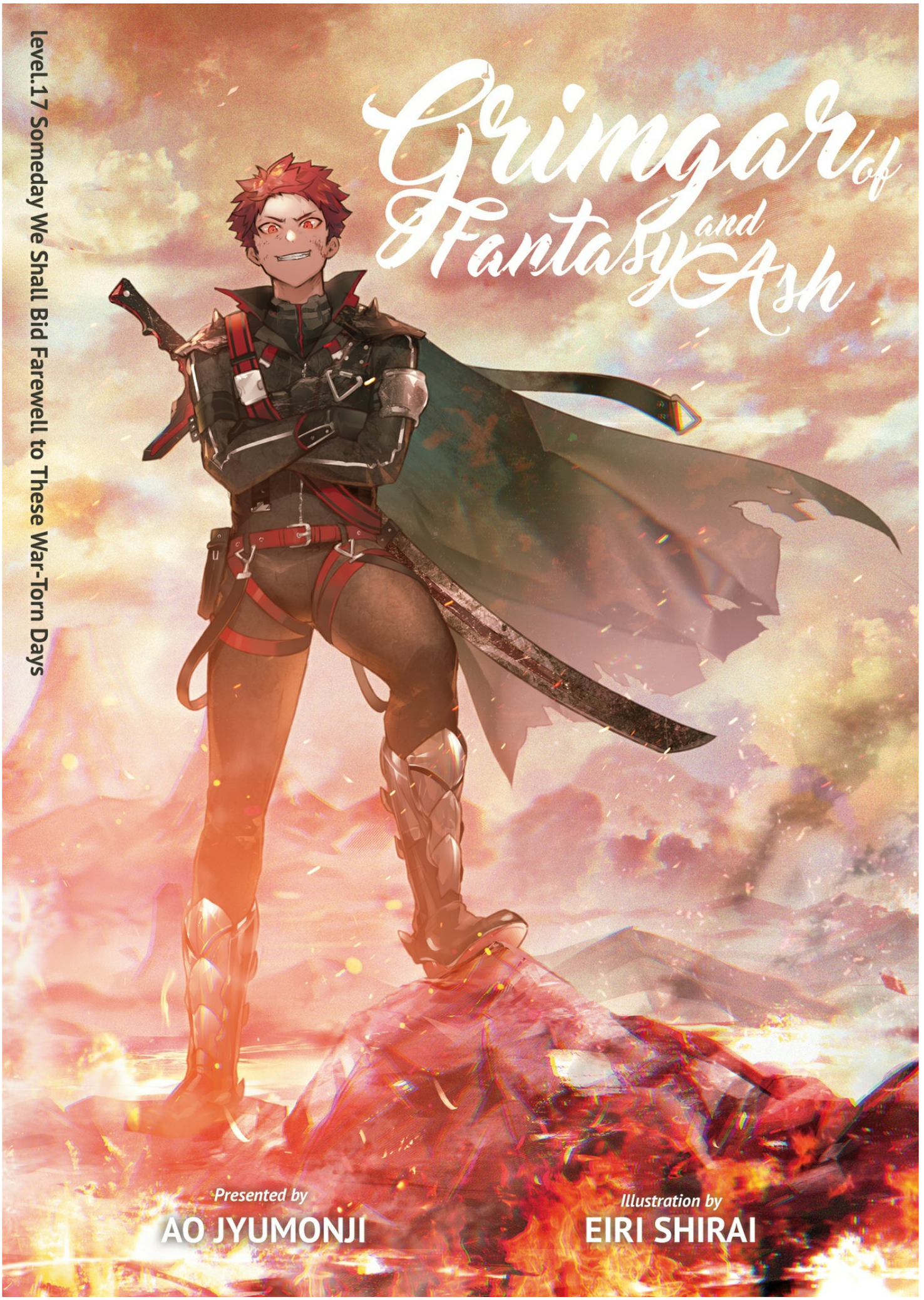
level.17 Someday We Shall Bid Farewell to These War-Torn Days

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash



Presented by
AO JYUMONJI

Illustration by
EIRI SHIRAI


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Eiri Shirai

Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash

Presented by Ao jyumonji / Illustration by Eiri shirai

Level. Seventeen


Created by the power of the ancient king who did not sleep, even in death.
The Graveyard would never run out of enemies. No matter how many they defeated, there would always be more.


Rub, rub, rub.
I can smell
Haruhiro.
Rub, rub, rub.
Oh, I've
dreamed
of feeling
Haruhiro like
this again.

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1. That Feeling, One More Time

“...This place is a ruin,” said the curly-haired dread knight wearing a mask and cloak as he kicked a scrap of wood that must have, at one point, belonged to a building. “This isn’t the Lonesome Field Outpost anymore. It’s the Lonesome Field Outpost Ruins. What a ruin. It’s a complete and total ruin. Seriously. Seriously...”

The sun was about to go down.

As the muttering dread knight had suggested, this outpost was no longer fit to be called one. There was nothing but rubble remaining, and only Haruhiro, his party, and ten members of Orion led by Shinohara had arrived so far.

“Heh...”

One member of Orion with short hair and round glasses let out a laugh that was a little creepy. He was apparently a priest.

“Indeed. Indeed. We operated out of the Lonesome Field Outpost too, so I can’t deny it’s emotional for me, seeing it in such a state. Eheh heh, bwa hah, heh heh...”

A little creepy... Yeah, no. It was really creepy.

Uh, but seriously, the guy was scary. Not that Haruhiro could say anything. No, he had no plans to call him out on it whatsoever. He was too scared to.

“You know, that laugh...”

Unlike Yume, he could never.

“Yume thinks it’s real unpleasant.”

“Do you now? Guhuh, nwuh huh, bwa hah...!”

“Sorry about him.” Shinohara was smiling like always, but seemed a little apologetic. “No matter how much I warn him, Kimura can’t seem to stop.”

“Well, that’s gruff luck then, huh?”

“You mean tough luck.” Ranta immediately pointed out Yume’s error. “That’s probably what you were going for. Not gruff.”

“Nah, I mean, she said gruff, right?” Kuzaku disagreed. “Maybe that laugh makes him sound gruff?”

“Lay off, would you, Beanpole? You’re an idiot. I don’t need this shit.”

“Beanpole, huh? Yeah, I am pretty tall. Way taller than you.”

“And now you’re *boasting* about it? That’s some personality you’ve got there. You’re a real piece of work. The absolute worst.”

“...You’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Huh? Pretty much exactly what it sounds like.”

“Jeez!” Yume puffed her cheeks up angrily. “Ranta and Kuzaku-kun. You two’re always fightin’, huh? Goin’ at it like cats and hogs.”

“Wasn’t it *your* fault this time?! Also, hogs? What kind of cat fights a hog?! It’s supposed to be cats and *dogs*!”

“Close enough! Dogs, hogs, it’s nothin’ to blow a basket over.”

“I’m not blowing a basket! Why would I blow a basket?! It’s *gasket*, okay?!”

“Gasket? You sure it’s not casket?”

“No, it’s gasket! You blow a gasket... Wait, what is a gasket anyway?”

“Well, what does the word mean?”

“Don’t ask me!”

“You’re the one who was sayin’ it!”

“It’s a figure of speech! You stupid, stupid, stuuuupid!”

“People who go around callin’ other people stupid are stupid, y’know?”

“Nuh-uh, the person who gets called stupid is stupid. Stuuupid!”

“It’s nice how lively things are with you guys around.”

Was Shinohara perhaps being sarcastic when he said that? He was smiling, so

it was hard to tell how he really felt.

“But seriously, Ranta-kun and Yume-san sure do get along well,” Kuzaku said, sounding half exasperated, and suddenly Ranta panicked.

“Whuh, wh-wh-wh-wha...!”

“Our relationship, huh?” Yume crossed her arms and frowned. “It’s not bad. If you were wantin’ to say it’s good, well, maybe it is?”

“Whah? Wh-Wh-Wh-Whaaa! Wh-Whah? Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Whaaaa?!”

Ranta was transforming into a creature that could only say “wha.” It grated on the ears.

“You’re stuttering way too hard...”

“Shove off, Paruparara!”

“If you change it that much, no one will even know who you’re talking about.”

“If you’re responding, you know damn well who I mean, Pourporaran! You Pirupiru! Papapa or Pipipi or Pepepe or Popopo oughta be good enough for you!”

Ranta wasn’t so much lively as he was loud and annoying. And he tended to drag others into it too, so he was a real nuisance. It was bad. But the guy had some serious vitality. Maybe Haruhiro needed to show a bit more energy too? Or maybe not? Yeah. No. Haruhiro didn’t particularly want to be that energetic.

Setora and Merry hadn’t said anything in a long while. They were both watching quietly from a distance.

If he addressed them directly, they’d respond. But only to say the absolute minimum. For instance, if he were to ask, “How are you?” the response would be something like, “Okay” or “Fine.” They would never answer more than he asked.

There was the matter of Shihoru, after all.

And Setora had lost Kiichi.

What was he going to do about that? Honestly, he couldn’t come up with anything that would help. Whatever he tried to do would be in vain. Waiting for

time to heal all wounds. That might be the only option.

He wished he could just accept that, but he couldn't help but think: If there was nothing he could do, maybe it was best to do nothing at all? Or was it better to try and do something? Well, yeah. He was their leader, after all. But what? What? Just do anything at all. Well, no, doing just anything wasn't good. Was it doing *something* that was important? No, not really. Just giving off the sense that, "Hey, I tried," was meaningless. Like, he'd only be doing it to show that, as leader, he'd made an effort, despite the futility of it. He didn't want to make excuses for himself like that.

Suddenly, his eyes met Yume's. She smiled as if to say, "What's up?"

Honestly, Yume must have been feeling down too. In fact, Haruhiro had occasionally spotted her sighing or getting a forlorn look on her face. Seeing the kindness she showed him, despite her own pain, touched him deeply, and the corners of his eyes started to feel a little hot. He thought he was going to cry. He wouldn't, though. Haruhiro looked around.

The Lonesome Field Outpost was in the bottom of a depression, so the area around it was slightly higher. Hills in every direction. But when every direction was a hill, they didn't feel like hills at all. Setting aside what it means to "feel like a hill," there were humanoid figures on the hill to the west.

"...Oh."

"Ahh." Shinohara was looking to the west. "Looks like they're here."

"Uh, hold on..."

That one figure was running.

"Haruhiro...!"

It was a woman, going by the voice.

Hey, wait.

"...Huh?"

Was Haruhiro imagining it?

Did she just call his name?

“Haruhirooo...!”

No, he was not. She had called his name.

Twice at that.

“Haruhirooo...!”

Make that three times now.

The woman was racing down the hill at an incredible speed.

“Huh? Huhhh...?!”

“Damn, she’s fast...!” Ranta, who was pretty quick himself, was flabbergasted. That was just how fast she was going.

The woman wore a big, wide-brimmed hat. It made her look awfully tall. No, hat or not, she would still be tall.

Though the Lonesome Field Outpost was a ruin, it was still surrounded by a moat. There was a spring in a depression in the Quickwind Plains. People had set up camp around it and dug a moat to defend themselves. That was apparently how this place got started.

Even with all of the buildings wrecked, the spring and moat were still intact. There had originally been a bridge across the moat. It was mostly destroyed now. However, it wasn’t impossible to use what was left of the supports and girders to cross without getting wet. That was what Haruhiro and his group had done.

But that woman, she just up and dove into the moat as if to say, “I don’t have time for that shit.”

“Haru! Ha! Haru! Hirooo...!”

The woman swam. She powered through the water using both arms, doing the breaststroke. That moat was pretty deep. She was trying to swim across it.

Her hat fell off along the way. She ignored it and kept swimming. In no time, she had swum across and finally stepped into the Lonesome Field Outpost.

“Haruhirooo...!”

“Huh...? Uh...? Wh-Who is that...?”

When it came to people from their pasts, most of what he knew came from Merry. For whatever reason, there was nothing he could draw from his head to explain *this.*

“Whoa...” Ranta was dumbfounded. Was he impressed? He seemed almost overcome with emotion.

“Ooooh...!” Yume seemed surprised too. She looked over to Haruhiro, her eyes wide. “Right?”

“Uh, no, I don’t know what I’m supposed to agree with—”

“Haruhiroooooooo...!”

The woman continued her mad dash. Sopping wet, splashing water all over the place, she kept barreling toward them.

Man, though, she was huge.

Probably not as big as Kuzaku. But her head was small, and her body was lengthy. Yeah. Big and lengthy, that was the impression she gave off.

It wasn’t like he couldn’t run away. He could. But the intensity with which she was coming at him was incredible. While he was still overwhelmed by it, the woman tackled Haruhiro.

“Oh...?!”

No, this wasn’t a tackle—was it?

Apparently not.

“Haruhiro! It’s Haruhiro! Haruhiro...!”

“Gwah...!”

It hurt—or rather, it was hard to breathe.

The woman hadn’t tackled Haruhiro and sent him flying. She had hugged him. Hard.

Haruhiro’s feet were off the ground. Floating in midair. The woman had picked him up.

She was bigger than he was. Despite looking slim, she was really tall, so she

had a lot of strength.

“Urgh... Agh! Ouagh...?!”

At the very least, she had the power to hug Haruhiro, lift him up, and crush the life from him. Fortunately, if you could really call this fortunate, she hadn’t killed him yet, but if she kept squeezing, who knew? It wouldn’t be surprising if she did.

“Haruhiro. I wanted to see you. Haruhiro.”

The woman rubbed her cheek against Haruhiro’s.

His consciousness was fading fast.

“H-H-H... Hel...”

“Hel? Who’s that?”

“N-No, uh...”

“Noah? I don’t know him either.”

“No! I’m in...”

“You’re in... In what?”

“I-I-In pain...”

“Pain...?”

Finally, it seemed to sink in.

“Ohh!”

The woman cried out and loosened her vice-like grip. Thanks to that, Haruhiro could breathe again.

“W-Would you let go of me...?”

“It’s been so long. Can I pet you?”

“U-Uh, no, I don’t know...”

She already was, though, wasn’t she?

The woman had already resumed rubbing her cheek against his.

What the hell?

She was all wet too.

What the actual hell?

I'm scared.

"That's Mimorin for you," the dread knight said, shaking his head in dismay. "For some reason, she's always been head over heels for Parupiro. It's unbelievable. What an absolute, crazy weirdo."

"You..."

Another woman rushed in, this one small but full-figured, in contrast to the one rubbing her cheek against Haruhiro's. Who was it this time? Where had she come from? The woman dropped a fist on the back of Ranta's head.

"Total moron...!"

"Bwuh...?!"

As Ranta's mask slipped and his eyes bulged, the petite woman gave him a firm kick in the butt.

"Hi-yah...!"

"Gah...?!"

Ranta jumped up into the air, seizing his wounded buttocks. What a leap. Man, could he jump. Ranta landed with both feet, and the impact rippled through his sore hind.

"Augh...?!"

"You no call her 'Mimorin' like you her friend, yeah!" the woman shouted, spittle flying as she did. "You *gross idiot*! You pervert! You nincompoop cabbage!"

"Y-Y-You bitch!" Ranta stood pigeon-toed, clutching his rear end, tears in his eyes and a whine in his voice. His butt must have been absolutely devastated. "Y-Y-You kicked me full force! In my glorious, firm ass! What if you made it split even more?!"

"Someone should...bisect? Bifurcate? Uh...break your stinky butt in two, yeah!"

“My butt doesn’t stink that bad!”

“You say it not stink *that* bad, but it still stink!”

“Butts are butts! They all stink a little! It’s what butts do! Even your butt—”

“Hey,” a man wearing glasses swung a warhammer that looked like it could easily shatter rock, stopping it just shy of Ranta’s face.

Whoa, hold on, where had this guy come from? How long had he been here?

Had Haruhiro just not noticed him? Even now, his attention was occupied by the woman who was molesting his cheeks, so there was no way he could have.

“Eeeeek...?!”

Ranta shuddered. No, more than that. He fell to the ground trembling. His hands were still holding his butt as he did.

“A loser like you has no right to talk about Anna-san’s butt,” the man wearing glasses said, pulling back his warhammer and resting it on his shoulder. “I’ll kill you, got it?”

“I-I-I-I nearly died...!”

“But you didn’t.”

“I could’ve! Then you’d be getting more than just complaints!”

“What? You can complain when you’re dead? That’s a neat trick. Wanna show it off?”

The man wearing glasses wound up for a big swing with his warhammer.

“S-Stop?!” Ranta was sweating and panicking. “There’s nothing to show off! I know I’m awesome, but if you kill me, I’ll be just a corpse like any other!”

“Boring.” The man lowered his warhammer.

“Hey! Heyyyy!”

An easygoing guy called out to them from a distance. Based on the way he looked, he might have been a warrior. That guy, another man who looked like a paladin, and some weirdo with a ponytail and an eyepatch over his left eye entered the Lonesome Field Outpost the way everyone ought to, using the

broken bridge.

“It’s me! I’m here! Like, on the scene! Heyyyy!”

“Rub, rub, rub...” The tall woman was still rubbing her cheek against Haruhiro. “Oh, I’ve dreamed of feeling Haruhiro like this again. Rub, rub, rub. I can smell Haruhiro. Rub, rub, rub...”

What the hell is this?

This went beyond being hard to deal with.

He wasn’t just uneasy, he was scared. Haruhiro felt nothing but despair for their prospects going forward.

2. Someone to Chase After

“I’m sorry.”

When the tall woman, Mimori, knelt in front of him, bowing her head apologetically, it made Haruhiro start to feel like he was the one who had done something wrong. It was tough.

“...Erm, you don’t have to apologize. You didn’t do any real harm... Uh, maybe I got a little wet, but that’s all...”

“I’m sorry,” Mimori repeated again, still not raising her head.

“Man, this is the problem with you...” Ranta elbowed Haruhiro in the ribs. “You’re awful. Making a hottie like her bow in front of you. What an absolute fiend. You’re a piece of trash. An absolute shitlord.”

Mimori looked up to glare at Ranta.

“Haruhiro is *not* a piece of trash. You are. You’re the only one who ever is.”

“Harsh!”

“But true,” Kuzaku added under his breath.

“Why you...!”

Ranta ran at Kuzaku, swinging his arms. Immediately, Kuzaku put his right hand on Ranta’s head. Given Kuzaku’s height, he of course had longer arms and Ranta’s fists couldn’t reach him.

“You ass! Damn it! Screw you!”

“Wow, what a childish comedy routine! I want in! Me too! Me too!” The intensely laid-back Kikkawa—a warrior who had apparently enlisted at the same time as Haruhiro and the others—started trying to hit Kuzaku too, for no well-explained reason.

“What the hell?!” Despite his incredulity, Kuzaku put a firm hand on Kikkawa’s head too. Kikkawa’s swinging fists didn’t reach him either.

“Take that! And that! Yeah, yeah! Yay! Whoa, man, this is super fun!”

“Ha ha ha!” Tokimune the paladin watched them go at it with an affable smile.

“Heh...” Behind Tokimune, the eyepatch-wearing nutcase with a ponytail, Inui, was laughing, but ominously. “Gwa ha ha ha ha ha!”

“You apologize enough, yeah, Mimorin.”

The petite Anna-san was, as you could tell from her white robes, apparently a priest.

“Now, stand! *Stand up!*”

Anna-san grabbed Mimori from behind, trying to pull her to her feet.

“For start, there is *nothing* reason you should cow toe.”

“This is to show my contrition.” Mimori still stubbornly refused to rise. “I’m prepared to keep cow toeing until Haruhiro forgives me.”

Er, that should be kowtow, not cow toe, thought Haruhiro. *Not that it matters.*

“...Uh, there’s really nothing to forgive.”

“In fact of matter, you should be one to apologize, yeah! Haruhirooo!” Anna-san teared up as she desperately tried to lift Mimori up by putting Haruhiro down. Honestly, at this point, none of it mattered to him anymore.

“...I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for, Haruhiro,” Mimori insisted. Haruhiro agreed, but this conversation refused to move on otherwise.

“I’ve got it.” The bespectacled priest, Tada, swung his warhammer in their direction. “I’ll beat him to a pulp. That’ll settle all this.”

“...Except I’ll be dead?”

“It’ll still be settled, though, right?”

“...What is wrong with you people?”

“Now, don’t be like that,” Tokimune said, throwing an arm around Haruhiro’s shoulder. “Everyone’s just so happy to see you guys. Right?”

No, winking at me like that doesn't fix it.

"Isn't the way they choose to express it just a little too unique?"

"Yeah, we're original like that. People tell us all the time."

"I'm not sure we're on the same page here..."

"Honestly, it's almost scary how much we *are*," Tokimune countered. "It's hard to believe you guys ever lost your memories at all."

"That's because you guys just keep doing these bits whether we like it or not..."

"Cut it out," Tokimune mussed Haruhiro's hair. "It's embarrassing when you compliment us so much."

"Okay, that's enough nonsense," a silver-haired man said from a short distance away.

Renji. He'd supposedly enlisted at the same time as Haruhiro and the others. It was hard to believe that, though. He had way too much poise. He had an intimidating face and an imposing physique. As for his equipment, Haruhiro didn't know what all of it was, but it looked really impressive.

Incidentally, the rest of Renji's group—the warrior with a buzz-cut, Ron; the bespectacled mage, Adachi; and the diminutive priest, Chibi-chan—had all enlisted at the same time as Haruhiro too.

Renji and his party had arrived at the Lonesome Field Outpost Ruins a little after Tokimune's band of weirdos, the Tokkis.

With the arrival of Haruhiro's six-man party and ten members of Orion, including Kimura and Shinohara, from the Frontier Army, as well as the six members of the Tokkis and four members of Team Renji from the Volunteer Soldier Corps, the twenty-six-member detachment that would take Mount Grief was now gathered at the Lonesome Field Outpost Ruins on schedule.

"You said it!" Kikkawa, who had been playing at not being able to punch Kuzaku with Ranta, instantly stopped what he was doing and hid behind Tokimune. "Yeah, I was starting to think that too. It was getting boring. I was thinking it was time to call it quits too... Renji's scary, y'know? Like, way more

than he has to be. He's *too* scary..."

"Heh!" Ranta had stopped futilely flailing at Kuzaku too, but he turned to Renji and puffed out his chest. "Pretty full of yourself, huh? I say there hasn't been near enough nonsense. If you think there has, then give us some quality nonsense yourself!"

"...How's that make any sense?"

"Oh, shut up. You stay out of this, Parupiro!"

"Your knees are shaking, man..."

"N-N-N-No, they're not!"

Ranta had raised his shoulders and arched his back, trying to put on a brave face. But his lower half was quaking. His legs trembled, with his knees knocking into one another.

"We're setting out soon." Renji didn't even glance at Ranta. "Get some rest."

"...Y-Yes sir," Ranta replied in a quivering voice.

"That was a prompt reply..." Kuzaku gave Ranta a cold look. But he kept his voice low. Like, really quiet.

"...The guy's crazy intimidating! If you think you can do better, you try picking a fight with him."

"No way, man. He's terrifying..."

"See, you're scared of him too!"

"There's no way that guy wasn't a gangster at some point."

"Get this, Renji was like that from the very start, okay? He hadn't done anything yet, didn't know a thing other than his own name, and he was still that confident. I just don't get it..."

"You say that, but Renji's been havin' troubles too," Yume interjected. "...Like with Sassa."

"Ngh..." Ranta groaned before falling silent. The truth was, Team Renji used to have five members. There had been one more: Sassa, a female thief who'd enlisted at the same time as Haruhiro and the rest. That meant she'd been in

the same line of work as Haruhiro and would have had just as much experience.

Team Renji was a standout team in the Volunteer Soldier Corps, while Haruhiro's party was the bottom of the barrel, known for only hunting goblins in the Old City of Damuro. Would it be too much of an exaggeration to say they lived in different worlds? The fact of the matter was, they hadn't come into contact all that often. Haruhiro likely hadn't known Sassa that well.

But when he heard there was a woman like that, but she was gone now, dead, it made him strangely sad.

It didn't feel unconnected to him. Sadly, he didn't remember them, but his own party had lost comrades too: Moguzo and Manato. On top of that, there was also Kiichi, even if he wasn't human, who had been killed by Commander Jin Mogis. Then there was Shihoru, still unaccounted for.

Without further instructions, the joint task force of twenty-six members from the Frontier Army and Volunteer Soldier Corps divided into their own camps with their comrades, and sat around the Lonesome Field Outpost Ruins.

The sun set, but because there were still enemy scouts lurking around the Quickwind Plains, they didn't light campfires.

"I'm gonna sleep. Wake me when it's time." Ranta lay down and was snoring almost as soon as he hit the ground.

"...Wasn't that a little too fast?" Kuzaku said in disbelief, but let out a yawn of his own. "Maybe I'll take a nap too..."

"You can go ahead," Haruhiro prompted.

Kuzaku gave him an apologetic "Sorry for the trouble" before lying down.

Yume sat between Merry and Setora, linking arms with them and pulling them close to her. With the three of them clumped together, Yume had them at her mercy. She was doing her best to help those two cheer up. Right now, just quietly being together like that might be doing more for them than awkwardly trying to talk would. Still, Haruhiro could never do something like that. Obviously. Only Yume could. That was a method only Yume could use. Thank goodness for her being there.

He sensed something. Someone approaching him. Renji? Haruhiro tensed up.

“Got a moment?”

Haruhiro nearly replied, “Sure.”

Come on, this isn’t Ranta.

“Yeah... I don’t mind.”

He stood up and moved away from the others. Chasing after Renji’s back. He didn’t remember it, but Renji must have been running ahead of Haruhiro all this time. So far ahead that it might not even have been possible to chase after him. The difference between them was simply too great for him to compare. To Haruhiro, Renji had been someone far off in the distance.

Even without his memories, when they were together like this, he could tell that’s how it must have been. Renji stopped at the moat. Haruhiro stopped next to him, but it didn’t seem right to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, so he stayed one step behind.

“What’s it like, not remembering?”

The sudden question caught Haruhiro off guard.

“Hmm... Well...weird, I guess?”

“You don’t remember Manato or Moguzo either, right?”

“...No, I don’t.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Renji snorted. Was that a laugh? It didn’t seem to be. What was this exchange about? Haruhiro didn’t get it.

But, somehow, he got the feeling that Sassa’s death had hit Renji hard.

Ranta said that Renji had been brimming with confidence from day one. He’d gone on to prove it wasn’t unjustified either. This was just Haruhiro’s imagination, but losing a comrade like that must have been a kind of frustration that a guy like Renji had never experienced before.

But this wasn’t really a situation where he could say, “I’m sorry for your loss,” or, “You have my condolences,” or anything of the sort.

“So, Renji...”

“Huh?”

That grunt was scary. Haruhiro nearly chickened out of saying more, but if he did, that seemed likely to anger Renji. Or maybe it wouldn’t.

“I was thinking, uh, you could stand to, I dunno...talk to your comrades more...like this, maybe...?”

Renji wasn’t saying anything, which made Haruhiro uneasy. Should he apologize? Would that be weird? Or maybe not? Which was it?

“What good would that do?” Renji said after a moment.

“What good?” Haruhiro rubbed his face. Were Ron, Adachi, and Chibi-chan all right when Renji took this attitude towards them? “You’d understand each other better...and everyone could share their opinions. I think there’s some merit in that...maybe...?”

“You’re deluding yourself if you think a bunch of strangers can understand one another. If you think I understand anyone, that’s just an illusion. No one understands me.”

“Well...that’s one way of seeing things, I guess. An illusion, huh? ...I’m deluding myself. ...Yeah. Sorta...”

“I do ask for their opinions. I’m not all-powerful, after all. When I need to make decisions, the more information the better.”

“...Oh. You’re not all-powerful?”

“What are you getting at?”

“N-Nah, it’s nothing...”

“Obviously, I’m not. If I was, then...”

Renji shook his head and sighed.

“Haruhiro.”

“...What?”

“What do you think?”

“...Huh?”

“About that man.”

Renji indicated in some direction with his eyes. Not toward his own party or Haruhiro’s. Probably not toward the Tokkis either.

Renji was looking toward where Shinohara and the ten members of Orion had set up camp.

Oh, so that was it. Renji had said he did ask people for their opinions. So he was asking Haruhiro now. What did he think about Orion? No, he’d limited it to “that man.”

Orion had a number of central figures; commanders, if you will. Like bespectacled Kimura, or Merry’s old comrade Hayashi. On this occasion, Hayashi was with the main Frontier Army force, leading a group with more than ten other members of Orion.

Kimura had a distinctive, eccentric personality, but he was still only the second-in-command.

Who was the man Renji was asking about? Shinohara, of course.

But Shinohara was acting as a member of the Volunteer Soldier Corps. So was Renji. Of the two of them, he should have had more opportunities to encounter Shinohara than Haruhiro had. Besides, unlike Haruhiro, Renji remembered the past. He had to know more about Shinohara than Haruhiro did.

Haruhiro wished he could ask him the same question. What did Renji think of Shinohara?

But while Renji might seek out the opinions of others, he didn’t see any value in revealing what he thought himself. Renji had just said as much. Haruhiro might not have agreed with that view, but to each his own. Was it really his place to tell Renji he was wrong or advise him to adjust his attitude? They weren’t friends or even comrades for that matter. Besides, was Renji even wrong to begin with? Probably not.

He was just different from Haruhiro. Very different, Haruhiro felt. Was the reason they had never become friends or worked together because they were

so far apart in every way?

Still, they had enlisted at the same time.

Strange as it was, despite having no memories, Haruhiro found it hard to think of Renji as just another random, unimportant person he had no connection to. For whatever reason, he had the impression that Renji was trustworthy.

And terrifying.

Not to sound like Ranta, but he's way too intimidating.

Renji wasn't the sort of guy to openly express his feelings. But it wasn't like he was keeping secrets either. He probably wasn't as cold and indifferent as he appeared, nor was he the type to betray others. While Renji might act like a bit of a dictator, he wouldn't just sacrifice his comrades for his own benefit. Team Renji had managed to get along as a five-man team for a long time. Knowing Renji, they had probably done some pretty reckless stuff, but no one had gotten killed. Until they lost Sassa. Her death had hurt him badly. That was Haruhiro's read on the situation.

I can rely on Renji.

That was mostly Haruhiro's gut speaking, but he decided to trust his judgment.

The one he couldn't bring himself to trust here was Shinohara.

"...I want this to stay between us. Because it's all a vague feeling, and I'm not sure of anything."

"Yeah."

"We woke up under the Forbidden Tower and had lost our memories."

"I heard Hiyomu was there too, trying to manipulate you."

"Hiyomu...seemed to be following someone's orders. She called him her master."

"And this master's not Jin Mogis?"

"No. It can't be. So I talked to the general about it, and he described that person as..." Haruhiro took a deep breath, then spoke very clearly. "'The master

of the Forbidden Tower.’ That’s what he said.”

“The master of the Forbidden Tower?” Renji parroted. He must have been surprised. “Who...is that?”

“I don’t know. But he definitely said it. And, ‘I can’t imagine the master of the Forbidden Tower would have invited the Southern Expedition in.’”

“Anything else?”

“...This is where it gets more vague. Shinohara, and Hiyomu... I don’t know what it is, but they seem to know things, more than you do or I would have before I lost my memory...”

“That’s not so strange. That man’s been a volunteer soldier longer than either of us.”

“Well, yeah, but...still, I think Jin Mogis has gotten into contact with the master of the Forbidden Tower through Hiyomu. I’m certain they joined hands at some point.”

“And you think Shinohara was involved in that?”

“If he was, it explains how Orion was able to join the Frontier Army so smoothly.”

“So the bit about him acting as a connection to the Volunteer Soldier Corps is just a cover story, then?”

“...I think it’s possible. Not that there’s any proof.”

“Any proof now, you mean.” Renji touched his lips lightly with his right thumb. “He wouldn’t give himself away so easily. But people make mistakes.”

“...It sounds like he’s done a lot for me in the past. And even more for Merry.”

“The man’s popular. Has a lot of connections. Lot of people have a high opinion of him.”

“If I hadn’t lost my memories, I might never have been suspicious of him.”

“I never liked the guy. Didn’t have any real reason for it, but we never got along.”

“You’re a completely different type of person from him, after all.”

“True.”

“You acknowledge it yourself, huh?”

“I’ve never wanted to make people like me.”

Hey, that’s you you’re talking about there.

Could Haruhiro get away with poking fun at him? Renji probably wouldn’t just laugh it off.

“...You think he acts the way he does to make people like him?” Haruhiro asked instead.

“That’s how it looks to me.”

“So...he’s not really like that, he’s just putting on an act?”

“It’s his eyes.”

“His eyes...aren’t smiling?” This didn’t ring true for Haruhiro. Shinohara smiled a lot. He’d never once sensed anything off about it.

“No,” Renji shook his head. “His eyes don’t move. Even when he’s smiling, they’re fixated on one point. It means he’s observing the other person.”

“...You watch people pretty closely yourself, Renji.”

“Just watch for it,” Renji said, then immediately turned and walked away. His movements felt weightless, yet each one seemed to be made with purpose.

Haruhiro couldn’t help but think, *Even at something as simple as walking, he’s on a whole other level from me.* It was silly to feel inferior. The thought made him gaze up into the sky.

Suddenly, Renji came to a stop.

“Even if you’ve forgotten, your skills haven’t dulled much.”



Turning back to Haruhiro, he said, “More than that, I barely recognize you now. I’ll be counting on you.”

Haruhiro felt his face twitch. How was he supposed to respond to that? “Thank you. I’ll do my best”? Would that be deprecating himself too much?

In the end, all Haruhiro was able to do was nod. He’d have liked to say something clever, but that was beyond him.

3. Is the King Who Does Not Sleep Unable to Sleep?

Who left this here? Or, if not who, then what?

How long had that mountain stood alone in the middle of the endless flat wasteland that was the Quickwind Plains?

People had a name for it.

Mount Grief.

There were a number of theories on its origin. This was the generally accepted one:

The largely broken form of the old castle at the summit was visible even at a distance during the day. Though it might have seemed like an ordinary castle, it was not. Long, long ago, it was a temple to the old gods. In ancient times, one king had the audacity to build a castle atop the ruins of that temple. Then, when the king died, the castle remained as his grave marker. The fearless king was revered for his great acts, and as a show of their sadness, people sang songs of lamentation as they faced his grave.

Even as countless stars shone overhead, the darkness of night on the Quickwind Plains felt suffocatingly thick. If a person looked up to the sky to resist being crushed by the oppressive gloom, the brilliant lights atop Mount Grief would be impossible to miss.

The scouts sent by the Volunteer Soldier Corps reported that there was currently construction underway to restore the old castle. In particular, the towering walls just past the steep slope near the summit had seen considerable repairs done to them.

With the exception of the narrow road to the gate, there were abatis-style barricades placed all around the castle. If they approached using the road, they would be picked apart by archers, crossbowmen, and slingers. If they took another route, they would have to remove the barricades. That would take time during which, obviously, they would be targeted by the same ranged weapons

they would have faced on the road. The Volunteer Soldier Corps could have their mages lead a frontal assault and rapidly push past these obstacles, but they would have to be prepared to take no small number of casualties.

That's why they were going for the back door.

Now, it wasn't the case that there was a front gate and a back gate to this castle on top of a mountain.

The information about a "back door" came from Shinohara. His clan, Orion, had for a time investigated Mount Grief because it had become a den of undead. They had even infiltrated the castle many times.

That said, Orion's focus hadn't been the old castle.

The castle had been built atop the ruins of an old temple. The king who built it was also buried there, if the stories were true. However, search as they might, Shinohara and his people had been unable to find anywhere that an individual of such high status might have been laid to rest.

Was it possible the king's grave was elsewhere? Orion continued their search, and, at long last, they found it.

It was underground.

Beneath the castle, there was a secret graveyard.

Well, to be precise, it was a space that they theorized was a graveyard, but that's getting too nitpicky, so for now we'll continue to call it the Graveyard.

Orion spent years investigating and finally succeeded in finding two ways into the Graveyard. One entrance in the old castle, another in the foothills of Mount Grief, each sealed behind a stone door.

Orion managed to enter the Graveyard through both. It was, unmistakably, a graveyard. Shinohara and Kimura were more or less certain the king had been buried beneath the castle. They claimed to have found enough proof to convince them of it.

Shinohara called the room where the king lay sleeping the burial chamber. Incredibly, Orion had managed to set foot in there. However, every time they entered the burial chamber, people died. Because of that, Shinohara was forced

to order a retreat.

The reason all of this was relevant to the operation to take Mount Grief lay in the fact that the Graveyard could be entered through both the foothills and the castle.

We'll call the entrance in the foothills the foothill entrance, and the entrance in the castle the castle entrance. Both led to the burial chamber. Incidentally, the castle entrance was far closer to the burial chamber.

In short, it was possible to enter through the foothill entrance, pass through the Graveyard, break through the burial chamber, and then enter the castle.

The assault on Mount Grief was a joint operation between the Frontier Army and the Volunteer Soldier Corps.

Commander Jin Mogis of the Frontier Army had sent a hundred of his best men under the command of General Thomas Margo. In addition to this, Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Ranta, Yume, Merry, Setora, and twenty-three members of Orion led by Shinohara were also participating.

The Volunteer Soldier Corps had sent Team Renji, the Tokkis, the Wild Angels, Iron Knuckle, and the Berserkers for a total of seventy people.

From this, a detached force of twenty-six members—ten from Orion, including Shinohara and Kimura; Haruhiro's party; Team Renji; and the Tokkis—would attempt to breach the castle by traversing the Graveyard.

That left the main force. Their role was to posture as if they were going to take Mount Grief in a frontal assault, forcing the enemy to maintain a combat-ready footing while they awaited a signal from the detached force.

It was no exaggeration to say that the success or failure of this operation would hinge on the detached force.

In fact, the main force wouldn't attack at all until the detached force made it into the castle and sent the signal. If they couldn't get results, the operation wouldn't even begin.

"Grah...!" Kuzaku went for a big swing with his large katana and slashed through a humanoid pawn.

“Na ha ha...! I’ll show you how I deal with pawns!” The masked dread knight let out an ominous laugh, before springing at a pawn like he was some kind of monstrous bird. His katana flashed evilly as he shouted “Pawwwn!” and cut its head off. “That’s how!”

“Lame...” Kuzaku muttered, as he continued swinging his large katana around as easily as a stick. With each nimble swing of the blade, another pawn was cut down.

“Hoo-hah!” Yume, incredibly, was kicking them. She used a forward kick to push one of the pawns that approached her backwards and immediately hit it with a roundhouse kick to send it flying. It seemed like that would be that, but then she sprang into the air, hollering, “Cha-cha-cha-chai!” as she fired off three more kicks, each faster than his eyes could follow, and sent it flying again. Then, on top of all that—“Hah-nyah!”—she struck it with the palm of her hand, knocking it back through the air once more.

“What are you, some kinda kung-fu master?!” said the masked dread knight, who had been cutting down pawns left and right while shouting “pawn, pawn, pa-pawwn, pawn,” like it was some kind of sound effect.

Why was he having so much fun with this? Well, maybe it was because he was Ranta? That was just how Ranta was.

Merry and Setora stood back-to-back, using their battle staff and spear to fend off any pawns that approached them.

Haruhiro wasn’t sure what it was, but because Ranta and Yume moved around too much, he felt relaxed when he saw Merry and Setora holding one location. It wasn’t soothing, exactly. That’d be overstating the effect. This was still a battle, after all. Yeah. He didn’t have time to be soothed.

Haruhiro got behind a pawn that had been closing in on Merry and grabbed it. He held its head with his left hand, while using the dagger in his right to quickly tear its throat open.

The word “pawn” was apparently derived from a word for “foot soldier.” These pawns in the Graveyard had their entire bodies wrapped in something that resembled whitish bandages. For that reason, Orion also referred to them as mummy men or just mummies. But instead of being made of cloth or gauze,

the bandages felt more earthy, somewhere between clay and earthenware. If you cut off or broke their heads, then they fell apart like the one Haruhiro had just killed. The pawns were apparently made of earth and bones.

"Thanks, Haru!" Merry shouted, which made Haruhiro feel a bit relieved, because recently she had been way too quiet. *Now if only Setora would cheer up a bit too,* he thought. He didn't want the two of them to force themselves to act cheerful, though. He knew they would still do what was needed. He trusted them to. If there was any way they came up short, then it would be up to Haruhiro to cover for them. He was their leader, after all.

This part of the Graveyard was called the entrance hall, a large room immediately inside the foothill entrance. It was Orion that had named it that, of course. But was that really what it was? It seemed to be built more like a theater.

