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AO JYUMONJI
Illustration by
EIRI SHIRAI
level.20 Thus the Star Fell, and Time Went By
Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash


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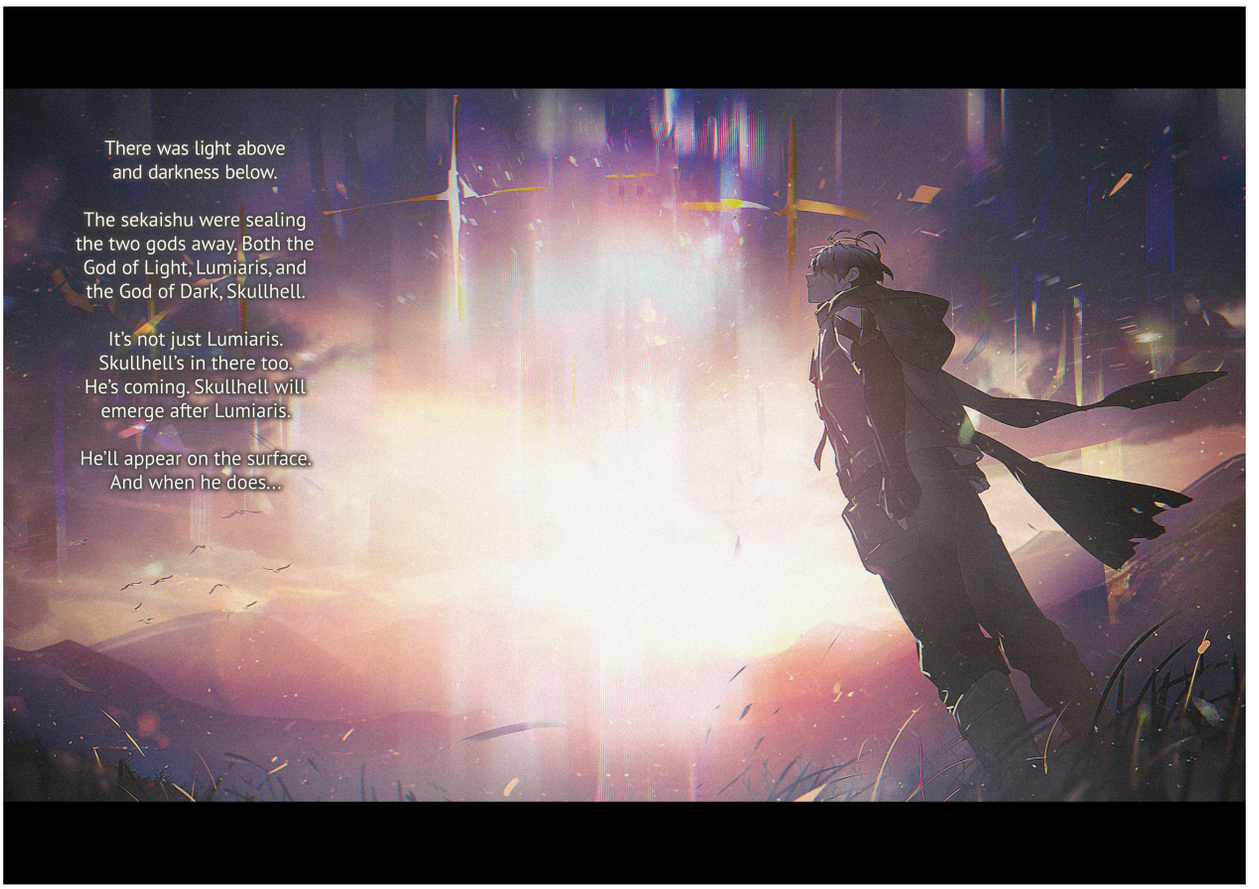
Thus the Star Fell, and Time Went By

Ao Jyumonji

Illustrations by
Eiri Shirai

Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash

Level. Twenty


There was light above and darkness below.
The sekaishu were sealing the two gods away. Both the God of Light, Lumiaris, and the God of Dark, Skullhell.
It's not just Lumiaris. Skullhell's in there too. He's coming. Skullhell will emerge after Lumiaris.
He'll appear on the surface. And when he does...

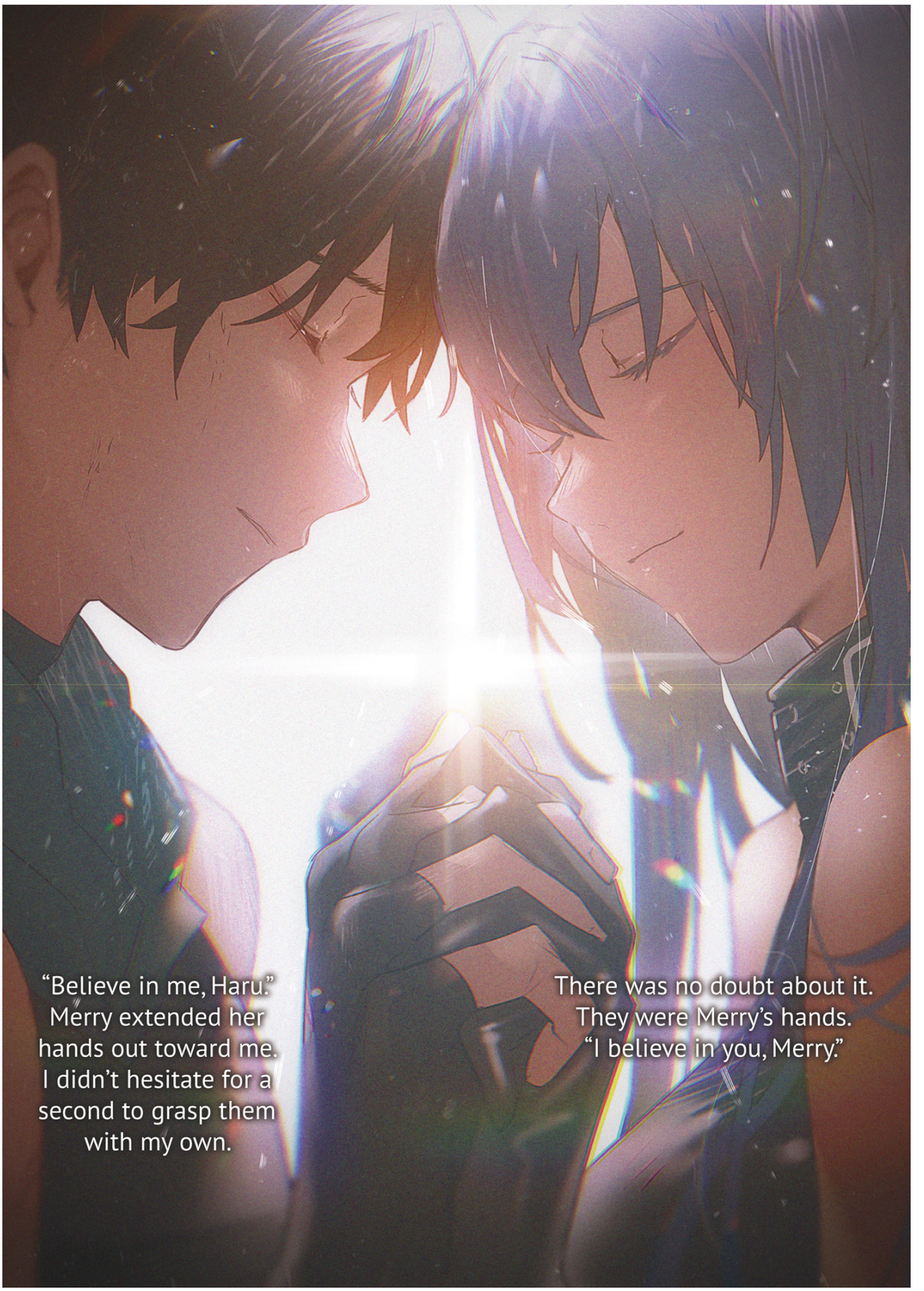

“Believe in me, Haru.”
Merry extended her hands out toward me.
I didn’t hesitate for a second to grasp them with my own.
There was no doubt about it.
They were Merry’s hands.
“I believe in you, Merry.”

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1. If Life’s Made Up of Nothing but Mistakes

What happened?

Do you really want to know?

Yeah, I figured.

But consider how I feel, having to answer your question.

It’s not a simple tale. There were a lot of different circumstances that played a part. It was a complicated situation in all kinds of ways. And it’s not like I even understand it all myself. Hell, forget understanding everything, my knowledge barely amounts to a fistful of sand. And even that may be overstating it. What I know might be closer to a single grain of sand.

But even that single grain of sand will be a long story.

If I were to try to tell you from the beginning—at least, the beginning as far back as I can remember it, when I heard the word “Awaken” and opened my eyes—it would take far too long. It’s not that I don’t have enough time, though. To be honest, it’s just that it’s hard for me to talk about. And I don’t want to. There’s that too.

Let’s start in the middle, back when I was called Haruhiro.

I mean, back when there were still people who called me that.

Yeah.

I had a few of those.

People who mattered to me.

It would have been, I think, January of the 660th year of the Arabakian Calendar. Yeah, on the twenty-second. I’m pretty sure I’ve got the year right, but who knows. I’m not quite so confident about the day. But anyway, it was either January twenty-first or twenty-second of 660 A.C. Or maybe it was the twenty-third? Somewhere around there.

Back then, I wasn’t alone.

I had comrades.

Ranta.

He wasn’t as tall as me, so you’d probably say he was short. But short though he was, he was capable of releasing these incredible bursts of explosive strength—and calling them “explosive” is not even remotely an exaggeration. Was that something he was born

with? Probably not. He wasn't the type to work hard and slowly build up to something, but he had some real tenacity to him. He wasn't the kind of guy who'd ever just sit there quietly while someone looked down at him from on high. He was noisy, and stubborn as hell. No matter how life beat him down, he never let it keep him there. More than anything, he was strong of heart, and brimming with vital energy.

I could never bring myself to like Ranta. We were never able to get along, from the first time we met, and there were countless times when I thought I couldn't keep working with him. We parted after a fight once, and there was a long time after that when we were each doing our own thing. As for him, I'll bet he hated my indecisiveness. No matter how much time went by, we were like water and oil.

Even now, I hate the guy. Just remembering the way his voice grated on my ears makes me mad. He had curly hair, and whenever it got too long, he'd wrap it around his fingers, then cut it with a knife. That move always pissed me off. Like I said before, I was called Haruhiro back then. But that guy would deliberately call me Parupiro, Parupirorin, and other similar names. That kind of stupid flippant behavior really rubbed me the wrong way.

He had all sorts of things I lacked.

Was I jealous of him? No. I will insist to my dying breath that I was not. I never wished that I was more like him. Not once.

But before I knew it, I found myself following him. He always kept on pushing forward. He wasn't the type to look back and wait for me to catch up. If I had stayed where I was, he'd have left me behind. I don't know if he was aware that he was pulling me, pulling us, along. I'm not him, so how could I know? But I doubt it.

He was just living true to himself.

Come to think of it, he had a scar on his face. It started on the upper right part of his forehead, crossed his brow, and ended under his left ear. It was a big, prominent scar. Yet he kept his head high, as if to say that scar was just a part of him. There were times when he seemed so radiant to me.

Then there was Yume.

If she hadn't been around, our journey would have been much shorter, and no one would be here now, looking back on it.

I'd never known anyone as agile and robust as she was. I still

don’t. Obviously, that’s nothing more than my personal perspective. Others might disagree. But I won’t let anyone who didn’t know Yume reject my view of her. I genuinely liked her. I could never hate her, no matter what. There was nothing *to* hate about her.

So I can understand why Ranta loved her so strongly and deeply. It would be strange *not* to love someone like her. I think the reason I didn’t love her in that way was because I simply liked her. My affection for her was—and I realize how weird it is to be saying this myself—incredibly innocent. I’m sure the idea of trying to make her my own never even crossed my mind. Not once. She cared about me too. I never once doubted the trust and kindness she offered me. I never needed to ask something of her. She gave everything freely, without being asked. And always without expecting anything in return.

I don’t think Ranta expected anything in return from her either. But maybe, in order to keep himself strong, he wanted her to be someone he could show his weakness to without restraint—basically someone who would indulge him. Yume was probably the only person who could have done that for a guy like Ranta.

It was around January twenty-second, 660 A.C.

I was working with Ranta and Yume. Yume’s master Itsukushima and the wolf-dog Poochie were with us too.

Itsukushima was a generation older than us, or more like two generations. He always seemed more like a parent than a big brother figure, so it feels a little bit wrong to call him one of us. He was a hunter adept in the art of survival, and a thoughtful adult.

Ranta, Yume, and I had spent many years in Grimgar, so we weren’t kids anymore. We were adults, at least in some respects. But looking back on it now, I think maybe we hadn’t fully matured. Me in particular.

Through a series of events, I had become the leader of the group, yet I can’t help but feel like I might have been the least mature of all of us. And because of that, having Itsukushima with us was a big help.

Itsukushima basically never told us how things were, or what we ought to do in any given circumstance. He moved on his own, and showed by example, not by words. That was the style of that most hunter-like of hunters. And, though I guess this should be

obvious, Poochie didn't talk either. As I recall, Poochie was fairly old for a wolf-dog. Maybe that was why whenever he sat in silence like an old forest sage, he seemed to understand the nature of things far better than us humans. I honestly believe that Poochie had a high degree of intelligence, even if it wasn't the same kind that we have. The fact is, there are any number of creatures out there that are wiser than us crafty humans.

Around January twenty-second of 660 A.C., we returned to Alterna.

Yes, *that* Alterna.

Or what was left of it.

It was in awful shape. I could say that it wasn't even a shadow of its former self, but that doesn't quite capture it. It wasn't that it was a pile of rubble, or that it had been laid to waste, or anything like that.

They were gone. The people. Not one of them was left.

In their place, the sekaishu—those dark, tubelike entities—were swarming all over the place.

Sekaishu. Back then, we didn't really know what they were. Or rather, it's fair to say that we had absolutely no clue whatsoever.

I think I sensed that something felt off about them. Like they were clearly not of this world. But, well, that wasn't all that uncommon in Grimgar. Still, the sekaishu were bizarre.

Black. The sekaishu were pitch black. A pure black, without a hint of luster. They didn't reflect so much as a mote of light. Does any material like that exist in the natural world? They were flexible, expanding and contracting, but could also be hard as well. Even if you slashed at them with a blade, they weren't easy to cut through. You couldn't hurt them. They moved. But at the same time, it was hard to imagine that they were alive. I didn't sense anything resembling life from them.

They were incompatible with this world, Grimgar—one of many worlds, created according to certain rules—and they were a thing, or a phenomenon, that was impossible to define as living or unliving.

That was basically what the sekaishu were.

If I were to try to put it into words back then, that was the sort of fuzzy understanding that I had.

Back then, we were resting at the building that had once been

the Temple of Lumiaris in the North District, which was located on an elevated bit of terrain. Then I went out to scout.

I was going to the thieves' guild in West Town. I had a feeling that, even with the state the town was in, one of the mentors, Eliza, might still have been there. If even she was gone, then that would mean there wasn't a soul left in Alterna. I wanted to check. I'd been a thief myself, so I was used to operating solo. Working that way was easier for me too. I cared about my comrades. Cared far too much. I didn't want to lose anyone. Couldn't afford to lose anyone else.

The thieves' guild was empty. Eliza wasn't there. How did that make me feel? I can't recall.

My first encounter with one of the night-clad ones—beings that completely went against everything we thought we knew about the sekaishu—left a much greater impact on me.

The night-clad one, to put it simply, was a creature shaped like a human—or something similar—that had been wrapped in the sekaishu.

The first night-clad one was riding on a mass of sekaishu that had taken the form of a four-legged beast, and carried a shining sword and shield. The creature also seemed to contain a human body. If that sword and shield had been made of metals produced in Grimgar, then they might have been reflective, but they wouldn't have emitted light, so I could tell at a glance that they were relics.

Since ancient times in Grimgar, there have been objects called relics that have popped up here and there throughout history.

What are relics, really?

I know that now, of course.

They are things that are not of this world, but which come from others, crossing into Grimgar in some manner, whether they drift there or are sent there. The process doesn't matter, only that they're from a foreign world and have ended up in Grimgar.

That's the true nature of relics, if you can really call it a "true nature."

In a way, we ourselves might also have been relics. Relics were commonplace in Grimgar. You couldn't really call them rare, but some of them could be valuable. Weapons and tools that had special powers or incredible abilities were hard to come by. When trying to use might to force others to submit, those sorts of relics

could be incredibly potent.

Not many people had useful relics. Those were pretty uncommon.

Since that night-clad one had two of them, if I had been thinking about it with a clear head, I could have narrowed down the list of candidates for who the person within had been considerably. I was anything but calm at the time, though, and went into a total panic once I encountered a second night-clad one.

The second wore golden armor and a crown, and carried a staff. Those were relics too. The second night-clad one could fire lightning from their staff, and was also able to fly. Their relics were powerful. I didn't have any idea what was going on at the time, but thinking back on it now, the second night-clad one probably didn't have a human inside. It was a goblin—the goblin king, Gwagajin.

I ran like mad. It was all I could do. I ran and I ran, and that's all I can remember. Was there any point where I gave up and accepted that my number was up? Even that isn't clear to me.

But right in the nick of time, someone poked their head out from between the old Volunteer Soldier Corps office and the building beside it. A human. A living human. It was Eliza.

I guess she must have just been away when I had visited the thieves' guild. I wasn't a total amateur. If I had carefully searched the ruins, I would have been able to tell whether someone had been living there, but I *hadn't* searched. Thinking about it, I might have been in a state of total shock at the time. She was still in Alterna. Had she been out scouting? And then she found me, running around, lost? She told me where to run, and I managed to escape somehow. Without her help, it's very likely—no, almost a certainty—that I would have been captured by the night-clad ones. On that day, probably January twenty-second of the year 660 A.C., my life would have ended right there in Alterna.

Maybe that would have been better?

I've thought that before.

Once or twice.

No, more than that. I've thought it more times than I can count.

But even if I were able to go back to that day and do things over, I'm sure that I would still try to survive. I may not have Ranta's spine, but you could say I'm greedy for life. When placed

on the brink of life and death, I choose life every time. I don't know why. But I do.

If you've never come close to dying before, then remember this: Sometimes whether we live or die comes down to spur-of-the-moment decisions. That isn't always the case, but if you find yourself in that kind of situation, there's no room for thought. Your true nature comes to the fore. Those who are attached to life live on stubbornly, while those who aren't lose their lives with surprising ease.

To put it another way, those who end up in a situation that should kill them, but don't die, are incapable of letting themselves die. And as somebody who's failed to die, I'm left with no choice but to go on living as I am. So, if the end of life comes for me too, I'm sure it will be a fitting death. If I have the good fortune to die as a human, that is.

Until that time comes, I have no choice but to accept that I am me, and pull myself along no matter how heavy that burden is.

I kept trying to live despite not really wanting to, and headed into the rear of the Volunteer Soldier Corps office from the back alley entrance. It was an awfully small door, even for a back entrance, and there was no sign that it had seen regular use. Then I descended down a vertical shaft inside the building to reach the basement.

Eliza told me there was a culvert there. It dated back to the days before Alterna was a fortress city. First the scouts of the Kingdom of Arabakia had built an outpost here, and then after a village had grown up around it, they had built aqueducts to bring in water from the nearby river. Later, people had dug wells, and it had gradually become harder to draw water from the river, so they had started to use the aqueducts as drains. In time, a portion of them had been filled in with dirt, or covered with stone.

The culvert was long forgotten. One eccentric thief had discovered it, and then reworked it to serve as a secret passageway. That thief had been Eliza and Barbara's teacher, so the two of them had been forced to help work on it. The thieves had also found the other remaining culverts, and brought in craftspeople to reinforce them where needed, creating a network with entry points all over the city.

I still remember Eliza telling me that story in a disinterested

tone, but explaining it in an odd amount of detail. I think she was probably reminiscing. She had no interest in the here and now. Her heart was directed solely toward the past. That was the feeling I got.

Eliza had a weirdly strong aversion to being seen by others, and when she showed herself in front of them, she would hide her face with her long hair and a scarf. She seemed incredibly bad at socializing, and not the sort to hang out in groups or make friends, but I think, maybe, she was proud of her work. She had a stronger sense of responsibility than most, and it was more out of a sense of duty than out of obligation. She likely felt a degree of loyalty and attachment to the thieves' guild too.

However, nearly all of the thieves that Mentor Eliza and her colleagues had trained were dead by that point. Even Barbara, whom she had been close with, had died. The way I see it, Eliza had devoted her life to the guild. Now the guild that she treasured was in ruins, and would soon vanish completely. Maybe she'd lost sight of her reason to live.

When we emerged from the culvert, we were inside the former headquarters of the Frontier Army which was also in the North District, not far from the Temple of Lumiaris, which was just up the hill from it. I noticed that Eliza was looking awfully grimy. Her hair was all matted, and had flecks of white stuff in it. Her dark clothes were little more than rags at this point, and they looked baggy on her. She'd shrunk. It looked like she was badly emaciated. I got the feeling she hadn't been eating much.

Right before we reached the temple, Eliza turned to head back.

Obviously, I stopped her. I was worried about Eliza. She was quietly choosing her own death. That was all I could assume. But she had seen me in trouble, and had been unable to abandon me. I didn't know her that well, but we were both thieves, and she was my teacher Barbara's coworker. It wouldn't have been right to abandon her.

"Would you like to come with us, Eliza-san?"

When I asked that, she replied, "Where?" Her voice was so tiny, so lacking in intonation that it hurt. I remember wanting to cry when I heard it. No lie. If I could have cried, I would have. Maybe if I were the kind of person who cried at times like that, things might have worked out differently.

“We’re still trying to figure that out.”

That was what I told her then. We hadn’t come back to Alterna with any plan in mind, only a vague hope that we might find some kind of hint. As we probably should have expected, that hope had been in vain. We needed a plan for what to do next. I’m not going to claim that I wasn’t hoping that she could help us come up with something. I probably was.

I wanted help. I had Ranta. I had Yume. And I had Itsukushima too. Even Poochie the wolf-dog was helping me. But it still wasn’t enough. Ever since I had first awoken in Grimgar, I had been living my life with the help and support of others. I had never thought to try and do anything alone. Not once.

Eliza helped me too. The best she could, in her own way. In dribs and drabs, she told me everything that she knew, as if she were squeezing the information out of herself.

Fifteen days earlier, the black sekaishu had begun pressing into Alterna. Shinohara and Orion had left town through the south gate to see what was happening, and no one knew what had become of them. Early the next day, Jin Mogis had opened the north gate, and attempted an escape with the cavalry and infantry. She didn’t know if he had succeeded, but not long after that, the sekaishu had overrun Alterna.

When had those night-clad ones begun wandering the city? Eliza couldn’t say for certain, but the first time she had seen one of them had been seven days earlier.

Since the sekaishu had destroyed Alterna, Eliza had only been outside town once. She confirmed that the sekaishu had also struck Damuro. It had apparently wiped out the goblins there. But she hadn’t gone as far as Riverside Iron Fortress. She had to stay in Alterna. That was the conclusion she had come to.

“Because that’s my role,” she explained in a monotone voice.

Should I have tried to convince her otherwise? I think even if I had said everything I could think of, it wouldn’t have done much good. But it wouldn’t have killed me to make the attempt, would it?

“There are stores of food in the thieves’ guild. I’ll share some with you,” she offered.

I turned her down. There was no way I could have accepted, because as long as she had food, there was a chance that she’d

survive. Once it ran out, I wasn't so sure. I had a feeling that rather than wander around searching for something to eat, she might decide to let things take their course and starve to death. I didn't want that.

I wanted her to live as long as she could, even if that went against her own wishes. I refused to take any action that might have shortened her life. I could never have done such a thing. Even if what she wanted was to rest, to be set free from the hollow suffering of living all by herself, I wouldn't help her with her passive suicide.

Please, don't make me bear any more pain.

I parted ways with Eliza and returned to the Temple of Lumiaris where my comrades were waiting. Itsukushima was away, having headed outside with Poochie. I told Ranta and Yume that I had met Eliza. It would have been cowardly to conceal that fact from them. Or maybe I just lacked the guts to brazenly lie like that.

I felt like Ranta would fault me for not bringing her along. But maybe he had a different perspective on the matter than I did. All he said was, "Okay."

"We can always come back, after all," said Yume.

Yume's eyes were always set on the next thing—on what came tomorrow. She forgave me, and consoled me. *Oh, yeah,* I thought. *That's right. This isn't the end,* I chose to believe. *We can come back to Alterna again. If I'm worried about Eliza, I can check in on her. I mean, maybe in time she'll have a change of heart. Maybe next time we'll be able to bring her out of Alterna.*

Itsukushima and Poochie returned and we spent the night in the temple.

It wasn't just the sekaishu roaming Alterna. The even more dangerous night-clad ones were there too. We couldn't find any reason to stay. After talking it over, we agreed we should go to Riverside Iron Fortress.

We left the temple at dawn, and headed in the direction of the northwest wall. Part of the fortifications there had collapsed, providing us with a small area where we could slip through. That was where we'd entered Alterna too.

Along the way, I felt eyes on me.

I looked to see Eliza, standing on a roof about twenty meters away. She wasn't really trying to hide, but she also didn't wave or

do anything to communicate with us. It seemed unlikely that she had just happened to notice us while she was out for a stroll. She'd refused my offer, saying she had no intention of coming along, but even so, she couldn't remain indifferent.

Yume waved to Eliza. Eliza didn't move. Ranta clicked his tongue before opening his mouth as if to say something. Maybe he meant to throw a mean comment in her direction. It would have been in character for him. But ultimately he said nothing.

Itsukushima and Poochie started walking, and we followed them.

Eliza followed behind us, staying at a distance of at least twenty meters. No, it's not quite right to say she "followed" us. She was watching over us. She wouldn't let anything happen to us before we left Alterna. She cared for our well-being. That was how it felt to me then, and even now I believe that's what it was.

In time, we reached the spot where the wall had crumbled, and Eliza vanished. Had she departed, as if to say that her job was done? No, that wasn't it. At some point, she had moved to the top of the wall. She was standing on the other side of the collapsed portion that we were about to pass through. In other words, she had circled around to go from being behind us a moment ago to in front of us now.

Eliza was one of the managers of the thieves' guild, and had been a mentor in charge of teaching other thieves. I had been made a mentor too, but only as a stopgap measure due to severe personnel shortages. Unlike me, she was the real deal. Barbara-sensei had been too, and she was an incredible thief that I could never hope to hold a candle to.

She barely moved until we got near the collapsed part of the wall. She just stood up there, watching us.

Unable to restrain herself, Yume waved again. "See ya!"

As she shouted that, Eliza finally reacted. But not to Yume.

Eliza turned to look behind her, gazing upward. Did I say anything then? I was definitely shocked.

Because *they* were there. A night-clad one.

It was the one that wore golden armor and a crown, and carried a staff. How long had they been floating there? I couldn't imagine they had been there long. Probably only since right before Eliza had turned to look. This is just an educated guess on

my part, but I think the night-clad one had been on the other side of the wall. And then maybe they had floated up from there without making a sound? Eliza must have sensed them.

The night-clad one leveled their staff at Eliza. Before they could unleash their lightning, she threw something like a dagger toward them. The bolt struck the dagger, not her, and exploded.

"Go!" Eliza shouted.

I immediately took off running. Her intent was clear, and I couldn't possibly have misunderstood. She was telling us, *I'll draw the night-clad one's attention. You get out of Alterna, and run as far as you can.* I had moved to obey her instinctively.

"We can't—!" Yume did the opposite of me. She tried to scale the crumbling wall, but Ranta immediately seized her by the arm.

"No, Yume!"

"Another one's coming!" Itsukushima shouted.

He was looking in the direction we had come from. I looked too. The staff-wielder wasn't the only night-clad one. There was at least one more, and there they were. The night-clad one that carried a shining sword and shield, and rode atop a mass of sekaishu that had formed a four-legged beast, was rushing fluidly down the street toward us.

"Run!" the senior hunter urged us.

Yume still wasn't in agreement, but Ranta and I physically dragged her out of Alterna against her will. Itsukushima sent us ahead with Poochie, then came through the gap too.

Lightning flashed somewhere. I couldn't see Eliza or the night-clad one with the staff, but if her opponent was still firing off lightning, that meant Eliza was fine.

I kept pumping my legs. I didn't need to check to know that Yume, Ranta, Itsukushima, and Poochie were still nearby. There was a forest just north of Alterna, and we were fleeing into it. We didn't expect to be safe once we got there, but there weren't any other options. As I was running, I looked back occasionally. I hoped there would be nothing chasing us. My wish did not come true.

We were being chased.

It wasn't just the night-clad one with the shining sword and shield riding on a beast made of sekaishu. There was a horde of sekaishu following them, almost like a big black wave. I call it a

wave, but unfortunately we weren't on the beach. This wasn't the kind of wave that crashed against the shore and receded. No matter where we went, that black wave would follow, and eventually it was going to catch us. Then we'd be swallowed up and probably drown in it.

"It's make or break now! Let's split up!" Itsukushima barked a command from up ahead in the forest.

I don't recall Yume pushing back on it. We were all out of breath, and she wasn't in any shape to talk. I'm sure it had degraded our ability to make decisions, and because of that, once someone suggested something, we had no choice but to do whatever it was.

I have my doubts about whether that was really the case, though.

How sure am I that I haven't doctored my own memories to make them more favorable to me?

It's definitely true that I did as Itsukushima said without another word.

It was all I could do at the time.

It should have been the same for Ranta, and even for Yume.

So it wasn't my fault. Not exclusively my fault.

But isn't that just the way I want to remember it?

Whatever my true reasoning was, I raced north into the forest. The next thing I knew, I was alone. Ranta wouldn't leave Yume, right? I'm sure he'd never have left her alone. If he was with Yume, then if worse came to worst, he could act as a decoy to help her get away, or something. But he couldn't do anything if he wasn't with her. He'd be useless. Maybe I should have tried to stay near Yume too?

That was probably what I ought to have done. But by the time I realized that, it was too late.

Itsukushima was an experienced hunter, and could operate just fine even without getting proper sleep. He rarely showed any signs of tiredness in front of us. Had he been putting up a strong front for us? If so, it would have required impressive mental resilience. His stamina was incredible too. For his age, that is. Itsukushima was much older than we were. The age gap was probably so wide that he could have been our father.

Maybe Itsukushima had used up his stamina racing all the way

from Alterna to the forest? But I don't think he could have told us if he was at his limit. He wouldn't have wanted to drag down those who were younger than him. That was why he had ordered us to run in different directions, to divide our pursuers. If we had all run away in one big clump, then we would have all lived or died together. That being the case, he would have preferred to have at least one of us get away, even if not all of us could. This is Itsukushima we're talking about. I'm sure he wanted to guarantee that Yume would survive, at the very least. But Yume was the biggest problem with that. She loved Itsukushima like a father, and wouldn't have abandoned him even if he'd begged her to do it. Maybe that was why? Itsukushima did it for Yume.

If it was for my comrades, I could have given my life. I wouldn't even have regretted it. Itsukushima had done what came naturally to him. And my perspective was the same as his. I wouldn't say that there was anything particularly special or unique about the choice he made. If I had been in Itsukushima's shoes, I'd have done the same.

Come to think of it, Poochie was a pretty old dog too. It's awkward to say this, but he probably didn't have long to live anyway. Itsukushima loved that dog, though. Maybe he did what he did because he wanted to share Poochie's fate. In a way, that would have been a fitting way for Itsukushima—that most hunter-like of hunters—to go out.

Unconsciously, I had begun using my thief techniques to erase the sound of my footsteps. There were sekaishu all over, but none of them showed any signs of viewing me as prey. I drifted through the forest, not really feeling all that threatened. Dried leaves blew in the wind, like seeds released by the trees.

I had a destination in mind. We'd originally planned to go to Riverside Iron Fortress. If I went there, I could meet up with my comrades. However, I felt terrible because of what had just happened, and I felt sad. I was beating myself up over it, but I had already long since given up on Itsukushima and Poochie. I was never going to see the hunter or his wolf-dog again. But there was hope for Ranta and Yume.

They'll be fine. I want them to be fine. If they aren't both still alive, Itsukushima and Poochie won't be able to rest in peace. It'd be bad for me too. I have no idea what I'll do if something happens to them.

I didn’t rush. I walked slowly but steadily, taking care to keep my distance from the sekaishu so they wouldn’t detect me and decide that I was an enemy. The sekaishu never approached me, and I never deliberately got close to them either.

A number of times—I forget how many—I spotted a night-clad one. But only at a distance. That was still enough to make me cower in the shadows of the trees, though, waiting until they moved on and were totally out of sight.

One time, I spotted the second night-clad one with the golden armor, crown, and staff silently flying around. I wondered what had happened to Eliza. That was the only time that I gave any more thought to her safety.

When I finally exited the forest, the sun had already set and it was dark out.

If I had simply gone straight north through the forest, then I would have come out close to Deadhead Watching Keep. However, continuing northeast through the forest from there had eventually brought me to the Quickwind Plains. There was nothing to hide behind on the plains. Was I scared? I don’t know. But whether I was or not, I decided to play it safe, and only started crossing the Quickwind Plains once night had fallen, heading west.

Uncharacteristically, there was very little wind on the Quickwind Plains. The sky was almost completely clear, and studded with stars that didn’t twinkle.

There was a moon out too. The red moon. But the light of the moon and stars was powerless. The land was locked in pitch-black darkness, and even with my eyes fully adjusted, I felt like I had been blindfolded. It was endlessly dark, aside from the eerily clear stars and the red orb hanging in the sky. I was only able to keep track of the general direction I was traveling in thanks to them.

Occasionally, I’d trip over, or step on, what I assume were sekaishu. That made me panic at first, but once I realized nothing was going to happen, I stopped caring. It wasn’t the sekaishu I needed to be wary of, but the night-clad ones. Most of the time, the individual sekaishu bodies didn’t react to even direct physical stimuli.

Night-clad ones were another matter. Those things were deeply connected to the sekaishu, and you might be able to say they were a type of sekaishu themselves, but really they were very much

their own thing. Maybe because there were humans—or humanlike creatures—inside of them, they seemed to have it out for us.

The Quickwind Plains were quiet, as if all life on them had perished. I was making as little noise as possible as I moved, to the point that I started to question whether I myself was dead or alive. Like, maybe I had died somewhere along the way. There are times when I think I did. Maybe this is all nothing more than a cruel dream I'm watching before I pass into the long sleep of death.

When the sky started to brighten, I turned slightly toward the south, and continued west along the foothills of the Tenryu Mountains. It was maybe forty kilometers from Alterna to Riverside Iron Fortress as the crow flies. Following the foothills was a bit of a detour, though, and no matter how much I hurried, I wouldn't arrive until the sun had fully risen. I didn't have the courage to walk boldly through the Quickwind Plains where I would have been far too visible in the full light of day. Ultimately, I didn't reach Riverside Iron Fortress until the sun was well on its way to setting again.

What had happened to this place, which the Volunteer Soldier Corps had retaken from the orcs of the Southern Expedition, and made into their primary stronghold? I had no idea at this point. But it was plain as day that nobody was around.

The hardened fortress surrounded by defensive walls abutted the Jet River, with part of the fortress actually extending out into it. Fourteen towers stood inside the walls, with bridges connecting them. I could see that a number of those bridges, and also the gates, had been destroyed. There were a huge number of birds perched on the walls and the towers. Some of them were flying around above the fortress as well.

Though I approached the gates, I couldn't bring myself to go inside. I wish I could say it was out of wariness, but that's not it. I was just sick of it all. I was feeling lazy, and didn't want to do anything anymore. I hadn't eaten since I'd left Alterna, or even had any water. My stomach was empty, and my throat was dry, yet apathy was still winning out over that.

I moved more than ten meters away from the gate, and sat down on the ground with my back to the wall. It wasn't a very

relaxing posture, though, so I eventually raised one of my knees and hugged it.

One of the birds up on the wall crapped on my head.

My only thought was, *Oh, bird poop.*

"Haruuuuu-kuuun."

Can you imagine how I felt when I heard that voice?

I must have been looking down. But I wasn't looking at the ground. I wasn't looking at anything, and I wasn't thinking about anything either. I'd regressed to become a life-form without emotions or conscious thought. Her voice made me human again.

Yume.

Ohhh, it's Yume.

I heard Yume's voice.

Even then, the first thing I did was shut my eyes tight, and then cover them with my hands. I was hearing her voice, though, so shouldn't I have been trying to plug my ears instead? Anyway, I closed my eyes and covered them. I was tired of being confronted with reality, but I probably wanted to hear Yume's voice—my comrade's voice. I strongly suspected that I might just be hearing things, but on the off chance that it was real, I couldn't *not* listen.

"Haruuuuuu-kuuun!"

"Heyyy, Parupiro! Quit moping around, you dolt!"

However, as a consequence, I also heard something I didn't want to. But I knew that if I was only hearing people's voices because I wished they were there, then there was no way I would have heard Ranta's voice. So if anything, that made it feel more real.

As I'd expected, Yume and Ranta hadn't spent a moment apart. They'd arrived at Riverside Iron Fortress a few hours after me, when the sun had already set.

I remember Yume getting the clump of bird crap out of my hair with her bare hands. Ranta didn't open his mouth, but the look he gave me said, *Is this guy all right?* When I mentioned I hadn't entered the fortress yet, Ranta finally let his distrust show.

"You should've at least checked if Itsukushima and Poochie were here. What's wrong with you, man? Are you an idiot? You are, huh? Yeah, you always have been an idiot, Parupiro."

I couldn't argue back. No matter what I said, I was afraid he'd see right through me and realize that I didn't think Itsukushima or

Poochie would be coming.

“But y’know…” Yume pointed at the birds lining the top of the walls. “…it sure is lookin’ like there might not be anyone inside.”

“What I’m trying to say is, even if there isn’t anyone, the obvious thing to do is to check to make sure. If we take a look inside for ourselves, we should be able to more or less figure out what went down here.”

Ranta argued back, Yume complained, and the two started arguing.

Maybe this was entirely because of Yume’s personality and manner of speech, but even when the two of them fought, it looked playful. It’s incredibly rare, but I still see scenes of them fighting in my dreams. When I do, I even find myself hoping they’ll keep going at it forever.

The sun was already setting, and it was getting darker by the hour. I don’t remember in detail what we talked about, but I guess that we must have settled on not investigating the fortress until the sun was up again. As I remember it, we camped out a short distance from the fortress, somewhere with a view looking down on the Jet River.

Ranta and Yume seemed exhausted, and fell into a deep sleep while I was standing watch.

I slept too at some point. But not for long.

Yume was lying on her side, and Ranta was holding on to her from behind. I have a clear memory of how the two of them looked sleeping that night.



After the sun rose, we entered Riverside Iron Fortress. From what we could see, there were no sekaishu inside, and the place was abandoned, like we'd thought. There were no survivors, but we found traces of the dead. The front courtyard, just inside the broken gates, was littered with bodies—no, it would be more accurate to call them scattered remains. The birds nesting on the fortress must have feasted on them. All that remained were the bones and equipment of the dead.

We spotted a familiar set of armor and a shield. They'd belonged to Tokimune, the leader of the Tokkis. I thought I must have been mistaken, but Ranta confirmed, "That's Tokimune," with surprising ease. Yume didn't disagree with him. Then Ranta picked up a sword. It was large, probably more easily held in two hands than in one.

"Man…not Britney too."

Britney was the former head of the Volunteer Soldier Corps office, and had been keeping the corps together after things had gone down in Alterna. He'd had green-dyed hair, and had even changed his eye color somehow. He had been a bit of an oddball, but also a capable paladin who had looked after us younger volunteer soldiers well. I found a skull with matted green hair stuck to it, but I very deliberately didn't tell Ranta or Yume. Tokimune and Britney had died here. It took everything I had just to process that fact.

And they weren't the only ones. How many volunteer soldiers had been lost? With the bodies in the state they were in, it wasn't easy to make even a rough estimate, but it was more than a few. Probably more than ten.

"Doesn't look like they were completely wiped out," Ranta said, sounding like he was trying to convince himself.

I agreed with him on that point. There weren't enough bodies for that.

The volunteer soldiers had taken a large number of casualties, and had found themselves in a disadvantageous situation. Then at some point they'd tried to withdraw from Riverside Iron Fortress. Maybe they'd had no choice but to run?

A fortress is a military facility built for defensive purposes. Yet Britney and Tokimune had died *inside* the fortress, not outside. The enemy, probably a massive amount of sekaishu, had forced

their way in, and that had necessitated that the volunteer soldiers retreat. It was horrifying to think about. No matter how I pictured it, it was awful. I could only imagine an absolute disaster playing out.

This isn't nice to say, but while it was one thing to have lost Britney, I couldn't believe that Tokimune of all people was dead. Yeah, he'd been the type that, when the cards were down, he'd ignore any danger to save his comrades. But at the same time, even when he had found himself in a life-or-death situation, he had always managed to cut his way out. Somewhere in my head, I'd always thought of him as the kind of person who would never die. He'd had a natural cheer, but more than just being a positive guy, he'd also been quick to notice opportunities. Despite them having taken loads of risks as volunteer soldiers, Tokimune had never lost one of his comrades. Unlike me, who had never amounted to anything more than an utter fraud as a leader. We were nothing alike. Tokimune was the polar opposite of me. When people talk about a "true leader," they mean a guy like Tokimune.

