



Nice work to you, too, Chiyu, on the meet. Congrats on a personal best! Chocolat and the others really worked hard in the Territories, so thanks to that, we could defend all areas. I'll tell you the details tomorrow. Make sure you go to bed early!

Once he had hit the send button and closed his mailer, Haruyuki psyched himself up. Wohkay! We get up on the count of three. One, two—

This time, a voice call came in. From Takumu, also at a sports tournament. He relaxed back into the bed and touched the answer button.

"Hey, Taku."

"Haru! So you're done with the Territories. How'd it go?"

"First, you gotta tell me how you did," Haruyuki replied, a wry smile unconsciously coming across his lips. "How's the tournament?"

"Oh yeah. We somehow made it into the top eight for both the group matches and the individual matches."

Takumu was at the Tokyo Metropolitan Block No. 3 junior high summer kendo tournament, a qualifier for the metropolitan meet, and Haruyuki was pretty sure that being in the top eight meant that they got the right to move on.

"Ooh! So next is the metropolitan meet, huh? Congrats!"

"Thanks. It'll probably be pretty tough, though."

"Don't say that. Go all the way to the nationals," Haruyuki urged him. "Chiyu said she got to the semifinals."

"Yeah, she mailed me, too. We gotta celebrate her personal best tomorrow."

"We gotta celebrate you, too. And we did a total defense in the Territories. And...GW's Bush Utan and Olive Grab came to the area the Chocolat gang and I were protecting. They both seemed pretty good."

"They did?" Takumu murmured, sounding relieved. "That's great. They were able to go back to the Legion, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess Ash's working hard to take care of them. The three formed this team called the Rough Valley Rollers."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" Takumu laughed happily. "I wish I could've fought them, too!"

"And..." After a moment's hesitation, Haruyuki announced, "After the fight was over, we all talked. And like, Utan and Olive, and Mint and Plum are concerned about her."

"Her? ... You mean, Magenta Scissor?"

"Yeah. Magenta was trying to spread the ISS kits and all...Anyway, Mint, Plum, and Ash were all forcibly parasitized with those scissors, so I guess they'd have the right to hate her. But—and this goes for me, too—they just can't seem to put her in the same group as those jerks from the Acceleration Research Society, you know?"

"...To start with, I don't have the right to say anything about Magenta," Takumu said quietly. "I'm the one who went to Setagaya and asked her to give me a kit..."

"Hey, Taku? Are you...Are you worried about Magenta, too?" Haruyuki wondered reflexively.

"Yeah...It's little different from worry. And she probably doesn't want our worry or whatever...But it's like, I don't want her to vanish from the Accelerated World. She's so strong. I want her to not rely on an ISS kit or whatever and fight under her own power...I guess it's like that? And that's a road I have to go down myself, too..."

"I started to fall into the dark side, too, you know. Or like, it was pretty critical for me."

"That's a weird thing to brag about," Takumu noted, and they both laughed helplessly.

"Hey, Taku, this is kinda sudden," Haruyuki said slowly, looking up at the ceiling where the gold of the evening sun was gradually deepening. "But before the GW meeting tomorrow, how about you and me go up to level six, too?"

"Th-that really is sudden. Does this suggestion have anything to do with Magenta?"

"Maybe, maybe not...So like, there's no one at level ten in the Accelerated World right now, so our level five is basically right in the middle, yeah? The Mid

Level."

"Yeah, I guess."

"So, like, somewhere in my head, I'm kinda freaked about becoming level six. You still can't really call a level six a high rank, but it's on the high side, you know? Like, when you go up the next level, you can't make any more excuses... And I feel like people at seven or eight challenge level sixes pretty much without a second thought," Haruyuki added.

"Yeah, that's true. Now that you mention it, I've been feeling kind of daunted by it," Takumu mused. "Actually, even though I have plenty of points for a safe margin, I've basically been trying not to think about leveling up."

"If we want to earn points efficiently, then it might be smarter to stop at level five where it's harder for high rankers to challenge us. But...when I think about Magenta Scissor fighting all that time at level six, I get this feeling like I can't sit here freaked out by it forever."

"And you have that promise with me, too."

"Yeah, that's right."

Here, the two friends fell briefly silent.

Haruyuki and Takumu had promised that when they reached level seven, they would go up against each other full throttle in earnest. To realize this battle that was partly scary and partly exciting, they couldn't allow themselves to be spoiled at the mid levels forever.

"Okay! So let's level up now, Haru."

"What? Now?!"

"No time like the present, right? And there's not even twelve hours left until the meeting tomorrow. So then, why not now?"

"...I—I guess," Haruyuki agreed. "We'll use up a point, but we can replace it in the next tag team fight or something." He stretched out on his bed. In order to do the level-up operation, he had to enter the Blue World of the initial acceleration and open the Installer. "Okay...We dive on the count of three."

"Okay!" Takumu said.

Haruyuki took a deep breath. "One, two, three..."

""Burst Link!"" they shouted together.

The dusk-colored ceiling, the large built-in bookcases, and even the particles of light dancing through the air turned a transparent blue. Haruyuki sprang up in his pink pig avatar and landed at the writing desk beyond his bed. He glanced around the room, but it wasn't like he was directing with Takumu on the voice call, so there was no one but him there.

To be more precise, the flesh-and-blood Haruyuki was lying on the bed, but because there were naturally no social cameras in this room, the parts that couldn't be captured with the Neurolinker's built-in camera were supplemented by the game system. The face of the real Haruyuki was extremely bland terrain, and looking at it made him depressed, so he whipped his face away and tapped the B icon on his virtual desktop.

From the Instruct menu that popped open, he moved to the points tab. He then clicked through to the level-up screen and compared the number of Burst Points he currently had with the number he'd use going up from level five to level six. He'd had a fair number of points added to his total when they destroyed Metatron's first form in the battle at Tokyo Midtown, and just as Takumu said, he had plenty to leave a safe margin.

Even still, he needed courage to press the button, but if he chickened out now, he would have wasted the point he used to accelerate. He raised the small hooved hand of the pig avatar and went ahead and slammed it down on the button.

A thrillingly cool chorus of fanfare echoed through his ears, and the number five that showed his current level was wrapped in flames and burned away. The flames danced for a moment in the window before drawing out the number six and disappearing.

...I did it.

In the fleeting moment of this thought, Haruyuki stared hard enough to burn a hole in the new Instruct screen that appeared automatically. Displayed there was what might be called one of the greatest joys of the Burst Linker life, the level-up bonus selection menu. The number of options there was the same as it had been up to that point: four.

The top left was a level-six special attack, Digit Pursuit. The top right was similarly a level-six special attack, Bulletproof. The bottom left was an Enhanced Armament, Lucid Blade. And the bottom right was an enhancement of his flight ability.

Haruyuki had poured all four of the bonuses he'd been given when he leveled up thus far into enhancing his flight ability. In the duel the other day, the raise-and-drop strategy he'd used on Chocolat Puppeter was a technique made possible precisely because of those enhancements, and he believed he'd made a choice to extract the maximum potential in Silver Crow, such as being able to fly carrying a maximum of four avatars as long as he didn't try to go fast. But that said, that didn't mean he was enlightened enough to cut free of worldly desires and immediately push the button on the bottom right.

"Unh, aaah...Like, the special attacks and the Enhanced Armament, they all look so cool—I mean, strong...I say this every time, but I wish you got a trial period or something." He folded his short arms and continued to moan and groan.

Ten seconds later, the conclusion he'd come to was...

"...I'll think it over carefully and then decide. I can get my bonus later, after all. Yeah, that's what I'll do." Muttering, he made the entire Instruct menu vanish.

Letting out a long breath, he checked the accelerated time and found he still had twenty-five minutes. He'd gone to all the trouble of using a point, so he decided to make effective use of what was left on the clock and activated the homework app on his virtual desktop.

"If I was going to end up doing this, I should've called Taku and directed."

He opened his math homework, which seemed the most difficult. But when his final exam had been given back the day before, he saw the best grade he'd ever gotten—although he still couldn't begin to compete with Takumu, even if Haruyuki was closing in on Chiyuri—so his awareness of being bad at studying itself was fading just a little.

"Okay! I'll solve five—no, four, problems in this acceleration!" he declared to

himself as he glared at the first quadratic equation.

Twenty-five minutes later—1.5 seconds later in the real world—the acceleration ended, and he let out a sigh as he pressed the save button on the homework app.

"From the sound of the sigh, you either couldn't decide at all on a level-up bonus, or you were doing homework inside." Takumu's laughing voice rang out in his mind.

Haruyuki had forgotten he was still connected to the voice call. "I-it was homework," he hurriedly replied. "I decided on the bonus in ten seconds!"

"Wow. So what'd you pick?"

"Oh. No. I decided to put off the decision. What bonus did you get, Taku?"

"I put it off, too, of course. I decided to really think about it before picking." Under orders from his parent, Takumu had chosen special attacks for the three bonuses up to level four. He seemed to regret this sometimes, but that was probably exactly why he'd decided to really mull it over in his own head.

"Yeah. If we have time tomorrow, I'll try talking about it with Kuroyukihime or Master. Although I'm pretty sure they won't give me any direct advice."

Takumu laughed. "No doubt about that. But it's exciting, huh? ...Oh! But, Haru, don't get all spaced out with your head all over your level-up bonus. The meeting with Great Wall tomorrow is very important. The future of Nega Nebulus kind of rests on it. We have to focus."

"Yeah, I know. I won't let a single word get away from me."

"And depending on the situation, maybe..."

"Huh?" Haruyuki asked. "Maybe what?"

"Oh, just maybe they'll ask us to speak, too, you know?"

Haruyuki felt like Takumu was trying to sneak something by him, but it was usually pointless to press him for details at times like this, so he decided to just let it pass. "True. Anyway...let's make sure we're on our toes for real from the moment we enter Shibuya Area tomorrow."

"Yeah. I think we'll have our global connections off, but that doesn't mean someone won't challenge us via the local net of some store or something. No matter what happens, it's our job to protect Master, Haru."

"Yup. We can't let her down!"

"Yeah!" Takumu shouted.

Unseen by his best friend, Haruyuki clenched his hand tightly as he ended the call.

Right...Tomorrow, Kuroyukihime would be stepping flesh and blood into a region controlled by Great Wall, the biggest Legion in the Accelerated World. And moreover, the GW executive knew that. He didn't think the Green King himself would plan a surprise attack now, but a knight serving his master needed to be ready for any possibility.

He absolutely could not let his guard down, from the time they left Suginami until the moment they returned. Carving this into his heart, Haruyuki set back to work on his math homework.

He absolutely could not let his guard down. He had been so firm, and yet...

Why—? How?!

"Seriously, how did it end up like this...?" Haruyuki relaxed and leaned against the transparent inner tube.

The sound of water and the voices of children playing beat against his eardrums. The sunlight pouring in through the windows reflected off the surface of the water around him, flickering irregularly. The water, at a constant temperature of twenty-eight degrees Celsius, communicated a comfortable coolness to his back and limbs.

Sunday, July 14, one PM. Haruyuki was in a pair of loose surf shorts—Neurolinker on, of course—floating in one corner of the twenty-five-meter pool. The wall on the south side was glass, and it offered a view of the towns of Shibuya, Daikanyama, and Meguro from a height of 150 meters above the ground.

"Amazing," Haruyuki murmured. "I've never been in a pool this high up before."

"Me neither." Takumu nodded, similarly floating nearby. His beach shorts were the sporty leggings type, and he had naturally taken off his glasses. He wasn't using an inner tube or a kickboard, but he was good at anything sporty, so he seemed to be able to float merely by moving his arms and legs slowly. "When I think about this much water being on such a high floor, I get a little nervous, you know?"

"Um. How many tons of water are in this pool?"

"It's about twenty-five meters long, eight meters wide, and a meter and a half

deep, I'd say...So calculating from that, the volume's just three hundred cubic meters. Which means, the weight's three hundred tons."

"Th-three hundred tons! I can't believe the floor doesn't collapse."

"I'm pretty sure this building'll be okay. Ravine Square opened up right around the Olympics, so." Takumu looked up at the summer sky outside the window.

Shibuya Ravine Square opened the same year as the Tokyo Olympics twenty-seven years earlier, a redevelopment around Shibuya Station. Centered around the forty-six-floor office building Ravine Tower, soaring up to a height of 230 meters on the east side of the station, the complex also included two mixed-use tower condos of 180 meters on the west side of the station, and then the thirty-four-floor commercial South Tower, also 180 meters, on the south side.

Shibuya Hikarie, which opened in 2012 on the other side of Meiji Street, was actually 180 meters tall, for a total of five skyscrapers clustered together in the small area. Although the name sounded like *loving* in Japanese, the area's nickname was actually Ravine, for the "valley" of an urban canyon that the area had turned into.

The pool in which Haruyuki and his friends were floating was in the high-cost, high-rise hotel in the upper floors of South Tower. As a general rule, it was for hotel-guest use, but they were visiting during the narrow wedge of time between checkout and check-in, so there was basically no one in the pool except Haruyuki and his friends. There were three or four adults in poolside deck chairs and about the same number of seven-or eight-year-olds in the water, and that was it.

Because they were in the luxury hotel of a skyscraper, he couldn't help but remember the fierce battle that unfolded two weeks earlier at Tokyo Midtown Tower. In order to slip past the ferocious attack of the Archangel guarding the building and beat down the ISS kit main body, they had investigated the strategy of staying over at the hotel in the top floors in the real world and diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field from there.

But this strategy had been scrapped due to the wall of the giga-premium lodging fee of thirty thousand yen for one night. Although if they hadn't had to

fight Metatron's first form head-on, they wouldn't have met her in her true form.

Regardless, Haruyuki was generally far removed from luxury lodgings, so how could he allow himself to simply bob along in the pool of this hotel, which was probably in the same price range, when he wasn't even a hotel guest?

"Whoa! Wh-! Ooooow!"

A familiar cry of delight came from him, and Haruyuki turned the inner tube around.

Trotting out of the locker room was Chiyuri in a shorts-and-top-type swimsuit, and behind her was the girls' camp of Nega Nebulus plus one—Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, and their guest, Rin Kusakabe, filed in wearing swimsuits of all colors.

This was not the first time he'd seen the girls in revealing outfits. At the eighth-grade class B's reverse cosplay Café Animal Kingdom at the school festival, all the girls had been suddenly clad in animal swimsuits with extremely little surface area due to an operation error on Haruyuki's part, an incident that was still too fresh in his memory.

But in the end, that had not been reality but an AR image created by their Neurolinkers, and the optical phenomenon that leapt into his IRL eyeballs now was indeed orders of magnitude different in terms of details, texture, and of course, impact.

No, how can I definitely say that what I'm seeing now is a real scene? What if my Neurolinker was hacked, and a video that would normally be impossible was being projected into my mind?

"Taku, is that real?" Haruyuki murmured.

Takumu shifted his fingers to the place on his temple where his glasses usually were and hit thin air. But he didn't even seem to notice. "I guess we'd find out if we took a visual screenshot. If it's real, the warning about taking photos without permission should sound."

"Makes sense. Okay. I'll give it a go. It'd be pretty serious if our vision had been hacked."

"Okay, I'll check, too, with video..."

"Hey! You two! What're you muttering about?!"

