

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY
HIMA



▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD**

15

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

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▶▶ **ACCEL•WORLD** 15 **THE END AND THE BEGINNING**



**REKI
KAWAHARA**

**ILLUSTRATION BY
HIMA**

**DESIGN BY
bee-pee**



"....."

NIKO

Legion Master of the Red Legion.
Prominence: Immediately after
the Metatron mission, she was
kidnapped by Black Vise.
Duel avatar: Scarlet Rain.

"You must
decide
yourself...
what
should be
accomplished."

METATRON

Archangel tamed by the
Acceleration Research Society.
Released by Silver Crow;
she gave him her wings.

"The Red King
is scheduled
to leave the
Accelerated
World today."

BLACK VISE

Vice president of the Acceleration
Research Society, which maneuvers in
secret in the Accelerated World. His
background is shrouded in mystery.

"...Rain!

Where are you?!"

HARUYUKI

Boy in the lowest school caste. Member of the
new Nega Nebulus, led by Kuroyukihime.
Duel avatar: Silver Crow.



*"You never give up!
You're more canine than feline!"*

ARGON ARRAY

Acceleration Research Society member.
Nicknamed the "Quad Eyes Analyst." Girl-type avatar with a distinctive way of speaking.

"I absolutely will protect you."

BLOOD LEOPARD

Deputy of the Red Legion, Prominence.
Nicknamed "Pard." One vertex of the Triplex. She has sworn her loyalty to Niko.



"...The ISS
kit main
body?"

FUKO KURASAKI

Burst Linker belonging to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus. The "wind" of the Four Elements. Duel avatar: Sky Raker.

"...This
can't
be..."

"...I think
it's real."

"I concur..."

KUROYUKIHIME

Legion Master of the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus. Vice president of the Umesato Junior High student council. Duel avatar: Black Lotus.

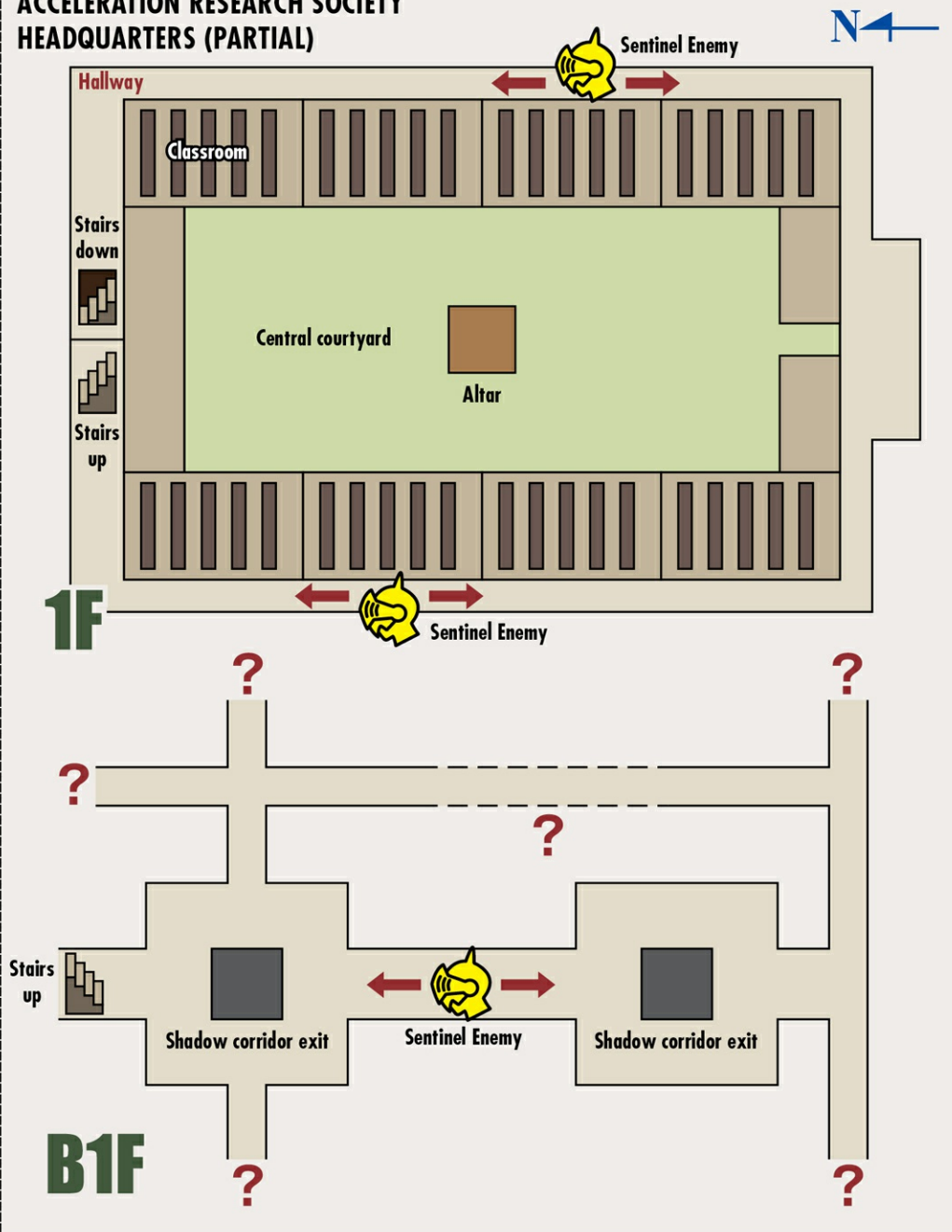
UTAI SHINOMIYA

Burst Linker belonging to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus. The "fire" of the Four Elements. Duel avatar: Ardor Maiden.

AKIRA HIMI

Burst Linker belonging to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus. The "water" of the Four Elements. Duel avatar: Aqua Current.

ACCELERATION RESEARCH SOCIETY HEADQUARTERS (PARTIAL)



Acceleration Research Society Headquarters (partial)

Thought to be secretly housing the main body of the ISS kits infecting the Accelerated World, Tokyo Midtown Tower is also presumed to be the headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society, the masterminds behind the kits.

However, when Haruyuki follows Black Vise through a shadow corridor in his attempt to rescue Niko, he

arrives not at Midtown Tower but rather a place that gives him a strange sense of déjà vu: a school about two kilometers southwest of the old Tokyo Tower. The basement holds an enormous dungeon, while the inside is guarded by knight-type Enemies. *This* is the Acceleration Research Society headquarters.

▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD** 

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 15

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen

Cover art by HIMA

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- 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. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).
- Uivi = 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).
- Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.
- Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

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- 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.

*In that case, I'll protect you.
If you get into a jam, I'll come flying. Anytime.*

Haruyuki had made this vow to Niko last night, when she'd suddenly arrived with the intent to stay over.

“I'm counting on you,” she had replied with a smile. And then:

It's fine. As long as you stay close, that's enough. So don't go changing on me, 'kay? Even after you go up levels and get to be a high ranker, you just stay the way you are. And...like, if someday I...

Had the Red King felt it then? Had she sensed the malicious presence that would attack her in the near future? Was her “if someday I” supposed to be followed by “disappear from the Accelerated World”?

Haruyuki couldn't let her premonition become reality. He had made a promise: No matter what happened, he would protect his cherished friend. He would protect Niko.

Which was why he had to fly now. Beyond his limits—at the speed of light.

“F...lyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!” Haruyuki cried.

As if in response to his will, the new wings stretching out from his back grew bright with silver light, brilliantly illuminating the sky of the Twilight stage.

There existed only one way to return to the real world of one's own volition from the Unlimited Neutral Field, aka the true Accelerated World: jump into one of the leave points, known as portals, that sat inside large, landmark-type buildings.

That was it.

Your health gauge could drop to zero and you could die, but you would only be confined, in spirit form, to the area around your death marker until you regenerated sixty minutes later. If you happened to die deep within the territory of an Enemy so powerful a single blow from it would strike you down, you could even get stuck repeating this cycle of death and regeneration until your burst points ran out.

Strictly speaking, total point loss would actually allow a player to leave the Field without the use of a portal. But in that case, the Brain Burst program and all memories associated with the Accelerated World would also be lost. And for the majority of Burst Linkers, if it was a choice between the two, it was considered better to spend however many years locked up in the Accelerated World.

Thus, when taking on the challenge of difficult missions in the Unlimited Neutral Field, it was standard practice to make advance preparations to automatically stop acceleration from the real-world side, a so-called automatic disconnection safety. More specifically, this entailed connecting to the global net with a hardwired Neurolinker connection—and then setting up a predetermined forcible disconnect time.

When they started out on the Archangel Metatron attack mission with the entirety of Nega Nebulus, together with Prominence's Niko and Pard, for a total of nine people, Kuroyukihime had set the safety to activate after ten

minutes. It seemed like a short time, but in the Accelerated World, where time flowed a thousand times faster than in the real world, it was equivalent to 166 hours and 40 minutes—approximately seven days. This gave them a fair bit of leeway, and in fact, by the time they managed to crush Metatron after an intense battle, they still had over six days until the automatic disconnect.

But that leeway suddenly turned into a trap that came out of nowhere to blindsides them all. The fight with Metatron had no sooner ended than their friend Niko—the Red King, Scarlet Rain—had been abducted by the vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, Black Vise.

Wherever he was taking her, if the global connection in the real world was cut, then in that instant, her duel avatar would vanish from the Accelerated World and she could escape from danger for the time being. But the safety wouldn't be activated for another six days—a lifetime away. Thus, Haruyuki had turned to his companions and shouted immediately before flying off after Vise: *Get out through the nearest portal and pull Niko's cable!*

Tokyo Midtown Tower, the stage for the Metatron attack, was one of the most famous landmarks in the twenty-three wards of Tokyo, so there would have to have been a portal in there somewhere. Most likely, inside the tower itself.

But the problem was that the portal wasn't necessarily at the entrance on the first floor of the building. In fact, the portal at Roppongi Hills, Midtown Tower's twin rising up over the landscape, was in the vicinity of the fiftieth floor. If Midtown Tower's was at a similar height, how many minutes would it take to climb up to it? And Midtown was an important base for the Acceleration Research Society, so it was also possible that they had set any number of traps to keep anyone from actually reaching their portal.

Which was why he couldn't rely on a disconnection alone to save Niko. He had to do whatever it took to follow Black Vise and get her back. Because Niko was Haruyuki's friend, and he had sworn to protect her.

"Faster...! Faaaaaasteeerrrr!!" Haruyuki forced a scream from his throat, seeking increasingly more speed even as he plunged through the air faster than ever before.

On his back, a new pair of pure-white wings—the Metatron Wings—sat above the ten metal fins that were Silver Crow's original wings, howling and whistling. Crowned with the name of an Archangel, the Enhanced Armament

gave him unprecedented power, causing the hands that he held outstretched before him to compress the virtual atmosphere; his fingertips burned bright red with supersonic friction. But Haruyuki, in his hyper-accelerated consciousness, continued to pray for more—to go even faster.

Black Vise had captured Niko after the Metatron mission, sinking into the shadow of Midtown Tower to run off. Vise had the ability to move anywhere within interconnected shadows and remain hidden, but fortunately, the Twilight stage had few buildings. The shadows cut off at an intersection about five hundred meters away from the tower in a straight line, and Haruyuki had not missed the glimpse of the jet-black avatar revealing himself in order to cross it.

That said, however, five hundred meters was more than double the distance across the Tokyo Midtown complex. On top of that, it would take Vise at most three seconds to cross the intersection and dive into the next shadow. And once he fled into the shadow of the bridge off Expressway No. 3 up ahead, Haruyuki wouldn't be able to follow him any farther—that bridge connected with the central ring road to the east and the Tomei Expressway to the west, which meant, in practical terms, it spread without limit.

Move five hundred meters in a mere three seconds.

To make that happen from a dead stop, he would need to achieve a speed of twelve hundred kilometers per hour. The acceleration required was about eleven G's—a maneuver far beyond the limits of a duel avatar. But he had to do it.

The maximum speed of his own flight ability was five hundred kilometers per hour. A thousand when he activated his secondary Incarnate technique Light Speed. And with the Enhanced Armament Metatron Wings, eleven hundred...twelve hundred...

“Ah...Aaaaaah!!” Haruyuki howled in his spaghettified stretch of time.

The wall of air transformed into a highly viscous liquid pierced by Silver Crow's sharp fingertips. Concentric shock waves shattered the buildings beneath him.

In the rapidly approaching intersection, Black Vise had finished crossing the road and was once more turning himself into square panels. The crimson armor of the petite avatar he held in both arms shone brightly in the depths of the dusk. But her bright color was already being swallowed up by the thin ebony panels.

Haruyuki glared at his enemy, about to sink into the shadows once more, and mustered every ounce of strength he had left. He was probably already flying at over twelve hundred kilometers per hour—beyond the speed of sound, in other words. Deceleration was out of the question—a normal landing was utterly impossible. His only option was to crash into Black Vise at top speed. Haruyuki and Vise would be killed instantly in the impact of the collision, and Niko, locked away inside Vise, would likely share their fate. But this was much better than her being carried off to some unknown location. While they were standing by to regenerate, their friends would catch up to them, and he could apologize as much as necessary once this whole mess with Niko was sorted out.

Silver Crow plunged toward the intersection, the steep angle of his plummet to the earth whipping up a storm of rubble in his wake. Ten meters until the inky panels slid into the ground...Five...

“Give back...”

Three meters. Two.

“...Nikooooooooooooo!!”

One.

At the exact same instant that Vise’s entire body sank into the shadows, Haruyuki’s hands touched that spot on the ground. An enormous explosion, grand enough to shake the heavens themselves...did not happen.

Plrmp! Instead, a strange sensation enveloped Haruyuki. All light disappeared; all sound was cut off. Even the energy from his supersonic dive—more than ample to create a massive crater in the earth—vanished as though it had been sucked into some alternate dimension. He would still have continued moving dozens of meters even if his wings had stopped—for instance, if he had dived into water—and yet, all of his inertia had apparently been canceled out.

It was almost like he had plunged into a bottomless bog of jet-black ink. All that existed in his field of view was his health gauge, 50 percent full. The vibrations that had made his avatar creak until a millisecond earlier were also gone, and the input from his five senses dropped to zero.

—*No.*

A lateral force assaulted him. He was being pulled—no, he was *flowing*. The densely concentrated darkness was moving like an underground water current, carrying Haruyuki off somewhere.

“...Rain! Where are you?!”

Sensing that even his shout was promptly erased, Haruyuki desperately reached out into the black. But the tips of his fingers brushed nothing. He tried to flare the wings on his back to push against the current, but the thick darkness wrapped around them and interfered. All he could do was allow himself to be swept away in a current so black, he couldn't see even a centimeter in front of his face.

Light...Some kind of light source...

He mentally went through his inventory for anything that might produce light before finally realizing he didn't need an item for that. He held his right hand up high and focused his mind.

Vween! The clear sound of vibration echoed through his avatar, and a silver light—his Incarnate overlay—pushed the darkness back ever so slightly.

He took a sharp breath the instant it popped up in his view: a rectangular plate riding the current a few meters ahead of him. There was no doubt; this was Black Vise. Which meant that this unlit space was inside the shadows Vise used as his escape route. Perhaps because of his timing when touching the ground or due to his speed, faster than sound, Haruyuki had apparently followed Vise into the shadows.

“Stop! Let go of Rain!!” Haruyuki shouted in a voice that traveled nowhere. He brandished his right hand with the light lodged in it.

“Laser—”

Before he could utter the “Lance” part of the technique name, Vise suddenly rotated to the right. It wasn't that he had sensed the attack from behind and moved to avoid it, but rather the shadow corridor itself appeared to turn at a sharp angle. And whether he liked it or not, Haruyuki was also swallowed up in that current, knocking him off-balance.

The light in his right hand flickered, and although he tried earnestly to maintain the image that powered it, he could do nothing while the force of the ebony current toyed with him. He had no choice but to pull in his limbs, fold up his wings, and give himself over to it. If he got separated from Vise now, in the worst case, he could end up knocked out of the shadow corridor.

Niko, hang in there just a little longer, Haruyuki called to her in his mind, remembering all too well the agony of when he had been similarly locked in Black Vise's plates. *I will save you. For sure...For sure!*

He didn't hear an answer. And there was no way his thoughts would even reach her anyway. Still, Haruyuki kept his mind firmly focused on Niko as he was carried along by the blackness.

Just when he was starting to wonder how many minutes it had to have been since he flew in after Vise—he had lost even his sense of time inside the shadow—the current finally began to ease up. Guessing exit was imminent, Haruyuki stretched his folded limbs out and brought the Incarnate light back to life in his right hand.

When he saw the silhouette of the rectangular solid pop up out of the darkness once more, albeit a little farther away now, Haruyuki was both relieved and anxious. Thankfully, he hadn't lost sight of Vise, but once this chase was over, a fight with the mysterious layered avatar was inevitable.

Haruyuki's previous encounters with Black Vise, the self-proclaimed vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, had been limited to a total of three occasions.

The first was the final battle with the Twilight Marauder, Dusk Taker. Thanks to the deceleration ability made possible by a Brain Implant Chip—aka a BIC—Vise easily ambushed him in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where such a thing should have been very difficult, and locked Haruyuki between two thin panels—an excruciating experience. If Kuroyukihime hadn't raced back to Tokyo from her school trip in Okinawa, Haruyuki would very likely have ended up in total point loss, together with Takumu.

The second time was in the racing event set against the backdrop of the orbital elevator Hermes' Cord. Vise, hidden in the shadows of the race shuttle, had withdrawn as soon as fellow Acceleration Research Society member Rust Jigsaw threw the event into chaos, not giving Haruyuki and his comrades a chance to counterattack.

And the third time had been ten days earlier, when Haruyuki had dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field after he'd made the mistake of equipping the Armor of Catastrophe. To fully awaken Haruyuki as the sixth Chrome Disaster, Vise had taken the form of the Black King, Black Lotus, and appeared before him on the roof of Roppongi Hills Tower. For a brief instant, Haruyuki had been on the verge of falling under the Armor's control forever, but he'd just barely managed to pull himself back from the brink at the last minute, finally retaliating against Vise in a joint Incarnate attack with Kuroyukihime.

All of which was to say that the reason he'd been able to make it through these battles with Black Vise was because he'd had help from Kuroyukihime and the other members of his Legion. But in this fourth encounter, Haruyuki would have to crush Vise on his own because he'd charged off by himself and left his comrades behind. But he hadn't had any other options in the moment; if he'd waited for his friends, he would've missed his chance to catch up with Vise.

Don't be afraid. You just do what you have to do, Haruyuki told himself, as he was on the verge of giving in to fear inside the black channel, which appeared to be ending at last. *I'll fight to protect Niko no matter who I'm up against—even if it's one of the Kings of Pure Color. I mean, I promised. I don't deserve to be a Burst Linker if I chicken out and run away now.*

He clenched his hands tightly, and his faint fear evaporated. Almost as if it had been waiting for exactly that, the shadow current finally stopped. The rectangular solid slid upward just ahead of him, and Haruyuki followed suit.

Once more, he passed through the disturbing *plrmp* sensation and shot up above a cold horizon. The exit at his feet then disappeared without a trace, and he landed on a hard floor. He quickly sent his gaze racing around his environs to figure out exactly where he was.

He wasn't outside, but rather in a fairly large room. The four walls, ceiling, and floor were made of marble characteristic of the Twilight stage. Two exits, before and behind him. There were no windows; the only light came from a few lamps set high up on the walls.

The room was deserted, with nothing between Haruyuki and the motionless black rectangular solid about ten meters away from him. Still on one knee, Haruyuki pressed against the floor, but his fingertips were pushed back by smooth stone. He had to assume that he'd been able to enter the shadow corridor at the intersection near Midtown because he'd hitched a ride with the activation of Vise's ability.

The rectangular solid that was the transformed Vise suddenly split into two panels down the center. Those spun around, the pieces fissuring again and again until the ultrathin panels once more took on the human shape of the layered avatar.

Vise stood with his back to Haruyuki, a small F-type avatar in his arms. She was still unconscious, with her limbs hanging limply and no light in her eye lenses. Her crimson armor was cracked in places, no doubt damage from

being forcibly closed in Vise's panels. Tiny fragments peeled off and fell to the floor as though she were bleeding.

The instant he set eyes on the battered Niko, Haruyuki's heart caught fire. Spurred on by the white-hot flames, he stood and shouted his enemy's name. His voice bounced off the four walls and echoed deeply.

Black Vise—perhaps having noticed Haruyuki's presence, or perhaps not—turned soundlessly and cocked his head slightly to one side. Although the collection of thin panels that was his head featured nothing resembling eyes or a mouth, a magnetic gaze came from among the gaps in the panels to caress Silver Crow's metallic armor.

“Oh my, this is a surprise,” Black Vise said a second later in his low, soft voice, somehow similar to a teacher's. “What would you be doing in a place like this, Crow?”

“I came after you, obviously!”

“Excuse me, that was a foolish question on my part. But I must know—did you capture me from Midtown Tower the instant I used my latent shadow that second time? You might be fast, but given the distance involved, you shouldn't have been able to catch up with me. How on earth did you manage it?”

The utterly casual nature of the question very nearly sucked Haruyuki in, but he kept himself from answering. The new wings folded up on his back—the Metatron Wings—weren't visible to Vise from where he was standing. He needed to keep any cards he held close to his chest.

“I could say the same. How'd you manage to ambush us?” he asked instead in a low, strained voice. “I mean, you alone is one thing, but Argon Array shouldn't have been able to withstand a long ambush. Or can she decelerate, too?”

“If I answer that question, will you tell me your secret? Hmm? It would be my pleasure to continue our little conversation, but unfortunately, that is the one question I cannot answer. You'll have to ask her yourself the next time you see her.”

“I'll do that,” Haruyuki declared with a threatening step forward, “right after I take Rain back.”

Vise stepped back in turn and shrugged. “Mmm, so sorry, but I'm afraid I can't help you there.”

He glanced down at the crimson avatar in his arms.

“The second Red King is scheduled to kindly leave the Accelerated World today.”

At first, the meaning in Black Vise’s sinisterly smooth voice went right past Haruyuki. His mind went blank for an instant—and then was filled with pure rage. This emotion, a powerfully flammable gas, caught fire with a single small spark—or rather, exploded—and spurred Haruyuki toward merciless battle.

“You. Bastard,” he said, pushing a hoarse voice from his throat and feeling as though his armor itself was electrified. “There’s no way I’m letting you do that. The one who’s leaving is you, Black Vise. I’ll make sure you never get to play another of your dirty tricks!”

“Dirty tricks? How cruel. I’m doing the best that I can here, you know, just as our president tells me to. I believe you act under the same principle, do you not, Crow?”

“Don’t lump us together! The Black King would never make her Legion fight while she went off and hid somewhere!”

At this very moment, Kuroyukihime and the other members of Nega Nebulus were headed for the nearest portal to force Niko to burst out. Kuroyukihime would lead her team to strike down any obstacle that might appear, expending every effort to rescue their friend. She was nothing like the unseen and unnamed leader of the Acceleration Research Society.

And it wasn’t as though Haruyuki blindly followed the orders of his Legion master, either. He knew what Kuroyukihime ultimately wanted, and it was precisely because he hoped to go down the same path that he offered her his sword as a knight. More than anything, Haruyuki hadn’t chased after Vise because Kuroyukihime had ordered him to; he’d done it because he wanted to save his precious friend, Niko—and because he believed that everyone in Nega Nebulus shared this feeling.

Just barely managing to control his explosive emotions, Haruyuki took another step forward. Again, as if expecting this movement, the layered avatar retreated to maintain the distance between them.

The urge to leap forward and rip Niko from his arms only grew, but if Vise was trying to provoke Haruyuki, he wasn’t going to play along. The

more time he could buy there, the greater the probability that Kuroyukihime and the others would succeed in forcing Niko to disconnect. And unfortunately, he couldn't say he had a good chance of winning in hand-to-hand combat against Vise. Although the black avatar specialized in capture and escape, he was still a high ranker at level eight when all was said and done, and he was also presumed to be one of the oldest of the old hands, the Originators.

While reason and emotion battled inside Haruyuki, Vise laughed lazily, probably guessing at least some of the inner turmoil playing out before him. "Ha-ha-ha! Now that you mention it, that's true. I haven't seen the president for some time, either. But that doesn't mean they're simply thumb twiddling or some such. After all, it was the president who tamed that Legend-class Enemy you fought before."

Haruyuki felt the Enhanced Armament on his back shudder sharply. He took a deep breath and once more suppressed the urge to spread those wings and charge. "But in the end, all that did was force us to fight Metatron. Sorry, but we smashed the tool your absent president used to tame it. You won't be able to make an Enemy protect your base anymore," he stated, remembering the silver crown that had dug into the head of the Archangel, which had been guarding—*forced* to guard—Midtown Tower.

Black Vise cocked his head slightly to one side before laughing quietly. "Heh-heh, I see. You still don't understand, hmm? Crow, what you smashed — Whoops, that's all the time we have for conversation, I believe."

"What do I supposedly not understand?"

"You'll know the answer soon enough. Yes, in about one second."

"What are you—?"

It was when he moved toward Vise a third time:

He suddenly felt an icy chill on his back and instinctively leapt to the right. A sharp steel-colored flash poured down from behind him and smashed into the floor where he had been standing a mere instant earlier. Staggering backward because of the blast and the wind pressure, Haruyuki opened both eyes wide.

A single sword, so large as to be terrifying all on its own: one and a half times as long as the Impulse, the greatsword carried by the Blue King, and twice as wide. Naturally, the hand gripping the hilt was also large. The arm and shoulder wrapped in steely armor were unusually tough, and the head

capped in a knight-style helmet was so high up, Haruyuki had to tilt his head back to see it. The avatar was taller than even Avocado Avoider, much less Cyan Pile.

“Name yourself!” Haruyuki challenged, leaping back even farther. An attack in this situation meant it was probably a member of the Acceleration Research Society, but since every Society Burst Linker he’d encountered thus far had been without exception midsize or smaller, certainly a super-large avatar like this couldn’t be on their register—

Wait. That’s not it.

Bwwn! Haruyuki moved back all the way to the wall to avoid the blade as it sliced toward him horizontally—and finally noticed the silver crown wrapped around the horned helmet. Although its size was different, the design, with its countless, overlapping C-shaped hooks, was exactly the same as the one that had been pressed into Metatron’s head.



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“It’s not a duel avatar...” Haruyuki’s voice was hoarse. “This one’s a tamed Enemy, too?”

“Exactly,” Black Vise readily assented, standing a little ways off. “And its status is Beast level. I must beg off battling solo, you see.” As he spoke in his drawl, Vise took one step back and then another. An entrance with no door popped open in the wall behind him.

Haruyuki couldn’t let the man get away now, but the knight Enemy was brandishing its blade once more, keeping him pinned in place.

“Rain! Wake up! Rain!!” Haruyuki shouted as he stared at the tip of the massive sword, but Niko’s eye lenses remained devoid of light. Since it was basically impossible to lose consciousness for long periods in the Accelerated World because of physical or attribute damage, Vise had probably pushed her into something like a Zero Fill state somehow, and Haruyuki didn’t know how to break her out of it. “Rain!!”

As if Haruyuki’s desperate cry was a trigger, the knight moved. It swung the massive sword in its right hand from top to bottom and then from left to right. Sparks jetted up from where the blade crashed into the floor, and the air it sliced through burned.

If Vise wasn’t lying when he said the knight was Beast class, then Haruyuki, at level five, might very well die instantly if he took a single blow from it. He didn’t know what would happen to Niko during the sixty minutes until he regenerated, and if the knight was always in this room, then Silver Crow might even end up in Unlimited EK.

Desperately dodging a series of blows, Haruyuki saw in the corner of his eye that Vise had finally reached the exit.

“Now then, I will take my leave of you here. I pray for your success in battle, Crow.”

Haruyuki made for Black Vise as the man melted into the darkness of the doorway, but the Enemy moved, swinging its sword around, and completely blocked the doorway with its massive body.

“Nngh!” Gritting his teeth, Haruyuki figured his only choice at this point was sink or swim—to charge past the Enemy to escape the room. He crouched down and was about to kick off the floor.

...*No*. Another voice murmured inside his head.

Precisely because he was in crisis mode, he relaxed, and his field of view expanded. Himself, the enemy, the battlefield: A close look at all these

should tell him what he really needed to do.

Even the weakest Lesser was still far too difficult an Enemy for Haruyuki to defeat on his own. And the knight standing in his way now was equivalent to Beast class, far beyond even the Wild class. If he charged it in desperation, it was all too possible that the Enemy would catch him in a counterattack that killed him instantly. Still, fighting and defeating it was far more difficult than trying to slip past it.

However, this particular knight Enemy had a glaringly obvious weak point. This was, of course, the crown on its head. If the knight was tamed by it the way Metatron had been, all he had to do was land even one blow there to stop it from moving. While it was frozen, he could break free of the room and go after Vise.

The problem with this strategy was that, although the knight was of such massive bulk he needed to look up at it, the diameter of its head was much smaller than the seven meters of Metatron's. And necessarily, the crown wrapped around that head was that much smaller as well—a mere five centimeters wide. Haruyuki would have to pinpoint a hard blow in that narrow range.

Since the knight was basically double the size of Silver Crow, a punch or a kick from the ground had no chance of reaching the crown. The idea of his long-distance Incarnate attack Laser Lance flickered to life in his mind, but he soon rejected it. The lance required a deeper imagination than Laser Sword and left him wide open pre- and post-activation. If, in the worst case, his aim was off, he would no doubt be hit with a counterattack. That said, it was still much riskier to try a direct physical attack on the head like in the fight against Metatron than to slip between the Enemy's legs.

Haruyuki racked his brain, constantly in retreat to avoid the relentless slicing of the sword. There had to be something, some other way...

Unexpectedly, the wings on his back—not Crow's original silver wings, but the white ones equipped above them—shivered once more. Almost as if they were trying to tell him something.

You...can do something?

Haruyuki didn't hear a voice in response to the question in his mind, but he felt sure the Enhanced Armament Metatron Wings still had unknown power to reveal. The heat coming through on his back was the sign of the activation of an unknown ability. He deployed all four wings and dropped

into a ready position.

Perhaps in response to Haruyuki's action, here, for the first time, the armored knight let slip the characteristic, strange cry of the Enemies: "Rrooah..."

Blue-black eyes shone behind the narrow slit cut into the helmet. The Enemy gripped the massive sword with both hands and concentrated its strength in its thick arms.

"Rroooooaaaaah!!" Roaring from the throat, it yanked its weapon into the air before swinging it, whistling, downward.

It took all of Haruyuki's willpower to stand still and wait for the blow coming with a speed out of sync with the massive body. If he dodged with room to spare, as he had so far, he'd lose his chance to counter. He had to evade the sword with maximum speed and minimum motion.

In his super-accelerated awareness, he stared at the lethal blade rushing toward him and watched for an opportunity *Riiiiight...*

"Now!!"

He took the Aerial Combo technique he'd spent so much time refining, added the force from kicking off the ground to the instantaneous thrust of his wings, and did a sliding dash a mere meter to the right. The massive chunk of steel slid by, whistling in his ear, and slammed into the marble floor, sending a galaxy of sparks shooting up to bounce crackling off Crow's armor.

Haruyuki ignored the harmless heat-and-light effect and yanked his right arm back. He had absolutely no idea what kind of power the wings Metatron had given him would offer in this situation. All that came to him was a vague will, a voice telling him they could do *something*. But now that he was in the thick of it, he could only trust that voice and attack.

"Aaaaah!!" Haruyuki thrust his right fist out. In response to this, his upper right wing stretched up high. The thin wing, reminiscent of a sharp sword, bent in the air ninety degrees.

Shak! The wing sliced through the air and plunged ahead like lightning. The knight attempted to dodge by throwing its upper body back with unexpected agility, but the wing, now transformed into a ray of light, followed that movement, carving out a gentle arc to make a direct hit on the side of its helmet.

A dazzling light erupted, coloring Haruyuki's field of view white, but he narrowed his eyes and watched as the silver crown, which was biting into the

helmet, was severed by the wing/ultrathin blade—and then fell apart into pieces.

“One...blow?” he murmured hoarsely, marveling at the fearsome power, despite that it had been his own attack. When he was fighting Metatron, he had to hit the crown dozens of times before it was finally destroyed. Given the huge difference in size, the two crowns likely also differed in terms of strength. And the physical striking attack of his fists was no doubt quite different from the slicing attack of the blade, but even so, the wings exhibited a spectacular cutting power.

Awakening from his momentary shock, Haruyuki hurriedly jumped back, but the knight remained frozen in an unnatural position. The rings that had formed the silver crown peeled away from the helmet one after another, fluttered to the floor, and vanished before the giant finally began to move sluggishly.

Even if he had released it from a tame state, Haruyuki recognized as a general principle that all Enemies were active against Burst Linkers. Metatron was an exceptional exception to that rule, lending Haruyuki its strength after judging that it “owed” him for releasing it from the tame state, and there was a strong possibility that the knight Enemy would attack him again. Haruyuki decided he needed to leave before that happened and go after Black Vise. He slipped by one side of the still-hazy Enemy, cut across the large floor, and flew into the exit Vise had passed through.

That turned into a long hallway stretching out to either side. There were no windows out there, either, just orange light flickering from a few lamps. Not more than a minute had passed since Vise had gotten away, but the hallway was empty as far as he could see.

“Nngh.” Haruyuki gritted his teeth. He had to get Niko back as soon as possible, but there were no clues to help him decide if he should go right or left. As he stood there in frustration, the Enemy behind him started to move.

Right or left— No, wait.

“Up!” Haruyuki cried out to himself, turning his eyes toward the high ceiling. He might be able to find Vise if he was in the sky, and he could also check where exactly he was in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Naturally, there was no window or chimney in the ceiling, but he figured he could probably smash through a few floors of a brittle Twilight-stage building.

Spreading all four wings, he dropped his hips and prepared to take off at

maximum velocity.

Rrrrrrring! He heard the light chime of a bell, and the top pair of wings—the Enhanced Armament Metatron Wings—turned into particles of light and disappeared. Losing his balance, Haruyuki fell backward onto his bottom.

“Wha—?” he cried out in surprise, looking back over one shoulder and then the other. But all he could see were Crow’s original silver wings. The string of characters METATRON WINGS, displayed in tiny font directly below his health gauge to indicate he had an Enhanced Armament equipped, melted away from the right into tiny pixels and vanished.

“W-wait!” Haruyuki called out desperately, looking at the snowy-white particles dancing up into the air. “He’s still got Niko! Just a little longer... Help me for just a little longer!”

But of course, he would get no reply.

Except he did.

“Calm yourself, little bird.”

“...Huh?”

“I am still here.”

With these words echoing in his mind, Haruyuki saw the particles floating in the air concentrate into a point. The small white ball instantly transformed into a more complex shape: a sharply tapered spindle facing downward with a thin ring floating above it.

Streamlined wings stretched out from both sides of the spindle. The whole thing shone with a white light and looked like one of the AR icons his Neurolinker displayed in his field of view. From the top of the ring to the bottom tip of the spindle, it was a mere fifteen centimeters long.

“Wh-what is this?” he muttered, peering at the mysterious icon.

“Not ‘this.’ ” He heard the intimidating voice once more. *“Call me Lord Metatron.”*

“Lord...Meta. Tron? So then— Wh-whaaaat?!” he shouted without thinking, hurriedly clamping his hands over his mouth. He looked back into the room behind him and checked that the massive silhouette of the Enemy was still motionless before turning an intent gaze on the mysterious body of light once again. “So, Metatron, you mean the Archangel Metatron we fought at Midtown—the one in control of its main body? You were on my back this whole time? You didn’t just give me your wings?”

In his great surprise, he forgot to say “Lord,” but fortunately, it seemed that the 3-D icon was willing to overlook it.

“I believe I told you that I would lend you my strength,” it replied, icon blinking randomly with pale light. *“The wings I extended to you are one part of my being. Thus, it is possible to have two-way communication with our true self. Although to do this, it is necessary to turn into a terminal for a time.”*

“Uh. Um. So then, that’s...The Metatron Wings are an Enhanced Armament, but they’re also Metatron itself. Which means they don’t entirely belong to me, is that it?”

It was like—no, in a certain sense, it *was* one of those items with a whole history, the super-high-level equipment you got after clearing a super-hard mission, only to have it just disappear when it wanted or talk to you a lot or whatever. That was what Haruyuki figured as he spoke anyway.

The icon’s response to this, however, was extremely cold. *“Essentially, the idea that I would be under the control of you little warriors, even if only a part of me, for no compensation whatsoever is out of the realm of possibility. To obtain our Four Holy Powers, you must crush the first form with special conditions—and then defeat the second form. Speaking for myself, there is not one warrior who has ever accomplished this.”*

He had spoken with Metatron any number of times during the fight at Midtown, but belatedly, he marveled at how perfectly they could understand each other through words. The Gods Suzaku and Seiryu had spoken insofar as speaking goes, but in contrast with the way they unilaterally issued statements, Metatron appeared to digest what Haruyuki said before it responded. If it was an AI, it was pretty high level—Haruyuki hurriedly yanked his thoughts back from this admiring train of thought and repeated the words spoken to him one at a time.

“Special. Conditions?” He once again visualized the earlier fight in the back of his mind.

The first form had to be the super-massive Enemy that Haruyuki recognized as Archangel Metatron with the spherical head and four wings attached to the long torso. In which case, was the Enemy that appeared after they crushed that the second form? Meaning that Haruyuki and his friends had, without knowing it, cleared these special conditions or whatever—even if accidentally?

He opened his mouth to ask just what those conditions were when he realized, finally, that now was not the time for leisurely conversation. He had to go after Black Vise and get Niko back as soon as possible. “Right. Um, I super-appreciate you helping me out so far. But it’s not over yet.”

The slowly blinking 3-D icon had nothing equivalent to a face, so he looked up at the ring part and continued earnestly.

“My really good friend’s been taken by a bad guy. I think this is his base or something, but while I was fighting the Enemy, I lost sight of them. So I’m going to smash through the ceiling and go outside. Please, Metatron, help me a little longer, just until I save Niko—my friend.”

He didn’t know how much of this Metatron, a non-Burst Linker—and not only that, a hostile Enemy of the highest rank after the Four Gods—would understand, but Haruyuki put every emotion into the eyes he turned on the icon. Finally, the flickering of the light sped up, and in his mind, he heard the same curt voice.

“I have no concept of good and evil as you do, and I have no interest in the squabbles of little warriors.”

“.....”

“However, I have no intention of breaking my vow to lend you my strength. The reason I took this terminal form is because you were on the verge of taking an extremely foolish action.”

“Huh? Foolish...action?” Haruyuki parroted, struggling with whether or not he should be happy about what he had just been told.

The icon flashed brightly, as if nodding, and continued in its cool voice. *“Earlier, you were about to try to smash the ceiling of this structure with your fists. If you had enacted this experiment, you would have been hurt instead.”*

“What?! But...I’ve smashed a bunch of buildings of the Twilight stage...”