If Tokimune was dead, then it wouldn't be surprising to discover that the Tokkis had been wiped out too.

The glasses-wearing priest who was an ex-warrior, Tada. Anna-san, who was a top-class motivator, and the life of the party. Inui with his ponytail and eye patch. The tall and athletic female mage, Mimori.

I'd had a lot of contact with the Tokkis. With Tokimune being the way he'd been, their team had been a cheerful group, each with their own radically different personalities, but strongly united. Once they had gotten into their groove, they'd been a group with incredible drive. For a gloomy guy like me, the energy that Tokimune had given off had never meshed well with my personality, but at least half of the reason for that had been because of jealousy. There's no question that the Tokkis had been a likable bunch. Despite any complaints I had about them, they were the sort that always seemed to survive, no matter what happened. I think they had been fine as they were. The Tokkis had always enjoyed life. They had been people who deserved to live.

If Tokimune and the Tokkis were dead, then Grimgar was truly heartless. How was I supposed to have any hope in a nonsense world like this?

Maybe there never had been any hope.

Shouldn't I have figured that out back in the beginning, when Manato had died? If this world was even remotely sane, then the people in it would die in a reasonable order. Manato shouldn't have been the first to go. Why couldn't it have been me? I'd have been a perfect first death. The same went for Moguzo. Why did Moguzo, out of all of us, have to die? Couldn't it have been me?

In Grimgar, the people you'd miss most died first. That was probably why I had so much trouble dying. Those who couldn't die had to watch the others go first.

It's a tough role, in its own way. *Hey, Manato. Moguzo. If we could trade places, I'd want to.*

Even though I have deeply wrong thoughts like that, I have a talent for finding the boundary between life and death.

Ranta and Yume were trying to figure out which way the volunteer soldiers had fled—that is, their escape route. Obviously, they could've gone out the gates, but since these gates were broken, it seemed appropriate to assume that the sekaishu had flooded in through them. It was possible the surviving volunteer soldiers had used another route. Maybe Tokimune and Britney had fought to the death in the courtyard here to delay the enemy? In other words, buying time for their comrades. Ranta and Yume bounced competing theories off one another as they searched for that alternate route.

As for me, I was just following behind Ranta. I glanced around, looking at the corpses, but my head wasn't working properly. I was listening to the two of them talk. But I had no opinions of my own. For as far back as I could remember, whenever I got quiet, people tended to assume that I was lost in thought, but in all honesty, I really wasn't. If I had actually been thinking, I'd have been able to put it into words. When I had nothing to say, that meant I wasn't thinking at all. But despite that, or maybe *because* I wasn't thinking, I sensed that something was strange.

Ranta and Yume had decided that the path we were looking for was probably the secret passage in the seventh tower, and were heading in that direction. Actually, we were already almost there.

Yume took off running toward the entrance to the tower, and Ranta yelled "Hey!" or something like that as he chased after her.

I looked up. If you were to ask me why, I couldn't tell you. But

there must've been something that made me do it.

The towers of Riverside Iron Fortress, including the seventh, were all built the same, with hardly any distinguishing features. They were thick cylinders, with a roof like a pointed hat on top of them. The Iron Fortress part of the name came from the fact that the foundations of the walls and towers had been made by pouring a composite material like concrete into an iron framework. Aside from those foundations, the walls and towers of the fortress were just stonework constructions.

Someone was standing there, atop the seventh tower. Armor. They wore an ominous-looking suit of armor. However, that thing wasn't human. Other than the armor, they were also wearing a long cloak, pitch black, and so long that it would trail on the ground behind them. But was that actually a cloak? No. No, it was not. It was a bunch of sekaishu. Dark sekaishu had gathered together, wrapping themselves around the suit of armor.

"Yume, Ranta!" I shouted immediately.

That armor. I recognized it.

Renji. Renji had been wearing it. He'd said it was a relic. Aragarfald, or something like that.

That's a relic. Renji. Could that be Renji? Is he inside of it? Even Renji died? The *Renji?*

Either way, that thing was a night-clad one.

At first, I'd been completely distracted by their armor. I didn't miss the fact that they were holding something in each hand, but that hadn't been the focus of my attention.

However, a moment later, there was no way I could keep overlooking those two objects when I realized they were alive.

The night-clad one was holding a human in their right hand, and a doglike creature in their left.

I'd be lying if I said a horrifying suspicion didn't cross my mind. No, it wasn't just a suspicion, I was certain of it. But I made a deliberate choice to say nothing about what I had realized.

"Run! It's a night-clad one! Retreat! Retreat!" I cried, racing in the direction of another tower.

Ranta and Yume followed me. As they did, the night-clad one leaped from the top of the seventh tower, their sekaishu cloak spreading like a pair of black wings.

We hid in the shadow of another tower. Why did all three of us

stop there? Probably because it was eerily silent. We couldn't even hear when that thing landed.

Ranta stuck his head out and pulled it back in just as quick. Moving his lips without a sound and making a few hand gestures, he let Yume and me know that the enemy was out there.

What were we supposed to do? I had absolutely no idea. If I were to try to think my way out of the situation we found ourselves in, I felt like I'd be crushed under the weight of realizing how screwed we were. That thing was coming after us, and they were going to find us sooner or later. Was Renji inside that night-clad one? Even if he wasn't, if the night-clad one could use the power of that relic, the demon armor Aragarfald, we would be no match for them. It was hopeless, so we weren't going to do anything. We were going to stay right where we were and wait. No, that wasn't going to fly.

I held up all the fingers on my left hand, then I tapped my palm with the index and middle finger of my right hand, indicating the number seven. I then pointed downward with my right hand and made a quick forward motion before pointing back up. *"Let's flee through the secret passage in the seventh tower."* Ranta and Yume immediately understood what I was suggesting and nodded.

Even though I had their understanding, I was still hesitant. Was this okay? Was this honestly a good idea? Of course it wasn't. We had to run, so I wanted to take the closest seemingly viable route. That was all this plan amounted to.

Ranta gestured to assert that Yume should take the lead, while I went second, and he brought up the rear. I didn't know the area well, so I had no objection to that. Yume accepted it too.

Yume took off running as hard as she could, and I did my best to keep up with her. It was smooth sailing to the entrance to the seventh tower, and I remember feeling like I'd psyched myself up for nothing. But then I turned and saw the night-clad one about to attack Ranta.

If I had been in his position, I'd have given up. I'd probably have tried to buy a second, maybe two for my comrades to get away. Or rather, that would have been the only option left for me.

Ranta was different. He came to a sudden stop, looking like he was bracing himself for the night-clad one's charge. But then a moment later, he was in a different spot, some distance away. He'd

done more than just use the unorthodox moves typical of a dread knight to dodge the night-clad one's attack. He'd mesmerized it, making it lose track of him for a second. In that time, Yume had made it through the door. I followed her.

"Personal skill—"

Ranta drew his katana, and struck the night-clad one. Its cloak of sekaishu blocked the blade, but Ranta instantly vanished. He hadn't actually disappeared, of course. His contradictory move, attacking and retreating simultaneously, had just caused the illusion of him vanishing.

Ranta had developed his rare physical abilities and skill with a sword using a unique and extraordinary regimen of strength training combined with actual combat experience. As someone who knew what he had been like before, it was hard to believe how much he had grown. Maybe I just had no eye for that kind of thing? I don't think I was any great judge of people, but who could have imagined *him* rising up to become a first-rate dread knight? It was almost like there were multiple Rantas, jumping around at random, then all rushing at the night-clad one. Even that probably wasn't going to be enough to damage it, but that wasn't what Ranta was aiming for. He was toying with the night-clad one. Ranta struck and moved away, struck and moved away again. He moved faster than the eye could see, and with timing that was hard to predict, all while gradually moving closer to the seventh tower.

Yume entered the tower without any apparent concern for Ranta. She trusted him implicitly, and knew he didn't want or need her to worry about him. Could I ever trust people the way Yume did? Well, I *did* follow her example a moment later.

They called it a secret passage for a reason. The flight of stairs that started the passage had originally been walled off, but the stone blocks had been smashed in. Thanks to that, all we had to do was climb over the rubble. When we reached the bottom of the stairs, we found the entrance to a passage that was tall enough for someone of my height to enter it without having to duck.

Obviously, we waited for a little while in front of the passage, then once Ranta raced down the stairs to join us, we headed in.

It was pitch black inside. The three of us proceeded for a while in silence, pushing deeper and deeper into the darkness.

I feel like I never at any point worried about what would

happen if the night-clad one pursued us into the passage. We couldn't see, and there was no way to fight, so there was no point in feeling uneasy about it. Maybe I had accepted that in our circumstances the best thing that we could do was to push forward as much as we could. Or maybe I was wondering when to bring up what I had seen before. I had to tell them about what the night-clad one had been holding eventually. Even though I knew, I didn't want to put it into words, and maybe that was keeping me from thinking.

Either way, the night-clad one didn't catch us. If it did come after us, it must have turned back. We survived.

Yume, Ranta, and I.

I have a very clear memory of what was said in that dark passage.

"Master didn't make it," Yume said with tears in her voice.

"Yeah." I didn't see it, but I think Ranta put his arm around her shoulders. "That's right. But listen. It's not that he didn't make it. Don't talk like that. We're here right now thanks to Itsukushima and Poochie. Right?"

I never knew he could sound so compassionate. Maybe it was because it was Yume. He wasn't the kind of guy to be gentle to just anyone.

Was I able to say anything to Yume? I don't think I was just quiet the whole time, but I doubt I did much more than agree with Ranta.

After all, I had believed that Itsukushima and Poochie had already died a while ago. Who would've guessed that they were still alive? Itsukushima and Poochie had gotten out of danger, and made it all the way to Riverside Iron Fortress. And faster than any of us had too.

But that had actually worked out in our favor. Because there had been another night-clad one at the fortress.

If I had arrived first and gone inside, maybe it would have gotten me. If that had happened, maybe Itsukushima and Poochie would have noticed something was wrong, and gotten out of there with Yume and Ranta.

Itsukushima and Poochie had died at Riverside Iron Fortress.

They died in my place.

That was all I could think.

I’m sorry. I wish I could apologize. I feel terrible. I was wrong. It was all my fault.

But who should I apologize to?

Itsukushima and Poochie are already gone. Nothing can come of saying sorry to the dead.

Then, to Yume or Ranta?

I couldn’t do that, and I shouldn’t.

In the end, I never got to apologize.

Even now, I think that it was my fault.

I wish I had died.

I should’ve died that day at Riverside Iron Fortress.

2. The Two Who Would Become Legends

I didn’t know this back then, but there is an old legend in Grimgar that goes like this:

There was nothing but the sky and the sea until at some point the nameless one, humanlike in form, came from beyond the sea.

The nameless one sowed myriad seeds in the sea.

The myriad seeds germinated, and bloomed into countless lives.

When those lives ended, their bodies sank to the bottom of the sea, where they accumulated over time.

Thus did the land come to peek out from beneath the waters, and eventually a continent took shape.

On this continent, too, life went on birthing more lives, and they increased greatly in number.

The nameless one with a humanlike form returned to the continent, sleeping and waking for eons.

Countless lives bloomed and fell as the nameless one watched over them, and the forerunners were born. The continent teemed with life and color.

However, one day the primordial dragon danced down from the sky, and it chased off the nameless one.

Having taken the place of the nameless one, the dragon made its bed on the continent. There it slept until it was buried in the earth, and the land was filled with a silent fertility.

Later, the peace of the continent was broken when two gods drifted here from beyond the sea and sky.

When the dragon awoke to the sound of a great clamor, it found that the two gods had made servants of the forerunners and were fighting each other.

The dragon crawled out of its bed, and went into battle to punish the two gods with death.

The forerunners were caught up in this intense struggle, and it continued for a long time.

With no sign of the conflict abating, the nameless one felt sorry

for the forerunners, and made a red star fall from the far end of the heavens.

The dragon shattered the red star, but its shards put down roots in the land, and became dark tumors. These dark tumors spread over the continent.

The two gods disappeared, buried beneath the tumors, and the dragon crawled back into its bed.

However, the dragon had exhausted its strength in striking down the red star, and would never wake again.

The dragon died in its sleep.

No humans appeared in this story. That's because the human race is a relative newcomer.

The forerunners were said to have been the ancestors of the elves, dwarves, centaurs, and kobolds. They look so different that it's hard to believe that they all descended from the same race, but they have been living in this land for much longer than us humans.

And at the very least, both the elves and dwarves have legends of the forerunners, the primordial dragon, the two gods, and the red star.

The hornedfolk tribes of the Northern Frontier—that land of extreme cold—and the piratsians who made their home in the Nehi Desert also have a longer history in Grimgar than humans do. There are tales told of the two gods even among those peoples, who are not forerunners. The hornedfolk fear Grimgar's red moon because they associate it with the red star, while the piratsians worship the primordial dragon as their ancestral deity.

Having escaped Riverside Iron Fortress through the secret passage, Ranta, Yume, and I headed east toward the Wonder Hole.

To describe it briefly, the Wonder Hole is a massive natural tunnel.

In this case, I use "natural" only in the sense that it wasn't crafted by people. It would be hard to imagine that any race of people, human or otherwise, could have created it. Not that I could imagine a natural phenomenon capable of creating it either. The Wonder Hole is more than a hundred meters across, and based on the shape it took as it sloped into the ground, it looked to me like it could have been dug by some incredibly massive

creature. It's also so absurdly long that it barely felt like an exaggeration to say that it went on forever. It is truly beyond human comprehension.

The Wonder Hole had been known of since long, long ago. According to the old legends, the primordial dragon had made its bed on the continent, where it had slept until it was covered in dirt. Later, when the two gods and their followers had begun fighting, the primordial dragon had crawled out of its bed to stop them. Where was that bed? Here. The forerunners believed the Wonder Hole was the place the dragon slept. Their name for it was "the Bed of the Dragon." They feared and revered it, and they made a point of never getting too close to it.

Apparently, the Kingdom of Arabakia had been investigating the Wonder Hole even before they had been forced to withdraw to the lands south of the Tenryu Mountains. But the exploration had only begun to progress in earnest after Alterna had been built, and volunteer soldiers started to take an interest in it.

Most humans thought that the Wonder Hole had been formed when a series of limestone caves, lava pipes, fissures, valleys, and other such formations connected with one another. But who can really say? I think the primordial dragon did exist, and that maybe the dragon's bed might have too.

Now, did that mean the Wonder Hole in its entirety was the dragon's bed? I'm not so sure about that. I suspect that it started with the dragon's bed, and over time it expanded from there. I have no direct proof of this, but there is corroborating evidence.

We were more than a little surprised when we reached the Wonder Hole. It was unchanged. In fact, the closer we got, the fewer sekaishu we saw, and when we got within a kilometer of it, we didn't see any at all. Not even those black scraps.

The slope leading down into the Wonder Hole was grassy, and giant herbivorous pseudo-chickens known as melruks were scattered around the area, seemingly not having a care in the world. It was a rustic scene, one that the Wonder Hole was famous for, and it hadn't changed a bit.

"It's way too peaceful here," Ranta murmured, taken aback.

Yume, like the hunter she was, spotted something halfway down the slope and raced toward it.

Losing Itsukushima and Poochie had, as you'd expect, been a

painful blow for Yume. But I can't remember Yume ever getting particularly depressed about it. If I wanted to point to some sign that losing them was affecting her, maybe she was talking a little less. But that was about it. If anything, losing her father figure had made Yume stronger. She would later go on to birth a son and become a mother, but that was a choice she made, a proactive decision on her part.

Yume needed to become a mother. Not so much to preserve her bloodline, but because we needed to give birth to and raise a generation of children who would come after us. Looking back on it now, I think Yume felt it was her duty. Every living creature has an instinct to reproduce, and is naturally equipped for the task. Maybe Yume was just following that biological imperative, but she changed after Itsukushima's death. I can't help but feel that way.

What Yume found halfway down the slope was the ashes of a campfire, and traces of a rather large number of people having slept in the area. Her assessment was that fifty or so people had camped there, and after investigating for myself, I agreed with her.

"They were volunteer soldiers," Ranta concluded. "The survivors from Riverside Iron Fortress fled here and set up camp."

"Yume's thinkin' it wasn't just one night. Maybe they were here a few days? There's a spot a li'l ways away that they were usin' as a toilet, and a dump where they discarded bones and stuff."

"So they were hunting melruks to eat? They saw that the sekaishu were avoiding the area for some reason, so they camped here to recover their strength, and then entered the Wonder Hole...?"

The area around the Wonder Hole was apparently a safe haven. Though there were more survivors than I had expected, they must've only narrowly escaped from Riverside Iron Fortress nonetheless. It was no surprise that they had decided to stay there for a few days. In fact, I wouldn't have blamed them if they'd settled there permanently.

But they'd gone into the Wonder Hole instead.

Why was that?

We debated the subject as we set up a campfire within the survivors' former camp. Though I was loath to disrupt our newfound peace, even if it was only a temporary one, I killed a single melruk, butchered it, and ate it. The melruks in front of the

Wonder Hole ran around and made a ruckus over the death of their friend, but they settled down soon enough and peace returned.

We knew of a watering hole less than a kilometer from where we were, and had a source of food. There was no need for us to be in any rush to decide our next move, so we remained in the survivors' former camp for three, no, four days.

Thinking back on those four days soothes my heart, and fills me with a feeling of satisfaction.

We had lost many people who were important to us. Our past was nothing short of a disaster, and our future looked dark. Yet despite that, during those four days, I was probably happy. Was I looking away from the things I didn't want to see, and avoiding the thoughts I didn't want to think? Not necessarily.

We talked about things. Talked about them at length. There was no shortage of topics, many of which we could only have talked about between ourselves. I don't think there was any subject we actively avoided.

We talked candidly about Kuzaku, Setora, and Shihoru.

And about Merry, the No-Life King.

Merry had died once, but a mysterious man named Jessie offered to bring her back, and I accepted. Jessie had been Jessie, and yet at the same time not Jessie. There had been something inside him that was not him.

In short, the No-Life King.

Established theory held that the No-Life King had died in 555 A.C. That's weird on its own. What does it mean for an undying king to die? Didn't people describe him as undying because he was unable to die?

The truth is that the No-Life King never died.

The No-Life King had been lurking inside other people all the way up to the present day. Even now, that monster is still alive.

Did Jessie deliberately tempt me into doing it? I've thought about that so much I'm sick of it, but he never forced me to do anything.

"She can come back to life, like me, who already died once."

"But there is a price to pay."

"She'll be coming back in my place."

"You people aren't stupid, so you understand, right?"

“This isn’t normal.”

“It’s common sense that people can’t come back to life, and that’s a fact.”

That’s what Jessie had said.

He had told us that he could do it, but that his method for doing so went against the laws of nature, and we would pay a suitable price for it.

If I had been thinking clearly, would I have refused?

I couldn’t have.

No matter how many do-overs I might have been given, I would always have made the same choice. Merry had died, I had let her die, and I couldn’t leave it that way. I didn’t want to lose her. I’d have taken any deal, no matter how unfavorable, so long as it let me erase that loss.

That was why I didn’t regret having taken Jessie’s offer. Rather than fall into regret, self-blame, and self-pity, I needed to rack my brain and think about how to improve the situation we were in. That was the least I could do to atone. Even if it wasn’t something I could ever fully atone for, I had to do it.

I talked about that with Ranta and Yume while we stayed at the site of the survivors’ former camp in front of the Wonder Hole. I was probably quivering the entire time, but I managed to get what I wanted to say across without coming up short for words or breaking down into tears. I was on one side of the campfire, and Ranta and Yume were sitting on the other. They were naturally snuggling up to one another. Ranta was facing left, and Yume was facing right. Ranta had his right knee up, with his elbow resting on it. Yume’s knees were more relaxed. Ranta’s left and Yume’s right arm were touching.

“Man, if that’s what you think, I guess that’s how it was,” Ranta said quietly.

Yume puffed up her cheeks a little. “There’s no need to say it like that, ya dummy. It’s Haru-kun talkin’, and he’s talkin’ about Merry-chan. So this stuff affects all of us.”

“Yeah, I know that.”

“If ya know, then ya coulda said it differently.”

“It doesn’t matter how I say it. Like it or lump it, we’re all in this together. I’m with you to the end. You got that, Haruhiro?” Ranta had called me by my actual name, and was looking me straight in

the eye. “We’ve had our differences, yeah,” he continued. “And honestly, there were times when I thought we’d gone our separate ways. But I was wrong. I’m gonna stay the course now. I’ve made up my mind. Sure, you really don’t have what it takes to watch my back, but bitching and moaning isn’t gonna get us anywhere. It’s time to buck up. So struggle uselessly like you always do, and at least try to keep up.”

Did I nod in response? Make a clever remark? I don’t really remember, but I know one thing for certain: It was a huge relief to hear Ranta say that. It may well be that him saying that was what let me start thinking about the future.

So, why had the surviving volunteer soldiers entered the Wonder Hole? We came to the conclusion that they were looking for something. If the survivors were going to have any kind of future, then it had to lie somewhere beyond the Wonder Hole. The survivors had pushed forward to grasp some kind of hope.

But if we were correct about that, what exactly were they trying to find?

Soma was one possibility. The strongest volunteer soldiers hadn’t taken part in the recent battles. It wasn’t just Soma and his comrades who had been absent, though. The key members of the Day Breakers like the living legend Akira-san and the Typhoon Rocks had been absent too.

Soma was a warrior of such rare talent that everyone knew of him. Even now, after having seen his sword strike with enough power to split mountains and part the seas, I still am not able to fully gauge his skills. All I really understood about him was that he was really strong. As a person, he was very human once you got to know him, but everything about him seemed inhuman. Just how inhuman? Beyond what a mediocre guy like me could even comprehend. He was a genius. That kind of hackneyed word is all that comes to mind.

Unparalleled genius that he was, Soma couldn’t help but stand out, but the other members of the Day Breakers were no slouches either. Kemuri was an incredible paladin blessed with a solid physique, while Pingo was a necromancer who had the flesh golem Zenmai and was a talented mage on top of that. Lilia the elven sword dancer had mastered the blade to a degree that no human could ever hope to match. Shima the shaman was a healer

and an ex-thief, and also adept at martial arts.

They were a well-balanced party, and overwhelmingly powerful.

It's meaningless to ponder this, but if Soma's party and Akira-san's party had gone head to head, which would have come out on top?

Though he tended to say he was already over the hill, Akira-san had unsurpassed willpower, stamina, and experience, and from the outside he looked like he was still in his prime. In addition to Akira-san, there was also the dwarven axe-wielder Branken and the tall warrior Kayo, giving Akira-san's party a collection of exceptionally powerful front-liners. They had a solid back row too. The young half-elf Taro was an amazing archer, their priest Gogh could also use magic, and they also had Miho, who was said to be the greatest mage of her generation. Akira-san and Miho were married, and up until Soma had appeared, it had been indisputable that they were the strongest volunteer soldiers alive.

There were also the Typhoon Rocks, who were every bit as unique as Soma or Akira-san's parties. There was Kajita, the bald-headed berserker; the dread knight Moyugi, who was a tactician; Kuro the ex-hunter, a sublime warrior who was in tune with nature; Sakanami, who'd worked many jobs and was always unpredictable; and Tsuga, the ex-paladin who said he was a priest, but had a somewhat mysterious work history. It was no exaggeration to say they were a collection of badasses. They were right up there next to Soma and Akira-san in terms of their combat potential. If I said that they were the number three team, nobody would object.

That added up to eighteen people if you included the golem Zenmai. But they weren't *just* eighteen people. They were eighteen people who each had the strength of a hundred, no, *several* hundred.

It's possible that if they had joined in the battle from the beginning, Grimgar's history would have unfolded very differently. If Soma and the others had been there, maybe the Southern Expedition could've been repelled. If that had happened, Jin Mogis never would have seized power in Alterna. The No-Life King might never have been revived, and we could have continued living our lives as volunteer soldiers while we tried to figure out how to get Shihoru back.

I don’t genuinely believe that, but the eighteen of them were powerful enough that I can’t help but wonder. Or maybe I’m overrating them?

For me, it’s all in the past—and not just a long time ago, but a different era. It’s so distant now, it feels more like a fantasy than reality. I once ran into a fire dragon in another world called Darunggar. The terrifying beast was huge, like a mountain, and could breathe fire. But maybe it wasn’t actually all that big. Maybe my memories have blown it up to many times its original size, turning it into a massive creature that resembles, but doesn’t actually match, the original.

Well, even if that is the case, for us volunteer soldiers back then, those eighteen people were figures who inspired absolute awe. Maybe the Typhoon Rocks were on a slightly lower tier than the other two, but that was mainly because Soma and Akira-san were just in a totally different class. It’s no lie to say that they were borderline deified. Heroes like them deserved to be treated like gods.

Those eighteen hadn’t joined in the fighting.

Why not?

Because they hadn’t been around.

Soma had been exploring the Wonder Hole. In the past, he had traveled through it to reach Undead DC, which was all the way up near the Northern Frontier, surrounded by the Great Whiterock Mountains. Because of that accomplishment, when Soma had announced that there were signs that the No-Life King would return and that he was founding a new superclan called the Day Breakers, everyone had found him reasonably persuasive. Soma had brought Akira-san and the Typhoon Rocks with him, and they’d continued exploring the Wonder Hole.

Actually, my comrades and I had also been members of the Day Breakers. I don’t know how Io and her party had joined up with them, but for us, it had just sort of happened. But because we’d spent so long in the Dusk Realm, and then Darunggar, and then Parano, we had no idea what Soma and the others had been up to. There’d always been a massive wall in between us.

Anyway, back to the Wonder Hole.

They had been focusing on exploring it.

I didn’t know this back then, but during the series of battles

that had occurred, rather than being in the vicinity of the entrance to the Wonder Hole where the melruks lived, they had been hundreds of kilometers inside of it. They had infiltrated Undead DC, and had been on their way back through the hole when everything had gone down. So even if they had tried to return, they couldn't have. They'd been much more than a couple days' travel away. However, the volunteer soldiers *had* known where they had gone.

If they could simply join up with Soma, they would have a chance to get out of this alive. They could expect to be protected. Even if they couldn't overcome the present situation, if they could at least survive it with Soma and the Day Breakers, there was hope for the future.

We only came to a final decision the night before we set out. There was no more directionless worrying about what our next move should be. Ranta and I both knew what we had to do. I'm sure it was the same for Yume too.

Did we have trouble making up our minds? We probably wanted to sit around that campfire, just the three of us, for as long as we could. But even so, the entire time, we had been making portable food like dried and smoked meat, drawing as much water as we could, and preparing to set out.

"I guess we should get going," Ranta said, putting his arm around behind Yume's back and pulling her close to him.

Yume tilted her head to the side, making a face that seemed to say, *What's that about?* but she didn't try to push Ranta away.

"Yeah," I replied, nodding, and Ranta nodded back.

"Better get a good night's sleep, then," Yume said.

The next day, we entered the Wonder Hole.

The first part of it was less a cave, and more a valley that gradually sloped downward. The volunteer soldiers called that area the valley of holes. The valley was home to the small demi-humans known as spriggans, duergar, and bogies. They hunted melruks and often attacked each other, but this time we didn't see any of them. There were only insects and small animals. The valley of holes was bizarrely quiet.

I'd heard that the Wonder Hole had recently been flooded with a new race of creatures called grendels.

Inside the massive structure of the Wonder Hole, there were

numerous points where it connected to other worlds. Every once in a while, a team of volunteer soldiers would discover a new one, and when that happened, they'd start exploring the new frontier. But it was usually the other way around, with otherworldly creatures coming into Grimgar. The locals, having never seen or heard of these creatures before, would treat them as new races. If the need arose, they'd name them sometimes.

"Grendels" wasn't what the new arrivals called themselves. It was a name the volunteer soldiers had given them. It wasn't clear to anyone where the name had come from.

When we had awoken in Grimgar, our memories had been missing—or maybe I should say they'd been stolen or destroyed—anyway, all we had been able to remember was our names, and we'd forgotten almost everything else. We had been able to speak, and had possessed an understanding of the natural world, human society, and what was common sense. Sometimes, memories that clearly had nothing to do with Grimgar would come back to us too.

Did the word "grendel" come from one of those missing memories? I don't know, but the first time I heard it, I had a vague sense that it was something horrifying. Maybe it was something that existed in the world that we'd come from? Or from a story told there?

Whatever the case, grendels were a major threat, both to the volunteer soldiers and to the creatures living in the Wonder Hole. Not just to the three kinds of demi-humans in the valley of holes. There had once been a colony of ant-like creatures known as the muryans in the next section beyond the valley of holes. The complex tunnels of the muryan nest were still there, but there was no sign of the muryans themselves.

According to Ranta, the three kinds of demi-humans and the muryans had been massacred by the grendels, and they were gone now.

The grendels dismembered their victims, removing heads, guts, bones, and teeth to take back with them. They were probably eating at least some of that.

For a long time, the valley of holes and the muryan nest had been littered with the dead bodies of the three demi-human races and the muryans. But eventually, the insects and smaller animals

of the Wonder Hole must've eaten them or something, because we didn't see them anywhere.

I can't imagine that the three demi-humans and the muryans went extinct. They'd probably abandoned their homes and fled out of fear of the grendels.

This next part of the story took place after Alterna had been taken over by the orcs of the Southern Expedition.

Britney and the volunteer soldiers who'd escaped the city had been trying to set up base inside the Wonder Hole. Riverside Iron Fortress had also fallen, so there hadn't been any other place for them to go.

The Wonder Hole had been one of the primary areas of volunteer soldier activity, so it was sort of like their backyard. There were obviously a lot of dangers, but any volunteer soldier worth his salt had camped out in the Wonder Hole at some point. Some of the creatures that came from other worlds were edible, and since it was underground, there was groundwater they could use. If that hadn't been the case, then not even Soma and his group would have been able to survive their months-long dives into the hole that saw them traveling hundreds of kilometers into it—and over a thousand when the return trip was counted as well. I don't know if it makes sense at this point to say home is where you make it, but the Wonder Hole was livable enough. Or it should have been.

Unfortunately, their timing had coincided with the grendels rapidly expanding their territory.

The Volunteer Soldier Corps had fought the grendels in the area that was referred to as the kingdom of devils, beyond the valley of holes and the muryan nest. Initially, between the corps and the regular forces of the Frontier Army—the real Frontier Army, before Jin Mogis had usurped that name—they'd had a force of over a hundred people who had escaped Alterna. That number had included a lot of priests and paladins, so they had been able to drive off the grendels with hardly any deaths. But though they had won, the grendels had made it very clear that they would not be easy foes.

At first, it had been over a hundred volunteer soldiers against less than ten grendels, but those ten had stubbornly refused to give up, and eventually, reinforcements had arrived to support

them. The Volunteer Soldier Corps had ended up fighting around thirty grendels, but had somehow eventually managed to force them to withdraw.

After the battle, the corps had only been able to find five grendel corpses. Unlike the volunteer soldiers, the grendels hadn't had magic to heal their wounded, yet the grendels had fought a long battle against a force more than three times their size with only five deaths.

They had high individual combat ability, communicated with what appeared to be some sort of language, and were skilled at fighting in groups. The grendels were terrifyingly accustomed to combat, like a natural warrior race.

That hadn't been enough to force the Volunteer Soldier Corps to back down right away, but the grendels had attacked them every day after that, and sometimes more than once in the same day. Despite that, the volunteer soldiers had been able to endure the constant defensive battles, always coming out of them basically fine, but most of the regular forces had died.

Eventually, they had decided to retake Riverside Iron Fortress instead, and had left the Wonder Hole on November fifteenth, 659 A.C.

Two months after that, when Ranta, Yume, and I stepped into the kingdom of devils, it was so silent it made my ears hurt.

The rock walls were hewn into incredible structures—the work of creatures the volunteer soldiers had called baphomets.

The baphomets were humanoid creatures with goatlike heads who carried staves. They used those staves and their hands to make all kinds of things. They weren't aggressive, and wouldn't attack volunteer soldiers unless they were attacked first. They were the artists and architects of the Wonder Hole.

But the baphomets had abandoned the dwellings that they'd built there.

By the time the volunteer soldiers had fought the grendels, the baphomets had already left the kingdom of devils. Had they fled after having their fellows massacred by the grendels? Maybe they had moved somewhere else, and were still practicing their arts and architecture. I even found myself hoping that they were. The quiet hanging over the kingdom of devils was cruel and suffocating. This is a hackneyed way to describe it, but it was as

silent as the grave.

The yellow-green lights around us looked less like the fruits of the baphomets' diligent handiwork, and more like some kind of mood lighting meant to accentuate the heavy silence. I was carrying a lantern because some places in the Wonder Hole had no light at all. The sky was visible above the valley of holes, but we had needed to provide our own light in the muryan nest. The kingdom of devils was a different story.

It had been a while since I'd last been there, so I took a moment to think about whether it had been like this before. Had whatever gave off this yellow-green light always been there? Probably not. I asked Ranta and Yume, who said it was the first time they'd seen it.

We looked for the light's source, and found that it was coming from a bunch of twelve-sided objects that could have fit in the palm of my hand. These dodecahedrons were made of thick glass or something, and they had a luminous object of some kind sealed inside. Also, upon closer inspection, we determined that the light wasn't constant, but fluctuated slightly in strength.

I dunno how many there were. We found them on the cold, smooth stone floor, on the pillars the baphomets had created lining the passageway, and inside of rooms. There was no rhyme or reason to it. It felt like they'd just been placed anywhere they could be.

Yume frowned when I picked one up and looked it over. I felt that there was something off about it, and soon started to notice a certain unpleasant sensation.

"Oh...?" Ranta said, covering his ears with his hands.

When I saw him do that, I mentally went "Oh" myself and realized what was up.

Compared to the muryans' nest, the kingdom of devils was so quiet that it made our ears hurt. But maybe that wasn't quite right. Maybe my ears had been detecting an anomaly. A sound so quiet you couldn't hear it, as such—or rather, something that wasn't quite a sound. And it had gotten stronger. Not quite like a ringing in my ears, but maybe close to it. I made a mental connection between the phenomenon and the dodecahedron. Hadn't the change occurred after I had picked it up?

I put the dodecahedron back down in the corner. I had a feeling

it would be best if I put it exactly where I had found it. I did my best, but I wasn't sure that I had gotten it exactly right. Still, when I put the dodecahedron back, the sensation that was like a ringing in my ears finally went away.

For a long time, we didn't talk about it. I didn't have a logical reason to feel this way, but on a gut level I just knew that we had messed up. And if we'd messed up, we weren't going to walk away from it scot-free. We usually paid a price.

While there was clearly some kind of purpose behind the design of the kingdom of devils, to me it essentially looked like an apartment complex divided into four or five levels, with the individual "rooms," which were neither particularly tall nor deep, completely open on the side that connected to the passageway.

We hid in a room on the third level with no dodecahedrons in it. Looking out from within the room, I was able to keep an eye on the one I had put back in its place out in the passageway. I had Ranta and Yume stay in the very back of the room, while I situated myself at the entrance to watch the dodecahedron.

I was using Stealth, just in case. It was an obvious precaution. But what if I got spotted anyway? I readied myself, playing through a number of scenarios in my head.

I don't think I waited for long. Not that I was really waiting.

It would have been best if nothing came, although I suspected something would. Because I never expect things to go well.

The grendel wasn't quiet by any means. He was wearing metal armor all over his body, as well as a poncho that was like a straw raincoat, woven out of some kind of hard fiber. He had a spherical object with two earlike protrusions over his head, and a peep hole in the front that looked like a cross between a W and a U, protected by some kind of lattice behind it. It wasn't fine enough to block a needle, but it would have stopped a sword from being thrust through the opening.

He was carrying a weapon composed of a long handle with blades on either end of it, both of which were straight. The handle and blades were merged together and seemed unlikely to come apart unless the weapon was destroyed. It looked pretty solid and hefty.

They—the grendels, I mean—weren't easy to tell apart at a glance. However, there *were* individual differences between them.

Even the smaller grendels were at least 1.8 meters tall, while the larger ones stood at easily more than two meters. They were at least somewhat bigger than humans in pretty much every way—I guess they were built more similarly to orcs.

Also, they wore globes over their heads with varying numbers of protrusions. The vast majority of grendels had two, and they looked like ears because of that, but occasionally you saw a grendel with three. Grendels with four were less common than that, and those with five were rarer still. If my memory is correct, there have even been sightings of grendels with six or seven protrusions, but those were almost unheard of.

There were also differences in the shapes of their weapons, which were simply called double blades. The handles were a meter to a meter and a half long, with sword blades extending from either end. The blades could be straight-edged, sickle-shaped, cross-shaped, spear-like, or on rare occasions, even ball-ended. Was that because of personal preference? Fighting style? Tribe? I don't know, but while the grendels' weapons all had some basic features in common, there *was* some variety to them, even if it wasn't particularly impressive.

This particular grendel's weapon had a roughly two-meter handle, the blades were straight-edged, and he had two protrusions on his head. I guess you could say that he was a typical, ordinary grendel of average level. I know I'm repeating myself, but I had suspected that one might come, and he didn't betray my expectations, so I wasn't all that shaken up.

He came down the passageway toward us, making distinctive metallic sounds.

Hard metal armor grating against itself. Heavy objects striking against the floor. That was all the noises were, and yet there was something distinctive about those sounds when it was a grendel that was making them. Even now, I can remember them quite clearly. The moment I heard them, my immediate thought was *I know what that is.* They're sounds that I've heard many, many times since then too. I doubt I'll ever be able to forget them.

The grendel walked straight to the dodecahedron I'd put back. He was obviously seeking it out. He was holding his weapon in his right hand, but then he transferred it to his left before crouching down with a rattling noise to pick up the dodecahedron on the

ground. I assumed that meant he was right-handed.

With the dodecahedron resting in the palm of the grendel's hand, that sensation like my ears were ringing started again.

Here's what I think might have been going on.

Those dodecahedrons activated when they were moved from the spot they had been placed in. This was the sound they made when activated, and it was a sort of alarm. Grendels were able to detect that alarm even from a long distance away. When I had moved the dodecahedron earlier, that had triggered the alarm, and the grendel had heard it and had come to check.

The grendel passed the dodecahedron to his left hand, returning his weapon to his right, then began wandering around the area. His spherical headpiece with its two protrusions slowly turned right, then left, then up, and then returned to looking straight forward. He seemed to be looking around. Was he searching for something? For whoever had moved the dodecahedron? In other words, for me?

He went back and forth without entering any rooms. That was no reassurance, though. I kept my guard up, but I didn't feel any fear. It's not that I was confident he wouldn't find me. I had no choice but to stay still and keep my Stealth up regardless. In times like those, my mind went almost completely blank. If I had started thinking, then a mediocre guy like me would have had trouble staying calm. I think I knew from experience that uneasiness invited mistakes. Experience. In the end, experience was the only thing I could rely on. Experience can also lead to preconceptions, which are another source of errors, but I needed to have *something* to guide me, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to take a single step forward. I wouldn't have been able to go anywhere.

How long did he keep looking for us? It might have been ten, maybe fifteen minutes. But then the grendel suddenly came to a stop in the middle of the passageway, and set the dodecahedron down on the floor.

Was he putting it back again? No, that wasn't it. He brought his right foot down on the dodecahedron, and it didn't look like he was just stepping on it. It was more like he was striking it with his heel. When he moved his foot off of the dodecahedron, the object was no longer emitting light. It had definitely been giving off a

yellow-green glow before then. Was it broken? It didn't look like it had been crushed. But anyway, he picked up the extinguished dodecahedron, and then he left.

Even once the grendel was out of sight, and the metallic sounds had faded away, it was several minutes before I moved again. I was mentally sorting out what he'd been doing.

First, the dodecahedron had set off an alarm when I'd moved it. That alarm had attracted the grendel. He'd checked the specific dodecahedron that had sounded the alarm. That dodecahedron had been returned to its original place, but the grendel had still searched for intruders. He hadn't been able to find us. He had then stepped on the dodecahedron to extinguish it, and carried it away.

I relayed everything I had seen to Ranta and Yume.

"Guess that means the dodecahedrons are alarms, then, huh? Looks like we shouldn't go touching 'em carelessly," said Ranta. "And by the way, don't just go messing around with stuff like that, you dolt, Parupiro. I mean, those things were clearly suspicious. Shouldn't you have been able to figure that much out right away? Are you an idiot? Yeah, you are, huh? Man. You've always been such an idiot. Sheesh…"

Sometimes Ranta would bad-mouth me like this, trying to make me mad. It was just his way of communicating. Although he never explained this to me himself, I knew he was always trying to suss out what other people really felt. No matter what their real feelings were, it was more valuable to hear the truth than it was to hear some polite words, platitudes, or other things people might say to keep up appearances. I think that's how Ranta felt about it.

Regardless, if the dodecahedrons were alarms, then that meant the grendels were on guard against something. There hadn't been alarms before, so the grendels must've been preparing themselves to deal with an enemy—and a new enemy coming from the direction of the Wonder Hole's entrance at that.

