

**REKI KAWAHARA**

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**



# ACCEL WORLD

18

**THE BLACK DUAL SWORDSMAN**

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18

**THE BLACK DUAL  
SWORDSMAN**

**REKI KAWAHARA**

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**







**GRAPHITE EDGE**

One of the Four Elements and an executive of the former Nega Nebulus. His objective and true identity is, as always, shrouded in mystery.

"Anytime you're ready, Lota."

**KUROYUKIHIME**

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

**UTAI SHINOMIYA**

Member of the new Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements.  
Duel avatar: Ardor Maiden.

"I'm all right!!  
...Superluminal Stroke!!"

"I suppose we should get started, too, then, Graph?"





"Just today, we could both order the same thing, right?"

"That's how it is, though. I mean, Burst Linkers."

**KOTO TAKANOUCHI**

Close aide to Blue Knight, the Leonids' Legion Master.  
Duel avatar: Cobalt Blade.

**YUKI TAKANOUCHI**

Close aide to Blue Knight, the Leonids' Legion Master.  
Duel avatar: Manganese Blade.



"Th-that's not the issue!"

**SHIHOKO NAGO**

Master of the small Legion Petit Paquet, which is made up of three close friends. Working with Silver Crow, she was able to free Yume and Satomi from the ISS kits.  
Duel avatar: Chocolat Puppeter.

"If you met in person, that bird boy would be knocked out in a single blow!"

"Well anyway, yeah. I think you're cute, too, Shiho."

**YUME YURUKI**

Member of the small Legion Petit Paquet.  
Duel avatar: Plum Flipper.

**SATOMI MITO**

Member of the small Legion Petit Paquet.  
Duel avatar: Mint Mitten.





You must go,  
Crow!!

**FUKO KURASAKI**

Member of the new Nega  
Nebulus. Master who taught  
Haruyuki about Incarnate.  
Duel avatar: Sky Raker.

"I'll  
count  
down.  
Five,  
four,  
three,  
two,  
one...  
zero!!"

**HARUYUKI**

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



"K."

"Pard, I'm looking forward to  
the labyrinth next week."

## NIKO

Red King, Prominence Legion  
Master. Duel avatar: Scarlet Rain.

## BLOOD LEOPARD

Deputy of Prominence.  
One vertex of the Triplex.  
Real name: Mihaya Kakei.



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THE BLACK DUAL SWORDSMAN

Reki Kawahara  
Illustrations: HIMA  
Design: bee-pee



NEW YORK



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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 18

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen

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■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level five).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level four).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level five).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

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■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

- Normal Duel Field = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.
  - Unlimited Neutral Field = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.
- 

- Movement Control System = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.
  - Image Control System = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.
  - Incarnate System = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.
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- Acceleration Research Society = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.
- Armor of Catastrophe = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.
- Star Caster = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.
- ISS kit = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to make use of the Incarnate System. While using it, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.































































































































































































































































































































































































▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD**

## THE BLACK DUAL SWORDSMAN



## PROMINENCE TRAJECTORY

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$\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4}$

She painted the clear glaze on the strawberries spread out on top of the cream. The strawberry jam mixed into the glaze gave it a light-pink hue. She wasn't particularly good with red liquids, other than food or drink, whether they were aromatic oils or detergents, but she wasn't bothered by this faint saturation. She moved her hand quickly yet neatly to make the many strawberries shine with a brilliant luster.

Once she finished that task, she spun the marble turntable around and checked how it looked. The No. 6 size cake—eighteen centimeters across, in other words—was covered in pure-white cream with rings of strawberries arranged on top. The cream beneath them was laid out in a narrow lattice, which was where the name of the cake came from: *le labyrinthe de la fraise*, or the strawberry labyrinth. The selling point of this one was that when a piece was cut, there would be three strawberries on it.

Having finished her personal check, Mihaya Kakei lifted her face and spoke to the woman in her forties mixing cheesecake batter to her right. "Could you take a look?"

The woman—Mihaya's aunt Kaoru Himi—set her bowl on the workstation and came over. She spun the cake around and smiled. "This is great, Myah. I'll leave the rest of the labyrinths to you."

"...N—" In her great relief, she very nearly said "NP" but quickly corrected herself. "Thank you."

Once her aunt nodded and returned to her station, Mihaya let her mouth relax just a little. She didn't normally smile that often, but she couldn't help it just now. This was the first time she'd been told a cake she'd finished could go out into the store as is.

She moved the strawberry cake into the fridge and set a sponge cake on the turning table. She painted it with a palette knife, a bowl of fresh cream tucked under one arm.

Her movements were bold and delicate, but the important thing was the rhythm. In making a cake, in operating an electric motorcycle—and in fights in *that* world.

Her mind threatened to wander off, and she pulled it back to the cake in front of her. Today was Saturday, the day *she* visited the shop. The order was always the strawberry labyrinth. So the cake Mihaya was making now would go into her mouth. Any imperfections in the presentation might have an effect on the Territories in the evening. Of course, being one of the Kings of Pure Color, she wouldn't stand directly on the battlefield, but she had the important job of putting together the teams and proposing the strategies to defend Nerima and neighboring Nakano.

And now she was here thinking about that again. Her aunt, the chief pâtissier, was very strict when she was wearing her chef coat, and if Mihaya did her work absentmindedly, she would send rebukes flying her way immediately. It had been over two years already since she started in the kitchen as an apprentice, but she still got yelled at a lot more than she got complimented.

But that was NP. That was the kind of person her aunt was, so Mihaya could relax and leave the kitchen in her hands. She'd never once felt anxious about the business she'd inherited from her father since she'd remodeled it into a Western sweets shop.

Yes. Mihaya, in tenth grade this year, was an apprentice baker cum waitress at Patisserie La Plage, and also the owner/operator.

Her father had run a café in Nerima's Sakuradai neighborhood but passed away suddenly four years ago from an incurable heart condition called idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy. It was the fall of Mihaya's twelfth year.

Although it was indelicate, Mihaya was surprised at the number of relatives who appeared at the funeral. Her father had been a playboy who loved coffee and motorcycles and had been treated like the black sheep of the Kakei family, many of whom worked in conservative industries, so they'd had almost no

contact with his family.

She somehow made it through her duties as chief mourner and fell into a daze, but she wasn't given the time to chew on her sadness at home alone. At the first meal after the funeral, her aunts and uncles immediately began to discuss her future.

Her father, on his sickbed, had created a formal will after talking with a reluctant Mihaya any number of times about what would happen after he died. Because her mother had passed away a long time ago, Mihaya would inherit the land and store in her father's name and his considerable amount of savings. Additionally, the national conservatorship law applied, and Mihaya would enter a full boarding school in Nerima until she graduated from junior high. That was all in the will.

When Mihaya told them this, the aunts and uncles cried "Unthinkable!" as one and insisted that a child needed a family, that one of them would take her in. Mihaya said she didn't want to leave the house, and they tried to tear her down with logic.

Inheriting property cost an incredible amount in taxes, so they told her she should take this opportunity to dispose of the house, the land, and one bright-red Italian electric motorcycle. They would carefully manage the money for her until little Mihaya came of age.

Now that some years had passed, she believed that they had spoken with good intentions. No matter the household, the burden of taking in a child who was about to start junior high was large. So Mihaya was actually surprised at the number of relatives who said she should come live with them. She had been surprised and grateful but had no intention of becoming the child of the people who hadn't understood her father and his way of life.

Mihaya held off on answering them right then and there. She told them she was too sad about the death of her father, and the day had been long and exhausting; she needed a little time to think. The aunts and uncles agreed to this reluctantly, exchanging looks with one another, and went back to the hotel in Ikebukuro after telling her they would come again the following evening.

The next morning, Mihaya started to move. She went to see her aunt, the



only one of her father's four siblings who simply disappeared when the funeral was over, Kaoru Himi.

When she went to visit her aunt, the pâtissier at a cake shop at a major Akasaka hotel, she did not ask her to take her in, as her father had told her to. Instead, she headhunted her. She said she was going to renovate the café her father had left her to open a Western-style cake shop, and she wanted her aunt to be the chief pâtissier.

She didn't think her aunt would simply say yes when she had a position with responsibilities at a famous kitchen. Mihaya had resolved to give up on the idea if she asked three times and got a no three times, but her aunt asked her only one question.

