a step forward, crunching against the pebbles on the ground of the stage.

This is no virtual image!

Haruyuki hurriedly leapt back again, and his hands snapped into a ready position in front of him.

As if induced by this movement, a tension raced across the face of the swordsman, and in a flash, his right hand was grabbing the black hilt of the sword on his back.

⁂

Where exactly am I? And who is that?!

The two questions simply played on repeat in my head.

In the advance lecture, operator Higa had told me that the field I was diving into was a gentle grassy meadow in the middle of the day. But the scene spreading out around me was the exact opposite of that.

Cracked earth. A half-destroyed blockade of concrete buildings. Tongues of

flame licking up out of oil drums. And a night sky without a single star in it. Like the world after the collapse of civilization.

If I had been the only one there, I would have started to wonder if there had been some kind of error with the quantum circuit, and my consciousness had been sent flying to future Tokyo. But fortunately—or perhaps not—a few meters ahead of me was another human form.

The silhouette was human at least. It wore a smooth, round helmet on its head, and the body was completely covered by metallic armor. Compared with the large head, the body, glittering silver as it reflected the light of the bonfires, was extremely slender. To the point where I could hardly believe there was a person inside. And it had something like radiation fins folded up on its back. The front of its helmet was a mirrored visor, and I couldn't see inside that.

"A robot?" I murmured, and took a step forward to try and find out what it was. The sole of my boot came down on rubble, making a crunching sound.

Instantly, the silver robot flew back quickly and brought both hands up in front of it. It had no weapons. However, the tips of its fingers glinted sharply, making me suspect they held a power that I couldn't dismiss. The moment this thought occurred to me, my own right hand automatically moved. Over my shoulder to clutch the hilt of a sword slung over my back.

A sword?

Here, I finally realized that I was not Kazuto Kirigaya, real-world high school student, but rather that I had taken on my old familiar form of Kirito the swordsman.

Higa had said that when I dived, my avatar would be automatically generated from my self-image. So that meant that more than my real self, I saw myself as *SAO*'s Black Swordsman, who no longer existed anywhere. I almost smiled wryly at this, but I was in no situation to lose focus. The mysterious silver robot had readied both hands, and I was holding the hilt of my sword. The situation was basically about to explode.

If I drew my sword, there was no doubt the robot would attack. Its form was a little awkward, but it left no openings in the way it held itself. The battle aura radiating from it was definitely not something a soulless NPC or monster would

be able to possess. In other words, the true form of this robot avatar was an actual human being somewhere.

In the tense atmosphere, I decided to at least try talking first. “Hey. Who are you? This is a private company’s closed net. Where are you connecting from and why?”

However, I got no reply. It seemed like it couldn’t actually hear my voice. In which case, I could use gestures—but it would be hard to get where I wanted in the current situation. If I moved my right hand even the slightest bit more than I already had, the top-heavy robot in front of me would very likely come flying at me immediately. We were both that worked up.

Well, it’s my fault for immediately grabbing for my sword. You’re just a little too belligerent, you know! I told myself. The silver robot had broken through the company’s firewall and invaded the test machine, and that was very clearly some kind of illegal hacking. But in that case, it should have been acting a little shiftier or something.

I had thought things through to this point when finally, incredibly belatedly, I noticed something in a fixed display in the upper part of my field of view.

In the center were digital numbers. Currently at 1,740 and decreasing in one-second increments. And then on either side of that, shining green bars. Lined up parallel to these were thin blue bars. Beneath the bar on the left, the text Kirito was sharply etched. No matter how I looked at it, that was my name—the log-in ID Higa had made for me before the dive. And then beneath the bar on the right, the name Silver Crow glittered brightly.

“Silver…Crow…,” I murmured inaudibly. There was no doubt that this was the name of the silver robot before me.

This screen composition. And this situation. My eyes flew open in surprise at the sudden revelation that came over me. This—this world was not the tranquil, harmless, and peaceful test VR space. It was a duel stage. I was diving in an old-school, one-on-one fighting game, a fighter!

Higa had mentioned the possibility of the quantum circuit the test machine was equipped with interacting with a world belonging to a different time stream. In which case, was this the world of the 1990s, when fighters were at

the height of their popularity? No, no, that couldn't be. They didn't even have an inkling of full-dive technology at that time. So then, the future? I didn't know how many years ahead it was, but were fighters taking center stage again in the far future?

"Hey, you…Silver Crow!" I called out, forgetting that my voice wasn't reaching my opponent. "Is this a fighting game? What's it call—?" As I asked, I carelessly took another step forward, my hand still on the hilt of my sword.

The reaction was instantaneous.

The silver robot-shaped avatar kicked hard off the ground with its left foot. I had no sooner noticed this than the lithe body was hurtling toward me like a bolt of lightning.

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After reflexively shooting forward, a corner of Haruyuki's mind called out, *Dammit!*

His opponent's approach might not have been a gesture of attack. He hadn't unsheathed his sword, he wasn't in an attack posture, and his front was wide open.

But Haruyuki couldn't cancel the attack order, output at super-high speed in his mind. His avatar charged forward and launched a preemptive midkick at the swordsman in black's side.

Normally, Haruyuki's duel style was far from aggressive. If it was an opponent he was fighting for the first time, his general rule was initially to watch carefully and measure attributes and technique tendencies before gradually approaching. To say nothing of the fact that before him that day was a bizarre duel avatar without a color name and his real face exposed. His only special feature was the black that covered his body. If it had been red or blue, he could have guessed he was long range or short range or whatever, but he couldn't do anything with black. While he was facing off with this mysterious avatar, he kept thinking, *I should have asked Kuroyukihime about black attributes before this!* but there was no use crying over spilled milk.

The reason Haruyuki had reacted with a preemptive attack to his opponent's slightest movement despite that opponent being a complete mystery was the

incredible aura he was getting from this swordsman in black, Kirito.

With a physique on the slender side and a facial structure that could be said to be still that of a boy, although he was simply gripping the hilt of his sword and standing there facing him, Haruyuki could feel a pressure that made his throat dry. A tension almost like he was a high ranker at level seven or eight—or even higher than that, like this avatar could go one-on-one with the kings even.

If the mysterious sword user had had a little more of an opening, Haruyuki would have actually retreated and hidden himself in a narrow path of the Century End stage to take stock of the situation. But the swordsman—Kirito—had nothing that could be called an opening. If he retreated even the tiniest bit, Haruyuki was afraid that his opponent's blade would instantly be unsheathed and try to take his head off in a single blow.

Thus, the instant Kirito stepped forward casually, Haruyuki exploded with all his stored strength.

But now I don't have any choice anymore! He resolved himself the instant before he launched the kick.