“If this Tawailait stayj, or what have you, that you speak of is the current field attribution HL06, then normally built structures do indeed have low strength. However, this structure is the exception to that rule. This would have been clear if you had paid greater attention to the attack of the mid-class Being earlier. This is why I call it foolish.”

He was well accustomed to being scolded in the Accelerated World, but he never thought the day would come when it was an Enemy taking him to task. A bit struck by this even as he chafed to get moving again, Haruyuki

guessed at the meaning of the three words he'd never heard before.

He was pretty sure that *attribution* meant *characteristic*, so that word probably indicated the attribute of the Unlimited Neutral Field. So then HL06 was the code given to the Twilight stage? The last mention of *Being* probably referred to a creature.

“Um, Being? Do you mean the Enemy?”

“I do not care for this appellation of Enemy that you all use. Refrain from it in the future.”

“R-right! ...So then, what was so obvious?”

“That Being struck the floor and walls several times with its sword, but they were not damaged in the least. If this were a normal HL06 structure, they would have been severely damaged.”

Haruyuki looked back, dumbfounded, and peered at the space behind him. Just as Metatron had noted, there was not so much as a scratch on the surface of the floor, against which the knight-type Enemy's sword had created such a spectacular show of sparks. He had no idea why that would be, but given that the building could easily withstand a Beast-level sword attack, it wouldn't crumble to pieces at a strike carrying the full propulsive power of four pairs of wings—in fact, there was a strong possibility that his fist would be what disintegrated, unable to endure the impact.

He looked farther back into the room to check on the status of the knight while he was at it and found the massive body still crouched on the floor. It looked like it would probably stay quiet for the time being, and Haruyuki let out a small sigh of relief.

But of course, in that instant, a vivid scarlet light flashed beneath the slits carved into the Enemy's helmet. Bits and pieces of metal armor clanking, the knight slowly rose to its feet.

“Gah!” Haruyuki let out a low cry and took a step back. As if to take his place, Metatron's terminal moved forward. The pure-white light flickered with dazzling intensity and reflected off the knight's armor. The strobe light appeared to convey some kind of information; the Enemy froze in place.

Then the massive creature—over three meters tall—turned on its heel as though it had been mentally overpowered by the 3-D icon, a mere fifteen centimeters in height. The Enemy continued in that direction, departing, its weighty steps ringing out, and Haruyuki stared, stunned.

Once the giant had vanished through the opposite doorway and he could

no longer hear its footfalls, Haruyuki asked, ever so timidly, “That En—I mean, Being—did it maybe leave on your orders?”

The icon spun around. “*I assume we do not have the time for obvious questions,*” it said, sounding exasperated somehow. “*It was you who said we must find your comrade warrior as soon as possible.*”

“Oh! Y-yeah. But if I can’t smash the walls or the ceiling, how am I supposed to look for her?”

“*What I promised to lend you was strength, not knowledge. You must decide yourself in what direction to move; what should be accomplished.*”

Thus chastised, he couldn’t stand there complaining any further. He should have simply been deeply grateful to Metatron for stopping him from recklessly crashing into the ceiling. And that the Legend-class Enemy—who could’ve instantly annihilated Haruyuki and his friends at Midtown Tower if it had felt like it—was helping him out at all was a significant bit of good fortune in and of itself. Better to get moving right away instead of standing here, twisting himself into negative, worried knots. So. Which way to go to save Niko?

“...This way!” Haruyuki shouted, kicking off the floor. Not to the right in the passageway, nor the left, nor upward; he charged back into the first room, cut across the broad floor, and flew out the door on the opposite side, as if chasing after the Enemy Metatron had gone to the trouble of neutralizing for him.

With exits A and B out of the hall, why had Black Vise chosen A? Maybe because the knight-type Enemy was approaching via door B? It might not have attacked Vise himself because of the taming, but it would have targeted Niko in his arms. Maybe that was why he couldn’t use door B?

In which case, Haruyuki could assume that the direction from which the Enemy appeared and into which it retreated was itself a key section of the base. If Vise had taken the long way around and was heading for that center, there was still the chance that Haruyuki could catch up to him.

The 3-D icon hovered silently by Haruyuki’s side as he ran. It wasn’t clear how long he had left until Metatron’s promise to lend him power expired, but all he could do was pray that it wasn’t before he rescued Niko.

Fortunately, unlike the other exit, beyond this doorway was a single straight path. He could see the back of the slow-moving knight up ahead, but he ignored it and kept running. *Kashak! Kashak!* He slipped by the massive

feet treading on the floor and passed the knight. He'd expected this, but it showed no signs of coming after him.

"Just in case, I shall give you fair warning, you who lacks knowledge." The icon bobbing along in the air spoke to him first, unusually enough.

"Wh-what?"

"The reason I was able to render that Being to the rear non-offensive is because the control state due to the abominable silver crown was released. Be warned that I cannot interfere with any new Being you might encounter up ahead, until you destroy the silver crown."

"G-got it." Haruyuki managed to wrap his brain around the meaning of this soon enough and bobbed his head up and down as he ran. "But the reason I managed to break the crown on the Being back there is thanks to the wing attack with the Metatron Wings."

He'd intended to suggest that with that Enhanced Armament in terminal mode, he might not be able to break the crown so easily, but Metatron's response was cold, as always.

"It is not a 'wing attack.' Call it Ektenia."

"...R-right." The laser attack had the ability name Trisagion, so he guessed the wing attack also had a proper name. He had no idea what either word meant, but he assented at any rate and turned his gaze back to the path ahead.

The straight line of the hall finally appeared to connect with the next room several meters ahead. Nearly a hundred meters away from the first room—meaning this base was relatively enormous. The Acceleration Research Society had to have been occupying a building somewhere in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but facilities of this size were fairly limited, weren't they? So why hadn't their base been discovered yet?

Haruyuki had pressed unprecedentedly deep into the central pillar of the Society, yet now he was assaulted with the sense that things were only going to get more ominous, and he wrapped his left hand around his right arm as he ran.

"...Metatron," he spoke without thinking as he realized all over again how much courage he got from the presence of the small icon floating beside him. "Thanks."

"Refrain from pointless utterances," the icon replied briefly.

"Right," he responded, pulling his head in. Haruyuki was gradually

coming to think of the Legend-class Enemy with the name of Archangel as a strict teacher.

Arriving at the entrance to the next room, he stopped and peered inside from the edge of the wall. The configuration closely resembled the first room, but openings were built into all four walls of this one. From where Haruyuki was standing, the doors to the left and right seemed to connect to new passages, but he could see stairs leading up beyond the doorway ahead. The enormous space was deserted; there was no sign of a new Enemy or Black Vise.

Haruyuki wrestled briefly in the back of his mind with the question of whether he had been wrong in assuming Vise was taking the long way around to this room and whether or not he should go back to the first room and head down the other passage when—

A spot on the ivory white floor flashed red. As if sucked in by it, he moved into the room and took a few steps before crouching down. With the outstretched fingers of his right hand, he gently grabbed the object that had reflected the light, an almost microscopic crimson *something*. There was no mistaking this color; this was a fragment of the cracked armor of the Red King, Scarlet Rain. Solid proof that Vise had passed through this room no more than a minute or two earlier.

“Niko...” As her name slipped past his lips, the crimson fragment lost its life as an object, scattered into fine particles of light, and disappeared. He clenched his hand tightly and lifted his face.

The exit through which Vise had disappeared had no doubt been a large detour that connected with the right or left entrance to this room. Which meant he had gone up the stairs on the far side. Thanks to his shortcut through the central passage, Haruyuki had managed to largely make up for Vise’s head start.

“Just wait, Black Vise!” Haruyuki called in a measured voice and turned toward the stairs. But the floor before him suddenly changed from the snowy-white of marble to the jet-black of coal tar. Hurriedly putting on the brakes, he jumped a step back.

Concentric waves spread out in the lustrous black floor, the center puffing up in a circle. Just like the room he’d arrived in, there appeared to be an exit to the shadow corridor in here as well. Haruyuki reflexively braced himself to attack. Would it be an Enemy that appeared or a new member of the Society

—?

Plrmp. With a viscous, watery sound, two human-shaped silhouettes leapt out, one after the other. Not Enemies, given that they were basically the same size as Crow. They shot up into the air before falling to the floor in a pile a ways off.

“Nngh!”

“Ouch!”

Both of these slightly underwhelmed voices were almost too familiar to him. He released his fists, ready for a surprise attack, and opened both eyes wide as he shouted, “Ta-Taku?! And...Chiyu?!”

The large blue avatar pinned to the ground and the small green avatar on top of him raised their heads toward Haruyuki at the same time. No matter how he looked at them, they were none other than Cyan Pile and Lime Bell.

According to the story Haruyuki was told later, it took Kuroyukihime and the others he'd left in the park at Midtown Tower a moment or two to get moving again. Haruyuki had called to them immediately before he'd flown off in pursuit of Black Vise: "*Pard, please chase down Argon!*" and "*Someone, leave through the nearest portal and pull Niko's cable!*"

The first to leap into action had been Blood Leopard. She raced off with the full strength of Beast Mode and receded into the distance in the blink of an eye, in hot pursuit of the Quad Eyes Analyst, who had been covering Vise with her laser attack from the roof of a distant building.

Six people remained in the park: Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Akira, Utai, Takumu, and Chiyuri. But Utai had been shot in the chest by four of Argon's lasers, and she lay cradled in Fuko's arms, unable to move. Chiyuri had restored the shrine maiden's health gauge with her Citron Call ability as soon as they regrouped, but it would take a little time to recover from the severe shock of the surprise attack. So the group would have to split into two, half backing Leopard up, while the others went off in search of a portal to stop Rain's acceleration.

Just as Kuroyukihime made this decision, a huge explosion rocked the north side of the park. Turning her head, she saw a pillar of red flames rising up from one end of the pale line of buildings. She suddenly tensed, fearing an attack on Leopard.

"It's all right," Akira murmured quickly. "That's Pard's work."

"Is it? Then..." Kuroyukihime brought her gaze back to her Legion members. "Pile, Bell, you go after Leopard!"

Takumu and Chiyuri agreed in unison.

"Leave it to us!"

“Understood, Master!”

The words still hanging in the air, the pair set to the north. Without waiting to see them off, Kuroyukihime turned to Fuko and Akira.

“Raker, Curren. We’ll head for the tower!”

The closest portal was somewhere inside Midtown Tower, the key Acceleration Research Society base. Her team had eliminated the biggest obstacle—Archangel Metatron—but they had no idea what other traps or powerful foes lay in wait inside. The two veterans didn’t immediately assent to this mission, however.

“Lotus, you don’t want to help Corvus?” Raker said with a concerned light in her madder-red eye lenses. “If he manages to catch up to Vise, he’ll be fighting a one-on-one battle with him.”

Akira nodded her agreement, the flowing water of her armor still largely depleted.

But Kuroyukihime looked up at the last remaining rays of light in the dusky sky and shook her head. “No. I believe in Crow—in my child. And you saw him, that incredible flight speed. He can beat Vise, even one-on-one!” she declared crisply.

The other two nodded understandingly, and then Utai uttered weakly, “That’s...exactly. Right. When he is fighting for someone he loves, C is... unbeatable.”

“Mei! Are you all right?!” Fuko demanded.

“I’m fine. Now,” the little shrine maiden avatar answered bravely. “Rain was stolen from under my nose because...I didn’t sense Argon’s attack. It’s my fault. I can’t stay here in your arms forever.”

Utai dropped to the ground to stand on her own two feet. Given that the sensation of pain was doubled in the Unlimited Neutral Field, she still must have been feeling the four ultraheated laser blasts, but she let no sign show in her stance.

There was no way that the responsibility for the current situation lay with Utai alone, but Kuroyukihime simply nodded, knowing she should just accept the girl’s readiness to push forward. “You can still fight, Maiden?”

“Of course I can!”

“Good. Then the four of us are breaking into Midtown Tower. I’m certain the portal is...”

“If it hasn’t changed from the old days, it should be on the forty-fifth

floor,” Akira promptly finished for her.

The four young women all looked up at the pale skyscraper, ripped apart vertically from somewhere near the top floor. Metatron’s superpowered laser, as reflected by Silver Crow’s Optical Conduction ability, had split the building in two. They strained their eyes to peer into the two-meter gap between the two halves, but they couldn’t see the blue light of a portal. If they could slip onto the forty-fifth floor through that opening, though, it would save them a huge chunk of time.

“So two hundred meters and a bit. Raker?” Kuroyukihime turned around.

“Unfortunately, my Gale Thruster can’t carry the three of you to that height.” Fuko shook her head slightly. “I could go ahead by myself, or I could fly as far up as I can with all four of us?”

“Mmm.” Kuroyukihime blinked once and made her decision. “We all go together. A forced disconnection is our last resort to save Rain. We cannot fail, no matter what lies ahead. Crow will certainly buy us the time to climb the stairs.”

“Right. I’ll give this flight everything I have, too.” Fuko spread her arms out wide. Utai clung to her body, Akira to her right arm, and Kuroyukihime to her left. The booster on her back was enveloped in a pale-blue light. There was the squeal of activation, and then Fuko’s long, fluid, metallic hair spread out around her head like wings.

“Here we go!” she shouted as she pushed off the earth.

Pale flames gushed from the jets of Gale Thruster, and the four members of Nega Nebulus rocketed toward the top of the massive tower.

* * *

Utterly. Unflinchingly.

I absolutely will protect you.

Blood Leopard—Mihaya Kakei—raced along, a crimson tornado with these words echoing over and over in the back of her head.

It wasn’t as though she hadn’t anticipated an attack by the Acceleration Research Society to some degree. After all, only two days earlier, while they were out working as a group in the Unlimited Neutral Field, the Red Legion had run afoul of a surprise attack by a Legend-class Enemy rode by a duel avatar disguised as the Black King.

The fake Lotus was actually the self-proclaimed vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, Black Vise. The purpose of the surprise attack was reconnaissance on Prominence and Scarlet Rain; the Red King had noted this herself the previous day. But at present, it wasn't exactly clear why Vise had taken on the guise of the Black King, but both Mihaya and Niko assumed that the most likely explanation was to stir up hostilities between the two Legions, which currently had a truce with no expiration date. And in fact, three Prominence members did independently attack the Sugunami area in the Territories on Saturday.

However, looking at how things stood now, Mihaya was starting to think their aim had been the exact opposite. If they could present a fake Black King and attack the Red King, pushing Prominence to retaliate, the two Legions would inevitably hold a top-level meeting in order to get the situation under control. And if a member of the Black Legion or a Burst Linker with a strong connection to them—someone like Ash Roller, for instance—was infected with an ISS kit, the loyal Red King would most certainly offer to help.

Indeed, before the battle with Metatron, when they'd fought Magenta Scissor and asked why she'd targeted Ash Roller, she'd replied that she had "obligations." There was a good possibility that those *obligations* were instructions from the Acceleration Research Society, all of it groundwork for abducting the Red King, Scarlet Rain, in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

There were far too many uncertainties to call it a real plan. But that was probably the Acceleration Research Society's style. They scattered the seeds of disaster one by one through the Accelerated World and harvested whatever fruit happened to grow. When Rain's parent Cherry Rook was taken over by the Armor of Catastrophe, when Rust Jigsaw ran wild in Akihabara Battle Ground, when Dusk Taker stole Silver Crow's wings, the damage could have been many times worse. In fact, the Society's scheming could actually have already brought about any number of massive tragedies, and Mihaya simply didn't know about them.

But this time, there's no way I'm going to let them get away with it.

Sadly, Mihaya didn't have the power to follow Black Vise as he sank into the shadows with Rain locked away inside him. But Silver Crow, whose growth was remarkable, had gone after him flying unbelievably fast, maybe even beyond the speed of sound. It was Mihaya's role to capture Vise's backup, Argon Array. Crow had no doubt given that instruction because he

was thinking of a hostage exchange for the Red King.

Argon's lasers had come from a building over three hundred meters away from Midtown Tower. This was a distance not so easily crossed even in a Normal Duel Field with its walls marking the area boundaries. And this was the Unlimited Neutral Field, where there were no such boundaries.

I'm not letting you get away!

Her leopard's maw howling ferociously, Mihaya pushed against the ground with everything she had. More than ten seconds had already passed since Argon's figure disappeared from the roof of that building. Blood Leopard had to at least stop her from meeting up with Black Vise, no matter what. She'd activated her First Blood ability, which allowed her to run at a speed of two hundred kilometers an hour, but it still wasn't enough.

Now was the time to use *it*: Blood Leopard's most powerful level-five special attack, so long sealed away.

Sight. Target set on five-story building two hundred meters ahead.

Load. Jump, limbs folded in. Formation of a tube of red light—a gun barrel around her body.

And—*fire.*

“Bloodshed Cannon!!”

With the call of the attack name, her special-attack gauge was essentially spent. An explosion loud enough to shake heaven and earth filled the air. Mihaya's body, a bullet, shot forward from the semitransparent barrel. Her field of view melted away into concentric rings and then to a whiteout. A fraction of a second later, her entire body was rocked by an impact that threatened to rip it apart, and Mihaya bit down hard.

Her health gauge instantly dropped more than 30 percent, and cracks appeared all over her armor. As she recovered her vision, she saw countless white fragments scattering outward against a backdrop of orange flames—the building in Mihaya's sights had been blown away, smashed to pieces by her “bullet” self.

Blood Leopard, Prominence lieutenant, was known as a Pure Red close-range type. She stood in contrast with the general rule of the Accelerated World because she used absolutely no long-distance attacks despite the fact that her avatar color was a highly saturated, long-distance red. Most members of the Red Legion even believed she had been dubbed Bloody Kitty because of the way she fought, shredding enemies with sharp teeth and claws, a close-

range fighting style on par with even blue-type avatars.

But the truth was something else. She was “bloody” not because she bathed in the blood of her enemies, but because she split and smashed her own armor with her Bloodshed Cannon. Equivalent to blowing herself up, if the attack hit its mark, the force would kill pretty much any duel avatar instantly. But if it missed and she crashed into buildings or the ground, she died. She had gotten away with losing a mere 30 percent of her health gauge after smashing into such a large building only because this was the Twilight stage and its buildings were brittle and easy to break.

After all, her avatar name, Leopard, was not just an animal: It could also be the Leopard of real-world tanks.

But Mihaya had sealed Bloodshed Cannon away after using it for a very brief period and had fought intently ever since as a close-range type.

There were two main reasons for this. To earn the extra points she needed to withstand the Level Drain attack of the God Seiryu, she couldn’t use a technique that was such a gamble: If she hit, she won; if she missed, she lost. And she realized she would never be able to catch up to Sky Raker and her perfect control of Gale Thruster, a falsely similar power, while relying on such an uncertain ability.

Even now, at level eight, she still felt her training was not yet sufficient. But she didn’t need to set her sights so precisely here, and this was no time to hold anything in reserve. She had to mobilize everything she had within her to catch Argon Array.

This resolve burning in her heart, Mihaya scanned her surroundings from the center of the massive explosion she had brought about herself. And then, beyond the vast quantities of rubble still falling to the ground, she saw it: a purple light flashing in the gloom about a hundred meters ahead. That had to be light reflecting off Argon’s armor.

One more time!

She had no sooner pulled her limbs in and fixed the gun barrel around her avatar than she was yelling the technique name. Bloodshed Cannon seriously depleted her special-attack gauge, but when she exploded an entire building into the air, she got a massive object destruction bonus. As long as her health gauge held out, she could shoot herself forward until the end of time.

With a thunderous roar, Mihaya rocketed toward the winding roadway, piercing two smaller buildings. The massive explosions turned the area into a

sea of debris. Her health gauge was further carved away, dropping to below 50 percent, but this time, her enemy couldn't have gotten away unscathed.

She spun around once in midair, her vision returning as she came down to stand on the ground. Her wide-open eyes caught sight of Argon with both arms crossed before her, a defensive position against the blowback.

“Graar!!” A roar raged from the leopard's maw, and Mihaya pounced.

Just as the nickname Quad Eyes Analyst indicated, Argon Array was an information-gathering type of duel avatar. Her main ability was to scan everything from the status to the storage of other avatars with the clairvoyant powers of her large eye lenses; even the executives of the six major Legions no doubt thought she was not a particularly strong fighter.

However, that information was fraudulent, just like the idea that she was on the executive team of the Acceleration Research Society. The four lenses of her eyes and her hat did not just emit harmless clairvoyant light rays; they could also shoot lasers at temperatures high enough and at speeds fast enough to dig into even a metal color.

The lone lens exposed behind her cross guard shone a vivid purple. This time, it wasn't the reflection of the twilight sun, but it was the advance signal of the laser activation. The light flared brighter and concentrated into a single point, a beam of bright light. There was no way to avoid it at this close range.

But Mihaya ignored the fierce pain of the laser piercing her left shoulder and flew at Argon. The blow ate further into her health gauge, pushing it into the dangerous red zone, but her priority was to sink her teeth into her enemy. She knocked Argon off-balance with a body blow, got around behind her, and bit as hard as she could into her left shoulder. Four fangs dug into the thin armor, sending the red flashes of a damage effect scattering around them.

“Ow, ow! Heyyy, that hurts!” Argon tried to peel Blood Leopard off with both hands, but her maw was not so weak as to lose in a contest of strength against a long-range type. Seeing that the fangs were not going anywhere anytime soon, the analyst turned her face as far to the left as she could to try to fire her lasers, but Mihaya was just barely beyond its sights.

Miyaha's near-empty health gauge pulsed with a red light and began to refill, the result of an ability she could use only in Beast Mode, Vital Bite. Mihaya couldn't see Argon's health gauge, but she knew it was dropping at the same rate as hers was increasing. This biting attack from behind was certain victory. Very few duel avatars had ever escaped her once she sank her

teeth into them.

“Ow, ow, ow. Come ooon, how’s this s’posed to be an easy job, y’know? Sayin’ I just gotta fire once and then run, but the runnin’s way too hard now, innit?!”

This barrage was probably directed not at Mihaya but Black Vise. He’d long since fled the Midtown area, but since all signs of Silver Crow in pursuit had also vanished, Mihaya wanted to believe he had succeeded in his chase.

The best outcome was Crow defeating Vise to get the Red King back, but she couldn’t put such a weighty burden on his shoulders when he was still only level five. Naturally, she wasn’t so pessimistic as to expect his utter defeat, but her role was to secure Argon as a hostage to exchange. And to do that, she first had to eat away the Analyst’s health gauge.

Since Mihaya had gone up to the same level eight as Argon immediately after the mission to rescue Aqua Current, she would get only ten points for defeating her; the real prize from Argon’s death was that she would be bound to these coordinates for sixty minutes in a ghost state.

With this merciless resolve, Mihaya bit down hard, her slender neck straining to recruit strength from other parts of her body. Argon had to have been in excruciating pain, being in the Unlimited Neutral Field with ongoing damage to a critical point. But that pain was nothing compared with the sum total of the pain and suffering of the Burst Linkers sacrificed thus far to the scheming of the Acceleration Research Society.

“Ah, crap...I’m gettin’ all dizzy. Yeah, this is not so...funny, y’know? At least change where you’re biting me...Askin’s not gonna do anything, though, huh?” Argon’s tone was as insolent as ever, but her voice faded in and out.

Unable to talk, Mihaya growled quietly in response. Her health gauge was already nearly 70 percent full again; Argon would be dead soon enough.

“Aah. No savin’. Me, huh? An’ kitty cat. You showed me. A seriously spectacular. Secret technique. ’S’not the time...for me to be pullin’ faces, yeah?”

“.....!”

Mihaya tensed. She was out of reach of Argon’s lasers; there should have been no way for her to turn the tables. Was it simple bravado? Or was there still something else?

A sharp shiver ran up her spine. Instinctively, she decided she should just

go ahead and strike the final blow now rather than completely recover her health gauge with Vital Bite. She raised her right hand to rip her claws through Argon's defenseless back—

But a vividly sinister violet light jetted out of the avatar pinned to the ground.

It wasn't a special attack. This was an overlay, proof of the activation of the Incarnate System.

“Infinite Array.”

By the time the whispered name reached Mihaya's ears, the materialization of her imagination was complete. The time required for activation: a mere half second. Without a moment to so much as consider a counterstrategy, Mihaya instinctively released her fangs from Argon's neck and tried to leap backward.

But she was too late. Tiny lenses popped up on the surface of the armor encasing the Analyst's body. Beams of haloed light rose up from the neat rows of infinite eyes.



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Pwaah. The air shuddered, and the miniature lasers fired in all directions. Sixty percent dug out black holes in the rubble blanketing the earth and the buildings that had so far escaped destruction, while 35 percent radiated outward up into the sky—and the remaining 5 percent shot through Mihaya.

“Nngh!!” First, she was hit with a mild shock, which was followed by a powerful sensation of heat, and finally, a pain so fierce it was dizzying.

Mihaya somersaulted backward and hit the ground. The health gauge she’d so recently recovered plunged back into the red zone, but she didn’t have time to check exactly how much was left. She scrabbled earnestly at the ground with her leopard paws to regain her footing. If she was hit with the same attack again, she would definitely die.

But perhaps this Incarnate attack couldn’t be used in quick succession or maybe she was showing off her advantage. Whichever it was, Argon Array took her time getting to her feet.

“Aah, that hurt, yeah? I been a BB player fer a long time, but that’s the first time I ever almost been bit to death by anyone—Enemy or avatar.”

She turned to stare at Mihaya, the millions of “eyes” still covering her armor. Nor had the hazy overlay enveloping her entire body disappeared. The activation speed, the power, the range, the elapsed time: The ability was superbly refined in every way. It even surpassed Rust Jigsaw’s Rust Overlay, a technique that belonged to the same fourth quadrant—destructive will with range as its target—that had once thrown the Hermes’ Cord race into total chaos.

It wasn’t as though Mihaya herself was completely ignorant of Incarnate techniques. But since she had learned hers to at most protect her from an enemy’s Incarnate attack, hers honestly didn’t even begin to compare with Argon’s in terms of pure power. In fact, Argon’s Infinite Array was so excessively powerful that she didn’t even need to check to know that this ability of Argon’s was abnormal.

All Incarnate techniques took the user’s “mental scars” as their energy source. The scars were absence, hunger, despair. Thus, even if you were to produce hope from those scars and sublimate them as first- or second-quadrant powers—positive will—a bias appeared in the technique itself. If you desired power, you lost speed; if you desired range, accuracy; breadth, endurance. The general principle was that a perfect Incarnate technique was not possible.

And yet, there was no flaw in Argon Array's. Had she spent vast amounts of time refining the technique to make it this way? Or...?

Her thoughts racing, Mihaya tried somehow to pull her injured body off the ground.

“Say, kitty cat?” Argon turned toward her and asked an unexpected question. “You ever think about it? Why most creatures only got the two eyes?”

* * *

When Silver Crow had used his flight ability to carry Kuroyukihime, Akira, Chiyuri, and Takumu to the top of the old Tokyo Tower approximately ten hours earlier, he had ascended at a modest speed to conserve his special-attack gauge.

But Fuko, now similarly given the task of carrying Kuroyukihime, Akira, and Utai to the top of Midtown Tower, turned Gale Thruster up to full power right from the start, prioritizing their fight against time over a desire to conserve fuel. Kuroyukihime thought her decision was the right one, but when they shot upward at the wall of the building at missile speeds, she couldn't help but cry out.

“H-hey, Raker! Can you—”

“—really—” came Akira.

“—stop?!” from Utai.

“Well, I'm sure it'll work out,” Fuko replied casually, the pale wall closing in before their eyes.

Kuroyukihime's whole body stiffened—Fuko couldn't actually be planning to plunge into the exterior wall headfirst—and in that instant, the booster jets sputtered out. They continued to ascend through sheer inertia, but they were quickly losing force. Now they started to worry about the opposite problem—the fall—but Fuko's eyeballed measurements were true. At the moment when they reached the pinnacle of the parabola, they were absorbed into the two-meter gap in the exterior wall of Midtown Tower.

“Ha!” The instant they entered the building, Kuroyukihime's right hand shot out and the sharp tip of her sword pierced the wall's cross section. Their fall was stopped for the time being, but now, the mass of all four duel avatars rested on her arm.

“Lotus, hang on three seconds!” Fuko shouted, pushing Akira up high.

Aqua Current was still missing a large part of her flowing-water armor, but she was apparently that much lighter for it. She grabbed onto the edge of the floor the laser had burned through and easily jumped on top of it. She immediately reached down to take Utai from Fuko and pull her up. Then Fuko climbed onto the floor assisted by Akira, and released from the weight of her three comrades, Kuroyukihime used the tip of the sword stuck in the wall as a fulcrum to swing her own body up. She spun once in midair and then came down to land next to her companions.

“That took five seconds, you know.” She tried pointing out the time overage, but Fuko quickly offered some understandable—or maybe not—logic.

“Five seconds here is a mere five thousandths of a second in the real world. It’s fine; don’t worry.”

Quelled, the Black King quickly changed the subject. “So then, what floor is this, I wonder?”

Posed with this question, Akira and the others looked around. The gloomy space was fairly large, with long marble tables set out at regular intervals.

“A restaurant—no, an office,” Kuroyukihime said. “I feel like we came in about two-thirds of the way up, so I think this is an office floor somewhere around the thirty-fifth floor.”

Akira and Utai nodded to indicate their agreement, while Fuko glanced up at the ceiling and narrowed her eye lenses.

“Which means ten more floors to forty-five, hmm? Then it seems like it would be faster to jump up through the gash created by Metatron’s laser than look around for the stairs up.”

“That might be, but if someone is lying in wait above, we’ll be fair game appearing from such an obvious opening...”

“So then, we make a hole in the ceiling a little ways off and attack the area before going in. Fortunately, it’s impossible to destroy the portal. We can attack all we want.”

“R-right. But...Raker, were you always so ready to charge in like this?”

Fuko had been the Submaster of the old Nega Nebulus, but Kuroyukihime didn’t actually have that much experience fighting alongside her in the Territories. Given that they had to simultaneously defend multiple areas nearly every week, they had frequently led different teams.

Fuko merely smiled gracefully at this question, but Utai, her longtime partner in the Territories, shuddered. “I think you only get a nickname like ICBM if you’re the type to charge right in.”

“I see. That makes sense. Well then, shall we charge into our target here?” Kuroyukihime said, looking up at the ceiling. “Maiden, help me.”

The shrine maiden avatar did an about-face and nodded forcefully. “Understood!”

Of the four, Ardor Maiden naturally had the greatest long-distance attack power, but the flame attacks that were her specialty didn’t have as much piercing power as a physical attack. Each time her flames plunged through a ceiling, the force would diffuse horizontally, making it unlikely that her attack would reach all the way to their destination. Of course, she would eventually get through at some point if she simply kept firing, but that would have been a waste of her special-attack gauge.

Thus, Kuroyukihime readied the sword of her right arm to tear open a vertical breach. Utai nocked a flame arrow in her longbow and similarly aimed at the ceiling. After checking that Fuko and Akira had taken a few steps back, she focused her imagination.

“Here we go! Overdrive! Mode Red!” Black Lotus shouted, and the narrow molding lines running across her body shivered a vivid scarlet, proof that her avatar’s ability balance had shifted to long-distance. The red light was in the sword of her right hand as well, and this concentrated around the tip, squealing with the vibration.

“Vorpal Strike!!” She thrust her hand upward.

This Incarnate technique, taught to her in the distant past by her master, dug through one thick marble ceiling after another, the sounds of each hard impact echoing back down. Since a floor at Midtown Tower was about four and a half meters high, ten floors up was forty-five meters. Range-wise, this was right at the edge of hers, but she had to make it. Mustering up every bit of her image power, she pushed the red lance forward. She counted the feedback from crashing through each ceiling—eight, nine, ten—and immediately stepped back, almost falling.

Fuko grabbed the staggering Kuroyukihime by her shoulders, while Utai turned her longbow toward the hole gouged out of the ceiling and pulled the bowstring back as far as she could.

“Flame Vortex!!”

Her voice was crisp as she called the name of not an Incarnate technique but a special attack. But the force of it was greater than the Vorpall Strike. The flaming arrow set in the bow grew to an enormous size in an instant, and the arrowhead started to spin fiercely. Transformed into a crimson tornado, the arrow shot forward, radiating heat and light.

The flaming spiral flew upward, doubling the size of the hole of half a meter or so cut out of the ceiling by Kuroyukihime's sword. If Flame Torrent, the special attack Maiden had used in the fight with Seiryu, was an attack across a broad range, then Flame Vortex was a technique that sought the straight and narrow. Its force was such that it would plunge forward dozens of meters even in the water of an Ocean stage, evaporating the liquid around it. These disembodied flames had trouble against only rock and metal walls, but if there was even the smallest hole, the flames would pass through and charge ever deeper.

Krrraarn! They heard the roar from far overhead. The flame spiral, tracing the trajectory of the Vorpall Strike, had reached the forty-fifth floor and exploded. If someone had been lying in wait around the gash, they would have been instantly killed or seriously injured in the ranged attack from behind.

"Maiden, did you get any points?!" Kuroyukihime asked immediately.

"No." Utai shook her head, longbow still in position above her head. "But there was feedback!"

"All right, we charge all at once! Everyone, go!" Kuroyukihime moved directly beneath the large hole and jumped with all her might. Even without any special jumping ability, a lightweight high ranker could jump the height of one floor of a building with just the avatar's basic abilities.

When she slipped through the hole, the edges still melted red-hot, and landed on the floor above, Fuko, Akira, and Utai also took turns jumping up. Without stopping, all four continued their leapfrog ascent through the improvised pit gouged out of Midtown Tower.

As they approached the forty-fifth floor, Kuroyukihime felt a sensation on the surface of her avatar's armor, like the prickling of an electric charge. It was a shiver of fear not unlike when they had charged into the territory of the God Seiryu—or when they had faced the main body of the Archangel. A certain instinct that someone was hiding up ahead—someone dripping with the dark, condensed malice separate from the battle power in the system.

However, regardless of whether some great threat awaited them, retreat was not an option. Out of a sense of chivalry, Niko, the Red King, had helped the Black Legion in their efforts to save Sky Raker's child and Silver Crow's rival Ash Roller, and now she'd been abducted by Black Vise. But more than anything else, Niko was a deeply valued friend to Kuroyukihime.

Two years and ten months earlier, Kuroyukihime had turned her back on all bonds and left Nega Nebulus to its destruction. Three of the Four Elements had returned to the Legion, but the majority of the members from that time did not show themselves in the Suginami area even now. That was only natural. Kuroyukihime had betrayed them twice, after all.

The first time was when, carried away by violence, she had taken the head of the first Red King, Red Rider, and made bitter enemies of the other six major Legions. And the second time was when she had fled the Accelerated World without even trying to rebuild the Legion after the Castle mission ended in tragedy and failure.

If she had simply had a will strong enough, Kuroyukihime could have rallied Nega Nebulus from that situation as well and somehow managed to at least hold on to their base of operations in Shibuya Area No. 1 while they attempted to rescue Ardor Maiden, Aqua Current, and Graphite Edge. But Kuroyukihime did not do that. She abandoned her members, who had lost massive numbers of points in the process of escaping the territory of the Gods, and locked herself away from the global net for over two years.

What had pulled Kuroyukihime out of this time of stagnation, of simply licking her wounds, was a small crow with silver wings on his back. He was supposed to be her scion, yet Kuroyukihime had been spurred on, led, and taught by him any number of times. She would never make the same mistakes again. She would never abandon a comrade—a friend. She would get Niko back. Without fail.

“Lotus, the forty-fifth floor's next!” Fuko murmured sharply after the ninth jump.

“Got it,” Kuroyukihime replied. She stopped for a moment, waited until Utai in the rear caught up, and then instructed rapid-fire. “Raker, Curren, Maiden, our top priority is to return to reality through the portal and pull out Rain's cable. Whoever contacts the portal first leaves. The other three will continue to investigate toward our secondary objective—the destruction of the ISS kit main body. Cut down anyone who gets in our way. No mercy.

Don't hesitate to use Incarnate techniques.”

The other three nodded firmly. Kuroyukihime looked up at the large hole in the ceiling—the cross section of which had finally cooled off—and quietly cried out, “Here we go!”

She sank her stance down and, sending dazzling sparks flying across the marble floor with the tip of her right foot, Kuroyukihime jumped for the tenth time.

“Why...creatures only have...two eyes?” Mihaya repeated in a low voice.

This was not the time for a biology lesson. But intense pain still tortured her virtual nerves after Argon's terrifying omnidirectional Incarnate technique Infinite Array ripped through her body, and she probably wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. And if Argon hit her with the same technique again, what was left of her health gauge would be obliterated. Mihaya couldn't figure out why Argon had decided to strike up idle conversation rather than finishing her off. But for the time being—at least until the pain receded—she had no choice but to go along with her enemy's whim.

“Optimization through the process of evolution.” She offered up what seemed like the most commonsense answer.

“Well, I s'pose that's one thing, sure.” Argon grinned beneath her large goggles, as though she had been anticipating this response. “Didja know? The ancestor of us vertebrates, like, back when it was livin' in the water, it had a third eye on top of its head. They call it a parietal eye, you know?”

“.....”

Mihaya held her tongue, but the Analyst continued to chirp away, not seeming to mind her enemy's silence.

“An' traces o' that are still in our heads. Right in there. The pineal gland. You heard of it, right? That thing used to be a third eye, yeah? Guess it evolved back when our ancestor came up from the water onto land. Bunch a theories 'bout why. But here's what *I* think. The reason three eyes're too many for vertebrates...is 'cos the position of our eyeballs is just too high spec. Y'know?”

“Too high spec?”

“Yep. The light our retinas catch gets reprocessed as a movie we can

understand. That's some seriously heavy work for our brains. So much that just two eyes is plenty—it's loads. And t'be honest, the only time we can see all perfect-like is when we focus our gaze in the middle of our field of view, yeah?"

Mihaya never dreamed she'd have a conversation like this in the Unlimited Neutral Field—and in the middle of a fight to boot—but she was slowly sucked in. "That's not just our eyes. I mean, we only hear the sounds we listen for with our ears. And it's the same with taste and smell."

"Yer right there. But, like, our ears feel the vibration of molecules of air, and our tongue, our nose, they catch the taste and smell of all kinds of molecules, too. But it's just our eyes what can sense these particles called light, yeah? Particles, waves—I dunno, light's a weird one. Y'know what, kitty cat? They can't measure the size of a photon. Our eyes can't see a thing like that."

"Even if they don't have size, they have energy."

"That's a bingo right there." Argon grinned once again at Mihaya's rebuttal and snapped the fingers of her right hand. "The energy of the light flying into our eyes is sucked up by photoreceptor cells in our retinas. Gets turned into 'lectrical energy in the cell to travel 'long the optic nerve. So then *that* gets to the cerebrum, and it's processed as a movie that makes sense to us...An' then it just disappears, y'know? That's the bit that's different from hearing an' taste or whatever. The air molecules don't up and vanish from yer eardrums, and taste and smell molecules don't go anywhere after you analyze 'em, right?"

The Analyst's voice hadn't lost the hint of sunniness it always held, but Mihaya noticed it had grown quieter at some point and was tinged with a new coldness. Argon glanced down with the lenses—"eyes" neatly arranged on the armor of her body as though viewing something repulsive.

