

▶▶ **ACCEL·WORLD** ◻

CRADLE OF STARS

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**






"I have a favor to ask. Would you maybe stand as candidates with me in the next student council election?"

MAYU IKUZAWA


Classmate of Haruyuki, Takumu, and Chiyuri. Also the class representative for the eighth grade's class C.




"...Wh-why us?"

TAKUMU

Haruyuki's good friend. Nickname: Professor. Member of the new Nega Nebulus, led by Kuroyukihime. Duel avatar: Cyan Pile.



"...I'll have you explain every detail later on!"



"Hey, hey!"

MEGUMI WAKAMIYA

Close with student council vice president, Kuroyukihime. Works as the student council secretary.



"Ooo heh ooo
oon oh aah!"

CHIYURI

Member of Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Lime Bell.
Haruyuki's childhood friend.

"That's
pervy,
Croooow!"

HARUYUKI

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

"Gah! D-don't
lick meeee!!"

"Wh-what are you
doing, you creep?!"

CHOCOLAT PUPPETER

Master of the small Legion Petit Paquet.
Working with Silver Crow, she was able to
free her two close friends from the ISS kits.

"I'm jealous—
I mean, no fair!"

MINT MITTEN AND PLUM FLIPPER

KUROYUKIHIME

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

"Haruyuki,
how are
you at
swimming?"

UI>
I BROUGHT
AN INNER
TUBE, TOO!

UTAI SHINOMIYA

Member of the new Nega Nebulus, led
by Kuroyukihime. Super president of the
Umesato Junior High Animal Care Club,
of which Haruyuki is a member.
Duel avatar: Ardor Maiden.

RIN KUSAKABE

Girl who adores Haruyuki. Member of the Green
Legion; Great Wall.
Duel avatar: Ash Roller. (During duels, ownership
of her consciousness shifts to her older brother.)

"Nice work, Corvus."

"Arita, no fair.
Answering...first!"

FUKO KURASAKI

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



"We'll talk
with our
fists—no,
our swords.
That's the
way of our
master."

"You've
gotten
strong,
Lota—"

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CRADLE OF STARS

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 17

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen

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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).

■ Uui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. 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.

■ 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.
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- 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.

1

“You absolutely cannot say a single word.”

“You absolutely have to be quiet right up to the end.”

“You absolutely must stay quiet.”

“You absolutely cannot get mad no matter what happens.”

Haruyuki had received these detailed instructions from his Legion head and its three executive members, but still, the instant he saw a certain someone, he had to fight the powerful urge to leap up, grab his collar, and send a right straight punch slamming into the other avatar’s face with all the power of his body behind it.

Sunday, July 7, 2047: The year’s third meeting of the Seven Kings opened with Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade of the Blue Legion starting the match for the rest of them to attend, just as it had the previous two times.

From the Leonids, the attendance included the Blue King, “Vanquish” Blue Knight, and these two, his close warrior aides. From the Green Legion, Great Wall, there was the Green King, “Invulnerable” Green Grandé, and his lieutenant, Iron Pound. From the Purple Legion, Aurora Oval, there was the Purple King, “Empress Voltage” Purple Thorn, and her deputy, Aster Vine. From the Yellow Legion, Crypt Cosmic Circus, there was the Yellow King, “Radioactive Disturber” Yellow Radio, and a small F-type avatar Haruyuki had never seen before. From the Red Legion, Prominence, there was the Red King, the “Immobile Fortress” Scarlet Rain, and her deputy, Blood Leopard. From the Black Legion, there was the Black King, “World End” Black Lotus, her deputy, Sky Raker, a bonus Silver Crow, and one other person. And then from the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe, there was Ivory Tower, the full proxy of the White King, “Transient Eternity” White Cosmos.

Haruyuki himself had never directly exchanged words with the sorcerer-like Ivory Tower. He’d only ever heard his voice a scant few times at the previous meetings. Regardless, the instant that the excessively thin silhouette of that avatar appeared soundlessly in the meeting venue, he burned with an overwhelming rage at his very core, and he couldn’t stop himself from

clenching his hands into tight fists.

Because it was clear to him now that Ivory Tower was a high-ranking member of the Acceleration Research Society, the group he'd been fighting for three months that had done so much to sow malice and chaos in the Accelerated World.

Seven days earlier, Haruyuki had discovered the terrifying truth: The Acceleration Research Society lay within the White Legion. The majority of the Legion members were probably completely unaware of this, but given that Ivory Tower was ranked highly enough to be here as the king's proxy, there was no way he couldn't be aware of the dark reality.

At the first meeting of the Seven Kings on June 16, when they had discussed the matter of the Acceleration Research Society's Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw interfering in the Hermes' Cord race, Ivory Tower had, with a straight face, voiced the doubt, "Who on earth is this Burst Linker who released the Incarnate in the middle of an event and pulled even the Gallery into the Space Corrosion, and what is their objective?"

Haruyuki knew now the massive deceit that colored that declaration. Because Ivory Tower had to have known only too well both Rust Jigsaw's name and the objective of that attack. And yet he had so magnificently feigned innocence; perhaps Haruyuki should instead admire the nerve that it took to lie. In fact, this very moment once again proved that Ivory Tower was not in possession of anything less than exceptional mental strength.

The White King, White Cosmos, had to have told the executive members Black Vise, Argon Array, and Ivory Tower that she had made it clear to each member of the Black Legion that she was the leader of the Acceleration Research Society. Which meant that Ivory Tower had to have known that his own secret had been exposed to Haruyuki and his comrades, and yet he continued to sit calmly in one of the seven chairs.

As usual, the duel avatar's sense of presence was weak, and Haruyuki felt not a hint of nervousness or mental perturbation coming from him. In fact, Haruyuki couldn't sense anything of the consciousness or thoughts of the real-life Burst Linker that should have lived within the avatar. He was almost like a human-shaped Enemy or a sculpture made of marble.

"Looks like we're all here, so how about we get started?"

The affable voice of Blue Knight made Haruyuki shiver. Next to him, Fuko touched Silver Crow's fingers lightly. He felt like he could hear his

master's voice telling him *Calm down*, and in his heart he replied, *Okay*. Because, unfortunately, they couldn't censure Ivory Tower or the White Legion here now.

Kuroyukihime had reported the following three points to the kings in advance: The Archangel Metatron guarding Midtown Tower had been crushed using the anti-laser ability Silver Crow had acquired; the ISS kit main body on the forty-fifth floor of Midtown Tower had been destroyed; and with the destruction of the main body, all kit terminals had at present been rendered powerless.

All of which was to say, she had not mentioned a word about the other fight that had taken place at the girls' school, which they presumed was also the White Legion's headquarters. The reason for that, of course, was they didn't have a shred of evidence that the White Legion was actually a front for the Acceleration Research Society. If they weren't careful, they could end up on the stand instead and be slapped with a penalty for slander.

We're going to get them by the tail at some point. We just have to hang on until then, Haruyuki told himself, while on the opposite side of the circular meeting space, the Blue King stood up, his armor clanking.

"First of all, how about we hear the investigation reports from each Legion? ...Actually, maybe I should put it like this instead: Has there been any confirmation of a Burst Linker still able to use the ISS kit this past week?"

No one raised a hand. This was only natural, given that Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Akira, and Utai had smashed the kit main body after a fierce battle, but even so, Haruyuki let out a sigh of relief beneath his goggles.

The Blue King nodded slowly and then softened his tone slightly. "Then there's no need to hear individual reports. The eyeballs—the ISS kits—all disappeared when the main body was destroyed; there's not a single one left now. I would like to say one thing to the Black King, however. She went on a special mission to Midtown Tower without telling us; although, well, it's not like this is the first time Lotus has acted arbitrarily on her own authority."

"I'm surprised you would say that, Vanquish." Kuroyukihime spread her arms lightly, seated on her impromptu seat. "At the previous meeting, we agreed that Silver Crow would obtain the Theoretical Mirror ability and use that power to defend against the laser of Archangel Metatron. Or at least, that's what I thought. I hadn't heard we required your approval for the actual

mission.”

“True—no one said you did.” The Blue King smiled wryly. “But normally, a person wouldn’t think of going up against that monster with six or seven people.”

“She was just greedy and wanted to stand out,” the Purple King interjected in a thorny tone. “She thought that if they managed to defeat that monstrosity all by themselves, her Legion would be all the more highly valued, and they could have the Burst Points and drops all to themselves.”

“Heh-heh! It’s true that there’s no precedent for defeating that thing outside of a Hell stage, right?” the Yellow King interjected. “It probably dropped a mighty fine item, hmm?”

“Prooolllyyy!” the small girl-type avatar on standby behind him said, her enunciation unclear. Her posture was unstable because she was sitting on top of a gaudy-colored ball. With her lemon-yellow leotard armor, plus the triangular hat and its large pom-poms, her duel avatar’s motif seemed to be a circus girl on a balancing ball.

Haruyuki was outraged at the contempt they displayed for his swordmaster, but not so much that he forgot himself and shouted a rebuttal. Half his mind was consumed by another concern.

“Um, could you all please not say monster and monstrosity and thing, though?” he thought desperately at the kings.

A female voice, pure as a heavenly chime and cool like a blizzard in Hades, echoed inside his head. *“It seems that the blue one, the purple one, and the yellow one do not value their lives.”*

The owner of the voice was the “other person” in their meeting contingent. The small icon riding on Haruyuki’s left shoulder was about five centimeters long, with a spindle-shaped body, thin ring, and a single pair of wings—the topic of conversation herself, the Legend-class Enemy, one of the Four Divines, Archangel Metatron.

“My servant, Silver Crow. Strike those insolent beings down immediately.”

“D—” He very nearly spoke out loud before switching to neurospeak and yelling, *“D-d-don’t ask the impossible! Those people are superstrong!”*

“You say they are strong, but that is, at best, strong on the level of you little warriors.”

“W-well, I am one of them...”

“Aah, how vexing. If I had my original power back, I could burn them to ash in an instant.”

“That would turn the Accelerated World into a warring state! So stop it!!”

Even as this cold-sweat-inducing conversation took place in his mind, Haruyuki felt a hazy warmth deep in his heart at the exchange with Metatron, the first in a few days.

It had already been a week since the fierce battle with the Acceleration Research Society at Tokyo Midtown Tower and the girls' school in Minato Ward. Thanks to the guidance of a mysterious voice that said it was “something *terasu*,” he had managed to revive Metatron, thought to have disappeared protecting Haruyuki from the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II's final, most powerful attack. But because she had pushed herself to her limit to transform herself into light energy in order to counteract Mark II's immense nihilistic power, she had lost essentially her full battle power. It was all she could do now to manifest as a tiny 3-D icon, and she couldn't appear unless Haruyuki established the link from his side. He had called her to this meeting because he wanted her to see the kings—and Ivory Tower in particular.

Currently, Metatron's actual self as an Enemy existed in her first form in the deepest level of the massive labyrinth beneath Shiba Park in the Unlimited Neutral Field, also known as the Contrary Cathedral. Metatron's real body was her second form, with her massive first form apparently being something like an Enhanced Armament with automatic battle functions. The latter was still easily able to greet with fire any Burst Linkers that challenged the dungeon to confront her, the last boss. However, if they managed to clear the secret requirement of defeating her first form outside of a Hell stage, they would next have to fight Metatron's true form.

In her current state, having lost the majority of her power, she said she wouldn't be able to fight much beyond her first form. Which meant that the terrible damage from the battle at the girls' academy had been deep enough to cut through to even her main body.

When they died, Enemies regenerated with the Change. But the regenerated Enemy was at best a different individual of the same species; it was thought that the memories from their previous life were not passed on. The Metatron that had eight thousand years of continuous thought, referred to herself as a Being, and created a bond with Haruyuki would have been

completely extinguished.

It was very close to impossible to defeat her first form without taking advantage of the weakening effect the Hell stage had on her. And now that the Arc, The Luminary—the treasure at the end of the Contrary Cathedral—was gone, he couldn't believe any Burst Linkers were heading in to take on that challenge anyway.

But the possibility was not zero. Haruyuki himself had proved the week before that it was possible to defeat her first form outside of a Hell stage as long as you had some method of reflecting the massive laser Trisagion. And that fact was also known to at least the kings and their executives gathered there today.

Of course, he would never tell the other Legions the requirements to make Metatron's main body appear. He'd also asked the Red Legion's Niko and Pard, who had both fought alongside them in the battle that day, to keep this a secret. But the high rankers were also veteran gamers at the same time as they were strong warriors. It wouldn't surprise him if some among them managed to figure out that something might happen if they defeated Metatron's first form outside the Hell stage.

Right. The Acceleration Research Society might know about those requisites to produce the second form of Metatron, given that they tamed her first form with the power of The Luminary and dragged her out of the dungeon. There was the possibility that they would try to tame her again to use her, or even defeat her while she was in a tamed state.

We have to hurry and do something. It'll be too late after Metatron vanishes. This time, I'll protect her. I will...Absolutely.

Perhaps sensing Haruyuki's feelings, the icon on his shoulder stopped flapping its wings to express its indignation. *"You, a servant, dares to fear for my own self? You might as well have been born yesterday."*

The voice that echoed in his mind was curt as always, but it was missing the thorny edge.

"It's only natural for a servant to worry about his master," he retorted immediately, feeling embarrassed that she had read his mind.

"Your manner of speaking is impertinent."

Even while they were having this conversation, the Seven Kings continued their discussion in the meeting venue.

"Either way, there's no doubt that the ISS kit outbreak was cut short on

the verge of a pandemic thanks to the distinguished service of Negabu,” the Blue King said. “I think we can all agree on this.”

“Although that doesn’t erase the betrayal of three years ago,” the Purple King assented while also offering a warning, and the tension in the venue eased the slightest bit. The Yellow King also appeared to have no further interest in jeers.

The Green King was silent as always, practically a large rock in a chair, while the Red King, who knew the truth about the whole situation, had her arms crossed in front of her as if to say she had no intention of making any unnecessary statements.

Just when Haruyuki thought the debate over the ISS kits was done, the ivory-colored avatar sitting silently in the front stood slowly and raised his right hand. “Um, may I speak?”

The tone of the full proxy of the White King, Ivory Tower, was lazy. His voice was essentially featureless, communicating nothing but the fact that he was probably male. When the Blue King nodded, he continued, slowly turning the tapered tower of his head.

“I understand that the ISS kit main body at Tokyo Midtown Tower was destroyed by the Black King, and all the kit terminals have now been rendered inactive. But there is nothing to celebrate here. What kind of measures shall we take for the ones pulling the strings behind these incidents, the Acceleration Study Group—er, no, *Research Society*, wasn’t it?”

Haruyuki was forced to use every spare bit of his mental energy to control himself once more. *How can you say that?!* He at least managed to calm himself down somewhat by shouting in his mind. A moment later, he asked Fuko quietly, “What exactly is he planning?”

Fuko, too, was aware that Ivory Tower was almost certainly an ally of the ARS. “Perhaps a challenge to us,” she murmured, still facing forward, so quietly he could just barely hear her. “I think he’s trying to make us call out the White Legion and then use that against us.”

“Like demand proof? Ugh, I wish we had some definitive evidence we could just slap down right now.”

“When the White King interrupted our meeting, I thought about using a replay card to record it, but unfortunately, she was in a dummy avatar. And it would’ve been difficult to get a card out of storage without her noticing.”

A replay card was a card item for recording video. The memory of how

the Yellow King had used one to upset Kuroyukihime during the fifth Chrome Disaster incident six months earlier was still fresh, but not only had Haruyuki himself never used one, he didn't even know how to get one.

“Um, how do you *get* a replay card?” he asked, even more quietly.

“At the shop, of course.” Fuko smiled faintly.

“Oh! R-right.”

“But you are forbidden from entering any shop for the time being, Corvus.”

“R-right...”

In the Unlimited Neutral Field (aka the Mean Level), the shop was a place that sold items...apparently. Given that Haruyuki's hobby was going around to retro game shops, he was immensely curious about this shop. But Kuroyukihime and Fuko reasoned that he would clearly spend needless points there and had forbidden him from entering one. And given that he had once nearly used up all his points carelessly leveling up, he couldn't say their concern was unwarranted.

“If this ‘shop’ you are prattling on about is the item vendor that exists in the Mean Level, I’d do the utmost to stay away,” Metatron's voice echoed in his mind. *“I have never visited one.”*

“Huh...Wh-why not?”

“Because that is another device to classify you little warriors.”

“To classify...us...?” Haruyuki longed to one day go to this shop he'd still never even seen and buy all the treats he expected were inside, so Metatron's words surprised and puzzled him. But the icon on his shoulder fell silent, so with no other choice, he turned his focus back to the kings' conversation.

“Now listen, just because you're a proxy, don't talk like this has nothing to do with you,” the Purple King snapped in response to Ivory Tower's question, slamming the butt of her staff—The Tempest, one of the Seven Arcs—loudly against the floor of the stage. She continued to speak, her voice as sharply edged as her name of Thorn. “To begin with, the ISS kit main body was found in Tokyo Midtown, and that is within Oscillatory territory. In which case, shouldn't you have done something about it in the first place? And yet you left the reconnaissance to GW and the attack to Negabu. And now, on top of that, you intend to have *us* take care of this Acceleration Research Society or whoever they are?”

The King Purple Thorn was the most antagonistic toward Black Lotus, but at this moment at least, Haruyuki couldn't help himself from cheering her on, internally shouting for her to keep telling the ivory avatar off.

It was only natural that the White King did not try to get on board with the Midtown Tower attack. Because the very person who had set the ISS kit main body in that place and captured Metatron's first form for guard duty was the White King herself.

But there was no way that Ivory Tower was going to tell them that. Haruyuki focused his gaze on the mage, wondering exactly how he would dodge the Purple King's questioning. If he revealed a single weakness, Kuroyukihime would immediately take to the offensive.

When he did speak again, finally, it was, however, in the same unhurried tone. "That's all fine and good to say, but this did take place in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where we cannot see the area borders. Unlike Aurora Oval, we do not assert our right to rule in the Unlimited Neutral Field. In fact, we have not interfered in any way in the activities of Great Wall or Nega Nebulus within the Minato Area, yes?"

"That just means you haven't done anything. And the reason we prohibit unauthorized entry into our area in the Unlimited Neutral Field is because so many idiots frequent the many high-class shops in Ginza until their point balance is tottering on the edge, and then they get caught by an Enemy on their way home and end up in total point loss."

"So you're saying to enter at your own risk? Overprotection is an obstruction to the growth of the younger ones. We want you to understand that doing nothing is also a contribution, Purple King."

Ivory Tower was disdainful, and deputy Aster Vine standing by behind Purple Thorn took a step forward, reddish-purple armor reminiscent of a military uniform clanging.

"You would mock us?! You're the one who asked what we should do about the Acceleration Research Society. So in that case, how about instead of being all slippery and evasive, you actually offer up a constructive solution?!"

"I would love it if I could. Unfortunately, I don't have any information on this Acceleration Research Society or what have you, so there is no way for me to offer anything in the way of a solution."

Shameless. Haruyuki also considered jumping out in front of Ivory and

giving him a piece of his mind, but he resisted the urge, telling himself that this was probably exactly what Ivory wanted.

Blue Knight shook his head in exasperation at the bickering; there had long been issues between the White and Purple Legions, simply because of the proximity of their territories. Meanwhile, Yellow Radio sneered, and Niko and Kuroyukihime watched wordlessly.

The voice that broke the heavy, tense silence could only be heard by Haruyuki.

“That little warrior...is strange somehow,” the 3-D icon on his shoulder murmured.

“Strange?” he replied in his thoughts as he glanced over at Aster and Ivory. *“Which one?”*

“The white one. Despite the fact that his battle power is numerically much lower than that of the blue or the purple warriors, the amount of information alone is extremely large...”

“Amount of information?”

This was probably the “information pressure” Niko talked about. Again, he looked hard at Ivory Tower, seated in the impromptu chair, but he didn’t sense anything along the lines of the pressure he was getting from the kings. In fact, it seemed like Tower’s presence was much fainter than Aster Vine or Cobalt Blade or any of the executive Linkers in each camp.

Still, given that he was a top member of the White Legion/Acceleration Research Society, it was obvious that he was no ordinary Burst Linker. Haruyuki focused his mind to try to feel something.

“If you could see that little warrior from the Highest Level,” Metatron murmured, *“you would understand all kinds of things.”*

“I—I would? Then let’s just go—”

“Why are you so foolish?” she chastised sharply. *“This is the field below the Mean Level, the so-called Low Level. It is impossible even for me, which means you could never reach the Highest Level from here, no matter how many hundreds of years you spent attempting to do so.”*

“O-oh, okay.”

The Highest Level that Metatron spoke of was the highest tier of space, but it was only possible to reach that space by further accelerating from the Unlimited Neutral Field, or the Mean Level. All the information in the Accelerated World was laid out there in a galaxy-like 3-D dot matrix,

showing observers the truth about their digital world.



However, Haruyuki had only peeked at this Highest Level for a mere instant when he was trying to evade sudden death in the battle with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, seven days earlier. And Metatron had guided him then; he couldn't even begin to understand how to "accelerate while accelerated" all on his own.

More importantly, just as Metatron said, the meeting venue they were currently in was a normal duel field created by the Cobalt-Manganese sisters. Haruyuki was a member of the Gallery, which could not so much as smash a tiny pebble; all he could do was watch and listen. In which case, he had to at least carve the words of the kings sharply into his memory.

"You're right, this lot has thrown the Accelerated World into confusion over and over, and yet, the only thing clear about the current situation is their name." The Blue King sighed, shrugging. "A sad story indeed."

"And that's just what *they* call themselves, isn't it?" the Yellow King agreed, revealing his annoyance. "Honestly, if they're going to call themselves a research society, then they should just be good kids and look for holes in the system."

"I think that's exactly what they're doing, Radio," the Black King cut in, tone controlled. "It's not just these ISS kits. The Hermes' Cord race chaos last month. The mess at Akihabara BG three months ago. The backdoor program of eight months ago—they're always causing confusion, and their modus operandi seems to sneer at the Brain Burst system. In other words, to them, it *is* 'research.'"

"Hmph," Yellow Radio spat. "It looks like mere terrorism to me, though."

Instantly, the antenna parts on the head of the Red King, seated to the right of the Black King, twitched. Blood Leopard casually stepped forward from behind and touched her fingers to her master's shoulder.

Rain—Niko—had probably remembered the other Society incident, which Kuroyukihime hadn't mentioned: the fifth Chrome Disaster of six months ago. They had no proof, but it had probably been Yellow Radio who had given the Armor of Catastrophe to Niko's parent, Cherry Rook, turning him into the fifth Chrome Disaster. And they had no proof of this, either, but there was a strong possibility that the invisible hand of the Acceleration Research Society had guided Radio's actions.

Judging from the Yellow King's tone, the thought that he had been manipulated by the Society didn't so much as cross his mind, but that wasn't

enough to assuage Niko's anger and grief, of course. Haruyuki fervently wished he could be there beside her, too, to offer her strength, but unfortunately, he couldn't do something like that at a meeting of the Seven Kings. Niko and Pard were in a delicate position here; the fact that they had even taken part in the ISS kit attack mission was a secret from the other kings present.

"The issue is what they're after," Kuroyukihime continued quietly. "Is their objective simply to upset the Accelerated World with means that people wouldn't normally consider? Or are they using a series of incidents to bring about monumental chaotic destruction?"

"Hee-hee." Purple Thorn chuckled, a laugh like thorns of ice buried deep within the sweetest honey. "Of course, *you* would be the one to say that, hmm, Lotus?" He was certain she was alluding to the events of three years earlier, the reason why Black Lotus was now called "the destroyer of order."

"I'll say it. Of course." Black Lotus kept her cool as she replied. "If the Society brings about the destruction of the Accelerated World, then given my stated goal of reaching level ten, they are nothing more than an obstacle for me."

Once more, sharp sparks crackled in the air between the Purple and Black Kings.

Purple Thorn didn't know that the mind of the first Red King, Red Rider, had been pseudo-revived and made to live in the ISS kit main body by the Acceleration Research Society. What would she have done if she had been there? Would she have worked with Kuroyukihime to give repose to the soul of the Red King once more? Or...would she have turned the Arc in her right hand on Kuroyukihime to save Red Rider, even knowing he was a ghost?

One thing alone was certain, however. The reason Kuroyukihime and the others had not reported that Rider's mind had possessed the ISS kit main body nor that it had been his Arms Creation ability that produced the kit terminals was out of consideration—no, kindness—toward Purple Thorn, who had once loved Rider.

"It's true. We do need to thoroughly investigate whether those Society guys are planning some huge thing," the Blue King said calmly, as if to ease the tension mounting between the Black and Purple Kings. "Of all the incidents they've caused so far, the Hermes' Cord chaos and the ISS kits are clearly connected. After making a show of the Incarnate System for however

many hundreds who were in the Gallery for that race, they distributed the ISS kits to allow easy access to Incarnate techniques. Depending on how you think about it, maybe the violence in Akihabara BG and the backdoor program experiment were in order to earn the points required to produce the ISS kits... Well, we have no idea how they made the kits, though.”

Haruyuki sensed the Blue Knight glancing over at them, but when he hurriedly took a peek at him, the Blue King had already resumed speaking.

“If there’s going to be a ‘next time,’ then the Acceleration Research Society had to have gained *something* from the free distribution of the ISS kits. If we can find out what that was, we’ll be able to see at least the direction of their objective. So, Lotus? You had direct contact with the ISS kit main body at Midtown Tower. Did you pick up anything?”

Kuroyukihime didn’t immediately respond. Naturally, she—and Fuko, Niko, Pard, and Haruyuki—knew the true identity of this “something” the Blue King mentioned. An object as evil as anything imaginable, the threat of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, born anew from the condensed negative will of the innumerable kit users poured into the Enhanced Armament that had been stolen from the Red King.

A week ago, Haruyuki had been saved by Metatron’s act of martyrdom and somehow managed to crush the Mark II. But when they tried to break Invincible apart with Lime Bell’s special attack, Citron Call, the vessel that was Wolfram Cerberus disappeared right in front of them, together with the last of Invincible’s parts, the rear thrusters.

In other words, Niko was currently only in possession of four of the total of five parts that made up Invincible. It was possible for her to equip it, even so, but of course she couldn’t get at its full capacity. They couldn’t let the other kings know this fact; if they knew the Red King was weakened, Yellow Radio in particular might come up with a no-good plan once again.

How much to tell them about the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, while keeping anything related to Niko quiet? Before the meeting, Niko herself had declared that she would leave that up to Kuroyukihime. She’d even gone so far as to say, “No biggie if anyone finds out I’m missing one part. I’ll show ’em I still mean business,” and Haruyuki and the others were forced to assent.

The kings and their subordinates stared while Kuroyukihime uncrossed her legs and stood up soundlessly. “I did indeed pick something up. No, I saw it with my own eyes. A certain phenomenon that occurred after the ISS kit

was destroyed.” She raised the sword of her right hand and pointed it directly ahead of her. “An ominous red light shot out toward the south from Midtown Tower. It was most likely the vast amount of negative energy that had accumulated in the kit main body.”

“Oh-ho?” The Yellow King spread his thin arms and made a show of being surprised. “So then does that mean that although you destroyed the main body, its contents got away from you?”

“Goooot awaaay from yooouuu!” the girl sitting on the ball behind him shrieked.

Frowning hard at them, Kuroyukihime brought her right arm down forcefully as she responded. “You speak almost as though you regret the loss of the transferred energy, Radio. If you’d gotten ahold of something like that, you could have been reduced to Chrome—well, *Yellow* Disaster right about now, you know.”

The Yellow King had once hesitated to equip the Armor of Catastrophe despite having gotten ahold of it somehow and had instead passed it on to Cherry Rook. Her words were just barely a comment, but, his pride seemingly injured, he simply sniffed indignantly before falling silent.

In his place, Ivory Tower threw a hand into the air. “You said in a southerly direction, but do you know specifically where this Incarnate energy or whatever it was was sent, Black King?”

Another blunt challenge.

Haruyuki had witnessed the moment the red light emitted from Roppongi Hills Tower came pouring down. The location was a girls’ school in Shirokane, Minato Ward, K–12. And they already knew its name: the private Eternal Girls’ Academy.

Thought to be the headquarters of the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe—and the Acceleration Research Society—this was a famous school with over 130 years of history. It was curious that the Society would base itself at a girls’ school when the majority of its members were boys, but their actions couldn’t be measured by the common sense of the Accelerated World. And this was also another cover.

They couldn’t announce that this was the place they had identified after so many difficult battles. Because they still hadn’t managed to put together any proof.

“Unfortunately, we could not trace the energy.” Even in the face of

Ivory's challenging question, Kuroyukihime was endlessly calm in her response. "Just in case, we checked on a map for suspicious points on the south side of Midtown Tower, but that area's quite far from our own. Although, come to think of it, it *is* inside Oscillatory's territory, so perhaps some place comes to mind for you?"

Ivory coolly accepted Kuroyukihime's smooth counterattack. "The south of Midtown is quite a broad area. I suppose the only remarkable landmarks are Roppongi Hills, the Institute for Nature Study, and around Shinagawa Station? After that, you get into Great Wall territory."

Eternal Girls' Academy was, of course, not on that list of names. Ivory Tower's arrogance made Haruyuki grit his teeth once more, but he remembered the categorical imperative that had been handed down before the meeting and grimly endured it.

The other kings appeared to sink into thought, and Scarlet Rain broke her long silence.

"At any rate, those Society jerks are planning something with the Incarnate energy they used the ISS kits to build up."

Haruyuki could sense the brightly burning will in the depths of her restrained voice and forgot his own momentary rage to focus his gaze on her.

"So far, we've always been a step behind in responding to the Society, always cleaning up the mess." Her large eye lenses shone brightly. "This time, we can't just sit around waiting for them to do something."

"But it's not as though they have a territory or anything like that, is it?" Of course, it was the Yellow King butting in. "It's all fine and good to strike a blow in advance, but exactly where do you propose we strike?"

"What I'm tryin' to say is we gotta be united here at least in the intention *to strike* at all. If we crack the headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society, then we attack with the combined power of the *Seven Kings* assembled here. We charge in without giving 'em the time to disappear from the matching list, and we take whatever points we can. Any Legion that doesn't take part in the mission'll be seen as collaborating with the Society."

This impressive statement from Niko caused the executive attendants of each king to murmur quietly. Even Yellow Radio fell silent as though daunted.

It was extreme, but what she was saying made sense. And more importantly, it would put at least a small amount of pressure on Ivory Tower

and the White Legion. If they could present some kind of definitive proof that Eternal Girls' Academy—EG—was the Society's base, then the White Legion would be forced to make a critical decision.

"It seems that as a king, she's finally taking off her kid gloves," Fuko murmured.

"Yeah." Haruyuki nodded slightly. "I think Rain's only going to get stronger from now on."

"You can't slack off, either, Corvus."

"R-right." He shrank into himself, nodding.

"The Red King makes a sound argument." Blue Knight's firm voice echoed through the meeting area. "If we agree on a policy for the seven Legions here, then we'll be able to move quickly when the time comes. Of course, I don't think any of us are colluding with the Society, but I'll ask anyway. Is anyone opposed to this proposal?"

Before the Blue King was finished speaking, Haruyuki caught himself staring intently at Ivory Tower. Although he had been evasive like wisping smoke over and over in the meeting, for once, he did not raise his hand. Purple Thorn, Yellow Radio, and Green Grandé also maintained their silence.

Looking around the meeting venue, Blue Knight stood up forcefully, his heavy armor clanking. "Well then, we adopt the Red King's proposal. The moment the Acceleration Research Society's base is identified, we will immediately put together a team from all seven Legions and carry out a concentrated attack. And we'll have as many high-level members take part in the attack as possible. By the way, I will be one of the Leonids' members."

The moment they heard this, the Blade sisters on standby behind him called out in a panic.

"K-King!"

"That's...!"

"I have to. You can only challenge the same opponent once a day. That's the rule. We don't know how many points they've accumulated, but we have to get in as many wins as we can if we want to push them to total point loss."

That was the hard truth. At level eight, Black Vise and Argon Array were high rankers, and they might have a store of a thousand or two Burst Points. It was unrealistic to think that even a concentrated attack could push them to total point loss in one go, but when it came to the level-six Rust Jigsaw or Sulfur Pot, who Kuroyukihime encountered in Okinawa...

Haruyuki wondered about it, and then a single name popped up in the back of his mind once again.

Wolfram Cerberus.

Ever since his first appearance in the Accelerated World, he had been hailed as the most powerful level one, taking the crown from Aqua Current. But in their fight last week, he had jumped up to level five in one go so he could dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field. And that wasn't all. He had told Haruyuki that he wanted him to strike the final blow against him so he could escape the control of the Society forever. And to that end, he had pushed his remaining Burst Points down to a mere ten.

After that, Cerberus was assimilated into the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, and then disappeared from the Unlimited Neutral Field through a forced disconnect. He had not appeared once since then, but Haruyuki believed he continued to be a Burst Linker.

At the same time, he couldn't believe it would be so easy for Cerberus to replenish his points when they'd been on the verge of depleting entirely. Outside of Nega Nebulus, only Niko and Pard knew Cerberus was a Burst Linker produced by the Acceleration Research Society and their Mental Scar Shell theory. But if the other Legions found out, and he was made a target in the joint operation they'd only just decided on, he would face total point loss in just a few defeats.

But even before that, Cerberus still had Invincible's thrusters, which contained a vast negative energy. Most likely, he would be dealing with ISS-kit-type mental interference or something even more powerful; if they didn't hurry to purify and dismantle the Enhanced Armament, there was the risk of the negative effect influencing even his real personality.

Where are you, Cerberus? Haruyuki called out from deep in his heart, looking up at the sky of the duel stage.

The stage type was Steel. The ground of their meeting venue, the east gardens of the Imperial Palace in the Chiyoda Ward, was covered in steel plates, and the trees had also transformed into reddish-brown steel frames; there was nothing charming about it. The sky alone, however, was beautiful. Several cirrus clouds drifted along a backdrop of transparent blue.

If he went to the Highest Level once again, he might be able to find Cerberus—but Haruyuki banished the thought almost as soon as he'd had it. No matter how infinite the perception offered by that level, it still didn't help

you find someone in the real world.

And if the Accelerated World and the real world became one; if that fusion could become the kind of world where they were all Burst Linkers, the duel was just a fun and thrilling game, and no one lost all their points or anything, no hatred was born...then he could go see Cerberus right away, as well as always be with Metatron...

His mind spinning these outrageous thoughts, Haruyuki unconsciously clasped the small icon on his shoulder with one hand and placed his other hand over that, bringing the tiny Being in front of his chest.

“Come now!” Immediately, a harsh voice bounced through his brain. *“How many times must I tell you that a servant does not touch his master so freely?!”*

“Oh! Uh! I—!” Even as he panicked, he realized that if he let go, Metatron might fly up and draw the attention of the other Legions, so he defended himself in his mind, still hanging on tightly. *“Y-you were so quiet, I thought maybe you froze...”*

“Froze? Even if I was in the field attribution W04—what you call the Ice stage—I would not freeze.”

“R-right. Then why were you so quiet? What were you thinking about?”

“I was exasperated at the deep inefficiency of the decision process of you little warriors. If this ‘akksellorashon society’ or what have you is what made that repulsive pseudo-Being, then rather than wasting time talking, you should go right away and crush them in their castle.”

“I-it’s not actually that simple. Unless we have some definite proof that that school is their base, we won’t be able to convince the other kings.”

“To begin with, I do not like this naming of ‘king.’ They could not so much as scratch my first form by themselves, and yet they call themselves kings. It’s absurd. And that black one you call a ‘parent’ is no exception to this.”

“Gah! Y-y-you can stop right there!”

His conversation with Metatron was happening telepathically, but Kuroyukihime had an incomprehensibly superpowered intuition when it came to herself, and he wasn’t certain she wouldn’t be able to actually pick up on thoughts, too. Haruyuki stared at the Black King’s back a mere two meters ahead of him and pulled the 3-D icon even more firmly to his chest.

Curiously, it was Fuko, rather than Kuroyukihime, who glanced over at

him this time and murmured, “Corvus, this has been bothering me since before the meeting started, but...what exactly is that white bug thing?”

“*Bug! Such insolence!*” The angry voice screeched in his mind. Metatron threatened to leap out of his hands, but he desperately pushed her back.

“Oh! Uh, this is like a pet or like an option or, uh.”

“Mm-hmm. And where did you find it?”

“Um, uhhh...”

At the meeting after the battle a week earlier, he had gone over every detail of how the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron had saved him and how she had been extinguished defending against the nihilistic attack of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II.

However, he missed his chance to tell his friends about how Metatron later miraculously recovered, and now seven days had passed.

There were two reasons he hadn’t found the right time to tell them. The first was that, since finals were coming up, there hadn’t been a chance for them all to meet. And the second was that he didn’t want to think about what would happen when the recovered Metatron and the Legion members—Kuroyukihime, in particular—met one another.

Kuroyukihime was Haruyuki’s parent and Legion Master. And Metatron was the “master” who called Haruyuki “servant.” When you added his “teacher” Fuko into the mix, the meeting would definitely be extremely frightening...

“All right then. Is that it for today?”

The Blue King’s voice pulled Haruyuki’s mind back to the meeting venue. Fortunately, Fuko had also suspended her questioning and turned back toward the center.

It wasn’t as though he had been paying zero attention whatsoever. He had definitely been paying attention to the kings’ conversation, and after they decided on the attack policy for the Acceleration Research Society, the discussion had continued with items not directly related to Nega Nebulus, such as the exchange of information regarding the finer revisions to the six-Legion mutual nonaggression treaty, and questions about why the Space stage hadn’t appeared yet, despite rumors of its introduction in July.

Krsh. With a heavy step, the Seven Kings stood all at once. The Blue King, the meeting chair, opened his mouth again.

“Once the Acceleration Research Society headquarters is discovered, I’ll

send out the call for the next meeting. If we determine the information to be correct, we will plan and execute an attack immediately. My hope is that we'll be able to beat them down before they start moving on their next conspiracy.”

“Permission to confirm one final thing,” Kuroyukihime said.

The Blue King inclined his head slightly. “What is it, Lotus?”

“Knight, you just said ‘if the information is determined to be correct,’ but on what basis do you intend to decide that?”

“My thinking there’s quite simple. It’s not like those Society folks could keep their Neurolinkers constantly disconnected from the global net, right? So then, their names should show up on the matching list in the area where their base is. Once we get any information, we dispatch a scouting party and check the list. If we see the names Black Vise or Rust Jigsaw or whoever else on it, then that means the information is correct.”

“...Mm. Understood.” Kuroyukihime nodded.

“Lotus, stop launching attacks on your own, all right?” Purple Thorn sounded kind somehow as she leaned on her long staff. “If you lose all your points somewhere I can’t reach you, I shall be very sad.”

“I accept the warning with gratitude, Thorn,” Kuroyukihime responded curtly, taking a step back, her feet ringing against the steel plates of the ground.

At this signal, Yellow Radio gave a silent-yet-theatrical thank-you before retreating swiftly with the girl riding the ball. Next, the Purple and Blue Kings walked away together with their respective subordinates, and the Red King and Blood Leopard also gave Haruyuki and his comrades a small signal as they left. Shifting his gaze, he saw that Ivory Tower’s seat had emptied at some point, and with that, the only ones left were the three members of Nega Nebulus and the two members of Great Wall.

Eventually, the Green King, Green Grandé, silent throughout the meeting again that day, turned his massive body, his emerald-green armor clanking heavily, and looked straight down at Haruyuki, a sharp light in his eye lenses.

It felt like it had happened a hundred years ago, but just over two weeks earlier, Haruyuki had encountered the Green King on the roof of Roppongi Hills Tower. At the time, Grandé had told Haruyuki the following: In addition to this world, Brain Burst 2039, there had been two other, very similar worlds, Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040. But both had

been abandoned for some reason.

Metatron had also used the same names when they were on the Highest Level. She had also said that the Green King, who had taught Haruyuki about the existence of the two other worlds, had perhaps visited the Highest Level.

What exactly was Metatron feeling now, observing Grandé as she was clasped in front of Haruyuki? Until seconds earlier, she had been fervently vibrating her wings to try to fly out of his hands, but at some point, that movement had stopped completely.

The one who broke the solemn silence was the figure of an iron boxer avatar that appeared from behind Grandé, the third seat of Great Wall's Six Armors, Fists of Steel, Iron Pound. He lightly raised a right fist encased in a lustrous glove and began speaking in a surprisingly friendly tone.

“Hey, good to see ya, Silver Crow. I was the one who asked you to get the Theoretical Mirror ability, but I never dreamed you'd actually do it, much less that you'd take out *the* Metatron with it.”

“N-no, I just reflected the laser, so...” And what Haruyuki had obtained was not the Theoretical Mirror that Mirror Masker, Ardor Maiden's parent, had produced, but the similar Optical Conduction ability. However, they'd decided to keep that out of today's meeting.

“Just reflecting it's amazing. I mean, our LM's Arc plus Incarnate defense could only last a maximum of five seconds. Boss, don't you have something to say to Crow?”

“.....”

“He says he's got nothing. So then, I'll just cut straight to the chase. 'Cause we don't know when Coba and Manga are going to close the stage.” Pound glanced around and checked that the other Legion members were all gone before continuing in a low voice, “We're pretty much fine with the matter in question.”

