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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash
level. 9
Here and Now, to Far Far Away



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level.9 - Here and Now, to Far Far Away

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Their thoughts are focused far away—On Alterna.
Here in Thousand Valley, Haruhiro and the others take another step forward.


Ranta and Haruhiro.
Where will their now separate paths lead them?

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1. Set Free From Their Own Restraints



He squeezed his right hand.

Opened it.

Squeezed again.

This was the hand, Haruhiro thought once again.

The one that had hurt a comrade.

No, that was wrong. He wasn't a comrade anymore.

"...Ranta."

When Haruhiro whispered the name, there was a bitterness deep in his chest. He shouldn't have been able to taste anything there, though. Despite that, it was definitely bitter. It tightened, as if his ribs were being constricted, they creaked, and he felt a dull pain.

Ranta. That Ranta. Damn Ranta. That piece of shit.

He'd gotten behind the guy, and buried this stiletto into the guy's right shoulder. The sensation he'd felt then was gone now. Which meant it had been just that ordinary to him. Just like every other time, as if it were a given that he'd do it, Haruhiro had stabbed him with his stiletto.

He could say that for that one thrust, he hadn't hesitated at all. If he'd wavered in the slightest, he'd probably have been the one hit instead.

The guy had been serious. That was how it had looked. Haruhiro could only assume that was how it was.

Ranta had been strong. His RIPer had been sharp, and surprisingly weighty. Had Haruhiro been underestimating it? That might be true. He'd never been on

the receiving end of that blade before, after all. He'd only watched it from up close.

He'd known it was fast. The guy was fast. Not like he'd been long ago. He was a completely different person from the one who had struggled against a single goblin.

That wasn't true only of him, though. Everyone had grown. Even Haruhiro had. But perhaps he'd underestimated the guy, after all. Haruhiro hadn't been properly aware of just how much the guy had grown.

If he'd known that properly, maybe there would have been more ways he could have dealt with the situation. Would he have managed to not have to resort to that?

He'd tried to kill the guy.

If it had gone any further, he'd have tried to jam his stiletto through the eyeholes in the guy's helmet.

"Haru," Merry called out.

Hearing her voice, Haruhiro came to his senses. Looking to the left, she was looking at him with a furrowed brow.

Just like back then. Merry had shouted, "Haru!" and hearing her call his name made Haruhiro stop just short of killing Ranta.

Merry had stopped Haruhiro, without a hint of doubt. He was glad she had.

"Yeah." Haruhiro looked down. "What? Is something up?"

Merry started to say something... but in the end, she only sighed.

Outside, it was raining.

Haruhiro and Merry were inside a cave. It was the cave that was connected to the mountain where the fire dragon lived in Darunggar. They had been just by the entrance before, but it didn't seem like the rain was about to let up anytime soon, so they'd taken shelter deeper in. They were still only about five meters from the entrance, though.

They were sitting together on the cool, firm ground, side-by-side, with their

backs against the wall.

Together.

Yes.

They were alone together.

They couldn't go to the hidden village, and this was about the only place that everyone more or less knew the location of, so they'd decided they would gather here if anything happened. That was what he'd decided after talking with Yume, Shihoru, and Kuzaku.

Haruhiro and Merry had arrived. Thanks to Kuro, the former hunter and current warrior who was a member of the Typhoon Rocks, having indicated the direction for them, they had somehow managed to make it here even with getting a little lost along the way. And now, they were waiting for their comrades.

Everyone else was late, he felt. How much time had passed since then? He didn't know precisely, but it felt like the sun was starting to set. Or had bad weather just made it get darker?

Impatience would do him no favors. They couldn't move from here, after all. Even if they went out searching, the odds of them encountering Shihoru and the others out there were not high. Not only were they not high, they were low. No, it was best to assume they were incredibly close to nil.

Maybe Shihoru and the others couldn't come here even if they wanted to. They might have gotten lost along the way. Were they in a situation that made it so they couldn't come? Had something happened?

How had the battle even ended? Ararara and the Rocks. Katsuharu. And Shihoru and the others. They were up against Forgan, led by that orc, Jumbo. When Haruhiro had headed out to rescue Merry, Rock and Arnold the undead warrior had been in the middle of a one-on-one duel. Who had even won that?

If Rock had lost, things had to have gone pretty badly. The Rocks would be wiped out. Obviously, Shihoru and the others would be, too.

Even if Rock had won, Forgan had the overwhelming numerical advantage.

Which meant...

Weren't they in trouble either way?

Shihoru. She'd put her hand behind her back, making a clenched fist, to give Haruhiro a sign of encouragement as he'd gone to rescue Merry.

Lately, he'd started to feel that he was no match for Shihoru. Shihoru was really watching her comrades, Haruhiro included, closely—and probably not just out of idle boredom, either. She was trying to understand them, which was why she could see through him.

Surely, Shihoru must have figured out that Haruhiro had special feelings for Merry. Haruhiro had denied it, and Shihoru had said she believed him. That had to just be an act, though. He was sure that the truth was that Shihoru saw right through Haruhiro's feelings.

At first, Shihoru had been hard to approach, and he'd never known how to talk to her when they were alone together. She'd been a precious comrade, but that was all. But, at some point, she'd become more important to him. She was a comrade, a friend, and someone who understood him.

Am I never going to be able to see Shihoru again...? he wondered. *No, I don't want to think that. I couldn't take it.*

He couldn't live without Shihoru. Or, at the very least, he couldn't imagine carrying on without her. Shihoru was a necessity. Not to the party. She was completely indispensable to Haruhiro.

Of course, that was true of Yume, too. Oh, Yume. He'd held her hand many a time. They'd even hugged. Yume was a girl, and Haruhiro was a guy, so he'd be lying if he said he felt nothing for her. *But so what?* he thought from the bottom of his heart.

He liked Yume. Loved her. He'd love Yume even if she weren't a girl. She was like a younger or older sibling, maybe. It wasn't like they were blood-related or anything, but he felt connected to Yume in some deep way. They had an inseverable bond, and he felt like they could maintain the same sort of relation they had now even into old age.

Not that he'd know. He couldn't predict the future. There might be no future,

you know? It could already have been lost to him. If Yume had been—if she wasn't all right—that was what it would mean.

Kuzaku.

If anything had happened to Yume or Shihoru, it would have happened to Kuzaku, too. Kuzaku would put his life on the line to defend the two of them, so he'd probably—no, definitely—be the first to fall. Haruhiro didn't want to think that was what had happened.

If Yume was like a big or little sister, then Kuzaku, even considering how tall he was, was like a little brother. He was loyal, and serious, and he believed in Haruhiro to the point it was embarrassing, showing him great respect.

Did I make the wrong call? Haruhiro couldn't help but doubt.

If he had, it was no small mistake. Had he made a mistake on an unimaginable scale?

Ranta and Merry had been taken prisoner by Forgan. Haruhiro had, through a meandering series of events, managed to reunite with Shihoru and Kuzaku. They'd learned that Ranta had apparently betrayed them to join Forgan. It had been unclear what'd happened to Merry. They'd been able to infer she was alive from the way Ranta talked about her. That was why Haruhiro had decided they'd save Merry.

Had that been okay?

Four people, himself included, had been fine. Ranta had betrayed them to save his own skin, or for some other reason.

Should Haruhiro have given up on Merry?

It was true that he'd managed to rescue her, but that something he could only see in hindsight. Ranta had seen through him, so Haruhiro had won by a paper-thin margin. It would have been completely unsurprising if he had failed.

If Haruhiro had considered Shihoru, Yume, and Kuzaku's well beings, he should have abandoned Merry. If he had, he wouldn't have lost any more comrades. This was another thing he could see in hindsight. If he had forgotten about Merry, and not gotten involved in the Rocks' fight, it wouldn't have been

hard for the four of them to get away. With the four of them, they might have made it back to Alterna somehow. Even if Haruhiro and Merry survived alone, what good would that do? There was nothing they could do, was there?

“Haru.”

Hearing his name called again, he looked over and saw Merry hugging her knees with her head hanging.

“I wanted to talk... about Ranta.”

“Ohh,” Haruhiro said. “...Yeah.”

“I don’t think you need to feel bad for... beating him.”

“He stabbed us in the back, after all. So... yeah.”

“To be honest, even I’m not sure yet,” Merry admitted. “I don’t know what Ranta was actually thinking. Why did he go and do that?”

“I have no clue, either.” Haruhiro smiled just a little. Was he an unpleasant person, being able to smile at a time like this? “I kind of feel like I don’t even want to know. Was it just to survive? He’s kinda... impulsive, you could say. Like he’s acting on the spur of each moment. He’s got that sort of aspect to him. Like, maybe it was all he could do then. For him, at least? I wouldn’t understand.”

“It’s just...” Merry hugged her knees tight. “If Ranta hadn’t done that, I think... they probably would have done unspeakable things to me, things I never want to go through.”

“He did it to save you—is that what you think? It was a ruse?”

“That might have been it, or it might not... Honestly, I just don’t know.”

“...I see.”

“The truth is, I was told to join Forgan, too,” Merry said. “If I did, they’d welcome me as a comrade, he said. I declined, though.”

“What? Wasn’t that... kind of bad? Wasn’t that the critical moment?”

“You’re right. I think that was.”

“Why did you refuse?” Haruhiro asked. “Though I suppose that’s a bit of an

awkward question...”

“I couldn’t be a traitor. Couldn’t betray you. Betray everyone. Even if it was only on the surface, for the sake of expediency, I couldn’t do it.”

Heavy.

It had been that heavy.

For Merry, the weight of her responsibility toward Haruhiro and the others, her comrades, had been so heavy and important to her that protecting them had outweighed her own life and dignity.

If Haruhiro had been in Merry’s position, what would he have done? Could he say with certainty that he would have done like Merry and not betrayed the party? To be completely frank, he couldn’t. He didn’t want to be a traitor, but perhaps he’d have felt he had no choice but to pretend to stab them in the back. That was probably about how it would go.

Merry.

Merry.

Haruhiro understood. Merry might not say it often, but she cared deeply and strongly about her comrades. He was well aware of that. That was why losing Moguzo had hurt Merry incredibly deeply. She probably was still dragging that with her, and had sworn firmly not to let any more of her comrades die.

Damn it.

It really was impossible. Haruhiro could never have abandoned Merry.

There were things he could accept with cold logic. There were probably quite a few cases where he would have to. But people didn’t act based on reason alone, so when making decisions as leader, he shouldn’t rely purely on reason, either. In the end, nobody would follow a leader who only ever acted in a logical manner.

For instance, if Haruhiro had made the call to abandon Merry back then, what would have happened? If it had been the result of considerable thought on his part, Shihoru might have supported him. Yume would probably have cried for Merry. Kuzaku might have been rejected by her, but he still held an affection for

Merry. He wouldn't have been able to accept the decision easily.

But then again, from the start, Shihoru, Yume, and Kuzaku must all have believed, without a shred of doubt, that Haruhiro wouldn't abandon Merry. That was exactly how it had turned out, in fact.

Haruhiro wanted to be the best leader that he could for his comrades, his friends. He wanted to grow in every way that he could. In order to do that, he would exert every effort. But no matter where he went, Haruhiro was still Haruhiro, and nothing more.

He couldn't become someone other than himself, and he was sure nobody wanted him to. He was the leader, so he bore responsibility for the results. He'd reflect on those, too. However, reflecting and regretting were two different things. If regret would let him change the situation, he'd regret as much as it took, but unfortunately things didn't work that way. Right now, Haruhiro was doing something meaningless.

Well, what should he be doing?

If he didn't know, that was the place to start. He should think about that.

The situation. It was always the same. He had to get a handle on the situation, and use that as material to make a decision. To gather all the information he could. To just learn.

"Merry..." Haruhiro said. "Even though you did that, how were you spared? I'm sure you'd rather not have to hear this question, but..."

"No... I think I need to tell you this." Merry finally raised her face. She still wouldn't meet Haruhiro's gaze. "It was something Ranta said. He said he'd wanted to make me his woman for a long time now. So he told everyone else not to lay a hand on me. If I adamantly refused to be his, then he said they could do as they pleased."

"Uhh, so Ranta said that... to this Jumbo person? Er, not person, orc."

"Right. Jumbo accepted it surprisingly easily."

"That's kinda..." Haruhiro faltered. "I dunno. They're pretty different, those Forgan guys. Maybe it's just that orc, Jumbo, who's different. No, maybe not so

much different as bizarre...”

“I was surprised, too,” Merry said. “I’d thought... it was hopeless.”

“You’ve got so much courage, Merry.”

“Not true. I was scared.” Even though she’d finally raised her face, Merry looked down again. Not just that. Her grip on her knees got a lot tighter. Her shoulder, her back—even her voice was quivering. “I was really scared, to be honest.”

Was there something he should do here? Like put his arm around her shoulder, maybe? Or rub her back? Maybe it would be best to do something in this situation. He couldn’t do it, though, you know?

If it had been Yume he was dealing with, he probably would have. He wasn’t so sure about Shihoru, but it would probably be okay on a case-by-case basis. Like, if she started crying, he’d probably try to do something to comfort her.

Why couldn’t he do that with Merry? Was it because he’d have unwholesome thoughts?

It’s not the time to worry about that, he told himself. *Forget about unwholesome thoughts and ulterior motives.* Was he an idiot?

“...So, basically, Ranta saved you.”

“Probably.” Merry nodded her head slightly. “It’s Ranta, though. I couldn’t say for sure. It was a lie that he wanted to make me his woman. That much, I’m sure of.”

“Well, yeah...”

In that case, it meant Ranta’s betrayal was a ruse.

Takasagi. The one-armed, one-eyed middle aged man with a pipe in his mouth. Was he the one in charge of keeping an eye on Ranta? That was why he’d had to fight seriously against Haruhiro and the others. Because if he’d held back, Takasagi might have seen through him.

It all added up. There was even a part of Haruhiro that wanted it to be true.

Haruhiro sighed. “Anyway, let’s set the issue of Ranta aside for now. Before

that, there are Shihoru and the others. Do we keep waiting here for them, or is it better if we move away from here? It's questionable if this place is safe. Yeah... That's right, huh. It's not impossible that Forgan might come here. It's best to assume they will, huh."

"...I'm sorry."

"Huh? What for?"

"Not being of any use," Merry said. "I'd hoped I could offer some good advice, but I've been shown quite clearly how inexperienced I am as a volunteer soldier."

"Hey, listen. Could you stop? Don't be like that."

Merry turned her head to the side, glancing at Haruhiro. "...Stop?"

"Yeah. I realize this may not sound that persuasive coming from me, but..." Haruhiro lowered his eyes and scratched his head. "Being self-effacing like that, it's pretty much my specialty. I think, right now, we're facing a really hard situation. Maybe that's all the more reason we've gotta cut it out. I'm not strong, and I mean that in a lot of ways. But I don't want to use that weakness as an excuse. I can't, you know. I mean, no matter how weak or how useless I am, the situation isn't going to go any easier on me as a result. Honestly, I feel like I'm in no position to tell you this, but let's stop looking down on ourselves. Both of us."

"...You're right." Merry lifted her head, looking straight up. She gave another little, subdued smile. "It won't be easy, but I've decided to stop. Blaming myself, that is. If you'll do it, too, Haru."

"You're right, it may not be easy, but..." *I mean, it's pretty much baked into who I am,* Haruhiro thought as he stood up. "I'm going to head over to the entrance and look outside. You rest."

"No." Merry stood up. "We agreed to do it together. Right?"

"...We sure did."

This is no time to start getting giddy, Haruhiro cautioned himself as he headed towards the entrance with Merry.

The rain didn’t seem like it would let up anytime soon.

2. I Want to Protect You



Honestly, Kuzaku didn't understand what was happening at first. Everything had been intense, violent, and extreme. It was only after the Rock and Arnold the undead had started their incredible scuffle that Kuzaku had noticed.

Haruhiro was gone. Or rather...

Where Haruhiro had been standing before, now stood that Sakanami guy with the crazy eyes, the Typhoon Rocks's thief.

On top of that, he was standing like Haruhiro. The way his shoulders were hunched slightly, his head was tilted forward a little, and his knees were slightly bent was identical. Kuzaku had no recollection of Sakanami ever standing like that, so he was probably imitating Haruhiro. He was a perfect copy of Haruhiro. Perhaps that was why Kuzaku hadn't noticed when Haruhiro went missing.

Kuzaku sensed it wouldn't be wise to make a fuss about it, so he asked Shihoru in a whisper, "Where's Haruhiro?"

While keeping her eyes fixed on the battle unfolding between Rock and Arnold, Shihoru simply replied, "Getting Merry."

Makes sense, thought Kuzaku, satisfied.

Haruhiro gone to save her. To save Merry, by himself.

Was he going to have trouble by himself? Nah, it was actually easier for him to move around when he was alone. Even if Kuzaku had gone with him, he'd only have been in the way. Haruhiro would pull this off. That was what Kuzaku wanted to think. Haruhiro had a rock-solid sense of responsibility. He could get things done when it was time to get things done. Of course, that made you question whether there was ever a time not to get things done.

Kuzaku had a bad habit of losing focus—no, of letting his mind relax sometimes. He hadn't noticed it until he'd been in Haruhiro's party for some time. Watching Haruhiro, he'd realized how easily he'd been taking things.

Even with his sleepy eyes, Haruhiro was always alert. If anything, the more focused he became, the sleepier his eyes looked. Haruhiro wouldn't lose focus at a key moment. He'd always have sleepy eyes, alert, using his head, and acting on behalf of his comrades.

Kuzaku always wished he could be like that, too, and he tried, but then he'd catch himself relaxing all of a sudden. Even in the middle of an intense battle, there were times when he felt like he couldn't quite focus.

Maybe it's because I'm so dependent, thought Kuzaku.

In the end, he tended to leave things to others. Somewhere in his heart, he was always relying on someone else. He was trying to adopt the mindset that he had to handle things himself, but he just couldn't do it.

I'm hopeless, Kuzaku thought. It was frustrating, too. He had this big body, but what was he using it for? If he couldn't shoulder any of the burden, it was meaningless.

I'll bet Moguzo wasn't like this.

Kuzaku had only seen the guy fighting that one time. The battle at Deadhead Watching Keep. He'd been big. Kuzaku was probably the taller one, but Moguzo had been thick, solid. He'd seemed so clearly reliable.

The sight of Moguzo's Rage Blow cutting down an orc was still seared into Kuzaku's eyes. He didn't know what to call it other than amazing.

In the Dusk Realm, Akira-san had showed off his Punishment for them. His skill had been like a crystallization of the highest level of technique, and it was hard to imagine how it was even possible to reach that level. Kuzaku had only been able to look on in awe.

Moguzo's Rage Blow, on the other hand, hadn't been like that. It wasn't that Kuzaku thought, *Hey, even I could do that,* but if it was possible, he wanted to learn to use his own sword that way.

The position of Kuzaku's hips was too high. It was unstable. He realized that, so he was trying to fix it. Even so, when he checked on himself occasionally, his hips were too high most of the time. He wasn't the flexible sort, and his arms and legs were long, making finer movements more difficult, so compared to Haruhiro and... yeah, that stupid traitor, Ranta, as well as Yume who was both a hunter and a girl, he was slow.

He knew he surely had a lot of points to improve on. He wanted to get rid of them one by one. He had strong points, like how big he was, too, so putting those to effective use was also important.

Shihoru had cautioned him to not let things weigh on him too much, but what else was he supposed to do? Kuzaku was the tank.

Haruhiro had said to him, "But now—Kuzaku, you're our party's tank, and I think you're the only one who can be."

He remembered it precisely. He'd never forget those words. Whenever he thought back to them, his heart shivered.

I've gotta do it, he'd think. *I'm gonna do it.*

I swear I'm gonna make myself into a great tank.

It was a good thing he'd had his heart broken. Now, without any distractions, he could focus wholly on a single goal.

I'm still worried about Merry... -san, though.

Well, of course he was. He was beside himself with worry, to be honest. Like, what were they doing to her? Those sorts of worries cropped up, of course. Even if he knew it was futile thinking about it, that didn't help one bit.

If he could have taken her place, he would have. She was a girl, after all. It was tougher on her.

That was all the more reason why he couldn't forgive that moron, Ranta.

"...Huh?" Kuzaku blinked and took another look. "Huh? Hold on. That's weird. Whaa...?"

There was a small hill across from them, and on top of it there was a goblin riding a giant wolf, and a smallish orc who was apparently called Jumbo. Down

at the base of the hill there was a mass of orcs, undead, and more races lined up—but there was no sign of that guy.

“Isn’t Ranta kinda missing?” Kuzaku whispered.

“Looks like he took off somewhere. Just now,” Yume said quietly. “Oh, that one human went and disappeared when Ranta did, too. They took some others along with them.”

“Whoa. I totally missed that...” Kuzaku sighed. “Damn Ranta. Where’d he go?”

“He figured it out.” Shihoru bit her lip. “Maybe. About Haruhiro-kun, I mean...”

“That’s... kinda bad, isn’t it?” Kuzaku asked with trepidation.

Yume groaned.

“It’s bad, but...” Shihoru shook her head slightly. “There’s nothing we can do. Even if we went on the move... I don’t think we could catch up to Haruhiro-kun now. We might get lost, too... For now, we have to trust in Haruhiro-kun.”

“Seriously...?” Kuzaku was speechless.

“Trust in Haruhiro.” For Kuzaku, that was easy. He was certain that Haruhiro would pull this off, and if Haruhiro couldn’t, then there was just no helping that. But trusting in Haruhiro and leaving it to him basically meant making Haruhiro shoulder all of the burden.

Once again, like always, everything fell to Haruhiro.

It made Kuzaku want to laugh. Mockingly, at himself.

I’m too powerless.

“Not an issue,” the self-proclaimed strongest dread knight in active service, Moyugi of the Typhoon Rocks, said, pressing on the bridge of his glasses with the middle finger of his right hand. “I’ve prepared for this.”

“Prepared?” Kuzaku moved his throat to swallow his spit, but there was none left in his mouth to swallow. “How?”

Looking smug, Moyugi didn’t answer.

Kuzaku didn’t know if the guy was smart, or a tactician, or whatever, but he

was smarmy, self-important, acted like he was mocking others, and was a generally detestable man.

The priest with the buzz cut, Tsuga, was smiling. This guy reminded him of something. That thing, you know. That. A Jizo. Yeah. He was like a Jizo.

But what was a Jizo again? He didn't know what it was, but he could bring its shape to mind. This bald little statue made of stone. Tsuga was like a Jizo.

Kajita, the one who wore sunglasses, who had been lying there spread-eagled ever since he'd been sent flying in from behind them and landed there with a loud thud, suddenly shouted "Oop!" and jumped to his feet.

What's oop supposed to mean? Kuzaku wondered.

Sakanami was still imitating Haruhiro.

You can give it up already, thought Kuzaku. *It seems like they're already on to us.*

Rock laughed loudly as he grabbed Arnold, or as he was pushed back and grabbed instead, punched and was punched, kicked and was kicked, headbutted and was headbutted, over and over. *Is he on drugs?* Kuzaku wondered. They were all a bunch of weirdos.

Well, it wasn't just the Typhoon Rocks. Whether it was Akira-san's group, Soma's group, or the Tokkis, they were all pretty weird.

I can't keep up with these people, was Kuzaku's honest opinion.

In that respect, Haruhiro's party was different. Very different. They were normal, you could say. Comforting. He was sure he could get along with them.

That didn't mean everything would work out fine, but he'd learn to like his comrades, and to respect them. Even if Ranta was the one huge exception to that, there were exceptions to everything, so he could tolerate that much. He had to.

It had been a big shock when Merry had shot him down, but neither of them were children. Merry was an adult, so she had let it slide, strange as it was to say it that way. They'd been able to go on as comrades, as if it had never happened, respecting one another, and moving forward. Even though he'd

thought it was impossible at one point, they'd escaped from Darunggar and managed to make it back to Grimgar. Alterna felt far away, but he was sure they'd get there somehow.

Or so he had thought.

What's up with this? Kuzaku thought. *Why do things keep going so wrong? Is that just life? Even if it is, aren't we being put through too many trials?*

I can't accept this.

If this was reality, he had to take it as it was. Even Kuzaku understood that. He just wanted to complain.

He'd found himself in Grimgar all of a sudden, he'd had no choice but to become a volunteer soldier, he'd seen all his comrades die—all of them except for him. Still, he had managed to try to stay positive and do his best. He was doggedly persistent, and thanks to that, he'd been admitted to Haruhiro's party. Kuzaku felt he'd done the best he could there.

And for all that, this is what I get?

A little harsh, don't you think?

I dunno... I think I deserve a little more.

Is that naive of me? My heart feels ready to break.

He couldn't let it. Haruhiro was still hanging in there, trying to do something. Kuzaku was just watching. How could he let his heart break?

Pull yourself together. Be strong.

But his legs felt weak, and he wanted to just sit down.

What about Shihoru and Yume? They clearly weren't doing so hot, but they didn't look like they'd given in to despair, either. How was he supposed to keep himself together at a time like this? He wanted someone to tell him how. He wanted to ask Shihoru or Yume. No, that wasn't it... He wanted them to support him.

"...Damn it." Kuzaku spat out those words and tucked in his chin. That wasn't how it should be. He shouldn't be getting them to support him; *he* had to

support *them.* That was the kind of guy he wanted to be. Ideally, he wanted to be like another leg for Haruhiro—No, that wasn't quite it.

Yeah, no, it wasn't. That seemed open to misinterpretation.

It was like, well, Shihoru was probably supporting Haruhiro mentally and spiritually. Kuzaku wasn't clever or cool-headed like her, so he'd do it with his body. Yeah, as a tank, he'd support Haruhiro like a wall, or a pillar, physically. That was it. He had an image of it, so now he just needed to make it a reality.

If Haruhiro made it back safely... that was. Merry, too, of course.

That piece of shit Ranta had betrayed them. They had lost a comrade, and in a way none of them had expected. If they lost any more, the damage would be too great.

He wanted to cry. Because, for all that he wanted to do something, Kuzaku couldn't do anything. He could just stand here, doing nothing. Kuzaku ground his teeth.

"Let's end this already," Rock called from the battlefield before them.

Rock mounted Arnold, raining fists down on his face, shouting, "Dah! Dah! Dah! Dah!" Every blow was a heavy one.

Arnold was a double-arm with four arms, but Rock had cut off one of his left arms, and his remaining left arm and one of his right ones were both heavily injured. That said, Arnold was acting like it didn't even matter, using his two right arms and remaining left arm to defend himself. But Rock's fierce attack broke through that, too. Was this fight just about decided now?

"Dah! Dah! Dah! Dah! Dah! Dah! Dah! Dah! Dah!"

Rock's fist was hitting Arnold right in this face. There were groans from the onlooking members of Forgan. If he kept taking hits like that, he wasn't going to last. If an undead's head was crushed, that was supposed to be enough to destroy them.

He could do it. Just like that. Arnold couldn't even defend himself anymore. Rock had won. No question.

Without meaning to, Kuzaku shouted, "Finish him!"

Then it happened.

“KYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY.”

Arnold let out a terrifying shriek and leapt straight up, taking Rock with him.

How had he done that? Arnold had been on his back, with Rock on his stomach, mounting him. In that position, how could he have sprung straight upwards?

If you thought about it normally, it was impossible. The undead, however, were not normal. Was that it?

Arnold, with Rock on his belly, had managed to jump what looked like three meters in the air.

Rock gasped in surprise, and tried to get away, but Arnold was having none of that, and he used his three remaining limbs to seize Rock. No, not just to seize him. Arnold had changed position in midair. He’d flipped over.

Arnold was on top, and Rock was on the bottom.

What was more, Arnold had used his three arms and both legs to point Rock’s head straight down.

Isn’t this bad? Kuzaku thought frantically. *Won’t he land on his head?*

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“SYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY.”

“Rock!” Arara, who had been watching the fight in a half-dazed state up until that point, shouted her champion’s name.

The bad feeling Kuzaku had turned out to be right. Rock slammed into the ground head-first.

Is he gonna be all right after that? I dunno.

Arnold immediately jumped off Rock, then kicked him.

Kick. Kick. Kick. Kick. Kick. Kick. Kick. He kicked, and kicked, and kicked Rock some more. Rock wasn’t even trying to defend himself. He was getting kicked as much as he possibly could.

The members of Forgan started to cheer.

Rock's comrades didn't move. Not Moyugi, not Tsuga, not Kajita, and not Gettsu, the tiger-striped mirumi that rock was keeping as a pet.

Shihoru turned away, unable to watch any longer. Yume wasn't looking away, but her cheeks were puffed up with a ridiculous amount of air.

Kuzaku muttered, "Awww...."

No, awww wasn't thing to be saying right now, it wasn't, but awww was the only thing he could get to come out.

They were going to lose? Or was it more like they'd already lost? Like, almost certainly? If Rock lost, what was going to happen here? Who knew?

Kuzaku didn't. His entire mind was going blank. This might be what it meant to be weak. In the end, no matter what happened, strong people probably never thought they were going to lose, or that it was hopeless. If not for that, it would be impossible to turn things around. And, probably, his comrades must have believed in him.

Arnold went to kick Rock again. Rock wrapped himself around that leg. He moved almost like a snake. Even though he'd seemed like he might already be dead.

Was that not it? Had he been faking it? The whole time that Arnold was kicking him, Rock had been waiting for his chance to strike back?

If he had, that took some serious endurance. How tough was he? He was way too gutsy. There had to be something wrong with him.

Rock tried to pull Arnold to the ground. Arnold was using his left leg to try to kick Rock off of him, but it wasn't going so well.

Rock shouted, "Yahhh! Take this!" Was he attacking his joints, maybe? Like his knee, or his ankle? He was trying to break them.

Arnold, not about to let him do that, screamed, "KAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" He twisted his body around, used his three arms, and tried all sorts of things. But Rock didn't let go of his right leg. He wouldn't let go.

The two of them fell over.

Fell and rolled.

“KU...!”

Suddenly, Arnold had stopped resisting.

Just before he did, Kuzaku felt like he’d heard a loud crunch. Was it his leg? His right leg. Had Rock finally finished off Arnold’s right leg? That must have been it.

Rock released Arnold’s leg of his own volition, rolled backwards to put some distance between them, then assumed a low posture.

Arnold got up, too, but he was lifting his right leg. There was no doubt about it. Arnold couldn’t use his right leg anymore. Could he still fight even with one leg busted?

Kuzaku sure couldn’t. First of all, he wouldn’t be able to move around properly. Or dig his heels in, either. He wouldn’t be able to do much of anything.

Rock wasn’t unharmed, either. His face was all swollen up, and was even bleeding. With the kicking he’d taken, it would be completely unsurprising if he had a broken bone or two, but it looked like his arms and legs were fine for now. Even if he had gotten off without any broken bones, he was definitely bruised all over.