Once Burst Linkers were facing each other, they could only fight each other single-mindedly. That's what his master and parent Black Lotus had taught him. Hit dead-on with a right middle, get his opponent off guard, and then continue to rush him, leaving no space between them. Give his opponent no space to draw the sword on his back, and when his special-attack gauge was half-full, finish him off with a dive attack from the air!

That was the intent behind this first attack, and his leg carved out a dark silver arc plunging toward his opponent's side.

Whk! He felt something hit lightly, and then his leg flew forward emptily, only knocking a single button off his opponent's coat.

"Wha…?" Haruyuki groaned, falling out of his battle stance. It was impossible—at that range, with that charge, a block would have amazed him, but an evasion?!

Before his eyes, as he gaped, dumbfounded, the boy's right arm flashed and

drew a jet-black longsword, accompanied by a cold metallic noise.

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What incredible speed.

After the silver avatar Silver Crow broke deep into my space with a charge, his right middle kick came sliding toward my stomach in a motion so smooth it made me wonder how many thousands of times he had practiced it.

But because it was so smooth, I was just barely able to sense the target of his first attack.

Moving Silver Crow was a real-life player. There was no doubt about that. And when a human being was controlling an avatar, the slightest bit of information bled through that you didn't get from a monster's motion: center-of-gravity shifts, toe direction, hip height—and the gaze.

In duels in *SAO*, where taking just one blow might cost you your actual life, you always needed to be one step ahead of your enemy. Thus, when you were fighting an opponent as capable as you were, if you launched a major technique from a distance, it was basically a certainty that you were not going to get a hit. So you built a structure where it wouldn't matter if leaping attacks were blocked or evaded, and always put together the critical major attacks in a flowing series.

From that viewpoint, the speed of Silver Crow's middle kick was worthy of admiration, but it had too little in the way of a show. I sensed the intention to shoot toward my left flank in his initial movement, and so I dashed backward with everything I had. It was actually fortunate that I had made it out with just one coat button knocked into the void.

Crow apparently hadn't anticipated a successful dodge, and his upper body shook with the force of the empty kick. It was too appealing a moment to let pass. Despite the fact that, rationally, I figured there was no reason to fight, my right hand automatically flashed and drew one of the beloved swords on my back—Elucidator.

"Hah!" I gave a short battle cry, feeling the familiar weight in my hand, and brought my sword straight down. Drawing out a band of pale light, the blade caught Silver Crow's right shoulder.

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“Ngah!” Letting out a thin cry, Haruyuki stared at the sharp edge of the approaching sword.

He didn’t have enough time to dodge it or block with his arms. Kirito’s movement, from unsheathing the sword to the slashing attack, was so natural that it appeared to take absolutely no effort. It was almost as if he were gently stroking the air, but the surface of Haruyuki’s avatar tingled at the enormous force hidden in that blade.

Being a metal color, Silver Crow did have resistance to slashing attacks. But he instinctively knew that he wouldn’t get away unharmed if that sword hit him. In which case, he had to at least minimize the damage.

Despite the fact that the battle had only just started, Haruyuki’s mind started to super accelerate as though this were the sink-or-swim moment. The color of his surroundings changed, and the speed of the approaching blade slackened, albeit slightly.

Haruyuki bent his knees and sank his avatar down on a trajectory that aligned with the vector of the sword attack. The black luster of the edge touched the armor of his right shoulder. Dazzling orange sparks flew up and shot off, glinting in all directions. Just as he had anticipated, the sword did not stop there. At a speed faster than Haruyuki’s descent, it ripped into his silver armor, digging in one centimeter, two. If he fell to the ground there, the sword would be brought down on him and cut right through his right arm. However…

Now!!

His HP gauge had decreased due to the shot to his shoulder, and the instant his special-attack gauge began to glimmer the faintest bit in proportion to this damage, Haruyuki converted it into momentary flight power and flickered the silver wings on his back for a fraction of a second.

With this, he managed to generate the power to move backward, although in a posture that left him nowhere to go but down onto the ground.

Silver Crow’s body slid, albeit a mere fifty centimeters. The sword pulled away from the injury on his right shoulder.

“Aaaah!!” Haruyuki roared, and kicked off the ground with all his might to leap even farther back.

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What just happened?!

I held my breath as the tip of my sword bit emptily into the ground.

Elucidator’s black blade had definitely caught Silver Crow’s shoulder. It had hit the seam of his armor, just as I intended, and I was sure it would cut through in another second, but when it had ripped in a mere two centimeters, the silver robot had suddenly escaped backward with incredible force. He certainly wasn’t in a position for that kind of movement to have been possible. It was an abnormal movement, almost like he had been pulled along on a wire from behind.

I lifted my head with a gasp and stared at the avatar as if to devour it. In the blink of an eye, he had gotten more than ten meters of distance between us. Of course, there were no wires attached to any part of his body. I couldn’t see anything of a jetlike nature, either.

Wait.

The thin metal fins folded up on Crow’s back. Immediately before his back dash, it seemed like they had shaken for the merest instant. If the secret to the impossible movement was those fins, then they were not a heat-radiating device as I had assumed, but rather some kind of propulsive device. But in that case, why didn’t he use that right from the start?

Once my thoughts had gotten this far, I noticed that there was a slight change in the information displayed in my field of view.

First, Silver Crow’s green gauge to the right had decreased the tiniest bit, about 3 percent. And my gauge to the left was still full, but the slim blue gauge beneath it was shining, also by a very little.

If this field was based on an old fighting game as I thought it was, then the meaning of the two gauges was clear. The green one was the “health gauge,” which we also had in *SAO*. And the blue one could be nothing other than the special-attack gauge. This gauge was probably charged when you took or dealt

damage. Which likely meant that the instant he was hit with my sword and his gauge started to charge, Silver Crow used that to move the fins on his back. Put another way, as long as his special-attack gauge was not charged, Crow could not use those fins in their entirety.

But in that case, what's my special attack? I don't have anything like that on my back.

The avatar dual sword wielder Kirito and the beloved twin blades that I was using now were my self-image—they were generated from my memory. From the fact that they were functioning in this fighting game system, the special attack should also be called up from that image. And if I was asked what my special attack would have to be, I could state it immediately: It could be nothing other than my sword skills.

I slowly drew my right leg back and readied my sword behind me to take on the stance for Sonic Leap, a basic one-handed straight sword technique. When I did, my sword whined faintly, and at the same time, the lit-up part of my special-attack gauge flashed, but the phenomenon quickly stopped. That must have meant that I didn't have enough in my gauge to use the technique yet.

"I get it," I murmured, and stared at my opponent before me again.

From Silver Crow's reaction and the unfamiliar screen configuration, it seemed that if I had to say it, I was the one intruding here—no, challenging. The brutal background was also something I could accept if this was a fighting game.

