

HIMA

16

SNOW WHITE'S SLUMBER

[illegible]

▶▶▶ **ACCEL•WORLD** 16

**SNOW WHITE'S
SLUMBER**

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**





"Well,
we've
come this
far. Gotta
go the
distance,
yeah?"

NIKO

Legion Master of the Red Legion,
Prominence. She was kidnapped by
Black Vise but was rescued by
Silver Crow.
Duel avatar: Scarlet Rain.

"Deelloorrrrr..."

ARMOR OF CATASTROPHE, MARK II

The ultimate evil duel avatar, built
using Scarlet Rain's Enhanced
Armament Invincible as a vessel.

"...We have to fight."

HARUYUKI

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



CHIYURI

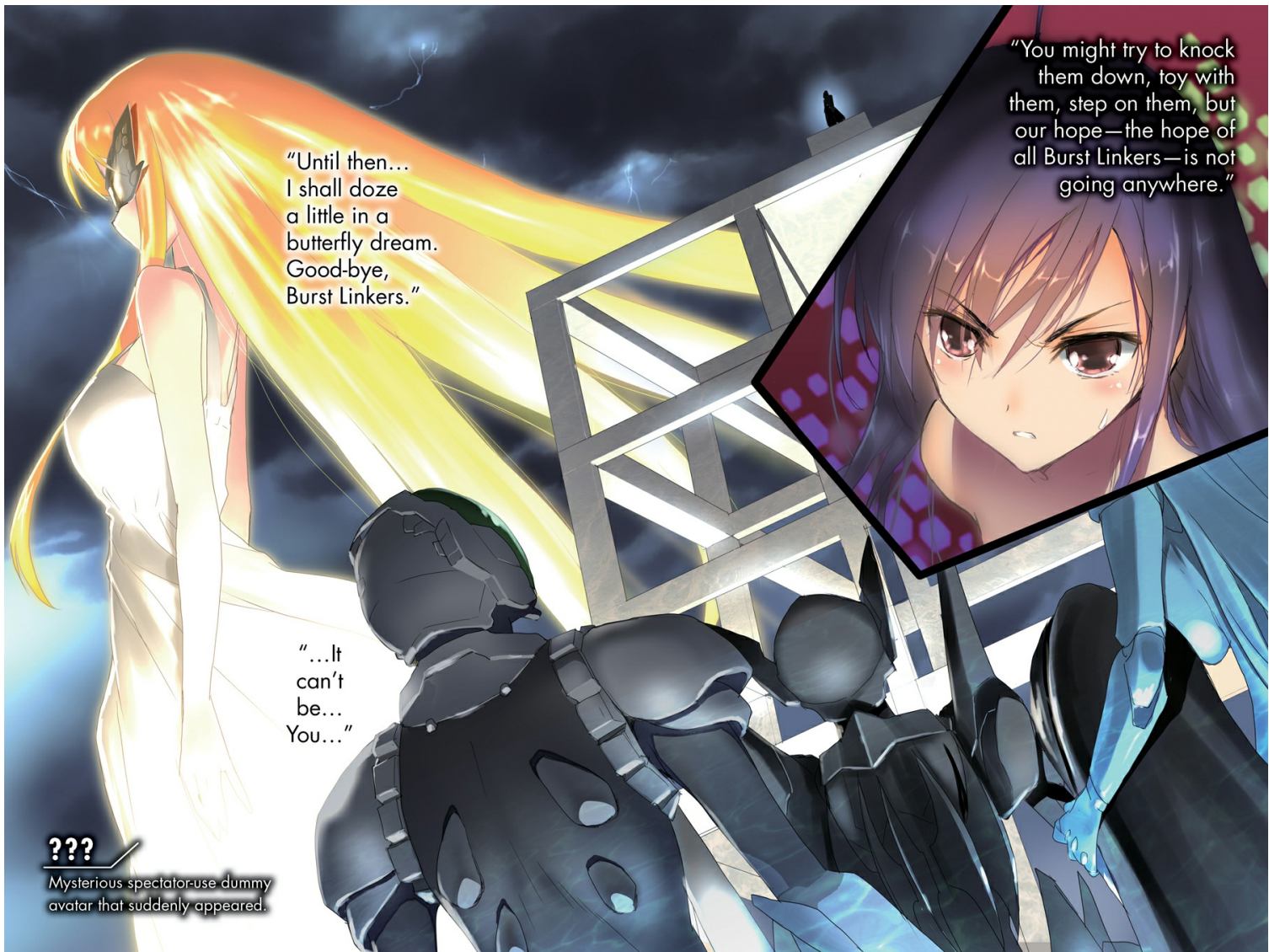
Member of Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Lime Bell.
Haruyuki's childhood friend.

"Haru...
You...
What is
this...?"

KUROYUKIHIME

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

"Wh-what's going on...?!"



"Until then...
I shall doze
a little in a
butterfly dream.
Good-bye,
Burst Linkers."

"You might try to knock
them down, toy with
them, step on them, but
our hope—the hope of
all Burst Linkers—is not
going anywhere."

"...It
can't
be...
You..."

???

Mysterious spectator-use dummy
avatar that suddenly appeared.



ARMOR OF CATASTROPHE, MARK II

The Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, given life by the Acceleration Research Society, is made up of three components.

The first is the mysterious metal color of Wolfram Cerberus, likely created by Argon Array based on the Mental-Scar Shell theory. The second component controls Cerberus—a red light of unknown origin that shot down from the sky into the cockpit to take the wheel of Mark II. And the physical vessel for Mark II is fashioned from the Enhanced Armament Invincible, which was made powerful through the tremendous efforts of the Red King, Scarlet Rain.

This is essentially the same construction as the first Armor of Catastrophe. The original Chrome Disaster was composed of the Beast, an artificial intelligence born from the negative incarnate energy that built up in the successive wearers who first cultivated the Armor and

then by the Armor itself, and the platinum armor, Destiny—the sixth star (theta) of the Seven Arcs, the Enhanced Armament that became the final vessel.

But unlike Mark I, Mark II does not have the techniques of previous wearers, such as the Wire Hook shot from both hands or Level Drain, which makes the health gauge of a devoured avatar its own. At over six meters tall, Mark II rivals a Beast-class Enemy in size, but its only visible weapons are the large laser guns that are equipped on both arms.

It is not clear whether Wolfram Cerberus maintained consciousness after he was incorporated into Mark II's torso, but he seems to have been lost along with the reproduced personality of Cerberus III, aka Dusk Taker, Seiji Nomi. The energy of the red light emitted from the ISS kit main body is believed to rule Mark II's consciousness.

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SNOW WHITE'S SLUMBER

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 16

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen

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- Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).
- Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level five).
- Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level four).
- Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level five).
- Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).
- Uiui = Uta Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).
- Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.
- Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

-
- Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.
 - Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.
 - Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.
 - Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

Unable to entirely absorb the impact, his health gauge was carved away another percent or so. But he was still alive. Almost as if to confirm his survival, the four upper wings vibrated slightly. But when he looked over his shoulder, he was back to his original pair of wings. The other four had soundlessly turned to light and scattered.

In the left of his vision, a system message modestly scrolled by, informing him that the Enhanced Armament, Metatron Wings, had been unequipped. The wings had also left Haruyuki, now that their original owner was gone. A sharp, sad pain pierced his chest, and he fought the urge to sink to his knees.

But he still had work to do.

“Niko!” Haruyuki called hoarsely, looking to the sky.

He first saw the massive body of Mark II falling to the ground, arms and legs limp. Its head was completely gone, and black noxious gas seeped from the cracks in its shattered armor like oily smoke. Its right arm had been destroyed by Trisagion and was missing from the shoulder, but the majority of its left arm was still in good shape, and Haruyuki spotted a red light of reflection at its end.

“Niko!” he yelled. “You have to jump!!”

Fortunately, his voice seemed to reach her; the crimson light pulled away from the giant’s bulk. Haruyuki turned toward the southern side of the crater where the little avatar would land and ran frantically on weak legs. Given that Niko’s health gauge may or may not have had 10 percent left in it, even if she managed to avoid getting dragged into Mark II’s plunge into the earth, she’d die if she fell from that height.

He didn’t have the strength to fly anymore, so he was staggering forward on foot when a shadow overtook him. A deep-red, leopard-type avatar—Blood Leopard. She, too, was severely injured after her special attack, Bloodshed Cannon, but when she reached the point of Niko’s descent a few seconds before Haruyuki, she jumped up and caught the red avatar on her back.

She very nearly fell over when she landed, and Haruyuki, finally reaching her side, held her up with one hand. He caught Niko with the other and sank to his knees with a *clank*.

“...Thanks, Pard...Ya did it, Crow. ‘Mazing...Sendin’ that sucker flyin’...”

He heard a murmur in his ear, and Haruyuki managed a pained smile. “It’s ‘cause you saved me, Niko. Thanks.”

An enormous sense of loss still ruled his heart. Archangel Metatron had given Haruyuki wings, become an icon and guided him through enemy territory, shown him to the Highest Level and given him a glimpse of the true form of the Accelerated World, and in the end, had transformed her very essence into light to strike down an enormously powerful enemy. And now she was gone. He couldn’t actually believe it. His tears threatened to spill out once more, but he gritted his teeth beneath his cracked mirrored goggles and held them back. He wasn’t allowed to cry just yet. Still holding Niko, he staggered to his feet and looked back.

The massive bulk of Mark II was just about to hit the ground. The reddish-black iron giant crashed back-first into the center of the crater it had made, and floods of miasmic vapors jetted from its joints and the openings where its head and left arm had been.

Haruyuki assumed the dull black smoke was Incarnate energy rendered visible, but the true nature of the “darkness” that lived in Mark II remained inside the massive body. Similarly to Mark I’s Beast, something was possessing the Enhanced Armament itself, system-wise; so as long as the armor existed, the darkness would also linger. There was only one way to make it disappear.

“Haruuuuuu!!”

Incredibly, he heard a voice shouting from behind...followed by the sound of two pairs of feet. Turning once more, he saw Lime Bell and Cyan Pile running toward them from the crater’s southern edge. He waved to signal them and responded with what voice he could muster. “Chiyu! Taku! Over here!”

Chiyuri waved back, and a few seconds later, she was standing next to Haruyuki and the others. She sighed heavily. “Sorry we’re late. We had a hard time finding any buildings I could break...”

“It’s okay. The fight...just ended,” he replied reassuringly, barely able to keep the tremors from his voice. He turned back to the center of the crater.

The five stared silently for a time at the giant in its death throes. The gas seemed to be nearly exhausted; only a thin trail of smoke rose from the head area. Somehow, the armor seemed smaller now. The limbs were wriggling helplessly, but even this movement gradually grew sluggish.

“If you would, Chiyu,” Haruyuki said.

The Watch Witch, Lime Bell, nodded deeply and took a few steps forward. She brandished the Choir Chime of her left arm. When she waved it in two large counterclockwise circles, something that sounded reminiscent of the chime of a school bell filled the crater.

“Citron Caaaaallllll!!” She brought down the large bell, and a yellow-green light spilled out and enveloped the giant on the ground.

The last time, Mark II had changed into Dreadnought mode and shaken off Citron Call with its mobility. But it looked like it no longer had the power now to stand up, much less transform. Even when the light hit it, it only twisted slightly, not enough to escape.

Seven seconds, eight, nine...Ten seconds.

The light blanketing Mark II grew dazzlingly bright. The arms and the nihilistic lasers that had so tortured Haruyuki and his friends—or to be precise, the forearm of the remaining left arm—melted into an infinity of glittering lights and vanished.

At the same time, a light of the same color wrapped around Niko, still in Haruyuki’s arms. Citron Call’s power to go back in time had returned the main armament of Invincible to its original owner. And ten seconds after that, Mark II’s legs vanished. All that remained were the streamlined cockpit and the thruster block on its back.

With her right hand on the large bell of her left and her thin legs firmly braced, Lime Bell continued to make the fresh green light flow. Looking at the small, reliable back of his childhood friend, Haruyuki had a sudden thought in the bottom of his heart. Would they be able to rewind the extinction of Metatron with Citron Call? In a certain sense, Metatron had possessed Haruyuki, so if they rewound Haruyuki’s status, then maybe...

Mark II's massive body flashed brightly a third time, and the torso that made him think of a type of shelled creature disappeared. The cockpit block had returned to Niko. And then there was a sharp metallic sound. *Kashak!*

Haruyuki gasped, his eyes still on the center of the crater. There was a slender avatar with gray metal armor lying on the ground. Wolfram Cerberus. A duel genius, toyed with by an unfortunate fate. Haruyuki's rival and dear friend.

There was no doubt that the sharply edged design and the extremely hard armor texture were Cerberus, but four protrusions almost like wings stretched out from his back. The thruster block for high-speed movement, the last Enhanced Armament that Cerberus III/the Nomi copy had taken from Niko, had shrunk to match the size of Cerberus's body.

The light of Citron Call continued to firmly hold Cerberus. In another few seconds, the thruster would also be returned to Niko, and the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, would be completely eliminated. Haruyuki—and probably the other four, too—believed this. But none could have predicted what happened next.

Still unconscious on the ground, Wolfram Cerberus abruptly vanished, almost as though he'd been an immaterial projection.

“What?!” Chiyuri cried out, whirling her head around.

Haruyuki also looked around the crater, dumbfounded, but there was no sign of Cerberus anywhere.

He'd been lying prone on the ground. It was absolutely impossible for him to have run away so quickly that the five of them hadn't seen him. Haruyuki could only assume he'd vanished from the field without warning.

Having lost its target, the light of Citron Call quickly weakened, and as it faded completely, Niko, still in Haruyuki's arms, clicked her tongue.

“Tch! Is that it? They got us!!”

“Huh? Got us? What?” he asked hurriedly in response.

“Them...” The Red King clenched her injured hand ruefully. “They cut off Wolfram Cerberus's connection from the real world. The way he disappeared,

that's the only thing possible."

"O-of course!" Takumu groaned. "I *thought* Black Vise and Argon Array were a little too happy to walk away...I never dreamed they'd use a trick like this."

"Nngh." Staring at the fissure in the center of the crater, Haruyuki clenched his teeth in simultaneous shock and understanding. He'd thought from the way Argon Array talked that she might be able to interfere with Cerberus in the real, too. But not that she would activate a forced disconnect without the least hesitation. And he was sure it hadn't been to help Cerberus.

Here, his surprise finally changed to worry, and he hurried to ask Takumu, "S-so then, Taku, what about the last piece of Niko's Enhanced Armament?!"

It wasn't Takumu who answered him, but Niko herself. "If he's vanished from the Unlimited Neutral Field, there's nothing we can do about it. Guess I'll just have to leave the thruster with him for the time being."

"B-but—!"

"No way around it. Let's just be glad we got the cockpit, main armament, and legs back. And he didn't get the missile pods to start with."

"B-but..." She was so clear and certain, though, that he couldn't really say anything more than that.

Jumping down from his arms, the Red King took a few steps and put a hand on Pard's back. The leopard avatar was also glaring regretfully at the center of the crater, but as a veteran Linker, she likely understood that they really could do nothing about it now.

Grrrr. She responded to the contact with a low growl and turned toward Haruyuki and the others.

Blood Leopard, one of the Red Legion's Triplex, and Prominence's leader, Scarlet Rain, both dipped their heads deeply at the same time. When they finally straightened up again, Niko looked at each of them in turn. "Silver Crow. Cyan Pile. And Lime Bell. Because of my cowardice, I put you in a seriously bad sitch."

"What?!" Chiyuri cried, waving a hand in front of her face. "Don't be so cold,

Niko! We're friends, aren't we?! It's only natural we help out when one of us is in trouble!"

"That's right, Red King," Takumu continued. "The two of you have helped us out any number of times before, after all."

Of course, Haruyuki tried to say something as well, but Chiyuri stole his turn from him. "And I'm sorry, too. I couldn't get all your Enhanced Armaments back...If I'd built up my special-attack gauge a minute—no, thirty seconds faster, I could've gotten back the last one before they pulled Cerberus's cable..."

"Now, *that's* cold, Bell. No, oh, um..." Suddenly tongue-tied, Niko scratched the damaged antenna parts on her head. "So, like, what should I call you? Not your avatar name, but somethin' from your real name."

After a moment of surprise, Chiyuri pulled at the brim of her triangle hat as if embarrassed. "Oh, that doesn't really matter. Kuroyukihime calls me Chiyuri, and Sister Fuko calls me Chiiko..."

"Th-that so? 'Kay, I'll think about it. Anyway, thanks. Seriously." Niko offered her thanks once more.

Takumu cleared his throat. "Red King, I also don't mind whatever you'd prefer to call me."

"I already got a great one for you, Professor."

"...C-certainly. That's that, then."

Chiyuri started to laugh out loud at this, and the air in the place eased up the slightest bit.

