



アクセル・ワールド8

— 運命の連星 —

「着装……《ザ・ディステイニー》」
《ISSキット》に侵された《シアン・
パイル》ことタクムへ、自分の思いを伝
えるべく対戦を挑んだハルユキ。しかし、
破格の力を得たタクムの前に、為す術も
なく倒れる。

体力ゲージが残り数ドットとなったハ
ルユキだが、謎の山吹色のアバターの誘
いを起点に、《加速世界》最強の強化外
装をジェネレートする。

「……それが、《災禍の鎧》本来の姿か
い？」

光の力を得た《クロウ》と、闇の力に
染まった《パイル》、二人の心意が強く
共鳴し合い、そして、激突した。

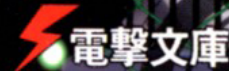
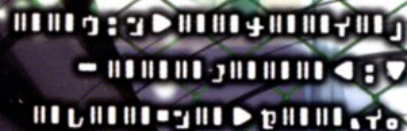
それぞれの想いが絡み合い、ひとつの
大きな物語へと収束したその先にあるも
のは——！

08

運命の連星

川原 礫
イラスト/HIMA

accel world 08





9784048705509



1920193005707

ISBN978-4-04-870550-9

C0193 ¥570E



発行 ● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: **本体 570 円**

※消費税が別に加算されます



アクセル弁当 ⑥ れき



かわはら れき
川原 礫

上の四コマを描くのに、超ひさびさに時間単位のデッドライン締め切りを経験しました。緊張で吐き気はするわぼんぼん痛くなるわで大変でした。次はもっと余裕を持って描こう……と確か前回のときも思ったような……

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド1~8
ソードアート・オンライン1~7

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 08

運命の連星

川原 礫
イラスト/HIMA
デザイン/ビィビィ



SILVER CROW

A YOUNG BOY AT THE BOTTOM OF HIS SCHOOL'S SOCIAL CASTE, HARUYUKI'S, DUEL AVATAR. CONTAMINATED BY «THE DISASTER ARMOR».

"PRAY, THAT MY HAND REACHES TAKU!"

"HARU, I WANT TO GET TA-KUN BACK"

"....."

CYAN PILE

HARUYUKI'S BEST FRIEND, TAKU'S, DUEL AVATAR. MEMBER OF "NEGA NEBULAS"





CHIYURI

CONTROLLER OF THE
DUEL AVATAR LIME BELL
BELONGING TO "NEGA NEBULAS".
HARUYUKI'S CHILD HOOD FRIEND


"WH-WHAT
ARE YOU
DOING!"

KUROYUKIHIME

UMESATO MIDDLE SCHOOL'S
STUDENT COUNCIL VICE PRESIDENT
WHO OPERATES THE BLACK KING BLACK LOTUS

"I-I'M-
I'M S-
I'M SORRY!
HU-HURRY
AND WIPE
IT OR ELSE
IT WILL
GET
STAINED"

"HMM, I
SEE.
THEN LET
ME WIPE
IT"



SHINOMIYA UTAI

CONTROLLER OF THE
DUEL AVATAR 'ARDOR MAIDEN'
BELONGING TO THE OLD "NEGA NEBULAS"
FOURTH GRADE ELEMENTARY STUDENT

"THERE IS
NO NEED
TO WORRY
ARITA-SAN.
WE ARE
PROBABLY
OUT OF
VIEW OF
THE SOCIAL
CAMERAS!"

"SHI..
NOMIYA...
SAN...?"

TRILEAD TETRAOXIDE

A YOUNG SAMURAI TYPE AVATAR
MET INSIDE THE IMPERIAL PALACE

"N,NO...
ME
TOO,
MEETING
WITH
LEAD.."

"...SO
THAT IS
YOUR
TRUE
FORM,
CROW-SAN.
TO BE
ABLE TO
MEET YOU,
I'M
REALLY
GLAD.."



The legendary Enhanced Armaments derived from the Big Dipper—"The Ursa Major Armaments"—are....?

Nicknamed the "Seven Sacred Treasures (Seven Arcs)" the strongest Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World starting from the stars on the Big Dipper's dipper.

Divine weapon of the First Star (Alpha) «Tensuu», Great Sword «The Impulse»
Divine weapon of the Second Star (Beta) «Tensen», Bishop's Staff »The Tempest»
Divine weapon of the Third Star (Gamma) «Tenki», Great Shield «The Strife»
Divine weapon of the Fourth Star (Delta) «Tenken», form/shape unknown «The Luminary»
Divine weapon of the Fifth Star (Epsilon) «Gyokkou», Straight Sword «The Infinity»
Divine weapon of the Sixth Star (Zeta) «Kaiyou», Full Body Armour «The Destiny»
Divine weapon of the Seventh Star (Eta) «Youkou», form/shape unknown
«The Fluctuating Light»

Are thus organized

Those derived from the laddle's First Star to the Fourth Star are spread East, West, South, and North of the Palace in four large dungeons, Shinjuku, Shiba Park, Tokyo Dome, and Tokyo subway.

At the present, the Great Sword from Shinjuku «The Impulse» is held by the Blue King - Blue Knight -, the Staff «The Tempest» from the Tokyo subway is held by the Purple King - Purple Thorn -, and the Great Shield «The Strife» from the Tokyo Dome is held by the Green King - Green Grandee - The owner of «The Luminary» from Shiba Park is unknown.

The Fifth Star to the Seventh Star which compose the Dipper's handle are in the Palace's interior. The Straight Sword «The Infinity» and the Full Body Armour «The Destiny» are possessed by Trilead and Silver Crow respectively. Only "The Fluctuating Light" is enshrined in the deepest room.

Second Star (Beta) «Tensen»
Bishop's Staff «The Tempest»

Third Star (Gamma) «Tenki»
Great Shield «The Strife»

First Star (Alpha) «Tensuu»
Great Sword «The Impulse»

Fourth Star (Delta) «Tenken»
form/shape unknown «The Luminary»

Fifth Star (Epsilon) «Gyokkou»
Straight Sword «The Infinity»

Sixth Star (Zeta) «Kaiyou»
Full Body Armour «The Destiny»

Seventh Star (Eta) «Youkou»
form/shape unknown
«The Fluctuating Light»

ACCEL WORLD⁰⁸
Binary Star of Destiny

Kawahara Reki
Illustration / HIMA
Design / Biibii



- Kuroyukihime = The Student Council Vice-President of Umeshato 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 Umeshato 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).
 - Fuuko = Kurasaki Fuuko. A burst linker that belonged to the old Nega Nebulas. One of the «Four Classical Elements». 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. Her duel avatar is "Sky Raker" (Level 8).
 - Uiui = Shinomiya Uta. A burst linker that belonged to the old Nega Nebulas. One of the «Four Classical Elements». A fourth-year student in Matsunoki Elementary. She is able to handle not only the high-grade disenchantment command, Purification, but is skilled at far ranged attacks as well. Her duel avatar is "Ardor Maiden" (Level 7).
-
- Neuro Linker = A mobile terminal that establishes a wireless quantum connection to the brain, supporting the five senses, such as sight and hearing.
 - 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.
 - 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.
-
- 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. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are affiliated to this.
 - Disaster Armor = An enhanced armament called Chrome Disaster. When equipped, powerful abilities such as one to absorb the target avatar's HP, Health Absorption (Drain), or one to act before enemies' attacks, evading them, Future Prediction, can be used. However, the one equipping it will have their soul tainted by Chrome Disaster, and end up completely taken over.
 - ISS Kit = Short for the IS Mode Study Kit. IS Mode refers to the Incarnate System Mode, and with the aid of this kit, any and all duel avatars are able to utilize the Incarnate System. While it's being used, a Red Eye will get attached somewhere on the avatar, with the Excess Light (Over-Ray) resulting from Incarnate released in the form of a black aura.

■ «Seven Sacred Treasures (Seven Arcs)» = a series of 7 enhanced armaments which are the strongest in the Accelerated World. The items include the large sword, «The Impulse», the staff, «The Tempest», the large shield, «The Strife», one with an unknown appearance, «The Luminary», the straight sword, «The Infinity», the full body armour, «The Destiny» and another with an unknown appearance, «The Fluctuating Light».

▶▶ accel world 08



Chapter 1

“Equip...«The Destiny».”

The voice command emitted from Haruyuki’s mouth quietly vibrated the parched air of the «Scorched Earth» stage.

The distant howling wind, the warning sound emitted by the restlessly blinking HP gauge a few pixels remaining in width, and the crashing sound of the approaching opponent «Cyan Pile» breaking through the heavy walls disappeared as if a switch had been cut off.

In the center of the wide room surrounded by scorched concrete, Haruyuki, who was enveloped in a dense silence, suddenly felt an unbelievably strong sensory signal explode at a point inside his body.

Intense pain.

It was completely as if a searing hot spear had deeply penetrated the area between his shoulder blades. A white halo of light occurred within his field of vision; innumerable sparks ran inside his head. His virtual breathing stopped; even his thoughts became a countless number of fragments and dispersed.

“...Nn...gh...aah...!!”

Haruyuki, who had contorted his entire body back like a bow and was on the verge of letting out a hoarse shout, suddenly became aware of

somebody's voice resounding either very far away or closer than anywhere else.

—**It's useless.**

—**It's already too late to separate my medium and me.**

—**The «Destiny» that guides the «Armor» was able to be set to be unchangeable by much anger, lament, and despair. I only seek blood. Only an ending, only massacre. Only endlessly repeating disaster.**

In his white-filled vision, like a movie folder played in continuous preview mode, a number of fragmented images flashed by one after another.

In all of them, knight-class duel avatars whose entire bodies were covered in blackened silver-colored heavy armor were projected in the center. However, some detailed designs differed.

One had countless teeth growing from the edges of its hood-shaped helmet.

One had a face whose entirety extended forward as if it were some kind of tentacle.

One had long silver hair draping from the bottom of its helmet to its feet.

One spewed crimson flames from its head, which could only be thought of as having the shape of a dragon's head.

And then, there was one who wore its sharply pointed visor low over its eyes and brandished an ominous, large sword.

Haruyuki intuitively realized that they were the successive generations of the «Chrome Disaster». Their forms were different, but their armor colors and the auras of darkness in which they were clad as well as their insane fighting styles were commonly shared. Inside the images, as if aroused by something the knights wielded their swords, using their claws to tear away and their teeth to pierce. In the midst of the duel avatars being slaughtered as if they were not worthy of being opponents, the Chrome Disasters howled and became agitated – and then, they seemed as if they were lamenting something.

At the same time the images disappeared, that voice resounded once again.

—Destroy. Then devour. That is your true desire.

—Devour, steal, become infinitely strong. Until the time you remain all alone on the wastelands of the Accelerated World.

—Until the time of demise.

In the center of his spine, from the precise location where in the past the fifth-generation Disaster's «Wire Hook» had deeply penetrated, a pain resembling pale blue lightning was periodically produced, and it pierced as far as the extremities of his four limbs. But Haruyuki ground his teeth and refused to let out his voice.

If he lost here to the impulse to destroy, everything would have been for naught.

The sorrow of Niko, who had executed her «parent» and closest friend «Cherry Rook» in order to make a sacrifice due to her obligations as a King.

The thoughts of Chiyuri, who had brought back the running amok Haruyuki and had restored the Armor once again to its seed.

The wish of Kuroyukihime, who had extended her hand to Haruyuki, who was cowering at the bottom of the Local Net, and had given him wings by the name of hope.

And the prayer of one girl dwelling in a corner of the Armor, who had been waiting a long, long time—

The pain augmented without limit, and before Haruyuki knew it, it had even transcended his material senses, becoming an overwhelming storm of energy and trying to tear up his consciousness.

If he just called the name «Disaster», it would be easy. Although he understood that, he mustered his remaining mental strength, resisting with all his might.

And, at that moment. From the other side of the incandescent world, far, far away, he had the feeling that another voice had faintly reached him.

...Believe.

...It's okay; if it's you, you'll definitely be able to do it...if it's you, whom I've been waiting for a long, long time...

That voice was unmistakably that of the bright golden yellow girl who had appeared a moment earlier like an illusion. Haruyuki replied with his meager remaining ability to think.

—I'm sorry.

—I'm not the kind of special person who you've been waiting for. I have a mountain of worries and hesitations; I'm always making mistakes; I'm unable to trust others and always run away from them; despite that, if I were by myself I wouldn't be able to walk straight; I'm a miserable guy.

—But, in the current me, there's only one thing I can be proud of.

—I was able to become able to love others again. Not only that, but quite a number of people and anyone too. I still don't like myself, and I still don't trust myself, but I'm probably able to try hard for everyone's sake. Though it's not much, in order to protect the warm place where I belong, I'll do anything I can, I'm sure.

In response to Haruyuki's thought, which resembled a light on the verge of burning out, somebody's voice responded gently.

...That alone is enough.

...Because, that alone is the proof of strength.

Snap; a faint, yet certain something that resembled a cracking sound was produced inside of Haruyuki.

It was not the reverberation of something collapsing. It was a sound of a hard, hard seed bursting from the inside. A sound of birth.

A clear silver color like that of cold, thawing snow overflowed, gushed out, and washed away the pain of the searing heat. Haruyuki opened his eyes wide.

At the fingertips of his one remaining right arm, smooth, shining supplemental armor was being generated. An «Armor» sporting a far purer, truer silver color than Silver Crow's armor color.

The design was reassuring, but there was no ill omen in it. From the back of his hand to his wrist, his upper arm, his elbow, the armor was equipped while resounding with metallic sounds one after another. Each time some reliable weight was added, Haruyuki was filled with an energy double the size of the weight, and his body conversely became lighter.

Haruyuki intuitively understood that this silver Enhanced Armament was the original form of «The Disaster».

The inscription «The Destiny». Zeta, the sixth star of the «Seven Arcs». Surely it was this armor, the Divine Weapon enshrined in the deepest reaches of the Imperial Palace side by side with the fifth star Epsilon, the straight sword «The Infinity».

Once, «someone» in the distant, distant past who succeeded in penetrating the Imperial Palace had procured this Destiny. However, after that, «something»—the «many sad things» mentioned by the bright golden yellow colored girl had occurred; the shape of the Armor had been distorted and had become the «Disaster». The term «verified four Divine Weapons» mentioned by Kurasaki Fuuko and Shinomiya Utai referred to the Blue King's large sword «The Impulse», the Green King's large shield «The Strife», the Purple King's bishop's staff «The Tempest», and one more, «The Disaster» possessed by Haruyuki himself.

If one tried to comprehend the unbelievable abilities concealed in «The Disaster Armor», one could understand. Being one of the «Seven Arcs», while the seventh star Eta still remained untouched, if one considered the fact that Epsilon was also essentially in a sealed state, without exaggeration the Disaster Armor was the strongest Enhanced Armament in the Accelerated World.

Haruyuki was currently trying to summon its original form, the one before its alteration, by calling the Armor's original name.

If he succeeded in doing so, even if he equipped it, it would not interfere with his mind. At the same time, the «Future Prediction Function» used to slaughter easily the formidable enemy «Rust Jigsaw» would not exist, but that ability was not necessary for this fight.

He did not want to triumph over Cyan Pile, who had equipped the «ISS Kit».

He merely wanted to convey something to Takumu, who had continued to blame himself and had finally been ensnared by the abyss of deep despair. How much Arita Haruyuki believed in the person Mayuzumi Takumu, how much he relied on him, and how much he needed him.

In order to deliver the last blow with his fist in which he had put in that emotion. With his remaining scant HP gauge, he wanted to borrow the power to break through that aura of darkness.

As if answering to Haruyuki's wish, the pure silver-colored armor continued its formation. A large-class piece of elbow plate armor was generated, and light extended toward his chest.

—However.

When the armor tried to reach his shoulder, suddenly an intense feeling of resistance was produced. In the interior of his ears, a ferocious howl faintly roared.

Haruyuki realized that that was the will dwelling inside the armor; namely, the voice of the beast by the name of the «Disaster Armor». The beast had not disappeared. It had become enraged by the summoning of only «The Destiny», which was the Enhanced Armament that had become the medium.

Letting out a creaking sound, the silver armor stopped its development at the point where it had covered Haruyuki's right shoulder halfway.

In the left side of his field of vision, a line of system font blinked irregularly. He was able to read as far as YOU EQUIPPED AN ENHANCED ARMAMENT THE..., but all that followed were the letters D, S, and T floating indistinctly.

All the voices and pain went far away and eventually disappeared.

A moment of silence filled the black, sooty space characteristic of the «Scorched Earth» stage corresponding to a portion of the first floor of the B building of his apartment house in the real world. In the center of the dark room, Haruyuki raised his right arm equipped with the new armor and clenched his fist tightly.

Immediately after, while breaking into pieces the wall opposite him crumbled, and a large silhouette appeared from within.

The aura of darkness in which Cyan Pile—Takumu was clad augmented in density. The original light blue armor color was covered and hidden; only the crimson glint of the eye of the «ISS Kit» residing in the Enhanced Armament «Pile Driver» of his right arm glittered vividly.

His thin-slit eye lenses also had changed from their previous light blue color to a dull purple. With those eyes, Takumu stared hard at Haruyuki. Finally, a quiet voice.

“Is that the original form of the «Disaster Armor»?”

Even when spurred on by the urges of destruction and ruin, it seemed he had not lost his discernment. Haruyuki looked down at his right arm covered in the new armor and nodded.

"Uh huh. Though I could only summon one arm's worth..."

"That alone's still an extraordinary feat. You're probably the first to struggle against the power of the «Armor», which has swallowed so many Burst Linkers up until now."

Although Takumu's voice was placid, his intonation was weak, and his echo reverberated somewhat hollowly.

"...You're strong, Haru. Even while you knew you could gain several times or tens of times more power if you gave in to the allurements of the Armor, you were able to fight it. If the Armor had parasitically infested me instead, I would have been immediately completely controlled and would have bared my fangs at you, Chii-chan, and Master..."

"No way, Taku. You would have been able to summon not just one arm, but the entire body of «The Destiny». I believe that."

While staring at Cyan Pile's face mask, Haruyuki immediately asserted that. However, as if trying to escape from that gaze and those words, Takumu hanged his head down deeply and whispered in a slightly trembling voice.

"...You still don't understand, Haru. That I'm...not a human that deserves to be talked about in that way. I only smooth things over on the

surface...in the seed, inside my heart, I'm always envying and hating someone else. I don't wish for other's happiness; I wish for their misfortune. If my rivals' grades dropped, I'd laugh from the shadows; if the guys who I'm competing with for a regular spot on the team got injured, I'd think it serves them right. When my dear two childhood friends who had always been together since they were small became distant from one another...while pretending to be worried, I secretly felt relieved. That is me. The true figure of the human Mayuzumi Takumu!"

Together with that blood-spitting shout, from his eye slits devoid of light, a number of white drops spilled out and fell.

At the same time, from his entire body an even greater black aura burst forth and reached almost to the ceiling.

Thump. Beneath his right foot that had taken one step forward, the burnt, hardened ground of the «Scorched Earth» stage cracked into pieces. A pressure so strong that it would blow Haruyuki away if he lost his focus pressed in on him, but Haruyuki resisted it and opened his mouth another time.

"Taku, about that; I'm just the same as you."

Earnestly suppressing his voice that was nearly about to tremble, he talked quietly, quietly.

"If we compared the number of people we've cursed inside our hearts, I'm sure mine is ten times more than yours. Do you think I've never been jealous of you or envied you up until now? Why I'm somehow able to

resist the allure of the «Armor» now is simply because I'm as black as the Armor on the inside."

"..."

Temporarily silent, Takumu, who had just slightly reduced the violently blowing jet black storm, swayed his shoulders slightly.

"...Fu, fufu. Your way of saying things hasn't changed at all since you were small. That's right...you were doing that from the past, properly controlling the black part inside your heart. Different from me, who tried to shut it away and gloss over it..."

"We're not different! I'm the same as you! Wavering, worrying, bumping into the next wall when I thought I had progressed a step...in spite of that, the reason I've been able to come to where I am now is because you were at my side! Surely you can resist that black power too! Break through it, and advance forward again! Isn't that right, Taku!!"

In response to Haruyuki's earnest call—

He had the feeling that Takumu faintly smiled behind the mask.

"...Thank you. Thank you, Haru. If you put it like that...maybe it wasn't worthless for me to have become a Burst Linker and to have fought until now. However...for that reason, until the end, for your sake...for the legion's sake, I wanted to use my own power. This...«ISS Kit's» ability to dominate is overwhelming...I don't know anymore how much of this

impulse to destroy that's about to overflow any moment is mine and how much is the lure of the Kit..."

His murmuring voice was quiet. But that quietness was full of some sort of immense foreboding inside.

Brandishing the throbbing blood-colored eyeball stuck to the «Pile Driver» of his right arm, Takumu continued in a strained voice.

"...This parasite was probably created by a skilled someone of the «King» class from a composite of his abilities and special techniques as well as the Incarnate system. The more you fight...the more you devour enemies, the stronger the power produced. And then one day it splits and makes a «Child»...no, a «Clone»."

"...A clone..."

Haruyuki shuddered at the nature of the Kit, which seemed to intentionally contaminate the «Parent» system that was at the root of Brain Burst. Takumu let down his arms, and while seeming even more as if he were withstanding something, he opened his mouth again.

"What's terrifying is...the Kit's fellow «clones» are linked through the medium of negative imagination. When Burst Linkers who possess clones belonging to the same cluster breed black feelings like hatred, malice, and anger inside the Kit, the Parent and Child Kits also display even stronger power. In short, the more the clones are disseminated, the stronger one becomes..."

"If...if that's true...are you saying that Burst Linkers who obtain the Kit will compete to spread their clones..?"

In response to the question that Haruyuki asked with a hoarse voice, Takumu nodded deeply.

"Uh...even now...I feel the black feelings flowing from the Burst Linker who gave me this Kit in the Setagaya area, «Magenta Scissor», and «Bush Utan», «Olive Glove», and others who possess her first-order clones like myself. And simultaneously, the darkness I've fostered strengthens them..."

—Basically.

The network of «ISS Kit» clones was a malicious imitation of the legitimate «Parent» as well as «Legion» systems. As a rule, if parents and children and legions were bound by the positive ties of love and camaraderie, then the «ISS Clones» were linked by the negative chains of the search for only for power and victory.

Takumu's voice, which resembled the creaking of cracked glass on the verge of cracking, reached the speechless Haruyuki.

"Now...if we don't do something soon, then like a terrifying contagious disease, the «Kit» will completely cover the Accelerated World in the blink of an eye. We don't have the leeway to wait for the Seven Kings' meeting four days later and their decision. I will get the name of the ringleader from «Magenta Scissor», who is probably exceedingly close to the source

of the spread of the Kit. Even if I cross swords with him, I intend to procure information about the Kit. His motivation and objective may be unclear, but the guy who would go so far as to scheme this must have prepared a method to control the situation..."

Thump. Takumu took another step forward, looked down at Haruyuki from a mere two meters away, and whispered.

"Afterwards, I'm leaving it to you, Haru. Even if I lose all my points in the fight with the ringleader, before I lose my memory, I will transmit to you what I've learned by any means. Because you'll save this world. You can do it...and only you. That is what I believe."

"...Taku."

Haruyuki somehow called the name of his friend in a barely audible voice.

He was not able to express any more words than that.

—Resolution.

Right now, the reason why Takumu was barely able to keep resisting the ISS Kit's frightening ability to dominate was earnestly due to his resolution as solid as a rock. He had already made up his mind. His own place of death. His final battle.

—However.

The source of that resolution was self-despair. The fact that he had lost to the temptation of the ISS Kit. The fact that he had slaughtered the PK

group «Supernova Remnant» due to his anger. The fact that he had set up the «Back Door Program» in Chiyuri and had attacked Kuroyukihime. And finally—the fact that in the faraway past, he had destroyed their circle of three childhood friends.

Takumu had made up his mind that those were sins unforgivable by any means. He had changed that despair into resolution and was trying to face his final battle.

“...I can’t let you go.”

In a quivering voice resembling that of a child restraining his sobbing, Haruyuki spoke.

“It’s impossible for me to say «I understand, leave it to me afterwards». I can’t sacrifice just you and continue to be a Burst Linker afterward.”

“...Fufu...Forever stubborn, aren’t you...”

Smiling as if he were genuinely happy, Takumu spoke.

“I forced you into a direct connection duel, wanting to hear you say that...but it’s enough. Thank you, Haru. With your feelings as my energy, it seems I’ll be able to be myself for a little longer. —Now, it’s about time we ended this.”

He lifted his burly left hand and clenched his fingers in order starting from his pinky. The condensed aura of darkness slighted vibrated the entire stage.

As if to answer him, Haruyuki confronted him and tightly clenched his right fist clad in the silver Enhanced Armament. He raised his face and slowly nodded.

"...Yeah. We've both already said to each other everything that could be said in words."

That's right.

In short, nothing would happen or end unless they exchanged blows with their fists. That was the reason that they had dived into this duel stage, and that was also the sole reason for which Brain Burst existed.

From his entire duel avatar, which had lost its left arm and left wing, Haruyuki gathered all his strength of will and focused it in his right fist. His silver Over-Ray split the raging waves of darkness and pushed them back.

The sixth star Zeta «The Destiny» of the Seven Arcs had somehow succeeded in summoning only one arm, but in terms of absolute ability it did not reach «The Disaster». It possessed neither the vast battle data accumulated over years nor the Mind Power of wrath and hatred carved by successive generations of users.

However, the Destiny had one thing within it that the Disaster did not.

That was «hope». A ray of hope glittering like the stars, protected over a long, long number of years by a bright golden yellow female-class avatar residing in a nook of the Armor. It was unknown who she was, why her

consciousness was carried in the Armor, and what she wished for, but that faint warmth rallied Haruyuki. Unlike the way the Disaster urged one on to conflict, it supported his back and encouraged him.

...Now that I think about it, I was always being supported by someone else.

The time of the very first «duel in the hospital», the following battle with the fifth generation Chrome Disaster, the decisive battle with Dusk Taker, the occasion of the Hermes Code Race, even at the door protected by Suzaku, one of the Four Sacred Beasts...Kuroyukihime-senpai, Chiyu, Master Raker, Ash-san, Niko, Pard-san, Mei-san, and of course Taku always protected and encouraged me. There probably hasn't even been once where I won a fight with only my own strength.

But that's fine.

Because those ties...those bonds are the true strength of a Burst Linker.

I want to convey that to you as well, Taku. I want you to understand that there are many people who think about you and need you.

—In order to do that, please lend me your power.

He did not hear a voice respond to the appeal he had made inside his heart. However, a definite heat was produced in the center of his fist, became a much more dazzling white light, and gushed forth.

Takumu slowly pulled his left fist back.

Haruyuki also drew back his right fist and sharply extended his five fingers.

The simultaneous pronunciation of the techniques' names reverberated quietly and far, almost as if Haruyuki and Takumu were sympathizing with each other.

“«Dark Blow».”

“«Laser Sword».”

The instant when the jet black and silver paths blended—following the already collapsed A building, the B building where the two confronted each other became innumerable heaps of objects and scattered radially.

When he had been hit by the same Incarnate technique—«Dark Blow» some number of minutes ago, Haruyuki was unable to stand its immense impact for even a second and had been sent flying several dozen meters straight backward. Rather, the fact that he had not been torn into pieces was wondrous.

However, this time, although he was pushed back at first he held his ground and repelled Takumu's fists just the slightest bit. At a central point in the few dozen centimeters' distance separating the hands of the struggling two, two colors of auras scattered sparks and clashed violently.

The supreme protection of the Divine Weapon «The Destiny» was frightening. In terms of only defensive functions, it might have been stronger than the «Disaster», which had transferred most of its potential to offensive aspects. However, it was useless continuing only to struggle at this rate. He must break the raging storm of darkness with his light and convey his message to Takumu. That he did not have a single unpardonable sin. That all the members of the legion needed him. And finally—that no matter at what bottom of a pit of darkness he was, if he looked up at the sky, the light of the stars would always be there illuminating the way.

—Reach.

—Reach!!

To Haruyuki's earnest prayer, namely his Mind Power.

Ring, a reverberation like the ringing of a bell responded.

A pure Over-Ray spread across the entirety of the supplemental silver armor covering his right arm. Simultaneously, from the tip of his right hand, which had all five fingers extended out, a sword of light began to stretch little by little, little by little.

Haruyuki's «Laser Sword» was an Incarnate technique classified as «Range Expansion». The source of his power was the wish to extend his hand to a place that wasn't here—



For a long time, Haruyuki had believed that that was basically the act of running away. He wanted to run away from himself, unsightly and always cowering. He wanted to run away from the guys who bullied him. He wanted to run away from the annoyed gaze cast by his mother. He wanted to run away from the memory of his father who said he didn't need him. Running away, running away, reaching his hand out to place where he was not...

However, there was no such thing as «a place where he was not».

No matter where he went, he would be there himself. The hand he extended would always be linked to himself.

Reaching out his hand was basically an active movement joining himself and his target.

—Therefore, this silver colored light is surely joining together Takumu and me. It will convey my heart to him. It will overwrite the defensive and offensive calculations carried out digitally by the Brain Burst system and create a small miracle.

—Reach, him..!

Accompanied by a strong echo, Haruyuki's shout inside his heart resounded throughout the field.

The pure, shining silver light melted the high-density darkness, penetrated through it, and progressed little by little, little by little.

It was no longer a sword. Extending from Silver Crow's right arm was Haruyuki's own flesh-and-blood arm.

—Taku!!

—I, need, you...!!

At the tip of his hand extended with all his mind and soul, from the far side of the gloomy darkness, he could suddenly see something.

It was a white left hand, armor-less like his own. It was Takumu's hand, filled with hard calluses from daily kendo practice swings.

His tightly squeezed fingers trembled with a twitch. They timidly began to uncurl, closed again, and relaxed once again. While wavering, they reached forth, trying to approach Haruyuki's hand...

At that moment.

In the space between the two of them, a dark blood-colored light sharply exploded like an infinite number of needles.

"...!?"

Pulled back from the hallucination guided by his imagination circuits to the duel field, Haruyuki saw an unbelievable sight.

On Cyan Pile's right arm, which was guarding his chest, the eyeball-shaped «ISS Kit» infesting the surface of his «Pile Driver» opened its «eye» wide as if it were about to spill out and deeply scattered a light resembling fresh blood.

From the vicinity of the eyeball, black tissues extending like blood vessels gathered in a place about ten centimeters away and created a round protuberance.

The protuberance rapidly grew to the same size as that of the adjacent eyeball. The black tissue surface split sideways with a snap. What was slowly opening vertically was nothing other than an eyelid. What appeared from within was another eyeball—

From the surface of Takumu's horizontally aligned right arm, the two eyes of the «ISS Kit» aligned left and right stared at Haruyuki from point-blank range. From their interiors, Haruyuki could surely feel the will of somebody. A bottomless sense of hunger. The impetus to destroy. The thirst for multiplication. And then—hatred.

“Wh...why..!”

It was Takumu, whose Mind Power had been fighting with Haruyuki's through his left fist, who had shouted. This was probably an unexpected phenomenon to he himself as well.

“I haven't given the command yet..! Despite that, why have the «Clones»..!?”

At almost the same time Haruyuki realized the meaning of those words—from the surroundings of the second eyeball, over ten black, thin tentacles extended forth and pierced Silver Crow's breast.

Cold.

No, hot.

The abnormal sensory signal ran through his entire body's nervous system. It was wholly as if ice water had been poured into all his blood vessels using sharp needles. The cluster of capillary tubes resembling microwires slipped deeply, deeply into his body. Surrounding his heart, coiling around his lungs, climbing his spine, reaching inside his head—Haruyuki became unable to move. He couldn't let out his voice either.

Although his avatar's chest had been penetrated deeply by over ten tentacles, his HP gauge only a few percent remaining had not decreased even one dot. But that in itself expressed the abnormality of the phenomenon. The silver Over-Ray overflowing from his right arm swayed irregularly and flickered. His extended «Laser Sword» also melted and collapsed like light snow.

Under ordinary circumstances, at this instant the two's Mind Power equilibrium would have collapsed, and Cyan Pile's «Dark Blow» would have blown Silver Crow away without a trace.

However, that had not happened. As for why, at the same time Haruyuki's Mind Power had swayed, Takumu had also retracted his left hand and had shouted.

"Don't you...dare touch Haru..!!"

While still enveloped in an aura of darkness, his left hand grabbed hold of the bundle of black wires that had been fired forth from his own right

arm and had pierced Haruyuki's chest. Twisting his entire body, he pulled with all his might. However, like some sort of living creature the wires shuddered, fighting and refusing to be pulled out.

The eyes of Haruyuki, whose body was numb and unable to move, and Takumu, who was continuing to pull the black tentacles violently with his left hand, met.

He had a feeling—that Takumu had smiled. In that smile, there was none of the emptiness tinged with deep resignation that he had shown several times during this duel. It was the trustworthy, warm smile that was always there if he looked sideways that Haruyuki had seen in their day-to-day fighting alongside each other.

Cyan Pile's right arm moved; he pushed the muzzle of his Enhanced Armament Pile Driver against his own throat.

"...T, Taku..!"

From the bottom of his throat, Haruyuki imploringly squeezed out that single word—

At exactly the same time, Takumu resolutely called the technique name.

"«Lightning Cyan Spike»!!"

From the gap between the adhering muzzle and his thick armor, a pale blue light vehemently burst forth. Immediately after, from the nape of Cyan Pile's neck, a streak of lightning pointed at the sky of the Scorched Earth stage rose high, high up.

Takumu, who had used his own special technique to bore through his avatar's vital spot, unsteadily leaned backward; right before he was about to fall, he held his ground. His entire HP gauge, which was still remaining close to forty percent, flushed a bright red and drained precipitously from the right—and reached zero.

The movement of the black wires, which were slipping deeply inside Haruyuki's body and about to reach the center of his head at any moment, stopped. Feebly dangling down, they were slowly dragged out of his chest and disappeared as if dissolving into the air.

The «second eye» born from Cyan Pile's right arm also closed its eyelid as if vexed and disappeared as if being absorbed into the first eyeball.

“...I'm glad it's over...”

He said that one phrase—

The bulky blue body of Cyan Pile, who had completely lost his black aura, became splinters of glass and dispersed in all directions.

In the center of the Scorched Earth stage, which had turned into the shape of a violently burnt, enormous crater, Haruyuki remained alone. From his right arm, the silver Enhanced Armament was removed as if unraveling.

As if to escape from the flaming words «YOU WIN!» displayed in the center of his field of vision, he looked up at the sky of the stage deepening into twilight.

An ineffable whirlpool of emotions filled his bosom, overflowed from his eyes, and blurred the sky's purplish red color. The duel ended, and until the moment when he withdrew from the Accelerated World, Haruyuki's avatar's shoulders only quietly trembled.

When he returned to the real world, the moment he opened his eyelids Haruyuki felt a drop of water splatter on his right cheek.

It was the teardrop Takumu had spilled the instant before the direct connection duel had begun.

Takumu, who had burst out at nearly the same time, was still pinning down with his left hand the right shoulder of Haruyuki, who was lying prone on the bed, and was still grabbing the direct connection cable with his right. Takumu opened his eyes wide. On the other side of his glasses, a new drop of water was born and fell drip, drip onto his lenses. Directly above Haruyuki, his lips slightly quivered, and he let out a hoarse voice.

"...I..."

However, unable to say any more than that, Takumu slowly fell prostrate and tumbled with a thump to the left side of Haruyuki.

The two of them were silent for a while, continue to lie diagonally next to each other on the wide single-sized bed.

At the tip of his vision—on Takumu's ceiling, there was a thin polyfilm printed A2-sized poster affixed.

The subject of the poster was an adult kendo practitioner. Due to the fact that there was not a single word on the poster, it was probably a picture Takumu had found and printed himself. Since the composition was of him in the midst of releasing an overhead face strike from a diagonally opposite angle, the tip of his *shina*^[1] was blurred. Although it was merely a 2D picture, it had an impact so strong that Haruyuki's body felt hot just by looking at it.

Through the direct connection cable still linking their two Neuro Linkers, Haruyuki asked a single thought.

Is that kendo practitioner your teacher, your senior?

After a slight pause, a quiet answer was returned.

"No. That person was last active fifty years ago."

"Which means...the person whom you set as your target?"

"...Rather than that...the person whom I respected, probably. It's too presumptuous for me to use the word "target." At any rate, he won the national kendo championship six times in the nineties. That record hasn't been broken in the fifty years that have passed from then to now."

"By the way...what's the second place record?"

"Three times. Even that was quite an amazing feat, though."

If that were true, then basically the kendo practitioner in the photo was the best swordsman of the real world Japan—no, of the entire world. The moment he thought that, Haruyuki murmured.

"I wonder what kind of a feeling it was to be that strong...he probably doesn't hesitate or worry at all..."

"...After he had retired and became a mentor, he said this in an interview. «I still haven't been able to grasp anything. I'm in the state of wandering at the entrance of a pitch-black tunnel.»"

"...Huh...I see..."

Inadvertently letting out a sigh, Haruyuki expressed his train of thought.

"...But you know, if it were pitch-black, then you wouldn't be able to know whether there were an entrance there. Maybe the exit's right there."

He cut short his thoughts for a moment, then continued.

"Comparing myself to that person is at a level far beyond presumptuous but...I...I also have thought time and time again up until now that I was in the middle of a tunnel with no exit...but there was an exit. Without fail, it was there...the next tunnel will come soon, but...in spite of that..."

While earnestly searching for the right words, Haruyuki turned his face left and saw the side of Takumu's face eighty centimeters ahead. On the other side of the temples of his glasses traversing his white cheeks, his pupils, still moist with tears, stared wholeheartedly at the ceiling poster.

Resolving himself, Haruyuki spoke a single, crucial phrase in his natural voice.

“—Taku. At first, for my sake you stopped the Incarnate attack...«Dark Blow», didn't you. In order to save me, you resisted against the «ISS Kit» and shot yourself, didn't you. I believe that that action was the true you. Even if you once obtained the «Kit» and wielded its power of darkness...I believe that you will sever yourself from its seduction and be able to break out of the tunnel.”

He had been unable to say those words until now because he was afraid that when their conversation was over, Takumu would stand up, bid him farewell, and leave the room—in order to fight «Magenta Scissor» as well as the «Acceleration Research Society».

Though Haruyuki was holding his tongue, for a while Takumu said nothing while looking up at the ceiling.

After a good ten seconds had passed, he said something unexpected, also using his natural voice.

“Haru...Yesterday, at the vocal solo presentation during music class, you sung “Please Give Me Wings,” right?”

“...Uh, uh huh.”

While being bewildered, he nodded. Takumu sent him a fleeting glance, then continued while faintly smiling.

"Even though there were several other set pieces to choose from, why that one? Didn't you hate that song in the past?"

"Ah...that's true..."

The anxiety in his chest slightly went away, and Haruyuki also somewhat smiled wryly.

"...Well, I didn't have a clear reason why I didn't like it though...how should I put it; in the past, I thought that song had «something that will not come true» as its premise."

"..."

While regarding Takumu out the corner of his eye, who was keeping silent to press him to go on, Haruyuki moved his mouth.

"I might have been prejudiced though...before the very first instance of the lyrics "If you will grant my wish now, I want wings," I always had the feeling that...the line "Though I know it won't be granted" was before it. That was too much like my own real feelings...I was never able to bring myself to like that song."

He returned his gaze to the ceiling and raised his right hand. With his fingertips, he caressed the sky that was there beyond the wallpaper and concrete.

"However...when I listened again to the reference sound source in the homework file received last week, I thought that...maybe it wasn't like that. Um...ummm..."

Explaining his state of mind with words was Haruyuki's worst point. While moving his upward-facing right hand like a bird, Haruyuki moved his mouth earnestly.

"...In that song, maybe wishes coming true and not coming true aren't that important. Wanting to go to the "free sky without sorrow" someday...while thinking that, always walking forward one step at a time: I think maybe it's that kind of a song...basically...uh...what's important is that..."

His language processing ability finally reached its limit at that point. In place of Haruyuki, who had become only able to flap his mouth open and shut, Takumu murmured softly.

"It's not the «result» but the «means»...it's in the continual process where something precious exists..."

"Y, yeah. My point exactly."

Tightly clenching his still raised right hand, Haruyuki braced himself and spoke.

"Kuroyukihime-senpai said something to me a long time ago. That «strength» is not a word that only indicates having victory as the end result. In addition to that, Shinomiya-san also said something. That true strength is advancing forward even when losing, falling over, and failing...When I think that maybe that's what that song is really trying to say...I've always disliked that song until now, but maybe I feel that it was just a little bit inexcusable of me...well, simply put, it might just be that if I

become able to fly in the Accelerated World, I will also have been able to forgive that song..."

While lowering his arm with a light flap and putting it behind his head, Haruyuki added another phrase with a bitter laugh.

"One way or another, my singing was terrible though. I'm really glad that sound recordings at school without prior approval are restricted."

"It wasn't terrible, Haru."

Haruyuki turned his eyes to the speaker of those words; he saw Takumu smiling while looking at the ceiling. Takumu softly closed his eyelids and murmured as if to remember yesterday's class.

"You didn't notice, but Chii-chan was secretly crying. While listening to you sing "Please Give Me Wings" with all your might."

"Eh..."

Haruyuki was suddenly at a loss for words, but Takumu quietly continued to speak without wiping away his smile.

"If I were the me of just a little while ago, the moment I saw Chii-chan like that I would have definitely inevitably become jealous and self-loathing...But...but you know, I was also happy then. I was happy in seeing you boldly sing that song and in seeing Chii-chan hear it and be moved to tears. At that moment...only at that moment, as if we had returned once more to the past...to our circle of three people..."

His voiced abruptly quivered at the end of the sentence; below his tightly closed eyelids, transparent drops flowed smoothly once again.

Touched with emotion, Haruyuki momentarily withstood his feelings. But he immediately turned his entire body left and spoke while propping up his upper body with his elbow.

"It's not «like the past». It's «now». That's how we are at the moment. Taku, Chiyu and I, we need you now!"

For an instant, as if trying to flee from those words, Takumu averted his face to the left.

However, Haruyuki had the conviction that his words would reach his old friend's heart. Having clashed all-out in the Accelerated World, through fist and fist—

Several seconds later.

Takumu, who had turned his body facing right again, looked at Haruyuki with his moistened eyes and whispered in a trembling voice.

"...Haru. I wonder if I'm also able to become like you. While fighting with the black emotions inside my heart...I wonder if I'll be able to aim for the «sky» and be able to continue to walk forward..."

"O...obviously, Taku! You're continuing to change too. From our duel a while ago, the «Lightning Cyan Spike» with which you shot yourself in the end is the proof of that."

Haruyuki sidled up to Takumu, facing him, and grabbed his left shoulder with his right hand. He stared hard beyond the blue glasses wet with tears—

“Taku, Give me just a bit more time. Tomorrow, Wednesday...with the escape strategy starting at 7:00 P.M., I will definitely return alive from the Imperial Palace with Shinomiya-san. She’ll definitely be able to purify you of your «ISS Kit». One more day...for just one more day, resist the temptation of the Kit, Taku.”

“...”

Takumu did not respond immediately to Haruyuki’s earnest persuasion.

He covered his eyes; at last, he squeezed out a tense voice.

“...Yesterday night, I received the Kit from «Magenta Scissor» in the Setagaya area. At that point, the Kit was still in the «Sealed Card» state. In spite of that...when I came home, finished my meal and my bath, and slept in this bed...*that* spoke to me. Not with words...with feelings. It poured anger, hatred, jealousy, and every other negative feeling into me. Furthermore, by that time, *I had removed my Neuro Linker*. Throughout the night, I saw a long, long dream...when I woke up, my chest was filled to the brim with a black something...”

Haruyuki felt Takumu’s body suddenly shake through his palm. His close friend, who had hung his head even more, whispered forlornly wholly as if he had returned to his elementary school days.

"...Haru. I'm scared...it's not just in my memory area anymore, it's inside of me...tonight, what it's going to show me in its unsealed form...will I be able to be myself as I am now until tomorrow...I'm unbearably scared of that...in our duel at first, I already no longer hesitated to wound you cruelly..."

—Although he was not equipping a Neuro Linker, he was being interfered with in the real world.

In principle, it was impossible. However, in truth it was a phenomenon Haruyuki had also experienced firsthand. Haruyuki himself had heard the voice of the «Disaster Armor» without accelerating or equipping his Neuro Linker.

However, if he thought about it, the «Thought Acceleration» implemented by the Brain Burst Program as if it were nothing was an absurd super-phenomenon. Not only that, two months ago Haruyuki had witnessed an actual example of a Burst Linker who had lost Brain Burst and had had his memories manipulated and deleted.

In short, that programmed possessed the ability to interfere with humans' consciousnesses—with their very souls. If that were so, it wouldn't be strange if something happened. Accept it, fight. Those were all he could do.

Haruyuki seized with even greater strength the left shoulder of Takumu, whose body was trembling bit by bit, and spoke.

"Then, Taku, today you're going to stay at my place."

"...Huh?"

That must have been completely unexpected to him; to Takumu, who had made an expression of mute amazement, Haruyuki began to jabber at high speed.

"Like in the past, if we sleep together in a huddle while playing games, you won't have the time to see any scary dreams. But if it's just two people, we can't really call it sleeping in a huddle. If that's so, let's call Chiyu too. If we say we're doing our homework together, my mom will also allow it. Wait, in reality we had homework for math and Japanese, didn't we. Then you'll take care of math, Chiyu'll do Japanese, and I'll serve the tea. Did you know? If we open the homework file in the Initial Acceleration Space/Blue World, that stingy file protection will become invalid, and we'll be able to copy our answers!"

To the vehemently arguing Haruyuki, Takumu rounded his eyes but—
When he looked again at Takumu's mouth, Haruyuki could make out a bitter smile that seemed to say "it can't be helped."

"...In the past, we often followed your lead like that and did quite a number of things that got adults angry at us."

"Did I do that? I don't remember."

With his released right hand, which had been gripping Takumu's shoulder for the longest time, he scratched his head forcedly. Takumu, who was

again wearing an ironic smile that gradually turned into a genuine one, removed his glasses and wiped his eyes with a jerk before speaking.

"It can't be helped...you shouldn't let exhaustion from homework affect the Imperial Palace escape strategy tomorrow. I'll come help you out. However, as your Burst Linker senior, I can't allow you to use a point just for the purpose of copying answers. Since I'll be teaching you how to approach the problem, you should do the calculation by yourself."

"What—..."

While appearing displeased, Haruyuki blinked several times and shook off the feeling that was sinking in.

The «ISS Kit» inside Takumu had not yet disappeared. Even now, it was on the alert, surely looking for another opportunity. Similar to how Haruyuki's «Disaster Armor» had done so.

However, only one time, even if for only one arm, Haruyuki had repelled the dominating power of the Amor and had summoned its original, «The Destiny». If he could, then Takumu could also do it. The act of continuing to resist the lure of the Kit for twenty-four more hours until the «Shrine Maiden of Purification» Ardor Maiden returned alive from within the Imperial Palace. Because he was trying like this to stand up once more from the abyss of despair and walk forth...

"—All right, then if it's decided, let's go to my place now! Let's stock up on food at the mall below while we're at it. No wait, if we call Chiyu we'll get a bonus item, won't we..."

While laughing, Takumu lightly poked the stomach of Haruyuki, who was thinking deeply.

"Who you really want to call isn't Chii-chan; you want the food prepared by her mom, right?"

"N, no, well, those two are indivisible...if you mention Chiyu, I think of refreshments, and if you mention refreshments, I think of Chiyu..."

"Uh oh, I'm telling Chii-chan what you just said now."

"It, it was a joke! W-well, I'll mail her, so you go get your mom's permission."

Attempting to steer him away from his improper remark, Haruyuki stood up from the bed.

At the moment when he was about to pull out the XSB cable still inserted into his Neuro Linker nonchalantly—

In the depths of his mind, a rather surreptitious thought voice resounded like a raindrop falling onto a water surface.

"...Thank you, Haru. I'm truly glad...to be able to remain friends with you."

With his back still turned to his dear friend, Haruyuki, who had strongly reflected upon those words, returned only a single, equally meager thought.

"Me too, Taku."

Chapter 2

When it was time to actually carry out the three-person sleepover that had been suggested out of nowhere, there really were a number of hurdles.

The act of obtaining permission from Takumu's parents, who by no means held good will toward Haruyuki.

The right or wrong of lodging Chiyuri at the Arita family's apartment, who, despite being a childhood friend, would be turning fourteen this year.

And of course, the inclination of Haruyuki's mother.

Unexpectedly, the most easily settled matter was the third. To Haruyuki's text mail, timidly sent to his mother still at work with the gist of "Is it okay if two friends come over tonight," the response was "If you guys make a mess, clean it up properly. Mom won't be coming home tonight, so I'm leaving it to you."

Although it wasn't certain whether she had already planned not to come home or whether she intended to vacate the apartment if her son's friends were going to stay over out of parental affection, if his mother wouldn't be coming home, it meant they could use the living room all night long.

The next cleared hurdle was the first, obtaining Takumu's parents' permission. It seemed that the phrase "doing homework" in itself really had shown some effect.

The problem was the second—what Chiyu herself as well as her parents would decide; as Haruyuki thought that, he and Takumu crossed the connecting bridge on the twentieth floor and rang the Kurashima residence's door chime—but.

"My goodness, Haru-chan, and Tacchan too! Well—Tacchan, you've grown so big! How tall are you now...my goodness, 175 centimeters tall!?! You're already taller than my husband; kids these days are amazing! And, I heard you three are doing tough homework together? That's right; this year's the first time all three of you've been in the same class. When I heard that Tacchan was transferring to Umesato Middle School, I was so happy. But with this, Chiyu will also be troubled more and more; I'd rather have both Haru-chan and Tacchan as my sons-in-law..."

