

The Distant Valhalla

Divergence 0.334581%

-Scenario: Hayashi Naotaka

Very often, many people want to escape from their responsibilities, but I have tons of fun while writing stories. It's even more exciting when the setting is the 'gigantic closed space' known as the SERN LHC tunnel. Doesn't that sound thrilling to you? Anyway, I originally planned to make this story about 30,000 characters long, but I put in a little too much effort and the contents reached 40,000 characters without me realizing it. By the way, the cosplayer-san that appears in the final scene is related to the story of the time traveller from 26 years in the future. Regarding that, please check out the manga 'Boukan no Rebellion' ♪

-Illustration: Ayakura Juu

Greetings, my name is Ayakura Juu. 'Steins;Gate' was one of the rare and wonderful products that I read from start to finish without stopping once, so I was very happy when I got the chance to draw illustrations for this short story. While working, I remembered the scenes from the original game and got a little sad when I realized that this is how this world line continues. This time I got to draw only Okarin and Kurisu. However, I am interested in trying my hand at drawing Mayuri and Suzuha, so I would be very ecstatic if I got the opportunity to do so. Thank you very much.

[Valhalla]

The name of the land which belongs to Odin, leader of the Gods in Scandinavian legend.

[21, DEC, 2011 11:31AM]

The girl who I haven't seen in about a year and a half was clad in an unwelcoming aura full of dignity.

One is free to say - for I am fully aware of it - that she hasn't changed at all since that time, and that a piece of the responsibility for making her like this is to be blamed on myself and my own *carelessness*.

The stings of the cold European December weather are so strong that everyone hesitates to go outside. Inside of that chill, the girl is gracefully sitting on the only bench placed in an outside terrace.

This is a humble apartment building in the French side of SERN's territory.

The building is surrounded by research establishments, so even from here, the 3rd floor, you can't get a nice rural view.

The inner courtyard below is completely devoid of people, and the withered trees make it feel even more lonely.

This is the world's greatest particle physics research facility. However, its atmosphere isn't that different from a standard Japanese university.

The girl, not yet aware of my presence, is intently looking into the distant sky.

I wonder what she's thinking of.

I don't know. I don't know, but-

Her facial features.

Her voice.

Her mannerisms.

I can clearly remember all of it.

I always wanted to meet her again.

It has been a year and a half.

Now that I think about it, the time that I've spent with her was barely even two weeks. In comparison, the long months of being apart felt like an eternity.

Even so, the girl is one of my very important friends.

Swallowing up the gathering tears and confirming that there's no one else around, I stand next to the bench where she is sitting.

"Eh...?"

Slightly frightened, the girl notices me.

Our eyes meet.

Looks like I have successfully surprised her. The expression on her face makes it too obvious.

"Assistant," I address her courageously.

"It has been a while."

"Okabe, you... Why...?"

Makise Kurisu, completely dumbfounded, starts to get up from the bench.

"I came to pick you up."

"...", and just when I thought she was speechless,

"Pfft..."

Hey, I'm being serious here, so why is she bursting into laughter?

"Playing cool as always, eh? GJ, you immature pretentious lunatic. Even though it's been a whole year and a half, you're Hououin Kyouma'ing as always."

"Don't turn my true name into an auxiliary verb."

Also, despite appearances, I only recently turned back into my Hououin Kyouma mode. Basically, I'm just trying to act brave, and to be honest, I'm slightly shaking right now. When I think about what a dangerous bridge I'm walking, my knees feel like they'll break any second. However, that is something that I could not tell Kurisu.

"Assistant, huh..."

A pained, lonely laugh leaves her mouth.

“Back then, you used to call me by a lot of silly names... Like Cristina or Zombie. I don’t remember if you ever actually addressed me properly. There are so many things I want to ask you right now, so why does something so pointless come to my mind...?”

“I feel apologetic about that.”

“Well, don’t be.”

After a little shrug, Kurisu stands up and faces me.

Step by step, as if confirming something, she walks closer to me.

“Hey, Okabe. Am I still a Lab Member?”

“Obviously.”

“I see... I’m glad...”

And suddenly, Kurisu’s face fills up with gloom as she jumps into my chest.

“I thought that I’d never see you again...”

I tightly embrace her slim body.

With my very being, I want to confirm the reality of her warmth and her being right here, in my arms.

However, the cold weather has soaked into her body, so I couldn’t confirm her warmth.

“I thought that you and Hashida were already dead...”

“Sorry I took so long to get to you.”

“Quit playing cool already, you immature lunat... *sniff*”

“Cristina...”

“I-I’m not crying!”

No matter how you look at it, she is. Even her voice was shaking.

However, a nonchalant teasing about that fact is something we cannot do anymore. Everything from that time when we were just innocently following our own curiosity has drastically changed.

And right now, we don’t have the time to celebrate our reunion.

“Cristina, we’re escaping.”

“Escaping? Where?”

“I told you that I’m here to pick you up.”

“Wait, so you’re seriously...”

“SERN escape plan. Codename, ‘Operation Valhalla’. Together, let’s go back to Akihabara, Kurisu.”



[21, DEC, 2011 11:36AM]

Everything changed 1 year ago.

The day when my ordinary university student life was taken away from me.

Sometimes, I still hear the gunshot as an auditory hallucination. The sound of the gun which shot the head of my precious *Hostage*, taking her life away.

Those letters, too, have been burned into my eyelids. When I got my hands on the despair-filled letter which practically screamed *I failed*, I realized just how strongly the universe desires a cruel ending.

Even worse that the result is my own fault, and now I'm only reaping what I sowed. I always understood that perfectly, but it still took me a year and a half to adjust to this unfair reality.

Two of my irreplaceable comrades became sacrifices to my carelessness.

One of them was my *Hostage*.

The other was my *best friend's daughter* that came from the future.

In front of so many sacrifices, I couldn't do anything but accept it.

And so, I've been led to this place.

SERN.

The particle physics research facility that, in the year 2034, successfully develops a time machine and leads the world into a dystopia. A research organization belonging to the Committee of 300 - Suzuha's enemies, the ones responsible for Mayuri's death, and the ones who put us in lenient confinement.

All of that because we accidentally invented a time machine.

SERN, who were doing time travel research in absolute secrecy, couldn't let that slide and sent the Rounders, their underground henchman organization, to stop us.

The unforgettable 13th of August, 2010. When they struck, we were casually hanging out in our lab in Akihabara.

That is when and where Mayuri was shot.

Since I didn't want to accept it, I went back in time.

I cooperated with Amane Suzuha, AKA *John Titor* – a traveller from the year 2036, to help her make a great change to the future.

But, that too, ended in *failure*.

Suzuha committed suicide in the year 2000.

I couldn't send the D-mail to erase the memories we created with her.

I tried to struggle by using the Time Leap machine, but that ended when I realized it's hopeless.

When I *gave up*, the future stayed the same and, once again, Mayuri died due to the headshot.

Our time machine was stolen, we were captured and sent here, to SERN.

Me and Daru were put under lenient arrest and separated from Kurisu, so for a whole year and a half, we couldn't confirm whether the other side was alright or not.

It was a very long year and a half, but now is the time to end it.

Divergence 0.334581%.

That is the number that I saw right before I was taken away from Akihabara, indicating the current world line fluctuation. Ever since then, Reading Steiner has been completely dormant.

[21, DEC, 2011 11:47AM]

Even though the institution where Kurisu is being held looks nice from the outside, it is an isolation ward.

There are no iron bars on the windows or anything, but the room which she was allocated has a camera on the ceiling. Her privacy is completely ignored, similar to our situation in the place where me and Daru were confined. I remember Daru grievously saying something along the lines of “Goddammit, now I can’t even fap on the floor!”. The guy should really stop screwing around.

With Kurisu by my side, we make our way from the terrace in the 3rd floor to the 1st floor of the building. Here, in the middle of the corridor, there is a computer-controlled iron bar gate. At the moment, it is fully open.

“Okabe, that...”

The moment when I tried to slip through the gate, Kurisu let go of my hand and stopped in place.

With a pale expression, she is looking to the side of the gate.

There, a brawny man is lying on the ground.

The gates are guarded 24/7, and this is the guard of the current shift. I unlocked the gates with the key that I ‘borrowed’ from him.

“Did you do that...?”

“I only put him to sleep.”

I clearly state that, subtly implying that *I’m not like the Rounders*.

