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level. 10
Love Songs Won't Reach
Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash



Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

level.10 - Love Songs Won't Reach

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Haruhiro.
Please, don't die.
We can't afford to lose you.
Without you, my world would be locked in darkness.


I'm really into this.
I can kind of see things. It's like, I should do this.

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0. The World



His breath turned white as he exhaled and prepared pine needle tea.

Because he always had young pine needles that he had washed in spring water and then dried and roasted already, it was an easy process. First, he lit a fire in the stove set up in front of his tent. He then put a kettle filled with water over the flame. Sitting down in his handmade folding chair, he waited for the water to come to a boil. Once it did, he placed the kettle on top of a wooden pot stand. He dropped the pouch full of leaves into the kettle.

He had a precise mechanical clock made by the dwarves of the Kurogane Mountain Range, but he wasn't to go to the bother of getting it out. While looking up at the dawn sky, he counted and waited. If he wanted a thick tea, he'd count to 300. Usually he counted to 180. In other words, around three minutes.

He poured the tea from the kettle into his favorite wooden mug. The tea made from roasted pine needles was almost colorless.

He inhaled the steam. The refreshing scent of pine filled his nostrils, and his bearded face broke into an unintended smile. *Phew... phew...* He blew on the tea, then took a sip. The mild taste spread through his mouth, running down his throat into his stomach.

"That's good," he said quietly to himself, enjoying the aftertaste.

Ahh, he wanted another sip. He couldn't help himself. When it finally became too much to bear, he brought the mug to his lips. The second sip was exquisitely delicious.

Every morning, when he woke up, this was the first thing he did, unless it was raining. When he wasn't residing in an area where the snow piled up, he always pitched his tent in the open, so he couldn't do it on rainy days even if he wanted to. It was a luxury he was afforded only when it didn't rain. When all

was said and done, he tasted that luxury on more than half of the days of any given year.

He always found himself thinking, *It's not a bad life.*

Taking it easy, once he finished drinking as much pine needle tea as he wanted, now it was time to decide what to do for the day. There were some clouds out, and the air was dry, but it didn't seem possible that it would rain anytime in the next three hours. For a day this time of year, when the winter drew closer day by day, the temperature wasn't all that cold.

Fishing, maybe? Going fishing in the mountain stream seemed like a good idea. He had plenty of stocks, so he could laze the day away and it would be no problem.

He'd do as he pleased, what he wanted, how he wanted, and however much he wanted to. In the end, that was what suited him.

In order to live this way, he'd washed his hands of the volunteer soldier business. Even if he hadn't had it in mind when he'd changed classes to become a hunter, which he'd done after some things had happened, it must have been to prepare him for this. He'd always wanted this kind of lifestyle.

Having granted his own wish, he was as satisfied as could be. He hardly ever remembered his comrades' faces now. Where were they, and what were they doing these days? Were they in good health?

It wasn't as if he didn't care at all. If his comrades still lived, it wasn't impossible that they might meet again, but if you were to ask him if he wanted to meet them again, the answer was no.

Honestly, he was hesitant to. In order to attain freedom, he'd had to go it alone.

His sole worry had been whether he could endure the solitude. There were still nights when he felt unbearably lonely, but he had gradually learned how to get through them. The heartrending loneliness didn't last long anymore. It gradually, gradually built up, and then when it reached a peak, he'd quickly get better. Unlike hunger or sleepiness, it wasn't something he could die from. In the end, it was just loneliness. Once he cried from loneliness, that was the end

of it, and the tears could wash any emotion away for him.

He obeyed only himself and nature, and he never had to think about unnecessary things. This lifestyle had a value he wouldn't trade for anything.

Rising to his feet, he folded up his chair, and decided, *Time to go for a walk.* Lands with distinctive scenery, like the Quickwind Plains, the Nehi Desert, and the Nargia Highlands were interesting, but the mountains were breathtaking wherever you went. It didn't have to be a major mountain range like the Tenryus, the Kuarons, the Rinstorms, or the Kuroganes. Even the small mountains you could find here and there each had their own unique appeal to them.

The more he walked, the more new discoveries he made, and he simply never got tired of them. Even if he did get tired of them, he could always set off on a new journey. The world was vast. Even if he spent his whole life, he likely wouldn't be able to see it all.

He prepared himself, moved away from his camp, and went down a game trail in the undergrowth.

By no means had he let his guard down. The moment he sensed the strong stench of a beast, he looked around the area.

There was a noise. Coming through the grass and trees. It was ahead of him, on the left.

Whether I run or fight, I'm not going to make it in time, he thought.

What was he up against? He had some idea. This stench. It was probably a bear.

He covered his face with his hands before it ran into him. Bears go for the face. He knew this from experience. As expected, it chomped down on his left hand which was protecting his face. It pushed him down at the same time.

His left hand was a lost cause. He gave up on it immediately, shoving his already-mauled left hand towards the animal's mouth. Having a foreign object shoved into its mouth, it groaned. While groaning, it was trying to swing both its paws down.

It wasn’t small. It was a fairly large bear. Probably close to three meters tall. One blow from its claws was likely to rend both flesh and bone. He knew that, so he clung to the beast desperately.

Burying his face in its smelly fur, his left hand still in its mouth, he wrapped his right arm around its neck and pressed himself close to it. Its claws dug into his left shoulder, and then his right flank. If it dragged them, he was finished.

He thrust the index and middle fingers of his right hand into its left eye. The bear howled with pain. It paws moved violently. Its claws injured him all over. He felt no pain.

Fight back.

He had to fight back.

He screamed, unable to admit defeat. While raising their voices at each other, he rammed his left hand, which he had no idea what shape it was in, down the bear’s throat. He punched it in the face with his right hand. He hit it like crazy.

Suddenly, his body soared through the air. Apparently, the beast had suddenly twisted its whole body, and the force of that threw him.

In midair, he drew his knife.

It looked like the bear was swinging at its falling prey. His body was broken badly. Had some part of it been destroyed? He didn’t know.

The impact made him lose consciousness for an instant. It was only an instant.

It was above him. It looked like he was being held down. While using his left arm, which no longer retained its original shape, to defend his face and neck somehow, he flailed wildly with the knife. He wanted to raise his legs to guard his belly, too, but for some reason he couldn’t do that very well.

The bear must have come up with a plan, because it raised its upper body. Not good. Its terrifying claws were coming down.

Avoid them.

He rolled to the right but was unable to get out of the way entirely, and when he was facing away from it, a blow practically crushed his left shoulder.

He crawled, trying to get away. No good. He couldn't get away. It caught him.

Was he being held down? He couldn't breathe. The bear bit down on him.

It was his left flank. He was wearing leather, but it didn't even matter. The bear was eating it. It was really eating him now. His flesh.

Unable to hold it in, he cried out in anguish. "Gyahhhhhh!" Even so, he didn't miss the chance to fight back against the creature that was focused on eating him.

He twisted his whole body, changing his knife to a backhand grip and targeting the animal's right eye. It didn't sink in deeply, but he was able to damage the eyeball. The bear had taken a wound to its left eye earlier. Now it couldn't see well with either eye. It whimpered pathetically and pulled away from him.

In times like this, wild beasts didn't hesitate. It turned and ran. It was running away.

"...What the hell?"

He coughed. It was intensely painful. He didn't let his knife go. It might come back. No, that wasn't likely. At the very least, it wasn't likely to return for a while. Besides, even if he had a knife, he couldn't fight anymore.

He closed his eyes. He waited for the coughing to subside. He opened his mouth to make breathing just a little easier. He wasn't sure it helped much. He didn't have the courage to try to move.

It was scary. How badly was he injured, and where? He didn't want to know what state he was in.

Well, this isn't going to end well, he sensed. He was probably hurt badly enough that it was a mystery he was still alive. He knew that full well, but he deliberately didn't want to take stock of the situation.

Disappointment.

Despair.

Regret.

Shame.

This is pathetic. Am I an idiot? he wondered.

But he couldn't help it. There was a sense of resignation, too. This was what it meant to live all alone out in nature.

Bears were usually nocturnal. But it was different just before they hibernated for the winter. He'd known that, and it wasn't as if he hadn't been on guard. For its part, the bear probably hadn't been looking to hunt a human, either. They mainly fed on deer, young ganaroes, pebies, rats, fish, and fruit. He suspected that the bear had been startled when they'd met and attacked him reflexively.

Thanks to that, he was in this sad shape, and the bear had taken some non-trivial injuries, too. It had been an unfortunate accident for both.

If you weren't living in a city surrounded by stone walls, accidents like this could happen at any time. The moment he'd chosen to live away from people, he'd anticipated this sort of end. If he'd been luckier, he might have been able to go more peacefully, but that had just so happened to not be the case. That was all.

Fortunately, it looked like he wasn't going to die immediately. He opened his eyes. He really couldn't convince himself to check the state of his wounds. Could he move?

He tried to roll onto his belly. His left arm was done for, and he had no strength in his legs, but his right arm was fine, so he managed it somehow.

"...Now, then."

It was time to have fun crawling. He was completely reliant on his right arm, so it took more than thirty seconds for every meter he went. What was more, he had to take frequent breaks, or it became difficult. It hurt, too. He'd probably lose the power to continue shortly.

"When it happens, it happens..."

He'd just go as far as he could. He'd learned that much in his time as a volunteer soldier. That, no matter what, he should do his best. That was all he could ever do.

He focused on moving forward, and maybe he just didn't want to think. He'd been prepared, but now that he was facing an end like this, a regret or two came to mind. He didn't want to regret things now. There was nothing he could do about them.

There had been a lot of twists in his life, but he'd lived the way he wanted. He was about to complete the life he'd chosen. He wanted to think that way. He didn't want to think about the comrades he'd left behind, for instance.

I should have done this. I should have done that.

There was another way. If he looked to the past, it was possible he'd become fixated on those regrets.

He was going to die anyway. Whatever the case, he hadn't been wrong. He wanted to die believing that.

Death wasn't frightening. He'd lost comrades before, and watched while it happened. He felt like he knew what death was.

The dead didn't come back. They remained only in the memories of the living. If no one remembered them, they'd vanish completely.

Naturally, it was hard to take the death of those close to him. There were even times when it had felt like some part of him had been torn out. Time could dull that sadness and sense of loss, but if he thought back to it, his chest tightened.

I want to see those who've died. Why can't I? he'd think. This world was unfair.

"If it's just me, no one loses anything..." he murmured.

Was that true?

Was that why he'd parted from his friends and chosen to live alone?

No, that can't have been all there was to it. He'd wanted to cast away all his burdens, to live uninhibited and free. He'd wanted to live just for himself.

In exchange for having gotten that, he couldn't rely on anyone else. He wouldn't trouble anyone.

He'd had enough of everything.

He was fine just by himself.

He didn't need anything else.

He'd live, and die, alone.

Wasn't this ideal, then?

Still, it was hard to believe it. What a shock. He'd made it back to camp.

He'd pitched a tent in a slightly open space with good visibility, built a cooking stove, laid out a full set of cooking gear, and put down a fold-up chair. He liked that sort of detailed work. Whenever he'd looked at the beautiful scenery as he was cooking, he'd been able to feel, from the bottom of his heart, that he was glad to be alive.

What a small, boring person I am, he laughed.

He was fine with that. It was the truth.

Leaning against the stove, his eyes were cast low, so he couldn't see the mountain slope or the plains in the distance. But the sky spread out endlessly, and even as the chilling pain tormented him, he felt a little bit good.

This wasn't bad. He'd die here. It was a fine conclusion.

"...Is it really, though?" he murmured.

Who am I even asking? he laughed. He was the only one here. Once he expired, the beasts would come to devour his remains, no doubt. He prayed that, before the curse of No-Life King took its effect, they'd dispose of him entirely.

Well, even if things didn't work out so neatly, it'd be after he was dead. He didn't have to care. He could reach his end silently here.

This was for the best. Far better than having someone else die on him again.

He hated that. He never wanted to experience it again.

If he had lived interacting with others, even if it hadn't been as a volunteer soldier, he'd have lost someone someday. People, all living beings, are guaranteed to die, after all.

To die.

So what...?

It was simple... a given...

“Hey, Geek.”

It had been a while since anyone had called me that. So long, in fact, that I’d forgotten ever being called that.

Keenesburg. Not the one in New Jersey. Colorado.

In that town with a population of about 1,000, everyone knew almost everyone, and having been born an otaku, I wasn’t just in the minority, I was a rare creature, and that made it damn hard to live there.

I’d been an otaku for as long as I could remember, and at some point, they’d started calling me Geek. Though I continued to be mocked horribly by the other kids in the neighborhood, I had no option but to act like a bug that clings to your clothes and comes into your home without you noticing, and subtly get them to let me join in with them.

I’d gotten sick of myself for doing that, and I thought I might be happier if they oppressed me and pushed me away, but, to them, I was just an otaku cockroach, not worth going to the trouble of bullying.

Well, I myself was able to see that I was worthless, and partly due to the influence of my father, who had a drinking problem and was an atheist, I didn’t believe in God. There would be no salvation. I’d live with the fact that this town, this country, and everyone else would just die, and I was at least a third of the way to being serious about it.

But I was definitely a natural-born otaku. One day I discovered Japan’s anime on the internet, and I started reading manga, too.

I had a dream now. I wanted to go to Japan. There was no God, and no heaven, but in Japan, there was paradise. That helped me get stronger.

“Hey, Geek.”

I had a stupid grin on my pimply face. But when Matt, the big guy who had spent more than five years mocking me called me that, I snapped and leapt at

him. My surprise attack was a success, and I pushed Matt down, mounted him, and flailed ineffectually at his face.

At the time, my heart was growing stronger, but my body was still weak, so I couldn't actually clobber Matt. Naturally, once he recovered from the surprise, Matt easily pushed me off him. His blows weren't so ineffectual, and I really did get clobbered. Still, I didn't beg for mercy. I defended myself the best I could, gritted my teeth, and held in there until Matt's fierce assault stopped.

It seemed like eventually Matt's fists started to hurt, and he left, spewing profanities as he went.

Keenesburg.

I lay on the side of the road on South Pine Street, alone, singing a little victory song to myself. I was an otaku, but I wasn't weak. Or stupid. I'd get stronger, and I'd make my dream come true.

How long had it been since then?

Why was I here?

Hadn't my dream come true?

Yeah. I'd studied Japanese. My textbooks had mostly been anime and manga. Also, anime music and J-pop. I'd read Japanese novels, too. I'd also studied.

I had originally done better in the sciences, but after studying Japanese, I stopped hating subjects in the humanities so much. While running and stretching, I did body building and trained. Even if I'd never be as big as Matt, I got some muscle on me.

I wasn't popular with the girls. No, not just the girls. No one, not even the guys, wanted anything to do with me.

I endured the solitude, and then, finally, set my feet on Japanese soil as an exchange student. It was for a period of about a year. I spent my days thinking, *I never want to go home.*

Why couldn't I have been born in this country? Anyway, the country was well-suited to me.

Naturally, I was still an otaku, but that actually made the Japanese feel a sort

of fondness for me. With my host family, the Hazakis, I felt a warm sort of familial love that I'd never experienced with my real family. In a Japanese high school, a place I had dreamed of attending, I was able to make real friends for the first time.

I found love, too. With a Japanese high school girl, a JK, Satsuki. Yes, I got myself a girlfriend with the same name as that girl in *Tonari no Totoro.* Satsuki and I held hands and went out on a date. We walked along an embankment, crossed a bridge, went into a bookstore, and sat on a park bench.

"Jessie, your Japanese is really good," Satsuki always told me.

"It's, like, so natural," she'd say.

I felt like I'd gone to heaven. *I might not believe in God, but if he were to take me to heaven, this is what I'm sure would it feel like.*

I kissed Satsuki. It was a sweet kiss, in which only our lips touched. But that was all. I was hesitant.

I mean, I'd have to go back, and I couldn't be with Satsuki forever. Was this her first kiss? I wanted to ask Satsuki, but I could never do that.

I mean, if it wasn't, what would that even matter? If I was her second, her third, I could feel more easy about pushing the relationship forward, maybe even have sex with her if things went well, was that it?

I wasn't able to think that way. I seriously loved Satsuki. Childish as this was in retrospect, I wanted to love Satsuki with all the sincerity I could muster, while still remaining true to myself.

Naturally, I had a sex drive. I felt so pent up after our dates, but I didn't want to use her just to deal with that. Even once I returned home, we'd have the internet, so we could manage. There was no guarantee a long-distance romance wouldn't work out.

Still, even though I told myself that, it was hard to believe it. If I were able to remain in the country and I could come to see her on the Shinkansen or something, that would be one thing, but we'd have the vast Pacific Ocean separating us. If I thought about it calmly, it wasn't going to work.

As the day I was going to leave Japan drew closer, Satsuki told me, “I’m okay with a long-distance relationship.”

I just repeatedly told her I loved her. That was how I really felt. But I didn’t want to make it clear we were breaking up and hurt her. I wasn’t ready to get hurt, either.

For a while after I left Japan, we communicated over the internet, but our multiple video chat sessions per day eventually became one, then one every several days.

Eventually, Satsuki said, “Jessie, aren’t you being a little cold lately?” And when I apologized, she snapped at me.

That was it. She’d probably found another guy she liked. I’d had a sense it was coming for a little while, but I had no intention of asking. I still loved Satsuki, but that gave me all the more reason not to tie her down. I wanted her to be happy more than anyone.

Not being at her side, I couldn’t even hold Satsuki’s hand. That was why I was fine with this. I kept telling myself that.

I still planned to go back to Japan, though. It wasn’t that I hated my own country. It just really didn’t suit me. While living in my country, I felt like a stranger. I felt like my parents weren’t my real parents. I felt like I’d been born in a distant land, and I’d only grown up here as the result of some mistake.

I mean, no matter how you looked at me, I was just a white guy who’d grown up in a small American town like Keenesburg, had a bad, but not terrible, family life, gotten good grades, been able to attend a good high school, and gone to a pretty decent university.

But that was wrong. That wasn’t me. I’m sure no one would understand, but I did.

I couldn’t be happy here. If I were in Japan, I could be myself. I could live the way I wanted, and even if I couldn’t patch things up with Satsuki, I could find a wonderful girl to love, and someday I could even build a family.

When that time came, I was sure I’d finally be able to love my parents. No matter what else had happened, they’d birthed me into this world. I’d no doubt

be grateful and do everything I could to be a good son.

In other words, everything would be good. It would all take a turn for the better. I was confident. In my year as an exchange student, my self-confidence had grown.

So, while attending university, I used a variety of methods, legal and otherwise, to make money. When I'd saved up enough for a few months over there, my patience ran out.

I took a break from my studies and flew from Denver International Airport to Seattle, Vancouver, and finally Narita.

I'd finally returned to Japan. Bliss and relief. That was what I felt.

"...Why? Grim...gar..."

That's weird, I thought.

I was in Japan.

Or I should have been.

While making money in the ways I'd learned to while in university, I lived the otaku life.

I found more friends. Not just otaku friends. I hung out with normies, too.

I didn't go near Roppongi all that often, but Nakano, Shinjuku, and Akihabara were like my backyard. The time I was going to stay slowly got extended, and I started thinking about what I could do to stay.

First of all, I couldn't drop out of university. It was probably a good idea to explain things to my parents, too. I'd need to go back home for a time, but that was a pain. But I couldn't just stay here like this.

It would be a lot easier to live here if I had a proper job. I had leads on that. It might be weird for me to say this myself, but I was clever. I was a pretty talented person. No matter what I did, I was never the best. But I could do better than most, so I could manage.

So... I was in Japan.

I should be... in Japan, so why...?

Why was I in Grimgar?

Before he knew it, he'd arrived in Grimgar.

A red moon. The moon was red, and that surprised him.

Just what happened...?

It was no good. He didn't know. Anyway, this wasn't Japan. It was Grimgar. Or was that all a dream?

He opened his eyes which had closed at some point. Scattered clouds. He could see the pale blue sky. This wasn't Tokyo's sky.

Tokyo. That's right. I was in Tokyo. There's no doubt about that. But this is in the mountains. On one of the Seven Mountains with their distinctive peaks. The Broken Valley where the grey elves lived was at the base of them. Yes. This is Grimgar.

He could remember details about all the comrades he had met and parted ways with here. He had an equally vivid recollection of Satsuki and all his friends in Tokyo's faces, too.

Weird.

He'd forgotten them for all this time.

What had happened?

How had he ended up like this?

That didn't matter now. Why was he still breathing? Even the pain felt far away. He was going to die...

Die.

Am I going to die? I want to see Satsuki. Am I stupid? How many years do I think it's been since we last saw each other? Being half dead is messing with my head. No, but my consciousness is surprisingly clear. I doubt I can move even a finger, and my eyelids are half closed. I'm clearly going to be dead soon. Despite that—am I going to die? To die like this?

This was unexpected. He'd expected his existence to be narrowed, to lose sight of it, his emotions and thoughts getting thinner, and then there to be

nothing left. If he didn't die instantly, that was what he'd expected the end to be like. Was that not what it was like? Death?

I'm going to die.

Any time now.

Still not yet?

When is this going to be over with? Give me a break already.

To think he'd have to sit here, impatiently waiting for death.

Something else.

Yeah. Think about something else. Enough about death.

It was inevitable. That was what made death scary. He knew now from experience. But there was just no helping it. If he acted scared, he'd just be scared. Time to distract himself.

Grimgar.

What was with this world? It was different—a different world? Or was it somewhere on Earth? No, there was no way such a vast land unexplored by people could still exist. In that case, it wasn't Earth. Another planet? The first exoplanet had been discovered in 1995. Lots had been found since. There were a number of them in the habitable zone, suitable for giving birth to life, but they were all distant. Unless faster than light travel had been made possible, like in some sci-fi novel, there was no way to go to them. He couldn't say the alternate planet theory was realistic.

Realistic?

There was magic in Grimgar. They even said there were gods. This place wasn't realistic to begin with.

Which meant...

...it wasn't reality?

Was it really a dream?

Not possible. No dream was this long, coherent, engaging of all of the senses, detailed, and vague yet deep. This was no dream. It was an indisputable reality.

Even so, Tokyo in Japan and Grimgar weren't connected. There was an unfillable disconnect between them.

It was a different world. A parallel world? Like in the many-worlds theory? Had some effect transferred him to one of those unobservable parallel worlds?

It was a ridiculous idea. He was fine hypothesizing that by some infinitesimally small probability, such a thing might have happened. But that wasn't it. The majority of the volunteer soldiers in Alterna had been people in the same situation as him.

That was reality.

This was reality.

But what if it wasn't?

Because he'd thought that was reality, he was able to believe this was also reality. What if that world, which had served as his basis for judging what was reality, hadn't been reality to begin with?

An idea suddenly occurred to him.

Simulation theory.

If sentient life forms, humans for instance, invent a computer, and that technology becomes advanced enough to simulate a universe, the odds of such a simulation being created are incredibly high. If the humanity inside the simulation in turn becomes advanced enough to simulate the universe, there would likely be a simulation inside the simulation. That simulation is bound to have a simulation inside it, as well.

Those simulations would simulate the entire universe, so the individual life forms inside the simulation would act like ones that actually existed. The simulated people would be unlikely to realize they were being simulated. Even if they suspected it to be the case, there was fundamentally no way to prove this world was a simulation.

Naturally, there was also the possibility that he was not living in a simulation, but was a resident of the one true world. However, if it was possible to simulate a universe, it was appropriate to assume there would be not just one simulation

performed, but many. With simulations running inside simulations, it could logically be deduced that there were an infinite number of simulated universes. In comparison, there was only one real world.

In the end, was he a person in a simulation, or was he a person living in the real world? In the infinity, or the one?

Naturally, the odds that he was living in a simulation were overwhelmingly higher.

Originally, this hypothesis had been proposed by some Swedish guy whose name he didn't remember. Had he read it in a book or something? That time, he'd gone, *Huh, that makes a lot of sense,* but he hadn't taken it all that seriously. The reality in front of him was far more important, after all, and the technological hurdles were so high that he found it unrealistic to imagine even simulating just one person. Simulating the universe had to be impossible. At that point, at least.

However, time had moved on.

ENIAC, said to be the first computer, had been completed in 1946. In just decades since then, computers had improved by leaps and bounds.

In that case, what about a century from now? How would things look in a millennium? If humanity wasn't wiped out, they would definitely be able to simulate the universe someday. If that time was sure to come, the simulation theory wasn't just a theory.

For instance, imagine Simulated World A. Assume there is a Simulation B inside it, which has been performed a number of times, and in Simulation B there is Simulation C which has also been performed a number of times. What if a bug or something in B sent people from B to C...?

Even if that were the right answer, the people living inside the simulation wouldn't be able to demonstrate it. However, compared to thinking that a person from Tokyo, Japan on Earth in Real World X was transferred to Alterna in Grimgar in Real World Y, it was far easier to accept.

A simulation. A simulation, huh?

He himself was living in a simulation within a simulation. When he thought of

it that way, his life suddenly felt a whole lot more trivial.

It was empty.

Still, he'd believed things were how you thought of them, and there was no heaven or hell, that they were scientifically impossible, but maybe the world beyond death was simulated, too. If so, death was not an end, but a journey into a new world.

Whatever the case, it was all just a simulation, though.

"...Is someone... watching...?" he murmured.

"Yeah, I'm watching."

He got a response.

No way.

He couldn't move his head. He searched for the speaker using just his eyes.

There.

At his feet.

Crouching down.

She wore a hood, so he couldn't see her face, but she was probably a woman. He felt like the voice was more feminine than masculine, too. Her words were in the common language of Grimgar, spoken by humans, elves, and dwarves. Come to think of it, why was the common language identical to Japanese? Now that he thought of it, the language of the undead was kind of like English.

"...I guess it doesn't matter," he murmured. "Either way..."

"You were talking about something interesting," the woman said.

"...Tal... king? Who was...?"

"You."

"...Was... I talking... out loud? Oh. I didn't think... anyone was there. I thought... it was just me."

"Did a bear get you?"

"...Mm." Even just nodding felt like it would shorten his life.

What a laugh. What was wrong with that? He wasn't long for this world. Whether death came in ten minutes, five minutes, a minute, or thirty seconds, it wasn't that big of a difference.

Besides, his life was almost certainly just a simulation anyway, so it was ridiculous to think about life and death. They were both meaningless.

There was nothing of value.

It was stupid, and ridiculous.

He wished he could just die already.

He wanted to disappear.

"The bear looked like it'd be dangerous if it were left alone, so I finished it off," said the woman. "I think it was probably the bear that did this to you."

"Oh, yeah?"

"What's wrong?"

Nothing, really.

There was nothing to it.

There was nothing that could be done.

To think, on the verge of death, he'd be able to feel like this.

"Are you crying?" the woman asked.

He might well be.

He didn't want to realize it.

He wanted to die without knowing anything.

That way was easier. How had things ended up like this?

Whatever the cause, he'd been transferred from Tokyo in Japan to Grimgar. When it'd happened, he'd forgotten almost everything about that world. Thinking about it, that might have been someone's act of mercy.

There was no need to know. It was better not to. He didn't have to think about it. About whether he was just a simulation, or whether he wasn't.

Whether it was a coincidence or an inevitability, he was a single life form born in a certain place, a single human being. Sometimes with diligence, others with sloth, and yet others with desperation, he would run through his limited time and someday he would die.

There were some who were praised as heroes, others who were mocked as cowards, and others who were scorned. There were those who loved people and brought happiness, and those good-for-nothings who stole from people or hurt them, too. There were even those who were at some times virtuous, and yet at other times would stain their hands with villainous deeds. Be they petty, great, or somewhere in between, all lives were unique, and each one had value.

At the very least, for the people themselves, they were the one and only life they had.

It was best to die feeling that way.

If he could believe it, he wanted to.

He couldn't anymore.

"Do you want to not die?" the woman asked.

He didn't have the strength remaining to answer. But, if he could, he'd say it. With all his soul, he'd shout it out.

YES! he'd cry. *I don't want to die.*

He'd thought he'd prepared himself to die long ago, but now he had to suspect that everything about that preparation had been hollow. He didn't want to die like this.

I know. Whether I want to or not, I'm going to die. I can't not.

But I don't want to.

Do I want to live more? I don't know. But I don't want to die feeling like this.

"There's a way. Just one," the woman was saying somewhere off in the distance.

Far, far away.

No, that probably wasn't it. He was probably going away himself.

He couldn’t see anything anymore.

He was dying.

“You seem to know some fascinating things, so I’d rather not let you die like this,” the woman said. “I wanted to at least get your name, but it can wait.”

And then the woman added: “See you later.”

1. The Secret Hearts of Prey



We have to have shaken them by now, Haruhiro kept thinking.

Was he being naive?

Breathing silently through just his nose, he grimaced slightly.

His body wasn't in bad shape. It didn't hurt anywhere in particular, and it felt nicely relaxed. He was hungry, but not starving. His problem was on the psychological front.

It was tough running around. Still, he'd finally shaken his pursuer. But the moment he'd felt that sense of relief...

U-ho, u-ho, u-ho, u-ho, u-ho...

He heard its voice. It seemed he was still being chased. This went beyond mere persistence. His pursuer had an unbelievable degree of tenacity.

It was maybe fifty meters away. No, closer than that. He wanted to peek out from behind the tree he had his back against and see it with his own eyes.

But I won't, okay?

The thing's sense of smell was apparently keener than a human's, but it wasn't on the level of a bear's. It didn't have the hearing of a dog or cat either, and its vision couldn't be much better than a human's. Even so, those things were able to detect the presence of things that humans couldn't. Maybe it wasn't that they were especially sharp, but that humans were just dull.

They're superior to us.

With that thought kept firmly in mind, Haruhiro was going to have to act carefully, cautiously, and with prudence layered atop more prudence.

Moving only his eyes and head, he looked around the area.

Green.

Green.

Green.

Green, green, green, green, green, green, green.

There were other colors here, too, but there were green leaves, grass, vines, or moss everywhere, so it felt like the whole place had been painted nothing but green.

This was the southwest of the Kuaron Mountains. The wyverns lived in the north, so he assumed this area was comparatively safe. He didn't see wyverns flying overhead, so it probably was. The mountainside was forested, and densely at that. The slope was steep in some places and gentle in others, and there were branches of trees covering it that blocked out the sunlight, making it gloomy in some parts. There wasn't much illumination reaching the surface, so that made things much easier.

When he thought about it, the areas around Alterna and the Wonder Hole might get awfully hot or cold at times, but they never stayed that way long. Thanks to that, he'd never thought much about the seasons. On top of that, because they had been in Darunggar for upwards of two hundred days, Grimgar was currently in the middle of July, apparently, even if it didn't really feel that way to him.

It was summer. Even as he kept quiet, he could feel the sweat beading on his skin. He was in the shade, though, so it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Still, it was pretty humid.

"U-ho, u-ho, u-ho, u-ho, u-ho..."

His pursuer was hooting again. Was that characteristic holler, done by making its chest and throat vibrate, passing information to the rest of its group? Or was it gauging the reaction of its target, Haruhiro? Whatever the case, the cries were coming from a little closer this time. The thing was closing in on him.

Where were the rest of them? Could it be that they were right next to him? His own comrades were about twenty-five meters from here, hiding, scattered between holes in the ground and the bushes.

He probably had awfully sleepy-looking eyes right now. He wasn't tired, of

course. Not in the least.

Should he turn back and rejoin his comrades? He had some confidence in his Sneaking, but what if his pursuer detected him? He wanted to take as few risks as he could, but if it continued to close in on him here, he'd be found sooner or later. He couldn't handle it alone, so he was going to need to rely on his comrades for assistance, no matter what.

He struggled to decide for a second, maybe two. Once he made his decision and began Sneaking, he started to hear the sound of footsteps and something violently colliding with trees and pushing them aside.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!" his pursuer hollered.

It was racing. Racing towards him. Had he been found? This was no time to be taking it easy and Sneaking.

Run. Run. Run, run, run!

But this was a dense forest in the mountains. The ground here was thick with tree roots, rocks that jutted out, and moss that covered both of those, making them easy to slip on.

His pursuers moved on all fours, with their hands on the ground. That sort of knuckle-walking meant they didn't lose their balance, even on bad terrain. If they were on level ground, that might be one thing, but here they clearly had the advantage. Overwhelmingly, at that.

It would be on him in no time. If his back was turned to it, he'd be killed. What was he to do, then?

Turn back and face it. Call his comrades. Endure his pursuer's attacks. Buy time until his comrades could arrive. That was the only way.

When he stopped, he heard a loud, high-pitched, *Funyaaaaaaow!*

"Kiichi?!" Haruhiro cried.

A nyaa. That was the voice of a nyaa. He turned back.

It seemed his pursuer was surprised, too, because it was looking up and to the left.

Haruhiro didn't think, *This is the perfect chance!* Still, its attention wasn't on him now. The moment he knew that, his body moved on its own. Drawing his stiletto and the knife with a hand guard, he charged towards his pursuer.

It was around two meters tall. It wasn't standing upright, though, so its head was around a meter and a half off the ground. Still, it was huge. An ape. It was built like a big ape, even though the surface of its body was covered with a shell-like skin that was like a blackish-brown exoskeleton structure. It was almost like it was wearing armor.

The males had thick, mane-like hair that grew from the back of their heads down to their backs, and it turned red when they came into maturity. These males, called redbacks, would form a troop, including a number of females and their offspring, with themselves at the center, living with them as they hunted.

Guorellas. That was what they were called.

The females were smaller than the males, but his pursuer was a male redback. Its arms, neck, shoulders, chest, stomach, waist, and legs were all frighteningly powerful. Even at a glance, it looked like it had a lot of muscle. In fact, even a small female could rend a person limb from limb. Redbacks were nuts. So nuts, that if Haruhiro fought it fairly, he had no chance of winning.

Of course he was scared. But wasn't that true of more enemies than not? In other words, things were the same as ever.

"I'm doing this!" he shouted, rousing himself to action and calling out to his comrades. Then he sprang at the redback.

The redback turned towards him and hollered, "Du-hoohhh!"

Its arms. It was swinging its right arm. If Haruhiro took a blow like that, he'd go down in one shot.

He stopped short, as he'd planned to. Its right hand swung past, right in front of his eyes. Without time for pause, the left arm came, too. It was a sideways swipe. Reaching out. If that left arm caught him, he'd be done. That was why he had to keep calm.

Look closely, he told himself. *Dodge it. Don't back away. The right. Forward and to the right. Throw myself that way.*

Grazing its left arm as he passed by, he went to its left. Rolling, he tried to get behind it. It wasn't going to let him, and it jumped in place and spun around.

Without missing a beat, Haruhiro changed direction. When he rolled backwards, the redback was a little too slow.

He attacked. Or he made it look like he was about to, and the redback tensed itself.

But it soon saw that this was a feint. That it was a threat with no substance. This prey was nothing to be feared.

Sensing that, it bared its canine teeth and came at him in earnest.

Now that it had come to this, there was no room for threats and tricks. It was closing in on him. At an incredible speed.

Haruhiro backed away. He might not be able to dodge the next one. But even if it wasn't much, he'd been able to buy some time. This had been his goal all along.

"Dark, go!" He heard a comrade's voice.

He immediately lowered his stance. Something flew past over the top of his head. Then a humanoid, or rather star-shaped, black thing, Dark the elemental, collided with the redback.

"Ah! Fuh!" Its whole body shuddered and its head was knocked back. It looked like it might go down like that, but it managed to hold out.

Still, it had taken damage. Now was the time.

Haruhiro turned. Not to run away. He needed to put distance between them.

"Haruhiro!" a tall man bellowed. He was wearing a helmet that was shaped like a hawk's head, carried a metal shield, and wielded a large katana in one hand. While charging forward, he hollered, "Ohhhhhhhh!"