Soon after entering the entrance hall, the members of Orion had scattered more than a dozen rods that emitted a powerful light, so the room was just bright enough for them to see. The light didn't reach the ceiling, though, and it wasn't clear if the walls and floor were cobblestone or stone slabs. It was lower in the middle and higher out toward the edges, with the low center not looking entirely unlike a stage. Whatever the case, Haruhiro and the others were working their way toward that stage-like spot.

The pawns were weak, but they rushed in one after another. It was a real slog, trying to make any progress at all. It didn't feel like the group was likely to take casualties, but if Haruhiro and his party were on their own, they might have been pushed out.

"Let's take it slow and steady!" Shinohara used a shield with a dull silver luster to bash a pawn. His sword was short, but broad, with the end of the blade cut off diagonally. The shape was kind of unusual, but it was awfully sharp. It cut through the pawns like they were made out of paper.

Orion was a famous clan. Shinohara wasn't the only skilled fighter among them. There was one guy called Matsuyagi, or something like that, who used a mace in each hand, fighting like a madman. It was a sight to behold. They also had two mages, a hunter, and a thief too. It was easy to see they were well

balanced.

“Mwe heh!”

Though, that priest wearing glasses was doing a whole lot to throw off that sense of balance just by existing.

“Mwa hah!”

Kimura had to constantly be weird. Now, given Haruhiro was making Merry fight, he wasn’t in any position to say that Kimura should be staying out of the action. But still, Kimura didn’t need to be quite so proactive about moving up to the front line. Orion had plenty of other fighters, after all.

His fighting style was bizarre too. He protected himself with a small, buckler-style shield as he got up close and personal with the pawns, swinging his mace. For whatever reason, he refused to use the traditional sideways, diagonal, or downward swings that Haruhiro would have expected. He always swung from below. Every strike was an upward swing. His target was always the same.

“Kehfwah!”

The crotch.

Kimura swung his mace upward into a pawn’s crotch.

“Swa hah!”

When he maced pawns in the crotch, they didn’t so much fall apart as burst. Kimura liked the feel of it.

“Nufoh! Tovahhh!”

Wow, those were some weird noises he was making.

It sounded almost like Kimura was receiving sexual gratification from smashing the pawns. What kind of priest acted like that? Then again, having lost his memories of his time as a volunteer soldier, perhaps Haruhiro’s vague conception of what a priest was supposed to be like was off the mark? He couldn’t deny the possibility.

“Now for my ultimate skill!”

Another man wearing the same priest uniform as Kimura ran to the front and

did a forward flip.

“Somersault Bomb!”

Using the momentum as he swung down, holding his warhammer with two hands, he smashed a pawn, and the floor beneath it. Both were utterly pulverized.

“Oooorahhh...!”

He then twisted around, lifting his weapon and swinging it down again all in one quick motion. It was terrifyingly fast.

That was Tada. Tada-*san*. He was nuts. There was a roaring explosion every time Tada-san struck down a pawn. Seriously, what was with that noise? This went beyond questions of whether or not it was appropriate for a priest to be fighting like that or not. What was even going on there?

“Heeeere’s my attack!”

Next to Tada, Kikkawa was a lightweight. He zoomed around, knocking the heads off pawns. Kikkawa was loud and seemingly desperate for attention, but moved efficiently, without waste.

“Dance like a leopard!”

When it came to Tokimune, it was kind of hard to tell if he was moving efficiently or not. He was certainly light on his feet, but what was with the way he twirled his sword around every time he struck a pawn? It seemed pointless, but maybe he was doing that to keep a certain rhythm? Though, that raised the question of whether rhythm was necessary.

“And sting like a whale!”

Seeing the way he jumped into the middle of a group of pawns, slammed his shield into the ground to do a handstand on it, then spun around as he kicked the pawns away, maybe he did need to keep a certain rhythm going. Not that Haruhiro would know. Seriously. Haruhiro had no idea. But setting that aside, he was pretty sure the saying was supposed to be, “Dance like a butterfly, sting like a bee.”

Anyway, the Tokkis were all crazy, but the craziest of them all wasn’t

Tokimune or Tada.

No, it was *her*.

She was supposed to be a mage, but she used swords.

Yeah, that's right, swords.

And she dual-wielded them too.

Okay, yes, she had been carrying them all this time. Two swords, hanging at her hips. It shouldn't have been a surprise that she used them. But the fact of the matter was, when Haruhiro saw her fight, it was gobsmacking. Just an incredible sight to behold.

If anyone was dancing like anything here, it was her, not Tokimune.

Mimori's skill with a sword was...what's the word? Magnificent. Her strokes were in no way slow, but they seemed unhurried. She went for a big swing and cut a pawn in half. Once she finished swinging her right blade, she didn't pull back. She kept going with a big swing of her left. You would think that a swing like that would throw her off balance, but Mimori had a strong core. Even if her whole body was at an angle or she swung around with considerable force, her core never shook. Mimori never stopped, never slowed down. She just constantly flowed from one swing to the next. There was nothing artificial about it. Like she just kept swinging, and this was how it turned out. It felt like she had reached a certain state of perfection. That might be exaggerating, but it really did feel like Mimori's swordplay was operating on another level. It was truly sublime.

And yet despite all of that skill with her swords, Mimori was still a mage, and she fought as only a mage could.

As she mowed down pawns, she was drawing elemental sigils with the tips of her blades and chanting a spell.

"Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve!"

Haruhiro had hallucinated explosive noises when he saw Tada pulverize a pawn with his warhammer, but, no, those hadn't been real. This ear-shattering noise that reverberated through his stomach, *this* was what an explosion

sounded like.

That was because five, six meters in front of where Mimori was pointing her sword, there had been an actual explosion.

The Arve magic spell Blast probably only blew away three, four, maybe five pawns at most. But it had a far greater effect than that.

“You see that...!”

Anna-san was being carefully protected by Kikkawa and Tokimune. Nothing was going to be able to hurt her. Now, as for Anna-san herself, she wasn’t really doing anything. Well, no, it’s not like she was doing absolutely nothing. She was puffing up her chest.

“That show you what we can do, yeah! Take that! Bet you scared now, you worthless losers...!”

She sounded full of herself. Full of herself and more than happy to show it.

The priests were there to act when something happened to their comrades. So, in a way, Anna-san might have been doing the right thing. The Tokkis had their own way of handling things. They didn’t seem to have lost anyone, so Haruhiro had to assume it was working for them. He even found Anna-san’s attitude almost refreshing. Because she was a priest, she was standing by until she was needed. But just because she had to stay on the sidelines, that didn’t mean she had to be apologetic about it. It was okay for her to be loud and proud.

The real surprise, though, was Team Renji.

The fighter with a buzz-cut who had a lantern hanging from his belt, Ron, and the teeny tiny priest, Chibi-chan, were defending the mage with black-rimmed glasses, Adachi, as they steadily took down pawns. Renji, meanwhile, was going all-out, and looked like he might take down all of the enemies himself, though realistically that wasn’t possible. The way that he kept a constant distance from his comrades and nonchalantly slashed any pawn that got too close to them seemed so easy, it was like he was taking a break.

No, he was fighting hard, and achieving more than most people, but didn’t it look like he was practically sleepwalking? That was how trivial he was able to

make it look. That might have been the most amazing thing about him. It kind of threw Haruhiro off kilter.

“Huh...?!”

Suddenly, Haruhiro sensed something. What was that something? In the moment, he could only describe it as “something,” but he soon found out what it was.

It came flying in. Toward the stage from the left—no, ahead and to the left, huh?

“Kuzaku!” Setora shouted a warning before Haruhiro could.

“Whuh?!” Reacting instantly, Kuzaku hit the incoming object with his large katana, changing its course. It was pretty big. It managed to throw him off balance, even if only a little, so it must have been pretty heavy. What the hell was that?

“There’s more incoming!” Haruhiro shouted.

Were those balls? No, they were *bullets*. Fist-sized ones, huh? Talk about huge.

“Evade!” Shinohara shouted as he protected himself with his shield.

“Meow!” Yume bent over backwards, and the bullet she’d avoided slammed into and demolished a pawn. “They’re firin’ at blinds!”

“You mean firing blind! Gwah!” Ranta used some mysterious move to woosh left and right, avoiding two or three bullets. The shots that had missed him destroyed a pawn.

“Haunts!” Shinohara shouted, indicating in the direction the bullets had come from with his sword. “Prioritize taking them down first...!”

He had told them about haunts in advance. Unlike the pawns, the haunts were only humanoid from the waist up. They would stay in one place with both arms touching the ground, and they launched bullets out of their faces. Haunts were like fixed turrets.

With Kuzaku, Yume, Ranta, Merry, and Setora all present, the party could function perfectly well without him. Haruhiro ran off in the direction he

expected the haunts to be in.

“You idiot!” Ranta overtook him and left him behind. “Leave this to me!”

He was exasperatingly fast. It was too late to try and get him to come back now. Haruhiro came to a stop. Let Ranta handle the haunts. He wouldn’t be the only one going after them, but at that speed, he’d surely be the first to get there.

Nope.

“Whuh...?!” Ranta cried out in surprise.

Haruhiro looked to see a figure racing ahead of Ranta.

“Renji!” Haruhiro was dumbfounded.

When had he gotten there?

Renji had left his team and gone to hunt down the haunts on his own.

“Murgh...!” Kimura’s glasses flashed.

In front of Ranta, Renji came to a sudden stop.

“What the...?!”

Were those mosquitoes? No, probably not. It just looked like a swarm of mosquitoes. A massive swarm, descending on Renji.

“Guheh...! To think a phantom would welcome us in the entrance hall!” Kimura couldn’t hide his excitement. Or was he just not trying to? Maybe not. This was Kimura, after all.

“Tch...!” Renji swung his greatsword, trying to drive away the swarm-like phantom. The force of the blade was able to scatter them, but it was like pushing your arm through a curtain. The phantom was made up of many, many miniscule insect-like things, making it difficult to cut them all with a sword. Even if the force of the blade could blow them away, they came back in no time.

“It won’t wooork...!”

Okay, Kimura. You’re allowed to be excited, but you shouldn’t sound so happy.

“Phantoms areeee! Practicallly immuuune! To physical damaaage! You

haaaave! To use magiiic! Or... Whah?!”

“Oof...?!” Ranta sputtered. He had slowed down because even if he caught up with Renji, he wasn’t sure what to do about the phantom, but then someone shoved him out of the way. Someone tiny. That was...

“Light...!”

Chibi-chan... Team Renji’s priest. What was she doing?

“Lumiaris...!”

Doing a forward roll as she said something short, Chibi-chan got out in front of Renji, turning her palms toward the phantom.

“Wasn’t that chant a little shooort?!” Kimura shouted.

A chant. That was a chant? Light. Lumiaris. It usually goes, “O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you,” doesn’t it?

“Judgment!”

Seriously?

No exaggeration, Haruhiro thought he was going to go blind. His eyes slammed shut to hide from the danger. Even despite that, he could still see an intense white light through his eyelids, searing his retinas. Then there was the sound. Ear-piercing, like nothing he had ever experienced before. Chibi-chan had been a good distance from Haruhiro when she’d fired off the spell, but it still felt like there was a powerful wind blowing against him.

“The ultimaaaate! Light magiiiic....!” Kimura shouted excitedly.

You’re so annoying.

Haruhiro opened his eyes. It was still hard to see. But Chibi-chan’s ultimate spell, or whatever it was, had blown the phantom away.

“Hah...!” Renji swung at the haunt.

He must actually have been taking a break earlier. No joke. That was the only conclusion Haruhiro could draw.

This was different.

Not so much the speed as the quality of movement.

It was on another level.

Was Renji stepping in as he swung his greatsword? It seemed like something else entirely, didn't it? The greatsword was single-edged with a thick blade, the back of which was all jagged. It was awfully long too, so it had to be heavy. No human should have been able to use it the way he did. It was like Renji had tied a chain to the hilt and was spinning it around using that chain. But you would have to add, like, two or three more of those chain greatswords on top of that, all spinning around at the same time, to have something close to whatever it was he was actually doing. Or maybe not? Yeah, no, that wasn't it. No matter what it was that Renji was doing with that greatsword, Haruhiro wasn't going to be able to figure it out anytime soon.

"Leave some for me!"

Ranta was saying something. But Renji wasn't going to listen. It was hard to imagine anyone could stop him now.

"He's really something, huh?"

By pure coincidence, Haruhiro happened to catch sight of Shinohara as the leader of Orion was whispering that. He had been taking every chance he could to observe Shinohara. Thanks to that, he was able to spot it.

Shinohara was expressionless.

That wasn't the face of someone praising another person. When did a person lose all expression like that? Haruhiro couldn't come up with an answer.

But it only lasted an instant. Soon, Shinohara was smiling again. His usual smile. That of the personable good guy. It seemed to say, *I can tolerate anything.*

"Hmph..." Tada shouldered his warhammer and looked around the area.

Tokimune gave his longsword a little twirl and cut down a pawn. "Have we more or less cleaned them out now?" he wondered aloud.

Renji had hunted down all the haunts. Ranta was stomping his feet in indignation.

“Ooookk!”

“What are you, a monkey?” Kuzaku muttered.

From the look of it, there were no pawns left, at least not in the area lit by the luminous rods.

“Duhuh...!” Kimura’s glasses flashed again. But, man, the way he laughed... Haruhiro just couldn’t get used to it. Every time he heard it, he got mad. It seemed to be different every time too. Because of that, it was always a fresh kind of infuriating. He didn’t need this kind of variety in his life.

“It looks like we’ve taken care of them for now. Gu fuh fuh...”

“Let’s hurry onward.” Shinohara sheathed his sword and headed deeper into the entrance hall. “More of them will turn up if we sit around.”

Was it just Haruhiro’s imagination? The remains of the pawns and haunts scattered around the entrance hall seemed to be stirring. From the look of it, the dirt wasn’t actually moving, so it must have been his imagination.

For now, at least.

Orion and the Tokkis started to move. Renji was already heading deeper and deeper into the entrance hall with Chibi-chan, Ron, and Adachi in tow.

Haruhiro signaled to Kuzaku, Yume, Merry and Setora with his eyes, then followed behind Team Renji.

Ranta adjusted his mask, then joined up with them.

“...This place gives me the creeps.”

Haruhiro agreed entirely, but it galled him to share an opinion with the masked dread knight, so he kept walking in silence.

In all the time they’d spent exploring the Graveyard, Orion had defeated a considerable number of enemies. And yet, more appeared every time they entered the Graveyard.

Shinohara and his people had even seen the remains of their enemies gathering together, forming into new enemies.

The Graveyard would never run out of enemies. There was no shortage of

materials to make new ones with, and more would be created so long as the materials were there. That meant that no matter how many they defeated, there would always be more.

Obviously, this was no natural phenomenon.

There had to be some power at work here to keep churning them out. The bearer of that ability was somewhere in the Graveyard.

It seemed likely that, even now in death, the ancient king did not sleep.

4. The Many Aspects of Love

When they came to the end of the entrance hall, there was a door made of some material that wasn't quite metal or wood. It was more than three meters high, and about equally wide, so it was almost square but not completely; the upper corners were rounded. It was recessed into the wall, and looked like it ought to open, but the question was how. There were no handles or anything of the sort. Just a depression in the shape of five overlapping circles in the center.

There was more than just the one door, by the way. There were two identical doors, ten meters apart. Shinohara stood in front of the one on the left, while Kimura was in front of the one on the right.

"We're going to demonstrate the primary gimmick of the Graveyard for you now," Shinohara said, placing his right hand on a depression in the door.

"We call this synchronized unlocking," he explained. "Kimura."

"Oh-hoh!" Kimura pressed his right hand into the depression on the door. "Take a gander."

"What's a gander?" Yume whispered in Ranta's ear.

"Don't ask me!" Ranta cocked his head to the side. "But, no, seriously? Where is this goose I'm supposed to take?"

"It means look at this," Setora said coldly, and Ranta awkwardly cleared his throat.

"Y-Yeah? I knew that. I mean, duh. Everyone knows that. And this is me we're talking about, okay?"

"Yeah, sure you did," Kuzaku said with a snicker.

"What was that, you asshole?"

Haruhiro could have ignored Ranta as he went off at Kuzaku, but it was painful to watch. He was about to stop him when something happened with the doors.

“Oh...!” Haruhiro’s eyes went wide. He’d expected the doors to open, but not like this.

There were furrows cut into each of the two doors, but Haruhiro had assumed it was just a design flourish of some sort. He’d been wrong. The doors were made up of many parts, and those furrows had been seams. With heavy noises, the parts recessed further and further, changing positions as they did.

The two doors folded into the walls as they opened, leaving a hole that the group could pass through.

“Fwooo.” Yume’s eyes were like saucers. “It’s sure got a pecooler way of openin’, huh, Merry-chan?”

“...Yes.” Merry looked at Yume, then smiled slightly. “It does. But I believe the word you were looking for was peculiar.”

“Nwoo. It is? Percruler, huh?”

“Yume, you got it wrong again. Just saying.”

“Oh, shove off. Your whole existence is wrong, y’know that, Ranta?”

“My existence is the most right thing ever! ...Wait, no, maybe not. That doesn’t sound that cool. Maybe my existence is evil? Downright evil. Hrmm. Yeah, that sounds more awesome.”

Either way, you’re still not cool.

It wasn’t just Haruhiro, everyone there was probably thinking that, but no one was going to say so. Giving Ranta attention just made things worse. It was best to ignore him.

“At last.”

Kimura turned around, his glasses flashing like always. It had gotten to the point where, even when that happened, Haruhiro never thought anything more of it than, *Oh, they flashed.*

“Now then...!”

Just after Haruhiro thought that, Kimura’s glasses flashed repeatedly. *Seriously, though, how the hell does he do that?* Was finally giving in to curiosity

a loss for Haruhiro? Was this even a matter of winning or losing? Yeah, no, it wasn't. But he couldn't help but feel defeated.

"I believe I will explain it once more, just in case. Vo-hoh! I, Kimura, Orion's humble fount of wisdom, will!"

There probably weren't that many people who went around calling themselves a fount of wisdom. Well, having self-confidence wasn't a bad thing, and Kimura was apparently supposed to be quite intelligent. Before the operation began, he had gone over what Orion knew about the Graveyard. His explanations had been well-organized and easy to understand. And this time too, his report was concise and to the point. It was readily apparent how smart he was. But he was still a freaking weirdo.

The key to the graveyard was, as Shinohara and Kimura had just demonstrated, synchronized unlocking.

There were two paths leading past the entrance hall. Door A and door B. These were the two Shinohara and Kimura had opened. The doors inside the Graveyard opened when the depression that looked like five overlapping circles was pressed. However, it wasn't possible to open just door A or door B. They could only be unlocked when the depressions on two matching doors were pressed in sync, causing both to open together.

It must have been a real headache figuring out how this system, or rule, or mechanic, or gimmick, or whatever one wanted to call it, functioned. Orion had done it. Haruhiro was genuinely impressed by that, though being the kind of person he was, he had to wonder why they would go so far.

Whatever their reasons, thanks to Orion, they knew how to progress through the Graveyard.

If there was a branch in the path, they couldn't choose just one, they had to proceed down both. There were doors down each. They'd have to press the depressions in both of the paired doors. Then the way would open.

When they entered the Graveyard through the foothill entrance, they started out in the entrance hall.

There were two doors in the entrance hall: door A and door B. When these

were unlocked in sync, two paths appeared.

We'll call these routes A and B.

Route A was connected to a room that Orion had named "the dining hall." There were two more doors there. One led to the kitchen and the other to the chapel. There was another door in each. By unlocking those doors in sync, they were able to reach a room called the inner courtyard. The inner courtyard was the end of route A.

Route B led into the great hall, which then branched into the audience chamber and the dressing room. If the doors in those rooms were unlocked in sync, they led to the master bedroom. Route B ended with the master bedroom.

Finally, if the doors in the inner courtyard and the master bedroom were unlocked in sync, the burial chamber lay beyond. But as for the full structure of the burial chamber, that remained a mystery. Based on the wall art here, Shinohara seemed certain that the king who did not sleep even in death, the Lich King, was there. However, Orion had yet to make it that far.

Also, if they entered the Graveyard from the castle entrance on top of Mount Grief, they would start in a complex room they called the treasury. The treasury was labyrinthine, and the need to defeat enemies as they went made progressing through it a grueling task. Orion had not succeeded in fighting their way through the treasury, but they had managed to completely map it out and had reached the conclusion that the treasury should have been connected to the burial chamber.

Either way, if things were as Shinohara anticipated, the enemies in the Graveyard were being produced by the Lich King. If they made the king who did not sleep even in death rest in peace, the Graveyard would just be an ordinary graveyard. Passing through the treasury would be a simple matter.

On that note, their platoon split into two groups here.

Route A would be taken by Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis, with Kimura from Orion as their guide. Thirteen people in total.

Route B would be taken by Team Renji and the rest of the members of Orion

led by Shinohara. There were thirteen in this group too.

“Well, until we meet again,” Shinohara said with a smile directed at Haruhiro and the others.

Renji was looking at them too. Well, not so much “them” as Haruhiro specifically. He wasn’t just looking, though. There was meaning in that glance. Haruhiro understood it. Nobody but him did.

Haruhiro didn’t nod. He just looked back at Renji. It seemed that was enough for him to get the message.

It was like their hearts were connected. Kind of a weird feeling. Sure, they had both enlisted at the same time, but Haruhiro didn’t remember that. The gap in their skills was plain for anyone to see. A man Haruhiro had no right to consider an equal had said he’d be relying on him.

It just doesn’t feel right. I don’t know how to describe it. Like an itch I can’t scratch, maybe? It feels weird, that’s all I can say. Renji, you sure you’re not making a mistake? This is me we’re talking about, you know? You don’t have me confused for someone else, do you? I’m more than half convinced you do.

“Shall we get going too? Zu-foh...!”

Haruhiro and the others followed Kimura through door A. Kimura, Kuzaku, Setora, Tokimune, and Kikkawa were carrying lanterns, so it was reasonably bright. The stone corridor connecting the entrance hall to the dining hall was about the same width as the door, so it was three meters across. Something was carved into the rock wall. Not text or symbols, but pictures.

“In our investigation, we found that they’re all pictures of giants and beasts native to the Quickwind Plains, gu-feh...!”

“Food, huh?” Tada said to himself.

What did that mean?

Nobody poked fun at it.

Nobody knows how to react to that, Tada-san.

“By the way, um...” Haruhiro hesitantly addressed the tall woman who had been walking right next to him for a while now. “...Mi-Mimori-san.”

“Mimorin.”

“...Come again?”

“Call me Mimorin.”

“Ohh... Erm...”

“You called me Mimorin before.”

“Before I lost my memory, you mean?”

“Yeah.” Mimorin nodded vigorously. “So call me Mimorin.”

“...I see.”

Was that how it was? He hadn’t known. He had a feeling he didn’t want to know either. But, well, if that’s what he’d called her, so be it. He might not remember it, but he’d still gone and done it. Okay, maybe saying he’d “gone and done it” was being overly dramatic. The point was, Haruhiro had been referring to Mimori as Mimorin.

Why’d you go and do something like that, past me?

“Uh, er, Mimo...rin.”

Mimori—no, Mimorin suddenly came to a stop.

She covered her face with both hands, looking downwards.

“...Huh?”

Haruhiro had just done as she asked. That was all... Right?

“Is something...wrong?”

“I was able to get you to call me Mimorin again.” Mimorin’s shoulders were quivering. “My heart feels so full.”

“...Nngh.” Kikkawa sniffed. “I mean, hey. Let’s be honest here. We figured you guys were goners, you know? I’ll be blunt. There was, like, no way you survived. We didn’t have proof, but all the rumors we heard more or less confirmed it. Mimori, she took it real hard. Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Of course she would. But she still said she believed! That Haruhiro’s out there, alive, and she’ll see him again! Seeing her like that, man, I don’t think there was a dry eye in the house. I cried

too. Only a little, though! It was like, ‘so this is pure love?!’ Still, I thought Mimori-san was being too devoted to you. Seriously, once she sets her mind on something, she won’t back down on it one jot. Not Mimori-san.”

“Hey, Parupiiirooo!” Anna-san walked up and grabbed Haruhiro by the front of his shirt. “I make something clear, yeah? I tell her lot of times, yeah. Even if she lucky, and you still alive, she need to move on. Mimorin not have time for balding ass like you. I say, *Time is money. Waste of time.* Hurry up, hurry up, move on to *next* guy, yeah? *But*, Mimorin, she refuse. *No matter how.* Like it the one thing she no can do, yeah? Why she insist on loser like you? Why she say she never forget you? Because she love you, okay? *Fuck you!*”

Anna-san was tearing up as she flipped him off. What had gotten into her?

No one dared to tease her about it. Least of all Haruhiro.

He was just in awe. Anna-san really cared about Mimorin, both as a comrade and as a friend. That really came across. Haruhiro was overwhelmed by the power of her emotions.

“Uh...” Kuzaku started to say something. But, in the end, the words never came out.

Haruhiro didn’t know what he was supposed to say either.

What am I supposed to do about this? If there’s a right answer, somebody please tell me.

“Well, gosh!” the masked dread knight said with a short snicker. “Isn’t that just lovely? Someone like her falling passionately in love with an aimless moron like you is the kind of thing that comes around once in a lifetime, if that. Just be grateful and accept it.”

“He’s not a moron.” Mimorin glared at Ranta. “Haruhiro is not a moron. He’s not aimless either. Not at all.”

“...S-Sorry.” Ranta ducked his head and apologized in a small voice.

Wow, you’re pathetic, was something Haruhiro didn’t think this time. Mimorin had this unique intensity to her, even if it wasn’t to the same degree as Renji, or at least not in the same way as him.

“All right.” Tada put his hand on Anna-san’s arm. He was incredibly gentle about it too. “Leave it at that, Anna-san.”

“Murgh...”

It was clear that she didn’t really want to, but Anna-san let go of Haruhiro’s shirt.

Incidentally, Tada’s warhammer was on his shoulder, ready for him to bring it down on someone at any moment. On top of that, Haruhiro could sense what he could only conclude was bloodlust leaking from his every pore.

“Haruhiro.”

“...Yes?”

“I don’t know what happened to you guys. I don’t care if you lost your memories, or whatever.”

“Yeah... I guess not. That’s kind of our problem.”

“But.”

“...But?”

“Our Mimori was hurt bad. Who hurt her? You did.”

“Huh? I...did?”

“Who else? If you hurt Mimori any more, I won’t let you get away with it. I’ll kill you.”

“...You just came right out and said that, huh?”

“I’ll kill you.”

“Twice, at that...”

“No!”

It happened so suddenly Haruhiro doubted his eyes.

Did Mimorin punch Tada?

She did.

“Gwagh...!”

Tada toppled to the ground.

He wasn't moving.

No, wait, he slowly sat up. His glasses were out of place, and there was blood on his lip.

"Ptooey..." Tada spat something out. There was a cracking sound as whatever it was struck the floor.

It looked like a tooth. Did it get knocked out? Was that a molar?

Tada adjusted the position of his glasses with his left hand.

Oh, man. The guy's smiling.

"...That was a good punch, Mimori."

"Because you said you'd kill Haruhiro."

"No matter what you say, I'll kill Haruhiro."

"No!"

Mimori came at Tada with—what was it this time? A kick? Oh, crap. That looked dangerous. She was going to kick him in the jaw. Haruhiro instinctively grabbed Mimori from behind and stopped her.

"S-Stop, okay?! Will you cut it out?!"

"Mimori!" Tada stood up fiercely. "If Haruhiro keeps toying with you, I am going to kill him!"

"I said no!"

"Uh, I'm not toying with her, though?! I just traveled around and then ended up losing my memories, okay?!"

Tada cocked his head to the said.

"...Was that what happened?"

"Yes!"

"Okay then."

Tada shrugged.

“The point is, I’m telling you not to hurt Mimori anymore.”

“...I’m telling you, I don’t have the slightest desire to hurt her, okay?”

“In that case!” Anna-san got up close and personal with him, spittle flying as she spoke. “You hurry up and accept Mimorin’s love, yeah!”

Mimorin brought her face close to his.

“Accept it. Please.”

“I...dunno what to say to that...”

“Wow, you’re popular...” Kuzaku crossed his arms.

I don’t know if you’re impressed or what, but put yourself in my shoes for a second, would you?

“Man, you’re super popular, Haruhiro. I mean, I can see why, but still.”

“Geh! I can’t!” Ranta spat angrily. But... “Arghhh! Bleh! Bleh!” He had to take his mask off before he hocked a loogie.

Whoa, man, keep your phlegm to yourself.

“Oh, to be young again!” Tokimune’s smile was so refreshing it seemed out of place. No, more like it didn’t even belong in this world. His teeth were way too white. How did he get them so pearly?

“Hmm, hold on?” Kikkawa interjected. “Haruhiro, you don’t have a girlfriend? Like, in your party? A little love in the workplace? I mean, that’s a thing that happens, right?”

“...What about you?”

“Oh, us? We’re like a family, y’know? No, wait, we *are* a family! Like, Tokimune’s the daddy, Anna-san’s the mommy, Tadacchi’s the big brother, Mimori-san’s the big sister, I’m the youngest child, and Inui’s our pet dog or something.”

“Heh...”

The look on Inui’s face could only be described as evil. At first it seemed like he was offended at being likened to a pet dog, but apparently not.

“Woof...” he barked. It was in a quiet voice, though.

“So? Do you? Do you?” Kikkawa ignored it and kept going. Actually, it wasn’t just Kikkawa, nobody was going to comment on Inui’s woof. It felt like he was already lower than a pet dog.

“What’s the lowdown on the love situation in your party? How about it? Is there at least a little something going on? I’m leaning toward yes. There’s gotta be, right? Like, with Merry, maybe?”

“Huh...?” Haruhiro glanced in Merry’s direction despite himself.

Merry, perhaps by sheer coincidence, was looking at Haruhiro too.

The result was that they ended up staring into each other’s eyes.

Then, instantly, they both looked down at the ground.

“Oh, what’s this now?” Kikkawa wrapped an arm around Haruhiro’s shoulder. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. What? What was that? You’ve got me thinking maybe, just maybe... Haruhiro, are you and Merry, like, going steady?”

“N-No. W-We’re not. N-Nothing like that...”

“Come on, man.”

Ranta was crouching sullenly. He pushed his mask up and looked up at Haruhiro. What was that suspicious look for? Who did he think he was?

“I know all sorts of stuff happened and I left the party. But up until that point, nothing like that had happened, okay? Once I was gone? Well, who knows? You could have forgotten all about it.”

“I forgot it...?”

“Merry’d remember, wouldn’t she? Even if you forgot, she’d still remember, assuming she was involved. That’s entirely possible, right?”

“Ohh!” Kuzaku slammed his fists together.

This isn’t an “Ohh!” moment, man.

“Mmmngh...?” Yume poked Merry in the shoulder. “Merry-chan, huh? Were you goin’ out with Haru-kun?”

“Huh? G-Go...? Going...o-out? Huh? No! We...!”

Merry? Merry-san? You’re suddenly turning into a nervous wreck? What? What happened?

Hold on, maybe, just maybe...did something happen?

Naturally, Haruhiro had no idea. He couldn’t possibly. No matter what had happened between them, Haruhiro didn’t remember it. Suppose, for a moment, something did happen. Haruhiro would have forgotten it. But Merry would still remember. Well, Haruhiro couldn’t help that he’d forgotten. He’d been forced to. That being the case, couldn’t she just tell him about it casually?

Yeah, no, it probably wasn’t that easy.

He had a feeling it would be pretty hard. Just a vague one, though.

Something happened...?

But was it okay for Haruhiro to ask Merry about it himself? If there wasn’t actually anything between them, then asking on the assumption that there might have been was embarrassing. Even if there had been something, asking her about it when he himself didn’t remember seemed kind of—no, really insensitive. He felt like it would be a pretty awful thing to do.

“People...!”

Suddenly, Kimura yelled at them.

“Do you think you could leave it at that? This is the Graveyard!”

He slammed his mace against the ground. Wait, he could use that thing for something other than swinging up into his enemies’ crotches? Yeah, of course he could.

But it looked like Kimura hadn’t swung his mace out of irritation or anger.

“The hell is that?!” Ranta’s eyes bugged out. When Kimura’s mace struck the ground at his feet, they didn’t hear the sound of the stone floor shattering. Why not?

Because what Kimura had struck was not the floor.

What was that thing? Pitch black, like a shadow, but different. That was no

shadow. It was reasonably thin, but still had some thickness to it. Maybe ten centimeters wide, and who knew how long. Fifty, maybe sixty centimeters? It was a very thin, pitch black snake. When that enemy had slithered up to Kimura, he'd immediately struck a powerful blow against it with his mace.

"Is that what they call a shadow?" Setora said quietly to herself. It had been in the explanation before they'd entered the Graveyard. There were a variety of enemies here that would try to drive out invaders. Shadows were one of them. They moved along the floor and walls and had very little offensive power but would wrap around an intruder to hold them in place. Sometimes they acted in groups.

"The Graveyard! Guh-hoh...!" Kimura started laughing. "Wo hoh! Nuh buh huh! This is the Graveyard, yes! Weh hah weh hah weh ha! I'd ask you to be more alert! Wa heeeah!"

He laughed like an idiot while slamming the walls and floor with his mace. Shadows. It was shadows. Shadows all over. But there was no reason to laugh like that, was there? For now, at least, Kimura seemed a whole lot scarier than any shadow.

"It's snake-slaying time!" Tokimune swung his longsword with a flourish and slashed a shadow on the floor.

"Hmph..." Tada spun around once, using the momentum to smash the wall. "I'll demolish them...!"

"Whoa...!" Kuzaku said in awe before noticing a shadow wrapping itself around his ankle, and shaking it off with a cry of surprise.

"Don't let your guard down, idiot!" Ranta shouted as he slashed that shadow with his katana.

"There're tons of 'em, huh!"

Yume used a large knife to cut up the shadows. Setora stabbed one after another with her spear. Merry crushed a few more with her battle staff.

Haruhiro couldn't just stand still either. He went to draw his dagger, but someone nearby moved forward before he could. Who? Mimorin.

Mimorin pulled out two longswords, slashing three or four shadows with such vigor that they went flying.

“It’s okay.”

“...How so?”

“I’ll protect you, Haruhiro.”

I’m grateful, but I can protect myself, you know...?

Actually, am I even grateful? Maybe not?

Before he had the chance to express an opinion, Mimorin rapidly took out the shadows one after another.

“Haruhiro!”

“...Yes?”

“I love you!”

Is that a fact?

Well, be that as it may, Haruhiro would just do what he ought to be doing. Or so he thought, but his body wouldn’t listen. He felt weak and couldn’t think straight.

What do I do?

5. How About This Kind of Rhapsody?

There was nothing *to* do. It was time to change gears. That was his only option. Being able to change gears on the fly was important and, well, that was one of Haruhiro's strong points. After all, he wasn't the type to get worked up and run ahead with an "Aw yeah, let's do this thing!" attitude. Mimorin occasionally moved a bit closer to him, so it was really tough not letting his thoughts shift back to her, but it looked like they'd reached the dining hall, so he wanted to change gears. *Time to change gears,* he told himself.

"You call this the dining hall, huh?" Ranta snorted.

A dining hall. It was true that this place didn't look entirely *unlike* one.

The hall was maybe ten meters across, and continued for a good distance, but the light didn't reach the far end, so it wasn't clear exactly how long it was. The ceiling was awfully high too.

What was most distinctive about this room was the stone platform, measuring seven or eight meters across, that dominated the center, as well as the countless smaller stands surrounding it. The arrangement suggested the big platform was a table, and the things around it were chairs.

Yeah, those were definitely chairs. Or stools. Nobody could say otherwise.

Each of the stools had a pawn seated on top of it, after all.

Every last one. No exceptions.

The pawns were sitting on stone stools around a massive stone table, having a meeting over lunch.

That was how it looked, hence why this was the dining hall.

Fair enough. The name made sense.

"These pawns don't move, though," Haruhiro noted. Then he asked Kimura, "Or do they attack if you get close?"

"Bu-foh!" Kimura pressed on the frames of his glasses, making the lenses

flash. Was he skillfully adjusting the angle so they caught the light of his lantern just right? If so, it was an incredible talent. And also incredibly pointless. What a waste of effort.

"I wonder," Kimura mused. "I have witnessed this scene many times, but never with so many pawns in attendance before. There were cases where the room seemed oddly vacant, and we thought we could just pass through until, suddenly, hidden enemies leapt out. It turned into a chaotic melee, and we were in real trouble."

"...Heh. You're useless!" Ranta's insult made Kimura burst out laughing for some reason.

"Gweah-hah...! Vwah-guffaw-heh-fah-foh...! Gehen-gehen! Bu-hen! Ngheh-hah?! Ogwa-foh?!"

Now he was coughing. He'd laughed too hard. And what a bizarre laugh too. He'd had it coming to him.

"Kimu-chin, you okay...?"

When Yume rubbed Kimura's back, Ranta snapped instantly.

"Heyyyy! Yume, you don't have to give a shit about that guy!"

"Aw, don't be like that."

"Nu-buh..." Kimura smirked. It goes without saying, his glasses flashed too. "Are you jelling? You are jelling, aren't you?"

"A-Am not! Besides, what's 'jelling' anyway...?"

"It derives from jealousy. In other words, I was asking if you're jealous."

"...I don't think you needed to invent a new word for that." Haruhiro poked fun at something he probably shouldn't have bothered to, then felt defeated.

"So? So?" Kikkawa ignored Haruhiro's comedic jab to keep the conversation going, which Haruhiro felt a little grateful for, but also kinda left out. "What're we gonna do? What're we gonna do? Go? We gonna go? Is that what we're doing? Well? If I get to decide, can we go already? Huh?"

"Kikkawa, the one thing we're absolutely *not* gonna do is let you decide on

the spur of the moment, like you're on a date with a girl!"

"Oh, come on, Ranta. That was mean. Aren't we buds? We're pals, right?"

"We're not pals. We just enlisted at the same time. That's the only connection we have."

"Hey, if we joined up at the same time, that practically makes us friends. Birds of a feather and all that, right?"

"I can't trust a guy who's so willing to call anyone and everyone his friend."

"Huh? Why not? Like, in the end, all mankind are friends, right? Nah, not that I think that either!"

"Even you don't think that?!"

Haruhiro sighed. Or rather, by exhaling, he was trying to expel the frustration from his body.

Ughhhhhhhhh.

These. People.

They just won't shut up.

Ranta was trouble enough on his own, but add in the Tokkis, especially Kikkawa, and then Kimura on top of that, and things got even more chaotic.

"Haruhiro," Mimorin called his name.

He looked over to see her flexing her arm in an attempt to encourage him.

"Live."

"...Uh, I am living, though?"

"That not what she means! *You idiot!* Nincompoop!" Anna-san insulted him, but Haruhiro felt nothing. Maybe verbal abuse just felt normal now? Was that okay? He felt like he probably shouldn't be getting used to it.

"Heh..."

At some point, the suspicious eyepatch-wearing guy with the ponytail had crept up behind Setora.

"You—"

That was all Inui managed to say before the tip of her spear was at his throat. Nice work. Setora had apparently sensed his presence.

“What?”

“Heh... You...”

What was with the way Inui cleared his throat? Was it a laugh? It was creepy, that was for sure.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“What?”

“I am inquiring as to whether you have a boyfriend...”

“...Are you right in the head?”

“I am sane. My head is aligned incredibly well...”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“So...do you have a boyfriend?”

Hold on, could it be? Was Inui...hitting on her?

Why? Why do that here, of all places? With this timing? They were sort of in the middle of an operation here. No, not just *sort of*. They *were* deep in the Graveyard on a mission to clear it.

“Hold on, Inui! Dude!” Ranta went after him. “You were chasing Shihoru’s ass pretty hard before, and she rejected you! Now you’re gunning for Setora?! Show some restraint, man!”

“That woman, huh? Heh...!” Inui’s right eye, the one not covered by the eyepatch, opened wide. That felt ominous in all sorts of ways. “However! That woman is not here! Therefore! My heart is drawn to the woman I see before me! Here and now!”

“You’re way too true to your desires...” Kuzaku seemed exasperated, or maybe outright shocked. The question of what had happened to Shihoru was a heavy weight on the party at the moment, so it was easy to understand how he felt. Inui, on the other hand, was an enigma.

“I see how it is.” Without a single change from her normal expression, Setora

mercilessly thrust her spear toward Inui’s eye.

“Ngh...?!” Inui instinctively jumped back. He narrowly managed to dodge but not completely. Setora’s spear gouged him deeply from right cheek to right ear.

Setora readied her spear. Her expression was blank, of course, but she was ready to fight. The only date he’d be getting out of her was one with the sharp end of her spear.