Dumbfounded, Haruyuki and Takumu continued to listen to Chiyuri's mama's specialty endless talk for the first time in a while. But at that point her single daughter in question stuck her face out from the direction of the kitchen and shouted with a facial expression like an inferno.

"Mama! You don't have to say anything unnecessary! The pot's boiling!"

"My, this isn't good! Stop the heat! No, don't stop it, set it on low, on low!"

In exchange with Chiyuri's mama, who had dashed pitter-patter to the kitchen, Chiyuri, who had advanced down the corridor in large strides, glared at the two from the *agarikamachi*^[2] and spoke.

"...That's not a «we're going to do it» face; that's a «we've already done it» face, right?"

What a discerning eye. The two boys who were evidently guilty of just having been through a bout could only laugh nervously and duck their heads.

In the mail Haruyuki had sent to Chiyuri before arriving, he had written only "Today, do you want to camp over at my place?", but she had probably immediately seen right through the fact that it wasn't only that.

Chiyuri, who had just come out of the shower after coming home from club activities and was sporting half-dried hair, a plain T-shirt, and shorts, put her hands on her waist and glowered at the two for a while.

However, she finally snorted and said briefly, "Well, sure. I'll hang out with you." Haruyuki reflexively made a stupid verification.

"What...is, is it all right?"

"Hey there, wasn't it you who invited me!"

To Chiyuri, who had lifted the corners of her eyes, together with Takumu he hurriedly lowered his head.

Twenty minutes later, with the basket filled with dinner for three people that Chiyuri's mama had had them bring, Haruyuki and company moved to his apartment. When he came home alone at nighttime to his deserted, spacious apartment with few possessions consisting of three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen, he couldn't help but feel chilly,

but if he were together with his two childhood friends, he didn't have the time to think about that. Haruyuki, who had first put down his bag in his room and had changed into a more comfortable outfit, launched his mailer application before going to the living room.

Not only Kurasaki Fuuko, who had informed Haruyuki, and Shinomiya Utai but also Kuroyukihime by this point probably knew that Takumu—Cyan Pile had been attacked by the PK group «Supernova Remnant» and had turned the tables on them in the Unlimited Neutral Field. It was imperative that Haruyuki transmit the situation to them, who were undoubtedly deeply worried, but he was far from able to explain the details fully by mail.

There, Haruyuki wrote just "Takumu's fine. I'll explain the details tomorrow during the Imperial Palace escape strategy" and sent the message. The three of them quickly responded "Understood"; Haruyuki could strongly feel their concern in their concise replies.

Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, and also Utai had probably surmised long ago that something not so simple—a state unable to be straightened up with the single word «fine»—had arisen. In short, Kuroyukihime and the others were implicitly conveying their will that they were entrusting everything to Haruyuki and Takumu's judgment.

However, at the same time, that also meant if something irreparable happened from now on, at that time all the responsibility would lie with Haruyuki and company.

Twenty-four more hours. Especially during tonight, in order for Takumu not to lose sight of himself due to the interference of the ISS Kit, the two of them—no, with Chiyuri, the three of them would have to pull through it together. They could definitely do it. Because from the time they were very little, the three of them had been through countless adventures...

Having thought up until there, Haruyuki suddenly noticed something and stopped his hand with a twitch.

When he had invited Chiyuri to tonight's spontaneous sleepover, he had done so on the spur of the moment, without any concrete intention. It was a result of his expectation resembling the subjective impression that «the three of us will somehow get through it».

However—. A certain «ability» that Chiyuri possessed. If it were used, couldn't the parasitic life form tormenting Takumu perhaps be removed from the system? The situation was so irregular that he couldn't even guess at its likelihood, but it was worth a try.

"Senpai, Master, Mei-san..."

Haruyuki softly called out to his three comrades, who were not here in this place.

"I'm sure, I'm sure that I'll do something about this. Because Takumu and Chiyu are...my best friends."

Haruyuki strode out of his room and with great momentum opened the door leading to the living room from where a good scent was floating.

What Chiyuri's mama had prepared in only a mere thirty minutes was curry soup made with plenty of summer-season vegetables. If they afterward warmed the frozen food stocked in the Arita household's refrigerator and prepared some iced jasmine tea, then they would have a dinner table extravagant more than enough.

Following their chorus of "*Itadakimasu!*"^[3], first the three wordlessly moved their spoons vigorously. It seemed that the appetite of Takumu, who had eaten nothing since morning, had returned as it was. Or it might have been due to the power of Chiyuri's mama's cooking, which one couldn't help but eat, furthermore when one's mind was carrying a large burden.

"Aah, when you deep-fry eggplant, it becomes so different..."

Haruyuki said that while stuffing his cheeks full of the round-sliced eggplant deep-fried once with olive oil and cooked quickly together with curry sauce; Chiyuri immediately raised a voice of incredulous doubt.

"Eggplant's tasty whether you bake it or cook it!"

"No way, eggplant that hasn't been deep-fried is just an edible sponge. Stuff like fill-and-fry is the cooking of the gods."

"Ah, enough already, this is precisely why people with kids' tastes are—! Why don't they understand the deliciousness of well-done, peeled, cooked eggplant with ginger sauce—"

Takumu, who was looking alternatively at the two of them quarreling, coughed and spoke.

"Now, now, both of you. Fried eggplant and baked eggplant are both delicious, but of course it's best pickled. Pickled eggplant soaked a deep blue for sure is the taste of summer."

To the statement unbelievable for a middle schooler, Chiyuri and Haruyuki exchanged glances and let out a long "Whaa~t..."

"Sorry, Takkun, but to me pickled eggplant is rather...it tastes for sure like a sponge..."

"Unh, me too...Taku, as much as you're a blue-color, you don't have to want your pickled vegetables to be blue..."

"Wh-what, avatar color's not part of the story, is it!"

Takumu, who had shown a genuinely hurt face, had his shoulders tapped by a laughing Chiyuri.

"Ahaha, sorry, sorry! As an apology, next time I'll request mama to also pickle eggplant with her secret *nukadoko*^[4]!"

While exchanging small talk, Haruyuki was conscious in a corner of his heart of the fact that this was the first time in a relatively long time that just the three of them had had a meal together.

The circle bonding Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Takumu was preserved through means of an exceedingly delicate balance.

The relationship between Takumu and Chiyuri, who had begun to date in the winter of their fifth grade in elementary school, had been reset once on the occasion of the «Back Door Incident» last fall, and since then the two had been estranged for a while. However, Takumu had transferred to Umesato Middle during the third school term, and by the first semester of their second year, when even Chiyuri had become a Burst Linker, though it was awkward they had once again begun to shorten the distance between them as «friends», which included Haruyuki.

Immediately after that, they had undergone a difficult fight with Dusk Robber, who had assaulted them, and their circle of three people was tightly bound once again the way it was in the past—so it seemed.

However, that relationship was built above the fact that they were Burst Linkers and members of «Nega Nebulas». Even if one of them lost all his or her Burst Points and memories of the Accelerated World, whether they would be able to continue to maintain their bond...Haruyuki did not know.

The one thing that was clear was that now was not the occasion to be afraid of hypothetical crises.

There was only rushing through every obstacle from the front, continuing to run toward only one ultimate target. Beyond the «level 10» horizon, where their legion master Kuroyukihime was aiming—.

While resolving himself anew, Haruyuki tried to extend his fork out to his plate, which had a little curry remaining.

However, at that moment,

“Haru, if you like it that much I’ll give you some eggplant! In return, you can have this—”

While saying that with a grin, Chiyuri dropped some round-sliced eggplant onto his plate and retrieved a large lump of chicken with her reverse strike.

“A, aaaaah—! Hey you, I’ve been carefully, carefully raising...I mean, saving it aside..!”

“Hey, didn’t you say at first that you liked eggplant a hundred times more than chicken?”

“I didn’t say that! Bring it out, give it back, return it—!”

While nearly being in tears, he protested fiercely, but as he watched, the gently simmered, juicy chicken meat was chewed inside Chiyuri’s mouth.

“Ah—, delicious...I wouldn’t begrudge using the acceleration command to prolong this deliciousness...”

“D, damn it—!”

From the neighboring seat, with a slightly amazed face Takumu watched Haruyuki, who was stamping his feet from his chair, but at last—.

“Fu, ha ha...ahaha...”

He let out his voice and laughed merrily.

Soon Chiyuri and Haruyuki also joined in his laughter. With their forks in one hand, they continued to laugh to no end.

After they had cooperatively tidied up the tableware and dining table, as per their declaration it was homework time.

They moved to the sofa set at the west side of the living room, huddled their shoulders together, and launched their homework applications. As this was exclusive software developed by the parent body of Umesato Middle's administration, a major education-related enterprise, copying and pasting answers was wholly impossible; furthermore, even if one tried to use an ad hoc connection or a wired direct connection, the technical specifications were inflexibly set such that other people's screens were invisible. If one dived into the Initial Acceleration Space/Blue World by means of the «Burst Link» command, each and every one of those limitations would be invalidated, but if one did not begin at least five minutes before the start of homeroom at school, one would not be permitted the luxury of «accelerating» and finishing off one's homework.

There, while the three shared information using the old-fashioned method of writing by hand on A3-sized electronic paper spread out on the glass table, they finished math and Japanese homework in forty minutes. If Haruyuki had been working alone, he probably would have taken several times longer.

When he looked at the clock, it was not even eight o'clock yet, so starting then and also for the first time in a while, they played a tournament of the old games that Haruyuki had been collecting. While connecting to the panel TV the hardware over thirty years old that even the manufacturer could not fix if it broke and while even enjoying the coarseness of the 1920 by 1080 pixel resolution, they clamored over the games chock-full of expressions of violence hardly seen in more recent games.

Around half past nine, the three took turns taking a bath—of course they didn't take it «together» as they had done so in the long-ago past—changed into their pajamas, and assembled in the living room once again. Cleaning up the game consoles, lining up three beds with folding-type high-resilience mattresses, pillows, and blankets—

“Well then, now.”

Chiyuri, who had changed into light green pajamas with a cat design on them, looked at Haruyuki and Takumu successively; while smiling she spoke.

“Both of you, have a seat.”

“Huh...”

“Uh, unh.”

The two of them hurriedly downed their after-bath iced tea and sat down side by side on top of the mattresses before Chiyuri, who had stood up

quickly. The reason why they had somehow ended up sitting *seiza*^[5] style was that their understanding that «both of them were basically Chiyuri's subordinates» engraved in their bodies and souls since they were young had caused them to do so.

Without wiping away her smiling expression, Chiyuri, who had folded her arms before her chest with great momentum, continued and spoke.

"Well then, let's have the explanation again, shall we? Haru and Takkun, this time what have you two perpetrated, and how bad of a situation has it become?"

—Uh oh, she had already seen through that far.

While earnestly being impressed, Haruyuki thought inside his head at high speed.

The biggest reason why he had also involved Chiyuri in this «spontaneous sleepover» was due to the expectation that her existence—to be precise, this state of affairs in which the three childhood friends huddled their bodies together like in the past—would block out the interference of the ISS Kit, which had been preserved «somewhere» inside Takumu. He had not thought to go as far as to reveal the entire situation to Chiyuri. The reason was that it would be equivalent to exposing as far as the deep wound that Takumu was carrying—his sense of guilt for the fact that it was he who had destroyed their circle of three people.

However, Chiyuri had already sensed the situation to a certain extent; no, nearly to the crux of it. What was more, if they wanted to attempt to erase the Kit with Chiyuri's «ability», then they couldn't hide the truth anyways.

Haruyuki glanced at Takumu to the left of him. His old friend with freshly washed hair returned his gaze straight back for a second, then turned back to Chiyuri and spoke.

“Chii-chan, I believe you've already at least heard the rumor. The problem of the «ISS Kit», which has been casting a great shadow over the Accelerated World beginning about a mere week ago...”

From there, in about twenty minutes Takumu told everything.

How he had went in the direction of the depopulated area Setagaya by himself and had received the «ISS Kit» in its sealed state from the Burst Linker «Magenta Scissor», whom he had encountered there.

How he had returned home and had seen a nightmare clearly seeming to be due to the interference of the Kit after climbing into bed, even though he had removed his Neuro Linker.

How on the same occasion his parents had sent him to the family hospital since he had a slight fever, he had attempted to collect information in the Shinjuku area. However, he had been sold out by the comrades of his former legion and had taken a real attack by the PK group «Supernova Remnant».

How Takumu had dived into the Unlimited Field with them and had summoned the ISS Kit there, cornering all the Remnant members into losing all their points with the strength of dark Mind Power. How as a result, while his Brain Burst had been protected, a considerable portion of his consciousness had been corroded by the Kit. How he, believing that he would harm his comrades of Nega Nebulas at this rate, had made up his mind to fight with «Magenta Scissor», to pin down the distributor of the Kit, and to obtain information with the resolution of committing a simultaneous suicidal kill while he could still barely manage to control the Kit's power.

However, immediately before that, he had entered a direct connection duel with Haruyuki, who had run from Umesato Middle to Takumu's home, and they both had fought with all the strength and suppressed emotion they had—at the end, they had succeeded in repelling the Kit's interference to some degree, but.

"...But, it still hasn't disappeared from inside me."

Takumu, who had finished telling the long story, with both his hands gripped his blue Neuro Linker, which he had not been wearing out of the bath, and brought his talk to a close with a half-whispering voice.

"The «Kit» is somewhere inside this Neuro Linker...and a part of it is maybe lurking somewhere inside my head. It's steadily absorbing power from the other linked Kits; even now, moment by moment it's becoming stronger. Tonight...if I see that nightmare again...I will probably call awake

the black thing inside my heart. That's why Haru is trying to prevent that by spending tonight with the three of us together...That's the reason that you were suddenly invited, Chii-chan. Everything's...a result of my foolish conceit..."

There, Takumu closed his mouth and deeply hung his head.

Chiyuri, who was still standing and had finished listening to the long story without stirring an inch, abruptly bent down on her knees in front of Takumu and reached her fair hand out from the pajamas covering three-fifths of her arm—with her fingertips, she gently wiped something beginning to blur the edge of Takumu's left eye. At the same time, a subdued murmur.

"...Sorry, Takkun."

"Huh..?"

To Takumu, who had raised his face and had opened his eyes wide, Chiyuri began to talk gently.

"From the past, I knew that you were really a very sensitive and kind person...maybe as sensitive and kind as Haru, Takkun. However...I've always depended on your kindness..."

Her pupils, always swirling and sparkling like those of a cat, slowly became downcast. Chiyuri let down her hands, seated herself in *seiza* position like the other two, raised her face again, and spoke in a firm voice.

"When I was small, I believed stubbornly...That no matter how old we became, how many years passed, the three of us would be able to laugh, getting along with one another. But in reality, that's impossible, isn't it? The flow of time is unstoppable...it can't be turned back. Even though I understood that somewhere inside my head...I always hoped that for just a little bit more, for just a little bit more things could stay like that..."

She took a deep breath—.

While looking in turn at Haruyuki and Takumu, Chiyuri suddenly said something greatly unexpected.

"Haru, Takkun. This is something I haven't said to anyone outside my family but...you see, my papa might not be able to live for long."

Completely as if those words had been lodged somewhere between his ear and his brain, for a while Haruyuki was unable to recognize what they meant. Takumu seemed to be the same; from his left, far from feeling his body stir, there was no sign of even his breathing.

Before the eyes of the two and furthermore without letting her peaceful expression crumble, Chiyuri continued and opened her mouth.

"Both of you, you already know why I was able to clear the «first condition of a Burst Linker», right?"

"...Unh."

While slightly nodding, Haruyuki thought in a corner of his mind.

To become a Burst Linker, that was, to install «Brain Burst Program» in one's Neuro Linker, there were two conditions. The first was «having continuously worn a Neuro Linker since immediately after birth». The second was «possessing a high-level quantum connection aptitude».

The second was able to be cleared through prolonged full dive experiences or active training—like how Chiyuri had done so herself. However, the first couldn't be helped by the will of the person himself or herself at such a late point. In brief, one could say that one's aptitude as a Burst Linker was halfway inherently decided.

The reason why a newborn baby was equipped with a Neuro Linker was almost always due to «child-rearing labor reduction» or «education for gifted children». Haruyuki and Takumu had been given infant-use Neuro Linkers immediately since birth, Haruyuki for the former reason and Takumu for the latter.

However, Chiyuri fell under neither of those categories.

Immediately before she was born, her father had suffered from a throat ailment and had had his vocal cords excised, making conversation using his real voice difficult for him. However, Chiyuri's parents, who had wanted their beloved daughter somehow to be raised having heard both their voices, had chosen to use the Neuro Linker's «thought voice function». From the time she was a baby, Chiyuri had been brought up hearing her father's voice through a Neuro Linker.

“...The disease that caused Papa to lose his voice was lower throat cancer.”

"..!"

To the two who had again turned speechless, Chiyuri shook her head to calm them.

"It's okay; it's not something that's going to happen right away. With the advancement of RTMMs^[6], cancer itself isn't a disease as scary as it was in the past...But, you know, once it's begun to metastasize, it's impossible to completely annihilate the cancer cells spread here and there even with today's technology. In these ten years, Papa's had a relapse once each in his esophagus and his lungs...each time, he was able to suppress it with anticancer drugs and MM therapy...but it seems he was told by the doctors that if he had another relapse, his prospects would be grim..."

Chiyuri, who continued to chat on, stoutheartedly made a smile, but Haruyuki noticed that her large eyes were thinly moist.

"...Of course, both Papa and Mama were considerate so that I didn't worry but...despite that, we'd been family for years; I somehow caught on. When Papa was undergoing treatment, he seemed so pained from the side effects...Mama, she woke up so many times in the middle of the night and rubbed Papa's body. That's why when the treatment was over and Papa got better, I made a prayer to the gods. I said, "Please let us be the way we are now." That was...back in fourth grade. To me, that time was...that time, when every day was enjoyable and seemed to be enveloped in a golden light, was..."

Chiyuri, who had shut her mouth there, turned her gaze toward the ceiling as if refraining from spilling her tears.

Haruyuki, unable to say anything, pictured the face of Chiyuri's father in his mind.

Around third or fourth grade, after they had returned from playing outside till they were worn out, nearly every day they intruded on the Kurashima residence, had dinner, and even took a bath. Haruyuki had frequently met Chiyuri's papa, but he was never let known a bit of his painful fight continuing several years against the disease. He always wore a smile on his thin face and sometimes also became their game playmate.

"...Chiyu, I didn't..."

Didn't notice anything.

To Haruyuki, who had tried to say that, Chiyuri again pointed a smile and shook her head bit by bit.

"I said it, didn't I, that nothing's going to happen right away. Maybe at this rate there won't be a relapse ever again. —That's why I also really shouldn't only have been afraid of the future. Despite that, I pretended not to see everything that was changing...I didn't try to understand Takkun's feelings either...even if «now» became the «past», I continued to try to return there. Last fall...when Takkun tried to learn my true feelings, it was obvious too. Because even if he were at my side, even if we made a dive call, I didn't properly see the current Takkun."

At that moment—.

Takumu, who had been silent all along until now, tightly clenched his fists above his knees and violently shook his neck left and right.

“That’s wrong...Chii-chan, that’s wrong. The one to blame is me, who was unable to trust you. I didn’t notice at all what you were carrying inside your heart. Only me, only seeing myself; only forcing that selfish wish on you. In the end...on your Neuro Linker...I set up on your Neuro Linker...”

His forcibly squeezed out voice fairly resembled his shout of anguish when he had fought with Haruyuki during the evening.

But Haruyuki believed that his openly spoke feelings were not uttered out of self-blame or self-repugnance. Believing that, he fought hard to swallow his words.

Takumu clenched his hands one last time to the point where his hands creaked—then he drained his strength and continued in a husky voice.

“However.”

He lifted his head and looked straight at Haruyuki and then Chiyuri, then spoke.

“However, I will change, Chii-chan. I promise. Though it will be little by little, I will grow stronger. One day I will recompense for all my sins such that I can lead your hand toward the future this time for sure.”

“...Unh.”

Finally letting a teardrop spill, Chiyuri also nodded.

"I too...I too will stop looking at just the past. Right now...I'm still scared, and I can't see the path ahead of me, but...despite that, I treasure the present, this moment. Because it's fun right now. It's fun and I'm happy being together with Takkun, Haru, Senpai, Nee-san, and Ui-chan and being able to aim for the same goal. That's why..."

She sucked in a deep breath and resolutely straightened her back; after wiping her eyes with a jerk, Chiyuri spoke in a clear voice.

"That's why I won't let that «ISS Kit» thing do with you as it likes. I will also protect you. Together with Haru, I will protect you, Takkun."



Chapter 3

Haruyuki was prone to forgetting it, but only a mere two months had passed since Chiyuri had become a Burst Linker. It was a short time span a quarter of Haruyuki's and a seventh of the time her «parent» Takumu had been one.

However, Chiyuri, who had finished listening to the details concerning the ISS Kit from the two veteran Burst Linkers, only brooded for a few seconds, then spoke while scowling magnificently.

"Perhaps...is it those guys' deed again? The «Acceleration Research Society»."

"..."

Without thinking, Haruyuki and Takumu exchanged glances, returned their gazes to Chiyuri, who was sitting on top of the three aligned mattresses, and nodded simultaneously.

"...Uh, unh, that's what we were thinking..."

"A, amazing, Chii-chan. Even with both Haru and I, we took more time to think of that."

"Well, you see."

Still wearing a sullen face, Chiyuri slightly lowered her voice.

“This way of doing things resembles that person’s. The feeling of not attacking from the front, but steadily encroaching in from the sides...”

The «person» of whom Chiyuri spoke was «Dusk Taker», former member of the Acceleration Research Society who already had eternally left the Accelerated World by now. When he had appeared before Haruyuki and had named himself, Nega Nebulas had already been stripped bare of all its information, and he had even grasped Haruyuki’s fatal weakness.

In this time’s incident, the Kit had also begun to circulate from the so-called depopulated areas of Setagaya, Oota, and Edogawa. There were probably a large number of people still unaware of what was happening among the Burst Linkers who had made the heart of the city their home.

At the «Seven Kings’ meeting» to be held in four days on Sunday, the matter of the Kit would probably be raised, but there was even the possibility that by then it would have already progressed into a pandemic unable to be dealt with...

Forcibly swallowing his stinging-like apprehension, Haruyuki squeezed his two ankles tightly, which were seated in cross-legged position, then opened his mouth.

“—In the Accelerated World, how do you put it; it’s like there’s a theory, isn’t there? For strong techniques and items, without exception there’s some risk or weakness built in that counterbalances it. Like my «flight», which sacrifices almost all of my avatar’s other abilities; for Taku’s «Pile

Bunker» and Master's «Gale Thruster», after one use, you can't use them again until their recharge gauges are full.”

“That's...true, I guess. My «Citron Call» also has a huge activation motion, and since it doesn't having a homing nature it's easily avoidable.”

Following the nodding Chiyuri, Taku also spoke while pushing up his glasses.

“Even the «Incarnate System», an irregular ability outside the game system, is like that. As a rule, it's not possible to acquire Mind Power contradictory to one's avatar's attributes, and if you use it too much you'll be engulfed in the darkness of your heart; there's a risk of losing control of its power... —Aah, that's right, what Haru wants to say is basically...”

“Unh. How things like the principles of the «ISS Kit» were created, I don't have a clue, but at the very least if the Brain Burst Program permits its existence, then in exchange for that fearsome power and limitless infectivity...I think it must have a huge vulnerability. So huge that if we pin that down, the entire network that's been built up will crumble into pieces.”

“...That's for sure. It's possible...”

Takumu, whose eyes had regained their intellectual gleam even if for just an instant, continued while slightly quickening his tone.

“I thought that the Kit's creator...probably one of the people near the top of the Acceleration Research Society, had inserted some kind of self-

destruct program into it, and I had thought about seizing detailed information prepared for it to end in a double death. But there's a possibility that...the vulnerability was inevitably contained within to begin with...in that case, if we arrive at that secret, even without possessing something like an activation key, we might be able to make the Kit self-destruct..."

In front of the face of Takumu, who had lifted his face at that point, had taken a large breath, and had been on the verge of opening his mouth again—.

Chiyuri stuck her right index finger straight out and spoke.

"You can't do that, Takkun."

"Eh..?"

"Any—how, right now you were thinking about using yourself as a guinea pig and having Senpai or Nee-san research the weaknesses of the Kit, weren't you?"

"Ah...uh, unh...because you see, even if I start running amok, Master and the others would be able to render me powerless before that happened..."

"You—can't! Our legion forbids stuff like sacrificing just yourself and undergoing painful experiences to try to accomplish something!"

To Chiyuri, who had declared that distinctly, Haruyuki and Takumu once again exchanged glances.

As for why, it was because she had «sacrificed just herself and had undergone painful experiences» on the occasion of the Dusk Taker incident, saving the two of them.

But Chiyuri, who had silenced Takumu as if to say that she had already forgotten that, pondered something for a moment before opening her mouth.

“—Hey, Takkun. Rather, about the ISS Kit possessing you...couldn't we erase it with my «Citron Call Mode II?»”

“..!”

The moment he heard that, Haruyuki sharply sucked in a breath. That very proposal was the idea to which Haruyuki had been warming inside his mind from some number of hours ago.

The special technique «Citron Call» that Chiyuri's avatar «Lime Bell» possessed exhibited the unbelievable effect of turning back time for the targeted avatar, and it had two modes depending on the amount of special technique gauge used and her motion.

Mode I, which spent half her gauge, reversed the state of the avatar who received the technique in units of seconds. It restored one's HP gauge and special technique gauge; in sum, in reality it was a powerful technique allowing her to serve well as a «healer» role, of which there were only a few people in the Accelerated World.

And then the released Mode II, which completely consumed her gauge, was even more tremendous. This mode reversed the targeted avatar's state in units of number of status changes. Status changes mainly pointed to the equipment or removal of Enhanced Armaments, loss of body parts, or shape changes for shape-changing avatars. It could make a huge breach out of the equipping of an Enhanced Armament, and since there was much equipment that could be only summoned once during a duel, if that equipment were forcibly removed in the midst of fighting, one could do nothing but retreat.

However, the absurdity of this Mode II was such that «it could even cancel the acquisition of Enhanced Armaments». It could not rewind one's status forever—at its current stage, it could cancel up to four stages—so the majority of phenomena that had occurred were limited almost entirely to immediately after the acquisition of an item, but if it manifested itself it could even nullify Enhanced Armaments transferred through a direct connection or force a cooling-off period on hard-earned purchased Enhanced Armaments at the Shop. Of course, in that case the points spent to buy it would also return though.

The innate Enhanced Armament «Pile Driver» was always in an equipped state, so there was no need for it to count. Also, its transformation from Pile Driver into «Cyan Blade» was an Incarnate technique external of the system, so this was not included either.

In short, the act of reciting the command for «IS Mode Activation» and equipping the ISS Kit in the battle from earlier counted as one time.

Before that, he must have done the same thing in the middle of the battle against the PK group «Supernova Remnant», so that was the second. Before that was the fight last night with «Magenta Scissor» conducted in the Setagaya area. He had been handed the ISS Kit in its sealed state during the fight, so that was the third. They could still make it in time for the fourth time, which was Citron Call Mode II's upper rewinding limit.

"Taku..."

Takumu also had probably completely traced the thoughts of Haruyuki, who had called his name in a low voice. In the eyes of his close friend who had turned his head around, there was a faint glimmer of hope.

—However, Taku immediately cast his eyes down and slowly shook his head.

"...No...It's true that the number of status changes is within four, but it's probably...not possible to erase that with Citron Call..."

"Wh...why, Taku! Why don't you hit Magenta Scissor back with it with cash on delivery!"

To the remarks of the assertive Chiyuri, Takumu slightly smiled. But he shook his head sideways once more and spoke gently as to admonish her.

"Chii-chan. It's...a part of it or its body is already inside me, not just my Neuro Linker. There's nothing that could have made that possible other

than the Incarnate system. —Do you remember, when you tried to resurrect Raker-san’s legs...”

“...”

Takumu and Chiyuri together bit their lips. Takumu nodded and continued.

“At that time, although Raker-san’s «body part loss» was still within four times, her legs didn’t return. It was due to her unconscious Mind Power that she had continued to deny her own legs. Surely the ISS Kit also will refuse destruction with its own Mind Power...”

“If that’s so! —If that’s so, I will too!”

Chiyuri looked alternately at Haruyuki and Takumu, then shouted.

“I will undergo the training for the Incarnate system too! It doesn’t matter how many years I spend in the Unlimited Field, I will acquire the power to be able just to erase the ISS Kit from Takkun!”

“You can’t do that, Chii-chan!”

Just at that moment, Takumu had shouted. Without a moment’s delay Chiyuri also retorted.

“Why not! Senpai and Nee-san both said that one day the time will come for me to find my own Mind Power and cultivate it! Why can’t that be now..!”

In opposition to that, Takumu tried to make a further rebuttal and began to open his mouth.

However, there his words were stopped. Haruyuki, who had distinctly sensed what he was about to say and why he had stopped short, leaned forward and softly touched Chiyuri's slender yet graceful arm.

"Chiyu."

Gazing at her large, catlike pupils, which were looking right back at him sharply, Haruyuki spoke slowly.

"...Chiyu, your Citron Call is an amazing technique. In some sense, it might be the strongest ability within Nega Nebulas. But, that's undoubtedly...*an ability that yearns for the past*. I don't know whether you've noticed, but the sound of the bell you hear when you activate the technique...it's exactly like the after-school chime in the elementary school we went to..."

She herself probably had been noticing that. For an instant, Chiyuri opened her eyes wide, then immediately covered her face. Haruyuki spoke even more to his silent friend.

"Of course, my special technique and Taku's too are both strongly bound to the past. However, at the very least Taku's technique is an incarnation of the will to cut through the past and advance forward. That's why I...and undoubtedly Taku too, want you to see the future when you undergo the Incarnate system training. Though we don't know what kind of powers

you will develop...we think that it'd be nice if it were a power like facing the future and reaching your hand out as far as you can..."

For a while, none of them opened their mouths or even stirred their bodies.

Only the thin second hand of the wall clock approaching eleven o'clock was rotating smoothly. The built-in type air conditioning on dehumidification mode hummed in a low tone; from the other side of the sound insulated glass, the noise of EV tires coming and going across the Loop 7 road at night faintly reached them.

At last, Chiyuri, who had suddenly relaxed her entire body, smiled placidly while her eyes were moistened.

"...That's true."

She whispered, then nodded, then moved her lips again.

"That's true, isn't it. If it's a technique set by the system, then anyhow...if it's a power that I have to find within my heart and cultivate...it'd be nice if it were something like being able to reach my hand out to hope. Something like Takkun's...something like Haru's."

"Nah...my Incarnate technique isn't something as exaggerated as that though..."

"Uh-unh, I love «Laser Sword» just as much as «Cyan Blade»."

Smiling and deeply laughing, Chiyuri continued in a voice that had regained its cheerfulness.

“That’s right, I might as well have a matching «Something Sword»! Something amazing that can blow both Haru and Takkun away!”

“Ugh...”

The two boys exchanged glances again. In truth, Lime Bell’s potential was still unfathomable. It was possible for her to be enlightened with an Incarnate technique that easily surpassed both of their techniques.

“P, please go easy on us...”

After Haruyuki said that, this time Chiyuri and Takumu exchanged glances and laughed together merrily.

Tomorrow they obviously had school, and after that the «Imperial Palace escape mission» was waiting for them, so it would soon become time for them to sleep; the three lay down on the three high-resilience mattresses aligned on the floor of the living room in the order of Haruyuki, Takumu, and Chiyuri from east to west. Long ago when they were small, when they had their afternoon nap at somebody’s house Chiyuri was always in the middle, but tonight’s leading role was Takumu.

If there were the apprehension that the ISS Kit would interfere with him during his sleep, then the three of them could rather pull an all-nighter—that method was also considered, but Takumu had immediately

dismissed it, as it would influence the «Imperial Palace escape strategy» tomorrow. Matters related to the Kit were urgent problems, but Haruyuki's alter ego «Silver Crow» was in a sealed state in the Unlimited Neutral Field. He had to escape together with the purification ability user «Ardor Maiden» by any means; if he was not purified of the «Disaster Armor» by the Seven Kings' meeting on Sunday, he would have a top-class bounty placed on his head in the Accelerated World.

"It's okay; if both of us are at your side, then you can sleep in peace until morning."

To Takumu, who had said that with his head facing sideways on his pillow, Haruyuki replied while also nodding back.

"Hey, if it seems that you're going to see a scary dream, then tell us right away, 'cause we'll knock you awake."

"I'm thankful, but how am I supposed to do that when I'm sleeping?"

"Uh, uhh...sleep talking..."

While feeling a sleepiness that caused his eyelids to gradually become heavier, as he exchanged those words, from Takumu's other side Chiyuri snapped her fingers.

"That's right! Hey, since you can't block the interference anyways even if you remove your Neuro Linker, why don't we sleep with the three of us joined by direct connection?"

"Huh..!?"

Haruyuki blinked, and Chiyuri agilely lifted her head and continued to speak.

"If we're directly connected, even if we're sleeping our thought voices are transmitted, right? If something abnormal happens to Takkun, we might be able to notice it with that."

"Ahh...I see, I didn't notice that..."

He exchanged glances for an instant with Takumu, who had let out a voice of admiration, and they exchanged their willingness to try it. They got up once, and the three of them simultaneously equipped their Neuro Linkers, which had been in the middle of charging wirelessly on top of the sofa set table. They prepared two XSB cables, and this time they lay down with Haruyuki in the middle. The reason was that only Haruyuki's Neuro Linker was equipped with two direct connection terminals.

He made a direct connection with Chiyuri on the left terminal and Takumu on the right one. The two wired connection warnings disappeared, and only a small connection icon remained in the tip of his vision.

While pulling his blanket up until his neck, Haruyuki tasted a strange feeling.

No matter whom his partner was, with some difference in scale a nervousness always accompanied wired directions. The sense of vulnerability from canceling his Neuro Linker's defensive walls and the

instinctive sense of immorality from joining their very consciousnesses together inevitably made his heart flutter.

However, right now Haruyuki only felt a quiet tranquility. The feeling of mutually protecting and being protected by his childhood friends, with whom he had spent more time than anyone else. It was just as if from the two cables, a sense of security from the two of them flowed in, filling his heart...

Before he noticed it, Haruyuki was closing his eyelids. The home server AI detected that the residents had went to bed and automatically dimmed the amount of light from the panel lights. From the other side of the gentle darkness that had visited, two voices reached him.

—Good night.

—Good night.

Without even knowing whether those were their real voices or thought voices, Haruyuki also softly murmured.

...Good night...

Chapter 4

...Haru.

...Hey, wake up, Haru.

Having the feeling that he had been called by someone, he slightly lifted his eyelids. His surroundings were a deep gray. From the other side, a hazy figure of a person.

"...It's still dark...let me sleep a bit more..."

Mumbling indistinctly, he tried to lie flat again, but this time his shoulder was shaken back and forth.

"Wake up, Haru."

That voice's echo, which in some way seemed urgent, slightly awakened his consciousness, which felt as if it were wrapped in cotton. He reluctantly opened his eyes again. As expected, it was dim. In this season, it was still around four at most.

"What's happened, Chiyu..."

While speaking in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki strongly blinked and forcibly opened his eyelids.

From directly opposite, the one placing her hand on the right shoulder of Haruyuki who was lying on the left side of his body was Chiyuri as

expected. A slender silhouette sitting plopped down. Short hair, and atop that a large three-cornered hat. A bright green semitransparent armor covering her entire body. In her left hand, a large hand bell Enhanced Armament...

“—Eh?”

His consciousness finally more than half awake, Haruyuki jumped up like a spring mechanism. At that moment, his body rang with a crack. What were there were not his vertically striped half-sleeved pajamas—it was his mirror surface armor that shone silver.

Flustered, he looked at his hands and touched his face. Without checking the feel of his smooth mask, he knew this was his duel avatar Silver Crow. And the yellow-green avatar sitting before his eyes was Chiyuri's Lime Bell.

...Why? Had Chiyu challenged him while he was half asleep?

First having thought that, he turned his eyes upward to try to check the health gauge and time count that were supposed to be in the upper part of his field of vision. However, there was nothing there. The green bar, the engraved number of 1800 seconds, and all the other overlay displays did not exist.

However, that was impossible. Since they had become duel avatars—basically, since they were making a full dive into a duel stage, no matter whether it was the normal duel field or the Unlimited Neutral Field,

without exception one's own health bar was visible, and it was not possible to erase it by changing one's settings either.

If so, then this was a dream.

Sitting with his legs still sprawled out, Haruyuki tried to pinch his own cheek with his right hand. However, it was blocked by his hard helmet, and he couldn't touch it. Still with halfway fuzzy thoughts, he thought about substituting with Chiyuri's cheek and began to reach his hand out to the avatar sitting immediately to his left. There, he remembered that all avatars' face masks were hard in the first place. Other places that seemed able to be pinched...now that he thought about it, how about female F-class avatars' chests below their armor...

While thinking that vacantly, Haruyuki moved his left hand, and into the round protuberance peeking out from below Lime Bell's mantle armor, with his index finger—

Squish. That feeling was transmitted through his fingertips half a second later.

"Wh, what're you doing!"

At the same time as her shout, ring! A tremendous impact accompanied with a large reverberation directly hit the crown of his head. With the Enhanced Armament «Choir Chime» in her left hand, Lime Bell had hit Silver Crow with all her might.

"Ooh!"

After causing the yellow chicks around the area of his head to tweet for a while, Haruyuki finally completely awakened his consciousness and suddenly lifted his head. Quickly looking around at his surroundings, he noticed that it was not the Arita household's living room. It was a dim tube-shaped space. To his right-hand side was a dead end, but to his left was a thin tunnel that seemed to continue forever while turning and twisting.

This was not a dream. However, it was not a normal «duel» either. Due to some irregular phenomenon, while sleeping, with Chiyuri the two of them had dived into this completely unknown space.

...The two of them?

"...! Wh, where's Taku!?"

He checked his surroundings again, but Cyan Pile's huge frame was nowhere to be seen. He turned his gaze to Chiyuri; the verdant green avatar glaring at Haruyuki while further covering her chest with both hands changed her expression to a seemingly worried one and softly shook her three-cornered hat left and right.

"I don't know...I also had just awoken here a moment ago. When I got up, I had become a duel avatar, you were sleeping beside me, and Takkun wasn't here..."

"...Is that so..."

Below his helmet, he thought for a moment.

Both of them had transformed into duel avatars, but since neither the time count nor their health/special technique gauges existed, it was clearly not the normal duel field. He had unconsciously tried to deploy his wings, but even though he could usually just bring out his wings even if his gauge were zero, right now they did not even respond with a twitch. It seemed that all abilities had completely been made ineffective.

If that were so, there was only one thing of which he could think. This unnatural phenomenon was probably—no, was without a doubt something that the «ISS Kit» parasitically inhabiting Takumu had caused. Haruyuki and Chiyuri, who had been sleeping while directly connected to him, had been pulled into the phenomenon through the XSB cable. To put it briefly, it could be said in a sense that right now the two of them were inside Takumu's dream.

If so, then Takumu must also inevitably exist in this world. Why they couldn't see his figure was surely because he had moved somewhere. Into the depths of the dark tunnel extending endlessly to the left-hand side.

"...Let's go, Chiyu. We have to search for Taku."

"Unh, got it."

Chiyuri, who had apparently reached almost the same conclusion as Haruyuki, immediately nodded. Haruyuki lifted his body up from a sitting position with a vertical jump impossible with his real body and lent his left hand to Chiyuri, helping her up.

Lime bell did not release her hand even after having stood up; on the contrary Lime Bell tightly squeezed it. Lightly squeezing back, he tried feeling this wall surface with his right hand. It was not earth or cement. It was a deep gray soft tissue having an odd elasticity. Its faint temperature and minute ring-shaped pleats were completely like the interior of a living thing's body—no, otherwise it was that very thing.

Looking at each other, they exchanged nods once, and with their hands still joined the two began to advance briskly into the depths of the tunnel.

Their sense of time and distance were lost in the wink of an eye.

It was even unclear whether the two of them were «accelerating» in the first place. If they were in a non-accelerating state, the home server alarm set to go off at seven in the morning would probably knock them awake sometime, but if they were accelerating then time would have might as well stopped. Or they maybe could have been able to leave this queer world with the «Burst Out» command, but they had reserves about leaving Takumu behind. The reason was that if they were in the midst of accelerating, then in the few seconds that they awoke in the real world and woke up Takumu sleeping next to them, in this place a vast amount of time would have passed by.

He had probably seen this dream yesterday night too. Then he must have received some kind of interference in his heart and been injected with a black something.

In that case, at this moment as well, that process might be progressing. What he had finally begun to take back through his direct connection duel with Haruyuki might be stolen once more...

That impatience caused his feet to quicken; before he knew it Haruyuki was running while pulling Chiyuri's hand. Chiyuri's feelings were probably the same; she was following the speed-class Silver Crow with all her might. The two avatars kept running, running in the tunnel that extended while twisting and turning.

He had thought rather about flying with the wings on his back, but for whatever reason it seemed like his «flying ability» could not be used in this place. With his metal fins tucked in, no matter how much he focused his consciousness they did not move.

When he felt that they had probably exceeded five kilometers, at that moment.

Finally from the path before them, a faint light could be seen.

"An exit..?"

To Chiyuri's voice, he nodded back and raised his speed even more.

They ran the remaining dozens of meters in one go; before the eyes of the two who had broke out of the tunnel at last—suddenly, a sight they had not anticipated in the slightest appeared.

It was outer space.

No; precisely, it slightly differed. A jet black space that could be thought of as stretching out endlessly, and countless points of light coloring it. In the direction far above the heads of the two who had stood still dumbfounded, the cluster of points of light agglomerated densely and beautifully sparkled like a circular galaxy. However, what was different about it from a starry sky was that those lights were swaying and moving incessantly. One ray of light collided with the other still rays of light, and this time those began to move, bumping into the next ones. That chain reaction was continuing in the entire galaxy without end. Just like gigantic three-dimensional billiards—or like some kind of network.

Since he could not get a grasp of the sense of distance, he did not know the precise size of the «swaying galaxy». However, Haruyuki intuitively felt that if he tried to draw right next to it, that cluster of light would spread probably spread out to a cosmic scale.

He looked at his back for a moment; the tunnel out of which he and Chiyuri had come was still existing there as if it were a hole opening to space. From the tunnel, a thin bridge of two meters' breadth extended and seemed to continue to the downward jet black space. The two were standing at the foot of that bridge.

Returning his gaze again to the beautifully sparkling cluster of stars, with his left hand still grasping Chiyuri's right he stood bolt upright; from his left, a faint whisper fell out.

"...Amazing..."

Nodding to that, Haruyuki also murmured in a hoarse voice.

"What on earth...is that..."

To that question—somebody responded from his immediate *right side*.

"«Main Visualizer»."

"Eh..!?"

"Wh, who is it!?"

Raising a voice of surprise at the same time as Chiyuri, he turned to his right. Close to the edge of the thin passageway where the two were, a slender silhouette that definitely had not existed until a moment before was standing inconspicuously.

It was not Takumu—Cyan Pile. Of course, it was not another legion member either. It was an F-class duel avatar possessing a flower petal motif design on every part of her body. Her armor color was a warm bright golden yellow reminiscent of the sunshine of spring.

The moment he saw that figure, Haruyuki relaxed his guard and whispered to Chiyuri.

"It's okay Chiyu, it's not an enemy."

"Eh...is she your acquaintance? If she is, then why is she here..? Isn't this Takkun's «dream»..?"

Answering that question was hard for Haruyuki too. However, while striving to somehow put the information he knew in an easily understandable form, he spoke.

“Um...this person’s not inside of Taku but inside of me. To be exact, she’s inside the Enhanced Armament I have, «The Destiny»...That’s right, isn’t it..?”

Last evening, Haruyuki had roughly explained to Chiyuri the matters concerning the Destiny, the sixth Divine Weapon that he had summoned. To Haruyuki’s inquiry, the bright golden yellow avatar slightly tilted her head.

“You could say it’s both like that and it’s not. It’s true that I exist inside the «Destiny», but because the main body of the Destiny is documented inside this world...”

“Eh..? What’s that supposed to...Besides that, what’s the Main...Visualizer you were talking about at first..?”

To the question he further asked, the mysterious girl returned a greatly surprising answer.

“To put it in your words, it’s the «Brain Burst central server».”

“..!!”

This time for sure he was shocked from the bottom of his heart; he along with Chiyuri froze their whole bodies.



The Brain Burst central server, whose place of existence was unknown, was the so-called «main body» of the Accelerated World. Containing all Burst Linkers' statuses, it was truly the core of the world, recording Brain Burst's each and every bit of data, calculating every change, and moving every enemy.

The central server, which rejected all irregular interference and only permitted players to imagine its existence, was in front of their eyes...no, the bright golden yellow avatar had said that they were already inside it.

"Bu...but why did such a thing..? Even though veterans say it's absolutely impenetrable..."

After he whispered that in a quivering voice, the girl faintly smiled—so he felt.

"Of course, that's true. However, we were given just one way to make our hands touch the natural laws of the world. You already know what it is."

"Make our hands touch...the natural laws of the world..."

After parroting her words in a murmur, Haruyuki abruptly opened his eyes.

"The «Incarnate system»..? The power of one's image...using «imagination circuits», overwriting phenomena..."

"Correct. A very strong as well as saddening power..."

While listening to the words of the girl who was nodding, Haruyuki remembered something for a moment.

This was not the first time that he had encountered this bright golden yellow avatar. That had happened during the final stage of the direct connection duel carried out with Takumu in Takumu's room today, no, probably already yesterday night.

From inside Haruyuki, who had been blasted away by Takumu's «Dark Blow» and had lost the strength even to stand up, the girl had appeared. At that time, sure enough she had said it. That "because the *circuits* to the *central system* had been temporarily activated, I was able to talk with you, Haruyuki."

The central system was namely the BB server, the «Main Visualizer» that the girl had mentioned. And the circuits were—«imagination circuits». It was the root of the Incarnate system, the path of conveying one's image power to the natural laws of the world.

"But...we haven't been using the Incarnate system..? What's what, I don't understand well what Mind Power is either...to begin with, we were sleeping, both of us..."

Chiyuri, who had been behind and to the left of Haruyuki up until now, took a step forward and asked that.

If one looked again, Lime Bell and the mysterious bright golden yellow avatar had completely opposite armor colors, but their entire body design lines were similar in some respect. They did not just have the

point in common of having «leaf» and «flower petal» exterior motifs but also something deeper and more fundamental.

The girl who had seen Chiyuri nodded slowly and pointed with her left hand to the dark, long tunnel through which the two had passed.

“This tunnel is precisely the «imagination circuit». The two of you had followed the circuit of your friend, whose heart you were connected to, and arrived as far as here.”

“Eh...T, Taku's..!?”

“Then...right now, is Takumu invoking the Incarnate system..?”

The two of them raised their voices one after the other, but the girl gently shook her head sideways.

“This image is not his own. It's a tunnel joined by the black power that's penetrated inside him. —Over there.”

This time, the girl lifted her right hand and indicated the tip of the passageway that disappeared into jet black space. The floating bridge, which extended while twisting and turning, seemed to descend into the depths, into the depths of space as if to avoid the sparkling, vast galaxy high in the sky. After squinting hard, far ahead through the darkness through which he had seen—.

An avatar who was walking tottering step by step while doubling his large frame over and deeply hanging his head was slightly visible.

Without verifying his blue heavy armor and the Enhanced Armament on his right arm, Haruyuki and Chiyuri knew who that was.

"T...Taku!!"

"Takkun!!"

The two simultaneously raised shouting voices close to screams and began to run forth. However, in front of the two, a bright golden yellow left arm swiftly blocked them.

"You mustn't. If you carelessly approach him, you'll be noticed by *that*."

"Th...that..?"

While being driven by impatience, he instinctively focused his gaze to where Takumu was walking.

A few seconds later, as if his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, «something» dimly stood out.

It was a thing that was difficult to describe as anything other than being enormous. If one said so, maybe a «lump of black living tissue». Meat wriggling in an indeterminate form that was surrounded by innumerable blood vessels in the shape of a mesh and was pulsing with a thump, thump. The blood vessels extended while branching off into the surrounding space, making its thin tips snake back and forth like tentacles.

The state of the «black lump of meat» swaying with a fixed rhythm somewhere resembled the «light of the galaxy» in the sky overhead. However, the impression it gave was the exact opposite. Chaos that opposed order. Darkness that opposed light.

“Wh...what is *that*...Why is that *thing* in the middle of the central server..?”

To Chiyuri’s trembling voice, the girl also lowered her voice and answered.

“That is...not something that the system gave birth to. It’s something whose seed has been sown by someone among the BB players and had been slowly, slowly nurtured over many years...a so-to-speak «foreign substance»...”

“Whose seed has been sown...nurtured...”

Immediately after he murmured that, Haruyuki convulsed his body with a twitch and gasped in a voice unlike one.

“S, surely not...the «Disaster Armor»? Is that, the main body of the Armor..?”

“Uh-unh, it’s not like that. The Armor is one of the «Seven Stars»...a part of the system. The Destiny, see it’s over there.”

