



アクセセル・ワールド5
星影の浮き橋

川原礫

電撃文庫

Ⓜ 570

ワ ア ー ク セル セ ドル

川原礫 イラスト/HIMA

アクセセル・ワールド5

ほしかげ う ほし
—星影の浮き橋—

スクールカースト^{ノウミセイジ}の頂点・能美征二による謀略は去った。《スカイ・レイカー》も加速世界に復帰し、これにより黒雪姫率いる《ネガ・ネビュラス》は、他の軍団に見劣りしない勢力となっていた。

とある日、ハルユキは軌道エレベータ《ヘルメス・コード》に日本の《ソーシャルカメラ・ネットワーク》が導入されるというニュースから、新たなるゲーム・ステージの気配を察知する。

《宇宙》ステージ。

そこに辿り着いたハルユキは、《謎の運営者》から提供された、《ブレイン・バースト》史上でも最大のミッションイベントを体感する——！

「……鴉さん。これは、どういう、ことですか？」

それはさておき、同時進行で発生していたのは、黒雪姫とハルユキのお泊まりイベントで、さらにそこに《スカイ・レイカー》ことフーコさんも乱入してきて!?

05

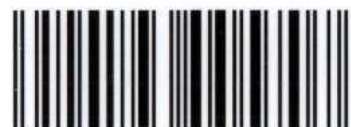
星影の浮き橋

accel World 05

電撃文庫



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アクセル并当③ れき

かわはら れき
川原 磔

先日、肩を変なふうに曲げたらピキッってなって動かすと痛い……という話を実家で父親にしたところ、「それ四十肩」と言われました。それ以来、人生について考えています。

【電撃文庫作品】

- アクセル・ワールド1 —黒雪姫の帰還—
- アクセル・ワールド2 —紅の暴風姫—
- アクセル・ワールド3 —夕闇の略奪者—
- アクセル・ワールド4 —蒼空への飛翔—
- アクセル・ワールド5 —星影の浮き橋—
- ソードアート・オンライン1 アインクラッド
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- ソードアート・オンライン3 フェアリー・ダンス
- ソードアート・オンライン4 フェアリー・ダンス

イラスト:HIMA

10月3日生まれ。挿絵は今シリーズが初のイラストレーター。『電撃萌王』小冊子への寄稿を見た文庫編集者が、今回の挿絵依頼をオファーしたことがきっかけ。本業仕事の合間を縫って、ブログやSNSサイトなどでイラストを発表している。



アクセル・ワールド 05

星影の浮き橋

川原 礫
イラスト/HIMA
デザイン/ピィピィ



E... EH!? I-I'LL
EXERCISE...
BUT WHERE... AND
WHAT KIND...

THAT'S
RIGHT, HARU.
LET'S
DO SOME
EXERCISE.

HARUYUKI

UMESATO'S VERY
BOTTOM STUDENT

CHIYURI

HARUYUKI'S
CHILDHOOD FRIEND



"PA... PARD-SAN!?
W-WHY HERE
AND NOW!?"

**SILVER
CROW**

HARUYUKI'S CONTROLLED
DUEL AVATAR

"YOU ARE HERE
FOR THE SAME
REASON AS ME!"

**BLOOD
LEOPARD**

BURST LINKER FROM
THE RED LEGION,
"PROMINENCE"

"T-THAT'S NOT A PROBLEM AT ALL, NOPE! IT LOOKS LIKE MY MOM ISN'T CO-CO-COMING HOME AT ALL TODAY! SO...!"

KUROYUKIHIME

THE BLACK KING - THE STUDENT COUNCIL VICE PRESIDENT OF UMESATO MIDDLE SCHOOL AND CONTROLLER OF BLACK LOTUS.

"SORRY, BUT I THINK I'LL TAKE YOU UP ON YOUR OFFER AFTER ALL!"

落雷注意
ネットワーク



"!?"

.....222222.....2222=

The division and ruling over Accelerated World's seven territories by Legions are....?



*Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building

Brain Burst, official name «Brain Burst 2039», is a mysterious game program released seven years ago by an unknown developer. It has already been updated several times. Around 1000 players, represented by Duel Avatars, repeatedly engage into fierce battles while aiming for the top, Level 10.

Legions are groups formed by several Duel Avatars aiming to control territories and secure their profits. They're similar to the guilds or teams found in other games.

There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the «Kings of Pure Color». There's, for instance, the Black Legion, Nega Nebulas, led by Kuroyukihime a.k.a Black Lotus, and the

Red Legion, Prominence, led by Nico (a.k.a Scarlet Rain) among others. Haruyuki's Silver Crow and Takumu's Cyan Pile belong to Nega Nebulas.

Territories -- The control of an area by a Legion is decided every Saturday evening during the «Territory Battle Time». Multiple battles having two groups of players face each others take place. At the end of the Territory Battle Time, the system gives control of the area to the Legion whose win average is above fifty percent. Members of a Legion controlling an area are given the right to decline battle requests in this area even if their Neuro Linker is connected to the global network.

ACCEL WORLD⁰⁵
Floating Bridge in Starlight

Kawahara Reki
Illustration / HIMA
Design / Biibii



- Kuroyukihime = The Student Council Vice-President of Umesato Middle School. A well-mannered and intelligent lady. Her background is mired in mystery. Her avatar in school is her self-made program, the "Black Swallowtail Butterfly". Her duel avatar is the Black King, "Black Lotus" (Level 9).
- Haruyuki = Arita Haruyuki . A first-year student in Umesato Middle School. A bullied child with a plump appearance. He's good at games, but an introvert. His avatar in school is the "Pink Pig". His duel avatar is "Silver Crow" (Level 5).
- Chiyuri = Kurashima Chiyuri. A childhood friend of Haruyuki. A meddlesome, lively girl. Her avatar in school is the "Silver Cat". Her duel avatar is "Lime Bell" (Level 4).
- Takumu = Mayuzumi Takumu. An acquaintance of Haruyuki and Chiyuri since childhood. Skilled in Kendo. His duel avatar is "Cyan Pile" (Level 5).
- Sky Raker = A resourceful burst linker that belonged to the old Nega Nebulas. Started living a secluded life due to a certain incident, but returned to the front lines after persuasion from Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki. Taught Haruyuki the Incarnate System.

- Neuro Linker = A mobile terminal that establishes a wireless quantum connection to the brain, supporting the five senses, such as sight and hearing.
- School's Local Net = A local area network constructed within Umesato Middle School. Used for taking attendance and lessons, it became a need for students of Umesato Middle School to connect to it.
- Global Connect = The act of connecting to the Global Net. As connecting to the Global Net is prohibited within Umesato Middle School, the School's Local Net is provided as a replacement.
- Brain Burst = An application within the Neuro Linker that Kuroyukihime transferred to Haruyuki.
- Duel Avatar = A virtual body controlled by players when battling in Brain Burst.
- Legion = Refers to groups formed by several duel avatars, with the aim of expanding their occupied areas and protecting their privileges. There are 7 main legions, with each of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» tasked as their legion masters.
- Standard Battle Field = Refers to the field where normal battles (1 versus 1 matches) take place in Brain Burst. Although the specs it possesses are close to that of reality, its system is still at the level of fighting games of the past.
- Unlimited Neutral Field = A field restricted to duel avatars at level 4 and above, geared towards heavy players. It is designed with a game system different from that of the Standard Battle Field, with a degree of freedom easily comparable to even that of the future's VRMMOs.

- Movement Command System = A system used to control the avatar. The avatar is normally manipulated entirely through this system.
- Image Control System = A system to manipulate the avatar by imagining (Image) it strongly. With a mechanism that works considerably different from the usual Movement Command System, there are extremely few people who can handle it. The important part to the Incarnate System.
- Incarnate System = A technique that interferes with the Image Control System in the Brain Burst program, bringing about a phenomenon that exceeds the game's limit. Also called Writing Over (Overwrite).

- Acceleration Research Society = A mysterious group of burst linkers. Considers Brain Burst to be not just a mere versus game and are up to something. Rust Jigsaw is affiliated to this.

accel world 05



Chapter 1

Preferably, it would be better if all of Tokyo's skies were covered in arcades^[1].

Avoiding the puddles that hadn't been absorbed into the water-permeable pavement tiles as he walked, Haruyuki thought that with a sense of desperation.

He had hated rain since long ago. The signal connection level of his Neuro Linker would go down even if it was only drizzling, one of the two hands he used operating his virtual desktop would be occupied by an umbrella, and as if that wasn't enough, his dampness-prone body would get even more wet.

Stopping at a stoplight along his route home from school, he looked up past the edge of his umbrella and saw that, even though they said that there wouldn't be any rain today on the first day of the month, the sky was still filled with plenty of moisture as it remained a sunken lead color. At the edge of his vision, the rain-probability prediction that was displayed alongside the headline news showed the numbers at 80 to 90 until tomorrow morning. It seemed that the seasonal rain front didn't intend to leave Kanto for the time being.

It would feel good if he could take a short flight and pierce through those clouds until he flew above them. The pure-white sea of clouds that spread out forever, the ultramarine sky, and the intensely shining sun. It

was a scene he had seen several times in the «Storm Stage», but of course he had never experienced it in the real world.

At the very least, he could imagine it, and so he stood on his tiptoes as he flapped his imaginary wings, and—.

“The light’s turned green!”

BACHIKON Haruyuki’s back was suddenly struck, and he stepped toward the pedestrian crossing as if falling forward. After he narrowly avoided falling, he started walking quickly to hide his embarrassment, and turned to speak to the person now beside him.

“...Ossu^[2].”

“Ossu.”

The one that answered him back while turning her vivid yellow-green umbrella round and round was his classmate, Kurashima Chiyuri. As if she didn’t feel the gloom of the rainy weather, but actually enjoyed it, she made splashing sounds with her water-repellant sneakers.

“Did you buy a new umbrella?”

When he inquired about her unfamiliar belonging, his childhood friend blinked her cat-like eyes bashfully, and nodded her head.

“Yeah...Don’t say anything more, I already know what you want to say! I know that I let myself be influenced about something like the color of an accessory. By my avatar.”

“That’s just how it is...I’ve also noticed that I’ve gotten things like memory card containers and Direct Connect cables in silver, after all.”

The armor of Chiyuri’s duel avatar «Lime Bell», which she had gained two months ago in April, was a lime color just as its name suggested. She herself hadn’t seemed really accustomed to that color at first, but without noticing it, she had changed some of her personal effects, including her trademark large hairpin, to a bright green color.

“But, you should stop it when it comes to your Neuro Linker. Going that far may cause your real identity to be identified.”

After he said that while looking at the pale purple exterior of the VR device attached to her thin neck, Chiyuri puffed her cheeks.

“What, but Haru, Takkun and Kuroyuki-senpai^[3] all have Neuro Linkers with the color of your avatars, don’t you?”

“I...I’ve just always used this one since long ago. The next time I change to a different model, I’ll get it in a different color.”

“It’s going be piano black^[4] anywa——y.”

He glared at her with a side glance, and unconsciously his eyes swam.

His childhood friend laughed with an expression that said ‘Yare-yare^[5]’, and then she leaned her brand-new umbrella back and looked up towards the sky past its edge.

“But it’s really coming down, isn’t it?”

"Yeah, really...By the way, what about your club activities?"

Haruyuki belatedly realized that Chiyuri normally, as part of the track-and-field club, and he, part of the go-home club, never found themselves together on the way home from school, and so he tilted his head in puzzlement. Then, Chiyuri shrugged her shoulder and answered idly.

"Whenever it rains, we always do muscle training in the gymnasium or long-distance swimming in the indoor pool. Since both places were full today with the other athletic clubs, I took the day off. It's unfair that Takkun and the kendo club have a dojo for their exclusive use...Aah, it's unpleasant how my muscles feel dull if I don't move my body for even a single day."

"Heeh, so that happens..."

As someone who took pride in being the exact opposite of an athlete, Haruyuki murmured with just a little bit of admiration.

Hearing that, Chiyuri blinked as if she had thought of something, and then she suddenly took a step closer and put her hand on Haruyuki's arm—and as Haruyuki became flustered at the sudden physical contact, she looked into his face and spoke.

"I know, Haru. Exercise with me."

"Ha...Haa!?"

Widening his eyes with a jerk, he flapped his mouth open and closed, before somehow asking again.

"E-Exercise, you say...where...what kind of..."

"...What's with that reaction? Ah, ah, you just thought of something weird, didn't you!"

After staring at him intently once again, Chiyuri gave a teasing smile.

"I was just thinking of going into a «duel» as a tag team. What other possible meaning could I have, Arita-sensei~."

"I-I also naturally meant that too."

After giving an unnatural cough, Haruyuki feigned calmness and continued.

"In other words, I meant 'where is the battle area we'll go to' and 'what kind of rules will we fight with'."

"Heh, hoh, hmm."

Fortunately, as if she were feeling inclined to post bail for a suspect, Chiyuri changed her expression in a wide smile, and pointed with her umbrella at the overhead structure of the Chuo Line railway that was visible ahead of them.

"Since it's still early, let's go to Shinjuku. We may get above the clouds if we're at the viewing platform of the government office."

"I don't think that would happen, but...Well, it's fine."

While answering with a shrug of his shoulder, Haruyuki was once again conscious of the weight of Chiyuri's hand, still placed on his right arm.

Arita Haruyuki and Kurashima Chiyuri had been born into the same combined multistory high-rise apartment building in north Kouenji fourteen years ago in 2033. Since their homes were separated by only two floors, they had grown up almost as twin siblings since they were infants.

Since their apartment building was huge, there had of course been many other children the same age as them. However, the only one of them that had remained steadfast close friends with him until today besides Chiyuri was Mayuzumi Takumu, who lived in a separate apartment. Since he had gone to a different elementary school than Haruyuki and Chiyuri, Takumu had been able to associate with him without any worry. And, even though Haruyuki had frequently gone to the same school as Chiyuri, his relationship with her had not changed—probably because of her earnest strength and kindness.

When he had begun to be the target of bullying from upperclassmen in elementary school, Haruyuki had tried to keep his distance from Chiyuri, because he hated her seeing his wretched state. But Chiyuri had stubbornly tried to keep close to him. Haruyuki also understood now just how huge the pressure was to «remain friends with a bullied kid» for elementary school students at that age. And yet, she had continued to return home to their apartment building together with him every day, and playing games and going on make-believe expeditions with him along with Takumu until fifth grade. The memories of the three's time

spent together after school were now stored deep within Haruyuki with a golden color.

—No, those memories may be even more important to Chiyuri.

Because, the source of the pseudo-healing ability that Chiyuri's duel avatar «Lime Bell» possessed was most likely...

"Let's take the train."

When she poked his elbow while saying that, Haruyuki raised his head and saw that they had reached the Chuo Line platform without him being aware of it. After looking at the orange train cars approaching from the west and then nodding with a "Sure", Haruyuki added something else in a low voice.

"...ank you, Chiyu."

"Eh, did you say something?"

When his childhood friend turned around towards him with a sway of her short hair, Haruyuki felt a moist and choked sensation in the middle of his chest, and then frantically shook his head.

"I-It's nothing. L-Let's get on!"

An astounded voice he was used to hearing followed after Haruyuki as he jumped into the train.

"Hey, there are only two stations, you know!"

Arriving at the government office after walking on the pathway that extended out from the underground west entrance of Shinjuku Station, the two of them jumped into the direct connect elevator that went up to the viewing platform on the highest floor.

GUGU A momentary feeling of acceleration hit them, then disappeared. The digital floor indicator on the wall changed numbers at a staggering speed. The wall outside soon changed from concrete to glass, and Chiyuri immediately flew forward and raised her voice in exclamation.

"Uwah...amazing, it's all grey..."

"You can't really see well with the rain..."

It was expected, but the view of the evening landscape of the huge metropolis that spread out to the south was obstructed by the incessant curtain of rain and mostly wasn't visible. Moreover, something like a haze coiled around the glass as they went farther up and further obstructed their view.

The elevator slowed down as a floating feeling gently went through his body, and then finally it stopped with an announcement of arrival. The other side of the opening doors was dyed all in white.

Rebuilt in the 30s, the Tokyo Government Office Building reached up to 500 meters in height. The only other building of such a height in Tokyo, or rather in all of Japan, was the Sumida Ward's Tokyo Sky Tree. But since the viewing platform there was the second-highest at 450 meters high,

the highest floor here at the government office was actually the closest to the sky in the center of Tokyo.

Running out of the elevator, Chiyuri spoke as she placed both her hands against the huge window glass at the front of them.

"Uwah.....Amazing, it's pure white..."

"Rather than raining, this place is already within the clouds."

While smiling bitterly, Haruyuki stood next to Chiyuri. The window simply shone a milky white color as if the other side was covered in thick cotton.

"It's unfortunate that we can't see the sky."

Saying that, Chiyuri became even more resigned and scowled out through the window, but she soon turned around and smiled.

"Well, it's fine. Thanks to this, we have this place all to ourselves."

Certainly, no one would care to go up to the viewing platform in the middle of such bad weather and furthermore on a weekday evening, so there was no sign of anyone on either side of the passage. Chiyuri suddenly latched her left arm around Haruyuki's right arm, and pulled him forward while shouting.

"Since it's rare to have it empty like this, let's do a once-around!"

"Uh, s-sure."

Recently, Haruyuki was also able to somehow talk normally with Chiyuri in person like he used to in the past, but whenever she got a little too

close, his mouth and tongue became fumbled. Laughing as she saw Haruyuki like that, Chiyuri began to walk clockwise along the passage that ran along the circumference of the viewing floor.

Naturally, the view outside the window didn't change no matter how far they went. Beyond the drops of water that clung to the glass, there were only surging lumps of white clouds. Even so, Chiyuri did not make a dissatisfied face, and moved her feet rhythmically.

His relationship with this childhood friend of his had been hard to grasp for a while now. Immediately after the absurdly tough and painful battle two months ago had finished, Chiyuri had wrapped her arms around Haruyuki and Takumu's necks, and shouted out while crying, 'I love you two'.

Since then, she had continued trying to talk casually and come into contact with both Haruyuki and Takumu just as she declared. It was as if she was trying to rewind time back to those days when the three of them played every day until it became dark.

"Ah, that's right, Haru."

Haruyuki raised his head when she suddenly called out his name.

"W-What?"

"If we're going to duel anyway, let's connect globally. If we do that, the sightseeing guidance tag will appear on the other side of the window.

"Ah...I see."

The two of them currently had their Neuro Linkers cut off from the Global Net. They did so because, since the Shinjuku Ward was the territory of the Blue Legion «Leonids», they didn't know when other Burst Linkers would suddenly intrude on them while they were connected.

For example, it would be dangerous if they «waited for a duel» while on the road, but now that they were in the viewing platform where no one was present, there wouldn't be a problem even if they automatically accelerated from a challenge. Haruyuki nodded, and first opened the console for «Brain Burst» and made a team with Lime Bell. With this, it would be clearly written on the matching list that the two of them were a tag team, and the opponents that could challenge them were also limited almost exclusively to two-player groups. After that, he connected his Neuro Linker to the Global Net simultaneously along with Chiyuri.

Immediately, countless small holo-tags appeared in his vision. These were the guidance markers of famous places and large-sized building that would have commanded the view outside if the weather had been clear. When the two of them turned towards the east, the names of the nearby Shinjuku Station and Southern Terrace, and Kabukicho^[6] beyond them also appeared.

"...Like I thought, it's no fun to see only the tags."

When Chiyuri said that with a bitter smile, as if the god of weather sympathized with the two of them, the thick clouds broke apart for a

moment, and the evening view of the center of Tokyo spread out suddenly beneath their eyes.

Letting out a shout of joy, Chiyuri flew over to the window. Haruyuki also hurried over next to her.

As they looked down from an altitude of 500 meters high with their naked eyes, the metropolis was laid out chaotically beneath them as if it were a tapestry with 500 years of history woven into it. As he thought of how the laminated-structured streets shined dazzlingly, the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden and the Akasaka Estate^[7] that hadn't been changed at all since the last century were sunken in dusk within those streets.

And furthermore, over towards the west, there was, like a large black hole that existed in the center of that galaxy, a vast space that was an even deeper black—the Imperial Palace.

It was a place that, of course, Haruyuki and Chiyuri couldn't enter in the real world, and they hadn't experienced virtual images of the palace's interior as Burst Linkers either. That was because that space's security system was not connected to the social camera network, a very special exception in present-day Japan. As a result, the Imperial Palace in Accel World's «Unlimited Neutral Field» couldn't have its actual appearance reproduced from the camera images like other place, and instead it always existed as an evil fortress-like original structure.

However, what if the opposite was done?

The Brain Burst Program was, for the time being, confirmed to be able to hack into the entire social camera network in Japan, and generate a field from it. It extended as far as even the Okinawa prefecture that wasn't connected to the mainland, and Kuroyukihime had once even covered the whole distance from Okinawa to Tokyo on the Unlimited Neutral Field. —In that case, what if there were also places under social camera surveillance outside of Japan as well? Would Burst Linkers be also able to «go» there...?

"...Hey, Chiyu."

Haruyuki whispered while gazing absentmindedly eastward.

"Hmm, what is it?"

"About the recent talk on the export of social camera technology on the news..."

Did you hear about it?

Haruyuki was not able to finish saying the question at the end of his sentence.

BASHIIII A familiar sound effect struck his ears, and at the same time his vision blacked out. Automatic acceleration—in other words, some Burst Linkers in the Shinjuku area had discovered the tag team of Haruyuki and Chiyuri on the matching list, and had instantly applied for a «duel». Within the darkness, the flaming characters of [HERE COME NEW CHALLENGERS] blazed brightly.

The excitement of a duel in an outside area for the first time in a while immediately washed away his earlier thoughts.

Chapter 2

Haruyuki's legs, wrapped in silver armor, landed on a thick moss-covered branch.

When he raised his head, what he saw was completely different from the rain-covered skyscrapers until just now. The sky was dyed a curious lavender color, and all the high-rise buildings had changed into huge gnarled trees. A lot of thick ivy also hung between the trees, and many pterosaur-like silhouettes could be seen gently flying among them.

Looking down on this netherworld jungle, whose basis was the Shinjuku Government Office, from a branch near the top of a frightfully high tree, Haruyuki grumbled.

"Uhheh. The «Primeval Forest» stage. It's hard to fight in."

A voice then responded from right beside him.

"What are you saying, it's pretty. It's way better than the savage maps like the «Wasteland» or «End of the Century» ones."

The speaker of those words was of course the avatar covered in semi-permeable emerald-colored armor, «Lime Bell». Underneath the brim of her big three-cornered hat, her beady eyes shined.

"Well, its appearance is pleasant, but still. Even if I fly, I can't see the ground here at all because there's too much cover..."

“Don’t complain! You should practice fighting on the ground every once in a while.”

“Yes, yes.”

Haruyuki nodded as he hit the huge bell in her right hand with a tap.

The characteristics of the Primeval Forest stage were its extremely bad visibility because of the thickly grown plants here, and its many random small animal objects. No, there were also a few huge carnivorous beasts in the forest, and their intervention must also be taken into account when making a strategy.

While reviewing the stage’s attributes in his mind, Haruyuki checked the two HP gauges located at the upper-right corner of his vision with a glance.

The ones that had challenged them to a duel were a tag team consisting of the Level 5 «Frost Horn» and Level 4 «Tourmaline Shell». Both were names that Haruyuki knew well. They were active members of the Blue Legion, «Leonids».

Since Haruyuki was currently Level 5 and Chiyuri was Level 4, there was no numerical difference. However, the opponents should have become Burst Linkers considerably earlier than them. Considering it simply, Haruyuki and Chiyuri seemed to be superior because of their quick pace in leveling up, but the reality was different.

In other words, it was like this. Burst Linkers were divided in many types based on their disposition, but even if the «types that ignore winning percentages and frantically duel against anyone at any time or place» and the «types that carefully calculate advantages and disadvantages and take part in duels they can win for certain» have the same numerical level, there was actually a big difference between them that existed in an aspect that wasn't visible.

In other words, it was their accumulated battle experience. Even if they challenged and lost against those of a higher level that they couldn't win against no matter what or against opponents with a bad attribute for their avatar, those duels gave the Burst Linkers themselves an experience value different from numerical points. Tactics, knowledge, and most importantly, a heart that stands firm in a crisis.

Of course, the play style of the reckless-types was inefficient compared to the clever-types. Their Burst Points were occasionally unsteady and unreliable, and they had to work hard at the tiresome Enemy hunting in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

However, those kinds of people have a higher chance of going «upwards» in the end, is what his master Kuroyukihime had told him. Therefore, Haruyuki was also consciously not picky about his opponents when he came out onto the streets to duel, with the intention of maintaining a style in the middle of the reckless-types and clever-types, but—

The two that had challenged them this time, «Frost Horn» in particular, were famous as super Go-For-Broke bastards that considerably exceeded Haruyuki in terms of being reckless. Also, it was probably exactly because they were like that that they had challenged Haruyuki and Chiyuri without hesitation immediately after the two of them appeared on the matching list.

Concluding that the enemy tag team was heading towards the tree of this government office in a straight line based on the motions of the guide cursor in the center of his vision, Haruyuki decided to go along with the opponents' style and spoke.

"Chiyu, is it fine if we also go down to the ground and do a quick decisive battle?"

His partner then grinned and nodded.

"Sure. My healing won't reach if the target's not in sight anyway, and besides, I've also been practicing my close combat recently!"

She waved the bell in her left hand, and it smashed five or six hard-looking fruits hanging together behind her.

Having been hit on the head by that bell once in the past, Haruyuki involuntarily drew back his head, and then extended his hand out to his partner.

"Alright, then let's charge at them from above!"

"Okay."

Saying that, she grasped his offered right hand tightly, and without hesitation they jumped from the branch 500 meters above the ground. They aimed at a faraway hazy point beneath their eyes within the forest, the point indicated by the guide cursor, and went into a headlong free fall.

The cursor only indicated the rough direction of the enemy. Therefore, the other team would not immediately notice that Haruyuki and Chiyuri were doing a direct fast approach from above. They had to delay their deceleration until the last minute in order to definitely seize that brief chance. The air groaned endlessly in their ears, and they approached the ground at a frightful speed. Even Haruyuki who was used to diving chocked back his breath hard, instinctively wanting to dodge it.

However, Chiyuri, diving at the same speed right next to him, didn't let out a scream, but instead had shining eyes. She really was surprisingly a daredevil, no, that description was unsuitable for a girl...

While Haruyuki thought that, a sharp whisper reached his ears.

"Found them! They're under that giant red flower!"

When he frantically strained his eyes, he confirmed with a glance that there were indeed a silhouette with a large build and a silhouette with a slender build dashing alongside each other among a dense growth of tall rafflesia-like plants. The one on the right was Frost Horn, who had a heavy light blue armor and huge horns growing from his forehead and

shoulders. The one on the left was Tourmaline Shell, who was wrapped in smart blue-green armor.

"I'll take the one on the right, you take the one on the left. Let's hit them hard with all our strength."

He said that quickly, and she responded with a nod.

Both of the enemies should be still thinking that Haruyuki and Chiyuri were somewhere on the ground or at the government office tree. However, in the next few seconds that would end, as the cursor disappeared when both sides were in close proximity. They had to slow down right before that and go into the offensive.

Haruyuki widened his eyes, focused his consciousness, and measured the distance.

"Let's go...Five seconds till deceleration, three, two, one, zero!"

He grasped Chiyuri's hand tightly, and at the same time as the countdown ended, he spread out the wings on his back to their limit.

In order to make the enemy mistakenly think that Silver Crow was still on the ground, he hadn't dared to store up his special technique gauge. Therefore, his wings couldn't produce any propulsion, but instead they could be used as a parachute. His metal fins caught hold of the air, and caused him to brake intensely.

He used that recoil to shift the direction of their bodies. He stretched out his left leg, and set up the posture for a dive kick. He subtly pulled

Chiyuri's hand as she took the same posture, and adjusted her aim as well. Immediately after, the guide cursor disappeared from his vision.

At that instant, the enemy tag team also realized that Haruyuki and Chiyuri were in unexpectedly close proximity, and hurriedly brought themselves to a quick stop by braking so much that they dug into the ground. After they gave a quick look at their surroundings, they abruptly looked up at the sky.

But by then it was already too late—

"Oryaaaaaaaaa!"

"To———oh!"

Along with those shouts, Haruyuki's left foot and Chiyuri's right foot kicked through the rafflesia petals and then accurately plunged into their respective targets at a sharp angle.

They had attacked with a timing that wouldn't allow the enemy to evade unhurt even if they were skilled masters. Frost Horn and Tourmaline Shell crossed their arms in front of their bodies together, and fortified themselves to block them. Regardless, the dive kicks that had gathered up energy by dropping down from 500 meters high above struck them hard.

As if a special technique had hit the mark, flashy light effects and impact sounds occurred at the same time and filled the area.

"Mugoh..."

“Funeen!”

Labored grunts leaked out from the mouths of Horn and Shell. They lowered their waists and resisted being bounced back by the kicks. They desperately dug both their legs into the green ground, and carved four deep tracks into it.

However, no matter how big their builds were, it was impossible to guard against such heavy attacks.

Their defense was torn apart in just a single second, and Horn and Shell were flicked backwards at the same time. They were blown away while deeply digging into the ground, and crashed into the trunk of a big tree far away. Impact effects shook the stage once again, and the upper right health gauges both decreased by almost 30%.

With their first attack a success, Haruyuki and Chiyuri landed on the ground with a backwards somersault, as many shouts erupted from further away.

Those cheers of things like ‘Amazing’ and ‘You can’t deal that kind of splendid damage with a normal technique’ were from the gallery of small groups of players looking down at the site of hostilities from high branches. As expected of Shinjuku, the mecca of duels, there seemed to be over 20 people here even on a weekday like this.

Just as the commotion settled down temporarily, Frost Horn and Tourmaline Shell stuck out and turned over their legs from the thicket of plants, and then stood up vigorously. Although they were a bit unsteady

from the lingering intense damage, they quickly held their ground and shouted in loud voices one after the other.

“Da—mn it, I hate it people like you that come from the viewing platform of the government office! Though you guys probably couldn’t see anything with that much rain!”^[8]

“That’s not the problem, Horn-kun! A date, these two are on a date, Horn-kuuuun!”

“Wh...Wh...at...They’re dueling while on a date...you mean...!?”

“That’s it, Horn-kun! After defeating us, they probably intend to hug and kiss, Horn-kuuu——n!!”

“Un...Unforgivable. No way I am going to accept Burst Linkers like that—!!”

Witnessing this little skit that one couldn’t help but think had been prepared beforehand, the surrounding gallery suddenly got all excited again. One-sided cheering like ‘That’s right, that’s right’ and ‘Show them the guts of the unpopular’ came down along with roars of laughter.

Hearing all this while dumbfounded, Haruyuki frantically shook his head back and forth.

“T-That’s not...We’re not on anything like a d-date.”

“You annoying people should also form tag teams with girls!”

Chiyuri's shout there seemed to add fuel to the fire and overwrote Haruyuki's defense. Frost Horn once again staggered on his feet.

"N...Now, I'm going to come at you guys seriously..."

Next to him, Tourmaline Shell put both hands on his waist and said 'Yeah, yeah' while nodding.

"We Leonids have barely any girl Linkers. They all sweat and turn away just by hearing about something like a close-range type group."

"There's no way you can understand! Since it's like this, we've got no choice but to fill 'em with holes and make them feel really sore on the way home!!"

"Uwah, that's really petty, Horn-kuuun!"

"Shut up! I'll show you! A real man's! Way of life! Let's go..."

As Haruyuki was once again dumbfounded at this comic skit, Frost Horn suddenly positioned his arms on either side of himself. The rough horns that sprouted from his forehead and shoulders were tinged with an intense light.

"«Frosted Circle»!!"

Along with that technique name announcement, a circle of pale light spread out with the horns at the center, and shot through Haruyuki and Chiyuri before dispersing behind them.

It occurred at a speed and range that couldn't be avoided, but the light itself was harmless. Haruyuki and Chiyuri's health gauges didn't change even slightly.

However, Haruyuki retightened his sense and waited for the phenomenon that would follow. He had fought with Frost Horn in the territory battles several times, but this was the first time that he had been directly hit by this special technique. If he remembered right it, it should be a technique that didn't do direct damage to the energy, but instead influenced the area and changed its characteristics.

KIN, KIN Along with thin and sharp sounds, the surrounding plants began to be dyed white. Particles of glittering light danced through the air. It was all «frost». The crystallized moisture adhered to all objects and covered them in ice.

While watching as Silver Crow's shiny silver armor clouded over all at once and a heavy frost formed right up to the tips of his limbs and armor, Haruyuki spoke in a low voice.

"Bell^[9], I'll face Horn. Hold back Shell until I finish him."

"Okay."

Immediately after she gave that short response—

"Uo...raaaah!"

On the other side of the veil of frost, a deep war cry was let out, and a huge silhouette charged straight at Haruyuki.

It was Frost Horn. There was frost adhering to his light-blue armor just like Haruyuki's. It seemed that the horns on his forehead and shoulder in particular were covered in a film of especially thick ice.

He thrust with the big horn on his right shoulder, and attacked Haruyuki with a violent shoulder tackle. Dropping his waist and opening his eyes wide, Haruyuki measured the timing to evade and counterattack.

".....Kuoh!"

With that shout, Haruyuki jumped to the right and tried to intercept the ramming attack.

However, his body was much heavier than usual because of the adhering frost, and his starting motion was too slow. Although not a direct hit, the horn grazed him, and he received a blunt shock through his left shoulder. He held his ground while gritting his teeth, and then let out a right punch at Horn's side as he tried to pass him by.

But his timing was once again out of order due to the added weight. Since it was heavily wrapped in frost, Haruyuki's short punch would have induced more damage than usual if it hit its mark, but its power was halted due to only slightly grazing Horn's body.

This was the main effect of the special technique «Frosted Circle». It increased the total weight of duel avatars within its effect range, and inhibited speedy small techniques and consecutive-hit techniques. Conversely, it also increased the power of big one-shot techniques. Moreover, since long-range vision got extremely bad as a side effect,

sniping from a distance was prevented, and heat-source homing was also canceled because of the cold.

In other words, it forced almost all types of avatars to use large sumo-like close combat attacks within this area, which made it a terrifying ability in various ways. Even if one moved and tried to leave the effect area, getting away was not easy since the frost was continually generated over a wide range with Horn as the center.

While glaring at the silhouette of Horn as he turned around further away and went into a charging position to use his horns again, Haruyuki murmured within his mind.

—Fine then, I'll play it your way.

While hardening his fists and his resolve, he glanced over at the two other people confronting each other further away.

His partner Lime Bell's body was similarly frozen white all over. Her left hand's bell was especially covered in icicles, and seemed quite heavy.

However—

Her opponent, Tourmaline Shell, wasn't covered in even a speck of frost anywhere on his body. The smooth and curved armor that covered his slender body was no different at all from when the duel had started, and shined a wet-like blue-green. No, it was actually wet. The ice that tried to cover him was melted the instant it touched him, and dripped down.

This was the reason Tourmaline Shell and Frost Horn liked to pair together.

His tourmaline-colored^[10] armor was tinged with an electric current that generates heat when anything impacted it. There were not many «electric-type» and «heat-type» avatars that could produce heat continuously like this. Shell was one of the few avatars that was completely immune to Horn's special technique.

PACHI, PACHI Positioning both his electricity-crawling arms as if to do a sword strike with them, Tourmaline Shell approached Lime Bell with a smooth motion. He fired close-range attacks with Chinese martial arts-like palm strikes one after another. Bell firmly hardened her guard using her large bell in place of a shield.

Being a green type of a very high color saturation, Lime Bell's defensive power was so high that it was comparable to that of a metal color. Since both her arms were furthermore covered thickly in frost, Shell's «electric heat palm strikes» seemed to deal almost no damage. As long as she concentrated on guarding, she should be able to mostly preserve her HP.

However—that was also surely within the expectations of the enemy tag team.

Horn and Shell of course knew that Lime Bell was an incredibly rare «healer». In this battle, where the total combined levels of each team were exactly the same, there was a high probability of them being defeated if she used her healing ability even once.

Therefore, they were using the strategy where Shell, who could freely move even within the effect range of «Frosted Circle», was restraining Bell with small consecutive attacks, while Horn finished off Crow. Although their first attack from above had been successful, the duel had changed according to the enemy's plan after they landed on the ground.

In order to overcome this situation, Haruyuki had no choice but to take down Horn without any support.

...But, we understood that from the moment we decided to fight at close quarters on the ground!

Bringing the last of his momentary thoughts to an end with that inner shout, Haruyuki focused his consciousness on the silhouette of Frost Horn rushing towards him.

He had felt the weight of the frost adhering to him in the tangle between them just now. He should be able to dodge with a last-second movement next time and land a counter without fail.

Horn stuck out his left shoulder this time and thrust the horn there forward like a battering ram. Haruyuki withstood his fear and deliberately drew towards the attack.

—Here!

He kicked off the ground to step out of the way with a timing just slightly faster than earlier, and at that instant.

The top of the sharp horn directly hit Haruyuki's left shoulder.

“Uah!”

Involuntarily letting out a shout from the intense impact, Haruyuki was helplessly blown away. He crashed into the ground while spinning, and without stopping he rebounded back high in the air. Since he would get additional damage if he fell like this, he somehow managed to make himself land on his feet to avoid that at least.

Even so, though, Haruyuki’s health gauge had decreased about 20% from just the horn attack. A deep gouge was dug into his left shoulder’s armor, releasing crackling sparks. A sharp pain that was characteristic of receiving large damage locally ran through his nerves, but Haruyuki felt more surprise than pain.

The timing should have been perfect. So then why had he been completely hit by the horn attack that should have been slower than a bullet?

The answer was given from the mouth of Frost Horn, who stood up to his full height a little further away.

“Uhahahaha! Are you surprised, bird-man! You might not know since you always look down from the sky, but my stylish horns get longer while within «Frosted Circle»! They rise strongly and sturdily!”

“...W-What did you say...”

While dumbfounded, Haruyuki focused his eyes, and saw that, indeed, the cone-shaped horns extending from the large water-colored avatar’s

shoulders and forehead were thickly wrapped in ice and seemed to be longer than they were when where the battle started.

Furthermore, their size still seemed to be increasing moment by moment. In other words, no matter how many times Haruyuki memorized the distance and interval of his tackle attacks, it would be useless.

“How is it, this! Is a real man’s! weapon! Uhaanohaa!”

In response to Horn’s loud laughter, applauses of ‘yeah, yeah!’ and retorts like ‘How vulgar’ rained down from the surrounding gallery.

Listening to it all, Haruyuki sucked in a deep breath, and then breathed out.

—It seems I was mistaken about this.

Fighting recklessly without choosing one’s opponent and fighting by destroying one’s style and just bulldozing forward are both similarly mistaken. Thinking I could win without any strategy in the enemy’s arena was the same as making light of my opponent. I should have fought by mustering all my ability from the beginning against this opponent. And if I don’t do so, I’ll have no chance of winning.

—From here on, I’m going full-throttle!

Making a fist with both hands and drawing them to either side of his body, Haruyuki started unfolding the wings on his back. With the first damage he had given and the damage he had received just now, his special technique gauge was about half-filled. First, he would retrieve

Chiyuri and fly up towards the sky. He would then wait for the Frosted Circle to be canceled, and then defeat Tourmaline Shell first with another double dive attack—

Haruyuki formed that strategy in his mind, but then experienced an unexpected phenomenon and cried out.

“Geh...!”

For some reason, his wings wouldn’t unfold. When he promptly turned to look at his back, he saw that frost was sticking to his folded metal wings, most likely acting as a glue that prevented them from unfolding.

Watching Haruyuki as he frantically moved his hands to his back and tried to rub off the frost, Horn shouted.

“Uhoh, somehow! I sense! A cha~~nce!”

Lowering his waist, this time he took a position to dash with the remarkably larger horn on his forehead in front.

Haruyuki’s gauge had lost 20% from just the shoulder tackle. He absolutely couldn’t allow himself to be hit by what seemed to be Horn’s sure-kill technique. However, even if he abandoned doing a counter attack and ran out of the way, the situation would just gradually get worse. Something, something, he had to do something—

“Teiyaah—!!”

It was at that moment that a high-spirited yell resounded.



When he looked in its direction for a moment, his eyes beheld the scene of Lime Bell catching Tourmaline Shell's palm strike with her right hand and then flinging him over her shoulder with a one-armed shoulder throw of excellent form.

SUPO—N The thrown Shell fell somewhere behind her about 10 meters away. However, it was unfortunate. The effectiveness of a throwing technique was at the lowest in a grassland or sand stage like this «Primeval Forest». The blue-green avatar started to jump back up immediately without having received much damage.

But, the true aim of that shoulder throw seemed to be something else.

Chiyuri turned around without looking at where her thrown enemy was going, and cried out while hoisting the large bell in her left hand up high in the air.

"«Citron Ca——!!»!"

As she swung down her bell, a lime-green light was sent out from it along with a beautiful bell sound. The light headed straight towards Haruyuki, and then—

Passed right by his left arm and disappeared into the fog behind him.

"Wha....."

Haruyuki's dumbfounded voice was overlapped by loud laughter from Frost Horn.

“Uhaha! Light beam techniques have their hit rate decreased by 30% within the «Circle»! If you’re a real man! Fight with! Your body!!”

GOH White frost was whirled up into the air at Horn’s feet. With an energetic dash with a strong kick-off, he thrust towards Haruyuki. His forehead’s huge horn shined sharply.

In the near-instant it took the enemy to close in on him, Haruyuki’s thoughts spun at full power.

No matter how low the visibility was, had Chiyuri really missed with her special technique just now?

She was an incredibly careful-type when it came to that. If she used her healing ability, she must have waited for the moment when it would surely hit. Yet, Haruyuki’s health gauge was down by only 20%. It was too soon for activating «Citron Call» with its bad energy consumption.

In other words, Chiyuri had purposely made her technique miss, no, she had aimed at something else besides Silver Crow.

If he had to name a factor besides the fighters in this Primeval Forest stage that could influence the state of the battle, it would be...

The instant his thoughts reached that far, Haruyuki realized what he had to do.

Opening his eyes wide, he waited for Frost Horn’s charge. He lowered his waist, with one leg bent forward and the other extended behind him, and calculated the direction he needed to dodge towards.

“Uo...ryaaaaa—!”

Pretending as if he was unnerved by Horn’s rough battle cry, Haruyuki turned his body around. He ran away at full speed while precisely following the line that Chiyuri’s special technique had pass through earlier. A trembling in the ground drew near him from behind, and a premonition of damage suddenly hit his back—

He then suddenly braked and kicked off the ground with all his strength, aiming directly above. Spreading out his hands and bending his back, he jumped over Horn with a backwards somersault, and tried going around to behind his back.

The enemy was aware that Silver Crow couldn’t use his wings. In that case, he shouldn’t expect for him to escape upwards. Sure enough, there was a feeling of grazing a sharp tip on the center of his back, but Haruyuki danced through the air without getting any further shocks.

The large avatar was charging in a straight line towards the center of his vision that had become reversed.

In the direction he was heading towards, a huge elliptical-shaped silhouette had appeared within the curtain of white fluttering frost.

“Owaah!?”

That shout belonged to Frost Horn. He flapped both his hands frantically and tried to do an abrupt braking. However, since the ground at his feet was half-frozen, he couldn’t immediately stop. While grandly kicking

about the frost on the ground, he slammed straight into the round silhouette.

BAKUSHA A dry yet wet smashing sound resounded.

The huge elliptical sphere broke greatly, and transparent mucus flowed out. Something crept out from inside it, and let out an angry cry of 'GIIIIIII' as if its back had gotten cold.

The things that one always had to look out for in the Primeval Forest stage were the gigantic living creature-type objects. There were various types like carnivores, dinosaurs, and also man-eating plants, but standardly all the creatures would indiscriminately attack any duel avatars that entered their vision.

The only exception to that was «when one broke an egg».

A huge living creature whose peaceful sleep within its shell had been disturbed would continue aiming at only the avatar that disturbed it for 500 seconds. Like this huge long-horned beetle, whose four eyes were shining red right now as it looked down on Frost Horn with its large robust jaws chattering.

As amazed voices saying things like 'Aah, he really did it this time' rained down from the gallery, Horn put up his hands and spoke to the carapace-covered creature.

"W-W-W-Wait! ...If we talk as fellow men, we'll understand each other!"

"GIGIGIIIIIII!!"

Unfortunately, it seemed to be a female. The long-horned beetle began to savagely chase after the avatar that wasn't even half its size, mowing down the surrounding rafflesia with its huge antennas. As Horn let out a scream of 'Uhhiii!' and tried to escape, its huge jaws bit the air several times above his head.

—Of course, «eggs of huge creatures» that could cause such a terrifying result didn't lie around the forest that conveniently. Even if you tried to use it as part of a strategy, there was a high chance of not finding even one after searching intently during the duel time limit.

But, in this case, the egg being there wasn't a coincidence.

Chiyuri had produced it. She had noticed the silhouette of a large insect moving on the other side of the mist while fighting. Then, she had released her special technique while pretending to aim at Haruyuki, when in fact she was targeting the insect.

«Citron Call» wasn't a true healing ability. It was actually the power to «turn back the time of the target». It healed the health gauge in a pseudo-manner, but it also canceled things like alterations by Enhanced Armaments, and if it hit an object on the stage, its state would be reversed in time. Destroyed objects would be restored to just as they were before—and a huge long-horned beetle would return to being an egg.

Naturally, Frost Horn probably would have normally noticed what had happened as well and not approached the egg. However, the frost

drifting thickly through the air had obstructed his vision and hidden Chiyuri's true aim. As a result, he had been deceived by Haruyuki's guidance and smashed straight into the egg—

"Hiiyaaaaah—!!"

That shrill scream and the huge insect's angry cries went far off into the deep forest to the west, in the direction of Shinjuku Central Park. «Frosted Circle» also moved along with him, and the surroundings regained their original brightness immediately.

Watching his partner's fleeing escape in a dumbfounded manner, Tourmaline Shell turned around and shouted while looking from Haruyuki to Chiyuri in turn.

"...I'll take revenge for Horn-kun! C-Come at meeeeeeee!!"

Of course, they came at him.

"Good work!"

Haruyuki bumped his own fist against Chiyuri's stuck out right fist as she said that with a smile over her entire face, and then dragged himself to sit down on one of the benches lying along the passage of the Tokyo Government Office Building's top floor.

He let out a long breath and cut off his connection to the Global Net for the time being, before collapsing and turning his face skyward.

Even though he had merely finished a single normal duel without anything other than Burst Points hanging in the balance, he was somehow extremely tired. The reason was probably because he had forced himself to continuously fight in close-combat on the ground, a way of fighting that wasn't his usual style.

The stress of «not flying» truly was like being in a desert without water to him. When the first school term had started, there had been a time when he couldn't use his wings for more than a week, but that experience had only seemed to increase his desire to fly even more.