A big man whose whole body was covered in scarlet and indigo cloth and leather followed suit. Was he a man? Well, he probably had been one in life, but he wasn't human anymore. He was a flesh golem.

"Kuzaku, Enba, I'm counting on you!" Haruhiro shouted.

“Yessir!” Kuzaku gave an enthusiastic reply, while Enba was silent.

The two passed him.

When he turned back, Kuzaku was swinging his large katana, and Enba was swinging his long, thick left arm at the redback.

“Nurrrrraghhhhh!” screamed Kuzaku.

“Nu-hoooohhhhh!” shouted the redback.

The redback swung both of its arms, knocking back both Kuzaku’s large katana and Enba’s left arm. Enba backed away, but Kuzaku stood his ground. The redback’s right arm, and then its left, rained blows on Kuzaku in quick succession. Kuzaku moved his shield from right to left, blocking them.

“Hah! Nuwah! Kwah!”

He was fully stopping each one. When Kuzaku tightened his defense like that, it wasn’t going to be shaken by any little thing. He was blessed with a height of over one hundred and ninety centimeters, and even with his hips bent and his waist lowered, he still looked really big.

With a silent exclamation, Enba pressed in on the redback from its side. Unable to withstand that, the redback jumped backwards diagonally.

“Hah!” Kuzaku stuck out his large katana, his shield still raised, and chased after it.

He did a combo chaining Thrust and Punishment. The redback pulled back. Enba looked like he planned to get around behind it.

They were pushing it back.

No. It was still too soon to think that.

The redback had its back pressed to a tree—or it looked like it did, but then it jumped. To the rear. Then, kicking off of a tree, it sprang towards Kuzaku.

“Gah?!” Kuzaku just barely defended himself against the redback’s surprise attack. However, he ended up being kicked away, shield and all, and was knocked over.

Enba tried to step in and help, but the redback swept him away with a single

violent swing of its arm. It looked like Kuzaku had determined he couldn't get away. He tried to cover his upper torso with his shield.

"Ha!" called the guorella.

The guorella was tenacious, and smart. In order to avoid a fatal wound, Kuzaku had chosen to protect his head, neck, and his torso where his heart was. That wasn't wrong. It was the right choice, but doing it left his lower half defenseless. The redback didn't miss that, and it seized Kuzaku by the right leg and threw him with all its strength.

"Kuzaaaakuuuuuu!" Haruhiro screamed despite himself.

Kuzaku flew about five meters before colliding with the trunk of a tree and falling to the ground. It was impressive that, even after being put through that, he didn't let go of his large katana or shield.

He's okay, Haruhiro told himself. *I don't know whether he can stand or not, but as long as he's still breathing, we can make it all work out.*

"Merry, tend to Kuzaku!"

"Right!"

"Yume!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Meow!"

There was no need to call her, huh, Haruhiro realized. Their hunter was already in a low posture, her long braids and cloak trailing behind her as she closed in on the redback.

In her hands, she held a single-edged sword. She was holding a katana in two hands. She'd found it in a place called the Mound of Katanas. The skills she knew were meant for use with a machete, a tool originally meant for breaking firewood and hacking through branches. The katana wasn't a hunter's weapon. However, her katana skills were so legitimately good that he had to say that didn't even matter.

First, she used Brush Clearer as if she were trying to chop down some of the plants, and then she chained into a Diagonal Cross. This special combo of hers actually seemed even more effective now than when she'd been using a

machete or curved sword.

When the redback jumped to the side to dodge it, Yume did a forward flip and swung down with her katana. “Gah!”

Raging Tiger.

Intimidated by the strong-willed and bold Yume’s offensive, the redback retreated even further. That was where Enba was closing in.

A flying kick. The redback took Enba’s flying kick in its left side and stumbled.

Merry was helping Kuzaku to his feet. Thanks to Yume and Enba keeping the redback away, Merry must have been able to focus on Kuzaku’s treatment without any worries.

Yume let out a cry of “Hi-yah!” and Enba silently whaled on the redback. This was where it started. Could they pierce its shell-like skin? It crouched down, taking a position where it could cover its head with both arms.

“Ungyah...” Yume’s katana bounced back.

Enba landed another flying kick on it, but this time the redback didn’t even flinch. It immediately went on the counterattack. Slamming both hands on the ground, it used the rebound to tackle Enba.

Enba was unable to avoid it and was pushed down. The redback tried to get on top of Enba, but Yume let out another odd cry and showered slashing attacks on it.

That was no good. Its shell-like skin deflected it. The redback wasn't afraid of Yume's katana anymore. If this kept up, it was going to get Enba.

Not that I'll let it.

Haruhiro hadn't been sitting on his hands the whole time, either. He'd put away the knife with the hand guard, surveyed the combat situation, erased his presence with Stealth, and climbed a tree. He hadn't been able to get directly above the redback and Enba. This would do, though. If he jumped in the direction of two o'clock, he could reach.

He jumped down. The point of his stiletto was sharp. It normally could barely cut anything, but if he exerted enough force at the right angle, it could even pierce solid metal armor.

Redback seemed to have noticed Haruhiro. It tried to look above its head. That was when he struck.

Haruhiro slammed his stiletto into the top of its head, a little to the left of center. He hadn't thought about the landing, but he ended up clinging to its body.

"Nggggggggggnnnnnnnnnggggggg!" The redback let out an incoherent scream as it writhed. It swung both its arms around, battering Haruhiro. The impacts were incredible, but he wouldn't let go. Like he'd ever do that.

He'd felt it. Haruhiro's stiletto had broken not just through the redback's shell-like skin, but through its skull, too. It might even have reached its brain. Grasping the hilt of his stiletto with both hands, he put all his strength into it.

"Gu-aaaaaaaahhhh!"

The redback was either in more pain than it could bear, or it was trying to shake Haruhiro off, because it finally started to roll around.

"Haru-kun!" Yume shouted.

"Haru!" This one wasn't Merry, it was Shuro Setora. He didn't have the time to look around, but he could hear his comrades' voices.

Not yet. He could still hold out.

Haruhiro wrapped his legs tightly around the redback's body. No matter how much its hairy horns stabbed into him, or where it hit his head, shoulders, back, and hips, he kept twisting his stiletto into its head. He was going to stop this thing from moving. Or slow it, at least. If he could just do that, it'd be enough. And he wanted to spend as little time on it as possible.

If he didn't, they were in trouble.

Thousand Valley, bordered to the east by the Kuaron Mountains, to the north by the Whiterock Mountains, to the west by the Nehi Desert, and to the south by the Nargia Highlands and Rinstorm Mountains, was two hundred and fifty kilometers from north to south and four hundred and fifty kilometers from east to west.

There were a number of major rivers, along with their countless tributaries. Those ran into one another in this area, intertwined, and created a complex series of seemingly unlimited valleys and hills that obstructed a traveler's path.

There was fog year-round in a central area that measured about a hundred kilometers in every direction, making visibility extremely poor, as if nature itself were forbidding humans from entering.

According to one theory, long ago, when the gods fought a battle so fierce that the once-blue moon turned red, the land had been sundered. They said that the fog had been called in by the curse of one god who was defeated, left as nothing but a severed head.

To find the shortest route to Alterna, they just had to go straight south. Once they crossed the Nargia Highlands or the Rinstorm Mountains, made it through the former domain of the Kingdom of Arabakia, traversed the Bordo Plains, which lay between the Kurogane and Dioze Mountains, and the Grey Marshes, they would be in the Quickwind Plains, and it would be easy street from there.

If they went another three hundred and something kilometers south-southwest from there, they would arrive in Alterna. At the very least, that was what it had been like on a map Shuro Setora said she'd seen before.

There was a problem, though.

Or rather, lots of them.

First, it was a long way. Way too long.

Then again, if we're going to have to brace ourselves for a seven to eight hundred kilometer journey on the shortest route, complaining isn't going to do much good. Let the distance be what it is. We'll just have to accept it.

It wasn't just the distance, though. Another objection was that the former domain of Arabakia, on the other side of the Nargia Highlands, had been divided between those who held power during the time of No-Life King's Alliance of Kings, and there were many fortresses and large cities there.

Thousand Valley might be enemy territory for humans, but it was nothing by comparison. The orcs in this place, in particular, would capture humans on sight and kill them, no questions asked. For Haruhiro and his group, who didn't know the lay of the land, it would be nigh suicidal for them to fumble through the area and figure it out as they went.

There was the option of avoiding flat land and walking through the mountains, where the orcs didn't live, but they couldn't follow the mountains all the way south, and it went without saying that crossing mountains came with its own risks.

The shortest route had to be eliminated from the list of possibilities. If they were in a hurry, they had to go around. Even if it was a roundabout course, they'd choose the safest one possible.

The Whiterock Mountains to the north weren't just a massive mountain range. Those mountains, topped with silver snow that would never melt, housed the capital of the former Kingdom of Ishmal. That kingdom, along with the surrounding scattered fortresses and cities, made up what was known as Undead DC—the main stronghold of the undead.

Soma and his group were apparently plotting to invade Undead DC at some point, but that meant that if Haruhiro and his party tried to approach the area, they wouldn't get off lightly. It was the wrong way anyway, so there was no going north.

The Nehi Desert had originally been the territory of the Kingdom of Nananka. There seemed to be nothing but rocks and sand as far as the eye could see, but there were actually oases to be found here and there. Most oases had a town,

and orcs or other races that had aligned themselves with No-Life King inhabited them. There was also talk of a tribe of humans, the Zafah, who had lived in the desert for centuries, and might still exist, too.

For Haruhiro and the others who didn't know the desert, it would be too reckless to go there. So the west was out, too.

East was the only option.

In the beginning, he had considered going northeast to detour around the Kuaron Mountains. However, that way apparently led into the former territory of the Kingdom of Ishmal, and it was swarming with undead. Besides which, those wyverns lived in the north of the Kuaron Mountains.

The wyverns apparently didn't eat undead, but Haruhiro and his group would make tasty treats for them. He'd heard that, long ago, in the Kingdom of Ishmal, they'd had the techniques needed to render wyverns harmless and tame them, or something like that. But according to Setora, that knowledge had been lost with the fall of Ishmal.

Whatever the case, they had just finished going through a hard time fighting off one of the beasts. There was no way he wanted to go anywhere near where those things lived.

So they put their heads to discuss, *Now then, whatever shall we do?* And Kuro of the Typhoon Rocks popped up and dragged off Tsuga, the priest with the buzz cut.

"Hey, Bonze Tsuga, we're going."

"Oh, sure," said Tsuga. "Well, see you all later."

That was all there was to their too-quick parting, and they were so dumbfounded that they neglected to ask Kuro, who seemed like he'd be more knowledgeable about the geography, for advice. That hurt.

Now it was a total unknown where the Rocks had gone, or what they were doing. If possible, Haruhiro would have liked to go with them. They were supposed to be fellow Day Breakers, too. This was just downright cold of them.

Still, even if they had been together, that seemed like it would have been a lot

of trouble in its own way.

That being that, with a prayer that the fog would clear, Haruhiro and the others set out for the east. Not long afterwards, pursuers from Jumbo's Forgan closed in on them, and they ran this way and that, not knowing what to do.

They ran into a large river, but couldn't cross it. They hid in a cave at the bottom of a valley to elude their pursuers. They were attacked by unknown beasts. They caught mysterious diseases...

Honestly, a lot happened.

In the end, it felt like a miracle that they never once had to cross blades with their pursuers. Kuzaku and Yume had lost their weapons, so it was helpful that they managed to get away without fighting. If they hadn't been in Thousand Valley, with its heavy fog and complex terrain, it wouldn't have worked out that way.

In exchange, there were times when even Setora got lost, and so they couldn't quite go in the direction they wanted to. Even though the straight-line distance was only about five kilometers, they had to walk two to three times as far. That sort of thing happened all the time.

Still, even if they had decided on a destination, there was no guarantee they would be able to make it there. They had settled on going east, but they might not be able to go east. Thousand Valley was an untamed frontier.

They had parted ways with Tsuga and Kuro on June 15th. Right at the beginning of July, Haruhiro and the others had reached a place that was apparently called the Mound of Katanas. According to Setora, it was located almost due south of the hidden village, and not more than fifty kilometers away.

This meant that, after sixteen days, they had only gone something shy of fifty kilometers. What was more, they'd meant to go east, but this was south...

They hadn't wandered into it, though. The Mound of Katanas was an old battlefield with copious amounts of corpses and equipment scattered over a plateau of around thirty square kilometers. These were people who'd died in battle before No-Life King's curse had started to influence the frontier, so they

wouldn’t start moving.

Whether it was the bodies themselves, or their armor and equipment, the vast majority of everything was rotten.

The people of the hidden village didn’t come near the place, but Haruhiro and his party had figured there might still be usable weapons they could get their hands on. Besides, if they went to the Mound of Katanas, that would apparently make it comparatively easier to head east, west, or south.

It was a creepy place to look at. There was an incredible volume of intertwined bones. And the swords, spears, and such that were thrust into the ground here and there looked like grave markers for the warriors. The fog thinned, and a moist breeze blew through.

Did something just move over there? Haruhiro thought and squinted his eyes, but it was just a skull hanging on a spear.

It was impossible to walk without treading on bones.

Whether it was single-edged katanas, double-edged swords, spears, axes, shields, or armor, it could be found here. However, everything was all badly rusted or decayed, and more than a few items crumbled just from being picked up.

It wasn’t clear if it was because of their quality, pure coincidence, or some other effect, but on very rare occasions, there were pieces of equipment that were just dirty and had not degraded. If the katanas, which there were an overwhelmingly higher number of, were used as a baseline, it was one in a hundred... no, one in every few hundred.

Wandering the Mound of Katanas, Haruhiro and the party found a large, solid katana, a thick, somewhat short katana, and a large, heavy shield. Or rather, they excavated them from the mountain of bones.

Naturally, they needed to sharpen and repair them. It took some hassle, but getting Kuzaku and Yume back into a position where they could fight was a big deal.

They had never expected they’d lose something in exchange. Even Setora seemed not to have predicted it, so there was no helping it.

Somewhere, off in the distance, there was a shriek. *Gyahh!*

It was a nyaa. They knew instantly.

Setora had been raising hundreds of nyaas in the village. Of those, she had deployed around eighty in the conflict with Forgan, sacrificing a little over ten there, and then having another ten or so drop out during their flight after the battle. Even so, there were still over fifty nyaas scattered through the area, serving as Setora's eyes and ears.

The gray nyaa called Kiichi was about the only one that made frequent appearances in front of Haruhiro and the others, and they never knew if the other nyaas were there or not.

Once in a while, a nyaa would cry out, and Setora would nod. When that happened, Haruhiro would think, *Oh, they really are there.*

Even if she didn't feed the nyaas, they would hunt and gather on their own to feed themselves, then continue serving their master. They had been trained to be more loyal than dogs, but with a strong sense of independence, and they looked cute, too.

On their way to the Mound of Katanas, the nyaas had gathered food for them. It was no exaggeration to say that the nyaas were the party's lifeline. Without the nyaas, they'd have likely starved.

Those nyaas were in danger. Naturally, that meant Haruhiro and the others weren't safe, either.

When Setora clicked her tongue, the high-pitched voice of a nyaa came back from beyond the fog.

Tch, tch, tch!

In that short exchange, Setora seemed to have figured something out. "We're moving, Haru. Hurry. I'll have the nyaas scatter and flee. For the time being, we won't be able to count on their support. Now!"

"Okay." Haruhiro nodded, and Setora let out a sharp fricative sound.

Shh, shh, shh!

She must have given an order to the nyaas. It seemed some unexpected

situation had occurred. From the way Setora acted, he understood it was reasonably serious.

But looking back on it later, he had to admit his thinking had been naive.

Haruhiro and the others had immediately departed the Mound of Katanas and headed east.

They kept their losses to a minimum by acting quickly, so they figured they'd be able to get by somehow.

Or so he had thought at the time.

He was a fool.

Finally, it stopped moving.

Of course it had stopped. It probably wasn't breathing. It was most likely dead.

Haruhiro was clinging to the fallen redback's back. His stiletto was still buried to the hilt in its cranium.

It was damn heavy. Half... no, two-thirds of his body was underneath it. On top of that, its hairy horns were stabbing into him, and it hurt so badly, it just wasn't funny.

Speaking of pain, he ached all over, to the point where he suspected there might actually be fewer spots that didn't hurt than did. He'd taken a real beating from it, after all. He'd been slammed into the ground and trees, too. He was also bleeding. He might have a broken bone or two.

"Hold on," he murmured.

I'm amazed I'm still alive.

He came close to feeling a sense of relief, but...

No, no, no, wait, wait, wait, not yet, not yet, not yet, he cautioned himself.

The redback. Was that thing really dead? With his hand still gripping the hilt of his stiletto, he felt its neck. He was searching for a pulse, but he didn't really know if he was doing it right. Or rather, he didn't know at all. For a start, could he take a guorella's pulse like he would a human's? It had this scale-like skin,

too. He felt like it might not be possible. Its whole body was relaxed, certainly. It was crazy heavy, too. Whether it was alive or not, it had to weigh more than a human, so he couldn't go by the weight.

Oh, right. Of course it felt heavy.

It's heavy. I can't breathe. This hurts. Oh, no...

"Haru!" Merry shouted. "Everyone, help him!"

His savior had arrived. With a grunt, Kuzaku lifted up the redback, and in the opening that provided, Yume pulled Haruhiro out from under it.

"Meow!"

Merry. Merry was crouched down next to him, with an incredible look on her face. She looked like she was about to say, "Oh, please!" or "Again?!"

Was she angry, maybe? He wanted to defend himself. He hadn't done anything too reckless. He'd thought he could pull it off. There'd been a need to settle things fast, too.

...*Sorry.* Haruhiro apologized in his heart. For now, he'd sit still.

Merry made the sign of the hexagram over her forehead. "O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you! Sacrament!"

Shihoru was clinging to her staff and looking around restlessly. Setora had Enba doing something for her, and did not look amused. The light flooded forth. It was blinding. Haruhiro shut his eyes.

Not long after heading east from the Mound of Katanas, they learned that it was guorellas who'd killed Setora's nyaa.

"What rotten luck," Setora said in a displeased tone. "Of all the things, we had to be targeted by a troop of guorellas. They can be unbelievably tenacious. They won't give up on us easily."

Setora made all her other nyaas run away, but Kiichi she kept close at hand. She said that Kiichi was the cleverest, most loyal, considerate, and capable of all her nyaas. He was trusted by the other nyaas, too.

Once things settled down, she would have Kiichi look for the other nyaas. But

they soon came to the conclusion that it didn't look like things were ever going to settle down.

The day after they moved away from the Mound of Swords, they saw a guorella for the first time at a distance. It was small, and they couldn't spot any hairy horns on it, so that apparently meant it was a female. It was looking in their direction. In other words, they had been found.

The female went, *Po, po, po, po, po, po, po,* making plosive sounds. Even without knowing the ecology of guorellas, it wasn't hard to guess it was a warning, or a report or signal.

If a certain stupid piece of trash had been around, he might have urged them to intercept and attack it. However, that guy was no longer their comrade, and according to Setora, guorella troops normally consisted of about twenty members. There was only one of the frightening redbacks per troop, but the females were still much stronger than a human, and the young males were mischievous and vicious.

Whenever the people of the village were pushed by necessity to drive off a troop of guorellas, a group consisting of tens of elite samurai warriors, necromancers, and onmitsu spies would take on the task.

Haruhiro and the party hurriedly fled. They didn't stop walking, even after it got dark, and just before dawn, when they thought it was safe to stop and rest, they were ambushed by a group of young, male guorellas.

By the time they managed to kill one, the rest had taken off, but they had to assume there were still guorellas with their sights set on them. That meant that even if they fought, they couldn't win, so their options were to run or hide.

Haruhiro didn't want to remember what the days after that had been like.

It was too painful.

Haruhiro opened his eyes. Merry was glaring at him. No, maybe not glaring, but her expression was scary.

I'm probably going to get chewed out again, he thought.

Merry looked like she was about to say something, so Haruhiro braced

himself for it.

“If you’re done, then move it.” Setora pushed Merry aside.

“Ah!” Merry nearly fell over.

How could Setora do that? This, he could object to. Even though it wasn’t like she’d done it to him, Haruhiro was mad. Merry must have been even madder.

Despite that, Merry looked down, took a single breath, and then, for some reason, said, “I’m sorry” to Setora instead.

“So long as you understand.” Setora crouched down right in front of Haruhiro. Haughtily.

Yeah, that was right. Setora had always had a big attitude. She acted like he owed her something, was sharp-tongued, and had far too little compassion, consideration, or concern for others.

He was about to give her a piece of his mind when Setora reached out with both hands and grabbed Haruhiro by the back of his head.

“Are you all right?”

“...Yeah. Um. Er... Merry did heal me. My wounds are all gone.”

“Even if your wounds have vanished, surely that doesn’t mean it is as if you are back to the way you would have been without them.” Setora cocked her head to the side slightly.

Um, she’s getting kind of close. Her face. It’s less than fifteen centimeters away. Twelve, thirteen maybe. Isn’t that a little too close?

If he averted his eyes, there was no telling what she might do. Was it okay, looking into each other’s eyes this closely? Wasn’t it kind of, no, really embarrassing?

Either way, her eyes sure were big. Setora’s eyes. It was a little late to be noticing, though. Her eyes were so big that they looked like they might fall out, and she had bags underneath them. Was that from exhaustion? He felt like those bags had been there to begin with.

Huh? Doesn’t she kind of resemble someone?

Who could that be?

“Haru,” her cheeky lips moved, speaking Haruhiro’s name.

He hadn’t asked her specifically, but Setora had to be around Haruhiro’s age, maybe a little younger. But ever since they’d met, she’d taken an attitude like she was his elder. Setora was like that towards everyone. The high-handed attitude had become ingrained.

“...Wh-What?”

“You are my lover.”

Merry coughed.

Haruhiro came very close to looking in her direction, but there was a risk that would displease Setora, so he stopped short. No, but wait! He wasn’t her lover; he was just acting the part until Setora grew tired of it.

He owed Setora. He’d borrowed her strength. She’d helped. It had been agreed that Haruhiro would let her remove his left eye and take it. He had accepted that, and he’d also had no choice but to play her lover.

If Setora asked him, *You are my lover, yes?* Haruhiro would have no choice but to answer, *Yes, you are exactly right.* That said, when it came to whether or not he was really her lover, the answer was a flat no.

It was only an act, like a children’s game of pretend. Did Setora understand that point? Of course, she had to.

You will act as if you are my lover.

That was what she’d demanded of Haruhiro. They had only just met then, so it would have been totally unbelievable, but if she had felt something greater than curiosity towards Haruhiro, something akin to romantic feelings, then the words *Be my lover* would have been enough.

In other words, this was just her toying with him.

“Haru,” said Setora. “I’m worried about you.”

Even if she told him that with a straight face, he had trouble responding. “...Th-Th... Thanks...?”

When he just barely managed to force out a response, Setora chuckled and mussed Haruhiro's hair with both her hands. "You really are an odd man, you know that? That is what I like about you, though."

"I... I see."

"Yes. I wouldn't be able to take you dying on me."

Right now, he badly wanted to tease her. *Oh, come on. What're you talking about, Setora-san. Geez,* he wanted to say. If he said it, she'd probably beat him. So he wouldn't say it, and he couldn't.

"...Nah. I don't, uh, want to die, or anything, either... you know?"

"You trust in your comrades, and you did it with some chance of victory," Setora said. "That's what you want to say, yes?"

"Well, yeah..."

"But, to my eyes, it looked purely like a dangerous gamble. You rate your own value too lowly. That is why you can cast yourself aside so easily. That is your strength, but also your weakness. Do you understand that?"

He understood it pretty well, actually. Shihoru and Merry had pointed it out to him, too. But still, he'd never thought Setora, of all people, would be cautioning him like this.

Honestly, it was unexpected. Unexpected that she was willing to be so kind, and to think about what was best for Haruhiro.

"If you were to die..." Setora looked around to Merry, Shihoru, Yume, and Kuzaku. "...what would happen to that bunch? They might be somewhat useful and excel at one trick, but they're a fundamentally unreliable bunch. They can't get by without you."

"Well, yeah," Kuzaku mumbled. "She's kinda got a point. Seriously."

"If Haru-kun weren't here, huh..." Yume murmured.

"I don't want to imagine it..." Shihoru agreed.

Merry was keeping quiet, but what did she think?

Setora raised one eyebrow in exasperation. "Look how pathetic they are," she

said with a sigh. “They’re completely reliant on you. If you’re thinking about what’s best for them, you are the one person who can never die. If someone must be sacrificed, you should be the last in line.”

“I can’t do that,” he responded immediately, despite himself. “Rather than die myself and let them get wiped out, the right thing to do is to stay alive and, as leader, make sure that nobody dies. That’s what you’re trying to tell me. I know that in my head, but when I find myself in that sort of situation, I’m probably going to put everyone else’s lives before my own.”

“Even if that’s wrong?”

“I do want to make the right decisions, as much as that’s possible. However, I can only live as myself. I can’t become someone else. I can tell my comrades, *This is the kind of guy I am, but I still want you to believe in me, if you can.* But acting like someone I’m not in order to get them to believe? Doesn’t that sound kind of unfair? We’re entrusting each other with our lives, which are more important than anything, after all. I don’t want to lie to my comrades. I can’t.”

“I’m jealous,” Setora said.

“Huh?”

“I want to steal you away now.”

“Whuh...?”

It was a surprise attack. Setora was suddenly pulling Haruhiro towards her.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, it was his forehead. Setora pressed her lips to Haruhiro’s forehead, and there was a smacking sound as she kissed it. Her lips were cold, but soft.

Merry coughed again.

Does she have a cold? Haruhiro wondered. *Wait, Setora-san! What are you doing? Everyone’s watching, you know...*

Haruhiro might not be in a position to refuse, but, at the very least, he didn’t want his comrades watching. That said, asking her to do this when the two of them were alone, with no one else watching, seemed wrong, too. Like it might invite misunderstandings, maybe? Was that the problem here?

Somewhere, Kiichi the nyaa meowed.

“We’ll do the rest later.” Setora gently pushed Haruhiro away and stood up.

What did she mean, “the rest”? He didn’t want to know, but if she was going to force him to do “the rest,” he’d have no choice but to comply—right?

Haruhiro stood up and wondered as he looked around the area. If the guorellas hadn’t been chasing them, what might have happened?

They continued to run and run, but the guorella troop kept relentlessly chasing after Haruhiro and the party. After not sensing their presence for several hours, maybe half a day, just as he was feeling relieved that, finally, it was all right, the guorellas would ambush them, or shout out and surprise them.

They weren’t just stubborn. The females were comparatively cautious, and not quick to attack. The ones that kept on coming at them were the young males, full of vigor. The females would first call in the others, and they had only seen the redback a few times before now.

“...Meow?” Yume tilted her head to the side.

“Why...?” Shihoru whispered.

“Huh?” Kuzaku had his shield on his back, with only his large katana drawn. “What is it?”

Merry pressed a finger to her lips as she looked at the dead redback. “The redback...”

“Ah!” Haruhiro’s eyes went wide. That was right. The redback. “Wasn’t this guy the leader of the troop?”

“He should have been, but...” Setora fell silent.

To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to to, to, to to, to, to to, to, to...

This sound. He’d heard it a number of times.

“This is... drumming, right?”

The guorellas pounded on their chests with both hands, as if they were beating a drum. It was a behavior seen only in guorella males. It was thought to

be done to intimidate, and when drumming started between a pair of males, a scuffle was about to follow. However, because the young males of the troop were kept in line by the redback, they didn't drum often. Normally, only the redback would drum.

That was what Setora had told them before. But the redback was here, dead.

"Dwelling on it will get us nowhere." Setora slapped Haruhiro on the back, then quickly jumped on to Enba's shoulders. "I told you. They can be bizarrely tenacious. Go, Enba."

2. No Biting



This was weird. Strange. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn't supposed to be this way.

Yes, Haruhiro had taken a risk. He'd finished the redback himself. Doing that was a gamble. He couldn't deny that.

He'd had some anticipation of success. Even so, if he hadn't had the idea in his head that it might end things, he would have chosen a much more cautious approach.

Guorellas formed troops of around twenty members. They were led by large-bodied males with hairy red horns called redbacks. When they lost their leader, would the young males fight to take its position? Or would a female temporarily become leader? Whatever the case, the troop would fall into disarray, if not fall apart altogether.

Guorella troops were persistent, stubborn hunters. They didn't just chase and capture their prey. They followed them without haste or hurry, slowly closing in, and waited for their targets to run out of strength. The redbacks were particularly clever, and despite clearly having greater strength, they rarely showed it. That was why this had been his one and only chance.

Thinking back now, Haruhiro might have been actively trying not to think about that. Thinking that he had to succeed no matter what, or that he absolutely couldn't afford to fail, or that if he messed up, it would be all over. The more he thought about stuff like that, the more tense he got, and that sometimes caused his hands to slip. For a mediocre person like Haruhiro to accomplish something properly, it was best to go about it with a level head.

With some trouble, he'd managed to take down the redback. Now, the guorellas wouldn't trouble them anymore. Well, that wasn't something he'd been optimistic enough to believe, but it seemed likely they'd have some degree of respite, at least. If the party used that time to pull away, they would

at least be able to catch their breaths. And if they didn't need to run and hide anymore, they'd be able to set a clear direction and choose a course.

However, nothing had changed.

He'd killed the redback, but the guorellas were still chasing them.

He also started to hear the *to, to, to, to, to, to,* of their drumming. When it was really bad, he'd hear the drumming start to the north, then after a little while, more drumming would come from the south. He could only assume there were multiple redbacks. But the one that was supposed to have been the sole redback in the troop was dead. What in the world was going on here?

The one good thing, though he wasn't entirely sure it was a good thing, was that the guorellas were more cautious now that he'd taken out the redback. Before, the young males used to occasionally attack. That was entirely gone now, and the amount of time where all he could hear was his comrades breathing and footsteps had increased.

Have the guorellas finally given up the pursuit? he would think. But every time that thought happened to cross his mind, he would hear drumming or shouting, or a thin tree would bend in the distance, or a branch would snap.

According to Setora, Kiichi the gray nyaa was frequently spotting guorellas. They were out there. Close by.

Were they closing in from behind? Were they to the right, and to the left, too? Maybe they were even up ahead. He almost felt like the party had been encircled.

There had to be a number of them. Including the redback, their party had to have killed five... no, six. So, there were a little over ten of those things remaining? Really? Was that all? It felt like there were more.

Everyone was extremely quiet. Who had been the last to utter a word? He didn't remember.

The guorellas clearly hadn't lost Haruhiro and the party. They were tormenting them. They intended to weaken them, then strike when they could no longer move. So it ought to have been fine to talk. Rather than stay silent, a little chatter would have helped take their minds off it.

But what was there to talk about? If he opened his mouth, he felt like he might say, *I'm exhausted,* despite himself. What else was he to say?

I'm exhausted. My legs ache. My body feels heavy. I've had enough.

Give me a break. It's hot. I'm hungry. I'm at my limit.

Whining would get him nowhere. Everyone had it rough. They were all enduring. Shihoru, in particular, looked like she could collapse at any moment. But she didn't stop. Her shoulders heaving with each breath, she was forcing her feet to keep moving forward. In her desperation not to fall behind, not to drag her comrades down with her, Shihoru was following them.

Yume and Merry were always at her side. Even when it came to Kuzaku, who was walking in front of the three of them, he was wearing armor and carrying that stupidly heavy shield on his back. The rest of them had to be suffering more than Haruhiro could possibly imagine.

Only Setora, who was beside or a little ways ahead of Haruhiro, might be feeling otherwise. After all, most of the time Setora was riding on Enba's shoulders.

If Enba the golem was given periodic injections of a mysterious liquid, and took special pills, he could operate for almost forever. Whenever he was moving, Enba was Setora's vehicle. Even if he shook somewhat, it wasn't going to cause her motion sickness, and it had to be easier than walking on her own feet. In fact, excluding Enba, whose face was covered, only Setora had a cool look on her face.

Sometimes it pissed Haruhiro off.

It was fine, though. It wasn't like he was thinking, *That's no fair,* or, *Suffer with us,* or anything like that. If she could conserve her stamina for when it was needed, it was best that she do so. Haruhiro had it in his head that, in a worst-case scenario, if there was nothing left they could do, he wanted Setora and Enba to be able to run away, at least.

Setora wasn't his comrade, after all.

Even if a sequence of events had brought them together, they had no real connection, and she'd been dragged into some real trouble. Haruhiro was no

optimist, so while he wanted to believe they could get through this, he couldn't say the outlook on that was bright.

He was sure his comrades were prepared for the worst. They'd been through a number of crises together. Once they had exerted all possible efforts, they could only rely on the heavens to sort out the rest. If they did all they could, then no matter how things shook out, he could accept the result. Haruhiro wouldn't blame his comrades, and he doubted his comrades would condemn him, either. However, Setora didn't have to share their fate.

Where was this place...?

It wasn't Thousand Valley. It was the southwestern portion of the Kuaron Mountains. He knew that much, but where was it, precisely? Where were they headed?

East. More or less. What were they going to reach if they continued this way? The sea? No, the sea was still a long way away. How far was a long way? A hundred kilometers? If they went that far, surely the guorellas wouldn't follow them. He had no basis to say that, but he hoped it was true.

If that idiot were here, there's no way he wouldn't be complaining. He'd insult me, make a huge fuss, and cop a horrible attitude. Even just thinking about it, Haruhiro was mad.

It was a good thing that guy wasn't here. They were better off with him gone. He wasn't their comrade anymore. He'd always been a seed of worry. Haruhiro didn't even want to see his face. There'd been times when he hadn't even wanted to breathe the same air as him.

He'd done well to put up with that guy. It had made him more patient. That was something like a side effect, but the guy was so detestable that it felt like anyone else would be preferable. Had it helped Haruhiro to grow as a person, having to deal with that guy being utter trash?

Now that he wasn't around, it really was quiet. Or "dead" might be another way to put it. Well, they were fine without him. This was far preferable to having that guy, who was too noisy for his own good, around.

Hey, man, that guy would've said. *If you keep spewing nonsense like that,*

you'll regret it, you know? I mean, you're regretting already, aren't you, Parupiro? Well? Hmm?

"Oh, crap..." Haruhiro muttered. He'd started having auditory hallucinations.

No, he hadn't actually heard it. It was just a thing that guy totally would have said. It had suddenly popped into his mind, and he'd played the scenario inside his head. Even though he wanted to forget the guy.

"Shihoru." He heard Merry's voice.

When he turned back, Shihoru was crouched down, hugging her staff, and leaning against a tree. Her shoulders were heaving.

Yume, who was leaned over, rubbing Shihoru on the back, looked over at him. "Haru-kun," was all she said.

Shihoru's head was hanging low. Yume's face was a little dirty, and she looked worn out. When Merry shook her head, sweat flew everywhere.

Kuzaku let out an exaggerated sigh and sat down. He was expressing that he had reached his limit in an overblown way in order to lessen Shihoru's psychological burden. It was so like Kuzaku to show his consideration that way.

"Let's rest," Haruhiro said, taking a breath. Looking up, he could see the scarlet sky peeking through the branches of the trees. Was it already evening? He wanted to sit down. No, to sleep. This was no good.

In the distance, the drumming of the guorellas began once more. *To, to, to, to, to, to...*

Seriously?

Were they being watched? Given the timing, he had to suspect that.

Shihoru lifted her head. She was trying to get up. Yeah, of course she was. They had no choice but to go. To move on.

Haruhiro started to move.

Setora got ahead of him. "Rest."