Yet the way he moved made it look like he didn’t even feel it.

Rock slid in close to Arnold, letting loose a punch. It was a left jab. With a quick combo, jab, jab, jab, he hit Arnold in the face.

Arnold may have tried to avoid it, but he wasn’t able to. That three-jab combo was followed by a right straight, a left hook, and another right straight that all landed, then a left uppercut and body blow, a right straight to the jaw, followed by a right uppercut to the same, a left hook to the side of his face, and an immediate right straight to follow.

“Look at that. There’s no way he won’t do something...” Kuzaku didn’t quite know what he was talking about, but he could tell that Rock’s attacks weren’t random. It had to be a martial art or something. Rock knew how to fight with

his fists. He was no amateur. “Boxing...”

Yeah. That’s it. Boxing.

He knew what it was. It was only for an instant, but an image appeared in Kuzaku’s head. Two men in short pants, wearing thick gloves on their hands, hitting one another.

That. That was boxing. He’d seen a boxing match—but where, and when...?

He didn’t know. He couldn’t recall. The image that had appeared so clearly in his mind was completely gone now.

Boxing. The word remained. Rock was a boxer. A fighter.

Kuzaku felt a sudden sense of urgency. Boxing. Boxer. Those words, the concept, he needed to carve them into his mind now, or he’d forget them. He felt like he’d forgotten many things this way. Lost them.

Rock went on the attack. It was one-sided. He was showering Arnold with carefully aimed punches.

This wasn’t a fight. His footwork was on another level. There was too great of a gap.

Looking closer, though, Arnold was still moving. Or trying to, at least. But Rock always circled around in front of him. When Arnold tried to run, Rock always headed in that direction. Then, he hit him with a punch.

Even when Arnold stumbled, looking like he might fall, Rock hit him with a punch to stop it. Arnold couldn’t even fall over.

Kuzaku sort of got why. It was because Rock was a boxer. Rock was at his best when he was on his feet, punching. Fighting from the ground, which was to say using pinning techniques and taking the mount position and then landing blows on his opponent, was not Rock’s forte.

His fists. Rock planned to settle this with his fists. He was confident in them.

“Rockyyyyyy!” Kuzaku was surprised when Sakanami suddenly started twisting his body around and shouting. “Four! Rocky two! Three! Four!”

What was he on about? Was he off in the head? He certainly didn’t *look* sane.

However, as if Sakanami's bizarre shouting had triggered it somehow, Rock got visibly faster.

"Whoa..." Kuzaku couldn't help but let out a groan of admiration. Whether he tried opening his eyes wide, or blinking, he couldn't see him properly. Fast. He was too fast. Rock's punches were too fast for his eyes to follow.

Whatever he was doing with them, Arnold couldn't block, or parry, or slip, or duck, or weave, or sway. Every single one of Rock's punches was hitting Arnold. They were all clean hits. At this point, Arnold was no more than an undead doll, there to take Rock's punches. No, not a doll, an undead punching bag.

The members of Forgan were quiet. They sensed Arnold's impending defeat, too. No, they didn't just sense it, they must have more or less accepted it.

The fight was decided. Rock just wasn't trying to end it. If Rock stopped attacking, Arnold would crumple. Why didn't Rock do that?

Whatever the reason, Rock kept up the chain of blows. Arnold wasn't groggy yet, either. Was that what Rock was thinking? It turned out that was exactly it. Rock unleashed his umpteenth right straight. It didn't look like he'd gone in for the finish, and his movements as he prepared to throw the punch had become larger, resulting in a so-called telegraphed punch. It was a normal one, too fast, and to Kuzaku it had looked like a perfect straight.

Then Arnold stopped it with his mouth.

He opened his mouth so wide that it looked like he'd dislocated his jaw, and was going to tear his cheeks, and Rock's fist went straight inside. That was how it looked.

Naturally, Rock immediately tried to retract his fist, but Arnold took his chance to bite down and stop him. His upper and lower teeth sank into Rock's arm, biting him hard.

With a gasp of alarm, Rock slugged Arnold in the gut and temples with his left fist. They were sharp punches, and powerful, no doubt, but not like Rock. Rock was disturbed.

Arnold, on the other hand, still seemed to be calm.

Arnold acted like Rock's punches meant nothing to him. He grabbed Rock's head with a left and right hand.

Kuzaku let out an "Ah!" despite himself.

His thumbs. Arnold's thumbs were in Rock's eyes. He was putting out both of his eyes at once with his left and right thumbs. If he only hurt the eyes a little, it would be fine, but if it was more than that, Rock's career as a boxer would be...

No, that wasn't the issue here!

"Enough!" someone shouted.

When that loud voice resounded through the area, it felt as if all the fog had cleared from Thousand Valley. Not that it would ever happen. But it felt like it could blow the fog away. It wasn't just loud; it was an incredibly clear voice, too.

"Jumbo," someone said. Probably one of Forgan's members. It led to a chain of people calling out that name.

"Jumbo."

"Jumbo!"

"Jumbo."

"Jumbo!"

"Jumbo."

"Jumbo!"

"Jumbo."

"Jumbo!"

Jumbo.

That orc was standing atop the hill, and had been watching over Rock and Arnold's showdown in silence up until now.

Was it him? Had he said it? Enough. Had he stopped them?

Either way, what an orc.

For Kuzaku, when he thought of orcs, the strongest impression he had was of

the ones he'd fought at Deadhead Watching Keep. The ones living in Waluandin in Darunggar came next.

In both cases, they were of larger build than humans, had roughly human-level intelligence, and were a little rough, like you'd expect them to be grunting. He'd assumed that orcs, as a race, were all like that. But that orc didn't fit into his image of orcs at all. He was a breed apart.

For a start, what was that robe that opened at the front that he was wearing? It was deep blue, with a silver flower pattern. Kuzaku hadn't seen a piece of clothing that beautiful anywhere he'd been in Grimgar or Darunggar. Had the orc made that? If he had, it was ridiculously detailed work.

His flowing black hair might have looked like he'd just let it grow, but it didn't give off the slightest impression that it was dirty at all. He probably at least combed it.

Then there was his face. His nose was low and wide, like it was smushed. Very orc-like. He had tusk-like teeth peeking out from the corners of his lips. This was typical of orcs, too. He was clearly an orc, but he wasn't orc-like.

When Kuzaku had first seen an orc's face, honestly, he'd thought they were ugly. There was no way you could have gotten him to say they were cool. Like, orc women, they were probably hideous? No better than goblins in that regard.

Yeah. They were like big, tough goblins. Basically, that was the image of orcs that Kuzaku had.

Jumbo was different. Maybe he was just a little orc-like, but actually belonged to a different race. Like some sort of super orc. Those orange eyes, they weren't normal. Higher. That was it. Higher. He was some sort of higher form of being.

Though, that said, even if they didn't take it to the same degree, all of the orcs in Forgan had some of that same atmosphere that Jumbo gave off. They might have been trying to imitate Jumbo's dress and demeanor. Or, perhaps, just like there was so much variety between different humans, orcs came in all sorts, too, and there were orcs like that out there.

The one who might have been their representative, Jumbo, came down from the hill. He didn't exactly jump. Or run. He came down at a surprisingly easy

pace, just walking.

“Your battle...” Jumbo placed a hand on Arnold and Rock’s shoulders. “...will be decided by me.”

“Huh...?” Rock said, looking dumbfounded.

“Ih...?”

Rock and Arnold had apparently tried to turn and look at Jumbo. But Rock had Arnold’s thumbs in his eyes, and Arnold had Rock’s right arm in his mouth, making it difficult for him to move his head properly. Even if it weren’t for that, they were both beaten and bruised all over. They were quite a sight to behold, but Jumbo seemed perfectly fine with it. He was cool and composed to a degree that seemed out of place.

“If this continues, you will both die. Arnold, my companion, and you, the human volunteer soldier—Rock, was it? I feel it would be a shame for either of you to die here. Therefore, I declare your match a tie.”

“No, man... You can’t just decide that,” Rock snapped.

“Oh... Fuh...”

“Hey, Arnold, you can’t accept this either, can you?”

“Uh...”

“Oh. You can’t talk like this, huh? I’ll pull out my fist now. That’s okay, yeah?”

“Nu...”

“I’m pulling it out. Also, my eyes hurt, so pull out your thumbs, too,”

It looked like Arnold had loosened his jaw. Rock pulled his right arm out of Arnold’s mouth.

“I said, that hurts! Get your hands off me already, Arnold!”

“Mu...” Arnold cautiously released Rock’s head.

“Damn it!” Rock jumped back, rubbing his eyes with his eyelids closed. “I can’t see a thing. If I go blind, it’s not gonna be funny. What’re you gonna do if I can never see Arara’s face again?”

Tsuga muttered, “It could go either way...” Like it had nothing to do with him. Okay, it might not strictly have been his problem, but they were comrades, weren’t they?

“A tie, is it?” Moyugi stepped forward. “I don’t care what you call it, but I’d like things made a little more clear. You’re Jumbo, right? How, precisely, do you plan to settle this?”

There was an uneasy buzz from the members of Forgan. It was easy to see where they were coming from. Moyugi’s attitude was awfully insolent. Even Kuzaku, who was ostensibly his ally, wanted to be offended by it, so the members of Forgan had to be downright livid.

Is Jumbo going to snap? he wondered.

It didn’t look like he was.

“To be precise...” Jumbo turned to face Moyugi like a leaf fluttering in the wind. “If you people withdraw now, I will not lay a hand on you. You may strike at us again another day. You may choose to forget us. From here on, you will be free to do as you choose.”

“I see.” Moyugi gave a haughty nod. “And if we don’t agree?”

“...No, hold on, Moyugi.” Rock looked around. He didn’t seem to be able to see, but was he looking for someone? “Arnold! Are you okay with that?! This was our fight! I dunno if this guy is your commander, or what, but are you just going to willingly let him get in our way?!”

“Kuu...” Arnold looked to Jumbo.

“He’s not understanding,” Tsuga said in a whisper, grinning. “Our language.”

Kuzaku felt his face twitching. *This Jizo, he seems like he’s a good guy with common sense, but maybe he’s actually got a nasty personality?*

“*This game is draw,*” Jumbo said to Arnold. “*Backout, eachother.*”

He was probably saying it in some other language that Arnold the undead would understand.

Arnold sat down “*I... gari.*”

I agree. That was what it sounded like Arnold was saying.

“The hell!” Rock kicked the ground, and looked pretty unhappy, but... this wasn’t a bad development. In fact, it might be a better opportunity than they could have hoped for.

Kuzaku quickly glanced over at Shihoru and Yume. They understood without any need to talk. They were of the same mind as Kuzaku.

Rock and his group had planned this strike for revenge because Arnold had killed Arara’s fiancé Tatsuru, but, cold as it was to say this, Kuzaku and the other two had never had any investment in that whatsoever. The reason they’d decided to give Rock a hand was maybe ten to twenty percent out of a sense of obligation, but the remaining eighty to ninety percent was to save their comrade, Merry.

What had happened with Haruhiro? Was Merry safe? That wasn’t clear now, but Kuzaku and the other two naturally needed to consider their own safety. If Rock and the others would call off their revenge and retreat, be that for now or forever, Kuzaku and the other two could escape from here. From there, they’d head to the meet up point and wait for Haruhiro.

If Haruhiro came back with Merry, would it be going too far to call that the best possible outcome? If Haruhiro didn’t appear—well, Kuzaku didn’t want to consider the possibility, but if it came to that, they’d think of something when it did.

“So?” Moyugi pressed the middle finger of his left hand against the bridge of his glasses. His right hand was on the hilt of his sword. “If we choose not to retreat, what do you intend to do?”

“I,” Jumbo said in a tone he might just as easily have used to say he was going to take an afternoon nap, “will annihilate you people, personally.”

“...Huh?” Moyugi said.

It seemed even Moyugi hadn’t anticipated this. Naturally, Kuzaku hadn’t either.

Hold on, Kuzaku thought slowly. *What did he just say?*

Huh? What, what? Personally? Like, Jumbo personally? You people? Basically, Rock and his group, likely Arara and Katsuharu, too, and then probably Kuzaku, Shihoru, and Yume.

Annihilate?

Not just wipe out?

Well, they're kind of similar, I guess. So, basically...

He's gonna kill us all?

Kuzaku did all he could to sort it out in his head.

"Get lost, or I'll kill you." That seemed to be what Jumbo was saying.

"The wind that blows in the darkness whispers to me..." Sakanami was biting his nails intensely. His whole body was quivering, and he was doing both hands, too. "The dark history invites me beyond the abyss.... The reason for solitude, the false season plays out a prelude to destruction that questions the meaning of our existence..."

What was with this guy?

"Big talk." The Jizo... er, Tsuga... looked angry.

Arara was the picture of indignation. "Just how much do you have to belittle us before you're satisfied?!"

"Damn, I'm pissed," Kajita muttered.

And then Kajita, the big man wearing sunglasses, hoisted his sword which looked like a thin slice of a massive mushroom, and charged forward.

Whoa, whoa, you're flying off on your own?! At least discuss it first! That's reckless! You're going off half-cocked! That's bad. Bad. I'm pretty sure this is bad. Man, Kajita means business. He's totally flipped. Flipped right the hell out.

Kajita charged towards Jumbo with incredible vigor, not looking aside. "Uehhhhhh, hahhhhhhhhhh!"

Why didn't Rock and the others stop him? Couldn't they?

Well, Kuzaku didn't know Kajita all that well, but he was a member of the Typhoon Rocks, he looked like bad news, and though he was a man of few

words, everything he said was weird. Not as weird as Sakanami, though. Regardless, he didn't seem like the type who would obediently listen if someone told him to do something. Though, that said, stopping him by brute force seemed like it'd be even more difficult, maybe almost impossible. Kuzaku, at least, had no desire to try it. He felt like he'd be blown away easily. Was he the type that even his comrades couldn't stop once he got like that? Maybe?

Whatever the case, negotiations were a bust now.

This is the worst.

Kajita.

Screw you.

What are you even thinking, Kajita?

Then Kuzaku burst out, "Kajita, you— Wha...?!"

Kuzaku saw it. Kajita swung down his massive mushroom sword from a distance that would normally make you think, *Seriously, from there? It'll never reach.*

Normally, you'd be right, and it absolutely wouldn't, but for Kajita that was killing range. Kajita wasn't just a super-powered moron. At long range he used his sword, and at short and medium range he used his kicks, switching deftly between the two. And for Kajita, long range was *long.*

Stretching out and using the length of his massive mushroom sword, his long arms, and that big body of his, he might even be able to cut an enemy who was close to three meters away in half.

The moment Kajita had Jumbo in killing range, he swung his massive mushroom sword at him.

Jumbo seemed to have predicted this, but he didn't move backwards, or to the left or right to evade it. Instead—he disappeared. To Kuzaku, it looked like Jumbo vanished for an instant.

The moment that he thought, *He's not there. He's gone,* Jumbo reappeared above them. He'd jumped.

It seemed that Jumbo had leaped to avoid Kajita's massive mushroom sword.

But what was with the way he was moving?

It seemed like a contradiction, but Jumbo was standing in midair.

Naturally, Jumbo only stopped in midair for an instant. Even so, it wasn't the stance that could easily be seen as that of someone who had jumped up to get there. Jumbo was relaxed. That was how he looked to Kuzaku.

However, he'd only evaded the first blow. Kajita still had his kicks as a weapon.

Using the momentum he had from swinging his massive mushroom sword, Kajita unleashed a reverse roundhouse kick with his left leg. Being in midair, Jumbo had to fall. That was what Kajita was aiming for.

There was no way to dodge this.

Jumbo didn't try to dodge it, either.

When Kajita's kick came in, he used it as a stepping stone to leap yet again. More than that, it looked like he was walking through the air.

Jumbo landed behind Kajita.

The way that Kajita immediately shouted, "Keyah!" and performed a reverse roundhouse kick with his right leg showed he was no ordinary guy. It wasn't a single attack, either. He did a left reverse roundhouse and a right forward kick. Then he bent his right knee and did a three-kick combo of high, middle, and low kicks. After two kicks with his left leg, he made it look like he was going for a kick with his right, then instead went for another two-kick combo with his left.

It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to call the combination of kicks Kajita displayed magnificent. He'd completely let go of his massive mushroom sword. With how big his body was, it was impressive he could move like that. To look at him, Kajita didn't seem at all like he'd be so quick.

But Jumbo didn't have so much as a scratch on him.

Jumbo had evaded all of Kajita's kicks, then finally went on a counteroffensive. That much was clear. Kuzaku also saw what Jumbo did to Kajita.

Jumbo used his right hand to jab at Kajita's chest—or rather, to push it.

That was all he did. That was all, but Kajita flipped over with his legs going up in the air, then landed head-first, striking his neck hard on the ground.

“I don’t see any way to win,” Kuzaku heard Moyugi mutter. He almost certainly didn’t just mean that the strongest dread knight in active service couldn’t beat Jumbo. Even if all of the Rocks, Moyugi included, were to gang up on Jumbo alone, they would be no match for him.

If Moyugi had made that call, he was probably right. In a fortunate coincidence, you might say, Kuzaku had just been thinking the same thing, and he didn’t disagree in the least.

“The way you are now,” Jumbo said in a tone no different than before, “you cannot even make me take a knee. However, you still have much ahead of you. Your room for growth is greater than my own. This is because while few in this vast world are greater than I, you yet have enemies to face. If you are able to best them, you will grow stronger yet.”

He said incredible things like they were nothing. Jumbo had declared that while he might not be the strongest person in the world, there was hardly anyone out there who could beat him.

No matter what, that had to be him getting ahead of himself. Though Kuzaku thought that, at the same time, if Jumbo wasn’t at the highest level, just what sort of creature did he have to imagine was above him?

That thing, maybe? The fire dragon in Darunggar? Even Jumbo probably couldn’t beat that thing. It could spit fire, after all. That thing was just too big. At the very least, he couldn’t take it alone.

Even he wouldn’t be able to... I think.

“Go.” Jumbo made a slight gesture with his chin. “At once. If you will not go, there will be no tomorrow for any of you. I will waste no more words. Live, or die. The choice is yours.”

“For our part,” Rock responded immediately, “we’re backing off. Arara, I’m sorry I couldn’t grant your wish. I won’t ask you to let it slide. I failed to do what I set out to do. I’m seriously the worst.”

Arara slumped her shoulders and hung her head. “...I wouldn’t say that.”

Because Kajita decided to get rough, I didn't know how things were going to turn out for a moment there, but it looks like this is going to go fine. Kuzaku let out a sigh.

It overlapped with Shihoru's sigh, so they looked at one another and smiled wryly.

Yume blinked repeatedly and then shook her head. Even in this situation, it was an expression and gesture that made you want to smile. Yume was kind of mascot-like, you could say. She had something that wasn't a girlish cuteness, but was cute nonetheless.

"We're leaving." Rock started to walk— Wait, why was he walking towards Jumbo?

Jumbo gently stopped Rock, then turned him back in the other direction. "Take care as you go."

"...Yeah. Sorry about that." Rock scratched his head.

Oh, right. Because Arnold had thrust his thumbs into his eyes, Rock couldn't see right now.

"...We're leaving. Is this the way? This way's good, right...?"

"Rock." Arara rushed over and took Rock's hand. "Let me do this for you, at least. This was all my fault to begin with."

"Hmm. I don't really think that's true. Though, for my part, I'm just happy I get to hold your hand."

"This way." Katsuharu beckoned to Arara. The Jizo was casually picking up Rock's sword. That guy didn't miss anything.

Moyugi was trying to drag Kajita to his feet. "...You're heavy. I don't think I can lift you up, after all. Get up on your own, please."

"Indeed." Kajita nimbly jumped to his feet.

He's still in pretty good shape...

Sakanami was twisting his entire body around, performing a bizarre dance.

Creepy...

Come to think of it, Kuro was missing. How long had he been gone for?

Who cares...

Kuzaku loosened his knees, raising his shoulders up and down. *Honestly, I seriously have no idea what to think of these people anymore. I don't want anything to do with them.*

He hoped this would be the last time. He just wanted to get all of his comrades back together quickly, and then to get out of Thousand Valley. Though, by "all of his comrades," he meant five people, not six.

Let's not to think about that. Thinking about it's not going to do any good. Try to forget.

"Let's go," said Shihoru.

Kuzaku and Yume each nodded, then they turned their backs to Jumbo. In front of them were the massive orc Godo Agaja and the members of Forgan. However, they had parted to make a path for them. Kuzaku and the others would be heading for the meeting point once they went through there.

Based on where they were standing, Kuzaku, Shihoru and Yume would have to be the first to walk through the crowd of Forgan members. That made him feel pretty tense, but he also urgently wanted to get done with it.

Kuzaku led the way, with Shihoru and Yume side-by-side behind him.

The wind was weak, and the fog was neither thick nor thin.

When he passed by Godo Agaja, Kuzaku looked up despite himself. *He's huge. Too huge.*

Godo Agaja glared at him, as if to say, "What?"

Kuzaku quickly looked back ahead, and hurried on his way.

Oh, crap.

His bad habit had struck again. It wasn't a situation where it was safe to let his guard down, but he'd had to go and think about things he didn't have to.

Focus, focus. I've got to focus.

I miss Alterna.

It's six hundred, seven hundred kilometers from here. That's far... So damn far.

Can we actually make it back...?

Come on. Now's not the time to think about that.

"Wait...!"

Suddenly, a man's voice echoed through the area, and Kuzaku came to a stop.

No, maybe I should run, not stop. That was the sense he got, but he didn't have the guts to take off running.

"Commander! Jumbo! Don't let them go!"

"Kuzaku-kun!" Shihoru called his name.

When he turned back, the one-armed man was on top of the hill. Takasagi. Had he gone somewhere, then come back? What about Ranta?

Jumbo turned to face Takasagi. "What is it, Takasagi?"

"One of them took the woman and ran! They got Ranta!"

"Huh?" Kuzaku was flabbergasted. "Haruhiro... killed Ranta... -kun?"

Shihoru gulped.

"No..." Yume was speechless.

"I won't let you say it was all the youngster's doing, and it had nothing to do with you." Takasagi drew his katana with his left hand, pointing it in their direction. "Even if Jumbo is willing to overlook this, I won't. I can't stand being made a fool of."

"If they withdraw, I will not lay a hand on them," Jumbo said. "I made that promise. I intend to abide by it."

"Well, you do that then, commander. I'll do as I please, too. My job in Forgan is to do what needs doing, after all."

"That is who you are. Do as you please, Takasagi."

"I don't need you to tell me that, Jumbo. Gudua!" Takasagi raised his katana aloft, shouting in some unknown language. Orcish, huh? "Ashuruha, udanzai! Ilda!"

“Osh!”

“Osh!”

“Kiu!”

“Kiuem!”

“Osh!”

“Osh!”

No, no, this was no good. This was bad, way too bad, seriously bad.

Kuzaku tried to say something, but no words came out.

Let’s go. We’ve gotta go. We have to go. Running’s the only option. He swung his arm to communicate what he wanted to say as he took off.

Yume took off at a dash, carrying Shihoru with her. They had been in the middle of cautiously going down the path Godo Agaja and his men had opened for them. If they had just gotten to the other side, it wouldn’t have been so bad. They were almost there. Thanks to that, the orcs and undead were coming at them from both sides. It was a pincer attack.

This is hopeless. There’s no getting away. I mean, what is this? Jumbo. Screw you, Jumbo. You said if we withdrew, you and your people wouldn’t lay a hand on us. What happened to that? Wait, am I wrong? Did he only say I, not we? Which was it? I dunno. I feel like I heard we, but I can’t remember. What the hell?

“Rah...!” Kuzaku used Bash to make an orc coming in from the left back off, then kicked him down. He needed to send Yume and Shihoru on ahead. But if he slowed his pace, the enemies would swarm around him even more. He had to keep running or things were going to get worse.

Behind him he could hear shouts and the sounds of flesh, metal, and other things colliding. He wasn’t at leisure to turn back and take a look, but it was probably the Typhoon Rocks.

Really let loose on them, he silently begged. If they didn’t, he was in trouble.

There was an undead coming at him from the right hand side, so Kuzaku used

his black blade to keep him in check while also using his shield to perform a Block on an orc's sword that came at him from the left.

Not much further, he thought. *In a few more meters, we'll have broken through. We're almost there—but is this gonna be too tough? Will Yume and Shihoru be okay? I don't hear screams, so I think they're fine. But, honestly, I don't know. I don't have a handle on the situation. There's no way I could.*

Orcs rose up in front of him.

Not just one, two.

Ah. This—this is gonna kill me.

If it had just been one, there would be things he could do. It might've been possible to open a path if he'd thrown his own safety to the wind, but with two, even that was going to be tough. Forgan's orcs were skilled, after all.

No, don't get dispirited. I have no choice but to try. Even if I try to muster my courage, I can't. I'm hopeless!

"Noooooooooooooooooooo."

Then there was a frightening voice, and one of the orcs fell over backwards. Naturally, he hadn't collapsed on his own due to a preexisting condition. The orc had been brought down. By the demon Moira, who looked like a long-haired woman, but was clearly no human woman, and carried a frightful scissor-like bladed weapon.

"Noooooooooooo. Noooooo. Noooooooooooooooo."

Moira wrapped her legs around the orc's torso, reached around his neck with one arm, and stabbed the hell out of him with her scissor-like blade. That looked like it spooked the other orc.

Yeah, I know, thought Kuzaku. *That's creepy. Moira-san's serious. It's a good thing Moira-san's super scary. That really saved us. Thanks, Moira-san.*

"Zahh!" Kuzaku swung his black blade down diagonally at the other orc.

The truth was, continuing to defend himself with his shield as he used it wasn't the only thing that was different about Punishment. Unlike the warrior's Rage Blow, because he kept some of his attention on defense and didn't swing

as hard as he possibly could, it was easier to chain it into the next attack.

His first Punishment had only indented the orc's shoulder guard, but the Bash that followed immediately after it struck his face. He slammed a Thrust into the base of the orc's throat, then another Bash, continuing to close the distance, and when he placed his foot on the orc's knee and kicked, he succeeded in throwing him completely off balance.

Kuzaku put all his strength into elbowing the orc to knock him down. Then, rather than move forward, he made a deliberate decision to stop where he was. "Yume-san, Shihoru-san! Go on ahead!"

"Meowger!"

"Okay!" Shihoru called.

In times like this, Shihoru-san tends to say "Okay." I've always kind of liked that.

Yume and Shihoru ran past Kuzaku. Kuzaku used Block on the sword of the orc that chased them past him, made him lean back with a Thrust, and then used Bash to deflect another undead's curved sword.

Are my hips too high? They are. Lower them. Don't strain myself. Make big swings with my sword, but use my shield more tightly.

There.

This is the feeling.

No matter how many enemies there were, no matter how many came at him, he wasn't afraid. He could see clearly, and block. He struck back solely for defensive purposes. That, and to convince his enemies he wouldn't only be defending, he could attack, too. Though, in the end, it was all defensive.

Defend them.

Defend them.

Defend them.

Defend.

I'm going to defend them.

I can defend.

Moira jumped around, not finishing off enemies one-by-one, but using her bizarre and creepy moves and scissor-like blade to mess with the enemy.

What about the Rocks? Kuzaku had been able to confirm that Kajita was swinging his massive mushroom sword around and fighting Godo Agaja. He wasn't sure about the rest, but knowing them, they wouldn't go down easily. Though, even if they did, he didn't care.

What was important were his comrades. Shihoru. Yume. Haruhiro. Merry.

Ranta.

Had Haruhiro killed him?

"Nuwah...!" Kuzaku used his shield to knock away two orcs at once, then turned and ran the other way.

I can go now, or rather, I need to get going, he thought.

He couldn't see Yume and Shihoru. The fog had grown thicker again at some point. They might get split up, but the two of them would probably be fine. That was the important thing.

Kuzaku ran at top speed.

"Ahh...!"

Suddenly, he stopped being able to see anything at all.

3. What is Bravery?



“Kuzaku-kun?!” Yume turned back without stopping and shouted. “Kuzaku-kun?! Kuzaku-kun?! Shihoruuu, Kuzaku-kun’s not followin’ us anymore!”

“No, Yume, you can’t stop!” Shihoru cried.

“Y-Yeah, but still!”

“First, we need to avoid capture by the enemy! That’s our first priority! I’m sure Kuzaku-kun will be fine!”

Was that really okay? Yume wasn’t sure. It didn’t seem like Shihoru was unworried. But for now, like Shihoru was saying, they had to avoid being caught by the enemy. Instead of fighting, they had to run. Then they could join back up with Haruhiro and Merry.

She should do that, and try not to think about Ranta. If she thought about him, she wouldn’t be able to move. That’d be no good.

Run. She had to run.

It felt like it had suddenly gotten darker. The fog was awfully thick. And that wasn’t all.

“It’s rainin’!” Yume shouted.

Heavy rain, at that. The drops were small, but the rate they were falling at picked up and got more intense in no time. It was like countless, hair-thin lances were falling to the earth.

Muffled by the rain, the noise of the battle sounded awfully far away. Their range of vision was extremely short, too. It was almost as if the rain had formed a wall, standing in their way.

This would make it hard for the enemy to find them. However, if the enemy

did approach, it would be hard to detect them, too.

But rather than the enemy, what about Kuzaku?

Yume and Shihoru couldn't spot Kuzaku, and Kuzaku didn't know where Yume and Shihoru were, either. That being the case, they might stay separated.

Up ahead, the ground on the left hand side was higher and thick with trees. Yume thought they were trees, at least. They weren't humans or orcs.

"Shihoru! Go that way for now!" Yume called.

"...Okay!"

When they got closer, there was just enough foliage for them to hide in. Yume went into the bushes with Shihoru, and they crouched down together.

Shihoru was breathing heavily. She was a mage, after all, and didn't have a lot of stamina, but she also wasn't the type to start complaining easily. She'd been that way for a while now, but Shihoru had also gotten stronger. Back when they had just started, she'd been crying all the time.

"What now?" Yume asked. "Shihoru, what do you think Yume and you should do?"

"Haruhiro rescued Merry."

"That old guy from Fonkon? He was sayin' that, yeah."

"You mean Forgan..."

"Ohh," Yume said. "Sorry 'bout that. Yume, she's always gettin' stuff like that wrong."

"It's fine. You're fine the way you are, Yume. I'm the one who should apologize. Sorry for always correcting you."

"Yume's grateful to have you correctin' her. That means she can fix it."

"...I guess that's right." Shihoru smiled just a little. "Since that Takasagi guy came back, I think that must mean Haruhiro and Merry got away. If they did, they'll have headed for the rendezvous point."

"Yeah," Yume agreed. "That sounds about right."

“The best thing would be for you, me, and Kuzaku-kun, all three of us, to head to the rendezvous point together, but...”

“But Kuzakkun’s gone missin’, yeah...”

