



# ワールド

# アクセラル

09

七千年の祈り

川原 礫  
イラスト/HIMA

▶▶ accel World 09

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 電撃文庫



アクセル・ワールド 09  
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川原 礫  
イラスト/HIMA  
デザイン/ビィピィ

# Green Grande

The «Green King», one of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color». Possesses the giant shield «The Strife», one of the «Seven Arcs», and is nicknamed «Invulnerable».

「Gu... rgh, ROAHHH!!!」

# Silver Crow

A boy on the lowest rung of the middle school totem pole. Haruyuki's duel avatar. Corrupted by the «Disaster Armor».



Rin

A mysterious girl who stopped Haruyuki when he fled from his own home.

「..... I love you.」

「W-Why...would you love someone like...」



# Kuroyukihime

The Student Council Vice President at Umesato Middle School, controlling the «Black King» Black Lotus.

「Haruyuki-kun. You are my property. I will never give up. I will never allow myself to lose you. Ever.」

「..... Senpai」





「— This is my choice.  
Please...vanish from this  
world.」

「.....How can.....that...」

## Ability / Special Skill List for the «Disaster Armor»

# ENHANCED ARMAMENT

### «Health Absorption (Drain)»

Absorb HP from attacked avatars and charge own HP. An ability inherent to the «Armor».

### «Future Prediction Calculation»

Analyze and scan the enemy's attack, and display its type, range, threat level, attack trajectory, and related information into the user's vision. An ability inherent to the «Armor».

### «Star Caster»

A viciously large sword. An Enhanced Armament inherent to the «Armor».

### «Flash Blink»

Disintegrate into microscopic particles and transport further away via teleportation. The Special Skill of the first generation «Chrome Disaster» — «Chrome Falcon».

### «Flame Breath»

Spray flames from mouth to attack the target. Can set enemies alight. The flames will continuously damage the enemy before being extinguished. The Special Skill of the second generation «Chrome Disaster».

### «Wire Hook»

Shoot ultra-thin steel strands from palms that transform into «hooks» upon striking a target, which can then be used to pull the target over. Very long range. Can also hook immobile «structures» to swing off them and boost own speed. The Special Skill of the fifth generation «Chrome Disaster» — «Cherry Rook».

### «High Speed Flight»

Wings growing on back can transform the user into the only avatar capable of flight. The Special Skill of the sixth generation «Chrome Disaster» — «Silver Crow».

### «Laser Sword»

Harden arm into a sharp blade to slash at enemies. Range Enhanced, increasing a small portion of effective attack range. An Incarnate Skill of the sixth generation «Chrome Disaster» — «Silver Crow».

### «Laser Lance»

Harden arm into a sharp spear to pierce enemies. Longer range than «Laser Sword». The An Incarnate Skill of the sixth generation «Chrome Disaster» — «Silver Crow».

# ACCEL WORLD <sup>09</sup>

The Seven Thousand Year Prayer

Reki Kawahara  
Illustrator / HIMA  
Design / beep



■ **Kuroyukihime** = The Vice President of the Umesato Middle School Student Council. A tidy, intelligent, proper young lady whose true identity is unknown. Her in-school avatar is a self-programmed “Black Swallowtail Butterfly”, and her duel avatar is the «Black King» “Black Lotus” (Level 9).

■ **Haruyuki** = Arita Haruyuki. A first year at Umesato Middle School. Slightly overweight, and a target of bullying. Highly skilled at video games, but an introvert. His in-school avatar is a “Pink Pig”, and his duel avatar is “Silver Crow” (Level 5).

■ **Chiyuri** = Kurashima Chiyuri. An energetic, “nosy parker” girl who has known Haruyuki since they were children. Her in-school avatar is the “Silver Cat”, and her duel avatar is “Lime Bell” (Level 4).

■ **Takumu** = Mayuzumi Takumu. Has known Haruyuki and Chiyuri since they were children. Skilled at kendo. His duel avatar is “Cyan Pile” (Level 5).

■ **Fuuko** = Kurasaki Fuuko, a highly experienced Burst Linker who was once part of the first generation of «Nega Nebulus». One of the four «Elements». For some reason, she had been living as a recluse, but under persuasion by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki, she has returned to the fight. Once taught «Incarnation» to Haruyuki. Her duel avatar is “Sky Raker” (Level 8).

■ **Uiui** = Shinomiya Utai. Part of the first generation of «Nega Nebulus». One of the four «Elements», and a fourth grade student of Matsunogi Elementary School. Can not only «Purify» with high-level curse release commands, but is also skilled at long range attacks. Her duel avatar is “Ardor Maiden” (Level 7).

■ **Neuro Linker** = A portable device that connects to the brain through a wireless quantum method and provides information for all bodily senses by way of video, audio, and so on.

■ **Brain Burst** = A Neuro Linker program transferred to Haruyuki from Kuroyukihime.

■ **Duel Avatar** = Avatars controlled by players when duelling in Brain Burst.

■ **Legion** = A group comprised of many duel avatars, with the goal of expanding territory and securing interest. Each legion is headed by the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» as legion masters.

■ **Normal Dueling Field** = A field for normal one-on-one battles in Brain Burst. Although they possess specifications close to reality, the system itself is still at the level of fighting games of the past.

■ **Unlimited Neutral Field** = A field restricted to duel avatars of Level 4 and above, targeted towards heavy players. Designed with a game system different from the Normal Dueling Field, with a degree of freedom easily comparable even to that of the VRMMOs of the future.

■ **Movement Command System** = A system that controls the avatar. The avatar is usually manipulated entirely through this system.

■ **Image Control System** = A system that controls the avatar by way of strongly imagining (Imaging) it. It possesses a mechanism that operates significantly different from the typical Movement Command System, and there are very few people who can use it. The integral part of the Incarnate System.

■ **Incarnate System** = An Image Control System that interferes with Brain Burst, a technology that induces phenomena transcending game boundaries. Also known as «Overwrite».

■ **Acceleration Research Society** = A mysterious group of Burst Linkers. They do not see «Brain Burst» as a mere game and have other plans. Members include «Black Vise» and «Rust Jigsaw».

■ **Disaster Armor** = An Enhanced Armament known as Chrome Disaster. As soon as one equips it, they will be able to use powerful skills such as «Drain» to absorb their target’s HP, and «Future Prediction» to prematurely calculate ways to evade enemy attacks. But Chrome Disaster will begin to corrode the wearer’s sanity, and dominate it completely.

■ **Star Caster** = A great, viciously-designed sword wielded by Chrome Disaster. However, its original appearance could be described as befitting of its name; it was once a dignified, gleaming sword that shined like a star.

■ **ISS Kit** = Abbreviation for Incarnate System Study. With this Kit, any Burst Linker can use the «Incarnate System». It presents itself in a set location on the avatar’s body with a red «eye», emanating a black aura — representing the «Over-Ray» of «Incarnation».

■ **Seven Arcs** = The seven most powerful Enhanced Armaments in the «Accelerated World». These include the great sword «The Impulse», the khakkhara «The Tempest», the great shield «The Strife», the amorphous «The Luminary», the straight sword «The Infinity», the full-body armor «The Destiny», and the amorphous «The Fluctuating Light».

▶▶ accel World 09



## Chapter 1

**Kill.**

**Kill them all.**

Only this impulse existed. It could no longer be called any sort of conscious thought. Arita Haruyuki's only desires consisted of slicing off and ripping apart the arms, legs, and heads of his enemies, and blasting them into scattered fragments. They transformed into chilling flames, coursing all over his body.

*“Gurr... “*

Uttering a low, bestial growl, he renewed his grip on the great sword at his right.

The pure silver color of the duel avatar Silver Crow had completely vanished, replaced with a chrome silver splotted with vicious black stains. The shape of the armor had also been drastically transformed: the once slender, flat limbs were now encircled with sharp rings composed of metallic parts, and his body was no exception. However, the most sinister part was still the helmet engulfing his round head, resembling the jaws of a carnivorous beast. A visor lined with tooth-like spikes completely obscured his face, replacing the mirror-surfaced shield. This armor was not merely an installable item – referred to as an “Enhanced Armament” in the fighting game, Brain Burst.

The Seven Arcs, also known as the «Seven Star Armaments», were the strongest weapons in the game. Theta, representing the sixth star, was the armor «The Destiny». It had been distorted by the deep-rooted anger and sorrow of a Burst Linker and had fused with the gigantic sword «Star Caster», a high-level armament, to become the «Disaster Armor». This legendary Enhanced Armament, «The Disaster», having transcended the realm of an Arc, had wrought much destruction since the dawn of the Accelerated World, and even after times of subjugation against it, it would not disappear completely, continuously reviving itself. Now, it was currently wrapped tightly around the body of Silver Crow.

No, the phenomenon had surpassed “summoning” or “installing”, let alone “wrapping”. It could almost be said that Haruyuki was the armor, and the armor was Haruyuki. The destructive will stored in the Disaster Armor unified with Haruyuki’s consciousness. He could no longer hear the voices of reason he’d heard in the past.

Instead, Haruyuki uttered a deep whisper, charged with his own willpower.

*“You bastards... I’m gonna kill you all.”*

Fully spreading his demonically silhouetted wings, Haruyuki hovered over Miyashita Park on Meiji Street in Shibuya Ward, currently in the form of the Demonic City stage. He looked down upon six Burst Linkers, who were standing in a circle and looking up at the intruder.

In the center of the circle were two sources of weak, shimmering light.

One of them was grass-green in color, and the other grey. These were «grave markers», appearing at the spot where Burst Linkers died in the Unlimited Neutral Field. The grass-green one belonged to Bush Utan, a member of Great Wall, the Green legion; the grey one belonged to Ash Roller, a brother-like friend of Utan, and Haruyuki's longtime rival.

Five of the six men surrounding and torturing the pair to death were new faces to Haruyuki. However, one of them, who had finished off Ash Roller minutes ago, was an avatar that he remembered.

Despite the fact that he was thin and his back was just averagely muscular, the avatar's hands seemed to be packed with volume. His armor was a dark brown-green. His name was Olive Glove, he was one of the core members of Great Wall, and he had partnered with Bush Utan a few days ago. He knew Ash, without question. No, they should even have been friends at the time.

Even so, without showing hesitation or any sort of similar emotion, he had pierced through Ash's heart, attempting to drain all of his Burst Points and erase him forever from the Accelerated World.

Slight surprise spilled from the face masks of Olive Glove and the other five when they looked up at Haruyuki; upon their chests were installed mysterious, identical objects resembling eyeball-like creatures.

Granting its installers the ability to control the Incarnate System's excessive power, the ISS Kit amplified their negative emotions, distorting their personalities in exchange. The six Burst Linkers were now dominated by the Kits, and this had been their reason for, without hesitation, assaulting Ash Roller, a senior in the legion, and Bush Utan, also a Kit user.

But Haruyuki no longer cared about these things.

Ash Roller was, after all, an enemy from another legion. Although his parent was Sky Raker, vice commander of Nega Nebulus, Haruyuki had never seen him in real life.

But —

Ever since he had become a Burst Linker, for his very first duel, very first defeat, and very first victory, his opponent had been Ash each time.

No matter what, Ash fully enjoyed Brain Burst as a normal duelling game, and he had, in a sense, become spiritual sustenance for Haruyuki. When Haruyuki fell upon hard times or when he lost himself, that manly fighting style and the strong blast of exhaust from his American bike would always pull him back onto the Burst Linker's righteous path. Duelling with him always got Haruyuki fired up and made him content.

But, these six men had been repeatedly murdering Ash with the crushing advantage of Incarnation and strength in numbers; Haruyuki only felt hatred

towards them. This hatred and fury had awakened the Disaster Armor, even though countless efforts had been spent reducing it to a seed state. It conflicted drastically with Haruyuki's righteousness as a Burst Linker, though he could no longer be aware of it.

Haruyuki raised his sharp, gigantic sword up high, scattering black sparks midair.

Taking that action as an aggressive one, the six men on the ground, including Olive Glove, raised their right hands against him with utter calm.

Their differently-sized palms were wrapped in the same muddy-dark aura of Over-Ray. Darkness dripping like slime quickly thickened, warping its surrounding space, exhibiting the terrifying power within.

Meanwhile, on top of an additional grey layer laid over Haruyuki's vision, red English text ran quickly across it — «Attack Prediction / Incarnate Attack | Enhanced Range, Enhanced Power / Void Energy Type | Threat Level / 10»

From those six palms, transparent red lines silently extended. These were not actual attacks but predictions of them, shown only in Haruyuki's vision, based on the massive database of duelling experience accumulated by the armor.

Running in a straight line from a distant position, these straightforward attacks aiming at his chest were easy to evade.

However, Haruyuki didn't bother moving even a millimeter. Instead, he tightened his right hand's grip on his sword. The jet-black aura enveloping the blade shivered powerfully. Its color might have somehow seemed like that of the six opponents on land, but specifically, theirs was slime while Haruyuki's were flames: flames of absolute zero, with overlapping barbarous fury and a condensed urge to slaughter.

The Burst Linkers on the ground bent their right fingers for a moment, then stretched them as far as they could. In unison, they called out a skill name:

“Dark Shot!”

It was one of the two basic skills that Burst Linkers would learn upon installing the ISS Kit. Three days ago, Bush Utan had released a dark beam from his right hand and destroyed one of Haruyuki's wings as if it were a piece of paper. Now there were six of them, with the same power, coming at him and resonating like the roar of a monster.

Facing the multiplied attack that was capable of instantly vaporizing any avatar, Haruyuki waited until the six shots merged into one — and easily slashed it with the gigantic sword, Star Caster.

Blazing flames of darkness prevented the beams from even reaching the blade. A shockwave, seeming to have cracked the air itself, blasted outwards, created by a collision between Incarnate attacks of the same attribute. All of

the beams were smashed down to Haruyuki's lower right. Black flames roared from a hole that immediately formed on top of the incredibly hard geographical object of the Demonic City stage.

But Haruyuki didn't so much as look at this phenomenon. He muttered hoarsely:

"... Lousy."

It was a borrowed power, after all. Even if they were able to mechanically initiate an Overwrite phenomenon, the attacks themselves were vague. They were too light to compare with last night's Lightning Dark Spike from Takumu, whose consciousness had also been dominated by the ISS Kit. Their attacks were devoid of spirit.

What existed in the minds of Olive Glove and his allies was pure thirst, a dull impulse to seek more Burst Points, a nasty greed for an instantaneous way to secure victory at no risk.

These bastards, with such power, had tortured Ash Roller by murdering him countless times. Ash had kept himself away from the Incarnate System with the pride of a fighting game player. All he ever wanted was to be a duelling player. Even so, they had drained his Life again, and again, and again, and again.

No, it was more than that. Even Bush Utan, Ash's companion, had been hunted in spite of the close relationship they used to have with those six Burst

Linkers. This assumption was proven by how the shimmering grave markers were so close to the six, as if they were trying to make contact as friends. If none of that had happened, Ash and Utan would have been waiting for Haruyuki and his comrades at Chiyoda far to the northeast.

Today, at 7 p.m. on 20 June, 2047, the six members of Nega Nebulus decided to rescue Haruyuki/Silver Crow and Shinomiya Utai/Ardor Maiden, who were trapped deep in the Imperial Palace at the center of the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Aided by the mysterious avatar Trilead Tetraoxide, Haruyuki and Utai escaped from the southern gate. Meanwhile, as they calculated the right timing, Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Takumu, and Chiyuri were distracting Suzaku, one of the Four Gods, a super Enemy, and guardian of the southern entrance, so that Haruyuki and Utai could escape directly outwards. That was the plan.

However, it turned out that Haruyuki and Utai were unable to flee accordingly, since Suzaku emerged earlier than expected. Just as the pair was about to be burnt to ash, Kuroyukihime and Fuuko leapt into the path of the scorching flames to change Suzaku's target, even though they knew that it would put them in critical danger. However, this would lead to the worst possible outcome: both the master and vice master of the legion would die, deep in the territory of the Four Deities, becoming locked into Infinite Enemy Kill. To save the masters he so adored, Haruyuki made a 180-degree turn after entrusting an unconscious Utai to Takumu and Chiyuri.

Holding Kuroyukihime and Fuuko each in one arm, Haruyuki flew upwards, the only way out. But Suzaku kept on pursuing them, no matter how far they went. Haruyuki drained his special gauge, the energy source of his flight ability, invented a new Incarnate skill, Light Speed, and broke through the stratosphere into a world of stars.

Haruyuki and Suzaku ceased flight due to lack of air, but Fuuko, with her Gale Thruster booster, helped Kuroyukihime charge at Suzaku by carrying her on her back. The Black King then retired Suzaku with her fierce Incarnate skill, Starburst Stream. She did not finish it off, however, as Suzaku began healing itself using its Connection Between the Four Deities. Despite this, Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime, and Fuuko managed to escape the territory alive.

The six members of Nega Nebulus hugged each other tightly, basking in their rescue operation's success. But Ash Roller was not where he should have been. Hearing that Ash did not show up at the appointed gathering point, Haruyuki could not help but feel anxious. To the extent that he immediately flew out to search for him on his own, and found — no, witnessed.

He witnessed the moment of Olive Glove brutally murdering Ash Roller.

Ash was a member of Great Wall, the Green legion, and therefore should have been an enemy of Nega Nebulus. Despite this, he swallowed his pride and set up a gathering with the Black legion within the treacherous Unlimited Neutral Field to learn about the Incarnate System.

Ash had said to Haruyuki after their duel that morning: *It's not like I wanna just let loose in the Unlimited Field. If I can wake Bush Utan up in one blow, I'm done with Incarnation.*

He must have fought Bush Utan in a normal duel while he had waited, and therefore he couldn't even show up at the gathering point as planned. Certainly, he would have persuaded, or even begged Bush Utan to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field with him, thinking that this could be the best chance to lead him back onto the right track.

It appeared that Utan had accepted his persuasion, or rather, desperate pleading. He decided to give up on the ISS Kit, and hit on the right way of a Burst Linker. They must have intended to meet Nega Nebulus, including Haruyuki, in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and hung around before the rescue operation completed.

However, the six, including Olive Glove, had noticed them and laid a trap.

Haruyuki did not know whether Ash or Utan died first. What he saw was Ash embracing Utan's grave marker, as if shielding it. It would be meaningless to do that as markers were, literally, markers; a dead Burst Linker felt no pain from attacks. Still, he just couldn't help it.

If there existed a time lag between the deaths of the pair, there would undoubtedly be another between their rebirths an hour later. When one came

back to life, the other could only, as a powerless ghost, watch his companion being killed. And it repeated.

“...ivable.”

A hoarse voice slipped from Haruyuki’s mouth again.

“Unforgivable. Kill. Kill you all. I’ll kill you all until you lose all your Burst Points and disappear from this world forever.”

The inferno of absolute zero coursing through Haruyuki’s entire body continuously pressured him, wanting badly to be released. Melting fury and hatred, the flames condensed into a spirit of burning blue fire.

“... Isn’t that what you’ve been wishing for, fighting and killing each other? And in the end demolishing yourselves and the whole world? Very well; I’ll grant it for you. I, will erase you.”

The voice seeping from under the ferocious visor did not sound like Haruyuki’s anymore. It was as if another person, as vicious as a beast and as heartless as steel, resonated within him.

— No, not only that. There was one more voice that could barely be heard, and it felt... somehow distant and deep. It sounded like someone, crying in sorrow, was eagerly trying to tell him something...

However, before those words managed to reach Haruyuki, the six on the ground raised their right hands again.

Even though their six beams had been deflected once by a sword, the Burst Linkers did not seem bewildered at all. They may appear to be much stronger than was revealed at first sight, but it was an illusion of their emotions being worn away.

In place of their own emotions, the crimson eyeballs rooted in their chests stared with hatred at Haruyuki, hatred so dense that it was about to drip onto the ground. Six right arms were wrapped in thick, slimy auras of darkness. The slime contracted itself to their hands, scattering tiny black sparks into the air, making this attack look significantly more powerful than the one before.

Once more, analyses and predictions were displayed in Haruyuki's vision. This was also a long-distance attack, but this time they took a different route. Transparent red lines stretched, dimmed and spread until they engulfed Haruyuki in a hemisphere, which meant —

“Dark Shot!!”

As if one man were controlling all six avatars, they called out the name of their attack in perfect unison. The jet black beams bursting out of their hands flung a few drops of themselves into the air while heading towards Haruyuki. But they did not follow a straight line as they had before. Coursing along an irregular route, the beams were definitely darting at him.

Haruyuki spread the metal wings on his back to dash right, but the beams curved in a tight angle to chase after him. As expected, a homing attack. The beams never crossed one another, so it was impossible to counter them in a single slash. If he successfully deflected one of them, the five others would obviously hit their target. It would not be fatal, as Haruyuki's HP recovered while the armor was equipped, though it would deal severe damage.

Haruyuki turned drastically to the left, but the beams, exuding bottomless thirst, did not stop. No matter how fast Haruyuki flew, they had no means of merging into one. Had he flown at full speed, he could have outrun the beams. That would be same as escaping, however.

Obviously, Haruyuki didn't have the slightest intention of escaping. Instead, he spread his wings, stopped instantly, and looked back once he came to a hover.

The six beams flitted around each other in a sophisticated fashion while approaching him. Misinterpreting Haruyuki's move as a sign of resignation, the six smiled. As if corresponding with them, he smirked under his thick visor as well.

With the gigantic sword still in his right fist, he crossed his arms in front of his chest. Straightening himself somehow arrogantly, Haruyuki stared at the Incarnation missiles. At an altitude of roughly 30 meters, he stayed still to lure the beams to him.

Right before he was swallowed up by void energy, he whispered:

“Flash Blink.”

*Vmm!* Silver Crow, no, the Sixth Generation Chrome Disaster, disappeared, leaving behind only the noise of vibration. Losing their target, the beams spun around for a few seconds before some of them stood still and some crashed into the ground, creating explosions of dark flame —

Meanwhile, Haruyuki restored the flow of dark silvery particles into the shape of his body, right next to the six installers of the ISS Kit.

Flash Blink. A special ability that belonged to the Burst Linker who created the Disaster Armor, or, combined The Destiny with Star Caster and distorted them by cursing the Accelerated World in anger and despair. Turning one’s body into microscopic particles, the skill instantly moves one far away, resembling teleportation.

Haruyuki didn’t even know that Burst Linker’s name. Only fragments of ancient memories were left, told in the strange dream he had seen in the Imperial Palace.

There was no way he could remember how he looked or fought.

Even so, he realised. No, he *knew*. He knew he could now use that power.

Suddenly noticing Haruyuki's appearance at almost point-blank range, the duel avatar in dark armor transformed his left fingertips into five muzzles, finally revealing a surprised face.

“...Dar...”

He was about to stretch his right hand forward as he called the skill name.

His right arm, though, was not able to aim at Haruyuki; it instead pointed upwards. It rotated backwards even beyond the normal range of an arm. After a moment, a dark silver line ran vertically through the shoulder joint, separating arm from torso. The arm dropped to the ground of the Devil City stage with an annoying *gashan*.

Haruyuki had sliced off one of his enemy's arms by slashing with the gigantic sword in his right hand at super high speed.

These fighting techniques, including Flash Blink, were not supposed to be available to Haruyuki. Not only had he never learned any kendo, like Takumu/Cyan Pile had, he was an expert of empty-handed combat in the Accelerated World. He should not know how to even hold a sword, let alone swing one.

But then again, what was happening to himself was none of Haruyuki's concern. His consciousness was obsessed with the violent impulse of chopping his enemies into pieces and eliminating them from the world.

The dark brown avatar stared at his arm on the floor for a moment, and finally frowned in vague fright.

“Who the hell are you... What the hell is that power...”

Those words came from behind the mask stamped with round, goggle-like lenses. Eventually the pain caught up to the wound, and as a result he tightly pressed his left hand to his right shoulder. As though reflecting the suffering of its equipper, the eyeball within his chest — the ISS Kit that had been emitting a steady red light, began to flash erratically.

But then, the other five Kits behind Haruyuki shone red together, each with a miniscule bit of lag. As though energy had been transferred, the Kit sitting in the dark brown avatar’s chest regained its glow. It seemed that the six of them belonged to the same cluster. If several ISS Kits were connected, it meant that these clones shared similar genes, or metaphorically, they were members of the same family. Even so, they were merely connected by the same greed; no one could expect emotional bonds between their installers. The six hunting Bush Utan, despite his common Kit, proved that assumption.

— Bonds...

When this word appeared in his head, Haruyuki felt a sting deep inside. It felt like a ray of sun striking into frozen darkness. Someone’s voice was echoing from far, far away...

— *emember... There should b... bonds that y... tresu... as well... !*

But then, overwhelming rage shut out the light and voice once more. Soaked in a blizzard of wild flame, Haruyuki whispered to the brown avatar in front of him.

“I’ll erase you anyway... Declaring my identity is meaningless...”

“... Don’t talk like you’re the boss...”

Red shone deep within his eye lenses. The ISS Kit in his chest pounded like a heart, synchronising with the other five. It seemed like he no longer felt pain, which should have been amplified to a double that of a Normal Duelling Field.

The brown avatar gave a simple signal with his left hand, which he had removed from his right shoulder. Immediately, the other five moved rapidly to surround Haruyuki. Although the brown one was likely their leader, after losing one of his arms the main combatant should have switched to someone else. Mechanically deciding to crush that combatant with his next attack, Haruyuki was about to turn around.

However, he suddenly jerked to a stop. Looking down, he realised that his legs had been sinking into a glossy green liquid. From within protruded a pair of hands, each tightly seizing one of his feet.

It was similar to Ensnare, the special effect of the Cemetery Stage, but this was different. The liquid making up the hands were the melted arms of a duel avatar standing to the left. This thin avatar's simple oval mask grinned when his eyes met Haruyuki's. It was Olive Glove —

Haruyuki pointed his gigantic sword down with his right hand and stabbed the tip into the hands gripping his feet. Unexpectedly, the sharp metal simply sank through with no resistance, showing no sign of damage. By the looks of it, this ability was not only able to seize his target with crushing force; it could also nullify physical attacks. There was no prediction of it; could it be because Haruyuki had been focusing too much on the brown avatar instead?

Trapped, Haruyuki was surrounded by the other five, spaced identically between each other, who immediately raised their left hands in unison. Firm fists covered in a thick layer of slimy, muddy black aura.

“Kuku...” The brown guy laughed, and continued in a coarse voice: “We’ll drain all of your Burst Points too.”

This time, text did run across Haruyuki's vision: «Attack Prediction / Incarnate Attack | Enhanced Power / Void Energy Type | Threat Rating / 30». The red prediction lines showing up at the same time pierced straight through Haruyuki from five directions.

Swinging down their raised left fists, five men dashed forth and shouted together:

“Dark Blow!!”

Direct punches came wrapped in darkness, burning the virtual atmosphere. No matter how capable the armor was, direct hits from five power-enhancing Incarnate attacks combined would cause quite an amount of damage. However, Haruyuki stared at the approaching fists in icy calm. Incarnation only enhanced their power; their speed was no more than that of rookies. To Haruyuki, who had accumulated experience through training to avoid being shot by red-type snipers, they were so slow that he could yawn. This time, again, he waited until the last moment — right before the auras reached each other, he whispered under his visor:

“— Flash Blink.”

Leaving only a bassy vibration, the dark silver avatar vanished from where it stood. Olive Glove’s hands grabbing Haruyuki’s legs vainly crushed thin air.

He teleported a short distance, to somewhere about three metres away, reconstructing his body in the same pose. Losing their target right before their eyes, the five fists were unable to retreat and immediately smashed into one another.

A shockwave so strong it could tear sky and earth apart; a black inferno flared wildly, obscuring Haruyuki’s vision for a moment. Facing the dense energy stream pouring towards him, he made no more reaction other than turning his face away.

Appearing in his instantly recovered sight were five duel avatars rolling on the ground and moaning in agony. Their left arms had been completely vaporized up to their shoulder joints. The wounds as grisly as though their arms had been ripped off; the pain should be so intense that being even cut by his sharp sword could never compare.

“.....What.....the.”

Without so much as glancing at Olive Glove’s stunned muttering, Haruyuki moved a few steps away and placed his right foot onto one of the avatars on the ground. It was the leader of the six, clad in reddish brown armor. Now that he had lost both of his arms, he could no longer use Dark Shot or Dark Blow.

Haruyuki whispered in a deep voice to his silent enemy’s shimmering lenses: “Never lose twice to the same move.”

Let alone during a rematch someday, being tricked by the same strategy — in this case, Flash Blink — in the same fight would seem utterly foolish. The rivals Haruyuki had fought so far would have seen through the skill’s characteristics and capabilities and would immediately have adapted to it. Obviously, that would include Ash Roller.

Hunted by the group drowning themselves in easily-obtained power, throwing away fundamental duel basics and relying on numerical advantage, Ash must have felt angry out of embarrassment. When this thought came up,

Haruyuki's chest twinged once more. Though it was soon replaced out of nowhere by fury.

Not thinking about how he looked right now to Ash Roller, who was waiting in Ghost Mode to be revived, Haruyuki flexed his right leg, with sharp claws on his foot.

Underneath, he felt the beating of the ISS Kit rooted in the chest of the brown avatar. Meanwhile, a carrying scream erupted from the avatar's mouth, louder than ever.

“Guah... Gh... Hah.....”

The avatar struggled as if scratching the ground with his lost arms, but the knife-like claws of the armor stabbed into him so deeply that he could not escape. His angular armor finally cracked, throwing a vivid red light effect into the air.

Driven by fury, brutally wearing away his enemies' HP gauges, a part of Haruyuki's consciousness was still able to digitally handle thoughts as if it were an independent processing unit.

Was it possible to destroy the ISS Kits individually in this situation? If so, what would happen afterwards?

As seen before, ISS Kits were linked through invisible circuitry, but the connection was not constructed between terminals in a peer-to-peer form, but

centrally administered as a cluster server. When the Kit was destroyed, something resembling a signal would be sent to the Kit's core, which was placed somewhere in the Accelerated World — could this happen?

Feeling the beating of ISS Kit under his right foot, Haruyuki stomped on it hard, without mercy.

“Ghaah... S-stop... Gh... Aaaargh!!”

The annoying shout and distinct noise of a duel avatar breaking into fragments were heard at the same time. To the left and right of Haruyuki's foot were the upper and lower parts of the avatar's body. Just before he could utter his last cry, he burst into glowing crimson fragments. Perhaps his HP had dropped to zero quicker than he could make any more noise.

Haruyuki coldly observed the death of the avatar, murdered by him in an unnecessarily brutal way. Silver Crow's right foot had definitely stepped through the brown avatar's ISS Kit. However, judging by the lighting effect when he had been eliminated and the amount of Special Skill Gauge filled, it could be assumed that destruction to Enhanced Armaments did not occur. In other words, normal physical attacks, even if directed at the ISS Kits, would only damage their owners. Destroying the Kit itself was impossible.

As Haruyuki thought robotically, one of the enemies to his right whose left hand had been blown away finally stood up and shouted shortly:

“... Retreat! We’ll leave Cocoa Cracker here!”

Cocoa Cracker was likely the name of the avatar that Haruyuki had killed underfoot. They were a quickly-formed team; it was obvious by the time they could easily talk about abandoning their leader. The four nodded to each other and, with the exception of Olive Glove, who was at a standstill, immediately began running south together. It seemed that they intended to escape from the Leave Point in Shibuya train station, at the end of Meiji Street. As for Olive Glove, the one not moving, he seemed to be waiting for his Special Skill Gauge to recharge so that he could use his ability once more.

Haruyuki stood there and gazed at the four running away at full tilt, but he had not the slightest intention of letting them go. Stabbing into the ground with the sword in his grip, he raised his freed right hand together with his left. Spreading his sharp fingers and thumbs wide, he targeted the two at the sides among the four, and rapidly pulled his wrists back.

There was a quiet hum. A silver light came out of the small of each of his palms.

Silver particles sprinkled the surrounding air, and light crossed roughly 10 meters, hitting two of them like bullets. Almost imperceptibly silently, the centers of their backs were magnificently hit. A rusty metallic sound softly reverberated, the remaining two hesitated but quickly started to flee. Nobody wanted to receive that much damage. But...

Haruyuki pulled his arms back slightly, creating a heavy presence in the air: pressure could be felt past the two running individuals. Stomping hard on the earth, they still tried to flee with all their might, but their bodies would not move forward. Finally, they fell to the ground and began flying in the opposite direction. In actuality, they were being forcibly pulled back by extra fine steel wire, shot from Haruyuki's palms. The Disaster Armor's hidden ability: the power of «Wire Hook».

In the blink of an eye the two of them were yanked backward from the center of their backs; Haruyuki's claws took hold of them, and soon after he was holding them above him.

“L...Leggo.....!”

“The hell?! You're not even in IS Mode, where does this power come fr.....!”

The two were raging and struggling like insects stung with pins; their voices were only annoying noises to Haruyuki. He concentrated his imagination in his hands and voiced a command with barely any intonation.

“«Laser Sword».”

*Zshooooom!!* The ground was shaken by heavy vibrations. Wrapped in the «Disaster Armor», blades of Incarnation stretched from Silver Crow's arms, piercing through his captured prey. The blades did not gleam the original silver; they were shaded with jet black Over-Ray resembling a cosmic abyss.

The hearts, the critical points of the two duel avatars, were destroyed, their ribcages were ripped open and left with huge holes. Thrown roughly a meter into the air by the terrifying power, the avatars broke and shattered immediately.



As the two death effect flashes were reflected in different colors by the dark metal armor, Haruyuki relaxed his arms. Looking through the visor, there were the remaining two enemies struggling to raise their speed and escape to the portal. They were already more than 100 metres away.

Of course, Haruyuki could easily catch them using the wings on his back. But instead, he drew his sword from the earth, bent his knees, and forcibly pulled the sword over his right shoulder.

With the tip of the blade, he aimed precisely at the two. Although their silhouettes looked smaller than peas, the resolution stayed virtually the same. Perhaps this was an effect of the armor's additional visionary layer. Calmly waiting for the correct timing, just when the two silhouettes overlapped in order to run in a line —

“«Laser Lance».”

As he recited the name of the attack, he thrust forward the sword in his right hand without question. The shadowy aura transformed into a sharp spear and flew through the air. This move was almost the same as what it was based on, the «Vorpal Strike» from his master the Black King, Black Lotus. But Haruyuki paid no attention to these things, blinking to see the effects of his attack.

Right before they were able to hide far beyond the temple under Miamasuzuka on Meiji Street, the spear dug straight into the avatars' backs.

The blow skewered them, leaving holes. At first they did not realize it: inertia helped them run a few more steps before they stumbled and scattered. Haruyuki was left to listen to the sound of the blows and the distant flash indicating their deaths.

Slowly, he pulled back the blade and rested it on his shoulder, glancing at the last remaining avatar: Olive Glove.

It was not their first confrontation. Three days prior, after school on Monday, he and the «Shrine Maiden of Purifying Flames» Ardor Maiden had fought a tag-team duel in Suginami against Bush Utan and Olive Glove.

During that battle, Haruyuki could not resist the force of Utan's ISS Kit, but his companion was able to overcome Olive unharmed. Of course, she was one of the «Elements» and a former officer of Nega Nebulus, but was still unlikely to win so easily. Most likely, it was because Olive Glove had been the most important member of that battle.

Olive did not move near Haruyuki. He was not going to act, but not because he had confidence in their abilities, not because he realized that before him, Haruyuki had become the legendary destroyer, Chrome Disaster, but because he was surprised by the ease with which his comrades were dealt with. His body trembled, as if covered by a layer of moisture.

“Faster... Faster...”

He muttered under his breath, his Special Gauge needing some time to recharge, he stood still, darting his gaze back and forth.

Haruyuki dropped the sword from his shoulder onto the ground. At that exact moment, Olive acted.

“Lipid Liquid!”

The command was given in a heavy voice. His tall, thin body collapsed and melted into the floor with a *slosh*. In this form, physical attacks against him had no effect.

However, he had not lost the ability to move; he maneuvered much like a slime in other fantasy games and, given the defined landscape of the road in the Demonic City, escaping unnoticed would have been extremely difficult.

But Haruyuki would not let Olive use this skill to get away.

In the center of the green puddle was a clearly visible mound. It was easy to notice a lump of black lurking beneath its surface. The ISS Kit. Even the ability could not change the attributes of this item.

In this situation, Haruyuki intentionally followed the movement closely.

He inhaled deeply, and once his lungs were filled, he stopped... and exhaled sharply.

Scarlet flames flooded from the menacing jaws of his helmet. It was another ability, Flame Breath.

As if sensing something, the puddle tried to crawl away to the building. But the flames caught up to him. Once they made contact, the fire spilled over.

The breath of flame had finally ceased, but the puddle continued to burn. It looked as though it were made of fuel... or rather, its current form was. Olive Glove's current body was not composed of water, but oil. That was why it had lost to Ardor Maiden, who controlled the element of fire.

Even as a puddle of oil, the ability to feel sensations should not have disappeared. While burning violently, the oil moved right and left in a panic. Haruyuki remembered the pain of the breath of «Four God Suzaku», and knew how realistic pain burned in the Unlimited Neutral Field. To endure such punishment for long was almost impossible.

But, to Haruyuki in this moment, the suffering of the «enemy» was only a good thing. Once the puddle was exhausted, Haruyuki stuck his hand into the mass. Grabbing the sphere about 5 centimeters in diameter, he tore away the many threads that connected it with the body. A red eye appeared in his hand: the ISS Kit.

The rules of Enhanced Armaments were different in the Unlimited Neutral Field compared to the Normal Field. First, death and rebirth within the same

person did not return the item. To reuse it, it was necessary to withdraw from the field, and then reenter it.

Also, depending on the type of item, picking up an item and using it, or even stealing was possible. After taking the Kit as Olive burned, it remained powerless. Now he could finally destroy it, and finish off the rest of Olive's health. From the system's perspective, Olive was still there, but the right to use the item had been given to Haruyuki.

But, of course, Haruyuki was not going to use the Kit. His mission was the opposite.

He was convinced that attempts to attack the avatars of those equipped with an ISS Kit only destroyed the avatars, leaving the weapons themselves intact. So he decided to separate them, and only then attack it. Haruyuki grinned and clenched his right fist.

Razor-sharp needles dug into the surface of the iris of the eye. He immediately opened his hand, and the red pupil trembled finely.

Helplessly, the back of the eye came to life and joined, forming a sort of drill, which then attempted to pierce Haruyuki. Apparently, it had decided to leave its former owner, pass to Haruyuki instead, and subjugate him to its will. During yesterday's battle with Takumu, something similar had happened: the veined Kit had tried to pierce Silver Crow. But the powerful Disaster Armor could easily deflect the attacks.

“... Pointless.”

Haruyuki whispered, squeezing his right fist even harder.

*Bachun!* The eye was crushed to pieces, and at the time of its death, a clang like a dying cry was heard.

He hoped that the death of the ISS Kit in the Unlimited Neutral Field would have some kind of impact.

And his expectations were met. From his right hand rose a thin beam of red mist, rising high and turning ninety degrees, fleeing. The Disaster Armor and its gray screen display did not register it as a threat and paid no attention to it. Olive Glove's health finally reached its end. The avatar again took on its humanoid form and broke into pieces. But without so much as glancing at it, Haruyuki spread his wings to leave.

He was preparing to fly and chase the light beam emerging from the ISS Kit, but... Eyes suddenly appeared, two grave markers, very near each other. One green and the other gray. They were the markers of Bush Utan and Ash Roller.

His original objective coming here was to save them.

But now he had lost everything for it. He had gained a thirst for destruction and slaughter, and these six Burst Linkers would not be able to satisfy it. He knew that if he stayed here, he himself would attack Utan and Ash after their resurrection.

That is why he focused his rage on the ISS Kit. However, almost unconsciously, he turned his gaze on the two avatars, who were watching the scene as ghosts.

“After you both revive... Before these guys can revive too, get out through the portal.”

After saying that in a hoarse voice, leaving behind the intersection of the slaughter, Haruyuki flew off.

## Chapter 2

The black-blue hue of the «Demonic City» stage made it easy to identify the red light shooting out of the ISS Kit.

Hovering near the swirling, dark cloud, Haruyuki stared at the glowing object rapidly flying due east. He intended to murmur: "You're not getting away," but the only sound that leaked from his helmet was a grunt.

“*Gurah!*”

It was the roar of a Beast.

«Silver Crow» — The sixth generation «Chrome Disaster», beat his now savage, viciously-shaped metallic wings, slashing through the clouds and flying straight ahead with the wrath of a predatory bird chasing its quarry.

The boiling anger after summoning the «Disaster Armor» had dissipated at some point, replaced with a feeling of refined calmness, intensity, and something synonymous with devastation itself. Perhaps it was a phenomenon that he had induced upon his own consciousness to avoid attacking Ash Roller and the others, but Haruyuki was no longer able to realize this on his own.

At this moment, the sole forces driving Haruyuki were one resolute objective, and two pieces of knowledge.

Determination — «Never, ever forgive the users and creators of the ISS Kit.»

Knowledge One — «The group that created and disseminated the ISS Kit was the Acceleration Research Society.»

Knowledge Two — «The one responsible for the event that created the Disaster Armor was the duel avatar shaped like black plates.»

This plated avatar was Black Vise; the vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, the one who had barged in at the last moment during the battle with Dusk Taker and forced Haruyuki and his friends into a bitter battle. His tone and attitude were far too mature to be that of a student, and furthermore, he was a strong enemy capable of terrifyingly powerful Incarnate attacks. Additionally, using the «Brain Implant Chip» within his skull, he had gained the ability to «decelerate» by slowing his thought processing frequency, thus making it possible to easily set up an extended ambush despite being in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where the passage of time was one thousand times that of the real world.

It was exactly this Black Vise, who had orchestrated a brutal trap long, long ago, that had forced a Burst Linker into the world's first «Infinite Enemy Kill», a situation that led to total loss of one's Burst Points. The anger and grief caused by this incident had warped the sixth of the Seven Arcs, «The Destiny», into the Disaster Armor, «The Disaster».

Originally, it would have been impossible for Haruyuki to know of this. The birth of the Disaster Armor took place near the creation of Brain Burst: seven years ago. Comparatively, Haruyuki had only been a Burst Linker for eight months.

However, Haruyuki did not feel weird at all as endless hatred and resentment drove his limbs, all directed at the plate-like Black Vise.

— Never forgive you. Never, ever forgive you.

— These bastards who created this ISS Kit shit, bewitched Takumu's heart, hurt Ash —

— And killed her with the fangs of «Jörmungandr», again and again..... I have to find these people, and kill them all. Just like what they did that day, I'll bring them the greatest pain imaginable, killing them without stopping, until all of their Points are completely gone.

Haruyuki single-mindedly flew after the glowing red body with this ice-cold determination.

He flew eastwards from northern Shibuya, passing through Aoyama Street and a wide-open area that resembled a school in one go. The tightly packed rows of small, square stones that slowly came into view ought to be the Aoyama cemetery. The glowing object flew directly above the innumerable headstones, as though it were being sucked by something.

If that glowing object was equivalent to the «core» of the destroyed ISS Kit, then it must be traveling to where the «main body» was located.

Late last night, Haruyuki and Taku had maintained a direct connection while they slept, and were brought through the imagination circuit to the interior of the mysterious «Brain Burst Central Server».

There, he saw a «galaxy of light», comprised of all the saved/operational data of the Accelerated World intertwined together. He also saw «black flesh», the ISS Kit main body, constantly eroding the entire space from every corner.

While in that world, Haruyuki had successfully destroyed the Kit parasitizing Takumu, and had also wanted to proceed to the central server to destroy the main body as well, which shouldn't have been impossible. But come to think of it, since there was data saved in the server, that meant that the Kit's main body was also an object saved within the game. Like the «Seven Arcs», which shined brightly in the server like constellations and manifested as swords, or armor, various other forms.

But the main body of the ISS Kit ought not to be concealable in a regular duel stage, which was repeatedly generated and demolished before and after every duel. He only needed to chase down this glowing red object, and he would definitely find the whereabouts of the main body. There should be some of «those guys» appearing nearby as well; not the accursed Black Vise himself, but his cronies.

“Gurrgh...”

An irrepressible growl crept out from Haruyuki’s throat.

Now.

Now was time at last.

He had waited for an eternity as the «Disaster», parasitizing one Burst Linker’s consciousness after another, and finally, the time for vengeance had come. *I will cleave each and every one of their heads from their necks, tear them limb from limb, and pound them into mincemeat.* He cared not what happened to him afterwards, even if he lost all consciousness and transformed into a demon that slew every Burst Linker he saw, even if the Accelerated World itself were destroyed. No, only an ending like that would be fitting for this murderous, fighting world.

The wings on Haruyuki’s back threw out V-shaped shockwaves that sliced apart the thick, dark clouds not far ahead of him. The glowing red body was only a short 100 meters away, as if it were actively, desperately trying to flee.

In front of the glowing body was an exceptionally tall building. The structure was surrounded by decorative, sharp-edged columns characteristic of the Demonic City, and judging by the relative positions of the building and the roads, this was likely «Tokyo Midtown Tower», a multi-function commercial

complex located in Akasaka, Minato ward in the real world. The glowing body seemed to be slowly descending towards somewhere near the topmost floor of the building, indicating that its target was there — the «physical body» of the ISS Kits in the Unlimited Neutral Field was there.

— I'll smash it!!

As Haruyuki felt the will to destroy fill his entire body, he was about to increase his flying speed to its limit.

But at that moment —

He seemed to hear someone speak, below him and to the right. It was not a mere utterance; a skill name was being called.

“— «*Parsec Wall*».”

Haruyuki had never heard this male voice in his life; he only felt that it was as deep and solemn as a grave, stern boulder, and at the same time, his vision was filled by a yawning green light.

A wall. Countless green crosses, each larger than a person, appeared seamlessly one after another, forming a wall whose width and height were infinite and boundless. Since it was absolutely impossible to make out the height or width of the wall, trying to get around it might very well result in losing track of the glowing object that was flying away on the other side. The current number-one priority was not to identify which Burst Linker this wall

came from; it was to identify the direction that the glowing object was heading in. Obstacles that got in his way could be dealt with at any time, there was no need to hurry.

“..... *Roaargh!*”

Haruyuki growled, and concentrated black Incarnate Over-Ray at his left hand. Without decreasing his velocity at all, he raised his fist and slammed it towards the green wall.

The silver-black flier collided sharply against the verdant barrier, and a tremendous shockwave was instantly generated, shaking the entire Accelerated World.

The wall — was not destroyed. The crowd of crosses merely vibrated slightly, absorbing the impact like ripples on the surface of water, preventing Haruyuki’s assault. He was currently no longer Silver Crow, who only prided himself in speed, but an ultimate fighting machine that possessed not only speed, but also strength and defense — the sixth generation Chrome Disaster. Moreover, Haruyuki had augmented his fists with a generous layer of Incarnate aura. The ability to block a blow like that indicated that this barrier was also a type of Incarnation.

“*Gurrgh...*”

Haruyuki let loose an agitated roar and pulled back his outstretched left fist. Neither his armor nor his HP gauge were damaged, but it seemed that the green barrier was equally unscathed.

Haruyuki spread his wings to hover in the air and slowly turned his head, staring in the direction that the skill name had been called from.

To the right — almost directly south, five hundred meters away from the Metropolitan Expressway Line 3 overpass there, there stood a great building almost as tall as the Midtown Tower. It was the main structure of «Roppongi Hills», also a large, multi-function commercial complex.

Two shadows stood side by side in the direct center of a wide helipad atop the building's roof. One of them had his left arm raised, and from it shot a dazzling green Over-Ray. That had to be the source of the Incarnate barrier obstructing Haruyuki's way.

“...Then I'll deal with you lot first.”

Haruyuki muttered, slowly wheeling around. The glowing object he had been chasing earlier — the ISS Kit “core”, had most likely darted into the Midtown Tower. Although finding the main body in that gigantic structure wouldn't be easy, he would tear the whole building down if he had to. Engaging these two annoyances would be only for the sake of replenishing the portion of his Special Gauge that he'd expended while flying here.

Haruyuki raised the sword in his right hand, placed it on his shoulder, and took flight again.

The rooftop of Roppongi Hills Tower was roughly one hundred meters below his own altitude, so he only needed to glide to the surface. Haruyuki brushed against the hard bricks with his taloned feet, landing north of the helipad.

Before he could turn towards the Burst Linker who had activated the humongous Incarnate defensive skill, a second figure quickly stepped in between to obstruct him. Haruyuki had never seen this duel avatar before. He was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor slender, and his build ought to be roughly the same as Haruyuki's right now. His figure itself was also rather medium-sized, but there were two things that caught one's eye.

The first was that his hands were a full size larger. Moreover, unlike Olive Glove, whose hands only enlarged at their palms, this person seemed to be wearing a thick pair of gloves. The second distinction was the color of his full body armor. It reflected a dull gray against the feeble sunlight; clearly a metallic texture. He was undoubtedly one of the rare metal-type duel avatars in the Accelerated World.

Then, Haruyuki shifted his gaze behind the metal-type avatar, looking at the hulking duel avatar there whose left hand was to the sky.

He had not simply seen this person before. Despite only having met him now, his color and physique were filled with an absolutely unforgettable presence.

That extremely heavy-looking armor was an indescribably pure «green». His four limbs and chest were thick and muscular; sturdy in the right places, without a hint of clumsiness. If one phrase could describe him, it would have to be «giant tree» — a ruler of the earth that would not falter, no matter how strong the wind or rain became.

When faced with a Burst Linker capable of bringing such pressure to the mix, it would naturally be impossible to admit any wrongdoing, but even as Haruyuki had already merged with the consciousness of the «Disaster Armor», he still felt that fact hard to believe.

Since they were both willing to prevent Haruyuki from pursuing the glowing object, he had no choice but to conclude that they were the creators of the ISS Kit, and members of the «Acceleration Research Society». But Haruyuki had once witnessed this exact green avatar at the “Seven Kings Conference” days ago. He hadn’t been part of the entourage; he had been a core participant of the meeting.

Haruyuki could not abandon this suspicion; he gazed at him silently, and suddenly the green avatar lowered the arm he had been raising. Just as the strong Over-Ray on his hand slowly dissipated, the massive «Great Wall» filling the sky in the corner of his eye disappeared as well.

No, the Over-Ray had not faded away entirely. The light still persisted within the avatar’s left hand, and then it expanded into a square and developed a

body. Finally, there appeared a shield with a purely green aura, resembling a huge, hewn slab of emerald stone.

This kind of high-priority status that was able to distort the space around it could not possibly be from a typical Enhanced Armament. This huge shield was the third, Gamma star of the «Seven Arcs», «The Strife».

It had to be him. This green avatar, creating a large wall with Incarnation that connected ground and sky in order to block Haruyuki's path, was the strongest player dominating the Accelerated World, the leader of the Legion «Great Wall», one of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» —

“... The Green King... Green Grande.”

Haruyuki shouted his name hoarsely.

Facing a «King» definitely carried with it a great amount of stress, but even more so, a feeling exceeding it made Haruyuki forget his reverence. An aura of black flames erupted from his entire body as he threw a question towards the colossal avatar more than a full head taller than himself:

“You're the... mastermind? You're the one responsible for creating and distributing the ISS Kit?”

His stance was ready as he asked; if his opponent were to nod his head even the slightest bit, he would immediately slash the blade in his right hand at

him. But the Green King merely observed Haruyuki silently with his amber eye-lens, making no reaction whatsoever.

The one who spoke in place of him was the metal-type avatar standing in front.

“Preposterous...!”

This person’s head was a simple cylindrical shape, but he also appeared more dogged for the same reason. He shook his head violently, aimed his boxing glove-shaped right fist at Haruyuki, and shouted:

“Silver Crow... or should I say, Chrome Disaster, *you* are a member of the «Acceleration Research Society»! That filthy Over-Ray coming off your body is the best evidence of that! You ought to think about the fact that the Six Kings graciously gave you a week of probation to purify yourself, and yet you’re secretly engaging in these shady actions; you are despicable to the extreme! As expected of the ‘Child’ taught by the unrivaled traitor of the Accelerated World!”



The moment these words echoed through Haruyuki's head, his heart spat dark blue sparks.

*This guy's death will not be a quick or easy one.* Haruyuki determined, as another part of his consciousness began to analyze information like an automated digital circuit.

These two avatars were already aware that the duel avatar in front of them was Silver Crow, who had summoned the «Disaster Armor». But that was not surprising. Despite the size of the Accelerated World, the only one able to fly at high altitude for extended periods of time was the «Crow» of Nega Nebulus. This fact was known even to beginners, so of course the King and his right-hand man had already been informed that the «Disaster Armor» had parasitized Silver Crow. Not to mention his state at the end of the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race», where hundreds of people saw him the way he was now.

Putting aside the Green King, this metal-type avatar displayed no fear whatsoever towards the legendary devastator, and had actually dared to provoke him; perhaps his courage should be praised. But Haruyuki said nothing of the sort and continued to think instead.

