

BONUS NOVEL

# hack//Legacy

「hack//」完全設定資料集 .hack//Archives\_03

特典小説

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1 - First

"Evolution... does not always mean progress."

He pressed a switch, and audio data began to play.

It was a speech he had already listened to countless times.

"Evolution sometimes leads to an undesired vector.

It is arrogant for one to reject change because it is undesirable."

As he listened to the voice, Lios snorted. He thought it was meaningless nonsense.

It seemed to him that anyone who would start forcefully

applying a vague concept like "evolution" was trying to pass judgment

by bending and twisting everything in a way that conveniently fit in with one's own circumstances.

Meaningless nonsense nonetheless, if these were the words left behind

by the developer of "The World," Lios couldn't disregard them.

Frustrating though it was, therein lay the problem.



"Rejection of change is the rejection of possibilities. Allow diversity."

Lios stopped the audio data, closed his eyes, and sighed.

What he would be attempting to do after this was by no means his idea.

However, he had to carry it out. Having carefully considered it many times over, that was the conclusion he had reached.

Lios flipped the communication switch.

"It's me. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I still wouldn't believe it."

Lios checked the connection and began speaking gravely.

"Everything's in place. I've already sent them all the e-mail."

He checked the time out of the corner of his eye.

“It’s almost time. They should be logging in any second now. Everything’s going according to plan.  
... Yeah. ... Ah, right. That’s not a problem. I’ll explain.  
I’ll leave the flow in the area to your discretion... What?”  
The person on the other end of the line pointed out that he was trailing off.  
“Shut up!!” he barked without thinking.

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## 2 - Second

Before I was even sure the Chaos Gate had flashed,  
I was already standing at the entrance of Highland City Dun Loireag.

A blue sky reminiscent of early summer. The strong rays of the sun.  
Long, winding wooden bridges that jutted out in midair,  
coiling around the mountain faces like a three-dimensional labyrinth.  
Far below, a sea of white clouds gently rolled by, pushed by the breeze.



About to start running toward the center of the root town, I wondered just how high up it was. Since it was called "Highland City," I figured the height should be something worthy of the name. Could it be higher than Mt. Fuji? I've only ever been to Mt. Fuji once, on a family trip a long time ago. Instead of climbing it, we drove around the base in the car, sightseeing along the way. I was a third-year in elementary school. That's the extent of my experience with mountains. I did once go to a picnic on the hill behind my school, but that of course wasn't a true mountain. It was more of a mound than anything.

So I had no means of determining just how high up Dun Loireag was,  
nor how precisely it had been recreated.  
The howl of the wind coming through the FMD gave me the feeling it was really high up,  
but again, I had no way of knowing for sure.

Ah, but it wasn't the time to think about things like that.  
The time for our meeting had long since past. I started running across the bridge.

If this were real life,  
there's absolutely no way I'd be able to run so quickly over such a rickety structure.  
With footwork I possessed only inside the game, I slipped past the other PCs coming and going,  
glancing at the rocky crags extending upward as I ran.  
I passed the bridges that led to the equipment shop and the magic shop,

and before long my destination, the grunty farm, came into view.

I stopped just before the entrance and jumped a few times with both feet.  
It was something of a habit of mine within the game.

When I'm logged into "The World," I sometimes get a strange feeling, almost like vertigo.  
I guess it's something like a vague sense of discomfort I get  
from slipping from reality into the virtual game space.  
There's a strange disconnect in sensation.

To shake that off, I hop up and down a few times  
to better sync my body with the virtual version of it compiled in the game as my PC.  
At least that's the theory BlackRose came up with when she called me out on my hopping the other  
day.

I can't say myself what the real reason is. Well, I guess habits are just like that.

Inside the fence of the grunty farm, that very same BlackRose was idly standing around,  
leaning against a sword as tall as she was. A young grunty frolicked around her feet.

"Oink! Oink!"

When I passed the grunty shop NPC and entered the farm, BlackRose noticed me.  
The look she gave me was half relieved and half exasperated.



"You're late, Kite! Laaaate!"

"Sorry. My homework took longer than I thought."

After apologizing for my tardiness, I pointed at the baby grunty at BlackRose's feet.  
"Seems like you've grown pretty attached. Are you going to try raising him?"

BlackRose picked up the grunty and peered closely at the ugly tip of its nose, appraising. She shook her head. “Emm, I think I’ll pass. Whenever I raise them, for some reason they all end up turning into Noble Grunties.”

BlackRose set the wriggling grunty back down, pulled her hair back with her left hand, looked at me, and smiled. In her expression I saw not BlackRose, but the player Hayami Akira. I quickly looked away.

Six months had passed since the end of our battle with Morganna.

Six months ago, BlackRose and I, along with our friends, put an end to the incident occurring within “The World” that began blurring the line between the virtual space and reality.

I joined the fight to help my friend Yasuhiko, who had fallen into a coma while playing the game. Likewise, BlackRose fought to save her younger brother, who had suffered the same fate. Everyone joined for their own reasons, and we came together to take on the “god” within “The World,” the autonomous program Morganna Mode Gone.

Once it was over, everyone started talking about meeting up offline. I immediately agreed. I wanted to better get to know the friends I had made playing “The World,” and more than anything I wanted to meet BlackRose and thank her in-person.

Akira got to the café a little late, and when she came in, it was just like BlackRose herself had burst out of the game. I could see the tanned female warrior in every single one of her mannerisms. I knew from the e-mails we’d exchanged that she was two years older than me, but she looked truly stunning in her high school blazer. For some reason I got strangely nervous sitting next to her, and I ended up spilling my cola all over the floor. In my scramble to mop it up, I didn’t get to express my gratitude to her, which had been my plan from the start. Even now I’m mortified thinking about it.

“So, what about Lios? He isn’t with you?” BlackRose asked.

“No. I’m by myself. He isn’t here yet.”

I looked around the grunty farm. There wasn’t any need to check; BlackRose and I were the only ones in the farm. The only others were the young grunty and the grunty shopkeeper.

“What’s with that guy? Calling people in and then showing up late,” complained BlackRose, who didn’t harbor many great feelings about Lios.

“I mean, whenever Lios e-mails us, he never has anything good to say, does he? I have a really bad feeling about this. He’s going to push something really annoying on us, I’m sure of it. Isn’t that how it always goes?”

“Sorry about that.”

We were surprised when the grunty farm owner we had thought was just an NPC suddenly started speaking.

“Lios, you’re here?”

BlackRose and I were both taken aback.

“Yes. It’s me. I got here before either of you and I’ve been waiting.”

The rugged grunty shopkeeper folded his arms and looked sharply at us from the eye that didn’t have a patch. His pompous attitude pretty much confirmed that he was the C.C. Corp. system administrator Lios.

“Hey buddy, quit going around pretending to be an NPC. You’ve got pretty bad taste to be doing that.”

