

Presented by
AO JYUMONJI
Illustration by
EIRI SHIRAI



A dynamic illustration of three characters in a fantasy setting. In the foreground, a blonde girl with a white headband and blue eyes looks back over her shoulder with a determined expression. Behind her, a dark-haired boy with a blue scarf and jacket looks off to the side. To the right, a pink-haired girl with a surprised or shouting expression has her mouth wide open. They are all wearing detailed armor. The background is a bright, cloudy sky.

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

level. 6
Towards a Glory Not Worth Taking

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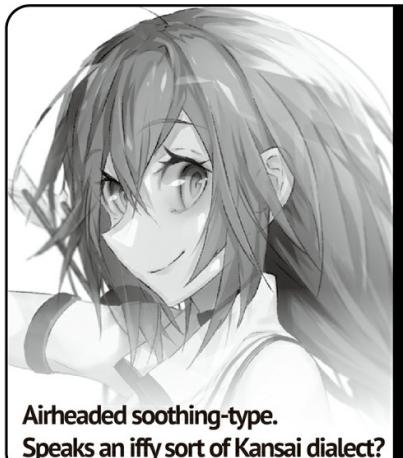


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Kuzaku had grabbed Merry's arm—no, her sleeve.
He pulled on it and they walked off. Merry didn't resist.
Still looking down, she followed him.

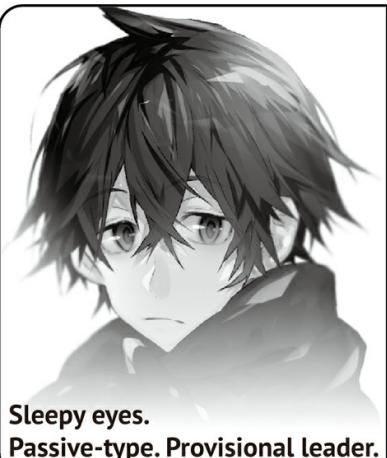
Characters



**Y
U
M
E**

Airheaded soothing-type.
Speaks an iffy sort of Kansai dialect?

Class –
Hunter



**H
A
R
U
H
I
R
O**

Sleepy eyes.
Passive-type. Provisional leader.

Class –
Thief



**S
H
I
H
O
R
U**

Shy and withdrawn.
Hard worker with little presence.

Class –
Mage



**R
A
N
T
A**

Selfish, flaky joker.
#1 most unpopular.

Class –
Dread
Knight



**M
E
R
R
Y**

Cool beauty. Has more experience
as a volunteer soldier and is a little
more of an adult.

Class –
Priest



**K
U
Z
A
K
U**

The new guy. Hard to tell
if he's motivated or not.

Class –
Paladin

Other Characters

Team Renji

Renji - Class: Warrior
Head of Team Renji. Wild beast-type. Dangerous.

Ron - Class: Paladin
The Team's No. 2.

Sassa - Class: Thief
Flashy woman. Probably an M.

Adachi - Class: Mage
Wears glasses.

Chibi - Class: Priest
Mascot.

Team Tokimune (Takkis)

Tokimune - Class: Paladin
Handsome. Friendly optimist.

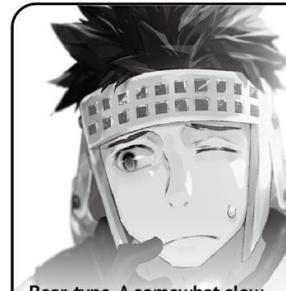
Inui - Class: Hunter
Looks middle aged. Has middle school syndrome, maybe?

Tada - Class: Priest
Fighting priest. Real showoff. Kind of a serious headcase.

Mimori - Class: Mage
Ex-warrior mage. Nickname is "Giantess."

Anna-san - Class: Priest
Blonde-haired, blue-eyed, self-proclaimed pretty girl.

Kikkawa - Class: Warrior
Good at getting by in the world. Enlisted at the same time as Haruhiro and the others.



MOGUZZO

Class –
Warrior



MANATO

Class –
Priest



SOMA

Started the Day Breakers Clan.
Seems to have some objective.

Class –
Samurai



CHOCO

Class –
Thief

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1. One Quarter of One Day



“Huff... Hahh... Huff... Hahh...”

Haruhiro ran. He dashed, panting.

He glanced behind him. —*They're there.*

There.

There.

There.

Chasing after him.

They were wearing large white sheets with a single eyehole cut out of them. Well, it was something like a long poncho. They had a torso, a head, and two arms and legs. It would have been fair to say that their physique was remarkably similar to a human's. Just, there was only one eye peeking out from their eyehole.

It was never just one of those white-sheeted things. There were always several of them.

He didn't need to bother counting. He already knew the number. Six of them. Five carrying spears, and then another carrying a sword and shield. The spears were unremarkable aside from their white poles, but each sword had a slightly purplish luster to it, and each shield looked almost like a mirror. Their swords had, for some reason, been given the name Lightning Sword Dolphin, and the shields were called Mirror Shields based on their appearance.

Someone had started calling them—well, no, not someone, it was those guys who'd started calling them it—cultists.

The spear bearers were standard cultists, all of which they had nicknamed Pansuke. The sword bearer was an elite cultist, for which they used the nickname Tori-san. Those names had stuck.

“Damn, I’m tired...” Haruhiro muttered.

Even as he grumbled, Haruhiro kept running without letting up. If he didn’t keep running at full-tilt, the Pansukes and Tori-san would catch him. If that happened, Haruhiro was a mere thief. He’d be ganged up on, and almost certainly killed in an instant. So, he had to run.

Run away, he thought. For now, just run. Run like mad. It’s the only option.

Beneath a sky with deep blue, a slightly reddish blue, purple, orange, yellow, red, and all the colors in between scattered across it, he raced as hard as he could through the white town.

—A town.

Yes. This was a town, or at the very least something of that variety. On either side of the roads paved with white stone, there were box-like buildings made, unsurprisingly, of white stone. No miraculous convergence of coincidences would ever have created something like this naturally. It was clear that someone, some intelligent beings, had created them.

“Augh! Enough!” Haruhiro shouted.

Sweat got into his right eye and stung. He got an urge to look back again, but he resisted it. Without doing anything unnecessary, he ran. With one eye closed, he ran.

“Hah... Hahh... Hah... Hah, hah...!”

It’s that corner. Turn there.

He practically dove left around the corner, then kept running down the slightly narrow path.

The footsteps of the cultists were closing in on him. His stomach hurt, as if it was being squeezed tight.

Haruhiro yelled as loudly as possible. Or rather, he couldn’t stop himself from shouting, and his voice came out on its own. His upper body was so upright that he felt like it might bend over backwards.

He pumped his arms. Pumped them as hard as he could.

Should I raise my thighs higher? Will that just tire me out more? Oh, I don’t know anymore. It hurts. I should never have gone along with it, this stupid plan.

“Crown Break!” Tada shouted.

They’re here. Finally. They came.

Without stopping, Haruhiro turned back to look. From a building off to

his right, a man wearing glasses and a priest's uniform had leapt down, attacking the cultists. Tori-san, specifically. The man in priest's clothes had a warhammer that looked stupidly heavy, and he swung it down with a satisfying thud on the cultist Tori-san's head.

Tori-san was a pretty high-level swordsman, a cut above the Pansukes, but he hadn't seen this coming at all. He took the full force of the blow.

Of course, he wasn't fine after taking a blow to the head from that warhammer. The cultists ponchos were highly resistant to bladed attacks, and could absorb impacts to a certain degree, but that wasn't going to be good enough here. Tori-san collapsed with his head caved in.

With their leader suddenly down, the Pansukes panicked.

"And here!" rang out a voice that sounded like exactly what you'd expect from a handsome guy.

The ambush wasn't done yet.

A man who wore armor with a hexagram engraved on it jumped up into the air to follow the man in the priest uniform, Tada.

"Huh?" Haruhiro stopped despite himself. *Why? Why did he have to jump up? Couldn't he just drop down?*

But Haruhiro knew the answer to that question. This was not a man you could apply reason to. He was well aware of that, but he was still appalled.

"This is where I stylishly finish this!"

Tokimune, the paladin who led the Tokkis, flashed his white teeth as he reached the apex of his jump, then plunged downwards.

They had managed to get the Pansukes flustered, but he'd wasted it. The Pansukes thrust out their spears towards Tokimune.

Aw, crap. That's not good. He's gonna get skewered, thought Haruhiro. Only he didn't.

"Dance like a panther!" Tokimune rotated his entire body along with his sword and shield, knocking the Pansukes' spears aside. "And sting like a whale!"

Stepping on Panske A's head, he kicked off and landed a roundhouse on Panske B, then landed on the ground and closed one eye.

"I settled that, huh," Tokimune said, grinning.

"Well, you haven't gotten run through yet, at least," Haruhiro shot back, making a funny joke.

Tada, the man in the priest outfit, slammed his warhammer into Panske

C's flank and sent him flying. "You didn't nail anything!"

"Tch, tch, tch." Tokimune calmly clicked his tongue, shaking his head. "The battle's already settled, you know?"

"Heh!" A middle-aged guy wearing a ponytail, an eyepatch, and a tight-fitting leather jumpsuit, a cringe-worthy combination, leapt out from an alleyway to bury his single-edged sword in Pansuke D's eye.

With hardly any delay, out followed a woman who, judging by her outfit, looked like a mage, but was gigantic in more ways than one and dual-wielded a staff and sword. Her nickname was Ms. Giantess. Mimori, also known as Mimorin, first struck Pansuke E in the side of the face with her staff, then without missing a beat stabbed her sword through his eye.

"Good luck, yeah! *Kill them all!*" A petite girl with blonde hair and blue eyes stuck her head out from the alley and cheered them on in a mix of Japanese and English.

Anna-san might peek out, but she wouldn't get involved. She was essentially a cheerleader.

"Yahoo! Let me get in on this, too!" Kikkawa cried. The uncommonly easygoing warrior jumped off the roof, probably imitating Tokimune. It was fine up to the point where he danced in midair and struck a pose.

Well, no, it wasn't fine. It was completely pointless.

The easygoing warrior Kikkawa tried to pounce on Pansuke A, the one whose face Tokimune had landed on and thrown off-balance. Or that was what he'd seemed to be going for, but while he was striking a pose, Tada grunted and swung his warhammer. It knocked Pansuke A flying until he slammed into the wall of the building, and Kikkawa's bastard sword slashed through nothing but air.

"Ahaha, Tadacchi! You stole my kill!" Kikkawa cried.

"Wahahahahahhh!" Tokimune shouted.

Then a piece of trash jumped onto Pansuke B, which Tokimune had knocked down with his roundhouse kick but was still trying to get up.

"Mine, mine, mine!" That bloodthirsty piece-of-trash-to-end-all-pieces-of-trash kicked Pansuke B to the ground, then held him down and went in for the killing blow. "For Skullhell!"

"Out of the way." Tada kicked the piece of trash out of his way, then mercilessly brought his warhammer down on Pansuke B's head, splattering it all over the inside of his poncho.

“Noooooooooooooo!” The piece of trash known as Ranta sat down and wailed.

Well, at least he's not crying.

“What the hell?!” Ranta screamed. “I was gonna off that one! You stupid moron!”

“Huh?” Tada pressed his left index finger against his bloodstained warhammer. “A stupid moron? You calling me that?”

“...No, not you,” Ranta said. “I’m sorry. Seriously, seriously, sorry. I didn’t mean you, really. No... F-Forgive me!” The piece of trash quickly got down and performed a kowtow. “It was just the way it came out, you see! Spur of the moment, and all that! I didn’t really mean it!”

“Well, good. This time, I’ll let it slide.” Tada shouldered his warhammer. “Next time, I kill you.”

“Y-Yes, siiiir! Th-Th-Th-Thank you kindly!” Ranta stuttered.

Is he stupid? Haruhiro wondered, but he also wouldn’t put it past Tada to bludgeon Ranta with that warhammer without hesitation. Apologizing was probably the right call. Seriously, the Tokkis were off the charts in all sorts of ways.

“Wow...” Yume, who had been hiding nearby, came out with her eyes wide. “It’s already over. Sure was quick, huh.”

“It sure was.” Shihoru came out from behind Yume, glancing around.

“No chance for us to show off...” The lanky Kuzaku came out from the alley.

“It was too fast,” Merry said with a sigh. She was standing behind Kuzaku diagonally.

“Well, when we go to work, it’s just this easy, am I right?” Tokimune flashed his all-too-white teeth and gave them a thumbs up. “The real fight’s just getting started though, right, Haruhiro?”

“Right.” Haruhiro kicked Ranta in the backside. “Come on, get ready.”

“Ow! Hey! You’re just a Haruhiro, how dare you kick—”

“Meow!” Yume nocked an arrow. “It’s coming!”

Noise. There was a loud noise coming their way. From the direction of the corner Haruhiro had just come around. Here it was.

Taller than Mimore the Giantess, taller than 190-centimeter-tall Kuzaku. More than double their size, probably. It was nearly four meters tall. It had a lion-like head, but with only one eye.

“Bwahaha! Time for me to show my stuff!” Ranta picked up Tori-san’s Lightning Sword Dolphin. “Here I go! With my usual Super Stunning Strategy!”

“That name...” Shihoru looked thoroughly unimpressed with it.

“Whoop!” The arrow Yume let loose shot towards the four-meter-class white giant’s one eye, and—did not hit it, instead scratching the side of its face. “Ahhh! So close!”

Haruhiro took a deep breath, letting the stress out of his shoulders, then glanced to Tokimune. “Okay, let’s do the usual.”

“Haha!” Tokimune gave a friendly laugh and slapped Haruhiro on the back. “Okay, okay. Let’s do this like we always do.”

“Delm, hel, en,” Mimirin began to chant as she drew elemental sigils with her staff while still holding her drawn sword in her left hand. “Ig, arve.”

She was a former warrior, and it seemed she was still more used to fighting in close quarters, but she was a mage now. This was the most basic of basic spells in Arve Magic, Fireball. The elemental formed a ball of fire larger than a person’s fist, then sped towards the white giant. The white giant made no attempt to avoid it. The ball of fire struck the white giant in the chest, and... vanished.

“Don’t get stepped on!” Haruhiro shouted an order he realized everyone already knew even as he said it, then looked to Kuzaku. “Kuzaku, you’re up front. Also, Takkis, form the front line, please.”

“We’re on it!” Tokimune banged on his shield with his right fist while still holding his sword in that hand. “Kikkawa, Inui, Tada, let’s make this flashy!”

“Righty-o!” Kikkawa called.

“Heh... So be it!” Inui added.

“Yeah,” Tada shot back. “I’ll show you I’m the strongest.”

Tokimune went, followed by Kikkawa, Inui, Tada, and a silent Kuzaku.

Haruhiro raised his hips up and down. He didn’t change position. Yume, Shihoru, and Merry took up positions right behind Haruhiro. Anna-san and Mimirin came over next to him, too.

I’m sure I have sleepy eyes right now, he thought. His breathing wasn’t ragged, and he was feeling pretty calm, more or less.

Tokimune, Kikkawa, Inui, Tada, and Kuzaku had formed a horizontal line with as much space between them as possible. That said, this wasn’t exactly a

wide road. It was a little over three meters wide, maybe.

Should we have chosen a different road? Haruhiro wondered. But if they had, then it wouldn't have worked as well for ambushing the cultists and taking them out quickly.

This time the cultists had formed a group with a white giant, so there were, broadly speaking, two options. Give up, or come up with a plan.

If it had just been Haruhiro and his group, they would have done the former. Ranta (the piece of trash) could have hollered all he wanted, but Haruhiro would have used all of his authority as leader to get the group to retreat.

But because, for better and for worse, they were working with the Tokkis, it wasn't that easy for him anymore. If Haruhiro said, *Hey, this is dangerous, let's not do it*, the Tokkis weren't the type to listen to him and back down quietly.

In the end, they came up with a plan where Haruhiro would act as a decoy, running around to separate the cultists from the white giant. Once the cultists were finished off, then they'd sort out the giant.

Well, I've gotten used to it, Haruhiro thought. A month had passed since they'd found this new area, NA for short, and discovered the Dusk Realm.

A lot's happened in that time, he thought. *Too much, really. No, maybe not, I guess?*

Has it? Yeah. It has.

At least, by Haruhiro's standards, it had been a rather eventful month. It was no exaggeration to say that the Tokkis had been around half of the reason for that.

After all, they had found this place together. Actually, Haruhiro and his party had found the entrance first, but it was generally thought the band of jokers, the Tokkis, had discovered it, while the Goblin Slayers, Haruhiro and his crew, had just tagged along. But ever since then, many things had happened to make them all closer. That was why, because Haruhiro and the others had remained too worried to go on their own, the two groups had ended up going to explore the Dusk Realm regularly together without really having discussed it.

This and that had happened. Every day, sometimes multiple times in a day, there would be some incident or another. After all, the Tokkis were nuts.

Unless Haruhiro, the one with pretensions of having common sense, was

actually the one who was crazy? Were the Tokkis normal? He had worried a bit about that, but it was all quite ridiculous.

The Tokkis were crazy. Haruhiro was sane. Ranta aside, there was a nigh-unfillable trench between Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis. No, not nigh-unfillable, completely unfillable. It couldn't be done. No way, no how. Once he started thinking that way, it actually made things a little easier on him. Though only a little.

If he knew it couldn't be filled, he didn't have to try. It was pointless to.

He tried not to think, *Why are things like this?* He always ended up thinking it anyway, but he didn't let himself agonize over it. There was no helping it. It was just the kind of people they were. Once he accepted that, if he just understood it, he could anticipate what they were likely to do in a given situation. That way, he didn't have to get upset or surprised every time they showed their insanity.

Other than that, they were certainly not incompetent, so he could use them well. In point of fact, while they were a little too biased towards offense, they were a real force to be reckoned with in combat. Tokimune and Tada, in particular, were first-rate attackers. Tokimune was a paladin, so that was fine for him, but even if he was a former warrior, Tada was supposed to be a priest...

Anyhow, if they could just get along with the Tokkis, they could do things together that Haruhiro's party couldn't do alone. It wouldn't be impossible for them to get through situations that seemed deadly.

Also, and this was the most important point in a way, they could make money. Even splitting half their earnings with the Tokkis, Haruhiro and his group were earning far more efficiently than they ever could have if they'd worked for it slowly and steadily by themselves.

“Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart!” Shihoru cast Thunderstorm, and a bundle of lightning struck the white giant.

There was a pretty tremendous noise, and the white giant's entire body convulsed. Its feet stopped. Of course, it would start walking again soon, and even if it was only walking, the white giant was huge. Its legs were long. It would close in on them with massive strides.

“Hey, hey, heeeeey!” Tokimune beat his shield to provoke it. “Come on, come on, come onnnnnn!”

“Go, go, go, go!” The white giant swung its fist down at Tokimune.

“Nimbly!” Tokimune leapt back and away.

“Go, go!” The white giant swung its fist again.

“Spin!” Tokimune danced out of the way.

“Go!” The white giant reached out with both arms to grab Tokimune.

“Whee!” Tokimune did a backflip to get away.

“Rahh!” Tada immediately slammed the white giant’s arm with his warhammer.

“Go, go...” The white giant pulled back its arm, turning its one eye on Tada.

Tada, intentionally no doubt, leisurely rested his warhammer on his shoulder and flipped his middle finger at the white giant. He probably meant something like, *Come get me, you piece of shit*. It wasn’t clear if the white giant understood the gesture. That was uncertain, but the white giant bent its knees and lowered its hips. It was getting ready to jump.

“Get back!” Haruhiro shouted.

That probably could have gone without saying, but he shouted it out just to be sure.

“Yeah, everyone knows that! Skip it! You don’t have to say it!” I don’t want them thinking that stuff, or “We already know that, you idiot,” but... Even if Haruhiro was going to get called an idiot, he had to do it. That was Haruhiro’s stance.

“All right!” Tokimune called.

The frontliners, including Tokimune, Tada, Kikkawa, Inui, and Kuzaku all pulled back as one. At almost exactly the same time, the white giant made its big jump.

“Pharaoh?!” Kikkawa exclaimed bizarrely.

What’s a pharaoh? Haruhiro thought.

The white giant leapt seven, eight meters, then landed with an earthshaking crash. No one got crushed, but if they had been even a little late in backing away, there was a risk that they might have.

Now. Haruhiro didn’t even have to issue the order.

“Yeahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Ranta, who had been lurking in the alleyway, lifted his Lightning Sword Dolphin aloft and charged at the white giant.

Ranta didn’t so much slash it as whack it with the sword. He was targeting the white giant’s right leg.

“Hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah!” Without giving it

pause for breath, Ranta struck, and struck, and struck.

Each time the white giant was hit with his Lightning Sword Dolphin, though only for a very short period, its giant, sculpture-like body would convulse.

This was it: the Super Stunning Strategy. What a terrible name.

The name aside, this tactic was highly effective, and by stopping its movement like this, it opened up a chance to fell the white giant. Only a chance, though. From here on, the battle would be decided by pure firepower... or destructive power, really.

“Tada-san!” Haruhiro called.

Tada licked his lips and charged forth. “Don’t tell me everything. Just let witnessing my power send you to heaven.”

No, I’m not going to heaven, Haruhiro wanted to mutter, but he restrained himself. If he took a comedic jab at every little thing the Tokkis said, he’d never last.

“Now, my killer attack—” Tada did a run-up before launching into a forward somersault and slamming his warhammer down on the white giant’s left knee with both hands. “Somersault Bomb!”

But man, Tada-san’s seriously amazing, thought Haruhiro.

Tada’s warhammer sank into the white giant’s left knee, sending lots of shards flying.

“Take that, and thaaaat!” Ranta hollered. He kept swinging his Lightning Sword Dolphin and stunning the white giant.

Tada took a single breath, adjusted the position of his glasses, then unhurriedly put some distance between himself and the white giant.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ranta shouted, looking at Tada while beating his Lightning Sword Dolphin against the white giant’s leg. “Hurry the hell up, man! This is pretty tough, dammit! Gwahhhhhhhh!”

Tada cocked his head to the side, swinging his warhammer around. “Did you just curse at me?”

“No, sir, I did not! You’re hearing things, man! Just hearing things! Nwahhhhhhhh!”

“I am, huh? So, is that tough?”

“It’s super, super tough, man! Hurry up! Like, seriously, seriously, get

another hit in!"

"Like I care," said Tada.

"Huhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?"!"

"If it's tough for you, that's your problem, not mine."

"Heyyyyyyyyyy, you ass!"

"You ass?" Tada repeated.

"Tada-san! Tada-sama! Tada the God!"

"I'm joking." Tada smirked and then raced forward.

—Yeah, Haruhiro thought. *I don't get it. Tada's jokes are always incomprehensible.*

"Ahaha! That rocked! I love Taddachi's surreal gags!" yelled Kikkawa.

Since the only one laughing is Kikkawa, and he has ridiculously high social skills, that probably means even the Tokkis don't get Tada's jokes, Haruhiro thought. *That's slightly reassuring. If they were the sort of people who burst out laughing at that, I'd never be able to put up with them.*

"Kwahhhh! Kwahhh! Kwahhh! Kwahhhh! Kwahhhh! Uwahhhh!"

Ranta let out what sounded like his death screams, wringing out the last of his power to keep whaling on the white giant's right leg.

"Now that I think about it—" Tada did a forward somersault and unleashed another Somersault Bomb. "—this killer attack isn't killing it at all, is it?!"

This time he went for the right knee. There was a resounding crunch.

Tada glanced over to see that Ranta was still working hard, then followed up with another two or three hits.

"Yume!" Haruhiro shouted, to which she responded, "Meow!" and started to fire arrows.

It was the archery skill, Rapid Fire. With no gap in between, she would nock arrows to her composite bow, then fire. She fired, and fired.

Inui's a hunter, too, and he has a bow, but I've never seen him use it—I think. That thought suddenly occurred to Haruhiro. *Maybe I should ask him the next time I get a chance.* "Aren't you gonna use your bow?" No, maybe it should be, "Can't you use your bow?" Of course, Inui might snap. But he might fight harder because of it. Would he? I dunno. I mean, it's Inui.

Yume fired off six shots in rapid succession, two of which hit the white giant's eye. It was a good result coming from Yume, who was a poor archer despite being a hunter.

“Gwah!” Ranta fell back, stumbling. “I’m at my limit!”

“Good job, Ranta! You have nice a butt hole, yeah!” Anna-san’s compliments were pretty effective. It was little wonder why the Tokkis kept her as their mascot and idol. Though you had to question why she’d compliment his butt hole, of all things.

“All right! Leave it to me!” Tokimune’s voice came from up above—

Wait, when did he get there?

He had been in the street until just moments ago, but now Tokimune was on top of the building ahead of Haruhiro and to the left.

“Hahhh!” Tokimune shouted. He leapt off the building with a cry.

Or rather, he leapt from it to something else. From the roof to the white giant’s shoulder.

Ranta had exhausted himself, and his Lightning Sword Dolphin’s stunning effect had worn off.

“Gu, go, ga, go!” The white giant tried flailing around.

Before it could, Tokimune buried his sword in its one eye. Tokimune didn’t just thrust it in, though, he twisted it around.

“There it is! Tokimune-san’s deadly skill, Saint Arpeggio!” Kikkawa cried.

Kikkawa was saying something, but if Haruhiro started wonder why it was an arpeggio, of all things, he wouldn’t be able to sleep at night, so he wanted to pretend he hadn’t heard the comment.

No, but seriously, why is it an arpeggio? Is it music now?

“Hah!” Tokimune immediately jumped away from the white giant, returning to the building.

Between Yume’s arrows and Tokimune’s Saint Arpeggio, or whatever it was called, the white giant had taken more damage to its one eye than it could handle.

“Pull back!” Haruhiro shouted as he backed away himself.

Yume and the other girls, Ranta, and everyone on the front line except for Tokimune put some distance between themselves and the white giant. Tokimune alone was different. On top of the building, he was literally watching from on high.

“Go, go, go!” The white giant swung both of its arms around, unsteady on its feet. It likely wanted to attack Haruhiro and the others somehow, but it was blind. On top of that, both its knees were damaged. The white giant fell

into a building on the right hand side, opposite from where Tokimune was. The outer wall, while it didn't collapse outright, took some damage.

"Go, go!" The white giant tried to steady itself, but it couldn't brace its legs, so that wasn't going so well for it. It looked like it might trip.

"Atta—" Haruhiro began to shout, then swallowed the word. Tada was already surging towards the white giant.

The white giant didn't fully trip, but it fell to one knee. Tada leapt towards that knee with a forward somersault, then...

"Somersault Bomb!"

It was a single strike—no, a single blast. Having been hit by a second Somersault Bomb, its left knee was half-destroyed. It probably wouldn't be getting back on its feet like that.

"Go!" The white giant reached out to grab Tada, but it didn't even graze him.

"Yeah, that's how awesome I am!" Tada shouted. While singing his own praises, he not only didn't run, he landed a solid blow on the white giant's right hand with his warhammer.

Having figured out Tada's location based on that, the white giant reached out for him with its left hand. Tada knocked this one back with his warhammer, too.

"If you think you can beat me, try again in a million years!" Tada hollered.

"Nothing to do..." Kuzaku muttered.

Oh, are you sure about that? Haruhiro turned to look behind him. Things happened sometimes, so he could never let his guard down. And sure enough, from the other side of the road, a number of Pansukes were running this way with their spears ready.

"Enemy reinforcements!" he shouted. "Pansukes, three of them! Kuzaku, Kikkawa, Inui-san!"

"Gotcha!" Kuzaku called.

"Okie-dokie!" Kikkawa yelled.

"Heh... What choice do I have?" Inui called back.

Kuzaku, Kikkawa, and Inui immediately broke off from the front line, running past Haruhiro and the girls in the back line to deal with the enemy reinforcements. Merry glanced over in that direction quickly, but immediately looked back to the white giant. The power of the God of Light,

Lumiarius, didn't reach the Dusk Realm, so she couldn't use light magic here. Even if all she could do was act as a bodyguard for Shihoru, Merry was staying focused.

That's not what I'm worried about, Haruhiro thought. Merry is overly serious by nature. Because of that, once she's done what she ought to, she tends to start thinking, "Is this good enough?" and "Isn't there anything else I can do?" I need to watch out for that, and take care of her. Naturally, I mean that as a leader. Nothing more than that. There are no other feelings involved. None. Zero, okay? Zero.

"Now you give it one last push, yeah! *Fight on!* Yeah!" Anna-san gave some welcome encouragement.

"Delm, hel, en, rig, arve!" Mimorin chanted as she drew elemental sigils with her staff.

Fire Pillar. This was the strongest spell that the former warrior Mimorin had. A pillar of flame rose at the white giant's feet. That said, it was smaller than Mimorin herself, and actually kind of cutesy. It was facing a massive white giant, so it wasn't likely to have much of an effect.

If she's aiming to become an Arve Magic user, shouldn't she at least acquire the Blast spell? Haruhiro thought. It wasn't something for a thief, and a member of another party at that, to give his opinion about, and Haruhiro had a somewhat complicated relationship with Mimorin, so while he thought that, he didn't say it. Even if he found himself wanting to say it occasionally, he really couldn't.

"Ohm, rel, ect, el, vel, darsh!" Shihoru used the Shadow Echo spell to launch three shadow elementals, which hit the white giant. The damage was trivial, no doubt, but her magic was purely meant as support here.

"...Whew." Ranta came up beside Haruhiro and squatted.

"Good work," Haruhiro told him, looking around as he did.

While he did, he flexed his knees so that he was ready to move at any time. Thanks to that, at times like this, Haruhiro was in a slightly forward-leaning position, both arms hanging loosely at his sides, and looking around restlessly with sleepy eyes. If someone who didn't know any better saw him, the way he looked, they'd probably think, *Is that guy all right?*

Haruhiro was aware that it wasn't a good look, but this was also the optimal stance for him to be in, so there wasn't much he could do about it. He'd given up on looking cool. For now, he had to focus on utility. Haruhiro

could never be Tokimune.

Speaking of Tokimune, he reached the new enemies before Kuzaku did.
“The true art of killing in midair!”

Leaping from rooftop to rooftop, then jumping down from there, he landed a splendid kick of Pansuke F’s head. Then, once he had knocked Pansuke F flying and landed, he swept Pansuke G’s spear away with his shield and thrust his sword through the cultist’s eyehole. Without missing a beat, he closed in on Pansuke H and whacked him with Bash and Double Thrust. Pansuke H managed to twist his body around and avoid a lethal blow through his eyehole, but he was overwhelmed and recoiling. When Kuzaku and the other two finally made it, the fight was already won.

Tokimune was strong. He was strong when he got carried away, and also strong when pushed into a corner. Basically, he was always strong. He had charisma, too, and a good personality.

If he had one shortcoming, it was perhaps that he was impulsive, arbitrary, and he would run off and do things all by himself. But that was a trend with all of the Tokkis.

When people are similar, they often are hostile to and reject those like them, but that didn’t happen with the Tokkis. Everyone seemed to be getting along and having fun, so they must have been doing something right.

“Go, go!” The white giant must have measured things out poorly or something, because it slammed into a building while moving at almost a crawl. No, it couldn’t see, so it couldn’t measure things at all.

“You clumsy oaf!” Tada hollered.

As if he had been waiting for just this moment, Tada landed a series of strikes on the white giant’s elbow and half-destroyed it. Now an enormous blow had been dealt to both the white giant’s left knee and elbow. Then, targeting the white giant’s right foot, Tada showered blows on its ankle, following it up by knocking its heel off. It had taken a blow to the right knee as well, so the white giant’s range of motion was fairly limited now.

Haruhiro nodded. “Ranta. One more time, it’s your turn.”

“Heh.” Ranta got up and shook his head back and forth, rotating his shoulders and taking a deep breath. “Fine, if you insist. I’ll do it!”

“Tada-san!” Haruhiro shouted.

When Haruhiro gave the signal, Tada backed down and Ranta stepped up to take his place.

Tada went into the alley. He probably meant to climb up onto the roof.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Ranta hit the white giant with his Lightning Sword Dolphin. He hit it. He hit it, and hit it.

It looked like Tokimune and the others were done mopping up the enemy reinforcements. They were headed back this way.

Tada did a forward somersault off of the roof.

Still, I'm amazed he can do something that dangerous, thought Haruhiro. At this point, it no longer surprised him, but it did impress him.

“Ultra! Somersault! Booooomb!” Tada’s warhammer thudded into the nape of the white giant’s neck with incredible force.

They had tried a lot of different things, but a white giant’s weak points seemed to be its one eye and the nape of its neck. Or rather, compared to its body as a whole, the skin there was a bit thinner. It wasn’t just that their necks were especially vulnerable to impacts; they seemed to have something analogous to the spinal cord in humans there, too. It was a hard area to target, but attacks that landed there were extremely effective.

“That’s enough, Ranta!” Haruhiro called.

“Yeah, I know, duh!” Ranta put some distance between himself and the white giant.

While Tada had fallen to the ground after unleashing his Somersault Bomb, he seemed to have landed well.

The white giant slumped over and fell on its front. At this point, Haruhiro didn’t need to urge anyone on.

“All right! *Party time!* Yeah?!” Anna-san called.

With that declaration by Anna-san, Mimirin was the first to begin climbing up the white giant’s back. Tokimune quickly caught up and got ahead of her, then Kikkawa and Inui followed. Kuzaku followed a little bit after them. Ranta and then Tada rushed up to the white giant and hit it. Stabbed it.

Haruhiro felt himself wanting to join in, too, but he refrained. There was no need, and more cultists might show up. It was even possible another white giant might come this way.

Haruhiro, Yume, Shihoru, and Merry stayed on the sidelines of this merciless celebration, not taking part. They cheered them on along with Anna-san.

I have to keep a cool head at all times, Haruhiro thought. Of course, there will be times when I have to gamble with my life, too. When those times come, rather than calm thought, the only option is to entrust my body to instinct and wild frenzy, then count on agility to carry me through, I'm sure. But I don't want to invite those sorts of situations, and to avoid them, I really do have to try and stay calm.

You're boring, you know that, Ranta often said to him. Haruhiro didn't think he was an interesting person. If he was being told he was boring, it was probably true.

My personality is plain. My face looks average. Middle of the middle, or lower, even. I'm not tall, either. I'm not especially shrewd, and I'm not someone who's actually really talented but trying to keep my skills a secret, or anything like that. The best I can say is I'm middle-of-the-road. Well, I'm normal.

The thing is, I don't mind my current self, a person who can say, "I'm fine with being normal," and not look down on himself for it.

I'm normal, and I'm sure I'm going to keep being normal. I can't become anyone special, and I'm not trying to. Though it's not like I'm satisfied with the current state of things, either.

I'd say to take it step by step, but that's asking for too much, so half-steps will be fine. Even if it's only one quarter of one step, and even if we can't make that much progress day to day, ten days from now, I want to have gotten just a little bit farther ahead.

Somehow, I get the sense that we're managing that.

That may be why I'm able to not hate myself.

I'm doing my best, right? What's more, I have results to show for it, which means I'm being rewarded, right? Being rewarded for your effort is a blessing, isn't it? That means I'm pretty fortunate, aren't I? I can look up into the sky and report to Manato and Moguzo, who we'll never see again, "We're still working at it, guys." Isn't that amazing?

I think it is.

While watching over the merciless party with his sleepy eyes, Haruhiro looked around to ensure no new enemies were coming. No matter how advantageous their situation, even if the battle were more or less decided, something could suddenly happen to turn everything around. If that happened, it happened, and they just had to accept it and move on, but he

didn't want to make that sort of decision if he didn't have to.



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The nape of the white giant's neck and the back of its head were more or less destroyed, and it had already stopped moving. It seemed to be dead.

But in some ways, the hard part of dealing with a four-meter giant was yet to come. It was a time-intensive and bothersome task, but it paid off well.

At first, the white giants had been these huge, dangerous things that had just gotten in their way, and they had treated them as something to run away from as soon as they saw them. However, Shinohara of Clan Orion had discovered that the white giants had a number of organs inside them where an unknown metal was concentrated. Ever since someone had spread word of that discovery, the white giants had become a favored target for volunteer soldiers.

By the way, this wasn't a recent development. It had happened close to a month ago.

"I got me some rainbow pyroxene!" Ranta shouted like an idiot, holding up an orb with a fifteen-centimeter diameter that shone with the rainbow of colors its name suggested.

As far as Haruhiro knew, these rainbow pyroxene organs that were unique to the white giants were usually fist-sized, so that one would be considered large.

"Yahoo! Me, too! Me, too! Me, too! I got one!" Kikkawa lifted another rainbow pyroxene up high, with one eye closed and his tongue stuck out. This second one was ten centimeters across, maybe. Still, that wasn't small.

In the end, those were the only two rainbow pyroxenes they extracted from the white giant. However, when they stripped the cultists of their ponchos and searched them, they were able to find a number of accessories with small pieces of rainbow pyroxene embedded in them. These rainbow pyroxenes had been diligently ground and polished, so they had a high value for their small size.

"Well, I'd say we'll make around six," Tokimune said from atop the giant's remains, his white teeth sparkling as he smiled.

While thinking, *Wow, they're brilliant*, Haruhiro tilted his head to the side in thought. "Nah... I'd say about five, maybe?"