If his denunciation that Haruyuki was an accomplice of the «Acceleration Research Society» had been a heartfelt declaration, then that meant that these two were actually not members of the «Acceleration Research Society». But if so, then why did they prevent Haruyuki from chasing the glowing object?

In addition, there was one thing that had to be sorted out no matter what. Before the fight broke out, he must get a definitive answer.

Haruyuki gazed at the visor of the metal-type avatar's boxing glove-shaped helmet and asked:

“If neither of you are part of the «Acceleration Research Society»... then why are you standing here doing nothing?”

“... What is that supposed to mean?”

“Up until just a few minutes ago, a mere three kilometers away from here, two «Great Wall» members were killed god knows how many times by ISS Kit-equipped people. Since you were so close... why didn't you save them?”

As he spoke, the image of Ash Roller getting stabbed in the torso and then his whole body exploding flashed through Haruyuki's head. It made him experience once again the icy rage filling his entire body. An irrepressible snarl burst from his visor.

“.....!”

Haruyuki moved his right foot a step forward, towards the metal-type avatar who had gasped, stared at his opponent's eyes from under his visor, and demanded at a nearly inaudible volume:

“Or that, in your Legion, regardless of whether low-leveled members were slaughtered, even if they had their Burst Points stripped entirely, you don’t give a fuck? Do you think people like that have the right to call someone despicable, to accuse others of being traitors...?”

Haruyuki spat, his words like a dark blue inferno. At a glance, the icy cold was actually burning fiercely, yet he did not realize that he had made a huge contradiction.

As the sixth generation Chrome Disaster, what Haruyuki desired was to find the plate-layered avatar Black Vise, who in the distant past had killed «the one whom he cherished», and exact his vengeance, then bring about the beginning of the end of the Accelerated World, which was only capable of becoming this «hotbed of tragedy». But once this goal has been attained, the group of people most important to Haruyuki right now would also disappear.

Yet Silver Crow, inside the «Armor», still believed that he had forged many «friendships» inside this world, and that was the reason he would feel angry when his senpai, Kuroyukihime, was humiliated. He also believed that he could never forgive the officers of the green Legion due to the fact they were unable to protect Ash Roller.

It was unclear whether his obliviousness to this double standard proved that Haruyuki had not yet merged completely with the Disaster Armor, or whether the Enhanced Armament «The Disaster» originally possessed this bipartisan nature within itself —

Then again, instead of revealing this paradox deep within himself, Haruyuki's body erupted with an intensified aura and he took another step forward.

The metal-type avatar stood his ground and did not retreat, but turned his face away slightly, struggling to speak:

“Th-That’s because... We’re preoccupied with something important right now...”

“— There is nothing more important than the lives of your Legion members. Those who don’t even protect their allies are shitstains worse than the «Acceleration Research Society». Now... I will remove you both from the Accelerated World!”

With a heavy vibration, the eyes of the metal-type avatar whose head was lowered lit up. He slowly lifted his head, looking Haruyuki in the eye, and said:

“...What do you even know? How could you possibly understand... what my king has done for the Accelerated World... How much time he has sacrificed... How could you possibly know who has always been protecting, maintaining this world, only to let you people duel around leisurely to your hearts’ content....”

Just then.

The Green King, who had previously remained silent, moved. That said, he really only took a step back, placing both hands behind the large shield. But the metal-type avatar knew what his king meant by this, so without further talk, his body stiffened and his head lowered. After a while, he looked up and said heroically:

“... I believed all along that you couldn't be dealt with by talking, «Disaster». Why don't we use our fists instead of our mouths? We'll discuss the remainder with our fists.”

His right foot took a step backwards, he turned his body sideways, tapping his feet lightly and quickly like the movements of two people at once, and simultaneously raised a pair of gigantic fists.

“— I am the third of Great Wall's «Six Armor», Iron Pound. Level 7. There is no need to wait for the Seven Kings Conference in three days, I shall deal with you now!”

Hearing his opponent's disciplined introduction, Haruyuki also opened his mouth beneath his helmet.

But he could not introduce himself as «Silver Crow of Nega Nebulus». Even in an irregular mental state, he was still painfully aware that currently, he hadn't that right. Hence, he only murmured the name of the accursed avatar.

“... The sixth generation «Chrome Disaster».”

The dark aura rising off his entire body of armor seemed to be calling this name, immediately intensifying in strength. On the other hand, his opponent «Iron Pound», the avatar bouncing his upper body to a light and quick rhythm, responded by also generating an aura around his boxing glove-like fists.

If the name «Six Armor» he just stated was equivalent to Nega Nebulus' group of high-leveled officers, the «Elements», it meant that the avatar in front was the fourth strongest of the humongous Legion Great Wall, and moreover, he was two full levels above Haruyuki. The disparity in strength was so large that even putting his life on the line still only meant a slim chance of victory.

But Haruyuki now only viewed Iron Pound as a hindrance; his real target was only the «Green King». Green Grande had abandoned Ash Roller even when he was in distress, and was also preventing Haruyuki from pursuing the ISS Kit. If Haruyuki didn't cleave his head off, he would truly be unable to swallow this bout of suspicion and rage.

Haruyuki steeled his determination, intending to deal with the obstacle before him in one swipe. So he wrapped his left hand around the sword's hilt, then raised it high. The sword's tip stopped at the zenith, and just when it was about to come crashing down...

A bright red line penetrated the reduced saturation of his field of view: the attack prediction line, which immediately began displaying incoming attack information. “Attack Prediction / Incarnate | Enhanced Range, Enhanced Power | Attribute...”

However, Haruyuki was only able to read the tiny letters up to that point.

Since the prediction line had just appeared, his opponent’s Incarnate attack had already begun, with almost no delay at all.

Even with Haruyuki’s ability to clearly discern a rifle bullet in the Accelerated World, here he could only see a flash of blue light. Iron Pound’s left fist continuously punched with appalling speed, letting out infinite strikes much farther away than what should have been the reach of his arm — By the time Haruyuki comprehended up to this point, his face had already been rocked by strong blows, struck to the point where he began to arch backwards.

*“Gu..... roaaaah!”*

Haruyuki let out a furious roar as he planted his feet, making use of the ground to forcefully swing his sword. The blade’s dark aura seemed about to cleave his opponent, who had just made his move, in two.

But the blade only caught what was left of Iron Pound’s shadow in Haruyuki’s view. The sword tip plunged deeply into the helipad on top of

Roppongi Hills Tower. Shockwaves from the power contained within the sword left meters-wide cracks in the ground, but by now his opponent had already dodged almost two meters left and flashed his left fist again.

*Bam bam, bam!* Briskly paced punches struck the side of his helmet. The attack prediction line was late again this time.

— So fast!

This speed was no trivial matter; it surpassed even the calculation capabilities of the «Disaster Armor». Although each punch alone wasn't too powerful, there were very many of them, together shaving Haruyuki's HP gauge down by five percent. These evidently had to be Incarnate attacks, in order for these light punches to be able to penetrate high-defense armor, but they were unlike any attack Haruyuki had seen or dealt with in the past.

Haruyuki wrenched his sword out of the ground and raised it to his middle, blocking his opponent's movements, while simultaneously pondering the reason it didn't feel right. Then, he finally realized where the problem was.

It turned out that non-Incarnate attacks required invocation of a «move name». That would explain his abnormal speed, and the extreme difficulty in predicting the timing of the attacks. He seemed to feel the voice of the Red King, Scarlet Rain, ringing in his ears from the distant past:

— The key to using Incarnate skills is to visualize strong images. Ideally, you should train to the point where you can use them like any other normal attack or special move. You spent nearly three seconds concentrating, from assuming the stance to actually using the skill; that's way too slow! So you need to first come up with a name for your move, concentrate your thoughts on your move, and then activate it with your voice...

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt a sharp, piercing pain in the depths of his heart, but he forcefully cast away this sensation, only extracting crucial information from that spiel.

Niko put it right. Incarnate attacks were different from ordinary attacks; the system did not absolutely require verbally calling out a skill name. The point of «calling a skill name» was a method to semi-automate the process of concentrating to the point of it becoming a reflex, therefore increasing activation speed. Currently, the time it took Haruyuki to progress from a standing position to the point of actually activating the Incarnate attack «Laser Sword» would altogether take roughly one and a half seconds, but if he did not call the skill name, it would take over four seconds.

When it came to the question of why Brain Burst required the names of normal special moves to be called, the reason was a restriction on the usage of high powered moves. Consequently, it was impossible to launch a normal attack from behind an opponent's back, and would also inform the opponent of the attacker's timing, thus giving the opponent time to react.

That was why «nonverbal special moves» were truly the strongest of all, and Iron Pound had just done it. He had used an Incarnate attack without calling the skill name, and had only taken roughly one second at the most from his starting position to the time he threw his fist. No wonder the armor was unable to show the attack prediction in time.

— But...

No matter how fast he was, in the end he was only throwing empty-handed fists. Although his attack range had been enhanced via Incarnation, it was ultimately shorter than the blade of a sword. As long Haruyuki timed his sword swing against the moment his opponent raised his fists, the blade would naturally strike first.

Haruyuki slowly raised the sword above his middle, concentrating solely on his opponent's movements.

Iron Pound lifted his ankles a little, constantly rocking back and forth with fragmented steps, making his movements very hard to predict. But even if it was possible to not call the skill name, it was impossible to conceal the intensified Over-Ray during an Incarnate attack.

“... *Pff!*”

Only a sharp breath was heard, and at the same time, Haruyuki noticed the aura surrounding his opponent's left fist emitting an intense light.

The timing of the counterattack could be described as perfect. Haruyuki's huge sword swung down as Iron Pound was about to throw his fist. There was enough distance to prevent the enemy's fist from hitting him, and just enough to allow the sword tip to strike its target. This sword contained enough power to easily slice through structures in the «Demonic City» stage; the opponent's boxing glove-shaped mask looked moments from being slashed in two, but...

Iron Pound took advantage of a movement that Haruyuki, from his experience, could not perform: he bent only his upper body back, while maintaining flexibility in his legs. The fatal sword harmlessly scraped by with a whistle, creating a few sparks, cutting downwards uselessly.

It was a feint.

The opponent had gestured as though he was going to throw his left fist, inviting Haruyuki to strike. He had merely relied on leaning away to avoid the sword swing coaxed out of Haruyuki, then immediately took a big step forward and threw a jab like a sniper rifle bullet with his right fist.

No move name was called this time, just like the last, but the fist was surrounded by a thick aura, concentrated with all of his energy. It struck Haruyuki, who had just finished his sword slash, heavily in the face.

The power of the impact was almost enough to shatter his entire helmet. Haruyuki was only barely able to evade the damage because of his reflexive retreat, as he flew backwards at full speed. Even so, the moment he was hit, his vision turned completely white and his neck snapped back. The combined strength of the punch and his backwards flight made Haruyuki's upper body arch backwards as he flew at least ten meters out.

*“Gurah...!”*

Haruyuki involuntarily let out a maddened roar as he used the talons on his feet to push into the ground, preventing himself from falling over.

A moment of silence passed, and Haruyuki turned his upwards-facing face back down as fragments of metal fell from the helmet's cracked visor. Haruyuki forcefully held back his impending anger, whispering:

*“...This is... boxing?”*

He was looking at Iron Pound, who had smoothly pulled back his outstretched right fist and returned both fists to a defensive position near his mouth, and nodded while replying:

*“Indeed; there are not many boxing-class Burst Linkers after all... That first encounter was hard to deal with, eh?”*

He was right. Haruyuki had never fought a Burst Linker who made use of boxing skills.

The most common avatars in the Accelerated World were blue-type «Strikers», who were skilled at attacking with both hands; he had gone up against a handful of them in the past, but this was his first time encountering someone who had mastered boxing techniques. The build of his opponent's avatar was purely that of a boxer. His surprisingly fast left-handed continuous punch «Jab», his completely natural defense skill «Sway Back», and his fatal right-handed «Straight» all displayed an amazing level of mastery. By the looks of it, this player had to be a boxer in real life as well; this level of strength was otherwise inexplicable.

Since several decades ago, people have talked about how a player's inherent abilities — also known as «Player Skill» — were emphasized more in FullDive VR games than in other types of games. For example, kendo athletes or people good at memorization were often very active in VRMMO worlds with swords and magic. Brain Burst, a VR fighting game, had inherited this principle.

But this so-called «starting ability bonus» did not necessarily destroy the balance of the Accelerated World.

One of the reasons is that «Burst Linkers coming from athletic backgrounds» were inherently rare. Since Brain Burst was an online fighting game, it was

natural that players who loved gaming, or in other words, whose hobbies were more inclined towards indoor activities, made up the majority.

Of course there were exceptions, like Takumu, who participated in a kendo club, and Chiyuri, who was on the track and field team, but the player's own skills may not always be reflected by the duel avatar; rather, it was normal that they were *not* reflected. For example, although Takumu's «Cyan Pile» was a blue-type, instead of a sword he held a pile driver; Chiyuri's «Lime Bell» was likewise not a high speed-type. Haruyuki was the same way: compared to the bare-fisted Silver Crow, why not just switch to a red-type equipped with at least one gun so that he could take advantage of his FPS experience? The disparity between these players and their avatars was the second reason that their starting skills did not necessarily affect duelling balance.

Even so, there were still extremely few players who created avatars that reflected their own personal knowledge, experiences, and abilities. That kind of avatar was known as a —

“... «Perfect Match».”

Iron Pound nodded again at Haruyuki's whisper and said:

“However, this is not the only reason you can't defeat me. We, Great Wall, in these past years... have conducted extensive research on the «Disaster

Armor». Our objective is not only to prevent it from wreaking havoc again, but to eliminate it from the Accelerated World completely.

“..... Research...?”

“Correct. Most unfortunately, the «Fifth Generation Disaster» half a year ago only appeared north of Shinjuku, and due to the mutual nonaggression treaty between the six great Legions, we had no way of investigating... But for the sixth generation, you, we will not let this opportunity slide. The original plan was to wait until you were registered as a wanted criminal, but since we ran into you here there’s no reason to wait.”

Iron Pound spoke with conviction, and Haruyuki gazed coldly at him from under his fragmented visor.

Even if Iron Pound was a «Perfect Match» boxer, now that Haruyuki was aware of the situation, there were many methods of dealing with him. Moreover, he admitted that he was indeed practicing boxing, and didn’t that mean exposing the fact that he could only deal with a six-meter — the length of a boxing ring — close-quarters combat range? No matter how fast he was in that radius, as long as Haruyuki could pull further out or stick closer to him, his abilities could easily be countered.

First and foremost, catch him. Next, either stab him with an Incarnate sword or just throw him off the edge of the building; that will take care of him.

“... Then I will let you know that your so-called research is a waste of time.”

Haruyuki whispered, then swiftly extended his right arm.

Next, he opened his five fingers, exposing his palm, then flipped the palm downwards. A streak of silver quietly shot from his wrist. It was a hook could not be shaken off: «Wire Hook».

This was originally the special ability of the fifth generation Disaster, «Cherry Rook»; similar to the first generation host's «Flash Blink» and the second generation's «Flame Breath», it had been replicated by the armor. Even though he resonated very deeply with the armor's consciousness, that was how deep Haruyuki was now. It could even be said that the ability to use the moves of previous Disasters, was truly the biggest strength of the sixth generation.

A moment ago Iron Pound had said that «he had not encountered the fifth generation», and therefore he was probably not aware of the existence of «Wire Hook». The speed of the firing hook rivaled that of a bullet, and it was small enough to be nearly invisible. There was no way he could avoid this move during his first encounter with it...

*Twang!* A crisp metallic sound echoed over the rooftop of the Roppongi Hills Tower.

Then, Haruyuki saw. The ultimate capturing attack «Wire Hook» that had once slain countless avatars, including Silver Crow, struck Iron Pound's round left shoulder, but it bounced off with a crack.

“——!”

By the time he inhaled sharply, the seasoned boxer had already closed the gap between them after an alarmingly fast sprint. The two fists raised in front of his chest glowed a brilliant blue.

“Hammer Rave!”

This time, he finally heard the quickly-articulated move name.

A relentless barrage of countless fists came. The left fist was throwing a tremendous number of jabs like a machinegun, throwing straight punches at bullet-like speeds and a machete-like left hook from time to time. Judging only by the total — ten punches on average were thrown every second.

He couldn't even defend in time. Every inch of his upper body was being pummeled by strong blows, causing Haruyuki to assume an ugly position by lifting his chin and arms. He was sent dozens of centimeters into the air, unable to retaliate or even move, in a thoroughly stiff and delayed state.

Haruyuki's upper body arched backwards as Iron Pound invaded right into his space, leaving a blue afterimage behind him; a second later, the Over-Ray

on his right fist intensified several times. Haruyuki instinctively realized that his opponent was about to deliver a fatal blow, and he frantically tried to flap his golden wings, but they became somewhat sluggish after enlarging, just as it was very difficult to generate lift.

The right hook traced a blue track like the main cannon of a battleship and struck squarely onto Haruyuki's unprotected chin.

Haruyuki flew backwards with his four limbs limp in the air, riding along a shockwave that seemed to uproot his consciousness entirely. After being thrown to his zenith, he spent another few seconds falling back down. Then, with a muffled boom, Haruyuki landed flat on his back, bounced once, and crumpled onto the ground spread-eagle.

The HP gauge at the upper left of his vision had been knocked down to less than half of its capacity in one hit, and turned yellow. He knew that he had to stand back up, but the impact was too great; topped with the mixed emotions filling his head due to his own rejection of the state he was currently in, Haruyuki nearly fell into «Zero Fill».

The clacking of hard footsteps came from the ground, then a voice spoke:

“— This is the common weakness amongst «all of you». Regardless of which generation you were, all Chrome Disasters... all had this common weakness.”

“... Weakness...”

Haruyuki said quietly, then at the same time, he lifted his head and frantically gazed back at Iron Pound, who was staring at him with an ice-cold expression two metres away.

This «Perfect Match» boxer’s simply styled eye-lens displayed a somewhat pitying look, and he lightly elaborated:

“The «Armor's» capabilities are indeed great, and the level of parasitism you have suffered seems deep enough that you could use the moves of previous owners. However... these powers are ultimately borrowed, just like a child without a driver’s license piloting a 1000-horsepower super sports car. No matter how fast you can go on a straight racetrack by flooring the accelerator, you won’t make it past any curves. It is because you relied on power that’s not yours that the most fundamental concept of duelling — understanding your opponent’s type — has been completely ignored by you.”

He raised his boxing glove-like right hand and poked his left shoulder with his only thumb — the place where Haruyuki’s «Wire Hook» had ricocheted off.

“My type is «Iron». I am the best of the best at anti-penetration defense, even amongst other metal-types. How could your pathetic little hook, not even strengthened by Incarnation, ever stab through?”

— So that's why.

Haruyuki's clenched fists nearly deformed, and this caused him to realize the mistakes he had made.

Metal-type duel avatars, which did not reside in the normal color wheel, could be said to be even rarer than Perfect Matches. Other than himself, the only metal-type avatars that Haruyuki knew of were «Cobalt Blade» and «Mangan Blade», the Blue King's closest aides, as well as a certain «Chrome» something-or-other, the creator of the Disaster Armor in the distant past. He had only heard of these people; in reality he had not duelled a single one of them.

Consequently, although he had been enjoying the heightened defensive capabilities of metal-types, he hadn't thought about the disadvantages of facing opponents like these. Could he still deny that he was being too careless?

— No, it wasn't just that. As exemplified by the «Wire Hook» that Iron Pound had deflected, if that were a familiar move he had used for a long time, then it must be possible to instinctively tell what kind of opponent that move was ineffective against. Indeed, half a year ago, when he had fought the fifth generation Disaster «Cherry Rook», didn't he actively avoid using Wire Hook against Haruyuki? It must have been because he knew that the hook was easily deflected by metal-types.

Borrowed... power.

Growling from behind gritted teeth, Haruyuki lay on the floor while Iron Pound continued talking with a calm tone:

“— We analyzed the «Disaster Armor» trying to come up with targeted strategies, and ultimately we concluded that there is only one type of power able to defeat the Disaster. It relies on neither numerical advantages nor extremely powerful Incarnate attacks... rather, «perfectly mastered basic moves». Thus we, the «Six Layered Armor» of Great Wall, spent countless hours practicing moves, aiming to train our most practiced basic skills to exceed the strongest Incarnate attacks... So that during the next encounter, we would no longer need to rely on the Kings' power in order to exterminate the «curse» parasitizing this world.”

A sharp swoosh of air was heard, probably Iron Pound's left punch, yet Haruyuki only saw the remaining aura that pierced through the air.

“... The five previous Disasters all had to be personally taken care of by the Kings, but this meant that they had to risk their own necks because of the «Level 9 Sudden Death Rule». To us, those who protect the king, I can think of no greater shame. This time, we must... no, I must stop the Disaster with my own two hands. Sorry, Silver Crow; I need to put an end to your life here, while your transformation is still recent... while the Disaster is the weakest.”

— Weakest.

The instant these words resounded through the space inside his helmet with an intense reverberating effect — A gale of emotion tore through Haruyuki's entire body and concentrated onto one point on his back.

— Kill you. Kill you kill you. *I'm gonna kill you!*

The fury was so intense that it dizzied him. The wave of power finally surpassed containment within his armor, seeping through the chinks on his back, then materializing and exploding into being.

There was a slippery sensation; out came a long, sharp object constructed of countless metal joints — «a tail». At the end of the Hermes Cord Traversing Race, Haruyuki had used his own Incarnation to sever this distinctive part of the sixth generation Disaster.

Haruyuki stabbed the tip of his razor-sharp tail into the ground, relying solely on this supporting force to push himself up without changing his sprawled posture or supporting his body. Standing swiftly back up, the sound of armor being equipped came from his body. A large sword gripped in his right hand, talons brandished on his left, he let out a monstrous bellow.

*“Gurrgh... Rrggh... Kill you... I'm going to kill you...”*

Murderous intent and fury coursed through every limb and bone in his body and manifested into a black aura that expanded devastatingly outwards,

throwing radial cracks into the hard ground of the Demonic City stage. Haruyuki's entire body went taut, his self-reflection over his previous blunder now tossed aside into the great beyond, only wanting to whirl his sword and murder the enemy before him.

Facing Haruyuki in this state, Iron Pound showed no hint of fear, and calmly placed his fists into a so-called "peekaboo" stance.

The iron boxer's lens-like eyes peeked through his fists with resolute determination, sureness, as well as pity.

With the little reasoning Haruyuki had left, he felt that this gaze was somewhat familiar.

That was when... Yes, it was during the battle half a year ago against the «fifth generation Chrome Disaster». At the end of the intense battle, as Scarlet Rain was about to use Judgement Blow on her Parent, the fifth Disaster «Cherry Rook», she too had this very gaze in her eyes. Niko had watched as Cherry Rook wallowed in power, falling victim to his own anger, degenerating to the point where only an impulse to attack and devour other people's existences existed, and so she had readied herself to release him from the curse of this armor...

The instant his thoughts reached this point, Haruyuki raised his right arm — and stabbed the sword into a point near his foot.

Loosening his fingers one at a time, he let go of the sword's hilt and allowed his hands to rest, in an attempt to restrain the anger storming within him.

Suddenly a violent roar came from his mind.

*— What are you doing?..... Raise your sword, slash him, slice him open, and devour him until not a single bone is left.*

Speaking to him was the «Beast» inside the Disaster Armor; the negative emotions and Incarnation of all previous Disasters across the ages, joined into an entity capable of thought.

Haruyuki had once heard that all Brain Burst data was saved and processed in its central server — also known as the «Main Visualizer» — - like human memories. Consequently, when an object was immersed in excessive emotions, it could manifest its own sentience.

But this «Beast» was too dominating, and did not resemble a simple consciousness. As this twisted noise reverberated in his head, Haruyuki felt his own consciousness be almost torn away, but he desperately endured it and screamed back at it inside his heart.

— Shut up!

— Losing my temper isn't enough to win against this guy! I... want to defeat him no matter what; I have to beat him! No matter what, I can't lose to a guy like this who says there's more important things than their comrades lives!

As a result, the growling became harsher and more violent.

— *Gurrgh... then you need my power even more. Because you are a powerless and insignificant crow.*

— Yes, you're right, I admit that. But... the way I am right now, I cannot use the full power of the «armor». Only my most trained moves can match his speed. So you better shut up and help me! You don't want to disappear in a place like this either, do you?!

In reality this conversation was not spoken aloud, but rather through telepathy, so the time spent did not even exceed a tenth of a second. The Beast growled a few times discontentedly, but seemed to agree with Haruyuki's idea and returned to him some control of the avatar.

Of course, Haruyuki's own fury had not disappeared, but this anger was now dissimilar to that previous, unforgiving hellfire. The anger felt more focused and precise, like bluish-white plasma permeating through his entire avatar all the way to the end of his tail.

Haruyuki's taloned hands extended directly forward, one in front of the other at the ready, his waist bent, poised to strike at any time.

Iron Pound originally wanted to close the distance between them, but now he only narrowed his lens-like eyes slightly. He stopped where his left jab could still just reach Haruyuki, then paused and stared at his opponent, as if he had realized why the sword had been discarded.

Haruyuki did not move. His left hand in front, his right hand behind, and his body standing sideways at the ready, with all his focus concentrated solely on his opponent's fists.

After using his painstakingly cooled-down brain to think, he deduced that relying on his teleportation ability «Flash Blink» to dodge or launch unexpected attacks should be an effective battle strategy. However, since this was a special move, its ability name would need to be called no matter what. And if he waited for his opponent's high speed punch, it simply would be too late to do any good. Even if he struck first, once the enemy had seen the move, it would be useless the second time.

On the other hand, since his special gauge was almost completely full, it was possible for him to fly to a place where the enemy could not reach, and then hover while using long range attacks like «Flame Breath» or «Laser Lance». But since the enemy knew that the sixth generation Disaster was Silver Crow, he had taken precautions against the flight ability. Furthermore, he could not forget Green Grande standing silently in the distance with his arms folded like a statue. If Haruyuki attempted to launch a one-sided attack from the sky,

it would be quite likely that the Green King would use that Incarnate move again — «Parsec Wall».

In the end, it was still best to slaughter Iron Pound in one move while the King was still not interfering. Pulling this off would prove incredibly difficult even with the Disaster's power, but he still had to do it. Because right now, Haruyuki's only reason for existing was to disable these two interlopers then rush into the Midtown Tower to destroy the ISS Kit's main body. If Acceleration Research Society members could be found nearby, all the more they must be pounded into mincemeat.

“——Bring it on.”

Haruyuki whispered as a thin aura of darkness enveloped his body.

Iron Pound responded by shaking his upper body and beginning to take quick, nimble steps back and forth. Using these small steps, he set his own pace and slowly closed the gap.

Earlier he had put it pretty well: «Incarnate Jab», which could be activated from his left fist without a preparatory stance or invoking the move name, was Iron Pound's most powerful weapon. Although the strength of one punch wasn't that impressive, its firing rate was shockingly fast. Moreover, once hit, he would be rendered immobile for certain, and be unable to evade the straight punch from his right hand that would come immediately after.

If this were a boxing tournament, facing this sort of featherweight boxer should technically be countered by setting up a tight and strong defense, knocking away his jabs, and then finding a way to close the distance. But this place was not a six-square-meter boxing ring; it was a helipad on the roof of the Roppongi Hills Tower. Regardless of whether the opponent backed away or retreated, there was too much space, so a counterattack was impossible no matter how strong the defense was, and therefore it would only lead to his own HP gauge being constantly depleted.

In the end, it was still necessary to understand this Incarnate Jab for even a slim chance at victory.

— Hey, «Beast».

Haruyuki adjusted the position of his right hand without relaxing it, at the same time mentally speaking to the armor's spirit.

— You're better at seeing through attacks than I am, so once he «readies» his jab, you find a way to see through it. I'll take care of «handling» it.

The wild Beast answered with a discontented growl of acknowledgement rather than words — but just then.

The Over-Ray enveloping Iron Pound's left fist intensified slightly.

At the same time, a distinct red line known as an «attack prediction line» sliced across Haruyuki's field of view.

Haruyuki reflexively spun the blade in his right hand in a corkscrew motion. Pound's Incarnate Jabs hit almost as soon as the attack prediction line appeared; it was impossible to clearly discern the attack path, so it was necessary to rely on his own ability.

His palms circled from the outside to the inside, bringing about a boiling heat as they touched the boxing gloves that traveled in a straight path. But if he only simply blocked them, all that would do was make the opponent step back, then continue punching very rapidly.

He did not want to block them outright; he wanted to bring them to himself.

Haruyuki visualized the image of attracting Iron Pound's jab into one place, and concentrated that into his palms, guiding the attack path towards his bottom left. This kind of higher ability that avoided directly confronting the enemy's attack power, instead only focusing on interference and defense, was called the «Flexible Way», also known as «Guard Reversal».

It seemed as though even a player this highly skilled had not expected the jab be attracted over rather than blocked. His upper body toppled forward, his footwork in a mess.

At this moment, from under his helmet, Haruyuki called out:

”Flash Blink — ”

The dark silver-armored avatar disintegrated into incorporeal particles, moving only a mere meter. He passed by Iron Pound’s body from both the left and right, then moved behind him.

Haruyuki turned and rematerialized then pressed a right fingertip onto his opponent’s vulnerable back, shouting:

“— Laser Sword!”

Compared to Iron Pound’s Incarnate Jab, Haruyuki needed far more time to activate his own Incarnate attack. If Pound could attempt to immediately dodge, maybe he wouldn’t be directly hit.

However, it was because of his ability «Perfect Match» that he hesitated slightly. «An attack directed towards an opponent’s back» violated boxing rules, so in a boxing match, a situation like this in which the opponent managed to get behind your back and attack you would be absolutely impossible.

Of course, Pound knew very well that there was no such rule in the Accelerated World. But reflexes developed over years of training in the real world would not change easily. Like Takumu, who had a fear of the sudden thrust technique in kendo due to a traumatic past; that’s why he would

involuntarily stiffen and freeze when Dusk Taker «aimed at his throat and made a thrust attack». Besides, using ultra close-range teleportation right now to attack from behind, this sort of situation was even rarer —

Pound's hesitation at this moment was Haruyuki's greatest and final chance for victory in this battle. A dark blade burst from Haruyuki's right hand and loudly penetrated his opponent.

Even the incredibly high physical defense of metal armor could not stop a point-blank Incarnate attack. The attack penetrated the vital heart, causing Iron Pound to retreat while curling up his whole body and letting out a painful moan:

“Ahhhh.....”

But ultimately a Level 7 was still a Level 7; he was not killed in one blow. Pound frantically sprinted forward to increase the distance between.

Common sense dictated that it was technically impossible for Haruyuki to perform a follow-up attack after he had just finished his powerful move and his right hand was extended all the way out. But this time he also responded instinctively by flapping his wings at full strength. The movement of the wings generated enough torque for him to perform an attack. Relying on aviation abilities during close combat allowed for instantaneous thrust in three dimensions, which was precisely the technique that Haruyuki had invented himself: «Aerial Combo».

Transferring the sharp moments from his back to his right hand, Haruyuki yelled:

“Woooo.....ahhhhhh!”

*CLANG!* The loud, piercing sound of metal tearing metal could be heard, and then dissipated.

A moment of silence fell upon the rooftop of the Roppongi Hills Tower under the setting sun. The two combatants' outlines appeared as one, drawing a long shadow on the vast landscape.

Iron Pound's hands fell powerlessly, his legs collapsing in the same manner. Supporting his body was Chrome Disaster's right hand, penetrating him from his back to his chest. The wound where his armor had been penetrated by «Laser Sword» had been perforated again by sharp hooked claws.

Haruyuki's hand-blade stabbed into Pound's body, his entire arm entering almost as far as his right shoulder. Suddenly, he heard a low and deep voice:

“.....The level... you have attained... Why...have you fallen to darkness...”

With that, the body of the «Perfect Match» boxer exploded into countless shards and flew in all directions.

After a large special effect faded, all that remained was a tiny ember burning beside Haruyuki's foot — Iron Pound's death marker — flickering with metallic gray rays of light. Haruyuki lowered his head and gazed at the ember, speaking huskily to it:

“.....«The Disaster» becoming this robust... was most likely caused by all of your rejection and unwillingness to understand.”

The marker did not reply, of course, but Haruyuki continued to speak softly to it:

“..... There must be this kind of darkness... inside everyone's heart.....”

He swallowed the remainder of the sentence because the «Beast» had let out a fierce roar inside his head.

— I know, and what comes next is the most important part.....

Haruyuki replied mentally, his armor clanking as he turned.

Directly in his line of sight was the one clutching a humongous cross-shaped shield, a giant nestling his hands in front of his chest. The Green King Green Grande, nicknamed «Invulnerable». His trusted subordinate had just been

killed before his very eyes, but his amber lens-like eyes only emitted a tranquil and mysterious color.

According to the combined memory fragments of Haruyuki and the Beast, the Green King was the only Burst Linker who had witnessed the elimination of the first four Chrome Disasters.

Although he almost never engaged in direct attacks, he had a legendary Enhanced Armament — the shield «The Strife» that had tenaciously blocked Disaster's swift and fierce attacks, creating opportunities for his comrades to attack. In other words, if it were not for the presence of the Green King, the scope of the damage inflicted by the Disaster Armor would surely exceed the original by more than two or three times.

Therefore, it could be said that the Green King was the greatest enemy of the «Beast» inside the armor. Roars reverberated incessantly in Haruyuki's consciousness, filled with uncontrollable desires to kill, seemingly about to erupt at any moment.

— Control yourself. It is impossible to beat this person by frantically attacking and slashing.

Haruyuki said to the Beast, then faced the green giant and slowly took two steps forward.

The king remained as motionless as a mountain. Haruyuki stared at him and then said in a low voice:

“.....If Iron Pound was right, then you guys didn't cooperate with the Acceleration Research Society..... so why did you get in my way back there?”

He waited for three seconds but did not get a response. During the «Seven Kings Conference» a few days ago, Green Grande had also said nothing from start to finish.

“— I see that it's pointless to ask you, so I can only get a response with my fists.”

After Haruyuki said that, half to himself, he lowered himself, preparing for combat.

But, just before that —

“— You will find out, if you wait a moment longer.”

These words brought with them a very strong effect, resounding loud and clear.

Without a doubt, it was the male voice of the one who called out the large-scale Incarnate ability «Parsec Wall». However, the voice seemed as though it was not transmitted through the air, instead coming from his feet, leaving Haruyuki unsure of whether it had come from the avatar in front of him.

Haruyuki stared at the man, but the Green King did not move a single inch. The large stature with folded arms did not face Haruyuki directly; it was instead facing roughly 30 degrees northeast. Subconsciously following the king's gaze, Haruyuki realized what he was gazing at — another high tech commercial structure, the main building of the Tokyo Midtown complex on the other side of Shuto Expressway Route 3.

This gigantic tower had sharp-edged features, a characteristic of the Demonic City stage. It was glowing red due to the light from the sun about to sink below the horizon. The rooftop was different than that of the Roppongi Hills Tower, taking the shape of a long and thin needle tip. Other than the small flying enemies circling it, the tower itself showed no signs of activity.

However, the «ISS Kit» main body gradually corroding the Accelerated World should be hidden inside that tower. As of today, at least 50 Burst Linkers had been infected, and if the main body were to be destroyed, it should stop the activity of those terminals.

The way Haruyuki was now, he was not thinking of saving the Accelerated World, but rather in the opposite direction. More than half of his thoughts were occupied by a destructive impulse intending to completely eliminate

any Burst Linker in his way, and even if the end result led to the decline or even destruction of Brain Burst, it would all be worth it. And the first he would kill were the creator of the ISS Kit as well as the «Acceleration Research Society» that spread it. This wasn't just about the Kit; even more so, it was about those guys who had set up those despicable traps, killing «.....» again and again, and each time causing unimaginable amounts of suffering.....

“.....!”

Suddenly, a burst of pain like a high-voltage electrical current ran up his spine towards the exact center of his head, making Haruyuki's entire body stiffen.

Up until now, it had been barely possible to keep the Beast under control, but it seemed to have broken free of its chains, letting out a ferocious snarl. This scream, filled with overwhelming rage and murderous intent, was sharper than ever; it almost sounded like a cry.

The dark aura enveloping the «Disaster Armor» at all times then transformed into a pitch-black flame that expanded in all directions. The sharp blade-like edges of the armor on his arms and legs became even sharper, and the talons on his hands and feet even more vicious. The tail on his back began swinging on its own like a whip, wrapping around the hilt of the large sword near himself. The sword echoed with a dull metallic sound as it was wrenched up, and once again held in front of Haruyuki.

Within the pitch-black yet glossily polished blade, Chrome Disaster's crooked, irregularly convulsing body was reflected. In the darkness under his cracked visor, a pair of eyes not originally on Silver Crow's visor flashed violently with the aura of death, filled with fiery rays of light.

“Grr..... rrrrrgghh..... “

The roar of both the «Beast» and Haruyuki was low and heavy. Discarding all ability to think and reason, leaving only a seething, turbulent killing intent. This was an «Overflow» effect caused by an abundance of negative Incarnation, but Haruyuki was already incapable of realizing this.

Haruyuki even forgot that the Green King was standing mere few steps away; he fully spread the metallic wings on his back, drew up the great sword in his right hand, and raised it to his side with a whoosh. He was preparing to take off from the rooftop of the Roppongi Hills Tower and charge towards the Tokyo Midtown Tower, but at that moment —

The same voice was heard again.

“Hold, it is not time yet.”

“.....*Gurah* .....!”

Letting out a murderous roar, he wheeled right.

Now, the Green King Green Grande had finally turned his thick mask towards Haruyuki. His mysterious amber eyes had remained so calm throughout, creating a sharp contrast with Disaster. There was no fury, anxiety, or fear in his gaze. He resembled an ancient tree in a forest that watched all, observed all, and yet stood unhurriedly in one place.

However, according to Haruyuki right now, the Green King's attitude was that of a challenge that could not be ignored. Since he was only here to interfere, he had to be destroyed. Driven by this inexplicable stimulus, Haruyuki slowly raised the blade in his right hand and placed his left on its hilt; all of the muscles in his body were strengthening for the purpose of utilizing every ounce of effort, squeezing out every burst of speed, and infusing every shred of willpower to slice the enemy in half.

Of course, Haruyuki had never learned how to use a sword regardless of the world he was in, be it the real world or the Accelerated World. Just like Iron Pound said before, this was a «borrowed strength and skill», and was not effective in a battle where speed was the decisive factor.

But at this moment over 90 percent of Haruyuki was no longer himself. His out-of-control Incarnation had caused «Silver Crow», equipping the Enhanced Armament «The Disaster», to become closer to the «actual Chrome Disaster» than ever before.

Haruyuki did not know what this person's name was, but the third Disaster had been a Blue type who used two-handed swords, and at some point had been as famous as the Blue King Blue Knight, nicknamed «Vanquish». In the end, the third Disaster had left the Accelerated World under the Blue King's blade.

Right now, it was precisely the «skill» left by the third generation Disaster in the armor that drove Haruyuki's movements. It was the same as the first generation Disaster's «Flash Blink», the second's «Flame Breath», and the fifth's «Wire Hook»; all of which he used earlier. When he and the armor's willpower, no, the «Beast» living inside the armor, synchronized powerfully, it would become possible to make all skills used by former Chrome Disasters his own. That was the true power of the «Disaster Armor», no, the sixth generation Disaster, Haruyuki.

The Green King seemed to have realized how out of control Haruyuki had become. He placed his right foot forward and turned his body directly towards him. Over half of this avatar's body was covered by the gigantic cross-shaped shield «The Strife», but Haruyuki ignored all of this. His entire body arched backwards like a bow, he raised his blade so high that it was over his back and drove the tip of the blade into the ground, slightly pressing it in. A muffled noise was heard as the avatar's body bent backwards to its limit, and just as the tension peaked —

*“Gu..... rah, roagghhh!”*

Haruyuki let out an explosive roar, letting loose all of his strength.

With the force of his step, he charged forward with the added momentum created by his wings. Virtual air was compressed and exploded, becoming a shockwave and tearing a V-shaped scar into the tough rooftop slabs.

A distance of more than ten meters was a bit too far for a close-range attack, but Haruyuki crossed this distance in almost no time at all. Moreover, no matter how far away he was, Green Grande seemed to have no intention whatsoever of dodging. His eyes perfectly captured the blade, which drew a jet-black crescent in the air as it flew towards him, yet his feet remained motionless and he merely raised the gargantuan shield equipped in his left grip slightly.

Once an Enhanced Armament was equipped, its color would often become that of the duel avatar equipping it. This appeared to be the case with the Green King's shield and the Blue King's double-handed sword. But after looking at it for a while, Haruyuki only felt that the shield blocking his view emanated an emerald-like gleam, the color of which was deeper and more sparkling than the King's armor.

Haruyuki had released what was undoubtedly as much of his attack strength as he could currently muster — and smashed his great sword towards this towering green wall, which held the presence of a deep forest.

Pure, gargantuan energy discharged where sword and shield met, greater than could be possibly described by sound or light. A bizarre vibration became a ball, expanding uncontrollably as though attempting to distort and shatter this entire space, then a ripple-like wave ran through the entire upper half of the Roppongi Hills Tower, trembling, and then —

This huge building should have been granted the highest durability under the «Demonic City» stage, yet it fragmented into a myriad of minute particles from the middle and disintegrated.

As the ground disappeared beneath them, Haruyuki and Green Grande began slowly descending dead center of the rain of rubble. But both of them maintained sword against shield, without moving an inch. Both sides' Incarnation contending each other overwrote the recoil and what ought to have affected their postures, instead allowing the duel avatars to sustain their original positions.

The green aura released by the great shield «The Strife» seemed to sprout new shoots, attempting to engulf the gigantic sword that was once named «Star Caster»; the jet-black flaming aura inundating the blade in turn charred the green, but the green aura germinated without end, showing no signs of withering whatsoever. It was, in a sense, a gigantic tree — the World Tree holding up the nine worlds of Norse mythology.

— Holding up the world.

The instant this phrase flashed through a corner of his mind, Haruyuki felt an image or a memory flowing into his consciousness. An endless, repeating battle taking place much too long ago. And his opponent wasn't a Burst Linker, but a vast, inhuman monster: an «Enemy».

After a while, both of them struck ground with a deep thud, landing atop a small mountain created by the bits and pieces of the upper half of the Roppongi Hills Tower.

Both of them retracted their auras at nearly the same time, then withdrew their sword and shield. In contrast with the scale of the occurrence itself, the silence of the aftermath was hardly believable. Unknowingly, the storm of fury that had raged so wildly inside Haruyuki was now calm, and even the «Beast» had fallen silent.

“... Even a strike like that was blocked as though it were nothing...”

He muttered under his breath. The sinister effect had dissipated somewhat from his voice, and Haruyuki's own senses took precedence while he spoke, but he did not realize this. He leapt lightly away, widening the distance between them, landed on the dusty ground and lowered his sword.

The Green King followed suit, lowering his shield and staring at Haruyuki. He heavily shook his head from side to side, then tapped his shield with his right finger, as though intending to stress that it had not been «nothing» at all. Haruyuki looked more closely and realized that there was a spot on the upper

edge missing; about three millimeters or so. Haruyuki had dealt merely that much damage, yet the Green King seemed to telling him “You won”, which made him smile bitterly.

“I was intending to cut through that shield and you.”

He spoke as he surveyed his surroundings.

Affected by the shockwaves from his strike just now, nearly half of Roppongi Hills Tower had collapsed, halving its height. Some of the attached buildings around it were now leaning to one side, while others had been shattered on their sides.

On top of the sand a distance away swirled a tiny, iron-gray ball of flames; it was likely Iron Pound’s death marker, and had probably dropped down along with the collapsing building. He was currently in a «Phantom State», only able to function as a bystander, and had to be watching Haruyuki and Green Grande’s confrontation with burning anxiety.

Before attacking, Pound had let slip something about “How much time my King has sacrificed for the Accelerated World”. Just now, Haruyuki had directly contended against the Green King with his mind and caught a glimpse of a fragment of his memories, and was able to somewhat understand the meaning behind that phrase because of that. He looked back towards the King and asked him directly:

“... All of the Points afforded by slaying Enemies in the Accelerated World... You took pretty much all of them for yourself, didn't you?”

The King said nothing, but his silence carried with it an air of certainty.

To more than one thousand Burst Linkers, «Burst Points» were not just currency and experience within the game; they were lives. They would increase after winning a battle, decrease after losing a battle, and the usage of various Acceleration commands, purchasing items in the «Shop», or leveling up with them would expend a large number of Points.

Common sense would indicate that Point allowance rate could never keep up with expenditure rate. The total number of Points spent each month must far exceed the total number of «starting 100 Points multiplied by the number of people» from new Burst Linkers each month.

Anyone insufficient would depend on high-level Burst Linkers heading into the Unlimited Neutral Field to slay Enemies, but even so, Haruyuki was never able to figure out how these Points were redistributed evenly among the entire Accelerated World.

The Green King had solo-killed the high-tier Enemies dwelling within dangerous dungeons, charged the large number of Points into card items purchased from the Shop, then thrown these cards for the low-tier Enemies dwelling within the plains to eat. When Enemy-slaying parties from other Legions took down these Enemies, they would gain a great deal of Points.

Only then would the Points finally be able to be distributed amongst the low-tier Burst Linkers within medium and small-sized Legions —

Such an action was basically that of an immense tree that fostered innumerable tiny lives with the sunlight and water stored within its body.

No matter how he thought about it, he was never able to figure out why the Green King would keep up this sort of thankless contribution over so many years. The Enemies that consumed the «Points Cards» were not necessarily all hunted down by members of the Green Legion «Great Wall»; in fact, there were staggeringly more cases in which they fell into the hands of other Legions. In other words, the Green King's actions were, in essence, benefitting other Legions. Come to think of it, Haruyuki himself had once joined an Enemy-slaying party, and an impossibly huge number of Points had burst from the quarry they defeated, making him elated.

“..... Why?”

He distributed these Points widely, not even missing Burst Linkers hostile to him, yet that meant that the lives of his own Legion's subordinates, Ash Roller and Bush Utan, were not of the highest priority. Haruyuki was unable to comprehend the Green King's frame of reference for his actions whatsoever, and could only weakly let out that one word.

It was not a yes-or-no question, so Haruyuki did not really expect an answer, but...

“— All of this, is because I do not wish for «Brain Burst 2039»... or the «Trial #2» experiment, to result in failure.”

In contrast with the fact that this had been the longest sentence uttered by the taciturn King — although almost all of it was utterly incomprehensible — Haruyuki felt more of a shocked sensation that pierced his very soul.

“Did you say... Trial... #2...?”

“Indeed. The earlier «Accel Assault 2038» and the later «Cosmos Corrupt 2040» have been long abandoned, yet this #2 possesses a certain factor that #1 and #3 both lacked. Before this factor presents itself, I cannot allow this world to end like that.”

“.....”

The Green King converted information into language in a perpetually low voice, but this information had far, far exceeded what Haruyuki could process. However, he still managed to find three points, listing them out in his mind.

Firstly, Brain Burst, or the Accelerated World, was not a «unique» existence after all.

Secondly, the goal behind the Green King Green Grande's actions was to maintain, or rather, extend the life of the Accelerated World.

Thirdly, Green Grande was aware of the reason behind this world's existence.

“..... You're... a GM?”

Haruyuki demanded of the giant in a taut, hoarse voice:

“You... You're the administrator of Brain Burst? The one who manipulates thousands of Burst Linkers within his palm, making them fight each other, is you?”

If the Green King admits it, then what would he do? Haruyuki hadn't given this any thought, and merely awaited an answer with bated breath.

Two seconds later, the King's heavy visor shook to the side, and he replied:

“Nay.”

After another second, he continued:

“... The authority given to me by the system is no different from you. If my head is felled, I die; if I die, I lose Points; if I lose all my Points, I shall leave the Accelerated World forever.”

“Then... Then why do you know things that no one else does?!”

“The answer to that is also no. I am not the only one aware of «Trial #2»; amongst the «Originators» apart from myself, there should be those who know of more information than I do.”

“... Origi... nator...”

It was not Haruyuki’s first time hearing this word that he repeated in a low voice. After the «Seven Kings Conference» four days ago, the Red King Niko had suddenly appeared in Haruyuki’s home and uttered this single word in a trembling voice. Although she had not informed him of its specific meaning at first, he was now able to speculate. The word probably referred to a group of players without «Parents», or in other words, «the first group of Burst Linkers».

— Hey, «Beast».

Haruyuki subconsciously inquired of the annihilator lodged in his armor.

— The person who first created you was an «Originator», right? Do you know something?

Then, the «Beast» who was able to keep silent for several minutes during the blazing battle let out an irascible roar.

— *Gurrrgh... Don't know, don't care. My goal is only to kill and destroy, and you only need to think of ways to slaughter the enemies in front of you.*

At this reply, Haruyuki almost cracked a bitter smile, but quickly pulled himself together. The «Beast» seemed to have calmed down a bit for the time being, but it was undoubtedly eyeing the situation covetously, preparing to take over Haruyuki's consciousness at any moment. Even if he put that aside, Haruyuki was no longer Silver Crow anymore; he was the sixth generation Chrome Disaster, so this wasn't the moment to grin stupidly. He no longer had the right to laugh like that.

— I get it, but from that strike just now, you should have felt that this guy isn't that easily beaten. Also... I keep feeling that there's something off about the whole thing. Even if I want to fight him, I want to gather as much info as I can before attacking.

The «Beast» merely gave a short roar in reply, and returned into the armor.

Haruyuki sucked in a deep breath, changed trains of thought, and stared into Green Grande's eyes again. Those emerald lenses were devoid of emotion as they returned his gaze calmly.

“— You have your own reasons for attempting to extend the life of the Accelerated World. For that, you’ve been solo-killing Enemies all this time, and I get all of that.”

Haruyuki muttered, and then his tone hardened:

“But... Even so, why are you standing in my way? The «Acceleration Research Society» and the ISS Kit clearly want to destroy this world. That building... Tokyo Midtown Tower has to be the base of those people, and my goal is to destroy their base!”

“I told you: you will understand after a moment.”

The Green King replied simply. Then he looked up towards Tokyo Midtown Tower, rising in the northeast. Haruyuki followed his gaze on reflex. Since Roppongi Hills Tower was only half as tall as it was, the Midtown Tower was now twice as tall to them. The sharp blue-black high-rise was completely silent, and absolutely no sign of activity was visible.

“... I’ve waited long enough, if you’re trying to stall...”

Haruyuki had only reached the middle of his sentence —

All of a sudden, a mysterious noise came from the eastern sky. It sounded like countless clocks chiming all at once, and simultaneously like shards of thin glass shattering.

Haruyuki turned his vision 45 degrees to the right and spotted a multicolored thread wavering in the air, tearing apart the thick blue-black cloud cover above the Demonic City. Were they aurora borealis...? No, they were the lights that declared the beginning and end of the world.

“..... The «Transition».”

As this word left his mouth, the Green King nodded heavily. So the King and Iron Pound were waiting for «this»?

The so-called Transition referred to the phenomenon of the change between stage properties in the Unlimited Neutral Field, such as «Demonic City», «Purgatory», «Primeval Forest», and so on. Whenever Transition occurred, slain Enemies would respawn once more, and destroyed objects would be completely repaired. Of course, the entire Field's appearance and geographical properties would also become completely different, and no matter whether one was duelling another player or hunting an Enemy, if Transition occurred mid-battle, the tide of battle would turn significantly.

The time between Transitions was arbitrary, but rumor had it that according to in-game time, the shortest gap between them would be at least three days (a little more than four minutes in real-world time), and no longer than ten days. Estimating the time of Transition was impossible, so Green Grande had probably been waiting here for several days.

But — Why?

While Haruyuki was currently trying to guess at their intention, the wall of aurora borealis had approached them with frightening speed. Looking closer, he could discern that once the the wall of light passed over something, everything at its very bottom, including the numerous skyscrapers populating the Tokyo city center, regardless of color or shape, would be overwritten.

The aurora reached Roppongi Hills less than 30 seconds after he had first heard their sound, painting everything with a kaleidoscopic gleam while applying a tiny bit of pressure onto Haruyuki's body, followed by his body being enveloped in a lifting sensation as though he were standing in a high-speed elevator. He wasn't flying with his own wings; the half-destroyed building had actually begun to repair itself at breakneck speed, pushing Haruyuki and Green Grande back to the rooftop where they had been.

When they stopped ascending and their feet had stepped onto rigid ground, the multicolored glow also dissipated.

Haruyuki watched as the wall of light continued to scroll quickly westward, then surveyed his surroundings.

The sinister deep blue of the «Demonic City» stage had vanished without a trace, and the entire world had taken on a condensed red color. Gray bricks and tiles lined the ground and structures, but out of every nook and cranny slowly flowed a viscous red liquid — blood, filling puddles all over the

place. The sky was now filled with a poisonous crimson distinct from dusk. It was the rarest stage: «Mortal Sin».