A year had still not yet passed since Haruyuki had become a Burst Linker. If it was «that person» who had six years of experience, it wouldn't be strange at all if she had continued hiding her passion for the sky more and more until it was maddening. Although signs of that couldn't be felt at all from her usually quiet manner...

"Hey, what are you spacing out about!"

GOTTSUN Haruyuki confusedly blinked his eyes as his head was hit.

Sitting on the next bench beside him, Chiyuri puffed up her cheeks and gave him a sidelong glare. It seemed he had completely missed what she had been saying.

"S-Sorry. What were you saying?"

"'Shall we do another battle?' is what I asked!"

After she said that, Haruyuki glanced at the time display at the lower right corner of his vision, and saw that only a few minutes had passed since they had arrived at the viewing platform. Burst Linker duels finished after 1.8 seconds at the most, so it was only natural, but Haruyuki thought it over a little, before answering.

“Hmm, even if we wait for another duel challenge as a tag team, I feel that we’ll probably just end up battling with Horn and Shell’s team again...Well, that’s not that bad either, though.”

Chiyuri rolled her cat-like eyes, before shaking her head.

“Certainly, fighting the same team might be boring. But, it’d also be a waste to do solo duels after the two of us came all the way here...”

After staying lost in thought for a while with an expression where she would probably have been moving her big cat ears if she were in the avatar form she used on the school’s local network, Chiyuri suddenly clapped her hands together and spoke.

“Ah, I know! Since we’re already in Shinjuku, let’s call Nee-san^[11] over! If I remember right, she attends a high school in Shibuya, so she could just travel over one station.”

The instant he heard that, Haruyuki was a little surprised. That was because the «Nee-san» that Chiyuri spoke of was «that person» who Haruyuki had been thinking of just now.

Her name was «Sky Raker». She was a senior Burst Linker that had joined—no, returned to Nega Nebulas just two months ago, and was also Kuroyukihime's old friend.

The reason why Chiyuri called her Nee-san was very simple. It originated from when they exchanged name tags in their first meeting in the real world, where Haruyuki had noticed that, like how Chiyuri's family name was «Kurashima», Raker's real name was «Kurasaki Fuuko», and then nonchalantly commented 'Since you're an island and peninsula together, it's like you're sisters, hahaha'.^[12]

Without waiting for Haruyuki's response, Chiyuri started typing an invitation email to that Raker-nee-san. As his childhood friend typed on her holo-keyboard with slightly awkward finger movements, Haruyuki wavered over whether to say "Stop". That was because he had an intuitive premonition that Raker-san would undoubtedly refuse that invitation.

While she had certainly returned to the legion, Sky Raker was still not released from the guilty consciousness that bound her. Even now, she still deeply regretted having left the legion a long time ago as if she were forsaking the leader Kuroyukihime. Chiyuri of course also knew about that. And in her own way, she was probably trying to knock at the door of Raker's closed heart.

That's why Haruyuki closed his mouth back shut.

Completing the email after a few seconds, Chiyuri connected her Neuro Linker to the Global Net for an instant and sent it. She cut it off again,

and then after waiting a little while, connected it once more. After receiving the reply from Raker, she disconnected from the net again, and then looked at the text.

".....'Sorry', it says."

After whispering that, Chiyuri then raised her head and gave a tiny laugh; Haruyuki carefully prepared his next words.

"Raker-san is in high school, so she's surely busy on weekdays. Since she should be participating in the territory match next weekend, we can meet her there."

"...Yeah, that's right."

His childhood friend sucked in a deep breath, smiled as if renewing her emotions, and spoke in a chipper voice.

"Then, shall we fight another round as solo fighters this time?"

"Hmm, I feel quite satisfied from the one earlier...If you're unsatisfied though, Chiyu, I'll keep going with you, of course."

When Haruyuki gave that as his answer, Chiyuri showed a sincere happy-looking smile and nodded.

"Yeah, since we were able to win in such an interesting and cool way, I'm also done for the day. Ah, it was really satisfying!"

"Pretty much."

Giving a smile of his own, Haruyuki reflected on their tag match earlier.

Just winning in a power battle with their avatars themselves was also very nice, but what was even more refreshing was having a strategic victory perfectly using the stage's attributes. Furthermore, it wasn't just something like a comeback victory while covered in disadvantages. That was evident by how the gallery had gotten thrilled and animated when the duel had been concluded.

Of course, the regret of having lost was also consequently doubled for the losers.

Chiyuri also seemed to recall at the same time as Haruyuki the magnificent words Frost Horn had declared to them after having somehow shaken off the hot pursuit of the huge long-horned beetle and returned to the battlefield only to be crushed by their concentrated attacks, and so the two of them burst into laughter together.

"Bufufu... 'Next time I'll definitely dropkick you off from the top of the Tokyo Sky Tree!'. If he gives us advance notice like that, we can just easily dodge it, and it'll end with him falling from that height."

"Before that, there's the problem of how he would reach up there. There's probably 200 meters from just the viewing platform there to the antenna at the top, and in the first place, do the social cameras even...reach...that high..."

An idea suddenly flashed through Haruyuki's mind as he spoke, and his words slowed down.

It was about the topic he had tried to remember just before they had been challenged to a duel. The first case of exporting the social camera technology outside Japan.

The memory of seeing it at a glance on the headline news finally came back to him.

As Haruyuki suddenly sank into silence, Chiyuri tilted her head in puzzlement.

"...What's wrong, Haru?"

"Eh, ah, n...no, it's nothing."

When he simply shook his head, Chiyuri shrugged, before standing up energetically.

"Then, let's get some tea somewhere and head home. You must be happy, Arita-sensei, you don't have to worry about going home all beaten up and full of holes with me!^[13]"

The thought 'No matter how much we make game talk, she still says that kind of remark as usual' flashed through Haruyuki's mind.

"N-Not especially, even if I was beaten up, I wouldn't really mind, not especially."

As he mumbled that, a giggle from Chiyuri who had started to walk towards the elevator reached his ears. After sighing, he hurriedly chased after her.

Outside the window, only the white clouds continued slowly drifting through air as usual.

Chapter 3

After parting from Chiyuri on the apartment floor below and returning to his empty home by himself, Haruyuki sat down on the living room sofa as soon as he changed out of his uniform, and ran his fingers over his virtual desktop.

He first opened a browser and vocally inputted the search words.

“Social camera, export.”

That news article on that was immediately displayed at the top of the search results.

[Installation of Japan’s security system into Hermes Cord]

‘Security system’ of course referred to the Social Camera technology.

And «Hermes Cord» was—

The name of the «space elevator» that had been built in the East Pacific Ocean.

Clicking the link with his finger, Haruyuki thought hard as he read the news story text.

This article reported, to summarize, that the same Social Camera Network as the one used in Japan was being adopted as the security system of the space elevator, an international facility. The ground station for the space elevator was located in the sea near Christmas Island, a place quite far

away from Japan. With social cameras deployed at such a place, would the Brain Burst program really adopt it as an «Area^[14]»? Even if it did so, would there be a way to Dive there?

After desperately thinking over in his head for about thirty seconds, Haruyuki quickly abandoned the effort. He had too little knowledge to find the answer to this question. About Brain Burst, and also about the space elevator. At a time like this, he should ask for advice from his leader. Yes, if it was that person, she should have plenty of knowledge on both subjects.

After closing the browser and starting a mail, he then hesitated for a bit.

Haruyuki considered the ratio within himself between «wanting to genuinely ask about it» and «wanting to talk with her using that as an excuse», and after concluding 'Hmm, it's a 6:4 ratio!', he quickly threw himself into the text mail. In order to make a Dive Call appointment with the talented woman with zero weak subjects, one of the most senior players in Brain Burst, the head of «Nega Nebulas», and the «Black King», Kuroyukihime.

The specified time in the reply message he immediately got was in ten minutes. After finishing his supper of a frozen shrimp Doria dish and oolong tea in that interval, Haruyuki Full-Dived one minute before the specified time, and then changed the environmental data of his home's

local network to the object set he had downloaded from an overseas website.

When he had invited Kuroyukihime over to his home network in a similar manner once before, he had frantically flurried his head over the sets he had on hand that were either cold or filled with gunpowder, so since then he had collected ones here and there that seemed to have a good atmosphere. His mother had complained that he shouldn't waste the storage capacity of their home server, though.

Once he had taken care of all the preparations, he pressed the connection request button as soon as the designated time arrived, and following a call sound for several seconds, an avatar appeared before him.

A jet-black dress with gleaming silver frills. A folded parasol of the same color. Black swallowtail butterfly wings with a red pattern design on her back.

With her mystique increased just a little more than her form in the real world, the fairy princess first smiled upon seeing Haruyuki's pink pig avatar, and then looked around at her surroundings.

Then, her eyes suddenly widened, and she clung to the side of a pillar with great force while letting out a cry.

"U-Uwaah!?"

"Heh!? W-What's wrong!?"

"E-E-Even if you ask what's wrong, it's all this! W-W-What-What is this environmental data!?"

When she shouted that, Haruyuki also frantically looked at the surroundings.

A ridgeline of mountains that hazily glowed purple. Vast woods and prairies, and a stone-made white city. The two of them were on top of a high, high tower that commanded a view of that beautiful scenery. Since there weren't any handrails anywhere on the very narrow watchtower with a diameter of about three meters either and there were only two chairs along with a gas lamp in the center, the view was the best.

"U-Umm...isn't it b-beautiful? It's an object set I found beforehand in the German net, but..."

"Before that, just how many meters high is this thin tower!?"

Seeing her ask that with a pale face, Haruyuki peered down from the edge of the tower. His sense of distance told him the height from the ground was comparable to the height of the government office he had jumped down from in the duel earlier this evening, so he answered as such.

"E-Err...about five hundred meters..."

"That's too high, idiot! Or what, were you aiming for some kind of suspension bridge effect!?"

"H-Huh? What is that?"

"The suspension bridge effect is...when in a dangerous place like a high suspension bridge, the feeling of fear is mistaken for..."^[15]

Kuroyukihime stopped her words suddenly in the middle of her explanation, and after giving a light cough, she glared at Haruyuki again.

"...Anyway, that kind of psychological effect is already meaningless with me! Well...since this isn't a duel, I'd probably be fine even if I fell from here, but at the very least tell me about this kind of thing in advance..."

After the end of her sentence dissolved into mutters, Kuroyukihime stood up at last, and then lowered herself down onto the chair next to her. After Haruyuki also sat down in front of her, he asked a little dejectedly.

"Umm, I'm sorry for scaring you...Should I change it to another object set?"

"No, it's fine. Whatever the height, it's something you searched for."

Finally seeing a smile appear on her beautiful lips, Haruyuki let out a sigh. He scratched his head with his left hand that had turned into a round hoof, and then gave a delayed greeting.

"E-Err...Good evening, senpai. Sorry for calling you so suddenly."

"Good evening, Haruyuki-kun. No, since we weren't able to talk at school today, I'm glad I'm able to meet with you now."

Since the cultural festival was at the end of June at Umesato Middle School and it was the last big job for the current student council, the

vice-president Kuroyukihime continued to have busy days. Remembering that, Haruyuki took this opportunity to ask the question he had thought of several times until now.

“Speaking of which, why did you become a member of the student council, senpai? Since the chairman and vice-president are decided by election, you have to announce your candidacy, right?”

“Hmm, well yes. Your question of ‘Why did I, someone concerned with only becoming a Level 10 Burst Linker, do that?’ is quite natural. Duels that take up time in the middle of council meeting are also unavoidable, too.”

After giving a meaningful smile, Kuroyukihime continued.

“However, if I had to answer honestly, it was all because of Brain Burst that I became a student council member as well.”

“Eh...eeh!?”

“Think about it, to Burst Linkers, the school you attend is the most familiar and therefore the most dangerous field. To grasp all the information there and establish a firm footing could be called a rather indispensable matter. If you’re a member of the student council, you can have almost full access to the school database, after all. With that point of view...”

There, Kuroyukihime gazed at Haruyuki with a smile, and said something unexpected.

"I don't think that the next student council elections that will be at the top for two terms will be a problem. How about you run for president, Haruyuki-kun?"

"Wha...W-W-W-W-Wha-Wha-Wha."

After jumping up lightly out of his chair, Haruyuki shook his nose back and forth at high speed.

"I-I-I-Imp-Imp-Impossible! I-I-If I did something like that, I really would get a dismissal ticket by the Supreme Justice Court, really!"

"Hmm, then I suppose I can't compromise by having Takumu-kun as the president and you as the vice-president either..."

"That! Isn't! The problem!"

Resolutely turning her down while slightly infected by Frost Horn's tone, Haruyuki forcibly changed the subject.

"Anyway, I dueled in Shinjuku today, and..."

"Yeah, I heard a rumor about it. It seems you fought desperately against some of «Leonids» main forces."

"N-News of that traveled quickly."

When Haruyuki blinked at that, Kuroyukihime changed her smile into a slightly more sarcastic one.

"Of course I know that you were in quite a close mood with Chiyuri-kun."

"N-No, that's, umm, uh, err."

"What's wrong? I'm not really blaming you for anything, am I? The fact that my legion members work well together is most important."

As he got a cold sweat from seeing her certain-kill Kuroyuki-smile, he changed the subject once again.

"J-Just before that duel ended, the opponent said 'I'll dropkick you from the Tokyo Sky Tree', and then I suddenly thought of something!"

Quickly opening his browser, he called up the article in question and slid the window over to Kuroyukihime.

"Umm, senpai, do you also know about that news article?"

"...Japan's security system in the Hermes Cord? Yeah, I feel like I glanced at it on the evening news, but..."

After glancing at the holo-window, Kuroyukihime looked up and tilted her head a little in puzzlement.

"What about this article?"

"Err...Actually, I had a little idea...although it may be something extremely off the point, but...or rather, I feel truly sorry about calling you out for something of that extent, but..."

After extending his mumbled excuses at high speed, Haruyuki finally brought up the main topic.

“That security system is the social camera technology, right? In other words, won’t the Pacific space elevator be entirely in the «Camera Sphere»? When that happens...will the Hermes Cord appear in Accel World as well...is what I mean...”

When he had finished saying that much, Kuroyukihime widened her eyes, so Haruyuki prepared himself for her to laugh loudly and say ‘What stupid thing are you saying?’, or get angry and say ‘Don’t call me for such a foolish idea’.

However—.

“.....H——mm.”

After giving a long hum, Kuroyukihime put her right hand’s fingers to her chin, and stared at the browser window again.

Finally, she raised her head and shook her head slightly.

“How to say this...you’re a guy who thinks of very wild things. But...it’s interesting. Yeah, it’s a very interesting idea...”

“H-Hah.”

As Haruyuki let out a foolish voice without knowing how to react, Kuroyukihime rose from her chair in front of Haruyuki and started walking back and forth on the narrow watchtower as if she had forgotten her fear of the five hundred meters height.

“Even if social cameras are installed there...it would normally be a closed network, but...in the Hermes Cord’s central station, is there really the extra space and spare electrical energy needed for accommodating a huge image processing system? Rather than that, it’s much more efficient and cheaper to process it by connecting to Japan’s SSSC through satellite connection. If it’s like that...then it’s possible that the BB Program^[16] could pass through even the firewalls there...”

“U-Umm.”

Somehow slipping in his voice there, Haruyuki vigorously waved both his short hands.

“Senpai, I don’t get what you’re saying at all.”

Stopping her walk at exactly that instant, Kuroyukihime’s right hand’s index finger waved back and forth as if she was wavering over how to explain, and then she spoke.

“Hmm...In other words, it’s like this. Since the Hermes Cord is a low orbit-type space elevator, its design is extremely tight...”

“What does low orbit-type mean?”

“...So that’s where you get stuck.”

Kuroyukihime gave a small wry smile, and sat back down on her chair again.

After giving a small cough, she called up a big blank window with her left hand. She drew a circle at the bottom of it with her fingertip, and wrote [Earth] inside it in elegant letters.

“Then, I’ll start from the big basics. A space elevator, or also called an orbital elevator, is simply put an incredibly high tower building from the surface of the earth up to space, in order to carry people and materials that use the elevator to go up and down it. Unlike launch-type rockets or round-trip shuttles, the elevator’s conveyance cost per weight can be made low beyond comparison. However...”

Kuroyukihime moved her finger, and drew an absurdly huge conical tower extending up from the round Earth.

“If, for example, they tried to build an elevator reaching up to space using the same method of construction as the Tokyo Sky Tree, the area of the base would have to be on a scale that would take up Japan’s entire surface, like so. No matter the circumstance, a tower of Babel like this is impossible to implement. So, you have to change your way of thinking.”

She quickly erased the tower, and this time drew a small square in a section of outer space far away from the Earth.

“First, you build a station in geostationary orbit 36,000 km away from the Earth like this. Then, a tough yet lightweight cable is suspended down toward the Earth’s surface from there. The speed of an object that goes around geostationary orbit will synchronize almost perfectly with the Earth’s rotation, so it will seem to remain «stationary» just as the name

suggests without moving from that one point in the Earth's sky.

Therefore..."

She drew a line that went down from the square—from the geostationary orbital station to the Earth.

"Once the end of the cable that reaches the ground is fixed in place, a tower...or rather, a ladder that stretches up from Earth to space is completed in this manner."

"Hah, I see!"

Haruyuki was impressed and struck his knee with his right hand's hoof.

However, he soon after furrowed his eyebrows and turned his head sideways.

"No, but, wait a minute. No matter how light the materials are, if its length is no less than 36,000 km and it also has to be a thick enough cable for the elevator to be installed, its total weight will be incredibly huge, won't it? By pulling tight on the cable, won't the geostationary orbital station fall to Earth?"

"It will fall down!"

Since Kuroyukihime gave such an immediate answer, Haruyuki's hips slipped on top of his chair.

"Wha..."

"Then, to deal with that, they do this."

This time, Kuroyukihime extended a line upwards from the station, and then drew a black dot at the end of it.

"You just need to lengthen the cable further above the station and then stick a weight at its end, so that the station becomes the center point of the heavy weight...in other words, at center of its gravity. Then, an upward vector occurs due to the centrifugal force of the rotating weight, and it balances with the downward weight produced by the cable."

"Hah, I see!"

Haruyuki was once again impressed, and then once again tilted his head.

"...So, where is that weight brought from?"

Kuroyukihime then gave a meaningful grin, and then used slightly abrupt words.

"—The concept of this «geostationary orbit-type space elevator» was actually announced by America's NASA forty-seven years ago, in 2000 AD. However, in those days, they predicted that it would take until 2062 to complete it."

"Heh!? ...I-Isn't that still much further in the future?"

"Yes. The reason why it was set in such a far future...is because, in NASA's plan, it was planned for **an asteroid passing within Earth's neighborhood to be caught**, and then used as the weight fastened to the cable extending up from the geostationary orbital station."

"Hah!? T-They were going to catch an asteroid!?"

"That's right. They said that, if they waited for as long as sixty-two years, a handy asteroid would fly by with luck and they would also have developed the technology to catch it by then."

"...That's fifteen years from now, isn't it?Isn't it still impossible?"

"Yeah, it's impossible."

No longer able to understand anything, Haruyuki flapped his mouth open and closed.

"...B-But...The space elevator «Hermes Cord» has already been built! If I remember right, it was complete five years ago, so that was in 2042. H-How did they make it then?"

"That's the thing..."

Kuroyukihime answered while wiping away and erasing the diagram she had drawn on the window with her palm.

"It's because, as opposed to the «geostationary orbit-type space elevator» that I explained just now, which is so to speak an initial concept model, the Hermes Cord is a «low orbit-type space elevator», which was redesigned in a more realistic form."

"Low orbit...type."

"The basic idea is the same as the geostationary orbit-type. But the structure is different. The central station of the Hermes Cord floats at a

much lower location than geostationary orbit, at 2000 km above the ground...Though that's still outside the atmosphere."

"Eh...err, if geostationary orbit is 36,000 km high...isn't that unreasonably close to the ground!?"

"It is close. Since the cable is also much shorter at that height and can thereby be made lighter, the weight for establishing balance does not need to use something like an asteroid either."

"A-Aah...I see..."

After nodding his head deeply, Haruyuki voiced a natural question.

"...Then, why didn't they plan to use the low orbit-type from the beginning?"

"That's because there's a problem with it. A man-made object placed at low orbit...in other words, from 1500 to 2000 km above the ground, has to orbit at a speed that far surpasses the Earth's rotation, in order to obtain the centrifugal force needed to balance the much greater attraction of gravity there than at geostationary orbit. For a geostationary orbit-type elevator, the lower end of the cable can be fixed onto the ground because the speed of its orbit synchronizes with the Earth's rotation, but a low orbit-type cannot do that."

While saying that, Kuroyukihime extended her finger and struck a small mark very close to the circle that represented the Earth.

"This is the Hermes Cord's central station, built at an orbit of 2000 km high. A cable made out of entwined carbon nanotubes stretches out from it both above and below, and this cable is connected to a top station that acts as the weight attached to the top end and a bottom station attached to the bottom end."

The bottom end of the line that extended upwards and downwards from the mark was just a little ways away from the outline of the Earth. Pointing at the gap between them with her finger, Kuroyukihime continued.

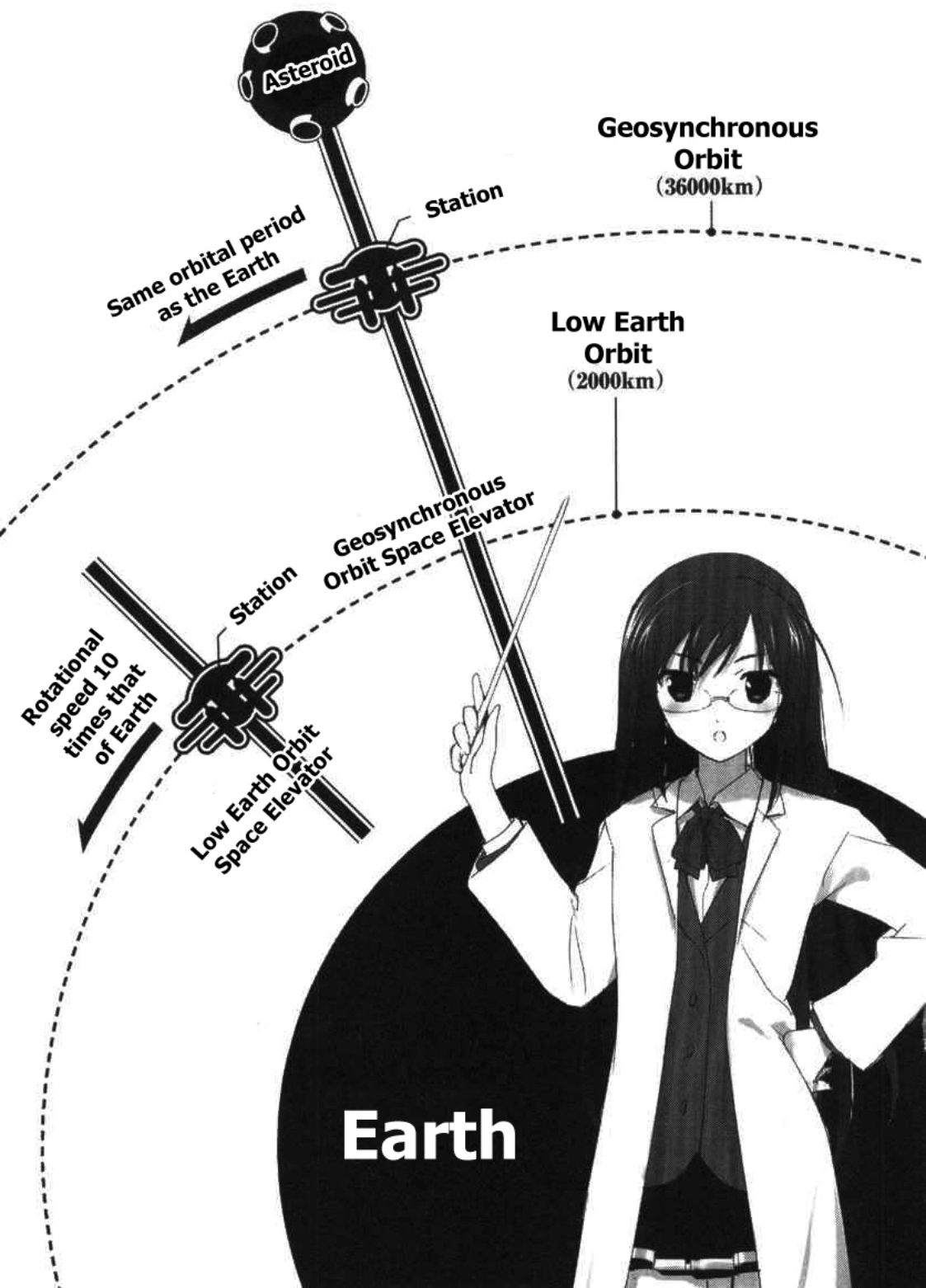
"This bottom station floats 150 km above the ground. If it was lower than that, the atmosphere would become too dense and the whole elevator would be drawn tight due to friction, and eventually fall to the ground."

"Ha—....."

Letting out a long breath, Haruyuki spoke in order to put his thoughts in order while twitching his pig nose slightly.

"In other words...err, the Hermes Cord is an artificial satellite with a length of 4000 km that is connected to these three stations by a CNT cable...right? And this orbits the Earth at a much faster speed than the Earth's own rotation...?"

"Exactly. Since the ground speed of the bottom stations reaches Mach 10, the low orbit-type elevator is also called by the nickname «Hypersonic Skyhook»."



Asteroid

Geosynchronous Orbit
(36000km)

Station

Same orbital period as the Earth

Low Earth Orbit
(2000km)

Geosynchronous Orbit Space Elevator

Station

Rotational speed 10 times that of Earth

Low Earth Orbit Space Elevator

Earth

“But then, what about...the fact that it was built in the sea near Christmas Island in the east Pacific Ocean? I have memories of looking at the huge man-made island on the news at the time, but...doesn't the long tower surely extend up from there...?”

“That island is a base for the arrival and departure of space planes that carry people and materials to and from the bottom station of the Hermes Cord. The planes that take off from there rendezvous with the station at 150 km above and drop off cargo there. Then, the cargo is lifted up inside the elevator until it reaches the top station at 4000 km altitude, and then it is carried from there to a geostationary orbital station or the international base on the moon's surface by a round-trip shuttle. Incidentally, since the geostationary orbital station is also right above the arrival-and-departure base, even if people say «the Hermes Cord is in the east Pacific Ocean», it's not really incorrect.”

“Hofuu...”

Letting out a sigh for the nth time, Haruyuki looked at the window diagram anew. Since the Earth's diameter was about 12,700 km long, comparing it with a 4000 km length could be considered as the same as the proportion between an apple and its stem, but the idea of such a thing flying overhead at Mach 10 was very difficult to take in.

“Hmm, somehow, I'm scared that it will fall due to some kind of rebound.”

When he murmured that without thinking, Kuroyukihime shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"Actually, there was someone who tried to make it fall as well."

"H-Hah!?"

"What, you don't know? From what I remember, there was a case at around the beginning of spring where a terrorist that had slipped in among some tourists tried to set a bomb in the central station. Due to that, it was decided that the Hermes Cord's security system would be strengthened, and Japan was also participating in the bid for constructing the system, so it's connected to the recent news about the first export of the social camera technology."

"Uwah, so that's how it was. I'm sorry, I haven't been diligent with the news..."

Just like the times he was nominated to speak up in class and he couldn't answer properly, Haruyuki hanged his head. However, Kuroyukihime didn't scold him any further, and continued her explanation with a wry smile.

"The low orbit-type elevator Hermes Cord has a small and thin cable compared to that of a geostationary orbit-type. Its design is tight. That's why, even if a bomb of a size that could fit in a pocket went off, it could cause tremendous damage depending on the location of the explosion. There is also no spare electric power or space for accommodating a large-scale surveillance system in it. I think that is the reason they adopted Japan's social camera technology...Yeah, with this we can finally return to our original conversation."

Letting out a long breath, Kuroyukihime waved her right hand's fingers and opened up the VR operating menu. She materialized two glasses and presented one of them to Haruyuki.

'Damn it, I should have prepared something like that as the one that called her here!' Despite inwardly panicking like that, he accepted it and took a sip. Seeming to be an original drink that had had countless flavor parameters fine-tuned, it was unlike any drink in the real world, and yet a fresh bittersweetness without any unnatural quality to it spread throughout his taste buds.

"It's...It's very delicious."

When he said that, Kuroyukihime gave a small smile and then nimbly extended out her avatar's left hand.

"I've also recently been doing real cooking practice, but...A task that you can't just do over again is really troublesome. Did you know, Haruyuki-kun, light-coloured soy sauce's only difference is its lighter color! What's with that, is it supposed to be like salt water!?"

"H-Heh, I didn't know that...Or rather, why are you suddenly trying to raise your cooking skills...?"

"That's obvious, it's so that, one day, for yo..."

Suddenly closing her mouth at that point, Kuroyukihime gave a big cough.

"...It's just for recreation^[17]. More importantly, let's finally get back onto the main subject."

Following her slightly forceful change of topic, she continued her rapid-speech explanation.

"I said that the Hermes Cord doesn't have the room to accommodate a large-scale surveillance system as well. So it became the turn of Japan's social cameras. That system collects in one place the images photographed by countless cameras through an exclusive high-speed network, and signs of criminal activity are detected by automatically analyzing them with a super high spec supercomputer. For example, if a gun were detected by a camera somewhere, the system would immediately analyze where the person who has that gun is and where they came from, and then continue tracking where they go. The locations of the facilities where this processing is performed, the «Social Security Surveillance Centers», have not all been revealed to the public."

"E-Even you don't know, senpai?"

When Haruyuki seriously asked that, Kuroyukihime gave the greatest wry smile yet.

"Hey, just what do you think I am? I'm only a frail female middle school student, there's no way I would know the greatest of our nation's state secrets such as that! ...Well, I do have some guesses, though."

"W-Where!?"

"That's a secret...More importantly, just as I explained just now, the social cameras gather the automated image analysis that acts as the guts of the system at the SSSC and process it there. In other words, neither huge recording equipment nor human operators are required for the surveillance cameras usually. Supposing that that very «simplicity» is the reason it was adopted for the Hermes Cord in this case...you could say it's inevitable that the space elevator's cameras and Japan's social camera network are linked."

POKAAN As Haruyuki was listening attentively to these words, Kuroyukihime gave a wink as she said the word 'connected' as if she were waiting for something, and then Haruyuki finally remembered the main purpose of this sudden Dive Call.

"Ah...I see, err, so the fact that they're connected means, in other words, umm..."

While flapping his pig avatar's short arms, he shouted,

"...we can go there!?! To the Hermes Cord in Accel World!!"

"Hmm...Well, we're only at the stage where we can't say it's impossible yet, though."

Giving a mischievous smile, Kuroyukihime continued in a tone as if she was somehow testing something out.

"First, there is the question of whether Brain Burst, a dueling game, will faithfully extend its stage all the way to there. And even if the networks

are connected, how would we go all the way there? We Burst Linkers, generally, Dive in at the places where our real bodies are. In other words, in order to go to the Hermes Cord in Accel World, it would be necessary to actually board the space elevator on this side. Tour packs for going up to the geostationary orbital station have also been put on the market these days, but it's expensive."

"...They're super-expensive, aren't they..."

Haruyuki dropped his shoulders. He considered for an instant that as Silver Crow, with his wings, he could fly up to the bottom stations above after Diving on the ground, but he dismissed the idea before even voicing it. The limit to the altitude Crow could reach was at most 1500 meters. On the other hand, Hermes Cord floated in the sky a hundred times higher than that, at least 150,000 meters high.

No, before that, he couldn't even go to Christmas Island, the terrestrial space plane departure base, with a middle school student's pocket money at all.

"Hmm...so in other words, unless you're a super-rich kid, there's no way to Dive in at the Hermes Cord..."

"Or rather, if you could go to the actual thing in the real world, I don't think there'd be any need to go through the trouble to Dive into the reconstructed article in Accel World."

"That's...true."

HAFU Giving a sigh of disappointment this time instead of admiration, Haruyuki looked up at the sky.

Even when seen from the top of a 500 meter tall tower, the virtual blue sky seemed as if it were far away and went on forever. No, in such a VR Object Set that's freely distributed to the public, the «sky» would not reach higher than 10, or maybe 100 times the height of this tower. That was because there was nothing «beyond» this blue sky. This was a closed world, where nothing but the thin blue color continued on past it.

"...Haruyuki-kun."

Hearing his name suddenly called, he turned his face back down, and met his gaze with Kuroyukihime's gentle yet somehow mysterious-seeming eyes.

"Why do you want to go to the Hermes Cord so much? Compared to how you can fly freely with your wings, the space elevator is only a man-made object that goes around a decided orbit, after all."

"Eh...err."

Having been thrown an unexpected question, it took several seconds for Haruyuki to form the ambiguous thoughts inside him into words.

"Umm, of course, there's the reason that I simply like high places as well, but...also, I was thinking that, supposing it was possible to go there, that person's wish might be fulfilled even just a little. That person...who has always aimed for Accel World's sky, no, for «beyond it»."

The instant she heard that—

Kuroyukihime's eyes widened slightly, and then her eyelashes turned down.

The words that eventually came out of her lips were so quiet, it was almost as if they were thoughts themselves.

".....I see."

After murmuring that, she turned her gaze towards the light blue sky.

"That's true...Her passion for the sky has surely not disappeared even now. Just as maddeningly as I aim for Level 10, no, even more so, she should be wishing to struggle on and reach the other side of that blue color..."

".....Yeah."

Nodding, Haruyuki also turned his face upwards once again.

That person—a core member of the first «Nega Nebulas», and a Level 8 Burst Linker, «Sky Raker».

Having lived in seclusion on the Old Tokyo Tower in Accel World for a long time, she had rejoined the reborn Nega Nebulas, reformed after three years, two months ago.

However, it was a little different from a complete return to active duty. Demonstrated by how she had refused Chiyuri's invitation this evening, she didn't do any normal duels at all, participating only in the «territory matches» every weekend, and furthermore she never came out onto the

front line. She always remained on standby at the back and concentrated on positional defense.

Of course, Haruyuki, and probably Takumu and Kuroyukihime as well weren't dissatisfied with that playing style at all. That was because Sky Raker, who moved through means of a wheelchair, generally couldn't run except on paved roads or smooth ground. Also, she accomplished splendid success in battle when defending her position through her original fighting style of freely manipulating her wheelchair and letting out hand-slash attacks while toying with her enemies. If the enemies were mainly close range types, she could fight sufficiently even when in a team of three where there was only one attacker and she had to protect the team healer almost perfectly.

Compared to the time where they had barely endured the hour-long territory matches with a team of just Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki and Takumu from autumn to winter last year, the battle power of the current Nega Nebulas had improved by leaps and bounds. That was without a doubt.

But, there was one clear fact that no one had tried to voice out loud.

If Sky Raker were to undo her seal on her Enhanced Armament «Gale Thruster» and wear it on her once again, her fighting power should leap up several, dozens of times greater than that of now. Even if she had lost both her legs, Haruyuki had proved that a mid-air dash through its booster propulsion displayed a huge offensive strength when he had driven away a huge enemy in the past with it.

However, even after Haruyuki had returned the Gale Thruster he had borrowed from her, and even when faced with losing battles, Sky Raker hadn't tried to summon. As if she was stubbornly denying the «wings» created by her own heart.

".....I."

Grasping his hands together in front of his round belly, Haruyuki whispered.

"I'm not particularly thinking something like, 'the legion will become stronger if that person flies again'. It's just...if Raker-san doesn't believe in her wings, I want to convey her that it isn't so. Having borrowed «Gale Thruster» once, I understand...Certainly, compared to Silver Crow's wings, that Enhanced Armament's flight time is short and therefore the altitude it can reach is also low, but its instantaneous output is more amazing than the acceleration of any other kind of avatar...That's why, there is actually much more power hidden inside it. I believe that."

After thinking and thinking, and then finishing his hard-fought explanation, Haruyuki raised his head and met with Kuroyukihime's eyes, which were filled with an unusually kind yet plaintive feeling.

The swallowtail butterfly avatar slowly nodded once, and then spoke in a quiet voice.

"If Raker can be taken to Hermes Cord, you can convey that to her...is that what you believe?"

Haruyuki also nodded, while being aware that he was saying something too romantic-sounding.

"Yes...Umm, that is if what I'm thinking is correct, though."

"Geez, how about you declare something while full of confidence once in a while?"

After immediately giving a wry smile, Kuroyukihime took a single deep breath, and then once again started speaking.

"—Just as I explained earlier, the Hermes Cord in the real world orbits at an altitude of at least 150 km. Therefore, even if the newly installed social camera network there is connected to the one in Japan, I believe that the Hermes Cord in Accel World will naturally appear at the same height. It's a distance that no kind of duel avatar could reach...but, I think getting there using a means of transportation is just possible."

"Eh...Eeh!?"

Letting out a high-pitched voice, Haruyuki leaned his body forward. As he was on the verge of falling off his chair, Kuroyukihime caught his flat nose with the tip of her high-heel shoe to stop him.

"I'm just talking about a possibility, calm down a bit."

"Y-Yessh..."

"Listen well, even if Brain Burst's origins are wrapped in mystery, it's still a dueling game on the surface. Therefore, when a new stage is added to

that world, don't you think it would be truly irrational if it was a place that no one could go to?"

Grinning, she moved her index finger as if inviting him.

"If we assume that, then it wouldn't be strange even if a method of transportation, one that can only be found by those who think very hard and search for it, secretly appears somewhere in Accel World."

"Secretly...huh."

"Even normal RPGs have them, right? Things like treasure chests that seem unobtainable at first glance, but a route to attain it can be found if you observe the map carefully and use your head."

"Ah, there are, there are. Those kinds of things are my favorite."

After nodding vigorously at Kuroyukihime's example, Haruyuki looked carefully at the diagram Kuroyukihime had drawn.

The space elevator that orbited at an altitude of around 150 km. Considering it, he couldn't think of any methods of going there besides a space plane or a rocket. If there were to be a place in Japan where a rocket would be launched—

"Err...how about the space center on Tanega Island?"

However, that guess he made was turned down by a single shake of black hair.

"No, 99% of Burst Linkers are in Tokyo. Therefore, a portal should also be prepared in Tokyo."

"B-But, there's nothing like a rocket launching pad in Tokyo!"

In response to his protest, Kuroyukihime looked at him with a grin.

"If our avatars were made of real substance, then a rocket might be necessary. However, that's not how it is, right? Our avatars are pure «information» constituted as proxy bodies in virtual space. And the information transmission facility with the highest output in Japan should be in Tokyo."

"Ah....."

After widening his eyes in shock, Haruyuki continued as if struggling to breathe.

"T-The Tokyo...Sky Tree..."

"Yes. If Hermes Cord really does become a new duel stage, I think it isn't possible for a portal there to appear anywhere besides the Sky Tree. And the timing of its activation...would be the instant the Hermes Cord comes the closest to Japan for the first time after having the social cameras installed in it..."

Erasing the window with the diagram, Kuroyukihime opened a browser and quickly operated it. A fully English-text screen that seemed to be the official site for the Hermes Cord was then displayed on it. However, Kuroyukihime followed the links one after another without wavering.

Finally, Kuroyukihime traced a wavy line on a global map that appeared with her finger, and then spoke in an affirmative tone.

"It's sooner than I thought, the day after tomorrow...it will be on Wednesday June 5, at 5:35 PM."

Chapter 4

As if the seasonal rain front was taking a brief recess at last, Tuesday was the first clear and pleasant day in a long while.

With only a few fleecy clouds floating in the sky when 6 o'clock classes ended, Haruyuki hurried to Kouenji Station at a quick pace as the rays of the setting sun hit his back.

His destination was, of course, on the opposite side of Tokyo—the New Tokyo Tower in Oshiage, Sumida Ward, whose official name was the «Tokyo Sky Tree». In about two hours, a door to the space elevator «Hermes Cord» would open up at the special viewing platform there...maybe.

It had all started from Haruyuki's almost dream-like idea. In reality, even when he went among the duel galleries in Suginami and Shinjuku, there hadn't been any other Burst Linkers talking about the Hermes Cord either. At the end of their Dive Call two days ago, even Kuroyukihime, who had guessed the time and place of the portal opening, had added 'Well, we shouldn't be too disappointed even if it's a hit-and-miss'.

Therefore, at the very least, he would have liked to incorporate the sub-theme of «an expedition to the East Tokyo Area» that they didn't normally visit, but unfortunately Takumu and Chiyuri were busy with club practice, and Kuroyukihime had a busy schedule in the student council in order to prepare for the upcoming cultural festival. And so, Haruyuki had

to pluck up the courage to risk being challenged to a solo duel in an unfamiliar territory.

“...If it really is a hit-and-miss, it’ll be fine if I go to the retro game store in Akihabara as well.”

Comforting himself in that lonesome manner, Haruyuki got on the Chuo Line.

Haruyuki changed over to the Hanzomon Line and got off at Oshiage Station, where the rows of buildings were increasingly dyed in the color of sunset.

Haruyuki circled around on the sidewalk, and after finally finding it in the sky, he let out a breath of relief.

Despite living in Tokyo, he didn’t often get the chance to go to «famous Tokyo sites», and so this was only his second time visiting the Sky Tree. Shining golden on its west side, the huge truss-structured tower rose up high sharply like a ladder reaching up to the heavens.

A length of 634 meters, and a base of 70 meters. Although 35 years had passed since it had been built, this communications tower was still the highest building in Japan even now. After standing there and staring up at its majestic appearance for a little while, Haruyuki hurriedly headed towards the tower.

He paid the middle-schooler fee at the entrance gate, and then got on the high-speed elevator. As the elevator lift began to go up with a feeling of acceleration, he was gripped by a sensation of lift different from taking off vertically in Accel World, and he unconsciously stuck himself to the glass wall just like when he ascended the Tokyo Government Office the day before yesterday. If Chiyuri were next to him, she would undoubtedly say “You really love high places don’t you!” in an amazed voice.

A few dozen seconds later, the elevator reached the viewing platform, and Haruyuki stepped out along with several tourists.

He restrained himself from immediately running up to the window, and first gave a look at his surroundings. It was a weekday evening, so there were very few non-adult figures on this floor. There were only college students who seemed to be in the middle of a date, and small children accompanied by their parents. From what he could currently see, there wasn’t any middle or high school students wandering around here by themselves with no apparent objective—in other words, there weren’t any «people who seemed like Burst Linkers».

Of course, he could also connect his Neuro Linker to the local network here, accelerate and check the matching list directly, but doing that in such a closed network would bring on the slight danger of his real identity being exposed. Besides, if he found the name of other Burst Linkers here, he would have no choice but to «duel», and that wasn’t his objective today.

Therefore, Haruyuki stopped scanning around the large viewing platform and stepped towards the window on the western side once again.

Although it was no match for the viewing platform of the Government Office in Shinjuku in terms of pure height, the view of the capital spread out under the clear evening sky was, in a single word, breathtaking. The way large laminated buildings struck upwards here and there on the ground among smaller grain-sized buildings looked like an outdated electronic board.

When he turned his gaze straight forward, the magnificent figure of Mt. Fuji lay stretched out there just beyond the demonic city^[18].

To its upper left was the sun, currently sinking down towards the horizon. It was followed by a belt of deep black clouds, so it would probably rain again tomorrow.

He raised his head further up. The sky filled his field of vision as its color changed from dark red to light purple. A jet flew above with lights on its wing-tips blinking. A sightseeing craft floated leisurely in the sky.

—At this instant, a 4000 km-long artificial object was approaching far above in that sky at the hypersonic speed of Mach 10.

The instant he thought that, Haruyuki let out a sigh.

—The world is vast. It's big. It's way too macroscopic in scale.

The reason I like to look up at the sky is surely because I want to experience this sensation. This feeling where my chubby, menial and tiny

self seems truly microscopic in comparison. In other words, it's a way of temporarily escaping.

The times when I become Silver Crow and fly are also surely like that. At that instant, I feel the absurd scale of Accel World with my whole body. Compared to the «infinity» of space and time there, even the mountain-sized troubles I have are just momentary sparks that burst meagerly on the ground. I believe that only when I'm touching the sky.

.....But.

In that case, why did you aim, no, why do you continue to aim even now for the sky? Just like me, you should want to taste that ephemeral release. If that's your goal, you can fulfill it plenty with your current abilities as well. Why...? Is there something you want there in the sky...?

The question that Haruyuki whispered in his heart was of course directed to his other «teacher», Sky Raker.

And Haruyuki could also vaguely guess the answer. Of course, he didn't know if it was correct or not. No, the problem wasn't whether it was correct. When the time came when Raker would once again flapped her wings and dashed through the sky, the answer would appear then.

That's why, visiting the Sky Tree and waiting for a portal to appear might be a completely useless action on Haruyuki's part right now. If Raker-san simply gave her usual gentle smile and shook her head to say she wouldn't go, that would be the end of it.

'But', thought Haruyuki. No matter how deep the scars she held were, Sky Raker was also a Burst Linker. Therefore, if a new field and moreover a 4000 km-long bridge to the sky appeared in Accel World, she will surely feel excited.

Like how Haruyuki's own chest was swelling unbidden at this instant.

As he continued staring at the evening landscape of the heart of Tokyo, the time display reached 5:30 without him noticing it. The predicted time of the portal's appearance that Kuroyukihime had accurately deduced was 5:34:42^[19]. At that instant, the Hermes Cord, which was flying on a wave-like trail along the equator, would be at its closest to Tokyo.

After waiting for several minutes while continuing to fret, he connected his Neuro Linker to the Global Net five seconds before the designated time.

Three seconds before, he took a deep breath. Two seconds before, he shut his eyes tight. And then one second before, Haruyuki cried out in a voice only he could hear.

"Burst Link!!"

BASHIIIIH!

The sound of acceleration struck his entire body.

When he slowly opened his eyes, he saw that he was in the frozen blue «Initial Acceleration Space». The metropolis spread out outside the

window, the floor and pillars of the viewing platform, the sparse number of tourists, everything had become like transparent crystal and remained stock still.

Haruyuki quietly separated from his real world body in the form of a peach-colored pig avatar. After taking one or two steps backwards, he turned around resolutely.

The central area of the viewing platform should, originally, be a space filled with coffee and goods shops. But now, those shops had completely disappeared, and only a deserted floor was left there.

No matter how hard he looked, there wasn't even a switch there, let alone a portal. After standing there stock still for almost ten seconds, Haruyuki let out a sigh.

—As I thought, the idea that a «Space Stage» would appear was just a childish fantasy.

He whispered that within his heart, and tried to sit down on the very spacious floor, but at that instant.

An intense light and vibrating sound suddenly struck Haruyuki's entire avatar's body, making him jump up. When he raised his face up with a start, there was a huge object gushing out now in the center of the wide empty floor.