“You’re the ones who mistook me.  
I simply chose the most suitable body to come here and logged in.  
There’s no problem with that,” Lios said moodily, his tone grouchy.

When I first met him, I wondered why he was always in such a huff and if there wasn’t some sort of deep reason for it. Now that I know it’s just his personality, I’m used to it and don’t think much of it.

If you really think about it,  
using an NPC body to surprise the people he’s meeting with could be his way of being playful, which is to say it could be his way of showing affection. But it could also not be. Actually, I don’t think it is. Nope. Probably not.

While I was thinking this BlackRose’s face began to turn an alarming color, so I stepped forward and put myself between them.

“So what is it, Lios? What did you call us about?”

“Right. The truth is, an area concealing a remnant of Morganna was discovered.”

“A remwhat?”

“The unfavorable legacy left behind by Morganna Mode Gone.  
In other words, a surviving Data Bug. We believe this could be the last one.”

BlackRose and I looked at each other.

After Morganna disappeared from “The World,” the illegal monsters dependent on her, Data Bugs, had seldom shown signs of existence. After the incident, to reopen operation of “The World,” CC Corp performed a thorough long-term investigation, and concluded that the Data Bugs in “The World” had ceased to exist.

And yet, one did.

“Late last night a distinctive data wavelength indicative of a Data Bug was detected in an area, and as a result of our analysis, we’ve concluded it to be the last monster outside of the system specifications within ‘The World,’” Lios explained gravely.

“There’s one thing I should say. If we delete that databug...” Lios paused there.

“That is, if you data drain it, your bracelet will probably disappear.”

I was shocked by Lios’s admission.

“Huh?! What’s that supposed to mean?” BlackRose shouted, equally surprised.

“The data wavelength the bracelet gives off and the data wavelength of the newly discovered databug are inverse matches. It’s similar to when you fought Cubia. Back then, you destroyed the bracelet and eliminated Cubia. This time, it’s likely the bracelet will disappear when you data drain the databug.”

I looked at my right wrist. Of course there wasn’t anything there. Only when I unleashed the power of the Bracelet of Daybreak, which bestowed upon me the divine protection of Aura, the goddess of “The World,” did the geometric patterns of the data sequence take shape and appear on my arm.

“There must be some mistake. That’s...”

“No, I think Lios might be right.”

BlackRose looked at me, shocked.

This whole time I’d been wondering why Aura entrusted this bracelet to me after the incident. Until Lios’s revelation, I’d thought it was simply my duty to protect it.

But hearing it said out loud, it was actually quite simple.

I would restore peace and stability to the world, because that was the will of Aura and the bracelet.

I looked to Lios and nodded. “If there aren’t any databugs, there won’t be any reason for the bracelet to exist, either. It makes sense that it would disappear.”

“I understand. So this will be my last task as the owner of the bracelet.”

I felt a dull ache in my chest at my own words.

Lios folded his arms and turned away from us, trying to avert his eyes.

“Then go. The enemy should be lurking on the lowest level of the dungeon. The keywords are...”

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Our destination was a jungle. It looked like a normal area, with nothing out of the ordinary.

So far, all of the areas we'd been to containing databugs had some serious data corruption or caused connection problems, but there wasn't any sign of that here. Somewhere off in the distance I heard the call of a bird or a monkey. It was soothing.



But of course we couldn't let our guard down.

Careful not to overlook even the slightest irregularity, we sought out the dungeon entrance and started making our way there.

Fields for jungle areas consisted of a series of small ground parts linked together, like dungeons. Normal monsters appeared in our path several times along the way, but they weren't any match for our level. We defeated them without difficulty.

Before long, we reached an area without a Magic Portal and took a break to recharge our SP.

"Ha!" BlackRose looked at me and chuckled.

"Huh? What is it?"

“You’re hopping again.”

I hadn’t even noticed I’d been hopping until she pointed it out.

“...Oh, sorry. Is it bothering you?”

“No, it’s not that. It seems like you’re checking your footing when you do it.”

“My footing?”

What was she talking about?

I’d understand being concerned about watching my step in a place like Dun Loireag, but this was a normal area. I wasn’t really worried about where I was walking.

“No, that’s not what I mean. ‘Footing’ isn’t quite right...”

BlackRose looked thoughtful, searching for just the right expression, and then her face lit up.

“Oh! It’s like you’re confirming where you are.”

I was a bit surprised. I hadn’t had that thought.

“Huh. I don’t think it’s something that significant.”

“It definitely is,” BlackRose said confidently.

A small light particle effect traced out a string of characters, slowly crossing in front of her face.

“I mean, isn’t it just like that?”

“Could be.”

“It is.”

Hearing her say it so definitively made me think she could be right.

Well, I guess habits are that sort of thing.

Following our silly chat, BlackRose’s expression suddenly grew serious as she spoke again.

“...The bracelet’s going to disappear, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“After the fight with Cubia, you got it back again, but this time it’ll be gone for good...”

I recalled what Lios had said in Dun Loireag: “It’s similar to when you fought Cubia.

Back then, you destroyed the bracelet and defeated Cubia...”

Cubia was, in a way, the foe that had tormented us the most.

Cubia was the anti-existence of the bracelet,  
and as both the bracelet and its owner grew stronger,  
Cubia grew to formidable strength as well.  
In the end, to defeat Cubia we had no choice but to destroy the bracelet.  
There was likely no way we could have beaten him without destroying it,  
because Cubia and the bracelet were two sides of the same coin.

“I feel like maybe I’ll miss it, or I’ll feel helpless without it...”  
BlackRose said somberly, and then added in an odd tone of voice,  
“Funny I should say that when I’m the one who broke it.”

She was the one who had swung her broadsword and shattered the bracelet during the battle with Cubia.

She and I both laughed.

Just then, I heard a sullen-sounding whisper right behind me.

“You aren’t in very much of a hurry, Kite-san...”

Startled, I turned around. A small girl PC was standing there.  
I was sure there hadn’t been anyone besides us in the area a moment ago.  
I hadn’t been at all aware that someone had been approaching us.

“Who are you?” I asked.

The intruder said, “I...” strangely drawing out her words.

“I’m in no rush for time. Also, what I’ve disturbed you with isn’t anything urgent.  
I don’t mind waiting for you to finish your conversation.”

“Who are you?” BlackRose asked.

“Of course if you don’t mind cutting your talk short on my behalf,  
I’ll reveal what my business is. But I don’t mind. I’ll wait.”

She looked to be about 10 years old, with fair, androgynous features.  
Her clothing was simple, made out of unbleached fabric.  
There was nothing remarkable about her outward appearance,  
but my eyes were drawn to the weapon she was carrying.  
It looked like a long iron rod that had forcibly been twisted into shape.  
It appeared to be a broadsword weapon, but I’d never seen one with such an odd design.