"That's all, you think?" Tokimune asked.

"Probably."

Five gold. Split fifty-fifty with the Tokkis, Haruhiro and the party's take would be two gold and fifty silver. Split six ways, that was a bit over 41

silver each. Not bad. Or rather, it was an incredible amount that they could never have imagined making a few months ago.

I shouldn't get used to this, he thought. I have to assume making this much won't be a given.

The white giant's remains would have to be left where they were, but they at least dragged the cultists' corpses to the side of the road before Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis moved on.

Soon, they passed by someone. Not a cultist, and not a white giant, but a human.

No, humans. Volunteer soldiers, to be precise.

"Oh." The hunter that led the group gave off an unpleasant vibe. He wore a hide outfit, a cap with a feather in it, and had a bow and a quiver of arrows slung over his back. He was probably a little older than Haruhiro and the others. He had eyes like a fox and a crooked mouth. "It's the Goblin Slayers and the comedians."

"Hello, Kuzuoka-san." Haruhiro bowed his head slightly.

Among all the senior volunteer soldiers, there were a few he was less than happy about having to address with a -san. This was one of them. They hadn't had much in the way of interaction, but he did have a grudge against this man. When they had just arrived in Grimgar, Kuzuoka had scouted Moguzo to join his party, then stolen his money and abandoned him.

"Tch..." Ranta clicked his tongue with distaste.

Kuzuoka narrowed his eyes and tried to intimidate them with a "Huhhh...?"

There were a warrior, thief, mage, priest, and dread knight following Kuzuoka. One looked as if he wanted to say, *Here we go again...*, while another was impassive, and yet another seemed amused. Each of the five had their own reaction, but none of them were anything remotely friendly.

"Why, hello, hello, Kuzuoka-saaaan," Kikkawa butted in, slapping Kuzuoka on the shoulder in that over-friendly manner of his. "It's been, like, ages. You been doing all right, Kuzuoka-saaaan? Like, how've things been lately?"

"Damn it, don't touch me, Crap-kawa!" Kuzuoka yelled.

"Huh? What's this? I'm cute as crap? Man, I always thought I was."

"I didn't say that, you dolt!"

"No, no, no, no need to be shy, Crap-oka-saaaan. Oops, got it wrong, it's

Kuzuoka! Soz, soz! I'm gonna reflect on what I did!"

"There's no way you're reflecting on anything!" Kuzuoka screamed.

"Yup! I'm not! Teehee!"

"You piss me off, you know that?" Kuzuoka snarled. "Move it, or die! I'll kill you!"

"That's not possible," Tokimune said with a friendly smile. "I don't know you all that well, but I do know you're weaker than me. Want to try it and see?"

"I-I'm not gonna do it!" Kuzuoka pushed Kikkawa aside.

"We're going!" he ordered his comrades, and they shuffled along. Even as he left, the way he kept muttering what sounded like insults at the group was very like Kuzuoka.

"That guy." Ranta kicked the ground. "With his rotten personality, I'm amazed he manages to be a party leader. I can't believe him."

"Yeah..." Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck. "You're not one to talk, though..."

2. My Love Is Always Like This



There was no sun that rose or set in the Dusk Realm, no mornings or nights. Compasses were worthless here, leaving no way to tell the cardinal directions. That was inconvenient, so Shinohara of Orion had come up with a proposal.

Looking out from the initial hill, off in the distance, there was a pillar-shaped object rising into the sky. It was of a size and shape that didn't seem natural, and it had probably been created by someone. He suggested that, for the sake of convenience, that direction would be North. With no objections, everyone had accepted that idea.

East of the initial hill, a pair of adventurers called Lala and Nono had discovered a valley where plants grew, and a spring with clear water at the bottom of it. Incidentally, it had also been Lala and Nono who'd arrived five days after Haruhiro and the others to discover the hole that had appeared in the Grimble Mineshaft in the Wonder Hole.

On top of that, Lala and Nono had named those bat-like creatures "gremlins." The name "ri-komo" wasn't being used anymore. Even Haruhiro and the rest called them gremlins now.

Lala and Nono named the area where the gremlins were thought to lay their eggs the Egg Storage, and the area past there the Gremlin Flats. Naturally, Haruhiro and the rest were using those names too at this point. Lala and Nono had a knack for business, and they had made money by inviting Orion, Iron Knuckle, and the other influential clans to the Dusk Realm and charging them to show them around.

Lala and Nono were apparently very diligent and meticulous. They searched every nook and cranny of the Gremlin Flats and discovered the entrance to another world, separate from the Dusk Realm, where it was

always dark and the dawn never came—the Night Realm.

The Night Realm was still more or less untouched. It was dark, after all, and there were rumors that volunteer soldiers may or may not have gone in there, never to return. It seemed to be a very dangerous place, and there were rumors that Lala and Nono were secretly continuing to investigate it.

On this day when those idle rumors were feeling like they might have some truth to them, the Dusk Realm was the number-one hunting ground for volunteer soldiers. It had become that way in almost no time whatsoever.

Haruhiro stood out in front of his tent, taking a sip of water from his canteen. He sighed. “It sure is amazing...”

In the area between the valley Lala and Nono discovered and to the east of the initial hill, there were not just ten, but tens of tents lined up.

Most of them belonged to volunteer soldiers who, like Haruhiro and the Tokkis, were staying in the Dusk Realm. The rest were for those that did business with volunteer soldiers—an itinerant cafeteria, an itinerant bar, a blacksmith, a bathhouse, a reseller, a branch of the Yorozu Deposit Company, and even... those sorts of people who sold “companionship.” These people had their tents set up near the valley, while the volunteer soldiers’ tents were set up around them, forming a sort of miniature village.

It was being called the Dusk Realm Volunteer Soldier Corps Settlement.

No, that was a lie. Almost no one called it such a fancy name. “The settlement” was what it was called for short.

Night never came here.

On the outside, it was probably the middle of the night now, but in a way, there was no time here, so it didn’t really feel like it. Anna-san had a mechanical clock, so Haruhiro and the others relied on it to wake up in the morning, be active during the day, and then sleep as much as possible at night.

Haruhiro really wanted to do that, but he was feeling a little bit of insomnia. That was why he was here alone, huddled outside the tent.

He could hear Ranta’s snoring.

No way I’m getting to sleep over that, he thought.

The voices of the volunteer soldiers at the itinerant bar were sounding awfully noisy.

I’m not going to be getting any sleep at all, he thought.

“The way that, y’know, it never gets dark here is getting to me,” Haruhiro

mumbled.

Is it making me nervous? he wondered. I'm not completely insensitive to these things like Ranta is, but I don't think I'm excessively sensitive, either.

"I want to live alone... someday..." he murmured.

There's just something intolerable about having people around at all times. It can get suffocating. Pretty often, actually. It's a pretty big dream, but I want to rent a room all to myself.

"Ugh, I hate this, I can't take it anymore..." He buried his head in his arms and muttered to himself for a while. That helped him feel a little better.

Let's be realistic. I mean, even if I were going to rent a room, we won't be back in Alterna for a while. In the Lonesome Field Outpost and the settlement, we're gonna be living in tents. When it comes to moving around, the fewer tents the better. The current arrangement, one for the guys, one for the girls, two total, is probably the best. I know that, so why do I occasionally have such an urge to be alone?

I can't think of a reason.

Maybe it's partly because I'm the leader, a role I'm fundamentally not suited for... actually, mostly because of that, I try to be considerate to the others.

That's fine when we're working. There's a lot to think about, a lot to do, so I don't focus on it so much. But when the day is over and I'm freed from my duties, it all weighs down on me, making it hard to breathe.

I don't think I want to throw it all away. I don't plan to run away from it, either.

Just, it's hard.

I can't throw anything away, and I have no intention to, but it's rough. I'm doing more than I can handle, and I can't help but feel inadequate. But still, I have to do it.

I can't whine about it, either. I don't want to worry my comrades, and I don't want to rock the boat. It could affect our performance.

Anyway, I'm being considerate of their feelings. Both with my comrades, and the Tokkis. I have no other choice. That emotional labor is wearing me out.

I want to be alone.

“Well, I am, though,” he murmured. “Alone...”

That's right. I got my wish. I am alone now. Haruhiro got up. *I'll go for a walk.*

He left the tent and headed towards the valley. There was no day or night here, so there were customers at both the itinerant cafeteria and bar. There were volunteer soldiers wandering around, too, but Haruhiro moved stealthily to avoid their attention.

There was a large number of volunteer soldiers gathered here in the settlement. Still, it wasn't like there were two or three hundred of them. He was at least acquainted with most of the volunteer soldiers, but they were his seniors, and Haruhiro and the others were generally the subject of ridicule. If one of them called out to him and he had to engage in pointless small talk, he was sure to have an unpleasant time. Besides, he wanted to be alone.

The members of Iron Knuckle were having a party at the itinerant bar. They were what you'd call a clan, but for some reason they called themselves a family, and addressed each other as brothers. In the center of the group was a man with a buzz cut who wasn't especially large, and had a baby face, but even at a distance gave off an intimidating aura, “Titan” Max. The man with a short goatee sitting next to him was his right-hand man, Aidan.

Apparently Max's real name was Masafumi and Aidan's was Eisuke, but anyone who spoke those names in front of either of them was guaranteed to end up seeing their own blood. It wasn't just Max and Aidan; most of the brothers had nicknames they called each other by.

“We! Are! Iron! Knuckle! Yeahhhhh!” the brothers shouted.

Haruhiro heard that shout from them often. The brothers got very excited when they shouted it together with their throaty voices. He didn't really get it, that sort of culture.

Iron Knuckle had been the next ones to storm into the Dusk Realm after Orion, and they had quickly demonstrated how fierce they were.

Orion was a reflection of Shinohara's character, and its members were generally elegant, a sort of large-scale explorers' club, but Max and his lot were completely different. They were bellicose to the core, a terrifying group of fighters.

They killed them. Every cultist they got their hands on, they killed. It was a massacre.

There were cultist towns scattered around the Dusk Realm. Before Orion

came, Haruhiro and the others had discovered two of them. However, they had never approached them, since there were cultists living there. That would have been clearly dangerous.

However, Iron Knuckle had charged into one of those towns like it didn't matter. From what Haruhiro had heard, they had spent a full day, over 24 hours, staying in town and murdering cultists. In the end, the surviving cultists had left town, and Iron Knuckle had returned singing manly songs about their victory.

They had occupied the town. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say they had destroyed it.

In fact, it just so happened that these days, that was the town Haruhiro and the others sometimes used as their hunting ground.

After that, Iron Knuckle hadn't continued to occupy the town; they'd set off on a journey of raids and slaughter. Did they spend their day's earnings the day they got them? No, that wasn't it. Anyway, the cultists had been returning to the town in small groups, but they only cleaned up the corpses of their fallen comrades and patrolled the area, showing no intention of living there for now.

Furthermore, the white giants were usually in the areas called cultist bases, or just bases, and not in the cultists' towns. That had been true, from what the party had seen so far.

For starters, unlike cultists, white giants weren't just anywhere and everywhere. It was only in the ruins of the temple of the giant gods that the Tokkis had fled into on their second day in the Dusk Realm, or in the basin to the southwest of the initial hill called the Great Cauldron of the Gods that there had been confirmed sightings of white giants.

However, ever since Iron Knuckle had crushed one of the cultists' bases, the white giants had begun to wander around. Sometimes, they were even seen acting in concert with the cultists.

For that reason, it was now easy to catch a limited number of cultists and white giants in the base that Iron Knuckle had destroyed, making it a convenient hunting ground for volunteer soldiers. Among volunteer soldiers, it was called "the first."

Did that come from it being the first base destroyed by humans, or from it being the first hunting ground? Or both, perhaps? Haruhiro didn't really know.

“Well, we’ve got a lot to thank Iron Knuckle for, that’s for sure...” he murmured.

They were terrible people, yeah. It wasn’t going to be easy to wipe away that feeling completely. But as Haruhiro and the others were living off the spoils of their work, that meant they were just as terrible, and they were also petty. They were in no position to criticize.

That aside, Haruhiro put his skills as a thief to use, reaching the edge of the valley without attracting anyone’s attention. He savored the small feeling of accomplishment.

I’m such a small-timer, he thought. But I’m fine with that. Being small-time. It’s great. I want to be a small-timer forever. Honestly, what I don’t want is to be a small-time leader, and it really hurts that I have no choice in the matter.

When this place had first been found, it had been verdant and green, but now it was much more desolate. The trees had all been cut down, not a single one left. There were some bushes left here and there. That was about it.

The spring in the bottom of the valley was being used as a water source. Haruhiro’s canteen contained water from this spring that had been boiled. The water looked clear and clean, but if you drank it straight, it was guaranteed to give you the runs. Intensely, too. The volunteer soldiers didn’t hold back in their use of water, so there was the risk of the spring running dry, but it seemed fine for now.

When he looked into the spring, for some reason, it calmed his heart. Doing this let him get back to a level state of mind. He was such a simple, cheap person. He was happy to be a simple, cheap person. If Haruhiro had been a refined and complicated person, he would no doubt have worried himself sick over more things.

He had started to feel like he could get to sleep, so Haruhiro decided to turn back to the tent. “This is all I amount to, really...”

As he walked, he laughed to himself. Day in and day out, he thought the same sorts of things over and over, wracking his brains over them, and then he would notice he just didn’t care anymore. He would start to get into the mindset of, *Well, I’ll work hard again tomorrow.*

“You could say I’m not making any real progress... but still, it’s not so bad. I’m no one important, so I have to question if it’s that easy to make progress...”

The party as a whole is making steady progress, and managing to turn a profit, so it's fine, right? he thought. Yeah. It's fine. I should just accept that. That's what I'll do.

My sweet tent is just around the corner now. Not that there's anything sweet about it.

Hey, wait.

Someone came out of the tent. No, not someone—it could only be Ranta or Kuzaku.

It's Kuzaku, Haruhiro noticed. He's as tall as ever, even if his posture isn't that good. Not a surprise, really. Height doesn't change that easily. That's obvious.

If that had been all, it wouldn't have mattered—*Oh, what's this, he woke up, hmm?*—but another person came out of the neighboring tent, so it was a big deal.

Well, no, not a big deal, but Kuzaku came out of the guys' tent, and Merry came out of the girls' tent at almost exactly the same time. Could that really be a coincidence? Maybe it was an inevitability? It was hard to say.

“...I can't ask them...” Haruhiro ducked into the shadow of a nearby tent. He had immediately hidden himself, though he hadn't intended to.

Is there anything wrong with hiding? Not really, no. But still. I really shouldn't.

He stuck his face out halfway, watching the two of them.

Why do I have to do this? It's like I'm peeping. It's not good. It really isn't. But still. I have to admit, I'm kinda curious. Of course I am. I mean, I'm the leader, right? Maybe that doesn't matter? No, but it's happening inside the party, isn't it? You can't say it's absolutely none of my business, right? I dunno. Maybe it isn't?

They were saying something. Merry was looking downwards a little.

I wonder what the hell they're talking about. Damn it. I can't hear.

“Oh...” Haruhiro finally let out a strange groan.

Kuzaku had grabbed Merry's arm—no, her sleeve. He pulled on it and they walked off. Merry didn't resist. Still looking down, she followed him.

Ohh. So she's going. She's going to go. Off together. Ohh. I see. So that's how it is...

“I saw it,” Haruhiro murmured.

Well, whatever.

That's right.

I'm A-OK with it, you know?

It's not like I haven't seen this coming for a while. Yeah. I did, okay? It was practically a sure thing. How far have they gone? That I'm not sure of, and I have no intention of finding out, because I don't want to find out, but I'm damn sure that something has happened between them, at least. I'm sure a fair bit has happened. So, please, just go ahead.

Do whatever you want!

Yeah!

Like it's any of my business!

I mean, if anything, I'd be rooting for you, okay?! I will, you know?!

If you'd say something, that is!

If you'd just be honest and tell me...

I kind of think they should come out and announce it, you know...

“Hahhhh...” Haruhiro let out a deep sigh, sitting down on the ground and holding his chest. He felt like he could cry.

It's a shock.

Why? Why am I so shocked by it? Because they're being secretive? Tell me! Say something! Don't you trust me?! Is that it? I don't think it's quite that. Even if I'd rather they didn't hide it, it's not exactly the easiest thing to announce. It's not like I can't see it that way.

“Actually, the two of us are going out!”

Just suddenly saying that wouldn't be like Kuzaku, and it wouldn't be like Merry, either. Y'know, it's just not in their personalities. Besides, their relationship may be slowly growing deeper, there may not be any clear line, or a definite form that it's taken. Maybe they both feel bad about keeping quiet about it to their comrades, but they just can't bring themselves to say anything. They may not know how to say it themselves. There could be all sorts of things going on. There must be.

Besides they have, what—feelings? For each other? So, they're mutually attracted?

“Urghhhh...”

There's a pain in my chest. This is agony. What is this? —Well, anyway, if they're going to be in, what, love? Something like that? A romantic relationship? Mutual love? That's between the two of them, and they're free to do it.

They're absolutely free to do it. No one has any right to get in their way. Anyone who gets in the way of love deserves to be kicked to death by a horse!

That was what Haruhiro thought. He really did think that from the bottom of his heart.

So, why?

Is that really the reason they're doing this?

It was hard to accept it, and he didn't want to accept it, and he felt like it was best not to, but in the end, that was probably what was going on here.

No matter what he said, Haruhiro had rather liked Merry. In a plain and simple way—a truly plain and simple way, a way so plain and simple that it suited him—he'd had a one-sided crush on her.

Naturally, I never really thought, even the slightest bit, that I could make Merry like me back. I had no expectation of that. I can say that definitively. That was why I never wanted to think that I was in love with Merry. I tried not to think about it. I mean, it feels so empty and meaningless.

Even so, he had probably loved her.

If he ran a thought experiment like this, he could see it.

Take Yume or Shihoru, his comrades like Merry, for example. Imagine Yume or Shihoru had gotten together with someone in the party. When that happened, would he feel this pain in his chest? Would it hurt like this?

Probably not.

Shihoru and Ranta—if it were a pairing like that, it would be a pretty big surprise. But he'd just be really surprised, and he might worry about what would happen in the future, but it would surely end at that. The same with Yume and Ranta. If it were Yume and Kuzaku, or Shihoru and Kuzaku, it would be unexpected, but *Oh, I see, I hope you find happiness, try not to break up, okay? It'd be a pain to deal with the fallout*, would be about his reaction to it.

It was only because it was Merry.

Whether it was Kuzaku she hooked up with, or anyone else, Haruhiro would probably always have been in shock. Because he had been pretty seriously in love with Merry.

“I see... So that's what it was...” Haruhiro looked vacantly up into the many-colored sky.

A hole opened up in his chest which had been weighed down and tormented by pain for a while now. Because it was a hole, there was nothing

there, just the wind blowing through.

Haruhiro's heart was broken.

Or rather, it had been broken for a while now.

3. With All My Heart



—And? So what if it had been? Did that mean anything?
It didn't. There was nothing he could do about it.

Haruhiro's emotions had nothing to do with the way they all lived day to day. His feelings had no influence on that.

He had settled those feelings now, or comes to terms with them, you could say. In fact, all his frustration had evaporated at this point. He didn't even care what was going on between Merry and Kuzaku anymore.

Well, it hadn't gotten quite to the point where he could think, *I wish them both the best, but, Sure, fine, do whatever you want. Oh, by the way, you may think you're keeping it quiet, but I know—*

Maybe?

Yeah, honestly, he couldn't think that either.

They thought it was a secret, but he knew. What could he do to resolve that gap? Should he try to resolve it at all? He wasn't sure.

It was awkward.

So, when the idea of *Let's go back to Alterna for a little while* came up, it was a huge help.

He had saved up a good amount of money, so it was about time for him to learn at least one new skill, and he wanted to do some shopping, too.

Also, he wanted to face himself properly. Or rather, he wanted some time. Sorting out his feelings, and all that stuff, it wasn't that easy!

Over the course of about two days, they traveled from the Dusk Realm Settlement, passing through the Lonesome Field Outpost, then crossing the Quickwind Plains, to Alterna.

They parted there for a time. Haruhiro went to the thieves' guild, where he spent seven days learning Stealth, the ultimate thieving skill. He had debated

whether to take the skill Air Throw from the art of fighting and killing instead, but as the party's plain and boring leader who doubled as its scout, what he really wanted was the full set of skills that would let him conceal his presence and not be detected by others.

He paid 20 gold to the guild for it. That wasn't cheap—it was expensive, actually—but if he didn't learn it properly, he would be missing out. Besides, Haruhiro's mentor Barbara was super strict, so there was no chance of her letting him cut corners.

"I thought I was going to die..." Haruhiro moaned.

This time, without any joking or exaggeration, he had been told to die. To become a corpse.

Stealth was composed of what could broadly be categorized into three techniques:

The first, to eliminate your presence—Hide.

The second, to move with your presence eliminated—Swing.

The third, to utilize all of your senses to detect the presences of others—Sense.

When he'd begun with Hide, the first stage, Barbara had ordered Haruhiro, *Die!* and then mercilessly punished him when he couldn't do it well enough. She'd broken two, maybe three bones, then forced him to train at using Hide in that state.

There was this one person with a shady background, a former thief who had now become a priest. When someone was injured at the thieves' guild, he would come to heal them, but it was still questionable whether she should be driving her students to the point of nearly passing out in extreme agony. It was just cruel.

As Barbara-sensei told it, if she didn't break him in under these extreme conditions, he wouldn't learn properly. She was doing this all for him. He ought to be crying tears of gratitude.

As a matter of fact, it was a trial he couldn't get through without shedding tears. He could see how what Barbara was saying had some truth to it. However, if he had made one misstep, Haruhiro might have died. It was scary.

Having borne through it had paid off, though. The basics of Stealth had now thoroughly seeped into Haruhiro's head and body and would never leave them. Now, even when he was just idly wandering through Alterna in the

evening, he would catch himself using Hide, Swing, and Sense without intending to. It was a little creepy, if he did say so himself.

You've got an aptitude for this, Barbara had said, offering him a rare compliment. *You must really be suited to this line of work.*

“Well...” Haruhiro smiled a little as he melded into the crowds of the marketplace. “I was glad to hear that, yeah...”

Even though it's for being a thief, you know? he thought. *It goes without saying, but a thief is someone who steals things. A robber.*

Apparently, the thieves' guild had its origins in a secret society of thieves, Black Widow, who'd worked behind the scenes in the Kingdom of Arabakia. When Arabakia had advanced into the frontier, Black Widow had offered to assist the Royal Army in exchange for the release of their imprisoned comrades. This offer had been accepted, and some of those former prisoners who'd been sent to certain death as scouts in the frontier had gone on to create the thieves' guild.

Quite the heroic tale, really, Haruhiro thought. *Is it because of those origins that the thieves' guild's training is so rough? Or is Barbara-sensei just a sadist?*

Whichever the case might be, a thief was still a thief. Some of them misused the skills they had acquired in the thieves' guild to indulge in a life of endless larceny. Haruhiro hadn't thought much about it before becoming a thief, or rather, he hadn't thought about it at all, but when he said, *I'm a thief*, it made more than a few people furrow their brows. Especially those living normal lives in Alterna.

That's just prejudice, he might try to explain. *Most of the thieves in the thieves' guild are volunteer soldiers, and they don't steal anything.* But the art of thieving still had skills like Picking, Burglary, and even Pickpocket, all of which had practical applications. If one were so inclined, a thief could turn to robbery at any time. It was hard to blame people for being wary.

“It's not a respected trade, I guess,” Haruhiro murmured.

He liked skulking around and doing reconnaissance. It suited him, to the point that he thought it was his calling.

But a thief, huh...

“Maybe they should have changed the name...”

When the guild was formed, they wouldn't have had to call themselves thieves. They should have gone with something else. Or did our predecessors

who founded the thieves' guild take pride in the fact that they were thieves? No, but is that something you'd take pride in?

"The thieves' guild has no code, so someone could even start up another guild... No, not that I'd do that, of course," he murmured. "Won't someone else do it for me?"

If someone did, Haruhiro would join that guild in a second.

I'd be a bit sad to break off my master-and-apprentice relationship with Barbara-sensei, maybe? Maybe not? I mean, Sensei's scary.

Well, it wasn't as if he was seriously considering it. It didn't really matter that much.

Ranta had said he'd be spending six days learning a dark fighting skill, Missing. Shihoru had said she'd be spending five days on Shadow Pond, which belonged to her main focus, Darsh Magic, and then two days trying to learn the Kanon Magic spell Ice Globe. Yume had seemed to have something in mind, and she'd planned to spend a total of seven days on skills like Hunting, Tracking, Pit Trap, and Bear Trap.

Because Merry couldn't use light magic in the Dusk Realm, she had chosen to spend five days learning the self-defense skill Revenge, while Kuzaku had decided to spend six days learning the defensive swordsmanship techniques Guard and Tug of War.

Haruhiro, Shihoru, and Yume had spent seven days on training, Ranta and Kuzaku six, and Merry five. As for the Tokkis, Anna-san and Tada had finally learned Sacrament. The others had each worked hard on their own training, then used their leftover time to do whatever. Tomorrow everyone would be meeting back up.

Ranta was probably in Celestial Alley around now, womanizing. Haruhiro didn't know much about it, but Alterna had brothels... Was that what you'd call them? Places where you paid money for women to be with you, and there was no shortage of people who patronized them.

In fact, Ranta had invited him to come along once. When he'd refused, Ranta had snapped at him. He'd apparently lacked the guts to go alone, and had been trying to drag Haruhiro with him. If he'd wanted to go, he should have just held his head high and done it. However, Ranta just hadn't been able to push himself to take that step, and he no doubt still hadn't gone. He was probably at a bar with girls who would pour his drinks for him, drowning his sorrows, or out hitting on girls or something.

Merry and Kuzaku were—

Well, you know? They're probably off somewhere together. Of course they would be! They seem to be going out, I mean. I wonder if they're doing it. Not that I mind. Please, build a wonderful family for yourselves. Am I getting ahead of myself? Well, it could happen eventually. I feel like that could be a good thing...? Maybe...?

The bell began to toll. It was the bell for six o'clock in the evening. The time-keeping bell in Alterna started ringing every two hours at six o'clock in the morning. At six o'clock in the evening, it would toll seven times to inform people of the coming of night, then it would go to sleep until the next day. Shops in the marketplace would begin to close, while Celestial Alley would become more lively.

Haruhiro stopped in front of the Yorozu Deposit Company. “Hey.”

“You late, yeah!” Anna-san said, puffing her cheeks up angrily and jumping. “Maybe not, yeah?! Because you not actually late, yeah?! But, for date, the man has to come early?! Yeah!”

Haruhiro bowed his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You not acting with straightness, yeah?!?”

“...You mean sincerity.”

“With sincerity, yeah!”

“Oh, I get it,” Haruhiro said. *She meant being straight with her, huh? I mean, I thought she was talking about the other kind of straightness. How embarrassing.*

Haruhiro hesitantly looked up at the tall girl who towered over Anna-san.
“...Hey.”

“Yeah.” Mimorin smiled—maybe? Her expression never changed much, so it was hard to tell. “I’ve wanted to see you.”

Her words were direct enough there was no way to misunderstand. She was so direct that it made his stomach hurt.

“...I see,” he murmured.

“You, Haruhiro?” she demanded.

“Huh, me?”

“Did you want to see me, too?”

“Um...”

Haruhiro hung his head. It made him want to give a diplomatic response. If he did, that would have been easier. For the moment, at least. But he

couldn't do that.

Haruhiro raised his face, looking Mimirin in the eyes. "Maybe not so much."

"Gasp," she said.

"Saying that in a deadpan voice doesn't help..."

"I'm very hurt. My heart is broken."

"There, there, yeah." Anna-san rubbed Mimirin's back, or rather her butt. He could see the tears welling up in Mimirin's eyes, and even Haruhiro had to be taken aback by that.

"No, hold on—h-huh? Where's Kikkawa? He was supposed to be here today, too..."

"There were circumferences?" Anna-san said, continuing to rub Mimirin's butt as she shrugged. "*Oh! No.* Circumstances? That why Kikkawa not here, yeah."

"With Kikkawa, there would have been four of us, and we could have had a productive time getting to know one another. That was why I said okay to this..."

"In life, there is ups, there is downs! Yeah?" Anna-san said.

"I don't get it..."

"*Bullshit*, you need to understand a maiden's heart, darn it! Yeah!"

"It's fine." Mimirin wiped the tears from her eyes using both of her index fingers. "This isn't enough to discourage me."

Be discouraged, please...

Haruhiro did think that, but it wasn't like he wanted to break Mimirin's heart. If possible, he didn't want her to be hurt.

She might be in someone else's party, but they were like allies, so he wanted to get along. At the very least, he didn't want it to be a strained atmosphere. He didn't want anything special, just for things to feel normal between them. However, Mimirin didn't feel the same way for some reason, and he had repeatedly received invitations to go out with her through Anna-san.

At first, it had been for one-on-one meetings with Mimirin. Well, basically something like a date. It had been clear Anna-san was trying to get him to just go with the flow and hook up with her, so he'd politely declined.

That still hadn't made Mimirin give up, and Anna-san had probably gotten upset by it, too, so he'd been asked on dates over and over. Ultimately,

even Tokimune had asked him to *Please, go on a date with her, just once.*

If he'd kept on stubbornly refusing, he'd figured he might rub people the wrong way, but Haruhiro could be pretty stubborn. He had given conditions.

A one-on-one meeting was out of the question. Because, as he had already clearly told her, Haruhiro wasn't interested. If someone else was present, and it was strictly as friends, Haruhiro didn't hate Mimirin or anything, so he wouldn't have a problem with that. That was how it came to be that Mimirin, Anna-san, plus one other person would occasionally go out for food with Haruhiro, or they'd go on walks together.

This time, because they were back in Alterna for the first time in a while, the suggestion had been that the four of them—Mimirin, Anna-san, Haruhiro, and Kikkawa—would go to a decent restaurant to get dinner together. There had been no reason for him to say no, so he'd accepted.

Honestly, he'd still felt a little hesitant. But he couldn't deny they were starting to feel a little bit vaguely like friends, so maybe they could get through this fine? That was what he'd thought.

Maybe he'd been being naïve. He'd fallen right into their trap.

He wasn't pleased.

He wasn't angry either, though. Getting angry would only make him tired.

"Well, anyway, shall we get something to eat?" Haruhiro asked.

"I'll eat." Mimirin gave a powerful nod.

Whoa, thought Haruhiro. Mimirin's eyes are sparkling. Is she that happy?

When someone else is that happy, it's hard not to be happy about it. But, well, I don't dislike her, you know? As a person. I do think she's pretty weird, though. She's too tall, which means I have to look up at her and my neck hurts, but that's not a major problem.

The three of them headed towards a place Anna-san said she'd picked out. Surprisingly, the cook, who was also the proprietor, was an elf man. This restaurant was popular for its spicy meat and wide variety of vegetable dishes.

It was a long, narrow restaurant, and crowded, too, but they managed to get inside somehow. There was a small table in the back with four-legged chairs around it. Anna-san and Mimirin sat on one side, while Haruhiro sat across from them. The ordering was done by Anna-san, who really liked to be in charge on occasions like this.

The herbal beer went down easier than normal beer. Every dish gave off a

wonderful aroma that stimulated the appetite, and the flavor was quite good, too.

During the meal, Mimirin said nothing. Anna-san was talkative, though she always was. Also, Mimirin sat up straight, barely making any noise. The way she ate was very neat.

Anna-san's eating was pretty rough. To be perfectly frank, her manners were atrocious. The truth was, Haruhiro couldn't stand people who were always dropping their food, knocking things flying, and chewing loudly. He didn't tell her off or frown at her, but he did wish she could do something about it.

On that point, he had a favorable view of Mimirin. Honestly, he didn't hate her as a person.

"So?" Anna-san, who seemed to have gotten a little tipsy, fixed her gaze on him, then let out a belch that smelled strongly of herbs. "What unearths you not like about Mimirin? You are just a stupid Haruhiro. *What the hell, cherry boy!*"

"What on Earth, you mean..." Haruhiro glanced over to gauge Mimirin's expression.

Their eyes met. She was staring at him hard.

"Wait, that's what we're talking about? I'm ready to say let's just be friends, really..."

"You may be fine with it, but Mimirin is not fine, yeah!" Anna shouted. "Figure that out, dummy! *Understand?*"

"*No understand,*" he said flatly.

"*Why not?! Dead or death?!*"

"If those are my options, I'm dead either way..."

"No witty comebacks! You answer!" Anna-san banged on the table. "What wrong with Mimirin, yeah?! If you don't have good reasons, I won't forgive you, yeah?!"

"Anna-san, c-calm down," Haruhiro muttered.

"How can I calm down, huh?!"

"Well, at least keep it quiet..."

"*Why, you, why you so calm?! Fuck, you piss me off!*"

"I don't know what to say to you there."

The restaurant grew quieter as Anna-san got more and more heated up. This was really awkward.

Haruhiro loudly cleared his throat, rubbing his forehead. He didn't want to have this talk, but if he didn't give a serious answer, Anna-san wasn't going to stop.

"Well... I dunno," Haruhiro said. "It's not... what is it? It's not that there's something wrong with her, or that I dislike her, or anything like that, you know."

"Then," Mimirin asked, leaning in, "what?"

"Hmm..." Haruhiro closed his eyes, rubbing them with both his hands. "I'm not confident I can explain it all that well. I get the feeling... I lack the experience."

"It's the same for me," said Mimirin.

"And for Anna-san, too, yeah?!"

"...I-I see. Erm, so, it's, like, you know? It's not a logical thing, right? This kind of stuff isn't. I mean, obviously, yeah? There're things like liking the person's face, or them having been kind to you, that sort of stuff. The reasons people, basically, fall in love, and such? The triggers. In some cases, there may be one, but is that all there is to it? Maybe not...."

"I love you, Haruhiro," said Mimirin. "You're right, there's no logic behind it."

"No, listen—"

He almost said, *Thank you*, but he forced himself to stop. There was no question that he was feeling inconvenienced by it. If he thanked her, that would be a lie.

"Yeah," Haruhiro said. "Somehow, well, yeah... Like, right, erm, it's not what's not good about you, it's that I just don't have those sorts of feelings for you whatsoever, you know. It's bad of me to say that so bluntly. No, maybe it isn't?"

"Of course you are bad, yeah?! *Ohhh, Mimiriiin, Mimiriiin...*"

Anna-san lost her mind, trying to hug Mimirin around the shoulders—but, given their relative sizes, she couldn't possibly hug her. It was an impossible challenge.

Give it your best shot, Anna-san, Haruhiro thought. *Mimirin is still crying. But man, she sure looks like she's in anguish. When I look at her, it makes my chest hurt. That doesn't mean I'm going to give in to emotion, though.*

Anna-san started to tear up, too, and when she glared at him with her

teary, reddened eyes, he honestly wanted to run away. “Haruhiro is heartless! Such a cold-hearted man, yeah?!”

“Oh, sure,” he said. “I can’t blame you for calling me that.”

“You corn seed?!”

“Huh? Corn seed...? Oh, I concede?” Haruhiro asked.

“That! That’s the word, yeah?! How did you know?! That amazing!”

“Well, I’ll have to admit, I’m amazed I got it myself, but—”

“That doesn’t matter, yeah!” Anna-san yelled.

“Of course it doesn’t...”

“No,” Mimirin said with a sniffle. “Haruhiro isn’t cold-hearted.”

“What?!” Anna-san shouted.

“Haruhiro isn’t cold,” said Mimirin. “He’s just not a liar.”

“Nghhh.” Anna groaned, holding her head. “Not a liar? But...”

You’re starting to act like a middle-aged man there, Anna-san, thought Haruhiro.

“He just doesn’t say things that would leave a false impression.” Mimirin bit her lip hard. “He doesn’t give me, whom he doesn’t love, any hope.”

“Gwahhhhhhhhhh.” Anna-san started pulling out her hair, forcing herself to speak with a voice that sounded like she might start coughing up blood.

“Mimori!!!!!!in, you not have to say all that, yeah?!”

“I understand it.”

“Buuuut—”

“I love that about him, too.”

“Ohhhhhhhh!”

“I love you.” Mimirin stared at Haruhiro as the tears streamed down her face. “So, please, let me keep you as a pet. No, wrong one. Go out with me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I expected that response.”

Haruhiro went on hesitantly. “Well, you know... even if the whole pet thing is kind of weird, I can see you’re serious about this, and, well, I can understand, but... while I comprehend it, in my own way, still... but that’s what makes it all the worse... like, you know? I can’t just say whatever...”



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“*You idiot!*!” Anna-san shouted, pointing her finger at Haruhiro. “Are you stupid?! You at the age when you want to do it all the time! Day and night, you think about it! That’s you, young! Why not just go out with her and do it? You can, can’t you? You’re in mating season! Yeah!”

“You’re getting a little lewd there, Anna-san,” said Haruhiro.

“Shut up, yeah! You look! Mimirin’s boobies! Boing! She have very good body! She does, yeah?! You not want to sink your teeth into that?!”

“No, I’m not going to be doing that,” said Haruhiro. “I’m not Ranta. Well, he’s all talk, too, so I doubt he’d actually do anything.”

“Mimirin is head over eels for you!”