Is that good news? Or is it the opposite?

I couldn't be sure one way or the other, but no one suggested we turn back.

We decided to continue on past the kingdom of devils. Obviously, if anything went wrong, we were going to run away immediately. Without anyone who could cast light magic, we

needed to avoid taking even minor injuries.

Why didn't the three of us choose to take no risks, and just survive together? That wasn't an option that ever occurred to us. But why was that? Thinking back on it now, I can't help but wonder, but at the time, pushing forward felt like the natural thing to do.

If we'd had nothing to hope for but survival, we would have made that our sole focus for lack of other choices. But we believed that if we steeled ourselves and pressed onward, there was a possibility that we could reunite with comrades. There might have been a better future waiting for us.

Instead of living for the sake of living, people choose to live for hope. In other words, if you have hope, you might die, but you might also live. However, without hope, you can only die. Isn't that just how it is to be human?

People can remain human as long as they have hope. Although, truthfully, that might be nothing more than wishful thinking on my part.

On the other side of the kingdom of devils there were several kilometers of limestone cave. The caves had dodecahedrons scattered throughout them too, casting a yellow-green light over all the stalactites and stalagmites. It was a breathtakingly beautiful scene, but there was no time to stop and take in the sights.

There was a dome-like structure about a hundred meters into the limestone cave area.

It was made up of more than ten frames, twelve to be precise—yeah, it was twelve—that had translucent walls inside of them. There was also a luminous object inside, giving off more of that yellow-green light, and I could make out the shape of someone sitting inside of it.

It was something we would see countless times after that—a grendel tent. We could tell from the outside that there was only a single grendel in there.

Later we would learn that while some tents only had room for one, there were also tents that had room for three or four, and even larger ones that could house upward of ten grendels. They all had the same shape, though. Domes made up of twelve frames using translucent materials. The grendels inside were usually sitting. I've never seen a grendel walking around inside one of their tents, except for when they were going in or coming out of it.

They didn’t lie down either. It can’t be because they don’t sleep, but to the best of my knowledge, grendels never lie down.

I had Ranta and Yume stand by while I thoroughly scoped things out. I checked out the area past the tent too. There wasn’t another tent anywhere for more than a kilometer, and no sign of other grendels.

There was one tent and one grendel. My guess was that this grendel would rush to any alarms that activated in the kingdom of devils or the limestone cave and check for enemies. Something like a sentry, I suppose. And if so, he was all alone, covering a fairly wide swath of territory.

After I returned, did we spend a long time discussing what to do? I don’t have any recollection of that. I had been considering whether we could take him out while I was scouting. When I got back, I found that Ranta and Yume had been thinking the same thing, and the argument was more about how we would strike than if we were going to.

“It’s three against one. If we can’t win in this situation, we’re not gonna get anywhere,” Ranta said.

“And then it’d be back to livin’ the campfire life, huh?” Yume added.

“It doesn’t seem like the grendels go outside at all, so if we have to, we can just hightail it for the exit. Easy.”

Ranta would play decoy. He would approach the tent, let the grendel spot him, and see how it reacted. Meanwhile, I’d move into a position where I could get behind the grendel unnoticed. Ranta would lure the grendel out of its tent and fight it, and Yume would join in. If it looked like there was no hope of us winning, I would distract it, and then we’d bail. If it looked like we *could* fight it, we’d take it on together. If anything seemed strange, like if we saw something other than the grendel moving, we’d put our safety first and retreat.

“This is the stuff. For all my complaining, this part really makes my heart pound,” Ranta said before we moved into action. “In the end, we’re volunteer soldiers. Violence is our way of life. We’re incurable.”

Was I like that too? I don’t think I was all fired up. I’ve never liked fighting, and I still hate it now. But even if I wasn’t burning with passion, it’s true I was ready to kill, so I was just as bad as he

was.

I went ahead, moving ten meters past the tent, and crouched down behind a stalagmite. I was carrying a dagger and a short sword that had a blade shaped like a flame. My wrists had been wounded when I had lost to a man named Takasagi, and they hadn't fully healed yet, but they weren't so bad that I couldn't wield a weapon. I held the dagger in my right hand, ready to strike. There was no need to give all my cards away from the beginning.

Though he wasn't on my level as a thief, Ranta could mask his steps too. He was carrying a nameless katana. I think it had once belonged to Takasagi. Ranta had already drawn it. His footsteps were nearly silent, but he wasn't even trying to hide. Ranta was boldly approaching the grendel tent. I had no clue where Yume was, though. Was she hiding somewhere? Once Ranta started fighting the grendel, she was probably planning to launch a surprise attack and back him up.

Yume was a pacifist by nature, and not bloodthirsty at all. Yet despite that, she had a natural sense for battle, and was incredibly athletic.

I'm glad the two of them left their bloodlines in this world. Knowing that those two have descendants is enough to make me feel incredibly emotional on its own, but their genes are also incredible. If Grimgar is going to have a future, then their blood may help carve a path to it. Though, that's just my selfish hope.

When Ranta was about three meters from the tent, the grendel inside started to move, grabbing his weapon and rising to one knee. The dome-shaped tent had twelve frames which supported it. The walls were twelve translucent facets. And as the grendel was standing up, he put his left hand on the facet nearest to Ranta. When he did, the translucent wall became completely transparent. Or rather, it disappeared.

The grendel pounced out through the opening, and attacked.

Two protrusions. A straight-edged double blade. Roughly two meters tall. This was probably the same grendel that had come to investigate the dodecahedron in the kingdom of devils.

There was a metallic sound as he lunged, rapidly swinging his weapon, not vertically, not horizontally, but two times diagonally. If Ranta had stayed where he was, then he definitely would have been cleanly bisected. But Ranta wasn't going to just sit there and

get cut up without a fight.

The dread knights have a technique in their unique fighting style called Missing. My understanding is that it casts an illusion on the enemy by using muscles that humans don't usually use, and with timing that we find unnatural. Basically, it catches the enemy off guard and makes them misread the dread knight. That's simple enough to say, but it isn't so easy to actually do.

Ranta slipped through the grendel's blade, easily moving around to behind him on the left side. Now, it's obviously impossible for him to have actually slipped *through* the blade; that was just how it looked.

The grendel seemed to lose track of Ranta for a moment, but found him again quickly enough. He closed in and took another two diagonal swings at the dread knight, but the result was exactly the same as the first time. Ranta slipped through the grendel's blade, easily moving around to behind him on the right side.

Ranta smirked. He was probably thinking something like, *Hey, it works.*

That said, the grendel wasn't an easy foe. He didn't press the attack, but swung his blades in a composed manner as he got a read on what Ranta was doing. His body was facing Ranta, but he occasionally turned his head back and forth. The enemy didn't think Ranta was alone. Or at the very least, hadn't ruled out the possibility that Ranta wasn't his only opponent. He was thinking that there might be others. But at the same time, he wasn't being hasty. His movements felt calm.

Yume hasn't made her move yet. I won't either. It's not time.

Ranta held his katana in both hands, bending both knees as he lowered himself. His back was bent quite heavily, and he never stayed still for a moment. He was constantly swaying in all directions.

What will his next move be?

"Pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa." Ranta brought his lips together and blew air through them repeatedly, making an odd noise. I don't think there was any particular meaning to it. But maybe his opponent would read into it and think that there might be.

The grendel didn't react. He wasn't going to be thrown off by Ranta acting a little weird.

"Heh."

Ranta smiled faintly. A moment later, he jumped hard to the right—or so I thought, but then he was on the left. Then again to the right. No. The left.

The grendel swung his weapon in a quick, compact motion. To the right. That was where Ranta appeared, swinging his katana down diagonally. The grendel had read his moves, and was trying to block his slash.

However, Ranta disappeared again. No, he hadn't vanished. Ranta was still there. In front of the grendel. Down low. He was thrusting his katana upward from a low posture. Ranta was aiming for the grendel's exposed neck, in between the straw-raincoat-like poncho and the globe-shaped helmet with two protrusions.



The grendel reflexively leaned back, dodging Ranta's thrust. Could the grendel recover from that position? Would he try to attack despite his unbalanced posture, in an attempt to drive Ranta off?

No. He did no such thing. The grendel simply rolled backward. Then, as he got up from his backward roll, he swung.

Ranta used a move that wasn't quite a step, and wasn't a jump, but was rather this sort of smooth shuffling of his feet to get out of the way of the grendel's weapon. The grendel didn't follow up on his attack, and Ranta was able to put some distance between them.

"Whew..." Ranta broke into a grin. "You're good. But with the way you look, I wouldn't've expected you to be so straightforward __"

In the middle of Ranta's bantering, the grendel suddenly charged in with no warning, swinging his double blade around in circles.

"Whoa! Yo! Hah!"

Using the same moves that I described before, Ranta slipped through the blade to the left, and to the right, and got behind his opponent. The more the grendel attacked, the more chances he gave Ranta to figure out his moves. For a speedy guy like Ranta, if he could see the enemy's moves coming, he could react.

A moment later, a small shower of sparks came from between them. It was Ranta. His katana had hit the grendel. But even when he landed a blow, it didn't so much as make the grendel flinch. Ranta was attacking while evading a double blade that was spinning around like a windmill caught in the gale, so there was no way he'd be able to land a decisive blow. But were his attacks really *that* ineffective?

The grendel's helmet, armor, and poncho—together, they were a terrifyingly effective defense. And the grendel was fast too. I'm sure part of the reason for that was his incredible strength, but his armor must have also been designed to not interfere with his movement.

And there was that weapon too. Not only could it thrust and slash, it could also make use of centrifugal force for spinning attacks. Spinning attacks inevitably left openings, but the grendel could afford to take a few blows from his opponent and still be

fine. He had good armor, so they didn't faze him.

He made use of unusual tools like the dodecahedron alarms that doubled as lights and the translucent tent, and he looked bizarre to our eyes, but like Ranta had said earlier, the grendel's fighting style was straightforward and steady, without any holes in it.

Was it about time for Yume to do something? If she hadn't acted yet, then it meant she couldn't afford to. If Yume was going to make a move in this situation, it would be when Ranta got into trouble.

As things stood, the grendel's attacks weren't decisive enough. Though, maybe it's not fair to the grendel for me to put it that way? Ranta was only able to keep dodging the grendel's double blade because of his unorthodox and, in some ways, supernatural movements. I could never have done that. I'm sure even Yume would only have been able to go toe-to-toe with the grendel for a minute at most, maybe less.

Ranta had an unusually high amount of stamina, but he was still human, so he had his limits, and his moves were gradually getting less sharp. Eventually, he wouldn't be able to move his legs anymore.

It should be the same for the grendel. But even if the grendel runs out of stamina first, can we beat it? Is there any way we can kill that creature? How?

I decided to make a move. I came out of the shadow of the stalagmite, and closed in on the grendel's back as it was trading blows with Ranta. Ranta had detected me, but was pretending he hadn't. We were perfectly in sync on that. I knew Ranta, and Ranta knew me. Possibly better than either of us knew anyone else. That didn't mean we knew everything. It was a partial understanding. But the parts of each other that we did know were core to us, and if we knew them, then we knew everything that mattered.

That's why he had me do what I did.

I didn't want to do it, but I had no other choice.

Who else but me could have done it?

I'm not glad that I did, though. Not one bit.

But if it had to be done, and if it was what he wanted—no, I and I alone know that it *was* what he wanted. I know it all too well. And that's why I had to do it.

Ranta slipped through the grendel's blade, heading right, with motions that flowed like water, flapping his lips as he moved away from the enemy.

"Pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa, pa..."

Those weird noises he was making seemed to chase after him.

He can't be messing around at a time like this. No, that's not it. It's intentional.

The grendel tried to attack Ranta by following that sound, or perhaps he was lured in by it.

Just one more step, and my dagger would reach the grendel's back. That was why Ranta chose this moment to deliberately draw the grendel's attention.

But the grendel apparently knew he was being baited. He didn't swing for Ranta, but tried to turn.

Did he know someone—namely, me—was behind him?

Either way, I was faster. I didn't bury my dagger in the grendel's back. He was covered in armor there, and wearing a poncho made of metallic fiber on top of it. It wasn't going to happen. I couldn't pierce that.

I held my dagger with a backhand grip and struck his poncho. I felt my blade scratch it, but I was already moving around to his left side, kicking his right knee as a parting blow. That gave me momentum, and I quickly jumped away. If I was lucky, that would be enough to throw him off-balance. And even if it wasn't, wouldn't it at least make an opening for Ranta to attack?

"Hyahhhh!"

Right after I kicked the grendel's knee, Ranta used his katana to smack that globe-shaped helmet with the two protrusions on it twice, from the right and the left. They weren't light taps either; he was really whaling on it. Maybe a little too hard.

Was it doing anything? I don't know, but the grendel showed signs of faltering. That said, its helmet wasn't cracked open, or even dented. It wasn't knocked askew either. And the grendel was going to counterattack soon.

"Mewwwwww!"

That was when Yume made her move.

It didn't surprise me, and probably didn't surprise Ranta either. If anything, Ranta leaning too hard into hitting the grendel's head had been a lead-in to this.

Yume appeared beside the grendel and pounced. A flying kick. She went high—surprisingly high. If it were me, I'd have gone for its back, but Yume wasn't me. She was bolder than I was. Yume planted a jump kick on the grendel's face. With both feet. The grendel was bowled over. And as for Yume, she executed a midair spin and landed with style.

"Meow!"

"How'd you like that, Paru!"

I could understand Parupiro, but where the heck had "Paru" come from?

I swallowed any complaints I had, though, and took off running, and now that little moment is something I look back on fondly.

We got the hell out of there.

I think we spent the next forty-seven days just running around and fleeing from the grendels that we couldn't have beaten even if we had ever tried to fight them again. Were we simply trying to grasp some sort of victory, no matter how small it might have been?

Thanks to Ranta and Yume, I wasn't crushed by reality. But what, ultimately, were we even trying to accomplish? If you'd asked me that back then, I would've had a hard time answering. But though they were physically taxing, when I look back on them, the impression I have of those forty-seven days is that they really weren't all that bad. Maybe the reason I'm able to feel that way is because I now know for a fact that our seemingly pointless struggle actually did have meaning to it.

3. The Difference Between All of You and Me

Forty-seven days. I just happened to keep track of the number, and I haven't forgotten it since for whatever reason.

Narrating what went on during those forty-seven days would only bore you. After all, we never got to the point where we could fight the grendels on even footing during those forty-seven days, nor did we manage to kill one of them using any kind of unorthodox tactic. All we did to the grendels was harass them.

Even with the three of us working together, we couldn't defeat even a single lone grendel. Well, maybe if we'd fought them to the death there would have been a chance, but there was no way we were going to do that.

What could we do, then?

We tried to put together something resembling a strategy, but no matter what ideas we came up with, we basically never put them into action. The holes in our plans would come out as we discussed them, and we'd always decide they weren't realistic.

It wasn't going to be easy to kill that sentry grendel. So, was there some way we could get around him? In order to find out, we tested various things, like what triggered those dodecahedral alarms, and how he would react when they went off.

I'm pretty sure it was on the eighth day that I tried applying a powerful shock to one to turn it off, and ended up having to fight the sentry grendel when he came to the kingdom of devils. It went pretty much the same way as our first fight with him. We ran. And that time, we fled all the way outside the Wonder Hole, and spent another night at the survivors' former camp.

The sentry grendel started sitting outside his tent, not in it. There was no question that he was wary of us.

If I moved alone, I could slip past the sentry grendel undetected. I passed through the limestone cave area, and went as far as an area that was known as the voxels beyond that.

I unfortunately have no idea what the word voxel means, but there were a whole lot of cubic stones of varying sizes there. The

floors and walls were made up of them too.

Had some otherworldly creature dug through there and created those cubic stones? Or were they some kind of remains? Or maybe an effect of magic or something? People had a lot of guesses about them, but nobody knew anything for certain.

Anyway, the volunteer soldiers called them cubes. The voxels area was full of nothing but cubes.

Those dodecahedrons were scattered around the voxels too, emitting their yellow-green light, and there were a couple more grendel tents as well. I spotted one small tent that was just big enough for the single grendel sitting in it, and a larger one that housed three, before returning to the room in the kingdom of devils where Ranta and Yume were waiting, where I passed on what I had learned.

A few days after that, the grendels came to the kingdom of devils even though we hadn't done anything to set off the dodecahedrons. And it wasn't just the lone sentry. That time, there were three of them.

The grendel trio searched every nook and cranny of the kingdom of devils. I'm not sure I would have been able to hide until they went away even if I'd been on my own. For lack of any better options, we made the decision to flee the room that we were staying in well before the grendels got close to it. They chased us, but we managed to get away. I guess you could say we picked up a useful piece of information during that encounter—that we could outrun them. But then, Yume and I, being a thief and a hunter, used light equipment, and so did Ranta, plus the three of us were all light on our feet. The grendels weren't slow, despite how heavy their equipment was, nor did they tire quickly. It was definitely not the case that grendels were significantly slower than humans.

After that, out of an abundance of caution, I went to the kingdom of devils by myself, and I found they had set up a tent there—a small one, with one grendel inside.

I continued on to the limestone cave, and found that the tent that had previously been there was gone, replaced by a larger one. There were two grendels inside it, and a third sitting right outside. It looked like they'd changed their security arrangements. I couldn't imagine that being a very positive development. They

were probably getting serious about dealing with us. That was bad news.

Or was it?

We felt a sense of impending crisis, but somewhere in our hearts, maybe we were happy about the change in the situation. We wanted to do something. Our greatest enemy wasn't the grendels, who we couldn't beat in a fight; it was our own sense of powerlessness.

We couldn't do anything. There was nothing *to* do. It all seemed hopeless. But if something happened to disrupt the status quo, then we'd do what we could to capitalize on it, no matter what 'it' was.

The grendels had pushed into the kingdom of devils, where we'd been able to stay before. We had to do something about that. Just racking our brains over what we should do, or what we needed to do, felt like doing something. But we were struggling in vain.

There were survivors deeper inside the Wonder Hole. There was a chance that we would be able to reunite with people we knew, maybe even people we'd fought shoulder to shoulder with. We had things to hope for, but almost no prospect of obtaining them.

We were stuck in the region around the entrance of the Wonder Hole, with no foothold that would allow us to progress. Honestly, I suspect that we were beginning to feel like we'd never be able to move forward. We couldn't even kill a single grendel. If there were tons more of them further in, we were clearly out of luck.

Even so, we kept pestering the grendels in the kingdom of devils. Occasionally, their numbers would be bolstered by reinforcements from the limestone cave. The grendels began laying dodecahedrons in the muryan nest too. Eventually, I went and scouted the voxels again, and found that there were more tents in the area than before, along with quite a few more grendels. When things started getting dicey, we left the Wonder Hole. Then, when the enemy settled down, we headed back in there again.

If we kept at it, there was a chance that we'd find an opening eventually. I feel like I remember Ranta saying something along those lines, but I'm not sure he even believed it himself.

Forty-seven days. That's how long we lived like that, but even if

it had gone on for a hundred days, it probably would have just been more of the same. I think we could have kept at it for two hundred, even three hundred days with no change. If we could have done the same thing for years and years, then at some point, would we have been able to say that, in a way, we were happy? I wonder about that, looking back on it now. Maybe I can think that way because of how things turned out. On the forty-seventh day. Though, to be precise, there were signs of what would happen before that.

The grendels' behavior changed. On the forty-fifth day, I was scouting out the limestone cave by myself, and there was only a single grendel sitting outside of a medium-sized tent. I remember thinking it was weird that he was all by himself. They had been gradually intensifying their security prior to that, but on that day their numbers had suddenly thinned out. I had no idea what could be going on.

I didn't go as far as the voxels. I got the feeling it would be dangerous to do so.

The next day—the forty-sixth—the tent in the kingdom of devils was empty. The sentry grendel was gone. And there was once again only one grendel in a tent within the limestone cave.

Then, on the forty-seventh day, I went to the kingdom of devils with Ranta and Yume. The tent was vacant, like before, and we saw no sign of the grendel. But that wasn't all. We continued on to the limestone cave, where the medium-sized tent there had likewise been abandoned. The grendels were gone. That actually made me more uneasy, and Ranta got all worked up about it.

"There's gotta be something up. I mean, something musta happened to them. Maybe we can move on now?"

I was still cautious, or rather, timid and indecisive. "Even if we push ahead, if there's even a single grendel, we won't be able to keep going."

"Well, how about tryin' and seein', then? And if it's no good, we can come back here real quick," Yume suggested.

"Yume's right," Ranta said. "We'll go as far as we can, then bail if it looks bad. That settles it."

We headed through the limestone cave toward the voxels.

Though Ranta and Yume had both been to the cave before, that was their first time in the voxels. There were an incredible number

of cubes piled up in the voxels, which was a bizarre sight and a huge contrast to the beauty of the limestone cave. But I had seen it many times before, and Ranta and Yume weren't exactly mesmerized by the unusual view either.

The moment we entered the voxels, we heard swords clashing. And voices too. Human-sounding voices.

"Hey!"

Ranta didn't need to say anything more than that. I took off running, and the other two raced to keep up with me. I think I totally lost my head at that point. The voxels were filled with pillars and hills made of cubes. Visibility wasn't great. But though I couldn't see who was shouting, I could tell the voices were probably human, and what was more, they sounded familiar. I knew those people.

I raced between numerous pillars of cubes, and climbed up and down several hills, before coming to a stop close to the summit of one of them.

There they were. Humans, at the foot of the hill. They were armed. Volunteer soldiers. The volunteer soldiers were fighting. Against the grendels, of course.

We had a pretty good view of it in the yellow-green light of the dodecahedrons. I counted five people, and was able to identify them in an instant.

There was a priest wearing glasses. But despite being a priest, he was wielding a warhammer. A massive one, larger than anything I could ever hope to swing. It was Tada. Tada of the Tokkis. I watched as he hammered a grendel's head and pulverized it.

There was a mage too. Though, mage or not, she was holding an impressive longsword in each hand. The tall woman swung her blades around gloriously. Despite being a magic user, she didn't hesitate to block the double blade of the grendel she was fighting, and was holding her ground even if she couldn't push it back. Mimori. It was Mimorin.

They were alive.

After we'd found Tokimune's remains at Riverside Iron Fortress, I'd half given up, no, almost entirely given up on them. *They're the Tokkis. Tada, Mimori, and the others would've fought to the end alongside Tokimune.* I'd had a pretty strong feeling about that,

given how tight the bond between them had been. But knowing Tokimune, it was possible he had sacrificed himself to clear a path for his precious comrades to get out alive. If Tokimune had ordered them, *Move onward, my friends,* with his bravery and good cheer, they'd have swallowed their tears and forged ahead without looking back. That was the kind of people the Tokkis were.

Tada had crushed a grendel, and Mimori had pulled another away, boldly fighting it one-on-one. But while Tada might have had the strength for it, Mimori was a woman. Sure, she was blessed with height and skilled with her blades, but it was hard for me to imagine her being able to push through a grendel's defenses. Who knew how long she would be able to keep fighting it evenly. Not that there was any need for Mimori to hold on. As I'd crested the hill, I'd witnessed Tada crushing one grendel, and Mimori crossing blades with another. That was pure coincidence. I had only witnessed one scene of the battle. But one scene flows into the next, and things never stop changing.

Someone let out an enthusiastic "Hey!" and rammed his body into the grendel Mimori was fighting. Well, not so much his body as his shield. The shield bash knocked the grendel off-balance.

"Kikka!"

Ranta shouted the man's name with glee. Though, to be perfectly accurate, his name wasn't Kikka, it was Kikkawa, but I guess Ranta mispronounced it in the heat of the moment.

Once his shield bash was successful, Kikkawa pulled back. Mimori didn't push the attack, though. Someone else landed the finishing blow on the grendel.

"Hi-yahhhhhh!"

A warrior named Ron with close-cropped hair charged in, swinging a greatsword that looked like a massive meat cleaver at the grendel with pure brute force. It wasn't as easy to do as that description made it sound, though. Without an uncommon amount of strength and more guts than most people had, attacking effectively that way would have been impossible. It also required experience. Unless someone had experience in battle, they wouldn't be able to really put their strength to use when the time came for it. That was why warriors who fought the way Ron did tended to lose their lives before they learned to fight like that. Like my comrade Moguzo had.

The road to becoming a powerful warrior is a thorny one, and there aren't any shortcuts to speed things along. You simply have to keep trudging along an incredibly steep path, with thorns scratching you from all sides. Ron had plodded his way up that path, and had eventually reached a pinnacle of sorts. It was possible that Tada, despite being a priest, had attained a similar level of skill.

However, the other warrior among the combatants—who had been lopping off the right arm and then the head of another grendel while Ron had been making his move—was cut from a different cloth. He had a bulkier build than Ron or Tada, and his overall physical attributes were off the charts.

Did he rely more on strength or finesse? If I had to pick, I'd have to guess strength. But strength wasn't all he had. There was flexibility in his incredible power. He was fast, but he varied his speed, and almost never stopped moving. Even when he *was* completely still, he seemed to be flowing gently. He was incomparably intense, yet aloof. He was impossible to resist, and demanded submission, like a majestic force of nature.

I know that he was also intelligent. In terms of his personality, he could be tough to deal with. He wasn't very open, and seemed obstinate. But on the other hand, he took things as they came, and had a mature, philosophical look in his eyes as he regarded other people. His swordsmanship was forceful in a way that completely swallowed up his opponents. He wasn't bound by form, and transcended mere adaptability. He had an unimpeded flexibility that seemed to not even care whether he won or lost.

His silver hair was even longer than the last time I'd seen him. He wasn't wearing that armor of his, the relic Aragarfald, but it was obvious that he wouldn't be. Because I had seen the night-clad one wearing it, I'd mistakenly assumed that he must have died at Riverside Iron Fortress with Tokimune and Britney. I had even convinced myself that it was him inside the night-clad one we had encountered there.

I had awoken in Grimgar on the same day as Renji, and we had enlisted at the same time, but we weren't comrades, nor was he my friend. He'd always been special. And I wasn't. I was middle of the pack at best. Or more like the bottom of the barrel. But he was just built differently.

Anyone could have guessed that he was going to rise to the top. And that was exactly what he'd done. He was a bird that soared into the sky, while I was an insect crawling on the ground. If we hadn't happened to enlist at the same time by pure chance, then I never would have even had the chance to look him in the eye. We lived in different worlds. Normally, we'd never have met, but we had both coincidentally been in Grimgar.

Renji was wearing something like a breastplate, but other than that, his armor was minimal. His weapon of choice hadn't changed. He was still using the single-edged greatsword that he had taken off the orc Ish Dogran. But knowing him, he probably could have torn through these grendels with nothing more than a rusty, bent blade.

How many grendels had Renji and the others encountered here in the voxels? Even just in the time since I had climbed the hill, Tada had crushed one, Ron had hacked up another, and Renji had cut down a third. There were more grendels around them collapsed on the ground—and grendels normally didn't even lie down to rest.

Only one grendel was left standing. Renji turned to face him, holding the sword of Ish Dogran in a fighting stance. Though, actually, while I called it a fighting stance, in reality he was simply holding his blade in one hand, with his arm held straight out, pointing at the grendel. His stance was wider than his shoulders, and his knees weren't even bent. He was basically just standing there.

I can recall Ranta staring intently at Renji at that moment. *What a guy,* I thought. Ranta was trying to learn from Renji. If there was anything he could steal, he was going to do it. It was absurd to try to use Renji as a reference. It was like a turtle watching a horse gallop and trying to figure out how to run like that, even though there's no way a turtle could ever run like a horse.

"Uuuuueeeeeeehhhhhhh." The grendel let out a low groan, then began spinning his blade around in a figure-8 motion.

He was a good head taller than Renji, and his helmet had more than two protrusions. It had three. The blades of his double blade were like iron balls with spikes, so maybe it wasn't exactly correct to call them blades. Regardless, this grendel was way tougher than the ones with only two protrusions.

The grendel made the first move. But from where I was standing, it looked like all he was doing was slowly approaching Renji, trying to get the weapon he was already spinning around to mow down his foe. That seemed easy enough to avoid.

Renji stepped aside, out of the way of the grendel's blade. But the grendel didn't stop; he just kept pursuing Renji, who evaded again in the same manner. The two of them were moving in circles. The grendel kept spinning his weapon, but didn't strike out with it.

We were all silent—not just Ranta, Yume, and I, but the rest of the volunteer soldiers as well—and we barely moved at all. Everyone was watching with bated breath.

I gradually figured it out. The weapon that the grendel was swinging around probably had the power to inflict a one-hit kill. It had a long handle, and considerable reach. If Renji got in range, the weapon would strike immediately. It was like there was a weapon that could kill with a touch coming at him.

On top of that, despite being isolated and alone, the grendel seemed perfectly composed. His steps weren't short, but he was clearly taking them at a relaxed pace. There was no telling when he might pick up the pace and go in for a sudden attack.

I doubt I could have kept my cool in the face of an attack like that. I'd always end up thinking, *This is bad. I need to do something.*

"Renji!"

Someone shouted Renji's name. It was that mage who wore black-rimmed glasses. Adachi. He had joined up at the same time as us, and was one of Renji's comrades.

"Back off," Renji said, probably to Adachi.

The mage simply adjusted his glasses, saying nothing in response.

The grendel increased the pressure right after that. It looked to me like his stride suddenly doubled in length. Renji's sideward movement sped up to match him. The grendel changed things up further, altering the way he was swinging his weapon. Its reach grew considerably.

Renji jumped back. Had that panicked him? No, that wasn't it. He moved back, and then forward again a moment later, thrusting the sword of Ish Dogran with both hands.

"Whoa!" Ranta cried out in admiration.

What had Renji thrust at? I couldn't tell. But somehow he'd

gotten past the weapon that the grendel had been swinging around with incredible force and had gone for his opponent's hands. The weapon suddenly stopped spinning. Renji then raced past the grendel's side, landing a decapitating blow as he went.

"I could do that," Ranta murmured.

That was something he thought he could imitate. He didn't necessarily mean it was something he could do right that moment. But even if it seemed like an incredibly lofty goal, Ranta was certain that it wasn't completely impossible for him to reach it. He'd build the strength necessary to get him there. Ranta was the kind of guy who could think that way.

"Let's go!" Yume urged, and we descended the cube mountain.

"Ahhhhhh!" Kikkawa shouted out loud when he noticed us. "It's Haruhiro! And Ranta! And even Yume! It's Haruhiro and Ranta and Yume, whoaaaaaa! Haruhirooo! Rantaaa! Yumeee! Woo-hoooooo! Nice! You're still alive! Banzai! This is like the best thing ever!"

Kikkawa had tears in his eyes. Mimori raced forward, and hugged me with all her might. I don't know why, but she had a thing for me. But I couldn't return her feelings, so I'd had to reject her. But that time, I just stood still, letting her hold me. She was stronger than I was, so it hurt, but I didn't say a word in protest.

"It's good... It's good, yeah. You're a son of a bitch, though. But it's good, yeah. Anyway..." The petite priest, Anna-san, who was the flag bearer of the Tokkis and the life of their party, was crying too. I remember that Tada slapped me on the back. It knocked the wind out of me for a moment. Inui was there as well, saying cryptic things like always. And he was still wearing his eye patch. All I remember about him is that he was always acting weird, and doing things that made no sense. But about a third of the hair in his ponytail had gone white. I'm sure that he was struggling too, in his own way.

Yume hugged Anna-san, and then also hugged Team Renji's priest Chibi as they celebrated our reunion. Chibi was an incredibly quiet woman, and even to this day I have no idea what she was really like. But after joining up with them, I saw her get emotional like that a number of other times. Though she wasn't one to voice her feelings, she could be incredibly caring. Despite her small stature, she stood head and shoulders above most healers, and was also a highly observant jack-of-all-trades. She was more loyal

to Renji than anyone, and Renji knew it, so he trusted her implicitly. If Renji hadn't put such massive trust in her, she wouldn't have turned out the way she had.

Ranta was having fun bantering with Ron. The two had always seemed to mesh well, and through our later shared struggles, they became as close as brothers.

Ron was one of Renji's comrades. I would say that they were war buddies and had a relationship built on trust, but they couldn't really open up to one another. Renji was more closed off than most people, and seemed to refuse to get emotionally involved with those around him. That was probably irksome for a guy like Ron, but Renji was just too appealing as someone to fight alongside, and to have watching your back. This was the point when Ron finally gained a friend in Ranta. I think it was probably good for him.

Once Mimori released me, Adachi came over for some practical, businesslike talk. There aren't many people with a brain as intricately organized as his. Once he heard my explanation, he briefly explained to me that our forty-seven-day struggle had not been in vain after all.

The surviving volunteer soldiers who had escaped Riverside Iron Fortress had, as we'd speculated, entered the Wonder Hole hoping to join up with Soma. They'd had to eliminate the grendels to advance, and it had been a difficult struggle at first. Even so, they'd had an impressive group consisting of Team Renji, the Tokkis—who had still kept using that name after losing Tokimune—Kajiko's six Wild Angels, and the four remaining survivors of the Berserkers and Iron Knuckle. They had also been fortunate enough to have Chibi, Tada, Anna-san, Cocono of the Wild Angels, and Wado from the former Berserkers for a total of five priests. They had been able to fight tenaciously, and had eventually learned to fight grendels.

They'd advanced little by little, and had managed to reach the place that the volunteer soldiers called junction one. That was where the main route and sub route of the Wonder Hole split. The sub route wasn't really any smaller than the main route, though. In surface terms, it took the long way around the Crown Mountains in the Quickwind Plains, splitting into multiple branches, before returning to the main route once again. The point where this sub

route and the main route reconverged was called junction two.

Junction one had been a tough spot for them. The grendels had built fortifications in the area, and had been amassing strength there. Renji and the others had tried to conquer the grendels' base, but had taken major losses, including three deaths—one of the Wild Angels, one of the Berserkers, and a member of Iron Knuckle. Ultimately, they hadn't been able to capture the fortifications, but they *had* been able to get over to the main route.

They had advanced further from there, and after fending off several pursuers from the fortifications, they had realized something. They were a collection of powerful soldiers, and despite not being a large force, they had been able to break through the fortifications at junction one even if they hadn't been able to seize them.

There had been several waves of pursuers afterward, but never more than around ten grendels at a time, and usually only five or six. Even in small numbers, grendels were tough opponents, so I certainly wouldn't say it was easy for them, but they had managed to beat back all the enemies that came after them.

That had made them wonder if there weren't all that many grendels in total. At the very least, they weren't a fecund race like the goblins, who could show up in such numbers that they seemed to pour out of the ground like a wellspring.

Each grendel was an excellent combatant. Superb, even. But unlike carnivorous beasts, it was less that they were natural predators, and more that each was individually skilled at fighting. They couldn't have fought like that unless they had training and experience.

It was not hard to imagine that the number of protrusions on their helmets represented a sort of class hierarchy. Trained soldiers fought under a commander, and eliminated foes in an organized fashion. Were they a small elite force like that?

After breaking through junction one, Renji and the others had encountered various difficulties like encountering monsters they'd never seen before, getting lost, and being ambushed by the small units of grendels that were pursuing them, but had continued to make relatively smooth progress until they had reached junction two. The grendels had a larger, more hardened fortification there than the one they had at junction one.

It turned out that the sub route was firmly under the control of the grendels, who had blocked it off at the two junctions that connected it to the main route. This is still unconfirmed, but there's probably a point somewhere in the sub route that connects to the grendels' homeland, or what we might call the "world of grendels." The grendels had entered the Wonder Hole through there, and were expanding their control.

Having already struggled with junction one, Renji and the others had stood no chance of taking over junction two. With no way to make more progress on the main route, they'd had to consider turning back. But even getting out of the Wonder Hole would have required them to break through junction one again.

Their backs hadn't been totally against the wall at that point, but they had still been at an impasse. They might have been forced to turn around and accept the losses they were sure to take trying to break through junction one again, if not for the junction two fortifications coming under attack from someone else.

"No way. Was it Soma and his group?" I asked, and Adachi didn't keep me in suspense.

"That's right." He nodded. "We came here searching for Soma, and then he came and found us on his own. You could call it good luck, but it was luck we made for ourselves. When fortune comes your way, you just have to seize it. And that's what we did. With Soma's help, we drove the grendels out of the fortress at junction two. It hurts to admit it, but Soma's group is on a completely different level from us. He's got his own party, Akira-san, and the Typhoon Rocks. They're the strongest force we've got at this point. The grendels were clever, though. They retreated before we could wipe them out. Their commander was a seven-protrusion grendel who fought Soma in single combat. Of course, Soma still won."

That was how the volunteer soldiers had taken junction two, but they had concluded it would be unwise to try to hold it.

First of all, as a grendel fortification, it had been constructed out of a mysterious metal, a translucent material, and those yellow-green lights, along with other things they had brought in from their own world. Repairs would have been an issue. The gates and a part of the defensive walls had taken serious damage in the battle, and had been unusable as they were. Fixing them would have required materials to replace what had been

damaged, and acquiring those materials would have taken a lot of time and effort. Thus, repairing the fortifications had been effectively impossible.

What was more, while the grendels didn't seem that numerous in absolute terms, there had still been between a hundred and fifty and two hundred of them stationed in the fortress at junction two. If the volunteer soldiers had tried to defend it, their security would have inevitably been thin in some areas. And what would they even have been defending it for? It was unclear whether there was any value in doing so.

Besides, it turned out that Soma and his group already had a base of operations. Not in the Wonder Hole, though. It was outside.

Though the Wonder Hole seems endlessly long, only six entrances have been found that connect it to the surface. One of those was at a point a hundred and fifty kilometers from junction two on the main route. It came out at a spot on the opposite side of the Jet River, which flowed along the western edge of the Quickwind Plains. The terrain there was complex and inhabited by dangerous beasts, but it provided a source of lumber and water. The orcs' and undead's reach didn't extend that far, so Soma and his group had chosen it as a good location to set up a number of shacks and establish a small village. As the village of the Day Breakers, it had been named Daybreak Village. They had built a storehouse for food preserved with salt or vinegar, sowed the seeds of useful local plants to make something resembling a small farm, and even had plans to dig a well.

Renji and the others had been led to Daybreak Village. There were only a handful of shacks there, and they were too shoddily made to really think of it as a true village. It wasn't even a hamlet. For one thing, there wasn't usually anyone living there. Uninhabited buildings would fall into ruin in no time, and easily rot away. But with maintenance, they'd provide roofs to sleep under, and they had ovens that could be used to cook and provide heat. The storehouse, which was half underground, might not have had an abundant supply of food, but it had enough that the volunteer soldiers wouldn't run out immediately. And if they needed additional shacks, they could always build more. Most volunteer soldiers didn't mind doing a little manual labor, and the more

dexterous ones could make any tools they needed in their daily lives for themselves.

Volunteer soldiers had always been less like soldiers, and more like explorers or adventurers. It wasn't a job you could handle if you had no idea what to do when you were missing an important piece of equipment, and we were used to coming up with ways to compensate for what we didn't have.

We lost Alterna. If we have no place where we can stay, we just have to find a good spot and create one. Once we do, that will be our place to belong. It will become a place for us to defend.

The volunteer soldiers in Daybreak Village had shared information with each other and discussed what they were going to do from then on.

Soma and his group were mainly going through the Wonder Hole to enter Undead DC so they could look into what moves the undead were making and probe their secrets.

There were the original races in Grimgar known as the forerunners, and orcs and goblins had come after them, followed later by humans. But the undead were different. The No-Life King had given birth to their race. The undead would stop functioning if their heads were destroyed, but every other part of their bodies could be reused. If an undead lost an arm, for instance, they could pluck an arm off another undead that had ceased functioning, and stick it on themselves. Obviously, if a human tried that, it wouldn't do anything. But an arm from an undead that had ceased functioning would attach itself to an undead that was still active. If you took it to an extreme, and swapped the heads of two undead, they could both remain active with their bodies swapped. That was the nature of the life-forms—if you could call them that at all—that the No-Life King had created.

They say that even with all his power, the No-Life King had still died. Except he hadn't. He had simply been lying dormant in Castle Everest in Undead DC—or so the rumors had claimed for a long time. I already knew that the No-Life King wasn't dead at all, but if he had lived on by entering the bodies of people like Jessie and Merry, the question of why remained.

The No-Life King had created the undead. But he was said to have died. Had no more undead been born since? I've killed—or if that's not the appropriate term, then I've destroyed or terminated

the functioning of—a lot of undead myself.

If the undead king was the one who birthed the undead, one would expect their numbers to decline over time. But that wasn't happening. Even after the No-Life King had allegedly died, more undead had continued to be born, with uncremated remains coming back to life as something like zombies. We referred to that as the No-Life King's curse. It had apparently stopped happening since the No-Life King had awakened inside Merry, but we still didn't know what it really was. There are a lot of mysteries surrounding the No-Life King and the undead.

For humans, life and death are always important. They're an issue that might lie at the root of all our thoughts and beliefs, and the more we think about them, the more the No-Life King and the undead disturb us.

The lives we're given as humans are finite. Death is an absolute end. No one can avoid death; it's the end point we will all reach someday. That's how it's supposed to be.