But fortunately—if you could call it *fortunate*—Chiyuri reached the deck before Haruyuki and Takumu could open their virtual desktops and fired her superpowerful Chiyuri Beam at them for the first time in a while. "Oh! No way! You weren't trying to take a screenshot, were you?!"

A shiver of fear running up his spine at his childhood friend's sharp intuition, he shook his head at the same time as Takumu.

""We weren't!""

"So then, what's that hand about, hanging in the air like that?" she asked, eyebrow arched.

Their heads shook faster.

""Warm-up stretches.""

"You usually do those before you get in the water, you know."

"You too, Chiiko. Make sure to stretch properly before swimming, all right?" Fuko appeared from behind Chiyuri and smiled at Haruyuki and Takumu in the water, who were also smiling. Her bikini and light-blue pareu, complete with ultrathin knee-highs to protect the nanopolymers of her prosthetic legs, looked very good on her.

Wondering what this particularly earth-shattering Raker Smile meant, Haruyuki brought a stiff smile to his own face, and Kuroyukihime came to stand next to Fuko. She was in a simple black bikini with a violet butterfly pattern.

The subzero Kuroyukihime Smile was fortunately not activated, and she looked at Haruyuki with a straight face as she spoke. "That inner tube looks comfortable. Is it your own?"

"Y-yes. The mail yesterday said to bring a swimsuit, so I figured, just in case..."

"I see. Would you lend it to me for a bit later?"

"S-sure, of course. However long you want."

While they were talking, Utai popped her face out from behind Kuroyukihime.

Her swimsuit was an orange one-piece with a large ruffle on the chest. She already had a red polka-dotted inner tube around her waist.

UI> I BROUGHT AN INNER TUBE, TOO! With a satisfied smile, Utai spun the plastic unit around for them.

Fuko suddenly picked her up from behind, inner tube and all. "Oh, you! Wearing an inner tube's against the rules, Uiui!"

UI> How is it against the Rules?! Utai flailed her legs as she tapped at the keyboard with both hands.

"Because it makes you too cute, obviously! " Fuko whirled her around, showing off her surprising arm strength. "So much that I could just toss you in the pool like this!"

UI> STI@PLSAEEEEEE

"Come, come! That's quite enough, Fuko. Before you throw her in, you have to make sure Uiui warms up, too."

"Oh! You're right. Okay, I'll let you stretch really well before I throw you in."

...You can just throw her in. Or like, if it's come to this, I feel relieved that Chocolat and the others can't be here, or like maybe a little sad?

These thoughts in his mind, Haruyuki couldn't take his eyes off the enchanting poolside view. But abruptly, the surface of the water rose up roundly right beside him.

"Wh-whoa?!" Haruyuki reeled with such force that he very nearly did a somersault, and Takumu held down his inner tube.

Breaking through the surface of the water with a splash was Rin Kusakabe, who had at some point unbeknownst to him dived into the water. Water dripped off her cute clover-patterned tank-top-style bikini and matching headband.

"Hello, Arita." Rin looked up at Haruyuki and grinned, water reaching her chin.

"Oh...H-hello, Kusakabe."

The members of Nega Nebulus—excluding Chocolat Puppeter and her friends

who they hadn't yet met in the real—met up in the morning and took care of their shopping and dinner in Shibuya, but Rin, a member of Great Wall, had joined them here at the pool.

Haruyuki had only just dueled with her older brother, Ash Roller, the day before, but it had been two weeks since he'd seen Rin, and for a moment, he was at a loss at what to say to her.

And then Rin placed her slender fingertips on Haruyuki's inner tube and said in a small voice, "Um. Your inner tube. Would you let. Me also borrow it later?"

"Oh! O-o-o-o-o-of course! Not even later, right now..." He hurriedly lifted it away from his body and set it to float in the water.

"G-g-g-g-go ahead — Huh? Whoa?!"

The reason Haruyuki cried out and Rin also yelped rather adorably was because someone jumped in from the sky above with a "Hup!" It was none other than Kuroyukihime, who flew right into the hole in the inner tube with a loud splash. Water droplets flew through the air to hit Haruyuki and Takumu in the face.

"K-K-K-Kuroyukihime, wh-wh-what are—?"

"I made the reservation, you know, earlier, Haruyuki?" And here, at last, the subzero Kuroyukihime Smile was activated. "Mmm. It is a rather comfortable inner tube, isn't it? What is it made of?"

He wasn't sure just how serious she was when she asked these questions, as she slipped her slender legs out of the inner tube and shifted to a sitting posture.

"R-right, it's a nanocrystal elastomer. Lightweight, thin, very elastic, feels good to the touch, and it's also very resistant," Haruyuki said, like he was an inner-tube salesperson or something.

And then from the deck, Chiyuri clapped her hands together with an exasperated expression. "Okay, no more playing! Pay attention! I will now reveal today's special guest!"

The four in the water looked up, and Utai and Fuko stood up from their

stretches.

With the seven looking on, a girl with short hair walked briskly out of the locker room. He knew it was a girl because of the snowy-white dress-type swimsuit she wore, but her long, slender physique had a neutral air about it. For a moment, he wondered who it was, but when he saw the semitransparent external Neurolinker equipped on her neck, he finally understood. This was Akira Himi sans glasses—Aqua Current.

This was probably the first time he'd seen Akira's naked face, and he stared unconsciously until Fuko clapped her hands together.

"Okay, everyone, get ready!"

Hurriedly, he stretched out in the water. Turning toward Akira on the deck, Kuroyukihime thanked her on their behalf. "Akira, thank you so much for getting so many precious tickets for us today."

"Thank you very muuuuch!" the other six immediately chorused.

Akira nodded coolly. "You're welcome."

Yes: The reason common junior and senior high schoolers like Haruyuki and his friends were able to have their fill of resort life at the lofty pool of the luxury hotel was because Akira had gotten a number of tickets for them. And she had been able to do that because her mother had apparently been the chef and pâtissier at the restaurant of an affiliated hotel.

"Okay, everyone, have fun," Akira announced, sounding exactly the way she always did, as she put on a white swim cap. "I'm going to swim."

She had been later than the others because she had done her warm-up exercises in the locker room, and now she artlessly bent over and dived into the lane to the far right with a form that seemed incredible to an amateur's eyes. She slid into the water and didn't pop up again until she'd gone nearly ten meters and then started to swim in a crawl. It looked entirely effortless, yet she was extremely fast. In the blink of an eye, she had swum twenty-five meters, and she flipped around to return. With her white swimsuit, she looked almost like a beluga whale.

"W-wow...That's Aquamatic for you," Haruyuki muttered.

Takumu once again caught the light on his air glasses. "I can't just let her beat me like this. I'm going to swim a bit, too." He moved smoothly into the neighboring lane and kicked at the wall at the same time as the returning Akira turned. In contrast with Akira, his form was powerful, and he swam hard.

Haruyuki didn't so much as go near the school pool, but because he had been forced to take swimming lessons as a kid, of all the sports in the world, swimming was the only one he didn't hate. But of course, he couldn't begin to compare with the speed Akira and Takumu produced, so he simply treaded water and wondered what to do next.

Still on Haruyuki's inner tube, Kuroyukihime pinched his shoulder. "Haruyuki, how are you at swimming?"

"Oh, well, I'm not awful."

"Oh-ho! That's good. So then how about we begin our training?"

"Huh? T-training? What training?"

Kuroyukihime grinned. "Oh my, knowing you, I'm sure you surmised the reason we came to this pool long ago."

"Reason? ...It wasn't because we got tickets?"

"No, if Akira hadn't been able to arrange for the tickets, I was thinking we could go to the Daikanyama sports center. I wanted you to get a little accustomed to it before the meeting."

"Accustomed? To what?"

He whirled around. Akira and Takumu were still swimming, and Chiyuri, Utai, and Fuko were continuing to warm up. Rin, looking puzzled, was next to Haruyuki.

"...To the. Water?" There was nothing but water around, so he hazarded that response, and Kuroyukihime smiled again.

"So close." She spun around with the inner tube and pulled her face in close to Haruyuki and Rin. "The sensation of floating in the water...Or to be more specific, to the sensation of artificial gravity."

He took a sharp breath and exchanged a glance with Rin before asking in a similarly small voice, "S-so then...does that mean it's finally going to be implemented today? The...Space stage?"

"Fuko and I have carefully considered that the possibility definitely exists."

"B-but why today? The rumors were all pointing to July fifth...But no matter how many days pass, it totally never shows. Some people are saying it might never be implemented, at this rate."

Kuroyukihime nodded firmly. Drops of water fell from her wet bangs onto the pale skin of her chest and then rolled down. "I also thought that if it was going to be implemented, it would have been on the fifth. Because that was exactly a month after Hermes' Cord appeared in the Accelerated World. But it's not as though we had any firm basis for thinking that. Brain Burst updates pretty much on its own schedule...Some things will be one month after the official event, but they'll also really stretch and push all kinds of commemorative days."

"Commemorative days...You mean like Culture Day or Respect for the Aged Day?"

"Oh...I've. Heard that. Too. The Ocean stage was implemented. On Marine Day," Rin said.

"That's exactly right." Kuroyukihime raised a single finger. "Incidentally, everyone's favorite, the Sewer stage, was also implemented on September tenth, Sewer Day."

"Is there actually such a day...? Huh? But wait." Furrowing his brow, he searched his hazy memory. "I'm pretty sure that exists—Space Day, right? And that's in September, too."

"Oh, well done! Space Day is September twelfth, the day that the space shuttle carrying the first Japanese person was launched into space."

"Wow. I get it...No wait, not that." He shook his head, the water around him splashing. "If there's a Space Day, then wouldn't the Space stage be implemented on that day? Which means that's still two months off?"

"But that would mean too much time would pass from the Hermes' Cord race," Kuroyukihime noted. "After the formal event for the Odaiba theme park,

Tokyo Grand Castle, the Ancient Castle stage patterned on the same motif was implemented thirty days later. I highly doubt they would drag it out three months. This is complete supposition on my part, but I believe the developer intended to implement the Space stage on July fifth, thirty days after the race, but there turned out to be a commemorative day unrelated to space a little later, so they postponed it. Perhaps."

"This developer's kinda doing things at random, huh?" Haruyuki said.

"That didn't just start now. To begin with, the very idea of giving a bunch of mere seven-year-olds something like the Brain Burst program and then going completely hands-off is entirely too random." Kuroyukihime denounced both game master and Originators at the same time, and Haruyuki unconsciously sank down into the water, but Rin displayed a surprising boldness and giggled. But she quickly got a strange look on her face and gave voice to another question.

"Um. So then. Today...July fourteenth is a commemorative. Day not related to space? So. What day. Is today?"

It was Fuko who replied, having come along to sit on the edge of the pool behind them at some point, her legs in the water up to the knees. In the water a little ways off, Utai was floating with her inner tube, having gotten in or been tossed in by Fuko. Chiyuri seemed to be swimming briskly together with Takumu and Akira in the opposite lane.

"All right, a multiple-choice quiz for Rin and Corvus." Grinning, she raised three fingers. "One: Dandelion Day. Two: Morning Glory Day. Three: Sunflower Day."

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After exchanging another look with Rin, Haruyuki asked timidly, "Um, none of them seem to have any connection with space, though?"

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"I wonder? Maybe think very caaaarefully?"
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"Um..."
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Dandelions...They have that fluff that flies away. And I feel like the shape of the fluff doesn't not look like a space shuttle reentry capsule. "D-Dandelion Day!"

"Ennnh! Wrong! As punishment, thirty seconds underwater."

Still smiling, Fuko stretched out her right leg and moved it up and down in Haruyuki's direction, so with a "'Kaaay..." he launched the timer app on his Neurolinker and took a deep breath before submerging his head below the water.

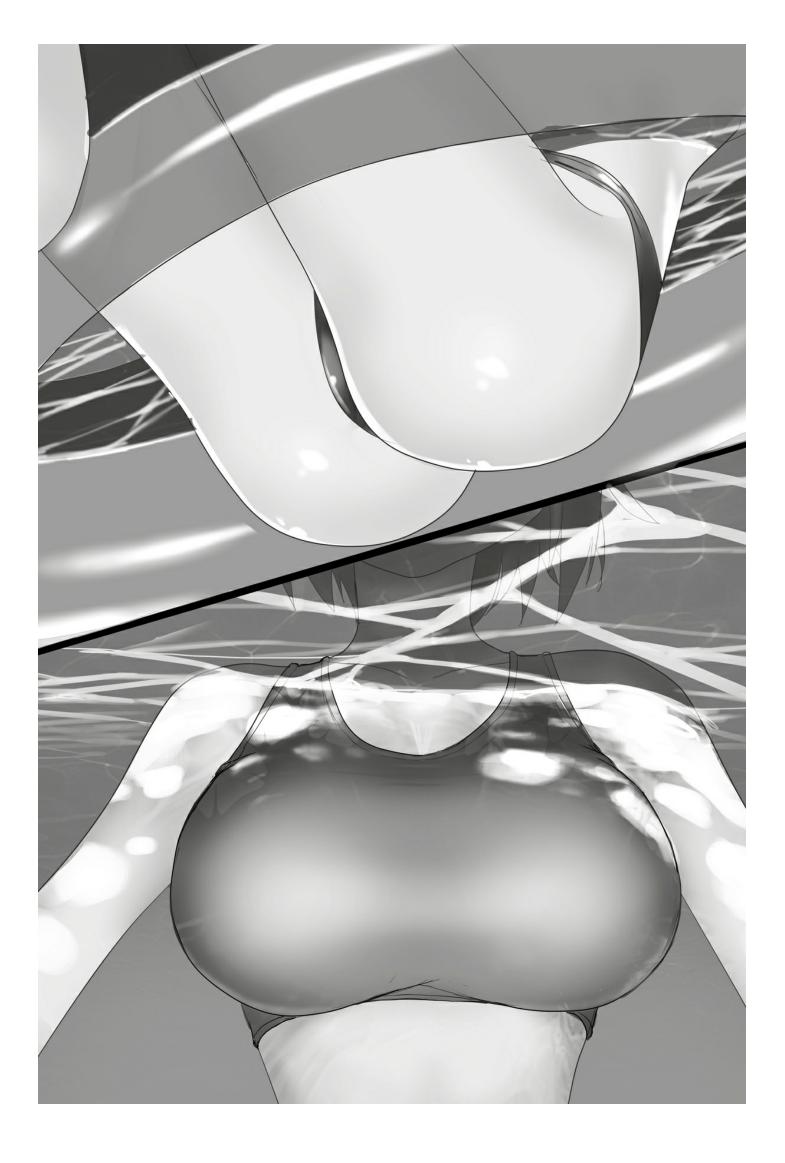
Of course, this was the pool at a luxury hotel, so the water was quite clear. He took his eyes off his own shadow wobbling on the floor of the pool and looked ahead. Instantly, Rin's chest, in the clover-patterned swimsuit, appeared at close range, and overwhelmed, he turned his body to the left.

This time, the lower half of Kuroyukihime poking through the inner tube on the water surface assaulted his retinas. Bubbles of air escaping his lungs, he was instantly in pain, but he felt like if he gave up then and there, they'd figure something was up, so he earnestly held on. He changed the orientation of his body once more, and the instant the digital numbers of the timer hit thirty, he pushed up above the water surface.