"But, like, the photons that go into yer eyes disappear. Our eyes...*eat* light. Somethin' that scary, even two're too many, prob'ly."

"What exactly are you trying to say?" Mihaya asked, the pain finally beginning to fade as she sank her animal body down gradually, preparing to jump.

"Yah, why *did* I start ramblin' away like this?" Argon spread her slender arms and shrugged lightly. "Just buyin' time...Razzle Dazzle."

By the time she'd gotten the first half of the technique name out, Mihaya

had closed her eyes tightly and was pushing fiercely off the ground. The Black Legion had told her about this particular special attack: The four lenses on Argon's head emitted a powerful light to blind her enemies. A glamour technique; the light itself had no attack power. As long as you knew that, it was a good opportunity to attack.

Aiming for where Argon had stood a half second earlier, Mihaya brought down her right hand. Her claws, sharp as knives, scratched the hard armor.

Too shallow!

Eyes still closed, she threw her left hand forward. That Argon had gone to the trouble of buying time to use a glamour-type attack no doubt meant she couldn't immediately fire off her Incarnate technique Infinite Array again. Mihaya wasn't clear on what kept Argon from using her Incarnate attack repeatedly since those didn't use up the special-attack gauge, but for now, the fact of it was enough. Like Mihaya, Argon had only a sliver of health left in her gauge. If Leopard bit her again, she could bring her down.

Yet her left hand, too, only gouged shallow grooves in her enemy's armor. The sense of Argon's presence receded.

But Mihaya couldn't let her get away now. With no other choice, she lifted her eyelids, and although it was starting to fade, a flash bomb of white light stabbed into her eyes. A thin gray shadow fluttered beyond the light.

"Graar!!" With a battle cry, Mihaya leapt with everything she had.

But the claws of her hands caught nothing but flat marble. Mihaya had apparently seen Argon's shadow projected onto the wall of the building. The brittle wall collapsed, unable to withstand Blood Leopard's assault, and Mihaya plunged inside.

"We'll finish this conversation next time, kitty cat." Her laughing voice suddenly grew distant.

Mihaya couldn't let her get away. Securing Argon was Mihaya's job. Silver Crow had believed that Blood Leopard, of all of them, could do this, which was exactly why he left the rest to her and went after Black Vise on his own.

Even though she had seen the flash of Razzle Dazzle for only a second, her eyes still hadn't completely recovered. But as Argon herself had noted in their earlier conversation, sight wasn't the only sense.

Mihaya's sharp leopard ears picked up the faint sound of footsteps; the pads on her four paws caught the vibrations in the earth. Argon appeared to

be running north—a different direction from Crow’s pursuit of Vise. Mihaya didn’t know their destination, but all she had to do was chase; directions didn’t matter to her now.

Smashing through another wall to come out onto the street, Mihaya ran low to the ground. Her whiteout vision couldn’t pick out small obstacles like a railing on the side of the road or crumbling pillars, but she pulverized these with her head as she charged forward. Although her armor wasn’t that thick since she was a red type, her basic defense and physical strength had gone up a fair bit in her leap to level eight. If she’d still been level six, Argon’s omnidirectional lasers would have no doubt killed her instantly.

Mihaya had gone so long without leveling up in order to rescue Akira Himi/Aqua Current from the nest of Seiryu. Current was Mihaya’s parent and also one of the Four Elements that formed the executive branch of Nega Nebulus. There weren’t many in the current Prominence who held a grudge against the Black King for pushing the previous Red King, Red Rider, to total point loss, but there were some—Blaze Heart and the others who attacked Suginami in the Territories the day before were representative of them. But given that Mihaya belonged to the Triplex, the executive group for the Red Legion, the fact that she had stayed at level six for Current’s sake was essentially a betrayal of her Legion.

But the Red King and the other two members of the Triplex had allowed Mihaya this selfishness. And it was the Black Legion’s Watch Witch, Lime Bell, who got Mihaya’s burst points back, when they should have been gone forever after she was hit with Seiryu’s Level Drain. After so many people had supported and aided her to allow her to finally reach level eight, she basically had an obligation now to muster up every little bit of power that level entailed and push it to the very limits.

“Graaaaaar!” Racing forward, Mihaya unleashed a wild roar, another of the special privileges of a half-beast avatar. A purple silhouette popped up in the center of her blurred-white field of view. There’d be no more chitchat when she overtook Argon. Only instant slaughter and transformation into a death marker.

As she concentrated her strength in her back legs and sprang forward, the glamour effect finally ended. Sight back to normal, she spotted Argon stopped in place and looking over her shoulder. The myriad lenses on her body had disappeared at some point. Was she giving up on her flight? ...No,

that wasn't it.

The slender avatar was sinking into the ground before her eyes. The shadow of a large building stretched out at Argon's feet. Mihaya strained her eyes and saw that the shadow had liquefied into a pool of ink about two meters wide, centered on Argon. The dark bog quickly swallowed up over half of Argon's body.

Black Vise was supposed to be the one with the ability to dive into the shadows, not Argon Array. She couldn't believe Vise was anywhere near them given that he had fled in an entirely different direction. So then had Vise lent his own ability to Argon through some means? ...Or...

Part of her head whirring with these thoughts, Mihaya stretched out her hands as far as she could to prevent Argon's flight. But once again, her claws did nothing more than scratch lightly at the large hat.

A faint smile rising up on her face, the Analyst sank into the shadow.

I'm not letting you get away! Mihaya did a somersault at the same time as she landed to dive into the shadow herself. She plunged both hands into the ebony bog without the least hesitation, and they were sucked in up to her elbows together with an unpleasant sensation. *Plrmp.*

But that was it. At some point, the shadow bog had shrunk so that it was smaller than Mihaya's shoulders. Not only were her avatar's elbows caught, unable to dive, the contracting hole was making her arms creak with an inescapable pressure.

"Shape Change!" Mihaya shouted, returning to human form. The now-slender avatar tried to dive in headfirst, but the speed of the hole's contraction was faster. Now both shoulders were caught, preventing her entry.

Most likely, this was a time-limited movement gate generated at these coordinates in advance by Black Vise. Argon's time-buying chatter was to ensure she arrived just before the gate disappeared. If it closed up, Mihaya's chance to follow her would vanish with it.

"Ngh...ah!" She marshaled all her remaining strength and tried to force the hole open. But the power of the hole's inward march was relentless. The armor of her arms cracked, and her health gauge was further cut away.

There was one thing left she could try: transform back into a leopard and attack the gate with her special attack that turned her into a bullet, Bloodshed Cannon. The technique caused enormous backlash damage, which meant she very likely would not be able to live through it with the current state of her

health gauge. But she had no other options. If she stayed the way she was, the contracting hole would rip her arms off and kill her.

“Shape...” She started to give the transformation command in a hoarse voice.

“Paaaard!”

“Leopard!!”

From behind her, she heard voices and footfalls. Even without looking, she knew it was Nega Nebulus’s Lime Bell and Cyan Pile.

“Help me”—she halted her transformation and called over her shoulder —“with this gate!”

Stopping at her sides, they seemed to instantly understand the situation. Lime Bell crouched down and was about to thrust both hands into the hole, but Cyan Pile stopped her.

“Wait, Bell! Please leave this to me, Leopard!” The large blue avatar readied the pile-shooting Enhanced Armament of his right arm, aimed at the gate, and shouted, “When I count down to zero, please get back from the hole! Three, two, one...”

If she pulled her arms out, the gate would close in a matter of seconds and disappear. But Mihaya shook off her momentary hesitation and leapt backward as she heard his voice call “Zero!”

Stepping forward as if to take her place, Cyan Pile called out a technique name she’d never heard before. “Spiral Gravity Driver!!”

As the spike in the Enhanced Armament was pulled in and tucked away, the barrel expanded. A flash of blue—a thick hammer drill—shot forth, more than double the size of the spike. The savagely spinning iron pillar wedged into the gate as it was on the verge of closing and stopped it with a strange *crack*.

But the silence was soon broken. The force of the hammer drill was greater than the pressure of the gate, and it began to rotate once more, sparks jetting up and tumbling down like waterfalls. As the drill dug deeper and deeper, cracks radiated outward in the ground around the hole.

“Ah...Aaaaaah!” Roaring, Cyan Pile thrust his right fist downward, as if to make doubly sure. There was an otherworldly sound like space itself was being destroyed, and the edges of the gate broke into pieces and fell away.

Now cracked open to a diameter of about two meters, the hole was filled with a viscous darkness. Cyan Pile pitched forward on the follow-through,

and Mihaya grabbed his shoulders to pull him back.

“GJ! Leave the rest to me!” She tossed herself into the hole. She was up to her chest in the liquefied darkness when Pile and Bell nodded at each other and jumped in after her.

She had absolutely no idea where the gate led, but because Argon had tried to block her pursuit, there was a strong possibility that it was to the Accelerated Research Society base. The danger level was on par with Midtown Tower or even greater.

But before Mihaya could say anything, Lime Bell shouted resolutely: “We’re coming, too! After all...”

Here, Mihaya’s head was swallowed by the darkness, and Lime Bell’s voice along with it. But she heard the words “...we’re friends” with the ears of her heart.

The shadow tunnel pushed the three intruders along for a moment or an eternity. Her field of view was painted a uniform black, and her hearing was completely blocked. She stretched out a hand, but her fingers touched nothing. All she could do was leave herself to the current and pray that she didn’t get separated from Pile and Bell and that they could catch up with Argon. And of course, that they could rescue the Red King—Niko.

Though praying alone would not be enough. She had to squeeze out every bit of knowledge and power she had and make it a reality, Mihaya vowed firmly. With that, she curled up and allowed herself to be carried away in the lightless channel.

* * *

Tokyo Midtown Tower, forty-fifth floor. In the real world, it was the lobby of a super-luxury hotel. In the Accelerated World, this was reflected in the building’s construction: A large space with orderly rows of square pillars spread out before Kuroyukihime’s eyes as she charged in through the hole in the floor.

As she did a rough survey of the terrain, her mind switched to enemy-detection mode. The floor was dimly lit, the four walls deep in the shadows, but she couldn’t see anything moving in the area. But Utai had said she’d gotten some feedback after shooting Flame Vortex up into this floor, so there was definitely something lurking there.

In the real world, the sensation of feedback felt by the user when a flying instrument made an accurate hit would probably be classified as some kind of occult sixth sense, but on this side, it was firmly based in reality. If your long-distance attack connected with an Enemy or a duel avatar, even beyond your own field of view, your special-attack gauge would increase. The amount it was charged was clearly different from the destruction of terrain objects. There was no way a veteran like Utai would mistake one for the other.

When Utai herself appeared from the hole in the floor, followed by Fuko and Akira, she quickly set a flame arrow against her longbow. She had anticipated immediate battle, but realizing that there was no enemy in sight, she murmured as though confused, “When I shot from below, I definitely hit something dead-on...”

“And you didn’t get any points, right?” Fuko asked quietly.

“I did not.” The shrine maiden avatar nodded sharply. “Maybe it retreated after taking damage. Or...?”

“Or it’s hiding in the shadows,” Akira concluded, flicking her light blue eye lenses around the room. But even someone as sensitive as she was couldn’t find any trace of their enemy.

After a moment’s thought, Kuroyukihime turned to the others. “No matter. Our priority is a quick departure. We ignore the possibility of an ambush and dive into the portal.”

“Agreed. But one question.”

“What is it, Curren?”

“The portal’s not where it should be.”

Caught off guard, Kuroyukihime stared intently at Aqua Current. The transparent crystal of her face mask turned toward the south side of the floor. “I’ve left from here any number of times. There’s no mistake. The Midtown Tower portal should be on the south wall of the forty-fifth floor.”

Following Akira’s gaze along with Utai and Fuko, Kuroyukihime peered into the gloom fifty meters ahead of them. But she couldn’t find even a reflection of the characteristic pulsing blue light of the portal. Instead, her eyes landed on a burnt fissure that cut a straight line across the center of the floor.

“It can’t be,” Fuko murmured. “Metatron’s reflected laser destroyed the portal?”

“Impossible!” Kuroyukihime refuted, voice emphatic. “The portals of the Unlimited Neutral Field can’t be destroyed or moved. This entire building could be destroyed, and the portal would stay in its fixed coordinates!”

“I thought so, too, but...”

“Wait,” Akira said sharply, staring hard at the place where the portal had once sat. “Something...There’s something there.”

“What?” Kuroyuki turned together with Fuko toward the south side of the floor and focused her entire being on seeing. The contrast in her visual field improved, and something that had melted into the thick darkness up to that point popped up hazily. It was big. Nearly three meters across. It appeared to be a sphere, but from this distance, that was all she could tell. “Maiden, shoot a flame arrow into the wall over there.”

Utai nodded and readied her long bow. The flame arrow, launched diagonally upward, carved an arc out of the air and plunged high into the wall on the south side, pushing back the darkness with orange light.

“Wh-what *is* that?” Fuko whispered hoarsely.

The other three simply opened their eyes wide without a word.

Some *thing* was occupying an area just under ten meters to the right of the fissure splitting the floor. “Brain” was the first thing that popped into Kuroyukihime’s head. There was a ruggedness—mazelike indentations—rising up on the surface of a massive spherical object. A pattern of fine stitches crawled all over it, pulsed, and throbbed, forcing to mind the image of a living creature’s brain—more specifically, a human being’s.

But the sphere was a matte black that sucked in all light, and a deep fissure cut horizontally across the front. If it had been modeled after a human brain, it should have been split not top and bottom, but right brain, left brain. This difference, however, only served to make the object even more unsettling. As though, despite the powerful resemblance to a human brain, it was actually the brain of a decisively different creature...

And now, Kuroyukihime finally noticed that the enormous organ was pulsing softly in the darkness.

She knew this sight. She hadn’t witnessed it herself, but she had received a detailed report from Silver Crow and Lime Bell. About their encounter inside the Brain Burst central server with the root of the dark force running rampant in the Accelerated World.

“...This can’t be...” Kuroyukihime’s voice was almost inaudible.

“...the ISS kit main body?” Fuko finished for her.

At first, Kuroyukihime couldn't believe that their final objective, the thing they had been convinced was hidden somewhere deep within the massive Midtown Tower—although at present, this objective had dropped to number two on the list of priorities—was placed—no, *left* here defenseless like this. It would have been logical to think it was a fake meant as a trap for intruders, but her eyes and instincts were insisting that this really was the kit main body. A mere shell of an object could never produce the weighty pressure she felt oozing from the massive brain, this unearthly force.

“...I think it's real.”

“I concur...”

Akira and Utai confirmed Kuroyukihime's instincts in hoarse voices.

“Mmm.” Nodding, Kuroyukihime put aside her shock for the moment and set the gears of her mind racing furiously. If this massive brain was the ISS kit main body, then they had to destroy it right away. Then the kit terminals parasitizing Ash Roller and so many other Burst Linkers would disappear, and the danger they presented would be gone from the Accelerated World. That was indeed the final objective of the series of missions the combined team of Nega Nebulus and Prominence had set out on.

On the other hand, Kuroyukihime and her comrades needed to reach the portal as soon as humanly possible and pull out the cable that connected with Niko's Neurolinker in the real world. Assuming they succeeded in destroying the ISS kit main body, if the price for that success was total point loss for the Red King, then the damage to both the Red and Black Legions would be more devastating than that caused by the ISS kits plaguing the Accelerated World. Both inside and outside this world.

If the Midtown Tower portal was gone, as Akira said it was, then should they leave the building right away and head for the next-closest leave point in Roppongi Hills Tower? But if they did that, would the ISS kit main body still be unguarded when they returned to this place?

There was also the option of striking it as a test to see whether or not they could destroy it, but she didn't expect they'd be able to see its health gauge, and it was quite possible that that one blow might bring about an unexpected situation.

The other three must have felt the same anguish as Kuroyukihime faced with the choice between two alternatives and no room for error.

“Your choice is our choice, Sacchi,” Fuko said in a clipped but gentle tone as she drew near. “No matter what the result is, we will share responsibility for it together, all of it.”

Akira and Utai also nodded deeply, their eyes shining with unwavering light.

Nodding briefly in return, Kuroyukihime announced her choice to her trusted comrades. “We head for Roppongi Hills. Seven hundred meters in a straight line to the building, forty-fifth floor for the portal. We’ll be there in less than five minutes.”

“Understood!” they shouted in unison.

With this reassuring push, Kuroyukihime stepped to the south. Roppongi Hills was southwest of Tokyo Midtown. Rather than drop down to the ground, it would be faster to have Fuko use Gale Thruster, likely charged up to some degree by now, to fly them as far as she could on that charge from the fissure cut out of the southern wall.

They began to run alongside the gash Metatron’s laser ripped north-south through the marble floor and were about halfway across the fifty-meter-wide floor, when the massive brain enshrined ahead of them moved.

“Look!” Utai called out, running at the tail end of the group.

Reflexively, Kuroyukihime turned her head and saw the crack running horizontally across the front of the ebony brain slowly opening. At first, she thought it was separated into upper brain and lower brain, rather than left-right. But it seemed that it wasn’t just the surface of the brain that was moving. The complicated indentations became wrinkles and folded back, gradually revealing something hidden inside.

“Don’t stop. Keep running!” Even as she gave the command, Kuroyukihime couldn’t take her eyes off the monstrosity.

Inside the membrane peeling back was a curved surface with an unexpectedly smooth luster. A sphere made of what looked like wet glass was enclosed inside the brain. The center of the exposed part rose up in the shape of a lens and emitted a hazy light. This lens part—perhaps a meter and a half around—abruptly moved. Then the entire glass sphere began to spin in all directions.

Whrr, whrr. The movement was so biological it called up an indescribable loathing.

Finally, the lens moved to the right and focused on the four runners.

Instantly, Kuroyukihime understood that the large object was not a brain, but an eye. The crack running from left to right wasn't the longitudinal fissure of the cerebrum, but the slit between upper and lower eyelids. The exposed glassy sphere was the white of the eye, while the perfect circle of the lens was the pupil and the iris. The massive eyeball was watching Kuroyukihime and the others with some sort of hidden purpose.

A reptilian vertical pupil sat in the center of the black lens, a blue light shimmering like the surface of water beyond it. The light was ridiculously pure in contrast with the extremely repulsive design of the eyeball. A clear blue she'd seen before, a color that evoked a feeling like homesickness.

"Wait," Aqua Current murmured sharply, her voice colored with an unusual tension that stopped the others in their tracks.

"What's wrong, Curren?" Fuko asked.

Akira didn't reply right away, keeping her focus instead on the gaze of the massive eyeball. "The portal," she said finally, sounding even more tense. "It's inside that eyeball."

"What?!"

"How is that—?!"

Fuko and Utai cried out in surprise simultaneously.

Holding her breath, Kuroyukihime peered into the black lens one more time. She compared the regular pulsation of the blue light with her memory of the portal she'd passed through too many times to even count. The color. The shimmering. The size. All of it matched perfectly.

"You're right!" Utai cried in a thin voice. "That's the light of the portal!"

"B-but..." Kuroyukihime—and likely Fuko as well—could find no basis on which to refute her. "Is it even possible for an object to fully incorporate something indestructible, like a portal?" she asked, baffled.

"To begin with, what would the ISS kit main body be in the system classification?" Fuko voiced her own doubts. "From its form, it's probably not duel avatar or Enemy. And if it were an item, which includes Enhanced Armament, it would be wiped out with the Change, right?"

Now that she mentioned it, that was actually true. Assuming it was the Acceleration Research Society that had made this enormous, jet-black, brain/eyeball object and that they had left it like this in the Unlimited Neutral Field, it would have been forcibly erased during the Change when the stage attributes switched. If the Society wanted to prevent that from happening,

they would need a semipermanent guard for it: The instant they sensed the Change, they would have to return it to storage and then rematerialize it after the attribute change. Considering the Change occurred at minimum once every seven days—once every ten minutes in real-world time—this was for all intents and purposes impossible.

Faced with nothing but questions, there was at least one thing that could be settled in that moment.

“Whatever class of item it is, if the portal’s inside it, our plan’s changed.” She pushed her surprise and confusion aside and continued firmly, “We are going to smash that creepy eyeball—the ISS kit main body—right now. And then we’ll leave the Unlimited Neutral Field through the exposed portal. Raker, Curren, Maiden...” She threw her sword-arms out with a clang. “This is our do-or-die moment! Get ready to attack!!”

“Understood!” The voices of her three comrades echoed with double the resolve from before and cut through the darkness of the floor.

They pulled together in a diamond formation with Kuroyukihime in the lead, Fuko to her right, Akira to her left, and Utai at the rear to face the massive eyeball enshrined twenty meters ahead. Blue light flickering inside the long pupil, the glassy eye looked back at them with an inorganic gaze utterly devoid of feeling.

No. It wasn’t that.

The eyeball brought its eyelids down slightly...and laughed. That’s what it looked like to her.

A shadowy pulsation poured from the massive body. The instant she touched it, Kuroyukihime knew that the inside of the eyeball was filled with a vast malice. Its lust for destruction, tragedy, and slaughter had become a dull black fluid, a flood inside the organ that threatened to burst forth at any moment.

The blue light of the portal leaking out of the pupil suddenly changed to a dark bloodred. Several lumps noisily popped up on the surface of the brain-like structure enclosing the eyeball. Tumorlike, they swelled up like balloons before bursting, releasing a viscous fluid and...something else.

Smaller eyeballs.

About twenty centimeters large, more than ten of them. The pupils shone the same muddied red as the main body, and long, skinny legs stretched out from the bottoms. No sooner had they fallen to the floor than they were

quickly crawling around, the legs making a dry rustling sound like some kind of monster bugs.

“M-most likely, that’s what my Vortex hit before!” Utai said in a shrill voice, readying her longbow. Even she, with her conviction to respect all life, couldn’t hide her revulsion at the leggy eyeballs. And to be fair, the small eyeballs were not critters that belonged to the Accelerated World.

“Careful! They’re probably ISS kit terminals! They might be able to parasitize us if they touch us. Destroy them before they can get close!”

Up to that point, the little eyeballs had been racing around the main body of the kit randomly, but as if Kuroyukihime’s order was the trigger, they began to run as one toward the girls.

Utai made her bowstring sing over and over. Her flame arrows found their marks on the kit terminals and sent them up in flames, but unfortunately, there was a limit to how rapidly she could get arrows in the air. Four of the eyeballs leapt over the blazing flames and spread double that number of needlelike legs to charge them.

Kuroyukihime raised the sword of her right leg and set her sights on the eyeball closest to her left. “Death By Bashing!”

So fast it was undetectable to even herself, her right leg shot out a flurry of kicks. The instant the eyeball came into contact with the effect range for the series of blows—a hundred per second—it exploded in a burst of red light.

The tip of her left leg jammed into the floor as a fulcrum, Kuroyukihime spun around to the right. The storm of kicks flowed with her, leaving a gray afterimage, and knocked one attacking eyeball after another flying. The ISS kits had thrown the Accelerated World into chaos with their overwhelming power, but the individual terminals were unable to use the two Incarnate attacks, leaving them with no method of fighting other than trying to touch an avatar to parasitize them.

Kuroyukihime’s special attack destroyed seven of the eyeballs, and the last one was finished off by Fuko skewering it with a sharp heel. Sky Raker’s specialty was flowing palm strikes, but even Strong Arm was apparently reluctant to crush them with her bare hands.

The dozen terminals the main body had produced were all destroyed in less than ten seconds, but given that the ISS kits should have been simple Enhanced Armaments in the system, that they could move on their own like

that at all was incredible. There was the precedent of an Enhanced Armament with its own independent will in the Armor of Catastrophe, but even that fearsome armor couldn't act on its own; it absolutely required a host. What exactly *were* these ISS kits? How on earth had the Acceleration Research Society produced such an object?

Struck once again by questions, Kuroyukihime pulled herself back into the present moment. "Beat down the main body before any new eyeballs come out! Ready for all-out attack!" In this situation, *all-out* meant a full attack using everything the Incarnate System had to offer them.

The reckless use of Incarnate attacks in the Unlimited Neutral Field drew in large Enemies, but there was no need to worry about that on the forty-fifth floor of a skyscraper. And although there was the risk of being swallowed up by the sense of omnipotence when using Incarnate attacks on other Burst Linkers—the forbidden delight of striking enemies down with overwhelming power could drag the user down into the dark side of the Incarnate—that wasn't much of an issue here, either, given that their opponent was a soulless eyeball.

The four Burst Linkers colored the marble floor with their various overlays and waited for the moment to launch their attack.

Kuroyukihime took a deep breath to shout *Here we go* but was interrupted by the somehow languid voice of an M-type duel avatar flowing across the deserted floor.

"Merciless as always. Looks like you haven't changed. I'm glad. Seriously."

"Who's there?!" Kuroyukihime barked, instead of giving the signal to attack.

Any number of large pillars littered this floor, which was a hotel lobby in the real world. Not only were there plenty of places to hide, but the voice reverberated in complicated ways, making it hard to pinpoint the source of the sound.

Regardless, Kuroyukihime *knew*. The voice was coming from the ISS kit main body.

But her instinct turned out to be only half right.

Chik, chak. She heard the hard sound of footsteps, and a duel avatar stepped out from behind the massive eyeball.

The kit terminals had been running in all directions around the main body, which meant that the owner of the voice would naturally have been within their reaction range, and yet, the person hadn't attacked him. So she had to assume he was an ISS kit user equipped with a terminal—in other words, an enemy. In which case, they should immediately beat him back with all their might and destroy him together with the main body.

This was the judgment handed down by reason, but the instant she set eyes on the foot of the avatar that first appeared from the shadow of the eyeball, that reasonable decision flew right out of her head.

Long-boot armor encasing his feet. Notched spurs stretching out from the heel. And the coloring of both was so pure that it could be compared to nothing else.

Red. So red.

“...It can't. Be...”

Was it Fuko who spoke or Akira or Utai? The same words tried to escape Kuroyukihime's throat, but her avatar's mouth was completely frozen in place.

Chak. Chak. Chak. The spurred boots echoed against the floor three more times before stopping.

Leaning his left shoulder against the brain-like external skin of the ISS kit main body, the M-type duel avatar brought his right hand to the brim of his ten-gallon hat. “Hey there. Been a while, Lotus.”

In her completely numbed mind, Kuroyukihime heard a cracked voice spill from her own mouth.

“Red King...Red Rider...”



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“Chiyutaku, wh-what are you doing here?!”

It was the most common of Burst Linker common sense to never use any form of address in the Accelerated World that could lead to being identified in the real world, even if no one else was around, but Haruyuki’s shock was so great that he ended up shouting the real names of his childhood friends twice.

“It’s obvious, *Crow*.” Lime Bell, still settled on top of Cyan Pile, flashed her eye lenses at him. “We came with Pard to help you.”

“Well, to be honest,” Pile said from below her, “we were actually chasing Argon Array.”

“Pard? Argon?” Haruyuki whirled his head around. But no matter how he searched the deserted hall, he could spot neither Blood Leopard nor Argon Array. And when he replayed his memory of a few seconds earlier, it had been just Pile and Bell who tumbled out of the shadow corridor. “It looks like it’s just you guys here, though...”

“What?!” Chiyuri leapt down from Takumu’s back and whirled her head around. “Huh? Weird...I don’t know about Argon, but we jumped into the hole with Pard. She was right there with us while we were moving.”

Following her to his feet, Takumu also let his eyes race around the room. “What is this place anyway?”

“I’m not exactly sure myself, but I think it’s probably the headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society.” Haruyuki had gotten this far when the pure-white 3-D icon floated out from behind him.

“*You are free to exchange information, but does there not exist a task with a higher priority at present?*” it said, phosphorescence flashing intermittently.

“Huh? Oh! R-right!” Haruyuki cried hurriedly, looking at the stairs leading up on the other side of the hall. He had skidded to a halt at the sudden appearance of Chiyuri and Takumu, but this was not the time for lazy conversation. He had to catch up with Black Vise, who had passed through there minutes earlier, as soon as possible and take Niko back.

“Crow, what’s that little thing?” Cocking her head curiously to one side, Chiyuri reached out a hand to touch the icon, but Haruyuki quickly grabbed it. From their reaction, it appeared his friends couldn’t hear the icon’s voice. And he couldn’t even begin to anticipate their reaction if he told them that the floating icon was actually the Legend-class Enemy Metatron.

“I’ll explain that as we go,” he said simply, starting to move again. “What’s more important right now is that Black Vise went up those stairs a little while ago. Still holding on to Rain.”

“You should’ve said so!” Chiyuri shouted, grabbing Haruyuki’s arm in turn and yanking it as she began to run.

Silent once more, the 3-D icon floated off to Haruyuki’s right, while to his left, Takumu considered the situation as he got his feet moving.

“I think the shadow road that I, Bell, Pard, and Argon went through was created by Black Vise in advance. He might have underground passages set up in places that will always be in shadow, no matter how the attributes of the Unlimited Neutral Field change—like under expressways or train bridges, so-called eternal shadows. In which case, it wouldn’t be strange if they branched along the way or something.”

“So you’re saying Pard and Argon went into another corridor at some fork?” Haruyuki asked.

“It’s at best a possibility.” Takumu cocked his head ever so slightly. “But even supposing they had, I expect the majority of the corridors lead to the headquarters. So Pard would have appeared somewhere in this building and could be looking for the Red King right now. I think if we go after Vise, we’ll meet up with her at some point.”

“Good point. If Pard were here, she’d tell us to forget about finding her and focus on rescuing Rain,” Haruyuki said, nodding deeply.

Chiyuri, who had run ahead, looked back for a second. “You’ve got no proof of that! C’mon! Hurry!”

The three level-five Burst Linkers and one (part of a) Legend-class Enemy raced up the stairs that stretched out on the other side of the hall.

The marble staircase was unexpectedly long. There was a landing every twenty flights—where the stairs would turn back the other way and go up another twenty flights—but no matter how many switchbacks they passed through, they never made it to the next floor. Haruyuki and his friends were reminded of the emergency stairs of the tower condo they lived in, but unlike their condo, none of the landings had doors, so they had no choice but to keep running up.

As a general rule, buildings in the Unlimited Neutral Field replicated the structure of the building existing in the same coordinates in the real world, but could such a long stairwell actually exist? In skyscrapers, there would be a door at every landing, and even with an exceedingly tall tower like the old Tokyo Tower, there'd at least be a vertical hole dug deep into the ground... Considering this with half his mind, Haruyuki listened to his childhood friends chat with the other half.

“That reminds me, Pile. That special attack you used back there to yank open the entrance to the shadow corridor—you just get it?” Chiyuri asked. “That’s the first time I’ve seen it.”

“Oh no.” Takumu scratched the back of his head. “That was my level-three bonus, so I got it over a year ago now.”

“What? You should use it more, then! I mean, you made that huge hole in the ground—it’s gotta be pretty great for attacking, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve known that since I got it...But it can only be launched perpendicular to the ground, so it’s hard to find a place to use it. I’ve basically only used it to strike the final blow on a defeated enemy. But the motion before activation’s pretty long, so sometimes, they manage to dodge it. And then, I end up stuck with the drill in the ground, and the timer runs out. Lots of that...”

“Hmm. Too bad. It looks cool. And the name’s cool, too.”

That’s exactly the trap of special attacks, Haruyuki thought earnestly. He had pushed all his level-up bonuses, including his current level-five bonus, into enhancing his flight ability, but it would be a lie to say he hadn’t felt some conflict each time. There was always one special attack in the four bonus selections that appeared in the Instruct menu, and Haruyuki had been seriously tempted by the attack motion displayed in silhouette together with a

technique name that would feel so good to call out. If his beloved parent and master, Kuroyukihime, hadn't taught him otherwise, he might have succumbed to this temptation once or twice, or even three or four times.

Takumu had once briefly told him it had been on his parent's instruction that he pick special attacks for his bonuses from level two through four. But his parent hadn't guided him the way Kuroyukihime guided Haruyuki, making him think things through himself, realize the correct way, and make a choice. Instead, he had given orders heedless of Takumu's hesitations and deaf to his cries of protest. Haruyuki didn't want to speak ill of his friend's parent, but privately, he thought you couldn't very well call that guidance.

On top of that, when Takumu was facing the danger of diminishing points, instead of helping him, his parent had used him as a testing ground for a backdoor program. In the end, he was investigated for his bad behavior and departed the Accelerated World through the Blue King's Judgment Blow.

At the end of this story, Takumu had said, *"I'm grateful to him for choosing me as his child and opening the door to the Accelerated World for me. Only learning special attacks, being seduced by the backdoor program—the responsibility for all those choices is mine. But if I had to do it all over again from the start...I can't say I've never wondered..."*

"It's all still ahead of us, Taku." Haruyuki dared to use his friend's real name as he took the stairs two at a time. "We can't know how our duel avatars will evolve until we're high rankers. And when that special attack of yours hits the bull's-eye, it's insanely strong. I've been hit with it myself, so I can tell you that, for sure!" He remembered when that drill had slammed him down during their first duel, from the roof of a five-story hospital all the way to the first floor. He felt a wry smile leaking from the slits in the face mask of the large avatar running to his left.

"You gotta let that go already. But if you say so, I'll try to think up more ways to use it."

"Cool! Then, in the next Territories, let's try a bunch of stuff, you and me in combo!"

The first one to react to this proposal was surprisingly the icon floating to his right—Archangel Metatron. *"What is this 'Territories' you speak of?"*

"Huh? Um." He opened his mouth to reply and then quickly closed it. Chiyuri and Takumu couldn't hear Metatron's voice or telepathy or whatever it was, so to them, it would look like it suddenly started muttering to itself.

But Metatron appeared to have absolutely no interest in taking such conditions into consideration. *“Provide the requested information immediately,”* it pressed him imperiously.

“R-right! The T-Territories are when Legions fight one another for control of Areas— Oh, a Legion is—”

“I know what it is. Hmm. So you mean to say that the little warriors race around their meager domains in the lower field and fight?”

“W-well, I guess that’s basically it,” Haruyuki assented.

“Hey, Crow?” Chiyuri looked back at him suspiciously. “You muttering to yourself there?”

“Oh, uh...”

But just then, fortunately—he supposed—a longed-for sight popped up in his field of view. In the wall on the landing ahead, a square hole opened a dark mouth.

“A-anyway, Bell, up ahead! Look!” Haruyuki indicated the direction of progress with one hand.

“Hmm?” Chiyuri turned back and then shouted in relief. “Oh! Great! An exit! I was starting to wonder if the map was caught in an infinite loop.”

“I don’t even remember how many times the stairs turned,” Takumu noted.

“Twenty-four times,” Metatron remarked in the voice only Haruyuki could hear.

They sprinted up the remaining stairs, and Haruyuki, the first one on what was apparently the twenty-fifth landing, pressed his back against the wall next to the opening and checked out what lay ahead.

Just like on the lower level, a gloomy corridor stretched out in a straight line. There was nothing moving as far as he could see, but it was more than likely that a tamed Enemy was also patrolling up here. They couldn’t just linger there, though. Black Vise would have come through only a few minutes earlier carrying Niko.

Haruyuki was just the slightest bit more at ease now that he had been able to join up with trusted comrades, and he focused himself once more with a deep breath.

Niko, hang on. We’re definitely going to save you. And, Rin, keep fighting just a little longer. When we get back to Midtown Tower, we’ll destroy the ISS kit main body.

After thinking these thoughts very hard at the two of them, Haruyuki gave rapid-fire instructions to his friends. “Tamed Enemies patrol this building. If you sense one, let me know right away.”

“Leave it to me!”

“Roger!”

“I suppose.”

The last response was unexpected, although he told himself it was time he got used to it already. “Okay, here we go!” he hissed.

Slipping through the square hole to step into the corridor, he ran as fast as was possible while still keeping his guard up. After thirty meters, he reached a corner that turned to the right, so he stopped for a moment and felt for any presence ahead of him before leaping out.

A pale-orange light filled his eyes. The source of the light was several long, horizontal windows on the left side of the long corridor. It wasn’t sunlight pouring directly in, but rather the faint light of dusk reflected in the cloudy sky falling diagonally from the windows onto the floor. There were evenly spaced glass windows, along with large sliding doors, on the opposite wall. It was supposedly the first time he’d set foot in this place, and yet, he felt a curious *déjà vu* at this sight.

Chiyuri summed up the reason for this when she murmured briefly, “Huh? Is this...a school?”

And truly, it was nothing other than a school hallway. The arrangement of the windows and doors set in the wall to the right were clearly those of classrooms. Disturbed at being yanked back from the headquarters of an evil organization to such an everyday space, Haruyuki proceeded a few cautious meters forward before peering into a window to the left.

On the other side of the transparent glass, he saw several large buildings that, although temple-like in construction in keeping with the Twilight stage, were completely unharmed. Behind these, an expanse of half-destroyed ruins spread out, while far off in the distance, he could see a slender tower rising up so high, it was nearly touching the sky.

“Is that maybe the old Tokyo Tower?” Haruyuki said.

“It looks like it.” Takumu peered through the window to his right. “From the position of the sun and the size of the tower, this building’s located to the southwest of the tower. Yeah...Maybe about two kilometers away.”

Haruyuki tried to mentally overlay this measurement onto a map of

Tokyo, but he had absolutely no sense of the terrain on the south side of the twenty-three wards. Even though he had been looking in this very direction from the top of the old Tokyo Tower a few hours earlier, the sense he got looking down from the sky versus up from the ground was totally different.

“A school two kilometers southwest of Shiba Park,” Chiyuri muttered faintly, now standing immediately to his left. “So then, that means— No way... This place is maybe—”

But he didn't get to hear the end of her sentence.

Thmmm. Thmmm. They all noticed the heavy echo approaching from deep in the hallway at the same time. No mistake: It was the footfalls of the knight-type Enemy he encountered in the basement. Since it hadn't overtaken them on the single set of stairs, it was probably another one of the same type. Which meant that a silver crown to tame it would be set into the Enemy's head, and unless they destroyed that, Metatron wouldn't be able to deactivate it for them.

It wouldn't be such a difficult job to destroy the crown now that there were three of them, but they needed to avoid any battles they could. Haruyuki put his right hand to the window in front of him and pushed hard, wondering if they could just step outside temporarily.

But although the glass panel looked to be at best two or three millimeters thick, it didn't so much as crack—and just barely creaked. He started to scratch his head at this—hard glass in the Twilight stage?—before he saw the 3-D icon flash in exasperation, and he realized it with a gasp. Just like the floors and walls on the basement level, the aboveground part of the building was also completely protected through some unknown mechanism.

Takumu followed suit and turned the Pile Driver of his right hand toward the window, but Haruyuki stretched out a hand to stop him.

“This building's indestructible—everywhere. Let's try hiding in a room and waiting for it to pass,” he said before realizing it was also possible that the doors were locked.

But Chiyuri had already yanked open the sliding door on the other side of the hallway. “Hurry up! Come on! It's pretty close!”

Flicking his eyes down the corridor, beyond the weak light coming in through the windows, he saw an enormous silhouette, so large as to very nearly scrape the ceiling. Hurriedly, he dived into the room with Takumu and closed the door behind them, careful not to make a sound.