Because we were born, we must die. There's just no helping that. Being alive, whether we like it or not, is a straight line that heads toward death. We're free to say that we don't want to die, and to wish we could keep living forever, but it's a wish that will never come true. All we can do is live for the moment. Live. Now. Live. Live. We meet, we part, and sooner or later, the end comes.

I don't want to part with her. Of course I don't. I can't accept that her smile, which is burned into the back of my eyes now, is something that I'm never going to see again. I want to be with her. Forever, if possible. I don't want it to end.

Life and death are inseparable, but I want to sever them from each other somehow. I want to cut life away from death. Is that silly? Is it an infantile wish? Do you think this is the nonsensical desire of someone who doesn't know reality? Well, what if eternity *is* real? What if there *is* a way to separate life from death?

What if the rules we believe are firm and immovable aren't universal at all? What if they have limits? What if there are situations where they don't fully apply? And what if we could discover what conditions give rise to those exceptions?

For instance, humans can only live for around a hundred years, but what if there were a drug that could double that time, and all of the risks involved were explained to you, and you could meet

someone who had actually taken it, and could see the results for yourself, and then you were asked, well, would you like to take it too? Would you turn that down? Could you refuse with no reservations? What if drinking that medicine didn't just let you live two hundred years, but three hundred? Or if it extended your lifespan to four or five hundred years? Would a life like that be too long, and you'd get sick of it? What if you were told that if you don't take it, you've got a hundred years, if that, but if you do, you'll get a thousand, or an eternity? If you had the choice between living a hundred years, and maybe not even that long, or living for eternity, can you say for sure that you would never choose the latter?

What if.

If life and death could be parted, and each could be its own wholly separate thing, and it wasn't about my own life, but I could meet a friend who I had been separated from? If the dead could come back to life, then what? What if I could reclaim what I had lost, but didn't want to lose, and never should have lost? If we could uncover the secrets of the No-Life King and the undead, then maybe, just maybe, we would be able to isolate life from death.

Honestly, it was a surprise to me that Soma and his group thought that way. I had thought of them as, I don't know, more above it all than that, but maybe that was simply the way I wanted to imagine them to be.

I had lost Manato and Moguzo, and I had let Merry die. I hadn't been able to accept losing her too, and as a consequence, I had invited the No-Life King closer to us. I had witnessed his revival firsthand. Things had turned out like this because I was weak and mediocre. That was what I was thinking.

But even if it had been Soma in my position, he might have made the same mistake. If even someone like Soma had weaknesses, then maybe he had parts of him that were mediocre too, like I did.

Anyway, Renji and the others had rested and recovered at Daybreak Village, and then they'd started to think about what to do next. Because of how long they'd been inside the Wonder Hole, Soma and his group had been unaware of the situation on the surface, so they must have had a lot on their minds about that.

Also, the revival of the No-Life King and the activation of the sekaishu had created a few more immediate problems.

During their last excursion, Soma and his group had acquired multiple relics from Undead DC, or rather, they had seized them from the undead there.

However, for some reason, the sekaishu had an intense reaction to relics. Did they just hate the strange magical items? Well, since the night-clad ones seemed to be sekaishu that had absorbed relics, then the answer was probably not that simple. But there was no question that the sekaishu gathered in places with relics.

When Soma and his group had left the Wonder Hole and headed toward Daybreak Village with relics in their possession, the sekaishu had advanced toward them from all over. It hadn't been long before Adachi of Team Renji had picked up on the fact that the relics had been the cause, and they had turned back to the Wonder Hole temporarily. Then, after leaving the relics there, they had set out again, and the sekaishu hadn't approached them again. That was one of the events I was told about. Something similar had happened at Riverside Iron Fortress, when Renji had followed Adachi's advice and ditched his armor, Aragarfald. That had saved Renji's life.

Basically, what all of that meant was that relics could no longer be used outside of the Wonder Hole.

Soma had originally been using a set of relic armor called the Magai Waiomaru, and Akira-san had been using a relic dagger called the Fatalsis. They'd also amassed a number of other relics in their time as volunteer soldiers, which they had discovered the uses of and utilized to great effect. None of them were safe to use on the surface anymore. Relics could make a decisive difference in battle. There was no denying that this development would make the Day Breakers less effective in combat.

Could nothing be done about the sekaishu?

The No-Life King's actions were also of interest.

What would the orcs, who had once been his allies, do now? Would the undead, who had been created by the No-Life King, gather under him as expected?

What about neutral factions, like the free city of Vele?

It seemed very unlikely that the dwarves of the Ironblood Kingdom, or the elves who'd gone to them for shelter, had been

completely wiped out. So then, what were the surviving dwarves and elves up to now?

What were the volunteer soldiers supposed to do?

Even now that they had Daybreak Village as their base, and as a potential new hometown, their numbers were far too small for it to not be a concern.

Were there really no other survivors? They couldn't know for sure that there were no others on the surface, waiting for their allies to come and rescue them. And at that point, even if it was just another one or two people, anyone they could get would be a valuable human resource.

Soma, Renji, and the others had left Daybreak Village and returned to the Wonder Hole. Though the grendels had reoccupied junction two, it had been relatively easy to simply pass by them. By the time the volunteer soldiers had reached junction one, the grendels had been in a state of confusion. The grendels in the base there had been sending squads southward on the main route, which was the direction of the entrance with the melruks.

The grendels are fighting something—or someone, aren't they? That's what the volunteer soldiers had thought. If so, maybe there were others who, like Renji and his group, had made it to the Wonder Hole.

The volunteer soldiers had conquered the fortress at junction one, and then they had split into two groups. Soma and his group had stayed behind at the junction one fortifications, investigating the sub route beyond there and fending off any enemy reinforcements. Team Renji and the Tokkis had continued southward down the main route, heading toward the entrance in search of survivors.

In short, our struggle had served as a signal to the other volunteer soldiers.

Well, even if we'd done nothing, they might have come eventually anyway. But if we had given up on the Wonder Hole altogether and set off traveling toward some other destination, who knows what might have happened. We probably wouldn't have met the volunteer soldiers. It's possible that we would have just dropped dead somewhere. Or been found and killed by the night-clad ones.

We had somehow managed to hold out in the Wonder Hole for

forty-seven days despite having been unable to kill a single grendel, and this was the result of our efforts. We had been able to meet up with Team Renji and the Tokkis.

We left the Wonder Hole with them for a time. Unfortunately for the melruks. We caught a few of them, cooked them up, and ate everything but the feathers and bones.

The campsite had originally belonged to Renji and the others, while we had only used it for a night, or maybe it was two? I don't have clear memories of it, but I do recall sleeping all the way until morning without ever having to stand watch. It was really quite unusual for me to be able to sleep through the night without waking once.

When I woke in the morning, one of the first things I saw was Renji, naked from the waist up, silently swinging his sword.

I said he was swinging it, but they were slow, graceful movements. It might have looked like he was engaging in some pretty erratic behavior from a distance, but even though I wasn't a warrior myself, I felt like I could tell what Renji was seeing in his mind's eye. Even as strong as he was, he was trying to defeat an enemy far stronger than him. Renji had a firm image of whoever that foe was, and he was desperately trying to fight them with his sword alone. He must have noticed I was watching, but he kept on swinging regardless. I focused my gaze on Renji, never tiring of watching him.

When I came to my senses, Ranta was awake, and crouching down next to me.

"He's pretty tough, man. Seriously."

"Ranta. You don't have to do what he does."

"You moron. Do you seriously think I'd be able to catch up to him just by copying him? Well...I'd say it's gonna take me fifteen years."

"What is?"

"I'm gonna catch up to him in the next fifteen years. Using my own methods. Fifteen years... That's how long it'll take as I am now. But once five years have gone by, maybe I'll be able to say I'll get there in another five."

Even then, I didn't have much hope of us both surviving for ten years. But I wish I could have at least found out what he'd have said in five.

Even if Ranta had grown rapidly, Renji would have gotten even further ahead, and the gap between them might have only grown. That's what I would have thought. When I chased after someone, they were only going to keep getting further away.

But Ranta wasn't like that, so the future could have been different for him.

I wanted to see it. If only I could have.

I know I say this too often, but I can't help thinking that way.

After that, we joined up with Soma and his group at the junction one fortifications. Then we headed to Daybreak Village by way of the fortress at junction two.

There was nothing there fit to be called a building. There were just a handful of shacks, and yet it still crossed my mind that it would be a fine place for our travels to end. It had been a long time since I'd washed my hair or body. I'd long since stopped caring about whether I was unclean, or if I stank, but I wasn't able to look straight at the women for a while after they got cleaned up, and couldn't go close to them either.

"Whoa, girl! Damn, you're hot!" Ranta said that to Yume, without any indication that he was exaggerating. He had tears in his eyes.

It was true, Yume was a very beautiful woman. Though, if I was trying to be fair, I should say that Yume was a beautiful woman *too*. After all, the people staying at Daybreak Village also included Soma's comrades, Shima and Lilia the elf, Akira-san's wife Miho, and Kayo—though those two were much older than us—and also Mimori and Anna-san from the Tokkis, Chibi from Team Renji, and Kajiko, Mako, Azusa, Cocono, and Yae of the Wild Angels for a total of thirteen women including Yume, and I thought every single one of them was almost mystically beautiful. It even inspired some kind of fear in me. I did my best not to talk to them, and even avoided Yume. Ranta teased me about it, but he also said, "Hey, man, I get it. Kind of."

"Yume's the only one for me," he continued. "But as a living being...as a male, maybe it's just how we're built. I may or may not start fantasizing sometimes...thinking anyone'll do at this point. Even though I know now's not the time for that."

Was that right? Were things really like Ranta said they were? I don't really know. I was a young human male at the time, and healthy too, so surely it was natural for my body to have those

kinds of urges. But I feel like somehow, as a human, I was incredibly afraid of those kinds of animal desires.

If Merry had been by my side, maybe things would have been slightly different. But she was out of my reach. Was I pining after her? I was certainly thinking about her. I wanted to see her. But she wasn't herself. The No-Life King was inside of her. Was she the primary owner of that body, or was he? I had forced her into that destiny. If the No-Life King's return had triggered the situation we were in, then it was all my fault. No matter what, I could never be forgiven for it.

I had revealed everything to Yume and Ranta, but they hadn't blamed me for it. I had committed a sin so grievous that "grave" didn't even begin to describe it, and yet I was going unpunished for it.

In Daybreak Village, I did whatever work I was told to. Expanding the village's facilities, acquiring resources, processing them, there were all sorts of things that needed doing.

I was well suited to just doing as I was told. I didn't complain, and actually had no complaints. I kept thinking about that. I had been thrust into the position of team leader, and had tried to fulfill the role to the best of my ability, but I hadn't been even remotely good at it. Nothing suited me better than plugging away at simple labor. Even free will felt like a burden to me. I was given orders, and I followed them. That was my true nature.

In Daybreak Village, there was active debate about what we ought to do, and what we were going to do. If anyone had asked me, I would have answered. But I never voiced my opinions proactively, because nothing resembling an opinion ever arose in my head.

I didn't want to think. And even if I were to use my head, I couldn't imagine myself coming up with any kind of brilliant plan.

In Daybreak Village, I was the most inferior. Everyone was better than me. I lost what little self-confidence I'd had, and became thoroughly depressed. But you could say that so long as I kept working, my depression wasn't that much of a problem, so I could be as depressed as I wanted.

I'm aware it wasn't a healthy mindset to have. Everyone was facing forward in their own way, even if we had different approaches. I had to do the same. I understood that. I wasn't the

kind of person to hope for things. I couldn’t ask for, or desire, too much. I was a small person. I wasn’t a large enough vessel to hold any kind of ambition. All I wanted was to live out the rest of my natural life alongside the comrades I felt at ease with. That was all I wished for. Just that. Except, thinking of it as “just that” was not something I could do anymore. Because of the mistake I had made, it became a wish that was far too much for me to ask for. I was afraid to even admit I wanted it.

4. Unchanging Things in a Changing World

I have to talk about Kuzaku and Setora. At the time, I was doing my best to put them out of my mind. But I couldn't do so completely, of course.

Kuzaku had been cut down by an orc named Jumbo, and Setora had tried to avenge him in a fit of rage, but it had only backfired on her. Then the No-Life King had shared his blood—though, "blood" might not be the right word; I just don't have a better one for it—but anyway, the No-Life King had shared the blood of undeath with the two of them to bring them back to life.

It's my fault that the two of them hadn't been able to meet a natural end, and that they had been degraded into something inhuman. So, they didn't get any kind of end at all. Despite having died, time didn't stop for them there. Their lives had run out, only to be topped back up in an unnatural way.

Perhaps the No-Life King had granted them a new life, but the two people I had known were no longer anywhere to be found. *Now that it's come to this, I should think of them as dead.* If I had been able to think that way, maybe I would have been able to sort out my feelings. But as things stood, I couldn't. It was true that they'd died in front of my eyes, and those things that had replaced them weren't Kuzaku and Setora. But they had changed too little for me to feel like they were completely separate from the people they'd been in life. On the outside at least, Kuzaku was Kuzaku, and Setora was Setora. But even so, it was best to regard what was inside them as different.

Or was it?

I couldn't come to a definitive answer. I didn't want to decide. So in my own passive way, by choosing not to think about them, I was putting the question off until later.

So then, why is it that I'm bothering to bring up Kuzaku and Setora? Why do I need to talk about them?

At some point, we volunteer soldiers started calling ourselves Daybreak.

The members of Daybreak weren't always in Daybreak Village. There were plans to launch an expedition to Undead DC, but it was a really long journey, so if we were going to do it, we needed to be very mindful of our situation and choose the timing of the trip carefully. As such, our priorities were to build up Daybreak Village, expand the facilities there, and improve our living situation, but there were always ten or so of us out working in the Wonder Hole.

The Wonder Hole was a place that was changing constantly, as exemplified by the emergence of the grendels. And given that those changes could be sudden and violent at times, we wanted to avoid a situation where we would go in there after spending some time away, and find that something ridiculous had happened.

There were some practical reasons for it too. For example, we weren't able to bring our relics up to the surface, but simply storing them in the Wonder Hole was not great either. It was better to have people carrying them. And using them.

The other less flattering reason was that guys like me who enjoyed doing simple work were in the minority. Most people in Daybreak Village felt more alive when they were exposing themselves and their comrades to the risk of death by exploring the unknown and getting into fights.

Ranta repeatedly asked me to come along, but I refused. Most of the members of Daybreak left me alone. I didn't feel any particular sense of gratitude to them for that, though. Nor did my days of silent labor gradually lead to me becoming more positive. I probably didn't want to swing between the highs and lows of emotion. I wanted to stop feeling happy or sad. Feeling nothing at all was preferable to me. However, there were a few occurrences that I couldn't help but get emotional about.

One time, when Ranta came back from a trip with Renji and Ron, after he had finished partying with the two of them, he came to me saying, "I've got something to tell you," and then took me outside Daybreak Village. It wasn't the middle of the night, but it wasn't exactly early in the evening either. The red moon was out. And despite his claim that he had something to tell me, Ranta was in no hurry to get to the point.

"What is it?" I asked reluctantly, and Ranta grinned.

"Let's go take a piss together."

"Huh? Why?"

“I’m just kidding. Like I’d wanna take a piss with you.”

“I wouldn’t want to take a piss with you either.”

“So here’s the thing.”

“Yeah?”

“We, uh… We may’ve done something.”

“Done something? Um, what?”

“So, uh…”

“Yyyeah…?”

“Me and Yume…”

“You and Yume?”

“Uh, there’s kinda something inside her now…”

“Inside…her?”

“Come on. Put two and two together, moron.”

“You and Yume did something, and now there’s something inside—whuh…”

I may be an idiot, but I wasn’t so dense I couldn’t figure out what he was getting at.

“Are you serious?”

“You think I’d be saying this if I wasn’t? Come on, man.”

“Well…”

“If this was a gag, would you laugh?”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“Oh… Have you told anyone else?”

“The other women. Or, Yume told them. I’m sure there’s a lot she wanted to talk about. Like, getting advice and stuff.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“Yume told me…and I haven’t told anyone but you. What was she saying? It was kinda unclear. I didn’t really get it. But apparently it’s not guaranteed to come out okay. Was it a timing thing? I dunno. Nothing I can do about it, though. If we want it to come out okay, there’s stuff we’ve gotta do, y’know?”

“No. You’re being super vague, so I have no clue.”

“Well, figure it out. Anyway, that’s how it is. It’s still kinda, y’know, but if things go smoothly, she’ll be due in September, or something like that. Still way off. But get emotionally prepared.”

“I don’t know if *I’m* the one who needs to be emotionally prepared for this.”

“If it came out of nowhere, it’d be, y’know. You’d be shocked.

Even a quiet, unsociable guy like you."

"Well... Yeah. I guess I would."

"That's all I had to say."

I had no idea how I should take the news. I was at a loss. And since I was at a loss, I couldn't stay emotionally uninvolved. I mean, at the time, Ranta looked like he was kind of dazed. He must have actually been pretty badly shaken. Confused, even. Given the relationship between the two of them, it wasn't all that weird that this had happened. Daybreak had other men and women who were, what would you call them? Lovers, basically. Like how Akira-san and Miho were officially husband and wife. There was no chance of children with same-sex couples, but with heterosexual couples, the possibility always existed. That must have crossed my mind once or twice, but I had apparently never really thought about it becoming a reality.

Ranta and Yume had made a baby. Their child might be born. Soon enough, Yume was going to give birth and become a mother. I felt some surprise about that, of course. And it's not like I didn't feel even a hint of joy. But it was buried under my uneasiness.

Like Ranta had been saying, there was no guarantee the baby would be born healthy. I had very little idea what the potential risks or complications were. But was it even possible to safely deliver a baby in Daybreak Village? Or to raise one there?

No amount of worrying on my part was going to help, though. Of that, I was sure. So I kept on working, day in and day out, just with an added sense of vague anxiety. I was worried for Yume, and occasionally watched her from a distance.

I think that Ranta telling me about her being pregnant was when I started to change. It showed me that even if I tried to remain stagnant, the world around me would not. As I watched Yume's belly noticeably grow over time, it made me want to pray before going to bed at night. But what was a man of no faith like myself supposed to pray for?

As for Yume herself, she was fine aside from her growing belly. If anything, she was amused by how people fussed over her. I've gotta say, I was pretty impressed by that. Her cheer shone brightly not just for me, but for everyone in Daybreak Village, warming all of our hearts.



Like Ranta had said, the baby was born not long into September.

I had created a small place for myself to sleep in, which was less of a hut, and more of a pyramid resting on its side. That night, I was sound asleep when I heard someone quietly calling my name over and over. I felt as though I knew their voice from somewhere, and responded with things like, “Yeah,” and, “Uh-huh.” I might’ve thought I was dreaming, and so I responded as I would to someone in a dream.

“Haruhiro… Haruhiro. Hey, Haruhiro, come on. Wake up, Haruhiro. Yeah, I’m a bit hesitant about waking you up when you’re so soundly asleep, or actually, I guess I feel bad about it. But I came all this way, and I wanna talk to you about something. Haruhiro… Come on, Haruhiro.”

They touched me somewhere. My leg, I think. They grabbed my right ankle. That was what woke me up. I realized that the voice hadn’t been in my dream, and I tried to shake free of their hand. But the person was incredibly strong, and they had a firm grip on my ankle, so I couldn’t even move my right leg very well. I tried to kick whoever it was with my left foot. When I did, they let go of me immediately.

“Shh! Shh! Don’t struggle. Quiet. I’m here to talk. Don’t you get that, Haruhiro? If I felt like it, I could’ve killed you. But I didn’t, right? So calm down. Oh, wait, maybe you haven’t realized who I am yet? It’s me. Me. Kuzaku. Did you forget about me, maybe? There’s no way that could be true, right?”

“You’re…Kuzaku?”

“You should be able to tell by my voice. If I’m not Kuzaku, then what am I, an impostor? But what would the point of imitating him be? Can you think of one? I dunno. I don’t think there is one. Nah, there definitely isn’t.”

I got out of my sleeping spot. I’d chosen a location that was well away from the center of Daybreak Village where most of the huts were clustered together. There was no one else around. Just me and one overly tall guy.

It was too dark to make out his facial features, but I could see and hear well enough to be confident of his identity. It *was* Kuzaku. The Kuzaku who’d died. Died and returned to life. The No-Life King had brought him back. It was Kuzaku.

The No-Life King had taken Merry's form. Or perhaps Merry was a part of the No-Life King now. Would he have revived Kuzaku or Setora on his own initiative? He'd had no reason to. Merry's will must have played into it. That was the natural thing to think. Just like when I had revived Merry after she had died, Merry had been unable to abandon Kuzaku and Setora, so she had made the same mistake. And now, everything that I couldn't accept about my choice had appeared before me in the form of Kuzaku.

"You said you wanted to talk… About what?"

"This isn't a good place. If they find me, I'm just guessing here, but it'll probably go badly. I mean, there's a lot of dangerous guys around. C'mon, let's go. Oh, and this isn't a trap, okay? I could've killed you easily. But I didn't, right? Though, I'm thinking maybe I will. I'll come right out and say it. More than anything, I want to be open with you. I wonder why. Maybe I'm trying to be sincere? In my own way? I think it'd be good to kill you and make you like us. Because that'd definitely be interesting."

"Man… What the hell are you talking about, Kuzaku?"

"I was thinking we'd all get along. Me, Setora-san, Merry-san, and you, Haruhiro. Doesn't that sound fun? I mean, we'll basically never die. Isn't that awesome? I'm still having lots of fun, in my own way, but if you were with us too, then it'd be even more awesome. I mean, since I like you and all. I love you, man."

"Kuzaku… How did you end up…like this?"



“Like this? Ohhh. Y’mean how I died, and then came back?”

“Yeah. Before you died…I know you liked me. And I felt the same.”

“Well, I haven’t changed that much. Seriously. I get it, though. You’re got your…misgivings? About it, I guess. If I’d been told, ‘don’t worry, you won’t change that much,’ before this happened to me, I don’t know if I’d have believed it either.”

“You…haven’t changed? I can’t believe that.”

“Oh, yeah? Of course, I’m not saying I’m one hundred percent the same. But, like, I’ve got my memories and stuff. I know all about what happened before. Oh, and my emotions too. I haven’t lost those either.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I just shook my head. Basically never dying? That, on its own, was a huge deal. Too huge. That wasn’t the kind of thing you downplayed as not being much of a change.

I mean, for us humans, whether we think about it all the time, or only once in a while, or come to terms with it, or ignore it entirely, we all know that the people around us will die someday. If we find bliss, we feel a sense of sadness because, *Oh, this can’t last forever, we have to die eventually.* When we find someone we love, we lament the impermanence of a world where we must someday part. It’s a rare person who hasn’t had a single experience like that.

Everyone thinks about it from time to time. If we’re going to die anyway, then isn’t all of this pointless? But since we’ll die either way, and in death we won’t be able to feel even that sense of futility, we tell ourselves that we should do what we can in the here and now. People live, and people die, in ways that are sad, comical, earnest, irresponsible, and serious. That’s what it means to be a person.

But you are *different, Kuzaku. You look human, but you’re not. The most horrifying, dreadful thing about it is that, while you might understand on an intellectual level, it doesn’t feel real to you, and it probably never will. That’s why you were able to say you haven’t changed that much. You can’t understand humans, because you’re not one anymore.*

You loved and respected me to a staggering degree, and were more loyal to me than anyone, to the point that it was a little annoying. It

was rare to have someone care so much for me, and I liked you back, but you're gone now. The No-Life King—no, Merry turned you into something different. And I'm *the one who turned* her *into something different. It was me, Kuzaku. Ultimately, I'm the one who did this to you.*

"Hmm…" Kuzaku crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side. "I guess persuasion's out, then? Well, Setora-san did tell me it wouldn't work. She mentioned something about how no matter what I said, you wouldn't accept. You know how clever she is. I mean, I know Setora-san's right most of the time. Always has been. I shouldn't neglect to respect her intellect. Hey, that all rhymes. Now's not the time for wordplay, though. Anyway, I wanted to take your opinion into consideration. Maybe the end result's the same, but I think how we get there matters. Setora-san's not the type to care about that kinda thing. She's all about efficiency."

"Take my opinion into…" I was a little slow to realize it, but it finally dawned on me that I needed to be a bit more concerned about what was happening.

Kuzaku wasn't human. He was in the No-Life King's camp. The No-Life King, borrowing Merry's lips, had told me that he wasn't the enemy of humanity. Humanity had decided he was their enemy. He'd even said that he wanted to be our friend. But the No-Life King had united the undead he'd created with the orcs, the gray elves, the goblins, and the kobolds to attack and destroy the kingdoms of the human race. He had tried to be our friend rather than our enemy at first, but it hadn't worked out, and so he'd joined hands with the oppressed orcs.

Even if the No-Life King hadn't originally wanted it to be that way, he had become humanity's enemy. And that had never changed. Kuzaku was a servant of the enemy. He was one of them. He was an enemy. An enemy had sneaked into Daybreak Village at dawn, and I was all alone with that enemy, an infiltrator whose goals I didn't know.

My life as a laborer in Daybreak Village lacked the dangers I'd been used to as a volunteer soldier, but even so, I hadn't become so careless that I didn't sleep with a weapon. When I backed away, preparing to draw my dagger, Kuzaku put his hands up.

"Nah, listen, okay? If I was gonna off you, I'd have done it by

now. I said I wanna talk, didn't I? By the way, I'm not here to chat about old times, you know? Oh, let's get back to the main topic. We've gotten way off into the weeds. Sorry about that."

"What main topic?"

"I'm here to do a job. A job? Yeah, I think I'd call it a job. The king—that's Merry-san, but it's complicated, so I'll just say the king. The king doesn't give me and Setora-san orders. We aren't told what to do, he only asks us for favors. He's soft-spoken, you could say, or humble. Doesn't act full of himself at all. He's pretty busy running all over the place, so either Setora-san or I had to do this, and we decided it was probably better if it was me. I mean, Setora-san was technically never a volunteer soldier. She was from that village."

"What... What did you come here for?"

"I. Already. Told. You. I'm here to talk. We seem to be going in circles here, huh? I'll cut to the chase. This is an offer from the king. We want to know if you'd be willing to work with us, even if it's just for a little while, toward a common goal?"

"That's not...something you're asking me as an individual, is it?"

"Nope. Soma's here, and he's your leader, right? But I feel like it'd be tough for me to just go and meet Soma right off the bat. Figured I'd better try going through you instead."

"How do you even know about this place?"

"It's near an exit to the Wonder Hole, right? Listen, Haruhiro. We're exploring the Wonder Hole too. And actually, we've got a pretty long history of doing that."

"I guess that's not surprising."

"Right? The king's already retaken Undead DC. And some of the princes who've been around longer than us—though not all of them—have come back too. Makes it feel a bit awkward for me when I'm there. One of the princes, Gyabigo, explores the Wonder Hole for fun. He's one of the ones that came back. You know about him?"

"Princes... And...Undead DC—you took it back?"

"Ohhh, you're not aware of the situation at all? Figures, I guess. It's pretty far away, after all. Undead DC was under the control of a prince called Ishidua Rohro. Terrible guy. Betrayed the king who made him undying, y'know. Used a relic to seal the king away. Then he took over, calling himself the king of the undead. Or at least, that used to be the case. When our king led the orcs and

gray elves in an attack on Undead DC, King Ishi ran away without much of a fight. But he took the king's original body and the relic with him, and we haven't gotten them back yet. Uh, wait. Is it okay for me to be telling you about that?"

"Wait... Just hold on. If you dump all of this on me at once, I can't keep up."

"Sorry, sorry. I'm not smart like Setora-san, so I'm bad at explaining things in an organized way. So, the king had five princes he'd shared his blood with, right? Or his power with. They were kind of like children to him. Me and Setora are the same, though. We're not exactly undead. They're something different from us."

King Ishi, or Ishidua Rohro.

Deres Pain, who had assumed the title of archduke after the No-Life King vanished.

The four-armed "Dragon Hunter" Gyabigo.

The wielder of the primitive but powerful original form of magic, Architekra.

And Ainrand Leslie.

Those were the No-Life King's original five princes.

One of the five, King Ishi, had sealed the No-Life King using a relic, and assumed the title of king of the undead.

Deres Pain had assisted King Ishi, and had then gone on to become the lord of a port town called Igor in the north.

As for Gyabigo and Architekra, after losing their sovereign, they had maintained a comfortable distance from King Ishi.

Ainrand Leslie had vanished. However, the name Ainrand Leslie and stories of him had continued to crop up in all sorts of places, beginning with the free city of Vele. I've had some involvement with Ainrand Leslie myself. We wandered into the Leslie Camp—which was, naturally, named after him—and as a result, we ended up in a mysterious world—or perhaps an afterlife—called Parano.

The No-Life King who had been revived inside Merry's body had shared his blood—his power—with Kuzaku and Setora, turning them into princes. Then he had apparently gone on to form an alliance with the orcs and gray elves, and had attacked Undead DC. King Ishi had acted as if he would resist to the end, but had fled with his most important forces. Also, it seemed as though he might have taken the relic he had used to seal away the No-Life

King with him, though that was unconfirmed.

"Y'know, it's a shame. That relic that sealed away the king? I've never seen it myself, but basically, it's supposed to be this big casket thing that the former king was inside. Like, you open it, and he's in there? All this talk about the king, and the previous king, I dunno, it's getting me twisted up and confused. The king's true essence? His main body? That's the stuff on the inside. And the outside is kinda just a vessel, maybe? There's no telling what would've happened to Merry if we had gotten our hands on that thing. I could ask the king, but that'd be a little too awkward, even for me."

"Merry's…a vessel?"

"Uh, I dunno? It could just be that there'd be two kings then. Nah, that can't be it. Or at least, I don't think so. Seems unlikely. But y'know, I wonder. Because the king's special. There could be things about him that make me think, 'Nah, that can't be it,' but then it turns out that, surprise, surprise, that's totally how it is. Yeah."

I couldn't decide how much I should believe what Kuzaku was saying. But if Merry was just the No-Life King's vessel, then weren't she and the No-Life King separate entities, strictly speaking? If the No-Life King regained his body, which was sealed inside that relic, then maybe he wouldn't need Merry's body anymore.

If so, then what would happen to Merry, his current vessel? If he left Merry, then would she go back to how she was before? Or was that too convenient of an outcome? It was possible that if the No-Life King left Merry, she would simply be an empty vessel that was no longer of any use. Basically, a hollow shell with nothing left inside. If that was the case, then I didn't want the No-Life King to leave her. It would be better if he didn't get his body back. But ultimately, that was all just hypothesizing. Even Kuzaku apparently didn't know what would happen.

"Well, setting that aside, we're facing the sekaishu, a massive problem, so wouldn't it be good to deal with that first? That's where we're at now."

"The sekaishu."

Thinking back, the first time I had encountered the sekaishu was after Merry's death. I had let Merry die, and Jessie had revived her by giving up his own life. Jessie had poured the contents of his

body—which had looked like blood, but there's no way that it was—inside Merry. From one container to another. And then there had been nothing left of Jessie but his skin. Obviously, he hadn't been alive after that. Those had been Jessie's remains. If Merry lost what was inside her, would she end up like that too?

But anyway, my first encounter with them was after that. The sekaishu had come seemingly out of nowhere. And then Merry had called them "Sekaishu." She had known what they were. Or rather, the No-Life King inside of Merry knew. The sekaishu had appeared because they had detected his presence.

Then, when the No-Life King had finally awakened inside of Merry, she'd spoken as his mouthpiece.

"The world hates me. I am being rejected by the world. The sekaishu will try to remove me," she had said.

All of this was triggered by the No-Life King awakening. The No-Life King draws in the sekaishu just by being there. That's why he hides inside people like Jessie and Merry. Because if he doesn't, the sekaishu will come.

But what about the relics? The sekaishu seem to be going after them. What are relics, really? Come to think of it, the hill southeast of Alterna turned into a mountain of sekaishu. What was on that hill? The Forbidden Tower. And what about the Crown Mountains in the Quickwind Plains? They were covered in sekaishu too. The lanky giants that lived around there also got attacked by the sekaishu.

The No-Life King.

Relics.

The Forbidden Tower.

The Crown Mountains.

Giants.

The world hates them.

The world is rejecting them.

Sekaishu.

I couldn't figure it out. The Crown Mountains were one thing, but the No-Life King? The relics? The Forbidden Tower? The giants? Those were all beyond human knowledge. There was no way I was going to be able to put all the pieces of the puzzle together.

They transcend human comprehension. It's hard to understand how such things exist in this world.

It's hard to imagine that they're of this world.

Someone had said something like that. Who was it? I can't recall, but I feel like it was a woman.

The word relic is a catch-all for things that can't be made with current knowledge, but that clearly had been made at some point in the past. Basically, they were things that seemed impossible to make, that weren't new, and that hadn't been made by anyone here.

It's hard to imagine that they're of this world.

They *aren't* of this world.

Once, I—right, it was in the Well Village, in another world called Darunggar. There had been a stonework building there, with glass windows, and inside the building, there'd been a doll. It had been dressed in a red dress, white socks, and black shoes, and it'd had blue eyes and a red ribbon in its blonde hair. The people of Well Village had called the doll Kinuko. There had been more than just that doll Kinuko, though. They'd had all sorts of things on display inside the building.

A picture frame. A small, boardlike machine. Yeah, a machine. There had been a machine with lots of buttons on it there too. Intricately designed glasses, and awfully small books. Cans. Transparent containers that hadn't been made of glass.

People would find those things, then put them in that building. They had to be objects from other worlds. Things that couldn't be made in this world, but that could be made in another. That's what relics are.

But what "things" can be relics? Is it limited to objects? What about creatures? What about *us*?

We came from some other world to Grimgar. I don't have any concrete proof of that, but it's a vague intuition I have. It's possible that I'm wrong, and we were born in some faraway place in this world, and were just brought here somehow. Or is there some reason that the sekaishu don't see us as foreign objects, unlike how they see relics?

Regardless, relics are foreign objects.

The No-Life King is a foreign object.

The giants are foreign objects.

What about the Forbidden Tower?

It was a relic.

Merry said so.

No.

That wasn't Merry. It was the No-Life King.

The Forbidden Tower was a relic, and therefore a foreign object, so the sekaishu swarmed around it.

The No-Life King knew he was being targeted by the sekaishu. You could say he was running away by hiding inside a human skin. But he'd come out when he'd transferred from Jessie to Merry. That had let the sekaishu detect him. If all of that was correct, didn't that mean I was the one who had created the conditions that had allowed this situation to develop?

If I hadn't tried to bring Merry back, the No-Life King would have stayed inside Jessie. Jessie had seemed like he'd been reasonably happy just building the self-sufficient village he'd called Jessie Land. Maybe he'd had some kind of secret plot to revive the No-Life King and regain power. But I, we, wouldn't have gotten involved in that, would we?

"You want to do something about the sekaishu...? Is that even possible? Kuzaku, is your...king going to deal with the sekaishu?"

"Well, see, that's the thing..."

Kuzaku started to answer, but then he shut his mouth. Kuzaku had the great katana that he'd used before his death strapped diagonally across his back, and a longsword hanging at his hip. He drew the longsword, and leaped backward.

I couldn't move a step. He wasn't like Kuzaku at all. Kuzaku hadn't exactly been slow, but because of his size, his arms and legs had moved at a more relaxed pace. Now that he'd died and become something different, he seemed to be twice as fast as he'd been before.

If Kuzaku had wanted to, he could have cut me down. He could have bisected me with ease. Therefore, he clearly had no intention of doing so. He hadn't drawn his longsword to slay me. It was for his own defense.

I hadn't noticed, but someone had been creeping up on us. They suddenly sprang out from behind me, taking a swing at Kuzaku.

"Hey, Ranta-kun! Long time no see!"

"Shut up, you knockoff!"

Ranta took swing after swing with his nameless katana, but Kuzaku dodged them all, or deflected them with his longsword.

Was Ranta fighting seriously? Or was he holding back? I couldn't tell. Kuzaku seemed like he was taking it easy, though. He made good use of his long limbs and the strength that allowed him to swing his longsword around like it was a twig to give himself a huge amount of reach. No matter how Ranta tried to close in, Kuzaku didn't let him.

"'Knockoff'? That's mean, Ranta-kun. You can't just go calling me that. It's me, Kuzaku, the genuine article."

"How're you Kuzaku?! Don't give me that shit! You damn fake!"

"Don't throw a fit just 'cause you can't beat me. You're plenty strong, okay? But I'm insanely good. That's all. I may not look like it, but I've been through some serious hell. Running all over the place. It's been a whole lot of trouble."

"Like I care, moron! Die!"

"Yeah, I can't do that. I don't die easily. Oh, I know. How about you, Ranta-kun? Want to try becoming like us? With your personality, I bet you'd turn out even stronger than me."

"Huh?! Don't be ridiculous! Who'd ever agree to—!"

"A baby's gonna be born here soon." Why did I say that? Well, one thing is clear to me. I wanted to stop them. I was *trying* to stop them. If I'd begged, Kuzaku would probably have backed down. But Ranta might not have. Knowing his personality, he wouldn't have taken a step back until he was satisfied.

"You...! Mor...!" Ranta sputtered before jumping sideways, then turning to look at me.

Kuzaku didn't take the opening to attack. "Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!" he shouted. His voice was incredibly loud.

"No way! A baby?! Whose... Whaaaaaaaaaa?! Don't tell me, whaaaaaaaaaaaaa?! It's not Haruhiro's and Yume-san's, is it?!"

"Like hell it is! It's *my* baby with Yume, obviously! Go die!"

"Oh, yeah? Go figure. But still, whaaaaaaa?! That's awesome. Whaaaaaa! I gotta let Setora-san and Merry-san know. Whaaaaaa! Seriously?!"

Because he was raising his voice so much, the people of Daybreak Village were waking up and starting to gather around. Kuzaku was quick to throw down his longsword and great katana and put up his hands, even kneeling on the ground to show he didn't mean to resist. In all likelihood, surrendering so that he

could bring the No-Life King's proposal to Daybreak Village had been part of the plan. He might have even been directed to do so by the No-Life King or Setora. If so, he should've done it from the beginning, but Kuzaku had deliberately come to me for a one-on-one chat. That was what he'd wanted to do. Maybe when he'd said he wanted to kill me and make me like him and Setora, that was his way of showing he cared for me, even as an undead. Kuzaku had changed. He was a very different person. But he was still Kuzaku.

The members of Daybreak bound Kuzaku and assigned guards to him just to be safe, then gathered around the campfire to discuss. Fortunately, Soma was in Daybreak Village instead of elsewhere, so the discussion didn't get too complicated. Soma wasn't the type to actively steer a conversation, and he didn't strongly push his own viewpoints. Outside of the battlefield, he almost never acted in an intimidating way. He'd talk frankly about what he was thinking, even to someone like me.

With Soma around, everyone could say what they liked, and yet somehow the discussion would never go totally off the rails. Those with strong opinions would dispute them fruitlessly for a while, and then he'd step in to sum it all up. With him at the center, things stayed calm. He really had an interesting kind of charisma about him.

That said, I had seen Soma for the first time not long after I became a volunteer soldier, and in the intervening years he had mellowed out a lot. The Soma in Daybreak Village came off somewhat like a father figure.

"Let's meet with the No-Life King and talk. If we can't meet, we can't trust him, and there's no cooperation to be had. How does that sound as our response, everyone?"

I couldn't nod in agreement. Meeting the No-Life King meant meeting Merry again. I wasn't ready for that yet at the time. But even so, if I could see her, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. Kuzaku was different from the old Kuzaku, but was still Kuzaku. So what about Merry? I had to see for myself.

5. Inside Me

It would have been September seventeenth, 661 A.C.

I'll remember that day for the rest of my life—though, for a guy like me, I'm not guaranteed any kind of life, and it seems questionable whether the time left before I disappear can even be called a life at all—but anyway, for as long as I possess the ability to think, remember, and feel anything, I'll never forget that day.

Daybreak Village had Kuzaku deliver our answer to the No-Life King, and then we had to wait for the king's response. Nobody among the members of Daybreak talked much about what would be happening next, though I'm sure we all had our concerns. I think that was because we had bigger worries. Like the reason that none of the male members of Daybreak were entering the hut we had all worked together to build. Except for one—Ranta.

The women, particularly the Wild Angels, had been critical of his being there, but Ranta didn't care, and more importantly, Yume didn't refuse him entry. In fact, Ranta told me himself that Yume had asked him to stay by her side, which left me beside myself with worry.

We have light mages, so no matter what happens, I think she'll be fine. But giving birth is no small thing.

If I recall correctly, the only person in Daybreak who'd even been present while a baby was being delivered before was Lilia, the elf from Soma's party. The birth rate among the elves had declined to the point where every birth was a big event which every member of their race would attend. Naturally, that had included Lilia, but she had only been there for the ceremony, so though she'd had it hammered into her that there were many dangers to the mother and child, she didn't have very much actual knowledge of the process.

Regardless, if Lilia was the main advisor for the operation, the commander in chief was Akira-san's wife Miho. This was a first-time experience for all of them, including Lilia, who had been nothing more than an observer rather than someone involved in the delivery she had witnessed. Even if they thought they were

fully prepared, I'm sure none of them were particularly confident about that.