As he panted and gasped, Fuko grinned and said, "Nice work, Corvus. How was the view underwater?"

She knows!! Haruyuki froze, Rin's face reddened as she covered her chest with both arms, and Kuroyukihime let out a cry.

"Wh-what view?!" she demanded. "What did you see?!"



"Uh, um, oh...Kuroyukihime. That swimsuit looks really good on you..."

"This is pretty much the worst time for you to be saying that!"

Still sitting on the inner tube, Kuroyukihime brought the heel of her left foot down and made a direct hit with the crown of Haruyuki's head. Once again, he burbled under the water.

"Okay, Corvus is out, then. So what's your answer, Rin?"

"Um. I'm pretty sure. There was that morning glory. In space thing, so... Morning Glory Day..."

"Enh! Enh! Enh! Wrong. Thirty seconds underwater."

"Okay..."

Splsh! Rin vanished, leaving behind wavelets. Perhaps because of the lighting, the water surface was dyed the blue of the sky, and he couldn't tell what was happening in the water at all.

Having recovered from the mental and physical shock, Haruyuki couldn't wait for Rin to come bobbing back up and looked toward Fuko on the poolside. "Um. Master? So that automatically means the answer is Sunflower Day, then..."

"Do you still not see the connection between sunflowers and space?"

"Um. I guess sunflowers follow the sun? ... Whoa!"

Rin popped up suddenly, ten centimeters before his eyes, so he threw himself back unconsciously.

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

"Oh! S-sorry."

"But I. Under. Stand." Whirling around, Rin turned to Fuko and said, "Sunflowers. Himawari. They rotate. With the sun. Like the. Himawari satellite, right?"

"Correct, Rin." Fuko smiled.

Kuroyukihime, to the rear, cleared her throat loudly. "You there, don't stay so close. It's just as Kusakabe said, on this day seventy years ago, the first Japanese

weather satellite was launched, the Himawari Number One. To commemorate that, July fourteenth is seen as Sunflower Day."

"Ohhhh...I get it. That is related to space, then." Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down admiringly before quickly realizing something and craning his neck. "Huh? Maybe this sounds rude, but like, if they were going to match it up with some minor holiday, then they should have implemented the Space stage last week on July seventh, right? I think the Tanabata Festival's way more of a major space-related holiday."

"True, but because of the history of Tanabata, the exact date is a bit hazy," Kuroyukihime noted. "When you look at the whole of Japan, there are a fair number of places that go by the lunar calendar—that is, they have the Tanabata Festival in August."

"Oh! Now that you mention it, in Higashine in Yamagata where my grandparents live, Tanabata is at the beginning of August."

"Oh-ho, is that so? Mmm. Well then, to be in time for that— No, no, we were talking about the Space stage." Her thoughts nearly derailed, Kuroyukihime cleared her throat once more before continuing. "At any rate, all of this is to say that Fuko and I were thinking that today, which could be said to be space-related, might be the day when the Space stage is implemented. We don't know because we're cut off from the global net, but it may have already been, and as we speak, no-holds-barred fights are taking place in a gravity-free space. In which case, we, too, must ensure that we are able to respond, just in case."

"Just in case...So then"—Haruyuki glanced around and checked that there were no poolgoers within hearing range—"do you mean the meeting with GW could be our first Space stage experience?"

"There's that, too."

"B-but we're only talking today, yeah? So a stage with new rules we're not used to still won't be a problem, right?"

UI> THAT'S WHY IT'S "JUST IN CASE." Bobbing on the surface of the water, Utai had been listening to them with a smile, and now she lightly tapped at the surface of the inner tube with her fingers. UI> I do not believe that the people of Great Wall would break their promise and challenge us. But we do not know what will happen; we do not know *if* something

"Right...I guess so. Especially at such an important talk like this one, this is the sort of thing *they'd* target." Haruyuki nodded, reminded of how Takumu had also said it depended on the situation the previous day.

Utai nodded firmly as well. He hadn't gone so far as to say who "they" were, but there was no doubt that the name Acceleration Research Society had popped up in all their heads.

"Right. I know Rin is here, so maybe we shouldn't say this," Fuko said. "But GW is a large family, so we can't exclude the possibility of an information leak."

"Only the top people know about the meeting," Rin replied in a quiet voice, still submerged up to her chin in the water. "But they issued a notice that global connections are prohibited between two fifty and three ten in Shibuya Two. So the Legion members are probably wondering what's going on...I think."

"We requested they send out that notice." A faint, wry smile rose up on Fuko's face. "If we hadn't, then we might be disturbed by a connection to the meeting stage, even if it's not deliberate. That said, however, having them issue a notice to every member of GW saying Nega Nebulus is coming so don't challenge them seemed like it would only court extra risk."

"...It's true that. There are a few. People who would want to go one-to-one with the Black King. Even if they got in trouble for disobeying an. Order. I think," Rin said apologetically.

Kuroyukihime grinned. "You tell that lot they can come to Suginami in the Territories, and I will be sure to take them on one-on-one. At any rate, I hope you've understood what Fuko and I are concerned about, Haruyuki?"

"Y-yes." Haruyuki hurriedly nodded. "An unexpected challenger—and in the newly implemented Space stage on top of that, so we can't fight properly...That kind of thing, right?"

"Yes. A gravity-free environment, which the Space stage is sure to be, requires fairly specialized movements and sense of direction...It actually would have been better if we could have trained in the Ocean-stage sea, but it would just be too much to stay accelerated until we drew such a rare stage. So! The real

world it is!" Kuroyukihime slapped at the water. "This explanation's run a little long, but we still have an hour and a half until the meeting at three. You may swim, you may dive, you may sip tropical juice by the poolside when you get tired. Everyone, play with all your might. That is today's training!"

Haruyuki and his friends all thrust their right hands into the air and shouted, "Okay!"

Akira and the others had apparently tired of swimming, and so he, Rin, and Utai took their place in the inside lane and swam back and forth several times before starting a game of underwater hide-and-seek. With this and drinking colorful juice on deck chairs, the time flew by.

When it was 2:50 PM, Kuroyukihime gathered them all in one corner of the pool to form a circle in the water.

"Now, how do you feel, friends?" the Legion Master asked. "Have your bodies become accustomed to the floating sensation?"

Chiyuri tilted her head thoughtfully. "Like, maybe it has, maybe it hasn't? Or like, Kuroyukihime, are we really going to be able to deal with the Space stage like this?"

"No idea. This will be my first time, as well."

At this response, everyone there rolled their eyes, but Kuroyukihime continued brightly.

"Of those present, the only ones who have tasted zero gravity in the Accelerated World are Fuko and Haruyuki, who made it through to the very end of the Hermes' Cord race. Considering this experience, perhaps you could say a few words?"

"Um." Haruyuki exchanged a look with Fuko before answering timidly, "I wasn't able to go all the way to the finish line. But due to the feeling of up and down and left and right, being hazy is maybe like diving in the water..."

"I only flew straight ahead to the finish line," Fuko said, cocking her head to one side. "But I think it's totally different depending on whether you're mentally prepared or not. We've played around a full two hours here in the pool, so there'll be no panicking if the Space stage really does come. As long as

we have that mental awareness, I'm sure we'll be fine."

"Mmm. That's exactly it. Now, everyone, we'll dive one last time into the water. Join hands with the person beside you."

He clasped the hand of Kuroyukihime on his left and Akira on his right. On Kuroyukihime's signal, he took a deep breath to fill his lungs and dived.

The faces of his comrades were distorted through the transparent aqua blue. To confront the Acceleration Research Society and Oscillatory Universe, Kuroyukihime had decided on a Legion expansion policy. Already, Chocolat Puppeter and her two comrades had joined the day before yesterday, and the total muster of Nega Nebulus was now ten—eleven if you counted the Archangel Metatron. Going forward, he would have fewer chances to work with the people there that day. He couldn't feel that this was a bad thing, but he still wanted to burn that moment firmly into his memory.

As if picking up on his thoughts, Akira and Kuroyukihime both squeezed his hand. One at a time, they squeezed one another's hands until the gesture made it all the way around the circle and back to him again. Then they rose up to the surface.

Once most of the dripping was under control, Kuroyukihime gave instructions calmly. "One minute to go. Ready your global net connections." They all put a hand to their Neurolinkers. Great Wall would be making the stage that would serve as the setting for the meeting, so all Haruyuki and his comrades had to do was wait. Of course, they had registered the starter Iron Pound on their automatic Gallery list.

"Thirty seconds. Start the connection."

He held down the connect button on his Neurolinker. The global net connection dialog box was displayed in his field of view.

"Ten seconds. Nine, eight, seven..."

As he listened to Kuroyukihime's countdown, Haruyuki closed his eyes.

"...three, two, one."

Not even a second late, a row of characters wreathed in flames shone red

against the back of his eyelids.

A REGISTERED DUEL IS BEGINNING!

His avatar's feet touched hard earth, and he felt the usual gravity of the duel stage. In other words, this was not the Space stage.

Opening his eyes, Haruyuki took in a magnificent gradation from a vivid gold to a bright canary yellow to madder-red and through violet down to dark blue. The eternally dusky sky—the Twilight stage.

In the real world, they were on the top floor of Shibuya Ravine South Tower, but he was quite close to the ground now. More precisely, in one corner of the central rooftop plaza. To his right was Ravine Tower, to his left the skyscraper condo, and the South Tower rose up in that very direction, so it appeared that he was indeed in the bottom of the "ravine."

Haruyuki took his gaze off the cluster of skyscrapers now transformed into massive temples and felt something like a mixture of disappointment and relief that it wasn't the Space stage as he checked for his comrades around him. Not one of them was missing, from Black King, Black Lotus, and Submaster Sky Raker on down.

Which meant.

"Crow must die..."

These curse-like words echoed from directly behind him, and he turned around with a jump.

Standing there was the fin de siècle rider, eyes burning white-hot in the skull helmet. They were in the Gallery, so he wasn't on his motorcycle, but the aura he was emitting was 130 percent of their regular duels. Through the helmet shield came a voice trembling with rage.

"You. Who said you could flirt and flirt and flirt and flirt with Rin in a bathing

suit...?"

"I—I wasn't flirting or anything like that at all, Big Brother!"

"No. Calling. Me. Brother! So you were just eyeballin' Rin in her bathing suit! This crime is worth ten! Hundred! Deaths! Crooooow!" The rage meter of Rin Kusakabe's older brother, aka Ash Roller, was shooting upward.

A hand from behind gently patted his shoulder. "I believe the saying is 'Ten thousand deaths,' Ash." The owner of the voice was his parent and master, Sky Raker. Similar to Ash, she was not using her wheelchair Enhanced Armament, but rather standing on the white tile on two elegant legs.

Ash froze in place, while Raker started to speak, her voice endlessly gentle. "To begin with, if you're going to translate the saying into English, it's probably more like 'Your crime deserves capital punishment.' And I also got a good look at Rin in her swimsuit. Does that mean I must die ten thousand times?"

"That's no big nothing at all, Master!"

"Well then, we don't have time for this, so it would be wonderfully helpful if you would get to work."

"Oh! Aye, aye, sir!" Ash Roller shouted, snapping to attention as he ran to the middle of the large rooftop.

The roof of the Ravine Square central building offered up something along the lines of a park in the air, the ground covered in soft undergrowth. Pillars like temple ruins stood in each corner, while the central area laid with marble tile conveniently had large benches facing each other. But there was no one there at present.

Haruyuki glanced at the two health gauges displayed in the top part of his vision. The gauge on the left had the name of "Fists" Iron Pound, the third seat of the Six Armors that was the Great Wall executive group.

And the name on the right was Viridian Decurion, the second seat of the Six Armors. Pound had called him Viri at the meeting of the Seven Kings a week earlier, but Haruyuki had never even seen him before, much less fought him.

At any rate, the duel starters were just as had been announced beforehand.

Now where were they? Haruyuki started to look around for them.

And then, Ash, standing still in the middle of the plaza, likely fifty meters on each side, spread his legs out, clasped both hands behind his back, and leaned backward. "Great Wall member, Ash Roller!" he shouted. "I have guided the Black King, Black Lotus, and her six party members to the king!"

There was no trace of Ash's peculiar way of speaking in this announcement, which echoed off the surrounding high-rise temples and disappeared. A full five seconds passed.

"Good work!" A throaty voice broke the silence, and the opposite side of the floor rose up as if exploding from inside the building and flew off in all directions.

From inside the large, two-meter hole came a steel-colored avatar with his boxing-glove fist thrust high above his head. Iron Pound. He had apparently broken through the ceiling from the floor below with a jumping uppercut.

"Oh, Fists! You put on this pointless cool act just because you're the starter, hmm?"

Fortunately, he appeared not to have heard Raker's overview, and Pound did a somersault backward through the air before coming to land on the roof.

One new silhouette after another jumped up through the hole Pound had made. Two, three, four people. When they had lined up, two on either side of the hole, a remarkably massive silhouette finally appeared. Causing the ground beneath even Haruyuki and his comrades on the far side of the roof to shake was a super-heavyweight duel avatar covered head to toe in vivid-green armor with an enormous cross shield in his left hand. There was no doubt that this was the head of Great Wall, the Green King, "Invulnerable" Green Grandé.

Haruyuki, Takumu, and Chiyuri pulled back slightly at the overwhelming information pressure that almost made the air of the stage crackle, but the youngest of their group, Utai, spoke in an even voice. "Is that the end, then? Even if they include Ash, they're still one person short."

Now that she mentioned it, that was true. In contrast with the full seven members on the Nega Nebulus side, the Great Wall side had the Green King,

Pound, and Ash, plus the three whose names Haruyuki didn't know, for a total of six. But he was pretty sure Pound had said last week that they would match Nega Nebulus's numbers.

"Well, I don't mind if they're short or not. Now, shall we go?" Kuroyukihime started to move with a gentle hover, so he hurriedly chased after her. At the same time, the green camp started to walk to the central area where Ash was waiting.

Twenty seconds later, both camps were facing each other, separated by a distance of ten meters. Ash looked at each of the Black faces in turn before nodding slightly and joining the end of the green line.

The first to speak was, of course, Iron Pound. "To start, we will remove the Gallery approach restriction! Like this, we can't talk without yelling!"

"We have no issue with that."

Sky Raker had no sooner responded than Pound was opening the Instruct menu from his own health gauge and deftly operating it with a hand stuffed in a glove. Once his opponent received this and pressed the button to accept, a message appeared in front of the eyes of Haruyuki and his comrades that the ten-meter limit had been lifted.

Both sides advanced once again and stopped to stand immediately behind the large benches facing each other in the center of the plaza. They had closed the distance to three meters, and Haruyuki could clearly see the face masks of the other side.

Standing in the middle of the seven of them, Kuroyukihime gazed at the Green King standing before her as she spoke quietly. "Grandé. I thank you for accepting my request for a meeting."

The Green King nodded ponderously in return, but as usual, he did not speak.

Kuroyukihime was also accustomed to this, so she continued without seeming to pay it any mind. "Now then, there are some here who have not met before, so perhaps we could start with introductions. I am the leader of Nega Nebulus, Black Lotus."