“It wouldn’t be good to search for him...” Shihoru added. “For now, let’s wait here...”

“Y’know, it’s really hard,” Yume said. “Just waitin’.”

“Yeah...” Shihoru put a hand on Yume’s lower back. “I’ll be here with you, though.”

“That’s right, huh.” Yume smiled. She felt like she should smile, even if she had to force herself to. “Thinkin’ about it, Shihoru and Yume are pretty much always together.”

“I think that’s because you’re always willing to put up with someone like me.”

“That’s not true at all,” Yume protested. “You’re cute, Shihoru, and... you’re cute. You’re cute, okay?”

Shihoru giggled. “...You’re just repeating yourself.”

“Nngh, if only Yume could come up with more to say. Even when a word comes to mind, it’s not quite right.”

“I understand. Your feelings are getting through to me just fine, so... I think I understand.”

“You do?” Yume asked.

Why was that? What had been the trigger for it?

For a moment, her mind went blank. Then something seemed to seep inside her empty head and fill it up. It grew by the moment, eventually overflowing, and pouring out through her eyes.

“...Yume?” Shihoru peered at Yume’s face. “What’s... the matter?”

“What... is the matter, huh?” Yume shut her eyes tight. “Yume’s not sure of that herself.”

“...Is it Ranta-kun?”

Now that Shihoru said it, Yume realized it was.

Ranta.



She'd been trying not to think about him, and thought she hadn't been. Thinking about it wasn't going to solve anything. She'd just get mad. Ranta was always that way. He always had been.

How can anyone be so unpleasant?

That had been her first impression of him. And the amazing thing about Ranta was that he never changed.

Of course, there were times when Ranta might say something that was good, for Ranta, or he might act cute or cool, for Ranta, or he might even be reliable, for Ranta. But that was only occasionally, and it never lasted more than a moment. He couldn't keep it up.

Still, he was a comrade. Even if he was one she hated. Ranta had taught her over and over again that, *Oh, this is what it's like to hate someone.*

She loathed him. But, for all her complaints, they had been in this party together since the beginning. He was a valued comrade.

There was no question that she hated him, but he was a friend.

No, that wasn't it. Rather than a friend, there was a more suitable word.

Family.

Yes. To Yume, the party was like her family. Ranta was a member, too.

"Yume... Shihoru, Yume, she..."

"Mm-hm..." Shihoru murmured. "What?"

"We were a family. Yume, and everyone... The whole party was like a family to Yume."

Yume opened her eyes. She wiped her eyes with one hand. But wipe them away as she might, her tears, just like the rain, refused to let up. Even so, she kept wiping them away. She couldn't keep her eyes closed forever, after all.

"In the beginning, there was Haru-kun, and there was Shihoru, and there was Moguzo—and there was Manato, and there was Ranta, yeah. And there was Yume, too. Then we lost Manato, and Merry joined the family. Then Moguzo ended up like he did, and Kuzakkun joined... For Yume, everyone was a member

of her family. Like, before comin' to Grimgar, probably, Yume thinks she must've had a mom and a dad. If she didn't, Yume'd never've been born, after all. But, Yume, she doesn't remember them, y'know? It's the same for you, too, right, Shihoru? It's the same for all of us. That's why we're all family. Love, hate, we've got all sorts of feelings for each other, but family is family. Right?"

"...Yeah, I think so," Shihoru agreed. "A family. That's what we are."

"But Yume's thinkin', even with a family, there are times when people go their separate ways. Like, Yume might never be able to see her mom and dad again. Though, not rememberin' them, she doesn't feel all that sad about it. Just a little bit lonely... But still. Still..."

"Yume..." Shihoru hugged Yume close, rubbing their heads together. "I don't know what to say, but I..."

"With things like this..." Yume let out a slow, deliberate breath. "You can never predict they'll happen... Not even Ranta could. When you think we might never meet again... Yeah, Yume doesn't want that."

"Yume..." Shihoru rubbed Yume's back firmly. "We still don't know what happened... or how things turned out. Not exactly. Right?"

"...Yeah."

"Well then, when we only have a hazy grasp of the facts... it's best not to let them influence how you think or feel too much."

"First of all... Well, anyway, we've got to meet up with Haru-kun, huh?" Yume asked.

"That's right. Let's take it one thing at a time."

"One thing at a time, huh." Yume nodded, pressing her index finger to her lips.

There was someone coming. No, not some*one*—this was... a beast.

The big black wolf. There was a goblin riding on its back. Yume recalled his name was Onsa. The goblin beastmaster.

It wasn't just the one big black wolf that he was riding—he had a number of other black wolves following him, too.

When she saw those black wolves, she couldn't help but think of the Black God Rigel. For those hunters who called the White God Elhit their protector, black wolves were ominous beasts that they were supposed to hate. The White God Elhit and the Black God Rigel were actually siblings, but Rigel had eaten their mother Carmia soon after being born, and that had caused the siblings to part ways.

Elhit's kin, the white wolves, were proud creatures, forming groups that consisted only of a mated pair and their children. They were always hunting beasts that were bigger than them. But Rigel's kin, the black wolves, formed large packs to chase down and kill their prey. They would attack human and orc alike, eating the children first, and that was why they were so hated and feared.

Onsa had tamed those black wolves.

It was amazing—but Yume knew now wasn't the time to be impressed. It wasn't just black wolves; wolves in general wouldn't submit to members of another species. They never grew close to them.

That was why hunters had chosen to mate wolves and dogs to create a new breed of wolf dogs. Wolf dogs had the loyalty of a dog with the toughness and ferocity of a wolf.

Generally, wolves were stronger than dogs. Even among wolves, black wolves were abnormally stubborn and cunning, with incredibly sharp senses.

Onsa was going to find them. That was the safe assumption. Even if it was raining, the black wolves weren't going to miss Yume and Shihoru. It wouldn't be long before one of the black wolves sniffed out Yume and Shihoru in the bushes. Then it would howl and plunge in after them. The other black wolves would follow. If that happened, there would be no hope for them. They had to act first. That was the only option.

Yume readied her bow and nocked an arrow. Shihoru might have been surprised, but she stayed put, not saying a word. She was putting her faith in Yume.

Near here. But not too far, thought Yume.

Black wolves were clever, but not in the same way as humans. If they noticed

an arrow, they'd look in the direction it went.

Yume loosed her arrow.

Like she'd expected, a number of the black wolves let out short howls, then headed in the direction the arrow had gone. Even without Yume having to tell her to, Shihoru was already getting ready to go. They jumped out of the bushes together, then went racing up the slope.

"Hyahhh!" Onsa let out a high-pitched shout.

That was fast. They'd been noticed already.

It wasn't that steep of a slope, but it was thick with trees, and they couldn't climb in a straight line. Shihoru, who was ahead of Yume, looked pretty exhausted.

Turning back, a number of the black wolves had closed into a distance of less than ten meters. They'd catch them in no time like this.

It wasn't just wolves: many carnivores showed no mercy to their fleeing prey. But if the prey turned on them and showed they were prepared to fight, they suddenly became wary of them. Predators were fundamentally cautious.

If Yume had been alone, it might not have been impossible for her to get away. But Shihoru was here. Leaving Shihoru to the wolves was out of the question.

She had to do it.

It was hard to see her winning this one, but, well, if she accepted she had no other choice, it was a lot easier to take.

"Sorry, Shihoru! Runnin' isn't gonna work!" she called.

"...Got it!" As Shihoru turned, she cried out, "Dark!" and opened the door.

Yume wasn't a mage, so she couldn't see that door with her eyes. But it was definitely there. It had actually opened. Black threads came out from some other world, wrapping themselves into a spiral shape, and taking on a completely human form.

Dark the elemental.

He was so darn cute. But then, Shihoru's Dark was more than just cute.

Yume came to a stop and fired an arrow. She fired and fired again. She fired off shots one after another.

Rapid Fire.

She didn't have to hit the black wolves. It was okay if the arrows hit the trees. She fired scattered shots.

When they learned that Yume and Shihoru weren't timid prey, the black wolves grew cautious. And when the arrows came at them one after another, they faltered a little.

"Disturb them!" Shihoru ordered. Dark flew towards the black wolves.

Vwooooooooooluuuuuuuuuuuu!

What was that noise? It was like the signature sound of Shadow Bat, only a little different. It was Dark. Dark was emitting a strange sound as he flew between the black wolves.

It was effective. The black wolves fell into a state of total panic, yelping pitifully as they fled in disarray.

"Dark-kun's sure amazin'!" Yume cried.

"Yume, the big one's coming!"

"Of course!" Yume took a deep breath, so as to let the air spread throughout her whole body, then let the focus of her eyes shift from near to far.

She heard her master's voice. *Yume, listen. You're going to hit. Hit... You're going to hit.*

Stop Eye.

She could see it. The big black wolf that Onsa was riding, almost as if it was right in front of her.

The big black wolf's right eye was crushed. It hadn't been that long since Kuro's arrow had hit it. It should have had other wounds, too, but it seemed to be doing just fine.

If she were to pick a target—Onsa.

Yume loosed her arrow.

It was good.

When a shot was going to land, Yume knew the moment she released her bowstring.

Yume's arrow stabbed into Onsa's chest. But it was a little to the right. Onsa was knocked back a little, but he lowered his upper torso and clung to the big black wolf.

By that point, Yume was already loosing her second arrow. This arrow just grazed the big black wolf's head and didn't hit.

"Yume!" Shihoru had her staff pointed up ahead. "I'm going to try it!"

Try what?

That became clear instantly.

"Dark, spread out!"

To Yume's eyes it looked like Dark, who had been intimidating the black wolves with his strange sounds and movements, suddenly went *boom.* He exploded, scattering all over. Like Shihoru had said to, Dark had spread out.

The rain and white fog were eaten away at by a black fog. What was more, that black fog was far thicker than the white one. The black wolves, which had already been confused, howled as if they had gone mad. They were unquestionably terrified. As the black fog spread, so too did the terror, and it grew.

This was one of the weaknesses of a pack. The individual members of the pack couldn't help but be influenced by the others.

The problem was that big black wolf. The expanded Dark was having a dramatic effect that well exceeded that of a mere smokescreen. However, he didn't seem to have the effect that caused them injury or pain. That being the case, Yume didn't think it would work on the big black wolf.

Shihoru could only send out one Dark at a time. That meant she couldn't do anything while the diffused Dark was interfering with the black wolves.

Yume had to do something. She *would.*

Discarding her bow, Yume drew her curved sword, Wan-chan. She wasn't scared.

Way back when, Manato had said, "I think Yume may well be the bravest of us all." He'd also said, "I'm glad that Yume might be there to help if anything happens."

She'd never thought of herself as brave before, so she'd been really proud of that. Proud that she might be able to help her comrades. At least, that was how Manato had felt.

She hadn't been able to, though. She hadn't been able to save Manato or Moguzo. She could still count the number of times she'd actually helped a comrade. But what Manato had said back then, that she was brave, was still carved deep into her heart.

It was strange, but even when things were so scary she didn't know what to do, she was able to think, *I'm not scared.* Because she was brave. So, even if it was scary, she wasn't scared.

The big black wolf carrying Onsa appeared from beyond the black fog.

It was charging in.

It was super scary, but she wasn't scared one bit.

"You're on!" Yume screamed.

She had no intention of backing down. She wouldn't dodge to the left or right to avoid it, either. When the big black wolf charged at her—Yume jumped on it.

Raging Tiger.

Using a somersault to launch a powerful attack on the enemy. Of all the machete techniques she knew, this was Yume's favorite skill.

The big black wolf wasn't frightened, and kept charging—and that was when something funny happened. When she spun around, for some reason she'd ended up sitting on the big black wolf's neck.

"Roh...?" Onsa said, startled.

Right there, literally in front of her nose, was Onsa. Yume herself had never imagined this would happen. It was a surprise. Onsa was shocked, too.

When a gobbie gets that surprised look on his face, it's kinda cute, huh? she thought.

"Well, yeah, it is, but...!"

They were enemies. Yume wrapped her legs tight around the big black wolf's neck, and tried to slam Wan-chan into Onsa. However, Onsa obviously wasn't just going to let that happen.

Onsa grabbed Yume's right arm with his right hand, pulling tight on the big black wolf's fur with his left. The big black wolf turned its body, trying to throw Yume off. Yume tightened her legs, and feeling like that wasn't enough on its own, she grabbed onto Onsa's right arm with her left.

"Yume!" She heard Shihoru's shout. She couldn't quite afford to respond that she was okay.

Onsa was shouting something in goblin-speak. He went for a weapon of some sort with his left hand. She wasn't letting that happen.

"Meowwww!"

Yume held onto Onsa as tight as she could. Unlike orcs, most goblins were smaller than humans, and that was the case with Onsa, too. In a competition of strength, she wouldn't lose.

"If Yume falls, you're coming with her!" she cried.

"&%+#*%?!"

She didn't know what he was saying, but Onsa seemed really panicked. The big black wolf twisted its body around and jumped as it raced up the slope.

"%*#+@!"

"You can say that all you want, but Yume's not lettin' go!"

"*+$@%&&?!"

"Yume's doesn't understand what you're sayin'!"

"%&#**!"

“Yeah, well same to you!”

“******!”

“Yume’s a *ponyfide* goblin slayer, you know!”

“$$#&&&&%?!”

Onsa was trying to do something. What was he planning? Onsa’s body lifted up. In that moment, Yume figured it out.

“Yume’s not lettin’ go of you!”

Yume had been grappling with Onsa, and Onsa was clinging onto the big black wolf’s back. Onsa had tried desperately to throw Yume off, but now he’d finally given up on that. That was why he’d let go of the running wolf, taking Yume with him.

They were going to fall.

Or more like be sent flying.

Yume wouldn’t let go of Onsa. If she let go, Onsa would probably brace himself for the landing, get up, and then immediately mount the big black wolf again.

If Yume didn’t separate from him, what would Onsa do? He’d try to land on top of Yume. Yume wanted to do the opposite, and to slam Onsa into the ground.

Who would end up on top?

But, before it came to that, there was a tree.

Yes, a tree.

Yume and Onsa collided in midair with a tree.

It was the left side of her head, her left shoulder, her left hip, her left thigh, or something like that. Yume hit the tree hard.

For a moment, she nearly let go of Onsa, but for a brief moment Ranta’s contemptible face flashed through her mind, and she thought, *No way is Yume lettin’ that happen. Stupid Ranta.*

She and Onsa rolled together. They were tumbling down the slope.

They stopped.

In that moment, Onsa opened his mouth right in front of Yume's eyes. He was trying to bite her. Trying to bite Yume's face. That shocked her, and she got scared despite herself, kicking Onsa away from her.

It frustrated her. Wasn't she supposed to be brave?

Onsa got up, fleeing in what was close to a crawl. Yume jumped up. She got dizzy, and stumbled. Was it because she'd collided with the tree just now? Had she hit somewhere bad?

"Hold up! No runnin' away!" she screamed.

Yume was stumbling as she gave chase, but the fleeing Onsa was just as unsteady on his feet. They were both tottering along, so they were even.

Her body hurt all over.

Where'd Wan-chan go? Yume wondered. Had she dropped it?

Yume pulled out a knife. Star Piercer. She tried to throw it, but for some reason it had fallen at her feet instead.

"No..."

It was no good.

She had to chase after him.

She had to catch him.

Onsa tried to turn and look back. He tripped. Rather than get up, he crawled onward.

Yume finally smiled. Onsa was hurt worse than she was. She could catch up to him.

Where is this? she suddenly wondered. It didn't matter. She had bigger concerns.

Onsa crawled up the slope. Though she occasionally had to put a hand on the ground, Yume was managing to walk fine.

Then, she suddenly lost sight of Onsa. Was it because of the fog? The fog certainly was thick. The rain was still coming down, too.

Yume was flustered and hurried to catch up. *Oh, I see,* she thought. The upward slope had come to an end. From here, it leveled out. That was why she'd lost sight of him. Where was Onsa...?

There.

To the left.

Onsa was crawling.

Yume tried to close in on Onsa, then came to a sudden realization.

How was she going to kill Onsa? And what good would killing Onsa even do? Would it change anything?

Awooooo... one of the black wolves howled. No, it was probably the big black wolf. From down below. It was coming. The big black wolf was racing up the slope.

Onsa faced the big black wolf and whistled. He was calling it. He intended to ride the big black wolf and run away. Like she was going to let him.

Yume kept her feet moving forward. Her vision was swaying strangely.

Was she tired? She shouldn't have been. That probably wasn't the problem.

Onsa didn't move from where he was. He was probably waiting for the big black wolf. Thanks to that, Yume was able to make it to where Onsa was. She grabbed at him—or rather, Yume fell down on top of Onsa.

The big black wolf rushed in. Trying to bite Yume. Yume clung on to Onsa and rolled, somehow managing to avoid the big black wolf's fangs.

Onsa shouted something and reached out. Was he saying, *Come, save me!* or something like that?

The big black wolf tried to attack Yume again. Yume shouted, "Wauh!" howling at the big black wolf. That startled it.

Onsa tried to get away. She wouldn't let him.

"...Yume already told you!"

“$#+&%%...!”

She’d never let him get away.

The two of them rolled together.

She hadn’t noticed it at all.

It seemed that the opposite side, the one Yume and Onsa hadn’t climbed, was steeper, like a cliff.

They were on the cliff’s edge now. No, worse than that, Yume and Onsa were hanging over it.

“Whah— We’ll fall—”

With an odd bark, the big black wolf leaned out over the edge of the cliff. Onsa grabbed the fluffy scruff if its neck. Reflexively, Yume did, too.

The big black wolf tried to dig its heels in.

No good, huh, thought Yume.

The big black wolf’s feet slipped over the edge.

It’d fall. At this rate, it was going to fall off.

If that happened, Onsa would, too. And Yume, of course.

“Shihoruuuu...!” she screamed.

Haru-kun.

Kuzakkun.

Merry-chan.

Everyone, be okay, she thought. *Please.*

If you aren’t—

Hold on, what about you? She felt like she heard someone say that to her.

...What?

Shut up, you dummy.

Ranta.

You're just stupid Ranta.

This, after you betrayed Yume and everyone. We may never see each other again!

Ranta was the one person she didn't want to hear that from. She got angry, and that motivated her. Yume gritted her teeth. For now, Onsa didn't matter; she just held on to the big black wolf. The big black wolf spun around once, then twice, then slid down the cliff while scratching at it with its fore and hind paws. They didn't fall, they slid. It looked like a sheer cliff, but maybe it wasn't actually that steep. Maybe they could make it to the bottom safely like this—or so Yume started to think, but then the big black wolf hit a snag in the cliff and they were launched into the air.

They were falling.

Spinning and falling.

Is Yume gonna die...?

She'd almost died once in Darunggar. That'd been a close call. They'd gotten her throat and blood had been everywhere. So much blood, she hadn't even been able to breathe. *Huh, this could be bad, Yume might be a goner,* she'd thought. *This's just how it goes, huh. It happened so easily...*

Her consciousness had faded—but then Merry's magic had worked, and she'd been able to come back.

That time, Haru-kun, he was cryin'. He hugged Yume real tight.

That'd made her happy, but... *Yume doesn't know why, but she was a little embarrassed, too.*

...Oh, she realized.

It was because everyone had been there. That was why she hadn't been scared.

She didn't like being alone. She didn't want to die alone like this.

This big black wolf didn't want to die, either. It was desperate. Onsa, who was clinging on to the big black wolf just like Yume, was, too.

The big black wolf caught the slope with its front legs again.

Keep tryin', big black wolf—Wolf-tan, you can do it. If you can't, everyone's gonna die.

From there she had a vague recollection that they rolled vertically, horizontally, and diagonally, hitting things, and she felt like she might lose her grip, but then grabbed on even tighter, but it was all a haze.

The rain continued to fall quietly.

The hanging fog seemed gentle, somehow.

It was a little cold, so she buried her face in the big black wolf's fur. It was warm, and she felt its pulse. The big black wolf was breathing. At some point she didn't remember, Yume had snuggled up to the big black wolf's belly. It was questionable whether it had realized or not. Yume didn't know.

But if he realized it, he wouldn't like it, she thought. *We're enemies and all.*

Still, Yume didn't mind. She didn't even think of the big black wolf was an enemy anymore.

He's alive, too. Maybe we can call it all off. That was how she felt.

How would Garo, who was plastered to the big black wolf's back, feel?

Onsa pushed up with difficulty and said something. Probably "Garo."

The big black wolf let out a weak bark. Maybe Garo was the big black wolf's name. It wasn't Wolf-tan, apparently. Well, of course not.

Garo.

"...Garon." Yume petted Garo. She didn't have the strength to stand yet, but she could move her hand to pet him, at least. "...You okay, Garon?"

Garo's whole body shuddered. Maybe he was trying to shake off Yume's hand because he didn't like it. Or maybe it was Garo's way of responding.

Onsa placed a hand on Garo's neck while looking at Yume. Onsa was greatly weakened, too. Though he'd gotten up, his back was hunched, and his shoulders were heaving.

"Onsan, hey, what are you gonna do...?" Yume smiled. It wasn't that she had

tried to smile, she just did. “Yume, she doesn’t want to fight with you, or Garo no more... If you’re gonna insist on fightin’, Yume’ll fight, too, but only ’cause she has to... But, to be honest, Yume doesn’t want to fight.”

Onsa averted his eyes. Yume took that to mean he had no intention of fighting.

For now, at least.

4. Reward



I saw everything up until the point where Yume jumped onto the big black wolf, thought Shihoru.

What had happened after that?

She didn’t know.

Had that big black wolf run off somewhere with Yume and Onsa riding on its back? The one thing that was certain was that they weren’t around here, and she had no way of confirming where they’d gone. More than that, though, Shihoru had to maintain Dark, whom she’d dispersed to confuse the black wolves.

Shihoru sensed that she and Dark were connected by a single string. And that string wasn’t tied particularly tightly. Shihoru was just holding on to it with her hand at this point. She’d gotten the knack for using that string to control Dark, but if she relaxed, she’d easily lose hold of it. If she lost her feel for the string, Dark would suddenly disappear.

She had to spread Dark out. To disperse him.

She’d had the idea in her head for a little while now. She never would have imagined that she’d be trying it out in actual combat, but when driven by necessity to do so, she’d thought it was the perfect opportunity.

The source of magic was not just in the mage’s magic power, a representation of their spiritual vitality, but also their imagination. Compelling and detailed imaginings that approached the level of truth were what caused magic to materialize.

The magic they were taught in the guild had already been materialized by those who’d come before them. The elemental sigils were a magic

materialization system created by their predecessors in order to give magic form.

Shihoru's Dark wasn't like that. Dark was a product of her own imagination. If Shihoru didn't strongly envision him, he'd dissipate in no time. His form was fixed by her having a clear image. Yet even if his form deviated from that, so long as Shihoru's image of him wasn't destroyed, Dark would continue to be Dark.

Even diffused, Dark was always Dark. It was only another form of his. Dark in mist form. Dark Mist, you might call it.

Having tried it, she understood. Even dispersed, Dark was a single Dark. He wasn't split into many smaller ones. That was why there was only one string. Shihoru just had to keep a proper grip on that invisible string.

But... this is...

Exhausting.

Due to his dispersion, Dark was covering a wide area. Each time she led Dark, trying to get him to move and succeeding, Shihoru's mind was shaken. It felt like she might be dragged around. Even just staying where she was required mentally bracing her feet against the ground.

It hadn't worked on that big black wolf, but the other black wolves were panicking quite nicely. There were no black wolves trying to penetrate the Dark Mist and attack Shihoru. Not currently, at least. She couldn't be sure that would continue.

Also, she probably couldn't keep this up for long. If she dragged it out to the limit and exhausted herself, she wouldn't have a next move to play.

Magic. No, Dark. Shihoru only had Dark. If she lost the ability to send out Dark, she wouldn't even be able to defend herself.

Shihoru was alone.

She'd need to make the switch somewhere. Let go of Dark, end the Dark Mist, then immediately call him again. Should she hide first? Or get away from here?

Run away. Would it be tough to do that while maintaining the Dark Mist? In

that case, she needed to prepare.

I'm pretty calm, she thought.

She couldn't let herself die. Honestly, Shihoru didn't have that strong of an attachment to her life. But her living or dying wouldn't only affect her. She'd experienced the loss of losing a comrade, so Shihoru was well aware of that. She couldn't just go and die.

She didn't want to make her comrades, her friends, sad. That pain, that suffering... she didn't want to make those she cared about feel them. So she wouldn't die.

I won't die just yet.

Not while she still had strength to spare.

Shihoru deliberately advanced through the Dark Mist. It was just as she'd expected. She'd had a vague feeling it would be. Going inside Dark actually made it easier to grasp the string.

This black mist was Dark. Dark was doing as Shihoru told him to. He was like a friend to her. Dark wouldn't block Shihoru's eyes.

She could see properly. Clearly. In fact, with the fog and rain, it was actually harder to see outside.

The black wolves were running around and barking with their heads kept low. There were black wolves backing away, too. That black wolf over there had tucked its tail under its belly, and was whimpering like a puppy.

How many black wolves were there? She didn't have time to count.

Shihoru walked through the Dark Mist. Running was obviously not going to be possible. If she tripped on something, she might lose her grip on the string.

Don't be afraid, she told herself. *Keep going, and don't be intimidated.*

Shihoru went back the way she had come. As she moved, the Dark Mist continued to be dragged along with her. It kept on moving. She hadn't directed him to, but Dark was following her.

It's fine. If she willed him not to, or tried to stop him, it would expend some of

her magical power. Shihoru pushed herself forward, focusing only on maintaining the Dark Mist.

At some point, there stopped being black wolves ahead of her.

Here.

When she let go and started running, the Dark Mist vanished in no time.

"Dark!" Shihoru immediately summoned him. Dark perched himself on Shihoru's shoulder in his usual humanoid form.

To be honest, when Shihoru had first materialized Dark, the image she'd used was a starfish. Even though she had never been to the sea in Grimgar, Shihoru knew the sea. Starfish were sea creatures. They were shaped more like a person's hand than they were like a person. Shihoru had seen a starfish somewhere. Once she imagined a starfish, she stopped being able to replace it with anything else. For some reason, Shihoru liked starfish.

The black wolves were barking. A number of them were chasing after her.

Shihoru stopped and turned back. "Go, Dark!"

Dark emitted a sound that was high-pitch or low-pitch, it was hard to tell which. *Vwooooooooluuuuuuuuuuuuu!* He flew forward.

There were three back wolves chasing Shihoru. Dark flew over their heads. The wolves must have really hated that sound or something, because they stopped short in fear.

But a few more were coming in from behind them. No, not a few. Two. No. Three from up ahead, and another from the right.

The first thing she did was have Dark confuse those four. While he was doing that, one of the initial three tried to come at Shihoru.

"Hit it!" she called.

When Dark tackled that one, he was blasted away, his entire body convulsing.

Should she call him again?

Her chest hurt.

Shihoru ran. Her pulse was racing like mad. No, her heart was throbbing. Her

throat grew tight, and it was hard to breathe.

She could still hear barking.

She didn't even need to look back. The black wolves were at her heels.

Something grazed her right shin.

A black wolf's fangs, she was sure of it.

Next it would bite her and drag her to the ground.

"Dark!" Shihoru turned and called him. "Ahh!"

It was at precisely that moment that a black wolf sprang at her.

If Dark hadn't struck the black wolf, it would surely have sunk its fangs into Shihoru's throat and bit down hard. Thanks to Dark, the black wolf's entire body convulsed. But, because it was a weak hit, she couldn't send it flying.

The black wolf collided with Shihoru, head first. Shihoru was knocked down. When she pushed the black wolf off of her and tried to get up, another black wolf sunk its fangs into her right leg.

Rather than let out a scream, Shihoru shouted, "Dark!"

Dark sent that black wolf flying.

Her right leg didn't hurt so bad, but it wouldn't move properly. As Shihoru tried to crawl away, the black wolves rushed her.

Dark.

She tried to call his name, but her voice wouldn't come out.

Her body was bitten all over. The fangs sunk in deep, and she was shaken around violently. If they kept doing that, her flesh would be torn loose.

Oh...

I...

I'm going to get eaten.

I tried my hardest.

Did everything I could.

But, no... not yet...

“O, listener listen in the night!”

She heard someone’s voice.

There was no way she could have anticipated this. She’d hoped for it just a little, though.

The voice shouted, “Bwahaha! Bwah! Pigs! You filthy pigs! You dimwits! You imbecilic fools, you nitwitted nincompoops, you mummified perverted sadomasochistic bitches! I’ll make you publicly profess penance for everything you’ve done, you mangy wolves! You’re beasts in wolves’ clothing! Helpless! Help me! Help, help, help, heeeeeeelp!”

Ohh. Why, of all people, did it have to be him?

That thief was wriggling his body around as he swung his two blades around. His wild, unorthodox movements were bizarre. It was hard to describe, but they lacked humanity... no, they lacked so much as a trace of the reason, wisdom, and self-restraint that any sentient being ought to have. Also, none of the words he spewed made any sense.

“Facts are made up of naught but fiction. Facts are fiction. Fiction is fact. The big dick makes preexisting technologies act aloooof! Open the anti-anti-anti-lock on my heart, lady! Heartful, heartful, these are our dark days together, baby!”

Sakanami. He was clearly insane. It seemed even the black wolves could tell something was wrong with him, because they were totally intimidated. The black wolves tried to run away. Some managed to, but he chased down and carved up some of the less fortunate ones.

There had been so many black wolves messily trying to devour Shihoru. There were none left now.

Sakanami screamed, “Amandaaaaaaaaaa!” for no apparent reason as he chased the black wolves off into the distance.

Scary. That guy was really scary. But...

He saved me...?

Could she really say that, though? Her body wouldn't move. Or, to be more precise, she was afraid of what would happen if she tried to move it, so she couldn't. She felt like she might fall to pieces if she moved so much as one finger the wrong way.

She was alive. No doubt about that. Breathing, and conscious. Barely.

She didn't know how bad it hurt. She might be in such a bad state she couldn't even feel pain properly.

I tried calculating it, at least, she told herself. *I thought if I went here, the Typhoon Rocks might come. But maybe... I never stood a chance. In situations like this, mages have it tough... huh. Because we can't... do anything alone.*

Being unable to do anything... That's the one thing I don't want.

Really... Even if I have to rely on others, somehow... I want to survive. I want to see everyone. I don't want to be alone.

I don't want to face the end... all alone.

I wonder how... Manato-kun and Moguzo-kun felt. We were able to be with them... so that might have been the one good thing about it.

The rain... Oh, the rain... It doesn't feel cold, or like anything.

I don't want... to go out like this.

Like this... all alone.

I don't want... to die.

I wish... someone had been at my side.

I wonder... if Yume's okay. If she is... I'm glad. I don't want Yume to die... like this.

Let me be the only one. Be the only one... to face an end like this.