“Huh? The matter... Which is what again?” Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, and Fuko to his right and Kuroyukihime to his left reached out and yanked him back.

““Pretty much'?” Fuko asked. “Does that mean you have some conditions, Fisty?”

Making a face at the playful nickname, Pound nodded. “Well, I guess it does. Our Viri—the second seat of the Six Armors, Viridian Decurion—wouldn't budge. We'll have the talk take place in Shibuya Two.”

Now Haruyuki finally remembered. A week ago, at the meeting after the long and difficult battle, Fuko had ordered Ash Roller to set up a meeting with Grandé. And soon.

She would leave the place up to him but would prefer a neutral area. At the time, Ash had thought it was absurd and excessive, but he had apparently carried out the order. But of course, it seemed they wouldn't be able to draw the king out of his territory.

Fuko exchanged a momentary glance with Kuroyukihime before tossing her long, shining silver hair, like liquid metal, and nodded. "That's fine. But as the bare minimum precautionary measures, could we perhaps have everyone except those taking part cut their global connection for ten minutes before and after the meeting?"

This time, Pound glanced up at Grandé, and despite the fact that the Green King did not so much as twitch, the smaller avatar quickly assented. "Should be all right. As for the meeting, we'll do it like this one, Gallery style. Viri and I will be the starters. And if anyone on your side jumps one of our members, even as a stupid accident, that'll be the end of the meeting. And if by any chance Boss gets jumped, that'll be all-out war right then and there."

"Understood." Fuko seemed unmoved by Pound's threatening tone. "As for the number of attendees, we are planning a maximum of seven."

"Then we'll go along with that, too. What about a date and time?"

"How about next Sunday, July fourteenth, at three in the afternoon?"

"Got it. Don't be late."

"Strong Arm" Sky Raker and "Fists of Iron" Iron Pound finished the negotiations in the blink of an eye and turned their gazes back to their respective Legion Masters.

It was then that Kuroyukihime, who had up to that point been silently looking up at the Green King, surprised him by saying, "Grandé. Do you remember our conversation two years and eleven months ago?"

"Of course." After a brief pause, a solemn voice deep enough to shake the thick steel plates covering the ground of the stage came from the Green King's face mask.

"You do? Then...the time to choose will come soon."

Haruyuki wondered what she could possibly mean as Kuroyukihime silently turned on her heel. Fuko also started to walk away behind her, waving lightly to the two green members.

“Uh, um, excuse me.” Haruyuki dipped his head and then chased after them. He wanted to ask what exactly the “time to choose” was, but the slim back of the Black King was filled with a crisp resolve, making him hesitate to call out to her.

When they started to descend from the meeting venue of Edo Castle’s inner citadel toward Kikyoumon Gate, Metatron, still wrapped in Haruyuki’s hands, murmured, *“That little green warrior is also very interesting, in a different sense from the white one.”*

“Huh...How so?”

“He has just a tiny bit of the same scent as us Beings.”

“So what...does that mean...?” Cocking his head, Haruyuki glanced back over his shoulder, but the reddish-brown iron skeletons obstructed his view, and he couldn’t catch sight of the Green King.

2

Even after Fuko pulled out of the parking lot at Kitanomaru Park and started driving down Yasukuni Street, Kuroyukihime remained consumed by silence in the passenger seat.

Now that he thought about it, she hadn't said much since the start of that day. She'd probably been tense before the meeting of the Seven Kings, but at the actual meeting, she'd stood up and argued against Ivory Tower and the others and even managed to apply a not-insignificant amount of pressure to the White Legion.

In the end, though, Haruyuki had simply stood there, so he wanted to at least offer her some sympathetic words. But the face in profile he could see from the back seat looked deep in thought, and he hesitated to disturb that.

Meanwhile, there was no sound from the driver's seat, either. Normally, Fuko would start talking about whatever came to mind to try to ease their Legion Master's tension, but that day, she just gripped the steering wheel, her mouth firmly closed. Inside the car, the only sound was the faint hum of the road and the whirring of the engine, interrupted periodically by the inorganic AR GPS.

I really do have to do something to lighten the mood here! Haruyuki caught sight of a game shop he was a regular at and decided to bring up the topic of retro games where you could only jump and dive-kick.

"Fuko." Kuroyukihime suddenly spoke up softly. "Could you please stop for a minute once we get into the Suginami area?"

"I was about to suggest the same thing." Fuko glanced at the GPS. At some point, the car had slipped past the Yamanote Line and gone from Yasukuni Street onto Shinoume Highway. A few minutes later, the instant they crossed the border between Nakano and Suginami, the car's left signal started blinking.

The canary-yellow Italian EV smoothly decelerated and slid into a parking spot along the side of the road. The car had no sooner come to a complete stop than Kuroyukihime was twisting her upper body around.

“Haruyuki.”

He closed his half-open mouth before responding. “Y-yes?”

“There’s one thing I want to confirm— No, let’s discuss the rest on the other side.”

“Y-yes?”

Really, before he could even blink, Kuroyukihime had dropped her seat all the way down and was leaning into the back seat. Clutched in her outstretched right hand was the plug of a shiny black XSB cable.

Plk! The plug was inserted into Haruyuki’s Neurolinker, and he was simultaneously directly connected with Fuko and Kuroyukihime. The words *Burst Link* left Kuroyukihime’s mouth, and before Haruyuki’s eyes, the flaming text **HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!!** appeared.

The whole process took a mere two seconds.

What on earth, for what reason, a direct duel in the car?! Haruyuki puzzled over this as he dropped down onto black, damp earth. In the night sky above his head, a thin sliver of the crescent moon hung like a sickle, and countless gravestones of all sizes and shapes surrounded him. A low-level dark type, the Cemetery stage.

He whirled his head around to look for his duel opponent, Kuroyukihime. There was no guide cursor in his field of view, so she had to be right nearby, but the stage was quite dark, so he couldn’t manage to spot the jet-black duel avatar.

“This is like looking for a crow at night...Oh! But wait, I’m the crow...” Muttering to himself inanely, he was about to start walking along the row of tombstones when from above his head came a familiar and yet somehow cold voice.

“I’m here, Crow.”

Hurriedly, he looked up at the sky again and found the sharp silhouette, totem pole-like, on top of a tall, thin gravestone. Arms crossed, legs firmly braced, this was no doubt the Black King, Black Lotus.

The hazy, pale moonlight brought out the linear edges of the semitransparent armor, and the bluish-purple eye lenses there shone with remarkable brightness. He could feel an intense pressure in the aura emitted from the avatar body.

She’s serious. But why all of a sudden? It can’t be some kind of special training now? Or maybe punishment? Or maybe she’s trying to be sweet to

me? These thoughts spinning through his mind, Haruyuki took a step back when a new voice rang out from behind him.

“I’m over here, Corvus.”

He whirled around. A pale shadow sat on the branch of an enormous gnarled tree rising up a little ways off. Clad in a snowy-white dress, a hat of the same color on her head, it was the deputy of Nega Nebulus, Sky Raker.

She should’ve been part of the Gallery, unable to interact with Haruyuki, but the wave of presence he felt from her was at least as strong as the one Kuroyukihime was emitting. Raker seemed serious, too. He just had no idea what they were serious *about*.

At a loss, wedged between Kuroyukihime in front and Fuko in back, Haruyuki looked at each of them in turn as he asked timidly, “Um, Kuroyukihime, Master, what is this...about?”

“I told you. There’s something I want to confirm.” Kuroyukihime danced down from the top of the tombstone, seven or eight meters off the ground.

“C-confirm?” Haruyuki also leapt from the tree to land gently on the ground. “You don’t think I’m parasitized by the Armor again, do you?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s nothing concerned with you.”

“Huh?”

“What was that on your shoulder the whole time during the meeting today?” Kuroyukihime’s entirely unexpected question further dumbfounded Haruyuki.

Gulp. His whole body stiffened.

“You said it was a ‘pet or an option or something,’ Corvus,” Fuko continued from behind him. “You couldn’t possibly have gone against our warning and picked up some strange thing in the shop, now, could you have?” As she spoke, she stepped past to give him a shaming stare from alongside Kuroyukihime.

“N-n-n-n-n-no!” Haruyuki moved his helmet along the horizontal at top speed. “I haven’t gone to a shop or anything!”

“Then where did you get it? I’m getting a weird vibe from that little bug.”

“Neither do I. It’s like I’ve felt that aura before. Or maybe not...”

Kuroyukihime crossed her arms once more.

“Maybe that’s just in your head?” He attempted an awkward explanation. “It, um, uh, before I knew it, in like a flash, it was sticking to me...”

“Mm-hmm. So then, pull it off,” his Legion Master demanded.

“What?!”

“It’s fine, isn’t it?” Fuko smiled. “Please introduce us to your cute little pet, Corvus, hmm?”

“Uh, oh, ah...” No matter how he tried to get out of it, the search engine in his mind only came back with *Your search did not match any documents.*

Since it had come to this, he braced himself as he realized his only option was to call out Metatron. He prayed he could avoid disaster, and then realized he might not be able to call Metatron there to begin with. They were bound by a kind of link according to “something-something~~terasu~~,” true identity unknown. That link didn’t connect them only in the Unlimited Neutral Field but also in the normal duel field. Still, to call up Metatron’s 3-D icon, he had to concentrate deeply and keep calling for a full minute or two.

He had summoned Metatron to the meeting of the Seven Kings without telling Kuroyukihime or Fuko because he wanted her to see Ivory Tower and the other kings. It had been worth the trouble; she’d sensed something in Ivory and Grandé.

But this Cemetery stage was a direct duel field, cut off from the rest of the world. In the end, he couldn’t say if his call to Metatron would reach her from here...

No, it should reach her. You gain and lose points even in a direct duel, which means we’re still connected to the Brain Burst central server.

With this thought in mind, Haruyuki turned to his Legion Master and Submaster and nodded. “I understand. I’ll call her now, so please wait for—no, thirty seconds.”

“It takes quite some time, hmm?” Kuroyukihime said as she took a step back and leaned against one of the tombstones.

“If you dawdle too much, dead people will reach their hands out of the ground, so I’d ask that you please do it sooner rather than later,” Fuko added with a smile.

“R-right.” Haruyuki took a deep breath and then expelled it before closing his eyes and focusing his mind.

Imagine. A single ray of light stretching out from himself in one corner of the Accelerated World and passing through the Highest Level far, far above to reach Metatron, resting her wings in the depths of the Contrary Cathedral. *Imagine* his voice being able to reach her through this link...

“Metatron. Can you hear me? I know we just said good-bye not more

than half an hour ago, but could you come out one more time? There are some people I want to introduce you to properly...”

In his field of view, locked away in complete darkness, an infinitely small point of light was born. The dot, blinking slowly, expanded bit by bit in breadth until it finally stabilized as a continuous light.

“Foolish as always, I see, Silver Crow.” An exasperated voice echoed inside his head. *“Thirty minutes in your world is equivalent to five hundred hours in the Mean Level. Although that amount of time, too, is but a moment’s slumber for me...The link is stable now; open your eyes.”*

When he opened the eye lenses beneath his goggles as ordered, the pure-white icon was floating directly in front of him. This was Metatron’s sensory terminal, a spindle-shaped body equipped with an angel’s halo and small wings.

Sensing that Kuroyukihime and Fuko were staring at him from where they stood about three meters away, Haruyuki wrapped the icon in his hands and gently moved it in front of his chest. “Um. Kuroyukihime, Master, I called her...”

Please let this “audience” end peacefully! he prayed as he spoke.

Having moved away from the tombstone, Kuroyukihime leaned forward with great interest and said, “Oh-ho, so this is your pet?”

“Who are you calling a pet, you insolent creature?!”

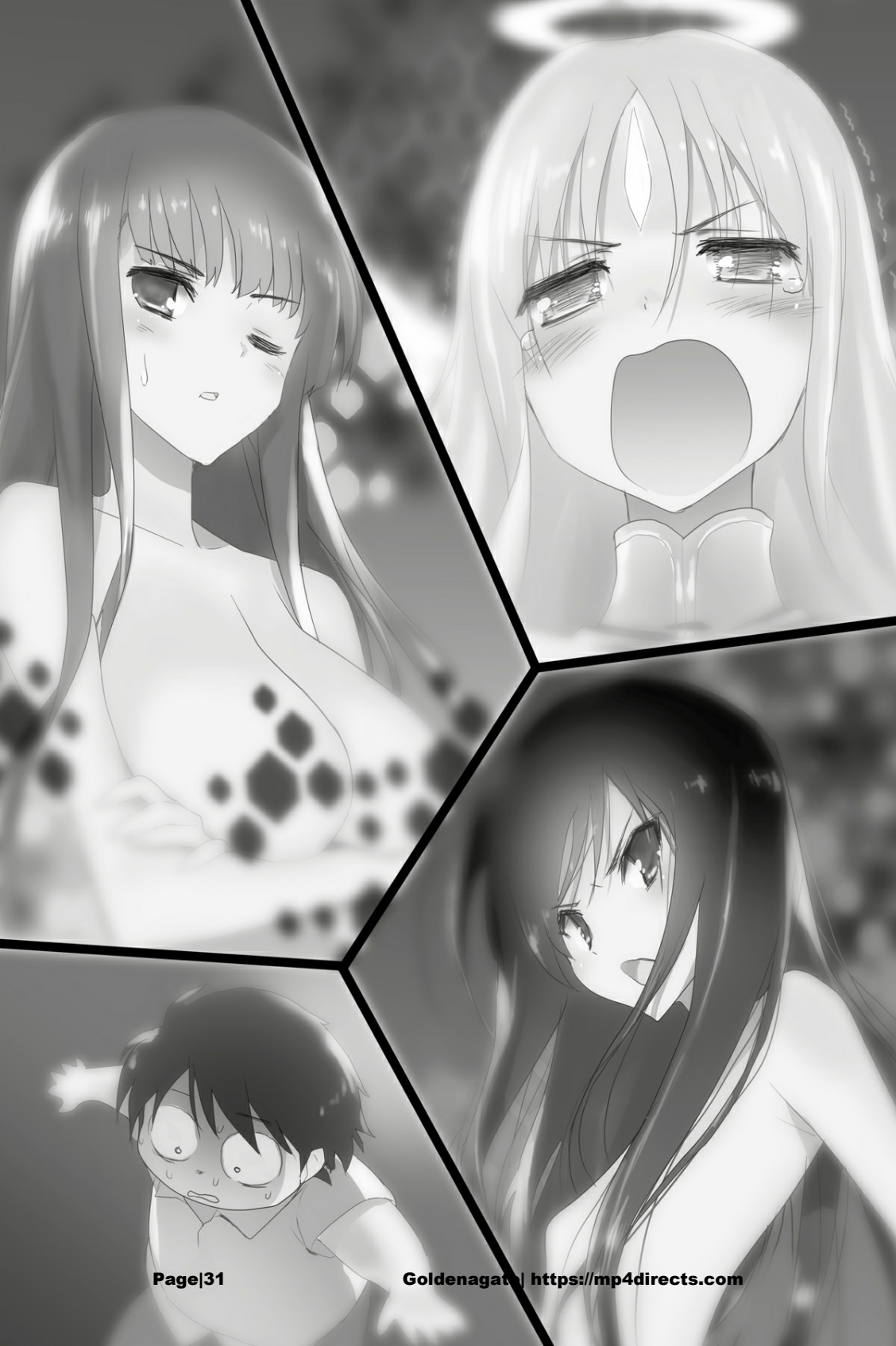
A voice, rather than the usual thought, instantly roared out, loud enough to shake the entire stage. In fact, any number of tombstones shuddered, and it seemed like even the dead writhing in the ground beneath them shrank back, although that was probably just in his imagination.

Kuroyukihime and Fuko reeled before exchanging a look.

“Raker, it’s like—I feel like I’ve heard that voice before.”

“I do, too, Lotus. I’m quite sure it was somewhere in the Unlimited Neutral Field.”

“That you would forget my voice is to compound your great insolence! I shall not forgive it! My servant Silver Crow, you will strike them down this very instant!”



“Y-your servant?! That’s really something coming from a bug like you! Crow is my child, you know!”

“And he is my student, little pet,” Fuko added. “I don’t care who you are, you have some nerve trying to steal him away.”

“It seems you truly do not value your lives, calling me ‘bug’ and ‘pet’ and what have you over and over! Given the situation, I shall make you understand directly! You shall come to my castle straightaway!”

Great. Time to run away. Having resolved to flee for the first time in a long time, Haruyuki started to inch backward, but Kuroyukihime turned the sword of her right hand on him, and he froze.

“Crow, who is this self-important someone?!”

“Corvus, if you run off or try to deceive us, I’ll make you regret it later.”

“Uh, um. Uhhh...” Still in his unstable posture, Haruyuki searched for a path to avoid the crisis but eventually resigned himself to the fact that this was an unavoidable dead end. “Um. This—I mean, this person is a Legend-class Enemy, one of the Four Divines, the Archangel Metatron.”

As he spoke with hesitation, the small icon floated up lightly and flapped its wings importantly, while Kuroyukihime and Fuko opened their eyes wide below it, dumbfounded.

“The Archangel. Meta...tron?”

“Metatron’s main body? It didn’t disappear?”

“You will call me Lord, little warriors.”

I just know that these three will understand one another and be friends someday. Someday...Right, when peace comes to the Accelerated World, then..., Haruyuki thought while sweepingly majestic music played in the background of his mind.

Metatron was thought to have been annihilated during the battle to the death with Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, but Haruyuki had somehow managed to revive her “core.” Ever since, she had been connected with him through this mysterious link where he was able to call her icon up even in a normal duel field. However, she had lost essentially all her battle power and was currently healing her wounds in her first form in the Contrary Cathedral.

It took about 70 percent of the duel time on the clock to simply explain these facts to Fuko and Kuroyukihime. Metatron kept interrupting him with complaints like “I did not do it to save you” and “You apparently revived me, did you not?” leaving Haruyuki having to apologize each time. But he

himself didn't fully understand the logic of the phenomenon, so there was a limit to how much he could explain.

Having heard him out, Kuroyukihime and Fuko looked at each other again and then let out long groans.

"We found out that the high-level Enemies possessed a certain level of intelligence during the battle with the Gods Suzaku and Seiryu, but this..." Kuroyukihime trailed off.

"Call us Beings, Black Lotus or whatever your name is."

"But I never dreamed they could talk like this or be so self-important..." Fuko added.

"I am not self-important. I *am* important, Sky Raker or whatever it was."

The floating icon interjected every time either of them said anything, wings flapping lightly, which was as frightening as it was laughable.

Haruyuki tightened his lips, a cold sweat on his brow.

Kuroyukihime, keenly picking up on this aura, stared hard at him. "Well, Crow's the type to pick up strays, so I'm not surprised at this stage, but..."

"Huh?" he said, aghast. "Really?"

"Have a little self-awareness, at least. Now, as for what happens next..." She turned her gaze toward Metatron, thirty centimeters above her head. "Divine Metatron. Before anything else, I shall thank you for saving my child, Silver Crow."

"There is no need for that, Black Lotus. Silver Crow is my servant, after all."

"...We'll sort out via the sword whether the rights of parent or master come first once you have recovered your strength. Until then, I am forced to recognize that you will be with Crow. But I want you to confirm one thing."

"I am under no obligation to confirm anything to you, but go ahead."

"Metatron. You also intend to fight the Acceleration Research Society again...Am I correct in assuming this?" Kuroyukihime asked, and the small icon fell silent for a moment.

A chilly, damp wind blew through the Cemetery stage, causing the branches of the twisted, ancient trees to rattle and rustle. He heard the sad howl of a wolf off in the distance, and a large bat cut across the night sky.

"I have no interest in the wars of you little warriors." Metatron sniffed curtly, but then she continued in a slightly louder voice, "But these who name themselves the Acceleration Research Society had the insolence to pull *me*

from *my* domain and make me a *guard*. They produced that repugnant, nihilistic pseudo-Being, and they attempted to erase my servant, Silver Crow. I must make them pay for that.”

“Mmm. That’s a bit of a troublesome answer, but...Well, fine. You’ve made your intent clear. So then, Divine Metatron. From this point forward...” Her eyes focused solely on the icon floating a little above her head, Kuroyukihime announced in a strident voice, “...you are a member of our Legion, Nega Nebulus!!”

3

“Thank you, Master. Please have a safe drive home,” Haruyuki said to Fuko in the driver’s seat and then got out of the car. From the sidewalk, he bowed his head to Kuroyukihime in the passenger seat. “Thank you, too, Kuroyukihime. I’m sorry for not telling you about Metatron...”

“No, it’s fine. I understand that you felt it was difficult to explain. That, well...” Kuroyukihime smiled wryly, and Haruyuki returned a small smile of his own.

After her proclamation that Metatron was now a member of Nega Nebulus, the Archangel had made a big fuss—*Why must I join a band of little warriors?!*—before finally assenting with a number of conditions. And that had just been a meeting with Kuroyukihime and Fuko. He couldn’t even imagine what a huge commotion it would have turned into if all the Legion members had been present.

“But...it’s curious. When we were fighting the first form at Midtown Tower—No, even when we went up against the second form after that, I could only see it as a fearsome Enemy, and yet, now I think of her as basically the same as us...,” Kuroyukihime murmured.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down. “When she was about to disappear protecting me, Metatron said that we *little warriors* are essentially the same as Beings like her.”

“In which case, it will be hard to go Enemy hunting from now on,” Fuko said, across from Kuroyukihime, a slightly troubled smile on her lips.

Haruyuki had been thinking the same thing these past few days. “Yes, I believe it will. I’m going to ask Metatron what she thinks about that.”

“Oh-ho, that said, I expect you will not run about with her and do whatever you please while I’m not around. I absolutely do not accept her as your master or any such nonsense!” A hand stretched out from the window and smacked Haruyuki’s chest lightly.

“R-r-r-r-right!”

“And I want to check one more thing. Is Metatron always in that little icon

form?”

“Y-yes. I guess she can’t appear in her true form until she recovers her strength.” Haruyuki nodded frantically, and the fingers finally were pulled back into the car.

“Well then, that’s fine. All right. Good work today, Haruyuki. I would like to tell you to have a good rest, but you have to study in preparation for the final exams on Wednesday.”

“All right, Corvus,” Fuko said. “See you. Good luck on your tests.”

“R-right...” Disappointed at being suddenly yanked back into the harshness of reality, Haruyuki listened as the car drove off down Kannana Street and disappeared to the south, leaving only the faint sound of the engine. He watched the vivid canary-yellow disappear in traffic before starting to walk to the pedestrian crossing.

He felt like he heard a familiar, shrill howl off in the distance suddenly, but looking back, there were only families and couples happily passing one another on the sidewalk. Of course, the massive form of an Enemy would not appear from behind a building there.

He passed through the large halls of the shopping center on the first floor with its many shoppers strolling beneath the Tanabata Festival decorations and jumped into the residents’ elevator before breathing a sigh of relief.

Haruyuki had been born the year his parents bought this condo in the large multiuse building that was just a five-minute walk from Koenji Station. Of course, his mother had known she was pregnant before that, and his parents had moved there with the intention of living together as a family.

But his parents had divorced when he was in second grade. He had been told it was because his father was cheating on his mother, but since the few memories he had of his parents as a couple were of all of them laughing together, he felt like they’d had a good relationship. But his father had left, essentially brushing off the weeping young Haruyuki clinging to him, and he hadn’t seen him once ever since. If the divorce had been amicable, then his father should have been given the right to see his child. The fact that he hadn’t meant that his mother had refused to let his father see him—or that his father had said he didn’t want to.

It was probably the latter, Haruyuki thought, staring absently at the elevator display as it changed one floor at a time.

One time not long before the divorce, his mother and father had argued in

the living room late at night about who would get custody of him. Having woken suddenly, Haruyuki listened to the thorny exchange from the hallway. Were they each trying to get sole custody? Or were they trying to *foist* it on each other? This, too, was probably...

The elevator gently decelerated, waking Haruyuki from his ruminations. He was sure he'd been thinking so much about the past lately because of the student council presentation "Time" at the school festival the week before. But it didn't feel as much like a sharp needle stabbing into his heart as it used to.

His mother was apparently not coming home today. Still, he no longer felt like she had abandoned him.

Ever since she was little, his mother had been a fighter and a bit of a sore loser—at least, according to his grandparents, who ran a cherry farm in Yamagata. Her grades had always been in the top of her class. So even after she grew up and got a job with a foreign capital investment bank, got married, and became a mother, she was still always fighting something. That was just how Saya Arita lived, and Haruyuki couldn't say a thing about it.

As the display lit up with a large 23, the elevator doors opened, and he stepped out into the empty hall. He turned to the right and rounded the corner, and when the door of his apartment came into view, he was for some reason not particularly surprised to see a small doll in front of it. He had probably realized subconsciously that the sound he'd heard on Kannana Street before was not the howl of an Enemy but rather the roar of a large electric motorcycle.

The doll jumped up when she noticed Haruyuki silently approaching, the red hair tied up on either side of her head shaking. "What?" she prodded, grinning. "You're not gonna say, 'Wh-wh-wh-why are you here?!'"

"I can't be surprised like that all the time, you know," Haruyuki replied, smiling in return. "I kinda had a feeling you'd come, Niko."

Yuniko Kozuki—the second Red King, Scarlet Rain—pursed her small lips as though slightly embarrassed. "Tch! So I guess you finally figured me out. I gotta work a little harder next time or somethin'... How about I smash the balcony window and come flyin' in?"

"D-d-d-don't! If you did that, I'd get yelled at until the day I die!" Haruyuki hurriedly shouted.

"Ha-ha-ha! Kidding! It's just a joke!" Niko laughed, seemingly satisfied,

and then tucked her hands behind her suddenly. “Why would I do something like that, *Big Brother*?”

The surprise switch to angel mode nearly shut down his brain. He managed just barely to brace himself and keep from staggering. “S-so then, what on earth do you...?”

An innocent smile playing on her lips, Niko shifted the large backpack on her back. “Obvious, isn’t it?! We haven’t had a sleepover in aaaaages!”

...I don’t care if you sleep over—you’re always welcome—but it would really help me out if you could at least e-mail me or something beforehand. And you say “ages,” but it was only eight days ago that you last stayed over...

Muttering and grumbling, Haruyuki showed Niko into the living room and then peered into the fridge. “Niko, do you want milk, grapefruit juice, oolong tea, mineral water, or milk?”

“Hey, c’mon!” the angry voice of normal mode roared instantly. “You said milk twice! You tryna be my mom or somethin’?! Like, telling me to be like Raker or what?!”

“I don’t think you could manage that, even if you did drink milk...”

“What’d you just say?! But since you’re asking, I’ll have the milk!”

“Nothing at all! And understood!” He pulled a chemically reinforced one-liter bottle out of the fridge and poured two glasses of milk. While he was at it, he washed a bunch of the cherries that had just arrived from Yamagata, set them in a glass bowl, and carried it out with two small plates.

The moment he set the tray down on the dining table, Niko’s puffed-up scowl transformed into a glowing smile. “Oh! Cherries! And they’re huge, too!”

“I didn’t tell you? My grandpa and grandma run a cherry farm in Yamagata. It’s cherry season now. They always send us a ton at this time every year.”

“A ton every year?! Huh. I shoulda come last year, too!”

“I wasn’t a Burst Linker in July last year...”

“Not important! So like...Can I have some?”

“Oh! Yeah, go ahead.” Haruyuki pushed the glass bowl into the center of the table.

Niko delightedly snatched one of the large Satonishiki cherries and shouted “Thanks for the grub!” before popping it into her mouth. She had no

sooner bitten into it with a small *splch* than a smile of bliss found its way to her lips.

“I didn’t know you liked cherries so much, Niko,” Haruyuki remarked as he stuffed a cherry into his own mouth.

Niko spit the pit out onto the plate before replying. “I didn’t tell you I like them best after strawberries? Like, when I first met Cherry Rook over there, I was all ‘I’d rather have that, switch avatars with me.’ And he was all ‘Uhhh.’”

“Huh. Now that you mention it, you’re kinda like a cherry somehow, Niko.”

He looked her over where she sat across from him. She was wearing a dark-gray tank top layered over a red boat-neck T-shirt, and perfectly fitted cutoff jeans. *Her slender build and brilliant-red hair were kinda like a cherry*, he thought before finally noticing that the girl wasn’t just red on her head but all the way down to her face.

“O-o-okay, look! Don’t just go saying such embarrassing stuff all of a sudden!”

“Huh?! I—I didn’t mean anything weird.”

“Course not! ...But, like, if you say that, Haruyuki, then, like, let’s just leave it at that.” Her face still red, she turned away curtly and stuffed two cherries into her cheeks at once.

He didn’t know what was so “embarrassing” about what he’d said, but he was glad the cherries had come that day, and he took a drink of his milk.

Ding-dong! He heard the sound of chimes, and a small window announcing a visitor was displayed in his field of view. For some reason, the hand he raised reflexively stopped in midair. A shiver of premonition crawled up his back. If he was forced to say, it was like the sensation of floating, mixed with the anticipation and terror of the moment right before a roller coaster drops.

Fortunately, Niko was absorbed in the cherries and noticed nothing. He swallowed hard before he touched the respond button.

The feed from the camera at the first-floor entrance was shown in the window. And pictured there was the smiling face of Kuroyukihime, who had supposedly driven off down Kannana Street twenty minutes ago. Haruyuki twisted around ninety degrees in his chair and asked in a tight and tiny voice, his back rounded toward Niko, “K-K-K-K-K-Kuroyukihime?! Wh-wh-wh-

what's going on?!"

"Oh, I was actually on my way home, but then I got this uneasy feeling. So I figured I'd come help you study and check out this feeling at the same time."

The Black King's super-senses are to be feared! A chill ran through his heart, but he managed to somehow produce a smile. "W-w-w-w-w-w-well, that's great. Thanks. Um. Wh-what about Master?"

"Unfortunately, Fuko had a thing. She said, 'Hello to Corvus and whomever.'"

Master's super-senses are also to be feared. Shivering once again, Haruyuki mustered up his courage and pressed the entry button. "P-please come on up then."

"Thanks. Be there in a minute."

When the window disappeared, Haruyuki slowly turned back around.

Naturally, Niko had noticed him talking and was sending a hard stare his way as she twirled the stem of a cherry between her fingertips. "So that was Lotus—I mean, Kuroyuki?"

"Y-yeah. Good guess."

"It's written all over yer face. Honestly. Are you freaked out or happy?" Niko snorted indignantly before leaning back in her chair. "Welp, guess I'll leave the rest of these cherries for her then."

Exactly one minute later, Kuroyukihime rang the bell to his door, and no sooner had she come face-to-face with Niko in the living room than a dangerous grin was popping up on her lips. "I *knew* it. I suspected something like this."

It was Sunday, so Kuroyukihime was also in street clothes: a layered tunic of black fabric with a white floral design and leggings that ended just below the knee. Her sleeveless shoulders were dazzling, but he didn't have the mental leeway to appreciate them as he urged her to a chair.

"Please, sit down. I'll get you something to drink. Um, what did you want?"

"Milk, of course," Niko said, grinning.

Kuroyukihime arched an eyebrow. "While I don't dislike milk, why the 'of course'?"

"'Cause you still got room to grow, y'know?"

"Wh-what are you looking at when you say that?! I am not dissatisfied

with the status of my own growth!”

“Oh-ho. So you’re deliberately going for lightweight, then.”

“Y-you are certainly not one to talk!”

“I’m gonna grow plenty from here on out.”

“Hmph, it will be too late to panic three years from now, after all.”

“So you *are* panicking, then.”

“I am not!”

Listening anxiously to this exchange, Haruyuki managed to fight for an opening and interjected, “So, K-Kuroyukihime, what did you want?”

“I’ll have milk,” Kuroyukihime said, glaring at him.

“R-roger.” He retreated meekly into the kitchen and let out the breath he’d been holding.

This wasn’t the first time Niko and Kuroyukihime had run into each other at the Arita house—he remembered quite well a similar development when Niko had slipped into his house six months earlier, pretending to be his cousin. He’d have to be on his toes for the time being, at least.

He poured milk into a third glass and carried it out with a new small plate. He set these in front of Kuroyukihime, who was sitting beside Niko for some reason, and gestured toward the cherries on the table.

“Please have some, if you’d like. They’re cherries my grandfather grew.”

“Oh! They’re quite large. Thank you.” It seemed Kuroyukihime didn’t dislike cherries, either, and she happily reached out for one. She popped one into her mouth and grinned. “They’re very good. What cultivar are they?”

“The old Satonishiki. There are a lot of new genetically modified types these days, like to make them sweeter or super-big. But they’ve basically always grown these at my grandparents’ farm.”

“I see...I’d like to visit your grandparents’ cherry farm sometime.”

“You can. Like, during summer vacation or something,” he replied. And then hurried to add, “Oh! B-but it’s by Higashine in Yamagata, so a day trip isn’t really an option.”

“Mm. That’s fine with me. As long as it’s no trouble for your grandparents, I could stay the night, or two nights, or three.”

“I-it wouldn’t be any trouble at all. In fact, I think my grandma and grandpa would be super-happy.”

“Well then, perhaps I’ll take you up on the offer.”

“Please do! Cherries taste best when you pick them right from the tree!”

The instant Haruyuki said this, there was a loud *bang*.

Niko leaned forward in her chair. "I'm going, too."

"What?"

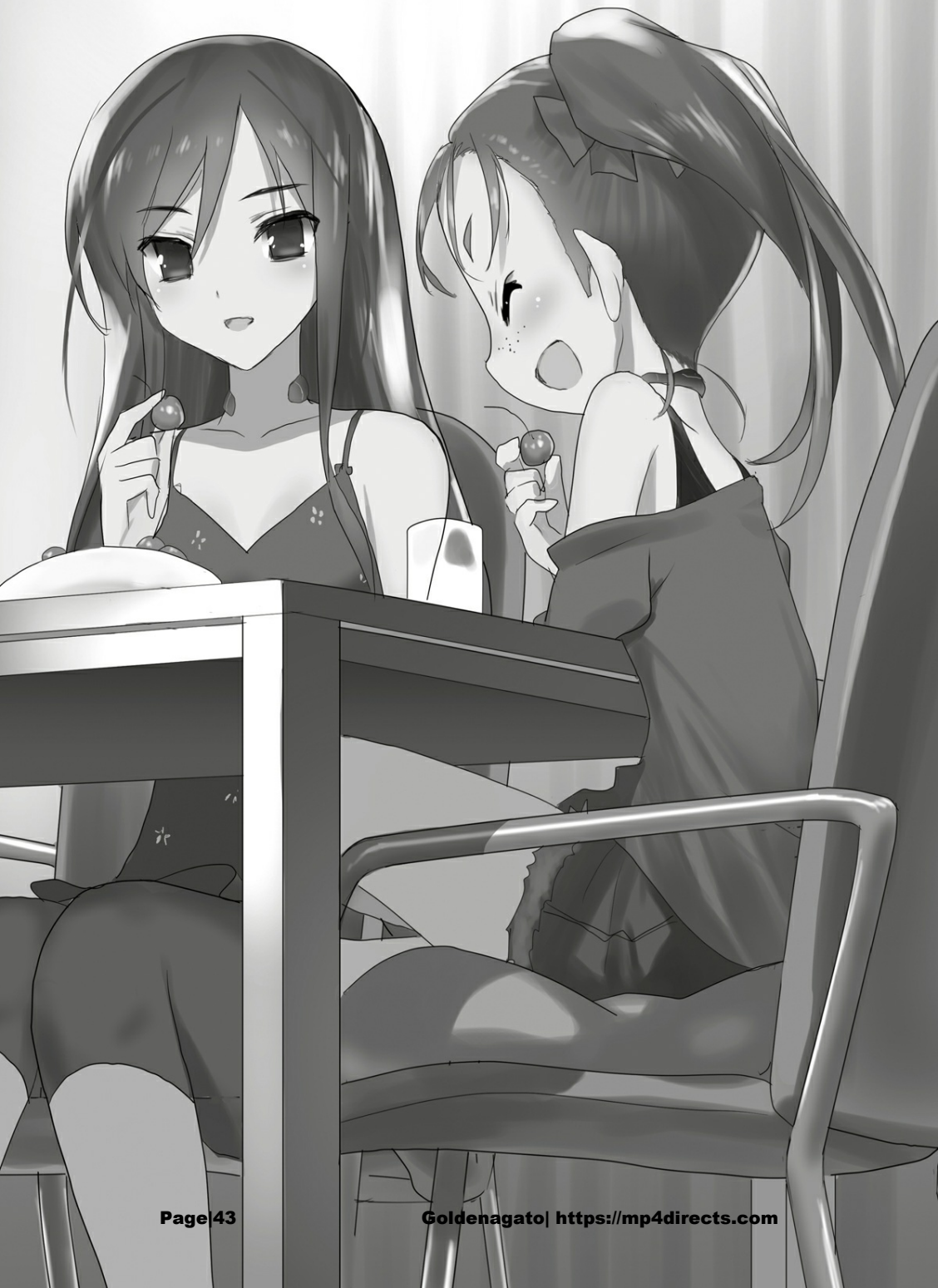
"I wanna go, toooo! I wanna eat fresh! Picked! Cherries!" Niko cried in a voice that was hard to tell if she was in angel mode or normal mode.

"Niko, you're not a little kid anymore, right?" Kuroyukihime patted her head with one hand. "So what do you say at a time like this, hmm?"

"S-stupid Kuroyuki. It's not even *your* grandpa..." Gritting her teeth in vexation, Niko turned back to Haruyuki and bowed deeply, Kuroyukihime's hand still on her head. "Haruyuki, c'mon...I'm beggin' ya! You gotta take me, too. Please!"

"Y-you don't have to beg. Of course it's okay. My grandparents' house is big, so it can accommodate a bunch of people. The building's pretty old, though."

"R-really?! Yessss!!" Niko yanked herself back up like she was going to fly off her chair and knocked Kuroyukihime's hand off her head. "Sweet! Summer vacation! It's already set in the schedule in my heart, so no take-backs!"



“I-I’ll have to ask them about when we can come...”

“Yeah, yeah. But the sooner the better! Oh! But. Hmm.” Niko abruptly started mumbling, so Haruyuki blinked hard. And then the smile on Niko’s lips turned into something a little bitter. “Oh, it’s just that I was thinking...At any rate, before we eat fresh-picked cherries, we oughtta finish those guys off.”

“I suppose so. I would very much like to.” Kuroyukihime also nodded deeply.

“Those guys” were, of course, the Acceleration Research Society—the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe. They had adopted the Seven Legion joint-attack policy proposed by Niko at the meeting of the Seven Kings that day. But there would be no attack until they could prove where the Society’s headquarters were.

“Um.” One of the few remaining cherries dangling from his fingers, Haruyuki switched gears and told the two kings, “The Blue King said if anyone brought information about the headquarters, he would send a scouting team and check the matching list in the area, but just that’s not enough to prove that the Eternal Girls’ Academy’s Minato Area Number Three is the Society’s home base.”

“You’re exactly right.” Kuroyukihime reached out for her glass of milk, drops of water condensed on the sides. “All those Society people are likely Oscillatory members, and at the same time, all of Minato Ward is Oscillatory territory. With the privileges of the controlling Legion, their names wouldn’t normally be on the matching list.”

“So then...how are we supposed to get proof?” Haruyuki bit his lip lightly.

“You gotta let me apologize for one thing first,” Niko said, a serious edge to her voice, as she sat up straighter in her chair.

“Huh...?”

“Like, that’s actually the reason I came over. Haruyuki...and Kuroyuki, I’m sorry for racing ahead like that at the meeting today without talking to you first.” Her pigtails bobbing up and down, Niko bowed her head deeply.

Even Haruyuki, who was generally a little thick, understood what Niko was talking about. Her proposal for a joint concentrated attack on the Acceleration Research Society in the middle of the meeting. And indeed, he had felt it was a little sudden. But as a result, they had likely succeeded in

putting a degree of pressure on Ivory Tower and the White Legion, so it seemed to him that there was no need to apologize now.

Kuroyukihime apparently felt the same way, and she patted Niko's shoulder as a faint, wry smile crossed her face. "No need to humble yourself like this. If you hadn't said it, Niko, I would have made a similar proposal... Although, well, if you'd given me word in advance, I think we may have been able to coordinate better."

"That's just it." Niko lifted her face and glanced out the window with a stern look. "I'll be blunt. The reason I couldn't talk to you earlier about the meeting today is that the opinion's still split with my gang."

"Split?" Haruyuki parroted, and Niko looked back at him with eyes that did indeed house the force of a king.

"Yeah. Put simply, some members—well, some of the executives—insist we shouldn't put any more into our relationship with Nega Nebulus. I managed to persuade them to agree with the joint attack, at least, right before the meeting."

"The executives... So, like, Pard-rank?"

"Yeah. The other two at Pard's rank, the Triplex. Lemme just say, both of 'em care super-loads about Promi and me. Which is exactly why maybe... They think just the indefinite cease-fire agreement with Negabu puts Promi in danger. And you know, you guys are squaring off against the other Legions and fighting, so. They feel like maybe they're gonna come after Promi sooner or later, and as the LM, I can't say I don't get that."

"I see. Their concerns are quite valid. The situation is such that I wouldn't be at all surprised if Radio and his ilk were to take note of our cease-fire and demand you withdraw from the Six Legion mutual nonaggression pact."