Differing from «Demonic City», «Mortal Sin» had a great deal of special effects that were extremely troublesome for duels, and the one to be the most mindful of was that «while dealing physical attacks to enemies in hand-to-hand combat, one half of the damage inflicted will rebound onto yourself». In other words, this stage was extremely advantageous for long-range duel avatars, but at least there were no red-colored players nearby right now.

— I remember that Chiyu doesn't like this stage at all; she'd be complaining nonstop right about now.

Haruyuki's mind thought of that for an instant without him realizing, and then he forcibly shook off this notion. At this moment, his Nega Nebulus partners should still be waiting at the southern gate of the Imperial Palace a long way off to the north. Haruyuki had a premonition that if he thought of them too much, he would break apart at any moment.

He desperately forced himself not to think, turned to look and confirm that the Green King was still standing a distance away from him with crossed arms, and then spoke:

“..... What now? What happens after the Transition?”

Tokyo Midtown Tower to the northeast had taken on a bloodied appearance, but no other change was visible apart from that. Haruyuki was still unable to see a single reason for the Green King continuing to block his way.

But the one who answered his question was not the Green King; instead it was a calm voice that came from behind.

“... It means that this time... we didn't win either.”

Haruyuki spun around and saw a steel boxer sitting cross-legged, crestfallen in a pile of half dried blood. It was Iron Pound. It had not yet been 30 minutes since his death at Haruyuki's hands; Haruyuki was astonished at his too-quick recovery, but then finally realized what was going on. It seemed that «Transition» had an effect that the 60-minute respawn rule would be ignored, allowing Phantom State Burst Linkers to immediately revive.

Despite his dreary respawn wait time being reduced by half, Pound did not look glad at all. Watching the boxer relax his clenched fists and drop them to his feet, Haruyuki wrinkled his brow and asked him:

“Didn't win...? You mean the Transition just now? What... exactly were you waiting for?”

“— Did you know that there is a certain pattern to Transitions?”

As his question was answered with a question, Haruyuki's brow wrinkled further. Yet he still managed to control himself, and shook his head obediently. Pound nodded and continued:

“Like duel avatars, the various properties of duel stages can also be divided into several large categories. Like how «Ice» and «Light Rain» are water-type, «Lava» and «Burnt» are fire-type, «Primeval Forest» and «Rotting Forest» are wood-type, and «Demonic City» and «Steel» are metal-type. Apart from these so-called natural-type stages, there are also Dark-type stages such as «Purgatory» and «Graveyard», and light-type stages such as «Aurora» and «Sacred Ground». You following me so far?”

His teacher-like tone caused the «Beast» to overtake Haruyuki and give a displeased roar, but thanks to it, Haruyuki missed the chance to lose his temper. He waved his hand in silence, beckoning him to continue, and Iron Pound slowly stood up and spoke:

“... Typically, stages of the same large category will not appear consecutively, and the spawn rates of the eight types: water, fire, wind, wood, metal, dark, and light, are virtually the same. However, in rare cases, the six big natural-types will keep cycling, and any dark-types or light-types that appear after that cycle will become quite pure in property... that is, very evil or very holy properties. Other than that, there are many other scattered patterns, but that's the gist of it. So we have been analyzing the patterns of stage change for long time, and predicted that a «super evil» stage would appear at this time today; that's why we were waiting here.”

“... Then you should have achieved your goal, right? There’s nothing more evil than «Mortal Sin». How is that not winning? Didn’t you hit the jackpot?”

Haruyuki pointed out, and Pound nodded, but then shook his head heavily.

“You’re not wrong, but... this still isn’t enough. We require the darkness within the darkness, the most extreme evil of all... the «Hell» stage.”

“.....”

In the eight months since Haruyuki had become a Burst Linker, he had risen to Level 5 and could no longer be called a beginner, yet he had only heard of the «Hell» stage a handful of times. Since he had only vaguely heard tell of that stage’s appearance and special attributes, he didn’t immediately react, but after following along the explanation, he was still only really aware of *what* Iron Pound and the King were waiting for here, not *why*.

“... What does the Unlimited Neutral Field becoming Hell have to do with you lot standing in my way?”

Haruyuki demanded, close to being unable to resist his irritable mood and taking a step into the pool of blood seeping from between the bricks underfoot.

Standing a few meters away, Iron Pound said nothing, but merely raised his right fist slowly, tightly clenching the steel boxing gloves that had been loosely splayed a moment ago.

Haruyuki's eyes narrowed sharply behind his visor, but Pound seemed not to be threatening revenge for his past defeat. He first opened his left boxing glove to stop Haruyuki, then turned his body towards the direction of Tokyo Midtown Tower, 500 meters northeast.

“... After you see this, you will understand even if you don't want to.”

Upon saying that, the steel boxer assumed a bizarre stance a bit unlike that of a boxing figure. A special attack. Haruyuki instinctively assumed a defensive stance, but his armor didn't show him any attack prediction lines. Without so much as a glance at Haruyuki, Pound stared at the bloodied tower far away and shouted the name of his move:

“— «Rocket Straight»!”

The portion near his wrist under his right boxing glove exploded.

No, that wasn't it; it separated. The plump boxing glove, along with a bit of his upper arm, detached from the upper portion of his duel avatar and flew straight ahead, spurting red fire. Even sixth generation Disaster Haruyuki couldn't help but be rendered somewhat speechless at this. There shouldn't be any sort of fighting skill like this here, let alone in traditional boxing.

... In what world are you a «Perfect Match» for a boxer avatar?

Haruyuki barely stopped himself from shouting that as he followed the flying fist with his eyes — perhaps Rocket Punch would be a better name. As expected of a move that took nearly five seconds from assuming the stance to actually performing it, and since they were putting aside tradition, its speed was really quite exceptional; it was bold enough to rival the main cannon attack of the Red King Scarlet Rain, a true long-range avatar. The fist drew a long streak of smoke as it plunged forward, instantly flying across Metropolitan Expressway Line 3 and the streets of Roppongi, approaching Tokyo Midtown Tower in the distance.

Just then —

Haruyuki saw «something» moving near the pointed zenith of that looming tower.

He was only able to discern that this «something» was absurdly large. He couldn't even make out its size or shape. Whatever it was, it was almost completely transparent, and even with Disaster's super-analysis, he was only able to perceive a subtle refraction appearing in the red light surrounding the tower.

Haruyuki tried as hard as he could to see, not knowing whether it was an ability of the armor or the «Beast» cleverly performing some adjustments for

him, but his vision managed to only emphasize an outline of refracted light in midair. That lightly-gray silhouette resembled a person and a bird at the same time and looked very peculiar. It was tightly clutching the tower with more than ten limbs, and its unusually large and round head turned towards the Rocket Punch flying straight towards it...

“.....!”

Immediately after, Haruyuki's body unconsciously went taut.

Because some sort of huge, thin, membrane-like objects had expanded left and right behind that transparent being. Those were undoubtedly «wings», wider than the 50 meters spanning the entire Midtown Tower, and perhaps larger than Super Enemy protecting the southern gate of the Imperial Palace, «Suzaku of the Four Gods».

The gigantic, expanded, transparent wings began radiating a vague white glow.

In the next instant — a jet of light shot from the center of the gargantuan head.

The light was bright enough to turn Haruyuki's enhanced vision completely white for a moment. This jet of light was exuding enough heat that the word «laser» was insufficient to describe it; it completely and utterly consumed Iron Pound's right fist, which had shattered the building wall and kept flying forward — effortlessly vaporizing it.

The jet of light continued and penetrated clear through the Roppongi streets hundreds of meters below.

A fraction of a second later, a titanic explosion erupted, enough to rival a large meteorite striking the ground.

“Urgh.....!”

Haruyuki couldn't help but grunt, the «Beast» deep within the armor uttering a deep growl at the same time. Roppongi Hills Tower ought to be far enough away, but it still shook fiercely enough that one expected it to collapse again. Haruyuki and Pound stood still with great effort, and only the Green King was standing idle and straight as if nothing had happened... However, traces of stiffness were visible in his wide figure.

The jet of light shot by this «transparent object» in order to repulse the Rocket Punch had power that far, far exceeded the scale achievable by a duel avatar, and the size and depth of the round crater left by the explosion only emphasized that point. Even if it wasn't a Burst Linker, then it could only be an Enemy, but if it were really an Enemy, its strength nearing that of the Four Gods... No, judging by how it was completely transparent, and how it would be extremely difficult to determine when to evade its attacks, it ought to be equal to the Four Gods.

But — Why was this? Tokyo Midtown was merely a landmark, very far away from the «Imperial Palace», so why would there be an Enemy this strong protecting it...?

“... Did you see it?”

Just then, Haruyuki heard Iron Pound, who had now lost a hand, ask him weakly. Pound continued without waiting for an answer:

“Its official name is... Legendary-Class Enemy «Archangel Metatron», and it's the final boss of the Shiba Park Great Underground Labyrinth... or, that's what it originally was.”

“Meta... tron.”

Haruyuki felt that he had encountered this name in games or manga outside of Brain Burst, but he was completely focused on a greater paradox, and spoke:

“You said... the final boss of an underground labyrinth? But it's not waiting underground, it's waiting on top of the Tokyo Midtown Tower...”

“That's why I said 'originally'. Someone moved it here. I think... they most likely tamed the final boss.”

“Tamed... the final boss... Can that even be done...?”

“Everyone thought it was impossible — right up until roughly a week ago in real world time, when Metatron appeared at the top of that tower.”

Iron Pound spoke with difficulty, staring at the utterly invisible «Angel».

“The official name of the Shiba Park Great Underground Labyrinth, one of the four great labyrinths, is «Contrary Cathedral». True to its contradictory name, as long as a duel avatar steps onto a designated panel, they will be able to bring about a 180 degree change to the interior attributes, swinging from the most extreme light-type stage, «Heaven», to the most extreme dark-type stage, «Hell»... or vice versa. «Archangel Metatron», the final boss there, possesses, under normal conditions, the special abilities of invisibility, one-hit-kill, and complete invulnerability to status damage; it’s fucking absurd. But only when the labyrinth attribute changes to «Hell» will its strength weaken, and our attacks be able to reach it. So as long as we waited where we were originally supposed to wait... the deepest reaches of Contrary Cathedral, you wouldn’t necessarily be completely helpless like we are now. Even if it would be kind of a drag, as long as you stepped on the control panel in the boss room, you could freely turn it into the «Hell» stage. At least it’s a lot easier to deal with than the «Four Gods» of the Imperial Palace, but...”

Hearing Iron Pound say this, Haruyuki finally felt like he had a grasp on the entire situation, and couldn’t help but blurt out something he was still unsure of:

“... But, once Metatron comes to the outside world... the «Hell» stage becomes exceedingly rare...”

The boxer nodded stiffly at this, and said angrily:

“It’s utterly unstoppable. Not only is it invisible, our attacks can’t hit it at all. There’s no way to win against this kind of Enemy. Right now, a 200 meter-radius sphere from the top of Tokyo Midtown Tower has already become an absolute restricted area where absolutely no one can enter. You could almost call it a «Mini Imperial Palace»...”

“.....”

Of course, Iron Pound had no way of knowing that Haruyuki and the other members of Nega Nebulus had completed the «Imperial Palace Escape Operation» less than an hour ago. But if they had made any errors in that miracle comprised of many smaller lucky accidents, it was hard to say whether Haruyuki, his beloved «Swordmaster», and his «Master» would have all been plunged into Infinite EK at the southern gate...

As his thoughts arrived there, he clenched his fists once more and cast away that notion, forcibly painting black the smiles of those most important to him that almost appeared in his mind, and asked lowly:

“— So as soon as you rush in, you’ll die and go directly into Infinite EK...?”

Pound did not look at Haruyuki, and his reply was now absent of the inner struggle he had displayed before Haruyuki's question.

“No... You'll die immediately, but since the Enemy's attack is so strong, you won't be able to get close to its effective range at all, so you actually won't be thrown into Infinite EK. As long as you flee at full speed once you revive, you'll probably be able to dodge the next laser. I've tried this myself.”

The boxer's mouth curled into an ironic smile beneath his visor, but then it vanished.

“... Even my King, who possesses the strongest defense in the entire Accelerated World, could only withstand the jet of light for five seconds using all of his Incarnate defense. An avatar like me would have absolutely no way of dealing with that... In any case, now you know what's going on, what we're waiting for, and why we stopped you from charging into Tokyo Midtown Tower, right?”

Pound closed his mouth, but Haruyuki kept silent for a while.

Indeed, he finally understood the situation. Iron Pound and Green Grande were waiting on the rooftop of Roppongi Hills Tower for «Hell», which could have appeared by way of Transition according to a fixed pattern. The reason was that «Archangel Metatron», which was protecting Tokyo Midtown Tower, would be weakened in the «Hell» stage, and only then could they attack it.

And the Green King had not hesitated to activate the Incarnate skill «Parsec Wall» to block Haruyuki's flight, because...

“Are you telling me... that you stopped me in order to save me from being killed by Metatron's one-hit attack?”

Haruyuki asked in a voice filled with hostility, but Pound shrugged and said:

“If we'd known from the start that you'd become so severely «Disaster-fied», Silver Crow, we might have just let you go. Because that way we'd have been saved the effort and Points of fulfilling the bounty on you.”

“.....”

Just as Haruyuki was grinding his teeth, the «Beast» also gave a short roar. The black aura emanating from his entire body rippled, but he still managed to suppress the urge to attack. Besides, putting aside Pound, he had just experienced first-hand how tough the Green King was, and there was no way he would win just by wildly swinging at him.

Iron Pound twisted his wrist stump as he eyed Haruyuki sideways:

“— Next time, the chance of the «Hell» stage appearing will be higher, and we'll need to wait three days in real world time, or Sunday night. My King and I have waited on this rooftop for nearly three months, which has been exhausting, so we will logout for now. As for you..... I'll be thanking you

for the time being, since one of our Legion members seems to be indebted to you.”

He paused here, then muttered:

“... You’re pretty weird. You’ve so severely Disaster-fied, yet you can talk to us normally...”

Haruyuki ignored that last bit, and replied in a low voice:

“... Instead of thanking me, why don’t you...”

But he stopped mid-sentence.

It seemed that Pound and the Green King had waited here for more than three months of in-game time for this Transition. If this ascetic practice had been for the purpose of attacking Tokyo Midtown Tower, then it meant that they cared very much about the threat of the «ISS Kit» spreading, and were trying their best in their own way. They likely knew that it was useless no matter how many «terminals» corroding lower-tier Legion members that they destroyed; they had to destroy the «main body».

“..... Although «Bush Utan» of Great Wall had once succumbed to the temptation of the ISS Kit, he was trying to get rid of the Kit on his own just now, and that’s why he was attacked by that group of Kit-wearers. So...”

Haruyuki muttered, and Pound nodded slightly in response:

“Yeah. In regards to this incident, the stance of my King and our Legion is not to take «Judgment» lightly. I think that during the Seven Kings Conference in three days’ time, the six Legions will also decide on how to universally treat the issue of the «Incarnation Training Kit»... But of course, that will come after we decide how to resolve the main issue, the «Disaster Armor».”

The steel boxer said in a businesslike tone, then headed to the Green King’s side a few meters away. The two of them exchanged a few words, then began walking further away. They probably intended to descend into the building using the elevator southeast of the rooftop helipad, and return to the real world using a nearby portal.

Haruyuki watched the steadily disappearing figures, and began thinking while ignoring the fact that his mind was still numb.

— I had allowed myself to be driven by rage and hatred and summoned the «Disaster Armor», and this time I completely transformed into the sixth generation «Chrome Disaster». I had wielded various tremendous powers that did not belong to me, and slaughtered the six ISS Kit-wearers who had attacked Ash and Utan.

— My actions are no different than those of Takumu yesterday. He had used the dark power created by the ISS Kit and annihilated the PK Group

«Supernova Remnant», who had attacked him. What did I say to him back then when he was like this...?

The instant he thought of this, his own sobbing words came in a small voice from far away to him.

... You'll definitely be able to fight this dark power! You'll definitely have a way to fight it, overcome it, and keep going forward! Won't you, Taku?!

And as he had said, Takumu had indeed faced the darkness in his own heart, swung the sword of his heart, and sliced the ISS Kit parasitizing him in half.

— I can't do that, Taku.

Haruyuki looked down at his fierce, clawed right hand, murmuring with self-loathing.

— I don't have an ounce of strength left; I have no way of parting with this «Armor». No... I've already combined with the armor, with «The Disaster», and yet I'm only at this level, so in the end I was nothing special after all. I fought so hard against a third-ranking officer from Great Wall, but I couldn't do a thing to their King above them. Compared to me, the fourth generation in the Replay from back then, and the fifth generation who scared off the Yellow King with one strike, were much stronger. Even they weren't able to resist the armor's control, so what is someone like me supposed to do...

If Kuroyukihime were here, maybe she would be saying, stunned, “You’ve got some talent, for being so negative even after becoming Chrome Disaster!” But Haruyuki was of course unable to hear that now, and instead, the half-roaring voice of the «Beast» came from the root of the tail growing out of his back.

— *Gurrgh... You’re the best host among all of the BB players, the one I’ve searched for the most. You are the first one to be so good at fighting after combining with me for not that long.*

At this, Haruyuki raised his gloomily drooping head, and finally replied with traces of a bitter laugh.

— What? Are you comforting me?

Then immediately came an explosive roar from the deep within his mind.

— *Gurah! If you have time to joke around, why don’t you go find your next prey?*

— You say that, but... No matter how I look at it, there’s no easy way to attack the Tokyo Midtown Tower I originally wanted to go to... You saw that ridiculous laser just now, didn’t you?

— *Urgh... If you’re able to get the special ability «Theoretical Mirror», or...*

Unknowingly, Haruyuki had begun talking like this with the Beast dwelling inside him...

But he realized that Iron Pound, whom he thought had already left, had stopped in front of the elevator, and turned around to gaze at him.

Haruyuki thought that he wanted a rematch, and stared right back at him, but the boxer shook his stump of a right hand to convey his absence of such intentions, and spoke:

“... Forget it, don't mind me, I think it was my imagination. For an instant, it looked like the color of your armor...”

Haruyuki instinctively looked down at his body, but of course, all he saw was the fiercely designed «armor», its color still a shadowed chrome.

“... Forget I said anything.”

Pound said to Haruyuki, who looked up again, and then he shouted loudly:

“Listen to me, Silver Crow! You only have three days of probation left! If that «armor» is not completely purged from your duel avatar by 1:00 pm on Sunday, you will become a wanted criminal with the highest bounty on your head in the Accelerated World!”

“... When that time comes, you can be the first to have my head. You want revenge for sure, don't you?”

Pound said nothing to Haruyuki's reply, and merely turned around. But then he thrust his left boxing glove into the air, perhaps saying that he would not lose next time. He then stepped onto the bloodstained elevator after the Green King.

The carriage plastered with filthy tiles began descending with an uncomfortable noise. Haruyuki was left alone on the tower rooftop in the «Mortal Sin» stage, and began murmuring to himself unconsciously.

“..... Only three days left, huh?.....”

If he thought about it, that was Haruyuki's remaining lifespan as a Burst Linker.

No matter how strong the armor — the Enhanced Armament «The Disaster» became, as long as he connected to the Global Net, an endless stream of challengers would come, and if he began fighting them without end, Haruyuki's focus would eventually deplete. Just like how no matter how advanced a sports car one drove, if one dozed off while driving, they'd crash... No, before crashing, the control would be taken over by the AI. In the same way, nothing was weaker than a Burst Linker who was unable to maintain their focus. Every Chrome Disaster, from the first generation to the fifth, had all failed for virtually the same reason.

“..... Hey, «Beast», what do you think we ought to do?”

His urges of fury and hatred had not vanished, of course, but perhaps they had dissipated a bit after that fierce battle with Iron Pound and Green Grande. He now felt that emotions such as loss, nothingness, self-loathing, and a bit of self-abandonment were stronger. Haruyuki no longer bothered to think about such things and had asked such a question carelessly, and the burning consciousness immediately responded:

— *We... must become stronger, stronger. Strong to the point where it won't matter if the enemy is an «Originator» or a «Pure Color Player»; we'll be able to kill them with ease, and swallow every inch of them...*

“... You sure are fired up.”

Haruyuki laughed softly under his visor.

This «Beast» — or strictly speaking, it ought to be an intelligence-like existence able to operate by way of the special nature of its recording medium, comprised of many negative memories and emotions assimilated by «The Disaster» — had a very simple goal: to see all Burst Linkers as enemies, fight them, win against them, and consume them. It was because of this simple goal that the Beast's control of one's consciousness was strong beyond belief. Putting aside the «first generation», which had created the Disaster Armor, the consciousnesses of the second through fifth generations

had more or less suffered corrosion by the armor, and they had become terrible, crazed warriors. Under their poisoned talons, there had to be more than a hundred Burst Linkers who had forever departed from the Accelerated World.

So if one thought mechanically about the current situation, «Disaster Armor» = «Beast» = «Sixth Generation Chrome Disaster» = «Silver Crow» ought to be a public enemy far, far stronger than the ISS Kit or the Acceleration Research Society.

During the end of the Hermes Cord Traversal Race two weeks ago, Haruyuki had involuntarily summoned the armor and was not satisfied just with instantly killing all of the enemies before him, he even wanted to attack the remaining hundreds of audience members. It was thanks to Lime Bell, who had activated her ultimate skill, that he had narrowly recovered, but he had had a premonition that if he had called out the armor again, he would definitely not have been able to recover. His own consciousness would have vanished in an instant, and become reduced to an existence that knew only how to wreak havoc.

And now, Haruyuki had entered this domain in one step. But he hadn't just summoned the armor for a second time, he had combined with it more deeply than last time, and had even unleashed it on his surroundings, allowing himself to be driven by rage. But in the battle against a strong enemy, Iron Pound, something began to change in his heart, and then the earth-shattering spat with the Green King made him unfathomably calm.

Was this proof that Haruyuki had fully combined with Disaster?

Or did the reason not lie with Haruyuki at all, but with the Beast...?

“..... Hey... you...”

Haruyuki had always been afraid of the «Beast», only seeing it as the root of the trouble buried within his body, or a timed bomb, but now he spoke to it of his own accord:

“If you kept winning against enemies like this, over and over, right until the last one falls... what will you do then...?”

There was a long silence without a reply. Haruyuki thought that maybe the «Beast» itself hadn't thought this far, but after a while a low growl resounded in his mind:

— *Don't know. It's not important; I have only one goal: to destroy the enemies in front of me.*

“..... Ha, ha ha... I guess that makes sense...”

Haruyuki gave a few short laughs, and nodded.

Since he had summoned the «Disaster» with his own will and completely awakened it, it was very possible that even with Lime Bell's «Citron Call» or Ardor Maiden's «Purification Ability», he would no longer be able to return to his original form. So Haruyuki, like the Beast, no longer had anywhere to return to. Because there was no guarantee that the instant he saw his partners from Nega Nebulus, he wouldn't lose his mind like he had just now, and impulsively smash his sword towards them.

Of course, he had to leave the Unlimited Neutral Field sooner or later, and meet Chiyuri, Takumu, Fuuko, Utai... and Kuroyukihime in the real world.

However, Haruyuki did not know what expression or language he would face from these people whom he loved, to the point that he would rather wander around in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where time was accelerated by 1000 times. Whether it was an Enemy or a Burst Linker, he'd kill whatever he saw, right up until the sands of time ground him right out of existence.

That way, maybe he wouldn't be hurting so much, even if there was no way for him to finish walking the same path with the group of people whom he so loved.

“... Looks like we'll be getting to know each other for a really long time, partner.”

Haruyuki's words were met only with a short, discontented roar.

— I didn't expect to engage in this sort of conversation with such a frightening «Beast». I don't really do well with animals anyway...

Having such thoughts in his head, he decided to tentatively head east — in the direction of Ginza first, so he stepped along the edge of Roppongi Hills Tower.

Currently, Haruyuki had overlooked two important truths.

Firstly, if Haruyuki had really become one with «The Disaster», he shouldn't be hearing the «Beast's» words at all. Roughly an hour ago, when Haruyuki had summoned the armor north of Shibuya, there was a long while in which he was completely unable to sense the Beast's presence, because he himself had become the Beast, and was wreaking devastation.

Only during the fierce battle with Iron Pound, in the instant that Haruyuki had tried to resist the armor with his own willpower, did he finally hear the voice of the Beast in his mind. Afterwards, Haruyuki had fought while conversing with the Beast at a very high speed. This was putting aside fighting strength, but this phenomenon could be seen as him having less of a connection with the armor in regards to consciousness, but Haruyuki was unable to realize this right now.

The second truth was something he had completely forgotten.

Roughly one hour ago, just as he had left the other members of Nega Nebulus at the southern gate of the Imperial Palace, and was about to fly to find Ash Roller, Chiyuri had told him something.

*“Haru, if you don’t come back in an hour, I’ll go back to that world and pull the cable out.”*

Just as Haruyuki was about to take flight from the eastern rooftop and become a wandering warrior, he saw a line of intensely flashing reddish purple system messaging dead center of his vision. [DISCONNECTION WARNING]. Disconnection warning.

A partner of his had first returned to the real world through a portal, and directly physically unplugged the XSB cable connecting him to the Unlimited Neutral Field from Haruyuki’s Neuro Linker. In the few seconds that it took for Haruyuki to come to this conclusion...

The bloodied scenery of the «Mortal Sin» stage began pulling away perpendicularly and vanished. Just as he was about to disconnect from the Accelerated World, he heard a short roar from the Beast deep within his mind.

Other than the usual fury and irascibility, that roar seemed to conceal within it an emotion that felt foreign to him.

### Chapter 3

The first thing that Haruyuki felt was not how clumsy his body in the real world was, nor the elasticity of the sofa against his back, nor how chilly the air being expelled from the air conditioning system was.

Rather, it was a hand tightly gripping his left shoulder, a whiff of slightly minty sweetness, and the feeling of silky hair brushing over his cheeks.

Before he even opened his eyes, Haruyuki was already sure who the person before him was. But watching Kuroyukihime widen her celestial eyes only thirty centimeters away from him, Haruyuki was still unable to stem the flow of emotions welling up in his chest, making him tremble all over.

Kuroyukihime's right hand seized Haruyuki's shoulder, her left hand still gripping the head of the XSB data cable that had just been pulled out of his Neuro Linker. By the looks of it, the one who had executed this method of physical disconnection had not been Chiyuri, but her instead.

Her wet, lightly pink lips moved ever so slightly, emitting a somewhat taut voice:

“..... Haruyuki, we waited for an hour but you still hadn't returned, so, I'm sorry, but we could only execute the «Emergency Disconnection Safety Measure».”

“..... Okay.”

It took considerable effort for Haruyuki to respond, and he realized that his voice was hoarse enough to shock even himself. His mouth had become completely dry, and even his tongue wasn't responding to his commands.

As a result, a glass full of iced oolong tea was immediately handed to him from his right. The one holding the glass was Kurasaki Fuuko, whose level of concern was clearly not below Kuroyukihime's. Haruyuki nodded slightly in thanks, accepting the glass, and downed the icy tea in one gulp. Only then did the pain in his throat alleviate, and he exhaled.

Kuroyukihime let Haruyuki calm down, before she spoke again:

“What... happened? When we were preparing to leave from the logout point in the guardhouse nearest to the southern gate of the Imperial Palace... I witnessed, around Akasaka to the south, an incredibly violent explosion... You weren't struck by it, were you...”

It was then that Haruyuki suddenly realized. The fact that when he bid farewell to Kuroyukihime and the others at the southern gate of the Imperial Palace, he had only told them he was going to look for Ash Roller, and they, of course, had no way of knowing about the chain of events that had taken place in the next hour.

His hands gripped the empty glass, and he gently swiveled his eyes.

Before him was Kuroyukihime, with a single knee against the sofa, her entire body pressed against him; to her right was Fuuko, kneeling on the carpet, and further right was Shinomiya Utai, sitting on the sofa beside Haruyuki.

Looking to the other side, Mayuzumi Takumu and Kurashima Chiyuri were leaning over, shoulder to shoulder. The faces of every member of the second generation of Nega Nebulus were filled only with heartfelt concern for Haruyuki.

— But I...

— I betrayed everyone's trust...

Haruyuki forcibly suppressed this suddenly surfacing notion and squeezed out a stiff smile. He glanced at Kuroyukihime again, without looking at her eyes, and spoke in a rigid voice:

“I-I’m fine... I wasn’t hit by the explosion... and I didn’t die once. I disconnected very close to a portal, it wouldn’t have been hard for me log off normally either...”

Here, everyone’s faces revealed slight relief. But the instant he saw these expressions,

Haruyuki instead felt a pang of guilt stabbing into his heart like a needle.

He had to tell them. He had to tell them everything, tell them what kind of things he had done, tell them he had allowed himself to be driven by rage and lost sight of reason, and had destroyed a valuable object.

He had destroyed — a possibility. The future of not just Haruyuki himself, but of the entire Nega Nebulus Legion.

Haruyuki restrained the urge to begin bawling like a child, desperately forcing a smile and simultaneously pushing Kuroyukihime's hand away from his right shoulder. Watching his beloved Swordmaster slightly wrinkle her brow but stand up all the same, he finally sat up straight on the sofa.

He reached out and placed the empty glass on a low table, then looked up and spoke:

“... Um, I'll explain everything in order.”

As he spoke, Haruyuki first glanced at Fuuko, and nodded.

“... Master, I found Ash Roller slightly north of Shibuya Station. By the looks of it, he had been planning to meet Bush Utan in Shibuya before meeting up with Master and the others... But, they were attacked on the way by a gang of ISS Kit users...”

“Huh...?!”

Fuuko’s eyes widened as she emitted a surprised noise; Haruyuki immediately nodded at her:

“Don’t worry. Although they looked like they’d lost a lot of Points, Ash and Utan’s Points had not been completely exhausted, and I believe that they’ve already logged out normally from the Shibuya Station portal.”

“— I see.....”

Fuuko slowly exhaled a breath that she almost couldn’t summon, then spoke with her brows tightly knit together:

“I know it is probably too late, but originally, I almost ran all the way to the underground garage to pull out his data cable. I really can’t stand it; no matter how many times I tell him, that child can never change their habit of being impulsive... It looks as though I will have to revise my Special Incarnation Training Course into the super luxurious special version.”

[UI> Please have mercy.]

Utai shrugged and replied by typing, causing Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, and Takumu to burst out laughing. Haruyuki tried hard to relax his cheeks and squeeze out an expression resembling a smile, then continued to explain:

“Um... Then, it was very hard, but I managed to defeat that gang of Kit users, and I saw one of the Kits flying to the east, so I chased it... I came to Roppongi Hills tower, but met some members of another Legion, then had a little fight, and all in all nothing went wrong... Not long after they logged out from the leave point at Roppongi Hills tower, Senpai helped pull out my data cable, so I logged out like that too. The explosion everyone saw was caused by a huge Enemy lurking nearby, but I wasn't seen by it...”

Haruyuki shut his mouth here, but he had left out too many details, and everyone looked at each other as though expressing that things hadn't been so simple. Finally, Kuroyukihime represented everyone and posed the question:

“— Haruyuki-kun, it's wonderful that you are all right... but you just said that you defeated a gang of ISS Kit users on your own... right? Do you mean to say that you, by yourself, defeated several opponents in «IS Mode»? Don't get me wrong, of course I'm not doubting your strength...”

“U-Um.....”

Chiyuri astutely sensed that Haruyuki did not know how to respond, and spoke in a clear voice:

“Senpai, Haru does really well in critical moments! Everyone's been talking lately about how whenever he's in a bad situation, the strategies he uses are even craftier than the Yellow King's!”

“... Chiyuri-kun, are you praising him?”

Their conversation made Takumu, Fuuko, and Utai laugh again, and Haruyuki desperately attempted to squeeze out what sounded like laughter from his throat to fit in with the other three.

But — at the same time, the emotion that he had kept desperately suppressed deep within his heart from the very beginning, finally let loose.

The laughter of these good friends was simply too warm, their expressions too dazzling. It had only been the instance of time between the clock on the wall a few minutes ago, and the moment in which everyone had dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field together, but Haruyuki and the other members of Nega Nebulus were still a circle of friends that possessed exceptionally strong friendship, despite not numbering many. Each one of them deeply believed that they could save Ardor Maiden from the jaws of Suzaku of Four Gods and purify the Armor parasite, and then everyone could fight side by side. Yet — Yet...

“..... Haruyuki...?”

Hearing Kuroyukihime ask him in a bewildered whisper, Haruyuki realized just then that a single track of tears was already flowing down his right cheek.

He hurriedly wiped at it with the back of his hand, and squeezed out a smile again:

“I-I’m sorry, it’s nothing. It’s just that after our mission to save Shinomiya-san is done, I was so relieved, and couldn’t help but...”

Haruyuki spoke very quickly, but his real world body refused to obey his commands; beads of tears continued to flow from his eyes, and before he knew it his entire face was twisted, his chest beginning to heave violently.

“— Haruyuki-kun.”

Kuroyukihime shouted his name firmly, reaching a pearly hand towards him.

But Haruyuki extended both hands and pushed it away softly yet firmly. Just as that slender body backed away, he immediately leapt off the sofa and ran towards the living room door with clumsy steps.

Once he put a hand on the door handle, Haruyuki spun around and spoke to everyone, all of whom were wide-eyed:

“..... I’m sorry, everyone. I’m really, really sorry.”

“H... Haru, what’s wrong? Tell us first. Didn’t we agree not to keep secrets from each other again?!”

Takumu’s shout made Haruyuki want to lower his face and sob on reflex, but he eventually resisted that urge.

Haruyuki placed this group of people most important to him in the direct center of his blurry vision, and spoke hoarsely:

“..... I’m... no longer... Silver Crow; I’m the sixth generation Chrome Disaster now.”

Immediately after, Haruyuki felt his partners gasp in unison, but the curtain of tears prevented the boy from clearly discerning their expressions, so he could only force himself to squeeze out some words.

“The Armor... has already completely fused with my duel avatar. It’s too late to restore or purify it... I’m sorry, Senpai, I... I really wanted to, with you...”

*I really wanted to walk to the end of the Accelerated World with you.*

Haruyuki swallowed that last bit and, without waiting for Kuroyukihime’s response, spun around, wrenched the door open, and ran into the hallway.

The footsteps coming from behind most likely belonged to Takumu and Kuroyukihime. Haruyuki bolted towards the vestibule, and simultaneously connected to his home server, opened a projector window, and placed his finger on the force-lock button on the safety settings page.

“Haru!”

“Haruyuki-kun, wait!”

As though wanting to escape from their shouts, Haruyuki slipped on his running shoes and pushed open the vestibule door, ran into the building’s public hallway and immediately closed the door, then pressed the lock button.

*Clack!* The locking noise almost sounded like the severance of some form of contact. Immediately after, he heard another, and another sound of a sliding door being pushed, and following that was a storm of clattering from the door handle being twisted, but the door would not open. Without Haruyuki, who had administrator privileges of the Arita family home server, there was no way to release the force lock setting.

Haruyuki manipulated the window, set the locking period to its maximum of 15 minutes, and simultaneously spoke to Kuroyukihime, who had continuously been calling his name against the five-centimeter thick door:

“Senpai... I... I summoned the «Disaster Armor» of my own accord. Fancy everyone... Fancy everyone trying so hard to help purify the «Seed» parasite from my body... Mei-san even came back alive from the Imperial Palace... But I wasted everyone’s effort...”

— *How could it be wasted?!*

*— You did it to save important friends, do you think I wouldn't know? It's just a tiny «Armor», I'll blast it away from you in one strike! Open up, Haruyuki-kun!*

Even though they were separated by two layers of aluminum door frame, Kuroyukihime's voice still carried over quite clearly. Even the vibrations from her hard pounding on the door seemed to travel from his back directly into his heart.

“... At this rate, during the «Seven Kings Conference» on Sunday, it's hard to guarantee that Senpai and the entire Legion will be free from blame. If our entire Legion is marked as wanted... Nega Nebulus will fall. I'll never let that sort of thing happen.”

Hearing Haruyuki say this, the trembling suddenly ceased.

In the short silence, Haruyuki desperately spoke the last few words.

“As the «Disaster Armor», I've made a decision, please wait for me... I will definitely come back. I'll come back to Senpai... and everyone else.”

Ever since he had become Kuroyukihime's Child and become a Burst Linker, this was Haruyuki's first time telling such a huge lie.

The Armor was no longer separable from him now. Even now, as he was present in the real world. He could feel the «Beast» breathing deep within his

body. He could only do one thing now, and that was to disappear together with it. Through infinite battles, he would wear his very existence down to nothing.

..... *I'm sorry.*

..... *Goodbye, Senpai. Goodbye, Master. Sorry, Taku, Chiyu. And...  
Shinomiya-san.*

Haruyuki said to himself in his heart, and then moved his back away from the door.

Clenching his fists, he began running towards the elevator. The small clock in his lower right vision showed that it was 7:20 pm; it still barely counted as the time during which a middle school student could walk alone on the streets. He only needed to find an Internet cafe and immediately dive back into the Unlimited Neutral Field; he believed that he could end it all before he was kicked out by the owner at 10 pm.

Even as he was in chaos and anxiety, by no means did Haruyuki think that his own actions might be too rash. But he could never, ever forget that once a Burst Linker donned the Disaster Armor, even his real world personality would be slowly eroded. After Cherry Rook became the fifth generation Chrome Disaster, as her «Child», he even wanted to devour Niko, his own Legion master; Haruyuki could never, ever let this tragedy repeat itself; never, ever.

When he was last online, the only opponents Haruyuki had attacked in an uncontrollable state were those guys equipped with ISS Kits, including Olive Glove. He had almost lost control during the fight with Iron Pound and the Green King, but fortunately, it hadn't progressed to a stage in which memories and rationality were lost.

He had to make a decision while he was still himself.

Haruyuki steeled his determination, and just as he stepped onto the elevator, he saw the icon for an incoming voice chat request begin to flash, accompanied with a brisk, synthetic sound effect. The one calling was — Chiyuri.

Haruyuki clenched his fists tightly, resisting the urge to press the icon, then simultaneously apologized in his heart and shut down all Internet connectivity on his Neuro Linker. Then, without using the AR button and instead using the elevator's own control console that he couldn't remember using even once, he directed the elevator towards the first floor.

The residential skyscraper in north Koenji where Haruyuki and the others lived was comprised of a large shopping mall from its lower first floor to its third floor.

Even on a normal night like this one, the central passageway on the first floor was filled with couples and families, becoming a bustling tide of people.

Haruyuki jogged past more and more happily smiling faces, feeling that he was seemingly once familiar with this sort of scene.

Yes. Earlier this year in April, during the day that the «Marauder» Dusk Taker, a Burst Linker suddenly appearing at Umesato Middle School, had seized Silver Crow's one and only special ability — «Flight». At the time, Haruyuki was threatened into surrendering Burst Points every day, and had bolted through the sea of shoppers, blinking back tears like he was right now. As for what happened next, Ash Roller, who'd run over to him on the 7th Ring to duel with him at the time, became his savior. He took Haruyuki to his own superior, Sky Raker, and through her Haruyuki received the two powers of the «Incarnate System» and «Gale Thruster» and, after an intense battle, finally defeated Dusk Taker.

However, this time he could not rely on anyone else. Because as soon as he met anyone in the Accelerated World, Haruyuki would fail to recognize his allies and begin slicing everyone in sight.

As soon as he thought of this, Haruyuki begin to feel that the very act of «connecting to the Unlimited Neutral Field» was inherently dangerous. After all, no one could guarantee that he wouldn't bump into someone he didn't want to fight. Maybe it was better to just remove the Neuro Linker from his neck, and either snap it in half or throw it into the fountain. Destroying the device and the BB program installed on it might be the only way to bury the «Disaster Armor»...

At that moment.

Haruyuki was proceeding towards the front gate of his building, his head slightly hung, but a neat pair of shoes suddenly ran into his vision.

That pair of black boat shoes was not new, but had been maintained quite beautifully. Further upwards, a pair of pearly white, slender calves were visible. Above tiny kneecaps a plaid pleated skirt swayed gently.

This person — who should be a girl — stopped right in Haruyuki's way: the very middle of the central passageway to the shopping mall. He didn't know whether this person was distracted by manipulating her virtual desktop, but this action of blocking the way was really quite rude. Come to think of it, of course Haruyuki didn't have the guts to push her out of the way, so without looking at her face, he adjusted his course to the left.

Surprisingly, as soon as he changed his direction, the black boat shoes also took a step left, still blocking his way.

Haruyuki finally became slightly annoyed, changing his course rightwards, the owner of the pair of shoes sliding horizontally in the same direction this time as well. At this point, the distance between them was less than one meter, and Haruyuki could not help but halt his footsteps.

As though he were peeved, Haruyuki refused to lift his head, and merely said in a small voice:

“... I’m sorry, please excuse me.”

Naturally, he was expecting her to respond, “Oh, I’m sorry!”, but after a short pause, the softly-voiced words were quite far from his expectations indeed.

“... I can’t... let you through.”

..... Huh?

With things the way they were now, Haruyuki could no longer keep his head lowered.

As his vision lifted upwards, the full body of this mysterious female in his way was gradually revealed. Above the plaid skirt was an ivory knitted uniform coat, with a sash of the same pattern as the skirt tied at the blouse’s chest opening. If this were a school uniform, it was quite fashionable indeed. Atop it was a small, slanted shoulder bag.

This girl should be middle school student, but her physique was quite petite. Even so, her slender arms were opened around 30 degrees left to right, blocking Haruyuki in earnest, whose width far exceeded her.

Watching her, Haruyuki became utterly speechless, and finally could not help but look at her appearance.

Her face was as foreign as her voice and uniform. Her fresh features looked a bit like a boy's, and her hairstyle was short and slightly sticking up. Although Haruyuki was not good at committing other's appearances to memory, he was almost certain that he had never seen this girl before. As to why he couldn't be absolutely sure, the instant he looked at her appearance, he would immediately avert his eyes on reflex.

Because the date-shaped eyes of this mystery girl were already shimmering with tears, with droplets sliding out every so often.

Suffice to say, he could not come up with any reason whatsoever for a middle school girl on the verge of tears to be blocking his way smack dab in the middle of a packed shopping mall. With great effort, Haruyuki squeezed shut his trigger valve, which had nearly burst open, and spoke again in a small voice:

“Um... I-I think you've got the wrong person. Sorry, I'm in a hurry...”

Saying this, Haruyuki tried for a third time to adjust his course, preparing to go around her from the left...

This girl, on the verge of tears, suddenly seized Haruyuki's right wrist with an unexpected amount of strength, and spoke in an equally small voice:

“I don't have... the wrong person. I can't... let you go.”

“What.....? W-Why... I didn't do anything.....”

Haruyuki was unable to withstand the eyes of people gradually congregating towards them, and his own talking speed had quickened.

The girl's response, however, was an even stronger denial.

“No... You've done... a lot... for me. You... saved me.”

The girl declared in a stammer, trying hard to stop tears from sliding out of her single-lidded eyes, and continued:

“I am... Ash Roller.”



## Chapter 4

Of the many different abilities demanded of Burst Linkers, the most important was the ability to easily adapt to changing situations.

Even if the opponent were a duel avatar one had long been familiar with, there was always the chance of something completely unexpected happening during battle. If one encountered such a situation but did not react at all, achieving victory was not something that could be guaranteed. The dividing line between one who could utilize their avatar's character abilities and one who couldn't was the ability to finish gathering information and select a course of action in the least amount of time.

Silver Crow's best attribute was «speed», bestowed unto Haruyuki due to his «response time». It was clear that his idle time during duels was less than that of a normal person, and this sort of assessment had not been applied to him merely once or twice.

But...

At this point, the speed of Haruyuki's processing clock dropped below 1 hertz. His eyes and mouth hung open as far as they would go and he could no longer do anything else.

Ash Roller... Who... exactly... was that?

His reaction time delayed, Haruyuki finally arrived at an answer.

*... It's Ash-san... Right? The guy with the antique American motorcycle and skull helmet, the guy who laughs weirdly all the time, going, "Yahaha, I'm Mega Lucky!"*

*... Huh? Ash-san is actually this small, petite little girl?*

Just when Haruyuki finally managed to digest this comparatively small amount of information, after a full ten seconds, his cognition halted again. Putting the mess he was in at the back of his mind for now, a chibi motorcycle slowly drove from left to right across his blank brain.

The teary-eyed girl tugged hard on Haruyuki's right wrist once again as he stood in a busy crowd, dead center of the shopping mall, completely frozen to the spot.

"Then... let's, go, somewhere else."

Haruyuki, whose mind had come to a full halt, allowed himself to be led by the young girl into the underground garage in Basement Two of the shopping mall. Walking past the EVs that were aligned neatly in rows, a small, familiar car came into view: the gleaming canary yellow five-door car of an Italian make, the beloved car of Sky Raker — Kurasaki Fuuko (or, to be precise, her mother's).

The young girl seemed to have an Instant Key. She waved her right hand, causing the car's directional lamps to blink and its door locks to click. She opened the right rear door, pushed Haruyuki inside, then sat down herself.

This girl possessing a key to this car proved that she knew Fuuko. Even so, the still utterly confused Haruyuki was unable to accept the fact that this girl sitting at his side, a cute middle schooler with short bobbed hair, was Ash Roller. It had made comparatively more sense when Haruyuki's relative "Saitou Tomoko" was discovered to have been the Red King, Scarlet Rain, in disguise.

But even then —

Haruyuki faced the burden of not being able to spend the rest of his life standing there stupefied. Seven minutes had elapsed since he had run out of his house in only a T-shirt and capri pants. The emergency lock holding Kuroyukihime and the others captive in the Arita household would only last for eight more minutes; it was a given that they would begin searching for Haruyuki the instant it unlocked.

Although it would be a Herculean task to search out someone whose Neuro Linker was disconnected from the Global Net in this vast apartment complex, Takumu and Chiyuri were with them. No matter how many times they had played as children, Haruyuki's win rate at hide-and-seek was absolutely dismal. Chiyuri in particular was a beast at hide-and-seek — as soon as ice

cream was agreed upon as a prize, she would sniff out Haruyuki in a matter of minutes. In other words, if he were to put a stop to this meeting, he would have to leave the apartment complex in no more than ten minutes.

Upon completing his train of thought and resuming brain function with great difficulty, he stole a sideways glance at the girl who was sniffing as she spoke. Putting aside the situation, he opened his mouth to ask:

“Erm... So... When you just said that you’re Ash Roller, were you trying to say you’re... someone Ash knows, or... his representative, or something like that?”

Haruyuki pinned all of his hopes on the infinitesimally small chance that he had misheard *I am... Ash Roller* while asking that question, but...

The young girl, who suddenly had a white handkerchief in her hand, lowered her face that had turned beetroot red for some reason, and said in a somewhat timid, nearly inaudible voice:

“..... I am, the real Ash.”

“.....”

Haruyuki’s thoughts almost jammed again, which he fortunately managed to fix. But no matter what, he still couldn’t believe it.

In the vastness of the Accelerated World, there were bound to be cases of a large disconnect between the appearance of the duel avatar and that of the real person. This even applied to Haruyuki himself. If someone knew only of the skin-and-bones Silver Crow, it would be hard to believe that he was truly a rotund second year middle school student.

However, these were ultimately only differences in appearance, and there typically wouldn't be huge differences in terms of one's tone of voice, actions, and other «characteristics». This applied to every Burst Linker Haruyuki knew in the real world; Kuroyukihime, the rest of Nega Nebulus, Pard-san and Niko from Prominence, and even the treacherous Dusk Taker were no exception.

On the other hand, there was not a single similarity between the girl sitting next to him and Ash Roller — or at least, that was what he thought. Whether it was tone of voice, actions, personality, or, most importantly, gender, everything was *completely* different. Yes, this motorbike rider was a «male avatar» no matter how he thought about it. In Brain Burst, as long as the player herself were female, then the avatar would be female too.

“Ah...”

When Haruyuki's thoughts reached this point, he could not help but make a small noise as a scene suddenly flashed by in his mind. His entire body leaned slightly to the right, and he finally was able to look closely at the girl's crying face.

The girl flinched slightly, but she still returned his gaze. Her gentle, lucid face... It was obviously the facial structure of a girl, but bore some similarity to a science boy's face... .

It was indeed somewhat similar to that of the facial structure below Ash Roller's skull-like helmet.

“You're..... really..... But, why.....”

Haruyuki asked, even more confused.

The teary-eyed girl replied not with words, but with actions.

She opened the small shoulder bag she had placed on her lap, stowed her handkerchief, then retrieved something from the bag. Its left and right supports were folded up, and it was a deep silver color — a Neuro Linker.

Confused, Haruyuki shifted his vision towards the girl's slender neck. A cute, pale green Neuro Linker was already being worn there, and since she had been able to unlock the car door with a wave of her right hand, it was obvious that she would be wearing a device like this.

A new question popped into Haruyuki's mind.

While Neuro Linkers, like the cell phones and smartphones of old, were considered portable communications devices, that was not their only purpose. They also served as name cards, wallets, and even IDs. The device would bind its user's unique brainwaves to a unique ID in its core chip, and this could serve as a way to identify a person if they wore it. That was why this sort of ID was, in essence, a «citizen number».

To put it another way, the Neuro Linkers were «name-tagged necklaces» wrapped around the citizens' necks by the government. The best proof for this was the fact that the law prohibited citizens from owning more than one device. While there were, of course, many ways to get two or three Neuro Linkers, only one core chip was distributed to each citizen. Moreover, when the device itself needed replacement, chip transfer could only be done in a ward office or government-approved store, so a chipless machine was useless. Even the ever-resourceful Kuroyukihime had only one Neuro Linker. If she had had more than one, then there would have been no need at all to have disconnected herself from the Global Net for two years in order to hide from search parties sent by the Six Kings.

For these reasons, Haruyuki was shocked when the girl took out a «second Neuro Linker».

“I-Is that..... yours? C-Can you..... use it?”

The young girl tilted her head ever-so-slightly in response to Haruyuki's hoarse question, and answered:

“Yes... I can. But it’s... not mine. This Neuro Linker was... my brother’s.”

“Was... your brother’s?”

Haruyuki repeated blankly, and the mysterious girl nodded, then turned her entire body towards him on the leather seat. They were alone in the car, so of course she could really only turn her upper body, and of course the hem of her skirt would be raised with her, revealing a wide portion of her pure white legs.

Even as the situation became more and more complicated, Haruyuki was only able to let his eyes wander unnaturally, but the girl paid no attention to it, instead straightening her back and taking a deep breath. Just like Haruyuki, she looked to be very nervous about this situation before her. The girl placed the gray Neuro Linker onto her knees below her skirt, clenching her fists as if she to cheer herself on. She then took another deep breath, looked directly at Haruyuki, and tried to speak in a clear voice while blinking back tears.

“My... name is, Kusakabe Rin.”

At the same time, she moved her right hand slightly, and a pale green rectangle appeared in Haruyuki’s vision. It was a nametag sent wirelessly, and the kanji written on it read [**Kusakabe Rin**]. The birth year was 2033, which made her a second year in middle school, like Haruyuki.

“H-Hello... I’m Arita Haruyuki.”

Haruyuki said his own name on reflex, tapping on the button that replied with his own name card. The girl — Rin looked down at the nametag Haruyuki had sent her, and then, for the first time since they had met, smiled slightly. Suddenly flustered, Haruyuki automatically asked her a question that did not rank very highly in priority.

“R-R-Right... Back at the mall upstairs.... How did you know I... was Silver Crow...?”

“Because... A few minutes... after I Burst Out in this car, Master sent me a short voice message... and attached your picture, ordering me, to stop you at all costs before you left the building...”

“... When you say Master, you mean... Sky Raker-san?”

Haruyuki decided to double-check. The short-haired girl nodded.

Indeed — Kurasaki Fuuko was, or at least seemed to be, a cultured and refined high school student from a wealthy background. Her relationship as the «Parent» of the flamboyant, apocalyptic bike rider Ash Roller had always seemed odd. From this point of view, the young girl before him could have had some sort of connection to Fuuko, but his most basic question had not yet been answered.

Just as Haruyuki was resisting the urge to hold his head in his hands, Kusakabe Rin hugged the metal-colored Neuro Linker once again. A faint floral scent floated around the car every time she moved, almost slowing Haruyuki's brain. But once he heard what she had to say next, Haruyuki hastily sat up straight.

“Then... I'll tell the story... from the beginning. I'll tell you... why... I became... a Burst Linker...”

My elder brother's name is Rinta, and he was an ICGP motorcycle racer.

ICGP were two-wheel vehicles — motorcycles — one type of racing car. IC was an abbreviation of “internal combustion”. Relying on gasoline engines and a lack of autopilot in the age where electric engines had swept up even the racing world, it was certainly an outdated form of racing.