"Are you making the café a Western cake shop to bring me in?"

"No, that's not it." Mihaya rejected this immediately. "It was my parents' dream to open a cake shop there. Until my mother got sick and passed away when I was a baby."

Her aunt had thought about it for a full minute before finally replying briefly, "All right."

Not long after, Mihaya had asked her aunt why she had so readily accepted this large request, one that would change the course of her aunt's life, who was still in her thirties. Kaoru had given her an answer with a smile:

Mihaya's father, her aunt's younger brother, had told her nothing except "If something happens, take care of Mihaya." And back when Mihaya's mother was newly married to her father, she and Kaoru had exchanged a promise to help each other out when they opened their own cake shops. This was long before Mihaya was born, when her aunt and her mother were studying at the same cooking school. That was when Mihaya first learned that Kaoru was the one who had introduced her mother to her father.

The other aunts and uncles definitely did not seem pleased by this choice, but it was no longer at the stage where they could voice any objection. That evening, they all went home to Osaka or Sendai, and in their place, Aunt Kaoru and her daughter, Mihaya's cousin two years her junior, came to visit the house/shop in Sakuradai. She had absolutely no idea that this cousin would

change her life as definitively as her aunt.

Her aunt opened the door toward creating the cake shop that had been her parents' dream. Her cousin gave her a world to sublimate the sadness she'd been pushing down for so long.

Her name was Akira Himi. She'd been in fourth grade at the time, but with her very short hair, hoodie, and twill pants, together with the simple shape of her glasses, she had a slightly androgynous air.

Only the adults had been part of the procession at her father's funeral, so it had actually been two years since she'd seen Akira. For elementary school students, two years was an incredibly long time, and Mihaya and Akira were both far from chatty, so Mihaya felt a little awkward when they ended up alone at some point.

But Akira was almost mysteriously calm, and after staring at Mihaya for a moment with her quiet eyes somehow reminiscent of the bottom of the sea, she offered her a certain something. Not a physical object, but a program. The key to releasing her soul and accelerating.

In the strange world she visited in the garage behind her house sitting alongside Akira on the seat of the large motorcycle, Mihaya finally cried. She cried and cried and used up a lifetime's worth of tears.

In the four years since then, Mihaya had not shed a single tear. Not in the real world, not in the Accelerated World.

She didn't have the time to cry. The hours flowed past with a ferocious speed. Even when her mind was accelerated a thousand times, that flow did not stop. She had to keep running straight ahead at the limit of the speed she could produce. Like a leopard racing lithely through a grassy field.

Naturally, she had school on weekdays, so she could only help with the evening preparation, but on Saturday mornings, she was full-on in the kitchen, and in the afternoons, she changed into her waitress uniform and worked the counter.

Mihaya wanted to focus on making cakes, but her aunt thought she should also get experience in customer service if she was going to become a pâtissier. It was pretty difficult for her to smile in a friendly way, but once she tried it, she also enjoyed working in the front. Especially when she saw the children with their eyes shining before the many-colored cakes lined up in the showcase, and her heart was filled with a mysterious warmth.

The problem was that the uniform her aunt proposed was the modern maid look, but she'd been forced to accept it when Kaoru told her it was the design her late mother had sketched during their student days. It was surprisingly very popular with the other two counter girls, and after wearing it for three years, she'd gotten used to it.

The strawberry labyrinth Mihaya had decorated in the morning—her aunt had baked the cake—was essentially sold out by three in the afternoon; there were only two slices left. A little on edge, she kept glancing at the clock on her virtual desktop when, right before her shift was ending at three thirty, she heard a synthetic chime modeled after a doorbell.

Slipping into the shop before the door was fully open was a small girl in a white blouse and a navy pleated skirt. The uniform of the elementary division of the boarding school Mihaya had also attended.

“Welcome.” Her internal relief and anticipation couldn't have been audible in Mihaya's voice, but the girl met her eyes and smiled mischievously. The red hair

tied up on either side of her head swinging, she approached the showcase on quick feet and peered in, almost pressing her freckled nose against the glass.

Listening with a smile to the sound of the tablet and other educational materials shifting inside the red backpack, Mihaya waited for her order. That said, she already knew what the girl would have.

“Yesss!” The instant she spotted the two remaining slices of strawberry cake, her face lit up. “There’s some left! Can I have a labyrinth?!”

“One piece of strawberry labyrinth, yes? Please wait just a moment,” she responded politely—she definitely couldn’t just say “gotcha” when she was in uniform—but omitted the eat-in or take-out question. She readied a plate rather than a box and opened the refrigerated case.

As she carefully moved a piece of the labyrinth to a plate with a cake server, she heard the chime of the automatic door once again. Then the sound of multiple feet approaching forcefully together with energetic shouts.

“I’m doing the strawberry larynx!”

“I want strawberry, too! Loads of strawberries!”

The new customers were young girls, about five or six years old. A woman who was likely their mother entered the store behind them. After Mihaya called out “Welcome,” she left the rest of the customer service to the other waitress and started to move toward the register. But there, she anticipated another problem.

The two girls, apparently sisters, had simultaneously realized that the “strawberry” in the case was the last slice. They looked at each other and fell silent as if measuring the timing before crying out in unison.

“I want strawberry!”

“No! I said it first!”

“Noooo! Strawberryyyyy!”

Tears immediately sprang up in the eyes of the younger sister, and the mother came up behind them with a furrowed brow, likely about to say something along the lines of “You’re the older one. You need to be nice to your

sister.”

And then the girl with the red backpack who had ordered the labyrinth first smiled lightly as she said to Mihaya, “Sorry, order change. One cherry tart.” She gently patted the head of the child in tears squatting next to her. “C’mon, look. There’s two strawberries now.”

Mihaya quietly moved back to the case and returned the labyrinth plate. Once the case was closed, the younger sister’s eyes grew wide.

“There’s two! Mommy, there’s two strawberries!”

The redheaded girl stood up with a smile and gave a light bow to the mother, who was dipping her head apologetically.

Mihaya took the cherry tart off another shelf and set it on a plate before moving to the register once more, feeling a sad sort of pain.

The girl who had ordered the strawberry cake first was in sixth grade. Compared with the kindergarten-aged sisters, she was much older, but she was still of an age where the world in general regarded her as a child. No one would have reproached her for not giving up the cake she’d been looking forward to for a whole week.

But she wouldn’t—or couldn’t—ignore the tears of a child in that situation. Any such childishness had long ago disappeared. The subjective time the eleven-year-old girl had experienced was most likely far greater than that of sixteen-year-old Mihaya.

When she walked over to the register terminal on the right edge of the counter, an accounting window popped up in her vision.

The redheaded customer also glanced at the display stating that one tart was 430 yen, and then, after a moment’s thought, said, “Please add an iced milk tea.”

“Very good.” Nodding, she added a drink set from the menu window. With the total now six hundred yen, the girl touched the confirmation button, and *ka-ching!* They heard a sound patterned after an old cash register.

The register terminal on the counter could also accept cash—that is, physical

money—but this feature was used perhaps once a month. In this era, for the majority of people, money had become nothing more than a number their Neurolinker displayed in their field of view. If you linked your e-money account with your bank account, it would even automatically recharge your balance.

But Mihaya knew that the six hundred yen the redheaded girl paid for the tart and iced tea was money saved up from the meager allowance the school gave her. And that this Saturday afternoon teatime was basically the sole luxury she permitted herself.

When the accounting window disappeared, Mihaya pushed back the ripples in her heart and said, “It will be just a moment, so please take a seat.”

“Okay.” The redhead grinned and walked over to the eat-in area set up in a corner of the shop.

Mihaya watched her small back for a second and then began to prepare the tea in the mini-kitchen on the opposite side of the register counter. In exchange for not being able to eat the labyrinth, she wanted her to at least enjoy a delicious cup of tea.

When the clock had gone a little past three thirty, the waitress for the late shift took over, and Mihaya was done.

Walking toward the door at the back of the shop with the sign that read STAFF ONLY, she glanced at the eat-in corner. The redheaded girl was racing her fingers across her virtual desktop at a table by the window, having long since finished the tart, but perhaps sensing Mihaya’s gaze, she lifted her face. Seeing Mihaya, she nodded lightly and picked her backpack up from the seat next to her.