A staircase gradually rose up from the floor step by step in a wide arc through the air. A circular stage appeared at its tip while spinning, and

furthermore six thin pillars rose up at its sides in a hexagonal arrangement.

The transparent pillars contained a blue light inside them. As if synchronizing with the pulsation of those lights, shining particles rose up perpendicular to the center of the pillars, and glittered beautifully as they extended almost all the way up to the ceiling.

"...This is...the Hermes Cord's portal..."

Whispering in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki stood up. He completely forgot about his disappointment from a moment ago, and tightly gripped his pig avatar's right hand. His guess was not wrong after all. Who was it that said it was just a childish fantasy?

He rushed up to the stairs in that state, and without feeling any fear or hesitation, he ran up the stairs with his hooved feet.

He passed through the gap between the six pillars, which were emitting a low vibrating sound, and went to the center of the circle.

On his last step, he gathered his feet together and jumped forward. However, his legs did not touch the floor again.

"Uwah...!?"

Haruyuki shouted as he saw his pig avatar start decomposing into countless light particles. No, rather than decomposing, it was returning to its original form. All the white particles were composed of detailed digital

code that served as proof that his virtual proxy body was being returned to its essence as information.

The instant after he realized that.

Haruyuki's consciousness felt as if he were rising vertically at a violent speed. But there was none of the Gs that accompanied takeoff. Having merely become light without mass, he shot through the Sky Tree's superstructure, flew up to the sky—

And then his vision whited out completely.

The sensation of stopping came just a few seconds later.

First, Haruyuki felt his feet touch on a level surface, and heard a hard 'GATSUN' sound. Weight suddenly returned to his body, and he involuntarily struck out one knee.

While in a crouched posture, he timidly opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was a HP gauge at the upper left corner of his vision. Thinking 'Eh?', he held out his hands and looked at them. They each had five sharp fingers that shined silver. Without a doubt, these were the familiar arms of «Silver Crow».

Since he had transformed into his duel avatar form without having started a duel, he panicked over whether this was the rule-less «Unlimited Neutral Field», but he quickly noticed something. The English word [LOCKED] was displayed in the center of the green HP gauge.

Unable to immediately grasp its meaning, he tilted his puzzlement for a while, before pushing it aside for the time being. After sucking in a deep breath, Haruyuki finally raised his head and looked straight in front of him.

And then, he shouted.

“Uu...uwaaaaah!?”

He bent backwards and fell on his backside from the momentum. Without being conscious of his awkward pose, he stared at the spectacle before his eyes.

The metal floor that Haruyuki sat on cut off just one meter in front of him. Beyond that was—the sky. And clouds. And beneath that, the surface of the Earth.

For Haruyuki with his flight ability, it was a familiar spectacle. However, the scale was completely different. It was way too high. Just how many times...no, how many tens of times higher was this higher than the 1500 meters altitude that was Silver Crow's flight limit? The sky was dyed a deep ultramarine, the clouds were shaped in thin streaks and huge swirls far below, the sea was an indigo blue, and the land was a blurry brown and green. If he fell from such a height, he would probably burn out from air friction in the atmosphere before receiving damage from the fall.

He unconsciously drew back, and when he was about three meters away from the edge without handrails or anything else, he finally let out the

breath he'd been holding in. He stood up with weak knees, and then finally looked to either side of him.

The grey metal terrace seemed to be shaped in a wide circle. While following the line of its edge, he automatically turned around. And then—

A curved wall stood in the center of the ring-like terrace.

No, it wasn't a wall. It was a pillar. An absurdly thick pillar, probably 100 meters in diameter, extended up vertically. Haruyuki was standing on a floor surface that spread out in the shape of a flange up to the base of the pillar.

"This is...the Hermes Cord.....?"

Murmuring that in a whisper, Haruyuki dumfoundedly looked up at the structure that was like a huge tower where gods lived. Shining dully like stainless steel, the metal tower stretched up infinitely towards the sky which changed from ultramarine to deep indigo, and its tip wasn't visible at all as it faded away into the vanishing point.

The space elevator in the real world should have been built by tying together several cables that were also twisted together from CNT fibers. Its diameter was two meters at most, so it was more accurate to describe it as a rope than a pillar.

But, the thing that had been reproduced from it in Accel World and rose high above before Haruyuki's eyes right now could no longer be called a

mere pillar. Floating at a high altitude, it was an incredibly large-scale tower of 100 meters in diameter and several thousand kilometers in height. Just why on earth had it been enlarged to such a size?

He probably wouldn't find the answer no matter how much he thought about it, but he thought it was a trifling question. The important thing was that the «space elevator» actually existed. No, the place he was standing on right now should perhaps still be called a «Super-High Altitude Stage». In that case, was real space waiting just beyond where this huge tower ascended...?

"It's way bigger than I expected."

Haruyuki nodded in response to the voice that spoke to his right.

"Yeah...Compared to this, even the Sky Tree is a toothpick..."

"On the other hand, there is also no detail on its surface. Is there an internal structure inside it?"

"But, I can't see anything like an entrance either...—Wait."

BIKUUN

His whole body stiffened, and after skillfully jumping up like that, Haruyuki cried out while rotating 90 degrees to the right.

"Waah!?! Wh, w-w-w-w-whowhowho, w-w-w-w-whenwhenwhen."

Who's that, when did you!

He tried to sharply ask the other person's identity, but only a strange series of sounds came out from his mouth. The silhouette that expressionlessly looked down on Haruyuki from right next to him was—

A thin dark red body. Robust thighs and forearms. Hands with sharp claws. A tail that flexibly swayed around. And with mask that projected triangular ears from the backside of the head and shining golden eyes, it was, without a doubt, the strongest class close range-type duel avatar that Haruyuki personally knew.

“Pa...P-P-P-P-Pard-san!? W-W-Why are you h-h-here!?”

«Pard-san», the Level 6 Burst Linker «Blood Leopard» that belonged to the Red Legion «Prominence», answered with a shrug of her shoulders.

“The same reason why you're here.”

“Heh...”

Finally settling down since the other party was much too calm and composed, Haruyuki belatedly realized.

The transport to this place was never a privilege granted to only Haruyuki. If a Burst Linker knew of the news on the social camera installation in the Hermes Cord, conceived of the possibility of a new stage being added to Accel World, and furthermore could guess the time and place when the portal to it would appear, anyone could manage to come here.

Slightly happy that there was another player that thought of such a reckless fancy and actually came to the Sky Tree like himself, Haruyuki

smiled. However, he immediately realized something, and stiffened his body.

In other words, it wouldn't be strange if new avatars appeared one after another here right at this instant. He frantically looked around at his surroundings, but he saw no signs of a third person appearing.

As Haruyuki started becoming scared only now, Pard-san spoke in a slightly amazed voice.

"The reason you entered the portal first is because you boldly accelerated at the viewing platform itself. I Dived inside the toilet on the floor below, so I was slightly late. Since other people will probably come from the ground with the prevention of having their real identities exposed as their top priority, there should be a margin of several minutes before they get here."

"Ah...yes, I see, that is true..."

While feeling belatedly scared at his own recklessness, Haruyuki once again greeted her.

"H-Hello, good day."

When Leopard nimbly held out her right hand, he did likewise and bowed his head to her.

"Umm, I'm seriously indebted to you for the other day. I'm sorry for only sending you a mail afterwards and not thanking you directly..."

Those words were thanks to Pard-san for the great help he had gotten from her in solving the huge trouble that assaulted Haruyuki two months ago. The leopard-headed avatar shrugged and replied with an unusually long response.

“NP^[20]. You also helped me a lot that time. Your information was very useful in finding the security hole within Akiba BG. More importantly...”

She struck Haruyuki’s back with a slap and urged him to move.

“We should effectively use the time advantage we went to the trouble of earning. Let’s investigate around the pillar.”

“K, K^[21]!”

Although the person that had appeared after him belonged to another legion, Haruyuki was seriously glad as he walked that it was Blood Leopard who he had made friends due to certain circumstances. If it had been Frost Horn, he would have definitely grabbed Haruyuki from behind without speaking first and thrown him down to the ground below.

They crossed over the approximately twenty meter wide flange and approached the main pillar of the Hermes Cord, but even when they touched it with their hands, no change occurred on its shining alloy-like surface. Even though there were details like seams between metal plates, there were no handholds for climbing at all.

Pard-san scratched the pillar with her sharp nails, and after confirming that it was so hard that it didn’t leave even a scratch, she began walking

around it clockwise. Haruyuki also followed after her. Since the diameter of the pillar was about 100 meters, they had a hard time going around the curving surface. When they could finally see the opposite side from where the transport location was, Haruyuki noticed that there was something there and raised his voice.

“Ah...There’s something here!”

The sound of their footsteps rose and they ran up to it.

The objects there seemed to be, at first sight, cars or ships. Streamlined vehicles about six meters in length were orderly lined up next to each other on top of a slanted rack installed at the bottom of the pillar, staring straight up towards the top of the Hermes Cord. There were ten of them.

The vehicles didn’t have a roof, and instead the seating areas were completely open. At the front, the one-seater cockpit was equipped with a transparent windshield. There were two rows of two-person seats placed behind it. The lower section was equipped with four big discs instead of tires, which seemed to be some kind of propulsion device. Its slender smooth body-line was fitting for the original meaning of the word «shuttle».

“W-What are these...?”

Murmuring that, Haruyuki climbed atop the slanted rack and approached one of the vehicles at the left end with the symbol «1» painted on its side. The cold iron-colored body remained coldly inactive, and there were no signs that it contained fire in its engine.

He timidly extended his hand forward, and at the instant he poked the smooth line of the door.

PIPON A purple holo-window popped up with a light sound. After being startled for a moment, he peered at it frantically. Pard-san also brought her face close next to him.

On the topmost part of the window, inscribed in robotic font were—.

The characters [3D 18H 25M 18S (JST)]. These digits, which appeared to indicate days, hours, minutes, and seconds in order, clearly seemed to be some kind of time count.

“Hmm. If this is a countdown, then when the digits will reach zero in 3 days, 18 hours and 35 minutes in Japanese Standard Time...in other words, at noon on Sunday.”

After Blood Leopard muttered that, Haruyuki also spoke following her train of thought.

“Will something happen at that time...?”

However, instead of answering his question, Pard-san pointed at the lower part of the window with her feline beast-of-prey-like claws. There was a short sentence displayed there as well. Saying, [DO YOU DRIVE ME?].

And beneath that, there was only a YES button. He understood that the meaning of the simple English sentence was “Will you drive me?”, but

even so Haruyuki wavered over what to do, and the ever-hasty Pard-san whispered in his ear.

"If you won't press it, I will."

"Ah, I-I'll press it, I'll press it!"

Answering frantically, Haruyuki raised his right hand and, after resolving himself, pressed the YES button.

Instantly, a short fanfare SE^[22] resounded and the English characters changed. [YOU ARE MY DRIVER!] —You are my driver.

Several seconds later, the string of characters changed again and became the single word [RESERVED]. At the same time, an object appeared as if oozing out from the window surface.

It was a transparent clue card. Besides the marking «1» on its surface, it also had the same countdown displayed on it as on the window. The instant Haruyuki took it, the next and final phenomenon occurred.

Along with a sound, the body of streamlined machine made changed from a cold iron color to a dazzling silver color. Haruyuki immediately noticed that its mirror-like tint was exactly the same as his, or rather, Silver Crow's armor.

"I see."

Pard-san murmured as if understanding something, and walked over to the shuttle marked with «2». When she touched its body, a window

appeared, and she touched the YES button without hesitation. After she took the card that appeared between two of her fingers, the body color of the shuttle immediately changed to Blood Leopard's deep red armor color this time.

Haruyuki walked over to Pard-san while holding his card and asked a question once again.

"U-Umm...Me and Pard-san have been registered as the drivers of these cars or ships...I understand that much, somehow. But, what is this countdown about? There's still more than three days remaining, but..."

"That's self-explanatory. The shuttles won't move until the countdown becomes zero at noon on Sunday."

After hearing that clear reply, he nodded in understanding, and immediately after his next question sprang forth.

"H-Haa...B-But, why is there such a long waiting time...?"

In response, Pard-san unusually opened her mouth that was hidden by the lower portion of her artillery shell-like mask, and grinned with her sharp fangs shining.

"That is also obvious. The given three and a half days are the grace period for preparing one driver and four passengers for each of the ten shuttles. At noon on Sunday, we'll all step on the accelerator in a race and aim for the top of this pillar. In other words."

Lifting up her right hand and pointing towards the far-off top, the deep crimson leopard-headed avatar said as if singing.

“We have acquired the right to participate in the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race».”

It took about a full five seconds for Haruyuki to understand the meaning of those words.

“Then...i-in other words...the goal is the top of this tower, in other words, s-s-s-space!?”

In response to Haruyuki voice which was turned inside out, Pard-san nodded ‘Of course’.

However, before he can say anything else, he heard a series of transport sounds from the opposite side of the pillar. Most likely, Burst Linkers that had accelerated on the ground level had arrived at the viewing platform’s portal.

Pard-san waved her long tail once, and then whispered to Haruyuki while touching his back.

“It’d be better for us to scatter before they find us.”

Certainly, since there were only ten shuttles, the remaining limit of people that could do the driver registration was eight. It would be troublesome if

the people that were excluded suggested something like deciding the right to use it through a duel.

"That's...That's true."

As Haruyuki pushed away the surprise inside him and agreed with her for the time being, her next words jumped into his ears.

"When you cease your acceleration, wait at the ground parking lot exit. I'll carry you to Suginami on my bike."

"Eh..."

He once again stiffened in surprise. The violent power of that large electric motorbike with Pard-san at the wheel was clearly revived in his mind.

However, he of course couldn't say no and decline, so Haruyuki nodded.

"T-T-Thank you that's a big help."

"NP."

And then, the two of them recited the command with their voices in sync.

""Burst Out!""

The real world Pard-san, who he hadn't met in a while, was fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately, dressed not in her maid-style uniform from the cake shop, but in a T-shirt and slim jeans.

His gaze unconsciously wandered to the unexpected volume that pushed up her tightfitting clothing, which he hadn't been able to perceive when she had worn her loose apron. Expressionlessly, Pard-san took out a spare helmet from the maintenance space underneath the seat, put it on Haruyuki's head with a plonk and straddled the motorbike. After putting on the helmet harness himself this time, he frantically climbed onto the passenger seat and timidly put his arms around the thin waist in front of him.

At first she withheld the amount of power she put into the engine, but after coming out from the Sky Tree's parking lot, the motorbike's in-wheel motor instantly howled and raged with a 'KYUIIIIN!'.

".....Ah——!"

Just like last time, Haruyuki had to thoroughly cling to Pard as he let out a scream. Though, as he did his best to endure the extreme stop-and-go that was repeated at every light, he didn't have the time to care about the sensation of touching anything.

When they got out of the Sumida Ward, to Okachimachi, Ochanomizu and then Iidabashi, Pard-san's voice reached Haruyuki's ears.

'It's before 6:30, but do you have some time right now?'

'Eh, ah...Yes.'

Since the curfew that Haruyuki's mother had set was 9:00 at night, he still had time. As for the reason why she allowed a middle school student to

be outside until a somewhat inappropriate time like that, he couldn't say whether it was because she trusted her son or because she found managing him troublesome. Haruyuki might know the answer to that if she scolded him if he were to seriously break the curfew once, but he didn't have that kind of courage, and so he added 'It's fine if it's only for two hours'.

Pard-san then murmured in an unexpected tone.

'If we went to go have tea for such a long time, it'd likely stop dissolving.'

Huh, t-tea?

Soon after he thought that, the large motorbike rode up to a fast food restaurant along the road while blinking its flashers.

Over the past eight months, Haruyuki had gone into shops like this twenty times with Kuroyukihime and once with Sky Raker. However, there was no indication at all that he was getting used to this kind of situation, and he always got a cold sweat when he felt himself exposed to gazes that said 'Just what the heck is with that mismatched pairing' from his surroundings every time.

Persuading himself that he was just self-conscious about that kind of thing and that anyone would worry about other people as he sat down in a boxed seat facing Blood Leopard, Haruyuki tried to block out the surroundings customers from his mind by concentrating with all his power on the hamburger set he was being treated to.

'It seems like I'll succeed', is what he thought for a brief instant.

Pard-san took out a red XSB cable from her belt pouch, leaned forward and thrust one of the plugs at the end into Haruyuki's Neuro Linker. Expressionlessly, she connected the other end to her own.

The Wired Connection warning that appeared in his vision couldn't hide the spectacle of the middle and high school students within the shop clearly looking at them and whispering amongst themselves, and so Haruyuki found himself in an awkward situation as he ducked his head down and felt cold sweat run down his skin.

The length of the Direct Connect cable expresses the degree of progress between two people going out with each other—that kind of custom was clearly something that Pard-san didn't care about at all, but Haruyuki wasn't able to be that free of worldly cares, and asked in thought speech with half a scream.

'Ah, u-u-umm, w-w-why Direct Connect?'

Her answer was very simple.

'We can talk while eating this way.'

Besides replying with '.....That's true.', Haruyuki couldn't say anything else.

Pard-san displayed the high-level technique of talking via the cable while eating her hamburger with relish just as she had declared. This seemed simple, but the risk of biting one's tongue while unintentionally trying to talk with one's mouth as well was high.



'Do you understand how to Dive into the stage for the race on Sunday?'

After she suddenly asked that, Haruyuki stopped his mouth in the middle of chewing a fry and spoke.

'Eh...don't we just use the Sky Tree portal again?'

'That isn't necessary. The card we got when we registered as drivers is a «transporter» item. It transports up to ten Burst Linkers who we Direct Connect with at the same time.'

'H-Heee...Then, if we gather in Suginami and use it, we'll instantly go to the Hermes Cord?'

'Yes.'

That was a feature he was really grateful for. Because, if Kuroyukihime also participated in the race, it would be dangerous if she, who was a Level Niner that was bound by the sudden death rule, connected to an external network as far away as Sumida Ward for even an instant.

After letting out a sigh and biting into his hamburger, Haruyuki felt his original question rise up within him now. Since he had jumped into the portal at the Sky Tree, he had been caught up in the flow of the situation all the way until now, but in the first place—

'...In the first place, why did it suddenly turn into a race? Those machines were prepared not by some player, but by the system's...in other words, Brain Burst's administrator. I've been a Burst Linker for about eight

months already, but I don't think there's ever been even one GM event like that up until now...'

In response to Haruyuki's question, Pard-san answered after thinking for just 0.5 seconds.

'Certainly, signs of the presence of BB's administrator are usually not felt at all. But, when there is a large-scale update in Accel World, there are also cases where one-time events occur like this time. Like when the «Tokyo Glass Castle» opened up the year before last...'

The Glass Castle was a large-scale theme park that had been constructed in the bay area. According to what he knew, it had been built as a Medieval European-style fortress city made of real stone with the theme of being «realistic», at the time when the Full Dive technology was at the height of prosperity.

'...The day when the social camera network there began operating, an event based on breaking through a group of monsters that crowded the city and aiming for the throne inside the castle occurred. My team regrettably got swarmed by a large heard of them along with the blue team and we all got mutually annihilated.'

As Pard-san's eyes burned with fire, Haruyuki somehow managed to respond while unconsciously drawing back his head.

'I...I see. Then, the race this time is also...so to speak, a «New Stage Connection Commemoration Event»? In other words, it is a race that will occur only once...?'

'Definitely.'

In that case, he really was extremely fortunate to have been able to reserve one of the only ten machines. Haruyuki cried out 'Mega-Lucky!' inside his head, but he then frantically drowned out that thought. Going to the Hermes Cord had never been about obtaining the right to participate in an open event. It was because there was something that Haruyuki had to tell that person—Sky Raker no matter what, that he was aiming for the top of the space elevator.

—Then, there should also be that.

Ostensibly because he should also learn as much preliminary knowledge as possible, Haruyuki nervously asked a question through the Direct Connect circuit.

'Umm...Pard-san. Since it's a race, umm, if one comes in first or second place, will there be something like, umm...'

'Of course there will.'

Without letting Haruyuki finish speaking, Blood Leopard nodded.

'It will probably give out an appropriate amount of Burst Points. Or prizes such as an Enhanced Armament or some other item will be prepared.'

"He...Heeh, is that so.'

As if roughly understanding that his throat was moving a lot despite his attempt to pretend being calm, Pard-san gave a faint wry smile. While

carefully folding the wrapping paper of the hamburger she had eaten in the blink of an eye, she spoke in a completely calm state.

'You shouldn't raise your expectations too high. There's no way the prizes will be so great that they could break the power balance between legions, after all. More importantly...'

Pausing for a moment there, the senior member of «Prominence» asked Haruyuki a question as her ponytail swayed.

'Will your legion participate with all five of your members?'

'Eh? ...Err, the capacity of the shuttle is five passengers, so...'

As he was about to nod, Haruyuki paused the movement of his neck.

No matter how well they got along, or how she had let him ride on her bike and treated him to a hamburger, Pard-san was ultimately not a «comrade». She was a core member of the Red Legion, which might one day turn against the Black Legion. Was it alright to tell such a person about the movements of Kuroyukihime, who was under the Sudden Death rule?

Most likely immediately seeing through Haruyuki's hesitation, Pard-san quickly shook her head.

'I'm not really asking in order to take advantage of this opportunity and take the Black King's head. In the first place, since the HP gauge is locked inside the event, it's impossible.'

'L-Locked...?'

After repeating the word, Haruyuki finally remembered. When he had transported over to the Hermes Cord earlier, there had definitely been the word [LOCKED] distinctly inscribed on his HP gauge.

'E-Err...in other words, during the race event, nobody can receive damage?'

After pretending to think for a moment, Pard-san immediately nodded to his question.

'Yes.'

'Then, why is it necessary for there to be four other crewmembers in the shuttle? Is it because just me isn't enough to attack and defend against other teams...?'

'Yes to that as well. Most likely, the shuttle's body is also configured with a HP gauge, and if it becomes zero it will be destroyed. The event at the Glass Castle I spoke of before was also like that. It was a game where you had to properly carry jewels given to each team up to the throne room on the top floor of the castle. The players couldn't die, but it was setup so that the HP of the orbs would wear out from attacks by monsters or other teams.'

Haruyuki nodded in admiration at Blood Leopard's words. If it was like that, then it would definitely turn into a hot race even in the slightly nulled situation where the HP gauges were protected.

'I see...so it has that kind of setup. In that case, I'm all the more certain that all five members of my legion will participate. But...why are you asking me about that?'

As Haruyuki turned her gaze towards her, Pard-san displayed the rare sign of hesitating to say something.

However, her hesitation disappeared in just one second, and—

'In Accel World, there are two people whose existences are important to me.'

Her quiet thoughts flowed through the red cable.

'One is the king I serve. A person I want to protect no matter what. And the other is my eternal rival. Someone who became a Burst Linker at almost the same time as me and who I fought against countless times, known as «Strato Shooter^[23]» and «ICBM^[24]»...'

Haruyuki immediately guessed who those two names belonged to.

'...Sky Raker-san...?'

In response to Haruyuki's whisper, Blood Leopard softly nodded.

'I was very happy when I heard that she had returned. But since she's only been participating in the territory defense battles, I haven't met her yet.'

'Ah...I-I see. That's true.'

Currently, the Red Legion «Prominence» and the Black Legion «Nega Nebulas» were under an indefinite ceasefire. Therefore, as one of the Red

Legion's core members, Pard-san couldn't participate in attacking the Suginami area.

Haruyuki sucked in a deep breath, and then spoke while unusually looking at his conversation partner right in the eye.

'The truth is, I also have a reason for wanting to take Raker-san to the Hermes Cord no matter what. That's why, even if she isn't interested in it, I'll do my best to persuade her. I think that you'll definitely meet her on Sunday.'

'I see.'

Her answer was short, but Blood Leopard gave a light smile, and slowly gave a deep nod.

'Thank you, Silver Crow. I'm glad I talked with you...Perhaps I have three important people now instead of two.'

—Whatever the meaning of those words were, Haruyuki could unfortunately not understand it at all. Therefore, he naively asked about it. But.

'H-Huh? What...who is the third?'

It's a secret.

As if saying that, Pard-san quickly disconnected the Direct Connect cable.

After being transported to Suginami again on the motorbike and seeing

Pard-san off until her tail-light disappeared far away, Haruyuki thought absentmindedly.

The total number of Burst Linkers was about 1000. Almost all of them lived in the center of Tokyo. There were so many that it was impossible to memorize all of their names, and most of them were in a relationship where they scrambled for Burst Points amongst each other, but—even so, if they continued to duel over a long period of time, a relationship other than as «enemies» was sometimes born eventually. Thinking about it, even Takumu, «Cyan Pile», who was now his irreplaceable tag partner, met him as a genuine enemy at first...

In Haruyuki's mind, the faces of his comrades in the legion starting with Kuroyukihime, of his friends Niko and Pard-san, of his rivals Ash Roller and tentatively Frost Horn appeared one after another and then disappeared.

Aiming for Level 10 as a Burst Linker was, in principle, equal to continuing to bring down other Burst Linkers. That was probably exactly what the game's mysterious developer intended. To make 1000 young people fight amongst each other, and select only one person as the victor.

However, despite that, even the developer shouldn't be able to stop feelings other than hatred from being born and exchanged in the process. The way Blood Leopard worried about Sky Raker who she shouldn't have been friends with was proof of that.

—I also want that.

Haruyuki strongly thought that as he walked towards his home.

—Even if I'm beaten black and blue, even if I'm so mortified I shed tears, I won't simply hate my opponent. Because I love this game...Accel World. Because I consider myself more fortunate than anyone for having become a Burst Linker.

—*Really? Is that really all?*

Suddenly, a voice asked him that.

At the same time, several silhouettes flashed quickly through his mind's screen. A rust-colored avatar that seemed to be combined with a steel frame. A laminated avatar made of parallel jet-black thin membranes. And—a dusk-colored avatar with a spherical visor and huge talons, who no longer existed. They were members of the group that judged Brain Burst not as a duel fighting game but as a thought acceleration tool and who aimed only at acquiring and using points, the «Acceleration Research Society».

They hadn't carried out any public activities over the past two months. However, that did not mean that they had vanished. They were probably hiding somewhere in Accel World and waiting with vigilant hostility for the chance to invade again.

—*Can you also **forgive those guys? Can you throw away the hatred***

you feel towards them, who cruelly wounded and tormented you and your friends?^[25]

Haruyuki did not notice that the voice echoing in his mind had at some point become not his own, but instead carried a shadowy and twisted metallic echo in it. While grimacing at the aching feeling at the center of his back, he stepped towards the location of his apartment building with rough steps.

—It's natural to hate guys like that. It's natural to crush them with hatred. Release all your anger, resentment and hatred, and destroy them. You have that power. The power to tear off their limbs, devour their flesh, and drain their blood. Yes—

Devour them. Devour them. Devour them. Devour them. Dev...

".....Shut up!"

He shouted that in a stifled voice as he hanged his head down deeply. Residents and shoppers avoided Haruyuki as he stopped in front of the entrance of a shopping mall.

Feeling as if he could see talons shining with a dusky purple color among the countless shoes that passed by on either side of him, Haruyuki shut his eyes tight. Inside his mind, he strongly spoke to himself.

—If they appear again, I'll fight them. But not because I hate them. It will be because I love Accel World. Because I believe that there exists bonds besides that of hostility in there. I will fight to protect those bonds.

—***Really?***

Leaving that single word along with a creaking laughter, the voice went away. The pain on his back also faded away soon and disappeared.

After letting out a long breath and rubbing his sweaty palms against his trousers, Haruyuki headed towards his empty home with heavy footsteps while hanging his head.

Chapter 5

“Hey, hey, heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey!!”

That shout resounded throughout the entire battlefield.

At the same time, there was the deep roar of a V-Twin Engine. Then a shrill squealing sound, and another shout.

“With such a cheap wall, you’ll never stop the great me!!”

“No way!?”

Haruyuki frantically looked at his surroundings. Faded buildings, characteristic of the «Weathered» stage, were collapsed everywhere, thereby making a barricade of rubble. The ones who had destroyed them were Haruyuki and Takumu, who was fighting a little further away. They had determinedly destroyed the buildings by using this stage’s characteristic of having very fragile geographical features, and filled in the surroundings roads with their rubble.

The objective of this was to weaken the mobility of the biker-user «Ash Roller» in the three-player team on the attacking side of the territory battle. Their aim had been successful, and there were no longer any routes that would allow him to move on his bike from the current front line to the position that Sky Raker was protecting at the back—is how it should have been, but.

“W-Where are you!?”

Haruyuki desperately searched for the source of the roaring engine sound.

After several seconds, he quickly found it. However, Haruyuki didn't move immediately, but instead fully opened his eyes and mouth wide while standing bolt upright.

A gunmetal American motorbike was moving from right to left on the opposite side of the one-sided two-lane main road. However, its speed was too slow. That was not because it was avoiding the rubble covering the road, but rather because it was impossible to avoid it in the first place, since the height of the rubble reached up to nearly two meters—so **it was being carried** instead.

The huge motorbike, with its rider on it, was being carried on the right shoulder of a short-statured avatar not even half as tall as the bike, who stepped over the rubble barricade with great effort. Ash Roller was merely straddling the seat of the bike as it swayed on top of the shoulder and repeatedly gunning the accelerator.

".....T-There's no point to revving the engine like that!!"

After instinctively letting out that retort with all his strength, Haruyuki finally noticed that this wasn't a situation where he could sit back and watch. Their aim was to cross over the mountain of rubble and reach its base. It would become troublesome if they got there.

"I-I won't let you!"

Shouting that, Haruyuki charged towards the opposite side of the main road. Then, the short-statured avatar carrying the bike glanced at him, and immediately after—

“Big Bro Ash! Forget about me and go—!”

While shouting out those somehow excessively cool words, he threw the bike forward. It was an incredible feat of physical strength compared to his size.

Leaving aside the fact that Ash Roller seemed to have gotten a younger brother at some point, the American bike he rode crossed over the summit of the barricade while emitting a particularly shrill exhaust sound.

“Your heart, is Giga Buuuurning!!”

Along with one of his usual incomprehensible shouts, he landed on the asphalt and made an extreme dash with his bike while letting out white smoke from his rear wheel.

Saturday, June 8, 5:30 PM. They were in the middle of a 3-vs-3 battle to defend the 3rd Battle Area of Suginami. Kuroyukihime and Chiyuri were having a break, so the «Nega Nebulas» side consisted of Haruyuki, Takumu and Sky Raker. The opposing attacking side consisted of three members of the Green Legion «Great Wall» led by Ash Roller.

There was a considerable gap in level composition between the two teams, with Haruyuki’s team having levels of 8-5-5 and the enemy team having levels of 5-5-3, but Brain Burst was a game where that kind of

difference could be easily overturned with a single moment of negligence. While gritting his teeth for having let that «single moment» happen by allowing Ash to break through the barricade, Haruyuki tried to chase after the fast bike. —However.

“I won’t let ya pass here!!”

Along with a cry that made Haruyuki wonder whether that kind of tone was for constructing a certain character or was simply natural, a shadow jumped down in front of him. It was the avatar that had carried Ash Roller’s bike.

His name was «Bush Utan^[26]», a Level 5 player with dark green armor. He was shorter than Silver Crow by several centimeters, but he had a robustness that didn’t give off that impression. The reason for that were his strangely-developed arms. His overall silhouette made one think of a certain kind of primate due to the way his hands almost grazed the ground when he bent forward, but even so, he wasn’t an opponent to be made light of.

Haruyuki responded back while glaring cautiously at those two huge arms pointed at him.

“...Guys that say lines like that are never able to hold others back!”

He then quickly bent forward and went into a super-low dash.

Bush Utan was a brute strength-specialized avatar that poured all of his potential into his two huge arms. If Haruyuki received a direct punch

from him, he would be blown away by damage equal to a 2 level difference, but Utan's speed was not that great. Besides, Haruyuki didn't intend to fight here in the first place.

After instantly shortening the distance between them with a ground-chafing gallop, Haruyuki jumped up with all his strength, since the enemy's focus was turned downwards. He vibrated his wings for only a moment in order to preserve his special technique gauge, and then passed over the enemy's head with a long jump instead of flying.

Utan tried holding his hands up frantically, but he couldn't reach him at all. During this scene, Haruyuki had the time to mentally comment to him, 'You should have shortened the distance between us yourself and reduced my options. You should actively control the distance between instead of simply waiting...'

"——wait, owah!?"

The surprised shout that leaked out from Silver Crow's mouth was overlapped by a thick male yell.

"Uhohoho! I'm not letting ya go——!!"

What had happened was that Bush Utan's arms had extended. It wasn't simply that his elbow joints had come undone. In fact, his arms had lengthened up to three times their original length and had firmly grabbed Haruyuki's ankles with his huge palms—

"Funuuuuussu——!"

Since he was about to be thrown right to the ground, Haruyuki fully opened his wings reflexively and released all the propulsive force they contained.

“Nuoo!”

The state of equilibrium was momentary. No matter how strong Utan was, his actual weight was still in the light-weight category. Haruyuki flew up blindly while having the primate-type avatar hanging from his legs. Since it had turned out like this, he thought of ramming into Ash Roller like this while still carrying him, but at that instant.

“Uho!? S-Scary!!”

After hearing a pitiful cry, the speed of his flight weakened with a jerk. When he frantically looked down, he saw that Utan had released only his left hand from Haruyuki’s leg and was holding onto a handrail on a building’s roof instead. Since both his arms were stretching to the limit, it was as if the primate avatar was fastened to the middle of a long rope.

“You, I-let go!”

“N-No way!”

Haruyuki tried flapping his wings desperately, but the grip on his left ankle showed no signs of loosening at all. Takumu’s «pile» might have been able to cut off Utan’s arm, but he was still fiercely fighting the third member of the enemy team somewhere a little further away and sounds of clashing could be heard from there intermittently.

While reluctantly continuing this tug of war in the air, Haruyuki cast his gaze around and looked at the western side of the main road. At that instant, he inadvertently blurted out.

“Oh no...!”

The big American bike had already dashed more than ten meters ahead and was trying to plunge into the small plaza at the end of the road. There was a circle that emitted a lavender-colored light with a tall flagpole at its center installed in the plaza. The black color on its flag was proof that it was the «base» of Haruyuki’s team.

Bases were selected spots that dotted various places on the territory battle field, and if a team occupied one, their special technique gauges could be recharged endlessly within the circle. In other words, territory battles in Brain Burst consisted of nothing more than pushing forward while occupying one base after another and assaulting the enemies’ bases.

The base Ash Roller was aiming for was currently only being protected by Sky Raker. As a Level Eighter, her ability was naturally guaranteed, but her unique fighting style could be a huge advantage or disadvantage depending on its compatibility with the enemy.

And according to Haruyuki’s diagnosis, the wheelchair-user Sky Raker and the bike-user Ash Roller were part of the same category, and as a result he judged that Raker was at a disadvantage. Her wheelchair’s

abilities as a vehicle-type Enhanced Armament were naturally outclassed by far in nearly all aspects by Ash Roller's bike.

Heading towards the delicate silver wheelchair that stood alone in front of the plaza and the graceful female avatar that sat on it, the motorbike rushed forward raging and roaring loudly.

"Masteeeeeeer!"

The skull-headed rider let out a yell, which was for some reason mixed with tears.

"Today...I will...surpass you, master^[27]!!"

Haruyuki gaped his mouth open in the air. Certainly, Sky Raker was Ash Roller's mentor and «Parent», but his words just now were the kind only spoken when on the verge of the final battle after many twists and turns. This was still only the third time that Ash Roller's team had participated in the territory attacks today, and moreover this should have been the first time this Parent and Child fought head-to-head.

On top of her wheelchair, Raker was smiling beneath her wide-brimmed hat, and spoke after shaking her long sky-colored hair.

"You're a hundred years too early, Ash."

And then, she held out her left hand straight in front of her and made the gesture of «Come and get it» by turning her palm upwards and motioning with her fingers.

“Toooooo!!”

Ash responded to that with a sharp yell. He jumped up from his seat and stood up straight with his right foot on the handlebar and his left foot on the back end of his seat. This was—the original technique where one controlled the bike like a surfboard called «V-Twin Fist», named by Ash Roller himself.

Although Raker showed no signs of panicking even when she saw that move, Haruyuki gritted his teeth once again. This put Raker at even more of a disadvantage. Since Raker couldn't stand up from her wheelchair, her hands no longer reached up to Ash Roller's body. And a bare-handed attack against the bike would cause damage to herself instead.

“Master! Giga-Thank you for everything until noooooooooow!!”

He used the sole of his boot to push down on the full throttle lever, and the bike went into one final burst of acceleration while gushing out flames from its muffler. Right at the instant when the huge grey front tire was on the verge of hitting the wheelchair hard—

Raker's left hand gently brushed against the silver wheel on her left side at a blurred speed. Raising sparks from the ground, the wheelchair did an extremely fast and sudden back dash.

—It's impossible, there's no way to get away!

Haruyuki inwardly shouted that at Sky Raker, who was his master as well. Although the wheelchair, which could only be moved by turning its

wheels by hand, had incredible dashing speed due to its ultra-light weight, it only lasts for a moment. The bike will immediately catch up to her after going backwards and send her flying.

At the same time as Haruyuki held his breath while expecting that outcome.

With utter abandonment, Sky Raker stretched herself forward while just barely dodging the bike's front wheel, and touched the bike's handle bar with her left hand—

And then lightly grasped the bike's brake lever.

Although it looked like a casual action, Haruyuki could tell that she had put unbelievable strength into it, as terrible sparks came out from the front wheel's rotor disk. What would happen to a bike that had only its front brakes locked and with such force as well?

"O-Owaah!?"

Faster than Ash Roller could let out a yell, the entire American bike instantly went into a handstand on its front wheel and shifted into the so-called "jack-knife" state^[28]. It rose up with the momentum and flew through the air while spinning, until it crashed into the wall of a building ahead.

It seemed that the shock of impact exceeded the durability of the Enhanced Armament motorbike, as it then exploded in a burst of magnificent flames.

However, Ash Roller himself had, thanks to standing on his seat, been thrown up in the air without being engulfed in the explosion.

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo—!?"

He reached the peak of his ascent with a scream, stopped for an instant, and then started falling back down. And right beneath him was Sky Raker, who was dashing forward with her wheelchair again.

"Make that two hundred years."

Along with that smiling comment, she shot her left palm upward with so much force that the air burned. The palm strike splendidly caught the back of Ash Roller's dark leather rider jacket, and released an impact that could be felt all the way up to where Haruyuki was far away.

Due to the critical blow dealt to the core of his body combined with the damage from the long fall, Ash Roller's HP gauge quickly disappeared.

"As expected of master...Forgive me, Tera-Nothing."^[29]

Leaving those mysterious words, the skull rider avatar burst and scattered into pixels. Haruyuki and Bush Utan simultaneously murmured as they watched Sky Raker dust off her hands.

"S-So powerful....."

"Way too strong....."

They exchanged glances. Since Raker had splendidly repulsed Ash and protected the base, there was no longer any meaning in continuing their tug of war.

Without saying anything, Haruyuki suddenly made his wings vibrate at high speed by consuming his entire remaining special technique gauge. The ascending force this produced made Utan's arms creak and grate.

"T-That's useless! Burn, my biceeeeeeeeeeeeps!!"

Utan pumped up his left arm that was grabbed onto the building handrail and his right arm that was holding Haruyuki's ankle, and tried to pull back Haruyuki with pure physical strength—and at that instant.

Haruyuki changed the flight direction of his silver wings by 180 degrees, and went into a diving posture. Inevitably, this caused Utan to pull Silver Crow towards himself with all of his arm strength.

"Wha...hey, wait a minute."

His words were erased by the sound of being hit by a violent dive kick.

Like that, the two of them fell to the ground like heavy lumps. Since Utan released his grip on Haruyuki's from the shock of impact, it showed that he still had a long way to go before he could fight Haruyuki at point blank hand-to-hand combat.

As his HP disappeared in a rush, Utan exited the stage with parting words of surrender just like that of his big bro's.

"I-I'll pay ya back for this tomorrow~~~~!!"

.....Tomorrow?

Haruyuki had a bad feeling about those words somehow, but he put it aside for the time being and hurried over to the front lines in order to assist Takumu.

Fifteen minutes later in real world time—

Having protected the First to Third Battles Areas of Suginami this week as well, the five members of Nega Nebulas gathered in the center of the field that had served as the stage for the last battle, and congratulated each other for a good day's work.

Sitting down on a nearby slab of concrete, Haruyuki let out a long breath, feeling comfortably fatigued, and spoke to Sky Raker next to him.

"Even so...I didn't think that Ash Roller's bike could be taken down through such a method..."

In the past, Haruyuki had defeated Ash by lifting the rear wheel of his bike and cancelling its propulsive force, but the method of grasping the brake lever while it ran and then blowing it away was far more smart, speedy, and most of all, interesting and cool.

However, Raker shook her head with a wry smile.

"Unfortunately, that method can only be used when Ash is standing up straight on his bike."

"Ah...I-I see..."

Certainly, a rider's hands usually do not separate from the handles. After he gave a thoughtful hum, this time it was Kuroyukihime who spoke up with wry laughter in her voice.

"Before that, if you don't synchronize your speed with the bike using a Raker-class dash when you touch it going at full speed, you would receive damage instead."

"Ah...I-I...see..."

As Haruyuki dropped his head, Chiyuri and Takumu let out unreserved laughter. The jet-black avatar also laughed for a while, but then added, "But, well".

"Perhaps if you flew at full speed, you might be able to do the same thing as Raker. You should look into the possibility."

"Yes!"

After Haruyuki energetically nodded, the legion leader looked around at her subordinates and spoke.

"If there's nothing else to discuss, let's talk about the matter of tomorrow. I think you've all already received a text message with an outline of it from Haruyuki-kun, but I'll have him explain it again here."

“U-Understood.”

After frantically standing up and facing the four other people sitting down side by side, Haruyuki started explaining the outline of the big event tomorrow—the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race».

He explained about how it was not necessary to specifically go to the Sky Tree, and that if they gathered and Direct Connected together at Haruyuki’s home, the «Transporter Card» item would teleport them to the bottom station of the space elevator.

About how they couldn’t change the driver of Shuttle-1 since Silver Crow had already registered for it, and so the rest of them would be passengers that protected their shuttle or attacked the shuttles of the rival teams.

About how, since their HP gauges were locked while in the race, the Level 9 Black Lotus would not be in danger either.

After somehow managing to explain that far while stumbling over his words, Haruyuki suddenly hesitated. He wasn’t able to decide on the spur of the moment whether he should mention how Blood Leopard of «Prominence» had registered for Shuttle-2, and how she was looking forward to meeting Sky Raker again.

However, he immediately decided to remain quiet about it for now. The exchange between Leopard and Raker could only be understood by the two of them.

Therefore, Haruyuki sucked in a deep breath and then finished with "That's all!".

"Good work."

Kuroyukihime said that and then immediately stood up in Haruyuki's place as he sat down.

"You should have learned this from Haruyuki-kun's mail as well, but an event known as the «Grand Castle Capture Race» also occurred one year ago as well. I think Raker already understands, but..."

Suddenly stopping her words, the Black King struck her right hand's sword on the ground.

"Back then, I was completely cut off from the Global Net and was hiding from the assassins of the kings, so I felt veeeeeeeeery mortified about not being able to participate.

"I truly did too. I sent a bitter call of resentment all the way to the Grand Castle from on top of the Old Tokyo Tower back then."

Raker smiled gracefully as she said that, making Kuroyukihime nod in agreement and the other three legion members straighten their backs nervously. While sharing the thought of «Raker-sensei is truly scary», they wouldn't have been surprised if several duel avatars had actually become paralyzed from the grudge and malice contained in Raker's message back then.

"Anyway. As a result, I would like to dispel last year's regret in tomorrow's race without fail. Takumu-kun and Chiyuri have also gladly agreed to enter, and above all, Haruyuki went through so much trouble to get us the right to participate by noticing the possibility of a new stage appearing and going all the way to the distant Sky Tree. I will allow no excuses for putting this to waste."

After Kuroyukihime spoke, Haruyuki frantically shook his head and hands.

"N-No, really, I merely came up with a trifling idea...The one who guessed the location and time of the portal's appearance was senpai..."

"That idea was very important. Although the ten participation slots were apparently all quickly filled, it seems most of the registered teams were people that bought an expensive piece of information at an NPC shop in the Unlimited Neutral Field. There were only one or two people besides Haruyuki-kun who realized it on their own."

"H-Heh...So that's how it was..."

Then, that NPC information may have had its announcement on the portal's appearance slightly delayed. In that case, Haruyuki, who guessed it from scratch by himself, and probably Pard-san were the first people to reach the Hermes Cord.

In that case, he was really grateful to Chiyuri for inviting him to the Shinjuku Government Office the other day. If he hadn't gone there, the news about the space elevator would probably not have come to mind in the first place. And of course, he was also grateful to Kuroyukihime for

giving him advice during their Dive Call. It truly was good to have comrades...As Haruyuki idly thought that—

".....Wait a moment, Lotus."

Sky Raker lightly raised her hand, and moved her wheelchair forward as its wheels squeaked. She turned the wheelchair around with a smooth motion and faced all the other legion members.

"I've also been looking forward to this kind of event very much. As someone who cut off social interaction in Accel World for a long time, I'm thankful every day that I can fight alongside the members of this legion...of the reborn «Nega Nebulas» once again. If possible, I would like to join forces with everyone and aim for the goal of the race tomorrow as well. However..."

She cut off her words for an instant, and dropped her gaze down to her legs wrapped within her long white dress.

"...According to what Crow said, there are only four seats for crew members in the shuttle, and it seems there isn't any other loading space. Therefore, I would have to remain fixed on a seat without my wheelchair. If I do that, this avatar of mine will just serve as an ornament. If I will just increase the carried weight without doing anything and slow down the shuttle's speed, it would be better if I didn't board it in the first place."

"N-No way!"

Haruyuki reflexively cried out and tried to deny Sky Raker's words.

However—

If Raker were a long range type avatar, she could sufficiently play the role of attacker even while fixed onto her seat. But, just as her vivid sky-blue color indicated, she was a pure close range type. Most likely, in order for close range types to play the role of attacker in the race, they needed to be able to jump over to other shuttles. For Sky Raker, who uses a wheelchair instead of legs, doing that would of course be impossible.

Watching as Haruyuki grit his teeth hard, Raker spoke gently.

“Karasu-san^[30], don’t worry about it. Even if I’m not there, I believe that you can surely reach the top at the top with you, Lotus, Pile and Bell.”

—No, that’s wrong.

I wanted to take you...to take you especially to that pillar reaching up to the sky. There’s something I want to tell you, in that world above that covers the entire length of the 4000 km long space elevator. To tell you a certain thought that cannot be expressed on the ground, where it is weighed down by gravity...

At the same time as Haruyuki thought that in his mind, Kuroyukihime also spoke in a pain-filled voice.