“You mean head over heels...”

“With her endless sexniques, she serve you endlessly, no doubt about it!”

“...Sexniques?”

“Sexual techniques are sexniques, yeah?! *Special technique! You know?!*”

“Yeah... Kind of. But you’re saying it kind of loud...”

“What’s more, she is a virgin! *Virgin!* Not even had her *first kiss* yet!”

“That’s true.” For some reason, Mimirin confirmed this with straight face.

Was that an important point, maybe? Haruhiro didn’t really get it, but there was one thing that seemed off to him if it was true.

“Huh? ...Then what about this *special... technique?*”

“I’ll study.” Mimirin nodded again. “It’s fine.”

“Just leave it to Anna-san, yeah?!” Anna-san thumped one hand on her ample, though not so ample as Mimirin’s, bosom. “Anna-san take her by the hand and teach her each and every *technique* there is, yeah!”

“You have a lot of experience... then?” Haruhiro asked hesitantly.

“Don’t be silly, pervert boy! I’m obviously a fresh virgin, yeah?!”

“No, but then—”

“Heh heh,” Anna-san put on a bold smile and pinched her own earlobe. “Anna-san knows so much about sex. I’m the kind of girl who comes along once in a century, you know? It will be easy.”

“...I see.”

“In my imagination, I make more than a million guys climax, you know?”

“Maybe you’re fantasizing a little too much.”

“It was obviously a joke, yeah?! Because Anna-san’s a pure, proper, holy virgin!”

“Okay, fine. Whatever...”

Haruhiro took a sip of his herbal beer and looked downwards. The inside of the restaurant wasn’t silent like it had been a moment ago, but Haruhiro and the others were still drawing attention, and more than a few customers were listening in. Anna-san sure liked her dirty jokes. Haruhiro didn’t especially hate them or anything, but he didn’t like them all that much, either.

“So, how about it?!” Anna-san took a long swig of her herbal beer, then let out a satisfied sigh. “For now, you try going out with her? Try it? Not a bad deal, yeah? Because, with her *nice body*, you drown in dirty desire *every day*?!”

“Yeah, no, I’ll pass.”

“Fuck you!” Anna-san flipped him the bird.

No matter what they said, he wasn’t going to cave in on this. Especially because they were his allies—but even if they weren’t, he’d have felt the same. He wasn’t keen on going out with someone he had no romantic feelings for. Or rather, Haruhiro felt it was impossible for him to do that. Even if she paid him, he’d feel that way. No, if he was offered money, that might make it even worse.

Maybe I’m just being stubborn? he thought. *I can’t deny the possibility, but the point is that that’s just how I am.*

“Is there any...” Mimorin started, then the tears started running again and she wiped them with her hand. “I’m sorry. For crying.”

“...No,” he murmured. He didn’t know why, but that made his heart skip a beat. Now why might that be? Why had his heart skipped a beat? Haruhiro himself didn’t know at all. “Y-You don’t need to apologize. Erm, it would help if you’d stop crying. It’s not like I want to make you cry. I don’t want you to cry...”

“This is a first for me,” said Mimirin. “I’m so sad, it hurts.”

“...Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault, Haruhiro. I just went and fell in love with you on my own.”

“Er, well, yeah, that’s true, but...”

“Can I continue with my question?” Mimirin asked.

“Oh, go ahead.”

“Is there any possibility?”

“...Of what?”

“Even if you can’t do it now. Someday...”

“Um, you mean at some point in the future?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Hrm...”

Haruhiro wanted to writhe and squirm, but he desperately restrained himself.

I’m not sure. That’s a really tough one. I’m stumped.

He felt that, maybe, telling her *No, at no point in the future would it ever be possible* might be the kind thing to do here. It was wrong for her to fall in love with someone like Haruhiro in the first place. Time wasn’t infinite. Even now, it was ticking by. It wasn’t as if he didn’t think she should give up on him and find someone else—but, you know?

Was that something for Haruhiro to decide? Mimirin, in her own way, had found something appealing in Haruhiro. As a result, she had fallen in love with him. Did Haruhiro have any right to deny those feelings?

Having worked alongside the Tokkis, he had gotten a sense for what Mimirin was like. True, she was strange. She was a mage, but she couldn’t ditch the habits she’d picked up as a warrior. It scared him when he saw her running up front and waving her sword around. However, she was strong, and she was good with a sword, too. She also cared deeply for her comrades.

Occasionally, she was adorable.

He didn’t really hate her as a person. If anything, he actually liked her.

The way she came straight at him and did nothing but push her affection on him was what he had a problem with. If not for that, honestly, he would have had no issues with her.

He even had a positive view of Mimirin’s personality. At the very least, he liked her enough that he wanted to respect her thoughts and feelings.

Haruhiro didn’t know what to do about Mimirin’s affection and thought, *If only we were just friends, that would be easier*, but even so... wasn’t it wrong for Haruhiro to try to change her values or feelings to get rid of her bothersome feelings for him? After all, Haruhiro was only thinking about his own convenience.

Besides, if he were to tell her there was no possibility of them ever getting together, sure, he could say that, but wasn’t it a lie? No one knew what tomorrow might bring. It was questionable whether they’d even still be alive.

Despite that, might it be best to tell that lie?

Or should he be honest to a fault?

What was right? What should he do for Mimorin? For Mimorin? Was Haruhiro really thinking of Mimorin? Wasn't he just pretending to care for her? Wasn't he being a hypocrite?

"Can I give it to you straight?" Haruhiro asked at last. "Well, I'm going to. I don't know what's possible. I don't know the future. That's not just me; it's the same for anybody. Just, right now, honestly, I think you're an interesting person. It's fun to watch you, and I don't mind talking at all, but I can't consider a romantic relationship. I really do feel like, 'Can't we just be friends?' I can't do anything more than that right now. Maybe, some years from now, I might decide I do like you that way, but I don't want to think about that. It's not reliable. Even if I started feeling that way, you might already have a boyfriend by then, and there would be nothing I could do about it. It's a matter of timing, you know. I can only speak for now, sorry. I have my hands full just worrying about the present."

Mimorin stared intently into Haruhiro's eyes, listening closely. It wasn't that Haruhiro didn't find that intimidating, but he did his best not to look away. When he finished, all of his strength left him.

I must have really sleepy eyes right now, he thought. He wasn't sleepy, but he was exhausted.

"I understand," Mimorin said, her whole face twitching. She narrowed her eyes, raising both corners of her lips in what was probably a smile.

She understood. Thank goodness. Haruhiro closed his eyes and let out a sigh. *That's a load off my shoulders.*

You know, my body's not that big, and my belly isn't either, so there's a limit to how much I can carry. I can only carry so many responsibilities. I lead the party, and I do my job as a thief. That's the limit for me. I don't have the time to think or do anything about other stuff.

That's right. Like romance. I don't have time for it. The same goes for Merry. If I'd had the room to do so, I'd have said something. Yeah. Maybe not. No way. It wouldn't have happened. Never. I couldn't have done it.

It's something to be grateful for, he realized. Despite his inadequacies, Mimorin had fallen in love with him. This kind of good fortune probably didn't come along often. It might never come again. This could be the last time. Rejecting it might be a terrible waste.

But what else could he do? It was true he didn't feel that way for her now.

He really couldn't lie about that. He didn't want to deceive himself, or to deceive Mimirin. He couldn't.

"Well, there you have it," he said.

"But I love you."

"...Come again?" he asked.

When he opened his eyes, Mimirin was staring at Haruhiro. Without a speck of doubt in them, her eyes were serious and filled with sincerity.

"Right now, I love you. I love Haruhiro. Is that wrong?"

"Whew..." Anna-san whistled, shrugging to the point that her shoulders touched her head. "Mimirin sure is stubborn. Like a rock, yeah? No, like steel, maybe?"

Haruhiro looked down at the ground and scratched the back of his head.
No... Is it wrong? I'm not the one to ask. It's not a matter of it being wrong or not. I have no right to tell her not to. That's Mimirin's choice. I have to respect that.

In the end, saying, *Thank you for understanding. Well, let's be friends,* then would be just a convenient way of handling it for Haruhiro. Whether Mimirin accepted it or not was up to her.

In the same way, whether Haruhiro accepted Mimirin's feelings or not was up to him, but Haruhiro couldn't change Mimirin's feelings. Mimirin's feelings belonged to Mimirin alone.

"It's not wrong," he said.

4. Paths Diverging Beneath a Different Sky



When everyone met back up, they went shopping. Kuzaku bought a new shield and helmet to replace the ones that had taken a considerable beating. Merry bought a staff with more attack power. As for Ranta's Betrayer Mk. II —a name that, of course, stupid Ranta had given his new sword—he haggled the price down as low as it would go. For the rest of the group, they just bought their daily necessities.

It was way more fun than they had been expecting. They could get their hands on a lot of stuff at the Lonesome Field Outpost, and they hadn't been left wanting for much, but Alterna had the better selection of goods. It was no contest. Just looking around at all of the stuff got them excited.

Even for Haruhiro, who was always being criticized for being boring, a downer, a wet blanket, and miserly... the experience of browsing the stock here was overwhelming, and there were times he felt like he might end up buying all sorts of things he didn't really need, but he desperately restrained himself.

When they left Alterna, they missed it a little.

They traveled west across the Quickwind Plains. Along the way, they camped out once, traveling roughly 35 kilometers on foot to reach the Lonesome Field Outpost at around two o'clock in the afternoon. If they entered the Dusk Realm and reached the settlement today, they would be able to start work as soon as tomorrow morning. Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis had intended to do exactly that, but...

In the Lonesome Field Outpost, they ran into Shinohara.

"Hey, Haruhiro," the man said. "Tokimune, too."

Shinohara hadn't changed a bit since the first time Haruhiro had met him.

He had a gentle-looking face, an easygoing demeanor, and he wore a white cape. The cape had a crest with seven stars in an x-shape. The mark of Clan Orion.

Haruhiro had noticed other men and women wearing Orion's white capes scattered around the Lonesome Field Outpost. Shinohara wasn't alone; he had the short-haired, narrow-eyed warrior Hayashi with him, as well as a bespectacled man with a crew cut.

Hayashi nodded to Merry, who returned the gesture with a slight nod and a smile. Hayashi looked surprised.

"...Wait, huh?" Haruhiro was startled, but pleased to see Merry able to greet her old comrade with a smile. He suppressed the cynical thought, *Yeah, and I'll bet that's thanks to him, too, huh*, rubbing his cheek with his fingertip. "Shinohara, are you guys pulling out of the Dusk Realm?"

"The truth is, we're not sure," the man said.

"Huh?! Huh?! Huhhhh?!" Kikkawa's eyes went wide. He jumped into the air and waved his arms around. "What, what? Did something happen? Was there a pening-hap?!"

"What's a pening-hap?" the guy with the crew cut and glasses asked.

"Wow, you're gonna call me on that?! Really?! Like, totally?!" Kikkawa yelled.

"Kikkawa, you annoying, yeah!" Anna-san slapped Kikkawa upside the head.

"Erm, well..." Haruhiro thought it was a pain, but that he ought to explain, at least. "A pening-hap is a happening... It's like he's scrambled the word, I guess..."

"Ohh." The crew cut guy suddenly started chuckling. "I get it, I get it."

He thinks it's... funny? It's really not.

"And?" Tokimune asked, flashing his white teeth. "Did something happen, Sheeno?"

"Sheeno??" Shihoru repeated under her breath dubiously.

"Because he's Shinohara!" Ranta (the piece of crap) shouted. "That's why he's Sheeno, huh!"

"Give him a -san, at least. He needs a -san," Haruhiro told them off, appalled.

Ranta (the piece of trash), who kissed up to the powerful and crushed the weak, quickly got down and did a kowtow. "I'm sorry! I got carried away!"

No, y'know, it was just the way we talk, or the spur of the moment, you could say! Like the way you talk about famous people without honorifics!"

"I'm not bothered by it." It was the mature response you would have expected from Shinohara.

"Heh..." Inui's one eye shone ominously—well, not that he actually had just one eye, he was just hiding the other one with his eyepatch. "He's just Shinohara, but he gets to be called Sheeno, huh..."

Whoa, Inui, you're being even ruder than Ranta, you know? Haruhiro thought.

"I've never heard it before," Mimirin said, blinking.

Huh? She's never heard that nickname before?

"I just came up with it now," Tokimune said with a wink and a thumbs-up. "It's the perfect nickname for him, am I right?"

"There's no denying it, yeah?!" Anna-san gave him a beaming smile and returned his thumbs-up.

"It's cuter than Shinoharadon and Shinoharacchom, at least," Yume added nonsensically, crossing her arms and nodding to herself.

"What?" Tada frowned. "Are you all stupid? Every last one of you? Shinoharaiden is better."

Kuzaku and Merry looked to one another with awkward smiles, then quickly looked away.

What, what, what? Why're you looking away? Go ahead, I don't mind. Why not just go off in your own little world together? You're not gonna? Hmm. Oh, I see. Not like I care.

"I'm fine with anything, really," Shinohara said. Even after all this nonsense, he was an adult, and he was laughing along happily with a smile that wasn't forced. "Now, as for the answer to your question... Yes, something happened. To cut to the chase, the Dusk Realm is becoming less appealing."

"Allow me to provide the rest of the explanation," the man with the crew cut and glasses butted in.

Wait, who is this guy? I've seen him before—I have, right? I don't know his name, though.

While Haruhiro was tilting his head and looking at the guy questioningly, the guy with the crew cut turned in Haruhiro's direction and grinned. "My apologies for the late introduction. I am Kimura of Orion."

“...Oh.” Haruhiro reflexively bowed. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

“I know who you are,” said Kimura. “You are Mr. Haruhiro. The one there is Mr. Ranta. Ms. Yume. Ms. Merry. Ms. Shihoru. Mr. Kuzaku. Mr. Tokimune and Mr. Tada, Mr. Inui, Anna-san, Ms. Mimori, and Mr. Kikkawa. Am I correct?”

He sure likes addressing people with Ms. And Mr., but he still addressed Anna-san with a -san, like he ought to. This Kimura guy is no ordinary customer, I guess, Haruhiro thought.

“Kimura-san and Shinohara-san are bosom buddies,” Hayashi explained.

“Possum buddies?” Yume asked.

Yume, that’s wrong.

“Moron, it’s boobie buddies, obviously!” yelled a piece of trash.

Ranta, that’s wrong, too.

“Chest friends, huh... Heh...” Inui was wrong, too.

“They’re syrupy friends, yeah?!” Anna-san’s was way out there.

“Whoa?! Like, they get into all sort of juicy and sticky situations together?!” Kikkawa shrieked.

What was Kikkawa getting so excited for?

“Gyudon is juicy,” Mimorin nodded.

There is one of those, though. A gyudon place. In Alterna. But there’s no beef in it, for some reason.

“Bosom buddies...” Merry seemed to be thinking about it deeply. “What’s that mean?”

“Oh, um...” Kuzaku didn’t seem to know either.

Bosom buddies, huh. Yeah, that’s a bit tough to define. You don’t really use the term often. I’m not surprised they wouldn’t know it.

Incidentally, Haruhiro had heard it before, and he could sort of guess at the meaning. Probably, it meant they were close, or something like that, right? Close confidants, that sort of thing? Shinohara and Kimura were? They made a bit of an odd couple.

“Heh heh heh.” Kimura let out a mysterious laugh that caused his shoulder to shake. “Me, Shinohara’s bosom buddy? You exaggerate. We’re simply friends. Of course there’s none of that BL stuff going on between us. Isn’t that right, Shinohara?”

“Yeah.” Shinohara’s response was still completely friendly. “If there were

BL-stuff going on between Kimura and me, that'd just be gross."

"Uwah ha ha ha!" Kimura laughed so hard, he had to grasp his belly.

"BL is short for 'boys' love,'" Hayashi was quick to explain.

"I know that much already, dummy!" Anna-san shouted at him.

What a chaotic mess, Haruhiro thought to himself. *This conversation is going nowhere...*

No, it would be more correct to say it *had* been going nowhere. After a good long laugh, Kimura efficiently and logically explained what had happened.

It was thought to have started five days ago when Iron Knuckle had attacked another cultist base and massacred the cultists there.

The assault itself had been a success, but two days later, which was to say three days ago, there had been a change in the Dusk Realm.

Incredibly, a giant god, a humanoid creature so massive it seemed to touch the heavens, had come and begun to chase after humans wherever it found them.

There had been sighting of the giant god off in the distance before. Haruhiro and the others had seen it a number of times themselves. However, the giant god had never approached them, and it had seemed to be a fair distance away from the initial hill.

They had heard that far to the southwest of the initial hill there was a basin, the Great Cauldron of the Gods, and the giant god wandered around in that area. They had also heard that the ones who'd discovered the Great Cauldron of the Gods and given it its name were Lala and Nono.

The giant god was so huge that it felt like it couldn't be real, and it was clear that messing with it would be dangerous. That was why, naturally, no one had been dumb enough to try, and even if it saw people, nothing really came of it. It was seen as essentially harmless.

However, that had suddenly changed—apparently.

It was "apparently" because no one had actually fought the giant god yet. That was why they couldn't decide if it seriously wanted a fight or not.

It was hard to imagine anyone was reckless enough, or rather, stupid enough to challenge a creature that huge to a fight. The moment they realized, *Oh, crap, it's here*, anyone would run away. Once they got a certain distance away, it wouldn't pursue, but what the exact distance was wasn't clear. If they had to be on guard against it at all times, that made hunting for

cultists and giants all the more exhausting.

Oh, this is getting bad, they had decided, so Orion had temporarily withdrawn from the Dusk Realm.

The situation might change, so it wasn't permanent. They'd decided to leave just one party behind while Shinohara and the others went and made money elsewhere for the time being.

"Iron Knuckle, again?!" Ranta shouted loudly. "Those assholes! Don't they think about how their actions affect everyone else?! It's a pain in the ass, that's what it is, dammit!"

"You're one to talk," Haruhiro muttered.

"Huhhh?! What'd you say about me, Parupiroooo?!"

"Ah..." Shihoru pointed off into the distance. "Someone from Iron Knuckle..."

"I'm sowwy!" Ranta immediately jumped into the air and did a kowtow. "I didn't mean it just now. Seriously, seriously, it wasn't me, our Haruhiro was saying it before, so...!"

"There he goes, subtly shoving the blame off on me... subtly, though," Haruhiro muttered.

"Whaaaa?!" Ranta screamed. "They're not there?! No Iron Knuckles! Shihoru, you tricked me! You secret, saggy titty bomber!"

"Don't call me weird names!"

"Shut up, saggy tits! For your crime, I sentence you to publicly change your clothes!"

"Heh..." Inui wore a smile of irredeemable evil on his old man face. "I, too, would like to burn that scene into my memory... However, I alone should be the one to see it!"

"Nobody's going to be seeing anything." Shihoru wrapped her arms around her body defensively, glaring at Inui like she would something filthy.

"You sure are a lively bunch." Shinohara was all smiles.

"They're just annoying." Tada adjusted the position of his glasses with his index finger. "What a bunch of dung beetles."

The dung beetle insult was a bit much, but Haruhiro couldn't have agreed more.

"The giant god, huh..." Tokimune looked to Haruhiro. "What do you want to do?"

Was there anything they even could do?

Considering the nature of the volunteer soldier trade, there was no way they could get by without taking any risks. That said, for Haruhiro's part, he wanted to avoid every avoidable risk as much as he possibly could. They were, technically, the discoverers of the Dusk Realm, so it was disappointing to have to do so, but it might be best to consider other options.

That was his opinion, and he said as much.

Now, as for the response he got, here's how things turned out.

"Whewwwww!" Up on top of that initial hill, Ranta let out a strange cry, his eyes wide.

It was the time of day when normally the sun would be setting, but here in the Dusk Realm, there was no morning and no night. It was always the same, the many-colored sky that spread out as far as the eye could say.

Beneath that indescribable, otherworldly dusk sky, a supermassive, lanky giant god was taking a leisurely stroll.

"How far away do you figure that thing is?" Kuzaku asked with a sigh.
"It's hard to get a sense for distance."

"Hrmm." Anna-san was riding on Tokimune's shoulders. "I say eighty kilometers? Around that?"

"Can't be that far," Haruhiro couldn't help but point out.

"Five kilometers... maybe, y'think?" Yume squinted at the giant god.
"Ten kilometers, maybe? Twenty, maybe? Yume's havin' a hard time figurin' it out, too. Whoooo. It's small, but it's real big, huh!"

"That's contradictory, but it sure does feel that way," Shihoru said with a nod, standing next to Yume.

Yeah, seriously.

Taking Yume's theory and assuming that it was a maximum of twenty kilometers away, that was pretty far off. If it was twenty kilometers off in that direction, even an extra-large, two-hundred-meter-tall giant would be a speck in the distance. Even that giant god wasn't so large that they had to look up at it from where they were.

But it was huge. That wasn't a size any living creature should be. It was a mountain. Not just a hill, it was a mountain.

He recalled the first time they had seen the giant god. It had been when they were returning from rescuing the Tokkis after they'd tried to steal a march on them.

At that time, Haruhiro had thought it was awfully large, given that it had to be several hundred meters away from them.

Several hundred meters?

Hardly. That time, it easily had to have been at least this far away.

No, farther.

It was like Kuzaku said. The giant god was so big, it messed with your sense of distance.

“It’s pretty fast, huh,” Tada muttered.

“It’s got some loooong legs...” Kikkawa sounded impressed for some reason. “Like, way too long. Its movements are surprisingly sharp, too. Wow, wow...”

The giant god was south of the initial hill, moving east to west. Its movements didn’t look all that sharp to Haruhiro, but they could make out the movements of its legs even from here, so it was by no means slow.

“Ah!” Mimorin sucked in her breath, pointing to the southeast. “There’s something there.”

“What *is* that?” Merry had a grim look on her face.

Kuzaku was looking sideways at her.

“That looks like a big one, too.” Tokimune licked his lips.

“Well, yeah,” Haruhiro said. *I’m sure it is.*

Haruhiro rubbed his belly. His stomach hurt a little.

This goes for all the Tokkis, but why does he sound like he’s having so much fun? Why is he so blatantly excited?

I know. That’s the kind of people they are. I know that, but I still get fed up with it. I’m used to that, though, y’know? I mean, we have Ranta.

Yeah. It was thanks to Ranta that he’d been able to get along with the Tokkis so far. That was definitely part of how he had managed it. If he hadn’t already been used to Ranta, even communicating with the Tokkis would have been difficult.

The Ranta effect sure was something. If people had a bad side, they had to have a good side, too. There could be no shadows without light.

However, he could also flip the theory around, and say that because he was too used to Ranta, they had ended up working with the Tokkis, and that was getting them into real trouble.

He could conclude that, in the end, Ranta was a plague upon the party. And, really, he *had* always been something incredibly close to a plague upon

them.

The big thing they saw out there, it was white and writhing. It might not be as big as the giant god, but it was pretty big. What on Earth was it? It wasn't humanoid. He could say that much for certain.

Is it an octopus... or something like that? Although I've never been to the ocean in Grimgar, I know what kind of creature an octopus is. It's... not really like an octopus. But, somehow, I can tell it's got a bunch of tentacle-like things, and it's like its moving them around to walk—No, maybe it's like a mass of tentacles?

From this distance, it was hard to say. It was much closer than the giant god. Two kilometers, three maybe. Or perhaps only one.

"It's cute..." Mimorin was staring passionately in its direction.

Haruhiro, Shihoru, Yume, Merry, Kuzaku, and even Ranta were shocked, but the Tokkis looked completely unfazed.

This is the problem with Mimorin...

"Um..." Haruhiro hesitantly raised his hand.

Tokimune looked to him with a "Hm?"

Now that they'd seen that thing—no, those things—with their own eyes, surely even the Tokkis would agree with Haruhiro. Or rather, they'd have the same opinion as him.

"Why don't we head back?" he said. "Those things are bad news. No matter how you look at it."

"You moron!" Ranta rounded on him. "You call yourself a man, saying stuff like that? Do you really have a pair of balls?! I'm asking if you've got a pair of balls hanging between your legs, you sissy!"

"Does that have anything to do with it?" Haruhiro asked. "Whether I'm a man or a woman?"

"Of course it does! It does, doesn't it, Tokimune-san?!"

"I dunno." Tokimune cocked his head to the side. "Maybe not?"

"It sure doesn't!" Ranta was quick to change his mind. "Ha ha ha! There's no way it would matter, would it? That's why I said so, Panpirorin! It doesn't matter if you're male, or female, or if you have balls! You really are a piece of crap who doesn't understand a thing, aren't you?"

"Balls, balls, balls, shut up already, yeah!" Anna-san snapped at Ranta from up on top of Tokimune's head. "You too vulgar, yeah?! We have many untainted ladies here!"

“You’re the last one I want telling me I’m vulgar! Even I’m not as bad as you!”

“*Do you know?! Ouch!* No, wait, what you mean?! You tiny-dicked, smegma bastard!”

“Um, anyway, moving on...” Haruhiro said, wiping Anna-san’s spittle from his face. “Can we go back? If we go now, we can make it back to the Lonesome Field Outpost today. We can decide what we’ll do from tomorrow on once we’re there...”

“Huh?” Tokimune blinked. “Why?”

“Hey, Haruhiro.” Tada put his hand on Haruhiro’s forehead. “Doesn’t seem like you’ve got a fever.”

“I don’t.” Haruhiro brushed Tada’s hand away. “If anyone here has a fever, I have to say it’s you people...” he muttered under his breath, despite not intending to.

“Heh...” For some reason, Inui burst out laughing. “Heh heh heh heh... Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

Hold on, he’s roaring with laughter. What’s wrong with this guy? Is he even human? Maybe he isn’t? He’s scaring me.

He’s really scaring me.

“Listen, Haruhiro,” Tokimune said, putting a hand on Haruhiro’s shoulder while Anna-san was still riding on his own. “I’ve got a surprisingly high opinion of you. If I say it’s surprising, does it come off as rude, maybe?”

“Nah, it’s fine. Call it surprising or whatever.”

“Well, anyway, you’re plain, and you’ve got basically no passion or spirit, but you’re calm, and you’ve got reasonably good decision-making skills, so it’s reassuring to have you as an ally. That’s because you’ve got something that we lack.”

“Flattery’s not going to get you anything from me, you know...”

“You’re kidding, right?” Tokimune asked.

“No, I’m serious.”

“Well, I don’t hate that about you.”

“You don’t, huh.”

I am happy to hear that, though, you know? As much as anyone would be.

He might not look it, but Haruhiro was happy in his own Haruhiro way. Probably. Though, that had nothing to do with the matter at hand.

“So, what about it?” he asked.

“I rate your skills highly, and I like you, but sometimes, I think, ‘Huh?’”

You guys don't just make me think “Huh?” sometimes, you make me think it all the time. If he told them that straight-up, it would probably just be a headache, so Haruhiro kept his mouth shut.

Tokimune flashed him a glimpse of those shiny white teeth. “Our goal is already decided, right? So what do you mean, we’re turning back? I’m not sure I understand.”

“Our goal?” Haruhiro repeated.

“Yeah.”

“What’s that?”

“A goal is something that you aim for and try to accomplish as part of your work, right?”

“No, I know that. I understand what the word ‘goal’ means.”

“Well, what do you want to know?” Tokimune asked.

“What this goal you think is already decided is...”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Tokimune gestured with his chin. “We’re taking that thing out, right?”

“...Whaaaaaa?” Haruhiro staggered.

What is this guy saying? Well, it did seem like something he’d say. But still, there’s no way that’s happening. He’s crazy, totally crazy. What kind of thought process could possibly bring him to that conclusion?

Shihoru, Merry, and Kuzaku were all shuddering. Yume was just sort of staring blankly; she didn’t seem to have any clue what was going on. Ranta, being the hopeless moron that he was, actually looked excited. The Tokkis were utterly unperturbed. Kikkawa was doing a little dance with Ranta.

Have they mistaken this for some kind of festival? They’re hopeless. I mean, come on... when he says “that thing,” he means that thing, right?

Either the giant god or the bizarre creature, right?

No matter how he thought about it, or didn’t think about it, it was impossible, right? That much was self-evident, wasn’t it? This was the sort of thing that was part of the collective understanding that all humans had, something every person was aware of, wasn’t it? It was, right? Yeah, it was.

Haruhiro was right. He couldn’t be wrong. So, what now?

At last, the time had come. It was here.

He’d suspected it would come eventually. Not that he had wanted it to. He had hoped it wouldn’t.

The Tokkis were a bunch of weirdos and they were a real mess, but they were fun people to be with. If you were to ask him if it was because he could use them, to be way too frank, yes, that was one aspect of it. None of the Tokkis were particularly mercenary. They weren't the calculating sort who hung around with people or helped them because they had something to gain. That didn't mean he could trust them implicitly, but the Tokkis would probably never stab Haruhiro in the back again. They weren't the type of people who would deviate from whatever code of honor they held. Still, there might come a day where they parted ways.

Haruhiro had worried it might come.

He was ready to accept that the Tokkis might drag them into situations that caused them some pain. These were the Tokkis, after all. If he didn't accept at least that much, the alliance wasn't going to work.

But that only applied to pain they could recover from. There were limits.

If they were going to take on those things, he had to be ready for more than just pain. Major damage, casualties, losses—He had to be prepared for death.

If they spontaneously found themselves in a situation where fighting them was the only option, that would be one thing. However, deliberately throwing themselves into that sort of peril was absolutely reckless.

If they discussed it as a party, others might disagree. That's why he wouldn't do that. This was going to be entirely Haruhiro's choice. He'd already decided. They were going to split up with the Tokkis.

He wouldn't say something naïve like, *Let's work together again, if the chance comes up*. That would be selfish reasoning, meaning, *You can count us out when it's dangerous, but if it's not dangerous, we're okay with joining in*. Sometimes working with them and sometimes not wasn't something Haruhiro wanted to engage in.

He looked Tokimune in the eye. *I'm sorry*, he was about to say—

Suddenly, beneath his clothes, that thing he kept in constant contact with him started to vibrate. "Whoa..."

In shock, Haruhiro completely forgot what he had been about to do. What was it again, anyway? Right, before that, he had to deal with this first.

That thing was hanging from his neck on a chain like a pendant. When he stuffed his hand down his collar and pulled it out, the lower end was shining green. It was an object like a black, flat stone. But this was no ordinary stone.

“What’s that?” Tokimune raised an eyebrow.

“Uh, um, this is...”

While Haruhiro was deciding whether to explain or not, the thing—the receiver—began to vibrate and produce sound. Not just sound, a voice.

“Members of the Day Breakers, are you listening? This is Soma.”

“Haeeee?!?” Anna-san let out a bizarre cry of surprise from up on Tokimune’s shoulders, her eyes popping out of her skull.

“Did he say ‘Soma’?” Tada adjusted the position of his glasses.

“By Soma, he means *the* Soma, right?!” Kikkawa looked ready to start dancing with glee at any second.

“Somatic...” Mimirin mumbled something irrelevant.

“Heh...” For some reason, Inui drew his sword and showed off a practice swing.

Haruhiro looked to Ranta, Shihoru, Yume, Merry, and Kuzaku.

They hadn’t told the Tokkis that they were a sad stain on the membership list of the Day Breakers. Ranta had wanted to boast about it, but Haruhiro had made him keep quiet.

I dunno. Honestly, it’s still hard to believe. We have the receiver as proof, so there’s no way it was a dream. Still, I just can’t quite see us as members of the Soma’s Day Breakers. It just doesn’t feel real. I mean, Soma’s never contacted us. I don’t know much about the Day Breakers, either. Even if you ask me to believe it, isn’t it kind of hard to?

It was hard.

“We plan to return to the Lonesome Field Outpost tomorrow night,” said Soma’s voice.

Still, when he heard Soma’s voice like this, he could believe it. He had to.

“I repeat. We plan to return to the Lonesome Field Outpost tomorrow night. If you can make it there, please come. I want to see you occasionally. Lilia, did you want to say anything?”

“Wh-Why are you asking me?!” her voice cried.

“Just thought I would. Can’t you?”

“It’s not that I can’t, just...!”

“I see. You can’t, huh.”

“I-I can! Please, hand me the sender.”

“Sure,” Soma said.

This was followed by the sound of Lilia clearing her throat. “I-I have

nothing in particular to say, but for many of you, it has been a long time since we've met. Look forward to it—No, I do not look forward to it, but you are free to feel as you will. Do as you please. That is all.”

The receiver stopped vibrating and the green light vanished.

Haruhiro sighed, looking to gauge Tokimune's reaction. Tokimune was deep in thought. What on Earth was he thinking? Haruhiro couldn't imagine.

“Erm... A-About this...” Haruhiro fumbled for words. “Well, what can I say...?”

“If we're doing it anyway, why not invite Soma along?” Tokimune asked.

“Huh?”

“To hunt the giant god.”

“...Come again?”

“Soma'd probably be up for it if we invited him along,” said Tokimune.

“Wha? Huh? Wait, hold on... You and Soma-san know each—Huh...?”

“We enlisted around the same time, and, yeah, you could say we know each other, I guess. We've gone for drinks a number of times.”

“No, but...” Haruhiro was at a loss for words.

But what? What is it?

Like, what should I do?

What's going to happen here?

5. My Natural Self



Whatever the case might be, Haruhiro had been wanting to meet with Soma. Well, he also felt like he didn't want to see him, but that was because he didn't feel he was worthy to, and he did still want to meet with him.

Soma, renowned as the mightiest of all volunteer soldiers; Kemuri, who was generous and powerful; Lilia, the beautiful elven sword dancer; Shima, the insanely sexy shaman everyone called "Big Sis"; Pingo, the creepy necromancer called the "Devil Child" for his childlike appearance; and Zenmai, the flesh golem that he created—none of them were normal. Each one gave off an exceptional aura, and they were, in fact, way ahead of the rest.

Even from a distance, they were a sight to behold. To put it in somewhat grandiose terms, Soma and his crew were living, walking legends. This wasn't just a chance to see these people. It might be a chance to talk to them.

No, not "might be." It was. After all, Haruhiro and the others were in the Day Breakers, too.

That said, he needed to think about it calmly.

That was what he told himself, but oh, man, they could meet Soma and the others. Oh, man, seriously, what should they do? What should they talk about? How should they greet him? What if he'd forgotten them? Yeah, that probably wouldn't have happened, but still, you never knew. Despite all appearances to the contrary, when they interacted with him directly, Soma had been a bit of an airhead. He might have completely forgotten Haruhiro and the others.

These were the sorts of thoughts that raced through Haruhiro's head.

Tokimune was planning to hunt the giant god and wanted to get Soma and his group mixed up in the action. That was something Haruhiro couldn't just

ignore. He needed to do something, but first they needed to head back to the Lonesome Field Outpost. They could talk about whether or not that was a good idea during the time it took for Soma to get there.

He was gonna do that. He totally was. He was, okay? Really, he meant it.

And so, having made it back to the Lonesome Field Outpost, they decided they should get something to eat in the back streets.

While Haruhiro was standing in line for one of the stalls, thinking, *Okay, I'm gonna say something, I'll bring it up, definitely*, an unfamiliar man spoke to him.

“You’re Haruhiro-kun, right?”

“...Yes, why?”

He definitely didn’t know this old guy. The guy looked to be around forty or so, maybe. He was nothing if not an old man from Haruhiro’s perspective, but he seemed pretty incredible.

For starters, he was well-built. He must have stood over 180 centimeters tall. He wasn’t just tall, though. He was broad and thick, too.

He had a gentle face, with wrinkles from smiling that reached his eyes, and his calm, low voice gave off a favorable impression, but somehow, he was threatening. Judging by his armor and the shield he carried, he was a paladin.

The old guy had company.

One of his companions was short and slender, a man who, unsurprisingly, was also in his forties. He looked like an artist of some sort and was wearing a priest’s outfit.

Next, there was a mage who looked to be in her thirties. She was older than Haruhiro, but not the kind of person he’d have felt right calling ma’am. She was incredibly beautiful.



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The woman standing next to that incredible beauty was huge. She reminded him of Kajiko of the Wild Angels, only she was way older than Kajiko. She must have been in her thirties, too. She wore a massive sword slung over her back. She was a warrior, no doubt.

The remaining two were—Haruhiro opened his eyes wide despite himself.
They weren't human.

The two of them were both men, but otherwise they were contrasting figures.

One had a short, barrel-like body. Not fat, though. He was a mass of muscle. No, a mass of muscle and beard and body hair, to be fully accurate. Much larger than his hairy, boulder-like body was the powerful-looking and terrifying ax he carried.

He was a *dwarf*.

The other was the opposite of a dwarf. He was slender. He was similar in height to Haruhiro, maybe a little taller. He looked like a beautiful and fair-skinned young boy. He was very pale, and the color of his hair and eyes seemed not so much bright as thin. He had a somewhat sharp look in his eyes, looking stubborn. He carried a bow and quiver, so maybe he was an archer.

The thing to take note of was his ears.

Long and pointed.

He was an *elf*.

“Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!?” Kikkawa suddenly let out a strange cry. “An older paladin, a priest, a mage, a female warrior, and a dwarf, could you possibly be hiiim?! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaakira-san, riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiight?!?”