About a month ago, during my preliminary investigations, I found out that every day at the same time, this guy goes to use a certain coffee machine. Then, all I did was insert a sleeping drug into the coffee he usually picks.

“Anyway, let’s hurry. The Rounders might already be after us.”

I can imagine that those perverts take a look through the security cameras in Kurisu’s room quite often, so they should have already realized that something’s not right.

“Rounders...”, her expression changes. “They’re here, too? Wait, of course they are.”

“They’re the ones who took us here, after all.”

“What about Hashida? Is he here right now?”

“Don’t worry, he’s just the usual perverted Daru. He’s the one who started this plan in the first place.”

“It’s unexpected for him to be more motivated than you, Okabe.”

“He’s powered by his wish to be there for the winter Comima.”

“Yep, that’s our usual sick pervert.”

Just like old times, Kurisu is merciless towards me and Daru. That makes me happy, not that I’m a masochist or anything.

Breaking through the lobby, we escape outside through the front entrance. Compared to Akihabara, the area near the border of Switzerland and France is very cold.

There are next to no people here. Again, compared to the hustle and bustle of Akihabara or Ikebukuro, this place feels extremely lonely. That makes it hard for us not to get noticed.

After confirming that there are no guards around, I start walking at a fast pace.

“Where are we going? The airport?”

The Geneva airport is a few kilometres away from here. That is probably the best place to go to if we want to get to Japan as soon as possible. That is what my original Plan A was, but then I came to the conclusion that it’s too risky.

“No, we’re doing Plan B.”

“Explain it in detail, please.”

“We’re going to the LHC. There, a certain companion will come pick us up in a helicopter.”

“Wha-, a helicopter? Who is that guy?”

“Daru’s acquaintance. We never actually met, but without him, the plan cannot proceed. The only thing I know about him is his nickname, which is...”

I stop and face Kurisu.

“Lightning-Fast Knight-Hart.”

“Another lunatic...? Even though he calls himself that, he’s Japanese, right?”

“Daru said that he’s an internet gamer from Japan.”

He once gave me a short explanation on Knight-Hart:

“Lightning-Fast Knight-Hart is an Ensue player who is known by everyone on the servers. Famous for liking Seira from Blood Tunes. As a fan of Erin-tan, I really wanted to fight him someday. But anyway, let’s go back to serious business. You remember the craze about espers that happened before the Shibuya earthquake 2 years ago? Well, there are rumours that the dull-looking high school boy found in the destroyed crossroad is Knight-Hart.”

When I told that story to Kurisu, she raised an eyebrow.

“Hmm... I did hear about the esper craze...”

“He’s a well-versed internet user, has many personal connections, and is very skilled at many things... apparently. Daru is quite something, but he’s not above Knight-Hart.”

“Is it okay to trust him?”

The moment I tried to answer, a distant sound of a whistle reached our ears.

After quickly turning around to where the sound was coming from, I saw a guard coming towards us on a bicycle.

“Damn, they found us out!”
 I grab Kurisu’s hand and start sprinting. At that moment...
 Bang, a dry sound pierces my ears.
 A gunshot?
 Behind the guard who was blowing the whistle, there are now two people.
 Both of them are pointing their guns at us while shouting something in French.
 Shots without hesitation, shots without warning.
 There are limits to how unreasonable one can be.
 The new people don’t look like guards.
 Even from this distance, I can tell that they have built bodies, which erases the possibility of them being particle physics researchers. Which means that they are...
 “Rounders... Their reaction is faster than I perceived! Kurisu, run!”
 “B-but, they have guns...!”
 Kurisu is crouching in fear.
 After missing the perfect timing to sprint, I grab Kurisu’s shoulders, as if to cover her up.
 The guard and the two Rounders are about 20 metres away. They have chased us to a road which goes through the area, putting us in a position where we are on one side, while they are on the other.
 If we stop here, they’ll call for reinforcements and everything will end before we can escape.
 However, if we move, then they will shoot without hesitation.
 What is the possibility of being hit if I was shot from this distance?
 I wouldn’t mind getting shot.
 However, the possibility that they will hit Kurisu is not zero. No matter how much I cover her with my own body, I cannot completely erase that chance.
 While thinking that, I lose my cool.
 What should I do? What should I do? What should I do? What should I do?
 What should I-
 I gradually start panicking.
 The guard who blew the whistle is already trying to go through the road.
 Should I run? Should I take the shot?
 I feel like both of those choices will end in failure.
 The back of my throat fills up with despair similar to that which I felt when reading *Suzuha’s letter*.
 A violent urge to vomit.
 This isn’t good. I still didn’t get over the events that happened a year and a half ago-!
 At that moment, a car went by on the road with a short beep.
 For a moment, the attention of the men was broken.
 “Now!”
 Before I realized it, I was holding Kurisu’s hand and sprinting like hell.
 Behind me, I hear a few gunshots.

I am shaking. The fear makes me want to shout, but I clench my teeth and hold it back.

If I was hit, I would've died. Just now, I realized it too well, which made shivers run down my whole body.

A certain scene comes back to my mind.

On the floor of the lab, Mayuri is lying in a pool of blood.

A shocked expression is painted on her face.

Lightless and lifeless, her open eyes are glaring at me.

My sight is drowned in a blood-red hallucination.

[21, DEC, 2011 12:03PM]

The emergency stairs are illuminated by nothing but the red lights.

This is not an illusion.

While going down the stairs, I have to keep repeating that to myself.

A dimly lit, long staircase.

Nothing here resembles a door.

This is a 100 metre one-way path going straight down.

I think I hear an intermittent rumbling sound coming from below, which makes this place feels like a gateway to hell.

Me and Kurisu are sprinting downwards. I feel like I'll lose my footing at any moment now, but I cannot stop.

"Hey, is your wound alright?"

Completely out of breath, Kurisu asks that while following me.

My leg is bleeding.

"It only grazed me. It only hurts a little bit, so don't worry...!"

Even though it was such a bullet storm, that is the only wound that I got. I wonder if it is because the Rounders lacked skill or-

The world line converged towards this result.

Anyway, we made it out alive, though only barely.

The staircase that we're using now is connected to the 27km ring tunnel, the Large Hadron Collider that is built 100m below SERN. These stairs aren't usually used.

This is the fastest way to get to the LHC from the establishment where Kurisu was confined.

Almost 5 minutes have passed since we broke the lock and started going down.

"Haah, haa, haah..."

Kurisu has trouble breathing.

Her pace is visibly slower compared to when we started.

"Don't stop, Cristina! We'll be there soon, so stay strong!"

“I, I know that...!”

I’m sure that the Rounders from before have stopped chasing us.

That too, is part of Plan B. It is the reason why I chose to go here instead of the airport.

But just to be sure, we mustn’t stop moving until we reach the bottom.

And finally, the staircase which I thought would last forever ends without any warning.

The lockless wire net door makes a creaking sound as I open it.

While breathing heavily and saying nothing, we pass through the door and enter the tunnel.

This is the LHC.

The world’s largest particle accelerator.

The 3 metre wide tunnel is lined with concrete.

It doesn’t feel cramped in here, but the fact that I can’t see how the tunnel curves is somewhat pressurizing.

Unlike the gloomy emergency staircase, this space has actual lighting, which makes it feel absurdly bright.

To fight off the recurring anxiousness, I start some of my usual small talk.

“Is this Uroboros? Or perhaps the Wheel of Fortune...?”

“You sure are in high spirits... But please stop that for now...”

Without a single giggle, Kurisu hugs her upper arms.

“Hey, what’s the possibility of them coming after us?”

“They won’t. Right now, there’s an experiment being conducted here.”

“You mean the proton-proton collision experiment.”

“That’s only what they want the public to think, you know. A year and a half ago, we found out what they’re *really trying to do*.”

“Z program...”

Time travel experiments involving the use of mini black holes. They are inhumane acts which have been committed since the year 2001. The test subjects are forced into mini black holes, causing them to be thrown back into a random time in the past. Their chances of survival are completely ignored.

“It’s suicidal to go to the place where mini black holes are being created...! Did you forget the Jellyman’s reports?”

“As if I could! It’s because I remembered them that I decided to go through here.”

“Oh, right... That’s why the Rounders...”

They want to avoid the dangers of becoming a Jellyman.

That’s why the off-limits LHC is the best escape route.