“...Raker. Your avatar’s body weight is probably lighter than Crow’s. There won’t be much difference in the loading weight of the shuttle whether you board it or not. Besides, even if you can’t move from your seat, it’s enough if you just act as a defender...”

“You can’t do that, Lotus.”

Raker decisively stopped her.

“Your...and Nega Nebulas’ activities should, first and foremost, be for the sake of toppling the other kings and allowing you to reach Level 10. If you end up in first place in tomorrow’s race, you’ll surely be given a considerable amount of Burst Points. That will certainly allow you to get closer to your final objective. In that case, you shouldn’t fuss over me and reduce your chances of victory even slightly...Isn’t that right?”

Her words were far too logical, and more than that, far too painful. Most likely, in Sky Raker’s heart, she had clearly regulated her own role, due to having a big limitation to her movements. She values her power when it can help the legion’s activities. But conversely, she absolutely won’t participate in a battle where she will be a burden.

In other words, it was like this.

Sky Raker had already given up on Brain Burst for herself. She had responded to Kuroyukihime’s request and returned to the legion, but her only motive was to help Kuroyukihime. She was strongly forbidding herself from feeling the thrill and excitement of «duels», and the joy of talking through fists. Like a punishment that she will bear forever.

—That’s wrong.

Haruyuki once again whispered that in his mind.

It was Haruyuki's goal to make their legion master Kuroyukihime reach Level 10 as well. He was always wishing to be a knight that would continue to properly protect his king until that time came.

He had no greater priority than that, but he did have a wish that was compatible with it.

To play and enjoy the fighting game known as Brain Burst.

Duels must not be fought out of bitterness or pain. They must not be done as work for earning points. There only lies darkness that casts a deep shadow even over the real world down that path, like with the «Acceleration Research Society».

Of course, Haruyuki didn't believe that Sky Raker would fall into such darkness either—but, if she still hadn't forgiven herself, she would never be able to enjoy Brain Burst.

However, Haruyuki didn't have a way to convey his thoughts and feelings right now at this place. It seemed to be the same for Kuroyukihime and Takumu, as both of their avatars were stiffened like rocks and were merely looking down.

Sky Raker tried to break the silence that engulfed everything other than the ticking time count, which showed 10 minutes until the field disappeared, by speaking with a gentle smile. However, an instant before she could speak.

"Raker-nee-san."

Without warning, Chiyuri addressed Raker with the name she had come to call her by.

“What is it, Bell?”

“There’s...something I’ve always been thinking about, but.....”

Speaking in a voice as if she were wavering over something, but still expressing a firm will at its core, Lime Bell stood up. She took several steps, and stood before Raker. She took a deep breath, displayed an unusually serious expression on her mask—

“If you’re okay with it, Nee-san, I’d like to try out returning your legs to normal with my power.”

And she said that.

The instant he heard her words, Haruyuki widened his eyes. Chiyuri’s—Lime Bell’s power, the special technique «Citron Call», had the effect of «reversing time». It turned back the time of an avatar or objected she targeted with it.

In ordinary duels, it was used as only a «fake healing ability» that restored the HP gauges of her allies. But, the technique’s possible applications didn’t stop at that, as proved by the role it played in the battle against Frost Horn and Tourmaline Shell the other day. Since enemies could move and escape from the technique, it was quite difficult to use it on them, but if it succeeded in hitting, it was possible to even force Enhanced Armaments summoned by the enemy to disappear.

As such, Citron Call was a special technique even rarer than the actual healing ability in a certain sense—however.

“B-But...Chiyu.”

Haruyuki reflexively broke into the conversation.

“Raker-san definitely lost her legs more than three years ago. Could you really turn back time that far back...?”

Chiyuri then tilted her pointy witch hat and answered while moving her index finger as if thinking it over.

“Well...My «Citron Call» has two modes. Mode 1, which consumes half of my special technique gauge, rewinds the state of a duel avatar I target according to the seconds that have passed in the game. This is what I usually use for healing HP.”

Then she held up two fingers and continued.

“...And Mode 2, which consumes an entire full-charged special technique gauge, rewinds avatar status effects besides level-ups...in other words, according to each individual permanent change caused by external factors. Like Enhanced Armaments bought with points, or parts and techniques stolen from other avatars, it cancels those kinds of changes one by one. This is what I used to restore Haru’s wings before.”

“So it...undoes permanent changes.”

Kuroyukihime whispered that. She gave a short nod, and thoughtfully applied the ridge of her right hand's sword to her mask's lower jaw while sitting.

"It sounds simple, but when you think about it, it's an unbelievable power. It's surely the natural enemy, no, the divine punishment towards stealing-type ability users..."

"But, since it can't apply negative interference on the status data of others who have not been made the technique's target, items that legally belong to people other than the target cannot be returned. That's why I wouldn't have been able to return Haru's wings if I used it on Haru himself. Also, since it's easy to escape from the technique itself, it is difficult to use on an enemy during battle, Lotus-senpai."

As Haruyuki tried with difficulty to understand the rules of this slightly complicated technique, Takumu spoke up next.

"Chii-chan, what is the maximum number of permanent changes that «Citron Call Mode 2» can cancel by reverse order of when they occurred?"

"Err...I haven't actually tried it, but considering how my gauge decreases, I think the max is up to three changes."

"Three...huh. —Raker-san, have you received any other status changes since losing your legs?"

After a short pause, the sky-blue answered Takumu's question.

".....Since I did an exchange of Enhanced Armaments with Karasu-san before...if that counts as two changes, then that would make the loss of my legs exactly the third change in reverse order."

The instant he heard those words, Haruyuki reflexively asked.

"U-Umm, master. What about that wheelchair...?"

The silver wheelchair Sky Raker sat on was the same kind of Enhanced Armament item as Ash Roller's bike. Haruyuki was wondering whether the acquisition of this counted as a permanent change.

But Raker shook her head lightly and spoke while quietly striking her chair's wheels.

"I acquired this right before I threw away my legs."

She said that casually, but the meaning hidden in those words was huge.

In other words, when she had asked Black Lotus to cut off her legs, Sky Raker had predicted that the body part loss damage might become eternal, or perhaps had resolved herself to it. In other words, the damage she received was not something within the limits of the normal game system—it instead fell under the higher-ranked logic of **that system**...

"Bell."

Calling out to Chiyuri, Sky Raker's voice interrupted Haruyuki's thoughts. As the gazes of the four other people present gathered on her, the Burst

Linker that was still living as half a hermit spoke in an infinitely gentle tone.

"Thank you. I gratefully accept your feelings...But, even if it isn't successful, don't blame yourself for it. The cause and effect of all this lies only within me, after all."

Haruyuki felt like those words were half directed to Black Lotus at the same time as Lime Bell. The black crystal avatar's body stiffened for a moment, and then she turned her face down slightly.

Chiyuri broke the silence that fell onto the stage with a firm voice.

"I understand, Raker-nee-san. But, I will definitely return your legs to you. And, Haru."

She suddenly turned her gaze and pointed her fingers at the blinking Haruyuki.

"I think that the confirmation message for acquiring an Enhanced Armament will probably come out for you while I use my technique, but you must absolutely cancel it. It'll make things troublesome later if you don't!"

"Y-Yeah, understood."

Haruyuki nodded, and then Chiyuri turned her gaze towards the upper right with a glance. She was probably checking that her special technique was still charged up to the base from the territory battle earlier. She then turned her face back down and took a step forward.

While Lime Bell took one or two steps forward, Kuroyukihime, Takumu and Haruyuki stepped back.

When the fresh green-covered avatar stood two meters in front of the wheelchair, she lifted the huge bell attached to her left arm and pointed it straight up towards the sky.

She leaned back her wide-brimmed pointy hat, and sucked in a huge breath. Her slender body bended slightly.

“Then, let’s do it……«Citron»……”

At the same time as she started speaking the technique name, she made her bell do a huge counter-clockwise spin in the air. A magnificent ringing sound poured over the field. Although she normally spun it twice when healing the HP of Haruyuki and the others, Chiyuri drew a circle in the air with her bell twice more, and then—

“……«Call»!!”

With a loud shout, she swung her left hand straight down.

A yellow-green ribbon of light and a chord like that of an angel’s band was released from the big bell and wrapped around Sky Raker. Her long sky-blue hair and the skirt of her white dress fluttered back strongly, and exposed her legs hidden beneath them. There existed nothing at all beneath her round knee parts, as if they had been designed that way from the beginning.

As Sky Raker shut her dark red eye lenses and grasped her hands together in front of her chest, her entire body glowed lime green for a moment.

[DO YOU ACQUIRE ENHANCED ARMAMENT «GALE THRUSTER»?]

Haruyuki quickly pressed the [NO] button of the window that appeared, which was flickering in and out irregularly unlike usual. It was a sign that something was being returned to Sky Raker. Immediately after, Raker's body glowed strongly once again. This probably meant that Chiyuri's ability had rewinded back to the second item transfer performed between Haruyuki and Sky Raker.

Haruyuki once again admired how truly unbelievable it was. Usually, it went without saying that only GMs^[31] had the exclusive right to cancel item and money transactions in net games. Due to that overwhelming authority, GMs were often compared to God. However, since Brain Burst had no so-called GMs, Chiyuri could be called the only one to have obtained the power of God—though only a small fraction of it—in Accel World other than the game's mysterious developer...

Haruyuki's momentary thinking was blown away by the third flash.

".....!!"

The three observers held their breaths together and merely widened their eyes.

In the midst of the strongly surging green light, they definitely saw small light blue particles attached Sky Raker's knees. They extended downward while rapidly increasing in number. They joined together into thin cylindrical forms with a taper, increased in density, drew the vague form of legs—

FUU

And then disappeared like visibly melting grains of ice.

Immediately after, the green light also faded and grew more indistinct along with the sound of bells, before vanishing.

In the center of the once again silent field, Lime Bell staggered as if she had used up all her energy. However, Black Lotus instantly moved in and caught her back.

The yellow-green avatar whispered in a hoarse voice while hanging her arms powerlessly at her sides.

".....Why...Why...Why...didn't they come back...?"

The one that answered her was Sky Raker as she quietly fixed the hem of her skirt.

"It's not your fault, Bell."

She shook her head slightly while giving a consoling smile.

"This result proves that the logic of the system whose priority is higher than the usual game system is responsible for the disappearance of my

legs. The «Imagination Control System»...in other words, the «Incarnate System»...”

Haruyuki sucked in a sharp breath. As a bigger reaction, Black Lotus drew back her right leg while still holding Lime Bell. Her V-shaped mask quickly turned away.

Facing the stock still Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime, Sky Raker calmly spoke.

“Since Bell has still only heard the rough outline of the «Incarnate System», it may be hard for her to understand, but...three years ago, I tried to raise the altitude limit of my flight through mind power. I wanted my hand to reach the sky in exchange for sacrificing my legs, and I made a contract with God...no, the Devil. My wish was only slightly granted. My altitude limit increased by only 100 meters...and my legs did not return after that no matter how many times I Dived into the duel field. It is my own mind power that keeps my legs from reappearing. Even I no longer understand how to undo it. That’s why it’s not Bell’s fault that it won’t return to normal...much less your fault, Lotus.”

—If you pursue mind power, you will definitely lose something in exchange for gaining something.

Blood Leopard of the Red Legion had once said that to Haruyuki. Back then, Sky Raker’s image might have been in Leopard’s mind when she said that.

In response to those words, Haruyuki answered with the following. 'I want to believe. I want to believe in the Incarnate System—and in Brain Burst itself.'

That must not be made into a lie. Definitely. For the sake of that as well, Haruyuki had to bring Sky Raker to the top of the Hermes Cord.

".....Raker-san."

Haruyuki called out to her with a quiet but resolute will in his voice. He gazed straight at her dark red eye lenses, and spoke.

"I think that the strength of a team...of one's comrades is not decided just by their avatar's fighting power. Their power of observation, their judgement...no, more than that, I think the feeling of doing your best because you're all together is what's most important. You support us, Raker-san. Just by having you with us, we can become much, much stronger. That's why...that's why."

Haruyuki could only speak up to there with his limited conversational skills. Even so, he somehow expressed what was inside his heart, and when he gripped his hands tightly, the big hand of Cyan Pile suddenly hit his shoulder from behind.

"It's just as Haru says. Raker-san, you are an irreplaceable battle force in this legion."

Chiyuri also gave a big nod to Takumu's words.

"That's right, Nee-san! We're the strongest when the five of us are gathered together!"

And lastly, Kuroyukihime took a step forward.

"That's how it is, Raker. It's just as everyone says."

The leader of Nega Nebulas quietly spoke in a tone which expressed the pain hidden at her core.

"I said it to you before. I need you. At any time...I will simplify it for you. In tomorrow's race, if you're not there, we four won't be able to do our very best. Just that is reason enough for you to participate."

Although it was quite high-handed, they were words that contained direct penetrating power.

Sky Raker widened her eyes for a moment, then gave a faint bitter smile—and shook her white hat as if to say "Really now".

"Lotus, the way you talk like that hasn't change since we first met."

She looked down and lightly stroked her knee with her right hand.

"...Things that are lost won't return again. But, there are also surely things that continue to shine without being spoiled...The right to believe that, no, to wish for that to be so may still be left in me as well....."

Her whisper, hardly loud enough to be a sound, flowed out quietly from beneath her hat. At the same time, Haruyuki felt as if he saw a single grain of light escape into the air.



However, when she raised her head, Sky Raker only gave her usual gentle smile.

".....Thank you, Lotus, Pile, Bell...and Crow. I accept all your feelings. —
However."

Then, her expression became mischievous.

"Since I'm going to participate, you'll have to throw away naïve thoughts like getting second or third place. We'll either win completely, or burn out in the sky."

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Watching Haruyuki as he straightened his back, Takumu and Chiyuri let out unreserved laughter.

—You two don't know how scary this person can truly be!

While shouting that inside his mind, Haruyuki also eventually managed to form a smile—though it was a little stiff—from the bottom of his heart.

Chapter 6

After using the command "Burst Out" to return to the real world from the territory battle field, Haruyuki hesitated before opening his eyes as he felt gravity press down on his body.

He stayed still like that for about 10 seconds, but then finally raised his head up.

Currently 6 PM, his home's living room was so deathly silent that the conversation and laughter that he exchanged with the others just a moment ago on the other side seemed like an illusion.

The room was quite gloomy since the lighting was off. The sliver of the evening sky that could be seen from the gap between the slightly opened curtains was a dull lead color. The only thing moving within his field of vision was the thin second hand moving languidly on the analog-type clock on the wall, which was practically just an accessory in this day and age.

Haruyuki let out a small sigh and slumped back his body on the sofa.

Their legion tried as much as possible to Dive for the weekly territory battles on Sunday after gathering together in real life, but when they didn't have the spare time to do so, they instead participated from each of their respective homes and neighborhoods. Although a single battle in Brain Burst took only 1.8 seconds to finish, having to fight defensively in more than ten consecutive battles, at the very minimum, made it come

out to closer to ten minutes when you included the intervals between battles. Today had turned out to be one of those days they each Dived separately, due to Kuroyukihime being unable to leave the student council room. —Of course, Sky Raker was the only one that participated from a separate location almost every week, due to her house being close to Shibuya.

Haruyuki could never come to like participating in the territory battles from his home by himself. The reason was simple. It was because, when he Bursted Out after having been absorbed in fighting ten consecutive fierce battles and sharing the joy of victory or regret of defeat with his friends, he always felt an intense loneliness when he suddenly woke up alone in his empty home.

It wasn't the kind of extreme loneliness at being completely alone that he'd felt before he'd met Kuroyukihime last autumn and received the Brain Burst program from her. Rather, that would have been more comforting if it were so. Back then, when he ran out of school as soon as school finished every day and returned home as if running away, he would keep immersing himself in the world of games, anime and comics that filled his room. Just talking with others in the real world—no, just being in the same place as other people was painful to him back then.

Almost eight months.

It had only been that long since he had become a Burst Linker. And yet, Haruyuki now felt from the bottom of his heart that he wanted to meet

with his friends in the legion that he had just parted with a few minutes ago. No, he didn't care if it was with Niko, Pard-san, Ash Roller, or even Frost Horn. He wanted to exchange fists in a «duel», to comment on battles as part of a lively gallery, to meet with others in real life and talk about trivial things.

“.....What's happened to me?”

Murmuring that, Haruyuki buried his face in a sofa cushion. Suddenly, some window opened in the center of his vision along with the default sound effect of his home network, but he hit the confirmation button with his right hand right away without looking at the contents. It was probably an automatic fixed message from his mom anyway about how she would be late tonight again. He quickly forgot about it and imagined the continuation of the question he'd asked within his mind.

—Have I become stronger, or weaker?

Considering how his fear towards other people had decreased, it could be said that he had become stronger. However, that had also increased his dependence on others at the same time.

When he'd been alone every day, there was nothing else he could lose.

But now, Haruyuki feared from the bottom of his heart that the personal relations he had obtained in these last eight months would break.

In particular, the one thread that was firmly connected to the very bottom of his heart and extended straight outwards from there, shining like black silk—

Even though he knew this kind of thinking was dangerous, he couldn't stop himself. He tightly shut his eyes while lying face-down on the sofa within his gloomily-lit living room, and continued thinking with his arms folded over his head.

What the end of the thread connected to was, of course, the person that had saved Haruyuki and was his «Parent», Kuroyukihime.

Kuroyukihime was currently a third-year at Umesato Middle School. And half of this year's first semester had already passed. In other words, there were ten months left. After only 300 more days passed, Kuroyukihime would graduate from Umesato Middle School. He hadn't heard anything about which high school she would be going to after that. He was too afraid to ask.

Haruyuki could feel the actual time passing by little by little even at this very moment, just like the rapid stream of thought from accelerating his mind's thought processes a thousand times. If he could, he would like to spend all of the remaining ten months in Accel World with Kuroyukihime. On the other side, time would flow almost infinitely, taking up to 820 years for the eight months to pass by his simple calculations, but even that seemed not enough to him.

".....Senpai."

He let out that whisper and grasped the ends of the cushion harder.

"Hmm, what is it?"

He imagined hearing her voice from very close by. While remaining face-down, Haruyuki repeated the same words in order to hear the reply of the imaginary Kuroyukihime once again.

"Senpai..."

"Like I said, what is it, Haruyuki-kun?"

Her voice was extremely gentle, not to mention containing a sense of realism, and Haruyuki heavily turned his body to the left, in a mood to see how far the limits of his delusional power went.

And there, right before his eyes, were two legs wrapped in black stockings, just fifty centimeters away from the sofa.

After blinking several times, he shifted his vision upwards. There was actually a superb knee-length skirt there. Above that, there was a jet-black short-sleeve shirt with a damp luster and a dark-red ribbon.

Her slender neck with a piano-black Neuro Linker attached, her long black hair that flowed down bewitchingly, and even her slightly tilted white face that possessed a beauty detached from people everywhere; they all had an overwhelming sense of reality as they filled Haruyuki's vision.

.....Wow, I really can't make light of my mind's delusional power. To think I would see such a clear illusion. Or was this developed from the image data in my memories while I was unconscious? But, do I really have such a high resolution photo of her entire body...?

While thinking that, Haruyuki nonchalantly held out his right hand and used it to grab and pull on the hem of her pleated skirt.

Even the realistic texture of the cloth and the mass and elasticity of the body beyond that were transmitted to his fingertips, and just when he thought 'Let's see now'.

"Nyaaah!?"

He heard that scream, and his right hand was smacked away. And then.

"Wha...Wha are you doing, you idiot!!"

A thunderous reprimand rained down on him, and at the same time two slender hands were held out towards him, which then grasped his cheek with three fingers each and mercilessly displayed their pulling power.

"Hii...Hafueh!?"

At the same time as he let out a scream and exclamation of shock, Haruyuki realized.

This was the real person. Not an illusion, not a photo, and not a solid AR image either. The actual Kuroyukihime had suddenly appeared in the living room of Haruyuki's house and was raising her eyebrows in anger.

But why, and how? Did she teleport here? Or maybe even quantum coherence^[32]?

After about thirty seconds of pulling on Haruyuki's cheeks, Kuroyukihime sat down on the sofa facing him with a thump and began lecturing him.

"Hey now, I properly rang the door chime, you know! And since you unlocked the door without even saying hello, I had no choice but to simply enter like that. I even properly greeted you by voice when I was at the door!"

".....Hah?"

Certainly, when he buried his head into the cushion and thought about this or that with his arms covering his ears, he had sensed that some kind of window had opened for a moment. He had thought it was surely a mail from his mother and had pushed the confirmation button without looking at what it said, but apparently it had actually been a notification window for the intercom.

After summarizing in his mind that leaving the settings on the similar-sounding default message chime had been a mistake and that he should definitely change the ringtone without fail, Haruyuki then straightened his back and opened his mouth again.

"E-Err.....W-Welcome, senpai."

"Hmph. Sorry for intruding."

Still pouting somewhat, Kuroyukihime answered back while adjusting the hem of her skirt. It was good that he had pulled it downwards just then, since if he had lifted it up, his punishment would definitely not have ended at just a cheek pull.

As he thought that to himself, Haruyuki was aware that the gears of his thought processes were still turning strangely. That wasn't the problem, nor was how Kuroyukihime had come up to his home either. The fundamental thing he had to solve first was,

".....S-So, umm...why did you suddenly come over to my place...?"

He timidly asked that question.

Based on her uniform and also her school bag lying on the floor, Kuroyukihime seemed to have come directly from Umesato Middle School. If it had been to give him a message, she would have said it when they were having their meeting after the territory battle earlier, and she could have send him a mail or called him as well. So it must have been a matter which she couldn't discuss through those means.

"...Is it about...something that requires an extremely high degree of security to talk about?"

He went ahead and guessed that, but Kuroyukihime shook her head slightly and shrugged her shoulders.

"It isn't something as grand as that...What, do I not have the right to come over to play every once in a while? Even though Takumu-kun and Chiyuri-kun seem to visit you quite frequently?"

As his cheeks started swelling again, Haruyuki shook his head back and forth at high speed.

"N-Nononono, that's not it, that's not it at all! I-I-I-I'm very happy. You can come every day if you like, rather you could even m-m-move in, wait, what am I saying, ah, that's right I'm sorry I'll go get tea! I'll make it right away so please sit down, wait you're already sitting I'm sorry!"^[33]

Since he was speaking of things that couldn't be recovered by talking any further, Haruyuki stood up as if rolling off the couch and escaped by dashing to the kitchen. From behind him, he heard her say "Please don't mind me" mixed with confused yet wry laughter, and the instant he heard that, his mental tension finally began to loosen slightly.

She hadn't come bearing some strictly confidential matter concerning the legion, but had simply come over to play on her way home. As if he was receiving a fellow classmate as a guest in his home. Like an ordinary middle school student.

The instant he thought that, Haruyuki barely held back the smile that tried to break out from his lips as he took out the most expensive bag of coffee beans his mother collected from the cupboard and roughly put it into the coffee percolator.

While the cloudy sky outside the window changed from gray to a perfect pitch black night sky, Haruyuki continued talking in an engrossed state.

About today's territory battle. About recent information on Accel World. About tomorrow's race.

They didn't stop at topics concerning Brain Burst; rumours and events at school, local topics within Suginami, and in the end even about the 2047 summer model Neuro Linkers announced by all the Neuro Linker-producing companies. They just kept talking, and talking, and talking about it all.

"...But, I think that the large and high functionality-type Neuro Linkers recently are putting the cart before the horse. In the first place, isn't it meant to be a device that's made to be so wearable that you forget you have it on your neck? And yet, the new Hitas model that came out just recently has an extra carry-use external unit made to attach to it!"

"Fufu, I understand how you feel. But, can you say that just by looking at the specs? According to rumor, it's equipped with a deferred unit line CPU by having the connector and slot connection placed outside the device itself."

"Uuh...N-No, regardless of how amazing the CPU is, it doesn't give an advantage for Brain Burst duels, right?"

"Hmm, well, you can say that. But, I also heard gossip that the effect processing is rather gorgeous for players that use the newest Linker..."

"Seriously!? Unfair, that's unfair!"

"What, it's not like their percentage of victories go up due to the beauty of their visuals. By the way, I've also decided to change over to the new Recto model next month."

"Uwah, that's way, way too unfair! S-Senpai, can't I also use yours a bit...?"

"Hey, hey, you can't use the Linkers of other people. Even if I did lend it, I don't think it'd fit on your neck, hahaha..."

So much fun.

Just thinking of having Kuroyukihime to himself, sitting on the other sofa and talking, nodding and laughing with a coffee cup in one hand, Haruyuki could taste a feeling of happiness that rose all the way to the heavens.

Haruyuki continued engrossing himself in the joy of communication known as a face-to-face conversation in the real world, which was a great luxury nowadays and was also something he still hadn't been able to do well out of nervousness half a year ago. That's why he wasn't able to notice it. The faint hint of sadness that ran through Kuroyukihime's eyes every once in a while.

After two hours.

This span of time that Haruyuki wished would continue forever was interrupted by a low grumbling sound from his stomach.

"Ah...It's already this late. I overstayed my visit all the way to dinner time."

After Kuroyukihime said that, Haruyuki shook his head frantically.

"N-No, it's fine! My stomach isn't hungry at all."

GUUH

His body betrayed his mind again by letting out another grumbling sound. Thinking 'This is why I hate this body!', he covered his stomach with both arms, but dealing with the involuntary actions of his internal organs was quite difficult.

"Fufu, it's only natural. Since you participated greatly in today's territory battle, you probably used up a lot of energy. You should replenish yourself fully for tomorrow."

Smiling, Kuroyukihime stood up. Although he very much wanted to say 'Then, at the very least, how about we have supper together?', the only things he could prepare were frozen pizza, frozen Doria casserole, or five servings of frozen Chinese fried rice. He really couldn't call it a menu appropriate for a guest.

While Haruyuki agonized over this, Kuroyukihime pick up her bag from the floor and began walking through the living room.

Her footsteps—

For an instant, her footsteps seemed just slightly heavier compared to her usual gallant gait. A needle of sharp discernment pierced through Haruyuki's brain.

—Could she have come here because there was actually something else she wanted to talk about?

—And yet I simply talked about my own things and used up the time? Was I so engrossed in only my own happiness and enjoyment that I didn't notice something important...?

Forgetting his intense hunger as well, Haruyuki opened his mouth.

But no words came out. How could he ask if she was worried about something, like an afterthought, in this kind of situation? He should have noticed it an hour, or at least thirty minutes earlier. He should have shut his rambling mouth and waited for her to speak.

While staring at her back as she approached the glass door to the hallway, Haruyuki prayed. 'God, please give me just one more chance.'

It was then that a low-pitched rumbling sound resounded from far away.

Of course, the source wasn't Haruyuki's stomach. It was thunder. When he looked outside the living room window with a start, he saw that the interior of the thick clouds that dimly reflected the city lights of Tokyo were two or three times whiter than before. Shortly after, there was another roll of thunder from slightly closer this time.

While looking at the raindrops that started instantly striking the window and the blurring color of neon lights, Haruyuki spoke in a hoarse voice.

"...Umm, senpai...It's really raining hard."

Kuroyukihime also halted, and whispered while looking at him sidelong.

"The forecast said there was a less than 10% chance of rain until 12 o'clock, though...This kind of mistaken prediction is rare."

"U-Umm...do you have an umbrella?"

"Unfortunately, it's just as you see. I'm sorry, but..."

As she held out her empty hands Haruyuki completely expected her to follow up by saying 'Can I take shelter from the rain here for a little while?'—however.

"...Can you lend me an umbrella?"

"Eh...Yeah, sure, of course."

After nodding stiffly and heading reluctantly towards the door, Haruyuki's feet were held back by a second phenomenon.

A window with a yellow warning mark attached to it popped up in the left side of his vision.

"Ah...There's a lightning warning and network malfunction alarm for Suginami and Setagaya."

"You're right. I don't think I would get hit by an actual bolt of lightning, but...I hate the connection lag on the road..."

Kuroyukihime said that with a shrug of her shoulders. When walking through traffic, it was convenient to have AR^[34] information on every place within sight—from the traffic report within the vicinity, to the navigation line towards one's destination, to the distance walked and to one's calorie expenditure—displayed by the Neuro Linker, but when lags occurred frequently due to the network being in bad condition, it instead made walking very difficult.

"Hmm.....But, the time is already this late..."

Although she was usually the kind of person who made quick decisions and took swift action, Kuroyukihime looked at the time with an unusually indecisive tone of voice. Haruyuki also followed suit and turned to look towards the lower right corner of his virtual desktop. It was 8:07 PM. It was a delicate period of time that couldn't be called either early or late in the evening.

As the sound of rain and thunder reached them dimly from the other side of the window, the two of them continued standing still with awkward postures in the middle of the living room.

Haruyuki inhaled and opened his mouth several times. However, no words came out in the end each time. No, he shouldn't have needed to feel pressured like this. 'You should wait until the rain stops and the

thunderclouds pass at least.' Wasn't it actually a harmless and natural request? Yet, why was his heartbeat skyrocketing like this suddenly?

He couldn't read the expression on Kuroyukihime's sidelong face two meters away. Was she wavering, or listless, or maybe tense, or was she just waiting for something...

PIPOON

A default beeping sound suddenly rang, and Haruyuki shrank back in surprise.

The window that appeared in the center of his vision was a text message sent via the home server this time. The sender—his mother. The title—Be back tomorrow night. The contents—I can't come back tonight, so please care of everything at home.

The third miracle in a row. Though, it wasn't actually something so exaggerated. Half the time, Haruyuki's mother would only return home on weekends after the date changed at night, and the other half she would not return at all. However, to Haruyuki, this message came with the greatest and most final timing. He closed the window and forcibly pushed out his voice from his constricted throat.

"U-U-Umm...I-I'm not really bothered by that kind of thing a-a-at all. That is, umm, ah..."

As Haruyuki agonized over how he should tell her about the contents of the mail from his mother in a non-suggestive way, Kuroyukihime touched precisely upon the crux of the matter.

"No, your mother will also be arriving back home soon, so I'd just be a bother. I'll just go now..."

The instant he heard that, several of the safety valves in Haruyuki's brain were blown away and the following words simply flew out of his mouth by themselves.

"No, i-i-it's fine! Because my mother isn't c-c-coming back tonight!"

The thought 'Oh no, that was way too blunt, it's like I'm saying I want her to take shelter here from the rain!' went through Haruyuki's mind as he fell into an even greater panic, but—

Even after she heard that, Kuroyukihime's upper body merely twitched. Eventually, she did a half-turn in the opposite direction to face Haruyuki, and then she whispered while looking at him sidelong.

"...I see. Then, sorry for intruding further, but I'll take you up on your proposal."

"I-I-I-It's p-p-perfectly all right!"

While nodding frantically, Haruyuki thanked his mother's super laissez-faire parenting policy within his mind. After that, he simply prayed for the thunderclouds overhead to remain there for even a second longer. If possible for an hour, no, at least thirty minutes...

Then, as Kuroyukihime started walking again, her mouth moved at slightly high speed.

"Now that I think about it, since we'll all be meeting up here tomorrow as well, it'd be a waste of time for me to leave now."

"T-That's right. That would be really inefficient..."

—Huh?

It'd be troublesome to leave since she's coming over tomorrow anyway? Wait, what did she mean by that?

As Haruyuki froze with an unnatural posture and expression, Kuroyukihime put her bag down on a chair in the dining room, and then, "Then, I'll go down to the mall below for a little while."

Leaving those words, she went out the door.

Haruyuki should have next cooked the best-class frozen marguerita pizza that he treasured within the freezer for dinner, made another cup of coffee and then watched the night news program on top of the sofa, but he had almost no memory of doing all that.

By the time he came to his senses, Haruyuki sitting in the living room alone.

However, it seemed that everything hadn't been a delusion, as the faint sound of a hair drier came from the bathroom across the hallway.

At this point, his brain transmissions that had been idling for over two hours finally entered first gear, and Haruyuki's thoughts resumed from where they had broken off.

'It would be troublesome to return.' In other words, would it be correct to interpret that as meaning she would not be going home before the time of the race tomorrow? Then, didn't this inevitably lead to a Kuroyukihime remaining here for the night? To put it another way, she was "staying over"? Was the occurrence of such a situation legally and morally allowable, even though they were middle school students? But, her words couldn't be interpreted otherwise, right?

—No, don't let yourself be shaken, me! Even if that's the situation, you should be able to cope with it calmly! After all, this wasn't the first time, she has stayed over before without this kind of feeling, but that time Niko was also here, and furthermore they'd slept in the living room while doing a retro game marathon...

"Thanks for letting me use the bath."

The living room door suddenly opened, causing Haruyuki to spring up and looked at the owner of the voice with a speed that almost seemed to dislocate his vertebrae.

She wore a simple set of dull gray pajama top and bottom. She had probably bought it at the shopping mall attached to the apartment building on the ground floor. While rubbing a towel over the hair behind her head, Kuroyukihime spoke with a faint smile.

"For some reason, the pajamas I have keep increasing one after another."

"Y-Yes...Then, you should just leave a pair here."

After he automatically said that, he realized belatedly what he'd said.

"No, I-I-I didn't mean it like t-t-that, I-I-I wasn't thinking something like how I wanted to you stay over again due to the thunder like today, n-n-no I'm not saying I hate it or anything, not at all, that is, err, err——"

As Haruyuki shook his arms and head in a complex manner, Kuroyukihime gave a big wry smile and offered some help.

"How about you use the bath too before the water gets cold?"

"Yes! I'll do that!"

Getting off the sofa as if rolling off, Haruyuki escaped from the living room at full speed.

While finishing up his bathing despite being hit by confusion again at steam still filling bathroom and then changing into a sweatshirt and sweatpants instead of pajamas, Haruyuki very carefully considered his next course of action that he would have to choose from among the available options.

The answer he came to in the end was—

"Umm, senpai, please use my mother's bedroom! It's the door at the end of the hallway! T-T-Then, good night!"

He babbled out those words from the entrance to the living room, and after that shut himself into his room and pulled his blanket over his head, which was a slightly, no, a very pitiful thing to do.

He had vaguely guessed that Kuroyukihime had come over because there was something she wanted to talk about. However, under these circumstances, Haruyuki didn't think he could remain calm at all when directly facing her in pajamas. After all, since his brain had already overheated a while ago, he would undoubtedly talk about a hundred more meaningless things instead of saying nothing. No, before that, it wouldn't be strange if he broke down from hyperventilation, dehydration or arrhythmia first.

If it was going to end up like that, he should put his head under the covers in his room like this instead. At the very least, he would not have to carry memories, permanently saved in his brain, that would always make him cry out "Wah!" or "Gyaah!" when he recalled it afterwards.

Activating his mental shut-in mode at full-throttle back pedal for the first time in a while, Haruyuki continued curling up in his bed while gritting his teeth in self-loathing with the thought 'Thinking that I had gotten stronger was just my imagination' in his mind.

That's why, about ten minutes later, when he heard the faint words "Can we talk a little?" along with a light knock on his door, he was greatly surprised that he didn't pretend to be asleep.

Instead, Haruyuki sat up on his bed and took a deep breath. He chased away the weakness inside him with the breath of air, and then answered "Come in" in a hoarse yet clear voice.

Opening the door and coming in without a sound, Kuroyukihime was for some reason holding one of the big cushions from the living room sofa in her arms. She took a single look around the room, and then quickly walked forward and sat down on the edge of his bed.

"I thought you would say no."

After Kuroyukihime said that in a low voice with her back turned to him, Haruyuki also answered back quietly.

"...I also thought I would say that."

"Why did you change your mind?"

"Hmm...err..."

His emotions were unexpectedly calm. Instead, Haruyuki even felt a tranquil composure in this astounding situation. That might have been due to his relief at not having made a huge error at the last minute here.

"...It's because I believed that you surely had something truly important to talk about, senpai."

"What, so then you tried to swiftly go to sleep even though you noticed that?"

Seeing her slender back twitch and go stiff, he apologized while scratching his head.

"S-Sorry."

"...Well, I'll forgive you since you let me into your room like this."

Letting the tension go out of her shoulders, Kuroyukihime turned her body a little and looked at Haruyuki as he sat in the middle of the bed. Her expression was gentle, but just as he thought, the sadness that had wavered over her face all day long still hadn't disappeared from her eyes.

She raised her slender fingers and stroked the piano-black Neuro Linker attached to her neck. At the same time, she whispered quietly.

"«Those that use up all their points and have Brain Burst forcefully uninstalled lose all their memories connected to it at the same time.»"

Haruyuki's breath caught in his throat. That was the Brain Burst program's secrecy protection system that they had seen proof of almost two months ago. It was a form of absolute salvation, but ultimately a merciless punishment for losers.

Lowering her hand, Kuroyukihime gave a smile that had various feelings mixed into it.

"When I was clearly demonstrated the truth of this final rule, which had only been a rumor until then, in the most irrefutable fashion possible, I became very afraid. Because, if I'm beaten by any of the other «Kings»

even once, it means that I would forget who I was at that very instant. But, Haruyuki-kun. At the same time, I...also felt relieved...”

Unable to immediately grasp the meaning of her words, Haruyuki was confused. Kuroyukihime gripped the cushion on top of her knees harder, and continued with her eyes cast downwards.

“.....Two and a half years ago, I banished one of the «Kings» from Accel World forever with a surprise attack during a meeting. Since then, I have always been frightened in the deepest depths of my heart. I thought that he...the boy who was once the first generation Red King, «Red Rider», held a profound resentment towards me from somewhere in Tokyo.”

Haruyuki sucked in a sharp breath.

He had heard this story several times before. No, he had even seen a replay file that recorded that very scene once. Therefore, he had come to understand the size of the scar which that incident had left in Kuroyukihime’s heart, but at the same time, he had foolishly thought that she had already overcome that pain.

Unconsciously leaning his body towards Kuroyukihime as she set on the left side of the bed, Haruyuki spoke keenly.

“B-But...Even if it was a surprise attack...Wasn’t it a legal attack in accordance with the rules? Furthermore, he didn’t even have a non-aggression pact with the legion boss he was facing at the time. In that case, he shouldn’t bear a grudge...”

Kuroyukihime shook her head gently but clearly and interrupted Haruyuki's desperate words.

"That's wrong, Haruyuki-kun."

"Eh...What do you mean, that's wrong...?"

"The attack I used when I cut off Red Rider's head was my Level 8 special technique, «Death By Embracing». It has an attack range of only 70 centimeters, but in exchange it has a high attack power. —That being said, regardless of how strong it is, it still shouldn't have had the power to instantly kill Rider, who was the same level as me and moreover had a high defense just below that of the green and blue colors due to being a pure battle type. Yes...you probably already understand. At that time, I activated the «Incarnate System». I used the forbidden power that all seven Kings had sworn to not use after subduing the fourth generation «Chrome Disaster»..."

This time, Haruyuki was speechless.

The high-ranking interface hidden within Brain Burst, the «image control system». Crossing over the limits within the game by intentionally using this interface was, in other words, the «Incarnate System». Its power was the greatest, but at the same time it seemed to also have a terrifying dark side to it. All the high-ranked players Haruyuki knew had told him that all those that pursue its power are swallowed up by the darkness within their hearts. Kuroyukihime, sitting in front of him, was not an exception to that either.

Her slender shoulders slumped even further and a dry voice came from her.

".....Rider has a right to resent me, after I broke the oath we all swore. Although I don't have any regrets at having chosen to fight the other Kings, my arms are still stained with the feel of that one attack...—That's why, Haruyuki-kun, for a long time I stubbornly didn't believe in the rumor that former Burst Linkers lose their memories of Accel World. Because I couldn't allow myself to cling to that rumor and let myself feel better because of it. However, when it was proved two months ago that the rumor of memory erasure was true...I was relieved. I recognized that Rider no longer remembers that he was the Red King and that he was banished due to my betrayal, and I felt relieved about it from the bottom of my heart. Geez...what an incorrigible cowards I am..."

Chuckling slightly, the pajama-wearing Kuroyukihime looked unusually weak and fragile. Haruyuki mustered what little courage he had and shortened the distance between them by another five centimeters.

However, he of course didn't touch her hand, but at least spoke as best he could.

"Se...Senpai. Umm, I think that the reason the existence of the memory erasure process is hidden is because it creates an incredible pressure within you if you fight while knowing about it. Bu...But, we already know about it. From now on, we have to fight while understanding that resolve.

So...it isn't cowardly to instead be a bit relieved about it...rather, I believe it's perfectly justifiable."

Kuroyukihime raised her head a little and glanced at Haruyuki. A painful yet gentle smile spread over her pale lips.

"...I see. That kind of logical opinion is just like you. That's right, you should fight under that belief...But, I probably don't have that right..."

"Wh...Why!?"

"That's...because the Burst Linkers that received an unrecoverable loss due to an incarnate attack by me aren't just Rider alone."

Blinking several times, Haruyuki frowned and asked.

"By that...you mean the fourth generation Chrome Disaster? B-But, that couldn't be helped with him, right?"

"No, that's not it."

Swaying her damp hair, Kuroyukihime shook her head feebly. After several seconds, she said the person's name in voice that was almost like a sigh.

"My...old friend. The only person I had a friendship with in the real world before I made you my «Child»...Fuuko, no, Sky Raker."

".....Eh...?"

"The reason Raker's legs weren't restored even with Chiyuri-kun's «Citron Call» after the territory battle today wasn't because her will power didn't

work. It was because of me. Most likely, my will power is still eating into Raker's scars even now and is preventing them from being healed. Like a poison...Like a curse."

"No way! No way, that can't be!!"

Haruyuki shouted fervently. Shaking his head repeatedly, he leaned forward his upper body and argued back vehemently.

"Raker-san said that she forcibly asked you to do that, senpai. You tried to dissuade her right until the end, but Raker-san wouldn't change her mind no matter what, so you reluctantly cut her legs off...Isn't that how it was!?"

"That's correct, on the surface..."

Burying her face into the cushion in her arms, Kuroyukihime whispered.

"But...my twelve-year-old self back in those days was far more childish and foolish than I am now. I couldn't understand her feelings when she chose...couldn't help but choose to yearn for the sky instead of fighting alongside me as the legion's sub-master. At the very end, when I realized that Raker would never change her mind, I felt sad...and angry...and so I loaded all those feelings into the blade of my right arm and cut off Raker's legs. At that time, there was surely the thought 'Then you should lose your legs forever' within my heart as I used will power. That became a curse which remains to this day. Just like the deep-seated grudge of the first generation Disaster that produced the «Armor of Catastrophe» in the past..."

She put even more strength into her hands holding the cushion. Her low cracked voice flowed into the dim bedroom.

"...The will power that Raker and you use is an embodiment of «hope». But I'm different. I override phenomena with the opposite...with the power of «anger», «resentment» and «despair». I don't pile up or create anything, I just cut through everything, and lose everything. It's as if my avatar is an extremely ugly form that symbolizes that...Everyone in the reborn, no, in the second generation «Nega Nebulas» that you revived will also one day be lost if they continue to fight with me...definitely....."

The volume of the last half of her words sank even lower, so much that Haruyuki felt as he was hearing not sound, but rather Kuroyukihime's self-reproach itself.

—That's wrong. That's wrong. That's definitely wrong.

«Despair» and «loss» can't be your true nature. Because, I was saved by you. You keenly held out your hand and pulled me up from the bottom of the bottom within the pitch-black bog I was in. You gave me overwhelming «salvation»!

Although he shouted that in his mind, he definitely wasn't capable enough to put those swirling feelings into words. Haruyuki gritted his teeth hard, and thought desperately about how he could convey to Kuroyukihime just how much he had been saved by her and Brain Burst.

After five seconds, the answer he came to was—

".....Senpai."

Haruyuki called out to her, and quietly held out an item he picked up from the corner of his headboard.

It was a XSB cable with a silver wire. Gripping the plug at one end in his left hand and the other end in his right hand that he was holding out to her, Haruyuki spoke.

"Senpai, please «duel» with me. If we do that, I think I'll surely get you to understand. About...about how..."

Unable to suppress the feelings that came welling up, tears fell in drops from Haruyuki's eyes. He took a deep breath while sniffing and then continued in a trembling voice.

"...how important you are to me."

Kuroyukihime turned her face halfway up towards Haruyuki, and widened her eyes. Showing an expression that went from shock, to hesitation, and to fear, she finally settled on a light yet pain-filled smile.

"...You always surprise me."

Muttering that, she took the plug.

But, instead of putting it in her Neuro Linker, Kuroyukihime crossed over the bed and sat on her knees right in front of Haruyuki. The scent of soap and shampoo drifted to his nose, and his mind jumped in spite of the situation.

“Now that I think about, this is the first time we’re...”

Leaving her words there, she put her plug into the port on Haruyuki’s Neuro Linker.

“...f-fighting each other one-on-one.”

Finishing her sentence, Haruyuki also held out his plug to Kuroyukihime’s Neuro Linker while suppressing the shaking of the hand holding it. He jacked it in at the same time as they ended up face-to-face and pressed against each other. A wired connection warning blinked in his vision.

While soaking himself in the sensation of touching not just digital signals, but each other’s consciousness themselves, Haruyuki quietly recited the command.

“Burst Link.”

Clad in silver metallic armor, his thin legs stepped onto a floor of cracked marble.

Haruyuki’s apartment building had changed into a white-walled shrine. All the walls that divided the rooms of every apartment disappeared, and it all turned into a single floor consisting of a vast circular atrium. The ceiling was high, supported by Greek-style pillars in some places. Faint pale yellow sunlight shined in from openings along its perimeter.

It was the same «Dusk» stage where Haruyuki had received his first lecture from Kuroyukihime in the past. When he finished confirming his

surroundings, he turned his gaze forward, and there, 20 meters away from him—a beautiful obsidian avatar stood there quietly.

Both her hands and legs were made of long swords. A petal-like armored skirt enclosed her thin waist, and both sides of her face mask gleamed sharply.

Accel World's rebel, the Black Knight «Black Lotus», had her arms lowered without taking any stance, and her face was slightly tilted downwards. However, that slender figure emitted an intense pressure that made Haruyuki feel as if he were standing under a huge guillotine, and so «Silver Crow»'s thin body unconsciously shook.

—No, I can't let myself be seized with fear in this situation!

He shouted that at himself beneath his silver exterior.

Haruyuki had a reason for challenging Kuroyukihime to a «duel». It was something incredibly simple. He wanted to convey to her a certain belief that supported him as a Burst Linker. That was—

«Brain Burst» is, at its foundation, an online player-vs-player battle game.

And all games are meant to be enjoyed.

For the thrill, the excitement, and the passion in playing. And in the case of net games, for the feeling of solidarity that came with competing and fighting alongside others. All players had a right to receive that. Games never exist for the sake of suffering.

In order to convey this belief to Kuroyukihime, the only thing Haruyuki could do was to muster his entire body and soul to fight her right here and now. With all his strength, he would challenge her, who thought that her avatar and will power projected «despair» and that those who crossed blades with her would also be consumed by it as well. And, he would remind her of the pleasure of dueling.