“I’m not interested.”

“...Heh.” Inui spread his arms wide, like a bird of prey intimidating an opponent, or perhaps someone welcoming a guest. “I wouldn’t have it any other way!”

Setora paused, incredulous. “Do you not understand words?”

“I simply! Have high standards! That is all!”

“Ha ha ha!” Tokimune laughed jovially and closed one eye. “Don’t take off that eyepatch, Inui. It’s not time yet!”

“Heh...!” Inui touched his eyepatch. Did being told not to just make him want to do it more? It was possible Tokimune had been egging him on too.

I don’t care, I just want him to stop.

What was the eyepatch sealing inside Inui? Haruhiro didn’t know. He didn’t want to know. But nothing good would happen when he removed it. That much was certain.

“Enough.” Tada said something Haruhiro could agree with for once.

Yeah. I’ve had my fill of this crazy comedic nonsense. Well, no, actually I never wanted any in the first place.

By the way, what are you doing there, Tada-san?

“Huh?”

When did you get on top of the table?

“I’m sick of this.” With those words, Tada leisurely walked along the table, the warhammer resting on his shoulder.

“Whoa... Hold... Huh? Hold o—” Haruhiro tried to stop Tada. He felt he needed to, and he wanted to, but how? The guy didn’t listen. Resort to force? Go after him? Chase him down and stop him? That would require Haruhiro getting up on the table too. Was that a good idea?

It didn’t matter if it was good or bad. It might already have been too late.

The pawns sitting on the stone stools began stirring one after another. It

looked like they were trying to stand up.

“Hah...!” Tada grinned, then demolished the rising pawns with his warhammer.

Smash!

Kersmash!

Smash!

Kersmash!

Smash!

Kersmash!

Ker-sma-sma-smash!

It was funny watching the way the pawns got wrecked.

Funny? Was it funny? Hard to say. Was it okay to be amused by it?

“That’s a sweet rhythm and beat!” Tokimune said nonsensically as he sprang up onto the table. “Everyone, follow Tada! Let’s play the best music ever!”

He bashed one pawn with his shield as it tried to get on the table, then, spinning his sword around, he slashed another.

“I’m not feeling musical...” Haruhiro muttered as he climbed onto the table. Ranta and Kuzaku were already following the Tokkis, so he had no choice but to go with the flow.

“Yume, stay by Merry and Setora!”

“Gotcha!”

“Okay!”

“Understood.”

He didn’t have to worry about the three of them. They’d probably be fine.

Tada pressed forward, smash, smash, kersmashing pawns as he went. Tokimune, Kikkawa, Inui, Ranta, and Kuzaku all chased after him like it was some sort of race. No, they were blatantly racing against one another.

Yume, Merry, and Setora were joined by Mimorin and Anna-san. Kimura, the clever bastard, had quietly joined that group too. He wasn't swinging his mace, just making his glasses flash. What was he up to? Because it was Kimura, Haruhiro was suspicious, but that weirdo might just have been watching to see what happened. If so, Haruhiro wished he wouldn't do things that seemed misleading.

That said, while Haruhiro had drawn his dagger, he wasn't fighting. The pawns were numerous but disorganized. Each of them just rose from their stone stools and tried to attack the group on their own, with no attempt at coordination, so they weren't particularly threatening. Tada and the others at the front of the pack slowed down, allowing the rest to catch up, so Haruhiro carefully chose a position that allowed him to survey the situation.

The pawns were pressing in from the front as well as the sides, and while they weren't slowing Tada and the others down, the group was making less progress than before. But it was just a matter of time. Tada and the rest would break through the mob eventually. If the pawns were their only enemies, that is.

"Tada-san, above you...!" Haruhiro called out a warning, and Tada finished smacking down a pawn with his warhammer, then jumped backwards.

Something was raining down. Fist-sized bullets. Haruhiro couldn't see the enemies, but they must have been stuck to the ceiling. It had to be haunts, firing straight down at Tada and the others. The pawns pressing in at the front were being torn to shreds, but these things didn't care about their allies being caught in the crossfire.

"Everyone, off the table!" Tokimune ordered, then jumped to a stone stool on the left.

"Wa-hey!" Kikkawa followed Tokimune.

"Heh!" As did Inui.

"The hell?!"

"Whoa!"

Ranta and Kuzaku jumped down to the right side of the table.

Yume, Setora, and Merry went right. Mimorin, Anna-san, and Kimura went left. Haruhiro followed his comrades.

Tada stayed on the table, whacking pawns and bullets with his warhammer, but who knew how long he could keep it up?

“Tada...!” Even when Tokimune called his name, Tada didn’t get down. Damn was he stubborn. That said, the haunts’ bullets were still flying at Tokimune’s left-side group and Haruhiro’s right-side group. The pawns were still rushing at them from the front as well, so their situation was largely unchanged.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve...!” Mimorin cast Blast. There was a roaring explosion right above Tada. She must have been targeting the haunts that were presumably there.

“Whoa?!” Tada rolled off the table to escape the falling dust. That and the rubble. Large amounts of both rained down in place of the bullets. Mimorin’s Blast had taken the ceiling down with the haunts, causing a collapse.

“Sorry...!” Mimorin apologized.

“*Never mind,* yeah!” Anna-san was quick to encourage her, but Tada couldn’t just let it slide so easily.

“Don’t use magic! You’ll bury us alive!”

“Mew! Can’t see ’em, but...!” Yume readied her bow. She nocked an arrow, then fired. Repeatedly.

Was that working? Was she hitting the haunts on the ceiling? The bullets were still coming, so, honestly, it was impossible to tell. But it was better to do something than nothing, right?

“There’s still a shitload of pawns!” Ranta slashed an incoming pawn with his katana, then kicked Kuzaku in the butt. “Do your job and tank, damn it!”

“I am!”

Kuzaku was putting up a valiant fight. He didn’t just cut the pawns down with his large katana, he also kicked them over, pushed them down with his left arm, and tackled them using his shoulder.

“Ngh...!” Merry struck down a bullet with her battle staff.

“Hi-yah!” With a single thrust of her spear, Setora took down a pawn that had been about to spring at the priest.

Haruhiro also dodged the falling bullets, slitting pawns’ throats or kicking them to the ground for Ranta, Merry, or Setora to finish, but there seemed to be no end.

“Kimura-san!”

“What we need here...!” Kimura shouted from the other side of the table. “Is for everyone to rouse themselves and strive to fight ever harder!”

“...That’s all you’ve got?” Haruhiro said after a pause, not even able to muster the energy for a comedic retort. Exert their utmost abilities. Sure, the words sounded nice, but basically all he was saying was, “Let’s give it our best shot, okay?” How utterly useless. Haruhiro had been a fool to expect anything from him.

“Tokimune!” Tada shouted. “If this is how it’s gonna be, let’s do the thing!”

“Oh, yeah, the thing!” Tokimune’s laughter felt refreshing even at a time like this. “Ha ha! Which thing?!”

It was impressive he could laugh like that when he apparently had no idea what Tada was talking about.

“This one!” Tada leapt back up onto the table, and wound up with his warhammer. No, he didn’t put it above him, so it wasn’t really “up,” was it? Tada spread his legs wide, lowering his hips, and twisted his body with the head of his warhammer on the other side of his right foot. Was he getting ready for a big swing? That’s how it looked.

“Oh, I get it now!” Having clued in, Tokimune danced—not like a butterfly, but like a panther. He hopped up on the table, then leaped again.

Incredibly, he landed on the head of Tada’s warhammer.

“Whuh...?”

The head wasn’t all that large, so it was impressive he could land on it so precisely. But Haruhiro was only awed for a brief moment.

“Oooorahhhhh!” Tada swung the warhammer upward. What do you think

happened next?

Tokimune was on the head of it. That naturally—as if there was anything natural about this nonsense—meant that he was launched into the air.

“Whuhhhhhhh...?!” Ranta shouted. The exclamation might not have been called for, but, yeah, fair enough, it was kind of surprising. Haruhiro was shocked himself.

“What’re they doing...?”

“Hah!”

Tokimune hadn’t just been launched into the air, he’d also jumped off. Once he reached a high enough point, he swung his sword like mad. Chunks of haunt remains rained down, so he’d apparently taken out a number of them. A moment later, Tokimune came back down, rolling and springing back up to dull the impact as he landed.

“Come here!”

Tada was already waiting. They were going to do that again? Apparently, yes.

“All right!”

Tokimune jumped toward the warhammer. Tada launched him. Tokimune cut up the haunts on the ceiling, and fell together with their remains.

“Come here, Tokimune!”

“Yeah!”

Tokimune ran toward Tada, who was ready and waiting, and jumped. Tada’s warhammer launched him. He cut up haunts on the ceiling, then fell. Tokimune rolled, then got back up again.

“This is ridiculous,” Haruhiro said in disbelief.

“Come here!”

Tada was already waiting. Tokimune looked like he was about to jump, then stopped.

“What’s wrong?!” Tada shouted angrily. Tokimune shook his head with a smile.

“Sorry, Tada. This takes more out of me than you’d think.”

“What?! Fine, then! Haruhiro!”

“Huh?!”

“Come here!”

“Me?!”

“You!”

“Whyyy?!”

“Hurry up!”

“Whaaaa...”

Why did it have to be Haruhiro? Ranta was light and would probably enjoy that kind of acrobatic stunt. He seemed like a better fit.

“Dammit! They just keep coming!”

He was also fighting his hardest against the pawns right now. Okay, Ranta was out. But what about Kikkawa, or literally anyone else? No, it wasn’t the time to say that. Not that Haruhiro had said anything. He was going. If he had time to complain, he ought to be using it to whittle down the number of haunts on the ceiling. If there was a way he could, he had to give it a shot. Haruhiro reluctantly climbed onto the table, and jumped.

The warhammer. The head of the warhammer. He needed to land right on it. Wait, had he really needed to jump? He hadn’t, right? He felt like he could have just stepped onto it gingerly. Actually, it would probably have worked better. Too late now, though. He was about to touch down on the warhammer.

“Oooorahhhhh!”

“Ulp!”

Haruhiro was launched into the air.

He’d jumped too, though. He was pretty sure he got the timing right. It was surprisingly easy.

Ohh.

So this is how it feels?

It's pretty fast, huh?

He was hurtling toward the ceiling. Or the haunts growing out of the ceiling, rather. The light barely reached, but he could make out vague outlines.

A bullet streaked right past him, and he idly thought, *Wonder what would've happened if that'd hit me?* He didn't feel like he'd dodged it himself. It just happened not to hit him. By a hair's breadth.

"Urkh...!"

Haruhiro clung to a haunt, tore into it with his dagger to carve off the head section that fired bullets, then immediately jumped to the neighboring haunt. *This is crazy,* a voice in the corner of his mind told him. He didn't have time to think. If he made decisions on every little thing, saying, *I'll do this first, then that next,* his mind could never keep up. Was this really okay? Reflection could wait. If he didn't want to have to repeat the whole process, he needed to take down as many haunts as he could during this one launch.

"Ahhh!"

He'd been able to keep count up until the ninth. He probably got about twelve of them. But this was it. He wasn't going to get a thirteenth. Too bad. There was no haunt close enough for him to jump to.

"Uh..."

Which also meant he had nowhere to go but down.

Landing. He needed to prepare for landing.

He had to do that thing Tokimune had done. Land with both feet, but then not absorb the impact with them. Roll and distribute the shock. Spread it out.

Is that something I can just pull off on the fly...?

He was going to have to. But even if he failed and got badly hurt, there were priests. It was easier to think that way. Or was it? Really? No, maybe not.

"Whoa?!"

Well, he gave it his best shot, and somehow it worked out. Not thud, then

spin, but both at the same time. He didn't know how to describe it, but his body moved really well. His legs didn't even feel numb. Haruhiro was standing up so straight he could hardly believe he'd just fallen from that height.

"Good, come here!"

Haruhiro looked and saw Tada ready to go again. He really didn't want to do it. Not ever again.

"Okuh!" For that reason, his reply was strangely slurred. Was he doing this? Did he have to? There were still bullets coming down, which meant there were still haunts, so someone had to deal with them. Maybe one of the others could. Nothing said it had to be him, but it was dangerous, and there was something of a trick to it. Haruhiro had just happened to figure out what it was. He didn't want to go again, but he'd probably manage a second round well enough.

Haruhiro didn't jump on Tada's warhammer. That part had been utterly pointless. He gently got on.

"Go ahead!"

"Oooorahhhhh!"

Haruhiro was launched into the air. How many more times did he have to do this? He wanted to minimize the number. To that end, he'd take out as many haunts as he could on each trip. *I'm pretty optimistic, huh?* Haruhiro thought to himself as he clung to a haunt and swung his dagger. Then, immediately, he moved on to the next.

There's no choice. I've gotta do it. I'll do it. I'm doing it, but still...

6. What the Warriors Left Behind

Having reached the end of the dining hall, sad to say, the group had to stop and take a rest.

Mimorin sat and looked at Haruhiro imploringly, with her legs folded under her and her knees sticking forward.

“She telling you to use those knees as pillow, yeah! You pig shit!” Anna-san shouted at him, but, no, he was going to have to pass. Haruhiro sat with his back against the wall, steadying his breath.

“...You okay?”

If he had Kuzaku worrying about him, it was already over. Okay, maybe he wasn’t completely finished. Rather, when Kuzaku, who gave off incredible little-brother energy, started worrying about him, he couldn’t help but be uneasy.

“It’s fine. I’m better now,” Haruhiro said, rising.

“Hah! Like hell you are!” Ranta wasted no time being toxic. “If you’re exhausted after that, we’re never gonna make it through this. The only thing you’ve ever been good at is putting up a strong front. If you aren’t fine, you still better pretend, you moron.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Don’t just brush me off!”

“What am I supposed to do...?”

What a pain in the ass. I wish he’d get lost. I don’t want the guy completely eliminated, but it’d be nice if he went far, far away every once in a while.

“Ranta’s always sayin’ heartful things like that...” Yume crossed her arms and sighed. “It never, ever stops, y’know?”

“People don’t change that easily,” Kuzaku said with a chuckle. “I mean, it just shows you, Ranta-kun’s never grown.”

“The hell, man?! Don’t get full of yourself just because you’re a little taller than me, you shithead!”

“Nah, I know I say this every time, but it’s not ‘a little.’ I’m a *lot* taller than you.”

“You still haven’t learned not to brag about your height?!”

“It’s a boney feed fact, y’know,” Yume interjected, making Ranta even madder.

“You mean bona fide! Oh, and it’s hurtful, not heartful! You made the same mistake a long time ago, just saying! You’re the one who hasn’t grown!”

“Yume has grown too!”

“Where?!”

“Yume’s not gonna say exactly where, but here and there!”

“That’s pretty vague! Wait, here and there...”

Ranta shifted his mask aside, and looked Yume up and down. Repeatedly.

“W-Well...maybe you have...? There are some places I guess I can’t for sure say you haven’t. I dunno, it’s not impossible...”

“See?” Yume thrust her chest out with pride.

“Where are you staring?” Merry muttered with a scowl.

“O-Oh, fuck off!” Ranta’s face was bright red. He hurriedly put his mask back on. “I can look where I want! I wasn’t trying to see anything she’s hiding! You’ve got nothing to charge me with!”

“Whoa, look at him try to defend it...”

“Shut up, Kuzaku! Get on your knees! I’ll kill you!”

“Tell me...” Setora pressed the tip of her spear directly against Inui’s throat. “Do I need to stab you before you’ll stop that?”

“Heh!” Inui opened his uncovered right eye wide before grasping the spear’s tip with his bare hands.

“Do it, if you can! Do it! I want it!”

Setora hesitated. “May I really?” She seemed perplexed for once.

“Sure, why not?” Tokimune flashed his pearly whites.

Wait, it’s okay?

“Yeah, do it.” Tada seemed fed-up. He might just not have cared anymore.

“Whew, that’s intense, Inuin! Burning love! Love, love, love! You’re making me want to fall in love too!” Kikkawa was writhing.

“Inui is sexual deviant who can’t pull his skin back, yeah,” Anna-san interjected with a completely unrelated insult.

“Inui is a true...” Mimorin began to speak, then for some reason, perhaps realizing she was about to reveal some truth that no person ought to know, she covered her mouth. But what was it? Well, not like it mattered.

This is utter chaos.

“Moving on.” Kimura’s glasses flashed. He repeatedly made his lenses glare as he repeated those words. In a way, he was as bad as Ranta and even more annoying.

“Tokimune-san,” Haruhiro prompted. Tokimune nodded.

“Yeah, all right. We should get going...”

The end of the dining hall was not a dead end. There were doors. Two of them, on opposite ends of the stone wall, made of a material which they still couldn’t tell whether it was metal or stone. Each door had a depression in the shape of five overlapping circles in the center of it. Haruhiro stood in front of the door on the right, while Tokimune stood at the door on the left.

“Okay...”

They nodded to one another, and then each pressed the depression in his own door. The doors creaked in unison and started to open, seemingly folding into themselves and the wall.

“Looks like we get the chapel.”

Haruhiro’s party would continue down the right-hand route.

“And we have the kitchen, huh?”

The Tokkis would go left.

Once Haruhiro's party opened the door on the far side of the chapel, and the Tokkis opened the door in the kitchen, the synchronized unlocking would be complete, and they would meet up in the inner courtyard.

"As for me..."

What was Kimura going to do?

"We-hoh!"

With that weird laugh, he walked over to Haruhiro and the others in front of the right-hand door.

"You don't need to come with us, you know? I mean, you probably fit in better with them. Go over there." Ranta made a gesture like he was shooing away a fly.

Kimura abruptly laughed. "Zwe-hah!"

"Eek!"

Ranta wasn't the only one who was frightened. Kuzaku, Merry, and Yume all jumped a little too. Setora gave him a mystified look, as if she were thinking, *Is this man insane? What is going on in that head of his?*

Haruhiro felt about the same as she did.

"...Kimura-san."

"What is it, Haruhirorororong. Rorororororong. Rororong. Rong."

"...You know what? Never mind."

They said this guy was close to Shinohara. How much did he know about Shinohara's intentions?

If, as Haruhiro suspected, Shinohara was connected to the master of the Forbidden Tower, was Kimura aware of that fact? If Shinohara was plotting something, was Kimura in on the conspiracy?

What about the other members of Orion? Like Hayashi, for instance.

Hayashi was Merry's comrade. If they were going to investigate Orion, he was

their way in.

But Hayashi hadn't joined the detached force. He was one of the thirteen members of Orion assigned to the main assault force on Mount Grief. Shinohara had entrusted him with leading that group.

If Kimura was so close to Shinohara, wouldn't it have been natural for him to lead the main force? But Shinohara had chosen to have Kimura join the detached force instead. Did that show how much he trusted him? Were they so close that Shinohara wanted him by his side at all times?

What if they were so close that you could say they were practically the same person?

Haruhiro and Renji had decided it was worthwhile to keep an eye on Shinohara. Kimura would need to be treated the same way. They would also need to consider the possibility that every member of Orion was under Shinohara's control.

However, it was possible that Shinohara hadn't disclosed his intentions even to Kimura, his closest friend. Taking it to the most extreme conclusion, Shinohara might be betraying his friends and comrades too. Naturally, there was no way to say anything for sure right at that moment. It might be true, it might not. No way to know.

"Well, see you later!" Tokimune said with a wink and a slight nod of his head.

"Yeah," Ranta replied with a wave.

"No, not 'yeah'! You cocky fly shit!" Anna-san snapped at him.

"...Harsh much?"

Though Ranta seemed hurt, Haruhiro didn't feel all that sympathetic, but if he'd been the one to be called "fly shit" out of nowhere, he'd have started doubting the value of his existence too. Anna-san's verbal abuse game was on point.

"Haruhiro."

He could feel the warmth in the look Mimorin was giving him even at this distance.

Was this what they called a passionate glance?

“I love you.”

“...Uh, sure.”

What am I even supposed to do? Jeez.

Well, he didn’t have to do anything for now. They were parting ways with the Tokkis for a while...though only a while. They’d be meeting up again in no time if things went as planned, and it would be bad if they couldn’t, so dwelling on what was to come wasn’t terribly productive. For now, he had to concentrate. Focus on what was in front of him.

The corridor beyond the door was ominously quiet. He made a point of keeping his ears perked up and his eyes peeled as they proceeded. Nothing happened, though.

“Now, let me tell you about the chapel...” Kimura said. “This room, to the best of my knowledge, is always filled with the same kind of enemy. That will likely hold true this time as well...” For some reason, he wasn’t laughing anymore. Kimura didn’t feel like Kimura without the bizarre laughter, so it felt wrong, and ominous.

“What enemies are those?” Setora got straight to the point.

Kimura pushed up the frames of his glasses. The lenses didn’t flash. Yeah, this was weird. Or was it weirder the way they usually flashed like crazy?

“In Orion, we call them wraiths.”

Fortunately, they didn’t encounter any before reaching the chapel.

Unlike all the other rooms before now, the chapel was lit. Light shone down from the high ceiling, apparently coming through panes of stained glass. This place was supposedly underground, so it was probably not natural light. What kind of light was it, then? That remained unclear, but it was good that the room wasn’t dark.

Because of how bright it was, the group could clearly see that the chapel was a cylindrical room, twenty meters across, and that there were stone stairs heading upward in the center of it.

People were sitting on those stone steps.

At least, they certainly looked like people.

Six of them.

This might seem obvious, but they had a mixture of ages, physiques, and manners of dress. There was one point in common though. Each of them was dressed similarly to the party. That is to say, they looked like volunteer soldiers.

“Our other name for the wraiths is mimics.” Kimura held his mace in his right hand, his buckler ready in his left as he pressed forward. “They are animated puppets, modeled on volunteer soldiers who fell in the Graveyard...”

The wraiths on the stone steps gradually stood up.

From the look of it, three of them—a young man, a middle-aged man, and a rather large woman—must have been warriors. The brave young man wielded a greatsword, the middle-aged man an ax, and the large female warrior a longsword and large shield.

The old man with graying hair wore white robes similar to Kimura’s, so he must have been a priest. He held a heavily-ornamented priest’s staff, but it looked like it would still be nasty to get hit with it.

The man with the pointy hat and excessively long goatee was clearly a mage. He carried an off-white staff that didn’t look like it was made of wood.

But it was the tough-looking woman who already had her longsword drawn that caught Haruhiro’s attention. She had a somewhat distinctive way of holding her sword, with the back of her hand turned toward them. There were sheaths on her trunk and thighs too. Did she carry multiple knives? There were a lot of them. Based on the size of the sheaths, they might have been throwing knives. It was impossible to see her face through the iron helm she wore, but her armor was limited to a breastplate, shin guards, and just the bare minimum. He watched her footwork as she smoothly shifted her body weight around. When she had been alive—if that was the right way to say it—the woman whose form the wraith had taken must have been a skilled fighter.

“Let me be clear,” Kimura said quietly, his eyes never leaving the wraiths. “Fight with everything you have. Even if Shingen and my beloved Yokoi are

mere shades of their former selves, they are still incredibly powerful.”

Did he just casually mention something huge? Er, was it huge? Hard to say. Maybe it wasn’t that big of a revelation after all.

“Delm, hel, en, trem, rig, arve.”

No time to dwell on it. At the highest point on the stone steps, the gaunt mage with the goatee began drawing elemental sigils and chanting.

“Firewall!” Merry shouted.

The flames rose. It was a literal wall of fire. The screen of flames hid the steps from view. Immediately, the wraiths moved into action. That tough-looking woman descended the stone steps. The greatsword-wielder went right, while the ax-wielder and the female warrior with the longsword and shield went left.

“Here they come!”

Haruhiro gestured for Kuzaku to go right and Yume to go left. Ranta had already taken off to the left.

In mere moments, the greatsword-wielder came out around the right side of the Firewall, and the ax-wielder and female warrior came around the left. Kuzaku took on the greatsword-wielder, Ranta engaged the ax-wielder, and Yume intercepted the female warrior.

“Kimura-san?!”

Kimura was standing before the middle of the Firewall. What was he doing?

Waiting. Was that it?

That tough woman. Kimura’s lover, that was probably what she was. Did he say her name was Yokoi? Yokoi broke through the Firewall like it was nothing, then came at Kimura swinging.

“Fwah-hah?!”

Kimura stopped Yokoi’s longsword with his buckler, then went for a swing with his mace. She might not have been the real thing, but was he really going to actively swing for his ex-lover’s crotch?

It didn’t matter, because Yokoi batted his mace away and attacked Kimura.

Repeatedly. Kimura tried to fend off her attacks with his buckler, but he wasn't quite able to manage it. He got cut all over and was heavily injured in no time.

"Weee! Yokoiii!"

He looked delighted, but she was going to slice and dice him at this rate, so something had to be done. Haruhiro was about to go help, but Setora stopped him.

"You get the mage!" she said.

Haruhiro nodded. "Take care of him!"

Leaving Setora in charge of protecting Kimura, Haruhiro circled around the Firewall. The gaunt mage with the goatee and the graying priest hadn't come down from the steps. It was like they knew Haruhiro was coming.

"Delm, hel, en, van, arve."

The gaunt mage triggered another spell. This one was...

"Ah?!"

Hot. In an instant, his eyes felt dry, and his throat was parched. The wind was intensely hot. But it wasn't so strong that it blew him away. He could hold his ground. He could push through the wind, somehow, but...

"Delm, hel, en, ig, arve."

Magic again?

Fireballs came at him. Not just one. Two, three whizzed past. Haruhiro instinctively stopped resisting the hot wind. He let it blow him backwards as he twisted out of the way of the orbs of flame. The third one only narrowly missed, and it singed a good chunk of his hair, but he managed to dodge it somehow.

"Huh?!"

The next attack wasn't magic. It was the graying priest charging in. He gave a sideways swipe of his staff, but put way too much force into it. Haruhiro crouched and got out of the way. But the staff didn't stop. Or rather, the graying priest didn't. He spun all the way around with the staff and went in for a second swing. *If that hits me, I might be dead,* Haruhiro thought as he leapt

aside.

“Delm, hel, en, rig, arve.”

The gaunt mage was at it again. Casting spells at regular intervals. A pillar of flame rose up, and Haruhiro came close to running right into it. That was the Fire Pillar spell.

“Urgh...!” Haruhiro tried to back away in a hurry, but the gaunt mage cast another Flame Pillar.

“Delm, hel, en, rig, arve.”

“Hot!”

Behind him. There was a flaming pillar right behind Haruhiro. He couldn’t go forward or back. Left or right? Haruhiro went right before he could second-guess the decision. The graying priest was waiting for him there, swinging his staff down at Haruhiro.

“Ah?!”

If he tried to think through his options, he’d never make it. Haruhiro let his body move for him. The staff grazed his left ear. It didn’t hit. Haruhiro passed by the graying priest, sweeping his leg out on the way. As the priest fell, incredibly, he began to chant a light magic spell.

“O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you!”

The graying priest dropped to the stone floor on his back with a thud. But he still turned his left palm toward Haruhiro.

“Blame!”

“Wha—?!”

Nothing was happening. Did the spell not trigger? Was the light magic a dud? Why? No, the why wasn’t important. Haruhiro jumped on the graying priest. He held the wraith down and slit his throat with a dagger. It was like a bag of dirt. Earth poured from the wound, and it rapidly fell apart. The graying priest turned to soil. No, not just soil. There were white objects mixed in too. Bones, huh?

“Wraiths can’t use light magic?! But they can use other magic!”

“Delm, hel, en, van, arve.”

Yeah. The wraiths couldn’t gain Lumiaris’s blessings with light magic, but they could still use other magic. The gaunt mage cast a spell. The searing wind blew against Haruhiro, nearly throwing him off balance.

“Urgh...!”

“Delm, hel, en, ig, arve.”

Then came the Fireballs. One, two, three. It was nasty work. Haruhiro somersaulted backwards diagonally, avoiding the first and second, then jumped to the side to evade the third.

“This is pretty dangerous, huh?!”

“Meow!”

Yume? Yeah, that was Yume. She had jumped over the now much lower Firewall, rolled, and assumed a kneeling position. Her bow was already drawn and ready. She quickly loosed an arrow. Then another, and another.

“Marc em Parc.”

The gaunt mage was good at reacting. Magic Missile. He generated multiple beads of light, and shot down Yume’s arrows one after another.

“Marc em Parc!”

He continued firing Magic Missiles as he went on the offensive.

“Hah! Whoa! Mew!”

Yume nimbly rolled around, somersaulting and avoiding the beads.

“Shoot!”

She even found an opening to loose an arrow. Incredible.

“Marc em Parc!”

If it weren’t for the short incantation time of Magic Missile, that gaunt mage couldn’t have hoped to win a shooting match with Yume. Judging by how good he was at choosing the right spell for the right situation, he must have been

quite a reliable volunteer soldier in life.

The Firewall was disappearing.

Kuzaku was struggling against the greatsword-wielder. Ranta seemed to have taken down the ax-wielder and was now facing the female warrior Yume had been fighting.

Yokoi was incredibly strong. Kimura, Setora, and Merry were all working together and still struggling.

Yume didn't even look at Haruhiro. As if he didn't exist. It wasn't that she couldn't afford to. Yume was deliberately ignoring Haruhiro.

Why?

That was obvious. So as not to get in his way.

Haruhiro's consciousness had already sunk into the floor.

Not literally, of course. That was just the mental image he used.

Stealth.

Haruhiro climbed the stone steps.

"Marc em Parc...!"

The gaunt mage launched four beads of light. Yume moved quick as a bunny to get out of the way and loosed an arrow that shot through the gaunt mage's hat. It instantly crumbled to dust.

"Delm, hel, en, van—"

The gaunt mage wasted no time casting another spell. But it would never be completed.

Haruhiro was already on the gaunt mage, twisting his dagger into the wraith's back. Backstab.

"Urghk...!"

The gaunt mage's agony lasted but a moment. He was already crumbling. It was almost instantaneous, the way the gaunt mage turned to dirt.

"Mew!"

Yume jumped once as if to say “We did it!” then turned around. They couldn’t waste time celebrating. The others were still fighting.

“How long are you gonna take, you numbskull?!” Kuzaku shouted, though it wasn’t clear if he was trying to psyche himself up or something else.

There were suddenly two, no, three Rantas. It almost appeared that way for a moment, but it was just the dread knights’ unique way of moving. Or perhaps a Ranta original.

The female warrior had completely lost track of Ranta. She stood there, doing nothing as both her arms got chopped off. The female warrior might have tried to turn, but in that instant, Ranta lopped her head off. She fell to pieces, leaving nothing more than dirt and bones.

“Ultimate technique, Dark Rending! Hot damn! That was badass! I’m the greateeest! Whooo!”

“Ngh!” Kuzaku blocked a downward swipe of the greatsword with his large katana, knocking it up and away. That left its wielder’s torso wide open. “Hahh!” Without missing a beat, Kuzaku slashed through the greatsword-wielder’s torso, cleaving the wraith in two. Just like that, it collapsed into dust.

“Hweeeeaaaahhhh?!” Kimura let out a bizarre shriek, swinging upward with his mace. Had he been aiming for Yokoi’s crotch? Light on her feet, Yokoi stepped back, easily evading the mace.

“Blargh?!”

Something stabbed into Kimura’s head. A throwing knife? Haruhiro missed the exact moment it happened, but Yokoi had presumably thrown it.

“Kimura-san?!”

“M-M-M-My! My skull! Is like steel! Therefore, such a paltry attack!! Could never harm meee!”

“It’s stabbed in there pretty deep...”

“That’s peeerfectly okay! I-I-It’s stuck in place! My b-b-bones will protect me! I will be protected by my booones!”

It looked very much not okay, but if Kimura was going to insist he was fine,

then so be it. It did matter, though. Despite being a wraith, Yokoi seemed bewildered. Haruhiro could understand how she felt. Not that it was clear whether wraiths felt anything.

“This brings back memories, you know?” Blood spurted from the spot where the throwing knife was buried in Kimura’s head. “The memories are coming back, Yokoiiii! Our days of love and luuust! Oh, I can’t even speak of them without tears and blooood!”

“Ugh, I don’t even want to know...”

Haruhiro wanted to plug his ears. Actually, he wanted to shut that weirdo up. Maybe Yokoi’s wraith felt the same way? Assuming they could feel, that is. Regardless, she tossed another throwing knife at Kimura.

“Oof?!”

It wasn’t just one. They struck Kimura in the right and left breast, then the stomach. There were three.

“Sweeeet paiiiiin?!”

“Damn, that guy’s way too messed up...”

Haruhiro didn’t want to agree with Ranta, but this time he had no choice but to silently nod.

“L-Let me heal—”

Merry tried to call out to him, but Kimura wasn’t listening. He closed in and swung his mace up at Yokoi.

That’s not working, man. See? She dodged it again.

Yokoi pelted Kimura with throwing knives, as if to say “enough already.” Three more. One in the right arm, and one in each thigh.

“Owwie?!” Kimura finally went down.

“Yeah, I’ll bet that hurts!” Ranta jumped in, swinging at Yokoi. While Ranta moved a lot for every action he took, Yokoi was efficient. With a twist of the elbow or a flick of the wrist, she didn’t so much swing her longsword as smash Ranta’s katana with it. Ranta held his katana in both hands, but Yokoi used a

one-handed style. Despite that, Ranta seemed to be the one getting pushed back.

“Whoa?! What the...?!”

“Careful, Ranta!” Haruhiro called out despite himself. Yokoi’s left hand was empty. There was no telling what she might do with it.

“Shut up, Parupirorin...!” Ranta jumped to the right of Yokoi. He stopped in a crouching position. Then, a moment later, he was on her left. Had he been trying to move quickly from her right to left, cutting her down with one strike as he went? Well, Yokoi was unharmed.

“Exquisite technique, Peregrine Counter! Think you can block this too?! Oh, shit, she did!”

As Yokoi silently advanced toward Ranta, Kuzaku sprang in.

“Oorahhh!”

Yokoi neatly parried Kuzaku’s large katana with her longsword. It might be exaggerating to say it was child’s play for her, but when she booted Kuzaku in the chest and sent him reeling backward, he must have felt like the gap between their skill levels was that wide. He swung his large katana with brute force, making her back away until he could recover.

“Uh, she’s kind of amazing!”

“So stay back, you loser!” Ranta began trading blows with Yokoi again. Haruhiro wanted to join in too, but it wasn’t easy. Kimura had said this was nothing compared to how she was in life. Seriously? She had been even stronger than *this*?

“Ngh, guh...” Kimura was attempting to get up.

Stop it, man. You’re gonna die.

Merry rushed to his side. Setora and Yume did too.

“I can’t heal him with the knives still in!”

“You prepare the spell.” Setora yanked a throwing knife out of Kimura.

“Mew!” Yume helped, removing one knife after another.

“Urgh, urrrgh...” Kimura’s whole body was leaking blood. Merry made the sign of the hexagram in front of her forehead.

“O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you... Sacrament!”

“Ohhhh!” Kimura did a bridge, then leaped to his feet with his arms in the air. He was soaked with blood, but his wounds had closed up. It made him look so heroic, but wasn’t it more important to focus on the duel between Ranta and Yokoi right now? Haruhiro understood that, but for some reason, he kept looking at Kimura. Was this becoming a habit? He hated it.

“Incidentally, Ms. Merry, are you able to cast Circlet?”

“Yes... I can. Why?”

“I have a plan. You are to cooperate. Understood? You will do as I say. Do exactly as I tell you. Understood?”

Merry nodded. There was no saying no to that. All she could do was nod. It was beyond intense. The guy had clearly gone insane.

“It must be I who settles things with Yokoi!” Kimura swung his mace around as he charged toward her. “Out of my way, gentlemen!”

“Whoa, watch it!”

“Gentlemen?!”

After driving off Kuzaku and Ranta, Kimura stood in front of Yokoi.

“O Liiight! May Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon youuu!”

Before Kimura could finish his chant, Yokoi had thrown her knives. Three of them, at practically the same time. How did a wraith’s memories and thoughts work? There was no way to know, but Yokoi had it in for Kimura. The way she threw them seemed to say “stay away from me, you filthy man!” Kimura twisted his head to the side and avoided one, but took the others in his left shoulder and right thigh.

“Mmph! Circlet!” Kimura finished his spell as if to say “so what?” A shimmering ring of light appeared right where Kimura was standing.

“Ahhh!”

The throwing knives fell out of Kimura's shoulder and thigh. His wounds healed. But Yokoi was right in front of him. Obviously, she wasn't just going to sit there and watch. Yeah, go figure. She had no reason to. Instead she just stepped in and hit Kimura with her longsword.

"Gahhhhhh?!" Kimura cowered after the blow.

Yokoi's longsword danced mercilessly. It was brutal. Kimura was slashed this way and that inside the circle of light. He was just barely defending his head and neck with his buckler and mace.

"Arrrrggh?!"

"Whew..." Yume's eyes were like saucers.

"What *is* this?" Setora was dumbfounded.

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Circlet!"

Merry cast a spell. *But wasn't that the same one Kimura just cast?* thought Haruhiro. He wasn't wrong. Kimura was still in the center of the circle of light, getting slashed. Now the circle seemed to get stronger. No, it didn't just seem to get stronger, it did. Had Kimura's and Merry's Circlets overlapped?

"Reeeee! I'm getting boosteeeed?!" Thanks to that, Kimura was getting healed as soon as Yokoi slashed him—or at least that's how it looked. Was this the plan Kimura had mentioned?

Merry gripped her staff, and looked down. "I-I... I just did what he told me to..."

"Befwegofeozuhyah?! Pain, pain, pain, pain, this is paiiiin! Pain, pain, go awayyyy! It's not going awayyyy?!"

"Uh, I think somebody's got a fetish..." Kuzaku was alternately trying to avert his eyes, and staring with morbid curiosity.

Ranta sheathed his katana. "I'm not getting involved..."

"...?!" Yokoi experienced a moment of silent shock as she tried to draw a throwing knife with her left hand but found she was fresh out. Her response was to kick Kimura. Was she trying to drive him out of the circle of light?

“Nghhhhh...”

Kimura stood his ground. He was turtling. This was going nowhere. Yokoi took her longsword in both hands. She swung down at Kimura. And then it happened.

“Nwa-hah!” There was a suspicious flash from Kimura’s glasses. Yokoi’s sword struck his buckler, and his mace whistled through the air. The crotch. Of course it was the crotch. The moment Kimura’s mace slammed into Yokoi’s crotch, there was a crack, and she was torn apart, returning to dirt and bones like all the rest.

“Urgh, ngh, guh...”

Kimura stood casually in the middle of the overlapping circles of light. The knives penetrating his entire body gradually turned to dirt, and the wounds healed as everyone watched.

“I feel it. Feeeel iiiit! Feel your loooove! But, no... This is the love lingering inside me...” Kimura ground his foot into the dirt. “You are not the Yokoi I loved. You are a vile being that soils that beautiful memory. Yokoi, you’re never coming back... Noooooo...”

“Now he’s wailing...” Ranta wasn’t the only one weirded out. They all were. Wait, no.

“You must’ve really loved her, huh?” Yume was tearing up a bit as she nodded to herself.

“Oh, how I loved her.” Kimura turned a face stained with blood, tears, and snot toward Yume. “She was my first, and my last. My greatest love. Yokoi forever...”

“Well...” Ranta chuckled. “If you loved her that much, I guess she was pretty fortunate, huh? Not that I’d know...”

“I was fortunate to be able to love Yokoi. And yet the past is the past.” Kimura knelt, laying his buckler and mace on the floor. Removing his glasses, he wiped his face with a handkerchief. Then, putting his glasses back on, he continued as if nothing had happened. “Now then, we have no time to dawdle. Let’s move along.”

Haruhiro had a lot he wanted to say, but he bit his tongue. He sent his comrades on ahead and was about to go himself, but Kimura didn't move. Was he still feeling sentimental?

"Kimura-san...?"

"Mr. Haruhiro." Kimura's glasses flashed weakly as he beckoned Haruhiro closer.

"Hey, guys..." Ranta shifted his mask and looked at them dubiously.

What were Kimura's still dully flashing glasses trying to convey?

Haruhiro signaled to Ranta with his eyes. Ranta got the message and returned his mask to its proper place. Turning to the also-stooped Kuzaku and booting him in the butt, the dread knight walked away.

"Don't kick my butt..."

"Shut up!"

Haruhiro lowered his voice and asked, "So, what's up?"

"You must excuse me for before." Kimura lowered his head.

"No, it's fine... You kinda surprised us there."

"I truly am embarrassed. Even now, I still lose my composure every time I see her again. Though I understand it's not really her, of course."

"But that thing was identical to her, right? I can't say I blame you."