An Enemy's main enemy-detection method—although in this case, “enemy” meant a duel avatar—differed from type to type. With beast types, it was smell; bugs used vibrations; and there were even some types that relentlessly targeted avatars within detection range using some mysterious extra sense. But human-shaped Enemies basically relied on sight and sound. In other words, if you hid behind something, stayed perfectly still, and made no sound, you had a fairly decent chance of making it through without a fight.

Similar to the hallway, the room inside the door was strongly reminiscent of a school classroom. Of course, the stage didn't go so far as to re-create the teacher's podium and lockers, but there was a neat arrangement of six long marble desks. The three friends squeezed together and hid among them, listening hard for the approaching footsteps.

Thmmm. Thmmm. The vibrations were on the verge of reaching the classroom, and Haruyuki gulped, opening his eyes wide. Although Cyan Pile even had managed to lay his bulk down flat and somehow tuck himself in the shadow of a desk, the white 3-D icon was bobbing above another one, totally exposed to the hallway through the window!

Instantly, Haruyuki reached out to snatch the icon down and hold it beneath him.

“Insolence! Release your hand this instant!” Metatron's rebuke was shrill inside his head, but he held the icon tightly with both hands.

“Sorry, just be quiet for a second!” he whispered.

“Do you know who I am?! One pillar of the sacred four, and you dare treat me like this! If I wasn't a terminal, I would turn you—”

“I know! I know! We'll do this later!”

As he was lost in restraining the icon, the regular footfalls stopped abruptly. A massive silhouette blocked the orange light coming in through the window, pitching the room into a gloom. Perhaps finding fault with Haruyuki's whispering, the knight Enemy was peering into the classroom.

It wouldn't be able to fit its enormous body through the doorway even if it did notice the intruders hiding in the classroom, but Haruyuki and his friends had to get out into the hallway to go after Vise. Not only would a showy fight on the upper floors likely call in even more Enemies, it would push Niko's rescue that much further away.

Go away, go away. Haruyuki didn't know if his telepathic message was

received, but the knight Enemy pulled itself back up soon enough and resumed walking. Its heavy footsteps moved slowly from right to left, and when it turned back at the south corner, it passed by the classroom once again and departed toward the north from whence it had come.

The footsteps finally faded, and Haruyuki relaxed his hands, letting out a sigh of relief. Instantly, the 3-D icon, having quickly escaped his grasp, began flickering ferociously.

“Remember this. You shall pay for this insolent behavior for a thousand years. Swear that you will obey my every order during this time as my servant. Otherwise—”

“Fine, got it. I swear.” He glanced to one side and met the eyes of Chiyuri and Takumu, dubious expressions on their faces.

“Crow, just explain it already,” Chiyuri demanded. “What exactly is this bug thing?”

“Bug?! Insults upon insults! I cannot endure this any longer!”

What exactly am I supposed to do here? Haruyuki swallowed a sigh as he shook his head.

And then Takumu abruptly opened his arms wide and embraced Haruyuki and Chiyuri—before pushing them down with a force that brooked no argument.

“Haru! Chi! Hide!”

“Wh-what’s wrong? The Enemy’s not back yet.”

“Not the hallway. Outside the window!”

Takumu’s whisper was extremely strained, and spurred on by this tension, Haruyuki looked back, still crouching, to peer out the window on the east side of the classroom.

On the other side of the glass was something like a central courtyard, enclosed on all four sides by the chalky temple—a school building. It was more than double the size of the courtyard at Umesato Junior High; each side was probably fifty meters long. The ground was covered in white marble tiles, and there were no decorative objects other than where the ground gradually rose up in the center like an altar. The only entrance was the large arch on the south side of the school building.

And under that arch, a lone silhouette had just appeared, moving as though oozing through. It wasn’t another knight; it was a jet-black avatar—much smaller but still emitting an unfathomable sense of presence. The

peculiar figure, dozens of thin panels overlapping to take on a human form, could be none other than Black Vise. He had gone around the basement of the school from the south and just arrived at the courtyard. Which meant *this* was Vise's final destination.

Vise's layered arms held the still-unconscious crimson avatar. The instant Haruyuki saw the battered Niko, an incandescent fury burst into flames in his heart once more. He tried to shake off Takumu's arm and charge toward the window, but his childhood friend firmly held his shoulder down.

"You can't just go charging in there recklessly, Haru!" he whispered urgently.

"This school's indestructible, right?!" Chiyuri chided him. "You can't break the window!"

This was unfortunately correct. Haruyuki could throw his whole body at it, but the glass window separating the courtyard and the classroom wouldn't so much as twitch. The only thing he'd accomplish doing that was to tell Vise where they were hiding, free of charge.

"But," Haruyuki said, his hoarse voice burning with impatience, "we don't have time to go all the way to the south arch!"

The Red King is scheduled to leave the Accelerated World today.

That was what Vise had told Haruyuki in the basement. It wasn't clear exactly how he was going to push her to total point loss, but that "process" might be starting in minutes or even seconds, if their luck was bad. Even knowing there was a 99.9 percent chance he would be repelled, he had no other options. His only chance was to charge at the window at full power and wager on that slim 0.01 percent—

"Calm yourself, little bird." The voice echoed in his mind and cooled Haruyuki's mind like a splash of cold water. *"How many times will you make me repeat myself? Now that you have become my servant, I would have you reconsider your rash actions."*

"B-but there's no time!"

"Stop. Listen to me." The small icon floated up right before his helmet and flashed strongly, as though scolding Haruyuki.

He hung his head and glanced out the window. The layered avatar was headed toward the altar at the center of the courtyard, not hurrying but at a measured pace. Turning his gaze back to the icon, Haruyuki said as fast as he could, "Fine. Could you talk in a voice so they can hear you, too?"

“It is unpleasant for me to align with those who cannot recognize my voice in compression mode, but I suppose I have no choice. Are you prepared? For you, it is a fortuitous event occurring only once in a thousand years to be able to hear my normal-mode voice.” The 3-D icon expressed some dissatisfaction. Haruyuki was hard-pressed to understand before it dimmed its pure-white light very slightly. The voice that came next was not in Haruyuki’s head, but his ears.

“The reason this structure is equipped with nonstandard strength”—here, Takumu and Chiyuri recoiled, stunned, but Metatron paid them no mind—“is most likely that the entire structure is set with prioritized owner privileges by some who are little warriors like you.”

“What?!” Takumu said immediately, apparently having decided to postpone the question of the icon’s true identity. “So do you mean to say this is...a player home?” His tone was on the polite side, maybe because he unconsciously picked up on Metatron’s information pressure.

Chiyuri, however, sounded the same as always. “No! Way! This gigantic school?! The whole thing?!”

Half a second later, Haruyuki also went through the process of consideration → understanding → shock, and his eyes flew open impossibly wide beneath his goggles.

Player homes in the Unlimited Neutral Field—such as Sky Raker’s Fufuan standing on the top of the old Tokyo Tower—were indeed given the attribute of indestructibility. But as far as Haruyuki knew, player homes only existed in remote areas, and the standard for size was at best about two rooms plus a kitchen. He’d never even heard of someone owning a building the size of a school. If that was allowed, then Kuroyukihime would have long ago bought Umesato Junior High, wouldn’t she?

But given that Metatron was, in a certain sense, the ruler of the Unlimited Neutral Field, Haruyuki doubted it was wrong. And if it was a player home, then unassailable strength of the walls and windows made sense.

“If this is a player home, then is there a way to slip through the wall?” Haruyuki asked, deciding to trust Metatron.

The Enemy with its own will stunned the three Burst Linkers once again. “You little warriors have the power to interfere with the way of this world, I believe.”

“Interfere...with the way...You mean the Incarnate System?”

“I do not know the name of the power. To us Beings, it is recognized with a singular sound, and thus, I do not care for it that much. But the only method to destroy the configuration of this structure is likely to use that power.”

The precise meaning of *singular sound* was unclear, but just as Metatron noted, the Incarnate System had the power to “overwrite” phenomena in the Accelerated World. On the subtler side, overwriting could correct an attack that couldn’t connect or fix an Enhanced Armament that couldn’t move, but there were also more incredible techniques, like reducing the health gauges of the locked Gallery or sealing away other people’s memories.

But if you were trying to overturn critical rules, then naturally, you needed an equally powerful imagination. The protection of player homes was so absolute they were more durable than even the ground of the field; a half-hearted Incarnate attack wouldn’t even scratch its walls.

But they had no choice. They had to break down the wall separating the classroom and the courtyard in order to save Niko.

Haruyuki made his decision. “Got it.” He clenched his right hand into a tight fist.

“Haru,” Takumu said, his arm still draped around Haruyuki’s back, in unison with Chiyuri on Haruyuki’s other side.

But then they both nodded firmly back at him.

“I’ll help,” Takumu said simply.

“Please,” Haruyuki replied, lifting his head just a little from his crouched position to look out at the courtyard.

Having just arrived in the center, Black Vise was setting Scarlet Rain down on the square altar. They didn’t have a second to spare. Still keeping himself low, Haruyuki approached the wall beneath the window and brought his fingertips to touch the white marble.

Takumu stepped up beside him and grabbed the pile sticking out of the Enhanced Armament of his right arm with his left hand. “Cyan Blade.”

As he quietly called the technique name, he pulled the pile out. Sheathed in a blue overlay, it transformed into a large blade. Takumu pressed the tip of the Incarnate sword, still badly damaged from the fierce fight with Magenta Scissor, against the wall right next to Haruyuki’s fingers and nodded.

“Let’s do this.” Haruyuki gave the signal quietly, then concentrated every bit of imagination he could muster into his right hand. And shouted, “Laser Sword!!” The silver gleam that jetted from his fingertips slammed against the

wall, sending dazzling sparks flying.

“Aaaaah!” Takumu added his own sharp battle cry, and the Incarnate sword plunged into the wall. Bolts of blue lightning shot from the tip and melted into Haruyuki’s overlay, coloring the entire classroom with a pale-blue light.

At this point, Black Vise appeared to notice the unusual phenomenon. And there was a very good chance that the knight Enemy that had gone off to the north in the hallway would return, drawn in by the singular sound of the Incarnate techniques. They were in a fight against time.

Go. Through! Haruyuki prayed, focusing his will to the limit.

In the four basic types of Incarnate System techniques, Haruyuki’s Laser Sword was classed as a Range Expansion type, while Takumu’s Cyan Blade was an Attack Power Expansion technique. Although both had improved in terms of activation speed, power, and range compared with when they first learned them, neither technique yet began to even compare with a high ranker’s second quadrant Incarnate technique. If Black Lotus or Ardor Maiden had been there, they might have instantly pulverized—or melted—the wall and opened up a path. But they were off fighting somewhere else toward the same goal as Haruyuki and his friends.

Up until that point, no matter what kind of tight spot he’d found himself in, he’d always been saved by Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, Akira, Niko, or Pard. Somewhere in his heart, he’d depended on the sense of security that came from having such reliable, experienced Burst Linkers by his side. But inevitably, the time would come when he would have to step out from under his parents’ wings and take off in flight, when he would have to stand on his own two feet to confront an enormous problem.

He was sure that time was now.

“Unh...Ah! Aaaaaaaah!!”

His entire imagination, so white-hot it very nearly burned up his soul, was concentrated in the single point of the tips of the outstretched fingers of his right hand. The words “go through” had even evaporated at some point, and he was overflowing with nothing but a silver torrent produced by the depths of his mind. The overlay in his right hand slammed up against the hard wall, compressed to become the smallest star, and shone.

“Nngh...aaaaah!” Takumu squeezed a battle cry from deep inside and tried to pierce the wall with the Incarnate sword he gripped in both hands.

One flash of lightning—then another—shot off from the point of contact, crashing into walls and desks and ceiling, an infinity of sparks scattering.

The marble wall under Incarnate attack resisted the pressure and shook violently. Two concentric circles of light that were the violet color of the system spread out on the surface of the wall and lapped against the window and the floor. But the wall remained stubbornly intact.

If the thought that their task was an impossible one so much as crossed his mind, then that would become the reality. So Haruyuki had no intention of releasing his focus on his image, even if it did burn his entire soul away. The edges of his field of view started to turn white, the roaring that filled the classroom receded, and he even started to lose his sense of oneness with his avatar.

“Unh...Waaaaaaah!!” The higher pitch of a third voice rang out behind him, and the light of a third color lit up the world. The torrent of vivid, fresh green light pushed between Haruyuki and Takumu and crashed into the wall: Lime Bell’s. But he hadn’t heard her shout the name of a special attack. Which meant that this green light was not a normal light effect, but rather overlay—the miraculous light produced by the Incarnate System.

Chiyuri can’t use the Incarnate System, so why—? The thought was a momentary spark and disappeared. Haruyuki once again mustered up all the imagination he had—the very last of it.

Silver, blue, and yellow-green light melted into one another to take on the clear color of the sky; this torrent smashed through the system-colored firewall. A single, minute crack raced across it, then a second, then a third.

A noise like a hammer hitting hard metal, powerfully loud—a sound Haruyuki had never heard before—rang in his ears, and then the wall smashed into pieces.

Haruyuki felt his consciousness start to fade, perhaps a reaction to pushing his mental powers past his limit. But before he could collapse, a yellow-green avatar flopped onto him from behind, so he stretched out a hand to stop her. Takumu lifted his left hand at the same time, and the two kept Lime Bell from crumpling to the floor.

He stopped moving for a mere instant from the sense of achievement at smashing a wall protected by the system and the shock of Chiyuri somehow activating the Incarnate System.

“The wall will close! Hurry and go through it!” Metatron chastised inside

his brain, kick-starting Haruyuki's mind again.

His wide eyes caught sight of a purple light shining on the inside of the two-meter hole in the marble wall. Semitransparent cubes shimmering with the system color took shape as objects, aligning themselves, trying to fill in the hole.

After exchanging a look with Takumu, Haruyuki got a firmer grip on Chiyuri's arm as he kicked at the floor. They dived into the hole in the wall headfirst, and while it was a little tight, the three managed to slip through and tumbled out into the courtyard about half a meter or so below.

The wall was rapidly plugged up, and a second after the 3-D icon passed through it with room to spare, it closed over completely with a bright *Klink!* As the hole was on the verge of disappearing, Haruyuki felt like he could hear the footsteps of the knight Enemy running back down the hallway, but there was no need to worry about that anymore. And he didn't have the mental energy for it, either.

Because when he lifted his head, twenty meters ahead of Haruyuki stood the figure of Black Vise, in what was to be their third encounter of the day. And on the altar immediately in front of the layered avatar lay a crimson girl.

I'm not letting you get away. I will take Niko back.

That resolution became high-temperature flames that flickered to life in every nook and cranny of his avatar, and Haruyuki's exhaustion receded at once.

"Pile, look out for Bell," he murmured quietly, entrusting the half-conscious Chiyuri to their mutual friend before slowly standing up. Tightly clenching both hands into fists, he took one step, then another forward. "Black Vise!!"

The angry roar came from the depths of Haruyuki's heart, but the layered avatar didn't bother to turn toward him. He merely raised his right hand, as if insisting Haruyuki wait a moment.

Spurred on by fresh rage, he took another step forward. Then all the thin panels that made up Vise's left arm dropped away soundlessly and were absorbed into the ground. Haruyuki reflexively took a defensive position, but he was not the target. The panels appeared on the altar in the shape of a black cross, crucifying the Red King.

The instant he saw Niko, both arms forced outward, helmet lolling forward, and a rage several orders of magnitude greater than anything he had

felt up to that point erupted inside him, coloring his field of view a pale red.

A long, long time ago, Haruyuki had seen a duel avatar held captive in exactly the same position. It wasn't his own memory, but a dream he'd had twelve days earlier inside the Castle after he'd charged inside with Utai. A cross stood at the bottom of an Enemy's craterlike nest—an F-type Burst Linker held captive against it. Black Vise, Argon Array, and one other person whose name and form he didn't know used a snake-type Enemy to kill the crucified girl over and over and over.

The Enhanced Armament that had shown Haruyuki this dream, the Disaster—aka the Armor of Catastrophe—had already been purified, split up, and laid to rest for an eternal sleep in a corner of the Unlimited Neutral Field. But that didn't mean all the memories the Armor had given Haruyuki had disappeared. And one of those memories he would never, ever forget was the execution of this girl—Saffron Blossom.

The vision of the extremely cruel Unlimited EK overlapped with the figure of Niko hanging from the cross before his eyes, and Haruyuki was filled with an incandescent fury.

“Viiiiiiiice!” Pushing a hoarse voice through his gritted teeth, Haruyuki was about to kick violently at the ground to propel himself forward, but he yanked himself to a stop.

No. Don't give yourself to anger. Anger's not a bad thing. But if you're swallowed up by a single emotion, you'll only be able to see a single thing. I've failed like that so many times before. But today, right now at least, you cannot fail. I'm not here to defeat Black Vise. I'm here to get Niko back.

Haruyuki took a deep breath and let it out. The flames of rage were compressed into a crimson crystal in his heart. The heat it emitted became a hazy overlay in his hands.

“You're giving Rain back now, Black Vise,” he called in a measured tone.

The layered avatar turned for the first time, watching Haruyuki. The many thin panels of his face had neither eyes nor mouth, but it managed to express emotion nonetheless.

“Oh-ho,” Vise replied, voice calm. “It seems you really are a little different from before, hmm? I'm also a tad surprised you were somehow able to make such a large hole in the wall of our castle. Although, it did apparently take three of you to do it. Even still, I think there aren't too many high rankers who could do such a thing. Aah, I've underestimated you.”

In point of fact, if the 3-D icon floating directly behind Haruyuki—Archangel Metatron—hadn't declared in its usual curt way that that was the only choice, Haruyuki probably wouldn't have been able to focus his imagination that intently, so it had actually taken four to do it. But there was no need to blurt that out like an idiot.

“Our castle.” He ignored Vise's faint praise and picked out one idea to pursue. “That's what you said. So then, this building—no, school—is the headquarters of your Society. I can see the old Tokyo Tower over there, so it shouldn't be too hard to dig up the name of the school in the real world. That said, I wouldn't go so far as a real-world PK. *But*. I wouldn't hesitate to attack on your local net.”

“Well, well, well, how dashing you sound. Indeed, it is my own error that allowed three uninvited guests to come all the way here. For future reference, would you tell me how you slipped past the guard in the basement? Or should I not ask?”

“You shouldn't. I have no intention of giving you one more piece of information. I wouldn't even give you a single burst point. Nor, of course, the Red King,” Haruyuki stated quietly, thrusting his fist—still wrapped in silver light—at the jet-black avatar. “This is where you and I settle things.”

“Oh my! How frightful!” Black Vise sounded completely unalarmed, as usual, and shrugged his left shoulder lightly; the arm below it was broken up into the cross at the moment. “But, you see, Crow, that's such a brave speech—but wrong in just one way.”

“And what's that?”

“You really must say not ‘you,’ but ‘all of you.’” Vise took a soft step back.

A short warning buzzer sounded in his mind. A moment before he heard Takumu shout “Crow!” from behind, before the air of the courtyard shook with the sharp sound of vibration, Haruyuki reflexively yanked his arm down in front of his face.

A ray of bright, reddish-purple light shot down at him at an angle. He caught this with the light-conducting crystal in the armor of his forearm—the Optical Conduction ability—and bounced it toward the ground before once again looking up into the sky on the south side of the courtyard.

There on the roof of the school building was, as he'd expected, a duel avatar wearing a large hat out of balance with her slender body—the Quad

Eyes Analyst, Argon Array. In the battle royale three days earlier, he'd been essentially defenseless against the lasers she shot simultaneously from the lenses on her hat and the goggles that were her eyes, and his avatar had been riddled with holes. And even now, if he'd turned himself over to his rage and narrowed his field of view, the surprise attack would have been impossible for him to defend against.

But this was the third time he'd seen her lasers. As long as he noticed the halo of light filling her lenses right before she fired them, his body now remembered how long it took for them to reach him. And he'd been on guard against a sniper attack in one corner of his mind ever since he heard that Takumu, Chiyuri, and Pard had jumped into the shadow corridor with Argon.

"Well done reacting in advance of my own warning," Metatron said in its compressed voice.

Haruyuki asked it to please say it in words next time before lowering his arm and glaring at the analyst-cum-sniper. "Come down, Argon! Or else I'll reflect your laser at you next!"

To be honest, he'd only just learned Optical Conduction, and he wasn't exactly confident he could control the direction of reflection with 100 percent accuracy. But Argon's shock at him escaping her laser scot-free when it had nearly destroyed him three days earlier must have been quite large.

"No long-distance type here gonna beat *me* down!" she replied, voice tense and lacking her usual cool grin. "Least, that's what I'd *like* to say..." She glanced over her shoulder.

"You never give up! You're more canine than feline!" she shouted, skipping down from the roof. She somersaulted lightly in midair and stuck the landing from a height of three floors up, then dashed to the side of Black Vise in front of the altar. "Yo, Vi! You said this job's a piece o' cake, just do a little backup an' then run! So why's it this superior hassle now, huh?!"

"Oh no, it's not a hassle at all. I'll toss in a little extra remuneration for you, so I would indeed appreciate you doing one more job."

"O' course you will! This ain't worth it 'less you pony up two—no, three times what you offered!"

Listening with half his mind to this back-and-forth between the executive team of the ARS, Haruyuki turned the other half of his attention to the school roof on the south side. His expectation—or maybe hope—soon became reality. A silent silhouette appeared against the backdrop of the twilight sky.

He didn't need to see the triangular, pointed ears or the long tail stretching out from the backside to know that this was Bloody Kitty—aka Blood Leopard. Although she had leapt into the shadow corridor with Takumu and Chiyuri, she had ended up on a separate branch somewhere along the journey but still managed to chase Argon all this way. To carry out the instruction Haruyuki called out to her before taking off at Midtown Tower: "*Pard, chase down Argon.*"

Apparently, it wasn't possible to pursue a powerful enemy like Argon and remain uninjured; Leopard was holding her left shoulder with her hand, but the instant her amber eyes turned to the center of the courtyard, a fierce roar erupted from her leopard's mouth, as though her pain had been forgotten. Now that she'd seen Niko pinned to the black cross, it looked like Leopard, crouched low, was going to leap from the roof and charge the altar. But perhaps controlling herself just barely, she leapt straight down the way Argon had and moved over to the east side of the courtyard where Haruyuki and his friends were encamped.

"Sorry for the wait," she said. Up close, Pard's deep crimson armor showed traces of being pierced by lasers in several places besides her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Pard," Haruyuki replied, once again feeling the weight of the emotion in her brief utterances. "I still haven't been able to get Rain back."

"NP. We won't let them go any farther." Her tone was restrained, but the resolve within Leopard became a radiant heat that warmed Haruyuki's armor. Perhaps the heat was transmitted to the two in the rear; Takumu and Chiyuri—albeit supported from behind—both stood and took up position to Haruyuki's right.

Black Vise—holding Scarlet Rain captive on the altar's cross—and Argon Array to his left. Lined up near the eastern wall of the school building: Cyan Pile, Lime Bell, Silver Crow, and Blood Leopard.

The two level-eight Burst Linkers and the other group of four—composed of one level eight and three level fives—faced one another silently for a moment. Breaking the tension-filled silence was a seventh person—the 3-D icon floating behind Haruyuki.

"*It seems that it would be best for me to return to your back, hmm?*" The compressed voice—which somehow communicated a speech of any length to Haruyuki in a mere fraction of a second—echoed in his mind.

Please, Haruyuki replied similarly with his thoughts, though unconsciously. They still haven't noticed you here. I feel like you're going to be the trump card in this fight.

"Naturally. However, once I become wings again, we will no longer be able to have this sort of two-way communication. You alone must control the power given to you with your own resourcefulness. Fight with your full might, so as not to disappoint me."

G-got it. I'm counting on the wing attack—I mean, Ektenia...Seriously, thanks, Metatron. For helping me.

"...Foolish one. Save such words for after you have successfully rescued your comrade."

The cool voice hadn't yet faded in his mind when he heard the light ringing of a bell, and the display in the left side of his field of view once again indicated that an Enhanced Armament was equipped. Metatron had materialized folded up on his back just like his own wings, and he felt a modest, yet reassuring weight there.

He took a deep breath, concentrating his willpower deep in his belly, before turning toward his fated, bitter enemies. "I'll rephrase then. This is where we settle things with the two of you."

Vise and Argon glanced at each other and chuckled. Stepping up to speak on both of their behalves was the "you" who had corrected Haruyuki before, Vise: "My apologies, Crow. And after you went to the trouble of correcting yourself. I wonder if I could ask you to correct once more the 'two of you' bit."

"...Is one of you planning on running?"

"Ha-ha! Not likely! Just the opposite." Vise threw his right arm out theatrically. "There is simply one more of us, you see."

In the next instant, an enormous dirt cloud rose up between the two encampments. A roar assaulted their ears, and a shock wave pushed toward them so that Haruyuki and his friends unconsciously pulled back.

"What?!" Takumu shouted. "A long-distance attack?!"

"No," Haruyuki replied, looking straight up. "Something just fell from the sky!"

From the explosive impact, the thing had to have fallen from a height of over a hundred meters. But there was nothing in the sky of the Twilight stage besides the thin orange clouds, so something flying at high altitudes hadn't

dropped an object on them. In which case, had the fallen object made it up into the sky on its own power and come crashing down? What on earth could...?

Holding his breath, Haruyuki waited for the dust to clear. Finally, the wind blowing across the field gradually dissipated the fine particulate effect.

It wasn't a thing. Crouching on the marble tile was a human being—a duel avatar, its body curled up as tightly as possible, arms wrapped around both legs. The armor was a sober gray, and the head was tucked in so Haruyuki couldn't see the face mask. He assumed this was the “one more of us” Vise was talking about, but there were still two things he couldn't get his head around.

One was why the avatar didn't get hit with falling damage and die after crashing into the ground at that incredible speed. And the other was how a single duel avatar made it that high up in the first place. As far as Haruyuki knew, there were only two duel avatars who could ascend beyond a hundred meters under their own power. One was “Strong Arm” Sky Raker. And the other was, of course, him, Silver Crow. But the multitude of sharp edges covering the curled-up avatar was a far cry from Raker's elegant flowing design.

Hold on. Haruyuki had very recently witnessed one other duel avatar who could “fly.” Four days earlier, on Wednesday, the final stages of a normal duel in Nakano Area No. 2. His opponent had ripped off Silver Crow's right arm and digested it, which allowed the avatar to temporarily reproduce the flight ability and fly.

“No...way.” Haruyuki muttered hoarsely.

Perhaps hearing these words, the duel avatar a dozen meters ahead of him unfolded its tightly bound arms and legs and slowly began to stand up. The evening sun, falling on the courtyard through the windows on the western side of the school building, reflected off the level surface of the main body of the armor, giving rise to a sharp shine.

Metallic armor—a metal color. Even from this distance, he could clearly see the overwhelming density and hardness of the unusual texture, and there was no longer any doubt. That was the tungsten armor assessed by Magenta Blade as being the hardest in the Accelerated World.

Haruyuki stared at the backlit face mask patterned after a wolf's maw as it was slowly raised and shouted the avatar's name.

“Wolfram...Cerberus...!”



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Kuroyukihime had tried any number of times to remember what specifically she had thought and felt in *that* moment.

The first meeting of the Seven Kings in the Accelerated World held two years and ten months earlier, August 2044. On this occasion, the Red King, Red Rider, pleading for a truce among the seven Great Legions, had turned to the Black King and said *If we ever meet in the real world, I could be friends with you. Totally. Actually, I want to be!*

This could also have sounded like a tentative push beyond the friendship that bound the young kings as Burst Linkers, depending on who was listening.

Hey, Rider! The first to react had been the Purple King, Purple Thorn—who was closest with Rider at the time. *You think I'm just gonna let that go?!*

N-no, that's not it. I didn't mean it like that...Ah, crap.

The Blue King, Blue Knight, and the White King, White Cosmos, had laughed at this, and even the Yellow King, Yellow Radio, managed a few chuckles. Only the Green King, Green Grandé, had stopped at simply allowing his thick armor to creak slightly. In this venue of an amicable battle royale field, Kuroyukihime had thought it was possible that the two were parent and child.

The Seven Kings, once called the Pure Colors, were the masters of the seven Great Legions and all veterans who had been fighting since the dawn of the Accelerated World. But that didn't mean they were all Originators, the initial hundred players. Naturally, Kuroyukihime, the child of White Cosmos, was not; and she wasn't certain, but there was a good chance that the White King herself was likewise not an Originator. She'd heard that the hundred people who received the BB program from the mysterious developer had

started grade one in April 2039—in other words, children born in the year 2032, the same year as Kuroyukihime and a year after the White King.

Why was the age of the Originators not the same as the oldest Burst Linkers? There were many theories, but the most plausible was that only about half the children born in 2031 could meet the conditions for the installation of the BB program. Neurolinker models for infants were developed in September of 2031, and it would have been impossible for children born before that to be equipped with a Neurolinker immediately after birth. At any rate, of the Seven Kings, the ones she could be most certain were Originators were Knight and Grandé.

If Thorn and Rider are parent and child, or maybe in love, she will never forgive what I'm about to do. Kuroyukihime's memories of her own thought process cut off there.

Once the Kings' laughter began to subside, she had stood up and approached Rider, showing her acceptance of the truce. Delighted, Rider had extended a hand to shake hers, and Kuroyukihime responded with an embrace. Thorn had objected with an even higher-pitched shriek, and laughter welled up once more. And then, *that* moment had been upon them.

Black Lotus's level-eight special attack, Death By Embracing. A range of mere tens of centimeters, but its power was limitless. When she had closed the swords of her crossed arms, anything within them was severed—no exceptions. Even if it happened to be the armor of a level-nine duel avatar.

She didn't remember what she had felt when the Red King's head sat at the intersection of those two swords and his body crumpled to the ground at her feet before melting into countless thin ribbons and disappearing.

N-nooooooooooo!! the Purple King had shrieked, loud enough to be heard across the entire field.

Is this your choice, Lotus?! the Blue King had roared, as if he'd switched personalities.

And there, finally, the blank space of her memory ended. Yanking her bladed arms down sharply, the twelve-year-old Kuroyukihime thought, *Four more.*

No matter how many burst points you accumulated, you couldn't reach the final level of ten from level nine. The system required that you push five

other level-nine Burst Linkers to total point loss. It was precisely because he knew this rule that Red Rider sought a truce among the kings—and also the reason why Black Lotus had lopped off his head. In the long history of the Accelerated World, the level-nine sudden-death rule had actually only been applied that one time—supposedly. Despite that Kuroyukihime had given herself over to madness and fought like a savage goddess, she hadn't been able to strike down a single one of the other Kings. It was perhaps a miracle, in fact, that she'd survived until the end of the battle royale and returned to the real world.

Two years and ten months had passed since then, and her memories of that night were closed off in a faint red fog; it was difficult to remember the details. But she had actually done it. When she opened her Instruct menu and looked at the level-up screen, a single red light flashed at the left end of the indicator of the five lives required to reach level ten. The name Red Rider was even displayed when she touched it. Which is why there was no way the first Red King could be there now.

Kuroyukihime stared hard at the gunslinger-style duel avatar that had appeared from behind the ISS kit main body wearing a ten-gallon hat and a gun belt, one part of her mind running through the possibilities: Someone had transformed into Rider. Or she was being shown a projection with no physical substance. One of the two was the most likely explanation.

But even as she hypothesized with her rational mind, she felt the truth of the situation instinctually, keenly. The voice. The tone. The mannerisms. The aura. All of it was that of the first Red King, the Master Gunsmith, Red Rider.

Fuko, Akira, and Utai came to stand next to her, having apparently recovered from the shock before she did. The youngest, Utai, had very little direct experience with Rider, but Fuko and Akira were veterans on Kuroyukihime's level; they had encountered him, exchanged words, and fought him any number of times in the battlefield.

But both maintained their silence, neither speaking to the red avatar twenty meters before them. Kuroyukihime distinctly felt through her armor her comrades' intention to leave all the decisions here to her.

The frenzied night when she had taken Rider's head—and the tragic collapse of Nega Nebulus at the Castle four months later. Kuroyukihime later learned that she had been deeply deceived and manipulated by the person she

trusted most in the world. She wouldn't make the same mistake twice. She would feel, think, choose, and decide on her own. As the master of the new Nega Nebulus; as the parent of a boy a year younger than she was, who was fighting in a different place right then at that very moment.

"I believe I killed you, Red Rider." Kuroyukihime uttered her first decisive words, eyes intent on the gunslinger approaching the massive jet-black eyeball.

"Yeah, you did." The red avatar had the air of a hazy smile. "That time, it was like, I went from Heaven to Hell, y'know? Just when I thought I was getting a hug from the no-touching-allowed World End, I get that, right?" He opened up two of the fingers of his right hand and closed them like a scissor's snip.

From hearing the way he so accurately captured the situation, his manner of speaking, and the boyishness lingering in his tone, she really couldn't believe she was looking at anyone other than the first Red King. She shivered uncontrollably at her astonishment at the impossible, and in turn, the shock of memories she had buried deep in her being were instantly unearthed. But she willed all her strength into her legs and stayed on her feet.

Five months earlier, when Kuroyukihime had agreed to assist the second Red King, Scarlet Rain, and joined the mission to subjugate the fifth Chrome Disaster, the Yellow King had surprised her with a video replay of Rider's total point loss, and the shock of being ambushed with such a painful memory had forced her into a Zero Fill, rendering her helpless.

A recording didn't begin to compare with the impact of what was going on at that moment before her very eyes. But whatever came from this unnatural meeting, she had no intention of collapsing in such an unseemly fashion again.

"So then, are you the ghost of a duel avatar? Or are you the first Burst Linker to find a way to reinstall Brain Burst after losing all your points? I suppose it's one or the other."

"I s'pose so." Rider tilted the brim of his hat at the hard echo in her voice and thought briefly. "If it has to be one or the other, I guess it'd be the first."

"Oh-ho, you were so consumed with hate, you became a ghost? Then you have perfect timing. I happen to be accompanied by a shrine maiden with the power of purification, so she can send you on your way."

She felt Utai twitch and stiffen beside her, and Fuko's hand flashed out at

inhuman speed to prevent the Shrine Maiden's retreat. Taking courage—albeit only a tiny bit—from this small moment of normalcy between her friends, Kuroyukihime added, “Or perhaps you appeared because you have something to say. In which case, out with it. You do have the right to...blame me, after all.”

Of course, Kuroyukihime didn't believe they were seeing an actual ghost. He might have been banished from the Accelerated World, but the boy who had once been the Red King still lived somewhere in real Tokyo, even now. And he had lost any and all memory of his life as a Burst Linker.

But on the other hand, anything could happen in the Accelerated World—within the limits of what the system allowed, naturally. The full-dive fighter game Brain Burst still hadn't shown even a veteran among veterans like Kuroyukihime everything it had to offer. So a digital phantom in some system-approved form...was perhaps possible.

“Well, you're exactly right that I'm here 'cause I got something to say.” Rider crossed his arms, still leaning back against the kit main body. “But I'm not here with some grudge or the resentment you're imagining. I know now: the real reason why you cut my head off in a surprise attack.”

“...What did you say?” Kuroyukihime murmured, dumbfounded, massively shocked for the nth time in the last few minutes.

The real reason Kuroyukihime had struck the Red King. The majority of Burst Linkers thought it was because she was trying to reach level ten before anyone else. That was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. Behind the tragedy was also a certain someone who had told Kuroyukihime about the Seven Roads, the gun-type Enhanced Armament the Red King produced with his Arms Creation ability. That someone had informed her that they were the ultimate weapons of destruction, designed to keep the Accelerated World forever in a state of stagnation.

But the only ones she'd confessed this truth to were the Four Elements of Nega Nebulus and her child, Silver Crow. There was no way they had given Rider that information; to start with, Rider was already gone by that point.

No...There is one other person who knows the whole truth. The “puppet master” who had so deftly deceived and manipulated her.

“His color.” Akira broke her silence quietly.

“What's wrong, Curren?” Fuko was quick to ask.

“That avatar,” Akira said, lowering her voice even further. “His color's

starting to change.”

Kuroyukihime stared intently at the gunslinger twenty meters ahead of her. The color of the armor of the duel avatar standing alongside the ISS kit main body was exactly the same as Red Rider’s in her memory, a pure and singular red that defied any kind of descriptive adjective—and yet. When she really strained her eyes, she saw that Akira was right. The color was steadily changing from the feet sunken into the gloom. From a dark, dirty bloodred, through the purple of twilight, and into a matte black reminiscent of partly burned charcoal.

Sensing the eyes of the four Burst Linkers firmly fixed on him, Rider also looked down at his feet and clicked his tongue lightly. “Tch! You’re here already? I figured I had three minutes, though...”

“What’s the meaning of this?!” Kuroyukihime yelled in frustration. “Are you really Rider?! Aren’t you here because you have something to say?!”

But instead of answering her, the gunslinger—now black up to his hips—tipped his hat apologetically. “Sorry, Lotus. We’ll finish this chat after we fight.”

“Wh-what?”

“Listen, you win, okay? Be more merciless than last time. Beat me black-and-blue. The more energy gets used up, the longer I can be me.”

“...Win? Against who?”

“Well, against...me, of course.” The Red King spread out his arms and shrugged lightly while the charcoal erased the red of his chest, his neck, and then finally, his face mask. The shallow V of his goggles was filled with a viscous darkness.

Bwmm. An unpleasant vibration accompanied a flash of light the color of blood beyond the goggles. And then, a murderous aura gushed from the avatar’s slender frame to nearly cover the floor, and Kuroyukihime and her comrades gasped. They knew this bottomless hunger—this somehow inorganic wave. The same aura the ISS kit users under Magenta Scissor were cloaked in when they had fought them earlier in the field on the north side of Midtown Tower.

Standing fixed in place, the four Burst Linkers stiffened for the merest of moments, and as if aiming for that opening, Red Rider’s hands, blackened all the way to the fingertips, flashed so quickly they blurred. He grabbed the two guns on either side of his gun belt, drew them, and aimed; the whole process

took essentially zero seconds.

* * *

I made it.

Niko still exists in this world.

The instant Mihaya set eyes upon Scarlet Rain, captive on the black cross, a smoothly liquid relief rose up in her chest. But a fraction of a second later, overwhelming rage set flame to that liquid.

Rain's armor was cruelly splintered, and she was unconscious—no light in her eye lenses. On top of that, she was crucified like a historical criminal receiving the death penalty, her arms spread wide. Mihaya would never forgive this treatment of the Red King, the leader of Prominence. Never.

Propelled by the flames of rage burning inside her, Mihaya forgot the pain in her left shoulder from Argon Array's laser and let out a roar. She sank down, preparing to leap the three stories from the roof to Black Vise, Rain's captor. But she managed to control herself, somehow.

Vise and Argon stood together in the center of a courtyard about fifty meters on each side, while Silver Crow, Lime Bell, and Cyan Pile were lined up along the east side. The three junior members of Nega Nebulus boldly faced the two execs of the Acceleration Research Society and their unfathomable abilities. This battle didn't belong to Mihaya alone. Silver Crow had continued to chase Vise to this place; he had earned the right to start this fight.