Her bright golden yellow arm pointed to near the center of the galaxy glittering in the distant overhead sky. When he looked, he saw some stars that were aligned in the shape of a ladle shining even more largely and brightly than the surrounding points of light. As if in sympathy with it, Haruyuki’s eyes were drawn to the sixth star from the left.

Differing from the five to its left, only that star seemed to be accompanied by the dark, small companion star at its immediate side. As the girl had stated, if the sixth star were the main body of the Divine Weapon «The Destiny», then the dark companion star at its side was the «will to destroy» dwelling inside the Armor—probably.

Feeling a strange heartrending sorrow toward the figures of the two stars of differing sizes, Haruyuki slid his gaze to the right. There existed the seventh star and the final Divine Weapon of the Chinese name «*Yao Guang*»^[7], «The Fluctuating Light». Sure enough, a large golden light could be seen wavering—but to Haruyuki, it could be thought of as being the center of the light of the galaxy itself.

What exactly did all this mean? No matter how immense the power they held was, the Divine Weapons in the end were Enhanced Armaments, one of the simple equipped items. Did that exist in the center of the Brain Burst Program itself..?

For a moment, he had that doubt, but Haruyuki immediately discarded it. Now was not the time to be thinking about the structure of the Accelerated World. Cyan Pile, who was walking with his head hanging down, would reach the black lump of meat a few minutes later.

He knew that grotesque lump was not the «Disaster Armor». If so, then what was it—.

“Ah..! H, Haru, look! It’s not just Takkun..!”

Chiyuri had suddenly shouted and pointed slightly to the left of Cyan Pile with her right hand. As he had been told, he strained his eyes as hard as he could. Sure enough, the same type of thin floating bridge on which Haruyuki and company were standing was extending from there as well; what was more, somebody was walking on it.

It was a small-class duel avatar. A familiar form. He was hanging his burly arms as though they were scraping the bridge and bending his body possessing a voluminous upper body over with all his might. His armor color was grass green.

"...B, Bush Utan..!"

There was no mistaking it. That was Bush Utan, who was like a brother to «Ash Roller», who belonged to the green legion. Only a few days before, he had fought with Haruyuki in the Suginami area and had flourished his terrifying Incarnate techniques of darkness at will like a seasoned expert.

Without even noticing Haruyuki's cry, Utan still trudged toward the black lump.

No; it did not end with him. Behind him too. Above and below as well. A countless number of floating bridges that had been hidden in deep darkness until now stood out in Haruyuki's field of vision.

On one bridge, without exception there was one duel avatar existing apiece; all were continuing to advance with a lifeless gait. The total number of the bridges that extended radially from the lump of meat, at a rough estimate, was thirty—no, possibly over fifty.

At this point in time, Haruyuki finally realized what that jet black organism was.

That was the main body of the mysterious «ISS Kit». Hadn't Takumu said it? That all ISS Kits were mutually linked. That if one Kit became stronger, then the surrounding Kits also became stronger. This very sight was undoubtedly that «link». Each time they fell asleep, through the imagination circuits of Brain Burst they were lured to this world and were mutually connected through the main body of the Kit, the lump of flesh.

In truth, a number of duel avatars had already arrived at the lump of meat and were kneeling before it. The black blood vessels extending from the lump crawled tightly around their entire bodies; while throbbing with a thump, thump, they seemed to be exchanging either liquid or information of some sort.

"No...no..."

Chiyuri, who although had less knowledge relating to the Kit than Haruyuki but had intuitively inferred the meaning of the sight before her eyes, whispered in a hoarse voice.

"This is cruel...everybody's having something precious to them sucked away...in exchange, they're having something undesirable poured into them..."

"Ahh...that's right. That thing...that lump led Taku astray. Even though he fought with me and had finally begun to regain himself...at this rate, again he'll..."

After moaning in a low tone, Haruyuki turned to the bright golden yellow avatar standing to his right and shouted.

“How are we supposed to stop this!? The ones walking over there are our friends! No, the ones there are all comrades playing the same game...playing Brain Burst! ...That black lump...if we destroy that, this can be stopped, right!?”

And then, the girl again swiftly raised her arm and restrained Haruyuki, who had been about to run out after Takumu without waiting for an answer.

Why Haruyuki had stopped was not because he had run into that arm. It was because *he had passed through it*. Like a picture that had no substance, her right arm had penetrated Haruyuki's body without a sound. Due to that disconcertment, Haruyuki had stopped his feet.

While being astonished, he looked back at the mysterious girl. Since he had always been grasping Lime Bell's hand, it was not that there were no «collision detection» in this world.

The girl smiled just a little bit in a seemingly lonely manner and opened her mouth.

“Didn't I say it? I am...a memory. I am the memory of a single BB player who left this world a day a long, long time ago...the echo of that player's consciousness...”

“M...memory..? But you're able to talk with us like this...”

To Chiyuri's whisper, the girl slightly nodded.

"With this Main Visualizer, all data is preserved in the same format as that of people's memories. That's why, objects with a strong will...objects engraved with a prayer or a wish can possess a pseudo-thought circuit. That is me..."

"A strong...wish..."

While murmuring, Haruyuki was remembering something in a cranny of his head.

The first time he had met her in the midst of his duel with Takumu, the girl had said it. She had been waiting for the person who would undo the curse of the «Armor»...for the person who would heal the anger and grief of «that person».

That person. He did not know who that was. But that person's wish had probably continued to let the girl exist in the Accelerated World even now.

As if she had read Haruyuki's mind, the girl nodded and spoke.

"In this place, only «will» realistically possesses power. That black lump is made of an enormous coagulated malicious intent. If you approach it any closer, you two will also be taken in."

"B...but, on the other hand, at this rate Taku will..!"

Driven on by impatience, he looked again at the bridge ahead. The distance between Cyan Pile, who was walking while looking down, and the ISS Kit was already only a few dozen meters. Within another minute, Takumu would be arrested by the black blood vessels and have something precious stolen from him again.

But, at that moment—.

“You already have the power.”

Said the girl in a distinct tone.

“P, power..?”

“That’s right. The «power to reach your hand out to the far distance for the sake of something precious».”

“..!”

Haruyuki reflexively looked at his own right hand enveloped in silver-colored armor. His five fingers, sharp-tipped and slender. His hand, which had been afraid of touching something, had been afraid of being linked with someone, and had continued to hide in his pocket for a long time.

Following that, he looked at his left hand. However, that hand had been securely continuing to grasp Lime Bell’s—Chiyuri’s right hand without shrinking from it.

If it had been before he had become a Burst Linker, even as fellow avatars in the middle of a full dive he would not have been able to show this kind

of behavior. However, from that day eight months ago, lots of people had extended their hands out to Haruyuki and had shared their encouragement and courage with him.

—I'm no longer the me of the time when I walked while only facing down. This hand isn't here for the purpose of breaking out into a cold sweat and being hidden behind me. It exists for the sake of grasping the hands extended out to me...no, for joining hands with someone of my own accord.

As if in sync with Haruyuki's thoughts, Chiyuri lifted Haruyuki's left hand and tightly clasped it.

"You can do it; if it's you, Haruyuki, then you can do it. Your hands...your feelings can reach where Takkun is."

Nodding and strongly squeezing back, Haruyuki spoke.

"Aah. I will reach him. As if I could stand letting Taku be taken by that lump of meat."

The bright golden yellow girl had said only will possessed power in this world. That basically meant one could only use the Incarnate system. To put it the other way, normal techniques did not have any kind of power. That was the reason why Silver Crow couldn't fly in this world.

Haruyuki's only Mind Power technique, «Laser Sword», was a basic technique of the range expansion type. Having said that, the interval added from his bare fists was at most two meters. In contrast, he

estimated the distance from himself to Takumu, who was continuing to walk, and the black lump of meat immediately opposite him to be fifty meters.

However, in this world, things such as apparent distances held no meaning. If he fired while believing his shot would not reach that far, then even large-class missiles probably would not reach; if he fired believing he could reach that far—even with Haruyuki's immature Mind Power, it would definitely reach.

With his left hand still grasping Chiyuri's right, Haruyuki lowered his waist and spread his legs open one in front of the other. He sharply lined up the five fingers of his right hand.

"Your chance is only one point, one moment."

Immediately to his right, the girl had whispered.

"But, if it's you, you can definitely do it. Believe. Believe in yourself...in yourself and in the power of the many people who have joined their hearts with your own."

And then the girl—her avatar suddenly began to fade; wholly as if melting into the inside of Haruyuki, her figure overlapped with his and disappeared.

He had a lot more things he wanted to ask her. However, they would have an opportunity to meet again. Right now, he should only think of taking back Takumu.

Haruyuki had intuitively understood the girl's meaning that his opportunity was one chance. In order for that lump of meat to connect with Takumu, it must expose some kind of vulnerable part. He would aim and shoot there.

He concentrated his senses in his right hand; a dazzling silver light was born in his fingertips and immediately covered him up to near his elbow.

As if responding to that light, the far-off lump of meat stirred its blood vessels extending from its whole body. It moved its tentacle-like tips and seemed to search its surroundings. Sure enough as the girl had said, if Haruyuki approached any closer those tentacles would notice him and try to take him in. Like how the ruptured «Kit» had done so at the end of his battle with Takumu.

While reverberating with a high *riiiiing* vibration sound, the silver light in his right hand extended a couple dozen centimeters in the shape of a sharp sword. Trying to guard his right hip with the pre-motion of the normal «Laser Sword», Haruyuki stopped his arm still.

The same techniques, the same Mind Power he had been using up until now would not be able to reach it. He had suddenly intuitively felt that. Haruyuki had already fought with the aura generated by the ISS Kit with his Mind Power yesterday night. To bore through that redoubtable, thick darkness, he needed a stronger, stronger image of piercing.

As if being led by something, he raised his right arm up to the height of his shoulder. He bent his body and arms and drew them tight nearly to

his limits. It was the motion of the astonishing long-range attack that in the past his teacher and parent Kuroyukihime—Black Lotus had shown a number of times, «Vorpal Strike».

That Incarnate technique was probably the ultimate range expansion and power expansion technique. One could not use the same technique without preparation. But he was sure he could definitely do it just by redoubling his image. He had to do it.

Due to the preparatory motion to which he was unaccustomed his image had possibly wavered, causing the Over-Ray residing in his right arm to flicker irregularly.

That moment, his left hand was gripped even more tightly. Simultaneously, a whispering voice.

“Haru. Though I can’t use Mind Power, my feelings are the same as yours. I want to take back Takkun. In order for us to begin to walk facing the future, not the past. Even if...even if one day our paths differ.”

Though her voice had slightly quivered and trembled, Chiyuri had proclaimed that distinctly.

Suddenly, a pale light green glitter covered Lime Bell’s whole body. That vivid light also flowed into Haruyuki’s body as well through their joined hands, stabilized the Over-Ray in his right hand, and strengthened it further.

“That’s the power of Mind Power, Chiyu.”

Haruyuki had answered in a dwindled voice.

“Pray for me. That my hand can reach Taku.”

“Unh.”

*Riiiiing...*The resonance like the sound of a bell increased again in volume. The black lump of meat made its mass of tentacles rustle irritably. However, it seemed unable to find Haruyuki and company.

At that time, Cyan Pile, who had been continuing to advance forward, finally arrived right before the lump of meat and stopped his feet. As if a thread had been cut, he kneeled and hanged his head deeply.

On the surface of the «Pile Driver» covering Takumu’s right arm, a burbling black globule rose up. It opened its eyeball with a color like that of drenched blood and looked about, checking its surroundings—and its entire form suddenly floated up.

With the narrow blood vessel tissue still joined to Takumu’s right arm, wholly like a snail’s antennae the black eyeball slowly lengthened upwards. From the main body, the black lump of meat, a bundle of thick blood vessels was extended out in order to accept it.

At the moment when both of them tried to conjugate with the other—

In one go, Haruyuki thrust his right arm straight out, which he had been tensing above his shoulder to his limit. At the same time, he shouted the words welling up from inside his heart.

“—«Laser...Lance»!”

With an intense metallic sound, a narrowly condensed lance of light was shot far, far from his right arm.

The lance penetrated the darkness lurking around the main body of the ISS Kit and lengthened. Twenty meters, thirty meters; its momentum had not yet declined.

However, there Haruyuki felt a heavy resistance in his right arm. *That feeling*. A cold incandescence, same as that of when he had taken Bush Utan’s «Dark Blow» for the first time.

—Reach!

—Reach!

The unvoiced shouts of Haruyuki and Chiyuri resounded simultaneously. The Over-Ray covering the two avatars scintillated dazzlingly, melted together, and flowed into the lance of light—and blew the heavy film of darkness away in all directions.

Takumu’s ISS Kit, which had been trying at that very moment to connect with the mass of blood vessels extending from the main body, looked back with the very movement of a living organism and caught sight of the lance. Its black eyelid was opened wide to its limits. It immediately began to return to the place it had parasitically infested, Cyan Pile’s right arm, but a mere moment earlier than that could happen.

The tip of the Mind Power lance deeply pierced the pupils of the crimson eyeball.

While raising a terrible splat sound and spraying out a jet black liquid, the eyeball ruptured all too easily. All of a sudden, Haruyuki felt the ferocious waves of anger emitted by the vast lump of meat—the Kit's main body.

The countless tentacles stretching from the lump somewhere resembling a brain searched for the intruder, swirling violently. Directly below them, Cyan Pile, who had been hanging his head down, suddenly lifted his head.

"T...Taku! Over here!!"

Haruyuki shouted in as loud a voice as he could muster. Takumu, who had looked back, visually recognized Haruyuki and Chiyuri. From the depths of the slits engraved in the face mask, his pale eyes, which seemed to have fully awakened, opened wide.

"Takkun, run!!"

In response to Chiyuri's scream, Takumu stood his avatar upright and stepped toward the two. Although he ran a few paces across the narrow floating bridge, whatever he was thinking he stopped still and turned about facing his rear—the direction of the lump of meat.

The Kit's main body had twisted together most of its tentacles into a single one and was trying to arrest Cyan Pile again with it. If he were engulfed by that, he would probably be parasitized by a new Kit once more.



“Taku, run awa..!”

Halfway through, Haruyuki swallowed the words he had begun to yell.

The reason was that Takumu had suddenly gripped the tip of the steel pile extending from the Pile Driver on his right arm with his left hand.

That was—that motion was the Incarnate technique Takumu had mastered, the attack power expansion—

“«Cyan Blade»!!”

The call of a technique name spoken with his head held high. At the same time, the Enhanced Armament on his right arm was dismantled, and a blue Over-Ray enveloped the pulled-out steel pile. By the time he grasped it firmly again with his two hands with smooth movements, the pile was already changing into a large two-handed sword.

Without any sign of fearing the rushing mass of tentacles, Takumu held his sword glittering blue overhead.

“CHEIAAAAAA—!!”

The vigor of a piercing scream. The very space around him trembled electrically, and an aftershock wave of intimidating might was transmitted as far as where the two were standing stock-still.

While effusing a light resembling lightning, the two-handed sword cut down from a head-on direction—.

It severed the swarm of tentacles and cut deeply into the lump of meat of the Kit's main body.

A silent shriek.

The entire body of the lump of meat writhed violently, and the dozens of Burst Linkers joined to its blood vessels also swayed tremblingly. Some of them had regained consciousness and seemed to be blankly gazing around at their surroundings. From the vicinity of the two-handed sword that was still cutting into it, a blue light stretched radially and gave birth to some fine cracks.

Right after, a part of the Kit's main body about ten meters in diameter internally exploded, and a large amount of black liquid and gas was dispersed. The passageway in which Takumu, Haruyuki, and Chiyuri were standing crumbled from its base. The avatars, losing their balance, were helplessly thrown into the bottomless space of outer space...

—Or so they had thought, but the next moment.

Chapter 5

"...Uwaah! W, we're falling..!"

While yelling, Haruyuki abruptly picked himself up.

Just at that moment, both sides of his neck were lightly pulled.

"Eh...what..."

While feeling his heartbeat ringing like an alarm bell, he looked several times left and right. An off-white wallpaper. A super-thin panel TV. A large dining table and a kitchen counter beyond it.

It was his living and dining rooms, which he was accustomed to seeing. He had been sleeping on the mattresses laid on the ground.

The home server, which had sensed the motion of Haruyuki raising his upper body, illuminated the ceiling panel lights at a low lux^[8] setting. In the dim gray light, he looked at what had pulled his neck; it was two XSB cables extending from his Neuro Linker, which he had been wearing. He traced the cable on the left side with his eye; only fifty centimeters from his side, the sleeping face of his childhood friend—Kurashima Chiyuri, who had peeled off her blanket and was sleeping with her tummy sticking out from the hem of her pajamas, dived into his view.

—Surely, it wasn't all a dream?

Becoming a duel avatar in a strange place; passing through a long tunnel and seeing the light of the galaxy; meeting that bright golden yellow girl again there...it was all just a dream..?

While Haruyuki was taken with that bewilderment, at almost the same time Chiyuri lifted her eyelids with a momentum that nearly made a sharp sound.

Chiyuri exchanged glances with him for only a mere second, then shouted in a hoarse voice.

"Haru...where's Takkun!? Was he able to come back safely from there!?"

Those words indicated she had also shared the same experience as Haruyuki.

That was right; there was no way it had been just a dream. What they had experienced in that world, what had happened was all real. The two had passed through «imagination circuits» and had entered the Brain Burst central server, had discovered the «main body of the ISS Kit», and had awakened Takumu, to whom it had been trying to connect, with Haruyuki's Incarnate technique, and then...

"—Taku!"

While raising his voice Haruyuki turned his body toward the mattress laid on his right side.

In the dim light, in contrast to Chiyuri, Mayuzumi Takumu was in a proper upward-facing position with a straightened back and was closing his eyelids.

“Takkun..!”

While Chiyuri also shouted thinly, she climbed over Haruyuki’s two legs and knelt at Takumu’s immediate side. At the moment when her extended hand tried to touch his shoulder, Takumu’s eyes opened with great momentum.

His slightly brown pupils caught sight of Chiyuri and Haruyuki in order, who were holding their breaths and had stopped still. His left hand came out from beneath the blanket and touched the Neuro Linker equipped to his neck and the cable extending from his direct connection terminal connecting him to Haruyuki.

At last his childhood friend spoke in a distinct voice that did not seem like that of just having woken up.

“...It wasn’t a dream, was it. No, it’s different. Haru and Chii-chan destroyed my nightmare for me. That’s how it was, right?”

And then he wore the exact same unchanged gentle smile he always had on his lips.

That moment, Haruyuki extended his right hand; while seizing Takumu’s left shoulder with all his might he shouted.

"Taku, you, you...if we tell you to run away, then run away! There it'd normally be impossible to counterattack!"

"That's right! If you got caught by those nasty tentacles, what would you have done!"

While also drawing near Takumu as if to lean on him, Chiyuri too raised a shrill voice.

Takumu, who, at the last scene of the «dream» a moment ago, far from escaping from the raging main body of the Kit had counterattacked with his Incarnate technique immediately after having escaped its mind control due to Haruyuki's Incarnate technique and was being reproached for that, answered while changing his smile to a seemingly regretful one.

"W, well you see, I thought of it right off the bat...That thing's to blame; it's the root of all evil. And I had the feeling that I had to return the favor with a blow by any means..."

"W, well, as for me too, if I could've then I would've liked to give it a hard knock with all my might though..."

After unconsciously nodding, Haruyuki abruptly raised his face and inquired hurriedly.

"Th, that's right, besides that...what happened? How's 'the thing' inside you..?"

Inside the «dream», with his new Incarnate technique «Laser Lance» Haruyuki had definitely pierced through and destroyed the ISS Kit, which

had broken off from Takumu's right arm. However, if that were an occurrence in the imaginary world, even if it weren't an actual dream he still did not know how much influence he had exerted.

The questioned Takumu lowered his eyes and then tightly closed his eyelids.

His right hand rose up and touched the area around his brow. His furrowed eyebrows trembled little by little. Takumu, who was in that state for a while, at last lowered his hand, and with his snapped-open eyes he stared straight at Chiyuri first, then at Haruyuki—.

He emitted a subdued voice.

"...It disappeared."

"Eh..?"

"It disappeared, Haru. That thing, which had been staying in a place deep inside my head since yesterday night and had always been whispering to me...it disappeared..."

At the same time as his words were petering out, the home server, which had judged that the inhabitants had risen from bed, raised the degree of illumination further.

The daylight color of the panel lights shone on the face of the widely smiling Takumu. It was no different than his smile since they had become the power forwards of Nega Nebulas—no, than the smile of his old friend

always at his side if Haruyuki looked there while they played as if in a trance since their childhood days.

—It was Taku. He had returned. To my side. To a place I could reach if I extended my hand out.

The moment he believed that, the smile of Takumu before his eyes was covered in a boisterous dance of white light and became blurred.

The instant he was aware of a hot something overflowing from his own eyes, out of embarrassment Haruyuki bumped his forehead into Takumu's broad chest with a thump.

"Y...you caused us to worry..!"

While shouting roughly on purpose, Haruyuki tried to hold back his tears with all his might, but on the contrary they welled up endlessly. With clenched teeth, from his throat he leaked out something, a sob like that of a child.

"Uh...nn...kk...uh..!"

A large, warm hand gently slapped the back of Haruyuki, who, unable to stand it all, was causing his shoulders to tremble.

"Just...just a moment, Haru, no matter how you think about it that's my role, isn't it!"

The voice of Chiyuri, who, aghast, had shouted that, was however also clearly wet. Immediately after, around Haruyuki's left shoulder Chiyuri also heavily bumped her body with a thump.

While feeling the body warmth of his two childhood friends with his whole body, Haruyuki only continued to be filled to the brim with hot tears.

And then, suddenly, in the far depths of his head he heard a faint voice.

...I'm glad for you. That you were able to save your friends.

That was unmistakably that strange bright golden yellow girl avatar. While bearing his sobs, Haruyuki replied with his thoughts.

—Thank you, it's all thanks to you.

...Fufu, I didn't do anything. The light of your heart shone upon the darkness. I want you to keep walking the path in which you believe. If you continue to gather lots of light, one day for sure the time when that person's deep despair will also be healed will come...

At this time he did not really understand the meaning of those words.

However, as if being led by something Haruyuki murmured.

—Unh. I promise. One day, I will definitely free you...free you and him from the cycle of the «Disaster»...

...Thank you. I believe in you...

With those final few words, the voice faded and disappeared.

With the sleeve of his pajamas, he roughly wiped his tears, which he had finally begun to get under control, and he lifted his head; to hide his embarrassment Haruyuki shouted with great force.

"It...it seems like after running till we were about to die my stomach's hungry. I'm going to see if there isn't anything in the fridge..."

Chiyuri's stunned voice overtook Haruyuki, who had pulled out the direct connection cable, had stood up, and was running with heavy footsteps toward the kitchen.

"Hey there, even if you're talking about running, wasn't it in the middle of a dream!"

Following her was also Takumu's laughing voice.

"Ha ha ha...Haru, I'm counting on you for my share too!"

After heating three people's rations' worth of frozen cubes of clam chowder and pouring equal amounts into their soup cups, Haruyuki carried them to the dining table.

He looked at the wall clock; it was already close to six in the morning. If he released the window glass' light shielding mode, the morning light from the east would probably shine in. It was an hour earlier than his regular waking time, but he considered getting up today as he was and stretched enormously.

At the same time the two who had cleaned up their beds came to the table, they first took a sip of the soup from which steam was rising. After puffing out their breaths, their gazes met.

The first to open her mouth was Chiyuri, whose expression had become serious.

"Takkun. Um...with this, it's okay to think of the problematic «ISS Kit» as having completely disappeared, right?"

"Unh, I believe so. I don't have data backing me up, but my intuition says so."

There was no hesitation in the voice of Takumu, who had come to that conclusion immediately. Haruyuki also nodded and spoke while thinking.

"It's not about reducing its degree of endurance in the duel stage, how do you put it...we destroyed some save data in the server. If it survived that, on the other hand that'd be surprising..."

"«Server». —Haru, basically that place was Brain Burst's..?"

To Takumu's inquiry, he nodded softly.

"Aah. The «Brain Burst central server»...That person had said so..."

To Takumu, who had awakened on the brink of leaving the server, Haruyuki and Chiyuri alternately explained what they had experienced in that world.

The long, dark tunnel and the infinite space in its depths. The wavering light of the galaxy and the jet black lump of meat. And then, the strange bright yellow golden avatar who had appeared from inside Haruyuki and explained various things to him—.

“...I see...”

Takumu, still with his glasses removed, was silent for a while with his completely regular «professor mode» expression. After probably having had his head revolve furiously for a number of seconds, he lifted his head and emitted some words crisply.

“Haru, do you remember? What we discussed regarding the vulnerability of the ISS Kit, last night, before sleeping.”

“V, vulnerability...um sure enough, what we said about since it has a power that formidable, it must also have a weakness to counterbalance it?”

“That’s right. At first, you had struck that very vulnerability. While its equipper is sleeping during the night, the ISS Kit automatically opens its imagination circuits and connects the equipper’s consciousness to the central server. There, with other equippers, it executes a so-to-speak...«nightmare parallel processing»-type of operation, strengthening the Kit’s main body as well as its terminals...”

At Takumu’s words, Haruyuki and Chiyuri simultaneously caused their bodies to shudder.

“Some...somehow, that’s absurd...Isn’t a thing like that already out of the limits of what players can do..?”

To Chiyuri’s whisper, Takumu lightly bit his lip.

“Aah, truthfully, I also have no clue how one would be able to make an Enhanced Armament that could do that kind of thing. But...if I could say one thing, then it would be that the Brain Burst program undoubtedly had that function from the outset. The one of «opening the imagination circuits as a dream and connecting to the central server».”

“Eh...that means that..?”

“Haru, you remember too right? What had happened the night of the day you installed Brain Burst.”

“Ah...”

After lightly raising his voice and exchanging glances with Chiyuri, Haruyuki deeply nodded.

There was no way he could forget it. He did not remember the details, but in the fall of last year, Haruyuki, who had received the program from Kuroyukihime, had seen a long, long nightmare. The program had filtered that dream and created Haruyuki’s other self, the duel avatar «Silver Crow». The avatar data must have also been registered simultaneously in the central server—rather than that, it was more natural to think of that process as having occurred in the interior of the central server. That night, sure enough Haruyuki had communicated with the server while sleeping.

It was basically completely the same as what had happened to Takumu's self tonight—.

Taking a sip of his soup, while being lost even further in thought Takumu continued.

"The nightly parallel processing, that's the very heart of the strength of the ISS Kit, but...however, at the same time it also has a humongous opening. Because no matter what, it'll call Burst Linkers right up to the side of the main body. Although if everyone's under its control like I was, it wouldn't become a problem..."

To Takumu, who had lifted his head and had laughed meaningfully, Haruyuki also returned a wide laugh.

"The guys who created the Kit also probably sure didn't imagine there were Burst Linkers who make direct connections and sleep with its equippers in real life."

"On top of that, all the more because it's a user who can attack with the «range expansion Incarnate technique» outside the sphere of influence of the Kit's main body."

Watching the two boys laughing together with a "fufufufu," Chiyuri shook her head with an "oh dear," but she spoke immediately in a half-smiling, half-displeased manner.

"In short, this time's the victory of our bonds! That's what it is! Aah, enough already, I want to meet the mastermind right now and say 'Serves you right!' to him!"

Gulping down her soup to the last drop, she vigorously returned her cup to the table, and after a shake of her short hair disheveled from sleep she opened her mouth again.

"...Hey, Takkun. At the end of that «dream», you chopped up the Kit's main body with «Cyan Blade» right. With that, were you able to destroy the main body..?"

"...No."

The interrogated Takumu changed his expression and slowly shook his head.

"It's unfortunate, but it didn't have the effect of being able to destroy it completely. —However, I ought to have dealt some adequate damage to its accumulated «malice» and its transmission circuits. The clones belonging to the same cluster as I do probably lost quite a bit of power."

The «cluster» of which Takumu spoke was a group consisting of the same ISS Kit's source of reproduction—in Takumu's case, «Magenta Scissor»—shared by some Burst Linkers and from there the people who possessed further copies of the Kit. At the last of last night's duel, if they had not been able to stop the Kit, which had broken off from Takumu and had tried to parasitize Haruyuki, Haruyuki also would have become a member of that cluster.

While remembering the figure of the grass green avatar walking next to Takumu's side inside the nightmare, Haruyuki murmured.

"...That means, if we think about releasing «Bush Utan» and «Olive Glove» from the Kit, then now's our chance."

"Unh. If it's now, then even if we don't enter the central server, we might be able to destroy it in a normal duel. Of course, with normal techniques it's of no use, but if we use Incarnate techniques I think there's a possibility."

"Understood. Convey this matter to that guy's «big brother». If we could do something we would, but today we can't make a move..."

At Haruyuki's words, Chiyuri and Takumu looked at the clock on the wall.

The date and time displayed was June 20th 2047, Wednesday, 6:30 A.M.

At seven tonight—that was to say, after twelve hours and a little bit later, Haruyuki would have to challenge a mission of high difficulty. Namely, the «Imperial Palace escape strategy».

Currently, his other self Silver Crow had been left behind in the depths of the «Imperial Palace» existing in the center of the Unlimited Neutral Field together with the purification ability user «Ardor Maiden». If the two did not slip through the fierce attack of «Suzaku, one of the Four Divine Beasts» and return alive from there once more, as a Burst Linker Haruyuki had no future. As for why, if he were not purified of the «Disaster Armor»

lurking in the depths of his avatar, at the next Seven Kings' meeting a bounty of the highest price would be placed on his head.

The night before the mission when he was really supposed to have slept soundly and fully he had braved an unexpected adventure, but on the contrary Haruyuki unusually felt brimming with energy. He had a real sense that the duel with Takumu, who had been violated by the ISS Kit, and the experience in the central server after that had given him a definite something.

The three, who had turned their faces back from the clock, nodded firmly and deeply at one another. Chiyuri, who was at his left, with a smile slapped Haruyuki's back with great force.

"Haru, you own that bird easily and come back right away!"

"That's right, Haru, compared with fighting me on IS mode, that's easy isn't it?"

"Oh, look who's talking Mayuzumi-sensei^[9]."

At the point where the two boys again grinned widely, this time's spontaneous sleepover event was wrapped up for the time being.

Chiyuri, the brave warrior who was going to return to her home two floors downstairs in her pajamas, proceeded to the door first, and Takumu, who had changed into sweats, followed afterward. Haruyuki, who had gone out to see the two off, noticed by chance Takumu's small gesture.

He was holding up his right hand and was softly holding the area of the outside of that wrist with his left arm. It was the exact spot where the ISS Kit had parasitized Cyan Pile.

Approaching a step, from behind Haruyuki called out to Takumu in a small voice.

"Taku...I have to apologize. For destroying your «power»..."

His old chum who had looked back smiled, but in its depths Haruyuki felt there was a faint plaintiveness after all. However, Takumu greatly shook his head and spoke distinctly.

"—To be sure, if I said I didn't feel any attachment to that terrible power altogether, it'd be a lie. However, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Because I want to be how I am now after all. No matter how much I worry or hesitate."

"...Taku..."

"Besides that, I obtained something much bigger than that power. That's why there's no need for you to apologize, Haruyuki."

At Takumu's words he blinked his eyes; while tilting his head to the side he inquired.

"Eh...does that mean some amazing special technique-like..?"

Whereupon quicker than Takumu could reply, Chiyuri, who had finished wearing her shoes, turned her head round and shouted.

“Ah—enough already, why are you so dull! What Takkun wants to say is...”

There for some reason Chiyuri cut her words short and grinned broadly.

“...You should think about it yourself after all. It’s your homework for tomorrow!”

Haruyuki, who had tidied the table to its original state, bolted down a breakfast of cereal and milk, changed into his uniform, and left the house.

While riding the elevator down, he typed a short text mail to his mother. The content was a report saying that he had properly gotten up and went to school and thanks for having let Takumu and Chiyuri stay over last night. Now that he thought of it there was also the plan tonight to assemble all legion members at the Arita residence, but they ought to disperse before his mother returned home, so he omitted that. When he had descended to ground level he sent it.

Some seconds later the reply was the single word **【Understood】** , but precisely five hundred yen’s worth of money code was attached. Haruyuki smiled in spite of himself and gratefully charged it into his own account.

Haruyuki’s mother, the person Arita Saya, was a rather mysterious woman even from the view of her biological child. She would be thirty-seven this year, so she had given birth to Haruyuki when she was twenty-three. He had not asked the person herself the particulars about her personal history, but at that time she still must have been a student attending a graduate school in the Tokyo metropolitan area. While at school, with a man three years older working at a network-related enterprise she had

entered her name in the family register and had borne a child. However, the details of that area's time series were unknown, and no wedding ceremony had been held either. That seemed to be the reason why they were still estranged from his maternal grandparents' house in Yamagata.

While rearing a baby—granted, she had depended considerably on the Neuro Linker—she had completed her master's coursework, obtained her MBA qualifications, and had secured a post in a Japanese subsidiary of an investment bank whose head office was in America. Distinguishing herself by being assigned to the training department and working on some large-scale projects, in a number of years she had been promoted to associate—.

In truth, Haruyuki had heard that story from Chiyuri's mama Momoe-san. She and Haruyuki's mother seemed to have been fellow friends since their university years. However, Momoe-san also would not tell him about certain matters. Namely, regarding why Haruyuki's parents were divorced.

Their divorce establishment was seven years ago. His mother was thirty, his father thirty-three, and Haruyuki seven. He hardly remembered anything at the time.

However, there was one scene that had stained a corner of his memory and would not disappear by any means.

The young Haruyuki, feeling that he had heard voices talking in the middle of the night, had woken up. Straining his ears, sure enough from

the other side of the door he could hear some conversational exchange. Why he did not fall asleep again there was because the two voices were sharp with disquiet.

Alighting from his bed, he softly opened the door. Back then, it was not his current eight-tatami-sized room^[10] but a 4.5-tatami-sized room that was Haruyuki's room. Dead ahead in the dark corridor, the glass door shone dimly. Haruyuki moved so as not to raise any footsteps and squatted at the side of the door.

His parents' voices, which leaked through and could be heard, were restrained in low tones, but it was clearly a venomous quarrel. The two were violently arguing about something. He could hear words like "looking after," "promise," and "been used," but he didn't understand their meaning. However, the young Haruyuki intuitively realized his parents were arguing over himself...

There, suddenly as if running into a wall with a clash, his memories were interrupted, and Haruyuki blankly lifted his face.

Before he realized it he had cut across the apartment house's spacious front garden and had come to right before the Loop 7 road. He lightly shook his head and switched his thoughts. He did not like to remember things of the past too much.

At any rate, the person Arita Saya was a woman who kept advancing only forward, forward as if driven on by something. Showing the depths of her heart to no one, not even looking back at her immediate feet—.

He had sometimes thought that was lonely, but right now he didn't particularly mind it. She didn't find fault with his grades; without forgetting she gave him his five hundred yen lunch money; she also let his friends stay over at home. With this if he complained, he would incur divine punishment.

He took a deep breath, replacing the air built up in his chest; Haruyuki glanced at his virtual desktop's AR display.

Today's weather forecast was cloudy, and around noon a drizzle would sprinkle but would end by evening. The forgotten item warning hadn't come out either; thanks to having left the house considerably earlier than usual, his estimated time of arrival at school was thirty minutes before the bell. He probably had the leeway to complete one of his missions before going to school.

Haruyuki, who at present had come out onto the Loop 7 line sidewalk, swung his shoulder bag around to his back and began to walk briskly heading south.

At the intersection under the central line overpass to where he would normally turn right, he went straight today. Climbing the south slope of Koenji, he rode the elevator-style pedestrian bridge crossing Ome Highway. At its apex he turned left and stopped directly above the wide main highway with four lanes on one side. While looking down at the flow of coming and going EVs, he muttered inside his mouth.

"Burst Link."

A roar of thunder resounded, and the world froze blue. He promptly clicked the letter B icon wrapped in flames in the lower left hand corner of the virtual desktop. From the launched «Install Menu» he opened the Sugunami second area matching list, and after running his eyes over the not-too-many avatar names he touched a name somewhere around the middle. Without hesitating he pushed the DUEL button in the small window that had popped up.

The blue transparent Blue World transformed while emitting a creaking sound. The road became a gravelly dry valley. The buildings became reddish-brown rocky mountains. The sky became a dusty light yellow. It was the «Wilderness» stage.

Haruyuki, who had confirmed that the guide cursor was pointing to the south side of Loop 7, vaulted his body, which had transformed into his duel avatar, from the pedestrian bridge. He landed swiftly and awaited the rumble of the gasoline engine approaching from the far distance.

Just the morning the day before yesterday as well, Haruyuki had «intruded» at the exact same time and same place on the same opponent. For that reason this time as well his opponent had probably surmised his intention—not a duel, but the desire for a conversation. Having come to that conclusion, while raising one hand while facing the silhouette that was coming into view,

“Ah, hello, good morn...”

Haruyuki, who had begun his greeting, halfway through changed those words into a scream.

“Now just wait a momennnnnt!?”

Narrowly throwing his body to the right, he dodged the hunk of iron rushing at maximum speed—the last-century large-class American bike.

Before Haruyuki’s eyes, the bike, which had settled its pistons while magnificently scattering sparks from the disk brakes of its front and back wheels, left a rut that smell burnt in the gravel-mixed ground and came to a stop. Haruyuki jumped up, and facing the rider on the vehicle, he shouted while being flustered.

“Uh, um, excuse me, today I also have something to say in «closed mode»...”

But the rider—«Ash Roller», the level 5 Burst Linker belonging to the green legion «Great Wall», wagged a finger on his right hand and cut off Haruyuki’s words.

“I understand that. I got it, but today let me start today with my turn!”

“Uh, unh...”

Ash Roller pointed the index fingers of both his hands straight at Haruyuki, who had been completely overwhelmed.

"All right, got it you Crow bastard, duel with me today for real! And then, if I lose, I'll listen to what you have to say. But if I win, you listen to one of my requests! That's a mega even condition!"

"What? R, request?"

"Besides that, if we continue two times in a row with no duel, the boys and girls of the gallery who took the trouble to register to watch our duels will be mega let down!"

To the remarks emitted from below the skull design shield of the helmet, suddenly cheers of "That's right, that's right!" and "Today we want to see something exciting!" followed. Hurriedly Haruyuki looked around at his surroundings and saw the silhouettes of spectators sprinkled on the roofs of the buildings along Loop 7.

He couldn't say there were very many, but almost everyone registered on the matching list seemed to have appeared in this stage. Among the Burst Linkers whose homes were west of Shinjuku, there were many who knew that Silver Crow and Ash Roller were closely connected fellow rivals, and since their fights tended to become showy due to the fact that both of their avatars' performances were too peaky and extreme, a duel of the two seemed to be treated as quite a good match. To add, both were level 5.

Giving a glance at the time count, which showed that sixty seconds had already elapsed, Haruyuki thought quickly.

Different from the day before yesterday when they had fully talked for close to thirty minutes, today what he had to transmit to him was just the single message «If we want to remove Bush Utan's ISS Kit, now's our chance». Surely it would not take thirty minutes. If so, in order also to make the most of his one point that he had gone to the trouble of spending, it wouldn't be bad to duel with Ash Roller in earnest for the first time in a while. Besides that, at tonight's «Imperial Palace escape strategy», or depending on how Sunday's «Seven Kings' meeting» unfolded, this would become his last duel with him, which he could not deny...

“—Understood.”

Nodding deeply, Haruyuki opened his mouth.

“I will accept it on a condition. If I win, listen properly to what I have to say – just a momennnnnt!”

However, without being able to speak to the end, he changed the end of his sentence into a scream and jumped aside to the left. The reason was that Ash Roller's large-class bike had charged ferociously without warning.

“Ah, isn't that dangerous! I'm still chatting...”

“Quiet shut u—p! The duel's already begun bo—y! My bad but today, you're gonna let me have a giga co—ol victory!”

While shouting that, Ash Roller made another spin turn. While being aware that his rotation radius had become far sharper than that of the time when they had met, Haruyuki also indomitably retorted back.

“I, I’m going to get a tera gorgeous perfect win myself! Rather than that, to begin with even if I win you’ll only listen to what I have to say, while if you win I have to listen to your request; somehow the conditions seem unbalanced...”

“Su—ck it! If you’re fussin’ over the details you won’t get used to the wind!”

Spouting exhaust flames from its fat mufflers, the American bike made its third mad dash.

Ash Roller was an abnormal Burst Linker who had invested the majority of his duel avatar’s potential in his Enhanced Armament, his large-class bike.

The rider himself had almost no fighting power regardless of whether it was close-range or long-range. In return, his bike was furnished with both high mobility power and high endurance power. A «Vehicle Enhanced Armament» itself was relatively rare, but within them one could probably say its capacity was top-class.

If one were forced to name its weaknesses, it would be that it was less adaptable than a living avatar and that it lacked covertness due to its size. If one were to attack the latter point, a «long-distance firepower concentration attack» would be effective, but Haruyuki did not possess red-class attack power at all.

Therefore, if he were to fight with Ash Roller on the ground, he would carry out «life-risking close-range attacks». Concretely, he would dodge the bike's charge by a paper-thin margin to the right or left and shower either Ash the person himself or his bike's engine parts with attacks.

It would be best if he used Silver Crow's mobility power to jump straight overhead and to aim for the head of the rider himself, but the other party knew that. The instant Haruyuki entered a vertical jump position he would make the bike wheelie and with a high-speed revolution of his back wheel would use his «anti-air technique». His jump attack and the anti-air attack, like the game of rock-paper-scissors, had one-way compatibility; if he took the hit he would not be able to avoid great damage. An unmeasured dive would be suicidal action.

"Yeeee—haw—!"

Haruyuki concentrated all his nerves on the huge front tire of the onrushing bike, whose rider was coming with a sharp war cry. The other side was also estimating Haruyuki's dodge; he would probably minutely adjust his path left or right just beforehand. It would be all right if Haruyuki attacked in the opposite direction; if he evaded in the same direction, he would unmistakably meet an accident with bodily injury.

—Which one...right, or left... It's not the tires but the incline of the bike frame I have to watch...

Activating his «super-concentration power limited to the middle of gameplay» that had been polished from the time before he had become

a Burst Linker, Haruyuki focused on the actions of the entire body of the bike with all his nerves.

—And then, at that time.

The winker on the side of the bike that was on the right from Haruyuki's view flickered with an orange color.

"Heigh..."

While leaking out his voice, he reflexively dived left.

However, at the same time the bike had also tilted *to the left*, and the rugged tire pressed in before his eyes—.

A fearsome impact as if he had been whammed by a humongous hammer. His entire view of the stage whirled round. No, the one revolving round was Haruyuki. While exhibiting a high-speed backward somersault body stretch not acted out nowadays even in gag anime, Silver Crow was blown off several dozen meters and pierced one of the craggy mountains on the east side of the Loop 7 road headfirst.

Knocked unconscious for a bit, he thrust his arms against the bare rock and deeply pulled his helmet out. As soon as he jumped down on the road, beside himself with rage, he shouted.

"Y, y, you turned in the opposite direction of your winker! Violation of road traffic laws! Two hundred million yen fine!"

After Haruyuki had done so, while chasing him and charging at him even more, the scarface rider roared with loud laughter.

“Hyahahahaa—! I, Ash-sama! My existence itself is a violation of road traffic laws—!”

That was the truth. Currently in this age, if one burned fossil fuels on public roads and tried to emit even a cubic centimeter of carbon dioxide, one would be handcuffed on the spot. Furthermore, the explosive roar from the muffler easily broke safety standards, and there was no number plate on the rear. However, of course in the field of the Accelerated World, there were no motorcycle cops who would crack down on him.

While being showered in the magnificent cheers given off by the surrounding gallery instead of a siren, Ash Roller came rushing, no doubt to knock Haruyuki flying again.

“You bastard...”

While raising a cursing voice, with a glance he checked the upper left hand of his field of vision. Silver Crow’s health gauge had two-tenths scraped away with the damage of a little while ago. In opposition, his special technique gauge had accumulated to the extent of three-tenths, but it was still undependable to activate his «flying ability» and claim a win.

He would fly after clashing one more time on the ground. Resolving to do that, Haruyuki dropped his waist and lay in wait for the large-class bike. He had involuntarily fallen for the feint using the winker since it was

the first time he had seen it, but he would not fall for the same trick again. In his mind, he shouted that this time for sure, he would barely dodge the charge and hammer him with a special technique counter.

However, somehow it seemed that Ash Roller also thought that the same feint would not work twice. Instead of causing his winker to blink—

“Tuo!”

With that shout he jumped vertically from his bike and stood upright with his seat and handle as footing. Like that, while manipulating the bike just like a surfboard he charged. It was Ash’s so-to-speak «hidden secret», also by the name of «V Twin Fists».

Its naming as well as its appearance could only be thought of as a joke, but as a matter of fact it had a concealed power that could by no means be belittled. Even if one dodged the bike’s front tire, the kick of the rider himself would come, so it was difficult to get the right timing for a counter. Although Haruyuki had already experienced this technique a number of times, he was still unable to find an effective countermeasure.

“Yaaaaahoo—!”

Haruyuki stared as hard as he could at the incoming bike slaloming left and right and the rider on it raising a war cry. It was possible to evade him with a large jump, but with that he would not be able to counterattack. Sky Raker, Ash’s master and parent, had destroyed that V Twin Fists with the superhuman feat of «gripping the bike’s brake lever

while making a back dash», but imitating that was still impossible for Haruyuki.

Were there no other weaknesses, something, somewhere, someplace—
“..!”

Abruptly, a flash of insight.

Would Ash Roller be able to make the bike wheelie from that stance as well? No, it was probably impossible. If he did that, he would tumble from the bike. Basically, what he had to aim for was,

“The top!”

The instant the huge tire drew close, filling his vision, Haruyuki stooped over and immediately kicked the ground with all his might and leaped up.

“Towaa!?”

The minute he slammed into the rider himself, who had let out a strange voice, he held on for dear life. The two were separated from the bike and dropped to the road with a thud. The American bike, which had lost its proprietor, ran away as it was to Loop 7.

“You, you, hold-me-tight...no, let go of me you bastard!”

With all his might, Haruyuki tried to pin Ash Roller down, who was kicking and struggling while bellowing. He could not miss this chance.

“No way! Ash-san without his bike is *fukujinzuke*^[11] without curry!”

"What did ya just say! I'm a hardcore fan of Japanese leek with curry!"

At the sight of the two rolling on the ground and grappling, the gallery again became excited. However, in a hand-to-hand battle between their fellow main bodies, Ash Roller did not have the power to pierce Silver Crow's metallic armor after all. Without even minding the fists flailing around hitting his face and chest, Haruyuki forcefully got behind him and tightly held his chest from the back.

"Gyah! Wait, y-y-y-you, don't hug me!"

"I-it's not that I want to hug you that I'm hugging you!"

"Don't say hug you suck-it bastard!"

"You're the one who brought it up first...right!!"

At the same time he shouted back, Haruyuki deployed his wings in one go. Investing in his special technique gauge, which had been charged to the extent of another tenth with the hand-to-hand fighting of right now, with all his strength he made his ten metal fins vibrate.

With a *doh!* impact sound, Silver Crow and Ash Roller took off vertically like a rocket.

"Gya—! What the heck, we're flying hi—gh!"

No longer keeping company with his emitted strange scream, with all his energy Haruyuki continued to ascend. In an instant, he passed the rocky

mountains where the gallery was standing, and at that rate he reached an altitude as high as one hundred—two hundred—three hundred meters.

“No, nooooo! I can’t be high up, don’t like it, no thank you—...”

The shrill shouting voice suddenly broke off into a mumble. Ash Roller stiffened his body, which had been thrashing about in Haruyuki’s chest, and he asked something in a hoarse voice.

“Uh, um, Crow-san? Surely not me from here? Not like a streak of a shooting star twinkling in the night sky?”

“Yes. Like some space debris whose trajectory has fallen.”

Nodding, Haruyuki released his hands mercilessly.

By making use of Silver Crow’s flying ability in combat, Haruyuki had devised some tactics. What he had continued to use from the very beginning was a kick or punch at an extremely high speed from a high, high altitude—«Dive Attack». Furthermore, recently he was also in the middle of practicing the technique «Aerial Combo», which applied the use of his wings’ instantaneous thrusts in close-range hand-to-hand fighting on the ground.

However, in reality, rather than those two a more surefire and effective way of using it existed. Holding his duel opponent, carrying him as far as the high skies, throwing him, and dealing damage from a high-altitude fall. It was difficult to use on large-class avatars, and he would not be able to hold opponents with a high fighting capacity in the first place, but

once fixed, a large amount of damage was almost certain. Why Haruyuki did not really use this technique was because on the contrary he tended to suffer a regrettable counter when his opponents realized he was aiming for close contact, and since there were plenty of avatars who had high resistance against falls even if they couldn't fly, there was no way not to aim for the situation like this time where it had become a scuffle with the spontaneous flow of things. If Ash Roller fell from this height, the largest value of fall damage would probably be applied to him, whose avatar's main body's armor was without the ability to lightly hover or to move in three dimensions.

Haruyuki had completely forgotten that day's goal and had become set on victory, but Ash Roller, who was in a desperate plight, was also not a manly opponent to the extent where he would be done in without a peep. On the brink of being separated from Haruyuki's hand, he grabbed it and at the same time shouted.

"If it's gonna be like this, then me and you are goin' to hell in tandem!
«Flying Knucklehead»~!!"

—A special technique!?

Haruyuki reflexively stiffened his body. He had surely not thought that Ash Roller's main body would have a special technique.