The waitresses at the counter didn’t so much as blink when the girl went through the door out into the back room with Mihaya. They’d been told the girl was from Mihaya’s old school (this was actually true), and Mihaya helped her study every Saturday evening.

In the back, there was the office and a washroom, as well as a changing room for the staff, but Mihaya passed by these and walked right to the back. With only twenty-five minutes before four o’clock, she didn’t have the luxury of taking her time to change clothes. She unlocked the door in the far back and let the girl go in ahead of her.

There was nothing but a low table and a sofa in the center of the nine-square-meter room. Back in the café days, this room had been used as a private party space, but Mihaya used the excuse that a cake shop had no need for that, so it had become dead space that she currently used for her own purposes.

The instant the door was locked again, the redheaded girl cast aside the air of an honors student she'd projected up to that point and threw herself onto the sofa headfirst. Kicking and flailing her legs and feet in white socks, she groaned strangely, "Unnnnnh."

Mihaya's mouth started to spread into a smile, and she pulled it back in before speaking. "If you're that upset about it, you should've just eaten it."

"I'm not upset!" A childish shriek came back at her immediately. "Just changin' my unfinished strawberry business into kinetic energy!"

Eventually, she stretched out her legs with force and flopped onto her back, locking her hands behind her head. "And anyway, if I was upset, that'd be, like, you know...not nice to Chef Kaoru, since she made the cherry tart. That tart was super-tasty, too, after all."

"...It was."

The girl seemed to have intuited it from Mihaya's reaction alone. She lifted her head slightly and stared with large eyes that looked green in the light. "Did you maybe make the labyrinth today, Pard?"

Asked so directly, she couldn't wiggle away. Careful not to change the expression on her face, she replied briefly, "Just the deco. Chef made the cake."

"...You did...Sorry for giving it away." The girl sat up and started to bow her head.

"You don't have to apologize," Mihaya offered quickly. "In fact, I have to thank you. If you hadn't given the cake up, Rain, I'm sure those kids would've cried."

"Crying makes kids stronger. Or that's what Chef Kaoru would say, I guess."

This time, Mihaya did smile a little at the reply and announced crisply, "From now on, I'll be finishing all the labyrinths on Saturdays."

“Oh! Then I’m excited for next week.” Grinning, the girl shook her red pigtails once before recomposing herself. “Kay then. Better get this Territories strategy meeting started. I guess Helix’s attacking today, so we let out guard down, and they’ll eat us up.”

“K.” Mihaya answered briefly and took a deep breath to switch mental gears. From a cake shop waitress to the Submaster of the Legion Prominence, Blood Leopard.

She sat on the sofa and pulled XSB cables out from the home router installed in the back of the table. Because this strategy room was shielded against electromagnetic waves, they couldn’t connect to the global net without a wired connection.

She inserted the plug into her Neurolinker, and the girl did the same thing on the other side of the table. And then the leader of Prominence, the Red King, Scarlet Rain, the one and only Yuniko Kozuki, raised two fingers of her right hand. Not a peace sign, but a signal for the start of the countdown.

“Two, one.”

In time with the brief words, Mihaya chanted the magic command she had been taught four years earlier.

“Burst Link.”



The full-dive-type fighting-network game, Brain Burst 2039. This was the new world her cousin Akira had given Mihaya.

It wasn't as though she'd liked full dive games when she was a kid. She'd basically only played motorcycle racing games with her father sometimes. So when Akira had first explained the concept of the BB program, it didn't actually click for her. She even wondered why anyone would get so worked up about a violent fighting game that they'd accelerate their thoughts.

But that diffidence vanished the instant she first set foot in the Accelerated World. Her duel opponent was, of course, her parent Akira—her name as a Burst Linker was Aqua Current—and the stage attribute was Primeval Forest. Even though the terrain remained the familiar Sakuradai in Nerima where she lived, the concrete and asphalt were completely gone, and in their place were massive knotty trees and strangely shaped rocks, green grasses, and a perfectly blue sky that continued as far as she could see.

The overwhelming detail of everything there, every blade of grass, every stone, was completely different from the VR games Mihaya had known up to that point. The gentle breeze held the scent of forests, and the sunlight caught particles in the air and made them glint and glitter. The vast amount of information vividly stimulating all five of her senses could even have been said to be greater than that of the real world.

It wasn't just the external world that had been entirely transformed. Mihaya herself had changed into something not human, just like Akira. Her whole body was wrapped in crimson semitransparent armor that felt like neither plastic nor glass, long retractable claws grew from her hands and feet, and she had the head of a leopard with sharp fangs.

After checking her own image out, Mihaya felt a powerful urge ahead of any confusion. She wanted release—she wanted to set free all the things she'd been pushing back in her heart all this time, ever since she learned the name of her father's illness.

Mihaya ran. She kicked at the ground of the Primeval Forest stage with all the might her leopard's paws possessed and flew. From one area boundary to the other, she ran at a speed that surpassed even the wind. And as she ran, she wept. She cried for her big, reliable, gentle father.

Her tears finally dried up when there were ten minutes left in the thirty-minute duel. Returning to her starting point, Mihaya silently faced Akira, who had been waiting patiently.

Her cousin also had a form that resembled her real-world self. Akira's avatar, surprisingly slender limbs wrapped in a membrane of water that continuously flowed from top to bottom, was more singular than Mihaya's leopard-person avatar while still being reminiscent somehow of the girl in the real world.

Mihaya stared at Akira's pale eyes, flickering beyond the streaming water, and asked just one question.

*Will I be able to run even faster?*

The answer was very simple.

*If you get stronger.*

Gazing down on the Primeval Forest stage below her, the same as that day four years earlier, Mihaya waited for the battle to start.

The stage itself was the same, but this was not a normal duel. It was the Territories that were held every Saturday evening, so the focus was less on individual battle abilities than on the coordination of the team. She couldn't go into a full-speed dash with enough force to push through the blazing characters FIGHT like she normally did. Still, Mihaya's strategy in the Territories was simple: immediately identify an enemy's critical point and bite into it as hard as she could.

Transformed into a crimson leopard-person, Mihaya was camped out at the top of the highest tree on the western side of the stage. Visibility was poor

because of the massive trees and the branches and leaves extending out in a broad circle, along with the fog that occasionally formed, but the sharp eyes of a leopard didn't miss the faintest of reflections of light below the trees. And there were basically no large objects to hide behind in the belt of grasslands cutting diagonally across the center of the stage—Kanpachi Street in the real world.

As she sent her eyes racing intently across the world below from the treetop 250 meters in the air, she heard an impatient voice from a branch just below.

“Paaaard, let's just go and make the hit ourseeeelves,” said an F-type avatar with a slender form. Her name was Mustard Salticid.

Her color name, Mustard, was easily remembered thanks to the prompt provided by the mustard-colored armor covering her body, but nearly every Burst Linker who met her had to ask about her proper name two or three times, and then ask again the next time they met her. It was also an English word Mihaya hadn't known, but apparently *salticid* meant jumping spider. And true to her name, Salticid had eight round eyes on her head, lined up in a row. Naturally, the surface area of her face mask couldn't contain them, so the eyes on the end reached the back of her head.

Thus, her field of view was unusually wide—although, apparently, the sensation of being able to see behind you even while facing forward took some getting used to—and her ability to detect enemies was in the top three even in the Legion. Her powers of concentration, however, needed a little more work, and she was already bored of searching, even though it hadn't been five minutes yet since the start of the Territories.

“Not yet. After we find the other enemy squad.” Mihaya continued to scan the forest in the distance.

The Territories were a team battle with a minimum of three on three. The Red Legion, Prominence, currently had thirty-three members, so they would split up into teams of eight to simultaneously defend the four areas of Nerima. However, this was the ideal. Given that Burst Linkers were, in principle, K-12 students, they weren't necessarily always free on Saturday evening. The policy of Prominence Legion Master Scarlet Rain was that if members had something

to take care of in the real, they could prioritize that, so the number of people taking part each week averaged thirty. And that day—June 29, 2047—three people had canceled unexpectedly, so there had been only twenty-five people at the pre-battle meeting. Split into four teams, they were six, six, six, and seven.

Of course, they'd anticipated areas where the fighting would be fiercest, and it wouldn't have been impossible to throw ten or more people in there, but no prediction was absolute. The leader of Helix, the midsize Legion from Itabashi that had been coming to attack Nerima every week this last month, had a pretty good head on his shoulders, so it was difficult to gamble on an attack area.