"No, but..." Haruhiro tried to argue, but he didn't continue. His body was rejecting it. Was he that exhausted?

“Kiichi and I will search for the enemy.” Setora glanced at Haruhiro, her lips turning upwards for just a moment. “You people stay here. I doubt you’ll be able to relax, but try to be able to move at least a little.”

“Sorry. We’re counting on you.” It was all Haruhiro could do to say that. Once he sat down on the ground, his breathing suddenly became ragged and labored. His vision blurred. Uh oh. It looked like he’d been on the verge of collapsing.

Setora got down from Enba’s shoulders. Was she going to walk with Enba following her? Where was Kiichi? He was nowhere to be seen.

Yume hugged Shihoru close and patted her on the head. “There, there...”

Merry looked up, in an almost dazed state.

Setora and Enba disappeared into the trees in no time.

Haruhiro’s racing pulse just wouldn’t return to normal. It was like his heart no longer belonged to him.

The next thing he knew, the guorellas had stopped drumming.

“...Did they run off?” Kuzaku muttered to himself.

A moment later, it occurred to Haruhiro that he meant Setora and Enba. Then he realized he’d been careless. She could use them as bait to make a clean getaway.

Haruhiro hadn’t thought of it, but he couldn’t rule the possibility out entirely. But, well... No, probably not. If she’d intended to do that, she would have acted on it earlier. Besides, it just wouldn’t be like her. Setora was cold, or more like heartless and inconsiderate, but she was also strangely true to her word. He figured that, probably, if she was going to abandon them, she’d abandon them, and if she was going to use them, she’d use them, but she’d be sure to tell them before she did. She might be merciless, but she wasn’t underhanded. That seemed like the kind of person Setora was.

“Rest,” Haruhiro told him, and Kuzaku replied, “’Kay,” and lay down on his side. A moment later, he was already snoring.

“No one told you to go to sleep, though...” Haruhiro muttered.

Shihoru giggled, and Yume’s shoulders heaved as she let out a bizarre laugh

that sounded like “Funyunyu.”

His eyes met with Merry’s as she was stifling a yawn. She hung her head in embarrassment.

“...I’m sorry.”

“You don’t...”

...have to apologize, he was about to finish. But then his pulse, which had begun to calm down, suddenly picked up once more.

To, to, to, to, to, to...

Drumming. From a different direction than before.

Damn, he wanted to curse, but he held it in. Losing his temper wouldn’t help. If he got emotional, he’d be giving the guorellas what they wanted.

...But what did that matter, anyway? They were out of options. Why didn’t the guorellas just swarm them? Were they playing around? The party wouldn’t stand a chance against them.

Or maybe that wasn’t true?

It might be that, in fact, the number of guorellas was lower than it seemed to be. They might just be making it look like there were more of them.

No, but it was definitely true that there were multiple guorellas drumming. In other words, multiple redbacks.

Then again, that was just something Setora had told him. Setora could be wrong. Maybe the ecology of guorellas wasn’t actually that well understood, and her knowledge was only based on guesswork. Even if it was generally the case that only redbacks drummed, there might be exceptions.

So if the guorellas attacked head-on, they were either anticipating they couldn’t win against the party, or fearing they would take serious losses.

Losses, huh.

If they were hunting in order to acquire food, they ideally would want to take no losses. Haruhiro felt the same way. He was fine with taking injuries they could heal with light magic, but he didn’t want even a single death. Naturally,

the guorellas would hunt with that as a prerequisite.

Haruhiro and the party had already killed guorellas. The creatures should have given up. But suppose that, right now, they were to launch an all-out attack. Haruhiro and the others might not be able to run away, but they wouldn't die quietly, either. They'd fight with everything they had. He could guarantee they'd take a few guorellas down with them.

The guorellas had to know Haruhiro and the party weren't easy opponents. They weren't first-rate volunteer soldiers, or even second-rate, but the party was still tenacious.

If guorellas could talk, Haruhiro would want to tell them this: *You're not going to kill us easily. If you don't want to die, find some other prey. If you want to do this, bring it. But I'm sure you don't want to die, either. Let's stop this.*

There was a rustling of leaves.

Haruhiro leapt to his feet and drew his stiletto.

"Ah!" He was so startled, he thought his heart might stop.

It was Setora and Enba. Had they come back?

"What, Haru?" Setora asked. "That's an awful look you have on your face."

Unable to respond so suddenly, Haruhiro adjusted his grip on his stiletto. He tried to swallow his spit, but found the inside of his mouth was dry.

"Kuzaku!" Merry called out.

"...Yeah. I'm awake..." Kuzaku sat up slowly, shaking his head.

"Hey, Setora." Yume's tone of voice was so fluffy, it seemed out of place, but Haruhiro found it soothing. "Where'd the nyaas all go?"

Setora ignored Yume's question and approached Haruhiro. She got closer and closer, touching his right arm, his right shoulder, his hips and sides...

That tickles, you know?

"...Wh-Wh-What?" Haruhiro asked nervously.

"Just testing. Don't let it bother you."

“I’m gonna let it bother me...”

“Wh-What exactly are you testing?” Merry asked for some reason.

“Keh...” Had Shihoru burst out laughing, coughed, or done something else?

“Haru.” Setora glanced over at Merry for some reason, then brought her lips up right next to Haruhiro’s ear. When she did that, by necessity, her body pressed up against his, too. Haruhiro nearly backed away. If it weren’t for the requirement of having to pretend he was her lover, he might have jumped backwards. “I have a plan. Will you listen?”

“I want to hear what it is, but can you back away a little first...?”

“I’m doing this because I don’t want to back away,” Setora said. “Is that a problem, somehow?”

“It’s... not a problem, no.”

“Good.” Setora nuzzled up against Haruhiro’s ears and neck as if she were a cat.

Umm... he thought uncomfortably. *Everyone’s staring, you know? What* is *this? I really... just don’t know what to do.*



There was nothing he could do, though. He just had to bear with it.

“The truth is, I was worried,” Setora said. “That maybe you actually hate me.”

“I don’t... hate you.”

“But you don’t like me, either?”

“No... That’s not true.”

“You’re an honest one.”

“I... I don’t know about that.”

“Nyaas go into heat twice a year, but there doesn’t seem to be a mating season for humans,” she said. “So when is it we go into heat? I’ve always wondered that.”

“O-Oh, yeah...?”

“I see. So when an agreeable man is next to me, this is how I feel, is it?” Setora pressed her nose and lips to Haruhiro’s neck, breathing in as if she were sniffing him, then let out a hot sigh.

His comrades weren’t so much surprised as dazed. Even Haruhiro was at a loss for what to do. If he didn’t stop Setora, what was she going to do? What was going to happen?

No matter what it was, wasn’t this kind of crazy? Should he push her away?

While he was still flustered, suddenly, pain jolted through the right side of his neck.

“Ow!” he shouted. “Huh?! Y-You bit me?! Just now, you did, right?! Why?!”

“Forgive me.” Setora smoothly backed away. Her face was flushed bright red. “I can’t tell you why, but I wanted to bite you. I see that when people go into heat, you never know what they’ll do.”

“I-Is that how it works...?”

“There may be differences on an individual level. This is my first time, too, you realize? I had an interest in romantic and sexual love, and it’s true that you had impressed me, but I never expected to fall for you.”

“Fall for...” Merry said to herself, and Shihoru let out another strange cough.

“Haruhiro’s kind of popular with girls, huh,” Kuzaku commented.

He was saying things that were total nonsense. Why was Yume nodding in agreement?

“Popular?” Setora glared at Kuzaku. “What do you mean? Are you saying Haruhiro has a woman other than me?”

“No, it’s just there was this other person who said she liked Haruhiro. She was in another party, though...”

“What did you say?!”

“Mimorin, yeah?” Yume crossed her arms and puffed up one of her cheeks. “Haven’t seen her in a while, huh. Wonder what she’s been doin’. Hope she’s all right.”

Setora clicked her tongue and ground her teeth. “There was someone before me? Well, he is the sort of man I would fall in love with, so I can’t say I’m surprised, but it’s still vexing.”

Unable to keep quiet, Haruhiro corrected her misunderstanding. “No, I’m not going out with Mimorin, okay?”

“Oh, I see!” Setora cried out with a gleeful smile. “That’s good! I’d prefer it be the first time for both of us. I don’t want to let anyone else touch you, and I don’t want anyone but you to touch me, after all. If I ever found you kissing another woman, even tearing her into little pieces wouldn’t be enough.”

Into little pieces? You’re saying some extreme things there, and it scares me, you know? And wait, the conversation’s gone so off topic, it’s been completely derailed...

“U-Um, about that plan?” Haruhiro said nervously.

“Ahh—” Setora was about to say something when...

To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to to...

“Not again!” Kuzaku kicked the ground.

Shihoru was looking at Haruhiro with upturned eyes. Even if she was

completely exhausted, the look in her eyes was one of strength. “...It doesn’t look like we have room to decide.”

Haruhiro nodded. She was right. Haruhiro and the party had already been chased down. No matter what the plan was, they would have to do it.

The sun would soon set. It was gloomy, or rather, it was dark already. The insects were chirping. Even if they occasionally heard the guorellas drumming, the other sounds didn’t stop. Sounds that were like paper being torn, metal being scratched across glass, and weeping.

His ears hurt, and his head felt ready to split. More than that, his whole body felt heavy.

No, he told himself. *Don’t think about difficult or unpleasant things. It’ll only make this rougher. It’s cooler now than it was during the day. That’s right. It’s not all bad.*

With Setora guiding the way from atop on Enba’s shoulders, Haruhiro and the party pushed further and further east through the southwestern portion of the Kuaron Mountains. Even though these were the mountains, they were near the foot of them, so it was a gentle slope, on the whole.

I can keep going, he told himself. *My body will move. It’s okay.*

More than himself, it was his comrades, especially Shihoru, that he wanted to encourage. But if he turned back and tried to talk, he felt like his strings might snap. What strings? He wasn’t sure, but those strings were hair thin, stretched tight, and if they loosened or snapped, he was in real trouble.

Again? When were they going to arrive at their destination? Did they still have to keep walking?

What if the guorellas attacked right now?

That was the one thing he tried to avoid thinking. If only a few of them attacked, maybe they could do something, but if it was more than ten and they all attacked at once, the party wouldn’t last long. Worrying about things he couldn’t do anything about was pointless.

Besides, they hadn’t attacked yet. Maybe they wouldn’t attack as long as the

party kept moving. They might be waiting for the moment when their prey were exhausted and unable to resist.

It was a contest of endurance. The pursuer, or the pursued. The chase wouldn't end until one of them gave in.

Up ahead, Enba stopped. Setora, up on his shoulders, raised her right hand.

It wasn't clear when he'd gotten there, but there was a gray nyaa at Enba's feet. Kiichi.

"Hooooooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhh!"

What?

Was that a guorella's voice?

Haruhiro hadn't heard that call before.

"Heh!"

"Huh!"

"Hoh!"

"Heh! Heh!"

"Huh! Huh!"

"Hoh! Hoh!"

"Heeeeh! Hoh!"

"Hooooooh! Huh!"

"Heh! Huh! Hoh! Hoh! Hoh!"

"Hoh! Hoh! Huh! Huh! Hoh! Huh! Ho-hoh!"

The shouts of what were probably guorellas came from all over.

Haruhiro turned back. Kuzaku. Yume. Shihoru. Merry. Everyone was ready to run. Haruhiro was scared, too.

It's finally time, huh.

"Hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh!"

"Heh, heh, huh, hoh, huh, hoh, heh!"

“Hah, hah, huh, heh, huh, hah, huh, hoh!”

“Huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh!”

The sky was still a little bright, but the sun had sunk below the western horizon, and twilight was pressing in. Though he couldn’t make out their figures, the voices told him the guorellas were coming in from all directions.

No, that wasn’t it. It wasn’t all directions.

Setora came down from Enba’s shoulders. Crouching down, she extended a hand to Kiichi. Kiichi let out a short, “Nya,” then ran over to Setora. Setora picked up Kiichi and hugged him tight. Then she looked at Haruhiro and the others.

“You’re all ready?”

Kuzaku took a deep breath, then responded, “...’Kay!”

“Meow!” Yume made a salute-like gesture.

Shihoru silently nodded her head.

Merry gave a short, “Yes,” looked to Haruhiro, and smiled a little.

“Houh!”

“Huh!”

“Hauh!”

“Huh! Hoh-hoh!”

“Heh, huh, huh, hoh, huh, huh, huh, huh!”

“Hauh, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah!”

Close.

They had gotten pretty close now.

Haruhiro and the others moved up to the place where Setora and Enba were standing. Peering over the edge, a chill ran down his back.

It sure is high...

Thinking it best not to say that, Haruhiro kept the words inside his head.

This was a dead end. If they took another step, there would be nothing there. Beyond them lay a cliff so steep they couldn't roll down it. It wasn't just ten meters high. It was over twenty. Tens of meters. Fewer than fifty, though. Probably.

Fortunately, it wasn't land at the bottom, but a river. If not for that, this plan wouldn't work. Obviously.

Imagine if it had been solid land down below. If they fell, they'd be guaranteed an instant death. They had not, for lack of better options, decided to commit mass suicide rather than be eaten by the guorellas. Even if this was a desperate measure, it held some hope. The party intended to survive.

"Hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh!"

"Heuh! Hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh!"

"Remember, feet first," Haruhiro told the others. "Fall feet first. Just focus on __"

Before he finished, he jumped. He suddenly felt the resolve to do it, and he did it on the spur of the moment.

Had he screwed up? Blown it? Made a mess of things?

But, rather than pushing one another, going, *You go first, no, you go first,* if someone took the first plunge, maybe that would make it surprisingly easy for the rest to follow.

"Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

No way, no way, no way, no way, no way, he thought frantically. *High, high, high, high, high. This is way higher than I thought. Oh, crap, I'm scared. My guts. They're going to escape. Through my mouth. My brain's going, "Guwahhhhhhhhh!"*

Is this what I think it is?

A one-way trip to death?

It's kind of long, too. I'm not falling hundreds of meters, so I figured it'd be over fast, and I'd be fine, you know?

I'm kind of wondering, why is it not like that? What about everyone? Did they follow me? Were they able to jump? How did that go?

Oh, crap. I kept thinking it was long, but there's the river now. It's not long, or far off. River, river, river. Close, close.

"Feet first!" he shouted.

Why am I shouting something I already said? Haruhiro was exasperated with himself.

Then there was an unbelievably loud splash, and the impact, of course, was incredible.



3. By Staying Close Together



“Haru-kun!” Yume cried. “Kuzakkun’s here!”

“Huh?! Where?!”

“Here! Over here! This way, Haru-kun!”

Yume’s voice was coming from downstream. Haruhiro moved far out from the shore of the river, borrowing the power of the current to half-swim downstream.

He didn’t go any deeper that his feet could touch. If he actually got carried away, he’d be in trouble. He wasn’t an especially good swimmer, so he might drown and die.

It was pitch dark, but with the reflection of the moon and stars on the water, he could more or less make out the outlines of things. However, he couldn’t see as far as the shore.

“Shihoru?! Merry?!”

“Yes, I hear you!” Merry’s voice came back.

“I’m heading your way, too!” Shihoru called. “Are you okay, Haruhiro-kun?! Be careful!”

Haruhiro called back, “Thanks, Shihoru!” as he hurried downstream.

But still, he wondered, were there any dangerous creatures living in this river? That was suddenly starting to bother him, but now wasn’t the time to say it.

He saw it. There was a person in the shallows, dragging something large. That was probably Yume, and she was dragging Kuzaku. Was he unconscious?

“Yume, I’ll help! I’m on my way!” Haruhiro called.

“Meow!”

Haruhiro headed for the shallows. On the way, he stepped on a large stone in

the bottom of the river, lost his balance, and ended up swallowing some of the water, but somehow he made his way to Yume.

Yume was carrying Kuzaku by his right arm, groaning as she pulled him.

Haruhiro took the guy's left arm. "Kuzaku, you're still alive, aren't you?! You're just unconscious, right?! Kuzaku! *Kuzaku!*"

While calling out to their party member, Haruhiro worked with Yume to drag him to the riverside. Merry and Shihoru were shouting something as they rushed over.

Kuzaku was still wearing his helmet. The first thing Haruhiro did was remove that.

"Kuzaku! Kuzaku! Kuzaku!" he shouted as he removed the shield and large katana tied to his back. Yume helped, too.

Haruhiro searched for Kuzaku's mouth. His jaw was limp.

"Kuzakkun, is he breathing, Haru-kun?!"

"He's not!"

Haruhiro put his fingers on Kuzaku's wrist. No pulse.

This can't be real, he thought. *No, it's too soon to say.*

"His armor! It's in the way! Help me get the top off!"

"O-Okay!"

While they were stripping off his armor, Merry and Shihoru came. He had the feeling one of them asked, "How is he?!"

Haruhiro didn't answer. He lay Kuzaku face up on his back, pressing on his chest with the palm of his hand. He did it again, and again, with a rapid rhythm.

"Do it around thirty times!" Merry told him, so he stopped. He put his right hand on Kuzaku's forehead, and used his left to raise his chin.

How did it go again? Right. Secure the airway. That should be right. Now, pinch his nose, and— "Blow into his nose twice!" Merry called. "Then compress the chest again!"

Following Merry's directions, he covered Kuzaku's mouth with his own. He blew in as hard as he could from his mouth to Kuzaku's. When he released his fingers from Kuzaku's nose, it looked like he'd let out a breath. But that was probably just the air he'd blown in escaping. He did the same thing again, then he compressed the chest. Thirty times.

"If you get tired, Yume'll take over for you!"

"I'm still fine!"

Artificial ventilation. Chest compressions. Artificial ventilation. Chest compressions. Kuzaku. Come back. Come back to us. Kuzaku. You're strong. I thought you were unreliable at first, but you thought about what you needed to do, and grew. You overcame it. If you weren't strong, you couldn't do that. Kuzaku. You're strong. You won't die from a little drowning. Wake up, Kuzaku. Come back. Kuzaku.

"Kuzaku...!"

Blugh! Kuzaku coughed something up. Water, it looked like.

Good. Good, good, good!

"Turn him to the side!" Merry shouted, turning Kuzaku's head to face to the right. "Move, Haru!"

"Sure! I'm counting on you, Merry!"

"Leave it to me!" Merry made the sign of the hexagram, pressing her hand down on Kuzaku's chest. "O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you! Sacrament!"

Haruhiro sat down, narrowed his eyes, and watched the overflowing light rush forth.

"Mrrowr! Kuzakkun!" Yume was jumping around friskily.

Shihoru placed her hands on Haruhiro's shoulders. She was trembling. It seemed she wanted to say something, but couldn't find her voice. Haruhiro rested his own right hand atop Shihoru's left.

Oh, crap, he realized. *That was close. I didn't really expect he was a goner, but... I think I'm going to cry.*

Haruhiro, Yume, Enba, and Kiichi were fortunate enough to be practically unscathed from jumping from that steep precipice, but Merry, Shihoru, and Setora had all broken bones, severe bruises, or other heavy wounds.

It was a good thing Merry was part of their party. They'd all managed to reach the shore and be treated with light magic. Except for Kuzaku.

He must have drowned or hit himself somewhere after impacting the water, because he hadn't managed to swim to the shore. Setora, Enba, and Kiichi had gone to check that the guorellas weren't coming after them while Yume and Haruhiro had searched the river, with Merry and Shihoru searching along the shore. If they'd found him any later, who knew what would have happened?

Following Yume's dragging him up onto the shore, Kuzaku had been in a state of cardiopulmonary arrest, with his trachea and lungs filled with water. Not dead yet, but if they'd healed him with Sacrament in that state, he'd have just been put into a state of agony again. So they had performed CPR, waiting to use light magic until after he coughed up the water.

It hadn't been a fully logical decision. Haruhiro had lost his head, but somehow, just barely, he'd managed to choose the right course of action.

We managed to not let him die. Haruhiro's vision quickly blurred with tears. *It's no good. I can't hold back anymore. Well, what's the harm?*

He wasn't trying to hold them back anymore, so the tears were flowing nicely. Maybe, when he wanted to cry, it was best to cry like this. It was also nice that, because it was dark, he didn't have to worry about his pitiful crying face being seen.

"Haruhiro-kun..." Shihoru pressed her face against Haruhiro's head.

Shihoru wasn't crying. Little things wouldn't make her cry anymore. She must be trying to support Haruhiro.

Haruhiro wiped his tears with his right hand, then said, "Thank you," in a quiet voice.

Shihoru shook her head.

"Oh! Whuh?!" Kuzaku jumped up, eliciting cries of surprise from Merry and

Yume.

“Hey!” Setora called. “Did you find that beanpole?!”

Upon the sound of her voice, Shihoru quickly moved away from Haruhiro.

Beyond the riverbed, the opposite shore had a slope that wasn’t as steep, and it was thick with trees. Setora and Enba were coming from that direction.

“Yeah, we managed.” Haruhiro rubbed his face with both hands as he stood up. “How were things on your end?”

Heh!

Hoh, hoh!

Hah, hah, hah!

Hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh!

Before Setora could answer, the guorellas began hooting. But they sounded rather far away. Most likely, they were still on top of the cliff that Haruhiro and the rest of the group had jumped down from.

“For now, it looks like they haven’t come to this side,” Setora said, gesturing to the opposite shore with her chin. “I highly doubt they can make it down that cliff. If they go around it, no doubt they can cross the river, but even if they choose to do that, it’ll take them time.”

“Time to get going, I guess,” Haruhiro said.

“Indeed,” Setora said. “If that beanpole hasn’t bought it, we’ll be leaving at once.”

“...Listen. You keep calling him ‘that beanpole.’ He’s got a name, you know. It’s Kuzaku.”

“I can only remember names that hold meaning for me. If you insist, I will endeavor to remember his, but give me a reward in return.”

“Reward?”

“Surely you can think of something. A loving caress, or a kiss perhaps. I’ve not experienced them myself, but these are good things, no?”

“I... I couldn’t tell you. Well, whatever, forget it for now. I feel kind of bad for Kuzaku, but you can go on calling him ‘that beanpole.’”

“Boring,” Setora said.

It was a relief she wasn’t forcing him to do it.

They had Kuzaku tidy himself up, and squeezed as much of the water out of his soaked clothing as possible. There was no time to let it all dry.

Haruhiro and the rest took off. Their guide, of course, was Setora, who was perched up on Enba’s shoulders. They heard Kiichi’s meows occasionally, too. Setora had sent Kiichi ahead, and she was now making calls on where to go as she received reports.

At some point, they stopped hearing the guorellas at all. The party should have been really exhausted, but life felt a lot easier now than it had before jumping off the cliff. That had to be because of the lack of pursuers.

No, it was too early to be sure. Guorellas really were persistent. They would cross the river even if they had to take a detour to do it. It was best to assume that. If they assumed the worst-case scenario was going to happen, they wouldn’t be shocked, depressed, or panicked when things got bad.

Haruhiro, at the very least, had to be prepared for it. The guorellas would come. They absolutely would. That was a given.

“Setora,” he said.

“What?”

“You saved us.”

“Don’t sweat it. It was to my own benefit, too. Besides, however I may feel about the rest, I will not let you die.”

Every time she said something like that to him, he had no idea how to respond, and his brain froze up. “Yeah, well... That’s, um, yeah. Err, I don’t want to die either...”

“I would dearly like to get on with making a baby with you.”

“...Uhh. Yeeeeah... err... t-take it easy on me...”

“However, though I believe I know how that is done, will it go so easily? We are both first-timers, so I feel like we may have difficulty.”

“Ohh...” Kuzaku said, as if it reminded him of something.

“D-Do you have experience with it?” Shihoru asked.

“No, not really,” Kuzaku said. “Oh. But I don’t really know, right? About what happened before I came to Grimgar. Huh? But, wait, that goes for all of us, right? So, that means Haruhiro can’t be sure about himself, either.”

Haruhiro was sure. “Nah, I’ve never done it, or anything like that.”

“You’re tall, after all,” Shihoru said. “I bet you were popular, Kuzaku-kun.”

“No, no, Shihoru-san,” Kuzaku said quickly. “My height is more than just being big, okay? It’s the kind of thing that actually puts people off.”

“Now that you’re mentionin’ it,” Yume put in, “Yume, when she’s talkin’ to Kuzakkun, she’s always lookin’ up, so her neck always kiiiiinda hurts, y’know?”

“Yeah, I get that, Yume-san,” Kuzaku said. “That’s how it is. I don’t really know for sure, but I feel like I was always getting told that. I’m probably ten centimeters taller than I need to be. But, well, the taller the better when you’re a paladin, so maybe it’s okay...?”

“Kuzakkun!” There was a sound that was probably Yume slapping him on the back. “You’re a real, shinin’ padalin! You’re so cool!”

“Y-You think? It’s paladin, though, okay? I mean, I did fall in the river and almost drowned...”

“Because your armor is heavy,” Shihoru hastened to reassure him.

“See, that? I hadn’t planned for it. I’m stupid about these things. Do I just not have the brains for it? I probably don’t.”

Hmph, Setora snorted.

Merry kept quiet. Was she feeling unwell? They had made her use a lot of magic for healing, so she might be tired. Haruhiro wanted to talk to her, but that would risk displeasing Setora, so he couldn’t. But why would his showing concern for Merry make Setora angry?

Oh, I get it.

Setora probably suspected that Haruhiro was thinking a lot about Merry. That, maybe, he had a thing for her. So that was it.

Well, she's right about that.

Of course, it was a one-way street, with no room for development, just an affection he couldn't act on. Haruhiro himself was more than aware of that. They were comrades, after all. Nothing more, and nothing less. Merry had said as much herself.

Besides, Merry and Haruhiro weren't a good match. What did Merry think of him? He felt stupid even thinking about that. Nothing, right? That was why they were comrades, wasn't it?

It looked like she respected him as a leader, and he was grateful for that, and she did a lot to look out for him, which he was also grateful for. He really had a lot to be grateful to her for.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you...

No, that's not it.

He was clearly out of it. This was no good. He was supposed to be the leader.

First of all, the guorellas might still come after them. He had to stay alert. And second, he had to consider the possibility they would encounter some other creature that was just as frightening as the guorellas.

The end point of this journey, their destination, was Alterna. But Alterna was too far away. The sea. Yes, the sea. He wanted to go out to sea.

If they could reach the free city of Vele, Vele and Alterna had trade links. If there were merchant fleets going back and forth, there had to be a safe course. They'd head for Vele, then go out to sea. In order to do that, they had to take the journey step by step.

He was fine for now. He was excited, and his body was moving. But if he thought he could keep this up, he was wrong. If he didn't rest, sometime not too long from now, he'd snap.

They needed food, too. Kiichi could provide enough for Setora, but Haruhiro

and the rest were on their own. There was mountain of work that needed doing.

Should they find a place to rest, and look for something to eat? Most of the dangerous beasts were nocturnal, and it was hard to get a good grasp of the situation around them in the dark. If they were going to rest, would it be better to wait for it to be light out? Could they hold out until then?

The meager light made them see things in the darkness that didn't exist.

There was something out there.

Over there.

And over there, too.

Eek! Someone was screaming. No, that was the sound of a bird's call in the night. That had to be it.

Was the sound of something closing in from behind just the noise of the wind blowing through the leaves?

It's a wonder we're still alive.

When he thought about it, Haruhiro felt like they should have died several times over already. But now wasn't the time to be looking to the past. He had to look only at what was in front of them.

No, that was no good, either. He needed to pay attention to what was behind them, to the sides, above, and below, too.

Why did they have to go so far to live?

Did life have that much value?

He was exhausted. It was all such a pain. If he was going to die, he'd die. What was wrong with that?

Do I really want to return to Alterna? It's not even my homeland. What's supposed to be there?

He didn't want to think about it, and, for the moment at least, he shouldn't be thinking about it. Despite that, he couldn't help himself.

As he thought, he took a deep breath and narrowed his eyes. He perked up

his ears. He lifted his feet. Tried to move forward.

He was moving forward. But to what end?

Hey, Manato, Moguzo, tell me. Is being alive all that great? How are things where you are? Was being alive better, after all?

You may not be anywhere, though. Is that why we try to live? Because when we die, there's nothing? Because we're afraid to let go?

But still. If there's nothing, then we won't know that, so there's nothing to regret about it. It won't be scary. We won't feel anything. In that case, it's fine, right?

It's not sad, lonely, or distressing. In a way, it's peaceful, you could say. Honestly, when you're alive, it's a hard time more often than not.

There are times when I want to be set free from it. Sure, there are happy and fun times. But happiness and good fortune, they only last for moments. Once they're past, even if I remember them, it's really just an, "Oh, yeah, I guess that happened, didn't it?" The pain of loss, I recall more vividly.

If you two were still alive, how would things have been? When I think about that, even now, I feel a tightening in my chest.

If you asked me if I wanted to survive, no matter what, it'd be hard to give you an immediate answer. I don't really know.

However, I don't want to let our comrades die. I want them to live. I think that from the bottom of my heart. That being the case, I can't die easily.

Our comrades must feel the same. I remember when we lost you two, what it was like to lose a comrade. I don't want to put them all through that.

In the end, I'm not living only for myself. If this life was mine alone, I'd have long since thrown it away. It's pretty hard, after all. I'm having an awfully rough time with it. I'd do that if I were alone.

But because I'm not alone, I can live. It makes me think, "I'll go on living. I don't want to die yet. I want to live on."

Everyone is like a tiny, insignificant light shining in an unfathomably deep and infinitely vast darkness. Those insignificant lights find one another, and then

gather close together. They shine for each other and warm one another, until eventually, the end comes, and they know no more.

That time may be far off. It could be a year from now. It could be tomorrow. It could even be today. But whether the time left to them is long or short, the lights are drawn together, and they twinkle.

They're simply embracing one another, and shining.

It was a bit brighter now. The birds were singing softly.

The temperature shouldn't have been very low, but because his coat hadn't dried properly, his skin felt a little cold.

There was a thin mist in the air, reminding him of Thousand Valley. He never wanted to enter that foggy region again. It was amazing the people of the hidden village could stand to live there.

He was feeling woozy. Uh oh. He needed to keep himself together. It was going to be hard, though.

He felt so sluggish, he couldn't help it. He was nauseous. If he tried to vomit, though, he probably wouldn't be able to. Nothing would come out.

If that idiot were here, he'd sit down and start making a fuss, no doubt. *Ugh, I can't walk anymore. This is a joke. You think I can put up with this? I can't put up with this!*

If you've got the strength left to shout so loud, you can still walk, right? Haruhiro would say.

Shove off, Parupirorin. I've got a separate appetite for shouting!

It's not something you eat, though.

Shut up, Porupiropin! Give me food, then!

How does that follow? There's no connection between the things you're saying.

They're connected for me, in my head. Tied together real tight with a tough rope!

They'd had many such arguments which didn't even deserve to be called

stupid. Couldn't he shut up? It just made them both more tired. It was why he hated that guy. But, huh, this was weird. When he thought about him, for some reason, his face relaxed.

Am I smiling...?

The branches of the trees up ahead swayed in an unnatural way. Was something moving from branch to branch? Haruhiro stopped walking and drew his stiletto.

He could react to this. When it came to it, he could move surprisingly fast.

He was about to give orders to his comrades, and then Setora looked up and said, "It's Kiichi."

When he took another look, there was a gray nyaa perched on a branch up and to the right of him up ahead. Kiichi gave a short meow, then faced east.

"Heh heh." With a satisfied laugh, Setora pressed down lightly on Enba's neck. Enba began to walk.

It looked like they'd keep going. Kiichi jumped, and Haruhiro quickly lost track of him.

Haruhiro sheathed his stiletto and followed after Enba and Setora. "Just how intelligent are nyaas?"

"Long ago, there was an onmitsu spy named Nonae," she answered. "She was wed to a nyaa named Onaki, and they stayed together for life."

"Wed..."

"It's only a legend, of course. They say a white nyaa named Senju lived for over one hundred years, and began to speak the human language. Still, Senju was apparently born with two tails, so she might have been a mutant or an otherwise special individual."

"Kiichi seems pretty smart, though."

"If not given a role, nyaas will do no more than eat and sleep, because they have no need to do anything else. They know satisfaction, and have no desires. However, if taught something they should do, they will do it without fear. I suppose it depends on how you define 'intelligent,' but by my thinking, nyaas

are wiser than us humans.”

“Is that why you love nyaas?” Haruhiro asked.

“No.”

“Why then?”

“Because they’re cute.”

Merry whispered from behind them, “...I can understand that.”

From up on Enba’s shoulders, Setora turned back to look at her. There was a blank look on her face. “I think we can get along, priest. Merry, was it?”

“Even if we don’t get along, I don’t see why we can’t agree on one or two things.”

“We don’t get along? Why? Because we love the same thing?”

“Th-The same thing? ...N-Nyaas? Well, nyaas are... Yeah, I do love them. I have ever since I first saw one. Wh-What of it? Is that a problem?”

Haruhiro stopped listening to Setora and Merry’s exchange after that.

There was an open area up ahead. It was morning. The sun was rising. Haruhiro quickened his pace.

“Myuoh!” Yume let out a strange noise.

Haruhiro and Yume quickly caught up to and overtook Enba.

The area wasn’t open. There was a steep downwards slope past here. Thanks to that, they had a good view.

The sky was seventy to eighty percent covered in clouds. Even so, the eastern sky was clear, and the sun was peeking above the mountain ridge.

Now, the area between the mountain Haruhiro and the others were on and the mountain to the east was flat, the river flowed to the south, there were trees standing here and there, and a verdant plain spread out before them.

No, he realized.

That wasn’t a plain.

“It’s farmers’ fields,” he breathed.

There were buildings that seemed to be made of wood dotted around. There were a number of roads running between the fields. It looked like there were fences, too. At the end of the roads was something that was too small to call a town, but it still had several dozen buildings gathered close together.

“Whooie...” Yume was beside Haruhiro, her eyes wide.

Haruhiro took a relaxed breath. He was a little shaken.

Calm down, he told himself. He tried to keep any swaying of his emotions to a minimum. He wanted to keep them level. This was practically a habit for Haruhiro.

“What lives there?” he asked.

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Setora shrugged.

She came down from Enba’s shoulders and snuggled up close to Haruhiro. When she pressed her face against his shoulder, he nearly ran away without meaning to, but that would have been bad.

...Would it have been bad?

It would, huh. Yeah. It would have been a bad thing to do, after all.

“There’s no doubt that they aren’t human, though.”

“...Yeah, that figures,” Haruhiro sighed.

Were they orcs? Or undead, perhaps? This might be prejudice speaking, but it seemed too full of the signs of life to be an undead village.

Merry, Shihoru and Kuzaku dashed over.

“A village, huh...” Kuzaku said quietly, as if impressed.

“...Yeah, that’s a village.” Shihoru nodded.

Merry silently peeked over in Haruhiro’s direction. It was like she was just sort of checking that Haruhiro was there, and there was nothing more to it.

Haruhiro looked sideways at Merry.

Merry bit the corner of her lip a little, with a look in her eyes like she was holding something in.

4. Saying Hello



Not long after that, the apparent residents of those houses came out.

Judging from the shape of the buildings, Haruhiro had more or less anticipated this, so it wasn't a surprise, but the residents were bipedal, like humans. Their overall builds varied. None were exceptionally large, and none were overly small, either. From a distance, they didn't seem markedly different from humans.

The residents went down the roads, scattered off into the fields, walking around and crouching down and moving their hands, apparently doing farm work.

There were four-legged beasts that were apparently livestock walking in a line. Were those cows? Or ganaroes? Or maybe, judging by their size, they were sheep. They looked like a different animal than any of those, though.