However, compared to the quieter smart electric racing cars, the deafening roar of gas engine exhaust and the wild appearance of burning rubber wheels definitely had some sort of irresistible charm. Seen as a symbol of environmental destruction, these types of races had long been attacked by public opinion and had thus declined almost to the point of extinction, but Haruyuki would still fight sleep in order to stay up late into the night and watch such races on TV.

“My brother is six years older than me... Even if it's weird for me to say this as his sister, he was quite a talented racer. Two years ago, he had the

opportunity to earn the right to go to Europe and compete there next season if he did well in a national race first...”

Rin half-mumbled, and tears formed again in her eyes.

“But during the last race... he was hit by another driver from the inner lane... I was out there, cheering him on... and right in front of me, there was... a horrible accident... But luckily, he managed to survive, but... he’s been in a coma ever since... The doctors even forced him into FullDive with a medical Neuro Linker, but they only... managed to pick up nothing more than weak... responses...”

“.....”

Unsure of how he should reply, Haruyuki only stared silently into Rin’s wet eyes.

In EV races with vehicles that had forcibly-equipped AI control, unexpected vehicular collisions were almost impossible. On the other hand, exciting overtaking and tire-to-tire spark-spraying battles for position were also unheard of. That was why ICGP and IC vehicle racing was still so popular — however, the accident rate was also many times higher.

Rin blinked several times. Once her breathing had returned to normal, she continued.

“... My brother was admitted to a large hospital in Shibuya two years ago... We live in Egota in Nakano Ward, but I chose to attend a private middle school in Shibuya.”

“To... be able to visit?”

Haruyuki asked quietly, and Rin nodded.

“The doctor said that... it’s best if we talk to him in the real world as much as possible, to hold his hand, since the chances of his recovery might go up... Every day, after school, I head to the hospital... I also wanted to go every day during summer break, but I felt bad asking my family to get me a bus pass just to visit him... In the end, last summer, the physician in charge suggested that I get a job in the hospital cafe during the summer holidays...”

“I s-see...”

Restrictions on hiring underaged persons had relaxed due to changes in labor laws. Having previously been unable to get jobs, middle school students were now allowed to work, but only with shorter hours. But even then, Haruyuki, who had never even considered earning his own money, could only sigh in admiration.

“That’s amazing... Working all summer for the sake of your brother...”

Rin's eyes were still filled with tears upon hearing that, but she smiled slightly and shook her head:

“No way... I'm so clumsy when I work... During that summer alone, I broke more than ten dishes and glasses.”

“R-Really?”

“Not just that... There was also one time... I spilled an entire glass of ice water into a customer's lap...”

“... Is th-that so?”

“Luckily, that customer was really nice... She was slightly older than me, but was also a middle school student. Her school was also very near, and we became closer to each other... I've talked to her about many things, like the problem of my school, and my brother...”

“... Oh.”

Haruyuki, forgetting the jam he was in, was completely unable to guess which direction the conversation was heading and leaned in towards Rin, listening. The timer in the corner of his vision was counting down towards the end of the fifteen minutes since he had left his home, but by now he had even forgotten the concept of time.

Last summer, roughly ten months ago, Haruyuki had become a Burst Linker at Kuroyukihime's invitation. Rin looked at Haruyuki tearfully and continued:

"... After a few meetings, she saw through... the «trauma» in my heart. She told me that there was another side of Tokyo. She told me, if I went there, maybe, I could find the... answer... I was looking for."

"Trauma... Another side of Tokyo."

As Haruyuki quietly repeated this, he realized what she meant.

A group of traumatized children gathering together in the virtual Tokyo metropolis to fight each other. This was the Accelerated World, the secret battlefield created by the program Brain Burst.

"So... that person, is your «Parent» Burst Linker...?"

"Yes. She is, my gentle, yet strict, «Master»..."

As soon as Rin spoke that word, an impact struck Haruyuki.

He had forgotten that the girl sitting in front of him had claimed herself to be Ash Roller. If that were true, it would mean that the person Rin had met at the

hospital cafe was Haruyuki's own Master, Level 8 «Strong Arm» Burst Linker Sky Raker, Kurasaki Fuuko... that should be the case, but...

Given the situation, it wasn't very likely that this was a trick. But if Rin were a hostile Burst Linker intentionally getting close to them for some ulterior motive, she shouldn't have said Raker's real name so easily. He was also unsure whether Rin had noticed his moment's suspicion and silence, but she looked down and began speaking again:

“... When she told me the install conditions for «Brain Burst 2039», I thought... I'm not qualified. I was bought my first Neuro Linker when I was about to start elementary school...”

“Then... you don't meet the «first condition»... right?”

Haruyuki whispered, and Rin nodded.

The first condition of installing the BB program — of becoming a Burst Linker, was that one had to have been to «wearing a Neuro Linker since birth». Most parents who doted on their children, or even the exact opposite, would not resort to such means.

“I, told her that, but... Master, she, she smiled a little and told me... that she had felt the light of strong will in me. And she also said, that her intuition, is never wrong.”

— This sort of speech, which «easily set one at ease», indeed sounded very much like Fuuko. However, even if she were still the «actually very scary Raker-sensei», fudging your way past the first condition of Brain Burst should have been impossible. Just as Haruyuki was cocking his head in thought, Rin raised the object held in her two hands and continued:

“... Then, I, remembered something. I remembered that ever since my brother... ever since Rinta was young, he loved practical jokes... He told me that he didn't just want to become an ICGP racer himself, he also wanted to train me into one... So when I was just a baby, he would secretly put his own Neuro Linker on my neck... and play recordings of races to me... or so my parents told me...”

“..... W-What a brother.”

Haruyuki blinked at Rin perplexedly, a rather stiff smile on his face. Even if they were siblings, they were still different people. Logically, if she put on the Neuro Linker, it still shouldn't turn on, right?

Rin, seeming to know what he was thinking, nodded and answered.

“... Apparently, an infant's brain isn't fully developed yet, so sometimes, it seems to become difficult quite hard to read inherent brain patterns... Of course, this is really rare, but I heard that back then, my brother's Neuro Linker recognized the me as its owner when I was still an infant... So after I became older, since I didn't have my own Neuro Linker yet, I would

occasionally borrow my brother's to read pictures books, or, FullDive, right up I was bought one of my own. This..... is that Neuro Linker.”

Rin reverently held the Neuro Linker aloft. It was a very old, silver wearable device.

Taking a closer look at the device, Haruyuki suddenly noticed something. The dim lighting in the car prevented him from realizing it earlier, but aside from the usual wear and tear on the outer plastic shell of the device, there was a large crack resembling a lightning bolt that was seemingly caused by a strong impact.

“My brother... would always use this Neuro Linker, the first and only one bought for him, and the only thing he would change was the outer casing. He said that he would race faster with it on, and instead of going to high school, after middle school he jumped straight into the world of bike racing, and kept using it from then on...”

Although the ICGP races that Rin's brother Rinta participated in consisted of old-style racing not controlled by AI, the driver would still be wearing a Neuro Linker in order to display minimally intrusive information and to communicate with the pit stop crew.

But if that were the case, then the device Rin held in her hands was —

“This Neuro Linker... Your brother, two years ago, in the accident...?”

Haruyuki whispered, and the girl slowly nodded her petite head.

“The coach, of my brother’s team, gave me this, at the scene of the accident. I think... he probably, intended it, as a memento, of my brother. My brother survived, but he’s been in a coma ever since... and there’s something else really weird.”

Rin stopped for a moment and smiled slightly.

“... When Master explained the Brain Burst install conditions to me... I took off my own Neuro Linker, and put this one on. The last time I had borrowed this Neuro Linker from my brother was just before I entered elementary school... Eight years later... I thought it wouldn’t turn on at all... but it did.”

“.....!”

Haruyuki gasped. That would mean that the girl sitting before him — Kusakabe Rin was «a user of two Neuro Linkers», something considered illegal and impossible.

Of course, there was no real point in carrying more than one Neuro Linker, other than attempting to commit identity theft. However, this action might seem plausible if one needed to use the Neuro Linker they had used since infancy in order to pass Brain Burst’s install conditions.

Whether it were the first condition: «having worn a Neuro Linker since infancy», or the second: «having long-term experience with FullDive», both were in place to ensure compatibility and low latency between the user’s brain and their device. Every Neuro Linker would have individual differences within its quantum connections, so the body... no, the brain would indeed be more familiar with a device that had been used since birth.

“... Then... Your copy of Brain Burst isn’t installed on that green Neuro Linker on your neck... but on your brother’s?”

Rin nodded very, very slightly in response to Haruyuki’s question.

“Yes. Master said she could only attempt the installation once, which really threw me for a loop... But I just said that there’s something else really weird, and that was... when I put on the Neuro Linker, and I saw the virtual flames created by the BB program, waiting for the progress bar to fill up... I heard, my brother’s voice.”

“Huh.....?”

“He told me — *You have to ride out your own path forward. .... And, I’ll give you a push...*”

Rin’s eyes were filled with tears. For the first time since their bizarre conversation had begun, she broke into her first true smile. The girl unfolded the locking mechanisms of the old and battered Neuro Linker, and continued:

“The installation.. was successful. But, when I... entered the dueling stage with Master, and saw my duel avatar for the first time... I couldn't help, but, laugh.

At this point, she paused, and let out a soft giggle.

“I was wearing a leather jacket, a ridiculous helmet, and riding this huge, shiny American motorcycle... the one my brother said he was going to buy for himself when he won the championship in Europe, and take me for joyrides... He told me... to ride out my own path... and in the end my avatar was one only he would have dreamed of... my brother... was always like that...”

Large teardrops clung to Rin's eyelashes as she hugged the silver-metallic Neuro Linker tightly to her chest. Watching her like this, Haruyuki also smiled slightly as he asked:

“I see.... Then, your avatar... «Ash Roller»... How should I put it... is a roleplay? Are you trying to say that, if you were your brother, that was how you would walk and how you would fight, so that's why you played him...?”

If that were really the case, then considering the depth of the feelings this girl had for her comatose brother, Haruyuki felt that it wasn't that unrealistic a situation that the teary-eyed girl sitting in front of him was a far cry from the apocalyptic bike rider in the Accelerated World.

While he was struggling to swallow this bit of information, Rin suddenly raised her head to look at Haruyuki and asked something completely unexpected.

“..... It’s, not... weird, is it? It’s... really cool, right?”

“Huh? Cool?... You mean is Ash-san cool?”

She frantically nodded her head of short hair, then began slowly approaching him. Rin got uncomfortably close to him, while asking in a quiet yet passionate voice, nonstop:

“Like the skull-shaped helmet... the spiky leather jacket... and the missiles mounted on the motorbike are really cute, too...”

Those hurried words were quite unbecoming of a girl wearing the uniform of a rather prestigious girls’ school, and who seemed to have a home tutor as well. Haruyuki nodded frantically, his mouth spasming slightly. Rin suddenly returned to earth at this point, switched back to shy mode, and looked down.



“Sor... Sorry... When I start talking about the Accelerated World, I can’t help but get really excited... That same thing, actually, happens to me during duels... I think it’s probably because, I lose myself in the battle, and I always think that 30 minutes pass by in no time... Even when I return to the real world, I don’t really remember... what happened in the duel...”

“I-I... see.”

Nodding once again, Haruyuki quickly searched for a reason.

Judging by what Rin had just said, did this indicate that «Ash Roller» was not a product of her theatrics at all, but rather, a second personality created out of her effort to win exciting and brutal battles — perhaps she was semi-consciously borrowing her brother’s personality? When Haruyuki himself got excited in the Accelerated World, his own tone of voice would become roughly fivefold more vulgar.

But Haruyuki felt a tiny, tiny movement of air just as he was about to sink into thought, and looked up.

Atop the leather seat, Rin had advanced closer than ever before, and was looking into Haruyuki’s eyes with virtually no space between them. Within her tear-filled eyes, with irises flecked with gray, a depth as though he were staring into deep water presented itself.

“... But, there’s one thing, I remember more clearly, than in the real world...”

Rin's voice was soft and hesitant like always, but inside the closed car, it sounded as clear as a telepathic voice travelling over a direct connection cable. In order to suppress his accelerating heartbeat, Haruyuki kept mentally repeating to himself that she was Ash Roller, she was Ash Roller, but —

The girl, who should be the controller of the post-apocalyptic biker, moved her face an inch closer and whispered passionately.

“It's... you. From the first time I fought you, and we each won against each other, from that day on... your figure, your voice, have never, not once, left... my... heart...”

“..... Ku, sa, kabe-san.....”

Haruyuki's thought circuitry had only just begun to cool down, but in one fell swoop it immediately spiked into the red danger zone, making him close and open his eyes at great speed. He felt that Rin's watery eyes seemed to be growing closer and closer every time his shutter-like vision flashed.

”You... focused on something that no other Burst Linker had thought of before, a special characteristic of the internal combustion motorcycle, and won against me... My brother often said, that bikes with front-wheel-drive weren't motorcycles at all. He would have been really upset with me for losing to someone of a lower level, and a fresh beginner at that, but I think... deep down, he'd be really happy too...”

The distance between their faces was already less than 20 centimeters, and Haruyuki's brain had lost 90% of its cognitive power, making him unable to notice the strangeness in the girl's words. She did not seem to she realize what she was saying... or what she was doing, as she got closer and closer to Haruyuki.

“... But... what really left a clear impression in my heart... was you, when you spread your wings, and flew into the sky. Your supersonic flight... faster than anyone else... you looked... almost like my brother, when he switched into sixth gear and sped along... on the straight track in front of the finish line...”

Then, the large droplets that had miraculously clung to Rin's eyelashes finally slid over her cheeks.

The tears slid over her pointed chin, landing on Haruyuki's T-shirt.

“I've..... always loved watching you fly in the sky of the Accelerated World. I've always loved racing at full speed on the ground myself, chasing you up there. The way you looked... you were practically embodying, the purest form, of the word, 'speed'...”

Her voice trembling, Rin was unable to continue for a moment. She looked down, and more tears fell. Then she took a deep breath, and, after a few seconds, suddenly continued in a voice that sounded somewhat aggrieved:

“But, but..... I did something without thinking, and acted really stupidly..... putting you..... in, danger.....”

— Huh? What did you say?

Suddenly bewildered, Haruyuki remembered the dilemma he was in.

Driven by rage, he had summoned the «Disaster Armor», merged with it, and transformed into the sixth generation Chrome Disaster. To ensure the safety of his Legion, he even decided that it was the be-all and end-all, and had attempted to put an end to his own life as a Burst Linker. As Rin had said, the reason for this was that Haruyuki had witnessed the death of Ash Roller in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

As for why Ash Roller was repeatedly killed by Olive Glove and six other ISS Kit users, Haruyuki could not help but admit that it was really his (or her) own fault for ignoring his master Sky Raker’s orders, connecting to the Unlimited Neutral Field ahead of the meeting time, and engaging in the dangerous act of travelling long distances within it.

But Ash had done it to rescue Bush Utan, his friend whom he treated like a younger brother. Like Olive, Utan had been parasitized by the ISS Kit, yet unlike him, he had tried to cut off the Kit’s control over him by himself, and Ash had taken action to save him. This was something he had no choice but to do, so how could anyone blame him?.....

“Ah..... R-Right...”

Finally remembering something he should have asked earlier, Haruyuki posed a question to Rin, whose upper body was now extremely close:

“D-Did you, and Bush Utan, safely leave through the portal...?”

“..... Yes. I did as you said, and as soon as we revived, I took Uu-kun and ran to Shibuya Station...”

“I s-see... Thank goodness... That’s wonderful...”

Haruyuki was just about sigh in relief, but...

Rin’s lowered head began to tilt — *Thump*. She fell softly onto Haruyuki’s T-shirted chest.

Haruyuki immediately went into complete standby mode. The girl’s petite left hand pressed softly yet firmly onto his back. To describe what this appeared to be in the simplest language possible, one could say that two people, alone in a car, were wrapped in an embrace. Even his mantra “*She’s Ash Roller*” instantly lost effect under such circumstances. His brain’s thought clock had slowed to its utter minimum, yet his heartbeat was racing as fast as possible,

creating a logical paradox against Brain Burst's acceleration of one's consciousness —

Just as Haruyuki was spending the remainder of his cognitive power on such utterly irrelevant reasoning, a voice travelled over from the body pressing tightly against him:

“I... saw everything. I saw you summon such a terrifying Enhanced Armament, to save me and Uu-kun. It was... the «Disaster Armor», wasn't it? If it weren't for me, making trouble, you would've been purified today.....”

“.....”

Haruyuki could only manage to open and close his mouth, he was unable to articulate even a “Yes” or “No”. Rin's silky, shiny hair, a few centimeters from his nose, exuded a faint floral fragrance.

Haruyuki took in this aroma, and an odd feeling shot straight up from deep inside his heart. It bore slight resemblance to anxiety and unease, but it wasn't quite the same. It felt a bit like the anxiousness of being stuck by soft needles...

“..... Only I, myself, was saved... Yet you, can never, fly in the skies the Accelerated World again. This is... wrong.”

Haruyuki unconsciously raised his hands to do something, but what Rin said next left his hands frozen precariously in midair.

“... Think about it... The fact that I, was able to fight for so long in this beautiful and cruel world, from back then until today... it was all because, of you. Because I’ve always, wanted to see you... the sunset reflecting off your body in the «Dusk» stage, or against the bonfires of the «Century End» stage, as you flew in the sky. That’s why, every day after school, on the bus on the way back home, I would be waiting so excitedly, wondering whether I’d be the one to duel you today, or whether you’d be the one to duel me... so...”

Rin’s soft, warm voice cut off, and she looked up.

Ash Roller, the rampaging apocalyptic bike rider who was always emitting strange laughter and shouting “Mega Lucky”, and who should be Haruyuki’s best rival, stared with her own wet eyes into his own, and spoke from her pink lips:

“..... I love you.”

In that instant, all of Haruyuki’s biological functions ceased — at least, that was what it felt like — and the muscles in his abdomen and back that were supporting the girl’s small weight relaxed.

*Thump.* With the boy on the bottom and the girl on top, both of them fell backwards onto the seat. The rear of the five-door Italian-make vehicle’s

interior was very spacious, but Haruyuki's head still grazed the car door slightly. He did not notice this at all, however, because the entire front side of his body was pressed by an airtight contact, and the destructive force of her words effortlessly sent him into an out-of-body experience.

“Bu... But...”

Haruyuki managed to force out an answer in a hoarse, cracked voice; a miracle in itself.

“But, I, look like this, in real life.”

Haruyuki did not have the awareness to realize how immature he sounded by saying what he just said; Rin was the same. Not only did she not let go, she pressed even closer, and whispered tearfully into his ear:

“I've... actually known your true identity... for a while... now.”

“Er... H-How?”

“Because, you, would always be standing at the avatar spawn location on the skybridge on Kannana Street... I, would be on a bus, passing by, from underneath.”

“.....”

This left Haruyuki speechless. Any rookie should know the self-defense principle of moving away as soon as possible upon finishing an open duel in a public space. But Haruyuki had a bad habit — if a duel got too intense and exciting, he would be unable to resist reminiscing about the battle once he Burst Out, and would stand there in a daze for a while. By the looks of it, Rin had clearly seen him like that from the bus window.

“But... since... since you know what I look like in real life, why... someone like me...”

“Because... you have, wings. Not only on your duel avatar... but also, in real life. I can see, your wings... really clearly.”

Circling around him, Rin’s left hand softly caressed the direct center of his back.

A sensation that was difficult to describe shot from the tips of Haruyuki’s feet to the top of his head, causing him to hold his breath.

With a soft smile that seemed as though her entire face were going to melt, Rin’s tears continued to drip, bit by bit, onto Haruyuki’s neck.

“From that day, I... decided that, if... if one day, I could meet you, in real life, I would properly say it, and tell you that, I love you. I would tell you that, ever since you were only Level 1, I’ve always loved you... I’m so glad, to

have been able to say it... I'm so, so glad, that in the end... I could be alone with you... like this.”

“Huh?..... I-In the end.....?”

His mind blank, Haruyuki was in the middle of his sentence —

This girl named Kusakabe Rin, whom he was basically meeting for the first time, took a deep breath and declared in a resolute tone, with a resolute expression:

“I... will destroy the «Disaster Armor» that you summoned. I will destroy it with my body... with my heart.”

“What... do you mean, by that...?”

“I'll endure your fury, your hate, all of it. Don't worry... as long as it's you... no matter what you do to me, I'm... not afraid.”

Rin pulled her left hand from Haruyuki's back, removed the the pastel-green Neuro Linker from her neck, and put on her brother's Neuro Linker, which she had held in her right hand the entire time.

As soon as the Neuro Linker's brackets softly closed around her neck, her now free right hand flashed through the air.

She retrieved a thin XSB cable from what looked like a small handbag, plugged one end into her Neuro Linker, and the other end into Haruyuki's.

Haruyuki hadn't the time nor the chance to say anything. The instant that a crimson Wired Connection warning disappeared as quickly as it had appeared — Rin's lips, close enough to touch his own, softly whispered a short command:

“Burst Link.”

All of the chaos, confusion, and his bittersweet, amorphous anxiety were swept away with the *clap!* of Acceleration.

## Chapter 5

HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!!

A line of blazing letters nimbly scrolled across his vision, then vanished, followed immediately by a falling sensation into impending virtual darkness. Haruyuki was struck by an intense premonition during this time, believing that he knew what was he was about to see next.

Shortly after, the soles of his virtual avatar's metallic feet found hard ground. Haruyuki stood properly again only after the falling sensation had disappeared.

He was, of course, still in the large parking garage in the second underground floor of his home apartment complex.

But the variously colored EV cars that had been neatly parked in the real world were now severely deformed, charred, rusted, and rotten. A yellow compact resembling Fuuko's beloved vehicle sat a few steps to his left, but it looked quite wretched as well — its entire hood had been removed, and small embers were peeking out of its exposed engine bay.

The duel had just begun, so it hadn't been destroyed by anyone. If he looked closely, he could see numerous hairline cracks in the cement below him, and a somewhat thick column and a wall with their steel reinforcements exposed due to severe damage. Come to think of it, if he wanted to get outside, no one

could even get in, as more than half of the entire building had already collapsed. This kind of «aftermath of destruction» phenomenon was the essence of the «Century End» stage, which Haruyuki had a hunch would be selected.

Just then —

In the darkness about 20 meters away, he could hear the coarse grinding of machinery.

Next came the irregular idling roar unique to a double-cylinder V-engine. Round headlights lit up, illuminating Haruyuki's duel avatar with dull yellow light.

Haruyuki reflexively lowered his head to glance at his own four limbs, confirmed that he was looking at the smooth silver armor of Silver Crow, and finally exhaled softly. «The Disaster» was not a permanent Enhanced Armament, so it had to be summoned verbally — at least, that was how it should have been.

“.....!”

Yet Haruyuki was immediately made painfully aware that his prediction had been much too naive.

Silver Crow's body was not the exact same as it was before. His ten fingers, once so slender that they were unsuited for physical attacks, had become claws with knifelike fingertips. The tips of his feet were also forked into three talons each, sinking deeply into the concrete ground. Haruyuki hurriedly felt his head with his hands: his helmet had retained its original shape, but he felt two projections near his temples; likely markings left from that mesh visor.

As expected, the «Armor» was not restricted to the category of an Enhanced Armament, and was attempting to combine with his duel avatar itself. Whenever it was triggered by Haruyuki's emotions or actions, it would effortlessly spark the Beast within the Armor, transforming him into an all-devastating annihilator.

A cold shiver ran through his entire body as soon as he realized this, and he heard «its» deep yet vicious roar emanating from deep within his back. Perhaps it had sensed that fighting and slaughter were approaching, and was preparing to awaken from its transient slumber.

—— Hey, «Beast».

—— At least until I finish this duel, please be good for me!

Haruyuki, confirming that he could still barely retain his consciousness, desperately warned the Beast, and then spoke to the headlights before him:

“Hey... Ash...”

The knight-like figure materializing behind the intense light remained silent, merely watching Haruyuki silently. Blazing vehicular wreckages were strewn all around, irregularly reflected as red light in the skull-shaped safety visor.

..... I'd never thought that, behind that skull visor..... is actually a girl my age.

..... And she just..... confessed to me.

In Haruyuki's fourteen years of life, this was the second time that a girl had seriously confessed to him. The first time had been his Legion master, sword master, and «Parent», Kuroyukihime. Before standing forward to protect Haruyuki from being struck by an out-of-control car, she had said: "Haruyuki-kun, I love you."

Back then... No, maybe even now, Haruyuki had never been able to completely remove the doubt from his mind; never understanding why someone like Kuroyukihime would like someone like him. Of course, in terms of emotion, Haruyuki felt so ecstatic he could fly, and of course he himself liked Kuroyukihime very much as well.

But he believed that, for now, this sort of emotion should be categorized as «adoration», or «respect». He believed from the bottom of his heart that although he was currently nothing but a fat, good-for-nothing crybaby, if there were to come a day during which he could become someone who suited

her, he would be able to properly respond to her. Therefore, Haruyuki constantly maintained self-control, always conveying his feelings to Kuroyukihime through language that was not overly clear.

Then, a few minutes ago.

In the confines of a completely enclosed, narrow car, Haruyuki had encountered a second confession. Without any reservations and in a voice that could not be mistaken as falsely synthesized, Kusakabe Rin had said that she loved him.

The boy had no reply, or even a way to face the situation. But the sudden arrival of a battle had transformed him from flesh and blood into his duel avatar, and had seemingly also succeeded in cooling down his head.

Ash Roller was actually a girl named Rin.

And Rin had fully confessed to him.

Putting aside the above two points first, the issue of utmost importance right now was Rin's final sentence. She had said that she would remove the Disaster Armor, but according to what Haruyuki knew, Ash Roller had no special ability relating to «purification».

Did this not mean that, in order to placate the annihilator Chrome Disaster's rage, she wished to put into practice her words of "I'll endure your fury, your

hate, all of it”, and make herself into a sacrifice for the «Armor»? Did this not mean that she wanted to do this in order to take responsibility for Haruyuki facilitating Chrome Disaster’s resurrection?

“..... Ash-san... No, Rin-san.”

Since this was an audience-less direct connection duel stage, Haruyuki called out her real name on purpose.

“I’m... very moved by your intent to save me. But... there’s no need to blame yourself for the «Disaster Armor». This Armor, no, rather, this Beast, has been inside me since several months ago, and I just called it out because of my emotionally-charged actions...”

Haruyuki glanced at the viciously pointed talons on his right hand and wanted to keep speaking, but was interrupted by the deep yet tranquil growl of an engine.

The internal combustion engine spun loudly, slowly propelling the thick back tire to turn, and the humongous American motorcycle immediately revealed itself from the darkness 20 meters away. The thin knight was riding atop his iron steed, both hands softly gripping the handles, skull mask drooping heavily, and expression inscrutable.

“Rin-san.....”

Just as Haruyuki was about to shout again—

Black leather gloves wrenched the motorcycle handles strongly, the right hand pressed down on the accelerator and left on the clutch. The engine let out an explosive snarl, and the back wheel spun violently on the spot, throwing out a plume of white smoke.

“... R-Rin-san...?”

Haruyuki blankly called her name for the third time, but didn't get the chance to continue, because the gigantic American bike had lifted its front wheel slightly and charged towards him from an extremely close distance of 10 meters.

With Fuuko's car to his left and an enormous SUV to his right, Haruyuki had nowhere to run. The bike smashed into him with a bang. Strictly speaking, it knocked him flying.

Haruyuki, who was not emotionally prepared to take a defensive stance and had landed on his bottom a few meters away, was completely bewildered by the situation. By the time he bounced off the ground, emitting sparks, a gray tire was already in front of his eyes again.

*Bang! Thump!*

*Bang! Thump!*

The combination of the smashing and landing noises echoed twice in the vast parking garage. Falling spread-eagle on his back the third time he landed on the ground, the physical impact and emotional shock almost sent Haruyuki into a daze. When he saw a silhouette appear above him, he finally emitted a scream:

“W-Waagh!”

Immediately after, the gigantic, falling rubber tire, the front wheel of the motorcycle, crashed into Haruyuki’s abdomen with a thud. Squeezed by crushing weight, he could only flail his arms and legs, unable to move his body. The three direct impacts from before, combined with this crushing, had decreased Haruyuki’s HP gauge by around 40 percent.

— You just told me “I’ve always loved you”, yet now you’re treating me like this? Perhaps this is your way of showing affection, taught to you by your master?

Haruyuki was still having thoughts like these even now, and about five meters above his head...

The skull knight sat straddled atop the seat of the American bike, arms folded firmly at the chest, spoke in a boorish voice utterly unlike Kusakabe Rin:

“You crow bastard...! How dare you, hook up with, my sister.....”

“..... Wha..... **Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?**”

Haruyuki could not help but scream. How could one blame him?

This duel avatar on top of a bike crushing his body, the eye sockets of its skull mask flaring with the flames of rage, should be controlled by a «younger sister», not an «older brother». Hadn't Rin told him that her brother was Kusakabe Rinta, a young ICGP racer, and had been comatose in a hospital bed ever since getting into an accident two years ago?

Then there was no way he could have connected to the Accelerated World via FullDive and become a Burst Linker, and moreover, the one who pushed Haruyuki down into the backseat of the car and initiated a direct-connect accelerated duel with him had undoubtedly been his sister, Kusakabe Rin. Of course, Haruyuki had never exercised any methods to verify whether she was actually a real middle school girl, as she appeared to be — and Rin had never clearly indicated that she *was* a girl, but even if that were true, there was no reason for Ash Roller to accuse him of “hooking up” with his sister, was there?!

“H-Hey, y-y-you're, you're Rin-chan, right...?”

Haruyuki demanded, panting as he withstood the weight of the front tire crushing his chest armor, emitting a grinding noise, and the apocalyptic biker's response was —

“You call her *Rin-chan*—? You bastard, who said you could call my sister by her first name?! It’s way too early for someone like you to be calling her by her second name, or even her third name!”

... The counterpart for «first name» should be «last name», shouldn’t it?

Normally, Haruyuki would respond with that, but he didn’t have the time right now. The biker’s fury had clearly surpassed that of theatrics. By the look of it, the person currently in Ash Roller’s body was obviously not Rin, the little sister, but Rinta, the elder brother. And the Ash Roller that had dueled, traded insults with, and sometimes confided in Haruyuki in the Accelerated World, should all have been the elder brother.

In other words... this was a so-called «split personality»? As soon as this Kusakabe Rin girl connected to the Accelerated World, she would switch into a second personality constructed by her memories — or recollections — of her brother...?

As he was thinking this over at super high speed, his HP gauge, slowly decreasing from the crushing, finally decreased below half and turned yellow.

Immediately after, Haruyuki heard another discontented growl from the thing on his back. No, if this continued, the «beast» that had finally managed to temporarily sleep after its huge battle with Iron Pound and Green Grande in the Unlimited Neutral Field would awaken once more. Although Rin had said

that she wanted to sacrifice herself before the duel in order to placate the Disaster Armor's wrath, Haruyuki could never, ever allow that. He had to think of a way to escape this crushing situation, and properly talk it out with Ash.

“H-H-H-H-H-Hey, Ash-san... No, onii-san!”

It took all of Haruyuki's strength to try and lift the huge tire with both hands, and he could not help but shout at the top of his lungs:

“P-P-P-P-P-Please, leave Rin-cha... No, please leave your sister, um, uh...”

If that girl's personality was stored within the apocalyptic biker's body sitting on top of him, perhaps there was a way to call her out, and have her take her brother's place? Perhaps this plan, upon traversing his ultra-chaotic train of thought, was processed weirdly—

“P-P-P-P-P-Please leave your sister to me!”

— And what came out of Haruyuki's mouth was that sort of shout.

Hearing this, Ash Roller's eyes flashed red, or rather, spurted a raging inferno.

“What did..... you say.....?”

“Ah... No, not, um, that, I meant...”

“Shuuuut uuuup, youuu!”

As Ash’s actor-like voice resounded, his folded arms simultaneously lunged forward and seized both handles of the bike. Fuel was injected into the double-cylinder V-engine, and it belched intense exhaust.

“You bastard! Are making my! Radiator overheat and catch fire!!”

The mouth of the skull sputtered white steam — at least, that’s what it looked like to Haruyuki.

Long tongues of fire spouted from both exposed exhaust pipes, and the front tire crushing Haruyuki was raised high into the air. If he were to be directly crushed by that, his HP gauge would most likely fall all the way into its danger zone. Haruyuki flailed his arms and legs to try and use the opportunity to escape, but his duel avatar’s back had already sunk a full ten centimeters into the cement, momentarily preventing him from fleeing.

“Wai-, wai-, wait, stop, just a moment!”

Even now, the furious brother would naturally ignore this scream.

The thick tire roaring down appeared to be seconds away from smashing Haruyuki's helmet into smithereens, yet it diverted from its course barely a hair away from impact, and slammed into a German high-grade hood to Haruyuki's right. The rusted metal slab dented on the spot, and a column of fire roared out from within.

The fire quickly dissipated, and the wavering embers were reflected in the car's chrome-plated body. Ash Roller lowered his voice and spoke:

“..... I *wary mach* wanted you to suffer the same fate...”

Haruyuki thought for a second, and realized that he had meant to say “very much”.<sup>[1]</sup>

“... But, you crow bastard, I do owe you a huge favor from that bit in the Unlimited Neutral Field just now... so I'll stop here. But! If you try to come near my sister again, I'll turn you into roasted crow for sure next time... No, I'll crush you into *tsukune* chicken meatballs and boil you in a pot! Do you understand?!”

“I-I-I-I got it, yes sir!”

Haruyuki raised his hand in a salute on reflex, scrambled out of the depression on the floor, and finally exhaled in relief. He looked closely at the skull mask belonging to Ash Roller, who also placed his bike wheel back on the ground.

He was a bit hesitant, but no matter what, there was one thing he had to make absolutely sure of. So Haruyuki put aside the fact that he was still collapsed on the ground, took a deep breath, and asked:

“Well... Ash-san... Who exactly... *are* you...?”

Haruyuki and Ash Roller, with a bit of a defeatist attitude, selected a huge American limousine sitting a bit further away, and sat down shoulder-to-shoulder on its hood.

The countdown towards the top of his vision only showed less than 600 seconds left — less than ten minutes. Starting from when Haruyuki had fled his home in the real world, the emergency lock’s fifteen minutes should be running out rather soon. If he wanted to keep his distance from his fellow Legion members and resolve the problem of the «Disaster Armor» on his own, he had to immediately get out of the underground parking garage and out of the building.

But Haruyuki had no intention of leaving this duel stage before disentangling the mystery of this Burst Linker, Ash Roller. Although he couldn’t deny that curiosity played a role in it, it wasn’t so simple either. In the eight months since he had stepped into the Accelerated World, the two of them had dueled countless times, with both victory and defeat, and since this «greatest rival» of his had shown herself in the real world of her own accord, he believed that he at least had the obligation to try and understand her hardships.

Fortunately, the «Beast» still remained in its shallow sleep. As long as they didn't continue fighting, it probably would not awaken again during this duel. Haruyuki sat to the left of the wide hood, swinging his legs slightly, patiently waiting for Ash to speak.

After a while —

“..... This is only Master Raker's guess.”

This slightly irreverent line shook the darkened scenery of the apocalyptic stage.

“She said that, our memories as Burst Linkers, of ourselves fighting each other or talking to each other in the Accelerated World... perhaps are not completely stored in our brains after all...”

“Hu... Huhh? If they aren't stored in our brains, then where do they go...?”

Haruyuki shouted, paling, but immediately shut up, then gingerly opened his mouth again to voice his thoughts:

“..... Could they be... stored in our Neuro Linkers...?”

“Yes. Of course, not all of them are stored inside. It's just that the «key» needed to play certain segments of memories isn't inside the brain, but inside the Neuro Linker... Master seems to believe that.”

Haruyuki digested Ash's words, then shook his head forcefully:

“B-But, even so, that’s just weird. In that case, won’t that mean that when we remove our Neuro Linkers, we’ll completely forget everything about the Accelerated World?”

“Remove our Neuro Linkers? But where are we going to remove them from, Crow?”

“From our necks, of course.”

“That’s right, our necks, not our heads... To be clearer, that wouldn’t be removing them from our «brain». This device can connect wirelessly with our brain.”

Ash Roller paused, then used his leather gloved fingers to knock the head and neck portions of his own helmet.

“Yeah, typically, this device should be worn on the neck, since it will refuse to turn on or connect otherwise, but this is because the device will detect its distance from the brain along with spinal signals and stuff to initiate a safety lock. You know... I only know this because Master told me about it... I heard that the larger experimental machine, before the Neuro Linker was released, was probably called the Soul... something, and that thing could connect with a tester’s brain from as far as ten meters away.”

“Ten... Ten meters?!”

Haruyuki was shocked again, his mouth opening and closing underneath his silver mask.

If this were true and the current Neuro Linkers also had this sort of ability, that meant that this device actually didn't need to be worn along the spine like a necklace. Whether you wore it on your wrist, chest, no, even just stuffing it somewhere convenient like your pocket or bag would suffice — *for someone like me who sweats easily, it really is hot having to wear it around my neck during the summer.* Even if he changed into a breathable fishnet top, it'd quickly be drenched in sweat, and ever since primary school people had said *Arita the Piggy is making juice...*

“N-No, that's not what I mean...”

Haruyuki banished the painful memories from his mind, and desperately reorganized his thoughts.

“Um... I-In that case, is this what you mean, Ash-san? Even if we take our Neuro Linkers off our necks, it's still able to secretly connect to our brains, and that's why we're able to recall our Accelerated World memories... right...?”

“Ultimately, it's just Master's guess. But... if I don't accept that, I have no way of explaining why I can stay myself like I am now.”

Hearing this, Haruyuki swallowed, and gingerly asked in a hoarse voice:

“... That is... you really are Rin-chan... Ah, no, I mean Kusakabe Rin’s brother... Kusakabe Rinta, who was once an ICGP racer...?”

He waited for more than ten full seconds, but didn’t get an answer.

His head bowed, Ash Roller stared at his hands, wrapped in leather gloves stamped with silvery-gray rivets. After a while, he flexed his fingers several times with his palms facing down, like was trying to determine whether he could feel anything.

“..... I don’t know. I have no idea.”

His answer was dispirited. It took Haruyuki slightly aback, since Ash had just claimed that Rin was his sister.

Watching Haruyuki’s astonished gaze, the biker spoke hesitantly:

“At least... I don’t remember being a real GP racer in the real world. Not just racing, I have absolutely no memories of myself before becoming a Burst Linker. My earliest memory... is me watching myself as a duel avatar, clumsily fighting other guys.”

“Huh... Y-You mean you were watching...? As a bystander...?”

“Yes. In the first duel... the person controlling this duel avatar was definitely my sister... it was Rin. And I was watching her nearby. I wasn’t in the audience decided by the system... How should I put it; it was almost as if I

were a spirit following her around? I was very close to her, my body was see-through, and I was floating...”

Upon hearing this, Haruyuki couldn't help but shiver coldly, stealing glances at Ash Roller's skull demeanor, which was probably enough to make small children cry, and then asked hoarsely:

“..... A-Are you a ghost?”

“H-Hell no! Look at me, I've got two long and handsome legs! And if I didn't have feet, I wouldn't be able to brake or shift!”

As he spoke, Ash Roller lifted his black biker-booted foot into the air and delivered a kick to the parking block in front of the American car they were sitting on. The rust-filled license plate clattered to the ground, dissolved into polygons, and vanished.

“A-Anyway... during my first duel, I was floating in the air, and I wanted to ask that brat Rin what the hell she was waiting for. That's the first memory I have now, as I'm talking to you. Watching her drive the bike so stiffly, I couldn't look anymore... I wanted to approach her from behind, sit on the backseat and teach her how to ride, but somehow...”

“... You combined into one...?”

Haruyuki asked cautiously, and Ash slowly nodded.

“To be frank, I... actually don't know exactly who I am. The only thing I'm sure about is that this duel avatar was created by «Kusakabe Rin», my «sister». So, I think I'm probably Rin's «brother». But, as to exactly what is going on... is it that «Kusakabe Rinta», who is currently comatose in a hospital somewhere, is initiating a super-long connection to his Neuro Linker and allowing him to talk to you? Or is it that I am a fake personality created by Rin in order to keep fighting within this world? No matter how I think about it, I can't come up with an answer...”

This mysterious biker sighed gently, swinging his booted legs back and forth like a child, and continued his monologue:

“If a fake personality is the correct answer, that means I don't really exist as a person... But, Crow, I think that might be better...”

“Huh... W-Why do you say that... If that's true, that means one day...”

This current «Ash Roller» might disappear.

Haruyuki swallowed that last bit, but Ash seemed to hear it clearly anyway. He nodded slightly, and muttered:

“It's fine. Because if I were the real Kusakabe Rinta... then that means that my dream of becoming a champion racer has already burned away from the crash, and yet in order to keep riding the charred remains... the ashes of the

tires, I used my sister Rin's consciousness, I used her soul. I clearly don't have the right to become a Burst Linker because of my age, yet I possessed my sister's body to freely ride my bike in the Accelerated World. I don't want that to happen... She... She has her own path to walk..."

He clenched his fists, and hit towards his knee, but Haruyuki reflexively reached out his right hand at the last second and caught it.

"No... That's not right, Ash-san."

The silver helmet shook back and forth.

"We... fight in the Accelerated World, not to replace what we lose in the real world, not to lose ourselves in abandoned dreams. We are here to... face, and accept our pains and weaknesses, and walk forward again. No matter whether you are the real Kusakabe Rinta or not... you're still existing perfectly right now! Not only are you existing, you have fought hundreds of duels with me, and other Burst Linkers! This alone.. These memories alone should not be fantasies, or fake...!"

Haruyuki was actually not quite sure what exactly he was trying to get across, even as he spoke.

Perhaps the existence of Burst Linker Ash Roller was a type of «miracle» constructed from two elements: Kusakabe Rin, who admired her comatose brother, and her brother Rinta's old Neuro Linker. If that were really the case,

perhaps the miracle was inherently unstable, leading to one day during which he would not be the same as he was now.

But — even if things really did turn out that way, to Silver Crow, the truth of the fact that the first opponent whom he fought, won, and lost to were all Ash Roller, would not change. This truth would never, ever change.

Haruyuki didn't know how to convert his chestful of emotion into words; he could only desperately grab Ash's hand.

The biker didn't push him or recoil back, only silently watching as the hand of Silver Crow clutched his own wrist, watching that hand that was no longer slender and weak like before, but now vicious talons.

“Back... in the Unlimited Neutral Field, I was already prepared to use up all my Burst Points.”

He suddenly spoke calmly.

“Olive Glove and the six of them had crushingly strong attack power... Even if it were just Olive himself, I would probably be no match for him. I'd originally planned to cover Utan while he ran away, but I couldn't do it... Later, I was thinking that the two of us would probably have disappeared from the Accelerated World today. It didn't matter if I, who's never known whether I exist or not, disappeared... But whenever I think of Utan and Rin, who's supposed to stay in this body, both disappearing... I feel pretty bad... But, just then, you caught up to save us. You knew what would happen if you

summoned the «Disaster Armor»... but you still called it out, and used that power to save me and Utan. Back then... I... Let's put aside the whole sequence of events... I thought that, for me to be able to become a Burst Linker, and fight in this world until today, I'm really very Lucky..."

Seeing this always harum-scarum apocalyptic biker lost for words, even for just a moment, Haruyuki felt a stinging pain in his chest.

Ash rubbed the nose on his skull mask a little embarrassedly, then resumed in his usual tone:

"After he got out of the portal, Utan told me to say 'thank you' to Silver Crow for him as well, and... 'Sorry 'bout all of that'. It looked like he'd finally learned his lesson, too: that so-called power can't be given to you by someone else..."

"Yeah... You can only find strength through hard work... No matter how many times you lose, even if they kick you while you're down, you still have to look towards the sky without losing hope... That is true strength..."

The instant a dazed Haruyuki spoke those words...

Ash Roller quickly flipped over his left hand, which was grasped by Silver Crow's right hand, and seized Crow's wrist.

Haruyuki wanted to shake it away on reflex, unwilling to let him see his own claw-like hand, but it was tightly gripped by the black leather glove, totally

immobile. Ash Roller maintained this position, then gazed seriously at Haruyuki from behind his skull mask:

“Yeah, Master taught me this too... But Crow, you could say the same for yourself right now.”

“Huh?..... M-Myself right now.....?”

“Yup. You’re really sure that there’s no way for you to separate your duel avatar from the «Disaster Armor» anymore, so you’re planning to die with it and end things that way. Am I right?”

Ash hit the nail on the head, so Haruyuki could only nod slightly.

Even now, he kept feeling a sort of omen on his back, intense enough to spit sparks, as though the «Beast» could awaken anytime from its shallow slumber and begin wreaking havoc. If Haruyuki awoke as Disaster, he knew that he would immediately and violently attack Ash Roller right before him. Haruyuki was able to force himself to suppress this urge, because this wasn’t the «Beast’s» original hunting ground — the Unlimited Neutral Field, and his heart wasn’t filled with fighting intent now.

But this sort of dangerous balance could be shattered at any time. If Ash Roller were to conscientiously swing a hostile fist at him right now, Haruyuki — no, the «Beast» — would likely respond sensitively. And every time he transformed into Disaster, the degree of fusion would become deeper. Although he didn’t know at what degree lay the point of no return, judging

by the example of the previous generation Disaster, Cherry Rook, he knew that it wouldn't take long before it got serious enough for even real world Arita Haruyuki's consciousness to be affected.

That's why Haruyuki had locked the door of his own home and bolted. If he hadn't been caught by Ash Roller's real body in the direct center of the shopping mall — Kusakabe Rin, he probably would have located an Internet cafe by now, and from there, charged into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Perhaps sensing Haruyuki's plan, Ash lowered his head slightly for a moment. But then he looked back up and spoke calmly but firmly.

“... Crow, it's not like I don't know how you're feeling, but... can't you think of it another way? Can't you just think that «becoming Chrome Disaster is only part of the process»? To me... no matter how I look at it, I don't think the «Armor» inside you is pure coincidence. I think it picked you... because you'll be able to shatter this curse that's been in the Accelerated World until today...”

As soon as he heard this, Haruyuki thought he felt the sound of a voice at his ear, coming from far, far away.

*... Don't be afraid; you can... definitely... do it... I've waited so, so long for you, you can definitely...*

But Haruyuki shut his eyes tight under his silver mask, trying to wipe away this voice from his memories.

It was only based on unfounded instinct, but «she», who had just said this to Haruyuki, was unable to appear when the «Beast» was active. That is to say, if he didn't restore the Disaster Armor back to its seed state, he would never be able to see her again. Yet that was likely impossible now.

— *I betrayed her hope too.*

Haruyuki digested this bitter realization, and whispered:

“... Unfortunately... by the looks of it, I don't have the skill to break the «Disaster Armor» curse at all. When... I saw you and Utan being attacked by Olive Glove and those guys, the first thought in my mind wasn't to save you, it was just furious rage at them. Then I allowed myself to be carried by this rage, and I summoned the Armor... I left first without waiting for you guys to revive because if I continued to stay there, I would probably have killed you both as well. It really is a one-in-a-million miracle that... I'm able to talk to you normally like this now...”

After Haruyuki shut his mouth, Ash Roller did not respond in any way for a while.

After nearly ten seconds, he released Silver Crow's wrist, and clasped his hands between his knees.

“... My sister... Rin, she won't have clear memories of what happened in the Accelerated World; and likewise, as to what she does in the real world, what she thinks of, I can only have a slight idea...”

The lowered, masked mouth spoke. Haruyuki couldn't put forth any estimate as to what kind of logic allowed the dual consciousness of both «Rin» and «Rinta», and could only listen quietly.

“... So, when Rin direct-connected and dueled you, I'm not too clear on what she was planning... No, I should say, what she was hoping for. But I think she's also thought of the fact that the instant she shouted the acceleration command and came to the dueling stage, the operating rights of the virtual avatar will be transferred to my personality... So, there's only one thing I can do now...”

Ash Roller paused here, then, swiveling atop the hood, turned his entire body towards Haruyuki.

With his right hand, he slowly lifted the safety visor of his skull helmet. The revealed «face» of the duel avatar possessed a set of slightly narrow, light-green eye-lenses, like those of a skinny teenager. If Haruyuki looked closely, he could see some resemblance to Kusakabe Rin in the real world.

Ash, who should not be able to see Haruyuki's eyes, had his sight fixated on Haruyuki's for a while. Then he moved his head down quickly and said calmly:

“Think of it as me begging you, crow bastard... Silver Crow. Don’t disappear from the Accelerated World. You’re... «hope». Let’s not mention Master Raker, who entrusted her dreams of flight onto you, and Nega Nebulus, which is slowly growing stronger after being resurrected... To the several hundred of us Burst Linkers who have fought against you, and have always looked up at you soaring like a bird in the sky, you are our hope.”

“Hope.....”

Haruyuki repeated in an inaudible whisper. Without looking up, Ash Roller nodded.

“Yeah. Of course, we don’t hope that you can become Level 9 and defeat the «Kings» or anything specific like that. Your wings are definitely unique and unmatched in the Accelerated World, but no one thinks that they’re too hacky, cheating, or strong enough to break the «Same Level Same Potential Rule». How should I say it... you...”

His hoarse voice paused, then immediately continued:

“... You’re just like us. You started from Level 1 when you didn’t know anything, and would sometimes lose almost all your Points, sometimes be upset enough to be unable to look up, but you still slowly became stronger... And when we were also lying on the ground, dismayed, when we looked up, we’d see you, flying. We’d see you frantically dodging snipers or bullets, your hands in front of you, flying as fast as you could. Your shiny, silver

body would reflect the sun, the moon... How should I say it, your entire person was shining so much in the sky... Heh heh, what am I saying?"

Ash Roller clenched his right hand and wiped his face roughly. He remained looking at the ground, his words becoming more and more intermittent, but he continued.

"Anyway... Whenever we saw you flying like that, we'd be able to tell ourselves that we needed to try harder. Not just me... during the Hermes Cord Traversing Race a while ago, the couple hundred people that saw you transform into Disaster all agreed not to say anything... because everyone believed in you. They believed that you... would never lose to some bullshit «Disaster Armor», they believed that you would definitely be able to clean all that curse crap away, then fly into the sky like normal again. So... So..."

Just then, the biker finally lifted his head, a few reflective drops of water seeping from his light green eye-lenses. Those eyes were definitely very similar to those of Kusakabe Rin, who had stared at Haruyuki while crying in the real world.

"— So, Crow, don't lose hope. Don't go somewhere remote in the Unlimited Neutral Field and disappear together with the Armor. You have Master Lotus, Master Raker, that tall blue guy, and that noisy green girl... You have so many dependable partners. Have you ever thought about how sad your Legion partners would be if you disappeared?... Also, how sad the Burst

Linkers who have always been chasing you into the sky until today would be.....?!”

Ash Roller half-shouted, then looked down again.

—— But...

But, if I fully become Chrome Disaster like this, and kill every Burst Linker I see... it won't be just me; even my best partners will be implicated.

Haruyuki didn't say it aloud; he merely murmured in his heart.

During the «Seven Kings Conference» last week, when the vice commander of the Purple Legion «Auroral Oval», the whip wielder «Aster Vine» had spoken with such high pressure, vice commander of Nega Nebulus Sky Raker had stepped forward and responded. She said that Burst Linkers who joined smaller Legions had all accumulated discontent towards the six great Legions, who had caused the Accelerated World to stagnate. If the larger Legions unscrupulously attempted to strike down Black Lotus and her Legion, who could be called the resistance, the long-brewing discontent within the Accelerated World would explode all at once.

The officers of the great Legions were probably already aware of this risk, and that was why they were unable to pronounce Haruyuki, Takumu, and the others as wanted criminals; simply because they were «subordinates of Black Lotus».

But if the sixth generation Chrome Disaster arose within the Legion, that would be another matter altogether. One only needed a random explanation, for example, that they were plotting to use the Disaster Armor to expand their Legion strength, to place a bounty on the entire Legion. If they wanted to prevent themselves from being smothered like that, Kuroyukihime, Takumu, and the others had to personally punish Haruyuki. Just like before, when the Red King Niko had blinked back tears while subjecting the fifth generation Disaster — Cherry Rook, to «Judgement»...

He loved his group of best friends, so Haruyuki had no intention of forcing them to make such a decision.

“I don’t want it to happen either... everything from the Legion’s goal to my own leveling up would be given up halfway, and I’d really regret leaving the Accelerated World like this...”

Haruyuki suppressed his heart full of hesitation with a downhearted mood.

“But when the time comes when I’m not able to control the «Armor» anymore... When I’m no longer *me*, then it’ll be too late. I feel that... the Burst Linkers who became Chrome Disaster in the past also started out by thinking that they would control this power, thinking that they would tame this ferocious «Beast», use this enormous strength for good, and help their friends, but... They were all eventually controlled by the Armor, and who knows how many Burst Linkers they killed indiscriminately... they didn’t

even recognize their own friends... and in the end, they were executed by their «Kings» as scourges.”