Haruyuki also let his shoulders relax and looked down at the bottom of the crater once more. Wolfram Cerberus had left the Unlimited Neutral Field through a forced disconnection, still equipped with the last of the parts that made up Invincible. Which meant that although the majority of the Incarnate energy accumulated in the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, had dissipated into the air, it would still continue to exist as an item in Cerberus's storage.

Had the darkness already disappeared from the thruster block, just as Mark I, aka the Disaster, had been purified and returned to the Destiny? Or was the evil

transferred from the ISS kit main body still lurking, weakened, in the Enhanced Armament? He had no way of knowing that right now.

Cerberus. And Niko. I promise. I'll completely eliminate Mark II and return the final part to where it belongs. Absolutely.

At almost the same time as Haruyuki made this vow in his heart, a cry slipped from Takumu's mouth. "Ah!" Under the collected gazes of his comrades, the large blue avatar took a step toward Niko. "Th-that reminds me. It's not just Cerberus. The Red King should also be disconnecting soon."

"Me? Why?" Niko sounded baffled, but Chiyuri and Pard exchanged looks that said, *Now that you mention it...*

"Because Master, Raker, and the others were returning to the real world through the portal at Midtown Tower to pull out the Red King's cable. On Haru's instruction."

"Th-that's okay now," Haruyuki hurried to interject. "I think. Kuroyukihime and them are on their way from Midtown. They must have seen Mark II's attack and decided to come here."

"How do you know that, Haru?" It was only natural for Chiyuri to ask the question, but he couldn't answer it so simply. Because he'd seen Kuroyukihime's team moving when he was looking out over the entire Accelerated World after Metatron brought him to the Highest Level. The only one who could explain properly was Metatron, but she would never tell the story again. Pushing back the painful sensation that welled up in his throat once more, Haruyuki said, "I'll explain later. At any rate, they should be here soon. They're coming from that direction." He indicated the northern edge of the crater, and everyone turned their eyes in that direction.

At basically the same time, a black silhouette rose over the edge carved smoothly out of the ground. One, two, three, four...five, six, seven...Staring dumbfounded at the shadows that continued to grow in number and surround the crater, Haruyuki remembered that he'd seen something similar once before.

It had been five months earlier when they were headed to the Ikebukuro Area in the Unlimited Neutral Field with Niko, who had asked them to help catch the

fifth Chrome Disaster, aka Cherry Rook. Crypt Cosmic Circus, led by the Yellow King, Yellow Radio, had ambushed them and put Haruyuki and his friends into serious danger.

It can't be... He swallowed hard and then suddenly noticed that not only were nearly all the silhouettes shaped differently from duel avatars, but some among them were rather large for avatars. In other words, they were...

“No way. Are those all Enemies?” Chiyuri murmured, and belatedly, Haruyuki remembered.

It hadn't been just Kuroyukihime and the others heading for this crater. Enemies of varying sizes were converging from all directions, drawn in by the “sound” of the Incarnate techniques. They were mainly Lesser class with only two or three larger Wild class, but there were far too many to be able to fight all at once.

“Aah, well. Only natural given how everyone was using Incarnate left and right,” Niko commented.

“NP.” Pard, now back to human form, spoke for the first time in a while. “Crow will fly us all out of here.”

“L-leave it to me!”

Wait, what? I mean, Metatron Wings...They don't exist anymore. Each time he remembered his parting with the Archangel, loneliness made his heart heavy, but this was not the time for sniffing.

Even though he hadn't even been equipped with the Metatron Wings for a full hour, his back felt so much lighter without them. He put his strength into it and spread his two silver wings. He should at least be able to get four people out of the crater with his own flight ability.

“Everyone! Grab on!” Haruyuki cried, spreading his arms, and just like when they had dodged Mark II's laser, Pard and Niko leapt onto his left arm while Takumu and Chiyuri grabbed his right. He revved his wings with enough force to use up the last of his special-attack gauge, and— “Nngh!”

Too heavy.

No, it wasn't because of his burden. He wasn't getting any lift with his wings. In addition to the damage the silver fins had taken in the many fierce battles, his mental exhaustion also dulled his flying ability. It wasn't quite the Incarnate System, but Silver Crow's flight ability mainly used imagination circuits for its control, so for better or for worse, his mental level affected it at the extremes. Even so, he managed somehow to ascend about ten meters, but there were more than a few Enemies with long-distance attack abilities. They would need to fly three times that high to safely escape the crater.

"Unh...Aaah!" Howling, he sincerely tried to get some thrust in his wings. But he merely used up his special-attack gauge; he couldn't get more altitude.

And perhaps the unstable high frequencies his wings were emitting stimulated the Enemies; over twenty of various sizes surrounding the crater began to run, letting out curious cries.

"Y-you okay, Haru?" Takumu asked uneasily.

"You can do it, Haru!" Chiyuri cheered.

Normally, the encouragement of his two childhood friends gave him more energy than anything else, but right now, the gaping hole in his heart sucked all the vitality out of it. Belatedly, he realized the reason he couldn't fly wasn't only the damage to his wings and his mental exhaustion. It was no good. He couldn't fly anymore. At least, not until he could be by himself and cry out loud.

"...Guys, I'm sorry..." Apologizing weakly, he helplessly dropped back down.

And then, a crimson light poured down from the sky. Countless fiery beams shot down to surround Haruyuki and his friends, and they had no sooner landed inside the crater than pillars of pure-red flames were jetting upward.

Outflanked by the flames, the Enemies lost sight of their prey and moved about in confusion, howling.

His surprise made him forget his defeat for the moment, at least, and as he continued to just barely hover, he turned his head back up toward the sky and saw a pale-blue light flickering and flying across the evening sky dyed its madder-red.

"Strato-Shooter," Pard murmured, hanging on to Haruyuki's left side. There

was no mistaking it. That light was the jet of Sky Raker's Enhanced Armament, Gale Thruster.

As the five stared upward, the shooting star abruptly split into two. The newly born light was a deeper red than the twilight. Falling in a straight line toward Haruyuki and the others, the light soon revealed the form of a duel avatar. Armor patterned after *hakama* trousers and a white robe. Adornments resembling long hair. A large bow in the right hand.

Testarossa Ardor Maiden drew her longbow Flame Caller as she fell and shouted the name of the technique loud enough for Haruyuki and the others to hear. "Flame Vortex!"

This time, a single flaming arrow was released. But this instantly grew enormous—into a lance of whirling flames—and plunged down right in front of the Wild-class Enemies about to recommence their charge from the southern side.

Of course, it was no match for Mark II's nihilistic laser, which had created the crater itself, but even so, it brought about a massive explosion like an air-to-ground missile, and at the same time as it pushed Haruyuki and the others to the north side, it knocked the massive Wild-class bodies back.

Ardor Maiden used the blast she had produced to kill the force of her descent and land gently in the bottom of the crater. She looked up at Haruyuki and the others seven meters in the air and shouted, "C! Please escape that way!" The small hand gestured toward the northern edge of the crater. But there, too, five or six Enemies, including a scorpion-shaped Wild-class, had leapt over the initial flames to approach them. The scorpion's tail was brandished high, and even if they got moving, it didn't look like they'd be able to escape its sinister stinger.

But the instant Haruyuki heard Maiden's instruction, his wilting vitality was stirred, and he flew to the north. Even if he couldn't ascend, he might be able to manage a horizontal half glide—now that Utai and Fuko had come to help them.

Holding Takumu tightly on his right and Pard on his left, he charged forward with all the speed he could muster. Ardor Maiden raced along on the ground beneath them with nimble steps befitting her form.

The scorpion Enemy ahead of them sensed the approach of its prey and boldly readied its large tail and claws. Utai drew her bow and launched a series of flame arrows. True to their aim, they plunged into the scorpion's body and enveloped the Enemy in flames, but it didn't stop moving.

"Crap. That thing's shell is fire resistant," Niko groaned, reaching out for the handgun on her hip. But before she could draw it, a flood of water poured down from behind the scorpion, hit the red-hot carapace, and instantly evaporated.

The white steam that puffed up blinded the scorpion and the small Enemies around it. Maiden didn't hesitate to plunge into the steam, and Haruyuki flew in earnest to take advantage of this chance to slip above the scorpion. Body swinging from side to side, he tried nevertheless to somehow get through the circle of Enemies.

The scorpion's tail rose furiously, piercing the white steam directly below. Perhaps the tail itself had a homing function; the darkly glistening stinger closed in unerringly on Haruyuki's chest. He couldn't avoid it or defend against it. He'd be beaten down. No, his health gauge would be emptied.

And then, beneath the steam, a crimson-red light flashed brightly. At the same time, a clear and powerful call to pierce the depths of his heart:

"Death By Embracing!!"

The scorpion Enemy's tail was cut off at the base, and the stinger shattered fleetingly as though made of glass before it could plunge into Haruyuki's chest. The Wild-class Enemy let out a high-pitched shriek before pulling in the Lesser-class Enemies around it and causing collateral damage.

As he cut through the countless fragments dancing through the air to keep moving forward, Haruyuki strained his eyes to look directly down. He saw Ardor Maiden nimbly dodging the scorpion's legs as she advanced—and running alongside her, a jet-black avatar. The Black King, World End, Black Lotus.

In which case, the water that had come pouring down to produce the steamy smoke screen had been launched by The One, Aqua Current. The four Legion members they'd left behind at Midtown Tower had probably fought the ISS kit main body, crushed it, and without taking even the briefest of breaks, had

advanced on the ruins of this school. All to save Haruyuki and the others.

As Kuroyukihime ran seven meters below him, he saw that the sword tips of all her limbs had been smashed, and her armor was covered in damage. Utai, Fuko flying far up in the sky above, and Akira, waiting on the edge of the crater, were no doubt also ferociously exhausted.

“Kuroyukihime...Master...Mei...Curren...!” By calling their names, he stirred up a power in him on the verge of being exhausted. Following a gentle diagonal, Haruyuki earnestly ascended, and his friends called out to him from either side.

“Just a little farther, Haru!”

“Haru, you can do it!”

“Crow, I know you can fly!”

“WTG, Crow!”

Their cheers were drowned out by the shaking of the earth. The group of Enemies were regrouping from the damage and chaos and chasing after them. Another thirty meters until they were out of the crater...Twenty...

“Unh. Ah! Aaaaah!” With a cry, he dug up the last of his strength and flew the remaining distance.

The instant he passed the sharp edge of the earth, like a knife had gouged its insides out, and found himself above the wide road, his special-attack gauge and his mental energy depleted at the same time. Even his field of view grew dim, and without the leeway to take on a landing posture, Haruyuki leaned forward and fell. But as he was on the verge of plunging into the ground face-first, powerful arms pulled him back from either side. Takumu and Pard had hit the ground with their own feet and propped Haruyuki up.

“GJ.” Pard was supposedly glued to him, but her voice sounded far away for some reason.

His body was heavy, like he had no strength in his limbs. But this wasn't the time to collapse. More than twenty Enemies were also quickly climbing the slope of the crater. They had to get as much distance as they could now, while they were temporarily out of the Enemies' sight.

Haruyuki desperately tried to stand up, when a hard, sharp, and somehow gentle hand patted his shoulder.

“You did well, Silver Crow.”

“...Kuro...yuki...,” he said hoarsely, managing to turn his face to see a hazy, jet-black avatar with broken arms stretched out before him.

Takumu and Pard held Haruyuki up while Kuroyukihime stepped forward and hugged him to her tenderly. “Leave the rest to us. Rest. You fought your battle magnificently.”

“But. From behind. Enemies...”

“Don’t worry. I couldn’t help you in your most trying time. Let me open a path of retreat at the very least,” she insisted.

“Thanks to how hard you fought, C, we still have plenty of energy!” Utai agreed, having climbed the slope with their king.

“We’ll take care of everything else.” Akira had also appeared from somewhere.

Finally, Fuko danced down from the sky with a light propulsive sound to finish up. “Corvus, you sit back and rest now.”

The shaking of the earth caused by the charging Enemies would be upon them soon enough. Kuroyukihime left Haruyuki to Takumu and whirled around with a sharp *tak* to stand on the edge of the crater. Utai, Akira, and Fuko stepped forward to either side of her. The four were just as injured as Haruyuki and his team, or even more so. To the point where Fuko switched from Gale Thruster to her wheelchair; both her legs were gone from the knee down. But there was not a hint of fear or cowardice in the Black King and the Four Elements.

“Honestly, just can’t be beat,” Niko murmured very close to him.

Right, they really can’t be beat, Haruyuki agreed in his heart.

All they could do was fight. Kuroyukihime and the others would never give up on this Burst Linker basic, this deepest secret and condition. As long as there were enemies standing in their way, as long as they had hands they could clench into fists, as long as they existed, they would fight.

They would keep fighting.

But that's me, too. There's still an enemy I need to fight. The Acceleration Research Society. They ran off with the last of Niko's Enhanced Armament; they still have Wolfram Cerberus. And the Society leader who not only uses so many Enemies, but also toys with the memories of Burst Linkers who've lost all their points.

It's all I can do right now to stay on my feet, but I'm going to keep fighting them. And then someday, I'll break through the Castle gate, attack the Shrine of the Eight Divines, and reach the last Arc. To learn about the end of the world that Kuroyukihime—and Metatron—have sought.

With the injured scorpion in the lead, the rampaging Enemies crested the crater edge and danced forward.

A fierce light jetted from Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, and Akira. Their massive, joint technique knocked the Enemy group flying. Howling, the various forms tumbled back into the crater and kicked and struggled for a few seconds, but even after they got back to their feet, they seemed to have lost their fight; they didn't move.

Kuroyukihime whirled around and announced crisply, "Today's battle appears to have ended here. The closest portal is in the Metropolitan Central Library a kilometer ahead. Now..."

She turned the sword of her right hand due north.

"Let's go home. To the real world."

The total time in the Unlimited Neutral Field for the missions to rescue Aqua Current and destroy the ISS kit main body, along with the surprise mission to get the Red King back and destroy the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, was approximately twelve hours and thirty minutes. In other words, when Haruyuki slowly opened his eyes after returning to the Umesato student council office in the real world, the analog clock hanging on the wall in front of him had only advanced fifty seconds from 12:20:10, when the mission had started. Considering that they had reaccelerated after the mission to rescue Current, this was a fairly high-speed clear.

He'd had dives this long in the Unlimited Neutral Field before, but he'd never really felt the density of this flow of time, sped up a thousand times, like he did now. He'd been accelerated, true, but it felt like several days had passed in the real world.

When he took his eyes off the clock, he could hear a commotion coming from nearby. He blinked, wondering what all the fuss was about, before he remembered. Today—June 30—was Umesato Junior High's annual school festival. Only that morning, he'd eaten a crepe at the booth on the track, gone around to the different classrooms, and watched the kendo team's samurai dance, but those memories didn't immediately come back to him. He was pretty sure he'd met up with Takumu in front of the kendo dojo and had lunch in the cluster of booths in the courtyard before they all went out into the front yard and then—

Rin Kusakabe had collapsed.

“.....!”

His memory finally completely awakened, Haruyuki threw himself forward

from the sofa backrest. Around him, the comrades he had fought with were blinking and stretching, but he was the first to stand—or he was about to be, when Fuko pushed him back.

“Uh, um, the Nurses’ Room, I—”

“I understand. I’ll come with you. Before that.” Grinning, Fuko pulled the emergency disconnect XSB cable from Haruyuki’s Neurolinker. If he had stood up with his intended force, he might have broken the connector. Shrinking into himself, he waited for Fuko to remove her own cable, and then they stood at the same time and moved away from the sofa set.

He turned to the girl in black still seated. “I’m sorry, Kuroyukihime. I have all these things I need to report to you.”

“Mmm. Go.” She smiled. “I’m sure Kusakabe’s waiting for you.”

“I-I’ll be back soon!” He dipped his head and hurried toward the door.

Fuko followed him. “We’ll be back in five minutes.”

He was worried about whether Kusakabe would actually be up so soon, but the only thing to do was go and check on her. It was a fair distance from the student council office, which was on the western edge of the first school building, to the nurse’s office, which stood at the eastern end of the second school building.

“Um, Master?” he asked Fuko in a quiet voice as they moved as quickly as possible through the hallways jammed with school-festival guests. “You guys took out the ISS kit main body, didn’t you?”

“It would seem so, at any rate. Although we had a little help.”

“Huh? From whom?”

“Let’s talk about that later. What I’m concerned about right now is that the kit terminals might not have actually disappeared when the main body was destroyed.”

“Uh...Huh?!” That was more than a concern; it was a serious problem. His feet tangled around themselves in his surprise and worry, and Fuko reached out to steady him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, leaning in, her arm linked through his. “I made you worry. Basically, the kits weren’t eliminated, but they *were* sealed. So all the terminals should have been rendered powerless, and the mental interference should have stopped for Rin.”

“They were...sealed?”