I’m aware of the dangers, but it’s necessary to take some risks to escape from the Rounders.

Also, I know for a fact that a black hole cannot spontaneously appear in the tunnel. If that happened, the LHC, no – all of CERN – would probably be thrown into the past, leaving nothing but a crater.

However, that doesn't change the fact that it's dangerous. The fact that Rounders aren't coming after us is proof of that.

I heard that when LHC is operating, it's not easy to stop it.

That is why this escape route buys us a lot of time.

Suddenly, I feel phone vibrations in one of my pockets.

"You have a cellphone? I didn't even see one since that time when I was brought here and mine was taken away."

"Knight-Hart sneaked it in for us."

"He sent it all the way from Japan?"

"The ability to make whatever he wants reach wherever he wants just by using the net is the most impressive thing about him."

I might have added too much fantasy to my words, but as someone who experienced it, I would say that it's not weird to call it magic. The way he makes the objects reach their destination is so cloudy that one can't help but wonder.

Oh, I forgot that I'm being called. There is only one person who could be calling me by this phone.

"Hello, it's me."

"Okarin, did you meet up with Miss Makise?"

Just as expected, it's Daru.

"Yeah. We're going slower than expected, but we successfully reached phase 3. What's the situation?"

"Been a while since you've been this lively, Okarin. As a pretentious lunatic, that is. Right now, the scientists don't look like they're gonna stop the LHC."

"So, there are no changes to phase 4, right?"

"If you don't get to the rendezvous point in the next 2 hours, it's gonna get real bad, bro. Think you can do it?"

"If we don't, it's all over. There's no room for failure. This plan will definitely succeed and we'll make it in time for Comima's first day."

"Uhihi, of course we will. After all, the driving forces behind scientific advancement are wars and erotica."

Before I let out a grand sigh, I cut him off.

Right now, the LHC is performing a Z program time travel experiment. The test subject is probably another human. He's probably just an uninformed volunteer waiting for something amazing.

Right now, we have no means of saving that person. No means of saving him from that horrible fate.

"From where did Hashida call?"

Sweat is running down Kurisu's forehead. Just like me, she is a bad athlete.

"He took different actions and is already here at the LHC."

"Eh? Really?"

"Yeah. Right now, I'm sure that he's now hacking around to put SERN into a chaotic state."

He might be the reason for the lack of Rounder activity.

Arranging my breathing, I once again look around.

Besides us, the tunnel is completely void of human presence.

The only sounds that reach our ears are the ones which remind me of rumbling. Even though an experiment is taking place, it is way too quiet. I wonder if this is the 'usual' LHC.

The thing that stands out the most in this tunnel is the pipe-like object releasing a silver glow. The whole 27km long tunnel was created for this pipe which isn't even 1m wide.

A particle accelerator. One can also call it an acceleration tunnel. This object which has a striking resemblance to a pipe is the true form of the LHC.

While thinking that, I realize that I'm somewhat afraid of touching it. I know that it's impossible, but a part of me is scared that it might explode if I do.

"Look, Cristina. Right now, inside that, a proton is accelerating to an amazing speed of 99.9999991% of the speed of light."

"...Right."

Kurisu doesn't seem to care much about it.

Now that I look at her, she's staying as far away from it as possible.

Strange. She's was always a hardcore experiment-loving girl and a vigorous scientist with limitless curiosity.

The Kurisu that I know would have shown interest already.

I ask her with a glance.

Noticing me looking at her, Kurisu quickly shifts her gaze towards the far tunnel.

"Okabe, aren't you afraid?"

"Are you?"

"..."

So basically, her fear is winning over curiosity.

The fact that bullets were flying at us just a while ago might be influencing that.

"Anyway, where to?"

She's asking where are we supposed to go now.

Fortunately for us, there's an information board nearby.

The place where we're supposed to rendezvous with Knight-Hart is the *CMS*, one of the LHC observation posts.

"Hmm... From our location, it's almost on the opposite side of the LHC ring. That's quite a distance."

"It was the easiest point to secure."

"Won't we be intercepted there?"

"That's what Daru is hacking for."

Also, SERN is not a fortress. It's not like there are huge numbers of standby Rounders all over the place. It's physically impossible for them to secure every exit of the LHC. We can take advantage of that.

"We now have to run to the rendezvous point in less than 2 hours."

“What’s the distance?”

“About 10km.”

“5km per hour, eh...? Well, it’s a distance I can cover by just walking at a fast pace.”

“There’s no proof that they won’t come after us. Also, did you ever run 10000m?”

“Nope...”

After a light nod, I grab Kurisu’s hand and start running.

“W-wait, Okabe! Stop pulling me...!”

“If we don’t rendezvous with Knight-Hart, it’s all over. We have to get there as soon as possible.”

“I don’t think my body can last...”

“Same here.”

Besides, my leg is damaged. The wound that I got from the shot is not deep, but it still kinda hurts.

Even so, now is not the time to be whining about something as minor as that.

“You sure are selfish...”

As if giving up on something, Kurisu slightly shakes her head and stops complaining.

A reunion after a whole year and a half. There are many things I want to say. However, there will be lots of time for that after we escape. Inaudibly, I keep telling myself that.



[21, DEC, 2011 13:32PM]

The LHC ring tunnel is cold. Even though this area is underground, it feels much colder than the outside.

However, the cold feels good on my body which has gotten really hot due to all the running.

For me and Kurisu, who are not very athletic, running 10km is borderline impossible, so we have to push ourselves real hard.

This whole run has been a muscle-tearing, throat-drying torture from hell, but because of it, we have reached the rendezvous point 30mins earlier than planned.

“We are... way too fast... haah, haah...”

Not being able to walk anymore, Kurisu drops to her knees.

I too, place my lactic acid-ridden body on the floor and position myself for a comfort rest.

Slowly, I look over what's over our heads.

I didn't have the time to inspect the gloomy and unnaturally high ceiling.
CMS.

Embraced in silence, the observation post gives off a sense of mystique. It feels like some sort of altar.

This is one of the places for the observation of the particle collision experiments of the LHC. The CMS shaft has a height similar to that of a 6 floor building.

In the middle of it, there's a large, awe-striking observation unit which resembles a Mandala.

An obvious lack of organic matter and a perfect symmetry.

Uncountable amounts of cords are connected to it as if they were blood vessels.

Daru, while looking at pictures of this, used to spout some bullshit about it being *moe*.

The current Z program experiment is being held at a different observation point. Right now, the CMS is nothing but a checkpoint for the accelerated proton.

For me and Kurisu, however, this place is our goal.

Just like the almost 10km road that we ran, this large manmade cave is void of other human presence.

Looks like Knight-Hart is not here yet.

Daru should be coming here as well. Just to confirm it, I take out my phone and call him. However, no matter how much I wait, he doesn't pick up.

“What is he up to now...?”

Maybe he can't answer because he's on the move.

Don't make me anxious, damn it.

I close the cellphone for now and decide that I'll call again after a while.

I approach Kurisu, who is standing with her back on the wall.

We were able to buy ourselves some time without thinking it.

I want to use this time to talk with Kurisu.

While Kurisu is regaining her breath, I sit down next to her. She throws a glance at my face, but then quickly looks to the other side.

If I had some water, I'd give it to her. Sadly, I don't have something that convenient.

"What were you doing the past year and a half...?"

"I've been confined, just like you."

Every day, we've been provided the same three meals, and bathed every evening. If we were lucky, we'd get books, DVDs or even a video game.

We've been observed by cameras 24 hours a day, and we couldn't contact anyone outside SERN, but besides that, there were no limitations for us.

Daru was placed in the same room as I, but instead of helping me get back up on my feet, he waited until I did it myself.

The room where we were confined didn't have internet connection, but somehow, Daru managed to contact Knight-Hart and had a big role in Operation Valhalla.

"Were you shown the experiments...?"

"Experiments? What do you mean?"

"Z program's human experiments..."

Kurisu's expression changes into a painful one.

"You didn't attend even one of them?"

"No..."

"I was coerced into watching. Not only that, but they also gave me a detailed explanation, as if they were expecting me to play a part in it."

Kurisu's intellect is extremely valuable, so SERN probably wants to use it.

The one who made the Microwave Ophone (temp) was Daru, and the one who upgraded it into the Time Leap Machine was Kurisu.

I didn't do anything. The only thing I did was spout stupid delusions.