“Wait! Akira,” Ranta whispered and then immediately got down and kowtowed. “I-I-I-I-I-I-I’m very sorry! How clumsy of me! I accidentally called you just plain ‘Akira’! I’m so, so sorry, Akira-san! Please, please, overlook this mistake!”

“What a funny boy,” said the thirty-something beauty with a laugh.

Ranta’s cheeks turned a little red. “Heh heh. I’m a *funny* boy. Heh heh heh.”

“Akira-san...” Haruhiro covered his mouth with his hands. “Wait, you don’t mean *that* Akira-san?”

Soma and his group were living, walking legends. Naturally, as *walking* legends, they walked around places. That meant that, although they were

legendary, they actually existed, and if you were lucky, you might pass by them somewhere. In fact, before Haruhiro and his party had ended up joining the Day Breakers by chance, they had once had Kemuri treat them to a round of drinks at Sherry's Tavern.

But *Akira-san* was different.

Any volunteer soldier who didn't know *Akira-san*'s name had to have been living under a rock. He was that famous, but *Akira-san* was far more distant than Soma and his group.

From what Haruhiro had heard, before Soma and his group had made their name, *Akira-san* and his party had long been seen as the strongest volunteer soldiers.

When Soma and his party had appeared, *Akira-san* had recognized their skills and praised them as the strongest. That was what had cemented their reputation.

That said, it had done nothing to diminish *Akira-san*'s dignity.

For instance, there were some volunteer soldiers who boasted, "I could take Soma in a one-on-one fight and win." In other words, there were volunteer soldiers who thought themselves his equals, whether they said it aloud or not. Influential clans like Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers felt especially competitive towards Soma. So while many volunteer soldiers praised Soma as the strongest, his position as such was by no means absolute.

That was the difference between him and *Akira-san*. No volunteer soldier would compare themselves to *Akira-san*. It would be presumptuous for them to even think about whether they were stronger or weaker than *Akira-san*.

To put it in extreme terms, it would be like comparing your height against a mountain. It was natural for humans to be shorter than the mountains, and strange to even attempt to make the comparison. *Akira-san* wasn't so much on another level as in another class altogether.

Akira-san had laughed, saying, "I'm getting old," and then casually pushed the title of strongest off onto Soma and his party. Then, one day, he had set off on a journey with his comrades, never to be seen again. That was the sort of unverifiable story, practically a legend, that Haruhiro had heard about him.

Now they were saying this man was *Akira-san*? This old man?

"Ah..." Tokimune blinked. "Man, it really is *Akira-san*."

"I've met you before," said *Akira-san*, or the old man who supposedly

was him, flashing Tokimune a wonderful smile. “Tokimune-kun. Tada-kun and Inui-kun. I believe it’s my first time meeting those young men and women.”

“Hey,” Tada said. And then the guy who looked like he had common sense at first glance, but was more arrogant than anyone, bowed his head.

“Heh.” Inui... grinned. “It’s an honor...”

“I’m K-K-Kikkawa, man! It’s a meet pleasure to you... No, that’s not it! It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Me A-Anna-san, yeah! You can call me Anna, too, though, okay?”

“I’m... Mimori.”

Oh, wow. Haruhiro was stunned. The Tokkis were acting all meek and quiet.

In contrast, Shihoru, Yume, Merry, Kuzaku, and even Ranta, who was on the ground kowtowing, were all stiff and nervous. Yume wasn’t the type to let someone’s *name* bother her, but she must have sensed something from Akira-san and his group.

It wasn’t oppressive by any means, but it was something.

Like, *They sure are adults*, or something like that? Although Akira-san was probably old enough to be their father, so they were clearly the children here. But it wasn’t just the age difference. It was experience. It was their weight, breadth, and depth as individuals. There was just too great a gap between them in all of those things. They could sense that clearly, but without having it feel like it was being rubbed in.

Akira-san was natural. That just made him more incredible.

“It’s a bit embarrassing to give my name at this point, but...” Akira-san said, extending his right hand, “I’m Akira.”

“Oh... uh... yeah.” Haruhiro wiped his right hand on his cloak, wiped it, and wiped it again, and then took Akira-san’s hand. “N-N-N-N-N-Nice to meet you. I-I-I-I’m Haruhiro.”

“It’s a pleasure,” said Akira-san, shaking his hand.

A handshake. I’m shaking hands with the Akira-san. His hand is big, warm, dry, powerful, and gentle. I could probably brag about this, huh? To whom is the question, though.

No, hold on.

There are other questions here, too.

“Wait, huh? Why would someone like you be looking for someone like

me?” Haruhiro asked.

“I heard about you from Soma,” Akira-san explained like it was no big deal.

“From Soma-san?”

“Yeah. You all came here to meet with Soma, too, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, well... You’re right. Huh? Us ‘too’—Wait...”

“I’m Gogh.” The short man in a priest’s outfit produced a black, rectangular stone from his pocket. “It’s inconvenient that this is about all we have as proof of membership, isn’t it?”

“That’s...” Shihoru gasped.

“It’s a receiver!” Yume cried, clapping her hands to her cheeks.

“Then, that means...?” Kuzaku looked to Merry.

“It can’t be—” Merry held her chest and tried to calm herself.

“Yeah,” the female warrior said, clearly having a good time. “It means we’re comrades. Oh, by the way, I’m Kayo. Gogh is my honey.”

“Your honey...” Haruhiro felt dizzy enough to faint, for some reason.

“Yeah, kinda.” Gogh may have felt a bit embarrassed, because he looked off in the opposite direction. “It’s true, Kayo’s my wife. And this here is our son.”

“I’m Taro,” the elf boy brusquely introduced himself.

“Wait, but...” Ranta rudely looked back and forth from Gogh and Kayo to Taro.

“As you’ve already inferred, we’re not related by blood.” Taro glared at Ranta. “But Mom and Dad are my real parents. Did you want to say something about it?”

“Nope! Not a thing! No, no, no, no!” Ranta laughed, shaking his hands back and forth. “Wouldn’t dream of it! Geheheh! Nothing I’d want to say, you know? I mean, blood ties don’t matter anyway! If anyone wants to obsess over that stuff, I’ll kick their asses myself! Gahahaha! B-By the way, um... What is the name of the lady over there?”

“Me?” The beauty pointed to herself. “Did you want to know something about me?”

“No, um, well, like, if you’re available, maybe...”

“I’m an old woman compared to you,” the beauty said. “I’m thirty-seven.”

“Thirty-seven?!?” Ranta shouted in disbelief. “You don’t look it! Not at all! No way! That’s the biggest shock in my whole life! Besides, who cares

how old you are?! You're above and beyond something like that!"

"Thanks. I'm Miho."

"Miho-saaaan! M-M-Marry meehee!"

"I'm sorry," Miho said, placing a hand on Akira-san's arm. "I intend to devote my life to this guy here."

"Gwarrrrrghhhh! My love, struck down in an instaaaaaaaant!"

"Are these people going to be any use?" the dwarf snorted. "I can't imagine Soma choosing them."

That's fair, Haruhiro thought. Especially Ranta. I mean, Ranta, I don't think I've been this embarrassed by you in a long time. I wish I could kill you and then die myself.

"Branken." Akira-san gave the dwarf a look of rebuke before turning a friendly gaze—or at least, one that felt that way—to Haruhiro. "I had been looking forward to meeting all of you. After all, I knew Rock and Io and their groups before they joined, but you guys, I only first heard about through Soma."

"Yeah, I imagine you wouldn't have met us," said Haruhiro. "Um, I dunno what to say, but we haven't been volunteer soldiers long, and we have no accomplishments to speak of..."

"You took down Death Spots, didn't you?" asked Akira-san. "I hear you performed well at the offensive on Deadhead Watching Keep, too."

"W-Well, yeah, we did!" Ranta puffed up his chest with pride. "Young up-and-comers! That's us, I'd say! No denying we've got a real future ahead of us!"

"Man..." Haruhiro wanted to give Ranta a good, hard punch, but he couldn't muster up the energy to do it.

"Hmm." Tokimune looked back and forth from Akira-san to Haruhiro. "The Day Breakers, huh. I was surprised to hear Haruhiro was with them, but you are too, Akira-san? I feel like I heard from Kikkawa that the Rocks and Io's party joined up with him, though."

"They're, like, totally the strongest!" Kikkawa was shaking his head around like he couldn't restrain himself any longer. "Awesome! The legends, the original legends—Typhoon, the Rocks, and Io-sama's team! It's, like, a dream team, or something?! No, like, a real dream?! Like, dream, dreamier, dreamiest?!"

"Oh. Right." Tada walked up, looking at Akira-san with appraising eyes.

“Hey, bud. Er, Akira-san.”

Whoa, there. Haruhiro was startled. *Did you just call him “bud”? Huh? What happened to meek and quiet mode? Kikkawa seems to be getting back into his groove, too. Whaaaaa...?*

“You know about the Dusk Realm?” Tada didn’t even make an attempt at being polite.

“We haven’t been there yet.” Akira-san didn’t seem to mind. “But we’ve heard of it.”

“There’s this crazy monster there,” said Tada. “Like, so crazy it’s even got me excited. It’s a giant god.”

“Oh?”

“We’re planning to invite Soma and the others along, but do you want a piece of the action, too?” asked Tada.

He’s inviting them. He’s totally inviting them.

Haruhiro pinched the bridge of his nose. He was starting to cry.

What? What the hell, Tada? Don’t pull this kind of crap. This is Akira-san, okay? You’re asking the Akira-san if he wants a piece of the action, like some two-bit hoodlum. If you want to invite him, there’ve gotta be better ways. Like, in how you say it. Besides, it’s not okay. You wouldn’t invite him, not normally. Well, Tada’s never been normal. I knew that, but still. Isn’t he a bit too abnormal?

“Let me think about it,” said Akira-san.

Man. You’re such a nice guy, Akira-san. The way you’re being considerate to him. You don’t even get upset at someone as brazenly arrogant as Tada. You’ve got such character. It’s wonderful. Haruhiro was moved.

“Huh?” Tada snapped.

So, why’s Tada got a vein pulsing on his temple? Isn’t that weird? Has he gone nuts, maybe? He’s clearly not normal, right? I mean, it’s totally weird, right? It’s not something to snap over, is it? He’s got nothing to be mad about, right?

“What’s with that response?” Tada snarled. “Like you’re trying to dodge the question. Me, I hate it when people do that. Are you interested or not? Be clear about it.”

Oh, that’s his issue? Haruhiro thought. I get what he’s saying. I get it, but he doesn’t need to snap over it.

Haruhiro, his party, and even the other Tokkis were looking on in

disbelief. As for Gogh, Kayo, Miho, Branken, and Taro's reactions, he was too scared to check.

"Hmm." Akira-san's face stiffened. Or rather, he had a serious expression. At last, Akira-san nodded slightly.

Did he just bow his head?

"I'm sorry. You're right, that response I just gave you was close to being a mere formality."

"Yeah." Tada mussed his own hair. "So, what's your response?"

"It sounds interesting, but I can't decide on the spot."

"Why's that?" Tada demanded.

"There are two reasons. First, I have no information on this giant god."

"That's what makes this interesting, isn't it?" Tada shot back.

"You have a point there." Akira-san wore a strangely childish, mischievous, and surprisingly nasty smile. "Here's the other one. We're meeting Soma tomorrow."

"That's just a matter of going to the Dusk Realm afterwards, you know."

"If we end up going, that's how it'll be," said Akira-san. "You said you mean to invite Soma, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then let me talk to Soma about it, too."

"I couldn't ask for a better outcome," Tada said.

"I can't reply immediately." Akira-san was still smiling. "But I'm inclined to go. You seem like you'd be fun to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with."

"I'll guarantee that." Tada grinned and thrust his fist out. "I only know you from rumors, but I know myself pretty well."

Akira-san bumped fists with Tada. "Let's make sure we bring Soma, too. Fighting alongside him is stupidly fun."

"Ha ha ha." Tada clapped Akira-san on the shoulder.

"Ohoh!" Ranta jumped up.

"Yahooey!" Kikkawa jumped into the air, too, and let out a bizarre cry.

"It getting exciting now, yeah!" Anna-san made V-signs with her hands and spun in circles.

Mimorin was staring down at Branken for some reason. She probably thought he was cute.

"We did it, huh, Haruhiro?" Tokimune flashed his white teeth and poked Haruhiro in the side.

Haruhiro said nothing. For now, he just wanted to crouch down. He wanted to sit down. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to sleep for a long time.

You can't give an immediate reply? No matter what you say, if you're saying you'll bring Soma along, Akira-san, you're already set on going, aren't you? I don't like it...

I don't like it...

I just don't get people who aren't normal, and I don't like it...

6. Priorities in Life



Haruhiro's favorite kanji was the one for "ground." He didn't like absolutely everything about it, but he liked most of the words and expressions it showed up in. "To have one's feet firmly on the ground," for instance.

He was more of a "ground" person than a "sky" person. He would rather be an insect crawling on the ground than a bird soaring through the sky. He didn't particularly like insects—he hated them, actually—but for all that people said, "You're gross," or "You're annoying," or "Don't come out," or "I hope you go extinct," or insulted them, insects kept on stubbornly surviving. He respected them for that. That was why you could say this job perfectly suited Haruhiro.

Beneath the many-colored sky of the Dusk Realm, Haruhiro held a shovel tightly. This goes without saying, but a shovel is a tool for digging holes and scooping dirt. He had been able to procure them at the Lonesome Field Outpost.

Haruhiro thought it suited him perfectly. He was a man who looked good with a shovel. That was cool. No, maybe it wasn't. He didn't need to be cool.

"Delm, hel, en—" Mimorin chanted as she used her staff to draw elemental sigils. "Balk, zel, arve."

When she did, the ground was blasted away and dirt and sand scattered all over, leaving a hole about 1.5 meters in diameter.

The was the Arve Magic spell, Blast. Maybe because she had just learned it, it wasn't as powerful as they had hoped. That had to do with the mage's basic skill, as well as her mastery, which was different for each school of magic.

"Mimorin, one more shot, go! Yeah!" Anna-san hollered.

With Anna-san egging her on, Mimorin let out a strange grunt of

“Mnngh,” then began casting her magic again. “Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve.”

Dungh.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve.”

Zongh.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve.”

Bokongh.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve.”

Bugoom.

“Delm, hel, en...” Halfway through the incantation, Mimirin bent over and rested her weight against her staff which she thrust into the ground.

“...Tired.”

“You worked hard!” Tokimune winked and flashed her a smile before lifting up a shovel. “Okay, let’s dig!”

The five holes Mimirin had opened in the ground with Blast were spaced ten meters apart in all directions. Haruhiro, his party, and all of the Tokkis except for Mimirin and Anna-san, so ten people in total, each took a shovel and began work on expanding the holes. They widened and connected the five holes, creating one much larger hole.

What were they doing, you ask? Don’t you get it?

“Zoooooooooooooreeeeeeee!” Ranta yelled.

“...Ranta,” said Haruhiro. “You’re too noisy. Can’t you just shut up and work?”

“No can do! If I shut up, my spirit will break down out of boredom!”

“Let it break...” Kuzaku muttered while swinging his shovel.

“What’d you say?! Kuzacky, why youuuu?!” Ranta screamed.

“You really are noisy,” Merry said coldly, brushing her hair back behind her ear.

“Oh, I’m being noooooisy. Soooorry, okay? It’s fiiiine. I’m used to being criticized like that. Me, I don’t care oooone bit what you say about me. Hyuk, hyuk, hyuk, hyuk.”

“You’re the worst,” Shihoru spat at him.

“Yayyyy! I’m the worst! I’m the worst kind of human ever!
Bugabugaboo!”

“Stupid Ranta! How about you stop runnin’ your mouth and start movin’ your hands, huh?” Yume snapped.

“I am moving my hands. Look at them go! Lookie, lookie, lookie!”

In fact, the more Ranta talked, the faster his shovel moved. It was pretty—no, very—creepy. Ranta was harmful and his actions were toxic.

Should I tell him off? Haruhiro thought it over for about three seconds. Nah. Leave him.

This was (worthless) (stupid) Ranta (the piece of crap). He'd argue back no matter what Haruhiro said. It would have the opposite effect. Following the most important principle in handling Ranta, he ignored him.

I have enough trouble already just with the digging, Haruhiro told himself.

It was heavy labor, but little by little, the hole was steadily expanding. It grew on him as he did it. Personally, he didn't mind work like this.

But why are we doing this anyway?

“Yeah, you know what...” Tada threw down his shovel and picked up his warhammer, which he had left sitting nearby. “Chipping away at this is gonna take forever. Let's speed things up.”

“Whoa, man!” Kikkawa cried. “Tadacchi, you're gonna go for it?!”

What, Kikkawa, are you trying to kiss up to him? Haruhiro thought. Well, he always seemed like the type.

“Heh...” Inui sat down. “I'm bored.”

“You no say you bored, yeah!” Anna-san smacked Inui upside the head.

Not that it matters, but Anna-san really doesn't participate when there's physical labor involved, does she? Haruhiro noted.

“Here goes!” Tada did a run up and then a somersault. “Somersault Bomb...!”

Boom... Tada's warhammer exploded and left a huge dent in the ground.

“Looks like it'll need more than that, huh,” Tokimune said teasingly.

“Tch...” Tada clicked his tongue and got ready for another Somersault Bomb. “I'll give it as many as it takes! Somersault Bomb!”

Fine, just do whatever you want, Haruhiro thought. But what are we doing this for...?

Why?

He understood, of course. He wouldn't be digging if he didn't know the reason. Digging suited Haruhiro's personality, but he didn't like it enough to make a hobby of it.

Just after six o'clock on the day after they'd first met Akira-san, Gogh, Kayo, Miho, Branken, and Taro, Haruhiro and the others had met up with Soma at the Lonesome Field Outpost.

It had been a bit hectic then. Soma was something of a star, after all, and not only with the volunteer soldiers. When the back street merchants, and even the frontier army soldiers spotted Soma, *Hey, that's Soma, man, Soma. It really is Soma. Isn't that Soma? It's Soma! Whoa, Soma in the flesh...* That's kind of how things went.

Then there was Akira-san and his group on top of that, so it was a real mess. It was like a little—no, that's a lie, a huge—festival was created on the spot.

It was decided they'd go for food and some drinks in the back streets, but Haruhiro and the party were all so tense, they couldn't say much of anything. Even though it was so loud with all of the onlookers, even Ranta was as quiet as could be.

Meanwhile, Soma and Akira-san's groups were both, with some exceptions, friendly and welcoming, so everyone got used to it eventually. *Where've you been? What've you been up to?* They got to the point where they would have been able to ask those questions.

Until the Tokkis barged in, that was.

"Hey, Soma." Tokimune was easygoing.

"Yo." Tada was brusque.

"Heh..." Inui made no sense.

"Here's Anna-san, yeah!" Anna-san was her usual Anna-san self.

"Hey." Mimorin waved one hand.

"H-Heya, hey, heeeeaya!" Kikkawa was the only one whose voice cracked a little.

When the Tokkis came in making a racket, Akira-san looked amused. He said, "Oh, yeah, come to think of it—" and brought up that topic. "I hear there's something interesting going on in the Dusk Realm that Haruhiro-kun, Tokimune-kun, and their group found a little while back."

Soma chewed his meat for a while, then swallowed. "Something interesting?" he responded. "I'd like to hear what it is."

"How about it?" Akira-san asked. "Why don't we all go check it out together?"

"Let's."

“That was fast...” Haruhiro murmured under his breath without meaning to.

“Hm?” Soma’s eyes opened wide with surprise and he looked at Haruhiro. “What was fast?”

“Nothing,” Haruhiro said, flustered. “Uh, let’s see, how fast you decided, how instantly...”

“It’s a real problem,” Lilia said with a look of exasperation on her nonetheless all-too-beautiful face. “I know I always say this, but please, consider your current position and act with prudence, Soma. You are too impulsive at times.”

“Ooh, she’s mad.” Shima gave a sexy little laugh.

“Well, yeah.” Kemuri rubbed his cheek. He had been clean-shaven the last time they’d met, but now his beard had grown a fair bit. It matched his dreadlocks well. “Still, that does work in our favor sometimes.”

“It’s because he’s an idiot,” Pingo said, narrowing his eyes in a way that didn’t suit his childlike face. “Uheheh... Poor thought resembles rest, and so an idiot’s thoughts seem to be at rest... In the end, he’s an idiot, so it’s pointless for him to think. There’s no medicine to cure stupidity...”

“I wish there was a cure.” Soma looked down, as if in thought, then his head snapped back up with a sudden realization. “I’m an idiot?”

“Did you think you weren’t?” Pingo asked. “Uheheheh...”

“Pingo.” Lilia gave him the side-eye. “You’re going too far. We elves have a saying: Be courteous even among close friends, and—”

“Well, I don’t see the harm, Lilia,” Soma said placatingly.

Lilia’s cheeks burned crimson with anger. “Who do you think I’m saying this for!?”

“Who?”

“Huh...? Th-That’s, um... B-Basically...”

The way Lilia fidgeted around was incredibly cute. It was a salve for sore eyes, but it didn’t comfort Haruhiro’s heart. That was because Tokimune’s scheme had succeeded. Just succeeded? No, it had found an unbelievably great success. Soma, Akira-san, and the Day Breakers were all going to invade the Dusk Realm, it seemed.

The rumors raced around the Lonesome Field Outpost, spreading at an incredible speed.

Me, too! Me, too! People hastened to join.

Incredibly, by the end of that night, messengers from “One-on-One” Max of Iron Knuckle, and “Red Devil” Ducky of the Berserkers arrived. On the next morning as they were preparing to depart, Shinohara of Orion came to meet with Soma directly.

Now that things had become such a big deal, *Nah, I think we’re gonna sit this one out*—was something Haruhiro didn’t have the guts to say. After all, Soma of the Day Breakers was saying he was going to do it. Haruhiro was part of the Day Breakers, the clan Soma had founded. Even if they were at the very bottom, they were comrades.

He couldn’t say it. Couldn’t say, *No way. We can’t do it.* It would be pathetic, embarrassing, and he would disappoint Soma and the others. He didn’t want them to look down on him.

Ignoring the Tokkis for the moment, if Soma’s party, Akira-san’s party, Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, and Orion were all taking part, it might not be that dangerous for them, after all. It was hard to deny that this thought had begun to take root in Haruhiro’s mind.

Well, I’m curious, too. It would be a lie to say I’m not.

When not only the current and former strongest volunteer soldiers, but also a number of famous clans gathered, what would happen? How would they fight? What sort of scenes would unfold there? Just how much higher of a level were all of them on?

Yeah, I want to see that. If we could just watch, honestly, I’d give anything to see it. It’d be a waste not to.

However, Haruhiro and the others just so happened to be in the Day Breakers. They couldn’t get away with just watching. They’d need to do something. He couldn’t ask for them to be left out because they were pitifully weak, no matter how much he might have wanted to.

But what can we do?

At ten o’clock in the morning, a total of twenty-four people entered the Dusk Realm: eighteen members of the Day Breakers (Soma’s party, Akira-san’s party, and Haruhiro’s party), plus the Tokkis.

While standing on the initial hill and looking to the giant god and that mysterious, massive white creature, Haruhiro thought about the situation.

No, he had been thinking for a while now.

Before long, Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, and Orion would catch up with

them. When that happened, these guys might start the fight right away.

One of the hunting skills Yume had acquired had given him the hint he needed.

Pit Trap.

“U-Um.” Haruhiro worked up his courage, as if he were about to jump off the stage at Kiyomizu. *Uh, what’s a kiyomizu again?* he wondered, as he said, “H-How about we lay a trap? Would that be a good idea... maybe? I think it might be... Like, instead of just fighting them straight-up, we should use everything we can...”

The plan that Haruhiro had needed to work up enough courage to jump off the stage at Kiyomizu to be able to suggest brought on a debate.

Just a debate, though. Like, if they were going to set a trap, what kind should it be? Or, what was their estimate on the giant god’s size, and how large would it need to be to accommodate that?

Soma’s and Akira-san’s parties in particular—though Zenmai the golem was an exception to this—had a spirited exchange of opinions on the topic.

They’re so different from us, Haruhiro painfully realized.

No one acted like it didn’t concern them. Not one of them acted like it wasn’t their problem, or like they weren’t good at thinking and it was a hassle, so they’d leave it to the others to decide. Though some would make jokes, mock the others’ ideas, or criticize them harshly, the debate never got bogged down, and things proceeded at a brisk pace.

Haruhiro’s party and the Tokkis were left on the sidelines. He didn’t know how the Tokkis and Ranta felt about that. But Haruhiro was, presumptuous as it was to be, frustrated.

He was also surprised to find himself frustrated. After all, Haruhiro was just an underling here. He knew he was the lowest of the low. It was only natural that they would be inferior to Soma and Akira-san’s parties, and it was a given that they’d be completely different.

He was frustrated? Huh? What was he getting so serious for? What a laugh. If he was an underling, he ought to sit in the corner like one, nodding along with whatever he was told, and at least stay out of the incredible people’s way. He really felt that way. Because they were different. They were made of different stuff. He could struggle all he wanted, but there was no way his party could ever be like Soma’s and Akira-san’s.

Right?

Yeah... That was right.

Could he not accept that? Did that mean he hadn't given up yet, maybe? It wasn't as if his own group didn't have some potential. At the very least, they didn't have absolutely zero. Was that what he was thinking? Was this the drive for advancement of someone who was the plainest of the plain? His sense of responsibility as their leader?

Whatever it was, he was definitely frustrated, and he didn't want to stay that way. Haruhiro did everything he could to involve himself in the discussion. He didn't manage to say much of anything, but they did decide to set traps.

It was decided that Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis would dig one pit trap, and Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, and Orion, who arrived at the initial hill one after another at around ten o'clock in the morning, would also each dig one. The locations were decided on by consensus.

In the time it took for the traps to be completed, Soma, Akira-san, and their parties would act as bait and lead the giant god and white creature on a chase while observing them.

From Iron Knuckle, a total of eighteen members under the command of "One-on-One" Max and Aidan would participate. The Berserkers had a total membership of over thirty, but seventeen of them came under the command of "Red Devil" Ducky and his second-in-command, Saga.

Orion also had over thirty members. Of them, four parties, for a total of twenty-four people including Shinohara, Kimura, and Hayashi gathered.

The Day Breakers had eighteen, including Soma's, Akira-san's, and Haruhiro's parties.

The Tokkis had six.

On top of that, there were five parties with no clan affiliation, or whose clan was spread out, for a total twenty-five people. That included the duo of Lala and Nono.

Incredibly, Tokimune's random idea had spawned a massive operation involving one hundred and eight people.

And so, Haruhiro was swinging his shovel and diligently digging.

Incidentally, Lala and Nono had shrewdly joined the diversion team, and the twenty-three volunteer soldiers who weren't digging were on standby in the settlement, which had become pretty desolate with more than half of the

merchants clearing out.

“But still...” Haruhiro wiped the sweat from his brow. He looked at the hole. “This isn’t as easy as I thought...”

Thanks to Mimirin’s Blast magic, they had managed to at least make a hole that was around ten meters across. However, the depth was a meter and a half at best. Even if a person fell in, all it was going to do was make them sprain an ankle or land on their rump. It wouldn’t do anything to the giant god.

“Who knew digging a hole could be this difficult?” Haruhiro muttered.

It looked like Ranta and the Tokkis were no longer in the mood to joke around. They were digging quietly.

No, not Ranta. He was rubbing his backside, crouching down, wandering around, and generally slacking off. Even Anna-san, the cheerleader, was doing the unfamiliar work of digging, but not that piece of trash.

“I’ll do it.” Mimirin, who had been kneeling and meditating with her eyes closed, stood up. So Haruhiro and the others got out of the hole for a moment.

“Mimirin, focus on one spot,” Haruhiro called.

Mimirin nodded and began to chant as she drew elemental sigils with her staff. “Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve.”

Boom. Mimirin slammed a Blast into the middle of the hole.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve. Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve. Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve. Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve.”

Five shots, pretty much sequentially. Like Haruhiro had told her to, Mimirin was triggering all of her Blasts in practically the same spot. Thanks to that, that section caved in and got pretty deep.

Mimirin stumbled, supporting herself with her staff to stop herself from falling. For Mimirin, who wasn’t good with magic despite being a mage, it seemed firing off five sequential blasts was hard on her.

“If I could use Blast, too...” Shihoru looked down and mumbled. “Instead of Ice Globe, I should have gone all the way and picked up Arve Magic...”

“Heh...” Inui blew her a kiss. “If you’d like, I wouldn’t mind being your Blast.”

“No thanks,” Shihoru replied immediately and firmly. “You being my Blast? That makes no sense. It’s creepy, too...”

“Meoooow!” Yume stretched. “Well, time to get back to diggin’.”

“Hold on, are we ever gonna finish this?” Ranta whined. Despite having done the least of anyone there, that piece of trash was losing heart.

“My back hurts...” Kuzaku sighed and put a hand on his lower back.

“You okay?” Merry glanced over to him.

“Oh. Uh, yeah. I’m fine.”

“Okay, then.”

Without intending to, Haruhiro composed a haiku in his head.

*Oh, to be so close,
What an incredible thing
That must be.*

- Haruhiro

Only he botched the syllable count.

No, this was no good. His heart felt like it was rotting away inside him. How could Haruhiro act like this when he was the one who’d suggested the idea?

“L-Let’s do our best, guys,” he said. It ended up being a weak, listless call to action.

“Yeahhhh...” Kikkawa’s response was just as unenthusiastic.

“I really not good at this stuff, yeah...” Anna-san said.

“Anna-san, you take a rest.” Tokimune flashed his white teeth and told her that with considerably less energy than usual.

“It’s weird.” Tada, on the other hand, seemed to be angry. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Why am I digging a hole?”

Yeah, that’s my fault. Haruhiro wanted to apologize, but what good would come from him bowing his head? It might help with the guilt, maybe? Then what? What came after that? They couldn’t very well stop digging the pit trap now. If they were going to do it, they had to go all the way.

Haruhiro resolved himself to continue, and stabbed his shovel into the earth. He went at it with all his energy, digging out a line.

The line eventually connected to itself, forming a circle with around a twenty-five-meter diameter. The current hole fit completely inside it.

“The enemy’s ridiculously huge, and clearly way too strong! I don’t think we can possibly prepare enough for this! L-Let’s dig!” Haruhiro called. “Dig that pit trap! I’m digging! I want you all to dig, too! It could come in handy...”

maybe, no, definitely, I think! S-So, um..."

"Dig." Mimirin dropped her staff and picked up a shovel. "I'll dig."

"Yume's gonna give it her all, too!" Yume breathed heavily through her nose as she tore into the earth.

Shihoru bit her lip. "Depending how I use them, Shadow Echo and Thunder Storm might help..."

Merry was silently swinging her shovel.

"Well, my body's pretty tough, after all." Kuzaku was steadily digging a hole.

"Bah! If I have to!" Ranta shouldered his shovel with an insolent attitude.

"Aww, yeah!" Kikkawa yelled. You could always count on Kikkawa at a time like this. "I'm on fire, fire, fire! I'm burn, burn, burning up!"

"I'll just have to be patient until it's time to fight." Tada adjusted his glasses with his left index finger. "Until then, I guess I'll dig to whet my appetite."

"Heh..." Inui opened his one eye that wasn't covered by an eyepatch wide. "Until the fated time comes for I, the one they call the Black Wings...!"

He made as little sense as ever.

"Let's be patient and keep at it." Tokimune gave them all a thumbs up. "Digging the hole is important, but if we exhaust ourselves doing it, it defeats the purpose."

"Yeah. You're right." Haruhiro hung his head.

Balance. It's important to keep a sense of balance, he thought.

When he thought about it, because he was the one who had proposed making a trap, he couldn't deny he had been fixated on the thought that, no matter what, he had to make a great pit trap.

What was the most important thing here? He couldn't lose sight of that. Right. What was the most important thing?

To defeat the giant god.

That was it.

Is it? he wondered.

Was that actually what was most important for Haruhiro and the others?

"Huh? You know, I'm having a hard time seeing it that way..." he murmured.

7. Disposition



But, well, you know?

It wasn't as if Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis did nothing but dig a hole for three days and three nights. There were no nights in the Dusk Realm, so saying it that way was strange... maybe? Yeah? Anyway, in those three days, less than half of those seventy-two hours were spent digging the hole. It was twenty-four hours, at best. The rest they spent sleeping.

No, no, that wasn't true. Naturally, they did take breaks, and did sleep, and even took turns going back to the settlement to bathe, but they did other stuff, too.

Taro wandered by and suggested they come see the giant god and hydra themselves. Incidentally, the hydra was that writhing white creature. Taro's father, Gogh, had given it that name.

"It's a good name." The young boy of unparalleled beauty, Taro, whispered to himself, his face bursting with an unrestrainable happiness.
"The hydra. It's cool. Dad's awesome. He sure is my dad."

Following Taro, who had a deep respect and love for his father, and probably his mother, too, Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis approached the giant god and the hydra.

Both the giant god and hydra were constantly on the move, chasing after the decoy teams, so ultimately, the closest they could get was about fifty meters away. Even that was more than dangerous enough for them.

The giant god, in particular, was of a size that could only be said to transcend human understanding, and when Taro told them it was estimated to be 300 meters tall, they could only say, *Oh, okay then. Is that all?*

Haruhiro was around 170 centimeters tall, so 300 meters was roughly 176.5 times that. Even compared to Kuzaku's 190 centimeters, it was still

156.25 times his size. There wasn't even any point in comparing.

Defeat that thing? No way. Impossible. What kind of joke was that? There was nothing they could do. There was no way it was gonna work.

That was why, according to Taro, the decoy parties were thinking it might be a little much to handle on this outing.

Well, duh.

Like, what did they mean, "On this outing"? Was there going to be another one? Were they going to take it on next time? Were they stupid? Or just incredible? Did people who were so incredible just experience things differently?

Whatever the case, it was good news for Haruhiro that the giant god was getting crossed off the target list.

I mean, just think about it. Haruhiro's feet were 25.5 centimeters long. If he multiplied that by 176.5 times, he got 4,500.75 centimeters. That was over 45 meters.

That thing wouldn't fall into a pit trap that was 30 meters across. As for the depth, with its massive, 300-meter-tall body, even if they were being fairly conservative, they would want around two hundred meters.

Not possible.

Even setting aside the pit trap, it was impossible.

For a start, while it was true that the giant god looked humanoid when seen from a distance, and it walked like one, too, it was closer to a moving, pure-white megastructure. It was insane to think of killing that thing in the first place. At the very least, they should talk about "destroying" it instead.

Also, if they were going to destroy it, Haruhiro had to humbly think it was going to require heavy weaponry of some sort. Like siege weaponry, maybe? Though, even if they were able to collect enough of it, the enemy was hardly going to sit there quietly while it was destroyed. No, it would probably attack, and that wasn't going to be simple to deal with. This was purely Haruhiro's view, but wasn't it kind of impossible?

Now, as for the hydra...

It must have been because they had seen the incredible spectacle of the giant god first before going to see the hydra. That must have been it. Because when Haruhiro looked at it, his first impression was, "Huh? Is that all?"

At a glance, it was maybe the size of a two-story building. No, maybe a little bigger. Also, it was long.

The hydra was a many-headed creature that looked like a mass of white snakes up to two to three meters thick.

It had nine heads, resembling snakes, but surprisingly without eyes. The creatures of the Dusk Realm all seemed to have one eye, so he would have expected one per head, but that wasn't the case. Maybe that meant they weren't in fact heads, but were actually tentacles after all.

The hydra moved by twisting a number of those tentacles around. It seemed four tentacles were used for moving. The remaining five were writhing in the air as if searching for something. They might actually have been feelers of some sort.

"We can take that thing easily," Tada said with a laughing snort.

I don't know about easily, but it feels more manageable than the giant god, and—No, no, no, no, no... Haruhiro shook his head. Hold on, hold on. I say that, but it's still crazy huge, okay? If I got hit by one of those tentacles, I'm confident I'd die instantly.

The hydra was around fifty meters ahead of Haruhiro and the others, traveling west, but wasn't that kind of close? Had they gotten too close? Right now, the five tentacles it didn't use for moving weren't pointing at them. In other words, the hydra either didn't notice Haruhiro and the others behind it, or it didn't care.

But what if it did notice? What would happen then? Wouldn't that be bad?

"Um, shouldn't we get farther away...?" Haruhiro ventured.

Taro looked back to him while continuing to walk. "It's fine. This distance is safe. Probably."

"Probably?"

"Nothing in this world is 100% certain." My dad told me that."

"Well, that might be true, but..."

"No, not 'might,'" said Taro confidently. "Dad's words are absolute."

Huh? Wasn't nothing supposed to be 100% certain?

How mad would this pretty boy get if Haruhiro poked at the holes in his logic like that? That'd be something to see. No, he didn't want to see it, and didn't want to get him mad. That sounded scary.

Incidentally, Haruhiro and the others were pursuing the hydra at a little more than a jog. Tokimune was carrying Anna-san on his back because he said it would probably be hard for her to keep up, but Haruhiro had to think he was a little too easy on her, even if she was their mascot.

“Who’s acting as the decoy?” Ranta asked.

Maybe Taro didn’t hear, because he didn’t answer.