As long as they were disabled, it didn’t much matter if they were eliminated or sealed, but the difference did make him a little anxious. But there was no point in getting all worked up here. He’d know the second he saw Rin’s face whether everything was over or not.

Their slippers stepped onto the boundary between the passageway and the second school building. When they turned right into an empty hallway, the door to the nurse’s office soon came into view.

Fuko pulled her arm free of his and gave him a gentle push. Taking a deep breath, he placed a finger on the door handle and gently slid it open. “Hello?”

The health adviser, Mitsu Hotta, turned around in her desk at the front of the room and smiled. “You really *are* back soon, hmm?”

Soon? He was about to ask before he remembered. After Rin had collapsed, he had brought her to the nurse’s office, and before he had raced over to the student council office, he had told Ms. Hotta that he had something to take care of, but he would be back soon. Then he’d dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field and fought fierce battles against powerful enemies before coming back here. In terms of his own subjective time, it was definitely *not* soon. But of course, for Ms. Hotta, it had only been a few minutes ago, so all he could do was nod.

The teacher urged him on with her eyes, so he bowed lightly before cutting across the room to a bed in the back that was separated by a curtain. There was only silence on the other side of the spotless white fabric.

He opened his mouth, thinking he should say *something* at least before he pulled the curtain open, but he didn’t know what. Was Rin sleeping? Had the interference from the ISS kit actually stopped? Had the battle Haruyuki and his friends fought really been able to clear away the darkness corrupting the Accelerated World?

“Rin, we’re opening the curtain,” Fuko said on Haruyuki’s behalf, reaching a hand out.

Shf! When the curtain was pulled back, he saw the curving line of a white sheet and the short hair, slightly unruly, that peeked out from the top. He entered the cubicle with Fuko and closed the curtain before walking around to the head of the bed.

There, he found the face of Rin Kusakabe in profile, eyes closed, her right cheek on the pillow. Innocence was the perfect adjective to describe this sleeping face. But the only one who could determine whether the interference of the ISS kit was gone was Rin herself.

Fuko gently stroked the younger girl’s hair with her fingertips. “Rin.”

Her long, soft eyelashes trembled and lifted slightly. After blinking a few times, she opened her eyelids about 70 percent. A hazy light flickered in the pale pupils. She took in first Fuko and then Haruyuki standing next to her.

“Kusakabe,” he said, barely moving his lips.

A faint smile rose on her face. “Arita...Master Fuko.” Her voice was faint but firm. “In my dream...I heard. Your voices. And the voices. Of many other people. Too. The voices of people. Fighting their hardest to protect. Me—no, the Accelerated World...”

“Rin.” Fuko crouched down and wrapped her hands around Rin’s small face. “Rin...How is it?” she asked gently but still with a note of tension. Of course, by “how,” she meant whether the interference of the ISS kit had stopped.

Several lights bobbed up in Rin’s eyes and came together, flickering, to produce shimmering, shining droplets that flowed softly down her cheeks. But these were not tears of suffering or sadness. Rin didn’t have to say anything for Haruyuki to know that. “Thank you so much, Master. Thank you, Arita. I...It looks like. I can still be. A Burst Linker.”

“...Rin.” Light streaming out of the corners of her own eyes, Fuko used both hands to help Rin sit up and then wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug. Watching over this scene, Haruyuki also felt something warm in his eyes.

Master and pupil embraced for a full ten seconds before they pulled apart.

Rin turned to him, and Haruyuki opened his mouth to say, *That's great, huh, Kusakabe?* But the instant her slender arms reached out toward him, he forgot his words and stood frozen in place.

But then Fuko, grinning, gave him a push with a force that compelled him whether he liked it or not. Haruyuki took a step toward the bed, and Rin wrapped her arms around him. The instant he was conscious of her softness and warmth and the faint scent of flowers, his brain stopped working. Or at least, he thought it would, but this time, it didn't. Because the overwhelming relief and joy, along with a strange heartache, that rose up in him, pushed away his usual upset and surprise.

He gently touched his hands to Rin's small back and murmured in the ear that was immediately nearby, "I'm so glad...This is really great." The mental interference from the ISS kit that had tormented Rin Kusakabe had disappeared completely. Haruyuki could finally believe it.

Strictly speaking, it had been Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Akira, and Utai who fought with and destroyed the ISS kit main body at Midtown Tower. So maybe Haruyuki himself hadn't been able to keep his promise to save Rin and her older brother, Ash Roller. But now, he was able to easily accept that he didn't need to fixate on details like that. Now that he had been shown the Highest Level by Archangel Metatron.

The Accelerated World was much broader, deeper, and bigger than he had ever imagined. And at the same time, it was fragile, precarious, and ephemeral. In that world, a lone Burst Linker shone brightly as best as they could, like a small star. Several people came together and became a star system. Star systems came together to form a star cluster. Star clusters came together to create a single galaxy. Burst Linker duels were proof of the life pulsing through that galaxy. By fighting in earnest, winning and losing, rejoicing and lamenting; light, sound, and story were born in the vast darkness.

Rin and Haruyuki were incredibly tiny stars compared with the enormity of the Accelerated World. But they weren't alone. They could reach out at any time, and there would be someone whose heart was connected to theirs.

All the stars had disappeared from the worlds he saw alongside one another

in the Highest Level, Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt. He didn't know why yet, but he firmly believed that he could not let the world of Brain Burst go down the same path. He felt like he understood at least a little of the Green King's motivation in redistributing points without fear or favor. He was fighting back. Against the rules of the Accelerated World that said that those who lost all their points were instantly eliminated. All by himself, he was trying to protect the entire galaxy that was Brain Burst.

Haruyuki couldn't even beat a Lesser-class Enemy solo; there was no way he could imitate Green Grandé. But he could help and be helped by the stars that formed the same star system near him and keep moving forward together. And then that star system would get bigger. Someday, it would be a star cluster.

"I'm so glad...you're not going anywhere, Kusakabe," Haruyuki said, tightening his arms around her, his voice shaking with emotion.

"Me too...I'm glad." Rin replied weakly. "I can see. You again...like this."

"And how long *exactly* are the two of you going to do that?" Two hands reached out and pulled Haruyuki and Rin apart. They turned their heads together and found Fuko's exasperated smile.

"Uh. Um. It's—," Haruyuki stammered, looking at Rin and Fuko in turn as he belatedly realized the excessive boldness of his own action. "Um. R-right. We said we'd be back with the others in five minutes, right? So we should get going. Kusakabe, can you walk? Or maybe it'd be better for you to rest here a little longer?"

"There appears to be no need for that, Corvus." Fuko set herself down on the folding chair that had been left out next to the bed. "I just got an e-mail from Sacchi. She can only use the student council office until twelve thirty, so we'll have the meeting in a regular duel via the local in-school net. Sacchi will start it, I'll be her opponent, and you two can just join the Gallery."

"Oh! R-roger." Haruyuki sat down on the chair next to Fuko, and Rin folded her legs underneath her on the bed. Because it was school festival that day, Rin, who was not a student at Umesato Junior High, had also been given permission for a limited connection to the local net. And Fuko was Rin's parent and master, so of course, she had Fuko on her list of automatic Gallery inclusion.

“Ten seconds,” Fuko announced, leaning back.

Haruyuki also waited for acceleration in a comfortable posture. He glanced over at Rin on the bed and saw her lovingly stroking the cracks racing along her Neurolinker shell. The instant he had the thought about how great it was again—*skreeeee!!*—the sound of acceleration echoed in his mind.

The light of the sun was harsh in the almost transparent sky. The ground it hit was also blue as far as the eye could see. The entire field was covered in water.

The Water stage, naturally, was affiliated with water. Unlike the Ocean stage, the water was only ten centimeters deep, so avatars were not submerged, and there were also no large waves. All the buildings were skeletal concrete frames, bleached white by the exposure to the sun, and slight waves lapped across the water surface between them. The scene was beautiful and somehow sad. Some Burst Linkers called it a beautiful fin-de-siècle stage.

Appearing on the roof of a concrete shell a dozen or so meters high and a hundred meters wide—the first school building of Umesato Junior High—Haruyuki allowed himself a moment to take in the watery world before he whirled his head around. Since the Gallery was placed randomly around one of the duelers, Fuko or Kuroyukihime should have been somewhere nearby, but he couldn’t seem to find either of them.

So he checked the two arrow cursors displayed in the bottom of his field of view. Both pointed directly in front of him. But there was nothing but the schoolyard, now transformed into a vast, unpopulated pool, glittering in the sun.

“Huh? Where are they?” he muttered, leaning over the edge of the concrete frame. “Did they already go outside the school maybe?”

“Real Down.”

He heard a voice from beside him. Concentrating on the town across from the school, he unconsciously asked, “What’s that mean?”

“‘S obvious, you. Real’s ‘direct’ and Down’s ‘below,’ so put ‘em together, and you get directly below you.”

“That seems kinda off...”

“Oh, really? Then you tell me how to say ‘directly below you’ in English.”

“Um. Maybe ‘right under’ or something.” Absentmindedly continuing the conversation, Haruyuki peered down as instructed and saw two F-type avatars facing each other. One was an onyx black, the other a light-aquamarine blue—obviously, Black Lotus and Sky Raker.

“—?!”

Haruyuki jerked his head up and looked to his right.

Standing there with arms crossed was a fairly large M-type avatar, wrapped in a leather jacket with scattered spikes and wearing a skull-patterned helmet. He wasn’t straddling his beloved American motorcycle, but it could only have been the century-end rider, Rin Kusakabe’s older brother, Ash Roller.

Magenta Scissor had planted an ISS kit in the motorcycle that was essentially a part of him, transforming it into something strangely half machine and half living creature. The mental interference from the kit extended to Rin in the real world, and to protect his little sister, he had even gone so far as to vow that he would lose all his points himself. The reason Haruyuki and his comrades had headed into the Unlimited Neutral Field in the middle of the school festival was nothing other than to save Ash and Rin.

Thanks to the hard work of Kuroyukihime and her team, the main body of the ISS kit had been destroyed—he’d learn the details of this at the meeting that was about to start—and all the kit terminals had been sealed away. From the look of him, it did seem that Ash Roller had been cut loose of all influence from the kit.

“Ah...Ah...A—”

Aaaaaash!! Maybe this was the moment when he leapt up and screamed, but since they’d just had that silly exchange, he couldn’t figure out what to do. Flapping his mouth beneath his goggles, he stood there, frozen in place.

“Hey, ya damned crow,” the fin-de-siècle rider said bluntly, looking out over the endless submerged city.

“Wh-what?”

“Looks like I actually owe ya one now. So I’ll say that last one is a no count.”

“Wh-what? That last one...is what?”

“Obvioso! You pawing at Rin on the other side in a so-called hug, you mega-dolt!”

“Wh-what?! I-I-I-I’m sorry, big brother, sir!!”

“Who you calling big brother, yooouuuu?! Lemme tell ya right here, this is a right-now, one-time thing only! The next time you go wild with the meaty embraces, mighty me here’ll flatten you with my machine! Ultrathin!” Ash Roller shouted wildly, arms still crossed. “That’s *thin* like *flat* and *ultra* like *you’re weak*, because my mighty self is mega-cooooool!!”

Haruyuki stared at him completely dumbfounded, thinking that this exchange ruined all sorts of things.

“Ash! Cooorvus!” Fuko’s voice came to them from the ground—well, watery surface—a dozen or so meters below. “It’s going to hurt if you don’t get down here in the next five seconds!”

“Y-yes sir, Master!” Ash snapped to attention and peered down. He couldn’t actually take any damage no matter how high the jump was since he was a member of the Gallery, but he seemed very reluctant to step over that edge.

“...What are you doing, Ash?”

“Aah, nah, just this rumor. Like, I heard sometimes there’re these huge sea slugs or sea anemones or whatever in the water of a Water stage...My fine self and the slithery things, it’s just—”

“.....”

Haruyuki silently pushed Ash, and they jumped from the school building together.

“Nooooo!” The century-end rider fell, kicking and screaming, and landed face-first in the water.

Coming down gently beside him, Haruyuki turned to Fuko and Kuroyukihime and dipped his head. “Kuroyukihime, Master. I’m sorry we’re late. Where’s everyone else?”

“They’re all here. Behind you,” Kuroyukihime said.

He turned and saw six people sitting alongside one another on the concrete structure of the first floor of the school building. Naturally, none of their avatars had a scratch on them. The light of the sun in the blue sky reflected off the water and made their semitransparent armor shine brightly. Staring at his comrades, Haruyuki reflected once again on the fact that the long, hard fight was over.

The ISS kit main body was gone, and the darkness that was on the verge of overrunning the Accelerated World had been banished. They had returned to the days when Burst Linkers fought one another simply with techniques, wisdom, and guts in the normal duel field, and Legion members challenged massive Enemies in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

However, *she* was not in this world. The pure-white Archangel who had given Haruyuki wings and courage and taught him so many things no longer existed...

“Now then, let’s begin,” Kuroyukihime said. “A normal duel ends in thirty minutes, after all.”

Haruyuki took a deep breath. “Okay!”

Fuko and Kuroyukihime stood alongside each other in the courtyard, a mass of concrete cut from the school building. The nine people who had taken part in the mission, with the new addition of Ash Roller, formed a circle, and the meeting began. Haruyuki spoke first, earnestly.

The school was in the Minato Ward Area—the apparent headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society into which he had chased Black Vise after he abducted Niko. The Archangel Metatron who spoke to Haruyuki when he lost sight of Black Vise and was at a loss as to how to proceed. The decisive battle in the courtyard. Wolfram Cerberus jumping in. The theft of Niko’s Enhanced Armament by Cerberus III, aka Nomi’s copy. The red light that poured down from the sky and the birth of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II...

When he paused for a breath, after muscling through the many dizzying developments, Kuroyukihime dropped her gaze to the shimmering surface of the water. “I see...In other words, because we destroyed the ISS kit main body, the accumulated negative Incarnate energy was sent to the Society’s

headquarters and created a new Armor at the worst possible time. Is that it, then...?”

“Not yer fault, Lotus,” Niko interjected immediately, sitting cross-legged on the concrete frame. “That damned Argon, she said it. Something about how it was too soon. ‘That lot, they went an’ did it.’ ‘That’ was deffo the ISS kit main body. And by *too soon*, she meant the timing of the Incarnate energy transfer. Which means those Society jerks were using the main body for storing energy right from the start. If everything’d gone ‘zactly ‘cording to their plan, the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, woulda been two or three or—worst-case scenario—ten times stronger than the thing we fought. This was the right time. We took it down. Couldn’t strike the killing blow, though...”

“If that’s the case, then I feel a little better.” Kuroyukihime nodded. “But all that said, you did well to defeat it. We saw that black explosion from Midtown Tower, but that went far beyond the level of an Enhanced Armament.”

“For reals!” Niko threw her hands up into the air. “Like, if you threw that at the Castle, you’d knock a god outta the sky...Heap your praise on your child, there. Without Crow, we’d deffo been wiped out.”

Pard next to her nodded her agreement.

“N-no.” Haruyuki flapped his hands in front of him. “We managed to win because no one gave up, right until the very end. If it had been just me, I probably would’ve run away before it even started.”

“Don’t be so modest, Haruyuki. You are definitely today’s MVP,” Kuroyukihime said with kindness, and a warm joy welled up in his heart.

But Haruyuki shook his head lightly once more and glanced up at the blue sky. “Thank you. But...it wasn’t my power alone. Archangel Metatron loaned me her wings and fought alongside me...If she hadn’t been there, I never would’ve been able to take down Mark II...”

No one responded for a time. Finally, Ash Roller spoke at last to break the silence.

“But, like, Crow, this Metatron, she’s like the Enemy boss, yeah? This is a giga-unbelievable story, man. Talking to an Enemy, tag teaming with her.”

“Yeah. But Metatron was no ordinary Enemy. We were just born in different worlds, but we have exactly the same spirit...I believe that.”

Once again, only the faint rippling sound of water filled the stage.

It was no wonder they were confused. For Burst Linkers, Enemies in the Unlimited Neutral Field were the ultimate foes. They sent large-scale parties scattering with their overwhelming battle power and occasionally pushed Burst Linkers to total point loss with unlimited EK. And the final objective of that day’s mission had been to subjugate the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron and end the blockade on Midtown Tower. He could say that this Metatron had become an ally, but there was no doubt it would be hard to believe right away...

“I believe you!” Chiyuri suddenly shouted forcefully.

Haruyuki let out a small “Huh?”

“I mean, I’ve actually seen an Enemy and a Burst Linker get close!”

“Seen—? Oh, right, you mean Coolu.”

When he visited the Setagaya Area of the Unlimited Neutral Field four days earlier with Chiyuri, Haruyuki had met a level-four Burst Linker called Chocolat Puppeteer. She had spent a long time reaching out to a Lesser-class Enemy of the species Lava Carbuncle and finally tamed it—though really, it was more like joined it in friendship.