"We've lost a number of our comrades in the Graveyard, her and Shingen included."

"Shingen-san... Was he the one with the goatee?"

"Yes. Orion has something of a connection to this place. Why do you think that is?"

"Uh, why?"

"Why, after losing so many of our number, does Orion continue trying to clear the Graveyard? Do you not find it strange?"

"Well... Sure."

“One reason was that despite its proximity to Alterna, it was nearly untouched by other volunteer soldiers, a sort of unexplored land of adventure. If Orion could fully unravel the mysteries of the Graveyard, it would give us a legacy that would last forever. It’s the spirit of adventure.”

“Hmm. The spirit of adventure, huh? ...I think I get it.”

“Mr. Haruhiro. You are not the type to be moved by such things. I can tell. To tell you the truth, I’m the same way.”

“Huh?”

“Clearing the Graveyard is Shinohara-kun’s goal. If he is so passionate about it, then we in Orion have to do everything we can to accomplish it. There’s no other choice.”

“I get the feeling...” Haruhiro tapped his cheek, looking at Kimura with upturned eyes. Kimura’s gaze was cast down at his feet. “You weren’t that keen on the idea, Kimura-san? Just maybe?”

“No, that is not true. Not at all,” Kimura responded instantly, but his tone was not as strong as the words he’d chosen. “If not for Shinohara-kun, Orion would never have been born. Without his magnanimity, his keen observation, his decisiveness, his rare leadership, his unparalleled communication skills, and his almost terrifying ability to adapt, Orion could never have come to be. Orion is the house that Shinohara-kun built for the people he saved. For we who were cast into Grimgar, with no memories of our homeland, it was our sweeeet hoooome...!”

Was Kimura joking around? Or was he serious? It was hard to be sure.

“The thing about Shinohara-kun is, despite appearances to the contrary, he’s quite the romantic. No matter how many of our comrades fell, he never gave up on exploring the Graveyard. He may well be taking advantage of the operation to take Mount Grief to accomplish his true goal here.”

“His true goal?” Haruhiro furrowed his brow. “What goal would that be exactly?”

“Kuh-buh...” Kimura let out another one of his characteristic weird laughs, and then shook his head. What did that mean? Was he unable to say? Did he

just not want to? Or did Kimura not know?

“For my part...Mr. Haruhiro, it may do no good to tell you this, but I am concerned for Shinohara-kun... As a friend, you see.”

“Uh... What has you worried about him?”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, Shinohara-kun is a very good person. I respect him. He’s the master of Orion, and a precious friend. However, there are times when he...”

Kimura’s face twisted with pain that he probably wasn’t faking. It felt like he was honestly troubled. That was the read Haruhiro got, at least.

“I hope I can be of assistance to him, but... I may not be good enough. Sometimes, even when I’m at his side, he feels so distant...”

“Kimura-san.”

Let’s try delving deeper.

Haruhiro made up his mind. Though Kimura was always next to Shinohara, it seemed possible he might still be on their side.

“You know the Forbidden Tower, right?”

“Yes,” Kimura said after a pause, adjusting the position of his glasses. His lenses didn’t flash, but his expression stiffened. He seemed guarded. “Of course. What about it?”

Is this a good idea or a bad idea? It isn’t too late to back off. But this is something Shinohara said. I’m going to check if Kimura knows. That’s all.

“Then how about the master of the Forbidden Tower?”

“Maaasteeer?”

“No... Master.”

“Master...” Kimura cocked his head to the side in thought.

Was he playing stupid? Or did he really not know? Which was it? It was hard to say.

“Mr. Haruhiro.”

“Yes?”

“I hear that you woke up beneath the Forbidden Tower. With no memory outside of your own name.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“What if...” Suddenly Kimura brought his face close.

Whoa, that’s close.

Kimura’s nose touched Haruhiro’s.

Too close, man.

“Did you meet him, this master of the Forbidden Tower? If you did, then was he the person who stole your memories? Though, I suppose he’s not necessarily a person. Was he human? You lost your memory. Nine times out of ten, that sort of thing is the work of a relic. Could we not speculate that perhaps all of us once had our memories taken by the master of the tower, and then we were led to Alterna to become volunteer soldiers?”

7. Experience Points

Kimura most likely hadn't known about the master of the Forbidden Tower until Haruhiro told him.

Of course, Haruhiro had never personally met the master either. It was just something Shinohara had said once. Hiyomu had a master she served, and that person, or whatever it was, had apparently stolen Haruhiro and the others' memories. Based on Hiyomu's actions, it was reasonable to infer that her master was in the Forbidden Tower. In other words, the master of the Forbidden Tower and Hiyomu's master might be one and the same.

If Renji were here, Haruhiro could have gone to him to talk about it, but they were in separate groups right now. Haruhiro made the executive decision to explain this much to Kimura.

"...I see. If there is indeed some conspiracy at work, as much as it pains me to admit it, I cannot deny the possibility that Shinohara-kun is involved. To be honest, I had my doubts about the decision for Orion to join the Frontier Army. Shinohara-kun made the call without consulting anyone else... It wasn't the first time something like that had happened, but this was bigger than any of those other times."

According to Kimura, he wouldn't be surprised to find out that Shinohara was in contact with Commander Jin Mogis of the Frontier Army.

When the need arose, Shinohara could shake an enemy's hand with a smile. It wasn't that he was everybody's friend, it was just that he didn't let his personal feelings get in the way of doing what he needed to. He smiled because it was generally better than scowling. Really, how would anyone benefit by going around with a sour face? Shinohara was an incredibly pragmatic person, which, as far as Kimura was concerned, was what made him trustworthy.

"Not everyone is able to hold on to an unwavering love the way I can. The human heart is an inconstant thing. Shinohara-kun is a man who moves according to logic, and a sense of duty is part of that logic."

Even Kimura, his close friend and confidant, didn't just see Shinohara as a good guy. He could be a good guy when the need arose. Shinohara was the sort of man who could act as benevolently and kindly as he needed to.

"Regardless, I am concerned for Shinohara-kun. If there are things he hides even from me, then I am sure he must have a good reason. It's possible that to deceive his enemies, he first has to trick his friends. But it's not good that he's made you suspicious of him, Mr. Haruhiro. I cannot simply ignore that."

Kimura was in agreement that they needed to probe Shinohara's true intentions. But he would always be Shinohara's friend and comrade. If he was faced with the choice of siding with Shinohara or Haruhiro and Renji, he would no doubt choose Shinohara.

It was best not to assume Kimura was their ally. But if Shinohara was part of some conspiracy and Kimura felt he needed to be set back on the right path, he might still side with them. That meant they could work together. There was room to cooperate.

The exit was in the back of the chapel. Haruhiro pressed his hand into the depression in the door and it immediately began folding in, indicating that the synchronized unlocking had worked. The Tokkis must have made it through the kitchen and reached their door before Haruhiro and his party.

"Next up is the inner courtyard, huh?" the masked dread knight said with a snort, and Kimura's glasses flashed.

"Yes, indeed it is."

"All right, let's do this thing!" Kuzaku said cheerfully.

Haruhiro paused and took a breath. "Let's move along."

Unlike the chapel, the corridor was unlit, though there was light coming from up ahead. In fact, they soon saw that the inner courtyard was so bright it made them question if they were not outside instead of underground. The ceiling was surprisingly high, and there was a second floor too. That second floor was U-shaped, however, and it did not cover the majority of the area.

What was up with that ceiling? It had a faint white glow. While it wasn't as bright as a clear blue sky, it probably gave off as much light as the middle of a

cloudy day.

“Oh?! Yoo-hoo! It’s Haruhiro and the gang! Here I am! I’ve arrived! And not just little old me! All the Tokkis are here! Yay!”

Maybe ten meters from where the party entered the inner courtyard, Kikkawa was waving to them with Mimori next to him. What was she trying to convey by standing there with both arms held aloft? Haruhiro wasn’t entirely sure, but she was clearly looking at him.

“I wasn’t worried, but I see you guys made it here safe!” Tokimune gave them the thumbs up. Anna-san puffed up her chest, acting even more full of herself than usual.

“It look like you worm poop manage to do good job, yeah!”

“Thanks!”

“Come on, Kuzaku! Don’t say thanks when she calls us worm poop, you turd!”

“...It pisses me off less being called worm poop by her than it does being called a turd by you, Ranta-kun. It’s not malicious when she does it.”

“And you think it is when I do?!”

“Huh? Of course it is.”

“Okay, yeah, I’m not gonna deny that.”

“Heh...” At some point Inui had walked up behind Setora again, and now had a spear pointed at his throat.

“...You’re incorrigible.” Setora seemed exasperated. How could she not be?

“If ever there comes a time when I learn my lesson...!” The eye not covered by Inui’s eyepatch opened wide. It was disturbingly bloodshot. “It will be once the seal is broken, I awaken as the demon lord, am slain, and am then reincarnated as the demon lord once more, but even still I shall not reform my ways!”

“...So you’re not gonna reform then, huh?” Yume muttered. Immediately, Kimura’s glasses flashed.

“Bo-hweh! I respect that!”

Merry and Haruhiro sighed in unison. Then, noticing they had, each looked at the other apologetically. It was nothing to feel sorry about, simply that they were both feeling embarrassed, but the moment was interrupted by a loud crash. They looked over to see Tada had slammed his prized warhammer into the floor.

“You people have rested enough. Let’s do this.”

“Tada’s right!” Tokimune smiled brightly and held up his shield, drawing his longsword with his usual flourish. Kikkawa banged on his shield with his sword. Mimorin drew her longsword with both hands.

Meanwhile, Anna-san didn’t do anything in particular, keeping her chest puffed out and her head held high like always. Behind her, giving off a malignant aura, was Inui. When had he moved from behind Setora? Inui had changed jobs from thief, to warrior, to hunter, so there was presumably more to him than just being a nutcase.

“Whew.” Kuzaku exhaled, grasping the hilt of his large katana. He adjusted his grip. “That’s it, huh? The enemy for this stage.”

That much was clear, and didn’t really require comment. They had spotted the enemy the moment they entered the area.

It had two arms, two legs, and a head sticking out from its torso. Despite the humanoid shape, it was considerably bigger than any human. It was hard to say exactly how big, crouched as it was, but it was likely more than five meters tall when standing upright. The inner courtyard had two floors. Even in its current posture, its head reached the second one.

“In Orion, we call that a golem,” Kimura said with a flash of his glasses. “They vary in size, but that’s a large golem. Think of it as a big, humanoid hunk of moving rock. Very hard. We’ve defeated them by destroying their heads.”

“The head, huh? Got it.” Kuzaku nodded. “But, uh, it’s less of a head and more of a roundish knob...”

“Mew! It just flashed!” Yume was right. There was a red light in the center of the golem’s head.

“It’s gonna move.” Ranta lowered his hips.

The golem shuddered as it rose.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve...!” Mimorin drew elemental sigils with the tip of her longsword, casting Blast. Not just a single shot. Two in sequence. They left the golem’s head wreathed in smoke, but it kept moving. Its upper body rose and its bent knees straightened. It was almost on its feet.

“That not working, yeah?!” Anna-san shouted. The fact was that, while slightly singed, the golem’s head was not cracked, and showed no sign of shattering. The one eye-like red light hadn’t faded either.

“Come to think of it, Haruhiro, we did something like this before!” Tokimune was smiling and looked like he was having a riot. Weird. If Ranta took that attitude, it would have pissed Haruhiro off, but it didn’t with Tokimune. Was it because he was more likable?

“Well, even if we did, I don’t remember it.”

“Oh, yeah? Okay, front-liners, scatter!” Tokimune said loudly then took off running. Tada, Kikkawa, and Mimorin followed suit. She was technically a mage, but she still counted as a front-liner, huh? Inui was gone. Who knew where he’d disappeared to.

“Haruhiro?!” Ranta urged him to act, and he couldn’t help but think, *Oh, shut up. I know.* Were they a poor match? Or was it because of Ranta’s rotten personality? Was Ranta just completely unlikable? Maybe all of those things were true.

“We’ll follow Tokimune-san’s orders! Kuzaku, Ranta, and Yume, take the front line!”

“Aw, yeah!”

“Let’s do this!”

“Hee-hee!”

“Merry, stay with Anna-san and be ready for anything! Kimura-san, you too! Setora, I’m counting on you to cover them!”

“Okay!”

“Leave it to me.”

“Understood.”

The golem was fully on its feet now, but Tokimune, Tada, Kikkawa, and Mimorin, as well as Kuzaku, Ranta, and Yume surrounded it in a flash. Anna-san, Kimura, Merry, and Setora kept their distance. They’d be safe as long as the golem didn’t start firing projectiles.

But where had Inui gone? Did it matter? Haruhiro decided to forget him for now.

“Somersault Bomb...!” Tada launched a preemptive attack. He ran up and did a forward flip. Then he slammed the golem. His warhammer struck it in the right knee. It didn’t so much as flinch. Instead it swung its massive arms to swat Tada away.

“Focus your attacks while keeping it in check!” Tokimune sprang at the golem, smacking its left leg with his longsword and shield. The golem took a swing at him, forcing him to rapidly back away.

“Hahhhhh...!” Next was Kuzaku, making it look like he would slash the golem with his large katana, then kicking it in the shin instead. The golem tried to turn and face him.

“And mew!” Yume immediately jumped up, stabbing the golem in the butt with a big knife.

“Whew...!” Mimorin gave the golem’s thigh a taste of her twin longswords.

“Heh, heh, heh! Golem-chan! I’m over heeere!” Kikkawa was banging on his shield with his sword. What was that about?

“Hunnngh!” While Kikkawa was clowning around, Ranta raced up the golem. He reached its head in no time. “Personal skill, High-Tide Waterfall Climbing! Ga ha ha!”

What did he think he was doing?

Well, riding on its head got the golem’s attention, and it tried to catch Ranta with both hands. The golem’s movements were sluggish, though. It lacked flexibility.

“It’s futile, futile, futile!” Ranta hopped from the golem’s head to its

shoulders, then to its back, avoiding its less than dexterous hands. He slipped right through them.

“Zwahhhhhh...!”

Tada moved in. You might think he was a one-trick pony, but no, clearly not. Tada took careful aim, and with an ever longer run-up than his first attack, he made an incredible leap.

“Nghhhhahhhh...!”

He did a forward flip, but not just one. It was a double flip.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh...!”

If you’d asked Haruhiro to do the same, he couldn’t have. It was difficult physically and scary to boot. If Tada messed up, he’d be slamming his head or back into the golem, a massive hunk of rock. That wouldn’t just lead to serious injury, it could also mean instant death. Was Tada fearless? Could he do something like that if he wasn’t?

“Somersault Bomb!” Tada’s warhammer struck the golem’s right knee. In roughly the same spot as his first attack. Maybe it was exactly the same.

The golem lost its balance. Tada’s unbelievably brassy Somersault Bomb attack had demolished a good third of the golem’s knee.

“Yay! That’s our Tadacchi! Whee!” Kikkawa was cheering. This wasn’t a party, though.

“*Good job,* yeah!” Anna-san was excited too. She was breathing heavily through her nose.

“Yaaaay.” Mimorin raised both her hands. She didn’t seem to be acting that excited, but maybe she was, in her own way.

“Whuh...?!” With the golem forced to one knee, Ranta had to jump down, but that was a small matter.

“It’s pile-on time, people! Raheeeeee...!”

What kind of battle cry was “rahee”? Haruhiro had no idea. Still, while Tada and Mimorin were impressive, it really was Tokimune who made the Tokkis

what they were.

He didn't have Ranta's speed or moves. He wasn't especially small and wasn't wearing light equipment. But despite that, Tokimune kicked off the ground, and boosted off the golem's knee, bounding up and up.

The Tokimune theater was now in session.

Tokimune shield-bashed the golem on the side of its face.

His longsword twirled around, stabbing the shining red eye.

Then he used his shield to whale on its head.

His longsword twirled and sliced.

Tokimune used the golem's body for footing and went wild. Absolutely wild. He danced like a leopard and stung like an elephant.

He looked like he was moving at random, without thought to what he was doing, but that probably wasn't true. Well, no, maybe he wasn't thinking all that much, but Tokimune's actions followed some kind of logic, ridiculous as they were. It didn't feel like he was walking a tightrope. In fact, he didn't seem to be in danger at all. He made it look easy.

"Tch!" Tada shouldered his warhammer. "There he goes, dancing like wild. What am I, the opening act?"

"Ha ha! Don't sulk!" Tokimune kicked off of the golem's head, flying high, high into the air.

"Wow..." Haruhiro said despite himself.

"He's a star!" Yume babbled some nonsense. Well, maybe it wasn't total nonsense. Haruhiro kind of got it.

The golem craned its neck, looking up at Tokimune.

"Yah-hahhhh!" Tokimune spun around—no, he flipped over in the air above the golem.

What did that mean?

Obviously, Tokimune's feet were facing upward and his head downward.

And he wasn’t so much above its head as its face.

Tokimune thrust out his longsword and fell.

“Finiiiiish...!”

It went in.

It went in!

Tokimune’s longsword sank into the golem’s shining red eye.

Deep.

To the root.

“Whew!” Tokimune immediately withdrew his longsword, hopping down from the golem and landing on the stone floor.

He put his feet together, stood up straight, and held his shield close. His longsword was pointing at his toes as he used it to draw a semi-circle, then he raised it to point straight up.

“Whoa...” Kuzaku stood there, dumbstruck. He must have been in awe.

Ranta ground his teeth. “Damn it, that was awesome...”

The golem did not move. Its eye no longer glowed, not even faintly.

“Aw, yeah!” Kikkawa struck the same pose as Tokimune. He didn’t look nearly as cool.

“No matter what anyone say, we won thanks to me, okay?!”

Where does Anna-san’s bottomless spring of self-confidence and self-affirmation come from? Haruhiro wondered.

“Sure did,” Tokimune winked at her. “We owe it all to you. You’re the best, and we’re blessed to be able to accompany you!”



I'll bet it comes from you.

Maybe Anna-san had become the kind of person she was because Tokimune so openly reinforced her behavior. Or had she been able to become the mascot of the Tokkis because she was like that? Which was it?

Whatever the case, Haruhiro couldn't be like Tokimune or Anna-san. He felt a little jealous but didn't think he needed to be. Maybe he shouldn't.

"Suh, suh, suh...!" Kimura started laughing. What kind of laugh was that? Was he forcing the laughter out between his teeth? He pressed on the frames of his glasses, and the lenses flashed.

"You are truly, truly gifted, unique, and reliable volunteer soldiers. I am deeply impressed. Suh, suh, suh. I never thought you would be this good..."

"That sounds like a line the final boss would say..." Kuzaku said. Haruhiro kind of got what he meant.

"Be-heh!"

Your laughs sound insane, Kimura.

"If that's what I sound like, then perhaps that is what I am."

"At least deny it..." Haruhiro said despite himself. Kimura slapped his forehead and doubled over backwards.

"Aheeejoahhhh!"

Seriously, your laughter is terrifying.

At this point, it wasn't even clear if that was a laugh or some other expression of emotion. But it felt like poking fun at him over it would be admitting defeat, so Haruhiro wasn't going to do it.

"Heh..."

Looking up, he saw Inui was on the second floor. He'd gotten up there without Haruhiro noticing. How? The second floor had a railing—or a parapet rather—around it, and Inui was resting both hands on it with his shoulders slumped.

"There goes my shot at the spotlight..."

“Like we care!”

Much to his displeasure, Haruhiro agreed with Ranta.

“Oh?” Tokimune looked deeper into the inner courtyard. “I don’t know about that.”

“Whuh?!” Inui leaped up onto the parapet. But that wasn’t all.

“Hohhhh!” Inui threw himself to the first floor. What was that for? Had he climbed to the second floor looking for his chance to jump in and steal the spotlight, but having failed to do so, decided to show off with a dive? Was he an idiot?

That wasn’t it.

The parapet that Inui had just dived from exploded. It had been destroyed by some kind of projectile.

Inui stuck the landing, but it didn’t matter. Something had blasted the second floor’s parapet, right? Was it a haunt?

“Everyone, take evasive action with style!” Tokimune ordered confidently, though the “with style” part seemed unnecessary.

They’re coming. Coming right at us. Bullets.

“Wahhhh!”

“Yahoo!”

“What’s going on?!”

“Damn it all!”

“*Fuuuuck!*”

“Bweh ha heh hahhhh!”

“You’re all so noisy...”

It was pandemonium. Everyone, Haruhiro included, ran around in confusion, but so far none of them had ended up eating a bullet yet. Tokimune stood almost unmoving, acting only occasionally to deflect an attack with his shield. Tada casually swatted down everything that flew his way. They were likely

trying to discern the direction and number of enemies. As he ran, Haruhiro tried to do the same, but was it working?

“Is this enemy mobile?!”

“Yeah, they’re mobile,” Tokimune confirmed with a relaxed shrug of his shoulders.

“I thought haunts don’t move?!” When Haruhiro watched Tokimune, his sense of crisis always weakened, for better or for worse.

“Zo-foh! They don’t move, no.” Kimura’s glasses flashed. “Not if they’re haunts. But could it be?! A new type of enemy?!”

“Uh, but...” Haruhiro came to a stop. He was hearing something other than ricocheting bullets, and he was certain it was coming from the second floor. Was something big on the move? The second floor creaked under its weight. Were those footsteps, then? It was hard to see up there from the first floor. But wait, he spotted something.

“A golem?!”

It looked almost the same as the golem Tokimune had just defeated. There was a red light in the center of its head. But this one wasn’t as large as the golem on the first floor. It was a size smaller. It didn’t feel like a small golem, though. Yeah, it was more of a medium-sized golem. There were medium-sized golems on the second floor. Not just one. The U-shaped second floor had one on the left side and one on the right. Two in total.

And?

Where are these bullets coming from?

Where are the haunts?

“Woo-hoo!” Kikkawa cheered. What was he woo-hooing about? “They’re growing out of it, right?! That golem’s got haunts growing out of it?!”

“A new tyyyype?!” Kimura shook his head. “No! We cannot really call it a new type! That is simply a haunt stuck to a golem! We should call it a hybrid instead!”

It didn’t matter what he called them, there were three haunts growing out of

each of the medium-sized golem's shoulders.

"Like a golem weapons platform?!" Ranta said. That name seemed a bit long.

"Golplat for short, yeah!" Anna-san provided a working short form.

Golplat A on the right side and Golplat B on the left were firing constantly as they approached.

"Whoa...!" Kuzaku jumped to the side to dodge a bullet, but another was in front of him, so he almost took a direct hit. He twisted his body diagonally, narrowly evading it.

Setora was escorting Anna-san, Merry, and Kimura to an area underneath the second floor. They'd be safe there. Wait, no, they were in Golplat A's blind spot, but Golplat B started firing on Setora from the left side of the second floor.

"Boom! Bash! Smash!" Kimura was deflecting the bullets with his mace and buckler, but he wasn't like Tokimune or Tada. He couldn't keep that up forever. Kimura was a weirdo, but he was still a priest. Then again, so was Tada. And Anna-san. Wait, were all priests weirdos? Was Merry the only sane priest here?

That aside, Golplat A and B needed to go down in a hurry.

Incidentally, Haruhiro had sneakily gone into Stealth, so he wasn't being targeted at the moment. It looked like Stealth was effective against the golplats.

"Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve...!" Mimorin suddenly cast Blast. No, it wasn't sudden. Golplat B had approached the parapet near the spot Inui had dived from, where the structure had a hole blown through it. Mimorin sent her spell at that opening.

"Nice one, Mimori-san!" Kikkawa cheered while deflecting a bullet. Despite being in trouble himself, he actively clapped and shouted encouragement to his comrades. The guy had guts.

The already broken parapet took further damage from the Blast, demolishing the floor there and causing it to collapse. Golplat B fell to the first floor in a cloud of smoke and rubble.

"Kuzaaaaku! It's our turn!"

"'Kay!"

Ranta raced toward it, zigzagging like lightning. Kuzaku couldn't run that skillfully or bizarrely. He charged straight at Golplat B.

"What now?" Tokimune was eyeing Golplat A, still up on the second floor.

Tada swung his warhammer. "Want me to throw you up to the second floor?" he offered.

"Uhh. That trick, huh? Maybe not so much..."

They seemed to be taking it awfully easy, but was that okay? Well, feeling tense, getting focused, and acting desperate wasn't really the Tokkis' style. They stayed chill and had fun. That might have been their method. Not that most people could do that, even if they tried, you know? The Tokkis were clearly not normal. That was why such an abnormal style suited them.

What was Inui—who was intensely idiosyncratic even by their standards—planning? How had he originally gotten up to the second floor?

Mystery solved, Haruhiro thought as he spotted him. Inui was clambering up the stone wall to get to the second floor now. *Oh, so* that *he does normally, huh?*

Haruhiro suppressed his desire to quip about it and tried imitating Inui. He was a pretty good climber himself. Maybe he'd done rock climbing as a hobby before losing his memory? Or had he just lived such a dangerous life that he'd been forced to climb sheer cliffs on a regular basis?

Whatever the case, he made it to the top of the stone wall before Inui, who'd had a head start on him, so now he was in trouble.

Okay, maybe not so much. Golplat A wasn't aware of Haruhiro. The haunts on its shoulders were unloading on the first floor. Haruhiro couldn't just sit and watch that. He approached the enemy, neither rushing nor taking his time. He remained alert, of course. But if Golplat A detected him, would he be done for? Not so much. If the bullets were going to come his way, either Golplat A's body or the haunts' heads would have to turn toward him first. Basically, it would be telegraphed. He could just move to evade when that happened. Jump down to the first floor and hide underneath the overhang. That position was hard for Golplat A to hit. Even if he botched the landing, it wasn't high enough for the

fall to kill him. They had several priests on standby, so he could get healed immediately. When he thought about it, the situation didn't demand he be so timid.

Haruhiro circled around behind Golplat A. What was Inui doing? He'd just made it onto the second floor, huh? Golplat A hadn't noticed Inui either.

Now Haruhiro got a little tense. But taking more time wouldn't increase his chances of success. If anything, he had to act quickly.

Haruhiro got up close to Golplat A. It was maybe four meters tall. Scaling it would be no problem. With Golplat A being humanoid, it obviously wasn't a flat surface, which made the climbing even easier. In no time, Haruhiro had gotten up high enough to touch the golplat's head. That was when it detected him. It twisted around, possibly trying to throw Haruhiro off. But Golplat A's back was not as flexible as a human's, nor did it have a moving waist. Its moves were heavy and sluggish. He didn't even have to cling on for dear life.

Haruhiro drew his dagger and finished off Golplat A's shoulder haunts one by one. It was simple work, especially compared to what he'd had to do when Tada had launched him up to the ceiling of the dining hall.

"Aww! My chance at the spotlight!" Inui was complaining. Haruhiro didn't give a damn.

Once he had reduced a total of six haunts to dirt, Haruhiro grabbed onto Golplat A's head and tried stabbing his dagger into the glowing red eye part. Emphasis on "tried." His dagger bounced off. It was clear like glass there, and something red shone behind it. He'd scratched the glass-like part, but it was going to take considerably more force to break it. Or maybe he could stubbornly keep attacking the same place?

He had nothing to lose by trying, but he could give someone else the chance to shine. Haruhiro hopped off Golplat A and landed on the parapet. The golem came charging at him, forcing him to jump backward. This being the parapet, there was nothing behind him to land on. He just dropped to the first floor, as did Golplat A, which smashed through the parapet after him.

"Haru-kun...!"

“Haru...!”

“Haruhiro...!”

He heard Yume, Merry, and Mimorin. He appreciated their concern, but, well, he’d be fine.

If he were Tokimune, he might have done an awesome midair flip and then stuck the landing. He was not. He lacked Tokimune’s charisma and star power, so he prioritized landing safely without getting hurt. The experience of being repeatedly launched into the air by Tada helped. You never knew what would come in useful. The moment he landed, he softened the impact, imagining his joints dislocating, and rolled right back up onto his feet. Tokimune and Tada, with Kikkawa as an extra bonus, were already descending on Golplat A.

“All riiiight!”

“Out of the way, Kikkawa!”

“Wow! Sorry! I’m mega sorry!”

“Okay, let’s race to see who can finish it first, Tada!”

“Me, obviously!”

It looked like Tokimune and Tada largely had it taken care of.

“Yahhhh!”

Haruhiro looked over just in time to see a large katana smash through Golplat B’s shining red eye thing. Ranta slapped Kuzaku on the back of the head.

“Dammit, you ass! Let me finish it!”

“Ow! There’s no reason to hit me for it!”

“When was I ever reasonable, you moron?!”

“Yeah... You got a point there. Makes sense to me.”

“Haruhiro!” Mimorin rushed over and grabbed his face with both hands. “Haruhiro!”

“Yesh?”

“You aren’t hurt?”

“I’m fwine.”

“I’m glad.”

He wanted her to stop, but once she’d teared up like that, he’d have felt bad for interrupting her. “Would you shtop that?” But, yeah, he still wanted her to knock it off.

Mimorin nodded, then let go.

Thank goodness.

8. Gaps Can Form Anywhere

The door out of the inner courtyard was on the second floor, not the first. There were no stairs anywhere to be seen, so everyone clambered up to the second floor through the hole in the palisade where the balcony had collapsed. With just one exception.

Anna-san threw a tantrum about having to climb up by herself, so Tada carried her on his back. He might have grumbled about it, but wasn't it a problem that he basically let Anna-san get away with anything? Wasn't that spoiling her? It seemed to be the Tokkis' policy, though, so it wasn't Haruhiro's place to say anything about it. But even once they got onto the second floor and everyone gathered in front of the exit to the next area, she was still riding piggyback. Was that really okay?

"What?" Tada said in a menacing tone, while Anna-san mockingly looked down at Haruhiro from his back, enjoying her elevated position.

"Uh, no, it's nothing."

"Parupiro!" The masked dread knight stepped up, placing his hand in the depression on the door. "Let me do this one! Oops! I already did! Gah ha ha ha! Oh?!"

The door opened as if folding into itself.

"It would seem Shinohara-kun and Mr. Renji already unlocked theirs," Kimura said, glasses flashing. "Now then. I think I've taken the measure of your capabilities... But! All of this has been a mere prologue for what is to come. The true test of the Graveyard is the burial chamber. It is no exaggeration to say that we are only just getting started. Even we of Orion have only made it through the corridor, antechamber, and central room of the burial chamber. I want all of you prepared for a literal battle to the death in there."

"The corridor is shaped like this..." Haruhiro said, making a square with an open side using his fingers. "The door we opened and the door Shinohara and

the others opened are separated from each other.”

“Correct. The door into the antechamber is at roughly the midpoint of the corridor.”

“A battle to the death, huh?” Tada pushed up the bridge of his glasses with his left index finger. “Not bad. Anna-san, get down.”

“Aww...” Anna-san reluctantly got off Tada’s back with a look on her face you could have pasted into the dictionary next to the entry for disappointment. “*Why* do I need to walk on my own feet, yeah? It’s not fair, yeah!”

Why do you think Tada should keep carrying you? was what Haruhiro honestly thought, but he didn’t say it.

“Okay, then...” Haruhiro tried to move down the corridor, but Tokimune stopped him.

“Wait, Haruhiro.”

“Uh, yes?”

The corridor was three meters tall and three meters across, looking about the same as any other they had encountered so far. There were no lights in it. Light shone in from the well-lit inner courtyard, but it was too dark to see deep inside.

There was a noise. Haruhiro listened carefully. What was it?

It was coming closer, right?

This tap, tap, tap sound.

Were those footsteps?

“They’re coming,” Tada said, striding forward with his warhammer on his shoulder.

“...Why are you a priest, Tada-san?”

“Huh?” Tada responded without looking back. “So I can heal myself if I get hurt, duh.”

“Oh, of course.” Haruhiro had figured as much.

The tapping sound was getting closer and closer. Tada ran forward.

“Murgh?!” Kimura’s glasses flashed. “These enemies are...!”

“Grahhh!” Tada bellowed as he took a sharp swing at one with his warhammer. Just before he did, Haruhiro was finally able to visually identify the enemy.

They looked pretty creepy. Like pairs of slim, white legs were running on their own. Okay, no, not just the legs. It was more like the lower half of a person’s body. That’s what they looked like.

“Take—” Tada’s shout was drowned out by an explosion. The moment his warhammer struck the white pair of legs, they burst.

“O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon youuu!” Kimura made the sign of the hexagram in front of his forehead. Tada, who had been thrown by the explosion, had reacted in time to at least cover his face with his left arm. But the front of his body was cut and torn, leaving him in pretty bad condition. Kimura turned his palm toward his fellow priest’s sprawled form.

“Sacrament!”

Powerful light radiated out, mending Tada’s wounds in mere moments.

“Tada!” Tokimune burst out laughing. “That was a good one! Getting blown up like that right after saying you could heal your own wounds!”

“You almost become one-hit wonder though, yeah!” Anna-san clutched her sides as she howled with laughter. Wait, was this really something to laugh about?

“Shut up!” Tada jumped to his feet and readied his warhammer. “The hell was that?! It hurt! A little!”

Man, imagine having the brass balls to take a hit like that and then say it only hurt a little. The guy was nuts. If Kimura’s Sacrament had come even a moment later, Tada could easily have died. Also, considering Anna-san was a priest, she really shouldn’t have been in a position to laugh about it.

“They’re specters,” Kimura explained. “Their special technique is self-destruction. Actually, it’s all they can do. They’re dangerous enemies.”

“So we can’t fight up close with them?!” Kuzaku shouted.

“Mewww!” Yume got down on one knee and fired an arrow down the corridor. Then another, and another.

There were two, then three explosions. Had her arrows caused the specters to go off? But the corridor was dark, so she couldn’t aim for them. Yume was just firing at random and hoping that with enough shots one would hit.

The specters that hadn’t taken an arrow rushed toward them.

“O Darkness, O Lord of Vice...!” The masked dread knight unleashed an ominous miasma from the tip of his katana. “Dread Wave!”

The specters enveloped by the miasma all blew up.

“Mew, mew, mew, mew, mew, mew, mew...!” Yume followed that up with over ten more arrows, and four or five specters blew up. No more were approaching.

“Heh! Out already?!” Holding his beloved katana, Ranta strode forward triumphantly, acting as if he alone had been responsible for that result, but then, “Nwuh?!” he nearly fell flat on his face.

“Shadows!” Setora thrust her spear at Ranta’s feet. One of the flat black snakes called shadows had apparently wrapped itself around his leg.

“I-I didn’t need your help!”

“Why can’t you just be grateful, man?! Huh?!” Kuzaku twisted around. It looked like there was a shadow wrapped around him too. “I-I can’t move...!”

“Do something about it yourself!” Setora snapped.

“Aren’t you a little too harsh with me, Setora-san...?!”

“Wa ha ha!” Ranta cut up the shadows clinging to both of Kuzaku’s legs. “She hates your guts! Take a hint, moron!”

“I’m shocked!” Kuzaku swung his large katana upwards. A number of shadows were dropping from the ceiling.

“Wow!” Kikkawa pointed his lantern toward the ground. There were a good number of shadows slithering soundlessly across the floor. No, not just the

floor, the walls too. Kuzaku had just slashed a bunch of them, but there were shadows rushing toward them across the ceiling as well.

“It’s an all-out offensive, huh?!” Tokimune twirled his longsword, slicing through the shadows on the ground like it was a lawnmower, then crushed some of the ones on the wall with a shield bash. “We’ve got specters incoming too!!”

It was true. Haruhiro could hear their steps.

Yume wasted no time loosing an arrow, causing a specter to explode.

“Haru-kun! Yume’s runnin’ out of arrows!”

“Gotcha!” Haruhiro replied, but what could he do about it?

“I have an idea.” Tokimune sprang into action with a flourish.

The specters were coming.

“Mew!” Yume was trying to fire an arrow, but Tokimune was in the way, standing in front of her. Hold on, though, there was no way a guy like Tokimune didn’t notice he was in Yume’s line of fire. He had deliberately stood in front of her. *Don’t fire, I’ve got this,* he was telling her.

“Have you noticed?! There’s a lag before the specters self-destruct!” Tokimune leapt into the air, slashing a specter with a twirl of his longsword. He bashed it with his shield too, almost simultaneously. Then, pushing away from the specter, he jumped back and away.

The result was that when the specter went kaboom, there was a gap of several meters between it and Tokimune.

“Yep.” Tokimune turned back to them with a flash of his pearly whites. “That’s how it’s done. Did you get that?”

“Sure... Not that we can imitate it,” Haruhiro replied.

“Oh, yeah? It was surprisingly easy to pull off.”

Maybe for Tokimune it was, but not for everyone else.

“It’s worth a shot.” Mimorin rushed forward.

“Huh?”

Why Mimorin, of all people? The shadows were attacking her too, trying to wrap around her legs and stop her as she sprinted ahead.

“Mimoriiin?!” Anna-san screamed. “*Gooo!* Yeah?!”

Why don’t they stop her? The Tokkis make no sense.

Haruhiro could have stopped her himself, but he’d totally missed his chance. Mimorin was already past Tokimune. And right on cue, a specter stepped up to meet her.

Here it comes. I’m telling you, that’s dangerous!

Mimorin was amazing in her own way, but she was in a different category from Tokimune. Completely different. It was blatantly obvious that she couldn’t pull off the same trick Tokimune had.

“Marc!”

As Mimorin ran, she drew elemental sigils with the point of her longsword.

“Em Parc!”

A Magic Missile flew toward the specter and obliterated it. No, the bead of light didn’t have that kind of force on its own. The self-destruct must have triggered.

“Oh, yeah... She is a mage, after all.” Haruhiro had completely forgotten.

“That’s some originality!” Tokimune said with a casual laugh.

Yeah, that’s right. Er, wait... Is it?

“Marc em Parc!” Mimorin spun around, drawing elemental sigils with the tip of her longsword, and fired off another Magic Missile.

“Marc em Parc!”

Explosion followed explosion. Haruhiro couldn’t see the specters running out of the dark corridor, but maybe it was different for Mimorin and she was able to make them out?

“Marc em Parc!”

Or was she firing blind? Either way, another specter had just self-detonated.

“Marc em Parc!”

And another one went off. Still, why did Mimorin have to spin every time she fired a Magic Missile? It was unnecessary.

“Marc em Parc!”

Was Haruhiro small-minded for dwelling on the pointlessness of it? Was he too hard-headed?

“Marc em Parc!”

“Aww, yeah!” Kikkawa did a wiggly dance. “Their suicidal explosions are blooming like flowers! Flower power! Yes, Mimorin-san, yes, yes!”

“We’re all just too badass,” Tokimune concluded with a shrug as he sliced away more shadows. “Gotta keep our awesomeness under control!”

Incidentally, Haruhiro and his party were busy taking care of the shadows coming at them on both the floor and the walls. They didn’t have time to do a little dance like Kikkawa. Which, hold on, should he really be dancing now?

“Urgh...!” For some reason, Inui was wrapped in shadows, bound and unable to move. Weren’t all of the Tokkis supposed to be badass? Was Inui any use at all?

“Hmm...” Kimura’s glasses flashed, and he smirked. “That’s miiiild.”

That didn’t even make any sense.

“Tada!” What did Anna-san, who was running from the shadows, plan to do?

“C’mere, Anna-san!” Tada welcomed her approach. Welcomed her? What was he crouching down for? “We’re gonna link up!”

“Yeah...!” Anna-san hopped on Tada.

She was riding on his shoulders.

“*Power up!* Yeah!”

“One hundred times! Hoorah!”

With Anna-san on his shoulders, Tada swung his warhammer around, knocking shadows into the air whether they were down low or up high. Was

that really one hundred times more power? Anna-san was small but by no means light. She had to be weighing him down a fair bit.

“Rah!” Despite the added burden, Tada slammed his warhammer into the wall with gusto. But doing that was probably the reason a whole pile of shadows rained down from the ceiling onto Mimorin.

“Ngh...!” Mimorin vanished in an instant, buried under the monsters.

“Haruhiro!” Tokimune said urgently, a serious expression on his face. “Please assist!”

“Me?!”

Honestly, Haruhiro wished he could refuse, but if he left Mimorin buried in that ominous pile of dark snakes, she might suffocate. If he let that happen, it’d keep him up at night. Haruhiro didn’t particularly dislike Mimorin. Her powerful one-sided affection confused him, but he didn’t wish her dead for it.

“But still...!”

Why Haruhiro? Tokimune could go himself. Anna-san and Tada, as a pair, or Kikkawa, or even Inui could too. Okay, maybe not Inui. Yeah, no, that wasn’t happening.

Haruhiro took off at a run. He stomped shadows into the floor as he went, or just jumped over them and left them behind.