“Hey, who is it? Hey? Who’s the decoy? Hey? Hey? Hey? Hey, why’re you so quiet? I’m talking to you, you know? Heeeeey. Hey, hey, heeeeey. Can you hear me? I’m asking you, can you hear me? Hey!”

“I hear you.” Taro didn’t even spare a glance in Ranta’s direction. “But I don’t care to answer. My mom told me, ‘Life’s too short to waste time talking to morons.’”

“What, I’m an moron?!?” Ranta yelled.

“Yeah, you’re a moron.” Haruhiro couldn’t help but agree.

“You’re a moron, all right,” Yume concurred.

“Worse than a moron...” Shihoru looked like she had her own opinion about just how much of a moron Ranta was.

“It’s true that it would be a waste,” Merry said coldly.

“Well...” Kuzaku, who had refrained from saying anything, might have still felt the need to hold back.

“Ahaha!” Kikkawa clapped Ranta on the shoulder. “Well, I love how much of a moron you are! One man’s trash is another man’s treasure, right?!?”

“Shove off!” Ranta yelled. “You’re annoying, Kikkawa! I’m not trash! If they want to throw me out like trash, I’ll throw them out first!”

“We wouldn’t mind that, you know?” Haruhiro said.

Ranta panicked. “You—you—you moron! That’s not what you’re supposed to say! You’re supposed to be, like, ‘Don’t say that!’ and tell me off! Tell me I’m not supposed to talk about throwing people away or being thrown away!”

“Ranta!” Tokimune flashed him a nice smile with his pearly white teeth. “You’re so high-maintenance!”

“Tokimune-san?! You know, that didn’t feel like a compliment to me!”

“It not compliment, yeah?!?” Anna-san gave him the middle finger from up on Tokimune’s back. “What kind of warty boar’s ass did you come out of, you rotten dick?!?”

“Heh...” Inui gave an evil smile. “Fall to ruin, you dog of the end...”

“Dog?” Mimirin looked around.

I don’t see any dogs here... Haruhiro agreed.

“Who is the decoy?” Tada asked, as if nothing had happened.

This time, Taro gave him a proper answer. “The hydra is primarily being

led around by Pingo's golem Zenmai. The giant god was Lala and Nono, I think. It was those two. Since they came here on horse-dragons."

Horse-dragons were small dragons that walked upright on their hind legs. If a dragonet was raised from an egg, it could be trained to carry a human like a horse. Having seen them at the Lonesome Field Outpost from time to time, at first Haruhiro had thought he'd like to try riding one someday. However, when he'd learned that horse-dragons had their wings removed at a young age to make them suitable for riding, he had quickly lost any desire to.

"I see." Tada nodded and stopped walking with a sudden jolt. "Heeeeey, you stupid hydra! Look at me! Yeah, me! I'm here! Right here!"

Were humans able to shout that loudly? Just how was he managing to make that loud voice? Wasn't he transcending the limits of the human body?

Haruhiro stopped in horror. Everyone else did the same. Even Tokimune and the other Tokkis were aghast.

"Wai—" Taro stopped, his eyes wide. "What are you...?"

"Come at me! Heyyyy!" Tada pointed his warhammer at the hydra. "I said, come at me, you wimp! Are you feeling cowardly?! Did you realize you can't beat me?! You're just an oversized weakling!"

That was when it happened.

The hydra didn't stop. Rather, with its size, it might not have been able to come to a sudden stop. However, its speed clearly slowed.

One of its tentacles, the head-like section on the end of it, turned to face them.

Finally, the hydra stopped moving forward.

A second, then a third tentacle moved, and their eyeless heads turned towards Haruhiro and company.

"Heh..." Tada shouldered his warhammer, adjusting the position of his glasses with his left index finger. "Finally noticed me, huh. Took you long enough. Way too long."

Tada, Haruhiro thought. What do you mean, "Heh"? Tada!
Tadaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

Even if he said it out loud, it would have no effect. Haruhiro realized that much. It wasn't uncommon for even basic conversations with Tada to break down. Well, what could he do then?

"Oh, for the love of...!" Haruhiro sputtered. He'd do this.

Haruhiro grabbed Tada by the collar of his priest outfit.

“—Gweh!” Tada squealed.

Maybe he was choking him, but Haruhiro didn’t care. It was Tada, after all. He’d survive.

“Everyone, run!” Haruhiro shouted.

He took off in a mad dash. Fortunately, the Tokkis followed him because it seemed amusing, so they were all able to start fleeing without a hitch. The biggest worry was the hydra’s actions.

If it came after them, would they be able to get away? What would happen if it caught them? Would they have to fight? Or rather, would they have to die? It was unbelievably terrifying just to think about it, but the hydra didn’t come towards them.

Had they gotten lucky? No, the decoy Zenmai must have done something to successfully provoke it. They had a lot to thank Zenmai for.

Once they had put 200 meters between the hydra and them, Haruhiro let go of Tada. He was sweating terribly. That had been scary.

“Man!” Tada held his throat, closing in on Haruhiro. “That hurt, you know, Haruhiro!”

He butted their foreheads together, but Haruhiro somehow held his ground. He only said, “Ow!”

Tada’s eyes were bloodshot. He was damn scary. But if Haruhiro backed down now, that seemed more likely to get him killed. He didn’t understand Tada, and doubted he ever would, but that was the sense he got.

“R-Reflect on what you just did!” Haruhiro shouted. “That was dangerous, you know?! I don’t even want to know what you were thinking, and I won’t ask, but please, cut that crap out, seriously!”

“Shut up! You’re the one who oughta reflect!”

“I wasn’t wrong, so I won’t!”

“What’d you say?!?”

“I won’t reflect on it! Y-You ought to!”

Ohh, was it okay to go this far? Was it dangerous? He didn’t know. But if he didn’t push back against the pressure Tada was putting on him, he’d probably be taken lightly. In order to push back, he probably needed to put up a strong front.

“You reflect, Tada!” Haruhiro screamed. “You can’t put your comrades in danger on an impulse like that!”



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“Ha ha!” Tada laughed as he ground their foreheads together again.

Haruhiro didn't back down. He couldn't. He couldn't retreat. With all he'd said, if he backed down and apologized, he'd look like a total fool. He was close to crying, but he wouldn't cry.

"A novice like you, trying to tell me..."! Tada moved his head back and forth. Their foreheads rubbed together.

Someone save me, Haruhiro pleaded silently. Someone stop him. Like Tokimune.

However, the moment he looked away from Tada to seek salvation from one of the others, the contest would be decided. That was the sense he got.

“E-Even if I am a novice...”

“Even if you’re a novice, then what?!” Tada screamed.

“...I can tell what’s right and wrong better than you can!” Haruhiro finished. “If you’re going to be like a child who can’t tell the difference, I’ll have to put you on a leash and lead you around!”

“Oh, ho.” Tada suddenly drew back, adjusting the position of his glasses with his left index finger.

Haruhiro nearly fell forward.

“Not bad.”

...Did he just grin? He seems happy? Haruhiro was stunned. I don't get him...

But I'm saved—I think? he thought uncertainly. At the very least, it doesn't look like I'm about to get beaten to death. No, if I let my guard down, he might come at me with his hammer, maybe? Just to be safe, maybe I shouldn't let my guard down?

“Haruhiro.” Tokimune flashed his white teeth and gave him a thumbs up.
“Nice fight.”

Oh, shut up, Haruhiro thought, but he was too timid to get angry.
“Thanks,” he said, bowing his head a little.

“Pft...” Taro burst out laughing, then covered his face with both hands.
“Hehehehehe! Ahahahaha! You’re weird! You’re all so weird!
Bwahahahahahahaha! Gwahahahahahahahah!”

He was laughing. Laughing like crazy. Laughing so hard, it looked like he was gonna keel over. The sight of the elven pretty boy doubled over with laughter was unexpected, and it took Haruhiro aback.

Taro stayed that way for a while, then suddenly cleared his throat and put

on a serious expression. But his face had turned red. Even his long ears were red. He might have been embarrassed.

“Dad once said, ‘Laughter is the best medicine,’” Taro said solemnly.

Well, okay then, Haruhiro thought. What a strange elf.

Regardless, in between events like that one, Haruhiro’s party and the Tokkis took seventy-two hours to dig a hole that was around thirty meters across, and roughly three meters deep. They set up a number of support beams inside the hole, put nets that came from the merchants remaining in the settlement over top, and then camouflaged it with grass to make it more like a real pit trap.

It was easy to tell from up close, so it could hardly be called a perfect job. Still, if they lured a giant creature like the hydra on top of it, maybe it might fall in? Possibly? Honestly, there was no way to know until they tried.

They had agreed in advance to gather back at the initial hill once they had a finished pit trap. The initial hill was to the west of the settlement.

Haruhiro and the others had built their structures around five kilometers south of the settlement. It was going to be along the way, so they had decided to stop at the settlement. They had finally become accustomed to their work as volunteer soldiers, so no one asked for luxuries like a proper bath, but they did want fresh water to drink.

Even before they reached the settlement, everyone thought something was strange. To put it more clearly, they had a bad feeling about it.

The giant god was visible far off to the west. If it was moving, that was not really a problem.

The thing was, it wasn’t. It was standing still.

Just before they reached the settlement, Anna-san idly said, “That... direction of initial, yeah...?”

Yeah, Haruhiro thought.

It was pretty noisy inside the settlement. While most of the merchants had packed up and left, there were still seventy to eighty volunteer soldiers gathered there, after all.

No, if they had only been gathered there, it wouldn’t have been this noisy.

“What was that, jerk?! You wanna fight?!” “One-on-One” Max of Iron Knuckle was closing in on a man with blazing red hair as if he might try to grab him at any moment.

There were men forming a wall around the two of them, jeering and

shouting, and that was why it was so noisy.

“Do I want to fight?!” The red-haired man who wasn’t just tall but had a big eyes, a big nose, and a big mouth, too, shouted at Max and didn’t back down a bit. “You’re damn right I want to fight, Tiny!”

“Who’re you calling tiny?! I’m not tiny, you’re just stupidly big!” Max yelled.

“Don’t blame others for your being tiny, Tiny!”

“Tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny”—is that all you can say, Fatty?!”

“What about me are you calling fat, Tiny?! I keep my body fat percentage in the single digits, so don’t underestimate my body, you tiny little shit!”

“How the hell are you keeping your body fat percentage down?! Don’t act like you’re hot stuff just because you dye your hair red, you big loaf!”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘oaf,’ you ignoramus!”

“Don’t try to pick grits with the way I speak, you red-haired ass! You wanna get burned?!”

“What the hell is picking grits?! And if you think you can burn me, then burn me, you ape!”

“Who’re you calling an ape, you ape?!”

“Nobody who’s called me an ape is still alive now! Not that anyone ever has, though, okay?!”

“I’ll call you it as many times as I want! You ape, ape, ape, ape, ape, aaaape, ape!”

“Why, you...!”

Red Hair’s fists roared through the air. Max... didn’t dodge. That was probably intentional. Without avoiding the blow, he lowered his waist and took the hit with his left cheek.

Max shook for a moment, but he held through it. “Your wimpy punches don’t hurt or even itch!”

“Oh, yeah?!” Red Hair battered Max’s knees with a low kick this time. “Then how’s this?!”

“Ugwahhhh!”

What a kick. It was bold and powerful, yet sharp. It looked almost like both of Max’s legs were broken. Yet still, Max was standing. With a smile, too.

“Gyahyahyahya! That won’t work on me!”

“You’re putting on a strong front!” Red Hair punched Max in the face

once, then again, and again harder. “It’s your one strong point, you little ape! Take this!”

“It doesn’t! Hurt! Dammit! Not! At all! Gwahrah!”

“Kuh?!” Red Hair pulled back the boulder-like fists he was pummeling Max with.

His head. He’d punched Max in the head. No, had Max let him punch his head? The skull could be pretty hard. If it hit at the right angle, it could even deflect a steel sword. Still, Max was covered in blood at this point.

Doesn’t that hurt? Has he completely lost it? That was all that Haruhiro could think.

Max immediately grappled Red Hair. Grabbed him by the lower extremities. He immediately pushed him down. He mounted him, raining punches down on Red Hair from above.

“Oorah! Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah!”

Red Hair was defending his face with both arms—or so it looked, but Max’s violent rush of attacks was incredible.

There’s no way he can fight back like that... The moment Haruhiro thought that, Red Hair thrust his right fist up from below.

If it had struck his chin, Max would surely have gone down. It would, without a doubt, have knocked him unconscious.

But Max twisted aside, dodging it by a hair’s breadth—and that wasn’t all. Without missing a beat, he seized Red Hair’s arm. He contorted himself around, going to put the joint in a lock.

However, Red Hair reacted quickly, too. He stood up, pulling Max up with him, who was clinging to his arm.

“Uwahahahaha!” Red Hair immediately swung his arm down, trying to slam Max into the ground.

Haruhiro imagined a scene of him being splattered, but that didn’t happen. Before he could be crushed, Max let go of Red Hair’s right arm. With a flexibility and nimbleness that made him look like an invertebrate, he spun around once and got back up.

“That’s not gonna work on me, Ducky! It’s the second time, after all!”

“I figured it wouldn’t! I still can’t forget how it felt smashing you up that time! I want another taste of it!”

“Well, isn’t that a coincidence? I dream of that time I beat the shit out of you sometimes, too!”

“Uwahahaha!”

Red Hair suddenly came out of his fighting stance and offered Max his right hand. Max grinned and slapped Red Hair’s right hand with his own.

The men around them all erupted into applause.

“Max! Maaaax!”

“Ducky’s the best!”

“Max is strong!”

“You moron, Ducky’s clearly stronger, you know?!”

“If they went at it for real, Ducky’s the one who’d die!”

“Shut up, you anus!”

“Now you said it, you stupid berserker!”

Some of the men were insulting each other, but they didn’t seem like they were ready to kill each other. It would have been a bit much to say they were getting along great, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

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

“It’s just an insult, probably,” Haruhiro said, trying to keep as calm as possible. “Anyway, you shouldn’t say that word.”

“Anuuuuus?” Yume looked at him, mystified. “Why?”

“No, it’s fine, I guess,” Haruhiro muttered. “Not really, though...”

“Now listen, Yume,” Ranta said with a sigh, putting his hand on Yume’s shoulder. “Let me tell you about the anus. It’s, well, hard to explain in words, so I’ll point out where it is. You know how you’ve got an ass, right? Well, inside your ass is—”

“...Filthy,” Shihoru muttered to herself.

“Clever!” Kikkawa pointed to Shihoru.

Shihoru shrunk into herself. “I... I wasn’t trying to make a joke.”



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“‘One-on-One’ Max and ‘Red Devil’ Ducky, huh.” Tada pushed up his glasses with his left index finger. “Yeah, they’re no match for me.”

“Those two are always going at it.” Tokimune looked at the two of them like a proud father might. “I guess it’s like they say—the more you fight, the better you get along.”

“I can’t understand that...” Merry shook her head.

“They were drawing blood...” Kuzaku seemed a bit weirded out, too.

“Heh...” Inui said.

I wish Inui would stay quiet, thought Haruhiro.

“To think they would begin that ritual without me....” Inui continued.

Because nothing he says makes a lick of sense.

“Oh, stupid fuckers! There other things to do first, yeah?!” Anna-san jumped up with her cheeks puffed up. “Other things? Why, shit? What was it? What?”

Honestly, what was it they ought to be doing first, huh? Haruhiro closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Perhaps he had always been the patient type. Either way, he felt like he had built up an impressive level of tolerance.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Shinohara approaching with a group of men and women in white capes. When compared to Max of Iron Knuckle and Ducky of the Berserkers, people it didn’t seem like he would ever understand, Shinohara seemed like a savior. He even had a halo of light around him. Was that an illusion?

Well, of course it was an illusion. There was no way he’d have an actual halo of light around him.

“Urk...” Mimorin grimaced a little and narrowed her eyes.

Was he too brilliant for her? No way... could Mimorin see that halo of light, too?

Haruhiro blinked to confirm it for himself. No, not even Shinohara, great as he was, gave off a halo of light. That was obvious.

“Hey, Haruhiro, Tokimune,” Shinohara greeted them. “It looks like we’ve gotten into a bad situation, huh.”

“Hello,” Haruhiro nodded, looking at Shinohara with upturned eyes, “A bad situation? What do you mean by—”

“Allow myself, Kimura of Orion, to explain,” the bespectacled man with the crew cut butted in.

This guy again.

“We noticed that the giant god had stopped moving roughly two hours ago. Our pit trap was already complete, so we decided to pinpoint the giant god’s current location. Not exactly a difficult task. If you approach the giant god, its location becomes readily apparent. And so, we saw it. The giant god towering over the initial hill. Oh, how awful! For that is our only way home! Now, while we may not be completely unable to return, to do so would be incredibly difficult!”

Wh-What did you say? Haruhiro almost said in a completely monotone voice, but he stopped himself. He wasn’t that surprised.

He was depressed that his worst prediction, the one he hadn’t wanted to think about, had come true. But that was all. That was all it was.

From the looks of Shihoru, Merry, and Kuzaku, this had killed any enthusiasm they had.

Yume seemed to be deep in thought. It looked like she’d come to a conclusion. “...Ah! If we can’t go back, does that mean we’ve got no way of goin’ home?!”

“He already said that! Are you a moron?!” Ranta shouted at her.

“Yume’s no moron,” she defended. “People who call people morons, they’re the real morons, y’know.”

“Well, following your logic, are the people who call people geniuses the real geniuses, too?!” Ranta hollered.

“Hmm. Probably, don’tcha think?”

“You genius! You genius! Yume, you’re a real beautiful genius!”

“Oh? Really? Ranta, so that’s how you’ve been feelin’ about Yume,” she beamed. “It’s kinda embarrassin’.”

“Y-You dummy! That’s not what I meant! It’s not like that, okay?!”

“Your face is all red...” Shihoru gave Ranta the side-eye, shivering with disgust. “So gross...”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Whose face is all red, damn it?! And what do you mean, gross?!”

“Hmm.” Kimura neatly adjusted the position of his glasses, looking back and forth from Ranta to Yume. “I apologize if this is a delicate question, but are you two in a deeply romantic relationship? In short, are you boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Wh-Whaa?!” Ranta flipped out so bad he did a little dance. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying, you idiot?! D-D-D-D-Don’t make me

laugh!"

"Nuh uh." Yume swiftly denied it. "You're wrong."

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Yeah! Y-Y-Y-You're wrong! D-D-D-D-Don't misunderstand! I'd never settle for her! I mean, look at her tiny tits!"

"Don't call them tiny!"

"What's wrong with tiny tits?!" Kimura was suddenly very angry. "Flat is sublime! Mankind has yet to invent anything that can transcend the flat chest! By no means!"

"Kimura, calm down." Shinohara looked somewhat troubled as he patted Kimura on the shoulder.

"Oh, pardon me." Kimura laughed. "I lost my composure there. However, allow me to clear up any misunderstandings. While it is my personal philosophy that flat chests are the pinnacle of all things, I do understand that they are not the only things of value. Naturally, I can get off to huge breasts, too! In fact, I am flexible enough to adapt to any bust size!"

"You're passionate!" Kikkawa pumped his arm. "You've got passion, Kimuracchi! I get it, I so get it! I'm the same way, man! I'm good with any size, yeah!"

"Yeah!"

Kimura and Kikkawa exchanged a firm handshake. It seemed that a passionate friendship had formed between them.

Even Orion had weirdos like this, huh. Somehow, that was a deeply moving discovery.

"Um, yeah..." Anna-san shrugged her shoulders and look at them with disappointment. "Every time you open your mouth, you say boobies, boobies, boobies! That? That called sexual harassment, yeah! What if Anna-san and other ladies start talking about dick size in front of you? Think how that would send you to heaven, you tiny-dick losers!"

Merry furrowed her brow. "Hayashi? What's wrong?"

Looking over, Merry's former comrade Hayashi was crouched over. "...No. It's nothing. Nothing's wrong. Really, nothing..."

"*Oh, my God!*" Anna-san covered her mouth. "Are you real tiny dick? Nothing to worry about, yeah? Theories say even if it small, it still function *no problem...*"

"Theories say," Mimirin said with no expression.

Why was she repeating it?

Hayashi was on the verge of tears at this point. The poor guy. But it would have been awkward to go comfort him. It wasn't as if Haruhiro was so small he needed to be pitied. He couldn't offer support, or really say much of anything in this situation. Maybe none of the guys could, and they just had to keep quiet?

"Hmph..." Tada licked his lips. "Basically, we're gonna have to fight. I wouldn't have it any other way."

That was Tada-san for you. No social graces whatsoever. For Tada, it didn't matter to him, and he probably just didn't care. That was why he ignored it. It was a very Tada way of doing things. In this case, Haruhiro was grateful for it.

No? Am I grateful? Huh? "We have to fight"? Hold on.

"What do you mean—" Haruhiro forgot what he was about to ask. More precisely, the fact that he was even trying to say something at all slipped right out of his mind.

Nooong.

Something echoed past.

A sound? No, it was more a vibration than a sound. Though, if I recall, sound is a vibration, so I guess it was the same as a sound. What kind of sound? Haruhiro wasn't sure, but it was loud. His whole body shook as if it had become one large eardrum. His very being was shaken by the sound.

With no time for surprise, he was at the sound's mercy. This was a first-time experience for him. Where was the sound coming from? Where did it come from, and how far did it go? He wasn't sure how vast the Dusk Realm was, but it couldn't be that small. Had it reached the very ends of it?

Haruhiro saw the sound. It shook the world and distorted it. The distortions were visible to the eye.

Haruhiro clutched his chest. His heart was racing like crazy. The sound passed in a few moments, at most. However, his heart was still shaking. It was different from his pulse. Was it numb? It felt something like that.

He looked around. No one was totally fine. Everyone had been hit by that sound just now. Shihoru was sitting on the ground, clutching her head.

"Are you okay?" Merry held Shihoru as she helped her to her feet.

Shihoru nodded, but it seemed she couldn't get any words out. There were tears in her eyes.

"What... do you think... that was, just now?" Haruhiro tried asking Shinohara, but then he thought Shinohara would be just as much of a loss for an answer as he was.

As he expected, Shinohara shook his head. He had a sharper look in his eyes than usual. "Dunno... but I doubt it's a good sign."

"You think?" Tokimune let out a deep breath, then flashed his white teeth. "I couldn't be more excited, though."

Ah... This isn't gonna end well, Haruhiro thought. I can say from experience, nothing good ever happens when Tokimune says that. This is the worst. I don't like this anymore. How did things end up like this? Whose fault is it? What the hell? Stop, please. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.

Haruhiro unleashed every complaint he could think of inside his head, and then bottled them all up.

I want to run away. I can't, though.

I'm ready for this—but that's something I can't say. It's not possible. But I have to brace myself. No matter what happens, all I can do is cope with it. No matter what happens?

Just what's going to happen here?

I don't know.

As if I possibly could.

Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers had each gathered into their respective groups to talk about it. Orion was doing the same. Those who weren't in a clan, or had come to the Dusk Realm as an individual party, not as part of their clan, were grouping together, too, out of uncertainty. Somehow, though Haruhiro's party and the Tokkis hadn't really decided to do this, the flow of things led them to join Orion's group.

They discussed a great number of things.

Where's Soma's party? Where are Akira-san and his party? What was that sound just now? What should we do? What can we do for the time being? We should go home. Even if we were to return home, the problem is there's no easy way to do that. Well, what should we do then? We should get out of here. Why would we move away from the settlement? Whatever we do, we need to decide on a general direction to take. It's better if we don't split up. Best if we stick together. No, maybe it would actually be better to split up and

not focus ourselves in one place? If everyone is clustered together, there's the risk we'll all be wiped out. Wiped out? What do you mean, wiped out? We don't know yet, right? It could be that nothing will happen. Where are Soma and his group? We were originally going to gather at the initial hill. Now we can't; that's why Orion came to the settlement. It's probably the same for the others. So, where are Soma and his group? Akira-san and his group? What do we do? What should we do? What's the right course of action?

It more or less just went in circles. They couldn't find any answers. Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers weren't moving, either.

Eventually, Shinohara and Kimura got into a discussion. It looked like the two of them would decide what to do for Orion.

There were volunteer soldiers scattered around, arguing over this or that. It was noisy. Not just that—there was a restlessness in the air.

Haruhiro had to say something. Had to talk to his comrades. Because Haruhiro was the leader. He had to decide. That was how he felt, but he couldn't think straight. Nothing came to mind.

This was no good. He couldn't let things stay this way. Honestly, that was the only thing Haruhiro knew. He didn't want to look his comrades in the eye, so he hung his head.

No good. This is no good. It's seriously no good. He felt ill. I can't breathe properly. It hurts. Hadn't I braced myself for the worst? How pathetic. Yeah, that's right. I'm a pathetic person. I know. I can't be decisive even if I want to. I mean, that's not what I am.

“Listen,” Kuzaku said. “Me, I’m going to follow you. No matter what happens, I’m with you, Haruhiro. I thought I should say that, at least.”

“M-Me, too,” Shihoru raised her hand a little. “Haruhiro-kun, you’ve saved me so many times. I wanted to say that...”

“It’s gotta be Haru-kun, y’know,” Yume said with a giggle.

“I’m sure,” Merry smiled. “If you hadn’t been there, Haru, something terrible would have happened. I mean that in so many ways. I’m here now thanks to you.”

It all resonated.

In so many ways.

Merry’s words in particular.

That's what it's like, huh?

It wasn’t quite the right way to put it, but he felt like something precious

had been snatched away from him.

If only he had realized sooner. That he truly loved Merry.

Still, even if he had realized it, this was Haruhiro. Surely he couldn't have done anything. In other words, it would have been the same.

Yes. The same. Things had turned out this way because they needed to.

“Heh.” Ranta snorted derisively. “You guys are so cheesy. Did you want to trigger your death flags that badly? You’re morons. Seriously, seriously.”

It was actually reassuring. If Ranta didn’t act like Ranta, it would have thrown Haruhiro off-balance.

Haruhiro spun his shoulders around. Worked out the tension. What good was being on edge going to do him? That wasn’t the sort of situation this was.

“They won’t die, man.” Haruhiro’s eyes probably looked sleepy right now. Of course, he wasn’t tired. “I won’t let anyone else die.”

The moment he said it, he started to think things like, *Well, that’s the hope, I’ll work myself practically to death to keep everyone alive, that’s what I’m saying, it’s an expression of intent, I don’t know if it’s possible or not, but—*

This was Haruhiro. He couldn’t suddenly change who he was. However, pretending to have changed—that, to some degree, he could do.

“Ducky, we’re going!” “One-on-One” Max led Iron Knuckle into action. It looked like they’d be heading for the initial hill.

“Do what you want! The Berserkers are staying on standby!” “Red Devil” Ducky shouted back. It looked like the Berserkers planned to stay in the settlement.

Max and Ducky had different builds, but they were the same type. Because they were the leaders, or bosses, rather, Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers gave off a similar aura. They were aggressive and showy.

Iron Knuckle used blue and black, while the Berserkers used red as their signifying colors, and each of the members had those colors displayed on their equipment. It looked like they had clan symbols, too. Iron Knuckle’s was a clenched fist, while the Berserkers used a skull with a cross sword and ax. However, though they were similar, Iron Knuckle were cheerful and mischievous, giving off what could be taken as a more youthful vibe. The Berserkers had what could charitably have been called a sense of dignity, or less charitably called cunning.

Iron Knuckle were going offensive, the Berserkers were defensive. Shinohara and Kimura were still talking it over. What would the Tokkis do? Haruhiro looked to Tokimune to gauge his reaction.

Huh? Is something weird? he thought suddenly. By weird, I mean—this is...

This sound.

Haruhiro looked to the east. Then, to the south.

It's coming. Getting closer. A white giant. Footsteps, huh. That's right. This rumbling... It's white giant footsteps. No, but this... But wait, huh? These white giants, the number of them...

It's not just one or two, is it? About how many? I don't know. Maybe they're still far off?

They're coming from over there, and over there, too?

I can't quite count. It's too many to. I don't have time to sit here and count.

“Th-There’s a swarm of white giants!” Haruhiro’s voice sounded like it might crack.

“Whoa...” Even Tokimune was shocked. “They’re coming from all over, huh.”

Tada laughed, spinning his warhammer around. “That’s how I like it.”

“Heh...” Inui spread his arms wide. “Wind of ruin, blow with wild abandon!”

“You no say *bad* omen things, yeah?!” Anna-san punched Inui.

“I’ll ard-gu Anna-san with my fe-li!” Kikkawa pointed to himself with his thumb.

“Ard-gu and fe-li...” Haruhiro muttered despite himself. They were probably some of Kikkawa’s signature scrambled words, but he couldn’t even figure out what they meant anymore.

“Kwahh,” Mimorin let out a strange sound as she drew her sword.

“Looks like we’ve gotta fight, damn it.” Ranta lowered the visor on his helmet.

“But even if we’re gonna fight...” Kuzaku adjusted his helmet and readied his shield. “...can we, really?”

Yume, Shihoru, and Merry were all silent. Their expressions were stiff and grim. Even Yume was grimacing.

Haruhiro honestly wanted to flee. But the question was, where to? Yeah, it

didn't look like there was anywhere. Because the giant god was at the initial hill.

Could the giant god have made that incredible sound? That was the kind of thing he was thinking. Then it turned out like this? They say let sleeping gods lie, but maybe we volunteer soldiers angered the gods of this Dusk Realm?

It didn't matter. At the very least, it wasn't anything to think about now.

"Hey, Shinohara!" Ducky shouted, waving to them. "Help us out here for now! Splitting up isn't a smart plan!"

"Let's call back Iron Knuckle, too." Shinohara nodded. "This is a time when we need to pull together, clan differences aside! Orion will do as it always does!"

"Listen, don't you dare get scared and turn your backs on the enemy!" Ducky roared. "If you turn tail, expect to get killed! Face forward until you die!"

"What's that red-haired guy stating the obvious for?" Tada laughed mockingly.

Was that guy not afraid?

Haruhiro was afraid. He could feel his knees and the bottom of his stomach quivering.

Iron Knuckle turned around and came back, led by Max.

"They're here, they're here, they're here!" Tokimune banged on his shield with his sword.

Oh, I don't want to look— But Haruhiro had to look. The white giants. They're still a ways off to the south. The white giants to the east are pretty close. From what I can see, there are around ten, maybe? There could be more behind them.

While there were differences between individual white giants, they could be categorized into roughly three size categories. The four-meter class, the six-meter class, and the eight-meter class. Those in the eight-meter class were rare, and Haruhiro had never seen one before.

There were two of what looked to be those eight-meter class white giants. One was six-meter class, and the rest were four-meter class.

Haruhiro wasn't brave and decisive, or stout-hearted, or clear-thinking, or calm. The best he could manage was to act out the role of the dauntless leader. He needed to play that role somehow.

Shihoru. Yume. Ranta. Merry. Kuzaku. He looked to each of their faces. *I have comrades, and I don't want any of them to die. That's why we need to overcome this together.*

“If you’re sleepy, just go to sleep, leader,” Ranta laughed.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I was born with these eyes.”

Haruhiro thumped one fist against his chest. “—Okay. Let’s get this job done. Sleep can wait until after that.”

8. Cross the Boundary



I know, Haruhiro thought. I ought to make a more powerful speech, one filled with energy.

Haruhiro would have loved to do that, of course, but nothing came to mind, so there wasn't much he could do about it. Besides, this time, there was no need.

“What are you doing?!” Haruhiro grabbed Ranta, who was just standing there, by the arm and took off running. As he ran, he shouted, “Get out of the way for now! Don’t stand straight in front of the dogs, get out of the way!”

Even without Haruhiro's encouragement, Kuzaku, Yume, Shihoru and Merry all ran away. It wasn't just Haruhiro and his party, either. The volunteer soldiers took off to the left, right, and backwards, scattering in all directions.

Ducky had said not to turn their backs, but that wasn't an option. There were white giants that were over four meters tall charging straight at them. If they got hit properly by that, they'd be run over for sure. Either trampled or knocked flying. If they tried to take them head-on, like Ranta had been about to, that would actually be worse. While they were trying to work themselves up, the white giants would close in, and while they were still going, *Oh, crap, oh, crap, what do I do?* and panicking, they'd get trampled to death.

But even if they ran—

“Ha-Ha-Haruhiroooo!” Ranta hollered. “I-I-Incomiiing! One of them’s coming this way!”

“Yeah, I already know!”

One of the white giants was chasing after Haruhiro and Ranta. Haruhiro let go of Ranta's arm and pumped his legs harder. But up ahead there was yet

another white giant. Where were the others? He didn't have time to look.

One white giant behind me. Another in front. Do I go right? Or left?

No good. Can't go right or left. That's just my intuition, though—no, don't doubt it.

“Charge in and slip past it!” he called.

“Huh?! Seriously?!” Ranta hollered.

“Seriously!” Haruhiro charged towards the white giant in front of him.

Hands. The hands will come first. Both hands. Trying to grab me. They're not that fast—They shouldn't be, right? Head for the right side. Slip past the white giant's left hand on the outside. Go. I've gotta go. Go. I can do it.

Dodge!

“—Yuh...!”

Turning his body sideways, he narrowly avoided the white giant's left hand. But what the hell was “Yuh” supposed to be? Haruhiro didn't know that himself.

“Ranta?!” he screamed.

“Yeah!”

Ranta had gotten by the white giant's right hand somehow, and seemed to have succeeded in getting behind it. It wasn't something they'd set up intentionally, but they heard the two white giants slam into one another behind them.

“Ha! Serves you right!” Ranta howled.

Haruhiro couldn't be as jubilant about it as the cheering Ranta. If anything, Haruhiro wanted to take his frustrations out on him.

“Aw, damn it! Them, too?!” Haruhiro cried.

Of course, the ones he had seen at the beginning weren't all of them. There were still more of the white giants coming. It wasn't just giants, either. Something else was mixed in with the white giants—or rather, it might have been more accurate to say the white giants were mixed in with them. There were clearly more of them, after all.

No, if he didn't say there were *far* more of them, it would be a straight-up lie. My, my, were these not the one-eyed, white poncho-wearing cultists, rushing towards them en masse?

Haruhiro wanted to regroup with his comrades. But first, he wanted to check if they were okay. He checked, and—

How? he wanted to scream.

“Don’t get separated, Ranta!”

“Hey, heyyyyyyyy?!” Ranta yelled back. “This is ridiculous, you know?!”

He wasn’t even listening. Ranta’s attention was entirely focused on the cultists. Well, maybe it was hard to blame him for that. *After all, the ordinary cultists are rushing us with their spears down.*

What do we do? Haruhiro thought frantically.

There was no time to think. Time was very, very limited. If they stopped, it would all be over. They had to press forward. Which way? Where would they go?

He heard voices. People’s voices. Sounds. Presences. Breathing. His own breath.

In front of them, there were ten ordinary cultists, Pansukes, or somewhere around that number. There were also two elite cultists, Tori-sans, wielding Thunder Sword Dolphins and Mirror Shields, maybe three? There were more cultists than just that, but these were the only ones Haruhiro had to immediately concern himself with. Also, a white giant, one of the four-meter class.

Behind them were the rest of the white giants. The two that had collided earlier were getting back up. There were a number of giants that had stopped —been forced to stop? Were they in combat? Were there volunteer soldiers fighting with the white giants?

Yes. There were. Over there.

“Come along, Ranta!” Haruhiro shouted.

“Nwahh?!”

Even as he ran, Haruhiro never stopped looking. Ranta was keeping up.

Those are the Berserkers, huh, he thought. Unbelievable. Even in this situation, they already have one of the white giants down. No, not just one. Two, huh.

Ducky and the Berserkers were going to work on their third white giant. They were using tools to do it. Ropes. With weights on the ends, probably.

They threw those, wrapping them around the giant’s neck. Then, they pulled on them as a group. Bringing it to the ground. It was easy to describe, but it would be difficult to throw the ropes and have them go the way you wanted. It took a lot of strength to pull one down. Their timing had to be in sync, too.

Despite their clan name, which would make you expect the Berserkers to

charge in with no fear of any counterattacks, they actually fought with finesse and technique.

Next to the Berserkers with their three parties, seventeen people, moving practically as one group, he spotted Yume. Either she was watching the Berserkers in awe, or she was staring off into space, because she was just standing there.

Even as he ran towards Yume, Haruhiro kept looking. It wasn't only the Berserkers who were fighting back. There were volunteer soldiers swarming an eight-meter class white giant a little farther away. There was a fearless and reckless one who scaled the giant, climbing onto its shoulders and striking it in the face.

Max. That was "One-on-One" Max.

Max was short, but he carried a thick sword in each hand, and slashed, or rather slugged, the white giant with them. He showered a flurry of blows on it.

Iron Knuckle were clobbering the eight-meter class.

He saw the white capes of Orion, too. They had spread out into individual parties. It didn't look like they were actively pressing the attack. But they weren't fleeing in confusion, either.

The Tokkis.

Tokimune stood right in front of a white giant, with Tada attacking it from the side. Kikkawa and Mimorin were there, too. Inui. And Anna-san.

That's Merry next to Anna-san, huh, Haruhiro thought. Kuzaku's there, too.

Deal with Yume first.

"That girl!" Ranta screamed. It looked like Ranta had spotted Yume.
"Hey, Yume! Don't just stand there!"