It's a peaceful morning on the farm. Those were the words that popped into Haruhiro's mind.

The village looked peaceful. In fact, it was probably Haruhiro, who was surreptitiously watching them, whose presence was suspicious and disquieting. To take it further, he looked like the bad guy.

In point of fact, whatever their race, if those people were just farmers, and that was a simple farming village, Haruhiro and his group *were* the bad guys, nothing more than villains. They were planning to procure supplies from that village, and he was scouting it out for that reason, after all.

The thing was, they were hungry. He wanted food. Potable water he could gulp down, too. He'd settle for milk, though. The more the better.

If they could beg for it, he'd gladly bow his head, and do whatever else that took. But what if they refused? From the perspective of those villagers, Haruhiro and his group were strangers, and human to boot. They wouldn't feel

any obligation to help them. Well, what then? Should they just give up? Or should they steal what they want? Rob them?

If possible, Haruhiro didn't want to resort to force. If they could talk things over peacefully and acquire food and drinks that way, nothing would make him happier, but he didn't even know that they could understand one another.

Haruhiro had his comrades stand by, and he descended the mountain alone. First, he wanted to find out what he could about the residents. However, naturally, no matter how he used his stealth skill, the closer he got, the higher the risk of discovery became.

How far could he go? Was it okay for him to go? Was it not? While seeing that for himself, he pressed forward, little by little.

He didn't hate this sort of work. It was odd to say this himself, and it wasn't really the sort of thing he needed to disclose at all, but he thought he was pretty good at it. Even setting aside the question of whether or not he had talent, he thought it really suited him, and he was secretly proud of that.

"I dunno," he murmured. "Did I get carried away? Maybe just a little..."

Haruhiro was in a field where a grass-like plant grew densely. Grass-like. For the moment, he could tell it wasn't a paddy field. This was a dry field, so maybe it was wheat. He couldn't be sure. Honestly, he didn't really know. He was no expert on plants. He was just an ordinary thief. But it was kind of wheat-like, right?

That wheat-like plant came up to just above Haruhiro's waist, and its ears had lots of little grains on them. Those grains looked edible. If they were going out of their way to cultivate these plants, they had to be edible. He plucked one grain, and put it in his mouth.

"...Yeah."

It was hard. He couldn't tell if it had flavor or not. It was apparently not suited to being eaten raw. If they fried it, or boiled it, or ground it and added water then rolled it into balls, and boiled it or baked it, it might taste good. Probably.

Haruhiro moved like a lizard of some sort, half crawling as he cautiously moved forward, but really, he found himself thinking, *Am I getting a bit ahead*

of myself? My body's fully hidden, so maybe I'm fine? Or maybe I ought to turn back, after all?

Raising his head slightly, he looked around. Even the closest of the farm workers had to be more than fifty meters away from him. It wasn't a distance where he had to worry about being noticed. He was still okay. He was fine for now, but if he got closer, he'd have to be even more cautious.

The residents were crouching down and doing something. Were they weeding? With their low posture, and the fact they were wearing hoods on top of that, he couldn't see their faces at all. Even so, they were a lot like humans.

Or that was how it felt to Haruhiro, but were they really? It was the way they carried themselves, you could say. They gave off a pretty human vibe.

Just a little further. If he could just get a glimpse of their faces...

In times like this, it was best not to move more than necessary. If he stayed put where he was, he wouldn't be found. So he waited patiently. Eventually, a chance would come his way... well, that was something he had no guarantee of, but if it didn't work out, that was that, and he could think of his next move then.

He didn't think he'd made a mistake. If you pressed him on it, maybe entering their fields in the first place had been a bad move. But, without doing that, he couldn't have surveyed the residents, so he'd had no choice.

There was a rustling in the grass behind him, and his heart jumped so hard it hurt.

No, wait. Was he imagining it? It was weird. When looking around before, he'd looked behind himself, too. Was there something there now? There shouldn't be. He'd checked. But, just now, he'd definitely heard something.

He had to calm down. The worst thing he could do was panic. He had to keep a level head.

The sounds. He could hear them. He could still hear them. That meant there was something moving behind Haruhiro.

What was he going to do?

What now?

In order to spot it, he'd have to raise his head. Would that be bad?

Behind him. Nearly straight behind. What was the noise doing? Was it getting closer? Moving away? He couldn't say with any certainty, but he felt like it was getting closer. Like there was someone parting the wheat-like plants and walking through them. Coming this way.

If so, he'd be found if he stayed here.

He couldn't go forward. The residents were there.

Left, or right, huh. Trying not to shake the wheat-like plants... yeah, that's not possible...

Suddenly, there was a sound like someone whistling. No, not *like*. It was someone whistling. The sort of whistle someone did to call dogs that were a little ways away. That was the kind of sound it was.

Haruhiro got up, and spun around. There he was. There was a hood covering his eyes, and he was wearing a long green coat, but Haruhiro could make out his build. It wasn't an orc. An undead, then? Or an elf? Or even a human?

Haruhiro raced diagonally to the right.

What was with that guy? He was watching Haruhiro from a distance of about twenty meters.

Or at least, I think he's watching me...

His hood was covering his face, so there was no way to know what direction he was looking, but that was probably it. He was probably looking at Haruhiro, but he just stood there. What were the farmers doing? Haruhiro didn't have the leeway to check.

I have to run. Run as fast as I can. Run. But it's weird. Why isn't he chasing me? Could he be letting me go?

He only had a moment to wonder that. Then the guy moved.

He was coming. For Haruhiro, of course.

Oh, he's coming after all? Of course he would. Yeah. I knew it. It's not like I

seriously expected him to let me go.

For now, he'd get out of the field, and head into the mountains. He was almost at the field's edge. The guy was running towards Haruhiro, but he wasn't that fast. That said, he wasn't exactly slow, either.

They were about ten meters apart. While that gap wasn't closing, it wasn't opening any, either. His steps were quick, and he seemed to have energy to spare. Why wasn't he closing in? It was strange. Haruhiro couldn't help but be bothered by it.

Haruhiro turned back without stopping. The residents had stopped their farm work and fled in all directions. They might be nothing more than the simple farmers they'd appeared to be. This guy was the only one pursuing him. It was risky to jump to conclusions, but for now at least, that was how it seemed.

"In that case...!"

He'd rush out of the field, jump the fence, and then it wouldn't be far to the forest. The forest wasn't flat, though. There was a slope. It was pretty steep.

Climb. Race up it. Damn it.

He was breathing heavily. This was awfully tough. Was it because he was hungry?

No, he was actually exhausted. But he couldn't afford to say that. Haruhiro checked his pursuer's location. It was the same as before, not getting closer or further away.

This was bad. If it was just one person, Haruhiro wanted to handle him by himself. If it was possible, that was.

Could he do it?

If he tried to settle things here, and he lost because he wasn't strong enough, in the worst-case scenario, only Haruhiro would die. They wouldn't find his comrades' position. In that case— I can't help but think stuff like that. It really is a bad habit. Shihoru's going to tell me off again.

Haruhiro weaved through the trees as he climbed the slope. The guy was still pursuing him.

It took some courage, but Haruhiro deliberately pretended to struggle to make progress. Even so, the distance didn't change. Well, that was expected.

It meant the guy had no intention of catching up with Haruhiro. For now, at least. He was deliberately letting Haruhiro run. What for?

It wouldn't hurt to look at it from the other guy's perspective. He was probably one of the residents of this village, and his job was probably something like guard duty. One day, during his regular patrol, he'd come across a clearly suspicious individual. A person snooping around in the fields. An intruder. The guy had whistled to intimidate him, and the intruder had panicked and taken off running.

The intruder seemed to be alone. But was he really? What if he was actually part of a group, and this intruder was just their advance scout? Wasn't he running back to his friends?

This guy might be chasing Haruhiro in the hopes he would lead him to where his comrades were. If so, maybe it was best not to go back to where they were waiting, after all.

This guy clearly had confidence in his skills. If not, he wouldn't be so bold about pursuing Haruhiro. If Haruhiro were him, and he'd come up with the same sort of idea, he'd have followed him quietly. Then, once he confirmed the number and location of the enemy, he'd plan out how to respond.

Haruhiro likely couldn't defeat that guy alone. No, he couldn't be sure of that, you know? Until he tried it, he couldn't say anything for sure. But he might win, and he might lose. "Might" wasn't good enough. Still, if he had everyone's help, they could manage. He was highly skeptical of his own abilities, but when it came to his comrades, he believed in them, and could rely on them.



What was the signal?

There was no such thing.

The terrain up ahead was a little unusual. There were massive boulders jutting out of the slope, and countless vines hung from them, making it kind of eerie. Maybe this area ought to be called the Eerie Rocks.

When he looked up to the top of the Eerie Rocks, Shihoru happened to have just poked her head out. Riding on top of her shoulder was the person-shaped, or more like starfish-shaped, elemental: Dark.

“Go, Dark!”

Shuvyuun! was the sound Dark made as he flew.

While turning right, Haruhiro turned back to look at the guy. He’d come to a stop. Was he dumbfounded by the ambush? If so, that was a surprise. Was he the easygoing guard of a peace-addled town, someone who’d chased after Haruhiro without much thought?

That couldn’t be right.

The guy drew something in midair with his right index finger, and spoke. “Marc em Parc.”

That’s...

Haruhiro hadn’t seen it in a long time, but he remembered it. That spell. Those elemental sigils.

It was light. A bead of light appeared in front of the guy’s face.

No doubt about it. That was Magic Missile. The first spell mages learned. The most basic of basics.

But, that....

It’s big.

The size of his head—no, probably larger.

With a silent exclamation, Shihoru waved her staff.

It looked like Dark tried to swerve around the bead of light and attack the guy.

He didn’t fly straight. Shihoru could control Dark, to a degree, and she was doing so. But he got caught.

The bead of light moved slowly, and captured Dark.

The moment Dark made contact, there was a whirlwind.

Haruhiro, who was about ten meters away, was fine, obviously, but the guy’s coat flapped about vigorously, and his hood blew back.

“You...” Haruhiro was speechless, his eyes wide.

The light grew stronger for just a moment, then contracted as if being neutralized by Dark, and ultimately vanished.

Darkness and the bead of light alike.

With just one Magic Missile, he had erased Shihoru’s Dark.

Was he a mage? If he was, that might not be surprising—maybe. After all, he...

“Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...!”

From up and to the side of the Eerie Rocks, Kuzaku was running down towards them with his shield and large katana. The stupidly loud shout was intentional. He was trying to draw attention.

The guy turned to look at Kuzaku. It happened right after that.

It was Yume. Yume pounced out of the bushes. She was close. Not more than five meters away from him. To think she’d been hiding there. Haruhiro hadn’t noticed at all. This was a shot to his pride as a thief.

Nice one, he thought.

Yume rushed at the guy silently.

The guy wasn’t looking her way. His eyes were on Kuzaku.

Haruhiro thought it was strange. When the guy’s coat had been blown open before, he’d seen it. The guy had a sword or something hanging at his waist. Despite that, he didn’t draw it. The guy seemed to be a mage, so maybe that weapon was just for show.

Apparently not.

Yume took a swing at him. Just before that, he drew his sword.

“Chuwah!” Yume swung down diagonally, but he blocked with his sword.

Easily, without looking.

Without missing a beat, he kicked Yume in the belly and pushed her away.

“Gwah...?!”

“Sowahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Kuzaku charged at the guy.

He had momentum, and his body was protected by his helmet, armor, and even his shield, so there was no stopping him. Kuzaku clearly intended to ram into the guy, send him flying or knock him down, then run him through with his large katana. It was rough and unsophisticated, but when Kuzaku, who was blessed with a large stature, did things that way, he was really strong. Even if the guy tried to avoid him, Kuzaku would use his long arms to swing his large katana or shield. His intensity was amazing, and while it might seem avoidable, it tended not to be.

“Nnngahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Kuzaku’s shield slammed into the guy. They definitely collided.

Had the guy been blown away? But something was strange. He flew to the rear, or backwards diagonally and up. What was more, it looked like he did a midair flip.

“Wha...?!” Kuzaku stumbled a few steps forward, unable to stop, and looked up.

The guy had already landed behind him. He ended up passing under the guy.

The guy planted a kick on Kuzaku’s back. Kuzaku let out a “Whoa,” and lost his balance.

If Enba hadn’t jumped out from the Eerie Rocks and sprang at the guy, Kuzaku might have been subject to a follow-up attack.

Enba’s club-like arms swung violently towards the guy. But missed.

The guy fell back. To the right, to the left, he retreated with small, quick steps,

using trees as cover to escape from Enba's arms.

What was with that guy? The party were serious, and had a numerical advantage, but he seemed almost to be playing with them. Was the gap in power too great?

No, Haruhiro and the group still hadn't taken full advantage of their numerical advantage. Shihoru and Merry were still up in the Eerie Rocks. Setora, too. Haruhiro, Yume, Kuzaku, and Enba were down below. He didn't want Shihoru and the others to get into close-quarters combat, so assuming that wasn't possible, it was four-on-one. Despite that, for the moment, they had only managed to have one-on-one exchanges with the guy. That was, well, because the guy was skilled, but if they surrounded him, that had to work. Even if four-on-one or three-on-one were too difficult, if they could just make it two-on-one...

"...It's me," Haruhiro muttered.

This was exactly what thieves were for, wasn't it? Yume and Kuzaku were already chasing the guy. But that was no good. He was dealing with Enba's attacks while moving to spots where Yume and Kuzaku couldn't reach him.

The guy had blond hair that was neither long nor short, as if he only cut it whenever it started to get in the way. He might only shave occasionally, too. White skin. Blue eyes. He was much older than Haruhiro and the rest. He was tall, but not as noticeably tall as Kuzaku.

No matter how you looked at him, the guy was human.

If he could use magic, did that mean he was a former volunteer soldier?

There were humans in Forgan, the group lead by Jumbo the orc, so maybe it was nothing to be so surprised about. Or rather, now wasn't the time to be surprised or suspicious. No matter who the man was, no matter what his situation, no matter how he'd come to be here, none of it mattered.

Haruhiro glanced up to the Eerie Rocks. His eyes met with Shihoru, Merry, and Setora's. Shihoru nodded, then called Dark.

Shihoru, at least, knew what Haruhiro wanted to do. Merry, if anything happened, she'd take care of Shihoru. Setora would handle herself well, too.

He took a single breath.

Relaxing all the joints in his body, he let his mind sink into a deep place. He erased himself.

Stealth.

His thoughts and feelings grew distant, and thinned out.

Even so, Haruhiro was still here. Here?

Where was here?

It didn't matter.

Wherever he was.

If he became a ghost, it might feel like this. Setting aside the issue of whether ghosts existed or not.

He didn't try to avoid making noise as he walked; it was more like, when he walked, he didn't make noise for some reason. He was in the world, but it felt like he existed a little apart from it.

Was he breathing?

He was.

Rather slowly.

His heart was beating.

Awfully sluggishly.

Kuzaku was completely unable to keep up with that man. The guy seemed to move with ease, and he was rather quick. Enba was able to keep up because he was a golem and never tired, but even Yume was having trouble, and just chasing after the guy was all she could manage. The way things were, getting behind him and catching him in a pincer attack with Enba was going to be extremely difficult.

There was a gray nyaa in the tree ahead of the guy and to the left. Kiichi didn't seem to have detected Haruhiro.

Haruhiro hid in the trees as he moved forward. It was like his nerves extended

outside his body, to the wider area around him.

The ground.

Grass.

Bark.

Wind.

He could feel it all.

This might be the first time he'd immersed himself so fully. When aiming for a Backstab, there were times when he'd seen a vague line of light. Was this the Stealth equivalent of that?

I'm really into this.

I can kind of see things. It's not like that line. It's like, I should do this. Or rather, I have to do this, maybe?

It's like I have a choice, but I really don't. In any given moment, there's really only one option. I'm not making the choice, or being made to. In a word, it's fate? I don't decide it. It's already decided.

It had long since been decided that this was where Haruhiro would get behind the guy. While that guy jumped backwards to avoid Enba's blows, his attention was focused ahead of him to his left. On Shihoru.

Shihoru was descending from the Eerie Rocks with Merry and Setora. She was trying to let Dark loose.

"Go!" she shouted.

Dark flew off.

The man didn't fall back; he did an about-face and took off running. He was fast. While putting distance between him and Enba, he shifted his sword to his left hand, and probably planned to draw elemental sigils with his right.

Yume and Kuzaku couldn't catch him. Enba, either.

Haruhiro didn't have to move, because he already was.

The man cast a spell. "Marc em Parc."

A bead of light. It was another Magic Missile.

The man drew Dark in as close as he could, then hit him with another bead of light.

There was another whirlwind. He made his move at the same time.

Haruhiro thrust his stiletto into the man's back. He'd already confirmed the man wasn't wearing heavy armor, thanks to the coat blowing open.

The blade of his stiletto was tough but thin, and could slip between the guy's ribs. However, if Haruhiro thrust it in a closer to the hips, on a slightly upward angle, where he wouldn't strike the ribs, he'd hit the internal organs, so that was simpler. He could aim for the kidneys on each side. Then there was the liver, too.

For any organ Haruhiro hit, it would cause massive internal bleeding, and eventually be a fatal wound, but the kidneys would really hurt. No matter how tough he was, the pain would be unbearable, and the guy would scream. If he wasn't healed with light magic, he wouldn't make it. It would have to be quickly, too. This was the same whether you were a human, an orc, or probably even an elf or a dwarf.

"Nngh..."

The man, however, did not scream. He merely groaned, twitched, and turned back to look, Haruhiro reflected in his blue eyes. He raised his left eyebrow, and let a slight breath out through his lips. He was so surprised, he was impressed. That was what the expression said.

"Not bad," the man said. Then, unwilling to admit defeat, he smiled. "But sorry."

"...Huh?"

Haruhiro had messed up. It was a painful mistake. He'd been naive. Why had he thought this would take the guy down? How foolish could he be?

It was inexperience. He'd gotten full of himself, thinking he'd built up some experience. Why had he thought this man was an ordinary human? Even if he looked that way, he might not be. It wouldn't be strange at all if there was a

monster that looked human.

Many thoughts and feelings raced through Haruhiro's head, confusing him. It was already too late. The man wrapped his arm around Haruhiro's neck, pulling him in close and twisting his hips.

It's like a judo technique, thought Haruhiro. *Judo...?*

He was thrown and spun threw the air. The next thing he knew, the man had mounted him and was looking down at Haruhiro.

"I'm not a big fan of punching people. It's barbaric, you know?" What he said and what he was doing didn't line up. The man pressed his palm hard against Haruhiro's chin.

Oh, but— *This isn't really a punch, huh.* It was a strange blow that made his brain, and his vision shake, causing the strength to drain away from his whole body.

Then, while drawing elemental sigils with his right hand, "Marc em Parc," the man chanted.

...Whoa. What are you doing? Stop it.

Magic Missile.

The bead of light came down.

I'm not getting out of this unharmed. No way.

Maybe because his mind was fuzzy, it felt like it was happening to someone else, but the bead of light was closing in on Haruhiro's eyes.

It was so bright.

Haruhiro heard the crunching of bones. That was probably his nose. Or maybe his cheek. Well, it was some part of his face.

It wasn't dark, but he couldn't see anything.

Not a thing.

Blugh... A breath escaped his mouth. His nose seemed to be blocked. His throat felt constricted, too, and his mouth wouldn't move. He was stunned—maybe?

He didn’t really know.

His comrades were all calling Haruhiro’s name.

“Don’t move,” the man said.

Haruhiro couldn’t have moved even if he wanted to.

Sorry, everyone. I’m really sorry.

“Move, and this kid gets it,” the guy said. “I don’t particularly want to kill him, either. So, all of you, stay put. Understood? Okay. Good. Now, let’s have you drop your weapons. Oh, you there—you’re from the hidden village, aren’t you? Trying to hide won’t work. Also, you have a nyaa following you, I see. The gray nyaa. You’d better not have him try anything funny, either. If it’s just the one, he must mean a lot to you. Okay. That’s good...

“Now, what to do? There are six of us including the golem, one nyaa, and then this kid. I’ll carry him, but I’m going to need the rest of you to walk on your own feet. I could kill you here, but like I was saying, I don’t want to. I’m not a fan of the needless taking of life. You get that? It’s Buddhism. Maybe not. Well, if the need arises, I won’t shy away from it, but it’s rare for humans to come out here. I’ll get a better idea about you before I decide anything.”

I can kill you anytime, after all, Haruhiro heard the man saying from far off.

Was it no good?

He wanted to hold on. To be here.

He had to do something.

Despite that...

...his consciousness was fading.

“Welcome to Jessie Land,” the guy said.

5. You Scratch My Back, I Scratch Yours



What is this place? Merry wondered. *What is with these people?*

Once they were ordered down the mountain by that Jessie man, a group in green coats just like his rushed over, and Merry and the rest were bound with ropes. They could move their feet freely, but Jessie was at the rear carrying Haruhiro, so they couldn't run away.

If he said march, they had to march, and if he said crawl, they had to crawl. That was Merry and the others' current predicament.

Haruhiro might tell them to forget him, but they couldn't abandon him. It would be unthinkable.

Haruhiro's face was crushed, and he was unconscious. Merry had, of course, asked to heal him, but Jessie wouldn't allow it.

"If this is all it is, he'll be fine," he said, even putting on a faint smile. "I held back, you know. He won't die. He's out cold, too, so he's probably not suffering much."

Is that really the problem? Merry was seething inside.

If she could do it, she wanted to club that man in the back of the head repeatedly with a blunt object, knock him out, and then say, *"I held back, you know. I don't think you'll die immediately. You're out cold, too, so you're probably not suffering much, are you?"*

On the other hand, she also recognized the need to calm down. Jessie. He had blond hair, blue eyes, and spoke the same language Merry and the rest did. In other words, the human language. He looked like nothing if not a human male. But that man had taken a solid hit from Haruhiro's Backstab.

Merry, who had once been a priest for hire, had worked with her fair share of thieves. Thieves, by their nature, tried to get behind their enemies in combat,

but even with that in mind, it was unusual for a thief to be as devoted to using Backstab as Haruhiro was. It was hard to say whether it was a devotion to his craft, or something else.

Whatever the case, while she didn't know what Haruhiro thought about it himself, he was by no means second-rate when it came to his use of the Backstab skill. That strike had definitely hit one of Jessie's vital points. There was no way that man should be fine after having his kidney stabbed from behind.

For humans, there were times when the excruciating pain of that injury could be enough to cause them to die of shock, and even when that didn't happen, they didn't last long. However, after making Merry and the rest surrender, Jessie had merely pulled the stiletto out of his back. He hadn't bothered with first aid.

He was bleeding. It bothered Merry, so she kept looking.

Jessie had definitely shed enough blood to wet his pants and boots. However, Haruhiro's Backstab should have struck the kidneys, where the flow of blood gathered, and possibly destroyed the liver and a number of arteries, too. For all of that, the volume of blood seemed low. What was more, Jessie wasn't acting hurt. His expression was unchanging and calm.

Jessie looked just like a human, but he wasn't one.

Or perhaps he was human, but he had some sort of special power.

What was the appropriate interpretation?

And...

Merry understood about Jessie. No, she didn't understand, but she had some clues to speculate with. But who were these people who seemed to be following his lead?

Merry and the others were walking in a line down the hardened paths between the fields where wheat or something was growing.

The people in the same green coats as Jessie walked three to the front, and three to each side of the line. Nine of them in total.

Their coats had hoods attached, and some wore the hoods up, while others didn't. One of the ones right next to Merry was unhooded, revealing her face.

She was clearly not like Jessie. In other words, not human. What would be the best way to describe her skin color? It wasn't white or yellowish. If Merry called it a creamy color with a hint of green, would that be close?

Her hair wasn't that different in color from her skin. Her eyes were red. The bridge of her nose was low and short, and her nostrils were like slits. Her forehead jutted out, but was narrow. Her cheeks were sunken, like someone had scooped them out, and her jaw was solid and pointed. From between her gaping lips, solid-looking gritted teeth peered out, and her gums were a vibrant orange.

Her chest stuck out enough that it was apparent even with the coat. That was why Merry assumed she was probably a woman.

Apparently having noticed Merry's eyes on her, the inhuman woman looked her way. For some reason, Merry couldn't avert her eyes.

Eventually, the woman snorted, then turned back to the front.

She's not human.

She wasn't an orc, either.

She was much taller than Merry. Likely over 180 centimeters. The others were all around the same, or taller than her. They weren't all women, though. Some seemed to be men.

Yet the men weren't like her. Their body shapes, skin color, hair color, eye color, and facial characteristics were all different. If there was something they had in common, it was that they had two arms, two legs, and were bipedal like humans. That, and the green coats. That was all.

To add one more thing, out of the residents who were doing farm work, those who had stopped working the fields to watch the group, and those who had come out into the road only to be shouted at by Jessie and driven off, there weren't many who looked alike. There were some, but there was too much diversity, and it was hard to tell who was similar to whom, and who wasn't.

“Jessie Land,” the man had called it. Jessie must be the leader or administrator of this town.

But Jessie was clearly nothing like the residents. If you looked only at appearances, Jessie and their party should have been on one side, and the residents on the other side.

Then again, Jessie might only look human. Merry and the others, however, were human.

Was he an enemy?

Or a friend?

That’s a stupid question.

If he were a friend, Haruhiro wouldn’t have ended up like he had.

Then again, Jessie had said, *I don’t want to kill you.*

It wouldn’t have been strange for him to have killed them, but Merry and the rest were only bound at the wrists, and they were being left alive. Haruhiro was still breathing, too.

For now.

“Hey.” Merry didn’t stop walking, but she turned back to Jessie who was at the tail end of the procession.

Haruhiro, who was slung over his shoulder like nothing more than a piece of luggage, did not move.

Jessie met Merry’s eyes, but said nothing. It felt like his cold blue eyes showed nothing resembling emotion.

Merry trembled, and her teeth chattered. Her eyes blurred.

No, she told herself. *The angrier I get, the more that Jessie guy has the advantage over us. We’re in an overwhelmingly disadvantageous position to begin with. When it comes to my feelings, at least, I don’t want to lose to him. I can’t afford to. Hold it in. Don’t let my voice shake.*

“You don’t plan to let him die, right?” Merry asked. “Then let me heal him.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’re a priest of Lumiaris, right? If I recall, there was a light magic spell that’s like Parupunte or Hocus Pocus. If you used it, I have no idea what might happen, and it’d be a bit troublesome. Here in Jessie Land, we have a shaman. I’ll have her heal him.”

“I haven’t acquired that spell,” Merry protested.

“You think I can trust you on that?”

“That’s...”

“Merry.” Shihoru called her name.

When she turned to look, Shihoru shook her head. Her face was tense. She was pale.

Shihoru was concerned for Haruhiro, too. If they could heal him, she wanted to. But still, *Now isn’t the time to take a firm stance,* she was trying to tell Merry.

If that was Shihoru’s judgment, Merry had to trust it. Shihoru was cautious, and thoughtful. Haruhiro was the party leader, but in times when he couldn’t make a decision, like now, Shihoru was the one most suited to lead.

Merry turned to look forward. *Haruhiro.*

Haruhiro.

Please, don’t die.

Jessie probably won’t let Haruhiro die, she told herself. *He’s said as much himself, and that’s Shihoru’s reading, too. I have to trust Shihoru. Haruhiro’s fine. He’ll definitely be fine. He’s stood at the brink of life and death time and again, so even if it looks like he might go to the other side, he’s guaranteed to come back. He’s always making us sweat. I wish he’d cut it out. If I’d healed him with magic again this time, I’m sure he’d have smiled, a little embarrassed, and then apologized. It’s not something you can settle by apologizing, though. Why don’t you get that?*

We can’t afford to lose you.

Merry had a sudden realization.

How did Setora feel? It seemed she really did love Haruhiro. She was probably overcome with worry. Merry hadn't had the presence of mind to be concerned for her.

Merry realized she wasn't the only one suffering. Shihoru, Yume, and Kuzaku had to be beside themselves with worry, too. And Setora, who'd decided she was his lover, probably felt like she was going to die.

I mean, if... Merry thought hesitantly. *If Haruhiro were my lover, and he got into this situation...*

No, that was something she didn't even want to think about.

Even for her, who was just his comrade, it was already hard enough. Honestly, rather than stand still or sit, Merry wanted to walk now. If she stopped, she felt like her legs might give out beneath her.

If she could cry, she'd have wanted to, but the tears probably wouldn't come out. Even if she screamed, her voice wouldn't come out that loud.

Haruhiro. Without you, my world would be locked in darkness.

Merry didn't have the courage to look and see how Setora was holding up. She didn't want to see her face. When she thought about how much more that woman must be suffering, she was overcome with pity.

Even though I'm a priest, Merry thought. *Even though I can heal him.*

"Hey," Yume called out to Jessie.

"Hm?" Jessie responded more easily than expected. "What is it?"

"Chessie, you're human?"

That was Yume for you. Straightforward beyond all reason. Also, it wasn't Chessie, it was Jessie...

"You mean Jessie," he corrected her with a light laugh. "And, yeah, I'm human."

"You are?"

"You sound doubtful."

“I mean, you got stabbed good. Normally, a stabbin’ like that’s real painful, and you stop movin’.”

“Well, it did hurt,” said Jessie. “That was some impressive Stealth. His Backstab was perfect, too. This kid’s a good thief.”

“He sure is. Yume, she’s allus thinkin’ that.”

I think so, too, Merry thought. *But, Yume, the word isn’t allus...*

“Always, huh.” Jessie laughed. “No, was it allus you said?”

“Huh? Allrus?”

“You, you’re funny.”

“Yume is? Yume doesn’t think she’s funny at all. Yume’s gucho serious.”

“Gucho, huh,” Jessie said with amusement. “Is that even a word in Japanese?”

“Japaneeese? Fwuh...?”

“No. Just talking to myself.”

Jessie was talking to Yume in an easy tone, so the sense of tension felt like it might be loosening a bit.

It quickly tightened again.

“That’s enough idle banter. I’ll ask the questions. You people can just answer what I ask. If you try anything stupid, this kid won’t live long.”

Jessie’s tone didn’t change. It wasn’t cold; if anything, it was friendly. That actually made it even scarier.

Yume shut up, and no one else went out of their way to open their mouth.

They were almost at the village. The buildings were of wood, while the walls and some other parts were made of earth, and the roofs were thatch. It couldn’t be called impressive, even if one was trying to be flattering, but there were raised-floor style buildings, too. Were those warehouses?

There was a plaza in what was probably the center of the village, and there was a well there.

Jessie laid Haruhiro down on the ground in that plaza and beckoned Merry.

“Come here, priest. You can heal him. You want to do it yourself, right?”

Merry shot off running to Haruhiro, and then kneeled. Jessie was saying something. It was about her hands, or something like that. Merry barely listened, her eyes wide as she stared at Haruhiro.

Ohhh. It’s a lie. A lie. No... It’s no lie. This is reality. I have to face it. But, oh, this is awful. His face is smashed. It’s bloodied and swollen. At least his eyeballs haven’t burst. How is it even a good thing that I can think that? His teeth are smashed inwards. Several of them. They haven’t fallen out, though. He’s breathing. He’s actually alive. He’s alive, but dammit—How dare he? How dare he do this? Jessie! I want to beat him to death. But before that... Right. I have to heal him. With my own hands. Haruhiro. I’ll heal you.

Merry’s hands were both bound tightly. Because of that, it was difficult.

Oh, right, she realized. This was what Jessie had been saying. *Do you need me to untie you?*

She recalled him asking that.

No, she thought. *It can wait.*

Bringing the fingers of her right hand to her forehead, she made the sign of the hexagram.

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

She wouldn’t miss it. Wouldn’t look away for a moment.

The light engulfed Haruhiro, and his bones, his flesh, his blood vessels, his skin, every cell was regenerated by the literal miracle.

Merry thought, from the bottom of her heart, *I’m glad I became a priest.*

If it was fate that had given her the opportunity to serve Lumiaris, she was grateful. She would offer up anything to Lumiaris. Even her own life. She would gladly give anything, except for Haruhiro, whose wounds were rapidly healing at this very moment.

Even when his injuries fully vanished, and he was back to his former self, Haruhiro showed no sign of waking. Well, of course he wouldn’t. He’d passed out from all those heavy wounds. He wasn’t going to wake for a while.

Merry reached out with both her hands, trying to touch Haruhiro's face.

Snapping back to her senses, she pulled back her hands.

Looking up to the heavens, she squinted her eyes.

I can't.

Merry was nothing more than his comrade, and Haruhiro's lover was Setora, even if they were only in that relationship way because of a temporary contract. Setora was right next to them. It must have felt like her heart was being crushed, so, somehow, Merry felt like she shouldn't do it.



No matter how happy she was, and no matter how important Haruhiro was to her, that was only as a comrade, and there was no more meaning to it. Even if her affection came out unintentionally, and even if that was all it was—she felt like it was wrong.

There was the risk of being misunderstood, after all.

If she were in Setora's position, she wouldn't like it, either.

Merry didn't really understand relationships between men and women, but that was probably how it worked.

She opened her eyes, took a deep breath.

Standing up, she turned to face Jessie.

His expression wasn't just calm; it could even be called soft, but Jessie's blue eyes were, like always, like two still pools of water, and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Merry bent at the hips, bowing to him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Jessie laughed. "Wait, it feels a bit off for me to say that."

"...Whew." Kuzaku fell to his knees, as if collapsing.

Yume meowed like a cat, then rubbed her eyes with her bound hands. She was tearing up.

When Shihoru's eyes met with Merry's, she smiled a little and nodded. Merry wanted to cling to her.

When had Shihoru become so dependable? Shihoru was supporting Haruhiro. It was Merry who needed to help Shihoru.

Setora was looking at Haruhiro, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere. Had the great relief made her lose her senses?

Suddenly, it occurred to Merry that she didn't hate Setora.

Setora seemed warped, but she was open about her feelings. She seemed to prefer to do her own thing, unrestrained by others, but never left her golem behind. She loved nyaas, and would nuzzle up to people she took a liking to. Unlike herself, Merry thought Setora had a certain charm, and was lovable.

Merry liked people like Setora. Despite that, she'd been pushing back against her.

It was because Setora was trying to hog Haruhiro.

Haruhiro was everyone's leader, and you could say... Yeah, Haruhiro belonged to everyone. It might be strange to say that, like he was an object, but it would trouble everyone else if someone hogged him. Besides, Setora wasn't even a member of the party.

That said, Setora had braved death alongside them. They were something like war buddies now.

It's going to be okay now, she wanted to say to Setora. *Your lover, he's not going to die from something like this. I won't let it happen.*

Enba was right behind Setora, and the gray nyaa was perched on his shoulders.

For now, everyone was all right. There was no telling what would come after this, but they'd overcome it, whatever it took. Believing in that, and pressing forward, was the one thing they could do at the moment.

"Now, then." Jessie looked around at Merry and the others before giving directions to the green coat gang. His words were in a different language than the one Merry and the rest spoke. It felt similar to the language the orcs spoke, but it probably wasn't the same.

The coat gang had Merry fall back, then turned Haruhiro on his side.

"About those questions," Shihoru said, stepping forward. "I'll be the one to answer them."

Jessie drew his sword, pointed the tip at Haruhiro's throat, then turned his blue eyes on Shihoru. "Who are you people?"

"Just what we look like. Volunteer soldiers from Alterna."

"I see a necromancer from the hidden village, too. What's more, you've brought a nyaa with you."

"She's... a nyaa lover."

“From my understanding, nyaa tamers generally command a number of nyaas.”

Shihoru glanced over to Setora. Setora was still out of it, and didn’t seem to even be listening to their exchange.

“Right now, it’s just the one,” said Shihoru. “Things happened, and we were split up.”