However, even after some seconds passed nothing happened. Judging that it was a bluff simply to gain time, Haruyuki had been opened his mouth and had been about to say a complaint out of Ash's not knowing

when to give up, but he immediately changed his words to a shout of surprise.

“Wait a moment Ash-san, there’s limits even to useless struggling—awaaaaaaah!?”

What had surprised Haruyuki was not Ash, whom he was still embracing in his arms—it was two rays of light rapidly approaching from directly below. Narrow, long cylindrical objects closing in while spurting orange flames. Four small wings near the area of their tails and a red lens on their heads. No matter how he looked at them, they were:

“M-m-missilesss!?”

With a scream, he rapidly launched forth in the air. However, the two missiles somehow seemed to be equipped with homing functions; they made their aims follow him. No matter how much he flew zigzag, he couldn’t outrun them at all.

Come to think of it, before Ash Roller had certainly said something like “I loaded missiles on my bike.” Basically what had fired those was the American bike supposedly fallen on the ground of Loop 7. Even if he were separated from his Enhanced Armament, instructions through voice commands were possible. However.

“A-a-at this rate you’ll be blown up too right!”

“Heh, it’s better than just being dropped right booooy!”

Sure enough there was that too. Haruyuki tried with all his might to discard his burden, but Ash, who was aiming for a double kill, at that critical moment was also clinging on with his two hands and feet. Due to that, he couldn't even put out half his normal speed, and within a few seconds the missiles were barely closing in on his toes—.

“Key Shoooo—p!”

At the same time as Ash Roller's yell of unclear meaning, they exploded spectacularly.

What was fearsome about the explosion-type attack was even more than its power and range, if one took its blow, for a while «one wouldn't be able to understand anything». From an altitude of three hundred meters, Haruyuki, who was falling head over heels while being knocked unconscious, had his ability to think restored right before piercing the ground, spread his wings, and suddenly applied a braking motion.

Where he crashed simultaneously with Ash Roller, who was still tangled up with him, was originally the center of the intersection between Loop 7 and Ome Highway. Peeling off Ash Roller, who was clinging to him even more, he thrust him several dozens of centimeters away and then asked without delay.

“...Um, Ash-san. What's the «Key Shop» you just mentioned?”

The bike rider, who seemed to have regained consciousness slightly more slowly, answered in a subdued voice while shaking his skull helmet bit by bit.

"Well, um...when there's fireworks, you shout «*Tamaya*» and «*Kagiya*»^[12] right. For the moment I tried translating them to English...but maybe you're better able to understand «ball shop»?"

"...From the bottom of my heart I don't care either way. In fact, either one's impossible to understand."

While mumbling, he checked both their health gauges. Before the missile had directly hit, Haruyuki's had been less, but his metal armor seemed to have somewhat reduced the explosion damage; at present either one of them only had a trifling ten percent left.

If one side dealt two, three more clean hits, it would be a situation where a conclusion would be reached, but as they lay on the road surface their faces met, and without knowing it both spoke.

"...Do you want to call it a draw?"

"...Let's make it a draw, shall we."

Mutually nodding, they simultaneously stood up with a heave-ho.

Looking round at the surrounding gallery, whose members were silently riveting their gazes on the two, Haruyuki strained his voice and shouted.

"Excuse me, we're sorry! With this, please let us call this match a draw!"

He had thought that voices of discontent would come, but contrary to his expectations—.

"Good game!"

“Next time also entertain us again~~”

The spectators individually shouted that, left a grand round of applause, and burst out. While gazing at them, Haruyuki was abruptly self-aware of some sort of deep emotion filling his chest.

This was a «duel». Even if there were thrill or excitement, hatred and anger did not exist. Even if the duelists were vying rivals, they were not enemies to be hated.

If one considered the cool-headed Brain Burst system, perhaps this world’s creator had envisioned a much more savage survival. However, the players had refused the creator’s intentions with their own will. Undoubtedly that feeling had been put into the name «Burst Linker», which had not been prescribed by the system. They were «comrades».

The ones trying to destroy that world were the «ISS Kit» and the Acceleration Research Society.

Both Bush Utan, who had fought with Haruyuki some number of days ago, and Takumu, whom he had fought yesterday, did not seem to be enjoying themselves at all. No, the Research Society’s members Dusk Taker too and even Rust Jigsaw were people to whom the enjoyment of duels was irrelevant.

That was wrong. Absolutely wrong.

With a slap, a hand wrapped in a leather glove tapped the left shoulder of Haruyuki, who was clenching his fists and standing still.

"Good fight, you Crow bastard. The weakness of my «V Twin Fists», you saw through it nicely."

"...I'm sure, next time the same trick won't work anymore though."

To Haruyuki, who had replied, Ash Roller let out a laughing "heh" voice.

"Of course. You'd better watch out, 'cause next I'll be doing a wheelie while standing."

The scarface, which seemed to have boasted that, glanced upward. He had checked the time count. Six hundred seconds remaining. It wasn't enough, but there was some leeway to talk.

Ash Roller, who had sat down on one of the handy-sized rocks dotting the inside of the intersection, jerked his chin up in a way that seemed to be telling him to start talking. Haruyuki sat on an opposite rock, nodded, and opened his mouth.

"Um...what I have to say is about Bush Utan."

He was unable to say as far as the details concerning Takumu to Ash, who tentatively belonged to an enemy legion, but despite that Haruyuki made his maximal efforts to convey information to the limits of what he could convey.

That the ISS Kit possessed a colony-like nature and linked with so-to-speak «genetically close» Kits. That the equippers were guided to that link each time they slept at night and connected with the main body of

the Kit. That Haruyuki and his legion comrades had attacked that main body in a data-like way and had dealt it considerable damage—.

“...That’s why, if we do it now, it might be possible to destroy the ISS Kit parasitizing Utan in the middle of a normal duel. However...to do that, there are two problems.”

Staring straight at the face of Ash Roller, who was listening attentively and mutely, Haruyuki spoke.

“The first is that we probably can’t deal damage to the ISS Kit without Incarnate techniques. And then the second is that Utan experienced firsthand the large-scale Incarnate technique of «Rust Jigsaw», who was riding in the tenth vehicle in the recent «Hermes Cord Race», and has been harboring a large distrust of the veteran Linkers, who have been hiding the existence of the Incarnate system...what he calls «IS Mode». And then I believe that feeling has given birth to the impatience that even if he relies on whatever dubious power, if he becomes stronger that’s fine with him; if he’s not strong there’s no meaning. If that’s not resolved, even if his current ISS Kit is destroyed, he’ll undoubtedly search for a new Kit again...”

“...Aah, that’s true. I think that too.”

Nodding, Ash Roller tipped up his skull-design shield with his right hand.

The face mask within that in some way gave the impression of a science boy looking at the yellow-tinged sky of the «Wilderness Stage». A voice

with a faded voice effect and an unexpectedly delicate tone flowed quietly.

"I already talked about how that guy Uu's «parent» lost all his points right. It's probably obvious, but it seemed to have been a big shock to him. Since then, there's been a huge frightfulness and...something like discontent or irritation always staying inside his heart. Doing something about him was probably the responsibility of me, who acted as his older brother...the losing-all-your-points system, I still haven't, how d'ya put it...come to terms with it. What I should've done for Uu, I didn't know..."

"Come to...terms with it?"

Ash nodded slowly at Haruyuki, who had asked that back, and turned his pale green eye lenses at him.

"«If your Burst Points become zero, the Brain Burst Program itself will be forcibly uninstalled, and you can't return to being a Burst Linker again.» I was taught straightaway by Master Raker that that was the Accelerated World's biggest rule. Crow, the same goes for you right?"

"Uh...yeah. I was distinctly warned as well by senpa...Black Lotus the first day I became a Burst Linker."

"I know right. Now that I think very closely about it, until now I've never once really been cornered to the brink of losing all my points. If I were forced to say it, maybe just the time I rose to level 2 my margin was kinda small, and losing immediately afterward to you, level 1 at the time, made me somewhat get the chills."

At his sharp glare, Haruyuki reflexively shrank his neck.

Now that he looked back, this Ash Roller was the opponent with whom Haruyuki had first fought as a Burst Linker and to whom he had first lost. After that, he was lectured by his parent Kuroyukihime about various things, and after having preparing all his tactics when he challenged him again, somehow in just in one day Ash had become level 2 and with the thanks of his newly acquired «wall climbing ability» his tactics had gone to waste.

Though he had given up on the match there for a moment, he had desperately used his head; that one fight where he had pinpointed the old-type bike's weakness that «only the rear wheel had motive power» and had achieved a come-from-behind victory became Haruyuki's starting point of tactics.

The «margin» in Ash's remark was a word arising from the uniqueness of the «level up» in the Brain Burst game.

In regular RPGs, at a point where one's experience points reached a certain value one would automatically level up. However, in this Brain Burst, in order to raise one's level, one must exhaust one's accumulated experience points, namely Burst Points. Concretely, the required amount of points to rise from level 1 to 2 was no fewer than 300. Basically, if one carried out the level up operation from the system menu called the «Install Menu», at that instant one's points would drop by 300 in one go. Therefore, one would need sufficient leeway—namely, a «margin»—just

to settle the matter so that when one leveled up, even if one lost a number of times continuously after that one would not fall into the pinch of losing all one's points. If one thought about it a little, it seemed obvious, but—.

In response to Ash Roller's words, while making a pitiable smile Haruyuki confessed.

"In, in reality, in the past I too got worked up when I had barely saved up 300 points and accidentally leveled up, nearly losing all my points."

"...Are you serious, really? At that time Suginami wasn't Nega Nebulas' territory yet right? Until you recovered it as a safety zone."

In response to his stunned voice, he shrugged.

"Uh, yeah that's true. My buddy...Cyan Pile saved me, somehow..."

Though he had begun to speak, he was unable to remember well at the time how in the world he had recovered his points. Instead, Haruyuki corrected the topic beginning to stray away to its original route.

"By, by the way, what did you mean by «coming to terms with losing all your points» a little earlier?"

"Aah...basically, well. To me, the system in which you lose all your points and have it forcibly uninstalled, it seems like a ridiculously harsh and cruel rule...however in one respect, there's the feeling too that as a Burst Linker if you're gonna receive the blessing of «accelerating» that much is probably a due risk. Frankly, I can't make head or tails of either one.

Because you see, it's easy to say that it's harsh, but...behind the scenes while you and I are becoming as far as level 5 like this, there also must be a number of guys who've had that number of points stolen from them and have lost all their points. You could also say that indirectly, the points I acquired and spent nonchalantly are the points that somebody stole from that guy Uu's parent the time when he lost all his points..."

"..."

Hearing remarks whose image differed slightly, no, quite a bit from the usual "hyahahaa" end of century rider, Haruyuki was involuntarily speechless. Possibly having read his thoughts, Ash snorted, turned away as if embarrassed, and continued.

"However, on the other hand I think that if you're a Burst Linker, from the start you should at least be prepared for someone to lose all their points. Both the side who's causing it and the side who's getting it. In that sense, I respect your parent...the Black King Black Lotus. It's quite something for me, who's entered the green legion Great Wall, to say, but...that person's amazing. In the way of her countenance of resolution, without question she's number one in the Accelerated World. I want to carry things through mega cool like that too, but...but you know...for instance Crow, when I'm dueling with you, if I were let known that you'd lose all your points with one more loss, whether I'd be able to strike the final blow mercilessly and in a cool way then...honestly I have no idea. At the least, I'm not confident that I wouldn't hesitate..."

“—Ash-san.”

Being truly surprised this time, Haruyuki staringly turned his gaze at him, and the bike rider returned a slightly dangerous voice.

“Oi you, you look like you’d say ‘I’d normally cause you to lose all your points though,’ don’t you.”

“N, nonono, no way! I’d hesitate too, I’d super-hesitate!”

“Oi hey there, you look like you’d say ‘Even if I hesitated I’d really cause you to lose all your points after all though,’ don’t you.”

“W, well Ash-san weren’t you saying that you’d just look like you were hesitating!”

After causing his two hands and face to undergo furious high-speed horizontal exercise and evading Ash Roller’s cross-examination, Haruyuki added something quickly.

“I mean, it’s natural to hesitate to do that. My parent...Black Lotus is surely hesitating. Because no matter how spiteful her opponent is...at their roots they’re similarly Burst Linkers. —Back then, I troubled you too, Ash-san, but...I was irreconcilable with the guy who stole my «flying ability» this spring to the bitter end...from the bottom of my heart he was an «enemy» whom I thought I loathed. Despite that, when I beat him in the «sudden death duel», I hesitated a little. I thought, wasn’t it perhaps possible to have met him differently and dueled with him differently...Now, I also have the feeling that as long as we’re Burst

Linkers, that hesitation might be something that's absolutely indispensable..."

"..."

This time Ash Roller was silent.

At last, while dropping his gaze to the reddish-brown ground between his legs, he murmured in bits.

"That's possible. But well..., due to that hesitation, I wasn't able to say anything to that guy Uu. If I were acting as his older brother, in truth I should've plainly said one or the other. 'I'll never forgive the guy who caused your parent to lose all his points; I'll definitely get revenge on him.'...or, 'Everyone's fighting with the risk of losing all their points; don't keep blubbering,' one of those two... However, I was unable to say either one. That's why only anger and fear grew inside Uu...he yearned for «power» other than his own. I'm the one who created one of the reasons for him to run to the «ISS Kit»..."

To Ash Roller, whose feet had trampled the ground with a sharp tap, Haruyuki could not immediately find the words he should have said.

Before he opened his mouth, there was something blinking red in the top of his vision. The time count had dropped below the remaining one hundred seconds.

"...Come to think of it, Ash-san. Didn't you say that you had some «request» for me..?"

"Ah...y, yeah. That's right, that's right."

The bike rider, who had lifted his head, let down the skull shield of his helmet with a creak and spoke in a voice with increased wildness in one go.

"It's also related to that guy Uu's matter though. Well, it's not a big deal. My bad, Crow, but could you teach me something in mega-deep length?"

"T, teach? Teach what?"

To Haruyuki, who had tilted his head, without hesitation Ash Roller spoke a single certain grammatical object.

"The «Incarnate system»."

Chapter 6

If he were asked which of the five weekdays he liked the most, without much hesitation Haruyuki would answer Friday. This was probably the same for most students—maybe adults too. It was hard to substitute anything for the bubbly feeling that came with knowing tomorrow and the day after that were days off.

However, his most disliked day was somewhat subtle. Of course most people would be fed up with Monday, but he had the joy of being able to meet her Excellency his revered student council vice president after two days, and though it was limited to this semester Monday's lunch special was the godly menu of minced meat cutlet curry.

Therefore, with him granting amnesty to Monday with remarkable mercy, the runner-up was undoubtedly Wednesday.

Because on Wednesday he had PE from first period; it was an unforgiving timetable.

"Hey, Arita, hey!"

Haruyuki, whose name had been called, whose entire body was drenched in sweat, and whose feet were wobbling, reflexively tried to throw the basketball that he had been carrying with his two hands over there.

However, the figure of his teammate who had raised his hand was immediately blocked by an opponent team player and went out of sight.

In the bottom left of his field of vision, the digital numbers counting five seconds as well as twenty-four seconds for violations were steadily decreasing. Out of impatience, in order to throw a long pass blindly, he raised the ball with both hands high overhead.

However, like a flash of lightning, the moment before the ball was thrown somebody deftly robbed him of the ball from behind.

"Thanks!"

The tall student who had left behind a spiteful voice and had cut splendidly into his own team's territory with a dribble was the basketball team regular Ishio. In the midst of the girls lined up around the perimeter of the court raising cheering voices, he broke through the two people marking him in the blink of an eye and made a layup with room to spare. The ring net rocked greatly, and the right side of the score of 22-36 displayed in the overlay in the lower right hand of his vision changed to 38.

"Don't worry about it."

With that voice, the teammate who had sought a pass from Haruyuki a little earlier tapped him on the shoulder. However, he couldn't help but search for the ring in that voice lamenting «the misfortune of being on the same team as Arita» rather than «the misfortune of being on a different team from Ishio's».

The basketball court able to be divided into two sides in the gymnasium had been split between boys and girls, and furthermore since the twenty

male students were divided into four teams, one match was only twenty minutes. However one thought about it a comeback from behind in the remaining seven minutes and thirty seconds was impossible, but he prayed that he would at least not make any more conspicuous basic mistakes—at the back of Haruyuki, who had begun to return to his fixed position while praying that, a voice different from the one earlier whispered in an undertone.

“Haru, what’s important is the whole image. It’s the same as the «territory battle».”

The person who had said just that and had left him was Mayuzumi Takumu, who coincidentally was on the same team. Though they were losing, they could say that a sixteen-point difference against opponents who had a basketball team regular on their team was on the contrary a good fight. The reason for that was that Takumu, who was a complete layman to ball games, was doing his best as a forward.

...The whole image? The same as the territory battle?

While running with heavy steps and chasing Takumu, who was attacking the enemy zone with a dribble as soon as he had received a throw, Haruyuki inwardly racked his brains.

The «territory battles» of Brain Burst were the competitions between legions for territory in group duels conducted Saturday evening every week. In a normal duel, one could only do as far as two-on-two tag matches, but in territory battles, large-scale fights of at least three-on-

three (and depending on the circumstances, over ten-versus-ten) were played out.

If it were so, then one could no longer win just by depending on his or her individual fighting strength. While recognizing the entire vast stage's conditions, one blocked the enemy's main attacks and simultaneously stabbed at chinks in their armor...in short, a comprehensive «image of the tide of war» was needed.

Did Takumu want to say that basketball matches were also the same as those?

However, Haruyuki's team was also already doing something similar. The main firepower of the enemy team was clearly the basketball team player Ishio, so there was the strategy of always having two people marking him and sealing his movements. Haruyuki and one other person were defensive middle guards, and Takumu was the one forward. However, even with two people guarding him Ishio would not easily be stopped, and with only Takumu as the pivot of offense of this side, they would not really be able to get any points. Having said that, even if they discarded defense and shifted the lineup to an offensive type, Ishio, who would become free, would just be able to rage about as he pleased.

...With this, it's useless just to form an image of battle tactics, Taku. It's as if the opponents have a «King» and we have a «level 1».

In his mind, Haruyuki had unconsciously retorted back in that matter to his old friend. Of course, level 1 referred to Haruyuki himself. As his feet

were slow, his height was low, and his ball-handling was poor, in a basketball match he was no different from an in-the-way obstacle that was just there.

And then, at that moment, Takumu fell to the court with a heavy *thud!* sound. He had shown signs of rushing to the enemy goal and had aimed for a three-point shot; an opponent player who had panicked had accidentally made body contact. A sharp alert sound resounded, and the word 【FOUL】 glittered blue in the center of his field of vision. Blue was the opponent team's color.

"Ta, Taku!"

Flustered, he tried to run up to him, but Takumu raised one hand as if he were okay and immediately stood up. He calmly made three free throws, and the score changed to 25-38.

Having tried to call out to Takumu, who had promptly jogged back, with a start Haruyuki held his breath.

Didn't the word «image» that his old friend had just mentioned have a much larger meaning—not just at the level of things like weaknesses and tactics?

At the start of class, their division into random teams had been carried out by the on-campus system, and the moment he learned that Ishio was among the opponents they would confront, Haruyuki had thought "This is bad" in the back of his mind; three of his four teammates also probably

felt the same. That basically was being seized by the «image of losing» before the match began.

However, Takumu was probably different. Due to his quiet demeanor and intellectual appearance, it did not show on the outside much, but he was by nature a trueborn fighter. That was why in his elementary school days he did not quit the classroom even when he met cruel bullying in the kendo classroom, and also due to that he could not help himself from confirming the rumors about the «ISS Kit», which was said to negate avatars' weaknesses.

And then even in this mere twenty-minute mock match of a mere PE class, while knowing their distinct difference in combat power Takumu refused to have an «image of losing». That was right; it was just the same as Brain Burst's territory battles. In those battles, both sides exhausted their tactics and strategies to the limit; on top of that, the first side to give up with "This is impossible" would lose.

"...My bad, Taku."

His murmured voice probably had not reached him, but Haruyuki gazed at the square back of his good friend and tightly ground his molars.

Six minutes and twenty seconds remaining. For that amount of time, at the least he would renounce the image of losing. Without thinking that it was impossible, he would do the utmost of what he could do. —If so, what could he do? Magnificent pass cuts and sharp dribbling were

impossible acts for Haruyuki. However, there must be something that even an oversized obstruction could do. Obstruction...

"..!"

Haruyuki suddenly opened his eyes wide; immediately after, with a fierce speed he manipulated his virtual desktop.

The application for PE ball games, which was the Ministry of Education's quality product, had various functions, but the Augmented Reality display, or AR display, had poor compatibility in the first place—while it was obvious, it hindered one from seeing the crucial ball—it was only used to the extent of overlay displaying the score and match time in a side of one's vision. Rather, it would have been better to remove one's Neuro Linker, but monitoring the pulse, temperature, and blood pressure of students in exercise was obligated by law, so that too could not be done.

However, right now Haruyuki opened the court condition tab from the app, and it was displayed in bird's-eye view slightly below the center of his field of vision. In the rectangle, which had become slanted, five red and blue circular symbols apiece moved irregularly. Of course, they were the present positions of all players. With the filter function, he made them to two. The remaining red circle was he himself. And then the blue circle was the enemy ace Ishio.

As soon as the match resumed with the opponents' throw, Haruyuki moved with heavy steps and spread his arms on the line joining the

basketball, of which he had caught sight with his naked eye, and Ishio, who was moving at his back.

He flapped his arms with all his might; by further enlarging his body, which at best could only be said to have great breadth, he tried to foil the pass course to Ishio. The gallery burst out laughing at his imbecile movements, but the enemy player holding the ball lightly clucked his tongue and made a horizontal pass to another player. However, at the same time Haruyuki also ran a couple of meters to the left and again greatly waved his arms up and down.

This was «something that he could do» that he had thought of.

The opponent team's strategy was to bulldoze a post play with their ace Ishio, who was camping underneath the goal. Since Haruyuki knew that the ball would ultimately be thrown to the low post area, first with his AR display he had precisely grasped Ishio's position and then had become an «obstruction» on the path between him and the ball.

With Haruyuki's amount of movement, a man-to-man defense sticking tightly to Ishio himself was impossible, but if he projected the pass course and optimized the distance he shifted, he might be somehow able to continue to fulfill this role until the close of the match.

At that time, the opponent player again showed the air of throwing the ball directly sideways, and Haruyuki began also to move his body that way.

However, right before he suddenly braked. Ishio, who was three meters behind him, was simultaneously running in the opposite direction. This was a feint motion. He somehow absorbed the mass of inertia with his planted left foot and threw his body right. The ball the opponent player had thrown bumped violently with a smack into his right hand, which he had extended with all his might. At the point where it seemed about to rebound somewhere, unconsciously with the gist of Brain Burst's «gentle redirection» he killed its momentum, pulled it to his chest, and held it tightly.

“No way!”

Haruyuki also thought the same thing as the opponent player, who had let that voice out while popping his eyes out. However, if he stood there dumbfounded, the ball would be snatched away from him by Ishio from the back again.

“Hey!”

Hearing that voice another time from his left side, Haruyuki reflexively threw the ball, this time without holding it high over his head. The ally player who received it—a member of the swim team by the name of Nakagawa—brought the ball into the enemy camp and made a pass to their own team's ace Takumu, who was running along the right side.

Takumu, who had reliably passed through and reached the enemy goal with a furious charge that made one want to think “As to be expected of a blue-color,” made use of his tall frame and made a marvelous jump

shot. With an airy beep SE^[13] resounding in his sense of hearing, the score display changed to 27-38.

“Nice, Arita!”

The one who had raised his voice was Nakagawa, who had quickly returned to their own side. The sports club member with a masculine figure raised his right hand while laughing with a smile; Haruyuki thought reflexively “I’m gonna get hit!”, but he somehow lifted his left hand and returned a high five. He only exchanged a fleeting smile with Takumu, who had come running from behind, but despite that he seemed to have conveyed fully what needed to be conveyed.

For the remaining slightly less than six minutes, Haruyuki only ran, ran, and ran till the end.

Sweat flowed like a waterfall down his face and body, his throat rang with a wheeze, and his legs and arms twitched in bits, but nevertheless he did not try to halt. Before he knew it, what existed in his field of vision, no, in his mind were only the ball ahead of him and Ishio behind him.

In opposition to those, he formed the image of the course he needed to move and simply traced it.

The image and its execution.

At last, in a recess of his consciousness that had become hazy, suddenly Haruyuki recalled that only a few days ago he had also had a similar experience.

That was, yes, the time when he was cleaning up the backyard's animal caretaking shed alone. He had thought hard about how he could tidy up the fallen leaves piled up to the point where it seemed impossible to remove them with manual labor, formed an image of the result, and afterward only believed and moved his hands. That was also bitter work, but the fallen leaves that seemed to exist infinitely had all also disappeared in the end.

Playing a basketball match and cleaning up a shed were of course completely different. However, at their root maybe they shared in common a thing that should even be called the «essence of action». — No, at that time, sure enough hadn't he begun to notice something more precious?

In another world different from this reality, the words someone had said to him echoed far inside his head.

...From your consciousness...an excessively strongly projected image...crosses limitations...and manifests itself.

Those were words that had explained a «power» hidden in that world. An ultimate power that crossed the frames of the normal system and could even be said to be a paranormal phenomenon. Miracles that did not exist in the real world. However, for all one knew that logic could be awfully simple—.

Even while he was thinking about those things, Haruyuki single-mindedly continued to run right and left as hard as he could.

Of course, with makeshift blocking he couldn't prevent one hundred percent of the passes to Ishio. Occasionally when Haruyuki was unable to impede the ball from crossing, in those cases the enemy ace was able to make a certain score. With Takumu and Nakagawa's counterattacks, although they had bridged the gap to five points, from there it was seesawing back and forth; the remaining time steadily decreased.

However, before he knew it Haruyuki had removed the time count and even the score display from his consciousness. From the gallery, mixed in with the usual laughing voices sometimes a buzz would also be emitted, but neither one reached Haruyuki's ears.

"Hah...hah..."

While hearing only the strenuous wheezing leaking from his throat and his heartbeat ringing with a clang in the depths of both his ears, he continued solely to trace his image predicted a second ahead of time. He no longer had time to spare to participate on the offensive, but if they were able to counterbalance one-versus-one the opponent team's ace with their own team's burden, with the remaining four they could play a more-than-even match. At the point in time where they had dropped under two minutes remaining, their two allies who had been marking Ishio up until now also participated in the offense; they struck at the gaps in their bewildered enemies' defense and thrust the ball into the hoop.

A three point difference.

"Over here!"

Ishio, who as expected showed signs of starting to have frustration build up, returned once deep into his side, raised his hand, and directly received a throw. Again two people from the red team marking him tried to block his way, but with his lightning-fast spin moves they were quickly overtaken. It seemed somehow that the basketball club's regular's «serious techniques» had been sealed up until now.

"..!"

In response to Ishio's figure pressing in and filling his field of vision, which was blurred with sweat, Haruyuki stood rooted to the spot. In a head-on one-on-one, the Neuro Linker's AR display would be of no help whatsoever.

—Physical Burst!

Haruyuki desperately held back the impulse of wanting to shout that inside his mouth.

If he used the «Physical Burst» command, which accelerated one's perceptions by ten times while retaining one's consciousness inside one's physical body, no matter what dribble technique Ishio used it would probably be easy to steal the ball while he was in the middle of doing it. However, all «cowardly acceleration» was forbidden by their legion. Before that, it was a slight to Ishio, who in opposition to the likes of Haruyuki had come challenging him with a match in earnest.

"Wa...wah—!"

Without «acceleration», all Haruyuki could do was spreading his hands as much as he could while raising that voice.

The left hand of Ishio, who was pressing in before his eyes, flashed, and the ball disappeared from his sight. By the time he had noticed that he had dribbled to his back side, Ishio was already ferociously overtaking Haruyuki's left side.

While knowing that he could not catch up to the back of the enemy ace, who was heading for their side's goal and pushing his way through, Haruyuki chased after him.

After having run a number of paces, before his eyes a bright red font he was unaccustomed to seeing blinked. It was a warning that either his heart rate or his blood pressure had deviated from its normal value. However, he ignored it. He single-mindedly pursued the vague human figure smack dab in the middle of his vision, which had begun to whiten out flickeringly.

And then, opposite Ishio a silhouette of tall height about the same as Ishio's blocking his way was dimly visible. Before he had known it Takumu had returned to the goal. With his techniques at full throttle, Ishio went about passing Takumu, who had matched him up. From a leg through dribble—to a behind-the-back dribble.

"K...ha!"

While exhaling all the remaining air in his lungs, Haruyuki faced the ball that Ishio was trying to dribble behind his back and dived with all his might.

The fingertips of his left hand that he had reached out as much as he could, whether they touched the granulated rubber—Haruyuki did not know. As to why, there his vision had become pitch-black, and even his ability to think had sharply decelerated. The front side of his body bumped into something wide and hard; at the same time he noticed that that somehow seemed to be the floor of the gym, somewhere far away a high-pitched voice like a scream resounded.

“Haru!!”

That voice was unmistakably that of Chiyuri, who was in the middle of a match in the adjacent court.

—Good grief, concentrate on your own game.

While hearing a number of footsteps running up to him, with that final thought Haruyuki’s memory was cut off.

Since something thin was being inserted in his mouth, for the time being he tried sucking on it.

In doing so, a cool, sweet liquid flowed into his mouth, so with his eyes shut he swallowed it deliriously. After gulping it down to the point where

breathing became difficult and sending the liquid to his stomach, he exhaled greatly.

He gently raised his eyelids, and a brilliant white light shone strongly on his eyes. He hurriedly closed them, blinked several times, and then opened them again.

The source of the light was the light panels embedded in the ceiling. In addition to that, there was an enclosing rectangular white curtain in his peripheral vision. Somehow it wasn't the gym. Below his body were not hard floorboards but rustling sheets—basically, a bed.

Before he thought "Where am I," the curtains in the direction of his feet made a light sound and were pulled open.

"Oh, Arita-kun, you're awake?"

Who had appeared was a woman whose semi-long hair was bound behind her neck and who was clad in a smart white coat above her patterned T-shirt—the Umesato Middle school nurse. Her family name was Hotta. So basically, this was probably the nurse's office of the east wing of the first floor of the second school building.

"Ah...um...I..."

As Haruyuki mumbled with his words inside his mouth, Nurse Hotta showed taken-aback laughter on her masculine face and spoke.

"It's important to try your best in matches, but you need to pay attention to your own condition. If your blood pressure had dropped a little bit more it would've been the ambulance for you."

"U, understood...I'm sorry..."

—I see, during the middle of the basketball match I collapsed from something like anemia or dehydration and was carried to the nurse's office, wasn't I.

Finally aware of the situation, he glanced at the time display in the lower right hand of his vision; second period had begun long ago. Somehow it seemed that he had been unconscious, no, sleeping for over thirty minutes.

The school nurse nimbly manipulated her virtual desktop, confirmed that Haruyuki's vital signs had returned to their normal values, and nodded lightly.

"Please rest during second period. Make sure to have plenty of water. I'll be out for a little due to a staff meeting, but if anything happens feel free to push the call button. With that, afterwards I'm leaving it to you!"

The curtains were again closed with a snap, and the pitter-patter sound of footsteps went far off. Finally, he heard the sound of the door opening and closing, and silence returned to the nurse's office.

Probably Nurse Hotta would have watched Haruyuki's condition until he awakened even if the meeting began. After absentmindedly thinking "I

sure caused her a lot of trouble, but well I guess that's her job," from the left side of his face the thin straw again extended toward his mouth.

Without thinking he held it in his mouth and sucked. The well-cooled sports drink pleasantly went down his throat.

"..?"

There, Haruyuki finally thought strangely about to where the straw was connected and turned his gaze left. Was it perhaps automatic water dispensing equipment? Surely not a robot nurse?

However, the straw was extended from a featureless cooling bottle.

And then a white, delicate hand that was not Haruyuki's was holding that bottle.

"..?"

Ordering his currently decelerating thoughts to do as he said, this time he traced that hand with his gaze. The thin arm was protruding from the sleeve of a black open-collar shirt. In the breast of the shirt, a dark red ribbon. Equipped on her thin neck, a piano black Neuro Linker. Flowing above that, jet black straight hair...

"...Buha!"

The moment he noticed that someone whose existence he had not even perceived until now was sitting at the immediate side of the bed,

Haruyuki caused the sports drink to spurt out forcefully from his mouth and nose.

The moment he saw that a part of the water drops had also splattered onto his companion's shirt, his body temperature and pulse ascended steeply again. He flapped his two hands and shouted in a hoarse voice.

"S, so, sor, sorry! I-if, if we don't hurry up and wipe it it'll become a s-s-stain."

Upon which the person sitting in the unadorned folding chair put the cooling bottle with a calm motion on the bed and spoke.

"Mm, is that so. Then let's wipe it up."

And then she lifted her two hands, took the hook-style ribbon, and with a pop began to remove the buttons starting from the top of her open-collar shirt. The skin of her unbelievably pure white chest began to peep out, and furthermore the upper end of her smooth curves also fleetingly came into sight.

"Hgwah!"

Haruyuki again let loose a queer voice and while greatly bending backward was unable to shut his eyelids, but fortunately—if that was the right word, there two hands stopped his violent action.

"It's a joke. Don't worry about me getting wet, it's shape-memory polymer material that can be washed as it is."

The person who had said that without changing her expression and who was rebuttoning her shirt to as it was before was of course, the sole person who wore a black uniform in Umesato Middle, the student council vice president, Haruyuki's «parent» Linker, and his legion master Kuroyukihime.

Returning to her original appearance, the beautiful person in black who had straightened her back tightly on the chair opened her mouth again with a facial expression that made one feel a faint tremor in the depths of her sternness.

“—Haruyuki-kun. A little earlier Hotta-sensei said it too; I too won't say that going all out in PE is bad. However, since you went to the trouble of equipping your Neuro Linker, you need to heed its vital warning. This time ended with some minor dehydration, but if the worst comes to the worst, it could also be linked to a large accident.”

“U, understood, I'm sorry... Without thinking, I became entranced in the match...”

He had the intention of striving to do his best, but the result was only being laughed at by his classmates; in the end, during the match he had collapsed in a heap, and not only that his foolish demeanor had become known to even Kuroyukihime. A fair right hand extended out gently covered the left hand of Haruyuki, who had hung his head, downcast.

“You don't have to apologize, I'm not particularly blaming you. However...don't cause me to worry too much.”

In response to that voice whose volume had dropped, he raised his face, and with a facial expression of increased softness Kuroyukihime whispered.

“When I heard from Chiyuri-kun that you had collapsed, I thought I would faint too. I was nearly on the verge of using the forbidden physical acceleration command to run to the school infirmary.”

The forbidden command was «Physical Full Burst», permitted to be used only by level 9 Burst Linkers. It was treated as the higher ranked version of the «Physical Burst» command that had Haruyuki had almost used in his matchup with Ishio, but the effect of its tremendousness was wholly incomparable. As for why, it accelerated not only one’s consciousness but also one’s real-world physical body’s movements close to the normal one hundred times greater.

Of course, the indemnifications were also inordinate. The user would lose ninety-nine percent of her accumulated Burst Points, putting her at the critical brink of losing all of her points. Kuroyukihime’s words were a joke, but in spite of that Haruyuki reflexively shook his head tremblingly.

“I, I’m glad you didn’t use it. Rather than saying that I collapsed, I was only a bit too tired and got giddy... —Then, it was Chiyu who let Senpai know?”

“Unh, it was almost the same time as when you were carried here. On that point, she’s pretty fair too.”

“...F, fair?”

Not catching her drift, he tilted his head in puzzlement; Kuroyukihime made a faint bitter laugh and with her eyes indicated the side to the left beside herself.

“Chiyuri-kun and Takumu-kun were also keeping you company for a while since the start of second period. Since they would be counted as absent at that rate I made them return to their classroom. Since they’re extremely worried, it’d probably be better to send them a mail.”

“U, understood.”

Haruyuki nodded and launched the local net-exclusive mailer from his virtual desktop. To his two childhood friends, he quickly sent the report that he had regained consciousness and that there were no problems with his physical condition and his thanks for them having accompanied him. There, he suddenly became aware of something, looked at Kuroyukihime’s face, and questioned her.

“Um, is it okay if you don’t go to class, Senpai..? Won’t the record of you skipping class without leave be left in the school register file...”

“Oi, who do you think I am. In the school system, I put in proof of being a substitute health-care committee member, of course. Hotta-sensei willingly signed too.”

If he were met with that laugh along with those remarks, he could only reflect on how that was a completely boorish question. Kuroyukihime slightly changed the nuance of her smile, leaned somewhat forward, and whispered mischievously.

“To compensate Chiyuri-kun for her spirit of fair play, I did think about issuing her proof of being a substitute too, but this time she listened to my selfish desire. Because you see, even though yesterday I went so far as to use my ace in the hole at great pains and was able to become alone with you in the student council meeting room, we weren’t able to talk about much. Well, you did have some inevitable circumstances though.”

“Ah...hah...hahi...”

In response to the excessive beauty of her black pupils glittering close at hand, while involuntarily turning his voice inside out Haruyuki nodded.

If he thought back on it, during yesterday’s lunch break Kuroyukihime had suddenly marched into the classroom of year 2, class C and had shouted “I demand the immediate presence of the animal caretaker committee chairperson!” Haruyuki, who by a misunderstanding had been appointed to that post due to his candidacy, had prepared himself to be the object of anger for some reason and had followed her to the student council meeting room, but Kuroyukihime’s order of presence was a simple pretext for the purpose of becoming alone with him in a private room.

Needless to say Haruyuki was very happy to be able to talk with Kuroyukihime with just the two of them—it was a dreamlike experience beyond happy.

However, inside Haruyuki she was a far too important as well as precious existence. She was not only his «parent» and «legion master» as a Burst

Linker. She was the «benefactor» who had rescued him from the swamp and had given him hope. She was the «master of swords» to whom he swore his absolute as well as eternal loyalty. Even with those words he was still far from able to tell the whole story. That was right—, preferably he should perhaps describe it in just one word like this. It was a «miracle».

Kuroyukihime, whose way of living was like aiming for a star in the far distance and pushing one's way there with one's heart and soul, though there were some circumstances had fixed her eyes upon a human like Haruyuki, had spoken to him, and had extended her hand out to him: if one didn't call that a miracle, then what? At present, in the center of Haruyuki's world, she was equivalent to a dazzlingly scintillating, humongous jewel. She was exceedingly beautiful to the extent where it seemed if one's hand touched her she would ephemerally disappear.

Though recently he had finally begun to be able to chat properly with others, just by being conscious of being alone with Kuroyukihime in a closed room, his heart rang with a thump, and his breathing became shallow. No, his current situation was even more critical than that of the one yesterday in the student council meeting room.

At any rate, in his surroundings were white, thick curtains tightly encircling them; Haruyuki was lying sideways on the bed; Kuroyukihime was pushing her hand on the edge of the bed, leaning her body out, and gazing at Haruyuki.

At this rate if he kept silent, his thoughts would overshoot into an unbelievable territory, so Haruyuki forcibly pulled the control lever and resumed conversation.

"...Um, I'm sorry about yesterday. Now that I think about it, I also hadn't properly explained the state of things, hadn't I..."

"Mm..., well, I meant to grasp the outline of it from your mail, but...though I was thinking about asking about various things in detail, you brought about this incident, so it had completely slipped my mind."

"I, I'm sorry..."

While nervously rubbing the fingertips of his two hands together, he apologized for the second time in a row.

Yesterday, why Haruyuki had returned from school at a dash was of course because he had apprehensions about Takumu's situation. By no means were those groundless fears; he was nearly at the point of having his mind controlled by the «ISS Kit», but through his duel with Haruyuki he had regained himself, and due to the fight in the dead of night in the «BB central server», the Kit had also been completely destroyed.

After his duel with Ash Roller this morning, Haruyuki had roughly explained the circumstances thereabouts or so to the three people Kuroyukihime, Kurasaki Fuuko, and Shinomiya Utai by mail, but it was quite impossible to sum up the particulars in a short piece of writing. Haruyuki himself had not precisely understood the occurrence in the

central server, and he had another important matter before the «Imperial Palace escape strategy».

Namely, Ash Roller's very unexpected «request».

Although he had a mountain's worth of things he needed to tell Kuroyukihime, not knowing from where on earth to start, Haruyuki again held his tongue. In doing so, wholly as if she understood Haruyuki's confusion and was trying to cool it down Kuroyukihime spoke tranquilly.

"Be that as it may, the fact that you tried hard in PE class to the point of collapsing... This may be a rude way of putting it, but it was a little unexpected."

"Y...yes, I was awfully surprised too..."

"Did you have some sort of change of heart?"

Questioned thus, he thought hard about it puzzlingly. Now that it was mentioned, he had the feeling that he did; it also seemed likely that nothing had changed.

"Um...it's not that there was anything special in particular, but...after I made a bunch of blunders during the match, Taku said something to me. That "what's important is your image." That's why I thought about ceasing only to play the match while carrying the «image of losing» at the least...and then, unawares it seemed that I got a little too serious. — Come to think of it, how did the match end after all..."

"According to Takumu-kun, it seems to have been a loss by a one point difference."

"Is that...so?"

According to his hazy memory, Haruyuki's team was three points behind with the remaining time of a few dozen seconds; moreover, they were taking the enemy ace Ishio's swift attacks. The fact that they had approached a one point difference probably meant that they had defended against those swift attacks and furthermore with a counterattack had stolen one goal, and there the match had concluded.

After he thought "No doubt Takumu had made an eye-opening counter, just as expected," while she smiled Kuroyukihime said something surprising.

"Truthfully, the ones who carried you and transported you to the nurse's office were Takumu and one other person, a member of the basketball team in your class."

"Eh...Ishio, carried me?"

"Unh. He has a message for you. It was 'This time was a complete defeat, but next time the same trick absolutely won't work again' apparently."

"Huh...co, complete defeat!? But, wasn't the match their side's win..."

"He seems to have set a personal margin of winning where if he doesn't win with at least a twenty point difference it's a loss."

"...Is, is that so."

In response to his message, without knowing whether Ishio was being humble or arrogant Haruyuki involuntarily laughed bitterly. Granted though, sure enough why this time Haruyuki had been able to continue to hinder Ishio was because the opponent team had stubbornly refused to change strategies. If the next gym class were basketball matches again, and furthermore if they had to confront Ishio, there was no way that the simple trick of blocks using the AR display would pass anymore. It was the same as Brain Burst's duels and territory battles. Even in the world over there, it was rare for the same strategy that had worked once to succeed a second time in a row. It was because one was not fighting AI but humans who possessed the power to imagine the future...

When he had absentmindedly thought that far, Haruyuki was suddenly aware of the precious «something» he had felt during the match beginning to be resuscitated into his head again.

"Ah..."

"Mm? What's the matter?"

"No, well...it's not anything of consequence, but...I mean, it might be an absurdly wayward guess, but..."

Backed by the gaze of Kuroyukihime, who was silently egging him on, Haruyuki moved his mouth, which was on the verge of stopping.

"...«From your consciousness an excessively strongly projected image crosses the system's limitations and manifests itself.»"

In doing so, for an instant Kuroyukihime opened both her eyes wide and subsequently smiled kindly.

"The one who said that to you was undoubtedly Fuuko, right."

"Ex...exactly. How did you know..?"

"I said it before, didn't I. She is, to the utmost of my knowledge, the purest user of «positive Mind Power». Those are words typical of Fuuko, who believes in the superiority of the light side of the Incarnate system..."

It was unlikely that Haruyuki had completely understood the meaning of Kuroyukihime's whisper. However, without venturing to interrogate her, he continued his words.

"The words we used right now were of course words explaining the Incarnate system of the Accelerated World. But during the basketball match I was told by Taku 'your image is important,' and somehow...I thought about it. Even in this real world...when we really try hard, I wonder if we aren't doing the same thing... Of course, on this side we're not able to use Incarnate techniques like superpowers, but even so...for example, the fact that I fought with that Ishio in the basketball match, the fact that I was able to manage cleaning up the caretaker shed alone; those to me were miracles above superpowers. Umm, basically, what I want to say is...well..."

There Haruyuki's verbalization ability finally reached its limit; afterward he could no longer do anything but flap his mouth open and closed like he always did.

However, fortunately it seemed that what he had to convey to Kuroyukihime had been conveyed. Her jet black pupils again opened wide, and from her bewitching lips she let out a thin sigh.

"...Haruyuki-kun. You always keep surprising me... I surely hadn't thought that you would reach that stage that quickly and furthermore unaided..."

"Eh..? St, stage..?"

Peering close at hand into the eyes of Haruyuki, who, dumbfounded, had asked that back, Kuroyukihime nodded deeply.

"That's right. The words that you spoke just now are the entrance to the second stage of the Incarnate system. To acquire the so-called «applied techniques», which surpasses the basic techniques of «range», «power», «defense», and «movement» expansion, you must master something in the imagination not through logic but through feelings. Master the power called the «imagination» given to us, which is such a vast, such a deep thing..."

"Ima...gi, nation..."

"Unh. Until now, you thought that the Incarnate system's main point «override through one's image» was nothing more than a bit of logic of the game system that only existed in the virtual world, right? However,

that is wrong. Imagination hides a boundless power even in this real world. Of course, you can't act in a way that ignores the laws of physics. Nevertheless, it's possible to override walls that seem to be one's absolute limits in borrowing the help of one's power to imagine. Like how you proved so yourself in the basketball match."

Those words of Kuroyukihime strongly shook a place in the deep recesses of Haruyuki's heart, but at the same time a large bewilderment too was born. Before he was conscious of it he had leaned forward, and while fixing his eyes on Kuroyukihime, who was in the same posture, from close by, he asked her in a hoarse voice.

"...The power of imagining causes one to cross one's limits. Its foundation doesn't change whether it's in the Accelerated World or the real world. I have a feeling that I too have somehow been able to understand that. — However, what kind of relationship is there between that and the «second stage of the Incarnate system»..?"

In response to Haruyuki's inquiry, Kuroyukihime did not respond right away. As if having been apprehended by hesitation in coming here she cast her eyes down and lightly bit her lip.

Haruyuki had the feeling that he was able to surmise that reason vaguely.

Kuroyukihime was carrying some sort of fear of the strength of the Mind Power she had acquired. She had misgivings about whether or not it was negative power that called on destruction and sorrow, not positive power like the type Fuuko—Sky Raker manipulated.

However, Haruyuki strongly believed that was not so. As for why, Kuroyukihime's Incarnate techniques were—the only one he had seen was the long-range attack «Vorpel Strike», but that technique was so beautiful to the degree where it made one at a loss for words. Even if it concealed a fearsome power, there was no way a technique that beautiful could be negative imagination.

Haruyuki sidled up to her a further number of centimeters closer on the bed, made his left hand softly touch Kuroyukihime's right hand, and spoke.

"Senpai. I was taught valuable things, first by Raker-san, and then by Niko, about the Incarnate system. However...my «parent» is you. I want to know everything about you, senpai. I want you to teach me everything. I implore you...please teach me your Mind Power."

A reply did not come back immediately.

The June sun of half past ten in the morning had already climbed close to its zenith, so light from the window did not reach the secluded corner of the nurse's office. In the space faintly illuminated by the dimmed light panels and cut off in a rectangular shape by pure white curtains, only the two's breathing faintly resounded.

Before long, the fingers of Kuroyukihime's right hand moved softly and gripped Haruyuki's fingers in a way as to entwine them. Following that, a quiet whisper.

"...If so, first we'll need a direct link-use cable."

On Kuroyukihime's face, which she had lifted up, there only existed the almost usual smile that was shrouded somewhere in mysteries. Haruyuki gently exhaled and then spoke while becoming slightly flustered.

"Ah...I, I'm sorry, my cable's inside my bag in the classroom..."

"Mine too. But they probably at least have cables here too."

While murmuring, Kuroyukihime manipulated her virtual desktop with light fingering. Probably having searched the list of equipment, straightaway she nodded, parted her fingers from Haruyuki's left hand, stood up, and disappeared smoothly to the other side of the curtains.

He heard the opening and closing sound of a drawer; sure enough a white XSB cable was grasped in the hand of Kuroyukihime, who had returned immediately. However—.

"Is...isn't that a little short..?"

The moment he saw the cable, which seemed to be only about fifty centimeters long no matter how he looked at it, Haruyuki blurted that out. But Kuroyukihime lightly shrugged her shoulders.

"If so, it'll be fine if we make it reach. Fortunately, it's outside of the view of the social cameras here."

"Eh...b, but, how."

As he had begun to say that, Haruyuki was forced to swallow his words down. As for why, it was because Kuroyukihime had placed her body on the bed with a heave-ho and a completely nonchalant bearing.

“Eh, um, well...”

He belatedly noticed that he was still in his white gym suit and drew his body back. Due to the fact that it was made of quick-drying material, his sweat had already dried, but he definitely wasn't odorless.

However, without any sign of minding that, Kuroyukihime reached out her left hand, softly pushed Haruyuki's chest, and made him lie supine on the bed. At his immediate left, she lay sprawled out sideways and directed a mischievous smile at him from an exceedingly close distance.

As usual the clutch controlling his ability to think ran idly, and a breath with a hint of laughter gently touched Haruyuki's ear, which was about to blow up into the red zone out of excessive throbbing.

“Fufu..., it's probably fine if you don't get that nervous at such a late point. The night before the «Hermes Cord Race», didn't we have the relationship of sleeping a night in the same bed?”

“Hah, hahi, th-th-that's true, but.”