Most likely, for Silver Crow, this was a game stage he played every day, and I—or rather, the quantum circuit of the fourth-generation test machine—was interacting with it. I really wanted to log out right away and give Higa a piece of my mind for creating such a ramshackle thing, but there was no log-out button anywhere in this world, and I didn't know the command for it.

However, given that there was a timer in the middle, once the duel was over, the connection should be severed as well. Still, even if that was the case, just standing still and deliberately taking hits until my gauge disappeared wasn't my style. And I was the challenger, at any rate. It was only polite to expend all my strength to destroy my opponent.

For the first time since I'd been thrown into this stage, my mouth turned up

into a faint smile. In my head, I heard the sharp *click* of a switch being flipped.

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The instant he sensed the unidentified Burst Linker known as Kirito smiling, Haruyuki's virtual skin rose up into goose bumps. For a moment, even the throbbing of the wound on his right shoulder disappeared. The intense pressure blowing over to him made him unconsciously start to take a step back, and he stopped himself abruptly.

Kirito was an intruder in the Umesato local net, but the one who found his name on the matching list and requested a duel was Haruyuki. The option of picking a fight and then running away was not permitted to the members of the Legion Nega Nebulus.

This isn't the time to freak out! If I can't talk to him, then the only way to get info on him is to exchange direct blows—fist against sword!

At the same time as he told himself that, Haruyuki felt a fire igniting in the depths of his own stomach.

Kirito's reaction when dodging a midkick delivered by full-speed dash was faster than any duel avatar Haru had fought before. He wanted to see that movement again. And then he wanted to surpass it. Clenching his fists tightly, Haruyuki dropped his stance, ready for a decisive charge once more.

A major attack from a long distance definitely would not hit. And in terms of reach, his opponent had the advantage with the sword. So then he had to dive in up close and personal, and break him down with small attacks.

His opponent shouldn't be able to repeatedly swing that heavy sword. If he dodged the one blow that would likely come as a counter, he would have a chance to stick to him.

Focus. Dodge the tip of that sword like it's a bullet. Haruyuki's mind shifted into high gear, and his field of view narrowed to the center. His entire awareness was focused on the tip of the glittering black longsword.

"Go!!" Haruyuki cried, and kicked off the ground. He kept himself as low as humanly possible, and closed the ten meters between them in a flash.

Kirito's sword, held slightly back at midlevel, began to move smoothly. From

below. After the tip sent sparks flying momentarily on the surface of the ground, it bounced up to welcome Haruyuki. It leaned forward, like the lethal fang of an onyx snake.

Haruyuki opened just his left wing the tiniest bit to rotate the axis of his body ninety or so degrees and dodge the blade. Even if he didn't have any charge in his gauge, he could still use the wings to control his form.

He howled as it was yanked upward, as the sword lightly grazed Silver Crow's chest armor. It left nothing but a brief heat and a flash of light before the tip disappeared upward. Instantly, Haruyuki stepped in closer with his right foot and brought his torso up with the launch of a right uppercut. The fist became a bolt of silver light shooting toward the thin chest beneath that black coat.

Immediately before it hit its target, Kirito parried fiercely with his left arm. Haruyuki's right fist flowed off to the side and stopped at merely grazing his shoulder.

However, this was all part of his plan. Now, Kirito wouldn't be able to bring both hands down right away. Haruyuki shot out a left short hook, aiming for the wide-open body.

Wham! He felt a solid response. The body wrapped in the coat stopped.

Got him! Now I rush him!

"Aaaah!!" With a battle cry, Haruyuki launched a knee kick with his right leg. Another hit. Because he was basically glued to his opponent, it didn't cause serious damage, but that was fine for the moment. He would freeze his opponent with repeated techniques, gauge the distance, and throw in a decisive blow.

Restraining his opponent's left hand with his right, he set his sights on short chops with his own left. At this distance, a longsword was useless. In other words, his opponent's right was dead.

Or at least it should have been.

He launched his left fist to smash down on the swordsman, but it was held back by something from directly above. The five open fingers of Kirito's right hand.

“Wha…?”

Wh-where’d his sword go?! By the time the question had appeared in his mind, his opponent was already moving forward.

With a light, smooth, and yet terrifyingly fast motion, Kirito’s right palm suddenly radiated an orange light against Haruyuki’s chest.

Sp-special attack! But without a weapon?!

He was a moment too slow in processing this unexpected development. In this battle, where both possessed ferocious speed, that left him wide open.

Wham! An incredible impact slammed into his chest, and Haruyuki was thrown back.

It was a direct hit, but the damage was really nothing. It appeared to be just a technique to gain some distance. So he’d let go of his sword to use it? In that case, Haruyuki couldn’t give him the chance to pick it up again.

Intent on breaking into his opponent’s space, Haruyuki’s eyes flashed wide at yet another surprise.

The empty-handed Kirito was leaping up into the sky, his right arm stretched high into the air above him.

Was he planning to unsheathe the other sword on his back? No, he didn’t have that much leeway time-wise. So then was he planning to strike with chopping hands like that? Did he think an attack like that would work on metal-colored armor—?

Wait. The light enveloping his right hand still hadn’t disappeared. Which meant that the special attack was still ongoing.

Haruyuki braced both feet, stopped retreating, and went to move forward once more, when, before his eyes, Kirito’s hand snapped shut around something.

The hilt of a sword. He hadn’t dropped his sword to the ground. He’d thrown it *straight up*.

By the time Haruyuki realized this, the entire longsword was already wrapped in a dazzling flame-colored light and coming down in a straight line.

This time, he really couldn’t run or guard. A ferocious impact assaulted him from left shoulder to chest. Haruyuki was swallowed up by an explosive light effect and blown helplessly backward, off to the right.

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“Combined martial-and sword-arts sword skill: Meteor Fall…I could say, but I guess he can’t hear me,” I said, rubbing my stomach where he’d kicked me hard.

I couldn’t say that it was on the same level as the real world, but the pain feedback was well into the range of illegal. From this pain alone, I knew that this wasn’t a game being run in the present-day Japan of 2026.

But after I got in a clean hit with a major technique and sent him flying spectacularly to bury him halfway in a pile of rubble, the pain Silver Crow was feeling must have been much, much greater. Of course, that was assuming there existed a nervous system underneath that metallic armor.

When I glanced up to check our health gauges, I was down 15 percent from the punch and knee I took while he was sticking to me, and Crow was down nearly 30 percent. Outwardly, we were a person and a metal robot, but it seemed that there wasn’t any big difference in our defensive power. That was also very like a fighting game.

And if this was a fighter, then a damage difference of this much could be flipped any number of times hence. Deciding that this was not the time to act like I had room to spare just because I had gotten a single blow in, I ran hard while deciding on a follow-up attack.