Submaster Raker, Akira, Utai, Takumu, Chiyuri, and Haruyuki all gave their

names in turn. And in Great Wall, they started with Ash Roller, likely the lowest level among them, and then the midsize avatar with the solidly built silhouette standing next to him bowed neatly.

"Sup. I'm the fifth seat of the Six Armors, Suntan Chafer."

This voice was definitely a girl's, which gave him a bit of a shock. And then the name sounded more Chinese than English, which was his second shock. Could it be like Chocolat Puppeter, and she was just choosing the pronunciation she preferred for the name she'd been given?

"Suntan is light brown. Chafer is a kind of beetle," Akira informed him quietly, from where she stood to his right.

"Th-thanks." Apparently, it only sounded like Chinese, but it was actually proper English.

The next to give a name was clearly an F-type this time, a slender duel avatar who seemed out of place in Great Wall. On top of pale-green armor, she wore a dark-green cocktail dress.

"Six Armors' fourth seat, Lignum Vitae." From her calm voice to her unadorned manner of speaking, she was shrouded in an air somehow similar to Aqua Current. Curious about the reaction of Akira, called the only bouncer in the Accelerated World before her return to Nega Nebulus, Haruyuki glanced to his right, but there was absolutely no change in the eye lenses beneath the flowing water armor.

"Lignum Vitae—that's the name of the wood that's said to be the hardest in the world," Akira explained for him once more, and he thanked her again before returning his gaze to the front.

Next up was an opponent he knew well.

"Don't think there's any need for me to introduce myself, but anyway. Third seat. Iron Pound." He brought his fists up in front of him and did a quick one-two punch, which was apparently Pound's way of saying hello.

When Pound lowered his hands, the large avatar next to him bowed, his heavy armor squealing, and gave his name in a baritone that carried. "Six Armors, second seat, Viridian Decurion. At the moment, I'm the Legion

Submaster."

Which means this guy's GW's number two? With this in mind, Haruyuki focused on him more closely.

Just as the name Viridian would indicate, his armor was a deep and vivid green. Clad in armor and helmet resembling that of ancient Roman soldiers, he was equipped with a circular shield on his left arm and a slightly smallish sword on his left hip. Even just at a glance, it came through loud and clear that this was a powerful veteran.

Still, the meaning of the avatar name Decurion...

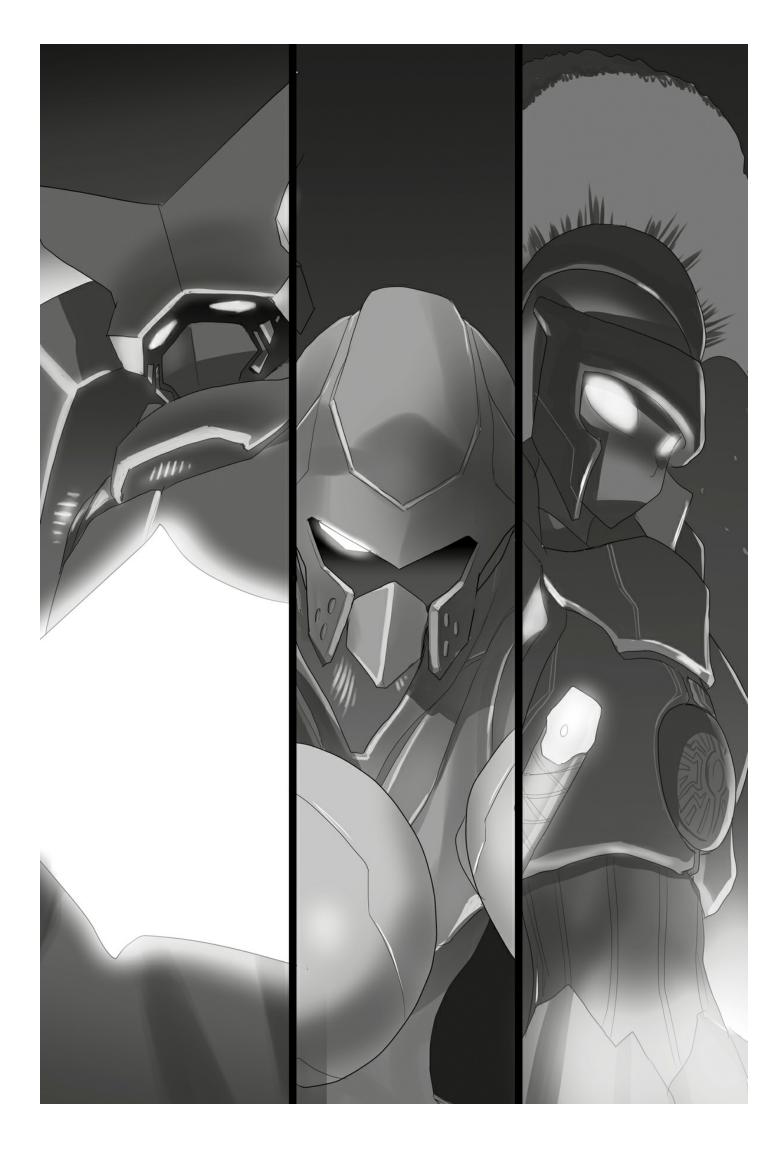
"Cavalry officer. In charge of ten men."

And again, Akira offered an explanation, and Haruyuki uttered "Thanks" for the third time, sounding apologetic. At basically the same moment, Viridian Decurion raised his right hand and introduced the Legion Master.

"And this, before you, is our king, Green Grandé."

Grandé simply nodded slightly again and stood wordless as always.

Opening her mouth in his place was the Black King. "Now that everyone here has given their names...Are you sure you're all right with six people? I do have a memory of Pound saying you would come in equal number."



"Oh...The thing about that, okay..." Rubbing the gear on his head with a glove, Iron Pound groaned. "Like, we were *planning* to have seven people...How about it, Viri?"

"Quit with that nickname in a place like this," Viridian Decurion replied in a low voice. "Otherwise, I'll call you Anpan."

"Whoa! Spare me...So? Is the first seat coming?"

Haruyuki unconsciously gasped.

Viridian Decurion, the second seat of the Six Armors, was the Legion's number two. Haruyuki had just gone with it because they were both "two," but just like Nega Nebulus's Four Elements, the Six Armors were Great Wall's executive group. In other words, in terms of rank, there definitely ought to have been one more person between Decurion and the Green King, the Six Armors' first seat.

But Decurion made a show of shrugging and remarked, in a tone that didn't imply much respect for someone higher up than he was, "I can't deal with all his whims. I contacted him at any rate, but it's been five minutes, and he still hasn't shown. We can just forget about him."

"Yeah? Tch! I figured today of all days I'd get to gaze upon the face of the first seat," Pound grumbled.

"Huh?!" Haruyuki unconsciously cried out. "Pound, you've never met the first seat, either?"

The iron boxer turned his eyes on Haruyuki and nodded. "Nope, not once. Or like, the only ones in all of GW who've met him are Boss and Viri—I mean, Decurion. I'm the third seat, and I don't even know his name."

"Whaaaat?! Is that even possible?"

"Just the way it is. Totally crushed Decurion in one-on-one, even got the boss to a draw. If he's that strong, then I can't say anything in a meritocracy."

"A...draw...," Haruyuki repeated, stunned, as he looked up at Green Grandé. The Green King was imperturbable, but his powers were unfathomable, to the point where he had easily stopped Haruyuki charging with all his might when he had been transformed into the sixth Chrome Disaster.

Grandé possessed one of the Seven Arcs, the large shield Strife, and could use the iron wall special attack Parsec Wall—to get a draw with him one-on-one... Who on earth was this first seat of the Six Armors?

Freeing Haruyuki from his frozen state was the voice of Kuroyukihime, smooth as ever.

"I understand your situation. There is always one problem element in any executive board." At this near grumble, faint smiles rose up on the faces of Fuko, Akira, and Utai. "There's no point in waiting for someone who's not coming. Now to get right to it, I'll begin discussing measures against the Acceleration Research Society—"

Kuroyukihime cut off mid-sentence, so Haruyuki turned his gaze to the right.

The Black King had frozen with her face mask turned slightly downward. Fuko started to take a step toward her, but then tilted her head back at the sky, as if sensing something.

Sucked in, Haruyuki looked up as well.

The three skyscrapers-turned-temples rose up sharply against the dusky sky of the Twilight stage. And the top floor of Ravine Tower up at a height of 230 meters melted into the madder-red sky, obscuring it from his view.

Glint.

Abruptly, something small flashed near the top of the building. Glittering with the reflection of the evening sun, it was approaching rapidly. A naturally destructing object— No. A human silhouette. A duel avatar.

Haruyuki stared hard at the avatar plummeting head over heels from the top floor of the skyscraper temple.

The armor color looked pitch-black because of the reflected light. The build was fairly slim, but the long coat-type armor billowed out past the waist, almost like wings. From the masculine design of the face mask, it was probably an M-type. Haruyuki still couldn't see the color of the eye lenses.

And then someone in Nega Nebulus let out a thin cry. "Ah...Ah!"

At basically the same time, Haruyuki realized there was something long and

slender equipped on the back of the mysterious avatar.

Swords. Two long swords crossed in the shape of an X.

A jet-black double swordsman.

To be continued.



TWO BLACK SWORDS, TWO SILVER WINGS NOVEMBER 2046

"Unh...Unnnh...Uuuunnnnnnh," Haruyuki groaned, moving a trembling finger above the open window on his virtual desktop.

The window was the console screen for the fighting game Brain Burst. He could open it even when he wasn't accelerated, to view things like the status and duel history of his avatar—and the number of Burst Points he had. Currently, he was staring at the Level-Up Bonus tab in his avatar status. Blank since he became a Burst Linker, this screen now offered him four options. This was because, last week, he had finally reached three hundred points, allowing Silver Crow to move up to level two.

When pushing the button to level up, he'd completely forgotten about making sure he had a few extra points to ensure his next loss wasn't his final one, so his points had dropped down to the single digits, causing chills and stomach pains for both him and his teacher Takumu. But he had somehow managed to get his balance back up, and now even that frightening time was a fond memory. It was strange that he couldn't actually remember much of the duels he'd fought to get his points back up out of the red zone, but he had bigger fish to fry at that moment.

That said, this was one of those moments where you cried for joy. The bonus screen before his eyes shone with a special brilliance, an extremely deluxe menu of four choices—two new special attacks, a new ability, and an enhancement of an existing ability.

"Unnnh...Gotta go with special attack...But it's hard to walk away from a new ability...And if I go with the special attack, then which one is stronger...?" His finger hovered above the three buttons at random, never coming down on any one of them. Haruyuki had truly cultivated and built up his indecisiveness in the

real world, but the real problem here was that the game Brain Burst did not allow players to save and load. So he couldn't use that old trick of picking one of them and then reloading and trying again if he didn't like his choice. It was, in other words, all or nothing.

"Ngah, nngh...If that's the way it's gotta be, then I just won't look at the buttons, I'll leave it to fate..."

He turned just his eyes upward away from the window, pulled a finger back sharply, and steeled himself before jabbing at the screen—or pretending to, at least.

"Arrrgh." Once again, Haruyuki decided to postpone his decision and was on the verge of dropping his hand.

"Hey, sorry to keep you waiting, boy! The tests just dragged on and on," a voice said from behind, accompanied by a strongish pat on the back, making him jump.

The rebound pushed his hand dangerously close to the window on his virtual desktop, so he yanked his arm back over his shoulder as a scream slipped out of him. "Aaah?!"

Fortunately, he managed to evade a second tragedy in careless game play, but for some reason, he heard a strange "Heep" from behind. He tried to pull his hand back down, but his fingertips caught on something.

Ever so timidly, Haruyuki turned around and saw Kuroyukihime with a cardigan and a thick shawl over her pajamas and his own fingers pushing through the front of those pajamas all the way inside.

"Hngah! I—I—I didn't mean—!!" Emitting an unintelligible cry, Haruyuki pulled his hand back with all the force he could muster. But it was caught on her second button. The pull of his hand sent this real-world button flying, and the most definitely real fabric fell open to both sides.

It had been four weeks since Kuroyukihime—vice president of the Umesato Junior High student council, Haruyuki's parent, and the master of the oncedefunct Legion Nega Nebulus—had been hospitalized near Asagaya Station. It had been touch-and-go immediately after the accident, but thanks to the great

strides made in micromachine medical treatment in the last few years and probably the willpower of the girl herself, she had come back from the brink of death. Since she had been released from the ICU, her recovery had been remarkable, and now the only physical manifestation of her many injuries was the cast on her left leg to set her broken fibula. She was expected to be released from the hospital soon.

Naturally, this would be a truly joyful event, but Haruyuki felt a little sadness at the thought. He'd been stopping in to see Kuroyukihime every day on his way home from school, but once she returned to Umesato, she would go back to being the student council vice president, an inspiration to all the students of the school; she probably wouldn't have time for Haruyuki anymore.

"I can actually read your mind now, you know," she said, yanking his left cheek outward.

He hurriedly turned his face upward and found beside him the beautiful countenance of his classmate pursing her lips. "N-no, I wasn't actually thinking anything weird—"

"I'll just say this now. Once I am released from the hospital, I have every intention of putting you through your paces. Our objective is level three—no, four within this year."

"Wh-whaaaat?!" Now Haruyuki felt a chill entirely opposite the one from earlier.

The fingers released his cheek, and Kuroyukihime turned to face forward, her expression softening. "Well, I, too, will be a little sad that these days will end."

The contrast between the madder-red of the evening sun dyeing her face in profile and the lustrous shine of her black hair was so dazzling that Haruyuki unconsciously blinked before turning his gaze to follow hers.

They were currently seated alongside each other on a bench on the south side of the hospital roof, looking down at a view of the city that spanned from Asagaya to Koenji. The elevated Chuo Line drew a line in the sky to one side, and a little beyond that was Oume Highway. In some weird twist of fate, the bench faced squarely in the direction of Umesato, and if he squinted, he could make out the solar panels on the building's roof glittering in the distance.

This part of Suginami Ward was a mix of shopping streets left over from the previous century, residential areas, and cutting-edge intelligent buildings, and all were highlighted a reddish-gold now. The sight was so beautiful that he almost wanted to call it a Twilight stage.

The skies had been clear the whole day, and the evening breeze had the slight chill that came with late autumn. Kuroyukihime pulled together the collar of the pajamas that Haruyuki had so recently defiled, and he pushed back to the depths of his mind the paleness of her bare skin that inevitably began to return to his thoughts.

"Um, we should probably be getting back inside," he said.

"No, it's fine. Thank you. It will be suppertime in twenty minutes...I'd like to stay here like this until then."

"B-but it's getting cold and all..."

"Mm. I see. So then, give me a little cold-resistance buff." Grinning, Kuroyukihime shifted about ten centimeters to the right, and her slender body inevitably came into contact—or rather became glued to—Haruyuki's left side, which did indeed cause the chill to recede. "Mm-hmm. This is perfect. You're quite warm."

"Uh, um, I am pretty confident in my heat generation." Haruyuki threw his everything into a self-deprecating gag, but Kuroyukihime only moved her lips without smiling.

"Idiot." She pulled her body even closer. "I'm not talking about physical warmth. I'm talking about emotional warmth. How can I put this...? I feel relieved. It's only natural that Kurashima would face off against me when it comes to you."