She turned her eyes toward Niko once more and vowed in her heart to save her before jumping almost straight down. She cut across the courtyard to Crow's side and offered a brief apology for keeping them waiting.

In fact, it had taken longer than she'd expected to reach this place. Everything had been good up to the point she charged into the shadow tunnel after getting help from Cyan Pile and Lime Bell, but she'd gotten separated from them in the total darkness and been carried to a different exit.

However, fortunately—she supposed—she caught sight of Argon running ahead of her in the gloomy corridor, so she followed her, taking care not to be noticed, and made it through the mazelike basement. Argon discovered her not long after they came aboveground, but she apparently prioritized meeting up with Vise; she just kept running, instead of attacking Mihaya with her

lasers. So Mihaya had managed to regroup with her comrades in the place of the final battle.

The fact that the Acceleration Research Society headquarters was this bright and large—and apparently a large school in the real world—had surprised her, but they could spend the day analyzing this information later. At the moment, she had to focus on crushing the two tough enemies before her to get Niko back. The Black King and the group they'd left at Midtown had to have made it to the nearest leave point by then, but no matter how they hurried, it would take at least three seconds to return to the real world through the portal, move their flesh-and-blood bodies, and pull out Niko's cable. That was fifty minutes on this side—it would be great if they could crush Vise and his crew before then, but even if they couldn't, they had to at least protect Rain.

Newly resolved, Mihaya extended the claws on her hands to their full length. And then, a seventh Burst Linker fell with a rumble from the sky, adding a new level of confusion to the war situation.

At first, Mihaya didn't know who the intruder was. But she'd heard the name Silver Crow uttered hoarsely before.

Wolfram Cerberus. The fearsome newbie who'd suddenly appeared in the Accelerated World. Parent and Legion affiliation totally unknown, battle intelligence far beyond that of a beginner, powerful defensive ability Physical Immunity. He'd crushed one middle ranker after another. A duel genius. All the rumors had reached Nerima.

Given that he mainly showed up in areas controlled by Leonids and Great Wall, Mihaya still hadn't seen him fight with her own eyes, but she'd been thinking she should sit in on one of his fights from the Gallery, at least. And now, her first encounter with him was here in this situation.

The issue was whether Cerberus was friend or foe. If he was a foe, then in a certain sense, she should probably be more on guard against him than Vise or Argon. Especially since all the three attackers on this side were only physical, close-range types. Her misgivings became reality a second later.

Standing up, the gray metal-color avatar turned his back to Vise and Argon and faced Silver Crow squarely. Wolfram Cerberus was a foe. A member of the Acceleration Research Society. Mihaya carved this knowledge into her brain.

But Cerberus's first words were somewhat unexpected. "I didn't want to

meet you again like this...Crow.”

He sounded as though he was enduring severe pain, and she didn't believe it was an act. Silver Crow's response, too, seemed to contain an equal mix of pain and shock.

“Me too, Cerberus. Because you're in the Unlimited Neutral Field...you went up a level?”

“Yes.” Cerberus nodded. “Not to the bare minimum of level four. The same level five as you, Crow.”

“So we're the same level now. But...does that mean your 'role' of staying at level one and earning points is over, then? I want to have a regular duel with you. A duel with no tricks—a pure duel. So...please don't stand there, Cerberus.” Crow's speech was restrained, but there was an earnest echo in his words.

“I'm sorry.” The small avatar shook his head slightly. “I can't step away from this place. But what you said after the battle royale on Thursday made me happy. And that you met me in the real as well.”

“...No need for the past tense. We can meet again whenever you want... Anytime.”

There was an edge in this exchange between gray and silver metal colors, like an extremely thin wire had been stretched as far as it could go and was now being plucked. A pure and dangerous rapport as they both pulled powerfully against each other. It would be no surprise if it snapped at any moment.

“It's just as you said, Crow. The role I was given is essentially complete. Which means there is no longer any reason to permit my existence. Today will be the last day I talk with you like this...”

Mihaya sensed a faint smile rising up on the wolfish face mask as Cerberus spoke. In contrast, Crow was clenching his hands into tight fists.

“Cerberus!” he called in an increasingly tense voice. “You don't need the role you were 'given' or a reason for your existence to be 'permitted' or whatever! A Burst Linker can always find their own objectives, right?!”

“.....”

Head hanging, Cerberus didn't immediately respond. Instead, they heard Argon Array's mirthful voice, with that hint of secret laughter that never failed to rub them the wrong way. “Ha-ha-ha! Crow, you really got some hella smooth words there! But damned straight here. We don't talk none of

that Burst Linker crap!” Argon jeered.

“You mustn’t say things like that, Array,” Vise rebuked her from her side. “After all, you yourself have an objective or two, yes?”

“Well, I won’t say I don’t got three or four. And one of ’em’s gonna be checked off today, so I’m not joinin’ you for any beatdowns or what. Aah, for real, this is a real long deal. I’m workin’ here, seriously...”

“Such comments are a bit premature. Personally, I’d be glad to have you begin before any further obstacles come along.”

The conversation made no sense, and Mihaya tried to shut it out of her head. She’d only recently learned that Argon’s tendency toward speech itself was a close-range, glamour-type attack, and she had paid the price for it. They had to attack before she got them all turned around.

“Can I leave Wolfram Cerberus to you?” Mihaya murmured to Silver Crow beside her, his hands still clenched into fists.

Although it took just a second to come, Crow’s answer was definite. “Yes. I’ll be his opponent.”

“Kay. I’m taking Argon down. Pile and Bell...” Mihaya glanced at them, and the large blue and small green avatars nodded in tandem.

“Vise, right?” Takumu said. “He’s a powerful enemy, but he can’t use one arm right now. I’ll do something and hold him off while you and Crow are fighting.”

“I’ve got your back, Pile,” Chiyuri chirped. “I’ll just keep healing you up!”

At this reassuring response from the level fives, Mihaya nodded slightly but firmly.

If they compared just the total value for their levels, the enemy was $8 + 8 + 5 = 21$, while her group was $8 + 5 + 5 + 5 = 23$. If this were the duel holy land, Akihabara BG—although you couldn’t fight there in teams of more than three—most people would bet on Mihaya’s group. But the true power of Wolfram Cerberus couldn’t be measured in numbers, and the other two Society members were the same. To even think that Mihaya, who had only just advanced to level eight, was in the same place as Argon and Vise, who had probably reached that level ages ago, was hubris.

But the three members of Nega Nebulus were true warriors; they inevitably displayed a power beyond their level when push came to shove. Lime Bell with her astounding ability to reverse time, Cyan Pile, hiding an

outstandingly keen intellect beneath that thick armor, and Silver Crow—the depth of whose potential still could not be seen. As long as she had these three with her, they would definitely make it over this sword’s edge. And they would get back Niko—the master she had sworn her eternal loyalty to. They would not fail.

Mihaya leaned forward the slightest bit and activated the Incarnate System that she had long kept sealed away. A bloody red overlay gushed from her hands and sharp claws, powerful enough to dim the red of the twilight.

As if in response to the sudden increase in battle spirit in the seven avatars, the sky above the courtyard suddenly clouded over and rumbled with the low roar of thunder.

* * *

Master Gunsmith.

This first Red King had been given this nickname because of his matchless ability to produce any number of gun-type Enhanced Armament himself. But that certainly didn’t mean Red Rider was what other net games called a *craftier*. Half the reason he’d been dubbed *Master* lay in the transcendence of his gun work.

Entire body dyed the color of darkness, Rider whipped his guns out in a quick draw like a lightning strike and pulled the triggers without a flicker of hesitation. One roar after another echoed across the vast forty-fifth floor of Midtown Tower, but Kuroyukihime and her comrades had already leapt off to the sides.

The Red King’s main arms were two revolver Enhanced Armaments called Helios and Eos. Since each of their cylinders held six bullets, with both guns, he could fire twelve successive shots. Alternately pulling the triggers of the left and right guns, the Red King used up all his bullets in a mere two seconds. Eight of the fired bullets passed between Kuroyukihime and Akira (who had jumped to the left), and Fuko and Utai (to the right), but the remaining four closed in with terrifying accuracy on the critical point of each girl—the heart.

“Nngh!” Gritting her teeth, Kuroyukihime deflected the bullets targeting her and Akira with a wave of her left sword-arm.

On the right, Fuko launched a left-right palm-strike combo and pulverized

those two bullets. The four young women had managed to prevent a direct attack on their bodies, but it was impossible to defend against bullets without taking some damage. The system registered the grazes, and her health gauge dropped the slightest bit. And it had to have been the same for Fuko.

Having emptied his rounds, Red Rider raised his guns smoothly. *Chak!* The cylinders swung open and the empty casings tumbled to the ground.

“Now!” Kuroyukihime called, kicking off the ground ferociously.

One part of her mind was still in chaos, an unpartitioned hard disk. Was this Red Rider who suddenly appeared before them the real deal or not? What was the meaning of his mysterious words? Why did his color suddenly change? Why did he start attacking? The mountain of questions only grew ever higher.

But in the bottom of her heart, Kuroyukihime had been prepared for something like this, knowing she would inevitably have to face her own past if she continued to pursue the ISS kit main body. The moment she saw the crossed-guns crest on the sealed card Silver Crow entrusted to her, it was clear that the first Red King was involved in some form or another.

Of course, she never imagined she would face Rider in a direct confrontation like this, but that didn’t mean she could run away. Rider had said to fight, so she would fight. A continuation of the “duel” that day that had ended in a mere second with Kuroyukihime’s surprise attack.

“Ah...Aaaah!” Roaring with resolve, Kuroyukihime brandished the sword of her right hand.

The biggest opening for a red-type avatar was the moment they ran out of ammunition. And the Red King was no exception.

Normally, once the empty casings were ejected, the cylinder needed to be reloaded by hand—one bullet at a time. But at nearly the same time that the chamber was emptied, the armor on Rider’s arms opened up and speed loaders popped out. The loader arms stretched forth and pushed six bullets into the empty cylinder simultaneously.

Chak! The sound echoed once more as the cylinders snapped back into the gun body, and reloading was complete. The time from the moment he turned his guns upward to the instant the loaders, having served their purpose, were tucked back into his arms was a mere two seconds. This was Auto Load.

Back when Red Rider was fighting on the front lines, this quick-firing, quick-loading technique had blocked the close-range attacks of the blue-type

avatars and had even broken through the solid defenses of green-type avatars with grazing damage alone. Even Kuroyukihime, who was justly confident in her charging speed, had been pushed back any number of times by this rapid-fire assault, leaving Rider just barely beyond the reach of her sword-arms.

But this time, she was fortunate in that the distance between them at the start of the fight was relatively small. By the time the Red King was aiming his guns again, Kuroyukihime was already bringing her Terminate Sword down on him. This blade severed everything it touched, and now it was closing in on Rider's defenseless neck.

But somewhere deep inside her, in a reflex she couldn't control, she shuddered for a mere instant. The vibration knocked her attack off course, and rather than the neck, the blade hit the left shoulder, covered in hard armor for a red type.

Skreek! The light of the damage effect scattered with a sharp metallic sound.

Her sword had cut deep into his shoulder, stopping the movement of the gun in his left hand, but almost as though he didn't feel the pain of the injury, Rider quickly turned the gun in his right hand squarely at Kuroyukihime's chest. His finger, machinelike in its precision and ruthlessness, pulled the trigger.

Flames blossomed at the mouth of the barrel that was practically pressed up against her chest. The bullet very nearly hit her armor before she whipped her sword-arm in front of her to catch it.

Once more, the ear-splitting shriek of metal. Brilliant sparks shot up from the ridge of her sword, and her health gauge dropped slightly again. And naturally, Rider's attack didn't end at one shot. He pulled the trigger over and over with the speed of a machine gun—and a second, then a third shot landed in precisely the same place. She defended against each one successfully, but with every impact to her arm, the amount her gauge dropped grew. Shot repeatedly in the same spot, the damage in her sword was accumulating. But she couldn't exactly move it and let a bullet hit her critical point.

Pushed back by the barrage, Kuroyukihime was keenly aware of the cause of the trembling that had knocked her slicing attack off course: the fear, regret, and guilt she'd shoved to the bottom of her heart for nearly three years. She hated herself for using a surprise attack to push the Red King to total point loss, and this hatred had made the battle spirit that moved her

avatar freeze up—if only for an instant. It was exactly the same reason as the Zero Fill six months ago.

Disgusting! Kuroyukihime rebuked herself as Rider emptied his right-hand gun, Helios. *I promised him—I promised Haruyuki!*

I said I wouldn't be afraid, I wouldn't run from the past anymore...I said no matter what was waiting for us at Midtown Tower, I wouldn't retreat a single step!

Hit with pinpoint accuracy by six bullets, her sword made a faint but ominous sound. It was still there, though, unbroken. And her spirit, while shaken, was not broken, either. She would fight on. Both the enemy before her eyes—and her own fear. She plunged the tips of both feet into the floor and stopped her retreat.

While auto-loading the emptied chamber, the Red King took aim with his left-hand weapon, which had previously been pushed back by the slicing attack. It was fast, leaving absolutely no opening.

He was supposedly an extreme red type, yet fighting him was like going up against a blue type with close-range weapons in each hand.

Kuroyukihime had the option of giving up on close combat and leaping back to join Fuko and Akira in a defensive formation, leaving Utai to attack with her longbow. But right before he'd turned black, Rider had told her to beat him black-and-blue, to be merciless. And then that bit about “the longer I can be me.” She didn't think she could make that happen with a clever strategic win, and more than anything else, she felt as if stepping back now would be the same as losing.

She wasn't trying to be obstinate and reject the help of her comrades, but at the very least, she couldn't fall back until she beat him back with a satisfactory slicing attack. But to get within sword's reach of Rider again, it wasn't enough to simply guard against his bullets. She would have to anticipate the firing of each bullet and dodge them while moving forward.

Kuroyukihime. She suddenly heard a quiet voice in her ears. *You can't look at the gun barrel. To see when they'll fire, you have to look at the person holding the gun and read the signs from their whole body.*

I'll try! She shifted her gaze away from the black barrel of Eos in Rider's left hand.

The vitality she'd sensed—albeit slightly—during their conversation had completely disappeared when the Red King was eaten up by darkness. But in

its place came a vibrant, thirsty bloodlust. Two points of bloody light blinked faintly beneath his V-shaped goggles.

Tossing herself forward, Kuroyukihime pushed off the ground and flew with every scrap of strength she had.

Fire jetted from the gun barrel. The bullet grazed one of the antennas stretching out at length on either side of her helmet. Rider fired again, lowering his aim, and Kuroyukihime sank even lower to slip past the coming projectiles. *Bang! Bang!* In her accelerated consciousness, she heard the roar of the bullets, and lumps of metal rocketing forward at nearly the speed of sound grazed the armor of her back. She had brought herself so low to the ground that she would fall on her face if she leaned forward any farther—and that was when the sixth bullet removed a piece of her armor skirt and shot off behind her.

She couldn't actually see it, but he should have been just about finished reloading the gun in his right hand.

She only had one chance to attack. This time, for sure, she had to shake free of the fear etched into the depths of her heart and launch a single blow with her entire body and spirit.

“Aaaaaaah!!” Roaring mightily, Kuroyukihime spread the swords of both arms.

From her position, body bent as far as humanly possible, a proper sword attack was not possible. She didn't have enough room to brandish her sword-arms, and a kicking technique would take too long. Kuroyukihime had only one technique she could launch from such close range.

She kicked off the floor once more and bounced upward. With a head butt, she pushed Helios up and away and latched her avatar onto Rider's. Wrapping both arms around him, she crossed the tips of her two swords.

A torso wasn't quite the same as a neck, but she had basically put them in an equivalent position three years earlier, deceiving the Red King with both words and attitude to get close enough to launch the technique. But this time was different. Counting from the first shot, she had dodged, repelled, and slipped past twelve bullets to close the distance between them.

I am not the person I was then!!

Putting every bit of willpower she had into her arms, Kuroyukihime pushed away her fear and shouted, “Death By Embracing!!”

A line of crimson light flashed. A relentless and decisive sound effect

rang out in her ears.

Black Lotus's level-eight special attack severed the torso of the Red King right along the line of his gun belt.

Rider didn't so much as grunt, despite that the pain dancing across his nerves had to be the fiercest sensation that could be generated in the Accelerated World, but instead tried to fire the gun in his right hand. For nearly all duel avatars, having their head severed from their body meant instant death, but some did manage to survive being rent asunder at the waist. But Kuroyukihime couldn't move right away because of the moment of stiffness that came immediately after activating a major technique.



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Just as the gun barrel was on the verge of exploding in flames, however, drops of water came flying up from behind to splash into Rider's goggles. The water became a vision-blocking fog that kept him from firing his gun.

Aqua Current had launched part of her now finally recovered flowing-water armor like a slingshot.

Then, a bright-red flaming arrow plunged into Rider's right arm. With magnificent skill, Ardor Maiden had pierced the core of the avatar's naked body and temporarily paralyzed the hand holding Helios. Even backed into this corner, the Red King still did not cry out, but rather, he tried to reload Eos in his left.

Sky Raker flew in now, transformed into a gust of wind, with sliver-blue hair fluttering. No doubt she had fired a burst from Gale Thruster to charge the Red King with a speed impossible to attain in a normal jump. With a brief battle cry, she struck him loudly with a palm strike. "Ha!"

The intense impact was too much to withstand, and cracks radiated outward in his thick chest armor. Sooty fragments peeling away, the Red King turned his guns forward with fearsome battle instincts.

Here, Kuroyukihime's stiffness finally ended. She used her hunched posture to jump up high, then turned toward Rider's torso floating through the air. She propelled a leg directly up. "Yaaah!"

The tip of her sword carved a blue crescent moon out of the air as it ripped through Rider's stomach up to his head, cutting his trademark ten-gallon hat perfectly in two.

That was the final blow. Red Rider's health gauge—assuming he had one—was completely spent. He stopped unnaturally in midair, torso reeling, before scattering into countless black fragments. The fragments turned into jet-black smoke and vanished while Kuroyukihime did a backward somersault to land on her feet. She turned slowly toward her comrades as they raced over to her.

"Sacchi," Fuko called to her in a murmur.

Kuroyukihime stopped holding her breath. "He's a fake," she replied briefly.

"....."

Her friends were silent, eyes turned toward her, and she continued, softening her tone, "Rider's strength wasn't that. Even four against one, he would shoot and shoot and shoot, never taking a step back. He would shoot

and win, shoot and win some more...That was the kind of guy Red Rider was. They might have re-created his gun techniques, but the will contained in each and every one of those bullets was totally different. There's no way that was the real Rider."

"But his aura, the way he talked before his armor changed color, that *was* the Master Gunsmith," Akira noted.

"Mmm." She nodded, then shook her head. "But...I can't say how, but it was different in some way. And my victories against level nines didn't go up, either." She glanced at the system message area on the left side of her field of view.

The voice she heard in response was not Fuko's, nor Akira's, nor Utai's.

"Ha-ha-ha! It'd really be something else if that went up. You could get to level ten just by taking me on here."

"——!!!"

Whirling around, the four Burst Linkers watched as an avatar was ejected from the pupil area of the massive eyeball on the south side of the floor—the ISS kit main body. Kuroyukihime didn't need to see the wide-brimmed hat and the large gun belt to know this was the very Red Rider she had only just defeated minutes ago.

"Wh-what's going on?!" Fuko cried out in surprise, staring at the avatar pulling his body free from the semitransparent membrane.

Rider stood up and then started to walk—the spurs on his boots clacking. "I told you—I'm kinda like a ghost. In a way, I'm the real Red Rider, but at the same time, I'm a total fake. To get you to understand that, I needed you to fight me once, you know? Sorry for attacking you, huh, Lotus?"

"N-no. That was on me, too—," Kuroyukihime said, baffled, before pulling herself back together and crying sharply, "real or fake, quit saying all these things that are supposed to be so deep! What exactly *are* you?! What kind of logic has you appearing here and regenerating?!"

"Don't be mad. I'll explain everything. Thanks to you guys totally crushing it before, it looks like I can be me for a while now." The Red King stopped about ten meters away from Kuroyukihime and her comrades, perhaps to show he was not there to fight, and sat cross-legged on the marble floor. He gestured with his fingertips for them to come closer, so they stepped toward him, on guard.

Kuroyukihime stopped close enough to be able to hear his murmured

voice, and Rider looked up at her.

“I’m a ghost, but it’s not like I transformed and appeared of my own will.” He made the fearsome announcement in a calm voice. “After you cut off my head, and I lost all my points, a certain Burst Linker brought me back to life in a limited way. As a pawn toward their own objective, you know?”

“B-brought back to life? A Burst Linker who didn’t die after his health gauge dropped to zero...but rather one who lost all his points and vanished from the Accelerated World?” Kuroyukihime’s voice was shaking—so hoarse she almost couldn’t believe it was her own. Fuko and the others stood with her, frozen speechless.

It was impossible. A Burst Linker who lost all their burst points left the Accelerated World forever through a final extinction phenomenon, and the Brain Burst program installed on their Neurolinker was completely erased.

To be more precise, this didn’t happen the moment a player lost all their points, but rather the instant they learned the outcome of the battle when they had zero points remaining. For instance, if you accidentally made a purchase in the shop so that your points dropped to exactly zero, you could escape forcible removal if you recovered those points before your next duel. In the case of the Red King, however, his points had been zeroed according to the level-nine sudden-death rule, so any rescue should have been impossible. And of course, any regeneration.

Having driven the top four members of Nega Nebulus into a maelstrom of shock, Rider shrugged lightly from the ground and added, “I said limited, yeah? The me here now is the shadow of the Red Rider who fought you and vanished three years ago— Frankly, I’m a zombie. The real me in the real world is out there living a peaceful student life, all memories of the Accelerated World gone from his head...Although I can’t say for sure he’s got no memory of *that* particular scene. Anyway, someone prob’ly made a copy of something like my spirit with a special attack or an Incarnate technique—and...made it possess the giant eyeball back there.”

“Possess...copy of the spirit...,” Kuroyukihime parroted back.

To her left, Utai shook her head slightly. “If that is true...you can’t be said to have come back to life. Copying the spirit of someone who’s left the Accelerated World and using it for your own purposes— That power is not a regeneration technique. It’s more fitting to call it necromancy.”

“That is true, hmm? But why? Why would this *whoever* do that?” Fuko

asked.

“To use Red Rider’s abilities, of course,” the shadow of the Red King replied quietly. “They made me, Rider’s zombie, so they could make the Enhanced Armament they want with Arms Creation. And then they made me parasitize that vessel, the eyeball.”

The Red King’s words were so shocking it was all Kuroyukihime could do to digest the information, but even so, she immediately grasped the meaning of this Enhanced Armament. “The ISS kits, hmm? Those eyeballs distributed throughout the Accelerated World were made using your ability. That’s what you’re saying, yes?”

“I’ll tell you right now, I didn’t pick the design or the specs. To start with, when I’m swallowed up by the giant eye, it’s like my main switch is turned off; I can’t see anything or hear anything or think anything. To make me come out like this, the eyeball uses up a ton of energy; it only happens when it’s in recovery mode. Now’s one of those times.”

“You mean it used energy to reproduce the you we defeated? That’s why you said all that about beating you black-and-blue?”

“Exactly. Incidentally, I managed to come out the first time because the giant eyeball materialized a ton of tiny eyeballs for defense. Although you guys made quick work of them, too.”

“I see. In other words, when the eyeball recovers its energy, you’ll turn black again and come to attack us, then.” Businesslike, she asked the question merely for confirmation.

“Sorry, but that’s about it.” Rider raised the brim of his ten-gallon hat lightly in apology. “Well, I expect I’m a whole lot weaker than the real me, though. I think I can still talk a little longer, though.”

If what Rider was telling them was true, then they had to get as much information from him as they could right now. But there were too many things she wanted to ask about, and it was hard to immediately prioritize one. Kuroyukihime fell silent, caught in this fleeting hesitation.

“To start with, what is *that*?” Akira’s voice pierced the brief silence. She shot her eyes toward the massive eyeball object behind them.

“It’s not energy, and it’s not an Enhanced Armament,” the Red King answered neatly. “It’s prob’ly a duel avatar.”

Shocked yet again, Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and Utai all gasped. But Akira, as might be expected of the parent of Blood Leopard, did not waste time; she

was already moving on to her next question.

“Which means that a Burst Linker like us is making that eyeball—the ISS kit main body—move?”

“That’s the rub right there. An Enemy wouldn’t sit still like this even if it was tamed, and an Enhanced Armament would be wiped out with the Change. Plus, this massive eyeball does actually have something like emotions and intent. Just...if it’s a Burst Linker, I don’t have the first clue how they can stay in the Unlimited Neutral Field for so long like this. I’m a zombie, so I don’t usually feel time, but this vessel here wouldn’t be like that. I mean, it’s been fifty years at least since it appeared in this spot.”

“F-fifty years?!” Kuroyukihime cried out reflexively. But it had already been over two weeks in real time since the ISS kits had been first confirmed in the Accelerated World. In the Unlimited Neutral Field, that did indeed work out to nearly fifty years. For both internal and external reasons, a continuous dive of that length of time was almost certainly impossible.

To start with, it was a sphere nearly three meters in diameter—surface covered in a fleshy armor reminiscent of a brain. It had no legs or arms, only a single massive eye. And it held a portal inside its body. Could a duel avatar like this even exist? What kind of mental scars exactly could produce such an avatar?

While on the one hand, she felt a Burst Linker like this was impossible, a part of her also wondered *What if*: What if the Acceleration Research Society were the ones distributing the ISS kits? They had for all intents and purposes produced the Armor of Catastrophe, Chrome Disaster; destroyed the Hermes’ Cord race; and even tamed the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron. She wouldn’t be surprised at anything they did anymore. She had no doubt that whoever turned Red Rider into a zombie to use him after his total point loss was also a member of the Society.

And more than anything else, the Acceleration Research Society had used the Twilight Marauder, Dusk Taker, as its vanguard to wreak havoc on Umesato Junior High School during Kuroyukihime’s absence and cruelly torment Haruyuki Arita, Takumu Mayuzumi, and Chiyuri Kurashima. They were working to bring about massive disorder and strife in the Accelerated World. When it came to that group, they might even be able to produce a duel avatar like the ISS kit main body using some unimaginable, evil method.

“Rider.” Shaking off her surprise and confusion, Kuroyukihime called to

the Burst Linker who had been her friend, whose life she had cut short with her own hands. “I— We have to destroy that eyeball. Whether it’s a duel avatar or not. Even...even if as a result, the you here now is extinguished.”

Still settled on the floor, the gunslinger let slip a faint, wry smile. “I’m not gonna beg you to stop or anything. This me’s just a zombie forced to make these shitty Enhanced Armaments. I’ve been waiting this whole time, y’know, for someone to end it for me. And then you, Lotus...” Unable to finish his sentence, the Red King shrugged once more.

“But, like, when you do end up fighting it, that thing’s strong. Even *I* don’t know what attacks it’ll come at you with. But the one thing I do know is that it’s hella strong. Don’t think of it as just an object. Go at it with everything you got, right from the get-go.”

“...Understood.” Kuroyukihime nodded.

Rider tugged the brim of his hat and stretched his legs out in front of him before jumping lightly to his feet.

“BBK, tell me one more thing,” Akira called out.

“That name takes me back! What, Aquamatic?”

“The ISS kits made with your ability and distributed through the Accelerated World. Will they die if the main body’s destroyed?”

That was indeed something they should confirm. Their current top priority was to leave for the real world through the portal that was inside the kit main body and pull out Niko’s cable, now that she’d been abducted by Black Vise, but the original objective of that day’s mission was to render the ISS kit terminals harmless and stop the mental interference with the infected—that is to say, with Rin Kusakabe aka Ash Roller—whom they had left behind in the nurse’s room at Umesato Junior High.

However.

Rider froze for a moment and then shook his head vigorously from side to side. “No. Even if the big eyeball dies, it prob’ly won’t take the teeny ones along for the ride. I’m pretty sure the big one and the teeny ones I was forced to make are connected through that portal. You wipe out the big eyeball, and that info exchange deal’ll stop, I bet. But the individual teeny ones’ll keep on going.”

“Th-that’s—!! So then, Ash—!!” Utai cried in a thin voice.

Kuroyukihime was equally stunned. She had believed unwaveringly that the terminals would die if the main body was destroyed.

“As long as we stop the information exchange, at least—the mental interference—we should be able to avert the crisis for the time being.” Akira’s voice was stiff but cool. “We just have to discuss how to get rid of the kit with everyone later.”

“Oh! Th-that’s true. Once we have some time, I can definitely purify the kit parasitizing Ash...” Utai started to say with conviction, but the Red King interrupted her.

“That won’t be necessary, miss. I’ll take responsibility for things I made and render them powerless.”

“...How will you do that?”

“They and Lotus know this, I bet, but I can remotely activate a safety in any Enhanced Armament I make. No matter where it is in the Accelerated World. Which includes the little eyeballs here, of course. And those eyeballs multiplying out there are no exception, either.”

“.....!”

Kuroyukihime inhaled sharply and then quickly shook her head. “I didn’t forget about your remote safety ability...But the crossed-guns emblem isn’t anywhere on the ISS kit terminals. And that’s the safety structure, isn’t it?”

“I said so before—it’s not like I designed the things. But if it’s an Enhanced Armament I made, then it’ll be there somewhere. Right now, the big eyeball’s stronger, so I can’t interfere with the teeny ones. But if you destroy Big Eye here, I’ll go ahead and lock the safety on all the little ones. I might be a zombie, but I’ve got that much pride left, at least.”

Making this quiet declaration, Rider turned his back to the four again. He made a show of giving a thumbs-up and started walking toward the massive eyeball.

Kuroyukihime shouted some last words at the gunslinger’s narrow back. “Rider! You...”

Don’t you have anything you want to say? Isn’t the anger and hatred toward me, the one who stole your life as a Burst Linker with a cowardly surprise attack and destroyed the Red Legion, stored up in that avatar?

But she couldn’t give voice to the words that rose up as far as her throat. Because she understood that she would only be asking to make herself feel better. Instead, she raised a superficially similar question.

“...You said before that you already knew why I pushed you to total point loss three years ago. How did you find out?”

“I said I knew, but it’s more like I guessed. I don’t think I’m wrong, though,” Rider replied without stopping. “Like I said, I don’t remember who turned me into a zombie. Unfortunately. But they had to have been in the field at the meeting of the Seven Kings. Y’think they were merely lucky enough to bring me back to life when you just happened to push me to total point loss? Nah, there’s no way. I was a target from the start—that’s how you should be thinking. The basic story is: set a fire under the Black King, get her to take the head of the Red King, and secretly make him their own puppet... Someone who could do something like that...”

Red Rider cut himself off and glanced back. The sharp shape of his goggles glinted in the evening sun pouring into the hall through the rupture in the building.

“You should look for the rest of the answers yourself. Later, Lotus. And to you three of the Four Elements. Say hi to Anomaly for me, too. And...say thanks to number two. He took over Promi for me. Tell him it’s up to him now.”

Lifting his right hand once more, he lightly waggled the index and middle fingers, and then the first Red King stepped feetfirst into the pupil of the massive eyeball. The semitransparent membrane swallowed the avatar slowly, sucking him in, and when the dark eyelid blinked sluggishly, there wasn’t a trace of him left behind.

Kuroyukihime didn’t understand the feeling she was experiencing. It wasn’t fear or anger or sadness, but a blend of all these—some kind of high-pressure energy that threatened to rip her avatar open from the inside.

“Sacchi.” Fuko touched her back gently, perhaps sensing her tension.

Kuroyukihime took a deep breath and let it out again. “What we have to do hasn’t changed,” she announced to her comrades, keeping herself under control. “We will expend every bit of power we have and destroy the ISS kit main body.”

“Right,” Fuko said. “That *is* why we came here, after all.”

“We’ll get it done,” Akira continued.

“We will fight as hard as we can!” Utai declared.

The ISS kit main body was neither Enemy nor Enhanced Armament, but rather duel avatar. That’s what the shadow of Red Rider had told them. In which case, whoever produced this massive eyeball was a flesh-and-blood human being just like Kuroyukihime and her comrades, a boy or maybe a girl

close to her own age. And they had the Red King locked inside them so they could use his ability to produce massive numbers of an Enhanced Armament injected with a dark will to spread throughout the Accelerated World.

She didn't know if this person had wanted this. It was quite possible they were simply under the control of the Acceleration Research Society. But even if that was true, now that things had come this far, there was nothing left to do but fight. When they faced each other on the battlefield as Burst Linkers, there was only the duel. There were things that could only be known, communicated for the first time through battle. Even if the opponent was a massive eyeball that didn't speak.

Perhaps in response to Kuroyukihime's resolve, the pupil of the ISS kit main body changed color once more—from the blue of the portal locked inside it to the dark red of venous blood.

Vwaaam! She felt a heavy vibration, and viscous darkness gushed from the spherical brain-life surface. This aura, nothing other than the manifestation of pure evil, rushed over to the four Burst Linkers standing at the ready twenty meters away, where it produced a sensation akin to the surface of their armor being stabbed by countless pins.

"Is this...all Incarnate overlay?!" Fuko shouted, almost moaning, as she raised her right hand. A shining ripple of light blue spread out from her palm and pushed back the dark aura. The overlay itself had no attack power, but in contrast with how a positive aura warmed and gave courage to those it touched, a negative aura had an effect like a chill that froze an avatar.

Kuroyukihime, Akira, and Utai simultaneously cloaked themselves in their own overlay colors, and the cold darkness receded. It wasn't clear whether or not the kit main body understood words, but just in case, she gave her instructions in a quiet voice.

"With that body, it shouldn't have any maneuverability! We all close in, go around to the rear, and hit it hard!"

"Roger!" came three voices in unison as the members of Nega Nebulus readied themselves, waiting for their leader's mark.

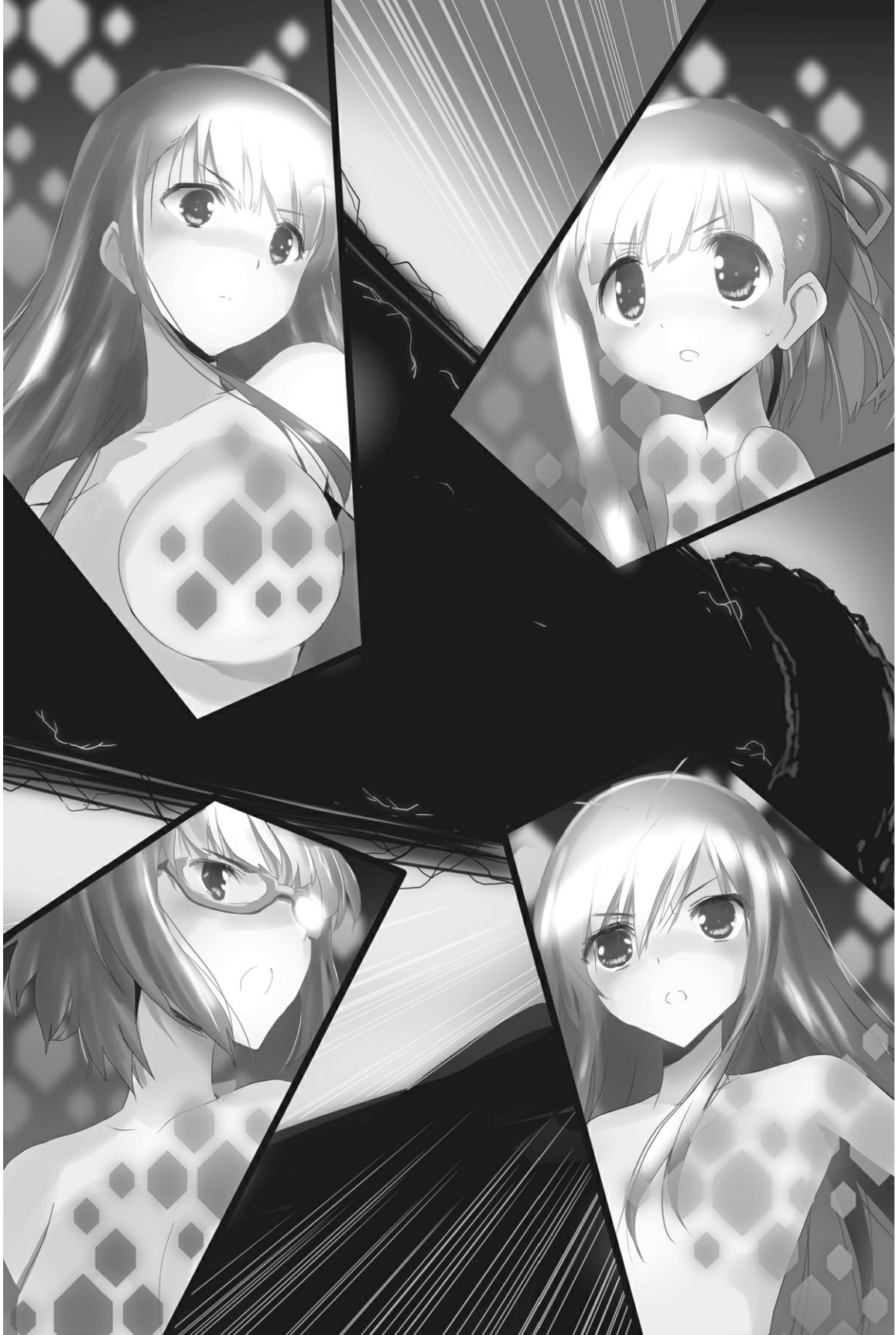
"A..."

...ttack.

Before the shout could leave her lips, the aura blanketing the eyeball concentrated to a single point. A jet-black beam shot toward them from the pupil: the ISS kit's particular long-distance Incarnate attack, Dark Shot. But

the scale was several orders of magnitude greater than the one Burst Linkers infected with terminals used.

Almost as if the attack had the exact opposite attributes of Archangel Metatron's superheated laser, the nihilistic torrent shaved away, ate into, and disintegrated everything it touched. And this beam charged forward to swallow up Kuroyukihime and her comrades.



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Once you've dived into the battlefield, there is only the duel, no matter your opponent. That was what his swordmaster Kuroyukihime had taught him.

The first time Haruyuki had fought Wolfram Cerberus was five days earlier, on the evening of June 25. He had been completely crushed, unable to mount any kind of real defense against Cerberus's incredible responsiveness, far surpassing Haruyuki's own flight ability, and the overwhelming hardness of his Physical Immunity.

Their rematch was the following day. After special training in the Way of the Flexible with Kuroyukihime, he had used this new system combined with throwing techniques to overcome the Physical Immunity ability and secure victory, although there had been the small matter of Cerberus switching personalities at the end.

And then again the next day, Thursday, June 27. Haruyuki had been dragged into a battle royale, with Suginami Area No. 2 as the battlefield rather than Nakano Area No. 2, and faced off for the third time against Cerberus. At the climax of their fierce fight, Argon Array had jumped in and flushed his win down the toilet, but Haruyuki still managed a face-to-face meeting with Cerberus in the real world after the duel, albeit for a mere instant.