When he sheathed his dagger and rammed his hands into the abominable mass of darkness, the shadows hissed and attacked him. He shrugged them off, wrapping his arms around Mimorin and pulling.

“Haruhiro!”

“Grahhhh!” When he shouted, a shadow got inside his mouth. “Gwogh?!”

That made it hard to breathe, obviously. It was trying to block his windpipe, but he wasn’t just going to let that happen. Haruhiro bit down on the creature as he tried to tear Mimorin free from the dreadful pile of shadows. But pull as he might, the shadows held on.

“O Liiight, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon youuu!”

Kimura. That voice has to be Kimura.

“Scold!”

“Gah!”

“Ngh!”

What was that light? Haruhiro felt like it was pummeling them. His whole body felt numb, and he couldn’t move so much as a finger. It wasn’t just Haruhiro either; Mimorin was affected in the same way, as were the shadows wrapped around the two of them.

“Hmm...”

Kimura. What did you do, Kimura?

“That seems to have done little good. I suspected as much...”

What do you mean, you suspected as much? That it would be pointless? Oh, I see. So that’s how it is.

Haruhiro felt the exhaustion ebb, and his body was able to move again, but that wasn’t true for just him and Mimorin. It was the same for the shadows. Ultimately, all it did was freeze them all for a few seconds without changing the situation in the slightest.

“Bwehhh?!”

No, the situation was worse. The moment it could move, the shadow went down his throat.

“Mnngh!” Mimorin was panicking about something.

Oh, crap. I can’t see. I can’t see anything. The shadows. They’re on my face.

“Haru!”

Merry. That’s Merry, right?

She yanked out the shadow that had been pushing itself down his throat and tore the one covering his eyes off too.

“Kimura, you help too!” Merry ordered, not bothering with an honorific.

“Yes’m!” Kimura shouted, oddly quick to comply.

Merry put Haruhiro in a pinion hold, pulling him backward while Kimura tossed his mace and buckler aside to tear the shadows off Mimorin with his bare hands.

“Looks like we’ve got more incoming!” Tokimune wooshed through the air, slashing specters with his longsword, pushing them away with his shield, and making them self-destruct.

“Fwoo!” Yume fired off a rapid barrage, hitting two more specters, which exploded with a boom-boom. “Arrows’re all gone now!”

“But I’m still here!” Ranta ran in even deeper than Tokimune, moving instantly from the right wall to the left.

Boom went a specter. Ranta had apparently cut it down.

“Ha ha ha!” Ranta cackled. “There’s nothing to it, now that I try! Damn, I’m good!”

“Oooh. That was cool, just now.” Yume said.

“Y-Y’think? I-I-It was cool? Well, duh, of course it was. I mean, I’m the guy who did it...”

“Yeah! But we’re making no progress!” Kuzaku complained.

Kuzaku’s right, thought Haruhiro. *We’re not moving forward at all.*

Thanks to Merry, and maybe Kimura too, the majority of the shadows wrapped around Haruhiro and Mimorin had been driven off, stomped, or cut to pieces. But they kept pressing in from the floor, walls, and ceiling, and the specters periodically came in for a suicide bomber attack too. The group had hardly progressed since entering the burial chamber’s corridor. They’d been stuck in the same spot this whole time.

The way things were now, they weren’t too exhausted yet. Not physically, at least. But just as Yume’s arrows had run out, their options to keep the fight up were guaranteed to run out eventually.

They could fall back and regroup, but the question was how far back. The enemy was sure to pursue. Besides, Orion’s information told them that as long as the Lich King, who was somewhere in the burial chamber, was still around,

the enemies in the Graveyard could regenerate themselves indefinitely. If they pulled back, it was entirely possible that enemies they had already defeated would be lying in wait.

This was not a good situation. If they were going to withdraw, it needed to be after they joined up with Shinohara and the others. For now, the only way to go was forward. They had no other choice.

“Tokimune-san! Let’s push up little by little! We need to join up with the others as fast as possible!”

“Yeah, leave it to me!”

Haruhiro wished he could be the kind of person who was able to smile and say that without hesitation in a situation like this. He felt like it’d be tough for him, though.

Tokimune suddenly made two specters blow up, advancing five or six meters forward in the process. The key to the method he’d come up with was to slash them, push them back, and then move away. If you took a step forward, you had to retreat the same distance. Yet Tokimune had blown up a pair of specters and still managed to make that much progress forward. However, mimicking him was easier said than done. And Tokimune had cut up a good number of shadows too while doing it.

“Everyone, follow me! We don’t need to take a single step back!”

Tokimune didn’t tell them not to retreat, he told them they didn’t have to. Haruhiro didn’t have the sense to choose his wording like that. And though he might eventually be able to emulate the way Tokimune spoke, if he couldn’t back it up with actions, it wouldn’t do him any good.

“Hah!” Tokimune made another specter blow up. Incredibly, this time, after slashing it and pushing it away, he didn’t back off. It looked like he’d defended himself with his shield, but that still took guts.

“We can do this! Onward!”

“Yay! Me too! Me too!” Kikkawa slashed a specter and shoved it with his shield.

“Whoa...?!” When the specter exploded, Kikkawa landed flat on his butt. He got up in no time, though, so it was probably no big deal.

“Nice one, Kikkawa!” It was so like Tokimune to encourage him rather than telling him, *Don’t be crazy. You can’t pull off the same stunts as me.*

“Cheers!” It looked like the praise had Kikkawa eager for more.

What if he messed up? Wouldn’t that be dangerous? That was how Haruhiro tended to think, but Tokimune must have trusted his comrades. If it didn’t work out, he and the rest of the party would cover for Kikkawa. That was what the Tokkis had been doing all this time. It seemed reckless, but they hadn’t lost a single person. They must have had a line they recognized as too dangerous, and they didn’t cross it. But after facing difficulty and death so many times on their own whims, the Tokkis had developed their own unique sense for how to manage danger.

“Personal skill!” The masked dread knight ran around. He slashed two, three specters with high-speed cuts, setting them off. “Sudden Cicada Serenade! Damn, I’m so cool!”

Ranta might have been a lot like the Tokkis. That was why he and Haruhiro didn’t mesh.

“I...!” Kuzaku swung his large katana, slicing up shadows over his head, at his feet, and on the walls. “Shouldn’t even bother trying that, right?!”

“Yeah, give it up,” Setora told him on Haruhiro’s behalf.

If he was able to realize that he shouldn’t try something like that, Kuzaku would never be able to be one of the Tokkis. Then again, Haruhiro wouldn’t want Kuzaku acting like them too. It’d be a real problem.

“Hm?!” Tokimune deflected something with his shield. “Whoa, hold on...”

It wasn’t like Haruhiro had relaxed his guard. But even he had gotten a bit excited about their progress. That was all blown away in an instant. What was it that Tokimune had deflected?

“That was a bullet!”

There were haunts here. The bullets. They came flying. More and more of

them.

“Kikkawa, we’re gonna block them! Kimura, you too!” Tokimune shouted while blocking the bullets with his shield.

“Yessir!” Kikkawa, who also carried a shield, did likewise.

“Umph!” Kimura smacked down a bullet with his buckler. He was even knocking them out of the air with his mace too.

“Anna-san, time to split up!”

“If we have to, yeah!” Anna-san hopped down from Tada’s shoulders.

Had they even needed to hook up like that in the first place? With that weight off his shoulders, Tada swung his warhammer, knocking down three or four bullets in one swing.

“Mrrgh!” Kuzaku narrowly blocked a bullet with the flat of his large katana.

“Tch...!” Ranta nimbly jumped about, dodging the projectiles. “If you go around hitting them with your sword, it’ll break in no time!”

“Ah!” Haruhiro reflexively crouched to avoid a bullet.

The haunts’ bullets hit a certain sweet spot in size, weight, and hardness. Tokimune’s shield could defend against them without issue. There was no risk of it being broken. But knocking them away with a sword was difficult. Not impossible, no, but unless the weapon had a pretty sturdy blade, it might chip or bend.

“Rah!” Tokimune deflected a bullet, then immediately slashed a specter and used his shield to knock it back. A specter. There were specters too. The pair of legs blew up, and it looked like Tokimune might back away, but he held his ground. “Urgh...!” Without a moment of leeway, he managed to block the next bullet with his shield. And the next specter was already coming.

“Marc em Parc!” Mimorin unleashed a Magic Missile at that specter and made it blow up, but Tokimune might have been in danger there. “Marc em Parc! Marc em Parc!” More Magic Missiles intercepted and detonated a few more targets before they could get close.

“*Keep it up!* Do your best, yeah!” Anna-san was doing what she could to cheer

Mimorin on.

“Bwuh!” Kikkawa failed to block a bullet with his shield and took it in the gut.

“You’re still good to go, right?!” Tokimune wasted no time encouraging him. It was just bluster, though.

“Damn right I am! Yay!”

If Kikkawa could reply that quickly, he was probably fine. Unlike a thief like Haruhiro, as a warrior, Kikkawa wore armor, so as long as the shot didn’t hit him in a particularly bad spot, no single bullet was likely to kill him outright.

“Heh!” Inui was crawling forward. Fast.

It was disturbing how fast.

“Finally, my time has come!”

As low to the ground as he was, the bullets didn’t even graze him. Was Inui planning to close in on the haunts with his creepy speed-crawling and finish them off?

“Augh!”

“Uh, hey, there’s shadows, remember?”

Inui was caught by a swarm of the flat monsters, turning into a mass of darkness in mere moments. How could one man fail so much? If no one was calling him out for it, it was only because they couldn’t afford to take the time right now. Honestly, Haruhiro was busy dodging the occasional bullet and slicing up the shadows coming from every angle. If he lowered his situational awareness, maybe he’d have some spare energy to work with. But could he do anything decisive with it? That was questionable. He couldn’t think of what he might do. Was there any way for the group to get out of this situation?

It’s looking pretty bad...isn’t it?

Tokimune was up on the front line, putting himself at risk. Kimura too. Could either of them see the full picture of what was going on? Despite his shortcomings, Kimura was one of the leaders of Orion, and Tokimune was, well, Tokimune. Even so, Haruhiro felt that he shouldn’t just blindly believe in them and let them make all the decisions. He was back here, paying attention to

everyone. Even if he might be overstepping his bounds, shouldn't he be the one to make a decision?

It didn't look like they could progress. The enemies were too strong.

If they stayed where they were, they'd eventually reach their limit.

In that case, retreat was the only option. They couldn't, mustn't retreat, so they had tried to proceed anyway. But they still hadn't managed to make headway and would only be whittled down if they stayed, so there was nothing to do but retreat.

If they could fall back to the inner courtyard, they would no longer be forced to face these waves of enemies in a narrow three-meter-by-three-meter space. But even if they escaped temporarily, then what? Well? What would they do? Did he have some idea? No, not really. In that case, he was just flailing around. But if he didn't make some decision now, in a moment someone might die. Yeah. It was possible his comrades could lose their lives here. But if Haruhiro just called for a retreat out of nowhere, that could cause chaos too. They were all managing to hold out somehow. But the slightest change might make that balance collapse. Was Haruhiro about to create that slight change? He wasn't trying to, obviously, but what if that was what he ended up doing?

Honestly, Haruhiro was thinking they had no choice but to retreat.

If his comrades were the only ones here, he'd probably have already ordered a withdrawal a long time ago.

But the Tokkis were here. Tokimune was here, and so was Kimura. Could he make that call without them? Tokimune and Kimura might have been waiting for the right moment too. When it came, wouldn't one of them say something?

Though he thought they needed to retreat, he wasn't certain. It wasn't like he was thinking that if they could pull back then they might find some way to handle this. There didn't seem to be anything they could do regardless, so Haruhiro believed they had no choice but to flee. He had a completely pessimistic assessment of the situation.

Thanks to that, Haruhiro couldn't do anything. He was in no position to laugh at Inui. Inui was at least trying in some way to do something.

It was a good thing he didn't end up having to regret it. While Haruhiro was wasting time, there could have been a tragedy he would never have been able to regret enough.

"Rahhhhhhhh!"

Far up ahead—uh, well, not *that* far, but still up ahead, purple lightning tore through the darkness.

That was someone's voice. Human. Probably male. And familiar. In fact, Haruhiro knew who it was.

"Hahhhhhh!"

Were those his swords, trailing arcs of electricity behind them as they swung?

"Renji!" Ranta shouted. "He's here! The bastard made it!"



9. Simply Painful

“Thaaat’s...!” Purple lightning danced madly as Kimura shouted. “The terrifying poweeer...! Of a reliiic...!”

“Is that the demon sword and armor, Aragarfald?!” Ranta jumped, slashed a specter, then raced past it. The specter burst. “It’s the power of the relic Renji found on the Red Continent!”

The number of incoming bullets had dropped massively. Actually, there were hardly any at this point.

“Tokimune-san!” Haruhiro prompted. *I didn’t need to say that,* he thought as soon as the name left his mouth. But Tokimune wasn’t the type to take an “I don’t need you to tell me that” kind of attitude.

“Yeah!” With a flash of his pearly whites, Tokimune began advancing once more. “Now’s our chance! Let’s go, people!”

Had Tokimune anticipated this? Anticipated that Shinohara, Renji, and the others taking route B would come to their aid?

Since the synchronized unlocking had worked, that had to mean the team on route B had entered the corridor. However, if the route A team ended up struggling, the route B team surely would too. That was the natural assumption. It was entirely within the realm of possibility that both teams would be pushed out of the corridor by the enemy. If Tokimune had been relying on support from the route B team, that was awfully optimistic of him.

But things worked out this way because the route A team had hung in for so long.

Haruhiro had been trapped, thinking, *Nope, we’re at our limits, this isn’t going to work.* While he might not have been in a state of panic, he’d definitely felt boxed in. If Haruhiro were the one giving commands, the route A team would have pulled back before Renji and the others could reach them.

Under Tokimune’s leadership, the route A team blew up the incoming

specters, carved their way through the shadows, and pressed forward.

Suddenly, the purple lightning vanished.

“Ron.”

“Aw, yeahhhh!”

The buzz-cut warrior who came in from the side had a lantern tied to his waist, and wielded a greatsword shaped like a massive meat cleaver. Ron. When Team Renji’s warrior took a swing, a horrifying slicing sound echoed through the corridor.

What had he cut? A pawn? Or was it a haunt? Or maybe a miniature golem?

Whatever it was, there wasn’t much that the meat cleaver he was carrying couldn’t cut. When he finished the swing, Ron’s weapon was buried deep in the floor. How was he planning to free it?

Ron gripped the hilt of the giant weapon with both hands and forcefully twisted it. When he did, it popped free from the floor, and he swung it down again. Slice. This time the arc was diagonal, and the blade tore into the wall instead of the floor.

With a grunt of exertion, Ron yanked the massive meat cleaver out of the wall, scattering shards of stone rubble all over the area.

“He’s mighty powerful!” Yume was impressed. Rightly so, but Haruhiro couldn’t help but question the turn of phrase “mighty powerful.”

“Zeel, mare, gram, tera, kanon.”

There was chanting. A spell? A whitish sphere flew about wildly. No, there were five, ten, maybe more of them, and they weren’t just flying around at random. Each one accurately struck a shadow, a haunt, or something else.

“Geh-boffah! So many Ice Globes, and with such controooool...!” Kimura shouted. When the whitish orbs struck an enemy, their bodies locked up as if frozen. They likely couldn’t move no matter how they tried.

“Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart.”

More magic. A bolt of lightning.

“Lightning! Yee-hawwww!” Kikkawa cheered. Haruhiro wasn’t about to start dancing jubilantly like Kikkawa, but it was definitely impressive. The magical lightning arced between the enemies frozen by the whitish spheres, as if chaining between them—no, it was definitely chaining between them—and electrocuted them.

Though Haruhiro didn’t know how it worked, there had to be some meaning behind casting Ice Globe and Lightning in rapid succession like that.

Haruhiro couldn’t see him from here, but Team Renji had a mage who wore black-rimmed glasses. Adachi. He must have been the one responsible.

“Rah!” Ron sliced through several more enemies with his meat cleaver sword. And when he was done, with his weapon embedded in the floor again, he didn’t yank it out for another swing. “We’re finished already? Wasn’t even a challenge.”

It seemed Ron was standing at the end of the straight path. There was a turn leading off to the left near him.

When the group went over to him, they were surprised to find Renji sitting against the wall with his legs crossed, greatsword lying in his lap, arms folded, and eyes closed.

“Hey...” Ranta looked like he was going to say something, but Ron shrugged at him.

“After he does that, he needs to rest a bit.”

“After he uses the power of the relic, you mean? I see...” Kimura’s glasses flashed and he nodded.

“What happens if he doesn’t?” Tokimune asked.

Ron groaned and thought a little before responding, “He probably dies, I guess?”

“Huh?” Haruhiro was speechless.

“Di...” Kuzaku stopped midword, then laughed. “You’re kidding, right? I mean, dying sounds a little excessive...”

“Well, I don’t know what would really happen,” Ron said, then added, “It’s

not like he's tried it," with a weak laugh. "But if Renji's taking a break like this, it's gotta be pretty damn serious."

"Kimura. Tokimune." There was a voice from the left.

Haruhiro looked over to see a tiny priest carrying a lantern and a mage wearing black-rimmed glasses standing there. Chibi-chan and Adachi. Uh, all the volunteer soldiers called her Chibi-chan because she was tiny, but was that okay? Calling her that?

"If there're no problems, let's move along."

Obviously, Haruhiro didn't remember Adachi. They hadn't had much occasion to meet, so the two of them had apparently never really interacted. Haruhiro got the impression Adachi was hard to get along with. He was an especially particular mage.

"You can hold on to all your thanks for saving you until this is all over. I don't want to waste time. Renji, you're ready to go, right?"

"Yeah." Renji stood up. He gestured with his chin, signaling something to Haruhiro and the others. *Move along,* probably.

He could've said it out loud. Why can't he just talk to us?

"Thanks," Tokimune said, winking as he clapped Renji on the shoulder. His forbearance was incredible. It made Haruhiro feel small and petty for letting such a minor thing get to him.

Having reflected on his behavior, Haruhiro said, "Thanks." The corners of Renji's lips turned up ever so slightly. Not enough to describe it as a smile. But enough to make Haruhiro think, *Wow! Never thought I'd see that from Renji. Glad I said something.*

They went left around the corner and found Shinohara waiting for them with nine members of Orion.

"Hey," Shinohara said, raising one hand as he gave them his usual smile—the strategic, practical one. That was how his own friend and confidant had described it, so it was basically a fake smile. It was a *very* convincing fake though. Kimura had also said Shinohara was a really good person. That might

mean he was multifaceted, hard to sum up in a few words.

“Looks like we kept you waiting.” For some reason, Tokimune extended his hand for a handshake, and Shinohara immediately reciprocated.

“Yeah. A bit.”

“Oh, listen to this guy,” Tokimune jabbed Shinohara in the ribs with his elbow.

“S-Stop it, would you?”

“That’s the kind of ‘stop’ that really means keep going, right?”

“No, it’s the kind of ‘stop’ that means stop, okay?”

“Are you serious?”

“What could possibly make you think I’m not?”

It was hard to imagine that look of bewilderment was strategic, something he was wearing purely out of pragmatism.

Shinohara was plotting something. But that didn’t necessarily mean it was some horrible conspiracy against everyone else present. At his core, he might well be a good person. Haruhiro wanted that to be true, but he knew to make the distinction between his hopes and reality.

“Anyway...” Shinohara and his people had been waiting for them at the fork in the road. To the right was the path Haruhiro’s group had come from, and to the left was the path Shinohara’s group had taken. If they went straight, they would reach the location that Orion had named the antechamber. There was apparently an antechamber, central room, and back room, but Orion claimed to have only reached the central room so far.

“First, I’d like to say that I’m happy to see the twenty-six of us have made it this far without losing anyone. How were things along the way, Kimura?”

“They did better than expected, as you expected. Ho-voh...!” Kimura’s glasses flashed. “Even with my guidance, they were relying on second-hand knowledge. It was their first time here. Despite that, they came as far as the antechamber with ease. Mr. Tokimune’s Tokkis and Mr. Haruhiro’s Haru Heroes are not to be underestimated.”

“Haru...Heroes...” If he acknowledged the pun, he’d only be kicking a hornet’s nest, so Haruhiro suppressed his urge to quip.

“We struggled just an eensy weensy bit there at the end, though!” Kikkawa said, sticking out his tongue playfully.

“Even if Renji hadn’t shown up, we could’ve broken through on our own!” The masked dread knight seemed needlessly insistent.

“Obviously.” Tada’s grip on his warhammer, which was resting on his shoulder, tightened. A vein was visible on his forehead. There was no need to tense up like that.

“We didn’t need your help,” he said. “Don’t get full of yourself, Renchin.”

“It’s Renji.” Though he had instantly corrected Tada, Renji’s face looked absolutely calm. Still, he might not have liked Tada’s attitude. There was a vein on his forehead that looked a lot thicker than usual.

“Looks like you and I need to settle this. Mano-a-mano. You’re not gonna refuse, right?”

“If it can wait until after this, then fine.”

“Could you please refuse?” Haruhiro quipped, and got ignored too.

“All right.” Tada licked his lips. “Don’t forget it. Because, come hell or high water, I won’t. I’ll BTBS you.”

“BTBS?” Tokimune cocked his head to the side. “Does that stand for something?”

“Beat, thrash, bludgeon, and smash.”

“Ohh! Cool! I like it. BTBS. That’s gonna be a thing.”

“B! T! B! S!” Kikkawa jumped up and struck a weird pose. “B! T! B! S! B! T! B! S! BTBS!”

“Shut up, yeah! Kikkawa! Or I BTBS you! Yeah!”

“Anna-san’s already using it! Yahoo!” Kikkawa cheered.

Mimorin nodded. “Yahoo.”

“Heh!” Suddenly, Inui started running. Toward tomorrow—no, back the way they had come.

“Huh? Inui-san?” Kuzaku looked at Haruhiro as if to say, *Uh, should he be doing that?*

Hell if I know.

...But Haruhiro couldn’t say that, so he shook his head diagonally, not committing to a yes or a no.

“We’ve brought some real talented people with us, huh?” Adachi muttered, then let out a short laugh. He was being sarcastic, no doubt. His exasperation was obvious. Understandable, really.

“A duel between Renji-kun and Tada-kun. This will be something to see,” Shinohara remarked, sounding like he might genuinely mean it. But, this being Shinohara, it was hard to say for sure. “Once the operation is over, I hope you’ll let me get a front-row view. Now then, how about we move on to the antechamber?”

The twenty-five members of the platoon waited for the priests to recast their support magic, then proceeded to the antechamber.

Unlike the corridor, the antechamber, central, and back rooms were not pitch dark, though they weren’t as bright as the inner courtyard either. Were the rooms reflecting the light of the party’s lanterns? Or maybe they were made or painted with a material that glowed when exposed to light. The patterns on the ceiling and floor, the wall art that seemed to depict the king and his retainers, and the rows of statues all shone faintly. Thanks to that, they could make out the size and structure of the room, at least vaguely, and could see even farther than the light of their lanterns would have otherwise reached.

“In the central room...I can see a passage on each side, heading off to the left and the right.” Haruhiro surveyed the antechamber, central room, and back room while remaining slightly cautious of the statues.

“It’s a T-junction... Are there passages in the front of the back room too? These three rooms are all cylindrical, and maybe...twenty meters across? They seem pretty tall too, but...there’s no second floor, huh? The ceiling’s about five

meters high. No, maybe a little more.”

“Those things,” Ranta said, shifting his mask aside, and indicating a statue with his eyes. “They’re not gonna start moving, right? Well? Am I right...?”

“Ryo-goh!” Kimura’s bizarre laughter took on too many implausible forms to count. “Why not find out for yourself, Mr. Ranta?”

“I’m taking that as a challenge. If you think I’m gonna chicken out, you’re dead wrong, okay?”

Though he said that, Ranta tip-toed forward, slowly, carefully inching toward the statue. How was it that despite being so recklessly bold, he could act comically cautious at times like this? Because he was Ranta?

“Damn it! I’m not scared! I’m too awesome to be scared!”

“Mew-ewww!” Yume pounced forward and hugged the statue. “Hmmm? It’s just a statue, huh?”

“Ahh! Yume! Damn iiit! I was just checking that!”

“Well, hey. You were actin’ all jumpy, so Yume got all hot and bothered.”

“That doesn’t mean whatever you think it does! Wh-What are you getting all hot and bothered for?”

“Hey, Yume has times when she gets hot and bothered too, y’know?”

“Don’t just say that in a public place like this! Have some shame.”

“Gettin’ hot and bothered is nothin’ to be ashamed of. Right, Merry-chan?”

“Huh?” Merry said after a moment of surprised silence. “Oh... Y-Yeah... Uh? I guess...? Uh...?”

“As animals that need to reproduce, I think some degree of sexual appetite is appropriate and to be expected, although the amount may vary from individual to individual,” Setora said in a disinterested tone.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Yume nodded. “Animals’ve got appetites too. They eat three meals a day. You’ve gotta remember to eat your greens.”

“Pft...” Hard as it was to believe, that outburst of laughter had come from Renji. But wait, when Haruhiro looked at him, there wasn’t even a hint of a

smile. Maybe he had imagined it?

“She’s a natural comedian...”

But it was Renji who muttered that to himself, so maybe it really had been him?

“Hm? Do animals not eat three meals a day?” Yume asked, cocking her head to the side, and Renji snorted again. Yeah, that was definitely him.

“Matsuyagi, help us prepare,” Shinohara ordered.

Matsuyagi, one of Orion’s warriors, stepped forward. The guy was practically a giant. He was taller than Kuzaku’s 190 centimeters, and his broad shoulders and chest were impressively thick. His head was big too, probably twice the size of Merry’s or Setora’s. Maybe three times. Matsuyagi had a white cloth wrapped around his neck, apparently the same cloak that the other members of Orion wore. He was so massive he could wear a cloak like a tie.

But Matsuyagi wasn’t just big, he also carried a lot of stuff. The large backpack he laid down on the ground looked awfully heavy. Inside was a bundle of warhammers. Easily more than ten, probably close to twenty.

Matsuyagi had two warhammers hanging at his waist. It was questionable whether Haruhiro could have swung one of them, even if he’d held it in both hands. They looked sturdy.

The warhammers in the bundle were much smaller.

“Stone guards.” Kimura’s glasses flashed. “That is what we call the enemies that caused us so much trouble, forcing us to retreat not once, but twice. We will have you use these to eliminate them.”

Orion had two more warriors in addition to Matsuyagi. Both were men, and they used swords. They undid the bundle and helped themselves to the warhammers.

“You can’t beat stone guards with ordinary swords,” Shinohara explained, but did not reach for the warhammers himself. He was the master of Orion, after all. Presumably his sword was no ordinary one. “Let’s see. I think Renji and Ron will do just fine with their usual weapons. And Tada as well, of course. Haruhiro,

I'll ask you and your party to use the warhammers Matsuyagi brought. We should have more than enough, so if they break, feel free to help yourself to another."

Despite being told he could use his own weapon, Renji grabbed a warhammer. No, not just one. Two of them. Ron was apparently good with his massive meat cleaver.

Tokimune and Kikkawa each took one. Mimorin followed suit.

Ranta tried to take two, but after giving them a test swing, apparently decided it wasn't for him.

"I guess one's good enough..."

"I'm gonna go with the two-sword style." Kuzaku bravely took one warhammer in each hand. Ranta snorted.

"They aren't swords, moron."

"Fine, two-hammer style."

"That's not a thing, you idiot."

"Fine, what should I call it then, senpai?"

"Senpai? Who're you calling senpai?"

"You. You've got seniority over me, right? Even if you're scum."

"Who're you calling scum?!"

"Yume's fine with takin' just one."

"Uhh, me too..."

Haruhiro and Yume both tried using the warhammers, but it didn't feel right to Haruhiro. *Can I use this thing properly?* he wondered. He wasn't sure, but he was going to have to try. Setora took a warhammer too.

"Um, what about Inui-san?" Haruhiro asked Tokimune, just to be sure.

"Ah." Tokimune deftly twirled his warhammer around, then flashed his pearly whites at Haruhiro. "No need to worry about him. He'll come back soon enough. Probably at the best possible moment."

Will he really?

"Now then..." Kimura's glasses flashed. "They say the third time's the charm. How about we get down to business?"

Shinohara nodded and drew his sword.

The blade was short and broad. Its tip wasn't pointed, but instead slanted, as if it had been cut off. It looked like a long, sturdy dagger, or perhaps a short, thick longsword. Maybe it was a relic?

"We tried a variety of methods, but magic was almost completely ineffective. To be exact, we found that it's possible to destroy the stone guards by alternating between Arve fire magic and Kanon ice magic. However, this technique can't be used in the middle of a chaotic battle, and it's hard to call it efficient. Considering what we'll still need to do after this, I'm asking everyone to conserve your magic."

"So all we've got to do is smash them up, huh?" Tokimune winked. "Simple is best. Anna-san, we're counting on you!"

"*Of course!* I cheer you *extremely* hard, yeah!"

"Yay! With Anna-san cheering for me, I've got the strength of eight men!"

"What, only eight?" Ranta said.

"Huh? Uh, well, how many do you have, Ranta? Can you beat that?!"

"I've got the strength of a hundred men, obviously!"

"I've got the strength of a thousand." Tada jumped in.

"Oh! That's some big talk, Tada! Then I'm gonna aim for eight thousand!" Tokimune wagered.

"Tokimune, you ass... I've got the strength of sixteen thousand, then."

"You so small, yeah! *Assholes!* Your loincloths squeezing your *family jewels* too tight?! Aim for a million!"

"Wow! A million?! Why not beat that and go for, like, a billion?!"

"I've got the strength...of eight trillion!"

“There he goes! Tadacchi! Tada-san! We’ve got a trillionaire! Yahoo...!” Kikkawa cheered.

“Yahoo.” Mimorin followed him.

What was that? The tag team of Kikkawa’s exuberant “yahoo” with Mimorin’s far more subdued one made Haruhiro’s head hurt.

“Buh-vwohah...!” Kimura laughed. His laughter sounded downright eccentric, and Haruhiro really wished he’d cut it out. “Here they come! Here they come! Here! They! Come! The stone guards have arriiiived...”

Shinohara banged on his shield twice with his sword, and a number of the members of Orion began throwing pole-shaped tools toward the central room one after another. Those tools would emit a relatively powerful light until they burned out. They started shining just past the entrance into the central room from the antechamber.

Haruhiro exhaled, then looked at each of his comrades.

“’Kay!” Kuzaku raised up his shoulders, then let the tension out of them.

“Meow!” Yume spun her right arm in a circle. That was the arm carrying her warhammer, but she seemed not to feel the weight of it in the slightest. Her wrists and her shoulders were both incredibly flexible.

“Heh...” The masked dread knight slowly twisted his neck, acting like this was no big deal to him.

Merry met Haruhiro’s gaze, nodding slightly.

Setora was looking toward the central room, not holding the warhammer in a fighting posture, but instead letting it dangle at her side.

Some things came out of the passages on either side of the middle room.

There was a heavy sound, and they came out, one after another, in columns.

The things. They were too stoney to call soldiers. Too stoney might seem like an odd turn of phrase, but they looked like rocks. They seemed to have two legs. Or maybe it would be better to say they had the bare minimum required to move around. Their bodies were like thick shields. In fact, it might have been more accurate to describe them as excessively thick stone slates. They didn’t

have arm-like appendages or anything that resembled a head. The shields, or slates, had four or sometimes five spines sticking out of them.

“Stone guards?” Tada lifted up his warhammer and lowered his hips. “You guys have no naming sense. Those things are just spiny walking statues. I’d call ’em spinies instead.”

“Ohh,” Tokimune said, flashing his pearly whites. “Spinies, huh? I like it.”

“Yes! Spinies! I dig it!” Kikkawa swung his warhammer around excitedly. “Spinies sounds wayyyy cuter than stone guards! Don’t you think so, Anna-san?!”

“They spinies now, yeah!”

“Yay! Spinies! Yahoo!”

“Yahoo.”

Seriously, what was with that “yahoo”? Mimorin’s yahoos are way too unenthusiastic. And they’re just renaming things on a whim. Spinies? Seriously? Is that name okay?

Well, it was already stuck in Haruhiro’s head. He wasn’t going to be driving it out any time soon.

“Then let’s slay some spinies.” Shinohara accepted it without fuss.

Looks like spinies it is.

“This is going to be a long fight. If you run out of breath or get injured, please don’t push yourselves. Fall back and rest. —Now, let’s get started.”

10. Falsehood and Truth

It wasn't that he'd been underestimating how difficult this would be. Orion had been forced to retreat here twice. It wasn't going to be simple. He'd been prepared for that.

When the spinies kept rushing into the antechamber, the members of the detached force had managed to handle it calmly, without panicking, at first. Renji, Tada, and Matsuyagi, the giant warrior from Orion, had all been incredible. With those three at the center, the detached force had pushed almost into the middle room. When the three of them started to look tired from smashing spinies, Shinohara, Tokimune, Ron, and Kuzaku, who had been acting in more of a support role up until then, stepped up to the front. These two groups took turns manning the front line, and the others, including Ranta, Yume, Haruhiro, Setora, Kikkawa, Mimorin, and the rest of Orion, filled any gaps that emerged. Merry, Kimura, and Chibi-chan were the healers. Anna-san was a priest too, but she was in charge of cheering for the group and providing encouragement.

Things went really well at first. It was going to be a slog, but there was no helping that. It was to be expected, somewhat. Haruhiro had braced himself for it, but by the time he had smashed three spinies with his warhammer, his arms were already numb. After he crushed his sixth, the strength started to leave his limbs. Haruhiro noticed he was sweating profusely. He retreated to where Merry and the others were. Ranta was there too, his back rising and falling with labored breaths.

Merry told him, "If it hurts anywhere, tell me. Like your shoulder or your elbow. I can fix that." So he had her cast Cure on him. It wouldn't do anything about the sweat, but the slight pain in his joints vanished.

"Time to get back into it, Ranta."

"Oh, shut up, you trash."

"Lose your spirit?"

“As if, you piece of shit. You turd. You steaming pile of feces.”

Ranta headed back to the front line spewing complaints about how this sort of manual labor was beneath him, it was a waste of his talent, and more. Haruhiro, on the other hand, probably didn’t mind simple, repetitive tasks. Even when he was standing next to Ranta, smashing up spinies, it wasn’t that bad, but his arms tired in no time. The sweat was unbearable. He was always worried about Kuzaku and Setora, and kept vaguely aware of how they were doing. It was tough to manage more than that, though. When he swapped into the front line, he couldn’t spare anyone else much more attention than thinking, *Oh, they backed away. I guess they traded places with someone*.

When he pulled back for the third time, he thought, *I don’t want to go back again,* and he meant it from the bottom of his heart.

“Haru? If it’s just for a little while, I could—” Merry started to say.

Haruhiro was able to charge off with a, “No, no, no! It’s fine, it’s fine!” so he wasn’t at his limit just yet. But it was hard to see when this might end. The spinies seemed limitless in number, coming out of the side-tunnels of the central room and the passages in the rear of the back room. If Renji and the others got serious, they could likely push into the next chamber. But they didn’t. It wasn’t that they couldn’t. It seemed more likely that they had decided it wouldn’t help. Advancing wouldn’t change the situation. There was nothing to do but smash spinies.

How long were they going to need to keep doing this?

Shinohara figured the Lich King was using some sort of power—from a relic, no doubt—to produce the enemies in the Graveyard. If that theory was correct, wouldn’t that include the spinies? The Lich King was using rocks or whatever to produce more and more, then sending them in to halt the group’s invasion. The issue was, could this continue indefinitely?

It was possible that the march of the spinies might go on for all eternity.

But no, it shouldn’t. Everything had its limit. Nothing could be infinite. No way. It couldn’t be.

Is this ever going to end?

That was the thing no one dared say. The moment they did, they were finished. Everyone must have felt it. If their commitment wavered, there would be no recovering.

"Tada, get back! I'm stepping in! Kikkawa, you take Mimorin's place too!" Tokimune's voice was as bright and cheerful as ever. "Time for a refresh! Get some water! It'll make you feel better! Anyone up for a word chain game?! No takers, huh? Ha ha ha!"

It was terrifying, really. How could he be so cheery? At times it could be maddening, but it was still an incredible help. Renji, who came back fully refreshed each time he pulled back, was a major contributor too. No matter how pessimistic Haruhiro was, he could still think, *It'll be fine, Renji's here.* His morale fell and fell, but it never bottomed out. Haruhiro might be hopeless, but Renji was here, so in the end, it'd all work out somehow. Renji would do something.

Haruhiro was hopeless. He had been for a while. His legs wobbled so much he could barely stay on his feet. The warhammer was heavy in his arms. No, more like he couldn't feel his arms. Wait, did he still have arms? He hadn't lost them, had he? How was Haruhiro holding the warhammer? If anything, it felt like the warhammer was his arms. They vaguely hurt every time he forced himself to swing and hit a spiny. Was this pain? No, not quite. He felt a throbbing. But the rest of the time, his arms were numb. His lungs felt like they were going to burst. Maybe they already had, judging by his wheezing breaths. He was a wreck. An absolute wreck.

It amazed him, though. Whenever he went back to Merry, everyone there was crouching, sitting, or lying on the ground. And yet none of them stayed there forever. Not one. It might have taken some time, but they all got up, and headed back into the fray. Wow.

Since they hadn't lost anyone yet, it felt like no one wanted to be the first to drop out. Haruhiro didn't want to, at least. He'd feel pathetic. Being the first to drop out would be a disgrace. It was scary too, since it could spark a chain reaction.

If you can't go on, you can't go on. It is what it is. Doesn't it take courage to

drop out too? That thought was a constant temptation. Even if he collapsed, no one would blame him. No, someone would. Ranta absolutely would. He'd go on and on and on about it. Well, maybe he couldn't afford to right now. But later? Oh, yeah. He'd tear into Haruhiro. If there was a later, that is.

Ranta was the one person he didn't want complaining about him. Not that much came out of Ranta's mouth other than complaints. When Haruhiro could justify his position, it was easy to think, *Oh, look. There he goes, spouting off again.* But when Ranta was right, it wasn't so easy. Nothing was worse than having Ranta laying into him and not having anything he could say in return. Ranta was probably thinking, *Like hell I'm gonna go down before Haruhiro* too. It was the one thing neither of them wanted. Seriously, though. What was with this relationship?

If Haruhiro didn't use everything, absolutely everything, which included his relationship with Ranta, to fuel himself, then the bonfire in his heart might burn out, and only ashes would remain until they too vanished.

Renji, and Tokimune, and Tada, and Shinohara might be different, but Haruhiro was just a normal guy, or close enough to it. He was just delaying the moment of his collapse as it approached little by little, wasn't he?

"Ngh...!" Renji threw his warhammers. Both of them. They struck a spiny that came trudging into the back room. It lurched, but didn't collapse.

"Ron!"

"On it!" Ron shouted, his voice hoarse, and he dashed off. He swung his massive meat cleaver, or more accurately he bodily slammed into the spinies along with it. "Yeah!" The spiny, which Ron and his meat cleaver had crushed into the floor, didn't even attempt to rise.

Renji was standing. Was that out of stubbornness? He puffed his chest out, gazing up at the ceiling as if he were too proud to look at the floor.

No spinies were coming out of the passages on the sides of the central room, or the ones in the rear of the back room.

Tokimune sat down. He was wheezing, out of breath.

Tada, meanwhile, was on all fours, vomiting.

Kikkawa had been sitting on his haunches for a while. Mimorin was also crouching. And behind them, Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Ranta, Yume, Setora, the warriors of Orion, including Matsuyagi, as well as their paladin, hunter, and thieves were all sitting or kneeling too.

With the exception of the priests and mages, the only ones still standing were Renji and Shinohara, who was helping Ron to his feet.

It had been a close, close, close shave.

They might have been able to handle another two, three, maybe even five spinies, but if there had been ten, who knows? It could have gone badly. Well, no, the priests, especially Kimura and Merry, could fight, and there were Adachi and the two mages from Orion as well. The detached force had managed to completely conserve their magic.

Did that mean that while it felt like a close shave to Haruhiro, it wasn't really?

"Whew... Still, though..." Haruhiro only had his left knee on the ground. The right one was raised, and he was managing to stay in a crouch.

He glanced sideways at Ranta, sitting on the ground, looking like he was going to collapse if he stopped propping himself up with both arms.

Nice, I won, he thought to himself.

As he did, possibly by pure coincidence, Ranta looked toward Haruhiro. His mask had shifted aside. It must have been too hard for him to breathe with it on.