"Cool as a cucumber when you say that, but..." Niko smiled bitterly and shifted to sit cross-legged on her chair, placing her hands on her slender ankles. She sat in silence like that for a moment, but then suddenly said in a tone that was somehow brusque, "...In fact, I'm basically of the mind that Negabu and we have already thrown our lots in together."

"Huh...?" Haruyuki's eyes grew wide.

Niko glanced at him and then turned to the side for some reason before standing up and speaking even faster. "I mean, we have, though. We hold Nakano One, and if the five Legions decided to launch an all-out attack on Negabu, that territory would be in the way. So they tell me to hand it over,

and if I just say ‘Sure, no probs,’ then there’s not even any point in setting up shop as a Legion. In the end, our only choice’d be to form a genuine alliance with you and fight together.”

Haruyuki wondered in his heart if that would be the case, but Kuroyukihime actually said it out loud.

“No, you have one other option. Form an alliance with the five Legions and attack us. In that case, there would be no need to hand over control of Nakano One.”

“...Nah, I can’t do that.”

“I’m grateful that you would say that, but, Niko, we have no intention of simply sitting back and accepting charity. In the end, if we aren’t an alliance on equal footing, then setting up shop as a Legion—”

“It’s not charity!” Making her chair clatter against the floor again, Niko stood up. In the light of the sun coming in through the window behind her, her red hair shone like flames as she looked at Kuroyukihime. “It’d be trouble for me if Suginami ended up Leonids’ or GW territory!”

“Why?” Though curt, Kuroyukihime somehow had the air of an older sister comforting a younger one as she looked up at Niko.

“Th-that’s... That’s—it’s...”

But the instant Kuroyukihime heard what Niko had to say next, her placid look turned to surprise. And because it was enough to surprise the Black King, Haruyuki got such a shock that he nearly flipped over and fell off his chair.

“That’s ’cause I’m starting at Umesato next year, maybe!” Niko shouted, as if pulling the words from her entire body, her hands clenching into fists.

“What... Whaaaat?!” Haruyuki shouted.

Niko glared at him before sitting back down. She drained her glass of the milk left in it in one gulp and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

It was true that the boarding school where Niko lived now in Nerima Ward was not so far from Umesato Junior High in Suginami. It was probably about twenty minutes by bus one way. But Niko’s school also had a junior high. If she was going to advance to a different junior high, wouldn’t she have to leave the dorms?

And to begin with, why Umesato? It was an academic school at any rate, but there were schools of the same level in Nerima, too. If it was because she wanted to go to the same school as Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Takumu, then he

was just plain happy. But at the same time, he felt like Niko—the proud Red King—would not decide on her future based on such emotion alone.

Haruyuki hesitated about whether it was okay for him to ask about this and the several other questions on his mind.

But as if she could read his mind, Niko glared at Haruyuki and let out a sigh before she started to speak. “This’ll be a loooong story. So the place I go now, the abandoned-child general-welfare facility and school, has this thing kinda like a scholarship system. Like, they give a few students with top grades a chance to go to a junior high outside the system.”

“Top grades?!” said Kuroyukihime.

“A few students?!” cried Haruyuki.

For a moment, Niko started to bristle, pigtails swinging, but then she simply snorted, and her expression returned to normal. “Yup. And I’ll tell ya now, I’m not cheating or nothing with acceleration. So, well, I’m in that box or whatever this year. And it’s about time I decide what I’m gonna do. Give up on an outside school and go to our junior high or go to an outside school. I can’t decide just like that, so I talked to Pard, y’know? And, like, she thought about it for a second before she said I should go to Umesato.”

“P-Pard suggested it?” he asked.

“Yeah. I guess she’s been thinking about all kinds of stuff since we went to your festival last week. Said, like, there aren’t too many places where they leave students so much independence in junior high.”

“Student independence...Umesato...?” Haruyuki cocked his head deeply to one side.

Naturally, he’d never compared it to other schools, but Umesato didn’t give the impression of a particularly lenient school tradition. They gave loads of homework, and if students did anything bad, the administration was on them in a hot second. Like when Dusk Taker, aka Seiji Nomi, hid a small camera in the girls’ shower room and tried to get Haruyuki to take the fall, there was an emergency notice that entry into the gym itself was prohibited, which caused a huge commotion.

But opposite the confused Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime nodded, her expression unchanged. “Well, that is our school’s greatest advantage, its fundamental charm. It seems that Haruyuki doesn’t feel the reality of this, but there aren’t that many schools where you can freely use Neurolinkers and the net like you can at Umesato. There are plenty of schools that forbid full dives

on school grounds.”

“Totally forbidden at our junior high, too,” Niko added. “Pard’s struggled a lot ’cause of that.”

Haruyuki looked at her and nodded. “So if your school forbids full dives, that means all kinds of hassle as a Burst Linker?”

“Nah!” Niko shouted loudly, before seeming to blush a bit. “Well, that’s one reason, but it’s a super-small one! It’s like, I dunno, I’ve never felt this before, either, but the atmosphere at Umesato’s loose somehow. And I mean that as praise, okay? I mean, look. I’m gonna be real with ya for a sec, Haruyuki; I went and looked at all these junior highs in Suginami. And I felt like all the private academic schools were so tense inside the school everywhere, but there wasn’t so much of that at Umesato.”

“The reason for that is no doubt because there is a place the students can escape to if need be,” Kuroyukihime remarked, and Haruyuki’s eyes flew open.

For once, he could understand what she meant right away. When he was in seventh grade, he had fled there at every school break, after all. “The in-school local net...right? But I mean, other schools have a local net, at least?”

“They may, but few schools have a VR space on it for student use. Umesato’s parent company is a private corporation, and it seems they’re collecting data for a model scenario of education using Neurolinkers. Well, regardless of that kind of behind-the-scenes information, they were not mistaken in the idea that this space where you can chat and play games using whatever avatar you’d like would be a place for relaxation for students.”

“Right. It’s true; on the local net, everyone, like, stretches their wings. It looks like they’re having fun, although I haven’t actually been in a while.”

“Isn’t that because you found a place even better than the local net?” Kuroyukihime noted with a faint smile. “A place called the Accelerated World?”

He nodded that this was indeed the case. If he hadn’t become a Burst Linker, and even if he was no longer being bullied by Araya and his gang, Haruyuki would no doubt still be fleeing to the local net during lunch even now. “So in that sense, is the Accelerated World a shelter for me to escape from the real world?”

“It’s not just you,” Niko replied. “It’s the same for Kuroyuki and me and all the other Burst Linkers. But it’s not just that. I mean, we can find the

courage we need to move forward there without running away. And it's not given to us from outside; it's in us. So even if you lose all yer points an' Brain Burst an' the power of acceleration, even when you don't even remember you used to be a Burst Linker, something from that place stays in your heart. Absolutely. That's what I think."

"...Niko." All Haruyuki could do was say the name of his younger friend, as her words surprised him and impacted his heart. There was plenty he wanted to say, but he couldn't easily put any of it into words, and he was stuck just chewing on his lip.

Niko grinned, a smile that made her seem younger than her years. "I said the same thing at the school festival, but, like...I've been terrified of total point loss. I'm no Originator, no Pure Color, so, like, I was sure someone'd come hunt me one of these days...But Kuroyuki gave me that message from my prede—from Red Rider, right? I had this thought—wait, no, I *knew*. Like, I was super-small, y'know?"

He suddenly noticed it was already past five in the afternoon, and the color of the sunlight pouring in through the south windows had grown quite saturated. The water droplets on the surface of the cherries still left in the bowl glittered in the sunlight.

"I...I was only about me." The droplets shivered a little at Niko's voice dipping. "Like, *I* gotta be tough, or they'll take *my* territory. Or *my* Legion members'll leave. I've only been thinking about stuff like that, hiding my own weakness and fear. But, like, what that all really boils down to is that I don't actually trust my comrades...My predecessor, like, he said he'd leave the rest to me, yeah? The way he could trust someone else entirely, get me to take over this thing he's been building up—that's gotta be real strength..."

"...Niko..." Haruyuki took a deep breath. "There's nothing that says a Legion Master can't show weakness. You need to rely on your comrades when stuff gets hard or painful. Before master or king or whatever, we're all Burst Linkers, after all. I mean, I've even witnessed Kuroyukihime cry—"

Thmp.

The merciless pressure of a foot under the table rendered Haruyuki silent, and Kuroyukihime started to speak in his place.

"Everyone's afraid of total point loss. And I was so afraid of a concentrated attack by the kings that I didn't connect globally for two years. My Legion was disbanded, and I even gave up on reaching level ten; I had

nothing left to protect...And yet I clung to the fact that I was a Burst Linker in an ugly way. When I think about it now, I can't even remember what made me do that...Ohhh...right..."

Apparently realizing something, Kuroyukihime released a faint smile.

"And perhaps that was thanks to the Umesato local net, as well. I felt that as long as I had that small virtual world, someone would certainly appear one day and lift me out of the deep darkness. And my premonition was correct."

Her right foot still pressing on him lightly, she turned her black eyes directly on Haruyuki, and he pulled into himself, suddenly self-conscious. But unable to escape from the swordmaster's gaze, he silently accepted it.

"Look, missy, I was here first today!" Niko shouted with a hint of exasperation. "Fine. While you two are makin' googly eyes at each other, I'm gonna eat the rest of the cherries!" She drew the glass bowl toward herself.

"Hey!" Instantly, Kuroyukihime released Haruyuki mentally and physically and reached out her own hand. "You can't have them all!"

The few remaining cherries were gone in a flash, and the glasses of milk were also emptied.

Letting out a sigh, Niko leaned back all the way against the dining room chair and said with satisfaction, "Thanks for the grub. I wish Pard coulda had some...She's looking for some good cherries to put on top of the limited-time-only fresh cherry tart."

"She is?" Haruyuki replied. "Then take some for her when you go home tomorrow."

"Really?! Hey, thanks." She bowed her head before continuing with a placid look. "So like, about the reason Pard suggested going to your school. Of course, the local net's got plenty of functionality, and the school festival was super-fun—there's all that, but...It's like, I feel like she's looking further ahead, y'know? Like, what do I want the me in the real world and the me in the Accelerated World to be from now on? Like, maybe she's thinking it'd be good for me to go to Umesato so I can really think about that for the next three years. Well, that's just what I'm picturing, so."

What Niko was saying was too abstract, and Haruyuki couldn't immediately grasp it.

"In the real world...from now on"—Did she mean what school to go to? Haruyuki was in eighth grade right now, but to be honest, he had only thought about his future education once. And that was when a slightly

impractical, slightly dependent hope rose up in his heart: the idea of going to the same high school as Kuroyukihime.

In the Accelerated World, he had a clearer objective. Defeat the Acceleration Research Society and the White Legion, attack the Castle and the Shrine of the Eight Divines, and challenge the Blue, Green, Yellow, and Purple Kings to a decisive battle. But this, too, when he thought about it, was really just chasing after Kuroyukihime and her fight to reach level ten.

But that's fine. I already decided I'd follow her anywhere.

Now it was Haruyuki who turned his gaze on Kuroyukihime, and she returned the look, her jet-black pupils shining with a bright light that seemed to illuminate everything. Just as they were on the verge of reactivating googly-eyed mode, Niko purposely cleared her throat and poured cold water on the mood.

“Anyway! It’s not like it’s all settled yet, so just be ready for the possibility, yeah? If I decide on Umesato in the end, we’ll need to upgrade the treaty, so I’ll meet with the executives again then.”

When she said it all so smoothly like that, Haruyuki wondered if it was really worth all this fuss, but he simply nodded. Kuroyukihime, as always, did not immediately reply but made a show of thinking for a minute before turning back toward the Red King.

“Niko. Before, you touched on the responsibility of a Legion Master. In other words...may I assume that the option of coming to Umesato is not unrelated to that?”

This time, for sure, the question was completely incomprehensible to Haruyuki.

And at the meeting, too, Kuroyukihime had a mysterious conversation with the Green King, huh...?

In the brief instant that Haruyuki started to think about this, Niko nodded forcefully.

“Yeah, I don’t care if you take it like that.”

“Understood. Well then, I shall do just that. As to who will do what, let us talk about it again someday.” Nodding in return, Kuroyukihime looked at Haruyuki with a faint smile. “Haruyuki, apologies, but we’ve talked a great deal, and now my throat is dry. I’d love it if you could make some tea.”

“Big Brother, I want milk tea! Not too bitter, ’kay?” Niko suddenly switched to angel mode, and he had the feeling that he was failing to ask

something important of that innocent smile as he got to his feet.

“Is black tea all right for you, too, Kuroyukihime?”

“Mm. The same as Niko will be fine. Oh! But no sugar.”

“...Me neither!”

“You’re still in elementary. No need to force yourself.”

“A-and I’m telling ya, I don’t need sugar!”

Listening to the two girls argue, Haruyuki set the three empty glasses and glass bowl on the tray. He then went to collect the small plates and their piles of cherry pits and stems.

“Oh, right,” Niko began. “Hey, Haruyuki? If you buried these seeds in a pot, would they grow?”

Haruyuki nodded his head at a slight angle. “Yeah, I wanted to do that, too, way back when, so I did some research—tried all kinds of stuff. Long story short, it’s not impossible, but it’s pretty hard.”

“Oh? So then how do they grow the cherry trees at your grandfather’s farm?” Kuroyukihime asked with honest interest.

“Please hang on a second. I’ll go put on the tea first,” Haruyuki replied, returning to the kitchen at a trot.

He pulled some mineral water from the fridge and poured some into the kettle before placing it on the induction cooktop burner and setting it to high-speed boil mode. He was in a hurry, so rather than tea leaves, he put tea bags—albeit expensive ones that his mother loved—into a teapot and washed the bowl and glasses while the water was boiling. The dishes were processed with nanotechnological super-water-repellent treatment, and the water droplets would fly off with just a light shake, so he returned them to the cupboard.

He carefully poured the boiling water into the teapot and then quickly laid out cups, saucers, and spoons for three, a jug full of milk, and a sugar pot—just in case—before returning to the table.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said as he began setting the table.

“You’ve gotten much more adept at household chores, too, haven’t you, Haruyuki?” Kuroyukihime commented with a smile.

“Huh? H-have I? Lately, I’ve been doing what I can by myself, but I still can’t make a proper meal, not even close.”

Now it was Niko’s turn to laugh. “But that curry you guys made me before was pretty tasty. And Pard seemed to like it, too.”

“All I did was peel the potatoes. The main part of the cooking was basically done by Chiyuri and Shinomiya...”

“Huh. So then I wonder what 'Ro did.”

“I—I cut the peppers, I'll have you know! Chopped up this red one like a certain long-distance type!”

Haruyuki finished laying out the tea set and cleared his throat to get their attention. “Um, so then, about the cherry seeds...”

“Oh, that, right. How d'they do it on the farm?” Niko asked.

“With production agriculture, they buy seedlings and do grafting, too. The germination rate for edible cherries is pretty low...But I guess it's not like it's totally impossible.”

“Oh? Is there a trick to it, perhaps?”

“Right...” Haruyuki picked up one of the yellowish-brown seeds from a small plate he'd left on the table. “What I tried before was after I washed the seeds really well, I kept them in the fridge for a while so they wouldn't dry out and then planted the ones that grew a root in soil. That was basically it, but only a few got roots, and even after I planted them, they didn't get all the way to germinating. Maybe the soil didn't agree with them.”

“Hmm. But you managed to get as far as a root,” Niko said, slamming a fist into her open hand. “Awright! Let's do it now!”

“Huh?”

“Mm.” Kuroyukihime nodded. “Prompt decisions and immediate action is the Nega Nebulus motto, after all.”

“N-no, I can keep them in the fridge, but...where would you plant them after that?” Haruyuki asked.

“Now you're thinking too far ahead, hmm? First, we wash them, yes? I'm just going to borrow your kitchen.” Displaying an impatience on par with Pard, Kuroyukihime moved to stand up with the small plate.

“Oh!” Haruyuki hurriedly pushed her back down. “You won't be able to get the slimy part totally off just by washing by hand...Let's do it after we have our tea.”

“I see. Well then, let's.” Kuroyukihime poured milk into a teacup of ruby tea with a careful hand and then slowly mixed it in.

In contrast, Niko poured the milk from the jug with gusto and swirled her spoon around just once before bringing the cup to her lips.

Haruyuki also put sugar in his tea and took a sip before asking, “Anyway,

why are you both suddenly so interested in growing cherries?”

“Isn’t it obvious?!” Niko cried. “Once the tree’s grown, we can eat all the freshly picked cherries we want!”

“Uh, um,” Haruyuki stammered. “Even if it does sprout, it’s still hard to make it grow into a seedling, and then even if you manage to do that, it takes, like, five years before flowers bloom and turn into fruit, you know!”

“We can wait, can’t we? Five years, at least,” Kuroyukihime responded smoothly, and Haruyuki looked at her, dumbfounded. “We—no, everyone in the Legion—can take care of it. All the while looking forward to when it bears fruit. Right. Perhaps we could plant it next to Hoo’s hutch. It’s the rear courtyard, but the area gets good light.”

“.....”

For a moment, Haruyuki struggled with what to say. Five years. For the Haruyuki of now, that seemed like an extraordinarily long time. Five years from now, Niko would be seventeen, Haruyuki would be nineteen...and Kuroyukihime twenty.

Would they still be Burst Linkers then? Would their hearts burn in the same way for duels in the Accelerated World? He wanted it to be like that, but he wasn’t 100 percent confident it would all stay this way. It might be that once the game of Brain Burst itself was cleared, all Burst Linkers would lose their memories of the Accelerated World.

Abruptly, what Niko said earlier popped back into his head. Even if their memories of Brain Burst and anything connected to it were taken, it wasn’t like the things they gained in the real world would all disappear.

The fact that Kuroyukihime saved me from that bully quagmire. That Niko pretended to be family and snuck into my house. Chiyu and Taku, Master Fuko and Shinomiya, Pard, Curren, Rin... That we’ve gone all kinds of special places together and shared so many laughs. These memories will stay forever in the deepest part of my heart. Just like the young cherry tree taking root in the soil and spreading its leaves to take in the light of the sun.

“Right. If it’s next to Hoo’s house, I’ll be able to look after it every day.” Haruyuki nodded at Kuroyukihime before shifting his gaze. “Niko, come to Umesato next year and join the Animal Care Club. Then you can take care of Hoo and the cherry tree, too.”

Even though Niko was the one who had brought it up, her eyes opened wide in surprise. She quickly turned away and blinked her long eyelashes

several times before replying in her usual tone, but with the tiniest tremor in her voice, “Now, look, I’m tellin’ ya, I haven’t decided anything yet. And I gotta help out at Pard’s place after school. If I do end up going to yer school, I could join your club, but I can’t stay for too long each day—got it?!”

Kuroyukihime smiled and patted Niko on the back. “Well, if there’s the possibility of you coming to our school, we’ll have to prepare earlier rather than later. So...today is a superhard-mode study group! Starting now!”

“Wh-whaaaat?!” Haruyuki cried.

Niko looked back and groaned in her usual way. “Whoa, hang on there a sec, Kuroyuki. I came to have a retro-game tournament.”

“That’s right, Kuroyukihime,” Haruyuki joined in. “A game I just got last week where you can only use dive kicks—”

“Listen here, Haruyuki. You, of all people, are not in a position to be saying such things! Final exams are in three days!”

“O-oh, right.” Haruyuki hung his head.

Kuroyukihime clapped her hands together loudly and said, “Now then, how about we first wash these cherry pits? A sponge or something would be handy if you have one!”

“O-okay, I’ll go get one...” Haruyuki stood up and plodded to the kitchen in search of a sponge.

4

“Haannngaaaangh!” After yawning for a full five seconds, Haruyuki glanced at the clock in the lower right of his virtual desktop.

Monday, July 8, 6:50 AM. The weather was slightly overcast, and although it was early, the temperature and humidity were rising rapidly. The gaits of the people plodding toward the station along Kannana Street before him were also heavy somehow.

Haruyuki had left his house an hour earlier than usual to say good-bye to Kuroyukihime and Niko. A few minutes earlier, they had gone off to the north and south in a bus and taxi, respectively, to stop in at home before going to school, and the spontaneous sleepover party/superhard study group came to a close. But he couldn't deny he was feeling a little sleep deprived after staying up and working hard until two in the morning since Kuroyukihime was taking the trouble to help him.

He'd gotten his things ready for school, thinking he'd just head that way once he saw the girls off, but he considered going back to his house and sleeping for another half an hour. But no, that would be nothing but a drop in the ocean of exhaustion. He agonized over this for a moment before he broke free from the temptation of an early nap and started walking along the sidewalk to the south.

If it had been Tuesday, he would have had his usual morning duel with Ash Roller, so that would've woken him right up. But unfortunately, it was Monday. And given that they had taken a break the previous week out of consideration for Rin Kusakabe's health after she was so recently freed from the mental interference of the ISS kit, tomorrow would be their first duel in a while.

I'm pretty sure I lost the last duel, so Ash'll be the starter tomorrow. He got me that time by diving into the sand with his bike and launching missiles from beneath my feet. I gotta watch out for that if we get another Desert stage... Haruyuki's mind was wandering as he turned right on the road beneath the Chuo Line elevated bridge.

“Sssssssuuuup?!” a forceful voice cried from behind as a hand slapped his back.

“Ouch!” His hanging head snapped upward, and before he even turned around, Haruyuki was shouting the name of the one person who would greet him in such a powerful manner. “Chiyu! Wh-what are you doing?!”

“You were walking like you were all down or whatever, so I just gave you a little pick-me-up!” Puffing out her chest proudly was, as expected, Chiyuri Kurashima. T-shirt on top, sweats on the bottom, large sports bag slung over her shoulder.

“It’s too early in the morning to have that much energy,” he replied in a near whisper before falling in alongside his childhood friend.

Haruyuki had totally forgotten that Chiyuri went to school every morning at about this time for track practice, and he let out a sigh of relief that he hadn’t run into her when he was still with Kuroyukihime and Niko.

But then a question came flying at him. “Haru, something going on today?”

“Huh? Something?”

“It’s just, you usually barely make it before last bell, so why’re you so early?”

“I—I go to school early sometimes, too, you know.”

“Hmmm.” Her voice was full of suspicion, and when he stole a peek at her face in profile, so was her expression.

He shifted the bag on his shoulder for no reason, and now 100 percent awake, he thought about whether he should change the subject to the final exams or the track meet after that, or even the end of the rainy season forecast for sometime that week...

His life raft dropped down from an entirely unexpected direction.

Skreeeeee!! The sound that filled his head was no doubt acceleration. And then the message that a challenger had appeared showed up in his field of view.

A-a challenger?! But it’s Monday?! Did Rin get the day wrong maybe?! But even if she did, it’s too early...?! Even as half his mind descended into utter confusion, the other half automatically switched into duel mode.

Descending into a virtual darkness, sparks scattering, Haruyuki landed as his duel avatar, Silver Crow, on an excessively elastic ground. Looking around, he saw that the road and buildings were covered in a pattern of

squares at a forty-five-degree angle. Each was about eighty centimeters, and the dense tiling made it seem like the world was made of an enormous quilt—no, it *was* made of an enormous quilt. This was a natural-type, wood-affiliated Buffer stage. Every terrain object was wrapped in thick, sturdy cushions, a rare stage where nothing could be easily broken, and impact damage was minimal. Even the cars driving down Kannana Street were rounded like stuffed animals.

At present, there was no sign of the Gallery on the rooftops. Most likely because it was still early, and it wasn't a day for the Ash-Crow duels that were so strangely popular.

After checking the situation, Haruyuki turned his attention to the health gauge of the dueler hanging in the upper right of his field of view. If Rin hadn't gotten the day wrong, then he thought maybe Niko or Kuroyukihime, whom he'd so recently parted with, had challenged him for some reason, but displayed there was an entirely unexpected avatar name.

CHOCOLATE PUPPETEER. Level five.

“Ch-chocolate—I mean, Chocolat Puppeter?!”

Haruyuki's shock was amplified by a voice behind him.

“Choco?! Why?!”

“Whoa?!” Leaping back, Haruyuki met the exasperated gaze of the Watch Witch, Lime Bell, in her yellow-green pointed hat.

“I was standing right next to you. Why're you so surprised?”

“U-uh, I never thought you'd be in the Gallery...”

“We're both on each other's lists. You should be surprised if I *wasn't* here. And, like, why are you getting challenged when we're in our territory?”

“Oh, uh. I've been leaving it set to open to challenges just when I go to school so that I don't deny Rin—I mean, Ash.”

“*Mmm-hmmmmmm.*” Although she really stretched the *Mm* out, Chiyuri seemed to accept this explanation, fortunately, and turned her gaze back to the challenger's health gauge. “She's gone up to level five from level four. But it's definitely Choco, huh? We met her in Setagaya the week before last.”

“Yeah...” He nodded but couldn't say anything more.

Chocolat Puppeter was a Burst Linker Haruyuki and Chiyuri had encountered when they visited Setagaya Area No. 2 of the Unlimited Neutral Field, the Master of a small Legion called Petit Paquet. But at the time, her Legion members, Mint Mitten and Plum Flipper, had been infected with ISS

kits by Magenta Scissor, whose stronghold was in Setagaya. When Magenta came to infect Chocolat as well, she and Haruyuki fought, and after a difficult battle with her scissor technique, he managed to get her to retreat. After that, Chiyuri had purified the ISS kits parasitizing Mint and Plum with her Citron Call, and the three members of Petit Paquet had gone back to being friends. So why was Chocolat here in Suginami and challenging Haruyuki, to boot?

“No way. Choco’s got an ISS kit...,” Chiyuri wondered aloud hoarsely.

“There’s no way!” Haruyuki shook his head forcefully. “The ISS kits have been destroyed. It’s not possible for anyone new to be infected now!”

As he shouted, he stared toward the south indicated by the guide cursor displayed in the lower part of his field of view, as if he could devour it with his gaze.

The ground and buildings of a Buffer stage were a uniformly bright color, off-white or beige, or maybe light gray to light brown. So Chocolat Puppeteer and her dark-brown body should have stood out, but he couldn’t catch sight of her.

Most likely, she’d challenged him because Suginami Area No. 2 was near the border of Petit Paquet’s headquarters, in Setagaya Area No. 2. In which case, it would still be a while until they made contact, given that she had no high-speed movement abilities.

“What’re you gonna do, Crow?” Chiyuri asked anxiously.

Haruyuki took a deep breath. “Fretting over every little thing here won’t change anything. I’ll decide what to do when I encounter her. If she *is* actually infected with a kit, then I’ll think of some way to purify her. I’ll probably want your help then, Bell, so get ready for that at least.”

“...Right. Got it.” Chiyuri nodded forcefully, sounding even more anxious, and Haruyuki walked over to the corner of the overhead bridge nearby. He tried punching it, this thing covered in an enormous quilt.

His avatar’s fist sank deeply into the thick cushion but was soon enough repelled with a bounce. There was basically no damage to the synthetic leather-like surface, either.

“Building up my special-attack gauge with terrain destruction’s a no-go, huh...?” He sighed.

“I’ve never seen this stage before, either, but I heard you can’t break the terrain with a gun or a sword or a drill, either.”

“So then, physical attacks are basically null,” Haruyuki responded, and

Chiyuri was about to say something in response when she suddenly disappeared without a sound.

Disconnection? —*No.* The guide cursor had also similarly disappeared. Which meant that Chocolat Puppeteer had gotten to within ten meters of him, even though he'd thought she was still far-off, to the point that Lime Bell in the Gallery had been forcibly teleported. *But where exactly was Chocolat?* Haruyuki wondered, looking around.

And then a small silhouette jumped down next to him from the roof of a stuffed bus driving along Kannana Street, bouncing fiercely off the ground to hit a nearby building and then bounce once again before somersaulting through the air and coming to stand before Haruyuki. Even after these acrobatics, she appeared to take absolutely no damage.

Bonnet-style hat with a large brim. Flared skirt spreading out in all directions. And smooth chocolate-colored armor. There was no doubt this was Chocolat Puppeteer.

“.....!”

Quickly dropping into a fighting stance, Haruyuki stared at Chocolat's chest armor hard enough to burn a hole in it. If she had been parasitized by an ISS kit, there'd be a repulsive black eyeball enshrined there. But Chocolat's armor was fairly dark to start with, and he couldn't immediately detect the presence of a kit. Straining his eyes, Haruyuki inched closer.

As if in reaction to this, Chocolat brought her hands up in a ready position.

He gritted his teeth—she was getting mental interference then. But at that moment, a shrill shout pierced his ears.

“Wh-what are you doing, you creep?!”

“C...c-creep?” Haruyuki hurriedly lifted his eyes.

Chocolat covered her chest with one hand while she snapped the index finger of her other in his direction. “I went to all the trouble of coming to you, and then the second you meet me, you're staring *there* of all places. Disgusting! I've lost all hope, Silver Crow!”

“Wh—? N-no...!” Haruyuki hurriedly waved his hands and shook his head, but further abuse rained down on him from somewhere up above.

“That's riiiiight! Total perrrv!”

“They'll be calling you Silver Perv from now on!”

Lifting his gaze to find out just who from where was trying to give him

the worst nickname in all of history, he found three figures on top of one of the buildings on either side of Kannana Street.

To the far left from Haruyuki's point of view was a bright, light-blue F-type avatar with large mittens: Petit Paquet's Mint Mitten. In the center was an F-type avatar with something like enormous candies stuffed into both hands and feet. Given the reddish-purple armor, this was Petit Paquet's second member, Plum Flipper. And then on the right was the cheeky figure of Lime Bell.

"I-I'm not a creep or a perv or *anything*! I was just worried you were infected with an ISS kit, Choco..."

"There's no way!" She jabbed her finger at him in the air again. "And you're acting far too familiar by calling me that!"

"You said I could call you Choco, didn't you?!" Haruyuki protested once again.

"I...I did, but..."

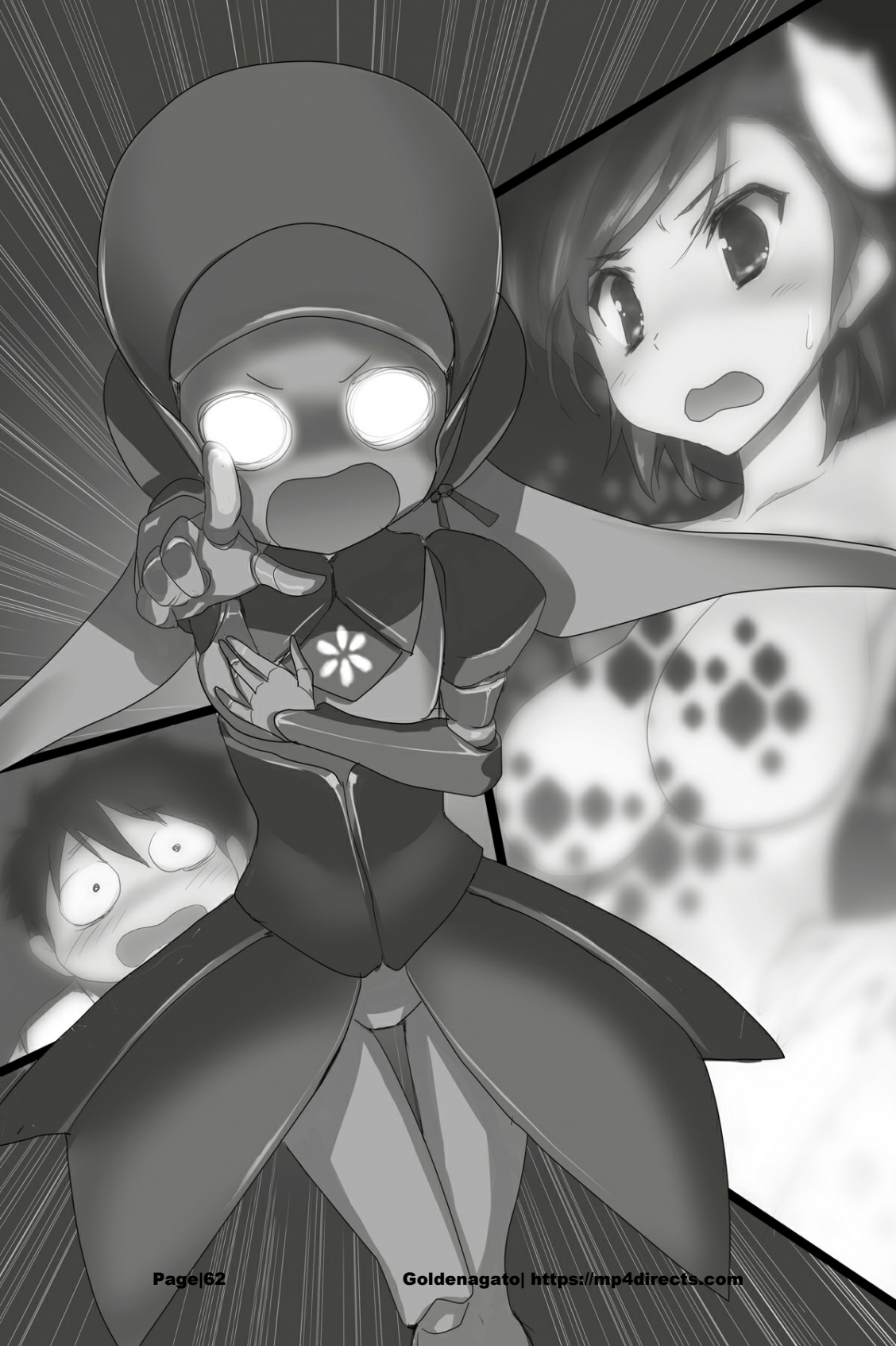
"And I think you'd actually read that avatar name as *Chocolate Puppeteer* instead of *Chocolat Puppeter*!"

"Y-you just be quiet! *Chocolat* is cuter, and *Puppeter* is easier to say. Do you have some kind of problem with that?!" Chocolat threw her arms up in the air, and Haruyuki suddenly returned to the point at hand.

He focused once more on Chocolat's mostly flat chest armor, but he couldn't find anything that looked like an ISS kit. And her behavior didn't seem to indicate she was experiencing mental interference, either. But then...

"I—I don't have any problems with that, but...Choco, so then, why did you suddenly challenge me first thing in the morning? I mean, you guys have school today, too, right?"

"That..." Chocolat started to say something but then snapped her mouth shut firmly before jabbing a finger at Haruyuki once more. "I will tell you that when I win!"



“Huh? We’re dueling?”

“Of course! I won’t hold back, either!” She pulled her index finger in to make a fist and lowered her center of gravity. The pumps on her small feet sank deeply into the cushioning of the ground. In the next instant, she charged with ferocious speed.

“Whoa!” Haruyuki hurriedly crossed his arms to take on a defensive posture. But Chocolat’s small fist slipped through his guard and landed a clean hit on his lower jaw.

Clang!! The sound of the impact echoing in the core of his brain, Haruyuki reeled backward. He desperately tried to keep his balance, but Chocolat was already at the cushions on the floor once again.

The next attack was a flying knee kick with more power than the first hit. Utterly unable to respond, Haruyuki was knocked flying by a solid hit to the solar plexus. He landed on the ground on his back, and the elasticity of the cushioning bounced him upward quite energetically.

While he was in the air, Chocolat quickly closed the distance between them and dropped onto him with a heel kick. This time, he managed to defend, but even so, he was knocked into the ground again. When he bounced back up like a roly-poly toy, Chocolat’s left roundhouse kick closed in on him with unerring aim.

“Hiyah!!” she cried sharply as the kick hit Haruyuki hard in the head. He saw stars as he flew to one side.

He’d taken four hits in a row, but as long as he didn’t crash into the ground, he’d be able to recover his balance. He’d get some distance from her and then his chance for a counter—

Sproing.

Haruyuki sank into the quilting covering the Chuo Line elevated bridge that had appeared out of nowhere. There was no collision damage, but whether he wanted to go flying again or not, he was forcefully repelled by the pressure of the cushioning.

“Hiyaaaah!!” Chocolat launched a right straight with impeccable timing.

His health gauge was already down nearly 30 percent. If he didn’t interrupt the succession of attacks somewhere, he might not be able to make a comeback at all.

Chocolat was smaller and lighter than Silver Crow, so why was he being thrown around like this? It was because she was using the reaction of the

ground to boost the power and speed of her kicks and punches, and at the same time kept knocking Haruyuki off-balance, constantly adding velocity. In other words, she was well versed in the ways of fighting in this Buffer stage.

His special-attack gauge was already pretty full, but before he could spread the wings on his back and escape into the sky, Chocolat's thrust reached him. He didn't have time to guard with his arms or counterattack with his special attack, Head Butt.

Staring hard at the dark-brown fist closing in on him, he desperately groped for a way to turn this around. An effective way of stopping a rush was a quick punch to a weak point. He'd only fought with Chocolat once before, and that had been as an ally, so her weak points—

In a flash, a certain memory sprang up in the back of his mind.

Unconsciously, he opened his mouth as wide as it would go. The bottom of his visor slid open, and his avatar's exposed mouth awaited Chocolat's fist. If it had been the fist of a large avatar like Cyan Pile, this strategy would have ended in his avatar's naked face taking a hard blow and his health gauge dropping quite a bit.

But Chocolat's fist, small enough to slip through his cross guard, fit perfectly in Haruyuki's open mouth. And he felt essentially no impact at all because Chocolat started to pull her fist back at the last second. It was a movement accompanied by a shrill cry echoing throughout the stage.

“Eeeaaaaah?!”

Her chain of hits at an end, Chocolat tried to pull her fist back, pushing on Haruyuki's face with her other hand, but if he let her pull away now, she'd just start attacking him again. In a trance, Haruyuki grabbed the arm sprouting from his mouth and twisted Chocolat's body to pull her down to the ground.

“Wh-wh-what are you doing?! This is a violation of the rules in the middle of the duel!!”

“Ooo heh ooo oon oh aah!”

You said you wouldn't hold back was his intended retort, but Chocolat's fist was jammed into his mouth, so all that came out was unintelligible noise. There was also a particular sweetness that filled his mouth. To be honest, it was rather tasty.

“Gah! D-don't lick meeeee!!” Chocolat's cries were nearly drowned out

by the protests from the Gallery.

“Hey! What’re you doing to Chocolat?!” yelled Mint Mitten.

“I’m jealous—I mean, no fair!” shouted Plum Flipper.

“That’s pervy, Croooow!” yelped Lime Bell.

Telling himself that it was definitely *not* pervy and that it was in fact an intelligent strategy, Haruyuki chewed even harder.

“Nngh! ...I—I won’t forgive this...!” Chocolat squirmed as she pinned Haruyuki down, thrusting her unharmed left hand out and shouting, “Cocoa Fountain!!”

Pink light poured from her fingertips to make a pool of chocolate bubble up from the ground nearby.

“And now...Puppet Make!”

A simple-shaped avatar slithered up from the pool, all narrow body and rounded head, Chocolat Puppeter’s automatic fighting doll.

“Get that lick-happy weirdo, Chocopet!”

At Chocolat’s command, the Chocolate Puppet aka Chocopet started running, and Haruyuki was forced to release its master’s hand. He left the puppet master on the ground panting for the time being and stood up to take care of the scion.

He had learned in his earlier battle with Chocolat that simple physical attacks didn’t work on the chocolate dolls. Their weak point was heat or a freezing blow or...being eaten.

Feeling relieved that there were only a few people in the Gallery, Haruyuki guarded against a Chocopet punch with one arm. The blow was ferocious enough that it was hard to believe it came from a doll, but unlike Chocolat, the mini ball of chocolate didn’t use the elasticity of the cushions, so he was able to get through it, more or less. Once the Chocopet stopped moving, he grabbed onto its arm, his mouth still exposed.

“*Hom!*” He bit down on the entire fist. It wasn’t quite as good as its master’s armor, but it was still pretty tasty. And surprisingly, his special-attack gauge was replenished, albeit very slightly.

“.....”

The mouthless Chocopet retreated silently bit by bit.

“.....”

Equally silent, Haruyuki advanced inch by inch.

Abruptly, the Chocopet turned around and started to run toward the

chocolate pond. It was half its original size, but there was still plenty of dark-brown liquid left.

“Stop!” Haruyuki cried, instinctively guessing the pond would heal the Chocopet’s injuries, and pushed off the cushions of the ground with everything he had. The unexpectedly strong reaction gave acceleration to his dash, but he had too much force behind him now, so rather than catch up with the Chocopet, he ended up flying into the pond of chocolate with it.

Plrp. A viscous sensation enveloped his entire body. The liquid chocolate poured into his mouth, so he hurriedly closed his visor and then kicked and flailed until he was finally able to stand up.

In the center of his field of view, dyed a light brown, was the Chocopet in an attack posture, her hand healed just as he’d expected. *Fine, I can chow down forever here!* Haruyuki readied himself, but there was something strange about his enemy. It had taken an attack posture, but it appeared to be frozen like that for some reason.

“.....?”

Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, and the Chocopet dropped its head in the same direction.

The reason it did not attack became clear three seconds later. Having recovered from Haruyuki’s licking attack, Chocolat dashed over at top speed, and no sooner had she put on the brakes than she was shouting, “Wh-what is going on here?! Which one is my Chocopet?!”

Haruyuki reflexively looked down at himself. Silver Crow’s shining silver armor had turned a dark brown, coated in chocolate from head to toe. And with his round head and slender body, he looked very much like a Chocopet. Apparently, it wasn’t just Chocolat; the Chocopet running on autopilot also seemed like it was not picking up Crow as a target for attack since he looked just like it.