Haruyuki exhaled shortly, staring at his long, sharp, taloned hands.

“Also... if I disappear like this, only the Burst Linker who hosted the Armor would leave the Accelerated World, but the Armor itself would transfer to the executioner’s inventory, or survive on some item it can parasitize as a seed. At that rate... there would be no way to fully deal with this «Disaster Cycle», which would have gone on for who knows how many years. Another person will become Chrome Disaster, and spread the same suffering and sadness... if I want to end this cycle, I have to run to the end of the Unlimited Neutral Field... let Enemies waste all of my Points, and leave this world without a sound.....”

*Crack!* An earsplitting metallic noise interrupted Haruyuki’s sentence.

Ash Roller’s clenched fist had smashed through the engine hood they were sitting on.

“A-Ash-san...”

“Then... I’m coming with you.”

The words uttered by this forcefully suppressed voice made Haruyuki’s jaw drop halfway open.

“With how much gas your wings eat up, there’s no way you can go that far, can you? I’m just going to be a generous guy and let you sit behind me. Whether it’s Hokkaido or Kyushu, I’ll take you anywhere you want... But if we go out that far, it’ll be too much hassle just to come back to Tokyo... They say that if you pop Poison you might as well pop Paralysis too, so I’ll play with the Enemies with you. Heh heh, you and I are both rivals anyway, so we’ll start and end together... Nothing wrong with that...”

As Ash Roller finished his feigned-cheerfully spoken lines, boiling-hot liquid began to roll from Haruyuki’s eyes.

He shook his head from side to side without stopping, virtual tears flowing without end beneath his reflective silver mask. He desperately squeezed out a trembling voice, like that of a little kid, from his throat:

“... How could you... Ash-san, you don’t need to... come with me... and disappear together...”

“You were just talking about the same thing!”

The biker shouted through tears, yanking his right hand from the hood and seizing the armor on Haruyuki’s neck:

“Do you think that, by disappearing together with the «Disaster Armor», you’ll restore peace to the Accelerated World and everything will be just fine

and dandy? Hell fucking no! Your elders, your partners, our masters... and Rin, that girl, how much they're gonna cry, how much they're gonna suffer, how much they're gonna blame themselves... Have you ever given it any thought?!"

"..... Urgh....."

Even if he were in a regular dueling stage, losing control of his emotions would be extremely dangerous. But even as he realized this, Haruyuki was still unable to restrain himself, and let loose a scream driven by raw emotion:

*"Then what do you want me to do?! Do you think that if I combine with the «Armor» like this, making me unable to recognize my own elders or friends, killing everyone I see, spreading disaster everywhere, and being executed in the end... Do you think this is the correct ending?! Compared with ending up like that, I'd rather... when I'm still myself right now..."*

Disappear and be done with it.

The moment he was about to speak these final words, Haruyuki suddenly felt thunderstruck, and instantly held his breath.

— They're the same.

— The words I just spoke are like Takumu's from yesterday.

Like Haruyuki, he had been parasitized by the dark power of the «ISS Kit», and had used this intimidating strength to kill each and every last member of the PK group «Supernova Remnant». Then, worried that he had changed, he had planned to end it all.

Seeing Takumu like that, Haruyuki had told him: *Don't give up, fight till the end. Please resist the ISS Kit with all that you've got, for me, for Chiyu, and for everyone in the Legion.*

If Haruyuki gave up everyone now and disappeared in the wilderness of the Unlimited Neutral Field, everything he had said would become a lie. Furthermore, even if the Disaster Armor disappeared, the ISS Kits already gradually permeating the Accelerated World still posed a huge threat. Haruyuki had gathered a certain degree of relevant information as to the suspected location of the core of the Kits, «Tokyo Midtown Tower», the Legendary Enemy guarding it, «Archangel Metatron», and he had to at least report it back to his partners.

..... But, if I see everyone again, I... I won't be able to leave them again.

... What should I do? What the hell — should I do...?

“You have to fight. Even up until the last moment, never lose hope; fight to the end.”

Suddenly, a whisper passed through his ear. It was Ash Roller, his hand still pressed against Haruyuki's chest armor.

“You gotta be like the second time you fought me. Bite the bullet and try to tough it out. You can do it, Crow. It's guys like you who Rin would develop feelings for... Although I won't allow you to hook up with her, making her cry is worse.”

“.....”

Haruyuki slowly exhaled the pent-up breath in his chest and smiled weakly.

“... This is such a mess.”

“Shut it, big brothers are unreasonable like that!”

Ash yelled a bit embarrassedly, lightly pushing Haruyuki's body away.

The two of them simultaneously glanced at the countdown towards the top of their vision; unknowingly, more than 1700 seconds had gone by. In another minute, this duel would end.

Since only Haruyuki's HP gauge had decreased, Ash Roller reached out to call up the draw offer window, but Haruyuki stopped him.

“I just got a lot of Points in the Unlimited Neutral Field, let me cover you for this duel.”

“..... Let me just say that even if you do it, I won't allow you to touch Rin.”

“I-I'm not going to!”

After the two of them went back and forth a few times, Haruyuki suddenly recalled something, then sat up straight and spoke:

“Right... Ash-san.”

“... What?”

“Um... A while ago, you interpreted your avatar's name as... tires that have been burnt to ash, but I... don't think that's quite right.”

Saying this, Haruyuki moved his sight and looked towards a large American bike parked a distance away. The tires were indeed not the black of synthetic rubber but instead a gray that resembled metal or ceramic, yet they certainly did not feel fragile like charred remains.

“The way I see it... Ash-san, the name of your character should be referring to someone who rolls over a road that's burnt to ash, laying out a new path... That's what it should be.”

Hearing Haruyuki say this, Ash Roller did not reply for a while.

After a while, he grunted, letting out his usual attitude.

“Why does that sound like a dumb old slash-and-burn farming thing, it doesn’t suit the Mega Cool me at all... Whatever, I’ll use your suggestion with good intentions. If I can meet you someday in the real world, I owe you 100 yen as royalty.”

“Tha... Thanks.”

But the «meeting in the real world» he was referring to probably didn’t mean his sister Kusakabe Rin’s personality, but the brother instead, the reality of whose existence he couldn’t figure out.

Just then, a fiery row of letters scrolled by: [TIME UP!], drowning out his thoughts that weren’t really constructive.

After Haruyuki ended this full 30 minute — equivalent to 1.8 seconds in the real world — battle and returned to the real world, his first feeling was an inexplicable serenity.

The only things he really did in that duel were to get hit thrice with Ash Roller’s motorcycle, and then sit on the hood of an American car and talk until it was over. Although they had discussed many important topics, they

hadn't reached any sort of conclusion. As for his next course of action, Haruyuki was still at a complete loss.

But his chest full of anxiety, regret, and despair before the duel was now temporarily calm. Haruyuki didn't even open his eyes, concentrating his mind and effort on immersing himself within the soothing warmth wrapped around his body.

A few seconds later — he finally realized that this feeling wasn't a psychological illusion, nor was it a virtual electronic signal, and he couldn't help but tremble.

The advanced elasticity he felt on his back was from the genuine leather seat within Fuuko's beloved automobile; Haruyuki was lying in it. Yet there was another elastic, soothingly fragrant object atop his body, accompanied by a tactility comprised of an exquisite balance between elasticity and plasticity, a hundred times more charming than the cushions of the Italian car.

Haruyuki gingerly, slightly lifted his eyelids, peeking at the ivory knit school coat pressed tightly against his stomach. To be more precise, it was a summer knit uniform embroidered with the emblem of a school that Haruyuki did not know. To be even more precise, it was the upper body of a same-aged girl who was wearing this uniform.

“..... Ugh.....”

Haruyuki emitted a soft hiccup-like noise, slowly swiveling his vision upwards at the same time. He saw a thin, plaid sash, a slender, tender white neck, along with a metallic gray Neuro Linker worn around the neck. Next came a boyish, sharp chin and thin lips, a clearly defined yet modest nose, and further above were a pair of eyes, among which a few flecks of gray were mixed in.

This girl's entire body was pressing against Haruyuki's; or perhaps it was better to say that she had completely fallen on top of Haruyuki, her right hand still clutching an XSB cable jack used for direct connection. The girl's eyes were still filled with tears, and she whispered to him from an extremely close distance:

“... I-I'm sorry. My brother said a lot of impolite things...”

“..... Uh, uhhhhhhh.....”

Even though Haruyuki's eyes were rolling back into his head from the severe chaos brought by the physical situation along with the words spoken, he forced himself to attempt to speak and put matters in order.

“Uh, um, first of all, uhh, d'you... remember, the «duel» just now...?”

He recalled that she had told him before the direct connection that during every duel, she would enter a state of muddled unconsciousness, unable to remember the specifics of anything. In other words, as soon as she connected

to the Accelerated World she would switch personalities with her brother, unable to make any sort of clear memories — which was what Haruyuki was hypothesizing about.

But the girl — the real form of Burst Linker «Ash Roller», Kusakabe Rin, nodded slightly and said:

“I can still remember... right now. When I’m wearing... my brother’s Neuro Linker...”

“I-I... see...”

Perhaps sensing the great number of questions stuffed into Haruyuki’s short reply, Rin blinked her wet eyes and explained further, in a small voice:

“... I... don’t know either... whether the «brother» appearing in the Accelerated World, is my real... brother... Kusakabe Rinta, in a coma in Shibuya hospital... or, whether he’s... a false personality I created... But, Master, told me before, that everything that happens inside the Accelerated World, must have another meaning. Master told me that as long as I keep fighting till the end with «my brother», there will eventually come a day when I find the truth.”

“..... I see...”

Rin had not mentioned before whether her «Master» was Kurasaki Fuuko, whom Haruyuki was familiar with. But upon hearing this, he had no more

doubt. According to Kuroyukihime, Fuuko was «the purest user of righteous Incarnation» — in other words, she believed, more than anyone else, in the power of hope, friendship, and love; those words certainly suited Fuuko’s actions the most.

This also meant that, when Rin was working a part-time job as a waitress in the hospital cafe last summer and had accidentally spilled ice water onto a guest, that guest must have been Kurasaki Fuuko. Haruyuki recalled that Fuuko did indeed live near the boundary of Suginami and Shibuya, and would need to periodically visit the Shibuya hospital for maintenance on her cybernetic prosthetic leg, so that was nothing strange.

Haruyuki thought the matter over, then nodded, and Rin stared straight into his eyes from a dangerously close distance.

The gray-flecked eyes became covered again by a thin gauze of tears, and droplets that exceeded the boundary of surface tension fell one by one onto Haruyuki’s face.

“..... Why?”

“Huh...?”

Seeing Haruyuki unable to understand her intention behind asking the question, which caused him to stiffen up, Rin’s face twisted and she asked again.

“Why didn’t... you attack... me? I... was prepared, all ready, for you to kill me, and disappear like this, and that wouldn’t matter... so I found and challenged you. I even said, that letting you take it out on me, would at least calm the «Disaster Armor» in your body a bit...”

Haruyuki hadn’t expected her to say something like this, and sharply inhaled a breath of cold air.

Indeed — Before Rin had challenged him to a duel via direct connection, she had indeed told him that she would clear away the «Armor» and endure all of the fury and hatred by herself. If anything out of the ordinary happened during that duel, maybe things would really have become that way... Putting aside the problem of whether the Armor would actually disappear like that, there really was a chance that Haruyuki would lose control during the duel and attack Rin at full strength.

But as soon as the duel began, Ash Roller (the brother) had thrown down the words, *how dare you hook up with my sister*, and completely yanked Haruyuki away, as though even such a ferocious «Beast» could find no opportunity to take action. He thought that there should have been no way for Ash to plan on shouting like that, but come to think of it, that had to be Ash’s most original demeanor towards Crow, the Ash who had fought countless battles against him in the past...

“How could I... kill you?”

Haruyuki smiled slightly in spite of himself, and gently shook his head.

“Huh...?”

“Think about it... Ash-san is my most important..... friend.”

Haruyuki chose his word carefully, but Rin tilted her head, tearfully repeating:

“..... Friend.”

Haruyuki could detect traces of discontentment in her voice, and hurriedly added:

“Yeah, yeah. Ash-san is my very important friend — and that’s why, even if I... become completely controlled by the Armor, and turn into Chrome Disaster...”

His words, which were about to conflict with an earlier idea, became lodged in his throat, but he still managed to squeeze them out:

“... I still would never take the rage out on Ash-san. Because... I like him.”  
In this instant...

Double the volume of liquid floated into Rin's eyes, along with tears that did not signify the same emotion as before.

Her small face moved, as though chasing the countless droplets falling down, and touched Haruyuki's left cheek. Then Haruyuki felt words, mixed with the warmth of exhaled breath, entering his ear:

“I'm... so happy. I've always been so scared, scared that after you met the real me... you'd be disgusted, that our Legions aren't the same... No matter whether it's regular duels, or territory battles, we can only fight against each other... But you... can even say, something like that...”

The feeling of bodily tactility, the warmth transmitting over to him, along with the sweet fragrance, nearly threw Haruyuki's mind into a blank again.

Even in a situation like this, the only bit of information Haruyuki was able to process was, *Ash-san's really gonna kill me when I see him again*, not to mention the fact that his right hand had broken away from his brain's control, risen up by itself, and was just about to rest upon Rin's slender back...

“..... What you just said, please say it again for me.”

Hearing this at his ear, Haruyuki's hand stopped cold, and he frantically rewound his memory, then played it back at a hoarse voice.

“Um... Ash-san, is my most important friend...”

“After that.”

“So, I would never, ever harm him...”

“After that one too.”

“I, like...”

*Knock knock.*

Suddenly, two stiff noises were heard.

Haruyuki dazedly directed his unfocused gaze above him.

The first thing he saw was the left rear door, and then the window above it. A translucent window capable of changing color depth, it should have been adjusted to highest opacity just a few minutes ago, but now it had somehow become completely transparent.

Moreover, a female with naturally long hair had materialized outside of the window — a smile on her face.

The fingers that had knocked twice on the window turned over, manipulated a holographic window, and the lock on the vehicle door was simultaneously

released with a swift sound. This female immediately pulled open the door from outside, leaned the upper half of her body into the car, showed a face all smiles from directly above at Haruyuki, who was leaning back in the backseat, and spoke:

“It’s so good to see you again, Crow-san. ♡”

Immediately after, Rin, whose head was lowered as she pressed upon Haruyuki’s body, trembled.



At the same time, Haruyuki's body completely stiffened, he forced a spasmodic smile, and with significant effort, squeezed out a few words to respond to this female — «Iron Fist» Sky Raker, Vice Legion Master of Nega Nebulus, Kurasaki Fuuko.

“Ah... Ye... Yeah... I'm, glad too.....”

— Don't be scared, there's no need to be scared yet, this still isn't a get-up-and-run crisis! Because Kusakabe Rin who was currently literally upon Haruyuki to the point of comicalness had received an order from Fuuko to catch Haruyuki so this situation doesn't really count as diverging from that order's extension line if I explain it like that it shouldn't be absolutely impossible in other words I can explain all of this properly and that should do it.

Haruyuki desperately laid out the above plans, completely and utterly forgetting that he had attempted to “get-up-and-run”, in the fullest sense of the phrase, from everyone in his Legion.

But then—

Chiyuri poked her head out from Fuuko's left side and got a good look at Haruyuki's situation.

Haruyuki saw a hallucination, as though fire-red Over-Ray seemed to be flaring from beneath her feet, and frantically moved his eyes towards the

door on the other side to escape, but instead saw his Legion master standing there, arms crossed, and immediately sank back into fully-frozen mode.

The right side door opened with a clunk, and Kuroyukihime, like Fuuko, bent her upper body and inserted her head inside, sporting her long-awaited, killer «Extreme Icy Kuroyuki Smile», and whispered in his ear:

“Haruyuki-kun, are we disturbing you two?”

Although Haruyuki possessed reaction speed widely accepted to be of the highest caliber among Burst Linkers, his cognition circuitry at full power could only produce such a response:

“..... N-Not really.”

## Chapter 6

The time was 7:40pm, and they had returned to the living room of the Arita household on the 23rd floor.

Today, June 20th, 2047, was the planned day of the «Imperial Palace Escape Operation». It had started at 7:00 pm, which meant less than an hour had passed. But to Haruyuki, it felt like a few days' worth of events had piled up together, which he hadn't bothered processing.

The escape from the Imperial Palace, the fierce battle against Suzaku.

The search and discovery of Ash Roller. Summoning the armor, and unleashing a massacre.

The meeting with the two Burst Linkers from Great Wall, and the even fiercer fight that followed...

Haruyuki sat at a corner of the sofa set and thought through these events, cringing. Then someone said to him “Enjoy”, and placed a mug of café au lait in front of him.

“... Th.. thank you...”

In a small voice, Haruyuki thanked Chiyuri who had prepared the drink for him, then placed the steaming hot mug to his lips, taking a big gulp, and in that instant...

*“Ahhhh hoooooot!?”*

His tongue was assaulted by the sensation of scalding hot liquid, and he couldn't help but scream. Sitting on the sofa opposite, Chiyuri looked as though the matter were of no concern to herself. She took a sip of her own coffee, then said nonchalantly:

*“Whoops, sorry.”*

The drinks she had served to everyone else were at the right temperature, but only Haruyuki's had been heated to boiling point in the microwave. This sort of prank could only have been targeted at one person, but only Takumu smiled wryly with some resignation. Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, even Shinomiya Utai were drinking silently.

This was not because of what happened just now, where Haruyuki had trapped everyone in the house and run away on his own, not even because of his summoning the «Disaster Armor».

It was because of the person sitting to Haruyuki's left — That «seventh» person was still gloomy-faced, her right hand clutching tightly to the edge of Haruyuki's T-shirt. Except for the period of time where Fuuko had pried her

off Haruyuki and dragged her into the elevator to the 23rd floor, and settled her down on the sofa, that hand had not left his T-shirt.

If it were the Red King Niko, also known as Kouzuki Yuniko, Kuroyukihime would already have yelled “Stop playing around and let go!” or something like that, or even resort to physical attacks, but since the other person was actually this pitiful, sobbing girl, even the Black King seemed unable to bring herself to use physical force.

The only audible noise in the tense silence was the sound of Haruyuki blowing into his mug.

After a while, Chiyuri put down her own mug, and as she rubbed her temples, asked with difficulty:

“Ummmmm... I’m still trying to understand this situation... or rather, I can’t accept this situation at all.....”

She lifted her head, and looked directly at the girl next to Haruyuki, or directly in front of her,

“... You’re really «Ash Roller»? Him? The guy who goes, *Hyahaha I’m Mega Luckyyyyy?* The Ash-san with missiles on his bike?”

That description might have been a bit off, but the girl — «The real face» of Ash Roller, Kusakabe Rin, nodded in response.

At this point Rin had already removed the her brother's old grayish Neuro Linker and switched back to her own pastel-green one. If what she said could be believed, it meant that she already could not remember what had happened in her duel against Haruyuki. But even so, by the looks of it, she was still aware what kind of Burst Linker she — or her brother — was like in the Accelerated World. Tears formed in her eyes as she apologized in a soft voice:

“..... Um, on the other side, I always say rude things... I'm... really sorry.”

“N-No need... I'm not that nice in battle either...”

Haruyuki and Takumu couldn't help but nod quickly, but Chiyuri swept the room with a glare, and the two of them quickly froze, scared. Then, she continued.

“... But, how should I put it? It's my first time seeing someone so different between the Accelerated World and the real world, so it's quite a shock. So you're actually a girl, and it's possible for you to have a male avatar...”

Hearing this, Haruyuki could not resist exchanging eye contact with Fuuko, who sat in the armchair next to him.

Rin's special circumstances had not been explained to Chiyuri and the rest yet, so the many complications involved between Rin and her brother's

Neuro Linker was only known to Haruyuki and Rin's «Parent», Fuuko. Fuuko's expression said something along the lines of "*Find a good time to explain later*", and so Haruyuki quickly butted in.

"W-Well, there are over a thousand Burst Linkers, so of course there will be some exceptions to the rules once in a while."

Chiyuri rolled her eyes and turned away unhappily.

"Yeah, right, like a certain someone who's such a timid scaredy-cat in the real world, but suddenly becomes so reckless and keeps causing trouble in the Accelerated World!"

"Ugh!"

Such an unexpected attack made Haruyuki instinctively retract his neck. He first took a sip of his café au lait that he had painstakingly cooled to a suitable temperature, and began thinking at high speed. Since the plan of making his own escape and ending it all had failed and he had been taken back, it was an unavoidable topic. He should at least take the initiative to apologize. But was now a good time?

Haruyuki set the mug on the glass table surrounded by the sofa set, took a deep breath, straightened his back, then cast a somber look upon his assembled Legion mates. He look from Kuroyukihime far to the left, Takumu and Chiyuri directly in front, Fuuko to the right, and Utai, who took up the

least space and thus sat rather close to his right, then forcefully looked down and said,

“About me causing trouble... I’m really, very sorry... Though I don’t think I can really be forgiven, since things have gotten to this point...”

“— Haruyuki-kun, do you really know why we are, no... why *I* am angry?”

That sharp voice came from Kuroyukihime, who had remained silent all along.

The Legion Master, also his Swordmaster, had her hands clasped together on her kneecaps, her deep black eyes glaring at Haruyuki. She continued calmly:

“It is not because you summoned the «Disaster Armor» and released the sealed Chrome Disaster within. You were forced to do so in order to save your friend, and I believe everyone here understands that. But you... ignored what we said, rejected our outstretched hands, and tried to punish yourself for it. If... If your plan had succeeded, and you disappeared at the end of the Unlimited Neutral Field along with the armor...”

Kuroyukihime’s voice suddenly began to tremble. Haruyuki felt his own heart seizing up, and he unconsciously held on to the chest area of his T-shirt with his right hand.

“... Did you really think that, after something like that happened to you, that we would be able to keep fighting without you? Back then, you didn't give up on Chiyuri-kun, who had been ensnared by Dusk Taker, or Takumu, parasitized by the ISS Kit, or Fuuko, who had almost given up her dream of flying, or Utai, sealed at the altar of Suzaku... or me, isolated in the school network for two years, so do you really think we would give up on you?!”

As she spoke, her voice slowly became louder, finally becoming a sharp blade that pierced through Haruyuki's heart. Yet this wound brought not icy agony, but a sweet, grievous, yet very warm pain that filled his chest.

Haruyuki bit his lip and lowered his head deeply. But he still restrained himself and did not treat the mild denunciation as a lifeline.

“..... I'm sorry.”

He apologized again in a trembling voice, then immediately continued:

“..... But... But... the Elements of the previous generation Nega Nebulus, and Kuroyukihime-senpai, you... two and a half years ago, didn't you also give up on yourself to protect your Legion members...? Didn't you also try sacrificing yourself at the «Four Gods Altar» to enter Infinite EK, so that everyone else could escape...? I... I just thought... that it was time I did the same as well. Because if this continued... everyone in the Legion will become wanted criminals like me... I feel like... I could never let this happen.”

“— Haru, what are you saying?! Didn't you just tell me yesterday not to torment myself on my own and to believe in the help of my friends—...”

Takumu's shouting was interrupted by Chiyuri's left hand.

His childhood friend restrained his explosive glare, and instead changed into a gentle gaze to indicate for him to continue. Under her encouragement, Haruyuki tried his best to speak:

“Sorry, Taku... While I was just direct duelling with Ash-san... no, Kusakabe-san, I also remembered what I talked to you about...”

Then he turned towards Kuroyukihime:

“— And, at the end of the duel, Ash-san told me something. He said, that if I wanted to exile myself to the edge of the Accelerated World, he would join me to the end. When I heard what he said... I realized... in the Accelerated World, even if one were to lose all their points Points and undergo forced uninstallation, only the person's memories of Brain Burst would be deleted... that is, um... ”

Haruyuki tried his best to articulate the important lesson he had learnt, but he found his language processing engine unable to continue. His mouth and right hand moved wildly, but not a word came out.

Then a soft, tranquil voice came from his right, helping Haruyuki out. It was Fuuko.

“... You mean that the «death of a Burst Linker» isn’t just the matter of one person... Right? Because the fact that you were once a Burst Linker, as well as whoever you met in the Accelerated World, what you thought, what goal you went towards, all of these will be forgotten by the person. What really dies... are the friends they make. Once a person disappears, only their partners, friends, and lovers, will mourn their «deaths» in the unlimited time of the Accelerated World.”

“..... Yeah.”

Haruyuki slowly nodded his head, and continued on his own.

“Exactly. So... I thought, in the Accelerated World, it’s impossible for «only one person to disappear»... So even if I find a place where I can quietly let Enemies can knock away all my Points... my actions would kill off the ‘me’ residing in everyone’s hearts... so it leaves, or rather opens, a hole in everyone’s hearts... ”

Kuroyukihime remained looking at him sharply. A moment ago Haruyuki had briefly glanced at her to glimpse her expression, but now he looked up and met her gaze, pouring his heart out without a second thought:

“... So... now, I no longer think... making myself disappear is the best way to solve this... because, I know that the pain this will cause Senpai and the rest of you guys would probably be pretty much like me going all Disaster and killing you all... but then... come to think of it...”

He balled his fists tightly on his kneecaps.

“I don’t think it’s possible to get rid of the awakening «Disaster Armor» before the «Seven Kings Conference» on Sunday... it’s better to say that it’s 90% impossible now. I’ve fought alongside it in the Unlimited Neutral Field, so I should know. The armor has almost completely fused with Silver Crow... No, not just that. Maybe... my own consciousness is being affected by the armor as well. Because..... I.....”

Haruyuki croaked, feeling everyone’s stares upon him. About how just before he logged out from the disconnection, he was preparing to embark on an endless journey of wandering with the Disaster Armor — no, rather, with the «Beast» parasitizing it, and how he had felt then.

“... I... didn’t think about getting help to destroy it. I thought, if I had no choice... the best I could do was to take it with me...”

He lowered his head and bit his lips tightly.

Awfully close to Haruyuki’s right, Shinomiya Utai, pressing up against him owing to a lack of space, asked him warmly by way of typing:

[UI> Arita-san, by «it», do you mean the Disaster Armor item? Or something else...?]

“..... Well.....”

Haruyuki hesitated for a while, then decided to say it.

He spoke about the two disembodied beings that resided within the armor. The mysterious girl with orange armor that resided within its original form, «The Destiny», as well as vicious fighting impulse inside the Enhanced Armament «The Disaster» that had initiated a twisted fate — the «Beast».

“Chiyu has seen that girl before, so I’m definitely sure that dream wasn’t a mistake.”

Hearing what he had said, Chiyuri nodded slowly from opposite him.

“Yeah... Haru, Taku, and I also went to that world — the «Brain Burst Central Server», and it might have been a dream too... but the girl we met there definitely wasn’t one, because she told me and Haru many things we didn’t know about.”

“Hm... a Burst Linker’s memories residing within an item... or forming something that can think for itself? Considering what the «Armor» can do to one’s consciousness, we can’t rule that out...”

Kuroyukihime murmured, her face deep in thought, then stared at Haruyuki, but not in the same daggers fashion as she had before:

“Haruyuki-kun, who did you mean when you said you wanted to avoid destroying? Was it the unknown female avatar who helped you... or was it the beast that pushed you into battle?”

“... Both... No, I probably... didn't want to destroy the Beast.”

Haruyuki lowered his head.

“That girl's wish was to see the «Armor» completely destroyed, breaking the cycle of destruction that has plagued the Accelerated World for years. So, when I thought that she would have to disappear along with the armor, she wouldn't be sad. But then... the Beast's wish was to destroy all Burst Linkers besides itself. Of course, I thought that was too much, but... if we consider what we just established about the «death of a Burst Linker», and what it has to do with this wish... that means, for every person it kills and banishes from the Accelerated World, that person's «death» will remain in its memory. If its wish comes true, and it becomes the only thing left in the Accelerated World... that means that it would have to carry the burden of the deaths and disappearances of over a thousand Burst Linkers. In other words... it plans to let every single Burst Linker who disappears live on in its memory. But, in that case, what does it... want...?”

Droplets fell onto his tightly clenched fists. Realizing that they were coming from his eyes, Haruyuki quickly wiped his face with his right hand...

Kuroyukihime was two seconds faster in leaning over, but Chiyuri snatched the tissue box half a step ahead of her, yet Utai took out a handkerchief from her pocket an instant earlier. However, there was someone faster than all

three of them, the seventh person who had been sobbing all along next to Haruyuki — Kusakabe Rin. The girl, who was Haruyuki's age, used the sleeve of her ivory knit summer uniform to wipe away the tears on Haruyuki's face, then uttered in a small voice:

“..... One person... is too lonely. No matter who... disappearing alone, is never okay.”

“... Ah, um, that, um...”

Haruyuki went into standby mode on the spot, but even Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri and Utai had frozen to the spot with different expressions on each of their faces. In the end, it was Fuuko's calm utterance that broke the silence.

“Rin?”

At this one word, Kusakabe Rin darted back to her seat, but she still seemed as stubborn as before; she had once again grabbed hold of a corner of Haruyuki's T-shirt and would not relinquish it.

Kuroyukihime, her expression complex, returned to her seat, cleared her throat, and said:

“... Haruyuki-kun. I find it hard to believe what you said, that your current emotions are caused by the effects of the Disaster Armor. Why? The reason is simple... The Arita Haruyuki I know would say exactly what you just said...” Chiyuri, Utai, and Fuuko all nodded their heads coincidentally.

“And it’s because of that, that I don’t believe that there is no chance of us completely purifying the Armor. Haruyuki-kun... just once. Could you please give me... give us one more chance?”

— Purification.

That meant using the unique power of «Shrine Maiden of the Scorching Flames» Ardor Maiden — Shinomiya Utai, to burn that «Beast», along with the Disaster Armor, into a crisp.

Initially, Utai had used an Incarnate attack to melt the ground into a large pool of magma, burying in it the guardian knights of the Imperial Palace’s main hall; there would be no need for further discussion on how good her Incarnate abilities were. With her abilities, maybe even if Silver Crow has completely fused with the Armor, she would be able to burn... no, purify — the Armor by itself. Moreover, the great expense they had gone through at the outset to rescue her from the Altar of Suzaku was to get her to perform this purification.

But at this point, Haruyuki could not accept that this was the only way.

Even if he couldn’t recall the details anymore, in the distant past, back in the dawn of the Accelerated World, something very cruel and tragic had happened. It involved that orange-yellow girl, a metal avatar who looked a lot like Haruyuki, and the self-professed Vice President of the Acceleration Research Society, Black Vise. Back then, it had been because of the deep despair that that metal avatar had sunk into that led to the fusion of the

Divine Weapon «The Destiny» with the longsword «Star Caster», creating the «The Disaster».

The «Beast» that resided within the Armor displayed a very intense reaction towards his memory of this event, to the point that it had caused a negative Incarnate «Overflow» towards the real-world Haruyuki. This proved that the repeated disasters in the Accelerated World all stemmed from this one incident. If he didn't find out... no, if he didn't recall exactly what happened back then and simply destroyed the Armor and the Beast, was that really okay?

Of course, if Haruyuki tried to remember a past he didn't know, to trace the Armor's own history, he knew that he would definitely suffer even more intense erosion of his consciousness, to the point that it would be difficult to prevent the «fusion» from progressing to «control» — causing Haruyuki's personality to completely disappear. If he hesitated only because of this right now, maybe that indicated that his own consciousness had already been affected...

Haruyuki lowered his head and bit his lip. A small hand reached from his side and rested gently on top of his own right hand, and at the same time, a line of pink text appeared in his vision, typed out with only one right hand.

[UI> Arita-san, my true «purification ability» actually is not the negative Incarnation of the fourth quadrant, back at the Imperial Palace.]

“Huh?..... What do you mean.....?”

At this vocalized question, Shinomiya Utai smiled serenely and replied:

[UI> I mean that it is not capable of any physical attack power whatsoever. It cannot hurt avatars, Enhanced Armaments, Enemies... nor any of the physical environment. My flames actually target... the so-called «origin». That is, it selectively targets the pathway by which the parasitic entity communicates with its controller, and destroys it. Therefore, this ability merely separates its target — in this case, the parasitic entity.]

“Not destruction... just separation...”

Haruyuki repeated to himself, and shook his head again.

“But... if that were the case, even if the purification is successful, the «Disaster Armor» will still be preserved as a seal card... right? Even if the card is handed to someone else for safekeeping, or sold to a Shop, or even thrown into the bottom of the sea... I’m sure it’ll find a way to infect another host... Senpai, remember that cards...”

Haruyuki turned to look at Kuroyukihime, who sensed what he was about to ask, and nodded, answering.

“Right... They’re indestructible, no exceptions. The most reliable way I know of to get rid of a card is to feed it to some God-class Enemy or

something with a Loot attribute, but even so... it's not going to be completely foolproof..."

A heavy silence pervaded the living room, illuminated by orange lamps.

It was broken by the tinny ring of the clock chiming 8:00 pm.

There was still some time before Haruyuki's mother returned home, so putting aside the elementary school age Utai, it was about time for everyone else to go home as well. No matter what sort of crisis the Legion was facing, it was an unavoidable fact that at the end of the day, everyone was still a student subject to some form of restriction in the real world.

Of course, there was the option of diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field and continuing their discussion there, or maybe even letting Ardor Maiden try «Purification». But there was one huge problem with this. Since Haruyuki had last left the Unlimited Neutral Field through «forced disconnection safety» — having the connection cable pulled out of his Neuro Linker, the moment he reappeared in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he would be far away from the others, alone on the rooftop of the Roppongi Hills Tower. It would be fine if he were able to simply head straight to a Portal and log out, but as he would be affected by the Armor's interference the moment he logged in, even Haruyuki did not know what would happen next...

Vice Legion Master Fuuko also seemed to realize this, and calmly said:

“In that case... we’ll finish up this conversation tomorrow. No matter what, we must move Crow-san’s in-game position somewhere safe first...”

Haruyuki had explained his forced disconnection from Roppongi Hills before he had fled his home. In fact, there was even more that he had to delve into details about, but not even he even remembered everything clearly. He definitely needed time to properly recall what had happened with the two he had met at the Roppongi Hills Tower — The Green King Green Grande and his subordinate, Iron Pound, the third seat of the Green Legion’s officers, the «Six Armor».

Continuing Fuuko’s statement, Legion Master Kuroyukihime swept the group with her gaze, then uttered firmly:

“We, Nega Nebulus, have taken a great leap forward today. For we have rescued Utai — Ardor Maiden, one of the «Four Elements» of the previous generation, from the Altar of the Four Gods, which we thought she had been lost to. After that came some rather unexpected things...”

She stopped here, shot a glance at Kusakabe Rin who was still gripping onto Haruyuki’s shirt, cleared her throat, and continued:

“... Silver Crow has been extremely instrumental in ensuring the success of this mission. So, Haruyuki-kun, this time it’s our turn to work hard for you. I understand the fear and hesitation you have... but I beg you, please give us a chance.”

Kuroyukihime repeated the words she had said previously while looking forward sincerely. Then a small figure stood out next to her. This girl, wearing a small gown-type uniform, was Shinomiya Utai. She bowed her head in respect, her ponytail swinging, then resolutely reached out all fingers on both hands to type in midair:

[UI> Arita-san, we need you. My being able to return to Nega Nebulus and escape two years of Infinite EK is all thanks to you. The entire reason I am here is to break the links between you and the «Disaster». Please, give me a chance, and let me fulfill my duty.]

After she had finished typing, her small hand moved to her chest and clenched. Fuuko, Chiyuri and Takumu also nodded deeply at the same time. Finally, to his left, Kusakabe Rin lightly tugged at the piece of his shirt in her hands.

The temporary but heavy knot that had formed in Haruyuki's heart made him shiver a bit.

Letting Ardor Maiden try her «Purification» required him to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field with all of his Legion partners once again. In the worst case scenario, he could be immediately taken control of by the Armor and end up indiscriminately attacking everyone. Of course, he felt that even if he were Chrome Disaster, he had no way of winning against the five members of Nega Nebulus all at once, led by the Black King Black Lotus,

but at that time Kuroyukihime and the others would have to find a way to incapacitate Haruyuki... No, they might even have to resort to «Judgement Blow» to force him into uninstallation.

That was something he never, ever wished to happen. No matter what.

Haruyuki murmured in his heart, but he raised his head, looked each at Kuroyukihime and Utai, then nodded softly and said:

“... I understand. I would also like your help... I cannot break this cycle of disaster by myself no matter what, so please, I ask the help of Shinomiya-san, Senpai... and everyone, to assist me in ending it...”

“You’ll be home alone tonight, Haru, will you be okay? Are you sure you don’t want to spend the night with me or Taku?”

Chiyuri had asked this question at least five times, and every time Haruyuki had said it was fine, and he finally sent everyone out of the house.

Kusakabe Rin was dragged away by the collar by Fuuko. She had very reluctantly let go of Haruyuki’s T-shirt, and after putting on her loafers, she turned and said,

“Um... the sushi was delicious.”

“Ah... I-If you want to thank anyone, thank her. This is Chiyu... Kurashima Chiyuri. Her mother made the maki roll that you ate.”

Rin turned around at Haruyuki's explanation, bowed in Chiyuri's direction, who had already walked into the hall outside.

“Thank you... for your hospitality.”

“... You're welcome... though it's not exactly something I should be saying.”

Chiyuri returned the bow with a half-nod, half-bow, but her and Takumu's faces still showed signs of deep doubt. Ever since Haruyuki and Rin had been dragged back to the Arita house from the underground garage, Rin had only simply introduced herself and never said much to them, so both of them still found it difficult to accept the idea of «Rin = Ash Roller». Haruyuki knew how they felt.

But Rin's withdrawn nature as Fuuko dragged her away by the collar, seemed to clearly create an indescribable feeling of a sort of master-and-disciple relationship. It had been decided that tomorrow, at 7:00 pm, they would meet again at the Arita household for the «Disaster Armor Purification Operation». At that time, Rin would also personally be there, so there would be time to talk more. But if — and only if — the operation succeeded.

Fuuko and Rin walked onto the corridor, and Utai followed, leaving only Kuroyukihime who was taking her time to put on her shoes.

She took a step forward then turned back to face Haruyuki. Her lips appeared to want to utter something, but hesitated as they trembled. They parted slightly, then closed again.

A moment later, Haruyuki's beloved Swordmaster smiled slightly:

“Sorry for constantly using your house as the Legion meeting point. We'll be troubling you again tomorrow.”

“Sure... I'm completely fine with it. Rather, isn't it difficult for you guys to get back home, Senpai, and Master?”

“Haha, it's fine, I'll just have Fuuko drive me home today. You have to rely on friends when you're out and about, after all.”

Fuuko looked awkward from behind her. The others chuckled, then Kuroyukihime took two steps back onto the corridor.

“Well, Haruyuki-kun, see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow.”

The door closed silently, obscuring the faces of Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki's other friends, separating his home from the outside. Then came the soft click of the automatic lock sliding into place.

Haruyuki waited for the sounds of his friends' footsteps to fade, then returned to the living room with heavy steps.

Chiyuri had taken with her the large plate of sushi she had brought, so he took the empty mugs of cafe au lait to wash them, then placed them into the automatically drying dish rack. Then he wiped the dining table and glass coffee table, arranged the chairs properly, and turned on the AI vacuum bot.

Haruyuki returned to his room, opened the homework software, and focused on finishing his English and math homework. It was just past 9:00pm when he finished.

His mother was not home yet. Usually, if his mother hadn't come home by now, she would almost always be back after midnight. He logged into the home server, opened the family message board, thought for a while, and typed a short message.

[I'm spending the night at Takumu's place to finish a group presentation. I'll be back tomorrow morning.]

It was a lie, of course, and he had lied to his mother and good friends, no... he had basically betrayed the trust of the entire Legion with that lie. But he

believed in the tacit agreement between him and Takumu, and if Haruyuki's mother actually asked about it, Takumu would cover for him.

Haruyuki pressed the Enter key with stiff fingers, then dismissed his virtual desktop with a flourish. He stood, changed from his home attire into a pair of camouflage suspenders and a printed T-shirt, put on a hat, changed to running shoes at the entryway and opened the front door.

Only one hour had passed, but at 9:00pm, the corridor seemed darker and quieter than just before.

This was to be expected, but Haruyuki's mind wandered in spite of himself — he couldn't find a single trace of his friends passing through here to return to their own homes, in this narrow space illuminated by LED lights. But he took a deep breath, trying to save as much of the air also breathed by everyone else in himself as possible, and walked out of the house. Now, there was no one left the Arita household, and behind him he heard the click of the door lock engaging, and the electronic beep of the higher security system being armed.

The last time Haruyuki left home alone at a time like this was for a somewhat different reason than earlier today when he had locked everyone inside and ran away. At the time, he had planned on looking for an internet cafe, logging onto the Unlimited Neutral Field, and heading for the ends of the Earth to allow Enemies to consume all of his Points.

But he had been stopped on the ground floor of the shopping mall by Fuuko's «Child» Kusakabe Rin, and the duel with Ash Roller afterwards, who called himself Rin's elder brother, had changed his mind. Even if he were to disappear, the matter would not be resolved at its root. Just last night, Takumu had been in the exact same situation, and had stopped after hearing what Haruyuki had to say. If only for Takumu, Haruyuki should not do something like that.

— I should be like Taku, and believe in my comrades... in the friendships of the Legion.

Right now, Haruyuki made that decision deep inside his heart. Thus, the reason he was out at a time where middle schoolers shouldn't be wandering outside, was not to die a lonely death in the Unlimited Neutral Field. If he were really looking to die, he would not need to leave his house, and could issue the command «Unlimited Burst» from the comfort of his own bed.

Haruyuki's destination was not in Suginami Ward; in fact, it wasn't in the 23 Wards of Tokyo at all. He planned to go to Musashino City, next to Suginami Ward. There was good Social Camera coverage there, and thus, it was also considered part of the Accelerated World, but not a single Burst Linker could be found there.

As for the reason, he wanted to try and see if he still could preserve his self-awareness upon logging into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

In the worst case scenario, during the «Purification Mission» tomorrow, Haruyuki would lose control immediately upon logging on and begin attacking his fellow Legion members. Maybe Kuroyukihime and the others have prepared themselves for that... or rather, they might be actively rehearsing for the event in which they would need to subjugate Chrome Disaster, but Haruyuki was not that optimistic. The sixth generation Disaster was capable of «using all the special skills of its previous incarnations». Even he was unaware of what sort of battle potential this was capable of, especially the intractable «Flash Blink» ability that the first generation had left in the armor. That ability, which reduced its user to particles that were capable of teleportation, would render most physical restraints utterly ineffective. Should Haruyuki, who had fused with the «Beast», be able to master such a skill, Nega Nebulus, which had no yellow-type avatars, would have no way of dealing with him...

As he blankly thought this, Haruyuki boarded the elevator from the 23rd floor.

Then he continued to think as the the elevator sped down.

He could not allow himself to transform into a violent, feral beast tomorrow and attack his own people. The only way to prevent this would be to enter the Unlimited Neutral Field, awaken the «Beast», and then either talk to it or resist it, to find a way to control as much of it as possible.

And to do something like that, he could not remain in Suginami. One single miscalculation and his mind would be taken over, Haruyuki — or the sixth generation Disaster, would begin a massacre of Suginami, the base of most Burst Linkers. Also for that reason, he had to avoid the nearby Nerima, Nakano, Shinjuku, and Shibuya wards as well. But if he went to Musashino City in the west, there would not be any targets for Haruyuki, no matter how much he raged. If he actually did want to hunt and kill players, he would first have to return to the real world through a portal and change locations by way of public transport, and perhaps he would calm down somewhat while on the train.

For these reasons, Haruyuki decided to act alone.

After 9:00pm, most of the shops besides the supermarket were closed. Haruyuki walked through the gradually quieting mall, and emerged into the front garden paved in red bricks. Flowerbeds and benches dotted the place, and at this time were mostly occupied by young couples. When 10:00pm came around and the building closed, only the residents of the complex would be allowed to pass through the area. But he could still see many young couples enjoying each other's company on the benches, probably intending to stay here until they were chased out.

From Haruyuki's perspective, there was nothing good to look at here, so when he needed to leave the building during later hours, he would use the residents' exit to the north. But to get to Koenji Station he needed to use the

main exit to the south. Thus, he lowered his cap, narrowed his shoulders, and prepared to pass through the garden.

Just then...

“Would you like to have a seat first before going?”

A voice came from one of the benches next to him.

Haruyuki shuddered on reflex, kept his vision locked forward, and froze.

This tone sounded quite masculine, but the voice was definitely feminine. It was smooth as silk, clear as water from melted ice, yet as piercing as a well-sharpened blade. It was unmistakable.

Haruyuki turned his head about 70 degrees to his right, his actions as stiff as a mechanical puppet.

There sat the «Swordmaster», whom he had just bid goodbye to an hour ago, on a bench of natural wood. She was smiling serenely at him, but her gaze, as deep as the corners of the universe, seemed to say: *Did you think you could hide your plans from me?*

## Chapter 7

— I never thought that would be a time when I would sit on this bench with a girl. Especially after 9pm. Of course, to onlookers, we don't look like a couple, do we?... At most, we look like siblings, and maybe people would even think she lost a bet...

As Haruyuki turned the thought over in his brain, a hand with five slender fingers stretched over from his side, and tightly grasped the left hand he had placed on his kneecap. At the same time, a voice said:

“Now we don't look like siblings anymore. Want to link our fingers together?”

It was almost as if she had used some sort of mind-reading technique to see through 80% of a thought that had just formulated in his head. Like a broken record, Haruyuki stammered “Nononononono this is e-e-e-enough.” Forgetting to add “People could also think this is punishment” was probably a wonderful judgment of his made under duress.

The scary thing was that if Chiyuri used a night-vision telescope to look down to the garden from the Kurashima residence on the 21st floor of Building B, she would be able to see Haruyuki's situation as clear as day, but that might be an unfounded concern. No, there really was no underestimating Chiyuri's animal-like instinct... And who knows, there was no guarantee that she wouldn't suddenly decide to come downstairs to buy the «soy banana au lait with tapioca» sold from the vending machines in this square...

“Even if Chiyuri-kun or Takumu-kun were to spot us, there is nothing to hide. Or rather, why is it that they can have sleepovers with you without warning while I do not even have the right to sit on the same bench as you?”

“N-n-n-n-no, w-w-w-why?”

It would be very disastrous indeed if his thoughts were to keep leaking out like this until they were all gone, so Haruyuki stopped allowing his thoughts to continue evading reality and looked to the girl sitting next to him — none other than the Legion Master of Nega Nebulus, the Black King Black Lotus, Haruyuki’s «Parent», Kuroyukihime. First, he asked apprehensively to answer his most pressing question:

“... Um... Senpai, I remember Master Raker driving you home... right? Why are you still here...?”

“Well... the answer is actually quite simple. Fuuko’s «Child»... Kusakabe, was it? She told us that she lived near Egota in Nakano, which is in the other direction from my home. Uiui lives near Fuuko, so she’s not much of a problem, but if Fuuko were drive me back as well, the route would become too inefficient, so I told her that I’ll just call a taxi from here. By the way, I didn’t say «What time I would call the taxi», so I’m not lying to Fuuko and the others.”

“I-I see. Wait, um, Senpai, where do you live...?”

Haruyuki asked without thinking. Kuroyukihime's eyebrow suddenly perked up, and then she smiled mischievously.

“You... Didn't you see my student handbook?”

Thinking that he had heard this before, Haruyuki spaced out for a moment, then frantically shook his head:

“I-I-I didn't see the inside! And how long ago was that anyway?!”

“Heh heh heh... Around eight months? How nostalgic.”

Kuroyukihime laughed for a while until her shoulders shook, then her expression changed as though she had remembered something. She tightly grasped Haruyuki's left hand and whispered:

“Say, Haruyuki-kun, coming out alone at this hour, you were thinking of going to some uninhabited area outside the 23 Wards and connecting to the Unlimited Neutral Field... am I wrong?”

This question laid Haruyuki's intention stark bare, and he nodded in spite of himself:

“Ah, b-but, I wasn't going to run through all my Points just for myself...”

He hurriedly added, but Kuroyukihime's expression seemed to say she had long expected this as she nodded, then asked:

“— You mean, you've already left an excuse to your family about going out late at night?”

“Y-Yeah... I said I was going to spend the night at Taku's to finish a group presentation...”

For an instant, Haruyuki expected to be scolded for his lie, but unexpectedly, Kuroyukihime nodded as though nothing had happened and continued:

“Hm, good, let's go, then.”

Saying that, she stood up, not letting go of Haruyuki's hand. Kuroyukihime dragged him to a standing position, then heroically began to walk: not towards the entrance of the building, but rather to the southeast gate of the complex.

“Uh, um, may I ask...”

This was the route Haruyuki had originally intended to take, but he was unable to comprehend Kuroyukihime's intentions, and so asked. But the girl in black leading the way said nothing, cutting straight through the couple-

filled garden and stepping out of the building complex, onto the sidewalk of Kannana Street.

By the looks of it, she had already called a taxi at some point from her virtual desktop, and an EV appeared with perfect timing, stopped by the sidewalk with blinkers flashing. The white taxi had a blue stripe running down its body and an old-fashioned lamp on its roof. Without a word, Kuroyukihime shoved Haruyuki into the back seat as the door opened automatically, then slid inside after him. “Sorry for the trouble,” she said to the middle-aged male driver, who replied “Okay”, and the car steadily began to accelerate.

In this day and age, when one sent a pickup request to nearby taxis via their Neuro Linker, the destination was already stated in the request, so Haruyuki had no idea where the car was going. He stared in a daze at the passing view through the window, as the taxi headed north along Kannana Street, it turned left onto Waseda Street not long after and heading west.

Was she planning to go to Musashino City with him? That would be bad... Haruyuki thought, but then, having travelled less than a kilometer, the car lurched left again, travelling south through the residential district, and under the Chuo Line overpass. A few minutes later, they reached Ome Street, and the car turned right this time, but not long after it turned left again.

In short, they had gotten a tiny bit closer to Umesato Middle School from Haruyuki’s building, then moved further and further... but still he hadn’t a clue where they were going. The view outside changed to a residential area

again, and more and more greenery cropped up — mere tens of seconds later, the taxi's emergency lights lit up and they came to a stop.

Kuroyukihime paid the fare through her Neuro Linker, so Haruyuki didn't know how much it cost. With a "Thank you for your patronage" from the driver, the car door clicked open; Kuroyukihime thanked him and exited the car, and Haruyuki followed suit.

As they watched the EV silently pull away, never mind the middle of Suginami Ward, the surrounding area didn't even look like Japan.

The area was filled with patches of grass and trees. Spacious, fashionable white-walled townhouses were lined up in neatly spaced rows, looking like a set for some American family sitcom, but the townhouses were all of the same design, and each house didn't look very big.

"... U-Um, where are...?"

"Hm? Oh yes, you're a second year now, so you'll probably cover this in social studies next semester. We're in «Asagaya Residences», a residential complex sold by lots, with almost a hundred years of history in the Urban Renewal Bureau. Although most of the city was redeveloped at the beginning of the century, only this place basically looks the same as it did back then."

"O-Oh..."

As he listened to her, he felt that the residential district, presenting itself under the orange streetlamps, strongly reflected he could see the architect's intention — or something like that.

“... You mean, it's considered a district with rich cultural heritage... isn't it?”

At his hesitant question, Kuroyukihime replied “Yeah, that's one way to put it”, as she took Haruyuki's hand and began to walk along the winding road.

— If Senpai brought me here, she must want me to learn some lesson. She's trying to tell me something that I need most right now... No, it has to be something important that I have to discover on my own...

Haruyuki turned the thought over in his mind, as he walked beside Kuroyukihime. The humid June air felt admittedly stuffy in reinforced concrete streets, but with the thick odor of plants here, it instead felt relaxing and uplifting. The black two-lane road was still wet, perhaps because of the rain a little while ago. After walking along the driveway for about twenty meters, Kuroyukihime turned right and started onto a small path.

The path was comprised of extravagant natural stone tiles and was just wide enough for two people to walk along it shoulder-to-shoulder. It didn't seem like a public path; rather, it resembled a private path belonging to one of the buildings. But Kuroyukihime's pace never slowed. If they really were trespassing on private property, the owner might actually contact the

residential police. Since Kuroyukihime didn't mind taking that risk if it would help Haruyuki understand, then —

Haruyuki's mind was spinning so fast that smoke was about to come out of his ears as Kuroyukihime stopped in front of one of the townhouses, and without hesitation, raised her right hand and pushed open the black metal gate.

“..... Huh? Wha?”

Before Haruyuki could think “At the very least, you shouldn't just open other people's gates like that”, he was waited upon by an even greater shock, causing his eyes to widen and his mouth to drop open. Kuroyukihime not only walked past the gate without a care in the world, she even put her hands on the handle of the front door.