Yume turned in their direction. "...Wha?"

"Come here!" Haruhiro called her over.

She gave a big nod and took off towards them at a run. The cultists would arrive soon, and this area would probably descend into utter chaos.

"Merry! Kuzaku!" Haruhiro shouted.

He turned back and looked as he ran towards the Tokkis. The cultists had arrived. Kuzaku and Merry noticed Haruhiro and the others.

"Where's Shihoru?!" he shouted.

"I'm sorry!" Merry frowned as she shook her head.

“We don’t have time!” Ranta hollered.

“She’s our top priority!” Haruhiro shouted back.

While thinking about it, he looked. He surveyed the area as he made his judgment call. As he looked around, Haruhiro came up with his basic strategy.

Well, we’ll be parasites, so to speak. I feel bad about it, but we’re going to act like parasites on the stronger fighters while we search for Shihoru. I’m strangely calm, huh? Maybe I just don’t have room to panic?

“Shihoru’s missing!” he called. “Anna-san, be careful!”

Once he had called out to them, Haruhiro changed course and headed in the direction of Iron Knuckle. His comrades were behind him. Ranta, Yume, and Merry, with Kuzaku bringing up the rear.

Shihoru, he thought. Where is she? Shihoru. Where are you?

For a moment, he feared the worst. He quickly dismissed the idea. The cultists had joined the battle between the volunteer soldiers and the white giants. That was going to make it all the harder to figure anything out.

Even if I can’t figure it out, I’ll look. I’ll look. Look. Look for her. Search. For Shihoru.

“Why, you...! I’m going, too!” Ranta went to attack a nearby Pansuke.

“That’s no good!” Haruhiro stopped Ranta, but didn’t stop moving himself.

“I can handle this one myself!” Max shouted as he clung to the eight-meter class’s face, driving his sword into its eye. “Massacre the cultists, my bros!”

He can handle it himself? What is he talking about? But the guys in Iron Knuckle are doing what he says. Seriously?

All of the members of Iron Knuckle except for Max moved away from the eight-meter class white giant and attacked the cultists.

There was one man who stood out. He was lightly equipped, with no helmet, and had a short goatee. It was Max’s right-hand man, Aidan. He wielded a spear, uncommon for a volunteer soldier. He was knocking down a cultist with the shaft, then impaling them through their one eye with the tip. On top of that, he used a variety of kicks to mow down the cultists. He was less a warrior and more a martial artist. His lack of armor might have been a sign of his confidence. It didn’t seem to be misplaced. Even a Tori-san, with his sword and shield at the ready, went down to a surprise jump-kick and a

stab from Aidan's spear. He was incredible.

The other bros went around crushing cultists. Iron Knuckle had destroyed two cult bases. They knew their opponents. It seemed like they thought mere cultists couldn't possibly take them down. They didn't look like they were going to lose.

Haruhiro acted like a total parasite. He joined in with Iron Knuckle, looking around, while being careful not to get in their way. He searched for Shihoru.

"Shihoruuuu!" Yume wailed.

The cultists and white giants kept pouring in. Were they gathering from all over the Dusk Realm?

Wasn't staying here and fighting a mistake? They were managing for now, but eventually the volunteer soldiers would run out of steam. When that happened, it would be checkmate. The end.

But the giant god was at the initial hill. Could they get past the giant god and flee back to the Ri-komo—no, the Gremlin Flats?

Shihoru. Before that, he had to think about Shihoru.

Shihoru.

"She can't not be here!" Merry shouted.

That was right. She was here. She had to be. She was somewhere. He just couldn't see her.

He *couldn't* see her.

She's somewhere I can't see her...?

"The valley!" Haruhiro shouted.

He could be wrong, but it was possible.

The volunteer soldier settlement in the Dusk Realm had been built around a valley with a spring at the bottom. It wasn't a deep valley, but it wasn't shallow, either. At least, he couldn't see the bottom from here. Not at all. If she had been separated from her comrades, fled, and tried to hide somewhere, wouldn't that be the place she'd choose?

The bottom of the valley was a dead end. It wasn't guaranteed to be safe. If the enemy found her, she'd be in immediate danger. But if she were pressed to make a decision, she wouldn't think that through.

While heading for the valley, Haruhiro continued to look. Glancing this way and that, he got as good of a grasp of his allies' situation as he could manage. It felt like his duty at this point. It was scary to look and learn what

was going on. Ignorance was easier on his mind, but it was scary in its own way, too.

Would he die with his eyes closed, or with them open? Either way, it was scary. However, if his eyes were open, he might find some way to avert his impending demise. If his eyes were closed, he couldn't even resist in vain.

At the rear of the group, Kuzaku was attacked by a cultist. It was a Pansuke. Just one.

Haruhiro immediately did an about-face. "Kuzaku, stop there!"

"Kay!"

Kuzaku parried the Pansuke's spear with his shield, then used Thrust. With Kuzaku's longsword stabbing his chest, but not through it thanks to his poncho, the Pansuke faltered. By that point, Haruhiro had already raced past his side.

With a sudden stop, he got behind the Pansuke. He grappled him, jamming his dagger into the Pansuke's one eye with a backhanded grip. He tore it free, and headed for the valley.

"You ass!" Ranta screamed.

Ranta, just shut up.

"Let me handle that stuff!"

"Next time!" Haruhiro called.

If you'd handle it quickly and well, I wish you would. Well, whatever. We're here. This is the valley.

"There she is!" he shouted. "Shihoru!"

Shihoru was cowering by the edge of the spring. She raised her face and looked towards Haruhiro.

"I-I'm sorry! I... I couldn't find any of you, and I was scared!"

"Well, who can blame you!" Ranta cackled. "I'll let it slide this time, so let me squeeze those tits of yours!"

"Wow..." Kuzaku was appalled.

"You're the worst. You couldn't sink any lower," said Merry, and Haruhiro had to agree.

"You moron!" Ranta laughed loudly. "I can always sink lower! It's being the lowest of the low that makes me the worst! Morons!"

This is the problem with him.

"Shihoru!" Yume rushed down the slope, as if she were rolling.

Haruhiro was about to follow, but then he turned and looked. It was a

good thing he did, too. “Yume! Bring Shihoru up here!”

“Meowger!”

Was that supposed to be a “roger”? Anyway, I’m counting on you. We’ve got things of our own to deal with. Enemies. Cultists incoming. Five Pansukes. One Tori-san. That’s a lot. But if they caught up to us while we were down in the valley, we’d be at a disadvantage because they’d have the high ground. We’ll fight them here.

Until Yume and Shihoru made it to them, they had four people: Haruhiro, Ranta, Kuzaku, and Merry.

“Kuzaku, do what you can!” Haruhiro ordered.

“Roger that! I’ll draw them to me!”

“Ranta, use quick attacks!”

“You don’t have to tell me!”

“Merry, don’t push yourself too hard!”

“I’m fine!”

“Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” With an uncharacteristic roar, Kuzaku charged towards the cultists. The Pansukes thrust out their spears in an attempt to meet his charge.

Kuzaku used his shield to block—no, to sweep their spears away. It wasn’t Block that he used. It was Bash. On top of that, he made grand swings with his longsword and shield.

“Ngahhhh! Rahhhhhhh! Yahhhhhhhh!”

Kuzaku’s longsword and his shield were both only knocking aside the Pansukes’ spears or landing grazing blows on their ponchos. He wasn’t doing any damage. But the Pansukes couldn’t move forward. Kuzaku was keeping a whole five Pansukes at bay. Obviously, he couldn’t keep that up. Besides, there was that guy, too. Pushing aside the Pansukes, the Tori-san moved up. Tori-san pushed Kuzaku’s longsword back with his Mirror Shield, then immediately slashed at him with his Thunder Sword Dolphin.

“Leap Out!” a voice yelled.

That was Ranta. He leapt in from the side at an incredible speed, landing a kick on Tori-san’s Mirror Shield. Even as Tori-san was thrown off-balance, he turned his Thunder Sword Dolphin towards Ranta. Ranta was trying to attack him, but it’d be bad if he took a hit from that weapon. Even a scratch would leave him stunned. Ranta drew back Betrayer Mk. II. His form flickered ominously.

“Missing!”

The Tori-san’s strike seemed to have been dulled. He had been fascinated by Ranta’s mysterious movements. Ranta easily avoided the Thunder Sword Dolphin and put some distance between the two of them.

“Ha! Damn, I’m cool!” Ranta laughed.

“Not really!” Haruhiro called back.

Haruhiro came out on the right side of the group of enemies, aiming for the Pansukes’ spears with his dagger and sap. Merry also took up a position behind Kuzaku diagonally and was using her short staff to interfere with their spears.

“Dahhhh! Tahhhhhh! Nwahhhhhh!” Kuzaku swung his shield and longsword with reckless abandon as he pressed forward. The Pansukes began to fall back, but Tori-san came and struck Kuzaku’s longsword with his Thunder Sword Dolphin.

“Ngh!” Kuzaku’s entire body shuddered. The Tori-san went in for a follow-up. Kuzaku may have had the best armor in the party, and he might have been wearing a helmet, too, but even he wasn’t going to be completely unscathed if he took a good hard thrust from a Thunder Sword Dolphin. Here in the Dusk Realm where light magic didn’t work, heavy wounds could be life-threatening.

“Hah!” Merry yelled.

If Merry hadn’t swung her short staff down diagonally, hitting the Thunder Sword Dolphin with a Knock Off, things could have gotten pretty bad.

Merry cried out, “Augh!” and fell on her backside, twitching, but the Tori-san nearly dropped his Thunder Sword Dolphin, too. In the end, he didn’t actually drop it, but Kuzaku was able to use that time to recover.

“Close call!” Kuzaku swept the Pansukes’ spears with his longsword and shield. “I’ve still got a long way to go!”

“You’re doing great!” Haruhiro encouraged.

Haruhiro tried to get around behind the Pansukes. *Come at me. Good. It worked.*

Haruhiro managed to peel a number of the Pansukes away from Kuzaku. “Ranta, show us your guts!”

“Don’t make it—” Ranta charged again, closing in on one of the Pansukes. “—sound so easy, damn it! Reject!”

The Pansuke put out his spear. Ranta pushed it aside with Betrayer Mk. II and backed away. The Pansuke fell for it and tried to pursue Ranta.

“Avoid!” Ranta screamed.

When his opponent tried to move up, Ranta made a thrust towards a vital point while retreating. Ranta’s skill landed perfectly. Betrayer Mk. II bit into that Pansuke’s one eye and he collapsed to the ground.

“I’ll do it easily enough, though!” Ranta hollered. “I mean, this is me, after all!”

“There you go, getting cocky!” Haruhiro called back.

Haruhiro Swatted two Pansukes’ spears, Swatted them, and Swatted them again. Ranta had taken down one Pansuke and was looking to take on another one, so Kuzaku only needed to deal with one Pansuke and the Tori-san. But the Tori-san was the problem.

“Nuh!” Kuzaku used Bash to knock away the Pansuke’s spear, then quickly tried to quickly close the gap between them, but the Tori-san swung his Thunder Sword Dolphin. That forced Kuzaku to jump backwards.

“I’ll take one of them!” Merry called.

Having recovered from the numbing effect of Thunder Sword Dolphin, Merry was trying to get the Pansuke to turn and face her. However, even in a one-on-one fight, the Tori-san was going to be tough. His Thunder Sword Dolphin was way too dangerous. All Kuzaku could do was keep track of the distance between them and run around.

“Dammit! This is pathetic!” Kuzaku yelled.

“Don’t rush it!” Haruhiro shouted while using Swat on the spears that kept coming at him. He said it to Kuzaku, but he was also saying it half to himself.

Yeah. I can’t rush this. Look. Take a good look. Are there enemy reinforcements? Not now. It wouldn’t be strange to see them come in at any moment, though. When that happens, I can’t just start panicking like, “Oh, crap, oh, crap, we’re so screwed!”

Kuzaku wholly focused on evading the Thunder Sword Dolphin. Merry was playing it safe and focusing on defense, while Ranta couldn’t land the deciding blow. Was he watching and waiting for his chance to do it in one blow? Haruhiro did nothing but Swat. They weren’t doing anything more than hanging in there, and they might eventually fall apart if they had to keep it up, but it wouldn’t be much longer.

See?

In flew an arrow. This one was going to hit. The Tori-san would take it right in the face. No, the Tori-san jumped aside to avoid it.

Haruhiro glanced behind him. Yume. She'd come up out of the valley. She was already nocking her second arrow. She fired. Then, at practically the same time...

“Ohm, rel, ect, nemun, darsh!”

Right behind Yume, Shihoru was chanting and drawing elemental sigils with her staff.

Yume's second shot also missed. The Tori-san dodged it. However, when he got out of the way of the arrow, a shadow elemental affixed itself to the ground where he was about to step.

Shadow Bond.

The Tori-san's foot was caught by the shadow elemental, and he couldn't move away from it. The Tori-san was clearly flustered. That was when Kuzaku went in to finish him.

“Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Punishment. It was fundamentally the same as Moguzo's specialty, the warrior skill Rage Blow, AKA Thanks Slash. He swung down diagonally with all his might. However, in this paladin version, he would defend himself with his shield as he did it. Normally, at least.

Kuzaku swung so hard it looked like he might fling his shield away, though he didn't actually do so, and slammed his longsword into the Tori-san's Thunder Sword Dolphin with all his might. Of course, when he touched the weapon, it shocked him.

“Ah!”

Kuzaku's body shuddered, and he ended up sitting down. He must have known that would happen. Even so, he'd taken the risk.

Kuzaku's plan had been to knock the weapon out of the Tori-san's hands. It'd worked.

The Tori-san crouched down and tried to reach for his fallen weapon. It was just barely out of reach. That was thanks to Shadow Bond.

Even so, the Tori-san tried stretching himself farther to grab his Thunder Sword Dolphin. It might have worked if no one had intervened. If Merry hadn't hit the sword's hilt with her short staff and knocked it far away.

“You're the best!” Kuzaku rose to his feet, then lifted his longsword over

his head. The Tori-san tried to cover his head with his Mirror Shield. However, Kuzaku didn't swing down. It was Feint.

“Rahhhh!”

Kuzaku kicked the Mirror Shield away, then smashed his longsword into the Tori-san's now-defenseless head. Not just once. Two, three, four times, he slammed the top of his head. Even if he couldn't cut him because of the poncho, that was more of a beating than he could take. Even once the Tori-san collapsed and was lying prone, Kuzaku attacked him two, three more times, making sure he was good and dead.

“Exhaust! Exhaust! Exhaaaauuuust! Gwahahahahahahahaaa!” Meanwhile, Ranta zoomed around with his creepy backwards movements to quickly collect the Thunder Sword Dolphin. With Betrayer Mk. II in his left hand, and Thunder Sword Dolphin in his right, he dual-wielded—

Wait, considering Ranta's lack of strength, that Thunder Sword Dolphin is pretty long and heavy. Is that going to be okay...?

“There! Ha! Take that!”

Like Haruhiro had expected, no matter how hard Ranta tried to swing both Thunder Sword Dolphin and Betrayer Mk. II around, he wasn't hitting anything. The Pansukes easily avoided them. He was a moron. A complete and utter moron.

“Choose one or the other!” Haruhiro screamed at him.

Haruhiro was still busy using Swat on the two spears. He wanted to tell Ranta he didn't have time to fool around like that.

I mean, I have to look around while doing it. This is pretty hard. I'm just barely managing it. Finish yours up and come help already, man. Well, it's fine, really.

“Yah!”

Someone came, at least.

It was Yume. Yume charged in fiercely. With a somersault, she let off a powerful blow with her machete. One of the two Pansukes that were attacking Haruhiro took it in the shoulder, and while he didn't go down, his head shot back in pain.

Raging Tiger. It was a machete fighting skill.

“Tau! Tau! Tauuuu!” With that strange series of battle cries, Yume put together a combo of Brush Clearer, Diagonal Cross, Brush Clearer and cornered the Pansuke.

She's as gutsy as ever. That's the kind of bravery you'd expect from a tank. No, given her light armor, she's braver than a tank. It's scary to watch. I've gotta support her.

The next time he Swatted a spear, Haruhiro simultaneously kicked that Pansuke in the knee. Shatter stopped his opponent from moving for a moment, which Haruhiro then used to get in close and clobber him in the chin with his sap.

The Hitter skill had been originally meant for striking the enemy's chin with your palm after performing a Swat, but Haruhiro had learned to apply it like this. Haruhiro had been on the defensive all this time, so that probably made it hard for the Pansuke to adapt to the sudden surprise attack. Naturally, that had been part of Haruhiro's calculations, which was why he went fully on the counterattack.

Once he cleanly landed a Swat, Shatter, and Hitter, it wasn't hard to sweep his opponent's leg and trip him. That was what Haruhiro did. Haruhiro mounted the fallen Pansuke, stabbing his dagger into the cultist's one eye. When he twisted and gouged, the Pansuke soon stopped moving.

"Haruhiro-kun!" Shihoru shouted to warn him.

When he looked, another four Pansukes and a Tori-san were coming their way. Haruhiro let out a deep sigh, then tore his dagger free and stood up.

Currently, Ranta and Yume were each handling a Pansuke. Kuzaku and Merry were double-teaming another. There were a total of five enemy reinforcements, and one of them was a Tori-san on top of that. The only ones free to act were Haruhiro and Shihoru. Shihoru couldn't fight in a melee, and the best Haruhiro could hope to manage was fending off a couple of Pansukes' attacks with Swat.

"Ohm, rel, ect, el, krom, darsh!"

But this was one thing Shihoru had. A black mist-like elemental blew towards the oncoming cultist reinforcements. Shadow Mist. It was the upgraded version of Sleepy Shadow, which caused intense sleepiness in the target.

Normally, whether it was Sleepy Shadow or Shadow Mist she was using, it wouldn't work when sent straight at an oncoming opponent like that. It was a spell that only worked if you caught them off guard. However, Shihoru happened to have learned that Darsh Magic was especially effective against the cultists.

When the shadow elemental enveloped them, the cultists started dropping like flies. She managed to put all of the Pansukes to sleep, but the Tori-san only staggered a little. He'd resisted it, huh.

The Tori-san kicked the Pansuke who had collapsed at his feet. It looked like he was trying to rouse him.

"Ohm, rel, ect, el, vel, darsh!" Shihoru immediately set off a Shadow Echo. *Vwong, vwong, vwong*. With that distinctive sound, three shadow elementals that looked like balls of black seaweed flew towards the Tori-san. However, even if they hit, he probably wouldn't go down.

Haruhiro shouted as he ran, "Kuzaku!"

"Kay!"

Kuzaku left the Pansuke to Merry and chased after Haruhiro. Two of the three shadow elementals hit the Tori-san and seemed to do some damage, but it was far from being fatal. On top of that, the Pansuke that the Tori-san had kicked got up.

If more new enemies come now, we're absolutely finished. That was the thought that crossed Haruhiro's mind. Well, not that he had time to be worrying about it. *Focus. I have to focus. Focus, focus, focus.*

Haruhiro repeated that to himself as he charged towards the Pansuke and the Tori-san. The reason he wasn't that scared was because he didn't plan to fight. Fighting them properly was just beyond him.

First, the Pansuke thrust out his spear. Haruhiro leapt aside to the left, and this time it was the Tori-san that followed up with another attack.

I'm still out of range, so I'm safe, he thought. Even if the Tori-san slashed at him with his Thunder Sword Dolphin, it wouldn't reach Haruhiro. Probably.

"Bring it, bring it, bring it!" Haruhiro shouted, not so much to provoke his enemy as to encourage himself, as he dodged the Tori-san's Thunder Sword Dolphin and the Pansuke's spear.

Soon Kuzaku arrived and used Bash on the Pansuke's spear. When he did, Haruhiro had predicted that the Tori-san would lunge at Kuzaku. Or rather, he had hoped that would happen, but it didn't go that way. While Kuzaku was attacking the Pansuke with Thrust, the Tori-san started to kick the other Pansukes.

Not good, thought Haruhiro.

At this rate, the remaining three would all wake up. But if he was going to

stop it, he would have to attack the Tori-san. If he tried to take the Tori-san in a straight-up fight, Haruhiro's life would be on the line. Was this the time to gamble like that?

The moment he paused to think about it, he had missed his chance to make that choice. It was already too late. The Pansukes were awake and starting to get up. Because there was already a chaotic mix of allies and enemies nearby, they couldn't count on Shihoru's magic.

"Zeahhhhhh!" Kuzaku forcefully pushed the Pansuke down, but he wasn't able to get in the killing blow. That was because the Tori-san intervened. Kuzaku had no choice but to run from his Thunder Sword Dolphin.

Where's Ranta? Yume? Merry? Haruhiro tried to look. I can't look.

The Pansukes that the Tori-san had beaten into awareness swarmed towards him. Haruhiro's pulse raced and his breathing became strained. The pressure was intense. He felt like he was going to panic. Though, if he could still realize that, maybe it wasn't so bad. His field of view had grown so narrow.

The spears. They're coming. Swat. Swat. Swat. No, I can't. I feel like I'm gonna mess it up. I can't afford the injury. Ahh—

Uwah...

Haruhiro leapt back without attempting a Swat. He couldn't Swat in this state of mind. He'd fail for sure.

A white giant. Not one of the four-meter class. Bigger than that. There's a six-meter class one approaching. What are we gonna do about that?

The spears came at him. One after another. Could he dodge? He'd have to. But he couldn't quite manage it.

Haruhiro instinctively threw himself to the ground and rolled.

"Whaaaat're you doing?!" Ranta flew in. He swept two spears away at the same time with his Thunder Sword Dolphin. Naturally, the two Pansukes holding them collapsed, twitching. Ranta had sheathed Betrayer Mk. II and was wielding Thunder Sword Dolphin with two hands.

"I told you to do it like that from the beginning!" Haruhiro screamed.

Haruhiro used Swat on the other Pansuke's spear, then followed up with Shatter and Slap. His dagger and sap were both weapons with a short reach, so it was pretty hard to strike his opponent's hands with them.

Slap wasn't a skill he used often, but it went well. The Pansukes held their

spears with both hands. When Haruhiro hit one of the Pansuke's right hands with his sap, the Pansuke let go of his spear with that hand. Without missing a beat, Haruhiro used the pommel of his dagger to strike his jaw with Hitter. When the Pansuke's legs gave out and he collapsed, Haruhiro speedily circled around behind him, then grappled him and used Spider. His dagger sank into the Pansuke's single eye.

"Shut up! Worthless Parupirori!" Ranta went to finish off the Pansukes he had stunned, exaggeratedly raising his Lightning Sword Dolphin over his head. That was when his hands stopped. "Wait, there's a white giant comiiiiiiing?!"

"Ranta!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Wha...?!" Ranta used Exhaust to fly backwards with a burst of speed. The Pansukes he had stunned had thrust out their spears.

Kuzaku was running around and avoiding the Tori-san and a Pansuke. Merry and Yume were each handling one Pansuke each, and they were unable to move.

Shihoru had noticed the incoming white giant, and seemed to be thinking about what she could do with her magic. Sadly, however, there probably wasn't anything. When it came to a white giant in the six-meter class, stopping its movement with Shihoru's magic was practically impossible.

The Pansukes that had failed to skewer Ranta to death now changed their target to Haruhiro. While using Swat on their spears, Haruhiro was appalled at himself for trying to escape from reality by focusing intently on just using Swat. But he couldn't think of *anything* he could do, and he didn't feel like he was going to be able to think of anything, either.

It was crazy to fight. They had no chance of winning.

So what, then? Would they run? They could get killed the moment they turned their backs on the enemy. Some of them might, at least. They were boxed in on all sides.

That was why he was Swatting, Swatting, Swatting some more.

Is this okay?

There was no way it was. He needed to make a decision.

If they dug in and continued the battle, they were guaranteed to all die. If they ran, some of them might survive.

Of course, Haruhiro would stay to the very end, working to make sure as many of them got out as possible. He was the leader, after all. He had to do

that much, at least. Yeah, he'd probably die. Not that he wanted to. He couldn't do the admirable thing and say he was prepared for it, but he would do what he knew he ought to do.

He didn't care what happened to himself. If Haruhiro's one life would pay for all of his comrades getting away, he was fine with that. But that wasn't how it would work. More than one person would be sacrificed. It was looking especially bad for Shihoru.

Besides, even if they cut their way out of here, after that, they would—No, he had to focus on now. What was the best thing to do at this moment? If he started thinking about what came next, he wouldn't be able to decide on anything. Even if it was just one of them who would get away, he wanted that person to survive.

The white giant had closed in to a distance of around ten meters away. Haruhiro didn't have any time to spare.

While Swatting a spear, Haruhiro shouted. “Ru—”

Or he started to, but then he quickly closed his mouth.

No way. That's just too cool. Haruhiro Swatted another Pansuke's spear, then shouted something else. This time, a name. “Tada-san!”

“Tornado Slam!” Tada whooshed in with incredible speed, spinning around horizontally and slamming his warhammer into the white giant's left ankle. The impact made the white giant stop and look down at Tada.

“Go, go...” the giant said.

“Hey there, small fry.” Tada shouldered his warhammer, then stuck up the middle finger of his right hand. “I'll take you on. Bring it.”

“Ohm, rel, ect, nemun, darsh!” Shihoru shouted.

Shadow Bond. Shihoru fixed a shadow elemental to the ground, stopping the Tori-san who was directing his Pansuke follower to put pressure on Kuzaku.

“Haaaaa!” Kuzaku immediately lured the Pansuke away from the Tori-san and went to work on him. He used Block on the Pansuke's spear. Then, stepping in after a Thrust, he used Bash to hit the Pansuke in the face with his shield. From there he pushed him down, ramming his longsword into the Pansuke's one eye.

“Ranta, get the Tori-san!” Haruhiro called.

When Haruhiro called out, Ranta's reply was “Die!”

Who're you telling to die?!

Even so, Ranta started to cross blades with the Tori-san. When it was Thunder Sword Dolphin against Thunder Sword Dolphin, neither would be shocked. The Tori-san had his Mirror Shield, too, though, so Ranta wouldn't be able to push past his defenses that easily, but even a total idiot like Ranta (that piece of trash) could be used to buy time. Without Haruhiro needing to tell him what to do, Kuzaku went to support Yume and Merry.

Haruhiro Swatted, Swatted, and Swatted again to defend himself from the spears of the two Pansukes in front of him.

The six-meter class white giant chased after Tada, slamming its fist down and trying to stomp on him, both with resounding thuds, but it hadn't managed it yet. Tada still had his warhammer resting on his shoulder, leisurely avoiding the white giant's attacks with minimal effort. He wasn't especially nimble, but he was unnaturally gutsy. Did Tada think he was invincible or something? He moved with absolute confidence. Even if it did manage to kill him, it didn't feel like that would be enough to keep Tada down.

Not long after that, Tokimune arrived, his white teeth shining.

"You're still alive, huh?" Tokimune called.

Kikkawa was there, too. Inui, Mimorin, and Anna-san, as well. Tada and Tokimune got on opposite sides of the white giant, taking turns provoking it, and skillfully dragging it around.

"Yahoo, Ranchicchi! I'm here to make my dashing entrance!" Kikkawa declared, taking a swing at the Tori-san.

"You dolt! Who're you calling Ranchicchi?!" Ranta immediately went on the offensive. "I don't let people make me owe them one!"

"You just can't show your gratitude, Ranchicchi! You're so tsun, tsun, dere, dere, it's just adowable!"

"Shut your face!" Ranta screamed. "I'll kill you, Kikkawa!"

"Shut up and *kill them all!* Yeah?!"

Inui, for some reason, had a glint in the eye that wasn't covered by his eyepatch. "Heh..." he laughed to himself, as he wandered around the area.

What're you even doing, man? Haruhiro was so dumbfounded, he slipped up and nearly missed his Swat.

"Ah!"

"Hahh!" Mimorin yelled.

If Mimorin hadn't swung down her staff with all her might, whacking the

Pansuke's head from behind with a loud thud, he'd almost certainly have been injured, or worse. Following her staff, Mimirin's sword landed a punishing blow on the top of the Pansuke's head.

Taking advantage of her unusual physique, Mimirin's sword technique was incredibly powerful, even though she used more than a sword. There was no careful technique involved—it was basically just big swings, and she left a lot of openings. However, when she hit, her blows had the force behind them to one-shot her enemies.

Incidentally, elementals, which weren't visible to the human eye in their normal state, hated most metals, so mages had to stay away from iron and copper. However, if they used a special process called elemental coating, it was apparently fine. Mimirin's sword had an elemental coating, and that was supposed to be pretty expensive. Despite that, she treated it with little care.

Mimirin kicked the Pansuke she had just landed that two-blow combo on to the ground with a "Hmph!" and then swung at the other Pansuke with her staff and sword.

"You bullied Haruhiro!" Mimirin shouted. "You can't do that! Absolutely not!"

Could it be that Mimirin's... angry? wondered Haruhiro. *Looks like it.*

Though she was expressionless, her face was red. Though the Pansuke tried to swing and stab at her with his spear, Mimirin ignored it and whacked him with her staff and sword. She pounded away. It was terrifying how hard she whaled on him.

Eventually, the Pansuke couldn't even stay on his feet, collapsing to the ground where he stood, but she still hit him, and hit him, and hit him until he collapsed to the ground, pulverized. He was close to breathing his last, if he hadn't already.

Mimirin turned to face Haruhiro. "I was worried."

"...That's, uh... well... So...rry...?"

"It's okay." Mimirin shook her head. "I'm glad I could see you again, safe and sound."

"...Me, too."

"Yeah. It's great."

Haruhiro started to panic. "Uh, uhhhhh, hold on, th-there're still enemies!"

"There are."

“We’ve gotta kill them.”

“I’ll kill them.”

“L-Let’s do it,” Haruhiro said.

“I’ll do it.”

“B-But...” Haruhiro looked around the area.

Kuzaku, Merry, and Yume were working together against two Pansukes. Ranta and Kikkawa were overwhelming the Tori-san. At the rate things were going, they’d have things wrapped up here sooner or later.

Inui was still wandering aimlessly.

No, seriously, what are you doing, man?

Ignoring that nonsensical deviant for the moment, the issue, it went without saying, was the white giant.

“Come on!” Tokimune banged his sword on his shield.

“Go, go!” The white giant lowered itself down and swung its right arm.

“There!” Tokimune slipped under the white giant’s onrushing right arm, avoiding it marvelously.

“Over here!” Tada called out to the white giant.

The white giant looked for Tada, and it found him. Instead of its hands, it used its foot. The white giant tried to kick Tada. It was a close one. Tada tumbled to the left, avoiding the white giant’s right foot.

The first thing Tada had done was slam his warhammer into the white giant’s right shin. While it showed a clear indentation, the way it was moving didn’t indicate anything resembling damage.

“Kill it! Kill it dead, yeah?!” Anna-san shouted. Anna-san could shout and encourage them until her voice went hoarse, but it was going to be a little difficult to pull that off.

Shihoru gripped her staff, looking around restlessly. It looked like there was nothing she could do, and no spell she could cast.

If it had been a four-meter class white giant, maybe she could have done something, but against a six-meter class white giant, it would be seriously tough. If there had been more obstacles, or something she could’ve used to stand on, she might have been able to do something better... maybe? Either way, in the current situation, she couldn’t even find a way to attack.

“Haru?!” Merry shouted his name. Haruhiro was being asked what to do.

*Don’t ask me. He got frustrated. Calm down, calm down, calm down.
Look, and think. That’s right. Look.*

His body suddenly floated up.

No.

It wasn't that Haruhiro was actually floating. That was obvious. It could never happen. This was a mental thing, you could say. Haruhiro's mind left his body—like an out-of-body experience, maybe? He hadn't experienced one before, so he couldn't say with any certainty that this was what one would feel like, but Haruhiro was seeing things that he couldn't possibly have been able to while standing down on the ground.

It only lasted an instant.

Maybe that was a hallucination. Or rather, it has to have been, right?

But... I was able to see it. Or, at the very least, I felt like I was able to.

For that instant, Haruhiro had been looking down at an angle on the six-meter class white giant. The many cultists, the other giants, and the other volunteer soldiers, too—he had been able to see the whole area.

It was a strange way of seeing things. It wasn't like he was seeing it clearly with his eyes, but it wasn't vague and blurry, either. It had been sort of like a picture, or a detailed diagram. Whatever it was, he'd had a flash of inspiration thanks to it.

It was the sort of idea that made him think, *Why didn't this occur to me sooner?* Not that he could have helped that.

"Well, you know, I'm just an ordinary guy, after all," Haruhiro murmured.

"You're special, Haruhiro," Mimorin said with a sullen look on her face. "To me."

"...Thanks."

I went and thanked her without thinking about it. I don't think it's good for me to be doing that. I need to shut her down more firmly. I'll be more careful from now on. For now, though, I'll focus on doing what needs to be done. That's what I'll do.

"We'll drop it into the valley," Haruhiro said, to which Mimorin nodded, then tilted her head to the side quizzically.

"How?"

"Yeah. That there is the problem..."

"You can do it if you try," she encouraged. Mimorin was acting like she always did, and it was strangely calming.

When Haruhiro and Mimorin moved, Kuzaku, Merry, and Yume came

with them. Ranta and Kikkawa looked like they'd still need some more time to take down the Tori-san. Anna-san had moved next to Shihoru at some point. Also, Inui was there, too.

Haruhiro caught Tokimune's eye. "Into the valley!" Haruhiro tried to communicate it with those few words and a gesture.

Tokimune flashed him a toothy grin, so he must have understood—right? It was probably fine.

"Come on, come on, come on!" Tokimune was banging on his shield and trying to lure the white giant to him, just like he had been all along, but he was clearly choosing a course that would take him to the settlement's valley.

Tada was a weirdo, but he was by no means slow, so he was bound to catch on.

"Mimorin, protect Anna-san!" Haruhiro said to her and then sped up. He needed to get ahead of them and pick out a good spot. He had an idea.

In that valley with the spring, there were some slopes that were gentle and easily climbed up or down, but there were also steep ones that could be called cliffs. First, they needed to drive it to the cliff's edge. Could he do it...? Well, according to Mimorin, he could if he tried. He was going to do it.

He scoped out the location of the cliff he had been thinking of for himself. It was about ten meters deep there, maybe. That wasn't too shallow. Well, it would be good enough.

The white giant was getting closer, led on by Tokimune and Tada. Ranta and Kikkawa seemed to have taken out the Tori-san, too.

There were another seven or eight cultists and a four-meter class white giant coming their way. He wished they wouldn't, but he was hardly surprised. It was always really apparent where the Tokkis were.

It made Haruhiro realize all over again that his party alone wasn't enough. And not just by a small margin. They were far from being sufficient.

He'd been aware of that, of course. But had he not been starting to misunderstand it? If something happened, there was no guarantee the Tokkis would be there to help them. In fact, just a moment ago, they had been on the verge of defeat. The Tokkis had only come around by chance. That was why they'd survived. It had been a bit of good fortune. Or, putting it the opposite way, if they hadn't gotten just a little lucky, there would have been casualties.

The difference between life and death was paper-thin. One mistake, or even one spot of misfortune, and they might trip and fall through that thin

barrier between one and the other.

That was how Manato and Moguzo had left them. They had gone far away, to a place where Haruhiro and the party couldn't reach them.

It wouldn't be strange for any of the others to follow them there. They had found themselves at the crossroads many times before now. It was only because, somehow or another, the paths he had chosen had all led to "life" that Haruhiro and the rest of the party were still here. This time had been the same.

If they messed up and walked down the path to "death," they would never come back.

It was a dizzying thought. He didn't want to do this anymore. He wanted to live in peace. Probably, it wasn't like he couldn't do it if he tried. They could find some sort of work in Alterna, earn money that way. Haruhiro had changed from how he'd been when he'd first enlisted as a volunteer soldier. If he tried it now, surely it wouldn't be impossible for him.

I'll give it some serious thought.

Later, of course.

If I make it out of this intact.

"Haruhiro!" Tokimune rushed over to him. "Get away from there! Leave this to me!"

"Okay!" Haruhiro ran off to the right. While he cut through the tents that the merchants had abandoned here, he kept an eye on Tokimune, who was about to reach the cliff's edge.

"Go, go, go!" The white giant pursued Tokimune.

Tokimune came to a sudden stop, turning to face the white giant. The cliff was right behind him at this point. "Heeeeey! Catch me if you caaaaan!"

"Go..." The white giant, however, came to a stop.

Ah... is it on to us?

"You moron, it's way too obvious!" Ranta jeered at Haruhiro.

He might have been able to take it from anyone else, but when that piece of trash said it, it hurt. Or rather, Haruhiro was in shock.

But it's not over yet.

"Plan B!" someone shouted.

Yes. He was there, too. The priest who had once been a warrior, who was still mostly a warrior. The man with the heavy warhammer. He who knew no fear, the Tokkis' Mr. Destructive Ability.

Tada.

Tada charged at the white giant from behind and did a somersault.
“Somersault Boooooooooomb!”

His warhammer exploded into the white giant’s Achilles tendon—or where it would be if white giants had an Achilles tendon, that was—and sent chunks of its flesh, or whatever it was made of, flying everywhere.

Plan B.

Wait, what’s that? Haruhiro thought, stunned.