“N-no fair! Show yourself immediately!”

How am I supposed to do that?! he very nearly shouted back before realizing something with a gasp. It was indeed a little unfair, but this was his chance, wasn’t it? If he could get just a little closer, he could cinch Silver Crow’s victory.

He slowly turned, conscious of moving like a Chocopet. He stepped out of the chocolate pond and moved briskly toward his opponent.

“Huh? Stop right there, Chocopet!”

The instant he was given the order, he froze in place.

“...So then, that one is Silver Crow...?” Chocolat turned her gaze toward the real Chocopet still in the pond.

“It was this one!” he shouted as he flew at her. He grabbed hold of the slender avatar’s hands and deployed the wings on his back. Using the elasticity of the ground, he took off.

“N-no faaaaaaaair!” Chocolat howled, and together they ascended to an altitude of two hundred meters in an instant. Half the duel time hadn’t yet passed, but thinking about what would have to *come next*, he needed to put an end to this now.

“L-let go! You!”

“You don’t have to ask twice!” He snapped his hands open. Chocolat blinked in midair before plummeting downward.

“Aaaaaaaah...” She receded into the distance, her cry fading out, and Haruyuki chased after her in a sharp descent.

This “bring ’em up and drop ’em down” strategy was Silver Crow’s most simple and effective plan for winning. The descent to the ground seriously damaged most duel avatars. But in this Buffer stage, he probably wouldn’t be able to win just by dropping her.

Just as he’d expected, when Chocolat plunged into the ground, she sank deeper and deeper into the cushions before being expelled with extreme force.

“...aaaaaaaah!”

The scream that had faded from earshot trickled back in. He brought his right hand down on the head of the rapidly approaching Chocolat in a chop. *Pkaan!* He heard the dry sound of collision, and the chocolate hat was ripped right in two.

The impact was amplified by the synergistic effect of the rapid descent and sudden ascent, and Chocolat’s health gauge immediately dropped by half. He passed the puppet master as she descended once again to land a minute before her and catch the falling Chocolat in both arms.

“Um, how about we call it a draw here?” he hurried to propose while his opponent was still dazed. “You must have come to Suginami because you wanted to talk, right?”

“.....”

After a full five seconds or more of silence, Chocolat Puppeteer replied, her

head hanging, bereft of its trademark hat, “Well, I suppose I could do that for you.”

The duel ended, and having returned to the real world, Haruyuki hurried to disconnect his Neurolinker from the global net. As a general rule, he welcomed challengers other than Ash Roller, but having two battles in a row first thing in the morning was sure to make him sleepy in the middle of class.

The moment he let out a sigh of relief, a noticeably exasperated voice came to him from one side. “Haru, the way you fought there...”

“I’m not listening! I can’t hear yooouuu!” Haruyuki tried to plug his ears, but Chiyuri caught hold of his right hand and grinned.

“Good thing we were the only ones in the Gallery, huh? If anyone else had seen that, you’d have yourself a serious nickname right about now.”

“Sh-shut up. Kuroyukihime and Master both say that the duel is about playing it by ear, to use whatever there is you can use.”

“Still, I don’t know about licking your opponent in the middle of a duel, thooooough!”

“I’m sorry, Chiyuri. Please don’t tell Kuroyukihime and the others.”

“My lips might be sealed by a gelato from Enjiiiiya~.”

They chatted as they walked under the elevated bridge before getting serious again.

“But still...,” Haruyuki muttered.

Chiyuri nodded. “That was a surprise, huh?”

After accepting the draw, Chocolat Puppeter used the rest of the time to tell them the reason she had suddenly challenged him. And that reason was simply baffling, so Haruyuki hadn’t been able to say anything other than “I’ll tell our master.”

He couldn’t even imagine how Kuroyukihime would react, though. He needed to report to her as soon as possible and seek her instructions.

“All right!” Chiyuri suddenly whisper-hissed, likely thinking the same thing. “Haru, let’s run to school!”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

“If we get there early, we can talk to Kuroyukihime.”

“Sh-she might be late today...”

“And how would you know that?”

He could only respond with “I—I just do.” He definitely couldn’t tell her that Kuroyukihime had left the Arita house a mere twenty minutes earlier.

“W-we can tell her at lunch. I mean, you have practice this morning, right, Chiyu?”

“Yeaah, buuuut. I wanna tell her right away and surprise her, too!”

“Yeah, I guess she’s gonna be surprised, too, huh? Anyway, if we do it at lunch, Master and the others might be able to come to the meeting, too, via remote access.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s probably better, huh?” Chiyuri assented, and he was secretly relieved. If he ran in this humid heat, he might very well collapse of dehydration before he reached the school.

But his childhood friend apparently didn’t miss Haruyuki’s relief, and she said with a grin, “So instead of jogging, let’s play vocabulary games until we get to school.”

“H-huh…”

“The words we memorize here might be on the test the day after tomorrow! C’mon! Here we go!” Chiyuri ran her hand through the air, and a request for an ad hoc connection appeared in his field of view. He had no sooner accepted it than the application launched and the word CRUNCH was displayed, while a five-second countdown began.

“Chew up!” he shouted, and the CORRECT bell sounded, but Chiyuri erupted in laughter. *Why?* He glanced to his side before realizing she was probably remembering Haruyuki crunching away on the Chocopet’s hand during the duel. “C-c’mon, be serious!”

“S-sorry, sorry. Um…” Chiyuri dropped her eyes to her own vocabulary app, and no sooner had her eyes lit upon the LICK displayed there than she was clutching her stomach and exploding with laughter once more.

5

The chime signaling the end of fourth period rang, and the teacher was barely out the door at the front of the classroom before Haruyuki was standing up and turning toward Takumu Mayuzumi. He quickly looked around to check that no one was listening before starting to speak in a low voice.

“Taku, about that thing I mailed you.”

“The emergency meeting.” Takumu nodded, his glasses glinting in the light. “Sounds like something big happened, huh?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure you’ll be shocked, too, Taku.”

“Can’t wait.” Smiling, Takumu stood up, his lunch in hand. “Fifteen minutes until the meeting starts. The cafeteria, right, Haru? I’ll come and eat with you there.”

“Yeah? Thanks.” He glanced over at Chiyuri. His other childhood friend appeared to be eating her lunch with a group in class she was chummy with, but she met his eyes as if to say she was all right, so he nodded lightly in return. The meeting would take place in a duel stage with Kuroyukihime as the starter and Haruyuki as the receiver, so it would be at most 1.8 seconds long. For that length of time, even if she was in the middle of eating with someone, no one would suspect anything as long as she prepared for it mentally.

“Okay, let’s go.” He slapped Takumu on the back and moved to leave the classroom.

“Arita, Mayuzumi, got a sec?” A voice called from behind, and Haruyuki jumped before turning around.

Standing there was a girl with her long hair tied in a side ponytail to her right, her forehead half exposed. Mayu Ikuzawa, the class representative for class C.

After exchanging a glance with Takumu, given that she’d said his name first, Haruyuki replied ever so timidly, “S-sure. What is it?”

“I wanted to speak with you. Would you mind letting me join you for

lunch?”

“H-haa...,” he replied unintelligibly, his mind racing at maximum speed. He’d experienced this kind of situation once or twice when he was in elementary school. When he was with Takumu in the plaza at the entrance to their condo building, several girls would approach them and glare at Haruyuki like he was in the way while telling Takumu they needed to talk to him. “Um, Ikuzawa, if you needed Taku for something, I can just leave you two.”

He made the suggestion in an attempt to be thoughtful, but Ikuzawa blinked, uncomprehending, before shaking her head fiercely. “N-no, c’mon, that’s not why I’m here.”

“Huh? It isn’t?”

“No!”

“Anyway,” Takumu interjected, smiling wryly. “How about we continue this in the cafeteria? If we don’t hurry up, we’ll run out of time to eat.”

And time to prep for the meeting. Twelve minutes until Kuroyukihime challenged Haruyuki. Taking travel time into account, they were already cutting it pretty close. “Got it. Okay, let’s go.”

Ikuzawa agreed with an “Okay.” Looking closely, he saw that she was holding a small pouch. Her lunch and a drink were apparently inside.

From her seat a little ways off, Chiyuri was watching them with a doubtful look, so Haruyuki threw a glance her way to say “I’ll work it out somehow!” and then followed Takumu and Mayu out of the classroom.

The Umesato student cafeteria was fairly large for a junior high. And farther in, by the windows, there was even a lounge that could be mistaken for a stylish café. The lounge was separated by a trellis covered in decorative plants, and it was an unwritten rule that only eighth and ninth graders could use it. So Haruyuki and his group could indeed have used it, but he figured they should probably use the long cafeteria tables. Because just maybe, at the round table in the very back of the lounge...

“Oh, lucky!” Ikuzawa said happily. “We’re here late, but there’s still a table left in the lounge! I’ll go get the table; you two buy lunch!” She bounded a step forward before trotting off and disappearing into the lounge.

“Ikuzawa, so she’s that kind of person, huh?” Haruyuki murmured. “She’s the class rep, though, so I figured she’d be a little more serious...”

Takumu laughed a little as he said, “I’ve heard that a certain Animal Care

Club president is also very serious and formal. Okay, we better hurry, we don't have much time. I just want a drink. What about you, Haru?"

"...I'm apparently very serious, so curry."

"Okay, I'll go on ahead of you to the lounge. Five minutes left."

"No probs!" He parted with Takumu, and as he got in line at the counter, he opened the menu window, which was just as the name implied, and selected the weekly curry that was always his Monday choice. Four hundred twenty yen was subtracted from the e-money charged to his Neurolinker.

This week's curry was a summer vegetable with batterless, deep-fried okra and eggplant, topped with zucchini. *Two more weeks until summer vacation, huh? And then we'll all go on a trip to Yamagata. I gotta call Grampa. But we still have finals before that...* His mind wandering, Haruyuki took the tray with piping-hot curry on it from the counter, and after pouring himself a glass of water, hurried to chase after Takumu.

When he slipped under the arch that served as the lounge's entrance, he stopped in his tracks. Seated at the round table by the window in the very back was a girl turning the page of a hardcover book. The white light coming through the window caught her long black hair, giving her a dreamlike silhouette. It was almost like he'd gone back to that day eight months earlier...

As he stood there absently, the girl—Kuroyukihime—abruptly lifted her face and looked at Haruyuki. A gentle smile briefly crossed her lips before she shrugged as if to say "Almost time."

Haruyuki hurriedly bowed to her and student council secretary Megumi Wakamiya next to her before moving over to where Takumu and Ikuzawa had gotten a table on the right side of the lounge. He set his tray down on the table and took the empty seat. Neither of his lunch companions had taken the lids off their lunch boxes.

"Sorry I took so long," he said.

"No, you're fine." The class representative shook her head with a serious expression. "I'm sorry for making you rush."

"So what do you want to talk about?" Haruyuki asked, impatient.

"We don't have a lot of time," Takumu noted, from his right. "Let's eat and chat."

Haruyuki glanced at the lower right of his field of view and saw there were just thirty seconds left until the time Kuroyukihime had specified. It

wasn't like his curry would get cold even if he waited until the end of the meeting, but with the steaming plate before his eyes, it was too sad to leave it for thirty minutes of subjective time. "R-right. Okay, let's eat."

Almost before the other two had finished nodding, he was taking a spoonful of the summer vegetable curry. He stuffed it in his mouth and chewed and swallowed, enjoying the spicy heat and the texture of the zucchini, and let out a sigh.

And then, for the second time that day, the sound of acceleration caressed the nerves of Haruyuki's auditory system.

"Um, so this time it's... a Primeval Forest stage?" The aftertaste of curry in his mouth rapidly disappearing, Haruyuki whirled his head around to check out his surroundings.

The Umesato school building had transformed into a superlarge, ancient tree. The cafeteria and the lounge were now massive cavities, and fluffy moss grew at his feet. Instead of tables, large mushrooms with caps that were a meter in diameter dotted the area. And at one of the mushrooms sat a jet-black duel avatar.

"Oh, Kuroyukihime!" Waving his right hand, Haruyuki started to weave through the mushrooms and run over to her.

Shwp!

A pale light cut in front of him, so he swallowed a yelp as he put on the emergency brakes. Tiny sparks flew off his helmet, and his health gauge decreased by a mere dot. "Wh-whoa?!"

At the same time as Haruyuki leapt back, several enormous mushrooms fell apart from the root, in pieces. His duel opponent, Black Lotus, had whirled the outstretched sword of her right arm several times with incredible speed to cut down the surrounding mushrooms. All that was left was an empty clearing about five meters across.

"Mm. What's the matter, Haruyuki? I was just making a meeting space." Her voice was chilly for some reason. She couldn't still be mad about the Metatron thing, could she? Or maybe it was the Niko invasion... "Don't just stand there. How about you have a seat? I'm not concerned about anything, you know? You are free to deliberately bring a girl I don't know to the lounge and enjoy lunch with her."

That...! Having understood the reason for the Black King's ill humor, Haruyuki tried desperately to explain. "Y-you've got the wrong idea,

Kuroyukihime! That's Ikuzawa— Oh! She's our class representative, but she came over and said she needed to talk to Taku and me.”

“Oh-ho? And what did she say?”

“Th-the meeting started before she could tell us...”

“Oh? So then, have I interrupted an important conversation?”

“N-no, that's not what I...” Beneath his visor, a virtual cold sweat poured down his face.

“That's probably enough bullying of Corvus, hmm, Lotus?” The voice that echoed through the hall was on the verge of laughter.

He looked to the Legion members who were only watching as they came in through the entrance farthest to the left from Haruyuki's perspective. Leading the group was “Strong Arm” Sky Raker in her wheelchair. To her right, “Shrine Maiden of the Conflagration” Ardor Maiden. To her left, “Aquamatic” Aqua Current. And behind them, Lime Bell and Cyan Pile stood alongside each other.

Rebuked by Fuko, Kuroyukihime stepped over to one of the uninjured mushrooms and crossed her arms. “Well then, I'll leave off there.”

Haruyuki breathed a sigh of relief and sat on the neighboring mushroom when a follow-up comment reached his ears.

“Of course, I'll have you explain every detail later on!”

“O-okay, that's already— Well, I actually have no idea what it's about myself.”

The others, except for Raker, sat down on their own mushrooms, and they were ready to start the meeting.

Or so he thought, but Kuroyukihime, who was supposed to announce the start of the meeting, said with an air of importance, “Now then, Crow. Call the eighth member of our Legion.”

“Oh, r-right,” Haruyuki replied.

Fuko also nodded, but the other four Legion members looked bewildered.

“Wh-when did we get another one?!” Chiyuri cried.

Haruyuki waved her off before focusing his mind. *Go deep into the image*—he gently called to his precious comrade. A few seconds later, the pure-white icon appeared soundlessly.

“Whaaaat?!” Chiyuri and Takumu both shouted the instant they saw it.

When Haruyuki introduced the icon by saying “This is the Archangel Metatron,” Utai and Akira also joined in the shocked outcry.

Haruyuki explained the situation with Metatron's recovery and status, and then there was an extremely arrogant greeting from the Enemy herself, by which time, they were down to twenty-five minutes left in the duel.

"It is very surprising, but when I think that it was C's doing, I can accept it somehow," Utai commented.

Chiyuri shook her head in exasperation. "Well, Haru's always been known to bring weird strays home..."

"Lime Bell," the icon on Haruyuki's left shoulder immediately snapped. "Surely you do not mean to suggest that I am a weird stray, do you?"

"Huh? Oh! Ha-ha-ha, nah, it's, uh..." Muttering and fumbling her way out of the question, Chiyuri cleared her throat loudly. "Anyway! The reason we asked you for this meeting today was because of a slightly—no, a fairly surprising story!"

"Oh-ho. Well then, shall we have you report, Chiyuri?"

"Okay!" Springing to her feet, Lime Bell looked at Haruyuki.

"*Silver Crow.*" The voice of Metatron echoed in his mind. "*What is this designation those ones have been using?*"

"*Huh? Oh, that? That's the name I use in the real world— Um, I guess it's even lower than the Low Level, like the world outside.*"

"*Hmm. So the Lowest Level, then.*"

"*...W-well, I guess so...*"

"*And there you are called Haru?*"

"*Yeah. You can call me that, too, if you want...*"

"*...I shall take it into consideration.*"

While they were having this exchange, Lime Bell came forward into the center of the meeting area and looked around at everyone before beginning. "Um, you all remember the Legion Petit Paquet we told you about before in Setagaya Two, right?"

Everyone except Haruyuki bobbed their heads up and down.

"So this morning, the master of that Legion, Choco—er, Chocolat Puppeteer, suddenly challenged Haru, and I was in the Gallery. At first, she was really letting him have it, and I was thinking, *Well, I guess he's gonna lose—*"

"Sh-sh-she did not let me have it! It was my first time in a Buffer stage, so I didn't know how to fight there."

"C'mon! Be quiet, Haru! But then from the middle, Haru was licking and

munching, and it ended up in a draw.”

“Licking?” asked Fuko.

“Munching?” asked Akira.

“So this is the main part now.” Fortunately, Chiyuri continued without explaining in detail. “Choco and the other members of Petit Paquet were there, too, Plum Flipper and Mint Mitten. So like, the three of them...” She paused for a moment before getting to the point in a loud voice. “They said they want us to let them into Nega Nebulus!”

Silence.

In the now-quiet meeting venue, Haruyuki remembered that moment. To be more precise, Chocolat had said, “We would be willing to do you the honor of adding our ranks to your Legion.” But Mint pushed Chocolat’s head down right away as she revised the statement to “What I meant to say is... We want you to let us in!” And then Plum began to explain the reason for the sudden request.

Plum Flipper, who was apparently the brains of Petit Paquet—in other words, in the Takumu position—had spoken in a rather laid-back tone, “Sooo, we heard this ruumor. That Nega Nebulus destroyed the ISS kit main body. So the three of us talked it over and made a decision. As a thank-you for saving us and Coolu that time, we could join you and fight together.”

What pulled Haruyuki out of his recollections was Kuroyukihime groaning next to him. “Mmmm. It’s a bit too soon, however. I appreciate the request, but do they know what kind of situation our Legion is in?”

“They said they talked that over quite carefully, too, before making the request,” Haruyuki replied. “If they cooperate with Nega Nebulus, the kings of the other Legions will give them the side-eye. So then, rather than helping as Petit Paquet from the outside, it’d be better to join Nega Nebulus. Then they’d be able to help out wherever the need is greatest. That’s what Chocolat and the others said.”

“...They thought that far ahead,” Kuroyukihime murmured.

Fuko picked up where she left off. “Where the need is greatest— So then, they mean...”

“The Territories,” Akira finished.

Everyone nodded firmly. It was no easy feat to defend all three of Suginami’s areas in the territory battles held each week on Saturday evening. Fortunately, up to that point, they hadn’t surrendered a territory, but lacking

sufficient members to defend thoroughly, they'd come dangerously close to it several times.

But if the three members of Petit Paquet joined them, Nega Nebulus would have a total of ten members, so they'd have one person extra if they placed teams of the minimum of three people in each of their three areas. In terms of numbers, that meant they would be able to fight equally in all areas.

“What shall we do, Sacchi?” Utai asked.

Kuroyukihime remained silent for a brief moment before saying slowly, “It’s a very serious thing to disband a Legion that’s already been formed.”

“True.” Fuko nodded. “Chocolat and her group, they managed to clear the Legion Master quest with just three people, even when it normally requires at least four, right? That’s not something you can do unless you’ve built up an incredibly strong bond.”

“Mmm. It’s not as if she would lose her Legion Master qualification, though, so it would be possible to re-form at some point. But...”

Kuroyukihime was unusually hesitant. “There are indeed things that they would lose by disbanding for the time being. I’m not sure if it’s really all right for us to accept their request simply because it would make the Territories easier.”

“Kuroyukihime!” Chiyuri sprang up in front of her.

“Wh-what is it, Chiyuri?”

“You’re overlooking a question that most people would ask straightaway! Can we trust them?” Chiyuri asked with laughter in her voice.

Kuroyukihime appeared caught off guard. She blinked her eye lenses several times before clearing her throat. “Th-that is because I trust you and Haruyuki. If you believe in them, then I will not doubt them, either.”

“Then c’mon, go all-in!” Chiyuri spread her arms wide. “Of course, Chocolat and the others are sad about disbanding Petit Paquet. But more than that, they want to offer their strength to you, Kuroyukihime—to the Black King, Black Lotus, someone they’ve never met. So then maybe you could at least meet them and hear what they have to say?”

“...I’m starting to think that *you* are much more qualified to be Legion Master, Chiyuri,” Kuroyukihime said with a wry smile, nodding slowly. “You’re right. Perhaps I should meet them and hear about their decision before considering whether to accept their application.”

Even with the push from Chiyuri, the Black King’s usual decisiveness did

not return. Maybe the memory of having terminated a Legion once before—the former Nega Nebulus—still weighed heavily on her heart. *If that was why she was hesitating to expand the Legion, then they might not be able to pull that boulder away with words alone*, Haruyuki thought.

And then, Metatron's 3-D icon jumped gently from his shoulder, flapping its wings to move to the space directly in front of Kuroyukihime. There, it made the small angel halo flash brightly. "How pathetic. How long does one who would call herself king intend to hang her head?"

"Wh-what?!" Kuroyukihime shouted, and the other six in the Legion snapped to attention.

"A king is one who leads one or two hundred soldiers easily!" Metatron continued to scold the Black King. "So then, why do you struggle with a mere three?! It is precisely because I believe your words about crushing the Acceleration Research Society that as one pillar of the Four Divines, I offered my strength—"

"Th-th-that's enough!" Haruyuki leapt forward and caught the floating icon in his hands, landing in a formal kneeling posture on the former mushroom table. As he hid Metatron, raging and shouting "Insolence!" behind his back, he explained to Kuroyukihime, "S-so like, Metatron's kinda the boss of all the Enem—I mean, Beings in the Unlimited Neutral Field, so she can sound a bit imperious someti—"

"Not imperious! I *am* imperial!"

"Aah, come on! Please be quiet for a sec!"

"Then first release your hands. How many times must I tell you not to touch me without permission, Silver Crow?!"

"Pfft...ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha..."

He realized the laughter was Kuroyukihime's and lifted his head.

The Black King, Black Lotus, continued to laugh, the slender body of her avatar shaking, and then eventually said in a carefree voice, "Honestly, I really can't beat you, Haruyuki. Even the Archangel Metatron, who made us shiver from head to toe, is already a friend to you."

"Huh? Uh, I don't know about that."

"Who would you call his friend?! I am Crow's master!"

"Heh-heh." Kuroyukihime wiped at the corners of her eyes. "I can't sit around being afraid, either, hmm? These hands might be nothing more than swords, but unless I push forward without fear of hurting others or being hurt

myself, the path will not open up. So then..."

Nodding firmly, she took a few steps forward.

"Chiyuri, thank you for the message. I have indeed received the application from Chocolat and her comrades. I would like to set up a meeting venue soon and confirm their ultimate intentions."

"Okay. Then I'll tell them that!" Nodding happily, Chiyuri stepped back to her own mushroom table.

Haruyuki returned the now-calm Metatron to his shoulder and waited for Kuroyukihime to speak.

"I haven't formally explained this before now..." With this as a preface, the Black King started speaking slowly, as though selecting her words carefully. "The name of our Legion, Nega Nebulus, was chosen with the image of a dark nebula in mind, like the Horsehead Nebula in Orion or the Coalsack Nebula in the Crux constellation. The correct word is actually *dark nebula*, apparently, but that doesn't have a defined enough color associated with it. That said, however, at the time, I was still in elementary school, and it's a fact that I held the ambition to paint over the brilliant primary colors in the galaxy of the Accelerated World with darkness."

"Oh? And what about now, Sacchi?" Fuko asked, all smiles.

"Well, it's not as though I've abandoned all ambition." Kuroyukihime shrugged lightly. "Still, in the beginning, the meaning of the name had a more negative connotation for me. But after the first Nega Nebulus was destroyed because of my recklessness...I learned that a nebula wasn't simply a black spot in space, but rather a place where matter came together to someday give birth to a new star—a nebula is a so-called cradle of stars. I felt this was deeply ironic when I lost my Legion comrades and all our territory and locked myself away on the local net, but that was the truth. Because in the reborn Nega Nebulus, new comrades come to join one after another and give me the strength to fight on."

She looked at each of them in turn before announcing in a resolute voice, "I'd like to take this opportunity to confirm our Legion action policy once again." The Black King thrust the sword of her right arm out with a cool *shakeen*.

"We in Nega Nebulus will confront the Acceleration Research Society and the front that is the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe! Someday, when the time is right, we will attack and take down Minato Ward Area Three in

the territory battles, the location of the Eternal Girls' Academy, Oscillatory headquarters! In that instant, they will lose the right to refuse challengers, and the names of Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw will appear on the matching list. We'll have Blue Knight confirm that, and then we'll launch the joint attack by the six Legions. Before we reach that point, we will no doubt face a series of battles fiercer than anything we've yet encountered. But I know that *we* can overcome them. That is all!"

Unable to contain himself at these rousing words, Haruyuki jumped down to the ground and shouted, "I-I'm gonna give it all I've got! No, we'll all give it everything we've got!"

"Yeah!" Chiyuri and Fuko cried out in response. And although Metatron didn't say anything, the ring above her head flashed brightly.

In the midst of all this, Takumu, who seemed to have been thinking about something the whole time, asked calmly, "Master, may I?"

"Of course, Takumu."

Cyan Pile stood up from his mushroom and stepped forward into the center of the meeting space. "I also have no objections to the action policy Master just announced. Because the road to eliminating the Acceleration Research Society cannot be passed without a general attack on the headquarters. But...I will take the opportunity to say this in my role here. I think there are two major issues that we must overcome in order to attack Minato Three in the Territories."

"Mm. Go on."

"All right. The first is...the fact that any Legion that is already in possession of a domain may only attack areas adjacent to that domain in the Territories. It goes without saying that our domain here in Suginami and the Society's headquarters in Minato Three are quite far apart. Nega Nebulus cannot currently issue a declaration of war on Oscillatory Universe territory."

"Oh..." Haruyuki had completely forgotten about this basic rule. The other members had apparently long ago realized this, however, and only waited silently for Takumu to continue.

"And the second is what we are going to do about defending Suginami area."

Haruyuki nearly cried out again but somehow managed to contain himself this time. It was exactly as Takumu said. To launch a general offensive against Minato area, all members of the Legion would have to move to

Minato Ward in the real world on Saturday night when the Territories were held, and there would be no one left to guard Suginami area that week.

“It’s true, those are two enormous issues.” Kuroyukihime nodded slowly. “But, Takumu, you of all people must have realized the solutions, yes?”

“Yes.” He lowered his face mask slightly. “There is just one method to resolve both issues at once. And that is to abandon Suginami area. If we lose all our territory, then we will be free to attack any area, and there will be no need to split our battle power on defense...But...”

Here, he lifted his face and asserted in a bold tone, “But I’m opposed to this method! Suginami area is where you and Haru declared war against the six major Legions that day eight months ago. We haven’t had territory taken once since then; we’ve managed to protect it together. I think the reason Raker, Maiden, and Current came back to the Legion was because we have continued to fly the black flag in Suginami. Even for the sake of a great cause like defeating the Society, if we abandon our territory without fighting, even if it’s only for one week, I just know we’ll lose something crucial. This place, here in Suginami, is *our* place, Master!”

His passionate will turned to flames in his voice and echoed through the large hall at length.

Haruyuki realized how much Takumu actually cared about Nega Nebulus and Kuroyukihime, even though he was always so rational and practical, and he felt something stop in his throat. Chiyuri, Fuko, Utai, and Akira all seemed to feel the same; each nodded deeply and purposefully.

The one who broke the intense silence was the pure-white 3-D icon sitting on Haruyuki’s left shoulder. “That blue one speaks well.”

The arrogance lingered, but this was still the greatest compliment from Metatron. The most powerful Legend-class Enemy flapped her small wings as she continued.

“If this Suginami or what have you is your territory, then to abandon it for whatever reason is a shameful act. If you require soldiers to protect it, then you must simply acquire them. And if you cannot attack a territory unless it is adjacent to yours, then you simply overthrow the intervening territories and *make* yours adjacent.”

Makes sense, Haruyuki thought before crying out in his heart, *No, no, no!*

Separating Suginami and Minato areas was the intimidating Shibuya area, the territory where the Green King reigned, leader of the largest Legion in the

Accelerated World, Great Wall. He couldn't even joke about Nega Nebulus taking it down.

But then, in a surprising turn, Kuroyukihime nodded again. "Mm. A valid argument. A frontal assault."

"Wh-whaaaaaat?! Are you serious, Kuroyukihime?!" Haruyuki shouted in disbelief.

"No need to be *that* surprised." The Black King bobbed her shoulders up lightly. "That GW lot comes and attacks *us* basically every week, don't they?"

"Th-that's true, but the teams that come are always just mid-level members...I don't think they're holding back, but it's not like they're coming in here serious about bringing down Suginami."

"Then perhaps I'll have your team charge in on them?"

"Wh-whaaaaat?!"

"Ha-ha! I'm kidding." Kuroyukihime raised her hand lightly and sat Takumu and Haruyuki down before stepping forward again. "Metatron is indeed correct, but to put that plan into action would take far too much time. I doubt the Society will sit quietly forever, and if possible, I'd like to put an end to them this month. I want to go into summer vacation feeling unburdened. So I'd like to resolve the issue through negotiation."

"Negotiation? Oh! Is that why you and Master wanted to see the Green King?!" Haruyuki finally remembered that Kuroyukihime and Fuko had already set up a meeting with the Green King, Green Grandé, and he cried out in surprise yet again.

"That was half our objective, yes." Fuko nodded, and her wheelchair moved silently forward to bring her next to Kuroyukihime. "Just as you said, Corvus, our meeting with the Green King is scheduled for next Sunday—three in the afternoon of the fourteenth. Everyone who can join us will go together to Shibuya Area Two. We intend to discuss an attack on the Minato area with their executives. I do not believe we'll be able to secure their assistance as easily as that, but that depends on the negotiations, hmm? Does anyone have any questions?"

Fuko let her eyes wander over the assembled group, and Chiyuri's hand shot into the air with incredible force.

"I do! Me! I do! I dooooo!"

"Wh-what, Chiiko?"

“Shibuya Two—that’s, like, around the station, right?! So like, Center-Gai and Dogenzaka and Shibuya Ravine Tower!”

“I—I suppose so.”

“So then, after the meeting— No, that’ll be too late. I propose that, before the meeting, we all go shopping or sightseeing or have tea or something!”

“...Wh-what do you think, Sacchi?”

Submaster and master exchanged a look.

“...W-well, I suppose it’s fine?”

“All right!!” Chiyuri bounded up into the air. “This Sunday, right? I’m so excited!!”

“Look, Chiyu, we’re not going there to play,” Haruyuki warned just in case, since his childhood friend was all smiles. “And don’t you have a track meet next weeke—?”

“My event’s on Saturday! I’ve got the whoooole day off on Sunday!”

“Oh, y-you do...”

“By the way, Haru,” Takumu immediately interjected, “my kendo tournament’s also on Saturday. I know I shouldn’t say this after all that talk before, but Chii and I will have to miss the next Territories again. So we’re counting on you out there.”

“Y-you are...” Haruyuki was a little disappointed—not because defending would be difficult, but simply because he’d be lonely. But he immediately corrected his thinking; he had to root for his friends at all their respective tournaments.

Kuroyukihime nodded coolly and thanked Takumu and Chiyuri. “We’ll make sure to defend all three areas, so you relax and go to your tournaments, Takumu, Chiyuri...But it sounds like the two of you will be quite busy. In a mere two weeks, you have the school festival, final exams, and tournaments all in a row.”

“It really is rough!” Chiyuri nodded her pointed hat. “If you had used your powers as student council vice president to at least move the school festival back a little, it would’ve been way easier to prepare for exams.”

“Yes, tests ten days after the festival also seemed a bit much to me, but unfortunately, it’s the end of my term. I can only stay on the student council until the elections for the next term in September.”

“Oh, right...Soon you won’t be vice president anymore, huh, Kuroyuki?”
Yes, that was true. Haruyuki nodded, too. He had a hard time imagining a

Kuroyukihime who wasn't the student council vice president, but at the very least, in daily life at the junior high, there was nothing that lasted forever. In just nine more months, that day would come. The day Kuroyukihime left Umesato...

His shoulders started to sink in dejection, and Metatron's thoughts, gentler than usual, echoed in the back of his mind.

"You little warriors do all sort of things on the Lowest Level, hmm?"

"...Yeah. In the real world, there's this thing called school, and we all go there every day to study."

"I see. Is it like a training facility?"

"W-well, I guess," he replied, before bracing himself for the "Take me there" that would inevitably follow.

"I am aware that there is no way for me to descend to the Lowest Level."

"....."

"But, Crow, I am able to ask you about it. As your master, I order you, my servant. The next time you visit the Mean Level, tell me about it. What kind of place the Lowest Level is, how you pass the time there each day, everything."

"Huh? E-everything?! Um. I feel like that'll take a super-long time, though..."

"Do you think I am concerned with how much time it might take?"

...Right. This Being is eight thousand years old, he remembered belatedly.

"U-understood. So I'll try to come to the Unlimited Duel Field as soon as I can."

"See that you do not make me wait too long."

"O-okay."

The conversation continued at length, but apparently, it took less time than if they had been speaking out loud, thanks to Metatron's thoughts, and when he lifted his head, Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime were still talking.

"...So that is Chiyuri's lone wish. Shall we go to Shibuya early on Sunday and recharge our batteries for the meeting with GW?"

"All right! Aah, I'm so excited!" Chiyuri was all worked up.

"Chiiko, our main objective is still the negotiations with the Green King," Fuko said, a smile in her voice. *"That said, Shibuya is my neighborhood. Looks like I'll have no choice but to guide you."*

"What? You'll show us around, Sister?!"

"Even just going for fun, you really need a solid plan to get the most out

of your time,” Fuko noted proudly, raising a finger.

Haruyuki didn't miss the whispered conversation between Utai and Akira.

“Fu's really all on board,” Utai murmured.

“When Raker gets like that, no one can stop her,” Akira agreed.

“Did you say something, Uiui?”

“I-I'm really looking forward to this!” Utai yelled.

Everyone laughed brightly at this perfectly timed exchange between long-time teammates ICBM and Testarossa.

As their cheerful laughter died down, Kuroyukihime glanced at the clock to check the remaining time and started to bring the meeting to a close.

“I said this before, but I believe the battle with the White Legion will be harder and more painful than we can imagine. Simply in terms of numbers, currently, there is a gap that would be difficult to overcome. On top of that, the White King, White Cosmos, and her executives, the Seven Dwarves, have unfathomable power in battle. They also still hold the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, in their hands. From the way Cosmos was talking when she appeared on the day of the school festival, it's certain that they intend to use the recovered Armor for some purpose.”

Haruyuki clenched his teeth together tightly. Just thinking about Wolfram Cerberus still in that armor and being used once more by the Society made his whole body shake. They had to free him before that. This was Haruyuki's mission now, after becoming friends with Cerberus through the four duels they'd had.

“But we have come out victorious in any number of fierce battles before. If we join together, I believe there is no wall we cannot smash. We'll fight together...for the things we love and believe in!!” Kuroyukihime thrust the sword of her right hand high up into the air, and the others also threw hands up, shouting with all their might.

The meeting ended, and the instant he returned to the real world, the taste of curry once more registered in Haruyuki's mouth. Still gripping the spoon in his right hand, he remembered that, oh right, he was in the middle of lunch.

Before his eyes was the still-piping-hot summer-vegetable curry. The place was the lounge of the cafeteria on the first floor. In the chair next to him, Takumu was about to dig into the lunch box in front of him. And also in front of him...

“Is the curry *that* good?”

Haruyuki blinked rapidly. Before him, a girl with her hair tied to one side was smiling. The class representative, Mayu Ikuzawa.

That's right. Ikuzawa invited us to the lounge with her. Still, why Taku and me all of a sudden? It's not like we're close. I mean, I've barely spoken to her before.

As these thoughts rolled through his mind, the class representative continued, grinning and holding a small sandwich in one hand.

“It’s just, when you took a bite of the curry, Arita, you closed your eyes and just sat like that. So I was just wondering if it was so great.”

“Oh! Y-yeah. It’s pretty good.”

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll try it next time.”

...Was he supposed to offer her a bite now? But Ikuzawa didn’t have a spoon. Should he go get a fresh spoon from the counter? No, no, if he went that far, it’d actually be weird, right?

As Haruyuki fell once more into the labyrinth of his thoughts, Takumu spoke up. “Haru, let me have a taste. I’ll give you my fried egg and mini croquette.”

“Huh? Sure. But you don’t have a spoon...”

“I do, though.” Takumu grinned and pulled a strangely shaped spoon and fork out of the lid of his lunchbox. They were the good kind, normally thin plates, but when you held them, they detected the electrical current of the body and changed into a proper shape. Instantly, he felt like his thoughts had telepathically reached his friend or something, he realized with a gasp.

“Oh...Ikuzawa, did you want to try it, too?”

The class rep smiled brightly. “You sure? Okay, I’ll give you one of my sandwiches. Ah, but I don’t have a spoon...”

“Here, you can use this.” Takumu immediately held out an emergency spoon.

As Haruyuki marveled at how he’d never in his life best Takumu when it came to responding in these sorts of situations, he pushed his curry plate forward. After thanking them both, Ikuzawa spooned a little curry onto the lid of the recyclable container with her sandwiches and set out a cute square sandwich in an empty space on his plate. When the trade with Takumu was finished, the three dug in.

“Oh! You’re right!” Ikuzawa exclaimed. “It *is* good. It’s spicier than the usual pork curry.”

“It goes really well with the fried eggplant,” Takumu remarked.

“Taku, you really do love eggplant, huh?” Haruyuki grinned as he took a bite of the thin chicken, lettuce, and cheese sandwich Ikuzawa had given him, a little flustered.

And then suddenly sensing eyes on him, Haruyuki turned his face in that direction and met the eyes of Kuroyukihime staring at him, her face half hidden in a hardcover book at a table some distance away.

Reflexively, a stiff smile crept onto his lips, and he had the thought *You’ve got the wrong idea!* But Haruyuki didn’t know himself what the wrong idea was. To start with, he still hadn’t heard what the class representative wanted to talk about. Instinctively understanding that it would be best to get down to business right away, Haruyuki finished the sandwich with his next bite and went to broach the topic. But.

“Arita, how was the sandwich?”

The question came at him first, so he immediately bobbed his head up and down.

“I-it was supergood. The flavoring isn’t the usual mayonnaise, huh?”

“Yeah. It has some herbs cut up and mixed into it,” she told him. “They’re fresh, so they have a nice fragrance, you know?”

“Wow. Do you grow them at home?”

“I do. In planters, though. Sweet basil, Italian parsley, rosemary...”

While they were chatting, he could feel Kuroyukihime’s penetrating gaze growing sharper. *She’s not gonna wait anymore!* Haruyuki understood intuitively and nudged Takumu’s foot with his own.

Fortunately, Takumu had apparently also noticed Kuroyukihime glaring, and he cleared his throat lightly. “So, Ikuzawa, what was it you wanted to talk to us about?”

“Oh! Right. Um. I know this is super-sudden, and you might be surprised, but...” Sitting up perfectly straight in her chair, Ikuzawa looked directly at Takumu and Haruyuki as she announced in a clear voice, “I have a favor to ask. Would you maybe stand as candidates with me in the next student council election?”

Whaaaaaat?! Haruyuki just barely managed to stuff the scream that leapt into his mouth back into his throat. Stewdent cownsil elekshuns? Is that the name of an herb?

He was basically given no time to let his thoughts run off evasively like

this because Takumu got back on his feet after a mere two seconds of shock and calmly confirmed, “So then, Ikuzawa, you want us to be the executive members in your standing for student council president?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” She nodded, looking utterly serious.

The Umesato Junior High student council elections were a little different from other schools. Normally, candidates ran for each of the four executive positions of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, and students also voted for each of those four positions. But at Umesato, four people ran as a set. Specifically, the student running for president collected her three staff members, and then the four campaigned as a team. In other words, Mayu Ikuzawa was saying she wanted Haruyuki and Takumu to be vice president or secretary or treasurer. But.

“I heard that usually people run together with trusted friends, though,” Takumu pointed out, and Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down.

“I don’t really think that’s so great,” Ikuzawa replied, still looking serious. “Student council shouldn’t be about hanging out. You should pick people you can trust as staff first and foremost, right? I heard the current executive board was put together like that, too.”

“But all the more reason to ask, why me?” Haruyuki inquired, baffled, pointing at himself with his hand.

If it had been just Takumu, he could understand that. He’d become the hope of the kendo team not long after he transferred there, and he was thought to be the front-runner for the position of captain. His grades were also always at the top of the class. And with his personality and appearance, even as a friend, Haruyuki could give him a big stamp of approval that there was no better person to run for election with.

And at the same time, Haruyuki Arita, a lump of negative elements, would most certainly erase all these positive things that Takumu Mayuzumi would bring to a campaign.

If she said something like it was because he was Takumu’s friend, Haruyuki was going to bow out in no uncertain terms. But Ikuzawa’s response was entirely unexpected.

“Well, that’s because I think I could run the student council with you, of course.”