—That’s why, I’m...

“I’m going to come at you seriously, senpai!!”

Shouting that, Haruyuki fiercely dashed forward off the ground.

Black Lotus still didn’t move. However, he didn’t slow down his momentum, and so he ran through the twenty meter distance between them in an instant and stepped right up to her so strongly that he cracked the marble floor.

His first attack was his best specialty, a left-hand straight punch, which he aimed at the center of her body with the maximum spin of his waist and shoulder to give it more power. Kuroyukihime stepped one leg back at just the last second and narrowly avoided his attack.

Although she had had accepted Haruyuki’s challenge, she was probably still held back by hesitation. Her movements didn’t have their usual sharpness. Although she raised her right-hand sword for a counter thrust, Haruyuki could clearly see the point of the sword as if it were in slow motion.

He gathered his fingers on his right hand into a straight open palm while extending the hand forward. Wielding his arm like a whip, he tried to repel Kuroyukihime's attack with a hand thrust.

Even though they had never fought each other directly, since they had fought side by side in territory battles for over half a year, Haruyuki had noticed a single very small weak point in the way Kuroyukihime fought at close range.

Although the swords on Black Lotus' four limbs were terrifying weapons that equally integrated both offense and defense, they were still swords, and so their power had a certain orientation and direction. To be specific, their strength was concentrated only on the blade edges, and the body of the sword was actually rather vulnerable.

Of course, they couldn't be broken with just a single strike, but it was possible to pile up damage. That was the only chance of winning that he would be able to find in a close range battle with her.

"...Kh!"

Along with a sharp righting yell, Haruyuki thrust his right hand into the side of the blade being swung at him—or tried to.

However, the impact he expected didn't occur. Instead.

Feeling a soft sensation he couldn't described except as 'gentle', Haruyuki was shocked.

The long jet-black sword enfolded Haruyuki's hand thrust with a small outward motion. He couldn't believe it, but it looked as if the blade had changed into a soft material and halted his arm with a spiral motion around it. But, the moment after he felt that—

"Hah!"

Letting out a momentary exhalation, Kuroyukihime shook her right arm sharply while taking a step forward.

Instantly, an explosive repelling force hit Haruyuki from his arm to his shoulder and chest.

"Wha....."

By the time he managed to croak that out, he had already been helplessly blown backwards. Unable to adjust his stance either, his back crashed into one of the distant pillars. The pillar broke with a loud crash, but even so Haruyuki didn't stop there, and after rolling on the floor some distance further, he finally stopped with his limbs spread out.

After seeing sparks flicker before his eyes for over a second, he shook his head and quickly stood up. Somehow managing to stay standing despite his shaking legs, he raised his head and shouted out.

"Wha...What was that just now!?"

Slowly approaching him with her legs' hovering movement from far away, Kuroyukihime shrugged slightly and answered back.

"A soft technique for facing a hard technique^[35]...I suppose you could describe like that. Someday I'll tell you about the time I trained in the Chinatown area within Yokohama...More importantly, Haruyuki-kun. Wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?"

Her voice was calm, but Haruyuki was strongly conscious of a feeling of suffocating loneliness contained within her tone.

Just as he thought, the current Kuroyukihime was always imprisoned by the feelings buried deep inside her. 'My fighting can only create negative energy. I can give neither the excitement of battle nor the feeling of solidarity from competing against each other to my opponent.' That's what she believed.

—No, that's wrong!

—I'm experiencing the strongest shiver in my body right now. It isn't due to fear. My entire body is shaking from the thought of having such a strong person in front of me...and of having that person fight me.

Haruyuki resisted the urge to shout that out, and clenched his fists tightly.

He wouldn't be able to convey this to her with words. That's why he requested this duel. He couldn't cower from having been blown back once in this situation. He couldn't stop until he completely used up his entire being right now.

".....I'll tell you with my fists!"

Shouting loudly, Haruyuki once again dashed forward.

His health gauge had decreased by 20% due to the attack that had sent him flying just now. However, in exchange, his special technique gauge had also been charged up. While running, he unfolded the metal fins on his back one by one.

He threw away his plan of counter-attacking Black Lotus' sword from its side. He risked everything on the three-dimensional rush attack from zero-distance that he had secretly trained for a long time.

"Uu...oooh!"

Crying out, he did another long punch. Kuroyukihime also did a thrust with her right sword just like before. As things stood, he would be hit first due to the difference in reach between them.

The shining point of the sword approached closer and close, and the instant it was about to touch his helmet—

Haruyuki strongly vibrated his left wing just once. Silver Crow's body slid to the right without any preliminary movement, and the sword scattered sparks across the surface of his helmet as it just barely passed by him.

"...!"

Kuroyukihime sucked in a short breath. But she didn't stop her movement even slightly, and instead rotated her body with her left leg's sword as the axis and tried to dodge Haruyuki's punch. At that instant, Haruyuki's

right wing quivered this time. He corrected his trajectory once again, and—

KIIIN! With a small yet clear sound of impact, sparks burst out from Black Lotus' left shoulder armor. Her health gauge indicated to the top right of his vision lost only a single small dot, but it definitely decreased.

—Now!

“Seaaah!”

Haruyuki let out a war cry and raised his right leg. Ordinarily, he wouldn't be able to successfully use a high kick when glued to his opponent like this. That was because a minimum fixed distance from the tip of his left foot that served as the axis of rotation and the tip of his right foot that dealt the damage was required. Kuroyukihime had perhaps figured that out as well, and instead of receiving or dodging the attack, she tried to counter with an elbow strike.

However, at that moment, Haruyuki once again activated only his right wing at full throttle for an instant. Using the center of his tilted body as the axis, he let out a groan as he put a miniscule swing that should have been impossible into his high kick.

Kuroyukihime stopped her elbow strike and bent her body back, but Silver Crow's sharp toes grazed the left side of Black Lotus' mask. Once again, sparks were emitted and minimum damage was dealt.

Having finished his bold move, Haruyuki was forced to experience a momentary stiff posture that was only natural at this point. Perhaps hating having her opponent glued to her, Kuroyukihime jumped back and crouched her body. But Haruyuki kicked off the ground with his left leg using the momentum from swinging his right leg. He activated his right wing for an instant again. Using the rotation this created, he unleashed a back roundhouse kick with his left leg.

Kuroyukihime blocked it with her bent left arm and received an intense impact. An orange flash effect dyed both their armors and the surrounding marble.

While perceiving the upper right gauge at the edge of his vision go down by two dots, Haruyuki added thrust from his left wing this time into the recoil of his kick. He rapidly counter-rotated in mid-air, and using that energy he thrust with his left hand. His fingertips shallowly dug into Kuroyukihime's right shoulder. He then activated both his wings when the two of them were face to face with each other. His double knee-kick was unfortunately blocked by her right arm, but it caused the greatest impact thus far to shake the stage. Damage, three dots.

—This was his second special technique that specially utilized flight ability, where he did a non-stop rush attack that efficiently employed momentary bursts of thrust from his wings, to which Haruyuki had dedicated special training for after the «bullet-dodging» training from before. Its name was «Aerial Combo». Compared to the first technique he had, «Dive Attack», its appearance was modest and it didn't deal extra-

large damage, but it could be used even indoors unlike the first and it could also be activated starting from when his special technique reached 20%. And most of all—it was almost impossible to defend against when seeing it for the first time!

“Oooh!”

Immersing his entire body in the sensation of acceleration as if his nervous system was bursting apart, Haruyuki sped up his rush attacks further. Remaining glued to his opponent, he continued letting out attacks with all four of his limbs while almost never landing on the ground. All of his attacks were avoided or blocked at the last minute, but it still gradually accumulated bits of damage to Black Lotus' gauge.

Even while frantically moving his entire body, Haruyuki shouted out within his mind.

—Senpai, this is my current self. This is all the power contained in me, who you saved from that bog and gave wings to. If your true nature is «despair» and «loss» that cuts down everything...then what do you make of this battle!?

Without him noticing, Silver Crow's form had turn into an aggregation of silver light that shined in the air. Putting at full throttle the reaction speed he'd trained at the virtual squash game in the Umesato Middle School local network, which had once served as the incentive that made him catch Kuroyukihime's eye, Haruyuki continued unleashing his Aerial Combo. Although he wasn't certain how many dozens of attacks he'd

done, he still hadn't landed even one clean hit. Kuroyukihime silently devoted herself to defense, and continued doing nothing but evading or blocking Haruyuki's unpredictable rush attacks.

Although they didn't exchange any words, after a certain amount of time Haruyuki was conscious of a deep emotion that was exchanged between the two whenever their avatars came into contact.

It was admiration. Towards Kuroyukihime's defensive skill for Haruyuki. And most likely towards Haruyuki's mid-air rush attacks for Kuroyukihime. Both of them felt unbelievably, deeply impressed and excited.

Suddenly, he felt as if he heard a voice.

—Aah, I see...So that's it.

—This is a «duel». You need only forget everything else, become one with your duel avatar, and fight to your heart's content. Even if this is a world that will disappear in just 1.8 seconds, even if it's a contact that will end in 1.8 seconds...An innocent duel will surely leave something behind. It will give something to you...

—Rider and I. The countless number of battles between Rider and I that we had when we were young also surely...created something precious...that remains behind even now, within both of our hearts.....

Haruyuki didn't know if he really did hear those thoughts.

Because that voice was transmitted to him in the space between seconds when Haruyuki's right fist, which he had lunged out dozens of times, was

touched and drawn in by Kuroyukihime's left sword, a transient instant that couldn't really be called time.

The next instant, that mysterious attraction intensely drew in Haruyuki's fist once again.

...Ah, that «soft technique»...!

Gritting his teeth, Haruyuki tried to oppose the explosive repelling force.

However, it never hit him. Instead, Haruyuki's body was pulled up to Kuroyukihime's chest, and was firmly halted and held within her arms.

"Eh....."

While Haruyuki stiffened as he was unable to judge what he should do in response to this very unexpected development, this time an actual voice whispered in his ear.

"You were splendid, Haruyuki."

—Eh? The duel is over? But, both our gauges still full, and there's still time left, isn't there?

When he checked their respective health gauges in confusion, Haruyuki realized something important.

Silver Crow's special technique gauge had been consumed what he'd accumulated on it due to his continuous momentary thrusts of his wings, and now not even 10% of it remained.

On the other hand, Black Lotus' special technique gauge was completely filled due to her endless blocking, and was shining a brilliant blue from end to end.

"This is the first time I've used this technique in two and a half years. Thank you, Silver Crow. Nice fight."

At the same time as she whispered that, Black Lotus' arms, which now wrapped around Haruyuki's back from both sides, emitted an intense violet-blue flash.

"«Death By Embracing»."

Right after she uttered the technique name—there was a light cutting sound. Before its echo could even fade away, Silver Crow's entire health gauge was dyed red—decreased swiftly from the right end—and reached zero.

.....Really, what power she has.

At the same time as the greatest feeling of admiration he felt thus far filled his chest, the flaming words [YOU LOSE] appeared before his eyes. Luckily, before the feeling of being cut in half could reach his senses, Haruyuki's entire body shattered into pixels while emitting a silver light.

He escaped from the darkness where he was filled with a feeling of floating, and returned to reality.



Opening his eyes on top of his bed, Haruyuki blinked several times, and looked for Kuroyukihime's face, which should have been right in front of him.

But, he couldn't find it. Because Kuroyukihime had pressed her body against his, put her head on his left shoulder, and wrapped her arms around his back at some point.

"Ah, umm, hey..."

As the sensation of her hair tickled his cheeks and the scent of her shampoo directly hit his brain, Haruyuki tried to jump up while still sitting. However, he wasn't able to perform such a dexterous movement at a time like this, and instead his balance was broken backwards. He tried to frantically recover his posture with the thrust of his wings, but the back of his physical body was of course equipped with no such thing.

As Haruyuki fell down onto the mattress, Kuroyukihime's slender body softly landed on his chest shortly after.

With only the faint sound of the air conditioner pervading the room, Haruyuki's entire body froze completely this time as he widened his eyes. 'First calm down, coolly judge the situation, and act!' is what went through his mind, as he completely failed to grasp what had happened.

He was lying down on his bed in his usual sweatshirt and sweatpants attire at 11:00 PM. Up till this point was okay. There were no problems. However, the pajama-wearing Kuroyukihime was on top of his body, with both arms wrapped around him, and was also putting further strength

into them—was this situation really reality? In the first place, why had they ended up in this kind of position? Was this all the work of a city-wide virus or something?

".....I'm surprised."

When a voice spoke directly in his left ear, Haruyuki's extremely confused thoughts halted.

"You...became that strong without me realizing it....."

Unable to think at all as he heard that emotion-filled murmured voice, Haruyuki's mouth moved by itself.

"B-But, the end result was an almost perfect win for you, senpai....."

"That merely reflects the difference in levels. That battle was far more even-matched than you think. I was forced to desperately block while you continued your mid-air rush attacks for an incredibly long time."

"Re...Really...?"

He skeptically muttered. In his estimation, though, he honestly thought the difference in true strength between himself and the Black King was like the distance from the bottom station of the space elevator to the top or geostationary orbit station.

But Kuroyukihime raised her head slightly, and then looked into Haruyuki's eyes from point-blank range and smiled weakly.

"Really. Aah...I wish I could convey to you how happy and how moved I am right now!"

A light like stardust whirled and glittered within her wide jet-black pupils. Just seeing that blew away his mind once again. Haruyuki didn't know from whose heart the intense heartbeat he heard came from as they remained glued to each other with no space between them.

As the tips of their noses were so close that they touched, and they held each other's gazes—

Kuroyukihime continued speaking quietly.

"...At the very least, I'll believe in the path I've walked until now. I still have many regrets, but...even so, the enormous time I spent in Accel World and the countless duels I accumulated weren't useless. Because I got to find and invite you at the end of that path..."

She moved her right hand from his back and gently stroked Haruyuki's cheek with her fingers.

"Haruyuki-kun. I'm proud of you."

The instant he heard those words.

All of the fright inside him concerning the current situation evaporated.

Instead, something hot overflowed out from his eyes, and dripped down his face and onto the sheets. The drops of liquid spilled out one after another without stopping.

While frantically blinking strongly several times and rubbing his face against the top of his right hand, Haruyuki apologized in a blurred voice.

"Ah.....Umm, s-sorry. I...err, I, I..."

But no matter what he did, even his voice trembled greatly, and he sobbed like a child between his words. Desperately withstanding it, he managed to continue.

".....T-That's the first time since I was born that anyone...has ever said they're proud of me."

Hating the idea of exposing his ugly tearful face any further, Haruyuki tried to push his face into the sheets.

But, Kuroyukihime seized Haruyuki with all her strength, and while gently caressing his head with her right hand, she pressed her own face against his tear-streaked cheek and whispered again.

"Then, I'll say it proportionally to the fourteen years that you've lived. You are my...the Black King Black Lotus' only child and greatest partner that I take pride in above all others."

As she gently touched his head, something crammed in his chest seemed to comfortably lessen. Haruyuki let out a long breath, and quietly closed his eyes.

A very faint voiced reached his ears.



“No, that’s not all. Your self in the real world, Arita Haruyuki, is also...my, the Black.....’s.....”

But, he couldn’t hear the rest of it.

Because Haruyuki had probably committed his greatest error this night right here.

The fatigue of fighting with all his strength in a duel, the sweet pain that had melted into overflowing feelings, and the sensation of that gentle hand and the warmth of the body touching him all fused together and sucked his consciousness into a smooth darkness...

In other words, he fell asleep. Out like a light. Just like a child.

At the very end, he felt like he heard a single short phrase mixed with a smile.

——Goodnight, Haruyuki-kun.

Chapter 7

PIN, PON

A light chime resounded in Haruyuki's brain, and disturbed his deep sleep.

Thinking "Oh" as his mind woke by about 10%, he realized it didn't carry the tone of the alarm clock he always used to get out of bed. And since his clock was placed on the headboard, he should have heard it from above him. It felt like the sound didn't pass through his ear, but rather directly reached his consciousness. Ah, that's right, he had carelessly fallen asleep while still wearing his Neuro Linker. He hoped that nothing had gotten into the cracks within the shell casing...

PIN, PON

That chime once again. Finally, he realized that this sound wasn't from his alarm clock. It wasn't the confirmation sound of receiving a mail, nor the ring tone from a call either. It was the chime from the inter-phone telling him that there was a visitor at the door. He reluctantly opened his half-closed eyes, and looked at the clock on the wall to the left of his bed. 9 AM.

His mother should have come home at midnight, so it was probably a morning express home delivery package that had arrived. For a moment, he thought of feigning ignorance and letting them put it in the mail box,

but he had to get up now anyway. Takumu and the others would be arriving at 11:00.

After closing his eyes tightly one last time, Haruyuki lifted his body up from his bed.

Suddenly, he felt a small resistance on the right side of his head as he did so. Lazily turning to look, he saw a silver XSB cable attached to the outer connection port of his Neuro Linker. Shining in the morning sunlight that came through the gaps in the curtains, the other end of the cable disappeared beneath the thin blanket—

And, a little further way, a head covered with glossy black hair peeked out slightly from the edge of the blanket.

".....Uwa—"

As he was about to shout out '-waaaaah!?', he covered his mouth with his hands and desperately held the scream back. His mind woke up completely in an instant as he was hit with such a strong shock, it felt as if the blood flow within his entire body had been reversed. He stared at the sight before him while blinking at high speed, but the small head didn't disappear. On the contrary, the outline of a slender body could be clearly seen lying sideways beneath the blanket. There was no longer any room for doubt; someone was sleeping on Haruyuki's bed with their back turned to him, only 50 cm away from him.

"Uu...nn."

That someone, as if sensing Haruyuki's shocked movements, turned over towards him while letting out a small breath.

".....Ku—"

He once again managed to somehow hold back the shout of 'rororororo!?' that followed his words. This beauty, who he knew very well and yet who he never seemed to get used to seeing, was without a doubt Kuroyukihime.

After he cried out 'Why am I in this kind of situation!?' in his mind, he finally remembered everything that happened last night. Kuroyukihime had visited his room late at night and talked with him for a while, and then they had Direct Connected to duel each other. He didn't really understand well what happened after that, but in short, Kuroyukihime had gone to sleep on his bed soon after, and furthermore, Haruyuki couldn't remember any of the circumstances that brought about that result. What a blunder. What a predicament.

As he hardened himself like a stone, he strained his will power to absolutely, absolutely not look at Kuroyukihime's slovenly form as her pajamas were turned over quite showily, and—

PIN...PON

He heard that chime once again, this time lasting longer than before. He looked at the visitor window on the right-side of his vision while thinking that it must be a very patient delivery person, and realized that they weren't at the first floor entrance, but had already come all the way up to

the twenty-third floor. Reluctantly deciding to postpone dealing with this situation, Haruyuki quietly extracted the Direct Connect cable and slowly got onto the floor. Walking through his room with stealthy footsteps and opening the door, he dashed toward the front door entrance while quietly answering, "Yes, yes, I'm coming right now!".

"Sorry for making you—"

Haruyuki swallowed back the "—wait" at the end of his sentence.

On the other side of the opened door, there wasn't a delivery man standing there with a smile. A wide snow-white hat. A bolero jacket of the same color^[36], and a light-blue chiffon dress. Over-knee tights with border designs, on slender legs that peeked through a skirt. With long puffy hair that flowed down her back and a small bag hanging from her hands, the visitor was without a doubt—

"Ma...Master!? No, rather, Raker-san!?"

After Haruyuki called out her name in a dumbfounded voice, the girl before him nodded lightly at him in greeting and responded in a clear voice even softer than the darkness across the net.

"Good morning, Karasu-san^[37]. You can just call me Fuuko when we meet in the real world."

After hearing these words from the girl two years older than him, the sub-leader of the legion «Nega Nebulas», «Sky Raker», whose real name was Kurasaki Fuuko, Haruyuki hurriedly nodded back in greeting.

"Ah, y-yes. Good morning, Fuuko-san. Ah, sorry, please do come in!"

"Thank you, sorry for intruding."

Closing the door and preparing slippers for Fuuko as she removed her sandals, Haruyuki spoke out with his head still feeling slightly absentminded.

"E-Even so...you're early. The time to meet up is still a while away..."

"Ufufu, I'm sorry. I also worried that I might trouble you by doing this, but I couldn't bear it when I thought of being able to visit your home for the first time. Just in case, I sent you a mail early this morning, but..."

"S-Sorry. I was actually sleeping until just now."

After responding like that with an embarrassed smile—

Haruyuki finally realized that this wasn't the situation to be smiling like this at all.

At this very moment, on the bed in Haruyuki's room just a little ways down the hallway, his Legion Master, Kuroyukihime, was soundly sleeping! Moreover, she was completely dressed in pajamas!

—W-W-W-W-What should I do? No, this isn't the time to panic. Think, think. That's right, first, I'll bring Raker-san to the living room. And then I'll secretly recover senpai's bag and have her change clothes in my room, and then have her to pretend to come in from the entrance once again. This is the only thing I can do.

Drafting this secret operation in an instant, Haruyuki led Sky Raker to the living room as soon as she changed into slippers after carefully arranging her sandals in front of the door.

"P-Please come this way, please, please, head straight this way, please!"

"Su...Sure. Sorry for intruding."

Giving a dubious smile and starting to walk into the hallway with him, Sky Raker whispered as if singing from right next to Haruyuki.

"Actually, the truth is, I came this early because there's something I wanted to talk to you about with just the two of us after so long, Karasusan. There hasn't been any opportunities to meet with you besides in territory battles, so...I wanted to properly give my thanks to you at least...once....."

The reason why her words slowed down and then broke off at the end was clear. But he didn't have the time to discern that. Because, at this moment, Haruyuki had also frozen up with one foot in the midst of stepping forward.

A person in warm-gray pajamas had appeared with a gliding-like gait from around the hallway corner just two meters in front of them, and looked first at Haruyuki and then at Fuuko with an absentminded expression.

Her long eyelashes blinked. Her lips moved and the voice of someone who had just woken up flowed out.

“Good morning, Haruyuki-kun.”

And then.

“Good morning, Fuuko.”

Haruyuki reflexively bowed in greeting with a “Good morning” of his own, and Sky Raker also responded back as if caught up in the flow of events.

“G-Good morning, Sacchan^[38].”

“Unn^[39].”

With her mind and body still 80% asleep, ‘Sacchan’, or Kuroyukihime, nodded and returned to face the direction she was originally heading in. She once again crossed through their field of vision with a gait that resembled her hovering movement in avatar form, and then disappeared to the left. After several seconds, the sound of the bathroom door opening and closing was heard.

SHIIIIIIIIIN

What broke the extremely dense silence wasn’t a voice, but a movement. A white hand came at Haruyuki from the right and grabbed his ear, before pulling it back hard.

Forced to turn around from being pulled while his body shrunk back in pain, Haruyuki saw Fuuko’s face right in front of him, wearing a smile he had never seen on her face before. He vaguely felt like he had seen that expression somewhere before, and then he suddenly recalled. It was the

exact same smile she had worn in her duel avatar form once before, when she had pushed him off from the top of the Old Tokyo Tower within Accel World's Unlimited Neutral Field, in order to train Haruyuki.

As Haruyuki ducked his head down in terror, Raker kindly asked him.

"Karasu-san. What is the meaning of this?"

".....I-It's not what it looks like."

Haruyuki could no longer think of any operation plan besides shaking his head now.

Ten minutes later.

Fuuko put a tea cup to her mouth in silence as she faced Kuroyukihime, who had changed back into her Umesato school uniform, and Haruyuki in a similar loungewear as the two of them sat side by side on a sofa.

She placed the cup back on its saucer with a small tap, and then raised her head. Although she wore her usual tranquil smile, Haruyuki was sure that, if this were in the VR world, there would probably be an angry emotion sign flashing on her brow.

"...Well, I understand the situation. To confirm, there was an unpredicted storm of heavy rain last night, right? And there also seemed to be a network failure in the 23rd western district, right? So, it might have made going home difficult, right?"

"E-Exactly. It was really raining hard, Fuuko. The clouds looked just like that time that damn Purple^[40] flipped out in rage..."

As Kuroyukihime gestured to demonstrate her point, Fuuko continued smiling at her. But, that smile maintained an offensive power equal to Kuroyukihime's own special technique, the "Extreme Cold Kuroyuki Smile". If it had to be given an attribute, it would probably be wind. That's right, it should be called the "Vacuum Destruction Raker Smile". Thank goodness Chiyu wasn't here. If this was combined with her "Super-Fiery Chiyuri Beam", this room, no, the whole apartment building would be destroyed by the annihilation energy...

As Haruyuki thought those escapist thoughts to distract himself, Fuuko's next attack reached his ears.

"Like I said, I understand. However, if you two didn't do anything you should feel guilty about like Lotus said, there's no reason for me to help you cover up this incident, is there? If Bell and Pile find out, they will surely be impressed by the intimacy between the Legion Master and Silver Crow..."

"T-T-T-That's...!"

As Kuroyukihime started protesting, Haruyuki's scream overlapped her voice.

"W-Waah, m-m-master, anything but thaaaaaat!"

"Then, this is what we'll do."

Fuuko gave another Raker Smile.

"Please invite me to a sleepover meeting sometime this month as well. If you can meet this condition, I'll be willing to remain silent on this matter, understood?"

"Wha...W-W-W-What are you saying, Fuuko!?"

"Oh my, Karasu-san has already stayed over at my place once before, you know? Including meals and bedding as well."

"Wha...W-W-W-What's the meaning of this, Haruyuki-kun!?"

"T-T-T-That's not it, that happened in Accel World not in the real world, and furthermore I slept on the floor!"

As he quickly shook his head at high speed—

Haruyuki thought inside his mind.

Until now, had he ever seen Sky Raker seeming to enjoy herself so much, and Kuroyukihime looking so defenseless? As he thought, these two are connected on a deep spiritual level. As two true best friends, with a history together different from what they had with Haruyuki.

That bond between them was once severed due to an inescapable fate. And three years later, they reunited once again due to a similar guidance of fate, and now their bond had been completely restored. He wanted to believe that. He wanted to believe that—but.

Haruyuki understood after continuing to intently and yearningly gaze at Kuroyukihime since autumn last year. No matter how much it seemed like the wall around her heart had been removed, there were signs of a pain he couldn't understand inside Kuroyukihime's eyes as they looked at Fuuko in the flesh before her. Most likely, Sky Raker was also hiding an equivalent amount of self-reproach behind the screen of her smiling face.

The «Incarnate System» sought to make the players who tried to master it to the end face the scars in their hearts. That was because a strong imagination could only be born from a strong wish, and the reverse side of a wish was, in other words, a lack of something. They had to face the dark hole in their heart that was the basis of their duel avatar and that they greatly wanted to forget, and if they turned away from it at any point, they wouldn't be able to obtain sufficient power for causing a greater «override».

Three years ago, Sky Raker had done that. In order to raise her «Boost Jump» power that she had received from the system to the level of true «flight» with mind power, she had both her legs cut off and purified the “lack” inside her. For Haruyuki as well, if he wanted to seek power beyond his basic fighting techniques someday, he would probably have to tear back open the scar in his heart that had finally managed to close up now, and make blood flow from it again. Haruyuki's scar was his self-hatred. His hatred towards himself that was ugly and fat, unable to talk, move, or study well.

—No, that might not be the actual truth.

—After all, back then, I wasn't as fat as now. Back then, I would stand beyond the door of this living room, and eavesdrop on the private talk going on inside. And yet...Those people, while quarreling in whispers would...about me...No, that's wrong. That's not it. It's because I was fat. It's because I always cowered away. That's why those people didn't...anything about me^[41]

"...yuki-kun. Haruyuki-kun!"

His arm suddenly being struck, Haruyuki raised his head with a start. Then, his eyes met with Kuroyukihime's, who was wearing a puzzled expression. He reflexively cast his eyes down.

"...What's wrong? You suddenly sank into silence."

"Your face...doesn't look well. Karasu-san...?"

Sky Raker also questioned him, making Haruyuki frantically shake his head.

"N-No, it's nothing! U-Umm...I was just thinking about the Incarnate System..."

After he unconsciously muttered that out, he realized that this was a very inappropriate subject in this situation and immediately closed his lips, but he couldn't cancel the words he'd already let out. Kuroyukihime and Fuuko both widened their eyes for an instant, and after several seconds of silence, the two of them gave similar smiles.

"...I see. Was there something you wanted to ask about?"

Kuroyukihime lightly placed her hand on Haruyuki's, as if reading what he was truly thinking. Her fingers, which had always felt cool, were now just slightly warm, and Haruyuki let out a small breath. The look Fuuko gave him was also filled with a gentle light, and so the words unwittingly spilled out of him bit by bit.

"E-Err, umm...I was just wondering. When I thought about the structure of the Incarnate System...in the end, is it something meant to allow Burst Linkers to become stronger the more the "lack" in their hearts grow...in other words, the more they become unhappy in the real world...?"

"No."

"That's not it."

The two of them answered him instantly. They locked eyes with each other, and as if having decided who would have the role of continuing to speak just with that, Kuroyukihime on his left directly faced Haruyuki and continued first.

"«Scars of the heart» are, in the end, only the key that determines the attribute of the duel avatar. There exist a virtually infinite number of powers stronger than that in Accel World. Training one's knowledge by constructing strategies and tactics, fighting strength cultivated by experience, and also the bonds between friends, comrades and rivals. Even if it becomes a battle of mind power, the predominance of those strengths will never waver. —In the first place, isn't the idea that those

who drag along misfortune in real life are stronger than those who purely enjoy «duels» completely contrary to your beliefs?”

“Y-Yes, that’s...that’s true, but.”

“Your belief is absolutely correct. Never doubt that...But, although I’m making this out as a major premise...”

Here, Kuroyukihime closed her mouth, and Sky Raker smoothly took her place.

“At the same time, there exists another reality to this, Karasu-san.”

“R-Reality...?”

“Yes. From the viewpoints of others, it merely looks like they’re intently enjoying duels...For example, even for Burst Linkers like my «Child» Ash Roller, because they’re Burst Linkers, it is almost impossible for them to be completely satisfied in the real world. That’s because, the indispensable conditions for installing Brain Burst, in other words, «wearing a Neuro Linker since soon after being born» and «possessing a high level quantum connection aptitude» are factors that run counter to happiness in the real world.”

The instant he heard that, Haruyuki sucked in a sharp breath.

90% of the reason for attaching Neuro Linkers to newborn babies was, in short, for labour-saving in child rearing. Since their body temperature, heartbeat and breathing could always be monitored with it, parents could turn their eyes away from them without worry; various learning programs

could be automatically used instead of teaching them vocally; and if they cried out at night, they could even perform a compulsory Full Dive on the children. However, they couldn't argue that this was fortunate to the child when facing scholars and educational critics.

Similarly, in the case of high level quantum connection aptitude as well, although it seemed like an outstanding talent only a select few children had, the reality was different. This aptitude, in others, one's affinity with the Neuro Linker, was determined since a young age by how much time and with how much frequency they had spent Full Diving. To put it another way, by how time in the real world they threw away and shut themselves in the virtual world—or something like that. Like Haruyuki, who had in the past continued fleeing into the virtual squash game in the local network at Umesato Middle School all the time.

As if reading his thoughts, Kuroyukihime calmly resumed speaking.

"...It may be an unpleasant way of putting it, but...in almost every case, the only ones that can fulfill these indispensable conditions to become Burst Linkers are children who grew up without being filled with love and affection from their parents. Conversely, to children who grew up while always watched over by their parents since they were a baby, physically interacted with them, and talked with them using their real voices, Neuro Linkers and the virtual world are both unnecessary. —However, it was necessary for my child self, and for Raker as well."

In response, Haruyuki feebly nodded and murmured.

"Of course...it was necessary for me too. Since when I was young...this home where I was always alone at night was incredibly scary..."

Kuroyukihime once again touched Haruyuki's hand with her white fingers, and continued speaking in a soothing voice.

"In other words...almost all Burst Linkers hold a lack of a certain thing that they have in common. That is, true love and affection between parent and child. That is the «reality» Fuuko spoke of earlier. And those that become Burst Linkers, when they eventually use their right for a single copy installation as a «Parent», try to choose as their «Child» someone who they instinctively feel to have the same scars as them. As a result, we strongly depend on and attach ourselves to the second «parent-child relationship» we obtain in Accel World. In order to regain what we never received in the real world...That is, in other words, an attachment to Accel World itself. In order to maintain our newly obtained bonds, we also try to maintain the stability and concealment of Accel Word. Geez...what a well-made system. I'd really like to applaud the developer..."

As Kuroyukihime gave a 'Fufufu' chuckle, Fuuko gave a slightly reproachful smile.

"Geez, Sacchan's cynicism is the same as ever. Karasu-kun, although I certainly called it an «unhappy reality» just now, that is not the same thing as being actually unhappy."

"Eh...eh?"

As Haruyuki blinked in surprise, Raker's eyes looked at him, as if embodying the word "affection".

"This is what I wanted to say. Certainly, the «Incarnate System» uses scars of the heart, in others words, trauma as its energy source. So, on one hand, if you're unhappy, it may be true that you can manifest a stronger power. But...all Burst Linkers, in the deepest, deepest depths of their hearts, carry the greatest of scars, of «receiving a Neuro Linker instead of their parents' hands the moment they're born». Since they don't clearly remember it, it simply isn't reflected in the forms of their avatar or mind power. Therefore, it's futile to try comparing it to the size of the unhappiness that is piled on top of it afterwards. Instead, let's compare it to the size of «hope». The power of the Incarnate System isn't decided by just the depth of the hole in your heart. It's also decided by the height of the tree that takes root and buds in that hole."

For an instant, Fuuko's voice wavered there. Her gaze slowly looked down at the glass table between them.

".....As someone who tried to forcibly extend that tree and had it cut down from the roots in the past, this might not be something...I have the right to say, though..."

Her whisper was filled with a deep regret and an even deeper resignation in it.

After Sky Raker sank into silence, Kuroyukihime held out her right hand to her and spoke.

“Come over here, Fuuko.”

Then, Raker stood up from the sofa facing them, and went around the table to sit down to Haruyuki’s left. Now sitting on the sofa with Haruyuki forcibly trapped between them, the two girls then did a completely unforeseen action.

They each held out their arms from either side of him, and tightly embraced each other with Haruyuki stuck between them. Naturally, the serious conversation they’d been having until now was blown out of Haruyuki’s mind, and he merely huddled in on himself in shock.

But, for some reason, the panic which he should have continued to constantly feel rapidly melted away only now, like ice in the sun. Instead, a warmth he couldn’t name filled his chest somehow. It was different from the sweet and heartrending heat he’d felt when he’d been embraced by Kuroyukihime on his bed last night.

Eventually, he heard Fuuko whisper above his head.

“Fufufu...We’re like a group of kittens that huddle together in their den when their parent cats don’t come back.”

Kuroyukihime responded back immediately after.

“Having people you can huddle with and depend on is a fortunate thing. Besides, the night will surely end soon. When it does, we can roll about and play under the sun again.”

"That's true...We'll play earnestly, with all our strength. Regardless of the expectations of the developer and Brain Burst system...I will never forget that at least ever again."

The two of them kept still like that for a while, but eventually they both separated from each other. Kuroyukihime placed her hand on Haruyuki's head as he remained stunned.

"First of all, there's today's race! It's an event in Brain Burst, so there will probably be neither a manual nor a tutorial for the race as usual and as a result we might suffer troubles, but we're counting on you, Driver!"

"Y-Yes..."

As Haruyuki frantically nodded, this time Sky Raker hit his back.

"That's right, I really hate words like 'We put up a good fight' and 'We lost by a narrow margin'. I also hate words like 'undecided'. Since you promised to call me over for a sleepover meeting, I'll also push you off from the Old Tokyo Tower again if the match ends up undecided."

"Eh...Eeh!? B-B-B-But that, that, that's!"

"T-T-That's right, Fuuko! No one has promised anything yet..."

"Ahaha, you can't get out of it, because we've already signed a contract in our hearts!"

While listening to Sky Raker as she pleasantly laughed, Haruyuki made a new resolution in his heart.

They absolutely had to win today's racing event. At the very least, they had to reach the top of the tower no matter what. It wasn't just for the sake of victory or the prize. It was in order to cut away the thorn of regret that had extended as a long, long vine from the past, and that still cursed these two girls even now. If they could make to that 4000 km height, where terrestrial gravity couldn't reach, it would surely be possible to do so.

Then, at that moment, the second doorbell chime of the day rang through Haruyuki's home loudly. Looking at the clock, he realized its hands had already reach 11:00 in the blink of an eye.

"Ah, it seems like Taku and Chiyu have arrived."

After standing up and walking forward several steps, Haruyuki timidly brought up a certain subject again.

"Umm, master, about those two, err."

"Don't worry, we made a promise, so I'll protect your secret."

Sky Raker nodded with a smile, and then gave a meaningful wink.

"But, a secret will inevitably bring about a new secret, you know."

Wah, this person is serious.

Pushing aside that particular thought for the time being, Haruyuki ran to the door before the impatient Chiyuri could ring the doorbell again.

“Prepare yourselves, and hold your heads high!”

Along with that declaration, Chiyuri held out a basket, and with the usual ceremony where everyone who were hungry prostrated themselves before the basket—or to be more accurate, the enchanting fragrance that flowed out from it, the first thing they all did together was eat.

What she took out from the basket was a seafood tomato-sauce tagliatelle skillfully cooked by Chiyuri’s mama. Servings for five people, no, more than that so that Takumu and Haruyuki could have extra helpings, had been properly prepared. Sitting down at the dining room table, the five of them quickly struck their forks into the flat pasta which still had steam rising up from it, as if Chiyuri has dashed up to the Arita home two floors above with it as soon as it was finished cooking.

“Hmm, this was excellently cooked.”

“Really, it’s incredibly delicious.”

When Kuroyukihime and Fuuko let out praises of admiration as they tasted the homemade cooking of Chiyuri’s mama for the first time, Chiyuri ducked her head down shyly.

“Ehehe, since it’s unprecedented in history for this many people to gather at Haru’s place, my mama was in pretty high spirits when she made this...”

“H...Hey, Chiyu, don’t affirm that.”

Although he instinctively interrupted her, Haruyuki knew best that it was the truth. He glared at Takumu as he laughed slightly, and chewed the pasta with increased vigor.

While similarly smiling, Kuroyukihime spoke in a slightly apologetic voice.

“Now that I think about it, since the «Armor» subjugation mission in the past, we’ve always been using Haruyuki’s house as our meet-up base for every occasion. Although I should have prepared a proper legion headquarters...”

“N-No, I really don’t mind that you use my home! My mother hardly comes home during the weekend anyway.”

After he frantically responded with that, he realized that talking about parents was still a slightly sensitive topic, and immediately spoke again to change the subject.

“Speaking of which...what did you do back during the first generation «Nega Nebulas»? For your headquarters, I mean.”

Then, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko who were sitting on the other side of the table from Haruyuki glanced at each other, and both made a nostalgic-looking expression. Fuuko answered in a gentle tone.

“There were many more legion members back in those days compared to now, but as a result there weren’t many members who had a close enough relationship to meet in real life. Specifically, there was only me, Lotus and one other person who were close like that. Because Nega

Nebulas was a legion that had banded together due not to the mutual relationship between members, but rather due to their individual strong feelings towards the aloof flower known as Black Lotus. For some it was yearning, for others it was worship, or even because they had a protective heart towards her.”

“P-Protective...heart?”

Takumu repeated in confusion. Haruyuki and Chiyuri also widened their eyes. Raker then continued speaking with an even cheerier smile.

“That’s right. It’s because Lotus was still nine-years-old in real life when she first formed the legion. Of course, that kind of real life information about her wasn’t open to the public, but people could tell to a certain degree from her behavior. There must have been many Burst Linkers who joined the legion after feeling their hearts thump tightly when they saw her act proud of her overwhelming strength, yet get easily hurt in a childish manner.”

“H...Hey, hey. I was certainly a kid back then, but I can’t consent to you saying that I got hurt easily, Raker!”

“Oh my? Then, shall I talk about how you came to meet me in the real world?”

“S-Stop it! You can’t, that’s forbidden, absolutely forbidden! If you talk about it, I’ll «execute» you!”

As Kuroyukihime shouted and started fervently peeling away the shell off her shrimp, Haruyuki and the others unconsciously laughed out. Kuroyukihime cast her eyes down further, and complained with a grumble of “Even the older members were only ten or eleven years old, though...”.

Fuuko’s shoulder’s also shook with held back laughter for a while, and then she continued explaining.

“...Due to that, we didn’t have any large-scale headquarters back then either. Though, it’s probably the same with almost all the legions of the other «Kings». If the King and their executive commanders exposed their real life information to even their legion members, it could possibly create a huge danger for them, after all...”

“Yes. Although it’s another matter entirely if they’re confident that they’ve completely grasped the hearts of the entire legion.”

Tidying up her shrimp, Kuroyukihime murmured that as her expression until now suddenly disappeared, and Haruyuki tilted his head in puzzlement once again. Even if the Legion Master had the right to use «Judgement Blow», it would be difficult to bind all the members of a large legions with just the fear of that. Since the valid time limit for «execution» was up to one month after a member left the legion, it be possible to betray them if they had the resolution to get away and hold on during that time period.

But, Kuroyukihime's words seemed to imply that there was actually a «King» that succeeded in fully controlling their legion. He considered asking her about it, but Kuroyukihime put down her fork and spoke as if satisfied in her usual tone before he could.

"Yes, it really was delicious! Thank you for the food, Chiyuri-kun. Please give my thanks to your mother as well."

"Ah, yes! I was worried whether it would suit Kuroyuki-senpai's tastes, but now I'm relieved."

As Chiyuri smiled happily, Kuroyukihime gave her a bitter smile while wiping her fingers.

"Hey, hey, my usual meals are extremely careless and half-hearted, you know. It's on par with what Haruyuki-kun usually eats."

"Eeh, that's not good for your body, senpai!"

Chiyuri frowned, and Sky Raker spoke out with a composed expression.

"Then, perhaps Karasu-san and Lotus ate the same frozen pizza last night."

Chiyuri and Takumu looked puzzled by her words. On the other hand, Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime suddenly froze.

"E-Even frozen pizzas are delicious thanks to CAS refrigeration technology recently! Did you know that the cell walls don't get destroyed when super-cooling is applied during the freezing process...?"

While desperately rambling on about that subject, Haruyuki suddenly thought in his mind.

—What, there is a fully-controlled legion after all.

The current second generation Nega Nebulas was exactly that, no, beyond that. Because, all members had revealed themselves to each other in real life, and gathered to eat together like this. Without anyone doubting anyone else, they were connected by a strong trust. As if they were a family.

In terms of scale, they couldn't reach the level of huge legions of over forty or fifty members at all, but Haruyuki felt that these bonds were the greatest weapon for fighting the other Kings from now on. At the same time as he felt that, he strongly prayed from the bottom of his heart that these bonds would remain permanent. He momentarily closed his eyes, and then immediately after reopened them, unconsciously giving a wry smile without showing it on his face. Within his ears, he once again heard the words Kuroyukihime had said earlier.

—In order to maintain our newly obtained bonds, we also try to maintain the stability and concealment of Accel Word.

Haruyuki's current state of mind was summarized by this very sentence.

'But,' Haruyuki thought as he took a step forward. 'Even if my heart is following the path that the developer intended it to. The worth of these bonds isn't reduced even a little.'

Yes, even if Brain Burst has a hidden purpose in its existence.

I will protect this «family».

Several minutes later, when they had all finished eating their meal and cleaned up their dishes, the five of them moved over to the sofas in the living room. Since the sofa set was arranged in a U-shaped pattern that could fit five people, they sat down next to each other so that they could connect all of their Neuro Linkers in a line.

When they finished quickly Direct Connecting with four variously colored XSB cables, Haruyuki looked around at everyone else and spoke.

“Err...When you accelerate and arrive in the «initial acceleration space», please remain on stand-by there. I’ll use my «Transporter Card» from the instructions menu, and after that everyone should be instantly transported to the Hermes Cord’s bottom station.”

The other four nodded. Since the details about the race had previously been explained in an email, the only thing left to do now was wait. They gazed not at the analog clock on the wall, but instead at the digital clock in their lower right visions on their virtual desktops that always indicated the exact Japanese Standard Time. There were thirty seconds left till 12:00.

Although normally real world time felt as fast as a surging wave in a torrent, this time every second by second was frustratingly long. Even so, the numbers on the clock steadily continued changing, and when there

was finally only twenty seconds remaining, Kuroyukihime spoke out in clear, light voice.

“Well then, everyone...Let’s enjoy the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race» with all our might! I’m starting the countdown! Ten, nine, eight, seven...”

The five of them deeply leaned their bodies back on the sofas, and at the same time closed their eyes. Six, five, four.

They shouted out.

“Burst Link!!”

Chapter 8

After having transformed from his pink pig avatar into his duel avatar «Silver Crow» while traveling up through a tunnel of light that connected to an area in the sky 150 km above ground, Haruyuki stepped onto metal ground with a loud clang at the same time as he left the especially dazzling ring.

Immediately after, the feet of his four comrades also landed on the ground loudly one after another. He slowly stretched his body out of his slouched posture, and then opened his closed eyelids.

At that instant—

“Uooh, it’s the «King»! The Black King has come——!!”

“It’s getting exciting now! Nega-Bu^[42] is the best——!!”

Cheers of “DOWAAAAH!” poured down on them from all directions, making Haruyuki jump slightly.

“Wha.....!?”

He frantically looked around, and found himself standing dumbfounded at the scene before him.

A flat ring-like metallic stage. A steel tower rising upwards in the center. A dark blue sky and a hovering cluster of clouds surrounding it all. This was, without a doubt, the majestic appearance of the space elevator «Hermes Cord» in Accel World, which he had visited several days ago.

However, there now existed three huge somethings surrounding the tower that he didn't remember seeing last time.

No matter how he looked at them they were «audience seats». Oblong stair-shaped stand seats about 50 meters in width were suspended slightly above the stage Haruyuki and the others were standing on. On the seats divided up into four rows per stand, avatars of all sizes and colors were positioned there bunched together. Combining all three spectator stands, their numbers probably exceeded five hundred people. In other words, more than half of all the Burst Linkers that exist were crowded together on this field.

"This...has become something amazing..."

"Yeah, I've never seen this many people..."

Next to Haruyuki, ^{Takumu} Cyan Pile and ^{Chiyuri} Lime Bell also murmured as if they were seized by shock. ^{Kuroyukihime} Black Lotus and ^{Fuuko} Sky Raker remained calm, as expected of them, but even so, they were each probably feeling deep emotions right now. They silently looked up at the sky.^[43]

"...How did those gallery viewers Dive into here...?"

When Haruyuki unconsciously asked that, someone answered from right behind his back.

"Spectator-use Transporter Cards were distributed."

"A-Ah, I see...Heh, so the system also does kind-hearted things once in a while...—wait, uwah!?"