I hate this.

I'm so lonely.

But... the time I spent with everyone... it wasn't in vain.

That's... what I want to think.

Because I should be able... to take everyone's voices... to take those memories with me...

I...

I did my best, right...?

Manato-kun.

I... I didn't lose.

Will Moguzo-kun... come to pick me up, maybe...?

If he does... I'll know... that I'm not alone...

"Oh, this looks pretty bad," a voice said.

I can't see. So dark. Just the sound of rain. And that voice. That's all.



“You did well.”

Yeah. I did well. Someone acknowledged it.

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

No way! I...

The light shone in. From here and from there. It poured into her from everywhere. It spread out, filling her. She became the light itself.

Warm.

It pulled her back.

Lifting her up, higher and higher.

“Ah...!”

Shihoru’s eyes opened.

There was a person with a buzz cut, with a look on their face like they had reached some sort of enlightenment, looking down at her.

“Hey. Glad to see you made it. That was kind of a close one.”

“Tsuga-san...”

“Where are the other kids? I don’t see them around here. You get separated?”

“Huh? ...Uh, yeah. Along the way...”

“I see,” said Tsuga. “Well, our group is in more or less the same situation. Nothing new there, though.”

Tsuga didn’t tell her, *So it’s going to be fine.* But she did feel better. Shihoru had thought for herself and then taken the best course of action she could. She’d risked it all on a thin sliver of hope, and it could be said that she’d won her bet.

In the end, she hadn’t gotten out of the situation with her own strength, so she wouldn’t take pride in it. Even so, she didn’t need to feel ashamed. No matter how it happened, she’d survived. As long as she was alive, she could work something out. As long as she was alive, the possibility existed.

“Um...” she said, “thank you... very much.”

“Think nothing of it.” Tsuga’s turned his eyes towards Shihoru’s chest. “I can heal your wounds, but I can’t mend your clothes.”

“My clothes...” Shihoru lifted her head and looked her body over. “Ah!”

Hurriedly getting up, she pressed her right arm against her chest. Pulling down the hem of her torn outfit, she did her best to cover up her lower half.

This was bad. Having been torn up by the black wolves, her clothes were in a sorry state.

When she looked at Tsuga, he had turned to the side. The look on his face was relaxed, as if he was enjoying looking at the scenery.

“I-I’m sorry you had to see that...” Shihoru stammered.

“It was quite the sight, though.”

“Huh...?”

“I only saw a little, so don’t let it bother you.”

“...It bothers me.”

“Yeah, that figures. Oh, right.” Tsuga put down his backpack and took something out from inside it. “Here, this is a cloak designed to protect against the cold. If you don’t mind using mine...”

“...I’ll borrow it.”

“It’s yours. If you don’t need it anymore, just throw it away.”

“Sorry,” Shihoru said. “For all the trouble.”

The gray cloak that Tsuga handed her was probably wool, and it was lined with fur. It was too big for her, and a little heavy, but it covered her body completely. She was happy to see it could be done up at the front, too.

She couldn’t find her hat, but her staff was laying on the ground nearby. Now that Dark was her only magic, Shihoru didn’t particularly need a staff. But she felt uneasy walking around barehanded. It was better to have a staff than not to have one.

“Where are the others...?” she ventured.

“Who knows. I heard Sakanami’s voice, though.”

“Sakanami-san was the one who saved me.”

“Oh, yeah? I don’t know about the others, but I’m sure Moyugi will sort that all out just fine. Even if we get messed up pretty bad, that guy tends to make it all balance out in the end.”

“...You really trust him.”

“I don’t trust him, okay?” Tsuga said plainly. “It’s just been that way up until now, that’s all.”

Didn’t that mean he trusted him? Shihoru couldn’t help but think that, but she just gave a vague nod rather than digging into it any deeper.

Everyone was different. It was natural for there to be gulfs between them, or for them to be on different levels, and forcefully trying to fill in those gulfs or level things out to make everyone equal wasn’t necessary. Tsuga was her senior, and in the same clan, and had saved her. It seemed he’d taken a bit of a look at her, too, but they weren’t friends.

“...What do you plan to do next, Tsuga-san?” she asked.

“I figure I’ll run around wherever until Moyugi comes to collect me. You?”

“I... have to find my comrades.”

“Kuzaku the tall guy, and Yume the hunter?”

“...Them, and Haruhiro-kun and Merry, too. We have a meeting point decided on. I think everyone will be heading there.”

“That cave, right?”

“Right.”

“Can they make it? Seems tough. Though, can you even make it there yourself?”

“...I have to go.”

“An appeal to force of will, huh.” Tsuga shouldered his pack. “I don’t think it’ll

do you much good. Not a big fan of that, myself.”

“Power...” Shihoru bit her lip, looking down. “I lack the power. I know that. Even if I’m not good enough... I have to do it. There are times when you just have to do it. For me... For me... that time is now.”

“Aren’t you thinking about this the wrong way?”

“...Am I?”

“You’re being naive.”

Shihoru raised her face.

It would have been fair to call Tsuga expressionless, but his eyes and mouth seemed to drip with compassion. On the other hand, he also seemed indifferent, or perhaps like he might be scheming something, or perhaps like he wasn’t thinking anything at all. Basically, she didn’t get him.

“You’re going to do it, even though you lack the power to? Isn’t that like a guaranteed recipe for failure? I think it’s meaningless. Do you just want to be able to say ‘I did my best’ for your own satisfaction?”

“That’s... not it,” Shihoru protested.

“Then you really are just making an appeal to willpower.”

“Think... or say whatever you want. I don’t care. I’ll overcome this.”

“You’re a stubborn one, I see.”

“...Maybe.”

“I think you’re putting yourself at a disadvantage, being like that.”

“Excuse me, Tsuga-san, but... I can’t imagine that you, or anyone in your group, is acting based on what’s most advantageous to them,” she said.

“Agh.” Tsuga slapped his forehead. “You got me there. Yeah. You’re absolutely right.”

“Um...” Shihoru bowed her head deeply. “Thank you again for healing my wounds. I won’t forget this debt of gratitude... Eventually, I’ll pay you back... if I’m able to, that is.”

“Hey, listen.”

“...Yes?” Shihoru looked up.

“You’re not expecting that I’ll help you without you having to say a word, or anything like that, are you?”

“No... I’m not, really. Huh...? Why do you ask that...?”

“I figured. I don’t like that kind of stuff.” Tsuga sighed as he took a look around the area. He seemed a little irritated somehow. “Oh, whatever. Fine. Come on, let’s go.”

“...Go? Where?”

“Looking for your comrades. I don’t have much of anything to do until Moyugi comes to get me, so I’ll help.”

Shihoru blinked repeatedly.

Tsuga was looking off to the side and rubbing his buzz cut head. He had a relatively solid body, and though his expression was soft, he had a normal, masculine face. Even though his hair was cut so short, too, he didn’t come across as very manly.

Maybe that was why Shihoru didn’t mind Tsuga. Maybe because she didn’t want to fall in love now, Shihoru had trouble with people who made her too conscious of the fact that they were of the opposite sex. Tsuga wasn’t like that.

Still, could it be—Tsuga was feeling shy right now?

He’s kind of cute, she thought, despite herself.

Shihoru hurriedly hid her smile. “...Thank you.”

“How many times are you going to say that?”

“H-How many times have I said it now?”

“Well, I don’t mind. Also, don’t worry about paying me back later.” Tsuga started walking, then added in a quieter voice, “I got a real good look, after all.”

“...Tsuga.”

“Huh? Did you just address me without an honorific?”

“I think you must have misheard.”

“Did I?”

“Absolutely, yes.”

Shihoru refocused herself as she followed after Tsuga. In the end, were all men the same?

She couldn’t let her guard down. That was what this had to mean.

5. A Condition for You



Had the rain let up a bit, maybe?

Haruhiro was posed with both hands on his right knee, with his left knee raised, looking out from inside the cave. He was barely moving at all, aside from adjusting the direction of his face. His concentration was incredible.

Merry, who was beside him looking at the outside, too, had nowhere near Haruhiro's level of concentration. More than that, it would have been more accurate to say that she was so distracted that there was no comparison between them.

They were right next to the cave entrance. Close enough that the rain from outside could reach them. Getting wet bothered them, and it felt cold on their skin, too. But, besides that—honestly, the lack of anything changing was tough.

The scenery around them, locked in rain and fog, was like a painting. While looking outside and listening to the sound of the rain, it made one wonder if there was any meaning in what they were doing. Well, of course there was. They were going to meet up with their comrades here. Merry and Haruhiro were waiting for their comrades. It was possible that the enemy might come instead. That was why they were watching. Of course there was meaning in it. Obviously.

Despite that, Merry found herself glancing at Haruhiro.

Maybe I should say something, she kept thinking.

There was no need to stay completely silent. Talking in whispers would be fine. What should she talk about? She didn't really know, but she felt like there were things they could discuss. There had to be any number of them.

It had been a while since they'd gone on watch here.

Just now, her eyes met with Haruhiro's for the first time.

"...Ah." Haruhiro immediately turned to look forward. "S-Sorry."

"Huh?" Merry started to hang her head— *No, now's not the time.* She thought better of it, and looked outside.

"Wh-Why are you apologizing?"

"Uh... Just because?" he said.

"...I see."

"No one's coming... huh."

"Yeah... You're right."

"You're not cold, are you?" Haruhiro asked.

"Not that cold."

"You mean you're a little cold, then? Yeah, that figures."

"It's only a little. I'm fine."

"I don't want you to push yourself to hard..."

"I'm a priest." Merry touched her lips. "That has nothing to do with it, does it?"

"Maybe not." Haruhiro laughed just a little. "You can't cure colds, can you?"

"I'm surprisingly unhelpful."

"Now that's not true. You're—priests are like a lifeline. For me... For us. Basically, for the whole party."

"That's what I want to be," Merry said.

"I think of you that way. No, not just me—everyone does."

"I'm doing my best... not to grow weak."

"Oh, yeah?" Haruhiro asked.

"Yeah."

"It's fine, though."

“What is?”

“If you feel weak. We all have times like that. I can... I dunno? Uh, I can support you. Yeah. Like... That’s what teamwork’s for?”

“You already—” Merry took a deep breath. “You’re already doing so much to support me.”

Haruhiro raised his chin. He let out an “...Ah.” The whole time, he kept looking outside.

He’s...

When she felt something welling up inside her, Merry was flustered.

Her first impression when she’d met him, for better or for worse, was that he was a boy, not a man. Even if he was just getting his start, he’d been too childish to be a volunteer soldier. He’d had sleepy eyes, dragged his feet, he’d been unreliable, and he hadn’t seemed to have any vision for the future. In a way, that might have been appropriate for his age. He’d been a normal boy—but in no way equipped to live in this place.

Back then, Merry had been a hired healer, not refusing any group that invited her. She felt that sort of work suited her best.

But maybe I should stop doing this, she remembered thinking back then. That was why she’d taken their offer.

Looking back, at that time, Merry’d had two conflicting feelings inside her.

The first was that if someone didn’t help these kids, they were going to end up dead. Now that she had been asked to take the job, she’d have trouble sleeping at night if she abandoned them. It’d been a feeling similar to pity.

Not genuine pity, though. For instance, if a dying mother entrusted her baby to them, few people would be able to throw it away. Even if it was a nuisance, they’d protect it for the time being. If it ended up being too much trouble, and they had no idea what to do, they would try to get someone else to take the burden. By leaving it in front of the Temple of Lumiaris, or something like that. That had to be better than it dying, at least.

That was the sort of irresponsible pity she’d felt.

The other feeling was wanting to board that sinking ship. That was the sort of self-destructive desire she'd had back then.

Even once she had joined the party, she hadn't imagined those kids having any sort of future. "Everyone was like that as a beginner," she'd consoled them, which wasn't true. If anyone was going to console those kids like that, there absolutely had to be some sort of malice behind it. To be frank, there probably weren't many volunteer soldier trainees that were as bad as they'd been. They'd done nothing but make their priest feel uneasy. They'd been a frighteningly underdeveloped party.

She never would have imagined they'd be together this long.

She never would have imagined a day would come when she'd be relying on the boy she'd met back then.

Haruhiro had grown. As a thief, and as a leader. She didn't think that was because he had any sort of aptitude for it, either.

Haruhiro had experienced so many things that it couldn't be written off with that easy explanation. More than that, it wasn't like Haruhiro had sought them out for himself. He'd probably been reluctant. He'd been forced into the position, and had no choice but to accept. The situation had left him no place to run.

He had been forced to walk a tightrope, and when he thought he'd finally gotten to the other side, he'd found himself forced to walk along a cliff's edge. The winds had been strong, and it'd been all he could do just to cling to the ground, but he'd had to move forward. If Haruhiro, who was leading the way, didn't move forward, no one else could move, so he'd had no choice but to.

He'd been through that again and again.

Merry hadn't grown half—no, maybe not even a third as much as Haruhiro.

Back then, Merry had been walking far ahead of the rest of them on the path of the volunteer soldier. At some point they'd passed her, and now she was chasing after them.

She wanted to be stronger.

She hated chasing after them.

She wanted to walk alongside them, at least.

She wanted to walk beside him. To be able to puff her chest out, and walk proud.

It might be because she'd been doing nothing but looking down for so long that she'd forgotten how to do that. Out of fear. Fear that she might lose sight of the path she'd found at last.

Never knowing when the ground might crumble beneath her.

In her own way, she'd been desperate. Afraid at all times.

I have to change myself, she thought, determined. *I want to change.*

The way things are going, I'm going to regret it. I have enough regrets already.

"Haru," she said slowly.

"...Huh?" Haruhiro looked at Merry for just a moment. "Uh, right. What is it?"

"Do you want to move a bit further inside? We need to avoid letting ourselves get too cold."

"Oh, that's right... But still..."

"Move back to where the rain won't touch us."

"...Okay."

"I may have said that too firmly," she added. "I'm not mad, okay? This is how I am. How I am now... and probably the real me."

"Yeah." Haruhiro smiled, and he pulled back about thirty centimeters. "I don't know how to say this, but if you're able to feel that way, Merry... No, how do I say this? If this is a place where you can be you, I'm glad."

Merry moved back just as much as Haruhiro had. "The party, you mean?"

"Maybe?"

"Maybe it's because we were in Darunggar for so long, but we're kind of like a family."

“Ohh... Yeah. You’re right. A family... huh.”

“Are you the father, Haru?” Merry asked.

“Me? No way. That’s not it. Hmm, well, I am the leader, so... I’m the eldest brother, maybe? At best... As for the mother, I wonder who that would be. If I had to choose... Shihoru, maybe?”

“She’s got it together, so maybe she does fit the role.”

“But having a mother with no father...” Haruhiro added.

“Maybe there are no parents? In that case, you’re the eldest brother, and Shihoru is the eldest sister?”

“Three sisters, Shihoru, Merry, and Yume, huh.”

“For the brothers, it’d be you, Kuzaku, and... I’m sorry.”

“Well, you know Ranta.” Haruhiro’s voice was strangely dry. “He’s not one to be anyone’s little brother.”

“...True.”

“I can say it now, but we were equals. He and I. I think he probably wanted to be my equal, too. We never held back with one another. I don’t like the guy, but he was always honest and forthcoming. ‘I hate this,’ ‘That pisses me off,’ ‘You’re wrong’... he’d come right out and argue with me over those things, whether it was serious or just stupid. We didn’t lie to one another. There was no need... I feel like, probably, it’s hard to find people you can be like that with.”

“You were... friends?” Merry asked.

“No.” Haruhiro grimaced just a little. “That’s not it. Definitely not. Not a chance. He’s not my friend... though we might have become something else, if we’d had more time together. I dunno. He could never be my friend, but maybe that was actually for the best. It meant we didn’t hold back with each other. — Strangely, part of me still trusts him. Yeah... I probably believed in him.”

“In what way?”

“I thought we’d always be the same way, not getting closer, or drifting apart. For me... My comrades, I love all of you, and you’re important to me. I can’t

help but go easy on you. There's that aspect to our relationship. But I didn't have that with him. That balanced things out, you could say."

"He was special to you."

"Not exactly in a good way, though."

"No one can take his place."

"He's not the only one that goes for," said Haruhiro. "It's true of all of us."

"Haru..."

"Yeah?"

"Do you really think he betrayed us?"

"I don't."

Merry almost couldn't help herself from smiling. Haru had replied instantly. He'd denied it without a moment's hesitation.

He believed in him. That was how much he trusted Ranta. Merry didn't find it any mystery why he would.

In fact, she found it hard to believe Ranta had honestly betrayed them. Whatever might happen, Ranta wouldn't betray his comrades. She'd have long since given up on Ranta if she hadn't believed that.

"Merry, there's one thing I wanted to ask," said Haruhiro.

"Okay. What?"

"Have you seen Zodiac-kun since Ranta ended up doing what he did?"

"...No." Merry shook her head, then thought back. She couldn't say it with absolute certainty, but she hadn't seen the demon. That was the feeling she had. "I don't think I have. Though that's limited to what I, personally, witnessed."

"I figured." Haruhiro looked around as he nodded. "It's weird. Even though he's a dread knight. Despite all his complaining, he really does love Zodiac-kun. He uses that demon as his emotional support. I'm pretty sure that's part of it."

"True. No matter how much abuse he takes from Zodiac-kun, he summons

that demon every chance he gets.”

“That’s exactly the reason why it stuck out to me,” said Haru. “He must have something he’s hiding. Not from us, but from the guys in Forgan. His not calling Zodiac-kun is emblematic of that. He might be thinking of it as a trump card of sorts. Stupid as that is, it’s the kind of thing he’d think of.”

“It really is...”

“He never harmed you directly,” Haruhiro added. “If anything, I think he was trying to protect you, in his own way. At the very least, it’s not impossible to think of it that way.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

“When he fought me, he was probably serious. It’s just, that’s because it was me he was facing, you know.”

“...The person he wants to be equal to.”

“Well, if you say it like that, it’s letting him look too cool,” Haru said. “If he’d taken a swing at Yume, and she’d gotten hurt, it’d be a different matter, you know? But it was me. This is a bit extreme, but even if he’d killed me... Well, even he might have felt just a little twinge of guilt. He’d have been like, *Don’t blame me, Haruhiro, I had no choice,* or something like that, with a forced smirk, don’t you think?”

“...He’d do it. He totally would. I can imagine the look on his face...”

“I know, right?” Haruhiro said with a chuckle.

The rain had let up a fair amount, to the point that it was indistinguishable from the fog. Wasn’t the sun going down? It didn’t feel like it had gotten darker.

It felt like she’d been here with Haruhiro, waiting for their comrades to return, for an awfully long time now. But maybe it hadn’t actually been that long.

Off in the distance, something moved. Was it just the fog thinning out?

No, that wasn’t it.

“Merry,” Haruhiro called out to her in a quiet voice.

She glanced over, and Haruhiro was pointing out in front of them with the index finger of his left hand. That sign meant, *Something's over there.*

Merry held her breath and squinted.

It was small. And it probably wasn't alone. Which meant it wasn't their comrades.

It was hard to eliminate the feeling of disappointment, but she didn't have time to let it get her down. It was coming straight at the cave.

Even before she saw the creature, she had a sense of what it might be. She was right.

"That's..." Haruhiro said.

"You know it...?"

"Yeah, I know it. Or I've seen it before, I guess."

The creature resembled a cat. However, its head was large relative to its body. Thanks to that, even though its body was the same size as, or slightly larger than, a cat's, it looked a little like a kitten.

Nyaas were four-legged beasts, but they could walk on two legs, too.

That gray nyaa was tottering along on its hind legs. One major difference between their legs and cats' legs was that they had long fingers, and were nimble enough to grasp objects firmly. They looked just like a cat's paws at first glance, though, and when walking on its hind legs, the nyaa crossed its arm-like legs and craned its head to the side. How cat-like.

It's so cute... Merry caught herself as she was about to break into a smile, pulled her lips taut, and made a small cough.

"...It's not one of Forgan's nyaas, then?"

"Probably not," said Haruhiro. "There's this person called Shuro Setora-san who lives in the village. The House of Shuro is apparently a family of necromancers, but Shuro Setora-san is a nyaa lover and started to raise them. If I recall, though, the village's nyaas are normally raised by... the House of Katsurai, was it? They're the village's *onmitsu* spies."

“...Hmm.”

Nyaa.

This creature was just so captivating for some reason. While Merry was held captive by Forgan, seeing the nyaas had been her only respite.

“Onmitsu...” she murmured thoughtfully.

“Yeah. So, in order to suppress Forgan’s nyaas, we got the village’s nyaa lover to cooperate with us. If I’m not misremembering... that’s probably one of Shuro Stora-san’s nyaas.”

Most of what Haruhiro said went in one ear and out the other.

It’s a nyaa.

The nyaa that was soaked in the rain was coming closer...

Merry almost said, *Come here,* despite herself. She wanted to click her tongue and wave it over. No, she couldn’t.

Can’t... I? If it’s not an enemy, it should be fine, shouldn’t it? Or not a problem, at least.

In the end, she restrained herself.

Soon after entering the cave, the nyaa shook itself, splashing water everywhere. Then, tilting its head slightly, it let out a “Nyaa.”

“It’s cu—” Merry clasped her mouth shut at the last moment, and swallowed her words.

“Cu?” Haruhiro asked.

“...I-It’s nothing.”

“Hmm...?” Haruhiro blinked, then put his hand on the nyaa’s head. “Hey, nyaa. Where’s your master at?”

Was that okay?! Was it a touchable nyaa, maybe?

“In that case...” Merry clenched her hand into a fist.

He’d touched it. She wanted to touch it herself.

Maybe it’s still not too late?

Was this a situation where it was okay to touch it? Maybe she'd be allowed to pat its head? Was this her chance to pet it?

But, at the moment, Haruhiro's hand was resting on the nyaa's head. For Merry to be able to pet that nyaa's head, she'd need to get Haruhiro to move his hand.

She'd get him to move it. How? What was she going to do? Did she have to ask? How? Maybe...

Haru, let me try petting it, too.

This was... too direct, no matter how she thought about it. Couldn't she find a more indirect way to say it?

Haru, let me try petting it, too?

Rising intonation on the last word. How was that? It felt a bit softer... maybe. Though she had the feeling it didn't change it that much. Well, how was this, then?

I'd like to try petting the nyaa, too, you know?

Indirect. That "You know?" at the end was so roundabout. It felt irritating. If someone asked Merry for something that way, she might respond, "And?" Haruhiro might think, *So what? What's the problem? What do you want to do? Come out and say it already.*

That was right.

If she wanted something, she should tell him, not try to avoid saying it. In that case, this was what she'd say: *Haru, I want to pet the nyaa. Let me pet it.*

That.

That was it.

Say it. Say it!

She could predict Haruhiro's response. "...Oh. I see. Sure. Go ahead." That was about it.

He wouldn't think, *Don't say weird things,* or anything like that. Haruhiro wasn't that kind of person. He didn't go around mocking other people.

So say it.

She should just say it. What was there to be embarrassed about?

Embarrassed. Yes. It was embarrassing. She was intensely embarrassed.

It was a mystery even to her why she felt so embarrassed over this, but she couldn't help herself.

Why? Is it pride? What kind of pride? Am I trying to act cool? I'm not cool at all, so what good is that going to do me? What's the point? Didn't I want to change? In that case, what am I going to do if I can't even manage this? I want to pet the nyaa. I want to pet it so badly, so I will. It's a really small step. I need to take it. If I can't manage this much, I'll never be able to change.

Say it on the count of one, two. No, one, two, is too short. Let's make it one, two, three. ...I'll count to five. If I do that, I'm sure I can do it.

"Merry?" Haruhiro asked.

"Oh! Huh...?"

"Is something up?"

"N-N-Nothing's up."

"You sure?" Haruhiro look out beyond the fog. "Ah..."

Again. There was something else approaching.

This time, it probably wasn't a nyaa. It was much too big for that.

Was it human?

Mixed in with the sound of rain, she could hear footsteps. It was apparently two people.

A group of two.

Even if they were big, that only meant they weren't as small as a nyaa, and not that they were especially tall for a human. One of them, at least, wasn't any larger than Merry. The other seemed to be larger than Merry... no, larger than Haruhiro.

It would have been fair to call them bizarre in appearance. They were each

wrapped in various colors of cloth that covered their whole bodies, and even their faces.

Haruhiro looked a little hesitant about what to do, then sighed. “...Urgh. I’d forgotten about that. Well, not actually... That’s right.”

“Forgotten? What?”

Haruhiro just said, “Yeah...” and gave a vague nod, then picked up the gray nyaa.

He picked it up? Merry thought in shock. *No way. That’s absurd. Tell me it’s a lie. No way. You can pick it up, too? Hold on, Haru. What are you picking up that nyaa so easily for...?*

“Setora-san.” Haruhiro gave a slight bow. Holding the nyaa as he did, of course. “Is that what I should be calling you? Or... do you prefer Shuro-san?”

“Setora is fine,” the smaller of the two said curtly, without stopping.

It was a woman’s voice.

Shuro Setora. The keeper of the nyaas. She was a woman?

Setora dragged the big person into the cave with her.

Merry took a long time to realize it, but she now saw that Setora’s companion probably wasn’t human. The companion looked human at first glance, but those armored arms were too long. The hands were big, too. Haruhiro had mentioned Setora had been born into a house of necromancers. Did that mean her companion was a golem?

“It seems they’ve scattered,” Setora said, then removed the cloth covering her face, as it seemed to be getting in her way. “What do you people plan to do?”

Haruhiro gulped and his eyes went wide. Merry was a little surprised, too. It would have been hard to imagine this face from her voice and appearance.

She was a girl, not a woman. Her black hair was in a bob cut, her eyes were so large they seemed like they might fall out, and yet she was still a girl who leaned more towards cute than beautiful.

“...What?” Setora glared at Haruhiro and Merry in turn. From the way she looked at them, she was offended. But because her face was so adorable, she wasn’t intimidating. “You people are not of the village, so it’s not like you find it odd that my hair is short, is it?”

“Oh, no...” Haruhiro rubbed the gray nyaa’s belly. “Haha...” He let out an awkward laugh. “Not particularly. Oh, right. The women in the village grow their hair out. You were saying something about that before, now that you mention it.”

“That’s an awfully familiar tone you’re taking with me,” Setora said coldly.

“Urkh. S-Sorry... I apologize. I dunno, when I saw your face, it felt familiar. Familiar? No, that’s not quite it....”

“It’s in my blood, you see. The members of the House of Shuro have had childlike faces for generations. That is also part of why I do not like to reveal my face.”

“I don’t think it’s anything to hide,” Haruhiro said. “Well, that’s just what I think.”

“Don’t act like you would know, outsider.” Setora seized the gray nyaa from Haruhiro’s arms, and let it loose. “Well, it seems I will be leaving the village, too.”

The gray nyaa sat at the mouth of the cave and began grooming its fur. It was licking itself. Diligently licking its body all over with that little pink tongue.

So cute.

Merry still wanted to hug it. But if she interrupted it while it was grooming, it wouldn’t like her.

Merry tore her eyes away from the gray nyaa, then looked back and forth from Haruhiro to Setora. What was going on here? Haruhiro was acting a little strange. He seemed intimidated.

Well, when meeting with people he didn’t know that well, Haruhiro tended to be that way. He wasn’t the type who always looked people in the eye when he talked. Even so, the way he hung his head, looking at Setora with upturned eyes

and trying to gauge her mood, was a little strange.

“You’re leaving the village, huh...” Haruhiro said.

“Well, yes. I’ve no lingering attachment to the village. Our paths were due to part ways eventually. That just happened to be now.”

“...Um, what about Arara-san?”

“Did I not tell you? They’ve all scattered. I have my nyaas keeping watch, but even I can’t keep track of where everyone is on a moment-to-moment basis. There are those the nyaas have lost track of, too, I’m sure. It’s cruel to expect so much of the nyaas.”

“Yeah, I suppose...”

“It seems that you are fine.” Setora gave a sideways glance to Merry. “This is the woman you went to such trouble to save? Did they not use her to relieve themselves?”

“That...” Merry hesitated for a moment, unsure how to respond. “...didn’t happen.”

“You were fortunate, then.”

“Yeah. You may be right.”

“Uh, hey.” For some reason, Haruhiro hastily pointed Setora and the gray nyaa with gestures and a glance. “The truth is, that nyaa showed me the way to where you were. If not for that nyaa... in other words, if not for Setora-san’s help, I don’t know if I could have made it to you by myself.”

“Oh... So that was it.” Merry turned back to Setora, bending at the hip and giving her a deep, polite bow. “Thank you... very much.”

“No need for thanks. I’ll be receiving my compensation, after all.”

“Of course you will...” Haruhiro closed only his left eye, and repeatedly rubbed his eyelid with his hand. Was it itchy?

Setora narrowed her eyes as she looked at Haruhiro, her lips forming a slight smile. It was kind of creepy. Or rather...

She reminds me of someone...? Merry thought, puzzled.

It might have been a miracle that it occurred to her so quickly. After all, she'd probably never even talked to her. It wasn't like she remembered her face clearly. Her hair style, her big eyes, and how simple and quiet she was. That was about all that came to mind.

This girl gave off the same impression as that girl who had been in Kuzaku's former party. If Merry recalled, she'd been a thief, like Haruhiro. Her name had been...

Choco.

Yes. Choco.

When she'd fallen at Deadhead Watching Keep, Haruhiro had cried out. Merry had thought, *Did he know her?*

He had known her. No doubt about it. He'd known her name, after all. Besides, there had been something clearly strange about Haruhiro that time. Merry didn't remember the exact details, but he'd been just acting weird. Maybe that Choco girl had been more than just an acquaintance to Haruhiro.

And so what if she was?

Setora resembled Choco, who had died right before his eyes. Was that why Haruhiro seemed so shaken?

"Now, then." Setora crossed her arms.

Haruhiro sat down where he was, for some reason. "...Yeah. I know."

Merry tilted her head to the side. "Huh? What do you know?"

"My compensation." Setora gave a low snort. "I've held up my end of the bargain. Now, I'll have what is rightfully mine."

"Oh, but..." Haruhiro looked up to Merry, a pained smile on his face. "Actually, maybe it's a good thing Merry is here. She can... treat me, right afterwards."

"Treat you? For what?" Merry asked.

"It was decided that I'd provide... material."

"Huh? Provide material? For what?"

“Erm... For a flesh golem.”

“Flesh—”

“I will be taking his eye.” Setora approached Haruhiro and crouched down. “You wanted me to spare your dominant eye, so it’s the left I’ll be taking, yes?”

“His left eye?!”

“...Uh, yeah.” Haruhiro looked down and scratched his head. “Sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for, Haru?!”

“Nah, I just sort of felt I should...”

“You’re providing your eye?! Like, taking it out, and giving it to her?!”

“I don’t know so much about how that’s gonna work, but... I guess?”