“...Wh-why?” Once again, all he could do was ask a question in reply.

“It’s not as mysterious as all that.” This time, she giggled. “You’ve been

doing great work as the president of the Animal Care Club. And officers from special clubs often stand for student council positions. I mean, the current student council president used to be the vice president of the AV club.”

“...R-really...?” Haruyuki belatedly realized that he was indeed the president of something. But he’d been ordered to be president of the Animal Care Club, and it had just been a month. Plus, his only job was to care for the northern white-faced owl Hoo in the animal hutch in the rear courtyard. Could that really be called getting results in his club?

But Ikuzawa continued, as if trying to block his path to retreat. “And at the school festival, you went the extra mile for our class exhibit and upgraded it all by yourself. That really made me think. I realized that even though I’m the Class C representative, somewhere in my mind, I was thinking the class exhibit didn’t really matter as long as we finished in time.”

“I-it wasn’t that much work at all, though. And I mean, I just went and modified it the way I wanted without actually discussing it with everyone...”

“Nah, I really loved that ‘Koenji Thirty Years Ago’ exhibit,” Takumu said with an entirely straight face.

You saying that has the opposite effect! Haruyuki screamed in his heart and tried to kick his best friend again.

But Takumu easily dodged the attack outside his view and continued, “The idea of doing AR mapping on the classroom walls and ceiling was a good one, and the skill to make it happen in just one night is a major deal. And the visitors loved it, too, right?”

“Ah, but compared with the student council’s ‘Time’ exhibit, you know...”

“True, that was amazing, but the exhibit you made, Arita, I like how time flowed at the same speed.” Turning her gaze upward as if remembering, Ikuzawa opened her mouth once again. “Looking at the condo where my family used to live, it made me think about all sorts of things. I’m fourteen right now, so I always thought that being a grown-up was a long way off, but it’s more like I’m *already* fourteen, you know? So like, a small part of the reason I decided to run for office was because of that exhibit.”

“Wh-what?” Haruyuki stared at her.

“Of course, I’m not confident I’ll get elected, but rather than regretting something I didn’t do, I figure it’d be better to lose and be disappointed.”

Haruyuki felt his heart tremble just the tiniest bit. It definitely wasn’t that

he was curious about standing as a candidate, but before he knew it, a question was slipping out of his mouth. “Um, Ikuzawa, why do you want to be student council president? I’m pretty sure you’re doing great work in the calligraphy club?”

“Well...the thing is...” Ikuzawa hung her head for some reason, turning a little red in the face, and neatly folded up the now-empty recyclable container. “So, like, you might laugh at me, but...I really look up to Kuroyukihime in ninth grade, the current student council vice president. I wanted to get even a little closer to her...And not like I want to be her best friend or something. I’m talking about the way she lives. Kuroyukihime’s always so cool, always standing perfectly straight; she has this relaxed grown-up air about her. I really love that.”

That same Kuroyukihime is glaring really hard in this direction ten meters behind you.

Naturally, this thought did not leave his mouth. Instead, he nodded sharply. “You do? I get that...And I think that’s a seriously valid motive for running for office.”

Haruyuki really did think so, but Ikuzawa lowered her face for some reason. He panicked that he had maybe said something wrong, but a few seconds later, she spoke again, her voice quiet.

“So like, I’ll tell you the truth, okay? I explained the reason I asked you to run before, Arita, but that’s not the whole story. The truth is, I also had an ulterior motive.”

“Huh? U-ulterior motive?”

“Yeah. Arita, you’re pretty close with Kuroyukihime, right? So I figured if you ran with me, Kuroyukihime might help out with the campaign stuff... It’s not fair of me to put that on you, though, to be so petty like this.”

“Huh?! ...Um...” At a loss for words, Haruyuki looked to Takumu for assistance. But his childhood friend’s expression told him he was on his own. “Um, Ikuzawa, I think maybe if you don’t want it at least that much, then you can’t win an election. And I think if you talked to her, Kuroyukihime would tell you to use what you can use.”

“...You think?” Ikuzawa lifted her face.

“Of course.” Haruyuki nodded deeply. “Although trusting your comrades is the most important thing. And, Ikuzawa, you just shared your true feelings with me, right? I think if you’re that kind of person, you can be trusted as a

leader.”

“...Thanks, Arita.” Her side ponytail bobbing, Mayu Ikuzawa bowed her head. When she straightened up again after about two seconds, she said in her usual voice, “I’m convinced all over again that the three of us could make a really wonderful executive group. We’ll have to talk about which positions you’ll run for, but I feel safe leaving any of the posts to you two. Thanks... Let’s fight together!”

“Y-yeah!” Haruyuki replied with force before belatedly wondering, *Huh? What just happened?*



6

The sky stayed fixed in the same slightly overcast pattern until after lunch, but by sixth period, the clouds had gradually woken up, and by the time homeroom was over, those clouds were shedding tiny water droplets.

The hourly weather report said it would continue to rain until evening, but for Chiyuri's sake, Haruyuki prayed it would keep drizzling like this for the time being as he headed for work behind the old school building, given that she was likely on the track prepping for her meet. And naturally, rain or shine, he didn't get a day off from his Animal Care Club duties.

When he arrived in front of the animal hutch, he said hello to his small coworker on the other side of the chicken wire. "Sup, Hoo?"

The northern white-faced owl had recently, and finally, started to acknowledge Haruyuki as his caretaker, and he flapped his wings a couple times to return the greeting.

Haruyuki figured he'd better take care of Hoo's health check while he was sitting on his usual perch, so he tapped on the Animal Care Club icon on his virtual desktop. When he pushed the weight measurement button in the management app, the weight sensors built into the perch connected wirelessly so he could record Hoo's weight. Compared with when he'd first moved here, he'd come pretty close to his ideal weight.

"Yup, looking good," Haruyuki commented. "But it's gonna get hotter out. Make sure you don't get heatstroke."

Hoo whirled his head around and complained about his empty stomach. But no one except the "super president," aka Utai Shinomiya, could feed him.

"Shinomiya will be here soon. Just hang on a bit longer."

It wasn't as if the owl could understand Haruyuki, but still, hopes dashed, Hoo lowered his ear feathers and turned away.

What would Metatron say if she saw this guy? His thoughts roaming, Haruyuki opened the door to the hutch and stepped inside, picked up the bathtub and waterproof paper on the ground, and stepped back out. He blasted the dirty paper clean with water and filled the tub—which was

properly called a birdbath—with fresh water before returning to the hutch.

He stepped outside once more, and as he brought out a bamboo broom and dustpan with the deck brush of the toolshed in the courtyard, he heard footsteps coming from the direction of the front gate.

“Prez, ’ssssup!” Animal Care Club member Reina Izeki walked toward him, her wavy long hair billowing behind her. She was in her gym clothes that day. Plus, she had a colorful sports towel around her neck.

“’S-sup. You’re all fired up, huh?” Haruyuki remarked.

“I had gym sixth period, so I came from there.” Reina pursed her lips slightly, as if embarrassed. “I don’t care about getting these dirty, so I can clean, no probs. So like, I’ll do the sweeping up.”

“Th-thanks.”

Is this the same Izeki who was all “Seriously?!” and “I don’t even get this!” from the first day in the Animal Care Club?! Inwardly impressed, Haruyuki handed over the broom and dustpan. He took the deck brush himself and scrubbed the dust away from the hutch’s exterior, finishing it off with a spray of water from the hose. He was mostly finished when he heard the light trot of footsteps.

Before he could look up, a request for an ad hoc connection popped up in his field of view. He had no sooner pushed the OK button than letters began to scroll across the chat window.

UI> I’M SORRY I’M LATE!

Approaching at a brisk pace from the front courtyard was Utai Shinomiya, in the white dress that was her school uniform, reddish-brown backpack, large tote bag hanging from one hand. She’d apparently run over from Matsunogi Academy without an umbrella; her bangs were stuck to her forehead, and her uniform had also absorbed a fair bit of water.

“Super Pres, no need to rush like that!” Reina called out in a hurry. “Hoo’s being a good boy; he’s waiting nicely! And like, you’re soaked!” She dropped her broom to run over to Utai. Pulling the younger girl under the eave of the school building, she took the towel from her neck and wrapped it around Utai’s wet head, rubbing it to collect the moisture with a practiced hand.

Utai looked surprised but let Reina have her way, and once she was freed from the older girl’s hands, her left hand flashed UI> THANK YOU VERY MUCH, IZEKI. SOMEHOW

The last part of the chat sentence was erased.

“Somehow what? Go on and say it,” Reina urged her with a smile, and this time, Utai’s fingers moved hesitantly.

UI> SOMEHOW, YOU ARE LIKE A MOTHER.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Reina laughed brightly—perhaps it was the first time she’d been told that—and wiped down Utai’s back. “I’m sorry for treating you like a kid when you’re the super prez. I got a little sister in kindergarten, y’know? So it’s like I just instinctively wanna dry you off when you’re wet?”

Huh. But isn’t that a pretty big age difference?

It wasn’t as though she could actually read Haruyuki’s mind, but Reina shrugged and turned around as she hung the towel around her neck again. “I mean, she’s my kid sister, but we only have the same dad. She’s got toooons of energy; she always runs around naked when she gets out of the bath... Why am I talking about this? Like, Hoo’s belly’s rumbling. Prez, get ready for feeding time!”



“R-roger!”

At this order from his subordinate, Haruyuki ran over to Utai and took the big bag from her. The three moved inside the animal hutch, and he got ready to help Utai put on the falconry glove that was more like a leather gauntlet. Meanwhile, Reina took the cooler out of the bag and opened the lid.

As soon as Utai raised her hand up high, Hoo flew down from the perch like he'd been waiting impatiently for this very moment and did a circle around the inside of the hutch before settling on Utai's wrist. Utai took a slice of dark-red meat from the container Reina was holding and gave it to Hoo. The white-faced owl caught the meat in his pointed beak and lifted his face up to swallow it with relish.

The feeding was a repeat of essentially every one of the twenty days since they'd taken Hoo in, but even now, when he watched Hoo eating, all kinds of thoughts popped up in his mind. Something about being alive, about being *made* to live, that he couldn't really put into words welled up from the bottom of his heart.

Abruptly, his lunchtime conversation with Mayu Ikuzawa came back to life in his memory: “...*Rather than regretting something I didn't do...it'd be better to lose and be disappointed.*”

He thought Ikuzawa's way of thinking was pretty great, but to be honest, even the thought of running for student council made him hyperventilate. Although he'd gotten carried away at lunch and basically agreed to do it, he had absolutely no interest in campaign speeches or public debates or any of that.

To begin with, he couldn't help but feel that he was not qualified to run given how freaked out he was by the very idea of it. The student council was for people who were passionate about trying to make the lives of all the students better. And no matter how deeply he dug into his heart, he couldn't find an inkling of desire for such a lofty mission. He'd always had more than he could handle with his own self, and that probably wouldn't change going forward...

Utai was about to take the final piece of meat out of the container, but her hand froze in place. Cocking her head to the side, she tapped at her holo keyboard with one hand. UI> ARITA, WOULD YOU LIKE TO GIVE HOO DINNER?

“Wh-whaaat?! But I thought Hoo wouldn't eat unless it came from your

hand, Shinomiya?”

UI> THAT’S HOW IT’S BEEN SO FAR, BUT I HAVE A FEELING THAT IT WILL BE OKAY.

“Y-you have a feeling...?”

UI> MY HUNCHES ARE ALWAYS RIGHT!

Even as they were talking, Hoo was clacking his beak as if to say, “Hurry up and give it to me.” Reina could also see Utai’s chat window and jabbed Haruyuki in the side.

“Go on and try! If you’re not gonna, I’ll do it.”

“G-got it,” he replied in a small voice, and firming his resolve, he took the piece of meat. It was more elastic than he’d expected, and he ever so timidly offered it to Hoo on Utai’s wrist.

The owl first bobbed his head and looked at Haruyuki. Then he looked at the piece of meat, brought his face in closer, pulled it back, and came in again. And then, almost anticlimactically, he grabbed hold of the meat in Haruyuki’s hand and swallowed it.

“Ah...He ate it...”

UI> HOO SAYS IT’S DELICIOUS! Utai smiled as she raised her hand up high, and Hoo lightly lifted off. After taking three turns around the hutch, he returned to his perch. The three looked up at him, smiling; the instant his stomach was full, Hoo immediately switched to nap mode.

On the owl’s left leg, there was a clearly defined scar from when his former owner had violently dug out the individual identification microchip embedded there and then abandoned Hoo. Bleeding to death, he had flown to Matsunogi Academy, where Utai had taken him into her care after finding him lying on the ground.

Since then, Hoo had been fiercely on guard against anyone who wasn’t Utai, but today, for the first time, he had eaten food from Haruyuki’s hand. That said, Haruyuki doubted that Hoo now trusted him implicitly. But it was true that he was gradually changing. Hoo and Haruyuki and probably Reina, too. And maybe even Utai.

Would he be able to change even more? Enough so he could speak his own thoughts in front of a large group of people?

If Metatron were here, she’d probably yell something like “Why do you quail in the face of something so insignificant?!”

Haruyuki looked up at the dozing bird, this thought wandering through his

mind.

“Kay, see ya tomorroooow!” Reina Izeki waved after changing back into her uniform and heading back to the classroom. Now alone, Utai and Haruyuki both exchanged a glance.

Utai stared firmly at Haruyuki, her large eyes shining, a hint of scarlet running through the irises, and inclined her head slightly as if to encourage him. Apparently, she’d seen right through to the troubles in his heart.

“Um. Do you have a minute, Shinomiya?”

UI> OF COURSE.

The response scrolled through the window immediately, so Haruyuki glanced up at the sky. The rain was still a drizzle, and it didn’t look like the weather would get any worse for the time being.

“How about we sit over there?” He pointed to a bench under a large camphor tree, and Utai nodded with a smile. She pulled a pack of hand wipes from her bag and cleaned a place for each of them before sitting down.

“Oh! Thanks. Sorry.” Haruyuki sat next to her, apologetic.

Utai might have had the biggest heart while being the youngest member of Nega Nebulus, and the chance to talk with her alone was surprisingly precious. They saw each other pretty much every day, taking care of Hoo, but Reina always seemed to want to take care of Utai for some reason—although the reason for that had become clear that day—and often walked part of the way home with them. So they hadn’t really been able to have a private conversation lately.

For a second, he had the thought *If only Izeki were a Burst Linker*, but then he remembered the glittering Neurolinker decorated with rhinestones and shook his head. And anyway, what he wanted to talk to Utai about had nothing to do with the Accelerated World.

After clearing his throat, he explained the gist of the whole student council thing and asked Utai how to get Ikuzawa to give up on the idea.

The girl, four years his junior, cocked her head adorably before typing rapidly on her holo keyboard. UI> I THINK THERE’S SOMEONE BETTER SUITED TO DISCUSS THIS MATTER.

“Huh? Wh-who?”

UI> PLEASE WAIT A MOMENT. Utai operated her virtual desktop, invisible to Haruyuki, for a while before nodding firmly. UI> WELL THEN, SHALL WE GO DISCUSS IT NOW?

“Huh? G-go where?”

Instead of answering his question, Utai jumped up from the bench and tugged on his sleeve. Haruyuki obediently stood up, and she picked up her bag, shouldered her backpack, said good-bye to Hoo, and then walked in the direction of the main gates.

He chased after her, wondering if they were leaving school grounds, but once they came out into the front courtyard from behind the old school building, Utai turned 180 degrees to the right and headed for the entrance. She changed into the slippers set out for school visitors and proceeded in the opposite direction from the cafeteria through the first floor of the new school building, where a number of students still lingered. Haruyuki looked up at the door Utai finally stopped in front of. The characters on the metal plate hanging there said STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE.

It's true that if I'm going to get advice on the student council election, there's probably no one better than her for it! But I'm still not mentally prepared for that!

By the time Haruyuki had this thought, Utai was knocking loudly on the door.

“You’re late!” the student council vice president snapped, after she sat Haruyuki and Utai down on the sofa set.

“I-I’m sorry. We were at the animal hutch, so we had to go all the way around the old school building to come here...,” Haruyuki hurried to explain.

“That’s not what I meant.” Kuroyukihime pierced him with a below-freezing gaze. “I’m saying you’re late in explaining what was happening in the lounge.”

“Oh! I-is that it...? I’m really sorry...”

Kuroyukihime had indeed told him before the meeting started at lunch to explain everything in detail later, and he had said he would. He’d had class after lunch, and then his club duties, but it was negligence on his part not to have sent mail. On the other hand, the truth was that this was not a matter that could be clarified fully via mail.

“O-okay, so I’ll explain why Ikuzawa invited Takumu and me to lunch.”

Haruyuki cleared his throat and then spent a little over ten minutes once again recounting the tale of Mayu Ikuzawa’s terrifying request.

“I see.” Kuroyukihime crossed her arms and leaned back against the sofa. “So that’s what she wanted.”

“Yes,” he said. “And I wanted to ask you about how to politely refuse.”

“Mm. Well, why don’t you?”

“...Huh? Why don’t I what?”

“Run for council, of course,” she replied. “Go on and do it. Everything is experience.”

He couldn’t respond at first. “Sorry?! You say it like it’s no big deal!!”

“With something like a mere council election, it’s best to think of it as no big deal. It’s not as though you’ll lose your life, after all.”

“Th-that’s true, but it’ll definitely shorten my life!”

Utai listened to the back-and-forth between Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime with a grin. She had apparently anticipated Kuroyukihime’s reaction.

“I’ll put on some tea, so just calm down,” Kuroyukihime said, standing up. “Is decaffeinated coffee good for both of you?”

UI> I’D ASK FOR PLENTY OF MILK, PLEASE.

“I-I’d like that, too, please,” Haruyuki seconded.

Kuroyukihime headed toward the simple kitchen counter in one corner of the student council office. With a surprisingly practiced hand, she returned with three cups, a coffee pot, a sugar bowl, and a milk jug.

“How about this?” she said. “If you’re on the council, you can have all the drinks you want after school.”

“But Secretary Wakamiya, the president, and the treasurer are not here, though...”

“Well, finals *are* two days away,” she noted. “On a normal weekday, Megumi is usually sitting there, elegantly reading a book. The president and treasurer are busy and don’t often come to the office, though.”

“Uh...uh-huh. Anyway, thanks...” For the café au lait Kuroyukihime poured for him—three parts coffee, seven parts milk—he selected a reddish-brown sweetener from the multicolored mix in the sugar bowl and dropped it into his cup. He stirred briefly before taking a sip, and a fragrant nutty flavor permeated his mouth.

To his left, Utai put a milky-white tablet into her cup—one to nine, coffee to milk—and took a sip before tapping at her keyboard. UI> IT’S VANILLA FLAVOR.

“I think mine was almond...”

“I like the cinnamon one,” Kuroyukihime remarked as she brought her eight-to-two adult-flavored coffee to her lips and then returned to the topic at

hand. “Haruyuki. You seem to have forgotten, but a mere month ago, you were talking with me about the student council election.”

“Huh? W-was I?” He did a high-speed search through the file of his every conversation with Kuroyukihime, which he had archived in his mind. He got a hit in about three seconds. The place was the VR space on the Arita local net, and the time was two days before the Hermes’ Cord race.

Kuroyukihime had suggested he run for the next student council, and Haruyuki had replied, “N-n-n-n-n-no way, no way!” The conversation promptly transitioned to an explanation of low-earth orbit space elevators, and the problematic bits had fallen from the surface of his memories. Because he could only assume she had been joking.

“I remember, but Kuroyukihime, you can’t... You couldn’t possibly have been serious?”

“Of course I was serious. About as serious as the percentage of milk in your café au lait.”

Which meant that she was 70 percent serious? Terrifying. Nervously, he asked for her true opinion again. “B-but... setting aside the question of whether I *could* get elected, um, why me? I don’t think I’d be a proper fit for president or vice president or secretary or treasurer.”

Mayu Ikuzawa had indeed referenced his work in the Animal Care Club and on the class exhibit for the school festival when she said that Haruyuki was suited to run for office. But when push came to shove, he’d been selected for the Animal Care Club because his usual scatterbrained powers had been on full display, and the level of technical expertise required for the class exhibit hadn’t been as high as all that. He could not understand why Kuroyukihime and Ikuzawa were suggesting he run, no matter how he tried.

His head hung low, and Kuroyukihime smiled gently across from him, while her mouth said something that was nearly the total opposite of the kindness playing on her lips.

“Whether you’re fit for office is a secondary matter. The reason I suggested running was of course because of the various advantages as a Burst Linker.”

“...Huh?”

“I’ve said any number of times before that that’s the reason I ran for vice president to begin with, yes? If you’re on the student council, you have greatly expanded access privileges on the in-school local net. You can

reference the register with every student in the school, and it's even possible to open a secret, external access gate like I've done. Also, you can use the council office as the operation room for the Legion. But, well, I would recommend staying away from the presidency, at least. What with the specialized committees and club activities and negotiations with school administration and what have you, the current president, Kamioka, seems quite swamped."

"Um, so the vice president doesn't have to do those kinds of things?"

"When I consented to Kamioka's request to join the candidate team, I had him make it so that the main part of my job would be behind-the-scenes office work and processing. Incidentally, as secretary, Megumi puts together all the notices and publicity, and Nishi's job as treasurer is actually to support the president in all aspects. I do the accounting."

"Y-you do?" Haruyuki asked. "So then, could I make my real role be cleaning and shopping and making tea and things?"

"If you request that right off the bat, Ikuzawa or whatever her name is might very well lose faith in you." With a wry smile, Kuroyukihime returned her cup to its saucer with a *clink*. "But on that point, it's fortunate for you that Ikuzawa wants to be president. If you look elsewhere for a vice president, who is generally as busy as the president, then Takumu can run as treasurer and you as secretary. So for another year at any rate, we can relax in the defense of Umesato as the base for Nega Nebulus."

"Wh-why am I secretary?"

"Well, you like books, don't you?" she asked. "In this day and age, there aren't too many students with bookshelves in their bedrooms and paper books lined up on them, you know. Well, though, in your case, you also have the retro games there..."

"My father left those books behind. But yeah, I guess I don't hate them... But what does that have to do with the secretary job?"

"When it comes to writing, if you haven't read a lot of books from childhood, you can't really write. That's what Megumi says. And I would also like to read the releases that you would write."

Haruyuki didn't have the least bit of confidence that he could write something like that, but he swallowed back the words of denial that tried to reflexively leap out of his mouth like they always did.

The ambition to be better, Ikuzawa's desire to grow closer to

Kuroyukihime as a person. Public spirit, the desire to be useful to the students of Umesato Junior High. Unfortunately, he couldn't find either inside himself.

That said, however, to defend his headquarters as a Burst Linker... Could that be his motivation in running for council? It was one thing for Kuroyukihime to say that when she so wonderfully fulfilled her duties as vice president, but Haruyuki had no talents whatsoever. If he was to run on this basis, wouldn't he be lying to Mayu Ikuzawa and the entire student body? Haruyuki bit his lip, and a small hand gently touched his arm.

With a smile, Utai Shinomiya tapped away, using Haruyuki's skin as a keyboard. Cherry-colored letters rose up slowly in his field of view.

UI> ARITA, I THINK WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS WHETHER YOU'RE TRYING OR NOT.

"Huh..."

UI> WHATEVER YOUR MOTIVATION, IF YOU DO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE STUDENT COUNCIL, I'M SURE YOU WILL CARRY OUT YOUR DUTIES DILIGENTLY. JUST LIKE WHEN YOU WORKED SO HARD TO CLEAN UP HOO'S HOUSE. AND I THINK THAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT THING.

"...I dunno," he muttered, taking his eyes away from her smiling face.

He quickly got fed up with anything that was hard or a struggle and ran away. That was the self-assessment of Haruyuki—of the human being known as Haruyuki Arita. If Kuroyukihime hadn't found him hiding away in the squash-game corner of the local net, those miserable days would still be happening. And the time he cleaned the animal hutch—if Utai had come along a little later, he might have thrown in the towel in the middle of it.

But was Utai saying that was okay, too? Did she mean that just trying to accomplish something was the most important part even without a grand motivation or mission, even if he couldn't make it all the way to the end?

"Is there any meaning in work without results...? That's what you're thinking right now, yes?" Kuroyukihime hit unerringly on the question he was asking in his heart, and Haruyuki lifted his face with a gasp.

The current student council vice president turned her jet-black eyes toward the courtyard beyond the window and continued smoothly, "It's still drizzling, but right about now, Chiyuri is training hard on the track for her meet. But if she doesn't win at the meet or if she doesn't reach her target

time, does that make the work she's doing now meaningless?"

".....!"

That was definitely not the case. The thought bounced in his mind, but unable to voice it, Haruyuki simply clenched his hands.

"Haruyuki, I've said a number of things, but I have absolutely no intention of pressing you into running for council. If it's hard for you to refuse, I can talk to Ikuzawa for you. However...you say that it's because you don't have any talents, but is that really the reason?"

"Huh...?" Haruyuki unconsciously opened his eyes wide.

Kuroyukihime gazed directly at him as if to drill a hole into his head. "If it's that you're afraid of losing the election and having a miserable experience...I don't want you to turn tail for a reason like that. Because even if you do lose, I think the experience of forming a team and working hard on the campaign will certainly be very formative for you."

"...And if a guy like me runs and everyone laughs and makes fun of me... even then?"

"They won't laugh," Kuroyukihime declared crisply. "Umesato is not the sort of rotten school where everyone laughs behind the backs of people who are standing up and giving an honest effort. Even if there are one or two misguided souls, well, laugh right back at them."

"....."

Kuroyukihime's words echoed strongly in his heart.

She loves Umesato. She said before that she ran for council for the sake of the Legion...But I'm sure that's not the only reason. I know she really does have a desire to make the school a better place. So what about me? Do I love this school? I came here because my mom decided I would. When I was being bullied, I regretted coming here every single day...But now, maybe...

"Um." Haruyuki took a deep breath. "I...can't decide yet. I don't really know what I want to do, either. But...I'll think about it. I'll think seriously about it."

"Mm. Good." Smiling, Kuroyukihime nodded slowly. Beside him, Utai also bobbed her head. "The registration period for candidates is after summer break. Talk it over with Takumu, too, and then decide. Still, Ikuzawa also has to solicit candidates, so things won't move that fast. I said this before: I won't force you. It's enough that you think seriously about it before giving your answer."

UI> IF YOU WANT TO DISCUSS IT AGAIN, YOU ARE ALWAYS WELCOME! Utai added.

“With me as well, of course!” Kuroyukihime chimed in competitively, and after glaring at each other for a moment, the two girls broke out in bright laughter.

His mouth unconsciously loosened as he watched them, and he murmured deep in his heart, *Of course I like this school. I mean, I got to meet Kuroyukihime and Shinomiya.*

“Okay, I’ll take you up on that. I’ll discuss it with Taku, too. I’d like to decide during this term—no, during the next week.”

Kuroyukihime flashed him a grin. “Then once you make it through the finals with good grades, you’ll have a little less to worry about, hmm? And I’m not opposed to joining you in another study camp, you know.”

“N-no, you’ve already shown me plenty!” he protested.

“Mm, really? Then I suppose you don’t need this, either?” Shrugging, Kuroyukihime twirled a compressed file icon around on the tip of her finger.

“...What is it?”

“A list of predicted questions for all the subjects I took when I was in eighth grade, based on the past ten years’ worth of test problems. Incidentally, if you get every question correct, you get a bonus of two hundred butterfly points.”

“T-two hundred?!” He gasped.

Butterfly points were a strange system in which a point was added to your total when you caught one of the small butterflies who appeared in the app Kuroyukihime made; supposedly, something happened when you collected a thousand. He was doing his best, but he’d just barely, *finally* managed to get three hundred points. But if he could get two hundred points here, he’d jump up the cliff to five hundred all in one go.

“I-I’ll do it! Please! Please let me have that!”

“Well, challenge yourself then.” Kuroyukihime flicked her finger and sent the file through an ad hoc connection. Haruyuki chuckled as he pressed the button to accept it.

Utai pursed her lips unhappily. UI> SACCHI, DON’T YOU HAVE A PROBLEM SHEET FOR FOURTH GRADE? I’VE ONLY COLLECTED FIVE HUNDRED POINTS, SO C WILL OVERTAKE ME.

“Mm. T-true. I’ll make something for summer break.”

UI> YES! I MEAN, THANK YOU! After clapping her hands together, Utai cocked her head slightly and tapped hesitantly at her keyboard. UI> ALTHOUGH NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT, THAT JUST MEANS I WILL HAVE MORE HOMEWORK OVER SUMMER HOLIDAYS...

Now it was Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki's turn to laugh out loud.

7

“Hey!”

The large displacement V-twin engine roared and howled.

“Heeey!”

The massively thick radial tires squealed and tore at the surface of the road.

“Heeeeeeeeeey!!”

The front tire lifted off the ground just a bit, and the large American motorcycle, covered in spikes, accelerated through the darkness.

“Here we go! Here it is, the Century End staaaaaaage! The special effects makin’ mighty me’s ultimate power fifty percent stroooooonger!!”

“Th-there’s no such special effect!” Haruyuki retorted reflexively as he awaited the motorcycle, which was charging straight at him at a ferocious speed. “And fifty percent’s kinda meh, you know!”

“Zip those liiiiiips!! Try sayin’ that when you see! Mighty me’s! Brand-new special attaaaaaaaack!!”

What? A new one? Haruyuki put his guard up at any rate, and in his field of view, the fin de siècle rider with his trademark skull helmet, aka Ash Roller, bounded up from the seat. He set his right foot on the handlebars and his left on the seat to shift to a surfing stance.

“That’s just the usual V-twin Punch!”

“Totes differeennt! Skin those eyeballs and watch and learn!”

“You *open* your eyes, you know! Not skin!”

“Open *and* skin ’em, then! Here we gooooo! New! Special attack! Max V-twin Puuuuunch!!”

Together with the name of the special attack (which Haruyuki thought was maybe cool or maybe not), Ash leaned forward. (And to be noted, this wasn’t a real special attack that was registered in the system, but just Ash going ahead and giving a move a name.) Instantly, sparks shot out of the front brake rotor while the machine decelerated dramatically. A burnout followed, the rear tire enveloped in a cloud of white smoke.

Now Ash would fly forward—or so Haruyuki thought, but he dropped to the right together with the vehicle so that the rear tire slid forward. With the front tire's ground contact point as the center, the machine spun around horizontally as it charged for Haruyuki, the tires carving black waves into the cracked asphalt road.

Whoa, this really is amazing. He's moving forward at maximum lean!

Haruyuki suppressed the unconscious urge to clap at this high-level technique, something that would no doubt have been utterly impossible in the real world. Although it had slowed down somewhat, the bike was already right in front of him.

Since the motorcycle was spinning at high speed on the horizontal, it would be a bit tricky to jump to the right or left to dodge it. So then, the only way to evade it was to jump straight up. After drawing it in plenty close, he shouted “Hup!” and jumped with everything he had. The lightweight Silver Crow could jump nearly three meters into the air, even without using his wings. That was easily high enough to get over Ash's head—or at least, it should have been.

“New special attack, part two! Jackknife Guillotine!!”

The instant the new technique name rang out, the motorcycle's spinning switched from horizontal to vertical, and the massive iron body bounced up into something like a handstand. The rear tire closed in before his eyes, covered in white smoke and spinning at top speed.

Without the time to avoid or defend against the superbly timed surprise attack, Haruyuki at least pulled his stomach in and threw his body forward. He just barely managed to escape a direct hit, but the thick tire came into contact with his avatar's stomach, generating a flood of sparks.

“Yaah! Hot! Hot! Hot!” Crying out, he instinctively knew that if he went against the rotation, his back would be scraped away, too, so he gave himself up to the tire. It yanked him back almost like a catapult and then launched him with a *pop* to the front.

Pressing a hand to his stinging stomach and flying along the horizontal, he checked his health gauge. It had dropped over 10 percent with that contact, so he had about 60 percent left.

On the other hand, the American motorcycle kept falling forward from its jackknife position, unable to recover its balance.

“No! Nooooooo!!” The rider let out a high-pitched scream as he was

pulled into the bike's momentum and crashed upside down. Haruyuki's opponent's health gauge was similarly down to 60 percent.

Haruyuki got control of his stance with his wings as he landed, then hesitated a little as he decided whether to charge Ash Roller as he kicked and flailed while pinned under the bike, or go to help out on the other battlefield.

Below his own health gauge were mini gauges for his team members. The one on top was Chocolat Puppeter. Below that, Mint Mitten. And farther down, Plum Flipper.

They had been members of the Legion Petit Paquet until the day before. As of five PM Friday, July 12, 2047, Petit Paquet was disbanded. At the same time on the same day, its members joined the Legion Nega Nebulus. And now, twenty-four hours later, the evening of Saturday, July 13, Haruyuki had teamed up with the Chocolat gang and sallied forth to defend Sugunami Area No. 3.

On the attacking side were three from the Green Legion, Great Wall: his old friend Ash Roller, Ash's student Bush Utan, and Olive Grab.

After staring with deep emotion at the names of Utan and Olive lined up to the top right, Haruyuki hurriedly checked their health gauges. Despite the difference in numbers, in the struggle for the stronghold in the center of the stage, team Utan seemed to be coming out slightly ahead of team Chocolat.

But there was nothing to be done about that. Chocolat and her friends had never held territory before, so this was their first territory fight. When he thought about how they hadn't learned Territories techniques, like how to use the stronghold or the timing to retreat and advance, he figured they were actually fighting a good fight.

He glanced over at Ash, who was finally about to crawl out from beneath the motorcycle. "Sorry! I'm off to the centerrrr!" Haruyuki called out, then spread his wings and took off.

"Don't! Run! Away! You bastard, Croooooow!"

Haruyuki waved lightly at the rage that trailed after him and flew in a straight line toward the stronghold enveloped in showy light effects.

Twenty minutes later.

Looking at the health gauges of Ash Roller and his team, all happily plunging into the red zone, Haruyuki called out to the enemy troops, "Um! Ash!"

"What, ya damned crow?!" he answered forcefully enough, but both front

and rear tires of the American motorcycle were flat, and black smoke was rising up from the muffler. Utan and Olive had also sunk down to the ground near the bike.

“I’ve got nothing to lose here, but you guys are all super-red, while we’re still yellow. On top of which, we’ve got the stronghold. So how about we say we won already?”

“Bull craaaaap! We’ll make a super-comeback from a single dot in our gauges! Right here, this is the heart and soul of my mighty Rough Valley Rollers, awright? *Comprenez?!?*”

Omitting the question of that team name, Haruyuki scratched the back of his helmet. “Y-yeah. Got it.” He glanced at Chocolat and her friends, standing at the ready, backs straight. “Okay, we fight to the end—”

“But like, if you’re gonna insist, then you know, whatevs,” Ash continued casually.

“S-sorry?!”

“M’kay, so we’ll call this a draw.”

“S-sorry?!”

“So like, what’ll we do? Only got five minutes left, you know...”

“S-sorry...?”

Any number of ripostes sat on the tip of his tongue—*You abandon your heart and soul as easy as that? You can call it a draw all you want, but with the amount left in our gauges, the system’s going to call it a win for us*—but it was true that they were basically out of time, so Haruyuki nodded. “Um, I wanted to talk a sec.”

“M’kay, let’s talk in the fort there. U, Oli, we’re moving out.”

“You got it, yo.”

“Yup, boss.”

Haruyuki started after the motorcycle as it wobbled away on its flat tires together with Ash’s team members, back on their feet again. But he turned around at a sharp jab in his back to see a truly troubled-looking Chocolat standing there.

“Can we really trust that skull face? Isn’t he just pretending to want to talk, and he’s really going to attack us?”

“N-nah, it’s okay. He’s not the kind of guy who can pull something like that off.”

“Well, then I can accept that,” Chocolat said, and Mint and Plum nodded.

Ash really does have his own code, huh? This thought in mind, Haruyuki started to walk.

The seven sat down in a circle in one corner of the rounded stronghold, and Haruyuki bowed his head once more. “Sorry for being so selfish when this is the Territories. I know how important they are.”

“No biggie. So what’d you wanna talk about?” Ash spread out both hands, and Haruyuki turned his gaze from him to stare at Bush Utan and Olive Grab sitting next to him. Naturally, there was nothing attached to the armor of their chests.

“Um, talk, it’s more like...I just wanted to tell you something. Um. I know we’re in different Legions, but I’m really glad you both came back okay, Utan, Olive.”

When Haruyuki said this, Ash shrugged, almost as if to say “Oh, is that all?” and Utan and Olive scratched their heads in embarrassment.

“Look, okay? That is only a natural, total matter of course. GW ain’t the sorta stingy Legion that’d chase a guy out for getting his hands on something a little off. And U and Oli are dark-root types who’ll just go and lock themselves away forever.”

“D-dark root?” Haruyuki asked. “What’s that?”

“Dark like night. Root like a plant. So like, gloomy! This’ll be on the test, so put it in your brain parts!”

“There is no test. And when you say ‘dark,’ it makes you think of something connected to the ISS kits. Don’t scare me like that,” Haruyuki grumbled.

“Um.” Chocolat opened her mouth, somewhat hesitantly. “From what’s been said here, were those two also infected with *that*?”

Utan glanced at Olive and nodded firmly, as if to shake off his fear. “That’s right, yo. Oli and I, we got our hands on ISS kits.”

“Top of that”—Olive picked up the story, clenching his large hands—“me, I even betrayed Brother Ash, tried to hunt him...But my bro here, he forgave me. Even since the ISS kit main body was destroyed, he’s checking the matching list dozens of times every day, coming to see me. That’s why I decided, as long as I’m a Burst Linker, I’m gonna follow my bro here!”

“Same here!” Utan thrust a fist into the air. “Team Rough Valley Rollers never dies!”

Ash Roller groaned, slightly embarrassed. “Nah, listen, kids. It’s not as

big a deal as that. Even mighty me here got infected by the kit, after all. Meh, you know. Stick the landing an' everything's okay.”

“Hell yeah!”

“Just like you, bro!”

The three guffawed, and Haruyuki looked on, thinking, *Well, I guess that's true if it ends well.*

Mint Mitten had remained silent so far, but now she said in a quiet voice, “So, um, Utan? Olive? Can I ask you?”

“O-of course, yo!”

“Aren't you...angry? At the ones who made the ISS kits...and the person who gave them to you?”

“.....!”

Before Utan or Olive could say anything, Haruyuki gasped sharply. It hadn't only been Utan and Olive who'd betrayed their friends after being parasitized by the ISS kit. Mint and Plum had been through the same experience. And yet, he'd brought up the topic of the kits without giving them the slightest consideration. He was supposed to be the leader of this four-person team, and he couldn't even give that much thought to them.

Turning, Haruyuki started to apologize, but Chocolat jabbed his shoulder lightly. She brought her small face mask close and whispered, “It's all right, Crow. Min-Min and Pliko have gotten over that day.”

“But then, why...?”

“Well—” Chocolat's whisper was interrupted by Bush Utan's decisive response.

“It's our fault for losing out to the temptation of the kit. O' course, I deffo want those Acceleration Research Society guys to fall off a cliff right now.”

“But we don't hate the person who gave us the kits,” Olive Grab followed up, turning his elliptical eyes up toward the dark sky of the Century End stage. “But...I'm a bit worried, you know? I hope she could make it back okay like we did.”

Hearing this, Plum Flipper nodded slowly. “I also hope sooo. I wonder where she is now...”

Haruyuki looked up at the night sky with everyone else. In his heart, he called to the Burst Linker who had sought homogeneity in the Accelerated World through the ISS kits and disappeared after losing a final, decisive battle against Nega Nebulus. *Where are you now, and what are you doing...*

Magenta Scissor?

The seven continued to sit silently, each with their own thoughts, until the remaining time in the duel hit zero.

After returning to the real world from the Territories stage, Haruyuki let out a long sigh on his bed. He'd come home from school right after taking care of Hoo, so he'd taken part in the Territories from his house. When he slowly opened his eyes, he was looking at the ceiling, dyed the color of dusk. The weather had been good all day, and the weather forecast said the clear skies would continue the next day as well.

He'd come home early because he wanted to take care of Saturday's homework that evening, but the dry breeze blowing in through the slight opening in the window felt good, and he couldn't quite find the right time to sit himself up. *Okay, I'll get up when I count to ten—no, twenty. Actually, let's make it thirty.* This in his mind, he lounged there, not knowing when to just give up already.

And then an icon flashed in the center of his field of view, announcing he had new mail.

The sender was Chiyuri. He hurriedly raised his right hand and opened it.

I DON'T HAVE A LOT OF TIME BEFORE WE'RE ON THE MOVE, SO SORRY FOR THE MAIL. NICE WORK IN THE TERRITORIES! I LOST IN THE SEMIFINALS, BUT I GOT A PERSONAL BEST, SO YOU KNOW, I'M HAPPY WITH IT, I GUESS. I'M EXCITED ABOUT TOMORROW! DON'T OVERSLEEP!

He read the message twice before hitting the reply button. It looked like she wouldn't be heading on to the finals, but she'd gotten that personal best in the Tokyo Metropolitan meet, so making it to the semifinals was pretty impressive. He made a note in his mind to check out the meet videos on the Junior High Physical Culture Association website as he tapped at his holo keyboard.