As the time when Yume's child would be born drew closer day by day, I wouldn't say that I grew more fearful so much as more pessimistic. What were the ways in which a pregnancy could go wrong? Not knowing made my imagination run wild with conjuring up bad scenarios.

The worst outcome would be never seeing Yume or her baby again. But the more I try to convince myself it won't go that way, the more it feels like it will. It's actually harder to imagine that it won't. I'm sure something's going to go wrong. But I obviously didn't say that to anyone. I just kept laboring away the same as always.

Up until right before the birth, Yume was going around Daybreak Village, holding her belly, which I thought looked not just big but massive, so we ran into each other pretty often. I couldn't simply ignore her. I would ask how she was doing, and tell her I knew she'd be all right, murmuring words of encouragement I didn't believe myself. She always smiled when I did. I thought that I had managed to hide my fear, which went well beyond mere uncertainty, but Ranta found out.

I think it was two or three days before the birth.

"You moron!" Ranta slapped me hard on the back. "What're *you* getting all nervous for? Yume's the one giving birth, okay? There's nothing we can do about it, so we've gotta at least act confident. I mean, come on, Yume and I are the parents, not you, got it?"

That Yume had asked Ranta to stay by her side probably indicated that she felt more uneasy than she'd looked. In some ways, Ranta may've been the calmest out of all of us. That was not a realization I expected to come to, and may ultimately be one of the reasons why I'll never be able to outdo him. If I'd been in his position, I'd never have been able to act like that.

"Ahhh! There might be somethin' weird goin' on?" Yume suddenly said one day—the seventeenth of September—before quickly heading to the hut she was using.

I spent some time watching the place from a distance, but eventually went back to work building another hut. I know I was doing some kind of manual labor, but my mind was definitely somewhere else. I did my best not to look at the area around that one hut. But I have vague memories of Ranta coming out of it,

then going back in, and of Anna-san and Mimori coming out, saying they needed this or that, and then Tada and Kikkawa running here and there to find it, so I guess I must have been paying some attention to what was happening after all. For some reason, I have a clear memory of Soma and Akira-san standing around and talking. Oh, and Renji called out to me once too.

"How's it going?" It was unusual for Renji to beat around the bush, so I don't think there was any actual meaning behind the question.

"Mmm..." I responded vaguely.

"All right," Renji murmured, then headed off somewhere. The sight of him scratching his head as he went left an impression on me.

It was after dark when a cry of joy erupted from the hut.

I was near my sleeping spot at the time. I know I was sitting on the ground, but I don't remember what I was doing very well. I was probably thinking things like, *It's taking way too long. It's not gonna turn out okay. There's no way it will. I figured as much. I knew it wouldn't. But it isn't my kid, and Yume's the one giving birth to it, so I shouldn't be thinking like this. I'm such an awful guy. There's no helping me.* I imagine I spent a lot of time pointlessly arguing with myself like that.

But anyway, when I heard that cry of joy, I recognized it for what it was immediately, so I shut my eyes tight and let out a deep sigh.

I know this makes no sense, but I felt like I was going to be punished. If you think about everything I'd done, it wouldn't make sense for me not to face some retribution. So there was no way I could expect anything good to happen to me. But it would've been completely unreasonable for that divine punishment to befall Yume, Ranta, and their child. And yet, because of how unfair it would've been, that made it the best, most awful punishment for me, which was why I was so terrified things would end badly. Obviously, I didn't want it to go that way. But for whatever reason, things seem to only ever go in the direction I *don't* want them to. If I wish for something, it never comes true. Actually, the reverse happens. Which is why I should never wish for anything. But even knowing that, I want good things to come to those close to me. But maybe a guy like me should not only refrain from wishing for

things for himself, but also from wishing for things for anyone?

Some time later, Ranta emerged from the hut. I thought he was going to shout something, but all he did was silently thrust his fist up into the air. He wasn't the one who had cried out as loud as he could earlier. That sound had come from the members of Daybreak inside the hut.

I was still near my sleeping spot at that point too. I felt weak, unable to move.

What if this was my last day? I distinctly remember thinking. *If everything ended today, I'd be fine with that. It would be better that way. Please, let this be the end. I just want to die here and now.* That was something I honestly, firmly believed. *Nothing could be better than this. It's not possible.* Life was rough for a weak guy like me. And then a day like this came along. *This is enough. End it here. Come on, I'm begging you.*

The members of Daybreak gathered around Ranta, giving him their blessings. I wanted to celebrate Ranta, Yume, and the birth of their child too, but what right did I have to do so? If a guy like me gave them his blessings, it'd be more like a curse.

This is embarrassing to admit, but it's in the past now, so I'm going to own up to it. At the time, I was thinking that if I could just find the strength in me to stand, I would leave Daybreak Village. It's not like I had any idea where I would go. I had none. There was no way there could be any place for me. I didn't belong anywhere. It was better for me to stay away from my comrades.

I was thinking that I'd head to the west, and walk until I collapsed and died—end my own life, basically. I didn't want to simply wish for the end anymore, but to end it properly.

If I had been thinking about how Yume, who had just finished giving birth, would feel, it would obviously have been wrong for me to do something like that. Of course. I knew that, but I still felt inexplicably compelled to end things.

I can't take this anymore. If I act now, I'll have the strength to end it. So, sorry, but let me wrap things up while I'm at a good part.

"Haruhiro!"

Even with all of the members of Daybreak around him, Ranta made a point of coming to me. I had been hanging my head up until that point, but I think I looked up, mumbled a vague response, asked how Yume was doing, and that sort of thing. I

don’t remember any of it, though.

“The hell, man? You’re such a downer. Why’ve you gotta act this way even at a time like this?”

“Sorry. It’s just… Well. I’m feeling kinda out of it.”

“Heh! Man, you were even more tense about this than Yume and I were.”

“Maybe.”

“Bet you were constantly thinking something bad would happen. I mean, this *is* you we’re talking about.”

“Yeah… That’s just how I am.”

“You’re hopeless. A piece of shit. The shittiest shit that ever shat.”

“Don’t be so harsh… I’m already aware.”

“Oh, are you?”

Ranta sat down beside me. *Why won’t he go away?* I thought. *The members of Daybreak want to celebrate with the two of you. And you deserve their blessings. You shouldn’t be wasting your time on me right now.*

“It’s a boy. I mean, I always kinda had a feeling it would be. And Yume was saying that too. Come on, man, this should’ve been the first thing you asked.”

“Oh, yeah… I guess so. A boy, huh? I’m sure he’ll grow up strong. He’s your kid and Yume’s, after all.”

“Damn straight. He’s gonna be stronger than anyone.”

“He…doesn’t have a name yet, I guess? Are you going to be deciding that later?”

“Nah. We already decided. Yume and me together. One for if it was a boy, and one for if it’d been a girl. We were gonna go with Yori in that case. It means something like gathering, holding together, that sort of thing.”

“So, instead…?”

“His name’s Ruon. Sounds cool, right?”

“Ruon…”

“This one’s not about the meaning, it’s about the sound. Ranta. Yume. Ruon. Feels right somehow, like…there’s a connection there, I guess?”

“A connection…”

“C’mon, you need to meet him,” Ranta said, throwing his arm over my shoulders.

I couldn’t help but feel surprised at him acting like that. I’m sure Ranta had a friendly side to him, and he often sat shoulder to shoulder with other people. But he didn’t generally do that with me. We didn’t have that kind of relationship. As far as I can recall, that was the first time he’d done it. And, of this I’m certain, it was also the last.

“You’re coming to see Ruon,” he said, arm still around my shoulders. “Listen up, Haruhiro. He’s my kid, and Yume’s kid. But he’s not only our kid. I’m not talking about blood here. By some twist of fate, Ruon was born in this place, at this time. In some sense…just some sense, okay? Ruon’s your kid too. You get me? Come on, figure it out. Don’t make me spell this stuff out for you. Yume and I aren’t the only ones who’re gonna be protecting him. Everyone will, including you. That’ll be the bond between us. Not that I wanna put all of that on my own kid’s shoulders. But it’s gotta be this way. So come see Ruon. Don’t run away, Haruhiro. Stay here. Today, tomorrow, and the next day. Here, with us. We need you, and you need us.”

I nodded. But I couldn’t find the nerve to actually go see the baby, so in the end, I didn’t meet Ruon until the next day. Soon after dawn, Ranta came out of the hut where Yume was staying, and I asked him to let me see them.

“Sure. Go on in,” was all he said.

I don’t know why he didn’t come with me.

I entered the hut alone. The floor was padded with straw, and Yume was lying there. The baby was sleeping with his head on Yume’s arm.

“Oh, Haru-kun,” Yume called my name, smiling as she did.

The inside of the hut was dimly lit by a hearth. Yume looked pretty exhausted. And sleepy. And thin.

I knelt down next to her bed. The baby was small. It was just this unbelievably tiny little creature. But despite being so small, it still had all the features of a human, which honestly creeped me out. It was a mystery and a horror to me that this little being—which seemed so fragile that it might break if I picked it up and then dropped it—was Yume and Ranta’s child.

There’s no way a creature like this can survive. That’s what I thought, deep down. Isn’t it just beyond cruel to throw a defenseless baby out into this merciless world? If it were up to me,

I would never let such a thing happen, and I wouldn't let anyone else do it either.

"Isn't he a cutie? Look, Ruon, it's Haru-kun. But there's no point in tellin' you that when you're sleepin', huh? And your eyes don't open very wide yet anyway. Oh..."

As Yume stroked the baby's head, his swollen eyelids opened a little, letting his pupils peer through the narrow slit.

"Did Ruon wake up? Looks like it. Maybe he could use a drink. Haru-kun, do y'mind lettin' Yume breastfeed Ruon a bit?"

"Huh? Uh, well... Sure, um... I'll, uh...look the other way."

"Oh, yeah? Watchin'd make you feel weird, huh?"

"Kinda..."

I turned my back toward Yume and the kid. I didn't really understand what they were doing, and I didn't particularly care. Anyway, I couldn't help but feel that I shouldn't have been there, and yet I couldn't leave either.

It was awkward staying silent, so I talked to Yume. Or rather, Yume started asking me stuff, and all I had to do was respond. What did I say to her? I seem to recall talking about some rather serious—or perhaps, rather grave—subjects in a calm, relaxed manner.

It was mostly about Shihoru, Merry, Setora, and Kuzaku. Yume wanted all of them to meet Ruon. We had told Kuzaku that Ranta and Yume were having a baby, and it would be born soon, so I was sure that Setora and Merry already knew. Yume believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that they would want to see her child.

I was fifty-fifty on that, or rather, I didn't really have a clue what they would want one way or the other, but I thought it would be nice if she was right. Maybe them meeting Ruon wouldn't change anything. In all likelihood, it wouldn't alter our situation in any meaningful way. But I wanted them to see him, and I felt like they should. Whatever ideas or plans we were going to be coming up with in the near future, I thought that it would be important for all of us to meet Ruon first. If we were going to scorch away heaven and earth with the fires of hell, we needed to be aware of what that would mean for this child.

"Haru-kun, do you wanna try holdin' Ruon?" Yume offered.

I turned her down. Partially because I didn't know how to do it correctly, and that scared me. But more importantly, I felt like

these stained hands of mine had no right to touch that innocent little creature. I regret that now. If I'd just had a little courage, then even if I wasn't quite sure how to hold the newborn Ruon properly, I might've been able to get it basically right. If I had, then I'm sure I would have held Ruon many more times after that.

I never touched Ruon. I was sure that it was fine for me not to, and I was making the right choice. But I was wrong, wasn't I? Because if I was right, things wouldn't have ended up like this. I should've held Ruon. Because I wanted to. I wanted to feel the warmth and the weight—or perhaps the lightness—of Ranta and Yume's child. I probably felt like forbidding myself from doing so was a suitable punishment for me.

If I had touched Ruon, even a little, I would have loved him more than I could bear. I probably sensed that. Ruon was important, and I had to treasure him, but I couldn't ever love him. My love would only bring misfortune on him. I genuinely believed that.

If you want to call me a damned fool and laugh at me for that, go right ahead. It's an accurate assessment. There aren't many guys who deserve to be laughed at as much as I do.

Kuzaku showed up again less than a month after Ruon was born to tell us that the No-Life King wanted to meet with us in person.

The main issue was that unless special measures were taken, the No-Life King would draw in the sekaishu, which would make it hard to operate on the surface. That being the case, the No-Life King and Daybreak would agree on representatives and meet inside the Wonder Hole where the sekaishu wouldn't go.

The No-Life King's team would include himself, Kuzaku, Setora, and Architekra of the four princes. Daybreak would send a team of around ten people to the designated location, but the only ones who would actually be meeting with the king were Soma and Akira-san, along with me and Ranta because of our familiarity with the other side.

The arrangements for the meeting were hashed out easily enough, but many members of Daybreak objected to letting Kuzaku meet Ruon, and that complicated things.

Kajiko and the Wild Angels led the opposed group, and argued quite passionately that Kuzaku might be trying to abduct Ruon to

use him as a hostage. The Tokkis sided with them, and for some reason the Typhoon Rocks did too.

"If you're that suspicious, then you can cut my head off!" Kuzaku said. He didn't exactly perform a kowtow in front of Daybreak, but he did kneel down on the ground and plead with them. "Then Ranta-kun can take my head to see Yume-san and the baby. It's not like I'll die. Even with my head cut off, I'll still be alive. Now that's what I call being a disembodied head. No, no, I'm not joking around. I'm being serious here, guys."

"Carrying around a severed head would just be gross!" Ranta shouted, slapping Kuzaku on the back of the skull.

"Ow! I know I said I can't die anymore, but I still feel pain, okay?!"

"Not my problem, moron! And if it didn't hurt, there wouldn't be any point in hitting you!"

"Well, y'know, it did make me a little happy, though."

"You like getting hit?! Are you some kinda freak?!"

"Nah, it's more of an 'Oh, you're still willing to smack me.'"

"I'm telling you, you're being creepy!"

But in the end, Yume had the final word on the matter, and she decided to let Kuzaku meet with Ruon.

For safety's sake, Ranta and I went with him, as well as Kajiko of the Wild Angels, and also Renji, Mimori, and Anna-san. Yume was sitting on her bed in the hut with Ruon in her arms. Kuzaku didn't approach them. Instead, he sat down on the ground at a reasonable distance, making a conspicuous effort to be on his best behavior. Yume laughed at the way he was acting.

"It's been a long time, huh, Kuzakkun. What's wrong? You're actin' real formed up."

"I think you meant to say formal," Ranta said.

Yume laughed and accepted his correction with a forbearing, "Oh, yeah?"

"Well..." Kuzaku seemed to be at a loss for words as he looked back and forth between mother and child. Then he suddenly hung his head, his shoulders trembling. "Aw, damn... I'm so full of emotion right now. Maybe for the first time since I ended up like this. Whew... Ranta-kun and Yume-san's kid, huh? That's totally wild. No, really, it's amazing. Just amazing. Ranta-kun's a dad, and Yume-san's a mom, huh? Well, only one thing to say about that.

You both better live a long time. Oh, and I hope the world can be at peace. With all of us getting along, you know? No conflict, or anything like that."

Kuzaku wasn't crying. It looked like he wanted to, but the tears wouldn't come.

"You all might not believe it, but that's what our king is hoping for. It sounds like it'll be tough, though. I bet it will. There're all these races, and countries, and all this history, or I mean, the sequence of events that brought us to where we are now. And from the sound of it, we can't simply let all of that be water under the bridge and just have fun together. It sure mystifies me. Like, why not? Is there anything we can do other than let the past go? Seems to me like we've gotta find a way to say that whatever happened didn't happen. If we fixate on it, it'll never end, and nothing'll change, right? I'm saying we've gotta cut it out. Yeah. I want us to take it all back to zero, return to a blank slate, and start from there. I think that'd be for the best. I mean, that kid there, he's a blank slate, isn't he? You'll all tell him this is what happened, or things were like that back then, and you'll think you're doing him a favor, but what you're really doing is planting stuff in his head, and coloring his views. But by nature, he's totally blank. He could get along with anyone. It'd be nice if the world could be the same. That's what I think. And I'm being serious here."

I could understand what Kuzaku was saying. I got his reasoning. But it was pure idealism. I could only think, *We can't do that. It's impossible.* Kuzaku himself wouldn't have said all that stuff back before he had changed. I'm sure it would've been unthinkable for him. In the end, the No-Life King and Kuzaku couldn't understand our feelings.

Yeah. It was all a matter of feelings, of emotions. If we could all let bygones be bygones, join hands and work together, then we at least wouldn't be stuck killing each other. No one needed to tell me that for me to understand it. But no matter how well I understood, there are some things that just can't be done.

"Kuzakkun," Yume called Kuzaku's name. "Do me a favor and hold Ruon, okay?"

Kuzaku hesitated. He stood up a little, then sat back down. All of us who were watching him were probably giving off a pretty threatening aura. It was Yume, Ruon's mother, who was offering,

so we couldn't stop him, but none of us had accepted it. Well, no, apparently Ranta had. He looked completely calm.

After rising and sitting back down several times, Kuzaku said, "I appreciate the offer, but no," as if he was trying to convince himself. "Much as I'd like to hold him, I'll save it for next time. For when, how should I put this…uh, when it's peaceful? And we've dealt with some of this stuff. Once we've got a certain degree of, uh, I guess you'd call it 'trust' going? I think it'd be better if I saved that for then. I dunno. It'd be encouragement for me, I guess? Something I have to strive for. If that's how I think about it, then it'll help me try my hardest. Yeah."

"Think like that for too long, and he'll grow up before you know it," Ranta said teasingly.

"We've gotta hurry, then!" Kuzaku replied with gusto. "It's not gonna take that long. That's not our intent, at least. We want this over and done with real quick. If everything goes according to plan, we'll all get another chance. I mean, I know we're in a tight spot now. But turning that around, this could be an opportunity."

The No-Life King's side was, in fact, acting with all due haste.

Kuzaku hadn't come alone. A large number of undead had been deployed in the Wonder Hole and on the surface, and when Kuzaku reported something to them, they passed it along immediately.

It was apparently Setora who had proposed this network to the No-Life King and implemented it. The system let the No-Life King learn about things that happened even a few hundred kilometers away the same day that they happened. As such, there was no need for Kuzaku himself to return and convey Daybreak's response to the No-Life King. Once the No-Life King was ready, word came via an undead messenger, which Kuzaku passed on to us, and then we left Daybreak Village with him.

There's a place in the Wonder Hole known as the underground forest. This remains unconfirmed, but it's apparently under the Shadow Forest where the elves used to live. As the name suggests, it's an area thick with foliage, but the trees there aren't very similar to the ones on the surface, and it's not clear whether they're related in any way.

The trees of the underground forest have white trunks and branches which emit a dim light, with translucent leaves, or maybe

something more like cotton fluff growing from their branches. The volunteer soldiers called them undertrees. They varied a lot in size. The short ones were a meter or two tall, while larger ones could be over ten meters. It also wasn't unusual to see what looked like red, blue, or yellow fruits growing on them.

The underground forest as a whole was a wide open area. It had height, and it had depth too, with underground streams, and even underground waterfalls flowing through it.

The largest undertree was called the great tree. It wasn't a single tree, but multiple undertrees that had intertwined as they grew. The great tree stretched from the floor of the underground forest all the way to the ceiling, and its branches spread out from there. Its trunk probably had a circumference of one hundred, or maybe even two hundred meters.

The talks were set to be held underneath the great tree. When Soma, Akira-san, Ranta, and I, along with Kuzaku, left the others who'd accompanied us behind and approached it, we found that the No-Life King, Setora, and Architekra had already arrived and were waiting for us.

Setora was dressed in a black outfit that resembled a kimono but was fairly short in length, and she was wearing a pair of knee-high boots. She also carried what looked like a dagger, but that was the only weapon I could see on her. She didn't even smile when she saw Ranta and me. In a way, that was very true to how she'd always been. If anything, Setora seemed more interested in Soma and Akira-san, and didn't hide that she was scrutinizing the two of them.

Architekra was the only person there that I was meeting for the first time. I had heard the name before, so I knew that it belonged to a mage who was one of the princes created by the No-Life King, but I hadn't known that she was a woman, or that she was so terribly petite that she looked like a child. That surprised me a little. Her hair was awfully long, and tied back and braided into a shape that made me think of a bird with spread wings. Her eyes were rimmed with red, she was wearing lipstick, and she had designs drawn on her forehead and her cheeks. Her attire was similar to Setora's. Also, she wasn't standing on her own two feet. Instead, she was sitting on a floating spherical object that was a color somewhere between gold and silver. Was that thing a relic?

Or was it a product of her magic?

Then there was the No-Life King, Merry.

In contrast to Setora or Architekra, the No-Life King wore a long garment that was colored purple, deep blue, and crimson. The king's hair was neatly brushed so that it was all straight, and on top of the king's head there was a crown. It wasn't ostentatious. In fact, if anything, it was relatively modest. Yet it was still immediately obvious that it was well-made, and highly valuable.

Merry wouldn't have dressed like that of her own choosing. Not the Merry I knew. But I could tell. That was Merry. She had her hands pressed tightly together in front of her stomach, and I could easily see there was a lot of tension in her shoulders. Her brow was slightly furrowed, and her eyes were pointed in my direction. She stared only at me, and I grew confident that it really was her. *Right now, she's Merry.*

We faced each other underneath the great tree. Five of us on one side, and three on the other. Setora shot an ice-cold glare at Kuzaku who was standing with us.

"Oh!" he said before walking to the midpoint between the two groups, where he lowered himself slightly as he indicated to the No-Life King with one hand.

"I think this goes without saying, but this is our king, the, uhh... This is our king. Uhm, well, we don't need to worry about speaking all proper... Or at least I don't think so. Probably."

After Kuzaku's introduction, the No-Life King lowered her eyes and nodded slightly.

"I am Architekra," the prince introduced herself in a high voice like that of a little girl. "I've served His Majesty for quite some time, and even in his absence, I awaited his return. His Majesty has appointed me as chief overseer."

"I am Setora, the king's assistant," Setora said curtly, and Kuzaku puffed his chest out.

"By the way, Setora-san's actually the chief minister, and I'm the chief judge. I don't really get what all that entails, but it sounds awesome, right? Somehow."

"I'm Soma."

"They call me Akira."

"Ranta."

"I'm Haruhiro."

We each introduced ourselves.

Since we were inside the Wonder Hole, Soma was wearing his relic armor, Magai Waiomaru. He carried a single-edged longsword on his back, and another small katana hung at his hip. Soma's magical armor was made up of countless plates of black metal. It covered everything including his wrists and feet, and even had an asymmetrical skirt attached to it, yet it never got in the way of his movements. There was an orange light that leaked out through the gaps in the armor, making it obvious at a glance that there was something mystical about it.

Rather than Soma's visage as a whole, it was his sharp eyes that left a powerful impression on everyone he met. I wasn't able to tell this at the time due to inexperience with seeing such things in others, but in hindsight, I realize that those were the eyes of a man who knew deep sadness.

Akira-san was wearing a scarlet coat over his armor, and carried a sword and shield. About a third of his tied-back hair and long beard was white, and he was always making self-deprecating remarks about how he was "getting on in years," but he still moved like a young man. He was fairly well-built, but he didn't look all that big, perhaps because of his gentle gaze. He looked a bit thinner than he had when I'd first met him, though. I remember him complaining that he wasn't able to eat as much as he used to. But he claimed that was a good thing, since we weren't always blessed with full larders. "I guess aging's not all bad," he'd sometimes say. Akira-san was treated as a legend among the volunteer soldiers, but he was very human. I'm not worried about being misunderstood when I say that he was an ordinary guy with incredible amounts of skill and experience. And he seemed to feel the same way, because he always had this approachable and unpretentious demeanor about him.

"Thank you for taking the trouble to come all this way," the No-Life King said in Merry's voice, looking at Soma, Akira-san, Ranta, and I in turn.

Something changed. That was what I sensed. *He was Merry until just a moment ago, but not now.*

"I believe you are aware, but in the past I formed an alliance with the orcs, gray elves, goblins, and kobolds to destroy the human kingdoms. It was not something I wanted to do, but I

imagine you would have a hard time accepting that, no matter what I say. I did try to bring the humans of the kingdoms of Ishmar, Nananka, and Arabakia to the negotiating table, and the elves and dwarves as well. But they were unwilling to give any ground, and they continued to slander us. They would only demand that we leave this region entirely and live in isolation within the barren wastelands. And so we drove out the human race, and we shared what we stole from them among ourselves. In the end, I was the one who made that decision. If anyone is to blame, it is me. We massacred the humans, seizing their lands, their cities, and all of their wealth and culture, chasing them out of the area north of the Tenryu Mountains—out of Grimgar. Those are all things that I did in the past."

"I—" Soma began, but then he shrugged and started over. "Would it be correct to say that you're currently living inside a host?"

"No, it would not." The No-Life King pointed to his chest with his right index finger. "I am inside of her, but I am also her, and it would be equally correct to say that she is me."

"I wasn't close with her, but I did know her. She should know me too. Is it all right for me to assume that you know what she knows?"

"More or less."

"Then you should already know this: We're humans, but we weren't born to the Kingdom of Arabakia. I think we may have come here from another world."

"There weren't any humans in Grimgar originally. According to the legends of the forerunners, at least, humans came later."

"The forerunners," Architekra interjected, "refers to the ancestors of the elves, dwarves, gnomes, centaurs, and kobolds. Given that they're so different from each other, this might be hard to believe, but they have an old legend in common. According to that legend, they all descend from a single source."

The No-Life King nodded.

"The hornedfolk of the Northern Frontier, the piratsians of the Nehi Desert, the orcs, and the goblins. These are the races that, like humans, came from outside."

"What about you?" Akira-san asked the No-Life King. "When did you come to Grimgar? And from where? Do you have an answer to

that?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t remember.” The No-Life King stared off into the distance. Perhaps he was thinking back to that distant past he said he couldn’t recall.

“Initially, I had no thoughts or memories. Those took shape gradually. In all likelihood, I became what I am over a long period of time. The me from that period which I don’t have memories of must have been very different from the current me. I know for certain that I started out in the Northern Frontier. The hornedfolk tribes still sing songs about me. But the passage of time has little meaning to them. When they sing of past events, whether from a millennium ago, a century, or only just yesterday, it’s all in the present to them. That is why the hornedfolk still treat me as a friend. They have promised to participate in the coming battle with the sekaishu.”

“It was ridiculously cold up north,” Kuzaku said, shivering. “Everything was white there. Just a single color wherever you looked. Pretty, though. Bet I’d have frozen to death if it weren’t for this body. It was so damn cold, I’m amazed the hornedfolk can stand it up there.”

“*You* went?” Ranta asked.

“Yeah,” Kuzaku replied casually. “And Setora-san met with the piratsians in the Nehi Desert. After that, we talked about which was worse, hot or cold, and I feel like cold weather is more tolerable than hot weather.”

“Sounds like you’re both going off on grand adventures.”

“If you became one of us, you could go to the Northern Frontier too, huh, Ranta-kun? Oh, and you’d live a long time too, wouldn’t you? C’mon, do it for Ruon. Though, you might just never die.”

“Like I’d ever agree to become one of you, moron!”

“Aw, it’d be great. You totally should. Just give it a chance. You can make your decision after becoming one of us. Hey, king, how about it? Why not make Ranta-kun a prince too?”

“Hey! Don’t try to push forward with this shit on your own!”

“That is not the problem,” Setora said coldly. “I’m going to insist that you two not get us off track.”

Her rebuke didn’t just make Kuzaku flinch; Ranta did too.

“So then, you’ve already joined hands with the hornedfolk tribes?” Akira-san asked.

Setora answered on behalf of the No-Life King. “The hornedfolk have always been allies of the king, and we’ve also come to an agreement with the piratsians. Both of them have already deployed their primary forces to the Quickwind Plains. Dif Gogun of the orcs, King Zwarzfeld of the gray elves, Chief Ademoi of the kobolds, the sixteen centaur clans, and Jumbo’s Forgan have also agreed.”

“Jumbo—Forgan’s in on this too?!” Ranta’s face twisted in shock, and I was more than a little surprised myself.

“You referred to this as a battle with the sekaishu a moment ago, yeah?” asked Soma, who then sighed when the No-Life King nodded. “Why bring us in on this? Do you need us in that battle?”

“Very much so.”

Ever since this part of the conversation had started, the No-Life King hadn’t looked at me even once. It was like I wasn’t even there. But it’s not like I was feeling left out or anything. It just helped reaffirm for me that the No-Life King wasn’t Merry at the time.

“I believe it will be important for you to have participated in the battle.”

“Hmm…” Akira-san touched his hair with a pensive look on his face. “Like how the orcs, goblins, kobolds, and undead worked with you to destroy the human kingdoms once upon a time, huh? I can’t imagine how you’re going to do it, but your aim is to sweep away the sekaishu, and share the reclaimed Grimgar among the victors, right?”

“Though it will undoubtedly not go as smoothly as that,” Architekra, who had been listening quietly with a faint smile, interjected. “What happened after we expelled the humans from Grimgar? Of all things, one of His Majesty’s own subjects, a prince, betrayed him, the gray elves who were framed for the murder left, and the orcs, goblins, and kobolds went their own separate ways. The tribes had only believed in His Majesty; they did not trust each other. His Majesty never goes back on his word once it is given. However, most individuals have other things that they value more than truthfulness. In a sense, that is even true for us princes, who have been granted the blood of the king. We all have our own distinct hopes and desires. And there was one fool of a prince who held the unreachable dream of replacing His Majesty.”

“I wouldn’t describe myself as being excessively optimistic

about this," the No-Life King said, not chastising Architekra. "After experiencing betrayal, discord, and division firsthand, for a good long while, I intended to spend what time I have left as a simple wanderer."

"You're never going to die, though." Soma cocked his head to the side, innocently mystified by this. "Isn't that a pretty long span to be referring to as 'what time I have left'?"

The No-Life King smiled ever so slightly. *It's not like Merry's smile.* That's what I felt. Or was it what I wanted to believe?

"I don't think I'll never die. At the very least, I am not indestructible. If you completely obliterate me without leaving even the slightest trace, I *will* meet my end. Even the beings known as gods are probably not indestructible. I simply won't die until I am destroyed."

Akira-san shrugged in response. "I'm already jealous enough that you won't die of old age. I've been thinking about it a lot lately. Death is one thing, but aging is rough. So anyway, how do we destroy the sekaishu?"

"The sekaishu has a root, and we have discovered where it is."

The No-Life King then told us that old story I talked about before.

In the beginning, there is only the sky and sea.

The nameless one comes from beyond the sea, spreads myriad seeds, and leaves.

The seeds blossom into life, then wither away, and become a continent of corpses—Grimgar.

The nameless one returns, Grimgar teems with life, and the forerunners are born.

But then the primordial dragon comes down from the sky, and chases off the nameless one.

The dragon goes to sleep and is buried in the ground, and after that, Grimgar is filled with peaceful abundance.

But then two gods come from beyond and start a war involving the forerunners, which wakes the dragon from its slumber.

The dragon emerges from its bed and fights the two gods.

The battle is unending, so the nameless one feels bad for the forerunners and makes a red star fall from the heavens.

The dragon shatters the red star, but the shards that remain put down roots, and they become dark tumors.

The two gods disappear, buried beneath those tumors, and the dragon goes back to sleep.

Then the dragon dies in its bed, having exhausted its strength.

I don't know what the red star refers to. But those black tumors are obviously the sekaishu. The red star was blown apart by the dragon, so if the sekaishu are its remnants, then they probably get along about as well as oil and water. And according to the old stories, the Wonder Hole is also the dragon's grave, which the sekaishu won't go near. They still avoid the dead dragon, or perhaps it's that they're keeping a respectful distance.

"In the place…" The No-Life King pointed in the direction of the sky with his right index finger, then slowly lowered it to point down. "…where the red star fell, we will find the root of the sekaishu. That was one of the things I was searching for during my time wandering Grimgar."

"And did you find it?" Soma asked, receiving a nod in response.

"The Crown Mountains. We will explain the details later, but our plan—which Setora came up with, rather than I—is to bring all our forces together in one place and draw in the sekaishu. Then I will use the opening that provides to quickly sever the root."

In short, everyone but the No-Life King was going to be acting as bait in a diversionary operation, while the king himself would destroy the sekaishu's root.

"I came up with all sorts of ideas, and determined that this one would be the most effective," Setora explained plainly. "If, by some chance, the king fails, then we will all retreat immediately. The king will be absorbed by the sekaishu, sealed away, or destroyed. If that happens, it happens, and we'll deal with it. We'll have to find a way to coexist with the sekaishu, or try something else to destroy it. Though, there's no guarantee we princes would survive the destruction of the king."

"You say that so casually," Kuzaku grumbled, but he was grinning.

Wasn't their continued existence on the line? It definitely was, but they gave off no sense of urgency. Maybe that was why it all felt fake to me. Besides, was there any need to go to such lengths to cut the sekaishu off at the root? The No-Life King probably had a reason to. But what about us? What reason did we have to care about the primordial dragon, the two gods, the red star, the black

tumors, or even the forerunners and Grimgar itself, when it really came down to it?

Come to think of it, a long time ago, one of Soma's comrades, Shima, whispered this to me.

"We're searching for a way back to our original world."

Our original world. Before coming to Grimgar, we had been in some other world. If there was a way to return to it, then maybe I would find that I had friends and family there. There could be a town in that world where I grew up. My true homeland.

Soma had originally founded the Day Breakers with the goal of infiltrating Undead DC, claiming that there were signs the No-Life King was going to return. But his actual goal hadn't had anything to do with slaying the No-Life King. For Soma and his party, their true objective had always been to find a way to return to our original world.

Back when Shima had said that to me, as a mere volunteer soldier for whom even staying alive had been a daily struggle, it hadn't felt real to me at all. But now I feel like I get it.

If I could return to my original world, would I want to? I can't immediately nod my head to that question. With Merry, Kuzaku, and Setora having ended up like this, how could I simply cast everything aside and leave Grimgar behind? But if there's a way to go back, I want to know what it is. Like a sort of final insurance policy. Then if things ever ended up totally unworkable, I could go back to my original world. I could just run away.

"This isn't a condition for our cooperation or anything, but..." What about Soma? Did a man as great as him want somewhere to run away to? Or did he have some other motive? "We're searching for a way back to our original world. I'm sure you know Grimgar better than any of us do. Do you have any leads?"

"I don't know where the volunteer soldiers of Alterna come from," the No-Life King said, shaking his head. Not vertically or horizontally, but somewhere in between. "What I can say is that all humans in Grimgar came from the same world. Can't you feel the lingering breaths of your original world in the culture of the human race?"

"Like our language, you mean?" Akira-san asked, crossing his arms. "We were able to read when we got here. The people who came to Grimgar long before us—our seniors, you might call them

—used the language they had already been using in our original world.”

“Enad George. Ishidua Zaemoon. Renzaburo.” The No-Life King started listing off names. “These were all people who existed at the time of the founding of the Kingdom of Arabakia. Though, those pronunciations vary slightly from how I recall them being said. Minato Joji. Ishido Uzaemon. Renzaburoh. They spoke of how they came from the Land of the Rising Sun, or Japan, as they called it.”

“Land of the Rising Sun… Japan…”

It wasn’t just me. Soma, Akira-san, and Ranta all repeated those words too. They had a nostalgic sound to them. We probably knew them. But we couldn’t quite picture exactly what they referred to. If that was our homeland, it had to be a place. Was it a continent? A region? Or perhaps a country?

“This is only to the best of my knowledge,” the No-Life King prefaced his next comment before continuing, “but I am not aware of any human ever returning to the world called Japan. But if someone did manage to return without telling a soul in advance, then there would be no way for me to know about it. However, given that you were able to come here, it’s reasonable to think that there is some point where this world connects with that one. If you can find that connection, it’s possible that you might be able to use it. And if there is any other possibility, it can only be found in…”

“Relics, huh?” Soma finished for him.

The No-Life King nodded. “Relics are objects of otherworldly construction. It may be that I, too, am a relic of sorts. This may be a broad interpretation, but the nameless one, the primordial dragon, the two gods, the red star, the black tumors that it left behind—all of these things which appear in the ancient legend are relics, aren’t they? Relics that appeared later struggled against the relics that came before them, with relics trying to expel other relics. That ancient legend may be a history of relics fighting a war of survival in Grimgar.”

“The dragon. The gods. The star. The sekaishu. The No-Life King.” Akira-san let out a sigh, and the lips hidden behind his beard curled upward a bit. “If all of those entities are relics…then maybe it wouldn’t be all that weird for there to be a relic that could

travel between worlds.”

The No-Life King suddenly furrowed his brow, as if he was thinking deeply. “It wouldn’t be odd for someone to already be seeking such a relic either. I intend to live out the rest of my life here in Grimgar, but I have a special interest in relics. If after this I find myself in a position where I can move around on the surface again, then perhaps I might be interested in searching for such a relic. If you don’t mind waiting until our current objective is complete, I will be able to lend you my strength.”

Soma and Akira-san seemed inclined to work with the No-Life King. But when you think about it, we didn’t have many options. Many races were gathering under the king’s command. If we joined them, we would need to unite with orcs, undead, and Forgan, groups that we had past grievances with, acting like yesterday’s enemy was today’s friend. Would we be able to do that? But if we turned our backs on them, we’d be outcasts.

The situation was already weighted against us badly enough. Calling ourselves a small elite force might sound good, but there were just too few of us.

The orcish race was by no means inferior to us humans, and for every one of us, there were thousands of them, if not more. If they were to attack us in earnest, not even one-man armies like Soma, Akira-san, or Renji would stand any chance of winning.

If we had tried to not join the No-Life King and remain independent, maybe that would have allowed us to avoid the battle, but would the orcs ignore us afterward, having been hostile to humanity for so long? Let’s just say I wasn’t getting my hopes up for that.

If, for sake of argument, the No-Life King had been calling for us to become his vassals, then many among Daybreak would oppose it. But that wasn’t what was happening. His proposal was for a temporary alliance, and once we’d done something about the sekaishu in the Crown Mountains, we would be able to justify going our own way after that. For our own survival, working with the No-Life King might not have been the best plan, but it was close enough to it.

Setora then explained the details of the operation. Soma and Akira-san listened intently, while Ranta just sort of half paid attention, and I was pretty much off in my own world. My mind

was on the No-Life King—on Merry.

The meeting ended with the decision that we would take the No-Life King's proposal back to Daybreak Village, and then send our formal response through Kuzaku who would be returning with us.

But at the very end, the No-Life King turned his gaze toward me and said, "It seems she wishes to speak with you." The look in those eyes wasn't Merry. It was still the No-Life King. "What you do is up to you. She doesn't mean to force you into anything either."

I nodded without hesitation.

Everyone—not only Soma, Akira-san, and Ranta, but Kuzaku, Setora, and Architekra too—stepped away from the No-Life King and I. They left the two of us alone. No, there were more just than the two of us there. Or perhaps not? Were Merry and I actually alone together under the great tree? It felt like Merry to me, but I couldn't be certain. That was why I did nothing but look at her quietly with upturned eyes for a good long moment.

Maybe she couldn't find the right words, because she wasn't opening her mouth either. But that inability to speak made me confident it was, in fact, Merry.

"Heya," I said, instantly regretting how stupid the greeting made me sound.

Merry lowered her eyes, clearing her throat faintly. I thought I spotted a faint smile on her face. "Haru... I..."

"Mm-hm?"

"I don't know what to say."

"Oh? Yeah... I guess you wouldn't, huh?"

"I probably knew a long time ago. But I couldn't tell you. I mean, it's not like I understood it completely."

"I'm...sure you didn't. I know this is a weird way to put it, but it defies understanding."

"You're right."

"Besides, when you get down to it, this is all my—"

"Don't say that," Merry cut me off, shaking her head. Her eyes were still lowered, and she didn't try to meet my gaze.

"It's not your fault, Haru. It's not. This is my problem. I mean, I'm the one who turned Kuzaku and Setora into what they are. I asked him to do it. He only granted my wish. I feel like...everything's gone wrong, and maybe it would have been

better if back then…it had all ended right there. I've thought about it so many times. I don't know. I hadn't told you about my feelings yet when it happened, so maybe it's for the best that it wasn't the end of me. That's another way I look at it sometimes. In the time since then, all sorts of wonderful things have happened…and so many precious moments. Moments that I can't deny I desperately wished for. It's true that from the instant I came back to life when I should have been dead, it was set in stone that this would happen someday. He has his own long path that he's walked, because there are things that he has to do, and he has no other choice than to do them. It's not that I can't defy him, or anything like that… It's that, as I am now, I understand him. But, you know…he can't understand me—can't understand us. Because his nature is so different from ours. He's trying to understand. He does want to. But he can't fully comprehend us. And he knows that too. The fact that he can't understand us…makes him want us all the more. Because he's alone. Genuinely alone. Because there's no other like him."

"Do you…sympathize with him?"

"Sympathy. That might be what it is. But you could also say that he's inside of me, and I'm inside of him. Sympathy… Honestly, it's hard to think of myself as completely separate from him."

"You're…Merry now, right?"

"I think so."

"You're…Merry now."

"Yeah."

"You're Merry."

"Yes. He's not here. He's sunk inside of me. Deep, deep inside…to my darkest depths. He's not even poking his head out."