Akira also nodded firmly. “There are rare examples of an Enemy being made non-active...or so I’m told. This is the first I’ve heard of one as high-ranking as a Legend class, but if it’s Crow...I feel like I can get on board with that.”

“The Sun God Inti even might become friends with C!” Utai declared, causing the whole group to laugh cheerfully.

“I see,” Takumu said once the laughter subsided. “That little icon flying around you in that school, that was Metatron herself then.”

“Yeah. She was showing us the way.”

“No way! I said something about her being a bug. I better say sorry the next time I see her.” Chiyuri shrank into herself apologetically.

And the tears he’d been pushing back since this conversation began, just one

of them spilled out. It was beneath his mirrored goggles, so he didn't think the rest of the group would notice, but Fuko sitting to his right peered into his face.

"What's the matter, Corvus?"

"Oh, n-no. It's nothing." His voice in reply shook slightly, and he very much could not fool these trusted comrades. Letting one virtual tear after another fall, Haruyuki turned to Chiyuri. "Chiyu...You won't be able to do that. Metatron is...To defeat Mark II, she transformed herself into the light of Trisagion...and she disappeared."

With the group silent once more, Haruyuki haltingly told them about his experience in the mysterious Highest Level. About the things Archangel Metatron had shown him. Had told him. And about the end of the world that she had wanted to see...

Once he'd told them about Metatron's annihilation, there was a full ten seconds of silence. When the timer in the upper part of his field of view reached five hundred seconds remaining, Kuroyukihime started to speak slowly.

"The final Arc, The Fluctuating Light itself, is the reason for the existence of the Accelerated World...Is that what Metatron said in this space, the Highest Level?"

"If that's true, then the world won't end even once someone reaches level ten...Is that it?" Fuko asked in reply, and the Black King slowly moved her face mask up and down.

After another brief silence, she said quietly, "When I attained level nine, the message text that was displayed in my field of view was precisely this: WHEN YOU REACH THE NEXT LEVEL, YOU WILL MEET THE CREATOR AND LEARN THE TRUE PURPOSE OF BRAIN BURST, THE TRUE MEANING OF THIS WORLD."

"Didn't *actually* say the game'd be cleared by someone hittin' level ten," Niko said, having seen the same message herself, her tone faintly angry. "But if we're not clearin' it, why make such a big deal outta level ten? I mean, the condition to make level ten's pretty for real—push five other level niners to total point loss or you don't get to be level ten. What's the point in that?"

"...No idea. The only thing is to ask this creator about the truth...But

Haruyuki's story does make me think otherwise than I have been. I feel as though while the creator does wish to see someone reach level ten, they're also afraid of this very thing happening...Something like that..."

Niko groaned.

"If the creator's afraid," Haruyuki said, trying to ignore the bitter pain of loss in his heart, "it might be connected with the end of operation of those two worlds—of Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040. If the same creator's behind all three games, then he—or she, maybe—this person only has our Brain Burst 2039 left now. And if someone reaching level ten means, like, the game's final stage begins..."

Metatron had said it on the Highest Level. Long, long ago, plenty of stars had shone in the two parallel worlds, as well. But those lights had gone out one by one until finally they all disappeared. Thus, those two worlds must have produced some "result" a step ahead of Haruyuki's. He didn't know whether someone had made it to level ten and challenged the Castle or whether everyone had lost all their points before that. But at the very least, there was the possibility that this world would go down the same path. The possibility that it would be swallowed up by darkness with no one able to reach the light at the end.

Stewing silently, Haruyuki lightly tapped his right hand to his left.

"You told us a little while ago, Corvus, about the Green King discussing these two 'trials,' Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt," Fuko said, her voice calm. "But now it seems that we need to obtain more detailed information. Ash."

The man snapped to attention. "H-hhyah, Master?!"

"Please set up a meeting with Grandé soon. I'll leave the venue to you, but I'd prefer a neutral area."

"R-roger, yes, Master...So, like, G-G-G-G-G-Grandé, you maybe talkin' about our LM?! S-s-s—"

"Seriously for real. Please." Fuko flashed him a bright smile, and even Ash could not say "Giga impossible!" to that grin.

As Haruyuki watched the petrified century-end rider, the corners of his mouth

finally softened. And then he heard a voice from nowhere.

“That won’t be necessary, Burst Linkers.”

Sweet like a young girl, clear like a pure holy woman—a stern echo like a noble queen. Although the elements resembled Metatron’s voice, he could tell that the essential nature of it was entirely different. Or rather, he couldn’t feel anything of the heart of the speaker, and that should have been the essential nature of the voice. A hard, cold, smooth wall completely blocked any empathy.

Who on earth...? Haruyuki started to look around and then noticed something strange about Kuroyukihime.

The Black King, also known as World End, was completely stiff, even more than the petrified Ash Roller had been. A strange light floated up in the eye lenses behind her goggles, but Haruyuki couldn’t tell what kind of emotion it was expressing. He’d never seen the Black King like this before. And yet, Haruyuki felt like he could see the expression on the face of the flesh-and-blood Kuroyukihime that lived in the avatar. It was definitely surprise, animosity, and fear.

Instantly, Haruyuki understood. Or rather, remembered. *I’ve heard that voice before, too. Not directly...In a dream. Within the memories of Chrome Falcon that I shared in the Castle...*

“On the roof!” Niko shouted, and everyone, with the exception of Kuroyukihime, leapt up from their concrete seats and looked up at the northern sky.

A hut that housed the stairwell jutted upward from the center of the roof of Umesato Junior High’s first school building. Someone was on top of it. Not a duel avatar; the slender body was wrapped in a snowy-white summer dress, and long golden hair fluttered in the breeze. A girl. But her face was covered by a platinum mask that you’d use at a masquerade ball.

A flesh-and-blood girl in the duel field? He was baffled for an instant before he realized it was a dummy avatar for spectator use. In other words, a Burst Linker besides Haruyuki and his friends had slipped into the Gallery for the duel that Kuroyukihime and Fuko had started.

“Who are you?!” Niko’s sharp voice flew once more.

Even at this demand from the Red King, the snowy girl didn’t so much as twitch. She stood on the edge of the hut and brought her hands together behind her back. A wind gusted up in the Water stage, making the girl’s golden hair and dress flap. He found it hard to believe that the lines of her graceful, refined limbs were polygons.

Although she had no butterfly wings on her back, and her coloring was the polar opposite, there was an air about her that was very similar to the avatar in the black dress that Kuroyukihime used in the local in-school net. For an instant, the words *Snow White* flashed through Haruyuki’s mind.

When the ripples on the expansive water surface died down, small, perfectly formed lips moved beneath the thin metal mask covering the eyes and nose. “Please ask Lotus for my name later. Right now, we have something more important to discuss.”

...She’d called the Black King “Lotus.”

Haruyuki glanced over at Kuroyukihime once again. The onyx avatar, the only one to remain seated, did not move a muscle, the swords of her arms and legs still crossed. No, just one place—the top of the sword of her right hand was shaking very minutely. Haruyuki couldn’t decide whether this trembling expressed fear or anger.

When he returned his gaze to the top of the school building, the mysterious girl looked directly at him with eyes covered by the mask and said, almost singing, “Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040. The reason these two worlds died out...is because both of these worlds were too biased.”

“...Biased?” Takumu asked, his tone half guarded, half curious.

“Yes. AA 2038 was filled with excessive fighting...and CC 2040 with excessive harmony. To put it another way, in the world of AA, every player other than oneself was an enemy, and in the world of CC, they were always allies.”

While he was concerned about Kuroyukihime, as a gamer, Haruyuki reflexively interpreted the girl’s words. Accel Assault was a game with nothing but a so-called free-for-all mode. And Cosmos Corrupt was a game with just a

cooperative mode. In which case, both were indeed biased. This was in comparison to Brain Burst 2039, in which all players could be enemies or allies.

But that this bias destroyed the world...What did that mean? He could understand if it was just the AA world. If the players were constantly killing one another, it was obvious that there would be only one left in the end. But why would the CC world also collapse over the same period when all the players should have been working together to clear objectives?

The girl on the roof seemed to sense Haruyuki's question. "Excessive harmony, excessive cooperation...What these produce is not acceleration, but stagnation. Time stopped in the CC world. And it was destroyed because of that. In that sense, the flow of this world that you all love might also be starting to stagnate bit by bit." The girl chuckled softly.

This sweet echo jabbed at Haruyuki's memory again. Chrome Falcon, the Burst Linker who synced with Haruyuki in the Castle...He'd become the first Chrome Disaster because his beloved partner Saffron Blossom was killed over and over and over before his eyes. In an unlimited EK using the terrifying hell worm, the Legend-class Enemy Jormungand.

It was the Acceleration Research Society's Black Vise and Argon Array who had put together this tragedy. But one other person was also there.

She had been wrapped in a mysterious light, so he couldn't see her, but someone higher up the ladder than Vise and Argon was there. The owner of a sweet, pure, stern voice.

"...It can't be...," Haruyuki squeezed out hoarsely.

Kuroyukihime, who had not so much as twitched up to that point, raised her face mask haughtily. She leapt up high from her seated position and did a backflip before landing on the mass of concrete with a sharp *klak*. She sighted the girl on the roof with the tip of her right sword hand.

"Do you intend to say that *that* was why?!" Her tone was sharper and more severe than her swords. But Haruyuki realized that there was a shared echo, albeit slight, in Kuroyukihime's crisp voice and the sweet song of the mysterious female avatar. "Are you trying to legitimize it by talking like that after you went around distributing a thing like the ISS kits?!"

She yanked her brandished sword downward, slicing through the air.

“Answer me!! White King...and president of the Acceleration Research Society, White Cosmos!!”

The wind of the Water stage ceased. The light of the sun clouded over, and the water surface calmed like a mirror. Thick black clouds rolled in to hide the endlessly clear blue sky. Even though it had to have been nothing more than a preset weather change event, it was almost as if the stage itself were afraid. Purple lightning bolts began wriggling like living creatures through the ink-black sky. The low rumbling thunder called up wavelets in the water at their feet.

The White King, White Cosmos. Also known as Transient Eternity, the head of the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe. Kuroyukihime’s parent and her real-life older sister. The very person who had convinced her that the Seven Roads—guns the Red King, Red Rider, created as symbols of peace—were the ultimate weapons of destruction and spurred her toward tragedy two and a half years ago.

She was the only one of the Kings of Pure Color who always had a representative attend the meetings of the Seven Kings that Haruyuki had been a part of, and now Kuroyukihime was saying that she was at the same time the leader of the Acceleration Research Society, another figure similarly shrouded in mystery.

“But...that’s...” The voice that spilled from Haruyuki’s throat shook so much that he himself could barely hear it.

The other eight were in varying degrees of shock. The one who appeared the most surprised was Ash Roller, who groaned “No way...” without a single word of Ash slang.

Chiyuri, on the other hand, muttered “Of course,” which jump-started Haruyuki’s brain again.

“Of course?” he asked his childhood friend. “How did you...?”

“Now look, the Society headquarters we slipped into...It was about two kilometers southwest from the old Tokyo Tower, right? And the girls’ school Kuroyukihime said the White Legion headquarters was in was basically the

same place.”

“That’s exactly right, Bell.” Fuko nodded slightly. “We also realized it when we were moving from Midtown Tower. The White Legion is a cover for the Acceleration Research Society. We were planning to make that announcement at the end of this meeting, but...”

“I never imagined that the White King herself would show,” Akira remarked.

“Nor I,” Utai added.

The girl avatar standing against the backdrop of the thunder clouds accepted Kuroyukihime’s censure silently. The cold wind that had started to blow toyed with the hem of her summer dress and her long, golden hair.

The last to respond was the Red King. She took one step, then another, toward the school building before calling out in a voice that burned with a powerful fire, “You? You’re the one pulling the strings here? Not just the ISS kits...Creating the Armor of Catastrophe, the Disaster, and parasitizing one Burst Linker after another with it—that was your work, White Cosmos?!” A crimson aura rose like flames from her right hand, thrust toward the girl on the roof.

Niko had made her own parent, Cherry Rook, retire through total point loss with her Judgment Blow, because Rook had turned into the fifth Chrome Disaster and was indiscriminately attacking members of other Legions. It had been the Yellow King, Yellow Radio, who had given Rook the Armor of Catastrophe, but even this act of his was likely the result of the Acceleration Research Society’s invisible machinations. Since the dawn of the Accelerated World, the White King and Black Vise had been sowing the seeds of tragedy.

Flames of rage enveloped Niko, while the girl in white looked down at her through her platinum mask.

“We’ve forced you into difficult roles any number of times, hmm, new Red King. But that is proof that we recognized your power...Although, I suppose even saying that, I can’t expect you to forgive us.”

“Yer! Damned! Right! I’ll pay back this debt a hundredfold!!”

“If that is what you truly desire...” The girl—the White King—said with an innocent smile, as if humoring a small child. “Shall I switch from the current

normal duel mode to Battle Royale mode right now?”

It took him about half a second to understand the meaning of those words. It was true that if all the spectators of a one-on-one duel agreed, they could switch to Battle Royale, and all the people in the stage would become duelists. The Red King and the White King, neither of whom had a health gauge at the moment, would be able to fight each other. However.

“You serious?” Niko snapped. “You seriously sayin’ you can actually fight us like that?”

Just as Niko noted, the White King had dived into the duel stage using a spectator dummy avatar, and a dummy’s fighting abilities didn’t begin to compare to even a level-one newbie. And the switch to a duel avatar required operating the BB console screen in the real world. Practically speaking, in a dummy avatar, the only possibility was to run—and run desperately. But in the Water stage where the buildings were nothing but frames, there were few blind spots. She might have been the White King, but escaping against ten people, including two kings and four high rankers, in the two hundred seconds remaining, would have been difficult...

No. Wait...There likely was a power in the Accelerated World that could be used wearing a dummy avatar. The Incarnate System.

Was that the source of the White King’s confidence? If she used Incarnate, then even with a dummy avatar, she could keep running until time ran out; maybe she even thought that she’d be able to win? He didn’t know. He couldn’t trace White Cosmos’s line of thought.

Shouldn’t it have been impossible for a King to challenge another King to a fight so casually like this, almost on a whim? The White King was a level niner bound by the sudden-death rule. If she fought using a dummy avatar, the defensive power of which was equivalent to a sheet of paper, and lost to the Black King or the Red King, both also level nine, she would instantly lose all her points.

Why? For what reason? Somehow, she was able to stand there quietly, not worked up in the slightest.

“...Cosmos...” Kuroyukihime called the name of her parent in a creaking voice.

Her left hand flashed as she accessed the Instruct menu. If she pressed the button just three times, an offer to switch to Battle Royale mode would appear before everyone.

Is this a trap? Or is it the chance of a lifetime?

Kuroyukihime stood there, left hand trembling in the air, and Fuko, Sky Raker, and Utai waited silently. The readiness to simply follow their Legion Master became a colorless aura that radiated from the members of the Four Elements.

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt a twitch from the white wings that no longer existed on his back—a sensation he'd felt any number of times in the Unlimited Neutral Field. A warning from Metatron.

Even knowing it was a phantom signal from ghost wings, Haruyuki instantly took a huge step back and cupped Kuroyukihime's hand in his own. At the same time, he turned to the girl standing on the roof and mustered all his courage. "White King!! Your offer's not fair!!"

His mental circuits were blown at several levels; his words were basically from instinct.

"...Why do you think so, Silver Crow?"

The moment White Cosmos said his name, a pressure that made him shudder in fear pierced his avatar's core, but he earnestly braced both feet and continued.

"Because your subordinate, Black Vise, still has one of the Red King's Enhanced Armaments that he stole! If you're saying you'll fight in order to apologize, then you have to give that back first!"

Everyone around him, including Kuroyukihime, looked at Haruyuki with slight surprise on their features.

Meanwhile, the White King on the roof smiled faintly beneath her mask. "I see. Your logic is both understandable and not, but unfortunately, I cannot comply with this demand. That Armor is a very precious hope for me. You've no idea how relieved I was when I heard that it had just barely been recovered after it was purified by you all and on the verge of very nearly being taken back."

“...Hope? What do you mean, hope?” He had thrown himself forward to stop a fight, but when the White King said this, he felt an enormous fire of rage blaze up inside him. He shouted at the top of his lungs, “You made all those people suffer with the ISS kits...pulled Metatron away from her domain...controlled total-loss Burst Linkers like zombies...stole Rain’s Enhanced Armament from her...forced Cerberus into such a terrible role...And you call the result of all this ‘hope’?!”

And that’s not all. The tragedy created by the White King and the Acceleration Research Society isn’t that. Chrome Falcon. Saffron Blossom. The Beast. The many Chrome Disasters. The first Red King. And now the Black King, my dear Lotus.

Three days before, Kuroyukihime had pressed her face to Haruyuki’s shoulder and sobbed. She had regretted and wept over the fact that, manipulated by the White King, she had stained her hands with a friend’s blood, abandoned friendships, and even destroyed her Legion.