That is why the people here started treating us differently over time.

"So, you were forced to watch the experiment where you knew that the test subject will be jellified?"

"None of the chosen test subjects were informed of the result. Most of them were told that they will become the first time travellers in history."

"..."

To observe the experiment is the same as to participate in a murder.

However, Kurisu cannot do anything to save the test subject.

That dilemma must be a mental torture.

I... they didn't do anything to me, I wasn't taken anywhere and I wasn't forced to observe experiments.

My and Kurisu's brain value is completely different. What SERN needs is not me, but Kurisu and her overwhelming intellect.

Wait, why am I feeling jealous? Am I an idiot?

“Hey, Okabe...”

Kurisu isn't looking at me. Embraced by the gloom of the room, her expression looks very empty.

For the whole past year and a half, Kurisu was probably the only one who didn't get a moment to let her mind and heart rest.

“If we escape here, what are you planning on doing?”

“After we return to Akihabara, I will change the past.”

Once again.

Changing the past changes the future.

The change is something I, the owner of Reading Steiner, can observe.

“Mayuri has to be...”

Mayuri has to be saved.

The failure to do that back then is now burning as fuel for my motivation.

“Did you find a way to change it?”

That question makes me lose my words.

Right, I don't know of a way to do that.

What I have are two things:

The will to change the past.

The will to bring back a childhood friend who died a year and a half ago.

“If you want to change the past, then there is no need to escape from here.”

“What...?”

“Do you remember what Amane-san said?”

The person who appeared on the Japanese discussion boards, claiming to be a time traveller from the future, John Titor AKA Lab member 008, Amane Suzuha – one of my trusted comrades.

“23 years from now, in 2034, humanity successfully creates the first time machine. The ones responsible for it are SERN.”

“What about it...?”

“If you want to change the past, then there is no need to escape from here.”

Kurisu repeats the same words once again.

“If you really wish to change it, then you should cooperate in SERN's experiments.”

I doubt my ears.

“Are you being serious?”

“If saving Mayuri is all you want, then that is the better choice. If you wait for 23 years, you'll get a method to influence Akihabara in 2010.”

“SERN and Rounders are the ones who killed Mayuri.”

Clenching my fist, I get angry.

“Don't you dare say that I should help them...!”

“Sorry, I didn't mean it...”

Kurisu gets visibly flustered at my reaction.

Of course, I know that Kurisu is not serious. Still, I can't help but become enraged. It surprises even me that I, who gave up a year and a half ago, still had such

feelings inside me.

“We had talks about the possibilities... The best plan of action if you prioritize saving Mayuri is to cut off all of your emotions and do what you must...”

“Truly, that would be a logical decision. However, I am neither logical nor realistic.”

Long ago, I used to call myself a mad scientist who doesn't choose methods to fulfil his goals. However, when faced with a situation like this, my emotions easily got the better of me.

“Hey, what will we do when we return to Akihabara...?”

Kurisu asks me that nervously.

“Do you have an idea on how to save Mayuri?”

“We will create another Time Leap Machine...”

“Impossible.”

Kurisu looks away and weakly shakes her head.

“That was the result of piled up accidents that one might call miracles. It is not something we made on purpose...”

“Are you saying that you want to stay here!?”

I shout with no hesitation, getting a bit too emotional. I realize that I should have some self control, but I can't hold back. Kurisu was never so menial and negative. Each and every one of her words were dignified.

Did she change? Just like I became rotten during the 1 year and a half lenient confinement?

I don't want to see my assistant like this.

“There's no way I would... It's just that, during all that time, I thought about a lot of things...”

Right, just like me. What is right? Am I mistaken? What should I do?

The result of that thinking was Operation Valhalla.

“Suzuha was a member of the resistance created by me and Daru. She fought to prevent SERN's dystopia rule. What did she use for that? Answer, Kurisu!”

Kurisu's body shook due to my loud voice, and she lightly hugged her own shoulders.

“Time... machine...”

“Right. The time machine that me and Daru made. It was incomplete, but it could go back in time. Not D-mails, not time leaps, but physical time travel, above what SERN could do...!”

We can make a time machine by ourselves.

We don't need SERN for that. There is no reason for us to stay here.

We mustn't remain in this place.

“I tried not to think much about Amane-san...”

However, Kurisu bites her lip, as if she has something hard to say.

What?

“If you're going to talk about time machines, then you shouldn't try to fool me.”

What?

“Try to remember the 2036 that she observed.”

“Observed...?”

“Specifically, our and Hashida’s state at that time.”

“...”

With a small gulp, I lose my breath without thinking it.

Kurisu covers her face with her hands and lightly shakes her head.

That action is a perfect indicator of how much she is suffering.

“When I think about something like that, I... I just don’t know. I don’t understand. The past year and a half, I’ve been thinking, and the more I thought, the more I got lost. I can’t differentiate what’s wrong and what’s right anymore...”

When she looked up, I noticed that her eyes are red.

Is she crying...?

“I feel as if we’re just walking straight into the same future that Amane-san told us about.”

“Same future...?”

“The incomplete time machine that Amane-san used was created by you and Hashida. For the sake of negating the future where Mayuri dies and SERN creates a dystopia.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“What became of that?”

Stop it.

“What became of Amane-san, the time machine... and Mayuri?”

Stop it.

“She failed. Amane-san failed. Don’t tell me that you have forgotten that letter...”

Don’t say anything beyond that.

Don’t say the *conclusion* that I’ve averted my eyes to!

“I will not repeat the same mistakes again-“

“It will be converged, Okabe.”

Shut up.

“Into the very same ending.”

“Attractor... Fields...”

The will of the universe.

The predetermined future.

Even if one changes the steps, the future will converge to the same result.

It’s as if the universe itself decides where the future will lead, making everything unconditional and absolute.

One year ago, I experienced it myself when I unsuccessfully tried to save Mayuri by time leaping countless times and trying out any possible method. I just couldn’t break away from the convergence.

That is the meaning of an Attractor Field.

Not the many-worlds interpretation, not the Copenhagen interpretation. But the

means by which the world is bound in 2036.

“The Attractor Fields are like shackles to us. I keep thinking that it’s hopeless no matter what we do... I don’t believe that a method to get a different ending even exists...”

While talking, Kurisu wipes her eyes with her fingers. Her voice is cracking due to her crying.

“Do you still think you can escape from here? Even if you know that you’ll fail, will you still resist SERN?”

“I...”

“Besides, even the mindset that you can make a change might be a mistake in itself... You might be misunderstanding things just because you have that weird Reading Steiner power. But me – no – every other human besides you cannot notice the world line changes. If that’s the case, then not only the result, but also the process cannot be changed...”

My power is a cheat.

It is something that must not be possessed.

“Having it is what gives me a chance to make a change.”

Even though I might be putting on airs...

I will use this chance that was given to me.

“I can’t become strong with just that.”

Kurisu laughs in self-derision. The unbalance of her laughing in the middle of a teary breakdown is a perfect indication of her mental state. Right now, Kurisu is too anxious.

“Amane-san’s *observed result* is so heavy that I can feel it pressing down on me, making it hard to move.”

The value of Makise Kurisu of the 2036 that Suzuha observed... That is-

“‘The Mother of Time Machines’, eh...?”

The main researcher behind the first time machine in history.

The main reason behind the dystopia.

A SERN researcher.

“If the world lines converge, then no matter what I do, I cannot escape from here. Right? From here on out, I will stay here, researching time machines for over 20 years...”

“Nobody can prove that.”

“You’re contradicting yourself, Okabe. You believed the words of the so-called *Hashida’s Daughter* who came to Akihabara in the year 2010 in a so-called *Time Machine*. Then you must believe her words about the situation in the year 2036.”

“That’s-“

“Your own future has already been *promised* to you. You have... to accept that...”

“My future...”

I will die in 14 years.

Suzuha AKA John Titor has predicted that.

However, ‘prediction’ isn’t the right word in this case.

To Suzuha, that was a *truth that has already happened*.

It was not a guess, but a result.

However, now I...

“I will not accept that!”

Coming closer to Kurisu, I grab her shoulders and look her in the eyes.

“You’re contradicting yourself...”

“No, I am not!”

“But I don’t understand! Did the egg come first? Or was it the chicken? Just tell me!”

“D-mails, Kurisu. By using them to influence the past, I was able to change the present. This is the same as that. Changing the past changes the future.”