"Is he…listening?"

"I don't want to lie to you, Haru. I think he can hear us. And if he decides to, he can come out immediately."

"And when he comes out, you—"

"I sink…deep down, to the depths. And it's not just me. There are a number of us."

"Those people…can you talk to them?"

"The first was a rat," Merry lowered her voice, speaking quickly. "A single rat. The Rat King. He was a spare. He gave the Rat King a part of himself, just in case. Prince Ishidua Rohro betrayed him,

using a relic to seal his main body away, but the other him, the Rat King, escaped. The Rat King then transferred to an orc named Diha Gatt. After him was Itsunaga. He was raised in the Hidden Village, but was exiled with his mother at a young age. Then next was a mage who was a former volunteer soldier. Yasuma. He studied under a wizard named Sarai, and then died when he was close to figuring out the deepest secret of magic. Ageha. She was also a former volunteer soldier, and had a lover named Takaya. Jessie Smith was unable to adapt to life as a volunteer soldier, and he died while traveling alone. And I'm the last. Though, I don't know if I'll be the final one. Jessie's memories were destroyed, and he's hiding somewhere."

After saying all of that, Merry let out a big sigh.

"He hasn't stepped in...even though I've been telling you all of his secrets. He's tolerant. But that may not be the same as being kind. He forgives, accepts, acknowledges. He hopes that by doing so, he can make friends with anyone. He's even tried to find a way to coexist with the sekaishu. He discovered that the root of the sekaishu was in the Crown Mountains during Jessie's time, but when he tried to communicate with the sekaishu, he failed."

"I can't imagine how it would even be possible to talk to them."

"Yeah. When he first gained sapience, the sekaishu attacked him. He originally created the undead as a shield against them. The sekaishu avoid the undead because he created the undead in a way that would make them do that. Even now, his main body, sealed inside a relic, is holding another relic called the Staff of Yotsui. If he pours a large amount of power into it, it can repel the sekaishu. So it's not like he's been in a constant struggle against the sekaishu his entire life. He's avoided fighting as much as he can, and has always tried to find ways of making it more feasible to do so. But in the end, he and the sekaishu just can't coexist."

"And so he's trying to bring an end to it once and for all."

"Yes. He's finally accepted it's the only way. He's always possessed incredible power, and now he's going to hit the sekaishu with everything he has. And I think he's going to win."

"Once he does...he'll have nothing left to fear."

"Are you scared of him?"

"I guess...I can't exactly say I'm not."

"That answer is so like you, Haru," Merry said with a smile. And

then she finally looked me in the eye. “Honestly, I don’t know what he’ll do at that point either. It’s possible that even he doesn’t know.”

Merry held both of her hands against her chest, as if she was trying to hold something in that was threatening to burst out of her. “But he’s inside of me.”

“Merry? What’s…that supposed to—”

“It’s a *good thing* that he’s inside of me,” Merry repeated herself firmly. “I won’t let him make a mistake.”

“You…won’t?”

“You don’t need to trust him,” Merry said, shaking her head. “Haru. Believe in me. I won’t let him make a mistake. Once the sekaishu are destroyed, he’ll help Soma and the others in their search for that relic they’re looking for. I’m sure he honestly is interested in finding out more about relics. After all, relics are filled with possibility.”

“Possibility…”

“Believe in me, Haru.”

Merry extended the hands that she had been holding over her chest out toward me, and I didn’t hesitate for a second to grasp them with my own. There was no doubt about it. They were Merry’s hands.

“Please,” she said.

“I believe in you,” I answered.

“Merry.”

I didn’t think that would be the last time I called her by her name. Even now, I’m still fervently hoping that it won’t be.

6. To Friends

We reached a decision not long after we returned to Daybreak Village. We were going to side with the No-Life King.

There were those who argued against doing so, but it was readily apparent that acting completely hostile toward the No-Life King and his side would not be a bright idea. The No-Life King already knew where Daybreak Village was, and had a good grasp of how much strength we could muster. We had to assume he'd shared that intel with the other races. If we were going to oppose them, then we had to be ready to abandon Daybreak Village. Even if some of us were willing to try to start over again from scratch, it seemed more reasonable to work with the No-Life King for now, and hold on to the shelters and facilities we had already built as we considered what would come next.

Kuzaku passed our official response to the No-Life King. The allied forces that had united under the king were going to deploy around the Crown Mountains before dawn on the eighth of August, 662 A.C., and launch our assault from all sides as the sun rose.

The dark tumors, the sekaishu, were said to be the remnants of the red star struck down by the primordial dragon. Apparently, it wasn't able to fully kill the star. But that was our goal this time around, and so we named the mission Operation Starfall.

We made plans and prepared extensively before the battle. As we did, the No-Life King provided us with vital information, such as how it was possible to protect relics from the sekaishu by packaging them in a certain way. Some of the undead created by the No-Life King had bodies covered in animal fur. The sekaishu couldn't detect relics that were wrapped tightly in their tanned hides. It wasn't enough to simply sew a hide shut around a relic, though. The hide had to be sealed with wax, so once that seal was undone, the protection was permanently broken. We were basically going to carry the relics to the Crown Mountains in a sealed state, and then unseal them when Starfall began.

Who among Daybreak would participate in Starfall, and who

wouldn't? It was left to each of us to decide that for ourselves, with one exception. Or rather, there were two. Before she even had the opportunity to say anything, Yume was immediately barred from joining the operation, as was Ruon, obviously, since he wouldn't even be a year old when it happened.

We couldn't just leave Yume and Ruon at Daybreak Village while everybody else went, though. But there were a decent number of people who didn't want to part with Ruon, so deciding who would stay actually turned into a bit of an argument, but once things were hashed out, Kajiko, Mako, Azusa, Cocono, and Yae of the Wild Angels were appointed to guard them and help out with childcare.

Once it was set in stone that Operation Starfall would be happening, even I, who'd been spending all of my time doing manual labor in Daybreak Village before, started making trips to the Wonder Hole. I'd resigned myself to the fact that my instincts were going to have dulled from disuse, and it turned out that was indeed the case. I genuinely worried that I wouldn't be able to get them back to where they were, but the day would keep getting closer whether I was out of practice or not.

The members of Daybreak taking part in Starfall would travel through the Wonder Hole to the exit near the Lonesome Field Outpost, and then move in small groups toward their designated positions around the Crown Mountains. Before our departure, Kuzaku left Daybreak Village to return to the No-Life King. I don't remember doing anything special to say goodbye. It was just a simple "See you later," "Mm-hm," sort of thing.

With only a few days left until our departure, I was barely getting any sleep. I would lie there in my sleeping spot feeling wide awake until I finally decided to sit up for a bit. Then I would lie down again, trying to at least rest my body, only to sit up once more. I did that over and over again.

On one such night, when Daybreak Village was fast asleep, and I could hear the bugs, the birds, and the beasts in the surrounding area, I noticed someone approaching my little hovel. At first, I thought it was the person on night patrol, who I periodically sensed passing by, but I quickly realized that wasn't the case when they called out to me.

"Haru-kun. You still up?"

"Yume..."

“Hey, mind if Yume joins you?”

“Sure. Of course you can.”

I was sitting on the ground with one knee up, and Yume plopped down next to me. She smelled incredibly sweet. Or, no, not really sweet. It was a fragrance filled with the blinding brightness of life. I felt something catch in my chest, and for a moment I was intensely jealous of Ranta. I also thought about how I had to protect Daybreak Village. No matter what happened, I had to defend Yume and Ruon to the death. Was cutting off the sekaishu at the root absolutely necessary to accomplish that?

Given the situation, we had no choice but to side with the No-Life King. I knew that intellectually. But unlike the No-Life King, who might himself be a relic, the sekaishu wouldn’t come after us so long as we didn’t carry relics around. If we gave up our relics, then couldn’t we live on in isolation?

But on the other hand, the No-Life King was inside of Merry. Merry had said that relics were filled with possibility. Soma and his group had found hope in relics too.

So I might be able to give up one thing, which would allow me to protect something else. But then there would surely be other things I could no longer protect. Do I want to give that one thing up? Or do I actually not want to give anything up? If I could protect everything, that would be the best. If only I had the power to. But I know better than anyone how truly powerless I am.

“Haru-kun, this mighta just been Yume’s dream,” Yume said before laughing. “It’s a bit hard to tell. Yume’s losin’ her confidence a bit too.”

“Your…dream? Oh… You mean you had a dream?”

“That’s kinda fuzzy, y’know? But anyway, Merry-chan came to see us.”

“Merry…?”

“Yep. Merry-chan was sayin’ she wanted to see Ruon’s face.”

“Uh, you mean…her, all alone?”

“She was alone, yeah. Sneaked into the hut all by herself. Yume and Ruon were sleepin’, and when Yume woke up, Merry-chan was there. But that’s kinda weird, right?”

“Well…yeah, it is.”

“Was it really a dream? But Yume talked to Merry-chan, y’know? ‘Congratulations,’ she said. And ‘Lemme see him again when he

gets bigger.' Or maybe she didn't say 'lemme.' Merry-chan doesn't talk like that. But anyway, Yume told her she could come anytime. Told her it'd be nice if she could just stay here with us. Yume knows it'd be hard. But we're comrades and all. And friends. Merry-chan'd feel lonely if Yume didn't say it, and Yume really does feel that way too."

"Yeah."

"Yume's got a feelin' they'll be able to come back some day. It'll be tough, though. If Yume didn't have that feelin', she couldn't take it anymore. That's why, when everyone's sayin' it's impossible, Yume chooses to believe that, no, that's wrong, they *can* come back. Merry-chan, and Setoran, and Kuzakkun, and Shihoru, they're all gonna come back for sure. But Yume's got her hands full with Ruon right now. He's runnin' Yume...rabid...?"

"Ragged?"

"That's the one. Ruon's a bundle of energy, and he's been runnin' Yume ragged. Yume can't take care of anythin' else, but Yume's choosin' to think that everyone'll be able to come back. It's all Yume can do. Sorry."

"What you're doing is more than enough."

We can get them back. I chose to think that. *We can get it all back.* Merry had said there was a possibility, and that wasn't something I could disregard.

The relics. Everything about this is too big for a little guy like me to handle. Like, not only am I hesitant to take the first step, it feels like my legs will give out if I try. But even so, if she says that relics are the key, then I have to seize on that lead no matter what it takes.

"It's a good thing that he's inside of me." Merry had even gone as far as to say that. I struggled to see it as good fortune, but it was true that there was a relic of immense power residing inside Merry.

First, we'd wipe out the sekaishu, and secure the No-Life King's freedom. Once that was done, we'd have Merry help us talk the No-Life King around, and we'd make use of him, or even join hands with him if that was possible. Then we'd search for relics. Relics with the power to let us get it all back.

A few days later, we set out from Daybreak Village and entered the Wonder Hole through the entrance near the Dusty Wasteland. We'd long since finished packaging and sealing our relics.

Akira-san passed me a relic wrapped in the hide of an undead.

"It's called Fatalsis, the fatal dagger. We've found other relics of the same type, so we know its effect. It will deliver certain death to whatever you stab with it, but only once. Then it shatters. I'll leave it with you. Those sekaishu…the night-clad ones, I think you called them? I don't know if it can kill them or not, but it's worth a shot."

"But why me?"

"I'm no good with daggers. I'm too clumsy for them. I thought a thief like you could put it to better use."

There weren't many thieves in Daybreak, and I was pretty much the only one who used a dagger. Did Akira-san hand me Fatalsis for purely practical reasons, like he was claiming? I don't know. But even if it was a single-use item, it was pretty reassuring to have a one-hit-kill weapon. Everyone in Daybreak Village knew I was a fragile person, and that my heart was already broken, so maybe Akira-san was trying to be considerate in his own way.

We left the Wonder Hole at the Lonesome Field Outpost exit and broke into teams.

Ranta and I headed east together. We crossed the Quickwind Plains and headed into the foothills of the Tenryus, and then proceeded further east from there. I think it was around July thirtieth when we reached our first destination at a point eighty kilometers due south of the Crown Mountains. The Quickwind Plains were flat, so we could make that eighty kilometer trip in two or three days, or possibly just one if we really hurried.

We rested for a number of days in the foothills. We weren't simply lazing around, though. We fished in a nearby river, and we hunted, and we did other things too.

There were dragons living in the Tenryu Mountains. Ranta suggested we try to find one, and we went mountain climbing. Did we ever find a dragon? I know for sure that we went looking. But I don't remember seeing one, so I'm pretty sure we were unsuccessful.

On August sixth, we headed back down out of the foothills and returned to the Quickwind Plains.

We arrived at our designated location in the middle of the night on August eighth, where we met up with the Tokkis, who had arrived first. Team Renji soon joined us. Renji also had a priest named Wado from the Berserkers with him.

The twelve of us were the rearguard, and a full third of our team—Tada and Anna-san of the Tokkis, Chibi of Team Renji, and Wado—were priests.

The vanguard was made up of Soma's team of six, if the flesh golem Zenmai could be counted as a person, Akira-san's team of six, and the six Typhoon Rocks, for a total of eighteen people. They would have already arrived at a point closer to the Crown Mountains.

The vanguard also included Soma's comrade Shima, who was a shaman and could heal people; Akira-san's sword friend Gogh, who was an ex-mage and priest; and Tsuga of the Rocks, who was also a priest. Akira-san and Kemuri were paladins, so while they might not have been as capable as the priests, they could also heal some wounds.

In accordance with Setora's plan, the members of Daybreak were south of the Crown Mountains, a combined force of undead, hornedfolk, piratsians, centaurs, and kobolds were to the north, the orcish army was to the west, and Forgan and the gray elves were to the east. We would advance at dawn. It was expected that the sekaishu would start attacking immediately, so each group would try to push them back and advance as far as possible. Then, when the time came, the No-Life King would strike the sekaishu at its root.

We were all quiet as we waited for sunrise, only close comrades occasionally exchanging a handful of words. Even the usually noisy Anna-san and Kikkawa of the Tokkis barely spoke at all.

"At times like this, it's best not to say anything," I remember Ranta murmuring as he sat there next to me. "No need to go raising your own death flag. Everyone's figured that out," he said with a little laugh.

He might have meant that as a joke. I thought of laughing to humor him, but I couldn't remember how to.

In time, the eastern sky started to brighten, and I was able to spot a group of silhouettes a few hundred meters ahead of us. Someone waved to us. Kikkawa jumped up and waved back.

The Crown Mountains were black. Just pitch black. They had been given their name because they looked like a crown no matter what angle you viewed them from. However, that had completely changed. The mountains, now swollen and covered in pure

darkness, looked like a massive upside-down bowl. I didn't need more than a passing glance to know that what we were looking at was nothing more or less than a solid mass of sekaishu. And they weren't simply covering the Crown Mountains, they were spreading out from it in all directions.

In the area around us, there were a number of dark strands that were not so much flowing like a river as crawling across the ground. While we had been traveling toward the mountains, we had more or less been able to avoid the sekaishu as long as we were careful not to tread on them. If our foot touched a sekaishu, then we took a circuitous route around it, or we jumped over it and kept on moving. But it's entirely possible that we had simply been lucky to encounter relatively few of them.

As it got brighter, we were shocked to see how much the sekaishu had spread. If you were to add up all the black parts of the area surrounding us and compare it to the land that wasn't black, then there was no question that the former was the larger of the two. That was a new piece of information for us. The dark growths, the black tumors, were steadily eating away at the surface. If we had left them to it, it might not have happened immediately, or even anytime particularly soon, but those black tumors would have eventually engulfed all of Grimgar, wouldn't they?

Maybe the sekaishu wouldn't attack us if we didn't have relics. But could we survive in a Grimgar where the sekaishu were running rampant? Even if we had air to breathe, people couldn't live on that alone. We needed water to drink and food to eat. Would we be able to secure those things once the sekaishu covered Grimgar? Could we sleep on top of the sekaishu?

Like it or not, we probably had no choice but to extirpate those black tumors. Even setting aside the No-Life King's objectives, there was likely no escaping the fact that we had no other way forward.

"Well, we've got no choice but to do this," the bespectacled Tada said as he swung his warhammer around. "So now it's just a matter of doing it."

"*Fighto happatsu*, yeah!" Anna-san went around slapping the other Tokkis on the back.

"Oh, going for an eightfold increase from *ippatsu* to *happatsu*?

Are you sure that'll be enough, though?"

At this comedic jab from Kikkawa, Anna-san immediately adjusted to, "*Fighto hyappatsu*, yeah!" raising the usual one *ippatsu* to a hundred.

Inui took off his eye patch. I don't really know why, but he seemed to think that would do something.

I got hugged by Mimori. I couldn't do anything to return her feelings, but I stayed still.

Adachi whispered something to Renji. Renji nodded, seized Adachi by the back of the head, then immediately let go. It was pretty rare to see him do something like that. Adachi was a calmer man than most, but he was obviously shaken up by it. Ron laughed at them. Chibi was smiling too.

I didn't know the priest named Wado very well, but I'd heard him talking with someone about how the Berserkers had treated him like a slave, and that he didn't have many fond memories of them. I also remember people whispering behind his back that maybe that was because he had an awful personality. I'm in no position to judge. I had hollow cheeks and sunken eyes that made me look gloomy, and kind of took a cynical attitude to things. But anyway, Wado was talking with Tada, Anna-san, and Chibi about how they would handle the healing during combat. If his clan had worked him as hard as he claimed, then it was probably because he'd had the abilities to merit it.

Did I have a conversation with Ranta before things kicked off? We were sitting shoulder to shoulder, looking up at the Crown Mountains. I'm sure that we did talk, but I'm strangely unable to remember a word of it.

"The sun's coming up!" a voice shouted from among the vanguard. It was Soma's voice.

Operation Starfall had begun.

I had the Fatalsis that Akira-san had given me strapped to my back, still sealed in undead hide. It was a single-use weapon, so I didn't intend to unwrap it until it was time to use it.

The vanguard included many people, Soma among them, who used relics regularly. But I was the only person in the rearguard who had one. If I kept my relic sealed, the sekaishu would be drawn toward the vanguard. That was going to make things difficult for them, but it meant the rearguard could focus on

providing support. That was part of the reason we were divided into a vanguard and a rearguard.

The sky had already brightened considerably, yet the ground remained dark. No, not just dark, black because of the sekaishu.

There was a flash of light on the eastern horizon. Sunrise.

That was when the sekaishu began moving. The black parts of the ground all began writhing at once, and a heavy rumble arose, not so much echoing as coming from all directions. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN—anyone who didn't flinch at that low, heavy noise must have been crazy. It certainly scared me. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN—before I knew it, I was overwhelmed by the low, heavy vibrations of the sekaishu, and just stood there in a daze. Ranta shouted at me. He'd already drawn his katana. Even though he was standing right next to me, I couldn't hear what he was saying.

NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN—but I realized I couldn't just stand there, of course. The sekaishu were already swarming the vanguard. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. It looked like a black wave was about to sweep our forward team away, but then someone swung their sword and triggered some kind of magic, knocking the sekaishu back. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. And yet, even as they were repelled, the sekaishu kept coming at the vanguard in droves.

NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. At some point, a chaotic river of sekaishu formed in between the rearguard and the vanguard. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. Renji, Ron, Tada, Kikkawa, Inui, Mimori, and Ranta charged into that stream. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. I had a weapon in my hands. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. But I didn't remember drawing it. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. I hadn't taken it out consciously. My body had probably done it on its own in response to the fear. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. I was shocked, and also ashamed, to realize I was in a state where only my defensive instincts were still working. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. But there was no time for shame. NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN. I had to follow Renji and Ranta.

NNNNNNNNN. I belatedly chased after my teammate. NNNNNNNNNNNNN. Ranta was fast, and I couldn't seem to catch up to him. NNNNNNNNNNNNN. Kikkawa was at the very

rear, so I passed him first. NNNNNNNNNN. Renji and Ron were already trying to hack their way through the torrent of sekaishu. No ordinary sword, no matter how sharp, could cut through those black tumors, though. Not even Renji's one-edged sword that he had taken from Ish Dogran or Ron's oversized meat cleaver could do anything to them. NNNNNNNNNN. But even if cutting through them was impossible, they could be knocked away with enough brute force. And when it came to that particular area of expertise—if that's the right term for it—the best person we had wasn't Renji or Ron, it was Tada.

When Tada swung his warhammer, black things flew through the air and scattered all over. It was all I could do to stay out of the way, but Kikkawa somehow managed to block any that came toward him with his shield, and knock them away with his sword. Mimori was doing a good job of pushing the enemy back as well, swinging her sword with all the might her two arms could muster.

Of course, Renji and Ron were no slouches either.

How was Ranta holding up? He wasn't using his katana. Instead, he weaved through the dark tumors, sometimes kicking them away as he pushed further and further forward.

I don't know about Inui. That strange man had always had a thing for disappearing from sight and then suddenly reemerging to do something totally ridiculous.

"Okay! Okay! Let's go, go, go, yeah!" Anna-san's cheering cut through the low rumble.

It's impossible to break through this unending current of sekaishu, I thought at some point. But the rearguard was actually making steady progress.

Soon, I caught sight of the vanguard again. They weren't like us. They were operating on another level.

Akira-san, his wife Miho, the dwarven warrior Branken, and the elven archer Taro, along with Gogh, Kayo, Kemuri, Shima, Pingo, and Tsuga—the priest of the Typhoon Rocks—were fighting in a close formation to improve their defenses. Miho and Gogh, who was a priest but could also cast mage spells, occasionally unleashed earth-shattering blasts that blew the sekaishu away. It looked like fairly powerful magic, but it was nothing to the two of them. I had seen them unleash even more incredible magic once before. They were undoubtedly holding back, conserving their

strength for a long battle. That was probably also the reason why Akira-san, Branken—who wielded an axe larger than he was—and Gogh's wife Kayo—who had impressive skill with a greatsword—were deliberately choosing not to move up any further.

But unlike Akira-san and the others I mentioned, the Typhoon Rocks—with the exception of their priest Tsuga—were going wild. There was Rock, with his typhoon-like hair, who was a real powerhouse despite his small size; the bald-headed giant warrior Kajita; the slender, glasses-wearing dread knight Moyugi, who was about as lightly equipped as possible; the feral katana-wielder Kuro; and the mysterious Sakanami. Their builds and fighting styles were all over the place. It looked like they were each just doing whatever they wanted, but no one got too far ahead of the group, or isolated from it. They went around, changing positions in a revolving circle. Where Rock was one second, Kajita would be the next, and then when Kajita moved, Moyugi would be there, and then he would switch with Kuro, and Sakanami would barge in, and Kuro would smoothly relinquish the position to him and drift elsewhere.

When people worked together for a long time, they tended to develop clearly defined roles, and had a deep understanding of one another, which was what allowed for that kind of flexibility. But even then, not many could make it work like the Typhoon Rocks did.

It was plain to see that they were organized, and yet it didn't seem like anyone was in command. Kajita—who was more dexterous than he looked—and the aloof Kuro were doing a good job of filling any gaps that opened up, but none of them were sacrificing their own individuality or limiting themselves for the sake of the group. They were well-balanced. However, their tactics didn't give me the impression that they had been aiming for balance when they had come up with them. They meshed together miraculously well. Their priest, Tsuga, wasn't in the circle with them, but if a situation where he needed to act ever arose, he'd probably dive right in there. The six of them were strong. Each was outstanding individually, but as a group, they were among the best of the best.

Of course, that praise is somewhat cheapened by the fact that Soma, Lilia, and Zenmai the golem were operating on a completely

different level from them.

Zenmai wore a frightening mask, and none of his skin was exposed, but he only had one head, and a torso with two arms and two legs attached to it. His arms were a little too long, but he was more or less human in form. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a thick chest. His upper arms and thighs bulged in a way that was almost sickening. If a person trained to the extreme, it wasn't totally impossible for a human to get a build somewhat close to that. But no human, no matter how muscular, could ever pull off the feats Zenmai was capable of.

Case in point, Zenmai's approach to dealing with the sekaishu was to simply rip them apart with his hands and throw them aside. The sekaishu could be as thick as narrow pipes, giant snakes, or hefty logs, but they tended to be really long, to the point that it was hard to tell where they started or ended, and Zenmai was just grabbing them and literally tearing them into pieces. Even a blade in the hands of a skilled swordsman couldn't cut through the sekaishu, so how was Zenmai able to do that to them?

That was already surprising enough on its own, but when Zenmai threw the pieces of sekaishu away, they flew absurdly far. What he was doing was inhuman. But Zenmai was an artificial man who had been constructed by Pingo, who had studied necromancy, so it wasn't really that strange that he could do inhuman things. Well, no, strange is still strange. That golem scared me. But the member of their group who boggled my mind the most had to be their elven teammate.

Lilia came from a proper elven family, and had been raised to be a sword dancer from birth. The elves were descendants of the forerunners, and were a race that was similar to but still different from us humans. That said, they looked a lot like us. The other descendants of the forerunners—the dwarves, gnomes, centaurs, and kobolds—were like distant relatives at best, but if you told me the elves were our brothers or sisters, I would have accepted it without question. But it's possible that we're only similar in appearance.

Rather than running around the battlefield, it was more like Lilia was jumping to and fro. If there was space for an elf to put her foot down, she could probably stand there. And no matter how far two footholds were from each other, an elf could move

between them with a single leap. Maybe none of that is true, but watching Lilia in action made me believe that it was.

It wasn't entirely clear to me what Lilia was doing. It looked like she was performing a flashy, beautiful dance in front of the sekaishu, but there was no way she'd do something so pointless. I had no doubt she was holding a sword, but I had no idea how she was using it. The only thing that was clear to me was that when Lilia spun or turned, the sekaishu were knocked upward or twisted around. I don't think she was throwing them like Zenmai, because the slender Lilia obviously couldn't have done that, but something was clearly happening. No, that's not quite right. Lilia was *making* something happen.

The only reason the enemy wasn't taking serious damage from her attacks was because they were sekaishu. If I had gone up against Lilia, she would have beaten me instantly before I could do anything. How many people could have fought evenly against her? What heights would one have to ascend to in order to even perceive her sword skills?

Though Zenmai's and Lilia's abilities lay in different directions, they were both in a completely separate dimension from where I was standing. And then there was Soma. He transcended dimensions altogether. You might even say that he was ultra-dimensional.

Soma was wearing the Magai Waiomaru. The fiery orange light the relic armor emitted must have been giving him some kind of power. That much was easy to guess.

One swing of his katana tore a hill-like mass of sekaishu to ribbons and sent it flying away. Then he stepped forward and swung again, slashing open a rift in the earth. Oh, and it also sliced up and blew away a bunch more sekaishu in the process. With each sweep of his katana, there was a sound akin to a scream. If there happened to be sekaishu in the way, his blade instantly scythed through them. Soma was easily the biggest threat to the sekaishu.

The vanguard were closer to the Crown Mountains now than they had been when Operation Starfall had begun at dawn. It felt like there was an infinite amount of sekaishu gushing out of the mountains, and the entire area we were in was being buried in the black things. It was like we were awash in a sea of black, and the

only reason it hadn't swallowed us up was Soma. No matter how impressive Zenmai and Lilia were, if Soma hadn't been there, we would've been completely unable to resist the dark waves, and eventually the black sea would have drowned us.

I was a long way from calm and composed at the time, so I can't say anything for certain, but Soma and Soma alone could do more than just push back the sekaishu. I'm not sure this is the right word, but it seemed like he could actually kill them.

I wasn't able to confirm it for myself, but I'm pretty sure Soma's katana was doing more than just cutting the sekaishu and sending them flying. I can remember seeing sekaishu shrinking and becoming like empty husks before turning to dust after he slashed them.

Only Soma could reduce the amount of sekaishu around us. But without his relic, the Magai Waiomaru, it's possible that not even he would have been capable of doing that, so maybe we really had the relic to thank for the success we were having, but the way I look at it, Soma was the one killing the sekaishu, and they probably focused their attacks on him because of that. The black waves came from every direction, racing toward Soma without giving him room to pause.

But despite that—no, *because* of that—Soma didn't back down. He was always at the head of the vanguard, and while he wasn't pressing forward constantly, he *was* advancing toward the Crown Mountains little by little. He drew in the sekaishu, pulling as many as he could toward him, and gradually whittled away at them.

Our role in Operation Starfall was to be bait, and Soma was doing that job flawlessly. The only thing the rest of the vanguard and rearguard needed to do was support him.

I was able to catch up to Akira-san and the rest while barely doing anything myself. Uncharacteristically, I started to think, *This could be surprisingly simple,* and, *Things are actually going pretty smoothly.* But pretty much any time that sort of thought crosses my mind, it means that something is about to go wrong.

"...!"

Suddenly, Gogh—who had a smaller build and looked like an artist in his priest robes—collapsed.

"Honey!" cried the female warrior Kayo, who struck a sharp contrast to Gogh with her much bolder proportions. Her face was

twisted in distress.

The elven archer, Taro, nocked an arrow and aimed up into the sky. “You hurt my dad!”

What was Taro trying to shoot? I spotted his target flying in the sky above us, wearing gold armor and a crown, and carrying a staff. The thing floating there wasn’t human. Its body was a little too small for that. But more importantly, it was clad in the black of night.

“Night-clad—”

I’d encountered three night-clad ones before now, and this one was one of them. The night-clad one was pointing their staff in my direction. Not toward me specifically, though. Their staff fired off a light that was like a bolt of lightning. Taro’s arrow was on course to hit the night-clad one, but it was blasted to cinders by the light, which continued on past it. If Taro hadn’t done a backflip to get out of the way, he’d have ended up like his adoptive father Gogh.

“Sacrament!”

Fortunately, Gogh hadn’t died instantly, and Tsuga, the priest of the Typhoon Rocks, healed him with light magic. But the night-clad one kept on firing their light.

“We can’t have that!” Akira-san moved around, blocking the light with his shield, which could apparently endure it. Branken the dwarf shielded himself from the light with his greataxe, the female warrior Kayo met it with her greatsword, and Soma’s companion, Kemuri the paladin, deflected the light with his longsword. Each time their weapons struck the light, it caused minor explosions. Were those people just able to shrug those blasts off?

“Ah, nu, pa, du, ha, yna, ku, suu, ri, sha...!” As Miho used her staff to draw something resembling elemental sigils, the air currents around the night-clad one grew violent. It wasn’t just wind. The moisture in the air froze into a vortex of ice. You could have called it an ice storm. There was even snow falling down on us from up above.

The night-clad one was in the middle of the ice storm, seemingly unable to move out of it. It looked like they couldn’t fire off that staff’s attack anymore either. Miho’s magic was working.

“Sorry...!” said Gogh, who was back in action after Tsuga’s Sacrament. He began drawing more of those shapes that resembled elemental sigils.

“Kui, la, va, dra, shinay, an, tal, vis, na...!”

A fireball appeared above Gogh’s head. The flames roared as they rapidly grew. Once it was bigger than Gogh himself, it shot upward.

The fireball scored a direct hit on the night-clad one, going off in a massive explosion above us that swallowed up both them and the ice storm. The noise was incredible, as were the heat and the shock wave. I wasn’t able to stop myself from crouching down and covering my head with both of my arms.

“No, that wasn’t enough!” Akira-san shouted.

Immediately, that light shot down at us again. One bolt after another. Akira-san and the others were probably blocking with their shields, or weapons, or whatever, but I was still crouched down in a state of panic. If the light had come for me, it would have scored a clean hit. But the light was going after Akira-san and the others. That’s why I was spared.

“Don’t just stand there in a daze!” I can recall Ranta shouting at me. I hadn’t even realized he was beside me, as I was so deep in shock.

“Adachi!” I heard Renji shout.

Then Adachi rushed into the middle of the vanguard with Chibi in tow. I watched as Adachi pressed a razor-like dagger to his own left wrist. He slit it wide open, and his blood flowed freely. He raised his left arm up high, and chanted frantically. This was the Blood Spell he’d learned on the Red Continent. A clear wall that appeared almost colorless, but on close inspection had a faint red tint, rose from the ground to surround Akira-san and the others. It was shaped like a dome, or maybe a cylinder. Ranta grabbed me by the sleeve and dragged me inside the wall too. That light came down at us like lightning, but it couldn’t break the barrier.

“Thanks, now we can catch our breath,” Akira-san said with a laugh, and Branken and Kayo smiled. Miho and Gogh, who had nearly died, were both fascinated by the Blood Spell. Taro was glaring up at the night-clad one.

“What do we do?” the dreadlocked paladin Kemuri asked.

Akira-san shrugged. “If Gogh and Kayo can’t take it out with their combined magic, there’s nothing we can do. I’d love to leave it to Soma, but I clearly can’t ask him to *fly*.”

“Yeah, guess not,” Kemuri responded with an exasperated

shake of his head.

Why were they so calm? It was like they'd been in this sort of situation many times before, and had always come out fine. Maybe they had.

It was true that ordinary weapons and magic couldn't harm the sekaishu. But the night-clad one had taken nearly fatal damage from Gogh's blast. We were managing somehow. And besides that, we still had Soma as our trump card. The situation was bad, and it didn't look like we could turn it around in a hurry, but things could've been going a whole lot worse. Even I'd had experiences like that before. Looking back at it now, we still had room to maneuver.

"I can't keep this up for long," Adachi said. He didn't have a particularly good pallor even at the best of times, but by that point he was pale in the face, and his body was shaking.

"Hey!" Ranta pointed toward the west with his katana.

I looked in that direction, and saw that the sekaishu were writhing darkly. They were shifting about all over the Crown Mountains, but the way that those particular sekaishu were undulating was different somehow. They were waving around, reaching up to heights of two or three meters, no, even up to four in some places. And at the highest point they reached, there it was. The night-clad one with the shining shield and sword. Now we had to deal with that one on top of the staff-wielder.

"That sword and shield were Shinohara's," Akira-san noted.

"Yeah," Gogh agreed with a nod. "Beheader and Guardian. Those are definitely his."

I had thought I'd recognized them from somewhere. When I had encountered the night-clad one near Alterna, I'd been confident that the sword and shield were relics, and Shinohara had crossed my mind. Because I'd known that Shinohara had carried sword and shield relics, and the ones that the night-clad one had been carrying had clearly resembled them. But I had never thought about it any more deeply than that. Maybe I hadn't wanted to consider it.

Shinohara had always been difficult for me to understand. He was awfully friendly, and had helped me out from time to time. I'd thought of him as a reliable senior, but then he had started to try to curry favor with Jin Mogis. That had struck me as shady, but

we'd known each other a long time. We'd fought together too. Maybe I just didn't want to think that that thing might be Shinohara.

But at the same time, maybe I had known all along. They had Shinohara's sword and shield. There was a human inside of that night-clad one, or the remains of a human, since he was probably no longer alive. It was Shinohara. He'd been absorbed by the sekaishu and had become a night-clad one.

"Um, I'm gonna go." I probably could have worded that better. Looking back on it now, there was no need to try to play it cool, so I should have expressed myself more clearly. I doubt Akira-san and the others, even Ranta, had any clue what I was trying to say, or what I planned on doing, at first.

"Huh?!" It was Ranta that shouted first. Of that, I'm sure.

"Uh, hey, wai—" Who was it that called after me next? I think it was probably a woman. That meant Miho or Kayo, or perhaps Shima. Definitely not Chibi. She rarely spoke in words that could clearly be distinguished as language.

I went outside the wall formed by the Blood Spell. Why wasn't I swallowed up by the waves of sekaishu that were pressing in on us? Honestly, I don't know, but at the time, I could see a path. I had something I was trying to do, and I knew what to do in order to accomplish that goal.

I'll be the first to admit how mediocre I am, but sometimes, and I'm talking incredibly rarely here, my focus rises to a peak, and everything just goes well for me. Maybe you could say that I get into the zone? I don't mind doing the same thing over and over. That probably has something to do with recognizing my own mediocrity. I'll improve more by doing something twice instead of once, ten times instead of twice, and a hundred times instead of ten. Repetition teaches my body how to do things, even if I'm not very good. Then I can manage the bare minimum even when my head's not working. I feel like that habit, or pattern of behavior, was key to unlocking that state of extreme focus. That said, I don't know how to find that key, and I can't even see the door, let alone the keyhole. But on occasion I suddenly find myself with the key in my hand, pushing it into the keyhole of that invisible door. I'd turn the key without even meaning to, the door would open, and I'd be on the other side. That's how it is for me.

I didn’t so much cross the black waves of sekaishu as ride them without resisting their flow, stepping from wave to wave, letting them raise me to where I could use another wave as a stepping stone to transfer over to yet another that was close to it. I’d specialized in Stealth, the one skill essential to a thief. It suited my personality. I’m exaggerating here, but that’s basically because I was a nobody, and it let me be who I was. I moved from one dark wave of sekaishu to the next without breaking my Stealth. But then, those things weren’t either humans or beasts, so did Stealth even work against them? I never even stopped to consider that. I barely had a conscious thought at all until I found myself standing behind the night-clad one, the former Shinohara.

I had the relic sealed in undead hide strapped to my back. The moment I opened that package, the sekaishu and the former Shinohara would notice me. *They can’t notice me yet. I’m nobody. I just need to get close enough.* I didn’t tense up. I was doing everything right. I thought it would work, and so what if it didn’t. I was a nobody. My existence was nothing. Even if I couldn’t do a thing, even if I accomplished nothing, then that would just mean that a nonentity had done nothing.

I only had fifty centimeters to go before I reached the dark back of the night-clad one that had once been Shinohara. I held the hide bundle in front of my chest, and tore it open with one slash of the dagger I was holding in my left hand.

The former Shinohara tried to turn. I was holding the Fatalsis in my right hand with a backhand grip, and as soon as it was out of its hide package, I stabbed it into the former Shinohara’s throat. If I’d been a tenth of a second, no, even a hundredth of a second slower, the ex-Shinohara would’ve decapitated me with Beheader, or sent me flying with a shield bash from Guardian. I didn’t feel the blade strike anything. If I were to reach for a comparison, it was like stabbing a sword into water. That was about the level of resistance I felt. The Fatalsis easily pierced through the sekaishu covering the former Shinohara. Its blade wasn’t even thirty centimeters long, and it buried itself into the night-clad one all the way to the hilt instantly. And once it had gone in as far as it was going to, the fatal dagger vanished without a trace.

I’m a little slow, but even I was startled when that happened.

“Huh?” I recall murmuring in disbelief.

Now, as I understand it, what happened next started not before the Fatalsis disappeared, but after it was gone.

The dark sekaishu turned a shade of gray that was almost white. And it wasn't just the sekaishu wrapped around the former Shinohara. It was the ones that it had been riding on, and the ones that had gathered in that area like a writhing whirlpool. I don't know how many sekaishu there were around me in total, or if it was even possible to count them like that, but all of the sekaishu in a ten, no, fifteen to twenty meter radius instantly turned that pale gray.

I was standing on top of those sekaishu. Up until that point, standing on them had been different from standing on rocks or sand, but there had been a certain level of stability to them. However, once they turned that whitish gray color, it was immediately clear to me that that was about to change.

They're gonna collapse, I thought. *They're about to fall apart.*

The whitish gray sekaishu were as brittle as dried out bones that had been left exposed to the elements for many long years. They crumbled to dust under my feet. Obviously, I started to sink into them, and the further I sank, the more the gray sekaishu crumbled away.

I fell about five meters, covered in gray sekaishu, or perhaps I should say I fell that distance inside of the gray sekaishu. If they had been bones, the dust might have irritated my eyes or made me choke, but I thankfully didn't encounter any problems like that.

Having lost their black color—though, is it really accurate to say that the blackness of the sekaishu was their color? Isn't black the absence of color? Well, anyway, having lost their black color, the sekaishu became extremely fragile, falling apart under even the slightest touch, and they broke into finer and finer pieces until there was nothing left of them.

I fell into the dried grass of the Quickwind Plains, rolling as I landed in an attempt to avoid the full force of the impact.

Shinohara couldn't do the same. Because he was dead. He was lying face down on the ground, with his back side pointed toward me. I had no intention of going over to him and cradling his body in my arms. His body wasn't rotted or anything, but he was weirdly white. The gray sekaishu turned to dust and vanished without piling up on the ground. Shinohara was lying there dead, with

Beheader and Guardian right next to him.

“Haruhirooo!”

I was stuck in a daze until Ranta called my name. It could only have been a few seconds, though. I put away my dagger, grabbed Beheader and Guardian, and tried to head back to the others. A flash shot toward me like lightning, and I instinctively held up Guardian to block it.

“Someone take these!” I handed the relics off to one of my comrades. It was ultimately Kemuri who ended up using them.

Even with the former Shinohara defeated, there was still another night-clad one dropping lightning on us from up in the sky. I also knew that there was at least one more. They were wearing Aragarfald, the armor Renji used to wear. I suspected Jin Mogis was inside of that one. He’d been carrying a relic too.

The transparent wall surrounding us was getting pretty thin. As Adachi, who was using the Blood Spell, stumbled and nearly fell, Chibi moved to prop him up.

“Adachi, that’s enough!” Renji shouted.

When the transparent wall dissipated, the night-clad one descended from above. Maybe they planned on getting closer so they could pick off those of us who weren’t able to defend ourselves using swords or shields? They had been maintaining an altitude of around fifteen meters before, but now they had lowered themselves to around seven or eight meters.