BlackRose shouted, “Then tell us who you are!” She was getting irritated.

“Huh? Oh, me?”

As though BlackRose’s voice had opened her eyes,  
she blinked furiously and pressed her hands to her face;  
I couldn’t tell if she was role-playing or being genuine.  
She casually whispered, “Indeed, who am I? That’s something of considerable interest. Who could I  
be?  
But, well, if it’s my present name you’re after, I can tell you right away.  
Would that be all right?”

A seemingly friendly, innocent smile came across her broad face. “I’m called Spoke.  
I’m a huge fan of the .hackers. I am very happy to be able to meet both of you.”

Soon after the end of the Morganna Incident,  
little by little we became known across the Internet via the BBS  
as the hero team that prevented the worst of the damage from the Second Network Crisis.  
At the same time, gossip about me personally became common talk. I only learned of it later,  
but it all started from Orca dubbing us the .hackers and posting on the forums.

It was said that the red Twin Blade who was leader of the group was an unbeatable master PC.

It was said that not only was he incredibly smart, but he was courageous, as well.

It was said that he showed great decisiveness.

It was said that he was empathetic and couldn't abandon anyone in need. And so on.

Before long, PCs I'd never seen before who called themselves my fans started calling out to me out of nowhere, badgering me to take screenshots, and asking if I could trade them items as commemorative tokens. While this was going on, the .hackers website got flooded with traffic; I had MP3 mics thrust before me, and a famous Internet broadcast requested I make an appearance. (I politely declined.)

Countless imposters using my name began starting threads like, "I'm Kite of the Azure Flame! Ask me anything!" and posting outrageously fake tales of our heroic deeds. Volunteers put together tours that followed the steps of the .hackers. This kind of uproar went on and on following the Morganna Incident.

As one would expect, the fervor had certainly cooled in the six months since the incident, but this Heavy Blade user calling herself Spoke appeared before me as a fan of the .hackers, which hadn't happened in a while.

"So..." she said, in that polite, but drawn-out and monotonous voice, "would you please let me in your party? I'll definitely be useful."

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BlackRose and I looked at each other.

Both BlackRose and I had been solicited by ".hackers fans" several times in the past. In most cases, they oversold their abilities, and we learned it was safer to not have very high expectations of their skills in battle. But more than that, we had to do everything we could to avoid entangling normal PCs in missions to eliminate databugs.

"Well...sorry, but we have to go at this one alone," BlackRose started to say. "If there's another opportunity in the future—"

"But," Spoke interrupted, not letting BlackRose finish, "the dungeon here looks really difficult." In a small voice, she added, "I definitely think it would be better if I went with you. It'd be dangerous if you went alone."

Her carefree way of speaking instead came across as arrogant.

BlackRose's expression immediately hardened, so I stepped in.

"Thanks for the advice, but I think we're going to give it a shot on our own."

"We (boku-tachi)..."

Spoke gave me a blank look.

“Ahh... Kite-san, you said ‘boku’ just now, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve heard that ‘boku’ is a word used by younger males.  
I think it’s odd that you use it despite being considered a hero.”

I was stunned that out of what I’d said, that was the part she chose to point out.  
Seeing my bewilderment, she tilted her head and smiled pleasantly.

“Hmm. But, I understand. You two don’t need my help now.”

“Huh?”

I thought she’d persist more, but it seemed like she was giving up.

“Well then, if you need me. When that time comes, please add me to your party.”

On that note, she teleported out. As her body vanished in the ring of light,  
it seemed like only her smile remained, like the Cheshire cat.

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We soon found the dungeon entrance.  
As we headed down the stairs and went underground,  
the laid-back, tropical atmosphere of the jungle completely changed.  
The background graphics that appeared before us made me think of a dank, frigid prison.  
This of course had nothing to do with the databug. It was a specification of “The World”.

I grew tense just from the scenery growing so eerie.

As I continued along the corridor alongside BlackRose,  
I started thinking again about how the bracelet would disappear.

I first started playing “The World” because my friend Yasuhiko invited me.

Yasuhiko, or “Orca of the Azure Sea,” and I, a complete newbie, went together to an area,  
where we encountered a girl in white clothing—the goddess Aura—being chased by Skeith,  
the “Terror of Death.” Orca succumbed to Skeith’s data drain and vanished right before my eyes.  
I would have fallen into a coma, too, if not for the hacker Helba,  
who saved me by pulling me out just in the nick of time.  
Where I ended up, I received the “Book of Twilight,” which caused the illegal bracelet to appear.

“A great force. The power it holds can bring forth either salvation or destruction  
at the whim of the user...”

Aura's words stayed with me after that, and I couldn't shake them.

That was because the power of the bracelet, which transcended the specifications of "The World," was the same power as what put Yasuhiko in a coma.

I couldn't save Yasuhiko without the power of the bracelet,  
but at the same time my actions seemed to make the situation worse.  
Because of me, both the Internet and the real world began to come apart, and from that gap  
would come a misapprehension of overflowing, infinite darkness that would engulf everything.  
Maybe it was that I'd chosen "destruction" instead of "salvation" after all.

The ones who supported me when I felt discouraged  
were the friends I made throughout my adventures with the bracelet.

When I was ready to give in, BlackRose was there to first chide me and then encourage me.

Balmung, who had long opposed us, became a powerful ally after we cleared up our  
misunderstandings.

Lios and Helba put aside their differences and presented a great undivided front.

Then when the all-out war, or "Operation Orca," began,  
all of our friends came together to face Morganna.

We were all able to meet because of the path the bracelet led me down.  
The bracelet was the unbreakable bond that brought us all together.

Therefore, I thought.

If it was the bracelet's will to disappear,  
then it was my duty as the owner of the bracelet to see that out.

Thinking about it in such clear terms made my heart ache, like it was throbbing.

Without thinking I stopped in my tracks. I couldn't say why.  
However, I was becoming aware of a faint sense of unease  
like a stroke of black ink taking hold in my chest.

"Kite?" BlackRose asked, concerned.

I shook my head. "Ah, no, it's nothing."

I tried to convince myself there was nothing to be worried about.

"Hey, keep your guard up! You wouldn't even know it if a monster ambushed you!"

As BlackRose was talking and she turned the corner,  
a Magic Portal concealed in the shadows reacted and opened.  
Three huge shadows appeared and surrounded BlackRose.

By the time I realized they were Armor Generals, it was already too late.  
A blow like lightning crashed over the top of BlackRose's head.

"Ow!!"

Her pained cry was lost in the attack sound effect of the second blow as it came crashing down.

Her status display immediately turned red, and the critical warning count began to sound.

Shoot. We were completely at their mercy.

The weapons in their hands more or less ignored the player's defense stat, delivering critical damage.

Even as I used a Healing Elixir on BlackRose, I thought it might only be just in time.