“If you do that, I can’t heal it, even with Sacrament! You understand that, right?!”

“...Well, more or less.”

“What do you mean, more or—”

“You, woman.” Setora glared at Merry. “What are you so angry about? This man made the deal with me because he needed my nyaas in order to rescue you.”

“I-I’m not angry...” Merry stammered.

“Then silence yourself.”

“There’s no way I could keep quiet! It’s because of me that—” Merry covered her mouth.

That was right.

He did it for me.

Because of me, Haruhiro’s being forced to give up his eye to this woman.

“...Sorry.” Haruhiro rubbed the back of his head and neck. “I kind of didn’t want it to go this way. The timing, I mean. Doing it in front of you, it’s just... I doubt you want to see it, and honestly, I don’t want to let you. So, sorry, could you... leave us? Oh, but I’ll need you to heal me with magic when it’s over, so

maybe it’s all the same in the end...”

“Enough of that. Raise your face and let me get a good look.” Setora grabbed Haruhiro’s chin between the index finger and thumb of her right hand, and pulled it up. “Hmph. A fresh looking eyeball, indeed.”

“Well, yeah, I’m not a corpse. I’m alive...”

“I suppose you are.” Setora brushed back Haruhiro’s hair with her left hand, and brought her face close to his. Was there any need to get so close? Well, Setora was planning to take Haruhiro’s left eye, so maybe there was. It was hard to say. Whatever the case, Haruhiro was docile, like he had accepted that he was obligated to allow this.

Neither Haruhiro nor Setora could possibly be serious about this, though. That was what Merry wanted to think. But, whatever Setora was thinking, that wasn’t true of Haruhiro. Haruhiro was dead serious.

It was hard to call him resolute, but Haruhiro could be strangely committed. Like how he would never abandon a comrade. Haruhiro was always sacrificing himself.

It wasn’t that Merry didn’t understand that. It was better to get hurt than to see her comrades hurt. Between losing a comrade, and dying themselves, if they were forced into a situation where they had to choose one or the other, Haruhiro would surely choose the later, and so would Merry.

That said, there was no way she could accept this.

“I’ll do it!” Merry interposed herself between Haruhiro and Setora.

When she did, Setora immediately, and bluntly, stopped her with a cold stare. “That will not do.”

“...Wh-Why not?!”

“You are not the one I made a deal with. It was this man, and him alone. And my condition was that I would receive this man’s left eye. It is no place of yours to demand I change the terms.”

“Okay... Maybe you’re right, but...”

“Moreover, I’ve no interest in your eyes.”

“...You’re saying you are interested in Haru’s, then?”

“Did it not sound that way?” asked Setora.

“I-I’ve got good vision, and mine aren’t sleepy-looking like Haru’s...”

“Merry... That’s got nothing to do with my eyeballs, I’m pretty sure it’s the shape of my eyelids...”

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that...”

Setora let out an exasperated sigh. “Your blathering will do you no good, woman.”

“W-Woman?!”

You’re a woman, too. Merry almost said it, but she kept her mouth closed. *This is no good. My emotions are running too high. Calm down. I should calm down first. Think it over with a clear head.*

“Then I’ll provide you something more valuable than Haruhiro’s left eye!” she blurted out.

“No.”

“Even if it’s an arm or a leg, I won’t mind!”

“I’ve no need of those.”

“Well, what do you want, then?!”

Haruhiro opened his mouth to try and say something. But Setora suddenly grasped Haruhiro’s head and jaw with both hands and pulled him towards her.

Wait. What are you doing? Merry thought frantically. *Treating Haru like an object.*

“Wai...!” she cried.

“I’ve taken an interest in this man,” said Setora.

“Huh?”

“Rather than the eye of a woman I care nothing for, it should be obvious that the eye of a man who interests me holds far greater value.”

“I don’t understand that reasoning at all!” Merry cried.

“I do not ask you to understand. Incidentally—” Setora began rubbing Haruhiro’s face with both hands. “I do not think there is any need to hurry in collecting his left eye. It doesn’t have to be now. I’ll have his left eye when I want it. Until then—Haruhiro.”

“...Y-Yes?”

“Your left eye is mine, but I leave it in your care.”



“Y-Yay...? That’s... good? Is it okay for me to be happy about that?”

“You’re unlike the men of the village. There’s something fresh about you.”

“...I-Is there?”

“Haru,” Merry said in a sharp tone, then realized she was acting upset. “What are you grinning for?”

“I’m... not grinning, okay?! I mean, this is not time for grinning, right?!”

“Oh, yeah?” Merry looked the other way. “You seemed a little happy, for some reason.”

“I’m not happy at all, though!”

“Incidentally, Haruhiro,” Setora said.

“Yes?! Wh-What...? Um, Setora-san, c-could you let go of me... please?”

“Do you think you are in any position to ask favors of me?” Setora asked coldly.

“I’d say that’s one thing, but this is another.”

“A fair argument.”

“I-I know, right...?”

“Though that does not necessarily mean I will accept it. You may not know this, but I was known for being a difficult person, even back in the village.”

“Oh, I get that! P-Please, let me go!” Haruhiro shook free from Setora’s grasp and stood up. “It was a promise, so I’ll give you my left eye anytime you want it! But I don’t owe you anything else!”

“Oh-ho,” Setora said, opening her eyes wide in an exaggerated fashion. “In other words, you no longer require my assistance? In that case, I will have all my nyaas pull out at once. I’ll have your left eye now, too. If we part here, we may never meet again, after all.”

Haruhiro hung his head. “That would be...”

A problem. Merry didn’t want to admit it, but she had to.

The fact was, Haruhiro and Merry were just waiting here for their comrades

to show up. They'd wracked their brains about whether to do this, or whether to try that, but in the end there was nothing else they could do. There were no moves they could make.

"Though I cannot do it immediately..." Setora bent her knees and looked up at Haruhiro's face from below. "If I were to have my nyaas concentrate on finding your comrades, I am sure they would be able to do it, too. My nyaas know this area even better than I do myself. What of you people? If you're familiar with the lay of the land, perhaps you don't need my help? I predict that the tomorrow will be an uncommonly clear day, so visibility will be good. There are other troubles that present themselves on days when the fog is not out in Thousand Valley. What will you do? Search the hardest you can?"

This woman. Shuro Setora.

She seems to like Haruhiro, but despite that, she's harassing him, making him suffer, and enjoying it. She said she was a difficult person, but it's more that she's just nasty.

I shouldn't be thinking this after she rescued me, and she keeps such cute nyaas, so I don't want to think badly of her.

Still, I can't bring myself to like her. I might really hate her.

Even if she did hate Setora, it would be immature to drive her off because of that, and realistically speaking it was a bad idea. A very bad idea. However, was Setora going to help them just because Merry bowed her head to her? Not likely.

Haruhiro. Setora was probably crouching low because she wanted to see Haruhiro ask her for help. Moreover, she wanted to make him submit to her. She wanted to make him obey her, didn't she? And Haruhiro knew what he ought to do as leader of the party. For Merry—for one of his comrades—he had already offered up his left eye. He might very well throw his life away.

"Setora-san." Haruhiro bent over to the point his head was almost at knee level. "...Please. Help us find our comrades."

"Very well." Setora said haughtily. Then added, so quickly it was hard to react, "But I have a condition."

I expected as much.

Just what sort of condition would she offer? Merry gritted her teeth. If Setora said anything weird, Merry would want to stop Haruhiro, but she couldn't. Unless it was something really big—no, even if it was—Haruhiro would probably accept it. Setora had seen through him, so she might say something truly outrageous.

"What is it?" Haruhiro kept his head bowed, looking at Setora with upturned eyes. "The condition."

"Before that, I have one question."

"Oh, sure... Go right ahead."

"Are you and that woman in love?"

"Huh?!" Haruhiro shouted, and Merry said, "What are you—" before going silent, at a loss for words.

"I don't think the question is anything to act so surprised about," Setora said, arching her eyebrows offendedly. "You two are comrades, yes? If two people who are together day in and day out happened to develop that sort of relationship, surely that would be nothing unusual. In the village, those from the lower houses generally marry those they are close to and have children with them. Furthermore, Haruhiro, you were prepared to die to rescue that woman. Is it not normal to think you are more than simple comrades?"

"N-No..." Haruhiro turned towards Merry, immediately averted his eyes, and then shook not so much his head as his entire body back and forth. "That's not it, okay?! We don't have anything like that, we're just really good comrades! Comrades, okay?! O-Okay...?! We're comrades!"

Setora fixed her eyes on Merry for some reason. "Is this true?"

"Of course!" Merry swallowed her breath, and almost ended up coughing. "...Comrades. That's what Haru and I are. Nothing more, and nothing more."

"Is there some reason why you said more twice?"

"N-No?! W-We're nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else! That's it!"

"I see." Setora gave two slight nods of her head. "Then there should no

problem, Haruhiro.”

“Wh-What... is it?”

“Haru.” When Setora corrected herself, Merry felt a throbbing in her temple, and a slight pain.

What’s with her? She’s acting way too familiar with him.

Then it suddenly hit her. If that was true, then Merry was acting overly familiar with Haruhiro by calling him Haru, too.

Originally, when trying to close the distance between her and her comrades, it had occurred her to change the way she addressed them, as a show of the kind of relationship she aspired to have with them. She’d debated back and forth with herself about what to do. Deciding to start with the leader, the first inoffensive option that came to mind had been adding a -kun to his name. Though it felt easy to get used to, and she liked it, Haruhiro-kun was a little long. If she used Haru-kun, she’d be overlapping with Yume. Besides, while it was cute for a girl like Yume to call him Haru-kun, wouldn’t it be off-putting if Merry did it? Using -san would have been weird, or rather it seemed likely that it would make it feel like she was being overly formal. In that case... how about Harupin? No way, not a chance. It made no sense. Harurin, then? Haruriron? Harumero? Go all out, and call him Haruharu? Haruchin? No, no, that was clearly too much...

After much wavering, she had chosen the short, easy-to-use Haru. She’d settled for something safe. She’d figured that would probably work. However, when it had come time to actually call him that, she’d hesitated.

Let’s not do this, after all. She’d been half way to rethinking her decision, but when she’d gone with the flow and tried addressing him that way once, it had been surprisingly okay. That was how it had felt to Merry, at least, but maybe she’d been acting overly familiar?

But, that aside, why had this woman suddenly started addressing Haruhiro as Haru?

“Haru.” Setora called him that again, then smiled slightly. “Until I grow bored of it, and tell you to do otherwise, you will act as if you’re my lover. That is the

condition.”

6. If You Can Chase After it, it Isn’t a Dream



I won’t lose, Ranta thought furiously. *Not to that damn wimp.*

He shouldn’t have lost.

That was the first time the two of them had fought for real. He’d known they’d come to blows eventually... was one thing he absolutely could not say. He hadn’t even considered it. But, if it came to it, he’d known he’d win. Ranta had been confident of that.

I mean, the guy’s a thief. Fighting’s not his specialty. I’m a dread knight.

“All is born from darkness, and to darkness will return. All who live, will equally be embraced by death.” This was the creed of the dread knights.

Conflict was the duty of those who followed the Dark God Skullhell, as was bringing death to the defeated. Every dread knight magical or fighting technique existed to that end. The lords had beaten other unique techniques that would bring death to their enemies, irrespective of the means they had to resort to, into the dread knights.

Only a servant of Skullhell could understand, but in abandoning morals and emotion, and sharpening the spirit, a dread knight reached a peak of purity. In that place, a battle was no longer battle, but something no different from breathing. Fight as you breathe, emerge victorious, and bring death. This was the ideal for a dread knight.

There was no way that a dread knight like Ranta would come up short against a mere thief.

The fact was, Ranta had been toying with the thief. When he closed his eyes now, his senses from that time returned to him. The more that thief’s stiletto and dagger had clashed with Ranta’s RIPer, the more fired up he’d gotten.

The thief had known Ranta, so it wouldn't have been easy to finish him with a single blow. Ranta had known that, too. However, because he thought he'd known that, Haruhiro had been surprised.

Is it this different? he'd been asking himself. Every time he'd sensed Haruhiro's shock, Ranta had wanted to say, *Have you learned your lesson?*

He'd barely been able to hold it in.

Know your place, Haruhiro. In the end, you're no match for me. You can't beat me. Just accept it, and surrender.

Exhaust.

Leap Out.

Then, Missing.

The movement-type dread knight skills weren't just about footwork; they also involved shrinking, stretching, bending, and twisting the entire body. For Ranta, who was on the small side for a combatant or a dread knight, and whose athletic abilities weren't significantly better than other people's, movement skills were the main focus. Basically, if he couldn't move, he couldn't fight. If he stopped to trade blows, he was sure to lose.

He had to move. Just keep moving. The more he moved, the more victory came into sight.

That was why, in actual combat, he went around constantly using his movement skills, like he was an idiot and that was the only trick he knew. Even once he'd used them, and used them, and used them some more, he would still keep using them. If he didn't go that far, Ranta the dread knight had no future. Ever since he'd learned Exhaust at the guild, Ranta had thought that. No matter what anyone said to him, he'd fought his battles with an excessive use of movement skills.

He did it to win.

This was the only path to becoming stronger.

You get that, Haruhiro? he thought furiously. *I'm not like you.*

I'm no leader, after all. Your job is keeping the party together. Even when

you're fighting, you need to keep tabs on everyone else, and control things. I'm different. The one thing I have to do, more than anything else, is kill the enemy. I've gotta get stronger.

I'm a shrimp, but I've gotta get tough. Do you know how hard that is, Haruhiro?

I'm gonna get stronger and stronger. "I'm strong," I tell myself. D'you know what happens when I do? I hear it. That mocking laughter.

"Hey now, come on, are you serious? Do you seriously, seriously, seriously think that? Look around. Every one of these guys is bigger than you, and they swing around these huge weapons like they're nothing. Even among the guys who enlisted at the same time as you, there are Renji and Ron. They're on another level. How many centimeters did Moguzo have on you? There's no closing that gap, you know? If Renji hit you with everything he has, Ranta, man, you'd die in one shot, wouldn't you?"

The more seriously I think about it, the more I'm forced to think the gap is huge. Too huge.

"Don't let it get me down"? That's impossible, and you know it, don't you? It's normal for that to get me down. It's easily enough to make a guy despair.

I mean, we aren't playing around here, you know? Lives are on the line, okay?

"If I die, I'll just be embraced by Skullhell"? Well, yeah. But you think I'm gonna be able to accept that? So easily?

I don't wanna die.

If I die, that could be the end.

I know that.

I've seen it.

The guys who died turned to ash, and now we'll never see them again.

I can't die yet.

I mean, I'm not done yet.

"This is as far as I go, this is my limit, I can't go any further"—I haven't hit that

point yet.

You get that, Haruhiro?

I'm not burned out yet. I'm not going to end here. Not me. That's what I tell myself to get going, and I move forward. I'm not a pathetic, indecisive loser like you. Like, playing nice with our comrades? That's dependency, and you know it. It's relying on other people. If I do that, I'm gonna get weak.

Haruhiro. I've gotta be stronger than you. I've done everything I can to be that way, and I'm still doing it. That's why I'm stronger than you.

Now's a good chance, so let me teach you a lesson!

That had been his intent.

Haruhiro had been sure to go save Merry. Given the situation, Ranta had known he'd probably do it alone.

Ranta had two options. Stop him, or don't.

No, there'd been no choice. He'd had to stop him. Old man Takasagi would have surely noticed Haruhiro going on the move. And Takasagi had suspected Ranta.

Ranta hasn't truly joined Forgan. He's sure to try to make things easy for his comrades. That was what Takasagi had thought. So he would have been watching Ranta, and paying close attention to Haruhiro and the others, too.

Takasagi never missed a trick. If Haruhiro'd moved, Takasagi would've been guaranteed to detect it.

Ranta had to stop him. He'd had to do it, on his own.

Naturally, he'd known Takasagi would come, too. He hadn't trusted Ranta, after all. In fact, that was exactly how it'd gone.

Now that it had come to this, Ranta had known he couldn't let Haruhiro go. He'd known how good Takasagi was. That old man was incredibly skilled. He only had one arm, and he only had one eye, but none of that even mattered. Even if Ranta, Haruhiro, and Kuzaku ganged up on him, they wouldn't stand even a slim chance of winning. Even if Yume, Merry, and Shihoru the mage joined in, it would be dicey. Takasagi would kill Haruhiro easily.

We were comrades once, Ranta had said. *I'll do him the decency of killing him myself.*

Saying it that way, Ranta had expected that Takasagi wouldn't refuse. Why? Because, judging by Takasagi's personality, he'd want to test Ranta.

In a way, that might have been Takasagi's weakness. Takasagi was too good. He was too perceptive, and could tell the clear difference in their skill levels. Takasagi knew Ranta was beneath him. He was a kid. Not worth fighting. Because of that, Takasagi had thought he could take care of Ranta any time he needed to. He hadn't really been looking down on him. It'd been an accurate assessment of reality. So that was the one opening Ranta had to work with, that Takasagi would let Ranta do his thing, even while suspecting him.

If Ranta had turned out to be fully loyal to Forgan, good. If not—if Ranta had tried to betray Forgan—he would've been dealt with then.

In the end, Ranta had gotten into a one-on-one fight with Haruhiro.

After that, he'd just had to win it. To beat Haruhiro down. Make him surrender.

They won't kill you, Haruhiro, he'd thought. *There's a path. A way to make this all work out.*

I show you what I'm made of. Then, when you're good and beaten, I'll make a proposal. All you have to do is say, "Okay." It's simple.

Joining Forgan will solve everything. No, not just me joining. All of us. We'll become members of Forgan. For now, there's no need to think about whether that'll be a permanent thing or not. Just join. Live with the orcs, the undead, the elves, and the other races here. Just once, try talking with Jumbo. You'll shit yourselves. The man's huge. Oh, I guess he's an orc, not a man. Well, you'll forget that in no time.

It'll broaden your horizons. We don't know a thing about Grimgar. You'll realize that so bad it hurts. You'll find out the human world is small, damn small. We became volunteer soldiers out of necessity, and we've been living that life, but I seriously question whether that's okay. Did we choose this for ourselves? Weren't we just forced to make that choice? Maybe we're just being used, you

know?

Haruhiro, I know you won't believe this, but I'm wracking my brains, too. I've thought about a whole lot in a short time. I want to tell you, and the others, what I've been thinking. I want you to hear me out. What do you all think?

Just because they're orcs, does that make them our enemies? Sure, undead are creepy, but they can drink and party, too, you know? They sit shoulder-to-shoulder with comrades, telling stories. For me, if I set my mind to it, I think I could get by here. I want to talk it over properly, and hear what you guys have to think.

You especially, Haruhiro.

I want to hear what you think.

I mean, you mull things over forever. You're not the type to decide on intuition. I won't say we're polar opposites, but we're pretty different.

I hate you, and I bet the feeling is mutual. Frankly, we just don't get along. Even after all this time working together, you and I aren't friends. I can't be your friend. If you weren't doing a bang-up job as leader, I'd have ditched you long ago. That's all you're worth to me, after all.

I'm sure you see things differently than me, and you think things I never would. You think differently. In ways that irritate me. You say things that piss me off.

That's exactly why I wanted to show you this world. This is another world that exists. Even without going to another world like the Dusk Realm or Darunggar, there are worlds out there that we don't know. With the long time we spent in Darunggar, don't you think we could accept another side of Grimgar? Don't you think we should?

Haruhiro, what do you think...?

"...Geh," Ranta muttered. *That ass.*

Ranta pressed down on his right shoulder with his left hand.

He'd known that Haruhiro was going to pull something. If he hadn't done something drastic, Haruhiro would've stood no chance of winning. He was

normally cautious to the point of cowardice, but sometimes he could be bold.

What is he going to try? Ranta had wondered.

His most special of specialties, Backstab and Spider, had both been completely locked down. Keeping them locked down only required not letting Haruhiro get behind him, so that was easy for Ranta, with his superior mobility. He'd known that if he stayed on the lookout for that combo of Swat, Arrest, Shatter, Slap, Hitter, he could defend against it, too. Outside of that, any distractions or feinting maneuvers wouldn't work on Ranta, who knew all of his tricks.

He'll try to take us both down. Ranta had thought the possibility of that was high. Even if Haruhiro hadn't tried something that would kill both of them, he might've sacrificed an arm to land a lethal blow on Ranta. It was exactly the sort of thing that guy would think to do.

Assault.

Ranta had known about it. Haruhiro didn't use the skill often. It was too exhausting, and it required him being prepared to die with his opponent, so it was only a valid move in a limited number of circumstances. But Ranta had known he might try to bet it all on that.

He'd predicted it.

Haruhiro's Assault had been beyond what Ranta had expected. He hadn't calculated for that.

That momentary burst of speed. To be specific, the start of it. That was what had settled it.

No.

He settled it.

Haruhiro had decided this was the only way he could beat Ranta. He'd resolved himself to do it, and he'd bet on that one moment.

That had probably been all Haruhiro had. If Ranta had just lasted through it, he'd have won. There would've been no second attempt.

If Haruhiro tried it again, he'd be able to respond.

It was true, Ranta had lost. But if you asked which of them was stronger, it was still Ranta. Haruhiro would probably acknowledge that, too.

Ranta was stronger than Haruhiro, but he'd lost. Haruhiro had stolen the win from Ranta using a method that was so very like him.

"...Didn't I know?" Ranta muttered. "That he'd pull something like that. Why'd he manage to get me? Was I underestimating him?"

He'd had an elf shaman heal the shoulder that Haruhiro had stabbed with his stiletto. The wound was closed now. It couldn't hurt, but there was a dull throbbing.

"Hey..." came a voice like a damp breeze.

Ranta's eyes snapped open. Arnold was sitting across from him at the campfire.

Arnold, who was half-naked, was a type of undead called a double arm, and he should have had four arms, but one of his left ones was missing. His whole body was wrapped in blackish leather, so Ranta couldn't see how bad the wounds were, but he had to be all beaten up.

From what Ranta had heard, so long as the undead didn't leave their wounds open, they'd heal. That said, it wasn't immediate. It would take some time. They could apparently stick another arm on, or something like that, too. However, it had to be held in place until it took, and—Ranta didn't really know anything about how this worked, but there was an element of compatibility between the undead and the other creature's body, so there were times when it wouldn't take at all. In bad cases, the arm or leg would just hang there limply until it eventually rotted and fell off.

The undead were without life. That was why they wouldn't die. Their bodies were not their own. They were based on other living creatures. The undead were markedly different from other living creatures. In fact, they weren't living creatures at all.

I wonder what it's like living as an undead... Well, not that they're alive to begin with.

But it was hard to see them as anything other than alive.

He was probably being misled by his fixed preconceptions. If something moved like a living being, that meant it was alive. *It has to be alive* was what he'd decided in his head. However, he had the undead in front of him, and they didn't fit into that classification.

"...Yo." Ranta bowed his head a little. What sort of expression should he make?

Arnold had faced Rock, the head of the Typhoon Rocks, a group within the Day Breakers, one-on-one, and it had ended in a tie because Jumbo had put the match on hold. Ranta had only seen part of the fight, but it'd been an intense back and forth brawl, and either of them could have emerged victorious.

It had been guaranteed that that the match wouldn't be decided until one, or perhaps both of them, died or was destroyed. Jumbo hadn't liked that outcome.

Ranta didn't really get it. *Isn't that what fights are like?*

What did Arnold think about it? Was he satisfied?

"Hey there." When Ranta finished wondering what to do, he ultimately settled on smiling. "Arnold-san."

Arnold said, "Heh..." his face distorting slightly. It might have been a laugh. Then he threw the container in his right hand over to Ranta.

Ranta caught it. It wasn't porcelain, or wood, or metal. The container was made of a material similar to leather, but it was awfully hard for that to be the case. It had a narrow mouth, and a stopper. He knew what was inside. Alcohol. Though, sadly, he didn't have a cup handy.

How much time had passed since sundown? Takasagi had apparently taken around half of Forgan to go chasing after the Rocks, Haruhiro, and the others. The other half that stayed with Jumbo were resting in this general area, or they were around the fire having a good time.

Ranta had built the campfire in front of him by himself. The elf shaman who'd treated him and a number of others had called out to him, but Ranta hadn't even given them a proper response. He hadn't known what they were saying, and he wasn't in the mood to wildly gesticulate in an attempt to get his intention across. Honestly, *please, just leave me alone,* was his attitude right

now.

“Aw...” While holding the container in his right hand, Ranta shook his left hand, indicating to Arnold that he had no cup.

“Dwin,” Arnold said, gesturing with his chin. *Just drink it already,* was what that apparently meant.

“Don’t mind if I do, then.” Ranta uncorked the container and drank directly from it. When he tilted it back, the dry liquor with just the right amount of sourness poured down his throat. “...Yeah. This is good stuff. I like it.”

Arnold said, “Gimme to me...” and bent one finger.

Once Ranta put the stopper back in and tossed the container over, Arnold took a drink, too, and chuckled.

His eyes are totally dead, though.

There was no life in Arnold’s eyes. It still felt bizarre to see an undead drinking, eating, and laughing. But it didn’t surprise him anymore. More than that, when Arnold was considerate like this, he found it calming, if strange.

What is this? he wondered. *Huh, Haruhiro? Would you guys feel this way, too? Or is it just me?*

He’d wanted to find that out, to know.

If Haruhiro and the others felt similarly to Ranta, it might mean there was something here that the human society in Alterna lacked.

But what if they didn’t?

What if Ranta were the only one to feel this strange sense of calm?

It’d mean I was different, of course. It’d mean the place where you guys are isn’t for me. Because I spent all that time in a place where I didn’t belong, I always felt irritated, and unable to settle down. Is that what it’d mean?

Ranta had started to think he couldn’t be friends with his comrades. He was probably right. It required mutual understanding. But they didn’t have to be buddy-buddy. No, it was the opposite. It was best if they weren’t. Instead of being clingy, they should keep an appropriate distance. That way, they could

fight about what they were thinking. Hating one and other was just fine.

Ranta hung his head. *But was it really like that from the beginning...?*

"Ranta-kun," Moguzo had said.

He had such a great look on his face then. It was a long time ago now, but I remember it so well.

"Someday, let's do it. Open a restaurant."

Moguzo...

No doubt about it, he'd been serious about that. Damn straight. Even if the whole world got turned upside down, Moguzo wasn't the sort of guy who'd say a thing he didn't mean.

He hadn't been just a comrade. He'd been a partner.

Was Ranta scared? Of losing someone again? Was that why he didn't want to get close to the others?

Thinking about it, back when Moguzo'd been alive, for all their bickering, the three guys had hung out together a lot. Ever since Moguzo had died, unless Ranta had some business with the others, when he'd wanted to drink, he'd gone out by himself.

It hadn't been a conscious decision. He'd probably been distancing himself from his comrades on an unconscious level. It hadn't caused any particular problems.

It's not like I need friends, you know?

Was that true?

It would be fine to have people he could open up to. Didn't he want them?

Still hanging his head, Ranta stretched his right hand out in front of him. He heard Arnold standing up.

Arnold approached, and put the container of alcohol in Ranta's hand. Ranta knocked the container back and gulped down its contents.

It stung.

“Heh...” Arnold laughed, but not to mock Ranta. He wasn’t the type to do that.

Haruhiro. Why didn’t you just go down quietly for me...?

I had to do that. Yeah, I was serious. I went at it hard enough that I might’ve killed you. Damn straight I did. If I didn’t, Takasagi might’ve finished me. Besides—you aren’t who you used to be, either. If I don’t go all out, I can’t beat you.

But, man, you know there’s no way I’d kill you, right?

We may not be friends, but we’re comrades, okay? You understand that much, don’t you? You’re supposed to be Haruhiro, but you couldn’t read what I was thinking? We’ve been together all this time, so why didn’t you get it...? Then, to top it all off—

You tried to kill me, didn’t you?

If Merry hadn’t stopped you, man, you might’ve killed me, huh?

That means—yeah, you don’t trust me.

Not that I’m disappointed. It’s just an, “Oh, yeah, that figures.” It’s nothing. That’s all we were, in the end.

I just feel a little pathetic, that’s all. That I tried to put my trust in someone who doesn’t even trust me. I was an idiot. A total idiot.

“Hey...” Ranta muttered.

He’d only drunk from the container twice, but he could already feel the alcohol taking its effect. Arnold had already returned to the opposite side of the fire and sat down.

Ranta smiled to him. “Arnold.”

Even when he addressed him without an honorific, Arnold didn’t seem offended in the least. He looked at Ranta with those dead eyes, as if to say, *What is it?*

Ranta didn’t fully understand what it was he was trying to do, or what it was he wanted. “O darkness—” He started to chant, then, *Oh, right,* he realized. He might be trying to reveal himself. He might be planning to open up, to have a

heart-to-heart. That might be something that he wanted.

“Heya,” Takasagi broke in.

If the guy hadn’t suddenly appeared, Ranta probably would have summoned Zodiac-kun. Why had he not used Demon Call even once since joining Forgan?

Because he hadn’t felt like it. He hadn’t had the opportunity. If you said that, then that was all there was to it, but there had likely been an element of fear involved, too.

The nature of a dread knight’s demon was difficult to explain succinctly. They weren’t what you would call a familiar, but they weren’t a part of the dread knight, either. Demons were unquestionably sentient. They had a will of their own, too. They wouldn’t appear unless called by their dread knight, and they were bound tightly to their summoner, but they were independent, in a way, too. The dread knight couldn’t control the demon. They couldn’t move them about at will, but the dread knight was connected to their demon.

The demon grew, or changed, as the dread knight accrued vice, and the way they developed was up to the dread knight. Furthermore, that growth and change was irreversible. There was no turning back. A dread knight couldn’t remake their demon, and they couldn’t cast it away. The precepts stated that a dread knight’s devotion to the Dark God Skullhell lasted a lifetime. The demon would be with the dread knight until they were embraced by Skullhell. The demon was their partner of the journey towards their inevitable death.

From experience, Ranta knew. A dread knight couldn’t deceive their demon. Even if he could lie to himself, his demon would never be tricked.

Ranta’s demon, Zodiac-kun, was very different from him. It was said that most demons didn’t resemble their dread knights. It was apparently common for male dread knights to end up with female demons. There were cases where burly muscle men had little puppy-like demons serving them, too.

Despite that, the demon really did reflect their dread knight.

If he called Zodiac-kun, how would the demon act? Ranta had no idea, and that was scary.

The uninhibited Zodiac-kun might hit him where it hurt. Ranta might let how

he really felt slip when he was with Zodiac-kun. Zodiac-kun might spill Ranta's real emotions, which even he himself was unaware of.

There was also the reason that he didn't want to go out of his way to reveal that he was a dread knight. He was hiding his Skullhell necklace, and the armor he had been using didn't have a brand that stood out, so it wasn't apparent from his appearance. Though, that said, Takasagi might've discerned it from his fighting style. Ranta never knew what might happen, or when, so he didn't want to tip his cards. More than that, though, he didn't want to give away what was in his heart.