He turned around in surprise, and there stood a slender avatar with a dark red body, which had approached him without him noticing. Even without seeing her mask with triangular ears and her long tail, he knew right away that it was the member of the Red Legion «Prominence», «Blood Leopard», or Pard-san for short. A little ways behind her, there were four people who were presumably her team members standing there and speaking quietly to each other. Although they were all veteran Linkers who he'd seen several times, there was no sign of a crimson little girl-type avatar among them.

"H-Hello, good day, Pard-san."

"_sup?^[44]"

After the leopard-headed avatar gave her usual form of highly abbreviated greeting, Haruyuki asked in a low voice.

"Umm...Niko didn't come?"

"She really wanted to participate, but the «Six Great Legions' Mutual Non-Aggression Treaty» states that fighting between Kings is forbidden even in events like this. Instead, she gave me this message for you. 'Aim for at least second place and do your best'."

"Ah...Y-Yes."

After unconsciously smiling as he imagined Niko's frustrated face and tone, Haruyuki asked another question.

"Then, err...will our team and your red team fight alongside each until we're close to the goal...?"

However, Blood Leopard did not answer. She turned her gaze away from Haruyuki, and silently started walking. She passed between Takumu and Chiyuri, and even passed by Kuroyukihime—heading towards the sky-colored avatar sitting on a silver wheelchair.

The two Burst Linkers, who had fought many hard battles against each other in the past, gazed at each other silently. There was no hostility there, and yet a thick and sharpened atmosphere formed between them, keeping the surrounding noise away for a short while.

After several seconds, Pard-san took a step back, and after glancing at all of the black team members, she turned back to Sky Raker and spoke.

"We'll obtain victory using all our strength."

That was a declaration that basically said that, even if their legions were friendly with each other, there would be no collusion between them. No, Haruyuki thought that there was probably a deeper meaning to it. Since Sky Raker continued to seal away her «Gale Thruster» and not participate in normal duels, the day when the two of them could return to their old rivalry would no longer come. Therefore, Pard-san undoubtedly wished for them to compete against each other seriously for today at the very least.

Likely realizing that, Raker gave a big nod and replied back.

“Just like I want it.”

Returning a light nod, the leopard-headed avatar flexibly turned around and returned towards her team members. The five of them then headed towards the ten shuttles parked at the base of the elevator tower.

When Haruyuki looked over there, he saw that, above the slanted starting grid that held the various-colored shuttles, a huge digital countdown was ticking away. The race was only ten minutes away from starting.

“Now then, let’s go as well. That silver one at the left end is our shuttle No.1.”

At Kuroyukihime’s urging, the five members of the black team also began walking to their shuttle. Then, another figure approached them from their right. Haruyuki didn’t know who that avatar walking in clunky rugged boots was until he spoke.

“Hey, heeeeeeeeeeeey! So the nonchalant Lose-Dog^[45], no, the Loser-Garasu^[46] has come!”

“Eh, huh, Ash-san!?”

“...H-Hey now! Who else looks like this Mega Cooooool self of mine!?”

The arrogant skull helmet avatar before was without a doubt the guy he had fought just yesterday, Ash Roller. When Haruyuki shifted his gaze, he saw a bright ash gray shuttle behind Ash as he ran up to him. It seemed

that this end-of-the-century rider had also somehow succeeded in registering as a driver. While thinking something very rude along the lines of "Noticing the appearance of the portal at the Sky Tree by yourself is a sign of intelligence that doesn't suit your character", Haruyuki apologized and explained his excuse.

"S-Sorry. I didn't realize it was you since you weren't riding your bike..."

"Hey, you! Treating the great me as if I'm an option on my bike, that's bullshit!"

"That's quite vulgar, Ash."

The instant that voice spoke out from behind Haruyuki, the end-of-the-century-looking avatar straightened his back in an upright posture that didn't suit his image, and gave a jerking respectful bow.

"H-Heeeello, master! And Lotus-sensei too, a-are you doing well?"

After mumbling out a greeting, Ash Roller raised his head as if having remembered something and suddenly brought his skull-face right up to Haruyuki.

"T-That's right, this isn't the time to be dissing each other! Crow, there's something I want to ask you."

"Y-Yes, what is it?"

"Since you're registered for the No.1 shuttle, that means that you were the first to arrive here when this stage opened up, right?"

Haruyuki looked at Ash in puzzlement when he asked that unexpected question, and then immediately nodded.

"Yes, that's right. But, I arrived at almost the same time as Blood Leopard, who took the No.2 shuttle."

"...Then, that shuttle has been like that since you guys came here? Or did you see the person that registered for it?"

Unable to understand what Ash Roller was talking about, Haruyuki tilted his head in puzzlement. The skull avatar then impatiently wrapped his arm Haruyuki's neck and started walking pass the line of shuttles.

"Wait, umm, where are we going!?"

"You'll understand the moment you see it! ...Here, this No.10 machine. Hey, was this one like this from the beginning?"

Haruyuki hardly heard the last part of that question. The instant **that thing** came into his view, his head was hit by shock.

Among the ten shuttles lined up on the starting line with two meters between each of them, the machine sitting at the right end was—

Rusted.

Its entire body was covered in rust as if it had been exposed to salt air for many years. Unlike the other nine shuttles that shined brightly in the same color as their registered driver, only the tenth shuttle had lost its luster completely and was rusted in a reddish brown color. It wasn't just

the body, even the seats and the driving disks on its lower body were weathered down, so much that it didn't look like it would be able to run at all.

Haruyuki unconsciously held out his hand, and lightly clicked on it like he had when he had registered on the No.1 shuttle several days before. With a 'PON', a system color window appeared. He read the words displayed on it out loud.

"Re...RESERVED? It's been registered...in this state!?"

"Yeah, it's completely incomprehensible, right? It was already like this when me and the other legion guys arrived here at 5:30 PM on Wednesday."

"Eh, that's strange!"

Haruyuki tore his eyes away from the window and objected.

"Pard-san and I left immediately after we registered for the No.1 and No.2 shuttles respectively, but at that time we could already hear sounds of people running towards here. There shouldn't have been more than ten seconds from when we disappeared to when Ash-san and the others ran over here. That's why it's impossible for someone to have registered without you or me seeing them...No, before that."

After closing his eyes for an instant and vividly calling up his memories, Haruyuki spoke clearly.

"When we left here, this No.10 shuttle wasn't rusted. It was the same beautiful steel grey as the other eight shuttles!"

"Well...so it's really true. Then that means...in other words, it rusted by itself in those ten seconds...or it's the work of someone that hid themselves..."

"That's impossible. There's nowhere to hide here...and leaving aside myself, there's no way even Pard-san wouldn't have noticed them..."

The two of them held their respective helmets, but before they could come up with a logical answer, a loud buzzer rang out, and excited cheering several times louder than it shook the stage. When they raised their heads, they saw that the remaining time till the race was down to three minutes.

"Oh well, it feels bad, but I guess we'll have to let this one go. It seems the driver hasn't arrived either..."

"...Yeah. If this is due to something by the system, we'll find out about it during the race."

"That's how it is...Well, in any case, let's each do our best."

"Yes, let's!"

Haruyuki and Ash Roller each gave a small nod, and then ran over to their respective machines. At their parting, the usual abusive language flew between them.

"I'll tell you now! I Giga-welcome anything with tires, from tricycles to tankers!"

"These shuttles don't even have tires!"

Giving that retort, Haruyuki finally arrived at the No.1 shuttle and found the other four already having taken their seats in the back. Chiyuri waved her right hand and shouted.

"So slow! What were you doing!?"

"I-I'm very sorry!"

He frantically jumped into the driver's seat and grasped the steering wheel. The text [HELLO MY DRIVER!] appeared in a small window, and then various indicators were displayed.

Despite that, though, it wasn't complicated. There was only a speedometer, a range finder, and a durability meter.

Sitting in the front row of the crew seats alongside Sky Raker who had de-equipped her wheelchair, Kuroyukihime leaned forward and whispered.

"Crow, I did a rough confirmation of the other participants, but they're all highly skilled Linkers, including the members from Six Great Legions...Though, it's still the first time any of the drivers have ever operated these shuttles. Go carefully at the beginning until you get used to operating it. The rest of us will tightly defend against attacks from the other teams, so don't worry."

After Kuroyukihime finished, Chiyuri also spoke up from where she was sitting in the back row.

"That's right, if we get even a little damaged, I'll rewind it back!"

"No, Bell, since our avatars' HP gauges have been locked, I don't think our special technique gauges will be able to accumulate that much."

After Takumu pointed that out, Chiyuri shouted "What's with that!", and Kuroyukihime and Fuuko laughed.

Looking at his comrades interacting together from over his shoulder, Haruyuki murmured in his mind.

—I'm counting on you, senpai. You too, Taku, Chiyu. And...Raker-san. I will absolutely bring you to the goal. I'm here right now for the sake of that.

"All right, one minute left! Everyone, make sure to hang on tightly!"

At the same time as Haruyuki shouted that, one of the shining digital numbers above them left became zero as all that remained were the two digits on the right end.

The cheers that poured down from the three floating spectator stands were already like an earthquake. Haruyuki tightly grasped the steering wheel with his hands, and lightly pushed down his right foot that was placed on the accelerator. The engine of the shuttle gave a reliable "VRRRRRR!" sound, and vibrations pulsed through the car. The digital

meter that displayed the total 4000 km of the race course shined brilliantly.

Staring at the majestic appearance of the «Hermes Cord» reproduced in Accel World, a metal column of 100 meters in diameter that rose up to pierce the sky, Haruyuki suddenly thought.

Were rich tourists ascending up to space on the real world elevator right now as well? Even if they were, they would never imagine it. That in another world created by the social cameras installed everywhere throughout the elevator, dozens of children were about to run right past them.

Of course, Accel World is, in the end, a false reality created through the Neuro Linker. But, even if this place didn't have any material substance, truth did exist here. That's because—

My chest is burning this much with hot excitement right now!

“Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!”

The sound of the red signal lighting up overlapped with the loud chorus of the gallery. Crimson dots of light appeared in a line in the sky above and illuminated the ten machines. At exactly the same time, one of the spectator stands obstructed the sunlight from above, and the starting block was wrapped in deep shadows. As the signal light dyed all the cars in a red color, the second buzzer rang. The revving of each car rose up all at once. Dazzling lightning was emitted from the four drive discs that were equipped in place of tires and burst out on top of the steel ground.

".....Gooooooooo!!"

The instant the countdown reached zero and the dots of light turned to blue, Haruyuki pushed the accelerator down to the floor.

A tremendous torque made the machine kick off the ground. The ten shuttles ran up the short slope in the blink of an eye, and began to dash straight upwards against gravity along the gently-curving surface of the giant metal tower. Some kind of attractive force seemed to work between the tower and the machines, so that even though the ascending angle was 90 degrees, it physically felt not much different from running across a straight road.

While pressing down on the accelerator, Haruyuki checked the speedometer. The vivid digital numbers had went past 200 km/h just like that in a little less than ten seconds, and was continuing to quickly rise even more.

"He...Hey, Haru, i-is it okay to take off this fast!?"

Hearing Takumu's question from the farthest back seat, Haruyuki responded back with a shout.

"Leave it to me! I've crashed a total of 10,000 times in various race games!"

".....T-That's..."

"All right, let's go full throttle—!!"

Chiyuri's cheer pushed aside Takumu's hoarse voice. When Haruyuki glanced at the rear-view display window on the upper part of the windshield window, he saw Kuroyukihime and Fuuko sitting there with cool and composed faces. Feeling supported by that, Haruyuki put even more strength into his left foot and pushed it further down. 250 km/h. 300 km/h. Although this would soon reach the maximum speed if this were a care race in the real world, the virtual linear drive shuttle kept revving even louder, and pulled up even more speed from somewhere. The details carved into the steel ground were melting, and the lumps of clouds that occasionally appeared were blown away behind them in the blink of an eye.

When the digital meter was dyed red and blinked with the MAX icon after several seconds, their speed had actually reached 500 km/h. This seemed to be the maximum speed of the shuttle. Letting out the breath he'd been holding back, Haruyuki finally started confirming the situation outside his vehicle.

The silver No.1 shuttle that the Nega Nebulas Team was riding was running along the left end of the course as before. To their left, about ten meters away, the Red Team machine driven by Blood Leopard was shining with vivid crimson sparks.

Behind that, there was the machine carrying four members of the Blue Legion «Leonids». The driver was Tourmaline Shell. The huge form sitting all alone on the two back row seats was Frost Horn. And further to the

right of them, Ash Roller, a member of the Green Legion «Great Wall», was shouting his usual “Hey, Heeeey!” from his own shuttle.

These four shuttles were fighting for the lead position in an almost straight horizontal line. Following right behind them was the team of the Yellow Legion «Crypto Cosmic Circus». There was no sign of the Yellow King of course, but there were some faces Haruyuki had fiercely fought against before among them.

He carved the thought ‘We have to watch out for those guys!’ in his heart, and looked across the race course once more. It seemed that these were the only teams from the legions of the Kings, and the four shuttles that ran together as a group at the very back of the racers seemed to be from medium-sized legions—though he said that, they all had more members than Nega Nebulas in the end.

The total number of shuttles running on the race course was nine. In other words, that extremely rusted shuttle didn’t start up in the end. Although his doubts about it didn’t disappear and gave momentary unease to Haruyuki, he quickly brushed it away from his mind. Even if someone had rusted the shuttle, it couldn’t affect the race anymore anyway.

When he finished grasping the situation and tried to return his gaze forward, Haruyuki was slightly surprised to see a huge silhouette in the sky behind them. The three floating spectator stands that were fully loaded with 600 gallery viewers were automatically chasing after the

shuttles. He now noticed the maelstrom of excited cheering overlapping with the roar of the linear engines.

"...Fufu, it seems that they're making bets."

In response to Kuroyukihime's words, Sky Raker gave agreement.

"Yes, I saw the «Matchmaker» running about busily back there."

The Matchmaker was the mysterious Burst Linker that managed the betting match arena «Akihabara Battle Ground». It seemed that he had butted into this race as well.

"H...Heh, so you've also visited the Akiba BG, Raker-san?"

When Haruyuki asked that while carefully adjusting the steering wheel, the one that answered was not the person in question, but rather Kuroyukihime with a wry laugh.

"Not just visited, Raker was once..."

However, he wasn't able to hear the rest of her words. This was because the cheers of the gallery suddenly doubled, and was overlapped by a series of ear-splitting sounds. Looking to his right at once, Haruyuki's face stiffened and he shouted.

"Uwah, Pard-san has already started!"

The source of the sounds was from the respective weapons of the four Burst Linkers sitting in the back of the Red Team shuttle being fired. It seemed that the only close range type among them was the driver Blood

Leopard, and the remaining four were long range types. The barrels of their machines guns and rifles were enthusiastically scattering light bullets.

They were aiming at the Blue Team shuttle on the right side of the Red Team shuttle. By contrast, all the Blue Team members seemed to be close range types, and so the thickly armored Frost Horn and one other member were leaning out and desperately blocking the rain of bullets. Since the HP gauges of their avatars were locked, they wouldn't die no matter how many bullets hit them, but there seemed to be a knock-back effect that occasionally snapped back their bodies, and during those instances the shots would accurately hit the main body of the shuttle.

"You bastards! I won't! Forgive you! Tour, ram 'em!!"

Frost Horn shouted that, and with a return shout of "OK, Horn-kuuuun!" Tourmaline Shell turned his steering wheel to the left. The Blue Team shuttle quickly drew close to the Red Team shuttle. It seemed they intended to defeat the enemy shuttle with a close range attack. 'That's Frost Horn's usual favorite pirate tactics', thought Haruyuki as he excitedly watched the course of events. The gallery group in the floating stands following behind them also let out a clamor with shouts of "Hit them!" and "Stop it!".

As the two shuttles approached each other, the hit rate of the rain of bullets also naturally went up. Innumerable bullet marks were dug into the left side of the blue shuttle and released crackling sparks, but its

durability seemed to be set quite high and there was still no sign that its speed would fall.

“All right! Eat! The fist! Of a man’s soul!!”

Frost Horn stood up with that shout and raised his huge right fist high.

At that instant, Blood Leopard, who was operating the red shuttle, turned the steering wheel so fast that its form grew hazy. The linear wheels twisted, and the shuttle instantly did a spin. Its right rear end was shaken out and violently hit the side of the blue shuttle. From that shock, Frost Horn, who had been standing with a punching posture, was completely swept out from under his feet and—

“Huh! Huh! HUUUUUUUUUUH!?”

With a scream, he quickly rolled down out of the car. The shuttle was traveling fast at 500 km/h after all. The instant he touched the surface of the tower, he was flipped up high with a frightening crashing sound and threw off flashy sparks. Repeating these bounces, his huge form and hoarse screams fell away behind them, and after several seconds he could no longer be seen.

Meanwhile, Pard-san stabilized her shuttle as if nothing had happened and took some distance from the blue shuttle as if sliding away. The violent shooting started up again. The Blue Team determinedly tried to approach them again, but it seemed that the durability of their shuttle finally reached its limit here. Suddenly, the two linear wheels on its left side simultaneously burst out in flames, and the six-meter-long machine

started to spin like a top. While the shouts of its three remaining passengers resounded high and low, the sound from the engine increased endlessly, and then—

A huge explosion.

Watching the now charred-black machine and the three avatars disappear from view in the blink of an eye like the distant Horn as the cheers and shouts of the gallery poured down, Haruyuki ducked his head down with fear. Then, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko started commenting as if they were impressed.

"I see. It seems it's the end of the line for you if you fall out of the shuttle. Even so, the attack by Promi^[47] was excellent..."

"It really was. As expected of Leopard for both her selection of team members and her operation of the machine, the good quality of her skill hasn't rusted at all."

"T-T-This isn't the time to be impressed, Nee-san! They're coming after us next!"

Just as Chiyuri shouted that, the four artillery members of the Red Team finished reloading their weapons and together turned around towards the left almost simultaneously. The muzzles of their guns were aimed precisely at the No.1 shuttle—or to be exact, to the space slightly before the front tip of their machine, as they took into consideration the curve of their bullets' trajectory.

“Ugeh!”

Haruyuki squealed, and frantically turned his steering wheel to the left. However, Pard-san maintained the same exact distance and positioning between them with her brilliant steering. The gallery instantly grew excited at the beautiful parallel driving as the two cars circled around the surface of pillar which was 100 meters in diameter and therefore 314 meters in circumference, but this was a desperate chase different from a car commercial. One of the gun-users gave a command, and then the four guns fired all at once.

“.....!”

Thinking it couldn't be dodged, Haruyuki reflexively ducked his head down, but—what he heard wasn't the sound of bullets impacting, but instead a high-pitched sound of something being deflected. When he confusedly turned his gaze to the right, an unbelievable sight greeted his eyes.

Leaning out from the starboard side, Black Lotus was flashing her hand swords at incredible speeds and was flicking away most of hail of bullets pouring down on them. In the backseat behind her, Cyan Pile was also firmly guarding the machine using his right hand's huge «Pile Driver» in place of a shield.

There were very few bullets that managed to pass through the guard of these two and hit the shuttle's body, and the durability indicator wasn't decreasing much either, but at this rate the situation would gradually

worsen. Even if they tried to approach them for close combat, Haruyuki didn't think he could win against Pard-san's driving skill, and rather his precious crew might actually be struck down like what happened with the Blue Team.

"Geez, just because we don't have any red-types, they're just shooting at us as they like!"

Sitting in the left back seat, Chiyuri shouted in indignation. Certainly, «not having any long range types» was the greatest weakness of Nega Nebulas since the legion had been reformed. When they lose in territory battles, it was mostly due to powerful red-types on the opposing team.

However, there was no use lamenting about it now. Haruyuki resolved to challenge Pard-san to a dogfight between their machines, and tried to shout that to the others behind him. However, a instant before he could so.

"I'll get off."

Sky Raker quietly said that.

"Eh...master, what are you saying!?"

"It's a simple matter of addition and subtraction. The Promi-Team has five people, and moreover four of them are carrying large heavy guns. If I get off from the shuttle, there'll be four people here, and that should let you shake them off with greater speed."

"T-That's no good, Nee-san!"

When Chiyuri shouted that, Raker stopped her with calm words.

"I already told you. Since I'm participating, we have to aim for first place with all our strength. Getting off here is my way of using «all my strength». If I don't do so, I won't be able to respond to Leopard's seriousness!"

And then the sky-colored avatar grasped the side of the shuttle with her left hand and without hesitation tried to leap off.

Instantly, Haruyuki pulled the steering hard to the right. Their machine did a half-spin and Raker was forced back onto her seat.

"That's wrong...That's wrong, master!!"

While concentrating all his nerves into operating the steering wheel and accelerator and desperately trying to regain the shuttle's stability, Haruyuki squeezed out his voice.

"Getting off yourself isn't using «all your strength»! If you don't fight on the same stage, you won't be able to convey anything, isn't that right!?"

"It's just as Crow says, Raker!"

Continuing her defense with frightful accuracy, Kuroyukihime also shouted.

"We are a team! We fight together with all five of us, and we win together!"

"But...But, I!"

Fuuko's shouted rebuttal resounded.

"I have no way of fighting! I can't attack, nor can I stand up to defend! I can't do anything besides sitting here like an ornament...!"

"There is something you can do!!"

Those scream-like words came out from Haruyuki's throat.

"You...have wings that you created and that you cherish!"

He felt hesitation about saying this here. Sky Raker probably had her own reasons and feelings for stubbornly continuing to seal away that power even after she returned to the legion. Haruyuki did not want to forcefully step into that matter. Therefore, Haruyuki was trying to take Sky Raker to the peak of the Hermes Cords, the only place where he believed that he was allowed to talk about that, due to a certain reason.

However, if Raker got off the shuttle now, that chance would forever be lost. Therefore, Haruyuki had no choice but to shout and pray his words would reach her.

"The special technique gauge will hardly accumulate on this field...so I can't fly. But, your wings are different. Your gauge is fully charged immediately after you equip it, so that means you can fly!"

Haruyuki turned around in the cockpit, and while looking directly at Raker's eyes—

"...Please. Please entrust the power of your wings to this shuttle...no, to us! If you do that, we should be able to escape from the shooting line of Promi!!"

Instant silence.

Haruyuki's ears couldn't hear the roar of the shots showering them, nor the sound of Kuroyukihime and Takumu deflecting them, nor the cheers pouring down from the audience above. He strained his ears to only hear Sky Raker's thin breathing, and the sound of the anguish charged into it.

...I hurt Sacchan.

...I hurt her with my words, my attitude, and my heart. Every drop of tears that Sacchan shed back then is contained in the fuel of my wings. That's why, I will never again.....

"That's not true, Raker!!"

At that moment, Kuroyukihime suddenly stopped her hands and swung around to face her as well.

The shots instantly began to dig into the side of their machine, and also mercilessly struck Black Lotus' back. Even while her slim body swayed unsteadily against the impacts, Kuroyukihime spoke firmly.

"I...I was stupid! I didn't try to understand the size of what you carried! I just wanted you to devote yourself to me, and I thought you were betraying that, so I got unreasonably angry and resented you! I have no right to demand anything from you...but!"

Kuroyukihime's voice finally started wavering as well as strong feelings spread through her. As she spilled violet blue tear-like beams of light from her eyes inside her jet-black face mask, the Black King shouted.

"But, now is the time for you to fly! Not for my sake or the legion's sake...Fly for your own sake, Raker!!"

At the same time as she shouted, one of the bullets from a large rifle came flying and violently hit Black Lotus' back. Sky Raker supported her staggering body with both her hands. Her thin arms trembled slightly as she hesitated over approaching her any further.

—Master, no, Fuuko-san.

While desperately operating the shuttle, Haruyuki spoke to her at the back of his mind.

—Two months ago, Kuroyukihime-senpai took a step forward on the roof of the Shinjuku Southern Terrace. That's why, this time, please...pull senpai towards you with your own hand. That final distance cannot be shortened by me or anyone else. It's something that only you can do!

He probably couldn't transmit those words to her.

But, the next instant, the trembling in Fuuko's arms stopped. She slowly folded the arms supporting Kuroyukihime's body, wrapped her hands around her back—and gave her a tight hug.

As countless bullets flew past them, quiet yet clear words flowed out.

".....Thank you, Lotus. I finally realized it now. My wings...aren't filled with your tears, but instead your hope, your kindness, and your love."

Then, after putting Kuroyukihime's body back in the seat to her right, Sky Raker nodded her head with a clear movement.

"That's why, there's no need for me to be afraid...I will fly. If it's now, I'll surely be able to fly once again...!"

At that instant, Haruyuki finally realized.

Sky Raker hadn't given it up. She had been afraid. She had been afraid that, even if she equipped her Enhanced Armament, she wouldn't be able to fly as she once did—that, just as her feet remained gone, her negative mind power would make her Enhanced Armament powerless as well.

However, now, she had no fear in her bearing as she stuck out her chest and held up her arms towards the sky.

Her dark red pupils gazed at the infinite sky above—

And as if singing, she recited her equip preset phrase aloud.

"«Calling Gale»!!"^[48]

In the path ahead of their shuttle, in the direction of the unending ultramarine-colored sky above, Haruyuki saw a vivid light blue star flicker.

It turned into two lasers and poured down, and in spite of the fact that their shuttle was moving at breaking speeds, they hit Raker's body with pinpoint accuracy. The light enveloping her entire body immediately

condensed itself on her back, and materialized the elegant-looking booster-type Enhanced Armament—«Gale Thruster». Most likely because they interfered with the equipment's position, her hat and dress melted away into light, and the body of her delicate was fully laid bare.

"Raker..." "Master!" "Nee-san!" "Raker-san!"

As the four of them called out at the same time, Sky Raker nodded reassuringly, and nimbly jumped up from her seat. Of course, she wasn't throwing herself out of the shuttle. She borrowed Lime Bell's hand and moved to the back of the shuttle, and then firmly grasped the small rear spoiler.

"Crow, stabilize the shuttle's body straight forward!"

Haruyuki immediately obeyed Raker's order. Probably noticing the intentions of the No.1 shuttle, the Red Team's No.2 shuttle increased their shooting even more, but Kuroyukihime once again struck their shots down from her side.

"Here we go! Three second to boost! Two, one, zero!!"

DOGOOOOH!! An extraordinary roaring sound was produced, and Haruyuki clenched his teeth as his whole body was thoroughly pushed back into his seat at the same time.

What an incredible acceleration. When he glanced at the rear-view window while desperately steering to hold down the shuttle as it tried to go wild, he saw the spectacle of two jets of exhaust flames pushing the

back of the shuttle from Sky Raker's back like a comet. Its output was clearly greater than when Haruyuki had used «Gale Thruster». The strange light effect «Over-Ray» wasn't being emitted from the booster, so it wasn't a power-up due to the Incarnate System. This was the power that crystallized the cherished hard effort from Sky Raker pouring a vast quantity of Burst Points into it over the course of many years.

When Haruyuki turned his eyes back to the front, he could see the speedometer at the right end of the windshield break through its limit and reach 650 km/h. The rain of bullets from the No.2 shuttle had already broken off, and the red machine was rapidly becoming small in his right starboard mirror.

Stopping the wave of admiration that was trying to overflow from his chest, Haruyuki concentrated on driving. If his posture was disturbed even slightly when they were moving at these speeds, the machine would instantly crash. There had been no obstacles along the surface of the Hermes Cord until now, but he couldn't afford to tread on even a small gap.

However, after only half a second. Haruyuki knew that his fears had become real.

Strange objects had appeared on the path ahead. Several rings of light that glowed a rainbow color were lined up along the surface of the tower with large interval between them. The rings' diameter was probably at

least three meters, and if they went right on through one like this, they would surely hit one of the others located behind it.

"...I-I'm dodging it! Raker-san, return to your seat!"

Haruyuki frantically shouted that. However, before he could finish speaking.

"No, plunge straight through it, Crow!"

Kuroyukihime issued an unthinkable order.

"Eh...B-But!?"

"It's okay, go!"

Either way, the energy gauge of «Gale Thruster» seemed to be exhausted now, so Sky Raker once again borrowed Chiyuri's hand and returned to her original seat. After confirming that, Haruyuki made up his mind and grasped the steering wheel hard.

"U-Understood, we'll plunge through it! Everyone, hang out tight!"

Just two seconds after that.

Without decreasing its speed at all, the No.1 shuttle plunged straight through the middle of the rainbow-colored ring.

Chapter 9

A flash, an impact and then an explosion—didn't occur.

Instead, a miraculous phenomenon wrapped around the machine. The dark blue sky around them disappeared, and a burst of rainbow-colored radiating light the same color as the mysterious rings spread out around them. At the same time, the roar of the linear wheels stopped and only a high-resonance sound filled the space around them.

While feeling a strange feeling in his ears due to the explosive and vibrating sounds of the race disappearing, Haruyuki spoke out timidly.

"Ah...umm, senpai, what is this...?"

"It's a **Warp Zone**."

In response to the decisive answer that Kuroyukihime immediately gave, he let out a "Heh!?" and turned around.

"W-Warp!? There's such a thing in a race!?"

"I see...No, rather, it's only natural that they exist here, Haru."

This time Takumu nodded. Holding up one finger, he explained in his mastered "professor" mode.

"After all, think about it. Remember, the Hermes Cord is in total 4,000 km long, right? And the maximum speed of this shuttle is 500 km/h.

Therefore, using math, even if you jam down on the accelerator, it would

still take at least 8 hours to reach the goal. That would be nothing more than an endurance race. It'd be unreasonable to cross that entire distance with only a single driver."

"A-Aah...I see, when you put it like that..."

While quickly coming to understand, Haruyuki looked at the remaining distance meter, and saw that the four digits on the counter were rapidly going down. It seemed they were able to take a shortcut through this space until a point around 1,000 km away from the goal.

"Then that means, it would have turned out pretty bad if we hadn't entered the ring back there..."

Chiyuri said that as her three-cornered hat trembled, and Kuroyukihime spoke back to her with a smile.

"Hey, hey, Bell, wouldn't it have been fine if we just did a U-turn at such a time?"

"Ah, that's right...Muuh, but, if we ran back in this sort of game, it feels like we'd be admitting defeat somehow!"

"Well, I completely agreed with that opinion."

A short burst of laughter erupted between the two, and then, with that settled, Kuroyukihime said,

"...Raker, thank you. And...I'm sorry. You were troubled for a long time because of my terrible cowardice..."

However, her motion to bow deeply along with her apology was stopped by Sky Raker's right hand.

"Lotus. I also...I also have many things I must apologize to you for. But, we probably can't transmit it all to each other with just words. That's why...one day, when I once again become able to «duel» with you at full power, let's say a whole, whole lot to each other then."

".....Yeah. Let's...Let's do so..."

Kuroyukihime also replied back in a whispered voice, and then, after closing her eyes, she continued with a slight smile.

"If I remember, my total battle record against you is 1213 victories...and how many defeats was it again?"

"Ah, so you intend to forget only the inconvenient numbers!"

Quiet laughter once again spread through the Warp Zone, and while immersing himself in that gentle reverberating sound, Haruyuki murmured in his mind.

—In the end, there might have been no need for me to butt in. These two are definitely connected somewhere in the depths of their souls. Yes...that bond was something nurtured because of Accel World, where time flows 1,000 times faster.

He closed his eyes and was going to properly reflect upon these thoughts—

But, at that instant.

The center of his back ached with a sudden pang. At the same time, cold words from a voice that wasn't Haruyuki's and had an alien-quality to it somehow appeared in his mind.

—Then, the reverse is also surely true. Right? —There should also exist ugly hatred bred and enlarged over the course of those 1,000-times accelerated hours in Accel World. Perhaps in me as well.

—That's right. A seed of hatred that doesn't disappear has taken root in you too. Patiently waiting for when its bud blossoms.

—Have you already forgotten about the people that used to oppress you? Have you already forgotten the pain they inflicted on us with their irrational violence and malice? Respond with malice for malice. Power for power. The «seed» for doing so is always inside you.

At the same time as that dark and twisted voice whispered to him, several faces appeared behind his firmly shut eyelids.

The classmates who mocked and were unkind towards Haruyuki in his elementary school days. The delinquents who bluntly demanded money and goods from him and showered him with violence as he rose up in the grades. When their faces disappeared, this time, the masks of duel avatars replaced them. Although they were few, all the Burst Linkers who he unreservedly hated in Accel World looked down on him from somewhere high, and laughed mockingly.

**—Can you understand those guys too? Can you connect with them?
No. Impossible.**

—Yeah, that’s true. After all, I’ve already banished one of them away forever. That’s why I can’t connect with them. But, that...can’t be helped. It was only natural to do that to someone like him!

He shouted out as if moaning, and the throb on his back rapidly became stronger. However, strangely, that pain was no longer merely unpleasant. The larger it became, the more comfort he could imagine feeling when it was all released. As if hurrying him, as if tempting him, the voice continued.

—That’s right, it’s only natural to crush them. You already possess the power to do that. You just need to call out one word, one name. With just that, you can crush them all without leaving a single one alive. Cut them apart, tear them to pieces, and completely devour them. Devour. Devour. Devo...

“Ka...Karasu-san!?”

Haruyuki’s left shoulder was tightly gripped at the same time as a sharp shout, and he suddenly opened his eyes. After stiffening his entire body for an instant, he turned around with an awkward motion.

The one that had placed their hand on him was Sky Raker sitting on the left side of the middle row. Concern burned in her dark red eye lenses, and she was staring at Haruyuki intently. She thinly let out a dry voice.

"Karasu-san...What did you do just now...?"

"Eh...w-what...I didn't do anything..."

While feeling guilty for having held such disturbing thoughts, Haruyuki desperately shook his head. But he wasn't trying to lie. His body had been merely sitting in the driver's seat and grasping the steering wheel. When he said he didn't do anything, he was telling the truth.

However, even Kuroyukihime spoke in a low voice next.

"...I also...saw it. For an instant...your body was shining with the «Over-Ray» of mind power...!?"

".....!?"

This time Haruyuki was shocked from the bottom of his stomach and gasped.

He definitely hadn't used the «Incarnate System». He could assert that at least. In the first place, Haruyuki shouldn't have been able to do something like unconsciously activate the «override» ability with his level of training.

"Tha...That's not it! I didn't use mind power! I'm telling the truth!!"

He shouted while frantically shaking his head. Fuuko gripped Haruyuki's shoulder even harder, but eventually removed her hand while letting out a small sigh.

".....Yeah. That...couldn't have been it. Karasu-san's Over-Ray is a silver color. But...the light just now was..."

As Fuuko's voice lowered into silence, Kuroyukihime continued after her.

"...That's right, it was a mistake. Most likely, the shifting of the surrounding light effects reflected off Crow's metal body. —Really, sorry for startling you. But, it's also your fault for having an avatar with that kind of color."

After she said those words with her usual tone returned by 70%, the atmosphere in the car going at super high speed warp relaxed. Chiyuri and Takumu both let out a breath together in the rear seats.

"Geez, don't surprise us like that, Nee-san! ...Well, it's true that Haru's avatar sometimes flickers in the eye."

"It really does. I know, how about we smoke him in sulfur and oxidize his silver armor?"

"Ahaha, that's a nice idea, Takkun!"

Haruyuki unconsciously gave a bitter smile at the conversation between his two childhood friends. He felt the tension in his strained body clear away slowly now, but the cold thing that sank into the depths of his heart wouldn't go away easily.

He had heard that voice several times over the past several months. Haruyuki thought of that voice with its metallic effect as something that was emitted from deep inside himself. His other self, which produced the

negative feelings that accumulated inside him. As someone who had a lot of time to pass by himself since a young age, Haruyuki had the peculiarity of talking like that with himself inside his mind.

But—what if that wasn't it? What if it wasn't just some mental metaphor, but an actual voice emitted by someone other than Haruyuki?

But in that case, the owner of the voice wasn't in Accel World, but in Haruyuki's Neuro Linker. Because that voice also whispered to him even when he wasn't Dived in. Then, was it some kind of virus or AI program? Or...someone's consciousness that was lurking somewhere in the Linker's memory? That was impossible, right...?

Feeling as if someone was chuckling somewhere far away, Haruyuki blinked hard and shook off the thoughts in his head. This wasn't the time to worry over such things. They were finally rushing into the climax of the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race», and they had to win no matter what.

When he opened his eyes wide, he saw a ring of blue light ahead of their machine. That was probably the Warp Zone's exit.

"Everyone, we're returning to the course! Hold on tight!"

He sucked in a deep breath and shouted that, and four crisp replies were shot back at him from the backseats.

Gripping the steering wheel firmly, Haruyuki aimed the nose of the shuttle towards the center of the blue light. The exit rapidly approached,

and barred their field of view completely—and the instant their machine touched it, everything was swallowed into a whirlpool of light.

“.....Waah!!”

The one that shouted first was Chiyuri.

It was followed by exclams of awe from everyone else, including Haruyuki.

The whole sky was perfectly jet-black. An infinite number of tiny dots of light gathered and drew beautiful lines against the background of it. It was the Milky Way—the galaxy. However, both the number of stars and their vividness were completely different from the night sky seen from the Moonlight or Deserts stages. Although it was a cold and still world, it was as if a clear melody played by the cluster of stars could be heard.

The huge steel pillar, the orbital elevator «Hermes Cord» pierced through that world of stars and extended straight upwards even further. Intense sunlight from the left illuminated its gently curved surface. The light came down on the body of the speeding shuttle, sparkling off its silver surface, and created a deep shadow off the right side of the car.

“.....So this is space...”

Murmuring that, Kuroyukihime held out her right hand sword straight towards the Milky Way. She continued in a quiet voice.

“Is this scene digitally painted by the BB server...or is it...”

"...They're probably using the actual footage of it caught by the social cameras. The positions of the stars are too precise..."

Fuuko answered in a similar quiet whisper.

Of course, even if this image was the real thing, it was all passing through the cameras, the network and then the Neuro Linker, so it was likely different from the view seen by astronauts and tourists looking at it with their naked eyes. Even so, Haruyuki, and probably his four other friends as well, continued staring up at the galaxy with deep emotions in each of their chests.

'If possible, I would like to marvel at this silent, cold and yet bustling world forever'—although Haruyuki wished that, regrettably this solemn moment in time did not continue for long.

The sounds of many engines resounded from behind them. Of course, it shouldn't have been possible to hear any sound if this really were space, but it seemed that priority had been given to small conveniences in Accel World. Turning around frantically, he saw various machines jump out from the Warp Zone exits.

At the front was the dark red shuttle driven by Blood Leopard. Slightly behind it was the gunmetal shuttle ridden by Ash Roller's team. And further behind them was the Yellow Legion shuttle.

After a short pause, two shuttles from medium-sized legions appeared behind them. It seemed there were six teams left including Haruyuki's.

Apparently, in addition to Frost Horn's team, two more had dropped out, with the rusted shuttle removed from the beginning.

At this point, a loud sound that surpassed the roar of all the shuttles shook space. Above their heads, the three huge spectator stands warped out. The over six hundred Burst Linkers there flung up their hands all at once and stamped their legs down. While being bathed in cheers, the six shuttles ran across the tower in a line.

"All right! There are only five rivals left!"

Kuroyukihime's voice suddenly changed and became commanding as she shouted.

"Although we face a formidable set of enemies, we will be the ones to win! All right, let's leave them in the dust!"

Haruyuki and the others also struck out their fists and responded with cries of "Yeah!". Checking the meter, he saw that there was a little less than a 1,000 km left to the goal. Although he calculated that it would still take two hours if they continued at 500 km/h, weekend territory battles were twice the length of that. That kind of time went by in practically an instant when you were engrossed.

—All right, we can't make a single mistake from here on! I won't let us get caught in the shooting range of Pard-san's team again!

Shouting that inside his mind and re-gripping the stirring wheel, Haruyuki glared at the complicated topography visible far ahead that was like an obstacle zone.

However—

Immediately after.

A completely unexpected phenomenon occurred right next to their shuttle's right side.

The pronounced shadow of their shuttle that was created by the intense sunlight. From the center of it, a quiet watery sound was emitted, and something strange came floating up from it.

It was a huge, thin plate sheet. The rectangular plate, with a length and height equal to the shuttle's, quietly ran parallel two meters away from their No.1 shuttle. Although it had to be moving at 500 km/h, it emitted not a single sound or even vibration. Its color was a lusterless black that sucked in all light.

Its appearance and texture intensely stimulated Haruyuki's memories. He didn't even need to try hard to remember.

Two months ago—immediately after the new school term started, a mysterious Burst Linker had intruded into their «duel» taking place in Umesato Middle School within the Unlimited Neutral Field. It was definitely that avatar, who possessed the ability to change his body into

an ultra-thin plate and slip into and move through all shadows. But, why was he here now?

Haruyuki's shock and questions burst forth from his throat in the form of a single name.

"«Black Vise»...!!"

And as if responding to his shout—

The huge plate soundlessly split in half. It became two plates and spread out, and then quickly disappeared as if melting away into the vacuum of space.

The thing that appeared there in its place hit Haruyuki with even further shock.

It was a shuttle. It had the exact same shape as the one the Nega Nebulas team rode, but its color was different. It was reddish like powder that irregularly spread across it. In other words, the color of rust. It was clearly the rusted No.10 shuttle that had been deserted at the right end of the starting block. However, despite looking like it wouldn't be able to move at all, the machine was emitting dazzling lightning from its four linear wheels and was running at maximum speed.

In other words, the No.10 shuttle hadn't been destroyed due to corrosion. It had merely reproduced the body color of its registered driver.

Hit by a firm conviction, Haruyuki shifted his gaze slightly and looked at the No.10 shuttle's cockpit.



The one that sat there and silently gripped the steering wheel was—

A duel avatar clad in the same rust color as the machine's, with a thin body that made one think of a steel frame with rivets hammered in. This wasn't Haruyuki's first encounter with him either. Two months ago, at the underground arena «Akihabara Battle Ground» installed in the local network of a game center in Akihabara, he had fought against him once.

In a voice even lower than earlier, Haruyuki spoke out a second name.

"...«Rust Jigsaw»..."

However, even when he called out his name, the rust-colored avatar remained silent and didn't turn to face him. His body was quietly sunk into his seat as if he had become part of the shuttle.

When Haruyuki looked at the four crew seats in the back, he saw that there was only one person sitting there. No, it would be better to say one set of «plates». There was only a thin shadow sitting at the backmost row. That atypical appearance in the form of black sheets lined up in human-shape couldn't be anyone other than «Black Vise».

These two were Burst Linkers that belonged to the club that called themselves the «Acceleration Research Society». Both the organization's scale and composition of members were almost completely unknown. The only thing Haruyuki knew about them was that they all possessed the illegal VR device known as the «BIC» (Brain Implant Chip) in their skulls, and using its power schemed to avoid various restrictions in Brain Burst.

That's why it was extremely shocking to Haruyuki that these two would appear in the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race», a festival-like event. He stared at it aghast as he remained numbed from the shock, and suddenly countless voices poured down from above.

"H...Hey, hey, where did that shuttle come out from!?"

"Wasn't the No.10 shuttle retired!?"

"If that one wins, what will happen to our bets!?"

The audience in the gallery also seemed surprised at this unexpected development. There were many voices of confusion rather than excitement contained within this rising commotion.

And then, as if slipping into the uproar, Haruyuki heard a quiet conversation exchanged by the two on the No.10 shuttle.

"...Is my job over with this?"

That quiet voice that gave off the impression of a teacher was from Black Vise. In response to the question, a boy's voice that sounded purposefully crushed low replied.

"Yeah, that's enough. You can go back."

"Then, I'll excuse myself here, Jigsaw-kun...Goodbye, Black King. And the other members of Nega Nebulas."

"...You bastard."

Kuroyukihime muttered, but by the time she moved her right hand slightly, the humanoid shadow sitting in the back seat had already jumped off the shuttle. Then, he was swept back far away in the blink of an eye as if slipping into the jet-black sky—and disappeared.

At this point, Haruyuki finally had a guess as to why the No.10 shuttle had suddenly appeared from the shadow of the No.1 shuttle.

Black Vise, who possessed many strange abilities, was probably able to shut into a black plate and sink into shadows not only himself, but also other people and objects.

When the portal on the top floor of the Sky Tree was opened at 5 PM on Wednesday, the first ones to visit the Hermes Cord hadn't only been Haruyuki and Pard-san. In reality, Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw had also been there. But the two of them had undoubtedly hidden in the shadow of the tower and, as soon as Haruyuki and Pard-san Bursted Out, rose out of the shadows and did the driver's registration. That's why, neither Haruyuki, Pard-san, nor Ash Roller and the others who arrived immediately after had noticed their presence.

And Vise's concealment ability hadn't been used only during the registration either.

The instant today's race had started, the starting block had been completely swallowed by the shadow made by the huge audience seats. Having boarded their machine by moving through the shadows, Vise and Jigsaw must have once again concealed themselves in the shadows along

with their machine immediately after the race started, and then without anyone noticing, moved to the No.1 shuttle's shadow. Like that, they had held their breaths quietly right next to Haruyuki and the others all the way until now. In other words, Vise's ability allowed him to «freely move or remain stationary within any shadow».

While Haruyuki came to such a hypothesis within his thoughts, Rust Jigsaw, now the only person left on the No.10 shuttle, once again became silent and intently gripped his steering wheel.

Even though he still hadn't fully grasped the situation and felt an unpleasant unease, Haruyuki spoke out to the rust-colored avatar.

"...Rust Jigsaw, why did you come out now? If you wanted to, you should have been able to hide in our shadow all the way until the goal and then come out at the last minute and claim victory."

Jigsaw, let alone answer, didn't even twitch at the question. But Haruyuki pressed forward the feeling of incongruity inside him and continued speaking.

"The fact that you didn't do so and came out from our shadow at this stage means...you want to properly race with us, do you? In that case, that's exactly what I want as well. I'll compete with you fair and square over the remaining 1,000 km..."

".....Be quiet."

That single phrase cut off Haruyuki's words. Rust Jigsaw's voice, which he was hearing for the first time, was cold and dry, and yet seemed to be tinged with a boiling feeling.

"Eh...?"

"Don't talk. Don't speak worthless words like 'race' or 'compete' to me."

Listlessly letting out those words, Rust Jigsaw turned for the first time and glanced at Haruyuki and the others with red eyes that carried a chill from inside his facemask designed in the form of thin iron materials put together. Although Haruyuki only remembered Rust Jigsaw being harshly defeated by Blood Leopard's bite attack during their previous duel at Akiba BG, his impression from then was erased due to pure coldness that dwelled in the rust-colored avatar's eyes.

Jigsaw narrowed his eyes, and spoke as if giving an order.

"You should be ashamed. You people should be ashamed of yourselves for continuing to turn your eyes away like that from Brain Burst's true purpose."

".....Hoh? Then let me ask you. Just what is this true purpose?"

Having remained silent until now, Kuroyukihime finally spoke in a dangerous voice. Even after receiving that question with an edge to it, Rust Jigsaw gave no signs of being perturbed. He turned his face back forward, and replied back as if spitting his words out.