But then the silver body twitched. The round helmet popped up. The eyes there seemed to emit a fierce light. And then the rubble half burying the silver avatar shot off in all directions.

Clouds of dust puffed up and blanketed the area. Repositioning my sword, I got some distance and waited for my vision to clear. The cool wind blowing along the bottom of the stage immediately carried away the dust. A few seconds later, the remains of the building appeared once more—without Silver Crow.

“What…?”

I quickly sent my eyes racing around to the right and left. The space to my sides and behind me was expansive and open, while an excessively wide three-story building sat in front of me. If it hadn't been crumbling in pieces, the terrain would have looked almost like a small school.

All the windows and entrances of the building were sealed with steel panels, and there were no stairs on the outside. If Crow had cut by either side of me, I definitely would have noticed it. Which meant that even if he had brought about that dust and blocked my vision for a moment, there shouldn't have been anywhere he could have gone. So then where on earth was that silver robot hiding?

—*Wait.*

He wasn't hiding. The special-attack gauge beneath Silver Crow's health gauge, charged to over 30 percent, was in this moment decreasing. He was executing some kind of technique. I had to assume that he'd disappeared from view because of that. Probably the ability to dive into the earth or to become transparent.

I strained all my senses to check both below my feet and all around me. I crouched down and softly readied my sword. Positioned so that I could immediately respond to the attack wherever it came from, I waited for his movement.

But…

Silver Crow appeared from an entirely unexpected direction.

Glint! I sensed something flicker above my head, and turned my face upward with a gasp.

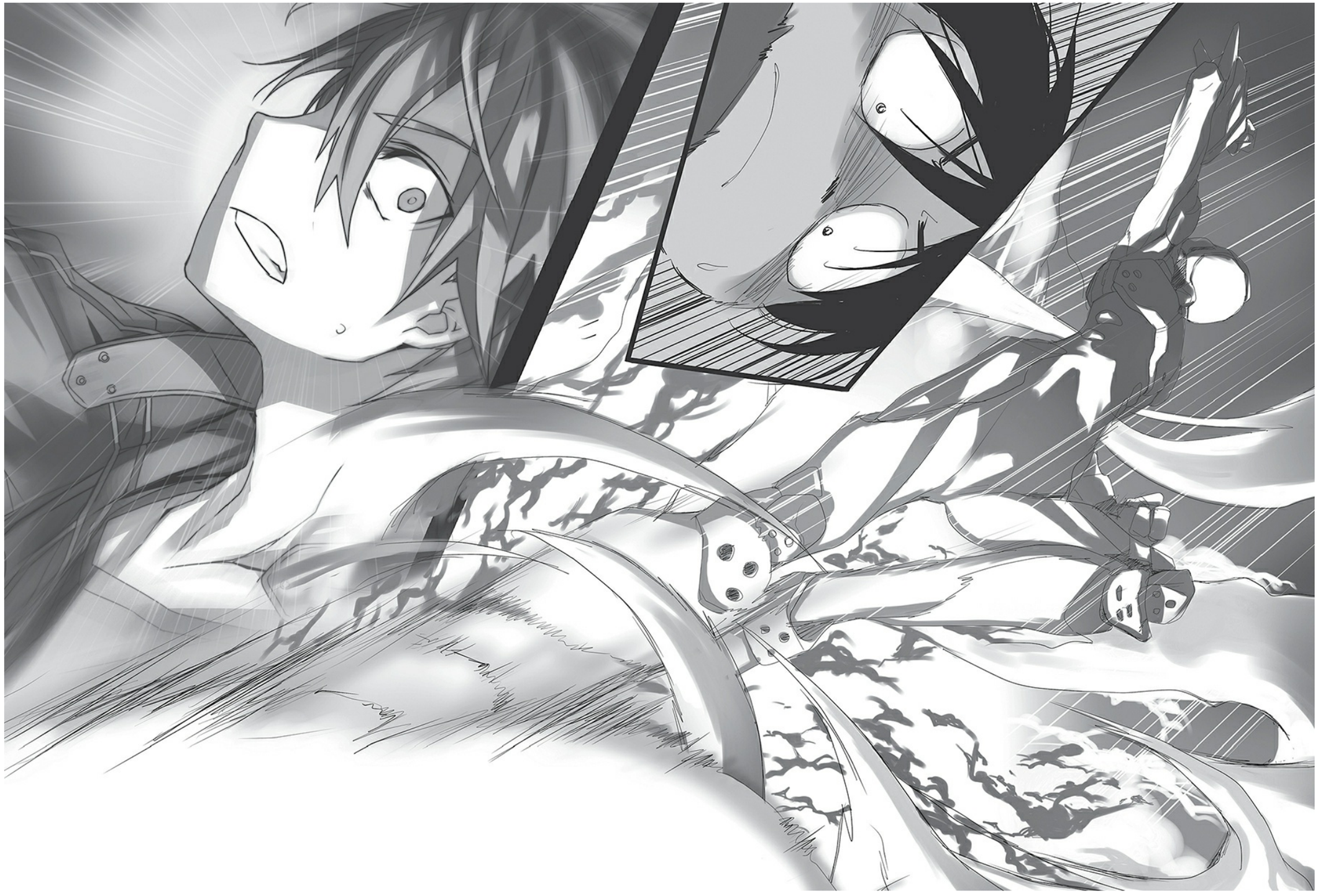
And then I saw it. The silver avatar with the tip of his right foot thrust sharply forward, dropping quickly, almost like a lance, his metal fins deployed broadly to both sides, shining on his back with a dazzling light.

So those were propulsive devices. But they were not simply something to move at high speed on the ground. Those fins were wings!

I kicked a shot off the ground as hard as I could and leapt off to the side. But Crow, shooting down in a straight line, changed his angle, using both arms as a

stabilizer, and perfectly followed my movement.

"Ngah!" A cry escaping me, I tried to parry those sharp toes with the sword in my right hand. But I couldn't put nearly the weight behind it needed to block a movement like this. In a collision like when I was charged by the Salamander in *ALO*—no, definitely an impact far exceeding that—my sword was knocked aside powerlessly, and the dive kick made direct contact with my right shoulder.



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For Silver Crow, who had poured all of his level-up bonuses into enhancing his flying ability, his greatest weapon was a sudden drop attack from a very high altitude.

How could he hit his target? Haruyuki had spent long hours intently studying this technique. It was still far from complete even now, six months after he had become a Burst Linker, but even so, the important thing was that it was taking shape—a perfect balance of power and precision (i.e., descent speed and homing function, respectively).

He spent all the power of his wings on acceleration and then carried out trajectory adjustment by moving his arms and body. He had no idea how many times he had crashed vainly into the earth before he got the hang of this trick.