Thus, an even number of defending personnel were assigned to Nerima Areas Nos. 1–4, with the leader for Area No. 1 being the Red King herself; while Area No. 2 would be guided by Blood Leopard, the head of the executive group Triplex; and Areas Nos. 3 and 4, the other two members of the Triplex, Cassis Mousse and Thistle Porcupine, would spread out their defensive power in all directions. And Mihaya's team had gotten Helix.

Since the number of people on the attacking side matched that on the defending side, they were six enemies and six allies. Given their numbers, they would split up into two groups or, at worst, three. Mihaya had the four with the greatest battle power go on ahead to occupy the central base, while she and Mustard tried to suss out the enemy's movements with their sharp eyes.

Helix had also apparently split into two groups, and she had already spotted the four that were likely the main force. Just like their own main force, they were heading straight for the central base—also known as the stronghold—so they likely weren't even trying to hide. The problem was the other two members. If she didn't sniff them out, their own main force could get caught in a pincer attack and be wiped out.

She heard a lazy voice from below once again. “Buuut if we crush the enemy main force with a pincer attack *first*, then all we have to do is hide in the stronghold, and we win, riiight?”

“It's not *hide*. It's *dig in*,” she retorted, but Salticid did make a certain amount of sense. A great number of the Burst Linkers who belonged to Prominence did

indeed have superior red-type—i.e., long-distance—fighting abilities, just as one would expect from the Red Legion, so having everyone charge their special-attack gauges and dig into the stronghold to turn it into a contest of firepower was one strategy for victory.

But naturally, there were risks. The stronghold itself had no defensive powers, so when they used the digging-in strategy, she wanted to have at least two shield avatars with defensive abilities. The breakdown of the four in the main force Mihaya had sent ahead had a good balance with two red, one blue, and one green, but she was somewhat uneasy about them defending the base from all directions.

And the Helix Legion Master was on the enemy team. Thanks to his sharp strategizing, Helix stood out from the rest of the midsize Legions, and there was no way he hadn't readied some countermeasures to the firepower encampment technique that was Promi's best party trick.

And then the enemy's main force stopped their run through the forest on the east side.

The tall tree where Mihaya and Salticid sat was the large chimney of a cleaning factory in Higarigaoka, Nerima, in the real world. As the crow flies, it was over two kilometers to the intersection of Kanpachi Street and Expressway 441, where the central stronghold was located.

At this distance, even her leopard eyes could just barely make out the number of enemies. As Mihaya continued to seek out the other enemy group, she sent a question down to the branch below. "Cid, can you identify the four enemies beyond the base?"

"Mm, hang on," Salticid replied, stretching her neck out almost as if she were trying to get even a little closer. A few seconds later, the answer came back to Mihaya, with a briskness that was utterly different from her demeanor up to that point. "Big green one in the lead. Pretty sure it's Verdant Colossus. Big brown one in the back; that's Cinnamon Raccoon. And the purple midsize is Azalea Baton...maybe. And then a small yellow in the rear. Never seen 'em before, but it's probably Rutile Check."

".....!"

Mihaya inhaled sharply, and Salticid came to the same realization.

“Whoa, whoa! So then, that means the leader Berry’s not there! So those four aren’t the main force?!”

Of course, it wasn’t a rule or anything that the team leader always led the main squad. Mihaya herself, the leader of the Promi team, had stayed behind to search for the enemy, after all.

But of the six people on the Helix team, the Legion Master Beryllium Coil had conspicuously more direct attack power. If he thought he could overtake the central base with a squad without him on it and essentially composed of defensive colors on top of that, he was gravely underestimating Prominence, one of the six great Legions.

*No, I can’t believe that someone as sharp as Beryllium would put together such a slapdash strategy.* In which case, were he and the other avatar—by the process of elimination, the red-type Chili Powder—planning to ambush the Prominence party from behind and wipe them out?

But even if they were, those two avatars still had to cross the grasslands of Kanpachi Street. The Promi party was currently moving forward and would reach the central base within the next two minutes. There was not enough time for Coil to come around from the rear, and if they approached from either side of the wide road, they would be totally exposed to the Promi team, ensuring that their health gauges were eaten away by long-distance attacks before they could make contact. There would have been no point in splitting into teams.

“Did we miss their crossing?” Mihaya murmured.

“No waaay!” Salticid rejected the idea immediately. “Nobody could sneak across Kanpachi right under our eyes!”

Mihaya nodded; it was true. It was possible to break across the grassy belt using a hiding technique of some kind, but neither the leader nor Chili Powder, accompanying him, had any such technique. Or so she thought.

The reason she couldn’t say for sure was because duel avatars grew. They obtained abilities, special attacks, and Enhanced Armament through their level-up bonuses. Although she could only run four years earlier, Mihaya, too, had

gained a number of powers now that she was at level six.

However, there were limits, too. As a general rule, it was not possible to obtain abilities that diverged significantly from the avatar's color affiliation. Beryllium was a close-range metal color, and Chili was long-distance. Neither was the type to awaken a hiding ability so powerful it could deceive the visual acuity of both Mihaya and Salticid.

Considering this, Mihaya called up in the back of her mind an image of Beryllium, an avatar she'd fought directly any number of times. His armor was a bluish silver-gray, and just as the "coil" of his name suggested, he had powerful coil springs equipped in his arms. The large jackknife that stretched out in an instant with the power of these springs was his greatest weapon.

Given that he was a metal color, his fists were also tough, and Mihaya had a hard time handling his fighting style, a constant switching between a striking-type knuckle attack and a slashing-type knife attack. The instant she thought it was a punch and tried to dodge, the knife would come at her, and the way he doubled the distance between them was truly annoying. On top of that, although he used to have a knife only in his right arm, he now had one in his left as well, likely due to a level-up bonus.

Her thoughts froze there, and Mihaya checked again the mini-health gauges of the six members of the enemy team lined up in her field of view. On top, the leader Beryllium Coil, level five. But the last time they'd fought, he'd been level four.

"Cid, *fly!*" Mihaya shouted the instant the various bits of information came together in her brain and guided her to a single inspiration.

Despite her normally laid-back style, Salticid was a reliable veteran when push came to shove. Instead of being surprised or asking questions, she simply jumped up next to Mihaya with a "Roger!"

Mihaya crouched down, holding the slender waist of the jumping-spider avatar with her right arm. Her thighs, already rather large for an F-type, swelled up further and stored power. Reading the direction of the wind, she waited for the perfect moment to leap diagonally up into the sky.

No matter how great Blood Leopard's raw jumping power, she still couldn't

make it two kilometers in a single leap. And jumping from a tree two hundred meters off the ground meant she would take serious altitude crash damage when landed. That kind of impact spelled instant death.

But Mihaya didn't hesitate. Leopard and Salticid, flying with intense force from the branch of the massive tree, became a bullet and charged through the empty sky. The destination was not the central base in the east, but the western side of the stage—where there was nothing.

Mihaya had spun around before jumping. If there had been a Gallery, they would have assumed she was fleeing.

But of course, she would never run away. Her jump finally reached the peak of its parabola, and they entered a downward trajectory. If they kept going, they would crash and die in a few seconds, but halfway down, they started to return to the massive tree, pulled back by the thin, transparent cable Salticid held in her right hand. The end of the cable was attached to the large branch they'd been sitting on. Using that as a fulcrum, they were swinging through the air like a pendulum.

The cable was, of course, Salticid's power—the ability Dragline. In other words, a spider's silk. Likewise, a real jumping spider did not make a web, but affixed “bookmark threads” here and there while in motion to avoid falling.

“Yeeaaaah!” Crying out cheerfully, Salticid stretched out the thread little by little. At a speed essentially the same as free fall, the two glided through the sky. In the blink of an eye, they passed the dead point of the pendulum's movement and rolled upward. Timed just right to obtain the ideal angle, Salticid cut the thread.

The two flew upward at an angle once more. This time they headed toward the grassland that was Kanpachi Street, and Mihaya could see the central base. Their four allies would make it out of the forest in another minute or less. They'd been instructed to occupy the base once they reached Kanpachi, and Beryllium was no doubt waiting for the moment they appeared in the grasslands. Probably not from the sides or behind, but...

“Ah! Pard! There!” Salticid cried, loud enough so as not to be drowned out by the wind.