"Huh?" Unfortunately, Haruyuki couldn't really understand what she meant, and he cocked his head to one side as he accepted her slight weight. "Chiyu—I mean, Kurashima just thinks that I'm her servant and should belong only to her."

"Hee-hee. Well, at some point it will become clear. All kinds of things." Now Kuroyukihime smiled and raised a finger as if she had just remembered something. "That reminds me. What on earth were you looking at before when you were waiting for me? You seemed to be excessively deep in thought."

"Oh! Um, the Brain Burst console."

"Oh? ...Aah, I understand now. There's only one thing that could make you agonize like that. Your level-up bonus."

"Th-that's exactly it." Haruyuki's eyes grew wide at how easily she guessed the answer. "But how did you know?"

"It's obvious. I struggled the same way, way back when. Or rather, it's a path all Burst Linkers walk down," Kuroyukihime responded, still smiling, and then her expression clouded slightly. "However, it has already been several days since you reached level two, yes? Have you been fighting without taking your bonus?"

"Uh, yeah, well...I guess." Haruyuki nodded, pushing together his index fingers, and now the face to his left was colored with a mix of surprise and exasperation.

"I don't know whether to call that prudence or perseverance," she remarked with a slight frown. "It's true that these last few days, I've been busy with test after test, and I haven't had the time to really work with you. But Takumu, for instance, seems like he would give you appropriate advice."

"Th-that's..." Haruyuki paused. "When I mentioned the level-up bonus before, Taku got this faraway look in his eyes and said he didn't think he could help me because he always just took special attacks without even thinking about it."

"...I—I see. My apologies." Apologizing to the absent Takumu, Kuroyukihime, with a strange expression, lifted the leg held fast in a thin, lightweight cast up onto her other leg and then sat like that wordlessly, looking up at the evening sky as it gradually deepened into purple.

"Kuroyukihime, um," Haruyuki said to his parent meekly. "I don't think I'm ever going to be able to decide, no matter how long I think it over. So maybe I could get you to choose for me? What bonus to take, I mean."

"I was just wondering if I should do that or not," Kuroyukihime murmured, and her eyes were serious as she brought her gaze back from the sky to him. "I

know very well how hard it is for you to decide on your own. There are more than a few parent Burst Linkers who decide the direction of their child's growth. The parent has knowledge and experience that the child does not. And I think perhaps this is correct because of that. However..."

She closed her mouth momentarily and set half of the black wool shawl she was wearing over Haruyuki's shoulders. But her eyes shone with a firm light, in contrast with the gentleness of this gesture.

"It might seem as though I'm being harsh, but the parent is not the child's creator, and the child is not the parent's creation. It was your own heart, Haruyuki, that produced your duel avatar, Silver Crow. In which case, the direction in which to flap those wings is something you should decide."

"...Right." Haruyuki nodded obediently. He realized that it was one thing to get advice on how to fight, but to rely on her for even the irrevocable choice of a level-up bonus was simply fobbing off responsibility. If he couldn't make a decision himself now, then he should never have pushed the YES button that time, that day when Kuroyukihime had sent him the Brain Burst program in the Umesato lounge. "I understand, Kuroyukihime. The next time I go to the Accelerated World, I'll try asking him—Silver Crow. I feel like if I really ask, he'll tell me."

"Mm. Good answer." Kuroyukihime grinned and hugged Haruyuki tightly, her right hand holding the edge of the shawl. He belatedly became aware of her warmth next to him, and his heart rate abruptly tripled. Frozen in a self-induced Burst Link, Haruyuki's five senses were so inundated with information—a sweet scent, a wonderful softness—that it surpassed his processing ability, and his consciousness started to fade.

"But I'm your parent. A sad thing to simply leave it at that," her lips murmured in his ear, so close that they nearly touched him, and Haruyuki's mind was somehow yanked back to the here and now. "Instead of advice, how about I tell you about my own experience?"

"Y-your own...," he repeated absently before finally recovering about 50 percent of his processing power.

Right. When he really thought about it, there was a time when Kuroyukihime

—known as the level-nine Black King, Black Lotus, in the Accelerated World—had also been a beginner.

"So...are you going to tell me about...your parent?"

"No." Kuroyukihime shook her head. "It's not that. My parent was completely hands-off in this area...To the point where I was not even allowed to join the same Legion."

"What? ... So then, did you get this strong all by yourself?"

"That is also a no. With the exceptions of the very beginning—and the end... my parent had essentially no dealings with me. But there was a Burst Linker who I could call teacher. So I will tell you about the way he spoke of."

"The way...," Haruyuki parroted, before he froze in a different sense. Because his not-very-sharp intuition was announcing danger, for some reason.

But almost as if she had anticipated his reaction, Kuroyukihime squeezed the hand resting on his shoulder. Holding him tightly, she inserted one end of a black XSB cable she had pulled from somewhere into her Neurolinker.

"Huh? Um, way?"

"We'll talk with our fists—no, our swords. That's the way of our master." Grinning, Kuroyukihime stabbed the other plug into Haruyuki's Neurolinker. Before the warning of a wired connection that flashed in his field of view had disappeared, her shining lips were striking the final blow. "Burst Link."

"Hiii...yaaaaah!!"

The blow came riding in on a full-powered battle cry. The roar of a sonic boom ripped through the virtual air and shook the very stage itself. The black sword raced through space even faster, at a speed that left even these effects behind in the virtual dust.

There was no longer anyone in the Accelerated World who would try to meet head-on the slicing attack of the level-eight Burst Linker nicknamed World End, the head of the Legion Nega Nebulus, Black Lotus—with two exceptions.

One was Invincible, the leader of the Legion Great Wall: Green Grandé. The great shield the Strife, the Enhanced Armament in his possession that was the third star of the Seven Arcs, could resist every type of attack, be it long-range or close. The other was one corner of the Four Elements, the executive of Nega Nebulus, nicknamed Anomaly: Graphite Edge. He was also level eight. And his avatar's coloring was almost visually indistinguishable from hers, not to mention a strikingly similar silhouette. Not the least of which reason was because, right now, his weapons were the two swords he held in his hands.

Graph waited for Lotus's full-body attack without moving a step from where he stood. He whirled the longswords in his hands as he raised them up and crossed them in front of his body. Both blades had the same design, with edges of a metallic gray that was essentially black, but the central parts were a transparent glass-like material. Thus, when seen from afar, the swords looked hollow with only a two-centimeter blade.

Normally, only the blade part of a sword was used when attacking or defending, but Graph had crossed and readied his swords with the transparent parts facing outward—that is, the flat of the swords. These looked as though

they would bend and break with a simple punch attack, but for him, this setup was no mistake.

Glaring at the midsize M-type avatar standing coolly on the other side of those blades, Lotus prayed silently in the moment of the slicing attack. *Today for sure, I will break that shield!*

It was a simple regular attack, but the sword of Lotus's right hand came down with a force greater than any special attack and collided with the intersection of Graph's double blades.

Kreeeaaan! She heard the screech of impact, and a shock wave rippled outward to the distant edges of the stage. The wave swallowed up two figures watching the battle a little ways off, but given that they were part of the Gallery, it had no effect on them.

Lotus's slicing attack didn't manage to take down Graph's cross defense in a single blow, but her attack was not repelled, either, and the fight became a struggle at the intersection of the swords. Some years ago, when she had first struck Graph's double blades, she had been easily repelled and knocked some twenty meters or more backward, so this could be said to have been significant progress. But World End would not be satisfied with this.

"Nngh...aaaaah...!!" She focused all her might in her right arm. Compressed to a pinpoint, the power transformed into pale sparks, causing the black armor of the fighters to flicker irregularly.

The swords of Black Lotus's four limbs had the Terminate Sword ability. The effect was to eternally generate the highest-level severance-attack power in her blades. Many duel avatars were equipped with swords, but normally, it was only during the attack motion—when the sword was swinging—that the blade housed any force. Lotus's swords, however, were always generating the attack force of a slicing attack, even when they were completely at rest. This power allowed her to sever an opponent's fist or foot—or take down her prey simply by guarding against their attack. This was the origin of the nickname World End.

The only things that could survive a collision with Lotus's limbs without being severed was armor that possessed the maximum resistance to severance damage (which only existed in Grandé's shield), and swords that had the same

level of power (and there weren't really any of these in the Accelerated World, either). It wasn't that there weren't exceptions like items or abilities that allowed defense with special conditions—for instance, Yellow Radio's baton increased his defensive power in proportion to the number of times it was rotated—but the only thing in the entire Accelerated World that could take Lotus's slicing attack while being on the supposedly fragile side was Graph's twin swords.

He wasn't leaving the flats of his swords open to her because he was trying to go especially easy on her. This was actually the power of the duel avatar Graphite Edge—or rather, of his swords.

Two extremely powerful abilities were hidden away in those double swords. One was that they could guard against any and all attacks when the transparent sides were used as a shield. This was no special ability, but rather was derived from the material of the sword itself. The transparent area was not glass or crystal, but something called hyper diamond, which had a hardness that surpassed even natural diamond. In the four years since the start of the game Brain Burst 2039, not a single Burst Linker had broken through the protection this material offered. And of course, Lotus was no exception.

But today...definitely today!

"Aa...aaaaaaaah!!" With every scrap of energy she could muster, Lotus pushed back against the hyper-diamond core of Graph's swords, supposedly the hardest substance in the Accelerated World. Another shock wave shot out and faded at super-high speed. The supposedly indestructible earth cracked with concentric circles racing outward, perhaps unable to withstand the power generated in the struggle of the two level eighters, a force that went far beyond the numbers.

Black Lotus had crossed swords any number of times with Graphite Edge, a member of the Legion she was master of—her subordinate, in other words. It wasn't that they didn't get along, despite Graph pushing back against her authority. In fact, just the opposite—he had been instructing Lotus in the art of sword fighting since she was still only level two or three. In other words, he was something of a teacher to her.

And yet, Lotus had a reason for desperately trying to surpass her teacher in today's lesson. She intended to advance soon to the (supposedly) untrodden territory of level nine. To go from eight to nine required the expenditure of a sum of Burst Points so vast it boggled the mind, but nonetheless, she had finally built up that massive reservoir, including an extra-points buffer that would prevent anything from getting in the way of her duties as Legion Master.

The masters of the other six major Legions were also on the verge of reaching level nine at basically the same time, so it would be unacceptable for her to be late, given that she was considered one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color alongside them. But there was one problem: Becoming level nine meant she would advance beyond Graphite Edge. She very well might be able to best him in a duel from level nine, but then she wouldn't be able to say that she had actually surpassed him when fighting as equals.

Which was why that day would most likely be the last she was able to fight Graph on equal ground. He had passed on to her a multitude of techniques over more than three years in the real world and a period of time impossible to count in the Accelerated World, so she wanted desperately to show him some proof of her growth. No...She wanted to beat him down, this vexingly cool-as-acucumber double-sword user, and be proud of her victory.

"J-just fly already!!" Lotus squeezed a hoarse voice out of her throat, as she felt the periphery of her vision start to white out, perhaps because of her intense concentration.

She no longer had the extra power to step back momentarily and then attack again. It had already been a bit of work just to push Graph into using his double-sword cross guard, given that he was a master of evasive footwork. And yet, even in this situation, the face mask that she caught a glimpse of through the transparent hyper diamond had an air of easy nonchalance about it.

At times like this, Graph's usual lines were things like "Not too shabby, Lota." Or "Just a bit more, Lota." "Nice guts, Lota." Ever calm and composed, the way he called her Lota as a play on *Lotus* would only further aggravate her.

This was likely because Lotus had still been in second grade when they met for the first time, and so he'd had no choice but to treat her like a child. But she was in sixth grade now; she'd be in junior high next spring. And when you considered the Brain Burst installation conditions, Graph had to have been of a similar age in the real, right? Honestly, this double-sword user was really—

"You've gotten strong, Lota—I mean, Lotus." His voice came suddenly over the squeal of their locked swords.

Stunned, she wondered if she'd misheard, but the ever-calm voice continued.

"Seems like there's nothing left for me to teach you."

"—?!"

He'd never said this to her before, and Lotus stumbled, her concentration faltering. The balance between the attacking and defending forces crumbled, and the pressurized energy concentrated there scattered violently.

Kreeaahn! That pressure slammed into her like an explosion and knocked her flying backward. She bounced off the cracked marble ground of the Twilight stage several times, tumbling and rolling until she found the right moment to plunge the sword of her right leg into the ground and bring herself to a halt, carving out a rut in the ground. She stood up, shaking her head lightly.

She had been convinced that Graph had also been knocked flying, given that he was just as close as she was to the explosion's ground zero, but in a twist, the metallic-gray avatar hadn't moved so much as a single step from his original position. He had taken the blow from that violent surge of energy with the crossed double swords.

... Honestly! This guy!

Cursing him inwardly, Black Lotus—Kuroyukihime—shouted, "Oy, Graph! What was that strategy about?!"

"That was how I really feel as a teacher." Graph shrugged lightly as he lowered the swords in both hands, a dozen or so meters away. "If I was going to set a trap to mess up your sword work...Right, I'd talk about flat, black bugs wriggling around or something."

"Stop it. I'll kill you," she returned in a cold voice—before letting out a long sigh.

Regrettably, she hadn't been able to achieve her objective of surpassing her teacher, but she *had* pushed Graph to a place where he'd had to say something like that, which gave her confidence. And with that in mind, she checked in with the acting referees, watching over the scene together from the left. "Maiden. Curren. May I call this...a draw?"

The small dual-colored avatar standing on the right side shook her head firmly. "No matter how you look at it, it's your loss, Lo."

This was followed by the avatar on the left, her entire body wrapped in her unique flowing-water armor, similarly shaking her head, sending water droplets scattering. "I think the winner of the battle is the one standing in the end."

"...Mm. I see." Kuroyukihime nodded, her gaze still turned toward the official referees.

"Hunh!" She brandished the sword of her right arm with a cry. Red light jetted forth in a straight line along the floor—or more precisely, the roof of the large, mixed-use building at the east exit of Shibuya station, Shibuya Hikarie. On this side of the line were Lotus and the two referees; on the other side was Graphite Edge.



"...Oh." Graph seemed to catch on that something was afoot and tried to run, still clutching his swords. But the ground on which he stood sank backward with a heavy roar.

"Lota! N-n-n-no fair!!" Graph shouted, waving both hands to try to keep his balance, but it was too late. Kuroyukihime had launched the long-distance attack technique he'd taught her and sliced through the top of the skyscraper diagonally. Cut free of the rest of the building, the large structure began to slide along the cross section, pulled down by gravity, and Graph was inevitably dragged along with it. "Whoa! ...I'm...I'm gonna faaaalllllll..."

With this, the double-sword user finally disappeared from Kuroyukihime's field of view. There was only one in Nega Nebulus who could return to the roof of the 180-meter tall building in that situation—the Element with an Enhanced Armament in the form of a high-output booster, who was not currently on the scene. And no Burst Linker in the Accelerated World could fly higher than she could.

Kuroyukihime stretched gently upward as she pulled her right arm down and looked at the two referees. "Now this is my win, yes?"

"... That's against the rules," said the smaller one.

"...Super-not fair," agreed the larger.