NICE WORK TO YOU, TOO, CHIYU, ON THE MEET. CONGRATS ON A PERSONAL BEST! CHOCOLAT AND THE OTHERS REALLY WORKED HARD IN THE TERRITORIES, SO THANKS TO THAT, WE COULD DEFEND ALL AREAS. I'LL TELL YOU THE DETAILS TOMORROW. MAKE SURE YOU GO TO BED EARLY!

Once he had hit the send button and closed his mailer, Haruyuki psyched himself up. *Wohkay! We get up on the count of three. One, two—*

This time, a voice call came in. From Takumu, also at a sports tournament. He relaxed back into the bed and touched the answer button.

“Hey, Taku.”

“Haru! So you’re done with the Territories. How’d it go?”

“First, you gotta tell me how *you* did,” Haruyuki replied, a wry smile unconsciously coming across his lips. “How’s the tournament?”

“Oh yeah. We somehow made it into the top eight for both the group matches and the individual matches.”

Takumu was at the Tokyo Metropolitan Block No. 3 junior high summer kendo tournament, a qualifier for the metropolitan meet, and Haruyuki was pretty sure that being in the top eight meant that they got the right to move on.

“Ooh! So next is the metropolitan meet, huh? Congrats!”

“Thanks. It’ll probably be pretty tough, though.”

“Don’t say that. Go all the way to the nationals,” Haruyuki urged him. “Chiyu said she got to the semifinals.”

“Yeah, she mailed me, too. We gotta celebrate her personal best tomorrow.”

“We gotta celebrate you, too. And we did a total defense in the Territories. And...GW’s Bush Utan and Olive Grab came to the area the Chocolat gang and I were protecting. They both seemed pretty good.”

“*They did?*” Takumu murmured, sounding relieved. *“That’s great. They were able to go back to the Legion, huh?”*

“Yeah, I guess Ash’s working hard to take care of them. The three formed this team called the Rough Valley Rollers.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Takumu laughed happily. *“I wish I could’ve fought them, too!”*

“And...” After a moment’s hesitation, Haruyuki announced, “After the fight was over, we all talked. And like, Utan and Olive, and Mint and Plum

are concerned about her.”

“*Her? ...You mean, Magenta Scissor?*”

“Yeah. Magenta was trying to spread the ISS kits and all... Anyway, Mint, Plum, and Ash were all forcibly parasitized with those scissors, so I guess they’d have the right to hate her. But—and this goes for me, too—they just can’t seem to put her in the same group as those jerks from the Acceleration Research Society, you know?”

“*...To start with, I don’t have the right to say anything about Magenta,*” Takumu said quietly. “*I’m the one who went to Setagaya and asked her to give me a kit...*”

“Hey, Taku? Are you... Are you worried about Magenta, too?” Haruyuki wondered reflexively.

“*Yeah...It’s little different from worry. And she probably doesn’t want our worry or whatever...But it’s like, I don’t want her to vanish from the Accelerated World. She’s so strong. I want her to not rely on an ISS kit or whatever and fight under her own power...I guess it’s like that? And that’s a road I have to go down myself, too...*”

“I started to fall into the dark side, too, you know. Or like, it was pretty critical for me.”

“*That’s a weird thing to brag about,*” Takumu noted, and they both laughed helplessly.

“Hey, Taku, this is kinda sudden,” Haruyuki said slowly, looking up at the ceiling where the gold of the evening sun was gradually deepening. “But before the GW meeting tomorrow, how about you and me go up to level six, too?”

“*Th-that really is sudden. Does this suggestion have anything to do with Magenta?*”

“Maybe, maybe not... So like, there’s no one at level ten in the Accelerated World right now, so our level five is basically right in the middle, yeah? The Mid Level.”

“*Yeah, I guess.*”

“So, like, somewhere in my head, I’m kinda freaked about becoming level six. You still can’t really call a level six a high rank, but it’s on the high side, you know? Like, when you go up the next level, you can’t make any more excuses... And I feel like people at seven or eight challenge level sixes pretty much without a second thought,” Haruyuki added.

“Yeah, that’s true. Now that you mention it, I’ve been feeling kind of daunted by it,” Takumu mused. *“Actually, even though I have plenty of points for a safe margin, I’ve basically been trying not to think about leveling up.”*

“If we want to earn points efficiently, then it might be smarter to stop at level five where it’s harder for high rankers to challenge us. But...when I think about Magenta Scissor fighting all that time at level six, I get this feeling like I can’t sit here freaked out by it forever.”

“And you have that promise with me, too.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Here, the two friends fell briefly silent.

Haruyuki and Takumu had promised that when they reached level seven, they would go up against each other full throttle in earnest. To realize this battle that was partly scary and partly exciting, they couldn’t allow themselves to be spoiled at the mid levels forever.

“Okay! So let’s level up now, Haru.”

“What? Now?!”

“No time like the present, right? And there’s not even twelve hours left until the meeting tomorrow. So then, why not now?”

“...I—I guess,” Haruyuki agreed. “We’ll use up a point, but we can replace it in the next tag team fight or something.” He stretched out on his bed. In order to do the level-up operation, he had to enter the Blue World of the initial acceleration and open the Installer. “Okay...We dive on the count of three.”

“Okay!” Takumu said.

Haruyuki took a deep breath. “One, two, three...”

“*“Burst Link!”*” they shouted together.

The dusk-colored ceiling, the large built-in bookcases, and even the particles of light dancing through the air turned a transparent blue. Haruyuki sprang up in his pink pig avatar and landed at the writing desk beyond his bed. He glanced around the room, but it wasn’t like he was directing with Takumu on the voice call, so there was no one but him there.

To be more precise, the flesh-and-blood Haruyuki was lying on the bed, but because there were naturally no social cameras in this room, the parts that couldn’t be captured with the Neurolinker’s built-in camera were supplemented by the game system. The face of the real Haruyuki was

extremely bland terrain, and looking at it made him depressed, so he whipped his face away and tapped the B icon on his virtual desktop.

From the Instruct menu that popped open, he moved to the points tab. He then clicked through to the level-up screen and compared the number of Burst Points he currently had with the number he'd use going up from level five to level six. He'd had a fair number of points added to his total when they destroyed Metatron's first form in the battle at Tokyo Midtown, and just as Takumu said, he had plenty to leave a safe margin.

Even still, he needed courage to press the button, but if he chickened out now, he would have wasted the point he used to accelerate. He raised the small hooved hand of the pig avatar and went ahead and slammed it down on the button.

A thrillingly cool chorus of fanfare echoed through his ears, and the number five that showed his current level was wrapped in flames and burned away. The flames danced for a moment in the window before drawing out the number six and disappearing.

...I did it.

In the fleeting moment of this thought, Haruyuki stared hard enough to burn a hole in the new Instruct screen that appeared automatically. Displayed there was what might be called one of the greatest joys of the Burst Linker life, the level-up bonus selection menu. The number of options there was the same as it had been up to that point: four.

The top left was a level-six special attack, Digit Pursuit. The top right was similarly a level-six special attack, Bulletproof. The bottom left was an Enhanced Armament, Lucid Blade. And the bottom right was an enhancement of his flight ability.

Haruyuki had poured all four of the bonuses he'd been given when he leveled up thus far into enhancing his flight ability. In the duel the other day, the raise-and-drop strategy he'd used on Chocolat Puppeter was a technique made possible precisely because of those enhancements, and he believed he'd made a choice to extract the maximum potential in Silver Crow, such as being able to fly carrying a maximum of four avatars as long as he didn't try to go fast. But that said, that didn't mean he was enlightened enough to cut free of worldly desires and immediately push the button on the bottom right.

“Unh, aaah...Like, the special attacks and the Enhanced Armament, they all look so cool—I mean, strong...I say this every time, but I wish you got a

trial period or something.” He folded his short arms and continued to moan and groan.

Ten seconds later, the conclusion he’d come to was...

“...I’ll think it over carefully and then decide. I can get my bonus later, after all. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do.” Muttering, he made the entire Instruct menu vanish.

Letting out a long breath, he checked the accelerated time and found he still had twenty-five minutes. He’d gone to all the trouble of using a point, so he decided to make effective use of what was left on the clock and activated the homework app on his virtual desktop.

“If I was going to end up doing this, I should’ve called Taku and directed.”

He opened his math homework, which seemed the most difficult. But when his final exam had been given back the day before, he saw the best grade he’d ever gotten—although he still couldn’t begin to compete with Takumu, even if Haruyuki *was* closing in on Chiyuri—so his awareness of being bad at studying itself was fading just a little.

“Okay! I’ll solve five—no, four, problems in this acceleration!” he declared to himself as he glared at the first quadratic equation.

Twenty-five minutes later—1.5 seconds later in the real world—the acceleration ended, and he let out a sigh as he pressed the save button on the homework app.

“From the sound of the sigh, you either couldn’t decide at all on a level-up bonus, or you were doing homework inside.” Takumu’s laughing voice rang out in his mind.

Haruyuki had forgotten he was still connected to the voice call. “I-it was homework,” he hurriedly replied. “I decided on the bonus in ten seconds!”

“Wow. So what’d you pick?”

“Oh. No. I decided to put off the decision. What bonus did you get, Taku?”

“I put it off, too, of course. I decided to really think about it before picking.” Under orders from his parent, Takumu had chosen special attacks for the three bonuses up to level four. He seemed to regret this sometimes, but that was probably exactly why he’d decided to really mull it over in his own head.

“Yeah. If we have time tomorrow, I’ll try talking about it with

Kuroyukihime or Master. Although I'm pretty sure they won't give me any direct advice."

Takumu laughed. *"No doubt about that. But it's exciting, huh? ...Oh! But, Haru, don't get all spaced out with your head all over your level-up bonus. The meeting with Great Wall tomorrow is very important. The future of Nega Nebulus kind of rests on it. We have to focus."*

"Yeah, I know. I won't let a single word get away from me."

"And depending on the situation, maybe..."

"Huh?" Haruyuki asked. "Maybe what?"

"Oh, just maybe they'll ask us to speak, too, you know?"

Haruyuki felt like Takumu was trying to sneak something by him, but it was usually pointless to press him for details at times like this, so he decided to just let it pass. "True. Anyway...let's make sure we're on our toes for real from the moment we enter Shibuya Area tomorrow."

"Yeah. I think we'll have our global connections off, but that doesn't mean someone won't challenge us via the local net of some store or something. No matter what happens, it's our job to protect Master, Haru."

"Yup. We can't let her down!"

"Yeah!" Takumu shouted.

Unseen by his best friend, Haruyuki clenched his hand tightly as he ended the call.

Right...Tomorrow, Kuroyukihime would be stepping flesh and blood into a region controlled by Great Wall, the biggest Legion in the Accelerated World. And moreover, the GW executive knew that. He didn't think the Green King himself would plan a surprise attack now, but a knight serving his master needed to be ready for any possibility.

He absolutely could not let his guard down, from the time they left Suginami until the moment they returned. Carving this into his heart, Haruyuki set back to work on his math homework.

8

He absolutely could not let his guard down. He had been so firm, and yet...

Why—? How?!

“Seriously, how did it end up like this...?” Haruyuki relaxed and leaned against the transparent inner tube.

The sound of water and the voices of children playing beat against his eardrums. The sunlight pouring in through the windows reflected off the surface of the water around him, flickering irregularly. The water, at a constant temperature of twenty-eight degrees Celsius, communicated a comfortable coolness to his back and limbs.

Sunday, July 14, one PM. Haruyuki was in a pair of loose surf shorts—Neurolinker on, of course—floating in one corner of the twenty-five-meter pool. The wall on the south side was glass, and it offered a view of the towns of Shibuya, Daikanyama, and Meguro from a height of 150 meters above the ground.

“Amazing,” Haruyuki murmured. “I’ve never been in a pool this high up before.”

“Me neither.” Takumu nodded, similarly floating nearby. His beach shorts were the sporty leggings type, and he had naturally taken off his glasses. He wasn’t using an inner tube or a kickboard, but he was good at anything sporty, so he seemed to be able to float merely by moving his arms and legs slowly. “When I think about this much water being on such a high floor, I get a little nervous, you know?”

“Um. How many tons of water are in this pool?”

“It’s about twenty-five meters long, eight meters wide, and a meter and a half deep, I’d say...So calculating from that, the volume’s just three hundred cubic meters. Which means, the weight’s three hundred tons.”

“Th-three hundred tons! I can’t believe the floor doesn’t collapse.”

“I’m pretty sure this building’ll be okay. Ravine Square opened up right around the Olympics, so.” Takumu looked up at the summer sky outside the

window.

Shibuya Ravine Square opened the same year as the Tokyo Olympics twenty-seven years earlier, a redevelopment around Shibuya Station. Centered around the forty-six-floor office building Ravine Tower, soaring up to a height of 230 meters on the east side of the station, the complex also included two mixed-use tower condos of 180 meters on the west side of the station, and then the thirty-four-floor commercial South Tower, also 180 meters, on the south side.

Shibuya Hikarie, which opened in 2012 on the other side of Meiji Street, was actually 180 meters tall, for a total of five skyscrapers clustered together in the small area. Although the name sounded like *loving* in Japanese, the area's nickname was actually Ravine, for the "valley" of an urban canyon that the area had turned into.

The pool in which Haruyuki and his friends were floating was in the high-cost, high-rise hotel in the upper floors of South Tower. As a general rule, it was for hotel-guest use, but they were visiting during the narrow wedge of time between checkout and check-in, so there was basically no one in the pool except Haruyuki and his friends. There were three or four adults in poolside deck chairs and about the same number of seven- or eight-year-olds in the water, and that was it.

Because they were in the luxury hotel of a skyscraper, he couldn't help but remember the fierce battle that unfolded two weeks earlier at Tokyo Midtown Tower. In order to slip past the ferocious attack of the Archangel guarding the building and beat down the ISS kit main body, they had investigated the strategy of staying over at the hotel in the top floors in the real world and diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field from there.

But this strategy had been scrapped due to the wall of the giga-premium lodging fee of thirty thousand yen for one night. Although if they hadn't had to fight Metatron's first form head-on, they wouldn't have met her in her true form.

Regardless, Haruyuki was generally far removed from luxury lodgings, so how could he allow himself to simply bob along in the pool of this hotel, which was probably in the same price range, when he wasn't even a hotel guest?

"Whoa! Wh—! Oooooow!"

A familiar cry of delight came from him, and Haruyuki turned the inner

tube around.

Trotting out of the locker room was Chiyuri in a shorts-and-top-type swimsuit, and behind her was the girls' camp of Nega Nebulus plus one—Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, and their guest, Rin Kusakabe, filed in wearing swimsuits of all colors.

This was not the first time he'd seen the girls in revealing outfits. At the eighth-grade class B's reverse cosplay Café Animal Kingdom at the school festival, all the girls had been suddenly clad in animal swimsuits with extremely little surface area due to an operation error on Haruyuki's part, an incident that was still too fresh in his memory.

But in the end, that had not been reality but an AR image created by their Neurolinkers, and the optical phenomenon that leapt into his IRL eyeballs now was indeed orders of magnitude different in terms of details, texture, and of course, impact.

No, how can I definitely say that what I'm seeing now is a real scene? What if my Neurolinker was hacked, and a video that would normally be impossible was being projected into my mind?

"Taku, is that real?" Haruyuki murmured.

Takumu shifted his fingers to the place on his temple where his glasses usually were and hit thin air. But he didn't even seem to notice. "I guess we'd find out if we took a visual screenshot. If it's real, the warning about taking photos without permission should sound."

"Makes sense. Okay. I'll give it a go. It'd be pretty serious if our vision had been hacked."

"Okay, I'll check, too, with video..."

"Hey! You two! What're you muttering about?!"

But fortunately—if you could call it *fortunate*—Chiyuri reached the deck before Haruyuki and Takumu could open their virtual desktops and fired her superpowerful Chiyuri Beam at them for the first time in a while. "Oh! No way! You weren't trying to take a screenshot, were you?!"

A shiver of fear running up his spine at his childhood friend's sharp intuition, he shook his head at the same time as Takumu.

""We weren't!""

"So then, what's that hand about, hanging in the air like that?" she asked, eyebrow arched.

Their heads shook faster.

““Warm-up stretches.””

“You usually do those before you get in the water, you know.”

“You too, Chiiko. Make sure to stretch properly before swimming, all right?” Fuko appeared from behind Chiyuri and smiled at Haruyuki and Takumu in the water, who were also smiling. Her bikini and light-blue pareu, complete with ultrathin knee-highs to protect the nanopolymers of her prosthetic legs, looked very good on her.

Wondering what this particularly earth-shattering Raker Smile meant, Haruyuki brought a stiff smile to his own face, and Kuroyukihime came to stand next to Fuko. She was in a simple black bikini with a violet butterfly pattern.

The subzero Kuroyukihime Smile was fortunately not activated, and she looked at Haruyuki with a straight face as she spoke. “That inner tube looks comfortable. Is it your own?”

“Y-yes. The mail yesterday said to bring a swimsuit, so I figured, just in case...”

“I see. Would you lend it to me for a bit later?”

“S-sure, of course. However long you want.”

While they were talking, Utai popped her face out from behind Kuroyukihime. Her swimsuit was an orange one-piece with a large ruffle on the chest. She already had a red polka-dotted inner tube around her waist.

UI> I BROUGHT AN INNER TUBE, TOO! With a satisfied smile, Utai spun the plastic unit around for them.

Fuko suddenly picked her up from behind, inner tube and all. “Oh, you! Wearing an inner tube’s against the rules, Uiui!”

UI> HOW IS IT AGAINST THE RULES?! Utai flailed her legs as she tapped at the keyboard with both hands.

“Because it makes you too cute, obviously! ♥” Fuko whirled her around, showing off her surprising arm strength. “So much that I could just toss you in the pool like this!”

UI> STI@PLSAEEEEEEEE

“Come, come! That’s quite enough, Fuko. Before you throw her in, you have to make sure Uiui warms up, too.”

“Oh! You’re right. Okay, I’ll let you stretch really well before I throw you in.”

...You can just throw her in. Or like, if it’s come to this, I feel relieved that

Chocolat and the others can't be here, or like maybe a little sad?

These thoughts in his mind, Haruyuki couldn't take his eyes off the enchanting poolside view. But abruptly, the surface of the water rose up roundly right beside him.

“Wh-whoa?!” Haruyuki reeled with such force that he very nearly did a somersault, and Takumu held down his inner tube.

Breaking through the surface of the water with a splash was Rin Kusakabe, who had at some point unbeknownst to him dived into the water. Water dripped off her cute clover-patterned tank-top-style bikini and matching headband.

“Hello, Arita.” Rin looked up at Haruyuki and grinned, water reaching her chin.

“Oh...H-hello, Kusakabe.”

The members of Nega Nebulus—excluding Chocolat Puppeteer and her friends who they hadn't yet met in the real—met up in the morning and took care of their shopping and dinner in Shibuya, but Rin, a member of Great Wall, had joined them here at the pool.

Haruyuki had only just dueled with her older brother, Ash Roller, the day before, but it had been two weeks since he'd seen Rin, and for a moment, he was at a loss at what to say to her.

And then Rin placed her slender fingertips on Haruyuki's inner tube and said in a small voice, “Um. Your inner tube. Would you let. Me also borrow it later?”

“Oh! O-o-o-o-o-o-of course! Not even later, right now...” He hurriedly lifted it away from his body and set it to float in the water.

“G-g-g-g-g-go ahead— Huh? Whoa?!”

The reason Haruyuki cried out and Rin also yelped rather adorably was because someone jumped in from the sky above with a “Hup!” It was none other than Kuroyukihime, who flew right into the hole in the inner tube with a loud splash. Water droplets flew through the air to hit Haruyuki and Takumu in the face.

“K-K-K-Kuroyukihime, wh-wh-what are—?”

“I made the reservation, you know, earlier, Haruyuki?” And here, at last, the subzero Kuroyukihime Smile was activated. “Mmm. It *is* a rather comfortable inner tube, isn't it? What is it made of?”

He wasn't sure just how serious she was when she asked these questions,

as she slipped her slender legs out of the inner tube and shifted to a sitting posture.

“R-right, it’s a nanocrystal elastomer. Lightweight, thin, very elastic, feels good to the touch, and it’s also very resistant,” Haruyuki said, like he was an inner-tube salesperson or something.

And then from the deck, Chiyuri clapped her hands together with an exasperated expression. “Okay, no more playing! Pay attention! I will now reveal today’s special guest!”

The four in the water looked up, and Utai and Fuko stood up from their stretches.

With the seven looking on, a girl with short hair walked briskly out of the locker room. He knew it was a girl because of the snowy-white dress-type swimsuit she wore, but her long, slender physique had a neutral air about it. For a moment, he wondered who it was, but when he saw the semitransparent external Neurolinker equipped on her neck, he finally understood. This was Akira Himi *sans* glasses—Aqua Current.

This was probably the first time he’d seen Akira’s naked face, and he stared unconsciously until Fuko clapped her hands together.

“Okay, everyone, get ready!”

Hurriedly, he stretched out in the water. Turning toward Akira on the deck, Kuroyukihime thanked her on their behalf. “Akira, thank you so much for getting so many precious tickets for us today.”

“Thank you very muuuuch!” the other six immediately chorused.

Akira nodded coolly. “You’re welcome.”

Yes: The reason common junior and senior high schoolers like Haruyuki and his friends were able to have their fill of resort life at the lofty pool of the luxury hotel was because Akira had gotten a number of tickets for them. And she had been able to do that because her mother had apparently been the chef and pâtissier at the restaurant of an affiliated hotel.

“Okay, everyone, have fun,” Akira announced, sounding exactly the way she always did, as she put on a white swim cap. “I’m going to swim.”

She had been later than the others because she had done her warm-up exercises in the locker room, and now she artlessly bent over and dived into the lane to the far right with a form that seemed incredible to an amateur’s eyes. She slid into the water and didn’t pop up again until she’d gone nearly ten meters and then started to swim in a crawl. It looked entirely effortless,

yet she was extremely fast. In the blink of an eye, she had swum twenty-five meters, and she flipped around to return. With her white swimsuit, she looked almost like a beluga whale.

“W-wow...That’s Aquamatic for you,” Haruyuki muttered.

Takumu once again caught the light on his air glasses. “I can’t just let her beat me like this. I’m going to swim a bit, too.” He moved smoothly into the neighboring lane and kicked at the wall at the same time as the returning Akira turned. In contrast with Akira, his form was powerful, and he swam hard.

Haruyuki didn’t so much as go near the school pool, but because he had been forced to take swimming lessons as a kid, of all the sports in the world, swimming was the only one he didn’t hate. But of course, he couldn’t begin to compare with the speed Akira and Takumu produced, so he simply treaded water and wondered what to do next.

Still on Haruyuki’s inner tube, Kuroyukihime pinched his shoulder. “Haruyuki, how are you at swimming?”

“Oh, well, I’m not awful.”

“Oh-ho! That’s good. So then how about we begin our training?”

“Huh? T-training? What training?”

Kuroyukihime grinned. “Oh my, knowing you, I’m sure you surmised the reason we came to this pool long ago.”

“Reason? ...It wasn’t because we got tickets?”

“No, if Akira hadn’t been able to arrange for the tickets, I was thinking we could go to the Daikanyama sports center. I wanted you to get a little accustomed to it before the meeting.”

“Accustomed? To what?”

He whirled around. Akira and Takumu were still swimming, and Chiyuri, Utai, and Fuko were continuing to warm up. Rin, looking puzzled, was next to Haruyuki.

“...To the. Water?” There was nothing but water around, so he hazarded that response, and Kuroyukihime smiled again.

“So close.” She spun around with the inner tube and pulled her face in close to Haruyuki and Rin. “The sensation of floating in the water...Or to be more specific, to the sensation of artificial gravity.”

“.....!!”

He took a sharp breath and exchanged a glance with Rin before asking in

a similarly small voice, “S-so then...does that mean it’s finally going to be implemented today? The...Space stage?”

“Fuko and I have carefully considered that the possibility definitely exists.”

“B-but why today? The rumors were all pointing to July fifth...But no matter how many days pass, it totally never shows. Some people are saying it might never be implemented, at this rate.”

Kuroyukihime nodded firmly. Drops of water fell from her wet bangs onto the pale skin of her chest and then rolled down. “I also thought that if it was going to be implemented, it would have been on the fifth. Because that was exactly a month after Hermes’ Cord appeared in the Accelerated World. But it’s not as though we had any firm basis for thinking that. Brain Burst updates pretty much on its own schedule...Some things will be one month after the official event, but they’ll also really stretch and push all kinds of commemorative days.”

“Commemorative days...You mean like Culture Day or Respect for the Aged Day?”

“Oh...I’ve. Heard that. Too. The Ocean stage was implemented. On Marine Day,” Rin said.

“That’s exactly right.” Kuroyukihime raised a single finger. “Incidentally, everyone’s favorite, the Sewer stage, was also implemented on September tenth, Sewer Day.”

“Is there actually such a day...? Huh? But wait.” Furrowing his brow, he searched his hazy memory. “I’m pretty sure that exists—Space Day, right? And that’s in September, too.”

“Oh, well done! Space Day is September twelfth, the day that the space shuttle carrying the first Japanese person was launched into space.”

“Wow. I get it...No wait, not that.” He shook his head, the water around him splashing. “If there’s a Space Day, then wouldn’t the Space stage be implemented on that day? Which means that’s still two months off?”

“But that would mean too much time would pass from the Hermes’ Cord race,” Kuroyukihime noted. “After the formal event for the Odaiba theme park, Tokyo Grand Castle, the Ancient Castle stage patterned on the same motif was implemented thirty days later. I highly doubt they would drag it out three months. This is complete supposition on my part, but I believe the developer intended to implement the Space stage on July fifth, thirty days

after the race, but there turned out to be a commemorative day unrelated to space a little later, so they postponed it. Perhaps.”

“This developer’s kinda doing things at random, huh?” Haruyuki said.

“That didn’t just start now. To begin with, the very idea of giving a bunch of mere seven-year-olds something like the Brain Burst program and then going completely hands-off is entirely too random.” Kuroyukihime denounced both game master and Originators at the same time, and Haruyuki unconsciously sank down into the water, but Rin displayed a surprising boldness and giggled. But she quickly got a strange look on her face and gave voice to another question.

“Um. So then. Today...July fourteenth is a commemorative. Day not related to space? So. What day. Is today?”

It was Fuko who replied, having come along to sit on the edge of the pool behind them at some point, her legs in the water up to the knees. In the water a little ways off, Utai was floating with her inner tube, having gotten in or been tossed in by Fuko. Chiyuri seemed to be swimming briskly together with Takumu and Akira in the opposite lane.

“All right, a multiple-choice quiz for Rin and Corvus.” Grinning, she raised three fingers. “One: Dandelion Day. Two: Morning Glory Day. Three: Sunflower Day.”

““...””

After exchanging another look with Rin, Haruyuki asked timidly, “Um, none of them seem to have any connection with space, though?”

“I wonder? Maybe think very caaaarefully?”

“Um...”

Dandelions...They have that fluff that flies away. And I feel like the shape of the fluff doesn’t not look like a space shuttle reentry capsule.

“D-Dandelion Day!”

“Ennnh! Wrong! As punishment, thirty seconds underwater.”

Still smiling, Fuko stretched out her right leg and moved it up and down in Haruyuki’s direction, so with a “Kaaay...” he launched the timer app on his Neurolinker and took a deep breath before submerging his head below the water.

Of course, this was the pool at a luxury hotel, so the water was quite clear. He took his eyes off his own shadow wobbling on the floor of the pool and looked ahead. Instantly, Rin’s chest, in the clover-patterned swimsuit,

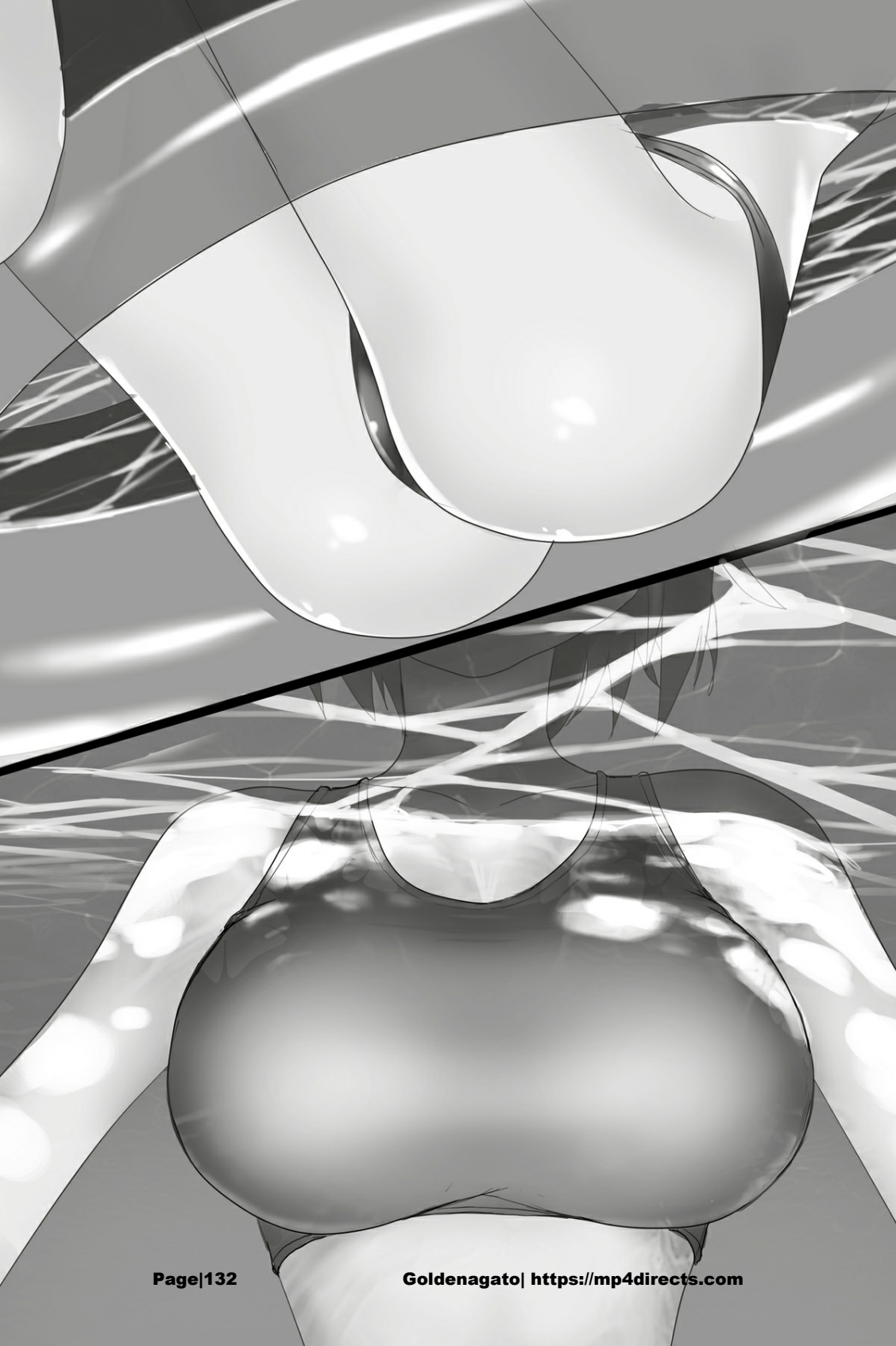
appeared at close range, and overwhelmed, he turned his body to the left.

This time, the lower half of Kuroyukihime poking through the inner tube on the water surface assaulted his retinas. Bubbles of air escaping his lungs, he was instantly in pain, but he felt like if he gave up then and there, they'd figure something was up, so he earnestly held on. He changed the orientation of his body once more, and the instant the digital numbers of the timer hit thirty, he pushed up above the water surface.

As he panted and gasped, Fuko grinned and said, "Nice work, Corvus. How was the view underwater?"

She knows!! Haruyuki froze, Rin's face reddened as she covered her chest with both arms, and Kuroyukihime let out a cry.

"Wh-what view?!" she demanded. "What did you see?!"



“Uh, um, oh...Kuroyukihime. That swimsuit looks really good on you...”

“This is pretty much the worst time for you to be saying that!”

Still sitting on the inner tube, Kuroyukihime brought the heel of her left foot down and made a direct hit with the crown of Haruyuki’s head. Once again, he burbled under the water.

“Okay, Corvus is out, then. So what’s your answer, Rin?”

“Um. Um. I’m pretty sure. There was that morning glory. In space thing, so...Morning Glory Day...”

“Enh! Enh! Enh! Wrong. Thirty seconds underwater.”

“Okay...”

Splsh! Rin vanished, leaving behind wavelets. Perhaps because of the lighting, the water surface was dyed the blue of the sky, and he couldn’t tell what was happening in the water at all.

Having recovered from the mental and physical shock, Haruyuki couldn’t wait for Rin to come bobbing back up and looked toward Fuko on the poolside. “Um. Master? So that automatically means the answer is Sunflower Day, then...”

“Do you still not see the connection between sunflowers and space?”

“Um. I guess sunflowers follow the sun? ...Whoa!”

Rin popped up suddenly, ten centimeters before his eyes, so he threw himself back unconsciously.

“Arita, no fair. Answering...first!”

“Oh! S-sorry.”

“But I. Under. Stand.” Whirling around, Rin turned to Fuko and said, “Sunflowers. Himawari. They rotate. With the sun. Like the Himawari satellite, right?”

“Correct, Rin.” Fuko smiled.

Kuroyukihime, to the rear, cleared her throat loudly. “You there, don’t stay so close. It’s just as Kusakabe said, on this day seventy years ago, the first Japanese weather satellite was launched, the Himawari Number One. To commemorate that, July fourteenth is seen as Sunflower Day.”

“Ohhhh...I get it. That *is* related to space, then.” Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down admiringly before quickly realizing something and craning his neck. “Huh? Maybe this sounds rude, but like, if they were going to match it up with some minor holiday, then they should have implemented the Space stage last week on July seventh, right? I think the Tanabata Festival’s

way more of a major space-related holiday.”

“True, but because of the history of Tanabata, the exact date is a bit hazy,” Kuroyukihime noted. “When you look at the whole of Japan, there are a fair number of places that go by the lunar calendar—that is, they have the Tanabata Festival in August.”

“Oh! Now that you mention it, in Higashine in Yamagata where my grandparents live, Tanabata is at the beginning of August.”

“Oh-ho, is that so? Mmm. Well then, to be in time for that— No, no, we were talking about the Space stage.” Her thoughts nearly derailed, Kuroyukihime cleared her throat once more before continuing. “At any rate, all of this is to say that Fuko and I were thinking that today, which could be said to be space-related, might be the day when the Space stage is implemented. We don’t know because we’re cut off from the global net, but it may have already been, and as we speak, no-holds-barred fights are taking place in a gravity-free space. In which case, we, too, must ensure that we are able to respond, just in case.”

“Just in case... So then”—Haruyuki glanced around and checked that there were no poolgoers within hearing range—“do you mean the meeting with GW could be our first Space stage experience?”

“There’s that, too.”

“B-but we’re only talking today, yeah? So a stage with new rules we’re not used to still won’t be a problem, right?”

UI> THAT’S WHY IT’S “JUST IN CASE.” Bobbing on the surface of the water, Utai had been listening to them with a smile, and now she lightly tapped at the surface of the inner tube with her fingers. UI> I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE PEOPLE OF GREAT WALL WOULD BREAK THEIR PROMISE AND CHALLENGE US. BUT WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN; WE DO NOT KNOW *IF* SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN... THAT IS THE ACCELERATED WORLD.

“Right... I guess so. Especially at such an important talk like this one, this is the sort of thing *they’d* target.” Haruyuki nodded, reminded of how Takumu had also said it depended on the situation the previous day.

Utai nodded firmly as well. He hadn’t gone so far as to say who “they” were, but there was no doubt that the name Acceleration Research Society had popped up in all their heads.

“Right. I know Rin is here, so maybe we shouldn’t say this,” Fuko said.

“But GW is a large family, so we can’t exclude the possibility of an information leak.”

“Only the top people know about the meeting,” Rin replied in a quiet voice, still submerged up to her chin in the water. “But they issued a notice that global connections are prohibited between two fifty and three ten in Shibuya Two. So the Legion members are probably wondering what’s going on...I think.”

“We requested they send out that notice.” A faint, wry smile rose up on Fuko’s face. “If we hadn’t, then we might be disturbed by a connection to the meeting stage, even if it’s not deliberate. That said, however, having them issue a notice to every member of GW saying Nega Nebulus is coming so don’t challenge them seemed like it would only court extra risk.”

“...It’s true that. There are a few. People who would want to go one-to-one with the Black King. Even if they got in trouble for disobeying an. Order. I think,” Rin said apologetically.

Kuroyukihime grinned. “You tell that lot they can come to Suginami in the Territories, and I will be sure to take them on one-on-one. At any rate, I hope you’ve understood what Fuko and I are concerned about, Haruyuki?”

“Y-yes.” Haruyuki hurriedly nodded. “An unexpected challenger—and in the newly implemented Space stage on top of that, so we can’t fight properly...That kind of thing, right?”

“Yes. A gravity-free environment, which the Space stage is sure to be, requires fairly specialized movements and sense of direction...It actually would have been better if we could have trained in the Ocean-stage sea, but it would just be too much to stay accelerated until we drew such a rare stage. So! The real world it is!” Kuroyukihime slapped at the water. “This explanation’s run a little long, but we still have an hour and a half until the meeting at three. You may swim, you may dive, you may sip tropical juice by the poolside when you get tired. Everyone, play with all your might. That is today’s training!”

Haruyuki and his friends all thrust their right hands into the air and shouted, “Okay!”

Akira and the others had apparently tired of swimming, and so he, Rin, and Utai took their place in the inside lane and swam back and forth several times before starting a game of underwater hide-and-seek. With this and drinking colorful juice on deck chairs, the time flew by.

When it was 2:50 PM, Kuroyukihime gathered them all in one corner of the pool to form a circle in the water.

“Now, how do you feel, friends?” the Legion Master asked. “Have your bodies become accustomed to the floating sensation?”

Chiyuri tilted her head thoughtfully. “Like, maybe it has, maybe it hasn’t? Or like, Kuroyukihime, are we really going to be able to deal with the Space stage like this?”

“No idea. This will be my first time, as well.”

At this response, everyone there rolled their eyes, but Kuroyukihime continued brightly.

“Of those present, the only ones who have tasted zero gravity in the Accelerated World are Fuko and Haruyuki, who made it through to the very end of the Hermes’ Cord race. Considering this experience, perhaps you could say a few words?”

“Um.” Haruyuki exchanged a look with Fuko before answering timidly, “I wasn’t able to go all the way to the finish line. But due to the feeling of up and down and left and right, being hazy is maybe like diving in the water...”

“I only flew straight ahead to the finish line,” Fuko said, cocking her head to one side. “But I think it’s totally different depending on whether you’re mentally prepared or not. We’ve played around a full two hours here in the pool, so there’ll be no panicking if the Space stage really does come. As long as we have that mental awareness, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“Mmm. That’s exactly it. Now, everyone, we’ll dive one last time into the water. Join hands with the person beside you.”

He clasped the hand of Kuroyukihime on his left and Akira on his right. On Kuroyukihime’s signal, he took a deep breath to fill his lungs and dived.

The faces of his comrades were distorted through the transparent aqua blue. To confront the Acceleration Research Society and Oscillatory Universe, Kuroyukihime had decided on a Legion expansion policy. Already, Chocolat Puppeteer and her two comrades had joined the day before yesterday, and the total muster of Nega Nebulus was now ten—eleven if you counted the Archangel Metatron. Going forward, he would have fewer chances to work with the people there that day. He couldn’t feel that this was a bad thing, but he still wanted to burn that moment firmly into his memory.

As if picking up on his thoughts, Akira and Kuroyukihime both squeezed his hand. One at a time, they squeezed one another’s hands until the gesture

made it all the way around the circle and back to him again. Then they rose up to the surface.

Once most of the dripping was under control, Kuroyukihime gave instructions calmly. “One minute to go. Ready your global net connections.” They all put a hand to their Neurolinkers. Great Wall would be making the stage that would serve as the setting for the meeting, so all Haruyuki and his comrades had to do was wait. Of course, they had registered the starter Iron Pound on their automatic Gallery list.

“Thirty seconds. Start the connection.”

He held down the connect button on his Neurolinker. The global net connection dialog box was displayed in his field of view.

“Ten seconds. Nine, eight, seven...”

As he listened to Kuroyukihime’s countdown, Haruyuki closed his eyes.

“...three, two, one.”

Not even a second late, a row of characters wreathed in flames shone red against the back of his eyelids.

A REGISTERED DUEL IS BEGINNING!

9

His avatar's feet touched hard earth, and he felt the usual gravity of the duel stage. In other words, this was not the Space stage.

Opening his eyes, Haruyuki took in a magnificent gradation from a vivid gold to a bright canary yellow to madder-red and through violet down to dark blue. The eternally dusky sky—the Twilight stage.

In the real world, they were on the top floor of Shibuya Ravine South Tower, but he was quite close to the ground now. More precisely, in one corner of the central rooftop plaza. To his right was Ravine Tower, to his left the skyscraper condo, and the South Tower rose up in that very direction, so it appeared that he was indeed in the bottom of the “ravine.”

Haruyuki took his gaze off the cluster of skyscrapers now transformed into massive temples and felt something like a mixture of disappointment and relief that it wasn't the Space stage as he checked for his comrades around him. Not one of them was missing, from Black King, Black Lotus, and Submaster Sky Raker on down.