Those fights had really brought home to him the idea of: The more blows exchanged, the closer the hearts become. If he and Cerberus kept dueling like that, he was sure they'd become real friends at some point. Haruyuki truly believed that; he just couldn't believe their fourth encounter would come to pass here of all places.

He'd known Cerberus had some kind of deep connection with Argon and thus with the ARS. He'd also wondered if Cerberus himself was the success

story of the Artificial Metal-Color plan based on the Mental-Scar Shell theory Argon was such a champion of. So in a certain sense, setting aside the timing and how they'd ended up there now, it really was inevitable that Haruyuki would see Cerberus in the decisive battle with them.

But I didn't want to meet you here, Haruyuki thought, pained. The courtyard around him was silent, but the intense battle lust from either side clashed in the air above.

The reason he had jumped into the shadow corridor, slipped past the guard Enemy, joined with his friends to smash an indestructible wall using their Incarnate attacks, and arrived in this place was to get Niko back. That was his lone objective, the one thing he needed to achieve at all costs. And anyone who got in his way would have to be eliminated, with every bit of force he had at his disposal.

The time for other considerations was past. He couldn't allow himself any softness now. Even if his opponent was the very Wolfram Cerberus he was certain he could come to an understanding with someday.

There were certain kinds of things you could say only through a sincere duel. That was what this principle of Kuroyukihime's meant. But the fight that was about to take place was no normal duel. It was an anything-goes slaughter, with the Incarnate System fully activated right from the start. An all-out battle that would snap the meager thread connecting Cerberus and Haruyuki in an instant.

Even so. I believe in you. And me. Haruyuki murmured this in his heart, and a remarkably strong wind blew through the courtyard, making the black cross, like that on the steeple of a chapel, creak. On this signal, the Burst Linkers—minus Black Vise—sprang into action.

“Aaaaah!”

Haruyuki dashed forward, roaring.

Before him, Cerberus slammed his fists together with a clang. The helmet visor patterned after a wolf's maw came down, leaving mere millimeters between top and bottom. The Physical Immunity ability was activated. The only attacks Haruyuki had that would work on Cerberus in this state were throwing techniques and his special attack, Head Butt, which caused light attribute damage. And if he tried either one while Cerberus was on guard

against him, his opponent would no doubt dodge and hit him with a counterattack. But that was when they were in a Normal Duel Field.

Throwing off any hesitation, Haruyuki called up a silver overlay in his right hand. Setting his sights on the center point of Cerberus's crossed arms, he launched a striking attack from outside his normal two-meter range: "Laser Sword!!"

With a sound like the shattering of glass, a sword forged of silver aura stretched from the tip of his right hand.

Cerberus's Physical Immunity boasted such absolute defensive power that he had managed to take the shoulder charge of the Leonids' heavyweight avatar Frost Horn and come out unscathed. Normally, Cerberus could easily guard against the striking techniques of Silver Crow's slender hands; in fact, all that would happen was that Crow's own fingers would be pulverized.

But there was only one principle at work now: Incarnate techniques could only be defended against with Incarnate techniques. Any normal ability, any normal armor, was powerless in the face of the Incarnate System, which overwrote the phenomena of the Accelerated World. In response to this principle, Kuroyukihime had strictly warned Haruyuki against using Incarnate techniques unless he was first attacked with Incarnate, but he dared to break that promise here. Even if he did end up dragged into the darker side of that power—if that was the price for rescuing Niko, he'd pay it.

Haruyuki's full-powered Incarnate attack pierced the tungsten armor wrapped around Cerberus's arms as though it were made of paper and sent the virtual heart beneath them scattering in tiny pieces. Or it should have, at least.

However, Cerberus's right hand was cloaked in some kind of crackling repulsive force, like a burst of high-voltage energy. The tip of the Incarnate sword was unable to so much as touch his armor before it was violently repelled, and Haruyuki himself was thrown backward by the reaction.

Haruyuki's eyes grew wide in surprise as he tried somehow to keep his feet under him. He saw a film of purple light covering the surface of the tungsten armor.

Cerberus hadn't called the name of a special attack. And anyway, a special attack couldn't defend against an Incarnate attack. Which meant that this luminescing phenomenon was the same as Haruyuki's Laser Sword, an overlay produced by the Incarnate System.

The marbled, writhing texture of the shades of purple caused a faint déjà vu in Haruyuki, but that was quickly crowded out by his overwhelming shock. The fights between Pard and Argon on his left and Vise against Takumu and Chiyuri on his right had started, but he didn't have the extra mental energy to look at either.

"Cerberus," he shouted hoarsely. "You know the Incarnate System?!"

"Yes." Cerberus nodded his helmet, only the upper half exposed, his arms still firmly crossed in front of his body and cloaked in the purple aura. "I was told that I couldn't fight in the Unlimited Neutral Field without it. Although I don't know the name of this technique."

Cerberus sounded a little unnatural as he said this, but Haruyuki's shock was so great that he didn't even notice.

It was too fast. Much too fast. Wolfram Cerberus had appeared in the Accelerated World three days before Haruyuki's first encounter with him. Which meant only eight days had passed since he started dueling. Of course, it was plausible that he had a period of training before making his official debut, but still, until very recently he had been level one and now he not only knew of the Incarnate System but had mastered it to a degree where he could use it in a real fight. This was so far from the norm that it couldn't be neatly tied up with the word *genius*.

Cerberus turned his gaze for just a moment from his dumbfounded opponent to check on the conditions of the battlefield before continuing quietly. "I suppose I should tell you this much, at least. I believe you met number two previously, Crow?"

"Y-yeah. The uh, what do you call it? Separate personality? That lives in your left shoulder. We've been calling it Cerberus II."

"Hee-hee, that sounds much cooler, doesn't it? Number two and me, number one, are indeed separate personalities. But it's not the psychological phenomena of so-called multiple personalities. It's actually a more fundamental issue; we are different people. number two was originally an independent Burst Linker with a name other than Cerberus."

"Independent...Burst Linker...?" Haruyuki parroted, stunned, unable to immediately grasp the meaning of those words.

"For the details..." Cerberus sounded pained, like he was suffering somehow. "Please ask Miss Argon someday. What I want to tell you, Crow, is that while there are limits, the me here now is able to use the powers of

number two without the personality change. The way I flew into this place from the sky, too, was number two's ability, Wolf Down—to be precise, I should say it was the power of flight he copied from you in the previous battle. The more he uses it, however, the less time it lasts, so he can only fly for a few seconds now.”

“.....!!”

Even as he gasped in surprise, this made sense to Haruyuki in one part of his mind. He'd remembered Cerberus II and his ability to fly when Cerberus I had fallen from the sky a few minutes earlier, and it seemed that thought had been exactly on the mark.

Which reminded him. When II ate Silver Crow's arm and re-created that power, he had said something strange: that his power wasn't stealing, that he wasn't like *that guy*. Something like that. Haruyuki frowned beneath his goggles, wondering what that meant, while Cerberus opened his mouth once more.

“And this is the true issue at hand...By advancing to level five, I became able to use not only the abilities of number two, but also the abilities of number three to a certain extent. This Incarnate technique...belongs to number three.”

“Wh...?” Rocked by even further shock, Haruyuki lowered his eyes and looked at Cerberus's arms. More than protecting Cerberus's armor, the purple marbling of the overlay wriggled like a worm, as though the armor was possessed.

Haruyuki was still far from experienced with the Incarnate System, but he knew this much, at least—whoever number three was, there was no doubt this purple aura was one born not from the positive but the negative Incarnate.

“Y-you can't, Cerberus.” Haruyuki faced the small metal color standing a mere meter away. “You can't use someone else's Incarnate. You do that, and you'll be dragged into their darkness—” But he cut himself off and ground his teeth together tightly.

The one who used an Incarnate attack first, a technique impossible to defend against with normal abilities, had been Haruyuki. It might have been a borrowed Incarnate technique, but from Cerberus's point of view, if he hadn't used it, he would have been dealt an irrational death in a single blow. So Haruyuki had no right now to tell him not to use it.

As if guessing at this struggle inside Haruyuki, Cerberus gently shook his head. “I understand what you’re trying to say, Crow. I also feel that there’s something inside myself that is carved away when I use this power. But...I don’t have any other options. Just as you don’t, Crow.”

This voice, low and throaty and yet filled with a powerful resolve, struck Haruyuki. Unconsciously nodding in return, he thought, *It’s true—I already made up my mind. To rescue Niko at any cost—no matter what I had to sacrifice. I can’t hesitate here. There’s only one thing I can do.*

“Yeah, you’re right. I was the one who wasn’t prepared. Cerberus, to save my friend, I’ll fight you,” he said, newly resolved.

“That’s exactly what I’d like, Crow.” Cerberus was similarly strong-willed. “I will also fight for what I want. Please come at me with everything you’ve got. Otherwise, you won’t be able to defeat me as I am now.”

Cerberus’s declaration was a definite fact. The conditions were all the same: level, status, even Incarnate techniques. Whether he met with victory or defeat came down to nothing other than the power of his techniques and his heart.

Dropping his hips and readying both hands, Haruyuki stared at the younger boy with the slightly long hair on the other side of Cerberus’s visor. From this moment, he would forget the Artificial Metal-Color plan and number two and three. He had a reason to fight, and he didn’t need anything else to face Cerberus on the battlefield.

Here I come!! He transformed the silent shout into a platinum aura emitted from his entire body and pushed off the ground.

Cerberus also charged directly at him—arms covered in the purple pulsation.

There was no changing the fact that Incarnate techniques were the most powerful weapons in Brain Burst, but given that they could both use them, he couldn’t really rely on that alone. An opponent could easily see the timing of Incarnate techniques that required the name to be called or some advance movement, so if he just recklessly lashed out, Cerberus would evade it and hit Haruyuki with a counterattack. This applied to special attacks as well, but the risk was greater with Incarnate techniques, given that they could fail to activate depending on your mental state.

Thus, Haruyuki simply readied himself to shoot back at Cerberus’s body slam, with the overlay still lodged in both arms for defense. His aim was to

move from the Way of the Flexible to a throwing technique—a guard reversal. Cerberus’s forehead, protected by a tungsten armor far harder than the silver of Silver Crow’s, closed in on him, and he sank down with everything he had. Dodging the special attack, Head Butt, Haruyuki grabbed onto Cerberus’s left arm with both hands.

In their third duel, after he’d managed to throw Cerberus, he’d been pulled into a fierce struggle on the ground. But Cerberus could only do that because they had been in a snowy Ice stage. The earth in a Twilight stage was covered in marble tile, so there would be nothing to cushion his fall.

Cerberus switched from a head butt to a body press, trying to knock Haruyuki and his throw off-balance, and lunged at him from above. But Kuroyukihime’s Way of the Flexible was to manipulate the vector and motion of the opponent’s force even when the two fighters were in close contact. Haruyuki gripped Cerberus’s left arm and further accelerated his forward roll. At the same time, he pushed his right elbow into Cerberus’s stomach and got into position for an overhead throw—

“Raaaah!” the young wolf howled abruptly. And then, Haruyuki saw semitransparent wings shimmering hazily as they stretched out from Cerberus’s back.

The wolf’s downward acceleration increased with a jolt. The phantom wings only generated an instant’s thrust before melting into the air and disappearing, but that was plenty to ruin Haruyuki’s throw. Unable to repel the weight of the heavy avatar combined with the propulsive thrust of the wings, Haruyuki slammed into the ground on his back.

“Nngh!” A groan slipped out of his mouth, and his body bounced.

Behind him, Cerberus spun around at lightning speed to wrap his hands around Haruyuki’s neck and his legs around his waist. He squeezed hard, and the sharp, tapered edges of his tungsten armor ate into Silver Crow, sending orange sparks cascading.

This was basically how things had played out in the battle royale three days earlier, but the one difference was that the choke hold now was from behind rather than head-on. In this position, Haruyuki couldn’t use Head Butt. And like the last time, he couldn’t deploy the wings on his back, either, so he wouldn’t be able to use a drop attack from sudden altitude or drag Cerberus scraping along the ground with parallel flight. Meanwhile, the viselike pressure slowly crushed him.

“I’m sorry,” Cerberus murmured in his ear. “I kept aside just a second of time in which I could use the wings. I won’t be able to use them anymore in this battle, though.”

“I...see. Quick...response as always. Dam...mit.” He managed to squeeze out a reply, but his health gauge was steadily dropping. The 50 percent or so he’d been left with at the end of the Metatron fight was now cut in half, dropping into the yellow zone. If he’d gotten Chiyuri to heal him with Citron Call when they’d met up again, he would have been able to fight in top form. But unfortunately, too much time had passed since he took the damage, making that impossible.

Of course, it *was* possible to get her to heal the wounds he was taking in this battle, but he’d never beat Cerberus by relying on that. He had to turn this tight situation around with his own intelligence and power.

Don’t panic. Calm down—and do what you can do. As he resisted a pressure that seemed to have absolutely no give, Haruyuki quieted his feelings and tried to focus on the situation.

It was true that the explosion of emotion and battle spirit could generate a great deal of power. But he had only just learned in the Metatron fight that there were some walls you couldn’t break with that power alone. Sometimes, you had to fight by finding the merest hint of an opening through honed powers of concentration.

Abruptly, like a switch in his mind, Haruyuki’s consciousness accelerated another level—the super-acceleration that had come over him any number of times in the climax of a fierce battle. The color of the air changed, and the sound of the world receded. In the midst of this quiet time, Haruyuki began to think.

What are the weapons left to me right now?

He naturally couldn’t use Silver Crow’s greatest weapon, his wings. Because he was being held from behind, Head Butt was also ineffective. And he didn’t know whether or not he could deploy his newest power, Metatron Wings, in this situation. Not to mention that his Incarnate techniques were repelled by the purple defensive aura and couldn’t reach Cerberus’s armor.

He exhausted the list of noes and found that the one bit of good news was that his arms were completely free. He wouldn’t get anywhere attacking Cerberus’s arms or torso with his bare hands when Physical Immunity was activated, though, so he had only one course of action from this position,

restrained with his face to the sky.

“Using a hold technique that takes time...was a mistake, Cerberus,” Haruyuki muttered, raising both arms high up into the sky.

The light of Incarnate grew in his hands. First, he stretched out the aura in his right hand to produce a silver lance in the air. He set his left hand on the base of the lance and focused his concentration, utterly intent on the image of a ballista.

“...What?” Cerberus’s voice came in his ear, but Haruyuki didn’t respond. Instead, he moved his arms quickly and aimed instinctively.

“Laser Javelin!!”

Zwwp! The air shook, and the Incarnate lance flew parallel to the ground.

With no homing function, the javelin couldn’t hit Cerberus behind him. But while Cerberus was fighting Haruyuki to defeat him, Haruyuki was not trying to crush Cerberus. He’d had one objective from the very start—to save Niko. To that end, he fired at the jet-black cross restraining her and probably keeping her unconscious, too.

The Incarnate lance carved out a platinum trajectory across the courtyard toward the altar, red in the evening sun, to land smack in the middle of the base of the cross, and nearly half of the thin, twenty-centimeter panel crumbled. A little ways off, Black Vise whirled his head around to stare at Haruyuki. But his left arm was busy doing double duty at the cross while his right was a shield of several panels defending against Takumu’s savage onslaught, so there was nothing he could do about Haruyuki’s attack.

“One more time!” Haruyuki shouted, starting the motion to activate the javelin.

“Whatcha doin’ there, Onesie?!” Argon shouted in irritation, caught in a dizzyingly frantic battle with Pard on the south side of the courtyard. “Least try do your last job for real-like!”

“Nngh!” Cerberus let out a short grunt and tried to bring Haruyuki down to the side. He was likely trying to put Haruyuki at an angle that prevented him from launching a long-distance attack, but given that he was using both arms and legs in the hold technique, he couldn’t twist their two bodies around so easily.

Haruyuki thrust his left hand to the ground and resisted Cerberus with all his might before suddenly releasing his hold on the ground and twisting his body forcefully to the left. With the accelerated momentum, Cerberus spun

around ninety degrees and loosened his grip on Haruyuki ever so slightly, allowing Haruyuki to spin another 180 degrees. Now, instead of holding Haruyuki from behind, Cerberus was facing his captive.

His back now exposed, Haruyuki fully deployed the silver wings pressed down against his back and activated them to full power. The moment their tangled bodies rose up into the air, Cerberus quickly released his hold. That choice was not a mistake—to avoid being yanked up to a high altitude.

But Haruyuki never had any intention of flying up high. He only risked being sniped by Argon, and more than anything else, a draw with dropping damage would be a loss in this fight because he had to get away from Cerberus and rescue Niko.

“Heeyah!” From just short of a mere meter up, he charged at Cerberus, who had one knee against the ground. He flipped over in midair and launched a roundhouse kick at Cerberus’s face from behind, and Cerberus raised both arms to defend. Of course, he couldn’t be damaged, but the kick was just the groundwork to get him to raise his guard. Using his wings, Haruyuki landed instantly, and with the light of the Incarnate still lodged in his right fist, he launched a hit at Cerberus’s open body.

Just as he had feared, however, the purple pulsation wasn’t only in Cerberus’s arms; he tried to defend against the punch by generating the aura on his body as well. Most likely, it was an automatic mechanism to respond to an opponent’s Incarnate rather than Cerberus’s instinctive Incarnate usage, but this made the reaction speed just the tiniest bit slower than that of an experienced user. Haruyuki himself was still very much a beginner when it came to the Incarnate System, but he was confident he could manage essentially the same speed as in a normal duel if he was just launching strikes enhanced by overlay rather than activating actual Incarnate techniques.

His right hook, with its silver light, was repelled by the purple aura when it was vexingly close, and once again, sparks went flying everywhere. But while Cerberus lost his balance under the reactive force, Haruyuki anticipated this pushback and used it to spin on the axis of his body and connect that with a left hook. The defensive aura was just an instant too late for this immediate follow-up attack.

Crack! Another furious shower of sparks. But this time, the tip of his fist grazed the tungsten armor. As his left hand was pushed back, he took a large step forward with his right foot, and his third blow, a right elbow strike,

plunged deep into the armor's thin solar plexus.

“Nngh!” Cerberus yelped.

Finally, the pace of Haruyuki's successive blows surpassed the reaction speed of the purple aura. The Physical Immunity ability also could not completely defend against the Incarnate-enhanced blows. The force of the elbow strike pushed all the way to the naked avatar body below the armor and dealt damage, causing the avatar to stumble backward.

Now I rush him!

“Aaaaaah!!” Yelling a furious battle cry, Haruyuki began his Aerial Combo, a series of three-dimensional attacks using the instantaneous thrust of his wings. The dizzying succession of blows from fists and feet, elbows and knees, and even his head, caused sparks to blossom like fireworks in the air. Not every hit made it past the purple aura—about half were repelled and caused no damage—but he paid that no mind as he danced in the air.

Cerberus appeared to be doubling down on his defense while looking for an opening to grab Haruyuki again, but now that both his Physical Immunity and Incarnate defense were unraveling, he was having more and more trouble simply staying on his feet. Perhaps realizing this, the light of his eyes flashed strongly beneath his goggles after a few seconds.

“Ngh!” The sharp cry joined a right straight to meet Haruyuki's left hook. It was an impeccably timed counterattack, but Haruyuki vibrated his left wing unconsciously and simply slid his body five centimeters to the right. At the same time as Cerberus's fist passed by his helmet, scraping it slightly, he released a right upper as a counter to the counter.

But Cerberus turned his face with terrifying reaction speed and dodged his fist. With his right hand, he pushed on the back of Haruyuki's head and shot his leg out in a *Muay Thai Ti Khao*. When Haruyuki raised his right leg to just barely guard against it, the collision between knee and knee whipped up a flood of sparks that illuminated their faces from below.

So close to his opponent that their foreheads were almost touching, Haruyuki exchanged an instantaneous glance with Cerberus.

They would fight until one or the other fell. This intensity radiated in the space between their face masks, sparking and crackling.

Haruyuki leapt back momentarily and then kicked off the ground. Forward. Always forward.

From a distance, the two metal colors fighting one-on-one looked like

guns firing at zero range. Arms to guard against punches, shins guarding against kicks, two blows occasionally crashing into each other—flowers of sparks and overlay bloomed in the air. The gunshot sound of the impacts rang out and roared, making the air around them shimmer like a mirage.

Haruyuki's Aerial Combo was winning with its many techniques and variations, but Cerberus had the greater inherent defensive ability and striking power. Their health gauges dwindled at essentially the same rate; whoever could get a clean hit in first—whoever could attack faster—would secure the victory.

“Unh...Aaaaaaaaah!!” Haruyuki squeezed this voice out from the depths of his stomach, pouring all his mental and physical strength into each successive blow.

“Heee...yaaaaaaaah!!” Cerberus yowled in response.

If they had been rushing each other like this in the real world, it would have been all they could do to draw breath, but the avatars of the Accelerated World didn't need oxygen. What was consumed instead was the energy of their very spirits, the power generated from believing in yourself, caring about your comrades, and burning with battle spirit.

Even as the ultra-high-speed battle unfolded, Haruyuki's expanded perception caught a sense of his comrades fighting on either side.

Pard, in Beast Mode once more, had grown Incarnate claws longer than Haruyuki's when he was Disasterfied and fangs like those of a saber-toothed tiger. She was in a heated contest with Argon Array, who fired her lasers wildly, machine-gun style.

Takumu, meanwhile, had turned the pile in his right hand into the Cyan Sword and was ferociously charging Black Vise, who had transformed his own right hand into a shield of several panels. The reason Vise wasn't using his restraint technique was likely because Takumu was relentless in his assault, leaving Vise no opening to pull the shield back. In a tag team with Takumu, Chiuri stood at the ready with the Choir Chime of her left hand to heal Takumu in case of the worst. She wasn't entirely over the exhaustion from abruptly activating the Incarnate System to break the wall of the classroom, but she was hanging back a bit because of it.

They were all fighting hard to save Niko, of course, but they were also creating an opportunity for Haruyuki to go head-to-head with Cerberus. No, it wasn't just Pard, Takumu, and Chiuri: Fuko, who had initiated him into the

Incarnate System; Utai, who had opened his eyes to the Optical Conduction ability; Akira, who had saved him from a brush with total point loss; his rival Ash Roller, who had sharpened swords with him; and Kuroyukihime, who had opened the door to this world for him—they and so many others gave Haruyuki the power to fight now. Including even Niko, currently restrained on the altar; the Enemy Archangel Metatron; and Cerberus, trading blows with him here.

Cerberus! Haruyuki shouted in one corner of his mind, pushing his rush up to his very limits. *You're strong. On pure talent alone, I don't even begin to compare with you. But you can't beat me while you're fighting with fists tightened by suffering and sadness!*

“Aaaah!” As he roared again, his loudest yet, Haruyuki’s right uppercut finally broke Cerberus’s iron protective wall. His fist slipped past the block, a gap of a mere—yet decisive—thousandth or millionth of a second, and slammed violently into the jaw of the lupine face. The purple aura was too late.

Haruyuki’s Incarnate-assisted blow cracked the tungsten armor—lightning bolt darting outward on the surface—and sent the small avatar sailing up into the sky. He could have chased after him for a follow-up blow, but Haruyuki waited for Cerberus to fall back to earth, his fist still shooting up into the sky.

He’d said what he needed to say. Through his fists and the size, heat, and power of the energy supporting him.

A few seconds later, he heard a fierce *skreenk*, and Cerberus plunged into the ground backward, legs and arms splayed in the shape of an X. He showed no signs of getting up.

Lowering his hand, Haruyuki walked over to the gray wolf. Before he could say anything, a quiet voice came to him through the face mask, cracked in a zigzag pattern from the jaw up to almost the eyes.

“...That’s the first time I’ve lost...in a fistfight.”

“...It is?” Haruyuki said.

Cerberus turned his head toward him slightly. “When I was defeated by your throwing techniques in our second duel...I told you, yes? That I lost but I was still happy, that I’d work hard and get stronger.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But the truth is, I was so sincerely vexed in that moment. I grew so hot,

and I very nearly cried, I was so frustrated. But...I couldn't tell you that because I was an idiot. I actually wanted to shout my frustrations, but I couldn't..."

At some point, the fighting to either side of Haruyuki had been temporarily suspended. It wasn't just his friends; Argon and even Vise seemed to be listening to what Cerberus had to say, in the moments they could spare.

"The reason control of the avatar shifted to number two that time is because I suppressed my own feelings—my will to fight—and ended up in a Zero Fill. Although he was happy to get to fight you..." With a faint air of a smile, Cerberus slowly raised his fist, covered in countless tiny cuts. But perhaps he didn't have enough strength left to hold it up, because the hand dropped back down to the ground. As if the *clang* was a signal, the wolf's maw visor opened. The goggles beneath reflected the evening sky of the Twilight stage.



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“But I’m not vexed this time,” Cerberus said in a remarkably clear voice. “I gave it my everything. Techniques, speed, abilities; I even mobilized the powers of number two and number three and fought in a trance. It was only for a mere instant, but I forgot the reason I was fighting and the role I’d been given...I really ‘dueled.’ I...I’m satisfied with this. I’ve been rewarded, more than enough...” A drop of transparent light pearled out from the fine cracks in his goggles and slid down the shining surface of his armor.

Haruyuki took a step forward. “What are you talking about, Cerberus?” he asked, raising his voice a little. “This is still just the one time. If you want to have a real duel, you can do it whenever you want from now on.”

The answer he got was a second teardrop. “Crow, I said it before the start of the duel...I’ve lost the reason I was permitted to exist, there’s nothing else to discuss. It’s been decided—there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“But that’s—!” Haruyuki started to shout, but Cerberus’s tranquil gaze closed his mouth. Something in those eyes—pride or dignity or a readiness—checked any words Haruyuki had.

“As long as I’m a Burst Linker, I can’t go up against them—the Society. They won’t hesitate to take Brain Burst away the moment they feel I’m in the way. But...even so, there is just one thing I can decide for myself. And that’s how I will disappear from the Accelerated World.”

The aura around Argon and Vise changed the slightest bit at this. But Pard and Takumu kept their Incarnate weapons at the ready and held the two Society members back.

“In their plan, I was to disappear at this time in this place, leaving only the avatar— No, I was to change into *something else*. But of all the things to happen, I wish to escape that alone. So...I adjusted the balance of my burst points in secret. Right now, the points left to me are ten.”

“.....!!”

Haruyuki gasped sharply, and he felt an even greater sense of urgency from Argon and Vise.

Ten points left. Compared with the terrible trap Haruyuki had fallen into once, driven into a corner with only two points left, Cerberus had some wiggle room, but he was clearly near death at the moment. If Haruyuki, level five just like Cerberus, didn’t stay his hand and instead struck the final blow, the tungsten avatar would in that instant face total point loss and be completely erased.

Haruyuki was about to take an instinctive step back, but Cerberus's powerful gaze held him still.

"I also considered losing all my points to a nearby Enemy opponent, but given who I'm up against, that was also an imperfect plan. So I made a wager. That you would come to save your friend. And then you would fight me, and whichever of us won or lost, you would be kind enough to listen to my story."

Cerberus thrust his left hand into the ground and pushed his battered torso up, wobbling. Beneath the cracked goggles, a light shone, the strongest and straightest Haruyuki had seen since they met five days earlier. "Crow," the young wolf said. "Please fly with me outside of Tokyo—to the very ends of the Accelerated World where no one will ever find me—and there take away my points. There is no other way for you to save your friend."

Haruyuki had trouble even getting his head around Cerberus's true intentions, much less obeying his request. As he stood there stock-still, gaping, he heard muffled laughter.

"Pff, heh-heh, ha-ha-ha..." The one laughing, both arms wrapped around her slender body, enormous hat shaking, was the Quad Eyes Analyst, Argon Array. "Ha-ha-ha! This is really somethin'. Never dreamed you'd go that far. Gettin' the job done, huh, Onesie? Warms the heart, it does. As the parent what raised ya. You're really all grown now."

Her laughter died away, and she nodded several times, hands on her hips. "T'think a mighty BB player, a base Burst Linker like our little Onesie's rebelling from our Society—whaddaya call this? Like, the student becomes the teacher, yeah? Guess it's only natural. Knighty boy hears this, he'll be raging, though. Ha-ha-ha! ...Still, though, huh, baby, you leaving your momma, it's still a bit— You're just way too young for that yet."

Pard carefully took position between Argon and Cerberus, ready to repel with her Incarnate power at any surprise laser attacks. But unlike the other day's battle royale, it was unlikely Argon would shoot Cerberus now as punishment. All her efforts would amount to nothing if his remaining health gauge was to vanish and he was to die, after all. In which case, was Argon planning to force Cerberus into his "role" somehow?

"Onesie, I'm sorry, 'kay?" the Analyst said unexpectedly. "Seems you're

thinking you c'n stay so long as you're not Zero Filling...But the president's Revive the Dead's not such a nicey-nice technique as all that. Honestly, ya made a deal with a real devil—”

“Array,” Black Vise warned curtly.

Shrugging lightly, the Analyst changed her tone and continued, “Well, that’s the long an’ short of it. So patience, Onesie. When we get back over there, I’ll buy you lunch in the caf—so no hard feelings, yeah?”

“...No matter what you say to me, I have no intention of following your orders any further. You people are wrong. You...mustn’t do this.” Cerberus returned resolutely and stretched his right hand toward Haruyuki from his spot on the ground. “Crow, please hurry and take me away from this place. If you do, they shouldn’t fight your comrades any further. They do nothing without purpose...That’s their code of conduct.”

Staring doubtfully at the extended hand, Haruyuki was assaulted by a moment of indecision. Just as he had told himself firmly before the start of the battle, his only goal right then was to retrieve Niko; he absolutely could not waver on this. But if what Cerberus had said was true, then he couldn’t save her even if he defeated Cerberus now. Plus, if he took Cerberus down, then the other metal color would lose all his points.

Why had Argon and Vise summoned Cerberus to this place to begin with? It had to be because they needed him to “process” Niko somehow. So if he carried Cerberus very far away, as Cerberus wanted him to, the danger for Niko would recede for the time being. Or it should.

Haruyuki made his decision and pushed aside his hesitation to grab hold of Cerberus’s hand.

Gripping Haruyuki’s hand tightly in return, Cerberus lowered his voice and said, “Actually...it might have been best if I’d never come to this place and instead disappeared somewhere far away by myself. But...I wanted to fight you in the end. I wanted to fight to our hearts’ content...and to say thank you...”

“...Cerberus.” Putting enough strength into his grip that he just barely didn’t generate damage, Haruyuki finally gave voice to his hardened resolve. “I’m going to do just as you asked. But I won’t take you to total loss. I just know there’s another way. A way to save both Rain *and* you.”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned to tell Pard to hold the fort for just a bit. She was standing a few dozen meters away, her back turned to him.

“As if there could be,” a voice said, as cold and dry as a dead tree in the middle of winter, all hint of sunshine whittled away from it. “I mean, a way to save someone. There ain’t no such thing in this world. Like, right from the very start and beginnin’, there was no salvation. There was only hatred, fighting, betrayal, fraud, violation, lament, despair, etcetera, etcetera. I’ll teach you boys right now just how cruel the Accelerated World really is.” Cutting off her icy speech, Argon Array let the hands on her hips drop loosely to her sides and cocked her goggled head slightly to one side. “Yer turn, Threezie. Cerberus number three, activate!”

Haruyuki tensed reflexively, thinking she was calling a special-attack name. But no. It wasn’t Argon Array who moved, but rather Wolfram Cerberus, hand still in Haruyuki’s.

The visor on his face creaked as it began to close. This was apparently against Cerberus’s will; he let out a small wail and tried to stop the movement of the visor with one hand. But the thick metallic armor steadily closed as though controlled by some high-output hydraulic device. The five centimeters of exposed goggles were slowly being swallowed up and hidden by the wolf teeth.

“Cerberus!” Haruyuki called, reaching out to grab the upper part of the visor. A cold like dry ice stabbed his fingertips, even through his armor. No, not cold. An extremely thin overlay was oozing from the surface of Cerberus’s armor. This purple was not so much light as it was a kind of thick liquid that squirmed and wriggled.

“C...row...,” Cerberus said in a pained voice when the visible slice of his lenses had been cut to a single centimeter. “I’m...sorry...I never...knew...they would force...three to wake up...”

“You can beat this, Cerberus! Just hold on!” Desperately, Haruyuki tried to shove his fingers into the remaining five-millimeter gap in the visor. But the heavy, edged armor mercilessly pushed Haruyuki’s silver away and continued its steady march. Three millimeters, two...

“Run, Crow. Before...he comes...out...” Those were the last words of Cerberus—no, “Onesie,” Cerberus I.

Shklak! With a sound like the slicing of a large cutting machine, the visor closed completely. Haruyuki’s one hand was knocked back in the impact, but with the other, he held tightly to Cerberus’s.

“Cerberus! Don’t give up, Cerberus!!” No matter how desperately he

called to him, the wolf's maw, teeth pressed firmly together, no longer reacted in any way. The small metal color simply sat on the marble tiles, a metal statue.

Skree, skree. Suddenly, there was a new creaking. The source was not the visor on the head, but below it—the shoulder armor. The heavy armor looked extraordinarily like a face mask, and the zigzagging line that cut across it was opening. Haruyuki had witnessed this before, in the final stage of their second duel. When the visor on the head closed and the shoulder armor opened, it brought about a personality change in Wolfram Cerberus of an unknown logic.

But this phenomenon had occurred in a different place four days ago. Instead of the left shoulder, the armor of the right was opening before Haruyuki's eyes. And in contrast to the red of the left—number two—the light spilling out from the jagged gap on the right was a dark purple. The same color as the aura that had automatically defended Cerberus in their fight.

Chang! The armor of the right shoulder opened completely.

Haruyuki felt an intensely icy shiver run up his spine. Instinctively, he let go of the hand and tried to jump back, but he was a moment too late. Aura in the form of claws jetting from Cerberus's hand dug deeply into Haruyuki's armor to slice open three gashes.

Haruyuki had felt this sensation before, although he knew he couldn't have. A feeling not of being ripped open by a hard cutting implement, but of being carved away by an emptiness made manifest like air. The technique of someone who had wounded Silver Crow's armor again and again and again...

Rooted to the spot, he watched Cerberus slowly stand as though pulled by an invisible thread. He clumsily covered his face with the purple claws of his right hand. Haruyuki heard a peculiar sound coming from inside the avatar's face mask, like a gear racing or droplets of water on a steel plate...

No, it was laughter. A sneering *keh-keh-keh* from deep in his throat. Neither Cerberus I nor II had ever laughed like that. Yet it sparked an even brighter flame in Haruyuki's memory.

I know someone who laughs like this. But I don't want to know. I don't want to remember.

As if sneering at even Haruyuki's thoughts, the gray duel avatar lowered

his right hand ever so slightly and spoke through the fiendish form of his claws.

“We finally meet, hmm? It’s been a while, Arita.”

Fuko and Utai leapt to the right, while Kuroyukihime and Akira went left. They were trying to dodge the extra-large Dark Shots launched from the ISS kit main body.

If it had been the same technique as the kit users', they would have avoided it with room to spare. But the Incarnate beam from the jet-black eye was simply too large. Although they managed to escape being swallowed up by the main current—albeit just barely—the dark splash scattering from it like a halo glommed on to their avatars and ate away countless tiny holes in their armor. Kuroyukihime felt icy needles stabbing at her, and her health gauge decreased a minute but real amount.

“Nngh!” She gritted her teeth unconsciously as she landed. They were still more than twenty meters away from the kit main body. If she was taking this kind of scraping damage this far away after dodging a direct hit, she had to assume her gauge would plummet into the red if she took the Dark Shot at close range. And of course, if she failed to evade a direct hit, she might even be killed instantly.

That said, keeping their distance and lobbing blows back and forth was an even worse plan. With only one pure long-distance type in Ardor Maiden, they wouldn't so much as tickle the thing. If it came down to a contest of sheer firepower, they were the ones who would be shot down.

Kuroyukihime came to this conclusion after watching the Dark Shot they'd evaded cut across the forty-fifth floor of Midtown Tower, open up a hole in the wall on the north side, and fly off into the distance in the evening sky. If it had been a physical projectile instead of a beam technique, it would have hit somewhere around Akasaka and caused massive destruction. In fact, if the aim had been a little lower to one side, it would have actually done so.

“A few more shots, and it’ll blow the building itself away,” Akira murmured from beside her. And if that came to pass, it would be a concerning development.

“In that case,” Kuroyukihime replied, “given that it’s swallowed up the portal, the kit main body would be left hanging in space by itself...is that it?”

“Probably.” Akira nodded sharply, the armor of her face mask now 60 percent recovered.

“Then a long battle would be bad. I guess the only thing to do is get close and polish it off in one go,” Fuko commented, standing at the ready a little off to the right. “But given that it’s the leader of the ISS kits, it should also be able to use the close-range attack—Dark Blow. Although I don’t exactly know how it could when it has no hands.”

“I don’t want to see that eyeball grow hands and feet. Dammit!” Kuroyukihime’s voice was venomous. “I know there’s no point in complaining about it now, but the fact that it can use both long- and close-range Incarnate techniques however it wants is simply too much!”

“Then we just have to make it so it can’t,” Akira responded calmly.

“I suppose so...”

As they conversed in hushed voices, the enormous eyeball continued to stare at them from beneath its half-closed lid—its gaze filled with inorganic malice. If they took even one step toward it—if they so much as glared at it—the thing would no doubt fire off the massive Dark Shot once again. The next time they moved, they would have to have confidence in their victory and an unshakable resolve.

The problem was they couldn’t see the kit main body’s health gauge. Yet another piece of evidence that it was not an Enemy perhaps, but even if it was a Burst Linker like Kuroyukihime and her friends, as the shadow of Red Rider had said, that didn’t necessarily mean that its health gauge would be more or less the same as theirs. From start to finish, the thing was beyond any known norms, so in the ultimate extreme, it could even have been equipped with a God-class health gauge. At the very least, they couldn’t charge it without knowing that they could destroy it, even if they had to beat it back blow by blow with their most powerful techniques.

“We’re just wasting time glaring at each other like this,” Kuroyukihime said, her voice strained.

At the moment, the group that had gone after Argon Array and Black Vise

were likely in a fierce battle. That Vise and his ilk hadn't shown up at Midtown Tower was proof that Silver Crow and the others were fighting valiantly. They had to get the portal back as soon as possible, pull Niko's cable out, and yank her from the Accelerated World. If her avatar disappeared, Vise wouldn't bother to keep fighting pointlessly. Even if her team was split into two groups of four, their battlefields were connected.

Haruyuki, hang in there a little longer. I will fulfill my role here. Willing this thought to that other, distant battlefield, Kuroyukihime murmured to the Elements around her, "We evade the next Dark Shot and then attack. Curren and Raker with the Incarnate defense, while Maiden and I use long-distance Incarnate attacks—"

"I'd like you to leave the attacking to me," a childlike yet resolute voice interrupted.