Following the direction in which she pointed, Mihaya could see a glint of reflected light deep in the eastern part of the stage wedging in Kanpachi Street. Not at the bottom of the woods, but the top. It was moving at high speed through the air, just like Mihaya and Salticid.

Mihaya's eyes weren't sharp enough to make out the identity of the light source, but she had no doubt it was Beryllium Coil and Chili Powder. The source of the power to move them through the air was not flight—there was only one avatar in the Accelerated World for whom that was possible—but the elastic energy of metal. In other words, a long jump using the reaction force of a spring.

"I'm transforming and running. Hang on," Mihaya said.

"Roger!" Salticid responded.

Their pendulum jump had already passed its apex, and they were on the downward trajectory. With one jump, they'd actually moved nearly seven hundred meters, but there was still over a kilometer left until the belt of grassland in the center. They had to somehow make it there before Beryllium's team attacked their comrades from the sky above.

Staring into the dense forest closing in below her eyes, Mihaya called the technique name: Shape Change.

Instantly, Blood Leopard was enveloped in a red light. A heat came to her, as though the inside of her body was in flames. First, her limbs transformed into those of a beast, and then claws stretched out from their ends as they grew sturdier. Her torso grew slender and long, and her head shifted to join her neck at a different angle.

When the instantaneous transformation was complete, Mihaya was no longer an F-type avatar, but a leopard. Salticid straddled her back, and they plunged through a gap between the trees.

The ground drew closer with each breath. Although it wasn't a direct fall downward, if they hit the ground at this speed, they normally wouldn't have been able to avoid serious damage. But the instant the paws that Mihaya stretched out touched the ground, she shifted into a full-power dash and took no damage.

This was an ability activated only when she was in beast mode, Fall Protection.

“Awwrrright! Let’s—” Salticid cut herself off mid-shout. Pushed back by the wind pressure, she hurried to sit back down and wrap her arms around Mihaya’s neck.

*I told you to hang on,* she thought.

Mihaya pushed herself to go even faster. The massive mossy trees whistled by them, and the ground flowed beneath them, a mixture of green and brown. But this still wasn’t enough. From what she’d seen while they were in the air, Beryllium Coil would arrive at the center on his springs in another twenty seconds. In other words, unless Mihaya burned through a thousand meters in less than that time, they would be too late. Doing the calculations, that was a speed of 180 kilometers per hour.

Her late father had ridden a bright-red Italian electric motorcycle. For the last four years, it had sat in the garage where he was a regular customer. It had been a mere two months earlier that Mihaya rode it for the first time. In the Road Traffic Act revision of a dozen or so years earlier, riders were allowed to get their licenses in April of the year they turned sixteen, so she’d started riding to school when she graduated from junior high.

Motorcycles equipped with two in-wheel motors with an output of 60 kilowatts reached a maximum speed of 240 kilometers per hour on paper. At present, Mihaya had only experienced the eighty kilometers per hour that was the speed limit on the main roads, but even that had made her heart rise up into her mouth at first.

Although this was the VR space of the duel stage, running at high speeds would incur serious damage and intense pain if she was to crash into something, but this brought about a mix of excitement and fear in her. Even Salticid, who had been so cheerful during their swing jump, was now pressing herself firmly against Mihaya’s back, a little more focused than before.

But Mihaya gritted her fangs and mustered up every bit of strength she had to push off the ground. Their subjective speed approached one hundred kilometers per hour in an instant, and her virtual heart beat with incredible

force. The continuous pounding echoed through her body like a single-cylinder gasoline engine from a previous era.

A chill crept into her heart. The mental trauma that had produced Mihaya's duel avatar Blood Leopard was her fear and hatred of the disease that had stolen her father. In other words, a fear of the engine that kept the body going: the heart, as well as its fuel: blood. The vague anticipation that her own heart, too, might one day use up its allotted number of beats and stop.

*Break free!!* Mihaya willed herself. If she was going to stagnate in the depths of terror, then better to throw herself into the fierce flow.

*Forward.* Even just one more step *forward*.

The moment her speed surpassed one hundred kilometers per hour, another heartbeat started in the right side of her chest. The two pulses resonated and changed into a slick roar reminiscent of an electric motorcycle. Her blood raced through her body hot like flames, sending an intense power circulating through her four limbs.

*Krrr!* In the center of a concentric shock wave, Mihaya accelerated once more. Transformed into a bloodred bullet, she charged into the depths of the forest. In an instant, her speed reached two hundred kilometers per hour, and the massive trees that appeared before her flew backward in the same instant.

In the top of her field of view, her special-attack gauge started to drop. First Blood, the ability that allowed her to surpass her limits and run at this high speed, had been activated. Mihaya didn't know of any other duel avatars who could produce speed greater than this under their own power, without using an Enhanced Armament.

She broke through the kilometer separating them from Kanpachi Street in nineteen seconds and flew from the forest into the belt of grassland to find the backs of the allied main force directly before her. They were clumped together, running toward the large metal ring ahead in order to occupy the stronghold.

"Scatter!!" She had no sooner barked this at her team than Mihaya was jumping upward diagonally. She flew over her allies and glared at the sky.

There: a bluish-silver metal color flying some dozen meters off the ground,

Beryllium Coil, and an orange-red avatar in his arms, Chili Powder. Chili was holding a large sphere in each of his outstretched hands.

Chili let go, and the two spheres, the same color as the avatar, fell soundlessly. Their trajectory would definitely catch the main Prominence force just as they were finally starting to scatter.



“Cid!” Mihaya shouted.

“Gotcha!” Salticid stretched out her right hand, and the thread that was launched from her palm caught one of the falling spheres. She pulled back on the thread immediately, swinging the sphere around, and tossed it into the forest ahead.

But there was nothing they could do about the other sphere. Salticid couldn’t launch her thread successively, and the sphere was out of reach of Mihaya’s claws and fangs. Praying her allies would dodge, they passed them in midair.

Just as they landed very close to the stronghold and whirled around, the red sphere hit the ground.

An explosion...did not happen. Instead, a vile red smoke shot out and blanketed a corner of the grassland.

Chili Powder’s special attack, Red-Hot Grenade.

He threw a grenade containing a powder that was so spicy, it was almost lethal, to block the vision and conversation of any avatars caught up in the smoke while at the same time dealing damage.

With the debuff effect, it was more terrible than a simple explosion attack, but it was still only a grenade, so the physical range was short. But the effect range was large, so unless the person who threw it immediately retreated as fast as he could, he would get caught up in it, too. And Chili Powder’s defensive powers were on the low side, so he had to approach the enemy with a guardian and then run away once the grenade was thrown. But if he could drop in a surprise attack bomb from above, then he could escape that restriction. They might have been the energy, but she couldn’t help admiring the strategy. But this way of fighting...

*No! Focus!* She quickly collected her thoughts as they threatened to wander off the battlefield and gave instructions. “Cid, check the enemy force coming up from behind!”

“Roger!” Salticid had no sooner leapt off her back than Mihaya was dashing again. Her aim was Beryllium Coil’s landing point. On the left ahead of her, her four allies leapt out of the red smoke that the wind was finally starting to clear



away. All their health gauges were down just under 10 percent, but because they'd spread out right before the grenade landed, they'd managed to avoid a direct hit.

"Rob! Cimon! Occupy the base! Mos, Akon, join up with Cid and take on their main force!" Mihaya instructed as she ran. She charged into the smoke without hesitation, eyes closing just before she did so in order to prevent the vision debuff. Her health gauge dropped a little because of the fine particles that stuck to her body, but she ignored this together with the tingling heat.

She broke through the smoke soon enough and opened her eyes as she charged into the forest once more. Looking around, she caught the reflection of silver just beyond the treetops.

To land from that height, it would take focus no matter what the mitigating effect of the springs. She knew in an instant: She would aim for that opening.

Making full use of her instincts as a leopard, a prime hunter of the forest, Mihaya ran lithely, lethally.

*Krsh!* The branches above cracked.

Coming down with his back toward the ground was without a doubt the head of the Legion Helix, Beryllium Coil. While Chili Powder had dangled down in front of him before, the avatar was now under his right arm, likely so he could secure a decent field of view.

Mihaya raced one, then two large steps, and on the third, she jumped.

The instant her maw was as far open as she could bring it, the back covered in bluish-gray armor stiffened, perhaps sensing something. But he didn't have time to turn around. Mihaya bit into not Beryllium but rather Chili Powder's right leg and ripped him from the other avatar's arms before breaking away toward the front.