I remember thinking, *Oh, crap.* And yet despite that, I didn’t feel a sense of urgency about it. The Fatalsis had struck down the former Shinohara. Shinohara was already dead, so pardon my use of a somewhat more pretentious phrase, but I had laid him to rest with my own hands. I may have been feeling the satisfaction of a job well done. I think I also had the sense that I wouldn’t be able to do anything more.

“I’m betting it all on this!” Soma shouted.

Of course it was all going to be up to him. But not even he could leap seven or eight meters straight up to take a swipe at the night-clad one. No, Soma didn’t jump. He lowered the tip of his katana to the ground, and swung it upward and diagonally.

“Yahhhhhh!”

Soma’s swordwork usually came across as beautifully flowing rather than powerful. But not this time. He swung his katana like

he was throwing an object of incredible mass. He put all of his strength into that swing. It looked to me like Soma's katana stretched to several times its length. It wasn't as if the extended blade hit the night-clad one. No, that's definitely not what happened. It was more like he fired something that warped the air out of the end of that extended blade, and *that* was what hit the night-clad one. I can't explain it any other way.

The night-clad one had been right about to fire off another lightning attack. But then the golden armor they were wearing, and the crown, and the staff all split in two. There was a bursting noise as the night-clad one was bisected from head to pelvis. It seemed less like Soma had cut through them, and more like some irresistible power had forced them to move in two directions, tearing them apart.

"Eyeaugh." Ranta let out a strange sound, like he wanted to express he was already sick of this.

For my part, though I was shocked Soma was able to do what he'd just done, it also kind of made sense to me. Soma was still human, but he could do things no human ever could. Because he was a hero. Heroes could do that kind of thing.

Seeing a hero helped to rouse us ordinary folk. It gave us courage, and let us dream that maybe we could do what seemed impossible. We simply had to follow behind the hero who carried the flag. That was pretty much all us riffraff were good for. We want to believe the future lies wherever we're headed. It's something we can't help but hope for. And a hero lets us believe that it does.

After slowly swinging his katana back down, Soma pointed it toward the Crown Mountains. Then he started walking. He was already heading toward the Crown Mountains.

Even with two of the night-clad ones down, the sekaishu hadn't stopped coming at us. The night-clad ones were gone, but that was all that had changed. We were still exposed to the black waves of sekaishu. Leading the way, Soma would swing his blade, and blast the sekaishu away. Now that Kemuri had gained Beheader and Guardian, he was able to deal effective blows against the sekaishu as well. But with that said, the other members of Daybreak couldn't do anything more than knock the sekaishu aside or push them back a bit. It wasn't like we were making easy

progress, but it wasn't sluggish, and we were starting to pick up speed.

Even as the Crown Mountains—which no longer looked like their namesake, but like a massive, pitch-black bowl that had been turned upside down—started to change shape, Daybreak kept on marching forward.

"Giants?!" Ranta sounded almost giddy with excitement.

There were a number of thorns growing out of that overturned black bowl. I call them thorns, but on closer inspection, they weren't really anything like pins, or even poles. They were tall and slender, but humanoid in form. The lanky giants. Those giants had lived on the Quickwind Plains since ancient times, and had been spotted especially frequently around the Crown Mountains. On our way to Alterna, we'd seen a lanky giant that had been caught by the sekaishu. That was what had become of them after the sekaishu got them. They had become night-clad lanky giants, or perhaps lanky giants infected with black tumors.

How many of those dark lanky giants were there? Seven, maybe eight? Ten? No, more than that? And rather than just appearing on the mountain, it was more like they had been birthed from it. They ambled down from the mountains, with two, maybe three of them coming our way. The others looked like they were heading to the north, east, and west.

Do we have to take these things on? Even Soma would have a tough time against enemies of that size, wouldn't he?

I might have been the only one faltering and thinking that kind of thing. Daybreak kept moving onward. Soma even started running toward the dark lanky giants, and some of the other members of Daybreak let out a battle cry. Not only were they not afraid of the giants, their morale had gone up a notch.

Maybe we can win, I remember thinking.

I still didn't believe, on a personal level, that we could. But I couldn't trust my own intuition. I wasn't the one who would be the deciding factor in the battle. If the rest of Daybreak thought they could win, then they were probably right. Because I was the kind of guy who couldn't be confident in victory until it was over. It was like a kind of insurance. I was prone to messing up a lot. Because of all my failures, I wanted to be emotionally prepared for when things didn't work out.

“Look over there!” Who was it that said that? In my memories, it was Renji. He must have pointed as he was saying it, because I realized what he meant immediately.

I was keeping my eyes on the dark lanky giants that were coming toward us, and I had the Crown Mountains in my field of view. There was something floating over the top of the mountains. I’m sure it hadn’t been there the whole time. If it had, we would’ve noticed it sooner. It was a shining blue orb. Did it fly in? How large was it? It wasn’t as small as a bird, but at the same time, it wasn’t anywhere close to the size of the dark lanky giants. It was pea-sized next to the Crown Mountains.

“That’s the No-Life King!” Akira-san shouted.

Was he able to see something that far away that clearly? Well, even if he couldn’t, he must’ve been able to tell somehow.

The shining blue orb began descending. A massive sekaishu, like a giant snake, reared its head out of the pitch black of the Crown Mountains. It had many heads, dozens of them, and it looked as if all of them were snapping at the shining blue orb. They *were* snapping at it, actually, but the snake’s dark heads vanished the moment they touched the shining blue orb.

We were decoys. Daybreak, the combined force of undead, hornedfolk, piratsians, centaurs, and kobolds who were attacking advancing from the north, the orcish army attacking from the west, and Forgan and the gray elves who were positioned to the east, all of us were just decoys. Bait to distract the sekaishu. The No-Life King was the one who was going to put an end to the conflict.

But more than that, the fight against the sekaishu wasn’t the end of the story as far as the No-Life King was concerned. He had his eyes on the future. It was what lay beyond that one battle that mattered to him. And it was the same for us.

If this were where everything was going to end, we wouldn’t have nearly as much of a reason to fight as hard as we are. This isn’t the end. It’s the beginning. Fortunately, we haven’t lost anyone in Daybreak yet. We shouldn’t lose anyone, and ideally the other races will have minimal losses too. This is a new beginning for us.

According to the old legend, the sekaishu have been in Grimgar for a long time. The nameless one dropped the red star to stop a fight between the two gods. The primordial dragon struck down the red

star, and its pieces became the sekaishu. Relics. Were all of them relics? Old relics try to expel newer relics. Was it a competition for survival?

But if we're intelligent, we can communicate, and maybe we can find a way to avoid conflict and reduce the fighting over time until it goes away. That's what the No-Life King was trying to accomplish.

If this is it, then we have no choice but to eliminate our rival for survival, and bring about the conclusion of the old era. Then we'll gather under the No-Life King who settled things, bend the knee, and debate how to build the new era. Right now, we're taking part in the ceremony that will usher that new era in.

The shining blue orb erased the countless grasping sekaishu tentacles attacking it in no time at all, and then slammed into the pitch black mountain.

There was a *poof*, like the sound you might hear when you expel pressurized air from your mouth. It seemed like a light noise, but it echoed over a considerable distance.

Then a blue light started spreading out in concentric circles starting from the point where the shining orb had entered the dark mass. The light flew past us, and continued expanding far and wide.

Was the blue light responsible for what happened next? The sekaishu lost their color and turned a whitish gray. Gray. The sekaishu turned gray, crumbled, and faded away.

The dark lanky giants fell one after another as the sekaishu were stripped away from them.

The Crown Mountains weren't black anymore. For a moment, they were wrapped in gray, and then the gray vanished, but even then they didn't regain the crown-like appearance they'd once had. The sekaishu had ground down and crushed the peaks. All that was left was a rounded, heavily warped set of mounds. But regardless, the sekaishu had been wiped away. Or at least, there wasn't any trace of them left near the Crown Mountains.

That's when it happened. A pillar of blue light rose up from the rounded Crown Mountains. It was tall. Incredibly tall. It rose all the way into the sky, and I couldn't see where it ended. At first, the pillar of blue light looked like a single vertical line. But it kept on getting thicker. There was a repeating *tung, tung* sound coming from somewhere—from within the Crown Mountains, I soon realized. I felt vibrations too. It wasn't clear what was making that

noise, just that something was happening. The No-Life King was doing something. The root of the sekaishu was probably inside the Crown Mountains, down in their foundations, or perhaps even deeper than that. What did the sekaishu's root look like? We may never know, but it was there. The No-Life King was trying to destroy it, and this was part of the process. That was pretty much all I could infer.

The only thing I was able to do at that point was stand in place, gazing up at the pillar of blue light rising out of the Crown Mountains. And it wasn't just me. Everyone else was doing the same thing. The sekaishu were disappearing. Or they'd already vanished. All we could do was watch. There was nothing else for us to do. Nothing.

The pillar of blue light never spread out wider than the Crown Mountains. Actually, it remained quite a bit smaller than them, aside from its height. It did keep getting brighter, though, until it was too bright to look at directly. It wasn't going to blind us, but you'd have to squint if you wanted to keep your eyes on it for long.

I don't know how long it was before the light stopped growing in strength and started to diminish, but I was looking at the blue pillar the whole time. It didn't feel like it took forever for it to do whatever it was that it did, but neither was it over quickly. And once the light started to weaken, it quickly returned to a single line, then vanished like it had never been there at all.

"Is it over?"

I don't think any one person said that. It was more like multiple people said it at practically the same time. I was thinking it too. Was that it? Had we put an end to the conflict? Had the No-Life King extinguished the root of the sekaishu? Had the sekaishu died out? We didn't have the answers to those questions, so all we could do was wait. The No-Life King would emerge from the Crown Mountains soon enough, and announce that he'd accomplished what we'd set out to do. I'm pretty sure all of us, myself included, were imagining how that scene would play out.

Something flew out of the peak of the Crown Mountains. It wasn't a shining sphere or anything like that; it was just a distant speck, flying like a bird, but it felt like it had to be the No-Life King. It rose up rapidly, dozens of meters above the Crown Mountains, stopping at maybe around a hundred meters in the air.

There were lots of voices saying things like “Oh?” and “Is that…?” and “The No-Life King?”

As for me, the word “Merry” ended up falling out of my mouth without me consciously thinking about saying it.

It may seem foolish of me, but at the time, I was thinking, *Now I’ll be able to see Merry again. The No-Life King is inside of Merry. That’s not going to have changed. The No-Life King has his own will, and his own objectives, and I don’t know if he’ll free Merry. It’s not even clear if that’s possible. But even so, I should at least be able to talk to her. I never hugged her when we spoke under the great tree in the Wonder Hole.* I had been regretting that. Maybe this is wishful thinking on my part, but she had wanted me to, right? The next time we met and I was able to talk to her, I had every intention of doing so.

No matter what she does, I’ll be at her side. With her. Maybe she won’t want that, and she’ll refuse. That’s fine too. I’ll do it because it’s what I want to do. I’ll tell her that. No matter what outcome awaits us, I want to be with her until my life runs out. That’s pretty much all I can do, so I hope she’ll let me. Merry, please let me be with you.

I was about to start running forward. But then the Crown Mountains—no, with how much they’d changed, the mountains didn’t look much like a crown anymore, so I couldn’t really call them that—the mountain formerly known as the Crown Mountains suddenly erupted or something. I screamed and fell over as a tremor thrust me upward. There was a horrible rumble, but the scene before my eyes was even more intense.

The mountain formerly known as the Crown Mountains ruptured, and massive hunks of rock and other stuff went flying all over. There was a burst of smoke, or dust, or something similar, and I lost sight of the No-Life King—of Merry. The mountain formerly known as the Crown Mountains soon ceased to be a mountain at all. Most of it went flying into the air, and by the time I was able to think, *They’re coming this way,* the rocks that had originally appeared to be fist-sized now looked huge, and were still getting closer.

I ran around in a frenzy because if one of those things hit me, I’d have been dead instantly. Even as I ran this way and that, a dense cloud of smoke, or maybe dust, billowed and swirled for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of meters around where the Crown

Mountains had once stood, as if it were descending to wreak havoc on the land. And there was something inside it. I couldn't sense any more than that there was *something*, but I could definitely feel its presence. Anyone could have, even Ruon, who wasn't even a year old at the time, would have been able to sense it if he'd been there. That's how overwhelming the being's presence was. Just by being there, it warped and twisted everything, its power bringing about and enforcing changes with no room for objection. The word "overwhelming" can't even begin to describe how overwhelming it was.

"Haruhirooo!"

Ranta called my name, but I didn't look at him. I was still managing to pay the bare minimum of attention needed to keep an eye out for incoming rocks, but I found myself unable to turn my gaze away from the being in the cloud.

Beams of light were tearing through the cloud, being emitted by something within. Was the shining object giving off heat too? It was hot. I could feel the heat. It made my skin sting, and my eyes dry out and hurt. The light was expanding as it tried to blow away the cloud around it. I felt like I was staring straight into the sun. But the sun is far away, and looks small when you see it from down here on the land. The thing I was looking at was different. It wasn't right next to me, but it was close enough I could have run to it.

What is that? It's light. Light itself.

There weren't any more giant rocks flying. The cloud was about to clear.

It's light.

The light was shining.

I shouldn't look at it. It'll blind me. It's horrifying. Yet at the same time, I can't help but stare. And I don't care if my eyeballs melt away. What is this feeling?

I wanted to get down on my knees. But not to bow my head. Because I wanted to see the light. What did I think I would get out of gazing up at it? I don't know. But I bent my knees and lowered my hips.

"You idiot! The hell do you think you're doing, Haruhiro?!" Ranta seized me by the shoulder and violently dragged me back to my feet.

What was I doing? I didn't know then, and I don't know now. The light was just too powerful. It warmed me, heated me, tried to make me boil. It was terrifying, but it also felt like it would let me escape from myself. If I gave myself over to the light, body and soul, I'd never waver again. I wouldn't suffer anymore.

"I know what that is! It's Lumiaris! And you're no priest or paladin!" Ranta shouted at me.

"Lumiaris..."

Ranta, what're you talking about, with your nose shoved right up in front of mine. You're yelling right in my face, Ranta. You know? That that's Lumiaris? What's that supposed to mean? What? Lumiaris? That? That's the God of Light, Lumiaris?

According to legend, at one point, peace on the continent of Grimgar was shattered by two gods that came from beyond the sea and sky. They raised such a ruckus that the primordial dragon was roused from its sleep. The two gods had been fighting an intense war with the forerunners as their servants. The dragon joined the battle in an attempt to punish the two gods with death. Who had won? One of the two gods? Or perhaps the dragon? None of them. The nameless one dropped the red star down from the heavens. The primordial dragon shot down the red star, and its fragments became black tumors. The two gods vanished, buried under those tumors—the sekaishu—and the exhausted dragon entered a slumber in which it perished.

The stone and clay tablets we'd found in Darunggar had also depicted the battle between Lumiaris and Skullhell. In the same way that the people of Darunggar had once fought each other, joining either the God of Light or the God of Dark, long ago, the forerunners had also been divided into two camps and fought here in Grimgar. For some reason, the two gods had moved their fight from Darunggar to Grimgar. But eventually, their battle in Grimgar had come to a conclusion. Except, I suppose it had never really ended after all.

The two gods had left Darunggar. That was why Lumiaris's blessings and Skullhell's power couldn't reach there. We hadn't been able to use light or dark magic very well during our time in that world. But they still had followers in Grimgar. There were wielders of light magic, and there were dread knights. The two gods had simply disappeared, buried beneath the sekaishu. The

sekaishu had been sealing them away.

“O light! May Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you!” someone said in a loud, eloquent, melodious voice.

I looked over and saw Akira-san was drawing a hexagram in the air with the tip of his sword. His eyes shined radiantly, light spilling out from both his pupils.

“O light! O Lumiaris! O liiight!”

The dreadlocked paladin Kemuri raised Beheader, which I’d taken from Shinohara, and was moving Guardian in a hexagram pattern. His eyes were also shining.

“Ohhhhh! O, light! Light! Let there be light! O Lumiaris!” There was light in Gogh’s eyes too as he swung his staff. He was a former mage, but he wore a priest’s robes. He’d devoted himself to Lumiaris when he became a priest.

“Ahh! Light! Light! Liiight!” Tada as well. The glow coming from his glasses wasn’t him making them catch the light like usual; it originated from the eyes behind them.

“Light! It’s light, yeah! Lumiariiisss! Liiight!” And Anna-san.

“Let there be light! May Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you!” And Tsuga of the Typhoon Rocks.

“O Lumiaris…! O light…!” Wado, the priest who had previously been in the Berserkers, knelt down and made the sign of the hexagram on his forehead repeatedly.

“What the—?! Hey!” Renji roared.

He was probably shouting at Chibi. There was something wrong with her. Though she wasn’t ranting about Lumiaris, there was a light in her eyes. I could see that there was clearly something wrong with her, but I still couldn’t believe what she did next. Chibi slammed her battle staff into Renji’s head with a thrusting motion.

Renji must have been caught totally off guard. He almost went down, like his legs had given out underneath him. He stayed on his feet somehow, but Chibi kept going, clubbing him repeatedly in the face. The whole time, her lips were moving. Maybe she was saying something, but I couldn’t hear it. The light was shining in her eyes. It also looked to me like she was crying.

“Chibi! Stop!” Adachi tried to get in between them, but Chibi took him down in one swing.

“Whoa, what’s going on?” Ron was at a total loss for what to do.

“O light!” Kemuri the paladin used Beheader to decapitate his

comrade, Pingo the necromancer, causing Pingo's golem Zenmai to be reduced to nothing but a corpse doll.

"What?!" Soma deflected Akira-san's katana as the other man slashed at him. With Soma's skills, he should have been able to strike back immediately. But he was up against Akira-san.

"O light! O Lumiaris!" Akira-san attacked relentlessly, not even pausing for breath. Soma was totally being forced onto the defensive.

"Akira-san! Stop! Why are you doing this?!"

"Liiiight!"

Tada pulverized Kikkawa's head with his warhammer. Mimori just stood there as Anna-san closed in and pointed her hands up toward Mimori's face, which was quite a long way to reach for a woman as petite as Anna-san.

"Blame!"

"Ah!" Mimori stumbled back as Anna-san unleashed an intense light right in her face.

"Lumiariiiiis!" Tada followed up with a flash of his warhammer that sent Mimori flying.

"Yoooooo!" Inui let out a strange shout as he tried to put Tada in a pinion from behind, but Tada easily threw him off, then hit him with his warhammer.

"Liiiight! Liiiiight! Ha ha ha hahhh!"

"O light!" Gogh raised his staff high as his wife, the warrior Kayo, and his adopted son, the elf Taro, were racing toward him.

"Darling!"

"Dad!"

"Judgment!"

The light that burst forth after Gogh's shout blinded me. My vision went white, and I couldn't see a thing, but I could hear Gogh, Akira-san, Anna-san, Tada, Tsuga, and Wado praising the light and chanting Lumiaris's name while the Daybreak members begged and pleaded with the priests and paladins to stop, or tried to get an explanation from them.

Ranta started shouting, "Oh, damn! This is bad! Real bad! Ahhhhhh!"

I realized I had crouched down and shut my eyes without consciously deciding to. When I opened them, I found that I could see, though my vision was pretty blurry. I immediately closed

them again.

I don't need to see this. I don't want to see anything. Sink. Submerge my consciousness into the ground. I was trying to use Stealth. Of course, that was in no way a good time to be doing so, and I knew it. *But what am I supposed to do? Even as I'm doing this, my comrades are hurting each other. People are getting killed. I'm sure some have died already. What can I do? There's nothing I can do, is there?*

"Haru, Haruhiro, Haruhiro! Haruhiro, please!" Ranta draped himself over my back like a child begging for a piggy-back ride.

What? The hell do you want now, man? Seriously, what?

"He's coming! He's coming! I know it! I can't resist! I have to obey! I'll kill you! I'll kill everyone who doesn't follow him and I'll offer their deaths to his name! I won't be able to stop myself! I know he's coming! He's coming, he's coming, he's coming, he's comiiiiing!"

What's he on about? Why is he rambling in my ear like this? I can't even make out what he's saying properly. "He"? Who's "he"? What's this about?

Ranta practically had his lips pressed to my ear. I looked at Ranta and saw something on his face. Ranta was crying.

Ranta's crying. Why?

Those tears, they're not transparent. They're black. Pitch black. Ranta's crying black tears. And they aren't just streaming down his cheeks. His eyes are stained black too. He's got his arms around my neck. It's like I really am giving him a piggy-back ride. Ranta might actually be clinging to me.

"Help me, Haruhiro. You're the only one I can ask. Only you. Kill me, Haruhiro. Do it now, while you still can. Before he comes. Before he dominates me. Before he takes full control. If you don't, I'm gonna kill you. And not just you, I'll kill them all. Everyone. Even Yume and Ruon. I'll do it for S-S-Skull—no, I can't. If I say his name, it's over. I'm begging you, Haruhiro, kill me! Kill me right now!"

How could I possibly do that? I can't. I could never. You want me to kill you, man? Ranta. I can't do it. I can't kill you. I'm just not able to. I don't want to kill you. I mean, what about Yume? And Ruon? Oh. Oh, I see it now. That's what this is about. Yume and Ruon. It's not me he's worried about. It's that he doesn't want to kill Yume and Ruon. He can't let that happen. But Ranta also can't refuse. Because he's a dread

knight. He's dedicated all of the murders he's committed as a dread knight to the Dark God, Skullhell. Ranta's been accumulating vice. He's sworn again and again that he will obey and serve Skullhell. And in return, he received power. He can't go back on that now. No matter how much he wants to. And the priests and paladins who've received the protection and boons of Lumiaris are the same.

The sekaishu were sealing the two gods away. Both the God of Light, Lumiaris, and the God of Dark, Skullhell. It's not just Lumiaris. Skullhell's in there too. He's coming. Skullhell will emerge after Lumiaris. He'll appear on the surface. And when he does…

I had been crouching down, with Ranta on top of me, but a moment later, it was Ranta who was on the ground. Our positions had been completely reversed. I had grappled Ranta from behind, and I was covering his eyes with my left arm. My left hand was holding Ranta by his right ear, and I had my dagger gripped in my right hand. The blade hadn't touched Ranta yet.

"Sorry," I said.

"That's my line, moron," he countered with a smirk.



I quickly slit Ranta's throat with my dagger. Then, without a moment's pause, I quickly started stabbing him all over, aiming for vital points, as I tried to snuff the life out of him as fast as possible. Even once I sensed he was dead, I kept stabbing him just to be sure.

I released his lifeless body and stood up. Light and darkness were twisted together in the place where the Crown Mountains used to stand. Light above, darkness below. They'd probably been in one big stack with the sekaishu on top, Lumiaris in the middle, and Skullhell on the bottom.

With the sekaishu eliminated, Lumiaris had emerged first, and then Skullhell had pushed Lumiaris up and surfaced too.

All I could tell was that Lumiaris was the light and Skullhell was the darkness. Did they have no physical forms? Or were their forms simply beyond the comprehension of a lowly being like me?

But that didn't matter to me anymore. I wasn't even interested in the members of Daybreak who were killing each other. I mean, I had just killed Ranta. Sure, Ranta had asked me to do it. I had thought that I was doing the right thing, or doing the only thing I could do. I'd had no choice. But even so, I had killed Ranta.

I turned my back toward what had once been the Crown Mountains. Was I walking, or running? I don't know. Either way, I got out of there. I fled. I ran away.

7. Awaken, One More Time

I tried to head to Daybreak Village, but the village was a long way away. Too long. Besides, the Wild Angels had remained in Daybreak Village to protect Yume and Ruon. Kajiko's right hand and confidante, Azusa, was a paladin; Cocono was a priest; and Yae was a dread knight. I didn't want to think about it, but when night fell, and the moon came out, I did. Was there any chance that nothing had happened in Daybreak Village? There was no way that was the case, right? That's what the moon that wasn't red made me think.

The moon over Grimgar was normally red, and yet for some reason, there was a time when I had thought that the moon being red was strange. I guess I had a feeling that the moon's color was supposed to be something else. But the broken moon hanging in the sky then was clearly not red. It was a yellowy silver color. With the sekaishu gone, and light and darkness swirling in the place that had once been the Crown Mountains, Grimgar had changed. Entirely.

I kept walking across the Quickwind Plains. The wind was blowing, its sound being the one thing that never ceased. I didn't turn back to look at the Crown Mountains. I didn't want to see the light and the darkness. I never saw anything moving. It might simply have been that I wasn't actively looking, but it felt like every living creature except for me had died. I didn't stop. I didn't feel hunger or thirst. I didn't even really feel exhaustion. My legs felt like sticks, but there was no pain.

Whether it was day or night, I simply kept walking. It's not that I wasn't thinking about anything. In fact, I was constantly thinking about a variety of topics. Numerous regrets arose in my mind. But the regrets left no scars on my heart, and my memories brought me no joy. They were all just there. I couldn't touch them. I could only silently watch.

Passing through the forest by night, I saw the Forbidden Tower standing beneath the moon. The ruins that had once been Alterna rested quietly next to the hill where the Forbidden Tower stood.

The gravestones on the hill shone white in the moonlight.

The next thing I knew, I found myself searching for Manato and Moguzo's graves. I should have been able to remember where they were, but for some reason I couldn't find them. Every gravestone looked the same. They were supposed to all have had the names of the deceased engraved on them, but when I looked, most were faded, illegible, or in a state where I couldn't tell anything had been carved on them in the first place, and whenever I managed to read one of the names, it wasn't one that I recognized. Maybe that was because, even though the moon was out, the night was still pretty dark. Or perhaps it wasn't the hill I knew. The tower atop the hill wasn't the Forbidden Tower, and the ruins next to the hill weren't Alterna. I could have wandered into another world at some point.

But at no point did I ever think, *If only that were true.* If what had happened at the Crown Mountains had been real, then it didn't matter where I was. Nothing I did held any meaning whatsoever.

I had brought Merry back to life. The end result of that was that the No-Life King had returned and destroyed the sekaishu. Thanks to him, the God of Light, Lumiaris, and the God of Dark, Skullhell, had been set free. And I had killed Ranta with my own hands.

Everyone died. And it's my fault. Why did I run away? Well, if I had stayed there, either the followers of Lumiaris or the servants of Skullhell would've killed me. Did I run away because I couldn't make any sense of what was going on at the time? Did I just not want to die? Or did I want to suffer? Maybe I didn't think I had suffered long enough, or hard enough. There's no denying that I deserve even more misery for what I've done.

That might be why I ran away. The fact is, I don't think it would be fair for me to die an easy death. I don't think I'd be forgiven for that. Who wouldn't forgive me? Well, whoever it is, they're definitely not a god. Of that, I'm sure. The gods are shit. Lumiaris and Skullhell are both pieces of shit. And they can both eat shit. Well, how about me, then? It's true enough that I can't forgive myself.

I sat down, resting my back against someone's grave. I thought about Yume and Ruon. I hoped they were all right, but I couldn't bring myself to believe that they had survived. I wanted to apologize.

I killed Ranta. I need to say sorry to Yume and Ruon for that. But

I'm pretty sure neither of them is alive anymore.

That thought ran through my head over and over again. Why wouldn't the tears come? Why wasn't I crawling on the ground, bawling my eyes out, crying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

The sun started to rise. *Once it's light out, I'll try to look for Manato's and Moguzo's graves again,* I thought vaguely. What did I plan to do when I found them? I don't know. Did I actually intend to search in the first place?

Either way, I chose to stand up. But before I was able to, the Forbidden Tower atop the hill exploded. I'm not talking about the whole thing. Just the upper part. The tower was maybe fifty meters tall, and the top five meters—or maybe a bit more than that; it might've been closer to ten—was blasted to pieces.

"Huh."

I let out a stupid noise. The blast startled me, but not enough to make my legs go weak or anything. I had been about to stand up, so I did that. There were pieces of the tower flying through the air, but also things that were clearly not pieces of the tower too. At a glance, I thought they might have been people. The shards and things that might have been people each traced an arc as they fell. Fortunately, there were only a few small pieces of rubble coming my way.

Something rose up vertically out of the broken part of the tower. I figured it was probably a person too. Likely a woman. Was she naked? No, half of her body was black, and the other half was unclothed. I was halfway up the hill, the tower was at the top of it, and she was up way higher than that.

"Shihoru?" Obviously, I couldn't make out her face. But even so, I thought to myself, *Isn't that Shihoru?*

Shihoru had been abducted by Jin Mogis, and then she had been held captive by the master of the Forbidden Tower, who seemed to have taken her memories. He had been manipulating her to do his bidding. It was perfectly logical that she would be in the tower. That was probably the reasoning or the argument underpinning my assumption, but I also just knew instinctively that it was Shihoru.

It's Shihoru. That's Shihoru.

I killed Ranta. And it's likely that none of the members of Daybreak who took part in Operation Starfall, whether they were in the

rearguard or the vanguard, walked away unscathed. Daybreak Village is a lost cause. But there's still Shihoru.

Had I forgotten about her up until that point? Honestly, I can't really say, but I hadn't been holding out hope that we'd be able to get her back. But the moment I thought, *There's Shihoru,* the light of my hope reignited. It was a tiny, tiny flame, but I felt like if I protected it so it didn't go out, then maybe someday it would grow into a larger one.

I repeated her name once more, in a louder voice this time. But she simply left. She went east, flying off at an incredible speed, and was gone in no time.

I collapsed.

That wasn't Shihoru. It couldn't have been, I thought. *I mean, it doesn't make sense. During the attack on Mount Grief, she showed up riding a relic that looked like a flying saucer. But just now, it was only her. She was flying on her own. Assuming that even was her. It wasn't. There's no way a human could fly like that. So what was that, then? How should I know? There's no way I can figure that out.*

There were noises around the tower. I stood up again. I didn't care about anything anymore, but it was precisely that indifference that left me with no reason to stay where I was. I climbed the hill.

"O light! May Lumiaris's...! Divine protection...!"

"O darkness...! Lord of vice! Skullhell...!"

People were fighting right next to the tower. A woman and a man. The woman wore a priest's robes, while the man was outfitted with dark armor and carried a sword. The woman appeared to be unarmed, though. The man came at her with his sword, and she leaped back out of the way.

"Blame!" The woman immediately unleashed a burst of light. It pushed the man back for a moment, but he closed in on her again, undeterred.

He'll go right. No, left. The dread knights' Missing skill, huh?

The woman reeled back. She'd apparently been slashed. The man kept on swinging, not wanting to miss his chance.

"O light! Sacrament!" The woman was wrapped in light. Light magic. It healed all her wounds in the blink of an eye. Then she cast another light magic spell.

"Lumiaris! Circlet!" A circle of light with a diameter of about two

meters appeared at the woman's feet, and she wasn't the only one standing on it. The man was in range too.

"Nngah...!" The man cringed. The woman sprang at him, pushed him over, mounted him, and started beating him, raining punches down on his face.

"O light! Lumiaris! Lumiaris! For Lumiaris! O liiight!" Light poured from the woman's eyes, and darkness from the man's. That's when I realized the woman was Io, and the man was her comrade Gomi.

Io and her team had been with us when we had returned to Grimgar from Parano. Their memories had subsequently been stolen, and they had chosen to work with the master of the Forbidden Tower. They'd been in the tower. Io was a priest, and Gomi was a dread knight. They hadn't been able to avoid Lumiaris's and Skullhell's influence either.

Io's party also included a thief named Tasukete. I wonder what happened to him. Shihoru. Was that Shihoru? And where's the master of the Forbidden Tower? Oh, and Hiyomu. Right. What happened to Hiyomu?

"O light! Lumiaris! I offer him up to you! This filthy servant of darkness!" Io stopped punching and grabbed Gomi's head with both hands, jerking it back and forth and twisting it around. I was watching them from behind a gravestone, having hidden there without even thinking about it.

Io's technique was brutish. If she did it that way, she'd hurt her own hands too. But, oh right, the Circlet. That spell gradually healed whoever was on the disc. Even if she suffered a major laceration or a broken bone, it would heal them. What about Gomi, though? Maybe light magic didn't affect a dread knight like him, since he was a servant of Skullhell, and an enemy of Lumiaris.

There was a horrifying sound. Gomi's neck must have broken. Then Io stood up and stomped on his head.

"O light! Light! Lumiaris! Ahh, O liiight!" Io praised Lumiaris's name in a state of ecstasy, pounding the heel of her foot down on the dread knight's head over and over and over again. The circlet of light had already vanished, and the dread knight wasn't even twitching. But that still didn't stop Io.

"Thank you!"

I don't know what changed. That part still isn't clear to me. But

Io suddenly paused, gazed up at the heavens, and made the sign of the hexagram, concluding her execution of the dread knight.

Io walked away from his corpse humming to herself. *What's so fun about this? She's skipping.* I felt something like indignation. I had no right to be mad at her, but that was still too much. That dread knight had been her comrade. She and her party members had always had a pretty warped relationship, but there must have been a history between them, bonds, or something that they valued in each other, something that wasn't visible to an outsider like me. It was insane that she could just destroy it all like that.

No, that's not right. Io didn't destroy it. The gods. Lumiaris and Skullhell destroyed it.

Ranta knew this would happen. That's why he had me kill him. He didn't want to become something other than himself. He couldn't stand it. He wasn't going to let anyone, god or not, do that to him. That was his pride. He always stayed true to himself, both in the way he lived, and in the way he chose to die. I wish he wouldn't have used me to accomplish that, though. You were a real piece of work, right up to the end, man. Don't make me do that kind of thing.

But you know, even though I never liked the guy as a person, we did have some kind of bond, and I think when it comes down to it, if the only options we had were for me to kill him, or for someone else to, then it's better that I did it. I think I had *to do it. I won't let anything, god or otherwise, turn him into something he doesn't want to be. I didn't want to see Ranta transformed like that.*

The dread knight whose skull had been beaten to a pulp by Io rose up. His head hadn't retained its shape. There was just some dark mass coiled there. It was probably the same stuff that had been pouring out of his eyes. Was the darkness trying to fill in the parts he'd lost? It looked to me like the darkness was trying to repair him.

"Ueh, ueh, ueh, ueh, ueh! Ueh, ueh, ueeeeeeeeeeeh!" The dread knight let out something resembling a voice.

Io turned around, and I immediately noticed that the light wasn't just in her eyes anymore. It was bursting from her nose and mouth as well.

"Filthy...! Servant of darkness...!"

"Auuuahhh! Euuuagh! Ooeuuugh!"

The dread knight flew toward the priest. I ducked back behind

the gravestone, made myself small, closed my eyes, and covered my ears.

I had been thinking that the believers of Lumiaris would fight the servants of Skullhell, with the people who followed neither getting caught up in the middle, and none of them would survive. But no. That wasn't how it was going to be.

The light of Lumiaris had healing power, and somehow, Skullhell's darkness also allowed the dread knights to recover.

That meant that even if the believers of Lumiaris and the servants of Skullhell killed each other, they would come back to life. As long as the war between Lumiaris and Skullhell continued, their followers would have to keep on fighting forever.

The two made their way down the hill as they fought. I just stayed put until I couldn't hear their voices, or the sounds of body parts being slashed, bludgeoned, and broken anymore.

The sun was about halfway risen. The two of them had disappeared into the woods, but I was still on edge, anxious they might return, as I walked around the Forbidden Tower. I couldn't find an entrance. Nor did I have any idea what I'd do in there if I did find one. Was I trying to get inside the tower? I'm not even sure.

I returned to where I'd been earlier, then without putting any serious thought into what I was doing, I started to make my way around the tower one more time. I was halfway around when it happened. Maybe fifteen meters from the tower, something moved. I hadn't noticed it on my first time around. It was a short distance down the hill, around where the gravestones started, in between two of them. What was it? I couldn't tell at a glance. It wasn't small. If anything, it was actually pretty big. Or long, I should say. But it was wide too. It wasn't thin. It had a thickness to it. And it was twisting and turning. Was it trying to crawl? It was moving sluggishly. Legs. Were those a pair of legs? It was apparently a person crawling.

Is it a person?

It didn't have anything like arms. Not complete ones, at least. Maybe they'd been blown off? It wasn't naked. It was wearing something. And it was all sooty, but it wasn't black, though I couldn't say if it was red, blue, or green either. Was that fabric? Or was it some harder material, like metal? I couldn't tell.

I walked closer.

“Nngh…” There was a voice. Or I think it was a voice. It was groaning.

“Um…” I stopped about two meters away, thinking it might have been dangerous to get closer. What did danger matter to me, though? Even after everything, I was still acting cautious.

The thing I wanted to laugh at the most always seemed to be myself.

“Are you…okay?”

“Nngh… You’re…” The thing was lying face down, but it was trying to turn itself over. I finally realized that the stuff covering its head was hair. It had been making me think of stringy insects. Like there were countless stringy insects infesting its scalp.

It took a long time, but the thing managed to turn its body onto its side, and then it lifted itself partially off the ground so that it was at an angle. It raised its face—it was probably a face, at least. That stringy, bug-like hair was growing all over its face too. In the places where I assumed its eyes were supposed to be, there were just a pair of holes, with something shining dully deep within them. Its mouth was a crack, and there were tiny fractures all around it. What skin I could see through the stringy, bug-like hair was a pale blue. No, it was blue-blue.

“You’re… Oh, I see… A volunteer soldier… From Alterna… Your name is…Haruhiro…”

“You…know me?”

“Oh, but of course…I do…”

“You’re—”

I looked up at the broken tower. Then I looked back down again. He looked pretty badly hurt. There were wounds all over his body, but I saw no sign of bleeding. It was like he didn’t even have blood flowing through his body. Did he have no blood or tears? Was he even a living creature at all?

“The Forbidden Tower’s…master?”

“Sir Unchain…is what…the margrave…called me…”

“Why—”

“Ainrand Leslie… That…is my…name…”

Maybe I should stomp the creepy head of this thing with bug-like hair that’s calling itself Ainrand Leslie until I smash it open. Either that, or I should run away right now.

I didn’t want to get involved in anything I didn’t have to. A guy like me had no business doing so.

“Shihoru… That girl…exceeded my imagination…”

“What?” I knelt down. “What’d you just say? Shihoru? Is that what you said?”

“Yes… She…completed…a new kind of magic… One nobody has ever thought of before… No magic…can equal the ancient, original magic… And yet she…”

“Shihoru… Is she…all right?”

“Even after losing…half her body…she used magic to…”

“Fly off. After destroying your tower.”

“She…destroyed it… Everything… That’s no girl… She’s a witch… A genuine witch…”

“So Shihoru really is alive, then.”

“I have…a favor to ask…”

“Huh?”

“Come closer.”

“A *favor*… Huh? Mister, do you have any clue what you’re saying? It was *you*, right? You’re the one who stole our memories.”

“I don’t…have…much time…left…”

“What do I care? How’s that my problem?”

“Just look…”

Ainrand Leslie moved his chin. He was apparently gesturing for me to look at his torso. I did. He’d been gouged right through. A big chunk of him between his chest and belly had been torn out. There had presumably been something there before, but now it was gone. There was a dark brown slime inside the cavity, and a trail of it had been left behind him as he had crawled. It looked like he had started at a grave about five meters further down the hill.

At some point, I noticed that the distance between us had shrunk, and I was close enough to him that I could’ve reached out and touched him. Had I shuffled closer to him while still kneeling on the ground? Or had he twisted the pillbug-like remains of his body to get a little closer to me?

“I want…you…to lend me…your strength… I still…have things left…to do… Things…that will not…be to your disadvantage…”

“I can’t trust that. Not coming from a guy like you.”

“You don’t…need to…”

“Huh?”

“In time, you will understand…”

“What’re you talking—”

I tried to stand up, but before I could, Ainrand Leslie opened his crack-like mouth, and a bloody arm shot out of it. Now, I said it was bloody, but it was dark brown blood—old, rotten, and unpleasant even to look at. It was awfully thin for an arm, no thicker than a child’s, and with a similar length. I only thought it to be an arm because there was a hand on the end of it.

He’s gonna grab me, I thought. *That arm’s about to try to catch me.* But my intuition was wrong. The arm that came out of Ainrand Leslie’s mouth didn’t grab me, it entered my mouth.

“——————————!”

It rammed itself down my throat and into my stomach all at once. There was pressure on my airway, almost totally blocking it, preventing me from breathing. I seized Ainrand Leslie’s arm—the armlike thing in my mouth—with both hands, and tried to pull it out, but it kept on diving deeper and deeper.

“I cannot perish yet.”

Ainrand Leslie’s voice was echoing inside of me.

“I’ve yet to unravel the mystery of the ark.”

“——————! ——————————!”

“You don’t need to trust me. I *will* be borrowing your strength, Haruhiro.”

“——————————! ——————————!”

“Do not fear. I won’t mistreat you. I’ve already told you. This won’t be to your disadvantage.”

“——————————! ——————————!”

“You can continue your travels. Together with me. I’m sure you’ll be able to meet that witch as well.”

“————————————————————————.”

“Awaken.”

How many times did I call out? Hey. Wake up. Rise and shine. Awaken. How many variations did I try?

The room was dark, but not pitch black. The hard, smooth floor wasn't carved rock, nor was it stone tile. What was it, then? I couldn't say. Regardless, there were blurry lines, both straight and curved, shining on the floor. They were a mixture of circles and diagrams, but what exactly they were supposed to be is another question I have no way of answering.