In the Accelerated World, the above-mentioned race event had taken place a mere two weeks ago, but since far too many things had happened since then, it also felt like the faraway past. However, the memory of that one night was vividly engraved into Haruyuki's mind.

At that time too, in the bed they similarly had dueled through a direct connection—though Haruyuki had unleashed his newly mastered «Aerial Combo» on Kuroyukihime and had challenged her, due to her «gentle redirection» of an even more advanced skill he had been easily dealt with, had ultimately suffered her level 8 special technique «Death by Embracing», and had been one-hit KO'd.

...Somehow, I have a hunch that this time seems like it's going to become something similar too...

While Haruyuki thought that, Kuroyukihime brought one end of the XSB cable only fifty centimeters long near his Neuro Linker. Reflexively, he began to distance his neck, but with his resistance in vain it was inserted.

"...Ah..."

Not heeding Haruyuki, who had let out an odd voice, following that Kuroyukihime connected the opposite side's plug into her piano black communication device equipped on her slim neck. In his vision, the wired connection warning blinked red.

"...Yesterday, with my selfishness I made you use one point. Today, let's make it my treat."

The meaning of the words whispered thus was not that both of them would simultaneously accelerate and dive into the Initial Acceleration Space the Blue World; only Kuroyukihime would accelerate and would promptly encroach on Haruyuki.



"Y...yes, please do so."

Before the eyes of Haruyuki, who had replied so, her light rosy lips slightly intoned «Burst Link».

Immediately after, an acceleration sound resembling a dry clap of thunder reverberated fully throughout his hearing.

Chapter 7

The stage of today's second duel was the «Steel stage», whose entire topography was formed entirely from riveted iron plates.

Its distinctive feature was that first of all, it was hard. It conducted electricity well. And one's footsteps echoed strangely. Even more so if one's duel avatar were a metal color down to one's soles.

Haruyuki, who had caused the reverberation of a shrill *clang!* sound and had alighted onto the stage, waited for a second sound of footsteps while looking down. However, since he did not hear anything even after several seconds had passed, he lifted his face and looked around at his surroundings.

The former Umesato Middle nurse's office had changed into just an empty rectangular room with neither beds nor desks. The floor, walls, and the ceiling were all bulky iron plates glinting with a dull brown color. The duel opponents who had nearly been stuck close together before acceleration had obeyed Brain Burst's rule that they would «materialize separated by at least ten meters»; she stood surreptitiously at the east window of the room.

A sleek jet black semitransparent armor that made one think of obsidian. An armor skirt in the design of a water lily and a superfine body; a mask sharpened in the shape of the letter V. And her limbs were all blades so long and sharp as to make one shudder—.

Giving a look at the Black King «Black Lotus's» beautiful as well as ferocious standing posture that he would never get used to seeing no matter how many times he saw it, Haruyuki finally realized why he had not heard footsteps. Though it was only the extent of a centimeter, the Black King's two sharply pointed legs sure enough were floating from the ground. She was also one of the few «hover-class avatars» in the Accelerated World.

In that state, Kuroyukihime stared at Haruyuki's avatar «Silver Crow» for a further number of seconds, but before long she came sliding smoothly forward. She stopped right before his eyes, and in the depths of her black mirror goggles, her violet blue eyes shone vividly.

"Just by looking at your figure I knew, Haruyuki-kun. You've gone through another harsh fight..."

He immediately inferred that those calmly resounding words referred to the heated fight carried out last night between Takumu and him. He had not yet explained to Kuroyukihime the details of the happening that had occurred from last night to this morning, but she had probably seen through the fact that the two had already spoken to each other through their fists as Burst Linkers.

To be sure, it had been a bitter, trying fight. In order to pull back his close friend who had begun to be drawn into the pitch-black power known as the ISS Kit, Haruyuki had lost his left arm and left wing and had continued to stand up even while his entire body was cracking into

tatters. Encouraged by the strange bright golden yellow girl, he had summoned the original form of the «Disaster Armor», the Divine Weapon «The Destiny», even if it had been only one arm's worth, and had squeezed out all the Mind Power that he had.

The result was that in order to save Haruyuki, who was on the verge of being parasitized by the clone of the ISS Kit, Takumu had punched through himself with his special technique, but what had been left inside Haruyuki by that fight seemed to be there, without a doubt. If one were to say what that was, it would probably be a mere small «feeling of believing in himself». Precisely because that feeling existed was he able to fire his new Incarnate technique, one that possessed a range surpassing that of «Laser Sword», in the following strange fight in the «Brain Burst central server».

However, Haruyuki, whose habit of shrinking when he was praised had become second nature, looked down while rubbing his two hands together, fidgeting.

"N, no, such a thing...I'm always just being saved by somebody..."

"Fufu, having become able to think like that is the proof that you've matured."

Kuroyukihime briefly laughed, lightly tapped Haruyuki's back with the ridge of the sword of her right hand, and spoke.

"Now then, show me, Haruyuki-kun. Show me all the Incarnate techniques that you've acquired."

Here he wanted badly to fidget again, but right now the two were not in the Unlimited Neutral Field but the normal duel field. They were only able to remain for a trifling 1800 seconds. It was normal for training to take over several weeks even to learn just one of the elementary techniques, so thirty minutes was too short. They could not afford to waste even one second.

Haruyuki took a deep breath, stored it firmly in his belly, and nodded.

“All right. —Let’s go.”

He moved several steps and halted at a position three meters from the wall of the south side of the deserted room.

Originally pure-white wallpaper had been pasted, but now it was a reddish-brown thick plate of steel. Even with just one of the rivets driven lengthwise and crosswise, it conveyed an overwhelming hardness.

However, that hardness was in the end nothing more than a parameter described by the server. It was possible to override it with the strength of the will of piercing it. Haruyuki slowly lowered his waist; he first assumed a stance with his left hand at his hip and aligned his five fingers straight.

He concentrated the image of a «penetrating light» at his fingertips, and immediately a silver radiance—an «Over-Ray» was born and lit up the dim room. As his image was focused, a *riiiiing* resonance sound faintly reverberated, and light covered the area from his left hand to his elbow. The speed of this Mind Power activation had become considerably faster

compared to that of the past, but taking no heed of that Haruyuki swiftly pulled his left hand.

"—«Laser Sword»!!"

At the same time that he uttered his technique name, he sharply revolved his waist and plunged his left arm forward.

With a clear-cut *shukiiiiin!* sound, the silver light that had taken the form of a sword lengthened over two meters from his left hand and drilled deeply into the thick steel wall.

However, without stopping his movement there Haruyuki drew his right foot far back, and he placed his right arm not at his waist but in the area above his shoulder. He readied his left arm, which had returned to its original position, horizontally before his body.

This time a silver light was born in his right arm and shone strongly.

"...Ohh!"

A war cry burst forth naturally from his mouth. He made the tip of the light that had sharply extended several dozens of centimeters from his right hand float about the back of his left hand—and released it.

"«Laser Lance»!!"

Just this morning, only one time, he had released this technique inside his dream in borrowing Chiyuri's help, but Haruyuki had the conviction that he could do it. The radiance of the Mind Power released not as a sword

but as a lance precisely hit its target, the bruise on the wall where his Laser Sword had bore through three seconds earlier, and again it pierced through ferociously.

The lance of light, which had stopped for an instant, unraveled into a number of threads of ribbons and vanished. Immediately afterward, the wall plates of steel themselves scattered into smithereens as if unable to absorb fully the power dealt to it. From the other side of the large hole opened in the wall, an iron pillar standing in the space that corresponded to the front yard of Umesato Middle in the real world was severed in its middle and fell with an earth-shaking rumble.

From where Haruyuki was standing to the iron pillar, it was probably easily ten meters. It was a firing range that was actually over three times farther than that of his Laser Sword unleashed earlier.

"...Whew."

At the back of Haruyuki, who had lightly exhaled and had let down both his hands, a refreshing *ring, ring* sound reverberated. He looked back; Kuroyukihime was clapping the swords of her two arms together wholly as if applauding.

"Splendid. Splendid imagination, Haruyuki-kun."

"Th...th, thank you very much..."

Haruyuki, as always unused to being praised by someone, bowed while ducking his head. However, at the remarks Kuroyukihime uttered immediately after, he raised his face with a twitch.

“That Mind Power of yours is already in the stage of completion as the basic «range expansion technique». Both «Laser Sword», used for hand-to-hand combat by expanding and contracting your sword from both hands at high speed, and «Laser Lance», used for midrange fighting as a lance that fires your amassed power from your right hand: both are good techniques whose sense of purpose is clear. However, due to that, from now on as well you can refine your technique and polish your sighting accuracy and activation speed but cannot expect to make dramatic progress...”

“Eh...”

—If so, does that mean...with this, this is the end for my Mind Power..?

Stunned and thinking in that manner, he began to slump his shoulders, but he was checked right beforehand by the following voice that resounded.

“It’s too early to be disappointed. I just said earlier, didn’t I, that there existed a «second stage» to the Incarnate system.”

Kuroyukihime, who had approached without a sound by hover movement, whispered as if admonishing a little child in a voice with lowered volume.

"You...your heart conceals unlimited possibilities. From the point of believing that, everything begins. —The technique you showed right now belongs to one of the four types of basic techniques of Mind Power, «range expansion». The appearances of basic techniques are multifarious, but if they're of the same type then they share the same essential abilities. You've understood that much, right?"

"Y...yes."

While nodding, Haruyuki recalled Niko's—the «Red King» Scarlet Rain's range expansion technique unique to her that she had shown before.

Niko's technique hurled flames dwelling in her hand at high velocity and burnt her faraway target to ashes. It far surpassed Haruyuki's technique with a long range that exceeded fifty meters and with a high-speed activation to the extent where she did not even require a technique name utterance any longer, but despite that they both shared the essence of a «long-distance standalone attack».

As if she were waiting for Haruyuki to understand that far, Kuroyukihime nodded, leisurely lifted the sword of her right hand, and spoke.

"—In opposition, the second stage of Mind Power is basically the «applied technique». Combining two or more images of the four elementary types, or incarnating a wholly new image, and bringing about an even larger «override». «Rust Order», used by Rust Jigsaw, who had destroyed the previous race event, and «Wind Veil», used by Fuuko, who

had protected us from that technique, are without a doubt second stage techniques.”

“...And your «Vorpall Strike» is one too, right, Senpai? That technique is a combination of range expansion and power expansion, isn’t it.”

In response to Haruyuki’s words, perhaps it was a figment of his imagination, but Kuroyukihime nodded her half-mirror face mask in a seemingly slightly embarrassed way.

“Mm, well...it’s something like that, I guess. Maybe, however, the right way of putting it is that it became that way as a consequence of something...at any rate. Haruyuki-kun, the time has finally arrived for you to proceed to that second stage as well.”

The first half of her words were slightly mysterious, but without the leisure to ponder their meaning Haruyuki straightened his back and shouted.

“U, understood! I’ll do my best!”

However, there another new question floated to his mind.

“...Um, however, at first in the nurse’s office, you said in order to acquire the second stage of Mind Power, one must understand the meaning of something along the lines of the power of imagination even in the real world...didn’t you, Senpai? Concretely, what did you mean..?”

“Unh... That’s, well...”

Though she had begun to speak, Kuroyukihime cut short her words and gazed at her right hand—the point of her sharp sword, which was still raised before her chest. For some reason, a faint tinge of nervousness clouded her blue-violet eyes, and she continued in a whisper.

“...Since that meaning’s difficult to convey in words, let’s substitute with a real demonstration. Haruyuki-kun, in truth for some time past, I’ve also been challenging myself to acquire a new «applied technique».”

“Eh...”

With bated breath, he stared gapingly at Kuroyukihime’s avatar mask. A new applied technique—in short, was that a super-offensive power that surpassed «Vorpall Strike» too? Was she going to demonstrate that in this narrow room?

“Ah, th-then, shall we go outsi...”

Kuroyukihime slightly shook her head and stopped Haruyuki, who had begun to speak.

“No, there’s no need for that. Here will suffice.”

And then, the Black King Black Lotus pointed the tip of her right hand sword straight at Haruyuki’s body and stood still.

—No way, surely she won’t perhaps use me as a guinea pig for that new technique.

—No, it's possible. Because this person is the sworn friend and master of Sky Raker, who pushed me off the summit of the Old Tokyo Tower. If so, even if Kuroyukihime were also more spartan in her way of guiding my Mind Power than she was, it wouldn't be strange at all. Don't be afraid, think of it as a windfall. Being able to be the first to experience the yet-to-be-revealed technique of the person whom I believe without question to be the strongest in the Accelerated World, there's no training better than this. I should take it while puffing out my chest.

While those thoughts progressed at high speed in less than a tenth of a second, Haruyuki gnashed his molars and stopped his breathing.

Kuroyukihime, whose right hand was still extended out, narrowed her eyes beneath her goggles and also similarly showed signs of concentrating.

At the point of the sharp sword, with a pop a yellow light—an Over-Ray was born. While it faintly pulsated, it lightly enveloped the sword up to a point around twenty centimeters from its tip.

While staring at that with both his wide-opened eyes, Haruyuki felt a slight bewilderment.

As to why—it was warm. The light enveloping the sword was kind, ephemeral, and warm to the extent where one could not possibly believe that it would produce massive destruction.

However, at the same time, in contrast to the gentleness of the phenomenon, Haruyuki also knew that Kuroyukihime was without

exaggeration mustering up all the imagination of her body and soul. The slender avatar trembled bit by bit, and her legs sometimes also wavered.

Then, a faint voice.

“Haruyuki-kun...your hand.”

Before pondering the meaning of her words or becoming perplexed, as if being drawn to her he stretched out his right hand. His fingers approached Kuroyukihime’s extended sword tip and softly made contact.

If Kuroyukihime’s Mind Power had been of the attack-class, at this point in time an override would have occurred, and regardless of his metal color armor hardness Haruyuki’s fingers probably would have fallen off.

However, that did not happen. Instead, a phenomenon he had not predicted in the slightest was incarnated.

The black, sharp sword—was softly dispelled.

Its tip divided into four. Slightly below, another one was born. The total of five partitioned thin, slender organs took in the light shining from the large hole in the wall and shone with a glitter.

These were—

Fingers. It was a hand.

Besides a faint Over-Ray, it was a slight change that produced neither a bit of sound nor radiance.

After he reflexively wondered why he had lowered her offensive power on purpose, Haruyuki finally noticed it. That this «applied Incarnate technique» was an extraordinary miracle that outclassed any large range attack technique.

No Burst Linker could acquire Mind Power contrary to his or her attributes.

In the past, the Red King Niko had said that that was a fundamental principle of the Incarnate system.

Judging from her figure, whose four limbs were all swords, Kuroyukihime's attribute was clearly «cutting». She cut everything she touched. Denial. An aloof black lotus that not a single person could approach. Even her sole «child», Haruyuki, still had many things he did not know regarding her. No matter how much they stared at each other from a short distance or exchanged words with just the two of them, the depths of her heart were hidden by a deep darkness and could not be seen.

Nevertheless, he thought that was fine. Even that was a part of the beauty of the person Kuroyukihime.

In spite of that—right now, Kuroyukihime had showed that she had refused her attribute of her own accord. She had shown that the words of “I don't even have hands in order to hold hands with somebody” that she had once spoken had been negated through her imagination.

There was certainly a declaration being put into this Mind Power. That as the chief of Nega Nebulas, she was facing its members in a form different from that of the past. That she was extending her hand out, opening up her heart, and forming true bonds not only in the Accelerated World but in the real world as well—.

“...Sen, pai...”

While whispering, Haruyuki was self-aware of an acute accompanying pain. That he really knew nothing about this person. That he had been using the superficial phrase «aloof beauty» without knowing anything.

His vision blurred and became distorted. While tears spread beneath his silver surface, Haruyuki tried to entwine her five slender fingers like needles with his right hand softly. The jet black and silver touched each other, and he felt a momentary warmth being transmitted to his consciousness, but immediately after.

With an ephemeral, hard sound like that of ringing an unlimited number of tiny bells, Kuroyukihime’s «right hand» scattered into minute crystals and broke into pieces.

“Ah..!”

Haruyuki leaked out a voice at the same time that Kuroyukihime’s body collapsed as if her power had been exhausted. Unconsciously, he extended his right hand and supported her slender waist.

Hugging her right arm, which had been lost up to near her elbow, to her chest, for a while as if withstanding the pain—no, in fact probably in that state, she took shallow breaths repeatedly. However, before long she lifted her face and whispered in a placid voice.

“Seventeen seconds... A new record by a wide margin. It was because you were here...right.”

Those words basically indicated that up until now Kuroyukihime had challenged this applied Incarnate technique and had had her right hand crushed countless times.

“...Senpai.”

Unable to restrain his infinitely overflowing deep emotions, Haruyuki returned that one word in a tremulous voice. Being driven by impulse, he tightly embraced the avatar in his bosom and strung words together with all his might.

“Senpai...thank you. I have the feeling that I’ve understood. In order to acquire the second stage of Mind Power...one must face not one’s avatar, but one’s own real self. One must continue to think about what one fears, what one desires, and what one imagines: not only in the Accelerated World but in the real world as well; it’s that sort of thing, isn’t it.”

“Exactly so.”

The voice that had responded close to his ears was in a volume almost equivalent to being inaudible, but nevertheless it resounded commandingly in the duel stage of just the two.

"It's a process unnecessary for users of pure «negative Mind Power». As for why, anger, hate, and then despair are things inseparable from their own living bodies from the start. However, «positive Mind Power»—to produce the power of hope, the process of «reversal of one's trauma» becomes necessary by any means. Meeting in the real world head-on with one's wound, which in the Accelerated World has been made into the sophisticated form of one's duel avatar, accepting it, and subliming it into an image of hope... That is not an easy thing. It's easy to fall into the «hole in one's heart», but the path of climbing it is steep...for me, who's spent a vast amount of time as a Burst Linker, even a thing at the level of changing my sword into fingers was beyond my reach. However..."

There, she temporarily stopped her words short; Kuroyukihime lifted her face, and from a distance so close their masks touched each other, she caught Haruyuki's eye.

"However, you can do it. You, who noticed singlehandedly your «image of something»."

Normally, this would maybe be a scene where he would say things like "That's impossible" or "Not me, such a thing." However, only right now did Haruyuki shake off his timidity and nod deeply. Their masks bumped

into each other with a clunk, but with them still touching each other he murmured.

"Understood. I..., I'll do my best. Though I won't make it in time for tonight's «Imperial Palace escape strategy»...despite that, I will do my best, and I will find it. My «image of hope»."

"Ahh. —I will do my best too. So that next time I can maintain it for at least thirty seconds and be able to hold hands with you properly."

This time for sure, the whispered words concealed a power enough to set Haruyuki into transition as usual.

"Uh, um, well."

After blinking at high speed below his silver surface, he somehow answered back.

"Th, tha, that's true. Besides that, if you had hands, it'd be easy to operate the «Install» menu."

At that very moment, her violet-blue eyes, which were right before his own, glittered glaringly and dangerously, and her voice, whose fridity had increased—.

"...That's true. I thought about making this duel a draw, but since it'd be troublesome to operate it without hands, I guess I'll just win normally after all."

Fortunately, with the point of her sword Kuroyukihime accepted Haruyuki's proposed draw offer.

Haruyuki, who had ended the direct connection duel, looked at the ceiling vacantly for a few seconds and then finally became of the situation again. He was lying on a bed in the nurse's office, and immediately next to him Kuroyukihime lay prone, her body stuck close to him, a situation surprising even for last-century romantic comedy manga—

"Haruyuki-kun."

A breath softly touched his left ear; after shrinking in fear, he timidly looked that way.

That moment, Haruyuki, who forgot both his nervousness and his fright, opened his eyes wide.

While facing sideways on top of the sheets, Kuroyukihime was staring hard at her snow-white right hand. Her petite nails, sleek like a pearl, shone glitteringly while reflecting the illumination of the light panels. Her black pupils blinked once and refocused on Haruyuki's eyes.

"Haruyuki-kun, do you remember. The day I gave you your first lecture on Brain Burst...in the «Initial Acceleration Space», I reached my hand out to you, and said: «Are these mere virtual two meters that far to you?»."

There was no way he would forget it.

At that time, Haruyuki had diverted his eyes from her extended hand and had answered in his heart. That it was far.

After he nodded deeply, Kuroyukihime wore a smile that was in some way filled with plaintiveness and continued.

"In truth...those two meters were far to me too. It was because it had been a long...a truly long time since I last extended my hand out to someone of my own accord. I had always continued to fear grasping a person's hand. The legion members with whom my heart was supposedly joined...even Fuuko, Utai, Current, and Graph's hands, I might have been refusing them in the true sense of the word. However...from the day I encountered you in the virtual squash corner...no before that, from the day I noticed the figure of a small pink pig looking down as if to avoid others' eyes and running with all his might in a cranny of the local net..."

There, Kuroyukihime closed her mouth. However, Haruyuki had the feeling that through the still-joined direct connection cable he had undoubtedly understood her unsaid words.

Another smile, and a faint whisper.

"Well, Haruyuki-kun. Have the two meters of that day shortened..?"

Haruyuki was unable to say anything. As to why, the emotion welling up was too great and was blocking up his chest a lot.

In exchange, he screwed up all the courage he had; he lifted both his hands up and softly wrapped them around her still-raised right hand.

It was warm. The same warmth as that of Black Lotus' «right hand», which he had touched for a mere instant in the «Steel stage», permeated his palms, circulated through his nervous system, and sparkled in a golden color in the center of his consciousness.

Kuroyukihime lifted up her left hand too and covered the outside of Haruyuki's right hand. In his world filled with warm light, only their four mutually touching hands and her beautiful face smiling placidly existed.

Her long eyelashes were cast down. The angle of her face changed.

As if being drawn in, Haruyuki shifted his upper body a little forward. With her eyes closed, Kuroyukihime also drew her body nearer in the same way. By now, her white face—or her pink lips were only a mere fifteen centimeters away. They approached each other a little bit more. The distance between them dropped below ten centimeters—.

Rattle; the sound of the door sliding brought their situation to a stop.

Only two seconds later, with a speed like teleportation Kuroyukihime had separated her body from his, pulled out the direct connection cable, alighted from the bed, and returned to the adjacent chair. The seam between the white curtains was lifted up, and the school nurse Hotta showed her face.

"Arita-kun, how are you feeling?"

"..."

After Haruyuki opened his eyes and mouth gaping wide and froze, the nurse furrowed her eyebrows.

"Your face is red, maybe your fever's returned?"

"...No, I'm fine-gh."

There was nothing Haruyuki could do other than answer with that. As for Kuroyukihime, who was sitting gracefully in the chair, with a completely composed facial expression she didn't have a drop of sweat on her face. It was actually a fearsome mind control ability. Not only that, but before he was aware of it her two hands were grasping the cooling bottle as they were before.

With no alternative, Haruyuki sucked on the straw of that bottle, which was outstretched straightforwardly with a gesture completely natural of a «health-care committee member substitute».

Chapter 8

During the ten minute break at the end of second period, Haruyuki changed out of his gym clothes into his school uniform and returned to the second-years' class C.

Immediately after he pulled the door open and set foot into the classroom, he was showered in considerable applause and stood stock-still. However, now that he thought about it, if he were a somewhat anemic, willowy female, then maybe this would not have happened, but since he was a male who had tried too hard and collapsed in a class that was only gym class at most, he would be seen as a somewhat physical type of comedian. Shrinking his neck, while lowering his head obsequiously he dashed to his seat; exactly at the point where he sat down, the chime for third period rang, and he let out a long breath.

He lifted his head, and his eyes met with those of Chiyuri, who looking back at him in a worried manner from the seat diagonally right in front of him. Nodding as if to say "I'm fine," on that occasion he also made fleeting eye contact with Takumu, who was sitting at his back right.

Takumu's facial expression seemed truly apologetic; in short, he was probably thinking that why Haruyuki had tried so hard to the point of collapsing was the fault of his own advice that "image is important."

—It's not your fault; on the other hand, thanks to you I was able to realize something important; I thank you for that.

Putting those thoughts into his gaze, he smiled widely, and Takumu also finally made his mouth grin widely.

During the classes of third, fourth period, lunch break, and afternoon classes as well, while studying with half his mind, with the other half Haruyuki continued to think single-mindedly.

What was the «second stage Mind Power» that he needed to find and nurture—.

He understood that now there were other urgent duties on which he needed to concentrate more. Of course, it was the «Imperial Palace escape strategy II», which was drawing close tonight at seven. He must dive together with Shinomiya Utai, also known as Ardor Maiden, into the Unlimited Neutral Field, meet again with the mysterious deep-blue young warrior Trilead Tetraoxide, receive his assistance, and return alive from the Imperial Palace as well as the territory of the Four Divine Beasts. If he considered the fact that they would fall into the terrifying state of «Infinite EK» if they were defeated by one of the warrior avatars prowling the interior of the Imperial Palace (not to mention also Suzaku, one of the Divine Beasts), no matter how much he concentrated it would not be too much.

However, Haruyuki could not help himself by any means from continuing to think about his own Mind Power.

As for why, at present another «circumstance» that he could not defer had arisen.

Namely, teaching the basics of the Incarnate system to his eternal rival—or the Burst Linker who had tentatively become that, the end-of-century bike rider Ash Roller.

At the end of their duel before going to school, when Ash had asked him straightaway “Could you teach it to me? The Incarnate system,” Haruyuki had been taken aback for close to a full five seconds.

After his ability to think somehow recovered, what he asked first of all was a question that he thought likely to be extremely obvious.

“Wh...why, me?”

In doing so, the end-of-century rider said,

“Well you see, you’re that, right? Master Raker’s disciple, right? Which means you’re my *kouhai*^[14], my brother disciple^[15], right?”

In a further second, he understood that that strange word referred to a «junior disciple»; stopping himself from butting in “But with that way of saying it you can’t distinguish it from «senior disciple»,” for the moment he asked back a practical question.

“If, if so, wouldn’t it be fine if you were properly taught by Raker-san? If it’s her, then regardless of differences in legion, I believe she’d teach it scrupulously to her own «child», Ash-san...and no doubt, thoroughly...”

“...That’s it. That «thorough» part’s the problem.”

The instant he caught the ring that seemed in some way frightened in the voice leaked from below his scarf, Haruyuki realized what Ash had a problem with. He did not seem to be frightened; he *was* frightened. Frightened of that fearsome spartan style of training, like that of two months before: when Kurasaki Fuuko alias Sky Raker had begun to teach Haruyuki the basics of the Incarnate system, she had pushed him off the apex of the Old Tokyo Tower.

Staring at Ash Roller for a while out of the corner of his eye, Haruyuki spoke.

"Um, if I may dare to use a self-important manner of putting it...the Incarnate system's not such a lenient thing. A way of doing things like using a dubious Neuro Linker-use study kit to acquire it with ease without going through hard pains is kinda..."

"Don't say everything! I got it, I too understand that!"

Before Haruyuki's eyes, Ash thrust his rider glove palms straight out and shouted.

"But if you'll let me say it, Master's lessons that you experienced were the mild version meant for guests!"

"Eh...th, they were?"

"That's right! ...well, generally speaking, I, how do you put it...this way of saying it might be unexpected, but I don't have the intention of firmly acquiring the Incarnate system and competing like mad with baddies in

the Unlimited Neutral Field. I'm fine with being able to use an Incarnate technique in just one fight; no, just one time. If I can give that guy Uu who's beginning to be swallowed up by the «ISS Kit» one hard knock and open his eyes, I'm fine with that..."

At those unexpected words, Haruyuki looked back at the side of the skull face. Ash Roller, who had turned his face to the sky of the stage, murmured quietly in a voice tinged with uncharacteristic heaviness.

"Because to me, Brain Burst is to the last a fighting game."

If he were spoken to like that, he could no longer refuse flatly.

As to why, the one who had conveyed to Ash Roller the information that «now's our chance to deal Bush Utan a blow with Mind Power and destroy the ISS Kit» was Haruyuki himself.

There, the duel time had ended; Haruyuki was unable to say either yes or no to Ash's «request», but however it had undoubtedly been conveyed to him. The fact that Haruyuki had made up his mind to accept his request.

While he continued to think round and round with half his mind, the end-of-sixth-period chime rang, and the atmosphere in the classroom became bubbly and enlivened.

Switching places with the subject teacher, the homeroom teacher Sugeno appeared, and the short homeroom period began. At the end of the various messages, the incident of Arita's loss of consciousness was brought up; at the point where he was scolded with the welcome maxim

of “It’s very good to try your best, but diligently maintaining your own physical condition is an athlete’s ironbound law” and broke into a cold sweat, the after-school chime rang.

First, Haruyuki talked lightly about that night’s plans with Chiyuri and Takumu, who were going to track and kendo practice respectively. After club and committee activities ended, they would change clothes, assemble at Haruyuki’s house, have a meeting with all legion members present, and thereafter commence the «Imperial Palace escape strategy»—they confirmed that flow of events and for the time being parted.

While he changed into sneakers at the entranceway and headed alone to the backyard in order to do his committee activities, Haruyuki continued to ask himself a single question single-mindedly.

Whether he had the qualifications to teach someone the way of using Mind Power.

In the nurse’s office, when he had sought his initiation into Mind Power in an almost slightly impatient way from Kuroyukihime, that doubt might have also existed in the depths of his heart.

In terms of just technical knowledge regarding the «Incarnate system»—namely, the sub-control system of the fighting game Brain Burst, a method of consciously using one’s imagination circuits—he had self-confidence in having acquired some as such. However, Mind Power was not a mere technique. It displayed an overwhelming power outside the

rules, but on the other hand the terrible risk of the player likely being pulled into his or her heart's own dark side existed. That was not just an analogy. Burst Linkers who unleashed negative Mind Power had even their real-world personalities distorted. Like the robber «Dusk Taker». And then, like the Takumu of yesterday—.

If he were to teach somebody the basics of Mind Power, he must devote himself to paying discreet attention such that his companion was not pulled to the dark side. It would probably not be enough just explaining the dangers in words. There was a need to show an illustration of how great a miracle Mind Power could produce at the very beginning. Like Sky Raker, who made her wheelchair dance back and forth, left and right without using her hands, or Black Lotus, who changed her sword into her hand.

If one considered that point of view, Haruyuki's «Laser Sword» and «Laser Lance» were somewhat weak. The reason was that as phenomena they were only mere one-shot attack techniques. There were no few numbers of other Burst Linkers who had acquired special techniques that possessed about the same range and power.

If he really had the intention of lecturing Ash Roller about the Incarnate system, he would probably have to show him the power of the «second stage» that Kuroyukihime had mentioned, not just the elementary four types of techniques. If he could not do that, then he probably did not have the qualifications to teach people Mind Power.

“...Though, having said that...”

While going around the second school building from its east side and walking on the backyard covered in moss, with a sigh mixed in Haruyuki muttered that.

At the nurse’s office, Kuroyukihime had said that to acquire the second stage of Mind Power, one must face one’s physical self head-on, reverse one’s trauma, which had become one’s avatar’s mold, and produce an image of hope. However, frankly Haruyuki himself did not understand well why he had been born as «Silver Crow»—as a metal-color who possessed slender limbs, a smooth head, and ten metal fins.

Because he had grown fat, he yearned for a thin body. Because he had lived groveling on the ground, he yearned for wings to fly in the sky. It was simple to draw that conclusion. But for some reason, he had the feeling that was not all. Because with that explanation, he did not understand the reason why he was a metal-color...

At that time, suddenly he heard a faint voice from somewhere.

—And then, people who possess «shells of trauma» that cross a certain level of intensity will almost certainly become metal-colors-*ya wa*^[16] ...

“..?”

He stopped still with fear and looked around at his surroundings.

It was the slightly husky voice of a girl. However, there was no one’s figure in the dim backyard. Again, he strained his ears, but only the calls

of the sports club members practicing on the faraway grounds and the sounds of the concert band club tuning instruments in the music room reached him.

However, he had not misheard it. Even if he did not know the word «shell of trauma», there were no female acquaintances in his surroundings who used the Kansai dialect.

Throb.

All of a sudden, a point on his back between his shoulder blades hurt intensely. He unintentionally staggered and put his hand on the wall of the school building at his side. Throb, throb. The pain did not readily go away.

Muscle soreness from first period's gym class—it wasn't that. Haruyuki already knew that this pain was not coming from an abnormality in his body.

"...hh...why, is that...here now..."

While clenching his fists and bearing it, he muttered in a hoarse voice.

That was right. *That*—the «Disaster Armor» parasitizing Silver Crow, namely the sixth star of the Seven Arcs «The Destiny» that had mutated and had given birth to the Enhanced Armament «The Disaster» was being excited.

In the depths of his ears, the roar of a ferocious beast different from the voice before reverberated.

—Destroy. Destroy. Those guys...tear them apart...chew them to pieces...devour them..!

In response to the quantity of heated anger and hate contained in that voice to an alarming extent, Haruyuki gasped for breath while still leaning on the wall.

Two weeks before, in the final stretch of the «Hermes Cord Traverse Race», being spurred on by rage toward Rust Jigsaw Haruyuki had summoned the «Armor». Though his mind had begun to be nearly completely controlled for a while, due to Chiyuri's special technique «Citron Call Mode 2», time for his avatar had been rewound, and the Armor had again been restored to simple parasitic factors—their entity was the hook wire fragments left by the fifth generation Disaster, Cherry Rook.

Since then he had never heard the Disaster's voice, but yesterday evening he had fought with Takumu, who had begun to be swallowed up by the ISS Kit, and in order to pull him back Haruyuki had tried to summon the original form of the «Armor», «The Destiny». Although it was not the Disaster itself, through the summoning process the parasitic factors might have again slightly awoken.

—However. Even while bearing the pulse of the lightning-like pain, Haruyuki felt some sort of sense of unease.

In some way, there was...something different from the previous «voice of the Disaster». He had that hunch. The brutal impulse to destroy was the

same, but it was likely that behind it there was another emotion vaster than the wrath and hatred. Howling, raging, and then—this emotion that seemed like wailing...

Before he knew it Haruyuki was trying to tune his consciousness to the voice to which he had been blocking his eyes and ears in the expectations that it would go away.

That moment, the highest degree of dizzying, intense pain up until now ran from his back to the center of his head, and he fell to the ground on his knees, trembling. A savage howl completely filled his hearing.

—Destroy. Destroy. Destroy destroy devour devour devour devour devour devour..!!

...Is this...sorrow..?

...Are you, crying..?

The answer in response to Haruyuki's question was a third merciless staggering blow. No longer even letting out a moaning voice, he tightly scrunched up his eyes and began to fall forward onto the moss-covered ground—but just beforehand.

Somebody supported Haruyuki's shoulders from the front with her small hands.

In that state, a soft, tender feeling enveloped his upper body. Quicker than he understood somebody had caught him in her arms, with his two arms Haruyuki also embraced that somebody as if to cling to her.

She had a cool body temperature like that of lulling, soothing, and absorbing blazing crimson flames. Each time her small hands rubbed his back, the pulse of pain rapidly receded.

"..."

Letting out a thin breath, Haruyuki relaxed his stiffened body.

With his thinking process still over halfway at a stop, vacantly he raised his eyelids. Before his eyes was a deep red, thin radial line on a background of black like sparklers on a summer evening. It took some time for him to notice that that was an iris—basically, a human eye.

He pulled back his face just a little bit and expanded his field of vision.

Fifteen centimeters before his eyes existed the face of a youthful girl whose large pupils were opened wide as if worried.

Bangs cut neatly to the same length. The back was fastened with a thin ribbon. A neck so thin it made one surprised, and below that a white dress type of uniform. A brown leather satchel on her shoulder—.

"...Shi, nomiya...san..?"

Haruyuki whispered in a hoarse voice, and his companion nodded deeply.

It was Shinomiya Utai, the off-campus member of Umesato Middle's caretaker committee on which Haruyuki served as chairman. A fourth grader of the affiliated Matsunogi Elementary Institute. And a level 7 Burst Linker who occupied a corner of the upper echelons of the first-

generation Nega Nebulas «Elements» in the Accelerated World, «Ardor Maiden».

At the appearance of a person on whom he could rely unconditionally, Haruyuki thinly exhaled a breath of relief and hastened to separate himself a bit more from her face, which had approached him far too closely.

However, he could not. As to why, it was because his own two arms were hugging her body, which was small and slender even for the norms for her age, tightly with all his might.

"..."

After looking down at the dress of Utai, who was in close proximity, and his round belly for two seconds, Haruyuki finally became aware of his deed that defied even the heavens and cried out.

"Nohyaa!"

Like a spring mechanism, he opened his two hands left and right and jumped fifty centimeters backward from his kneeling posture.

"I, I'm, I'm shorry! Y-y-you've got it wrong, i-i-it's not like that..."

As he waved his hands in a flapping way, there was a red system message in the center of his virtual desktop. Without recognizing whether it was an ad hoc connection request, he pressed the yes button. As soon as the chat window appeared in the bottom of his field of vision, Utai's lovely ten fingers typed in the air with furious momentum.

【UI> There is no need to worry, Arita-san. We are probably out of view of the social cameras.】

—Was, was that so? Speaking of which, wasn't that even worse?

For an instant, he had thought that but did not put it into words; Haruyuki tried to make a more logical justification.

"Uh, um well, while I was walking I felt a little dizzy, and I thought it was undoubtedly because I had went all-out too much in gym class, but since I'm fine now, I'm sorry to have caused you to worry..."

However, his words were interrupted by Utai's placid as well as heartbreaking smile, which seemed to see through everything. After she separated her knees, which were on the ground like Haruyuki's, and got up, she slightly dropped her speed and began moving her fingers again.

【UI> You don't need to be in such a flurry. Because I understand... What had happened just now was probably the thing called «Overflow».】

"O...ver, flow?"

He tilted his head at the word he had heard, no, seen for the first time. However, immediately after, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide at the line of words that continued to flow.

【UI> It's a higher version of «Zero Fill». If the act of one's heart being filled to the brim with an absence of Mind Power, basically resignation or a sense of helplessness, and becoming unable to move is Zero Fill, then overflow is the act of negative Mind Power...rage, hate, or despair

overflowing and becoming unable to control oneself. Of course, originally it was a phenomenon that occurred to Burst Linkers in the Accelerated World, but I heard that even in the real world it happens rarely to Burst Linkers who are users of negative Mind Power.】

“...Negative, Mind Power...”

He mumbled in a small voice and abruptly looked at Utai’s face. While shaking his head back and forth, he forced out some words.

“Uh, um, I’m...definitely not doing anything like practicing negative Mind Power of my own accord...”

Whereupon Utai again smiled placidly, walked up right next to his side, and touched her left hand to Haruyuki’s cheek in a squishy way. At the same time, she typed with her right hand alone.

【UI> I said it, didn’t I; I understand. Earlier, that was...the interference of the «Armor», wasn’t it?】

“..!”

He sharply swallowed his breath, but if she had seen through him to that extent then it couldn’t be helped even if he denied it.

“...Yes, that’s correct... By remembering something...um, with the springboard of remembering somebody’s words, suddenly it began to act violently...”

【UI> Words? Of what kind?】

“Uh, I can’t remember who it was. In fact, no matter how I think about it, it was the voice of someone I didn’t know...if I remember correctly, the content was that if there was something about one’s shell of trauma, then one would become a metal-color, something like that...”

What had trembled with a twitch was not Haruyuki but the left hand of Utai, who was touching his cheek.

The iris streaked with deep red lines opened completely wide. Her lips faintly quivered, but of course her voice did not come out; her right hand tapped the keyboard falteringly.

【UI> Who was it? Who was the one who said that to you, Arita-san?】

“...Sorry, I’m trying as hard as I can to remember...but it’s no use, I don’t know. All I recall was that it was the voice of a female...”

【UI> Is that so. I’m sorry, please forget it. Is your physical condition fine now?】

It seemed to be a sudden change of topic, but Haruyuki immediately forgot his sense of discomfort and nodded. Utai’s left hand left him; with a heave-ho, he stood up and brushed off his uniform at the knees.

“Unh, I’m fine now, thank you. —It seems wholly as if you can use Mind Power even in the real world, Shinomiya-san.”

While thanking her and saying that casually at the same time, Utai showed signs of acting bashfully in a way appropriate for her age, which was rare. Her cheeks slightly reddened, she cast her eyes down, and she

let out a flow of words in the chat log in one go with the fastest typing speed up until now.

【UI> I'm glad it didn't turn into a serious matter. I believe there's no need to worry that much with regards to the interference of the «Armor». If it's an Enhanced Armament that's had that much of a history, rather it'd be strange if overflow didn't occur. No matter what interference there is, unless you intone the equipping command in the Accelerated World, it should not exhibit a connection-like influence. Besides, either way, if tonight's escape strategy succeeds, I'll be able to purify you of the parasitic factors on the spot.】

"...Unh, that's true."

Why Haruyuki's answer was a moment late was because he had felt an instant of vacillation about the presently most important topic, the «purification of the Armor» mission—everything was nothing more than laying the groundwork for the sake of both Ardor Maiden's rescue and the escape from the Imperial Palace.

However, was there the need to hesitate about something? If he did not completely get rid of the Disaster Armor, at the imminent «Seven Kings' meeting» in three days, Silver Crow would be designated with a bounty on his head by the joint signature of the six large legions. He absolutely had to avoid that.

Fortunately, it seemed Utai, whose head was lowered, had not noticed Haruyuki's abnormal state; she continued to make her fingers flash.

【UI> Now then, let us begin committee activities. Hou-san must be hungry.】

She swiftly waved her hand, erasing the keyboard, and she lifted up her bag, which had been put in a place slightly separated from them. Haruyuki hastily chased after Utai, who had headed for the caretaker shed in the northwest corner of the backyard and had begun to walk briskly without trying to regard Haruyuki's face.

The African Sunda Scops-owl «Hou» had moved from Matsunogi Institute to Umesato Middle a mere three days ago.

However, the small-class bird of prey nodding off on his perch established in the caretaker shed already seemed completely used to his new surroundings. Though he did not so much as open his eyelids even if Haruyuki approached the shed, as soon as he noticed the footsteps of Utai, who had put her bag and satchel at the side of the sink, he opened its round eyes perfectly wide and also incidentally moved his wings restlessly.

“Really, what a self-interested guy, huh...”

Haruyuki muttered that with a bitter laugh mixed in and unlocked the electronic lock on the door. He nimbly entered and retrieved the water-resistant coated paper laid around the vicinity of the perch and the bathing-use vat. Swapping places with him, Utai lined up the paper

washed and dried from yesterday and checked whether or not Hou's weight and body temperature were at their normal values.

As Haruyuki, who had again went outside, washed the paper mat with a sloshing noise with the water supply established at the flank of the shed, a white cooling receptacle peeking out from the handbag at his side caught his eye.

The contents were Hou's feed. Yesterday, the limits of what he had been shown were some kind of meat, but according to Utai it seemed to be neither chicken nor pork nor beef. Come to think of it, sure enough today she was supposed to show him starting from the point where she would dress the feed, but Utai had also added "I predict you'll suffer emotional damage, so prepare yourself." While again racking his brains on what on earth that meant, Haruyuki began to softly reach out his right hand. At that instant—

【UI> It probably wouldn't be strange even if you ate it, Arita-san.】

Those words flowed into his chat window that had been left displayed, and he froze his hand in fear. He looked back; Utai, who had come out from the shed without his knowing it, was smiling from ear to ear.

"N, no, such a thing, I wouldn't snitch food, I'm already a second-year in middle school."

Forgetting even the fact that he and Chiyuri had made a great fuss last night over the fried eggplant of the soup garnish and the chicken, Haruyuki shook his head minutely and hanged the coated paper, which

he had finished washing, on some small hangers. With a handkerchief, he wiped his hands and then looked at Utai.

The grade schooler four years younger than he showed for an instant a facial expression as though she were considering something, but immediately she nodded deeply.

【UI> Now then, I'll prepare Hou-san's food.】

She moved to a place before the sink, inserted her hand into the handbag, and took out the cooling receptacle. She loosened the buckle fastening its four sides in place and opened the lid. Spurred on by curiosity, Haruyuki, who had thrust his face out and had peered inside the receptacle, stopped his breath short two seconds later with a start.

Lined up inside along with the ice packs were small pink animals of five centimeters' length—probably mice before their fur had grown. Of course, they weren't alive, but their shapes were the same. From the four there she took out one and typed with one hand while placing it on the lid of the receptacle, which had been put on the sink.

【UI> It's a feed called «frozen pink mouse». Basically, mice, chicks, or insects like crickets and mealworms are distributed to pet Ural owls or horned owls. However, it's too large as it is now, so we'll need to dress it.】

And then she put her hand into the bag again and took out a thing that surprised Haruyuki even more greatly.

It was quite small but without a doubt a knife—no, perhaps he should say a pocketknife. She removed the scabbard made of glossy, natural wood, and a six-centimeter blade glittering with a pale blue sheen appeared from inside.

【UI> Of course, I've obtained permission to carry as well as use this pocketknife. Despite that, if I take it out somewhere like on the public roads, in the blink of an eye I'd be taken into protective custody.】

Utai's annotation was not an exaggeration at all. Now, in 2047, carrying any tool with a blade was a violation of regulations, regardless of size. If one had a reason as part of one's duties, it was possible to carry one by obtaining a permit from the public safety commission, but he recalled from the news he had seen that the screening was rather harsh.

"Seems...seems like you were granted permission all right."

In spite of himself Haruyuki muttered that, but in response to that Utai only faintly smiled, not replying with anything. In return, with her left hand she steadied the pink mouse put on the receptacle's lid, and with her right she applied the seemingly sharp tip of the penknife to it.

As the blade moved sharply, its target was split neatly in half. Despite that, there was not a sign of a cut on the plastic covering. The pocketknife moved a further two times, and the mouse quickly became four thin slices of meat. Sure enough, their hue was that of what Hou seemed to be eating in an appetizing way yesterday. Its internal organs

seemed to be processed already, but some blood flowed out and moistened the blade.

Utai, in the midst of work, gave off an air so strained that even the changes in the surrounding air pressure were nearly visible; Haruyuki could no longer even speak out to her. Of course, though, he didn't have the courage to propose «let me do it» in the first place. The remaining mice were also prepared one after the other, and in less than a mere two minutes, the contents of the receptacle had changed into the same state as that of yesterday.

Utai finished her work, washed the pocketknife at the tap, wiped the blade well with a cloth resembling cotton, and returned it to its sheath. With that cloth, she wrapped the penknife, scabbard and all, put it in her bag, and raised her body. Without looking at Haruyuki, she typed on the holo keyboard.

【UI> Normally, one would use scissors for this work. That way's easier.】

“...If so, then why the pocketknife?”

He interrogated her softly, and after looking down for a while as if in thought Utai answered.

【UI> I thought it would be a memorial service at the bare minimum, but it might have been meaningless self-satisfaction after all. Now then, let's go feed these to Hou-san.】

While chasing after Utai, who was holding the receptacle and her leather gloves and again heading for the shed, Haruyuki tried to ponder the meaning of the line of words still displayed in the chat window. However, no matter how he interpreted it, it felt slightly wrong.

The two entered the shed, and as if to say he couldn't wait any longer the Eurasian Scops-owl showed the behavior of flapping his wings from his perch. No later than Utai raised her left hand fitted into the leather glove did he move, flying round the shed in circles.

With both hands, Haruyuki held the receptacle in the same fashion of that as yesterday; from there Utai grabbed slices of meat one by one and gave them to Hou. The answer to his homework was in short rat meat, but now that he thought of it he had the feeling that owls in fiction for the most part caught mice. Well, there was no way they would eat pork, beef, and the like.

While staring fixedly at Hou, who was swallowing the meat one after another, Haruyuki thought absentmindedly about the obvious fact that "that guy's living too, huh."

Though he was of a species that did not inhabit Japan and was only sold with the intention of being a pet, he was not artificial protein synthesized in a factory, much less a polygon object. Within this four meter by four meter room, from day to day he was eating, sleeping, and then feeling something. Something that Haruyuki had no way of imagining...

Possibly having caught wind of the sign that he had slightly bit his lip, Utai turned round and tilted her head. Haruyuki hurriedly tilted his head and spoke in a small voice.

"Ah, I, I'm sorry. It's not anything big. It's just that, um, I was watching him bathe yesterday and said 'What a lucky guy you are,' maybe it was a little rude..."

There, he noticed that this time those remarks might have been rude not to Hou but to Utai, and he became flustered even further.

"Uh, um, I-I-I'm not particularly saying that it's a misfortune for him to be taken care of by you, I think that's a blessing, if anything I want it too...nooo, that's not what I meant, um."

Around there, Haruyuki's «wanting to escape running meter» had risen quite a bit, but in a situation where he was holding meat with both hands that was not possible either; he joined words together with all his effort.

"Uh—mm, well, Hou was probably born from artificial breeding, so I think that from the beginning he didn't know what was outside his birdcage, but...however, he's a bird. Birds want to fly in the sky...possibly. Ah, of course I'm not saying we should set him free. I'm not saying either that this situation's a misfortune for him. But, at the least, maybe it's not good for us to arbitrarily decide what he should feel..."

The more he spoke, the less clear his meaning became, so there out of necessity Haruyuki shut his mouth.

However, it seemed that some extent of his intention had been conveyed to Utai. She nodded once and resumed feeding him with an expression of mulling over something on her face. The four pink mice's worth of meat slices disappeared in succession inside his beak, and the Eurasian Scops-owl, who in the end had his head petted and seemed to be satisfied greatly, unfurled his wings and took off from Utai's left hand. He flew leisurely inside the shed, tracing a counterclockwise arc.

No matter how many times he saw that figure, it was so beautiful as to make him let out a gasp. While becoming absentminded, he gazed on, enthralled, and with a discreet sound effect words flowed in the chat window.