By ‘past’ I mean the events that lead to an *end*.

“Right at this moment, countless *endings* are being born, along with the *processes* leading to them! Not even God or whatever knows the difference between the two! This isn’t a movie or a short story, so there is no clear punctuation between them!”

I won’t let my future to be decided.

I can change it, I know it.

There must be a way to save Mayuri.

And there must be a way for me to not die in 14 years.

“There must be a method to avoid convergence. Suzuha’s entire mission was based on that fact. That is why she went to 1975.”

To escape the influence of the attractor fields – the fate of the universe – is to give some form of influence on a major *turning point* in history. By doing that, we can create an entirely different path. That is what Suzuha told us.

To her, the needed tool was the IBN5100.

“Even though she failed, it is still possible to make a change. That is what I believe...!”

I know that I’m just spouting shit about will-power or whatever and that Kurisu dislikes that.

However, to summon miracles, one must not stay at the theory level.

“Kuris, what about you? Do you or do you not believe that it’s possible?”

“...”

I ask her if she’s prepared.

I just stated my own resolution, but what about her’s?

I send her a questioning glance.

Kuris, tell me whether you’re prepared or not.

“I want to believe.”

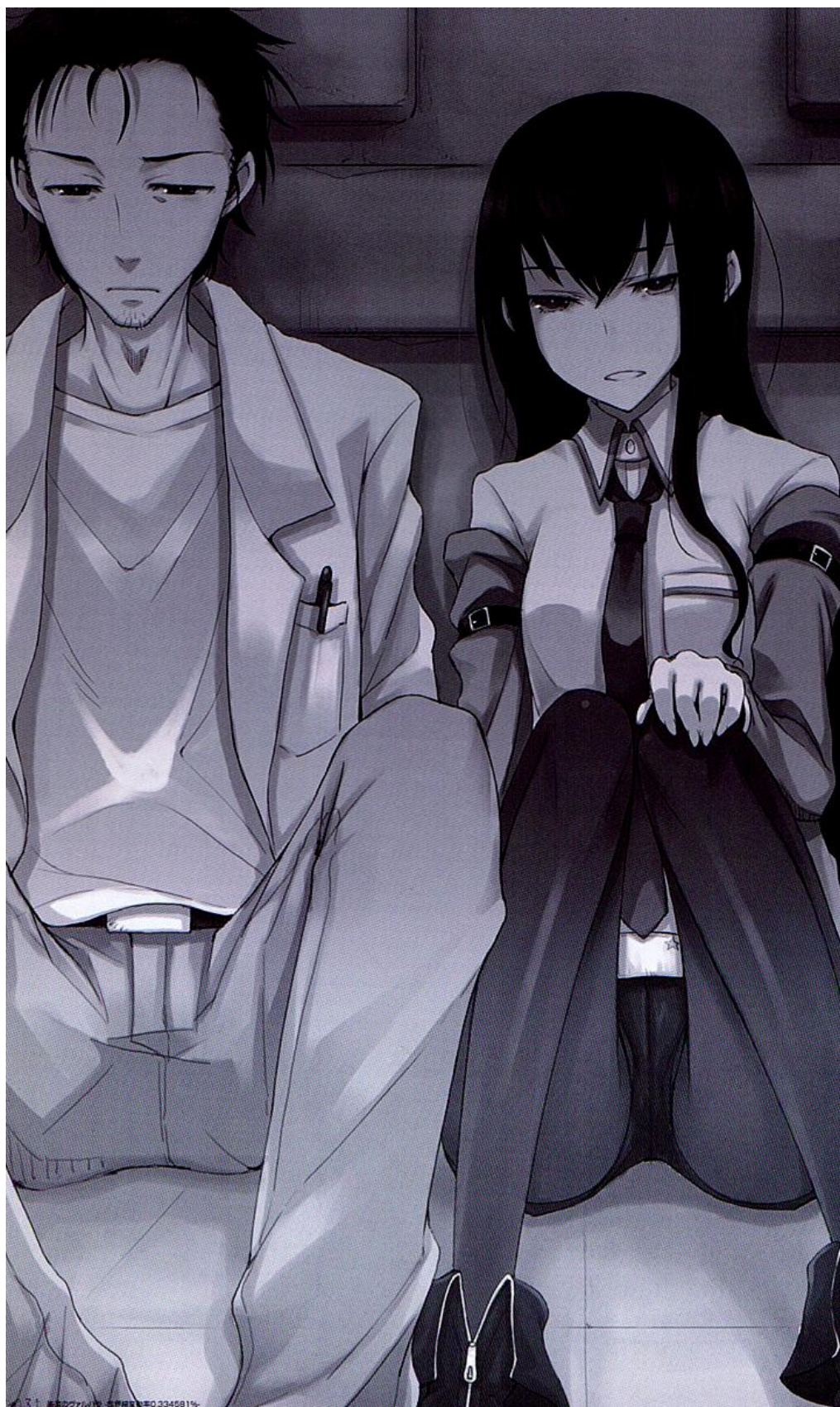
Not even wiping her tears, she returns my gaze.

A gaze like in the old days.

Challenging.

Biting.

Piercing.
Sharp.
“I want to believe that.”
She repeats her answer again, and jumps into my chest.
With no hesitation, I embrace her.
As she shakes in my arms, I gently stroke her hair and back.
I’ve always wanted to see her.
A friend from which I was separated for a year and a half.
A friend who fought with me for the sake of saving Mayuri.
The only one who understood me in my battle against time.
She’s the only one who supported me, and she’s the reason why I lasted.
She gave me the *chance to try again* – the Time Leap Machine.
I knew that you would stand up to this challenge.
That is what a strong comrade you are.
Without Kurisu and Daru, I cannot save Mayuri.
“We will definitely escape. We will return to Akihabara.”
“Take me with you, Okabe... Away from world line convergence...”
I will not allow it.
I... we will definitely avoid that future.
The escape from SERN and the Operation Valhalla are events decided by
Okabe Rintarou, not the universe.



[21, DEC, 2011 15:04PM]

5 minutes have passed since the set rendezvous time.

Neither Daru nor Knight-Hart came.

Grasping each other's hand, me and Kurisu silently, calmly and anxiously waited for them.

The one who told us not to be late was Daru.

Not only the one who had the guts to say that, but the guy who did pretty much everything perfectly up to now – Knight-Hart – is also late. What the hell's up with that?

I call Daru again, and that makes it my 5th attempt. None of the previous ones were successful.

"It sure is quiet..."

Kurisu whispers that with a clear expression while looking upwards.

Silence.

The only thing I can hear is the call signal from my phone.

The silence is so thick that it brings on the feeling of us being alone in the world.

Even time itself seems to have stopped.

Once again, I realize that this is a place cut off from the rest of the planet.

After all, this *is* 100 metres underground.

Why isn't Daru answering...?

What's up with Knight-Hart?

Why aren't they here yet?

Please don't let it be that Knight-Hart has been intercepted and is currently having a shootout with the Rounders up above...

Or maybe... they already escaped?

No, I absolutely don't see a reason for Daru to betray us. Maybe there was some sort of accident? Did I get the wrong rendezvous point? No, that can't be, this is unmistakably the CMS.

What other reasons could there be?

Sudden echoes of high pitched footsteps.

Surprised, Kurisu and I slightly rise up and become alert.

I close the phone, ending the unsuccessful call attempt.

As if clinging to me, Kurisu comes closer.

The direction of the footsteps...

The footsteps are coming from the tunnel opposite to which we came from.

I can see a person there.

Just a single person.

Light is coming into my eyes, so I can't see who it is.

The person is coming closer.

There are 2 things I can tell from those footsteps.