"Ouch! What, what, what?!" Chili shouted.

She released his leg in midair, only to sink her fangs deep into his neck. His shout changed to a shriek, but of course she didn't care. Her sharp fangs ripped through the orange-red armor, down to the avatar's inner body, and Mihaya's health gauge started to recover from the earlier smoke damage. It was the

effect of her ability, Vital Bite.

They landed with Chili gushing a bright-red damage effect like fresh blood, and she whirled around. About ten meters away, Beryllium was sticking his own landing.

As she'd expected, he looked a little different from the last time they'd fought. Large springs had been added inside the shins of both legs. These contracted all the way to absorb the impact of landing, and he bounced up just a little from the reaction before coming down to the ground. Just like the suspension of a car or motorcycle, he appeared to also have a shock absorber to control the spring return.

"Help! Leader, heeeeeeeelllp!!" Chili Powder shouted and flailed his arms and legs, his neck firmly in Mihaya's mouth.

Beryllium started to react but then quickly checked himself. He'd probably seen Mihaya relax her bite so as not to strike the final blow. If she fought Beryllium with Vital Bite still active, her health gauge would continue to recover, so she'd have an advantage to compensate for the fact that she wouldn't be able to use her fangs, but apparently, the star of the brains team was not taken in.

"Sorry, Chili. Forgive me. I'll avenge you," Beryllium said, readying his hands into fists.

Chili Powder swallowed a shriek as if accepting his fate. "You better! The rest is up to you, Leader!"

After being witness to this exchange, she couldn't exactly dangle him like a kitten from her mouth forever. Mihaya bit down and crushed Chili's neck, and his health gauge dropped to zero. Enveloped in the vanishing effect of his avatar, she shot a glance at Beryllium Coil.

Near the stronghold a little ways off, her comrades should have been engaged in battle with the main force of the Helix team. Although it was five against four, Brain Burst was the kind of game where things never went according to those sorts of calculations. She had to defeat Beryllium as soon as possible and race to the center, but there was just one thing she really wanted to know before they fought.



“That strategy back there. You come up with that?” she asked in a low voice.

Beryllium shrugged, but then, his inverted triangle goggles shook from left to right. “Sorry, no. I just heard about this player who did huge damage with a strategy like that back in the day. Long-distance, wide-range attack from above. Most powerful combo when you think about it. I was thinking we could take the victory in one blow if we used it, but...” Here, he closed his mouth and nodded as if he’d realized something. “I get it. You told your comrades to dodge back there ‘cause you know whoever came up with that strategy?”

“I do.” Mihaya nodded gently. “We’ve fought a bunch of times.”

Normally, when the parent Burst Linker belongs to a Legion, the child generally becomes a member of the same Legion.

But that was difficult in Mihaya’s case. At the point when she became a Burst Linker four years earlier, her parent, Akira Himi—Aqua Current—belonged to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus, and their headquarters at the time were not in Suginami but Shibuya. This was pretty far from Mihaya’s home in Nerima, which meant she wouldn’t gain the greatest advantage of being in a Legion, the right to refuse challenges within Legion territory.

Mihaya wasn’t sure what to do, but Akira had had a ready suggestion. “You can just join the Red Legion that occupies Nerima.”

But then, wouldn’t Mihaya and Akira have to fight at some point in the future?

Her cousin in red-framed glasses had nodded simply, as if wondering what the issue was.

“We’ll just fight with everything we have, then. I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

So following the advice of the younger Akira, Mihaya had joined Red Rider’s Legion, Prominence. Although to be more precise, they had actually scouted her when she was still unaffiliated with any Legion and learning how to fight.

Four years ago, the mutual nonaggression pact did not yet exist among the major Legions, so Akira’s Nega Nebulus and Mihaya’s Prominence were actively fighting territory battles for the right to control the Suginami area between Shibuya and Nerima.

One day after Mihaya had reached level four through steady work, she was finally instructed to take part in the Territories. She attacked Suginami Area No. 2 as one member of an eight-person team, but Aqua Current was not on the enemy team.

An emotion had flickered through her heart, though regret or relief, she couldn't tell. But then, ordered to defend the base to the rear, Mihaya had suddenly looked up at the sky of the field and saw it: a sky-blue duel avatar ripping through the black clouds of the Purgatory stage.

The speed was incredible. Three times Mihaya's maximum running speed at the time of one hundred kilometers per hour—no, four times that. In the blink of an eye, the avatar had moved from a corner of the sky to directly above the base, holding a small, light-red avatar. This avatar had drawn the large bow in her hands and launched a single flaming arrow.

Or so Mihaya had thought, until it split into countless pieces that poured down on the heads of the four members of the Promi team.

Desperately weaving through the fierce attack, essentially a rain of flames, Mihaya had chased after the sky-blue avatar shooting off to the north. Part of her mind had been vaguely occupied with not allowing another attack like that, but to be honest, she had simply chased after the blue comet as if she was in a dream.

Fortunately, the avatar had been flying along the broad Kannana Street, so she managed to keep up somehow, running at full power in Beast Mode. The propulsive flames of the large booster equipped on the avatar's back weakened, and the two members of Nega Nebulus landed on the roof of a building alongside the road. Mihaya ran up the pedestrian bridge, leapt into a nearby building, and continued to jump and jump until she reached the same altitude as the enemies.

Quickly noticing Mihaya's approach, the light-red, long-distance avatar had immediately hid behind her comrade.

At her first glance of the sky-blue avatar turning around lightly, Mihaya had felt something pierce her heart. Despite the long hair swaying and shining like liquid metal, the graceful lines of the F-type body—an elegant form in extreme

contrast with Blood Leopard's—she had strongly felt that this avatar represented a craving very much like her own.

Recovering from her momentary distraction, she had lowered her leopard body and took on a battle posture, while the sky-blue avatar smiled brightly at her.

“What wonderful speed. And your form is also very beautiful. What’s your name?”

“Blood Leopard,” Mihaya had replied briefly.

“I’ll remember it,” the blue avatar had said. “I’m Sky Raker. And this is Ardor Maiden.”

This had been her first meeting with Sky Raker, the Submaster of Nega Nebulus, already the fearsome ICBM, and Ardor Maiden, aka Testarossa, who was getting serious results paired up with Raker despite essentially being a newbie.

And then Mihaya had fought Raker and was promptly dispatched with a dance of three successive palm strikes before she had a chance to strike a real blow.

It had been four years since then. Sky Raker, Mihaya’s fated rival, had disappeared from the Accelerated World two and a half years earlier and then returned two months ago as a member of the new Nega Nebulus.

And Nega Nebulus wasn’t the only one welcoming a new generation, but Prominence, too. Since the two Legions had concluded an indefinite truce, she hadn’t gotten the chance to directly duel Sky Raker again. But Mihaya felt like the time was coming soon. When they cleared away the dark clouds covering the Accelerated World, and Aqua Current also returned from semiretirement the way Sky Raker had, she would have her parent and her most worthy opponent see everything she had become, the sharpness of her honed fangs, the quickness of her refined body.

She never dreamed she would see another Burst Linker copy that strategy before she could finally fight Raker. She struggled for half a second between whether to praise Beryllium Coil’s passion for research or be angry at his nerve

in copying his predecessors.

“Unfortunately, the original was about three times as painful and five times as fast,” she said finally, careful to keep her expression entirely neutral.

“Well, I guess so.” The slender metal color nodded evenly and nonchalantly raised his arms. “But we’ve got only one level between us now. I’m definitely going to win one-on-one today. We’re both making our comrades wait. How about we get started?”

“K.” Mihaya sank her body down.

The biggest characteristic of the Primeval Forest stage was the large creatures, as powerful as the Enemies of the Unlimited Neutral Field, who lived there and would attack if provoked, but she had already confirmed during their scouting mission that there weren’t any within a kilometer of the central base. There weren’t any other annoying obstacle effects, so from here, victory would be decided by a simple contest of their abilities.

She didn’t like to idly glare at her opponent before the fight. She started to leap forward when she noticed that Beryllium Coil looked a little shorter than he had when she’d first faced off against him. The reason was because the springs equipped in his legs were compressed at that moment, making just the faintest of sounds.