Which meant.

“Crow must die...”

These curse-like words echoed from directly behind him, and he turned around with a jump.

Standing there was the fin de siècle rider, eyes burning white-hot in the skull helmet. They were in the Gallery, so he wasn't on his motorcycle, but the aura he was emitting was 130 percent of their regular duels. Through the helmet shield came a voice trembling with rage.

“You. Who said you could flirt and flirt and flirt and flirt with Rin in a bathing suit...?”

“I—I wasn't flirting or anything like that at all, Big Brother!”

“No. Calling. Me. Brother! So you were just eyeballin' Rin in her bathing suit! This crime is worth ten! Hundred! Deaths! Croooooow!” The rage meter of Rin Kusakabe's older brother, aka Ash Roller, was shooting upward.

A hand from behind gently patted his shoulder. “I believe the saying is

‘Ten thousand deaths,’ Ash.” The owner of the voice was his parent and master, Sky Raker. Similar to Ash, she was not using her wheelchair Enhanced Armament, but rather standing on the white tile on two elegant legs.

Ash froze in place, while Raker started to speak, her voice endlessly gentle. “To begin with, if you’re going to translate the saying into English, it’s probably more like ‘Your crime deserves capital punishment.’ And I also got a good look at Rin in her swimsuit. Does that mean I must die ten thousand times?”

“That’s no big nothing at all, Master!”

“Well then, we don’t have time for this, so it would be wonderfully helpful if you would get to work.”

“Oh! Aye, aye, sir!” Ash Roller shouted, snapping to attention as he ran to the middle of the large rooftop.

The roof of the Ravine Square central building offered up something along the lines of a park in the air, the ground covered in soft undergrowth. Pillars like temple ruins stood in each corner, while the central area laid with marble tile conveniently had large benches facing each other. But there was no one there at present.

Haruyuki glanced at the two health gauges displayed in the top part of his vision. The gauge on the left had the name of “Fists” Iron Pound, the third seat of the Six Armors that was the Great Wall executive group.

And the name on the right was Viridian Decurion, the second seat of the Six Armors. Pound had called him Viri at the meeting of the Seven Kings a week earlier, but Haruyuki had never even seen him before, much less fought him.

At any rate, the duel starters were just as had been announced beforehand. Now where were they? Haruyuki started to look around for them.

And then, Ash, standing still in the middle of the plaza, likely fifty meters on each side, spread his legs out, clasped both hands behind his back, and leaned backward. “Great Wall member, Ash Roller!” he shouted. “I have guided the Black King, Black Lotus, and her six party members to the king!”

There was no trace of Ash’s peculiar way of speaking in this announcement, which echoed off the surrounding high-rise temples and disappeared. A full five seconds passed.

“Good work!” A throaty voice broke the silence, and the opposite side of

the floor rose up as if exploding from inside the building and flew off in all directions.

From inside the large, two-meter hole came a steel-colored avatar with his boxing-glove fist thrust high above his head. Iron Pound. He had apparently broken through the ceiling from the floor below with a jumping uppercut.

“Oh, Fists! You put on this pointless cool act just because you’re the starter, hmm?”

Fortunately, he appeared not to have heard Raker’s overview, and Pound did a somersault backward through the air before coming to land on the roof.

One new silhouette after another jumped up through the hole Pound had made. Two, three, four people. When they had lined up, two on either side of the hole, a remarkably massive silhouette finally appeared. Causing the ground beneath even Haruyuki and his comrades on the far side of the roof to shake was a super-heavyweight duel avatar covered head to toe in vivid-green armor with an enormous cross shield in his left hand. There was no doubt that this was the head of Great Wall, the Green King, “Invulnerable” Green Grandé.

Haruyuki, Takumu, and Chiyuri pulled back slightly at the overwhelming information pressure that almost made the air of the stage crackle, but the youngest of their group, Utai, spoke in an even voice. “Is that the end, then? Even if they include Ash, they’re still one person short.”

Now that she mentioned it, that was true. In contrast with the full seven members on the Nega Nebulus side, the Great Wall side had the Green King, Pound, and Ash, plus the three whose names Haruyuki didn’t know, for a total of six. But he was pretty sure Pound had said last week that they would match Nega Nebulus’s numbers.

“Well, I don’t mind if they’re short or not. Now, shall we go?” Kuroyukihime started to move with a gentle hover, so he hurriedly chased after her. At the same time, the green camp started to walk to the central area where Ash was waiting.

Twenty seconds later, both camps were facing each other, separated by a distance of ten meters. Ash looked at each of the Black faces in turn before nodding slightly and joining the end of the green line.

The first to speak was, of course, Iron Pound. “To start, we will remove the Gallery approach restriction! Like this, we can’t talk without yelling!”

“We have no issue with that.”

Sky Raker had no sooner responded than Pound was opening the Instruct menu from his own health gauge and deftly operating it with a hand stuffed in a glove. Once his opponent received this and pressed the button to accept, a message appeared in front of the eyes of Haruyuki and his comrades that the ten-meter limit had been lifted.

Both sides advanced once again and stopped to stand immediately behind the large benches facing each other in the center of the plaza. They had closed the distance to three meters, and Haruyuki could clearly see the face masks of the other side.

Standing in the middle of the seven of them, Kuroyukihime gazed at the Green King standing before her as she spoke quietly. “Grandé. I thank you for accepting my request for a meeting.”

The Green King nodded ponderously in return, but as usual, he did not speak.

Kuroyukihime was also accustomed to this, so she continued without seeming to pay it any mind. “Now then, there are some here who have not met before, so perhaps we could start with introductions. I am the leader of Nega Nebulus, Black Lotus.”

Submaster Raker, Akira, Utai, Takumu, Chiyuri, and Haruyuki all gave their names in turn. And in Great Wall, they started with Ash Roller, likely the lowest level among them, and then the midsize avatar with the solidly built silhouette standing next to him bowed neatly.

“Sup. I’m the fifth seat of the Six Armors, Suntan Chafer.”

This voice was definitely a girl’s, which gave him a bit of a shock. And then the name sounded more Chinese than English, which was his second shock. Could it be like Chocolat Puppeter, and she was just choosing the pronunciation she preferred for the name she’d been given?

“Suntan is light brown. Chafer is a kind of beetle,” Akira informed him quietly, from where she stood to his right.

“Th-thanks.” Apparently, it only sounded like Chinese, but it was actually proper English.

The next to give a name was clearly an F-type this time, a slender duel avatar who seemed out of place in Great Wall. On top of pale-green armor, she wore a dark-green cocktail dress.

“Six Armors’ fourth seat, Lignum Vitae.” From her calm voice to her unadorned manner of speaking, she was shrouded in an air somehow similar

to Aqua Current. Curious about the reaction of Akira, called the only bouncer in the Accelerated World before her return to Nega Nebulus, Haruyuki glanced to his right, but there was absolutely no change in the eye lenses beneath the flowing water armor.

“Lignum Vitae—that’s the name of the wood that’s said to be the hardest in the world,” Akira explained for him once more, and he thanked her again before returning his gaze to the front.

Next up was an opponent he knew well.

“Don’t think there’s any need for me to introduce myself, but anyway. Third seat. Iron Pound.” He brought his fists up in front of him and did a quick one-two punch, which was apparently Pound’s way of saying hello.

When Pound lowered his hands, the large avatar next to him bowed, his heavy armor squealing, and gave his name in a baritone that carried. “Six Armors, second seat, Viridian Decurion. At the moment, I’m the Legion Submaster.”

Which means this guy’s GW’s number two? With this in mind, Haruyuki focused on him more closely.

Just as the name Viridian would indicate, his armor was a deep and vivid green. Clad in armor and helmet resembling that of ancient Roman soldiers, he was equipped with a circular shield on his left arm and a slightly smallish sword on his left hip. Even just at a glance, it came through loud and clear that this was a powerful veteran.

Still, the meaning of the avatar name Decurion...

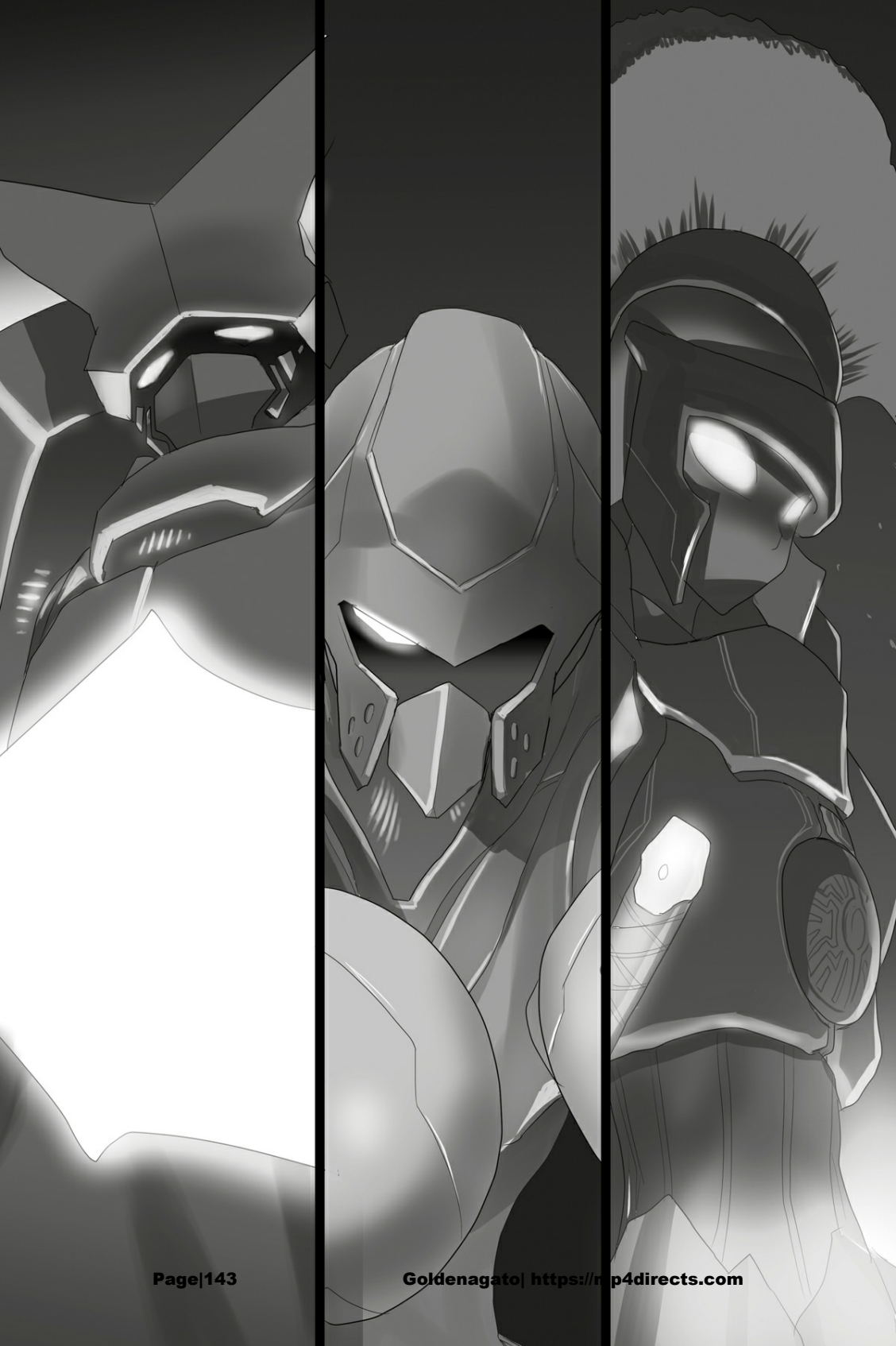
“Cavalry officer. In charge of ten men.”

And again, Akira offered an explanation, and Haruyuki uttered “Thanks” for the third time, sounding apologetic. At basically the same moment, Viridian Decurion raised his right hand and introduced the Legion Master.

“And this, before you, is our king, Green Grandé.”

Grandé simply nodded slightly again and stood wordless as always.

Opening her mouth in his place was the Black King. “Now that everyone here has given their names...Are you sure you’re all right with six people? I do have a memory of Pound saying you would come in equal number.”



“Oh...The thing about that, okay...” Rubbing the gear on his head with a glove, Iron Pound groaned. “Like, we were *planning* to have seven people... How about it, Viri?”

“Quit with that nickname in a place like this,” Viridian Decurion replied in a low voice. “Otherwise, I’ll call you Anpan.”

“Whoa! Spare me...So? Is the first seat coming?”

Haruyuki unconsciously gasped.

Viridian Decurion, the second seat of the Six Armors, was the Legion’s number two. Haruyuki had just gone with it because they were both “two,” but just like Nega Nebulus’s Four Elements, the Six Armors were Great Wall’s executive group. In other words, in terms of rank, there definitely ought to have been one more person between Decurion and the Green King, the Six Armors’ first seat.

But Decurion made a show of shrugging and remarked, in a tone that didn’t imply much respect for someone higher up than he was, “I can’t deal with all his whims. I contacted him at any rate, but it’s been five minutes, and he still hasn’t shown. We can just forget about him.”

“Yeah? Tch! I figured today of all days I’d get to gaze upon the face of the first seat,” Pound grumbled.

“Huh?!” Haruyuki unconsciously cried out. “Pound, you’ve never met the first seat, either?”

The iron boxer turned his eyes on Haruyuki and nodded. “Nope, not once. Or like, the only ones in all of GW who’ve met him are Boss and Viri—I mean, Decurion. I’m the third seat, and I don’t even know his name.”

“Whaaaat?! Is that even possible?”

“Just the way it is. Totally crushed Decurion in one-on-one, even got the boss to a draw. If he’s that strong, then I can’t say anything in a meritocracy.”

“A...draw...,” Haruyuki repeated, stunned, as he looked up at Green Grandé. The Green King was imperturbable, but his powers were unfathomable, to the point where he had easily stopped Haruyuki charging with all his might when he had been transformed into the sixth Chrome Disaster.

Grandé possessed one of the Seven Arcs, the large shield Strife, and could use the iron wall special attack Parsec Wall—to get a draw with him one-on-one...Who on earth *was* this first seat of the Six Armors?

Freeing Haruyuki from his frozen state was the voice of Kuroyukihime,

smooth as ever.

“I understand your situation. There is always one problem element in any executive board.” At this near grumble, faint smiles rose up on the faces of Fuko, Akira, and Utai. “There’s no point in waiting for someone who’s not coming. Now to get right to it, I’ll begin discussing measures against the Acceleration Research Society—”

Kuroyukihime cut off mid-sentence, so Haruyuki turned his gaze to the right.

The Black King had frozen with her face mask turned slightly downward. Fuko started to take a step toward her, but then tilted her head back at the sky, as if sensing something.

Sucked in, Haruyuki looked up as well.

The three skyscrapers-turned-temples rose up sharply against the dusky sky of the Twilight stage. And the top floor of Ravine Tower up at a height of 230 meters melted into the madder-red sky, obscuring it from his view.

Glint.

Abruptly, something small flashed near the top of the building. Glittering with the reflection of the evening sun, it was approaching rapidly. A naturally destructing object— No. A human silhouette. A duel avatar.

Haruyuki stared hard at the avatar plummeting head over heels from the top floor of the skyscraper temple.

The armor color looked pitch-black because of the reflected light. The build was fairly slim, but the long coat-type armor billowed out past the waist, almost like wings. From the masculine design of the face mask, it was probably an M-type. Haruyuki still couldn’t see the color of the eye lenses.

And then someone in Nega Nebulus let out a thin cry. “Ah...Ah!”

At basically the same time, Haruyuki realized there was something long and slender equipped on the back of the mysterious avatar.

Swords. Two long swords crossed in the shape of an *X*.

A jet-black double swordsman.

To be continued.

▶▶▶ ACCEL·WORLD
CRADLE OF STARS

▨ TWO BLACK SWORDS, TWO SILVER WINGS
NOVEMBER 2046

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1

“Unh...Unnnh...Uuuunnnnnnh,” Haruyuki groaned, moving a trembling finger above the open window on his virtual desktop.

The window was the console screen for the fighting game Brain Burst. He could open it even when he wasn't accelerated, to view things like the status and duel history of his avatar—and the number of Burst Points he had. Currently, he was staring at the Level-Up Bonus tab in his avatar status. Blank since he became a Burst Linker, this screen now offered him four options. This was because, last week, he had finally reached three hundred points, allowing Silver Crow to move up to level two.

When pushing the button to level up, he'd completely forgotten about making sure he had a few extra points to ensure his next loss wasn't his final one, so his points had dropped down to the single digits, causing chills and stomach pains for both him and his teacher Takumu. But he had somehow managed to get his balance back up, and now even that frightening time was a fond memory. It *was* strange that he couldn't actually remember much of the duels he'd fought to get his points back up out of the red zone, but he had bigger fish to fry at that moment.

That said, this was one of those moments where you cried for joy. The bonus screen before his eyes shone with a special brilliance, an extremely deluxe menu of four choices—two new special attacks, a new ability, and an enhancement of an existing ability.

“Unnnh...Gotta go with special attack...But it's hard to walk away from a new ability...And if I go with the special attack, then which one is stronger...?” His finger hovered above the three buttons at random, never coming down on any one of them. Haruyuki had truly cultivated and built up his indecisiveness in the real world, but the real problem here was that the game Brain Burst did not allow players to save and load. So he couldn't use that old trick of picking one of them and then reloading and trying again if he didn't like his choice. It was, in other words, all or nothing.

“Ngah, nnggh...If that's the way it's gotta be, then I just won't look at the

buttons, I'll leave it to fate..."

He turned just his eyes upward away from the window, pulled a finger back sharply, and steeled himself before jabbing at the screen—or pretending to, at least.

"Arrrgh." Once again, Haruyuki decided to postpone his decision and was on the verge of dropping his hand.

"Hey, sorry to keep you waiting, boy! The tests just dragged on and on," a voice said from behind, accompanied by a strongish pat on the back, making him jump.

The rebound pushed his hand dangerously close to the window on his virtual desktop, so he yanked his arm back over his shoulder as a scream slipped out of him. "Aaah?!"

Fortunately, he managed to evade a second tragedy in careless game play, but for some reason, he heard a strange "*Heep*" from behind. He tried to pull his hand back down, but his fingertips caught on something.

Ever so timidly, Haruyuki turned around and saw Kuroyukihime with a cardigan and a thick shawl over her pajamas and his own fingers pushing through the front of those pajamas all the way inside.

"Hngah! I—I—I didn't mean—!!" Emitting an unintelligible cry, Haruyuki pulled his hand back with all the force he could muster. But it was caught on her second button. The pull of his hand sent this real-world button flying, and the most definitely real fabric fell open to both sides.

It had been four weeks since Kuroyukihime—vice president of the Umesato Junior High student council, Haruyuki's parent, and the master of the once-defunct Legion Nega Nebulus—had been hospitalized near Asagaya Station. It had been touch-and-go immediately after the accident, but thanks to the great strides made in micromachine medical treatment in the last few years and probably the willpower of the girl herself, she had come back from the brink of death. Since she had been released from the ICU, her recovery had been remarkable, and now the only physical manifestation of her many injuries was the cast on her left leg to set her broken fibula. She was expected to be released from the hospital soon.

Naturally, this would be a truly joyful event, but Haruyuki felt a little sadness at the thought. He'd been stopping in to see Kuroyukihime every day on his way home from school, but once she returned to Umesato, she would go back to being the student council vice president, an inspiration to all the

students of the school; she probably wouldn't have time for Haruyuki anymore.

"I can actually read your mind now, you know," she said, yanking his left cheek outward.

He hurriedly turned his face upward and found beside him the beautiful countenance of his classmate pursing her lips. "N-no, I wasn't actually thinking anything weird—"

"I'll just say this now. Once I am released from the hospital, I have every intention of putting you through your paces. Our objective is level three—no, four within this year."

"Wh-whaaaat?!" Now Haruyuki felt a chill entirely opposite the one from earlier.

The fingers released his cheek, and Kuroyukihime turned to face forward, her expression softening. "Well, I, too, will be a little sad that these days will end."

The contrast between the madder-red of the evening sun dyeing her face in profile and the lustrous shine of her black hair was so dazzling that Haruyuki unconsciously blinked before turning his gaze to follow hers.

They were currently seated alongside each other on a bench on the south side of the hospital roof, looking down at a view of the city that spanned from Asagaya to Koenji. The elevated Chuo Line drew a line in the sky to one side, and a little beyond that was Oume Highway. In some weird twist of fate, the bench faced squarely in the direction of Umesato, and if he squinted, he could make out the solar panels on the building's roof glittering in the distance.

This part of Suginami Ward was a mix of shopping streets left over from the previous century, residential areas, and cutting-edge intelligent buildings, and all were highlighted a reddish-gold now. The sight was so beautiful that he almost wanted to call it a Twilight stage.

The skies had been clear the whole day, and the evening breeze had the slight chill that came with late autumn. Kuroyukihime pulled together the collar of the pajamas that Haruyuki had so recently defiled, and he pushed back to the depths of his mind the paleness of her bare skin that inevitably began to return to his thoughts.

"Um, we should probably be getting back inside," he said.

"No, it's fine. Thank you. It will be supertime in twenty minutes...I'd

like to stay here like this until then.”

“B-but it’s getting cold and all…”

“Mm. I see. So then, give me a little cold-resistance buff.” Grinning, Kuroyukihime shifted about ten centimeters to the right, and her slender body inevitably came into contact—or rather became glued to—Haruyuki’s left side, which did indeed cause the chill to recede. “Mm-hmm. This is perfect. You’re quite warm.”

“Uh, um, I am pretty confident in my heat generation.” Haruyuki threw his everything into a self-deprecating gag, but Kuroyukihime only moved her lips without smiling.

“Idiot.” She pulled her body even closer. “I’m not talking about physical warmth. I’m talking about emotional warmth. How can I put this...? I feel relieved. It’s only natural that Kurashima would face off against me when it comes to you.”

“Huh?” Unfortunately, Haruyuki couldn’t really understand what she meant, and he cocked his head to one side as he accepted her slight weight. “Chiyu—I mean, Kurashima just thinks that I’m her servant and should belong only to her.”

“Hee-hee. Well, at some point it will become clear. All kinds of things.” Now Kuroyukihime smiled and raised a finger as if she had just remembered something. “That reminds me. What on earth were you looking at before when you were waiting for me? You seemed to be excessively deep in thought.”

“Oh! Um, the Brain Burst console.”

“Oh? ...Aah, I understand now. There’s only one thing that could make you agonize like that. Your level-up bonus.”

“Th-that’s exactly it.” Haruyuki’s eyes grew wide at how easily she guessed the answer. “But how did you know?”

“It’s obvious. I struggled the same way, way back when. Or rather, it’s a path all Burst Linkers walk down,” Kuroyukihime responded, still smiling, and then her expression clouded slightly. “However, it has already been several days since you reached level two, yes? Have you been fighting without taking your bonus?”

“Uh, yeah, well...I guess.” Haruyuki nodded, pushing together his index fingers, and now the face to his left was colored with a mix of surprise and exasperation.

“I don’t know whether to call that prudence or perseverance,” she remarked with a slight frown. “It’s true that these last few days, I’ve been busy with test after test, and I haven’t had the time to really work with you. But Takumu, for instance, seems like he would give you appropriate advice.”

“Th-that’s...” Haruyuki paused. “When I mentioned the level-up bonus before, Taku got this faraway look in his eyes and said he didn’t think he could help me because he always just took special attacks without even thinking about it.”

“...I—I see. My apologies.” Apologizing to the absent Takumu, Kuroyukihime, with a strange expression, lifted the leg held fast in a thin, lightweight cast up onto her other leg and then sat like that wordlessly, looking up at the evening sky as it gradually deepened into purple.

“Kuroyukihime, um,” Haruyuki said to his parent meekly. “I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to decide, no matter how long I think it over. So maybe I could get you to choose for me? What bonus to take, I mean.”

“I was just wondering if I should do that or not,” Kuroyukihime murmured, and her eyes were serious as she brought her gaze back from the sky to him. “I know very well how hard it is for you to decide on your own. There are more than a few parent Burst Linkers who decide the direction of their child’s growth. The parent has knowledge and experience that the child does not. And I think perhaps this is correct because of that. However...”

She closed her mouth momentarily and set half of the black wool shawl she was wearing over Haruyuki’s shoulders. But her eyes shone with a firm light, in contrast with the gentleness of this gesture.

“It might seem as though I’m being harsh, but the parent is not the child’s creator, and the child is not the parent’s creation. It was your own heart, Haruyuki, that produced your duel avatar, Silver Crow. In which case, the direction in which to flap those wings is something you should decide.”

“...Right.” Haruyuki nodded obediently. He realized that it was one thing to get advice on how to fight, but to rely on her for even the irrevocable choice of a level-up bonus was simply fobbing off responsibility. If he couldn’t make a decision himself now, then he should never have pushed the YES button that time, that day when Kuroyukihime had sent him the Brain Burst program in the Umesato lounge. “I understand, Kuroyukihime. The next time I go to the Accelerated World, I’ll try asking him—Silver Crow. I feel like if I really ask, he’ll tell me.”

“Mm. Good answer.” Kuroyukihime grinned and hugged Haruyuki tightly, her right hand holding the edge of the shawl. He belatedly became aware of her warmth next to him, and his heart rate abruptly tripled. Frozen in a self-induced Burst Link, Haruyuki’s five senses were so inundated with information—a sweet scent, a wonderful softness—that it surpassed his processing ability, and his consciousness started to fade.

“But I’m your parent. A sad thing to simply leave it at that,” her lips murmured in his ear, so close that they nearly touched him, and Haruyuki’s mind was somehow yanked back to the here and now. “Instead of advice, how about I tell you about my own experience?”

“Y-your own...,” he repeated absently before finally recovering about 50 percent of his processing power.

Right. When he really thought about it, there was a time when Kuroyukihime—known as the level-nine Black King, Black Lotus, in the Accelerated World—had also been a beginner.

“So...are you going to tell me about...your parent?”

“No.” Kuroyukihime shook her head. “It’s not that. My parent was completely hands-off in this area...To the point where I was not even allowed to join the same Legion.”

“What? ...So then, did you get this strong all by yourself?”

“That is also a no. With the exceptions of the very beginning—and the end...my parent had essentially no dealings with me. But there was a Burst Linker who I could call teacher. So I will tell you about the *way* he spoke of.”

“The way...,” Haruyuki parroted, before he froze in a different sense. Because his not-very-sharp intuition was announcing danger, for some reason.

But almost as if she had anticipated his reaction, Kuroyukihime squeezed the hand resting on his shoulder. Holding him tightly, she inserted one end of a black XSB cable she had pulled from somewhere into her Neurolinker.

“Huh? Um, way?”

“We’ll talk with our fists—no, our swords. That’s the way of our master.” Grinning, Kuroyukihime stabbed the other plug into Haruyuki’s Neurolinker. Before the warning of a wired connection that flashed in his field of view had disappeared, her shining lips were striking the final blow. “Burst Link.”

2

“Hiii...yaaaaah!!”

The blow came riding in on a full-powered battle cry. The roar of a sonic boom ripped through the virtual air and shook the very stage itself. The black sword raced through space even faster, at a speed that left even these effects behind in the virtual dust.

There was no longer anyone in the Accelerated World who would try to meet head-on the slicing attack of the level-eight Burst Linker nicknamed World End, the head of the Legion Nega Nebulus, Black Lotus—with two exceptions.

One was Invincible, the leader of the Legion Great Wall: Green Grandé. The great shield the Strife, the Enhanced Armament in his possession that was the third star of the Seven Arcs, could resist every type of attack, be it long-range or close. The other was one corner of the Four Elements, the executive of Nega Nebulus, nicknamed Anomaly: Graphite Edge. He was also level eight. And his avatar’s coloring was almost visually indistinguishable from hers, not to mention a strikingly similar silhouette. Not the least of which reason was because, right now, his weapons were the two swords he held in his hands.

Graph waited for Lotus’s full-body attack without moving a step from where he stood. He whirled the longswords in his hands as he raised them up and crossed them in front of his body. Both blades had the same design, with edges of a metallic gray that was essentially black, but the central parts were a transparent glass-like material. Thus, when seen from afar, the swords looked hollow with only a two-centimeter blade.

Normally, only the blade part of a sword was used when attacking or defending, but Graph had crossed and readied his swords with the transparent parts facing outward—that is, the flat of the swords. These looked as though they would bend and break with a simple punch attack, but for him, this setup was no mistake.

Glaring at the midsize M-type avatar standing coolly on the other side of

those blades, Lotus prayed silently in the moment of the slicing attack. *Today for sure, I will break that shield!*

It was a simple regular attack, but the sword of Lotus's right hand came down with a force greater than any special attack and collided with the intersection of Graph's double blades.

Kreeeeaan! She heard the screech of impact, and a shock wave rippled outward to the distant edges of the stage. The wave swallowed up two figures watching the battle a little ways off, but given that they were part of the Gallery, it had no effect on them.

Lotus's slicing attack didn't manage to take down Graph's cross defense in a single blow, but her attack was not repelled, either, and the fight became a struggle at the intersection of the swords. Some years ago, when she had first struck Graph's double blades, she had been easily repelled and knocked some twenty meters or more backward, so this could be said to have been significant progress. But World End would not be satisfied with this.

"Nngh...aaaaah...!!" She focused all her might in her right arm. Compressed to a pinpoint, the power transformed into pale sparks, causing the black armor of the fighters to flicker irregularly.

The swords of Black Lotus's four limbs had the Terminate Sword ability. The effect was to eternally generate the highest-level severance-attack power in her blades. Many duel avatars were equipped with swords, but normally, it was only during the attack motion—when the sword was swinging—that the blade housed any force. Lotus's swords, however, were always generating the attack force of a slicing attack, even when they were completely at rest. This power allowed her to sever an opponent's fist or foot—or take down her prey simply by guarding against their attack. This was the origin of the nickname World End.

The only things that could survive a collision with Lotus's limbs without being severed was armor that possessed the maximum resistance to severance damage (which only existed in Grandé's shield), and swords that had the same level of power (and there weren't really any of these in the Accelerated World, either). It wasn't that there weren't exceptions like items or abilities that allowed defense with special conditions—for instance, Yellow Radio's baton increased his defensive power in proportion to the number of times it was rotated—but the only thing in the entire Accelerated World that could take Lotus's slicing attack while being on the supposedly fragile side was

Graph's twin swords.

He wasn't leaving the flats of his swords open to her because he was trying to go especially easy on her. This was actually the power of the duel avatar Graphite Edge—or rather, of his swords.

Two extremely powerful abilities were hidden away in those double swords. One was that they could guard against any and all attacks when the transparent sides were used as a shield. This was no special ability, but rather was derived from the material of the sword itself. The transparent area was not glass or crystal, but something called hyper diamond, which had a hardness that surpassed even natural diamond. In the four years since the start of the game Brain Burst 2039, not a single Burst Linker had broken through the protection this material offered. And of course, Lotus was no exception.

But today...definitely today!

“Aa...aaaaaaah!!” With every scrap of energy she could muster, Lotus pushed back against the hyper-diamond core of Graph's swords, supposedly the hardest substance in the Accelerated World. Another shock wave shot out and faded at super-high speed. The supposedly indestructible earth cracked with concentric circles racing outward, perhaps unable to withstand the power generated in the struggle of the two level eighters, a force that went far beyond the numbers.

Black Lotus had crossed swords any number of times with Graphite Edge, a member of the Legion she was master of—her subordinate, in other words. It wasn't that they didn't get along, despite Graph pushing back against her authority. In fact, just the opposite—he had been instructing Lotus in the art of sword fighting since she was still only level two or three. In other words, he was something of a teacher to her.

And yet, Lotus had a reason for desperately trying to surpass her teacher in today's lesson. She intended to advance soon to the (supposedly) untrodden territory of level nine. To go from eight to nine required the expenditure of a sum of Burst Points so vast it boggled the mind, but nonetheless, she had finally built up that massive reservoir, including an extra-points buffer that would prevent anything from getting in the way of her duties as Legion Master.

The masters of the other six major Legions were also on the verge of reaching level nine at basically the same time, so it would be unacceptable for her to be late, given that she was considered one of the Seven Kings of Pure

Color alongside them. But there was one problem: Becoming level nine meant she would advance beyond Graphite Edge. She very well might be able to best him in a duel from level nine, but then she wouldn't be able to say that she had actually surpassed him when fighting as equals.

Which was why that day would most likely be the last she was able to fight Graph on equal ground. He had passed on to her a multitude of techniques over more than three years in the real world and a period of time impossible to count in the Accelerated World, so she wanted desperately to show him some proof of her growth. No...She wanted to beat him down, this vexingly cool-as-a-cucumber double-sword user, and be proud of her victory.

“J-just fly already!!” Lotus squeezed a hoarse voice out of her throat, as she felt the periphery of her vision start to white out, perhaps because of her intense concentration.

She no longer had the extra power to step back momentarily and then attack again. It had already been a bit of work just to push Graph into using his double-sword cross guard, given that he was a master of evasive footwork. And yet, even in this situation, the face mask that she caught a glimpse of through the transparent hyper diamond had an air of easy nonchalance about it.

At times like this, Graph's usual lines were things like “Not too shabby, Lota.” Or “Just a bit more, Lota.” “Nice guts, Lota.” Ever calm and composed, the way he called her Lota as a play on *Lotus* would only further aggravate her.

This was likely because Lotus had still been in second grade when they met for the first time, and so he'd had no choice but to treat her like a child. But she was in sixth grade now; she'd be in junior high next spring. And when you considered the Brain Burst installation conditions, Graph had to have been of a similar age in the real, right? Honestly, this double-sword user was really—

“You've gotten strong, Lota—I mean, Lotus.” His voice came suddenly over the squeal of their locked swords.

Stunned, she wondered if she'd misheard, but the ever-calm voice continued.

“Seems like there's nothing left for me to teach you.”

“—?!”

He'd never said this to her before, and Lotus stumbled, her concentration

faltering. The balance between the attacking and defending forces crumbled, and the pressurized energy concentrated there scattered violently.

Kreeaahn! That pressure slammed into her like an explosion and knocked her flying backward. She bounced off the cracked marble ground of the Twilight stage several times, tumbling and rolling until she found the right moment to plunge the sword of her right leg into the ground and bring herself to a halt, carving out a rut in the ground. She stood up, shaking her head lightly.

She had been convinced that Graph had also been knocked flying, given that he was just as close as she was to the explosion's ground zero, but in a twist, the metallic-gray avatar hadn't moved so much as a single step from his original position. He had taken the blow from that violent surge of energy with the crossed double swords.

...Honestly! This guy!

Cursing him inwardly, Black Lotus—Kuroyukihime—shouted, “Oy, Graph! What was that strategy about?!”

“That was how I really feel as a teacher.” Graph shrugged lightly as he lowered the swords in both hands, a dozen or so meters away. “If I was going to set a trap to mess up your sword work...Right, I'd talk about flat, black bugs wriggling around or something.”

“Stop it. I'll kill you,” she returned in a cold voice—before letting out a long sigh.

Regrettably, she hadn't been able to achieve her objective of surpassing her teacher, but she *had* pushed Graph to a place where he'd had to say something like that, which gave her confidence. And with that in mind, she checked in with the acting referees, watching over the scene together from the left. “Maiden. Curren. May I call this...a draw?”

The small dual-colored avatar standing on the right side shook her head firmly. “No matter how you look at it, it's your loss, Lo.”

This was followed by the avatar on the left, her entire body wrapped in her unique flowing-water armor, similarly shaking her head, sending water droplets scattering. “I think the winner of the battle is the one standing in the end.”

“...Mm. I see.” Kuroyukihime nodded, her gaze still turned toward the official referees.

“Hunh!” She brandished the sword of her right arm with a cry. Red light

jettied forth in a straight line along the floor—or more precisely, the roof of the large, mixed-use building at the east exit of Shibuya station, Shibuya Hikarie. On this side of the line were Lotus and the two referees; on the other side was Graphite Edge.



“...Oh.” Graph seemed to catch on that something was afoot and tried to run, still clutching his swords. But the ground on which he stood sank backward with a heavy roar.

“Lota! N-n-n-no fair!!” Graph shouted, waving both hands to try to keep his balance, but it was too late. Kuroyukihime had launched the long-distance attack technique he’d taught her and sliced through the top of the skyscraper diagonally. Cut free of the rest of the building, the large structure began to slide along the cross section, pulled down by gravity, and Graph was inevitably dragged along with it. “Whoa! ...I’m...I’m gonna faaaallllllll...”

With this, the double-sword user finally disappeared from Kuroyukihime’s field of view. There was only one in Nega Nebulus who could return to the roof of the 180-meter tall building in that situation—the Element with an Enhanced Armament in the form of a high-output booster, who was not currently on the scene. And no Burst Linker in the Accelerated World could fly higher than she could.

Kuroyukihime stretched gently upward as she pulled her right arm down and looked at the two referees. “Now this is my win, yes?”

“...That’s against the rules,” said the smaller one.

“...Super—not fair,” agreed the larger.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Kuroyukihime turned away abruptly and looked to the western sky. Just as the health gauge with the name Graphite Edge to the right dropped dramatically against the backdrop of the orange of the dusk, the heavy *thud* of destruction reached her from the ground far below.

Five minutes later.

Due to bad luck or actual ability or both, Graph just barely managed to avoid his gauge being completely emptied. He returned to the roof via the elevator, and now the four of them sat together in a circle. The chairs were the Grecian temple-style pillars particular to the Twilight stage, cut down to an appropriate height.

Since Lotus and Graph had generated this field for a regular duel, they were limited to thirty minutes. Half of this had been spent on the confrontation between teacher and student, leaving them around ten minutes now. They were connected not through the global net, but rather through a Legion-exclusive closed net, so there was no audience.

The first to open her mouth was the shrine maiden avatar clad in crimson

and raw muslin, Ardor Maiden. “Lo. Are you ready to advance to level nine?”

The reason that Maiden called Kuroyukihime, the sixth-grader, Lo—short for Lotus—was extremely simple. As a second grader, she was likely by far the youngest in the Legion. But she had already reached level seven, and she was always extremely calm and collected.

“Well...” Kuroyukihime nodded at a strange angle, looking back at the younger girl’s rounded, innocent eye lenses. “To be honest, I had intended to have a complete victory over Graph today and level up with a clear heart...” She looked hard at the metallic avatar sitting in front of her.

He scratched his head in a very un-teacher-like manner. “I—I was thinking the same thing, which is why I said that whole initiation-type stuff.”

“Then perhaps you could have waited until the end of the match to say such things rather than in the middle of the struggle!” she snapped.

“Aah, like, that’s not really who I am...Or like, it’s embarrassing...”

While he was the most powerful swordsman in the Legion and a veteran since the formation of Nega Nebulus, Graph’s lack of solemnity remained unchanged from the old days. The fourth member of the Elements, who could not be there because of reasons related to the time school let out, said he was “basically a sword.”

And this actually hit pretty close to home. Graphite Edge’s weak point was basically hand-to-hand combat, so in a battle without his swords, he probably couldn’t have won against the long-distance-type Maiden, even. He was a duel avatar of a fixed-point type, that had poured pretty much all his potential into his Enhanced Armament—his swords.

“It’s all right, Graph. I think your feelings must have been communicated to Lo through your swords,” Maiden said, following up with an air of a smile bleeding through onto her small face mask.

“Right!” Graph nodded deeply as if he understood just what she was getting at. “That’s pretty much what I was trying to say, my student. Just like the conscience of Nega Nebulus to say that, Denden.”

The instant she heard this affectionate nickname, the light that filled Maiden’s eye lenses got just a little scary. Being called Lota herself, Kuroyukihime understood how she felt, but they had to continue talking right now. She cleared her throat. “Whether or not your feelings reached me, I am also satisfied with that session. I didn’t manage a complete victory, but it still

wasn't bad for our last fight as two level eighters...I think."

"So then, you're going to go up a level, yes, Lo?" Her face back to normal, Maiden cocked her head adorably to one side.

"Yes...Aah, it is frightening to use such an enormous sum of points in one go, but if I'm going to make it to level ten, then this is a road I cannot avoid going down."

"While your points are down, we will offer you the perfect protection, Lotus, so you can relax," came the quiet voice of the slender flowing-water avatar Aqua Current, who had so far simply listened in silence.

"Thanks, Curren." Kuroyukihime leaned to the left and bowed her head toward the avatar, ears attuned to the faint babbling sound of her armor. "But there's no need for you to concern yourself. I will also be taking part in the regular Enemy hunt in the Unlimited Neutral Field soon after I level up."

"I thought you'd say that," Current said. "But...there is something that concerns me."

"That rumor?" Kuroyukihime raised an eyebrow. "That once you go up to level nine, some kind of special rules that did not previously exist will be applied?"

Current nodded, and the part of the water armor that was like hair tied back swung back and forth.

In the Accelerated World, the rumor of special level-nine rules had started circulating about three months ago. Its origins were unknown, and the details themselves were unclear. The reason for the scarcity of information was that the majority of Burst Linkers ignored it as having nothing to do with themselves.

And this was no surprise. There were said to be just under a thousand Burst Linkers, but it was an easy thing to count those who had reached level eight, and those in range of level nine were no more than ten. For Kuroyukihime, being the leader of Nega Nebulus had been a huge help in securing this many points. In which case, that was precisely why she had to confirm for herself if there was any kind of risk in ascending to level nine... Or so she thought.