【UI> I believe the thing of which you wish to speak, Arita-san, is called «respect».】

The instant the emphasized word came into his view, Haruyuki nodded furiously several times. That was right; that was precisely the thing that Haruyuki was feeling a moment earlier.

Hou was; no, all pets, including him, were not existences just «kept» by humans. One could also say they were «at the side» of humans. That was why it was amiss to measure their happiness or unhappiness with a human scale. All they could do was approach them with respect.

No, it wasn't just pets. Earlier, Utai had used not scissors but a properly sharpened pocketknife and had dressed the pink mice with the utmost

seriousness. In short, she had not forgotten to respect even the mice that were going to be the feed...

While looking up at Hou, who had returned to his perch, Haruyuki was struck by that deep emotion, and in the chat window text was again composed in a slightly slow manner.

【UI> I also believe that it's very important to hold respect for all things. Respect is basically not disdain. Even oneself is included as a target of that respect, no doubt.】

"Eh..., respecting oneself..?"

Haruyuki drew his gaze away from Hou and stared at the girl standing at the side.

"Isn't oneself...different..? Because isn't that, something like conceit...something like narcissism, isn't it like tha..."

Haruyuki, who far from respecting himself frankly spared himself from even looking at himself in the mirror, only said that. However, still smiling gently, Utai paused slightly and then moved her fingers.

【UI> If one overdoes it, it may become like that, but I believe that slighting oneself is also looking down upon the path one has walked until now, the time one has passed, and the people to whom one is related. Inside you, Arita-san, there's undoubtedly a «flame» that will not disappear by any means no matter how much water is poured on it or how much the wind blows.】

The girl reached her right hand straight out and applied it precisely to the center of Haruyuki's breast—right above his heart.

【UI> That flame burns with your experiences and memories...with even your sins and errors as firewood. In the final analysis, people's consciousness and thoughts cause neurons ignite...for both an instant and an eternity, that flame is the essence of all life. I hold the conviction that not forgetting respect toward others and yourself and continuing to let your flame burn the proper way will illuminate the path you should walk. 】

Without even looking at the holo keyboard, Shinomiya Utai had managed to type that difficult to decipher as well as lengthy text with her left hand alone. During that period, her pupils, which concealed deep crimson sparks, had been fixed continuously upon Haruyuki's eyes. It seemed to Haruyuki as if from her small hand still touching his chest, surely some kind of energy—perhaps real flames were being emitted and flowing into his heart.

“My flame...the path I should walk...”

The heat in his blood vessels ran through his entire body and at last gathered at his back—at his two shoulder blades.

In real life, Haruyuki of course did not have wings. Far from that, his body was round and his height low, and his physical ability was at the extent where if he tried a little bit in PE class, he would collapse.

However, he could advance forward. He could kindle the slight flame inside his heart, light his way, and take a step forward. Not facing backward, solely running—forward. Forward. Everything was the problem of his image. If he had possessed the image of moving his feet forward in this real world, without a doubt his pace would have become several times, several tens of times greater in the Accelerated World.

“...My image...my, Mind Power.”

After softly murmuring that, he deeply inhaled, and in a completely changed, clear voice, Haruyuki spoke.

“Thank you, Shinomiya-san. Somehow, it seems like an answer for what I’ve always been worrying about has come.”

Upon which Utai softly separated her right hand from Haruyuki’s chest, gave a glimpse of her teeth like drops of pearls from her lips, and showed one of her rare articulate smiles.

Having left the caretaker shed, the two of them finished washing their hands at the water supply, signed the committee log file indicating they had completed their activities, and submitted it to the school local net.

The time was 4:15 in the afternoon. The time to assemble at Nega Nebulas’ temporary headquarters, aka Haruyuki’s house, was six in the afternoon, so they still had some leeway before they had to move.

—For the moment, maybe today I'll go together with Shinomiya-san to the student council meeting room and wait for Taku's and Chiyuri's club activities to end while chatting with Senpai...

While thinking in that manner, he tried to pick up his school-commuting bag put at the flank of the sink—but just beforehand.

Utai, who was using a handkerchief at his immediate side, stiffened her body with a twitch. Immediately after, Haruyuki also sensed some kind of presence creeping in at his back.

—A thirst for blood..!

Quickly, he tried to look back, but even quicker than that. Two arms extended across the shoulders of Utai, who was standing next to him, tightly seized her body. Simultaneously, a cheerful voice.

"Ui-ui, I—got—you!"

【UI> Stopm, itd paonful】

The two hands of Utai, who had been hoisted into the air, tapped the keyboard in a struggling way, but the line of words flowing in the text box amounted to no meaning. All Haruyuki could do was catch the white handkerchief that had slipped out in midair.

The assailant who had succeeded in a splendid backstab whipped Utai's small body around, wrapped her up super-tightly into her own chest, and raised a nasal voice.

“Aah, Ui-Ui, you’re so cute as always! At this rate, would it be fine if I put you in my pocket and took you home! Or should I make you into a mascot and decorate my dashboard!”

The one who fired in succession those questionable lines of which it was dubious whether they were expressions of love or not was a female student wearing a uniform not from a school in this area. She was quite taller than Haruyuki, clad in a blouse with a too-magnificent proportion of light blue and a checker-patterned skirt, and had thin overknee tights covering her legs up to an area fairly high above her knees. Her hair was naturally long hair that seemed fluffily soft—.

Utai’s right hand, which was clawing even more at the air, came down with a sudden stop as if she were exhausted of strength.

The captor, who checked that her target had been suppressed, at that point finally looked at Haruyuki and smiled gently.

“How do you do, Karasu-san. Good job with the caretaker committee work.”

“Ah...th...thank you, how do you do, Master.”

While making his face twitch, Haruyuki returned a greeting to his «master», the vice chief of Nega Nebulas and level 8 Burst Linker «Sky Raker», Kurasaki Fuuko. Following that, he inquired timidly.

“Um, well...wh, why are you here at Umesato Middle, Master?”



"What I needed to have was a friend with power. Sacchan gladly issued me a one day visitor's pass."

In this day and age, the security at K-12 schools kept getting stricter; even if the outsider were a child of the same generation, one could not come and go as one pleased. At the school gate, a certification test would be carried out through one's Neuro Linker; if one had not been issued a pass, in the wink of an eye a security guard would come flying.

"...I see."

After nodding deeply, Haruyuki immediately shook his head.

"N, no, I'm not talking about the system...the meetup was at six at my place, right?"

"My, even if I don't have pressing business, is it not all right if I only «wanted to meet Karasu-san more quickly»?"

If he were smiled at with those words, as a robust middle school boy his head couldn't help from going *poof*, but at a precarious point Haruyuki remembered the fact that his conversation partner was «in fact a scary Raker-sensei». He tightened his cheeks, which seemed to be slackening, and shook his head minutely.

"N-n-no, such a thing, of course it would be all right, I-I-I-I'm pleased about that."

It was not the situation to be getting carried away here. As to why, currently Haruyuki was keeping an important secret from Fuuko. That he had to teach the basics of Mind Power secretly to her «child», Ash Roller.

As he stood bolt upright and wore a stiff smile, Fuuko stretched her left hand straight out and lightly grabbed Haruyuki's right cheek.

"Ha...hahi?"

"...Karasu-san. Is it perhaps a figment of my imagination? Somehow, I have a feeling as if you're keeping a secret from me."

Desperately restraining himself from jumping up in fright, again he shook his head sideways.

"N, no, such a thing, there's no way I would hide a secret from Mafter!"

"Is that so? For the most part, my intuition about things like this isn't wrong."

While gently squishing Haruyuki's grabbed cheek, Fuuko wore all over her face a smile that was as sweetly enchanting as the finest fresh cream. However, he could not forget it. The fact that a first victim was already buried limp in her chest.

Fuuko put both her hands right on her legs, stood up, and continued to shake her head slightly; her fingers moved from Haruyuki's cheek to the area around his ear. This time, while her fingertips played with his earlobes, she drew her face closer and softly whispered.

"Then, was 'that' perhaps my misunderstanding?"

"Wh...wh-wh-what do you mean by 'that'?"

"It's not anything of much consequence. Today, I left school and had a bit of time, so I thought about participating in the gallery of a duel. In doing so, by chance I found Ash in the gallery of the same duel and thought about talking with him, but..."

"..."

"For some reason or another, his attitude was a little weird. Therefore, after I apprehended the real him and gently cross-examined him..."

"....."

"Somehow, leaving aside me, his «parent», didn't he make a promise to be taught something important by you, Karasu-san? Something whose name people even hesitate to utter in public spaces, something *veery* secret, something *veeee-ry* important, the..."

There, Fuuko moved her lips without letting out her voice: In-car-nate.

"...system's way of use?"

—Ash Ro~llerrrr~!!

You readily spilled the beans! Well, if you're going to spill the beans there, you might as well have been taught by Raker-san in the first place! What on earth will become of my day today that I spent worrying about and

toiling over, and rather first what are you going to do about this situation!

Though he had shouted that inside his head, it was too late to rewind the situation. Haruyuki stopped his head, which he had been exercising up until now in the horizontal direction, resignedly moved it profoundly in the vertical direction, and spoke.

"Umm...uh...I, I'm sorry...I, have been keeping...a secret, from you, Master..."

"Is that so?"

What was terrifying was that without letting her smile fade away, which could not have been any kinder, Raker also nodded once.

"You've said it well. If you had played dumb even further there, I thought about putting both you, Karasu-san, and Ash together in a full course of special training, but I'll forgive you with half."

"...Ha, half..?"

"That's right. Depending on whether today's «Imperial Palace escape mission» succeeds, we'll start the special training in the Unlimited Field in that state. I was just thinking that soon it would be a suitable time for you to progress to the next stage, Karasu-san."

"...To, today..?"

After murmuring that with his mouth in a flabbergasted way while also sensing the dependability of Fuuko, who had readily put «mission success» into words, Haruyuki looked around restlessly at his surroundings. However, needless to say there was not the figure of anyone in the dim backyard other than Haruyuki, Fuuko, and Utai, who was slumped senselessly in Fuuko's bosom.

"B, but, how will Ash-san meet up with us? If we don't meet up at considerably close to the same time, won't the rendezvous in the Unlimited Field be difficult..."

In response to Haruyuki's question, Fuuko replied exceedingly readily.

"No problem, because I've had Ash confined...no, stand by in my car, which I've parked nearby. In that state, I'll take Ash to your apartment house, Karasu-san, and we'll dive together. Of course, not from your house but from a nearby parking space though."

"Eh...is Ash-san going to come there? In real life?"

Momentarily forgetting even his punishment-like situation, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide. —That meant basically, if Haruyuki desired it, he could meet with him in the real world. By his prediction, that end-of-century rider's physical body would also be in riveted leather jeans, with mohawk hair.

However, regrettably—if that was the right word, Fuuko slightly shook her head.

"Ash will come, but it's probably better for now if you two don't meet each other's real selves yet. Because that child's one way or another a member of one of the Six Kings' legions, «Great Wall»."

"...Tha, that's...true, I guess."

While exhaling his bated breath, Haruyuki nodded. Sure enough, no matter how much they were fellow brother disciples, he was a subordinate of the Green King, who was an opponent of Kuroyukihime. There existed a line he had to draw.

Lifting his head and finally looking at Fuuko head-on, Haruyuki nodded deeply. Before he had known it, Haruyuki was not teaching Ash Mind Power; the flow of things had become such that the two of them were being taught side-by-side by Fuuko, but rather than feeling regret his elation was greater.

"—Understood. I was also just having a feeling as if I've found a new hint. It's my pleasure to be able to be taught once again by Master!"

"You've said it well. That's the spirit."

He saw the face of Raker, who was smiling widely as if enjoying herself, and thought, "Maybe I was a little hasty..."; as he did so, the two hands of Utai, who was still seized in her chest, moved in a feeble manner and typed on the keyboard.

【UI> I too will accompany you in your training. 】

After Fuuko, who had finally released Utai, greeted Hou in the caretaker shed—it was their first time meeting, but the «flying-class» comrades seemed to get along quite well—Haruyuki along with the two of them headed for the student council meeting room.

Though there were few students remaining in the school buildings after school, walking with an elementary school girl on one side and with a female high school student on the other lined up was quite an ordeal for Haruyuki. While slipping his way through the stunned gazes that bombarded him one after another, he moved from the entryway to the end of the first floor of the first school building and let out a long breath the moment he passed through the door.

However, once he entered the locked room aka the student council meeting room, this time he could not help but feel yet another type of nervousness. In adding Kuroyukihime, who had received them with a smile, to their party, the situation of having one dull male in the midst of a gaggle of girls brewing an even more charming aura would inevitably show up. What was more, these three were the chief and highest executives of the former Nega Nebulas that had in the past occupied a seat of the Accelerated World's seven great legions; Haruyuki did not have a reason to be able to relax.

...Now that he thought about it, even with Chiyu and Taku added the current Nega Nebulas had four females and two males. If the number of new male members didn't increase soon, then they wouldn't be able to

balance it out. However, if possible it'd be good if they weren't that scary. That's right, I wonder if *he* would join...if I meet him today, maybe I'll try inviting him...

While thinking that, in a nook of the sofa set he sipped the black tea that Kuroyukihime had brewed for him, and before he knew it the clock on the wall was pointing to five in the afternoon.

"Oh my, it's already this time, isn't it."

Fuuko, who had stood up as if in a hurry, clapped her two hands together and spoke.

"I can't keep ignoring Ash, whom I've shut in the ca...whom I've had wait in the car, I'll move one step ahead. I'll park my car near your house, Karasu-san, and only I will intrude at six o'clock."

"...Really, I have the feeling that you've been thoroughly neglecting Ash, though..."

In response to what Kuroyukihime had pointed out with a bitter laugh mixed in, Fuuko answered with a composed face.

"I told Ash to earn ten points in free duels for the dive into the Unlimited Field while waiting, so that guy probably isn't bored. With that, everybody, see you later."

With timing almost as if replacing Fuuko, who had waved her hand lightly and had withdrawn from the student council meeting room, Chiyuri and Takumu, who had finished club activities, appeared. They met up with the

two, who had probably hurried in using the showers, as their hair was still wet, and their company, which had become five in number, moved on foot toward the northern complex high-rise apartment building in Koenji.

Something for which they were both greatly apologetic and grateful was that things had become such that the day before yesterday, yesterday, and today successively, Chiyuri's mama had prepared everyone a light supper, so they only stocked up on drinks at the shopping mall attached to the apartment building and rode the elevator. In order to transport the provisions, Chiyuri and Takumu got off at the twenty-first floor, and just Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime, and Utai proceeded ahead to the twenty-third floor—.

While also dealing with those actions of preparation, Haruyuki felt his nervousness grow minute by minute with regards to the imminently coming time of seven in the afternoon.

Currently, Haruyuki's other self, the duel avatar «Silver Crow», was deserted in the depths of the «Imperial Palace» enshrined in the center of the Unlimited Neutral Field. If he did not escape from there, not only would the purification of the «Disaster Armor» be unable to be carried out, but also the question of whether he would continue to be a Burst Linker would become doubtful.

Takumu and the other had declared that they would continue to provide Haruyuki with the necessary points even if he were designated with a bounty in the name of the Six Kings and became unable to duel. That

feeling made him happier than anything else, but he could not take advantage of that. He did not want to do something like clinging to «acceleration» to the point where he became the legion's burden...

"Do not be seized by negative images now."

The moment he had entered his house's living room and had put down his bag, someone whispered in that manner at his ear; taken aback, Haruyuki raised his face.

The owner of the voice was Kuroyukihime, who stood immediately behind him. She placed her right hand on Haruyuki's chest, and before he was aware of it, his body, which had developed the habit of facing downward, arched backward.

"It's important to hypothesize about every possible situation. However, at times there are also scenes where one must single-mindedly look only forward and plunge on. Now is that very time."

【UI> It is as Sacchan says. Now, let us only believe and advance forward. 】

If even Utai, who had popped her face out from behind Kuroyukihime, typed thus, then he could not look down any more. Haruyuki threw his chest out and answered with a single word.

"—Understood!"

With just that, curiously enough even the cold sweat soaking his hands withdrew.

On the dining table for six people, at the point where the *chirashizushi*^[17] and *norimaki*^[18] into which Chiyuri's mama had put her heart and soul were lined up and tea was being served, with good timing Fuuko joined them. Haruyuki looked round at the legion members, who were lined up in the same rows as the day before yesterday, and inquired timidly.

"...Um, is it really okay? Leaving Ash-san behind in the car..."

Chiyuri and Takumu, to whom the details had already been explained, and Kuroyukihime laughed forcedly; as usual Fuuko wore a composed expression.

"Ash was somewhat miffed, but I couldn't possibly invite that guy here, right?"

"...Then, Nee-san, at least deliver this sushi to him afterward."

While laughing, Chiyuri proposed that, brought a plastic container from the kitchen, and quickly began apportioning the *norimaki*. Imagining that end-of-century rider eating *kappamaki*^[19], Haruyuki unintentionally let his mouth loosen, and with a serious face Kuroyukihime made an unexpected proposal.

"How about it, Fuuko. Why don't we recruit him to our side?"

"Huh...eh, say what-!?"

The one who had shouted that was naturally Haruyuki. However, the other members had not particularly shown signs of surprise. As for Taku, he was nodding calmly and saying something like "That's a possibility too."

As he opened his eyes wide, dumbfounded, Fuuko changed her expression and tilted her head slightly.

"—I too have thought of that, but...that child unexpectedly has a strong sense of duty in a unique way... Will Ash be fine or not with lowering the once-hoisted flag of the green legion Great Wall? Moreover, of course there's also the fear of whether the Green King Green Grandee would use «Judgment Blow» without recognizing Ash's secession."

"...Uh—mm... To be honest, I also don't know well what that guy Grandee's thinking, just him... I believe I've grasped the other Kings' personalities to an extent, but just that shield-wielding male..."

Kuroyukihime folded her arms with a troubled look on her face.

At last week's «Seven Kings' meeting», Haruyuki also had seen the Green King up close, but he didn't know a single thing other than that «he seems super-hard». In the end he had not said a word from beginning to finish, and even on the occasion where the conclusion to grant Silver Crow a one-week postponement was reached, he had only nodded once.

He's able to command his large legion of over a hundred members well in his own way, huh...Haruyuki hurriedly returned his thoughts, which had begun to digress along those lines, to where they were before.

Ash Roller, coming to Nega Nebulas. Up until now, he had not thought about that event at all, but he didn't particularly dislike it either. He was an eternal rival with whom he had fought countless times from the first day he had become a Burst Linker, but when Haruyuki had lost his wings and had lost heart he was also the benefactor who had fervently chastised him and had introduced him to his parent, Sky Raker. From his habitual attitude, it was fairly hard to imagine, but he was in his own way a considerate «man among men»...

And then, having thought that far, Haruyuki noticed something and abruptly raised his face.

"Uh, um, Senpai, Master...I believe that at the least, for now Ash-san won't accept a legion transfer."

"What's the reason for you to state that positively?"

"—It's Ash-san's younger blood brother, «Bush Utan»..."

There, Haruyuki temporarily cut his words short and proposed, "Since it's going to be long, why don't we discuss it while eating."

After Fuuko, who had parked her car—though it was not in her name but apparently her mother's possession—in the large-sized parking underground the apartment house, returned from delivering the improvised *norimaki* bento that Chiyuri had prepared, they chanted "Itadakimasu" anew with everybody there.

While Chiyuri's mama's greatest forte was Italian cuisine such as pasta and lasagna, that skill was also amply flourished in Japanese food; Haruyuki, who normally had no opportunity to eat *chirashizushi*, shoved it into his mouth in a state of ecstasy. Everyone else also undauntedly moved their chopsticks, and at the point where the large plate's contents had been reduced to half, conversation finally resumed.

"An' then...a'out Fush Uhan..."

While chuckling, Takumu checked Haruyuki, who was trying to chat with *norimaki* in his mouth.

"Allow me to explain that matter. Since it's something deeply related to me myself as well..."

Startled, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide and hurriedly tried to chew his sushi rice, but while he was still chewing Takumu had begun to explain, so reluctantly he switched to the role of listener. As expected of the legion's finest intellectual, the briefing was easy to understand, but Haruyuki could not help but be kept on tenterhooks. As for why, true to his words from earlier Takumu explained to Kuroyukihime and the others what had happened to him without omitting any details.

How the day before yesterday, he had left on a solo investigation after hearing of the «ISS Kit» from Haruyuki. How he had made contact with the Burst Linker Magenta Scissor in the Setagaya area and how the Kit in its sealed state had been transferred to him.

And then yesterday, how he had been assaulted by the PK group «Supernova Remnant» in the Shinjuku area and had backlashed against and annihilated them in the Unlimited Neutral Field with the power of the ISS Kit. The subsequent direct connection duel with Haruyuki. And then the strange «dream» the three of them had shared during the wee hours of today—.

Haruyuki had only let Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, and Utai know the general outline regarding this string of events by mail. The reason was that it seemed impossible to put why Takumu had yearned for power and how he had overcome that precisely into written words. Of course, it was imperative that they give an explanation sometime; in that sense, perhaps having Takumu himself narrate it now from his own mouth was a desirable result, but all the same he couldn't help but involuntarily feel uneasy. About whether Kuroyukihime would rebuke Takumu, who had arbitrarily reached his hand out to the ISS Kit.

—However.

"...Is that so. You've tried hard, haven't you, Takumu-kun."

The head of the legion, having finished hearing everything, first of all put that into words while smiling kindly. Fuuko and Utai also nodded once with gentle facial expressions.

"Huh...I thought you'd be awfully angry and would smash the table, Senpai, so I was preparing an emergency sushi evacuation, but..."

Chiyuri, who had in reality stuck her two hands out on the table, said that with a serious look, and while laughing forcedly Kuroyukihime answered her.

“Indeed, I am the legion master, but I don’t think I could or would try to control all the members completely. All Burst Linkers continue only their own battles from day to day. In both the Accelerated World and the real world. Even if one’s a parent or a master, what one can do is only believe and encourage. —In the first place, the arbitrary action of Takumu and company is still a cute little thing. In comparison to those of the first Nega Nebulas’ «Elements», that is.”

At the last phrase that Kuroyukihime had tacked on, with expressions of feigned ignorance Fuuko and Utai simultaneously stuffed their mouths with *norimaki*.

In the middle of that peaceful atmosphere, behind his glasses Takumu repeatedly blinked his eyes several times, but at last with a jerk he bowed his head deeply. When he raised his face, there was only the completely usual intellectual expression on his fair complexion.

“—Thanks to Haru and Chii-chan, I was able to cut off the controlling power of the ISS Kit. At the same time, we inflicted a certain extent of damage on the Kit’s main body in the middle of the «Brain Burst central server», but the Kits parasitizing Bush Utan and Olive Glove were just weakened and worn away, they probably haven’t disappeared yet...”

There, Haruyuki finally remembered what he wanted to say and put his words together.

"Th, that's right. It seemed that Ash-san felt a tremendous responsibility regarding Bush Utan being taken in by the ISS Kit. Until Utan's released from the influence of the Kit, I think he won't say yes even if we invite him to our side. To begin with, why Ash-san wanted me to teach him the Incarnate system was not for the sake of becoming stronger but because he wanted to destroy Utan's ISS Kit by his own hand; that's all he wished for..."

"...Karasu-san, you truly understand that kid well, don't you."

At the point where Haruyuki was taking a breather and trying to drink his tea, suddenly Fuuko said that, so involuntarily he slightly choked.

"Uh...eh, is, is that so...honestly, I still can't imagine at all what kind of person his real self is..."

"Eh, isn't he as he is? Going 'hyahahaa' while riding an electric scooter every morning?"

In response to Chiyuri's opinion, Takumu also nodded with a serious face. However, Fuuko only laughed with an "ufufu," not answering that question, and she clapped her hands together with a sudden stop.

"Even if we set aside the matter of transferring legions, if that child wants to learn the Incarnate system for a friend's sake, I cannot stop Ash. I believe his ability as a Burst Linker has reached a level where it can be

allowed; in the first place, obtaining Sacchan's permission to have him accompany us today was also for that purpose..."

—After the escape from the Imperial Palace, they would seamlessly start special training. Haruyuki, who had remembered those words of Fuuko, made his back tremble with a shiver. At his right side, Utai, who had finished eating her *kanpyomaki*^[20], ran her fingers above the table with a *tap tap*.

【UI> Well then, today's schedule is jam-packed. ① Escape from the Imperial Palace, ② purification of the Armor, ③ Mind Power special training. Since it also costs 10 points to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, it'll be a bargain if we can settle everything in one time.】

"Fufu, quite right. Once everything's over, while we're at it why don't we do some light enemy hunting."

"Ah, in that case I wanna go to one of the four big dungeons—"

As Chiyuri suggested that innocently, all together the three senior Burst Linkers became hushed, and following that with grave expressions they shook their heads with a trembling motion. With awfully stiff movements, Utai typed.

【UI> If you're thinking about going to the deepest parts with this number of people, I'm sure it would take about half a year.】

At the same time the three younger members gaped in astonishment, the clock on the wall pointed to 6:45.

At the point where they had worked together to take care of the tableware, took turns to use the bathroom, and moved to the sofa set in the west side of the living room, the time had become five minutes to seven.

Looking around at everyone's faces, Kuroyukihime carried out the last briefing. Having said that, different from last time there was no strategy-like strategy. The four people consisting of Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Chiyuri, and Takumu would move to the area before the south gate of the Imperial Palace that covered the Sugunami through Chiyoda areas and would stand by after the dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field. After diving, since Haruyuki and Utai would appear in last time's automatic disconnection coordinates, in short the «sanctuary» in the underground of the Imperial Palace's main shrine, from there while enlisting the cooperation of the mysterious young warrior «Trilead Tetraoxide» they would return to the south gate, break the seal, and depart. They would coordinate with Kuroyukihime and company, who would be waiting outside, evade the onslaught of «Suzaku, one of the four Divine Beasts», and flee to the exterior of the large bridge extending from the gate—.

Since they could not anticipate Suzaku's behavior, they had no choice but to deal with the real run by adapting to the circumstances of the moment. However, different from last time when they had to retrieve the aboveground Ardor Maiden, this time it was fine if they only fled and escaped at full steam. The bridge's total length was a mere five hundred

meters. If all went well, they might be able to break through before Suzaku, who would catch wind of the invaders into his territory, finished materializing. No, without a doubt they could do it...

While murmuring that in his heart, after tightly clenching his fists Haruyuki remembered something and looked at Fuuko, who was sitting on the side opposite him.

"Come to think of it, what'll Ash-san do? If he's to meet up with us from in front of the apartment building, if he doesn't match his timing very closely, then..."

"It's all right, as I've strictly ordered Ash to dive a second before seven o'clock."

To Haruyuki's question, Fuuko responded in that way simply. True enough, if that were so, then it would be impossible for Fuuko and the others to stand Ash up—in fact, it was the opposite. A second in the real world was a thousand seconds in the Accelerated World; basically, Ash Roller would wait in front of this apartment house for sixteen minutes and forty seconds. As he furtively thought, "As expected of Master, her mercifulness is tera-nothing," Chiyuri inquired while giving off a slight air of apprehension.

"...Nee-san, well...isn't it dangerous? Even if we say it's only a mere sixteen minutes, he'll be all alone in the Unlimited Field..."

Whereupon Fuuko unhesitatingly spoke some even more relentless lines even while smiling at the kindness of Chiyuri, who was being considerate of Ash, who was tentatively an enemy.

"It's unthinkable that our dive time would be leaked to an outsider, and even if by bad fortune Ash is attacked by a large-class enemy or a hostile Burst Linker and dies, during the one-hour resurrection time we'll appear. We'll at least be able to take on the enemy ♡."

"...That's true, all right when that time comes I'll try my best too!"

As Chiyuri readily came to that understanding and the two males made their backs shudder, trembling, at last it was a minute before seven.

The six of them were already linked in a daisy chain through five XSB cables, and furthermore, through a second cable extending from Haruyuki's neck they were connected to the Arita household's home server. Afterwards, with just a push of the button displayed in Haruyuki's field of vision, all members would be in a state able to connect to the Global Net.

Kuroyukihime, who was sitting at his immediate left side, stared fixedly at Haruyuki's eyes and whispered kindly as well as commandingly.

"—No matter how many hours...how many days elapse, we'll be waiting, Haruyuki-kun. For the time you and Utai open the gate of the Imperial Palace again and take flight, that is."

"Un...understood!"

After nodding once, Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head sideways.

“N, no, we won’t keep you waiting that long! Even if it takes us a long time, in five hours...no, in three hours will we escape!”

【UI> Then let’s make our goal two hours. We’ll also be busy with our plans afterward, after all.】

Without a moment’s delay, Utai had typed that, and everyone laughed. Kuroyukihime, who had nodded greatly, resolutely straightened her spine and cried out.

“With that—commencing the count! Ten seconds to acceleration! Eight, seven, six...”

From there, all members matched their voices and recited the countdown.

Five, four, three, two—one——!

“ “ “ “ “Unlimited Burst!” “ “ “ “ “

Chapter 9

His Neuro Linker amplified his thought process clock, and Haruyuki shut his eyes and passed through the «acceleration» process released simultaneously from his five senses' signals in the real world.

Waiting till he felt his momentarily floating body descend to a hard, level surface, he raised his eyelids.

What was there was no longer the Arita family's living room he was accustomed to seeing. A floor joined together in a complex manner from blue-black tiles with a dull metallic luster. Walls with a design of like that of thin blades lined up. A ceiling with narrow beams in lattice formation crossing it. The only illumination was from a number of curious purple candles installed on the wall; on the whole, it was rather gloomy, and from both his gut feeling and his knowledge, he knew that it was a deep underground room.

This was the center of the Unlimited Neutral Field, the deepest of the depths of the main shrine of the «Imperial Palace»—a small room linked to the hall a certain person had called the «Shrine of the Eight Gods». Why the design differed from the one he remembered was because the Unlimited Field's characteristic «transition» had occurred, and the attribute had changed from last time's «Heian^[21]» stage to this.

"...It's the «Demonic City» stage."

A lovely voice that was also clear resounded; Haruyuki turned his gaze that way.

The one standing with her two hands aligned precisely before herself was a duel avatar of a small frame equipped with white and scarlet armor that reminded one of a *miko*'s^[22] dress. One of the corners of the first Nega Nebulas' Elements, the world-destroying conflagration shrine maiden «Ardor Maiden». The one handling her was of course Shinomiya Utai—.

In response to Utai's voice, which he could not hear in the real world, he quickly responded.

"I'm glad it's not a stage full of terrain traps and wild creatures. The terrain's probably harder than that of the Heian stage, but the Imperial Palace's building is indestructible anyways..."

While chatting, he checked his status in the upper left hand of his field of vision. Since they had dived again after leaving once, while his health gauge was at full throttle his special technique gauge was zero.

Following that, he looked around in circles, but of course other than those of himself and Utai there were no figures of legion members. Unlike the two of them, the four people including Kuroyukihime and company who had escaped normally from the «Leap Point» portal in last time's dive would appear in Suginami, separated ten kilometers to their west. Around now they were probably meeting up with Ash Roller and starting to move. Basically, the only ones here were Utai and Haruyuki—
...No, that was not so. There was one more person who should appear.

"...Tha...that's right. He's..."

"Already here."

In response to Haruyuki's murmur, Utai had responded like that, so with an "eh" he tried to look around at his surroundings anew; at that instant.

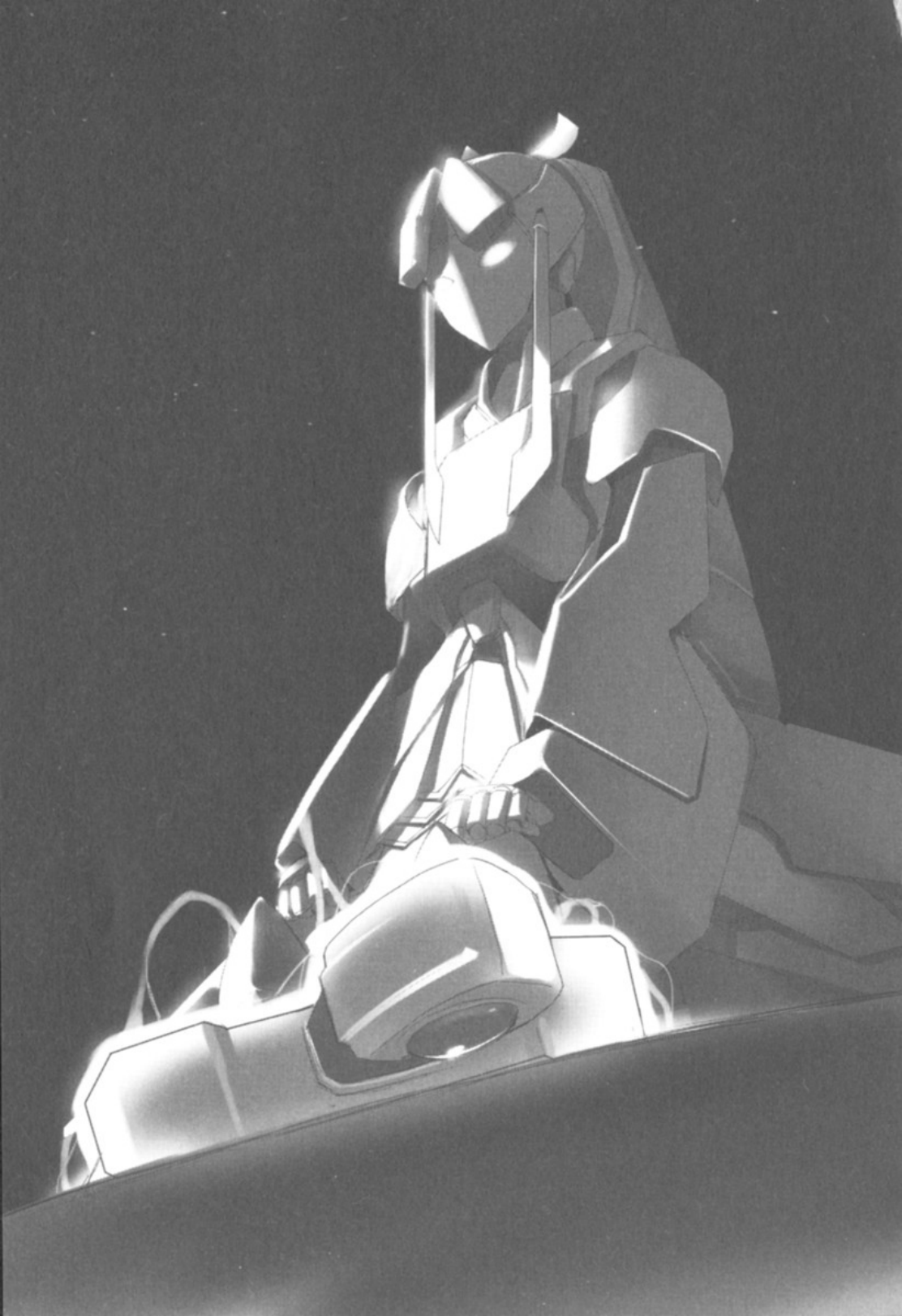
"—I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Crow-san, Maiden-san."

From the darkness alongside the wall, a refreshing boy's voice reminiscent of a balmy breeze in early summer reached them.

He strained his eyes in that direction, and in the middle of the meager candlelight a silhouette stood out.

His overall impression was quite similar to that of Ardor Maiden. Head armor in the shape of a parted hairstyle and a lucid face mask. Arms swelled out in a shape that made one think of Japanese-style dress. Why the *hakama*^[23]-style breast armor was extended horizontally was because the avatar was sitting *seiza*-style on the ground. His armor color was nothing but serene azure.

In front of the body that was, if anything, of small build, a silver bar-shaped object lay flat. A straight sword sheathed in its scabbard. It was not that large a thing, but perhaps reflecting its concealed overwhelming potential it even seemed that the surrounding space was distorted imperceptibly. The fifth star of the «Seven Arcs», the group of the strongest Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World, «The Infinity»—.



The deep blue avatar, who could be perfectly described as being a young warrior, looked straight at Haruyuki and Utai with his light blue eye lenses and then made a deep bow while still in *seiza* posture. He lifted his body, raised his straight sword up from the ground, and stood up lightly.

With a splendid movement, the neighboring Utai also bent her waist and returned the favor to the young warrior, who had stepped forward a few paces from the wall, so Haruyuki also hurriedly bowed his head respectfully. He lifted his face; after being at a loss for words for a while, he opened his mouth.

“Uh...um, uh, it’s been a while...though it really hasn’t. Good evening, Lead. S, sorry to have kept you waiting.”

At Haruyuki’s awkward remarks, the young warrior avatar smiled tenderly and shook his head.

“Not at all, even if one said I waited, it was only to the extent of two seconds in real world time. Please don’t worry about it.”

—Though having said that, in this side two seconds was two thousand seconds, in short over thirty minutes. If he sat in the *seiza* position for that long a time, Haruyuki’s legs might go numb even as a duel avatar.

Before that, in this day and age where the Neuro Linker was in widespread use, no one was «just waiting» any longer in one’s daily life. For example, even in cases where one had arranged to meet someone, the Neuro Linker would tell one how many more minutes till one had to leave the house and which time’s train would be able to optimize the

migration to one's destination when ridden, and even the current location and the estimated time of arrival of the person one was meeting were displayed in detail. Even for having a meal, one understood the congestion conditions of the surrounding stores in real time, so it could be finished without lining up, and as for riding a taxi, with the push of a button from one's navigation application a request would be sent to the nearest vehicle. Of course, due to unforeseen circumstances some waiting time sometimes occurred, but there were a heap of ways of using one's time meaningfully built into one's Neuro Linker.

As a result, in this place where there was nothing to do, from the bottom of his heart Haruyuki thought that having kept him do nothing but wait for thirty minutes was inexcusable and tried to lower his head again. However, wholly as if he were used to sitting for long periods of time with neither an AR nor a full dive the young warrior stopped Haruyuki's apology and spoke amicably.

"Really, please don't mind it. Waiting for the two of you to come was also a very heart-pounding experience. I wouldn't even mind waiting a whole day."

"Is, is that so... Um, well, I too...in terms of the situation, I was in a pinch, but I too was greatly looking forward to it. That is, being able to meet you once again, Lead."

A remark rare for Haruyuki spilled out like a drop from his mouth; the azure avatar hunched up his shoulders, and replied with a smile as if feeling bashful.

Lead was an abbreviation. Correctly, it was «Trilead Tetraoxide». Haruyuki had not checked that name, which according to what Takumu had searched was the chemical formula of the substance « Pb_3O_4 », in the Brain Burst system. To the last, it was just that he had given his name as such.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, health gauges apart from his were not visible, so if he were to check his avatar name, within Haruyuki's knowledge he could think only of sending him a request for admission into the legion from the «Install Menu». But he couldn't behave like that all of a sudden, and, in the first place, whether «Trilead Tetraoxide» was his real name or not strangely did not bother him. If he were hiding his proper avatar name, then Haruyuki only thought that he had a reason for having to do so by any means.

First and foremost, bearing any kind of doubt toward Lead at such a late point would make this very Imperial Palace escape mission not come to completion. As for why, without his cooperation the act of Haruyuki and Utai coming out from the inner sanctuary probably would not be fulfilled—.

Therefore, Haruyuki had already decided to have complete faith in Lead, and Utai seemed to have done the same. The shrine maiden whose frame

was even smaller than that of the young warrior lowered her head respectfully once more, and spoke far more smoothly than Haruyuki had.

"I too am happy to have been able to meet you once more, Lead-san. I have a strong urge to inquire about various things, but...since we're making our legion comrades outside the Imperial Palace wait, it's selfish of me, but I was thinking about receiving your opinion regarding a means of immediate escape from here."

Though Haruyuki had a heap of things he really wanted to ask Lead—how he had entered this Imperial Palace, why he had not used the «one-time portal» in the hall above and escaped, what was the truth behind the words that "he had not fought a normal duel even once," et cetera—however, true enough it was not the situation to be chatting leisurely. Kuroyukihime and the others were probably still in the middle of moving, but he wanted to make the time they waited outside the south gate as short as possible.

They would surely have opportunities to hear his story while moving; thinking that, Haruyuki also nodded wordlessly. In doing so, Lead straightened his sitting posture and replied in a voice with increased spirit.

"You being selfish, that's unthinkable. The first time the two of you met me, you trusted me unconditionally. In that case, it's natural to answer to that trust... Allow me to gladly assist you in escaping."

There, the young warrior stopped his words temporarily and mounted the sheath of the straight sword gripped in his left hand at his waist. He leisurely raised his hand, which had become free, into the air and continued.

“Currently, there exist two ways of breaking out normally from this Imperial Palace. However, one of them is realistically impossible.”

His left hand moved further and indicated the depths of the not-so-wide room.

What existed there was a railing, no, barricade with a design completely like that of diagonally intersecting countless short swords. On the other side of the railing was a vast space filled with blue darkness. In the far distance of the large hall that was several times, several tens of times larger than Umesato Middle’s gymnasium, two small colors of light were visible.

What was pulsing blue like a water surface was the light of a portal, basically a pathway to the real world. And then a golden light that wavered ephemerally existed before it. According to Trilead, that very thing was the last Divine Weapon remaining in the Accelerated World, crowned with the name of the seventh star «*Youkou*» and inscribed «The Fluctuating Light».

In the same way as that of the day before yesterday, as if being lured in Haruyuki went out a few steps and fixed his eyes with a stare upon the golden resplendence. Since it was too far, he could discern neither the

substance of the light nor the pedestal on which it was supposed to be placed. However, in spite of that Haruyuki still felt «something».

The desire to possess a rare item? —Nay.

The instinct to strengthen his fighting power? —Nay.

The reason was that to Haruyuki, that light, which was supposed to be nothing more than an Enhanced Armament, Divine Weapon be that as it may, could not be thought of as a simple item by any means. As proof of that, the «dream» he, Chiyuri, and Takumu had shared this morning—had «The Fluctuating Light» that they had seen as save data in the middle of the «Brain Burst central server», which in a certain sense was an area more inviolable than the Imperial Palace, not been shining more greatly and dazzlingly in the center of the galaxy than anything else? Just as if it were even the absolute core of the Accelerated World itself...

“The last Divine Weapon, «*Youkou*»—”

Suddenly, at his immediate left Lead’s voice reverberated, and taken aback Haruyuki awoke from his internal thoughts.

“If you can obtain it and activate the portal at its back, a normal withdrawal from the Imperial Palace is possible. However, that is far too difficult. As to why, this railing...the day before yesterday, it was a *shimenawa*^[24], but from the moment you cross it, absurdly powerful enemies will begin to appear in the space back there.”

“«Begin to»...does that mean that it’s not only one?”

From Haruyuki's right, Utai interrogated that, and Lead slightly nodded.

"Correct. In the beginning there's two...as the invader advances, or as the time he or she stays lengthens, a further two bodies will increase apiece. I've confirmed up to six, but probably with that it's not the end. Based on the conjecture that they will probably increase by at least two more, I call them the «Eight Gods»."

"...Eight, Eight Gods..."

Haruyuki murmured in a stiffened voice. Though they had been unable to deal with even one of the «Divine Beasts», the super-class enemies who protected the gates outside the Imperial Palace, they were even doubled here.

"...If in actuality that portal were linked to the next boss room, and there «Sixteen Gods» popped out..."

In response to Haruyuki's nonsensical statement, next to him Lead showed signs of being in serious thought, so in a flurry he shook his head and hands.

"N, never mind, sorry, forget what I said just now. Th, that's right, at any rate even if we don't defeat the «Eight Gods» and manage to reach the portal while evading their attacks, that also seems hella^[25] futile, right."

"Yes, as you say, Crow-san, it hella seems that way. Besides that, if we don't completely defeat the enemies, I think that procuring «*Youkou*» also probably seems hella impossible."

"...Forget about «hella» too."

Since it seemed that he would accidentally cause Lead, whose brain's conversion dictionary seemed to be in a state of brand-new purity, to learn a strange word, Haruyuki hurriedly added that and continued.

"Uh, um, to be sure it seems that realistically we can't go out from that portal. Which means, about the second method...I tentatively predicted that we might have to also do that. Basically...returning to the south gate once again and leaving from there...right?"

Upon that, Lead turned toward Haruyuki and nodded while smiling.

"It is exactly thus. —If you insist by any means, Crow-san, I don't mind the north or west gate either though."

"No, no it's all right, we're fine with the south gate! I mean, our comrades are also waiting for us there..."

After replying with that, Haruyuki suddenly tilted his head quizzically and inquired.

"—Is the east no good?"

"I'm somewhat diffident about recommending the east gate... Since the characteristic attack of its guardian beast «Seiryuu» is slightly troublesome..."

"Really? What does he do?"

"«Level Drain»."

"Let's give up on the east."

In less than a tenth of a second, he replied right away and immediately continued.

"N, no, let's give up on the north and west too; the south, if you please."

"Hella understood, Crow-san."

Lead nodded with a dead serious expression on his face, and Utai, who was standing to the right side, let a rare small voice of laughter slip out with a chuckle.

"Kuu-san and Lead-san are harmonized in sync too much, I don't have a chance to get a word in."

"Eh...is, is that so."

"You two have splendid *shite-kata*^[26] and *waki-kata* styles."

Utai, who had commented with words that Haruyuki did not know, changed the expression of her face mask and bowed her head facing Lead.

"Lead-san, forgive us, but we would like your assistance."

"I'll do what little I can. —Well then, the two of you, first of all to above."

Lead left the barricade of swords and began to walk toward the ascending steps at the rear of the small room. Utai continued after him.

After chasing after the two and stepping forth several paces, Haruyuki looked back at the «Shrine of the Eight Gods» once again. Gazing at the golden light swaying in the distant ultramarine darkness, he murmured inside his mind.

—One day, I will come here again. Besides that, I will acquire enough power, go on the right path, and come to meet you again...until then, please wait.

For some reason, his words had become as if they were a call directed not at an Enhanced Armament but at «somebody», but to Haruyuki, completely as if the seventh Divine Weapon carried a will and were answering him, it could be clearly seen flickering strongly once—or so he thought.

The stairs, which were heavy boards the day before yesterday, had changed into a spiral staircase joined together from polished stones and steel.

At the time when he had begun to lose track of how many rounds they had done, they finally managed to reach the ground floor.

The hall at the place where they had come out from the stairs also indeed deserved to be called the «Demonic City» stage, having been transfigured into a both sinister and solemn figure. Countless spear-shaped protuberances decorating the walls. A pointed ceiling chandelier that seemed just like some sort of free-fall type of trap. What had not

changed were just the two right rectangular prism objects lined up in the center of the hall. The pedestals of black granite where in the past the fifth and sixth Divine Weapons had been enshrined—.

“Is that so...come to think of it, after all...”

Casually speaking out while walking, Haruyuki held his tongue. Lead, who was ahead, had looked back strangely at him, so he apologized with “Sorry, it’s nothing.”

What he had tried to say was “After all, I have one of the Divine Weapons that used to be on those pedestals.”

«The Infinity», the fifth Divine Weapon, was glittering beautifully at the waist of the young warrior avatar before his eyes. And «the Destiny», the sixth Divine Weapon—was dozing lightly in the depths of Haruyuki himself, who was basically Silver Crow. However, it was no longer its former mirror-like silver color. A black-tinged chrome silver. The «Destiny» had now transformed into the Disaster Armor «The Disaster», not the strongest but the most atrocious power in the Accelerated World.

Haruyuki could not fully remember that strange dream, but in the far, faraway past...in the very dawn of the Accelerated World, a Burst Linker who had succeeded in trespassing into this Imperial Palace had acquired the Divine Weapon the Destiny. He did not use it for himself but gave it to his partner. To the girl who had bright golden yellow armor and had appeared in Haruyuki’s dream.

However, after that, something had—«something» very saddening as well as frightening had happened. No matter what, he couldn't remember the details. Even if he retraced his hazy memories with all his might, all that was resurrected were a number of fragmentary images.

—An enemy with a humongous, repulsive figure.

—Many Burst Linkers who were lined up around the edge of a large hole and were looking down.

—And a number of people talking covertly in a corner, though he did not understand them too well. «Main Visualizer»...«Override phenomenon»...and «shell of trauma». Those words faintly grazed his hearing, but if he tried to grasp them then they would disappear all too quickly like soap bubbles. If he tried to chase after them forcibly, then that phenomenon would surely occur again. «Overflow», which would call up an extraordinary amount of negative emotion as well as intense pain. Right now, he had to avoid collapsing and becoming unable to move.

At any rate, due to some occurrence involving those images, the shape—or the essence of the «Destiny» had changed into that of the «Disaster».

As a result, the Enhanced Armament that Haruyuki possessed now could no longer be called one of the Seven Arcs. If he were to explain how that had become so to Lead, who knew nothing, no matter how much time he spent it wouldn't be enough; in the first place, he did not possess sufficient knowledge to explain things out.

...I'm sorry, Lead.

Inside his heart, facing the blue back of the younger warrior who made him feel a curious intimacy, Haruyuki apologized.

...One day, I will surely tell the whole story. Not just about the «Armor»; why I became a Burst Linker, what sake I'm fighting for, what I'm aiming for...everything, without leaving out a thing. However, when that time comes, you too...

There, against his will he checked his thoughts; Haruyuki hastened his feet and lined alongside the two walking ahead.

With their shoulders side-by-side, they passed through the area with the pedestals lined up left and right, and they headed for the south of the hall.

At the point where the depths of the exit adorned with austere decorations became visible, Haruyuki again slightly raised his voice.