“Things happened, huh. I see.” Jessie shrugged. “It seems like you people were on the run from something. If it was orcs or undead, we may have a little problem.”

Shihoru furrowed her brow, biting her lower lip a little. She was thinking. Merry found it suspicious.

This was in between the mountains of the Kuaron Mountain Range, to the northeast of the Nargia Highlands. She didn’t know specifically, but this land was probably in the former domain of either the Kingdom of Arabakia or Kingdom of Ishmal. Whatever the case, this ought to be enemy territory for humans, and the domain of orcs, undead, and the like. Why would it be bad if the party was being chased by orcs or undead?

Jessie didn’t look like an orc or undead, but he wasn’t on the party’s side. He had to be in cahoots with the other side, right?

Merry had been looking at it in simple terms like that, but was she wrong?

“It wasn’t orcs, and it wasn’t undead, either,” Shihoru answered. It wasn’t the complete truth, but it wasn’t a lie. The last group to chase Merry and the others around certainly hadn’t been orcs or undead. “We were running from beasts.”

“You people are volunteer soldiers, aren’t you?” Jessie raised his left eyebrow. “If it was just one of you, I could see it, but you’ve got a whole group. If it’s just beasts, drive them off. How pathetic.”

“It was a troop of guorellas,” Setora said in what was almost a whisper. “We killed several, but they never ran away.”

“Ohh.” Jessie’s eyes went a little wide. “That’s some rotten luck. If you’re telling the truth, that is.”

“It’s a fact,” Shihoru said in what was, for her, an awfully strong tone. “We finally shook them off, barely holding on to our lives, and finally found this village. But we didn’t know what kind of people lived here, so Haruhiro went out alone to scout things out.”

“So you could steal or pillage some food, was that it?” Jessie asked.

“If there was something we could offer in exchange, we would have preferred to trade,” Shihoru said. “But we... we didn’t know if you were people we could negotiate with, and we needed to see that for ourselves.”

“I suppose that’s a reasonable explanation.” Jessie retracted his sword.

Suddenly, Merry was breathing a lot easier, as if she hadn’t been breathing at all up until now.

If she could, she wanted to trade places with Haruhiro. No matter what, they couldn’t afford to lose him. No matter the cost, she had to protect Haruhiro. She didn’t want him hurt anymore.

Knowing Haruhiro, he was always trying to be considerate about this or that, attempting to take everything on himself, and not resting properly. Merry wanted to feed him some good food, and let him rest well.

“Something!” Unable to endure it any longer, Merry shouted out. She immediately thought, *What am I doing?* and deeply regretted it, feeling an intense sense of shame.

Her face was hot. So hot it hurt. She wanted to dig a bottomless hole under her feet and jump down it.

Of course, she couldn’t do that.

Obviously.

“Something!” Merry added in a more normal tone. “Isn’t there something I can do? “I’ll do anything.”

Jessie shouted, “Wow!” raising one hand, with a surprised look on his face. “That’s not something a girl should be saying.”

“I... I didn’t mean it like that...”

“No, if you’re going to say you’ll do *anything*, isn’t that stuff kind of included?”

“I-If you demand it...”

“M-Merry, no! You can’t!” Shihoru said in a panic.

“Y-Yeah!” Kuzaku agreed in a shrill voice. “Th-That’s no good, at all! I mean, I’ll do anything, okay?! If it’s me, I’ll honestly do *anything*! It’s no big deal for me, okay?!”

“Yume’ll do anything, too!” Yume cried. “Like, she can do an impression of the White God Elhit!”

“Oh?” Jessie stroked his chin. “Let’s see you do it. Show me your Elhit.”

“Sure thing!” Yume hunched her back like a wolf, and howled. “Awooooo! Awoooooo! Woof, woof, woof. Awooooooooooooo!”

“Hmph. So, is that what Elhit’s like?”

“It is! Yume, she sees Elhit in her dreams sometimes, and Elhit howls like this! Awoooooo! Elhit-chan’s super cute, y’know. Real fluffy, and gentle!”

“Ohh,” Jessie said. “All right, then. You’re a hunter, after all. I was one, too.”

“Fwuh?! Then do you know Yume’s master, maybe?! Um, lessee, his name was Itsukushima.”

“Yeah, I know him. You’re Itsukushima’s pupil, huh?”

“Yep! Yume hasn’t seen her master in a real long time, though. It’d be nice to see him...”

“I hope you can.” Jessie smiled broadly, but though it didn’t seem fake, it seemed hollow somehow.

It was important not to forget that this man should have taken a fatal blow from Haruhiro’s Backstab, but he was just fine. He seemed human, and was apparently a former volunteer soldier. He’d said he was a hunter like Yume. Even so, he was clearly not a normal human.

“Like I’ve said before, it’s not like I have some burning urge to kill you people,” Jessie said. “I’ll do it if I have to, and it won’t keep me up at night,

but... yeah. How things go from here is up to you.”

“What does that mean?” Shihoru asked, bracing herself.

“It’s simple.” Jessie sheathed his sword. If they took that act as a sign of reconciliation, they’d probably be dead wrong. “It’s give and take. You get me?”

Just what did Merry and the rest have to give Jessie?

At the same time, Merry thought about it.

What could she do to repay all that Haruhiro had done for them up till now?

6. The Steps of Happiness



Kuzaku was with a woman in a green coat—or so he thought. He was scared to ask her gender, and he doubted she spoke his language anyway, so he couldn't ask. But, well, she was probably a woman.

Her chest was, well, you know. She had a pair? Like, they were huge. You could say she was tall, but there were women out there who rivaled any man when it came to height. But, well... her face? It was hard to call it beautiful.

Her skin color, too, it was this kind of greenish cream color. She had no nose. Well, no, she did sort of have one. Or just nostrils, you could say. There was her mouth, which showed her teeth and gums, too. And her eyes were red.

She was kinda scary. Scarier than an orc. Oh, also, her name was apparently Yanni.

Yanni led him into the mountains, and after walking for a while, a building that was like some sort of mountain hut came into view. No, not *like* a hut, it *was* a hut.

Next to the hut was a pile of logs that had been cut to be the same length. Come to think of it, he'd been periodically hearing *conk, conk* sounds for a while now. Someone was felling trees around here. In that case, was this a lumberjack's hut?

Yanni gestured to the pile of logs with her chin. Was she telling him to make something with them?

"No way. That can't be it," he muttered. Kuzaku mimed shouldering a long object, then shook his head in the direction they'd come from. "You want me to carry them? Back to the village? That's probably it, right?"

Yanni nodded, as if to say yes.

Kuzaku pointed to himself. "Me, alone?"

“Ah?” Yanni tilted her head to the side.

“Erm, I dunno how to say this, but this work? This job? Like, am I doing it alone? You know, there are kind of a lot of them? Easily a hundred, right? More, maybe. On top of that, those trees, they’re pretty big, aren’t they? I wonder if I can carry them by myself? I’m a little hesitant...”

Yanni was quietly listening, but the moment Kuzaku stopped speaking, she gestured to the pile once again, as if to say, *Get on with it.*

Kuzaku frowned and held his head. “Dammit. No room for negotiation, huh? I’m about as exhausted as possible, so physical labor is gonna be tough...”

Yanni made a loud sound, sucking air through her teeth. Meant to intimidate, no doubt. Scary.

Kuzaku shrugged his shoulders and lowered his head. “Okay. Getting right on it.”

“Wolla.”

“...Huh? What’s that? What do you mean?”

“Waouf.”

“No, I don’t understand. But I’m guessing it probably means ‘Hurry up,’ or something. I’ll do it. I’ll do it. I mean, the girls can’t do this sort of work, and Enba-kun’s only got one arm.”

“Neak!”

“Right! I said I’ll do it!” Kuzaku jogged over to the mountain of logs. He’d meant to dash, but his stomach growled incredibly loudly, and he stumbled.

Oh, crap. My legs are going to give out. I don’t have the strength.

He managed not to trip, somehow, but he crouched down, unable to stay on his feet.

“Ohh,” he murmured. “What is this? My eyes are spinning. Ohh. Wow...”

Yanni walked over. “Rua?” She peered at Kuzaku’s face. Her face was as frightening as he’d expected, but it wasn’t like he couldn’t see something resembling concern in her expression.

“I’m sort of, um... running on fumes, you could say. Like, I’m out of gas. Oh, those are the same thing, huh. I haven’t been eating properly. I know I probably shouldn’t be saying this, but...”

Yanni sighed, started rummaging through her coat, and then, voila, she presented a bundle to Kuzaku.

Was it something wrapped in a thick leaf?

“Ohhh. Thanks,” Kuzaku said as he accepted it. He brought his nose close, and *— This is... I can’t say for sure, but it’s probably the smell of some sort of grain.* His mouth began watering in an instant.

“I-Is... is it food?”

Yanni turned to look away, somewhat embarrassed, then said, “Wolla,” in a quiet voice. This might have been Kuzaku’s mind playing tricks on him, but she was a little cute. Her face was scary, but she wasn’t a bad person...? Oh, wait, she wasn’t a person at all.

When he unfurled the leaf, there were these flat, brown things that were halfway between bread and a dumpling. Three. There were three of them. He grabbed one, and bit hungrily into it.

“Oh!” he gasped.

Inside. There was something inside them. It was this meat-like stuff with a salty-sweet taste. Some sort of filling.

The outside of the bread, or dumpling, or whatever it was, didn’t have a particularly strong flavor, but it was chewy and...

Good. This is good.

In a word, it was delicious, but so delicious that he couldn’t put it into words. It might have been nothing special if he hadn’t been so hungry, but right now, it was delicious. Delicious enough to make him grateful he was alive. It was delicious, so amazingly delicious that he thought his head was going to start leaking weird fluids.

Deelicious. Deeleesheeous. ...What’s deeleesheeous? Well, it’s delicious.

The next thing he knew, he was gorging himself while crying. *Don’t cry,*

Kuzaku thought to himself, of course, but he couldn't blame himself that badly for crying.

Once he had devoured those three things that were somewhere between bread and dumplings, his head was filled with a numbing feeling of happiness and satiation. His eyelids and nostrils wouldn't stop twitching.

Man, I want more. That's how I honestly feel. Right now, I could eat a hundred of these bread-y, dumpling-y things. There'd be no end to it, though, and it looks like I can move now, too.

"Yanni-san." Kuzaku smiled at Yanni. Or rather, his face broke into a smile on its own. "Thanks. That was super good. You saved me."

Yanni met Kuzaku's eyes for just a moment, then turned to look away. She was saying words like "nuan and "wakundawo," and other stuff he didn't understand. Was she mad? That didn't seem to be it.

He didn't get it. Interracial communication was kind of tough.

Kuzaku stood up. He wasn't wearing his armor. He'd stripped it off and left it behind. Naturally, he didn't have his sword or shield, either. He glanced at the mountain of logs.

"Those who don't work don't eat, huh," he murmured.

It was a give and take thing. Jessie had said he wouldn't kill Kuzaku and the others, and he'd provide them food, water, and a place to sleep, but it wouldn't be free. In addition, he had placed one more condition.

I won't allow you to leave this village, Jessie Land.

Haruhiro was being held hostage, and all of them had been bound and tied, so there was no other choice.

Actually, to be honest, Kuzaku had thought, *Huh, are you sure that's it?* He'd expected it to be something crazier, involving more direct danger for all of the group, Haruhiro included. They could eat, sleep, and live. Wasn't that enough?

But when it came time to be put to work, and Yanni indicated for him to start walking, the condition of not being able to leave Jessie Land started to weigh on him heavily. Even if he accepted it as inevitable for the time being, how long

would they have to be here? Forever, maybe? An eternity? Did that mean they were going to live in this village until they died? They couldn't go back to Alterna anymore?

Kuzaku approached the mountain of logs. He lifted one up. It was heavy. Long, too. Still, it wasn't so bad he couldn't carry it. When he put it on his shoulder with an, "Oof," the log swayed, and Kuzaku stumbled.

Yanni laughed.

"Hey, Yanni-san. Don't laugh. I'm not used to this yet. Once I get the hang of it, it'll be easy. No, seriously."

It was probably about center of mass. He tried balancing the center of the log on his shoulder. It went as expected. The log didn't sway that much.

"Look. See?"

Yanni gave a snorting laugh.

"...What? I thought you were a little cute, and this is what I get? Fine. I've just gotta work, right? I'll give it my all. Okay. Here goes. Yanni-san, you coming? Even if you don't watch me, I'm not gonna run away or slack off, though."

"Wolla."

"Yeah, yeah. It means 'go,' or 'do it,' or something like that, right? When you say wolla. Even an idiot like me has figured that much out by now."

"Waouf."

"Hurry up? Sure thing. Roger that."

Kuzaku started to walk, still carrying the log that was over two meters long.

How far had it been from the village to this lumberjack's house? Probably about thirty minutes? Carrying a log, it would probably be longer. How many trips was he going to have to make today? The thought was dizzying.

Yanni was following behind Kuzaku.

If I swing the log now... No, he was thinking things that would get him nowhere. Even if he defeated Yanni and escaped, there would be nothing to do after that.

“Yanni-san doesn’t seem like a bad person anyway,” he murmured.

It wasn’t just Yanni. The way Kuzaku saw it, the residents of Jessie Land might look ugly—no, that was only if they were judged by Kuzaku’s human standards of aesthetics. But still, even setting aside the undead, which didn’t feel like living creatures at all, he felt like the residents weren’t exactly easy on the eyes, even compared to other races like orcs, goblins, and kobolds.

They were better than the bizarre folks of Darunggar, but they were still creepy. In their outward appearance, at least. He wasn’t so sure about what was inside.

The villagers who worked the fields didn’t seem to be armed, and they looked like your stereotypical farmers. Even with the guys in coats, they were all well-built, and they carried weapons, but they didn’t come off as thuggish.

From the way they moved, they seemed to have built themselves up a lot. They’d probably gone through some kind of training, but their moves were closer to a hunter’s than a warrior’s. Jessie was apparently an ex-hunter, so maybe he was the one who’d taught them.

Kuzaku would have liked to ask Yanni all sorts of questions, but that wasn’t going to be possible for now.

“Well, what good is *me* thinking about all this gonna do, anyway?” he muttered.

He hadn’t been able to keep the log in position at first, and it was hard to walk, but he’d quickly gotten used to it and was making good time. When he moved his body like this, it cheered him up. When it came down to it, he was probably far better suited to physical labor than mental labor.

Whenever he watched Haruhiro and Shihoru, Kuzaku was always thinking. His field of vision was limited. If there was a group of enemies in front of him, he could think about how to handle them. That wasn’t his limit, but when it came to, say, a year from now, he couldn’t even imagine what it would be like. Even a month out was too far.

He had trouble imagining the precise details of things if they were even ten days away. Tomorrow. A few days from now. That was the best he could do.

He wasn't good at paying attention to all these different things. He watched his comrades the best he could, and was trying to think about them, but what went on inside the girls' heads was beyond comprehension for him.

Yume was so ditzy that she made no sense. She was funny, though, so that was okay. Shihoru seemed to see through everything, and that made her a little scary.

But still, Shihoru-san, what about you? You're always thinking about the party, the party, the party. Are you okay with that? Even if he wanted to ask that, he couldn't.

When it came to Setora, Kuzaku wasn't even sure she registered as human to him. And as for Merry...

With everything that had happened, he couldn't help but think about her, and he found himself watching to see how she reacted to every little thing.

Like that.

Yeah.

When she was healing Haruhiro.

The truth was, even before that, he'd been thinking, *Oh?*

It went without saying, it was only natural for Merry to be concerned for Haruhiro. Haruhiro was their leader, after all. Kuzaku was also well aware that Merry revered Haruhiro. Revered? That sounded too stiff. She worshiped him? That was even more off. What was it? Like, she evaluated his skills highly, and had a deep trust for him, was that it?

"I feel the same way, though," Kuzaku murmured.

Even putting it lightly, Haruhiro was Kuzaku's savior. Without Haruhiro, he wouldn't be who he was now.

What was it about him? Haruhiro didn't shout at him, saying to do this, or do that. He led by example. It wasn't that Kuzaku wanted to be like him. He couldn't, you know? It was just, he wanted to follow him. To lend him his strength.

Because Haruhiro was working harder than anyone. Rather than that

encouraging Kuzaku, it naturally made him think, *I've gotta do more. Like, I can do more, can't I? I've got to be able to. I mean, Haruhiro's doing it. Our leader's got sleepy eyes, and he's not anything unusual, not some sort of superhuman hero, but he's still amazing.*

Merry had to feel the same way. But was that all?

He couldn't brag about it, but Kuzaku wasn't that dense when it came to these things. He might not be on the same level as a woman with good intuition, but his romance sensor worked pretty well. That was why he'd already suspected.

It was like, well, you know, he thought. *When Setora was getting all over Haruhiro, Merry-san, her attitude was kind of awkward. There were times she looked ready to snap, too.*

Though, well, even if she didn't have those sorts of feelings for him, they were comrades in the same party, and he was the leader. Even if Setora hadn't quite come out of nowhere, seeing a woman who had been a total stranger not long ago sweep in and snatch him away was probably frustrating for the female members.

If Yume or Shihoru suddenly got together with some guy he'd never heard of, Kuzaku might get a little upset about it, too. Naturally, he'd give them his blessings, and he'd get over it in no time, but for a little while, he might feel a sort of half-baked envy that didn't quite reach the level of true jealousy.

Especially with this party, because of the time they'd spent time in Darunggar, not interacting much with other humans, just staying close together with their comrades, they probably had a powerful bond. Was that it?

Was it like, *I don't mind if you go out with my big sis, but I don't want you flirting in front of me, and if you hurt her, you won't get off lightly, got it?*

Is that what it is for Merry?

Kuzaku tried thinking about it that way.

But wasn't it kind of different?

Like, you know.

Wasn't Merry seriously jealous?

Didn't it seem like the fires of her jealousy were burning hot?

Then again, maybe Kuzaku's own feelings for Merry, which he couldn't completely let go of, were causing him to see it that way. Kuzaku didn't think he had any conclusive evidence.

But still...

Merry had used Sacrament to heal Haruhiro, then reached out with her hand, trying to touch Haruhiro's face. Her expression from then was burned into Kuzaku's memory.

She'd furrowed her brow, narrowed her eyes, and pursed her lips, as if she wanted to say something, but was unable to say anything. It was like her entire existence was being pulled towards him, or perhaps hers was trying to pull him towards her with everything she had.

It was a good expression. Good for you, Kuzaku thought from the bottom of his heart. *Good for you, Merry-san. It must have been hard. You wanted to heal Haruhiro as soon as possible. Like, every second, you felt like you were on a bed of needles. It must have hurt crazy bad, like you were the one injured yourself. I'm seriously happy for you. You finally got to heal him. I mean, you're comrades. He's our leader, too. So, of course I would be, right? You must be relieved. I'm sure you're happy.*

But was that it?

To be blunt, Merry-san, you might be in love with Haruhiro, he was able to think without being disturbed, half-satisfied with that answer.

He could have denied it like, *Nah, that can't be it,* but he wasn't able to. If anything, her face had convinced him.

So that's how it was? I see. Makes sense. That was it, huh. Oh, I see, I see. I totally get it. I mean, hindsight is 20-20 and all, but looking back, I kind of knew it.

But what about Haruhiro?

Well, this isn't any ordinary woman, it's Merry-san. If you asked whether he

likes or hates her, it's got to be a given that he likes her. Even with how quiet and unsociable Haruhiro is, right? No, I don't mean that as a put-down, he's just a serious guy. Being that type of guy, even if he seriously fell in love with her, I doubt he'd confess to her or anything like that. Haruhiro seems shy, after all. Besides, they're comrades. Even if he thought, "Merry's beautiful. I really like her," he'd hold back. Romance or camaraderie. Which would he put first? Knowing Haruhiro, he'd choose the latter.

Why couldn't he choose both?

That was how Kuzaku thought, but Haruhiro couldn't handle it skillfully like that. That might be part of what made Haruhiro Haruhiro.

And Merry was similar to Haruhiro.

You knew what that meant. It was a thorny issue, right?

If everyone around them was like, *Okay, okay, if you love each other so much, just go out,* that might be a little hard for Kuzaku to take, but it wasn't like she'd be going out with that idiot Ranta. It wouldn't be some shallow guy with a handsome face, either.

If it was Haruhiro, he could bite back his tears and wish them well. It wouldn't be a lie. He could say it properly. Having been thoroughly rejected by Merry, Kuzaku had no right to be biting back tears to begin with, but that was a matter of his emotions.

Still, even if it was mutual, those two wouldn't get together.

Neither would tell the other, *I love you.* It didn't seem like they could. Even if they didn't put it into words, maybe they could get that sort of atmosphere going, and do it...

No, that doesn't seem likely, either. Even if they do love each other, aren't they just going to make everyone around them worry about it, then ultimately do nothing?

Besides, there was Setora. That woman seemed to have a serious thing for Haruhiro. She was clearly a hundred, no, ten thousand times more proactive than Merry, so she might well crawl into his bed one night. If that happened, Haruhiro probably wouldn't be able to refuse her. He was a serious guy, after

all. If she used their contract as cover, he might do the deed.

That could lead to babies. They might end up raising those children in Jessie Land.

Merry liked cute things, so she might dote on the kids more than you'd expect.

If that happened, well, that was one way of living, and Merry might be able to look back on it and laugh someday, but would she really? How would Merry feel watching it all play out? Wouldn't it hurt a lot? And not just once, but over an extended period of time...?

That would be harsh.

Way too harsh.

Still, he could see Merry giving up, accepting it, learning her place, earnestly praying for Haruhiro's happiness, and doing all sorts of bone-breaking work.

That's... right, huh, Kuzaku realized. *There's a shadow that hangs over her, you could say. She doesn't seem very happy. I dunno what it is. Is it because, as a priest, she let her comrades die? It's like she's given up on herself in a way.*

For Kuzaku, that was a source of worry. He wanted a person like Merry to be happy. He wanted her to always be smiling, and he wanted to make her smile himself, if possible.

I wasn't up to the task, though.

They were comrades. It wasn't good to have that sort of thing going on inside the party. She wasn't able to think about romance right now. Those reasons Merry had given when rejecting Kuzaku might not have been lies, but there was probably more to it than that.

Basically, Kuzaku was no good. From Merry's perspective, Kuzaku was too much of a kid, and she couldn't see herself with him romantically. He felt the same vibe coming from Shihoru when he talked to her, but it seemed he'd settled into a sort of little brother position.

In the end, he wanted women to indulge him. To spoil him. He seemed to have those sorts of desires.

What a pathetic man. That was why Merry wouldn't rely on him.

But what about Haruhiro?

At the very least, he had a strong sense of responsibility. He was accommodating. Well, he had a gentle personality. He wasn't super interesting to be around, but he was strangely comforting. Even when he and Kuzaku slept shoulder-to-shoulder in the same tent, it wasn't unpleasant. He was the soothing type.

That probably matched well with Merry.

If Haruhiro and Merry got into that sort of relationship, how would Shihoru and Yume react? Even if it surprised them, they wouldn't say anything negative. They'd probably be happy, and celebrate with them.

Brain blast! Kuzaku realized. *I just had a flash of inspiration, you know?*

Why not get the two of them together?

Left alone, they'll never make any progress. In that case, others need to push them in the right direction. I could turn to Shihoru for help. I feel like she'd lend me a hand.

Kuzaku still loved Merry, but he knew he stood no chance. And he could trust Haruhiro with Merry.

I know I'm in no position to say anything so self-important, but it beats the hell out of another man taking her. I don't want to see Merry flirting with anyone, obviously, even Haruhiro, but if the two of them are happy, I can grin and bear it.

The problem was...

Shuro Setora.

That woman was in the way.

"What's a guy to d—Whoa?!"

Tripping on a hole in the ground, he stumbled. The log swayed wildly, like it was jumping, and one end struck the ground.

Yanni gave a quick shout of, "Au!"

“Th-That was dangerous...” Kuzaku hurriedly adjusted his grip on the log.

“Sheiwa!” Yanni scolded him. It probably meant something like, *Get your act together!*

“I-I’m sorry, okay! I’ll be careful, so forgive me.”

When he turned back to look, he nearly lost his balance again. “Whoa... oh...”

Yanni muttered, “Wainea...” as if she were saying, *There’s no helping this guy.*

7. No Going Back



The man beside her wasn't particularly tall. Maybe a little taller than Haruhiro. His sloped shoulders weren't particularly broad, and were in fact kind of narrow.

Yume had thought the men in coats were all well-built. It seemed that wasn't necessarily the case.

If she were to say one more thing, the coated group wasn't just the nine who escorted Yume and the others back to the village. There were others, and this Tukotan guy was one of them.

Tukotan? No, Tokyon? Was that it? Coulda been Totokyan, too. Totokyan's cute, so he can be that. Yeah, Totokyan's good.

"Hey, Totokyan!"

When she called his name, Totokyan stopped and looked back at her. He grabbed the part of his hood that was covering his eyes and pulled it back a little.

His face was bumpy and purple. He had an upturned chin, his canines jutted out, and his nose was awfully big and long. His eyes were a reddish purple. His bushy hair was dark black, and glossy.

Totokyan wore a bow and quiver diagonally across his back. It was simple bow, but not poorly made. Care had been put into it.

Yume had been given a bow to carry, too. It was a small bow like a kid might use, and she'd been given twenty short arrows with it.

"This thing," Yume said, touching the bow on her back. "Yume's thinkin' she'd prefer something bigger, y'know. This bow, it's real tiny. If this's all she's got, her arrows aren't gonna fly that far."

Totokyan just looked at Yume, but didn't say anything.

“Hm...” Yume tilted her head. How could she explain it in a way he’d understand? She looked down at the ground.

Totokyan went off the road and into the mountains, sometimes brushing aside grass or branches as he moved forward. He was choosing the easiest route to walk, though. It might not look like a road, but it was a path that Totokyan clearly used often.

Looking upwards, she sometimes spotted little birds chirping as they flew by.

“Tuoki,” said Totokyan, all of a sudden.

Yume said “Nyoo?” and blinked.

“Tuoki.”

“Tu-o-ki.” Yume tried sounding it out for herself.

When she did, Totokyan nodded, then pointed to his chest with his index finger.

Yume’s eyes opened wide, and she clapped her hands.

“Ohh! It wasn’t Totokyan, it was Tu-o-ki!”

“Yai.”

“Ohh. Tu-o-ki, huh. Tu, Tu, Tuuohki. Ngh... It’s kinda hard to say. Is Tuokin no good? Yume thinks Tuokin would be easier for her to call you by. It’s cute and all.”

“Tuokin...” Tuokin lowered his eyes, then shrugged his shoulders a bit. “Rei. Tuokin. Weiha.”

“Ooh. That mean it’s okay, huh? Hello again, Tuokin.” Yume extended her right hand.

Tuokin looked at Yume’s hand, seeming mystified for a while. Then, using his own right hand, he grasped Yume’s. When Yume gripped his in return, Tuokin tried to let go.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Yume, she’s not gonna do anythin’ to hurt you.”

Yume grinned and shook his hand up and down. Tuokin’s hand was soft and warm.

Tuokin seemed confused, but he didn't try to pull back his hand anymore.

She could trust Tuokin. Yume sensed that.

"Mm-hm! Hello, Tuokin."

"...Ah?"

"Um, lessee..." Yume brought her left hand over to Tuokin's right hand, and clasped it with both her hands. Closing her eyes, she thought, *Hello, hello, hello, hello, hello,* over and over. Even if he couldn't understand her words, the feeling should come across, she figured.

Opening her eyes, she smiled. "Hello!"

Tuokin said, "Yai..." and lowered his chin. "He...llo."

"Whoo! Hello, hello!"

"Hello."

"Pah!" Yume let go of his hand for a moment, then immediately shook Tuokin's right hand with both hands again.

Tuokin had said "hello" for her!

"Hey-ho!"

"Hey...?"

"Hey-ho, heeeey-ho!

"H-Heeeey-ho."

"Ooh!"

When Yume closed one eye, Tuokin winked, too. Yeah, Tuokin really was a good person. He wasn't a person, though. Well, person or not, it didn't matter.

"So..." While Yume held Tuokin's right hand with her right hand, she lightly tapped on the back of his hand with her left. "Tuokin, for Yume's bow, she was thinkin' she'd like somethin' bigger."

This time, he seemed to have gotten it, and using pantomime he explained that Jessie didn't fully trust Yume and the others yet. While a small bow could be fired more quickly, it was only useful when closing in on prey in an area with

many obstacles to shoot them, or in battles fought at relatively close distances. With a bow that had longer range and power, she could snipe from a distance, too. He couldn't give a weapon like that to someone who might mean them harm. That was probably what it meant.

Yume crossed her arms. "Oh..." she said, puffing up her cheeks. "That makes sense. If that's why, guess this'll have to do."

"Rei."

"Okay, Tuokin, let's go."

"Yai."

"But where're Yume and Tuokin goin'?"

Tuokin held up his index finger, and rotated it in a big circle.

Yume said, "Ohh..." following his finger with her eyes. "Round-n-round, huh."

"Wolla."

"Sure, sure. Yume's all ready. She's good to go anytime."

Tuokin started to walk, so Yume followed.

She wondered what her comrades were doing now. It looked like that Jessie guy had separate tasks for each of them. Maybe he meant to split them up when they ate and slept, too. If that was the case, she might not be able to see her comrades that much. Being away from Shihoru and Merry made her feel really lonely.

Tuokin turned back occasionally, and adjusted his speed each time. He was probably trying to be considerate to Yume.

"Tuokin, you're real nice, huh?" Yume called out. "Yume's fine, though. Yume, she can keep up, so you don't need to be so considerate."

Tuokin looked back at Yume quickly, then picked up the pace a little. From then on, their pace never let up.

Yume focused on keeping up with Tuokin, and surveying the area around them. Various things crossed her mind, but thinking about it wasn't going to help, so maybe she was better off not thinking.

When Yume's reborn, she wants to be a wolf dog. She suddenly had that thought.

There were times she felt like she wasn't suited to be a human. She hadn't told anyone, and she probably wouldn't ever, but she felt like a person like her might be better off as something other than a human. If she weren't a wolf dog, a nyaa could be pretty nice, too.

"Whoopsie," she whispered, and chased the idle thought away.

Tuokin would occasionally touch the trees or the ground. It wasn't something she noticed at first glance, but there were apparently stakes driven into them. Those had to be signs. Marks to confirm that this was their territory, maybe.

They took a number of short breaks. Each time, Tuokin offered a canteen to Yume and let her drink. He fed her these flat, brown things that were halfway between a bread and a dumpling, too. The water had the refreshing taste of fragrant herbs, and the bread-y, dumpling-y things were delicious.

How many of those marks had they encountered? She hadn't been counting at first, so she didn't know precisely, but it was probably the fortieth, or somewhere thereabouts. When Tuokin crouched down to check the ground, he raised his face and quickly looked around the area.

Yume also lowered her stance, and reached for the bow on her back. What was it? She wanted to ask, but it was best to keep quiet.

Tuokin was still crouching. Pulling the stake like thing from the ground, he put it in his pocket. Had there been something wrong with it?

"Yuuume." Tuokin called Yume's name in a quiet voice.

"Yeah. What?" Yume whispered back.

Tuokin covered his mouth with his hand, pointing up ahead. Then, turning the palm of his hand downward, he raised and lowered his right hand a number of times. He was probably trying to communicate that they would advance, but slowly.

Yume nodded.

Tuokin began to creep forward. Yume followed.

The sun was going down. They had walked a fair distance, but they weren't that far from the village. The coated group's job must be to patrol around the village looking for impending danger, then report to Jessie if there was any.

While walking, Yume put a hand on the hilt of the katana hanging at her waist. The coated group had collected Yume and the others' weapons after Jessie had forced them to drop them, and then returned them to them before they left the village. Compared to her original machete, or the curved sword Wan-chan, this katana was longer and heavier. She'd gotten pretty used to it, and she could use it without it feeling weird at all now.

Tuokin was clearly on alert. There might be a threat nearby. He was probably searching for it.

The truth was, Yume had been sensing something for a while. She could only say that it was *something,* but there was a faint tingling on the back of her neck.

If she was imagining it, great. But she might not be. Honestly, Yume thought it was more likely that she wasn't.

"Tuokin," she said.

"Ah?"

"There might be somethin' around, huh? Yume... she feels like she's bein' watched, y'know."

"Rei."

It seemed Tuokin was sensing the same presence as Yume. However, she couldn't see what it might be.

Suddenly, there was a high-pitched cry and a beating of wings. A bird, huh?

Tuokin came to a stop, so Yume stopped, too. It looked like it really was a bird. A bird that had been singing happily was startled by something and took off flying. It probably wasn't Yume and Tuokin who startled it. It had to be something else.

"Hey, are Tuokin and Yume gonna search for it?" Yume asked.

Tuokin let out a thin breath. It seemed he was undecided.

“Tuokin.” Yume softly placed her hand on Tuokin’s arm. “When you’re not sure what to do, you don’t have to decide. It’s at times like that when you should be relyin’ on others for help. Listen, it’s important to try to do what you can on your own, but the end result’s the most important thing of all. Oh, and it’s not good to push too hard and put yourself in danger, either. You’ve got comrades, don’t you? If you end up gettin’ hurt real bad, no one’s gonna be happy about that. Hopefully you understand what Yume’s tryin’ to say...”

Tuokin said, “It’s okay,” the corners of both sides of his mouth twitching upwards. It was apparently a smile. “Datto anbu. O dea. U nens Jessie.”

Probably, Tuokin was saying something like, *It’s getting dark. We’re going home. I’ll report this to Jessie.*

Yume chose to understand it that way. “Okay, Tuokin, you wanna go home?”

“Yai. Wolla.”

“Be careful. The field trip’s not over ’til we get home.”

“Fi... eld... trip...”

“Um, a field trip’s... It’s kinda hard to explain, so maybe next time. For now, it’s time to go home!”

Yume patted Tuokin on the back, then turned to go the other way. Tuokin followed. It almost looked like Yume was the one in control of Tuokin like this.

“Tuokin, Tuokin, you’ve gotta go first, y’know!” she called. “Yume doesn’t know the way that well yet.”

“Wah.”

Looking a little embarrassed, Tuokin said, “It’s okay,” and gave Yume a thumbs up before passing her.

Yume giggled. “Tuokin, you’re so cute.”

What was going to happen after this? Yume did have her concerns. However, they would definitely be able to something about it.

Because Shihoru was here, Merry was here, and Kuzaku was, too. Shuro Setora and Enba wouldn’t try to sell Yume and the rest out to save themselves,

either. That was what Yume thought, at least. Besides, her gray nyaa Kiichi was really cute.

While Haruhiro had been in bad shape, Merry had healed him with her magic. He'd wake up eventually. When that happened, things would be back to how they were before.

There was a stinging sensation in her chest...

"...Stupid Ranta."

No, things wouldn't be back to the way they were. They never would.

Would she never see him again, for the rest of her life?

She didn't want to, of course.

But if she really couldn't see him, that felt a little sad.

Just a little, though.

If she saw Ranta's face, she might get mad and slap him. No, she would absolutely, positively sure she would punch him as hard as she could. But she'd probably never get the chance to give Ranta that clobbering.

It was best to think that way. That was the feeling she got.

If she did... she wouldn't have to be disappointed that way.

Yume gulped and looked back.

Her heart was racing. Her breaths were quick and shallow. Her whole body felt cold, and she could tell she was sweating. What could this be? What?

That was it. It might be an exaggeration to say this, but she was hit with a sensation like something had caught her by the scruff of her neck.

Yume had already started drawing her katana without noticing. There was no way she could describe what it was in words. She could only call it intuition.