The third monster still had yet to attack.

Should I keep using Healing Elixirs, or would it be better to have a Resurrect ready?

In that moment, a brief but shrill sound echoed throughout the dungeon.

It was a distinctly different type of slashing sound from both the monster's attacks and BlackRose's counterattacks. It was like a hard object cutting through water.

The Armor General poised to strike BlackRose froze mid-swing.

As its coloring became jet-black, like ink, it toppled over and vanished.

The other two followed suit, turning black and vanishing in the same way.

We were stunned. We had no idea what had happened.

Just then, a petite figure appeared from around the corner.

"I told you so. It's a good thing I came back."

It was Spoke, the girl PC we thought we'd parted ways with above ground.

"This dungeon is dangerous for a two-person party.

Monsters like the ones just now appear in droves," she said,  
pointing down the corridor with her broadsword.

Was it even a broadsword? Its shape had changed from when I saw it before.

The metal curled loosely around like a snake, laying the blade tucked inside bare.

With a wave of Spoke's arm, the strange weapon folded up  
and returned to its rod-like shape in the blink of an eye.

"Therefore," she said, smiling, "would you please let me into your party? I'm sure I'll be helpful!"

The monsters got noticeably stronger from the mid-point of the dungeon on.

Along with Armor Generals, other bothersome enemies that were immune to physical attacks started appearing in groups.

If it had just been me and BlackRose,  
there was no doubt we would have been forced into difficult battles we likely couldn't have won.

So we were really grateful for Spoke's helping hand.

With her young, innocent appearance, she didn't look it at all,  
but she was actually quite a powerful warrior.  
Her strange, completely indescribable weapon left behind a lingering effect  
like a vacuum wave as it repeatedly sliced through the monsters.  
I'd never seen a skill like that before.

"That's an amazing weapon," I told her. Spoke gave me something of a distant look.

"Do you mean that in the good sense or the bad sense?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry! Of course you mean that in the amazing sense.  
Hahaha. Yeah, it is pretty amazing, huh?"

Somehow, our conversation was getting slightly off-track.

Once the Armor Generals were taken care of,  
I suggested to BlackRose that Spoke come with us.  
Furrowing her brows, she pulled me into a corner and whispered,  
"Are you sure it's a good idea to get a regular PC involved when we have a databug to fight?"

As she spoke, she glanced nervously in Spoke's direction and lightly cleared her throat.  
"Well, that is... She does seem pretty capable, but still, it's dangerous, isn't it?"

Whenever fighting a databug, there was a chance that one could fall into a coma.

Honestly, when the time came for the bracelet to disappear,  
I didn't want some unrelated third-party there.

Shaking my head, I whispered back,  
"But she's come this far already, and even if we argue she might decide to come along.  
That would just be even more dangerous.  
It would be safer for her and for us if we added her to our party."

"I'm fine with it if you are," BlackRose answered, shrugging.

When we conveyed this to Spoke, she leapt for joy.

"Wow!! Thank you so much! Oh, we should exchange member addresses, huh?  
I'm so happy! I'm really touched!"

Her words made her seem incredibly happy,



but her laid-back tone lacked the same enthusiasm, making it sound like she wasn't touched at all. When we made it down to the 5th floor, something suddenly came to me.

"Um...Spoke, are you by chance a foreigner?"

I was thinking of Sanjuro, who role-played an old-style samurai. He was an American living in South Dakota who loved period dramas enough to access "The World" through a Japanese server.

I felt like Spoke's slightly off way of speaking and her odd word choice were in some ways similar to Sanjūrō's.

Spoke tilted her head to the side as she walked.  
"'Foreigner'? ...Oh. No, I'm 100% purely native."

"Oh."

Sure enough, I had no idea what exactly she meant by saying it like that.

"Instead of asking me about myself, how about you tell me more about you?"  
Spoke asked, grinning as she peered at me.

“For example, how about... Yes, that.” Her gaze fell to my right hand.  
“You could tell me about your bracelet.”

I looked at Spoke, shocked. Her usual smile was plastered across her face.

“I’d love if you could tell me about the adventures you’ve had with it!”

I knew some not completely truthful information about the bracelet was being passed around among some of our most maniacal fans, so the fact that Spoke brought it up wasn’t all that surprising to me. What did surprise me was how she looked at my hand as she talked about it when she wasn’t supposed to be able to see it.

Without thinking, I tried to hide my right hand behind my back. “Um...can you see it?”

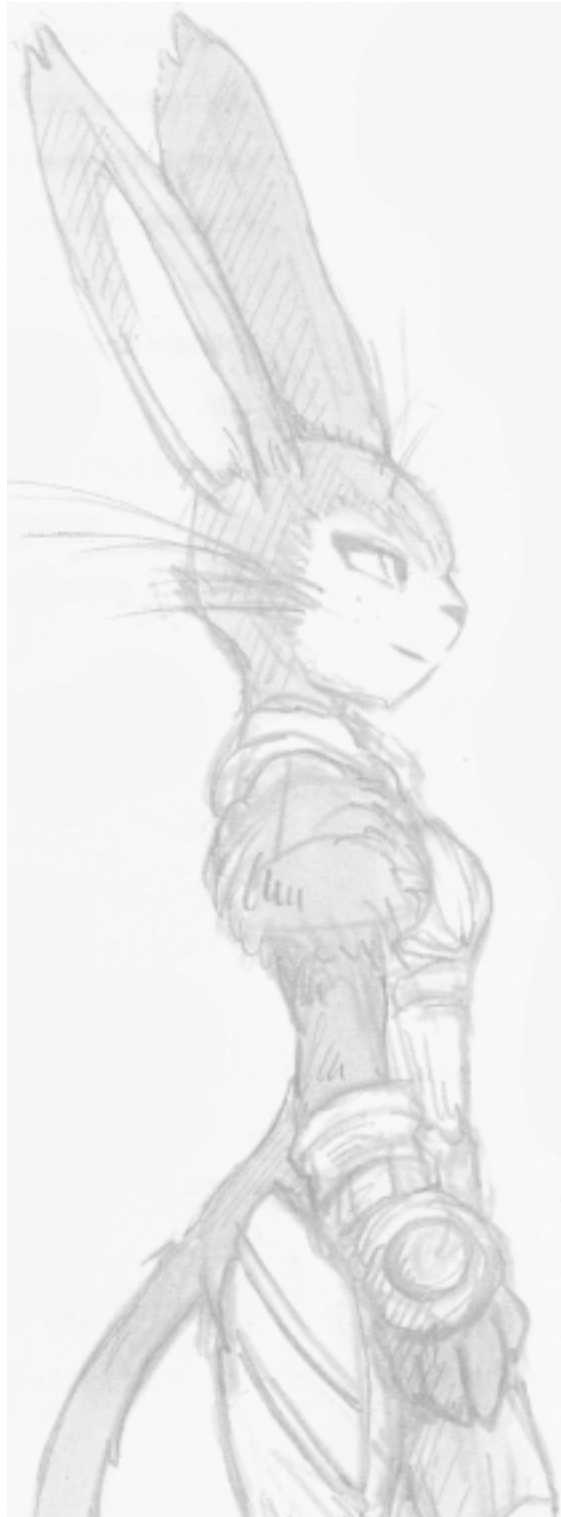
“Yes, of course,” Spoke answered, nodding firmly.