"You should recognize it. Brain Burst is merely a dirty Life Hack tool."

"Life...Hack...!?"

The fury-filled voice that spoke out was Takumu's. The large blue avatar tried to lean out from the side of the shuttle, but the yellow-green avatar next to him pulled him back.

"Hey, you! That's just your personal interpretation! Even if it's a crafty tool to you, it's different for us! To us, Brain Burst is the greatest PvP game!"

"Exactly."

Sky Raker also continued speaking after him.

"Besides, your words are contradictory. If it's just a tool, why are you participating in this race? Why did you show yourself halfway through the course? If you feel the desire to fight and compete, that's proof that Brain Burst is not a tool, but a game to you as well."

In response to that sharp remark—

Rust Jigsaw curled his body deeper into his cockpit seat.

Haruyuki felt like he was enduring something with that movement. Then, several guesses as to the reason for it automatically appeared in his mind.

Could it be that Jigsaw himself also wanted to deny his own words? Didn't he want to fight directly as a Burst Linker—to taste the thrill and excitement of «duels», and the feeling of connecting with someone through it? In other words, he wanted to leave the organization...the «Acceleration Research Society» that bound him.....?

The instant he remembered the dusk-colored plunderer that once belonged to the same organization, who had gained that choice and yet hadn't chosen to do so, or perhaps been unable to choose so, Haruyuki reflexively called out.

"Y...You...Don't you actually...want to come over to **this side**...?"

Silence.

After a slightly long pause, Rust slowly raised his head from the steering wheel, and once more looked at Haruyuki.

At that instant, Haruyuki realized that his guess had been completely mistaken.

The emotion Jigsaw had been enduring was anger. A chaotic, boiling rage that had nothing to do with sharpness or purity. A hatred that had no clear target, but instead scattered in every direction intensely. Like a huge rusted saw that was waved about erratically, so to speak.

"Regret it."

Rust Jigsaw whispered in creaking voice. Immediately after, he separated his right hand from the handle, and tightly grasped his forehead with his five fingers. He acted as if he was bearing an intense pain, but his words slowly began to be tinged with a crazed zeal, and rose until it became a shout.

"Regret your naivety in not attacking the moment you saw me. And taste the price of that. Scream in overwhelming fear! Your stupid game ends

today! And the time of desire and fighting, destruction and slaughter will arrive! Now...is that time!!”

Immediately after, Haruyuki saw it.

Beams of dull red light were rising up in all directions from Rust Jigsaw’s entire body.

The lights whirled around all at once, and twisted violently like countless snakes. High frequency vibrations shook the shuttles and also the huge form of the space elevator. The steel ground, their two shuttles, and even the jet-black reaches of space shined brightly.

This wasn’t a special technique. Since this was a race event where the HP gauge was locked, the killer technique gauge could not accumulate. Therefore, this life was from the imagination born from Jigsaw’s «heart»...

“This is bad, that’s «Over-Ray»!”

The first to shout out was Kuroyukihime.

“Get us away, Crow! An incarnate attack is coming!!”

By that time, Haruyuki was already turning hard to the left. With that last minute turn of the steering wheel that didn’t collapse into a full spin, he tried to distance their shuttle from the No.10 machine.

He then heard a voice that sounded as if it was chasing after their shuttle as they escaped towards the other side of the tower.

“Watch, you imbeciles! This is the true form of Brain Burst—!!”

In Haruyuki's rear-view mirror, Rust Jigsaw stood up from his cockpit seat, raised his arms high—and bellowed.

“«Rust Order»!!”^[49]

The world shook.

...That's «Over-Ray»!?

While pushing down on the accelerator right down to the floor, Haruyuki shuddered. The maelstrom of red light that was released with the No.10 shuttle at its center expanded to the size of a small star, and in the blink of an eye the light was hot on the heels of the No.1 shuttle.

“Ho...Hold on!”

While shouting that, Haruyuki cut back the steering wheel slightly. The explosion of light was composed of energy that swallowed the entire 100 meters diameter of the Hermes Cord. If they tried running away diagonally along the tower, they would not be able to escape. The light chased after them from just a few centimeters behind the back of the shuttle as it returned to going straight forward.

Turning to look over his shoulder while fixing the steering wheel in place, Haruyuki gasped violently at the spectacle behind him.

Having shined a beautiful steel grey just a few seconds ago, the surface of the elevator was—decaying away at a frightening speed!

As if he was observing at high speed an iron plate that had been left on the beach next to ocean, spots of rust appeared bit by bit on the parts of the tower touched by the light. Those spots joined together as they rapidly grew bigger and covered the entire elevator. Soon cracks started appearing here and there, the blood-colored rust caved in while scattering dust. Many craters like those from a meteorite collision were forming.

"Tha.....That's ridiculous....."

Leaking out a hoarse voice, Haruyuki shook his head.

"Even if it's an incarnate technique...Pard-san's nails weren't able to even scratch the elevator...I-In the first place, its range is too great...!"

As far as Haruyuki knew, all incarnate techniques should have been limited to phenomenon that affected oneself. Even if it was a long-range technique, it functioned by first extending one's own attack power through mind power and firing it at the enemy.

But, the mind power of Rust Jigsaw, who had been visibly angry just now, destroyed all of the vast surrounding area without restrictions. Such a thing should be theoretically impossible. The energy source of incarnate techniques was supposed to be scars of the heart, in other words, the imagination that belonged only to oneself.

In response to Haruyuki's question, Kuroyukihime answered in a low voice as she similarly turned around to look at the phenomenon.

".....It's «Spatial Erosion»..."

Sky Raker explained that unfamiliar word.

"The opposite side of mind power which uses hope as its source...the ultimate form of mind power born from hatred. An overly strong resentment towards the world creates an «override» over the field itself...But, even for those of the King-class, mental concentration done over an absurdly long time should be necessary in order to train an imagination of this magnitude..."

Kuroyukihime also narrowed her eyes sharply and nodded in agreement.

"That guy was probably lurking in our shadow all this while in order to gain the time to do so, but...even so, it's too abnormal. Did he forcefully boost his mental concentration with the function of the BIC...?"

"No way, that...would surely place a huge burden on his brain as well..."

While those two conversed, the storm of rust created by Jigsaw wrecked further destruction.

Several of the other team shuttles behind them became victims of the corrosion. It seemed that Blood Leopard and Ash Roller had avoided it by decelerating with their fine machine control, but even so more than half of the shuttle rusted instantly and greatly slowed down. With that, even if they avoided completed destruction, they would be forced to retire from the race.

However, the damage to Yellow Legion and two of the medium-sized legion teams was far worse than that. They had rushed directly into the affected area, and many screams overlapped with each other as they echoed through the field.

The three shuttles were rapidly covered with thick rust. That wasn't all. The armor of the crew members of the shuttles also eroded in the blink of an eye and scattered huge chunks of parts and equipment that rusted off.

Eventually, the destruction reached the main body of the avatars, which then spilled over the shuttles and fell into the darkness behind them as their whole bodies decayed and crumbled away.

"What's with this, even though their HP gauges were locked!"

Following Takumu's groaning cry, Chiyuri added on her own bitter shout.

"So...So horrible! The race has already become all messed up!!"

Then, as if he had heard their words, Rust Jigsaw let out a laugh as he continued chasing them from behind.

"Kukuku...Haha, hahahahahaha!! Despair!! Lament!! And feel remorse!! This is retribution for your deception!! This world is the same as the real world in the end!! Nothing in existence can avoid being corroded away—
—!!"

Just then, as if his words themselves were mind power, the raging red light scattered upwards like an explosion.

That maelstrom of energy caught one of the floating spectator stands and swallowed it.

Before Haruyuki's widened eyes as he thought 'No way', even the spectator stand, which should have been an object completely protected by the system, was covered in rust along with an unpleasant grating sound. Many cracks instantly ran along its formerly smooth bottom, and planks fell down one after another.

And several seconds later, the huge structure quickly collapsed above the tower.

The hundreds of gallery viewers that had been crowded together there were thrown out into the empty sky like an avalanche. While all simultaneously screaming, some of them had their entire bodies corroded, and others fell down to the surface of the elevator and were forcibly expelled from Accel World along with momentary flashes of light.

"Ri...Ridiculous..."

Kuroyukihime gasped with her head thrown back as if pushed back by that spectacle.

"At this rate...the gallery viewers will definitely notice. That this phenomenon is boundlessly transcending the framework of the normal system..."

Haruyuki once again realized the seriousness of the situation when he heard those words.

Senior Burst Linkers, including the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» were constantly taking great pains to hide the existence of the Incarnate System as much as they could. Even at times where a necessity arose to teach others how to use it as a teacher, the first thing they made their students promise at the beginning was to «only use mind power when attacked by mind power».

The reason for that was because there was an enormous dark side included within the Incarnate System.

Those who wished for greater power and reached their hand down into the hole within their hearts could be, at the same time, drawn to the bottom of that hole. After doing so once, they would become drunk on the negative feeling of sublimating with their duel avatar once again. The worst example of this was the «Disaster Armour», Chrome Disaster, who once caused huge mayhem in Accel World. The Kings had been controlling information concerning the Incarnate System so that the same thing would never again be repeated; even «Yellow King» Yellow Radio, who excelled at craftiness, had chosen to withdraw without using mind power in front of many of his subordinates back then.

However, right now, at the climax of the huge Hermes Cord Traversing Race event, Rust Jigsaw's incarnate technique was being released in full view of over five hundred Burst Linkers.

The gallery viewers should have strongly realized it through their own senses. Realized the irrationality of the spectator stands that should have

been protected from collapsing, and of the HP gauges that should have been locked being blown away. And the existence of a different power that was overriding the normal system.

“Why...such a thing?”

Sky Raker feebly whispered while shaking her head. Haruyuki painfully understood her feelings.

She probably believed in the light side of the Incarnate System the most among all Burst Linkers. She prayed that, not hatred or fear, but hope itself was the greatest power in Accel World. For Raker, this spectacle that a power that embodied the ultimate hate while hurting many Burst Linkers must have been unbearable.

“Master...”

When he turned around and said that, Haruyuki noticed something at the edge of his vision, and frantically returned his body forward.

In the direction their shuttle was dashing towards while just barely staying out of the effect range of Jigsaw’s big technique «Rust Order», many protruding objects were sticking out from the surface of the elevator. They were probably obstacles for heating up the race. Though he would have been enthusiastic to display his skills here if they weren’t in this kind of situation, Haruyuki couldn’t help but be terrified right now. It was absolutely impossible to go straight at high speed among the antennas and tanks standing in close proximity to each other, and if he

reduced his speed even a little, they would be caught in Jigsaw's mind power.

As Haruyuki gritted his teeth, the loud sound of a second floating spectator stand collapsing and countless screams reached his ears.

"Damn it...damn it!!"

Haruyuki unconsciously cried out. His vision became blurred in rainbow colors as tears fell from his eyes.

—Even though this was a race that filled me with greatest excitement. Even though I united together with my greatest friends and was competing with my greatest rivals. And most of all—even though I was so, so close to bringing Raker-san to the «end of the sky» that she wished for so much!!

"As if I'll...let us lose here—!!"

Shouting that and brushing away his tears, Haruyuki glared ahead.

He couldn't accept that this race was going to be broken by hatred under the name of mind power. He'd fight to the end. He'd resist.

In order to advance forward while avoiding the incarnate attack, he had to escape from the obstacle zone without reducing speed even once. Although Jigsaw's No.10 shuttle had overwhelmingly less weight loaded on it than theirs, since he was running the shuttle while only pressing down on the accelerator as he released his big technique, his running speed was the same as the No.1 shuttle of Haruyuki's team. If they

continued maintaining this distance between them, Haruyuki's team should be able to jump through the goal first without getting caught by the storm of rust.

As if becoming one with his machine, Haruyuki concentrated all his nerves into the steering wheel he gripped with both hands, the accelerator pedal he was stepping on with his right foot, and the seat his waist was sticking to.

After several seconds, the fast shuttle jumped into the center of the group of antennas that irregularly covered the tower's surface.

"Kuh...oh..."

While leaking out his voice from the gaps between his clenched teeth, he avoided the steel antennas that flew past him to the left and right one after another. Since he couldn't ease down the accelerator, it would be over the moment he broke his posture. Just before the magnetic forces emitted from all four linear wheels could no longer grip the steel surface, he did another last minute turn.

The four people in back also seemed to grasp Haruyuki's determination. Without saying anything, they would push their weight on the opposite side whenever the machine tilted in one direction due to turning. Through this desperate cooperation play, the No.1 shuttle continued to desperately escape the looming storm of mind power by just a few centimeters.

Even when the No.10 shuttle rushed into the obstacle zone, it didn't pause through the course at all. The antenna and tanks blocking its way were changed into lumps of rust and blown away one after another. Even though more than five minutes had passed since «Rust Order» had been activated, the raging light of mind power showed no sign of weakening at all.

Continuously maintaining a large-scale «Override» like this for such a long time required a terrifyingly intense imagination. At the same time as he shuddered at the depths of the hatred contained within it, Haruyuki also harbored some slight doubts.

This wasn't his first time facing Rust Jigsaw. Two months ago, within the duel stage at «Akihabara Battle Ground», Haruyuki had fought and won against Jigsaw while teaming up with Blood Leopard in a tag team.

However, back then, Jigsaw hadn't tried to use any incarnate techniques at all. Based on his words and conduct today, he would have absolutely used it back then if he could. Therefore, there were only two reasons for this that he could think of. Jigsaw's incarnate techniques consisted of only this «Space Erosion-type» technique which was also accompanied by a risk to his brain the longer he use it, or he had been forbidden to use any mind power by his superiors.

If it was the latter, it meant that a huge change of policy had occurred within the mysterious «Acceleration Research Society» during these past two months. That was because the actions of Rust Jigsaw, who had been

speaking recklessly, must have been done with the approval of his organization in that case. The fact that «Black Vise», who called himself the group's vice-president, had been helping him was proof of that. Just what was the objective of the «Acceleration Research Society» by doing such large scale subversive activities...?

The reason that Haruyuki was also able to think about such things even at the corner of his mind was because he had managed to memorize the arrangement pattern of the obstacles to some extent. Although it was complex, the antennas were arranged in accordance with fixed rules. After that, he just had to repeatedly dodge left and right without a single mistake. He had already done this kind of action many times in the racing games he had played endlessly up until now—

However, at that instant. Haruyuki realized that that pattern itself was the greatest obstacle of this area.

Just as he was getting used to the arrangement of the antennas and relaxed a bit in his mind, the arrangement rules changed entirely.

“Guh.....”

While groaning quietly, he desperately operated the steering wheel. As the shuttle unsteadily shook left and right, its sides chafed against obstacles he couldn't dodge, and bright sparks were scattered in the air.

And after several seconds, as if to ridicule Haruyuki's hard struggle, a group of antennas lined up side by side blocked the path ahead. There was no space to pass between them. He had to dodge them by turning

hard to the right or left. But at this speed, he would barrel roll the moment he spun the wheel.

By the time he determined that, Haruyuki's right foot had already reflexively let go of the accelerator and pushed down on the brakes. As the magnetic force of its wheels twisted, the shuttle entered a right turn while falling forward.

That slight deceleration—was not overlooked by the storm chasing them from behind.

"Haru.....!!"

At the same time as Takumu shouted, the back of their shuttle was swallowed by dull red.

A strange vibration was transmitted to him from the steering wheel. Even without looking at his rear-view mirror, he understood that the shuttle's beautiful silver body was being rapidly corroded and falling off in chunks. Haruyuki resisted panicking and tried re-accelerating the shuttle once it finished turning. —However, it didn't produce the same reliable acceleration that it had just a while ago.

It wasn't just the body, even the back linear wheels were being rusted. The No.1 shuttle desperately tried to dash forward using just the magnetic force emitted from its front disks, but the output was only half of that of before.

"Guh...!"

“Kyaaaah!?”

Immediately after hearing Takumu and Chiyuri’s cries, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko sitting in front of them, and even Haruyuki in the driver’s seat were caught in the jaws of the red storm.

“...Hahahaha! Corrode! Degrade! And crumble—!!”

Jigsaw’s high-pitched laughter reached them from far away. However, Haruyuki didn’t have the time to stop and listen to him.

—Hot! His entire body was wrapped in sharp pain, as if he were being showered in boiling water. When he looked down, Silver Crow’s shining beautiful silver armor was clouded over in white all over, and small holes were drilling into it. Synchronized with that phenomenon, the HP gauge in his upper left vision was quickly being shaved away as if ridiculing the [LOCKED] display.

Withstanding the pain, Haruyuki turned around.

And his face reflectively distorted. The other four passengers were similar having their duel avatars’ armors encroached all over, and were bending over their bodies as they withstood the pain. Although the metal color Silver Crow was weak to corrosion attacks in the first place, to think that it would also eat this much into Kuroyukihime and the others who were normal colored. Jigsaw’s mind power was no longer the image of just «iron rust» anymore. Just as he had shouted out just now, it was a «decay» that was closer to «degradation» at its core.

“Ah...aah...!”

A thin scream leaked out from Chiyuri’s mouth as she apparently couldn’t bear the pain. Hearing that, Takumu tried to put his body over her to protect her, but the red light slipped inside every gap and cruelly withered Lime Bell’s fresh green color.

“Bell...!”

Sky Raker called out her name, and for an instant, cast her gaze downwards as if hesitating over something.

But the next instant, she raised her head and held her thin right arm up high.

“...Raker.”

Whatever Kuroyukihime had to say was stopped by her left hand—and then Fuuko released a vivid sky blue light from her raised palm

«Over-Ray». The radiance of a firm will that was released from the depths of the heart.

“«Wind Veil!!»^[50]

Following the loud technique name declaration—the wind blew.

A whirlwind tinged with a faint sky color formed with Sky Raker at the center, and wrapped around the entire shuttle. Immediately after, the pain of corrosion that tormented Haruyuki’s entire body faded away as if it had been a lie. Small sparks flashed in meshes where the red light and

blue wind touched, and showed how the two forms of imagination were clashing.

There wasn't any doubt. This was an incarnate technique invoked by Sky Raker. It wasn't an offensive, but rather a defensive image. Moreover, it was covering not only Raker herself, but everything within a 3 m radius.

If positive mind power that targeted individuals was «hope».

And negative mind power that targeted the surroundings was «hate».

Then what should this positive mind power that was protecting the five of them be called?

That kind of thought and deep emotion passed through Haruyuki's mind for an instant. The No.10 shuttle that Jigsaw rode passed by the No.1 shuttle, which slowed down while wrapped in the blue veil, from about twenty meters away from them at high speed. The rust-colored avatar standing tall in the cockpit stuck out his hands to the heavens once more, and let out loud laughter filled with malice.

"Hahaha...hahahahaha!!"

While smashing through one antenna after another ahead of it and carving deep rents into the tower surface behind it, his shuttle instantly grew distant from them. Only this person, who had thoroughly destroyed the Hermes Cord Traversing Race, was dashing to the goal line that awaited the winner in the sky ahead...

"Damn...it...!"

Haruyuki unconsciously swore.

This was unforgivable. It was already impossible for him to overtake the No.10 shuttle again with the partially destroyed No.1 shuttle, but, at the very least, he absolutely couldn't accept Jigsaw becoming the winner. That would mean the defeat of all the teams that participated in this race...no, of everyone including the many people in the gallery.

But, even so, there was nothing Haruyuki could do...

—No.

There was. Even if he couldn't win the race, there was still just one way to stop Jigsaw.

At that time, their shuttle finally escaped from the effect range of «Rust Order». Raker stopped the sky-blue wind and collapsed into her seat as if she had used up all her strength. Kuroyukihime anxiously held her shoulders. After ascertaining that, Haruyuki returned his gaze forward. Although the speed of the shuttle had been reduced by half, the two front linear wheels should still be working.

Completely forgetting his thoughts and feelings about Raker's incarnate technique he'd been thinking about just a little while ago, Haruyuki gritted his teeth.

Even if the shuttle kept running like this, they no longer had any chance of catching up to Jigsaw. But now, there was just one method that could be used. Yes—if it wasn't the shuttle, but just Haruyuki by himself.

".....Haru, what should we do...? If we follow him while maintaining a safe distance, we'll probably be able to get second place, but..."

In the back, Takumu murmured that. Kuroyukihime responded in deathly stifled voice.

"Hmm...rather than pick up a prize like that, it'd be better to just scuttle the machine here and..."

Their conversation scarcely reached Haruyuki's consciousness. He merely gazed at the storm of rust becoming more distance by the second, and then stood up from his driver's seat.

"...Crow...?"

Kuroyukihime called out to him as if having sensed something from him. He gave a short response without turning around.

"—Senpai, take care of everyone."

"Wha...What are you going to do!?"

Instead of answering, Haruyuki pressed down on the accelerator while still standing.

The dying machine released a shrill shriek. Lightning sprouted from the rust-covered linear disks like death throes of agony.

Confirming that the digital meter had gone back up, Haruyuki suddenly leaned his body forward.

He extended both his hands forward. And then drew them back hard. Synchronizing with that motion, the thin metal fins currently folded on his back were deployed on either side.

Just now, Silver Crow had received damage that ignored the system protection due to the incarnate attack, which took away close to 30% of his gauge. In exchange, his special technique gauge had also been charged by more than half. In other words—he could fly now.

“N...No, don’t do it, Crow!”

Guessing Haruyuki’s intention, Kuroyukihime shouted.

“You mustn’t oppose mind power born of hatred with hatred of your own! There’s no meaning in fighting here anymore!”

“But...I...I!”

From the space between his clenched teeth, Haruyuki squeezed out a cracked voice.

“I can’t forgive him no matter what!!”

—No matter what means I have to resort to, I’ll stop Jigsaw. No, I’ll crush him.

Immediately after adding that within his mind, the right linear disk finally exploded with dazzling sparks.

And right before that, Haruyuki bent his body and shot out into the sky above with all his strength.

A slight vibration went through his wings as they spread out behind his body. He glared forward as if devouring what he saw, and caught sight of the No.10 shuttle in the center of his vision as it dashed forward.

“—Go!!”

Along with that sharp cry, he fully released all of his wings' thrust output. Leaving behind the No.1 shuttle as it stopped in place after spinning, Haruyuki flew forward by himself.

As the only flying-type duel avatar in Accel World, Silver Crow's highest speed was about 300 km/h. The No.10 shuttle was running at a speed of over 400 km/h. Therefore, he definitely wouldn't be able to catch up to it with zero head-start, but if he jumped off his own shuttle that was running at the same speed like a catapult, there should be a slight chance for him to catch up.

Converting all of his will and special technique gauge into flight power, Haruyuki rushed forward as a streak of light.

He instantly broke into the effect range of «Rust Order» and all his armor began to cloud over. The armor surface bubbled as if boiling, and dissolved into fine particles before crumbling away behind him.

Although burning pain once more ran through his nervous system, the size of his anger won over. He pierced straight through the raging storm of rust and approached the shuttle. Although all ten of his metal fins on either side of his back's wings peeled off from the base one by one, he pushed on without caring.

Both his inertia and propulsion were rapidly lost, and his speed fell down. 600 km/h. 500 km/h. If he didn't catch up before his speed fell lower than the shuttle's running speed of 400, he would never again get the chance to touch it.

He got closer to the rust-colored shuttle...and closer...but his momentum was rapidly slowing—

"Uu...oo...!"

Extending his left hand forward with all his concentration, his fingertips touched the shuttle's rear wing, then lost it, then touched it again—and then firmly dug into it.

"Ooooh!!"

While crying out, Haruyuki drew out the last of his strength and jumped into the shuttle's backseat. Jigsaw quickly turned around in the cockpit. Slight surprise ran over his bare framed face.

It seemed that, at this distance from it, the corrosive effect was almost completely absent, like the eye of a typhoon. Even so, Silver Crow's body had rusted all over from shooting through the storm of mind power. His remaining HP gauge was halfway gone at 30%. While dropping fragments of his armor, Haruyuki drew back his right hand, arranged his fingers and concentrated the last of his mental strength into there.

He sharpened his imagination. Generating Over-Ray, he condensed it on his fingertips, and converged it into the form of a sword.

".....«Laser Sword»!!"

Haruyuki released the only incarnate technique he had mastered towards the center of Rust Jigsaw's chest.

With a loud metallic sound, a silver light extended out from his projected right hand, touched the rust-colored armor, and shallowly gouged into it—

But, at that point, Silver Crow's right arm itself broke apart at the elbow. The silver light also uselessly dissolved away in the air, and the final part of Haruyuki's attack that had begun ended with depleting only a single dot from Jigsaw's HP gauge.

Just before Haruyuki fell down on the shuttle after using up all his strength.

A thin line that extended out from the outer side of Rust Jigsaw's right arm hooked under Crow's left armpit and supported him.

".....Ku, kukuku."

Letting out a chuckle, the rust-colored avatar turned around completely to face him. He had removed his foot from the accelerator and the shuttle was gently slowing down, but even if Haruyuki had succeeded in momentarily stopping the No.10 shuttle here, it was all meaningless if the surviving No.1 shuttle and the two machines driven by Blood Leopard and Ash Roller were greatly damaged.

At the same time as the No.10 shuttle stopped completely, the storm of mind power gradually settled down, and the universe regained its original color and silence.

Bathed in the cold light of the stars and the intense sunlight pouring down on them, Rust Jigsaw whispered while lifting up Haruyuki with the thin two meter-long line extending out from his right arm.

“Acknowledge it. This is the limit of you people who blindly believe this world to be a game.”

Suddenly, the thin black line began gradually vibrating. Close-packed fine triangular blades were carved into the top side of it.

It was a saw. This was without a doubt his main armament that troubled Haruyuki and Blood Leopard in their duel against in Akihabara, a «jigsaw».

“And feel it keenly. This is the price of your foolishness.”

The jigsaw suddenly sped up its vibration. At the same time, a pale Over-Ray wrapped around the entire saw. At the same time as it was strengthening its cutting power through mind power, it cancelled the HP protection rule of this stage.

A shrill metallic sound was immediately emitted from Haruyuki’s left armpit, followed by a scorching pain.

“Uu...aaaah!”

While screaming, Haruyuki tried to jump away. But, his body didn't listen to what he said. Due to Silver Crow's weight, the jigsaw quickly cut into his left arm at its base.

Several seconds later, huge sparks were scattered and his left arm was swiftly cut off. His health gauge was dyed red and cut below 10% remaining.

Having lost both arms, Haruyuki collapsed onto the shuttle like a broken doll, and words mixed with derisive laughter were once again thrown at him.

"Kuku...Lament the fact, if you were going to be a metal color anyway, that you didn't get a corrosion-resistant color like gold, platinum, or at least stainless steel."

And then Jigsaw released another jigsaw from his left arm, crossed the two together and hooked them on Haruyuki's neck, and lifted him up high.

As Haruyuki was crucified and his head bent back powerlessly, his eyes caught the last remaining spectator stand.

The hundreds of gallery viewers were in a commotion as usual with questions and confusion at the situation. However, even among all that, clear disappointment towards Silver Crow, who hadn't made a single hit despite his bold rush attack and was hanging there powerlessly, was hanging in the air. Countless comments like "What did he come here for?"



and “So this is all he’s got after all that anticipation...” pierced through Haruyuki’s ears.

—Even if you don’t say all that, I’m the one that’s most disappointed in myself.

While waiting for the saws to tear through his throat, Haruyuki murmured within his mind.

—I was naïve. I was too ignorant. I never even thought that mind power born with «hatred» as its source could have such a frightening power...

As he thought that, someone else replied back within his head.

—That’s only natural. Did you really believe that a thing such as «hope» could overcome «malice» in offensive power?

Closing his eyes, Haruyuki answered back.

—I never knew of such a thing. After all, I can’t use that kind of power.

Once again, that someone refuted him.

—That’s a lie. You know that. That power from long ago is sleeping inside you. A power even purer than «hatred». A malice that hasn’t spread to the outside world, but has been accumulated inside you and keenly sharpened itself.

—In other words, «anger». Mind power of «rage» has existed inside you since long ago, and has been waiting for the time when it would be released.

Throb.

Suddenly, the center of his back ached chillingly. Throb, throb. It pulsated like a heart, and circulated a frozen liquid like mercury through Haruyuki's body.

—*Do it.*

—***Do it!!***

—***Call my name now!! Release me!! I'll turn your anger into power!!***

"Uu...aah...!"

The cold feeling filling his body suddenly became fiery, and as he was hit him with a blazing sensation, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide.

And he saw it. The aura surge clearly rising up from his tattered body—Over-Ray. However, it wasn't the color of silver. It was a grey that was close to being black as possible—a color he was sure he had seen somewhere before.

Something terrible was happening. For an instant, he was wrapped in fear, but that also flew away the moment he caught sight of Rust Jigsaw who was lifting him up.

It seemed that the words from that unknown person had come to him in the split second between when Jigsaw had lifted up Haruyuki and started vibrating his saw. A dissonance was born on his throat, and the fine blades ate into his thin armor. However, Haruyuki forgot the fear of his

head being chopped off as well, and whispered while intently staring at Jigsaw.

"I won't...forgive you. You're the only one...I'll absolutely never forgive."

"Ku, kuku. Resign yourself. There's nothing more you can do."

"I'll never forgive...I'll never forgive..."

His core cold like ice, and stirred by an overwhelming anger that seemed to enclose his surroundings in scorching flames, Haruyuki repeated that as if he were delirious.

Rust Jigsaw was no longer just Rust Jigsaw to him anymore. He was the symbol of all the unreasonable malice that had continued to oppress Haruyuki for the majority of his fourteen years of life.

If any of his comrades who had linked hearts with him were here right now.

Haruyuki might have been able to stop himself here. Like he had two months ago during the duel within the Unlimited Neutral Field.

However, Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Takumu and Chiyuri were currently deeply damaged due to Jigsaw's incarnate attack, and had been left behind far away in the stalled No.1 shuttle. That fact increased Haruyuki's anger further, and he wasn't able to restrain himself.

"You...you people....."

With a voice tinged with a metallic resonance, Haruyuki let out a final roar.

"I'll absolutely never...forgive you all——!!"^[51]

Instantly.

His hot anger finally exceeded a certain threshold.

Haruyuki felt something break through the armor of his back and extend out with a twist. It waved forward in place of his lost arms and snapped away the two jigsaws holding up his neck.

"Muh..."

As Jigsaw let out a low grunt, Haruyuki jumped high up and took distance from him. Landing outside of the stopped shuttle, Haruyuki violently pierced the surface of the tower with the thing extending out from his back. Dazzling sparks scattered along with an unbelievably loud impact sound.

The thing was a sinister-looking «tail» that was made of countless dark-silver worm-like parts tied together and that had a sharp sword-like protrusion at its tip.

While waving the dark silver tail like a snake, Haruyuki sucked in a deep breath, bent his body back, and howled.

"Uu...oo...oooooooooooo—!"

An aura of darkness gushed out from his entire body, and shook the stage violently. The gallery viewers above made a violent commotion. But their voices no longer reached Haruyuki's ears. Instead, a single sharp order hit the center of his brain.

—Now! Call, my, name!!

While standing up to his full height and thrusting his tail into the vertical tower wall to support himself, Haruyuki took the name that automatically flashed in his mind—

And shouted it.

“Chrome...Disaster————!!”

Chapter 10

The gallery viewers, Rust Jigsaw, and even the stars were silent.

Within the silence, a flash of jet-black lightning poured down from somewhere and hit Haruyuki.

In his upper left vision, a purple message blinked.

[YOU EQUIPPED AN ENHANCED ARMAMENT...]

The cursor at the end flickered on and off two, three times. As if the BB system itself was scared of writing that name.

But, after the fourth flicker, the cursor continued on to the right and wrote one phrase.

[...«THE DISASTER».]

Darkness overflowed.

A dusky dark grey aura flowed out from the base of his tail and deeply wrapped around his entire body. It immediately condensed, increased in density, and erased Silver Crow's silver color.

Eventually, a smooth metallic luster appeared on the surface of the thick darkness. A dusky dark metal shine just like his tail's. Countless armor parts with sharp edges were solidified at high speed from his back to tips of his body. The armor covered his chest, torso, legs, and even the space

of his lost arms without leaving a single gap, and was completed as a dark-silver full-body armor.

At the same time as both his arms were regenerated inside the armor, his HP gauge recovered completely right to the right end.

Finally, a grave metallic sound was released, and his head was covered with a thick helmet from behind.

The color of his vision changed. A pale grey layer was added to everything, and only the figure of Rust Jigsaw in the center of his vision stood out clearly.

Haruyuki slowly raised his arms and looked at the shining, fiendish claw-like fingers on them.

They were completely different from Silver Crow's delicate hands. One could easily believe that they were now merely frightening weapons that couldn't hold anything.

No, it wasn't just his hands. His torso, covered in thick armor. His legs, drawn with muscular and supple lines. And the tips of his feet, equipped with three huge talons each.

His entire avatar had now transformed into a crystallization of pure power.

Unable to bear the feeling of power that ran through his entire body, Haruyuki tightly clenched his hands, looked up at the sky—and howled.

“GUU...RUOOOOOOOOO!!!”

The sound that came out from his throat was the roar of a beast tinged with a metallic effect.

Slightly further away standing on the shuttle, Rust Jigsaw flinched back for a moment, and then immediately returned his posture to normal. This situation should have been unexpected to Jigsaw as well, but the voice he let out was filled with the same unchanging cold contempt as before.

“...Kuku, interesting. The «Armor of Catastrophe», huh. Very well, I’ll prove that...the power called the most evil is also a mere embellished virtual image in the end.”

Though he said that, his words felt like only a drop of water falling into a scorching flame to Haruyuki.

His thoughts and emotions were completely inhibited, and only high speed calculated logic filled his consciousness. That is, on how to efficiently incapacitate the enemy before him.

He could no longer hear that voice which had whispered to him countless times until now, and he no longer felt the anger that the voice had incited in him either. The reason for that was clear. It was because that voice and the anger had now completely merged and become one with Haruyuki himself.

—Ah, I see.

—I’m now...the sixth generation Chrome Disaster.

—I'm sorry, senpai. I'm sorry, master. I'm sorry, Taku, Chiyu...

Such thoughts made a small ripple on the surface of his consciousness and then disappeared. Afterwards, there only remained the purified desire to fight.

The one that moved first was Rust Jigsaw.

He casually held up his right hand on top of the stopped shuttle and spread out his five angular fingers. That hand was wrapped in a darkish red light.

Instantly, a strange phenomenon occurred within Haruyuki's vision.

Many alphabetic letters appeared at high speed on top of his vision's newly added grey layer. What they spelled out was—«Attack Prediction/Incarnate Attack, Long Range/Power Expansion/Corrosive Type, Degree of Threat/0».

“—«Rust Touch».”^[52]

Following the technique name announcement, an enlarged phantom hand shot out from Jigsaw's right hand and firmly grasped Haruyuki's entire body. His shining dark grey armor immediately began to cloud over. —However.

“GURUOOH!!”

Along with a short bellow, Haruyuki spread out his arms widely. The phantom hand was easily torn off and scattered away into space. His chrome silver armor also immediately regained its original wet-like gloss.

Taking a step towards the shuttle, Haruyuki gave a short, sneering laugh.

“Ruru...—Just now, you said I should have been stainless steel.”

The voice he let out was tinged with a metallic overtone and was strangely distorted.

“...That’s a misunderstanding on your part. Stainless steel does not rust because the **chrome** included in it puts it into a fixed state. It’s chrome that doesn’t rust.”

He let out another thick laugh.

“—Your mind power is now useless against me.”

Declaring that as if jeering at Jigsaw—Haruyuki then leaped forward off his legs like a beast.

In midair, he unfolded the wings on his back with a whoosh. He strongly vibrated his wings, which no longer bore the slightest resemblance to their original simple metal fin form and had now changed into weapon-like silhouettes.

By simply raising his right hand without even particularly concentrating his will, a darkness-colored Over-Ray surged out of it as if overflowing. It

instantly condensed into the form of a Qatar thrusting sword used by Middle Eastern warriors, and advanced upon Jigsaw.

In response, Jigsaw released a long jigsaw from his right arm and tried to intercept Haruyuki's attack with its blade tinged with a red Over-Ray. Instantly, detailed information flowed into Haruyuki's vision once again. «Attack Prediction/Incarnate Attack, Power Expansion/Cutting-Type, Degree of Threat/20». Furthermore, even the predicted curve of the jigsaw's trajectory was added as well this time.

"RUUU!"

Letting out a short roar, Haruyuki slid his body 50 cm to the right in midair.

The jigsaw, with its superior reach, reached Haruyuki first. However, its tip traced the displayed prediction line too faithfully. As a result, Haruyuki dodged it by just a few millimeters, which should have normally been impossible if there wasn't a considerable difference in ability between opponents, and immediately after drove his right hand's black Qatar into Jigsaw's left shoulder.

BAKIN! A painful screeching noise resounded, and Jigsaw's body was blown away from the shuttle. However, he managed to spin with his expert body control and landed on the tower surface on his two legs.

His body was tilted down towards the Earth. Although the interior of the shuttle created false gravity down in the direction of the Hermes Cord's

shaft, when players stepped outside it, the tower's surface became not the ground, but rather a several thousand kilometers long vertical cliff.

Jigsaw thrust a saw from his right hand into the tower surface right away and supported his body from falling.

Landing in front of him, Haruyuki similarly pierced the tower with his feet's talons and stood at full height.

"Rururu...What kind of acrobatics will you show me next...?"

At this point, a feeling of thick hatred was finally released from Rust Jigsaw's eyes.

"You bastard.....gret it...egret it. You'll regret it. You'll regret it. Regretitregretitregretitregretit!!"

His murmurs were replaced by shouting, and as if it was guided by his hatred, the greatest Over-Ray yet was released from his left arm.

JAK! A jigsaw flew out from it. A red light flowed through it and lit up its countless saw blades.

His arm drew a circle in the air so fast its form was hazy, and the jigsaw changed into a big ring. Immediately after, its spin increased and it shot off to somewhere with a groan. Rust Jigsaw's long-range attack technique, «Wheel Saw». Haruyuki had once been greatly harassed by this technique that threw spinning saws possessing super-cutting power.



Moreover, it didn't follow a straight trajectory this time. The saw disappeared completely from Haruyuki's field of vision, and struck after curving through the air like a boomerang. It wasn't a technique that could be dealt with when seeing it for the first time, or so it should have been.

But. Detailed information once again appeared in his vision. «Attack Prediction/Incarnate Attack, Long Range/Power/Movement Expansion, Degree of Threat/40». And then—a prediction line stretched out straight up from Jigsaw's left hand and went around Haruyuki to his back.

Without turning around, Haruyuki did a wide swing with his back tail.

GIN! A jarring impact sound resounded, and the special technique spinning saw was easily flicked away, disappearing into the starry sky.

Haruyuki vaguely realized what the variety of information being displayed over the grey layer in his vision was. This was a form of future prediction that calculated from the extensive battle experience accumulated in the body of the Armor of Catastrophe, the Enhanced Armament «The Disaster». It was unimaginable how many duels this armor, which was born at the dawn of Accel World and inherited by five Burst Linkers, had overcome. Data equal to that infinite span of time predicted all of the enemy's attacks with frightening accuracy.

".....What is this? Explain. What is that power?"

When Rust Jigsaw groaned that out in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki glanced at him through his thick visor—and whispered.

“Is it already over? Then, disappear.”

And then, he casually swooped down to attack right from the front.

This wasn't a «duel» that risked the pride of Burst Linkers, nor a mere «battle»; it would be better to call it «carnage», no, more like a «mechanical action».

Unable to use his right arm, Jigsaw tried to attack Haruyuki with the saw blade of his left arm and kicks from his two legs, all imbued with mind power, but all his attacks were completely seen through by the Enhanced Armament's prediction ability and Haruyuki's own instincts. Haruyuki merely moved the minimum distance to dodge with his wings and tail, and then effortlessly chopped up the enemy avatar with Qatars on both his hands.

In a certain sense, this fight may have been the completed form of the «Aerial Combo» that Haruyuki had aimed for. However, there was not a trace of excitement, aesthetics, or pride in it. It was merely an ugly slaughter that unfolded in space 3,500 km above the ground.

First, Haruyuki cut off his left arm. Then his right leg. Then his left leg. And finally, his right arm that was supporting his avatar on the tower.

Having finished slicing apart the enemy in ten seconds, Haruyuki grasped and pulled out the head and torso portion from the lump of wreckage of the avatar that was once Rust Jigsaw as it started falling downwards.

Although he should have been feeling extraordinary pain, Jigsaw still retained the energy to let out a thin laugh.

"Kuku...ku. Praise yourself for now. But...my objective has already been completed."

Although he was mostly uninterested, Haruyuki tilted his head and listened to Jigsaw's words.

"No, in a certain sense, even the revival of that «armor» will probably be beneficial for us. Tremble in fear. From this moment on, this world you people believe in will start to deteriorate. The false sense of order will be lost, and the original chaos will cover everything. Despair—at the beginning of our revolution, and..."

GUSHA

Without listening till the end, Haruyuki crushed Rust Jigsaw's head with his hands. The avatar exploded in a burst of red light, and the Burst Linker that had destroyed the Hermes Cord Traversing Race exited instantly from Accel World.

—No.

The destroyer, in the true sense of the word, might be Haruyuki himself now. He no longer cared about even the race that he had wanted to protect so badly just a few minutes ago.

.....It's not enough. Just this much isn't enough at all.

Muttering that in his mind, Haruyuki glanced around at his surroundings. Of course, there was no one around. But, the energy and destructive impulses that swirled through his entire body wouldn't quieten at all; rather, they seemed to burn inside him vigorously.

I want to fight. I want to thoroughly defeat and crush many, many more enemies with this power.

When Haruyuki looked directly upwards in search of enemies—the last surviving spectator stand came into his view.

The hundreds of gallery viewers, leaning out from their seats, all uniformly showed dazed and dumbfounded expressions. As they rustled, quiet conversation came and went across space between them.

"Huh...Isn't that the «Armor of Catastrophe»...?"

"No way, I heard that it was completely annihilated not long ago."

"But...what else besides that «armor» could possess that kind of unreasonable ability...?"

"But, its appearance is different from when I saw it in the Unlimited Neutral Field..."

—If you want to know that much. You should confirm it for yourselves with your own bodies. Confirm the overwhelming power of this legendary berserker, «Chrome Disaster».

Underneath his visor, Haruyuki gave an insane-looking smile.

He slowly unfolded his wings. He bent and folded his long tail in the shape of an S, and sunk down his body.

He was going to kick off the ground and fly towards the countless prey—but just before that.

Something softly touched the wings on his back.

It was memories. The memories of countless duels that had sunk into his metallic fins, which should have only been a piece of propulsion equipment. In particular, the recollection of his battle with the Black King Black Lotus last night in Haruyuki's room flashed back for just an instant within his darkness-dyed wings.

From far, far away, he recalled a gentle voice.

.....I'm proud of you.....

Suddenly, the talons on his feet strongly held down on the tower's steel plates with an unconscious motion. His body, which had been about to fly up, was pulled back down with a jerk.

—I.

In the center of his consciousness that seethed for battle, a thought like clear water fell into it.

—The strength I sought...wasn't...blind carnage like this...

A white ripple spread through the interior of his mind. For an instant, a part of his black-shining armor trembled unstably.

—Don't resist. Don't be afraid. This is what you wished for.

Someone whispered to him irritatingly at the back of his head.

—Now, release even more anger. Destroy everything before your eyes. And devour. Consume. If you do, you can obtain even greater, greater, greater unlimited strength.

—Devour? I...I never wished for such a thing...

—The reason I wanted to get stronger...wasn't for myself. For the sake of the people I care about...In order to protect my meager, but warm «family»...And, in order to continue chasing after the same dream as the person I care about more than anyone else, I.....!

Suddenly, several fuzzy faces appeared in his vision. Those smiling faces which gazed at him kindly were closed in by black waves from every direction, trying to blot them out.

—Then devour them. Devour them and turn them into power. Other people are unnecessary. Break them. Destroy them. I am the incarnation of catastrophe. I am the symbol of fear. I—am «Chrome Disaster»!!

In response to that voice, which sounded like a cracked bell.

Haruyuki strained all his will and shouted back.

—No! No!! I...I...!!

“I am Silver Crow————!!”

The instant he released that cry from beneath his visor—

The heavy armor covering his entire body lost its hardness as if becoming liquid metal. With a swish, it flowed down towards the soles of his feet, and Silver Crow's original helmet was exposed. However, the darkness-colored metal didn't disappear. It coiled around his silver armor, and tried to once again resolve back into the armor.

"Uu...oooooh.....!"

Clenching his fists tightly, Haruyuki resisted it. He tried to push away with all his might the darkness-colored metal surge trying to control both his avatar and his mind.

But, after just a few seconds. His resistance was in vain, as the cruel shining metal started to return from the tips of his limbs.

Its power to control exceeded the limits of a normal item by far, as if it were a genuine «curse». Not a digital code encoded within the server, but someone's consciousness itself. And it was trying to merge with Haruyuki's mind.

Although he couldn't guess just what kind of logic could cause that kind of phenomenon to occur, the reality was that Haruyuki had been struck by a strong interference in his thoughts, even if it were only for a few minutes. When he fought with Rust Jigsaw, Haruyuki had been half not himself. If he fell into the same state again, then this time he might really

direct that frightening power at his comrades—and at his important person.

Yes, just like the fifth generation Disaster, Cherry Rook, who had hunted down his own «Child», Scarlet Rain.

“Disappear...disappear...disapeeeeeeeear!”

He desperately squeezed out his voice from between his clenched teeth. However, the armor had already been restored up to his elbows and knees. It was unlikely that its momentum would stop.

—Then, there’s only one thing left I can do.

Raising his right hand, with its shining sharp claws.

Haruyuki pointed their tips towards the center of his chest.

The instant he was about to pierce through his central core, one of the most critical points of a duel avatar, with his five fingers dripping with a darkish mind power aura while he was still in his normal state.

He heard a voice shout his name from far away.

“Haru————!”

Raising his head with a jerk, he looked downwards across the space elevator.

There, he saw a scene he could never have imagined.

Heading towards Haruyuki, with her right extended out as far as possible, was a fresh green-colored avatar—Lime Bell. Carrying her on her back and flying straight at him while releasing jet flames from her booster was a sky blue-colored avatar, Sky Raker. And desperately following right behind them with only one linear wheel remaining was the No.1 shuttle.

“...Don...Don’t come! Don’t come here, Bell, Raker-san!!”

Haruyuki shouted in a daze. He lost his mental concentration for an instant, and the speed of the armor’s restoration increased.

“Get away! I...I can no longer...hold this thing...back.....!!”

An aura of darkness spurted out from Haruyuki’s entire body.

Sharp metallic clangs resounded once after another, and the Armor of Catastrophe covered his chest and torso from his shoulders. Now only his neck and head remained. The heavy metal rapidly gathered there as well, and tried to make a crude helmet. A thin film of grey covered his vision.