"Ngh...!" Ranta grunted as he tried to rise to his feet. That made Haruhiro want to stand too, but it'd be stupid to strain himself competing with Ranta.

"Grr...! Hahh...!" Ranta finally got to his feet, then stuck his tongue out with a vulgar laugh.

"I win! Geh heh heh!"

"Fine, whatever. It is what it is."

"A win for me is a loss for you, Parupiro! Be a man and recognize it!"

"I told you I was fine with it..."

“Well, say it more clearly! I want to hear you say, ‘Ranta-sama beat me!’”

“Why should I?”

“Because you lost! You’ve got to declare it! Quit your moping! This is your responsibility as a man, man!”

“You’re the one guy I don’t want telling me how I ought to act, but...hold on, why’re you so full of energy?”

“Because I’m awesome!”

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. I get it. I lose. I lost. Happy now?”

“Like hell I am. Act like more of a loser! Because you are one. You *lost.* Lick my feet like the pathetic loser you are! Ah! Yeah, no, forget that. If I let you lick my feet, they’ll get dirty. With your Parupiro germs!”

It looked like Ranta was regaining his vitality by running his mouth. Haruhiro, on the other hand, got more and more exhausted the longer he was forced to hear Ranta yammer on. Was Ranta sucking the life out of him? He had to assume so.

“Heh...” There was a familiar voice.

Looking over, a man with an eyepatch and ponytail was walking out of a passage in the rear of the back room.

“Huh?”

“Well fought, people...” Inui stopped in the middle of the central room, opening his right eye wide. “I, yes, *I* scouted out the burial chamber for you! While you were all stalling for time here, *I* did it!”

“That’s our Inui. Wouldn’t have expected anything less from you,” Tokimune said with a wink and a thumbs-up.

“Heh...” Inui turned to the side. Did he feel embarrassed by the compliment?

“When did he get there?” Shinohara blinked in surprise.

I know, right?

To be honest, Haruhiro had nearly forgotten Inui existed. If Inui never reappeared, that would have been that. It wouldn’t have even mattered.

“If you were gonna come back...” Kuzaku started, but trailed off.

Haruhiro could tell what he wanted to say. If Inui’d had time to scout, he could have, should have, helped with slaying the spinies. It was hard not to think so.

But they had managed without him, and things wouldn’t have changed drastically if he had stuck around. Even if Haruhiro didn’t agree that sneaking ahead to scout during the chaos was necessarily the right decision, well, maybe it wasn’t that bad.

Actually, according to Inui, he hadn’t initially gone down the passages in the rear of the back room. He had scouted down the side passages in the central room, then looped around to return through the back room’s passages. In other words, the passages were all connected, and formed a structure that could be called the second corridor.

At the midpoint of the second corridor was a set of stairs leading up to the upper level of a large hall. On the far side of the ground level in that hall there was a throne on a raised platform, which, according to Inui, had someone sitting on it. The hall had a great many lights hanging from the ceiling, mounted in the walls, and placed on the floors, so it was well illuminated. The figure on the throne had something like a crown on its head, wore a cloak studded with gold and silver, and carried a scepter. He hadn’t gotten a good look at the figure’s appearance, but it was clearly someone of high stature, or their remains. Inui said he hadn’t seen anything else moving in there.

The second floor of the hall was like a terrace sticking out from the wall, and there were stairs on either side of it leading down to the lower level. There was a landing about twenty steps down each set of stairs, then another twenty steps or so to the ground floor. Each step was about twenty centimeters. That put the distance to the landing at four meters, and then another four meters to the first floor from there, meaning the second floor was about eight meters up.

The hall itself was roughly thirty meters across, and more than fifty meters deep. The platform supporting the throne was about five meters high. There was no way they were going to be jumping up onto it. But according to Inui’s report, the platform had stairs on either side. If they were going to get up there,

they would have to use those.

“Hmm...” Kimura murmured, glasses flashing, when Inui finished his report. “This is big, Shinohara-kun. This intel could even prove decisive.”

Shinohara held his chin as he nodded. “It seems like it. That must be the Lich King on the throne. We finally have the king who does not sleep, even in death, in our sights.”

“Heh... Thanks to my heroic feat!” Inui twisted his body around, raising and lowering his arms to strike some kind of pose.

“Weren’t you supposed to be the demon lord, or something, pal?” Ranta muttered, and Inui smiled faintly.

“A fallen hero. That is what the demon lord is...”

“So you’re going to fall now...” Haruhiro was sad he couldn’t resist quipping.

“Life is full of ups and downs!” Inui stood on his tiptoes, twisting his arms to form a figure eight. “Life is for living! And for dancing! I’ll live a life of fighting, and losing, and fighting again, and tasting sweet victory! The grand epic of a protagonist! The end of a hero! The terrifying awakening of a demon lord! Listen and behold this one of a kind saga!”

“Listen and behold...?” Haruhiro was about to say something, but stopped himself. Normally, you beheld with your eyes, not your ears, so “listen and behold” was a weird thing to say, but what good did pointing out every little mistake do him? Inui was weird in general. If he started talking normally, that’d actually be even scarier. Like the precursor to some incredible calamity.

The priests recast the support spells Protection and Assist on everyone in the platoon. Protection had the effect of raising the subjects’ vitality and natural capacity for healing. Simply put, it pepped everyone up. It might not get rid of their fatigue completely, but it helped to mitigate it.

Renji, Ron, Kuzaku, Yume, and the warriors from Orion all took a power nap. Even sleeping for a little while made a world of difference. Ranta bragged that when you got to his level, you could rest just fine while awake, and Haruhiro felt like there was no way he could sleep, so he sat around doing nothing instead.

Shinohara and Kimura spent the whole time talking. Haruhiro watched them, and it felt like Shinohara saw Kimura as different from all the others. Everyone else in Orion clearly looked up to him. Shinohara was polite and never condescending. But did he treat the other members of Orion as equals? No, not at all. This might have been an exaggeration, but Shinohara acted like his comrades in Orion were pets, and he was trying to love them all equally. He was probably a fair, kind, and good owner. But if one of his comrades picked a fight with him the way Ranta did to Haruhiro, maybe Shinohara wouldn't tolerate that.

The members of Orion deferred to Shinohara. Their bond was tight. It probably made them a strong group.

But Haruhiro couldn't place others under his command like that. Ranta, obviously, would be impossible. Kuzaku would follow someone he'd grown attached to anywhere. That made his loyalty dependent on the leader's character, but it seemed unlikely he'd take to Shinohara. Merry hadn't fit in with Orion's vibe and had felt she had to leave. As for Yume, she was kind of a free spirit. Haruhiro wanted her to live as she pleased. Setora was anything but servile.

At a glance, Shinohara seemed like a forbearing and welcoming leader. But Kimura had said he tended to make decisions without consulting the others, and also that he acted logically.

Did the people in Orion know what Shinohara was really like? Haruhiro couldn't say, but Kimura was still with him despite knowing.

Maybe that was why.

When Shinohara was talking to Kimura alone, he was different than usual. His face wasn't so expressive. Yeah. He didn't smile much. He might laugh a little, but he didn't force himself to wear that smile. He would frown and shake his head a lot too. The way he talked to Kimura also felt more familiar, less guarded.

Kimura must have been more to Shinohara than just a comrade. They were closer than that. In other words, they were friends.

So, supposing there was some conspiracy, the question that arose was

whether Kimura truly didn't know anything about it.

Kimura had said he was concerned for Shinohara, so he wanted to learn the truth. Was he just pretending not to know, acting like an informant for Haruhiro while manipulating him to gather information? Kimura might have been like an extension of Shinohara himself.

When Haruhiro was thinking that, Kimura looked his way, glasses flashing. Then he turned back to Shinohara and started talking about something again.

"What was *that* about?"

Kimura was too close to Shinohara. If they could take advantage of that, then good, but it was dangerous to trust him; though, actually, the guy was such an enigma, there wasn't much chance of Haruhiro ever trusting him in the first place.

Some time later, the nappers awoke, and Shinohara declared it was time for them to head out.

The team headed through the passages in the rear of the back room to enter the second corridor. The second corridor had lights hanging from the ceiling, so it was dimly lit. This was probably where the spinies had been lined up. Haruhiro could see alcoves where they would have fit on either side of the wall. How long was the second corridor in total? If it was a hundred meters, and the walls were packed with spinies, there would be a considerable number of them. It was amazing the group had managed to smash them all.

Haruhiro, Inui, and a thief from Orion named Tsuguta went up the stairs, which were five meters across, and entered the large hall.

As explained, the second level was essentially a terrace. Fifteen meters across, five meters deep. There was a low parapet around the edge, and golden railing shone dully on top of it.

Haruhiro, Inui, and Tsuguta hid in the shadow of the parapet. They stuck their heads over the edge of the railing just a little, surveying the first floor. It was more or less as Inui had described, but it felt different seeing it in person. It was hard to do the grandiose sight of it justice. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. If you could see it, you'd understand. But since you can't, you

won’t.

The being seated on the throne down on that platform above the first floor was the unmistakable ruler of this place. In life, he would have been the master of a kingdom. He had built a glittering palace in this land and no doubt sought to continue to rule it even in death. The lighting fixtures built into the walls and platform were ornate, and even if they were just gold plated, you would still need an immense amount of the stuff to make this many.

There was no doubt about it.

This was the throne room.

Haruhiro nodded to Tsuguta, who turned to head back.

Not long after, Tsuguta led Shinohara and the others up the stairs. Everyone stayed low, so as to remain hidden behind the parapet.

The Lich King remained motionless on his throne.

“We sure he isn’t just dead?” Ranta asked in a whisper. He might have been joking, but no one reacted.

“Heh...” Inui gave Setora a passionate glance with his uncovered right eye. “If both of us survive this ordeal, I want you to become my infernal bride.”

“I refuse,” Setora declined instantly.

Go figure.

“Heh!” Inui began scratching his head. “I can feel the waves of darkness inside me, flaring up from within the shadowy depths...”

Tokimune winked and slapped Inui on the back.

“Don’t sweat it. Someday, there’s bound to be a girl who gets your unique charm, Inui.”

I dunno about that, thought Haruhiro, but he kept it to himself. He also wished they’d save this nonsense for another time, but he knew better than to waste his breath telling the Tokkis that. Besides, if they were able to keep carrying on like normal right before the final battle, that was reassuring.

Haruhiro was feeling as tense as anyone would—or was he?

He wasn't as excited as Ranta, who had shifted his mask aside and was licking his lips in anticipation.

"Okay..." Kuzaku nodded. It looked like he was trying to psyche himself up.

Yume, incredibly, looked like she was going to yawn, then covered her mouth to stop herself. Her eyes met Haruhiro's, and she let out an embarrassed giggle.

Setora looked disinterested, and Merry seemed calm too.

Haruhiro was uneasy. How could he not be? There was no predicting how this fight would play out. Some injuries were going to be inevitable, but no matter what it took, he wanted to avoid losing any of his comrades.

He tried not to think about Shihoru, their comrade who had vanished.

Once he started thinking about her, it was hopeless. He couldn't possibly keep a level head. Was Shihoru okay? Where was she? What was she doing? Stewing over it wasn't going to do him any good.

But why else would they be participating in the operation to take Mount Grief? Why else would he have joined the detached force and be trying to break through the Graveyard at the risk of his comrades' lives?

They weren't here because they wanted to be, obviously. If Jin Mogis gave them an order, they couldn't afford to refuse. There was no choice but to reluctantly obey. That was true, of course, but there was also a chance that they would get Shihoru back. Haruhiro could endure for as long as he was able to think that.

He had no real hints to go on. Shihoru's whereabouts were unknown. That was why he had to endure and keep searching. Maybe it was more accurate to say he was searching for a way to search, some way to find a lead.

Enduring. And not giving up hope. That was all he could do. So for now, that was what he was going to do.

"Is it just him?" Renji asked in a low voice. "We'll have to see what he does."

"Yeah," Shinohara nodded. He looked around at the members of the platoon. For a moment, he was expressionless. Like he was calmly selecting a human sacrifice. That might have been reading too much into it, but it was how he

looked.

“We’ll go in first,” Renji said, completely calm. “We descend to the first floor, sprint across to the other end, then climb the stairs up to the platform and crush him. Should we split up?”

“The stairs seem reasonably wide, so I would rather not do anything reckless like dividing our strength,” Shinohara said.

“If it looks like we’re going to get caught in a pincer attack, then we’ll split up and handle it.”

“All right. Then please do whatever you think is best.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ll take command of Orion, as well as Tokimune and Haruhiro’s parties.”

“We’re counting on you, Renji,” Tokimune said with a grin, and Renji shrugged a little.

“Yeah,” Haruhiro agreed.

Renji offered no response to the look Haruhiro gave him. He didn’t ignore it, no. He took it in, and then chose not to respond.

If Haruhiro wasn’t wrong, there was an unspoken *you know what to do* in there that transcended mere language. In somewhat dramatic terms, it was a confirmation of their secret pact.

Though Renji was brusque and felt like an unstoppable force of nature in battle, he probably had a sensitive side too. It could well be that Renji’s brusque image was something that he played up precisely because of just how caring and emotional he could be. If Haruhiro ever suggested that was the case, Renji would deny it and probably resent him for it.

Renji led the way with Ron, Chibi-chan, and Adachi following him toward the stairs on the left.

Haruhiro, Inui, Shinohara, and Tsuguta the thief peered over the railing, watching the first floor. Obviously, they were monitoring Team Renji too.

Renji began descending the stairs.

Immediately, the Lich King rose. Throughout the throne room, incredible whirlwinds, like sandstorms, brewed up. Dozens, at least. More than Haruhiro could count at a glance. All he could say was that there were a lot of them.

Renji and the others raced down the stairs. They hadn't reached the landing yet.

Some of the sandstorms, maybe just under ten of them, coalesced, hardening into humanoid forms.

"Wait, isn't that—?!" At some point, Ranta had moved up beside Haruhiro. He took his mask off and tried to stand up, but Haruhiro grabbed him by the arm and forced him back down.

"Stop that!"

"Look, moron! That's Renji and his team!" Ranta wasn't just saying something moronic, as was so typical for him. The humanoid sandstorms were near the bottom of the stairs Team Renji were trying to descend. There were eight of them. Renji, Ron, Chibi-chan, and Adachi. Two of each.

"Are those wraiths?!" Shinohara's expression was tense.

The real Team Renji was almost at the landing when the two fake Team Renjis began climbing to meet them. No. The two fake Adachis stayed where they were. Were they planning to cast? They were drawing elemental sigils with their staves, trying to form spells.

"We're going in too!" Shinohara gave the order.

Stay calm. Keep a level head. It's one thing to aspire to do that, but when there's a sudden change in the situation like this, the body acts before the head can keep up. Ranta took off at a run before Haruhiro could say anything.

"Let's go!" Haruhiro dashed off too. Kuzaku, Yume, Merry, and Setora followed. They jostled with Orion and the Tokkis for position as they all rushed toward the stairs.

The double fake Adachis launched some kind of spell at the landing where Team Renji was. Kanon and Falz magic, huh? No matter how great Renji and his team were, they were in trouble if they took a solid hit from that.

That was a big if. The fake Adachis' magic seemed to explode. Was that a misfire? Team Renji was covered by an invisible wall, and it seemed to have fended off the fake Adachis' magic. That was how it looked. Had Adachi done something? He was holding his left arm up high. Blood. He was bleeding from his wrist.

"I can't use Blood Spell that often!" Adachi shouted. Haruhiro had no idea what Blood Spell was, but it had apparently protected them from the fake Adachis' spells. That had to be it.

"I'll crush them!"

What was Renji planning to do? He didn't go down the stairs. He was jumping off the landing.

"Haruhiro, you come too!"

"Me?!"

He wished Renji wouldn't drag him into this. Besides, why did it have to be Haruhiro? If he ignored Renji after being called out by name, it'd look bad, and it might even be considered a bit of a stab in the back, so he couldn't refuse.

I've gotta do it.

"Setora, you take it from here!" Haruhiro ordered.

"Got it!"

"Damn it all!" He was acting half out of desperation, pushing past the Tokkis and Orion as he raced down to the landing. Ron and Chibi-chan had already pushed forward to the next set of stairs, taking on a fake Renji and Ron. Was Adachi supporting them with magic? Renji was down on the first floor, going wild. There were still sandstorms all over the first floor, but there were also a bunch of fakes of all the volunteer soldiers here. It was ridiculous.

Go? Down there?

Me?

Uh, how about no?

"You chicken! I'll go! Zeeeeeeee!"

What's Z?

The masked dark knight bellowed the enigmatic Z as he raced past Haruhiro and jumped down from the landing.

"Personal skill...!" Before even landing, Ranta slashed one of the fake Orion warriors, then rolled as he hit the floor and got back up. "P-Personal skill...?!" he shouted again as he cut down a fake Orion paladin, then immediately sprang at a fake Kimura. "Personal skill, Stellar... Uh?!"

"...!"

The fake Kimura narrowly parried Ranta's katana with its mace and buckler, but he still had it on the ropes. Haruhiro hated what a loud, obnoxious show-off Ranta could be. But it did stir him to action.

"If you can't come up with a technique name, then just give up!" Haruhiro shouted, jumping from the landing himself. He wasn't going to use the momentum of the fall to strike an enemy like Ranta had. He couldn't. Instead he made sure he landed properly, blunting the impact, and used Stealth. His mind filled with the image of sinking into the floor.

He was a little quiet, a little slow, as if he were slightly separated from everything around him—and yet, he was here. Or maybe it was better to say he was *there.* His self was not inside him, but outside, perceiving the area as a whole. He heard sounds, felt the flow of things.

It wasn't bad. He was able to concentrate.

Renji slashed one fake and took the shortest route to the next, instantly laying that one low too, and taking off to terminate the next. Renji could see it. Where the enemies were. In what order he should take them out. He knew it instinctively.

Compared to that, Ranta was far less efficient. He leaped right and left, then moved even further left, making it look like he would bound again, then instead charging in with an upward swing of his katana. It looked like a lot of effort. Horribly inefficient. But his unorthodox style bewildered enemies as he searched for other targets, figured them out, and prepared to act. In that sense, while he seemed to be doing a lot of meaningless things, not everything that

appeared to be pointless actually was.

Haruhiro crept up on a fake Kikkawa that was trying to get behind Ranta, grappled with it and slit its throat.

It felt like...yeah, like sand. It was as if he were cutting sand.

The fake Kikkawa didn't so much crumble as burst, turning to literal dust.

That sand-like powder began moving from where it landed.

Haruhiro looked in the direction it was heading and saw there was already a sandstorm whirling there. It was going to form another fake, wasn't it?

Yeah, it absolutely was.

The fakes were different from the wraiths they'd fought in the chapel. They looked pretty human from a distance, closely resembling whoever they were a copy of, but up close, they were obvious phonies. The skin didn't look alive, and the eyeballs hardly reflected any light. They lacked luster in general. The details of their construction were somewhat lacking too, with their faces looking flatter than the originals. There were hardly any wrinkles either.

Basically, these fakes were sand or mud dolls created by the Lich King's magic. Their abilities were nothing next to the originals'. They seemed to be a match as far as physical strength and agility went, but they weren't fast to react. It could be that the Lich King was controlling them all, and because of that he couldn't micromanage them effectively.

Haruhiro took down a fake Adachi with Spider, hit a fake Tokimune with Backstab, then delayed a fake Ranta with Shatter before using Hitter, and finishing with a Backstab as he ran past. Fake or not, it felt good to be teaching Ranta a lesson, but he'd prefer to keep that a secret. For his part, Ranta was toying with a fake Haruhiro, a look of maniacal glee on his face, so they were even.

In addition to Renji, Haruhiro, and Ranta, more and more of their allies were piling down the stairs to the first floor. At one point, one of the fake mages managed to get off some Arve magic, but Adachi used his Blood Spell, or whatever it was called, to block it. Renji, Haruhiro, and even Ranta, to a degree, were making it a priority to take down the fake mages. That was the intent, at

least, but Haruhiro noticed something.

He'd taken down fakes of Adachi and the two Orion mages. But Haruhiro had not touched a fake Mimorin.

They existed. Haruhiro had seen one, but Renji had been closer, so he'd let Renji take care of it.

Also, while he was fine with Rantas, Haruhiro hadn't touched any of the fake Kuzakus, Merrys, Setoras, or Yumes.

Even though it was clear at a glance that these things were fakes, he still hesitated just a little.

In the chapel, Kimura had faced nearly identical wraiths of his fallen comrades. That must have been difficult in its own way, but these impostors were copies of people Haruhiro was working with in the present moment. Because he had incredible allies like Renji, he'd been able to think, *Well, they're just fakes,* and shift gears into battle mode. But if not for that, fighting these opponents might have shaken everyone, and they could have ended up on the defensive instead. The margins here were razor thin. If the enemy had been able to make an early push, it would have been hard for the platoon to recover from it.

There was no way to be optimistic about the current situation either.

The whole team was heading for the stairs on the left side of the platform where the Lich King awaited them. Renji, Ranta, and Haruhiro led the way, and the others followed.

Renji, at the very front, was maybe fifteen meters from the stairs. Ranta and Haruhiro were hanging around behind him. The rear group was headed by Ron, Tokimune, Tada, and Kuzaku, as well as Shinohara and Matsuyagi of Orion.

If he had felt like it, Renji could probably have gone even farther ahead. But it would have left too large a gap between him and the rear group. Renji was taking out fakes as he waited for the rest to catch up.

With Renji leading the way, the detached force eliminated any fakes approaching them at an incredible speed, but the number of enemies wasn't going down at all. Though they struck their copies down again and again, the

fakes turned into sandstorms, and the sandstorms turned into fakes, which rushed toward the group all over again.

It went without saying, this was the work of the Lich King standing in front of the throne.

Was the Lich King expending some sort of magical power to create the fakes? If he was, then just like human mages, his reserves of power were likely not inexhaustible. He'd only be able to create fakes for so long.

But wasn't it also possible that this was the effect of a relic, and endless? Even if it wasn't endless, the Lich King's reserves of magical power could very easily have been absolutely massive. If he could make fakes all day and all night, it was essentially inexhaustible.

The detached force had the upper hand for now, but, again, the margin was razor thin.

Renji was going absolutely wild and showed no sign of tiring, but he'd already worn himself down fighting the spinies. The fatigue might all hit him at once at some point. That also went for the others, including Haruhiro, who'd given their all fighting the spinies. Honestly, while Haruhiro was doing a good job of maintaining his focus, his body wasn't moving so well.

A fake Yume was taking aim at Renji.

"Ah...!"

There was a moment's hesitation, but Haruhiro closed in on the fake Yume from behind and tried to hit her with a Backstab, only for her to turn and loose her shot at him instead. Haruhiro managed to avoid it by jumping sideways, but the fake Yume shot again, and again. Oh, crap. It was all he could do to dodge them.

"Hee hee!" If Mimorin hadn't cut the fake Yume in half with her longsword, one or two of those arrows might have hit him.

"Haruhiro! I love you!"

"Th-Thanks..."

I'm focusing well? Who am I kidding? I'm doing a terrible job, aren't I,

Mimorin?

But what was Mimorin doing here? Actually, it wasn't just Mimorin. Ron, Tada, Tokimune, and Kikkawa too. Kuzaku was also nearby, as were Shinohara, Matsuyagi, and more. It was the rear group. They'd caught up.

"Renji!" Shinohara shouted. "Let's rush in and focus on taking out the Lich King!"

"Vo-foh! Go-feh!" Kimura laughed. "Let's wrap this one up quiiick!"

The warriors of the detached force used War Cry one after another. This wasn't just a loud shout. It was a sound like no other, making enemies falter and rousing the user's spirits.

"Grahhhhhhh...!" Renji roared and charged. It was like he was unleashing a well of power that he had been holding back all this time, storing it up for this moment. In the blink of an eye, Renji was on the stairs.

"Oh, for crying out...!" Ranta tried to keep up with him.

"Ha ha...!" Tokimune's longsword flashed, and he raced forward with Tada, each overtaking the other repeatedly.

"Hoorahhhhh...!" Ron, Chibi-chan, and Adachi had gotten close to the stairs too at some point.

"Yahhhhahhhh...!" Orion's giant warrior Matsuyagi was putting on a real display too. He easily mowed down fakes with his twin warhammers, steadily advancing. Shinohara, Kimura, and the members of Orion were pretty much all following Matsuyagi.

"Damn, he's cool!" Kuzaku was a bit farther behind but was doing a good job of swinging his large katana around and drawing the enemies to him. There was a group with Kuzaku at its center, including Yume and Merry, Setora, Kikkawa and Inui, and Anna-san the cheerleader bringing up the rear, and supporting the platoon's advance that way.

I'll join up with Kuzaku and the others, Haruhiro thought for a moment, but he ended up following Mimorin to the stairs. The Lich King. They had to defeat the Lich King as soon as possible. If they didn't, they'd run out of steam before long.

When Renji began climbing the stairs, Ranta, Ron, Tokimune, Tada, and finally Matsuyagi followed.

“Grahhhhhh...!”

Renji reduced the fakes crowding the stairs to sand and dust in short order. Even without the power of a relic, he could do that? Could humans get that strong? Yeah, no. They couldn’t. It was only because it was Renji that it was at all possible.

If Renji weren’t here... Just the thought alone was chilling. They wouldn’t even have made it to this throne room without Renji, would they? Shinohara had led Orion in multiple attempts to clear the Graveyard before now, and all of them had failed. Maybe he’d decided it might be possible because Renji was coming?

So long as Renji was around, it felt like they could do anything.

That wasn’t true, of course. Obviously. Renji had his limits too. He wasn’t immortal or indestructible. He was human, the same as Haruhiro or any of the others. But even knowing that, Haruhiro wanted to doubt it. Renji was just so completely different from everyone else. He couldn’t be evaluated with common sense. It was like he belonged to a different dimension.

Thinking back on it now, it seemed apparent that Renji had seriously pulled his punches during the fight with the spinies. He probably hadn’t had an easy time. They’d all been pretty exhausted, but for Renji, that was all it was. The repetitive manual labor might have left him with some pent up frustration. Now he was blowing off steam.

Renji reached the top of the stairs. The upper level was much less well-guarded. Actually, Renji was mowing down fakes like some kind of reaper.

The second to make it up there was Ron. Matsuyagi pushed Ranta, Tokimune, and Tada aside, leaping up onto the platform. Those three, along with Shinohara and Orion’s best fighters, all arrived in one clump, climbing up onto the platform one after another. Haruhiro and Mimorin followed.

“Delm, hel, en, giz, balk, zel, arve...!”

“Zeel, mare, gram, eld, nilug, io, sel...!”

Two of Orion's mages drew elemental sigils and chanted. Adachi was doing the same.

"Jess, yeen, sark, viki, teo, meo, fram, dart, ul, dio, zeon...!"

That was a long incantation. It was a big spell. The Orion mages were using Arve and Kanon magic. Adachi was probably using Falz. All of them were targeting the Lich King, no doubt. The mages fired off their most powerful spells, which they had been able to save until now, in an attempt to finish him off fast.

"Goooo...!" Ranta screamed. Haruhiro didn't say it out loud, but he felt the same way. His personality being what it was, he thought, *It can't work, right?* They'd struggled a lot to get here. The battle to take Mount Grief was still just getting started, but this confrontation with the Lich King had to be the greatest challenge of the Graveyard. It would never end so easily. He didn't want to feel disappointed, so he kept his defenses up. Was this a habit or his nature?

In all honesty, though, he hoped it would end quickly. Of course he did. That was obviously preferable.

That's why when all of the fakes turned to sand and dust just before the mages cast their spells, he thought, *No, please, just stop it,* from the bottom of his heart. *Enough of that.* Not that the Lich King would grant Haruhiro's wish.

Most likely, the Lich King had stopped manipulating the fakes and changed over to another power instead.

"It's an Anti-Spell!" Adachi shouted. Haruhiro wasn't a mage, and he didn't have his old memories, so he didn't really know what that meant, but it was presumably some kind of magic that blocked magic. Maybe it was the same sort of thing as Adachi's Blood Spell, which had come from the Red Continent.

The mages' spells might have started to trigger, but then they were erased.

The Lich King was wrapped in a transparent bluish dome. Was that what had deflected, or perhaps dispelled, the mages' magic?

The king who did not sleep, even in death, wore clothes that looked like they were worth a fortune on their own, and an imposing, majestic crown. But he was dead. It was clear to see that he was no longer among the living. He was

obviously deceased. He wore an impressive golden gauntlet on his right hand, so the only exposed skin on his body was his face and his left hand, which held his scepter. Could it even be called skin? At one time, it must have been full of life, coursing with blood. Now it was dried up, clinging to his bones. His face was not so different from a skull. The eye sockets were black pits. No more than holes.

Many long years must have passed since the time of his death.

Sure enough, he was standing, and moving. He manipulated great powers. Even though his body was lifeless, he was the master of the Graveyard.

The king who did not sleep, even in death.

The Lich King.

“Yahhhhh...!” Renji charged in with fury. His ominous greatsword shone with purple light.

“Aragarfald!” Ranta shouted the name of the relic. It wasn’t the greatsword. The relic was the armor Renji wore. It imbued his sword with a special power.

Magic didn’t work on the Lich King. He could deploy an Anti-Spell to block it. But if that was the case, all they had to do was close in and chop him up. It seemed like an idea anyone could have thought of, but Renji made the decision well before anyone else could. It was as if he’d already decided to do it the moment Adachi and the others’ magic proved ineffective. He might have even been getting ready to.

It was fifteen to twenty meters to the Lich King’s throne. In mere seconds, Renji would break through the Anti-Spell and bisect the Lich King. Haruhiro didn’t think, *There’s nothing the Lich King can do now.* Surely he’d do something, Haruhiro just couldn’t imagine what.

And the Lich King did, in fact, move, though only to raise his right hand, the one with the golden gauntlet. When he did, the bluish Anti-Spell vanished. But it was more than that. At the same time, the Lich King rapidly rose.

Well, not the Lich King, but the floor beneath his feet. No, that wasn’t the floor, it was sand, huh? It gathered at an incredible speed, lifting the Lich King up. He rose higher and higher, five meters or more. The Lich King stood atop a

pedestal of sand.

“Ngh...!” Renji slashed the pedestal, but it was just a mass of granules. There was a flash of purple lightning, and the greatsword sent sand flying all over, but the hole quickly filled with more.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve...!” Mimorin wasted no time before drawing elemental sigils and casting Blast.

For a brief moment, Haruhiro thought, *That might work.*

The Lich King had stopped making fakes when he put up the Anti-Spell. Then he had dropped the Anti-Spell to manifest a pedestal of sand. That meant he couldn’t do two things at once. He was limited to one major thing at a time. If that was true, then if he got up on the pedestal, he could avoid physical attacks but not prevent magical ones.

Haruhiro’s guess had to be right. The Lich King didn’t use Anti-Spell now that he had raised himself up. Mimorin’s Blast flew toward him, but missed. He’d dodged. The pedestal of sand was more than just a pedestal. It moved like the head of a dragon, carrying the Lich King with it. Did he plan to leave the platform? The sand dragon was lowering its head, bringing the Lich King down to the first floor.

“Zeel, mare, gram, fey, ruvy, quo, pai, silka, krai, es...!” Adachi was chanting. What spell was that?

“Whiteout!” Mimorin blurted out. Was that the name of the spell? It was probably Kanon magic. It affected the area near the Lich King as he was about to touch down on the first floor, and a fairly wide area around that. Everything in a radius dozens of meters wide, centered around the Lich King, was covered in white. Snow. It was a violent blizzard. Despite its distance from Haruhiro and the others up on the platform, they were still shivering from the cold.

“How do you like that?!” Ron shouted.

“He blocked it!” Adachi replied, spitting the words out angrily. “He used Anti-Spell at the last second!”

That meant that the Lich King was safe behind a magical Anti-Spell barrier in the middle of the raging blizzard.

“Okay, change of plans!” Tokimune flashed his pearly whites and headed for the first floor. Was the word disappointment not in his dictionary? He had incredible mental fortitude.

“Get down there!” Shinohara ordered. The platform was maybe five meters high, at most. While it wasn’t impossible to jump down, Haruhiro would have preferred not to.

“We’re going!” Renji had no intention of using the stairs. Haruhiro got that. It was way quicker not to. They wanted to get to the Lich King before Whiteout wore off. In Renji’s case, because he was using the purple lightning effect of Aragarfald, he had a time limit he needed to take into consideration too. It wasn’t so convenient that he could switch it on and off at a whim. He needed to end this while the purple lightning was still active. If he didn’t, he’d be rendered immobile for a while. At worst, it could cost him his life. He needed to hurry as much as he could.

That said, if Renji hadn’t shot a glance toward him, Haruhiro would have taken the stairs with Tokimune. *Why’d he have to look?* Haruhiro wondered.

Was that a “You’re not coming?”

Or more of a “You’re obviously coming, right?”

I wish you wouldn’t lump me in with you.

Unlike Renji, Haruhiro was normal. Just a regular, mediocre guy. That was a reality he’d have trouble changing. Haruhiro didn’t know what it was that Renji expected of him, but it seemed like there was something. Honestly, it was a nuisance.

I can’t do what I can’t do, man.

A lowly guy like Haruhiro couldn’t chase after Renji. So Haruhiro wanted to watch his exploits from a distance. Cheering for him like Anna-san. He didn’t remember the past, but he was proud to have enlisted at the same time as Renji. That was no lie. It was the truth.

So why? Why did Renji having high hopes for him make him want to hang his head? Haruhiro had trouble understanding it himself.

I mean, it's impossible, you know? There's no way I can do it. I can't live up to your expectations.

But was it right for him to take the attitude, *You're in a completely different dimension, so please just forget us lower beings. Don't make unreasonable requests like asking us to keep up with you,* at this point?

If Haruhiro were in Renji's position, he'd have been appalled. He couldn't treat someone who gave off that vibe as an equal.

They weren't equals, mind you. There wasn't just a gap in their abilities, there was a gaping chasm.

It was blatantly apparent in their combat potential. But humans did more than just fight. Did he need to act subservient to someone because he couldn't beat them in a fight? Could someone stronger than him not be an equal and a friend? That couldn't be right.

Still, Haruhiro knew his place. For the sake of his comrades, he couldn't afford to act recklessly and get himself badly hurt or even killed.

I can't be that foolish. I won't do what I can't do, okay?

But, well, if it was just a matter of getting down from a five-meter-high platform without using the stairs, a thief like Haruhiro could manage it. Renji didn't exactly dive off the platform himself. He hung from the edge, then dropped. Haruhiro did something similar. If he used the side of the platform for footholds, it wasn't terribly hard. If he were wearing armor or carrying bulky weapons, maybe it would have been, but Haruhiro was fortunately unencumbered. Renji was loaded down with heavy equipment, but he wasn't a normal person. Aragarfald's purple electricity might have had something to do with that.

Renji dashed toward the area affected by Whiteout.

Haruhiro chased after him, glancing at the stairs to the platform as he went. Tokimune had already made it down. He saw Ranta, Shinohara, and Kimura too. And there were more following them.

There was a loud thud behind him, and he turned back in time to see Matsuyagi bracing his legs against the impact from landing on the ground. Had

he jumped from the platform? Maybe Renji and Haruhiro had convinced him to do it. But was he okay? Well, he was running now, so at least his legs weren't broken.

The effect of Whiteout was fading. It was no longer a raging blizzard that turned the whole area white. The snow was still violent, but Haruhiro could see the Lich King behind his Anti-Spell barrier.

Renji charged into the blizzard. He rested the greatsword that was arcing with purple electricity on his shoulder, ready to swing it down any time.

The Lich King was bound to lower the Anti-Spell. Would he rise on a pedestal to escape again? Ride on the head of a sand dragon to get farther away?

Haruhiro needed to see it for himself.

How would the Lich King, and how would Renji, act?

What could Haruhiro do?

As he'd expected, the Lich King's Anti-Spell vanished. The blizzard had gotten a lot weaker.

Renji leapt. His ability to jump was not normal. It was like he was dropping from the sky. Renji attacked the Lich King, purple lightning arcing off of him as he did.

There would be no pedestal of sand. That seemed like a safe call. If the undead man went up high, he'd fall prey to Renji. Instead, he rose up, but only slightly. Sand. The sand was gathering. A sand dragon. Haruhiro's body moved on its own. To the left.

Renji swung his blade down in a maelstrom of purple lightning, and it smashed the floor, kicking up sand and dust.

He'd missed.

The dragon head carried the Lich King to the left.

Haruhiro wasn't so much lying in wait, as they arrived at the same time. The Lich King hadn't expected Haruhiro to be there. Haruhiro was surprised to be there himself.

“Ah!”

He ran into me, Haruhiro thought. From Haruhiro’s perspective, it was like the Lich King had tackled him, and it would have been completely unsurprising if he were thrown through the air by the impact, but somehow he clung on, dagger out, his left arm wrapped around the Lich King’s head. The crown slipped off, and Haruhiro was nearly thrown, but despite the Lich King’s skeletal appearance, he still had hair. It was white, or gray, and pretty long. Haruhiro grabbed it with his left hand.

Holding his dagger with a backhand grip, he tried to slam it through the Lich King’s face.

He’d honestly almost managed it when the sand at the Lich King’s feet formed up into something. Well, not so much something as...

“Me...?!”

It was Haruhiro. Well, no, not Haruhiro himself, obviously. It just looked like him.

Once he was tussling with his own fake, he wasn’t able to hold on to the Lich King any longer. He got on top of the fake Haruhiro, then ended up under him, and then got back on top again. He finally managed to slit the fake Haruhiro’s throat and jumped off.

Renji was surrounded by multiple fakes, new ones forming even as he slashed and destroyed the ones around him. Matsuyagi, Shinohara, and Kimura, as well as Ron, Tokimune, and Tada were fighting a bunch of fakes not far from Haruhiro.

The Lich King. Where is he?

There.

The Lich King was closer than Haruhiro had thought, standing only six, seven meters away.

He’s just one person. Uh, can I call him a person? Eh, I guess he was human originally, so sure, why not?

The enemy could only use one power at a time. That was more or less certain

at this point. He'd dispelled the dragon head to create fakes. While he was making fakes, he couldn't do anything else.

It felt like the Lich King wasn't watching Haruhiro. Well, since he didn't have eyeballs, he wasn't looking at anything, really. But his body and face weren't turned toward Haruhiro.

Could this be my chance?

Couldn't I get him now?

Maybe it would have been better if Haruhiro had moved before thinking, but who knows? He couldn't say one way or the other.

The Lich King slammed the butt of his scepter against the floor and raised his right hand, the one wearing the golden gauntlet.

Something felt intensely wrong. That's the only way to describe it.

Basically, it was instinct. Haruhiro dropped to the ground, suddenly feeling like he couldn't breathe. Why did he hit the ground? He couldn't explain it. But a shining golden globe had appeared in front of the Lich King's outstretched hand, then split into three, and shot off.

"Demon Call, Zodie!" Sensing the danger, Ranta summoned his dread knight familiar, the demon Zodie.

Did Haruhiro see one of those golden bullets that had broken off of the globe whiz past over his head? Whether he was able to see it or not, he was certain that had he not been on the ground, it would have hit him.

"Whoa!" Ranta shouted. Haruhiro looked in time to see his party's dread knight pathetically sprawled out on the ground. The demon he'd summoned was nowhere to be seen. Had it vanished? After blocking the golden bullet? Had it shielded Ranta?

"Wha—?!"

Based on his current position, Renji had jumped to the side. He must have reflexively dodged the bullet. But there was another person right behind him.

Orion's giant warrior. Was that a hole in Matsuyagi's flank? It was like a deep, black stain. Was that where the golden bullet had hit him?

Matsuyagi dropped the warhammers he held in both hands. He'd been running at the time. His body was tilted forward, leaning more and more. Matsuyagi fell over to the side.

"Whahhhh...?!"

Whose voice was that? For a moment, Haruhiro didn't know. There was no way Shinohara's voice could crack like that. Surprisingly, it had. Shinohara was flat on his backside. That was strange too. It looked like someone had shoved him away.

The only possible conclusion was that Shinohara had been pushed away by Kimura, who had been right next to him.

Why had Kimura done that?

Why was Kimura tumbling toward Shinohara?

The leader of Orion caught him. "You... You're dead. Kimura, why...?"

"De—" Haruhiro was speechless.

He's dead.

Kimura.

Matsuyagi too.

Haruhiro and Renji had dodged in the nick of time, while Ranta had survived by sacrificing his demon. It had killed a giant like Matsuyagi in a single blow, as if he were nothing. If that magic hit, it was guaranteed to end you on the spot. Call it an instant-death spell.