“Do you mean to say that you cannot see this nice bracelet?  
Even if you can’t see it, as long as you know it’s there, it’s the same thing as seeing it, right?”

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Her words tugged at my memories. I felt like I’d heard that from someone before.

It didn’t take me long to remember.  
It was Mia—the mysterious cat PC who was always hanging out with Elk, the timid Wavemaster. When we first met in Mac Anu, she looked at my right hand and said that to me.



"You know, you added me, a complete stranger, to your party..."  
Spoke continued, her smile never wavering.

"But, you don't trust me completely. Right? There isn't just 1 and 0.  
Ambiguity is permitted between Yes and No. Humans are interesting, aren't they?"

Again, she used Mia's words. How could she know what Mia had said?

And what was her point in plagiarizing it for us?

It was like the juvenile girl PC before me had suddenly transformed into something completely unknown.

Mia's true identity was actually Macha the Temptress—one of the eight phases that made up Morganna. As our ongoing battle with Morganna escalated, Mia regained her past form and abilities, and she stood against us as an enemy of the .hackers.

Thinking about it that far, I was filled with horror.

Could Spoke...could this Heavy Blade's true form possibly be a phase?

No. Deep down, I knew that couldn't be it. That simply wasn't possible. With the exception of Mia, who we rescued after the Morganna Incident, the Eight Phases should have been completely destroyed. They should have been fully deleted by this bracelet.

"That such a person can wield a bracelet with such a high density of data is particularly interesting. ...Huh? What's the matter?" Spoke asked, looking back at us.

Without realizing it, in a grand lobby on the lowest floor, my feet had come to a halt.

BlackRose, who had been scouting up ahead, came around back to us. "It's a linear path from here on out, without any Magic Portals. We're almost to the Gott statue room."

She must have realized how tense I was as she was speaking.

"What? What happened?"

Spoke continued on as though BlackRose wasn't even there. "Despite that, you haven't let me see it once, have you? Data Drain, that is..."

I took a step back from Spoke. Now at my side, BlackRose looked like she wanted to say something, but I stopped her with a hand. "How do you know about that?"

Spoke's grin only widened, the corners of her lips curling even higher.

Never mind the bracelet, no one outside of the .hackers who fought in the battle against Morganna should know about Data Drain, one of the bracelet's illegal skills.

"An intimate acquaintance told me all about you. That person said that Kite of the Azure Flame was the hero who saved both this virtual world and the real one."

She didn't answer my question.

In a detached tone, she continued,  
“That person instructed me to go along with you and learn from you.  
But they didn’t specify exactly what it was I should learn.”

“So I’ve been observing you two ever since you warped to this area,  
even before we met on the field. Since the moment I saw you. What I’ve seen is—”

“—you’re afraid that when the bracelet disappears,  
you’ll lose the connection you have with your friends.”

I was shocked. Somehow she saw right through to the innermost depths of my heart  
and laid bare the worries I’d been trying to keep hidden. I clenched the hand held behind my back.

For me, the bracelet was a symbol of the bond shared by the .hackers.  
I felt as though losing the bracelet would also mean losing the connections  
I’d made with my friends along the way.  
By ridding myself of the bracelet, wouldn’t I also be severing that irreplaceable bond?  
Wouldn’t it be the same as throwing away those memories?

“Why do you know that about me?”

“‘Boku’ again?” Spoke shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated way and let out a deep sigh.

“I have to say, I’m disappointed. All I feel from you is fear and reluctance to lose.  
Nothing more.” She shook her head in disappointment. “You’re far too immature.”

“Now you wait just a second!”



BlackRose, who had been quiet up until now, suddenly pushed past me and strode up to Spoke, glaring at her.

“I keep my mouth shut and you sure just say what you please, don’t you?!”  
Her tone was the same as the time when she’d snapped at Balmung in the cathedral.

“Where do you get off being so arrogant? What do you know about Kite, anyway?  
Why wouldn’t he be a little hesitant? It’s only natural!”

Surprised by BlackRose’s outburst, Spoke’s eyes widened slightly, but her enigmatic smile quickly returned.

Stepping back slowly, she spoke as though she was lecturing us.

“To begin with, you two don’t seem to fully comprehend the situation. You’re misunderstanding.”

“The bracelet disappearing...”

She started heading back the way we came.

“That it’s only natural to hesitate...”

Once she was past the entrance to the room, she looked back at us and grinned.

“You’re operating under the assumption that you’ll be able to delete the Data Bug.

Don’t you think that’s a funny hypothesis?”

Her tone retained its persistent innocence.

As she spoke, I thought I felt the floor shake slightly.

“The world will accept change. The Data Bug is attempting to change with it. He’s desperate to survive.”

When I noticed it, the walls began to pulse.

The ceiling was distorting weirdly and becoming curved.

As it spread static from the floor,

countless vines rose up and wrapped themselves around me and BlackRose.

“No! What is this?!” BlackRose cried.

The area beneath our feet caved into a mortar-like shape,

and the carnivorous plant that had us in its grip started to drag us down,

ready to trap us and devour us in its digestive juices.

By now the entire room had gone wavy, and that characteristic corruption was embedded everywhere.

The last Data Bug in “The World” wasn’t a monster, but a dungeon floor.

In other words, it was leeching off of the background scenery.

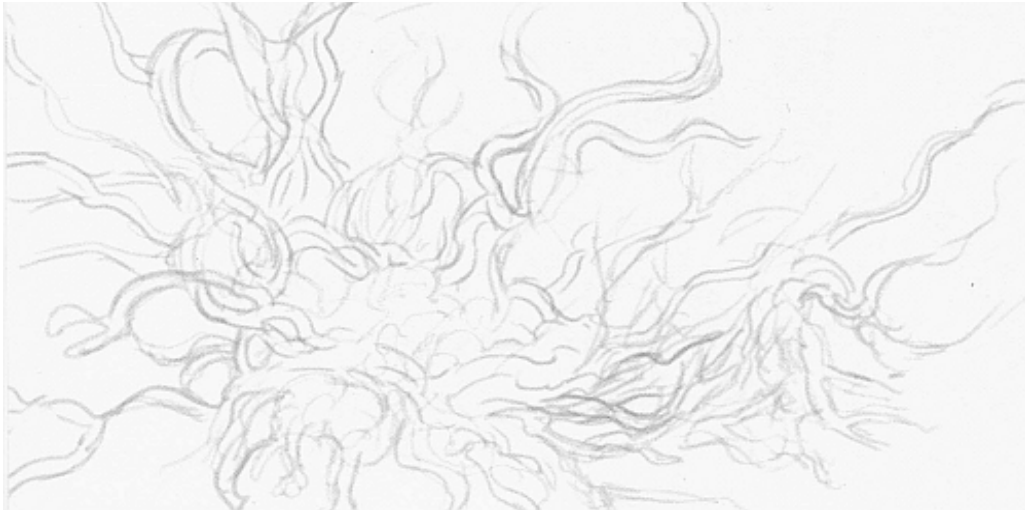
The room itself was one massive Data Bug.