With an "Oof..." Takasagi sat down next to Ranta, bending his head left, then right. His joints cracked.

When Ranta handed over Arnold's alcohol like it was no big deal, Takasagi said, "Oh, thanks," and took a swig.

"...So, you were back," said Ranta.

"Just now. I just got in." Takasagi scowled and clicked his tongue. "No luck, I'm afraid. Worse yet, Onsa's not coming back. I'd like to think they can't have taken him out, though."

"That's—" Ranta rubbed his nose.

The words wouldn't come to him. *What am I thinking?*

No luck. That meant the others hadn't been killed, or captured. Assuming Takasagi wasn't lying to him.

He couldn't be sure about that. Takasagi was probably capable of being as underhanded as he had to, and wouldn't hesitate to resort to deceit or anything else. Furthermore, he didn't trust Ranta. Takasagi might be dropping hints about Haruhiro and the others' fates to see how Ranta would react. That was entirely possible. If so, he was best not to show too much interest.

Maybe he should show concern for Onsa, who hadn't come back? That seemed too forced.

Ranta sniffled without a word, and shrugged.

"The Rocks, was it?" Takasagi threw the container of alcohol over to Arnold,

then pulled his pipe out of his pocket. “They’re pretty good. Ranta, your comrades still have a ways to go, but they may be surprisingly stubborn.”

“Former comrades, you mean.”

“You’re not completely without compassion for them, surely.”

“For guys who tried to kill me?” Ranta shot back.

“What, are you sulking about that?”

“I’m not—” Ranta narrowed his eyes and scrutinized Takasagi. “Huh?”

“That thief.” Takasagi filled his pipe with ground tobacco. “He could have killed you, but chose not to. That’s how it looked to me.”

“...I dunno about that.”

“You have the cheek to resent him?” Takasagi took a burning branch from the fire, and lit his pipe. “To him, you’re the traitor. You’ve got no place to resent him, have you?”

“Don’t be silly. I don’t resent him.” Ranta nearly raised his voice, but he just managed to restrain himself. “There’s no way I would.”

Takasagi blew smoke. “It’s a shame your plan didn’t work out, Ranta.”

Ranta’s heart went cold. Had Takasagi seen through him? If so, how far? Or was he just acting like he knew something? Takasagi was trying to shake Ranta up. To tear off his disguise?

Though, if he wasn’t wearing a disguise, it couldn’t be torn off. He’d thought he was wearing one, but maybe he’d been naked all along. What if he were wearing another disguise beneath the disguise?

Honestly, Ranta wanted to know the answer myself.

How do I really feel...?

“Things never go as planned. That’s life.” Ranta forced himself to let out a nasal laugh. “That’s what makes it fun.”

“You act like you’re so experienced.”

“What, has your life gone as planned, then?”

“Mine?” Takasagi took a puff from his pipe, then another, then, *phew,* he blew smoke and emptied the ashes out of the pipe bowl. “Well...”

When, and how, had this middle-aged man lost his left eye and right arm? He said he’d once been a volunteer soldier. Why was he in Forgan now? Would there come a day where he’d be able to hear Takasagi’s story, from the man’s own lips?

“Old man,” said Ranta.

“Huh?”

“Me, I want to get stronger.”

He’d thought he might get laughed at for saying this. But Takasagi merely snorted and said, “And?” indicating he should continue.

“Do you understand? ...Well, not that I need you to. I wanna get strong. I’m sure you know this, but damn, I’m weak. Even this is better than I was before, though, you know? Still, I’ve got a long way to go. I dunno how to say it, but living when you’re weak, you wouldn’t understand, but... It’s tough. You’ve gotta give up on all these things. It’s lame.”

“Listen, Ranta,” said Takasagi.

“Yeah?”

“You may have trouble imagining this because you’re young, but even an old man like me was young once. While I had both my eyes and arms back then, I lacked skill with the sword.”

“...I’m sure you did, yeah, but I can’t imagine it.”

“As far as I know, only a handful of geniuses are able to get strong without seeking strength for themselves. Our boss, for instance. I’m not like that. Even if there were ten of you, you couldn’t beat me the way I am now. But the me of ten years ago, you could.”

“You’ve gotten stronger.”

“It’s like you said, Ranta. It’s tough being weak. It narrows your path.”

“...It’s suffocating.”

“Strength doesn’t only come in one variety, though.”

“There’re lots of types of strength.” Ranta nodded. “Even I understand that. Vaguely. But what I want is to be able to fight earnestly, and not lose. That sort of easy-to-understand strength.”

“There’s always someone above you,” said Takasagi.

“I know that... I know so bad that it hurts. But if I don’t have enough room that I can stand up without hitting my head. That’s tough.”

“There’s too much that you’re lacking.”

“I don’t have the height, after all.”

“Even with that, those who are strong are still strong.”

“You’re saying I lack talent, right? Basically.”

“That’s right.”

“...You’re blunt about it.”

“I don’t lie when I don’t have to.”

“I know that already.” Ranta strained his neck, which had been about to droop down. “Everyone’s got a limit. But they’re not all the same. It’s different for all of us. There are guys who start at one and can go to ten, and there are guys who end up stuck at five. There are guys who start at ten and go to one hundred, too. For the guy stuck at five, no matter how he tries, he can’t even hit ten. The best he’ll do is a six, maybe a seven. That’s all he’s good for.”

“Listen, Ranta.” Takasagi started filling his pipe again. “Having gotten to my age, there’s something I think whenever I see younger folks. That’s, *Don’t do things that are futile.* Generally, you can’t see yourself. Even in a mirror, the image is distorted. There’s no helping that. If you live wanting for this and that, eventually you learn your place. Up until then, all you can do is struggle. If you bite it while struggling, well, that’s interesting in its own way. You have to take it as it is.”

“I’m not gonna bite it,” Ranta shot back. “I have no intention of learning my place, either.”

“I see guys like you sometimes.” Takasagi lit his pipe. “Morons, basically.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“You wanna get strong, Ranta?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Rahntah...” Arnold suddenly called his name, which surprised him. When he looked over, Arnold was smiling with his gash-like maw.

When Ranta smiled back, Arnold let out a “Heheh...” and took a drink.

“There’re a lot of morons out there.” Takasagi twisted his neck around as he blew smoke. “They’re everywhere.”

“All right!” Ranta jumped to his feet. He bent his knees and stretched. He moved his shoulders up and down. He spun his arms in circles. His right shoulder didn’t hurt one bit. It was in great shape.

The fog in Thousand Valley was thin tonight. Almost nonexistent, you could say.

Looking up to the night sky, he could see the red moon.



7. Indulgence



Floating... and sinking. He would notice he was floating, then sink. Sink endlessly.

There was no bottom. None, anywhere.

He felt heavy. So heavy that he didn’t know what was weighing him down. Then... he’d get lighter.

Ah. This is bad... he thought. *Huh? What is this? What’s... going on? It’s so... dark.*

It was pitch black. And... he couldn’t move.

Or maybe not?

It wasn’t like he couldn’t move his hands and feet. But somehow... it felt cramped.

Was he sleeping? Was he lying down somewhere?

No.

Obviously, he wasn’t standing, either.

His body was at an angle. His head was below his feet. It was like... he was wedged in somewhere? Or something like that?

It felt like a bad idea to call out.

Why?

Enemies.

That was right.

He’d be in a bad spot if the enemy found him. But who was the enemy?

What were they again?

I...

What was I doing?

Nothing, really.

I took a shower, dried my hair, and then was watching TV when Big Sis said something to me, and I was like, “Ugh, you’re so annoying.”

Then I went to my room, lazed around checking my smartphone, and got a call from Yukki saying, “I can’t head out after this,” or something like that.

I was like, “It’s fine! You can, you can.”

Big Sis was still nagging me. When I said, “Who do you think you are? You’re not my mom,” she came back at me with, “We don’t have parents, so I’m the one who has to say it!”

When did I ever ask for this? I didn’t, did I? Frankly, I don’t need it.

“Cut it out.”

“What? You’re saying I’m annoying?” she demanded.

“Well, to be honest, yeah, you’re annoying.”

“Well, then try getting your act together.”

“No, I’m acting normal.”

“In what way?”

“On the whole?”

“You’re taller than anyone, so I can’t stand to see you acting so irresponsible.”

“I’m not being irresponsible.”

“You so are. No matter how I look at you, you’re acting irresponsible.”

“No one’s ever said that to me. Only you, okay?”

“Don’t take that tone with me.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Honestly, you get me so ticked off.”

“Isn’t it exhausting, getting ticked off over every little thing?”

“It is exhausting. Isn’t that obvious? Don’t wear me out.”

“Then why don’t you just leave me alone?”

“That’s not going to work, and you know it.”

“It’ll work, seriously. I’m fine.”

“Says the guy who can’t even feed himself properly.”

“I can eat. If I wasn’t eating, I wouldn’t be so tall.”

“Like, seriously,” she muttered.

Big Sis was tiny. It wasn’t just that she was just small compared to me. She was under 160 centimeters (155, I thought it was), so I was pretty sure she was small even for a woman. That was why, when we were facing each other like this, Big Sis looked up at me. She was forced to turn her face way up.

Big Sis wasn’t just short; she was like a little animal. You could see it in things like how her head was small, even though she was short, but her eyes were big and dark, and her mouth was tiny. Or her hair, that she cut sometimes, and grew out at other times. Or the way her mood changed easily. Or the way she was pretty thin, but her skin was squishy.

She was my Big Sis, and there was nothing else she could have been, but she didn’t look like a big sis. It might’ve been different a long time ago, but if people were to see me walking with Big Sis now, not many would think we were brother and sister. Not that it really mattered, but we didn’t look like we were brother and sister.

“You’ve sure grown,” Big Sis said.

“What’re you getting all sappy for?”

“Well, Mom, she was big. So I always thought you’d grow. People say it, don’t they? That if a boy’s mother is big, he’s going to be big, too.”

“Ohh. Yeah, they do. I’ve heard that from Aunt Yasuko repeatedly.”

“But I never thought you’d get *this* big.”

“It’s not like I’m the one who decided on it. I was always telling my body to stop. You’re probably fine up until about 182 centimeters. But any more than that, and you start hitting your head all over the place in this country.”

“182? Why so precise?”

“Well, my friend says anyone 183 and over hits their head, no exceptions. If you’re under 182, that’s not the case.”

“Your friends are like giants, after all.”

“I know a lot of them are big because I used to play basketball, but some of them are small, too.”

“Are you going out?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“You delinquent.”

Big Sis always puffed her cheeks up like a little kid when she got angry. That was another way she wasn’t like a big sis. But this big sis who wasn’t like a big sis had gotten herself into a good company, was working hard, and was making money. She always wore a camisole and short pants around the house, like she was now, but when she went to work, she wore a suit. She’d tie her hair up, too.

I pinched Big Sis’s cheeks and pulled on them.

“Hey!” Big Sis cried, brushing my hands away. “Stop that!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Geez!”

“Well, I’m off,” I said. “You go to sleep, Big Sis.”

“Of course I’m going to go to sleep,” she retorted. “I have work tomorrow.”

“Keep at it.”

“You tick me off so bad!”

I left the house. When I closed the door, the hallway in our apartment building were awfully quiet. I didn’t like this sort of silence, where it felt like I

had something plugging my ears.

Before Mom died, I was at the hospital for days. I'd been told it was against regulations or something to stay overnight, but when I laid down in the hall, or on the couch in the waiting room, the nurses on the night shift didn't complain. In fact, they even talked to me sometimes. There were clearly people in the hospital at night, but unless something happened, it was strangely quiet, and I couldn't take that.

I should've gone home, but I felt obligated not to, like it was my duty to stay in the hospital. I worried that if I left, Mom might die. I had no reason to think she would, but that was how it felt.

At the same time, though, I didn't want to be there when Mom took her last breath. It was unpleasant watching her gradually die. I knew she would die eventually, but I didn't want to accept it. The sadness had long since passed.

Mom hadn't just been sickly to begin with; she'd also been through several operations for cancer. When I was a kid, I'd cried every time, but I was long past that.

I hated the hospital, but for some reason, I couldn't leave it.

Big Sis went to school up until the day Mom died.

It finally started looking bad, and the nurse told me I should call my dad and big sister, so I phoned them both. Neither answered, so I called Dad's company and Big Sis's school. Big Sis came immediately, but Dad said on the phone that he might take a while.

I calmly thought, *Well, it's noon, so he's probably not with his mistress. Must be work.*

My dad had a mistress he'd been seeing forever. I knew, Big Sis knew, and Mom knew, too.

Just once, I'd said to my father, "I'm amazed you could just leave her like that, and find yourself another woman."

Instead of snapping at me, he'd calmly said, "I doubt you understand, and I

don’t expect you to, but if I didn’t do something like this, I couldn’t keep things in balance.”

In the end, Dad made it in time, but Mom had lost consciousness well before her heart stopped, so it didn’t make much difference. Big Sis was crying like a baby, and Dad sobbed a little, too.

I couldn’t cry.

The silent hall I stood in now took me back to how I’d felt then. In a word: miserable. It had felt unpleasant being there, and I just wanted it to end already.

I walked down the hall quickly, and got in the elevator. Inside the elevator, I checked my smartphone, and then— Then what...?

“...Huh?”

What was it?

There was something bothering him.

No, there was nothing bothering him. There had been something there. There should have been, but there was nothing. It had vanished.

“Big Sis... I... Wait, huh?”

Big Sis.

Had he just said “Big Sis”? If he’d been saying “Big Sis,” he had to be talking about a big sister. A big sister.

He had a big sister? He had a vague sense that he’d had a sibling. But even when he thought about it, he didn’t know if it was a big sister or a big brother that he’d had, and he obviously couldn’t remember them.

Had he had a big sister? He had called her Big Sis.

“...It doesn’t feel real,” Kuzaku murmured.

Whatever the case, there was one thing that was certain. Forget a Big Sis; he didn’t even have comrades here. It was just him.

Also, he didn't know where "here" was. Why was he in this dark, cramped place alone?

Think, he told himself. If he couldn't even remember that, he had it pretty bad.

His head hurt. If he moved it even a little, it ached. It wasn't just his head. His neck hurt, too. He was still wearing his helmet. He hadn't taken it off.

He'd been running.

Right. He was still in the middle of running away from Forgan.

Just what had happened?

He didn't know. When he'd come to, he'd been like this.

Anyway, he needed to get out.

Get out.

Of this place.

Could he get out? How?

First... Yeah, first... the situation. He had to get a grasp on the situation. Haruhiro was always saying that.

It was dark, so he'd have to feel around to figure out what was what. Kuzaku tried to do that, and he was shocked.

He was empty-handed.

No sword, no shield.

"...Seriously?"

This was the worst. He wanted someone to help him. But it wasn't going to happen. No one would save him. He was alone.

After his original party had been wiped out, he had been alone in Alterna for days. But that was Alterna. There'd been people around. He chased Haruhiro around, too. Basically, he'd wanted someone to save him. Who was he going to turn to help now, though?

Things were completely different this time. There was no one here.

Kuzaku had probably been here for a good amount of time. Maybe Haruhiro and the others were looking for him, and just couldn't find him.

If he stayed put here, they'd find him eventually. No, that line of thinking was probably far too optimistic.

There was an earthy smell, but it wasn't the same as dirt. It seemed damp near his left hand.

The area near his right hand was dry, more of a curved wall than a sheer cliff. The incline on his left was fairly steep, but that didn't mean it was totally unclimbable... or was it? He couldn't say without trying.

I'll try it, I guess, he thought. *I have to do it.*

First, he turned his body around, getting his head facing upwards. Then he started slowly clambering up the steep slope.

He came close to giving up several times. Every few minutes, no, every ten seconds, he would think, *I can't take any more, I hate this, it's over, I want to stop, fine, I'll die, somebody kill me,* and a whole lot of other things, but so what?

Alas, when there was no one to save him, getting dejected and desperate only made him feel empty. It was fine if someone would comfort him when he cried, but when there wasn't the remotest possibility of that, he couldn't even find the willpower to cry.

Kuzaku had no will to try harder. He just wanted to run away from the difficulty, the pain, the loneliness, the uncertainty, and the fear. He wanted to be released.

He knew he was near the outside. The air here was different. The cold, moist air was flowing in from up above.

Once he crawled out, he lay on his back facing up for a while.

"...Wait, I'm alive, right?"

The sky was studded with countless stars.

They were so clear it felt like he should be able to reach out and grab them, but they weren't bright in the slightest.

Dark.

This world was endlessly dark, and it weighed heavily on Kuzaku. He found it suffocating. But he only felt suffocated by it; his actual breathing wasn't impacted much. He hurt all over, but he wouldn't be dying immediately, at least.

He stood up and tried to remove his helmet. His neck hurt when he bent it. He didn't feel dizzy or nauseous. He felt much better without the helmet on, so he decided to carry it under his arm.

He stood up and tried walking around. There were no trees nearby. It looked like an open area. It wasn't very grassy, and was more or less level.

It seemed Kuzaku had fallen into a rift and lost consciousness. It wouldn't be funny if he fell into another, so he'd have to watch out.

His current location was unclear. He had no idea where it was. He'd even lost the weapon with which he protected himself. The situation was nothing if not terrible.

"...What now?"

No one was going to tell him. He had to think for himself, and act on his own.

"Well, I'll manage... is something I'm gonna have a hard time thinking. Yeah."

Despite that, Kuzaku was trying to walk forward. He could hear the chirping of insects and birds. He didn't know the reason why, but he hated when things were so silent that it felt like his ears had been plugged.

This darkness wasn't that quiet. That alone made it much better than that hole.

8. Not Weird



His left foreleg was probably broken, or he had some similar injury. That was why Garo was keeping his left foreleg raised, and was trying to avoid it touching the ground.

Because he was in that state, Garo couldn't climb slopes, so they could only go along the flat areas. Onsa was using a branch he picked up as a walking stick, too. He seemed to be hurt somewhere.

Yume was the only one who was fine—or at least, that was what she'd have liked to say, but she was pretty tuckered out. It also seemed she'd cut herself on something sharp while sliding, and she had gouges on her right arm, left leg, and left side. However, none of them were that serious. Or so she'd thought, but it looked like they were festering.

She was sure she had a fever.

Yume had decided that if Garo and Onsa tried to rest, she would sit down and catch her breath, too. It wasn't like they had talked it over and decided to travel together, and they couldn't understand each other when they talked to begin with. But, as far as Yume was concerned, if they weren't going to fight, there was no need to split up. It was obvious that two people was better than one, and two people and one wolf was better still.

If Yume took a rest, what would Onsa and Garo do? Would they leave her behind? She didn't want to be left alone.

It was something she just had a vague sense of, but Yume thought Onsa and Garo felt the same as her. So she might be surprised to find Onsa and Garo would stop for her, too. She couldn't be sure.

It's high time for Garon or Onsan to be restin', too.

If they would, then Yume could take a break without worries.

Where was this place?

It'd been a while since the sun had gone down.

Onsa and Garo's steps were faltering, but they showed no sign of hesitation. They probably knew the way. It was just that they could only go at a sluggish pace, so it was taking a while to get to their destination.

Where were Onsa and Garo headed? To their comrades' place?

"...Forgan, was it?" She hadn't meant to say that out loud, but she mumbled the words.

Onsa gave a low grunt. Was that a response?

Yume pressed her hands to both cheeks. *It's hard tellin' if they're hot or not. It is, but Yume's feeling real fuzzy and woozy. What's goin' on?*

"Hurmm..." she murmured.

Forgan, huh.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her.

What'll happen if Yume goes to Forgan's place? Feels like it might be not so good. Will Ranta be there, too?

Stupid Rantaaaa.

But Haru-kun, he...

What'd Haru-kun do to Ranta again?

What was it?

Yume can't remember so well.

This could be tough... Yume thought, despite not wanting to, and almost stopped.

That was when it happened. Garo, who was up ahead, fell on his side.

"Garo!" Onsa raced over to crouch at the wolf's side.

Yume forgot all about her fever, and tried to run over to Garo, too.

Did she trip over herself? Or stumble over something else? She tried to recover, but she fell down.

Once she was down, it was hard to even raise her face. Before she knew it, her eyes ended up closed. It was too dark to see much of anything anyway. There was no need to strain herself.

Yume curled up into a ball, like Yume was some sort of larva. Doing this made her feel at ease.

“What’s that supposed to be? Are you trying to get a laugh out of people?” She remembered... someone saying that to her.

“That’s filthy. You’re all covered in mud.”

“Nuh uh. It’s dirt, y’know.”

“Same difference.”

“Is not. They’re as different as water and ice.”

“Water and ice’re the same, y’know.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Oh, shove off.”

Those people sure like talking, she thought. Even after she’d gone out of her way to go into the bushes in the school yard, and curled up there...

How did they find Yume? Yume didn’t want to be found.

“Hey, you, aren’t you gonna come out?” a girl called.

“You think she’s feelin’ intimidated?” another girl asked.

“Wow, that’s gross. You make it sound like we’ve been bullyin’ her or somethin’.”

“You’re a natural bully, after all, Hii-chan.”

“Hey, Kina, don’t go sayin’ stuff that makes me sound bad. What’re you gonna do if she takes it seriously?”

“But it’s true, y’know.”

“You, too, Rucchin? Don’t jump on her awful bandwagon.”

“You say that, but if someone thinks they’re bein’ bullied, then it’s bullyin’.”

“I told you, I’m not bullyin’ her!”

“You can sound harsh, Hii-chan. The way you speak.”

“Well, sure, Kansai dialect can sound harsh enough on its own, too.”

“Sure, if you’re not a Native Kansaiberian.”

“What’s a Native Kansaiberian supposed to be? It’s too long!”

“Native Kansanberian.”

“You’re not even sayin’ it right! You’re trippin’ over your own tongue!”

Yume tried staying curled up in a ball and ignoring them, but the three tried dragging her out. She flailed about and tried resisting, but it was no use.

“Ooh...” she moaned.

“Don’t you be groanin’ at us. Stayin’ in there all the time ain’t gonna do you no good. It makes no sense.”

“Y’think this girl is a space case?” another girl asked.

“What’s a space case supposed to be?”

“Nah, I dunno.”

“You don’t?!”

“But this girl, she doesn’t talk all that much.”

“What’s her name supposed to be again?”

“XXX?”

“That’s her last name. I meant her first.”

“She said it in her self-introduction, y’know.”

“Yeah, that’s why I was askin’ you. She doesn’t talk herself.”

“Lessee... it was Yume, I think.”

“She really is a space case!”

“How so?!”

“No, I don’t know either.”

“You don’t?!”

“It’s Kina, after all.”

“Hey, Yume?” one girl asked.

“Your name’s Yume, right?” another added.

“...It’s Yume, yes,” Yume said. “Is that a problem?”

She’d responded because they were being so noisy, but they all went “Whoa!” and sounded taken aback.

“She’s totally speakin’ standard dialect!”

“Whaddaya mean ‘standard dialect,’ Kina?”

“They call them Osaka dialect and Kyoto dialect, so why not call theirs a dialect, too?”

“Kina’s got a point.”

“Fine, fine, I’m wrong.”

“You’re the straight man, Hii-chan. You can’t help it.”

“Yep, yep.”

“You make no sense!”

You people make no sense. This was why Yume hadn’t wanted to move here. It was always like this.

She knew there was no helping it. It was because of her parents’ situation. She’d resigned herself to it. It was like this every time.

“Yume’s not a space case,” she said insistently.

“Oh! She spoke again!”

“Well, yeah, she’s human, y’know.”

“Human? C’mon, Hii-chan, that’s a pretty basic thing to be callin’ me out on.”

It was kind of funny, and she mouthed their words back to herself, which only made it funnier, and she giggled. That made the three of them happy.

“What’re y’all so happy about?” Yume asked. She tried imitating the way they spoke around here, but the three of them clutched their sides laughing.

“Y’all, she said!”

“There’s a serious misunderstanding!”

“What a weird girl!”

Yume doesn’t think she’s a weird girl, though. Yume gets called that a lot.

Why?

What for?

Yume’s just acting normal.

And as time passed, she had some hesitation at first, and there were times when she had trouble fitting in, but it wasn’t as if she made no effort at all.

Yume’s not weird, Yume thought. *She’s not.*

“...Ungh.”

Yume opened her eyes and tried to get up. But her body felt awfully heavy, and she couldn’t lift it up at all.

There was a goblin looking down at her.

“...Onsan,” she whispered. Only an incredibly hoarse voice came out.

Onsa was staring at Yume with his light brown eyes. His goblin face had no real expression on it. What in the world was he thinking? Yume had no idea.

“Where’s Garon?” she asked.

Onsa gestured behind him with his chin. Garo was sitting right behind Onsa. With his left foreleg lifted a little, of course. But he looked to be in pretty good shape, even though she remembered him collapsing.

“Yume’s even more worn out, huh?” Yume pressed the back of her right hand to her forehead. It felt cold. Had her fever gone down?

The sky was just a little bright.

“Did Yume sleep for a while?”

There was no response. Onsa was still scrutinizing Yume.

“You were waitin’ for Yume, yeah?” she asked.

Onsa turned up the corners of his mouth and snorted.

“...Thanks. If you left her here, Yume’d have been perpexed about what to do. Huh...? It’s not perpexed, it’s purpluxed? No? Hm...”

“What a weird girl.”

She had the feeling someone had said that about her. When had that been, and who had said it?

She didn’t know.

She couldn’t recall.

Or was it just a feeling she had?

“Well, sure, but Yume doesn’t think she’s weird,” Yume said.

Onsa shook his head side-to-side lightly, and clicked his tongue. Was he irritated? That didn’t seem to be it.

Onsa raised the palm of his right hand over here, waggling his fingers around. Though this was only Yume’s guess, Onsa had probably clicked his tongue to get her attention, and now he was trying to communicate something with gestures. Like, *Get up.* Or maybe, *Can you get up?*

Yume sat up fast. When she tried to stand, she stumbled.

“Eek!”

If Onsa hadn’t reacted and supported her, Yume would probably have fallen over.

“...Ngh. Sorry about that, Onsan.”

“Kuh.” While still holding her up, Onsa turned to look away from Yume.

“But, y’know, Yume, she might be doin’ better than she was before? You two’re lookin’ good, too. Y’think it’s ’cause we got some good rest?”

Onsa didn’t respond, but Garo sneezed.

“Oooh,” said Yume. “Wolves sneeze, too, huh. They would, huh. It’s just sneezin’, huh. They’re animals, too, huh. They’re alive, after all, huh?”

Garo tilted his head to the side, as if he was thinking, *What is this human talking about?* Maybe he just looked that way, though.

Yume let out a breath, nodded, “Okay!” and patted Onsa on the back. “Yume’s feelin’ great now! Maybe she’s a little woozy, but that’s just a little handycup. Right?”

With a “Shh!” Onsa knocked Yume’s arm away, then started walking away using a branch as a cane. Garo followed Onsa. His steps were tottering because of the wound to his left foreleg, but that actually made it more cute. Yume followed after Garo with a giggle.

The sky was becoming brighter as she watched.

This whole area was densely forested. Because of that, even though there was hardly any fog, visibility was limited.

“Come to think of it, Yume trained in the forest with Master...” she mused.

There were times when she’d thought that they might never make it back to Grimgar. That she’d never see her master again.

“Yume might be able to see him, huh. Now that all this has happened, there’s no tellin’ when that’ll be, though. But, before that, there’s Haru-kun and everyone, y’know? Ahhh...!”

When Yume stopped and shouted, Onsa and Garo stopped, too, and turned back. Onsa’s eyes bugged out with surprise.

“Nwuh?! Onsan, you’re makin’ a real shocked face!” she exclaimed.

“Kuh...”

“Oh, it’s not that Yume’s makin’ fun of you, it’s just—You know, Yume, she doesn’t have any weapons! She does have a spare knife, though. Oh, a throwing

knife, too! Maybe this'll be enough? Hrmm. Yume's not feelin' too confident..."

Onsa let out a sigh, then went to turn back forward. As he did, there was a strange sound.

Pigyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

The sound was probably coming from above. Yume reflexively looked up to the sky.

"Kih!" Onsa let out a short, powerful shout and waved his arm. *Hide,* it seemed he wanted to say.

"Well, sure, but where—"

Onsa shouted, "Hah!" and pointed up ahead to the left. That area was dense with trees that had vines and leaves hanging from their thin branches, and it looked like they could hide themselves there. Yume and Onsa positioned themselves to the left and right of Garo and headed into the bushes.

Pigyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

The sound echoed through the area again. It was a real unpleasant sound. It disturbed her, and it was definitely coming from above. Did that mean the thing making that noise was up in the sky?

Garo laid down, with Onsa on his right, and Yume on his left. Garo was panting and his back went up and down with each breath. Yume stuck close to Garo's side, listening closely, and her eyes went as wide as saucers.

Pigyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

That voice. This was the third time now. It was like a scream, but it clearly wasn't human. This was probably the voice of a larger creature.

A voice. Right. This had to be the cry of some creature. If it was coming from the sky, did that make it a bird?

Onsa probably knew what the voice belonged to. It had to be a dangerous creature.

Yume looked up to the sky. The blue sky was peeking through the branches in some places.

Just now, she'd caught a glimpse of a shadow... maybe?

Onsa had his hand on the back of Garo's neck, not so much patting it as holding him in place.

Pigyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

This time, the cry was really loud.

She could hear other noises, too.

Fwump, fwump, fwump.

It was like the sound made when you swung something large and thin as hard as you could. Wings, huh? Was that the sound of beating wings?

Yume naturally held her breath.

It was coming.

Descending.

Something big.

It was—not close. Probably around the area where Yume and the others had been before. But, still, there was the sense that it was getting closer.

Yume covered her mouth with her hands. Why did she do a thing like that? There was no meaning to it. She just couldn't help herself.

There was a winged creature coming down, kicking leaves and branches out of its way.

It landed. There was an impact a second time, then a third time.

She could hardly see it. At all. The most she knew was there was something big, and it was over there.

It was probably blue. It seemed to be moving at a relaxed pace. The creature's body was hitting the trees and branches, making a lot of noise. She could hear what sounded like footsteps, too.

Was it walking?

Somehow, she got the feeling it wasn't a bird.

Yume wanted to close her eyes. That wouldn't be good. She was struggling to

breathe.

It was because she'd stopped. There was no need to hold her breath the whole time. At least, if she didn't breathe, she was going to die. She should breathe. She had no choice. Quietly. In and out, as quietly as she could.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Measure the distance using sound and its sense of presence.

Was the winged creature coming closer? Or was it getting farther away?

Unfortunately, it was approaching them. The rustling of leaves and sound of footsteps forced her to come to that conclusion.