She forcefully twisted her leaping body to the right and changed the trajectory of her jump. At exactly the same time, Beryllium’s legs screeched, and the bluish-gray avatar charged with essentially no warning, using the reactive force of his springs instead of the usual steps involved in a leap.

“Heeah!” His left arm shot forward from its compact ready position.

If she took a striking counter from the fist of a metal color, Mihaya would take some serious damage, even with her defensive powers, fairly high for a red type.

But in Beast Mode, Blood Leopard had a height of less than a meter, making hitting her with a punch a Herculean effort. Beryllium lowered his trajectory with the flavor of an uppercut, but Mihaya had already slid down beneath it to avoid it.

*Skeek!* The air shook once more, and a silver light flashed in Mihaya's field of view.

The large knives in Beryllium's arms sprang out in an instant. This was the spring-loaded Jackknife Guillotine.

Naturally, she had not forgotten about the existence of this ability. But she hadn't expected that the attack also went from stored to rotating 180 degrees. In the middle of the rotation, the forty-centimeter blade stood up directly from his arm, albeit for a mere instant. Beryllium magnificently matched that instant with Mihaya's evasive action.

*Cool*, Mihaya murmured to herself, twisting her head farther to the right. If she'd been in normal mode—i.e., human form—she would have had no way to evade or defend against the knife blade and would have taken serious damage to her face. Even if she wouldn't have died instantly, she might have lost an eye lens and had her field of view cut in half.

But transformed as she was in Beast Mode, Mihaya had an even more powerful weapon in the claws of her four limbs. And in the head the knife was aiming for. Four hard, sharp fangs.

Of course, if the timing had been even a millisecond later or faster, her counterattack would have failed, and she would have taken real damage. But Mihaya already knew that running alone wasn't just about speed. There was also the "battle of speed" that existed only in the world of the instantaneous.

Two months earlier, when she'd only just started high school, Mihaya had ended up fighting in a tag team with an unexpected Burst Linker. The place was Akihabara Battle Ground, the duelist holy ground in the Akihabara area. The enemy was Rust Jigsaw, who had the ability to ignore the rules and isolate himself from the matching list. And her partner was a member of the new Nega Nebulus and the only avatar in the Accelerated World with the ability of true flight, Silver Crow.

At first, she got the impression that she couldn't really count on him, but when it came down to the actual battle, Crow showed duel instincts that made it hard to believe he'd become a Burst Linker only six months earlier.

The enemy Rust Jigsaw had the annoying long-distance technique of

launching jigsaw rings rotating at high speed, and Mihaya had no way of defending against these. Right before Jigsaw leapt out, the rotating saws were thrown at a timing that was impossible to avoid, and Mihaya had instructed Crow, on her back, to take care of them. To be honest, she would've thought he'd done a great job if he'd sacrificed an arm defending against them.

But Crow had realized that there were no teeth on the inside of the rings and caught the rotating saws flying in at super-high speeds with his fingers, like some kind of miraculous ring toss, to stop them totally uninjured. If his timing had been off by even a second, his fingers or neck or even both arms would have been knocked flying.

Silver Crow, three years her junior, had taught her then and there that the fight wasn't only a competition of avatar action, but also of the speed of perception.

Ever since, when she was dueling, she always practiced honing the acceleration of her senses—her powers of insight. It was a mysterious thing, but the sharper her instantaneous perception was, the more her struggle and hesitation when decorating cakes in the real world disappeared. Her aunt praising her work on the strawberry labyrinth was definitely because of this work.

Now was the perfect time to leverage the way of fighting in the Accelerated World that a hard-working player two years her junior had taught her.

The moment she felt the knife approach with a sense that was neither vision nor hearing, Mihaya bit down, her mouth opening the bare minimum.

*Skreeeench!* Pieces of the blade scattered glittering to either side of her face. Her powerful and sharp leopard fangs unerringly caught the side of the knife and shattered it.

"Nngh!" A grunt of surprise slipped from Beryllium Coil. He swung out with a left uppercut, and the instant his balance tipped slightly, Mihaya lashed out her long tail. The tip caught Beryllium's left leg and further knocked him off-balance.

They slipped past each other, and no sooner had she landed than she was leaping forward. Using the trunk of the tree directly in front of her as a

foothold, she somersaulted backward.

In her upside-down field of view, she saw the crumpling Beryllium. The springs of both legs were contracting once more; he was likely intending to close the distance with another Spring Dash. But she was not about to let him.

*Rawr!* A wild howl ripping from her throat, Mihaya pressed her front paws against Beryllium's back and bit deeply into his defenseless neck. Her fangs sent sparks flying as they dug into the metal armor and pierced the avatar's body inside.

"When—? Y-you—!" Beryllium deployed the jackknife of his right hand and tried to attack Mihaya behind him. But before he could, she shook the duel avatar in her mouth as hard as she could. Her fangs dug in ever deeper, and the knife was knocked off course.

An avatar that was more close-range than mid-range had essentially no way of escaping when Blood Leopard was biting into his neck from behind—just like prey being taken down by a wild leopard.

With Beryllium Coil hanging from her mouth, Mihaya started to run east.

"Dammit! I'm not some kitten here!" the leader of Helix grumbled, flailing his legs and arms, but he couldn't do anything more than scraping damage. And the gauge he worked so hard to take from Mihaya was recovered instantly through the effect of her Vital Bite.

Meanwhile, with her four fangs digging into his vital spots, Beryllium's health gauge was dropping before her eyes. It hit zero as they flew out of the forest into the grasslands.

"Just you wait. Next time..." Unable to finish this speech, Beryllium Coil broke into countless fragments and disappeared.

"Next time, bring a new trick. GG," Mihaya muttered after him.

And then she remembered it was a little too soon to be saying *good game*. Ahead of her, the five members of Prominence and the four members of Helix were still engaged in a fierce fight around the stronghold. Chili Powder and now their leader Beryllium had been dispatched, and they were pressed down in terms of what was left in their gauges as well, but the enemy appeared to have

no intention of throwing in the towel yet. In which case, she would meet them with everything she had.

Mihaya howled once to encourage her comrades before starting off across the grassland at top speed.



All the Territory Battles for the fifth week of June were finished, and Mihaya slowly let out the air that had built up in her chest as she returned to the specialized room in the back of Patisserie La Plage.

During the accelerated duel, she had, of course, continued to breathe with her real-world body. If she fought the whole time in the Territories, 1.8 seconds passed in the real world, so the lungs that exhaled with the Burst Link command would be taking in their next breath around the time she woke up.

Back when she was a newbie, she would often try to take a deep breath immediately after she returned to the real world before exhaling the last one and end up coughing. Her parent, Akira, rolled her eyes and said it was because she kept running all over the place during the duel, but that was a long time ago now, too.

She hadn't dueled or fought alongside Akira in almost three years. A lot of things had changed after the destruction of the former Nega Nebulus headquartered in Shibuya—no, the night before that, when the Red King had been pushed to total point loss by the Black Lotus.

Prominence fell into total chaos, faced with the abnormally abrupt departure of their Legion Master, who had earned their absolute faith as one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color. Although system-wise, the master privileges were automatically ceded to the Submaster at the time, half the members refused to accept him as the new leader of the Legion.

They came up on their next Territories with nothing settled, and Prominence was utterly crushed. Even though the Legions of the other kings did not attack them, they lost to one after another of the mid-and small-size Legions, opponents who were superior in number and average in level. In a single night,

their territory was halved, and more than a few members put in their resignations. The indignant new master went so far as to use the Judgment Blow on one of those leaving, and Prominence's split became decisive.

Mihaya emptily watched the destructive drama of the Legion she had belonged to for a little over a year from almost the outside. Regardless of the fact that she'd barely spoken to Red Rider, she'd trusted him as a strong and fair master, and she'd had absolutely no complaints about fighting under him, but she felt nothing like the adoration of the veteran members.

So she coolly accepted his departure as the result of having lost a fight. And even if he was dead as a Burst Linker, that naturally didn't mean his life in the real world had also been taken. It wasn't as though he could never ride a motorcycle again or drink his favorite coffee, like Mihaya's father.

Mihaya thought this way of thinking probably meant she was heartless. She stayed a member of Prominence, but she never really liked the new master, and she even felt like she might retire, too, if things stayed the same.