However, all his effort was not for nothing. Because he was able to perfectly catch even Kirito, who had an awesome reaction speed.

—Wait.

Haruyuki inwardly shook his head as his dive kick slammed into Kirito's right shoulder, and he chased the figure in black with his eyes as it tumbled and bounced endlessly along the ground.

Kirito somehow had not known that Silver Crow was a flying-type duel avatar. If he had been a Burst Linker who was dueling regularly, the instant he lost sight of Haruyuki in a cloud of dust, he would have been paying attention to what was above his head and not his surroundings. However, Kirito had only looked up as Haruyuki's kick was on the verge of hitting home. Really, the reaction ability he had, trying to step and parry in that split second, was incredible.

He glanced at their health gauges. Kirito's was just barely dipping below 50 percent and had changed to yellow. He had turned things around on the amount of damage given, but it would be hard to get another clean hit with the same attack on an opponent who now knew he could fly. He'd have to put this technique to rest.

Haruyuki spread his wings once more and dashed at a low altitude toward the figure crouched on the ground a ways off.

Kirito had taken a serious blow to his right shoulder, his sword hand. And the shock to his nerves would linger for at least ten seconds; he wouldn't be able to swing his sword at full speed. If Haruyuki rushed him now, he might just be able to win this thing!

"Hnngaaaah!" Roaring, Haruyuki closed in on Kirito and launched a large roundhouse kick from a high-angle diagonal.

The way he used his wings was not just to drop from high altitudes. In short-range, hand-to-hand combat, they allowed action in three dimensions that ignored gravity and momentum. This kick, too, should have been hard to handle on first sight.

His right foot made the air sing as it raced through space like a laser. And Kirito was indeed not attempting to move, after having finally sat up.

It's going to land hard!!

At exactly the same time as this conviction shot through Haruyuki, Kirito's eyes glinted sharply beneath the long fringe of hair. His left arm, wrapped in the black leather coat, vanished in a blur.

Skreee! The high-pitched sound of collision. Dazzling sparks. And a heat burning into him.

Haruyuki only understood what had happened after his midair kick was repelled and he was knocked to the ground with the remaining force.

Up on one knee, Kirito was brandishing, high in his left hand, the second of his swords, shining with a vivid white light even in the dark.

Slowly standing up, the swordsman in black spun the white and black longswords he held in each hand.

Schwiiing! They cut through the air to each side.

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I had to admit it. I totally underestimated the power of this fighter, Silver Crow.

Just as his name implied, the potential of this avatar was largely invested in the ability to fly. In other words, it was as if I had gained the upper hand by

crushing a Sylph, whose air raid ability was its life, in a ground-based battle.

Given this, I very much wanted to finish the battle with an aerial fight, but the avatar I was housed in was not Spriggan Kirito from *ALO*, but the double-sworded Kirito from *SAO*. With no wings on my back, I obviously couldn't fly. In which case, unless I mustered up every last ounce of power I had, I didn't have a chance at victory.

The awareness that this battle was an accidental situation brought about by a quantum circuit anomaly had basically disappeared from my head. My entire body was cloaked in the racing tension and exultation that I had experienced with truly powerful enemies, the number of which I could count on one hand.

Feeling the reliable weight of Elucidator in my right hand and Dark Repulsor in my left for the first time in a year and a half, I stared wordlessly at the silver avatar slowly getting to his feet. Deep cuts ran along his chest and left leg, scattering pale sparks, but he still had 40 percent left in his HP bar. About the same as me, and the faint smoke rising up from the burns on my shoulder.

But now that both of us had shown off our trump cards, the next clash would likely decide the battle. The wings on Silver Crow's back spread out wide with a *clang*.

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The instant he saw Kirito bent over, holding his two blades, Haruyuki understood the true nature of the aura he had felt since the beginning of the duel.

It was like hers. Like the Black King, Black Lotus.

His form with twin blades in his hands and the color he was cloaked in were obviously similar, but more than anything, what they shared was an "unfathomableness."

In all honestly, Haruyuki had never seen Kuroyukihime fighting with all her strength. In his memory, there was the one battle she had fought with another level nine, the Yellow King, which had taken place in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but even then, he had gotten the impression somehow that they had both had energy left in reserve.

That sense: like he couldn't see down to the bottom of that strength. The sneaking suspicion: If this person truly let loose for real, what kind of ferocity would manifest? That exact same element was also latent in this Burst Linker Kirito.

If he really is as strong as Kuroyukihime, then there's no way I can win, Haruyuki's logic determined. But for some reason, the flame burning beneath his battered chest armor didn't cool in the least. To the contrary, it burned increasingly hotter and redder, sending heat even down to the tips of his limbs.

He wanted to fight. He wanted to burn up everything Silver Crow had and everything Haruyuki Arita had and smash up against this powerful enemy.

Shivering with such a fear that if he relaxed even the tiniest bit, he very well might lose consciousness and burst out before the figure of the Twin Blade Swordsman slowly walking toward him, Haruyuki smiled faintly beneath his mirrored surface.

Although there didn't seem to be a large numerical difference in the potential of their avatars, comparing the ability to intentionally control it, he was somehow at a disadvantage. Kirito was a cut above him in both the ability to analyze the situation and the ability to respond. Even though they were both seeing each other for the first time, Haruyuki was always one step behind.

In which case, the only thing he could do was bet on his speed, the one thing his meager confidence rested on.

Believe—in the longing that produced the silver wings on your back. Concentrate.

"Go beyond. Go past him," he murmured, and the color of the world shifted slightly. Sound receded, and the movement of the sparks drifting through the air slackened.

However, not even aware of these changes, Haruyuki simply concentrated all his mental energy on the two blades of his opponent.

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I immediately sensed that the nature of the aura surrounding Silver Crow had changed. Most likely, my opponent had also determined that this was the

deciding moment. The wings on his back were wide open, but rather than taking off, he leisurely dropped his hips and readied his hands, waiting for me in a natural pose.

If he was going to wager everything on one clash, I couldn't ask for anything better.

I finally noticed the faint smile bleeding out onto my lips.

This wasn't the kind of battle you got to experience every day. I had faced the most serious battles in all kinds of game worlds up to this point, and I had even lost some of them, but the last time I felt this level of stinging tension was three months ago against the Absolute Sword at the *ALO* Duel Tournament.

It was incredibly strange. It wasn't even clear why Silver Crow and I were fighting to begin with. I had encountered him, sure, but that was nothing but an accident, a problem with a test machine.

However—that was precisely why. It was precisely *because* this battle was taking place in an unknown game, a situation where every little thing was shrouded in mystery, that I was this excited.

And it wasn't just that. The name Kirito and these long-beloved swords in both hands would not allow any half measures in battle.