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My whole body shuddered at the foreboding aura of our situation.

What would happen to us if we were just swallowed up by the floor?

On top of that, the vines were growing, binding our hands and feet.



Just then, I felt as though my right hand was trembling.  
The bracelet had begun giving off a phosphorescent light.  
The light focused into a single arrow and pointed at part of the wall.

As it did, the wall contorted like a caterpillar being pricked by a needle, shrieking and groaning.  
The vines wrapped around my hands and feet were growing weaker.

“Look over there!” BlackRose shouted.

From the part of the wall that the light had struck, an object resembling a massive black cocoon emerged like a stereoscopic picture, trailing an afterimage. It was beating like a heart.  
The bracelet had pointed out the Data Bug’s weak point.

BlackRose tore her legs free from the vines with her broadsword and,  
staggering from the effort, swung the weapon back over her shoulder.

“Kite! She was talking about what would happen to your connections with your friends,  
but...” As she spoke, BlackRose again took her sword in hand and charged at the black cocoon.  
“They didn’t come together because the bracelet—it was because of you!”

At BlackRose’s words, a series of images flowed through my mind like a current.  
Were they mere recollections or images the bracelet was showing to me?

The setting was the square in Net Slum.  
The town ruler, Helba, was face-to-face with Lios, and the .hackers stood in a circle around them.  
All were grim-faced. BlackRose was there, as was I. I was there when I didn’t have the bracelet.

I recalled that this had happened after we’d battled Cubia, the bracelet’s anti-existence.  
It was a memory from when I’d lost the bracelet and with it,  
the means of fighting Corbenik, the last of the eight phases.

“Very well.” Lios’ voice resounded through Net Slum.

“This is neither an order nor obligation.  
Those who will not join, gate out while I count down from three. ...Three.”

He paused for an unnaturally long length of time.

“...Two.”

Roughly the same amount of time passed.

“...One.”

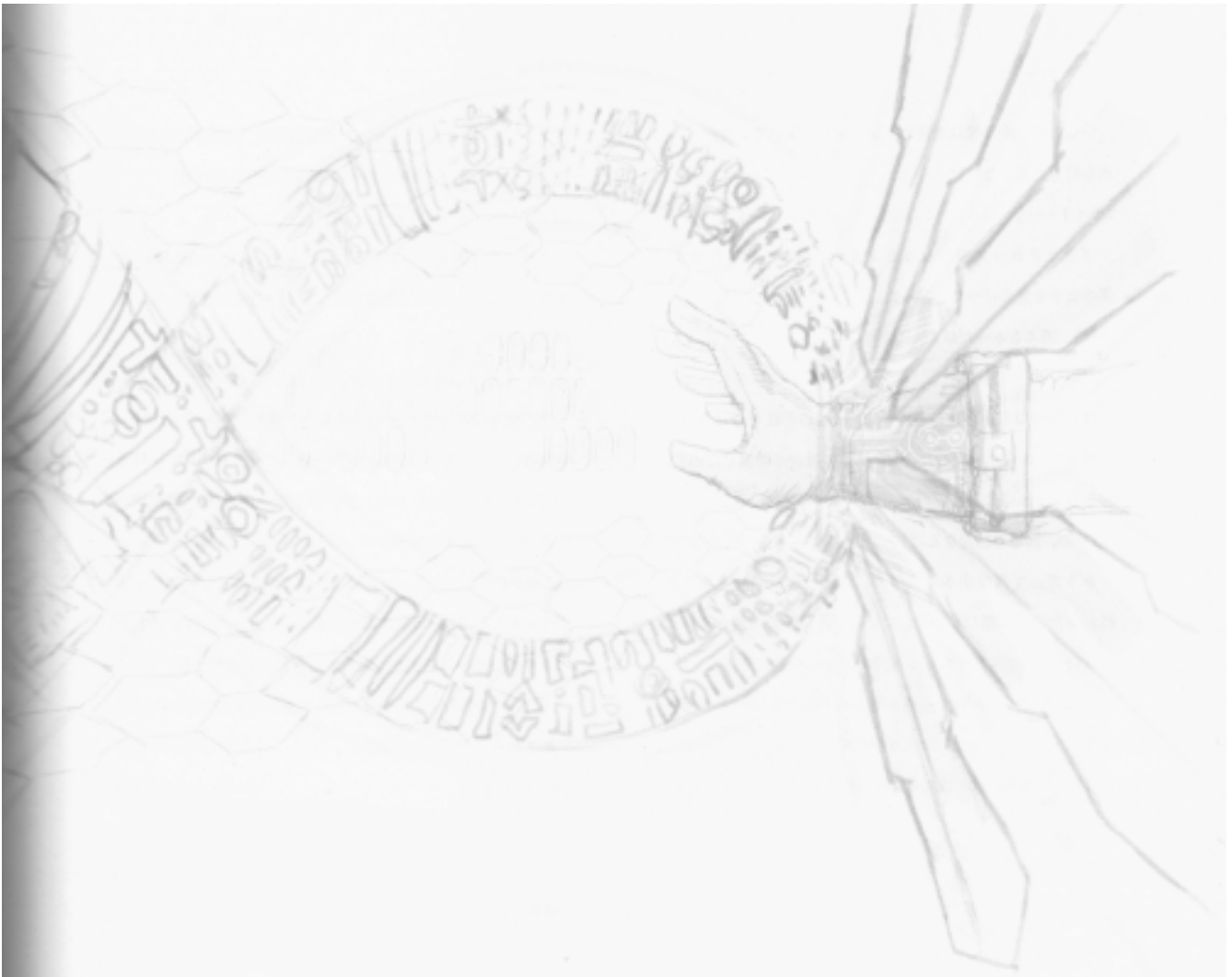
No one moved an inch.

Helba smiled. “It would seem we’re decided...”

BlackRose leapt at the Data Bug, and twisting her upper body to the right, used her momentum to bring her broadsword down on the cocoon with both hands. Its anguished cry echoed throughout the room.

Tumbling back to the ground, BlackRose looked to me and shouted, “Now!!”