What changed this was when she saw a newbie Linker trying desperately to protect herself and a few comrades in the Nerima area, which had fallen into its own Warring States period. Her level was still quite low, and her fighting style was the very definition of rough, but her spirit alone was so hot that it threatened to burn the entire stage to the ground. *This kid'll definitely get stronger if she survives the chaos.* Mihaya applied to join the girl's team, in a move that she herself found strange.

Her instincts had been right, but at the time, she never dreamed that not only would this small girl's avatar become so strong that she would charge through the wall of level eight in only a year, but she would eventually take the throne as the second Red King.

"What're you looking at me and grinnin' for, Pard?" The redheaded girl sitting across from her—the Second Red King, Scarlet Rain, aka Yuniko Kozuki—pursed her lips tightly together in a frown.

Mihaya quickly shook her head. "I wasn't looking at you and grinning."

"Huh? So then, a smile of satisfaction at beating Helix?"

“Not that, either.”

“Then what? ...You don’t have to say if you don’t want to, though.” Niko leaned back on the sofa, a childish—and indeed, she was still in sixth grade—pout on her face.

Mihaya thought a moment before answering. “I was just remembering all this stuff during the duel. From way back.”

“Hmm.” Niko cocked her head to one side but then nodded quickly and smiled herself. “You were, huh? Nice to have memories that can make ya smile.”

“.....”

Mihaya shifted her gaze unconsciously in a questioning manner. As if he could read her thoughts, Niko’s smile became pained.

“Don’t look at me like that. I got memories like that, too, y’know. Like maybe what you said to me the first time you ever talked to me.”

“Just forget that.”

“No way! Saving it forever!” Niko laughed out loud before composing herself in a Legion Master way. “Anyway, nice work defending again this week. How was the fight with Helix?”

“The leader and the members are gradually getting stronger. And they’re keen students.”

“They are, huh? It’s ’cause we were all a mess with the whole ISS kit thing. We let our guard down even a bit next week, and it could be dangerous. And we had fewer people taking part today, too.”

“About that.” Mihaya got a serious look and stared hard at Niko. “A small issue with the members who backed out at the last minute.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“It wasn’t all of them—probably three. They ignored orders and attacked another Legion.”

“Who?” Instantly, Niko’s brow was furrowed. “And where?”

“Blaze Heart and two others. The location...Suginami. Nega Nebulus.”

“Whaaaat?!” Leaping to her feet, Niko bashed her shins on the edge of the table. “Ow!” The cry slipped out as she fell back onto the sofa. Even as tears sprang up in the corners of her eyes, her fierce expression remained unchanged. “That’s a violation of the truce! Why the...? So ohhh, I get it...That thing yesterday...”

Mihaya nodded. “I think they probably went to confirm with the Black King directly. Blaze has been a member since your predecessor’s Prominence.”

“Unnnh, I get how they feel, but, like, whoever butted in yesterday in the Unlimited Neutral Field was probably—nah, like an 80 percent chance that was a fake Lotus. That’s why I said to wait until we could get some info.”

“They’ve attacked, though, so that’s that. They were probably—no, an eighty percent chance they were repelled.”

“Ninety percent. Although, like, if they beat a team with Black One on it, I’d actually wanna high-five ’em.”

She smiled wryly at her leader’s nonchalance before clearing her throat and returning to the subject at hand. “Win or lose, we need to follow up on the treaty violation. I’m going to go to Suginami now and apologize directly to the Black Ki—”

“Mm. Mmmm. Hang on a sec.” Niko snapped her hand up to cut Mihaya off and turned her gaze to the ceiling for a second before grinning. It was her “great idea” face. “I’ll go do that.”

“.....”

“Listen. This is the kinda thing that’s got more weight if the leader herself goes out there.”

“.....”

“And we’re supposed to go along for their school festival tomorrow, yeah? Gonna be there anyway, so!”

“...We’re going to be there tomorrow, so you’ll take care of it today?” Mihaya asked, eyes turned up slightly.

The Red King cackled. “I’ll stay over at his place tonight, so come get me in the morning. I’ll make sure to get your ticket for the festival, too!”

“...Thanks.”

Although Niko was generally on the serious side, today was not the first time she had gotten overly active when it came to Nega Nebulus. Mihaya swallowed all kinds of things down and nodded, and Niko jumped off the sofa and picked up her backpack from the floor, no doubt intending to head over to Suginami right away.

“You can leave your bag here and just come get it tomorrow on our way home.”

“Oh, thanks. Then I will do just that.” She set the bag on the sofa and trotted to the door. She put her hand on the knob, but rather than open it right away, she looked back—and the young king had a smile on her face that was equal parts innocent and adult.

“Pard, I’m looking forward to the labyrinth next week.”

“K.”

She nodded at Mihaya’s reply, still smiling, and then waved before opening the door and stepping out.

After waiting until the sound of her footsteps disappeared, Mihaya also stood up. Four years since she’d become a Burst Linker. Three years since she’d found a master she could truly serve.

She had fought too many duels to count, leveled up, and could now run so fast that her old self didn’t begin to compare, but Mihaya still wasn’t satisfied with her speed. It was getting to be time for her to break free from running to escape fear. To go to the next stage. To become faster than she was now. And to protect the people she loved, the things she loved.

She raised her right hand and made a loose fist. She could feel the movement of her blood in her fingertips. *Ba-dmp. Ba-dmp.* The pulse, once a second. The direct cause of her father’s death was a sudden palpitation of the ventricle caused by cardiomyopathy. His pulse was over two hundred beats per minute, and then his heart stopped as if burned up, never to move again.

It was faint, but there was also a genetic element in idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy. So it was possible that Mihaya would someday be afflicted with the same disease, causing an anomaly in her heart. But her avatar, Blood Leopard, had taught her that she could never go anywhere if all she did was live in fear of that.

Burn her blood. Make her body race like a maelstrom. She would look only at herself and keep running. Just like a leopard racing smoothly through the grass.

Mihaya picked up Niko's backpack and, holding it tightly, left the strategy room.

**(End)**

## AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 18: The Black Dual Swordsman*.

First of all, I apologize for once again making you wait eight months since the last volume. I'm going to do my best to deliver the next volume to you at my previous pace, so please forgive me!

Now, then. In Volume 18, the last of the Four Elements, Graphite Edge, finally makes an appearance, and the executives of the first Nega Nebulus are together. Although Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and the others don't appear to be too moved at their reunion...(LOL). With his demeanor, his position, the names of his special attacks, and so much more, Graph is quirky in all kinds of ways, but he's a valuable (?) male character, so please do cheer him on!

This is changing the subject, but as a general rule, up to now, *Accel World* has been written from the limited third-person perspective of the protagonist Haruyuki. But with that single viewpoint, there comes the fact that I can only write the things that Haruyuki saw or heard, and when the number of complex scenes with simultaneous development in different places increases together with the increase in the number of characters, the story just doesn't come together with Haruyuki's viewpoint alone, and so the perspectives of other characters have been added since around Volume 15. We've had scenes from the point of view of Kuroyukihime, Pard, Magenta Scissor, aka Rui Odagiri, and in this volume, scenes from the perspective of Utai Shinomiya and Chocolat Puppeteer, aka Shihoko Nago.

The number of things I can write about has increased—or rather, the number of things I *have* to write about has increased, so in order to progress with the story, I'd prefer not to add too many characters' perspectives. But on the other

hand, it is quite a bit of fun to write these new perspectives. In particular, the scene with Shihoko and the members of Petit Paquet was quite novel for me, with its tone like a slice-of-life comedy novel, which I've never done before (LOL). If I can find the opportunity, I'd like to do their part again, a little longer next time.

The story is at last (or perhaps I should say finally...) moving toward the conclusion of the two pillars of the tale that are the Castle and the Acceleration Research Society. I intend to do my best to retrieve the countless bits of foreshadowing I've sown aimlessly up to now, so I do hope you will all join me for the ride!

Additionally, as in the previous volume, this volume collects a previously unpublished story that was a perk for the TV anime *Accel World* Blu-Ray and DVD release, "Prominence Trajectory." I would like to once again thank those involved who allowed me to print it here, as well as everyone who watched the anime version.

Thank you also to illustrator HIMA, who drew so cutely the three members of Petit Paquet and the Coba-Manga sisters who appeared here in the real for the first time, and my editor, Miki, who took the greatest of pains in arranging for this and that and doing traffic control! We will meet again in Volume 19!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in April 2015



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