First, the way the legs move is so carefree that it's annoying.
And second, the fact that the shoes are heels.
Knight-Hart is...
"A woman..."
The one to questioningly bend her head was Kurisu, but she didn't say anything besides that.
Daru isn't with her...
Then why isn't he answering?
"Hey..."
Clinging to me, Kurisu whispers.
Due to the overwhelming silence, Knight-Hart might be hearing that whisper.
The sound of the heels is echoing all over the CMS, which is as large as a 6-floor building.
"Isn't it too quiet?" Kurisu asks.
Judging only by the silhouette of the shadow of the woman who we think to be Knight-Hart, she isn't Japanese.
She is also somewhat tall, probably the same height as me.
As she gracefully walks while wearing a black suit and a tight skirt, she reminds me of some woman right out of a Hollywood film.
It's annoying that I can't see her face. I can't tell if she's Japanese.
"Too quiet? Obviously. Now where the hell is Daru loafing around?"
"It is too quiet, Okabe."
It's important, so I said it twice. Remembering that net slang, I pay more attention to her next words.
"When we were going down here, there was lots of sound, remember?"
Truly.
There was also the intermittent rumbling.
I made vague assumptions that it was the LHC operation sound, or perhaps ventilation. I didn't think anything beyond that. I thought that it doesn't matter.
"That humming sound is gone."
"Gone...?"
I listen deeply.
Just like she says, the sound has stopped.
I can't hear the heavy low sound anywhere.
What was it like when we came to the CMS?
Could we hear the sound in here?
I don't know. I cannot remember. I wasn't so conscious of it.
LHC should be in the middle of a Z program proton-proton collision experiment. It should take a long while to stop it, so why can't we hear the sound anymore?
"Mister Okabe and Miss Makise, right?"
While I'm in a state of confusion, Knight-Hart starts speaking to us.
"I am Lightning-fast Knight-Hart. Heheh, it's embarrassing to introduce

myself with that name.”

Her voice is calm and intellectual. A complete contrast to what you’d normally expect from someone with a handle name ‘Lightning-fast’.

“You’re a woman...?”

Once again, Kurisu tilts her head. That question stops my thoughts from going nuclear.

“My real name is Hiragi Akiko, and just like you, I’m Japanese.”

Kurisu should work on her question priorities.

Whether Knight-Hart is a man or woman doesn’t matter right now. The real question right now is why did the LHC stop!

“The LHC stopped... Even though it should be impossible to shut it down so quickly...!”

Strongly pulling Kurisu with me, I dash to the altar-like observation unit which is pierced by the pipe extending from the tunnel from which we came from to the one from which Knight-Hart entered.

“Why did they stop it?”

After slowly extending my hand towards the pipe, I touch it.

The only thing I feel is that the surface is pleasantly cool. I cannot tell if there’s a proton going at speeds close to the speed of light just by touching it.

Right after that-

The lights embracing both of the tunnels have disappeared.

It felt as if someone turned off all the light switches in no proper order.

As the fluorescent lamps surrounding the CMS are getting switched off, the darkness is coming closer...

And the light is escaping.

My eyes didn’t adjust to the dark yet, so I lose my sight for a moment.

The sound of heels has come to a stop.

“Knight-Hart!? Where are you? It’s gonna get real bad at this rate, the Rounders are-!”

“Please calm down, Mister Okabe.”

Calm and collected, Knight-Hart’s voice echoes in the man-made cave. She didn’t raise her tone or anything, but I still heard that perfectly.

However-

I can’t tell from which side the voice is coming.

Is my sense of direction gone crazy due to the lack of light?

Where is Kurisu? I look around, but can’t see her anywhere through the darkness.

I can’t let go of the pipe that I’m touching. It feels like the darkness will consume me if I do.

After all, this is 100 metres under the ground, close to the place where mini black holes are created and the headquarters of the people who killed Mayuri.

“No need to worry. Everything is going according to plan.”

Something about those words felt uncomfortable. How can she be so calm?

“Are you really Knight-Hart...?”

Kurisu’s voice came from closer than I thought.

Feeling her presence, I extend my hand towards her.

“Kurisu?”

“Okabe...!”

Kurisu jumps into my chest.

“Miss Makise, do you think I am not Knight-Hart? That’s rude, did we meet on the net before, Miss ‘KuriGohan and Kamehameha’?”

I still can’t tell Knight-Hart’s location.

That aside, what did Kurisu say just now?

“We didn’t. However, the high school kid who was found in the Shibuya crossroad during the esper craze was male.”

“Is there any proof that the boy was Knight-Hart?”

“So you’re a person who judges people by intuition, Miss Makise? That’s somewhat disappointing.”

What the hell are they on about?

“Hey, please tell me. What was that about ‘according to plan’. Was Daru the one who turned off the lights? Where is he? Don’t tell me that he has been captured...”

“Okabe, something about this person is strange.” Kurisu whispers to me.

“That aside, there’s a possibility that Rounders are coming down, let’s escape ASAP!”

I have to contact Daru for that, too-

“Rounders are...” Knight-Hart’s voice is brimming with enjoyment for some reason “... already here.”

For a moment, I fail to grasp the meaning of those words.

Adjusted to the darkness, my eyes can finally make out something moving.

Hastily, I look around.

Two green lights are floating in the darkness.

No-

Not two.

The number is constantly increasing.

6... 10... 14... 20...

Countless green demons playing in the dark.

These are eyes.

Turning crimson, the 10 sets of eyes are glaring at us.

Now I know true fear. A sense of dread so great that I can’t even scream.

Who are they where did they come from they didn’t make stepping sounds these lights are infrared goggles they probably came from the tunnel that we ran for almost 2 hours did they come after us didn’t Daru and Knight-Hart notice if they did why didn’t they tell us CMS is too quiet the rumbling sound of the LHC has stopped though we heard the sound of the heels of the woman we thought to be Knight-Hart we didn’t feel the presence of the 10 soldiers coming after us at all did they come by car or bicycle we didn’t hear the sound of engines or pedals and not even the

footsteps of them running I don't get it I don't get it-

"You better not move. P90s are aimed at you right now, so if you move, it won't be a *test*."

Knight-Hart's tone is carefree.

"Rounders...!?"

Cold sweat trickles down my back and my throat became completely dry.

Kurisu also lost her words.

The armed men did not make a single sound while coming after us. No sound at all. Now that I think about it, the time between the lights turning off and us realizing their presence was less than 30 seconds.

Which means that...

We weren't ambushed. When we came here, I felt no hiding human presence.

"They were... right behind us...?"

"Staying about 500 metres away is more than enough."

Knight-Hart AKA Hiiragi Akiko says something cryptic.

"At that distance, you couldn't notice us due to the curving of the LHC ring."

What is she saying?

Suddenly, the phone in my pocket starts vibrating.

Someone is calling me. That 'someone' is too obvious. The only one who knows the phone number is Daru.

However, I cannot answer. The fear of being aimed at by 10 guns in this blinding darkness destroys my ability to move even a finger. The sound of the vibration is getting so annoying that I want it to stop already.

"The reason why you didn't realize us coming after you is not because you are incompetent."

She's talking as if to console us – cheerfully, calmly and somewhat annoyingly.

"It's because all Rounders are very skilled."

"So you weren't Knight-Hart after all!"

Kurisu shouts with a shaking voice.

"No." The self-proclaimed Knight-Hart AKA Hiiragi Akiko denies that claim, as if she was expecting it.

"I am the same Knight-Hart who planned Operation Valhalla along with you and Mister Hashida. Why don't you try answering the phone?"

The... phone...?

"Okabe, this was all a trap..."

I take out the phone from my pocket. In complete darkness, the light of the display screen feels brighter than usual. The displayed number is not Daru's.

"Do you get it now?"

The voices coming from both my phone and Hiiragi Akiko's mouth are synchronized.

I'm at a loss for words. My arms wrap around Kurisu without me realizing it. Not knowing her location, I talk to the phone.

“You too... are a Rounder!”

“Heheh.”

A feminine laugh.

“Well then, let’s begin the experiment.”

“Experiment!? Z program!?”

“An experiment to prove world line convergence.”

“What...?”

A pressurizing bloodlust.

Chills go down all of my body.

This does not bode well.

I can feel the green-eyed demons adjust their weapons.

Death is close.

It feels so bad that I feel like vomiting.

My fingers are so cold that they might drop at any moment.

The atmosphere of the room itself seems to have frozen.

“Kurusu, run-!”

Sounds of gunshots pierce my ears.

Muzzle flashes become rays of light which pierces the darkness.

With Kurisu in my hands, I drop to the shadow of the LHC *pipe*.

All I can do now is hide our bodies.

Kurusu shouted something, but the sound of the guns was too great for me to hear it.

Chaotic shooting. Shots flying into a single direction, devoid of any pattern or order.

Countless bullets are flying above us.

I never stood in the middle of a battle before, but the sounds and violent explosions which shake the heart are so strong that I’m at a loss for words-

[21, DEC, 2011 16:10PM]

It hurts.