"Huh...the terrain's...different..?"

The day before yesterday, when he had entered this hall, if he recalled correctly he had went through a passageway running east and west. However, now the pathway visible on the other side of the exit stretched south as it was—what was more, in its depths he could see an ascending staircase.

The one who answered Haruyuki's bewilderment was not Lead but Utai.

“Since a «transition» had occurred and the stage had changed from «Heian» to the «Demonic City», not only the labyrinth’s design but also its structure changed.”

“Geh... —That means, my «memory» can’t be counted on anymore, doesn’t it...”

The day before yesterday, why Haruyuki and Utai had been able to arrive at this large hall without attracting the sentry enemies once was due to the fact that he had vaguely remembered the route the avatar whose name he did not know had taken in the middle of his strange «dream». However, if the terrain had changed due to a transition, obviously that memory could not be used.

However, fortunately as if to reassure the two Lead nodded and spoke unhesitatingly.

“It’s all right, I know the way.”

“Eh...does, does that perhaps mean that you memorized the maps of this Imperial Palace, each and every one of the over one hundred types of stage attributes..?”

As he asked in a dumbfounded way, the youthful samurai nodded while slightly being bashful.

“Though having said that, I only remember the path from this hall to the exit of the inner sanctuary though.”

“Th, that’ll be enough. Whew...I thought maybe we had to do a dungeon strategy from square one until the exit...no, by no means do I hate it though...on the other hand, I like it, but...”

At Haruyuki’s strange relief, Lead showed a modest smile, but his expression immediately returned to what it was before, and he spoke.

“—However, speaking from experience, the level of difficulty of this «Demonic City» stage is slightly higher than that of «Heian». The strength of a single sentry enemy is not that much, but since their numbers are many, it’s difficult to move without being found...”

At the imbalance of the knowledge of Lead, who seemed to know relatively many stage names for not knowing the name of «Nega Nebulas», in his heart Haruyuki wanted to slightly tilt his head, but he immediately put his doubts aside and murmured.

“I see, it means that the mob’s^[27] easy to aggro^[28], so it’ll be hard to sneak around...”

Upon that, not only Lead but Utai too wore puzzled faces. It seemed that somehow or another, both of them were unacquainted with online games’ general purpose terminology. Putting aside the thought that it would no doubt be interesting to have them chat with Pard-san, he continued without online gaming terms.

“Um basically, it means that we have to use our nerves to move, more so than in the Heian stage. If that’s so, I’ll do my best somehow or another. I’m pretty good at sneaking around.”

"That's reassuring."

In response to Haruyuki's declaration, which was meant half in jest, Lead nodded with a serious expression and added "However."

"It's just one place, but there's a place where we can't slip through the enemy's blind spot no matter what. Therefore, we must engage in combat once. Please prepare yourselves for that."

"...Is, is that so. Unh, understood. It's all right, w-w-we'll try our best. They're weaker than those of the Heian stage, right, if so I think we can do it, it'll definitely be fine, hopefully."

In his mind, he was in the mindset of breaking out into a great sweat, but with a show of courage Haruyuki pounded his chest once with a thump to deceive them and with great vigor went forth about three meters. He looked back and questioned Lead.

"With that, well...tentatively, just to be sure I wonder if you could tell me something. The fight, when will that be..?"

In doing so, Lead's response was unusually delayed; about two seconds later, for some reason he apologized.

"...Pardon me, Crow-san. My explanation was not sufficient."

"Eh..? Wha, what wasn't sufficient..?"

"Combat will become inevitable when we leave this hall. As the sentry guards are patrolling the inner passageway en masse..."

".....What."

At the same time Haruyuki murmured, stupefied, a heavy metallic sound rang out at his back with a clank.

Fearfully, he looked round, and from the large exit, an even more enormous silhouette peered into the hall.

In the Heian stage of the day before yesterday, all the bodyguard enemies of the Imperial Palace's inner sanctuary had Japanese-style warrior figures, but the ones of now had a figure that should be called a «knight» that matched the Demonic Stage well. Its huge frame approaching an overall height of three meters was surrounded in bulky metal armor. A kite shield like a sliding door in its left hand. A rough large sword that seemed as if it were cut from a plate of steel in its right hand.

The part below its helmet, from which a long horn was growing, was engulfed in darkness and was not visible, but two eyes radiating a dull purple looked down on Haruyuki in a staring manner. That gaze indicated that Haruyuki had basically entered the knight's sphere of response.

".....What."

Leaking out a hoarse voice once more, Haruyuki tried to draw back gradually.

However, quicker than he could the knight caused the earth to rumble and took a step inside the hall.

"VORUAAAAAA!!"

That war cry, which would be like that if one were forced to transcribe it, struck his avatar with a physical pressure. Overhead Haruyuki, who had reeled, a too-immense sword was raised very high up.

"Just...a mome..."

In blank amazement, he had let out that voice, but there was no way the enemy would accede to it. Its two purple eyes gleamed in a fiery way, and the knight tried to cleave in half the small avatar who did not even reach his waist with a single stroke—

Giin! That sharp metallic sound restored Haruyuki's thought process, which was in a half-stopped state.

An arc of blue light that had come flying from the rear collided with the knight enemy's sword and had forced it slightly back. Not letting the produced extension of time slip through his fingers, this time Haruyuki made a back dash with all his strength.

The one who had passed him and had gone forth was the young warrior Trilead who possessed azure armor. The earlier attack was unmistakably his, but however his left hip's straight sword was still sheathed in its scabbard. Instead, his hands were enveloped in a blue glitter.

Before Haruyuki, who had opened his eyes wide, Lead raised his swordless right hand straight overhead.

"—Ha!!"

A razor-sharp fighting cry. His hand in the shape of a sword flashed vertically. From that trajectory, a blade of crescent-moon-shaped light same as the one he had seen earlier was generated and ran through the air. A second metallic sound. The blue arc, which had hit its target of the knight's neck, engraved a definite scar in the heavy armor.

"Voruuu..."

The knight enemy growled in a low voice, and the focus of its gaze shifted from Haruyuki to Lead. Its target had been transferred. Basically, just as Haruyuki had felt the day before yesterday, the knight AI was different from the «Four Divine Beasts» and was based on the principle of simple hate^[29].

"VORAH!!"

At the same time of the howl, the huge sword was swung with a sidelong sweep. With a sliding-like step, Lead evaded that blow, which seemed as if it would snap even the large trees of the «Primeval Forest» stage. For the third time, an arc of light was released from his sword-like hand and scraped the surface of the knight's left-hand shield diagonally.

While making Ardor Maiden, who was at his back, retreat even more with unconscious movements, Haruyuki continued to open his eyes very wide.

This was the first time he was watching the mysterious Burst Linker «Trilead Tetraoxide» in combat. From the way he carried himself, he had anticipated it to a certain extent, but even so it was unmistakable that he was unbelievably skilled. A way of walking smoothly like flowing water,

his swiftness from dodging to counterattacking; more than anything else those blades of light fired in rapid succession from his two hands were not mere special techniques. Judging from the lack of technique name utterance and their might in chiseling the knight enemy's armor that seemed ridiculously hard, they were clearly a power outside the system produced from his imagination—namely, Incarnate attacks.

At the same time he collected those pieces of information owing to his Burst Linker instinct, Haruyuki also felt a question.

Why had he not withdrawn his sword? It would not be an exaggeration even to say that the thing fitted at Lead's left hip had an offensive power that could be said to be the strongest in the Accelerated World, the Divine Weapon «The Infinity». If he could produce that much power without the sword, then if he used the Divine Weapon it wouldn't be impossible to even deal several times, no, several tens of times more damage...

"—Forgive me, Crow-san, there's a reason I can't use the sword right now!"

Just as if he had read Haruyuki's mind, while avoiding the knight's slashing attack by a wide margin Lead shouted.

"One way or another, we must defeat this enemy without the Divine Weapon!"

"...Un, understood!"

After immediately shouting that in return, he hurriedly added a question.

"Is, is it okay even if we use Mind Power!?"

Why he had asked that was because the conversation of Kuroyukihime and the others from the day before yesterday had lingered in his ears. According to them, the more an enemy's class rose, the harder it became for Incarnate attacks to work, and simultaneously it became easier to be drawn in by the waves of Mind Power. Though the one knight before their eyes was so scary that he was about to faint, if they increased to two or more he did not have the confidence that he would be able to be there without fleeing.

However, fortunately Lead quickly nodded.

"In this room, as long as you don't use it continuously more than you need to, it's okay!"

"Understood!"

Shouting once more, Haruyuki belatedly also positioned his hands in front of him. His head, which had shaken by the sudden enemy appearance, finally switched to battle mode.

By good luck, the knight enemy seemed not to execute long-range attacks. Of course, their opponent was an «Imperial Palace guard enemy» who probably concealed a potential rivaling that of the «Legend class», so if he took a direct hit from its huge sword, Haruyuki would probably die in one hit anyway. No matter how he thought about it, his

concentration to continue to draw its target would not last, but however if he attacked from a far distance while coordinating with Lead, they definitely had a chance of victory.

While sucking in a huge breath, he conceived the «image of the speed of light» in his hands, and Haruyuki chased Lead and aimed his mind's scope at the back of the knight.

The enemy brandished its sword, its bulky armor slipped out of place, and a portion of chain mail whose defense seemed slightly thin became visible at its neck, at that instant—.

"...«Laser Lance»!!"

He loaded the Incarnate technique he had just developed into the fighting spirit of his whole body and mind and released it. From his right hand extended straight out, a lance of silver light poured out and without straying from its mark hit the knight's lower neck. Its huge frame slightly faltered, and the path of its sword attack aimed at Lead went astray and violently struck the ground.

At the same time, in Haruyuki's field of vision the knight enemy's health gauge was displayed. The right end of the first bar of the vertically three-layered bar—decreased about two percent.

"...Wah..."

Reflexively, he groaned. Including the one clean hit Lead had landed on the knight's body a while ago, the gauge of which they had deprived it

did not fill even a tenth of the first bar yet. At this pace, if they were to shave away at that colossal gauge, just on earth how many dozens of minutes...no, how many hours would it take?

At that moment, at his back a young and resolute voice resounded.

"Both of you, please endure it for three minutes. After that, I will undertake the job."

The owner of the voice was of course, Shinomiya Utai—Ardor Maiden, who had been silent up until now.

In only three minutes, at best they could probably scrape a few percent more of the knight's gauge away. Even though she said she would undertake it afterwards, could Maiden, who was a complete long-range type, take the enemy's target?

Instantly, Haruyuki flicked that question from his head and yelled.

"Ro, roger!"

Simultaneously, from a slightly separated place Lead also responded.

"Understood!"

Before he was aware of it, Maiden, who had nodded in response to the two's replies, had raised her long *wakyuu*^[30] equipped in her left hand forward. It was rapidly enveloped in scarlet flames and changed its shape as if melting. The item, which had changed into a short, flat rod shape, opened thinly and became a folding fan together with a satisfying *bam!*.

From the left and right of the face mask of the lovely *miko*, pure white supplementary armor slid together, merged at the middle, and created a both beautiful and bewitching mask. Immediately after, a scarlet aura heavily wrapped up her avatar's entire body...

Having verified that phenomenon thus far out of the corner of his eye, Haruyuki moved toward Lead's side. With only eye contact, they communicated their strategy to each other. Having said that, it was not a complicated thing. They would only mutually draw the knight enemy's hate^[31] in nearly equal amounts apiece and attack while causing its target to scatter as much as possible.

"VO...ROOOAAAAA!!"

As if it were irritated at not yet having scored a direct hit, the knight howled. While swinging the large sword left and right wildly, which till now had only been striking with single blows, it pressed in on the two.

After having lured it in to their limits, Haruyuki and Lead, who had dove greatly left and right, matched their timing perfectly—

"Haa!!"

"Laser Lance!!"

They let blue and silver light fly. At the flank of the knight, the dichromatic light effect burst. Damage, four percent.

From there, for three minutes it became something that was painful, drawn out to the point where he would faint, and then just a little bit exciting.

No matter how much they were splitting its target, he would not run that much about his circle of safety. Even though he was barely dodging the sword of the knight, who was closing in while bellowing in a rage, occasionally he accidentally received splash damage from its blade, which struck the ground.

If Haruyuki were alone, without lasting a minute he would be showered in direct blows, but despite that why he was able to continue slipping through the lethal blade was because of Lead's precise instructions. Somehow or another, it seemed that the young warrior was completely knowledgeable about not only all of the attribute's maps of the Imperial Palace's main shrine but also the attack patterns of the metamorphosing guard enemies. Without mentioning the path of the sword the knight was brandishing in every direction, he splendidly read even its trampling steps from its log-like legs and the wind pressure attacks for which it used its shield, and he conveyed the ways of dodging those to Haruyuki.

He faithfully followed the instructions and kept avoiding the attacks, and when its target transferred to Lead he aimed for the opportunity to get a blow in. Continuing to clear the tightropes that would lead to instant death if they had even one miss with actions of superb coordination was in a certain sense the very thrill of online games.

From the time two minutes had elapsed, Haruyuki and Lead almost no longer even exchanged voices. With just a slight hand motion, Lead conveyed his instructions, and Haruyuki responded to that without time lag.

...If I could have done it like this.

...If I could have done it like this in today's basketball match too. If I had formed an image of the movements and thoughts of not just the opponent players but also my allies and had been moving according to that, perhaps...

In the midst of the intense fighting, that thought crossed his mind for an instant; he immediately denied it.

...There's no way I could have done it. The real world me is completely different from Silver Crow. I'm not this light. I'm not this fast.

...However. I just might be able to aim for it. No matter how impossible it seems...if I wish to change and just try to take one step, just one step out for that purpose...perhaps, I too...

"—This way!"

Suddenly at his back a sharp voice rang out, and Haruyuki abruptly opened his eyes wide.

Before he had known it, the three-minute interval designated by Utai had passed by. Briefly exchanging glances with Lead, who was at his right side, he simultaneously made a huge back jump. They steered the knight

enemy, who was chasing them while becoming increasingly enraged, in the direction from which they had heard Utai's voice.

However, although they had endured it for three minutes as they were told, the first of the three levels of the enemy's health bar still had close to ninety percent remaining. From here, what on earth did Utai intend to do?

While carrying that worry, Haruyuki lined up with Lead, continued his back dash, and reached the vicinity of the second pedestal in the center of the hall.

That moment, the right side of his vision was stained a deep red, and reflexively his eyes were separated from the enemy and looked that way.

What existed there was—a sight at which even Haruyuki, who had stumbled across various superphenomena in the interior of the «Imperial Palace» and whose nerves had supposedly gotten reasonably used to them, could not help from catching his breath in blank amazement.

Flames. What was burning was the entire body of the *miko* avatar of small build. From her *tabi*^[32]-shaped tiptoes to the tip of her long hair parts, she was enveloped in blazing bright red crimson flames.

It seemed that Ardor Maiden herself was not receiving damage, so it probably was not a true blaze. Probably, it was the irregular light effect that accompanied the activation of the Incarnate system, namely the «Over-Ray». However, even compared with the Over-Ray of the Red King

Scarlet Rain, who was likewise a red-color, hers was closer in its fluctuations and hue to a true flame.

That aura, which had been refined over a good three minutes, was even several times more violent as well as beautiful than that of the time she had reduced Bush Utan to ashes in their tag duel of three days ago. The *miko* clad in crimson wielded the fan in her right hand and leisurely continued to dance. With a momentum as if to trample Maiden into pieces, the knight enemy pressed in—.

“—«Pitiable, agonizing flames of ire»^[33]”

All of a sudden, a sonorous «poem» resounded from the *miko*'s mouth.

The fan was swiftly shaken, and from it small sprays of flames flowed in the air. Seeming only like trifling fire powder, they fell at the feet of the knight enemy; at that instant.

The roar of a thunderous *crack!*, which nearly deafened his ears, rocked the air, and the floor of the supposedly preposterously tough «Demonic City» stage burned—no, melted.

The knight enemy sank helplessly up to around its chest in the middle of that liquid that sparkled in a dazzling orange color and could no longer be called anything but magma. That moment, its metallic armor, which till now had been shining in a cold, dull color, became red hot like coal.

“VOOOOOOAAAAA!!”

A howl that gushed out, or a shriek. Flailing its two arms about pell-mell, the knight tried to escape from the magma, but the diameter of the «pond» able to melt the floor easily surpassed five meters. It only scattered drops of flames in vain; there was no sign of its huge frame emerging.

“«Return unto the dust of the ground»”

Again, the poem possessing a strange meter resounded. The crimson aura enshrouding the *miko* became increasingly violent, and the quantity of heat in the pond of magma also increased further. A hot, burning-like wind drifted even to the body of Haruyuki, who was separated far enough away. If he approached any closer than this, it wouldn't be strange even if he actually received damage.

After standing still dumbfounded for more than ten seconds, Haruyuki finally looked at the health gauge displayed overhead the knight enemy. In doing so, the first level was at the point of literally burning to nothing.

Lead had said that if they continued to use Incarnate techniques for over ten minutes in this hall, then there was a possibility other enemies would be called here. If they considered that, whether they would be able to scrape away the remaining two gauge levels within the time extension was slightly dicey. It might have been a scene where Haruyuki should also assist with long-range techniques, but however for some reason his gut told him that he must not do so. This «dance of flames» was Utai's stage alone; there was no need for others to cut in. Perhaps Lead also felt the

same; in Haruyuki's immediate proximity, he only continued to stand quietly.

Thereafter, indeed over a five-minute interval the *miko* danced, the blaze swirled, and the knight continued to writhe.

At last, finally the third gauge burnt out, and in the middle of the pond of magma, together with a fearsome, tremendous explosion effect the enemy was extinguished.

Even when Ardor Maiden had slowly lowered her folding fan and had stopped her movements, Haruyuki was unable to speak out once.

He had been overwhelmed. By the might, the beauty, and the fearsomeness of Utai's Incarnate technique. By the exceedingly terrible «power of destruction» at which he could not help but shudder—.

In terms of the logic of the technique, it was not that complicated a thing. It melted the setting of the stage, changed it into a high-temperature liquid, and dropped the enemy there. What was terrifying something else. Basically, there was no way to escape this technique. Without the ability to fly like Haruyuki or a unique movement ability like the fifth-generation Disaster's «Wire Hook», the act of crawling out of the magma pond would not be granted. The viscosity of the liquid was high, obstructing movement inside, and even if one somehow managed to reach the bank, the sides of the hole would also melt. It was probably even more difficult than climbing a glass wall smeared with oil.

It was a power that differed fundamentally from the «flames of purification» that had reduced Bush Utan to ashes three days ago. As for its Incarnate technique category—he did not want to think this, but probably it was the fourth quadrant, basically a «negative power with range as its target», was it not. Why on earth would that young, sweet Shinomiya Utai have a technique this mercilessly destructive...

At the moment where Haruyuki had thought that far in a corner of his half-numb mind. The body of Ardor Maiden, who was standing still a number of meters ahead, wavered with a violent shake.

“Ah...”

Reflexively, he dashed and supported the back of Utai, who seemed about to collapse to the ground. Before Haruyuki’s eyes, the pure white mask covering the *miko*’s face was divided and was retracted beneath her hair parts.

Her scarlet eye lenses flickered irregularly and regarded Haruyuki. Her voice flowed out in a frail manner.

“...It seems that, it was slightly too early for me...to use it yet, in actual combat.”

“Eh...what does that mean..?”

“The technique, of just now was...the «technique specifically against anti-ground-type heavyweight-class enemies» in its experimental stage that

I've been practicing for about a year. If I said more...it would be «exclusively for one of the Divine Beasts, Genbu».”

“...Exclusively for, Genbu...”

After repeating after her in great surprise, Haruyuki held his breath.

Of course, Haruyuki had not directly seen the «Divine Beast Genbu», the super-class enemy guarding the Imperial Palace's north gate. He did not know at all what kind of form he had or what kind of attacks he made. However, there was just one thing he knew. That was the fact that even now one of the Elements of the old Nega Nebulas like Utai or Fuuko was sealed at Genbu's feet.

Inside the arms of Haruyuki, who had lowered his waist, Utai closed her eyes and continued in words that tended to taper off.

“...It was just as if, my power did not...work on the «Divine Beast Suzaku». On the occasion of the past Imperial Palace conquest tactics, the one who desired to command the anti-Suzaku forces was me myself. No matter what power he had, if it were flames then I would control it; that was what I foolishly...thought conceitedly. If, the one who confronted Suzaku had been...Aqua Current, who manipulated water, Suzaku's opposing attribute. Or if it had been Sky Raker, who's faster than even the wind...they might have broken through Suzaku's guard. If so...the legion's annihilation, of two years ago was...the responsibility of, me, who made light of...and forgot my respect for the enemy...”

The instant he saw a small drop glisten at the rim of one of her closed eyes, in spite of himself Haruyuki shouted.

"That's...that's not true! Absolutely no one thinks that it's your responsibility, Mei-san!"

"No...the blame's mine, for which I ought to be rebuked. As to why...at that time, in my heart I thought...if it were me, then I could quell the flames of the Divine Beast Suzaku, and we might have been able to pass through the gate without have anyone's lives robbed... If you don't call that foolish conceit...what would you call it..."

There, the whispering voice that had a faint scream-like ring completely broke off.

Without even being able to find the words he needed to say to her, Haruyuki had the feeling that now at last he was able to understand the reason why Utai had continued to live in seclusion in a nook of the Accelerated World without contacting Kuroyukihime and the others for a good two years.

In the past, Utai had explained that reason as being for «the sake of not wanting to cause secondary damage in having Ardor Maiden, who was in a sealed state, rescued». Of course, that probably also was not a lie. However, at the same time she was continuing to blame herself deeply. Tormenting herself with the thought that the cause of the legion's annihilation lay with her, she had personally decided that due to that sin,

no matter how much she wanted to meet Kuroyukihime or Fuuko, it would not be tolerated. Indeed, over a good two years.

However—.

However, that feeling of self-reproach was common to both Kuroyukihime and Fuuko as well.

Driven by impulse, Kuroyukihime, who had captured the head of the first-generation Red King, Red Rider, and had brought about an all-out war with the remaining five kings' legions, was fixed on thinking that that was a direct factor in Nega Nebulas' annihilation and had continued to hide herself for two years in the Umesato Middle local net.

Fuuko was worried that the fact that she had resolved to have both her legs severed in order to strengthen her own Mind Power and that she had compelled Kuroyukihime to do so had created all the underlying causes, and for two years she had retired from the world in the Old Tokyo Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

They were the same. All three of them were the same. Since they strongly thought about their comrades to whom they were bound by deep bonds, they punished themselves. Undoubtedly—, undoubtedly, the remaining two people of «Elements» too and the other legion members too whose names Haruyuki still did not know had thought the same thing and had erased their forms, no doubt about it. They had sacrificed themselves eternally in the former Nega Nebulas' annihilation...they would never again stand on the center stage of the Accelerated World any more...

"...However...however."

While gazing at the face of Ardor Maiden, who was still in his arms with her eyes closed, Haruyuki squeezed his voice out with all his might.

"However...suffering, worrying, hating, fighting...Brain Burst doesn't...exist for those things' sake...it must be like that. In this world, plenty of saddening things and harsh things also happen, but...however, one day, the day when we can overcome those, hold hands once again with the people we love, and share everything will definitely come. The day when you can share the suffering you've always been carrying alone with your comrades, Mei-san, will inevitably come. —A good two years have already passed since the annihilation of the former Nega Nebulas. If so, it's fine even if today is that day...!"

Even while moving his mouth desperately, Haruyuki vaguely realized what the source of the fearsome Mind Power of destruction that Utai had activated a moment earlier was.

It was a «sin». It was not as tainted in darkness as «despair» or «hatred», but however by no means was it a positive power. If it were a flame that burnt offenders, then while her technique was activated, Utai was continuously tasting the same suffering as that of her target.

And then, simultaneously—. The sin Utai was carrying was probably not only something concerning the legion's annihilation. There existed a deeper, stronger emotion that was directly connected to her in the real world. As for the reason, had Kuroyukihime not said it? That if one did

not face one's «wound» head-on in the real world, then on no account would one be able to produce the second stage of Incarnate techniques.

Of course, there was no way that Haruyuki, who had met Utai only a few days ago, would be permitted to trespass into the depths of Utai's heart. Right now, he could not even imagine what she had experienced in the past, what she had suffered—and then why she had lost her natural voice. However—however...

“Even in this world, if we must forever suffer from and hate each other for...all our mistakes and misunderstandings...then, for what purpose did we become Burst Linkers...!”

At the words that Haruyuki, driven by emotion, had squeezed out from his chest, the body of Utai, who was completely exhausted and had lost her strength, quivered with a twitch.

The scarlet eye lenses slowly opened. However, their light was still wavering frailly. Though he thought he wanted to say something, say another sentence, Haruyuki's chest kept trembling strongly, and words would not come out.

Then—.

A voice that was refreshing and calm like a breeze blowing across a meadow flowed softly.

“—«For play were we born, for mischief were we born»^[34].”

It was Trilead, who had been silent up till then. The young warrior moved from Haruyuki's back without a sound, stopped at a position directly across Utai with her between them, and sat *seiza* style with an upright posture.

After a moment of silence, while slowly blinking Utai replied in a faint voice.

“—«If I hear the voices of children playing, even my body moves»...”

It seemed probably to be something like an old *waka*^[35], but Haruyuki did not know that phrase. However, though it was through his feelings, he had the sense that he was able to understand its meaning. Lead transferred his gaze from Utai to Haruyuki and began to speak quietly.

“It's embarrassing, but...till now, I have not thought about what kind of fate all the Burst Linkers apart from me shouldered or any kind of the goals for which they fought... Only—I only thought, that it was fun for them to play this game in large numbers. And then, that if someday I too could join those comrades...I thought, those shallow thoughts...”

He rocked his tied-up hair and hung his head. Raising his face, the warrior of many mysteries continued quietly.

“—However, the only Burst Linker I knew until I met you two...basically, the person who was my parent and teacher said this. That 'Even if you're alone, even if you're unable to go outside this castle, play and enjoy yourself with all your body and soul.' That 'only that single path leads to your future.' —Forever, while I imagined the voices of children merrily

playing on the other side of the high castle walls, I continued to swing my sword alone. At the end of my long...long days, at last Crow-san and Maiden-san appeared before me...exchanged words with me...promised to return...and then today, we were able to fight shoulder-to-shoulder. I am quite unable to put what I am feeling now into words.”

Mutely, Haruyuki and Utai watched the streak of a drop fall down along the shapely face mask of Trilead, who had cut his words short again. Without wiping his face, in a trembling voice Lead put a final sentence into words.

“Just...what I can just say is...that I’m glad to have become a Burst Linker. That it was a blessing to have been able to know the Accelerated World. The ones who gave me this joy were...Crow-san, and Maiden-san, you two.”

There, the young warrior closed his mouth and again made a deep bow.

For a while, silence ruled the hall enveloped in a curtain of dim blue darkness. Before he was aware of it, the pond of magma created by Utai’s Incarnate technique had also cooled, and only a slightly low indent remained.

Before long, Utai raised her body from Haruyuki’s arms, and after looking at the two in turn she spoke in a distinct voice.

“—To me too, just that...just having been able to have become a Burst Linker was an unmistakable blessing. No...serving the Black King, Black Lotus, as well as fighting as a member of Nega Nebulas...and then, at the

end of that path, having been able to meet Kuu-san and Lead-san were also like that. If so...the path I've always been walking till now...was not wrong..."

Her feet, which were an imitation of *tabi*, moved and touched the floor with a tap. Matching Utai's movements, Haruyuki also slowly stood up.

Waiting for Lead to also similarly stand, Utai took a step out, looked back, and spoke.

"—My apologies for having caused you to worry. Now then...let us go. Ahead this path that we have walked one step at a time, without a doubt our future...our destiny extends out infinitely."

Lead's words that he had memorized the internal structure of the Imperial Palace's inner sanctuary, including all its attributes, was by no means an exaggeration.

The young warrior continued to lead them without losing his way even once through the «Demonic City» stage's complex map, which was wholly different from that of the «Heian» stage of two days ago.

He climbed stairs, crossed aerial corridors, pushed mechanism switches to open hidden doors, and descended below with pulleys. It wouldn't be strange even if it took a number of days, no, a number of weeks to break through the old-castle-type dungeon chock-full of gimmicks without guidance. Furthermore, on top of that, ubiquitous enemies of the same type as the knight with which they had first fought and guys with heavier

armor, guys that seemed quick-witted and agile, and even magician-type guys were wandering about.

Haruyuki was prepared for them to be unable to avoid maybe another two, three times of accidental random encounters, but Lead's instructions were flawless. Even in situations where groups of enemies were walking from the left and right, they could calmly remain in the shadows and run all-out as soon as the enemy had went far off and had entered a blind spot. Once, they displayed the feat of purposely moving an empty elevator and descending down a ladder on the opposite side once the enemies had gathered there. Describing it as one's own backyard would not be an exaggeration at all.

For Haruyuki, a hardcore gamer, the titles of «being able to move» this freely went only to an online FPS^[36] he had played for a number of years and a one-player action ADV^[37] in which he had spent over a hundred hours. Moreover, since the structure of the Imperial Palace changed completely with every transition, just exactly how many years had Trilead continued to fight...no, «play» in this place...

—While he pondered that question, before the eyes of Haruyuki, who had followed Lead's instructions, had run, had climbed, had descended, and no longer even knew how many doors they had passed through, that sight suddenly appeared.

Just one small window set up in the wall. In its depths, a vast space that spread out, and pillars that stood lined up, and then the sky swirling with black clouds. It was the «outside».

"...Good work. The inner shrine of the Imperial Palace ends here."

Saying that as if it were nothing, Lead approached the window and casually flung it open. A cold wind blew and coolly caressed Silver Crow's armor.

As if drawn to it, Haruyuki approached the window and looked outside.

Two lines of blue-black, enormous pillars were lined straight into the distance from the far right side of the window. He had seen that appearance before. Even in the Heian stage of the day before yesterday, though their shades were different, similar columns had stood at the front of the inner sanctuary all in a row. Basically—what lay ahead was...

"...It's, it's the gate...!"

Almost involuntarily shouting, he hurriedly restrained his mouth.

On the other side of the mist trailing the ground, sure enough a huge castle gate could be slightly made out extending in a straight line from the procession of pillars. From the orientation of the shadows made by the pillars, the gate was straight south—basically, that very thing was the «gate of Suzaku» that Haruyuki and Utai had broken through two days ago.

At last—at last, they had come to the point where the gate could be seen again.

Afterward, all that was left was to open that, go outside, shake off the flames of the Divine Beast Suzaku, and fly to the foot of the bridge.

Thinking that, after tightly squeezing his right fist, Haruyuki noticed something and sharply sucked in a breath.

“...Come, come to think of it...how do we open it...?”

—That was true.

The castle gate visible in the far distance of the thick fog was tightly shut without room for doubt. It seemed utterly improbable that they could open the gate doors, which were made of stone and close to twenty meters both horizontally and vertically, by pushing on them with their hands. Why that gate had automatically opened when they had entered, even if only slightly, was because from the inside, someone had...no, the young warrior before their eyes had destroyed the sealed plate fulfilling the role of a «key»—

The instant Haruyuki had thought that far, completely as if he had read his thoughts Lead nodded.

“I will break the regenerated Suzaku gate seal now once. With that, the gate should open.”

“Is...is that, something able to be easily done...?”

As he timidly asking that, Lead tilted his head as if lost for words and slightly nodded.

"I don't know...whether it's easy or not, but however since I was able to do it once before... Besides that, why I had not drawn, no, been unable to draw this sword in the earlier fight was solely for the sake of destroying the gate's seal."

"—What do you mean?"

The one who had inquired that was Utai. Haruyuki also did not understand at all the cause-and-effect relationship of Lead not being able to draw his sword and being able to destroy the seal. Lead nodded deeply once more and softly touched the straight sword at his waist with his left hand.

"...Though it's beyond my control, «The Infinity», which I currently have the honor of possessing, has a couple of special effects. One of them is the power that «the longer it's kept in its sheath, the more the might of the one attack immediately after it's drawn increases, infinitely so»."

"...!"

While also opening his eyes wide in astonishment, at the same time he profoundly understood it. True, if it had that unbelievable extra effect, it was not the situation to be using it on guard enemy opponents. In fact, Haruyuki, who had a poor person's mentality, seemed as if he would have it drag on forever without using it.

However, Lead seemed to have the intention of using the sword's power, which he had undoubtedly been storing up for a considerably long time, for Haruyuki and Utai's sake without regret. He had the feeling of questioning whether it would be okay to take advantage of him any more than this though they had no way of giving their thanks even after he had led them this far, but however it was also the truth that there existed no other substitute plans for the sake of fulfilling their highest-priority objective of escaping the Imperial Palace. As a result, Haruyuki could only deeply bow his head and speak a single expression.

"—Thank you, Lead."

At his side, above her *hakama* armor, Utai also put her hands together and deeply bent her waist. As if embarrassed, the young warrior shook his head and replied in an airy voice.

"Not at all, it's still early to be expressing gratitude. Because we have to make one more push from here to the gate."

—Though Lead had said it, going out of the inner sanctuary's small window and advancing south through the shadows of the pillars was not especially laborious compared to the journey up until now.

Of course, groups of fearsome guard enemies were incessantly patrolling the wide main road sandwiched between the two lines of pillars in the same manner as the day before yesterday, and they could hear things such as strange footsteps or growling voices from the deep forest at their

left side, which chilled their hearts. However, since they knew that they would not be targeted as long as they were hidden behind the columns, it was not difficult calmly clearing them one at a time. Fortunately, all three of their avatars were of small class and light weight. Their footsteps were also small, and their bodies would not jut out from the pillars either.

Over approximately forty minutes, the three finally managed to reach the southernmost pillar's shadow, leaned their backs against its cool, curved surface, and exhaled deeply in unison.

Looking at each other, they exchanged small smiles.

At last, they had come here. Inside the Imperial Palace, only one sequence remained. As Haruyuki softly opened his Install menu and checked the time elapsed since they had dived, the digital digits displayed 135 minutes. It slightly crossed the target of two hours that Utai had set, but they could say it was a fine achievement, could they not.

Having said that, about this time, at the exterior of the south gate Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Takumu, Chiyuri, and Ash Roller, who had participated unannounced, were waiting impatiently for the gate to open. He wanted to break through the guard of the remaining Suzaku, join up with everyone as soon as possible, and share the joy of mission success.

Perhaps having picked up on Haruyuki's rushed feelings, Lead whispered in a very small voice.

"Well then...it's about time we went about the finishing touches. The procedure is simple. We will jump out when the enemies patrolling the

main road and the corridors to the left and right have become as far away as possible, and I will break the seal. At the same time, the two of you will break out of the gate. If you are prepared, we shall go at the next chance we have.”

At the nervousness that was welling up, Haruyuki could only nod. In opposition, Utai showed signs of seeming to want to say something, but she immediately drew her jaw back and similarly showed affirmation.

From the shadows of the pillar, Lead cast a glance at the front and raised his right hand.

The south gate, which towered like a great rock, was in a position about twenty meters away in the southern direction from the pillar where the three were hidden. At the center of the two left-and-right gate doors existed a steel plate with a relief of a fire bird, the only thing that was the same in the Heian stage. That very thing was the «seal of Suzaku».

The wide main road extended straight north from the gate, and a total of eight groups of guard enemies were patrolling there. What was more, there were winding passageways east and west too before the gate, and a group of enemies was making rounds at each one.

The movements of all the groups were subtly out of alignment; the space before the gate would not readily become clear. However, as they held their breath and waited, gradually, their timing began to overlap—before long, Lead opened the five fingers of his right hand wide. Following that, he bent his fingers one at a time. Four, three, two, one...

—Now!!

With their silent shouts overlapping, the three simultaneously ran out from the shade of the pillar.

Kicking the ground assembled from blue-black tiles, they cut through the heavy fog and ran with all their might. In a mere three seconds, they reached the square before the gate.

Lead swiftly raised his left hand, checking Haruyuki and Utai, and simultaneously put his right hand on the scabbard of the straight sword—«The Infinity», one of the Seven Arcs.

Immediately after, from the body of the small-framed young warrior, a blue flash of light that wholly resembled a young star poured out intensely.

Over-Ray. It was the shine of Mind Power. When they were fighting the knight enemy earlier, he had thought he was quite a skilled Incarnate user from the fact that he had used techniques without uttering their technique names, but his system activation speed, Over-Ray, and scale all far exceeded Haruyuki's imagination. Although he had not yet activated his techniques, the hard tiles at his feet cracked radially, and a blue plasma burst in the air—.

The young warrior firmly dropped his waist and clenched his straight sword's sheath with his left hand and its hilt with his right.

"O...OOOOHHHH...!!"

Lead's severe vigor, which he was hearing for the first time. Unable to respire any more, with his arm Haruyuki unconsciously pulled close the body of Utai, who was standing at his left.

Lead's eye lenses, which were usually refreshing, burned blue-white in a rage. At the same time, a technique name utterance accompanying a deep echo.

"«Heavenly—Stratus»!!"

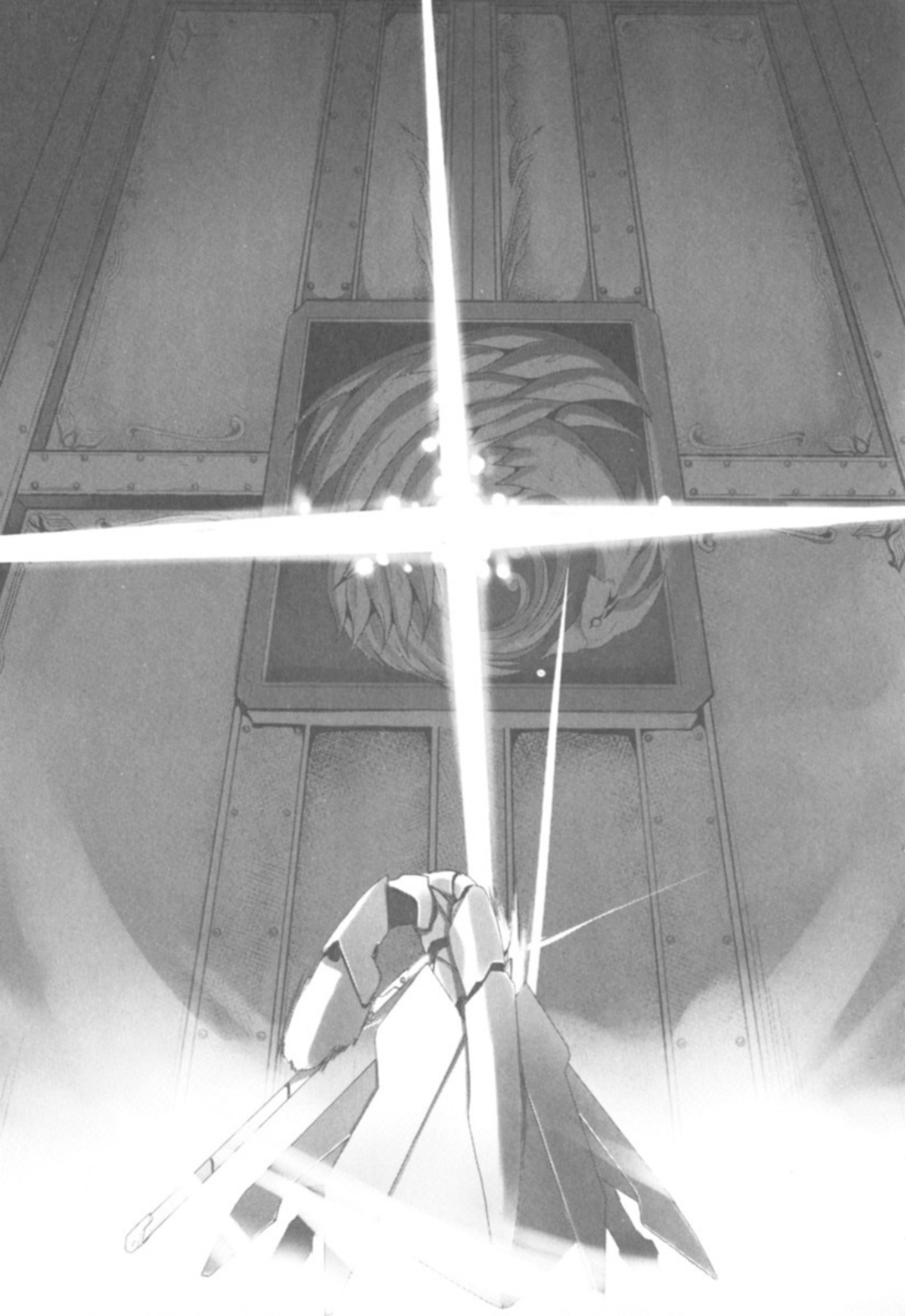
His right hand moved with a speed so fast that it blurred, and he released a horizontal straight line of slashing attacks.

A blade of blue light polymerized from the super-offensive power of the Divine Weapon itself, which charged more the more it was sheathed, and Trilead's Mind Power, which seemed to split heaven and earth, ran through the air. To Haruyuki's eyes, it seemed as if the very world itself were divided above and below its trajectory.

From left to right, an attack consisting of a draw and a strike.

Without a moment's delay, the sword returned and made another attack from straight up downward.

The blade of light, which had become a huge cross and had flown, splendidly apprehended the bulky steel plate joining the two doors. A cross-shaped light ran sharply across the fire bird relief. The lengthwise lines extended up and down, penetrating the entire door. The south gate standing and blocking their way like a precipice trembled heavily—.



—Open...!

Haruyuki held Utai's body even more tightly and drew his clenched right hand to the side of his body. Working in sync with that movement, the ten metal fins that had been folded small at his back up until now unfolded in one go.

"...That, is your true figure, Crow-san."

Hearing that murmur, Haruyuki looked to his side.

The young warrior, whose silver, naked sword was still lowered, narrowed his eye lenses as if it were bright. Once again, a whispering voice.

"It's beautiful... I am truly glad, to have been able to meet you..."

"Re, really now...as for me as well, being able to meet Lead was..."

When he had spoken that far, suddenly the body of Utai, who was adhered closely to him, stiffened. Simultaneously, Haruyuki became aware of it too.

The main road extending long at Lead's back. The corridors joining east and west. From all of them, masses of patrolling enemies were raising thunderous earth tremors and coming in a flood. After being shocked at why on earth they had come when they were unmistakably outside the range of their field of vision, Haruyuki finally noticed it.

High-ranking enemies were drawn by the waves of Mind Power.

The Incarnate technique «Heavenly Stratus» that Lead had activated in order to destroy the gate's seal was the highest-class attack even of all the ones Haruyuki had witnessed up until now. If he used it in an open space where one's view was clear, even if he caused enemies in a wide range to aggro it wouldn't be strange.

Haruyuki hurriedly reached his right hand out and yelled.

"L, Lead! Hurry up and grab my hand! Together with us, you too will...!!"

—However.

The azure young warrior wore a smile of placidness that also contained a tinge of pained sorrow, and he slightly shook his head.

"No, I cannot go. Only the two of you, please escape."

"Wh...why...if you stay here, you'll be done in by the enemies!!"

The swarming enormous frames of the knights and magicians who were filled to the brim with clear hostility exceeded ten in number. It was a number that even Lead, the master who possessed the Divine Weapon the Infinity, could not face as his opponents.

No, before that, until now Haruyuki had always believed and never doubted that Trilead also would obviously escape the Imperial Palace with them. For that reason, although he had a heap of things he wanted to ask him and wanted to talk to him about, he had put them off. However—if they parted ways here at either side of this gate that did not

open, then he did not know at all whether they would be able to meet again sometime.

"You...you can't do that...Lead!!"

Haruyuki shouted with all the voice that he had and again extended his right hand out. However, Trilead retreated with a wide step and quickly pointed to the south gate with the sword in his right hand.

"Go!! It's fine, if it's this place then I will not fall into the state of infinite EK! Besides that...now, I am not yet able to leave this castle!! However, I promise you...one day, I will meet you, Crow-san and Maiden-san, once again. At that time, I will tell the whole story. The reason this castle exists in the Accelerated World...and even the reason why it is strictly protected, I will tell everything I know!!"

At the spirit of the young warrior who had declared that resolutely, Haruyuki was unable to say anything more.

Instead, at his side Utai whispered sharply.

"—Let us go, Kuu-san. Even if we stay here, Lead-san's will will only have been for naught!"

"...!!"

For a moment, Haruyuki shut his eyes tightly; following that, he opened them, resolved himself, and caused the twin wings on his back to vibrate lightly. The produced force of lift silently buoyed their two avatars up.

From an elevation of roughly two meters, Haruyuki put in the thousands of feelings he had and shouted briefly.

"Lead...until, next time then!"

The young warrior greatly laughed with a broad smile and replied.

"Yes...until we meet again!"

The two phrases were the very ones young children exchanged in the evening, promising their reunion the next day. Mixed in with the footsteps of the swarm of surging enemies, Lead's last words reached the ears of Haruyuki, who was holding back his tears and had tried to look back.

"—The name of Trilead Tetraoxide was what I was dubbed by my parent. My true name is..."

Controlling the urge of wanting to look at Lead one more time, Haruyuki strongly caused his wings to vibrate. A voice resembling a deep-blue, refreshing breeze pushed the backs of the two rushing toward the Imperial Palace's southern gate, which was in the process of narrowly opening from its middle.

"...«Azure Air»!!"

Chapter 10

Crimson.

The first thing that Haruyuki saw once they had passed through the tiny gap of the Imperial Palace's south gate and had finally escaped to the outside world was that.

Swirling, raging deep crimson flames. However, it was not mere heat energy. The hieroglyphic shape of a huge bird possessing two enormous wings, a long neck, and two eyes that glinted like rubies.

The super-class enemy, the «Divine Beast Suzaku».

"Wh...why, has he materialized already...!"

Utai, who was clinging tightly to his neck, had shouted that in a hoarse voice.

Likewise, Haruyuki had also been surprised. Suzaku, who safeguarded the south gate, would begin to pop out above the altar established by the gate of the bridge at the point in time when someone intruded on his territory, which consisted of the large bridge of a total of five hundred meters in length and thirty meters in width. The time till he materialized and began to take action was about five seconds the last time they had witnessed it. As for Haruyuki, he had calculated to be able to escape from the gate and fly a considerable distance during the interval till Suzaku's appearance.

Despite that, due to whatever reason, at the point in time where the two had left the gate Suzaku had already finished materializing. The distance between them was only about thirty meters. Haruyuki desperately spread the wings on his back and exerted his brakes, avoiding a collision with the bird of fire.

However, at his back the south gate was already tightly shut. Even if they returned, it would not open again. Last time, why the gate had allowed Haruyuki and Utai in was because Trilead—true name «Azure Air» had destroyed the seal plate for them in advance, but with every cycle of opening and closing the seal seemed to regenerate.

It seemed likely that Lead would be attacked by the ten-plus guard enemies and would perish, so obviously they could not hope for him to cut the plate again. What was what, if here they returned inside once more, they would have no face to meet with Lead, who had sent them out prepared to die himself.

—They had no choice but to slip through Suzaku's flames and fly to the other side of the bridge.

Brushing aside his momentary hesitation, Haruyuki resolved himself to do so. Their enemy who possessed the name of a god and was staying practically right before their eyes looked fixedly at the two with his ruby eyes.

Abruptly, he had the feeling he heard a voice.

—Very puny one.

—Atone for the sin of laying waste to my sacred lands and slipping through them impertinently.

—Burn to ashes.

Predicting that a breath attack would come, Haruyuki concentrated with all his might, trying to make out its path.

However, the bird of fire did not open his beak but spread his enormous wings wide and flapped them strongly once.

"...No!"

The one who had shouted was Utai. At the same time, Haruyuki saw the bright-red, super-intense heat wave Suzaku's wings had produced surge forth in a hemispherical shape. Not a line, but a face attack. No matter where he flew, there was nowhere to escape.

No way...were they going to die here? This easily? Going through all that pain, passing through the Imperial Palace's inner sanctuary, and having the gate opened in exchange for Lead's life—despite that, were they going to be arrested here in the cage of «Infinite EK»...

"—I will not...let you do so!!"

In the arms of Haruyuki, whose thoughts had begun to fall into a stop, the young *miko* had shouted fearlessly.

She extended her small left hand out far. From that exceedingly slender palm, a scarlet wave greatly resembling Suzaku's wave attack was released.

The instant the two energy waves made contact, a dazzling white light thoroughly colored the world.

The center of Suzaku's heat wave was offset in a circular shape; the heat wave became a ring and passed through their surroundings with a deafening roar.

And then simultaneously, perhaps having received some sort of damage feedback, Ardor Maiden's left arm instantly evaporated from the tip of her shoulder down.

"W...ah..."

With a thin scream, the body of the *miko* convulsed. Perhaps unable to stand the real, intense pain that the Unlimited Neutral Field caused to occur, in that state she made her head deeply droop.

Tightly embracing the body of Utai, who had lost consciousness, Haruyuki squeezed out all his remaining energy and reactivated his fighting spirit.

Fly. —Fly! If I don't fly here, there was no meaning in having been born as an aviation-class avatar!

"Wh...ooooaaaa—!!"

Bellowing, he made his wings vibrate with all the power he had; Haruyuki charged straight forth.

On the other side ahead, Suzaku was again unfurling his wings. The same attack would come again. Earlier than damage could occur, he would run through it.

—Let us make it in time...!!

—However. Before Haruyuki's eyes, like a heat haze the air shimmered and began to glisten red. The surface of his avatar began to be scorched in bits. A feeling of heat that seemed to blind his eyes assaulted him, and his HP gauge, which had close to ninety percent remaining, began to decrease...