Seeing those tears, Haruyuki had made a vow. When the time came that he faced off against the White King, he had to tell her. Tricking her little sister, making her cry, chasing her out of the house—was this what an older sister, what a parent, does? He had to tell her.

Sucking air into his trembling chest, he got ready to yell with everything he had.

But then Kuroyukihime gently placed the sword of her left hand on his shoulder.

“...Crow,” she murmured, and he knew instantly what she was trying to say.

Now was not yet the time for that. There was an appropriate time and place for the decisive battle with the White King.

“...Okay.” Haruyuki somehow managed to swallow his anger and took a step back. In his place, Kuroyukihime stepped forward—her earlier tenseness transformed into cool resolve.

“Cosmos. Your hope is for all other Burst Linkers to despair,” she announced to the White King. “I’m sure it is for Vise and Argon as well.”

“...That may very well be. But if that’s the case, then what, Lotus?” The question was calm, at best.

“It might not be enough for you to take, but we also have our own hope.” Kuroyukihime was also quiet in her reply. “The many Burst Linkers whose names you don’t even know have their own hope and are fighting in earnest. You might try to knock them down, toy with them, step on them, but our hope—the hope of all Burst Linkers—is not going anywhere. The small fires will come together, turn into a massive inferno, and someday burn away the cold hope that you all spread.”

As she made this bold declaration, a bluish-purple aura rose from the Black King, making the water at her feet rise up into fierce waves. Almost in response to this display of fighting spirit, bolts of lightning shot down from the black clouds that filled the sky to hit various areas of the first school building. One landed right next to the White King on the roof, but the silhouette of the girl didn’t move.

Amid the roaring storm, the older sister—parent—offered sweet words to the younger sister—child. “You’ve gotten stronger, Lotus. I look forward to it...the time when you come to stand against me of your own will...” The figure of the girl blurred in the rain that started to fall.

Mysterious particles of light enveloped her body. “Until then,” the White King said in a melodic voice, “I shall doze a little in a butterfly dream. Good-bye, Burst Linkers. It was a pleasure talking to you...”

Beyond the now-pouring rain, the girl transformed into a butterfly of light—or that was what it looked like. The butterfly danced up into the thunderous sky and immediately disappeared from view.

And then the timer hit zero, and flaming letters announcing that time was up burned a bright red in Haruyuki’s field of view.



Rin said that she was fine to get up, so the three said their good-byes to Ms. Hotta and left the nurse's office. For a while, they walked silently down the empty hallway.

"Um." Haruyuki stopped in front of the small hallway that led to the main entrance and looked up at Fuko. "I'm sorry for butting in, Master."

"No need to apologize, Corvus." Even the ever-calm Fuko had a hint of tension playing on her lips as she turned them up in a faint smile. "In fact, I should be thanking you for stopping a fight with the White King. Although, when the battle does commence at some point, I will of course expend every effort...But even as it was presented to us just now, I wouldn't say we had even a thirty-percent chance at victory."

"What?" Haruyuki gasped in surprise—it was ten against one, and the one was a dummy avatar.

"That person..." Rin clung to the hem of his shirt on his left side. "I can't believe she's a Burst Linker...like us. Maybe it. Was because. She wasn't a duel avatar. But...more than that...it was...almost like..." Rin fumbled for the words, and Fuko explained in her stead:

"Almost like she's in a different time flow."

"Oh...Yes. It was. Like that."

Now that she mentioned it, the White King did indeed have an air like that about her. While she proposed changing to Battle Royale mode, it was almost like she was talking about someone else—she seemed like an observer looking down on the duel field from somewhere far, far away.

"What on earth did she show up for?" he asked, half to himself, as he

remembered her mysterious words. “I don’t feel like her end goal was to eavesdrop on our meeting or anything like that. I mean, she seemed to know so much more than we do. She even knows why AA and CC ended...And how did she get to the stage in the first place?”

And then Haruyuki finally landed on the one thing he should have noticed and dealt with right away. “Oh! Th-this is bad, Master! That duel was via the local in-school net, right?!”

“It was.” Fuko’s expression was troubled.

“And you can only connect to the local net from inside the school. Wh-wh-which means th-th-the White King’s real self is somewhere in this school right now...”

He had just disclosed the most dangerous and deeply critical idea possible, but Fuko and now even Rin simply looked more troubled. He cocked his head to one side. “Huh?”

“Come, come. You’re saying that *now*, Haruyuki?”

He heard a voice from off to his left and turned to find Kuroyukihime, Akira, Niko, Pard, and the others stepping into the second school building from the entrance hall. They’d apparently been on their way from the student council to meet them.

“Look here, Haruyuki,” Niko said with a look of pure exasperation, on the heels of Kuroyukihime’s stunned question. “You gotta notice that stuff the second she shows up in a duel stage like that. And then ya check the matching list the second the duel’s done.”

“...R-right. But—so then, you already checked?”

“Mmm. And we were the only Burst Linkers on the list.” Kuroyukihime walked over to Haruyuki and the others and scrunched up her face.

“She wasn’t there? So then, that means she cut her Neurolinker connection?” But Haruyuki’s guess was quickly shot down:

“No, that’s not it. She was connected remotely from her own Legion territory.”

“What?! To our local net from outside?! Can you even *do* something like that?!”

“It’s not that you can’t, it’s that we don’t allow it...Normally, that is,” the vice president of the student council, who had control over the core systems at Umesato Junior High, added regretfully, leaning back against the wall. “But today, when the school’s opened up for the festival, we have no choice but to lower the firewalls so visitors can connect. With her skill and privileges, it’s possible that she dug a hole somewhere in the network and slipped through... Naturally, I absolutely will not allow such things to happen again.”

Privileges. Maybe she meant that her family in Minato Ward had some connection with the company that managed Umesato Junior High, but he couldn’t exactly ask about that now.

Instead, he dipped his head in front of her. “Um, Kuroyukihime? I’m sorry for suddenly butting in back there.”

“Mmm. No, you don’t have to apologize.” Her response was basically the same thing as Fuko’s, a faint smile playing on her lips. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I was utterly undecided about whether to push the button to switch to Battle Royale. And if I’m uncertain, then now is still not the time to fight.”

Haruyuki felt a bit surprised and very delighted at how surprisingly normal the swordmaster’s demeanor was. The appearance of the White King had to have been completely unexpected for Kuroyukihime. He couldn’t believe she maintained her composure when faced with her older sister who had manipulated her, betrayed her, and chased her away.

Eight months earlier, when Haruyuki had only just become a Burst Linker, Kuroyukihime had said to him:

That person was once...the person closest to me. I believed this Linker would shine brightly forever at the center of my world and keep all kinds of darkness and cold at bay.

However, one day...one incident, one instant, I realized that this was an ephemeral illusion. Now, you could go so far as to say that, for me, this person is my archenemy.

Ever since, she had been unable to speak of the White King without getting upset. But today, when she finally encountered her mortal enemy again, she had pushed aside all fear and terror to stand tall and boldly declare the fight that was to come. A level-nine king herself, Kuroyukihime definitely wasn't standing still, either. She trained and kept moving forward, seeking to grow stronger.

She had also once said the White King, her real-life older sister, was able to exert the greatest influence on her in the real world, and that if they were to fight, this fact would become a curse and bind her swords. But the Kuroyukihime of today would definitely be able to get past this almost absolute obstacle for a Burst Linker. He had no doubt that she would stand at the head of the Legion to boldly lead them.

Haruyuki gently wrapped his hands around the hand of hers that was still resting on his shoulder. "I'll get much, much stronger before then. Strong enough to have your back in the field of the decisive battle."

"...Mmm. I'm counting on you, Haruyuki."

This would normally be the time when Chiyuri or Niko said something snarky, but even they had gentle smiles on their faces. In the center of the circle, Kuroyukihime gripped Haruyuki's hands tightly in return and nodded deeply before looking around.

"Now then, everyone. After all that fighting, you must be hungry. Let's get some food at the booths and have lunch in our secret box seats."

They went around the refreshment booths in the courtyard and stocked up on the usual offerings—*yakisoba*, *okonomiyaki*, baked potato—added in some more unusual treats—tacos, falafel, samosas—and threw in churros and *taiyaki* for dessert, with enough drinks for them all, of course, and then Kuroyukihime led the party to a place no one expected—the roof of the second school building.

For Haruyuki, this was a space with no good memories. Up until the second term of grade seven, he had been called up here over and over by three boys in his class and forced to buy them snacks or juice, and he had been beaten up for no reason at all. After he was finally freed, he would hide until the end of lunch

in a stall in the boys' washroom in a part of the school where no one ever went and distract himself from his empty stomach in a one-person squash game on the local net.

With Kuroyukihime's help, that bullying had ended abruptly, and he'd barely thought of it since then. But it wasn't as though he'd forgotten those hellish days. That small, hard lump of memories was buried somewhere deep in his heart; he just pretended it didn't exist.

Following everyone up to the roof, Haruyuki hung his head and came to a stop when he spotted a familiar rain stain on the concrete at his feet. Back then, too, he had always stopped here for a moment on the days that gang called him out. Beyond this shadow was territory that was out of range of the social cameras. Once he took a step forward, all the rules against irrational violence would go out the window.

Why had Kuroyukihime chosen this for her box seats? And what on earth were they supposed to see from here anyway?

"Haruyuki."

He hurriedly lifted his face.

Kuroyukihime, who had been walking a little ahead, was now standing on the other side of the rain stain and smiling as she offered him her hand. Half unconsciously, he took it, and she pulled him forward, so Haruyuki was forced to jump over the gash and take a step forward.

What he saw first was a large plastic tarp spread out next to the solar power-generating nano-wire panel. Was this the place she was calling box seats? Sitting down, about all they'd be able to see was the trees of the inner courtyard and the northern wall of the first school building. But then Haruyuki realized that the tarp wasn't the only thing near the solar panels.

A slim metal pole stretched up from the floor. He looked up and found not a floodlight at its tip, but rather a black sphere about fifteen centimeters across with a bluish luster. A social camera.

"Huh? ...How...? There didn't used to be a camera there," Haruyuki muttered.

Kuroyukihime stood alongside him. "It took quite a bit of time. But there is no

longer a single square meter of this school that is in the blind spot of a camera, and that includes the rear yard and the inner courtyard. I wanted to tell you that.”

“.....”

He couldn't say anything in reply at first.

The other eight had probably guessed there was something going on between Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime at the moment. They took off their shoes and slippers and stepped onto the tarp, chattering excitedly as they started to set out lunch. Haruyuki watched them absently.

The social cameras were set up and operated so that the government could strictly monitor the citizenry, including inside elementary and junior high schools, and no one would have said it was a perfect system. In fact, more than a few teachers hated the idea of cameras in schools. Such teachers insisted they shouldn't rely on social cameras to prevent bullying, but rather give the students the independence and power to fight back on their own; i.e., deal with it if you're dragged into a camera blind spot. But practically speaking, the camera blind spots themselves were what produced bullying, this denial of humanity through malice and violence. Haruyuki thought that not having any students bullied right from the start would be much more meaningful than the independence of the school that the teachers fixated on.



“Now no one will ever have to go through anything like that again, huh?” he said finally.

“Yes.” Kuroyukihime nodded firmly. “This was the one thing I felt I absolutely *had* to do while I was a member of the student council...Now, let’s have lunch. We can’t keep everyone waiting forever.”

“...Right!” As he walked over to rejoin their friends together with Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki’s voice was full of the emotions welling up inside him.

The seemingly plentiful lunch they had prepared vanished without a trace from the plastic tarp in a mere twenty minutes.

“Aaah, I’m stuffed.” Both legs stretched out in front of her, Niko patted her stomach, which was so slim you had to wonder where all that food went. “Eating outside’s pretty great. Let’s have a picnic in the park one o’ these days. There’s that big one over by the government building, yeah?”

“Th-there is, but that’s right in the middle of Leonids territory,” Takumu noted hurriedly.

“Listen, Professor.” Niko glared at him out of the corner of her eye. “We can cut the net off for a picnic, at least!”

Utai ran her fingers through the air. UI> IT WOULD BE FUN TO HAVE A PICNIC ON SATURDAY AND ATTACK THE BLUE TERRITORY ALL TOGETHER AFTER EATING.

“H-hang on, Uiui. That would leave Suginami area empty.” Kuroyukihime was quick to interject, and the other girls laughed cheerfully. Rin Kusakabe’s smiling face was also among them, naturally.

While on the one hand, he felt another wave of relief at how great everything had turned out, he also felt several thorns stabbing into the depths of his heart. One of these concerns was just as he had blurted out in the confrontation with the White King: the fact that they hadn’t been able to get all of Niko’s Enhanced Armament back. White Cosmos had called the thruster block still in Cerberus’s possession Armor and said it was a “precious hope.” Which meant the Acceleration Research Society’s scheming still wasn’t over. They were probably going to use Cerberus’s Armor to try to produce a new—and maybe even more massive—problem than the ISS kits.

“You’re not having a good time?” Akira had come to sit next to him at some point, and she offered him a paper cup as she spoke.

“Oh! No, it’s...Thank you.” He accepted the cup at any rate and took a sip of oolong tea. He brought his upturned face back down and found all eyes suddenly on him, so he unconsciously started to drop his head.

“Haruyuki, we still have some time. If you have something to say, you can say it, you know?” Kuroyukihime urged.

He nodded, although he did wonder exactly how much time until what. “Um. The thing that’s just really bothering me...is that we couldn’t get one of Niko’s Enhanced Armaments back.” He looked up at the girl in question, and the Red King merely blinked rapidly in response. This was unexpected, and Haruyuki unconsciously kept going. “I—I mean, Prominence has Territories, too, and all. And you can’t summon Invincible without the thrusters...?”

Niko exchanged a look with Pard to her left, and then they both looked at Haruyuki. Tugging on one of her red pigtails, Niko said, just the slightest bit apologetically, “Nah, I can.”

“.....What?”

“Even without the thrusters, I can summon just the other parts.”

“.....Y-you can?” Haruyuki gaped.

Her slightly contrite look disappeared, and the Red King puffed out her cheeks. “So, like, that knockoff Dusk Taker stole my Enhanced Armament and managed to equip just the four parts without the missile pods, y’know?! Normally, a person’d figure it out then! Listen. Invincible’s an attachment Enhanced Armament with the cockpit block at the center. So long as I got the cockpit, doesn’t matter if the rest is one piece or four pieces!”

“...R-really...?” Now it wasn’t just his mouth; Haruyuki’s eyes were also opened as wide as they could go.

“Well, I guess I’ll say thanks for lookin’ out fer me, at least.” Niko’s puffed-out cheeks deflated as she scratched the back of her head. “And it’s true; just ’cause I can equip the four pieces doesn’t mean I can forget about the thrusters or whatever. Just...I think that’s a problem I need to take care of myself.”

“What—? I’ll help! I mean, you went to the Unlimited Neutral Field to aid us, so we have a responsibility for what happened there.” Haruyuki unconsciously leaned forward toward Niko on the opposite side of the circle he and his friends sat in.

But the Red King curled her lips up in a faint smile, her face a mix of emotion, and then she looked up at the partly cloudy sky as she spoke slowly. “When that Vise jerk had me captive in that school, I was still conscious, still feelin’ stuff. I mean, it was kinda hazy, but I was there. So I was thinkin’ all kinds o’ stuff when that monster took my Enhanced Armaments one piece after another. Like I was gonna hafta give up being Promi’s LM now. Or like, maybe Pard’ll step up and take the reins as LM. But that wasn’t all. Surprised even me, but I was ready to give up, but also the opposite, too.”

She dropped her gaze down to her own small hand and clenched her fingers together tightly. “Level-wise, sure, I’m at nine, but my power doesn’t begin to compare with the other kings. Not in battle or in leadership or mentality.” Kuroyukihime opened her mouth to interject, but Niko shook her head lightly with a faint smile still visible. “I was half going with the flow when I became Promi’s LM...I’ve actually always thought that I don’t got the right to call myself the second Red King. In my heart somewhere, I was like, I should walk away from the whole mess before the chrome plating peels off and everyone sees how awkward I really am. But then my Enhanced Armament got stolen. *Plus*, my back was up against the wall, like maybe this is it—maybe I’m lookin’ at total point loss here. I finally had a *reason* to throw in the towel, y’know? But I didn’t want to, suddenly. What I really felt was regret. I didn’t want it to end there... Like, I didn’t want to betray Promi, not when it’s come so far after all that chaos three years ago. I mean, the Legion’s stuck with me all this time.”

Pard pursed her lips tightly together as if to keep the words that bubbled inside her from spilling out. Niko didn’t dare look in her direction, either, but rather looked at Haruyuki and Chiyuri in turn, her hands still clenched into fists on the slender legs that stretched out from her cutoffs.