It hurts so much that I feel like my limbs are ripped off.

Where’s Kurisu...?

Before caring about my own wounds, I focus my attention on her.

She is curled up in my arms.

“Uh, uhh...”

A relieving light groan.

I’m so glad that she’s alive.

“Mister Okabe, are you alive?”

I don’t know since when, but light was shining here once again. A woman’s silhouette stands nearby.

I try get up, but it’s hopeless. Heat is flowing all over my body, and pain pierces me the moment I try to move. That is when I realize that I’m covered in blood.

Even I am amazed to be alive in such a state.

“Wow, this is wonderful!”

A high-pitched feminine voice full of excitement reaches my ears.

“You’re alive, even though a bunch of Rounder elites seriously attempted to kill you. They had infrared goggles on, so they couldn’t have missed because of the darkness. Regardless of that, you’re still breathing. Not only that, but you don’t even have any critical wounds.”

I can’t raise my head due to the pain, so I can’t look up at her – Hiiragi’s – face. I *can* hear her voice though, and it’s carefree, as if a shooting has never happened here.

The Rounders who shot large amounts of bullets at us are standing at a distance, holding their guns.

Adorning gray city-use fatigues, they look like normal soldiers.

“Attractor fields and world line convergence. I never thought that they’d be so grand. It completely defies common sense. *Us* being scientists, we didn’t really want to believe such a phenomenon until it’d been scientifically proven.”

They were fucking around with us.

They were planning this from the start.

And they don’t even try to hide that they’re related to SERN.

“After seeing this result, all I have left is to believe. Don’t you think so, Mister Okabe? Ah, don’t worry. Doctors are on standby here, so they’ll treat you soon.”

Violent pain flows through my body and mind like electricity.

I bite my lips to hold back the pained moans.

“We are on strict orders from the *Committee of 300* to understand the structure of the universe. For that, we would also like to find out more about your Reading Steiner psychic power.”

Regret builds over the pain.

I bite my lips so strongly that I pierce them, causing the taste of blood to spread in my mouth.

The words said by the woman known as Hiiragi Akiko.

Attractor Fields and world line convergence.

I wanted to reject those curses.

‘The future can be changed.’

‘I will change the failures of the past and restore the future.’

However, if what happened here right now is reality...

Then the things that John Titor said were neither child’s scribbles nor bullshit.

This is the *result* of the universe strictly going towards a pre-destined future.

The fact that I’m still alive is proof that the world is converging towards the same result.

Yes. Normally I would have died 2 times today.

Luckily, however, I survived.

Both of the times, the bullets did nothing but scrape my body.

Is that really luck?

Or perhaps-

The fact that I'm alive right now is just a converged event?

If that's true...

Then isn't the *result* of me dying in 2025 also already decided?

Just like Suzuha knew.

Suzuha is the only one who observed the future.

"So... I cannot escape from causality...?"

Not only me.

Kurisu's future is also known.

If it's like Suzuha said, then until Kurisu completes the time machine in 2034, she cannot escape from SERN no matter what.

"The results of the current experiment are collected. It wouldn't be wrong to say that it's a success. You two – no – three including Mister Hashida. Thank you for cooperating in the experiment. Allow me to explain why we chose such an inconvenient way of going around it. We have a responsibility to do so."

Hiiragi is still talking. So fluently that it feels like she's singing, and with that usual cheerfulness.

"To put it simply, we respect the free will of the 3 of you. If we tried to bend causality with our own hands, the results of the experiments would be somewhat doubtful. The sample we needed was a more pure and natural occurrence of the phenomenon. That is why I found out some of the *results* of the future from Mister Hashida. Like the fact that his little lady time travelled from 25 years in the future. I don't really doubt that. After all, we are also doing time travel research."

I'm imprisoned by the will of the universe.

Whatever I do, I won't die for the next 14 years.

Whatever I do, I will die after 14 years.

Whatever I do-

For 23 years, Kurisu will be researching time machines for SERN.

Daru will be killed by Rounders, while his time machine is still incomplete.

Suzuha will time travel to 2010 and fail.

I won't get back the IBN5100.

I cannot escape the attractor fields.

Mayuri will not be saved.

"By using the girl's information as a base, we manipulated your actions. That might be called causality manipulation and add a little doubt to the experimental results. Anyway, since this isn't 2034, and we still don't have time machines, this kind of inspection of causality bending is kind of meaningless."

Nothing will change. Nothing *did* change.

A year and a half ago, I gave up once.

No matter how much I try, it will all repeat itself.

Everything's pointless.

"The result was satisfying. World line convergence prevents death itself."

No matter how much I try.

Just like I couldn't save Mayuri back then.

Nothing has changed.

"Forgive me..."

"It's regrettable, but we have to release Mister Hashida. He must go back to Japan and have a daughter. Until we have our time machine in 23 years, we don't want to mess with causality that much."

While the woman is speaking, the Rounders are standing completely still. So still that they look like mannequins. Their guns are aimed at me and their fingers are on the triggers.

I'm in a situation where I could normally die at any moment.

"Sorry for the trouble, but Miss Makise will have to stay with us. The reason is more than obvious, I believe. It's because you're the future's *Mother of All Time Machines*. Well, how about you, Mister Okabe? We are going to respect your free will."

If world lines converge, then I will not die no matter what, apparently.

Their weapons might get jammed, steel girders might fall on their heads, the great and mighty old farts of the Committee of 300 might come down and say '*Don't kill that man.*', or the bullets might just ignore the laws of physics and completely miss me.

Anyway, following any of these retarded joke-like events, my death will not happen, no matter what I think about it. That fact has just been proven by an experiment.

"We would really like to research your Reading Steiner. If you want to cooperate with us on that matter, we promise to treat you very kindly. The Committee of 300 will welcome you with open arms."

However, will these *jokes* really happen again? I'd really like to test that again.

In my current state, I feel so idiotic and powerless.

So powerless that I almost want to ask them to kill me.

"Also, I previously said that we don't want to bend causality. If we want to follow that to the smallest detail, we must set you free now. In both Mister Hashida's and Miss Makise's cases, we chose what would have the smallest effect on causality, but that still doesn't reduce the possibility of there being doubting results. We want world line convergence that is as natural as possible."

After 23 years, not only will the SERN dystopia be created, but millions of people will lose their free will.

If I cannot resist a *result* which has already been decided just by changing the process, then...

"You are going to pass away in 14 years. We are well aware of you being a threat, but following the decision theory, we know that there's no need to do anything about you. So please, choose."

... Isn't this way of living meaningless?

Also, it hurts so much that I can't stand anymore.

The bleeding won't stop, and my vision is getting blurry.

I am tired.
 Let me rest.
 Hey, somebody.
 Please kill me.
 If you do, then that will prove that the future is not decided.
 I don't think that I can go on living without being able to suffocate myself to death with this silken hair...
 "Okabe-"
 The voice that I'm used to splashes some colour on the world that has gone monochrome.
 "Okabe, listen."
 Within my arms, Kurisu starts making slight movements. Looks like she got her consciousness back.
 From below my vision, Kurisu stares straight into my eyes.
 Her hand gently touches my cheek.
 "I will stay here."
 "What... huh...?"
 Just when I lost my words, Kurisu, totally unharmed, stands up as if pushing me aside.
 "Kurusu...!"
 As I lay on my side, I extend my hand. However, not even my fingertips reach her.
 "Thanks. For covering me up then."
 Giving up, I stop putting strength into my arm.
 "I am going to stay here."
 As if to emphasize it, Kurisu says that once again and turns her back to me. She's basically implying that she's accepting the world line convergence. No, it's not like it's her free will. This too, is the choice of the universe. Our will doesn't matter.
 Trying to stop her here is pointless.
 World line convergence is absolute.
 It is impossible to resist it.
 Kurisu only accepted what a feeble existence she is.
 And thus, while living a life equivalent to a one-way rail, she will only wait for the *decided death* to come. A programmed existence.
 Forgive me, Kurisu. I lied to you.
 I gave you false hopes.
 There is nothing more cruel than hopes that cannot come true.
 That is why, I'm sorry.
 I don't care if you hate me.
 After all, I wasn't able to take you away from here-
 "Hey, Okabe."
 With her back towards me.