Aqua Current turned her streamlined face mask to the left and met the pale eye lenses of Graphite Edge. "Graph. If you became level nine before Lotus, I think you could safely confirm the truth of the rumor."

Hit so casually with this rather shocking suggestion, the metallic avatar

reeled. “Wh-whaaat?! M-me?!”

“Maiden and I are still level seven, but you’re eight... And I think you’re closest to nine after Lotus. Am I wrong?”

There was a reason that Current didn’t refer to the remaining member of the Four Elements, who was not present at the moment. She was also level eight like Graph, but she had recently hinted at pulling back from the Legion front lines. It wasn’t that she had grown tired of the game—just the opposite. As a Burst Linker, she was aiming for the heights more purely than anyone else.

Lotus’s heart started to hurt when she thought about this friend—her closest connection in this world, albeit in a different sense from Graphite Edge—moving away from her, but she pushed this aside and focused on the conversation between Current and Graph.

“Uh, um. I won’t say you’re wrong, but if you think about a safety margin, too, I’m a little short. And to begin with, someone like me leapfrogging ahead of the Seven Kings of Pure Color to become level nine...”

“So then you can just call yourself a king, too,” Maiden replied simply.

“N-no, no, no!” The double-sword user repeatedly alternated between moving his hands and shaking his head. “That burden’s too much for me. And to start with, my color name’s graphite... Even if I did name myself a king, what king would I be? The Graphite King?”

“That overlaps with Lo’s Black King, so that’s no good.” Maiden rejected the idea bluntly, perhaps as payback for him always calling her Denden, and the swordmaster was at a loss for words.

“I think the Pencil King is good,” Current remarked mercilessly.

“Pencil...” Maiden cocked her head to one side. “What’s that, Curren?”

“Way back when, a lot of people used a writing instrument that had a graphite core,” Current, apparently also in sixth grade like Kuroyukihime, explained. “It was very thin and broke easily, so it suits Graph to a tee.”

“Wow...,” Graph mused. “Kids these days don’t know what a pencil is—No, wait! Forget that! Curreent! My metal’s not *that* weak, you know!”

“Everyone noticed when you were secretly down before when the Purple King totally beat the hell out of you,” Current replied. “And... I’ve said this a million times, but it’s not Curreent, it’s *Current*.”

“Aah, um, there’s this sweet where I’m from called *reent*, so I just...”

“That’s a total lie!” Current shouted.

Here, Kuroyukihime burst out laughing at last. Perhaps her friends had noticed that she was feeling a little glum before, so maybe they were purposefully offering up this sunny back-and-forth. But that was just how kind they were.

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, let’s leave it there, Maiden, Curren. Even if there is some uncertain element in going up to level nine, I can’t exactly make my teacher run a screen for me. And at any rate, it seems like the other kings will be leveling up at basically the same time. So dangerous or not, they’ll be in it with me.”

A serious look rose up on Graph’s simple yet masculine face mask. “The same time as the other kings, huh? So then, Lota, will all Seven Kings meet or something once you’re all level nine-ish?”

“Depending on the veracity of the rumor, it’s not out of the question. We’ve had diplomatic relations before on the scale of two or three, or even four of us. So I think of that as the seven-person version, basically.”

“I see.” Graph folded his arms, appearing to sink into thought. Normally, he was so detached and aloof that there was nowhere to grab hold of him, but since he very rarely displayed a keen power of insight, the other three kept their mouths shut and waited.

“Lota.” Eventually, the double-sword user lifted his head and offered, “I’ve given you all kinds of advice about your level-up bonuses so far.”

Kuroyukihime looked at him questioningly. “Yes, and I’m grateful for that...”

“Oh, I’m not looking for you to thank me,” he went on hurriedly. “Because that was me determining your direction as a Burst Linker. Specializing in offense in one-on-one duels.”

“...What’s this about all of a sudden? It’s not as though I’ve strengthened this avatar simply as you told me to. It’s because I felt that this direction would allow me to fight in a way that most suited me.” Kuroyukihime moved the swords of both hands slightly.

Graph nodded slowly. “And I’m not trying to contradict myself or anything now. Rather than an all-purpose build, a singularly specialized build has the power to break through the hard-edge moments of the game at the end of the end...That belief’s not going to change, no matter what happens. Well, I don’t have to tell the three of you that, though.”

This time, Kuroyukihime, Maiden, and Current all nodded.

Ever since she was a baby newbie, Kuroyukihime had selected her level-up bonuses based on advice from her teacher. Not taking a single special attack or Enhanced Armament of the long-range or mass-effect type, she had only chosen close-range/single-target special attacks and enhancements to the attack power of her four limbs. She had never once regretted this. She believed it was precisely because she had aimed for this singular specialization that she'd been able to manifest her powerful Terminate Sword ability.

Ardor Maiden and Aqua Current weren't Graphite Edge's students, but their direction of growth was the same, so Maiden had mainly enhanced her long-distance firepower and Aqua her flowing armor.

So why is Graph suddenly talking about this now?

The three turned curious eyes on him, and the double-sword user displayed a rare moment of hesitation.

"I know it's a bit late for this," he said finally, in a low voice. "But Lota, even if, like, you get into a group fight with some people as strong as you are in a field where we aren't...you absolutely can't give up on yourself. Don't think of it as many against one; you focus on the one-on-one that's in front of you. Attack. Attack, attack, cut it down, whatever it is. That's your strength."

3

“...That’s your strength. That’s what my master said. Perhaps he already knew it then...That I would stain these swords with blood at the meeting of the Seven Kings.” The Black King finished her story almost in a whisper, and Haruyuki stared wordlessly at her fierce yet elegant form.

Before starting this direct duel, Kuroyukihime had said they would talk with swords, but fortunately, she had not come at him the second they landed in the stage. Instead, she got Haruyuki to help her turn terrain objects into chairs and sat them across from each other before telling him this somewhat long tale.

She had mentioned no names. But one of the subleaders of the first Nega Nebulus that had been annihilated two years ago in the summer of 2044 was Kuroyukihime’s teacher. And that person had advised her to aim for singular specialization rather than all-purpose style.

There were plenty of things she didn’t tell him that he thought strange—like, why wasn’t it her parent who had been her teacher, but some other Burst Linker?—but she looked like she was hurting in her heart at that moment, and Haruyuki leaned forward in his impromptu seat.

“Uh, um, Kuroyukihime? I said this a little while ago, too, but...I think it’s only natural that you would have chosen the path of fighting the other kings. I mean, Brain Burst is a fighting game, and we dive into this world in order to fight...” He managed to push his linguistic abilities to the limit and put this much into words.

Kuroyukihime lifted her face mask and stared hard at him with bluish-purple eye lenses that shone on the other side of her semi-mirrored goggles. “Mm-hmm. Right, that’s exactly it.”

She made the tip of her right leg clank against the marble of the floor, as if to mentally switch gears, and stretched her slender body up straight. The pale moonlight that poured down penetrated deep into her semitransparent, piano-black armor to make her entire avatar glow hazily.

They had accelerated on the roof of the Asagaya hospital, so they had

come down in the same coordinates. But the scene below was completely different. All the buildings were white marble with gothic notes, and the sky was colored a bluish black, while a truly enormous full moon hung above their heads. The beauty of the Moonlight stage surpassed even the countless other stages that existed, and since there were no terrain effects or critters to be wary of, it was the perfect place for talking. And naturally, given that this was a direct duel, there was no one in the Gallery around them.

“The stages are for fighting, the duel avatars for fighting. My teacher was a Burst Linker who embodied that simple concept better than anyone else.” Still looking into Haruyuki’s eyes, Kuroyukihime started to speak again quietly. “And I cultivated Black Lotus to specialize in close-range, one-on-one fighting because I hoped to be like that, too. It wasn’t only that my teacher told me to. It’s because I felt that it was what this avatar actually wanted.”

“The avatar...wanted?” Haruyuki repeated, his eyes widening. He had not so much as considered this since he’d become a Burst Linker.

“Yes.” Kuroyukihime dipped her head in assent, an air of laughter bleeding through. “Our duel avatars are one with us Burst Linkers, coupled with us...Before I called this Lotus the ‘epitome of hideousness,’ but that wasn’t because I hate my avatar. This ugly form, the embodiment of severance, is surely my own self. What about you, Haruyuki? You’ve fought together all the way to level two now. Have you started to hear Silver Crow’s voice?”

He unconsciously looked down at his hands. The slender fingers wrapped in silver armor were far from the power of a fighter type.

In his first duel after becoming a Burst Linker, when he’d seen this avatar reflected in the window of an abandoned building, Haruyuki had inadvertently thought he was a “total small fry.” And that impression still hadn’t gone away, but if someone said they’d trade avatars of a different design from Crow, he’d probably refuse. It wasn’t because he’d manifested the lone flight ability. It was because the awareness of this shiny-headed metal color being himself had taken root in his heart at some point.

“Um. I can’t hear his voice yet, but I don’t hate him, either. I mean, Crow was born from my own heart. He was born for me,” Haruyuki said, clenching his tapered fingers.

“Mm. Yes. That’s exactly it.” Kuroyukihime nodded happily two or three

times. “The words you just gave voice to are precisely the starting point for a duel avatar’s growth. Never forget that. Now. Taking this recognition into consideration, it’s about time we got started.”

“Huh? Started? With what?”

“Look here. I told you clearly before we accelerated, yes? That we would talk with swords.” Kuroyukihime shook her head in exasperation and stood up from her chalky chair. She glanced upward. “Ten minutes left. Well, that’ll be enough, I suppose.”

“E-enough? For what?” Haruyuki asked, not knowing when to give up, and at his throat was a sharp, inky blade, appearing so quickly that he couldn’t see the tip. Unconsciously reeling backward, he said hoarsely, “Uh, um. No way. A...a d-d-duel with me...”

“Hee-hee. Although I would love to ask you for a bout, the difference between our levels now is simply too great. I’ll look forward to a one-on-one duel when you’ve grown more,” Kuroyukihime replied in a laughing voice, and Haruyuki was relieved as the sword before his eyes was pulled back slightly.

“As a general premise, there is no correct way to cultivate a duel avatar. Will you aim to be an all-purpose type, with long-, close-, and midrange abilities? Or will you specialize in a single ability like my teacher and me? The choice in the end is yours. It would be simple for me to tell you to choose this or that level-up bonus, but I do want you to feel it yourself. What Silver Crow wants, what path he wants to go down.”

“What...he wants...?”

“Yes. That is, put another way, your own desire hidden away deep in your heart...Now stand up, Haruyuki.”

Kuroyukihime’s voice had an unusually kind air to it, and Haruyuki got to his feet from the white impromptu chair as if sucked in. He moved to take a step forward, but she actually waved him back. At the same time, she slid backward in a hovering motion to put a full ten meters between the two of them.

“Now then, here we go, Silver Crow! Respond to this blow with your whole heart and soul!!” Her fiercely thunderous voice—so powerful that he wanted to ask what happened to the gentle voice from just a moment ago—echoed through the tranquil stage. Her violet-blue eyes flashed forcefully. She pulled the swords of her arms back as her slender avatar gently leaned

forward.

Boom! Concentric cracks raced outward on the hospital roof from her feet. She charged—or rather, shot forward—an obsidian arrowhead launched from an enormous bow. Before he could so much as blink, the figure of the Black King was closing in before his eyes.

When the sword of her right arm started slicing from above her head, Haruyuki's brain finally switched gears. The sound around him seemed to drop in pitch as time got just a little looser. Even so, Black Lotus's attack was incredibly fast, and the infinitely sharp black closed in before his eyes.

If Silver Crow had been given a long-distance special attack or Enhanced Armament, then perhaps it would have been possible to divert the attack before it got any closer. If, for example, he had been his friend Takumu's avatar Cyan Pile, he could have checked Lotus's approach with the special attack Splash Stinger, which launched a multitude of needle missiles from his chest area.

But at present, Crow didn't have a single long-range technique. There was one in his level-up bonus options, but it was not possible to test it out before claiming it. All he could do in this situation was use his characteristic metal armor to defend himself. Kuroyukihime herself had said that metal-color avatars had a resistance to severing and piercing attacks.

In which case, if he firmly fixed his gauntlet arms, he should be able to guard here. Haruyuki was a wee chick who'd only just made it to level two, but of the many duel avatars he'd fought up to that point, there hadn't been one who'd ripped through Crow's arm armor using a sword.

These thoughts racing through his head in an instant, Haruyuki braced his legs firmly and crossed his arms in front of his face. Even seeing Crow's fixed defensive posture, Lotus did not attempt to change the trajectory of her slashing attack. The blade came slicing down in a straight line from directly overhead.

Now... Guard!!

At the moment of contact, Haruyuki put all his might into his arms and waited for the impact.

But.

He didn't sense any sound or weight or any other kind of impact. About all he got was a mere spray of orange sparks in the edge of his vision. He opened his eyes wide and saw something that was hard to take in at first.

The thin, jet-black blade was cutting through his thick silver armor like butter. A sight that lacked reality, as if his collision detector was on the fritz. But the chill that ran up both arms and the health gauge that started to drop in the upper left of his field of view were indeed reality. Staying with his guard up like this, in a moment, both his arms—no, Silver Crow’s body itself—would be cut in half.

“Nngh!” Haruyuki held his breath and threw his torso backward. However, there was no way he could move faster than the slicing attack. In the blink of an eye, the blade had cut through his armor and touched the naked body of his avatar inside. Perhaps because it was so sharp, he didn’t feel any pain.

This is the actual power of a level niner...a close-range, specialized avatar. How am I supposed to guard against this? She knew it would turn out like this from the start. So then, why’d she tell me to defend?

When he’d gotten this far in his mind, thoughts mixed with defeat, Haruyuki finally remembered. Kuroyukihime hadn’t told him to defend. She’d said to “respond.” Which meant that the current Silver Crow had the power to manage this slicing attack somehow. And that meant there was just one possibility.

“Unh...aah!” Inclining his body even farther, Haruyuki deployed the thin metallic fins—the wings equipped on Silver Crow’s back.

The blade had already reached the center of his arms, and the tip was digging into the left side of his helmet. If he used his wings and tried to fly forward or upward, it would be the same as slicing his avatar up himself.

Up to that point, Haruyuki had only used the wings on his back—his flight ability—to charge, ascend, or drop rapidly; in other words, to advance. In fact, he’d thought there was no other way to use it. But Crow’s silver wings didn’t fly by flapping like a bird. The extremely thin blade fins vibrated at high frequencies and gained thrust by beating at the air. In which case, he should be able to fly backward from a static position.

“Fly!” Legs bent, leaning forward, Haruyuki fluttered his wings with everything he had.

Hit by the sudden atmospheric current, the speed of Lotus’s slicing attack dulled the slightest bit. Not letting his sole chance get away, Haruyuki kicked off the ground.

Graarr! He heard a sound like an explosion, and Silver Crow flew

backward like he'd been hit by a giant's hand—he was sent flying. The inky blade pulled free of his arms, tracing out a tail of sparks. Although he'd avoided the danger of being sliced in two, he lost his balance in the unfamiliar maneuver and just barely managed to take off, his feet scraping along the ground any number of times.

Once he'd ascended more than ten meters into the sky with the pale full moon behind him, he finally shifted to hovering.

“...Haaah...” As he let out a long breath, he looked down and met the eyes of Kuroyukihime, who was already lowering her swords.

Her gaze was calm and satisfied, as if the earlier murderous aura had been an illusion. She nodded firmly and called to him in the sky, “You've grown, Haruyuki!”

Understanding that he'd apparently “responded,” Haruyuki sighed again with relief and lazily descended. He landed right in front of Kuroyukihime and looked again at the wounds on his arms. The cuts were so perfect that if this were the real world, they would have been impossible to create, no matter what tools were used. The cross section that he could get just a peek of shone like a mirror.

“Nice work realizing in that moment that you could not guard against my swords. And the speed of your response after that was marvelous,” Kuroyukihime reported with a cool look.

“If you'd told me in advance, I wouldn't have thought to guard from the start,” Haruyuki replied, a hint of complaint in his tone.

“But then that wouldn't have been a lesson.” Kuroyukihime laughed briefly before straightening up. “Now, then. How about it? Did you perhaps hear Crow's voice?”

“Uh. Um...I feel like maybe I did...But...,” Haruyuki stammered in reply, even though Kuroyukihime was taking the trouble to give him hands-on instruction.

But his teacher didn't get mad, only nodded coolly. “It's all right. If you can move like you just did, then the answer is already inside you. You just have to cultivate your avatar directly as your heart tells you to.” She quickly opened her Instruct menu.

Before he pushed the OK button in the window, requesting a draw that appeared in his field of view, Haruyuki clenched his hands into fists and bowed his head deeply. “Thank you very much!”

He left Kuroyukihime in front of the elevator on the top floor of the hospital, and while he was walking toward Koenji and home, Haruyuki played the words she'd said in the final moments of the duel on repeat in the back of his mind.

“You just have to cultivate your avatar directly...”

Although he had nodded as if in solid agreement, to be honest, he still had misgivings. Regardless of the fact that he had just barely managed to respond to the Black King's indefensible attack in the Moonlight stage, if, for instance, Crow had had a long-distance special attack like Cyan Pile, he might have been able to stop the initial charge itself. And one of the four level-up bonuses he could select from at any time was Radial Shot, a special attack that launched three metal arrows from the armor of his arms radially.

The only information he had was the short explanatory text and the silhouette motion, so he couldn't know how it would be used in a duel unless he actually selected it. But he'd been fighting empty-handed all this time, so for Haruyuki, a “flying tool” was a dream power. If he had that, he might be able to repay the red-type avatars that shot at him from far away as much as they liked with a shot—no, three shots.

And yes, Kuroyukihime had even said it herself, hadn't she? To choose the power he most desired.

“Unnhh.” He groaned the same way he had a half hour or so ago and opened the Brain Burst console on his virtual desktop. He switched the tab to the bonus selection screen that he was now utterly familiar with.

The top left of the four bonuses was Radial Knuckle, a close-range special attack that closed the distance aboveground with a slide dash and launched a series of high-speed punches. The bottom left was Hard Armor, an Enhanced Armament that would increase the defensive power of his torso. And the bottom right was an enhancement of the flight ability he already possessed.

The Enhanced Armament wasn't a weapon, so he wasn't drawn to that, and the ability enhancement was so boring. If he was going to choose, then it would actually be a special attack, and of the two of those, the flying tool... His thoughts did indeed run in this direction.

“It's a total waste to keep fighting without taking my bonus now that I finally made it to level two,” Haruyuki muttered weakly, and taking advantage of having stopped at a red light along the Chuo Line elevated bridge, he extended his finger to the top right of the window.

“Okay! That settles it then! When you think about it, flying tools plus flight is the most powerful combo, right? I’ll rack up the wins with this and hit level three before Kuroyukihime gets out of the hospital!” Unconsciously, he started explaining as if to convince himself, and his trembling finger approached the Radial Shot button.

But just a few millimeters away, his hand stopped for some reason. He had decided in his mind to push this button, so then why wouldn’t his body listen to what he was telling it? It was almost like he’d been hit with a debuff that made movement impossible.

“Haah.” He sighed with disillusionment—there had to be limits to indecisiveness, and yet...Haruyuki abandoned the bonus selection for the moment and glanced at the opposite side of the road. The wait time in the AR display next to the red pedestrian light said twelve seconds. Plenty of time.

“Burst Link.”

Skreeeeee!! The familiar sound of acceleration came as the world was frozen blue. Descending in the pink pig avatar in the initial acceleration space of the Blue World, Haruyuki switched the open console to the matching list.

After a moment of the loading display, the names of nearly ten Burst Linkers were immediately lined up on the list. The Suginami area where Haruyuki currently was had long been neutral territory, but together with the Black King’s return to the Accelerated World, she had declared this the territory of the new Nega Nebulus.

Within a territory, members of the ruling Legion had the right to refuse challenges from other Burst Linkers. Thus, as long as you were in your territory, it was possible to select only opponents who were advantageous for you. But after checking the list from top to bottom, Haruyuki reached out to the sole name he’d never seen. Unlike before, his hand didn’t stop; the black hoof touched the list. He hit the DUEL button that immediately appeared with a *clack*.

I’m going to make sure of it in this battle. Of what kind of power I—and Silver Crow—really want.

With this thought strong in his chest, he gave himself over to the effects to transform into his duel avatar.

4

In the normal duel field for the second time that day, the stage, and its marked destruction, had changed from Moonlight to Weathered. All of the surrounding buildings were transformed into desolate objects, crumbling concrete with chunks of rusty steel skeletons breaking through to the exterior. The surface of the road was a spiderweb of fine cracks, and the never-ending wind tossed up tufts of dust and dirt. The sky alone was beautiful, the clearest of blues, the dry clarity of a world from which the human race had vanished.

Haruyuki took in the blue of the sky for just a moment before blinking and checking the health gauge in the upper right of his field of view. The name displayed there was JADE JAILER; the level was three, one above him.

“Jade...Like the gem, huh? So then, a green type? Jailer is...like a prison person? Maybe a prisoner?” Unfortunately, this analysis was the limit for seventh-grade Haruyuki’s English abilities. Everything about the Brain Burst system was displayed in English, so for a Burst Linker, English was actually an important skill, but a language wasn’t the kind of thing you could learn in a day. In tag team matches with Takumu, his friend generally translated the English words for him, so he’d also been pretty spoiled and hadn’t really felt the need to study harder.

Either way, he’d figure out what *jailer* meant once he actually saw his opponent. The guide cursor floating in the middle of his vision was pointing pretty much due east. The fact that it wavered slightly was proof that his opponent was approaching in a straight line.

“Moving in a straight line in this terrain? But this is a residential neighborhood. There shouldn’t be any straight roads,” Haruyuki muttered, but then he quickly grasped the reason for this. His opponent wasn’t using the roads. Haruyuki smashed a series of nearby concrete lumps to charge his special-attack gauge and then jumped up with his wings to leap onto the linear structure that cut across from east to west above his head—the Chuo Line elevated bridge.

The track slab that supported the line was also covered in cracks, but the rails at least shone a dull steel color. Depending on the stage, if there was a proper track, then generally, a train would be running on it from outside the area border. Of course, it was a rare event and unlikely to happen more than once during the course of a duel, but if a player was hit by that rare train, it was a foregone conclusion that they would take serious damage. Haruyuki quickly checked ahead and behind him, but he could see no sign of the train.

But instead, a silhouette was approaching at top speed from the direction of Koenji station—his duel opponent, Jade Jailer, naturally. As they drew closer, several more human silhouettes appeared on the roofs of the buildings that looked down on the train line. The Gallery was in automatic follow mode, and its members had teleported in.

He should have kept his eyes focused ahead of him on his approaching enemy, but Haruyuki nonetheless glanced over to check the faces of the audience. It was only natural that Takumu wasn't there, given that he was probably still at practice at his school in Shinjuku, but he also didn't see Kuroyukihime—Black Lotus—from whom he had only recently parted. Of course, it wasn't as though the hospitalized Kuroyukihime had automatic viewing set to ON twenty-four hours a day, but he still felt a little anxious at her absence. He quickly rebuked himself, however: This duel was to determine the path he was meant to tread. All he could do was give it everything he had, whether his parent was there or not.

Clenching his fists tightly, he turned his gaze forward again to stare down his duel opponent, who had just stopped between the two rails about ten meters away.

If his enemy's color name had been a long-distance red, then Haruyuki wouldn't have naively jumped up onto the rails, but instead flown down from a neighboring building and aimed for a surprise attack. But with a defensive green, the possibility of being attacked with flying weapons was low. And his expectations were not betrayed; his opponent did not appear to have a gun or a bow.

Still, it wasn't as though he was completely bare-handed the way Crow was. His hands were totally fingerless and uniquely shaped into enormous rings about fifty centimeters across. Thin like washers, the rings didn't appear to have blades on the edges. The color of his armor, including the rings, was a jade green, just as his name suggested. But most noticeable was the thin

chain that connected right and left wrists. Two or so meters long, it clanged and jangled, hanging nearly down to his feet. Given how long it was, Haruyuki assumed it had to make any kind of offensive action difficult, and the whole aura of the other duel avatar was like someone robbed of their freedom.

So then Jailer was a prisoner, huh?

Haruyuki bowed his head. “Um, nice to meet you. I’m Silver Crow, a member of Nega Nebulus. I’m sorry for intruding on you, but I’m hoping for a good fight!”

His opponent was also Low Level, so they were both on the newcomer side of the equation, but Haruyuki said his greetings at any rate as the challenger.

His opponent responded by jangling the chain in his hands. “I would be Jade Jailer, a member of Great Wall.”

...Would be? Haruyuki furrowed his brow but then reminded himself that this was not where his concern ought to lie. The Green Legion, Great Wall, was the largest in the Accelerated World, with a massive territory spanning from Shibuya to Meguro. Shibuya *was* right next to Suginami, but the members of GW almost never went on trips to the neighborhood of Koenji.

As if reading Haruyuki’s mind, Jailer shook his unusually shaped head; he looked as though he was wearing an old-school woven rice hat. “You need not apologize for the challenge. Because I have humbly come to the Suginami domain so I might join you in a contest. Since I am unable to challenge you, it is most splendid that you were so kind as to challenge me.”

...Humbly? Suginami domain? Caught on the particulars of speech, Haruyuki bowed his head once again. “O-oh, well, then I th-thank you for making the long trip.”

“Goodness! Now you are thanking me. In any case...” Jailer turned the ring of his right hand toward Haruyuki with a jangle, and his voice grew tense. “...I shall inscribe you on the newest page of the detective’s memoirs!”

“...D-detective’s memoirs?” Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, while cheers poured down from the Gallery on the roofs of the surrounding buildings.

“Yah! Inspector Jade Poirot!”

“You won’t catch the crow with your policeman’s rope so easily!”

From the look of the Gallery, Jailer was apparently pretty famous in the

Shibuya area. But Haruyuki was no slouch himself; the name Silver Crow had reached the opposite side of Tokyo by now. Apparently.

A prisoner avatar in chains, and you're planning to catch me? Go ahead and try! he shouted inwardly, joining his opponent in snapping his arms up into a ready position. "Okay then, permit me to get started!"

"The usual contest it is, then!"

A small spark bounced up between their two battle cries, and the two avatars moved at the same time.

Haruyuki didn't know the first thing about Jailer's fighting style or abilities. But he could at least be sure that his opponent was a close-range type, given that he was also charging straight at Crow.

...At a time like this, if I had a long-distance special-attack gauge like Radial Shot, I could launch a feint and check my opponent's output.

These thoughts rose up persistently in the back of his mind, and he forced them out of his head so he could focus his attention on his enemy's weapons—the rings of both hands. Given that they had no blades, they were an impact-type weapon rather than slicing, but this was actually more of a threat to the metal-colored Crow. He'd best deal with them by evasion rather than guarding.

"Hup!" Jade shouted, bringing the ring of the right hand down from directly above, and Haruyuki dodged it with a side step.

"Yah!" This time, the ring of the left hand closed in on Haruyuki on the horizontal, and he dodged this with a jump. But that seemed to be his enemy's intention, and the third blow—the chain connecting Jailer's hands—came rushing toward him, carving out an arc in the air.

Normally, the only choice when he was attacked mid-jump was to guard. But of all the duel avatars in this world, Haruyuki could completely change his trajectory mid-jump. He applied a brief burst of back thrust with the wings on his back, a technique he'd only awakened to in the duel with Kuroyukihime earlier, to stop his jump in midair.

The chain passed in front of him and slammed into the concrete slab in vain, and Haruyuki launched his own attack with a roundhouse kick aimed squarely at Jailer's left shoulder.

Skreenk! His opponent's health gauge dropped just over 5 percent. The damage was slight despite the fact that Haruyuki had gotten a clean hit, which meant his opponent's defensive power must have indeed been great.

To come out on top here, he'd need moves to counter rather than defensive power.

*If only I at least had a continuous special attack like Rapid Knuckle—
How long am I going to keep thinking about this?! Concentrate on the battle!*

Scolding himself, he used the reaction from the kick to do a backward somersault and landed some distance away from Jade. He'd managed to get the first attack in at any rate, but now his opponent also knew Crow's fighting style. What they would do with that knowledge was the difference between winning and losing.

Jailer seemed to be thinking that same thing. "I see now!" he shouted as he stood up, the chain between his hands clanging. "You do indeed move quite well! It seems that I am at a disadvantage in this fight, so if you please, I will allow myself to use my secret technique!"

"P-please! Go ahead!" Haruyuki replied, checking his enemy's special-attack gauge. With the charge Jade had built up in advance plus the charge from Haruyuki's blow, it was more than half full.

Jailer thrust both arms forward so the chain hung down loosely. And then he had no sooner yanked it up with a snap of his wrists than he was calling the name of the special attack. "Skipping Chain!!!"

Ah, of course, the name of the special attack's in English. In the fleeting moment of this thought, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide at his enemy's movements.

When the shining-green chain hit Jailer's feet, he did a little jump and leapt over it. The chain came up around the top of his head from behind, and then back down to the ground. At the same time as the edge hit the concrete, he jumped again. Three, four times, Jailer repeated the same movement.

So then this was the jump rope—no, jump chain—that Haruyuki was extremely terrible at. He watched, dumbfounded, as Jade jumped faster and faster and faster, the *klak, klak* of it hitting the ground becoming a successive *ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-kak*, and Jailer became a sphere shining with green light. Carving out a narrow rut in the concrete slab, he charged Haruyuki.

"G-gah!" Haruyuki hurriedly leapt backward, but the jump-rope ball also changed its trajectory to chase after him. The chain touched the steel rail, sending red sparks gushing upward. Judging from the nature of the technique, shaving damage would steal away a not-insignificant portion of his health gauge if he tried to guard with both arms. He felt a bit pathetic, but his only

choice was to retreat first to the sky above with his flight ability.

“Nngh!” He kicked off the ground and jumped, vibrating his wings at the same time. The thrust yanked his body upward, and he ascended directly up into the sky.

“It would seem you fell for it!!” Jade called out, and the sphere bounced. The chain spinning at high speeds seemed to be generating some kind of propulsive force, and the green avatar leapt up three meters to where Haruyuki hung in the sky. The glowing ball touched the tips of Crow’s toes.

“Waaah!” The chain caught his ankles, and Haruyuki was slammed down to the ground with a force he was helpless against. Although he managed to avoid crashing into the track slab at least by using the last of his thrust, he still landed flat on his back.

And the spinning chain ball came down at him from the sky above. If he got pinned under that, he risked having the last of his gauge shaved away. Fortunately, however, Jailer’s special-attack gauge ran out there. The jump-rope status was released to reveal the avatar in midair.

The perfect chance!

Haruyuki quickly got to his feet and waited for the chain hanging loosely from Jailer’s wrists. If he could grab hold of it and pull it up high into the sky with him, then it would be Haruyuki’s undisputed victory. No matter how tough the green type was, he wouldn’t be able to withstand the falling damage from a hundred meters above the ground.

“I got yoooooooouuu!” Haruyuki stretched out a hand to grab hold of the chain.

“Do yoooouuuu?!” Jailer lowered the ring of his right hand.

There was no room to dodge, but Crow was also a metal color. He could handle a single normal technique blow. He centered his strength in his stomach, ready for the impact, and the ring swept sideways into his body.

But. He felt none of the anticipated shock. Because the left half of the ring had moved to the inside using a pivot hidden at the top as an axis. It spun once to slide around to Haruyuki’s back before closing up in a circle once more with a high-pitched *ting*. Crow’s torso was now inside the ring of Jailer’s right hand.

“You have been apprehended!!” Jailer’s shout was practically a declaration of victory, but Haruyuki’s health gauge did not drop so much as a pixel.

Ignoring whatever was going on with Jailer's hand, he tried to take off, but his opponent had another surprise for him.

The moment Jailer's feet touched the ground, he slammed the ring of his left hand against the steel rail at his feet. The brittle concrete slab crumbling, half the ring rotated and reconnected with a *chak*. This hand ring now held the track inside it.

Unable to understand what Jailer was trying to do with his right hand around Haruyuki and his left around the rail, Haruyuki wondered about his next action, but the truly astounding part of this curious fight was yet to come.

Clunk! The rings of Jailer's hands separated from his wrists. The now handless jade-colored avatar jumped back and put some distance between them. All that was left was the ring wrapped around Haruyuki's torso, the ring eating the rail, and the two-meter chain that connected them.

"Unh." Here, finally, far too late, Haruyuki grasped what Jailer's peculiar hands were all about. They weren't striking weapons; they were massive handcuffs. And *jailer* didn't mean prisoner, but...*imprisoner*.

"Silver Crow, you have been apprehended! Indeed!" Jade Jailer announced, firmly crossing arms that had nothing beyond the wrists.

The voices of the Gallery rained down on them from the buildings on either side of the tracks.

"Yah! Perfection, Jade Poirot!"

"Aah, Nega Nebulus's little bird in chains, too? Well, this is a tough one to handle on first sight and all."

"Damned bird! Next time, don't get caught!"

The Gallery and his duel opponent were talking as though Jade's victory was assured. But his health gauge hadn't dropped any further. And they still had fifteen minutes left.

"It's not over yet! I'll break out of these handcuffs right now!" Haruyuki cried and grabbed the chain hanging down from the ring around his torso. He yanked on it for all he was worth, this chain with the opposite end touching the rail.

"Unh...Gaaaah!" He continued to pull with all his might, but the jade chain didn't move a millimeter.

"It is hopeless." Jailer shook his woven-hat-shaped head five or so meters away. "Not even Frost Horn of the Blue Leonids was able to pull apart that

chain.”

“Huh? S-seriously?”

Frost Horn was a super-close-range-type avatar who boasted of his ferocious charge and physical strength. He far surpassed Crow in terms of sheer power.

“W-well, then!” This time, he hit the taut chain with his fist, but of course, it made no real mark. So he tried placing it on the slab and stomping on it with his feet, but the result was the same.

If the chain was out of the question, then he could destroy the rail the other ring was attached to. So he flew at the steel rail with a full-power kick, but he actually ended up taking a tiny bit of damage. From the feedback he got, he guessed it was probably an indestructible object.

Why would the train track be protected like that? he wondered in an outburst of anger, and then a chill ran up his spine. The reason it was indestructible was obvious. Because the train ran along it. And now the reason Jailer had chosen the overhead bridge as the battleground, as well as the reason he had locked Haruyuki to the rail, was as clear as day.

To have the train hit Silver Crow, of course.

“It appears you have at last come to understand. And yet, your understanding comes at too late a date.”

Haruyuki lifted his face and saw Jailer gently raise his left arm in the direction of Shinjuku. Shining beyond the dust of the Weathered stage was, without a doubt, the headlight of a train.

“Nngh!” Gritting his teeth, Haruyuki yanked on the chain once more. But he had already confirmed that it wouldn’t be severed by Crow’s strength. Faint vibrations came to him via the taut chain. And then a heavy metallic sound. *Ka-tunk, ka-tunk.*

Is it over? Is my only choice now to be hit by a train? If only Crow had flying weapons, I could have attacked Jailer even stuck like this.

Ah, I’m an idiot! If I had flying weapons, all Jailer would have to do is get in my blind spot. The reason I’m losing now is much more fundamental. Jade Jailer’s whole deal is catching and fixing an enemy in place, and he’s been fighting with the sole thought of using that power to the maximum. This is precisely the strength of a singularly specialized avatar...

“It’s still...not over!” Haruyuki howled, half to himself. He released the chain in his hand and stared upward. If Jailer specialized in arrest, then Crow

specialized in flight. Even if he couldn't break the chain with brute force, there was one power he still had yet to test.

“G...ooooo!!” He clenched his fists and opened his wings up full throttle. Crow shot up like a rocket—only to suddenly stop in midair.

Chank!

The chain, only two meters long, was completely taut, and orange sparks flew from both the ring fixed around Crow's torso and the one around the rail.

“Unh...ah...aaaah...!!” He stretched out his arms and vibrated his wings with every bit of strength he had. *Kee, kee, kee, kee.* The source of the creaking was the chain or the rail—or perhaps Crow's body itself.

Finally, the armor on his back gave in to the pressure, and the ring started to dig into him. His health gauge started to drop, but Haruyuki ignored this and kept trying to reach the sky. The train was already close enough that he could see there was no driver. And the automatic driving program showed no signs of slowing down because of the foreign object on the rails.

Then.

Krrk! The health gauge to the right—Jailer's—dropped just the slightest bit.

In one corner of his nearly burned-out mind he wondered why that was, but then realized the answer immediately. The handcuffs were not an Enhanced Armament; they were Jailer's hands—a part of his body. And the fact that his health gauge was dropping meant the chain was being damaged.

“Nngh...ah...aaaaaaaah!!” Shouting, Haruyuki mustered up the last of his strength. He probably had twenty seconds before the collision with the train. And fifteen seconds before his special-attack gauge was used up. But these calculations flew from his head, and he saw only the blue of the sky.

Sky. Toward the sky. I want to fly. Higher, beyond the heights.

...Oh, I get it...I'm such an idiot. I mean, what I want, what Silver Crow wants, ever since I became a Burst Linker— No, I knew it way before that. Crow doesn't need long-distance or continuous hit techniques. Because I'm not in this world just to win duels. There's something more precious and good, something I want from the bottom of my heart.

To fly.

Unconsciously, Haruyuki moved his outstretched hand slightly. He touched his health gauge and called up the Instruct menu.

The train, wrapped in rusty steel panels, passed with a roar.

But before it did—*skreek!*—a silver arrow flew ever upward toward the clearest of blue skies above the ground.

5

Black Lotus—Kuroyukihime—watched over the battleground from the roof of a building a little ways off from the rest of the Gallery.

She had seen right through what the boy Haruyuki, her child, was planning to do and turned on automatic-viewing mode as she returned to her hospital room. But she had the function to follow the battlefield switched off, so she'd had to move on her own power.

When the four-carriage train passed the position where Silver Crow was attached to the track, and his health gauge remained in the green zone, the Gallery started to get excited. His duel opponent, Jade Jailer, was whirling his head around, looking for the silver avatar, but all that was left on the rail was one half of the handcuffs and the chain severed in two.

But then finally, they also noticed the shining bird dancing in the sky above, glittering silver at a distant height. Astounded cries reached Kuroyukihime's ears.

“H-how'd he cut the chain?! I thought that was totally impossible?!”

“I-it's like he just suddenly accelerated. Like the firing of a booster or something.”

“I saw it. Right before the train came, he was fiddling with the Instruct menu, yeah?”

“So that's why he suddenly powered up. He doesn't have any Enhanced Armament, and anyway, he'd have to use a voice command to call it up.”

The heated debate continued for a few seconds until finally one person hit upon the truth of how Silver Crow got enough thrust to sever Jade Jailer's chain.

“Oh! ...Oh, ohh! I got it! He— That damned bird, he took his level-up bonus in the middle a duel. He enhanced his flight ability!”

While the other members of the Gallery stood dumbfounded, along with Jailer, Crow rebounded against the sun and turned around. The way he looked, the sharp tips of his toes stretched out straight, plummeting downward, a line of fire in the blue sky, was exactly like a falling star in

broad daylight.

“So? Maiden, Curren. Raker. Graph. Did you see that?” Kuroyukihime murmured, narrowing her eye lenses. “That’s the child I chose. The door that I could not cut open with my two swords—I’m sure he will open it for me with his two wings. I know that *he* will fly to that far-off place that we could not reach. I...I believe it.”

(End)

AFTERWORD

It's been a while. Reki Kawahara here. Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 17: Cradle of Stars*.

To start, I sincerely apologize that it's been eight months since Volume 16. I had other books come out, but the power of the universe was at work here...But given that this volume ends with a smart "to be continued," I would like to bring the next volume to you as soon as possible! Yes!

And please allow me to explain one more point. In this Volume 17, in addition to the main story, there is the short story "Two Black Swords, Two Silver Wings." This was something I wrote as a special bonus for the first Blu-ray and DVD of the TV anime *Accel World*, and since a lot of the details are the foundation for Volume 17, I thought it might be fun to read them at the same time, so I put it together like this. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in allowing me to do this. And once again, I thank all of you who bought the Blu-ray and DVD from the bottom of my heart! Thank you so much!

Just a little further to go in the main story. In this volume, the name Shibuya Ravine Square comes up as a large-scale commercial facility near Shibuya Station. This is as of 2014 a redevelopment plan that will go ahead with construction aiming to open in six years' time, but as of the current moment, the name of the facility has not been decided. At present, the name of the main building is Shibuya Station Area East Wing, and I had the thought that at some point in the future, this will turn into Something-Something Hills or Something-Something Tower, so I simply went ahead on my own and named the building Ravine Tower and the entire facility Ravine Square in the Accel universe. If you are reading this book in 2020, you are likely thinking, *The name of the building's wrong!* but this is the situation, so please forgive me!

As for the story itself, the incident with Chocolat Puppeter and her comrades, who first appeared in Volume 12, is fairly big. So that happened. They still haven't met Haruyuki in the real, but I think at some point, they

will, so I'm looking forward to writing Chocolat and her friends in the real world. Once again, I must thank Nagomi Ikuya for entering the avatar contest.

We are moving forward with giga-maximum danger, and I have caused only serious trouble for my editor Miki and illustrator HIMA. I'll tera-fight next time!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in September 2014