"Yuuume?" Tuokin asked.

Yume immediately shook her head. "Shh... Hold on. Just now, something..."

With her eyes as wide as saucers, she was looking for something. But what was she trying to discover?

The trees already made visibility less than great, and it was dark in the mountains, making it even harder for her to see very far.

She took two breaths.

Her chilly body began to regain its heat.

“Wora,” Yume said.

Tuokin looked suspicious, but nodded.

Before they started walking again, Yume looked around the area one last time.

Something was watching Yume and Tuokin. Of that, she no longer had any doubt.

The problem was, what was it?

8. Does the Past Chase After Us?



Shihoru didn’t know how she should call out to the person on the other side of the bars.

It seemed even in Jessie Land, which was by no means a large place, they needed a jail. This building had apparently been built to serve that function.

There were no windows, and only the light of the setting sun which shone through the now-open door faintly illuminated the inside.

Wooden bars separated a dirt floor corridor from three rooms. Two on the right side of the corridor, one on the left.

In the front room on the right was Enba, with his one arm bound to his body and his legs fettered, and in the back room was Shuro Setora, also bound hand and foot. In addition, Kiichi the gray nyaa had been put in the left room.

Kiichi was curled up in a corner of the room, sleeping. Enba was standing in the center of his room. Setora was sitting with her back against the wall, staring at the opposite wall. She didn’t even spare a glance at Shihoru, who was on the other side of the bars.

“Um...” Shihoru looked, not at Setora, but at Jessie, who was beside her. “Why is it just them... that have to be confined like this?”

“Out of caution, of course.” Jessie stroked his bearded chin. “Since she’s a woman of the Shuro family, I understand her being a necromancer and bringing around a flesh golem with her. However, her being a nyaa tamer at the same time... That’s suspicious, or dangerous, you could say. Despite how they look, nyaas are frightening creatures. If you train them, they’ll perform assassinations, or anything else you might want them to.”

Setora snorted.

Jessie smiled faintly and put his fingers on the wooden bars. “What’s so funny?”

“For all your talk, it seems you do not understand us, or our nyaas.”

“No, Kuzen remnant,” he said. “I know all about your people. More than you know yourselves, perhaps.”

Setora turned her face towards them. It didn’t show on her face, but Shihoru could still tell she was surprised. “...You. You’re not just a volunteer soldier dropout.”

“I’ve learned a little history, that’s all,” Jessie said. “You people used nyaas for everything. Even raised nyaas that would only eat orcish meat. Nyaas are intelligent creatures, but they have no conscience or morals. Depending how they’re raised, they’ll do even the most heinous of things with no compunctions. They’re similar to golems in that way. You people specialize in running and hiding, and devising tools with which to murder people. Then you use them.”

“Our country was destroyed, and we were driven from our land,” Setora said. “We had to overcome hard times.”

“I understand that. I do sympathize. For my part, at least. Still, I can’t bring myself to trust you people, you know. Besides, you people don’t trust anyone but yourselves, do you? That’s why you’ve hidden yourselves away in Thousand Valley.”

“When our motherland was attacked, no one offered to help us,” she retorted. “How could we trust outsiders so easily?”

“In other words, you chose the path of isolation for yourselves. How am I to trust people who make no attempt to get along with others? Even among yourselves, you’re quick to cut off anyone who breaks your laws.”

“I cast aside the village.”

“Considering you’re an eccentric who was born into the house of Shuro, but decided to raise nyaas, weren’t you always being excluded anyway?”

“Um...!” Shihoru couldn’t hold herself back anymore, and forced herself to speak.

Jessie’s blue eyes turned to look at Shihoru. There was something strange

about this man's eyes. Something wrong. It might not just be his eyes. It was probably his entire face.

Jessie's face—If she removed his skin, and the muscles beneath, she felt like she might find an entirely different face. The man's face didn't seem fake, but it didn't seem real, either.

"Setora-san takes good care of her nyaas," Shihoru said hesitantly. "She wouldn't have them do the things you're talking about... That's what I think. Now, sure... It's not like we've been together all the time... I might not even be able to call her a comrade. Setora-san herself... might not see me that way. But still... even so, she's saved us repeatedly... I don't know much about the hidden village, but Setora-san is a person I can trust."

"I see." Jessie held his chin, and tilted his head to the side a little. "I understand you're softhearted. Oh, I don't mean that sarcastically. It's my honest opinion. I like girls like you. Oh, you might take that the wrong way. It's not affection, it's positive regard. For my part, at least."

"...Thank you."

"You're straightforward, but not thoughtless. That's good, too. Anyway..." Jessie tapped on the wooden bars with the back of his hand. "I still can't trust her. I'm working through this game carefully. If you don't take things seriously, it's no fun, right?"

Shihoru furrowed her brow. "Game...?"

"I'll decide how to deal with her later. Come along, Shihoru."

Jessie started walking towards the exit, and gestured for her to follow.

Shihoru looked at Setora. She had her eyes on the wall again. It was going to be take a lot of effort to get Setora to recognize her as a comrade.

She followed Jessie outside, and it was already pretty dark out. None of the residents were out walking around. They must have been cooking dinner. Smoke from cooking fires rose from each of the houses.

"Now then, Shihoru, you've seen the situation in various parts of Jessie Land, so..." Jessie kept talking as he walked. "What do you think?"

Kuzaku had been sent out to do manual labor. Yume had been taken outside of the village by one of the guys in coats. Merry was attending to Haruhiro. Setora, Enba, and Kiichi were imprisoned.

Shihoru had been taken around to various places by Jessie. She had been to the fields and residents' houses, gone inside the livestock barns and warehouses, and seen the well, the irrigation system, the water mill, and other facilities. Jessie had only answered simple questions, along the lines of, *Is this a waterwheel?*

"What do I think... about what?" she asked.

"Do you think you could live here?"

"It's a quiet..." Shihoru looked down, and chose her words. "...peaceful town. It's orderly, too... So long as we have food and water, we can live."

"Well, yes, obviously. But isn't it boring to just live?"

"...I suppose, yes."

"You were a volunteer soldier, so I can understand you not being able to leave behind a lifestyle with so much stimulation. For my part, at least."

"I think... I might be better suited to a peaceful life," she said.

"I was exhausted," Jessie agreed. "Exhausted? No, that's not it. What was it? I got tired of it? I can't say precisely how I felt back then. Regardless, I quit being a volunteer soldier, left my comrades, and was alone. A solo trip, you could say, to wherever the wind, and my feelings, took me. There's an expression like that in Japanese, right?"

"Uhh... Japanese..."

"You're Japanese, right? From Japan. Though, even if I say that, you wouldn't know."

"I don't..."

Shihoru's feet stopped moving on their own. She felt like she was forgetting something important.

This wasn't the first time it had happened, either. There had been similar

occurrences before. Many times. So many times she'd lost count.

She gently shook her head. If she moved it too quickly, she felt like she might collapse. Where...? Where was this...?

Jessie Land.

A village in the mountains.

Grimgar.

What is this place?

There was a crow-like bird cawing somewhere.

She hated crows; they were scary.

If she was carrying sweets, they'd sometimes attack.

They remembered when humans had tasty things on them.

Walking through the town at sunset, turning back, her shadow was unpleasantly long. It made her want to run despite herself. But run and run as she might, when she turned back, the shadow was there. It followed her everywhere. It was her own shadow, so that was to be expected, but it scared her.

It scared her beyond all reason.

"You're such a scaredy cat, Shihoru," somebody mocked. *"You always have been."*

Who's saying that...?

I don't know.

I can't remember.

I forget.

About you.

About everything.

That there was a person there at all.

There?

Where?

Somewhere not here?

That's...

Oh...

I don't know.

I don't know. I don't know.

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

"I..."

Shihoru covered her face with her hands.

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

"What was I...?"

"Are you okay?" a man asked.

There was a hand placed on her shoulder.

She raised her face.

On the man's shadowy face, only his two blue eyes seemed to shine brilliantly.

"...I'm... fi...ne," Shihoru managed. "Did I... say something, just now...?"



“‘I don’t know,’” Jessie responded. “That’s what you were saying. You said, ‘I don’t know.’”

“...I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to worry about it,” Jessie said. “That’s normal.”

“Normal...?”

“I’m sure you don’t understand what I’m saying. That’s how it is. If something seems meaningless even when you think about it, you’re better off not to think about it, right?”

“Meaningless...” she murmured.

Jessie crouched down next to Shihoru’s ear. “That’s right. There’s no meaning to it,” he whispered. “Japan. Tokyo. Shinjuku. Akihabara. You’ll forget everything that happens after hearing those things. I don’t know the reason. For my part, at least, there’s no helping it. You’ll even forget that you’ve forgotten.”

She felt like her brain was being stirred up.

Memories.

Things she remembered.

They were inside her head.

Whatever form they took, they were carved into her brain somewhere.

That was the part of her that Jessie’s words touched. Like a pair of fingers, pinching at her memories.

Twisting, then crushing them. That, or moving them to a different place.

However, they needed to exist where they were. If he moved them, they would cease to function as memories.

That can’t be right.

After all, Jessie had just been whispering something to her. But what?

He’d said something.

xx.

xx.

xx.

xxx.

xxxx.

xxxxx.

xxx■■■■.

■■■■■■■■.

■■■■■■■■■.

No.

I don’t know.

I don’t know.

I don’t know.

“Shihoru,” he said. “You came to Grimgar from Japan, too, didn’t you?”

Japan.

xxxxx.

■■■■■.

Came?

To Grimgar.

“From out of that tower that never opens...”

Out?

Of the tower that never opens. Tower that xxxxx xxxxx. xxxxx that ■■■■■ ■■■■■. ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■.

—x.

Tower. From that tower.

“Um... Where is this, do you think?”

Someone was asking that.

“Um, d-does anyone...”

—Was that her?

“...know? Where is this place?”

Asking did no good.

No one was saying anything.

No one knew.

They didn’t know.

“Did you see the red moon, too?” Jessie asked. “When you first saw the red moon, what did you think?”

...The moon.

The red... moon.

That was right. She’d seen the red moon. The moon was red, and she’d gulped despite herself.

“I don’t know how it’s set up,” Jessie said. “But you people forget. I was the same at one time. It was a coincidence.”

“A coincidence...”

“Something happened, you see,” Jessie said. “As for what exactly... It’s a private matter, and doesn’t concern you directly, so it’s not that important. In any case, because a number of special circumstances happened to coincide, I recalled everything, and I stopped forgetting, too. Fascinating, right?”

“You... know?” Shihoru said slowly.

“The truth? You’re asking if I know the truth? I wonder about that. I have no way to test it, after all. It may all just be a grandiose fantasy of my own making. At the very least, it’s a fact as far as I’m concerned, and that’s all I can say.”

“What... are you?” she whispered.

“Me?”

Jessie moved away from Shihoru and closed one eye.

“My name Jessie Smith. I was volunteer soldier.”

He spoke with a deliberately heavy accent. Normally, there wasn't anything odd about the way he spoke. He spoke fluently, but his intonation was just a bit off at times.

That, and Jessie would add, "For my part, at least."

"For my part, at least."

It felt like she had heard it several times. There was no need to say that. Was it a simple speech quirk? It bugged her.

"For my part, at least."

"This place... the place you call Jessie Land... just what... is it?"

"It's a game." Jessie thrust out his chest, spread his arms wide, and spun around. "In terms of genre, I was more of an FPS or RPG fan, but I didn't mind simulation games, either. I built this village from nothing."

"F... R... simu... Come again?"

"The people are what are called gumows," Jessie went on. "In Orcish, it means something like 'demi.' Basically, it refers to children that orcs forced humans or other races to give birth to, as well as their descendants."

"Then... the residents of Jessie Land are..."

"Exactly. They're all gumows."

"These... gumows... Are they oppressed?"

"You're fast on the uptake, so that makes things quick. That's right," Jessie said. "Orcs discriminate against gumows. Violently, at that. Orcs value bloodlines highly to begin with. While that's lightened somewhat over how it used to be, clans are still important. You know what clans are, right?"

"They have shared ancestors, and a shared last name... right?"

"Yeah. That's right."

Jessie suddenly started walking, so Shihoru hurried after him.

"To spread their blood, and to strengthen their clan, orcs would often abduct and rape women from other clans. Maybe this isn't a good conversation for me to be having with a girl."

“...No. I’m fine.”

“When the Alliance of Kings was formed, and when Kuzen, Ishmal, Nananka, Arabakia, and the elf and dwarf lands were invaded, the orcs did as they always had. The humans had seen orcs as savages or beasts, enslaving them and putting them on display, so there was an element of revenge to it, too, I’m sure. Honestly, I’m not sure I should be saying this to a girl, but I’ll bet all that murder and rape was a great way to take out their frustrations. The surprise was that humans, elves, and dwarves could interbreed with orcs.”

“There were children,” Shihoru said.

“See, that’s the thing. It should be a surprise. I mean, cats and dogs are both mammals, they walk on four legs, and they have tails, and if they got in the right mood, they could even copulate. I doubt they ever do get in the right mood, though. Regardless, it’s possible. However, it would never produce offspring. With two dogs, no matter how different they look, even a Chihuahua and a Saint Bernard, it’s theoretically possible for them to get pregnant.”

“Chihuahua?”

“It’s a tiny dog. They’re a small breed of dog. Saint Bernards are really big. The size difference is so huge, it’s unbelievable. Even closely-related species like lions and tigers can interbreed. However, only for one generation. Well, what about humans, elves, dwarves, and orcs, then?”

“‘The children orcs forced other races to give birth to, and their descendants’... You were just talking about that.”

“That’s right, I did say that. Gumows can reproduce together. If it was a gumow with an orc, or a gumow with a human, those pairings would probably be fine, too. Did you understand, Shihoru? Basically, this means that humans, elves, dwarves, and orcs are extremely closely-related species.”

“...Like how dogs can look very different?”

“It’s fascinating, isn’t it? Did they diverge through a process of evolution? Or were their genetics similar by chance? Or were they created to be that way? Whatever the case, they’re kin. Humans, orcs, elves, and dwarves, they’re like siblings. Normally, siblings don’t do it, and—excuse me, this is a crude way to

put it—while they wouldn't usually be driven by lust to engage in sexual intercourse, it's not that they can't. If they decide to do it, they can. There will be children, too."

Jessie used large gestures as he spoke. When he got into what he was talking about, that was apparently what he did. It was likely a habit of his.

Still, why did this man know so much? He recalled things, and he'd stopped forgetting. That was what Jessie had said. What did he mean by it?

Could it be that Shihoru had known this, too, before forgetting?

She'd forgotten the things she had known. That's why all the things Jessie was talking about sounded completely unfamiliar to her.

Jessie didn't stop. He continued speaking smoothly and articulately. "For the orcs, the birth of a large number of gumows was both a great shock and a mark of shame. More than a few gumows were disposed of like trash while they were still babies. I can understand why. The gumows carried in them the blood of the humans, elves, and dwarves that they hated. However, it's not like they were all killed. The orcs aren't as savage as humans think they are. They couldn't expect to be treated equally to an orc, but many gumows were allowed to live. Go to any large orcish city. There are gumows working everywhere. They do jobs no one wants, for food only fit for livestock, and somehow manage to live. They're ugly, unsanitary, smelly, and if they approach an orc without taking the proper caution, they'll either get yelled at or kicked until they run away. They're not worth anything. They live on by the mercy of the orcs. That's your standard gumow. They have no dignity, of course. Do you feel bad for them, Shihoru?"

"They look different on the outside, but they aren't so different from us..." Shihoru said slowly. "That's what I think."

"You're right. The gumows' appearance makes an impact. Their build is somewhere between an orc's and a human's, I'd say. They're not that far from human. Generally speaking, they're about as intelligent as humans or orcs. Teach them, and they can learn anything. The gumows living in orcish cities are mean, underhanded, and slothful. But that's the fault of their environment, I'm sure. If you give the gumows in my Jessie Land ten, they'll try to give you eleven or twelve back in return. If seems like if they can't pay you back with ten to

twenty percent more, they aren't satisfied. There are some with violent tempers, yes, but if you lock them up for a day or two, they'll repent, and act more docile. On the whole, they're obedient, and hard workers. They're basically the ideal villagers. It helps that they're easy to manage, but that takes away some of the entertainment value."

"That's why... you want to add us... as villagers?" Shihoru asked.

Jessie's shoulders heaved with laughter, but he didn't answer.

Eventually, they left the area where the buildings were concentrated. There were fields to the left and right.

The sun had already set.

"Shihoru." Jessie came to a stop.

"...Yes?"

Shihoru let out a short breath. Her grip on her staff naturally tightened.

"You use unusual magic. Where did you learn it?"

This man probably had a stronger sense of curiosity than anyone. He liked to learn things. She had anticipated he would ask her eventually. There were things Shihoru wanted to learn, too.

"You countered my magic with a Magic Missile," Shihoru replied. "I never thought someone could use it like that. Besides, you... don't look like a mage."

"Because I'm not a mage," Jessie said with a shrug. "For my part, at least."

There it was again.

For my part, at least.

Jessie turned back. "Could you try using it again? That magic. I want to see it once more, closely."

"I might try to take you down, you know."

"If anything, I actually want you to try. It's fine. It's really hard to kill me. You're no idiot, so you understand that, right?"

"Dark."

When Shihoru called, the unseen door opened and he appeared. No, there was no door. He was always there. It might be more appropriate to say that elementals were always everywhere. However, they were invisible. Even a mage like Shihoru couldn't see them.

Magical creatures. Elementals. In the mages' guild, mysteriously, they would never teach exactly what they were. But they definitely existed, it was possible to sense them, and magic borrowed their power to produce its effects. Once she had been shown clearly that this was the case and tried using magic for herself, she'd had no choice but to believe it.

The things called elementals existed. The way Shihoru thought of them, they probably had no defined form. Arve. Kanon. Faltz. Darsh. Those varieties didn't exist.

In all likelihood, they were entirely different from what Shihoru and the others thought of as living creatures. Invisible, and without mass. If you used your common sense, you wouldn't say that something like that existed. They were different even in the way they existed.

The existential axis of the elementals and of Shihoru and the others were parallel, and they would never cross ordinarily. Mages called elementals to this side. By doing that, a point of connection was formed.

Normally, a mage used elemental sigils or spells to do that. By focusing their mind, imagining a specific elemental, and chanting a specific spell, it was possible to pull in an elemental. She firmly believed that. If she followed the path of those who came before her, the path the pioneering mages had carved out and established, she could use the same magic they did. In a way, that was the essence of the magic she had learned in the guild, and its secret.

Shihoru's Dark appeared as a dark vortex, taking on a star-like form, and it hovered just above her shoulder.

When she called the elemental to this side, Shihoru anthropomorphized him. That was the easiest way to come up with an image. He had no heart that could communicate with humans. Even so, it was convenient in many ways to posit that he did.

"That's interesting. It's like summoning magic." Jessie drew elemental sigils

with the index finger of his right hand. “Marc em Parc.”

Magic Missile.

A shining ball manifested in front of Jessie’s chest.

It was big.

It had been small at first, a perfectly ordinary Magic Missile, until it had gotten bigger.

Based on what she had learned in the mages’ guild, she was forced to think it was odd. By following a set procedure, an expected effect was triggered. That was what they called magic. That was why, in the mages’ guild, they learned how to perform proper magic the proper way.

However, his trick was basically the same as her Dark. It was a matter of how he called the elemental to this side, and how he used its power. Shihoru had used Dark as her method. Jessie was accomplishing the same with a Magic Missile. They might look different, but both were elementals.

“...Go, Dark.”

With a sound like *shuvyuuung,* Dark went straight forward. Shihoru didn’t hold back. Dark accelerated, heading for Jessie at top speed.

The corners of Jessie’s mouth turned upwards just a little. With a gesture like he was pushing it with his right hand, he sent the ball of light forward.

Immediately afterwards, Shihoru willed, *Turn.*

Dark, who had been going straight, changed course. To the right. It wasn’t a sharp-angled turn, but he didn’t collide with the ball of light. He traced an arc around the ball, with the intent to hit Jessie.

Jessie had said to try to take him out, so she deliberately made the attempt. But it didn’t work. She’d known it wouldn’t.

As expected, the Magic Missile moved in response to Dark.

It hit him.

For a second, the light grew stronger, then there was a gust of wind. Not sideways, but a strong upwards draft. Her hat was nearly blown off, and her

body felt like it might lift into the air.

Dark was swallowed up by the ball of light. Then again, the ball of light also disappeared, so it might be more accurate to say they consumed one another.

Shihoru couldn't breathe either in or out.

She knew. She'd known for a while. More than that, she had known all along.

The flaming Arve resembled burning flames.

The freezing Kanon resembled icy crystals.

The electric Falz resembled lightning.

The shadowy Darsh resembled a mass of dark seaweed.

The four types of elementals. Elementals were everywhere. They sucked up the power of a mage's spirit, their magic power, to manifest and to unleash their power.

"I'm not a mage," Jessie said with his eyes downcast, almost as if he were making excuses. "But, for certain reasons, I guess you could say, I can use magic. Shihoru. Who did you learn under in the mages' guild?"

Shihoru could finally breathe again. Steadying her breath, she answered, "My chief instructor was Wizard Yoruka."

"Yoruka. Ohh. She made wizard, huh? That's impressive, given how young she must still be."

"However, I underwent basic training with Wizard Sarai."

"That's a real senior mage," Jessie commented.

"Wizard Yoruka told me... that the things Wizard Sarai taught me would become an invaluable asset. Even if I didn't understand them now... later, I'd realize that."

"That makes sense," Jessie nodded. "In that case, did she say anything about the meaning behind having every mage learn Magic Missile first?"

Magic Missile. It wasn't Arve, Kanon, Falz, or Darsh. What kind of elemental was it? She vaguely remembered having that doubt crop up in her mind at the end of basic training.

“No... Nothing directly.”

“I see. Even if she didn’t convey it clearly, she gave you the key, huh.”

“The key...”

Shihoru clutched her staff. Her hands... no, her entire body... was trembling.

—The key. That was right.

She’d been given the key long ago.

From there, she’d needed only to fit it into the keyhole, turn it, unlock the door, and open it. Despite that, Shihoru had kept the key in her pocket, not even giving it a proper look. In a way, Wizard Sarai and Wizard Yoruka had told her everything.

Shihoru had taken an incredibly roundabout route. She didn’t think the effort was in vain, but if she had realized sooner, she might have been able to do things back then that she still couldn’t. When her comrades were in difficult situations, Shihoru could have offered a hand, and pulled them up.

I’m an idiot.

I’m worthless, and a moron.

That was something she already knew, though. And she had improved from before, so it was best not to think that way. She had to keep it firmly in mind.

She was inferior. That was why she had to think her hardest, and could never stop walking. If she stopped, she would decide it wasn’t worth it anymore, sit down, and no longer be able to make progress.

Shihoru looked upwards, and took a breath. Then she fixed her eyes on Jessie.

“You said... you’re not a mage.”

“I did.”

“Despite that, you know a lot. Why is that?”

“It’s not something I can explain briefly.”

“Even if it’s not brief, I don’t mind in the slightest.”

“Oh, did you not get what I was saying?” Jessie cocked his head to the side. “I

was trying to be indirect. Maybe I chose a bad way of saying it.”

In other words, he didn’t want to say. He probably meant he had no intention of telling her.

It was probably best not to trust this man, after all. He hadn’t needed treatment even after taking Haruhiro’s Backstab, and he kept a lot of secrets. He looked human, seemed to be a former volunteer soldier, and knew a lot about Alterna, too. However, at least now, he wasn’t human in the same way that Shihoru and the others were. It was best to think that way.

For the present, she had no choice but to listen to him. To not resist, to earn his trust if possible, and wait for her chance. But then...

“By the way, Shihoru.”

“...Yes?”

If she acted too obedient, it might seem forced, and he’d see through her. If she tried to build a web of lies, it would surely collapse. While doing her best not to be untruthful, she would deceive him about the most important of things. Could she do that? Even if it was difficult, she would.

She didn’t know what his intentions were, but Jessie was leading Shihoru around like this. If they were going to be together, she had the chance to curry his favor.

“What is it?” she asked.

“That’s one hell of a body you’ve got.”

“...Huh?”

“Do you look even better with those clothes off?”

“Whuh...?”

Unable to understand what was just said to her, she fell deep into thought.

Oh, I get it.

The moment she figured it out, she got scared, and jumped back a little.

“...I-I-I-I-III-III don’t have th-th-th-thaaaat great a body, I-I-I-I-I’m just fat, that’s all. I-If you saw it, you’d just be disappointed, s-s-so, um, I-I can’t show it off to

anyone!”

“I was joking.” Jessie laughed. “You really are entertaining, you know that.”

“J-Joking...”

Oh, right. Joking. Yeah. Of course it was a joke. Obviously. Who would ever want to see her ugly, unsightly body? Not that she’d let him see it if he did. Even though it was nothing so important. She couldn’t. That was one thing she absolutely couldn’t do.

It was a joke. But was it really a joke? She couldn’t trust this man. How could she say for sure that he wasn’t a degenerate who might turn his poisonous fangs not necessarily on Shihoru, but on anyone he pleased?

“...I-I’m sorry about that.” Shihoru cleared her throat. “I’m embarrassed... to have taken it so seriously...”

“Nah. If you don’t mind, I’m up for doing it anytime, though.”

“I-It’s not that I don’t mind... though...”

“I told you, I’m joking.”

“Jessie...” she muttered.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“No... Nothing. I think you must have imagined it.”

“Really? I could swear I heard someone whispered my name with murderous intent...”

Jessie suddenly spun around. He was facing to the northwest. Shihoru looked that way, too.

Someone was walking along the road through the fields. Who could it be?

The gumow residents had already finished their farm work, and returned to their houses. It was pretty dark.

Shihoru narrowed her eyes. It wasn’t just one person; there were two. One was waving.

“Meow! Shihoruuuuuu!”

“Yume!” Shihoru waved back. “Welcome home, Yume! Did nothing happen?! Good!”

“I’m back! Yume’s doin’ real great! How’re you, Shihoru?!”

“Erm, me, too! I’m fine, just like you can see!”

“Oh! That’s swelled! No, that’s wrong! It’s swell!”

“It really is!”

“How’s everyone else?! What’re they doin’?!”

“Everyone’s...!” Shihoru felt a pain in her throat, and held it with her hand.

“No need to shout so loud.” Jessie laughed so hard his shoulders heaved. “You can talk all you want once you’re closer.”

“Right...”

“Shiiiihoruuuu! Yume’s comin’ right over!”

“Y-You don’t have to rush...”

“Okay!” Yume cried. “Tuokin, time to dash!”

“...You don’t have to run, either.”

But Yume probably couldn’t hear Shihoru’s voice now that she had stopped shouting.

Yume tapped the person with her on the back, and they both took off running.

“They’re getting along,” Shihoru murmured.

If she were to say it was like Yume to do that, it was, but even though it always happened, she was still surprised. How was it that Yume could get along with anyone, even crossing racial boundaries? Honestly, Shihoru envied her. Yume seemed to shine so brightly. In the past, she had even been jealous. The recent past, too; it wasn’t like it had been five or ten years ago.

If she thought about it, it hadn’t even been two years since they’d come to Grimgar. She had no concrete memories of her life before that. However, there must have been all sorts of things. It wasn’t like she’d been spontaneously born

into Grimgar with a poof. She was certain of that, just as she was certain that the memories she should have were missing.

That made these two years everything Shihoru had, and more precious than anything. The people she'd met, the things she'd lost, she wanted to hug all of it tightly for as long as she could.

Yume passed the gumow in the coat who was accompanying her at top speed, and broke away by a wide margin. "Shihoruuu!" She raised her right hand.

"Huh?! Wh-What...?!"

Even though she was flustered, Shihoru still managed to move her staff to her left hand, and extend her right.

Yume declared, "Yume meowins!" and slapped her right hand against Shihoru's.

There was a loud clap, which startled Shihoru, and she closed her eyes despite herself. Her palm hurt, but for some reason, it felt good, too.

Yume followed it up by jumping on her, and Shihoru's head was knocked back. "Meowhahahah! Shihoruuu!"

"Eek!"

Shihoru's legs were unsteady. Before she could trip, Yume lifted Shihoru up and spun her around sideways.

"Whoa... Whoa! Y-Yume, th-this is dange...! My eyes are spin...!"

"Whoa!" Yume cried. "If that's it, we'll try doin' a reverse spin on the trouble!"

"Th-That's not the problem...! A-Also, it's not on the trouble, it's on the double...!"

"Nwuh! Yume went and learned sumpkin else thing wrong, huh?!"

"N-Not sumpkin, something...!"

"Summin', huh! Nice job, Shihoru! Thanks for pointin' it out!"

"Not summin', something! P-Put me down, Yume, please, my eyes really are..."

“Roger! Rodger dodger! Roger dodger dodger roger! Stoooop!”

Yume stopped spinning her, then rubbed her cheek against Shihoru.

Yume had always liked to get touchy feely with comrades of the same gender, but this was not normal. Most likely, having spent all that time working with a gumow, Yume had gotten tense in her own way. Thinking of that, Shihoru couldn’t tell her to stop anymore. Besides, Shihoru felt relaxed when Yume was touching her.

Though I’d be too embarrassed to ever say so. I can’t be as honest with myself as Yume is.

The coated gumow came after Yume. Tuokin, was it? If she recalled, she’d heard Yume call him that.

Tuokin was talking to Jessie about something. Was it Orcish, or the gumows’ own language? Either way, Shihoru couldn’t understand a word of it. But she found it odd.

Jessie crossed his arms, looked up to the sky, where the stars were beginning to show themselves. He tilted his head to the side with a pensive look. It gave her a premonition she couldn’t call good.

Shihoru had a tendency to imagine things getting worse and worse, even when that wasn’t true. She hoped that was all it was.

9. Why Did You...?



...So, I realized something.

You’re drinking a soda, yeah? Even though you complain your throat hurts, you’re drinking carbonated drinks all the time, aren’t you?

That soda, the one you’re drinking. Give it to me. Even just a sip.

I’m parched.

My throat’s so dry, it’s not funny.

You’re sitting in front of that vending machine, like always, drinking a soda.

Is it night?

It may already be pretty late at night.

It’s dark, after all.

Totally dark.

Everywhere I look... it’s pitch dark, or rather, pitch black.

Except for that one vending machine.

You’re illuminated by the light of the vending machine.

But I can’t see your face. It’s the only thing I can’t see.

Weird. I should know what it looks like. So why?

Who are you...?

I’m asking you. I have been for a while now. Over and over.

Can’t you hear me?

And you, you’re hanging your head? Is that why I can’t see your face?

You’re drinking a soda, like always. On and on, you continue drinking. Nothing but soda.

Thanks to that, there are empty cans rolling around. Tens, hundreds, maybe more.

Here, there, everywhere. They're more than just rolling around. The countless empty cans, it feels like you and the vending machine are about to be buried in them.

Hey, you. It's dangerous to be there.

Heeeey. I raise my voice to caution you.

It's dangerous, okay?

The empty cans. They're weird. They keep growing in number.

Where are those empty cans pressing in from?

Heeeey.

Heeeey, I said.

Please give me a response.

Why is it? I don't know, but I can only call out to you from here.

I can't go there.

You know, don't you?

Hearing a familiar voice, I turn to look.

There's someone there.

In the inky black darkness, there's someone.

I know he's there. But I can't see him. He speaks.

That's not where you belong.

That's right, someone else says. *You can't go there. Not yet. You can't come here, either.*

What's with that?

What do you mean?

I have to stay here, then...?

If you want to come, you can.

No. That's no good.

Yeah. You're right. It's too soon.

Yeah. Don't go there. You shouldn't come here, either.

You say that, but then I'm all alone.

It's so dark.

There's nothing.

Being here all alone, it may not be impossible for me, but I can't stand it.

Come, you say from in front of the vending machine.

When I look, you're standing up.

You were looking down, but not anymore. You raise your face, and you're looking at me.

In one hand you have a soda, and your face is black, as if blotted out.

Liquid pours from the mouth of the can. A black, black, ink-like fluid.

The darkness itself.

Come here, you say. Even though you have nothing resembling lips. *I'm lonely. Come.*

I'm scared.

Frightened beyond belief, but I'm so sad I can't take it.

I want to go.

I want to go there.

To your side.

I don't want to leave you alone.

You can't go, you say. *Hold on. Don't go.*

Why stop me?

I don't want to leave you alone, and I don't want to be alone myself. You know that, right?

I mean, this place is...

Where is it?

Oh...

Choco.

Manato.

Moguzo.

They’re not here.

None of them.

That’s right. The vending machine.

It’s not here.

No light.

Darkness.

This overwhelming, complete darkness.

Dark, dark,

dark, whe, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, re, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, where, dark, dark, dark, dark, am, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, where, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, am I....?

There was a sound of gulping.

He quickly realized it wasn’t dark.

Indoors. Yes. This wasn't outdoors. He was beneath a roof. What was more, it was soft. He wasn't sleeping on the ground, or the floor, but on proper bedding.

When he tried to get up, someone shouted his name. "Haru?!"

"Huh—Merry...?"

Merry. It was definitely Merry.

It seemed Haruhiro was lying in a bed of sorts. Merry was sitting in a chair that had been placed right next to him. Merry stood up with such force that she almost kicked the chair over, then fell on top of him. No, she didn't fall on top of him. Not precisely. But she came at him with such momentum that it looked like she might, putting her left hand down next to his head to support herself, and using her right hand to touch Haruhiro's cheek and neck.

Merry's hair fell over Haruhiro's face. He could smell her scent.

It was probably night. It was dark in a way, but there was a window, and a little light shone in through it, letting him faintly see Merry's face. Her eyes, in particular. They didn't meet his own. Merry touched him here and there, then looked to his eyes, as if confirming whether he was all right.

He wanted to say, *I'm okay,* but he couldn't.

Haruhiro couldn't take his eyes off Merry. This might have been impure of him, but while it didn't need to be forever, if only for a little longer, he wished she would have kept touching him. If he reached out, he could hug her close. That thought occurred to him. Somehow, he had the feeling Merry wouldn't reject him. When that stupid idea crossed his mind, he felt hopelessly pathetic.

"I'm fine, Merry," Haruhiro said with a smile. Was he really managing to smile? He couldn't tell himself, and he wasn't confident. It was always this way.

"...I see." Merry took a breath, then lifted herself up and ended up sitting on the edge of the bed. Merry's hands moved away from Haruhiro, and her scent grew fainter. To the point he could barely sense it.

He wasn't sure if he felt disappointed, or relieved. Possibly it was both.

Whatever the case, this was fine. He could just barely stay sane. There had to be an appropriate distance between comrades. Most likely, that was even more

true when they trusted each other with their lives.

“...Sorry,” he added.

“Why are you apologizing?” she asked.

“I mean, well... I dunno. Erm, when it comes to what happened to make things turn out like this... I have no idea. But, like, it’s my fault we’re in this situation to begin with, you could say.”

Merry silently shook her head. Haruhiro understood already. It was his fault. He’d made the wrong call. Even so, his comrades wouldn’t unilaterally blame him. He knew that, so how many times was he going to go through this same thing?

There wasn’t time for apologies. There were plenty of things he needed to be asking about. Why couldn’t he say anything?

Merry was keeping quiet.

The silence weighed on him. Mainly on his heart, and his stomach. They ached.

Eventually, Merry sniffled.

Haruhiro was shocked. “...Merry?”

“I’m sorry.” Merry covered her face with her left hand. Pressing on the area around her eyes, she might have been trying to hold back tears.

“No... But that’s—”

“It’s nothing. Just... I was relieved.”

“I... see. If that’s all, well...”