"I'll take that as a compliment." Kuroyukihime turned away abruptly and looked to the western sky. Just as the health gauge with the name Graphite Edge to the right dropped dramatically against the backdrop of the orange of the dusk, the heavy *thud* of destruction reached her from the ground far below.

Five minutes later.

Due to bad luck or actual ability or both, Graph just barely managed to avoid his gauge being completely emptied. He returned to the roof via the elevator, and now the four of them sat together in a circle. The chairs were the Grecian temple—style pillars particular to the Twilight stage, cut down to an appropriate height.

Since Lotus and Graph had generated this field for a regular duel, they were limited to thirty minutes. Half of this had been spent on the confrontation between teacher and student, leaving them around ten minutes now. They were connected not through the global net, but rather through a Legion-exclusive closed net, so there was no audience.

The first to open her mouth was the shrine maiden avatar clad in crimson and raw muslin, Ardor Maiden. "Lo. Are you ready to advance to level nine?"

The reason that Maiden called Kuroyukihime, the sixth-grader, Lo—short for Lotus—was extremely simple. As a second grader, she was likely by far the youngest in the Legion. But she had already reached level seven, and she was always extremely calm and collected.

"Well..." Kuroyukihime nodded at a strange angle, looking back at the younger girl's rounded, innocent eye lenses. "To be honest, I had intended to have a complete victory over Graph today and level up with a clear heart..." She looked hard at the metallic avatar sitting in front of her.

He scratched his head in a very un-teacher-like manner. "I—I was thinking the same thing, which is why I said that whole initiation-type stuff."

"Then perhaps you could have waited until the end of the match to say such things rather than in the middle of the struggle!" she snapped.

"Aah, like, that's not really who I am...Or like, it's embarrassing..."

While he was the most powerful swordsman in the Legion and a veteran since the formation of Nega Nebulus, Graph's lack of solemnity remained unchanged from the old days. The fourth member of the Elements, who could not be there because of reasons related to the time school let out, said he was "basically a sword."

And this actually hit pretty close to home. Graphite Edge's weak point was basically hand-to-hand combat, so in a battle without his swords, he probably couldn't have won against the long-distance-type Maiden, even. He was a duel avatar of a fixed-point type, that had poured pretty much all his potential into his Enhanced Armament—his swords.

"It's all right, Graph. I think your feelings must have been communicated to Lo through your swords," Maiden said, following up with an air of a smile bleeding through onto her small face mask.

"Right!" Graph nodded deeply as if he understood just what she was getting at. "That's pretty much what I was trying to say, my student. Just like the conscience of Nega Nebulus to say that, Denden."

The instant she heard this affectionate nickname, the light that filled Maiden's eye lenses got just a little scary. Being called Lota herself, Kuroyukihime understood how she felt, but they had to continue talking right now. She cleared her throat. "Whether or not your feelings reached me, I am also satisfied with that session. I didn't manage a complete victory, but it still wasn't bad for our last fight as two level eighters...I think."

"So then, you're going to go up a level, yes, Lo?" Her face back to normal, Maiden cocked her head adorably to one side.

"Yes...Aah, it is frightening to use such an enormous sum of points in one go, but if I'm going to make it to level ten, then this is a road I cannot avoid going down."

"While your points are down, we will offer you the perfect protection, Lotus, so you can relax," came the quiet voice of the slender flowing-water avatar Aqua Current, who had so far simply listened in silence.

"Thanks, Curren." Kuroyukihime leaned to the left and bowed her head toward the avatar, ears attuned to the faint babbling sound of her armor. "But there's no need for you to concern yourself. I will also be taking part in the regular Enemy hunt in the Unlimited Neutral Field soon after I level up."

"I thought you'd say that," Current said. "But...there is something that concerns me."

"That rumor?" Kuroyukihime raised an eyebrow. "That once you go up to level nine, some kind of special rules that did not previously exist will be applied?"

Current nodded, and the part of the water armor that was like hair tied back swung back and forth.

In the Accelerated World, the rumor of special level-nine rules had started circulating about three months ago. Its origins were unknown, and the details themselves were unclear. The reason for the scarcity of information was that

the majority of Burst Linkers ignored it as having nothing to do with themselves.

And this was no surprise. There were said to be just under a thousand Burst Linkers, but it was an easy thing to count those who had reached level eight, and those in range of level nine were no more than ten. For Kuroyukihime, being the leader of Nega Nebulus had been a huge help in securing this many points. In which case, that was precisely why she had to confirm for herself if there was any kind of risk in ascending to level nine...Or so she thought.

Aqua Current turned her streamlined face mask to the left and met the pale eye lenses of Graphite Edge. "Graph. If you became level nine before Lotus, I think you could safely confirm the truth of the rumor."

Hit so casually with this rather shocking suggestion, the metallic avatar reeled. "Wh-whaaat?! M-me?!"

"Maiden and I are still level seven, but you're eight...And I think you're closest to nine after Lotus. Am I wrong?"

There was a reason that Current didn't refer to the remaining member of the Four Elements, who was not present at the moment. She was also level eight like Graph, but she had recently hinted at pulling back from the Legion front lines. It wasn't that she had grown tired of the game—just the opposite. As a Burst Linker, she was aiming for the heights more purely than anyone else.

Lotus's heart started to hurt when she thought about this friend—her closest connection in this world, albeit in a different sense from Graphite Edge—moving away from her, but she pushed this aside and focused on the conversation between Current and Graph.

"Uh, um. I won't say you're wrong, but if you think about a safety margin, too, I'm a little short. And to begin with, someone like me leapfrogging ahead of the Seven Kings of Pure Color to become level nine..."

"So then you can just call yourself a king, too," Maiden replied simply.

"N-no, no, no!" The double-sword user repeatedly alternated between moving his hands and shaking his head. "That burden's too much for me. And to start with, my color name's graphite... Even if I did name myself a king, what king would I be? The Graphite King?"

"That overlaps with Lo's Black King, so that's no good." Maiden rejected the idea bluntly, perhaps as payback for him always calling her Denden, and the swordmaster was at a loss for words.

"I think the Pencil King is good," Current remarked mercilessly.

"Pencil..." Maiden cocked her head to one side. "What's that, Curren?"

"Way back when, a lot of people used a writing instrument that had a graphite core," Current, apparently also in sixth grade like Kuroyukihime, explained. "It was very thin and broke easily, so it suits Graph to a tee."

"Wow...," Graph mused. "Kids these days don't know what a pencil is— No, wait! Forget that! Cureent! My metal's not *that* weak, you know!"

"Everyone noticed when you were secretly down before when the Purple King totally beat the hell out of you," Current replied. "And...I've said this a million times, but it's not Cureent, it's Current."

"Aah, um, there's this sweet where I'm from called reent, so I just..."

"That's a total lie!" Current shouted.

Here, Kuroyukihime burst out laughing at last. Perhaps her friends had noticed that she was feeling a little glum before, so maybe they were purposefully offering up this sunny back-and-forth. But that was just how kind they were.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, let's leave it there, Maiden, Curren. Even if there is some uncertain element in going up to level nine, I can't exactly make my teacher run a screen for me. And at any rate, it seems like the other kings will be leveling up at basically the same time. So dangerous or not, they'll be in it with me."

A serious look rose up on Graph's simple yet masculine face mask. "The same time as the other kings, huh? So then, Lota, will all Seven Kings meet or something once you're all level nine-ish?"

"Depending on the veracity of the rumor, it's not out of the question. We've had diplomatic relations before on the scale of two or three, or even four of us. So I think of that as the seven-person version, basically."

"I see." Graph folded his arms, appearing to sink into thought. Normally, he

was so detached and aloof that there was nowhere to grab hold of him, but since he very rarely displayed a keen power of insight, the other three kept their mouths shut and waited.

"Lota." Eventually, the double-sword user lifted his head and offered, "I've given you all kinds of advice about your level-up bonuses so far."

Kuroyukihime looked at him questioningly. "Yes, and I'm grateful for that..."

"Oh, I'm not looking for you to thank me," he went on hurriedly. "Because that was me determining your direction as a Burst Linker. Specializing in offense in one-on-one duels."

"...What's this about all of a sudden? It's not as though I've strengthened this avatar simply as you told me to. It's because I felt that this direction would allow me to fight in a way that most suited me." Kuroyukihime moved the swords of both hands slightly.

Graph nodded slowly. "And I'm not trying to contradict myself or anything now. Rather than an all-purpose build, a singularly specialized build has the power to break through the hard-edge moments of the game at the end of the end...That belief's not going to change, no matter what happens. Well, I don't have to tell the three of you that, though."

This time, Kuroyukihime, Maiden, and Current all nodded.

Ever since she was a baby newbie, Kuroyukihime had selected her level-up bonuses based on advice from her teacher. Not taking a single special attack or Enhanced Armament of the long-range or mass-effect type, she had only chosen close-range/single-target special attacks and enhancements to the attack power of her four limbs. She had never once regretted this. She believed it was precisely because she had aimed for this singular specialization that she'd been able to manifest her powerful Terminate Sword ability.

Ardor Maiden and Aqua Current weren't Graphite Edge's students, but their direction of growth was the same, so Maiden had mainly enhanced her long-distance firepower and Aqua her flowing armor.

So why is Graph suddenly talking about this now?

The three turned curious eyes on him, and the double-sword user displayed a

rare moment of hesitation.

"I know it's a bit late for this," he said finally, in a low voice. "But Lota, even if, like, you get into a group fight with some people as strong as you are in a field where we aren't...you absolutely can't give up on yourself. Don't think of it as many against one; you focus on the one-on-one that's in front of you. Attack. Attack, attack, cut it down, whatever it is. That's your strength."

"...That's your strength. That's what my master said. Perhaps he already knew it then...That I would stain these swords with blood at the meeting of the Seven Kings." The Black King finished her story almost in a whisper, and Haruyuki stared wordlessly at her fierce yet elegant form.

Before starting this direct duel, Kuroyukihime had said they would talk with swords, but fortunately, she had not come at him the second they landed in the stage. Instead, she got Haruyuki to help her turn terrain objects into chairs and sat them across from each other before telling him this somewhat long tale.

She had mentioned no names. But one of the subleaders of the first Nega Nebulus that had been annihilated two years ago in the summer of 2044 was Kuroyukihime's teacher. And that person had advised her to aim for singular specialization rather than all-purpose style.

There were plenty of things she didn't tell him that he thought strange—like, why wasn't it her parent who had been her teacher, but some other Burst Linker?—but she looked like she was hurting in her heart at that moment, and Haruyuki leaned forward in his impromptu seat.

"Uh, um, Kuroyukihime? I said this a little while ago, too, but...I think it's only natural that you would have chosen the path of fighting the other kings. I mean, Brain Burst is a fighting game, and we dive into this world in order to fight..." He managed to push his linguistic abilities to the limit and put this much into words.

Kuroyukihime lifted her face mask and stared hard at him with bluish-purple eye lenses that shone on the other side of her semi-mirrored goggles. "Mm-hmm. Right, that's exactly it."

She made the tip of her right leg clank against the marble of the floor, as if to mentally switch gears, and stretched her slender body up straight. The pale moonlight that poured down penetrated deep into her semitransparent, pianoblack armor to make her entire avatar glow hazily.

They had accelerated on the roof of the Asagaya hospital, so they had come down in the same coordinates. But the scene below was completely different. All the buildings were white marble with gothic notes, and the sky was colored a bluish black, while a truly enormous full moon hung above their heads. The beauty of the Moonlight stage surpassed even the countless other stages that existed, and since there were no terrain effects or critters to be wary of, it was the perfect place for talking. And naturally, given that this was a direct duel, there was no one in the Gallery around them.

"The stages are for fighting, the duel avatars for fighting. My teacher was a Burst Linker who embodied that simple concept better than anyone else." Still looking into Haruyuki's eyes, Kuroyukihime started to speak again quietly. "And I cultivated Black Lotus to specialize in close-range, one-on-one fighting because I hoped to be like that, too. It wasn't only that my teacher told me to. It's because I felt that it was what this avatar actually wanted."

"The avatar...wanted?" Haruyuki repeated, his eyes widening. He had not so much as considered this since he'd become a Burst Linker.

"Yes." Kuroyukihime dipped her head in assent, an air of laughter bleeding through. "Our duel avatars are one with us Burst Linkers, coupled with us... Before I called this Lotus the 'epitome of hideousness,' but that wasn't because I hate my avatar. This ugly form, the embodiment of severance, is surely my own self. What about you, Haruyuki? You've fought together all the way to level two now. Have you started to hear Silver Crow's voice?"

He unconsciously looked down at his hands. The slender fingers wrapped in silver armor were far from the power of a fighter type.

In his first duel after becoming a Burst Linker, when he'd seen this avatar reflected in the window of an abandoned building, Haruyuki had inadvertently thought he was a "total small fry." And that impression still hadn't gone away, but if someone said they'd trade avatars of a different design from Crow, he'd

probably refuse. It wasn't because he'd manifested the lone flight ability. It was because the awareness of this shiny-headed metal color being himself had taken root in his heart at some point.

"Um. I can't hear his voice yet, but I don't hate him, either. I mean, Crow was born from my own heart. He was born for me," Haruyuki said, clenching his tapered fingers.

"Mm. Yes. That's exactly it." Kuroyukihime nodded happily two or three times. "The words you just gave voice to are precisely the starting point for a duel avatar's growth. Never forget that. Now. Taking this recognition into consideration, it's about time we got started."

"Huh? Started? With what?"

"Look here. I told you clearly before we accelerated, yes? That we would talk with swords." Kuroyukihime shook her head in exasperation and stood up from her chalky chair. She glanced upward. "Ten minutes left. Well, that'll be enough, I suppose."

"E-enough? For what?" Haruyuki asked, not knowing when to give up, and at his throat was a sharp, inky blade, appearing so quickly that he couldn't see the tip. Unconsciously reeling backward, he said hoarsely, "Uh, um. No way. A...a d-d-duel with me..."

"Hee-hee. Although I would love to ask you for a bout, the difference between our levels now is simply too great. I'll look forward to a one-on-one duel when you've grown more," Kuroyukihime replied in a laughing voice, and Haruyuki was relieved as the sword before his eyes was pulled back slightly.

"As a general premise, there is no correct way to cultivate a duel avatar. Will you aim to be an all-purpose type, with long-, close-, and midrange abilities? Or will you specialize in a single ability like my teacher and me? The choice in the end is yours. It would be simple for me to tell you to choose this or that level-up bonus, but I do want you to feel it yourself. What Silver Crow wants, what path he wants to go down."

"What...he wants...?"

"Yes. That is, put another way, your own desire hidden away deep in your

heart...Now stand up, Haruyuki."

Kuroyukihime's voice had an unusually kind air to it, and Haruyuki got to his feet from the white impromptu chair as if sucked in. He moved to take a step forward, but she actually waved him back. At the same time, she slid backward in a hovering motion to put a full ten meters between the two of them.

"Now then, here we go, Silver Crow! Respond to this blow with your whole heart and soul!!" Her fiercely thunderous voice—so powerful that he wanted to ask what happened to the gentle voice from just a moment ago—echoed through the tranquil stage. Her violet-blue eyes flashed forcefully. She pulled the swords of her arms back as her slender avatar gently leaned forward.