If he were to guess, luring it over the edge of the cliff had been Plan A, and dragging or pushing it over the edge of the cliff was Plan B. Haruhiro had honestly only thought of Plan A. However, with Tada’s strength...

“Go, go!” The white giant tried to do an about-face as it stumbled. That was when it happened.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve!” Mimirin called.

“Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart!” Shihoru added.

There was a flash of light and a blast of smoke on the white giant’s chest, while a number of streaks of lightning struck its face and shoulders. Blast and Thunderstorm. Had they signaled each other, or was it coincidence? Mimirin and Shihoru had launched their magical attacks simultaneously. Even the great six-meter class white giant had to bend backwards from that.

Oh, right, Haruhiro realized. *That makes sense. If one spell’s power isn’t enough, they can just combine them. That’s one way of doing it, huh.*

“Whoosh!” Yume called. She used Rapid Fire, loosing a number of arrows in quick succession, sniping the white giant’s one eye. In a remarkably rare occurrence, Inui followed suit and fired an arrow of his own.

“Aieeeeeeee!” Anna-san squealed and jumped into the air. “Fuck off!”

“Tokimune-san!” Haruhiro began.

Without Haruhiro needing to say any more, Tokimune moved away from the edge of the cliff.

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve!”

“Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart!”

One more shot. No, two shots. Mimirin’s and Shihoru’s Blast and Thunderstorm gave it the last push, forcing the white giant to bend back even farther. At this point, it could hold out no longer. It couldn’t stay on its feet.

The white giant seemed aware of the cliff, but it had to move its left leg in that direction in order to support itself. However, there was no ground there.

It was a cliff, after all.

Falling. The white giant was falling.



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“Nice!” Kuzaku pumped his arm.

Merry placed her hand over her chest, looked up to the heavens, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Yeah!” Yume was all smiles.

“See, I told you so!” Ranta screamed. He was so excited, he was babbling nonsense.

“Happy New Year! Wow!” Kikkawa made even less sense.

Why is it suddenly New Year's?

Haruhiro didn't want to rain on their parade, but this wasn't the end of things. He took a short breath.

“Next! Six Pansukes, two Tori-sans, one four-meter class giant!
Incoming!”

“Hahahahaha!” Tada laughed as he pushed up his glasses with his left index finger. “It's nice having no shortage of enemies to crush.”

“We can have at them with mirth and good cheer, huh!” Tokimune seemed to truly be enjoying himself. “Let's do this, guys! Anna-san, we're counting on you for some good cheering!”

“You can super-duper leave it to me, yeah!” Anna-san puffed her chest out with pride and thrust her fist forward. “For as long as sun is in sky and Anna-san is on ground, victory will be yours! *Everybody*, fight for Anna-san!”

What, this is all for Anna-san now? Haruhiro wasn't sure he was down with that, but the others were erupting in cheers, and it seemed to be raising their morale, so he decided to let it slide.

“Ranta, take one of the Tori-sans!” he called. “Kuzaku, take as many Pansukes as you think you can handle!”

“I'll do it, so you better pay me the proper respect, Parupiro!” Ranta hollered.

“Kay!” Kuzaku called.

“Merry, Yume, Shihoru, you stay bunched together for now!”

“Got it!”

“Meow!”

“...Okay!”

“Tada!” Tokimune took off running. “We're gonna take out the white giant!”

“I could do it myself,” Tada bragged.

“Count me in to help, too! Peace, peace! Yay, yay, yay!” Kikkawa yelled.

Tada and Kikkawa followed Tokimune. It looked like Mimorin would be guarding Anna-san. Inui, meanwhile, was wandering around aimlessly near Shihoru.

No, seriously, what is with that guy?

Kuzaku could manage three of the Pansukes, while Haruhiro, Merry, Yume, and Shihoru would quickly take care of the rest. One of the Tori-sans would go to Ranta, but what about the other?

Haruhiro could probably count on Tokimune, Tada, and Kikkawa to handle the white giant. He glanced towards the valley. They hadn’t exactly finished off the six-meter class, so it was sure to climb back up here eventually. They needed to wipe out the reinforcements before that, and then high-tail it out of here.

Hurry. But don’t be hasty.

Tada lunged towards the white giant.

Man, I’m amazed he can do that without being afraid.

Kuzaku bravely used Bash on the Pansukes’ spears, sweeping them aside with his long sword. Their party paladin wasn’t a nutcase like Tada. Because of that, it made Haruhiro think, *Damn, Kuzaku’s incredible. He’s awesome, seriously. Maybe I have Merry to thank for that. Yeah, I figure he wouldn’t want to look lame in front of the person he loves.*

Whatever the case, he wouldn’t let Kuzaku’s hard work go to waste.

He could see that line.

That dimly shining line.

It wasn’t straight. It bent and twisted many times. It was a proposal being offered to him by his situational awareness that arose from his observations, combined with his predictions based on experience.

Hey, if I do this right now, wouldn’t it work out? it said. If he delayed even a tenth of a second, it would be of no use anymore. In Haruhiro’s case, fortunately, whether by habit or some other force, he never hesitated when he saw the line—or rather, by the time he saw it, he was already on the move.

With smooth steps, he rushed past one of the Pansukes, burying his dagger in the cultist’s one eye as he did.

While pulling it free, he performed a Shatter on the Pansuke next to him, then followed up by using the sap in his left hand to perform Hitter on the other Pansuke’s jaw.

To top it all off, he landed a Shatter on yet another Pansuke. Then, he pulled back.

“Ohhhhhh!” Kuzaku scattered the Pansukes with his longsword and shield. One Pansuke was dead, and three had been thrown into disorder when Haruhiro had caught them by surprise, so they couldn’t stop Kuzaku.

Do we all pile on them now? No, Haruhiro thought.

“Ah!” Kuzaku backed away. When someone took a swing at him with a Thunder Sword Dolphin, all he could do was avoid it.

It was a Tori-san. Two of them, at that. What was Ranta doing?

“Exhaust!”

There he was. About damn time.

Ranta leapt in and attacked one of the Tori-sans from the side. There was a loud clash as Thunder Sword Dolphin met Thunder Sword Dolphin. Ranta won the pushing contest and threw the Tori-san off-balance. But there were two Tori-sans. The other one took a thrust at Ranta.

“Exhaust!” Ranta shot straight backwards at an incredible speed.

If the Tori-sans went after him, they would be playing right into Ranta’s hands. Sadly, they didn’t. The Tori-sans both focused their attacks on Kuzaku.

“Oh, crap! I can’t take two of them!” Kuzaku was forced to run around.

The Pansukes were using that opening to attempt to regroup.

“Rantaaaa!” Haruhiro shouted despite himself.

“I’m just getting started, okay?” Ranta contorted his entire body and took up a strange pose with his Thunder Sword Dolphin turned sideways. “O Darkness! O Lord of Vice! Dread Wave!”

Maybe his moronic pose caught their attention, because it wasn’t just Haruhiro—the Pansukes and Tori-sans were staring at Ranta, too.

Well, not like anything will happen, though.

That much was obvious. It wasn’t only the God of Light, Lumiaris, whose power didn’t reach the Dusk Realm. The Dark God, Skullhell’s, didn’t either.

“Huh?” Haruhiro looked on with surprise and dismay. “What? Huh? Why?”

“Hmph...” Ranta looked down at the ground. “Totally forgot I can’t use magic here.”

“Stupid Rantaaaa!” Yume shouted.

Ranta really was an idiot, and a piece of trash, and he was beyond all help,

but the enemy had stopped moving. Even if this was an unexpected side effect of his idiocy, as volunteer soldiers, they ought to exploit it to its fullest.

“Ohm, rel, ect, el, nemun, darsh!”

Shadow Pond. Shihoru affixed a shadow elemental to the ground where the two Tori-sans were standing. They wouldn’t be moving from that spot for a while.

“Get the Pansukes!” Haruhiro immediately ordered, and Kuzaku lunged at them.

“Zeeah! Rahhh! Oryahhhh!” he yelled.

Haruhiro circled around behind the Pansukes. Yume drew her machete and came at them swinging. Merry didn’t leave Shihoru’s side.

Suddenly, though Haruhiro didn’t see the line, he got the feeling he could take one of them down. *Gotta kill them when I can*, he reasoned. *Okay, now’s the time...*

But when he went in for a Backstab, someone suddenly stole his kill.

“Heh!” It was Inui. That deviant Inui landed a jump-kick on the Pansuke’s back, knocking him down, then stomped hard on the cultist’s jaw.

Crack. There was an unpleasant sound, and his neck bent in a direction it was never meant to.

“I am Inui! He who brings destruction from the heavens!”

Man, that was impressive and all. But it came out of nowhere. You spooked me.

Inui turned to Shihoru with a mysterious glint in the one eye that wasn’t covered by his eyepatch. “Oh, my fated bride, walk the path of carnage with me!”

“No way.” It was an immediate response, and in a rather strong tone for Shihoru. Well, of course it would be.

“Heh...” Inui turned and went the other way. “For now, I bid you farewell...”

—*Wait, huh? You’re going? Where the hell to?*

That wasn’t clear, but Inui dashed off.

Well... Maybe we’ll just let him do what he wants? I mean, he doesn’t have to come back if he doesn’t want to. We’re busy enough taking care of ourselves.

Tokimune, Tada, and Kikkawa were circling the white giant as they attacked it. It looked like Tokimune and Kikkawa were harassing it and

acting as decoys, while Tada was the one putting in the heavy blows. The white giant already had damage to both of its legs. The way things were going, it looked like those three could take it out, but it wasn't going to be quick.

There's still time before the Tori-sans break free from Shadow Pond or its effect expires. In that time, if we can just get the four Pansukes—

But while Haruhiro was thinking that...

“Delm, hel, en, balk, zel, arve!”

...the Tori-sans got blown away. It was the Blast spell.

They were pounded into the ground, then rolled a bit—but they were getting up. It didn't look like they were completely unharmed, but they didn't seem to have taken serious injuries from it, either.

Miiimoriiin, Haruhiro moaned silently. Damn, their ponchos really are durable.

“Oh, well.” Muttering to himself a little, Haruhiro decided to change gears. He couldn't change what had already happened. Kuzaku, Haruhiro, Ranta, Yume, Merry, Shihoru, and Mimorin would have to take out the two Tori-sans and four Pansukes.

We've even got Anna-san cheering us on, so we do have the numerical advantage, you know. We can do it. We should be able to. I'm sure of it. Probably.

Kuzaku kept three of the Pansukes under control, while Yume dealt with the other. Ranta looked like he was aiming for a Tori-san. If he didn't do so, they'd be in trouble.

While keeping an eye on the Tori-sans, first they would have to quickly reduce the number of Pansukes, and then—

Haruhiro glanced towards the valley. Just to be on the safe side.

He looked again to check what he was seeing.

“...Already?”

This is terrible.

Wasn't that the six-meter class white giant trying to climb up out of the valley?

It was a shock, but Haruhiro didn't lose his head over it. He couldn't claim this had been within his range of expectations. He'd been focused on other things, after all. But they just had to cope with it.

The volunteer soldiers were pulling back.

They're retreating?

Where're they gonna run to?

And why?

“That, huh...” he realized. This time, he couldn’t help but lose his head.

From the south.

There's something coming.

It's big, white, and writhing.

Well, yeah, of course. Of course they'd run. I want to run, too. There's no choice but to run from that thing.

Its height wasn’t that enormous, although it did look bigger than the six-meter class giant. The problem was its length. It was twenty meters long, maybe twenty-five. It might have even reached thirty meters long. Possibly even more.

The hydra.

It was an unsettling, giant creature that looked like nine snakes of two to three meters in diameter had all been balled up together. If it attacked them, what would they do?

Haruhiro, of course, would flee to the ends of the earth. That would be the normal response.

It seemed Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, and Orion all agreed with Haruhiro’s view. They were human, too. Thank goodness. Was that good? No? It wasn’t particularly good.

Haruhiro didn’t take any time to think about what to do. “Tokimune, it’s the hydra! We’ve gotta run!”

“Whoa...!” Tokimune made his decision quickly. “Okay, everyone run! Protect Anna-san!”

“Just when we were almost done here. Dammit.” Though he complained while he did it, Tada shouldered his warhammer and took off at a run.

“Run, run, ruuuun! Yep! Run!” Kikkawa was cheery even at time like this.

Even though Anna-san was supposed to be the group’s cheerleader, she was grinding her teeth in audible frustration. “It time for strategic retreat, yeah, damn it! No choice, yeah!?”

“Let’s go.” Mimorin grabbed Anna-san by the scruff of the neck and dragged her away.

“Meow...!” Yume turned and fled.

“Just when I was about to show you all how great I am!” Ranta went, too. Merry hesitated.

“I’ll be fine, so go!” Kuzaku didn’t back away. Or rather, he couldn’t. If he tried to, the Pansukes would gang up on him and beat him to a pulp.

“Haruhiro-kun...?!” Shihoru looked to Haruhiro.

“Go, Shihoru! You, too, Merry!” Haruhiro ran as fast as he could, trying to will himself to *See it, see it!* —That line. It was times like this when he really wanted to see it.

But, of course, it wasn’t anything so convenient.

Haruhiro was no hero. He was just a leader. That’s why he had no choice to do what he should, and what he could, as a leader.

“Kuzaku, give ’em hell!” he called.

“Roger that! Ruahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Kuzaku used his longsword to sweep a number of spears away, then used Bash on the Pansuke in front of him. “Dahhhh! Gahhseahhh! Rahh! Nwahhhhhhh!”

Without stopping, Kuzaku swung his sword around while protecting himself with his shield, and advanced. Even when the Pansukes’ spears reached his armor, he ignored them and advanced.

Kuzaku was wearing sturdy plate armor. That said, when he took a good hard hit to his armor, it still had to hurt. He’d get bruised, at least.

Hang in there. Hang in there, please, Kuzaku.

“There!” Haruhiro grappled one of the Pansukes, not from behind, but from the side, and strangled him using his left arm while he stabbed his dagger into the cultist’s single eye.

That was pretty forced just now, wasn’t it? If I’d messed up my timing even a little, I’d have been in danger. Scary...!

He could feel a cold mass of fear cling to the inside of his stomach. But so what? What difference did it make?

Haruhiro got in close to another Pansuke, pulling off a combo with Shatter and Hitter. Yet another Pansuke reached out to get him with his spear, but he jumped to avoid it. Even as he cried out, *Oh, crap, oh, crap, this is seriously dangerous*, in his heart, he Swatted the spear twice.

While screaming, *Seriously, I’ve had enough, give me a break, augh!* in his head, he stepped in and used Arrest to seize the Pansuke’s arm, followed by a leg sweep to trip him.

“Assuh!” Kuzaku let out a mysterious shout to psyche himself up, then

used Bash to knock one Pansuke flying.

Now, let's run, Haruhiro thought.

He didn't have to say anything to get that message across. Haruhiro and Kuzaku took off running at the same time.

"Ha ha!" Kuzaku laughed as he ran. "This is awesome! Ha ha ha! Just awesome!"

No, um, buddy, now's not the time for laughing. Well, it's not like I don't get how he feels. Kuzaku must have been pretty scared, too. Now that he's set free from it, he's feeling a high. But is that all? He's enjoying this crazy bad situation so much he can't help himself. Could that be part of it? The thrill of it all is addictive. I want to live in peace. That's how I really feel, but the question is if I can. What would a life without stuff like this be like? Surprisingly less boring than I might expect...?

The Pansukes, the Tori-sans, and the four-meter class white giant chased after them. Behind them were volunteer soldiers, cultists, white giants, and even the hydra.

Where they were headed was the valley and the six-meter class white giant that would soon crawl up out of it.

This is the worst. I feel terrible. I wish this were all just a dream. Can someone take my place? Like, I want some help here, you know? I'm not kidding. If someone will save us, and guarantee me and my comrades our safety, I'll do anything. No lie. No matter what it is.

I don't want to go through all this. It's ultra-stressful, you know? Man, I've had it with this, seriously. I'm fed up. It's not fun at all, okay?

I think we might die, too. This time, we may just be out of luck. What'll happen when we die? Do we go to heaven? Or hell, maybe? Do we cease to exist? Return to the void?

I don't want to die. I'm scared of dying. I don't wanna. No, no, no, I don't want this.

Yeah. I knew it. I don't need this. This sort of situation. I don't mind a little thrill now and then, but I don't need this extreme life-and-death stuff. Haruhiro felt it quite keenly. I want to live in peace!

Tokimune and the others who had gone on ahead of them looked like they were taking a detour around the valley to reach the initial hill.

Will they be able to avoid the six-meter class that way? Haruhiro thought. Or not? I dunno, maybe it could go either way?

It didn't seem like their pursuers were about to catch up to them for the moment.

Even if the route was a bit questionable, they had to take it.

The six-meter class was already out of the valley up to its waist. It supported itself with its left arm and swung with its right.

"Go, go, go, go!" the giant called.

It was trying to slam Tokimune and Tada with its right hand.

"Dodge it!" Haruhiro shouted.

They didn't need him to tell them that. Tokimune, Tada, and even Kikkawa threw themselves to the ground to get away from the white giant's right hand.

The white giant braced itself with both arms and lifted its body up. While it was doing that, Mimirin and Anna-san, Ranta, Yume, Shihoru, and Merry all passed in front of it.

Inui was missing. But who cared about that deviant?

Haruhiro and Kuzaku stood there, unable to move.

"Whoaaaaaaaaaa?!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Wha... Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha...?!" Kuzaku sputtered.

The six-meter class white giant rose up before their very eyes. To be precise, it had just gotten out of the valley, so it was still down on one knee, but it was still big. It was huuuuge. But if they stopped here, the enemies behind them would catch up. It would be like saying, *Why, yes, please do try to hit us*, to the white giant, too.

Haruhiro slapped Kuzaku on the back. It was do or die time. "G-Go! Go for it! We have to!"

"Guhsuh!"

What the hell does "guhsuh" mean?

That wasn't clear, but Kuzaku took off running. His running form was a little awkward, though. Not that Haruhiro's was much better.

As if we could run smoothly now!

"Go, go...!"

The white giant tried to slug Kuzaku and Haruhiro with its left hand while still on one knee, or maybe it was trying to grab and crush them instead.

"Bwuh...!" Kuzaku slid headfirst to the ground, avoiding the white giant's right hand.

"Ah...!" Haruhiro rolled to avoid it.

“Go, go, go!”

Next was the left hand. It came down at them.

“Uwahhhhhhhh?!” Kuzaku tossed his shield and kept crawling forward. He was desperate.

Of course, Haruhiro was dashing like a madman with his butt on fire, too.

“Nnnnng!” he grunted.

Is it gonna hit? Is it gonna hit me? Am I gonna get crushed?

When the ground shook violently, he let out a weird little shriek. It looked like he had made it.

“M-My shield!” Kuzaku gasped.

“I-I-I-It’s not worth your life, okay?!” Haruhiro yelled.

It got up!

The white giant got up!

“Go! Go, go! Go! Go, go! Go! Go, go, go!” The six-meter class white giant got up and danced. No, maybe it wasn’t dancing, but the way it was coming at Haruhiro and Kuzaku, it looked like it was following the steps of some sort of dance.

I don’t even know what’s happening anymore. It’s going in random directions. Anyway, we need to avoid its feet. That’s the best we can manage. We need to catch up with the others. I’d really love to do that, and we’re farther away from the valley than we were before, but what direction did they go in? No, that’s not what—

“Somersault Boooooooooomb!”

Huh?

The white giant stopped moving. Or rather, it stumbled. That was because someone had slammed a warhammer into its left ankle, which was the leg that had been supporting it at the time.

—Tada.

Why is Tada here?

It wasn’t just Tada.

“Hah...!” called Tokimune.

When Tada slammed it with his Somersault Bomb, Tokimune hit it with Bash. Well, not so much Bash as an ordinary tackle. Still, he was up against a six-meter class white giant, you know? That wasn’t even going to shake it. If not for the fact that Tada’s Somersault Bomb had made it stumble, that is. It was their combined attack that made it work. Then, on top of that...

“Del, hel, en, balk, zel, arve!”

There was a flash of light and then an explosion near the white giant’s crotch for some reason. It was Mimirin’s Blast.

The white giant was thrown completely off-balance, and it stumbled backwards one, then two steps.

“Haruhiro!” Tokimune turned back with a flash of his white teeth. “We owed you one! We couldn’t leave you for dead!”

“Stop talking!” Tada spun around in a circle, then slammed his warhammer hard into the white giant’s left shin. “And attack! Tornado Slaaaaaaaaaam!”

“Gohhhhh?!” The white giant shook again. What power.

“Damn, he’s cool,” Kuzaku whispered.

Haruhiro felt the same way, but he prayed no one would start aspiring to be like that. If his party members started acting like that, his heart would never be able to handle the stress, even if he had more than one. And, fundamentally, humans only had one heart, so he’d probably die of a heart attack in no time. Besides, while Haruhiro and Kuzaku had survived thanks to it, was this really okay?

It wasn’t just Tokimune and Tada. There was Mimirin, who had cast the spell earlier, and Anna-san. Kikkawa was turning around and coming back. Ranta, Yume, Shihoru and Ranta, too. What about Inui? Haruhiro didn’t care about him, but they had lost their chance to escape now.

The cultists and four-meter class white giants would reach them soon. The volunteer soldiers and the hydra, too. It would become a chaotic melee. They’d be caught in the fray.

There were no guarantees that things would be any better where they were running to. Still, there was a major difference between things ending here and there being a next place for them to head towards. If they were caught up in that wave of enemies and allies, they were more or less sure to be finished. He couldn’t help but think that.

It looks like this is the end. I can feel my strength draining away. Well, of course it is. This is tough. How am I supposed to turn things around here? I mean, even if I did get us back on a proper footing, what then? I’m sure we’d still be screwed.

I wish I could just give up.

GAME OVER

That text flashed through his mind.

What was that?

Have I seen it somewhere before...?

GAME OVER

G A M E O V E R

- GAME OVER -

Game Over Continue? Yes / No

Will you continue? Y/N

GAME OVER RETRY?

game over

GAMEOVER

G A M E O V E R

A game, huh? Haruhiro thought. But this is no game.

“It isn’t, right? Manato, Moguzo?” he murmured.

That’s why I can’t give up. Not until the very end. Giving up is out of the question.

First, I need to look around. That’s right. Look. Look properly, and see.

Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers were, to some degree at least, moving together as a group. Orion was more spread out, but none of the white capes were completely isolated. They seemed to be moving as parties.

There were dozens—no, easily over a hundred cultists. Several hundred. As for the white giants, at a glance there were around ten of the four-meter class, two of the six-meter class, and one ridiculously huge one that looked like it was in the eight-meter class, too.

Then there was the hydra. That thing was bad news. Seriously.

“Kuzaku, you don’t have your shield, so don’t do anything too crazy,” Haruhiro warned.

“Kay. Not like I could, anyway.”

“Come with me!”

Haruhiro brought Kuzaku with him and joined up with Ranta, Yume, Shihoru, and Merry. Kikkawa, Anna-san, and Mimorin were with them, too. Right after that, the cultists caught up with them.

“Kikkawa, I’m counting on you to be the main tank!” Haruhiro called.

“Righto! You just leave it to me!”

“Everyone, stay together!”

Everyone gave their own response, but Haruhiro was more focused on

looking than listening. He had to be.

Kikkawa swung his sword around and drew the enemies to him. Kuzaku and Ranta shored up his defense on each side, attacking the enemies there. If there were enemies that the three of them couldn't stop, then Yume, Merry, Mimorin, and finally Haruhiro would suppress them. Even Anna-san had some sort of stick-like weapon at the ready as she cheered on the rest of the group.

Shihoru was pretty badly winded. She was catching her breath and looking for the right time to use her magic. The other volunteer soldiers also stopped fleeing near where Haruhiro and the others were.

It was the hydra. It had caught up to the rear of the fleeing group of volunteer soldiers.

Ducky's red hair was shaking around wildly as he shouted something. One of the Berserkers got punched by a white giant and sailed spinning through the air.

Oh, Haruhiro realized. Yeah, that guy's dead. But now's not the time to worry about others.

“Augh!” Yume cried out, and her body shuddered. It was a Tori-san. She had knocked Tori-san's Thunder Sword Dolphin aside with her machete.

The Tori-san stepped in and tried to slash Yume.

He's gonna kill her. Kill Yume. No, I won't let him.

Haruhiro charged in and, rather than interpose himself between them, he tackled the Tori-san at the hip. He used his sap to Slap the hand the Tori-san was holding his Thunder Sword Dolphin with.

It connected. How's that?

But the Tori-san didn't drop his Thunder Sword Dolphin. He just pulled it back. Worse yet, he thrust out his Mirror Shield.

Oh, crap. Not good. I can't avoid it.

“Urgh!” Haruhiro took the shield bash directly and was flipped right over.

Will I die? he thought for a second.

“There!” Mimorin called.

“Take that!” Merry shouted.

Thanks to his comrades, he didn't have to die. It was a close call. Mimorin and Merry double-teamed the Tori-san and made him back away. Meanwhile, Yume helped Haruhiro to his feet.

“Sorry, Haru-kun!” she said.

“It’s fine!” he answered.

There were going to be mistakes. It wasn’t possible to reduce their failure rate to zero. The important thing was that they support whoever messed up, avoid getting injured, and survive. When holes started to open, they had to fill them in, or cover them to keep it from becoming noticeable. If they could just repeat that process steadily, they could get out of here alive somehow. If that was all it took, well, even if it might not be Haruhiro’s strong suit, he could make an attempt at least.

Though, naturally, there were limits.

Tokimune and Tada were still going at it with the six-meter class. Kikkawa, Kuzaku, and Ranta were doing well on the front line, and Haruhiro, Yume, Merry, and Mimorin were doing a relatively stable job in the rear, too. Thanks to that, Anna-san and Shihoru hadn’t had to do anything yet. The way things were going, they would probably be able to count on Shihoru’s magic when they needed it. They could support this system for now.

From what he could see, Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, Orion, and the other volunteer soldiers had all taken up formations of their own, and were managing to repel their enemies as a group.

If the enemy only had six-meter class white giants, it might not be impossible to defeat them one by one and then wipe out the enemy.

The problem was going to be the eight-meter class white giant and the hydra.

The eight-meter class’s movements seemed sluggish, even compared to the other white giants, but just by being there at all, it got in the way. Of course, it was also a threat.

The hydra was swinging five of its tentacles around to attack the volunteer soldiers, while the other four slithered around, pressing it forward.

When the eight-meter class white giant or the hydra were attacking, the volunteer soldiers couldn’t fight. That gave the cultists and other white giants an opening to attack. They were making a mess out of this battlefield.

The way things were going to work here was simple. If they did something about the eight-meter class and the hydra, the volunteer soldiers would win. That was, if they could just do something.

At the very least, that task was beyond Haruhiro and the party’s capabilities. Even the Tokkis would have a hard time with it. No, it would probably be impossible for them, too. As for Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers,

and Orion, if they could do it, they would have by this point. Things had gotten like this because they couldn't.

Still, things hadn't fallen apart yet. Whenever the occasional volunteer soldier got caught by the hydra's tentacles, or kicked into the air by the eight-meter class, and their party looked ready to break and run, someone would quickly step in and support them. "One-on-One" Max, "Red Devil" Ducky, and Shinozaki were running all over the place to assist their comrades.

Through great pain, the volunteer soldiers held their lines and were slowly backing away. Haruhiro and his party were doing so, too. It was a gradual retreat.

Even as they were being pushed hard, they held out the best they could.

There was going to be a break somewhere, no doubt.

Eventually it would be too much for them to endure, and they would collapse.

But it was strange. Even though they were clearly being chased down, the senior volunteer soldiers looked unperturbed, and were just doing their best. No one had given in to desperation, and no one gave off a sense of despair, either.

Had they all stopped thinking about things they didn't have to think about so that they could focus on the task at hand?

In the end, people could only do the things they could do. They could give it their best. They couldn't control the situation beyond that. Even if they wanted things to go a particular way, wish and pray as they might, it would only turn out the way it was going to turn out.

"Focus. Focus. Focus..."

While whispering that to himself, Haruhiro looked around. He looked and got a grasp of the situation. He swatted a Pansuke's spear.

There was a gap forming between their front line and rear line, so he had the rear line move up. There was another Pansuke coming up from the rear, so he had Yume and Merry fall back behind Anna-san and Shihoru.

Kuzaku was pretty exhausted. Haruhiro wanted to let him rest, but that wasn't an option.

"Keep at it!" he shouted to him.

He swatted a Pansuke's spear. He wanted to chain that with Shatter, but that was only his wish. It wasn't something he had judged was doable at this moment. He had to show restraint.

The eight-meter class hadn't really gotten any closer, but the hydra had. Were Tokimune and Tada, who were jumping around near the six-meter class white giant, going to be okay?

"The hydra's coming!" Haruhiro called.

He'd at least warned them. Then he Swatted a Pansuke's spear. He ordered Kikkawa, Ranta, and Kuzaku to shift their positions to the left twice. Swat, Swat, Swat.

He took a look around the area. *It's to the west*, he thought. They were heading west. Towards the initial hill. The giant god was there.

In other words, the way things were going, they would eventually be caught between the hydra and the giant god. Though, only if they lasted that long.

No, no. Don't think about that. Don't get distracted. Focus, focus, focus, focus.

"Gahhh!" Kikkawa accidentally struck a Tori-san's Thunder Sword Dolphin and was stunned.

"You moron!" Ranta deflected the Thunder Sword Dolphin with his own Thunder Sword Dolphin to protect Kikkawa.

The front line broke formation, and it looked like the cultists would push past them.

For a moment, Haruhiro was scared, but they could make it through this. "Kikkawa, keep going and swap places with Ranta! Mimorin, support Kikkawa!"

"Righty-o!" Kikkawa shook his head to clear it as he passed Ranta.

"Aye!" Mimorin took a position diagonally behind Kikkawa, knocking aside a Pansuke's spear with her staff.

I know there was another Tori-san around here, Haruhiro thought, scanning the area. *There! He's circled around behind us.*

"Merry!"

Reacting to his warning, Merry twisted in time to avoid the Thunder Sword Dolphin.

"Ohm, rel, ect, el vel, darsh!"

Shihoru used Shadow Echo. Three shadow elementals flew towards the Tori-san. It was relatively close range.

They'd hit. No, the Tori-san had blocked two with his Mirror Shield. But one got him in the face.

The Tori-san's head shot back like he'd been punched. Merry jabbed at his Mirror Shield with her short staff and made him back away even more. However, she couldn't just focus on the Tori-san.

Merry and Yume had each been keeping a Pansuke busy. With the Tori-san getting involved on top of that, they were having trouble dealing with them. Even if Anna-san joined in, it would be too little, too late, and Shihoru wasn't able to handle close combat. Haruhiro himself was already keeping two Pansukes busy with Swat.

Do I have Mimorin move back? he wondered. Or do I take someone off the front line and send them to help? Decide. Right now.

“Kuzaku, go to the back!”

“Kay!” Kuzaku began to fall back immediately.

Kuzaku had probably been hopelessly worried about Merry. It would be easier for him if he was by her side, no doubt. Now, how to fill the hole he left?

Ranta was fully occupied dealing with the Tori-san in front, while Kikkawa was handling a number of enemies, too. Mimorin only had the one Pansuke for now. If Haruhiro took that one and freed up Mimorin...

Focus. I need to focus. Focus, focus.

The hydra.

It's close.

It's gotten pretty close. Maybe not? I dunno. But... it feels kinda close.

“Whoa!” Tokimune was hanging from his sword, which had been stabbed into the white giant close to its waist, and it looked like he was close to being shaken off.

What the heck is he doing? Though, white giants have pretty hard bodies. I guess it's impressive that he managed to stab it in there, huh?

This is no good. Calm. I have to stay calm. Swat, Swat.

“Haaaaaze!” Tada screamed.

Tada swung his warhammer up on the diagonal, slamming it into the white giant's left shin. The white giant's massive body shook. The left shin. Come to think of it, Tada was stubbornly focused on hitting that one spot. He was serious. Tada really meant to fell the white giant. Together with Tokimune, it might actually be possible.

If they had had more time, those two might have taken care of the six-meter class white giant. In that instant, something must have happened, but

Haruhiro wasn't entirely sure. Or rather, why had what happened happened? And was it even possible?

He doubted his eyes.

The six-meter class white giant's head had just suddenly exploded, after all. Like a watermelon being smashed with a stick. It wasn't that unusual to see a watermelon get smashed, but this was a white giant's head. Wasn't it strange for it burst like that, with its contents scattering all over the place? It was weird, wasn't it? Or was Haruhiro the one who was weird for thinking that way?

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?" Tada roared. "That was my prey! Who did that?!"

That's right. It couldn't possibly be a natural phenomenon, so someone must have done it. Was it magic? Who did it?

It didn't take long for the answer to that to become clear.

"Ohhhh?!" Ranta leapt backwards.

Yeah, I can't blame him for being surprised.

The Tori-san's head was gone.

An ax. It was an ax. Held by a short, stocky figure. The thick-bearded dwarf had closed in on the Tori-san from behind and decapitated him with his ax.

No way, Haruhiro thought. It shouldn't be possible to cut through their ponchos. Does that not apply to that dwarf—to Branken?

"Gwahahahaaaaah!" Branken let out a throaty and unsettling laugh as he went around cutting cultists cleanly in two one after another with the terrifying ax he held. He cut through them easily.

This is a kind of simple thing to question, but is that ax light? It looks kind of heavy, you know? How can Branken swing around an ax that's bigger than he is so easily? Because he's crazily strong? Is that how it works?

Haruhiro had been distracted by Branken, so it took some time to notice, but he wasn't the only one who had come. Not far away, there was a large woman swinging around a massive sword, and, of course, cutting down cultists one after another, completely ignoring the blade-resisting property of their ponchos. That was Kayo.

There were also a mysterious number of cultists dropping like flies, even though they hadn't been cut. Haruhiro wondered what it could be, but it was arrows. They were being shot through their single eye.

Where are the arrows coming from? he wondered. The west, huh.

They were probably coming from the west. When he looked that way, he spotted him. The beautiful elf boy with his bow at the ready. It was Taro.

The short former mage, Gogh, and the beautiful mage, Miho, stood behind Taro with an air of composure. The spell that had gone off might have been from Gogh. Or perhaps it was Miho's.

And then...

“Sorry. We’re running late.”

That man walked in. Drawing his sword, it was the former strongest, the man who was an indisputable legend.

“That guy’s got one hell of an aura...” Ranta said with an admiring groan.

He can say that again, Haruhiro thought.

People often talked about someone with a lot of presence having an aura, but this might have been what a real aura looked like.

“Akira-san!” Someone called out his name.

“It’s Akira-san!”

“Akira-san’s here!”

“Akira-san!”

“Woo! Akira-san!”

“We’ve got Akira-san!”

The atmosphere changed in an instant. Akira-san. It was Akira-san. The whole area was dyed in Akira-san’s colors! Enveloped by his aura!

The cultists were going down in a one-sided fight against Branken, Kayo, and Taro, and they were in an utter panic.

Oh, oh? What’s with that four-meter class white giant? It’s turning towards Akira-san, isn’t it?

Akira-san was a big man, but the difference in size between him and the white giant was still greater than that between a child and an adult. Even so—damn, Akira-san was huge. For some reason he looked larger than the white giant.

Well, that’s reckless, thought Haruhiro.

The white giant foolishly took a swing at Akira-san. Naturally, it never stood a chance of hitting. Akira-san turned and evaded it as easily as he might have avoided a butterfly fluttering along, letting the white giant’s right fist fly past him. With a slight movement, somehow he managed to get right behind the white giant.

“And... there!” Akira-san climbed the white giant. He didn’t clamber up it. With the ease of walking up a hill, Akira-san reached the white giant’s shoulders right before their eyes.

Haruhiro was watching it happen, but he couldn’t understand. It might not have been completely vertical, but it had been an incredibly steep angle. Wasn’t it insane that he could climb it like that?

“Rest in peace, okay?” Akira-san buried his sword deep in the white giant’s single eye. In a rather offhanded manner, too. It was like he wanted to say, *Hey, at least put up a fight.*

Not that it could have heard him if he did say it. It was too late for that.

The white giant collapsed.

Just before the white giant’s back touched the ground, Akira-san flipped into the air and came down with a graceful landing.

“Well, doesn’t that just beat all.” Tokimune laughed in amazement. “He’s in a whole other dimension from us, huh?”

It really is another dimension, Haruhiro agreed. *There’s that much of a difference between us?*

“Yeah, so what?!” Tada pushed up his glasses with his left index finger, then rushed over and swung his warhammer down at the nearest Tori-san. “I’ll make a new dimension of my own!”

The Tori-san’s head and the Mirror Shield he attempted to defend himself with were both crushed, and he collapsed to the ground.

“Yahoo!” Kikkawa jumped for joy. “Not just another dimension, but a new one, huh?!”

With those words as their signal—no, that was definitely not what it was—the volunteer soldiers began their counterattack. It was no simple counterattack, though. It was a violent onslaught, a massive counteroffensive.