Master had told her, *Listen, Yume, there are three times I've thought I was a goner. One of those times, I got stranded, and was on the verge of death. The other two times, I was up against an incredible foe. One that transcended human wisdom. There are creatures out there that'll make you realize how tiny you are. It's best not to encounter them at all, but if you happen to, what do you think you should do?*

Don't focus too much on them, Yume's master had warned her. *Their size and power is overwhelming. If you focus on an opponent like that, you'll be overcome with awe. You won't be able to think straight. In the worst case, you may not be able to move. So look at yourself, instead.*

Being a hunter is a lifestyle, Master would often say. *To live at one with this world. It's a path to doing that. Those who live with the world will learn that they are only a small part of it. Even the White God Elhit is. Live as part of the world. That's what a hunter is.*

But understand, Master said with a gentle look in his eyes. *If you do that, it means being eaten by those who'll try to eat you. That, too, is a truth. That's how living beings go through the cycle of life and death, after all. They throw their lives away in front of a being of overwhelming power, and are consumed. They become its flesh and blood. It's the law of nature.*

But if you do that, you'll die.

When you want to live, when you want to survive no matter what—cut yourself off from the world. Yume, become a single person. Ask yourself: "What do I want to do? What should I do?" If you do that, you're sure to find an answer. If you can't find anything, it means you were missing something you needed. There's nothing you can do then.

But, Yume, this is something I want to say to you, not as a hunter, but as someone who's lived longer than you have: I believe in you. So believe in yourself, too. When it comes down to it, you're the only one you can rely on. The person who's going to be there to help you, and to save those you care about most, is you yourself.

What did Yume herself want to do? And what should she do?

This isn't scary, she thought.

She didn't know why; she just thought, *There's nothing to be afraid of.* She didn't have to be scared.

Garo was shaking. His whole body was trembling violently. Onsa was trying to calm Garo, but it didn't seem to be having any effect. Onsa was looking noticeably tense, too. Maybe Garo was picking up on his uneasiness.

Yume leaned against Garo. Rather than hug him too tight, or try patting him, she figured this would be better. She obviously didn't use her voice, but she mouthed the words, *It's okay, it's okay.*

Garo's heart was racing.

It's okay, it's okay. It's going to be okay.

It wasn't that she was certain of that. But, in the end, the winged creature never came to where Yume, Onsa and Garo were.

That noise...

Was it flapping its wings?

It was taking off.

Yume came close to saying something, but she held it in. Through a gap in the trees, she saw the winged creature ascending.

Was it a bird? No, not quite. It had a snake-like tail. It was blue. Its wings and body were blue, too.

“Wyvern...” whispered Onsa.

Wyvern? she thought.

Was that the creature’s name? A wyvern.

Yume buried her face in Garo’s fur and took a deep breath. “There’re things like that out there, huh. If it finds us, is everyone gonna get eaten?”

9. That’s What I Decided



She woke up.

Tsuga, the priest with the buzz cut, was crouching down right next to her, stroking his chin.

When Tsuga had suggested, *Why not rest a bit?* it had occurred to her that if she pushed herself too hard, she might actually end up causing more trouble for him, so she had laid down, and then immediately fallen asleep.

That had been closer to dawn than to midnight. It wasn’t noon yet. It was probably early in the morning. She hadn’t gotten much in the way of sleep, but had he seen her face while she was sleeping? That embarrassed her, and Shihoru looked away, pulling on her bangs as she got up.

“Um... Just now, did you hear something?”

“Yeah. I did hear it.”

“Any idea what that sound that might be...?”

“Nope, not the foggiest,” said Tsuga. “Sounded like some sort of creature, though.”

“I thought it sounded awfully loud...?”

“But it was pretty far away.”

“Do you think it’s okay?”

“I wonder.” Tsuga cocked his head to the side and let out a short yawn. “I’m not that good at living in the wild.”

“...Huh? But you’re a volunteer soldier.”

“Yeah, but only because I have to be. Because of the people I associate with,

you could say. If it were just me on my own, I wouldn't be doing this. If I hadn't happened to enlist at the same time as Rock, and we hadn't paired up, I'd probably have long since given up on it. When Rock's around, it's never boring, and I'd say the reason I'm continuing is because I don't get bored."

"That's your motivation, or rather... your reason. I see."

"Well, yeah." Tsuga searched through his pack which was at his side. "How about you?"

"For me..." Shihoru hugged her staff tight. "This was the only thing I could do. I can't imagine there were any other options. So, basically, it just sort of worked out like this. I went with the flow, and it took me to where I am today."

"Still, if I had quit, who knows?" Tsuga shrugged. "There are guys like that occasionally. One took up a trade; another started a business in the free city of Vele. There was a guy who went to the mainland of the Kingdom of Arabakia, too. Wonder what he's doing now. Did he make it there?"

"...You know a lot of people."

"Because we've been all over the place. Well, it's Rock, you know. Because of the kind of guy he is... what is it, a person's vibe? Not many people's match his. If they don't feel right, Rock's quick to give up on them. I'm not picky, so I get along fairly well with anyone I've worked with, even if it was just once, and any time I meet them, I'll talk about what they're doing, or what they've done."

"...I see."

This person was a competent priest. But he really was normal. So normal that it made him weird for a volunteer soldier.

There were apparently volunteer soldiers who only worked alone. Some like Lala and Nono only worked in pairs, too. That said, the vast majority of volunteer soldiers formed parties of five or six, so it was a hard life for those who couldn't work in groups.

Working in a party was similar to working in a group like, for instance, a military unit, but also different. If tens, hundreds, or more people were going to act or fight together, there needed to be a certain amount of discipline maintained. Frivolity, incaution, rashness—those were all things that could

disrupt that order. The way Shihoru saw it, if the commander was logical, intelligent, and bold, the soldier only needed to be loyal and able to endure.

The commander gave the right orders, and the soldiers followed them. That was all they had to do. In fact, that was optimal.

In the case of volunteer soldiers, that wasn't necessarily true. There was a certain level of basic cooperation and sociability needed to keep the party intact, but after that, the individual members' individual personalities and abilities did the talking. The volunteer soldiers had to adapt to many different environments, and had to be able to deal with every situation imaginable. Many of the most capable volunteer soldiers wouldn't make for good soldiers of the more traditional variety.

Even a poor volunteer soldier like Shihoru was confronted with situations where she had to make her own decisions and overcome them with her own power. Without realizing it, she had picked up the habit of thinking things through for herself, in case the worst should happen. If she couldn't, she might die. Or let one of her comrades die instead.

This was something she had felt for a long time now, but volunteer soldiers tended to be very unique. It might be that the really unique ones were more likely to survive. But was that really all there was to it? Didn't living as a volunteer soldier draw out those quirks?

When she thought about it, her days as a volunteer solider had been absurd. Losing those she cared about, nearly dying herself, seeing nothing but unfamiliar things, and going to places she didn't know. It had been frightening, but also fun.

There might have been more days than not when she'd thought she might not live to see the next one. It wasn't like she'd been in constant fear of death. But though she wasn't ready to die, death was around her at all times. She didn't want to have regrets. The one thing she didn't want was to meet her end feeling regret.

Everyone else must feel the same. Because they could never know when their lives might end, they wanted to kill as little of themselves as they could while they were alive, at least.

There were times when patience was necessary. But they didn't want to spend all their time restraining themselves. Wouldn't that just feel stupid?

They were alive. Because, unlike those who had died, they were still alive.

I want to live true to myself, until the day I die.

That was probably why the volunteer soldiers tended to go their own way. They charged down their own paths with the limited time they had.

But it was strange.

Even if Shihoru weren't a volunteer soldier, even if she were working in a cafeteria in Alterna, the truth was, nothing would change. Even if she didn't go outside, she might be killed when the orcs raided, or she might get caught in an accident and die in a way she never expected. She might come down with an incurable disease. In the end, death would come, and her life would be over.

Even if she was doing dangerous things on a daily basis, that didn't necessarily mean she would die early, and some who tried to live as safely and quietly as possible still didn't live long lives. Even so, if she had lived normally, this thought likely would never have occurred to Shihoru.

If I don't live true to myself, even if it's just for a day or two, that would be such a waste.

Even if Tsuga lived an ordinary life, not as a volunteer soldier, maybe he wouldn't change all that much. That was kind of how Shihoru felt.

Maybe that was really weird. Maybe Tsuga was actually not normal. There were people like this.

I... need to find who I am.

She wanted to be true to herself. But what did that mean? When she thought about it, there was nothing that she could say represented her. She was still inexperienced, as a volunteer soldier and as a person.

Could she mature?

Would she be able to live that long?

Shihoru shuddered and gulped. "...Tsuga-san!"

“Yeah.” Tsuga was taking it easy, holding his knees close, and looked nothing if not calm. That said, his face was turned up, and he was looking back and forth slowly. “Looks like something’s there.”

“Looks like...? Don’t you mean there definitely is?”

“Think it’s a bird?”

“...Those cries don’t sound like it.”

“Maybe it’s a real big bird.”

“Do you have any in mind?”

“Nope. But...” Tsuga rubbed his buzz cut hair. How did it feel? Shihoru was just a little interested. Tsuga’s attention seemed to be caught on something else. “...Now that I think about it, it’s not foggy today. This is kind of a first for us, since coming into Thousand Valley.”

“...I don’t think good weather is a bad thing.”

“That would be the normal way to feel, yeah. It’s just that, speaking from experience, unusual happenings tend to overlap with one another. What is it, I wonder? It’s like, the ground hardens after it rains, and that’s good, but when it rains in the desert, it turns into a massive storm. There’s lightning, and hail, and then it starts raining arrows and spears, too. I’ve been through a lot of things like that. Oh, there it is again...”

Far off, something cried out, *Pigyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!*

It was ominous, and it grated on the ears.

“Um...” Shihoru said.

“What?”

“I was just thinking... Is it safe for us to be sitting here?”

“I wonder. Honestly, I have no idea.”

“Tsuga...”

“Huh? Did I just get addressed without an honorific?”

“I think you must have imagined it...”

“I heard it, though.” Tsuga blinked, and looked around the area. “There it is again.”

Pigyahhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

This was the quietest it had sounded yet. Did that mean it was farther away?

Shihoru sighed. It was too soon for relief, but at least the threat didn’t seem to be bearing down on them.

“Listen, I just wanted to say...” Tsuga got up and stretched. “I’m not taking this lightly, either. But just acting tense isn’t enough. If you relax, you’ll be able to respond better, and you’ll make fewer mistakes, too.”

“Relaxing... I might not be so good at that...”

“Yeah. I’m sure you’re not. Even when you were asleep, you were curled into a ball, after all.”

“Please, don’t just arbitrarily decide to watch me.”

“I was awake with nothing better to do.”

“Well... sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize over every little thing, you know?”

“...I won’t apologize anymore, then.”

“Okay,” said Tsuga. “I mean, I can see you’re being humble like that to try to avoid being blamed for things. That might be unconscious, though.”

“Th-That’s awfully blunt...”

“If you think something, you have to say it then, or you may never get the chance. Have you never felt like that before?”

Shihoru tried to respond, but she found herself unable to speak, and only a sigh escaped.

That was when it happened.

In an instant, it became dark.

A shadow. Something was passing overhead. It had to be that shadow. They heard the sound of it cutting through the wind, too.

Shihoru and Tsuga looked up at the same time. They were in a small, open space. The area around them was green with trees, grass, and moss. Green, green, green, as far as the eye could see. The sky was very clear. Not a cloud to be seen.

“Something flew by, just now, right?” she asked hesitantly.

“Probably, yeah.” Tsuga shouldered his pack, picking up the club that was beside him. “It seemed dangerous, so let’s scram. Think we can make it?”

He said that like it was someone else’s problem. Shihoru didn’t want to waste the time to call him on it, though, so she stood up vigorously. Tsuga seemed undecided on which direction to flee in. Shihoru couldn’t decide, either.

At a glance, there was nothing nearby that would give them cover against the sky. It didn’t seem they could do any better than hiding in the shadows of the trees. No, even that...

“Ah!” Shihoru clutched her staff and crouched down. If she didn’t, she’d be blown away. That, or mown down. She didn’t shut her eyes. Shihoru saw it.

Blue. It was a blue creature with wings. It had suddenly swooped down from the sky. Did that mean it was a bird? She didn’t know. But it felt like something else.

Big. It was massive. Were those feet? There were five hooked claws on the end of them. Those two hand-like feet were pointed their way as it came at them.

Tsuga held his club. “A dragon!” he shouted as he jumped in front of Shihoru.

A dragon. That was a type of dragon? Like the fire dragon in Darunggar? If so, they clearly stood no chance against it.

“Sto—”

“Hah!” Tsuga swung his club with both hands. Was he trying to hit the incoming winged, blue dragon?

His club probably hit the dragon’s feet somewhere. But it didn’t care. It grabbed Tsuga tightly in its right foot, and went past to the right of Shihoru. Shihoru nearly tripped, but she managed to steady herself somehow. When she

turned around, the dragon had Tsuga pressed to the ground with its right foot, and was stretching its neck out to try and chomp on him.

“Ahh! Urgh!” Tsuga was struggling wildly. It hadn’t gotten him yet. He was alive.

“Dark!” Before she could think *I want to save him,* Shihoru had already summoned Dark the elemental. Even without orders, Dark took starfish form and flew towards the dragon.

No, she realized.

That wasn’t good enough.

A little impact wasn’t even going to shake that dragon.

“Spread out!”

Dark scattered into thousands of pieces. He diffused, enveloping the area around the dragon.

This was Dark in mist form. Dark Mist.

The dragon cried *Pigyahhh!* and raised its head, swinging it violently in all directions. That wasn’t going to be enough to shake off Dark. The dragon suddenly couldn’t see anything, and that had it badly confused. Hawks, eagles, and other such birds of prey searched for their prey from a high altitude, so they had very good eyesight. In exchange for that, they had to become reliant on it. This dragon probably was the same. The dragon was so confused, it accidentally loosened its grip on Tsuga. He escaped immediately.

The dragon cried, *Pigyahhh, Pigyahhhhh,* flapping its wings and wandering around in confusion.

Tsuga crawled and rolled away, and once he had some distance, it looked like he was healing himself with light magic. There were times when a heavily wounded priest couldn’t focus well enough to cast magic, and they couldn’t heal themselves as a result. Would Tsuga be okay? Even if it concerned her, she wouldn’t worry.

Shihoru focused on maintaining Dark Mist. How far could she spread Dark Mist? To what degree could she move him? Shihoru didn’t have a grasp of that

yet.

No. This line of thinking was a mistake. It was up to Shihoru, but Dark could spread as far as she wanted. She could move him, too.

Don't put limits on it, she told herself. *They'll turn into restrictions.*

She started sweating.

Her vision was shaking.

Shihoru gritted her teeth. Not yet. She could keep going. If she started to think she couldn't, at that moment, it would be over.

The dragon started running and flapping its wings. Did it plan to fly?

"Sorry!" Tsuga shouted.

The moment she heard Tsuga's voice, she lost focus. Immediately after that, the dragon jumped up, and Dark Mist scattered and disappeared in an instant.

"We're getting out of here!" Tsuga grabbed her arm, and pulled her along.

Shihoru stumbled, and fell into Tsuga. Tsuga was covered in blood, but his wounds all looked healed, and he lifted Shihoru up as he took off running.

"Well, doesn't that just beat all? Never expected something like that..." he commented.

"S-So—" Shihoru was about to apologize, but then she caught herself and stopped short. "Th-That was dangerous, you know! You're so reckless!"

"You should've made a break for it while I was getting eaten!"

"I-I couldn't! I won't do a thing like that..."

"Well, I'd hold it against you if you did, though." Tsuga glanced overhead. "I'd kind of hoped, after that, it'd give up on us and let us go..."

Shihoru didn't want to look up. But she had to see it for herself. No matter if it was frightening, and no matter if she really, really didn't want to, she had to take these things on herself.

She didn't want to leave it to others anymore.

10. Someday, With Honest Feelings



I have some problems with what Haru did, but I don't think he had any choice in that situation, Merry thought. *Or rather, he probably didn't have any choice... so...*

There was probably no helping it. Besides, Merry couldn't see with her own eyes exactly what the two of them were doing. Haruhiro and Shuro Setora walked side by side in front of her, behind them was the golem Enba, and Merry was bringing up the rear.

Enba wasn't that tall. He was around 170 centimeters, or thereabouts. However, his arms were bizarrely long. His upper body was muscular, with awfully broad shoulders, and, honestly, he was in the way. She couldn't see up ahead that well.

Haruhiro had had no choice but to accept the conditions Setora had forced on him. If Merry had been in his position, she'd have made the same choice, no matter how gut-wrenching it felt. She understood. She could accept it.

However, this was hardly the time... That was a feeling she just couldn't keep from bubbling to the surface. They weren't doing anything all that substantial, but it was irritating, and downright vexing. Setora had ordered him to act like her lover, or something like that, but what was that about? Did she mean, you know...?

It's not like it's any of my business, she told herself firmly.

The fact was, Merry didn't know. She'd never dated a boy, or a girl for that matter. At least, not since coming to Grimgar. She didn't remember what had come before, so she couldn't know about that, but she felt like she'd never been in a serious relationship of that sort.

And when she looked at her personality, even if she'd decided she liked someone, she was likely to have thought it over hard before she decided she wanted to spend the rest of her life with them.

She'd probably get cautious. Just feeling, *Hey, he's kind of nice,* wouldn't make her lose her head. She wouldn't make a fuss. She'd try to maintain her composure.

Considering all that, she must have been timid when it came to love. That still might not have changed, even now.

"Haru." Setora called his name in a not particularly syrupy tone.

"Uh, yes, ma'am?" Haruhiro responded. He sounded so distant.

"Did you just call me ma'am?"

"Oh, sorry. ...Yeah. What is it?"

"I just wanted to try calling your name. Is that wrong?"

"It's not wrong... okay?"

"I see."

"Yeah."

"It's nice," Setora said.

"Huh? What is?"

"To have someone I can casually address by name so close."

"Ohh. Erm... I guess it is." Haruhiro gave a hollow laugh.

Enba might be deliberately acting to create a wall between Merry and the two of them, so that Merry wouldn't get in their way. It looked like they were just talking like that occasionally as they walked, so she had to question what exactly she was supposed to be getting in the way of, though.

Or could Merry just not see it, and they were actually cheek to cheek, hand in hand, with their arms linked? Or maybe they were engaged in some even more intimate kind of physical contact?

Whatever the case, because of Enba, Merry couldn't see them from her

position in the rear. Still, although she couldn't say anything for certain, that didn't seem particularly likely. She could more or less tell that from their conversations.

So, what exactly are the two of them doing?

They were supposed to be lovers? Like that...?

It seemed that was how Setora thought lovers acted when they were together. Haruhiro was going along with it. With doubts, probably. Thinking, *This is kind of not what I was expecting.* After all, when you said the word "lovers," you expected something more like...

More like... What exactly?

More clingy, and flirty?

What constituted being flirty, exactly?

Merry wasn't that knowledgeable about it, so she didn't know, but whatever it was, they weren't it. They didn't feel like lovers at all. Or maybe she'd be surprised to learn that most of the lovers out there were like them? Maybe they were like that in front of others? Even if Merry found herself in that sort of relationship, she'd restrain herself in public places, where people were watching.

Restrain herself from what? Well... From flirting? Though, there was the question of whether she wanted to flirt in the first place. Maybe she didn't really? Or did she just feel that way because she had no one to do it with, and her mindset would change if she did?

But she was sure she'd never be able to.

She didn't want it, and didn't need it.

It wasn't like Merry hadn't known about Kuzaku's affection for her. However, she'd also doubted it, thinking she was being overly self-conscious. Besides, Kuzaku had joined the party after everyone, so he had felt uneasy. Her desire to be kind to a comrade, to be useful to him as someone who had been around longer, had been much stronger.

When he'd confessed to her, she'd thought, *I knew it.* She'd hoped she was

wrong, but Kuzaku had been looking at her that way.

She'd readied herself for it, so she gave him a straight answer.

I can't, she'd said immediately.

Merry couldn't think of going out with someone. They had been comrades in the same party up until that point, and comrades they would stay. That was how she wanted it. If possible, she wanted Kuzaku to feel that way, too.

I wasn't that she disliked him. If she were asked whether she liked or disliked him, well, she liked him. He was tall, and his face was probably not bad, either. He got along with people, though she felt some weakness in him, and he wasn't selfish or pushy like Ranta, so it was fair to say he was a pretty good guy.

She didn't dislike him. It might not be wholly impossible for her to love him.

But she wouldn't.

Because he was Kuzaku.

No, that wasn't the reason.

She wouldn't fall in love with anyone.

There would be no romance for her.

It was impossible for her to feel love for others.

Merry had something far more important than that. She had comrades, and she had to protect all their lives. She couldn't let herself get preoccupied with other things. She didn't have time to waste on silly things like romance and love. That was just how she was.

Even when it came to the members of her party, she had no intention of forcing her views on them. If one of them fell in love with another, she felt that was just fine.

Not that it seems all that likely in our party.

Even when she was with the other girls, Shihoru and Yume, they hardly ever got talking about the topic. No, not even "hardly"... they never did. It was always about cute things, or tasty food. Thanks to that, she felt incredibly comfy, and it made her like Shihoru and Yume all the more.

There was no rule against romance inside the party, but she thought they might as well put one in place. If they did, Merry could feel even more at ease. She wanted to interact with her comrades as fellow humans. Even if she could be their friend, there was no way she could be someone's girlfriend or wife. She didn't even want to consider the possibility that she might end up in a relationship like that.

"By the way, Haru," Setora said in the same, not particularly familiar, tone.

"Uh, yes—Yeah."

"How many children do you want?"

"Bwuh...!" Haruhiro sputtered, and Merry coughed strangely, too.

"Hm? What's the matter, Haru?" Setora asked.

"...No. I-It's just kind of sudden... Erm, w-we're lovers, right?"

"Yes. You and I are lovers."

"...Just until you grow bored of it and say otherwise, though."

"You may be surprised to find that I never grow bored with it."

"Huh...?" Haruhiro seemed surprised, but Setora's conditions had stood out to Merry from the very beginning.

"Until I grow bored of it, and tell you to do otherwise." It wasn't impossible to read that as, *I'll eventually grow bored of it, so do your best until then.* Had Haruhiro been optimistically assuming that? He had a strangely low opinion of himself, so he might have underestimated this in a variety of ways. He must have figured that Setora had to be doing this on a whim, or by some mistake, and so not only would she just grow tired of him soon, she'd get fed up. That had to be what Haruhiro was expecting.

But you never know, right? Merry thought.

It seemed Setora had been interested in Haruhiro to begin with. She might never grow bored, and decide to keep him as her lover.

Haruhiro would deny that, saying it would never happen, but it was entirely possible. Even if he wasn't the type that was popular with girls, there was

already a precedent set by Mimori of the Tokkis. There were women out there who were into Haruhiro. In fact, it wouldn't surprise Merry if there were a lot of them.

Haruhiro always looked sleepy, but that meant he wasn't noisy, and while he didn't have an imposing presence, that meant he was relaxing to have around. He was considerate of his comrades, had a sense of responsibility, and was patient. That, and he said what needed to be said. He seemed timid, but he could be surprisingly courageous.

He didn't have any abilities that let him excel, or traits that put him ahead of the pack. Yet he was doing his job as a leader properly, and he never tried to abandon it. Who knew how many crises Haruhiro had gotten them through now?

Even if Haruhiro was betrayed, he couldn't betray others. He was a leader she could be proud of, one she could trust, and who she could respect as a fellow person. She'd never told him that to his face, though. In fact, she probably should have. Even if she praised Haruhiro, he wouldn't let it go to his head.

"Ha—" Merry had been about to call out to him, but hurriedly coughed to cover it.

—Why now? Even if I'm going to tell him, now isn't the time. Obviously. What's my hurry?

"Hm?" Had Setora stopped? Enba, who was right in front of her, came to a stop, and Merry nearly walked into the back of him. "Did you say something, woman?"

"...Not really." Merry hung her head, and bit her lip slightly. It felt like she was talking to Enba's back. Setora had been practically ignoring Merry. Why, despite that, had she responded at a time like this? "I didn't say anything."

"I see," Setora said coldly. "It felt to me as if some ill-mannered person was ignoring me, his lover, and referring to Haru as Haru."

"I'm free to call Haru whatever I want," Merry snapped.

"That will not do. We are lovers now, and I will be giving birth to Haru's child. Naturally, I'll not be letting any other woman lay a hand on him."

“Child?!” Haruhiro cried out.

Merry said, “Lay a hand on him, you say?” Then she was hit with a relatively minor dizzy spell.

“Erm, y-y-you’re going to have a child?!” Haruhiro yelped. “So suddenly?!”

“Naturally. Is there anything else for a man and women so besotted with one another to do?”

“I...” Haruhiro seemed to be in a daze. “I don’t know about that...”

“Th-There’s an order to these things!” Merry slipped past Enba to the side and moved up to the front. “Y-You have to do things in order, you know! N-Not just suddenly go and make a b-b-b-baby...”



“An order?” Setora furrowed her brow. “You mean like coming together at night, sucking on each another’s faces, and feeling each other’s bodies all over? It hardly seems like a suitable thing to discuss here.”

“Y-Yeah...” Haruhiro stuttered.

“What do you mean, yeah, Haru?!”

“R-Right?! Sorry...”

“Don’t apologize to that woman, Haru!” Setora shouted. “You are my lover. I’ll not allow you to apologize to anyone but me!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

No, that’s not something you say “Yes, ma’am” to! Swallowing the words that almost came out of her mouth, Merry pressed down on her chest hard. Even now, Setora’s nyaas were spread out over the area, looking for their comrades. Haruhiro couldn’t push back against Setora. Practically speaking, he had no choice but to do as she said. If Setora ordered something, Haruhiro had no choice but to obey. So, basically...

They’re going to meet up at night?

Suck each other’s faces?

Feel each other’s bodies all over?

And then... do something to make a baby?

“Heh...” Merry laughed. Why had she laughed? Merry didn’t know that herself. It was a mystery.

Was it because this was more sudden than she’d expected? *You’re going that far all of a sudden? Wow, you’re really going for it,* was one thing she certainly felt. *So that’s what you’re going with? Really? Wow.*

But are you okay with it, Haru? she wanted to ask, but couldn’t. That was something she couldn’t ask.

There was no being okay with it or not. He had no choice. If they were going to do it, he’d have to do it. He’d have to do it. Yeah, that “it.”

No big deal, though? It didn’t break the rule against romance inside the party,

after all? Not that any such rule existed. So, it had nothing to do with her? It was no problem?

Yeah. What was she getting so disconcerted about? There was no real problem here, was there? It was something that not just humans, but all beings that reproduced sexually did. Even if Haruhiro did it with Setora, how could that be a problem? At least, it was no business of Merry's. If Haruhiro didn't want it, she felt bad for him, though. But it was for their comrades. Haruhiro was the leader, so he'd have to tolerate it. This was Haruhiro, after all, so he'd get through it and do a great job, she was sure.

He might not be so against the idea, anyway. If she looked at Setora with unbiased eyes, she was a cute woman. That, and she looked like her.

That girl.

Choco.

Maybe he wasn't entirely against it?

So that's it. That might have been why Merry laughed.

Haruhiro was keeping up appearances by saying, *Oh, woe is me, I'm in a real spot of trouble now,* but deep down, he thought this was a perk, and maybe he was glad it'd turned out this way. If she recalled, that idiot Ranta had said something about this before. Men got pent up, apparently. For Merry, this was something about the opposite sex, so she didn't really understand, but it basically meant they wanted to do that sort of thing, right? Haruhiro was a man, too. If he had a good partner for it, of course he'd want to.

That was fine, she figured. In its own way. If they kept it somewhere she didn't have to watch, she didn't mind.

There'd been this annoying, *Pigyahh, Pigyahhhh,* for a while now, but she'd more or less sorted out her feelings.

Merry sighed. "...So, what is that sound anyway?"

"That is the cry of a wyvern," Setora said, looking up to the sky and squinting as if it was blindingly bright. "Thousand Valley has an inseparable relationship with fog. However, there will be a few days in every year, up to around ten,

when the fog fully clears like this. On those days, they fly in from the Kuaron Mountains to the east. The creatures here aren't adapted to wyverns, after all. For them, this must be a hunting ground with easy prey lying around."

"Huh? Hold on, wai—" Haruhiro asked in a panic. "Those wyverns, what are they? What kind of...?"

Pigyahhhhhhhhhhhhh! The cry of that wyvern creature echoed through the area again.

It was different from before. Loud enough that Merry flinched despite herself. Did that mean it was close?

"A sort of dragon," Setora explained nonchalantly. "They have wings, and can fly like birds. A flying dragon, you could say. They come in many colors and sizes, but blue wyverns are said to be the largest, and the most vicious. They're completely carnivorous. Whether it be humans or orcs, they'll eat anything."

Merry looked up at the sky, despite herself. It was splendidly clear. When she thought about it, it had been a pretty long time since she'd seen such a beautiful blue sky.

No, now's not the time to get sentimental.

"That's... dangerous, isn't it...?" she asked.

"Naturally, it's not safe." Setora snorted. "The village is in utter chaos now, I'm sure. On clear days, rather than be able to enjoy the precious sunlight, they're busy preparing for wyverns. There was a time in the past when the village was attacked by a flock consisting of tens of wyverns. After that, they sent an expedition to the Kuaron Mountains to burn their nest, and there hasn't been such a major disaster since. However, those creatures build their nests at high altitudes, up steep inclines, so it isn't possible to exterminate them entirely. When the fog clears, they fly in. They feed until they are full, and when the fog comes back, they return home. Those who live here are forced to accept this as a fact of life."

"We could..." Haruhiro started to say, then covered his mouth with his hands. "...try to run, but it wouldn't work. Uh, what then? If it comes, it comes, and there's nothing we can do?"

“Surely not.” Setora poked Haruhiro in the forehead with her index finger. “There.”

“Ow!” Haruhiro held his forehead. “No, it didn’t hurt, but...”

It seemed like they were having fun. Playing around. That was kind of lover-like, maybe? If it had been at any other time, she’d have been all for them doing it, but the situation was what it was.

“So?” Merry demanded. “You got any way to prepare? You do, right?”

“That’s an awfully self-important tone, woman. If it comes to it, I think I’ll choose to abandon you.”

“Setora, um... Merry’s an important comrade to me,” Haruhiro said hesitantly.

“I don’t know if she’s your comrade or what, but a woman is a woman. She could bear your child. That makes her presence unsightly to me. I see. Could this be jealousy, perhaps?”

“I’m...!” Merry couldn’t help but raise her voice. “Haru’s comrade, not anything more, and not anything less! I’m never going to get pregnant with Haru’s child, and you getting jealous is nothing more than a headache for me, so, please, just stop!”