"Now. I'll give him everything I've got." A quiet whisper.

I took a large step forward with my right foot and carried out the Sword Skill motion. Both blades became tinged with a vivid orange light.

I flung myself in a long-distance charge toward Silver Crow, like I had been shot out of a cannon.

Dual blades charge attack, Double Circular.

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The figure of Kirito plunging forward, his twin swords tracing out a glittering trajectory within the depths of the darkness, was like the breath of a dragon burning everything to ash.

Haruyuki kicked aside the knee-jerk reaction to flee into the sky and simply waited at the ready. Even with his mind shifted to the highest gear, everything

happened in a single moment.

Before his eyes, Kirito's body spun around. The black sword in his right hand sliced ferociously upward through the air from below, drawing out a spiral in space.

Haruyuki moved to send the tip of it bouncing farther upward with the armor of his left arm.

The armor on Silver Crow's arms was harder than any other part of his body. And yet, despite this, the sword ripped halfway through his arm, and brilliant sparks flowed into the night sky from that sharp wound.

"Ngh!" The cry slipped from Haruyuki's throat, but his bull's-eye hit was coming.

With the briefest of pauses, the white sword in Kirito's left hand cut in from beyond of the arc of the savage slash lingering in space, as if to cross it. With terrifying accuracy, the tip was aiming for Haruyuki's neck, faster than the attack of any Burst Linker he'd ever faced before, much faster than a bullet or even a laser.

Haruyuki was aiming to evade that blade and catch it. But he could find absolutely no opening to do so. In fact, it was a single blow of such great speed, it would not allow him to even dodge.



Thus, he spread his palms, prepared to let his right hand fly, and caught the tip smack in the middle of it.

Without the slightest hint of resistance, the sword pierced his hand and continued to push forward. However, it slowed down the tiniest amount, giving Haruyuki just enough leeway to twist his head. A light vibration came to him on the right side of his neck, and the blade ripped deeply past, to the rear.

Ten percent left in his health gauge.

This gamble is—

My win!! he shouted in his mind, and with his right hand, sword still plunged through it, Haruyuki grabbed Kirito's left hand, hilt and all.

"Aaaaaah!!" he roared. Both feet kicked off the ground, his wings beat at the air, and Haruyuki flew up into the night sky with a force that burned up the whole of his fully charged special-attack gauge in an instant.

In the middle of this full-throttle acceleration, he flipped his body around. Taking advantage of the force of the inertia, he flung Kirito straight up with everything he had.

The sword slid out of his hand and grew distant, leaving a thin trail of sparks. With no wings, the twin-blade swordsman ascended endlessly in the night sky with ferocious force he could do nothing about.

Even in this situation, surprisingly, the swordsman didn't seem the least bit shaken. He wasn't flailing his arms and legs, but instead spread them out, trying to control his posture.

But now that it had come to this, there was nothing left he could do.

The majority of Burst Linkers likely didn't have a clear understanding of the fact, but physical attacks were generally a reaction against an action. Whether it was a punch or a kick, a sword or a blunt weapon, unless you stepped firmly with your feet, kicked off the ground, and put some weight behind it, you generated no power. This was the reason that the effects of hand-to-hand combat were weak in the Ice stage, where your feet slipped in strange ways.

And in midair, there was no ground. Kirito could probably still swing his

swords, but that fearsome power lodged within their blades would be no more.

In contrast, Haruyuki could use the thrust of his wings to kick off *the air*. For instance, even if they both struck simultaneously, he would deal a far greater amount of damage.

“This,” Haruyuki shouted, as he stared at the silhouette of Kirito, the force of whose assent slackened as he approached the upper dead point, “is the eeeeeeend!!”

Fwoosh!! The air howled in his ears. He concentrated the force of his charge in the singular point of his right foot, and launched a long-range roundhouse kick.

Kirito tried to catch this with the sword in his left hand, but it was easily repelled with a high-pitched noise, and the kick pushed deep into his flank.

The black figure bounced off into space once again, and Haruyuki chased after him in another dash. Deflecting the slashing attack again with crossed arms, Haruyuki kept going, lunging forward with a head butt. He beat ferociously at the center of Kirito’s chest.

And with that, both of their health gauges were left with 10 percent.

He only had that much left in his flight gauge as well. But that was enough. He would finish this with the next blow. He clenched his fist with all the strength he had and started on his final charge.

Instantly.

Kirito’s eyes flew open. Long coat flapping fiercely, his entire body seemed to be wrapped in a pale red aura. The black longsword in his right hand radiated a crimson red light akin to blood.

A special attack! Don’t freak!!

Haruyuki gritted his teeth, and kept shooting straight ahead. It might have been a long-range thrust attack, but in midair, with nowhere to brace himself, it should flow off to the rear along with Haruyuki. A technique like that couldn’t pierce the armor of Silver Crow!

“Unh…aaaah!” Haruyuki was turning his grunt into a roar when ahead of him,

Kirito flipped around.

Krrrrrr!! With a roar like a jet engine, the black swordsman launched a straight-jab piercing technique from his right hand. Haruyuki could clearly feel its incredible force as it rent the night sky rather dazzlingly.

—And headed in the exact opposite direction of Haruyuki's approach.

"Wha…?!" Haruyuki gasped as Kirito took the reactive force of the fierce thrust attack and plunged forward implacably.

The sword in his left hand burned a flash of pale crescent moon into Haruyuki's eyes. It came slicing down on his chest. The tip touched, and he simultaneously felt heat and cold.

Who is *this guy?!*

To use everything left in his special-attack gauge not for an offensive move, but to gain a moment of thrust…Haruyuki was taken by a moment of amazement once more. However, at the same time, his mind was attempting a final counterattack.

Haruyuki thrust his right fist directly forward, crossing the trajectory of the sword. But his reach wasn't long enough. Reflexively, he extended his fingers and made his hand into a flat edge. His sharp fingers lined up and shone whitely, almost like a sword of his own.

You gotta make it!! To at least tell him I fought right to the end!!

The white sword started to pierce Silver Crow's chest.

His silver fingertips touched Kirito's coat.

In that instant, Kirito's avatar changed into particles of white light without a sound.

The sword lost physical form and passed through Haruyuki, as Haruyuki's right hand slipped through Kirito's body. The two made contact in midair and their bodies intersected.

The instant they passed each other, Haruyuki felt like he heard a voice in his head. A soft yet clear echo, a good voice.

“That was a good duel. Let’s fight again someday.”

And then the mysterious Burst Linker Kirito was removed from the virtual field.

In the center of Haruyuki’s field of view, the system text DISCONNECTION blinked lightly.

✻✻✻

“…to. Kazuto!”

He jerked his eyes up to find Suguha across the dining table from him, lips pursed in a pout.