Kuroyukihime turned her eyes momentarily toward Utai, who was standing coolly beside Fuko. "But Maiden, even *you* can't attack alone—"

"I have developed a technique specifically for this kind of large and ponderous enemy. If I can activate it, I will empty its health gauge—no matter how large that might be. It takes three—no, two minutes to prepare for activation, though, so I need you to hang on through that somehow, Lotus." This was an unusually bold statement for Utai, who didn't have a belligerent bone in her body, despite being called the Shrine Maiden of the Conflagration.

Fuko looked back, eye lenses blinking, and nodded as though she was satisfied somehow. "Mei, did you maybe have this technique for the God—?" But she cut herself off and turned forward again. "Understood. We'll leave it to you. That's all right, yes, Curren? Lotus?"

Kuroyukihime didn't have to look at Akira's face; she responded with immediate decision. "Of course. We're counting on you, Maiden."

"We can hang on for two minutes, at least," Akira said.

Utai nodded firmly in return. "Well then, let's begin." She held up high in her left hand the longbow Flame Caller. Instantly, the bow was enveloped in transparent flames before contracting and shrinking into the form of a hand fan.

Pop! At the same time as the white fan opened with a satisfying snap, the face of her avatar was hidden by new armor. A simple, clean face mask with only narrow slits for the eyes, almost like—no, *exactly* like—a Noh mask.

Perhaps in response to Utai's mode change, the ISS kit main body snapped open its slightly narrowed lid. Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and Akira instantly aligned their breathing and leapt out at the same time.

"Over here, monster eye!" she shouted, kneading her imagination as she ran. A deep red overlay grew in the sword of her right hand. The pupil of the massive eyeball trembled intermittently as if it didn't know who to target, but eventually its gaze caught Kuroyukihime dashing along the left side of the floor.

Although she had succeeded in drawing its focus away from Utai, it would see through her diversion if she stopped her attack now. She had to follow the technique through to its conclusion, even at the risk of being hit.

Incarnate techniques took the mental trauma of the Burst Linker as their energy source. Thus, just like the duel avatars, each and every technique held a unique form and potential. On the other hand, there was also one limitation which nearly all Incarnate techniques shared: The activation success ratio dropped significantly while doing any action unrelated to the technique, such as talking or running. Even Fuko, a master of the Incarnate System, and of course, Kuroyukihime, were no exceptions to this principle.

However, at this moment at least, she couldn't stop her feet. She needed to dodge the Dark Shot that was no doubt coming at any moment while also attacking with Incarnate techniques. It would be difficult, but she had no choice.

"Aaaaah!" Racing ahead, Kuroyukihime amplified the overlay in her right hand. At the same time, the pupil of the kit main body shone with dark sparks. "Vorpal Strike!!"

Kuroyukihime released a crimson spear; the eyeball shot forth a ball of inky-black light. She extended the Incarnate spear several dozen meters with 80 percent of her mind and ran with the remaining 20 percent. This was multitasking in the extreme, but given that Black Lotus had the power to move by hovering, she didn't need to keep kicking at the ground with both feet in order to run. She could move at high speeds simply by leaning forward and concentrating her strength into her legs. It wasn't that this had no drawbacks—sudden changes in direction were not great while hovering—but at that moment, at any rate, all she had to do was lean in...

"...!"

The red and black Incarnate attacks slipped past each other, and

Kuroyukihime opened her eyes wide.

The Dark Shot was spinning in a spiral, bending to the left. She had thought light-beam techniques couldn't have homing abilities, but she quickly realized this was merely her own preconception. That sort of commonsense thinking didn't apply to Incarnate techniques.

If she kept running straight ahead, it would catch up with her. She had to turn to the right, but if she did that while she had an Incarnate technique activated, there was a very good chance she would fall. Even as Kuroyukihime gritted her teeth, the jet-black torrent closed in on her, resonating with both high and low vibrations.

“Lotus!!”

The voice came with an intense impact to the right side of her back. Her body was pushed off the Dark Shot's trajectory, and the massive lance passed her, a mere meter away. Her own red spear plunged into the white of the kit main body, and liquid like blood gushed out. The feedback was faint, but it seemed she did some damage at least; the main body shuddered and shook its bulk, blinking over and over and over.

Here, finally, Kuroyukihime turned her gaze to find Fuko, who had fired Gale Thruster to push Kuroyukihime out of the way, off to the right. A dark residue was scattered around her and her two slender legs were severed cruelly at the knee. She had taken the Dark Shot in Kuroyukihime's place.

“Fuko!” she cried in a strangled voice and whirled around to embrace her friend.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, a wound as severe as a severed limb—not to mention losing half of both legs in one blow—would bring about a terrifying intensity of pain. The avatar would be unable to move briefly, and it would be within the realm of normalcy if they fell into shock for a brief period.

But Fuko courageously replied, “Not there yet!” and summoned a new Enhanced Armament. She pulled free of Kuroyukihime's arms and sat down in the silver wheelchair that materialized in the place of Gale Thruster before pointing at the struggling kit main body. “I'm all right! Let's stay the course!”

“Right!” Kuroyukihime kicked ferociously at the floor with her right foot. She leaned as far forward as she could for a super-high-speed hover dash. Fuko's wheelchair followed lightly to her right, and Akira was running just as

hard even farther down the line.

She was nearly certain that the ISS kit main body had the close-range Incarnate technique Dark Blow. The problem was how the massive eyeball, lacking hands and feet, would activate it. If, hypothetically, there was some kind of advance action, then it would be possible to dodge as long as they didn't miss seeing it. If, in the worst case, there was no motion, and they were shot from all directions—well, they'd handle that when it happened.

Having closed a dozen meters in an instant, the Burst Linkers avoided the front where the eyelid was and came in to attack from the sides.

First, Akira cloaked her entire body in a pure blue overlay. She called the technique name with maximum volume. “Phase Trans: Keen!”

Instantly, the flowing-water armor that enveloped her slender avatar froze in place, transforming into clear, transparent shielding. Her silhouette grew even more slender, thanks to the long katars that appeared on both arms. Akira crossed the blades before her, thin and sharp like razors, and prepared to fight.

She danced about the fleshy armor of the ISS kit main body to hit it with successive high-speed blows. Enhanced with Incarnate, the ice swords easily sliced through the thick flesh, and fresh blood jetted out. But the cascade of blood was frozen instantly in the chill of the blades, breaking into countless red crystals and scattering on the floor.

One of the more peculiar features of the avatar Aqua Current—formerly known as Aquamatic, a portmanteau of *aqua* and *achromatic*—was that she could freely change her uncommon flowing-water armor to match the characteristics of the stage. In an Ice stage, she produced weapons and armor of ice; in a Volcano stage, she used high-temperature steam to carry out range attacks. Aqua Current's secondary Incarnate technique Phase Trans made this change from ice ⇔ water ⇔ steam happen, using only the force of her own will.

However, there were multiple variations of the outcome of this technique, and Kuroyukihime herself knew of five. The Keen Pattern was the transformation into light ice armor with katars as weapons for close-range fighting.

It was similar to Kuroyukihime's ability Overdrive, but the phenomenon was much more drastic, and the two katars enhanced with Incarnate exhibited an attack power on par with an actual close-range type. Each time the ice

avatar pirouetted up, the blue flash of a sword ripped into the left side of the kit main body.

A little behind Akira, Fuko launched her attack from her wheelchair. She thrust both hands out in front of her as though she were holding an invisible ball and shouted the name of the technique. “Swirl Sway!”

A small, glittering, green tornado grew in the space between her hands. Fuko only used this technique to protect herself, since she strictly forbade the use of destructive Incarnate for herself as a general rule, but there was no way that an Incarnate whirlwind spinning at super-high speeds was a harmless defensive technique.

Released from her hands, the tornado grew to enormous size in the blink of an eye and touched the right side of the kit main body. The countless knives of air inside it began to dig into the thick armor. Chunks of flesh and rivers of fresh blood swirled up in the center of the whirlwind to become crimson light effects near the ceiling before evaporating.

Attacked by powerful Incarnate techniques on the left by Akira and on the right by Fuko, the massive bulk—nearly three meters across—of the ISS kit main body spasmed fiercely. A reddish-black light flickered irregularly from beyond the almost entirely closed eyelid.

If it had been an average duel avatar, this combined with Kuroyukihime’s initial direct Vorpal Strike hit was enough damage to knock the color out of its health gauge three times over. However, that it showed no signs of disappearing even as it struggled and writhed was proof that it was indeed outside the norm in all ways. Even now, after charging directly into battle with it, she had no idea how the Acceleration Research Society created it or how they made the shadow of Red Rider possess it.

But they didn’t need to analyze in that moment; they needed to destroy. Following Akira and Fuko, Kuroyukihime jumped with all her power, did a somersault directly above the kit main body, and loosed a battle cry while upside down. “Aaaaaaah!!”

A blue, almost white overlay grew in the swords of her hands. Spreading her arms wide, she spun her body at high speed, becoming a human drill. The pale-blue light became a ring around her inky-black avatar and jetted outward, like the solar corona viewed during a total eclipse.

“The Eclipse!!”

Guided by her imagination, the swords of both arms began to shoot

outward at an incredible velocity. Kuroyukihime's swordmaster and one of the old Nega Nebulus's Four Elements, Graphite Edge, could launch twenty-seven consecutive blows of this major technique in a mere two seconds. Considering that this was 13.5 hits per second, it didn't really seem to compare with the hundred blows a second of Black Lotus's level-four special attack, Death By Bashing. But the force behind each strike was completely different. And in contrast with the system assist for a special attack that essentially moved the body automatically, you had to boost your hit speed with nothing but your own imagination when using an Incarnate technique.

Faster...Faster! Focusing only on this idea, Kuroyukihime became a dwarf sun, shooting off the incandescent sword attack. Each time she hit, thick fleshy armor was ripped off like an explosion. Since she was hitting it repeatedly at ultra-speeds, it was more like she was shooting it with a large auto-cannon than cutting it with a sword.

One second, two...When she had finished the twenty-seven hits at two and a half seconds, Kuroyukihime once again somersaulted and landed next to Fuko. Her two comrades finished their attacks at around the same time, and Akira's armor turned from ice back into water.

The ISS kit main body had lost almost all the armor on the top and the sides, exposing a smoother, curving black surface—most likely the internal eyeball. If they could destroy even part of this shell, which didn't look very tough, they might be able to get at the portal locked inside, even if they were unable to eliminate the kit main body.

But Kuroyukihime—and probably Fuko and Akira, too—couldn't move right away, due to the backlash from using the most powerful Incarnate technique she had in her arsenal at full power. She had, however, fought four successive battles against extremely powerful opponents—the God Seiryu, Magenta Scissor's army, Archangel Metatron, the shadow of Red Rider—and even though there had been a break in between, she could feel the energy of her spirit itself being consumed. But this was where they could stand tall as high rankers.

“...And Haruyuki and the others, too...,” Kuroyukihime murmured.

Fuko nodded immediately. “They're working hard right now.”

“We can't lose, either,” Akira agreed.

Their fighting spirits reignited, the three stood tall, and Kuroyukihime cast her eyes behind her for just a moment.

The small shrine maiden in the Noh mask was dancing gracefully with the snowy white fan in one hand. There was a tranquility as though only the area around her had become a wooden stage, but anyone watching could tell that no ordinary phenomenon was proceeding there. The profound imagination being polished and refined by the dance made the space around her shimmer like a heat mirage, and ripples spread out in the marble floor like on the surface of water.

“Another minute, whatever it takes,” Kuroyukihime said, turning back around. At that moment, the ISS kit main body, which had been seriously wounded and fallen into a suspended state, abruptly opened its eyelid wide. The reddish-black light that spilled from the massive pupil dyed their armor the color of blood.

Wondering whether it was going to fire the Dark Shot a third time or try something else, Kuroyukihime focused her mind so she wouldn't miss any changes that might occur in the eyeball. Because of this, she was late to notice that the Change occurred not in the exposed pupil in the front, but the fleshy armor remaining to the rear.

Zlrmp. Two long tentacles popped out from the armor with a viscous sound. An ebony aura wrapped around the rounded nodules of the tips.

“Close-range attack! Evade!” Kuroyukihime shouted and dashed backward with everything she had.

Fuko spun the wheels of her chair in reverse, and Akira quickly retreated with a sliding dash by making the water membrane on the soles of her feet slip across the floor.

But the two tentacles reached out nearly ten meters in an instant, squirming and twisting like black snakes, and easily caught Kuroyukihime and Akira in their range. The vast dark aura around the bulbous tips cohered, absorbing even the twilight sun coming in through the cracks in the wall and covering the floor in a gloom.

Looking at the tentacle closing in on her from directly above, Kuroyukihime determined that evasion was impossible. She had no sooner landed than she was crossing the swords of both arms above her head and shouting, “Overdrive! Mode Green!”

“Phase Trans! Adamant!” Akira shouted at the same time, stopping a few meters to her right.

The two avatars were cloaked in overlays the exact same shade of green.

Strictly speaking, Black Lotus's mode change wasn't an Incarnate technique, but there was a powerful synergy when she used it in conjunction with the Incarnate System. The shining green light spread out to form a circular shield with the intersection of her crossed swords at the center.

And then, a pure and condensed negative Incarnate, the likes of which she had never experienced before, slammed into Kuroyukihime.

If she hadn't managed to defend against it in time, her avatar would have been annihilated together with the space around it by the super-powerful nihilistic Incarnate attack. She just barely escaped that, but the impact was on par with or greater than the time the God Byakko's claws dragged into her. Her consciousness was half beaten out of her avatar, while a large amount of her health gauge was snatched away. Her sight, hearing, and even her sense of gravity were inhibited. In the middle of this blackout world, she resisted the enormous pressure, half dazed.

A few impossibly long seconds passed, and the pressure finally started to ease, returning her vision to her. The first thing she saw was her own arms—more than ten centimeters battered off from the tips, the current edges chipped and peeling, and the black tentacle slowly pulling back. When she shifted her gaze to her feet, she saw that the swords of both legs had sunk into the tile floor nearly up to her knees.

The situation with Akira was much the same; the heavy ice armor generated on her arms had shattered and scattered without a trace. On top of that, her left hand was missing from the wrist. Her legs weren't stabbed into the floor, but she was low on her knees and seemed unable to stand.

"Lotus! Curren! Are you all right?!" Fuko called out urgently, apparently having escaped the tentacle's attack. Kuroyukihime managed to move her right hand in reply.

The damage was enormous, but they had somehow made it through the Dark Shot and the Dark Blow that followed. Another thirty seconds until the two minutes they had promised Utai. If all three attacked with their entire might once more, they could buy that much time.

Kuroyukihime tried to pull her left leg from the floor when she felt an abnormal shiver and jerked her head upward.

And then she saw it. Immediately after firing the Dark Blow with the two tentacles, the ISS kit main body was concentrating a black aura in its wide-open pupil. Dark Shot...Its target was likely Fuko.

Is its Incarnate energy limitless?! Groaning in her heart, Kuroyukihime shouted, “Raker, get out—!”

But she froze mid-sentence. The massive eyeball, shining the color of blood, actually had its sights set far behind Fuko—on Utai dancing to the rear. She might have been able to avoid the attack if she stopped dancing and ran, but that would be a waste of the imagination she’d worked so hard to knead.

It was Fuko, a mere ten meters in front of the eyeball, who made up her mind first. She released the wheels of the wheelchair and spread her arms out to both sides. More than a defensive posture, she cut a cool figure of an older sister protecting the baby.

“It’s no use, Raker!” Kuroyukihime squeezed a hoarse voice from her throat and tried to pull out her right leg. Beyond the motionless wheelchair, Akira was also trying to rouse her injured body. The reason they had been able to defend against the Dark Blow—albeit just barely—was because the force of it had been divided into two. There was simply no way Fuko alone could defend against a Dark Shot with twice that power. At the very least, they needed to fuse their Incarnates.

But just as Kuroyukihime and Akira were finally able to take a step forward—*zwaaaaan!*—space itself shuddered, and the jet-black lance shot forward.

Fuko pushed her arms forward in an almost lazy motion. Her slender palms hit the tip of the vortex of darkness with a *whap*.

Kuroyukihime stared, dumbfounded, at the sight of Raker’s hands, which looked as bare as the word would suggest, not a hint of overlay about them, as they welcomed the superior Dark Shot of the kit main body. The nihilistic energy that ripped apart, swallowed, and vaporized everything it touched became a massive sphere, stopped, and then shivered heavily in front of those hands. A black spark would occasionally shoot off, hit the floor or ceiling or Raker’s body and hair, and then bounce away.

How exactly was she guarding against what was arguably the greatest attack power currently existing in the Accelerated World? Eyes open wide in utter shock, Kuroyukihime suddenly realized what she was doing.

It wasn’t a defense. She was neutralizing it. By pouring a pure positive will into the rampaging energy and its bottomless hunger, she was overwriting the nihilistic attack power. Not fearing the superpowered Dark

Shot, but rather accepting it and fusing with it—this was the Way of the Flexible in the Incarnate System.

The source of the vast imagination Fuko was generating was likely her firm desire to protect Utai. Her hands only *looked* defenseless because the shining of her overlay was instantly swallowed up by the black of the darkness. The moment she could no longer keep up with the generation of Incarnate energy, Fuko together with her avatar would be devoured by the emptiness and vanish.

Having understood the phenomenon in front of her in less than a second, Kuroyukihime lifted her face and exchanged a quick nod with Akira.

The bond between Fuko and Utai was special, even among the Four Elements. “Testarossa” Ardor Maiden would team up with ICBM Sky Raker and be propelled mercilessly into enemy camps, and what made that strategy possible was that the two were bound by a deep love and trust.

But if it’s love for our friends, that’s in me, too. I almost forgot...But Haruyuki made me remember those precious feelings.

“Raker!” Kuroyukihime started.

“Us, too!” Akira continued.

They approached Fuko from either side and raised their wounded hands.

Utai, Fuko, and Akira; Haruyuki, Takumu, Chiyuri, Leopard fighting in some distant place...and Niko and Rin Kusakabe. She would protect them. She concentrated this feeling in her hands, shaping it into a ball of light.

A pure-white overlay was born in the space wedged between her broken swords and began to sparkle like a star. Kuroyukihime took another step forward and gently touched the light that was her hands to the shuddering inky-black lump.



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Arita.

There was only one Burst Linker who would call—no, who *had* called Haruyuki that.

But that wasn't possible. He'd lost all his points over two months earlier, lost all his memories relating to Brain Burst, and left the Accelerated World forever. Haruyuki himself had struck the final blow. He'd definitely seen that avatar cut perfectly in two and swallowed up into the night sky of the Moonlight stage, wrapped in a final extinction effect.

So the third personality lodged in Wolfram Cerberus's right shoulder that had appeared as Cerberus III couldn't be *him*. No matter how familiar his voice or his tone or his laugh or the way he called Haruyuki "Arita," that alone was absolutely, absolutely...

But then the gray avatar, lowering his right hand another few centimeters, turned the completely closed visor to the left and continued, "Aah, Mayuzumi and Kurashima are also here, I see. That does bring a certain memory to mind...About that night..."

The purple claws hid his mouth, and his shoulders shook with laughter. Called out by their real names, Takumu and Chiyuri also stared dumbfounded at the third.

Argon Array, who had summoned him with her mysterious command, and Black Vise, still restraining Niko, maintained their silence. Pard, her leopard body readied in a low position, was on guard against Argon and Vise even as she occasionally sent suspicious looks toward Cerberus III.

"Quit with the creepy impersonation!" Takumu's strained cry broke the momentary silence. "The Burst Linker you're copying no longer talks or laughs like that. He was released from the curse of acceleration. If you're a

Burst Linker, too, then how about you stand up and fight as yourself?!”

“Oh, oh, how many times do I have to tell you?” Cerberus III finally took his right hand away from his face and waved it from side to side as though he were chasing away an unpleasant smell. In the faint gloom of the courtyard, the purple overlay drew a complicated afterimage. “Please don’t refer to me by that disgusting collective noun. And my hobby is not to blindly imitate others, you know. I am me, Mayuzumi. It does give one goosebumps to name oneself before the battle, but well, today is a special day, so let’s say that’s fine. My name is...”

Haruyuki felt the powerful urge to plug his ears and interrupt Cerberus III and his voice full of condescension. He felt like if he was forced to hear the name, then the thing that he was desperately rejecting in the back of his mind would become fact.

But it wasn’t the metal-color avatar before his eyes who spoke the name; it was Chiyuri, finally breaking her silence.

“Dusk Taker.”

Her voice was quiet, but it carried. Cerberus III froze on the spot. He turned his entire body to the left and looked directly at her before bowing halfheartedly. With a laugh deep in his throat, he resumed speaking, his voice dripping with venom. “Keh-keh...I’m so happy we can speak again like this, Kurashima. That was fun, wasn’t it? When we overran the Shinjuku and Shibuya areas as a tag team? Although, well, you were just playing at being the obedient pet while you watched with an eagle eye for your chance to betray me, hmm? Ha-ha-ha! I was completely fooled by your adorable demeanor and sweet attitude—”

“Stop it, Nomi!!” Haruyuki reflexively took a step forward.

“Don’t you dare say Chii’s name!” Takumu shouted, readying his Cyan Blade.

Cerberus III spread his hands as if to say *Oh dear* and shrugged. “It seems that you will not accept reality, so perhaps I should make you believe it? But you already understand, don’t you? That I’m the real thing.”

It was true. They could no longer reject it. He had absolutely no idea what logic exactly was bringing about this strange phenomenon, but Cerberus III,

number three, Threezie, was the very Seiji Nomi who had supposedly been banished after total point loss—the Twilight Marauder, Dusk Taker.

But was that even possible? In experienced time, it had been a day before, but in real time, Haruyuki had just seen him a mere half an hour or so earlier. At the Umesato school festival, Nomi had been dancing with his whole heart in the kendo team’s samurai performance. At what point had he gotten his memories and Brain Burst back and dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field to chase after Haruyuki and his friends? And even if he had managed that, why had he not appeared in his original twilight-colored avatar, but rather in the form of a parasite on Wolfram Cerberus? Above all else, was the Nomi at kendo, the one who practiced so seriously with Takumu, the one who called him “Taku,” all just a lie?

It wasn’t Nomi, or Black Vise and Argon Array, waiting behind him, who pushed away the darkness of doubt that began to swallow Haruyuki; it was Chiyuri speaking in her calm voice once again.

“Real thing? You’re wrong about that, Dusk Taker.”

“...What do you mean, Kurashima?”

“Cerberus I said it before. That number two had originally been a single, independent Burst Linker with a different name, not Cerberus. So then, you, number three, must work the same way. You used to be a Burst Linker with the name Dusk Taker, but now you’re not. Now you’re a shadow parasitizing Wolfram Cerberus’s avatar, a ghost copied from the memories of Dusk Taker. *That’s* what you are!” Chiyuri proclaimed, stabbing the index finger of her right hand forward.

The hint of a sneer disappeared from Cerberus III. “I see you’re as clever as always,” he murmured, covering his face with his right hand once more. “Reminds me of the time you went and betrayed me now, doesn’t it? Aah... that was quite annoying. I’m serious here. Honestly...” He hung his head deeply and put his left hand to his face as well.

Haruyuki kept his guard up, eyes on Cerberus, as he quietly called out to Chiyuri. “Is a copy of memories even possible, Chiyu? I mean, Nomi lost all those memories two months ago already. Even if you were going to copy them, the originals aren’t...”

“That’s true, but that’s the only thing that’s even plausible, right?” Chiyuri shot back.

“Oh!” Takumu shuddered, his Incarnate sword still at the ready. “N-no

way...Actually, right, so that's what it is..."

"Wh-what, Taku? What is what it is?" Haruyuki realized after pushing the question that he'd uttered the real names of his comrades on enemy ground. But there was no point in worrying about that after Nomi had tossed "Arita" and "Mayuzumi" around all over the place. Given that the school that was the main base for the Acceleration Research Society had also been exposed, it wasn't likely that they'd get into a back-and-forth of attacks in the real.

Takumu glanced at Haruyuki. "Burst Linkers who lose all their points have their memories relating to the Accelerated World erased. We've all believed that up to now, right?"

"Y-yeah. We actually saw it happen." Haruyuki naturally thought of Seiji Nomi after he lost all his points. When they'd seen each other at school, Nomi had told him apologetically, "I'm sorry, but I don't really have much interest in net games anymore," and Haruyuki absolutely could not believe that the whole scene was an act.

"Yeah." Takumu nodded as if recognizing this fact, but then quickly uttered an oppositional conjunction. "But what if...your memories aren't annihilated but are taken from you? They're pulled from the head of the Burst Linker and saved somewhere in the Brain Burst central server. And then someone—probably a member of the Acceleration Research Society we don't know yet—called up those memories somehow and set them inside Cerberus ___"

Clap. Clap, clap.

Haruyuki jerked his head in the direction of the brief spate of applause and saw the Quad Eyes Analyst, Argon Array, bringing her hands together.

"The blue kid's not too bad. Not bad at all," she said, and once she stopped, a faint smile rose up on her face. "Instinct's important. I mean, in the very end, all you got to count on's your guts and your feet to run away on. And here's what my instincts are sayin'. They're sayin' it's getting to be about time." She flung her arms open and cocked her head slightly. "Threezie, I'm sure you kids got loads to talk about, but the time for chitchat's over. And Vi, would it kill ya to be serious once in a while?"

Cerberus III kept his face turned downward, but Black Vise lightly raised and lowered the thin panels that passed as a shoulder.

"That was wholly unexpected," he remarked coolly. "I am ever serious, you know. But it does indeed appear that this is the most critical position in

the current game. So then, let us make a real effort.”

An overlay like a gray shadow enveloped the jet-black layered avatar, and seeing this, Haruyuki and his three comrades immediately took on ready positions.

He was still reeling from the shock of discovering that Cerberus III was *that* Dusk Taker. Takumu’s hypothesis was the only thing that explained the situation, and Argon sounded like she was acknowledging that he was largely correct, but it was still a bitter pill to swallow. The memories of a Burst Linker in total point loss were actually saved somewhere in the Accelerated World—Haruyuki could more or less accept this. But was it really possible to take the memories of a Burst Linker in the same position as Haruyuki and his friends and make them possess someone else? Wasn’t that an act that went far beyond the domain of a player?

But he couldn’t deny the reality before his eyes, and it wasn’t as though his objective had disappeared, either.

Save Niko.

He was here for that reason and that alone.

His sole concern now was whether or not he ended up fighting Dusk Taker—no, Cerberus III. That the avatar before him had only ten burst points left hadn’t changed with the personality switch from I to III, which meant that assuming he won, the chimera Burst Linker known as Wolfram Cerberus would leave the Accelerated World forever.

Cerberus himself sounded like that was what he wanted. And Haruyuki already knew that sometimes total point loss could be a seed of salvation.

...*But. I...* He pushed the complicated tangle of feelings in his heart down to the bottom of his stomach with a deep breath of the cold air. There was no longer any time for indecision or hesitation. All that was left was to simply give it everything he had. For the sake of Niko and Rin. For Cerberus I. For Takumu, Chiyuri, and Pard fighting with him there. For Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, and Akira likely fighting at Midtown Tower.

Metatron. This is the final battle. Lend me your strength just a little longer. He sent a prayer to the new wings folded up neatly on his back and clenched his hands into tight fists. A silver aura rose up to wrap around those fists, and he started to step toward the motionless Cerberus III.

And then, a gray overlay wriggled upward from Black Vise. The dozens of thin panels that comprised his right arm and leg separated one after another

and floated up. Haruyuki and the others quickly braced themselves for Vise's specialty, restraining techniques.

“Octahedral Isolation.”

The name of the technique was very similar to the restraining technique Haruyuki had been caught in after he turned into the sixth Chrome Disaster. However, the panels transformed into a square fence that encircled Vise, Argon, Cerberus III, and Niko.

Immediately, Pard leapt forward with a savage roar. An instant behind her, Haruyuki also realized Vise's intent. This wasn't a restraining technique; it was a separation technique for defense.

They had to destroy it immediately. Alongside Takumu, he pushed off the ground as hard as he could.

An instant before claws and fists and sword could make contact—*klink!*—an extremely thin fence stretched up and down, bent toward the inside to create two peaks, and closed. The regular octahedron extended at least twenty meters on each side. The panels had grown to such an enormous size, they turned semitransparent like smoked glass, looking more brittle than the Hexahedral Compression Haruyuki knew.

Smash it! Haruyuki beat on one of the equilateral triangles that made up the octahedron with a fist full of resolve.

The dull sound of impact echoed through the stage, and sparks flew from the joints of his wrist, elbow, and shoulder—unable to completely absorb the intense backlash. But the semitransparent glass panel—which looked to have essentially no breadth—was not so much as scratched. Pard's Incarnate claws and Takumu's Cyan Blade had similar results. The three kept attacking for a moment, but they were forced to concede the absolute strength of the octahedron and step back.

“This is an Incarnate of absolute refusal,” Beast-Mode Pard said quietly with her leopard mouth. “Simply punching or clawing at it won't break it, even if we are using Incarnate techniques.” This was an unusually long speech for Pard, which seemed to in fact show the panic in her heart.

“That's—!” Haruyuki cried, dumbfounded.

As if he had heard him—except, no, he *had* heard him: Cerberus III slowly lifted his face, and his voice, although strangely distorted (perhaps because it was passing through the defensive wall), reached Haruyuki's ears very clearly. “It doesn't matter whether I'm real or whether I'm a fake.” He

flicked the claw-shaped auras of his hands open and closed in front of his face. “I’ve waited for this moment. The moment when I take the duel avatar from number one and fight you once more. My dear upperclassmen, all the many, many things you took from me—my points, my pride, and my power—I will have you return them now!!”

Haruyuki stared, holding his breath, at Cerberus III—at *Nomi*—as he threw his arms out. Attacks couldn’t actually pass from inside the octahedron to the outside, could they? No, there was no way. In which case, what on earth was he planning?

Haruyuki could sense Nomi sneering beneath the face mask, mouth and eyes completely hidden. The gray metal color pulled his left foot back a step and slowly turned around as if irritated. Past Takumu and Chiyuri—until facing him was the small altar that stood to the right, inside the octahedral object in the center of the courtyard.

“Nomi...You—!!” Haruyuki flew at the octahedron once again. Beating wildly on the glass panels with both fists, he shouted, almost howling, “Stop it! *I’m* the one you want to fight, aren’t I?! I’ll fight you, just like you want, so come out of there right now!!”

But Nomi did not so much as glance at Haruyuki; rather, he twisted his body a little farther until his right shoulder was turned toward Niko, still unconscious and restrained on the jet-black cross before him. The shoulder armor—its design so eerily similar to that of the head—opened its heavy metal fangs wide. The light that leaked out dyed the inside of the octahedron violet.

“Nomi! Stoooooooooop!!” Haruyuki shrieked. Pard bit into the edge of the octahedron, while Takumu stabbed his sword into it.

And then he heard the technique name that had plunged the old Haruyuki into a bottomless despair.

“Demonic Commanderrrrrr!”

Zrrrmsh! A twilight-colored beam of viscous light jetted from the maw of the right shoulder to hit Niko squarely in the chest and penetrate every crevice in her armor. And after a fleeting silence, it started to flow back toward Nomi.

The precarious balance would have crumbled instantly if they'd had even a drop of fear or animosity or rejection in their hearts, and Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and Akira—and probably Utai, too—would have become fodder for the immense Dark Shot.

Chasing even this thought from her mind, Kuroyukihime focused her whole being on transforming the desire to protect her friends into the image of light and touched it to the hulking onyx mass.

She felt no impact, no pain.

Nothing but an absolute attraction.

The black hole of cold nothingness greedily sucked up the positive Incarnate energy Kuroyukihime generated.

Good. Swallow as much as you want. Your hunger might be bottomless, but my feelings are limitless.

The old me wasn't able to unconditionally accept the bonds I had with my comrades—my friends. I didn't make a sincere effort to understand them: Fuko's longing for the sky so great she cut off her legs, Utai pleading to stand on the Noh stage, Akira chasing after the outrageous idea of a world without total point loss. I was too obsessed with my own desires, and I pulled the trigger on the destruction of the Legion.

The truth is, all I had to do was believe. In the feelings of my friends who cared for me. In my own desire to support my friends and be supported by them. Lay myself bare, accept the others, and reach out my hand... That's all I had to do.

I thought I'd lost everything and that I'd never come back. But a small silver crow flew down into my stagnant garden and taught me that you can

start again—however many times it takes. You can get back what you lost. You just have to take a step forward and say their names. Like I called out to Fuko that day on the skyscraper of Shinjuku Southern Terrace.

The tears I shed then, hugging her; the tears when Utai—when Akira—came back to me; and the tears when I knew that Haruyuki had protected me until he himself was a battered mess...they shine in the very depths of my heart even now, like precious gems. As long as I have them, the will I produce in my heart is...

...limitless.

This thought existed as the explosion of an assembled image, an instantaneous flash through Kuroyukihime's mind. But it did indeed reach Fuko and Akira, linking their three hearts, fusing them, to create an energy orders of magnitude larger than what they were capable of on their own. Arms outstretched, the three avatars were engulfed in a shining white light that neutralized the pulsating darkness and pushed it out of existence.

When they abruptly returned to themselves, the savagely twisting lump of Dark Shot had disappeared without a trace.

Crumpling to the floor with Fuko and Akira, the strength drained from their bodies, Kuroyukihime—in a daze—thought *Two minutes. We made it.*

She heard the reply to this as a voice in her mind: *Please leave the rest to me!*

Utai's actual voice rang out sonorously across the expansive forty-fifth floor of Midtown Tower.

“The pain of pathos, flames of rage...”

Still lying on the floor, Kuroyukihime somehow managed to move her head and look at Utai behind her.

The overlay blanketing the small shrine maiden became crimson flames that rose up to the ceiling. They couldn't have been real flames, and yet, a definite heat reached Kuroyukihime a dozen meters away. Almost divinely beautiful, Utai danced gracefully inside the pillar of swirling flames—the very image of the Shrine Maiden of the Conflagration. She flipped the fan in her left hand upward, and then once again, her “song” echoed powerfully.

“...*Dirt of the earth, we are.*”

Krrrr! An extraordinary roar beat down on Kuroyukihime’s back. Forgetting her fatigue, she reflexively flipped around and saw a red light illuminating the ISS kit main body from below. The floor ten meters around the bulky eyeball shone a brilliant red.

No, it wasn’t shining—it was *melting*. The Incarnate Utai had spent a hundred and twenty seconds kneading was overriding the thick marble of the floor and heating it to a super-high temperature beyond its melting point, turning it to liquid—the attack was turning the floor into magma.

The kit main body wrapped its fleshy armor with a dark aura and tried to block the heat, but the magma, shimmering in a gradient from the red of the twilight sun to the white of the blazing sun, evaporated even its aura and mercilessly scorched its thick armor.

Eventually, the immense body began to sink into the lake of magma. Although it seemed to have a meter or two of play, the kit body had essentially fixed its three-dimensional coordinates by locking the portal inside of it. This, in turn, became the reason it couldn’t escape the magma.

If, hypothetically, it had had a mouth, the massive eyeball would likely have been howling very loudly. The reaction of the main body was so intense Kuroyukihime could be certain of that. Its front eyelid twitched and shuddered shut, and the two tentacles flailed senselessly. From time to time, a black overlay condensed at the tip of one of them, and an incomplete Dark Blow beat at the lake of magma. But it merely stole a tiny fraction of the vast thermal energy and vanished without causing any damage.

“This...is the Incarnate technique she came up with for the God Genbu,” Fuko said quietly, glancing at Utai dancing beyond them.

“It has to be,” Kuroyukihime responded hoarsely. “The circumference of the magma will need to be about four times this, but if she can drop Genbu’s bulk in...”

“...she could burn it up.” Akira’s voice also contained a hint of tension.

More than the fearsome power of the lake of magma, what made a chill run up their spines was because Utai, the mildest and most even-tempered of the Four Elements, had generated this level of Incarnate technique. If it was categorized on the regular coordinate system, it would likely have fallen into

the fourth quadrant—negative will with range as its target.

Destructive Incarnate techniques had their energy source in negative emotions such as anger, despair, and sorrow. Thus, compared with the creative Incarnate techniques produced by positive emotions, the extent to which the user was pulled into the hole of their heart was overwhelmingly greater. From the results' end, an Incarnate technique like Kuroyukihime's Vorpal Strike brought about significant destruction on a large scale, but the kernel of the image was formed with the creative desire to enhance her own sword technique. But the aim of Utai's so-called Flame Dance was clearly to burn up its target to cinders. The blowback to her mind would be as enormous as the power of the technique itself.

"...Uiui..." Fuko said, pained, clenching the hands she had pressed against the floor. In her heart, she probably wanted to run and make Utai stop her Incarnate attack right then and there. Kuroyukihime felt the same way. But whether they succeeded in destroying the ISS kit main body now rested squarely on Utai's small shoulders.

Holding their collective breath, the three Burst Linkers watched as the kit main body finally lost all its armor and its two tentacles to reveal its true form—a hard, lustrous, ebony eyeball. With the thick flesh burned away, the eyeball was now just two and a half meters across, but this only increased the sense of otherworldliness. Even with its bulk half swallowed by the lake of magma, and even as flames spurted up from every part of it, the animosity jetting from the bloodred pupil did not weaken.

".....?!"

Now the pupil abruptly spun to the left and looked at the southern side of the floor. Following its gaze, Kuroyukihime turned her eyes but saw nothing other than the rows of Grecian temple pillars and the marble wall. There was no sign of anyone there. But the kit body was clearly looking at something. Perhaps it was on the other side of the wall, somewhere off in the distance.

The red pupil narrowed in diameter—a lens automatically adjusting its focus. And then, a single beam of red light shot out from the magma-scorched eyeball.

The beam was far thinner than Dark Shot, and no sound accompanied it.

Stretching out to the side, it hit the undamaged wall but slipped through it smoothly, butter-like, instead of destroying it. One thing was clear: It was not an attacking technique.

Regardless, Kuroyukihime felt an icy chill envelop her as she lay still, prone on the floor. Fuko and Akira similarly stiffened, and small cries slipped from their throats.

The red light, that thing—it was not a good thing. Quite the opposite. Even compared with the many, many things she'd witnessed in the Accelerated World, this object might very well have been the absolute worst.

It was...*the embodiment of the vast, malicious evil the ISS kit main body had accumulated through every single kit terminal.*

“Aaah...Aaaaaaaaah!”

Haruyuki screamed as if to rip his throat open, fists waving wildly.

Demonic Commandeer. Dusk Taker’s sole special attack. Of all the special abilities Haruyuki knew, its effects were by far the most fearsome: the semipermanent theft of another Burst Linker’s ability, special attack, or Enhanced Armament.

Far too belatedly, he understood the true meaning of what Cerberus II had said when he activated his Wolf Down ability during their second duel—“Relax. My ability’s not stealing. Unlike *that guy*.” *That guy* was Cerberus III, aka Dusk Taker. And *stealing* meant Demonic Commandeer.