It could have just as easily been Haruhiro, or Renji, or Ranta, or Shinohara instead. Any one of them could have died.

If the Lich King could use that instant-death spell again, even more might fall.

It could be Haruhiro's turn next. He might lose one of his comrades.

Haruhiro was still on the ground, staring at the Lich King. He couldn't move.

He was terrified.

His whole body cowered. But even beyond that, his brain refused to function.

Obviously, he couldn't stay like this, so Haruhiro got up immediately. But the situation was not good. Very not good. It was extremely bad. His field of vision narrowed, and all he could see was the Lich King. He couldn't keep track of his comrades or the other members of the force. It was scary. He couldn't help but be afraid. If the Lich King used that instant-death spell, he absolutely had to avoid it. No, his comrades came before himself. Okay, sure, but what did that mean? Kimura had covered Shinohara. If Haruhiro were in a position to do so, he'd do the same. He definitely would. If it was possible, at least. The only one anywhere near him was Ranta. His comrades. He had to figure out where his comrades were. But he couldn't look away from the Lich King.

"Rahhhhhh...!"

Renji.

Oh, it's Renji.

Wow. That's Renji for you.

Recovering before anyone else, Renji swung at the Lich King, electricity arcing as he did, but the sand dragon head carried the Lich King away. The purple energy chased after him, but the sand dragon head was a little faster.

It was pulling farther and farther away from Renji.

The Lich King was getting more distant from the platform with the throne. There were no members of the team where he was going.

"Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve...!" Mimorin targeted the Lich King with two, then three Blasts. The sand dragon head slithered out of the way each time, but that was a reminder. They had magic on their side too.

"Now! We're just getting started, people!" Tokimune shouted. He sounded cheerful, and brave. There wasn't a person out there who wouldn't be encouraged by hearing that voice.

Haruhiro took off running. He was scared. Damn scared. So scared he couldn't see what was going on around him very well. But being frightened wouldn't get him anywhere. The Lich King was going to use that instant-death spell when he could. They had to take him down. Defeat him. Kill the Lich King. That meant Haruhiro didn't have the option to stand by. If nothing else, he could act as a

target for the spell. If he got hit by it and died, that would at least mean someone else didn't.

"Delm, hel, en, giz, balk, zel, arve...!"

"Zeel, mare, gram, eld, nilug, io, sel...!"

"Jess, yeen, sark, viki, teo, meo, fram, dart, ul, dio, zeon...!"

The Orion mages and Adachi cast Arve, Kanon, and Falz magic. None of them were nearly so gentle as Mimorin's Blast.

The Lich King returned his dragon head to sand, and put up an Anti-Spell to block them.

Meanwhile, Renji was closing in on him.

"Greahhhhhh...!"

Purple lightning violently assaulted the Lich King.

Maybe this is going to work.

The Lich King dropped his Anti-Spell. Whatever he meant to do next, Renji's greatsword would get him first. Renji wouldn't need a second strike. He'd finish it in one blow.

And yet, that sort of optimistic assumption had a way of clouding people's eyes, making them misjudge things. Renji definitely closed the gap, but not quite enough.

The Lich King slammed the butt of his scepter on the floor, turning his gauntleted hand toward Renji. The golden globe had already appeared.

It was close, but Renji's greatsword wouldn't reach the Lich King. The instant-death spell would fire first.

Unlike Haruhiro, who had fallen into the trap of optimistic thinking, Renji knew that. That's why he stopped his swing and turned around.

"Renji...!" someone shouted.

The golden globe split into three. That instant-death spell, the terrifying bullets that would bring on a death that could not be resisted, shot forth.

“Out of the way!” a roar echoed through the chamber.

Someone charged toward the Lich King, taking Renji’s place.

“Shinohara-san...?!” Haruhiro had been following Renji with his eyes. That was why he hadn’t noticed Shinohara. They’d just lost Kimura. Shinohara had seemed overwhelmed. But rather than be laid low by his grief, he’d been spurred to revenge.

But, man, that’s dangerous.

The Lich King’s instant-death spell had already fired.

Shinohara ran straight at the golden bullet.

At this rate, wouldn’t all three of them hit him straight on? In his hands Shinohara didn’t hold a sword, but a dully gleaming shield. He was going to use it to defend himself and then tackle the undead lord. But could a shield block the instant-death spell? Wasn’t that impossible?

“Whoooooa!” Ranta shouted. The members of Orion, Tokimune, Tada, and Kikkawa were shouting Shinohara’s name. Merry said something too, and Haruhiro shouted despite himself.

Shinohara’s shield shone white, as if it were incredibly hot.

A relic.

It was a relic?

“Urgh...!” The shield clobbered the Lich King, stunning him. Haruhiro already knew that the short sword with the diagonal tip wasn’t normal. Shinohara used it to stab the Lich King through the throat, and he let out a voiceless cry. It was like he had expelled all the air from his lungs at once, and it just happened to produce a sound.

With a twist and a jerk of that strange sword, the Lich King’s head flew high, high into the air. That seemed unnecessary. He didn’t have to do it, but Shinohara probably wouldn’t be satisfied otherwise.

“Nghhhah...!” Shinohara followed up by chopping off the Lich King’s left arm and sending his right flying. Then he bisected the undead, and kicked the lower half out from under him.

The severed head of the Lich King rolled to Shinohara's feet.

He stomped and crushed it.

That was finally the end.

The Lich King's form crumbled away to nothing more than sand and dust. All that remained were his clothes, scepter, and golden gauntlet.

"Ahh..." Shinohara gazed up to the heavens. His shoulders rose and fell, his breathing awfully shallow. He might have struggled to stay on his feet without support.

And yet the man who had been his friend was no more.

Shinohara let go of his sword and shield, dropping to his knees. His head hung, and his arms touched the ground. His hands angrily tore through the Lich King's dust.

"Arrghhhhhhhh...!"

They'd won. The Lich King was finally finished. They'd done it.

But Haruhiro couldn't possibly say that. He could only remain silent. What was he supposed to say to Shinohara? No matter what words he used, he was sure they would be the wrong ones.

The members of Orion gathered around the remains of Kimura and Matsuyagi. They all seemed concerned for Shinohara, but none of them tried to approach him.

Renji was the only one to walk over to him, thrusting his greatsword into the floor and sitting down. It wasn't emitting purple electricity anymore. The effect of Aragarfald had already faded. Renji wouldn't be moving for a while.

"A priest taking the blow for someone else...?" Shinohara mumbled. His voice was low and hoarse. "What were you thinking? That was stupid... My shield could have blocked it..."

"Was that guaranteed?" Renji asked. His breath was ragged. Despite that, he spoke quietly. Had using Aragarfald made it hard for him to talk? Or was he showing respect for the dead?

Shinohara couldn’t answer immediately. It took him some time before he shook his head.

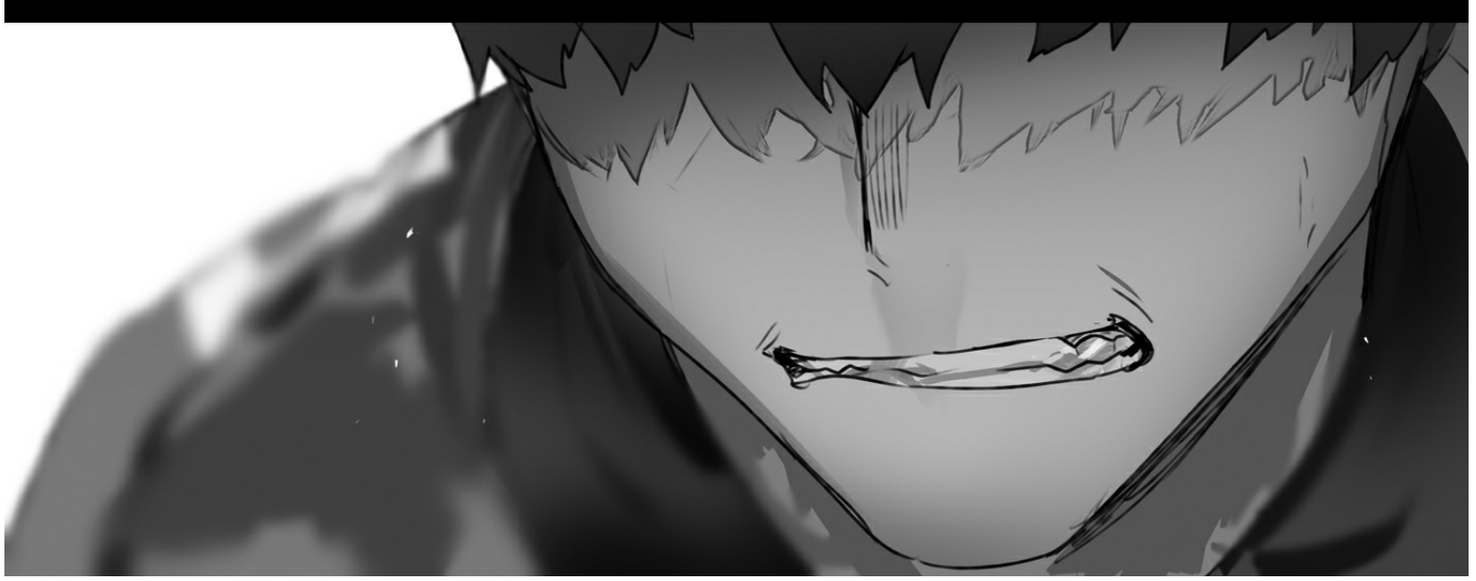
“It was a bit of a gamble. I’ve never been hit by magic like that before.”

“Then Kimura wasn’t an idiot. There was a risk his clan leader might die instantly. If I were in his place, I’d have done the same.”

“You would?”

“Yeah.”





“The same thing as Kimura... You’d have done that, Renji?”

“He was your friend, right?”

There was a pause before the answer came. “Yeah.”

“It’s not a matter of logic.”

“No... I guess not.” Shinohara let out a long, deep sigh.

Then he picked up the golden gauntlet. The one that had been on the Lich King’s right hand.

The Lich King had turned to dust and vanished. All that remained were his clothing and shoes, his scepter, and the golden gauntlet that Shinohara now held. No, the crown that had fallen from his head while Haruhiro was clinging to him was lying on the ground nearby too.

Relics.

Oh, yeah.

What was it that had kept the Lich King from sleeping, even in death? Considering how his body had crumbled, it probably wasn’t some special power that the king had possessed in life but rather the effect of a relic. In that case, his possessions were the most likely culprits.

Haruhiro crept over and quietly picked up the crown.

It was old and dirty, but decorated with many jewels, large and small. It must have been worth a fortune. But was it a relic? Honestly, Haruhiro had no idea.

Shinohara lifted up the golden gauntlet, held it close to his face, turned it around slowly as if appraising it.

“What do you plan to do with that?” Renji asked. “It’s a relic. Gave the dead king power, kept him from resting.”

“You can tell?” Shinohara asked with a smile.

It was *that* smile.

His usual affable smile, warm and so very natural, but out of place here, making it clearly unnatural.

“Here’s what I think,” he continued. “In all things, it’s possible to have too much. I don’t know what kind of authority the king who was buried in the Graveyard once wielded. But in the end, he was only human. This much power was too much for any one person to have. Especially one who wasn’t even alive. Not even the living need this sort of power. It’s harmful.” Shinohara held the golden gauntlet in his left hand, his sword in his right. “If I’m fully honest, there’s some resentment involved here. I’m angry. I never thought Kimura would do something like that. It was completely unexpected. I couldn’t react. So I may be taking it out on these things. Renji. If you think I’m trying to do the wrong thing, then please stop me.”

Renji opened his mouth and was about to say something. That’s when Shinohara did it.

He lobbed the golden gauntlet into the air, and his sword flashed.

“Whuh...?!” Ranta cried.

The golden gauntlet fell to the floor in two pieces.

“Nnnrraaaah!” Shinohara hid none of his rage, stomping on the severed gauntlet. Repeatedly. Over and over again. There was no need to go that far, right? It was impossible not to think that, watching him. Did Shinohara have to completely obliterate it before he’d be satisfied? His breathing was ragged. He whaled on the gauntlet and the floor with his sword, and there was no end in sight. No one could stop him.

There was no way to stop him.

“Shit...! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit...!”

Perhaps Shinohara had misjudged his strength, because something caused him to trip and fall. Even once he did, he gripped his sword and was about to swing, but his hand stopped.

“Shit...!”

He was down on all fours again, his sword thrown away haphazardly. The shreds of the golden gauntlet were mixed with the sand and dust. It was like he was trying to bury his face in there. Or was he crying? Maybe he didn’t want anyone to see his tears.

Renji's eyes were closed.

Haruhiro looked away from Shinohara too. *What about the crown?* he thought, though it hardly seemed like a good time for that. He'd grabbed it, thinking, *It might be a relic,* but if it wasn't, it was just a massively valuable accessory. Depending on how you looked at it, you could say Haruhiro was trying to abscond with some of the treasure. He wouldn't want to be misunderstood like that. But at the same time, he didn't want to put it back down. Seriously, what was he supposed to do here?

When he looked back, Shinohara was already standing.

"We'll have to cremate the two of them here," Shinohara said, looking around at the members of the platoon. "After that, we'll take a break before moving on. The operation isn't over yet. We have to finish this, so their noble sacrifice isn't in vain."

Obviously, he wasn't smiling as he said that. He didn't seem tense either. If anything, it was an expressionless face. His tone was disinterested, but he might have been suppressing his emotions.

Haruhiro had been suspicious of Shinohara all this time. That was why it seemed off to him. That outburst hadn't been like Shinohara. Now he'd changed his tune all too fast. But maybe that was just how Shinohara was? He was just acting like he'd changed gears, but maybe he hadn't?

What if all of it was an act?

Maybe Haruhiro was the abnormal one for thinking that way.

At the very least, Kimura had cared greatly for Shinohara, to the point that he hadn't hesitated to give his life for him. He'd been a weirdo, but also a good, loyal friend.

Kimura had cared so much for his friend, cared for him from the depths of his heart, that he might have sided with Haruhiro.

Shinohara wasn't the only one to suffer from this death. Haruhiro and the others had lost Kimura too.

11. Confrontation

It was decided that Orion would divide the Lich King's scepter, crown, clothes, and shoes and carry them back. They were the proof that the team had slain the ancient king, as well as being valuable treasures in their own right. When the conquest of Mount Grief was complete, they would discuss how the spoils were to be divided among the Frontier Army and Volunteer Soldier Corps.

Matsuyagi and Kimura were cremated in the throne room. Orion had past experience with that, so it got done quickly. The two mages from Orion lit the pyre, then Adachi used Firewall to surround their fallen friends' remains. Mimorin was about to join in and use Blast, but Haruhiro stopped her. That wouldn't cremate the bodies, it would just blow them up.

Merry and Anna-san offered prayers that the departed would rest in peace. Tada was a priest too, but he simply stared into the flames, not praying. The usually boisterous Tokkis and a certain masked dread knight were respectfully quiet for once on this occasion.

"We buried Sassa on the Red Continent," Ron said, out of nowhere. "The No-Life King's curse doesn't reach all the way across the sea. It felt wrong to burn her. Even dead, she was a fine woman, you know?"

Shinohara watched, almost without moving, until Kimura and Matsuyagi were reduced to no more than bones and ash. The way he kept his right fist clenched the whole time was particularly memorable.

The members of Orion collected their ashes. They would take them back to Alterna to be interred on the hill where so many other fallen volunteer soldiers had been laid to rest.

There were two doors in the throne room. When they were opened with synchronized unlocking, they led into the area Orion called the treasury.

The treasury was connected to the inside of the old castle at the summit of Mount Grief. It would not be easy to make it through the intricate maze of

many small rooms that it comprised.

If the Lich King were still active, that is.

It would have been quite difficult to make it through a maze full of dead ends and forked passages while being attacked by pawns, specters, and phantoms. Orion had faced the challenge a number of times, so they had a more or less complete map of this section. Yet despite finding four different doors, they had never been able to figure out the conditions to do a synchronized unlocking of them.

However, now that the Lich King had been sent to his eternal rest, the treasury was just another maze. They could determine that the two doors that didn't connect to the throne room must have been decoys or traps. The platoon easily broke through the maze, proceeding as far as the entrance beneath the old castle.

This entrance into the Graveyard had originally been sealed with a stone door. Long ago, Orion had smashed through it, then piled up rocks to block it off again.

When entering the Graveyard, they would move the rocks aside. Then, when they were finished, they would go to all the trouble of sealing the door up again. If other volunteer soldiers—experienced ones like Souma, for instance—were to swarm into the Graveyard and defeat the Lich King, it would have been a huge loss. Orion had done what they could to conceal the Graveyard's existence as they explored it independently. Maybe it had been petty, but thanks to their decision, the orcs of the Southern Expedition now occupying the old castle didn't know about the castle entrance. It was still blocked with rocks.

The detached force removed the stones blocking the entrance one by one. It wasn't a great deal of work, so it barely took any time at all.

The old castle was not large by any means. There were seven towers on the summit connected by curtain walls and a stone building in the middle of them. This structure was where the ruler must have resided, but only the first two floors and parts of the third were still intact. The Volunteer Soldier Corps' scouts reported that those parts of the third floor were currently being used to build a watchtower.

The castle entrance was in the basement of one of the seven towers. The one farthest from the castle gate. If you were to number the towers starting with the one closest to the gate and rotating clockwise, this would be tower #4. The gate was between tower #1 and tower #7.

The towers were maybe only four meters across on the inside, and had been designed primarily to allow access to the top of the walls using the internal stairs, with the top floor serving as a lookout point that could be used in defending the castle. However, the old castle on top of Mount Grief didn't just have the prior undead inhabitants anymore; they had been supplemented by the orcs that had relocated from Deadhead Watching Keep and the kobolds that had fled after their defeat at Riverside Iron Fortress. There were reports that some fraction of the kobolds had since left Mount Grief, but the enemy still easily numbered more than a thousand.

Maybe there were enemies in the basement of the tower. That had been a concern, but it proved to be a needless one. The basement of tower #4 was apparently being used for storage. It was packed full of barrels, boxes, bundles of arrow shafts, and what were presumably dried foodstuffs.

Haruhiro, Inui, and Orion's thief Tsuguta would now send the signal to the main force.

They didn't know what the situation was like outside, but if the operation was proceeding as planned, then the main force—composed of nearly a hundred of the Frontier Army's best troops led by Thomas Margo, as well as the Volunteer Soldier Corps' Wild Angels, Iron Knuckle, and the Berserkers—would be stationed on the path up the mountain to the gates, keeping the enemies holed up within the old castle in check. In addition to them, the main force would have thieves waiting in all directions. No matter where Haruhiro and the others raised the signal, the main force would be notified immediately. Only one of the three needed to succeed. So long as they sent the signal, their job was done, even if they were discovered immediately afterward.

Haruhiro and the others split up once they were out of the basement. Though he'd lost his memories, working as a thief just felt right to Haruhiro. Tsuguta had a career of more than ten years in the same job. Inui was a hunter currently, but also had experience as a thief. There was no point in their kind

traveling together. It was when they were on their own that they shined the brightest. Er, that is to say, thieves were at their best when trying *not* to stand out, and to accomplish their goals while running and hiding. They didn't need to shine. Not in the slightest.

Tsuguta passed luminous rods to Inui and Haruhiro. If they pushed hard on one end and then removed the sheath-like cap, the rod would heat up and emit light for several minutes. Haruhiro had no idea how they worked, but they were apparently not relics, but an invention of the gnomes who lived beneath the Tenryu Mountains. The dwarves of the Kurogane Mountain Range were apparently producing replicas based on them too.

The plan was that Haruhiro and Inui would go to send the signal. Tsuguta would remain in hiding, watching them, and if they succeeded, he would relay that information to the rest of the detached force. If they failed, he would send the signal in their stead.

Whatever the case, once the signal went out to the main force, Shinohara would lead the detached force into action. Their primary task was to open the castle gates from the inside.

If they could assassinate commanders to disrupt the enemy, that would be good too, but they had no idea where to find them. The unit of orcs that had been garrisoned at Deadhead Watching Keep were likely leading the orcs here. But that was only an educated guess. They didn't have much to go on.

First they would open the gate, allowing the main force to penetrate the old castle.

Before this, the Volunteer Soldier Corps had brilliantly retaken Riverside Iron Fortress, despite being massively outnumbered by the kobolds that had held it. The volunteer soldiers excelled in chaotic conditions, and if they could just get close to the enemy, they could bring their full potential to bear.

There was noise somewhere in the distance.

The area around tower #4, where the castle entrance was placed, was relatively quiet. It seemed likely that the enemy had focused their forces near the gate. The rest of the place would be much less defended.

“Okay...” Shinohara looked from Haruhiro, to Inui, to Tsuguta. “I’m counting on you.”

The three of them each nodded in response. It was impossible to tell what an eccentric like Inui was thinking, and Tsuguta wasn’t the type to show his emotions either. Though they were all very different people, none of the three gave off the sense of being overly anxious. Maybe that was just how thieves were.

“Haru,” Merry called out to him.

What could it be? he wondered.

However, after calling his name, Merry didn’t say anything more. When she stared at him like that, it made him feel a little, uh, confused, maybe even kind of tense. Not that he wasn’t tense already.

“...?”

As Haruhiro let out a small grunt that couldn’t quite be categorized as either a “Huh?” or a “Hm?” and cocked his head to the side, Merry moved closer.

Huh?

What? What?

Wh-Wh-Wh-What is it?

“Whoa...?!” someone exclaimed. Kikkawa, maybe?

Haruhiro couldn’t say a word. He’d gotten all stiff. It had been so sudden. Of course he’d be surprised.

Merry’s face was so close her nose nearly grazed Haruhiro’s. Okay, that might be a bit of an exaggeration, but she’d moved in so close and so fast that it felt that way. She didn’t make contact, of course.

Haruhiro’s left shoulder and Merry’s right, while not touching, were not very far from each other at all.

Their faces were right beside each other.

What is this?

What is she doing?

What's going on here?

It wasn't very thief-like to let events make him freeze up or panic. A thief needed to be bold. But, as far as he saw it, this didn't really have anything to do with his job as a thief, so he was still in the clear. Uh, maybe? Was that really the problem here?

It felt like they stayed that way for a rather long while.

Or...maybe not. Yeah. That couldn't be right. It must just have felt that way. Like time was standing still.

Obviously, time stands still for no one. His heart was beating too. At an incredibly fast rate. He could sense it. His heart rate, that is. Hear it, even. But he got caught in the illusion that it wasn't his own pulse he was hearing, but Merry's. He was so embarrassed to catch himself fantasizing like that.

"Be careful..." Merry whispered in his ear.

If he'd replied immediately, it would have come out slurred. A "yesh," or maybe a "yuss," and that would have been pathetic. Haruhiro made a wise decision. The best one, he'd like to think.

He held it in, pausing for a moment. Then, when the right moment came, he nodded.

"Yeah..."

He'd be careful, of course. That went without saying. Or rather, he didn't need to be told. She didn't have to tell him to. He was going to be very careful. It was the most basic, fundamental part of his job.

"I-I'm sorry, I..." Merry backed away. She hadn't done anything that demanded an apology, so maybe she didn't need to act so flustered. Still, Haruhiro was struggling to maintain an unaffected facade, so he couldn't say anything.

Seriously, what was that just now? Haruhiro had no idea. He wished someone would tell him. It would be fastest to ask Merry herself, but it felt wrong. What was wrong about it? That, he couldn't say. He really didn't know.

"Mm!" Mimorin stepped forward. "Haruhiro."

“Yes...?”

This seemed like it could get complicated, so he couldn’t help but be wary. Mimorin grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him close.

“I like you,” she said right into his ear. Well, that wasn’t so complicated. Actually, it was fairly clear and simple.

“Oh, yeah...?”

“I love you.” Mimorin pushed Haruhiro away, her face contorting as if she were fighting back tears. But she didn’t cry. “Be back soon.”

“I will...”

Haruhiro felt an urge to apologize, but that felt wrong. What was wrong about it? In the end, he couldn’t figure that out.

“Why, you!” Ranta suddenly whacked him on the back of the head.

“Ow! What was that for?!”

“Why are you so popular with the ladies all of a sudden?! Screw you, Parupiro! What is this? Foreshadowing for your death? Yeah, I’ll bet it is. Don’t go triggering death flags like that. You’re triggering ’em like crazy. You’re a dead man walking. Absolutely dead. It’s pretty much a done deal, all right? So be careful while you’re dying out there, okay?”

Haruhiro wanted to roll his eyes, but knew better than to actually do it. Ranta was the kind of trash he needed to ignore. Haruhiro wanted to sigh, but he held that in too.

“You’re ignoring me, huh?!”



Ranta stomped his feet in indignation. What was he, a child? Haruhiro wanted to quip about it, but had the courage to hold back. That was the most effective counter to Ranta.

“You’re ignoring me...?!”

“Ranta, you cryin’?” Yume didn’t just not make fun of Ranta, she was actively consoling him. Wasn’t that being too kind?

“I am *not* crying. As if I’d cry! But if I wanted to cry...would you lend me your chest?”

“Mewww. Dunno about that. That sounds really unpleasant.”

“Really unpleasant, huh?!”

“Let me ask you instead, what made you think Yume-san would ever let you cry on her chest?” Kuzaku interrupted.

“Oh, shove off, you beanpole. It was a moment of indecision...”

If anything, your real feelings just slipped out there, Haruhiro thought, but he kept his mouth shut. If he said anything, this would just turn into a headache. It was plain as day that Ranta felt a certain affection for Yume but didn’t want to admit it to himself. Not in front of others, at least.

Haruhiro glanced at Merry. She was looking down at the floor.

Affection?

Is that what that is?

Could it be...maybe?

“No, no, no...” Haruhiro mumbled to himself.

Come to think of it, there had been a conversation like that. Like, about what might have happened between Merry and him while Ranta and Yume had been away from the party.

Obviously, Haruhiro didn’t remember it. But that wasn’t true for Merry. When Yume asked her about it, Merry had been awfully flustered.

What if, unlikely as it seemed, something *had* happened between them?

What if Merry remembered it, but Haruhiro had forgotten?

What then? How did Merry feel? Haruhiro wasn't particularly perceptive about that kind of thing, so he had trouble imagining it. But suppose, to use a concrete term, there were two lovers, A and B. A had forgotten the relationship, and only B remembered. Wouldn't B feel terribly lonely?

Well, he couldn't say for sure that anything had happened. Only Merry knew.

If she said something had happened, it had. If she said it hadn't, it hadn't.

To take that logic to its extreme, even if Merry lied about it, Haruhiro would never be able to tell, and neither would anyone else. There was only one truth but no way to tell what it was.

Maybe she couldn't say? Whether something had happened, or nothing had happened, the moment she put it into words, it either became a fact or something he would doubt. If Haruhiro were in Merry's position, he might keep his mouth shut too.

It might not just be about that; there could be any number of things Merry was keeping to herself that she wished she could say but couldn't. If that were the case, the psychological toll on her might be higher than Haruhiro had been thinking.

"Heh..." Inui stood in front of Setora. The eye not covered by his eyepatch had a sinister light in it.

"Are you even human...?" Haruhiro said what he was thinking out loud, but Inui apparently didn't hear him.

"If I manage to return alive," Inui said, without a hint of shame, "I'd like you to bear my child."

"I would never," Setora replied immediately. That was to be expected. "Only one person needs to send the signal to the main force. *You* don't need to come back. In fact, I hope you fail. Never show yourself before me again."

"Heh... To think, even now, you would persist in hiding your embarrassment. How precious..."

"How can he be so nervy...?" Kuzaku shuddered.

“You showed her your fighting spirit.” Tokimune flashed his pearly whites and slapped Inui on the back.

“Farewell...” Inui said, then quickly departed.

“Oh... All right, bye, I’m gonna head out now too.” Haruhiro and Tsuguta set out as well. It was a bit rushed because of Inui, but there was no need to drag this out. Actually, it felt stupid to.

Haruhiro had nearly muted his footsteps as he climbed the stairs. It was quiet inside tower #4, as he’d expected. There were no enemies here. Inui was gone too.

The spiral staircase had been built into the inside of the cylindrical tower. Haruhiro could hear what sounded like footsteps, so were there enemies up above? Or was it Inui climbing the stairs? If so, he was being awfully bold, but this was Inui. There was no discounting any possibility with him.

Haruhiro and Tsuguta headed outside the tower. There was a faint light in the sky. It would soon be dawn. Tower #4 was directly opposite the castle gate. Just as he’d thought, there were no enemies here. There were lookouts on the top of the other towers and the walls, though. He could see their watch fires.

It wasn’t even five meters from the wall to the main building. The walls were maybe six to seven meters high.

He could hear jeering, mixed with barks that presumably came from the kobolds. It didn’t seem like there was a pitched battle underway. They were trying to provoke the humans that, despite displaying their intention to attack, weren’t getting any closer to the gate. Maybe that was it?

Haruhiro and Tsuguta nodded to one another.

The enemies would be packed into the area between tower #1 and tower #7. Haruhiro kept an eye on the top of the walls as he headed toward tower #3.

It was pretty bright past tower #3. Not only were there watch fires lit, the walls were packed with orcs, kobolds, and undead carrying torches. The space between the walls and the building was crowded too, with enemies going in and out of the towers, carrying supplies back and forth.

Haruhiro couldn't go any farther. On the top of the wall between towers #4 and #3, there were watch fires every few meters, and orcs standing guard. Though that was "all," it was still questionable whether he could get up on the wall without being detected. No matter how he looked at it, it wasn't going to be simple. In fact, it would be incredibly difficult.

Well, he didn't have any other choice. Tsuguta put a gentle hand on Haruhiro's shoulder, as if to say, *Give it your best shot.* Haruhiro sighed and began clambering up the wall.

If he climbed here, he'd be halfway between two fires. Once he reached the top, he'd send the signal using the luminous rod before the guards near the fires could spot him, though lighting it up would probably get their attention right away. How could it not? But once the signal was sent, his job was done. He could flee. And if he couldn't? Well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

It wasn't like he assumed things would just work out somehow. He'd send the signal. That much, he could manage. He was pretty pessimistic about what came next, but he'd do what he had to do first. For now, he would focus on the task at hand.

So Haruhiro thought, but just as he'd almost reached the top, it got noisy all around him.

Haruhiro nearly muttered, *You're kidding me.* It wouldn't have been that much of a problem if he had. The enemy was making a ton of noise. And who could blame them?

There was a light spinning around on top of tower #3.

It was a luminous rod. Someone was sending the signal.

Well, there was only one "someone" it could have been. It obviously wasn't Haruhiro, and Tsuguta was down below, ruling him out too.

"Heh...!" It was Inui. "Gwah ha ha ha ha ha! The demon lord has descended!"

The enemies on top of the wall started loosing arrows at Inui.

"Hoo...! Hah...!"

Inui jumped and ducked to avoid the projectiles. If Haruhiro shouted, *Enough*

of that, hurry up and run, the enemy would find him too. Haruhiro decided to leave Inui alone and hurriedly descended the wall he had just finished climbing. Tsuguta was nowhere to be seen. He'd already headed back to tower #4 where Shinohara and the others were waiting.

Haruhiro headed toward tower #4 too. The others were already coming out.

He heard what sounded like war cries in the distance. Not from orcs or kobolds. They were clearly human. The main force had seen the signal and begun the assault.

"Renji, Tokimune, take point!" Shinohara shouted. Renji and Tokimune stood at the front of the group. Tada, Ranta, Kuzaku, Kikkawa, and Shinohara followed. Haruhiro joined Yume, Mimorin, and Orion's warriors and paladins behind the vanguard.

He instantly felt lighter. Merry had cast support magic on him.

"*Go, go,* yeah!"

Haruhiro couldn't explain why, but hearing Anna-san's voice was strangely uplifting at times like this.

"Rahhhhhh!"

"It's on!"

Renji and Tokimune began tearing into their nearest targets. The enemies were packed in pretty tight, but the platoon pierced through them at an amazing speed. The orcs, kobolds, and undead were absolutely losing their heads. They had never imagined the invaders would attack from inside as well as outside.

Slaying enemies and stepping over their corpses, the detached force just kept on going. The vanguard was fighting, but Haruhiro hadn't even had to use his weapons yet. He just followed the vanguard. There wasn't much to do other than avoid falling enemies or hop over their corpses.

The gates are already in sight. This might work.

This might actually *work.*

Any time he started thinking that, it was bad news. Was this Haruhiro's

experience speaking? Could he use his experience, even without remembering it? Or was this his nature? Had he simply been born without the ability to get caught up in the moment?

“Ooooooossshhhhhhh...!”

Thanks to that, when he heard the incredibly loud voice echo throughout the compound, he wasn’t surprised. *Here it comes,* he thought.

Still, it was dramatic. After the first shout, the orcs responded in kind.

“Osh!”

“Osh!” “Osh!”

“Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!”

“Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!”

“Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!”

“Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh!” “Osh...!”

Soon, the kobolds began barking and howling.

“Awooo!”

“Woof!”

“Bow!” “Wow!”

“Awooo!” “Bow!”

“Woof!” “Woof!” “Woof!”

“Awooo!” “Awooooooooo...!”

Then the undead joined them, hollering something or another.

Was every orc, kobold, and undead in the old castle raising their voice now? It wasn’t just that. The roar of stomping feet and weapons banging on shields shook the whole castle.

Renji, Tokimune, and the others in the vanguard tried to keep going, but they had clearly slowed. The enemy had been going down without much of a fight until now, but that had changed. They were fighting back in desperation.

“They’re coming from behind us too!” Setora shouted. The detached force had made their way past tower #3 and #2, and were closing in on #1. The gate was between #1 and #7. It looked like a group of enemies from up on the wall had come down through towers #2 and #3 to attack the detached force from behind.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve...!” Mimorin turned and fired off a Blast. It sent some kobolds flying, but the enemy didn’t falter.

“*Bullshit!* This looking bad, yeah?!” Anna-san was running around. Setora, Merry, Yume, and the members of Orion were fighting defensively, but they couldn’t advance at the same time as they were fighting the enemies behind them.

“Shinohara-san, let’s stop for a moment! If we keep going, we’re going to get split up!” Haruhiro warned.

“No, we can’t...!” Shinohara instantly shouted in response. “We can’t stop until the gate’s open! Everyone, fight your hardest! You are not allowed to die! Don’t let any of your comrades die either!”

His orders were harsh. But they couldn’t show weakness now. It would turn into a vicious cycle, and they’d lose. That must have been what Shinohara had decided.

Mimorin, Adachi, and the Orion mages let loose with their magic. Magic was incredibly powerful, but because of the time it took to chant their spells, there were inevitably openings. Haruhiro and the others needed to step in and fill them. Nobody worried about some minor injuries. If someone went down with a major wound, Merry, Chibi-chan, or Anna-san would be right there to heal them. There was no time to waste on slow healing, so they stuck to using Sacrament, which would heal anything, even otherwise fatal wounds, in an instant, no matter how inefficient it was. Haruhiro just focused on trying his best to defend the mages and priests. In the current situation, he couldn’t do everything. As he’d worried, Renji, Tokimune, and Tada were pushing ahead. Everyone else was getting left behind, but there was nothing to be done about that at this point. He had to do what he could within the limits of his own abilities.

“Ooooooossshhhhhhh...!”

That voice again.

It was coming down.

Something was.

From the building? The second floor. Or maybe higher.

Was that an orc? With white hair streaming behind him and a big sword in each hand, he landed on the ground near the gate. Wasn’t that where the vanguard was? Or rather, hadn’t that orc jumped off the building to get in reach of them?

As soon as the orc landed, he was crossing blades with Renji.

“Urgh...!” Renji grunted.

“Human warrior!”

Was that the orc’s voice? Had he just spoken? Using *human words*?

“Whoa?!”

“Tch!”

Tokimune and Ron backed away from Renji and the orc to begin taking on other opponents. They couldn’t help him. They knew that. What would happen if they got close to Renji and the orc now? It was hard to imagine exactly, but it seemed likely they’d get in Renji’s way. The two who were facing off both used large weapons, so they were able to deal lethal strikes from a good distance. If the others didn’t keep away, they would likely get caught in the crossfire. Basically, it was dangerous and terrifying to be near them.

If those two were going to fight a duel, everyone else would have to wait for it to run its course. Haruhiro didn’t have time to worry about it either. That orc wasn’t the only enemy here. They were surrounded on practically all sides. It was nothing but enemies, enemies, and more enemies.

Haruhiro was still guarding the mages and priests, tripping enemies that got too close and letting his allies finish them, or hitting them with Backstab himself.

More enemies kept swarming in, and his comrades fought them off valiantly. Despite that, no one, friend or foe alike, seemed able to focus. They weren't dazed, just distracted by the duel between Renji and that orc. It was almost impossible to ignore.

The orc's pure white hair flapped about wildly, his two swords swinging again and again. Renji deflected them with his greatsword, or dodged and counterattacked. The white-haired orc didn't avoid Renji's slashes. He always guarded. Their swords were about the same length. They probably weighed about the same too. Even the shapes were similar. But Renji held his in two hands while his opponent was dual-wielding them. Renji should have been able to put more power into each of his swings, but the orc wasn't giving any ground. There was a height difference. Renji was tall, but that was only by human standards. Orcs, as a race, were larger than humans. That white-haired orc was probably large even by orcish standards, though not tremendously so. It wasn't as if he was overwhelming Renji. In fact, Renji probably had the advantage in flexibility and agility. But not by much.

Renji and the orc were at a stalemate. That's how it looked.

Each was probing the other for weaknesses.

"Osh!"

The orcs on top of the wall were cheering.

"Osh!" "Osh!"

"Osh!" "Osh!" "Osh!"

"Osh!" "Osh!" "Osh!" "Osh!"

"Ooooooosh...!"

For the first time, the white-haired orc dodged instead of parrying Renji's greatsword. The orc probably swung his swords in from both sides right after that. There was an intense screech of metal on metal, so had Renji blocked them with his greatsword? Haruhiro hadn't been able to see it, but Renji hopped backward, then immediately stepped in again.

In that moment, the orc's twin blades struck at Renji's knees and head at the

same time.

Renji jumped. But what did he do next? Haruhiro couldn't tell. He couldn't follow it with his eyes.

Renji's greatsword collided with his foe's twin swords a number of times, and then both backed away.

"My name is Don..." the white-haired orc moved slowly as he gave his name. "No... Zan Dogran. Human warrior. You use that sword knowing it is Mozzo?"

"It belonged to an orc who attacked Alterna." Renji held the greatsword in a diagonal stance and did not move. No, while his voice remained level, his shoulders were rising and falling slightly. "That was way back. His name was Ish Dogran."

"Ish Dogran...!" Was the white-haired orc smiling? Or was he angry? It was hard to read an orc's expressions, but Haruhiro thought it looked like he was smiling.

"He was my brother! Fierce human warrior!"

"The name's Renji, Zan Dogran."

Renji lowered his stance. It was as if he was tensing his entire body, storing up energy.

"Gwah hah...!"

Yeah, the orc, Zan Dogran, was definitely smiling. Renji had killed his brother. That made Renji someone he needed to take revenge on. What was so fun about that? Did orcs feel differently than humans about these things?

"Haigodoh! Zasshahehg! Zawaggah Dogran...!" Zan Dogran must have been saying something in the orcish language. The orcs in the old castle shouted.

"Zawaggah Dogran!"

"Zawaggah Dogran...!"

"Zawaggah! Dogran...!"

"Zehn sidah!" Zan Dogran said something again. The enemies grew far more menacing, and the human platoon was forced onto the defensive, so was that

an attack order?

Haruhiro was busy grappling with a particularly large kobold that was about to pounce on Merry. He slit its throat, then circled around behind an orc who was charging with his sword already in motion, hitting him with a Backstab. He didn't have time to focus on Renji and Dogran.

Merry was fine. He knew because he was still able to invest time in keeping track of her. She was a priest, and therefore defending her was a top priority. Yume and Setora were always defending the priests and mages, so he naturally ended up taking note of them too.

He hadn't seen Kuzaku and Ranta in some time. He wanted to look around and check that they were all right, but there was no getting around the fact that they were a lower priority.

Mimorin was with Anna-san almost constantly. He couldn't see Chibi-chan. Was she with the vanguard? He didn't even know who was who when it came to the members of Orion.

In addition to Zan Dogran, there were many other white-haired orcs. They probably bleached their hair. Was that meant to imitate him? They used similar single-edged swords too. These guys were especially strong. Not so much individually, but as a group. They frequently barked orders to one another, encouraging and covering for their allies. When one got injured, other orcs would drag him away and retreat.

"Dogran!"

"Zawaggah Dogran!"