Right after.

Again, an unexpected phenomenon impeded Suzaku's attack.

Lances of light of two colors, red and blue, that had rushed toward the back of the enormous bird pierced his left and right wings.

He recollected having seen those colors of attacks. The blue was «Lightning Cyan Spike». The special technique of Cyan Pile—his good friend Takumu.

And then the red was «Vorpal Strike». The special technique of Black Lotus—Haruyuki's parent, master, and the person whom he respected and loved more than anyone else, Kuroyukihime.

Suzaku's super-intense heat wave, which was on the verge of causing Haruyuki's and Utai's bodies to evaporate, was torn to pieces and disappeared.

Grazing the large feathers enveloped in flames, Haruyuki at last passed to the rear of the Divine Beast Suzaku.

However, obviously the enemy changed direction, and while he apprehended Haruyuki with eyes smoldering with indignation, this time he opened his bill wide. A breath attack—.

That moment.

Haruyuki, who was plunging forward with all his strength and aiming for the south side of the large bridge, and a silhouette that had come flying at a fearsomely high velocity from that side crossed.

The perceptions of Haruyuki, who was accelerating to his limit, grasped the identity of that shadow precisely.

Burst Linkers. Not one, but two. The one below was a sky-blue duel avatar carrying a streamline-type booster on her back. The vice executive of Nega Nebulas who possessed the alias «ICBM», Sky Raker.

And then on her back there was one more person kneeling low. A jet black duel avatar possessing obsidian armor and long swords for her four limbs—the «Black King» Black Lotus. The blue-white flarebacks extending long from Raker's Enhanced Armament, «Gale Thruster», dyed her semitransparent armor a beautiful sapphire color.

The instant they crossed paths, Raker—Fuuko, and Lotus—Kuroyukihime gazed at Haruyuki with madder red and blue-violet eyes and smiled gently. The two's voices directly reverberated in his mind.

...Welcome back, Karasu-san. Leave Suzaku to us.

...We're entrusting the legion's future to you, Haruyuki-kun. Now then, fly. Without looking back, straight ahead.

The stretched-out flow of time returned to its original state; Haruyuki, who was holding Utai in his arms, and Fuuko, who was giving Kuroyukihime a lift, rapidly drifted apart.

"Ah..."

Unable to apply the brakes on himself while flying at full speed, while only letting out a mere scream-like voice Haruyuki craned his neck with all his might and caught sight of the view at his rear on the edge of his field of vision.

Fuuko and Kuroyukihime, who had become a single warhead, skimmed past the vicinity of the right eye of Suzaku, who seemed just about to spit out a fatal flame breath now. Black Lotus' right arm flashed and cut up the enemy's eye in a straight line. Flames resembling blood spouted out in great quantities, and the strange bird roared with a howl of anger.

Suzaku stopped his breath attack and began to revolve his massive frame north again. His target had switched from Haruyuki to Kuroyukihime and company. Basically—

The two of them had a mind to die.

Their self-sacrifice was in a sense both equivalent to and different from that of the young warrior Trilead, who had attracted ten-odd bodyguard enemies in order to allow Haruuki to escape from the gate. The reason was that unlike Lead, who could avoid the state of infinite EK by immediately moving into a safe area the next time he respawned, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko had nowhere to escape at all. There was just the rectangular altar behind Suzaku—the very spot where Ardor Maiden had been «sealed»—and if they died there, even the next time they respawned they would only be assaulted quickly by Suzaku and would instantly die again.

Kuroyukihime and the others had probably witnessed Suzaku's sudden materialization while standing by and had seen through the fact that that was an action meant to hinder Haruyuki and Utai from escaping. And then they had resolved to do it in a moment. Letting them escape by using themselves as bait. Even if both Kuroyukihime and Fuuko became sealed.

—That was out of the question.

That was out of the question. It was absolutely out. The only existing goal for which Haruyuki was fighting as a Burst Linker was that of reviving Nega Nebulas and arriving together with Kuroyukihime beyond the «level 10» horizon for which she longed. What meaning was there in sacrificing his legion master and sub-master and having only himself survive?

Haruyuki was assailed by a momentary conflict; at that time.

From below his path, a sharp hail reached him.

“Haru!!”

Taken aback, he turned his eyes there. The one greatly raising his left hand at a spot about two hundred meters from the foot of the bridge was a large-class avatar who had heavy light-blue armor, Cyan Pile. And then next to him was a yellow-green lightweight avatar, Lime Bell.

“Haru—!!”

Bell also shouted in a voice with all her might and greatly revolved the large bell equipped in her left hand. At the same time that an airy chime sound rang out, the bell was enveloped in a light effect of a fresh green color.

“—«Citron Ca—ll»!!”

Together with the enunciation of her technique name, she swung her hand bell straight down. The lime green light that effused out warmly wrapped up Haruyuki, who was in the middle of flight.

The damage received from the duels versus enemies inside the Imperial Palace and Suzaku’s heat wave from just a little bit earlier was healed in a twinkle. However, the wounds of Utai, who was still unconscious in his arms, remained as they were. Citron Call’s effect target was a single body, so it could not have two people recover simultaneously, but then in that

case should she not have healed Ardor Maiden first, whose damage was great?

For an instant, Haruyuki had difficulty grasping the intention of Chiyuri, who was restoring Silver Crow's health gauge here and now. However, the shouting voice that Takumu subsequently emitted dispelled Haruyuki's bewilderment.

"Haru, leave Maiden-san to us!"

"...!!"

Haruyuki opened his eyes wide—right after, without hesitating he passed the body of Ardor Maiden, who was in his arms, to the outstretched arms of Cyan Pile below. Elevating his body, which had become light, in one go, he entered a loop turn with a tight radius. Piercing through the air howling in his ears, Chiyuri's voice reached him.

"Haru, Senpai and Nee-san...!"

"—Got it, leave it to me!!"

Haruyuki's two childhood friends had hesitated, suffered, and decided it in his stead. That they would not let Kuroyukihime and Fuuko die here. That by all costs, they would go home with everyone together.

Backed by Takumu and Chiyuri's emotions, Haruyuki soared again northward.

On his path, the Divine Beast Suzaku, who had likewise turned northward, was craning his long neck in the shape of an S and opening his beak wide. There were maybe five...no, three seconds till a super-intense heat breath would be released.

In front of his line of fire, Sky Raker, who was carrying Black Lotus on her back, descended, drawing out a parabola. Gale Thruster's jet exhaust flickered irregularly and was on the verge of disappearing. That Enhanced Armament displayed overwhelming thrust, but once it used up its energy, there was a long recharge time that was imposed till the next time one could fly. There were no longer any means for the two to escape from Suzaku's flames. From his vast bill, a glimmering orange light spilled out. The surrounding atmosphere became a heat haze and shimmered—.

—I won't...let you do that!!

"Wh...ooooooooo—!!"

With a force that burnt up all his remaining special technique gauge, Haruyuki caused the metallic fins on his back to vibrate. A faint light surrounded Silver Crow's whole body. Penetrating the wall of wind pressure with the fingertips of his sharply extended hands, his avatar became a lance and soared.

Suzaku, whose right eye had been smashed by Kuroyukihime's crushing blow, did not notice Haruyuki approaching from that side. Haruyuki plunged forth on a course that nearly grazed the large bird's visage. He passed a couple dozen centimeters by the right side of his beak, which

was trying to spit out a conflagration at that very moment. In one stretch, he sprung out to the enemy's front.

At his back, overwhelming waves of indignation toward him, the obstacle, were produced.

In front, the two Burst Linkers opened their eyes wide in shock.

"Why...!?"

"Haruyuki-kun...!!"

With a momentum that made him nearly crash into them, under both arms Haruyuki carried the bodies of the two, who were trying to shout as if gasping. He held the slender waists of Sky Raker and Black Lotus, who were nearly equal size-wise, with all his strength, and in one gulp he changed his flight direction upward.

Their situation fairly resembled that of the «Ardor Maiden rescue strategy» the day before yesterday, where he had picked up Utai, who had appeared in the center of the altar, from the south. However, one thing that was different was that unlike Utai, who was on the ground, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko were still maintaining an approximate elevation of twenty meters. From here, they still had the leeway to change their direction toward their sole escape route—namely, straight up.

Abruptly, their surroundings were stained a deep crimson. Suzaku had fired his flame breath at last. An overwhelming torrent of heat-attribute

damage was imminent; if they took that hit directly, no matter what kind of Burst Linkers they were they would not elude evaporation.

"G...rrr..."

Clenching his teeth and bearing it, Haruyuki soared vertically with all the power he had.

Tch; the tips of his toes had grazed something. In one gulp, over a tenth of his health gauge was scraped away. He had probably touched not the main body of the breath but its surrounding damage zone, but he did not look down. He only glared at the cloudy blue-black sky of the «Demonic City» stage and flew.

Even the slightest deviation from his path would not be tolerated. The reason was that super-gravity had been set on the left and right of the large bridge, which was a flight-prohibited zone, and invisible barriers extended infinitely along the gate of the Imperial Palace as well as the sky above the castle walls. The instant he touched those, his flight would be impeded, and they would fall.

What was permitted was only perfectly vertical ascension. He would fly straight up as far as he could fly, cutting off Suzaku's target. After that, he would draw a large arc due south, fall down, and escape to the south side of the large bridge—.

Passing through the wind that howled like a dog, Kuroyukihime's whisper resounded at his right ear's side.

"...Good grief, you really..."

Following that, at his left ear was Fuuko's suppressed laugh.

"Fufu.., somehow, I had the feeling it would turn out like this."

"I'm sorry...after we return, I will fully apologize!"

Answering like that in the same manner as that of the day before yesterday, Haruyuki made the silver wings on his back quiver even more—

"Ah...!"

The one who had shouted was Fuuko. Feeling that something was abnormal, this time Haruyuki reflexively looked down.

The figure of the huge bird clad in flames could be seen to be surprisingly near. However, why. Though they had already reached an altitude near three hundred meters.

Basically—he had chased after them. The Divine Beast Suzaku, the protector beast who supposedly would not leave the south large bridge, its territory, was also ascending himself and was tailing Haruyuki and company.

The one remaining left eye of the enemy was narrowed as if sneering at them. Inside Haruyuki's mind, a grave voice reverberated.

—Foolish.

—You cannot escape from my twin wings with those sham wings.

At the same time, Suzaku violently rang his wings, which were extended out twenty meters from side to side. His massive frame steadily accelerated, and the distance between them shortened.

“Kk...!”

Glaring straight up again, Haruyuki tried to raise his speed further.

However, immediately after, he noticed a terrible truth.

His special technique gauge, which was supposed to have been fully charged when he had taken off inside the Imperial Palace, was already beginning to be depleted. However, if he thought about it that too was obvious. He had continued to fly all-out carrying first Utai, then Kuroyukihime and Fuuko; even if his gauge were consumed at a pace even several times faster than that of when he flew solo, it wouldn't be odd.

—However, if his thrust were lost here, they would rapidly be burnt by Suzaku's flames, and the three of them would die all together. And then their respawn point was directly under, basically the altar before the Imperial Palace's south gate. Without a doubt, all of them would fall into the state of infinite EK.

While fixing his eyes on his special technique gauge, which was vanishing at a fearsome speed dot by dot, with a momentary thought Haruyuki examined all the action options he had.

Letting just Kuroyukihime and Fuuko escape? —Impossible. If they fell from this height, they would die instantly from the fall damage, and before that they would be killed by Suzaku, who was chasing them from directly below.

Escape south right now with a loop turn? —Impossible. In a state of being targeted by Suzaku, even if they turned, before they managed to reach the surface they would just take a direct breath blow.

Having the two of them attack Silver Crow on purpose and having his special technique gauge charged again? —Impossible. If their speed slackened even slightly when he received damage, they would rapidly be seized by Suzaku's attack range.

They could only fly.

Even if his gauge were exhausted. Even if it was proclaimed that in the Brain Burst program, flight greater than this was not permitted. He would fly, destroying the system's limits with the power of imagination and overwrite the phenomenon of inability to fly.

Image. A true image of «soaring».

The sole and greatest power conferred to the duel avatar «Silver Crow» of «flight ability» had, in the Accelerated World, taken the shape of the emotional trauma that Haruyuki had always continued to carry.

His trauma was, namely, the feeling of wanting to run away. Cutting himself loose from the ground, which was full of things he detested, and

wanting to go a place that was high to the ends of the world, far to the ends of the world. Wanting to go to a world that shook off anything and everything and where only the speed of light existed. And then, wanting to forget everything.

However—.

At present, Haruyuki was questioning whether that was really «flying».

There was no bird that could continue to fly forever. They all ate, slept, and accumulated strength in order to fly for a while. Living to fly. Flying to live. Those two were one and were inseparable.

If so, even without wings at their backs, people in the real world too could definitely fly. Carrying what they were aiming for and what they wanted to overcome in their hearts, forming an image of those things' realization, and advancing one step, one step at a time. Not facing downward and being swept along from day to day while harboring discontent but looking fixedly at the sky—the place they wanted to reach someday, and actively stepping forth. When they could do that, people would undoubtedly make their invisible wings flutter and would fly.

“...Fly...!”

While staring with all his heart at the sky of the Unlimited Neutral Field swirling with dark clouds, Haruyuki yelled briefly.

Not causing his propulsion-use objects, his so-called metallic fins, to vibrate due to numerical energy, his so-to-speak special technique gauge—.

Making the wings produced from his own heart beat due to the power of his image and flying.

In the past, at the apex of the Old Tokyo Tower, Fuuko, who had first initiated Haruyuki into the Incarnate system, had said it. That “If it’s you, then one day you may become able to fly in the sky with Mind Power alone. However, it will take an unbelievably long time for that.”

As both a Burst Linker and a user of Mind Power, Haruyuki was still a fledgling. Neither his training nor his experience was sufficient at all.

However, if he were to fly, then it was now. If he were unable to fly now, then for what purpose had he been born crowned with the name of «Silver Crow»^[38]?

Imagine. Imagine. The meaning of flying. The meaning of kicking the ground and aiming for the sky.

In Haruyuki’s vision, the phantom of a small scops owl flapping its white wings and soaring twinkled.

“—Fly, Crow!!”

At his right side, Kuroyukihime.

“Fly, Karasu-san!!”

At his left side, Fuuko shouted.

They all melted together into one silver imagination, ran through Haruyuki's body, and cohered at both his shoulder blades. And then, with the eyes in his heart, Haruyuki watched them. The ten metal fins extending from Silver Crow's back sparkling dazzlingly, changing shape, and being overwritten into genuine «wings» resembling those of birds of prey.

"Wh...o...ooooooooa—!!"

At the same time Haruyuki bellowed, the last dot of his special technique gauge ran out. However, the thrust accelerating his entire body toward the sky did not disappear.

Flapping his wings, which were shining in a glaring silver color, with all the power he had, Haruyuki sonorously intoned the name of a new Incarnate technique welling up from the depths of his heart.

"—«Light...Speed^[39]»—!!"

Pah...his entire vision was surrounded in a silver resplendence. He approached the phantom of the scops owl flying slightly ahead, touched it, and assimilated with it. While carrying two duel avatars, with a fearsome acceleration he had not experienced before Haruyuki soared. The thick clouds of the «Demonic City» stager drew rapidly near, and with a slight feeling of resistance he rushed into them.

The landscape was lost and was blotted out into a monochromatic deep gray. However, immediately a crimson light shone from below. Suzaku was pursuing them even further. The enemy's ascension speed was also clearly increasing. The two bodies of contrasting size in flight vertically pierced the sky of the Accelerated World while drawing silver and crimson paths—.

A number of seconds later, suddenly his view became clear.

An unbounded sky tinged azure that seemed to absorb them. Below, a pure white sea of clouds that stretched out to the ends of the world. He could no longer even imagine how many hundreds, no, thousands of meters high their altitude was. However, Haruyuki flapped his silver wings still more powerfully.

With a sound of impact like a *bo*, a vast hole was opened in the sea of clouds below. From its depths, what appeared was a giant bird clad in flames that blazed a still greater bright red. Filling one eye to the brim with the volition of burning the trespassers who had twice invaded his territory to ashes by any means, the Divine Beast Suzaku plunged forth at almost the same speed as Haruyuki, who was flying with the power of Mind Power.

—As you desire...follow me if you can!!

Roaring inside his mind, Haruyuki squeezed out all the imagination that he had and beat his silver wings.



The tint of his surroundings gradually changed. From azure to ultramarine, and then to black. Beyond, a number of miniscule points of light flickered. They were stars.

Furthermore, he noticed narrow silver threads glittering vertically in a space separated far from him to his front right. That was—the «Hermes Cord». It was the low-orbit-class space elevator that went around at a super-high altitude in the Accelerated World. It was probably just traveling in the Tokyo vicinity.

Before long, his ascension speed gradually began to become dull. Haruyuki's Mind Power had not weakened. It was not that; they had reached the limiting altitude of his «wings».

As much as he tried to override things with his imagination, as long as the propulsion engine extending from Haruyuki's back was wings, he could not fly without air. That was right—here was already nearly outer space.

The deep crimson brilliance below them hot on their heels sharply weakened. At the same time, a roar filled with rage from the great bird swayed the very thin air.

While stopping the beating of his wings and ascending leisurely with only inertia, Haruyuki looked down. The flames covering at all times the entire body of the Divine Beast Suzaku, who had closely tailed the three of them up to here, had nearly disappeared. It was because the surrounding

oxygen was quite thin. His feathers, which had become exposed and were a glossy red, were covered in white frost from their tips—.

“—Now’s our chance!”

All of a sudden, Kuroyukihime had shouted.

“Crow, let go! Raker, you can fly right!?”

Haruyuki reflexively opened up his arms, and in the world that had nearly no gravity, the jet black and light blue avatars drifted lightly. Fuuko nodded firmly, and turned her back to Kuroyukihime.

“Of course, Lotus!”

“All right!”

Black Lotus securely held Sky Raker’s back with her legs. With a turn, Raker changed the orientation of her body and lit a blue light at the nozzle of the Enhanced Armament that was recharged to the extent where there was an energy gauge.

“—Let’s go!!”

Briefly announcing that, Fuuko unhesitatingly opened her booster full throttle.

While trailing blue-white flames, the two integrated avatars aimed at the Divine Beast who was cruising below and charged fiercely. Different from Haruyuki’s wings, the «Gale Thruster» that Sky Raker possessed was an

energy-jet-type propulsion engine. Only she could fly even in space, where there was no atmosphere.

While the Divine Beast Suzaku caused his left eye to burn with a dreadful rage, he widened both his half-frozen wings and tried to engage the two. However, however much he flapped his wings his massive frame hardly moved. Giving up on advancing forward, he opened his beak and tried to emit a flame breath, but even preheating it seemed to take more time than on the ground.

“Too slow!!”

Kuroyukihime gave a cry, opened the swords of her two arms wide at Fuuko’s back, and in that state drew them tight backward in the shape of the letter V. It was a motion Haruyuki was seeing for the first time. Her twin swords were enveloped in a white-blue splendor that reminded him of fixed stars.

“HA...AAAAA...!”

A relentless shout of vigor poured forth, and her arms’ aura focused at several points of light. They were eight apiece in number left and right; in total, sixteen. Accompanied by the confluence of light that was just like an enormous constellation, Kuroyukihime made her voice, which seemed to reach the ends of the universe, resound in a dignified manner.

“«Starburst...Stream^[40]»—!!”

Her two swords struck alternately at a speed so great his eyes did not catch them. With each blow, a «star» that shone blue-white was fired one at a time, became a meteor, and directly hit Suzaku, who was far in the distance. Each time, a tremendous impact boomed and rocked Haruyuki's body.

At the meteors, which had ridden even Sky Raker's super-accelerated energy, were fired into him one after another, even the Divine Beast Suzaku had to strew about a shrill scream. From the huge body of the enemy who had lost his armor of flames, bright red feathers and damage scattered in huge quantities. Suzaku's health gauge, which was also displayed in Haruyuki's vision and reached five levels, was being whittled away at a momentum that made him doubt his eyes.

"HI...YAAAAA!!"

Without ceasing, Kuroyukihime's twin swords flashed and fired forth the meteors her Mind Power had produced like a rapid-fire gun. Ten hits. Eleven hits. A number of huge holes had already been drilled through both of Suzaku's wings, and his torso and tail were also being torn up here and there. However, the flames of indignation smoldering in his left eye did not vanish. Even while receiving enormous damage, he opened his bill wide and forcibly tried to discharge a flame breath.

"—Ohhh!"

Haruyuki also reflexively roared and drew his right hand tight. He scraped an image of light together from his whole body, condensed it at a single point, changed it into a lance of light—and released it.

“«Laser Lance»!!”

The lance, which had become a streak of light and had run through the cosmos, overtook Kuroyukihime from the right side and hit Suzaku’s left eye without straying from its mark.

The breath’s flames, on the verge of being released, wavered, and in the momentary chance that was born, Kuroyukihime fired the final—the sixteenth star with an ear-splitting roar. Its light, which soared through the heavens while trailing a tail resembling a comet, made a direct impact on Suzaku’s oral cavity and caused the super-intense heat energy of his flame breath to spontaneously discharge...

A red light stained his entire field of vision.

An awfully huge fireball that seemed like a second sun was born, and immediately after an overwhelming torrent of energy dispersed in all directions.

With his outstretched two hands, with all his might Haruyuki seized the bodies of Kuroyukihime and Fuuko, who had been pushed back by the shock wave. He again carried them tightly at his left and right, received the flow of energy with the wings at his back, and changed it to thrust. It was a phenomenon where it just seemed as if Suzaku himself had

exploded, but the last one of their enemy's health gauges was still about halfway remaining. They should not approach him recklessly.

Haruyuki drew a great arc, circled around the fireball, and entered a course descending toward the surface of the earth.

The red light gradually faded, and the figure of the huge bird on the brink of death became exposed. His dignity of a «god» had already disappeared; he only weakly flapped his wings, which were wounded and were in pieces.

—If we're to defeat him, how about now!?

For an instant, Haruyuki thought that. However, immediately after, a strange light wrapped up Suzaku's massive body. A triple aura of white, blue, and black. As he wondered what on earth that was and opened his eyes wide, before him—a further superphenomenon occurred. Suzaku's injuries were rapidly mended from their extremities. His health gauge, which had lost ninety percent of its total, also began to recover rapidly.

"...I surely hadn't thought that the support of the other «Divine Beasts» would reach outer space..."

At Kuroyukihime's whispering voice, he finally recalled something. The four super-class enemies guarding the gates of the four cardinal directions of the Imperial Palace were mutually linked. Even if they attacked one and dealt one damage, if the other three were not in the middle of fighting they would help the one infinitely recover with their support ability.

“Chasing him too far is useless, Karasu-san.”

In response to Fuuko’s words, Haruyuki nodded. Today’s objective was not to defeat Suzaku but to get out of his territory. Fluttering his two wings, which were still enveloped in a silver Over-Ray, he seized the thin air and switched over to vertical descent. The surrounding darkness shifted from darkness quickly to ultramarine and then to a clear azure.

Before long, they drew near the thick sea of clouds, and they dived in headfirst. Passing through the gray veil, they went toward the sky of the «Demonic City» stage. Far below, the large castle enclosed by perfectly circular castle walls and the bridge extending straight out from its south gate were visible. Haruyuki sighted the figures of three small people greatly waving their hands at the south end of the bridge.

At a hundred meters in the sky overhead the large bridge, he changed the orientation of his body and transferred to a leisurely glide feetfirst. Prudently manipulating his wings such that they did not jut out to the left or right of the bridge, he aimed for the ground with the greatest speed possible. The tile pattern covering the surface of the large bridge floated up, and its resolution increased—

At last, the tiptoes of Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime, and Fuuko simultaneously touched the bridge’s surface.

That was the south tip of the large bridge, basically, a spot one meter from the boundary of the territory of the Divine Beast Suzaku.

Before his eyes were the smiles of his three comrades. The small-build *miko* Ardor Maiden, who stood at the right end, had probably also already recovered with Chiyuri's special technique gauge; she was extending out her restored left and right arms straight out before her.

The three people consisting of Haruyuki and company advanced one step, two steps, and then three steps, and left the bridge.

"Welcome back."

Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, and Haruyuki replied with voices in unison.

"...We're back."

And then they finally took another step forward—.

Haruyuki and Takumu. Kuroyukihime and Chiyuri. And then Fuuko and Utai hugged each other with all their strength. At the same time, from the skies overhead, at the «altar» in the distance a pillar of red light towered, was absorbed into the ground in that state, and disappeared.

At this instant, the «Ardor Maiden rescue operation» as well as the «Imperial Palace escape operation» by all hands of the black legion, Nega Nebulas, ended completely.

Chapter 11

At the same time his Over-Ray disappeared, Haruyuki's wings returned to their original metallic fins. They were folded automatically and were stored in the interior of a cover-shaped protuberance. After softly casting words of gratitude in the back of his mind to his twin wings, Haruyuki looked at the faces of his comrade anew in order.

As if they had seen through Haruyuki crying on the inside of his mirror surface visor, all of them were laughing kindly with smiles. However, just now it seemed that there was no need to look down to hide his embarrassment. The reason was that the existence of the *miko* smiling in front of him was the realization of an indescribably huge miracle.

That was right. The «world-destroying conflagration *miko*» Ardor Maiden, who had been sealed at the south gate of the Imperial Palace in the Unlimited Neutral Field over a period of two years, had been released at last now. At this rate, if they moved a mere hundred meters south and passed through the portal established in the inner court of the triangular building—the real-world Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, Utai would be able to return to the real world normally together with her own alter ego.

"...You've done it, Haru."

The one who had said that anew with a smile was Lime Bell—Chiyuri. Gazing at her eye lenses, which were filled with transparent drops, with an effort Haruyuki returned some words.

“Unh. —Thank you, Chiyu. Thank you, everyone...”

That moment, he seemed about to have the power drain straight out from his legs and sink to the floor there, but hurriedly he replanted his feet. It was too early to feel exhausted. There still remained one, no, two things he needed to do.

First, the purification of the «Disaster Armor» dwelling within Haruyuki. If they succeeded in that, the fear of being designated with a bounty by the Six Kings would also disappear. At the same time, the repeating disaster cycle would also finally be cut off.

When the purification ended, the joint training with Sky Raker’s «child», Ash Roller, who desired to acquire the Incarnate system, was waiting next. He could not even imagine what kind of Mind Power Ash would embody, but no doubt with a showy technique he would cause everyone’s nerves to—...

“H, huh?”

Having thought that far then, Haruyuki finally noticed that the skull face of that end-of-century rider did not exist before his eyes. Shaking off the tears brimming in his eyes by blinking, he turned to Fuuko and asked.

"What's happened to Ash-san? He met up in front of my apartment house in Sugunami and came this far together with us, right? ...Ah, surely he didn't get cold feet from seeing Suzaku and run away or something..."

He had added the end of his sentence thirty percent in seriousness and seventy percent as a joke, but however Fuuko did not laugh. Far from that, she bit her lip, and a seemingly anxious tint rose up in her eye lenses.

"...About that, the truth is...we, we were not able to meet up with that child."

"Eh...wh, what do you mean...?"

Ash Roller should have dived from Fuuko's car parked in the underground parking lot of Haruyuki's real-world apartment house. The horizontal-direction distance between them was nearly zero. It seemed easy to meet up in front of the building.

Takumu explained it to the bewildered Haruyuki in a reserved voice.

"About that, Haru. In front of the apartment house, there were only tire tracks seemingly left behind by Ash Roller's bike; no matter how many dozens of minutes we waited, the person himself didn't appear..."

"Tire tracks...? Then, did he move to the Imperial Palace by himself, unable to wait...and get lost on the path somewhere...?"

"No...that's difficult to consider."

This time, Fuuko lightly shook her head.

“That child should know the route from Suginami to the imperial residence well. The path of the Demonic City stage is also easy to understand; it seems unlikely that Ash got lost.”

“Besides that, Haruyuki-kun. We tentatively did try to follow the tire tracks as much as we could, but it seemed that they kept going south from the apartment house.”

Kuroyukihime murmured that while crossing the swords of her arms before her chest. True enough, that was out of the ordinary. If one were to head for the imperial residence from Suginami, then even if one went south one would have to turn to the east soon.

Suddenly—.

An apprehension that seemed to block his breathing assaulted Haruyuki.

Ash Roller did have his whimsical points, but he was not the guy to stand someone up. In the first place, his master and parent Sky Raker was also included among the people he had arranged to meet. Even if he saw small-class enemies that seemed easy to defeat from afar, it was unthinkable that he would do something like chase after them with his bike.

In that case—«something» had happened. Probably, while standing by in the underground parking lot. Due to a situation so urgent he could not even wait to join up with Fuuko and the others, Ash had run south. And then, there a further something had occurred.

Also, two and a half hours had already elapsed since Haruyuki and company had dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field. And then if Ash had dived a mere minute earlier than the appointed seven o'clock in the evening, it would amount to a calculation of him having already spent ten-odd hours in this world.

"Uh, um...I'm, going to look for him!"

Driven on by an ineffable unease, Haruyuki again widened the metal wings on his back. Using his special technique gauge, which had been charged again during his battle in space with Suzaku, he lightly floated up.

"Haruyuki-kun, operating solo is dangerous! If we're to search, then together with everyone..."

"I'll be fine, if I find something I'll return! Senpai, you and the others, please wait in front of the Metropolitan Police Department's portal!"

Interrupting the words of Kuroyukihime, who had tried to curb him, Haruyuki took an even higher altitude.

"...Haru, if you don't return after we've waited for an hour, we'll pull the cable on the other side!"

While giving a forced laugh at Chiyuri's words, Haruyuki nodded, shouted just "Understood, I'll leave it to you!", and rose to a greater altitude in one go.

Presuming that Ash Roller had headed south from Koenji, he should be southwest of the Imperial Palace. From about fifty meters from the ground, he tried to strain his eyes, but there were many tall buildings in the Demonic City stage, and he could not see through. While raising his altitude further, he began to move slowly.

From the south of the Imperial Palace, basically Kasumigaseki, Haruyuki moved in a straight line to Akasaka and Aoyama. While flying, he scanned with all his might, but all that moved were small~medium-sized enemies. He thought about interrogating enemy hunting parties if there were any, but perhaps due to the fact that it was a weekday night, not a single sound of combat reached him.

Even if he strained his ears, he could only hear the sound of the wind blowing across the stage. However, that stillness further stirred Haruyuki's anxiety. Although he was flying at the bare minimum energy-conserving speed, moment by moment his special technique gauge decreased. And being able to use his new Incarnate technique that had just spiritually awakened a while ago, «Light Speed», was very unlikely in this state of mind.

"...Guess it can't be helped..."

Resolving himself, Haruyuki ran the risk of being discovered by hostile existences on the ground and raised his altitude. Before he was aware of it, he had reached Harajuku. Ahead here was already Yoyogi Park^[41], and south of that was Shibuya.

And then—at that moment.

Smack-dab in the middle of the wide intersection where Meiji-dori^[42] and Inokashira-dori crossed, he had the feeling that something had gleamed with a flicker. Even if he looked down again, there were neither Burst Linkers nor enemies, but just in case he opted to try descending.

Haruyuki, who had landed on the blue-black surface of the road while being cautious about his surroundings, reached his hand down to his feet and picked up the thing that seemed to be the source of the reflected light.

At first glance, it was an unidentifiable object. There was an orange hemisphere-shaped clear lens fit in the silver disk about four centimeters in diameter. There was a thin rod extending from the side of the disk, but it seemed to be snapped halfway.

“...What the heck is this...”

He murmured and twirled the mysterious part in his hand; it reflected the faint sunlight of the Demonic City stage and flickered periodically in an orange color.

That moment—Haruyuki noticed it.

This was a bike winker. To be precise, it was the very winker part that Ash Roller had made blink in order to pull a feint on Haruyuki in their duel conducted this morning on the Loop 7 road.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, objects missing from Enhanced Armaments remained for a fairly long time compared with those in the normal duel field. Some accident had probably happened when Ash Roller's bike was passing by here, and the blinker had been damaged. Looking around at his surroundings again with that conviction, he discovered some damage tracks burnt black on the surface of the walls of the buildings lined up along the south side of the road.

The orientation of the attacks was from north to south. Basically, Ash had driven from Loop 7 to this place via Inokashira-dori, at that point had been attacked by someone, and had turned south at the intersection...?

Still gripping the winker part, Haruyuki kicked the ground and flew up. The level of the dread filling his heart had already reached the area around his throat.

At the bare speed such that his gauge did not decrease steeply, he flew south along Meiji-dori. In doing so, in a mere two twenty seconds the next fallen object caught his eye. He descended to the ground and made sure of it.

There was no longer the need to be perplexed about what that was. A hub and rim fixed in place with a thin spoke. In its vicinity, a gray, thick rubber wheel. It was a bike tire. From its width, it was the front wheel.

The same black traces of attack as those he had seen a while ago were concentrated on the surrounding ground. It seemed that here the bike had taken big damage, its front wheel had fallen out, and its experienced

rider had headed south furthermore with a wheelie. However, that trick play would not continue forever.

"...Ash-san...!"

Haruyuki let out a hoarse voice and looked out to the far side of the road that extended south.

A faint sound of impact rocked the air at that time.

The surface of the walls of a mass of buildings about a hundred meters ahead shone in a flickering green color. The hard sound and the brilliance were not the explosion of an object or an attack effect. It was the death effect of a duel avatar.

".....!!"

Haruyuki, who had reflexively begun to run, switched to flying midway. He flew over the roof of the buildings and took a shortcut past the road, which gently curved left. The instant the road in the neighborhood of Miyashita Park^[43] in the Shibuya ward entered his field of vision, a profound shiver assaulted Haruyuki's entire body. His wings stiffened and arbitrarily hovered about twenty meters high in the sky.

What his eyes caught straight away was the mercilessly destroyed object whose tire, engine, frame, and muffler were strewn about that previously used to be a metallic gray American bike.

A bit ahead from there, six Burst Linkers were standing in a ring. Of course, there were not any with whom he was friendly; there were hardly

even any whose names he knew. What was common to the six was that thin auras of darkness were rising from their whole bodies. The Over-Rays of Mind Power. The sources of their energy were—the «eyes» glittering red like blood in the center of their chests. The «ISS Kits».

And then, in the center of the six people lined up in a circle was a single Burst Linker who had curled his body up and was cowering.

A sleek leather rider suit. Gaudy protectors on his shoulders and knees. And on his head, a full-face helmet equipped with a shield that imitated a skull—.

“Ash, san...?”

Haruyuki squeezed out a voice unlike one from his chest.

Deep scars were carved lengthwise and crosswise into Ash Roller’s whole body. However, why he was not trying to move was not because of the damage he had received. He was trying to protect the small light floating above the road with his avatar’s whole body as a shield.

That point of light, which flickered grass green, was the «marker» left at the spot where Burst Linkers died in the Unlimited Neutral Field. It was probably the owner of the death effect Haruyuki had felt a mere number of dozens of seconds ago. He recognized the hue of the light. That was—Ash’s friend who was like a younger brother to him, «Bush Utan», without a doubt.

In a moment, Haruyuki intuitively realized what had happened here while he and Utai were fighting hard to escape the Imperial Palace.

It was probably like this.

Ash Roller, who had been waiting for their dive time of seven in the evening inside the car parked in the underground of the real-world apartment house, had participated in the gallery of someone's duel while standing by. In that stage, he had run across Bush Utan, who was either a duelist or likewise a spectator. There, he had persuaded Utan and instructed him to meet up at the same time in the Unlimited Neutral Field. In order for him to convey something that needed to be conveyed to Utan as his big brother.

That rendezvous place was probably in the direction of Shibuya. For that reason, before joining the four members of Nega Nebulas at seven in the evening sharp in front of the apartment house, he had dived early and headed for Shibuya to bring Utan along.

However, the place and time had somewhere—probably in the duel field where he was part of the gallery been leaked to one of the equippers of the ISS Kit. They had lain in ambush in front of the Meiji Shrine in order to hunt Ash and Utan as prey. Ash, who had taken a surprise attack from an Incarnate technique of darkness, had gotten away this far with all his might even while his bike was receiving damage, but in the end his beloved bike had been destroyed. No, that was not all. If he had dived into this world slightly earlier than seven o'clock in the evening, then

Haruyuki guessed that over ten hours had already elapsed. Basically—undoubtedly, at this place he along with Bush Utan had died and been resurrected repeatedly no few number of times.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, Enhanced Armaments that had been completely lost once did not regenerate unless one carried out a relogin^[44] into the field. Even if Ash Roller lost all his health gauge, died, and respawned one hour later, the American bike in which he had invested nearly all his potential as a duel avatar would not be brought back.

In short, the Burst Linkers standing in that place had surrounded Ash Roller, who had lost practically all his combat ability, with six men and furthermore were tormenting him to death with the strength of the Mind Power of darkness the ISS Kit produced.

Again and again. Again and again. Again and again and again and again—...

“W...a, ah...”

From the throat of Haruyuki, who was hovering, a husky voice leaked out.

Without the sign of even noticing that, one of the six walked up to Ash Roller, who was crouching on the road surface. His middle-class form was rather unremarkable, but there was a slight sense of volume in his hands. Haruyuki also had the feeling that he had caught sight of him somewhere, but he could not remember his name.

"Next...it's my turn right. I wonder...does he still have points remaining?"

The avatar who had lazily put that into words clutched Ash's helmet with his large right hand from which a dusky aura was being discharged. A dull *crack!* sound reverberated, and his trademark scarface was splintered into smithereens.

The aggressor seized anew the exposed neck of the duel avatar who gave off a delicate impression considering his character and who in some respects seemed like a young boy.

With all his strength, he dragged Ash Roller, who was still trying to defend Utan's marker light, up from the road. The eyes of Ash, who had been forced to face upward, sighted Haruyuki, who had frozen on the roof of a building.

His pale green eye lenses opened wide for an instant—following that, they seemed as if they were weakly laughing. In Haruyuki's consciousness, his normally reckless and boisterous voice reverberated in a manner that tended to cut off.

...Heh heh...I made, a blunder. My bad, Crow...I made the feelings of you and Master...go to wast...

Glug. That blunt sound resounded; the assailant's left arm had deeply penetrated the middle of Ash's chest.

A pillar of gray light towered, and the thin avatar burst and scattered, rider suit and all.



While being showered in his scattered fragments, the attacker, perhaps looking at his own Install menu, slightly tilted his head and spoke.

"Oh, with one more time I'll be able to level up. It'd be nice if he remained till my next turn, huh."

Haruyuki's whole body trembled so strongly that it seemed as if it would disintegrate. His limbs, tense to their limit, creaked with a grinding sound, and underneath his helmet his teeth rang repeatedly. The voice that leaked out from his throat had collapsed and was cracked in a tone so low to the extent where he himself had never heard it.

"Ah...a, a, aaah...AAAAH..."

From head to foot, it seemed as if he were filled with liquid of quite a low temperature. No, it might have even been the super-intense heat of melted iron. At the very least, it was unmistakable that a vast emotion had been compressed and was running through his entire body in place of blood.

Rage.

Anger. A fury so great it made his view red hot. Blackish hatred. And then the impetus to destroy.

"AH...AA, A, AAAAH...!"

Shing.

That sharp metallic sound rang out from Haruyuki's hands. Silver Crow's slender ten fingers had sharpened, curved, and been enlarged like the claws of a bird of prey. At the same time, his armor color changed too. From a shining mirror silver to a chrome silver like a shadow.

...You mustn't!

...You mustn't entrust yourself to that emotion! You will disappear...!

Someone had shouted far away, very far away. However, that faint voice no longer reached Haruyuki's consciousness.

The metallic sound did not stop; Haruyuki's two arms were covered in chrome supplementary armor. Both his legs too. That form, whose edges were so effective they were atrocious, was far more sinister and looked more like that of a demon than when it had previously materialized at Hermes Cord.

Instead of the girl's voice, a voice distorted by a metallic quality resounded throughout his mind.

—I am thee. Thou art me.

—Passing through a time of eternity, now at last have I been resurrected. I am «disaster». I am «demise». I be the one who makes the sound of the bell of the end ring out to the world.

It was exactly the same as the voice he had heard after school today in the real-world Umesato Middle rear garden, but different from that time he felt no pain whatsoever. Basically, this was not negative Mind Power's

«overflow». Haruyuki himself had called *that* awake and had yearned to fuse with it.

At the same its voice rang, Haryuki called its name.

——My name is——

".....«Chrome Disaster»——!!"

That yell, which had ferociously surged forth, was the very howl of a beast that hungered for blood and desired massacre. Purple system font traversed the upper left hand of his field of vision from left to right like a flash of lightning in one go.

【YOU EQUIPPED AN ENHANCED ARMAMENT «THE DISASTER»】

While releasing a violent metallic sound, armor resembling a demon's fangs heavily covered him from his stomach to his breast. A sharp tail lengthened out in a slithery way from his back, and his two wings changed into a silhouette like some sort of weapon.

A visor in the imitation of the jaw of a beast swallowed up his smoothly round helmet from the top and bottom without leaving a gap. His view was wrapped up in a thin gray additional layer.

In the skies overhead, the dark clouds of the Demonic City stage were making an enormous whirlpool. From its center, a jet-black thunderbolt poured down together with a thunderous roar. Haruyuki received that with his outstretched right hand.

The thunderbolt stayed in his hand as it was, changed shape, and produced an object. A long sword possessing a hilt that shone black and a blade that was fiercely sharpened. A high ranking Enhanced Armament called by the name of «Star Caster» in the distant past.

That very thing was the binary star of destiny that twinkled in a bewitching manner and nestled close to the side of the sixth star «*Kaiyou*», alias the original of the Disaster Armor, the Divine Weapon «The Destiny». The eighth star of the Big Dipper—.

Brandishing the cursed sword high, Haruyuki howled.

“GR...AAAAAAH!!”

That war cry was filled with rage and hatred, but as if weeping in some way, it resounded throughout the sky of the Accelerated World.

(To be continued)

Author's Notes

I am Kawahara Reki. Thank you for having read *Accel World 8: Binary Star of Destiny*.

In this volume, the ambiguous term «image power» became a key word; since I believe there are some readers for whom it just doesn't strike home, allow me to borrow this occasion to make a slight supplement.

I believe that the power of one's image, the thing called imagination, is the greatest ability that humans possess. The reason is that the power to imagine is the sole thing that is not «output in opposition to input» but output that the human consciousness can produce from zero.

Although it seems like one won't understand it right away (laughs), the point is, maybe the thing called the power to imagine isn't confined to the specialized fields of the arts, literature, science, and sports but is very important and valid even in our daily lives repeated every day. For instance, anyone who lives has lots of enjoyable things and other painful things, difficult things. I believe that perhaps in first thinking of a way to cope with them after confronting them, imagining them before the fact, and preparing to accept them, the energy required or even the result also changes.

After rising every morning, while checking that day's plans one by one, I do things in a way such that in the case I have disagreeable things or tedious things I imagine how to manage them. Whether that's actually

helping or not is not too certain (laughs), but nevertheless when one begins to actually take action, one can feel that one's resolution has been decided just a little bit. Today, after this at the dentist's my teeth will be polished, so I will imagine the *bzzz* feeling with all my might!

In addition to that, in this volume Haruyuki-kun was able to do his best in the basketball match due to his image power, but even though there was some exaggeration in that, I believe it's not a downright lie either. I'm also a person who's super-poor at exercising, but when I'm putting out the speed of my limit on my bicycle, the time that I can keep going greatly differs in whether I imagine my breathing and pedaling or not. Though I won't be exercising the Incarnate system and be putting out 60 km/h. For now. ...In the end, it seems that this has become an essay where one can't understand what's what (laughs), but if you please, everyone, please also try imagining various things! Oh, and my apologies for letting the story continue on again! Next time for sure it'll absolutely end! Really!

To my editor Miki-san (former basketball club member) and illustrator HIMA-san, I'm sorry to have caused you trouble in having my manuscript be overdue this time as well! And then all my readers, although the times are rough, while imagining the future let us try our hardest together!

2011 April 14th, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ A bamboo Japanese sword used in kendo.
2. ↑ Piece of wood near the entryway of a residence.
3. ↑ An expression said before a meal to give thanks.
4. ↑ A bed of salted rice bran used for pickling.
5. ↑ A formal sitting position in which one kneels down with feet pointed backward and sits upright.
6. ↑ Radiation Treatment Micromachine. I believe this is a term created by the author.
7. ↑ Written in Japanese kanji as 揺光 and in traditional/simplified Chinese hanzi as 瑤光/瑶光 or 搖光/摇光 respectively (there are two ways of writing it in Chinese, and then there are the traditional and simplified variants of each of those two ways of writing it). The Japanese pronunciation is *Yōkō/Youkou*. In English, it is known as Eta Ursae Majoris, a star belonging to the constellation Ursa Major.
8. ↑ SI unit of illumination.
9. ↑ Sensei (先生) is a polite honorific used for teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc. Here, Haruyuki is using it sardonically in conjunction with Takumu's surname.

10. ↑ One tatami mat is approximately 1.66 square meters, so an eight-tatami-sized room is about 13.3 square meters. A 4.5-tatami-sized room is about 7.47 square meters.
11. ↑ Vegetables sliced, pickled, and flavored with soy sauce.
12. ↑ This is a custom dating back to the Edo period, when two clans of pyrotechnicians of the same name competed annually to exhibit the better fireworks display and spectators would call out the name of their preferred guild. One possible way to translate *Tamaya* (玉屋) literally is “ball shop.” Similarly, *Kagiya* (鍵屋) would be “key shop.”
13. ↑ Sound effect.
14. ↑ *Kouhai* (後輩) means junior. Its opposite is *senpai* (先輩), “senior.”
15. ↑ In Japanese, 弟弟子/弟々子 (*otoutodeshi*) means “junior disciple,” and 兄弟子 (*anideshi*) means “senior disciple.” Literally, they mean “younger brother disciple” and “older brother disciple” respectively. Ash Roller’s term “brother disciple,” spoken in his usual nonsensical English manner, refers to the former, but without context it’s impossible to tell which of the two he meant, as in English one’s brother can be either an older brother or a younger brother.
16. ↑ *Ya* is a copula prominent in the Kansai dialect, and *wa* is a particle commonly used by both males and females in the Kansai

dialect, compared to other dialects of Japanese where *wa* is considered to be more feminine.

17. ↑ Sushi rice served in a bowl and topped with ingredients.
18. ↑ Rice flavored with vinegar and wrapped in *nori* (seaweed).
19. ↑ A type of *norimaki* with cucumber, named after the mythical kappa for its liking of cucumber.
20. ↑ Sushi with strips of gourd wrapped inside.
21. ↑ Refers to the Heian period of Japanese history from 794-1185.
22. ↑ A shrine maiden.
23. ↑ A Japanese skirt worn primarily by men.
24. ↑ A rice straw rope that delimits sacred spaces.
25. ↑ The original word used in the text is 無理そげ, which is infrequently used in Japanese to the point where I have not been able to find a dictionary entry for it in either English or Japanese. From what I could surmise, it is more or less similar to the much more common expression 無理 except to a stronger degree. Therefore, I took the liberty of translating そげ as the intensifier "hella." "Hella," derived from something along the lines of "hell of a" or "hell of," has a meaning similar to that of "very" or "really" but can serve as multiple parts of speech. It is a slang term used mainly in Northern California in the United States.

26. ↑ *Shite-kata* and *waki-kata* (also spelled without the hyphen and sometimes simply referred to as *shite* and *waki* respectively) refer to two roles in noh theater. The former plays the lead role, while the latter has a supporting role as the counterpart of the *shite-kata*.
27. ↑ As a note, the word "Mob" was written in English in the original text and capitalized.
28. ↑ A slang term perhaps originating from the word "aggravation" or "aggression" that refers in gaming to the initiative of an NPC (non-player character) to attack without necessarily having been attacked first. Can be used as a noun, adjective, or verb. This term and the aforementioned term "mob" are both used in a gaming sense.
29. ↑ See footnotes below regarding "aggro" and "hate."
30. ↑ A *wakyuu* (和弓) is a Japanese bow, sometimes also referred to as *yumi* (弓) in English, though in Japanese this term usually refers to bows in general.
31. ↑ Here, hate is used in a sense similar to that of the aforementioned "aggro."
32. ↑ *Tabi* (足袋) are Japanese socks with a division between the big toe and the other toes.

33. ↑ This line and the one that follows are from a noh play concerning the Chinese military leader Xiang Yu (traditional/simplified Chinese: 項羽/项羽, Japanese: 項羽, *Kouu*), also known as Xiang Ji (traditional/simplified Chinese: 項籍/項籍, Japanese: 項籍, *Kouseki*).
34. ↑ This line and the one that follows are from a poem in the Ryojin Hisho (梁塵秘抄), a collection of songs in the imayo (今様) style.
35. ↑ A *waka* (和歌) is a classical Japanese poem.
36. ↑ First-person shooter.
37. ↑ Adventure game.
38. ↑ Here, his avatar name is written as 白銀の鴉, "Crow of Silver," different from the customary シルバー・クロウ.
39. ↑ The kanji, 光速翼, literally mean "Light Speed Wings."
40. ↑ The kanji, 星光連続撃, literally mean "Starlight Continuous Attack."
41. ↑ Also called Yoyogi-koen (*Kouen*, 公園, means park).
42. ↑ The suffix *-dori* means "street" or "avenue."
43. ↑ Like Yoyogi-koen, it is also referred to as Miyashita-koen.
44. ↑ Written as "leave and dive again" (離脱・再ダイク) with "relogin" in furigana.