“Oh! S-sorry! What?”

“Your hand hasn’t really moved for a while, so I asked if you like it!” Suguha puffed out her cheeks even farther.

“O-of course I do!” He hurriedly shook his head. “This *oden*’s really good.” I opened my mouth wide and shoved a piece of potato in, nodding appreciatively as I did so, but Suguha still wasn’t happy.

“This isn’t oden. It’s pot-au-feu.”

Are you supposed to put whole eggs in pot-au-feu? I thought, although naturally I didn’t say this out loud. I handled the situation by shoveling down whatever it was, and my plate was empty in no time, so I thrust it out in a gesture of *More, please!*

As always, Mom was late, so it was just me and Suguha for supper again today. I fell silent there, and the table was quiet. But even as I started to take my second plate of French-style *oden*, my thoughts were always pulled back to the mysterious incident I’d experienced that afternoon.

In the strange one-on-one fighting game field, I had gone up against the unknown avatar Silver Crow in a white-hot contest, but just before the deciding blows were landed, we were disconnected; the whole thing had happened a mere four hours or so earlier.

I leapt out of the test machine, and of course, I rambled on and on to Takeru Higa about everything.

And yet Higa actually got a skeptical look on his face, so I got mad and said that I would connect to the game again and rather than sword and fist, we would exchange information.

What I saw on the second dive was…the bright woodland scene, just like Higa had told me about. There was no health gauge or timer in my field of view, and no opponent appeared. After I collected data there, just like in the initial plan, Higa and other staff members also tried diving just in case, but none of them saw any mysterious human figures.

Right, the quantum circuit of the test machine had been “fixed.” Almost as if having witnessed the fight between me and Crow, the machine was completely satisfied…

Or maybe that fight was a fleeting dream I had on my first full dive in the fourth-generation machine. That’s what Higa had said when my task was finished, and I was about to leave the lab.

But I couldn’t completely believe that. Silver Crow’s movements were almost a wonder and his battle spirit was like a super-high-temperature flame. We tried to burn each other up. There was no way that duel was just a dream.

“Come on. What have you been thinking about this whole time?” came Suguha’s voice once more, to pull me out of my head again.

If this kept up, she would get mad at me, so I decided to bring her into those thoughts, and as I pierced a wiener with my fork, I said, “Oh, it’s just today, I dueled an amazing opponent. The connection got cut, so it was no count. But, well, I can’t really say I won.”

“What? You ended up in a draw with an unknown player? Is there actually someone like that?” Interest piqued, Suguha also leaned forward. She seemed to have misinterpreted it as something that happened in *ALO*, but even if I did want to correct her, I’d sworn to keep the test machine secret, which meant I actually couldn’t talk about that, so I just left it.

“Let’s see. He flew in the sky incredibly naturally. It looked like the real deal, real flight.”

“What do you mean?” Suguha cocked her head, and, fork still in one hand, I

tried to stage it for her.

“It’s like, in *ALO*, you don’t really control your wings with just your brain. You actually use the movement of your shoulder blades, right? Like this to accelerate.” I pulled my shoulders back and pressed my shoulder blades up against each other. “This to decelerate.” This time, I stretched my arms out ahead of me and pulled my shoulder blades apart. “As you get skilled at it, the motion gets smaller and smaller. But you’re still moving a little, at least. So during an air raid, no matter what, it interferes with your attack motion.”

“Right.” Suguha nodded deeply. “When you swing your sword, you have to open your shoulders, so you end up ordering your wings to brake at the same time that you’re attacking. The only ones who can attack flying at full speed without being killed are people with lance-type weapons readied at the hip. But there’s no way around that. After all, human beings don’t have real wings. You have to substitute some other motion of your body.”

“Right. But this guy, it looked like he controlled his wings with absolutely no conflict. After this one intense dash at full power, he accelerated even more and thrust his fist out.”

“What? That’s impossible!” Suguha opened her eyes wide.

I smiled slightly. “Right. It’s impossible. It probably just looked like that because he was so fast. If he could freely control just his wings, he wouldn’t be a person, he’d be a birdman. Or…”

Or in that world, there’s a human-machine interface that goes beyond my understanding.

Right. If, rather than picking up movement orders from the medulla oblongata like the AmuSphere, it read movement images directly from the consciousness. Or…But there was no way that could be done. Accessing the consciousness—in other words, the soul itself…

Yet it was the only thing I could think of that would allow Silver Crow to move like that.

Image power. In other words, a world where a person’s very will was digitized into actual power. Right. Thinking about it like that, hadn’t the test machine

there read my self-image and produced the swordsman Kirito avatar that way? So then, the fourth-generation dive machine Higa made communicated not with the brain cells, but directly with the soul. Did that mean that in that world, it was possible for divers to make use of the ultimate output—the power of will?

I closed my eyes tightly for a second before looking at Suguha across from me. I ended up grinning.

“What are you smiling about, Kazuto?” The Sylph swordswoman speedaholic was getting annoyed.

“Maybe someday,” I said. “No, maybe in the unexpectedly near future, we might be able to really fly. Not any pseudo, involuntary flight, but flapping our wings just as we imagine it in our hearts, yeah?”

Suguha blinked rapidly, and then her whole face broke out into a broad grin. “Yeah, it would be great if that happened,” she agreed.

As I chewed loudly on a wiener, in my mind, I called up one more time that figure.

The beautiful silver crow flying through the dark night sky.

✻✻✻

“…yuki. Hey, are you listening to me, Haruyuki?”

Hearing his name, Haruyuki hurriedly lifted his head. Kuroyukihime was staring seriously at him from the opposite side of the round table.

“Ah! I-I-I’m sorry! I was just thinking…”

“Well, what exactly is this item for investigation that is more important than discussing where you would like to go with me? I’d be very interested to hear.”

Shrinking back with an *eep*, he gulped back the iced latte in his paper cup to buy some time.

The lounge after school was deserted; there wasn’t another student to be seen. Even so, just in case, Haruyuki looked around and checked that no one would overhear their conversation before he mumbled his reply.

“Um, well…the truth is, I dueled with this weird Burst Linker…” He

deliberately left out “over lunch today.” A mysterious enemy appearing over lunch and on the in-school local net was serious, even without the Dusk Taker incident this spring. Really, immediately after the duel, he should have reported to all members of Nega Nebulus and cracked the real of this enemy, but Haruyuki hadn’t done that.

Because he hadn’t gotten any sense of malice or even enmity from that dueler. He had only displayed the pure excitement and joy of the duel. The battle had been so fierce, and yet he had left Haruyuki feeling refreshed.

He probably wouldn’t appear a second time. Haruyuki had no basis for believing that, but believe it he did.

“He was weird, but he was amazing,” he said slowly. “He had two swords for weapons, and I basically couldn’t even see his techniques.”