Kurisu whispers.
 She neither looking at me, nor looking down.
 She has her head held high.
 “What Amane-san observed is just bits and pieces.”
 “Huh... what...?”
 I cannot understand what she is saying right now.
 “It’s true that both of our futures were observed. However, that wasn’t my whole life. It’s not like Amane-san was a constant spectator of my life. Right?”
 The tone full of cool-headedness, pride and strength-
 “Between the *present* in which I live now, and the future that she observed is nothing but pure white.”
 -is exactly the same as that of the genius assistant that spoke to me back in Akihabara.
 “We can impose on that.”
 The result cannot be changed.
 The process can.
 “I told you back then, right? That *I want to believe*.”
 Until then, Kurisu has been giving up.
 In that state, I gave her some feelings – hopes that cannot be fulfilled.
 “I completely ignored the theories because I believed in you-“
 Right now, Kurisu, who believed those feelings, is...
 “I will despair no more-“
 Right now as she is turning towards me, her expression is...
 “I just want you to groundlessly keep saying that the future can be changed...”
 A nearly crying...
 “I will stay here by my own will, so please come pick me up someday.”
 Filled with loneliness...
 “It’s a promise, Okabe.”
 Smile.
We will return to Akihabara.
 The promise that we exchanged a few hours ago.
 The promise that I believed with foolish honesty.
 Belief.
 It is the will with which Kurisu stands up against this world.
 With it as support, she is walking away from me, and those footsteps are devoid of hesitation.
 On her back, I can feel the resolve to never let her will waver.
 As if inspired by that, I hold back a teary breakdown.
 This is not a farewell.
 As long as the promise lasts...
 No matter how far apart we are, we will meet again.
 Someday, we will return to Akihabara.
 We will definitely create...

That future...
And that ending.



高瀬のヴァルハ

[29, DEC, 2011 14:49PM]

The Sea of Japan that I haven't seen for a year and a half doesn't seem beautiful or anything.

The midwinter evening Sun is shining on the surface, giving it a nice glow, but it still isn't something I'd call beautiful.

I have been looking at it for about 4 hours now.

Tokyo, Ariake.

I am surrounded by a hustle and bustle of male otaku carrying loads of paper bags with anime pictures on them and female otaku wearing sexy costumes.

The first day of Comima.

An event that happens twice a year.

Even at this time, the usually empty outskirts of the international exhibition hall are quite prosperous.

Now that I think about it, I never got to go here a year and a half ago.

A sigh escapes my mouth.

I feel gazes piercing my body.

When I raise my head, I clearly see two suited men throwing glances at me from a distance.

Rounder observation. By being so open about it, they're wordlessly warning me by saying *Don't do anything weird*.

I gulp down the idea of approaching them.

In SERN, Operation Valhalla ended with Kurisu staying there while me and Daru were released. Daru was just nicely captured.

The promise.

Ever since we came back from France, Kurisu's smile of that moment has been at the back of my mind every day.

The things that Kurisu said at that time...

Did she really believe what I told her then?

Or did she make a lie to help me escape?

I really don't get it. Never before has Kurisu made a conclusion by ignoring the theories behind it.

However she said that she'll *believe*.

Thus, I too decided to believe her and my own words back then.

I will despair no more. No matter what, I will keep on fighting.

Whether that's the will of the universe or my own decision doesn't matter. I'll leave that answer for when I die. Right now, I only have to keep moving forward.

The salty wind makes my wounds hurt. The hundreds of scrapes I got from the bullet storm in the LHC still haven't fully healed. Bearing the pain, I take out an old pocket watch. The see-through plastic part that acts as the surface is slightly cracked. However, it still works and is recording time as it always did.

“Okarin is only Okarin when he wears a lab coat.”

Hugging lots of paper bags, Daru walks up to me while sweating.

It’s amazing that he can be like that in this cold winter day. Sighing, I put the pocket watch back.

“Looking at your current state, I’m guessing that you got what you aimed for.”

“I did, bro! The next part of ‘*Chu² Chu with Erin*’! It took me 3 hours of line standing, but I have no regrets! This was a challenge against this very era!”

“You damn lolicon.”

“Don’t praise me, bro.”

A useless and pointless conversation of 2 bastards.

However-

A burst of air escapes my nose.

These feelings that I tried to hold back overflow so suddenly.

When I realize it, I am breaking down in tears, completely ignoring everyone’s looks.

“You, you’re a d-damn pervert, D-Daru...”

“Not only m-me, bro. J-Japanese have b-been perverts, si-since the dawn of time...”

When I look at him, I notice that Daru’s face is covered in tears, as well.

This must be a pathetic sight. Outside Comima’s grounds, two grown men are standing and crying with no control over their voices. However, we can’t hold back.

The things that we lost to get here are just too great.

Only a year and a half ago...

These conversations were an everyday thing.

Now, however, it feels as though it is something irreplaceable.

“H-hey, Daru... I-it looks like our f-future, is to create a r-resistance against the R-Rounders...”

“I am... hic, I-I am ready...”

Daru says that while sobbing convulsively, totally surprising me.

“Wait... Are you serious?”

“That is why this is my last Comima. Now, I don’t have any regrets...”

I see. So Daru was also thinking about it... in his own ways.

“We might never come back... hic... Are you really fine with that?”

“I will become your right hand man and all that, right...? That’s why we’ll bro it out until the end...”

“As expected of the Super Haka.”

“It’s Hacker.”

Looking at each other’s faces covered in tears, we exchange a friendly grin.

The Rounders are still observing us. We have to lose them somehow. Is it possible for unskilled guys like us?

“Uhhh...”

At that moment, a female cosplayer wearing maid-like clothing asks for our attention.

Looking at our faces in worry, she's holding out a handkerchief towards us.
 "Would you like to use this?"
 "WOAH!!? T-This cosplay is... from Real Dream Club! Hhnnnnnng!"
 Breathing heavily through the nose, Daru greedily took the handkerchief.
 And, right in front of the girl, he sniffs it with all the strength he can muster.
 Now that's just catastrophic...
 "For my whole life I'll go MoeMoe Kyun over you! Please marry meee!"
 "Ahahah... Th-that's a little..."
 "You're a famous cosplayer, right? Yuki-chan, right?"
 "Yes, that's right."
 "Then, can I ask you something."
 "I won't marry you."
 "Can you get your fellow consplayers to band up around here? And then-"
 Daru suddenly lowers his voice.
 "See those two guys wearing suits? I want to show them that Comima is a wonderful event."
 Daru... Are you...?
 "Who are they?"
 "Secret agents of the government. The instigators of the people who want to destroy otakuism and Comima."
 "So they're a danger to otaku culture."
 "So, can you help us out?"
 "Leave it to me."
 The cosplayer named Yuki nods with a bright smile on her face.
 "I'll get some of my friends."
 "Okie dokie. Do your best!"
 "Okie dokie? What does that mean?"
 "A joyful way of saying OK."
 "He~h. I think I'll use that. Okie dokie ♪"
 And so, Yuki runs off towards the conference area.
 "So, Okarin..."
 Pretending to be wiping his tears with the handkerchief, Daru looks at me.
 "Get ready to run. We're gonna lose those two."
 "Is that girl in any danger?"
 "There are no idiots who would shoot down a civilian in a place like this, bro. Also, I only asked her to show them the wonders of Comima."
 So basically, it won't end in violence.
 "Okie dokie."
 I also wipe my tears. It would've been nice to use the girl's handkerchief with the pleasant floral scent, but I gave that privilege to Daru.
 "So what's the operation name?"
 I lose my words again. I didn't think about it yet, so it feels so sudden.
 "Right, the operation name is..."

Cosplayers and brats with cameras are starting to gather around the suited men.

With Yuki as the heart of that, they first begin to sing an anime song as a chorus.

The Rounders are overwhelmed.

“... Valkyrie.”

We nod at each other and start dashing at the same time.

Our battle starts right now.

The battle for the sake of escaping world line convergence, gaining true free will and regaining our lost comrades.

A battle that I will be fighting for the next 14 years.

“It’s like the final chapter of a manga, bro!”

“Just please spare me all the ‘Thank you for reading my work all this time.’ bullshit!”

Sprinting through the otaku people leaving Comima, I speak the final *password of goodbyes with no special meaning* towards the international exhibition area.

“El Psy Congroo... This is the choice of Steins;Gate.”

[Valkyrie]

The general term used to describe the divine women that have the role of taking those who have died in battle, prepare them for Ragnarok and take them to Valhalla.