The tips of the vines had hardened like swords, and one of them reached my face, grazing my cheek. I ignored it and raised my right hand towards the cocoon.



My hesitations were gone. When I opened my palm, geometric patterns of data sequences began to appear. The pale light the bracelet was giving off intimating its power gave way to a blinding flash. Bathed in the light of the bracelet, I knew without a doubt that this would be the very last data drain. This final data drain would end it all.

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One by one, my adventures up until now in “The World” flashed through my mind like a revolving lantern.

Orca succumbing to Skeith and falling into a coma.

Receiving the bracelet from Aura.

Balmung accusing me of being a hacker and raising his sword against me in the cathedral.

Meeting Mia and her pointing out the bracelet.

Destroying the bracelet in order to defeat the anti-existence Cubia.

Facing each of the eight phases.

It was then that I understood. Ending meant changing.  
The bracelet had desperately been waiting for this—the moment it could eradicate the very last Data Bug.  
To end everything. To change. Apoptosis. The pattern of life and death.

The moment I clearly felt the bracelet's will,  
the lattice of data sequences shot forward and pierced the cocoon.

The Data Bug let out a shriek. The entire room distorted like it was rippling.  
Muffled cries filled the room, but I couldn't stop the data drain's power.

The bracelet blended with the data lattices it had emitted and little by little began to break apart.  
At the same time the bracelet disappeared, the massive cocoon dissolved,  
leaving a blood red stain that spread across the wall in its wake.

Before I knew it, the room had returned to its original state. There was complete silence.

"Kite..." BlackRose returned, still staggering slightly.  
She looked at my right hand and said quietly, "The bracelet's gone, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

I looked at my right hand. I could feel the absence of the bracelet. It was empty.  
The bracelet had vanished from my arm, probably for good.

I smiled a little. "This is the will of the bracelet." Now I really felt that it was all over.  
I felt invigorated, like I'd been freed of a massive burden. Yet at the same time I missed it.

"If a time comes when the world has need of the bracelet again...at that time,  
surely the right person will come forward."

The next people would inherit both the world and the bracelet. That felt right to me.

Once I'd started to relax, I caught a glimpse of the distortion on the wall behind BlackRose.  
Just when I thought I saw what remained of the Data Bug--that blood-red stain--start to spread,  
the blade-like vines gathered the last of their strength and shot straight at BlackRose.  
I wouldn't have thought them capable of such an attack after being weakened by data drain.  
It happened so quickly I didn't even have time to warn her.

A shadow like a strange bird appeared.

At the same time we heard the sound of something heavy cutting through water,  
the vines were hacked to pieces, and they scattered across the floor.  
The stain on the wall seemed to have used the last of its energy.  
There was a flicker of noise before it vanished as though it evaporated.

I gasped.

It was Spoke.



She silently unfolded the weapon she held in her hand, letting the bits of the vines still clinging to it fall to the ground before refolding it again.

I felt this was the first time I'd seen her weapon's true form. No wonder I'd felt it was oddly shaped for a broadsword. It wasn't a sword at all. It was a scythe. It was a massive scythe one might use for tearing up roots.

"It's incomplete..."

Spoke wasn't smiling. Rather, her voice had a touch of wonder to it.  
For the first time since I'd met her I could hear emotion in her voice.

"Decisive individuals are laudable because they can act while troubled, not in spite of it."

She looked up at me, half-speaking to herself. Her gaze was full of admiration.

"Humans are...you are connected by an unseen power I hadn't foreseen."

"What's with this PC?" I thought. I felt like maybe I had met her a long time ago.  
That shouldn't be possible, but still I got the feeling she was a lot like someone I had already met.

My voice was a little hoarse as I asked, "Who are you?"

Spoke tilted her head and smiled, "I already told you. I'm a fan."

Her impish grin lingered when she gated out.

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### 3 - Third

Having seen the full account of Kite and BlackRose's adventure, Lios shut off the viewing monitor and let out a sigh, relaxing his shoulders.

The bracelet was gone.

Paradoxically, that also served as evidence that all of the Data Bugs had been completely eradicated from "The World."

With that, at long last the Morganna Incident had truly come to an end.

Standing at his side, Helba took a look at Lios's face as he gave another deep sigh. Teasing him, she asked, "Are you relieved?"

"Don't be stupid. Who's relieved?"

Hearing how his clearly relieved tone of voice gave him away, Lios boomed, "You just make extra work for me when you come up with these convoluted schemes. Typical, I don't understand you hackers at all."

"Just by understanding that you don't understand, it's clear you've grown pretty soft compared to your old pigheaded ways."

Lios snorted, but Helba paid him no mind, continuing, "What kinds of rules did Harold impose on this world? It's something we can only speculate upon now, but I think we can safely conclude at least one thing: he meant for it to be 'ever-changing'."

"If you look at it from a different angle, the bracelet that received Aura's blessing was also a cursed bracelet, continuously diluting both Kite and his player in 'The World'."

The Wavemaster addressed Lios's question, giggling. "The boy severed his connection with that of his own will. From now on, 'adventures' in the real world are waiting for him. I wish to observe that. My hope is that he is a vessel befitting of a hero there, as well."

A lyrical voice suddenly cut in. "I'm back!"

Before Lios realized it, the girl who had returned from the area took her place at Helba's side.

Lios scrutinized the small PC in her unbleached clothing.

"Helba, I've been wondering for a while now but, this PC helper of yours." He spoke with the authority of a system administrator. "Who is she? Not some newcomer hacker, I hope?"

At Lios's words, Helba and the girl looked at each other and shared an amused smile. They seemed

very close, almost like mother and daughter.



“Lios, your joke is even funnier than you realize!”

“What?”

“This child is,” Helba continued, “an existence that will serve as a guide in this changing world. She will be like a large tree that keeps pointing to the heavens in the midst of clamoring and bustling.”

Unsure if Helba’s explanation was genuine or merely masked her true intentions, Lios scowled again, but he didn’t say anything.

“She’s still in training, though.”

At this, the girl looked up at Helba, puffing out her cheeks.

“Ahh, you’re mean! I really studied hard. I learned a lot from Kite!”

“Did you just say ‘boku’?” Helba tilted her head to the side, but then smiled and nodded.

“I see. Well then, you’ll have to share your results with me in further detail.”

The two turned away from Lios and left together.

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4 - Last

Before I was even sure the Chaos Gate had flashed,  
I was already standing at the entrance of Highland City Dun Loireag.

When I made it to the grunty farm, where we had planned to meet,  
a swirling light effect appeared before my eyes.

“Oh, oh, oh-”

I heard BlackRose’s disappointed voice, followed by a comical voice.

“Oh, mon ami! Thank you! I've become a fine gentleman, because of you.  
To thank you for all your loving care, I want you to have this, mon ami!”