“I seriously thank you from the bottom o’ my heart for taking down the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, and gettin’ back three pieces of my Enhanced Armament. But I think I need to spend some time really thinkin’ about what it

means that the one piece is still gone. I hafta learn something from this. Just like you're always doing, Haruyuki. So...don't panic. As long as my thrusters are out there somewhere in the Accelerated World, I know I'll get the chance to get 'em back. Until that chance comes along, I'm gonna rebuild myself so I can *really* call myself Legion Master—and maybe even the Red King. Also, I gotta pay back Metatron somehow, after she disappeared right next to me there.” Having finished this long, resolved speech, Niko gulped down the orange juice in her paper cup, looking embarrassed.

The thorn that had stabbed at Haruyuki's heart melted away at her words, but something hot welled up in its place, and he had to blink repeatedly. He didn't think he could speak, so he nodded his head silently over and over.

Sitting on her knees to the left, Kuroyukihime rose to her full height and unexpectedly said, “Niko—no, second Red King, Scarlet Rain. I have something to say to you on behalf of a certain friend.”

The tale she then told was a shocking truth. It hadn't just been Dusk Taker that the Acceleration Research Society's necromancer brought back. The memories of the first Red King, Red Rider, had also been revived to produce massive quantities of the ISS kit terminals and had been made to parasitize the kit main body.

“We fought the Rider that appeared from inside the main body. Naturally, it was not the real Rider I forced to total point loss, but rather a reproduction of his memories...But because of this, now, he himself is the lone true BBK.” Kuroyukihime looked directly at Niko. “When he was on the verge of disappearing, Rider said to tell his successor his last words...” She paused very briefly. ““Say thanks to number two. She took over Promi for me. Tell her it's up to her now.””

The second Red King stayed silent.

And then, abruptly, clear droplets rose in her large reddish-brown eyes, flecked with a green that shone brilliantly depending on the light. Her tears soon spilled over, slid down her freckled cheeks, and fell onto the front of her red T-shirt. Perhaps noticing a little too late, Niko wiped furiously at her eyes, but the large tears just kept falling. Finally, she dropped her hand and pressed

her face into the chest of Pard next to her. The Legion deputy, who'd long protected her Master, also blinked repeatedly as she held the girl tightly.

As he listened to the youthful wailing, tears sprang up in Haruyuki's own eyes, too. But this time, at least, he wasn't alone in his sympathetic tears. Chiyuri, Utai, Rin, Fuko, Takumu, Akira, and even Kuroyukihime all had watery eyes as they watched over the second Red King, now finally the official heir after more than two years.

A minute, then two, then three passed. Lifting a finger to the corner of her eye, Kuroyukihime called out loudly, "Now, it's getting to be time. It's starting!"

Reflexively, Haruyuki glanced at the clock in the lower right of his virtual desktop. The display was clear, unaffected by the tears filling his eyes, and showed 13:59:50. He wondered what exactly was supposed to start at two PM before he remembered. He felt like Kuroyukihime had said something about the student council's festival exhibit starting at two before they dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field. But no matter what class or what gym it was in, they'd never make it in time now—

Clang, clang!

Just as the clock hit two, a light peal of bells rang through the air. But of course, there were no actual bells in the Umesato Junior High school building. Which meant only those connected to the local in-school net could hear this sound via their Neurolinkers. The bell, which sounded very much like Lime Bell's Choir Chime, rang fourteen times and then stopped—its echo lingering in the air.

"Guests of the twenty-eighth Umesato Junior High School festival and school students," the gentle, cadent voice of a female student—probably student council secretary Megumi Wakamiya—announced. *"The student council executive will now unveil their project 'Time.' Please ensure your Neurolinkers are connected to the network for use at this school. The exhibit area is outside the school buildings. Those of you already outside, please remain there. Those of you inside, please go to a nearby window. Now then, let's begin."*

The exhibit area's outside the school? Haruyuki looked over at Kuroyukihime. But the student council vice president said nothing—a faint smile lingering on

her lips. Takumu, Akira, and the others also looked around dubiously, while Niko lifted her face from Pard's chest as though she hadn't spent the last ten minutes wailing.

Fwssh! He felt a refreshing breeze on his skin. Since the Neurolinker's augmented reality mode could only produce sound and images, this was just a real wind that came along at just the right time. But almost as though it were a signal of some kind, afterward, the back of the tall building he could see beyond the first school building to the south disappeared entirely.

"Ah!" Hurriedly getting to his feet, Haruyuki started to move toward the railing of the roof, but Kuroyukihime pulled him back.

"Haruyuki, everyone, it's easier to see on the other side."

"O-other side?" He turned around as he was told. The roof was only ten meters or so wide, so he should have been able to see Oume Highway and the neighborhood of 3-choume Minami Koenji over the railing on the opposite side.

But the familiar town wasn't there, either. What spread out before him instead was a ocean of grass as far as the eye could see. It was almost like the Accelerated World's Grassland stage, but it was dotted with low bushes, and he could see an enormous river about two kilometers to the north. From the location, he assumed it was the Myoshoji River, but that river was at most ten meters across. The one he saw now looked to be a kilometer to the opposite shore.

They all moved to the railing on the north side and opened their eyes wide in amazement, when, once again, they heard Megumi's voice.

"What you are seeing right now is the view from eight thousand years ago in the early Jomon period. At that time, the end of the Musashino Terrace was a shoreline, and what is currently Suginami was in the center of a peninsula that jutted out into an enormous bay."

"J-Jomon period?!" Haruyuki cried out in surprise and peered directly down over the railing. The grassy plain started immediately to the north of the animal hutch where Hoo, the northern white-faced owl, lived; Umesato was like a ship floating in a massive green ocean.

“Master. So does this mean then...that a video of a grassland is being AR–projection mapped over everything outside the school premises?” Takumu asked, showing off his professorial side.

“Mmm.” Kuroyukihime nodded. “Well, basically, yes.”

Genre-wise, it resembled the “Koenji Thirty Years Ago” that Haruyuki had unveiled with his own class, but the scale and difficulty were orders of different magnitude. To simply overlay AR images onto the classroom wall, they only had to set up markers in the corners. He had no idea what you would do exactly to overwrite an entire town. Sighing in admiration, he shifted his gaze from east to west, and further explanation came from Megumi.

“In this era, the Musashino Terrace was an important place for the people who lived in Tokyo in the Jomon period. They built pit-style homes near the water and went hunting and gathering in the vast grasslands. Earthenware and stone tools have been excavated in nearly every area of Suginami, and large-scale ruins have also been discovered in the southern area of the ward.”

Abruptly, a throaty howl rang out across the grassy plain.

“Ah! Over there!” Chiyuri jabbed a finger into the air.

He followed it with his gaze and saw ancient humans with simple lances and bows in their hands, clad in garments made from pelts and coarse cloth, chasing an enormous boar, large enough to be a Wild-class Enemy. They then disappeared, and several cone-shaped residences appeared in the grasslands. In the plaza, women worked together cooking, while children frolicked around them.

“It was eight thousand years ago. But those children. Looks like they haven’t. Changed so much from us...now,” Rin murmured.

“I suppose not,” Fuko said. “Actually, it’s not only the Jomon people from eight thousand years ago; even the first Homo sapiens who appeared two hundred fifty thousand years ago were basically the same as modern humans in their brain structure. If you gave those children Neurolinkers and a modern education, they’d probably grow up just like us. Although happy or not is another question.”

UI> THAT LAST BIT IS VERY YOU, FU.

Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime and the others laughed at this, with even Niko guffawing loudly, her eyes still swollen and red. As he joined them, Haruyuki quietly puzzled over the meaning of it all.

This exhibit was indeed amazing. It must have taken an enormous amount of time and effort to prepare. But why the Jomon period? Because it was easier to create a video of grasslands? But he found it hard to believe Kuroyukihime and the student council would choose their topic for a reason like that.

“Now then, let’s move the era forward a little,” Megumi said, surprising him. The number *–8,000* appeared in the lower part of his field of view and began to drop with intense speed.

The exhibit from then on was nothing short of stunning. All at once, several thousand years passed to bring them to the Yayoi era twenty-three hundred years earlier. Wetland rice farming had begun, and the green plain was transformed into a golden-yellow rice field.

Seventeen hundred years ago—the Kofun period. The ancient state formed, and the control of the Yamato royal authority reached Musashino. The tools for working the fields and hunting, along with weapons for humans to fight humans, were now metal.

Fifteen hundred years ago—Asuka to Nara eras. Powerful regional clan chieftains known as *kuninomiyakko* appeared, and Musashino Province was established in the Kanto region by Chieftain Musashino. This was when the regional name Musashi appeared for the first time.

A thousand years ago—the Heian era. In Kansai, the nobles exulted in the height of their glory, but in Kanto, the warrior clans—the so-called bandomusha—rose to prominence a little earlier, and large domains took shape. Although the Musashino provincial government had been set up in the city of Fuchu, not so far from Suginami, antagonism among nobles on appointment from the capital and local warriors deepened, eventually leading to the insurgency of Tairo no Masakado, the most well-known of the bandomusha.

“All we ever study in school is the stuff that happened in the west in the Asuka and Heian eras, but there was stuff happening here, too, huh?” Haruyuki

murmured as he watched the warriors cross swords on horseback.

“You’re totally right.” Takumu tilted his head so his glasses shone in the light. “We live in Tokyo, so we should really take up more of the history of the east in class. For instance, the Musashi Shichito, warrior groups that sprang up here in Musashino, were assigned important positions in the Kamakura bakufu. It wasn’t just Kiyomori and Yoritomo establishing the samurai government; these eastern warriors were in there, too—”

“Come, come, Takumu. I know that as a samurai, you get excited about these warriors, but don’t go getting on ahead of the show,” Kuroyukihime interjected with a wry smile, and Takumu dropped his head, embarrassed. All the while, the times continued to flow past with Megumi’s smooth narration.

Eight hundred years ago—the Kamakura era.

Six hundred years ago—the Muromachi era. With the formation of medieval samurai society, several small villages appeared in what was currently Suginami Ward. The area around Umesato Junior High was a village known as Ozawa, and the temple at the center was called Koenji.

And then they passed through the warring-states era to four hundred fifty years ago—the Edo period. Many tough laborers were transforming the narrow path to the immediate north of Umesato Junior High into the broad town road. The narration informed them that the Oume highway they came to school on every day had been built for the construction of Edo Castle, and they all cried out in surprise.

A large, imposing procession appeared on the highway. This was the procession of the third shogun, Iemitsu Tokugawa, who was said to have enjoyed falconry in Ozawa. Because Iemitsu would sometimes stay at Koenji, the name of the village eventually changed to Koenji. Looking ahead of the falconry procession on their way home, Haruyuki saw the majestic figure of Edo Castle’s *tenshukaku* tower keep rising, looming above the streets of Edo.

“The Castle,” Akira murmured, and they all nodded, each weighed down with their own thoughts.

But finally, the Great Fire of Meireki burned Edo up. The tower keep was also burned down, and the night sky was dyed a brilliant red. In the present year of

2047, the social cameras would no sooner catch the signs of a fire starting than they were sending the information to the fire department network, so there were basically no large-scale fires, and the fearsomeness of the great blaze of Edo left them all at a loss for words.

But the gutted town was immediately rebuilt. The development of the relay station that opened to the immediate east of Koenji, Naito Shinjuku, continued, and they could clearly see the bustling streets of town from the roof of Umesato Junior High. There were any number of great fires after that, but the city continued to develop at a speed that far surpassed the fires. The culture was overripe, and the wind of a new era finally blew in the town of Edo, which boasted the largest population in the world at that time.

One hundred seventy years earlier—the Meiji era. This was the start of the Westernization movement, and the tree-and-paper-town streets changed to stone. The light of gas lamps bled into the night fog, and horse-drawn carriages passed on the cobblestone lanes. Finally, the laying of railroads began, and Kobu Railways started operation between Ochanomizu and Hachioji. A British-made K1 steam train raced along an open field a little way from the highway, puffing black smoke, and children chased after it, cheering. At the end of the Meiji period, Kobu Railways was nationalized and became the Chuo Line.

One hundred thirty years earlier—the Taisho era. Koenji Station was built between Nakano and Ogikubo stations, and a new town sprang up around it. Of course, this wasn't yet the overhead rail line, and the station building was surprisingly small, but it was in exactly the same place as the current Koenji Station. The steam locomotive ran ahead of other lines and turned into a train.

And then, a hundred years earlier. The Showa era. In place of carriages, automobiles began to race down Oume Highway. Naturally, the cars were gasoline engines, and Japanese models like Datsun were mixed in with the Fords and GMs. Airplanes and biplanes appeared in the sky.

Before Haruyuki knew it, the wild warriors who raced on horseback across the plains of Musashino were a distant vision. Over a period of a thousand years, civilization had made surprising progress, with the feudal system becoming a democratic system to give shape to a peaceful modern society. The sun sank, and the gentle lights of incandescent lamps shone in the windows of houses.

Suddenly, however, an ominous formation of airplanes cut across the sky high above. Black objects fell from the bellies of the machines, and several explosions erupted in Ogikubo before his eyes.

“Huh?! Is this the Pacific War?” Chiyuri cried out, shaken. “There were air raids in Suginami?”

“Yeah.” Haruyuki nodded and gripped the railing tightly. “There was a factory in Ogikubo that made warplanes, so it was targeted straight off.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable, Haruyuki,” Kuroyukihime said quietly, holding down hair that fluttered in the breeze with one hand. “I had no idea until we were putting together the materials to make this exhibit. And it only happened a hundred years ago.”

“Oh! Uh, I never actually thought about it in relation to where I live, though.”

While they were talking, the sound of engines roared above their heads once more. This air raid was a large one. Firebombs fell from countless bombers, and the town of Koenji was enveloped in flames.

“Ah!” Rin cried out weakly.

The Koenji Station building crumbled in the blaze. The shops and houses in the area were burned up one after the other, the night sky dyed a bright red. And it wasn’t just Suginami; all of central Tokyo was ablaze. The narration informed them that in over a hundred air raids, including the one of the night they were watching, a third of the area of Tokyo’s twenty-three wards had been burned to ash.

In the summer of 2045 when Haruyuki was in sixth grade, a large ceremony to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the end of the war had been held in Tokyo. Bored by himself at home, Haruyuki had watched the broadcast of the ceremony, but he hadn’t been able to feel anything, apart from an understanding that there had been a war a hundred years earlier. That was no doubt because he’d thought wars from long ago were events from different worlds, different times. But that wasn’t the case. One had happened a mere hundred years ago in the town of Koenji, where he lived.

As he stood there watching, time continued its endless flow.

Reduced to a barren landscape in the war, Suginami was rebuilt in the blink of an eye. A new Koenji Station building was also built, and a brand-new 101 series train began to run along the silver rails. Finally, the era of rapid growth came, and the buildings gradually got taller while traffic on Oume Highway continued to increase.

Fifty years earlier. Forty years earlier. Thirty years earlier. The town steadily approached the form it had been in Haruyuki's memories. The combustion engine cars moved through hybrids to eventually become electric and fuel cell vehicles, while the people coming and going on the sidewalks gripped portable terminals in their hands.

"Ah," Chiyuri gasped. "The social cameras."

He looked closely and saw that black spheres—the social cameras—had appeared all over town at some point. The introduction of the cameras had actually happened with similarly little fanfare.

Another significant change that didn't look like much happened right away. The terminals disappeared from people's hands, and in their places, wearable transmission terminals—Neurolinkers—began to appear on their necks. The counter in the bottom of his field of view read *-0015*.

On the other side of Koenji Station, a large skyscraper condo with a shopping mall appeared. Haruyuki's parents had bought No. 2305 in this building, and Haruyuki had been born the following year. Even though he knew it was only a reproduction, he stared at the windows in the area of his house. He imagined his mother and father, back when they still got along, and himself as a baby living together happily in the gentle light shining through the glass. But the timer quickly passed the year his parents had divorced.

The time it took for the exhibit to move from the Jomon era eight thousand years earlier to the present day was a mere twenty minutes. A rough calculation showed that the scale of acceleration was about two hundred million times. The exhibit seemed to decelerate as it grew closer to the present day, but even still, the fourteen years since Haruyuki was born were equivalent to a tiny spark in the long history. A time so short and insignificant that he couldn't find any meaning in it.

But this exhibit, “Time,” was not trying to make that point. History was a series of human activities. Perhaps even time itself was. They were alive right now in the midst of the flow of vast time. The time in which all people had lived was spun into thread and woven into fabric to create the long picture scroll that was history. And that flow would continue on from now. Forever. Endlessly. This was what the exhibit was telling Haruyuki and his friends.

“Our long historical journey is approaching its end,” came the quiet announcement to bring the exhibit to a close. “Please look to the sky now.”

Haruyuki and company all turned their heads skyward. Although the actual time was not yet two thirty, the sky was dyed the bright red of twilight.