"Dogran!" "Dogran!" "Dogran!" "Dogran!"

"Dograaan!"

The orcs were hooting and hollering. It was a strange atmosphere. The intensity, or perhaps the kind, of fervor on display was unlike anything they'd seen before.

"Renji...!" Ron shouted. He glanced, if only for a moment, at Haruhiro.

Zan Dogran, endlessly trading blows with Renji, was different from before.

He'd grown a size larger. No, that was absurd. But that was how it looked. His hair was unreal. It stood on end, crackling with static electricity. What was with that? And not just his hair. That static discharge seemed to come from Zan Dogran's entire body.

"Diiiieeeeiiii...!" Zan Dogran let out some sort of orcish battle cry and brought his twin swords down like he was playing a taiko drum. It couldn't be normal for anyone to be able to use two swords of that size so easily. Renji was on the wrong end of a one-sided beatdown. But somehow, he'd managed not to get chopped to bits. It made no sense. How in the world could he block that flurry of blows? Haruhiro had to assume it was impossible. Wasn't that beyond even Renji?

Purple electricity raced along Renji's greatsword. The single-edged orcish sword that had once been possessed by Zan Dogran's elder brother, Ish Dogran, was wreathed in violet light. Thanks to a relic.

Renji had used his trump card. The power of Aragarfald.

Now he can turn the tables...right?

The sword of Ish Dogran grew sharper, and Renji became faster and more fierce. No doubt about that.

But it wouldn't last long. If he kept using that power, it might kill him. Impressive as he was, after just a minute or two under its effects, he needed to stop and rest for a while. He wasn't going to be able to rest and recover in the middle of a duel with Zan Dogran.

Renji had no choice but to take down the orc while the effect lasted.

Well, no, it would be great if slaying Zan Dogran were the end of things, but was it, really? He wasn't the only enemy here. Zan Dogran seemed to be a charismatic enemy leader. Losing him might cause the others to lose their will to fight, but it might also send them into a rage as they fought to avenge him. Renji had to know that. He'd no doubt wanted to avoid using Aragarfald if he could.

Zan Dogran had forced his hand. Renji had no choice but to rely on it. He stood no chance of winning otherwise. That was why he'd reluctantly fallen

back on the relic.

“Urgh...!”

Setora was up against the ropes facing two orcs when her spear snapped. She immediately discarded it and drew her sword, but was unable to fully defend herself and took a number of slashes.

“Rah...!” Mimorin swung her two longswords, keeping the orcs that were trying to finish off Setora at bay.

“Merry!” Haruhiro left Setora to Merry and raced between the orcs. He tried to land a Backstab on them as he passed, but another orc sprang at him, forcing him to roll out of the way, and then yet another orc kicked him.

“Haru-kun...! Twa-tah!” Yume came flying in with a mysterious battle cry and sent an orc flying with a tackle. Impressive, considering the weight difference between them. Not that Haruhiro had the time to be in awe of her. He jumped to his feet and used Stealth. He hadn’t consciously planned to. That was just what he found himself doing.

Enemies. Enemies. Enemies. There were a lot of orcs in particular. Maybe eighty percent of the enemies in this area were white-haired orcs. He could see his allies, dotted around in the middle of the mob of orcs. Merry, Setora, Anna-san, and Orion’s hunter and female paladin were clustered together, but pretty much all the others were on their own. Everyone must have been trying their best not to get separated, and so was Haruhiro, for that matter. But it had still happened at some point.

Ranta was coming this way. He might have been worried about Yume. Kuzaku was working with Tokimune, Kikkawa, Ron, and Chibi-chan, each working to fill in the others’ blind spots as they handled the onrushing orcs. Where were Shinohara and Tada? Haruhiro figured they would be trying to open the gate, but he didn’t know quite how.

Zan Dogran’s duel with Renji was up in the air. No, Zan Dogran still had the clear advantage. Having used the power of Aragarfald, Renji needed a clean win. And it needed to come as soon as possible. If Renji couldn’t manage that, he—no, the entire detached force would die here.

If they couldn't open the gate from the inside, the main force couldn't attack and take the old castle.

The operation would fail.

We're screwed, aren't we?

They hadn't reached the end of the road yet, but there was only one path. There was no turning back now either. They had to move forward.

There was a sheer cliff ahead of them.

No matter what they did now, the outcome wouldn't change. All they could do was struggle in vain.

But was that really true?

Sure, there was only one path. It was a road leading to nowhere. It was a dead end. The operation had failed. Hard as it was to accept, there was no redeeming themselves now. But was it true that they couldn't turn back?

Couldn't they get away?

If they retreated to tower #4 and into the Graveyard, then the treasury was a maze. Even if the enemy followed them, wouldn't they be able to lose their pursuers? If they fled all the way through the Graveyard to the foothill entrance, then maybe.

It wouldn't be simple. They wouldn't all make it. Renji, in particular, would have to fight Zan Dogran until he reached his limit. Someone would have to play the role of rear guard, holding off their pursuers. They'd lose several people along the way. So that the others might live.

There was also the option of taking just his comrades and getting away as quickly as they could.

I couldn't do that, he thought. He wasn't that heartless, or that much of a coward. Even if he could cast his conscience aside, it probably wouldn't work out that well. Though their team had lost Kimura and Matsuyagi in the Graveyard, they hadn't lost a single person yet inside the old castle. It might have been a miracle, but it was because they were all fighting as one, doing their very best. If someone did something to disrupt that unity, the platoon

would collapse in no time. Haruhiro could escape alone, but there would be no point. Not if he was the only one.

What was Tsuguta doing now? Or Inui? He didn't know. Were they using Stealth like he was?

Being able to vanish in the middle of a chaotic melee like this was something only a thief was capable of.

If Haruhiro were on his own, he might have been able to pull off some pretty ballsy moves.

Opening the gate. That was their mission. It would be bolted, so there was the issue of whether Haruhiro could lift or destroy the gate bar. Tada or Shinohara probably could. That was likely their goal.

Haruhiro needed to forget about his comrades for now and get the gate open, destroying or removing the gate bar if necessary. If Tada or Shinohara were moving in that direction, he could support them.

There was no time to be indecisive.

It pained him to do it, and he felt like he was being ripped apart, but Haruhiro tore himself away from his team and headed for the gate. Him leaving might mean his comrades would die. It was a realistic possibility. Either way, if the gate didn't open, the operation couldn't succeed, and the detached force would be finished. That included Haruhiro's comrades. This was his only choice. But even knowing he had no other option, it was hard to accept. He wished he could tear himself in two, leaving one half with them and sending the other half to the gate.

But he needed to cut off his emotions for now. He kept his Stealth going as he passed by Renji and Zan Dogran's duel to the death. Shinohara and Tada really were pressing toward the gate. That said, the white-haired orcs near them didn't just have those single-edged swords, they had sturdy-looking shields too. Even Shinohara, who had a relic, and Tada, who was like a mass of destructive energy, wouldn't get through them easily. Haruhiro alone might be able to slip past and reach the gate. The orcs had their backs to it. He could probably get there and lay his hands on the gate bar. Could he lift it, when it was so large he could barely wrap his arms around it? It might not be impossible. But it would

be really hard work. Tada would be able to smash it with his warhammer. That *was* impossible for Haruhiro.

No, he couldn't remove the gate bar. Haruhiro couldn't do it, but Tada could do it alone.

Tada. He needed to get Tada to the gate. To make it happen, he'd need to disrupt the orcs guarding it. He'd slip into the middle of their formation and Backstab one or two. Maybe make a show of trying to lift the gate bar, even if he couldn't. They'd notice him immediately, of course. He just had to raise some hell once they did.

It was going to be pretty dangerous. He'd be risking his life, but he had no other moves available to him. None that he could think of, at least. He'd rather die doing something than nothing. Even if he died, if the gate opened and the main force breached the old castle, it could lead to the operation succeeding. That might let his comrades survive.

What chance did he have of succeeding? It was pretty low. It was a gamble. He knew that.

Haruhiro was a pessimist by nature. He wasn't going to turn into an optimist at this late stage of the game. Still, even if he thought it was hopeless, if he was going to do it, he was better off convincing himself it was possible. That one percent chance might become one-and-a-half. Half of a percent might seem like next to nothing, but it wasn't zero. Since he was going to be risking his life on such slim odds, he wanted to make them as good as possible.

Haruhiro followed the wall as he approached the white-haired orcs in front of the gate, but their shields were up. No matter where he looked, there was no gap a person could slip through. Why had he thought there would be? He'd been analyzing the situation with a clear head, hadn't he? This was hopeless.

Is it hopeless?

The way things were, he'd have to push his way between the orcs and their shields. No way was Stealth going to get him through that.

What the hell? One-and-a-half percent? Who was I kidding?

It's zero, isn't it?

Haruhiro stood there in a daze. It only lasted a moment. But he absolutely let his guard down.

The nearest orc looked at him, looked away, and looked again.

“Ngh...?!”

He saw me.

Haruhiro couldn’t shrug this off with an “Oops.” What was he doing? They’d noticed him.

“Zigassa!” The white-haired orc raised his single-edged sword to intimidate Haruhiro. But he didn’t leave his post. His job was to guard the gate even if it meant his death.

“Hahhhh!” Tada slammed his warhammer into one of the orcs on the front line. It pulverized the orc’s shield, but another orc stepped up to take the place of the orc whose shield had been destroyed, and thrust his weapon at Tada, who was forced to back off temporarily.

“...!” Shinohara charged in to take Tada’s place, jostling against two or three orcs with his relic shield held in front of him, knocking them off balance. Shinohara’s shield flashed, and he slashed away at the orcs’ single-edged swords and shields. Tada came in again with a forward flip to hit them with a Somersault Bomb, smashing one white-haired orc’s head into pulp. But when one went down, another stepped in without missing a beat, immediately filling the hole in their formation.

What now? What should I do?

The white-haired orc from before still had his eyes on Haruhiro, growling to let him know he’d be run through if he came any closer.

Do I charge in?

If he charged in like a death-crazed lunatic, he might take one or two orcs down with him. But what good was that? There was no benefit to it.

It was pathetic, pitiful, and embarrassing, but Haruhiro was pinned with his back to the castle wall, unable to do anything. Well, no, he could breathe. He just couldn’t escape the guilt he felt over the fact that his heart was still

beating, and he was still breathing. Maybe he ought to charge in like an enraged bull, heedless of the consequences, and die. But, before that, was there anything he could do? He couldn't imagine there was. There was nothing he could do. It was already over. That was how Haruhiro felt, to be honest. The thin sliver of hope he had clung to was completely gone now.

That was why what happened next stunned him.

"Grahhhhhh!"

The gate. Someone was grabbing the gate bar, trying to remove it.

"I am the demon lord! My! Time! Is! Noooow!"

Inui. It was Inui! Had his eyepatch come off? Had he taken it off himself? His ponytail had come undone, and his hair hung loose and wild.

"Weagasshah!" One of the white-haired orcs near the gate turned around and slashed at the madman.

"Nwoh-hohh...!" Inui let out a bizarre cry, leaping into the air like a demonic bird and dodging the strike. That caused him to let go of the gate bar, but Inui instantly grappled with another orc and slit his throat.

"Hyeh-arah!"

"Dammit!" shouted another voice. Looking over, it was Tsuguta of Orion, pouncing on the orc closest to Haruhiro. Had he been in Stealth nearby, watching? He must have been stuck, unable to make a move, just like Haruhiro. But now it was sink or swim. There was little hope of getting the gate open anymore. Yeah, there was none. They could all struggle to the last, and that zero still might not even turn into point-one percent. But hopeless or not, it was preferable to sitting around, waiting for death.

Haruhiro made it look like he was charging in, then dove at a white-haired orc's feet. He penetrated their formation, quickly slipped behind their second row and clambered up an orc's back to slit his throat with a dagger. Haruhiro then immediately stabbed the orc beside that one in the eye, tearing the blade free before grabbing him. A shield bashed into him, nearly knocking him out cold, but he still managed to grab the next orc's white hair with his left hand. He wasn't going to get thrown off. He summoned every last bit of strength he had

in reserve and jammed his dagger into the back of the orc's neck.

"Nghahhhh...!"

Right after that, he took another hit from a shield and may have actually lost consciousness. But if he did, it was for a few seconds at most.

"Ow..."

When the pain brought him back to his senses, he was being stomped and kicked by the orcs. He was right in the middle of their formation in front of the gate, crawling on the ground, or rather lying there like an old dishrag.

But it seemed the orcs weren't kicking and stomping him intentionally. They weren't even looking down. Their eyes were raised, looking at something more important as they shouted loudly.

Something. What could it be? Had something happened? Was something happening now? What? Haruhiro didn't know. How could he know?

Haruhiro crawled forward. He took several kicks as he went. His head and back ached, but his left arm and right leg were even worse. They wouldn't move properly. But in spite of that, he kept crawling between the orcs' legs.

Finally, he managed to get out of the formation. When he crawled out between the feet of the orcs on the front line and looked up, Haruhiro saw the something, but he had no idea what it was, or what was happening. Was it because his eyes were a bit blurry? No, probably not. Anyway, the thing was flying. A flying object. No, maybe floating was more accurate. It wasn't directly over Haruhiro, but above him diagonally, floating there between the gate and the building. *Is it a kite?* he wondered. The kite-like flying or floating object was pretty big. Oh, and there was something riding on top of it. Well, not so much something as someone. Probably human, or a humanoid creature. The creature was holding a lantern of some sort. Whatever it was, the flying thing didn't emit light itself, but he could see light, so he assumed the lantern was where it came from.

"Go, Shihorun...!" the creature atop the object cried loudly. The voice was familiar. Haruhiro might have been misremembering, but if he was right, it was a female voice belonging to someone he had met in the time between awaking

beneath the Forbidden Tower and now.

I think that's Io's voice, Haruhiro suddenly realized. They had only been together for a very short time, so he couldn't be confident. But there was one thing he was certain of. The woman who might have been Io had spoken a name.

Shihorun.

That was close to a name Haruhiro knew. Very close. He couldn't imagine it was unrelated. The similarity was too great.

Something, someone leaned out over the edge of the flying, or maybe floating, object. She was pale. Pale-skinned. She. It was a woman. Definitely a human woman. And he was shocked to see that she wasn't wearing anything fit to be called clothes. No, maybe she did have some kind of clothes on. They just weren't very thick. As wispy as they were, she *was* wearing something, of a pale, whitish color too.

"Dark," she said.

Something black appeared. It wrapped itself around the woman in an instant. She leapt from the flying or floating object in the embrace of that blackness. The kobolds barked at her. The orcs shouted. The undead did too. And so did Haruhiro and the other humans. No one could remain calm, witnessing this. What was that thing? What did it all mean?

The girl wrapped in darkness fluttered to the ground. Slowly.

Too slowly to be falling.

Was that black cloud doing something, curbing her descent? It had to be. The dark thing wrapped around her grew larger by the second. Dark tentacles sprouted from it one after another, and they grew. In length and in thickness. The thing was clearly sinister. No one, regardless of their race, thought otherwise.

That thing is terrifying. I'd better not touch it. I'd better not let it touch me.

I should run. That thing is decidedly not good.

There was still time before she touched down. But one of the black tentacles

lashed out at a white-haired orc.

“Gah...?!”

The black tentacle curled around him, easily popping the orc’s head off.

“Shihoru!” Yume shouted. Merry called out her name at almost the exact same time.

Yeah. Shihoru. That’s Shihoru. Shihoru. It’s Shihoru. Dark. That’s Dark. Shihoru’s magic. That bizarre nshooooo sound. I’ve heard it before. That’s Shihoru’s magic.

That’s really her magic?



That black thing, with those black tentacles plucking the arms and heads off orcs, kobolds, and undead as if it were pulling weeds, is Shihoru's magic?

"Ough...! Ooughh...!" Zan Dogran's shout echoed. He had been winning his duel with Renji. Victory was right in front of him. But that didn't even matter now. No one, friend or foe, could afford to keep fighting.

"The hell?!"

"Sh-Shihoru-san...!"

"Seriously?!"

"*Jesus!*"

Ranta, Kuzaku, Kikkawa, and Anna-san ran around at random along with the enemy, or ducked and tried to take cover.

"Hahhhh!" Tokimune twirled his longsword and took a swing at Zan Dogran.

"Ngh!" Zan Dogran deflected Tokimune's longsword with the single-edged sword in his left hand, then countered with the one in his right. Tokimune blocked with his shield, then not so much jumped back as was forced to retreat by Zan Dogran's superior strength. He stepped back in to attack, even though he stood no chance. Tokimune must have known that, but there was Renji behind him. Had the effect of Aragarfald worn off? Renji was squatting.

Had he used up his power? He wasn't moving. Ron, Chibi-chan, and Adachi rushed to his side. Until they could evacuate him, Tokimune needed to buy time against Zan Dogran.

"Ahh!" Haruhiro was trying to get up. He felt he had to do something, and he wanted to.

Shihoru. No.

Shihoru's Dark whirled, and those caught in the vortex never escaped. They were chopped up before they could. Torn to pieces. Arms, legs, heads, torsos cut into rings, and bodily fluids flew about wildly. Was it only enemies? Or were there allies, comrades, in there too? Who could say? Haruhiro didn't know. In the center of the inky black vortex, Shihoru, her face just barely visible, was about to touch down on the ground. That horrifying dark eddy filled nearly the

entire gap between the wall and the building. If any of their comrades were in there, there was no saving them.

“Hoo-rahhhh...!”

There was an incredible sound coming from the gate. Tada. Tada was slamming his warhammer into the gate bar, and it gave way under the first blow. The white-haired orcs in front were in a panic, and there was no sign of the impenetrable defensive formation they’d been in before. Tada and Shinohara hadn’t missed the opportunity. They’d eliminated whatever orcs still tried to stand in their way, and finally reached their goal. And then Tada had demolished the only thing holding the gate shut.

“I’m opening it!” Shinohara slammed his shield into the gate and pushed.

“Dammiiiit!” Tada put his right foot on the gate. He pushed like hell.

It was opening.

The gate was opening.

“Zongadda...! Zaaaajih...!” Zan Dogran shouted while deflecting Tokimune with his twin swords. That had to be Orcish. Haruhiro obviously didn’t know what it meant, but it was probably some sort of order. The white-haired orcs started pushing on the gate with Tada and Shinohara. Had Zan Dogran ordered them to do that? They were trying to get it open. That was the only possible conclusion.

“Wha...?!”

“The hell’s with these guys...?!”

Shinohara and Tada were confused. Even as they tried to understand what was happening around them, the gate swung outward. It didn’t take long for the gate to open wide enough for a number of people to pass through. Once it did, the white-haired orcs started pouring out.

“Huh...?”

Something jumped over Haruhiro. He still couldn’t stand, and his left arm and right leg wouldn’t move as he wanted them to, so he couldn’t even get up on all fours. He twisted around, trying to see what had jumped over him, and it was

Zan Dogran, on his way out the gate.

Oh.

“He’s running...?”

So that’s it.

The detached force and Shihoru were in the old castle. And now that the gate was open too, the main force would come rushing in. Their defenses were already broken. They couldn’t defend this stronghold. That was what Zan Dogran had decided. Instead of fighting to the last man, until only one side or the other remained, he ordered all his forces to retreat.

The enemy fled as fast as they could. All rushing outside. Where were they going to go once they got out?

“Shihoru...”

What did it matter where they went? Haruhiro didn’t care. Once the enemy ran away, they were not his problem.

The black vortex stopped stretching its tentacles out in all directions and began to contract. There were no enemies left anywhere near it. Or allies. No limbs, heads, or chopped-up bodies with their fluids flying around. There was only that black thing, and Shihoru, wrapped in Dark. Had Shihoru already landed? Dark was covering most of her body, so it was hard to say anything for certain. It felt like her face was a little high up for her feet to be on the ground.

Haruhiro crawled. He shouldn’t get any closer. It was dangerous. Something inside Haruhiro, his reason or instinct, was sounding the alarm bells. So it’s not like he wasn’t scared. Dark’s tentacles were still reaching, and if one so much as brushed Haruhiro, the results would no doubt end him.

But would Shihoru do a thing like that?

If she really was Shihoru, that is.

Her face was Shihoru’s.

Dark.

That was Shihoru’s magic.

Her unique magic.

Had it always been so horrifying?

At some point, Haruhiro had stopped crawling forward. It was the pain. He ached all over. He probably had broken bones and severed tendons. That was why. Not because Shihoru scared him. Or that Shihoru might kill him. Those thoughts didn't cross his mind.

She was his comrade, after all.

It was impossible. Shihoru, kill him? She would never.

"Shihoru?"

She had been looking down at him since before Haruhiro called her name. Her eyes were turned to face him, but they were unfocused.

"Shihoru?" Haruhiro called her name one more time. He started to question if maybe he was wrong. Maybe it was another person who just looked the same and happened to be able to use Shihoru's magic. Was this a case of mistaken identity?

It was an absurd thought. She looked so much like her. Too much like her. But something was wrong. She didn't respond to his call.

If, by some remote chance, she wasn't Shihoru, that would obviously mean she wasn't his comrade.

The Dark wrapped around her suddenly spread his wings like a massive black bird about to take flight. Dark turned into countless thin, black tentacles that whirled into another vortex, and a part of it brushed against Haruhiro's face. He knew it had gouged through his nose and cheeks, as well as the skin of his forehead, and even the bone beneath.

I'm dead, thought Haruhiro. *I'll be killed.*

If Haruhiro were in top condition, he'd have leapt to his feet immediately and run for it. But that was beyond his abilities right now. He felt weak. His body wouldn't move like he told it to.

"Shihoru?"

She's not Shihoru. Not my comrade. Shihoru wouldn't do this. Wouldn't kill me. There's no way she's Shihoru.

But even as he thought that, the only thing Haruhiro could do was call her name.

"You..." She spoke.

He watched as Dark withdrew. Coiling around her body, shrinking toward her back. Dark was vanishing. More and more of her appeared. She was wearing a thin outfit that was almost white. It covered her from her chest to halfway down her thighs, hanging by strings over her shoulders, almost like underwear.

Dark finally vanished. Or so Haruhiro thought, before a black, humanoid thing flew out from behind her. It stopped to perch on her shoulder.

"Do...you...know...me?" she asked. Asked Haruhiro. With empty eyes. In the voice of his comrade, Shihoru, which he knew so well.

I know you.

That's what he should reply.

Shihoru.

He should just say her name again.

Shihoru. You're Shihoru, right? It's me. It's Haruhiro. Don't you recognize me, Shihoru?

Why couldn't he say it? He couldn't even nod.

"Shihorun."

Something was coming down. It was that object. The one that floated like a kite—no, that flew. The flying object descended, and he could see who was on it.

"We're done here. Time to head home."

It was Io.

But not just Io. There were two others with her. One of them was dressed all in black and had a scary face, and the other had terribly long bangs. Gomi and Tasukete. Gomi was carrying the lantern.

“Come on.” Tasukete offered her his hand.

Shihoru stared vacantly at it. As if she had no idea what it was.

“You want to go home, right?”

At Io’s urging, Shihoru extended her right hand to Tasukete. Tasukete took it, and pulled her up onto the flying object.

“Wait...”

It wasn’t until the flying object began to rise that Haruhiro finally tried to stop her.

“Wait, Shihoru, it’s me! Shihoru! It’s me...! Shihoru...!”

Shihoru sat on the flying object that was probably a relic and looked down at Haruhiro. Her brow furrowed, as if she were mystified. She cocked her head to the side, unable to understand. Haruhiro searched her expression and gestures for any hints. Proof that she was Shihoru. He thought she was. If she was Shihoru—if she was Haruhiro’s comrade—then obviously she would know him. How could she not? So why? Why did she react like she was wondering who this random person calling her name was? She was Shihoru, and yet for some reason, she didn’t know Haruhiro.

She doesn’t remember.

Shihoru had forgotten Haruhiro.

It’s her memories.

They’ve been erased.

Shihoru’s memories had been stolen again.

Afterword

Why do people explore dungeons? Okay, I'm sure there are some people who don't really want to clear dungeons, but I'm one of the ones that does. If I see a dungeon, I suddenly find myself wanting to clear it. That's not just in games. When I was a child, if I saw a hole or gap I could fit myself into, you could guarantee I was going to try going inside. Sometimes that resulted in me getting myself into incredible adventures, but it would take too long to tell those stories, so I'll leave it at that.

After this afterword there are some short stories that serve as an epilogue and a preview of the next volume. Please read them after completing the main story.

To my editor, Harada-san, to Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers at KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in the production and sale of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Jyumonji Ao

#1 Thanks to You, I...

He stood before a white stone on a hill in the middle of a rainstorm that was heavy, but not too unbearable.

He wasn't alone. There was a line of men and women wearing white capes behind him.

"It's like the sky is crying..." one of them said. He turned to look for whoever it was, but soon gave up. It could have been any of them. He didn't care. But then why had he turned around?

The white stone bore a crescent moon and a name.

Kimura.

His clan, Orion, had lost five people taking Mt. Grief. The priest Kimura and the warrior Matsuyagi had fallen in the battle against the Lich King. The thief Tsuguta had fought to open the gate, but died there. Then the hunter Uragawa and the mage Tomida had been caught in the crossfire when Sir Unchain sent in Dark to support the detached force.

As he looked at the five stones in front of him, he wondered what the hell he was doing.

The battle was over. Their detachment had only lost five people, all members of Orion. The main force had lost seventy members of the Frontier Army. But the thirty members of Orion under Hayashi were all safe, and between the Wild Angels, Iron Knuckle, and the Berserkers, only three volunteer soldiers had died.

The operation had been a success. They hadn't been able to wipe out the remnants of the Southern Expedition, who had been holed up in the old castle, but they had managed to dislodge them. Zan Dogran and the orcs had retreated to the north, while the kobolds were fleeing back to the Cyrene Mines. It wasn't clear what the undead were doing, but the speculation was that the majority had gone with Zan Dogran.

Five people dead. It was a painful loss, but not outside the realm of

expectation. He hadn't believed for a second that they would take the castle without losing anyone. Someone in Orion might die. Or someone in another clan. The only death that had to be avoided at all costs was his own. So long as he didn't die, there was no problem.

His wish had been granted.

What was he doing in front of these dead people's graves?

Intellectually, he understood it. This was a necessary ceremony. His comrades had died. Five of them. The dead needed to be mourned. He needed to make a show of grieving their loss, so he'd brought his comrades who had not died, buried the dead, and given something of a eulogy for them. What had he said? He didn't really remember now. Some of the members were still weeping or putting arms around one another's shoulders, so whatever it was must have been appropriate.

I'm done. I've had enough of this. To be honest, if there's one thing I hate about losing comrades, it's the need to mourn them afterward. It's depressing. Once they're dead, they're gone. What reason is there to think about someone who doesn't even exist? Sadness. Grief. What could be more pointless?

"I'm sorry," he said without turning to face his comrades. "Could you give me some time alone?"

He couldn't say, *You're depressing, so beat it already.*

His comrades left. Their one saving grace was that they did whatever he told them to. Of course, that was how he'd taught them to be. What good were comrades if he couldn't make them move as he would his own hands and feet anyway? They'd only be a liability.

He waited until his comrades were totally out of sight.

A quick scan of the hill around him. No sign of anyone. He ran his fingers through his rain-drenched hair, sighing.

"You really went and did it this time..." Why did he even say that?

He looked at the grave marker.

"Kimura. I never thought you'd die protecting me. That was stupid."

Kimura must have known he was only being used. They were using each other, though when you boil it down, isn't that what friendship is? It was easy to picture Kimura saying that. In that fake polite tone of his. With that creepy laugh. Kimura had kept others at a distance with feigned eccentricity, all while carefully monitoring them. He'd been uniquely perceptive. When handled properly, Kimura had been useful.

"I had planned to get a lot more work out of you still. Fool that you were, you were genuinely concerned for me. I'm sure you would have done things I didn't plan on. Gained access to information I never could. But if I asked, you would always tell me. You were still useful. It's utterly stupid that you died. Died protecting me. Did you think I was in need of your protection? I know, hindsight is always twenty-twenty. But I could have blocked it. Because I have relics. The shield of protection, Guardian. And the decapitating blade, Beheader. It's always relics that are the key."

He looked toward the Forbidden Tower.

"Sir Unchain. Ainrand Leslie. The...person, if you can call him that, who possesses more relics than anyone in Grimgar. One of the five princes, confidants of the No-Life King, who was said to be undying yet is supposed to have been killed. He even had that huge, flying kite-like relic. Relics. Relics. Relics. He gathers relics, and manipulates his comrades with them. Well, I have no intention of being that demon's thrall. The monster will try to use me, and I will use the monster too. In a way, we're equals. But not really. In the end, as far as that abomination is concerned, both relics and humans are only tools to be used. It's the relics that are important. Kimura. Foolish Kimura. This is all thanks to you. If only I could say that. But you died in vain. Even if you hadn't died, I would have gotten my hands on it."

He opened his right hand which he'd been clenching all this time.

A ring sat in his palm.

The band and prongs were made of a slightly reddish metal. It might have been an alloy of gold and something else. The stone in the prongs looked almost like a pearl, but at the same time it was clear. Only the very center was clouded, shimmering endlessly. When he looked into that impurity, he felt

drawn in and wanted to turn away. But he couldn't take his eyes off it.

"You know, the whole time, I thought it was the gauntlet too. Who would have imagined otherwise, right?"

The Lich King had turned to dust, leaving behind the clothes he was wearing, his shoes, crown, scepter, and golden gauntlet.

He'd had his eyes on the gauntlet, drawn to a certain special quality it seemed to have. This was something he'd heard from Ainrand Leslie: Every relic had its own signature energy. No matter what effect or power it manifested, that energy would always be present.

Ainrand Leslie called that energy "Elixir." There was even apparently a relic that could measure Elixir.

Did Elixir power relics? Or did their creation cause it to gather around them? Whatever the case, in the broadest of terms, the more powerful the relic, the greater its Elixir. Disposable relics would lose their Elixir after being used. If the Elixir was removed somehow, a relic would be turned into just another object with no power at all.

Once a person had been in contact with a number of relics, they started to be able to tell when something was one. Humans probably had the ability to sense Elixir. He only got a vague sense that something was off about them, but other people saw them emitting light or smelled them giving off a particular scent.

"I was so sure it was the gauntlet..."

He'd lifted up the gauntlet, trying to get a sense of its weight. He'd brought it to his face, scrutinizing it closely. He'd even sniffed it. And yet, he hadn't detected what he was looking for. It *had* to be the gauntlet. But something was wrong. Something was different. As he tried to determine what was so off, he'd slowly turned the gauntlet around, shaking it, and there was a sound. Something moving inside the gauntlet. Was that it?

Oh, I see. It wasn't the golden gauntlet. It was inside it.

Just as he'd been about to fish it out, Renji had asked, *"What are you planning to do with that?"*

Renji also thought the gauntlet was the relic. But that wasn't all. Renji saw through him. Saw he was trying to take the relic for himself. With this limitless power, the king who did not sleep, even in death, had formed soldiers from sand and bone, reigning over the Graveyard for a time too long to contemplate. Or rather, it was this power that had kept the king from sleeping even in death. It was as if Renji saw that his goal all along had been to acquire that relic.

He's too dangerous, he decided. *How much does Renji know? I'm not sure. But I can't push things forward too forcefully while a man like Renji is suspicious of me. He's experienced and will soon be on the same level as Souma or Akira. I'd rather not end up in a situation where I need him eliminated.*

"I put on a little act. I was always good at that. I'm pretty much always acting, after all."

He'd destroyed the gauntlet as Renji watched. There'd been a risk he would destroy the relic inside it too. But he knew it wasn't that large, probably a ring that the Lich King had been wearing under the gauntlet. Based on where the sound had come from, it had most likely been on his middle or ring finger. That was what gave him the idea. He was confident he could pull it off. And he did.

"That's right... Your death wasn't in vain, Kimura. Because you died, I was able to do that in a fit of anger. Thanks to you, I was able to put on a convincing act. One full of passion. Under the guise of sorrow, I was able to acquire this ring."

He gripped the ring tightly in his hand and smiled.

"Rejoice, Kimura. This is all thanks to you."

#2 True Feelings

Why had Haruhiro come to Sherry's Tavern just to sit down? Because he wanted to be alone. Why had he wanted to be alone? Maybe because he wanted to think long and hard about some things. Or perhaps there wasn't anything he wanted to do. He might have wanted to do nothing. And for that he needed to be alone. When he was with his comrades, he couldn't just stay quiet the whole time; they'd end up talking about something or other. Just thinking, on its own, was heavy enough.

In his head, he understood. They needed to have a proper talk.

"Shihoru..."

If one of his comrades had been injured—or even died—in Dark's attack, he'd have been forced to confront the issue. Such an outcome was hardly impossible. Far from it.

Orion's hunter and mage had both been killed by Dark, after all.

He didn't think Shihoru had meant to attack their platoon. Her goal must have been to support them, or rather to support the operation to retake Mt. Grief. But had she been taking care to prevent harm to the detached force? Had she tried not to hurt Haruhiro and the others? It would be nice if she had, but Shihoru hadn't even recognized him. She didn't remember. She'd forgotten.

Shihoru and Io's party had likely joined the operation to take Mt. Grief under the orders of the master of the Forbidden Tower. They'd accomplished their objective, then taken off.

It seemed likely that Jin Mogis was in league with the master of the Forbidden Tower. That was why the master had sent reinforcements to help take Mt. Grief. Powerful reinforcements. If Shihoru hadn't shown up, they wouldn't have been able to open the gates. The operation would have failed, and the detached force might have been wiped out.

The end result was that Shihoru had saved them.

So wasn't it possible to look at it another way? Shihoru had *pretended* not to know Haruhiro. Maybe she was being threatened by the master of the Forbidden Tower or Jin Mogis and had to do their bidding. That was why she was acting like she'd forgotten. She actually remembered and had just saved them.

It's raining outside, thought Haruhiro.

The doors and windows were wide open, so he could hear it clearly.

"I can't imagine that was an act... Shihoru doesn't remember. She forgot again... *Again*. Our memories were stolen before. That's what was done to her."

"What're you mumbling about? It's creepy."

The masked dread knight stepped into the tavern and immediately removed his rain-soaked cloak, then started swinging it around. His lack of social graces always rubbed Haruhiro the wrong way.

"How'd you know...? I never said I was coming here."

"We always used to come here. Even if you don't remember that, your feet turn this way on their own. That's how it works."

Ranta picked up one of the toppled chairs and walked over to Haruhiro.

"This was our table," he said, throwing his cloak down on top of it, then sat in the chair he had brought over and removed his mask. "Our usual seat in the dark corner. We were always outcasts, after all. This ringing any bells?"

"Nah... Not at all."

"Well, it's nothing worth going to the trouble of remembering anyway. We'd gripe and argue like idiots. I mean, we genuinely were idiots. It's a dark chapter of my history. I'm almost jealous that you were able to forget it."

As he crossed his legs, leaning over a little to rest his elbows on the table and his head on his hands, Haruhiro noticed the expression on Ranta's face wasn't as edgy as usual. Who did he think he was kidding, saying he was jealous of Haruhiro for forgetting? Ranta was clearly reminiscing about the time they'd spent here.

"We all came here...together?"

Haruhiro was the one who felt jealous. If he couldn't remember what he'd lost, he shouldn't have been able to miss it. So why did his chest feel so tight?

"Like with Manato...and Moguzo?"

"Yeah..." Ranta cocked his head to the side, then a sigh escaped from the corner of his mouth. "Well, no. It started after Manato kicked the bucket, I guess. We only knew him for a short time, really. Moguzo, though, he came here with us a whole lot."

"Oh, yeah?"

"It was you, me, and him... We'd start arguing, and then Moguzo would stop us. If he was still alive, he'd have made one hell of a warrior by now. But what can you do? Life's just one big roll of the dice..."

"Yeah. He rolled, all right..."

"What was that, some lame attempt at a joke?"

"Uh, no..."

"What, can't you even joke around? Man, you have no sense of humor."

"I know I'm a humorless guy. I'll bet I always have been."

"From day one. It's the one thing about you that's never changed."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"And about me."

Ranta looked down at the table, falling silent for a while. Finally, he opened his mouth to speak again.

"I did a whole lot of stupid shit. I can't fix the past. Not even if I could forget it, like you people. The facts won't change. The guys we lost ain't coming back."

Haruhiro couldn't nod, couldn't say anything in response.

He had to accept the facts, whether they were about things he'd forgotten or things he remembered. He couldn't make it so they'd never happened, and couldn't twist them either.

"So, listen..."

“Hm?”

“I love Yume.”

“Yeah... Yeah?”

Haruhiro stopped and stared at Ranta.

Ranta was looking away awkwardly.

I probably didn’t mishear that. Well, it’s no big surprise. Anyone could see it. Like, yeah, I already knew. But I never would have expected Ranta to come out and say it like that.

“Have you...told her that directly?”

“As if I could, moron.” Ranta was touching his face all over. Even if he was trying to hide his embarrassment, it was excessive. “Listen, man... It’s not like that. When I say I...love Yume. It’s not that I want to do anything to her. Well, okay, that’s not entirely true, but—”

“So you do, then...”

“Of course I do! Who the hell do you think I am?”

“Who do you want me to think you are?”

“I’m Ranta the Great, got it? But, well, as far as she’s concerned... Agh...”

Ranta cleared his throat and scowled. He hemmed and hawed for a long time, then finally mumbled, “It’s just... I just want her to be happy, I guess? She loves her comrades and her friends, and when we’re smiling, she’s able to smile too. That’s why she tried to get stronger. And she really did. Don’t tell her I said any of this, though. I think she’s incredible. She can be a bit of an airhead, but she’s one badass woman. I want... I want her to always be able to smile. I want to make her smile...myself.”

“Your love feels more...pure than romantic, I guess.”

“Man, do you hear yourself? Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“I think the stuff you’ve been saying’s way more embarrassing...”



“You don’t have to point it out! I know, damn it!”

His ears were beet red. Haruhiro decided not to push the point. Call it a warrior’s mercy. Not that Haruhiro was a warrior. He was just a lowly thief.

It was embarrassing just listening, but Haruhiro was genuinely impressed.

Ranta. He loves Yume that much. He loves her like that. Genuinely, and from the bottom of his heart.

“Anyway...” Ranta crossed his arms, looking off to the side. “Shihoru’s our comrade, and more importantly, she’s Yume’s friend. Not that she’d say that now. They’re both girls, and probably had a sisterly bond going too.”

“So, for Yume’s sake...you want to—”

“Yeah, you’ve got it.”

“Oh...”

Haruhiro wanted to say it. He couldn’t help himself. That Shihoru didn’t remember any of them. That her memories had been erased.

“You want to go home, right?”

That’s what Io had said to Shihoru. Go home. What did that mean? Go home to where? Did she have a home to go back to? Haruhiro didn’t know, but just like Io’s party, Shihoru was working for the master of the Forbidden Tower.

“She was alive,” Ranta said, smiling faintly. It looked forced, but it also suited him. “Shihoru’s alive. That’s a step forward, isn’t it?”

Haruhiro closed his eyes. His shoulders had tensed up a lot without him realizing it, but the tension was fading away now. He could breathe easier.

For a moment, an image of a gentle giant, holding a mug as he looked at them with a slightly troubled smile, flashed through Haruhiro’s vision.

Who could it be?

No.

Haruhiro knew. He didn’t remember, but he knew.

It’s Moguzo.

“Isn’t it great, though?”

He even felt like he could hear his voice.

“Shihoru-san’s okay. That’s great. Don’t you think so too, Haruhiro-kun?”

“Yeah, it is...”

Haruhiro opened his eyes. Was that man really Moguzo? Was that Moguzo’s face? Was that his voice? Had he spoken like that? Haruhiro had no way to check. Moguzo was dead. The past in which Moguzo died was part of the reason Haruhiro was who he was now. But still, he wished Moguzo could be here.

The day when he would have to think of Shihoru in the same way hadn’t come yet.

“We’re moving forward.”

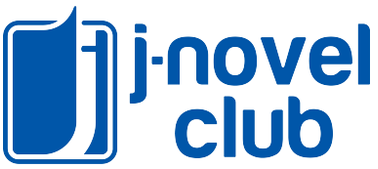
“At breakneck speed too. You better keep up, man. I’m damn fast.”

“If you trip, I’m leaving you in the dust.”

“Don’t forget you said that. Life’s always trying to trip us up, but even when he falls, the great Ranta doesn’t get back up without something to show for it.”

I’m glad you’re here, man.

Haruhiro only thought it. It was just one of those things that, no matter how he truly felt, he could never have brought himself to say out loud.



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 17

by Ao Jyumonji

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