I hopped on both feet and entered the enclosure.  
BlackRose gave me a blank look when she noticed me.

“It became a Noble Grunty again...”

“Oh, you raised it.”

“Yeah. I decided to give it the Grunty food I had left.”

A month had passed since Lios sent us on the expedition to eradicate the last Data Bug.

Since then, I’d had to devote more time to schoolwork and career guidance,  
so I hadn’t been able to log into “The World.” It was the same for BlackRose.  
We both were starting to get tied up with preparation for our entrance exams,  
mine for high school, and hers for university.

That mysterious Heavy Blade...I don’t know anything for certain,  
but I’d never been able to get in touch with Spoke at all.  
So I decided just to send her the same farewell message  
I’d sent to the rest of my friends in the .hackers.

We’d decided that today would be the last day we went adventuring in “The World”.

BlackRose and I chit-chatted the whole way back to the Chaos Gate.  
When I told her what I’d heard from Yasuhiko about Balmung, her eyes grew wide.  
Balmung was a college student in real-life,  
and he was already getting ready to apply to work at CC Corp.

“So he’s already thinking about that.  
Ahh, I should be giving my future serious thought, too!!”

BlackRose furrowed her eyebrows and groaned.  
I’d been trying to just make idle conversation,  
but it seemed like I’d hit on a sore subject.

“Kite, do you know what you want to do in the future?”

“Huh? Um...well, I haven’t really decided anything, but I’m thinking maybe I’ll study foreign languages.”

“Foreign languages?”

“Yeah. In online games, people of different nationalities, from all different walks of life gather together and share the same world, right?”

BlackRose’s question made the things I’d vaguely been thinking about over the last several days start to come together.

“I think that’s an amazing thing. Because of that, I’d really like to meet those people in real life. I’d like to study languages and then in the future get a job where I can interact with people from different countries.”

“Sure enough, you have been thinking about it. Am I the only one who hasn’t? A girl with no clear future. Umh.”

We reached the Chaos Gate.

“Well, I don’t think you need to be so worried about it. It isn’t like you to think before you act.”

BlackRose looked at me, stunned.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You make it sound like I go through life making knee-jerk reactions!”

I quickly shook my head. “That’s not what I meant. During the Morganna Incident, I was able to give it my all until the very end because you were there. Because you were at my side and you usually acted first, I was able to fight until the end without being crushed by my own anxieties.”

Not only that, but if she hadn’t been by my side, I probably wouldn’t have been able to part with the bracelet.

“So...thank you. I’m really grateful to you.”  
I’d finally said what I hadn’t been able to at the meetup six months prior.

“W-What? What’s with that?”

Looking everywhere but at me, BlackRose muttered,  
“You’ve never said anything like that so seriously before...”

I could tell from her voice that she was really touched.

“This is the last time we’ll meet here in ‘The World,’”  
I continued, taking a leap of faith. “From now on, let’s meet up in real life.”

BlackRose's wandering gaze finally settled on me.  
She looked at me for a moment, and at last, she nodded.

"Ah. Right. Yeah, let's do that."

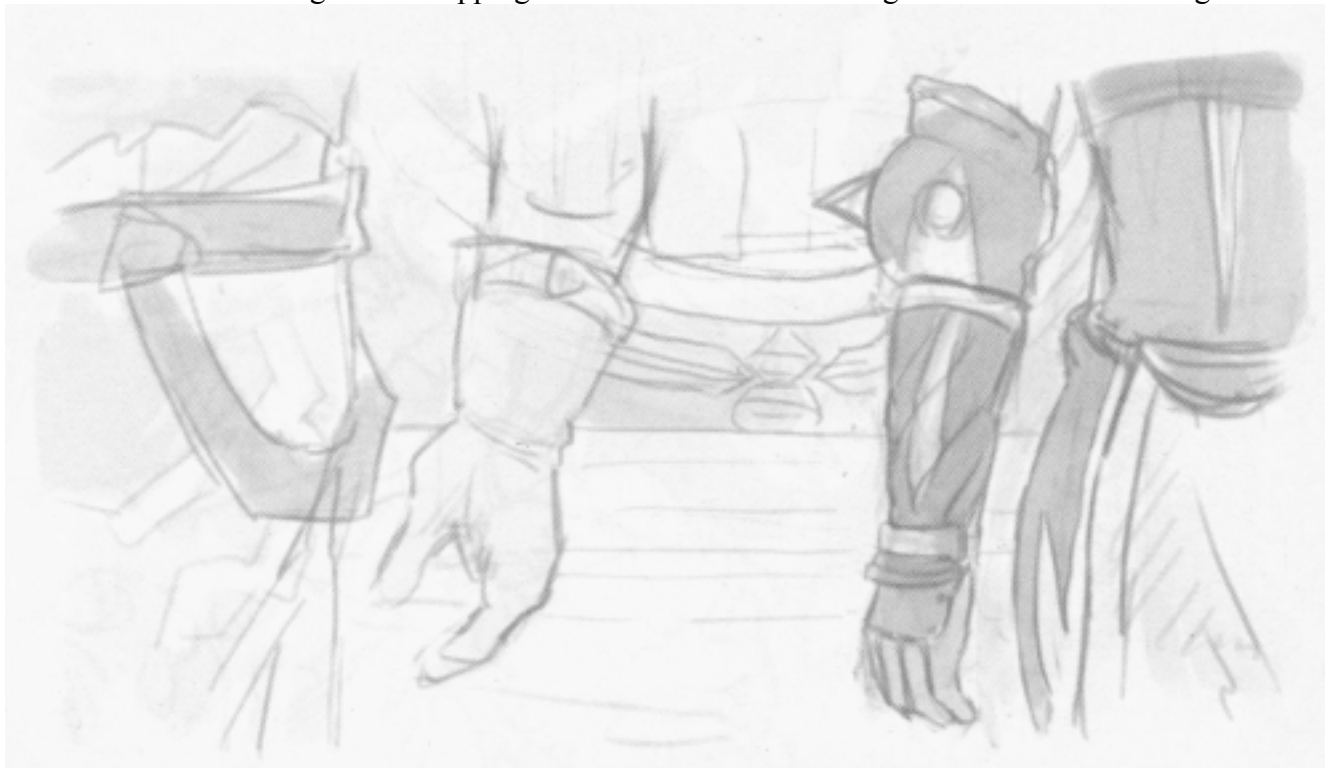
She spoke in a quiet voice and worked a hand through her hair, smiling shyly at me.  
I saw Akira Hayami in the gesture.

"Okay, so let's go to an area. Since this is our last day, we have to make the most of it."

"Yeah, you're right. Let's go."

We stood together in front of the Chaos Gate.

I didn't know what would happen from here on out. I had no idea what path I would take.  
But I did know one thing. I'd be hopping beside Akira. I had a feeling this was where I belonged.



FIN