Boom! Concentric cracks raced outward on the hospital roof from her feet. She charged—or rather, shot forward—an obsidian arrowhead launched from an enormous bow. Before he could so much as blink, the figure of the Black King was closing in before his eyes.

When the sword of her right arm started slicing from above her head, Haruyuki's brain finally switched gears. The sound around him seemed to drop in pitch as time got just a little looser. Even so, Black Lotus's attack was incredibly fast, and the infinitely sharp black closed in before his eyes.

If Silver Crow had been given a long-distance special attack or Enhanced Armament, then perhaps it would have been possible to divert the attack before it got any closer. If, for example, he had been his friend Takumu's avatar Cyan Pile, he could have checked Lotus's approach with the special attack Splash Stinger, which launched a multitude of needle missiles from his chest area.

But at present, Crow didn't have a single long-range technique. There was one in his level-up bonus options, but it was not possible to test it out before claiming it. All he could do in this situation was use his characteristic metal armor to defend himself. Kuroyukihime herself had said that metal-color avatars had a resistance to severing and piercing attacks.

In which case, if he firmly fixed his gauntlet arms, he should be able to guard here. Haruyuki was a wee chick who'd only just made it to level two, but of the many duel avatars he'd fought up to that point, there hadn't been one who'd

ripped through Crow's arm armor using a sword.

These thoughts racing through his head in an instant, Haruyuki braced his legs firmly and crossed his arms in front of his face. Even seeing Crow's fixed defensive posture, Lotus did not attempt to change the trajectory of her slashing attack. The blade came slicing down in a straight line from directly overhead.

Now...Guard!!

At the moment of contact, Haruyuki put all his might into his arms and waited for the impact.

But.

He didn't sense any sound or weight or any other kind of impact. About all he got was a mere spray of orange sparks in the edge of his vision. He opened his eyes wide and saw something that was hard to take in at first.

The thin, jet-black blade was cutting through his thick silver armor like butter. A sight that lacked reality, as if his collision detector was on the fritz. But the chill that ran up both arms and the health gauge that started to drop in the upper left of his field of view were indeed reality. Staying with his guard up like this, in a moment, both his arms—no, Silver Crow's body itself—would be cut in half.

"Nngh!" Haruyuki held his breath and threw his torso backward. However, there was no way he could move faster than the slicing attack. In the blink of an eye, the blade had cut through his armor and touched the naked body of his avatar inside. Perhaps because it was so sharp, he didn't feel any pain.

This is the actual power of a level niner...a close-range, specialized avatar. How am I supposed to guard against this? She knew it would turn out like this from the start. So then, why'd she tell me to defend?

When he'd gotten this far in his mind, thoughts mixed with defeat, Haruyuki finally remembered. Kuroyukihime hadn't told him to defend. She'd said to "respond." Which meant that the current Silver Crow had the power to manage this slicing attack somehow. And that meant there was just one possibility.

"Unh...aah!" Inclining his body even farther, Haruyuki deployed the thin

metallic fins—the wings equipped on Silver Crow's back.

The blade had already reached the center of his arms, and the tip was digging into the left side of his helmet. If he used his wings and tried to fly forward or upward, it would be the same as slicing his avatar up himself.

Up to that point, Haruyuki had only used the wings on his back—his flight ability—to charge, ascend, or drop rapidly; in other words, to advance. In fact, he'd thought there was no other way to use it. But Crow's silver wings didn't fly by flapping like a bird. The extremely thin blade fins vibrated at high frequencies and gained thrust by beating at the air. In which case, he should be able to fly backward from a static position.

"Fly!" Legs bent, leaning forward, Haruyuki fluttered his wings with everything he had.

Hit by the sudden atmospheric current, the speed of Lotus's slicing attack dulled the slightest bit. Not letting his sole chance get away, Haruyuki kicked off the ground.

Graarr! He heard a sound like an explosion, and Silver Crow flew backward like he'd been hit by a giant's hand—he was sent flying. The inky blade pulled free of his arms, tracing out a tail of sparks. Although he'd avoided the danger of being sliced in two, he lost his balance in the unfamiliar maneuver and just barely managed to take off, his feet scraping along the ground any number of times.

Once he'd ascended more than ten meters into the sky with the pale full moon behind him, he finally shifted to hovering.

"...Haaah..." As he let out a long breath, he looked down and met the eyes of Kuroyukihime, who was already lowering her swords.

Her gaze was calm and satisfied, as if the earlier murderous aura had been an illusion. She nodded firmly and called to him in the sky, "You've grown, Haruyuki!"

Understanding that he'd apparently "responded," Haruyuki sighed again with relief and lazily descended. He landed right in front of Kuroyukihime and looked again at the wounds on his arms. The cuts were so perfect that if this were the

real world, they would have been impossible to create, no matter what tools were used. The cross section that he could get just a peek of shone like a mirror.

"Nice work realizing in that moment that you could not guard against my swords. And the speed of your response after that was marvelous," Kuroyukihime reported with a cool look.

"If you'd told me in advance, I wouldn't have thought to guard from the start," Haruyuki replied, a hint of complaint in his tone.

"But then that wouldn't have been a lesson." Kuroyukihime laughed briefly before straightening up. "Now, then. How about it? Did you perhaps hear Crow's voice?"

"Uh. Um...I feel like maybe I did...But...," Haruyuki stammered in reply, even though Kuroyukihime was taking the trouble to give him hands-on instruction.

But his teacher didn't get mad, only nodded coolly. "It's all right. If you can move like you just did, then the answer is already inside you. You just have to cultivate your avatar directly as your heart tells you to." She quickly opened her Instruct menu.

Before he pushed the OK button in the window, requesting a draw that appeared in his field of view, Haruyuki clenched his hands into fists and bowed his head deeply. "Thank you very much!"

He left Kuroyukihime in front of the elevator on the top floor of the hospital, and while he was walking toward Koenji and home, Haruyuki played the words she'd said in the final moments of the duel on repeat in the back of his mind.

"You just have to cultivate your avatar directly..."

Although he had nodded as if in solid agreement, to be honest, he still had misgivings. Regardless of the fact that he had just barely managed to respond to the Black King's indefensible attack in the Moonlight stage, if, for instance, Crow had had a long-distance special attack like Cyan Pile, he might have been able to stop the initial charge itself. And one of the four level-up bonuses he could select from at any time was Radial Shot, a special attack that launched three metal arrows from the armor of his arms radially.

The only information he had was the short explanatory text and the silhouette motion, so he couldn't know how it would be used in a duel unless he actually selected it. But he'd been fighting empty-handed all this time, so for Haruyuki, a "flying tool" was a dream power. If he had that, he might be able to repay the red-type avatars that shot at him from far away as much as they liked with a shot—no, three shots.

And yes, Kuroyukihime had even said it herself, hadn't she? To choose the power he most desired.

"Unnnh." He groaned the same way he had a half hour or so ago and opened the Brain Burst console on his virtual desktop. He switched the tab to the bonus selection screen that he was now utterly familiar with.

The top left of the four bonuses was Radial Knuckle, a close-range special attack that closed the distance aboveground with a slide dash and launched a series of high-speed punches. The bottom left was Hard Armor, an Enhanced Armament that would increase the defensive power of his torso. And the bottom right was an enhancement of the flight ability he already possessed.

The Enhanced Armament wasn't a weapon, so he wasn't drawn to that, and the ability enhancement was so boring. If he was going to choose, then it would actually be a special attack, and of the two of those, the flying tool...His thoughts did indeed run in this direction.

"It's a total waste to keep fighting without taking my bonus now that I finally made it to level two," Haruyuki muttered weakly, and taking advantage of having stopped at a red light along the Chuo Line elevated bridge, he extended his finger to the top right of the window.

"Okay! That settles it then! When you think about it, flying tools plus flight is the most powerful combo, right? I'll rack up the wins with this and hit level three before Kuroyukihime gets out of the hospital!" Unconsciously, he started explaining as if to convince himself, and his trembling finger approached the Radial Shot button.

But just a few millimeters away, his hand stopped for some reason. He had decided in his mind to push this button, so then why wouldn't his body listen to what he was telling it? It was almost like he'd been hit with a debuff that made

movement impossible.

"Haah." He sighed with disillusionment—there had to be limits to indecisiveness, and yet...Haruyuki abandoned the bonus selection for the moment and glanced at the opposite side of the road. The wait time in the AR display next to the red pedestrian light said twelve seconds. Plenty of time.

"Burst Link."

Skreeeee!! The familiar sound of acceleration came as the world was frozen blue. Descending in the pink pig avatar in the initial acceleration space of the Blue World, Haruyuki switched the open console to the matching list.

After a moment of the loading display, the names of nearly ten Burst Linkers were immediately lined up on the list. The Suginami area where Haruyuki currently was had long been neutral territory, but together with the Black King's return to the Accelerated World, she had declared this the territory of the new Nega Nebulus.

Within a territory, members of the ruling Legion had the right to refuse challenges from other Burst Linkers. Thus, as long as you were in your territory, it was possible to select only opponents who were advantageous for you. But after checking the list from top to bottom, Haruyuki reached out to the sole name he'd never seen. Unlike before, his hand didn't stop; the black hoof touched the list. He hit the DUEL button that immediately appeared with a *clack*.

I'm going to make sure of it in this battle. Of what kind of power I—and Silver Crow—really want.

With this thought strong in his chest, he gave himself over to the effects to transform into his duel avatar.

In the normal duel field for the second time that day, the stage, and its marked destruction, had changed from Moonlight to Weathered. All of the surrounding buildings were transformed into desolate objects, crumbling concrete with chunks of rusty steel skeletons breaking through to the exterior. The surface of the road was a spiderweb of fine cracks, and the never-ending wind tossed up tufts of dust and dirt. The sky alone was beautiful, the clearest of blues, the dry clarity of a world from which the human race had vanished.

Haruyuki took in the blue of the sky for just a moment before blinking and checking the health gauge in the upper right of his field of view. The name displayed there was Jade Jailer; the level was three, one above him.

"Jade...Like the gem, huh? So then, a green type? Jailer is...like a prison person? Maybe a prisoner?" Unfortunately, this analysis was the limit for seventh-grade Haruyuki's English abilities. Everything about the Brain Burst system was displayed in English, so for a Burst Linker, English was actually an important skill, but a language wasn't the kind of thing you could learn in a day. In tag team matches with Takumu, his friend generally translated the English words for him, so he'd also been pretty spoiled and hadn't really felt the need to study harder.

Either way, he'd figure out what *jailer* meant once he actually saw his opponent. The guide cursor floating in the middle of his vision was pointing pretty much due east. The fact that it wavered slightly was proof that his opponent was approaching in a straight line.

"Moving in a straight line in this terrain? But this is a residential neighborhood. There shouldn't be any straight roads," Haruyuki muttered, but then he quickly grasped the reason for this. His opponent wasn't using the

roads. Haruyuki smashed a series of nearby concrete lumps to charge his special-attack gauge and then jumped up with his wings to leap onto the linear structure that cut across from east to west above his head—the Chuo Line elevated bridge.

The track slab that supported the line was also covered in cracks, but the rails at least shone a dull steel color. Depending on the stage, if there was a proper track, then generally, a train would be running on it from outside the area border. Of course, it was a rare event and unlikely to happen more than once during the course of a duel, but if a player was hit by that rare train, it was a foregone conclusion that they would take serious damage. Haruyuki quickly checked ahead and behind him, but he could see no sign of the train.

But instead, a silhouette was approaching at top speed from the direction of Koenji station—his duel opponent, Jade Jailer, naturally. As they drew closer, several more human silhouettes appeared on the roofs of the buildings that looked down on the train line. The Gallery was in automatic follow mode, and its members had teleported in.

He should have kept his eyes focused ahead of him on his approaching enemy, but Haruyuki nonetheless glanced over to check the faces of the audience. It was only natural that Takumu wasn't there, given that he was probably still at practice at his school in Shinjuku, but he also didn't see Kuroyukihime—Black Lotus—from whom he had only recently parted. Of course, it wasn't as though the hospitalized Kuroyukihime had automatic viewing set to on twenty-four hours a day, but he still felt a little anxious at her absence. He quickly rebuked himself, however: This duel was to determine the path he was meant to tread. All he could do was give it everything he had, whether his parent was there or not.

Clenching his fists tightly, he turned his gaze forward again to stare down his duel opponent, who had just stopped between the two rails about ten meters away.

If his enemy's color name had been a long-distance red, then Haruyuki wouldn't have naively jumped up onto the rails, but instead flown down from a neighboring building and aimed for a surprise attack. But with a defensive green, the possibility of being attacked with flying weapons was low. And his

expectations were not betrayed; his opponent did not appear to have a gun or a bow.

Still, it wasn't as though he was completely bare-handed the way Crow was. His hands were totally fingerless and uniquely shaped into enormous rings about fifty centimeters across. Thin like washers, the rings didn't appear to have blades on the edges. The color of his armor, including the rings, was a jade green, just as his name suggested. But most noticeable was the thin chain that connected right and left wrists. Two or so meters long, it clanged and jangled, hanging nearly down to his feet. Given how long it was, Haruyuki assumed it had to make any kind of offensive action difficult, and the whole aura of the other duel avatar was like someone robbed of their freedom.

So then Jailer was a prisoner, huh?

Haruyuki bowed his head. "Um, nice to meet you. I'm Silver Crow, a member of Nega Nebulus. I'm sorry for intruding on you, but I'm hoping for a good fight!"

His opponent was also Low Level, so they were both on the newcomer side of the equation, but Haruyuki said his greetings at any rate as the challenger.

His opponent responded by jangling the chain in his hands. "I would be Jade Jailer, a member of Great Wall."

... Would be? Haruyuki furrowed his brow but then reminded himself that this was not where his concern ought to lie. The Green Legion, Great Wall, was the largest in the Accelerated World, with a massive territory spanning from Shibuya to Meguro. Shibuya was right next to Suginami, but the members of GW almost never went on trips to the neighborhood of Koenji.

As if reading Haruyuki's mind, Jailer shook his unusually shaped head; he looked as though he was wearing an old-school woven rice hat. "You need not apologize for the challenge. Because I have humbly come to the Suginami domain so I might join you in a contest. Since I am unable to challenge you, it is most splendid that you were so kind as to challenge me."

...Humbly? Suginami domain? Caught on the particulars of speech, Haruyuki bowed his head once again. "O-oh, well, then I th-thank you for making the long trip."

"Goodness! Now you are thanking me. In any case..." Jailer turned the ring of his right hand toward Haruyuki with a jangle, and his voice grew tense. "...I shall inscribe you on the newest page of the detective's memoirs!"

"...D-detective's memoirs?" Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, while cheers poured down from the Gallery on the roofs of the surrounding buildings.

"Yah! Inspector Jade Poirot!"

"You won't catch the crow with your policeman's rope so easily!"

From the look of the Gallery, Jailer was apparently pretty famous in the Shibuya area. But Haruyuki was no slouch himself; the name Silver Crow had reached the opposite side of Tokyo by now. Apparently.

A prisoner avatar in chains, and you're planning to catch me? Go ahead and try! he shouted inwardly, joining his opponent in snapping his arms up into a ready position. "Okay then, permit me to get started!"

"The usual contest it is, then!"