“No! Stoooooooooop!!” Bringing his fists together above his head, he beat at the semitransparent, purplish-black defensive wall. But Black Vise’s Incarnate technique Octahedral Isolation repelled Haruyuki’s fists with its absolute strength as if space itself had been cut away, and faint cracks appeared in his silver armor.

Then, the purple light flowing back to Cerberus III from Niko throbbed noticeably. A dazzling sphere was pulled from Niko and eaten up by the mouth on Cerberus III’s right shoulder. He was steadily stealing Niko’s power—mostly likely one of the firepower parts that made up her Enhanced Armament Invincible.

Eyes open wide in shock, Haruyuki felt another shiver of fear and moaned. The light flowing from Niko wasn’t disappearing. He heard a slithering, viscous sound as Cerberus III attempted to greedily suck away even more of her power.

“Ah...Aaaah!” Haruyuki screamed once more—his shock changing to a dizzying hatred and rage, then to despair. His voice had to have reached the

inside of the octahedron, but neither Vise nor Argon, watching over the proceedings silently, much less Nomi, shivering with pleasure at his theft, so much as raised an eyebrow at him.

Haruyuki went to raise his cracked fists above his head once more. But a sharp voice slapped him from behind.

“Calm down, Haru!”

At the same time, someone caught the wrist of his right hand. Turning, he saw immediately before him Lime Bell’s eye lenses, radiating a cool light.

“You can’t lose control! Think...I just know you can think up a way to save Niko!”

“But...But! But!” Moaning blindly, he tried to wrench his wrist free from her grasp. And then, he felt the new wings folded up on his back shudder slightly. Almost as if scolding him.

Right. This is exactly the kind of time when I need to calm down and broaden my perspective. Look at everything...and think about what we should do.

Through intent imagination, he condensed the fit of rage piercing his entire body into a small sphere and sank it to the depths of his consciousness. He didn’t need anger at that moment. If he had the energy for that, then he should use it to think even just a little faster—a little more deeply.

“Got it.” Calm once again, Haruyuki gently freed his hand from Chiyuri’s grip. “Hang on just a sec.” He looked at the massive octahedron towering before his eyes, making full use of all of his senses.

Although it was Black Vise’s Incarnate technique, and the true depth of his actual power was still unknown, this partition couldn’t have had the absolute strength of Green Grandé’s Incarnate attack Parsec Wall. The amalgamation of thin panels had originally been an arm and a leg, which maybe meant that the joint areas would be weaker than the flat areas? In which case, they should attack...?

“Not the surface! The corners!” Haruyuki shouted.

“I got it,” Pard responded immediately. She leapt forward, opening her mouth to bite into one of the octahedron’s peaks. Rather than being pushed back again, her four Incarnate fangs just barely caught the place where the four surfaces came together. With every muscle of her animal body writhing, she generated a bite force that made the massive silhouette creak.

Haruyuki was confident it would break. But suddenly, the eight-sided

body rotated quickly just a quarter to the right. The bottom edge that dug deep into the ground sent marble fragments flying, while the precarious balance of Pard's fangs against the peak was shattered.

Kachank! She flew back—her jaw snapping shut—yet she had no sooner hit the ground than she was leaping up again, trying to bite into the new corner. But now the octahedron rotated to the left, and her fangs were knocked away once again.

“Taku! Chiyu!” Haruyuki shouted, pushing on one surface of the octahedron with both hands to hold it in place. Takumu and Chiyuri flew around to the opposite side, with Pard in the middle, and braced themselves. But the surface of the semitransparent wall had absolutely no handholds, and their hands slipped off when the octahedron rotated for the third time.

“Nngh.” Haruyuki gritted his teeth.

A second ball of light was pulled from Niko's body and swallowed up by Cerberus III's right shoulder. If this kept up, Cerberus III would soon steal all the pieces of Invincible—Haruyuki assumed they were the main Armament, the missile pods, the cockpit with its machine gun, the rear thrusters, and the legs: a total of five parts.

Haruyuki fought back the irritation threatening to balloon in him and thought harder. He was certain the octahedron peak was its weak point. But in order to hit it, they had to somehow stop the rotation. A simultaneous attack on all four vertices from all four directions? No, they still wouldn't be able to block the rotation itself. The fulcrum was the regular octahedron's bottom vertex, but that was digging deep into the marble earth; they couldn't so much as touch it.

Digging into the earth...

“—!!”

Haruyuki's eyes flew open, and he turned his head back to the sky above.

Of the six vertices, the true weak point was the actual peak—one of the apexes. The octahedron might be able to rotate on the horizontal, but it couldn't spin perpendicularly, because the bottom vertex was fixed firmly in the earth. But if they tried to attack the apex, they would be shaken off by the horizontal rotation, like Pard's biting attack had been. They needed to apply pressure directly to the bottom vertex from the top, a perfect perpendicular line without the slightest deviation.

A conversation from earlier suddenly popped up in the back of his mind.

He whirled around. “Taku! How much is in your special-attack gauge?!”

“I’ve got plenty left!” Cyan Pile answered immediately.

“Great! I’m carrying you to the top of the octahedron. You do your thing straight down!”

With that alone, Haruyuki’s intention came through loud and clear. Eye lenses beyond the slits carved into Takumu’s face mask opened wide for a moment, and he nodded forcefully. “Got it. Leave it to me!”

Haruyuki grabbed Takumu from behind, spread the silver wings on his back, and pushed them as hard as he could. They soared the twenty-five meters to the top of the octahedron in an instant and looked down on the Incarnate defensive wall that cut a square of the courtyard.

At that very moment, a third ball of light was removed from Niko and devoured by Cerberus III’s shoulder. Just two more left. When all her Enhanced Armament had been stolen, Niko would lose the overwhelming firepower that earned her the name Immobile Fortress.

Brushing away a fleeting terror, Haruyuki dropped into an attack posture. Holding tightly to Takumu, he fell forward so that he was parallel with the top of the octahedron. At the same time, Takumu returned his Incarnate sword to its Pile Driver form and turned the exposed pile in the barrel toward the peak of the walled structure.

“Here I go, Haru!”

“Hit it hard, Taku!” Haruyuki deployed his wings fully, hoping to absorb the recoil.

Takumu shouted the name of the technique with everything he had—his voice echoing across the expanse of the courtyard. “Spiral...Gravity...Driiiiiiiiver!!”

The Pile Driver barrel was wrapped in a shining blue light and expanded with a *kashak*. The pile was tucked away, only to promptly return in the form of an enormous hammer drill, and this was fired—flames jetting from the rear.

The flat tip of the iron pillar spun savagely as it hit the peak of the octahedron—a perfect bull’s-eye accompanied by an incredible roar—as if the air itself was suddenly compressed at supersonic speed. The eight pieces of semitransparent glass that comprised the Incarnate shelter shuddered, and sparks cascaded from the point of impact.

Here, finally, the architect of the octahedron glanced up at Haruyuki and

Takumu. He cocked his faceless head to one side, and as if that was a signal, the massive structure began to spin counterclockwise, the opposite direction from Cyan Pile's drill. The waterfall of sparks became a torrent, the roaring grew deafening, and Haruyuki felt the world shaking as he clutched Takumu tightly.

If the launch angle of the hammer drill had been even a degree off from the direct perpendicular, it would have slipped away before it caught hold of the peak, now that the octahedron was rotating at top speed, and the two would have tumbled to the ground. But Cyan Pile's level-three special attack, Spiral Gravity Driver, could *only* fire directly downward. Takumu didn't have to bother with any fine tuning, and the direction of launch would still be fixed perpendicularly.

"Unh...Aaaaaah!" As Takumu howled, a blue overlay jetted from his entire body. The shine of the Incarnate flowed down his right arm to the hammer drill, changing the dark gray spike into super-hard corundum. The swirling jet of orange sparks mixed with the blue aura to brightly illuminate the courtyard.

Psheenk! A strange creaking sound Haruyuki had never heard before shook the air. Unable to withstand the intense pressure, the octahedron spun ever slower, until it eventually stopped. In contrast, the now-sapphire hammer drill continued to drive into it with a force that likely far surpassed the time it had slammed Haruyuki down from the roof to the first floor so long ago.

The second creaking noise was accompanied by a high-pitched wail. Lightning-bolt cracks shot through the octahedron from the peak out to the fourth panel. But the fine cracks stopped at the next peak, a hair's breadth away from causing total destruction.

"Just...a little...more...!" Takumu's voice was pained.

Instantly, Haruyuki made up his mind. "I'll help!"

He put more strength into the arms around Takumu to make the two avatars one. In addition to Silver Crow's original wings stretching out from his back, he deployed the white wings he'd been newly given—Metatron Wings. All four spread out in the shape of an X, and he pushed every ounce of his willpower into them.

"Smash...iiiiiiit!!"

A white light shot upward perpendicularly—the jet of a massive rocket.

The incredible thrust went through Haruyuki and Takumu into the hammer drill down to the octahedron, and the flat surfaces buckled and warped. The cracks now stretched farther down, passing through the side vertices, and then split again to join the cracks reaching out from the other vertices.

Once the structure was covered in a spiderweb of fine cracks, the high-pitched shriek of destruction pierced the entire field. The smoky-black defensive wall shattered into countless fragments and scattered, glittering in the twilight sun.

At the same time, Cerberus III stole a fourth ball of light. Still bound as one, Haruyuki and Takumu thrust the tip of the still-spinning, roaring sapphire drill squarely at Nomi, directly below them.

““Ngaaaaaaaah!!””

The Spiral Gravity Driver, containing the power and will of both of them, transformed the fragments of the wall fluttering downward into fine particles and plunged forward toward Cerberus III’s helmet. An instant before it could make contact, Argon Array shot four lasers from off to the left to stop it.

Two of these Haruyuki repelled with his Optical Conduction ability, but the other two grazed Takumu’s flank and left shoulder, knocking him off-balance. The drill slipped and the spinning strike charged down a mere five centimeters to the left of Nomi, narrowly missing him and shattering the marble tile there.

Haruyuki put on the brakes with his wings to get Takumu back to the ground with no damage, but then he felt like he heard his good friend’s voice.

Haru! I’m okay. Go for the Red King while you can!

Roger!

After this instantaneous exchange, he released his hands, and no sooner had he turned himself toward the altar where Niko was held captive than he was flying at full power. Argon’s four lenses shone purple once more to his left, but Pard charged in under the cover of the rain of wall fragments and body-slammed her, so that her lasers shot off in vain toward the school building to the rear.

“Nikooooooooo!!” Haruyuki spread his arms out and grabbed onto the crimson avatar spread out over the black cross. He tried to destroy the cross at the same time, but perhaps not wishing to lose his left arm, too, Vise transformed the cross back into thin panels as he sank into the earth.

If Haruyuki had seriously chased after him, he could have maybe

destroyed some of the panels, but he had something far more important to take care of first.

“Yaaaah!” he cried, flashing his right hand forward with silver Incarnate light to sever the line of purple that connected Cerberus III and Niko. The fifth ball of light he was trying to pull from her at that very moment stopped and returned to the inside of her avatar.

Niko! Haruyuki didn’t say it aloud this second time, but instead, he called the name of his cherished friend—his heart balancing a dozen mixed emotions.

The small, smooth duel avatar was definitely there in his arms. It had been forty minutes from the moment she’d been abducted by Black Vise at Midtown Tower to this joy of getting her back. It may have been a short time, but it felt like several days in Haruyuki’s lived experience.

And she had lost something incredibly huge. Cerberus III, Nomi, had in fact stolen four of Niko’s Enhanced Armaments with his Demonic Commandeer. Haruyuki didn’t know which parts those four were, but whichever they were, that was 80 percent of Invincible. Considering the MO of the Acceleration Research Society up to that point, the instant they judged the situation to be disadvantageous, Vise and Argon would try to take Cerberus and flee. He had to get those Enhanced Armaments back before they did.

Niko, hang on. I’m going to totally— Haruyuki had thought this far when the small face mask below stirred, and a faint green light rose up in the blackened eye lenses. Had she regained consciousness now that she was free from Vise’s cross? Haruyuki turned to the avatar in his arms and started to whisper to her.

But before he could say the first syllable of her name, he saw something unexpected: a crimson overlay jetting from Scarlet Rain with the force of a small star. A shock wave, pregnant with fierce heat, ripped his arms from her body, and Haruyuki fell, splayed, to the ground. He managed to avoid landing flat on his butt, but he was instead caught somewhere in between—his rump sticking up into the air as he turned his eyes up at the avatar floating above the altar.

As she descended gently on the upward current of air produced by the heat, Niko’s eye lenses looked in turn at Haruyuki, Takumu turning the Pile Driver on Nomi, Chiyuri with Choir Chime at the ready, and Pard facing off

against Argon. He felt her gaze soften a little until she turned to glare at her three enemies.

The cute, round lenses changed from their usual green to the blue-tinged white of super-hot flames. The crimson aura spilling from her grew stronger, heating the cool air of the Twilight stage so it shimmered like a mirage.

Riding the powerful heat, she spoke finally, in an increasingly threatening voice. “You dolts...Just out here doing whatever the hell you want, huh...?”

Here, her smooth descent ended, and she came to stand on the small square altar as she crossed her arms in front of her.

“I ain’t gonna pay you back double, nuh-uh. That’s too good for you. I’ll give it to you ten times— Nah, you took such good care of me, I’ll pay you back fifty times this. I’ll burn ya to such a crisp there won’t be a lump of charcoal left behind. You can count on that.”

It’s Niko. Staggering to his feet, Haruyuki felt something hot welling up from the depths of his heart. *This* was Bloody Storm, Immobile Fortress, Scarlet Rain. Even if she had been forced into a fake Zero Fill for forty minutes—even if she had had her Enhanced Armaments stolen from her—the fire that lived in the spirit of the second Red King had not been extinguished.

Haruyuki knew that real-world Niko was a twelve-year-old girl who sometimes whined, sometimes cried. Maybe that was Niko’s true face. But if instead of sinking to her knees and giving up in the direst of predicaments, she was able to clench her fists and stand up—that itself was true strength. That was precisely the truest of wills that went beyond even the Brain Burst system.

Pard flipped her leopard body and howled before leaping to take up position at Niko’s feet. Haruyuki also moved a few steps and readied himself to the right of the altar. Takumu and Chiyuri were quick to join them on the left.

The first to react as they took up formation around Scarlet Rain was Argon Array. A thin smile rose up on the mouth exposed beneath the goggles. “So assertive, huh, teeny tiny?” Her voice was sunny and icy cold in equal measure. “All attitude even though you got four Enhanced Armaments nicked. If it were me, like someone took this big ol’ hat from me, I’d be weepin’ and wailin’ to be sure.”

“Then I’ll rip that stupid thing off together with your damned head and make you cry.” There was no sense of confusion at the present situation in

Niko's words or tone. She most likely hadn't been unconscious during the time Vise's technique had forced the Zero Fill on her.

“Ha-ha-ha!” The Quad Eyes Analyst's shoulders shook with laughter at Niko's refusal to back down even a step. “Scaaaary! But y'know, I'mma lady, so spare me the chrome dome. An' I'm all tuckered out—all this fightin', y'know? I'll leave the rest to the young'uns and enjoy the show from on high. So, Threzie, please and thanks, yeah? You got a new toy an' everything, just like you wanted.”

Haruyuki turned his gaze to Cerberus III. The metal color had maintained his silence for nearly two minutes now, ever since Takumu and Haruyuki had severed his Demonic Commandeer. His arms dangled loosely at his sides, and his head also hung low; he was like a robot with the power turned off.

No, maybe he actually is? Maybe with the reaction from stealing four large Enhanced Armament, he's over capacity and can't move? Haruyuki thought, remembering the time Nomi tried and failed to steal Takumu's Pile Driver on top of Haruyuki's flight ability.

But then a poisonous smile crept across the face mask, dripping with venom, to refute Haruyuki's guess-cum-hope. “Heh...heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh...It's indeed annoying to have an intrusion at the very end...but this is incredible...I suppose I should say this is the power of a king, hmm? Compared with this, the cutter, the tentacles, the stingy wings I once stole from whoever, wherever, were utter garbage. I merely stole four items, and now I have the capacity of three people, hmm...”



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As if reading Haruyuki's thoughts, Nomi slowly lifted his face. The visor was, as before, completely closed, but Haruyuki saw a vision there of two dark purple eye lenses shining. Gradually pulling his upper body back and lifting his clawed hands, Nomi suddenly shouted, "This is precisely the pleasure of marauding! In an instant, the power that someone else worked so desperately to gain, that they cultivated with such love, that they held so precious, becomes mine...Heh-heh-heh. With this power, I'll steal even more...Keh-keh-keh-keh! Ngah-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Aaah! Ha! Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

This loud laughter was exactly like the real Dusk Taker's during the fierce showdown with Haruyuki two months earlier. No, the metal color laughing before his eyes now was the real one. The malice cut away from the real-world Seiji Nomi when he lost all his points had been summoned once more by some as yet unseen master of a massive evil intent. That was the true nature of Cerberus III.

He couldn't let this happen. He had to rebury Nomi's memories—no, his ghost—deep in the Brain Burst central server once again. He had to erase it completely, if possible. And maybe it was feasible in that moment.

Even if Cerberus had switched personalities, his total points saved in the system shouldn't have changed. Right before he was forced to cede to III, Cerberus I had said he had only ten burst points left. Which meant that if Haruyuki—also level five—was to defeat him, then exactly ten points would be transferred, and Wolfram Cerberus would be left with nothing and would vanish.

In that case, the memories of Cerberus I would likely be handled with the normal erasure (or transfer) processing, but Haruyuki didn't know what would happen to the memories that existed as II and III. They might be returned to some part of the server once more, or they might be completely erased this time, for sure. But if he *could* erase Nomi's memories, Cerberus I would also disappear with them.

Haruyuki had no proof, but most likely, Cerberus was an unnatural Burst Linker produced through the Artificial Metal-Color plan based on the Mental-Scar Shell theory. Regardless that he had been made to fight and stay at level one to accumulate points on Argon's orders, he was a rare genius, genuine and earnest, who hadn't lost the heart to love the duel. And he was Haruyuki's friend. Even if Cerberus himself wanted it, Haruyuki couldn't

send him to total point loss. Once the tungsten avatar was released from all this scheming, Haruyuki wanted to exchange blows with him. Whenever they wanted.

While Haruyuki wrestled with the two opposing emotions, Niko turned toward the one who had stolen her Enhanced Armaments.

“I get it.” Her voice was caustic. “Just as warped as they say. Jerk like you could never master Invincible. I mean, there’s heart in Enhanced Armaments.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” With another short burst of laughter, Nomi spread his arms theatrically. “Just the sort of thing one of those who call themselves Burst Linkers would say, hmm! Then I shall give you proof that this thing called *heart* has no power in either the Accelerated or real worlds.” His left hand flashed quickly, manipulating his Instruct menu. “The sole exception being a heart of loyalty to me.”

Oh yeah. This guy hates shouting the command names, Haruyuki remembered, holding his breath.

The sharply tapered index finger pressed four buttons that no one else could see.

Gogonnn! A tremendous roar shook the earth of the courtyard. Several enormous, transparent bodies appeared around Cerberus III—the detail and texture on them increased before his eyes to materialize a group of weapon objects covered in *purple* armor plating.

First, the long, narrow cockpit wrapped around Cerberus III from behind. Large laser-gun arms joined this on either side. A thruster block with four large thrusters clamped onto the rear, while two sturdy legs stretched out from below.

Haruyuki and his friends weren’t simply sitting and watching this combination sequence. The Enhanced Armament had no sooner started to appear as objects than both Niko and Haruyuki, with their long-distance Incarnate techniques, were bringing crimson and silver overlays into their arms. But Argon and Vise took similar action behind Nomi, so they couldn’t fire.

There was a brilliant burst of light, another colossal roar in the tight group encamped across from them, and then the fusion of the four Enhanced Armaments with Cerberus III was complete.

It was very different from Niko’s original Invincible in both shape and

color. Because it was missing one part—he hadn't been able to steal the missile pods—the sense of volume didn't begin to compare with the original. It was closer to human than fortress—the slender body tall enough to nearly reach the top of the surrounding school buildings.

Just as the deep purple—a midrange color between long and close range—of his armor indicated, the laser guns on the outsides of his arms were scaled down, but in exchange, the arms were equipped with hands and four sinister claws. Two long claws also stretched out from the tips of both feet, and massive spikes shot up from his shoulders and knees, for an overall image that went past giant and on to demon.

Essentially encased in the thick cockpit block, Cerberus III brandished the Enhanced Armament arms. *“How do you like this?”* The shriek was amplified and twisted with a metallic edge. *“This is power! This is what it means to rule!! Ruling through theft!! This is the sole absolute power!! Ha-ha-ha-ha...Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”*

The exultation once evidenced by the real Nomi was the same to the letter. This fact strongly pushed home to Haruyuki that the Nomi before his eyes was nothing more than an emulated presence from multiple memories... which was exactly why they needed to erase it.

For the sake of the real Seiji Nomi walking down a new path in the real world—and for the sake of Cerberus I, created as a vessel and made to fight without knowing the joy of the duel. And for the sake of Cerberus II himself, used after being called forth like a ghost through someone else's will.

“Chiyu,” Haruyuki called to his childhood friend in a small voice that just barely reached her. “I'm counting on you *this time*, too. I'll signal you at the right moment. Until then, focus on protecting yourself. Taku, I'm counting on you to guard Chiyu.”

He waited for the green pointed hat and the blue helmet to move slightly before speaking to the two members of the Red King, Prominence. “Niko, Pard. We're gonna have to fight Invincible. You're okay with that, right?”

“No big. Just get in there, do it.”

“Kay.”

Their replies were immediate and heartening. He felt like they were spurring him on, too.

Thmmp. The ground vibrated heavily as the purple demon took a step forward. As he slowly opened the claws of his hands, he spoke, sounding like

he was licking his chops. *“Have you finished your strategy meeting, Hero and minionssss? Please don’t disappoint me...I’ll have you entertain me for five minutes, at the very least!”*

Haruyuki was hit with a wave of battle pressure as he dropped into a ready position and kept one eye on the avatars to the rear of the demon. The amalgamated Cerberus III was a fearsomely powerful enemy, but he couldn’t forget about Argon Array and Black Vise, either. Argon was essentially at full strength still, and although Vise had lost his right arm and leg when the Octahedral Isolation was destroyed, he was standing calmly alongside Argon, showing no signs of suffering from any pain. If Haruyuki and his comrades gave him any opening, he wouldn’t hesitate to use his remaining arm and leg to attack.

Always stay calm and look at the whole battlefield, Haruyuki told himself.

As if this thought were the signal, Nomi raised the laser gun of his left arm. An amethyst light sat in the inky-black barrel, fifteen centimeters around. *Hwheeen.* The sound of the gun charging grew louder by the second.

The white wings on the upper part of his back—Metatron’s wings—shuddered warning.

I know. I’m not gonna get hit with a totally obvious attack like that, Haruyuki replied reflexively. He intended to take off just as the laser was on the verge of firing, grab onto the massive body, and beat it down with a combo attack.

But Metatron wasn’t warning him about the amalgamated Cerberus III’s long-distance attack.

Niko shuddered to his immediate left. “Nngh?!”

“Whaaat?!” Even Argon Array diverted her attention from the battlefield to stare up at the northern sky.

Haruyuki flicked his eyes in that direction and then opened them wide in amazement.

A single red line chased soundlessly across the evening sky and its gentle gradation from orange to dark blue.

It was too slow for a long-distance attack. And he sensed basically no physical power in it. Even if it had been aimed at Haruyuki and his friends, they would have easily been able to evade or repel it. And to start with, on its current course, the red light would pass through the sky above the school.

Nonetheless, Haruyuki was suddenly assaulted by a dread like his body

had been plunged into ice water. Beneath his armor, his avatar stiffened down to its fingertips, and his virtual breath stopped. And yet he was overcome by the powerful urge to run and run now; his motionless body shivered fiercely.

Niko, Pard, Takumu, and Chiyuri were also stuck in place, staring with intense concentration at the sky. If Nomi fired his laser, they would have been hit hard. But Nomi, in position to fire the main Armament, also seemed to feel something, and he turned the massive bulk of the Enhanced Armament upward to peer out from the gap in the cockpit block.

The red line reached a spot in the sky directly above the courtyard and bent ninety degrees downward in a motion that ignored all the laws of physics. A faint sound reached Haruyuki's ears: *Hween, raaaah*. A sound like the wind cutting—a noise like a crowd screaming.

“What is that—?” Nomi started dubiously.

The red light twisted to hit the cockpit block dead-on. But there was no explosion, no big effect of any kind. The light simply clung to the armor surface like slime, pushing inward through the gaps.

“Unh...Aaaah! Stop! ...I heard nothing about this. Vise! Argon! Stop this thing alreadyyyyyy!!” Nomi screamed, nearly shrieking. The Enhanced Armament arms waved wildly, and the feet trampled the tiles of the courtyard. The armor was in the way, so Haruyuki couldn't see what was happening inside the cockpit, but he had no doubt it was terrifying, whatever it was. Something terrible beyond measure.

“No way...” Argon quickly pulled away from the rampaging Cerberus III and groaned in a rare show of shock. *“It's too soon. Like, this is too much! It can't be...That lot, they went an' did it in? This is really somethin', def not what the president's expecting.”*

He couldn't immediately understand what she was talking about. At any rate, the Acceleration Research Society apparently wasn't expecting this, either.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah! They're...inside me! ...Stop! Stooooooooooooooooop!!” Shrieking in terror, the purple demon charged into the south side of the school building, arms raised, and began beating against the third-floor wall, like he had lost all control of his body. The building had the same attributes as a player home, and thus, not a single pane of glass was broken, but the powerful vibrations generated made the surface of the earth shudder, shaking Haruyuki and his friends.

The intense shock pulled Haruyuki free of his paralysis, but he didn't actually know what he should do.

"I dunno what's what here," Niko shouted, "but in Promi, we smash first and ask questions later! Crow, we're going in!"

"R-r-r-roger!" He clenched his fists tightly to chase away his fear and surprise, then called a silver overlay into his hands. With fists similarly hosting a red overlay, Niko took up position boxing-style.

"Laser Javelin!!" A silver lance shot forth from Haruyuki's right hand.

"Radiant Burst!!" Ten flaming fists erupted from Niko's.

Their Incarnate attacks caught the amalgamated Cerberus III at the base of his left shoulder and exploded spectacularly. The massive body lurched to one side, and the left arm, damaged at the joint, slowly pulled away and fell to the ground with a *thud*, followed by a waterfall of sparks.

The purple demon staggered a few steps before freezing in place. Nomi's moaning, previously drowned out by the din of his attack on the indestructible building, echoed across the courtyard like a curse. "...*You... tricked me... We'll give you a new power, we'll let you have revenge... You said all these convenient things... This was your plan... right from the start...*"

Argon Array's response was probably the closest thing to gratitude she was capable of, but she still sounded flippant, somehow. "Sorryyy, Threezie. You were s'posed to get to play a wee bit more, y'know? But, like, we're just scraping by here, short-staffed an' all that, sooooo sometimes, plans go belly-up."

"Shut...up. Hurry...get it off. Help me...Otherwise, you all, too..."

Skree, kee, kee. The massive right arm creaked, and Nomi got Argon and Vise in the sights of his laser gun. But the two level eighters shrugged in unison, not seeming the least bit perturbed.

"Well, this won't do." This time, Vise spoke. "No matter which way you look at it, this situation is a difficult one, Taker."

Haruyuki felt like he'd heard that line before, and Nomi's voice grew even more deeply colored with anger.

"Are you...Are you going to abandon me again, Vise...? Twice...Me, here..."

"Relax, Taker. I doubt that what's happened twice will come about a third time." Black Vise's voice was aloof to the extreme as he turned the collection of thin panels that served as his face toward Haruyuki and his friends.

“Finally, I shall also offer a warning to the esteemed members of the Black and Red Legions. I would recommend you do *not* attempt to take back the Enhanced Armament, but rather depart immediately. The fusion is a tad early, but either way, the situation is more than you can handle now.”

“Bastard!” Niko cursed. “You planning on running?!”

“Of course.” The layered avatar, now missing an arm and a leg, nodded evenly. “Both Argon and myself find our lives dear, you see. We just barely managed to achieve forty percent of our mission objective, but, well, we’ll call it a win.”

“That’s the story. If you lot manage to get away okay, too, let’s play again. Pleasure chattin’ with you, kitty cat.” Argon waved her right hand with a flourish, and the thin panels of Vise’s body spun around and instantly fused into two larger panels.

Haruyuki dropped his eyes to their feet with a gasp and saw they were just barely touching the shadow created by the southwest side of the school.

“Nngh!” He gritted his teeth, but right now, his main priority was not a follow-up attack on Vise and Argon. They had to get Niko’s Enhanced Armament back and go meet up with Kuroyukihime and the others at Midtown Tower. To that end, they needed to destroy the purple demon and pull Cerberus III from the cockpit.

The instant the two thin panels clamped around Argon, Nomi shouted in a voice filled with rage.

“Viiiiiiiiiiiiise!!”

A malevolent purple beam of light burst forth from his laser gun.

But the ebony panels had already fused into one and had sunk into the shadows. The light beam blasted into the earth, and a magnificent pillar of fire erupted upward. Marble tiles ripped away from the ground danced up into the air, but there was no sign of Vise or Argon among them. At that moment, they were likely escaping off somewhere inside the shadow of the school building.

“*Dammit. Dammit! Daaaaammiiiiit!!*” Nomi howled his rage, voice cracking. “*I do not accept this! I will not allow this development! Someone, anyone, come here...And then, I...me...Aah...Aaaah...! Stop—no. I don’t want to lose...my power...my...*”

The cursing steadily grew weaker. But as it did, a thin shadow of an aura began to bleed through the surface of the purple armor.

“Crow!” Niko cried sharply. “One more time!”

Haruyuki half-automatically raised his right hand. Brushing away the fear rising up in his heart, he focused his will.

The Laser Javelin/Radiant Burst combination hit the amalgamated Cerberus III squarely in the back—or it should have. But almost as if it had its own will, the shadowy aura crawling along the surface of his armor came together to create a thick membrane and repel the double Incarnate attack.

“What?!” Niko shouted.

“N-no damage?!” Haruyuki cried, hearing his comrades groan in shock around him.

But Nomi in the cockpit didn’t seem to even notice he’d been attacked. “No...I...don’t...I’m d-disappearing...I can’t. See anything...I can’t hear...Aaaah...Disappear...Dis...a...ppear...”

Abruptly, the tone of his voice changed. The fear, the rage, every emotion dropped away, leaving only an echo like digital noise.

“Disappear...DISAPPEAR...appear...ppear...ppear. D-d-d. D-D-D. Dee. Dee . Deel. Deel. Deel-deel-deel-deel. Deel-deel-deel-deel-deeeeeee.”

The strange cry suddenly cut off—the massive purple body frozen in an unnatural pose. Even the breeze that supposedly always blew in the Twilight stage dropped, and all sound vanished from the courtyard. Haruyuki was seized with a shiver of fear he’d never felt before in the Accelerated World and stood rooted to the spot, voiceless. Niko, Pard, Takumu, and Chiyuri also held their tongues, as though if they spoke a single word, the lid on something even more terrifying would have been lifted.

Breaking the silence was a *dromp*, a thick, watery sound. When he looked, the dull-black aura was dripping like blood from the wound on the giant’s left shoulder. It stretched out in a long thread before falling to the earth and pooling on the tile. The pool became slime and wriggled away... toward the left arm sitting on the ground.

Maybe he should have attacked the black slime, but Haruyuki couldn’t move. In the blink of an eye, the slime had reached the arm and entered through the destroyed joint.

The four sharp claws twitched. A thin, elongated form connecting the avatar and the arm, the slime contracted and pulled the arm back to the shoulder. As Haruyuki gaped, the massive iron arm was yanked up into the

air and then wetly fused with the left shoulder six meters above the ground.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, a destroyed Enhanced Armament was cut off from its owner and would not regenerate until the owner dived again. This bit of common knowledge was completely overturned as his left arm was regenerated, and the amalgamated Cerberus III staggered to stand up straight and turn ninety degrees to the left to face Haruyuki and his comrades squarely.

Because of the construction—cockpit block in the center, arms to the sides, legs below, thrusters to the rear—the giant had no head. But Haruyuki felt it. A gaze filled with a bottomless hunger staring down on the five of them from far above.

“...pppear...Deeeel...” The abnormal howl echoed half like a beast, half like a machine. The shadowy aura wriggling around the giant’s body rapidly grew more concentrated. With a metallic creaking, the shape of the armor began to change. Straight lines bent and warped into organic curves. Claws on arms and legs exploded in size; gill-like slits sprang up everywhere.

Haruyuki noticed that at some point, thick black clouds had gathered in the twilight sky directly above the courtyard. Bolts of pale lightning flashed inside them, and the low roar of thunder rumbled across the sky. In this world where light was receding, the giant continued his transformation into a true demon.

The spikes on shoulders and knees nearly doubled in length, while the gaps in the cockpit block were completely blocked with metal panels like scales. The laser-gun arms began to look like annelids—rear thrusters like massive tumors. Finally, with a *plok*, a semicircular “head” appeared in the upper part of the cockpit.

The front of the semicircle opened like an eyelid, revealing an enormous eyeball with an iris the color of blood. Now glaring at Haruyuki and his comrades with a true gaze, the demon brandished his hands and the scythe-like claws and roared, “*Deeel...llllllloooooooaaaaaaah!!*”

Purple lightning crackled and streaked down from the black clouds around the demon. It was no longer Invincible nor the amalgamated Cerberus III that rose up before them in the courtyard.

Haruyuki had seen something before that resembled this new creature almost perfectly, except for its size. Once in a video replay of the past. Once in a dream he’d had in a castle. And then, as something Silver Crow himself

had transformed into.

In the back of his mind, a dreadful phrase came to life from a conversation he'd had with Kuroyukihime and Akira Himi three days earlier. The name that had spilled unconsciously from his lips, colored with an icy shiver of fear.

“...Armor of Catastrophe...Mark II...”

To be continued.

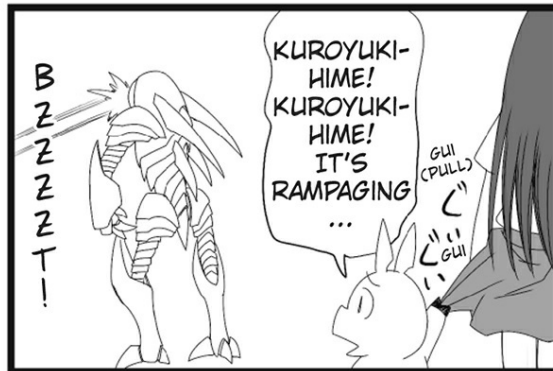
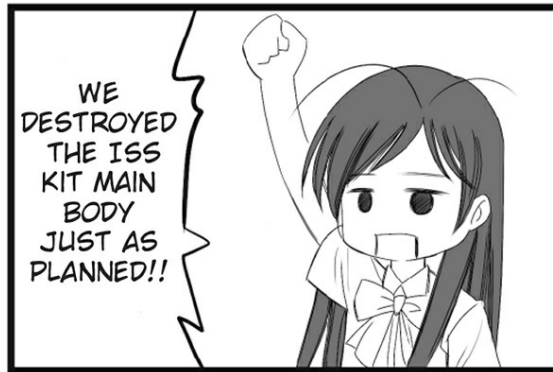
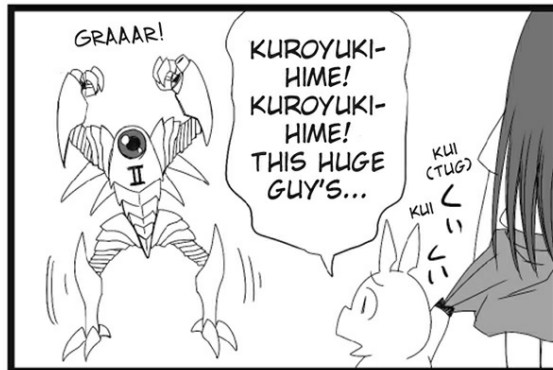
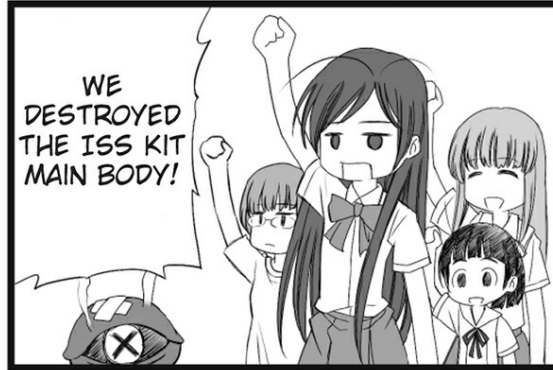


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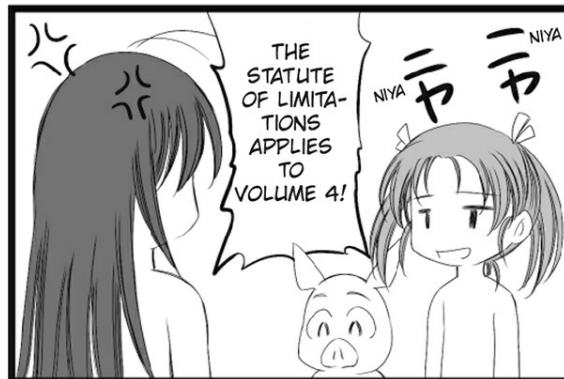
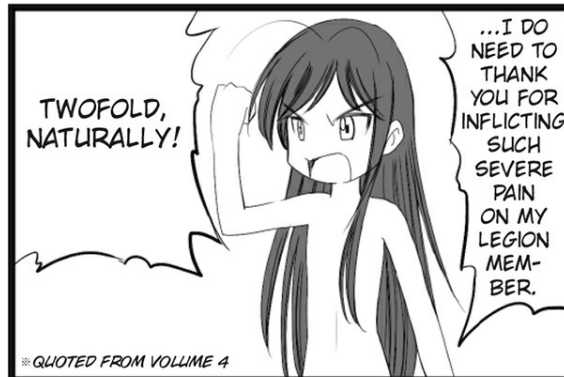
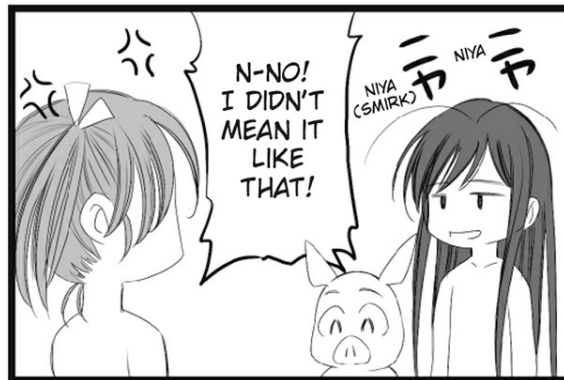
AFTERWORD

(I strongly recommend reading the book first.)

Accel Lunch (13) Reki



Accel Lunch (14) Reki



Please do pick up Volume 16!

Reki Kawahara
On a certain day in August 2013

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