The counter finally reached 0000, but the digit on the right end went just a little farther ahead and stopped at +0005. A series of glittering lights approached from the distance of the twilight sky. They stretched out—perpendicular and endless—into silver threads. A ladder that continued up to the Heavens. It was...

“Hermes’ Cord!” Haruyuki shouted, unconsciously throwing himself backward, losing his balance, and very nearly falling down. But Kuroyukihime grabbed his right arm—and Chiyuri his left—to keep him on his feet.

Wordlessly, Fuko took Kuroyukihime’s right hand—and Takumu Chiyuri’s left. Rin, Akira, and Utai similarly held hands. Finally, Niko and Pard joined in, and the ten formed a large circle on the roof.

The space elevator, Hermes’ Cord, was classified as a low-earth orbit type, but since it flew along at the supersonic speed of Mach 10 at the super-high altitude of 150 kilometers above the ground, to the naked eye, it was nothing but a small point of light. But the threads of this god of flight reproduced as an AR image approached slowly, low enough in the sky that they could clearly make out the details of the bottom station, and stopped directly above Umesato Junior High. The tip of the 40-kilometer-long elevator—made principally of carbon nanotubes—melted into the sky where madder-red changed to indigo blue and disappeared from view. A silver transport ship piled with some kind of cargo ascended from the station.

“Five years from now, in 2052,” the narration recommenced, *“the world’s first*

international manned Mars mission will begin. The parts for the spacecraft will be carried to Hermes' Cord's top station, and the ship will be assembled in orbit. People who once ran through the grasslands of the Jomon era with stone lances in hand will step onto the soil of Mars eight thousand years later. But this doesn't mean we will stop there. Humanity will continue to move forward for hundreds, thousands more years. Our parents' generation, our own, that of our children—we will all walk that path."

The transport ship, having reached the edge of the sky, flickered brightly and disappeared. Hermes' Cord started to move again and receded, swallowed into the large twilight sun.

"This concludes the student council executive's exhibit 'Time.' Thank you for joining us."

With Megumi's announcement, the counter disappeared, and the red of twilight faded until the cloudy sky returned. But that was the only change that happened in his field of view. Because the view spreading out beyond Umesato Junior High had already become one with the AR image.

There was a slight pause, and then an enormous applause swelled up from inside the school. Haruyuki also let go of Kuroyukihime's hand and slapped his hands together enthusiastically, and his friends quickly joined him.

Niko had supposedly stopped crying, but something bright rose in her eyes once again. Without bothering to try to hide this, the second Red King said, "I'm glad I came today. I can really feel the meaning in me being born, becoming a Burst Linker, and making friends with you guys." Wiping roughly at her eyes with a fist, she continued jokingly, "Buuut, Kuroyukihime, you know you got high school exams, yeah? Can't believe you had the free time to make something huge like that!"

"Y-you don't have to mention that now," Kuroyukihime retorted, her face grim, and everyone laughed out loud. Soon, she was smiling, too, as she shrugged lightly. "And it's not like I made it by myself. The president's surprisingly good at this sort of thing...Well, I *did* use up thirty points, though."

"Ah, no fair!" Chiyuri yelped.

"It is not 'no fair'!" Kuroyukihime argued immediately. "There is no more just

use of Burst Points than this!”

Everyone raised their voices in laughter once again.

Watching over this cheerful back-and-forth among his comrades, Haruyuki made one hard decision in his heart. When Lime Bell took apart the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he’d had the thought that Citron Call might be able to rewind the extinction of Metatron, too. That hope—or regret—was still there. If there was even a 0.1 percent chance, he felt compelled to try it.

But.

Chocolat Puppeteer, who he’d met in the Setagaya Area, had explained to him that when a dead Enemy is restored, it’s at best the same species of Enemy; the exact same individual is not reproduced. The bond that took long hours to build was gone forever.

Even if he could bring Metatron back, there was no guarantee it would be the proud Archangel who fought Haruyuki, helped him, spoke to him, and was destroyed protecting him. If she regenerated as a completely new Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron, that individual would immediately kill Haruyuki and Chiyuri on the spot.

He wasn’t afraid of being attacked. But Metatron’s essential nature was a “soul” that had lived in the Unlimited Neutral Field the vast amount of time of eight thousand years—in terms of human history, from the Jomon era to the present day—cultivating knowledge and deepening her thinking. To revive her as a soulless Enemy was a desecration of *his* Metatron. Above all else, she herself would not want that.

“What’s. The matter...Arita?” Rin had come up beside him at some point, and now she tugged on his sleeve, and Haruyuki came back to himself, hurriedly shaking his head.

“Uh, oh, no, it’s nothing. I was just, um, thinking about stuff.”

“I’ve. Thought a lot. Too. Like. I have to cherish. The time I spend with you. Like this...Even more than. I have...”

“Uh, oh, y-yeah, right.” Haruyuki started to nod, and Kuroyukihime grabbed

his collar; Fuko, Rin's sleeve.

"Haruyuki, I'm very happy that the student council exhibit caused you to think about a number of things, but I didn't intend the takeaway to be that you should deepen your relationship with any particular girl."

"That's right, Rin. I would appreciate it if you would also cherish your special training with me as much as the time you spend with Corvus."

"R-right..." Haruyuki and Rin replied together.

"The message I got was there's no time to waste," Pard commented coolly. "There's thirty minutes left until the school festival ends at three."

"Oh yeah. Anything you wanna recommend that we haven't seen yet?" Niko asked, having completely wiped her tears away.

Haruyuki thought a minute, the collar of his shirt still gripped from behind. He'd already shown them his own class's exhibit, and anyway, after they'd all been knocked out by the student council's super-junior-high-student-level AR display, he would be too embarrassed to show them the work he'd finished up in a single night. Did any of the other classes do something that might be fun...?

Pard was apparently headed for even greater impatience in life, because she said, as though she just couldn't wait any longer, "Then we show Kuroyuki, Chiyu, and the professor Haru's class's exhibit, too."

It appeared that the two members of the Red Legion had decided to call Kuroyukihime "Kuroyuki," Chiyuri "Chiyu," Takumu "the professor," and Haruyuki by his full name or "Haru" in the real world. This kind of nickname normally came into existence spontaneously at some point, but his heart couldn't help but skip a beat at Pard suddenly calling him Haru after going with Crow all this time. He coughed to hide his surprise.

"B-but it's totally nothing compared with the student council's display..."

"What are you talking about? I've really been looking forward to it. As have Takumu and Chiyuri," Kuroyukihime said, letting go of his collar.

Chiyu-Taku also chimed in enthusiastically.

"Of! Course! It's our class display, and if we didn't have time today, I was

going to get you to let me see it after the festival closes to the public.”

“Same here. I’ve been hearing good things about it.”

“...O-okay then, just for a sec...” He nodded slightly, although he was actually happy to hear Kuroyukihime and the others say that.

“Right.” Fuko clapped her hands together and smiled brilliantly. “We’re all together at last, so after that, why don’t we go to the Animal Kingdom again? Sacchi and the others haven’t tried it yet.”

“Huh?” Haruyuki stiffened instantly, and Pard, Niko, Akira, Utai, and Rin looked away awkwardly. But when the still-smiling Fuko went so far as to wink exaggeratedly at him, Haruyuki couldn’t refuse. He turned back toward a doubtful Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, and Takumu. “Uh, um. Okay then, let’s get going to eighth-grade Class C...”

The last thirty minutes of the festival actually saw a number of exciting developments.

Fortunately, the three who hadn’t yet seen “Thirty Years Ago in Koenji,” the class exhibit Haruyuki had worked so hard on—although his hard work was about a hundredth of the efforts of Kuroyukihime—appeared to enjoy it. This era passed by in the blink of an eye in the student council exhibit, but if you looked closely at the recent past of around 2017, it did make you think about all kinds of things...was Kuroyukihime’s comment.

Then they headed toward the problematic eighth-grade Class B’s Café Animal Kingdom. Reina Izeki, the project producer and fellow member of the Animal Care Club, grinned as she led them to a table. “So you’re back, Pres?” Just like the last time, they ordered drinks with animal names. Chiyuri, on her first visit, chose the Kitten’s Prank, and similarly inexperienced Kuroyukihime ordered the Twilight Crow.

When they were done with their drinks, they moved to the stage at the rear of the class, and the eight girls took a commemorative photo by themselves in the *normal* AR animal costumes. Then, at Fuko’s instruction, everyone except Kuroyukihime and Chiyuri left the stage. Without a moment’s delay, the truly frightening Master Raker looked at Haruyuki and said with another wink, “Okay, go ahead, Corvus.”

This is an order. I can't exactly go against my master's orders. Haruyuki dug deep into the costume program menu and, abandoning all hope, changed the current selection of ANIMAL FUR SUITS to ANIMAL FUR SUITS S (aka sexy).

Onstage, Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime stared blankly for about two seconds, but the instant they realized that the surface area of the fur covering their bodies had decreased by 90 percent, they let out shrieks he'd never heard before.

"So, Haru." Takumu turned toward Haruyuki at the tail end of their party as they headed for the entrance after leaving Animal Kingdom and pushed up the bridge of his glasses. "Did you get the photo?"

"Yeah. But it was erased in the forced direct connection..."

"It was...? What about recovering the data?"

"Not very likely. But I intend to try."

"...Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"Got it. I'll be in touch."

As they talked in low voices, Chiyuri turned around and stared at them. "What're you whispering about?"

""Nothing."" The two male members of Nega Nebulus shook their heads in perfect unison.

Three o'clock.

Haruyuki and his friends heard the announcement of the end of the school festival in a corner of the front yard. Once again, applause rose from within the school and then faded out like the tide. The invited guests—mostly students' friends and family—slipped through the front gates and chatted about the festival with smiles on their faces.

The next day, Monday, was cleanup, and the day after that, Tuesday, was a day off in lieu of Sunday. Once that was over, the special atmosphere of the school festival would disappear without a trace. He'd experienced this in seventh grade as well, but he didn't think he'd be able to return to regular life so easily this year.

"Aaah, it's over, huh?" Niko said, stretching both arms out, and then added as

if a sudden thought had occurred to her, “You guys don’t have an after-party or anything now?”

Whaaat?! Haruyuki nearly shouted, but Kuroyukihime commented before he could.

“That’s a good idea...I’d like to say yes, but unfortunately, I have a number of things to take care of and won’t be leaving anytime soon. It’s impossible.”

“You don’t gotta come or anythin—”

“It’s. Im. Possible! Anyway, everyone’s tired today. If you don’t go home and get a good night’s sleep, tomorrow will be painful.”

“Tch! Whatevs.” Although Niko looked disgruntled, she followed this with a serious yawn.

Pard awkwardly picked up her Legion Master from behind. “We’ll head back to Nerima now. Thanksy. Stuff happened, but it was fun.”

“Pard, once again, congratulations on reaching level eight.” Longtime rival Fuko celebrated Pard’s leveling up and then asked, “So what should I call you in the real, I wonder?”

“Myah’s fine, Fu.”

“...Understood. Well then, I look forward to dueling you, Myah.”

“K.” Pard nodded.

“M’kay, next time, come to us!” Niko waved, and the two members of Prominence disappeared into the throng of people passing through the gates.

Fuko tugged on Rin’s hand and moved forward. “I’ll thank you one last time. Corvus, thank you for saving Rin and Ash.” She bowed her head deeply.

“Th-that’s— It wasn’t just me,” Haruyuki hurried to reply. “All of us worked hard to make it happen...And it was you and Kuroyukihime and the others who destroyed the main body and all.”

“But that all began because of your desire to help Rin.” Fuko smiled.

“Um.” Rin arranged her hands in front of her and bent deeply at the waist. “Me. And my brother. We both really, really. Really appreciate what. You did,

Arita. I'll do whatever. I can to pay you. Back. First, I want to. Materialize as soon. As possible, like. Master said."

What? He was confused, but Rin bowed her head once more with watery eyes, so he simply said, "Me too. I'm really happy that you and, of course, Ash came back to us, Kusakabe. Tell your brother I'm looking forward to our next morning duel."

"Yes. Of. Course!" Rin nodded.

"I have to thank you, too." Akira stepped forward and turned to Haruyuki and the others. The ever-cool eyes beyond the red frames of her glasses softened as she continued. "Thanks for freeing me from the Castle. It's like a dream to be able to fight with everyone in that world again. We still have mysteries and problems to solve. But we can take them one by one. We'll figure it out."

At last, Fuko, Rin, and Akira all bowed together once more and headed toward the side gate. Fuko would probably give them a ride in her car. Once they disappeared from view, Utai's fingers flashed.

UI> NOW THEN, I WILL GIVE HOO HIS SUPPER BEFORE I ALSO GO HOME. THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR INVITING ME TODAY.

"Oh, I'll help you," Haruyuki naturally offered as president of the Animal Care Club.

UI> NO, I WILL BE FINE ALONE TODAY. ARITA, YOU MUST BE MORE EXHAUSTED THAN YOU THINK. YOU REALLY MUST HURRY HOME, EAT A BIG SUPPER, TAKE A LONG BATH, AND GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP. Utai rebutted him like an older sister even though she was the much younger one, and Haruyuki tried to argue with a "B-but"; however, he was cut short by the words that flowed across his field of view. UI> THAT'S AN ORDER FROM THE SUPER-PRESIDENT! Utai tapped out with a grin.

"That's right, Haruyuki." Kuroyukihime's smile was slightly wry. "Go home and rest. Otherwise, the cleanup tomorrow will be rough."

"Yeah, Haru!" Chiyuri immediately chimed in her own encouragement, and Takumu was not far behind.

"They're right, Haru."

So he was forced to nod in agreement. Thinking that those two had to be just

as tired as he was, he asked if they could walk home together, but Chiyuri had track and Takumu, kendo. He felt like he was forbidden to even offer to wait, so he simply said, as a good-bye, “Um. Okay, then, Shinomiya, say hi to Hoo for me.”

UI> I’LL MAKE SURE TO DO THAT!

“And, Kuroyukihime, I really was impressed by that exhibit. The crepes at your booth were delicious, Chiyu, and Taku, your samurai dance was amazing. Thanks for a great school festival, everyone.”

Kuroyukihime and the others all exclaimed, “Thanks, everyone!”—with Utai via chat, of course.

In that moment, Haruyuki felt keenly that that year’s school festival was over. They still had to clean up, but for eighth-grade class C, at least, all they had to do was take down the panel boards and put the desks and chairs back. They could probably finish that in the morning the next day.

And so the long June finally ended. Morning would bring the start of July. They’d have finals and the closing ceremony, and then it would be summer holidays. No one could stop the flow of time. The future kept pushing in, changing the present to the past. At the very least, he wanted to spend each and every day—each minute, each second without regret, if possible. To pay back all the people who had guided him so far.

Haruyuki waved a big good-bye at his friends and slipped through the clock-shaped gate and out of the school.

But the truth was, he didn't want to go home by himself. He wanted to hang around the school until the mandatory departure time and chat with someone about nothing. Or have an after-party at his house like Niko suggested. He wanted Chiyuri and Takumu to stay over, so they could all fall asleep after exhausting themselves with retro games.

If he could've greeted the next day like that, the heavy, painful throbbing of the thorn still piercing his heart would have maybe been less.

He passed through the entrance to the skyscraper condo, the exterior of which had faded to some degree since its construction fifteen years earlier, and took the residents' elevator to the twenty-third floor. He walked down the hallway, unlocked his door, and opened it.

"...I'm home," he muttered, but there was only silence in the dark house. His mother was on a business trip overseas and wouldn't be back until late that night, and today, at least, there would be no surprise attacks from Niko. He slowly took off his shoes and washed his hands and face before going to his room and changing out of his uniform and into a T-shirt.

He glanced at the time, but it was not yet four o'clock. He'd left the house at eight thirty that morning with Niko, who spent the night, so it had only been a mere seven and a half hours since then. If he counted the long mission in the Unlimited Neutral Field, then, in subjective experience, he had spent nearly three times that amount away, but his heart couldn't keep up. The reality of standing alone in his room seemed like a fake experience created by someone else.

This curious sensation would probably go away if he did the things he usually did when he came home. With this in mind, he opened the to-do list on his

virtual desktop, but there wasn't a single task on it. Of course, there would be no homework on the day of the school festival, and there were no files he needed to submit. In that case, he thought maybe he should have a big room-cleaning session, but he couldn't find the energy.

His thoughts chased themselves round and round, and his body gradually grew heavier, so Haruyuki flopped onto his bed. He rolled over and looked up at the ceiling. Although he considered just going to sleep, he didn't actually feel sleepy, even though he *was* tired. He intertwined his fingers behind his head and let his rambling thoughts drift.

In the fierce battle fought by Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Akira, and Utai, the ISS kit main body had been destroyed. All the terminals—the black eyeballs that parasitized Ash Roller, Magenta Scissor, and dozens of other kit users—had now been completely wiped out. There would be no more threat of Dark Shot or Dark Blow in duels, nor any spread of the kit infection.