“You idiot.” Merry thumped Haruhiro lightly in the chest, then chuckled. Her right hand tried to pull away, then didn’t. It was left softly on Haruhiro’s chest. “...No. I’m the idiot.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I’m probably not saying anything meaningful.”

“You... aren’t?”

“I’m not clever, so there are times when I do that.”

“I don’t think it’s true that you aren’t clever.”

“I’m afraid to be looked down on, so I just hide it.” Merry gripped her right hand a little. “But I’m sure it shows.”

Haruhiro let out an “Uh...” sounding like an idiot. In times like these, he cursed himself for not being able to say something clever and considerate. But what were times like these? What kind of time was this?

“Merry, you’re...”

What was she? Merry was... what?

Haruhiro breathed in, breathed out.

Words, come out, he pleaded. *Come out, please.*

Please, please... come out.

Come on. I’m begging you. I don’t care what the words are at this point.

“...irreplaceable...” he finished. “For all of us... Yeah. You’ve saved us all. Me... My face was a mess, wasn’t it? The one who fixed it, that was you, right, Merry?”

“Because I’m a priest,” she said.

“You’re needed, Merry. Um... by all of us... absolutely.”

“That’s you, Haru,” she said. “Without you there, we’d be in trouble. All of us.”

“All of us... Yeah.”

“So...”

“So?”

“I’m glad, Haru. That... you’re here. That I was able to meet you.”

“No, I’m the one... who should be saying that...”

“Saying what?” Merry asked.

“Huh?! Ohh... erm... Well, that I’m glad I was able to meet you... Wait—”

What is this? he thought frantically. *This conversation?*

We're grateful to have met each other. That isn't strange at all, in and of itself. It's a fact, after all. I am grateful, you know? But, somehow, this is different. Huh?

Isn't it?

Am I reading too much into it? Too much? How?

Huhhhhhh? I don't know anymore.

"Whuh?" he began to vocalize, but Haruhiro had no idea what he'd been attempting to say. "Whuh. Whuh. Whuh...?"

"Whuh?" Merry repeated, and tilted her head to the side.

"Whuh..."

Oh, crap.

His mind had gone blank. Even though it was dark. Come to think of it, they were inside a building, but there wasn't a single light.

A building.

A building?

"Whuh...?"

Where was this building? In that village? If so, why? Haruhiro didn't exactly seem to be bound hand and foot. It seemed the same went for Merry. What had gone on after Haruhiro passed out?

Merry was here. Where was Shihoru? Yume? Kuzaku? Setora, Enba, and Kiichi?

"Whuh..."

That *"Whuh."* How many times had he said it now?

Merry burst out laughing a little, then pulled back the hand that she'd left on him. "I'll give you a brief rundown of what happened."

"P-Please. Oh, right... Can I get up? Is that okay?"

Merry laughed again, then said, "Go ahead."

When he got up, he felt a little dizzy, but nothing else seemed that out of the ordinary. Considering his face had been smashed in before he passed out, well, it was an improvement.

No, more than that, judging from the way Merry was acting, all of their comrades were fine. Merry explained to Haruhiro the series of events by which the man who called himself Jessie had taken him captive, forced their comrades to submit, and then brought them to Jessie Land.

Then, even though they had expected to be imprisoned as a group, that wasn't how it had gone. Merry had been ordered to attend to Haruhiro, while the rest of their comrades were given orders to go off and do other things elsewhere.

Shihoru had gone off with Jessie to see what things were like. Setora, Enba, and Kiichi were apparently being confined in something resembling a jail. Yume and Kuzaku seemed to have been assigned jobs, too. Shihoru was being forced to accompany Jessie, and she was asking him for various facts about Jessie Land.

"You mean he's revealing the actual state of things to Shihoru?" Haruhiro asked.

"Yes. According to her, that's right. He might be hiding something, though."

"You never know..." he murmured.

"For a start, that man took a solid hit from your Backstab, but he was fine."

"He looks like he couldn't be anything other than a human, but he's not," Haruhiro said. "Gumows, was it? The babies orcs forced humans to have?"

"I haven't heard about them in much detail," Merry said. "But, basically, in the war where the Alliance of Kings defeated humanity, the orcs..."

"Erm, yeah... I, uh, feel kind of bad for those people. Oh, I guess they're not people. No, but they have human blood, so... Yeah, compared to full-blooded orcs, they should be closer to us."

"The ones guarding this building are green-coated gumows," Merry said. "This is a gumow village, though, so that's to be expected. They're fairly kind. Oh,

right.”

Merry got up from the bed. There was a table-like piece of furniture by the wall. Merry came back carrying something that had been on top of it.

“Food and water. The gumows brought this, too. I tried eating some. I don’t think they’ve put anything dodgy in it.”

“Oh...” Haruhiro’s stomach suddenly began to rumble, and his mouth watered.

“Wait.” Merry sat down on the edge of the bed again. “The food is wrapped. I’ll open it now. Have this first.”

Haruhiro brought the leather water bottle he was given to his lips and drank. It was warm, and slightly sour. Not an unpleasant sourness, like it had gone bad. It was easy to drink. He couldn’t help but gulp it down.

Merry said, “Here,” and offered him something flat. Obviously, he was meant to accept it with his hands, but spurred on by his appetite, Haruhiro stretched his neck up to bite the thing Merry was holding.

It looked like he’d surprised her, because Merry let out a little scream. “Eek!”

Before he could apologize, there was a feeling like an electric shock in his brain.

“Damn, that’s good!” he exclaimed.

“I-I know, right? This stuff is delicious.”

“It’s bringing me back to life.”

“Even though you were alive all along.”

“Well, yes, but, you know...”

“There’s more still.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Here.”

He opened his mouth, and the rest of that flat dumpling-like thing went in. He hesitated a little, but he didn’t know when he’d next get the chance to eat, and

he wanted to eat it, so Haruhiro chewed and swallowed.

It really was delicious. And he got the feeling that wasn't just because he'd been hungry.

First of all, the chewy texture was good. It had a faint savory flavor to it, too. Nice.

Also, there was something inside it. The ground meat and savory vegetables combined for a salty-sweet flavor. It was that sort of filling. This was delicious, too. It tasted like civilization. He hadn't eaten anything decent in a while, after all. But even without that, it was probably delicious. A taste he'd never tire of.

If he were to say more, the flavor left him with a feeling of nostalgia. Like soul food. The soul food of what, though? He didn't know, but it was amazing.

"Want another?" Merry asked.

He couldn't possibly refuse. Even if it weren't Merry doing the offering, he'd have wanted a second. By all means. Two, three, he'd eat all she had.

"Please."

"Say ah."

"Okay. Ah..."

Hm?

With his mouth wide, Haruhiro looked into Merry's eyes.

Their lines of sight collided.

"Ah...!" Merry looked away. "I-I'm sorry. I was just sort of going with the flow. Th-There was no... deeper meaning to it..."

"S-Sure." Haruhiro cast his eyes downward, rubbing his shoulder more than necessary. "I-I know that."

"Go ahead," she fumbled.

He hesitantly bit into the flat dumpling-like thing she extended to him. So good. He could feel it seeping into him. The taste was gentle. It would go with anything. He felt like if these people were eating this stuff every day, he could get along with them, even if they were another race.

Naturally, that was just how he felt. He wouldn't actually factor the taste of this food into his decision. It was hard to come away with a bad impression, though. He'd already eaten a second, after all.

"Let's leave it at that... okay?" he said. "If I suddenly eat as much as I want, it might give my body a shock, after all."

Merry laughed. "That's so like you, Haru."

"Huh, really? How so?"

"The way you calmly try to control yourself. I'm always thinking how I need to learn from your example."

"I'm nothing that special... you know? No, really."

"The way you're humble about it, too."

"Hmm..." Haruhiro scratched his body all over.

He wasn't good at taking compliments. It wasn't that he wasn't happy, just that they made him embarrassed, and he didn't want to get a big head.

I mean, obviously, right? I'd be over the moon to have Merry compliment me so much. That's why I want her to stop. I don't want to get too happy. When good things happen, I get worried. There are good times, and bad. For every upward slope, there's a downhill one coming. We live in a web of weal and woe, they say.

"Merry," he said.

"Yes?"

"I feel like..."

This building's window was in a sort of high position, its wooden shutter was open, and there were wooden poles supporting it. It was quiet outside.

Until it wasn't.

To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to...

That was the noise he heard.

No way, he thought. In his heart, he didn't want to believe it, but Haruhiro's

body reacted quickly.

He jumped up to stand on the bed, and tried to look out the window. No good, huh. It was dark, and he couldn't see. But he could still hear that distinctive *to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to* sound echoing in the distance.

"It's drumming... A redback guorella's."

"No way..." Merry was speechless.

He could understand. Haruhiro felt exactly the same way.

Guorellas were strangely tenacious. Haruhiro had killed the male redback leader of their troop. Despite that, they still kept chasing them. It seemed this was an exceptional troop, and they had multiple redbacks. The party had managed to shake them somehow by risking their lives and diving off a cliff. That was how it was supposed to be.

It wasn't just the drumming. He heard other noises, too. Screams. He didn't know what they were saying. Was it in the Gumowan language? There were lights going back and forth. Torches, apparently.

The door opened, and the room lit up.

"Merry! Haruhiro-kun?!"

It was Shihoru. Behind Shihoru, who had called their names from the door, was a blond-haired man carrying a torch. Jessie.

"You're awake, huh. Perfect. It looks like I'm going to be asking you for help," Jessie said plainly.

He spoke like he wasn't tense at all. His expression was calm, too.

Haruhiro armed himself with his stiletto, and his knife with the hand guard, along with his cloak and other equipment that had been laid out in a corner of the room, then left the building together with Merry. He was a little unsteady on his feet, but if he kept moving, he'd be fine. It was a good thing he'd gotten something to eat.

The village was surprisingly calm. The villagers weren't panicking and rushing out of their houses and running off to who-knows-where, or anything like that.

“I’ve ordered them not to leave their houses,” Jessie explained as they walked. “It looks like they’re listening for now. By the way, the gumows wearing green coats like mine are different. I call them the Ranger Squad. They’re like my hands and legs, you could say. They’re as good as the volunteer soldiers in Alterna.”

The building Haruhiro and Merry had been in was apparently at the outer edge of the village. There weren’t buildings around them for long. This road was already in the fields. There were a number of flames in the distance. They didn’t look big, but they apparently had watchtowers.

“How many are there?” Haruhiro asked. “Um... of those rangers, I mean.”

“Twenty-four,” Jessie answered.

Jessie led the way, Haruhiro was behind him, and Shihoru and Merry stood side by side, bringing up the rear.

To, to, to, to, to, to... To, to, to, to, to, to... To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to...

The sound of the drumming never stopped. From here, and from there, too.

“Any damage?” Haruhiro asked.

“No—” Jessie began before shaking his head. “I’m not sure. Not yet.”

Was this their fault?

Haruhiro and the others had brought the guorellas to Jessie Land. That might be true, but Jessie was also responsible. Jessie could have driven Haruhiro and the others off, or killed them all. It wasn’t clear why, but he hadn’t done that. This was the result. So, it could be said that he’d brought this on himself.

Jessie went out into a narrow path. There was a small shack up ahead.

In front of the shack, someone shouted, “Ahhh!” loudly, and swung a torch around. “It’s Haru-kun! Shihoruuu! Merry-chan, too!”

“Yume!” Haruhiro cried.

In addition to Yume, there was another green-coated gumow ranger at the shack.

Jessie said, “This is Tuoki,” and then introduced Haruhiro and the others, to

which the purple-faced ranger nodded.

“Oh, hello... I’m Haruhiro.”

“Tuokin here’s a real capable guy, y’know!” Yume slapped Tuoki on the back, causing him to cough.

“Yume, you’re friends with him?” Haruhiro asked, startled.

“Just kinda. Yume just met him, y’know? Maybe Yume and Tuokin’re becomin’ friends, though. Right, Tuokin?”

“A-Ah...”

“He sounds like he might be a bit troubled by it...” Shihoru said.

Yume cried, “Meowhuh?!” Her eyes went wide, and she spun around to take a good look at Tuoki’s face. “Tuokin, is Yume troublin’ you? Is it too early to call her your friend?”

“...Wah.”

“Yume...” Merry shook her head. “He probably doesn’t understand you.”

“Nuoh, so that’s it!” Yume poked Jessie in the ribs. “Jessie, if that’s how it is, interpret what Yume’s sayin’ for a bit!”

“Yeah... No, we don’t have time for that...” Jessie said.

“Fwah! That’s right! Haru-kun, we’re in a real clam here!”

“Jam, you mean. It’s jam, not clam...”

Well, honestly, this was just Yume being Yume, so maybe it was fine as it was. He really didn’t have time to be correcting her.

The shack seemed to be a storehouse or rest house of some sort, but there was a ladder on the outside of the building, and a simple watchtower incorporated into the roof. Jessie told Tuoki and Haruhiro to accompany him and then climbed up to the watchtower.

It was narrow up there. There, four people would fit at most. It was only a little higher than the second floor, but there were no obstacles, so they could see for a long distance.

Excluding the tower where they now were, there were a total of eight other towers with fires of some sort lit. Were they positioned with one in the north, south, east, and west, and then one in each of the northeast, southeast, northwest, and southwest?

“That way’s north,” Jessie pointed and explained.

Like Haruhiro had thought, the towers were placed at the cardinal and intercardinal directions.

To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to... To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to... To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to...

Listening carefully, there was guorella drumming coming from three directions. The north, the west, and the southwest.

“This is an exceptional situation,” Jessie said with a shrug. “In a guorella troop, only the redback drums. To be accurate, it’s not that it never happens, but if a male other than the redback does it, it’s seen as a challenge to the redback. Normally the females and young males of the troop side with the redback, and the male who started drumming is pulverized.”

“I’ve heard the same,” Haruhiro nodded.

“From that woman from the village?” Jessie asked.

“You mean Setora, right? Yes, that’s correct. We were in Darunggar, another world different from Grimgar, and—”

“I’ve already heard the gist of that story from Shihoru. Fire Dragon Mountain, huh? Sounds interesting. You met Unjo in Darunggar, I hear?”

“Is he... someone you knew?”

“No. Don’t know him. For my part, that is.”

“...Huh?”

“Jessie!” Tuoki shouted. He was looking to the northeast.

Looking in that direction, one of the watchtowers’ fires went out.

“Oh, man.” Jessie snorted. “The drumming was a diversion? Amazing.”

He was right, it was amazing. The guorellas had used drumming to show their

existence, saying, *We're here, and we're going to attack you now.* To intimidate. Then, while doing that, they had snuck around and attacked from a different direction.

"Uh, I'm not sure this is the time to be impressed," Haruhiro put in.

"Fair enough. Tuoki."

Jessie gave Tuoki some sort of order. Tuoki nodded, then hurried down the ladder. He'd probably go to intercept the guorellas coming in from the northeast.

The remaining seven fires were intact. The drumming continued.

"That can't have been their main target... right?" Haruhiro said.

Jessie nodded. "Haruhiro. If it were you were them, what task would you have the vanguard do?"

"Instead of using a light attack to keep us in check, I might go in as deep as I could. That's right, the young ones... If I were the guorellas, I'd send the young males, full of vigor, to charge in, I think."

"I agree. It looks like we'll get along."

"I'm not so sure about that..."

"Can't you just say we'll get along for now?"

"You don't have to threaten me. I'll do what I can. We may not have meant to, but we did kind of lead the guorellas here, after all."

"This is a really clever troop," Jessie said. "They knew you would eventually head for a human village, so they let you go free. You've killed a redback. That drumming. There are probably several redbacks. There must be a big boss leading a number of troops."

"Where's Kuzaku?" Haruhiro asked.

"The big guy? I think he'll be here soon. I told them to bring him around."

"Setora and Enba?"

"I don't trust people from the village, personally."

“We can use them,” Haruhiro said. “Kiichi, too.”

“That’s the nyaa, huh? I’ll consider it.”

“The villagers who aren’t rangers... can they not fight?”

“I’ve never taught them to. They’re such good-natured creatures. The rangers are the only ones carrying weapons. They have a knife or something like that in every house, I guess. Farming implements, too.”

“What is this place?” Haruhiro asked.

“Jessie Land,” Jessie responded with a satisfied smile that seemed nothing if not out of place. “The main field in the game I’m playing.”

“Game...?”

Once, Manato had let that word slip. He’d said this was like a game. However, though the word was the same, it felt a little different when Jessie said it. No, not a little, completely.

“You seem detached somehow, Haruhiro.”

“...Do I look that way?”

“You do. No matter what life we lead, in the end it’s like a game. You understand that, right?”

“You and I may not get along.”

“No,” Jessie said. “You only think that because you don’t know anything yet. If you learn, you’ll see quite clearly what I mean.”

“No matter what I learn, that won’t change. It’s not a game. We aren’t playing around.”

Haruhiro didn’t glare at Jessie. His emotions were running high. He seemed to be angry. However, even if he loudly argued his case, he couldn’t prove he was right, and he didn’t really want to prove Jessie wrong or persuade him.

Still, even if there was no meaning to it, he felt the need to say it.

Haruhiro took a deep breath.

“If we die, it’s all over, and we lose everything. We may think we’re small and

meaningless. It can be a hassle, and it can be painful, and we may get sick of it. But even I think, every once in a while, that I'm glad to be alive. It means we can laugh and cry, after all."

"That's why life is important, you're saying?"

"It's not about if it's valuable or not. I don't know what life's worth. Either way, for as long as I'm able to think, I don't want to let go of what I have. I have no choice but to cling on to it. When I started doing that, I eventually found myself surrounded by so many things that it wasn't so easy to throw it all away anymore."

"The fact is, if you just go ahead and throw them away, you'll find it's surprisingly easy, though."

"Is that how it is?" Haruhiro said. "Well, I'm sure you don't want to lose this village, either."

"If the villagers of my Jessie Land, which I worked so hard to build up, were to get wiped out by guorellas here, I might get a little sad, I guess."

"We'll do everything we can to prevent that from happening. We'd better have everyone prepare to fight a defensive battle."

"Let's do that." Jessie raised his left eyebrow. "It's not game over just yet."

Not long after that, Kuzaku was brought to the shack by a female ranger. The fire at the north tower went out after that.

This shack was about two hundred meters from the village. The north tower was around a kilometer away.

"Haruhiro, you go." Jessie apparently didn't intend to move from this shack for now.

When Haruhiro nodded, Jessie gave an order to the female ranger who had brought Kuzaku. Most likely, he was telling her to go with them and watch them, or something like that.

When he descended the ladder, Kuzaku shouted, "'Hey!" and extended his fist, so Haruhiro lightly knocked his fist against it.

"It sure is easier having you around, Haruhiro," Kuzaku said. "I mean, without

you around I feel so uneasy. It's tough, man."

"You're creeping me out a little," Haruhiro said.

"Huh?! That's how you respond?!"

"Nah, I'm kidding. Oh, but maybe I'm not..."

"Harsh, man. But I'm kind of happy, I guess."

"Huh? Why?"

"I mean, you're being a bit meaner to me than before. Isn't that good?"

"You're a total M," Shihoru muttered.

"Am not!" Kuzaku immediately denied it, then cocked his head to the side. "Ohh. But I'm not an S, either. That's not quite me. I may not be a total M, but if we're talking S and M, well, maybe I'm a bit of an M...?"

"Yume's an L, huh. Or maybe an F?"

"F...?" Merry frowned, and seemed to be seriously thinking about it.

Up on top of the shack, in the tower, Jessie was laughing wryly.

"Wolla!" The female ranger slapped Kuzaku in the ass.

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" Kuzaku pushed Haruhiro's back. "Haruhiro, let's go! Yanni-san's a good person, but she's scary when she's mad!"

The woman with the cream-colored face whose name was apparently Yanni shouted, "Waouf!" Yeah, she was one scary gumow.

"Okay, let's go," Haruhiro said. "If we carry torches, we're bound to be targeted, so I'm counting on you, Kuzaku. Take the lead. Yume, you stay at the very back. Watch Merry and Shihoru. This may be a long battle, so hold back for now, Shihoru. I'll be behind Kuzaku."

"'Kay!"

"Mrrowr!"

"Okay!"

"...Right!"

When they set out, Yanni quickly passed Haruhiro to walk alongside Kuzaku. Unlike Kuzaku, the party's heavily armed tank, Yanni wasn't wearing armor or a helmet. Wasn't the front of the line dangerous? Sure, she was probably assigned to watch them, but she could do that from behind. But even if he said that, it seemed likely she'd snap at him. Well, even before that, she wouldn't understand his words.

Haruhiro had intended to cut across the fields, but Yanni went down the road, and if Kuzaku moved away from her, she shouted "Wolla!"

It was hard walking in the fields, and Yanni probably knew the terrain of Jessie Land. Haruhiro decided to leave choosing their route to her.

To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to... To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to... To, to, to, to, to, to, to, to...

The drumming was now coming from the east, the west, and the southeast. If he recalled, it had originally been coming from the north, the west, and the southwest.

Eventually, they heard the "Uho, uho, uho, uho, uho, uho!" hooting of the guorellas. They probably had noticed Haruhiro and the others.

"Stop! They're coming, Kuzaku!" Haruhiro called.

"Okay!"

Yanni shouted, "Seinea!" and snatched the torch from Kuzaku's hand. Kuzaku immediately drew his large katana. Those two seemed oddly in sync.

Haruhiro readied his stiletto, too. He took a breath, then loosened his shoulders and hips.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"Right, left, and ahead!" Yume shouted, firing an arrow to the right.

Did she hit? Did she miss? It wasn't clear.

Shihoru cried, "Dark!" and summoned the elemental.

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you. Protection!" When Merry chanted her spell, a shining hexagram appeared on their left wrists.

This isn't it, Haruhiro sensed. It wasn't that he had a firm basis for it. But it probably wasn't a redback. They'd been attacked many times before, so he could tell. It was a young male.

"Shihoru, to the left!" he called.

"Right!"

"It's here," Haruhiro muttered.

First, the front. It was a guorella. A young male, like he'd expected.

When Male A leapt at him, Kuzaku shouted "Ragh!" and pushed it back with his shield. Kuzaku wasn't going to lose in a contest of strength when he had a firm grip on his shield. Not to a guorella that wasn't a redback.

Next, the right.

"Meow!" Yume loosed another arrow before immediately discarding her bow and drawing her katana. She took two slashes at Male B which was charging in, and quickly circled around to the side of it.

"Chai, chai, chai!"

She slammed her katana into it.

Yume's slashes were deflected by its shell-like skin, so Male B hadn't taken any damage. However, because she never stopped moving and attacking, Male B was overwhelmed. Eventually, Male B would probably recover, but Merry would assist Yume if need be. No, before it came to that, he'd finish this.

There was a Male C coming diagonally from the front left, trampling the barley-like plants as it raced in. Though it was male, it was smaller than a redback, and instead of standing upright it was knuckle-walking, so it didn't look that big.

That said, if Haruhiro took a tackle from it head-on, he wouldn't get off unscathed, and he might even die if he was unlucky. He wasn't tough like Kuzaku. He had no intention of fighting it straight-up.

That was why Haruhiro ran to the left.

Male C roared, chasing closely after Haruhiro.

“Go!” Shihoru loosed Dark.

Shuvwooooooooong. Dark flew with an otherworldly sound, and Male C couldn’t avoid him.

It was a hit.

Male C shrieked and convulsed. Haruhiro had been waiting for this. It was what he’d been aiming for.

Haruhiro jumped on Male C, wrapping his left arm around its neck. The hairy horns that grew densely in the area from the back of its head to its back stabbed into him painfully, but there was no helping that. He ignored them, stabbing the stiletto he was holding backhanded into Male C’s right eye.

Deep. Deep. As deep as it would go.

He pulled it out, changed the angle slightly, and stabbed again. Pulled out, and stabbed again. Once he repeated that eight times, Male C slumped over and stopped moving at all.

Haruhiro moved away from Male C, glancing quickly at Male A and Male B. Kuzaku was hitting Male A with his large katana, knocking it back, and Yanni was kicking it and beating it with the torch, so they were fighting it on more than equal footing. Well, facing a guorella, it was still hard to deal a fatal blow, but those two weren’t going to fall apart right away.

Yume was a bit further away. Bouncing around, she was moving furiously, trying to keep Male B away from Shihoru and Merry.

Merry gripped her head staff, seeming to be trying to decide what was best. Should she go to support Yume, or stay close to Shihoru?

Shihoru looked in Haruhiro’s direction. Her eyes were asking whether she should send Dark out again.

Haruhiro shook his head. *Stealth,* he told himself. *Sink.*

He imagined himself sinking into the depths of the earth.

He’d gotten into a good mindset.

Haruhiro lowered his head and moved forward.

Yume was moving right, left, and backwards like always. “Geh! Nyah! Hnghyah! Nyoh!” She was swinging her katana around.

Yume’s moves hadn’t dulled, and she didn’t seem tired. However, it looked like Male B had gotten used to her. Instead of Yume toying with Male B, it looked like Male B was chasing her around. Male B might catch her any moment now.

Of course, I won’t let that happen— was something Haruhiro tried to avoid thinking. He just had to keep doing what needed to be done. He was detached, somehow.

There might have been some truth to that. He thought there had to be.

Emotions had a large effect on one’s perception and manual control. Haruhiro knew that to be true. His emotions could call forth an explosive burst of power sometimes, but in many cases, it was the opposite. His shaken feelings would work negatively, causing him to make mistakes and blunders.

“Yikes!” Yume cried.

Male B swiped Yume’s katana aside with its arm. It almost went flying, but Yume tried to dig her heels in. Because of that, she stopped moving. For a moment, Yume panicked. Male B wasted no time, closing in on Yume and wrapping both its arms around her.

Haruhiro latched onto its back, wrapping his left arm around its neck. The hairy horns stabbed into him. He didn’t feel any real pain.

Oh, they’re stabbing into me, was his only reaction. He could complain about how it hurt later.

He stabbed his stiletto into its right eye. The same method as before. In and out. In and out. In and out. In and out. In and out. In and out.

“Mrrowr...!” Yume pushed Male B away with both her legs. That made Male B roll over, and Haruhiro was going to end up underneath it.

He jumped away to prevent that, raising his shoulders, letting out his breath, and relaxing as he pulled back. At the same time, he cocked his head to the side.

His eyes must look awfully tired right about now. He wasn't particularly tired, though.

"H-Haru-kun, thanks!"

"Nah..." Haruhiro said, waving to her vaguely, but then Yume's eyes went wide.

"Y-You're bleedin'! It's drippin' all over the place!"

"I'm fine."

He'd planned for the hairy horns stabbing into him, and there weren't any particularly bad wounds. It did hurt, though. His chest and arms were gradually starting to feel the pain, but it wouldn't hinder him in combat, and he figured he could tolerate it. He just needed to have Merry heal him up later.

"Yume, go back to where Merry and Shihoru are. There may be new enemies that come in."

"S-Sure! What about you, Haru-kun?"

"It seems like it's fastest for me to kill the guorellas."

Breathe in, breathe out.

Sink. Stealth.

Had he gotten the knack of it, or something like that? He was able to slide into it more easily than before.

Improving was a strange thing, not quite like climbing up a slope. Rather than slow incremental gains, it seemed to come in steps. He would work on something day by day, coming up with various tricks, but wouldn't seem to change much. Then, after that continued for a while, at some point, he'd rapidly go up a step. He'd suddenly be able to do the thing he'd been frustrated with all this time that he couldn't.

Had he gone up a step? Even if that was what it was, he couldn't let it go to his head, and he had to stay cautious.

Kuzaku used Block to take Male A's attack, occasionally using Bash and Thrust to counterattack. Yanni was using Kuzaku as a meat shield while she focused on

disrupting Male A.

They didn't look hastily thrown together. The more Haruhiro watched, the more they seemed like a good pair. But they lacked the ability to land the decisive blow.

Knowing Kuzaku's strength, it wouldn't be impossible for Kuzaku penetrate a guorella's shell-like skin with his large katana, but he would have to get in a thrust with some serious momentum, or swing as hard as he could to do it. In order to pull that off, he'd first have to keep the guorella from moving. If that was too difficult, he'd need to at least throw it off balance.

Kuzaku's fighting style was a reliable one. He drew in as many enemies as he could, made them attack him, rebounded all their efforts, and protected his comrades. He was putting everything he had into his role as a tank.

That was not, in itself, a bad thing, of course. In fact, it was praiseworthy. He'd done well to grow this much.

I wish I could give him my unreserved praise, but... Haruhiro thought. *Honestly, it's not enough.*

If he were to dare say it, Moguzo had performed his role as a tank while also having enough power to decide the outcome of battles. Moguzo had been a warrior, and Kuzaku was a defensive paladin.

Still, despite that difference, Kuzaku had a height, long arms, and uncommonly great strength that outstripped Moguzo's. He should have been able to do more. While his defense was almost completely solid now, that should have been giving life to his attacks. Knowing his personality, Kuzaku must have wanted to contribute more to the party. In addition to that desire, Kuzaku had the ability.

Kuzaku was focused on one thing to the point of being single-minded. That was a strength. However, once he set down a path, he charged forward like an enraged boar, not looking to see what was to either side of him.

Haruhiro was the leader, so he had to take him by the reins, pointing Kuzaku this way or that. If Kuzaku began to stagnate, it was Haruhiro's fault. It seemed presumptuous to say this, but wasn't it Haruhiro's duty to develop Kuzaku into

a paladin who was more than just a tank? Even so, it wouldn't be good for Kuzaku to overextend himself, and things were fine as is for now.

I'll finish it.

Haruhiro wasn't being over-enthusiastic. He felt it was natural, and a given he would do it.

Haruhiro moved through the field to circle around behind Male A.

It wasn't just Male A; everyone, his comrades included, had stopped paying attention to Haruhiro. That was why Male A didn't turn..

Weruu, ruu, ruuuu, ruu, ruu, weruuuuuu!

There was a sound they hadn't heard before. Probably not that far away.

The sound didn't come from tens of meters away; it was at least a hundred, or somewhere around that far. Judging by the timing, the instant Male A heard it, it made an abrupt turn—and its eyes met with Haruhiro's.

Haruhiro couldn't help but be flustered by this. There was no way he could have predicted it.

But, well, that was life for you. Things like this happened. If he avoided being killed in one blow, he wasn't alone, he had comrades, they'd get through this.

Haruhiro lowered his hips and readied himself. *All right, bring it,* he thought.

However, Male A didn't head for Haruhiro. It passed by Haruhiro's side, though not right beside him, knuckle-walking at full speed to get to a fairly distant spot.

In this case, it isn't a knuckle-walking, it's knuckle-running, huh? Well, it's too much trouble to distinguish them, so walking is fine, Haruhiro thought, despite himself.

He hadn't even been considered a threat. Male A had retreated without even a glance at Haruhiro. Probably that noise had been a guorella's cry, a signal to retreat.

"It... ran away?" Kuzaku said, his shoulders heaving with each breath. "You think that's it?"

Yanni slowly moved and she held the torch in, looking around restlessly.

Weruu, ruu, ruuuu, ruu, ruu, weruuuuuu!

That voice again.

Haruhiro thought for a little, then had Merry heal them, and decided to head for the north watchtower. Of course, he wouldn't let his guard down, but they probably wouldn't encounter any enemies.

This wasn't him being complacent. There was a flow to these things. The guorellas had retreated. They probably wouldn't attack again immediately.

Though it was called a tower, it was only high enough he could still jump up on to it, and it had no roof, making it more like a simple platform. The northern watchtower had collapsed, and the supporting legs and basket that held its watch fire had been destroyed, too, being left to lie on the ground nearby.

There was a single ranger collapsed face down next to the smoldering firewood that hadn't been fully extinguished. Merry rushed over, trying to get the ranger up, but she stopped mid-effort, her shoulders slumping.

Yanni turned over the ranger in her place. The ranger had no face. He'd been suddenly attacked by the guorellas, and had his face bitten off. Obviously, the ranger was dead.

They heard that same *Weruu, ruu, ruuuu!* call five times, and then it stopped. Then they started to hear or not hear drumming from all over.

Were they going to go back to Jessie, or stay here? It was a hard call, but Yanni wasn't moving away from the ranger's dead body. Haruhiro felt uneasy leaving just her, and if he wanted them to come back, Jessie would probably send a messenger.

He and the others decided to stay at the remains of the north tower and wait to see what the enemy did. But he was sure they wouldn't move.

He didn't think for a moment that this was the end, but they would probably just intimidate them with drumming for the night, and wouldn't attack. For some reason, Haruhiro was almost certain of this.

As he predicted, the drumming stopped when the sky began to brighten, and

ultimately the guorellas only launched that one assault that night.

Not long after sunup, Jessie wandered over himself. Stroking his beard, he asked Haruhiro, “What do you think?”

“They’ll be back, I’d guess.”

It would have been nice if that weren’t the case, but he had to give that answer. He had no concrete proof, though, so he wasn’t sure he should say definitively. In a way, it was his intuition. However, in his mind, Haruhiro imagined a single guorella with three or four redbacks at its command, leading a large troop of over fifty.

A redback among redbacks. It boasted an unusually large body, and it was strong, but more than that, it was quick-witted and crafty. It was enjoying the hunt. It had followed Haruhiro and the party as they did their best to run, and it was overjoyed to find a new hunting ground in Jessie Land. It had decided to have its underlings take a rest, as if they were making themselves wait for it.

That scene might all be Haruhiro’s imagination, but that was a good thing. If they saw that the enemy was more frightening and had greater numbers than they’d expected, the guorellas would run off. Haruhiro was almost praying that was how it was.

“Denko,” Jessie said with a glance to the ranger’s remains. “Him included, we lost three rangers. That leaves twenty-one rangers, me, and you guys.”

“Won’t you let Setora go free?” Haruhiro said. “She’d be an asset in battle.”

“I just can’t see someone from the village fighting for Jessie Land.”

“That doesn’t just go for Setora. We’re the same.”

“Why didn’t you people run away? If you had killed or restrained Yanni, you could have done it.”

“Honestly, it never crossed my mind, but that would have meant leaving Setora behind, right? I’m not sure I could do that. Also, our Kuzaku seemed to be getting along with Yanni-san.”

“Uh, listen,” Kuzaku interrupted. “Let me just put this out there, but me and Yanni-san aren’t in that sort of a relationship.”

“...I didn’t think you were, man.”

“I mean, Yanni-san might not look it, but she can be cute, you know? I guess it’s rude to say she doesn’t look it.”

Yanni seemed to have picked up on the conversation. “Ahh?!” She kicked Kuzaku in the hip.

“Yowch! Hey, cut out the violence, Yanni-san! That’s not cute!”

Shihoru smiled wryly. “You two really seem close.”

“Basically, it means he has good communication abilities, unlike me...” Merry was mumbling to himself.

“Yume’s made friends with Tuokin, too.” Yume puffed up one of her cheeks. “Jessie, Tuokin’s not hurt, is he? He okay?”

“Tuoki is unharmed,” Jessie said with a shrug. “He’s the leader of the rangers. He may be small, but he’s clever.”

“Fwoo,” Yume said, looking impressed. “Yume knew Tuokin was good at his job. He can get stuff done when he tries.”

“Incidentally, the ranger I trust most next to Tuoki is Yanni,” Jessie went on.

“She’s strong, after all,” Kuzaku said.

“Nara!” Yanni immediately shouted and kicked him in the butt. Kuzaku was wearing armor, but it looked pretty painful.

“Oh, also, get the residents to...” Haruhiro started to say, then glanced to the south. It wasn’t that he heard something... he thought. However, he could only say something bothered him.

“That was careless of me.” Jessie turned and headed back. “Yanni! Afta ewa!”

Yanni looked to Denko’s body, showing a little hesitation. Still, she immediately replied, “Yai!” and took off running.