If this helmet visor fell over him—Silver Crow would probably disappear completely.

However, Sky Raker’s rush forward didn’t weaken. Her speed increased even further, and she flew right at Haruyuki.

On her back, Lime Bell swung her left hand’s bell straight forward.

She swung the large bell, shining dazzlingly in the sunlight, around counter-clockwise once, twice. Three times. And then, four times.

Finally, she swung it down straight towards Haruyuki—and Chiyuri shouted in a voice clearer than the noise of the stars.

“Citron Caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaall!!”

An angelic orchestra released the sound of solemn bells. Following those beautiful chords, shining ribbons of transparent green light flowed out from Bell.

Unsteadily flickering words appeared on the thin layer covering his vision. «Attack Prediction/Normal Special Technique, Range Unknown/Power Unknown/Effect Unknown, Degree of Threat/100».

Haruyuki’s left arm moved by itself and tried to release a surge of darkness towards the ribbons.

However, Haruyuki strained his will power to the point that his brain burned, and grasped his left arm with his right arm in order to hold it back.

Immediately after, a pure lime-green light wrapped around Haruyuki’s entire body.

His dark metal armor split apart all over as if it were being cut off by the ribbons of light. The heavy metal dissolved into fluid once again and was pushed back all the way to the base of the tail on his back. Due to the power of Chiyuri’s special technique «Citron Call Mode 2», which

forcefully rewinds an avatar's state, the equipment of the Enhanced Armament was being canceled.

—GU...RUOOOOOOOH!

A fierce beastly roar filled his head. It was the sound of an overwhelming anger and frustration. And contained within those feelings—was some slight fear.

—Disappear. Disappear! I don't need you! I already have a far more proper power to get stronger on my own! That's why...you should just disappear———!!

As if pressed by Haruyuki's shout, all of the metal finally gathered into the tail that had first appeared, and then vanished. Within the fresh green light, Haruyuki raised his now freed arms, grasped the tail extending out from his back, and put all his strength into pulling it out.

His entire avatar creaked and a terrible pain pierced through his back. But, he didn't let up his strength. Sickening cracking sounds resounded, and the thick tail between his hands waved wildly as if it were another living creature entirely.

—Fool.

The voice, its volume now weaker than before, whispered on his back.

—In the depths of your heart, you wish to fuse completely with my power. Because you are the only one that has been able to fuse with me so strongly since I was removed from my original creator.

In response to the voice, Haruyuki firmly retorted back.

—Even if that is true. Even so, I reject you. I deny you. For the sake of the people who gave me the power that allows me to do so, I refuse you!!

At the same time, Haruyuki concentrated all of his remaining willpower into his hands gripping the tail.

And released it as light.

“La...ser...Sword!!!”

A clear metallic sound resounded through all of space, as two silver swords crossed together.

The pure white swords of light that crossed together cut off the heavy metal tail from the middle.

The howl of a wild beast resounded one final time—and then a system message appeared in his upper left vision. [YOU DEFEATED «THE DISASTER»].

The final remaining fragment of the tail dissolved away as if blown out by the sunlight, and disappeared.

As Haruyuki slowly started falling down towards the Earth after having used up all his strength, the flying Chiyuri and Fuuko stopped him by gently cradling him in their arms.

It seemed that his consciousness had ceased functioning longer than he thought.

When Haruyuki opened his heavy eyelids, the reflective jet-black visor of the Black King Black Lotus was right before his eyes.

"Se...npai..."

Murmuring that, he raised his head slightly. He was in the front passenger seat of the stopped No.1 shuttle. Haruyuki was lying sideways on the bench seat, and his upper body was being supported by Lotus' knees.

When Kuroyukihime noticed that Haruyuki had regained consciousness, she slowly nodded once. A quiet, slightly trembling voice came out from her mask.

".....You came back, Crow. You truly did your best...You really...came back..."

"Sen...pai..."

The instant he heard her, Haruyuki's voice also trembled intensely.

"I'm...sorry. I...I....."

"Don't say anything now. You used all your strength and fought the enemy you had to fight. For now, that's enough..."

"...That's right, Karasu-san."

Sky Raker turned around from where she sat in the cockpit and extended her hand to him. She smoothly patted Haruyuki's helmet and whispered.

"You protected the race from the hands of that destroyer. No one in Nega Nebulas...no, no one in Accel World can condemn that battle."

"....."

As Haruyuki's chest suddenly felt flooded and he tried to look down, Takumu also spoke out from the backseat where he'd been sitting since before.

"That's right, Crow. Besides, I've known since long ago how reckless you get when you lose your temper. I just thought 'Ah, there he goes again' when you flew off to chase the No.10 shuttle as well."

"Ahaha, that's true! And so, we cleaned up your mess afterwards just like always!"

Hearing Chiyuri laugh happily from next to Takumu, Haruyuki couldn't help but retort.

"I-I didn't particularly ask you to clean up after me!"

"Ah, geez. Saying that kind of thing. You say that, even though Raker-nee-san and I worked so hard back there."

"Uu...S-Sorry...I'm indebted to you two..."

Hearing this exchange, the other four laughed together all at once. Slightly afterwards, Haruyuki added in his own laughter as well.

After calmly talking for a little while, Chiyuri looked around at the shuttle and raised her voice.

“Ah, but, it’s such a shame that we can’t reach the goal even after Haru worked so hard! Geez, even though it was just a little further ahead...”

At those words, Haruyuki lifted his body off Kuroyukihime’s knees and confirmed the state of the shuttle. Certainly, just as Chiyuri had said, this shuttle couldn’t run anymore. The section that had been directly exposed to Rust Jigsaw’s incarnate attack was all rusted and in tatters, the front right wheel had been completely blown away, and the left wheel was also crackling with sparks; rather, the shuttle had done well to reach where he had been fighting with Jigsaw from the place where its right wheel had blown out.

“...Well, it can’t be helped.”

Kuroyukihime lifted her right hand sword and spoke.

“The fact that that guy didn’t manage to win the race at least should be enough for us to be happy about.....Besides, after this, Accel World will most likely become so hectic that no one will have time to think about this event.....”

The last half of Kuroyukihime’s words were whispered quietly, and Haruyuki was about to ask what she meant by that—but then.

That shout resounded loudly from beneath them on the tower.

“Hey, hey, heeeeeeeeeeeey! It’s too early to give up
heeeeeeeeeeeeeere!!”

“Nowah!?”

Haruyuki turned around while exclaiming in surprise. There, he saw the forms of two shuttles climbing the tower with a great deal of effort while letting out weak sparks from their linear wheels. It was without a doubt the Green Team and Red Team machines that he thought had already retired.

Ash Roller was sitting in the cockpit of the shuttle running in the lead. However, Bush Utan and the other Green Legion members who should have been sitting in the backseats were nowhere to be seen.

And the one operating the shuttle following behind it was the crimson leopard-headed avatar—Blood Leopard. But she was also on the shuttle alone, with no sign of her four long range shooting team members present.

Both shuttles were greatly damaged not all that different from the No.1 shuttle. While Haruyuki and the others watched them with dumbfounded expressions, the two shakily approaching shuttles awkwardly stopped right next to their shuttle. Immediately after, both shuttles’ linear wheels let out a pitiful sound and were blown away.

“Ah, aaaah. So this is as far as you go. Mega-Thanks for all your hard work.”

Ash Roller struck the side of his shuttle gratefully, and Pard-san also softly patted her steering wheel and murmured.

"GJ."

And then, the two of them raised their heads together and looked at the five members of Nega Nebulas. While tilting her head, Kuroyukihime spoke as their representative.

"...A-Although I first should congratulate you guys on your hard work...Just why did you chase after us even after your other members fell? It's definitely impossible to continue the race anymore."

"Ah, well, err, you know, I discussed it a little bit with this panther-head Nee-san here."

Scratching the back of his skull-face helmet, Ash Roller spoke.

"Like, everything would be way too for nothing if all the teams retired like this, and..."

"Your explanation is too roundabout. And I'm not a panther, I'm a leopard."

Pard-san cut into with a cold tone and took over the rest.

"It's impossible for all the shuttles to run in their current condition. But, if our three teams worked together, there's a slight chance we can reach the goal."

"Wha...What do you mean, Leopard?"

When Sky Raker leaned out from her seat and asked that, Pard-san gazed at her directly and spoke.

"If we take one step out of these shuttles, it will turn into a vertical cliff for us from there. But, my «Beast Mode» and Bike Guy's bike have the power to run along the tower wall."

"B-Bike Guy..."

Ignoring Ash Roller as he muttered that in a complicated tone, Pard-san's unfaltering explanation continued.

"However, both of our abilities consume our special technique gauges. Therefore, Bike and me will carry Crow and Raker up as far as we can. Then, Crow will carry Raker on his back and fly up as far as he can. Finally, Raker will fly up as far as the energy remaining in her «Gale Thruster» can take her. After that, whether she can reach the goal..."

—only God knows.

Without saying that last part, Pard-san spread out her hands.

Upon hearing this unexpected proposal, Haruyuki and the others sank into shocked silence. The one that broke the silence first was Kuroyukihime.

"...I see, how interesting. There is value in trying. But...naturally, you two aren't offering your help for free, right?"

"Well, of coooooooooooooooooourse! The first place prize will be cut up in three equal pieces! If the cat old lady Giga Sucks though..."

"That's too vulgar, Ash."

As Ash Roller became silent with a jerk at Raker's words, Pard-san tilted her head slightly.

"Well?"

"Of course, we'll join in on this plan."

In response to Kuroyukihime's immediate answer, the leopard-headed avatar responded with her usual "K" and gave a faint smile.

The lightweight Sky Raker rode on the back of Blood Leopard after she transformed into a graceful quadruped through the «Shape Change» command.

And Haruyuki sat on the back of the chopper-type American bike summoned by Ash Roller.

"Then, I wish you good luck. We'll cheer for you guys from here."

After Kuroyukihime's words, Takumu and Chiyuri nodded as well.

"We're counting on you all. Tie up this event with a happy ending!"

"Good luck, Crow, Raker-nee-san! And also Leopard-san and the bike person!"

After visibly slumping his head at Chiyuri's words, Ash Roller then shouted out as usual.

"Then let's gooooo! Hold me tight, you crow bastard! Aaah, I wanted to say that to master——!"

Those slightly pitiful words were overlapped with the roar of the revving engine. After the back wheel spun grandly, the bike dashed forward as if kicking off the vertical wall.

Next, Pard-san also started running up while hardly making a sound with Raker on her back. Her savage feline-like legs stuck precisely to the tower surface, and her appearance as she ran was like that of a cat galloping across a tree trunk.

Suddenly, unexpected loud noises poured down from above their heads as they started moving up the tower. Those were cheers of support. Various avatars poured down their voices all at once from the last remaining floating spectator stand.

"All right, show us the Burst Linker soul——!"

"Don't lose to that kind of interfering bastard——!"

"Do your best~, Leopard-sama~~!"

"Karasu, you really fought well earlier——!"

As some of that cheering was aimed at Silver Crow, Haruyuki unconsciously looked up at the sky.

Those guys must have seen Haruyuki summon the forbidden Enhanced Armament, the «Armor of Catastrophe». Moreover, he had even considered massacring those hundreds of gallery viewers earlier due to that power. But, he didn't hear any voices condemning him.

They might have simply not noticed the truth of these events yet. But, even so, those cheers thrown at him warmly soaked into Haruyuki's chest.

It seemed as if the ascent of the spectator stand was set up so that it was synchronized with the shuttle in the lead, as the gallery viewers didn't follow after them. The giant stand, as well as the forms of Kuroyukihime, Takumu and Chiyuri waving their hands beneath it grew distant in the blink of an eye, and finally melted away into the silver shining surface plates of the elevator, disappearing from view.

For a while, only the sound of the heavy engine and the soft pitter-patter of footsteps could be heard in space more than 3,000 km above the ground. As if the great destruction not long ago were a lie, the silver-colored Hermes Cord extended upwards beautifully and continued up to the Milky Way through which countless stars flowed.

No one tried to speak, and there was no reason to. All four of them were aiming for the summit of the tower with each of their own deep emotions, and one shared thought in their chest. Haruyuki believed that, and simply yielded himself to the shaking motions of the bike.

Rust Jigsaw had said the word «revolution» just before he left. In other words, that meant that the large scale subversive activity this time was

done under the clear intent of the «Acceleration Research Society». But, no matter what kind of changed visited Accel World after this, it would never change. The important things would definitely remain. Because right now, members from three different opposing legions were working together and aiming for a single goal.

—As long as I don't forget this truth, I won't lose to the temptation of the «armor» again.

When Haruyuki muttered that, no voice responded in return this time.

They kept running up the tower like that for some time.

Eventually, a line of small dots of light that weren't stars appeared up ahead of them. Surrounding the Hermes Cord as its form faded away into jet-black space above, the blue lights formed a beautiful ring.

"...It looks like that's the goal, the top station."

Ash Roller muttered that and slowed down the bike's speed.

"I was able to go quite far thanks to the gravity being weak here, but this far is my limit. How about you, Leopard-nee-san?"

"Me too."

The two of them lightly nodded at each other, and looked at the other people riding with them respectively over their shoulders.

"The rest is up to you, Crow.....Also, regardless of the method you used, you showed extreme guts in your battle against that rust bastard. A severe situation may come after this, but don't lose heart."

After Ash Roller said that in a seemingly embarrassed tone, Haruyuki deeply nodded, and somehow managed to say one sentence.

"Th...Thank you very much."

"Yeah. —And don't forget my share, you crow bastard!"

On their right, Blood Leopard spoke some very short words to Raker.

"Raker. I have only one thing to say.....Welcome back, «ICBM»."

Raker gently patted her back and gave a similar short response.

".....I'm back, «Bloody Kitty»."

When their respective greetings were over, Haruyuki unfolded the wings on his back.

Due to Jigsaw's incarnate attacks, his special technique gauge was also completely filled. He lightly vibrated his fins, and rose up without a sound from the bike's tandem seat.

He held out his right hand, and firmly grasped Raker's own held out left hand. With just that, her very lightweight avatar separated from Leopard's back and nestled up to Haruyuki.

It seemed that the bike's and Leopard's special technique gauges had finally run out at this point. Both quickly slowed down. Haruyuki turned around to fly backwards and saw the two of them off.

"See ya! Make sure to properly escort master, Crow!"

"CU."^[53]

Their tires and legs halted, and for a moment remained still on the tower surface—and then they fell off it.

Pulled by the gravity of the big blue Earth below, Ash Roller and Blood Leopard slowly started falling downwards. If this were the real world, there would be no atmosphere at an orbit of this height, but it seemed that atmospheric friction damage was set up in Accel World, and so their two avatars were wrapped in orange light.

Their silhouettes rapidly grew distant while pulling bright tails behind them like shooting stars, and then finally disappeared in a burst of strong light.

"...Thank you."

Bowing his head deeply towards the two of them as they returned to reality, Haruyuki then turned around to face the summit of the Hermes Cord once again.

There was still quite a lot of distance until the top station illuminated by the blue ring. There was a delicate line between whether they could reach it or not even with their flight abilities combined. However, Haruyuki

thought it was no longer important whether they could reach the goal or not. Three teams had pulled together and did their best. That was the most important thing in this race.

"...Let's go. Master, climb onto my back..."

When Haruyuki said that to the sky-blue avatar holding his hands, Fuuko smiled slightly.

"Since we're like this anyway, please carry me from the front. The two of us are finally alone together, after all."

"Eh...Ye...Yes."

Nodding nervously, Haruyuki placed his arms under her back with her booster attached and her slender legs which cut off at the knees. Raker also wrapped her hands around Haruyuki's neck.

"Th...Then, let's go!"

Declaring that out loud to hide his embarrassment, Haruyuki vibrated the wings on his back.

In order to reduce the consumption of his special technique gauge, Haruyuki limited his thrust to minimum power. There weren't any opponents to fight anymore anyway. Their two avatars left a trail of pale silver light behind them as they started ascending up quietly.

The two of them flew through the silent world, only watched over by the countless stars above. Perhaps it was his imagination, but Haruyuki felt as

if the light of the sun shining from the upper right increased in softness as well. Only a small shadow ran parallel to them along the surface of the smoothly curving Hermes Cord.

Neither of them tried to speak for a while.

But eventually, Fuuko, with her forehead leaning against the right side of Haruyuki's chest, whispered while closing her dark red eye lenses halfway.

".....I've dreamt of...this view for a long time...but at the same time, I also feared it somewhere in my heart..."

Despite the atmosphere being infinitely thin, a faint wind still blew through, and swayed her bluish silver hair. Brushing aside her forelocks gently with her right hand's fingers, Fuuko continued speaking.

"Going «beyond the sky» was an unfulfilled dream for me. In order to fulfill that dream, I sacrificed everything. My ability to fight...my responsibilities as the sub-head of Nega Nebulas...and my friendship with Sacchan. I threw them all away and shouldered huge crimes, and yet even then my hand did not reach the sky...When I realized that...I might have been just a little relieved. 'With this, I'm released from the deep-seated obsession that stirred me. Now, I should just stay on the top of that tower by myself, forgotten by everyone, and look at Accel World's ever-changing view from there'...is what I thought..."

Raker gave a faint smile on her lips and closed her eyes. Her expression was incredibly calm, but Haruyuki saw very small grains of light—tears shining like diamonds appear at the corner of her eyes.

".....My dream was too heavy for my shoulders. But, even after dropping it off my shoulders when I could no longer bear it, I couldn't abandon it. When that dream, which I continued cherishing in my hands as if protecting embers on the verge of being extinguished...was inherited by the small Karasu-san that suddenly appeared in my yard on a certain day...I was just so happy...Now, I'll say the thanks that I haven't been able to say all this time. Thank you, Crow...no, Haruyuki-san."

After stroking Haruyuki's cheeks with her left hand as he widened his eyes—Fuuko suddenly spoke in a clear tone.

"You carried me all the way here, but—I do not have the right to visit this race's goal, the true place beyond the sky. Let's switch roles. I'll carry you as far as I can fly. From there, please aim for the goal. That is my duty as one who gave up on that dream, and your right as one who continued aiming for the sky far more strongly and earnestly than I did...Now, Karasu-san. Let me down here."

In response to her instructions—

Haruyuki gently, but decisively shook his head.

"No. That's wrong, Raker-san."

"Eh.....?"

"You didn't give up on your dream. The sky you aimed for is far, far higher than what I can reach. I'll prove it to you now. I...came all the way here, to the summit of the Hermes Cord, in order to transmit that to you."

Cutting off his words there, Haruyuki suddenly vibrated his wings at full power.

His metal fins were wrapped in a dazzling white light. A high-pitched resonance sound occurred, and a strong propulsive force wrapped around the two of them. The stars on either side flowed past them in long lines. However—

His full power rush only continued for a few seconds.

The vibrating sounds of his wings quickly faded and their luminescence also disappeared. The gauge wasn't exhausted. Although his fins were trembling violently, they didn't produce any thrust. When even the force of their inertia eventually vanished and they stopped ascending, Haruyuki spoke while smiling at Fuuko in his arms.

"My wings can't fly any further than here. The atmosphere is too thin. My flight ability produces thrust by striking the air with the vibrations of my fins. That's why, when I'm this high up, no matter how much I vibrate my wings, I can't advance forward. This really is a game that fusses over the details of abilities too much..."

Fuuko widened her eyes, and listened to him in silence. Gazing at her beautiful dark red eyes, Haruyuki finally turned the words that had continued to heat up inside his chest for a long, long time into proper sounds.

"But...But, your wings, «Gale Thruster» is a jet-type propulsion device. Even in this world without air, you...only you can fly. Then, why are your

wings in the form of a booster...? It's because, from the beginning, you never looked the sky, but only beyond it. You wished for a place much, much higher than the clouds or stratosphere...in other words, this world of stars. —That avatar of yours was..."

After closing his mouth once here and sucking in a deep breath underneath his helmet, Haruyuki spoke in a trembling but clear voice.

"It was created for the sake of flying in this world. Sky Raker^[54], you are originally a space battle-type duel avatar."

Those words spread through the thin atmosphere, dissolved away, and disappeared.

Fuuko widened her glittering dark red eyes greatly. But she didn't say anything and just, just continued staring back at Haruyuki.

Eventually, she quietly turned away her face and looked down at her feet. Haruyuki also turned his eyes to look in the same direction.

As if supporting the steel tower towering up towards infinity—the Hermes Cord, a huge blue planet spread out beneath them.

It was the Earth. Illuminated by the sunlight from the right, it was dyed in beautiful gradations of color that sank from blue through indigo to black. With those colors in the background, pure white clouds drew complex patterns across it, and continents carved complex edged along the circumference.



Fuuko held out her right hand, and pointed it towards the right hemisphere which curved loosely, at the boundary line where it met with jet-black space.

When Haruyuki focused his eyes, he saw a thin blue veil there that wrapped around the surface as if protecting it from the coldness of space. Compared to the scale of the planet and the universe, its brightness was too dim.

".....That line of ephemeral sky blue is....."

Fuuko's whisper brushed against Haruyuki's mind as if it were a thought itself.

"What I aimed for, dreamt of, sometimes even hated...and everything of the sky that I gave up on....."

This time, large tears overflowed and rolled down from her sunset-colored eyes, and softly drifted away into space. Eventually, those drops of water would be pulled down by the minimum gravity here and return to the planet's blue ocean.

Fuuko looked at Haruyuki once again, held out her left hand as well, and then wrapped both her arms around Silver Crow's neck and tightly, tightly held him. In his ear, she spoke some words as if carving them into him.

"Thank you, Karasu-san. I'm truly glad that I was able to come here...and was able to see this view. I finally realized it now. What kept these legs

from returning...wasn't my obsession, but fear. I was afraid of knowing the hugeness of the sky...and of my dream ending. But, I don't need that anymore. After all..."

Haruyuki also unconsciously spoke out the next words along with her.

"This world is infinite."

Fuuko smiled slightly next to his ear, and suddenly pressed her lips onto the side of Haruyuki's helmet. Like that, her lips slide along it until she reached his mouth, and then she slowly pulled away.

"Eh, ah, umm."

Haruyuki frantically shook his head with a vigor that spoiled the situation, and then Raker's smile turned mischievous.

"Since it was over your helmet, Sacchan will probably forgive it."

Changing her expression, she then said in a firm voice—

"Truly, thank you, Karasu-san. I'll...be going now."

".....Yes!!"

With a strong nod, Haruyuki supported Fuuko's body with his hands and softly set her adrift into space. Raker stroked his arm and touched his hand with her fingers, before letting go.

Responding with a silent nod of her own—the sky blue avatar looked up straight up towards zenith.

The blue ring illuminating the top station of the Hermes Cord just a little further away could already be clearly seen. Further beyond it was a cluster of artificial lights blinking faintly. That was surely the geostationary orbital station lying 38,000 km beyond it.

Fuuko swung her thin hands to the sides of her body, and tiny flames erupted from the jet exhaust of the elegant Enhanced Armament «Gale Thruster» equipped on her back.

Since there was almost no gravity in this world, her avatar started to slowly ascend even with that small amount of thrust. Without turning back, Sky Raker gradually increased her speed. Growing farther away. Farther away.

—And then, Haruyuki definitely saw it.

Particles of blue light gathered on the cut-off ends of her half-lost legs, condensed, and formed two beautiful lines. Their surface, transparent like glass, was gradually restored to the same sky blue color as the avatar's main body from her knees.

Moderate calves, and shins that smoothly extended out from them. Feet heels wearing high heel shoes, and sharp tiptoes. They all glittered brightly in the sunlight.

".....Ah, ah....."

A quiet voice leaked out from Haruyuki's throat. At the same time, hot liquid overflowed from his eyes.

In the center of his blurred field of vision filled with the light of the stars, Sky Raker, who had finally returned to her form from three years ago—no, to her true form after who knows how much accelerated time in Accel World, flew and pierced through the jet-black darkness. As if dancing, as if swimming, she fluttered forward at a supple acceleration.

At this point, the energy of Haruyuki's wings that had held him here until now against the force of gravity finally ran out.

Defying the virtual gravity as it gently drew his avatar downwards, Haruyuki held up his right hand as far as he could.

Between his fingers, the light of the thruster became a big blue star, and drew a cross of light across the sky.

Chapter 11

“The previous Chrome Disaster’s...«wire»...?”

Halting her glass in midair as she was bringing it to her mouth, Kuroyukihime repeated Haruyuki’s words in a dumbfounded tone.

“Yes...I can’t think of anything else besides that...”

Haruyuki looked at Fuuko, Takumu and Chiyuri who were all similarly at a loss for words, and then nodded as if hanging his head.

Sunday, June 9, 12:15 PM. It had only been ten minutes since all five legion members returned to the real world, where only a short amount of time had passed, on the sofas in the Arita home’s living room.

Of course, at first, they had all shook each other’s hands and had rejoiced at having overcome many troubles and brilliantly won—even if the prize points had been equally divided in three shares with the Red and Green teams as well—the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race». They all praised each other for having fought well, and gave a toast with glasses of Oolong tea.

However, after having finished taking about the victory for a little while, a heavy subject had to be put on the table of conversation. In other words—about Silver Crow’s «transformation into Chrome Disaster».

Though, no one condemned or blamed him for having summoned the armor in the first place. Right from the beginning, Kuroyukihime admitted

that she might have done the same if she were placed in the same situation as him. However, there was one matter they had to clarify no matter what. That was the mystery of how that armor had reappeared, no, restored.

Five months earlier, Haruyuki, Takumu and Kuroyukihime had accepted the request of the Red King Scarlet Rain, and fought the fifth generation Chrome Disaster in the Unlimited Neutral Field. At the conclusion of the battle, the armor had finally been destroyed, and Cherry Rook who had summoned it was also «executed» by the hands of the Red King.

Just before everything had ended and they returned to the real world from the Leave Point in Ikebukuro Sunshine City, everyone there on that occasion had opened their item storage and confirmed that the Armor of Catastrophe hadn't been sent over to any of them. Of course, Haruyuki also clearly remembered that his opened item window had been completely blank.

That's why, Silver Crow shouldn't have been able to summon Chrome Disaster now.

However, in reality, Haruyuki had instantly killed the formidable enemy Rust Jigsaw with the fearsome power of the armor.

The only explanation for that inconsistency was a small thing from that hard battle in Ikebukuro that Haruyuki miraculously remembered in the middle of the discussion—a certain phenomenon that he hadn't paid any attention to at all until now.

"Err...I think senpai, who directly fought the fifth generation Disaster, remembers, but..."

Tightly grasping the glass of now completely lukewarm Oolong tea in both his hands, Haruyuki haltingly spoke out his idea.

"That guy had a false flight ability by drawing duel opponents and objects up to him with super-thin hook wires released from either of his hands, or conversely by attaching his wires to parts of the terrain and pulling himself towards them. His movements couldn't be predicted at all...I had no choice but to intentionally let myself get hit by his hook wire on my back in order to prevent him from running away into the portal."

While saying that, Haruyuki remembered the shock, the metallic clang, and also the cold feeling of the sharp hook when it hit his back.

"After being connected to him through the wire, I pulled Chrome Disaster up to a high altitude with my wings, and then finished him off with a dive kick. At that time, the main body of Disaster was certainly destroyed, but...the wire broke off from him due to the impact...The end of that wire remained...attached to my back...I can't confirm what happened to that wire when we returned home through the portal."

As Haruyuki cut off his words there, Kuroyukihime whispered in a dumbfounded tone.

"The previous Chrome Disaster's...«wire»...?"

"Yes...I can't think of anything else besides that..."

As Haruyuki hanged his head, Takumu's voice, similarly blurred with shock, reached his ears.

"B-But, Haru. Isn't it impossible for parts that fall off duel avatars...to remain in existence while attached to other avatars when they Burst Out...?"

"I-I've also never heard of such a thing."

Chiyuri frowned strongly and shook her head.

"I've also finished duels with broken swords or spears still stuck to me in the past, but they were all gone when I entered the next duel, you know!?"

"But...there's no other possible explanation. B-Besides, when I summoned Disaster earlier, a long tail was created from my back at first. That spot is definitely the place where I was pierced by the hook wire."

—And, whenever that mysterious voice spoke to me many times over these past few months, the same spot on my back definitely ached as well.

He didn't speak out that last thought. Because it was far too terrifying. If that ache was also something that remained due to Chrome Disaster's wire, then that meant...wounds received in Accel World also continued to affect the living body as well. That was the one thing that was impossible no matter how he thought about it. It didn't make any reasonable sense.

As the three childhood friends looked into each other and fell into silence, Fuuko, who had remained silent until now, hesitatingly spoke up.

"...Actually...«foreign substances that remain after duels» is a phenomenon that can occur according to the system."

"Eh?"

The three of them turned their gazes towards her with a jerk, and Raker looked around at them and explained.

"In other words, an attack with a «parasitic attribute». Although it's incredibly rare, there seem to be cases where a «curse»-type power reaches its extreme limit, and it acquires such an attribute. However, the only such cases I know about are abilities that turn a small animal-type object into parasites that then steal an enemy's sight and sound, or that insert a bomb into an opponent and then make it explode with some kind of trigger..."

Continuing after her, Kuroyukihime murmured in a low voice.

"...An Enhanced Armament that turns a part of itself into a parasite and escapes the main body's destruction...I've never heard of such a thing...But...If what Haruyuki-kun says is true, it could explain a part of Disaster's legend."

Putting down her glass and twining together her fingers on top of her crossed legs, the Black King continued.

"The Armor of Catastrophe always leaves its owner and transfers itself to someone else's storage with 100% certainty. That kind of percentage isn't possible under the usual ownership transfer rules, but at times when it

can't transfer itself as an item, it survives by turning a part of itself into a «parasite»...If I think of it that way, it sounds convincing..."

"Ye...Yes, certainly..."

Parasite. While his entire body shuddered at the horrifying image conjured by that word, Haruyuki nodded. Then, he thought of something, and hurriedly asked a question.

"B-But, if parasitism is a system ability, shouldn't there be a method to cancel it?"

"Yes...there is. Although normal parasitic attacks disappear over the course of a long time, it should be possible to cancel it with a «purification» ability as well. —However, the ability's level would need to be the same or higher than the attack being purified...If there's an ability-user who could purify a parasitic ability that can even regenerate itself completely from the cut-off end of a wire, then that would be..."

There, Kuroyukihime exchanged a look with Fuuko, and the corners of both their mouths tightened. However, her face immediately returned to normal and she spoke in a clear tone.

"All right, I will take measures for dealing with this case. It'll take a bit of time."

"—Now that I think about it."

Continuing the conversation, Fuuko spoke.

"When Karasu-san stayed over at my house..."

Immediately, Kuroyukihime, Takumu and Chiyuri all repeated back her words together all at once.

""""Stayed over?""""

"I'm talking about in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Back then, when I caressed Karasu-san's back."

""""Caressed?""""

"I'm talking about when we were in our avatar forms. Geez, I can't continue speaking if you're all like this...Back then, I also felt it slightly. That there was something of a different nature on one spot of his back...If I had only investigated it more deeply back then..."

"H-Hey, Raker, just what would you have done in order to investigate it?"

As Kuroyukihime's right cheek twitched, Fuuko smiled sweetly at her.

"That's a secret, of course."

As the atmosphere in the room finally came undone with this exchange, Haruyuki let out a sigh. Raising his head, Haruyuki declared in a firm voice.

"Umm, it's true that I lost to its temptation once, but the armor disappeared again thanks to Chiyu's ability...besides, even if it continues to remain as a parasite in my avatar even now, it should be fine as long as

I don't summon it again. Of course, I want to quickly have it purified, though."

"...Yeah, that's right. I believe in you. Of course, you were also saved by Chiyuri-kun's ability, but at the same time, you rejected the armor with your own will. That is something none of the people who wore the armor up until now have been able to do."

Kuroyukihime said that and smiled, but her face immediately became clouded in concern next.

"Wha...What's wrong, senpai?"

"Hmm...But...this matter may not end as just as our problem. Haruyuki-kun, when you summoned the armor and fought Jigsaw, hundreds of gallery viewers from the stands saw you, right?"

"Eh...yeah..."

"Then, even though if you only used it in one battle, the rumor that Nega Nebulas' Silver Crow has become the sixth generation Chrome Disaster owner has probably already spread across Accel World...After this, those who express drastic opinions may come out..."

"Eh...senpai, what do you mean by drastic?"

As Chiyuri tilted her head, Takumu quietly explained.

"In other words, that Haru should be «punished», or «executed»...opinions like that."

"Eeh!! Tha...That's way too messed up!! After all, Haru didn't do anything wrong!!"

Chiyuri shouted indignantly, and Fuuko softly soothed her with her hand from beside her.

"Bell, everyone present here believes that. But...in Accel World, there are many forces that strongly oppose Nega Nebulas."

"But, even so, that's just horrible..."

As Chiyuri frowned sadly from the bottom of her heart, Haruyuki strained to smile at her with all his might while feeling something well up inside his chest.

"It's okay, Chiyu. The legions of the other Kings besides Prominence have already been frenzied against us until now anyway. Even if another fire for us to face has lit up now, we'll face it together."

"Yes, exactly."

Nodding deeply, Kuroyukihime then stood up. With her skirt fluttering, she moved over to the big window on the south side of the room. After turning around and gazing at her four subordinates one by one with sparkling eyes, the Black King firmly spoke.

"—Most likely, in a few days, a meeting between the Seven Kings will be called for the first time in two and a half years. Although the first topic of discussion should be about taking measures regarding the concealment of the Incarnate System being completely shattered due to Rust Jigsaw

and the «Acceleration Research Society», the subject of Haruyuki-kun's transformation into Disaster—will surely be brought up by the Radio or someone else there anyway. But, no matter what kind of demands they make, I will protect you, Haruyuki-kun. I'll give them an all-out war just as I desire. This plan...does no one have any objections to it?"

"No objections!"

Fuuko, Takumu and Chiyuri immediately said that in chorus.

".....Thank you."

Haruyuki could only whisper that in a trembling voice.

—I'm truly glad that I'm here right now. I'll also definitely protect this place...these comrades of mine. No matter who the enemy, no matter what the adversity, I'll protect them till the end.

Just as he was engraving that thought into his heart. Chiyuri's curious voice entered his ears.

"...By the way, Kuroyuki-senpai, why are you wearing your uniform even though it's Sunday?"

GIKU

Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime both froze.

"That's because..."

Fuuko, after giving her usual Raker-smile and sending a Raker-wink their way, spoke.

"...Sacchan's closet is filled with nothing but a mountain of uniforms."

After that, they replenished their sweets and drinks at the ground floor shopping mall, and once again held a victory celebration.

After they made lots of noise, talked together, and finally finished cleaning everything up together, the time was around 6 PM.

Chiyuri and Takumu went home first due to their earlier curfews, and several minutes after that, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko also headed to the front door together.

As Kuroyukihime was bending down to put on her shoes, Fuuko spoke in a small voice.

".....Sacchan."

"Hmm?"

Kuroyukihime stood back up and turned around, her black hair swishing.

"What's wrong, Fuuko?"

Taking a step away from Haruyuki next to her as he stood to see them off, Fuuko grasped her hands together in front of her body, as if searching for the words to use.

After a while, she started nervously speaking in a tone unusually blurred with childishness—as if they had returned to being elementary school children.

"Umm...Umm, at first, I thought I should stay quiet about it until our next «duel» and surprise you then, but...as I thought, I should say it to you right away..."

She sucked into a deep breath.

And then, the girl, who had spent a long, long time as a hermit in Accel World, cherishingly spoke a single sentence that marked the end of her days of solitude.

"Umm. My legs, have returned."

Jet-black eyes widened. A short breath leaked out from slightly opened lips.

Then, Kuroyukihime changed her shocked expression to one that was half tear-filled, and half smiling.

".....I see."

Whispering and nodding, she spoke out one more time.

"I see...You found it again. The thing you lost that day."

"Yes."

Nodding her head with a gulp, Fuuko took one, two steps towards Kuroyukihime. She held out her arms, drew the stock-still Kuroyukihime to her, and quietly hugged her tightly.

Unlike the time they did so two months ago on the Shinjuku Southern Terrace, the two of them didn't say anything further. They just quietly, gently, held each other. Haruyuki felt that they were connecting far deeper than linking their Neuro Linkers with a cable could, connecting with each other's souls, so to speak. Haruyuki heard the sound of the glass wall separating the two of them fall away.

Eventually, Kuroyukihime slowly raised her head, and gazed straight at Haruyuki with wet eyes and smiled.

".....The enormity of the miracle you created...cannot be conveyed at all with words. Thank you, Haruyuki-kun."

Fuuko also turned around and smiled broadly with tear marks shining on her cheeks.

"Karasu-san. I will never forget...how you found the path to the Hermes Cord, invited me, and brought me to that place beyond the sky at last."

Haruyuki gave a short, gradual shake of his head at their words.

"No, that's too much. I...I just thought of it a little at first...It was everyone in the legion, Ash-san and Pard-san who made it a reality..."

As he mumbled that out in a low voice even he couldn't hear well, he thought 'Uwah, I've spoiled the whole situation with this', and pressed his back against the wall and tried to hide himself there.

Kuroyukihime and Fuuko exchanged a look, smiled at the same time, and then suddenly walked towards Haruyuki.

“Eh, umm, err.”

He looked up at each of their faces and tried to use his ‘fading into the wall’ skill even further, but before he could, Kuroyukihime’s right arm and Fuuko’s left arm came forward and held up Haruyuki from either side of him, and then—

There were no memories of what happened after that.

(END)

Author's Notes

Kawahara Reki here. Thank you very much for picking up “Accel World Volume 5: Floating Bridge in Starlight”.

There’s something I must confess first. I had already described the existence of the «orbital elevator» in the world of Accel World at the beginning of Volume 3, but I hadn’t done any preliminary investigation into the actual technology of it at that point, sorry! I just vaguely wrote it down while thinking “It should be possible to make an orbital elevator by the time of 2047, right?”, but some time later when I thought “Now then, let’s finally make it appear in this volume.” and did some belated research...I was put into an incredibly terrible bind...

In reality, the so-called «orbital elevator» has actually still not gone beyond being a theoretical experiment, and it is unlikely that it can be realized at all in the next 30 years. The detailed reasons for that were explained by Kuroyukihime-senpai in the book, so I’ll omit saying it here, but I turned pale when someone from NASA retorted to me “The counterweight would have to be a small asteroid!”.

Fortunately, I spoke to researchers who have advocated more realistic ideas, and those ideas became the model for the «Hermes Cord» that appears in this volume. Though, it seems there are actually huge problems with the «hypersonic sky hook» that I used as a model...But, I

didn't write any of those problems into the book. So don't pay it any notice.

In any case, I got the precious lesson "Look into the actual materials before writing anything about it!" from this. A new character of a very young age will probably be appearing in the next volume, so I think I'll do my best to investigate into a lot of things and consult with my good friend Professor A-san.

This afterword is being written on April 10th, that is, the deadline for the 17th Dengeki Novel Prize. In other words, a full two years have already passed since I handed in the envelope (if I remember right, it was an Expack) containing my first draft of Accel World to the post office window.

Honestly, when I handed it in back then, I didn't think it would all come thi~~s far after that. Rather, to be frank, I just thought, if I managed to get some prize, that would be the end of it. Really, I have never even thought that would be a new starting point for me, and that I would continue steadily writing these manuscripts for as long as two years...Of course, being able to write them is extremely Mega Lucky~, but sometimes I just feel dazed by it all. Just where does the goal of this thunder road lie?

To my editor Miki-san, who has patiently guided a troubling lost child like me; the illustrator HIMA-san, who I made a lot of trouble for by firing non-stop difficult requests at him as usual; the manga artist Kurusu

Tatsuya-san, who accepted and took over the design drafts for the newly appearing avatars; and all of you who have stuck with me this far, Giga-thank you very much!

2010 December 15th, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ "Arcade" here refers to overhead arches or ceilings that are placed above a street, not the gaming establishment.
2. ↑ Ossu: Japanese greeting that basically means "Hi", but it sounds better when left in the original.
3. ↑ The "Kuroyuki" here is not a mistake; Chiyuri leaves out the "hime" (princess) when she refers to Kuroyukihime, thereby calling her "Black Snow" instead of "Black Snow Princess".
4. ↑ Piano black is basically a very glossy kind of black.
5. ↑ Basically means "good grief" in English.
6. ↑ Kabukicho: Red light district in Shinjuku, Tokyo.
7. ↑ Akasaka Estate (Akasaka Goyouchi): a large forested tract of land that contains the Akasaka Palace.
8. ↑ Both Horn and Shell speak in an exaggerated and rough manner that's hard to translate in English. Just imagine the way a couple of old-style high school delinquents from some anime would speak, and you'll get the idea.
9. ↑ Here, Haruyuki says "Bell" in the regular text, but "Chiyu" in furigana. Since he's speaking in front of other players, I'm leaving it as "Bell".

10. ↑ It says tourmaline in furigana, but the kanji beneath it translates as “electric gem”.
11. ↑ For those who don’t know, Nee-san is a way of saying “big sister”. In this case, though, it’s meant more as a familiar nickname toward an older female acquaintance, the reasons for which are further explained in the next few paragraphs.
12. ↑ The comment here lies in the kanji meaning of Chiyuri’s and Fuuko’s family names, which are “倉嶋” and “倉崎” respectively. Besides the first kanji 倉 they share which is pronounced as “Kura”, the similar-looking second kanjis 嶋 and 崎 each respectively mean “island” and “peninsula/cape of a coast”, two terms that are closely related.
13. ↑ For those who don't notice, this is a reference to the declaration Frost Horn made earlier in the chapter.
14. ↑ The kanji below the English furigana “Area” is “戦域” (battle area).
15. ↑ To finish Kuroyukihime’s purposely cut-short explanation, the “suspension bridge effect” is the psychological phenomenon where a person is in a very frightened state, like if they were on a very high and rickety suspension bridge, and that heart-pounding and adrenaline-filled fear is mistaken for love/passion for another person with them.
16. ↑ Brain Burst Program

17. ↑ Kuroyukihime's pause here and her change of words is better understood in Japanese. At the end of the first line, she says "ki", which is the beginning of "kimi" (you), while in this line she changes it to "kibarashi" (recreation). I'm sorry I couldn't make this evident in the English translation.
18. ↑ Demonic city: Written as 魔都 (mato) in Japanese, it is sometimes used as a nickname for Tokyo, or more rarely, for Shinjuku specifically, which fits in this case.
19. ↑ 5 o'clock, 34 minutes and 42 seconds.
20. ↑ NP: No Problem.
21. ↑ This is one of those places where the use of English letters makes it hard to translate effectively. Here, Haruyuki stutters as he copies Pard's use of capital letter abbreviations, starting by saying "ke" before properly saying "K", short for "okay".
22. ↑ SE: Sound Effect.
23. ↑ The kanji beneath the furigana English name "Strato Shooter" is "超空の流星", which translates roughly as "shooting star of the hyper-sky".
24. ↑ ICBM: Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile
25. ↑ Like in the first chapter of Vol 4, the bold part of the text indicates that the text here has switched over to using katakana instead of

hiragana, most likely indicating that the voice has become rougher and darker.

26. ↑ "Utan" is presumably short for "Orangutan".
27. ↑ Master (shishou) in this case means more along the lines of "teacher", but master sounds better when speaking to someone, so it's left like that.
28. ↑ Jack-knifing: basically, when a vehicle like a trailer (or in this case, a motorbike) suddenly brakes, causing the back section to turn at an acute angle from the front section/wheel.
29. ↑ Yes, that's literally what Ash Roller says in English, "Tera-Nothing". No idea what that's supposed to mean.
30. ↑ Karasu: Japanese for "crow". Left in Japanese to differentiate when they say "Crow" in English.
31. ↑ GM: Game Master.
32. ↑ This is a complicated subject of physics that even I don't fully understand. For a jargon-filled explanation, go to this link^[1].
33. ↑ Haruyuki is babbling here, so the lack of commas is on purpose to demonstrate his rushed speech.
34. ↑ AR: Altered Reality. Similar in a sense to Virtual reality, but involves overlaying virtual images or words onto one's vision of the real world instead of creating an entirely digital environment.

35. ↑ “Soft” and “hard” in this case are basically referring to two different kinds of martial art or just basic fighting styles: “hard” attacks focus on power to deal direct damage, while “soft” attacks focus on gentle and flowing motions that utilize precise technique instead of pure strength to deal more indirect damage.
36. ↑ Bolero jacket: a short tailored jacket similar to a shrug or cardigan
37. ↑ Karasu (鴉) is Japanese for crow
38. ↑ “Sacchan” is Fuuko’s nickname for Kuroyukihime. It combines with the friendly suffix “-chan” with “Sa”, which is presumably the first syllable of Kuroyukihime’s real name
39. ↑ A vague noise to convey assent
40. ↑ Referring to the Purple King in an informal/rude manner
41. ↑ This paragraph is rather complicated to translate properly. For one thing, I had to add more “...” than were actually present, due to sentences cutting off before the verbs were mentioned. Also, very peculiarly, the last sentence ends without a period like I showed in this translation, suggesting that, instead of being interrupted or pausing like usual, Haruyuki’s thoughts literally just cut off there without warning. There are a variety of psychological interpretations for this, which I will leave to your imaginations.
42. ↑ Nega-Bu: Shortened nickname for “Nega Nebulas”

43. ↑ In this paragraph, everyone has their real names in furigana above their avatar names, so I duplicated that here.
44. ↑ Here, Pard-san actually does use the English greeting «'sup?», the popular abbreviation of “What’s up?”.
45. ↑ As always, Ash Roller is speaking in terrible Engrish. The kanji he uses here means “losing dog” (like the expression “a dog running away with its tail between its legs”) or just plain “loser” if you want to simplify it, but in the furigana, Ash Roller uses a literal English translation that’s grammatically incorrect. I left it as is because it’s just Ash’s style of speaking at this point.
46. ↑ Ash is simply slurring Karasu (Crow) into Garasu here.
47. ↑ Promi: Shortened for “Prominence”
48. ↑ Kanji beneath English phrase “Calling Gale” are “疾風召喚”, which basically means “gale summon”.
49. ↑ Beneath the English furigana “Rust Order” are the kanji “錆びる秩序”, which translate as «rusted order/system”.
50. ↑ The kanji below the English furigana “Wind Veil» are “庇護風陣”, which translate as “protective wind encampment”.
51. ↑ Here, Haruyuki switches from the “I” pronoun “boku”, which how younger boys usually address themselves, to “ore” instead, which is an older and rougher way of referring to oneself.

52. ↑ Beneath the English furigana “Rust Touch” are the kanji “錆びる 掌握”, which translated as “rusted grasp”.
53. ↑ “CU” is Pard’s abbreviation for “see you”.
54. ↑ Here, Sky Raker’s English name is put in furigana unlike normal, and the phrase “空を見晴らす人” is put beneath it. This translates as “Person who commands the view of the sky”.