“H-Hey, Senpai!”

Haruyuki stopped in front of the door and emitted a broken voice.

“Senpai, what are you doing?! Th-Th-They'll get mad if you do that!”

“Huh? Why? Who'll get mad?”

“Who else... the homeowner...”

Kuroyukihime shrugged at that.

“No need to worry. Since **this is my house.**”

“..... What?”

Haruyuki’s mouth, already fully open, widened even further, and his upper body arched backwards in shock. Then he heard her say calmly to him:

“Remember to close the door after you. It locks automatically.

“..... Okay.”

Haruyuki was unable to produce any response besides that.

The standalone duplex one-story house, with one bedroom, one living room, and a bathroom, with an attached garden.

This was the home of the beautiful, mysterious girl dressed in black.

In a dreamlike state, Haruyuki removed his shoes and stepped into the house. Led by Kuroyukihime, he entered the roughly seven-tatami living and dining room.

“I’ll go change, make yourself at home.”

With that, she exited through a door in the west wall. Haruyuki wobbled over, his thought processes on standby, but when he stopped in the middle of the living room, he tried his best to first collect as much visual information as he could.

For a standalone building, it had a rather compact design, but the floor and pillars were all made of natural wood, and there was a very large south-facing window, so it felt quite open. Unexpectedly, there wasn’t a lot of black in the room’s fittings. The walls and ceiling were a soft gray, and the carpet and curtains had were streaked with coffee-colored stripes. There were very few furnishings: only a small table and bean bag in the living-dining room, and a wardrobe that took up the entire west wall. Visible in the small kitchen behind the bar were only a smallish fridge, a multifunctional microwave, and a small crockery cupboard. It honestly didn’t look like much cooking was done here.

Amidst the minimalist furnishings, the one standing out the most was a large water tank standing in the southeast corner of the room. Haruyuki was unconsciously attracted to it, and watched the orange LED-illuminated aquarium with much interest.

Inside were approximately twenty small tropical fish. There seemed to be comparatively few fish for an aquarium that was almost a meter wide. This was because the aquarium was not populated completely by fish, but a large

amount of seaweed. Some resembled furry carpeting, some had oval-shaped leaves bobbing with the current of water, and some just looked like tiny forests; there was a myriad of varieties. But the most striking one was the thin stem stretching from the sand on the bottom up to the surface of the water.

The view at the top of the aquarium was blocked by a purifier that also maintained temperature, so Haruyuki bent down and looked through the water as if he were a fish himself looking out from inside. He watched the several thin stalk-like plants on the surface of the water with their large, round leaves, as if they were attempting to stick their heads out in the air.

Haruyuki felt that those deep green leaves looked very familiar. He tilted his head, wondering why these leaves would look familiar despite himself having no interest in water flora. Then he suddenly recalled the answer.

He had only done it once in his fourteen years of life. He had spent several days doing research on the internet, even spending an hour or so sweating at the florist's, and then, using all of the pocket money he had saved up, he had purchased a water plant. This long-rooted plant with large round leaves was the «tropical lotus» he had chosen that spring, asked the shop owner to wrap in a bouquet, and then brought to a certain hospital for a sick visit.

“... I looked it up afterwards, and I found out that the lotus you gave me was of a variety known as «Lindsey Woods».”

A soft voice suddenly entered his ear and Haruyuki stiffly turned 90 degrees to his right.

Kuroyukihime had changed from her Umesato uniform into a small sleeveless nightgown, and was bending down to look at the tank. This was probably her home attire, but since it was fully black, it resembled a formal dinner dress. At this point, Haruyuki finally managed to recover about 80% of his brain output, which had stalled to the point of nearly shutting down just now, and forced himself to think about the situation.

— It's almost 10:00 pm. Here I am, bothering Kuroyukihime-senpai in her own house for the first time, and never mind the two of us being alone, I even left a message at home saying that I'm not coming back tonight. Why? What in the world is going on?

This thought flashed through his head, but he felt that if he pursued that train of thought further, he would end up in dangerous places, so Haruyuki focused on the matter at hand:

“..... I-Is that right? I, I, I, at the time, I only picked it based on the color...”

Haruyuki replied, recovering his original posture and staring at the tank again. Kuroyukihime chuckled close from his right.

“At the time, I had never heard of any type of decorative lotus. I only began looking into it after you gave me these.”

Indeed: in autumn of last year, the day a gravely injured Kuroyukihime recovered enough to be transferred from the ICU to the general ward, Haruyuki had brought a bouquet of a tropical lotus when he visited her. Of course, he had chosen it as a reference to Kuroyukihime’s duel avatar «Black Lotus», but besides the lotus, the shopkeeper had also packed four or five leaves into the bouquet as well. Haruyuki was able to recognize the aquarium plants as lotuses without looking at their flowers because he remembered the round, slightly spotted bodies of their leaves.

“S-So, you mean, these lotuses, they’re the same kind as... the one I gave you?”

At this, Kuroyukihime smiled a smile that seemed somewhat mischievous, yet naively flaunting at the same time. She shook her head and replied:

“Well, they are the same variety, but it’s not that simple. The flowers in this tank is the one you gave me eight months ago... no, to be precise, these are its «Children».”

“What...!?”

Shocked, Haruyuki and stared at Kuroyukihime’s side profile, illuminated by the aquarium lamps.

“B-But... I bought one that only had flower petals left... Even if you planted it in sand, it wouldn't survive...”

“Ah, you're right. I actually only learned this after looking it up, but inside the «Lindsey Woods» you sent me, some of them were «bulbs». When a leaf and a stem intersect, a new bulb will grow, which can then develop a new shoot and roots.”

“Huh... A stem and roots growing from a leaf?”

“Yup. After I learnt about that, I took a closer look at the five leaves in that bouquet and found that one of them had already grown a bulb. So I placed it in a pot and watered it for it to sprout, and after I left the hospital, I moved them into this tank. It took eight months for it to grow to this degree, which really was no mean feat. But unfortunately, we'll have to wait a month or so before it blossoms.”

“.....”

Haruyuki was not only amazed at the wonders of botany, he was filled with gratitude for Kuroyukihime, that she would spend so much effort in finding a way to preserve one flower he had bought for her. His eyes fell upon the stems swaying in the water. A silence, filled with a mysterious quiet, persisted for a few seconds, or maybe a few minutes, until Kuroyukihime quickly stood, tapped Haruyuki's back, and said:

“Well, please do come back in a month when they blossom. — Right, how about taking a seat?”

A large bean bag had been placed on a mat by the window in the living room. Kuroyukihime sat down on one side and mercilessly pressed Haruyuki, whose completely stiffened, down next to her.

The small cushion slowly changed shape, absorbing Haruyuki’s weight. Now his body would definitely going to gravitate towards the middle of the cushion, and beside him, Kuroyukihime was also sinking slowly. Their hands touched, nearly causing Haruyuki’s senses to fly out of the stratosphere again, but Kuroyukihime calmly raised her right hand and quickly operated her virtual desktop.

She adjusted the lighting in the living room to a bare minimum, and the previously-shut curtains automatically opened by about a meter, while the transparency of the smart glass windows increased. Under the illumination of the street lamps, the grassy patches of the garden could be seen through the window, along with the contours of the trees lining the road, and further along the skyline, they could see the tall, brightly lit redeveloped apartment towers that seemed anxious to pierce the night sky.

This view made one feel as if they were watching the Tokyo of 2047 from some time in the previous century, ages and ages ago. With renewed realization, Haruyuki knew that Kuroyukihime was most likely... no,

definitely living by herself in this small house, built in a corner of Asagaya Residences. He asked her subconsciously:

“Senpai... When did you start living here...?”

It took around five seconds for an answer to reach him.

“It was around when I left my original home and began living here, when I was about to enroll in Umesato Middle School. To be more precise... it was half a year after I beheaded the first generation Red King, «Red Rider».”

“.....”

Haruyuki inhaled sharply, trying to comprehend the meaning of that. No, he didn't need to know. Kuroyukihime was telling him that she left her old home not because she was starting middle school or something reason of the real world; it was because of an event related to the Accelerated World that had resulted from her murdering the Red King.

But what exactly had happened? As Haruyuki understood it, the reason that Kuroyukihime had taken all of Red Rider's points in accordance with the «Level 9 Sudden Death Rule» was to protest against the mutual nonaggression treaty agreed amongst the «Seven Kings of Pure Color». In other words, it was a matter that had started and ended in the Accelerated World, so what did it have to do with her having to leave home no matter what?

“..... I’ve never told anyone this before... not even Fuuko or Utai...”

Kuroyukihime suddenly placed her head on Haruyuki’s right shoulder and whispered in his ear.

“Out of all the Kings, I didn’t only plan on only killing Red Rider. At the time I also tried to kill another King with my own hands, and not through a normal «duel», but by physically threatening them in the real world... or, in other words, attacking them with real-world violence.

“Uh.....”

Haruyuki’s breathing stopped again. Kuroyukihime, who even instructed her Legion members not to use Acceleration in exams, had attempted the repugnant act of attacking someone in the real world: «PK». But that wasn’t the only thing that shocked Haruyuki. If she was capable of something like that, then that meant —

“S-Senpai, you knew the «real identity» of that King... didn’t you.....?”

There was no reply for a long while.

After a lengthy silence, Kuroyukihime uttered one word:

“..... Sorry.”

After that, she turned to the left. Now, not only was the girl’s head touching him, her entire form leaned onto Haruyuki’s upper right body. The softness and warmth transmitted to Haruyuki’s five senses almost made him faint again, but he managed to pull through this time. Because Kuroyukihime’s actions seemed to him as though she were some child desperately seeking support.

“Someday..... When I can say it, I will definitely tell you.”

Listening to her almost inaudible voice, Haruyuki nodded.

“..... Okay.”

That was all he could force out, but upon hearing that, Kuroyukihime tightly seized the sleeve of Haruyuki’s T-shirt, and whispered softly: “Thank you.”

They passed the next few minutes silently, but calmly. Since there was no clock in the room, it was only possible to tell the time by checking the right lower corner of the virtual desktop. But from Haruyuki’s perspective, the tiny numbers in his augmented reality display were shown right on Kuroyukihime’s chest. Apparently, females had a sort of super-sense that could detect a guy’s perverted eyesight; Haruyuki had been scolded many times in the past by Chiyuri: *Where are you looking, Ero-yuki?!* From his perspective, Haruyuki wanted to make the defense that his eyeballs had not

swivelled consciously, but rather the more primeval parts of his brain had unavoidably issued the command. However, there was something he could be sure of: if this caused a misunderstanding between him and Kuroyukihime now, something really important would be lost. Thus, Haruyuki could not help but engage in the difficult operation of looking at the lower right corner while moving the entire virtual desktop to the left —

“... Right, I still haven't asked you to explain what you're doing.”

This sudden sentence made Haruyuki shudder, and his eyes froze.

“Wh-What do you mean, doing what, I-I-I was just looking at the time.”

“... Sure, go ahead. That's not what I meant...”

Kuroyukihime lifted her head, and pouting somewhat petulantly, continued,

“I meant to ask you, what you were doing in Fuuko's car with that Kusakabe-kun.”



An attack from that angle with that much power was out of Haruyuki's expectations, causing him to freeze again. It was then that he remembered that the time he had been directly connecting with Kusakabe Rin in the back seat of the EV, had all been seen by Kuroyukihime.

“Uh, um, well, Rin and I... Kusakabe-san and I were just talking in a duel stage, besides that it was nothing...”

“Hmmmph. If that's the case, I think she was being a bit too emotional. Is that really all?”

As she stared at him with her wide, deep eyes, Haruyuki was forced to recall. It was honestly quite difficult hard to say that that was «really all»... After all, Rin had openly confessed to him. That simple but strong words, “I love you”, were really unexplainable in any other way.

“U-U-Uhmm... Th-There's nothing between *Ash-san* and me, really! Even though I was planning to go to ends of the earth in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he offered to give me a lift on his bike, but that's it.”

That was the truth. There was only a sympathetic friendship between rivals for Haruyuki and the Burst Linker «Ash Roller». Because in the Accelerated World, the person who controlled that apocalyptic biker was not Kusakabe Rin, but actually her brother Rinta, or at least his artificial personality.

Haruyuki's not-really-lying explanation made Kuroyukihime pout suspiciously again. She, Chiyuri, Takumu and Utai were still unaware of Kusakabe Rin's special circumstances, believing that that timid, crybaby girl would immediately start playing the character who cackled weirdly all the time upon entering the Accelerated World. But Haruyuki couldn't even clarify the truth, because something like that was best left to Rin herself to explain, or at least her «Parent» Kurasaki Fuuko.

Luckily, Kuroyukihime's facial expression relaxed a few short seconds later, and she pinched Haruyuki's round face with the tips of her fingers:

“.. Never mind, at this point, one more probably won't make much difference in battle.”

“One... One more what?”

“You really need me to explain that to you?”

She said, putting even more strength into her pinch. Haruyuki shook his head frantically:

“Nyo, nyo nyeed, nyope, nyope.”

“..... Good grief.”

Kuroyukihime smiled meaningfully again, and finally released him. She then lay back onto the cushion and said while looking at the ceiling.

“To be honest... I was quite shocked. I never expected that biker, our first opponent, to be a female student even younger than me... Up until that point, I always believed that he would be like he is in the real world as well.”

“Yeah, me too...”

“— But, the part about how she met Fuuko does make sense. I heard a bit about it on the way from your house to the garage. Apparently, they met at the hospital they both frequented. Both of them seemed to connect the first time they met, just like that time when I first found you.”

“I-I see... I really don't know what that feeling is like...”

“Yeah... I'll say it in Fuuko's words then. *If Crow-san manages to flip some switch in me to the degree of 100 points, Uiui would be 200 points, but Rin would be 1,000 points. The instant I met her, I knew that I definitely would have to train her well!* — That's how she put it.”

“..... I see.”

Haruyuki replied dryly. If his 100 points merited being thrown off the top of the old Tokyo Tower, then what had Rin gone through with 1000? The thought intimidated him.

But then Kuroyukihime smiled bitterly and added some more harrowing news.

“By the way, according to Fuuko, when I first met her I was rated at 100,000 points. Should I be happy that I’m her friend and not her «Child»?”

“..... I-I see.”

Kuroyukihime and Fuuko had likely gotten to know each other when they were at lower levels. That meant that they should have been in third or fourth grade. Looking at Kuroyukihime now, he was unable to think of what she might have been like as a kid.

“Had I... Had I gotten to know Senpai earlier... I could have joined the last generation Nega Nebulus and gotten to be part of many things...”

Hearing Haruyuki mutter to himself, Kuroyukihime looked up and stared into Haruyuki’s eyes from up close.

“What are you saying? At that time you definitely would not have met me in the real world, so never mind being «Parent/Child» or being in the same Legion together, it’s more likely that we have met for the first time as enemies.”

“Ah... R-Right, makes sense...”

Haruyuki lowered his head dejectedly, but his chin was held up by a slender finger.

“However, even if that were the case, I think I would still have gone against all odds to recruit you. If that really had happened... meaning that you had joined another King’s Legion and I came to poach you, what would you do?”

Her question seemed very much like a joke, but at the same time it conveyed a certain sincerity, making Haruyuki hesitate. But then he managed to return Kuroyukihime’s gaze from a somewhat slanted angle, and replied:

“I think I would also go against all odds to transfer to the Black King’s Legion. How should I say this... It’s not something you can just joke around about, I heard that when Taku... Cyan Pile transferred from Leonids to Nega Nebulus, he paid quite a cruel price for it. No matter how I asked him, he would not tell me exactly what happened... So, I think I would definitely do the same, because even if you’re not my «Parent», or my Legion master, Senpai, you... Black Lotus, the Black King, are my...”

Haruyuki desperately conjured words until he finally exhausted his vocabulary. If he were typing with his Neuro Linker’s text editor, occasionally the predictive engine would automatically provide him with suitable words, but at this time he could only rely on himself. His mouth opened and closed a few times, finally forcing out two last words.

“... My... hope.”

Those were his heartfelt, unembellished thoughts. Kuroyukihime’s glance wavered thoughtfully for a while, but she finally let out a tiny smile that was half-elated, half-complex.

“Hope...? I am very happy to hear that, but I should be the one saying that to you. I think I’ve told you this many times since we met. Haruyuki-kun, you are the fastest Burst Linker in the Accelerated World. There will come a day when you can surpass even the Kings, and discover the origin of this world. Ahh... I remember that I told you something else too.”

The beautiful girl in black said, color filling her snow-white face. She flipped over for the third time, slid her arms around Haruyuki’s neck, and pulled their bodies together tightly.

The icy temperature, the sweet and refreshing fragrance, and the firm elasticity had already overloaded Haruyuki’s nervous system, but the fatal blow was dealt by her final sentence.

“Haruyuki-kun... —I love you.”

An impact enough to fry several of his neural circuits nearly caused Haruyuki to faint. He narrowly avoided shutting down again, but with a wave of soft

exhalations, Kuroyukihime sent her next words pouring into Haruyuki's right ear.

“Whether it's Silver Crow in the Accelerated World, or the Arita Haruyuki in the real world, I love both of you equally. With this emotion as my guide, I was able to stand firmly once again as a Burst Linker, and I have walked that road to today. That's... the real miracle, and it's incomparable to the Incarnate System or anything like that. As long as it's for you, I think that I can do anything, and as long as your hand is in mine, I believe we can go anywhere...”

“..... Sen... pai.”

Haruyuki whispered with great difficulty.

Up until now he had been slowly trying to shake off his ultra-negative self perception that “he hasn't the right to let others say that they loved him”, but of course, he could not take such a confession lightly.

And thinking further — it would be very inappropriate to think of other girls in this sort of situation — but just about two and a half hours earlier today, Ash Roller's real identity, Kusakabe Rin, had also in such an intimate situation, said directly to him “I love you”. Getting confessed to twice in a day not only overloaded Haruyuki's brain, it also made it difficult for him to acknowledge reality.

Using what remained of his rapidly burning thought processes, perplexed at what level of causality had been distorted to allow something like this to happen. Then he suddenly realized it.

It was because Haruyuki was about to disappear.

Disappear from his friends in the Legion, disappear from his comrades' sight, disappear from the Accelerated World. In order to try and keep him here, his best rival Kusakabe Rin, as well as Kuroyukihime who had spent the most time with him, had expressed their important, precious feelings in words for him to hear...

— I am too blessed. In this world, what Burst Linker... no, what middle school student is as blessed as I am?"

Haruyuki murmured to himself in his heart. Such thoughts were quite revolutionary for him, and it wouldn't be too much to say that he felt reincarnated.

All along, he had hated himself, despised himself. The emotions and the smiles of Kuroyukihime, the others in the Legion, as well as Niko, Pard-san and Ash Roller did make him feel moved; but all along he had thought that he must change his appearance and inner self no matter what, or else he wouldn't have the right to be part of all that.

But, in this moment, for the first time Haruyuki felt that maybe it was okay to just be himself. Even if the power in his heart was not enough to make such a concrete decision, but one day — someday, he wanted to be sure that he could... when the time came...

“Senpai..... I..... I also.....”

Haruyuki said in a hoarse voice, as he gently moved his left hand to Kuroyukihime’s tender right shoulder.

But he could not do it, and he could not say any more either.

Because maybe he could not wait until that «someday». The Disaster Armor had already deeply fused with Silver Crow, no, Haruyuki himself. If he was unable to purify himself of it, then even if he wanted to go to the ends of the earth in the Accelerated World to spend all his points by himself, he would still be pursued by the Six Kings’ chase party and defeated. He would then cease to be a Burst Linker. With that he would also lose most of the memories and feelings he had with Kuroyukihime, and even this heart-wrenching experience was no exception —

— But, even if I were to lose my memories, the truth would remain. The truth that Senpai once told me that she loves me, and I felt blessed. Even if it were all to end, these truths will continue to encourage me and lead me forward, like precious jewels that I don’t know where I got them from, but somehow hold in my hand.

When he thought of this, two tears that he had struggled to hold in slid from his eyes, down his face, and onto Kuroyukihime's cheeks, her head leaning on his chest.

The pair of thin arms around Haruyuki's chest tightened their grip twice as much, and at the same time a small, barely audible voice said:

“Haruyuki-kun. You are my property. I will never give up. I will never allow myself to lose you. Ever.”

As these words carved themselves into Haruyuki's heart, Kuroyukihime slowly raised her head.

On that pure white face, other than Haruyuki's own teardrops, a small glint of silver could be seen flowing from her own eyes. Her tender lips were trembling horribly, almost pressed together, as she continued:

“... Even with Utai, the highest-level user of purification in the Accelerated World, to separate you from that «Armor» would still be a huge gamble. I've fought that insane warrior more than once, and yet I can still feel that there's some sort of eternal darkness within that armor...”

Haruyuki held his breath as he listened carefully. Kuroyukihime looked into his eyes, and continued with a bit of regained strength:

“But, there’s a way, to perhaps increase the chance of success... In certain circumstances, the negative incarnation of the previous Disasters could be quite weak. That means... after intensely battling a strong enemy. It is not the «carnage» of mutual disgust and hatred, but a sense of true «duelling» that comes when both of them are exchanging skills and spirit at the highest level. Remember that time... when you, me, and that red brat went to deal with the fifth generation Disaster, when we fought close-range battles all the way until we were very nearly drained and unable to avoid sustaining serious injuries by Rain’s barrage from her main cannon... If it had been the original Disaster, he would have been able to deflect it with pure aura...”

Listening to her say that — Yes, the fifth generation Disaster, Cherry Rook, really did have some sort of change in his aura after a rather intense skirmish with the Black King Black Lotus. If not for that, how could that mad fighter have not been able to shake off Haruyuki, who back then had only reached Level 4 and not yet learned about Incarnation?

— No, never mind the fifth generation, Haruyuki as the sixth generation had completely proved this theory. Haruyuki quickly inhaled, nodded twice or thrice, and said:

“Senpai... I can probably remain myself, because of this reason...”

“Hmm...?”

“Um, I didn’t say it very clearly back at my place... but remember when I said I was at the Roppongi Hills Tower in the Unlimited Field, I fought members of other Legions?”

He quickly closed his mouth, swallowed, and continued:

“I fought, um, some officer of the Green Legion... I think he was called Six Armor, I fought one of their guys, «Iron Pound», a Level 7 player...”

“What... Y-You mean Great Wall’s «Iron Fist», Pound?”

“Ah... Y-You know him, Senpai...?”

He asked, and Kuroyukihime moved her arms from Haruyuki’s neck and used her hands to pull his ears hard as she continued:

“Know him?... He’s the sworn enemy of «Iron Arm» Raker. Pound went against his own principles in order to shoot Raker down from the sky, and trained in long-range skills just for that. It’s one of the legends of the Accelerated World.”

“Ah... so that’s how he got his «Rocket Punch»...”

Haruyuki nodded in realization, and continued thinking. He had long heard of the rivalry/friendship between Sky Raker and Blood Leopard, second-in-

command of the Red Legion, Prominence, and also of the story about her hanging Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade, sub-leaders of the Blue Legion, Leonids, off the roof of the Shinjuku Government Building. Not only that, she also frequent clashed with Aster Vine of the Purple Legion, Auroral Oval. Just how many «rivals» did she have...?

A chill ran down Haruyuki's spine, which pulled his skewed thoughts back on track. When the two of them exchanged eye contact, Kuroyukihime smiled wryly and said:

“You really went up against some strong guy again... You even fought the «Iron Fist».”

“Ah, well... Um, actually, it wasn't just Pound-san...”

“What? You mean there were other members of «Six Armor» there? They can't be ranked higher than Iron Fist?”

“Well, that might not be wrong...”

As Haruyuki's ears were stretched, he gingerly spoke that person's name.

“The G-Green King... Green Grande was there too... How should I say... I took advantage of the opportunity and...”

“..... Hey, don't tell me you...”

Kuroyukihime said somewhat stiffly, putting more strength into stretching Haruyuki's ears.

“You... You also fought that big shield guy?”

“I wouldn't say *fought*... I just hit his shield with my sword...”

“.....”

His Swordmaster gently let out a deep breath, and released Haruyuki's ears like a rubber band. She next put her hands around his neck again, and said while caressing the hair on the back of his head:

“... I thought I wouldn't be scared by your troublemaking again... You said you hit it with your sword, so does that mean you managed to withstand that big shield «The Strife»'s Extra Effect? Thank god you're all right...”

“E-Extra Effect? What's that?”

“«As long as the attack can be completely blocked, its power can be reflected back several times stronger». In other words, in order to breach the defense of that shield, there are two ways: either with a super attack that overwhelms it in one hit, or an endless stream of attacks to force him to let his guard down

somewhere, and find a way to attack the avatar itself. It's just that I've never seen anyone succeed with either way."

"Reflect... Maybe it had reflected, if I remember correctly..."

The instant when Haruyuki had faced off against the Green King's shield with all of his might, sword against shield, Incarnation against Incarnation, seemed to be ages ago in his memories, but he couldn't resist trembling.

"... But, I think the power ended up spreading around into the surroundings... which is why half the Roppongi Hills Tower collapsed..."

"Ha ha... so that explosion was caused by you guys? The one we saw from the south gate of the Imperial City..."

Haruyuki thought for a while at Kuroyukihime's question, then shook his head:

"No... I don't think so. Just after I fought Pound-san and the Green King... something else happened... I'll talk about that later, let's get back on topic. Just now, Senpai, you said that the «Disaster Armor» can tire itself out after really intense battles against strong enemies, so I think that's the situation I'm in now. The «Beast» in the Armor is obediently sleeping now... or rather, napping, because my battles with the two Great Wall guys completely exhausted all my Incarnate energy. That's why I was able... to talk normally with Ash-san, and be with you here and now, Senpai... but... eventually..."

No, I think tomorrow it will wake up again, and drive me to go out and seek battles. To be honest... I can't... I don't think I can resist it and retain self-control..."

For Haruyuki, being able to deliver a speech that long in the embrace of the person he loved and respected the most, and to say it completely, was a very difficult challenge, but he didn't realize that. Once he was done, Kuroyukihime who had been listening quietly, smiled lightly.

"... Oh, your deduction is quite logical; I think that should be the truth as well. Since that's the case... then tomorrow's «purification» mission has to succeed. There's only one thing we can try next."

"Huh... th-th-th-th-th-thing... what k-k-k-kind of thing is it?"

Even if Haruyuki had said all of that just now, now he was mincing his words again. Kuroyukihime smiled at him again and quickly operated her virtual desktop.

Then, beside them, the apparently unblemished natural wood floor began to rise. It was a cylindrical device about 15 centimeters in diameter and 50 centimeters tall, probably a router connected to this household's home server. Such a device was originally meant for homeowners to control various appliances without the need of a Neuro Linker, but it seemed that Kuroyukihime had put it to other uses. She pulled a retractable XSB cable

from somewhere near the top middle of the small tower and plugged it into her Neuro Linker.

“Haruyuki-kun, when you were disconnected, you were on the roof of the Roppongi Hills Tower, right?”

The question came completely out of left field for Haruyuki. He simply nodded.

“Hm, then, in five seconds... no, three will do. Three seconds after I accelerate, please pull out this cable.”

“Um... Uh, Senpai, what are you...”

“I’ll explain later. Remember that, I’ll be counting on you. «Unlimited Burst».”

As Kuroyukihime nonchalantly issued the command, and her body suddenly fell unconscious. Haruyuki had no idea what was going on, but did what he was told for now. As soon as three seconds had passed according to the digits in the lower right of his virtual desktop, he yanked the cable out of the piano black Neuro Linker.

Kuroyukihime opened her eyes before him, and said with a serious expression:

“I’m back, Haruyuki-kun.”

“..... Um, Senpai, I don’t understand what’s going on at all...”

“What else? I was moving from Suginami to the Roppongi Hills Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field, of course.”

“..... W-What?!”

Haruyuki couldn’t help letting out an expected yell. The command he had heard Kuroyukihime give did indeed head towards the Unlimited Neutral Field, but even in a world accelerated by a thousand times, only fifty minutes had passed in the real-world span of three seconds. In a world where Kuroyukihime had no taxis or any other form of transportation, it would take a hell of a lot of travel on foot to get to Roppongi from Asagaya...

— No. This was not the concern now, he should be wondering why Kuroyukihime would do something like that.

And the answer was no clearer than what it could be: to meet with Haruyuki in that world.

“N... No, Senpai! Once I go into the Unlimited Neutral Field, the «Beast» could wake up any time...”

“That’s why I’m going.”

Kuroyukihime said decisively, as she removed a second cable from the router and brought it near Haruyuki’s neck, at the same time closing the distance between their faces. When she was so close that her sweet scent could touch Haruyuki’s face, a voice even clearer than telepathic transmission rang out:

“Haruyuki-kun, you and I are not just «Parent and Child». We are also «master and disciple». So when the day of «that time» inevitably comes, this will be it. Don’t be scared about whatever happens, or how it ends; just honestly be yourself and stand in front of me.”

“Senpai.....”

Haruyuki said in a barely audible voice, and trying desperately to turn his stiff neck side to side.

The words Kuroyukihime wanted to say could not be any more obvious.

She meant that — she wanted to fight him in order to deplete a certain energy from the «Beast» residing within the Disaster Armor. In order to do that, the Black King would personally be his opponent, so as to ensure that the Beast would be sufficiently subdued before tomorrow night’s purification mission... but...

“Ever... since the day I became a Burst Linker, I swore that, no matter what happens, I will never, ever battle with you, Senpai. Rather than this, I would sooner uninstall Brain Burst on my own.”

Haruyuki sounded like a child about to cry, and Kuroyukihime couldn't help but let out a gentle smile as she patted his head and guided him:

“Even if I call it a battle, it is not a battle of hatred. It is a «duel», the only, and most important reason for Brain Burst to exist. Or...”

Her cheeks puffed up.

“You're able to fight with Ash Roller, no... with Kusakabe-kun, but not with me?”

“N-No way, I don't mean that...”

“You know, in the Accelerated World, there are things that can't be said verbally, so you need to use your fists, blade, or bullets in a battle in order to convey to your opponent what you want to say... and come to think of it, didn't you come asking me for a fight that night before the «Hermes Cord Traversing Race»? Back then, you didn't use words; you used your fists to tell me lots and lots of things. This time, as your «Parent», it's time for me to tell you something.”

“..... Senpai.....”

Touched by a myriad of emotions, Haruyuki could only say one word. Kuroyukihime nodded with a warm smile and pulled out another XSB cable from the router, then softly plugged it into Haruyuki's Neuro Linker.

“Come on, help me plug mine in.”

She urged, and Haruyuki realized that he was still holding on to the first cable. His heart still in chaos, but his fingers moved by themselves and stiffly transferred the connector to Kuroyukihime's Neuro Linker.

Kuroyukihime closed her eyes and accepted the connection. Once the Wired Connection warning disappeared, she said quietly, smiling,

“On my count of five. If we can come back safely...”

Her lips continued to move, but Haruyuki could not hear what she said next.

After another moment, she read out the time in a louder voice.

“Then, on my count. Five, four, three, two, one.”

As soon as he spoke the command with her, maybe he could no longer go back to who he was. Haruyuki mentally prepared himself, cherishing the

conflicting feelings of decisiveness and perplexion, and shouted the command in unison with Kuroyukihime.

““Unlimited Burst.””

## Chapter 8

Even though it had already been 45 years since the Roppongi Hills Tower had been completed, it still stood out like a sore thumb amidst the buildings of Akasaka. The area on its roof was about 6000 square meters, far larger than Umesato Middle School's playing field. It stood 238 meters tall, which, while being around 10 meters shorter than the Tokyo Midtown Tower to the northeast, had 1.5 times the number of floors.

Hence, when Haruyuki opened his eyes, a breathtaking view that could be described as «a garden in the sky» immediately entered his vision, and mesmerized him.

The Greek-style walls and round pillars were made of a ceramic-like white limestone. On them could be seen signs of cracking and instability, and at their bases were unknown, wavering types of small flowers in full bloom. In the sky were moving clouds glowing a fiery red, and against the horizon to the west was a sun like a large gold coin.

This was the Earth-type «Twilight» stage that was part of the nature series. Its speciality was that its terrain objects were easily destroyed. Even though it seemed like almost everything was rocks, many flammable objects were present in addition to coincidental shadows behind obstacles; but besides these, it wasn't too eye-catching.

But to Haruyuki, this was a very meaningful place.

That unforgettable autumn day last year, when a black swallowtail butterfly had landed in front of him, and given him a key to another world. After that, the place where the two of them had come to was this eternal sunset. The other person had stood over there, stretched out her hand to Haruyuki who had his head constantly lowered, and said, “Is this two meter distance in the virtual world really too far for you?”

And eight months later, during the direct connect duel in Umesato Middle’s sick bay, Kuroyukihime had shown Haruyuki a small but sure miracle. Using the Incarnate system — meaning, the power of Overwrite, she had modified the attributes of her avatar, transforming her right arm-blade into five delicate fingers. Even though the newly created «hand» lasted for all of seven seconds, that sort of determination was a message from Kuroyukihime, a message that she wanted to shorten that two meter distance.

As Haruyuki thought so, he moved his vision, in search of Kuroyukihime’s figure.

However, just as he was about to do that, he suddenly remembered something he should have checked first. He quickly raised both his hands, opened his palms, and quickly sized them up. Normally Silver Crow’s fingers were slender to a point that couldn’t be thought to be from a fighting avatar, but his armor was now covered to almost twice its thickness, his fingertips extending like claws – this state hadn’t really changed since his direct connect duel with Kusakabe Rin.

He quickly checked the state of the rest of his avatar. Just like three hours ago, it was still about «80% Crow, 20% Disaster». Finally, he closed his eyes and focused on the center of his spinal cord, somewhere deep within his body, but the «Beast» that should be there seemed to still be napping, as he could not feel the piercing pain, nor hear the low growling.

“..... Please continue to quietly sleep down there...”

Muttering that, Haruyuki raised his head and took a look around his surroundings. While the roof of Roppongi Hills Tower was spacious, the many pillars and walls had formed a sort of maze due to the effects of the Twilight stage on the terrain, and it was impossible to see the outside. Even if one tried to listen closely, they would not be able to hear anything other than the breeze.

“..... Senpai?”

Haruyuki raised his voice slightly and called out to the one he was waiting for. However, not only was the obsidian-like armor nowhere in sight, he could not see anything moving at all. But come to think of it, Kuroyukihime had only mentioned that she had moved from Suginami to the top of this tower. Even she probably couldn't triangulate Haruyuki's position. In that case, she must be in this maze too, searching for him as he was for her.

As he thought about this, Haruyuki began to walk down the narrow pathway lined with tall marble walls on both sides. As these walls and pillars were not

part of the building itself but instead properties of the Stage, their durability should be very low, so while he could just destroy them on sight, he hesitated. To Haruyuki, this rare «Twilight» stage was to be remembered, since it was so sacred.

Very soon, he ran into a solid wall that blocked the way forward, and the path forked left and right. Instinctively, he turned to the right, being careful not to trample on the small flowers blooming to both sides of the stone path. Guessing that he was making his way to the center of the rooftop, he took a few more right turns, then after turning left and passing through a gateway that looked like as if it were about to collapse, he arrived at a large plaza that was slightly lower in elevation than its surrounding grounds, and was about twenty meters wide.

This was similar to the real world's Roppongi Hills Tower. Right in the middle was a helipad lower than its natural wood-floor surroundings by one step. In that case, this should be the center of the rooftop. Of course, there was no “H” marking here that usually marked helipads; instead there were around 10 round pillars, in the middle of which was an especially tall and rough-looking pillar, with a steady stream of water flowing from its tip, and a shallow basin at its bottom.

As Haruyuki looked at this, he entered the plaza and began walking towards the center of the pillars, stretching his hand out to touch the wet stone. Just then...

“... Crow.”

A low, but calm call was heard from behind the pillar.

“Ah..... S-Senpai! There you are!”

Haruyuki was just about to walk around the pillar but the voice stopped him.

“Slow down, don’t move, listen to me.”

“Um..... O-Okay...”

The pillar in the middle of the plaza might have appeared rougher, but was only about 80 centimeters in diameter. Black Lotus was not a small avatar, and her limbs made special emphasis of their sharpness, so in order to fully conceal herself behind the pillar, she would have to curl herself up as much as possible. Arriving at this conclusion, Haruyuki finally stood still..

“Silver Crow, I’ve been continuously thinking of a way to save you from being parasitized by the «Disaster Armor».”

From the other side of the stone pillar, Kuroyukihime sounded as if she was forcing back the undulations in her own voice; it sounded somewhat flat. Haruyuki inhaled and waited for her to continue.

“I considered a few ideas, but it seems that this is still the best method. Crow... Unfortunately, you have already become far too dangerous a liability. Be it for the Legion, for the entire Accelerated World, or for me.”

“..... S-Sen... pai?”

Haruyuki felt an indescribable bewilderment. Her words might actually reflect the truth... but her tone was too businesslike... no, maybe even... cold....

“Therefore — This is my decision. Please... disappear from this world.”

Her voice, utterly devoid of empathy, rattled Haruyuki’s eardrums from behind the pillar.

Almost at the same time, an object pierced through the thick pillar and extended straight towards him. A black, sharp... sword. No, it was the hand of the Black King, Black Lotus.

Haruyuki looked at the jet-black sword vacantly. It was aimed directly and accurately at the middle of his chest, the most fatal point on his avatar's body. His thoughts instantly stopped and his limbs lost feeling in them, but his body seemed to react of its own accord and he leaned about five centimeters to the left.

*Crack.* With a soft noise and an infinitesimal impact, the black blade pierced deeply into the right side of Haruyuki's chest and exited from his back.

For an instant, he felt ice-cold; then, burning, excruciating pain.

“Uh... Ahh...!”

Haruyuki cried hoarsely, injected all of his willpower into his legs, and leapt backwards. Another wave of pain assailed him as the blade slid out of his chest, trailing a fiery damage effect brightly through the air, shining like blood. Bathed in this light, he wobbled and fell onto his left knee.

He had managed to avoid the sword stabbing through his heart, but the deep, clean wound through his chest had taken away more than twenty percent of his health. His Special Skill meter had filled up proportionally at the same time, but other than that, there was another clear change about to occur inside Haruyuki.

..... *Grrgh.*

A deep growl. The first drop of a wave of red-hot rage was about to drip into being, like molten metal. The «Beast» was about to awaken. Even though it was just by a few centimeters, Haruyuki's dodge of the fatal surprise attack was not by accident, nor was it his reflexes. It was an act of the Beast controlling his avatar.

“Sen... pai, why.....?!!”

Haruyuki’s right hand pressed the wound in his chest — or attempted to contain the Beast’s rage from spilling out of it, wheezing:

“Why... Why are you doing this...?!!”

Kuroyukihime had indeed asked Haruyuki to fight her in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but doing it that way — attacking from the shadows, would only stimulate the Beast’s anger, fully waking it up.

No... Maybe Kuroyukihime had never planned to «duel» in the first place. Perhaps, from the beginning, she only wanted to take Haruyuki to the Accelerated World, abuse him, and then take care of the problem once and for all with «Judgement Blow»...?

— *Grrgh... Enemy... No matter who... kill... all... enemies...*

— *Even... your own «Parent»...*

A roaring «voice» reverberated in the deepest depths of his mind. The Beast’s awakening could no longer be stopped.

But Haruyuki remained on one knee and shrank himself down, desperately trying to talk to the consciousness inside him.

— Wait, «Beast»! there's something wrong... there *must* be something wrong!

Yes.

Something was wrong. Whether it was the voice that spoke to him from behind the pillar, or the sword that had pierced through his chest, it all sounded like and seemed like the Black King, Black Lotus, no matter how he looked at it... but something was off. She would not say such things. She would never do such things. This meant that someone was impersonating the Black King's voice and moves. That was the only possible conclusion. No, it was truth.

Haruyuki slowly stood up. He first glanced at his own armor, which had begun to slowly blacken as a result of the Beast awakening, then shouted firmly:

“Please come out from behind that pillar... No, get out of there! Who ARE you?!!”

For an instant, the wind froze, as if it were afraid of what would happen. Even the flowers at his feet also seemed to bow their heads.

After a moment, he heard the voice, smooth as silk.

“... That makes me so sad, Crow. I never expected you to say such things... even after hearing my voice with your own ears... and personally taking my attack.”

The white pillar stood in the middle of the roof of Roppongi Hills Tower, its right side dyed gold by the setting sun of the «Twilight» stage, creating a sharp contrast with a deep black shadow on its left side.

A figure emerged silently from the shadow.

A V-shaped face mask pointed on both sides, a slender waist surrounded by an armored skirt resembling black lotus petals, long blades for arms and legs, all covered by an armor that was an even deeper black than the shadow itself.

“..... No..... way.....”

Haruyuki felt a black drop of despair fall into his heart. Just like a highly concentrated drop of black ink in a glass of water, his avatar was dyed in black from the inside towards the outside.

The Beast’s roars grew louder in direct proportion, and the claws on his hands and feet began to enlarge with grinding noises. The protrusion on both sides of his forehead grew in size, beginning to form a visor resembling the jaw of a wild Beast.

But Haruyuki was unable to detect the changes slowly happening to him as he watched the jet-black avatar standing in the shadow of the column.

An avatar with this shape and this color could be none other than the Black King. So those words earlier were from the heart of Black Lotus...

Kuroyukihime? Declaring her intention to view Silver Crow, no, Arita Haruyuki, as a dangerous liability, and remove him from the Accelerated World. Did she really mean those cruel words.....?

*Clang!* An icy noise resounded from Haruyuki's body as the armor on his limbs began to morph, transforming into sharp-edged dark silver heavy armor. The visor clamping down from top to bottom over his original helmet had fully generated, and all that was left was for fang structure to clench together.

— *She's an enemy. Our enemy. Summon the sword. Let your anger burn!*

The «Beast» began giving very clear orders to Haruyuki.

But even so — Haruyuki only clenched his teeth under the visor and shook his head:

“No... I refuse to admit it. I don't believe it. That's not Senpai.”

These words that Haruyuki forced out were partly meant for himself. While her voice, appearance, and color were indeed that of the Black King, his

senses, his soul, screamed out to him that that was not Black Lotus... not Kuroyukihime.

The towering pillar cast a thick shadow, characteristic of the Twilight stage. That all-consuming, all-blackening shadow obscured his vision... No, it obscured all of his senses. That avatar that resembled the Black King seemed to be avoiding the sunlight, remaining motionless in the darkness, seemingly on purpose.

Was there a way to get rid of this shadow? Destroy the pillar... no. If he performed a physical attack now, he would completely transform into the Disaster. He shouldn't destroy it; he should light the darkness, with a new, strong light.

... Beast. Just once, let me find this out. Don't block my Incarnation.

He whispered to it, and in response, heard a rather displeased growl.

*...Grrgh... If you're going to get a better view of the enemy that way, then do as you like.*

... Yes... I'll get a better view of the enemy, and get a better view of just «what that is».

Haruyuki murmured, and slowly pointed his right hand, now a vicious mass of claws, towards the «Black King» hidden in the darkness. His movements

seemed as if he were enduring a great impulse to destroy, but inside his heart it was the opposite and his heart remained calm, like a realm of still water. He realized that he only had one chance. He would have to finish concentrating an image, then activate, and release the Incarnate power in a shorter time than before.

Light. The image of the speed of light. Haruyuki gathered the source of power of the familiar Incarnate attack «Laser Sword» from his entire body, and gathered it onto his right hand at an extremely high concentration. Then, condensing it into an extremely small, extremely sharp image, so small that no Over-Ray formed, he released it in one go!

“Light!!”

He shouted without realizing, and at the same time, more than half of Silver Crow’s hand that had turned into Disaster, fired a ray of pure light that illuminated the world.

And Haruyuki saw it.

This person’s shape was indeed very close to that of the Black King, but only from a specified angle. In other words — the shape lacked thickness. Regardless of the blade-like limbs, or the petal-like skirt, they were all merely outlines comprised of panels thinner than paper. The avatar did indeed look like Black Lotus in the darkness, but under the illumination of strong light like a camera flash, its true form was revealed.

“You... Who are you?!!”

Haruyuki yelled, continuing to point his right hand towards that person.

The silhouette-like avatar sank back into the shadows of the pillar, and froze as if projected by a strobe light. Haruyuki realized how well this avatar simulated Black Lotus in the darkness, but now that he was certain that it wasn't her, he noticed a small detail that didn't correspond with the true Black King. She usually floated on a cushion of air, and the tips of her feet never approached more than one or two centimeters from the ground. But this silhouette-like avatar, on the other hand, had its feet slightly sunk into the earth. This was a small detail, but it was thus decisive.

Even after being exposed by Haruyuki's light, the person masquerading as the Black King remained silent for a few seconds, but they seemed to decide that they could not continue with the act, so they spread their arm-blades — or rather, blade-shaped panels to the side, and said:

“I really have underestimated you. If you are still able to use Type One Incarnation even after being eroded so deeply by the «Armor», then you really have improved quite a bit.”

The voice still reminded him almost perfectly of Kuroyukihime, but their tone and manner of speech sparked unpleasant memories in Haruyuki's mind. He knew that he had already met with an avatar who spoke in a similar

manner, back in... Yes, also in the Unlimited Neutral Field... and also in a very dark place.

“You..... You're.....”

Haruyuki growled. The voice of the «Beast» in his mind also tightened.

— *You, you are... from back then.....*

Even as two gazes filled with hostility stared, the silhouette-like avatar remained standing there nonchalantly, no, stuck into the air. They lowered their splayed hands with movements, and began monologuing again:

“Although I did not plan to meet members of the Black Legion here, this is one rare opportunity. Ahh, I had heard that «Metatron» at the Midtown Tower hadn't moved for three days and then suddenly attacked, so I rushed over here just in case to wait for a bit, and I ended up bumping into a completely unexpected guest. What a surprise.”

This unperturbed voice that simultaneously sounded like a teacher giving a lesson disturbed Haruyuki's memory to no end, but his suspicious feeling pressed over it, forcing him to ask.

“You're saying... that you've always been waiting here?”

«Metatron» referred to a Legendary-Class Enemy, «Archangel Metatron», which guarded the Tokyo Midtown Tower half a kilometer to the northeast. Haruyuki had indeed seen that terrifying invisible monster react to Iron Pound's Rocket Straight by launching a gignatic cannon-like laser attack, opening an enormous crater on the Roppongi streets. The silhouette-like avatar before him was probably here to find out what had caused this, and dived where they could get the best view from Roppongi Hills Tower.

However — this was actually impossible.

It had been three hours ago in real world time since Haruyuki saw Metatron attack. In other words, that avatar would have spent more than 3,000 hours... 125 days in the Unlimited Neutral Field. No one should be able to wait so excruciatingly long without sleeping, just for «something» that they weren't sure what was.

Just as his thoughts ran to this point.

Haruyuki recalled that he had experienced this same shock before.

It... had happened in the Unlimited Neutral Field during the final showdown against the strong enemy who had stolen Silver Crow's silver wings — «The Marauder» Dusk Taker. Haruyuki and Takumu had done everything in their power and protect themselves from Dusk Taker going back on their promise and setting an ambush, but even then, at the beginning of the battle in the Umesato Middle School, someone had dived there ahead of time.

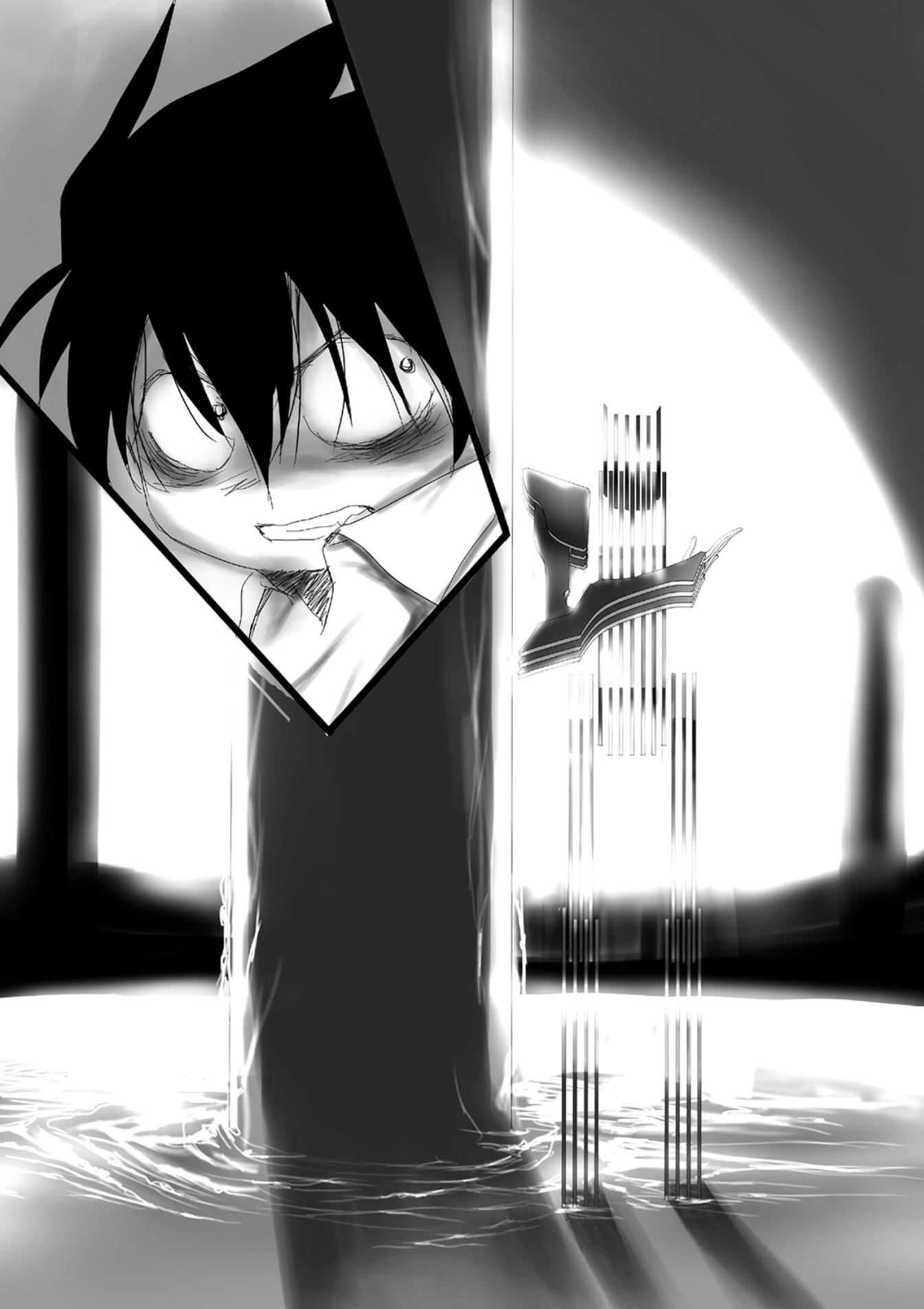
At the time, Dusk Taker had declared complacently to his stunned opponents that out of the entire Accelerated World, only he had the ability to wait an incredibly long time like this. He was the one and only «decelerator»: even under the effects of acceleration, he could disable the effects on his consciousness using his BIC —

“You..... You’re.....”

Haruyuki cried hoarsely at the two-dimensional avatar as thin as a black silhouette:

“Vice President of the Acceleration Research Society... «Black Vise»!!”

Once the silhouette avatar heard this name, he raised his right hand to his chest and bowed graciously.



Immediately after, using the tip of his right toe in the ground as a pivot, his body turned 90 degrees. As he consisted entirely of extremely thin panels, from Haruyuki's point of view, the avatar now resembled a single line. But before he could get a closer look, the plates began to divide towards left and right, separating into more than 10 pieces, lining up in an orderly row a few centimeters apart from each other. What finally appeared was a «layered avatar» resembling thin heatsink fins cut into a humanoid shape. This was the true form of Black Vise, who had previously used his special abilities to plunge Haruyuki and his friends into a bitter battle.

Vise kept his right hand raised to his chest in a respectful gesture, but unlike when he was impersonating Black Lotus, his left hand was now missing from its shoulder down. Yet he had not been injured in any way, because this queer avatar was capable of dividing the panels of his own body into parts and controlling them from a distance. If he was still using that ability right now, he was probably...

“You... What have you done to Senpai, to the Black King...”

Since the real Kuroyukihime, who should have appeared on this rooftop at same time as him, had not yet appeared, Vise had no doubt set up some trap. Realizing this in an instant, Haruyuki was just about to step forward to continue demanding of Vise when just then —

A crimson wave of pain suddenly shot up from the direct center of his spine.

“GROOOAAAHHH!!”

Haruyuki was unable to understand whether that thunderous roar of fury was only resounding in his mind, or whether it had actually exited his mouth. Immediately after, he clearly discerned in the depths of his mind the «Beast» bellowing as though it were going insane.