A small spark bounced up between their two battle cries, and the two avatars moved at the same time.

Haruyuki didn't know the first thing about Jailer's fighting style or abilities. But he could at least be sure that his opponent was a close-range type, given that he was also charging straight at Crow.

...At a time like this, if I had a long-distance special-attack gauge like Radial Shot, I could launch a feint and check my opponent's output.

These thoughts rose up persistently in the back of his mind, and he forced them out of his head so he could focus his attention on his enemy's weapons—the rings of both hands. Given that they had no blades, they were an impact-type weapon rather than slicing, but this was actually more of a threat to the metal-colored Crow. He'd best deal with them by evasion rather than guarding.

"Hup!" Jade shouted, bringing the ring of the right hand down from directly above, and Haruyuki dodged it with a side step.

"Yah!" This time, the ring of the left hand closed in on Haruyuki on the horizontal, and he dodged this with a jump. But that seemed to be his enemy's

intention, and the third blow—the chain connecting Jailer's hands—came rushing toward him, carving out an arc in the air.

Normally, the only choice when he was attacked mid-jump was to guard. But of all the duel avatars in this world, Haruyuki could completely change his trajectory mid-jump. He applied a brief burst of back thrust with the wings on his back, a technique he'd only awakened to in the duel with Kuroyukihime earlier, to stop his jump in midair.

The chain passed in front of him and slammed into the concrete slab in vain, and Haruyuki launched his own attack with a roundhouse kick aimed squarely at Jailer's left shoulder.

Skreenk! His opponent's health gauge dropped just over 5 percent. The damage was slight despite the fact that Haruyuki had gotten a clean hit, which meant his opponent's defensive power must have indeed been great. To come out on top here, he'd need moves to counter rather than defensive power.

If only I at least had a continuous special attack like Rapid Knuckle— How long am I going to keep thinking about this?! Concentrate on the battle!

Scolding himself, he used the reaction from the kick to do a backward somersault and landed some distance away from Jade. He'd managed to get the first attack in at any rate, but now his opponent also knew Crow's fighting style. What they would do with that knowledge was the difference between winning and losing.

Jailer seemed to be thinking that same thing. "I see now!" he shouted as he stood up, the chain between his hands clanging. "You do indeed move quite well! It seems that I am at a disadvantage in this fight, so if you please, I will allow myself to use my secret technique!"

"P-please! Go ahead!" Haruyuki replied, checking his enemy's special-attack gauge. With the charge Jade had built up in advance plus the charge from Haruyuki's blow, it was more than half full.

Jailer thrust both arms forward so the chain hung down loosely. And then he had no sooner yanked it up with a snap of his wrists than he was calling the name of the special attack. "Skipping Chain!!"

Ah, of course, the name of the special attack's in English. In the fleeting moment of this thought, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide at his enemy's movements.

When the shining-green chain hit Jailer's feet, he did a little jump and leapt over it. The chain came up around the top of his head from behind, and then back down to the ground. At the same time as the edge hit the concrete, he jumped again. Three, four times, Jailer repeated the same movement.

So then this was the jump rope—no, jump chain—that Haruyuki was extremely terrible at. He watched, dumbfounded, as Jade jumped faster and faster and faster, the *klak*, *klak* of it hitting the ground becoming a successive *ka-ka-ka-ka-kak*, and Jailer became a sphere shining with green light. Carving out a narrow rut in the concrete slab, he charged Haruyuki.

"G-gah!" Haruyuki hurriedly leapt backward, but the jump-rope ball also changed its trajectory to chase after him. The chain touched the steel rail, sending red sparks gushing upward. Judging from the nature of the technique, shaving damage would steal away a not-insignificant portion of his health gauge if he tried to guard with both arms. He felt a bit pathetic, but his only choice was to retreat first to the sky above with his flight ability.

"Nngh!" He kicked off the ground and jumped, vibrating his wings at the same time. The thrust yanked his body upward, and he ascended directly up into the sky.

"It would seem you fell for it!!" Jade called out, and the sphere bounced. The chain spinning at high speeds seemed to be generating some kind of propulsive force, and the green avatar leapt up three meters to where Haruyuki hung in the sky. The glowing ball touched the tips of Crow's toes.

"Waaah!" The chain caught his ankles, and Haruyuki was slammed down to the ground with a force he was helpless against. Although he managed to avoid crashing into the track slab at least by using the last of his thrust, he still landed flat on his back.

And the spinning chain ball came down at him from the sky above. If he got pinned under that, he risked having the last of his gauge shaved away. Fortunately, however, Jailer's special-attack gauge ran out there. The jump-rope

status was released to reveal the avatar in midair.

The perfect chance!

Haruyuki quickly got to his feet and waited for the chain hanging loosely from Jailer's wrists. If he could grab hold of it and pull it up high into the sky with him, then it would be Haruyuki's undisputed victory. No matter how tough the green type was, he wouldn't be able to withstand the falling damage from a hundred meters above the ground.

"I got yooooouuuu!" Haruyuki stretched out a hand to grab hold of the chain.

"Do yoooouuuu?!" Jailer lowered the ring of his right hand.

There was no room to dodge, but Crow was also a metal color. He could handle a single normal technique blow. He centered his strength in his stomach, ready for the impact, and the ring swept sideways into his body.

But. He felt none of the anticipated shock. Because the left half of the ring had moved to the inside using a pivot hidden at the top as an axis. It spun once to slide around to Haruyuki's back before closing up in a circle once more with a high-pitched *ting*. Crow's torso was now inside the ring of Jailer's right hand.

"You have been apprehended!!" Jailer's shout was practically a declaration of victory, but Haruyuki's health gauge did not drop so much as a pixel.

Ignoring whatever was going on with Jailer's hand, he tried to take off, but his opponent had another surprise for him.

The moment Jailer's feet touched the ground, he slammed the ring of his left hand against the steel rail at his feet. The brittle concrete slab crumbling, half the ring rotated and reconnected with a *chak*. This hand ring now held the track inside it.

Unable to understand what Jailer was trying to do with his right hand around Haruyuki and his left around the rail, Haruyuki wondered about his next action, but the truly astounding part of this curious fight was yet to come.

Clunk! The rings of Jailer's hands separated from his wrists. The now handless jade-colored avatar jumped back and put some distance between them. All that

was left was the ring wrapped around Haruyuki's torso, the ring eating the rail, and the two-meter chain that connected them.

"Unh." Here, finally, far too late, Haruyuki grasped what Jailer's peculiar hands were all about. They weren't striking weapons; they were massive handcuffs. And *jailer* didn't mean prisoner, but...*im*prisoner.

"Silver Crow, you have been apprehended! Indeed!" Jade Jailer announced, firmly crossing arms that had nothing beyond the wrists.

The voices of the Gallery rained down on them from the buildings on either side of the tracks.

"Yah! Perfection, Jade Poirot!"

"Aah, Nega Nebulus's little bird in chains, too? Well, this is a tough one to handle on first sight and all."

"Damned bird! Next time, don't get caught!"

The Gallery and his duel opponent were talking as though Jade's victory was assured. But his health gauge hadn't dropped any further. And they still had fifteen minutes left.

"It's not over yet! I'll break out of these handcuffs right now!" Haruyuki cried and grabbed the chain hanging down from the ring around his torso. He yanked on it for all he was worth, this chain with the opposite end touching the rail.

"Unh...Gaaaah!" He continued to pull with all his might, but the jade chain didn't move a millimeter.

"It is hopeless." Jailer shook his woven-hat-shaped head five or so meters away. "Not even Frost Horn of the Blue Leonids was able to pull apart that chain."

"Huh? S-seriously?"

Frost Horn was a super-close-range-type avatar who boasted of his ferocious charge and physical strength. He far surpassed Crow in terms of sheer power.

"W-well, then!" This time, he hit the taut chain with his fist, but of course, it made no real mark. So he tried placing it on the slab and stomping on it with his feet, but the result was the same.

If the chain was out of the question, then he could destroy the rail the other ring was attached to. So he flew at the steel rail with a full-power kick, but he actually ended up taking a tiny bit of damage. From the feedback he got, he guessed it was probably an indestructible object.

Why would the train track be protected like that? he wondered in an outburst of anger, and then a chill ran up his spine. The reason it was indestructible was obvious. Because the train ran along it. And now the reason Jailer had chosen the overhead bridge as the battleground, as well as the reason he had locked Haruyuki to the rail, was as clear as day.

To have the train hit Silver Crow, of course.

"It appears you have at last come to understand. And yet, your understanding comes at too late a date."

Haruyuki lifted his face and saw Jailer gently raise his left arm in the direction of Shinjuku. Shining beyond the dust of the Weathered stage was, without a doubt, the headlight of a train.

"Nngh!" Gritting his teeth, Haruyuki yanked on the chain once more. But he had already confirmed that it wouldn't be severed by Crow's strength. Faint vibrations came to him via the taut chain. And then a heavy metallic sound. *Katunk*, *ka-tunk*.

Is it over? Is my only choice now to be hit by a train? If only Crow had flying weapons, I could have attacked Jailer even stuck like this.

Ah, I'm an idiot! If I had flying weapons, all Jailer would have to do is get in my blind spot. The reason I'm losing now is much more fundamental. Jade Jailer's whole deal is catching and fixing an enemy in place, and he's been fighting with the sole thought of using that power to the maximum. This is precisely the strength of a singularly specialized avatar...

"It's still...not over!" Haruyuki howled, half to himself. He released the chain in his hand and stared upward. If Jailer specialized in arrest, then Crow specialized in flight. Even if he couldn't break the chain with brute force, there was one power he still had yet to test.

"G...ooooo!!" He clenched his fists and opened his wings up full throttle. Crow

shot up like a rocket—only to suddenly stop in midair.

Chank!

The chain, only two meters long, was completely taut, and orange sparks flew from both the ring fixed around Crow's torso and the one around the rail.

"Unh...ah...aaaah...!!" He stretched out his arms and vibrated his wings with every bit of strength he had. *Kee, kee, kee, kee.* The source of the creaking was the chain or the rail—or perhaps Crow's body itself.

Finally, the armor on his back gave in to the pressure, and the ring started to dig into him. His health gauge started to drop, but Haruyuki ignored this and kept trying to reach the sky. The train was already close enough that he could see there was no driver. And the automatic driving program showed no signs of slowing down because of the foreign object on the rails.

Then.

Krrk! The health gauge to the right—Jailer's—dropped just the slightest bit.

In one corner of his nearly burned-out mind he wondered why that was, but then realized the answer immediately. The handcuffs were not an Enhanced Armament; they were Jailer's hands—a part of his body. And the fact that his health gauge was dropping meant the chain was being damaged.

"Nngh...ah...aaaaaaaah!!" Shouting, Haruyuki mustered up the last of his strength. He probably had twenty seconds before the collision with the train. And fifteen seconds before his special-attack gauge was used up. But these calculations flew from his head, and he saw only the blue of the sky.

Sky. Toward the sky. I want to fly. Higher, beyond the heights.

...Oh, I get it...I'm such an idiot. I mean, what I want, what Silver Crow wants, ever since I became a Burst Linker— No, I knew it way before that. Crow doesn't need long-distance or continuous hit techniques. Because I'm not in this world just to win duels. There's something more precious and good, something I want from the bottom of my heart.

To fly.

Unconsciously, Haruyuki moved his outstretched hand slightly. He touched his

health gauge and called up the Instruct menu.

The train, wrapped in rusty steel panels, passed with a roar.

But before it did—skreek!—a silver arrow flew ever upward toward the clearest of blue skies above the ground.

Black Lotus—Kuroyukihime—watched over the battleground from the roof of a building a little ways off from the rest of the Gallery.

She had seen right through what the boy Haruyuki, her child, was planning to do and turned on automatic-viewing mode as she returned to her hospital room. But she had the function to follow the battlefield switched off, so she'd had to move on her own power.

When the four-carriage train passed the position where Silver Crow was attached to the track, and his health gauge remained in the green zone, the Gallery started to get excited. His duel opponent, Jade Jailer, was whirling his head around, looking for the silver avatar, but all that was left on the rail was one half of the handcuffs and the chain severed in two.

But then finally, they also noticed the shining bird dancing in the sky above, glittering silver at a distant height. Astounded cries reached Kuroyukihime's ears.

"H-how'd he cut the chain?! I thought that was totally impossible?!"

"I-it's like he just suddenly accelerated. Like the firing of a booster or something."

"I saw it. Right before the train came, he was fiddling with the Instruct menu, yeah?"

"So that's why he suddenly powered up. He doesn't have any Enhanced Armament, and anyway, he'd have to use a voice command to call it up."

The heated debate continued for a few seconds until finally one person hit upon the truth of how Silver Crow got enough thrust to sever Jade Jailer's chain.

"Oh! ...Oh, ohh! I got it! He— That damned bird, he took his level-up bonus in the middle a duel. He enhanced his flight ability!"

While the other members of the Gallery stood dumbfounded, along with Jailer, Crow rebounded against the sun and turned around. The way he looked, the sharp tips of his toes stretched out straight, plummeting downward, a line of fire in the blue sky, was exactly like a falling star in broad daylight.

"So? Maiden, Curren. Raker. Graph. Did you see that?" Kuroyukihime murmured, narrowing her eye lenses. "That's the child I chose. The door that I could not cut open with my two swords—I'm sure he will open it for me with his two wings. I know that *he* will fly to that far-off place that we could not reach. I...I believe it."

(End)

AFTERWORD

It's been a while. Reki Kawahara here. Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 17: Cradle of Stars*.

To start, I sincerely apologize that it's been eight months since Volume 16. I had other books come out, but the power of the universe was at work here... But given that this volume ends with a smart "to be continued," I would like to bring the next volume to you as soon as possible! Yes!

And please allow me to explain one more point. In this Volume 17, in addition to the main story, there is the short story "Two Black Swords, Two Silver Wings." This was something I wrote as a special bonus for the first Blu-ray and DVD of the TV anime *Accel World*, and since a lot of the details are the foundation for Volume 17, I thought it might be fun to read them at the same time, so I put it together like this. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in allowing me to do this. And once again, I thank all of you who bought the Blu-ray and DVD from the bottom of my heart! Thank you so much!

Just a little further to go in the main story. In this volume, the name Shibuya Ravine Square comes up as a large-scale commercial facility near Shibuya Station. This is as of 2014 a redevelopment plan that will go ahead with construction aiming to open in six years' time, but as of the current moment, the name of the facility has not been decided. At present, the name of the main building is Shibuya Station Area East Wing, and I had the thought that at some point in the future, this will turn into Something-Something Hills or Something-Something Tower, so I simply went ahead on my own and named the building Ravine Tower and the entire facility Ravine Square in the Accel universe. If you

are reading this book in 2020, you are likely thinking, *The name of the building's wrong!* but this is the situation, so please forgive me!

As for the story itself, the incident with Chocolat Puppeter and her comrades, who first appeared in Volume 12, is fairly big. So that happened. They still haven't met Haruyuki in the real, but I think at some point, they will, so I'm looking forward to writing Chocolat and her friends in the real world. Once again, I must thank Nagomi Ikuya for entering the avatar contest.

We are moving forward with giga-maximum danger, and I have caused only serious trouble for my editor Miki and illustrator HIMA. I'll tera-fight next time!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in September 2014

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