Once she got all of that out, she snapped back to her senses, and glanced to Haruhiro to see his reaction. Haruhiro was looking down, and he had a strained smile on the corners of his mouth.

“If you’re going to say that much, well...” Setora shrugged. “For all you say to the contrary, I had thought you two were close, or had a relationship that was similar to that. It would seem I was mistaken. Or, perhaps, were you harboring a one-sided affection for her, Haru?”

“...No.” Haru rubbed his belly. “That’s not it, okay? I think of Merry as a comrade, too... She’s a precious comrade, and comrades are important, they really are, so... a comrade’s a comrade, you could say.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure I understand, but I’ve taken measures to prepare for wyverns. My nyaas are watching. That, and this isn’t entirely a bad thing.

Wyverns may help us, too.”

One of those nyaas jumped out of a nearby bush. It was a stripped yellow nyaa. The nyaa purred and gestured to communicate something to Setora. When Setora nodded, then shook her head, the nyaa let out a single “nyaa” then vanished again.

It’s frustrating to admit, but they’re cute, Merry thought.

“It seems they’ve found them.” Setora quickly covered her face with the cloth wrapped around her neck. “Or rather, a wyvern found them for us. If they haven’t yet been eaten, I’m sure you’ll be able to see them.”

So that was it.

The wyverns had flown here in search of prey. When the sky was clear, the people of the hidden village, and probably the members of Forgan, too, would be on the lookout for wyverns. But those who didn’t know about wyverns would be unguarded, and make for easy targets.

Setora took off running, and Haruhiro, Enba, and Merry followed. They occasionally heard the voices of nyaas. The nyaas seemed to be guiding Setora.

Where were they running through, and where were they trying to get to? Merry had no idea. They went up and down hills, so it was all she could manage just to keep up.

Occasionally, Haruhiro would turn back to look at Merry. He must have been worried for her as one of his precious comrades. But still, why had she gone and said that? That she would never get pregnant with Haru’s child? The fact was, Merry did think that, but it was too blunt a way of saying it.

It was inappropriate. Setora had incited her. It was Setora’s fault. Setora was in the wrong.

Pigyahhhhhhhh, that cry echoed.

There was something in the sky. It had wings, but it was no bird. It was probably a wyvern. It was swooping down.

Setora seemed to be heading in that direction. That was where the wyvern’s prey was. It might be Shihoru and the others.

The wyvern they had briefly lost sight of rose into the air once more. It came about, and was it preparing for another attack run?

There was someone up ahead. They were running this way.

“Shihoru!” Haruhiro and Merry both called out in unison.

She wasn’t wearing her hat, and she had an unfamiliar gray coat on, but there was no mistaking her.

She was holding her staff.

It was Shihoru.

She was all right.

Merry ran earnestly forward. The corners of her eyes felt hot.

Thank goodness, she thought. *Shihoru. You’re alive.*

But who was that with her? His hair was short. He had a buzz cut, and he wore a priest’s outfit. It was an unfamiliar man. Where were Yume and Kuzaku?

Haruhiro shouted, “Tsuga-san!” and sped up, breaking away from Setora.

“Haruhiro-kun!”

“Come along, Shihoru!” Haruhiro caught Shihoru in his arms, then immediately had her get behind him.

What was that supposed to be? Merry thought. It was pretty cool.

“Haru! Don’t hug other women!” Setora shouted.

“Shut up!” Haruhiro shouted back without delay. “Merry, watch Shihoru!” He gave directions, then went further forward.

Tsuga. The Rocks’s priest. Tsuga was a good distance behind Shihoru. Haruhiro must have planned to go assist him.

The wyvern had begun another rapid descent. Its target was probably Tsuga. But Tsuga looked fairly exhausted, dripping with sweat as he ran towards them. He couldn’t afford to look up at the sky. Though, that said, would Haruhiro be able to save him even if he went?

Shihoru was winded, too, and she collapsed into Merry’s chest.

“Merry, thank good...ness. I...”

“I wanted to see you!” Merry was overcome with emotion and hugged Shihoru despite herself. She dragged her into the bushes beside them.

Haru...

The wyvern was closing in from above Tsuga’s head.

Haruhiro lowered his posture, tackled Tsuga, and kept going, pushing him over, forward and to the left, diagonally.

It was a close call.

The wyvern’s hooked claws passed right above them.

But Setora and Enba were in the wyvern’s path.

“Enba!” Setora gave the order, and Enba the golem moved up.

The wyvern stuck its right leg out, grabbing Enba, and pressing him to the ground.

Wasn’t that bad? Was he going to get killed?

When Enba bellowed, “GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOON!” in a loud, frightening voice, it happened.

It must have shocked it. The wyvern let out an ear piercing screech, released Enba, and started beating its wings. It was ascending. No way... was it trying to flee?

“Wyverns hate golems!” Setora rushed over to Enba. “They’re built to have that effect! However, it only stops the wyverns from eating them, not from attacking them! We’re running away!”

“Tsuga-san!” Haruhiro helped Tsuga to his feet. “Can you run?!”

“I’ll run! Because I’m probably going to die if I don’t!”

“Shihoru!” Merry held Shihoru’s hand. “I’m here, so it’s going to be okay now!”

“Yeah, I’m counting on you!”

“Setora, everyone will follow you, so give directions!” Haruhiro commanded.

Setora said, “You’re uppity, for a man!” But she still took off running alongside Enba. “Well, I don’t mind that! I want your seed even more now! So this is love, is it?!”

“S-Seed...?!” Shihoru’s eyes went wide.

“We’ve been through a lot!” Merry shouted. Somehow, she was now over it. It made sense to her, you could say.

I mean, Haru was cool just now. I don’t know about wanting his seed, but I could see how someone might fall in love with him.

Setora was a bit extreme, but she was interested in Haruhiro in her own way, and she was presently in love with him. That wasn’t strange at all.

For me... He’s an important comrade, so I don’t feel that way at all, though.

Setora and Enba led the way. Haruhiro had Tsuga go ahead of him, and Merry watched Shihoru, while frequently looking to the sky to confirm the wyvern’s position. During times like this, Haruhiro could be so focused it was scary. Despite that, his eyes would be even sleepier than usual. His nerves were sharpened to the point they couldn’t get any sharper, and he should have been worn down, but he looked almost aloof. He couldn’t have had much left to work with, but it still felt like he could keep going, and that made her feel like he’d manage things somehow.

Hey, Haru, do you realize? she thought silently. *You’ve saved us many times like that. If you look at our power levels individually, or as a group, we may not be first rate or even second rate volunteer soldiers, so why do you think we’ve survived up until today?*

More than anyone, more than anything, it was thanks to you, Haru. Do you know that?

You probably don’t. I’ll bet you think it’s thanks to everyone. Thanks to the comrades who kindly follow an unreliable leader and support him.

I can’t help but find you strange. I think it’s because you’re that kind of person. The kind that everyone follows, tries to support, and wants to walk forward with together. Haru...

I don't need to be at your side. I'm fine with walking behind you, but I want there to be a place for me there. For as long as I live, I'm going to do my job. I'll fulfill my duty.

Setora seemed to be guiding them down a decent path. It might be fair to say it was a highly appropriate one.

The wyvern was circling overhead, as before. It was following them, not willing to let them get away. It had swooped down several times, but it hadn't gotten anyone. It was narrow on both sides, or sometimes only on one side, and was often dense with trees. There were many obstacles for the wyvern, and Setora was choosing places with spots the party could take shelter in for their route. That, and the nyaas were probably playing a role or two, as well.

There were a variety of nyaas. No, not just nyaas. Shuro Setora.

If she, the necromancer and nyaa tamer, hadn't been with them, they wouldn't have gotten anywhere. Merry probably needed to recognize that fact. She had to be grateful to Setora. Maybe because she was from the hidden village, there were some areas where she lacked common sense. But she wasn't a bad person. Besides, the only reason Merry was here at all was thanks to Setora.

If Haruhiro thought it was a good idea, Merry would cheer him on if he wanted to make a baby with Setora, or in anything else he wanted to do. Maybe because it had been so sudden, there were some parts of it she was finding hard to accept. That would resolve itself with time, though, she was sure. Soon enough, she'd be able to think that was just how things were. The reason her chest ached was from running.

Honestly, she might be nearing her limit.

No, Merry could still push herself a little more, if she had to. However, Shihoru's face was all screwed up, and she was panting in a weird way. Tsuga, who was up ahead, looked bad, too. He'd tripped over his feet a number of times, and nearly pitched forward. The only reason he hadn't fallen was that Haruhiro had helped him each of those times.

"Wyvern incoming! Everyone, to the left!" Haruhiro called.

Eventually, Haruhiro started giving out precise orders. Everyone was thoroughly exhausted, their attention was diffused, and their ability to make decisions was lowered. Haruhiro realized that. If they were just doing as told, Shihoru and Tsuga could still manage somehow. But it wouldn't be long before even that became difficult.

No more. I'm at my limit. Those words were on the tip of Merry's tongue. But she couldn't say them. Haruhiro was doing his usual thing, and putting up a furious struggle. The burden was clearly heaviest on Haruhiro, and he must have had it twice as hard as anyone else. Merry couldn't say she was done.

"Setora, we can't run anymore!" he called.

Oh, that's why. Haruhiro had spoken up for them. He was on top of everyone's condition, so even if Haruhiro could keep running himself, he would realize they were on the verge of not being able to go any further. No matter what the result, he would make a call, ready to bear all of the responsibility himself. Haruhiro could do that. He certainly wasn't fine with doing it, and it was obviously a burden, but he didn't try to set down that burden.

Merry had heard about Manato the priest. Him, and Moguzo. Ranta might have betrayed them all, too.

Even after losing comrades, Haruhiro had been able to remain the leader. Through trials and tribulations, he led the way.

Haru, do you know how incredible that is?

When I think of your pain, my heart could easily be torn in two. Just imagining the loneliness you must feel, my whole body feels like it might freeze.

I want to hold you tight, and to warm you up, but it's fine, I'm sure you'd rebuff me.

You'd say, "You don't have to do this. I'm fine. We're comrades, but we're only comrades."

I wish I could embrace you, while we both stay precious, irreplaceable comrades to each other.

"Even if we fight, there's little hope of winning!" Setora counterargued as she

came to a halt. “Even just driving it off! There’s little hope of that, too!”

“We’ll do it!” Haruhiro raised his voice and drew his stiletto. “Enba and I will take it as it comes in! Merry, Tsuga-san, be ready to heal us at any time! Shihoru, spread Dark all over the place! Don’t anyone die! I won’t let you die! We’re going to live!”

“Okay!” Merry and Shihoru responded in unison.

Tsuga was holding his club, but he didn’t seem like he had the strength left to wield it and fight.

When Setora gave the order, “Support Haruhiro!” Enba moved next to him. Merry, Shihoru, and Tsuga rolled into the bushes to the right. What would Setora do?

She was diagonally behind Haruhiro and Enba, her eyes fixed on the wyvern in the sky. That meant she didn’t mean to let the two of them risk themselves alone, it seemed. She was respectable.

The blue wyvern started coming down. Naturally, it wasn’t falling. It was swooping down. But it did feel like it was falling headlong to the ground. It was scary. Merry wanted to scream.

Haru, no! Run! It’s too dangerous!

Naturally, she didn’t do it. Now that it had come to this, she could only watch. She had to trust in him.

Shihoru shouted, “Dark!” and called forth her elemental. Merry opened her eyes as wide as she possibly could, and she stopped breathing.

The wyvern cried *Pigyahhhh,* strongly batting its wings and turning around.

Its legs. Both of its legs were pointed down. Even so, it was unable to break the inertia of its descent. It was about to not so much land as crash feet first into the ground. Did it mean to crush Haruhiro and Enba beneath it?

Haruhiro, Enba, and Setora jumped to the side to avoid it. The first time, that is.

It didn’t end with just once. The Wyvern trod on the ground with its right foot, then left, and jumped.

Pigyahh, pigyahh, pigyahh, it squawked, dancing around as it beat its wings and jumped.

The vibrations were intense. It was like being right above the epicenter of an earthquake. Were Haruhiro, Enba, and Setora all right? There was a cloud of dust rising, making it hard to see.

“Haru! Haru! Haru!” Merry called out his name repeatedly. She couldn’t help herself.

The wyvern. A blue wyvern. What was that monstrosity?

The fire dragon of Darunggar was clearly in another dimension from it, and it was nothing next to the hydra in the Dusk Realm, either, but it definitely had an intimidating aura that could match a white giant, and an eight-meter class one at that. It was much less tall than one of them, but its wingspan, the width of its wings when spread out, was nothing to make light of.

The wyvern cried *Piiiigyahhhhhh,* and flapped its wings. Was it going to fly?

She saw a humanoid silhouette in the cloud of dust. Who could it be?

“Go!” Shihoru sent Dark forward. “Spread!”

The human-like, or rather doll-like, form of Dark exploded with a bang. But he didn’t just explode. He was spread out. Dark presented a thick, black mist-like form, and enveloped the wyvern’s head with it. The wyvern ran.

Pigyahh, pigyahh, it squawked, moving its wings up and down furiously and gaining altitude. The misty Dark gave chase. He chased, and—couldn’t keep up, huh. When the wyvern had flown up about three meters, the black mist suddenly grew thinner and vanished. Had it shaken him off?

Or...

“Shihoru?!” Merry hurried to catch her comrade. Shihoru had been about to crumple. She was in no state to be using magic. Despite that, she’d summoned Dark.

What can I do?! Isn’t there anything?!

“Haru!” Merry called.

There was an immediate “Yeah!” in reply.

She couldn’t confirm his location, but Haruhiro was alive.

What should I do right now?!

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

A shimmering ring of light appeared, and it surrounded Merry and Shihoru. The light of Lumiaris would heal those inside the circle. She could maintain the circle to a degree. *Because I’m a priest.*

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

Two hexagrams of different colors appeared on Shihoru’s left wrist. One of the two also appeared on Merry’s own wrist, and on Tsuga’s wrist because he was nearby. It didn’t reach Haruhiro, Setora, or Enba.

At the very least, she should have put Protection on them in advance. She kept repeating the mistake she’d made when they’d lost Moguzo. It was careless, and she felt like a terrible priest, but— *I’m still a priest!*

“Shihoru, I’m going to protect you! You use all of the strength you have!”

“Merry...” Shihoru gave her an exhausted smile, and then a firm nod. In that moment, there was a sparkle brighter than the light of Lumiaris. “All right. I’m feeling better thanks to you... so I’m going to go until I collapse!”

Though the light of healing could mend wounds, it couldn’t be counted on to recover a person’s stamina or willpower. Assist boosted all kinds of resistances, so it might give some slight boost in vitality, but it was going to be small. Shihoru must have known that, too. There were few things Merry could do. Very few things, but that still wasn’t nothing. Besides, if she was here, she could at least cover Shihoru if the worst should happen.

My existence isn’t meaningless. I’m going to do everything I can!

“Maybe I’ll try praying to God. Not a big fan of it, though.” Tsuga brought his fingers to his forehead, and made the sign of the hexagram. “O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you. Prayer.”

She’d never seen this one before.

Prayer.

A single beam of light shone down from beyond the heavens to illuminate Tsuga. Some sort of supernatural phenomenon had been brought about by the great power of the God of Light, Lumiaris. It wasn't clear what would happen. It might be that nothing would happen at all. Or, perhaps, even if something happened, it might not necessarily be observable or recognizable by mere humans?

This was said to be one of the ultimate spells of light magic, on par with Sacrament, but it was said few priests attempted to acquire it. The thing was, it wasn't just unreliable, its effects were uncertain. If it were just without benefit sometimes, that would be one thing, but it might be harmful.

If Tsuga had consulted her beforehand, Merry would have probably objected. But he'd gone and used it. It was too late. All she could do was pray that nothing terrible happened.

Perhaps Merry's prayers were granted. Or maybe it was the power of Prayer.

The light shining down on Tsuga vanished, and—that was it. It seemed nothing had happened.

Tsuga clicked his tongue. "...What, that's it?"

"Tsuga..." Shihoru said distastefully, dropping the honorific.

"Huh? Did you just address me without an honorific again?"

"...You imagined it. That, or your hearing is abysmally bad."

The dust cloud started to clear, and Merry caught sight of Haruhiro and the others. There were still three of them, like there should be.

"It's coming!" Haruhiro shouted.

The wyvern.

The wyvern turned in midair. Was it trying to get in position for another dive?

"Dark!" Shihoru summoned the elemental.

Merry wrapped her arms tightly around Shihoru's back, and gritted her teeth. What good was this going to do? She didn't want to think about that. For now,

she was going to stay at her side.

Piiiiigyahhhhhhhiiiiiyahhhhhhhhh!

The wyvern swung its head around as it shrieked. It folded its wings in a little and dropped down. It seemed to be going strangely slowly, but that was her imagination. It was almost right next to them.

Shihoru let out a gasp. Had she hesitated over whether to send Dark or not? She seemed to have stopped short of it. That said, Shihoru had reached an extreme of exhaustion, and there was no guarantee she could use more magic. That had to be why she was betting on her current Dark. Shihoru was trying to do something decisive. In order to accomplish that, she needed to find the perfect chance. Even with it so close, she could be cautious. That was Shihoru's strength.

Merry thought something was strange, too. What was strange?

The speed and angle of its descent.

It was only a slight difference, but it wasn't going at as steep an angle as the descent had been until just now. The wyvern was coming in on a bit of a diagonal. It was probably a little slow, too. This time it didn't have the power it had before. Even so, Haruhiro and the others could only choose to evade it. There was no other option.

Haruhiro threw himself to the right, and Setora and Enba threw themselves to the left to avoid the wyvern. The wyvern then landed on the ground with enough force to crash—or not. It didn't put out its legs, either.

It had pulled up suddenly just before the surface.

The wyvern didn't fly up high, either. It pulled a tight turn, then came down again.

"Whoa!" Merry very nearly clung to Shihoru despite herself, but just managed to hold back.

Steep dive, steep climb, steep dive, steep climb. The wyvern repeated that like it was a pendulum.

Though she compared it to a pendulum, it wasn't like the wyvern was always

flying the same course. It changed course in all directions. Its angle and speed were probably different every time. The dust cloud was incredible, but not as bad as when the wyvern jumped up and flew. She could see, faintly.

Someone tripped after getting out of the way of the wyvern's charge. Was that Setora?

Enba immediately went to scoop Setora up. In that instant, the wyvern shifted from a steep climb to a steep dive, and it assaulted the two of them. This time, its feet were out. It intended to stomp them.

With an "Nnnnnngh!" Enba threw Setora away, and tried to jump out of the way himself.

It was really close. He didn't make it.

The wyvern's right foot grazed Enba's right arm. That was all it took for Enba's arm to be torn off, and taken away.

"Ennnnnnnbaaaaaaaaa!" Having positioned herself to fall safely, as soon as Setora got up, she tried to rush over to Enba, but Haruhiro snatched her and pulled her away.

The wyvern started its usual ominous, terrifying dance. It beat its wings and jumped.

Enba was—unaccounted for. What had happened to him? That wasn't just dangerous to Enba, though; it was a threat to Haruhiro and Setora, too.

"Dark! Here's everything I have!" Shihoru shouted.

Had Shihoru decided it was no longer time to be looking for an opening? The Dark floating over her shoulder finally launched.

Dark charged towards the wyvern, emitting a noise that made it feel like electricity was running through their eardrums and skin. There would be no second shot. Shihoru had put everything into that Dark. That was why Merry had naturally assumed it would get bigger. Her expectations were betrayed. It was the opposite. Dark gradually contracted. The strange sounds got quieter, too.

Partly because of that, the wyvern didn't attempt to avoid Dark. It might not

even have noticed him. After all, even Merry couldn't see him. She suspected that Dark had hit the wyvern somewhere around its chest. He had become too small to see before that, so Merry had lost sight of him.

But there was no doubt that Dark had hit the wyvern. If not, the wyvern wouldn't have spread its wings out, thrown its head back, and its entire body wouldn't have started shuddering like mad.

It worked.

As Shihoru's eyes rolled into the back of her head, which lolled to one side, Merry held her tight and let out a silent cheer.

Shihoru! That was amazing. You're great. It was beyond amazing. I'm can't believe you could use magic like that.

The wyvern pitched forward. Had that taken it out, maybe?

No.

Pyohhhhhhhhhhhhh... the wyvern cried as it started beating its wings. It was less like it was trying to fly, and more like it was striking the ground with its wings to try to catch its balance. It might look like it was struggling, but it wasn't out of strength yet. It was coming.

The wyvern was coming their way, even if it was stumbling as it did.

Where were Haruhiro and Setora? Merry didn't have time to look for them. Tsuga held his club tight, exhaled, and said, "Take care of that girl for me," in a whisper.

Shihoru had passed out in Merry's arms. Merry nodded, crouching down with Shihoru still in her arms.

She picked up Shihoru's staff. If she had a mage's staff, maybe she could use it for something. It had to be better than going barehanded.

The wyvern was still unsteady on its feet, but it was definitely closing in. Could it be because of Circlet? If the wyvern had discovered Merry and Shihoru because of the ring of light, and that made it target them, what a way to screw up. It was too late for regrets now, but it was frustrating.

I'm just so...

Suddenly, something heavy came from behind her and fell at her feet with a thud. When she looked, it was a tall man she had definitely not expected to see. What was he doing here?

Kuzaku raised his face. “Ha ha! I found you. Things look crazy bad, but... I’m all fired uuuuup!”

He jumped to his feet.

Wounds. Kuzaku looked injured. He was covered in bruises. Were they being healed by the Circlet? You never knew what was going to work in your favor.

Kuzaku shouted, “Let me borrow that!” and snatched Shihoru’s staff out of Merry’s hands. “Even this is better than nothing! Merry-san, take Shihoru-san and run!”

Merry shook her head. She just wanted to get Shihoru out of here. She’d hide Shihoru somewhere, then be right back. There might still be something she could do with light magic. There ought to be. The ring of light was vanishing. Kuzaku and Tsuga moved up to the front. The wyvern came at them with thunderous steps that made the ground shake.

Even if Kuzaku and Tsuga went at it with all they had, they couldn’t possibly bring that monster to a halt. But they might be able to stall it for a few seconds. They could buy some time. That was probably their intention. Naturally, Merry was going to help, too.

But she never imagined there would be a sudden howl of, *Awooooooooooo* echoing through the area, with tens of black wolves rushing at the wyvern at once.

If the wyvern had been in top form, it might not have mattered, but it was still suffering from the punishing blow Dark had dealt it. The black wolves tore into the wyvern’s legs, and tore the edges of its wings.

The wyvern writhed about, swinging its wings to keep the black wolves from getting closer. However, the black wolves were quick and persistent. When it kicked one away, there was another, and when it shook that one off, there was yet another. They came at it from all directions, taking turns attacking it. They were used to attacking as a pack to take down creatures that were much larger

than them. They were organized. They had an absolute leader, and they were following that leader's orders.

"Meooooooooooooooooow!"

This voice wasn't a wolf. That was a human's voice.

On the right side in the direction Merry was facing, there was a gradual rise as the ground got higher. That was where she was. It wasn't just her. There was a big black wolf, too. That, and the goblin beastmaster, too.

Why were those three together?

Yume puffed up her chest and stuck her fist out. "Yume, and Onsan, and Garon're here to savage the situation! Meooooooow!"

Yume, you probably mean "salvage" the situation. Also, why are you meowing?

Not that it mattered. It was cute, after all. There was something hot welling up inside her chest. Her vision blurred. Merry held it inside. She wasn't going to cry. No way. The tears went away in no time.

The wyvern. Someone had grabbed the wyvern by the neck. The wyvern, being a sort of dragon, had its body covered in scales, but on closer inspection, it had hair, too. Someone was clinging to that hair, and not just trying not to get thrown off, he was climbing up.

"Haru!" Merry cried.

What was he thinking? When had he gotten there?

Stop. It's dangerous! she wanted to shout, but her voice wouldn't come out.

She knew. Haruhiro wouldn't stop. Because this was where the fight would be decided. Everything had come together. There might never be another chance like this.

Haruhiro was trying to settle it. In order to break out of this situation, he'd gone all-in on this attempt. He wasn't desperate. Even when Haruhiro was risking his life, he had a solid plan behind it. There was no stopping him now. So Merry had to believe in him and hope. Watch him. And be sure not to miss it.

Haru will pull through.



Like with a bird, the wyvern's front legs had developed into wings. It had no arms or hands. That was why it couldn't throw Haruhiro off very well. Knowing Haruhiro, he'd probably taken that into consideration before he'd gone for it. Once he got to the back of its head, the rest was quick. Haruhiro pounced on the wyvern's face, then stabbed it in the right eye with his stiletto. He went for three thrusts, then moved on to stab its left eye, too. The wyvern emitted a sky rending shriek and writhed in pain.

Haruhiro waited for the wyvern to swing its head down, then jumped away. Even if he seemed death-crazed, he'd still make the choice to live. Naturally. If he died on them, they'd be in trouble.

The wyvern flapped its wings. Was it going to fly? It was trying to. Its eyes had been put out, so it wasn't going to be safe, even up in the sky. But it had to be better than the ground, which was swarming with enemies that meant it harm. That must have been what the wyvern decided. Yes. That was good.

"Us, too!" She heard Haruhiro's voice. "Run for it! While we can!"

"Meow!" Yume cried as she rushed down the slope.

The big black wolf and the goblin didn't move.

Yume said "Meow bye!" to them, and it looked like she waved.

Kuzaku snatched Shihoru from Merry's arms and carried her himself. "Let's go, Merry-san!"

"Right!" If she were being honest, Merry wanted to carry Haruhiro. But Haruhiro wouldn't want that. The thing Haruhiro had most on his mind right now was his comrades. In order to put their leader's mind at ease, they ought to withdraw as soon as possible. That was for the best.

The wyvern was taking off, and Haruhiro and Yume were both fine.

Merry took Shihoru's staff back from Kuzaku, and led the way as they fled.

The rear guard, Tsuga, started laughing.

Merry doubted her eyes. Was this really possible?

It was fog. Suddenly, the fog rolled in.

Who'd have thought? She'd believed there hadn't been a single supernatural phenomenon. Had she been wrong?

Prayer. Could that be what had brought in the fog?

She had heard that the wyverns flew in from the Kuaron Mountains in the east on clear days. There had apparently been a time when tens of them had attacked the hidden village at once, too. That meant the blue wyvern might not be the only one around. Other wyverns might have come to Thousand Valley in search of prey, and they might still have encountered them.

With the fog out like this, though, that was no longer possible.

Had they gotten lucky? Merry thought otherwise. Luck had played into it, no doubt, but there was definitely more to it. Because they had all done their best and not given up, they had been able to make it to this result.

Because of the fog, visibility was rapidly getting worse. Even when she turned back to look into the sky, she couldn't even make out the shape of the wyvern.

"Yume!"

"Haru-kun!"

The moment she heard those two call each other's names behind her, she couldn't hold it back anymore. Merry kept running, not even bothering to wipe the overflowing tears.

Even when Setora cried, "Haru!" and Haruhiro responded, "Thank goodness you're okay!" Merry didn't feel anything but relief. She was able to feel glad from the bottom of her heart that Setora was all right.

If Merry stayed like this, she could get along without hating her. Everyone was precious to her, she loved them, and embarrassing as it was to admit it, she wanted to tell them that honestly. She wanted to tell everyone with a smile on her face. Someday, she'd surely be able to.

That was how she felt.

11. Save the Fun for Later



“Did I have too much to drink last night?” Takasagi got up still hugging his katana, and sniffed his nose.

Ever since the short sunny period a little earlier in the morning, Thousand Valley had been enveloped in the usual thick fog.

Forgan operated freely over a wide area including the former territories of the kingdoms of Nananka, Ishmar, and even Arabakia. They never settled in one place for long. That was exactly what Takasagi liked about the group. He didn’t understand how people could put down roots in one place, and he’d thought for a long time that when he died, he wanted it to be in a place he didn’t know. Even so, he had some familiarity with Thousand Valley, having visited a number of times, and that clearing of the fog was unusual, bizarre even.

“Thanks to it, we let those guys get away, too.”

Takasagi scowled and clicked his tongue. He’d remembered something trivial and boring.

When he looked around, he spotted Garo sleeping, and Onsa petting his neck. The other black wolves were sitting next to them, or lying down nearby. There were a number of nyaas he’d started training, too. Onsa and Garo were fine, so maybe he should leave it at that. The number of nyaas had dwindled considerably, but they could breed and raise more.

Takasagi stood up and sighed. He had a headache. A hangover, huh?

“Still, I’m getting tired of it. This fog. Maybe it’s time to move. I’ll talk to Jumbo, and—”

“Takasagi,” Weldrund addressed him, walking over with a dour look on his face. The gray elves from Broken Valley had the gray skin you would expect

from that name, and this shaman was no exception. He was a rather expressionless man for someone whose hobbies were poetry and music, and so he couldn't help but look dour.

"What is it, Duke Wel?" he asked.

"I have something to show you. Please, come with me."

Takasagi followed him to a place behind the rocks where a wangaro pelt was laid out, and a single piece of parchment was laid on top of it. The parchment had been weighed down with a stone so it wouldn't blow away.

Takasagi burst out despite himself, "Oh, come on, seriously?"

He crouched down, moved the rock, and picked up the parchment. This is what was written, in sloppy letters:

Sorry.

Not going to make excuses.

I've decided to leave on a journey.

Don't look for me. I'm begging you.

With love, sincerely,

Ranta-sama

"That bastard..."

Takasagi crumpled the piece of paper. *Oh, man. This is great. It's more than just a laugh.*

When he reached his limits, Takasagi laughed. He burst out laughing.

"What do you mean, you 'want to get strong'?"

There were tears in his eyes.

He was laughing so hard, he thought his sides might burst.

"Since you were so insistent, I was ready to give you some real training, and this is what I get for it?! This is perfect, Ranta! You're a real funny guy! Don't

look for you, huh?! Like hell! I’m gonna look for you! I’m gonna find you, and murder you with my own two hands! It’ll be fun! I can’t wait, Ranta! You little shit!”

Afterword



This doesn’t just go for Grimgar, it goes for my other novels as well, but I don’t do much planning before I write. This time, in particular, it wasn’t just that I didn’t do much planning, I did none at all. When I first started writing, even I had no idea how things were going to turn out, and where we would end up.

When it’s like this, how things will go really depends on the characters showing up in the novel. In this volume, I particularly leaned on Haruhiro’s group. Well, I did have the intention to make it that sort of story, but it seemed like it would be a little hard for just Haruhiro to do, so I had the rest work hard, too.

The road to Alterna still looks long and fraught with peril, but I’d like them to make it there somehow. Will they be able to, I wonder...?

I’ve run out of pages.

To my editor, Harada-san, to Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers of KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in production and sales of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Ao Jyumonji



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 9

by Ao Jyumonji

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