— *You bastard... I'm gonna kill you! Kill! Kill KILL KILL KILL KILL!!*

A gargantuan wave of negative emotions erupted, forcing Haruyuki to stagger forward as though he had suffered a physical shockwave.

At the same time several scenes flashed by his entire vision.

A large, bowl-shaped crater in the ground, with a jet-black cross erected at the bottom, and a female avatar in yellow-orange armor bound to it.

There was an extremely deep perpendicular hole next to the cross, and from it emerged a bizarre worm. With a mouth filled with countless razor-sharp teeth, it clamped down on the girl, and crushed her armor while emitting deafening crunching sounds.

Dozens of Burst Linkers, lining the edge of the bowl-shaped crater, silently watched the tragic scene. At one corner were three silhouettes, maintaining a distance from the crowd. One of them was a short avatar with four eyes emitting a queer glitter. One was covered entirely by a light so bright that its

figure could not be seen. The last one — a matte black layered avatar made of thin panels that seemed to form a human shape...

The image in the «Beast's» memories overlapped perfectly against Black Vise before him. In that instant...

Haruyuki felt a great volume of information being injected into his mind like red-hot molten metal. No, maybe this information was originally in Haruyuki's body to begin with. Two days ago, when he and Shinomiya Uta had charged into the Imperial Palace, he had taken a short rest, and he had dreamt a «dream»... A extremely long, tragic dream that he had forgotten in the depth of his memories before — it could also be that all of the memories of the first generation Chrome Disaster, «Chrome Falcon», had finally awoken.

— It's him.

— The yellow-orange girl «Saffron Blossom» had a dream that no one should disappear from this world ever again, and this guy had set a trap to harm her, murdering her over and over again with the hellworm Jormungandr. This had caused the sixth Arc, «The Destiny» and the high-level armament «Star Caster» to distort into the Disaster Armor, «The Disaster», and the one who had caused all of that was Black Vise, standing right before him.

“You..... It was you.....”

Now, the Beast's rage was Haruyuki's rage. He allowed the crushing murderous intent and thirst for destruction to drive him, instantly transforming the light armor covering his entire body into dark silver heavy armor, and a long, thick tail grew out of his back.

“You... killed... Fron.....!!”

As he screamed, the visor on his forehead clamped down with a sharp metallic clang; his vision was painted light gray, and the figure of the enemy was especially visible.

Even as he watched Silver Crow completely transform into Chrome Disaster, the layered avatar remained unperturbed. His paneled head cocked slightly, and he murmured quietly:

“Well, that's food for thought... He knows, no, he remembers who I was?”

His voice now was no longer like when he was impersonating Kuroyukihime, and had reverted to a low but calm male voice. He spoke extremely quietly, but Haruyuki's enhanced hearing captured every word clearly.

*“How could... I, forget... All these years, I've, remained in this world, just to, see you die...”*

Staccato words exited his mouth and melted into crimson flames, scorching the air.

The ultimate goal of the Disaster Armor, Chrome Disaster, was to «destroy all other Burst Linkers». The reason for this tragic impulse originated from the death of Saffron Blossom. Blossom held an ambitious goal, planning to uphold a system of reimbursing Burst Points for each other, freeing all residents of the Accelerated World from the fear of losing all of their Points... but more than 30 Burst Linkers had betrayed her and trapped her. In that case, he'll grant them their wish of losing all of their Points, and completely destroy them — This determination of the «first generation», Chrome Falcon, remained on the Enhanced Armament, driving every player who donned the armor after him to walk the road of endless carnage.

But the core of this huge impulse still originated from a wave of hatred, hatred towards those «three people» who had orchestrated the tragedy on Blossom. Ever since that incident, those three people had vanished, and after more than seven years in the real world, one of them — the «Restrainer» Black Vise — now finally stood face to face with a fully awakened Chrome Disaster.

Compressed to an extreme, his vindictive heart was ignited, letting his murderous intent explode fantastically, completely and effortlessly discarding Haruyuki's sense of rational thought and control. Haruyuki, no, the sixth generation Chrome Disaster allowed his entire body, now a dark silver, to exude an even thicker black aura, as he took his first heavy step.

*“I’m gonna hack your body into mincemeat... I’m gonna slice you into pieces...”*

Haruyuki whispered, his breath scorching, and raised his right hand high.

Clouds suddenly formed in the beautiful, fiery sky of the «Twilight» stage. Accompanied by suddenly appearing black cumulonimbi, thunderclouds streaked with white gathered over in a vortex. A strikingly intense bolt of lightning flashed out from the center of the vortex, and the great sword formerly known as «Star Caster» was about to be summoned into Haruyuki’s raised hand.

Black Vise, whom had been watching silently all this time, finally moved.

The thin plates making up his right hand began to quickly slide down and sink into the shadow underfoot. Immediately after, two thin plates emerged from Haruyuki’s own shadow and surrounded him on both sides, attempting to crush his avatar from left and right. This was a restraining technique that Haruyuki had once faced: «Static Pressure».

Haruyuki stopped summoning the great sword and immediately shouted:

*“Flash Blink!”*

When he had been crushed between these panels two months ago, it had taken the loss of all the armor on Haruyuki's upper body to escape, but now he has a method of escaping without receiving damage at all: the instant teleportation ability left on the armor by the first generation Disaster — Chrome Falcon. A very, very long time ago, Falcon himself had escaped the ultra-crushing pressure of these plates using this technique.

Haruyuki's body disintegrated into countless particles and tried to move forward at tremendous speed — in that instant.

As though Black Vise was expecting him to react like this, he said in a low voice:

“«Hexahedral Compression».”

Haruyuki's field of vision was shrouded in pitch black. No, he had not lost his vision; rather, a new plate had suddenly appeared in front of him, blocking his way.

The avatar, in particle form, charged forward but smashed heavily onto a wall and materialized as body bounced off. Haruyuki staggered in retreat, but his back bumped into a another panel. «Flash Blink» could be termed as virtually almighty as a close-range movement special skill, but it was not true teleportation. If there was not a single gap for the particles to pass through, he would be unable to perforate the barrier.

*“Guroh.....!”*

Haruyuki growled furiously. Black matte walls surrounded him on all sides and there was no way out. Haruyuki made the split-second decision to change his axes of movement, and just as he was about to leap upwards, as though his opponent were anticipating his movements, more black plates emitted deafening clangs as they blocked the gaps above and below him.

After all light disappeared, Haruyuki found that he was completely enclosed within a cube. But it didn't end there. All six plates were slowly but heavily crushing towards him. Terrible pressure could be felt from his head, shoulders, chest, back and legs as sparks flew from his entire body of armor, grinding piercingly.

*“Gurgh... Grooagh.....!”*

Haruyuki roared and threw his entire weight against the plates. Chrome Disaster was unlike the completely speed-type Silver Crow; it was an omnipotent type with both speed and strength, far incomparable to its form before transformation. Yet the six plates seemed to become the boundaries of the world, completely indestructible.

Then he heard the voice again, almost like that of a young teacher speaking:

“Crow-kun... No, Disaster-kun. You’ve seen my techniques before, and likewise, this is the second time I have seen your techniques. You broke out of them quite easily last time, so I thought I’d make some improvements.”

The voice seemed to coming from all directions. No, that was the truth: all six plates surrounding Haruyuki were speaking.

*“Gurrgh... Gurgh, urrghh.....!”*

Haruyuki — or rather, the «Beast» roared in response to Vise’s calm words, its consciousness now melded with Haruyuki’s. His clawed hands seized the pitch-black walls and tried to rip them apart, but these claws that had torn to pieces the armor of countless duel avatars now only produced sparks against the plates. If he had his great sword, maybe he could pierce the wall, but this closed space probably also prevented the summoning of Enhanced Armaments, because no matter how much he called for it, nothing happened.

Haruyuki let loose a beastlike howl, pounding the wall with his hands and kicking at random with his feet. Then, as though he were pitying this uncontrolled maniacal annihilator, the voice was heard again:

“—— Although this is a bit earlier than planned, I will be taking this armor for analysis. Unfortunately, Crow-kun, you will have to leave the Accelerated World, but no matter, since I doubt that you would want to wander forever in the Unlimited Neutral Field given your current state. Of course, if the President has other plans, maybe there still is another way...”

With a loud screech, the cube imprisoning Haruyuki suddenly dropped downwards, plunging his feet into a very uncomfortable sensation, as if he had stepped in a hot, sticky liquid. This was — a «shadow». Black Vise was intending to take Haruyuki away in his shadow, along with the cube enclosing him.

A wave of bone-chilling cold reached from the shadow engulfing his feet, rendering his body weak. Combined with the Beast, Haruyuki, tried to resist it, but his limbs slowly lost their strength. The shadow rapidly rose, from his thighs up to his waist, then his chest...

Right at this moment.

A scarlet line sliced across Haruyuki's vision from his left to his right.

The extremely thin line of light turned towards the right, continued to turn 90 degrees behind him, and curved around and returned to its origin. When the red light surrounding him disappeared, he could see a slight glimpse of the outer world through the gap —

Immediately after, he suddenly heard a crashing noise as though thick glass were being shattered, and the black cube holding Haruyuki captive was destroyed.

Already chest-deep in the shadow, Haruyuki leapt outside and collapsed to the white rocky ground of the «Twilight» stage with a loud crash.

The first thing he saw with widened eyes was the «Restrainer» Black Vise standing there, now with both of his hands missing, and...

About 10 meters away from him, near the west entrance of the circular plaza, there stood another black duel avatar.

Four elegantly streamlined blades. Waist armor resembling lotus petals. A mask that resembled a bird of prey with its wings outstretched.

This silhouette was hardly different from the outline created by Black Vise, but the figure illuminated by the setting sun possessed many unreplicable characteristics.

Firstly, the beautiful luster exuded by the orange sunset reflecting off the depths of the armor, off the translucent armor material that appeared to be made of black crystal. Secondly, a pair of eye-lenses flashing violet and emitting intense willpower —

Even though she had logged on ten minutes after Haruyuki, the real Black King, commander of Nebulus, the «Rebel» Black Lotus had finally appeared. She slowly floated forward on a cushion of air for about three meters. On close inspection, the remains of a red aura lingered around her avatar's right

arm. It seems her sword had used an Enhanced Range attack to slice apart Vise's «Hexahedral Compression», freeing Haruyuki.

But she did not even look at Haruyuki on the ground after moving forward, instead sharply glaring at the black layered avatar. If a beginner were glared at like that, they might even enter «Zero Fill», but Black Vise was nonchalant, even nimbly shrugging his armless shoulders and replying:

“... You never stop surprising me, Black King.”

His voice was unperturbed and lacked any hint of anxiety.

“You managed to break free effortlessly last time, so this time I tried to completely restrict and paralyze the swords on your arms and legs... How in the world did you manage to get yourself out? Well, no matter, it seems like you had to pay a price.”

He was not wrong. About twenty centimeters of blade was missing from the tip of Black Lotus's left blade-arm, but there was plenty of blade intact. If all four of her sword-limbs had been immobilized by Vise's restraining mechanism, then she had probably thought of a way to destroy her own left arm, and used her freed arm to slice through the bindings on her right arm and legs?

The Black King's reply to Vise's question was very cold.

"I have no reason to tell you how I did it. You were the one who explained the demerits of being too expressive when we met before."

Her icy verbal swords made the layered avatar chuckle wryly:

“Ha ha, well, you win that one. Maybe I was a bit too talkative today, but after waiting two hours, I was fully prepared for the possibility that I had come all the way here for nothing, but an unexpected gift ended up falling right into my lap. It’s natural to get a bit too excited.”

“Hmmp. I find that opening your gift and realizing that it’s a bomb is also pretty common. By the looks of it, you seem to have taken more damage than I have, and while you’ve played plenty of little parlor tricks on my partner, it’s still two against one.”

——— Exactly.

As Kuroyukihime exchanged verbal swords with Black Vise, Haruyuki and the «Beast’s» merged consciousness analyzed Black Vise and calculated a method of completely destroying this wretched layered avatar.

Black Vise was capable of large-scale restraining attacks that could immobilize both Black Lotus and Chrome Disaster simultaneously. That capability was certainly frightening, but both of them had managed to escape captivity, and deprived Vise of both arms. In other words, he no longer could use powerful skills like «Hexahedral Compression».

But he had once said that he was best at «fleeing».

This was true; Vice could gather his body into a single plate and sink into any shadow in sight on the stage, which could be described as the ultimate escape ability. Taking into account of the shadows on top of Roppongi Hills Tower cast by the countless walls and columns of the «Twilight» stage, reaching the edge of the tower shadow by shadow would not be a problem at all.

Furthermore, as soon as he reached the gigantic shadow cast by the building itself, he could go anywhere. The 238-meter tall Roppongi Hills Tower cast a kilometer-long shadow under the setting sun, blanketing the streets of Roppongi.

Therefore, in order to surely deal with this hated enemy and peel off his panels one by one, they could not simply lunge and attack; they must deal with his escape method first.

“*Gurrrgh.....*”

Haruyuki growled as he slowly rose, continuing to stay on all fours. He glanced at his HP gauge. The initial attack on his chest and the pressure damage he had taken inside the cube had reduced it by more than thirty percent. The aborted «Flash Blink» had also depleted almost all of his special skills gauge, so was temporarily unable to fly or use any other special skills. In that case, his first goal should not be Vice himself, but the column in the

center of the plaza. Its destruction would mean he could eliminate the shadow that Vise had been present in from the beginning of this battle...

Haruyuki did not know this, but all previous Chrome Disasters had not been capable of such calculations after completely melding with the «Beast». As soon as they equipped the «Disaster Armor» they had no choice but to subject to its instinct and go berserk. As a result, their mental state was slowly eroded, and in the end, they were led into a trap and killed like wild animals.

But, Haruyuki, the sixth generation Disaster, was different. Even though he was driven by unlimited hatred for Black Vise, who had caused the death of Saffron Blossom, he still retained perhaps the most important skill of Silver Crow: his capacity for analysis and decision-making. Was this because he had not yet fully become Chrome Disaster — or was it because he could empathize with the Armor's spirit more than anyone else?

The answer came faster than he had expected — in 10 short seconds.

Unexpectedly, it was Black Vise who had made the first move. With slow movements, he moved out from the shadow he had never left, cast by the large pillar at the center, and exposed himself under the sun.

Although his name also began with the word «Black», under the reddish sunset, the texture of his armor was very different from that of the Black King. Lotus's translucent armor shone gleamed with the sheen of black

crystal, whereas Vise's plates were an opaque black reflected almost light at all.

Vise gestured at Haruyuki lying on the ground with the tip of his right foot, which seemed to be made of sheets of black paper, and asked nonchalantly:

“Two against one? So you trust this boy that deeply... even after he has transformed into «Disaster». Is this the bond between «Parent and Child»...? I envy you very much, because I have never known such a relation.”

Suddenly — the outermost plate of Vise's right leg softly separated from him, transforming into a square in midair. It then began spinning rapidly, resembling an ultra-thin translucent disk with a gray afterimage.

“I envy you so much... at least allow me to take away the bonds between you.”

As soon as he said that, a blood-red light surrounded the disk. «Over-Ray». Haruyuki immediately began preparing a long-range Incarnate Attack, but when he saw the the information that appeared immediately after, he felt a bit suspicious, because it said:

«Attack Prediction / Incarnate Attack | Enhanced Range / Cutting Type | Threat level / 5». Only that line of text, and the red attack prediction line was only a straight line. If the Armor's analysis abilities could be trusted, he only needed to take a step to the side or block it with his armguard.

But he didn't actually have to attack.

“In your dreams!!”

Because the Black King had violently charged towards Black Vise with a sharp shout. Her right sword arm was engulfed by a bright blue Over-Ray, and her special skill, its power enhanced by Incarnation, activated with a burning shout of the skill's name:

“«Death by Piercing»!!”

The power accumulated at the sword's tip was enough to violently shake the entire huge Roppongi Hills Tower — but the layered avatar did not move an inch.

Just before the special skill could connect, he changed his appearance again.

Black Vise's entire body instantly collapsed into a single plate, including the one spinning at high speed. The ultra-thin plate spun about 10 times before turning back into human form.

Then another plated silhouette figure, without thickness, appeared before Haruyuki's eyes, but it was not the fake Black Lotus had had been used to trick Haruyuki.

A head of short hair, curled outward at the tip; petal-like shoulders and waist armor; slender limbs, and a cute magic wand grasped in her left hand...

It should have been just a black shadow, but for an instant, the rays from the sunset of the «Twilight» stage reflected off it, exuding a dazzling yellow-orange, and at the same time, Haruyuki heard a name slip from his own mouth:

“..... Fron.”

This shaking voice — was immediately drowned out by a hard impact.

It was the sound of the Black King’s piercing attack drilling deeply into the chest of the yellow orange avatar.

The girl fell slowly backwards, reaching her right hand towards Haruyuki. Simultaneously, Haruyuki felt a shout as faint as a gust of wind echoing deeply, deeply within his ears.

..... *Fal*.....

The center of Haruyuki’s mind exploded in a thunderous *clap!!* of fiery sparks, and his vision was instantly painted red; the sky, the ground, and all

objects instantly disappeared, leaving only two intertwined silhouettes clearly defined against the bloody background.

Her chest pierced by a sharp sword, the girl's knees bent weakly, she collapsed onto her right side, and vanished. The remaining person remained frozen after her completed attack, then suddenly looked up at Haruyuki, but by now Haruyuki was unable to recognize this person.

An explosion of sparks twice as powerful as before scorched his mind blank.

In the next instant, the last remnant of Haruyuki's — Silver Crow's «judgment» completely disappeared, leaving only a feral Beast thirsting for revenge and massacre.

*“Gu... ROAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH——!!”*

A shriek that shook the heavens and the Earth rang out, and thick gray clouds formed once more above his head. A bolt of black lightning flashed out from under the black vortex, striking his raised right hand. The lightning instantly materialized and transformed into a great, sinisterly shaped sword.

*“GURAAHHH!!”*

The Beast roared once more and kicked off the ground, lunging the few meters towards the jet black avatar — the «attacker» who had killed his beloved girl, charging towards this «enemy».

As the Beast sprinted violently, it raised the sword grasped in its right hand high into the air. The sword left a trail of black sparks behind it, and the power contained within it was so great that no more could be added, but if one timed it right, a strong enough veteran should be able to dodge it easily.

But the «enemy» did not dodge it, instead crossing her two sword-shaped arms — although the left arm was severely damaged at the tip — emitting a bright green color.

Engulfed in black lightning, the sword smashed against the the green cross. The gathering of so much energy in a miniscule place threw out a white gleam like the birth of a new star.

Immediately after, there was a deafening resonance as the energy formed a ball and was released into its surroundings. The countless stone objects on the roof of the tower were instantly disintegrated upon contact with this wave of energy and disappeared without a sound. Although it was unlike the time when a tower had collapsed as the result of such an attack being used against the Green King, this power was still stunning, enough to flatten the entire rooftop.

Even after the shockwave dissipated, both sides continued clashing their swords together. Screeches could be heard at the point of intersection, with sparks flying out each time that illuminated both their faces.

Under the black visor of the «enemy», a pair of violet eyes squinted uncomfortably. She was yelling desperately while resisting the Beast’s great sword attack with her crossed arms. But the Beast was now a manifestation of fighting instinct no longer capable of intelligent reasoning, and was completely unable to hear what she was saying.

“*Guraah!!*”

The Beast roared briefly and raised its left fist to strike its «enemy’s» slender body. The avatar tried to dodge right with super-fast reflexes, but the Beast flapped its left expanded wing, allowing it to swiftly change the direction of its fist. This made use of «Aerial Combo», painstakingly trained by the Burst Linker now possessed by the Beast, but even that memory no longer remained.

Engulfed in a dark aura, the fist connected with the right side of the «enemy», mercilessly pummeling and shattering her armor.

As though she were struck perpendicularly with a gigantic hammer, the «enemy» was blown more than 10 meters away, bounced a few times off the now flattened rooftop, and landed in a heap. Without waiting for her to get up, the Beast lunged over with its wings, crashed onto and straddled the body lying flat on the ground, and screamed:

“*Gu... ROAAHHHHHH—...!!*”

Stabbing the sword in its right hand onto the «enemy's» unharmed right arm-sword, the Beast pinned it to the ground. Then it clenched its now free sword hand, raised it high into the air, and brought it crashing onto the «enemy's» mask.

With one punch, spiderweb cracks formed on the protective visor. The Beast clenched its left fist and flung it towards the armor on her chest. Tiny fragments sprayed, reflecting a dazzling red against the rays of the sunlight.

Right, left, right. The Beast bellowed nonstop, rhythmically pummeling the body of the «enemy».

This was no longer a duel, not even a battle. This was merely the explosive, ugly release of years and years of accumulated fury.

As the Beast threw its left and right fists onto her body at random, it heard a faint yet gentle speaking voice in its head.

— *This... is okay.*

— *All that tortures you, I, will, endure it.*

— *Because, I am your «Parent», your «Master», your «Senpai».....*

— *And, I love you more, than anyone else.*

The beautiful black crystal armor was shattered beyond recognition, transforming into countless fragments dispersing in the air.

Between these pieces were several lines of silver, differing in color, falling downwards.

These particles of light were from the vicious mask obscuring the Beast's face. Within the gap between what looked like the jaws of a carnivorous beast, silver droplets were spilling out, splashing silently onto the battered black armor. At a glance, they looked like rain.

Like tears.

## Chapter 9

Haruyuki hugged his knees tightly at the bottom of a deep pit where no light could reach.

Muffled, heavy clashing sounds could be heard periodically, coming from very high up above his head. He didn't know what was making the noise, but still managed to feel it.

Outside this hole — this prison — something that should not be happening was happening.

And if he were to wait for the sound to stop, all would be lost.

He had already tried climbing up the wall a few times, but to no avail, as the black vertical surface provided nothing he could grab onto, never mind a ladder. The wall was as strong as steel, on which he could not even make a scratch, and flying out was also impossible.

Right now Haruyuki was not controlling his duel avatar «Silver Crow», but his pudgy human body of flesh and blood. There was nothing in his pockets of his school uniform, and he could only do two pull-ups, so there were no way that he could climb a vertical wall.

So, Haruyuki could only bury his face in his kneecaps, with his powerless arms. Hearing the sound that acted as a countdown to his end, large tears unconsciously flowed out of his tightly closed eyes.

*..... I... have always been like this.*

*..... When someone took and hid my outdoor shoes for the first time in second term of third grade; when I was first forced to behave like a pig in fifth grade; even after entering middle school, when they took my paltry pocket money from me and beat me up for no reason, I would always run to the hiding place that only I knew about, hug my knees, and cry.*

*..... So, even if it all ends, it'll just go back to all that. I'll just wake up from this happy dream and return to reality.*

Haruyuki murmured to himself in the depths of his heart, finally even trying to shut out the noise from above.

But the pair of hands he raised to cover his ears suddenly stopped. He lifted his head slightly, lifted his eyelids slightly, raised his hands in front of him, and stared at them.

His fingers were short and round. His palms were sickly pale because he always hid them in the pockets. These were hands that always refused to reach out and help others or clench into fists and fight —

— *This is only a gap of two meters in the virtual world. Is it really that far for you?*

Suddenly, he heard a distant, very, very quiet voice. Then, he heard himself answering.

..... *It is.*

“But.....”

Hearing the conversation from a far end of his memory, even as he curled himself up at the bottom of the dark pit, Haruyuki continued his answer aloud.

“As long as you stretch out your hand, you get a bit closer; if you take a step forward, you get even closer. This is... what someone very important taught to me.”

Placing his hands on his kneecaps, he got up shakily. He looked upwards, yet he could not see the exit. The vertical walls continued to stretch up with no end in sight.

Haruyuki wiped his tears on the back of his sleeve and turned back to face the towering dark wall before him, the eternal wall that he had given up trying to climb after trying a few times.

He suddenly remembered something. The memory might be hazy, but something like this had happened to him before. He had once been plunged into an abyss of despair, but had still managed to scale the looming wall and find a new path.

Haruyuki unconsciously clenched his right fist. He looked back and forth between the coldly gleaming black wall and his clenched fist of flesh and bone, grit his teeth and threw a decisive blow.

It was an awkward punch, lacking speed and strength, but when the fist made contact with the wall, a searing pain spread from Haruyuki's right hand into his brain, causing him to yell loudly.

“Owww...!”

With some effort he managed to prevent himself from falling onto the ground, cradling his faintly throbbing hand to his chest. He looked closely at it: the skin around his joints was raw and had begun to bleed. Not a single dent could be seen on the wall, never mind a scratch.

Haruyuki summoned his nearly-depleted determination and clenched his left fist.

“... Aghh!”

With a pathetic cry, the fist flew forward. *Thud!* More excruciating pain. The tears he had been trying so hard to hold in immediately flowed out again. Haruyuki placed the bleeding fist by his mouth, struggling to contain himself from sobbing.

He wanted to sit still and do nothing. He wanted nothing more than to place his back against the wall, hugging his knees, covering his eyes and ears, and wait for it all to end.

But Haruyuki actually knew in his mind. At that point, he would not be the only one losing a place to belong to. Whether it was the numerous friends he had made in this new world, or his old childhood playmates who had been by his side all along, everyone would be devastated — he would be especially deeply hurting «her», the most important person to him, forever sealing the road he should have taken.

“Ooh... AHHH!”

Yelling loudly, he raised his injured right fist and hit the wall again. Tiny drops of blood splattered onto the wall, and for a moment blinding pain once again pierced his brain.

“Ahh... AHHH.....!”

His left fist this time. His flesh split, his bones about to crack; tears and snot slid down his face, dripping onto his chest.

Haruyuki did not think for one second that his fists of flesh and blood could do anything to this solid wall, which he didn't know was rock or steel. Even as he let out roars that sounded like screams, his face screwed up with sobs, he continued to strike the wall with fist after fist, right, left, right. The bell tolling the countdown to destruction was heard from far above, and Haruyuki matched his rhythm to that, hitting the wall, hitting, and hitting.

His fists very quickly became painted red with blood, his flesh a hammered mess. The pain had surpassed the stage where it could be conceived as pain and had become a hot, burning sensation coursing through his nervous system that made him feel as if he were being burnt alive. If he relaxed even just a tiny bit, he would probably collapse and never get back up again. So Haruyuki clenched his teeth so tightly that they felt like were going to crack, screamed sharply through them, striking punch after punch onto the wall.

Punch after punch. Right, left, right, left, and right again ———

“It's no use.”

Suddenly, a tiny voice came from behind him.

Haruyuki temporarily lowered his shattered fists, and turned his head to look.

A boy, much younger than he was, stood at the bottom of the pit. He was completely foreign to Haruyuki. He wore a T-shirt and knee-length jeans,

with slightly long hair falling over his forehead. Judging by his shorter stature and more childish face than Haruyuki, he should at most still be in second or third grade of elementary school.

The boy looked at Haruyuki with vague eyes dotted with traces of pity, and said again.

“It’s no use, you can’t break this wall.”

Haruyuki shot back in a small voice through haggard breaking:

“How... do you know... if you... haven’t tried?”

His two hands were indeed about to shatter, but at least they were still able to move and grab. Even if his fists were no use, he still had his legs, shoulders, and head. Until his entire body was destroyed and he could no longer stand, he had no intention of giving up.

Haruyuki injected this will into his tear-stained gaze at the boy, then turned back towards the wall. Just as he was about to continue swinging his fists, the boy shook his head gently and said:

“You can’t do it. Because this «despair»... isn’t yours; it’s mine. This is the «hole in my heart».”



“Huh?.....”

“You’re the first person to make it this deep inside. But even for those who’ve made it to shallower places than here, no has managed to leave. Even the previous one, or the one before him, or the one before him... none of them could leave. This hole will only disappear once the entire Accelerated World disappears. Until not a single one of the ones who betrayed Fron and tortured Fron is left, my despair will never end...”

The instant he heard that, Haruyuki suddenly had a revelation.

This tiny young boy standing in front of him was the «first one». He was the Burst Linker who, in the early days of the Accelerated World, had contorted the two Enhanced Armaments «The Destiny» and the great sword «Star Caster» into the Disaster Armor, «The Disaster», caused by his excessively gargantuan Incarnation of rage and despair.

«Chrome Falcon».

“You... have... always... been here?”

Haruyuki asked hoarsely. No, of course he had always been here. The parasitic «Beast» residing inside the Armor was his creation. It was no surprise that Falcon’s spirit was concealed in the deepest layer, the innermost core of the Beast.

But if that were the case, how ironic was that? It was also possible to find the spirit of Falcon's love, «Saffron Blossom», inside the data that comprised the Disaster Armor. Yet Blossom — that yellow-orange girl, was unable to manifest while the Enhanced Armament was activated as the Disaster. At the same time, Falcon could not appear while The Destiny was summoned. Two lovers were as close as could be, but could never meet —

... No.

No, that wasn't it. No matter which form was summoned, Destiny and Disaster were still the same object, as Haruyuki had seen very clearly in the «Brain Burst Central Server». If the dazzling light in the middle of the fluctuating galaxy, the sixth star of the Big Dipper, still preserved their memories, they should have met a long time ago.

For a moment, Haruyuki forgot the pain in his hands as he thought with all his might.

He thought about the fundamental difference between the Disaster Armor, «The Disaster», and one of the Seven Arcs, «The Destiny».

The difference was — when the Armor was in Disaster mode, it absorbed the great sword Star Caster, and while in Destiny mode, both of them were separate. Only when the sword and armor were separated; when they were computed separately by the system, Saffron Blossom could appear.

Blossom's spirit did not reside in the Armor.

It was in the sword. There was another small star faintly glowing beside the sixth star, «Zeta». Perhaps she herself might not have realized it, but Blossom's memories were stored in that star.

As Haruyuki melded with the Beast, he recalled a sequence of memories as a long, sorrowful dream. In the closing act of that tragedy, Saffron Blossom had been masticated to death again and again by the great hellworm, Jormungandr. In the end, Star Caster had dropped from Jormungandr when it died, as though they were Blossom's remains.

“So..... that's how it is.”

Haruyuki muttered to himself under his breath.

If this assertion was correct, there was perhaps one and only way to remove this curse known as the Disaster, and break off the cycle of neverending tragedy in the Accelerated World. But to try that, he would first have to break out of this darkness no matter what, before everything came to an end.

He stared at the young boy who stood still and looked downward — Chrome Falcon — and said:

“I... will never give up. Because... I... am still here.”

He turned around and raised his right hand, which by now was no more than a bloody lump, his fingers refusing to respond to his commands. But he resisted the pain, and beginning with his little finger, curled them up into a fist.

“Ugh... Ahhhh...”

With a loud yell, he raised his fists high —

“AHHHHHHH!!!!”

And forced it towards the wall. *Thump!* Red light coursed through his head.

“WhooooaaaaaAAAHHHHH!”

His left fist next. Brought along with the momentum from his wheeling body, the straight punch crashed onto the wall, scattering blood onto it.

“It’s no use.....”

A quiet voice came from behind.

“No one can break out from this despair, and no one can break this cycle of destruction. Not until the world ends and only one person remains.”

“..... Is that... what you... really want?”

Haruyuki asked as he raised his right fist.

“Becoming the last one in this world... meaning, that you have to endure all this sadness yourself. That also means you alone will have to endure all the memories left behind by all other Burst Linkers. Do you... want to be this lonely!?”

With a burst of strength, Haruyuki landed a fist on the wall. *Bang!* His fist was bleeding nonstop as he pulled it back.

“Do I want to? You’re wrong.”

The boy’s reply was calm, but there were traces of loneliness in it.

“They’re the ones who want to be destroyed in battle. The ones who betrayed Fron, and killed her. As for me, I’m just fulfilling their wishes.”

“Then... let me ask you!”

As his left fist landed on the wall and blood splattered onto his face, Haruyuki shouted loudly.

**“What about Saffron Blossom’s wish!?”** Her hopes that no one else should ever have to vanish from the Accelerated World! Aren’t you betraying Blossom’s hopes right now?”

The boy remained quiet and thought for a while. After that, an even softer voice shook the thick darkness.

“..... Fron, is no longer here.”

He continued:

“Fron’s gone. A world without Fron doesn’t need anything like hope. Those guys who killed Fron, they don’t have the right to seek hope.”

“No..... Wrong, wrong!!”

Haruyuki cried as his bloodied fists alternated between each other, hitting the wall.

“Even if Blossom’s gone, her hope lives on!! It’s living right by your side!!”

“..... Liar.”

“I’m not lying!! Once you reach out your hand... Once you’re willing to reach a little bit beyond this wall, there sh...”

“LIAR!”

The young boy formed from the residual memories of Chrome Falcon screamed coarsely:

“There is only despair in this world! No one can get out from this abyss of despair! Not you... Not even me!!”

“Do you think... only *you... know what despair feels like?*”

Haruyuki roared between scattered tears and blood.

“If this wall is your despair... then watch me destroy it!! Watch me, Arita Haruyuki, «Ari Piggy», «Gross-yuki», «Pizza Belly», «Mr. Piggy»...”

Though he perfectly knew that the next punch would likely shatter his fist completely, Haruyuki still pulled back his right fist, now adding a lunge forward, throwing his entire body into the wall to ——

“—— *Shatter it to pieces!*”

**CLAAAAANG!**

An impact as if Silver Crow's metal armor had struck the wall echoed in the dark.

After a moment's silence —

A faint, yet clear *Crick!* could be heard.

Then, Haruyuki saw it. Many tiny white lines had begun to radiate bit by bit from where his fist had hit the wall.

The entire world began to shake. The cracks began to stretch as they gradually sped up, covering the curved wall and the ground.

“..... You.....”

Came muttering from behind.

Haruyuki turned around slowly, and looked at the boy who was stand there blankly. And from Haruyuki's lips, which he had bitten so many times that they had begun to bleed, words came out unconsciously:

“You, and I, are the same... Everyone in this world, for sure, are the same deep down in our hearts.....”

Hearing that, the boy — Chrome Falcon slightly lifted his perpetually bowed face. Haruyuki could not see his expression, but the moment his clear eyes met with Haruyuki's own —

The world of darkness transformed into countless shining glass fragments and instantly dissipated in the air.

*“Gurgh... WOOOAAAAHHH!”*

With that ferocious bellow, the black metal armored right fist was about to swing down.

Haruyuki reflexively took control, redirecting it towards the right. Under the impact of that punch, cracks soon developed on the limestone platform of the «Twilight» stage, and the expanding shockwave shook the entire Roppongi Hills Tower.

And to the left of his outstretched arm —

Lay the damaged mask of the Black King, Black Lotus, broken so thoroughly that it seemed impossible to damage it further.

The V-shaped sides were snapped off at the middle, and the visor with a once beautiful sheen was filled with cracks. Her entire upper body was damaged; it was difficult to find any place that remained unharmed.

This destruction had been inflicted by Silver Crow, who had morphed into Disaster — Haruyuki's own hands. As he stared in astonishment, his avatar's left arm continued trembling and raised itself high for the next attack.

Without moving from his position sitting on top of the Black King, Haruyuki focused all of his own willpower on halting the movement of his arm. At once, the rage-filled roars of the «Beast» echoed in his mind.

— *Why resist me!?*

— *This is an «enemy»!! An enemy to be destroyed!*

His entire body was so taut that it trembled, but did not move any further. At least for now, Haruyuki was taking control of this duel avatar.

Leaving his left arm up high in the air, Haruyuki desperately yelled back in his mind.

— NO!!

— She's not an «enemy»!! She's my... most important... more than anyone else...!!

But midway through that scream, Haruyuki hastily put a stop to his thinking as he did not know how long he could retain control over the avatar. There was one thing he had to do before the avatar descended into a rampage again.

Crossing Kuroyukihime's right arm, who lay ragged and semi-conscious, the sinisterly built great sword was stabbed into the ground. But this sword had not always looked this way. In the distant past, when the girl Saffron Blossom had been slaughtered by the great hellworm, Jormungandr, the silver great sword Star Caster had appeared within the enemy as if it were conveying her final wishes. Distorted by Chrome Falcon's rage and grief, it had been absorbed to become part of the «Disaster».

If, as Haruyuki deduced, Blossom's soul still resided within the sword, and if the «Disaster» had actually created the eternal isolation between her and Falcon, then the two ought to meet once more. As to what could be done about that, Haruyuki could come up with only one answer.

But there was still a huge obstacle in front of him.

It was obvious why the «Beast» would suddenly lose control and go so rampant as to attack Kuroyukihime. This was because, just as Black Vise was about to take the Black King's attack, he had changed his appearance into that of Saffron Blossom's silhouette, tearing open the deepest wound in the «Beast's» heart.

According to what Haruyuki could remember before being forced into that black world, when the fake Blossom had been stabbed in the chest by the Black King's critical attack, Black Vise had pretended to fall lifelessly to the ground while instead he sinking into the shadow stretching from their feet.

After that, the pillars, walls and such on the roof of Roppongi Hills Tower had been utterly blasted away by the shockwaves from Black Lotus' clash against Chrome Disaster. This meant that the shadows created by these objects had also disappeared, so he was no longer able to use that «shadow movement» ability.

In other words — **Black Vise was still hiding within the dark shadow in front of him.**

Hence, he probably had not yet realized that Haruyuki had broken out of his rampaging state. But as soon as he realized any slight anomaly, he would no doubt employ his despicable tactics again. So to get one step ahead of him and ensure a successful revenge, there had to be no mishap in what Haruyuki would do next.

The ones who had set a merciless trap to hurt Saffron Blossom and Chrome Falcon, thus creating the «Disaster Armor», were Black Vise and the «Acceleration Research Society». The following tragedy had recurred for the next seven real-world years. Could he break the cycle? — Or would the «Society» capture him and turn him into their pawn?

The moment of truth had come.

It was either victory or catastrophe.

“GURAAAAAH!!”

Haruyuki deliberately let out a fierce roar, and with his raised left hand, pulled out the dark silvery sword on the ground nearby.

Then he flung out his right arm, seizing the thin neck of Black Lotus who lay unconscious on the ground.

— Sorry about this, Senpai! I’ll apologize to you properly later...!!

Holding the sword in his left hand, and the Black King in his right, he arched his body backwards and roared loudly:

“Rrr...WHOOOAAAAARGH!!”

With a shake of his long tail, the metal wings on his back spreaded out fully, and with a strong kick from both legs onto the stone plate, he took off. Then, flying in a spiral, he headed towards the golden sun hanging on the sky to the west. Distance and angle were key. Keeping the Roppongi Hills Tower roof in sight, he flew for about 30 meters and hovered there.

Perhaps it was the sudden change in gravity that had woken her, but inside the cracked mirror-surface visor, the purple-blue eye-lenses flashed faintly.

From behind his beastlike mask, Haruyuki stared closely at the Black King's eyes, desperate to deliver his emotions. Then, a fading, almost inaudible voice reached his hearing.

..... Haruyuki... kun.....?

— Senpai! Kuroyukihime-senpai!!

Haruyuki tried to snatch back control from the Beast, while replying in thought with all his might.

— I hurt you so much, so I don't think you'll believe what I say... but right now, just this moment! Please, trust me!!

Then — the Black King smiled faintly, or so Haruyuki thought.

..... What are saying?

..... I trust you, always. I always have... and I always will... Forever...

These words dropped into Haruyuki's mind like variegated gemstones. As they shone, a warm, hysterical emotion burst into his chest.

All he wanted to do was throw away the sword in his left hand and hug Kuroyukihime with both arms, but that should be left until everything was over, and right now there was an obligation he had to fulfil. To break the curse of the Armor, and put the chain reaction of sorrow to an end, he had to make «those two» meet again.

“Grooo... AAAAAAAHHHH———!!”

Haruyuki let out an especially fierce cry into the perpetual sunset. Then, turning the blade in his hand to point in the opposite direction, he raised it high. From below, it would undoubtedly look as if he was intending to run through the avatar in his right arm with the sword in his left. Moreover, he completely turned his back to Roppongi Hills Tower, so the tip of the sword should be hidden by the large avatar and its spread wings.

Holding his breath, Haruyuki put all his determination — «positive Incarnation» that could be described as a prayer, or a wish, into his left hand, raised the sword, and stabbed downward.

The sharp tip of the blade grazed the Black King’s body, and lightly stabbed into the middle of the Disaster Armor — just above Haruyuki’s own heart.

— *You betray me?! Even YOU are trying to betray me, erase me?!!*

In his mind he could hear the livid scream of the «Beast», but he seemed to feel an echo of sadness in that roar.

— No! I will not destroy you! This sword will not harm you!!

Haruyuki concentrated all of his willpower towards shouting at the «Beast», but an overwhelming flow of hatred threatened to swallow that.

— *You liar! Everyone deceives, cheats and betrays!! I TRUST NO ONE!*

Sounding somewhat like a sob, the roar resounded as a few strands of dark aura leaked from the wound in his chestplate. The aura began to wrap around the blade of the great sword, attempting to repel it. As he struggled to resist the force, Haruyuki shouted.

— I don't need you to trust me!! But... in this world, there's one and only one person who loves you, who cares about you!! Please... trust her!!

From Haruyuki's left hand, grasping the sword, burst a pure white beam of light.

This clean, brilliant light extended from the hilt of the sword all the way to its tip, steadily masking the sinister-formed sword. Any part it touched soon evaporated and altered the design, reforming into a brand new sword from within. It was a translucent blade with several stars sealed within, appearing as an elegant, slick, bright silver sword. Enhanced Armament «Star Caster».

“Ahh... AHHHHHHHHH——!!”

Calling out with his own voice, Haruyuki stabbed the sword, which had regained its original appearance, deeply into his own chest.

The sword was not causing any numerical damage, nor any pain or impact, but all five of his senses were receiving some form of stimulation.

A thick and extremely hard shell, filled with infinite darkness.

Small cracks soon developed in the metallic shell, obscuring the entire world. Through the cracks suddenly shone clean white light, somehow reminding one of spring sunshine. The cracks immediately widened as the light strengthened. Then, somewhere in that blinding light — someone stretched out both their hands, and leapt into the world of darkness.

She was covered in petal-like yellow-orange armor, and beneath her short hair were two sky blue eye-lenses. This was the girl residing in the great sword Star Caster, who had been praying for so long — «Saffron Blossom».

Blossom landed softly, stood dauntlessly and faced the center of the dark world.

There was a gigantic object there, engulfed in dark fire, with blood-red eyes and long fangs. The «Beast».

The yellow-orange girl stepped forward without any trace of fear, and stretched her right hand out towards the Beast.

“I’m sorry for leaving you alone for so long. You must be very lonely... You must’ve had a hard time.”

The Beast’s mouth let out a low growl as it shook his head. It lowered its tail and tried to shirk away, as if it could not believe in the girl’s existence.

But Blossom resolutely continued to walk towards the Beast, and without hesitation, she reached out to hug its large neck with both hands. As she stroked its flaming fur, she whispered:

“From now on, we can be together. Together, forever...”

At once...

With a snap, the black flames on the Beast’s body dissipated. A huge shockwave spread out from within the shell, and eventually died down. What remained was —

Not a duel avatar, but the very human body of a little girl.

She had somewhat boyish short-cut hair, wore a slightly oversized parka and a culotte skirt. In her arms she held a small black cat.

The girl smiled warmly, carrying the cat and taking a few steps ahead. And not far in front of her, stood that boy — Chrome Falcon.

The boy's lips were trembling, as he cautiously raised his right hand.

Towards his, the girl started running with a skip in her step. The two of them approached each other, reaching out and touching each other's fingers, then intertwining them and grasping them tightly —

——— Fal!!

——— Fron!!

Their cries soon formed a gentle wave, spreading within the entire metal shell.

At that moment, the heavy shell sealing this world deformed into countless petals, and fell apart.

As if all the hatred, pain, and suffering that had been sealed in this armor had been melted away by the scattering white light, they slowly began to

sublimate. Along with the sound of sparkling, dreamy shaking bells, everything floated, glided, and drifted further, and further away...

And just when he was about to return to the field of golden rays, Haruyuki thought he heard that sound himself.

— *Farewell, my final partner in battle.*

— *You are... strong. Stronger than I am. Stronger than those whom I have destroyed, and those who have destroyed me.*

— *If only... your light may eradicate the very last curse remaining in this world.....*

Simultaneously as the voice disappeared, Haruyuki once again returned to the Accelerated World — within the sky of the «Twilight» stage.

His held Black Lotus's battered body in his right arm. His held nothing in his left.

And the metal armor covering his entire body, reflecting the light of the setting sun, was shining a mirror-like silver.

## Chapter 10

“Senpai.”

Lost in all his conflicting emotions, Haruyuki could only say that.

Having so carelessly fallen into a frightening rampage and inflicting such deep pain on the king he had sworn to protect with his life, Black Lotus — he felt so much self-reproach that he wanted to tear himself to pieces.

However, Kuroyukihime probably wanted to deliberately endure Haruyuki’s attacks, who had lost himself. As long as she used that high-damage King-level skill that she had used against «Suzaku of the Four Gods», even if it was the rampaging Chrome Disaster, she could at least match its strength. But she did not, choosing to endure the countless merciless attacks, as she believed Haruyuki would be able to find himself again —

In the embrace of Silver Crow, hovering in the sky, listening to him call out, a pair of bluish-purple lenses blinked a few times under the damaged and broken mask. Her reply was soft and warm, accompanied by a slight breeze.

“...Welcome back, Silver Crow. You’ve worked hard...”

The left arm-blade, snapped at its midpoint, gently brushed his round helmet.

“Sen... pai...”

Haruyuki squeezed intermittently out of his throat, as he tried to swallow the wail he was about to erupt into.

Oh, how he wanted to bury himself in Kuroyukihime's chest, and cry like a little baby. However, it was not the time for that yet, and there was something still to be done. The artificial intelligence «Beast» really once was Haruyuki's partner, and there was a promise he had to fulfill — to put an end to the «root of evil that split the world». It would probably still take a very long while — but Haruyuki wanted to launch the first strike of his counterattack, in order to demonstrate the will of the black legion, and his resolve as a Burst Linker.

Through their touching armors, it seemed that Kuroyukihime had also felt Haruyuki's will. She nodded and said softly:

“— We only have one chance, one instant. Both of us are close-range avatars, so we have to rely on long range Incarnate skills. But I guess there's not much time to focus slowly... you focus on aiming, and I'll provide the force.”

Kuroyukihime's heavily wounded body didn't look like she had any strength to continue fighting, but her words were filled with determination. Haruyuki nodded in response, clearing his mind of unnecessary thoughts.

“On my count of three... two, one, zero!”

With the seemingly telepathic command, Haruyuki spun around in the air.

Far below in the middle of his vision sat a gigantic chalk-white skyscraper bathed in the twilight sun — the Roppongi Hills Tower. All objects on the roof had been destroyed in the prior skirmish between Black Lotus and Chrome Disaster, becoming a flat white surface.

Right in the middle was a miniscule, blurry black dot: the shadow cast by Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime with their backs to the sun. In this moment only, that shadow was not just a result of the virtual world's lighting effects, but also where their hated enemy had hid himself.

Indeed, at this time, that layered avatar and self-proclaimed vice-president of the Acceleration Research Society — «Restrainer» Black Vise, was hiding in that small shadow. He was «the root of evil in this world» that the «Beast» had entrusted Haruyuki with slicing apart.

“Crow, your hand!!”

Kuroyukihime shouted sharply, raising her still-intact right arm-blade. The tip of her arm glowed a faint golden-yellow as clicked softly, split and formed into five slender fingers. Haruyuki stretched out his left hand and intertwined his fingers with hers.

Their hands, united as one, shined brilliant red and silver.

Perhaps their opponent had realized something was off; a black plate scuttled out from the blurry shadow about 30 meters below. Black Vise. The plate began to glide along the ground, heading towards the edge of the roof — to be precise, towards the large shadow cast by the building to its east.

If the roof had still been covered with pillars and walls, this avatar moving around in the shadows probably didn't need to show himself, and would be able to leave the battlefield unscathed.

But since anything that could provide a shadow had been destroyed and the Roppongi Hills Tower was the tallest building in this area, the only shadow cast on the roof was that of Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime, whose backs were against the sun. This was no coincidence, because Haruyuki had made careful calculations based on angle and distance before flying to his current location.

These reasons left Vise unable to reuse his tactics of retreating into the shadows — unable to utilize his self-proclaimed «expert ability at running away».

There was only one moment, one chance, right now.

Haruyuki summoned all of his energy and focused an image of light on his left hand. The red Over-Ray emitted by Kuroyukihime's right hand melded with his silver Over-Ray in a corkscrew pattern.

“— «Laser Lance»!!”

“— «Vorpals Strike»!!”



The two different skill names were called out at the same time, like a duet.

The two differently colored Over-Rays shot out like the double helix of DNA, extending from their interlocked hands and formed a huge spear.

In perfect unison as one, they pointed the spear down onto the tower beneath them. The bicolor ray rippled the air as it moved and soon gained onto the black plate hastily speeding away. The two points of the blade touched the middle of the plate...

And Haruyuki saw it.

The pitch black plate disintegrated into many pieces and shattered into a radial pattern.

The spear did not stop there. Once it touched the ground of the roof, it drilled in as if it were parting the surface of water and cut through the building with ease.

Just like that, it disappeared into the 238-meter tall building, leaving behind only a sharp explosion.

Seconds later, a louder shockwave erupted from somewhere inside the building. The Greek temple styled columns and relief windows on the building's exterior trembled violently, causing some debris to fall. The signs

of destruction did not end, as cracks soon appeared on the exterior of the building, and flaming energy began to shoot out —

In the next instant, the landmark that without a doubt was the tallest building in the Accelerated World, Roppongi Hills Tower, split its large form into countless fragments of debris, and began to collapse.

Such a phenomenon was stunning to behold, but to Haruyuki, the building's complete destruction only meant that his special skill gauge was filled up. The pop-up that had appeared to his left was far more important, which showed a system message telling him that he had gained Burst Points. In other words, that Incarnate attack had completely drained the HP gauge of their bitter enemy Black Vise — he was dead.

Of course, death was a mere inconvenience in the Accelerated World: one would only lose a few Points. If this were a normal battle, you would fully recover for next time; even in the Unlimited Field, you only had to wait an hour. But there were «exceptions».

“—— Senpai!”

Not letting go of their intertwined hands, Haruyuki turned around and shouted to Kuroyukihime:

“How is it!?”

The Black King shook her head at this extremely reduced question.

“No, judging by the number of Points he gave us, he looks to be Level 8...”

“..... I see..... ”

Haruyuki exhaled the breath trapped in his chest and murmured to himself.

If the «Restrainer» Black Vise had been Level 9 like Kuroyukihime, the when he died he should have been subject to the «Level 9 Sudden Death Rule», losing all his Points and being expelled from the Accelerated World. Considering Vise’s sheer experience and his statement that he was a part of the pioneering generation, Haruyuki thought there might be a high chance that he was Level 9 — but unfortunately he seemed to be Level 8.

Even so, once that avatar had been fatally struck by that Incarnate spear, he should have become a small «death marker» left on the ground, to be revived in an hour’s time. In theory, as long as they prevented him from fleeing and repeatedly defeated him, eventually they could take away all his Points. But...

“It would be really difficult to find that marker in this mess...”

Hearing Kuroyukihime say that, Haruyuki looked at the debris pile: the remains of Roppongi Hills Tower. This pyramid-shaped mountain had

probably tens of thousands of debris fragments in it, and searching through every single to find that death marker would be very difficult indeed.

“... Also, there are also plenty of shadows on the ground. Once he revives, he’ll run away. We don’t have a chance.”

“Yeah, you’re right... but since we defeated him once, it should serve as a message.”

Kuroyukihime replied, and gently released Haruyuki’s left hand with her right. *Clunk*. Her five slender fingers shattered.

“Ah...”

Hearing Haruyuki’s gasp, Kuroyukihime smiled warmly at him and said:

“Around two minutes. That’s a great new record.”

“... Senpai...”

Haruyuki reached out his right hand again and took the blade that had been snapped at the middle. There was so much that he wanted to say right now, but his heart was filled with so many conflicting emotions that he could not speak.

Everything... was not over yet. While he had managed to break free of the curse that had created «The Disaster» and the Armor itself had disappeared, some form of it was probably still part of Silver Crow's data in the system. They must separate it into an object with «purification», and only then would the mission be complete. And as for the Acceleration Research Society, postulated to be the source of the «ISS Kits», they had unknown motives and still needed to be investigated as well.

Haruyuki supported the heavily injured Kuroyukihime in his left arm, giving him the impulse to tightly embrace her beautiful form. Suppressing it with difficulty, he turned his hovering body slightly to the northeast.

He fixated onto the Tokyo Midtown Tower half a kilometer away, the scale of which was far grander than the Roppongi Hills Tower.

“Senpai, can you see it? On top of the Midtown Tower, that big, invisible Enemy hiding there?”

“..... Yeah.”

Kuroyukihime's soft reply came a few seconds later.

At a glance, there seemed to be nothing at the top of the tower, illuminated by the setting sun. But on closer inspection, one could detect «something» gargantuan, slightly refracting the sunlight.