“Two swords,” Kuroyukihime murmured distinctly, and furrowed her brow slightly. But when Haruyuki turned puzzled eyes on her, her expression returned to normal and she continued, “Oh. No, it’s nothing. And? Did you win?”

“Oh! Um, right before the deciding battle, the connection was cut…but if it hadn’t been, I’m sure I would’ve lost. My final blow probably wouldn’t have landed.”

“My! To overwhelm you in close combat. What was his color and level?”

At Kuroyukihime’s question, Haruyuki got a troubled look on his face and shook his head. “Maybe it was a system error or he was using some kind of filter, but I couldn’t see his color name or his level. Just…looking at him, he was incredibly…black.”

Faced with the Black King narrowing her eyes slightly once more, Haruyuki, still not thinking too deeply, casually asked the question that had come up during the battle. “Oh, right. I meant to ask you a million times before. What kind of attributes does ‘black’ have, anyway?”

Kuroyukihime blinked, puzzled, and then smiled a wide, wry grin. “Where’s that coming from all of a sudden?”

“Oh! S-sorry.” When he unconsciously shrank into himself, a smile like that of

one a wise older sister would turn onto a thoughtless younger brother crossed her lips.

“No, no need to apologize. Because the answer is, I don’t know, either.”

“Huh?”

“That said, I have made certain suppositions.” Her glass of iced tea clanking, Kuroyukihime began to explain, her eyes turned to the hazy light of the afternoon sun. “On the color wheel, there’s close-range blue, long-range red, and intermediate yellow. And then green and purple with attributes in between there. Except for the metal colors, pretty much every duel avatar is categorized in this wheel. The greater the saturation, the purer the affiliation.”

All of this was laws Haruyuki also knew very well. For instance, Cyan Pile, controlled by his good friend Takumu, was a fairly vivid blue, but he tended just a tiny bit toward the purple direction. This was why his initial armament Cyan Pile did double duty with long-distance attack power.

As if reading Haruyuki’s mind, Kuroyukihime nodded as she continued, “Conversely, the lower the saturation, the more the affiliation is particular. Your friend Ash Roller is a green type, but he’s so gray, you basically can’t tell. That’s because a large part of his potential has been poured into the special Enhanced Armament of his bike. But even with the same lowering of saturation, why do some avatars go darker and others go lighter? That still hasn’t been properly explained.”

“Some get darker…some lighter…,” he parroted, and Haruyuki finally got it. The end of an avatar getting darker and darker was, of course, black—pure black. Conversely, at the end of getting lighter was white—pure white. Both had the ultimate in specificity, but in that case why were black and white split up as total opposite colors? He didn’t have a clue.

Haruyuki twisted and craned his neck, and Kuroyukihime spoke abruptly, clearly, “Black is the color of refusal. Or so I thought for a long time.”

“Huh? R-refusal?”

“Yes. It refuses to be dyed with any hue. It is a nihilistic color, possessing nothing. You can’t go any further than that. The color of the bottom of a deep

well.” Her words were cold, but Kuroyukihime shook her head before Haruyuki could open his mouth to say anything. A faint smile bled onto her pale lips. “But…but lately, I’ve been feeling that maybe that’s not the case. And that’s because…” Abruptly, she slid her slender hand across the table and squeezed Haruyuki’s. “…You have held my hands like this countless times. Because you made me remember that even someone like me can have that contact with another person.”

Faced with eyes gentler than he had ever seen, Haruyuki turned red right up to his ears, but still, he managed to resolve himself and squeeze Kuroyukihime’s cool hand. His heart was pounding, and it didn’t seem like he was going to be able to say something really appropriate, so he tried earnestly to communicate everything in his heart through their touching fingers.

Black definitely isn’t the color of refusal. I mean, you, you were the one who reached a hand out to me alone at the bottom of my pit. You wrapped yours gently around it; you healed my wounds.

Right. And him, too. That black swordsman had the same sort of composure somehow. He had a strength and breadth to accept and support all things.

Haruyuki lifted his face timidly, as if pushed from behind by the Kirito in his memory and managed to get something akin to words to come from his mouth. “Um. Uh, I was taught in class that black things look black because they don’t repel any light. So…so it’s definitely not a sad color. I think it’s bigger and warmer than any other color.”

Kuroyukihime’s eyes flew open wide for a moment. And then a smile like the bud of a lotus flower unfolding spread across her face.

AFTERWORD

Reki Kawahara here. I'm bringing you *Accel World 10: Elements*.

…Well, I'm aware it's a bit late for this, but it is the tenth volume. This story was born from the simple, single idea of "it would be interesting if there was a fighting game that used the real world as a stage," but then I thought that a few minutes into a carefree fight, you'd be hit by a car, so I added the element of "acceleration" and started writing. Once I began writing down all the various other elements of the story, things sort of snowballed.

The fact that this sort of haphazard story has been able to continue all the way to Volume 10, and by the hand of me, a fundamentally extremely lazy person, is because I've had the support of all of you reading this text.

That said, just looking at the other series under the Dengeki Bunko label, there are a lot that have surpassed twenty volumes, forget ten, so I still can't be getting into an ending feeling, I guess. (lol) Story-wise, I feel like I'm maybe in a place where the setting has come together at last, and now we can finally get into the meat of the battle between the Legions of the Six Kings of Pure Color and the Acceleration Research Society. Or we should be able to, but I won't know until I write it…It's that sort of "where the wind takes us" story, but I do hope you'll continue to come along for the ride.

If I could touch a bit more on Volume 10 here, it's more of a sporadic short-story collection. The three stories collected here are a bit experimental, with a lineup of "The Sound of Water on a Distant Day" taking us waaaaay back in the past; "Roar of the Sea at the Ends of the Earth," the first story from Kuroyukihime's point of view; and "Versus," a crossover with my other series, *Sword Art Online*. With the last story "Versus" in particular, there are details

that will make you wonder about the relationship between the two series, but as their writer, right now, I'm taking the stance that nothing clearly links the two series. I'd be happy if you read this story the way *SAO* protagonist Kirito assumed, as a fun short story with the pretext of the dramatic move of a step into a parallel world through a quantum computer. I apologize for always making selfish requests in every book. In Volume 11, coming up next, we'll return to the main plot. I'm planning to start it at the meeting of the Seven Kings, where Haruyuki will be summoned to testify.

To my editor, Miki, on whom I've foisted so much as I flee with a nimbleness on par with Black Vise in the face of the tsunami that is this story being turned into an anime, a game, and drama CDs; my illustrator, HIMA, of whom I asked an impossible schedule from October to December; and to guest illustrator, abec—thank you so much once again! And all you readers, please do join me again in 2012!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in October 2011

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