But they had a new problem. Wolfram Cerberus had vanished due to a forced disconnect in a state of near death, with a mere ten Burst Points remaining. And Invincible's thruster was still in his possession.

Niko had said not to panic, but they needed to recover and purify the stolen thruster as soon as possible. Some element of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, likely remained in the Enhanced Armament, and knowing the Acceleration Research Society, they would try to use this for some new sinister design. Cerberus was...He was Haruyuki's rival and friend, and they needed to completely cut out the root of the evil before Argon Array and the others toyed with him any further.

Also, just because the ISS kits were gone didn't mean that the memories of the people who had used them were also gone. Some people had experienced serious mental interference and beaten down what had been friends and fellow Legion members with the kit's power. And some had forcibly infected Burst Linkers around them with the kits.

What would Magenta Scissor and Olive Grab do now? Did they still have somewhere left to go? He hoped they could come to a consensus that it was the Acceleration Research Society they should turn their hatred toward. *They*

were the ones who had disseminated the ISS kits. The crimes of former users should no longer be a question. But he would have to wait for the decision of the kings.

And kings...the White King and her abrupt appearance in the local net duel... She was Kuroyukihime's parent and real-life older sister, and now the shocking fact that she was also the president of the Acceleration Research Society had been made clear, but Haruyuki couldn't decide how to process this. If they denounced her without a scrap of physical evidence, there was the risk that this could be used against them at a moment's notice as a pretext to expel Nega Nebulus. In the end, he had to leave this, too, to Kuroyukihime and Fuko.

In short, there was nothing Haruyuki could do right now. The recovery of the thruster, getting Cerberus away from the Society, the condemnation of the White King—these were all problems he could do nothing about on his own. And he had only destroyed the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, somehow because Niko, Pard, Takumu, Chiyuri, and...Metatron had helped him.

Haruyuki squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

The Archangel Metatron had helped Haruyuki time and time again, and now she was gone. Faced with this fact once more, his eyes grew hot. In subjective time, it had been a mere three, four hours earlier that they'd first exchanged words before fighting together, and then she'd disappeared. That was it. And she wasn't even a Burst Linker. So why did he feel such a strong sense of loss?

It has to be because I was happy, Haruyuki answered the question he had posed. *All this time, the Enemies have only been rivals to defeat. And then one talked to me—a powerful Legend-class, the terrifying guard of the impenetrable fortress Midtown Tower. I was so happy she talked to me—that she became my friend.*

No. That's just me finding a reason after the fact. The truth is that I really liked Metatron... When he lifted his eyelids, the tears that had filled his eyes absorbed the yellow light shining in through the window, making it flicker and sway.

Metatron had been chasing after the reason the Accelerated World was created and the meaning of her eight thousand years of life. She said she wouldn't care if it meant her own extinction even, as long as she got to see the

end of the world...

Haruyuki had been able to communicate to her the immensity of the real world that existed outside the Accelerated World. The nearly limitless scale of the time that had passed up to that point in the real world; that would continue onward from that moment as well.

Through the high-performance glass, he could just barely hear the sounds of traffic on Kannana Street. Right about now, the families enjoying a Sunday of shopping in the mall on the ground floor were probably heading home. In this place where Jomon children of eight thousand years ago ran around, where warriors ran wild a thousand years ago on horseback—in this burned-out field of the firebombings a hundred years ago where Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Takumu had played hide-and-seek ten years ago, time continued to flow. In the real world...and in the Accelerated World.

Maybe I'll go say good-bye, he suddenly thought.

Utai and Kuroyukihime had told him to make sure to rest, but they'd forgive him, surely, for just a little dive—thirty minutes or maybe an hour. And for the fact that he used ten points. Because Metatron definitely would have been their comrade, too.

He closed his eyes, and the tears that built up there flowed down his cheeks. Not bothering to wipe these away, Haruyuki murmured softly, "Unlimited Burst."

The Unlimited Neutral Field he returned to after three and a half hours in real-world time was dyed a pure white. He touched the crystals of snow falling soundlessly from the ashen sky with an outstretched palm, and they immediately melted and vanished. The skyscraper condo that rose up at his feet had transformed into an enormous mass of ice.

An Ice stage. Given that the stage did not allow entry into buildings, he had appeared on the roof of the condo.

“So there was a Change, huh?” he muttered, but that was only natural. Three and a half real hours was equivalent to about 146 days in the Accelerated World. He slowly lowered himself onto the ice block, covered in about twenty centimeters of snow. Metal-color avatars did have resistance to ice damage, but that didn’t mean they didn’t feel the cold. But right now, he felt fond of even the chill that pricked at his nervous system.

“You said you hated the Hell stage, but I wonder what you thought of the Ice stage,” he spoke to himself as he pulled up a lump of snow with both hands. There was no voice in return, but this was Metatron. Her entire body was a snowy white. He was sure she had liked this pure-white world. Still sitting on the edge of the roof, he stared to the southwest.

The falling snow obstructed his view, so he couldn’t even see the government building in Shinjuku. But in that direction lay Tokyo Midtown, where they had fought a fierce battle with Metatron’s first form...and farther beyond that was the old Tokyo Tower and Shiba Park.

“I wanted to see what your Castle was like...”

Now that he thought about it, although he’d been to the old Tokyo Tower

where Fuko had set up her hermitage any number of times, he'd never even seen the entrance to the dungeon below Shiba Park. But he probably wouldn't visit it now. The masterless Castle would only make his sadness grow.

And then Haruyuki suddenly realized. Maybe he didn't need to get Chiyuri to use Citron Call? When an Enemy was defeated, it came back when a Change happened. Metatron's true body—her second form—had not once been defeated in eight thousand years, but the same rule had to apply to her, too, didn't it? In other words, it was possible that, at that moment, the master had come back to the lowest level of the Shiba Park dungeon.

“.....”

He scattered his momentarily rising hope with a sigh into the chill air. Even if she *had* come back, it was undoubtedly a “new” Metatron. Not the Being who fought her own destiny and longed to see the edges of the world, but an Enemy who simply and faithfully executed its orders to attack any visiting Burst Linkers.

“...Why?” Haruyuki muttered hoarsely. “Why...did you...?”

The person he spoke to was not Metatron. It was the unknown developer who had created the Accelerated World—Brain Burst 2039, along with Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040.

“Why did you give Metatron a mind? For what reason did you give her the power to think...the ability to worry, feel pain, have hope? Why did you give her the courage to save a speck of dirt like me...a soul...? Why did you give her love?!” He beat his clenched fists against the ice. The large, strong building of the Ice stage didn't so much as shudder. He brought it down again and then a third time, and a sharp pain ran through his fist, but he paid it no mind and kept punching. “Why...why...why?!”

A small crack ran across the armor of his right fist. An agony like he was being stabbed with ice needles raced along his virtual nerves. But it was not enough. Not by a long shot.

That moment, back then.

He'd only watched at that moment, when Metatron transformed her own self into energy and fired Trisagion. He'd only felt her dedication and annihilation

from close-up. Wasn't there actually something he could have done?

Incarnate energy if there wasn't enough sunlight. His own spirit when his imagination was used up. Hadn't there still been a way he could have fought alongside her rather than just being protected by her, even it meant he totally fried his nervous system?

"But...But I...!!" He beat down on the ice as hard as he could. Concentric cracks raced outward in the blue mass of ice, and minute fragments of his silver armor scattered. His health gauge decreased, and an intense pain pierced his head.

Again. And again.

The armor on his hands peeled away to reveal the dark gray of his avatar's naked body. If he kept hitting the ice, his arms themselves would shatter and scatter. But he didn't care. He would keep tasting this pain until he himself was gone.

As if in response to Haruyuki's feelings, a strong wind started to blow, and a snowstorm fell upon the stage. Wrapped in swirling white flakes, he moved to bring his peeling fists down hard on the ice again.

...still...there.

He felt like he heard someone's voice from far off in the distance somewhere. He stopped breathing. Hands still in the air, he cleared his ears. In the middle of the roaring snowstorm, he desperately sought out the voice.

...you're...still...there.

It was calm—a silky-smooth mezzo-soprano. A female voice...but different from Metatron's sweet, clear soprano. It wasn't Kuroyukihime's or Fuko's or the voice of anyone Haruyuki knew.

"Who are you...?" he asked hoarsely, slowly lowering his hands. "What's still there...?"

...am...terasu. Meta...sworn friend.

Like tuning an old radio transmission, the voice gradually grew louder and clearer. Haruyuki forgot about the pain in his hands and focused his mind

intently.

...The link to...Meta...core is...still inside y...

...It depends on you whether the core can be recovered. On the strength of this power you all call Incarnate.

...There's not much time left. Before the core vanishes...

...Reach out your hand. If you...then...surely...

The voice receded rapidly and disappeared.

No matter how hard he listened, all he could hear was the roar of the blizzard. He almost believed it had been an auditory hallucination brought on by his endless regret, but it couldn't have been. The link with Metatron was still inside Haruyuki. The mysterious voice's proclamation had been entirely unexpected.

"Inside...of me...," he muttered, dumbfounded, and then clenched his hands together tightly. Metatron's core could be recovered if he had enough Incarnate power...That's what the voice had said. And also that there was no time.

If there was even a chance, he had to take it. But he didn't know *what* he should do. To activate the Incarnate System, a focused imagination was necessary. But he had absolutely no idea what the shape of the image would be or its target...

He was on the verge of looking around to try to find the someone who had told him this, but he restrained himself. *There's no one but me here. The only one who can reach out to Metatron is me. This is a time when I have to think by myself, work by myself, and make it happen by myself. My promise to Metatron...the promise to see the end of the world together, it's now.*

If he still had a connection with Metatron, then the key to it was the wings. The Enhanced Armament, Metatron Wings, that the Archangel had loaned him—the wings that had saved Haruyuki from a crashing death in the final moments of the battle with Mark II.

He knelt on the ice, clasped his hands together in front of his face, and imagined them. Elegant, sharp, pure-white wings stretching out a little above his shoulder blades. Metatron had warned him of danger any number of times

through those wings. That sensation...that connection, one more time.

He closed his eyes. The raging storm, the pain in his hands, the cold enveloping his body—it all receded. In the darkness, the image of transient wings stretching out. The image of rising up higher and higher until he reached the end of this world. The image of breaking out of the Mean Field, the Unlimited Neutral Field...Flying to the Highest Level...

“Metatron.

“Can you hear me, Metatron?

“I’m here. I’ve spread the wings you gave me, and I’m flying through the world you loved.

“And I’m reaching a hand out to you.”

Shik!

A small star flickered in the distance in the infinite darkness. A white light so ephemeral, so weak it looked like it would disappear at any second...but from it came a hazy warmth.

Flapping his wings as hard as he could, Haruyuki reached out. *Fwnk, fwnk*. The flickering light was so far away, and his arms were far too short. But distance wasn’t the problem. If he believed he could reach...If he changed all the energy his mind produced into the power of belief—if he could just reach out a little farther, a little bit more...See?

Gently, softly, he wrapped the light up in the palms of his hands. And opened his eyes.

The dancing snowflakes. The smashed ice floor. And icicles hanging from his hands, frozen hard—still clasped together. Slowly, he pulled his hands apart. Icicles dropped off, hit the ground, and shattered. Bit by little bit, he opened his hands up.

But there was nothing there. The whirling snow stuck to his gray palms and colored them white. Was it all an illusion? A brief dream he’d had in the freezing storm?

No. A tiny point of light, smaller than a single ice crystal, shone faintly in the

center of his palm.

Shik, shik. It flickered on a definite cycle, like a beacon to guide travelers through the blizzard. Or like the pulsing of a heart.

Curling up his hand to protect the spot of light from the cold, Haruyuki gently exhaled. The flashing gradually grew faster. The cycle of once per second became three times...and then ten. Finally, Haruyuki's eye was no longer able to perceive the amplitude as it stabilized into a state of continuous light.

The light puffed out to become a ring about two centimeters across. Below the ring, a long, slender spindle appeared. And then two small wings stretched out from either side of that. The entire thing was tinged with a milky-white light.

There was no way he was seeing wrong. This was the three-dimensional icon of Metatron that had guided Haruyuki in the Acceleration Research Society headquarters. Was it the real thing? Or a momentary vision produced by his imagination?

Ever so timidly, he moved his hand to gently stroke the spindle with his index finger. He touched it. It had substance. And a hazy heat that penetrated the core of his body.

"...Meta. Tron...," he said in a shaking voice, going to touch the icon again.

"Such...insolence!!"

A powerful scolding voice slammed into the center of his brain, and Haruyuki reeled, landing on his backside. The icon slipped from his palm and began to hover about ten centimeters above his head, vibrating its wings.

"Do you think a servant such as yourself is permitted to touch me in such a fashion, Silver Crow?! As punishment for this rude act, I shall extend your period of service to me by five hundred years!!"

"....."

For a moment, he stared up at the icon, dumbfounded. And then abruptly, his field of view warped. Beneath his goggles, he felt hot liquid spilling from his eye lenses. These fell from the bottom of his face mask and instantly melted the

snow piled up on his avatar's armor. The hot tears welled up one after another.

It wasn't a vision. Just as the mysterious voice had told him, she hadn't vanished. The details of the logic weren't clear, but the link with Haruyuki had remained, and on the brink of extinction, Metatron's spirit had been revived by his activation of that circuit.

Unable to speak, he simply let the tears spill from his eyes, and Metatron's tone softened just a little.

"At any rate, it should have been possible to guess that I had evaded complete extinction at the point when the wings I loaned you remained even after the link was cut. To begin with, it's quite impossible for me to disappear in a battle with an enemy on that level. You are my servant; understand at least the scale of your master's power. However, that said, I shall commend you on being able to reestablish the link with me. Unfortunately, at the moment, I am unable to bestow a proper reward..."

That was the limit. Unable to hold back the emotions that swelled up in him, Haruyuki reached out, wrapped his arms around the icon, and hugged it to his chest.



“Ah! Come now! What are you doing?!”

Feeling fond of the vibration of the small wings and the hazy warmth of the light, he murmured, “Welcome back, Metatron. I’m so glad that you’re... you’re...” He managed to get that far somehow, but his sobs got in the way, and the rest of his sentence failed to become words.

As the storm started to calm, he curled into a ball on top of the ice and wept. He sobbed out loud like a small child. The vibration in the palm of his hand changed to a gentle pulsation, as if she had resigned herself to this indignity or to soothe him, and the spindle got a little hotter. The gentle warmth eased the pain in his injured hands.

Without noticing that the snow had stopped at some point, the sun shining through gaps in the thick clouds, Haruyuki continued to cry for a long time.

(The End)

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 16: Snow White's Slumber*. I had a hazy image of the scene in this volume where Snow White, aka Shirayukihime, appears back when I was writing the first volume, *Kuroyukihime's Return*. Volume 1 was published in February 2009, but I submitted it for the fifteenth Dengeki Novel Prize with a deadline of April of the previous year, so I actually started writing it in the fall of 2007. In other words (counting on my fingers)... that was more than six years ago at the moment when I am writing this afterword in December 2013, hmm?

When I was writing the manuscript for the first volume, although I imagined where the story would end up, I had neither the will nor the intention to continue writing it up to that point, so I am deeply grateful that I was finally able to make it to *that* scene after the undeserved honor of the prize, having the book published by Dengeki Bunko, being supported by so many readers, and telling this tale for six years and sixteen volumes. *Accel World* is truly a blessed work. I cannot begin to express my gratitude to everyone who's supported me.

...Blah blah blah—I write like it's the last book, but that is absolutely not the case. (*sweats*) And just when the great Shirayukihime/Snow White finally makes an appearance, she basically shows her face and then immediately leaves. And there's still tons of mysteries, all kinds of problems that have just piled up...

The truth is, this isn't the time to get all maudlin, is it? The ISS kit arc that was at last resolved in this volume started in Volume 11, which came out in April 2012, so I've had all of you spending a full year and a half with those black

eyeballs. Frighteningly, in the calendar in the story, Volume 11 begins on June 23, 2047, and Volume 16 begins on June 30, so time has only advanced a week over six volumes...And Volume 6, when the Armor of Catastrophe arc started, was on the sixteenth of the same month! No wonder it seemed like it was always raining!

That said, I sincerely apologize for the fact that although I announced in the afterword of Volume 14 that the arc would end in the next book, it clearly did not—and that the afterword of Volume 15 ended up being two *Accel Lunch* comics. We've finally reached a place where we can take a breath, but the story will still continue. A brighter story in which there is no Armor or eyeballs...or that's the plan anyway. At the very least, I think the rainy season will be over!

Thank you to my illustrator, HIMA, who I always cause problems for as my schedule delays become chronic, and my editors, Miki and Tsuchiya! And all you readers, I look forward to our sixth year together!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in December 2013

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