There was a person lying face up on the floor. A man, judging from how he was built. He had long hair, and still looked young—probably around twenty-ish. In all likelihood, he was Japanese. After some time, he stirred, and his eyes fluttered open.

"Huh?"

"You're awake?" I said to him, and the Japanese man sat up.

"Who… Juntza? Amu? Neika? No…?"

He squinted as he looked around the room. He was surprised, confused, and disoriented. But it would have been a bit much to expect him not to be.

"Unfortunately, I'm not…Juntza? Or Amu, or Neika," I said in a relaxed voice, trying not to agitate him.

The Japanese man sighed. "Figured not."

"Are those your friends?"

"What?"

"Juntza. Amu. Neika. Are they friends of yours?"

"Friends… Mmm, I dunno about that. More like comrades?"

"Oh, yeah?"

"Do you…know where Juntza and the others are? They're probably…around here somewhere."

"No, sorry, I have no idea."

"Oh. Okay then."

The Japanese man lowered his head. He was thinking about something.

He should have his memories. I haven't put him in a state where he can't remember anything except his name.

Unlike what had been done to me. Unlike what had been done to all of us back then.

"Can you stand?" I asked, and the man nodded.



“Sure… Well, actually, I dunno. But I feel like I should be able to…I guess?”

“There’s no point in just staying here. Let’s leave.”

“Leave? I can leave?”

He seemed to be misunderstanding. Probably assumed he’d been abducted or something, and was locked up in here. Hard to blame him, given the situation.

“If you want to stay here, that’s fine with me. I’ll be going soon. What will you do?”

“What will I do…? Hold on.” The Japanese man stood up. He seemed agile. It wasn’t just his youth—I sensed that he had the flexibility of someone who was used to moving their body.

I walked over to the wall, then waited for the Japanese man. There was something distinctive about his gait. He carried himself more like a thief than a warrior or hunter. If anything, he was like a wild beast. That wasn’t very Japanese of him.

“We can get out through here.”

“What do you mean?”

“We just have to go outside.”

I walked into the wall, and out the other side. There was a spiral staircase with a railing there, but there was no railing in the spot where I came out. There were no visible light sources, but I could see clearly.

I didn’t understand how it worked, but I didn’t let that mystify me. There’d be no end to it if I did. There were all sorts of things I could try to figure out the how or why of, but most of the time I wouldn’t be able to work it out completely, and would only end up with more questions for my efforts.

After I had descended a few steps, the Japanese man came through as well.

“So you did decide to leave. Let’s head down,” I said.

“Uh, listen.”

“What?”

Once the question left my mouth, it occurred to me why the Japanese man was so confused.

Oh, right. It’s because of this, huh?

Our eyes met. The Japanese man was looking at my face. Or more precisely, at the visor I was wearing. Visor. Mask. What exactly should I call it? I don’t know. It wasn’t just something I

wore because I didn't want to see my face, and didn't want to show it to others either. If that were all it was, then I wouldn't have to wear it all the time. The mask was a relic. One with a variety of features. It was convenient, and it didn't get in the way at all once someone got used to wearing it, which I already had.

Because I was hiding my face, the Japanese man must have been looking at me as an unfamiliar, and also obviously suspicious, person.

"Where is this?"

But even so, he didn't seem afraid. In fact, he was strangely calm.

"They called it the stake long ago."

"The stake? You mean like a pole?"

"We're inside of the ark."

"The ark? So, it's a ship?"

"Let's head down."

As I began to descend, the Japanese man followed me. He was light on his feet.

"Hey, hold on," he called after me.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry for all the questions, but...who *are* you?"

"Me?"

It's a simple question, I thought at that moment.

"Well..."

For some reason, it's not coming to me.

Who am I? What am I?

"Manato," said the Japanese man.

I stopped walking.

"Manato?" I echoed.

"Yeah."

He'd definitely said Manato.

I turned to look at him. "That's...your name, is it? Manato?"

"That's what I just said, yeah. Some of my comrades call me Matt, and others Manato. But Manato is my name. Since that's what mom and dad called me."

"Your dad... You have parents?"

"They're dead. Long dead. None of my comrades had parents either."

"How old are you?"

“How old? Oh, in years? Umm… Twelve, maybe? Or was it fourteen? Could be thirteen.”

“You’re young. Younger than I thought.”

“I’m just making shit up. It’s been maybe…three, four years since my folks died? I think that much time has passed. I haven’t been able to keep track of it properly.”

“Manato…”

“Yeah.”

“I knew one of those…”

A Manato. It’s been a while. Hasn’t it? Has it been a while? Since I murmured that name to myself? Maybe it has. I don’t think I’ve said it recently.

“It was a long time ago, but it just so happens that I had a friend…a comrade with the same name as you.”

“Huh. Is that right? What a coincidence,” he said.

“Serendipity, I’d call it.”

“Serendipity?”

“When something happens by chance, but in a happy way.”

“Serendipity, huh? Never heard that one before. Oh, right. What about you?”

“You mean, what’s my name?”

I grasped the railing. I felt like if I didn’t, I was going to need to sit down. *A name. My name. What need do I have for one of those? There’s no one left who’d need to call me by my name. But it’s not like I’ve forgotten it. I can’t forget the past. It weighs on me too heavily to forget.*

“Haru,” I said, letting go of the railing. “There were once people who called me that.”

“Haru,” Manato repeated the name in a murmur.

Does this Japanese boy resemble him? The other Manato? Honestly, I don’t know. I can call his face to mind, but is the face that I remember really his? If my memory differs from reality, I have no way to check. The same goes for his voice. That other Manato had called me Haruhiro. I might have been afraid. Horrified that if this Japanese boy called me Haruhiro too, then my memories of him—of his face, his voice—might fade completely, and be lost to me.

“So you don’t mind if I call you Haru, then?”

“I don’t.”

What should I call this young Japanese boy? The other Manato

would've laughed and told me, "That's obvious." That's the feeling I get. I mean, it is *his name, after all.*

"I'm going to call you Manato. Do you have any problem with that?"

"Problem?" Manato smiled. His smile was different from the other Manato's, more innocent. "Not a one. No problem whatsoever. I mean, I *am* Manato."

"Okay then. Let's head down, Manato. I'm sure you want to know where you are."

I started descending the stairs again, feeling like my body wasn't my own. Though, truthfully, there was no guarantee that my body *was* completely mine, but I didn't think that was what was causing my uneasiness. So what was, then?

In time, we reached the bottom of the stairs, and I headed over to the other side. Or maybe it's better to say that I went out.

Outside.

It's after sunset, huh? That, or before sunrise, I guess.

I had been in the ark long enough that I couldn't immediately tell. The eastern sky was lit up slightly. That meant the sun would be rising soon.

It's daybreak.

I was standing atop the hill. And I wasn't alone. Manato emerged from the ark too.

Come to think of it, way back when, we used to refer to the ark as the Forbidden Tower. Which was fair enough, since the ark looked like a tower from the outside. The top floors were still damaged, and the whole thing was covered with ivy. It didn't look like anything other than an old tower.

"Huh?" Manato looked around anxiously. "Where is this place?"

"A different world from the place you came from."

I descended the slope, stopping in front of a large white stone. There were many others like it on this hill.

"It's called Grimgar," I continued.

"Another world... Grim...gar..."

Manato's eyes widened. He shook his head.

"What the... Huh? How... I don't remember coming here. What do you mean, 'another world'? This world...isn't Japan?"

"Japan is...a country. I used to live there. I don't remember anything about it, though. But I've heard about Japan, so it's not

like I know nothing."

"Are you…from Japan too, then, Haru?"

"Apparently. I came to Grimgar from Japan."

"Again with that… Uh, how?"

"I don't even know."

I wish I could tell you. I wanted to know myself, and I looked into it. But it didn't go anywhere.

"I wouldn't say there were a ton of people who came to Grimgar like you, but there were a fair number. They all said that they didn't know. Even if they had memories from before coming, they never knew what they'd done—or what they'd done *wrong*—to end up here. That was true for every last one of them."

"Hold on." Manato crouched down and scratched his head. "Then, are there others…like you? Other people from Japan?"

"It might be better to say there *were*."

"So…not anymore?"

"It's been a long time."

"A long time? Since what?"

"When someone crosses from Japan into Grimgar, they're transported to that room in the ark. There's a system in there that makes that happen. Or a machine, it might be better to say. Back when my group arrived, a number of people would arrive together every few years on average. Sometimes more than ten at once. But it became less and less frequent over time, and the numbers dwindled."

"If you're saying it's been a while, then…no one's come recently?"

"That's right."

"For about how long?"

"More than forty years."

Once I said the words aloud, I couldn't help but feel fresh shock over them. I was pretty sure no one who came here from Japan intended to. They were probably caught up in some unfortunate accident. That's why, though I felt bad for them, I felt a certain kinship there. I won't say I had been waiting eagerly. I can't say that. But the arrival of Japanese people gave me something. It's hard to express what, but it was something akin to a purpose in life.

"I guess it's been close to five decades now, huh?"

“Fifty years? That’s…a long time, isn’t it? People don’t usually live that long. When mom and dad died, they weren’t even thirty. Don’t you think you’ve lived way too long, Haru?”

“It sounds like your folks died young, but as for me…yeah, you’ve got it right, Manato. I’ve definitely lived for too long.”

“Fifty years… So…back then, the last time a Japanese person came to Grimgar, were you still a kid?”

“Nah.”

“Then…how long have you lived, Haru? I mean…in Japan, if you make it thirty years, that’s already a pretty long life, you know? We’re all gonna die anyway, so nobody’s all that serious about keeping track of what age they are.”

“I’ve stopped counting too, Manato. Though for a different reason from your people. It sounds like the situation’s changed a lot.”

Something’s strange. But what? It’s clearly messed up. People dying before they hit thirty? I mean, sure, that’s not out of the realm of possibility. If it’s not natural causes. But what could have made it so that living to thirty is considered a long life? Also, why had Japanese people stopped crossing over to Grimgar? I’d had some vague thoughts on that. Like, there was some sort of abnormal phenomenon—an accident, disaster, or whatever—that was happening in Japan, and it had been sending people to Grimgar. But whatever the cause, it had eventually halted. Perhaps because of a drastic change in Japan.

If the life expectancy of people living in Japan was suddenly and drastically reduced, that’s a major change. Humans might not be as long-lived as dwarves or elves, but they can live for seventy or eighty years. That’s how it’s supposed to be. What in the world could have happened for that to be reduced by more than half? I have absolutely no idea.

“In just the last four decades…something must’ve happened to Japan. Has it really only been four decades? It feels like longer…”

When I came back to my senses, Manato had stood up. He was breathing, stretching, and flexing to both sides.

“What’re you doing?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’?”

Manato spread his legs wide. Then he leaned all the way back, and all the way forward again. He did it over and over.

“I’m moving my body. As long as you can move well, you won’t die in the near future.”

“Huh… Is that how it works?”

“For all your years, you’re still pretty spry, Haru. Isn’t that why you were able to live so long?”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Hey, got anything to eat? I see there’s a forest. Oh! And mountains too! They’re so tall!”

Manato was pointing to the mountain range south of where we were.

“Those are the Tenryu Mountains.”

Oh, yeah. I guess there aren’t many mountains that high in Japan. I remember someone who came from there saying that.

“Dragons live there,” I continued. “Not even the servants of the gods can enter those mountains.”

“What’re dragons? Wild beasts? Can you eat them?”

“It wouldn’t be easy… You’d get yourself eaten instead.”

“Huh. Is that a fact? But there’s animals in the forest, right?”

“Yeah. Well…”

“If they’re not that dangerous, then we just gotta kill ’em, and boil or roast ’em. Then we’ll have food. Oh, and there’ll also be mushrooms and berries and other stuff we can forage for. I mean, I figure a forest’s a forest, and a mountain’s a mountain, but maybe it’s different here than in Japan.”

“If you’re hungry, I can provide you with enough to eat for a while.”

“For real? Nice. Okay, guess things’ll work out, then.”

“You’re…not depressed at all?”

“Depressed? Why would I be? I’m alive, aren’t I?”

I laughed. Was he putting up a strong front? It didn’t feel like it. Manato flexed his knees and swiveled his neck. He jumped a little. Then he went for a much bigger leap after that.

“I’m worried about my comrades, but they’re probably alive. And as long as I keep living too, maybe we’ll meet again. Maybe not, though. But if I really want to see them, then I have to go to them. Do you think I can? Or is that impossible?”

I could only shake my head in response. “Sorry, I don’t know. But as far as I’m aware, no one’s ever returned to Japan.”

“Oh. I see.” Manato took a deep breath in, then let it out. His

expression was filled with good cheer.

He said he's around thirteen. Still just a kid. But he's not built like one. He's slender, but not because he's underfed. It's because his muscles are packed in as densely as possible. He's taller than me too. It's an odd mismatch. His body's developed, but his face and expressions feel incongruously young.

"Well, maybe this…Grimgar, was it? Will surprise me. I might actually be more comfortable here. Though, if I had my comrades too, it'd be even better. But I don't even know how I got here, so there's nothing I can do about that."

"You're certainly positive." I couldn't help but smile, if only just a little. "Can I ask you something, Manato?"

"Sure."

"What year was it in Japan? A.D., I mean. If you don't know what that means, then you don't need to answer."

"A.D." Manato pressed his fingers to his temples. "Twenty-one hundred…A.D.? It's kind of foggy, but I remember mom saying something like that. Maybe it was in the papers. But that was a long time ago."

"Twenty-one hundred…" I covered my mouth with my hand. Even though the relic mask was covering my face, I couldn't stop myself from making gestures like that sometimes.

"All right then. In all likelihood, time flows at the same rate in Grimgar and Japan. Although, it sounds like Japan has changed a whole lot in the last four decades or so."

hardcore level.1: Dragon Riders

This day had been a long time coming.

Yori loved her great-grandmother. Loved her from the bottom of her heart. Her beloved, beloved great-grandma. Though, it wasn't just Yori who loved and respected her great-grandma. Great-grandma had been the living encyclopedia of their tribe. They'd had all sorts of names for her, like the great mother, and godmom, and so on, but Yori was able to call her great-grandma because they were related by blood.

I'm great-grandma's great-granddaughter.

Just thinking that gave her power. It let her believe she was invincible. There wasn't a thing Yori couldn't do. There was no goal she couldn't accomplish if she set her mind to it. Nothing was impossible.

When a child was born into the tribe, great-grandma was always the one to name them. So, of course, great-grandma was the one who had named Yori Yori.

Yori was the second Yori of her tribe. She hadn't met the first Yori herself, though. Her great- grandmother had only had one son, and that son's first daughter was named Yori. So the first Yori was her great-grandmother's first granddaughter. But the first Yori had apparently died young.

She'd heard that if her great-grandmother's only son had been born a girl instead, she would have named him Yori. Great-grandma had an emotional attachment to that name. And great-grandma had given that name to Yori. That made Yori special.

When Yori begged her dear, dear great-grandmother for a story, great-grandma would beckon to her, and let Yori sit on her lap. The others would tell her that the great mother was too old to be doing that anymore, and that it would be terrible if it affected her health, and all sorts of other things they shouldn't have said, but great-grandma didn't care in the slightest. Great-grandma's stories were all incredibly interesting. Yori loved all of them, and remembered them precisely. But Yori's favorites were the tales of adventure in Grimgar.

Long, long ago, great-grandma had lived north of the Tenryus. She hadn't been alone. She'd had comrades, and together with them, she'd gone on unbelievably grand adventures.

Yori could imitate great-grandma's unusual storytelling style perfectly. Great-grandma had met lots of people in Grimgar, and been through many heart-pounding battles. She'd had painful partings as well. The man who had become Yori's great-grandfather had been one of great-grandma's adventuring companions.

After that, great-grandma had escaped from Grimgar during the great cataclysm, and crossed over to the Red Continent. She hadn't been willing to talk much about how she had been forced to flee in desperation while protecting her only son. It had been so hectic and difficult that she'd said she didn't remember what happened very well.

However, even once she reached the Red Continent, great-grandma probably hadn't had much time to rest. "Maybe not," great-grandma would say with a smile. "It was fun, though, and there was all sorts of stuff goin' on."

The reason that "all sorts of stuff" happened was because great-grandma had been incredibly popular wherever she went. According to the stories told in their clan, there had been thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of men who had tried to court her. But great-grandma never got into a relationship with any of them. Yori had heard time and again how cool and amazing her great-grandfather had been. After praising him to high heaven, great-grandma would always say, "The only reason everyone's here is because of him."

Great-grandma was singly devoted in her love, and Yori thought that was a wonderful thing. She admired her for it. Yori hoped she could be the same. No, she *would* be. When Yori found somebody to love, she'd never betray them. And she'd never let them betray her. Yori would love only that person for all her life, and only let that person ever love her.

Great-grandma was a tolerant person. Her patience was deeper than the boundless sea. She'd often said, "Yesterday's enemy is today's friend." When the time came that she had to shake hands with old enemies, she always initiated it, never making them extend their hand first. She was flexible, but had an incredibly

strong will. She even smiled when telling sad stories. When she got mad, she was so terrifying that the whole tribe shuddered, but then she'd go back to smiling again in no time.

"There's somethin' your great-grandma forgot in Grimgar. And someone's gotta go get it. Do y'think you could go and do that for your great-grandma, Yori?"

Great-grandma had only said that to Yori once. Never again. They had been alone at the time, with no one else around. Of course, Yori had promised to go. But when she did, great-grandma shook her head and said there was no need to promise.

"Yori, you should do whatever it is you want to do. That's how your great-grandma's always lived her life. So, Yori, you live for Yori. Can you promise that?"

Of course, Yori had made that promise to her great-grandma. But she had made a point of not specifying what she meant by doing so. She was going to go and get whatever it was that great-grandma had left behind, because that was what Yori wanted to do. She loved and admired her great-grandma beyond compare. If her great-grandma had a wish that she couldn't fulfill herself anymore, then Yori would make it come true in her place. That was Yori's own wish.

"Karambit!" Yori called out at the entrance to a dragon hole, and a screech responded from deep inside.

The hole was about four meters across, and more than twenty meters deep. There were eight dragon holes about halfway up Step Mountain, which was located on the southern side of the Tenryus, and one winged dragon was being raised in each of them.

"Ushaska!"

There was another voice calling for a different dragon at a neighboring hole. Yori looked over to see Riyo looking back at her. Yori wasn't very fond of her blood-related little sister. When she'd been younger, Yori had adored her, and she didn't *hate* the girl now, but she'd gotten sick of Riyo following her everywhere. For one thing, her sister was a year and a half younger than her, and used to be so little, but then she'd pulled a growth spurt, and now Riyo stood about a head taller than Yori. Just try to put yourself in Yori's shoes, being followed around by a little sister who's way bigger than you. She got in the way all the time, and was annoying

and creepy.

Yori looked back at the dragon hole. Right before she had done that, Riyo had opened her mouth as if to say something, but as usual, now she was going to just slump her shoulders and keep it to herself. Yori wished she'd stop acting like that. It made it seem like Yori was being mean to her. But all she was doing was ignoring her annoying little sister. She was expressing with her attitude that it was time for Riyo to grow up and become independent. She'd told her little sister that too. Repeatedly. But Riyo wouldn't listen. Yori's little sister was such a dunderhead. Ah, by the way, dunderhead was a word great-grandma used. When someone went too far, she'd be like, "Oh, you're such a dunderhead." Though, maybe only Yori used it now. She had a number of great-grandma-isms like that. Quite a few, actually. But anyway, Riyo was a real dunderhead.

Karambit crawled up out of the dragon hole. The winged dragons they raised on Step Mountain were small to medium size for dragons from the Tenryu Mountains, and even then, they never got bigger than the low end of medium size. They had wing membranes on their front legs which allowed them to fly, their necks were a little on the long side, and they were quite skilled with their tongues. Their rear legs had a streamlined look to them, but they had considerable kicking power.

Karambit poked its head out of the dragon hole, and immediately started licking Yori's face with its reddish-purple tongue.

"Whoa, Karambit! Ah ha! Hey! Hee hee!"

Yori grabbed Karambit's head with her hand, but didn't try to stop the dragon from licking her. The skin of a winged dragon was covered with something that was like a midpoint between scales and feathers. It wasn't soft or hard. Its texture was indescribable, but felt amazing to touch. Their saliva was smooth, and had a surprisingly mellow taste. Their breath wasn't particularly bad unless they had just eaten. Humans who didn't brush their teeth were far worse. Though, maybe Yori only thought that because she was used to it.

Karambit had still been an egg when they'd first met, so Yori had known this winged dragon since before it had hatched. She'd spent five years learning to be a dragon tamer as she raised the

dragon to this size.

"There, there. You're a good girl, Karambit. Yori loves you. Almost as much as she loves her great-grandma. Ha ha! Stop it! Don't get mad. It was always gonna be this way. You never stood a chance against great-grandma. But you're still special, Karambit. You're gonna carry Yori south of the Tenryus now. Riyo's gonna come along too, though. She's such a dunderhead. It's so annoying. But oh well. You already know this, but Ushaska's a good girl. Unlike Riyo, it won't be so bad having her along with us. You agree, don't you? There, there, there..."

It had all been for this day.

Raising dragons was incredibly dangerous. One in five dragon tamers would be killed by a hatchling, and two more would be killed during the juvenile stage. Only the two still alive after that would get to become dragon tamers. But even after becoming full-fledged tamers, many still died. It had always been rash to try and tame dragons, hadn't it? That was an opinion that was still strongly held in some quarters. But if care was put into raising them, some dragons would grow attached to humans like these ones had. They might not do everything they were told, but they would listen to the caregivers who'd raised them. That was why if you wanted to be a dragon rider, you had to become a dragon tamer first.

The Tenryus couldn't be crossed on foot. The line of extraordinarily tall mountains stretched out as far as the eye could see, and they were home to dragons and other related subspecies that were too big or vicious to ever be tamed, as well as horrifying beasts like the spotted bear and ashen panther, which could even devour dragons. Once upon a time, there had been a tunnel through them—the Earth Dragon's Aorta—but the Kingdom of Arabakia had collapsed it, and it was now impassable. Short of borrowing the help of the elusive gnome race, it would never be possible to open that path again.

Sea routes were more practical, but every plan for exploration or colonization that went through the Coral Archipelago and Emerald Archipelago had ended in failure.

Every member of the tribe knew that great-grandma longed for a return to Grimgar. But it wasn't only their tribe that had an emotional attachment to the continent.

It had been over forty years since the tribe had started a joint

venture with a company to expand south of the Tenryus. The north of the Tenryus was Grimgar, but the south of the Tenryus was both Grimgar and at the same time not Grimgar. It had been controlled by the Lion God King, Obdoo, who commanded the seventeen beast god tribes, while the remnants of the dismembered Kingdom of Arabakia lived on the run. The tribe and the company had absorbed the survivors of the kingdom, defeated the Lion God King, and made peace with thirteen of the beast god tribes, establishing a united kingdom a little over two decades ago.

Yori hugged Karambit around the neck as she pulled her beloved winged dragon out of the hole. Of course, if Karambit resisted, then even with all her might, Yori wouldn't have been able to make the dragon budge. If Karambit *really* didn't want to come out, the dragon could've bitten her head. But Yori couldn't let herself tense up because of that possibility, since dragons were sensitive to that sort of thing. Dragons were capable of love, but they could never love someone who feared them. A dragon tamer could never let themselves be awed, and at the same time they couldn't underestimate their dragon. If they let themselves be overwhelmed, they had to expect resistance, and even if they showed their dragon love, they couldn't count on being loved in return. Even if they were about to be devoured, they had to love their dragon to the very last moment. Only a dragon tamer who offered themselves up body and soul would be loved by the dragons.

Over at the neighboring hole, Riyo had already gotten onto Ushaska's back. Back when her little sister had first begun holding Ushaska's egg to warm it with her body heat, she'd been much smaller than her big sister, and had been clumsy and awkward at everything. In all honesty, Yori had worried that raising a winged dragon would prove too much for Riyo, and had repeatedly tried to convince her to give it up. But even though her little sister would do almost anything she asked—except when she asked Riyo to stop following her around—the younger girl had stubbornly refused.

Yori lowered Karambit's head, had the dragon crouch down, and threw a saddle over its back. As she got into the saddle, Yori thought, *Now that I think about it, that was when this all started.* When she had started raising her dragon, her little sister had

started training to build muscle. She'd trained under a man who'd come from who-knows-where to learn some strange martial arts, and she'd started reading a whole lot of books too. Then she'd started eating a ton. Before Yori knew it, her little sister had caught up to her in height. Then she'd quickly passed her. That was good, in some ways. All of that training had meant her sister had less time to follow her around. But then, after a good long time of not seeing her, Riyo would suddenly show back up. Yori might go to sleep in her own room, only to find her oversized little sister curled up next to her in a way that looked uncomfortable when she awoke.

"Karambit." Yori leaned forward to hug the winged dragon gently around the neck and to whisper in its ear. "You're all Yori needs. Despite all their talk about it, nobody else is serious about crossing the Tenryu Mountains, so the plan was going to be for you and Yori to go alone. And Yori really was fine with that."

Karambit let out an indulgent squeal. The dragon's eyes, with irises that were a complex mix of orange and green, stared back at Yori. Yori almost smiled, but then sat up straight.

"Yori! I'm going on ahead!" her little sister declared, making Ushaska's winged front legs flap as she began racing down the slope. There were types of flying dragons that could take off vertically, but these winged dragons needed a running start in order to fly.

Ushaska took off.

Yori slapped Karambit gently on the neck and whistled. Karambit took off running. A dragon rider needed to do more than just hang on for dear life. Yori put her feet in the stirrups of her saddle and raised her hips. She had to match the dragon's movements, controlling her body flexibly so as to never kill their momentum. But at the same time, she had to keep her core steady, so that she didn't become unstable. There were running dragons, pure dragons, winged dragons, and more, but the differences between individual dragons went beyond just their species. Each one also had its own personality. Trying to make a dragon match its rider wouldn't work. The rider had to match themselves to their dragon. Only once they accomplished that would the dragon begin to try and match their rider. The key things were its pulse and its breathing. If the rider could sense

their dragon's pulse and breathing, their movements would match naturally.

Yori loved the feeling when her winged dragon kicked off of the ground and soared into the air. In that moment, Karambit felt a pleasure like every cell in its body was buzzing at once, and in their many flights together, Yori had learned to feel it too.

"Okay, Karambit, the castle. You know where that is. We're going to the castle first, so you don't have to fly too high. That's right. You know just what to do, Karambit."

With a few words and a gesture from Yori, Karambit turned south. They were only around three hundred meters in the air. Riyo was up ahead, riding on Ushaska's back. It felt like Karambit wanted to catch up to Ushaska.

"Oh, fine. Go on, Karambit. Catch up to them."

When Yori spoke, Karambit started flapping faster. With each flap, the distance to Ushaska shortened.

Yori and Karambit, along with Riyo and Ushaska, had to visit the castle for a ceremony after this. It wasn't necessary, but Yori and Riyo were direct descendants of their great-grandma, after all. That made them royalty in the united kingdom. In fact, the two of them were proper royals, referred to as princesses and everything. Two princesses were about to depart on a journey across the Tenryus on dragonback, and that was going to cause a bit of a stir. But they couldn't just leave without saying anything, so they had to at least let the higher-ups in the united kingdom know. In their position, they couldn't just say, "We're going," and let that be the end of it, so the decision had been made to hold a ceremony. Actually, it was apparently going to be a pretty major affair.

"It's a pain in the backside, but we can put up with it one last time. Right, Karambit?"

Karambit let out a cry, and Yori laughed.

Karambit would soon catch Ushaska. Riyo glanced back. It was just for a moment, but her eyes clearly locked on to Yori. Even though Yori had been hoping to finally get away from her sister once she crossed the Tenryus into Grimgar proper.

Karambit passed Ushaska.

Yori wanted to leave her little sister behind. She was going to go get what her great-grandma had left in Grimgar, to make her elder's wish come true. That was a certainty. Yori would definitely

do it. But even if that was her intent, she had no guarantee that she'd be able to make it back alive. She was going to Grimgar, after all. She hadn't wanted to bring her little sister along. She had a lot of problems with Riyo following her, so she'd tried to push her away. But the little sister acted almost as if she knew what her big sister was planning, and raised a dragon, and kept on getting bigger and stronger.

"Stubborn girl. You're such an idiot. Oh, there's no helping you!"

Even without turning to look, Yori knew that Ushaska was right on Karambit's tail. Riyo had her eyes on Yori's back. The little sister would try to protect her big sister no matter what. She wasn't that same little Riyo anymore. She'd grown enough now that her big sister could trust her to watch her back.

Two people and two dragons crossed the Tenryu Mountains into Grimgar.

Yori didn't think about what would be waiting for them there, because Yori was the one who'd been waiting. She'd been dreaming of Grimgar all this time. They were going, two people and two dragons, to make their dreams and wishes come true.

Afterword

Time's gone by, and all sorts of things have happened. In regards to this series specifically, my editor has changed. Also, to tell you the truth, I was going to wrap it up after a little more, but I had some thoughts about that, and decided to have Haruhiro keep on giving it his best for a little longer.

The protagonists of my books all tend to have a rough time, and even among that company, Haruhiro's lived a pretty harsh life. Even when he's forced to his knees and needs to crawl, or is left completely unable to move, he'll start walking again. For a guy like me, who has lived a pretty easy life just writing all the time, I respect that.

The story's started making some big twists and turns again, so along with a wish that I'll be able to deliver you the next volume without much delay, I'd like to offer my heartfelt thanks to my editor Kawaguchi-san, to Shirai Eiri-san, to the designers of KOMEWORKS, and to everyone else involved in the production and sale of this work, as well as to all of you out there who are now reading it, whether that's on paper or digitally. And with that, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Ao Jyumonji

Bonus Short Stories

Wait For Dawn

Gwendendorogahbrazdajin was a goblin who'd spent a long time living in the Old City of Damuro. He used to be called Gwende a long time ago. Then he came to be called Gwendendo, then Gwendendorogah, and finally Gwendendorogahbrazdajin. There had probably never been a goblin in the Old City who'd lived as long as he had, so Gwende's name had gotten to be just as long as his life had been.

Gwende had been exiled from the New City, like all of the other goblins in the Old City had been. He had survived all this time despite not being particularly big or strong because he was deeply cautious, but also acted without hesitation. In addition to this, he made careful note of all the humans and goblins who came to the Old City and remembered them. The goblins of the Old City looked at Gwende as a wise elder, but he was aware of how dangerous it would be to let that go to his head and make him overconfident. All he had going for him was that he had lived for a long time. He had never left the Old City to see the wider world. Somewhere in his heart, he longed to explore, but the cowardice that came part and parcel with his caution kept him from doing so. Deep down, Gwende mocked himself as nothing more than a foolish goblin who just happened to have survived this long.

When he heard from another goblin named Wadamudd that the black ones had pushed into the Old City, Gwende remembered a prophecy.

The black ones will come and swallow the world. Lie in wait in the deepest depths until the black ones depart. A new dawn awaits us after the calamity brought by the black ones.

The seer Togorogo, pride of the goblin race, had left these words for them. Gwende had heard them back when he had still been living in the New City, and he still remembered. The black ones were going to swallow the world.

The Deepest Valley had been dug in the New City. He couldn't

flee there. Gwende immediately told Wadamudd and all his other acquaintances they had to flee. But where would they run to? The New City? No, he told them. Outside. They had to leave Damuro. The goblins pushed back, saying they couldn't leave. But if they didn't, they would die, Gwende scolded them, and then went to where the women were. There were few women in the Old City. They were the only ones who could give birth, so it was customary for the strong males to secure many women for themselves. Women were never exiled from the New City, but on rare occasions they would flee from there. The men of the Old City took care to protect such women. If they fought to monopolize the women, and the women died as a result, the harm would be irreparable.

The Old City had a house where the women lived. The men would go there and do various things to try to get their attention, and if it went well, they would be allowed to mate and have children. It had been a long time since Gwende had last mated with a woman, but he visited their house often. Ensuring the women were living comfortably was one of Gwende's important duties.

Gwende told the women to get out of the house and leave Damuro. To ensure that as many of the women with large bellies and suckling infants would survive as possible, Gwende brought a number of trustworthy goblin men with him. He told them to protect the women with their lives. The future of their race depended on them.

One of the women asked Gwendendorogahbrazdajin what he would do. Gwende answered that he would stay. The woman clung to Gwende, begging him to come with them. That woman had birthed thirteen of Gwende's children in the past, and one of those children was among those he had brought to guard the women. Gwende wanted to go outside, as he had desired to do for his whole life, but he still had things to do. He had to speak to as many goblins as possible.

Gwende had lived a long time. A very long time. He knew he wouldn't live to see the future of his race. That was why he told them to survive. To live to see the new dawn, and pass their blood down to future generations.

Even Then, Love Goes On

What is love? I know I'm *in* love. I'm sure of that much. But nothing else. I have love. It's here. Inside of me. It definitely exists. I can feel it. Distinctly. All of the time. I can't *not* feel it. But what *is* love? I've thought about that a lot, and I still don't know. It may not be the kind of thing you *can* figure out by thinking about it.

I've lost someone important to me. I talked to him about love once. Or rather...

"Mimori, I may just be imagining this, but have you got something on your mind? Why don't we talk about it?"

He said that, and I opened up to him.

I have someone I like, and I always find myself thinking about him, but he's got another girl he likes, and so my feelings may all be for nothing, so I considered just not liking him anymore, but I do like him, no matter what I do, and it hurts, and I can't take it anymore, and I don't know what to do.

"That's love!" my important person said with a smile. "You're in love. Love's great. Really great. Huh, I didn't realize you liked Haruhiro that much, Mimori. But hey, that's great. If you're in love, then love away. It's not the kind of thing you can stop doing just because someone tells you to. That's not how love works."

I like Haruhiro. It's a feeling I can never erase. This is love. I'm in love.

But nevertheless, I have to ask, "What is love?"

The person I cared about who's gone now said love can't be stopped. Even if I want to throw it away, I can't. I wish it had somewhere to go so it wouldn't just stay inside of me like this. If there was some way to move forward, I wouldn't feel so miserable. I simply love, love, love him so much, and I think that should be okay, so why does it hurt so much?

I wished he would be mine. I wanted to make him mine alone.

From the hair on his head, to the fingers on his hands. Every part of him. I love everything about him. There isn't a single thing I don't like. My love can always grow, but it never diminishes, so it was impossible for me to not want him. Why do I love him so much? I don't know. I always come back to that question of why.

I want him to at least be alive. I hope he's healthy, if nothing else. Okay, that's a lie. But it's also the truth.

Be alive. Be out there, breathing somewhere. That isn't enough for me, but at least give me that.

After losing someone close to me, I thought I'd forget about my love and it would fade away, but it didn't. If I could tell the person I lost about the feelings I still have, I bet he'd laugh.

"That's love all right!" he'd say.

I can't bring myself to think that I have to live his share of life too. I'd never considered what the Tokkis might be like without Tokimune. It had crossed my mind that someday we might lose him. But it had seemed obvious that when that time came, that would be the end for all of us. If anything happened to him, there was no way the rest of us would be all right. We'd smile the best we could and embrace the end. That's just how we Tokkis are. And that's nothing to be upset about. It's how we've always lived our lives. It's how we'll end them. That's all. And when I go, my love will go with me.

Or so I thought, but I'm still in love. I want Haruhiro to live. To always be healthy. And please, please...if it's at all possible, I want him to be happy too.

An Adult Secret

He often felt that something as simple as surviving a little longer than the people around you can become a weight on your shoulders, making it impossible to move. It wasn't just about age. The name Akira had been around so long that, despite the fact that it belonged to him, it had taken on a life of its own, narrowing his path.

Even as he lay next to his wife Miho in their tent, he could sometimes feel his heart trying to act in ways that were like someone else who was not him. For example, though he heard Miho's shallow breaths next to him, and their arms were touching, he still felt an indescribable loneliness occasionally. When he had felt that way in his younger years, he would have hugged her tight, or kissed her. And even if she acted like it was a nuisance, she'd accepted him indulgently.

Even now, if he did the same thing, she might be a little surprised, but she wouldn't go so far as to push him away. They had tried for a long time, but were never able to have children.

They had talked about it, though, and had made a decision one night. There was something wrong with one or perhaps both of them, and it meant that the future they had been hoping for would never arrive. They hadn't so much given up as accepted the way things were, and that they had to move on. That was the conclusion they had reached.

After that, the two had stopped having sex. They even hesitated to kiss. That irritated him sometimes. Even if she would never have his child, he still loved her. And surely she loved him as well. There shouldn't have been anything stopping them from making love like before.

He had considered asking her about it. In fact, if the opportunity arose, he still wanted to ask her this very moment. But how was he supposed to go about it? Even though he wanted to hold her in his arms, he couldn't help but hesitate. Could he just talk to her about his desire for her honestly? If he spoke up, she'd give him some kind of answer. She might even put up with him making love to her once in a while. But did he need to ask her to 'put up with' it? Maybe she wanted it too. Perhaps she felt the same hesitation he did. Although, thinking about it a little, she had almost never been the one to initiate. Once she had no reason to respond to his advances, she might not have wanted it anymore. In other words, if there was no hope of them having children, then she didn't need to accept him anymore.

No one would have imagined that the man called a living legend was agonizing over something like this.

The man who often went on about how he wasn't young anymore, or how he was getting on in years, didn't even have the courage to hold the one woman he loved when she was sleeping right next to him. He spent his sleepless nights feeling alone and empty.

"Miho," he called her name.

Her soft breathing remained unchanged.

His faint hope that she would wake up deflated, and the loss left him with a cold pain which quickly spread throughout his whole body.

He'd never thought getting old would feel like this. He had thought that as he grew in years, he would become more mature. Was he still not an adult even at his age? No, of course he was.

That was why he wouldn't breathe a word of this to anyone. It was his secret, and he would carry it to the grave. Now he just had to hope he'd die in a way that let him have a grave.

A Night of Tenderness

"Come to think of it, Chibi-chan..."

One night, the bespectacled mage Adachi and Chibi were on duty watching the campfire. Chibi wasn't talkative, so Adachi had been keeping quiet too, but then he suddenly struck up a conversation.

"You don't talk, generally."

Chibi nodded.

Adachi was quiet for a while. Then he opened his mouth again. "I've been thinking about that for a while."

Chibi nodded again. Though she didn't speak much, it wasn't the case that she didn't listen to people, or that she didn't want to hear what they had to say.

"I'm curious about why you don't talk. It's not that you can't. A long time ago, I asked Sassa—uh, are you okay with me talking about Sassa?"

Chibi nodded. Adachi smiled just a little.

"So, I asked Sassa about it, and she told me something that she said was a secret I couldn't share with anyone else. But it's okay to talk about it with you, right? Chibi-chan, you talk in your sleep sometimes, don't you?"

It was embarrassing for that to be brought up, but Chibi smiled faintly. Sassa had told Chibi about her sleep talking. At first, she'd thought that Sassa must have been lying. But then one day, Chibi had woken up in the middle of doing it, and realized it was true.

"Is there some reason you don't talk? I mean, if there isn't, that's fine too."

Chibi looked into the campfire as she thought about it. It was second nature now for her to speak as little as possible. She struggled to come up with an answer to the question. Even if there was a reason for it, some inciting event, maybe it was so long ago that she had forgotten it.

Oh, right. Even if there was any such event in her past, it must have happened before she had come to Grimgar. Which meant

that Chibi herself didn't know.

"Mm…" She managed to vocalize something. "Mm… Ahh…" She touched her throat. It felt a little itchy.

Adachi was staring at Chibi. Their eyes met. He smiled.

"It's fine," he said. "You don't need to talk. We've known each other for a long time, so I can more or less guess what you're thinking. It's not really an issue."

"Mm-hmm… Yeah…"

"But this feels nice. Novel."

"Yeah…"

"If you don't want to talk, we don't have to. But if you do, you're welcome to."

"Yeah…"

"As for me… Yeah. I guess I do have something I want to talk about. Or at least I feel like I probably do."

"Go…ahead…"

"It's nothing major. But maybe I should tell you while I can. I dunno… I don't mean anything deep by that. It's just what it sounds like. I mean, it's not like there's any guarantee that we'll still be around tomorrow or the day after to talk about it. That's…just a fact. That's reality."

"Yeah…"

"So, I was thinking that, if there's anything I want to talk about…no matter how stupid, then maybe I should."

"Talk…"

"Huh?"

"Talk… Please… I want…to hear it."

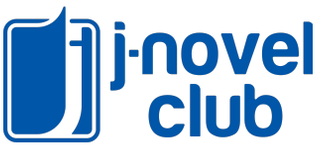
"Oh, okay."

After that, Adachi hung his head for a long time. Chibi mostly watched the wavering flames, only occasionally looking up at Adachi.

"Well, you see, I…"

When Adachi opened his mouth to speak again, for some reason Chibi already knew what he was going to say, so she wasn't surprised at all.

"I like Renji. I mean…*really* like him. I've…wanted to talk to you about it for ages. Maybe you already figured it out, but I still wanted to tell you. I wanted you to know. I wanted you to remember…that I told you I love Renji."



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by Ao Jyumonji

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