“Iron Pound of the Green Legion Great Wall said that that’s the God-class Enemy «Archangel Metatron», It seems that someone managed to tame it and removed it from its dungeon to move it here.”

“..... So Metatron’s left the Cathedral. That means... we better not get close to that tower, unless the Space changes to the extremely rare «Hell» stage...”

“Yup. Last time we logged in, Senpai, the large explosion you guys saw to the south was Metatron reacting to Pound’s Rocket Punch and firing some really strong laser.”

“I see... Well, that explains the scale of the attack. That means, Midtown Tower is...”

Haruyuki continued Kuroyukihime’s train of thought.

“Yeah, that’s where the main body of the ISS Kits are... the headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society.”

“.....”

Kuroyukihime glared sharply at the large, faraway tower and kept silent for a while. After a few seconds, her voice slightly relaxed and she said:

“I really want to just barge in there right here, right now... but if we did that by ourselves, Fuuko and the others would get mad, so we’ll have to leave the fun of storming that castle for another day.”

Hearing that swift and fierce reply, the corner of Haruyuki’s mouth slackened somewhat behind his helmet visor. As though Kuroyukihime could feel that he was smiling, she too smiled lightly and changed her tone:

“Well, it’s about time to go back. The nearest Portal is...”

“Oh..... C-Crap, it was supposed to be in the Roppongi Hills Tower... Did it get destroyed with the building?”

Kuroyukihime laughed again seeing Haruyuki freak out.

“Ha ha ha, no worries. No attack can damage a Portal. Also, their coordinates are completely locked, so even if the building collapses, it’ll just be floating where it’s supposed to be.”

Hearing that, Haruyuki looked around and saw that there indeed was a blue oval floating in the air a few tens of meters below him. The light, pulsating like the surface of water, was without a doubt a one-way passage to the real world.

Carefully supporting Kuroyukihime’s injured body with his arms, he opened the silver wings that had regained their original sheen, and began to descend.

The hovering portal seemed to grow bigger and bigger, ready to receive them with a warm, welcoming light.

Just before entering the portal, Haruyuki turned to look around, taking in the vistas of the «Twilight» stage.

The streets of Roppongi extended to Shirokane and Shinagawa, and further out, the waters of Tokyo Bay reflected the dazzling gleam of the orange sunset. For some reason, this view awoke a nostalgia in Haruyuki's heart that almost made him cry.

The two of them stepped through the blue ring of light in the Unlimited Neutral Field and returned to the real world.

Soon, a soft object was forcibly pressed into Haruyuki's face, completely blocking his vision. For a moment he forgot where he was, and under what circumstances had he dived in, and both his hands flailed about.

Then, in his hands was a smooth, extremely silky feeling — of course, he had never touched real silk before — and he could not resist caressing it. This smooth feeling was from recently... Oh right, not long ago, he had collapsed while playing basketball and was sent to Umesato Middle School's nurse's office. Kuroyukihime had very brazenly crawled on top of him and directly connected with him, back then, touching her hair had felt very similar... No, it was completely the same...

“... Haruyuki-kun, you’ve worked so hard.”

The boy suddenly heard a soft voice in his left ear.

He instantly remembered where he was.

This was the living room of a rather beautiful house in a corner of the «URB Asagaya Residences» in south Asagaya, and right now he was sitting on a cushion placed by the window. As for the person hugging Haruyuki’s head tightly, she was the owner of this house, Haruyuki’s «Parent», commander of the Black Legion «Nega Nebulus», vice president of Umesato Middle School’s student council, the Black King Black Lotus, or Kuroyukihime.

... My first time coming to Senpai’s house... Direct connecting with her on the super huge bean bag, using the command to enter the Unlimited Neutral Field... and then.....

As soon as Haruyuki’s realization caught up with reality, his entire body began to tremble violently, and words began tumbling uncontrollably from of his lips.

“S-Sen... pai. I..... hurt..... you badly, so badly.....”

“Don’t talk about it anymore!”

Kuroyukihime's sharp voice interrupted Haruyuki's self-blame. The girl gently released Haruyuki from her embrace, looked at him from a close distance, and spoke slowly:

“You have nothing to apologize for. Whether it was the duel or other things to be one, you did beautifully. End of discussion. If you want to blame someone, blame me, because I didn't consider the possibility of an ambush...”

“What... What do you mean... I... should have taken precautions. I knew the place I was logging into was very close to «their» base...”

“No matter how many precautions we could have taken, to be honest, we wouldn't have been able to completely prevent that layer guy's attack. From this perspective... I guess both of us can say that things turned out pretty well. Besides... you and I can talk here just like how before we dove in...”

Kuroyukihime's warm, soft voice soothed Haruyuki's paralyzed senses. Just being here, letting her rub his head, was almost enough to send him drifting away. But then he remembered something and opened his eyes again.

“Ah... right, I remember... you said something before we connected, Senpai?”

“Hm? Did I?”

“Yeah... I recall it to be something... about after both of us come back safely...”

He turned to look, and saw...

Kuroyukihime’s pure white face had turned mysteriously turned a crimson shade of pink. Her upper body shot up, but perhaps she had moved too suddenly; she lost her balance and fell onto the bean bag.

Haruyuki reached out his hands to no avail. With a loud thump, the bottom of her nightgown-clad body fell onto the wooden floor. Two seconds later, the beauty in black got up as if nothing had happened, and purposefully cleared her throat.

“Ahem... I-I guess I said something like that. Um, well, I meant that if we came back safely I would treat you to something nice that I personally prepare to celebrate.”

While her expression and voice were rather stiff, most of Haruyuki’s consciousness had been distracted by the phrase «something nice that I personally prepare». After all, ever since around 6:30, when the six of them in the legion - no, seven including Kusakabe Rin - had sat down to enjoy a large plate of assorted sushi and maki rolls, he had had nothing else to eat. Even though his body had not exercise much, so much had exhausted him mentally. A quick and simple list included —

On June 20th, 2047, at 7:00pm, he and Shinomiya Utai/Ardor Maiden had dived into the inner sanctuary of the «Imperial Palace» in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and with the help of the mysterious warrior avatar Trilead Tetraoxide, had defeated the guarding Enemies there and left the Imperial Palace.

On the same day, they then encountered «Suzaku of the Four Gods» on the south palace bridge. Haruyuki had allowed Maiden to escape first, then had returned to rescue Kuroyukihime and Fuuko, who had been acting as a diversion and had gotten themselves trapped, and used the Incarnate flying skill «Light Speed» to ascend beyond the atmosphere. Then, with Kuroyukihime's critical Incarnate attack «Starburst Stream», they had defeated Suzaku, who had lost the protection of its flames.

On the same day, they then successfully retreated to Nakano Ward, and completed the «Ardor Maiden Rescue Mission». But, in order to look for Ash Roller who should have met up with them, Haruyuki left the group on his own once again.

On the same day, he ran into six ISS Kit-infected Burst Linkers on Meiji Street in Shibuya ward, one-sidedly killing Ash Roller. Haruyuki lost control and summoned the «Disaster Armor», which had been in seed form up until then, used the power of the sixth generation Chrome Disaster to massacre these Kit users, then left.

On the same day, he then ran into the Green King Green Grande and his bodyguard Iron Pound atop the Roppongi Hills Tower, and after a ferocious battle ending in Pound's defeat and a scratch on Grande's shield, he was Burst Out due to the «forced disconnection» that had taken place in the real world.

At 7:20pm, he had locked his fellow Legion members in the house and tried to run away, but had been caught by Fuuko's «Child» Ash Roller, or Kusakabe Rin, in the front garden of his apartment block. The two of them went to the car in the basement garage to talk for a long while, and then entered a direct connect duel.

At 7:40pm, he had been caught once again by Fuuko, Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime. He had promised them not to commit suicide. They left at 8:00pm, and he then he quietly did his homework in his room.

At 9:00pm, he had left a message to his mother that he was going out and left, but had ran into Kuroyukihime in the front concourse. He was then thrown into a taxi and brought to Kuroyukihime's home in south Asagaya. After a long talk, they once again entered the Unlimited Neutral Field.

At 10:15pm, on the observation deck of the Roppongi Hills Tower, he had dueled Black Vise, vice president of the «Acceleration Research Society». Even though he had fallen for the enemy's tricks and lost such a degree of control that he had never before, he had encountered the first generation Disaster in the depths of his imagination circuit —

Chrome Falcon. Discovering the secret of the creation of the «Disaster Armor», he had managed to break the curse.

So many things had happened in just over three hours, and according to Haruyuki's own calculations, he had probably expended over 2500 calories. Hence, he couldn't resist the temptation of Kuroyukihime saying she would «personally cook» for him.

Haruyuki also got off the bean bag and followed Kuroyukihime's nightgown figure into the kitchen. For a one-person residence, the kitchen was quite large, but the counter and electric stove looked brand new; not much different from the situation at the Arita resident. Also, no utensils were in sight round the kitchen, but Haruyuki rationalized it as the occupant having good housekeeping skills and had tidied the place up well. He then told Kuroyukihime, who was walking towards the fridge:

“S-Senpai, let me help. I'm not that good at cooking... but at least I can help peel potatoes or something...”

“Oh? That's pretty good, teach me how next time. Whenever I try peeling them, it seems that the potato's weight decreases by a lot.”

“O-Okay, anytime. Wait... *huh?*”

Hearing words that shouldn't really be coming from a gourmet chef, Haruyuki couldn't help but blink rapidly. Then the oversized fridge suddenly

swung open. It was not filled with a variety of vegetables, fish, meat, and fruits, but rather, countless white rectangular packages stacked neatly on top of each other.

“Haruyuki-kun, what sort of food do you want? Jap-Wes-Chi-Ita-Span-Ger-Fren?”

Hearing her say this with a straight face, Haruyuki immediately sank into thought. Putting aside the first big three, Japanese, Western, and Chinese, the following four were probably Italian, Spanish, German, and French... right? If that was the case, then he naturally had a question.

“U-Um... What’s the difference between «Wes» and «Ita-Span-Ger-Fren»?”

“Hm? Isn’t that obvious? «Wes» means Western food. I will say this though: it may be called Western food, but it’s actually traditional Japanese cuisine. I like the stewed beef and the baked macaroni the most.”

“I s-see... Th-Then, I’ll have the «Western» stewed beef please, Senpai...”

“Got it, then I’ll have the bake.”

With practiced movements, Kuroyukihime pulled out two boxes from the densely piled tower, placed them side by side into a high-output microwave, and pressed a button.

“It’ll be done in five minutes, so you can go wait by the dining table.”

... It was hard to determine whether this actually counted as handmade food. Well, at least she pressed the button herself. Comforting himself, Haruyuki quickly returned to the living room.

The steaming hot stewed beef was poured into a ceramic plate. Well, regardless of how it had been prepared, at least it tasted great. The seasoning was also lighter than most mass-produced frozen food, but it was pretty sweet, and plenty of shoot vegetables had also been included. Considering the especially bland packaging, it was probably a branded product from a well-known restaurant, and since salad was included, there also didn’t seem to be a problem with nutrition. But as Haruyuki rapidly moved the spoon between the plate and his mouth, he subconsciously found one similarity with the frozen pizza he often ate alone. That would be...

“Haruyuki-kun, let’s trade. Come on, open up.”

With that, a fork appeared near his mouth, and he opened wide on reflex. While it was obviously frozen food, the large piece of macaroni drenched in white sauce did taste ideally *al dente*, completely taking him away. Kuroyukihime smiled warmly as she looked at him, dropped her gaze to the table, and said:

“Then, I’ll have that large piece of carrot over there...”

“Ah, okay...”

“... The huge piece of beef next to it.”

“Ah, okay... Wait, heyy, how is that fair!? I was saving that one for later...”

“Blame yourself for agreeing without asking for the conditions. Okay, I’m opening up.”

After she was done talking, she closed her eyes and opened her mouth. Haruyuki could only sadly deliver the piece of beef he was saving for last. As he half-sadly, half-anxiously sent the spoon to the other side of the table, Kuroyukihime mercilessly closed her mouth, chewed and swallowed with a flourish, she then happily opened her eyes and smiled.

“Yup, food tastes better when you have someone to eat with, all right.”

— Those words touched right upon what Haruyuki had just been thinking of.

Yes — no matter how luxurious the food was, Kuroyukihime probably sat at this table every evening by herself. Eating alone was a lonely thing. Whether it was good to eat or nutritious, one would always feel lonely, and Haruyuki knew that feeling very well.

“Hey, Senpai...”

Pushing away the sorrow from his piece of meat being taken away, Haruyuki spoke with a chestful of emotion.

“Hm? Isn’t it a bit too late to get it back from me?”

“N-No, I’m not talking about the meat, I... um...”

As if the spoon in his right hand were a good-luck charm, Haruyuki stared straight at the pair of eyes 80 centimeters away from him, black as night, and said:

“Um, I’m not sure whether it will come true immediately, but... I wanted to say... I hope, someday... we can eat together everyday...”

There should be a way. Well, ‘everyday’ might be a stretch, but there should be a way to reduce the number of days Kuroyukihime had to eat alone.

Perhaps she could go to Haruyuki’s house after school, or think of a way to help Haruyuki avoid the enforced time when he had to leave school, so that he could wait in the student council office for her.

Haruyuki had originally meant something like that.

But Kuroyukihime’s reaction was somewhat unexpected. The fork in her right hand dropped into the casserole plate, and as she reached to pick it up,

her finger touched the boiling hot sauce, causing her to cry out “Ow!” and she quickly reached to touch the ice-cold glass of water, and ended up knocking that over.

Fortunately, it was almost empty, so Haruyuki caught the rolling glass and sat it down properly, at the same time opening his eyes wide and looking to the other side of the table.

Kuroyukihime was frozen there, her left hand still held in front of her chest grasping her right hand. The amount of redness in her face increased, but her expression was unclear: was it shock, or perhaps some other completely different emotion?

“..... Again? Really, again?”

“Huh? A-Again... What again? Didn’t I talk about having meals together before?”

“No... this is the first time you’ve used this method... but this is the second time you’ve tried to interrupt the workings of my circulatory system.”

She sighed after uttering that utterly bewildering sentence, and then looked straight at Haruyuki, who was lost for words, and let out a very warm smile that Haruyuki seemed to have witnessed before, and said:

“..... All right. No matter how many times, I promise you.”

Saying that, the girl stood and walked around the dining table to Haruyuki's side and stretched out her right hand. Then, she slowly enclosed it into a fist, and extended only her little finger.

“Come on, let's pinkie promise.”

Obediently and gingerly, Haruyuki raised his hand and hooked his rotund little finger onto hers. Kuroyukihime then slowly shook their hands up and down, smiled again, and said softly:

“I promise. Let's have dinner together every day someday.”

## Chapter 11

On the next day, Friday, June 21st, at 7:00 pm.

Just like yesterday, the six current members of the Nega Nebulus were gathered in the living room of the Arita household. Unfortunately (or was it?), there was no sign of Ash Roller — Kusakabe Rin. Apparently it was because she had broken her curfew of 8:00 pm the night before that her father had grounded her for today.

“No wonder, I always thought that someone like her wouldn’t come out for night battles too often...”

Chiyuri said in realization, and Rin’s «Parent» Fuuko chuckled:

“That girl’s not good at controlling any form of transportation. Never mind electric scooters, she’s terrible even with a bicycle, which lacks its own motive power. There are few in the Accelerated World who are a «Perfect Match» with their avatars, but it’s probably only Rin who has something like a «Perfect Mismatch».”

“Ha ha, yeah! But to a lesser degree, so is Haru!”

Haruyuki was taken very aback by conversation suddenly switching to him, and the noodles on his chopsticks nearly slid off.

Since it would be rude to ask Chiyuri's mother to prepare so much food for several days in a row, everyone had decided to prepare their own meals. "Preparing their own meals" actually involved only the two boys were cooking noodles, while the girls prepared dipping sauces and a variety of side dishes. Preparation only took about 20 minutes, but the cold noodles tasted wonderful in the sweltering June heat, and besides that, they were eating with friends.

Haruyuki fished out more noodles from the large glass bowl into his mouth with some Japanese ginger slices, while retorting:

"I... I have plenty of similarities with Silver Crow... for example, neither of us can take many attacks, both of us burn fuel at ungodly rates, both of us hate getting shocked by static electricity, and more..."

[UI> Those are all weaknesses.]

Shinomiya Utai had very politely placed her chopsticks down on the provided holder before typing that out, which caused everyone to laugh.

15 minutes later, after everyone had finished eating and put their utensils back in the kitchen, they moved to the sofa set. Traces of anxiety could still be seen on everyone's faces.

Kuroyukihime looked around at everyone from the seat of honor and said in a calm voice:

“— As I said earlier, thanks to Haruyuki-kun’s efforts last night, we’ve managed to remove the negative Incarnation from the «Disaster Armor». The armor is now a normal Enhanced Armament with no will of its own... or so it should be.”

Feeling Kuroyukihime’s gaze on him, Haruyuki nodded hard in response.

He had typed out a long email to the other four earlier in the afternoon detailing what had happened last night after everyone had left — of course, he couldn’t help but leave out the fact that he had been to Kuroyukihime’s house.

“However, in the system, the Armor is still a parasitic existence residing somewhere within Haruyuki-kun’s avatar. If the Armor is not completely removed with Utai’s «Purification Ability», those deadbeat Six Kings might not acknowledge the complete destruction of the Armor — Utai?”

Feeling the gaze on her, the youngest girl present typed on her keyboard with a decisive look...

[UI> Leave it to me. That is the only reason I am here... However, since the target of purification is something on the level of the «Seven Arcs», it probably will take a while. I think it will take an hour, at least.]

“Yep. That is to say, besides Haruyuki-kun and Utai, the other four of you will be responsible for ensuring their safety from Enemy attacks or other Burst Linkers during this time. Though I don’t think there’s a high chance of the latter happening. Of course, we’ll choose a place far away from where any large-scale Enemies roam, but everyone already knows that they can be attracted by the «scent of Incarnation»...”

Kuroyukihime closed her mouth, and Takumu, with a smile that put the others at ease, continued:

“If we do run into something, we can earn back the Points we used to dive in, Legion Master.”

“Heh heh, exactly. If there is any danger, we just need to lure the Enemy to Shinjuku, and leave it to the Blue Legion Leonids or some other Legion’s hunting squad, and we’ll be fine.”

Everyone could only smile awkwardly upon hearing the «actually very scary Master Raker» say that. Just like that, the meeting ended, and like yesterday, they all direct connected with each other, using the Arita family server as a safety mechanism.

This was the fourth time this week that Haruyuki was diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field. But when he called out the «Unlimited Burst» command along with everyone else, he did not feel any unease or fear, only a sense of trust in his comrades.

Haruyuki knew more than full well of what the «Shrine Maiden of Purifying Flames» Ardor Maiden, one of the «Elements» of the first generation Nega Nebulus — Shinomiya Utai was capable of. She had defeated the ISS Kit-equipped Olive Glove completely unscathed, and then set Bush Utan along with the entire stage completely ablaze in one fell swoop. Then, even the gigantic knight Enemies that guarded the main hall of the «Imperial Palace» had been trapped and melted completely by her pool of lava, which led Haruyuki to believe that in the entire Accelerated World, her flames no doubt held within them the greatest attack power of all.

But Utai's ability was not based on «destruction», as Haruyuki would soon learn for himself.

The location that had been selected for the purification ritual was the grounds of Koen-ji — not the neighborhood, but the large temple not far from Haruyuki's apartment from which the district took its name. Most thought Ardor Maiden to be a shrine maiden, so choosing a shrine for the ritual had seemed more fitting, but she herself had said that there were no problems with a temple, and there were no nearby shrines, so they hadn't much of a choice.

Nonetheless, under the moonlight of the «Moonlight» stage, the temple gave off a unmatched aura of divinity and sanctity, which didn't seem to exclude any of the shrine maidens in their white *haori* kimonos and red *hakama*

trousers. Utai had Haruyuki stand in the middle of the vast space, moved three meters away from him, and placed her right arm forward.

Flames appeared at the tips of her small fingers, forming into a white fan. With a clap, the shrine maiden opened the paper fan, and began waving it from left to right.

Quickly and one-by-one, tall red pillars of flame shot up to Haruyuki's forward-right, forward-left, rear-right, and rear-left position. Far away, Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Chiyuri and Takumu were watching with bated breath as Utai pulled the fan back to her front, and began to move forward on tiptoed feet.

“*«Atara sakura no... atara sakura no ka toga wa, chiru zo urami naru...»*”<sup>[2]</sup>

A clear «song»<sup>[3]</sup> began to resonate in the cold air of the Unlimited Neutral Field. The four pillars of flame around Haruyuki began to erupt in conflagrations. His entire vision was dyed red, and a physical force lifted Silver Crow's body about a meter up.

But he was not afraid at all, and submitted himself entirely into the power. He felt absolutely no burns or pain, and while the HP gauge at the top left hand corner of his vision remained untouched, he could feel intense, overwhelming fire burning — no, «purifying» — something. According to Kuroyukihime, the flames were burning away the «parasitic state» in the system, but when

Haruyuki subjected himself to the burning flames, the words «cause» and «attachment» appeared in his mind.

Yes — in the beginning it was indeed the Armor that had parasitized on Silver Crow's back. Then, after many times when the sentient «Beast» within the Armor had spoken to Haruyuki, they had bonded further, finally awakening him as the sixth generation Chrome Disaster. To say that Haruyuki had never felt any «attachment» towards this force — towards the overwhelmingly destructive power of the Armor — would be a lie. From another perspective, if not for this attachment, he would never have bonded so much with the Armor.

Haruyuki felt that such thoughts that had developed in his heart were being slowly burnt away by the strong yet cooling flames produced by Shinomiya Utai's Incarnation. He closed his eyes, spread out his limbs, at the same time calling out to the existence that had fought alongside him, deep inside his heart.

— Hey, «Beast».

— I actually don't hate you. Working with you... was a pleasure.

— In the future... if we meet again in a different way, let's have a proper «duel» then. Be it one-on-one, or even a tag battle, let's have a proper «duel».

Haruyuki did not received an answer, but he felt that, imprisoned somewhere in the dark flames, that hideous yet beautiful «Beast», was crying out to the moon from somewhere very far away.

Ardor Maiden's elegant dance lasted for a full hour and 30 minutes.

They had worried about being disturbed by Enemies or some other Burst Linkers, but fortunately that never happened. The shrine maiden's movements gradually slowed, and when she finally halted, the pillars of flame had also weakened into countless sparks, dissipating into the night sky.

Haruyuki landed on his feet, and noticed that two small items had appeared in his hands. They were cards that emitted a pure silver glow under the moonlight.

One of the cards had a line of words — [STAR CASTER] carved on them, while on the other the words [THE DESTINY] could be seen shining. The sword and the armor. These were the initial forms of the «binary stars» that had appeared in the early days of the Accelerated World, changing the fate of countless Burst Linkers. Since these two had returned to their sealed card state, that meant that the [THE DISASTER] no longer existed in this world —

Haruyuki grasped the cards firmly, took a few steps forward, and bowed deeply to the spent Shinomiya Utai.

“... Thank you, Mei-san. It’s over... It’s all over...”

“... I could not have done it alone. Kuu-san helped me bid a proper farewell to the «Armor».”

Saying that, she stretched out a small hand, gently rubbing Haruyuki’s helmet. He raised his head, and behind Utai, she saw Kuroyukihime, Fuuko, Chiyuri, Takumu all with the same smile.

Ardor Maiden took a few steps backward and was supported by Sky Raker, while Black Lotus moved forward on a cushion of air, nodded, and said:

“Crow, you’ve done well. Like this, no one should be able to blame you at the «Seven Kings Conference» on Sunday. I believe the main topic there would be how to deal with the ISS Kit and the Acceleration Research Society, and by then you can make your stand with a clear conscience. Also, as for how to deal with these two Enhanced Armaments, I will leave it entirely up to you, so please think carefully before making your decision.”

Hearing the Legion Master’s words of unconditional trust in him filled Haruyuki with joy, but he shook his head and said:

“No, about that... I’ve actually already decided.”

“Oh?”

Haruyuki looked away from Kuroyukihime who had her head slightly tilted, looked at everyone in turn, and continued:

“Everyone’s tired, especially Mei-san, so to say this sort of thing might be unreasonable, but... could everyone please help me out once more?”

Haruyuki first touched his HP gauge, opening the «option menu», and temporarily placed the two cards into his almost empty inventory. He then looked for some objects to destroy outside the temple, filling his special skill gauge. Then, with Utai in his right arm and Chiyuri in his left, he ascended into the sky, and allowed Takumu to grab his legs. Kuroyukihime had Fuuko activate her booster-type Enhanced Armament «Gale Thruster» to carry her.

Like that, the six of them followed Loop 7 southwards. Past Setagaya Ward, then to the east down Meguro Avenue, past the center of Tokyo. Their destination was «Shibaura Pier», facing Tokyo Bay.

Haruyuki landed at the Shibaura rest stop of the Shuto Expressway’s northbound Odaiba Route, and while waiting for Fuuko and Kuroyukihime who were relying on the Thruster’s long distance jumps, compared his surroundings to his own muddled memories.

The warehouses at the docks had transformed into beautiful temple-like structures under the «Moonlight» stage. At the intersection of the a truck route passing through these buildings and another westbound road —

“... Right here.”

Haruyuki muttered to himself, then said to the other five who didn't understand what was going on:

“There's... an object there. I think it was dropped near that intersection.”

“Object...? Not a card, but an object?”

He nodded to Takumu's reply.

“But aren't dropped objects cleared away every «Transition» in the Unlimited Neutral Field?”

Chiyuri asked. Haruyuki nodded, then shook his head.

“That's usually the case, but I do remember hearing that there are some very important things that won't go away after a few days... no, even years, even if a Transition happens. Right, Senpai?”

He looked at Kuroyukihime, and the Burst Linker with perhaps the highest experience among them nodded.

“Yes, that is indeed the case... but items that can last for eternity are extremely rare. Like the proof that one has completed a «Legion Master Quest»... the pass to the Four Great Dungeons...”

“And the key to a Home.”

Fuuko supplied nonchalantly. Haruyuki nodded forcefully and said:

“That’s it! Can everyone help me find a «key»?”

Under the «Moonlight» stage, there was a layer of very fine sand on the ground, which made it very difficult to look for things. But compared to the «Rotting Forest» stage where the ground became a poisonous swamp, or the «Purgatory» stage where worms wriggled around all over the place, this wasn’t half bad. With that in mind, Haruyuki began searching with his bare hands in the white sand under the large intersection.

To be honest, was unable to prove that the «key» was buried here. But he believed that some sort of will, or someone, had asked him to come here. If that very long dream he had in the Imperial City — that tragic story, had indeed been a part of history, he would be able to find the key here. When he was very young, he and his parents had gone to Okutama to climb mountains, and had found a small obsidian arrow on the hillside. He believed that this key was probably like that stone tool, waiting quietly for someone to find it.

After searching through the sand a few hundred times, he finally touched something hard.

He stopped what he was doing, and then slowly pulled out an object from beneath the sand. It was an item that had been through countless ages — perhaps about seven thousand years — a tiny silver key that reflected the light yet showed no blemishes at all.

“..... Found it.....”

Haruyuki muttered, and stood up. His companions realized what he was doing, stopped their own searches, and gathered around him. Haruyuki raised the small object, gleaming under the moonlight and let everyone take a good look at it. He then said again:

“Found it. This is what I was looking for.”

“Crow... what key is this?”

Hearing Chiyuri’s question, Haruyuki nodded in reply:

“I’ll bring everyone there now. This key isn’t mine, of course... but I think its owner would appreciate it.”

Haruyuki carefully placed the small key he had found into his inventory, and made his way towards the next target. This time, there was no need to fly long distances. From Shibaura Pier, they crossed Rainbow Bridge into the south of Odaiba, landing not far from somewhere called «Harumifuto Park» in the real world.

Next to the narrow road, there was a small cottage that was different from its surroundings in both color and other geographical features. If Haruyuki was not holding the small key he had just found, it was possible that they would not be able to locate the house no matter how much they looked. This was because only after an astronomical number of Burst Points had been spent at one of the «Shops» dotting the Unlimited Neutral Field to buy a key, would the player have the right to enter what was known as a «Player Home».

Bathed in the gentle moonlight, the pure white stone walls of the house very much resembled Kuroyukihime's house, which he had visited last night. Haruyuki took a few steps into the small garden, turned around, and told his comrades:

“This is the Home of «Chrome Falcon» and «Saffron Blossom».”

Hearing what he had said, the five of them opened their eyes wide. He had only given them a brief overview of the story of the «Disaster Armor», but they all seemed to come to a quick realization and guessed as to why

Haruyuki had painstakingly attempted to search out the key, and come to this place.

“Then... back there, that intersection at Shibaura Pier was...”

Haruyuki nodded at Utai’s softly uttered question.

“Yes, that was where Blossom lost all of her Points, and disappeared from this world... and also, where Falcon had become the first Chrome Disaster, and undergone Judgment Blow. I was thinking, regardless of which one of them held the key, it must have been left there.

“I see... That’s right, there’s no better place than this for the final resting place of these two Enhanced Armaments...”

Kuroyukihime murmured, glanced at Haruyuki and nodded deeply at him, as if she were praising the decision.

Haruyuki nodded in reply and opened his inventory, materializing each of the three items into real objects. With the two cards in his left hand, and the key in his right, he approached the house.

As he approached the door, the small door opened noiselessly without him inserting the key into the lock.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

With that, he entered the house.

It was very carefully adorned with various furnishings and household items, and even under the pale moonlight, it still managed to make one feel rather welcomed. Yet the rooms, having laid undisturbed for so long, exuded a deep loneliness. This was to be expected, since the two people who used to live in this house no longer existed in this world.

Looking back, Haruyuki saw that Kuroyukihime and everyone else had decided to wait outside the vestibule, gazing at him quietly. Even so, he couldn't keep everyone waiting for too long. Moreover, he had already made Utai, exhausted from the long «Purification», spend nearly another two hours with him.

Haruyuki once again faced the inside of the house, and said softly:

“... Blossom-san, thank you for helping me, giving me a way to return to someone important to me... Falcon-san, from now on I will continue to think of what you wanted, and what you wanted to destroy..... Thank you.”

With his poor oratory, he was only able to convert the countless emotions in his heart into one sentence. But Haruyuki thought that, even so, he had conveyed what those two needed to know. Thus, he took a step forward, gently lay the two cards on the dining table where the two lovers had used to

eat together, talk together, and be with each other, then placed the silver key next to it.

“... Goodbye.”

Haruyuki took a step back, and turned around, walking back to where his comrades were waiting for him.

But just as he was about to step out of the room, he suddenly felt as if someone was calling out to him.

When Haruyuki looked back again, he saw ——

Beside the table stood a skinny avatar in slightly deep silver armor, much like Silver Crow. By his side, an yellow orange female avatar was sitting on the white chair.

On the girl's knees was curled a tiny black cat, its eyes closed as it slept blissfully.

The three silhouettes trembled and flashed under the moonlight, but Haruyuki was certain that they were not mere illusions. It meant that this boy and this girl, along with the cat created by their mutual feelings, had finally returned to where they should be.

—— Goodbye. May we... meet again.

Blinking back tears, Haruyuki bid them a silent farewell once more. Then, he took a large step with his right leg, and returned to his comrades who were waiting outside.

## Chapter 12

On the day after, June 22, 2:30pm.

Haruyuki was walking alone in the back courtyard of Umesato Middle School.

Since today was a Saturday, classes had already ended in the morning. Rumor had it that at the end of the last century, there were quite a few years where almost all schools practiced a two day weekend, meaning that both Saturdays and Sundays were off days. That was truly an age to dream about, but around the 2010s, as more and more schools elected to restart Saturday morning lessons, by present day in 2047 even the Ministry of Education was acting like two day weekends never existed.

But Haruyuki couldn't just lounge at home for the entire day even if there were no Saturday classes. That was because every Saturday at 5:00pm would be Brain Burst's weekly «Territory Battles». In fact, it could be said that the Legion's reason for existing was to participate in these team battles (with at least three versus three) that determined which Legion had the right to occupy what territory.

The «Nega Nebulus» of the past had managed to take over the entire Sugunami Ward's battle areas with only five people, but today onward, that number would increase to six, due to the return of a member of the previous four «Elements», Ardor Maiden — Shinomiya Utai. In that case, not only

could the Legion split into two three member groups and defend two pieces of territory at once, it also meant that a long-awaited «red long-range type» member had joined. In the past, their opponents would frequently have heavily-armored vanguards at the front and hard-hitters at the rear, something which troubled them frequently. But from today onwards, it wouldn't be so easy to defeat their team. He also hoped that he could be in the same team as Utai when they split off into groups, and then he could say tough-sounding lines like “Mei-san, I'll deal with the ones at the rear, please cover me with your firepower!” .....

Somehow, he had ended up in the middle of the backyard with a smile on his face so wide that his cheeks were loose, so he quickened his footsteps and hurried forward. Of course, he was about to go to the small wooden hut in the northwest of the school that virtually no students knew about.

In all honesty, ever since last autumn when Nega Nebulus had entered the territory battles with only three people, Saturday afternoons were always a maddeningly boring time for Haruyuki. After 4th period homeroom ended at 12:50pm, he could leave the classroom, but even if he went to have lunch at the empty cafeteria, that could last until 1:30pm at most, still a long time from the start of the battle at 5:00pm.

Kuroyukihime had student council work, Takumu and Chiyuri had club activities, and so he could not ask them to kill time with him. One could join the battle from any part of Suginami, so he could just go home, but that way he could not join Kuroyukihime and the others in celebrating their victory (or

ruminating their defeat), so it was quite lonely. Before, he would go to the library to leaf through paper books, or try to make a high score on his long-missed squash game, but that sort of solitary life had come to an end this week.

Because Haruyuki had also finally been granted a task to occupy himself with on Saturday afternoons, and that was as the chairman of the school's Animal Raising Committee.

Haruyuki approached the small wooden shed, looked through the wire mesh, and greeted what was inside. This had become a daily ritual. But while it was called a small shed, it was actually pretty roomy inside, containing two small perches. On the one to the left, a bird grasping the tallest branch with a single leg, which had become its default position, and closing its eyes as though it were sleeping. It was a bird of prey about 20 centimeters tall, had gray stripes on its white fur, with its beak buried in the fur at its chest — the northern white-faced scops owl «Hou».

Since they had only known each other for five days, Hou didn't seem to trust Haruyuki yet; but seemingly detecting someone's presence, it opened its right eye, looking at Haruyuki with a beautiful golden-red pupil.

“Hey, Hou. It's kinda hot out today.”

As Haruyuki talked to it, he operated his virtual desktop. The branch that Hou-san had perched on had weight and temperature sensors in it, and both

values were within expected range. By the looks of it, much of the weight it had lost when it was first moved here had been regained.

The owl, somewhat perturbed, stretched out its wings in response to Haruyuki, and then went back to sleep. Smiling wryly, Haruyuki prepared to wirelessly open the electronic lock, to take the sheets inside the shed out for cleaning. At that moment —

He heard the sound of small feet stepping on the moss-covered ground behind him. Haruyuki thought that it might have been the arrival of Housan's original caretaker — Shinomiya Utai, a fourth year student at Matsunogi Elementary School. He turned around, and to his surprise, it was someone he was completely unfamiliar with.

This person was wearing a white blouse and a slightly green-hued skirt, the uniform of Umesato Middle School. The ribbon at her chest was blue, indicating she was a second year. Her long curly hair, thinly trimmed brows, and eyeliner that was just thick enough to avoid a teacher's reprimand, all indicated that this person was at a level in the school hierarchy that was far out of Haruyuki's league. The Neuro Linker that peeked out from beneath her collar was glossy pink, lined with rhinestone decorations, the so-called «Decorin» model.

She was pretty, all right, but she gave Haruyuki a slightly feeling of oppression. Haruyuki looked at her face for all of 0.2 seconds, then averted his eyes towards the ground, and asked incoherently:

“Um, uh, may I ask... Did you drop something? If so, I’ll post a notice on the school lost and found board if I find it...”

The reason he said this was that he was unable to determine any other reason for a student like her to come to the back courtyard, but a few seconds later, the answer he received was even more unexpected.

“Ahhh, you actually forgot who I am, Chairman.”

“Huh?...”

Haruyuki’s head swung up on reflex, this time looking at her face for 0.5 seconds, and then he began to feel as if he had met her before. Of course, they were in the same year of the same school, so he probably had brushed past in the corridors already, but by the looks of that it, that was not the case... No, wait, she called me Chairman? Chairman of the Animal Raising Committee?

“Ah... R-Right, I remember you. Um... You’re in Class B... I-Iza...”

Haruyuki desperately shoveled around the bottom layer of his memory for the name, but his sentence was interrupted by her very fierce voice correcting him.

“It’s Izeke! Izeke Reina.”

Haruyuki dared not look at her face, and could only nod.

Even though he had completely forgotten about her existence, Izeke-san was one of Haruyuki’s colleagues, also a member of the Animal Raising Committee. On the first day of the week, the administration had chosen three members from second year to accept the pet (Hou) that had been raised by Matsunogi, a sister institution of Umesato Middle School, and she had been one of them. Haruyuki had bravely volunteered to be chairman, and hence he was not supposed to forget the names and faces of his members.

Haruyuki briefly entered a state of panic, his mind full of the trouble he had just gotten himself into, but fortunately, Izeke did not pursue the matter, instead taking large steps towards the hut and looking through the wire mesh, saying in a voice that was not as fierce as before,

“Ohh, wow, there’s really an owl here. Wow, he’s so furry.”

Putting aside her manner of speaking, her tone sounded very genuinely surprised, and since Hou was clearly asleep, she was also thoughtful enough to lower her voice. This took Haruyuki out of his slightly shocked state, and he nodded and said:

“Y-Yeah, an owl... a northern white-faced scops owl.”

Haruyuki added apprehensively. Izeki-san glanced back at him, tossed her head of hair once, and asked:

“What’s the difference between a regular owl and a scops owl?”

“Ah, um... A scops owl is a type of owl... Strictly speaking, it belongs to the owl family.”

“Really? What’s its name?”

“Hou.”

“... That’s a pretty simple name. Who gave it to him?”

“I h-heard it was by majority vote.”

Even though he was just barely managing to answer her questions, it was still a conversation. Izeki-san nodded with a “Hmpf!” and looked towards the shed. Placing a hand on her mouth, she called its name softly.

“Hou, Hooou.”

Haruyuki thought that the grumpy old owl didn’t care much for people, and so it probably wouldn’t respond to someone it was meeting for the first time in broad daylight, but when Hou heard Izeki-san’s call, it suddenly opened its

eyes, both of them. It turned its head, as if to identify the person in front of the mesh, and then something shocking happened: it spread its wings wide and flew off from the perch.

The elegant sight of Hou flying about the shed caused Izeki-san to cheer:

“Wow, awesome, he’s flying! He’s flying! Wow, that’s amazing!”

*The first time I came, Hou only opened an eye at me, so why is he giving her special treatment?* But Hou paid no notice to him, flying a full five rounds before returning to its perch. It stretched out a leg, folded its ears and returned to its resting state. Izeki-san continued staring at it. Haruyuki watched her profile, and asked hesitantly:

“... Um, well, Izeki-san... Why... did you suddenly come today...?”

She immediately glared at Haruyuki, scaring him so much that he couldn’t move.

“I’m also a member; I can’t come for no reason, can I?”

“W-Well, you’re not wrong... But, um, on the first day, you didn’t seem particularly pleased to be a member... or so I thought...”

“Yeah, yeah, at that time I didn’t feel like it at all, and since you as the chairman said it was fine, I just went home. But! After seeing you update the log every day, I kinda regretted going back, and I thought that making you clean up all by yourself was too much! Is that not okay?”

Unsure whether she was apologizing to him or blaming herself, Haruyuki shook his head repeatedly and continued:

“N-No, of course it’s okay.”

“So I thought I’d come and apologize earlier, but the chairman refused to give us any work? Every day he’d do all the work and then update the log by himself, so I had to personally drop by! What’s wrong with that?”

“N-No, nothing’s wrong, that’s fine, of course.”

Haruyuki shook his head repeatedly again, frantically piecing together the mess of information in his head, and finally reaching a conclusion. He looked at Izeki speculatively, and asked with caution:

“Uh... S-So, Izeki-san, you’re here for committee activities... to take care of Hou... Right?”

“I said that at the beginning!”

... Did she? Haruyuki stopped himself from entering deep thought, and slowly exhaled the sigh that had been building in his chest.

If that were the case, then even if this person was from a clique that Haruyuki never normally associated with, and a girl at that, he would have welcomed the person, to be honest. After all, the shed was quite large and cleaning it was exhausting, and especially since he was alone, he had to take extra care while opening and closing the door. Haruyuki filled his just-vacated lungs with June air tinted with the smell of green leaves, then mustered his courage and said:

“Well... Uh, there’s plenty of leaves in front of the shed again, so let’s sweep that up first. Just use the broom to sweep everything into a pile.”

“OK.”

Luckily, Izeki-san accepted the broom Haruyuki passed over, without a “I can’t be bothered” or “So annoying.” He watched her sweep up the slightly wet leaves with stiff movements, then relaxed and got to work himself.

Hou took no notice of the two people working in front of the wire mesh, and continued napping on the perch. Looking at the bird that had completely settled down five days after moving, Haruyuki spoke to it in his heart as he swept.

... Hou, I have to properly thank you as well.

... This is my first time taking care of animals, but instead, you've taught me a lot. You told me the meaning of living... and flying. Though I can't express it properly in words, I think it's because I met you, that back then, I could fly faster, higher, than Suzaku of the Four Gods.

... Whether I'm in the real world or the Accelerated World, I've always been so useless... But, lately, I feel that... I've been able to take a step forward, slowly, one at a time...

Haruyuki turned these thoughts over in his head, and just as he was really about to take a step forward —

At that moment.

Someone pulled hard on the back of his shirt.

“.....!?”

Haruyuki opened his eyes wide and looked back, and saw another completely unexpected person. This person indeed was wearing a school uniform, but the uniform of Umesato Middle School was not ivory colored with a plaid skirt. She had a head of slightly curled short hair, a bright green Neuro Linker, her right fingers tugging on Haruyuki's shirt, and for some reason, her eyes watery.



He didn't expect her to come here, but she was not a stranger. As his right cheek grew stiff, Haruyuki asked in a cracking voice:

“Ku-Kusakabe-san... You, you, why are you here?”

Then her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

This girl, Kusakabe Rin — controller of the Level 5 avatar «Ash Roller», a member of the Green Legion Great Wall, appeared neither to hear the question that Haruyuki asked nor the one he did not ask. All she did was opened her mouth very slightly and ask:

“Excuse me... Who, are you?”

That was not directed at Haruyuki; Rin was looking at a wide-eyed Izeki-san, the Animal Raising Committee member a distance away, still grasping the bamboo broom. Haruyuki, unable to comprehend the situation, stood where he was. Izeki-san walked over with large strides, and spoke in a slightly thorny voice:

“I should be asking who you are. This uniform is from that rich girls' school in Shibuya, isn't it? What's a rich girl like you doing here?... Wait, huh? What? Is this what I think it is?”

Haruyuki did not know what on earth she was talking about, but from the look in her eyes as she between himself and Rin he realized that the situation was bad, and frantically waving his left hand to try and salvage the situation.

“Iiiiiizeki-san, p-p-p-please wait a second!”

Then he dragged Rin, who was still grabbing on to his shirt, to the side of the second school building, asking rapidly in a small voice:

“H-H-H-H-Hey Kusakabe-san...”

“My brother’s Kusakabe too, just «Rin» is fine.”

“R... R-R-R-R-Rin-san, um, this... Why are you here? The territory battle is tonight... Ah, n-n-no wonder, you want to dive in from here? Would this mean...”

— Would this mean that everything was over, and she was jumping ship to our Legion today? Leaving Great Wall and joining Nega Nebulus? That would also mean that, from today onwards, that apocalyptic rider who kept going on about *I’m Mega Lucky!* would be one of our own...?

Or so Haruyuki guessed, but Rin tilted her neck and said:

“I’ll join, territory battle. But... today, I’m still, on the offensive side. Because changing Legions and stuff like that... is up to, my brother...”

“Ah, I s-see...”

As Haruyuki felt an emotion that both resembled relief and regret at the same time, he nodded his head, but then his eyes widened:

“... Wait, o-o-o-offensive side? B-B-B-But, there needs to be at least three people in a territory battle... Where are the other two...?”

“I asked them to waiting on the border between Shibuya and Suginami... They’re Uu-kun, and...”

By “Uu-kun”, she was probably referring to Bush Utan, the guy who littered his speech with the word «d’yeah». By the looks of it, although Utan had once lost himself to the seductive power of the ISS Kit, after being betrayed and hunted by his comrades, he had regained his sense self. Even though the Kit still remained on the avatar, perhaps after today’s battle, they could ask Ardor Maiden to help purify him.

“... The other one is Iron Pound-san.”

“Hm, I see. Even if Utan is an enemy, I’m also happy that he’s recovered... Wait, huh, huuuuhhhh?”

Rin had mentioned the third person quite calmly, but the name made Haruyuki cry in surprise. If he was not wrong, that would mean Rin's team would include seat number 3 of Great Wall's «Six Armor», the terrifying fist fighter nicknamed «Iron Fist»...

“Heeyy, chairman! How long are you going to whisper into each other's ears! Our work's still not done!”

Izeki-san called out, somewhat annoyed, forcing Haruyuki to once again salvage the situation. He had to successfully finish the committee activities before thinking about the territory battle. Although unsure about how he should explain Rin's presence to Izeki-san, he had to say it properly, for fear that by next week it could become a terrifying rumor that spread across the entire second floor of Umesato's main school building.

Allowing Rin to continue grasping his shirt, he dragged her back to the vicinity of the shed, and in an scratchier voice, he recited the explanation he had managed to cough up.

“Um, Izeki-san, this is Kusakabe-san, and, um, you know there's a special member in the Animal Raising Committee from Matsunogi Academy right? She's a friend of a friend of that special member, and she's here to help today...”

That wasn't a complete lie, because the so-called special member Shinomiya Utai's «friend» Kurasaki Fuuko was Kusakabe Rin's «Master». “Coming

here to help” was something Haruyuki had made up, but since it was a *fait accompli* that things had gotten to this stage, he had no choice but to ask Rin to come and help.

“Hmmmmm.”

He didn’t know if Izeki-san had even accepted that explanation; she dragged out her tone, then and looked from Rin to Haruyuki, continuing:

“... You really have your ways, huh, chairman? Am I in the way of something good?”

“I-I-I didn’t do anything, okay! And y-y-you aren’t in the way at all, having you here is really a huge help, a huge help!”

Hearing Haruyuki speak frightfully, Izeki-san seemed to finally understand; she tossed her curls hard and said:

“Then I’ll keep sweeping. I’m done piling the leaves, what next? Burn them?”

“Th-Th-That would call a ton of police cars and fire engines here, a ton of them!”

“I’m kidding.”

His colleague laughed triumphantly, and walked towards the small wooden shed. Haruyuki also exhaled a large breath of air, passing the broom in his right hand to Rin, who had finally let go of his shirt, and walking to the toolbox next to the shed to retrieve the dustpan and trash bags...

In that instant, a bolt of electricity flashed across his eyebrows.

——— Murderous intent...? He was just about to leap backward, but the sound that heralded the arrival of a new danger echoed through the back courtyard.

“Ahh! Haru, what’s going on!?”

He was so shocked that his entire body froze up, and he carefully considered whether he should run towards the east where the voice had come from, or simply flee towards the courtyard to the southwest. If Izeki-san weren’t here, he would have picked the latter, but as committee chairman, he couldn’t leave behind his hardworking committee member and disappear.

With no other choice, Haruyuki turned around as stiff as a gear-powered automaton, and saw...

Chiyuri in her track and field outfit, grasping a bag from the school shop in her right hand, filled with snacks and drinks.

Shinomiya Utai to her left, a red backpack on her back, and Hou's food and other necessary implements in her arms.

Kurasaki Fuuko to Utai's right, her face all smiles, but exuding an aura that made people want to keep their guard up around her.

And to Chiyuri's left, in a custom-made black school uniform, was the vice president of Umesato's student council, Kuroyukihime. On her coolly elegant, threatening face was an expression that looked as though she were about to unsheathe a sword...

Behind the four girls, Takumu, also in exercise clothing, was vaguely visible; the sight of him a fortune amongst many misfortunes, but his face had a smile that seemed to say "Good luck, Haru". Haruyuki nodded, trying as hard as he could to squeeze out an expression that said, "Taku, save me", but —

"So many people are here, are they going to help too?"

Hearing that, Haruyuki turned around, and saw that that Izeki-san was staring at him with a dumbfounded and flabbergasted expression.

"... What sort of VIP are you, chairman?"

"I-I'm not a VIP or anything like that!"

He replied in a whisper —

Then Haruyuki finally discarded the urge to flee that he had decided upon at first, as he straightened his back towards Kuroyukihime and the others, and repeated once more in his heart.

— Yup, I'm nothing by myself. I'm just a weak, shy, middle school student addicted to games you could find anywhere, without a single redeeming quality.

— But, as long as I'm with these good friends who are important to me I can become someone with purpose. I can try harder than when I am alone, I can stand straighter, and I can also believe in myself a little more.

In the shed, Hou, appearing to sense the arrival of Utai, beat its wings hard. Haruyuki took a step forward to the sound of its beating wings, and waved his right hand at his five people who were slowly approaching.

(End)

## Afterword

I'm Kawahara Reki. Thank you very much, readers, for finishing this book, «Accel World 9: The Seven Thousand Year Prayer».

The «Disaster Armor Chrome Disaster» first appeared in Volume 2, became the main theme of the whole story in Volume 6, and has finally reached an end in Volume 9. I am really very grateful, readers, that you were willing to endure the repeated attacks of three volumes in a row, 6, 7, and 8, all ending with «To be continued», and accompany this series to the «End» in this volume.

But, come to think of it, the remaining mysteries and foreshadowing still pile into a mountain (and this volume seems to have added a great many of them...), so the story itself shouldn't really be ending this quickly. What kind of goal will Haruyuki ultimately pursue? What sort of past does Kuroyukihime have? Why does the Accelerated World exist? Although I am still unsure of whether I can really explain these parts clearly, I hope that in the future I can continue to slowly progress volume by volume, and help myself look forward to it more and more as I write. As for Volume 10 right ahead of us, I hope I can write a bright and cheerful story that can also end in one volume!

Also, there's something else that I'm very hesitant on whether I should mention it or not, but I think I'll mention it a bit anyway... For readers who read Volume 8 of my other series «Sword Art Online», in the preview pages at the end of book teasing Accel World Volume 9, there is a new female

character with her arms spread, blocking something, who will be joining the scene. I know that everyone must be thinking “Who is she?”, and the answer to that question will be revealed in Chapter 4 of this volume, but just because she is joining the scene, I don’t mean to declare that OoOo is a girl! (I should probably obscure this for the time being, to avoid spoilers.)

I think that there will be more opportunities to write more about her in the future, so if I can make you confused about “Ah, which side is it?!”, readers, I think I’ll be very glad... and I would feel sort of saved, as well. (LOL)

I don’t have a lot more lines left, so I’ll put an ad here... I think the wrap-around band on Volume 9 here already says it, but «Accel World» will be receiving a television anime, produced by Sunrise. It’s Sunrise (honorifics omitted). Personally, I am totally from the Gundam generation, and the design of the duel avatars have been greatly influenced by Sunrise’s robots, so it brings me joy to no end that I am able to simply see a moving Crow or Lotus. I must ask you, readers, to greatly devote your support and love towards the anime version of Accel World!

Finally, other than thanking my illustrator HiMA-san, who devoted all of their abilities to that new female character I just mentioned, and my editor Miki-san, who requested corrections to her scenes at an unprecedented scale (LOL), of course, I must extend a greater thank you to you, readers, who walked to the end of the «Armor arc» with me, I really am very, very grateful!

August 21, 2011 Kawahara Reki

# アクセル弁当⑦ れき



(Right-to-left, top-to-bottom)

Title: Accel Bento 7 by Reki

Haruyuki: “Senpai, it’s happening! There’s going to be an anime of us! What do we do?”

Kuroyukihime: “Haruyuki-kun, don’t worry.”

Kuroyukihime: “The anime isn’t going anywhere.”

Haruyuki: “They’re using cel-shading already now!”



## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Originally, Ash Roller says “too mountain” in English, which when translated literally to Japanese, means “very much”. A substitute has been used here because “too mountain” does not make sense in an English translation.
2. ↑ “Lamentable, the cherry flowers, their fault is that they scatter bitterness in their wake.” This is a translation by Robert N. Huey of a line from a Noh play called *Sakuragawa*, by Japanese playwright Zeami Motokiyo.
3. ↑ Meaning “classical Japanese poetry”.

## **Credits**

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**Illustration Editing:** Mttblue2

***Compiled by Ice Phantom***