“Haruhiro-kun?!” Shihoru shouted.

Haruhiro called out, “Let’s go!” to his comrades, and followed after Jessie and Yanni.

Jessie seemed calm, but Yanni was panicked. She occasionally tried to pick up the pace, only to be told off by Jessie.

“Yanni-san...” Kuzaku seemed awfully worried about Yanni. “Hey, Haruhiro, you don’t think...?!”

Before Haruhiro could reply, *Probably,* Yume said “Gworellons?!” Something which might make no sense, but he felt like it made sense. “Yume stopped hearin’ their voices, so she was feelin’ all relaxed!”

“...That may have been the trap,” Shihoru said.

She was probably right.

“Setora!” Merry called out.

It wasn’t that Haruhiro hadn’t been thinking about Setora and her group. But it was a little surprising. It wasn’t just Merry; none of his comrades’ relationships with Setora could be called good.

“Haru! If Setora’s in the jail, she can’t run away! We have to hurry and save her!”

“Uh, yeah.”

“I’m sure Setora is waiting for you to come for her!”

“Y-You’re probably right...”

What was this? Haruhiro pressed his hand against his chest. This unpleasant feeling. Merry wasn’t saying anything wrong. Despite that—was he irritated? But why would Haruhiro get irritated? No, he felt like he wasn’t exactly irritated. Though, if you asked him what this feeling was, he couldn’t tell you.

Kuzaku raised his voice, for some reason. “Does Setora even matter?!”

“Obviously she matters!” Merry immediately countered.

“Okay, saying she doesn’t matter may be a bit much, but still! Is she that high a priority? I mean, she’s not even one of us, you know?!”

“She’s saved our lives over and over! Besides, Setora loves Haruhiro!” Merry shot back.

“That’s her problem, isn’t it?! Haruhiro’s just being forced to play her

boyfriend, or lover, or whatever it was, because he had no other choice! Not that it makes a difference which he is!”

“So, you’re saying to just abandon her?!”

“I’m not saying that! Just...”

“Just what?!”

“Oh, fine, whatever! I don’t want to fight with you! I mean, I don’t even get why you’d be so supportive of her!”

“Neither do I!”

If the argument had gone on any longer, Haruhiro might have stepped in to stop it. Or maybe not. He might not have been able to say anything, after all. He wondered which it would have been. He didn’t know.

Whatever the case, it was good that they’d settled it. It made his stomach hurt. Why would Kuzaku and Merry argue about Setora? He could understand Kuzaku’s position, but while he wasn’t Kuzaku, it was incomprehensible to Haruhiro why Merry would side with Setora.

Maybe Merry really thinks I should get together with Setora? I don’t need her deciding that for me, though...

Well, not that I intend to abandon Setora.

He could hear what he thought were screams. It was maybe another three hundred meters to the village. What was going on there? Was something happening? They couldn’t see it yet, but this was not good. It looked bad.

Haruhiro suddenly realized something was wrong. Or rather, it finally hit home that something had been wrong with him. When he had woken up, alone with Merry, he had felt kind of elated. When the guorellas had appeared, he could have been more tense.

He’d been calm. Too calm, maybe. He wasn’t the type to get engrossed in things to begin with, but still there may have been a small, ever so slight, distortion between him and reality.

Gumows weren’t all that different from humans. Even if he thought that, Haruhiro had probably only seen the remains of the ranger who fell at the north

tower as an object. Had he sympathized, even a little, with Yanni, who had lost one of her own? Barely. No, not at all. It didn't feel real, somehow. Like he was in a game.

Even though this isn't a game.

In the distance, Haruhiro saw a guorella break through a door and charge into a house. That large guorella knuckle-walking from house to house was probably a redback. Just how many guorellas had gotten into the village?

"Haruhiro!" Jessie threw something to him. "Get that Shuro woman out here!"

The key to the jail. It was the key to the jail.

"Right," Haruhiro said and took it. "Where is she?!"

"Shihoru should know! Yanni, wolla!"

"Yai!"

Jessie took Yanni with him, and it looked like he planned to act separately from Haruhiro and the others from here on.

"I'll lead!" Shihoru tried to move up.

"No!" Haruhiro stopped her. "Kuzaku, you take the front! Shihoru, stay behind me and tell us the way!"

"'Kay!" Kuzaku called.

"...Right!"

"Yume, watch the area around us! Merry, cover Shihoru and Yume!"

"Meow!"

"Sure, leave it to me!" Merry called.

"Haruhiro-kun, over there!" Shihoru pointed ahead and to the right.

Haruhiro hesitated. They'd be in the village soon.

There were the screams and shouts of the gumows, and the roars of the guorellas. There were a number of gumows collapsed in the road. All of them bloodied. Their arms and legs were torn off, and their faces had been bitten.

There were even gumows who'd had their heads crushed.

Most of them weren't moving. They probably weren't breathing. It wasn't just adults; there were children, too. Why weren't they in their houses? This was no good. Had they thought the crisis was over when the sun came up? Jessie shouldn't have told them it was okay to go out yet.

No—Just as he thought that, a number of gumows raced out of one of the houses. Then a guorella followed. The guorella had gone into that house, so they'd been left with no choice but to run. Was that it? But even if they ran...

Ohh. This was awful.

The smallest gumow, probably the equivalent of a five or six-year-old human child, was caught by the guorella. It was a young male. The young male pushed down the gumow child, then bit through the child's head. It crushed it with its teeth, not eating it, just spitting it out. Then, twisting off one arm, it munched on that.

The mother gumow let out a scream and tried to charge the guorella, but the father gumow caught her and pinned her arms behind her.

What was going to happen to that family? He didn't know.

Haruhiro and the others had to circle around to the right of the village and find the jail where Setora was held captive. They couldn't save that family, and they didn't have time to watch them meet their end. Haruhiro wasn't sure if he felt bad about that or not.

But if he did, he should have saved them without hesitation. Or rather, wouldn't he have tried? In the end, gumows weren't human. They were ugly, and besides, while he couldn't say this had nothing to do with him, it was a crisis. He couldn't sympathize with each and every one of them.

At the same time as he thought that, he also thought he was wrong. He felt pity for them. But what could he do? There was nothing.

"Over there!" Shihoru pointed.

The door to the building Shihoru pointed at was broken, and there were even two guorellas on the roof. They were small, clearly different from the males.

Those two were females.

Kuzaku was intimidated, his voice shrill. “Th-This isn’t funny!”

“Draw them to you!” Haruhiro tapped Kuzaku on the arm. “I’m going to look inside!”

“This is crazy, Haruhiro! I can’t imagine she’s all right!”

“Whatever, just do it! We don’t know until we check!” Haruhiro took a breath and relaxed. “Everyone, support Kuzaku! I’m the only one who needs to go inside for now! If I need you, I’ll yell!”

“No, even if you yell...!” Kuzaku banged on his shield with the hand he used to hold his large katana. “Damn it! Hey, come at me, you female guorellas! I’ll mess you up! Not that way, though! Just saying!”

It looked like the two females were interested in Kuzaku. Taking advantage of that opening— Sink. Stealth.

There were apparently no windows on this building. He’d have to go in through that door.

Yume loosed an arrow at the females, and Shihoru launched Dark.

Haruhiro slipped into the building through the entrance.

There were three rooms on the left and right side of a corridor separated by bars. The one tackling the bars of the front right-hand room was Enba. The nyaa was letting out high-pitched cries.

“Goooohhh! Gaaahhhh! Oooohhhh!” A guorella was letting out incredible hoots as it violently shook the bars on the rear right-hand room. Setora had to be in there.

The bars seemed to be a mix of iron and wood, but one of the guorellas looked like it was going to tear them down at any moment. Unfortunately, that guorella’s hair was red. It was a redback.

Don’t hesitate. Haruhiro drew his stiletto and held it backhanded. The redback hadn’t noticed him. He’d go in like this.

When he tried to walk forward, the redback looked in his direction, its hands

still on the bars.

Haruhiro gulped. His whole body stiffened. His heart raced, and he felt a sharp throbbing.

It was bizarre, but the redback narrowed its eyes, bared its fang-like teeth... and smiled. That was what it looked like.

Now that he'd been detected, he couldn't take it down. There was zero chance. Haruhiro knew that. If he didn't run, he'd be killed.

In that moment, he didn't think one bit about Setora. In the end, that was probably for the best.

Haruhiro immediately pulled an about-face. In was the same moment that the redback took off at a run, or maybe Haruhiro was a little faster.

The moment he was out the door, Haruhiro jumped sideways to the right. He felt something like an explosion right behind him. The redback had burst out, apparently.

"Gah?!" Kuzaku shouted.

Had Kuzaku been sent flying by the redback?

Haruhiro rolled, got up, and looked up to the roof. The female guorellas still hadn't come down. Yume wasn't that far away.

"Yume, here's the key! Get Setora!" Haruhiro yelled.

"Meowger!" Yume caught the key Haruhiro threw to her, and headed for the entrance to the building.

"Whoa..."

That was Kuzaku. What?

The redback.

The redback was swinging Kuzaku around. By his leg. The redback had grabbed Kuzaku's leg, and was whipping him around in circles.

"Kuza—!"

"Zaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!" The redback threw Kuzaku.

Hey.

Come on.

How can you do that?

Kuzaku was flying. He traced a gentle parabola, then collided with a house not ten, but twenty, meters away.

“Merry!” Haruhiro shouted, then tried to charge the redback.

Then what? he demanded to himself. *What’ll I do? Is this an enemy I can face straight-out?*

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Good. Now relax.

Loosen up my knees. My elbows. My wrists, and ankles. Loosen up all my joints. Lean forward just a little. This is good.

He licked his lips.

Merry was running over to Kuzaku now.

Shihoru was hiding behind a nearby building.

Yume was already inside the jail.

The two females were up on the roof, the same as ever.

The redback scrunched up its face covered in shell-like skin, and it smiled again.

That almost dragged Haruhiro into smiling a little, too. Of course, it wasn’t because it was funny. That wasn’t it.

That jerk. Is he making fun of me?

“What’s your problem, bud?” Haruhiro snarled.

“Ohh.” The redback narrowed its mouth and vocalized. It was totally teasing him.

Even so, he didn’t have to get angry. Haruhiro took another breath.

It was going to be too much to take down the females, let alone the redback, but he had to buy time somehow. There were very few things Haruhiro could do, but well, he'd do what he could. He'd give it one hundred percent of that.

The redback turned its back on him.

"...Huh?" Haruhiro said.

Immediately, he thought, *Don't be disappointed.* The moment he relaxed, it might take a shot at him.

His worries were in vain.

The redback turned its tail on him and ran off, and the two females went off somewhere else, too.

"I have no idea what just happened..."

Whatever it was, it had saved him. That was what was important now. He had to change gears.

Shihoru came out of hiding and rushed over. "Just now..." was all she said.

Setora, Enba, Kiichi, and Yume came out of the building. Setora hung her head, and seemed to be sulking. That was how it looked, but it wasn't.

"Haru," she said, "thanks... You, too, Yume."

"Oh..." Haruhiro said awkwardly. "Th-Think nothing of it."

"Nyeh!" Yume closed one eye, and gave her a thumbs-up.

They all hurried over to where Kuzaku and Merry were. Kuzaku was injured with just a few broken bones, bruises, and a gash, so Merry didn't even have to use Sacrament. She was able to heal him with just Cure.

"Man, there are times when I marvel at how sturdy I am," Kuzaku said.

"That's not a bad thing." Merry glared at him slightly. "But don't get overconfident."

"'Kay. Sorry for all the trouble. I apologize."

"You don't have to do that. It's my job."

"And?" Setora seemed to be back to her usual self. "Are we getting out of

here?”

Haruhiro traded glances with Shihoru.

Taking advantage of the chaos, and escaping from Jessie Land. It wouldn’t be impossible. That was the feeling he got. It might even be what they ought to do. If they only considered what was beneficial for them, or their own safety, that was probably the best thing to do.

Shihoru lowered her eyes first. She couldn’t possibly decide. That must have been what Shihoru was thinking. She probably felt bad for not being able to voice an opinion.

It was fine. Shihoru was trying to lessen Haruhiro’s burden. That was enough. It really was helping.

Why did they need a leader? To make a decision in any situation. That was what a leader did, and that was Haruhiro’s role.

He might get it wrong. He might regret his choices. But even so, if they hit a fork in the road, left or right, he had to pick.

“We need to chase off the guorellas.” Haruhiro lightly adjusted his grip on his stiletto, taking a shallow breath. He looked out of the corner of his eye to the right. “Either way, if we don’t get rid of them, we can run, but we can’t get away.”

“Well, yeah.” Kuzaku let out a little laugh inside his helmet, then he added, “Yeah!” It was clearly a shout to psyche himself up.

“Let’s keep alert as we go.” Merry readied her head staff, covering Shihoru who was behind her, and made the sign of the hexagram. “O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you. Protection.”

Shihoru glanced to the hexagram that appeared on her wrist, then nodded. “One by one... and be sure about it!”

“For now...” Yume nocked an arrow, then loosed it. “Start over there!”

The arrow Yume let loose hit a young male guorella about fifty meters away that was feasting on a gumow, and bounced off.

“Enba, help them.” Setora held Kiichi in her arms, and gave orders to the

golem. “There’s no choice. We’re all in the same boat here.”

The young male charged straight towards them in a mad rage.

One by one, and be sure about it. It was a simple thing, but Shihoru was right. Guorellas certainly made for frightening enemies, but not alone. The method where Kuzaku, Yume, and Enba drew its attention, then Haruhiro closed in with Stealth to deliver the killing blow, would even work on a redback. That was why they avoided facing two or more whenever they could avoid it.

If they were forced to fight multiple guorellas, they would use Shihoru’s Dark to stop one from moving, then Haruhiro would quickly snuff it. In that time, Kuzaku and the others would hold out, and from there, they’d continue to reduce the enemy’s number one by one. If there were fifty of them, or a hundred, it was all the same.

The guorellas had made a fatal mistake. The location. They’d attacked the village. They might have thought it was an ideal hunting ground. But for the party, they could use the buildings to split them up. The guorellas were drunk on killing, and intent on feeding, which made it all the easier.

Even now, one after another, the gumows were being killed. Before Haruhiro and the party’s eyes, a number of gumows lost their lives. Who knew how many victims there were at this point.

We’ll make them pay. They’re dead. We’re going to kill them.

Haruhiro did his best not to think like that. He couldn’t let his heart be stirred up like that. For now, they would just reduce the guorella numbers one at a time. That was the one thing to focus on.

He couldn’t eliminate mistakes. However, he could reduce the number he made. No, but...

This is nearly perfect, isn’t it?

He noticed that, aside from his own injury from the guorellas’ hairy horns, no one was needing Merry’s help. Even for Kuzaku, the party tank, the addition of Enba gave him some room to work with, and he wasn’t taking the kind of wounds he’d need to get healed with light magic.

Haruhiro killed fourteen males, and three females. It seemed Jessie was leading a group of capable rangers to take down guorellas one by one, too, and they passed each other a number of times.

There were no villagers walking around outside now. The surviving residents all had to be indoors.

The guorellas were now starting to run away when they saw Haruhiro and his group.

They hadn't taken down a single redback. In fact, they weren't even seeing them. That stood out to him as weird.

"...Found it," Haruhiro said. "There's one."

It was standing practically upright in the middle of an intersection, looking their way.

When its eyes met Haruhiro's, that guorella opened its mouth wide and stuck out its tongue, vocalizing something like, "Wuehh."

He knew immediately. It was that redback.

"I'll kill it! Kuzaku, go!"

"'Kay!"

When Kuzaku ran forward with his armor clanking, the redback leisurely entered the building to their left. It was brazenly acting like it owned the place.

Kuzaku glanced back, but he kept going after it.

Why didn't I stop him? Haruhiro thought. *That's right. I have to stop him. Something's wrong. We have to be careful of that one.*

"Kuzaku, sto—"

It was too late. Kuzaku rolled out as if he'd been blasted out the door. Without missing a beat, a guorella sprang on him.

It was a guorella. But what was with that guorella? It was big, but its hairy horns... They were long, but they had a lot of volume, too. It was like a lion's mane. They were red.

No, more than red. Deep red.

It was a redback.

No. Compared to the redbacks they'd seen so far, it was half again as big, and had twice as many hairy horns. It was clear this was no ordinary redback.

Was it that? The redback among redbacks? Was that it?

"Dark!" Shihoru called Dark and immediately set him loose. "Go!"

The big redback jumped up, squashed Kuzaku, and tried to devour him.

Dark flew in with an otherworldly *shuvwoooong* sound, striking the big redback right in the flank.

"Guhh..." The big redback groaned for a moment, its entire body shaking, and it stopped. For just a moment.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!" The big redback swung both its arms up, and brought them down as hard as it could.

Kuzaku wasn't just taking a pounding. He was trying to defend himself with his shield. But could he fully defend himself?

Bang, bang, bang, bang. Had the big redback mistaken Kuzaku's shield for some sort of percussion instrument? Haruhiro had to assume it had. It was hitting the shield with both hands. Pounding it like crazy.

If Kuzaku was taking that many blows, even through his shield, it had to be tough. It would be hard even if they weren't sequential. Haruhiro couldn't have taken even one of them.

"Kuza... Kuzaku!" Haruhiro shouted, and tried to leap on the big redback.

Thwock... He was knocked back with one arm. The shock hit him so hard that he thought his body had been torn apart. What incredible power.

Haruhiro was spread-eagled.

"...Ohhhh," he moaned. It hurt, or rather he felt like every nerve in his body had come apart, and it was impossible to move.

I don't have time to be saying that, though. Get up. Get on my feet. Hurry and get up, then calm down. It's no good. I have to cool my head, and do this right. It'd be fair to say that's my only weapon here.

“Haru-kun!” Yume helped him to his feet.

Merry was rushing over to him.

Kuzaku. What about Kuzaku?

“Ugaaaahhh, goooooohhh!” and “Oh-booooohhhh, duaaaaaahhhh!” the Big Redback roared.

“Hungh! Gahh! Hyagh!” Kuzaku screamed.

Kuzaku was in trouble. It had him at its mercy.

What is with that thing? It’s way too crazy. Screw you! I never heard about this! It’s no good. I have to calm down. Like I could. Move. My body won’t move. Why? Am I scared? Yeah, I’m scared. Of course I’m scared. I recognize that. I accept it, okay. But even if I’m scared—I’m still alive. There are things I can do. What? What am I saying I can do?

“O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you. Cure!” Merry healed Kuzaku’s wounds for him. It wasn’t clear exactly what injuries he had, though.

Think.

Enba came and didn’t grapple with the big redback, or even perform a flying kick on it, but ran up to the top of the big redback’s massive body. He could do things like that?

Enba successfully ascended the big redback. He clung to its body. Enba was one-armed, but he had two legs. However, if he was going to hold on tightly like that, naturally the hairy horns would stab into him.

Haruhiro had been able to handle a little of that himself, but he couldn’t have gone that far. It didn’t seem like golems felt pain, though, so maybe Enba was fine.

It seemed like this was troublesome for the big redback, too. It interrupted its assault on Kuzaku and raised both its arms. It tried to shake Enba off.

Haruhiro looked to Setora. She was holding Kiichi tight with an incredible look on her face.

His eyes met Shihoru’s. Shihoru nodded.

“Dark!”

“Yume, save Kuzaku!” Haruhiro ordered. “Merry, get ready to heal!”

“Meow!”

“Okay!”

They could do this, and they were going to. They’d probably only have one chance. They couldn’t miss their timing.

The big redback finally caught Enba.

“Enba!” Setora shouted.

Its grip was shockingly powerful. It happened in an instant. Meat, bone, and armor flew everywhere. It looked like Enba had been torn to shreds.

Having witnessed that sight, it might have been cruel, but Haruhiro was able to confirm for himself, *Good. I’m calm.*

“Go!” Shihoru launched Dark.

This wasn’t the ordinary Dark. It was a small, small Dark that had been polished and polished, to the greatest extent he could be. The smallest Dark at full power.

If this doesn’t work, nothing will, Haruhiro told himself. *It’s our full power right now. Go, go, go, go!*

The big redback hadn’t noticed the minimum size, full power Dark. He hit the guorella.

Shwoop! He was absorbed into the big redback’s neck.

“Come on!” Haruhiro gave the order.

Run. Run. Run!

“Hah...” The big redback breathed in. “Koh!” It made a strange vocalization. “Ah!” It arched back, and writhed in pain. “Na-goaaahh!” It stumbled, moving away from Kuzaku.

Haruhiro jumped in to get to Kuzaku’s side. Kuzaku was slumped under his shield.

Is he alive? Please, be alive.

Haruhiro thrust his hands beneath both of Kuzaku's armpits and pulled on him. Yume was helping, too.

"Merry!" He needn't have called. Merry had come, too.

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

Light, flow out, shine on Kuzaku, heal his wounds, I'm counting on you—
Haruhiro snapped back to his senses. He turned around.

Shihoru. She was alone. Shihoru was. They'd left Shihoru alone.

Having used the minimum size, full power Dark, she was pretty spent. She might not even be able to move properly. But they'd still left her alone. Even though there was another one. Had he forgotten? What a blunder. A total blunder.

The smiling redback. When had it come out of the building? Haruhiro wanted to shout, *Behind you!* and warn her. But it didn't look like he'd make it. After all, it was already right next to Shihoru, closing in from behind her. That was why, honestly, he gave up, thinking it was hopeless.

"Marc em Parc!" a voice shouted.

That was why... why, this one time... he couldn't have been more grateful. He was so grateful, he could have sworn loyalty to the man for life.

Jessie. He'd come at just the right time.

Jessie slammed his Magic Missile into the side of the smiling redback's face, and made it back off.

"Ho?!" The smiling redback stumbled, and tried to look in Jessie's direction.

"Marc em Parc!" Another ball of light swerved around to impact the back of the smiling redback's head this time.

Yume jumped in, and pulled Shihoru by the hand. Shihoru stumbled along, somehow managing to follow Yume.

Jessie fired off a series of Magic Missiles that targeted the smiling redback. Finally, the smiling redback fled into an alleyway.

“Shihoru’s my favorite, you know,” Jessie called. “I wouldn’t want her getting killed!”

Jessie gave the rangers following him, which included Tuoki, Yanni, and more, an order in an unusually sharp tone for him. It looked like he planned to send them after the laughing redback. But the party needed to do something about this one, too.

“Phew... Gah...!” Kuzaku jumped up.

Do, do, do, do, do, do, do, do, do, do, do! The big redback was striking its chest with both hands. Its drumming made the bottoms of their stomachs shake.

But—it was huge! When it stood up, it was damn huge! It made Kuzaku with his shield and large katana look like a child.

“Marc em Parc!” Jessie tried to slam a Magic Missile into it, but the big redback swung its arm and erased it.

Shihoru was retreating, with Yume pulling her along. She wasn’t going to be rejoining the battle line in a hurry. They were going to kill that thing with just Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Merry, and Jessie? No, there were others, too.

“Eeeeeeeeahhhhhhh!” Setora let out a battle cry and charged the big redback. She wasn’t holding Kiichi. She was holding a really, really long pole, maybe a piece of construction material, in both hands. Had the big redback not been paying attention to Setora at all?

Setora easily got in close, and slammed the tip of that pole into its throat. “Deeeeeeyahhh!”

Naturally, it was just an ordinary pole that she had picked up from some collapsed house nearby. The big redback only shook a little, the pole broke, and Setora flipped over. Why had Setora done something like that?

“How dare you do that to Enba!” she screamed.

Oh, so that was it.

Haruhiro thought she was being stupid. But he couldn’t blame Setora. Besides, it gave him a hint.

“Attack!” Haruhiro ordered Kuzaku. “You can’t fully defend, so attack with

everything you have, Kuzaku! You have strength the rest of us don't!"

"Aye aye!" Kuzaku tossed his shield, and drew a hexagram with his large katana. "O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you! Saber!" In a flash, he took his large katana which was wreathed in light in both his hands, and Kuzaku attacked the big redback.

No, I know I said to attack, but that's way too straightforward, thought Haruhiro. *Couldn't you have come up with a little more of a trick?*

But there might have been no need for petty tricks, after all. Kuzaku charged the big redback, bent his whole body back as far as he could, and then swung the large katana. The big redback neither retreated nor tried to dodge.

Had it been caught by surprise? Or was it confident its shell-like skin would protect it? It had made a big mistake.

"Wow!" Jessie shouted.

Seriously? Whoa. Kuzaku, man, just how much sheer idiot strength do you have? Haruhiro had clearly been underestimating him. He'd never thought the guy was this strong.

"Zweeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaeeeeeeeeeh!"

Kuzaku's large katana sliced through the big redback's shell-like skin, biting into its left shoulder. By biting in, that meant it sunk in deeply, and stayed there. The large katana went from the big redback's left shoulder to the middle of its torso, maybe a little lower, diagonally, all in one go.

"Ohh-ah... Uhhh... Goh..."

It seemed the big redback didn't understand what had happened to its body. It may have been the same for Kuzaku, who was soaked all over by the big redback's blood. The blood didn't so much flow as erupt out of its body.

"Huh? Whuh? B-Blood?!" Kuzaku yelped.

Haruhiro sighed.

The big redback. The redback among redbacks. This terrifying, exceptional guorella troop's leader. Honestly... Yeah. I didn't think it was possible. I thought maybe we couldn't beat it. Kuzaku. It was Kuzaku, huh. Kuzaku did it. I'd been

thinking I wanted him to polish his attack, but to think he had this much untapped potential. This is a happy miscalculation. No, the big redback hasn't expired yet. Kuzaku's large katana probably reached its heart. Even so, it hasn't gone down yet. Though it looks like it's about to keel over, it's standing. I think that's just a matter of time, though. That wound could have killed it instantly. Soon, the guorella troop will lose the big guorella. Their leader. When that happens...

Something fell from the sky. Haruhiro reflexively jumped back and avoided it.

The thing that hit the ground was wearing a green coat. It was a gumow ranger. The gumow's arms, legs, and neck bent in strange directions. He found it hard to tell the gumows faces apart, but he recognized the purple skin.

Haruhiro turned around and looked up, casting his gaze in the direction the ranger had flown in from. Up on the roof of a building not far away, it was there. The moment it narrowed its eyes and grinned, he realized he had misunderstood. The big redback wasn't the troop's leader.

"...It's you, huh."

"Fooo, fooo, fooo," it began whistling.

It was making fun of them again— No.

No.

Haruhiro shouted, "Enemies!" That was all he could manage.

From on top of that roof, from here, from there, from the alley across from them, from ahead, from behind, the guorellas appeared all at once.

It was a signal. That voice. *Come out,* was what it probably meant.

From somewhere, they heard a voice shout, "Tiarg! Jessie!" It was probably Yanni. Yanni was still alive. She was telling Jessie something. It had to be about this.

Guorellas were smart. But they were still just beasts, so they could whittle their numbers down one at a time. That was what Haruhiro had thought.

The fact was, that was how it had been, and when they'd taken down the big redback, he had been seventy to eighty percent sure they'd won.

And yet, at some point, they'd been surrounded.

The guorellas pressed in from all directions.

"Everyone!" Haruhiro ordered. "Stick together, don't split up! Yume, Shihoru! Over here!"

"Oh, crap, Haruhiro! My shield...!" Kuzaku called.

"Forget it! Swing your sword!"

"Shihoruuu, you okay?" Yume cried. "Come with Yume!"

"Yeah, I'm fine!"

"Setora, get up!" Merry called. "Come on, you have Kiichi, don't you?! And Haru, too!"

"Silence, priest! I don't need you telling me what to do!"

"Haruhiro! Use the jail!" Jessie shouted. "If you're in there...!"

"What about you, Jessie-san?!" he yelled back.

"I'll look for Yanni and the others! Go!"

Kuzaku was swinging his large katana around like crazy. Haruhiro somehow managed to join up with Shihoru, Yume, Merry, and Setora, then headed for the jail. But could they make it?

"Kuzaku, this way!" he called.

"Yeah, I know!"

Sure, he knew, but if Kuzaku stopped swinging his large katana for even a moment, he'd be taken down in no time.

On this end, Yume and Merry were doing their part, of course, but even Shihoru was using her staff, and Setora was using that pole she picked up somewhere to threaten the guorellas, and they were just barely hanging on.

That's why it's up to me, Haruhiro told himself. *I have to do it. I will. Me. In this situation, surrounded by enemies? Yes. Do it. Sink. Stealth.*

When he was pushed into a corner, he could actually do it.

Silent... was not what it was, but none of the noise bothered him. Because

there was no need to hear them, no doubt.

Haruhiro moved away from his comrades alone, walking through the guorellas.

He could see the line. Hazily shining. He didn't move so much as followed it. It was already decided that Haruhiro would move along that line. Direction, angle, speed, he didn't have to think about any of it.

His angle of vision suddenly rose up. Like he was looking down on an angle. Himself, his comrades, the guorellas, Jessie, Yanni and the rest, he knew all of their positions, maybe not like the back of his hand, but close enough to it.

First up, this one. The young male Merry just whacked with her head staff. I'll wrap my left arm around its neck, and stab my stiletto through its right eye.

Next, this one. The one Kuzaku scared into retreating with his large katana. A young male, of course. I'll kill it, too.

Then this one that's trying to attack Shihoru. Its hairy horns are a bit red. It dies, too.

With that, a narrow path opened.

Haruhiro shouted, "Run to the jail!" to his comrades, and then immediately sunk in again.

Stealth. I have to remove the obstacles, those who get in my comrades' way. It's possible. For me. Only I can do it.

Don't think I have special powers. I don't. It's only because it's now. In this moment, I am performing the role I was given. That's all. If I get full of myself, I'll get tripped up. I've had countless failures like that. That's why I know.

They were almost to the jail where Setora had been held.

Kuzaku, the rear guard, shouted, "Go in first! I'll go in last!" still swinging around his large katana. His stamina and guts were commendable.

Shihoru, Setora, Merry, and then Yume all raced into the jail. Kuzaku was getting bogged down at the entrance.

I could help, thought Haruhiro. The male, the one that was stubbornly

pressing in then pulling back, attacking Kuzaku. *That's a redback. If I down him, Kuzaku will have it easier. No problem. I can deal with it. See.*

Haruhiro was already behind it. He grappled with it, wrapped his left arm around its neck, and repeatedly stabbed his stiletto into its right eye. The usual.

It's fine. Go. He didn't even have to say it before Kuzaku rushed into the jail.

Haruhiro followed.

He was struck by dizziness. He was running out of strength. He couldn't keep standing. Walking was beyond him...

But he still continued down the corridor, and knelt in front of Merry. He got down on all-fours. What was Kuzaku doing?

"Oorah! Rahh!" It looked like he was keeping the guorellas that were trying to get in to the jail in check with his large katana. Not good. Merry and the others were saying something.

Oh, right. Blood, huh. Each time he'd killed a guorella, he'd been injured by their hairy horns, and lost blood.

"Merry, magic... heal... sorry," he said fragmentarily. He felt like he was going to pass out. He couldn't let that happen.

Merry used light magic for him. Cure, huh.

He felt a little better. Or so he thought. At the very least, he could stand. It was a little hard to breathe, though.

"Damn!" Kuzaku shouted. "It's hard to use my katana! It's so cramped, I can only thrust in here!"

"What now?" someone shouted.

...Shihoru, huh. Kuzaku. Is it bad? Who was it who told us to go to the jail? Jessie, huh. That guy. But in a more open place, we could do more. Is now the time to think about that? It isn't, right? We need to act.

"...That one," he murmured.

Right. We have to kill it. It's the leader. We take it down. If we don't, this'll never end.

“I’ll do it...” he mumbled. “One attack, with all my strength. I’m... going outside. I’ll find it... and I’ll do it. I’ll end this... Me.”

“Sure, but...!” Yume argued back.

“I’ll do it!” he shouted and shut her up. “There’s no choice. The way this is going, we’ll be wiped out. Everyone will die. I’ll do it. Listen, we all counterattack as one. In that time, I’ll go outside. One, two...!”

“Zuoooooahhh!” Kuzaku tackled several guorellas and knocked them back. He kicked down the guorella in front of him, and swung his large katana. Kuzaku was probably wringing out the last of his strength. His large katana severed a guorella’s head.

Seeing the guorellas get scared, Yume cried, “Mrrrowr!” and went after Kuzaku.

Shihoru fired off Dark. Setora threw something. Haruhiro tried to sink himself.

Stealth...

He couldn’t get into it properly. What? Weird.

Slipping through the gap between Yume and Kuzaku, a male guorella came into the jail. He had to stop it. To fight. The guorella was coming his way. Why did he have no strength in the hand gripping his stiletto? The enemy was right there.

“No!” Merry moved up, slamming it in the head with her head staff. He thought he saw her immediately pull her staff back, trying to make a second strike.

She didn’t make it.

The guorella caught her head staff with both hands, and pulled her towards itself.

Shihoru cried, “Merry!” and Setora shouted, “Let go!”

That’s right, Merry. You have to let go.

Together with her head staff, Merry fell towards that guorella.

That was when, finally, Haruhiro managed to move again.

“Ohh...” He groaned, and there was a shattering, crunching sound.

Merry had done as Setora said, and let her head staff go. But the guorella had no interest in her head staff, and grabbed something else, or hugged it, rather. Merry.

“Eek!” Shihoru let out a frail scream.

In that same posture, the guorella chomped down on the area between the tip of Merry’s shoulder and the nape of her neck.

Immediately after that, Haruhiro grappled the guorella. He was practically clinging to it as he jabbed his stiletto into it right eye.

Merry’s eyes went wide, and he could see it.

I have to hurry. Hurry. Hurry. Have to hurry and kill it. Or it’ll be too late. Too late? For what...?

When the guorella died, Merry fell to the floor with it. It was hard moving the guorella off her. The strength—He didn’t have the strength. Not in his arms, his legs, anywhere.

While doing something...

“How is she?!” Setora asked.

Haruhiro didn’t answer.

Merry’s eyes were half-closed, and she was quivering. She coughed, and blood came out.

“Magic!” Haruhiro called out to her. “Merry, use magic. You have to heal. Hurry. Merry.”

Merry tried to raise her right hand. It seemed like she couldn’t move it. Was it an injury? Her bones? Were they broken? Where? How?

Haruhiro laid down his stiletto, lifting up her right hand with both of his own. Merry groaned, and shook her head.

Did it hurt? Badly? What could he do?

Magic. The sign of the hexagram. For that, she needed her hand. The incantation. Was it no good if all she did was the chant? If she couldn’t move

her hand, could she not use light magic? What the hell? How did that work?

“Merry? Merry?!” he cried. “Wha... Wh-What should I...?”

Something. Merry was trying to say something. Haruhiro brought his ear to Merry’s lips.

“Merry? What? Merry, what are you saying?!”

“Ha.”

“Yeah. What?”

“...Haru.”

“Huh?”

“I...”

“Yeah.”

“Haru... you’re the one... I...”

“The one you what? What is it, Merry...?”

Merry inhaled sharply.

Was Merry trying to breathe? Or to say something? Haruhiro moved his face away a little, and looked at her face.

Why was it? Why did she have a smile on her face? Wasn’t she suffering? Didn’t it hurt? Wasn’t she scared?

Why are you smiling?

Merry.



Next Volume Preview



What did I mean, I went up a stage?

What did I mean, I was going to develop Kuzaku?

What did I mean, my intuition was sharp?

What did I mean, I could see the redback among redbacks in my mind?

I didn’t understand anything.

Didn’t manage to do anything.

I couldn’t do anything.

That’s how this happened.

It’s all over. Or it should have been.

That man says, “There is a way. Just one.”



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 10

by Ao Jyumonji

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