After all, the absolutely legendary team of Akira-san, Branken, Kayo, Taro, Gogh, and Miho were mowing down cultists and white giants like they were cutting weeds. It was less clear with the white giants, but the cultists did seem to come equipped with emotions, and it looked like shock and panic were included. The cultists were looking ready to flee. The volunteer soldiers, emboldened by Akira-san’s arrival, moved as one to attack them.

The Pansukes’ spears broke one after another. The Tori-sans’ Thunder Sword Dolphins weren’t so scary when everyone rushed them at once. Their weapons were battered from their hands, and their Mirror Shields were

trampled. The four- and six-meter class white giants were felled one after another.

Haruhiro and the others finished off a number of cultists, too. Especially Ranta and Kikkawa, who got carried away and ran wild.

Where had the difficult battle they had been fighting all this time gone to? Haruhiro couldn't help but think it wasn't that the enemy were scary, it was the flow of events. With one change in the winds, everything could change dramatically like it just did. That being the case, it was entirely possible they would suddenly be knocked from this position of overwhelming advantage into a disadvantage they couldn't hope to recover from.

Is this... really okay? Haruhiro couldn't go with the flow, and he didn't know what to do with himself because of it. *That's, well, yeah... It's fine, I guess? I should probably try to go with the flow when things aren't going so badly.*

"I see you're still all right, Haruhiro-kun," a voice said.

Haruhiro was shocked to find Akira-san right next to him. Akira-san returned his sword to its sheathe, crossing his arms with a cool look on his face.

"Oh, er, yeah, w-we're fine, all of us," Haruhiro stammered. "Well, my party is, at least..."

"We've been trying out different things with Soma and his group to see if anything can be done about the giant god."

"Oh, yeah?" Haruhiro asked. "—And?"

Akira-san shook his head. "Ever since it took up that spot in the middle of the initial hill, it's hardly moved. That thing is tough."

"Even for you guys?"

"We're still volunteer soldiers, just the same as all of you. I've merely survived at it much longer than you have. When you've lived twice as long, you're bound to be a little better at things."

"Is that how it works?"

"Of course it is." Akira-san smiled and nodded.

This guy had been giving off an aura that put pressure on the whole area just moments ago, but now he looked like just a nice, regular old man. Of course, that wasn't the case at all.

"I'm just an old man," Akira-san said. "Because of my old age, I find myself wanting to meddle. —Kuzaku-kun, look at this for a moment."

Akira-san called out to Kuzaku, then readied his shield and drew his sword. He moved forward, covering half of his body with the shield, and swinging the sword down diagonally at a nearby Pansuke. Even Haruhiro could tell what he was doing. It was the Paladin skill Punishment. But Akira-san deliberately chose to stop his sword halfway and pull it back. The Pansuke was cowering, as if frozen.

“Did you see that? With enough repetition, you’ll be able to do this, too,” Akira-san said.

“Right...” Kuzaku stood bolt-upright and watched closely.

I couldn’t have put it better myself, thought Haruhiro.

Akira-san used Punishment on the Pansuke once again, only this time he let it hit. At least, it was probably Punishment, but it was completely different.

I dunno, it was like it was all one movement.

Defending with his shield, advancing, and swinging down with his sword. The three actions had completely melded together to become one.

Akira-san’s sword cleanly cut through the Pansuke from his left shoulder to his right hip. It looked like when you got to the same level as Branken, Kayo, or Akira-san, the supposedly uncuttable ponchos didn’t even matter. Was this really something they could achieve through repetition? It was hard to accept at face value, but Akira-san didn’t seem like the type to make things up to trick those who were younger and less experienced.

“It’s all about what you build up over time.” Akira-san returned his sword to its sheath once more. “It’s experience. Feel things for yourself, and build on that. If all you’ve done is learn it, a skill is just a skill and nothing more. True power lies somewhere beyond that. Now, when it comes to how you get a sense for that, really, repetition in the field is the only way.”

“Hmm,” Gogh snorted. “Well, aren’t you sounding self-important.”

The beautiful mage Miho was standing there, too. While the situation was in their favor, it was still a chaotic battle, so why were these people taking it easy as if they were out for a stroll in their own garden?

“Giving lectures doesn’t suit you, Akira-san,” Gogh said. “You’re not even the type to follow theory. The fact that you want to tell the younger folks these things anyway may be proof that you’ve gotten old.”

“Well, yeah,” Akira-san shrugged. “I’m aware of that myself.”

“He’s still young,” Miho said with a giggle.

“Bwuh!” Ranta may have just imagined something strange. “M-Magic!” Shihoru leaned in, clutching her staff tightly. “Wh-What about... magic? Is there a trick to it?”

“I want to know.” Mimirin nodded.

“Hey, wait.” Anna-san looked around restlessly. “Is it okay to jabber?! There still lots and lots of enemies around, yeah?!”

“Well, time to do a little work, then,” Gogh said with a look to Shihoru and Mimirin. “I’ll answer your question while I’m at it, too. You’re only at the start line for magic once you’ve properly learned all the elemental sigils that you can pay for the guild to teach you. From there, it’s up to you. — Miho.”

“Right.”

“We’re doing it.”

Gogh and Miho walked away. Akira-san followed after them without a sound. If any enemies attacked the two of them, Akira-san would cut them down immediately.

The three soon came to a stop. They were looking towards the eight-meter class white giant.

Gogh and Miho began tracing what looked like elemental sigils with the tips of their staves.

“De, he, lu, en, ba, zea, ruv, dag, na, mitoh, la, we, swa, va.”

“Ne, ve, lu, shia, rass, fe, de, ge, hi, mina, sheh, kweh, du, il.”

“I’ve never seen that before,” Shihoru whispered.

It was true. Haruhiro hadn’t seen elemental sigils like these before, and it was an unfamiliar chant. It felt like, maybe, the intonation was different from the incantations Shihoru or Mimirin used, too?

The eight-meter class, seeming to have noticed Gogh and Miho, looked down at them. Right after it did, there was a resounding *thuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuun*, a sound that seemed both high- and low-pitch, and its head was blasted off.

“...One shot.” Merry’s jaw dropped.

“Meow...” Yume blinked repeatedly.

“And, well, there’re countless points I could cover, but...” Gogh spun around to face them, brushing his hair back behind his ear with an artistic flair. “Even after changing jobs to become a priest, I was able to manage this much with enough study. Though, I couldn’t have done what we just did on

my own. We set loose an elemental, then activated an alternate power. They won't teach you this stuff at the guild. You have to study it for yourself, make discoveries, and refine your skills. ...Whew, I'm beat."

Gogh suddenly hung his head and pressed a hand to his forehead. He looked like he might slump to the ground at any second.

"Oh, my." Miho narrowed her eyes and covered her mouth with her hands.

"We're both getting old." Akira-san offered Gogh some support.
"Though, in your case, your body was weak to begin with."

"...Oh, shut up," Gogh grumbled. Leave me alone.""

"Honeeeeeeeeey...!" Kayo rushed over, leaving a fine mist of blood in her wake. "What's wrong?! Are you okay?! Honey?! I'll never forgive you if you die before me!"

"Dad?! Did something happen to you, Dad?! Don't die!" Taro also rushed over, his face contorted with anguish.

"Listen! I'm not gonna die that easily!" Gogh shouted at them, but the sound of it was mostly covered by the thunderous crash from the eight-meter class white giant falling hard to the ground.

To think the eight-meter class white giant that had been such a problem would be killed so easily.

The volunteer soldiers let out a cheer.

"Gwah, hah, hah, hah, hah!" With a terrifying laugh, Branken pointed his ax towards the other problem. "Now, it's your turn! Get ready to die!"

Haruhiro tried to swallow his spit, but his mouth was dry, so his Adam's apple just moved meaninglessly.

The hydra must have sensed something, too, because it stayed put where it was, its tentacles writhing. No, not just writhing. Its tentacles spread out wide, like it was trying to make its already huge body look even bigger.

"Well now." Akira-san walked away from Gogh and drew his sword.
"First, let's see what it's capable of."

Iron Knuckle. The Berserkers. Orion. They were all among the foremost volunteer soldiers, and yet they didn't move, or couldn't move. Akira-san, Kayo, and Branken were the only ones approaching the hydra.

The five tentacles all lashed out at them at once. Three at Akira-san, and one each at Kayo and Branken.

They're fast. Even at that size, they're that fast?

To Haruhiro's eyes, it looked like they were moving at a speed similar to a person swinging a sword. *There's no dodging that*, he thought for a moment.

But Akira-san took just two quick steps, Kayo pressed forward, and Branken rolled to the side, each of them avoiding the tentacles in their own way.

Akira-san went to the right of the hydra, while Branken went to the left. Kayo was approaching it straight-on and closing in.

The hydra swung its tentacles. It seemed to have two type of attacks it could do with them. Swings and downward stabs.

The stabs seemed dodgeable, but the swings would be tougher. They were over two meters in diameter. If something like that, which was way too thick, and way too long, came at them at those intense speeds, wasn't there kind of nowhere to run? Why were Akira-san and the others able to avoid them? Haruhiro couldn't even imagine.

Maybe they can predict them, he thought. *They must know where the tentacles can't reach them. Probably. But how did they figure it out? That's a mystery. Way too much of a mystery. Without spending a long time observing it closely and studying it, isn't that impossible?*

"Not unless you're the kind of genius this world has rarely seen," Gogh said, seeming to have seen through Haruhiro's current thought process. "In the end, experience does all the talking. When we're up against an enemy we've never seen before, of course we won't know those things either. However, there will always be some similarities, points of commonality, with enemies we've faced before. What's similar? What's the same? You can't deal with them if you're agonizing over those things. What do I do here? What gives me the best odds? Your body needs to move on its own before you start arguing with yourself about what to do."

"Th-That thing..." Ranta groaned. "They've fought lots of things like it? That's why they're able to fight it like it's no big deal?"

"I get the impression that it's pretty tough." Gogh shrugged his shoulders. "They'll have a hard time with it. Without access to light magic, they'll be less willing to press their luck."

"You say that like this doesn't concern you." Miho furrowed her brow, but Haruhiro couldn't help but think she seemed completely at ease with the situation, too.

“There’s nowhere to target.” Taro lowered his bow, a frown distorting his beautiful face. “I hate big enemies. I wish I could help Mom...”

Taro looked younger than Haruhiro and his party, but he must also have had considerable experience. Given he was traveling with Akira-san and his party, that was only natural.

“Mind if I ask a question?” Kuzaku asked hesitantly.

Gogh glanced over to Kuzaku, indicating with his expression that he should go on.

“You said ‘unless they were geniuses,’ but...” Kuzaku asked just what Haruhiro had wanted to. “It’s a little much to try and claim Akira-san and the others aren’t geniuses, isn’t it?”

Though this was true for Branken and Kayo, too, it was incredibly hard to believe the things Akira-san was pulling off. He had been focused on evading the attacking tentacles at first, but now he was doing more than just that. After dodging, he would slash at it with his sword. On top of that, wasn’t he slowly closing in on the hydra? He probably was. No, not just probably, he was definitely getting up closer to it.

“Akira’s no genius,” Gogh said definitively, then let out a malicious chuckle.

He’s gotta be lying, Haruhiro thought incredulously. *Is their relationship coloring his perspective?*

“You’re right,” Miho said instantly.

Haruhiro started to think that maybe that wasn’t the case.

She said, “When we first met, that guy was a hopeless coward.”

“The guy’s still pretty timid, you know?” Gogh agreed.

“You could be right.”

“Even in our generation, there were plenty of guys stronger than him.”

“I’d say Kayo was far braver.”

“Not that that’s changed.”

“My mom’s the bravest in the world, and my dad’s wisest,” Taro declared with a look in his eyes so serious that it was scary. “And me, I’m the most fortunate.”

“You sure do love them, huh,” Yume said earnestly.

“Of course I do!” Taro shouted, his eyes wide. “My love for Mom and Dad won’t lose to anything! Never! Ever!”

“I’m not sure it’s a matter of winning or losing, though.” Gogh patted

Taro on the head with a wry laugh. “That aside, the one thing I can tell you for sure is that Akira’s no genius. But he survived. That’s thanks to me, Kayo, Branken, Taro, and the many friends and comrades we’ve lost along the way. Many talented warriors and paladins who were blessed with talent fell, while he remained. He didn’t survive because he was strong. What was it that worked in his favor? If you were to sum it up in a word, it’d be luck, I guess. Because he was lucky, he survived, and he was able to become strong.”

It wasn’t just one or two instances—it was more than two decades’ worth of good luck accumulated. That was what had created Akira-san.

Just how lucky was he? Even just one instance of bad luck might have been enough to get him killed like Manato or Moguzo.

Turning that around, if Manato or Moguzo had not died when they had, they would have had the chance to become like Akira-san. In fact, Manato and Moguzo had both had more aptitude than Haruhiro did. Which meant there was no guarantee of success. If a volunteer soldier’s luck was bad, even a little bad, they would drop out. They’d die.

Either way, Akira-san was one of a chosen few.

“...I’m not like that,” Haruhiro murmured.

Akira-san, Branken, and Kayo were almost touching the hydra. The five tentacles couldn’t seem to catch them at all.

Then, suddenly, the four tentacles it used for moving attacked Akira-san and the others. While Haruhiro was caught by surprise, Akira-san and the others seemed to have anticipated it. Dodging and weaving between the tentacles, Branken and Kayo fell back, but... Akira-san stabbed his sword into the root of the tentacles.

With that as a handhold, he climbed. It was that same climbing style, like he was walking up a hill. He ran along the top of the tentacle.

“Ohh.” Gogh snapped his fingers. “There was one strength Akira did always have. His sense of balance. That’s the one thing he was above average in.”

“He liked high places, too,” Miho giggled.

“He must be an idiot.” The corners of Gogh’s lips turned upwards. “It’s almost time, huh.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

Almost time for what?

The tentacle tried to shake Akira-san off. Akira-san jumped. He kicked off another tentacle, then yet another tentacle. Akira-san vanished behind the tentacles.

“I-I-I-Is he gonna be okay?!” Kikkawa shouted.

The hydra's entire body shuddered.

If a woman who was over ten meters tall let out a scream, it just might have been that loud. That sound was released from the lower portion of the hydra along with a blast of air, stirring up the tentacles and making them flap around.

Akira-san rolled out from a gap between the tentacles.

Gogh and Miho drew elemental sigils with their staves and chanted their spells.

“Ea, zu, fa, nwe, meu, hoa, rahi, kweh, ba, ju, sai, le, cthu.”

“Ni, fau, shin, dza, wao, iki, le, vu, duma, gis, qua, zu.”

"It's hot?!" Haruhiro covered his face without meaning to and bent his knees. The blast of hot wind blew into him. Or it might have been more accurate to say that it swept violently over him.

The hydra was at the center of it. The hydra was burning—no, that wasn't it. There were no flames rising from it. But it was hot. There was an incredible vortex of hot air tormenting the hydra's tentacles. That vortex seemed to be heading towards the core of the hydra. Haruhiro and the others were only being caught in the trail of it. Even so, it was hot and frightening.

What was going on? What was going to happen here? The trail suddenly changed direction. It wasn't blowing into them anymore. It was sucking.

They were being pulled in.

“Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!” Ranta yelled.

“Yahoooooooooooooooo?!” Kikkawa screamed.

Ranta, Kikkawa, shut up.

I know how you feel, though.

“Eeeeeeeeek?!” Shihoru shrieked.

“Funyoooooooooooooo?!” cried Yume.

“Yahhhhhh?!” shouted Merry.

Shihoru, Yume, and Merry were hugging one another.

“The hell?!” Kuzaku got down on the ground.

“What the heeeeeeeeell?!” Anna-san screamed.

Mimorin held onto the panicking Anna-san, and for some reason, she had a firm grip on Haruhiro, too.

“No, I’ll be fine, okay?” he told her.

“Just in case!”

I really will be fine, and actually, it’s harder on me when you hold me tight like that. Come to think of it, are Tokimune and Tada all right? Also, where’s Inui?

“Oh!”

The wind changed direction again. This time, it neither pushed nor pulled them. It was blowing downwards from above. The mass of hot air was pressing down and crushing them.

Haruhiro and his party were only being hit with enough pressure to force them down on all fours, but the hydra in the center of the storm had it far worse.

Seriously?

The hydra was being crushed.

The nine tentacles were pressed flat to the ground, revealing the center part—its main body, maybe? Or the torso? Whatever it was, that part which looked like a massive white succulent plant had been exposed, and the top of it was creaking and caving in farther with every second.

What is this magic? Arve Magic? It can’t be Kanon Magic, right? It doesn’t seem like it would be Falz Magic or Darsh Magic, either. Well, what was it then? I remember Gogh said something about releasing elementals, then activating an alternate power. Is that the true nature of this super-hot, crushing whirlwind spell?

Eventually the hot wind subsided.

The massive white succulent plant thingy looked like it had shrunk to half its original size. It wasn’t possible to confirm it from here, but the middle of it was probably caved in pretty heavily.

The hydra didn’t move at all.

“Is it... dead?” Ranta fell on his backside, his mind only half there.

“I’m exhausted...” Gogh staggered.

“Dad! Here!” Taro moved his bow and quiver of arrows under his arm, then crouched down in front of Gogh and offered him his back.

“Now, listen... I’m your father, got it?” Even while uttering what sounded

like a complaint, Gogh rested on Taro's back. He might have been having a pretty hard time.

"Hee hee." The smiling Miho seemed to be having no such trouble. Was she tough, on top of being an incredible beauty? Or was Gogh just too weak?

"Is it... over...?" Shihoru clung to Yume, trembling.

"Maybe?" Yume rubbed Shihoru's back reassuringly.

"I hope so." Merry joined Yume in petting Shihoru.

"Whew..." Kuzaku looked up timidly.

"Is it safe now?" Mimorin asked.

Anna-san, who was playing with Mimorin's all-too-ample chest for some reason, tilted her head to the side questioningly.

Is it okay when girls do that to each other? Haruhiro wondered. Not that he was jealous or anything. "Wh-Who knows..."

But was it, really?

Haruhiro couldn't say for sure, but he might have appreciated it if Mimorin would let him go, you know? Feeling Mimorin's breasts pressed up against him, he was just about to tell her as much when, not far away, Tada started shouting.

"No, this isn't funny! I refuse to let it end this easily! I haven't even done anything yet! Don't just stay dead, come back to life already!"

Gyahhh
hh
hh
hhhhhhhhhhhh!

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!" Mimorin let out an uncharacteristic shriek and squeezed Haruhiro and Anna-san tightly. Or rather, she was strangling him. He couldn't breathe.

Save me, Haruhiro silently begged. But, well, he couldn't blame her for being surprised. He had been surprised himself.

The hydra he had assumed was dead suddenly let out another burst of sound from the bottom of that large, white part that was like a succulent plant. What was more, the sound was louder and more violent than the first time. Then the tentacles began swinging around wildly.

Akira-san, Branken, and Kayo were falling back. Well, no surprise there. It looked pretty dangerous, you know? The other volunteer soldiers were panicking now, just like Haruhiro and his group.

“Hahahahahahahaha!” Tada seemed thrilled, though. “Good! That’s the way I wanted it! Amuse me more!”

“Nice! This is where the second round starts, huh!” Tokimune seemed to be enjoying himself.

Are they stupid...?

“Kwa, do, roh, wo, su, eck, lue, rah, va, le.” Meanwhile, Miho cast a spell.

If he were to describe it with a color, it was purple. This purple thing that was neither a flame nor bolt of lightning exploded into the gigantic, white succulent plant-like portion of the hydra with a tearing sound. It was cut and torn, splattering some sort of mucus-like substance around, and the hydra started convulsing, but you could say that was all it did. Still, Miho remained confident. Not only did she not back away, she moved forward.

“Ah, lua, de, muo, su, vi, gwa, pa, le, tu, kia.”

This time it was a blackish green. The dark-green light flashed repeatedly and struck the massive, white, succulent plant-like part. It pierced through it. It scratched it up. The tentacles writhed. The hydra writhed, mucus splattering everywhere, and then...

“Ta, tu, rua, fa, yek, nie, she, la, stoa, ryu, kweh, wana.”

Huh? More still? You’re going for more?

A pink dot formed above the massive, white, succulent plant-like portion of the hydra. Then it fell.

Shishishishishishishishishishishishishishishi...

Wait, what kind of sound was that? What was it? That wasn’t clear, but it was apparently coming from where the pink-colored dot made contact with the massive, white, succulent plant-like bit. What was that pink-colored dot anyway? It was getting bigger.

The dot wasn’t a dot anymore. It was a ball now. Getting bigger and bigger.

The tentacles flailed wildly. Their tips were slapping the ground. Like it was saying, *Hold on, hold on, seriously, hold on*, and trying to call for a time-out.

Naturally, the volunteer soldiers weren’t going to hold on. Giving it a break was unthinkable.

The pink-colored sphere was erasing the massive, white, succulent plant-like bit. Like it was melting it away. The pink-colored sphere finally sunk inside the massive white succulent plant-like bit.

The nine tentacles went limp. The massive, white, succulent plant-like bit looked like it had gone limp, too.

Miho stopped and let out a sigh. Then she giggled. “It was stubborn and cheeky, so I punished it a little.”

Haruhiro was shocked and clung to Mimorin without meaning to. *Is she a total sadist?*

“Come *oooooon!*” Tada shouted in Miho’s face. “Just when it was finally about to get good, you had to ruin it!”

“Oh, dear. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry’s not gonna cut it! Now, you listen here—Murgh?!”

...*Whoa.* Haruhiro knew he couldn’t afford to be shocked by every little thing, but this was really astonishing.

The hydra’s tentacles were suddenly filled with strength. The nine tentacles pushed off the ground, and the hydra sprang into the air.

It jumped.

Huh, it can jump?!

“Oh, crap! Get back!” Akira-san shouted.

This was the first time he’d heard an urgency in Akira-san’s voice. Akira-san, Branken, Kayo, Miho, and Taro, who was carrying Gogh—none of them hesitated when it came time to run. It was almost dumbfounding how incredibly they ran away.

The hydra leapt. It flew into the air, swinging its tentacles around.

Tokimune and Tada backed away, too.

“Mimorin, let go!” Haruhiro broke free from Mimorin’s confining grasp. “W-W-W-W-We need to hurry and get out of here!”

“We do, yeah!” Anna-san shouted.

“Yep!” Mimorin plodded off carrying just Anna-san.

The rest of their comrades fled, too. It was like a competition to see who could run first. They needed to get away from the hydra.

Oh, man. No. Just no. Haruhiro kept moving his legs as he vented all of the feelings he couldn’t convert into words inside his head. *Ranta, Merry, Kuzaku, Yume, Shihoru. They’re all okay. Kikkawa, Tokimune, and Tada, too. Inui’s still missing, but who gives a damn about him? What about Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, and Orion? It looks like they’ve scattered, maybe?*

Haruhiro, for his part, was still following after Akira-san and the others. Was this okay? Was it not? He had no clue. He couldn’t decide.

Suddenly, the hydra stopped jumping around.

It's coming.

It slammed all nine of its tentacles into the ground hard, charging forth in a wild rampage.

"Wawawawawawawaaaaaa?!" Haruhiro flipped out and babbled incomprehensibly in panic.

Is this bad? It's bad, right? Huh? Did I screw up? Did I do the wrong thing? I mean, it looks like the hydra's coming this way. Is it targeting Akira-san and his group? If it is, should we separate from them? Maybe?

"De, he, lu, en, ba, zea, ruv, ah, tu, la!" Gogh turned back while still being carried by Taro and began chanting as he drew what seemed like elemental sigils with his staff.

Kaboooooooooom!

There was an explosion directly underneath the hydra, blasting a vast amount of grass and dirt into the air.

The hydra lost its balance. That was because its footing had been wrecked with magic. They needed to gain as much distance on it as they could now. But what good would that distance do them? What was going to happen? Wouldn't it eventually catch up? What would they do if it did?

For now, all we can do is run as fast as we can, thought Haruhiro. If the hydra's actually targeting Akira-san and his group, that's not good. I dunno how to say it, but you know, there are better ways for us to handle this. Like, if I'm looking out for our safety, you could say there's only one option.

If Haruhiro was to be perfectly blunt, he thought it was best not to follow Akira-san's party. The way things were now, they were standing on the straight line between the hydra and Akira-san's party, and they didn't want to be there. It might be best for them to change course and act independently.

I'd feel guilty about doing it, though. Besides, it's not absolutely certain Akira-san and the others are its target. What if they aren't? If it turns and follows us when we break off from Akira-san and the others, it'd be a total disaster. Akira-san and his party wouldn't be able to help, and, well, that'd be the end of us.

That said, I'm pretty sure the hydra has got to be going after Akira-san and his party.

Do we take that gamble?

It doesn't feel like a bad bet, but I can't quite commit to it. I should decide

sooner rather than later, though. I'm so indecisive. I hate it.

In the end, won't Akira-san and his party handle things somehow? Is that what I'm thinking? I can't say that's not at least part of it. That's just leaving my problems to someone else, isn't it? I think there's something wrong with that. Is that okay? I can't say that it is, can I?

Even in his indecision, he was continuing to diligently pump his legs when he ran past something going the other direction.

"Huh?" Haruhiro realized. *The other... direction?*

Yes. There was no doubt about it. Something had raced towards him, then ran right past Haruhiro.

Haruhiro turned back and looked.

That something was clad in black armor.

It was tight-fitting, looked light, and it was black where it was black, but what was with that orange-colored light that came out of it here and there? How did that work? There was a short, curved sword, or rather a katana, on one of the figure's hips, and a rather long katana over their back. The person reached back and put one hand on the hilt of his katana as he kept running. Dashing straight towards the hydra.

"Soma..." Haruhiro accidentally said his name without an honorific.

He stood there in a daze.

Soma.

It was Soma.

The hydra was rushing towards them, and Soma was running in the opposite direction from them, so the two were guaranteed to collide.

Was he... going to be okay?

It would be a lie to say he wasn't worried, but for some reason, Haruhiro couldn't imagine Soma possibly getting killed.

The hydra lifted up its massive body with its tentacles, then sprung at Soma.

Soma didn't stop, didn't even slow his pace.

He drew his katana.

Haruhiro was able to see everything up until that point. But what did he do after that?

Haruhiro's eyes had been wide open and he watched closely, but still, he couldn't tell.

He only knew that two of the hydra's tentacles were lopped off and soared

through the air.

The hydra landed with an earth-rattling thud—but what about Soma?

Haruhiro was finally gripped by uncertainty. Had Soma been crushed?

The hydra's tentacles twisted and coiled as the creature tried to make an about-face. Did that mean that was where Soma was? Had he slipped under the hydra? Or something like that?

While Haruhiro was still in suspense, unable to be sure what had happened, the hydra jumped to the left.

There.

That's Soma.

He was swinging a katana. It's long, that katana. Why does it look so much longer than when he had it slung over his back?

Whatever the case, Soma's slashes were making the hydra hesitate. He was taking on that massive creature in one-on-one close-quarters combat, and he was the one pushing it back.

It's weird. That's just not right. What's going on?

"Now, see, when you use the word 'genius.'" The next thing he noticed, Gogh was next to him, still being carried on Taro's back. "That's the kind of guy you're talking about. He's only been active for one-fifth of the time we have. Yet, still, he can do that. Talent is a cruel and terrifying thing."

Incredible, thought Haruhiro. The rumors about him weren't all talk. Soma had saved their lives before, too. He wasn't called the strongest for nothing.

Haruhiro knew that. Or he had thought he had. But he must not have truly understood what that meant.

That katana might have been special somehow. His armor seemed to hide some secret power that transcended human knowledge. Even so, Soma himself was a flesh and blood human. He had to be.

Was he really human, the same as all of them? It was hard to believe.

Soma was driving the hydra back with a single katana. How was he cutting through those tentacles that were over two meters thick? Haruhiro had no idea. It was clearly impossible. But Soma was doing it.

Haruhiro probably wasn't hallucinating, so this was reality. It was a reality that transcended Haruhiro's understanding and imagination. Or rather, there was no way he could have imagined something like that.

Like, if he were to say, *Someday, I'm gonna swing around a katana and*

take down a monster the size of a two-story building, people would be guaranteed to laugh at him. Haruhiro would do the same, of course. If anyone around him said something like that, he would think, *What an idiot.*

Were people like Soma, who made those ridiculous-sounding dreams a reality, the true geniuses?

Gogh was right—it was cruel. There was no closing this gap, and no jumping over it. It was like the difference between the moon and a turtle. Sure, both were round, but even trying to compare the two was pointless. They were just too different.



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Even the things that came to mind when he thought about it were so ordinary that he just wanted to disappear. Haruhiro had always known he was ordinary, so he wasn't frustrated by it at all, but it still made him feel empty. If he had thought he had the potential to be someone, and he'd been aiming for the top, the shock might well have left him unable to recover.

He was glad that he and everyone else recognized his mediocrity. Thanks to that, he only had to suffer from this feeling of powerlessness.

“Soma!” shouted a creature of inhuman beauty and elegance as she raced past Haruhiro.

It was only natural she seemed inhuman. She wasn't human at all.

She's an elf. Well, Taro's an unusually pretty boy, too. Maybe the elven race only has beautiful people? Either way, her beauty stands out. That fair skin of hers ought to be against the rules. She's got silver hair, too. The way her eyes sparkle, they look exactly like gemstones. When it comes to her figure, I guess you could say, or her physique and musculature, they aren't even human. Like, her head is soooooo tiny. The way she runs is different, too. Her steps are much lighter than a human's. It's less like she's kicking off the ground, and more like she's sliding along it.

“You're running off on your own again!” Lilia drew a thin sword which suited her well, and charged straight towards the hydra.

She was a sword dancer. It was truly like she was dancing. Lilia spun circles around the tentacles, making her sword dance. Rather than cutting them with her sword, it was like she was cutting them with the motion of her sword and body. Even if she couldn't cut them off like Soma had, Lilia was definitely injuring the tentacles she attacked. Naturally, they couldn't touch her. She never let anything get near her.

While Haruhiro was holding his breath and watching the elf's magnificent and sublime sword techniques intently, he heard someone let out a sigh that sounded like a yawn. When he looked over, the big man with the dreadlocks passed by Haruhiro with relaxed, but incredibly large steps.

Kemuri was a paladin just like Akira-san, Tokimune, or Kuzaku. Naturally, that meant he had a shield on his back, but the very long sword he was wearing diagonally over his back caught Haruhiro's attention first.

Slowly drawing that sword with both hands, Kemuri approached the hydra.

No matter how good he is, isn't that being a little too careless?

One of the tentacles took aim at Kemuri. From up above and to the side, it swung down diagonally at him.

“Heave—” Kemuri didn’t dodge. He met the tentacle with his sword. “—ho!”

When it collided with the sword, the tentacle was torn in two. How did that even work? He’d just won a contest of brute strength against a tentacle that was over two meters thick.

“If he does stuff like that, I’m amazed his back doesn’t hurt.” Akira-san was stroking his chin, having switched into spectator mode.

Is that the problem here?

“You have back pains, after all.” Miho rubbed Akira-san’s back.

“Hmph! I could do that, too...” Branken had shouldered his ax and looked like he was taking a break, too.

“I’ll pass, thanks.” Kayo walked over to Gogh, snatching up her hubby and carrying him in her arms like he was a princess. “That was some good work you did. You must be tired from using all that magic, aren’t you, honey?”

“...Not that tired, so stop carrying me like this.”

“At your age, what do you have to be embarrassed about?” Kayo asked.

“It’s precisely my age that makes this so embarrassing. Let me down!”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Dammit!”

While watching that husband and wife who were so close it made everyone who saw it embarrassed for them, their elven son wore a truly contented smile.

“Oh, my. It’s Shima-chan,” said Miho. Looking over in the same direction as she was, Haruhiro saw the sexy older girl walking gracefully in their direction.

“Hey,” Shima said with a bow of her head. “What’s the situation here?”

“It’s tougher than we thought.” Akira-san tilted his head to the side a little. “It looks like we won’t be able to just hit its weak spot and finish it quickly like that. We’ll need to wear it down. Where’s Pingo-kun?”

“He’s sticking close to the giant god. Zenmai, too. He’s been with Pingo since he came back when he couldn’t lead the hydra around anymore.”

“Do you think Lala and Nono fled?” Akira-san asked.

“I wonder,” Shima said. “There’s no predicting those two.”

“I guess we’ll have to sort out the hydra first.”

“If anything happens, I’ll heal you,” Shima said. “Not that I think it will.”

“No, I’ll be counting on you. I mean, I’m getting on in years, after all. I could always slip up.”

“Surely you jest.”

“I’m serious. —Branken, Kayo, time to get back to work.”

“Very well.” Branken stroked his beard, a fire burning in his eyes.

“Honey, wait for me, okay?” Kayo set Gogh down, then spun her arms in circles to warm up.

“I’ll help, too!” Taro readied his bow.

Oh. They’re actually doing it. Well, yeah, I guess they would, huh? I mean, it’s looking like Soma, Lilia, and Kemuri could take it out by themselves, thought Haruhiro. There was nothing for him and the others to do, so they were probably good to stay here in spectator mode and watch the fight to the end. Or rather, they couldn’t do anything more than that.

Tada spoke up. “We’re gonna steal their thunder, Tokimune.”

“Let’s do it, Tada!”

Tada and Tokimune were raring to go, and Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, and Orion all looked like they saw this as the time to turn things around, but Haruhiro had no intent of getting dragged into it.

Despite that, Ranta said, “O-O-O-O-Okay, me too!” with a quiver in his voice. He was hopeless.

“Yeah, you go right ahead,” said Haruhiro.

“—Wait, you’re not stopping me?! Damn you and your sleepy eyes!”

“My eyes have nothing to do with this...”

“They so do, you dolt!” screamed Ranta. “It creeps me out, that look in your eyes!”

“Akira-san and the others are leaving without you, you know,” said Haruhiro.

“Whoa, you’re right! I missed my chance! Maaaan, I’m too late. What a shame, huh. Can’t go now. It’s all your fault, Parupiro.”

“My fault, huh...”

While thinking, *Man, how about you just go charge at the hydra*, Haruhiro looked around. There was no way he could fight the hydra, but there could still be cultists or white giants coming. If necessary, they could handle a number of those.

That's right. I've got to keep it together. We ordinary people need to do ordinary people things. That's fine, or rather, it's all we can do. Even if we're mediocre, we won't let our skills rot, you know? I mean, if we let them rot, we'd be even worse than mediocre.

“...Wait? Is that—Huh...? Hold on... Yume?”

“Meow?” Yume asked.

“Hey, over there...” Haruhiro pointed off to the south. “I mean, it could be my imagination, but...”

“Huh? Whewie. There's somethin' there,” Yume agreed. “Not sure 'bout this, but maybe it's a hydra?”

“Yeah, I thought so. That's what I thought it lo—” Haruhiro panicked and looked again. “I-It does look like one, doesn't it?! It looks like a h-h-hydra, right?! Yeah?!”

“Another one?!” Merry cringed.

“No way...” Shihoru was trembling.

“Huh? Isn't that bad?” Maybe because of exhaustion, Kuzaku's posture was even worse than usual.

“You joking...” While still tucked under Mimirin's arm, Anna-san shaded her eyes with one hand and looked off into the distance. “—*What the fuck?!* No way!”

“Oh, come on, come on, come on, come on, come on!” Ranta pointed the tip of his Thunder Sword Dolphin at Haruhiro. “This is all your fault, bud! I blame you!”

“What the heck?” Mimirin said in a monotone voice and whacked Ranta in the back of the head with her staff.

“Urgh...” Ranta squatted down in pain.

“Maaaan!” Kikkawa tried to joke around for some reason. “It's like, doesn't that just beat all? Even I've got to cry uncle after seeing this! Wait, have I even got an uncle?!”

“Hm...” Gogh seemed to be thinking about it.

“Well, that's a quandary.” Miho's tone didn't sound quite serious enough given the gravity of the situation.

Is it because she's too beautiful? wondered Haruhiro, *Or does that have nothing to do with it?*

“There were others, huh.” The way Shima said that with a furrowed brow seemed, in a word, seductive.

Hold on, why are these people acting so undaunted? Is it experience? This kind of crisis is nothing to them? Maybe they think they'll just be able to get out of it in the end anyway?

“A-A-Akira-san!” Haruhiro raced over.

Akira-san was about to throw himself at the hydra. Even so, he noticed Haruhiro and turned to face him.

“What is it, Haruhiro-kun?”

“Th-Th-This is bad! There’s a hydra!” Haruhiro looked once more to the south, then cast his eyes to the east and west.

He almost fell speechless.

No, I can’t afford to get tongue-tied. Not now.

It wasn’t just the south. It was a good thing he’d looked to the east and west, too. Was it good? He couldn’t say. But the facts were the facts.

“Th-Th-Th-Th-There are more coming! I see one, two—three or four?! Around that many!”

“What did you say?” Even Akira-san was surprised by this news, but apparently not to the point where he was shocked by it. He took a quick look around the area, then lifted his sword up high. “Miho, Gogh, keep me apprised of the situation. To any volunteer soldiers sure of your skills! Follow me and Soma! Don’t fall behind! Victory will belong to those who pluck it for themselves!”

With the legendary man firing them up, the volunteer soldiers roared as one.

Huh? Haruhiro thought, stunned. Is that okay...?

This time, Haruhiro really did fall speechless, and he stood there in dumb shock.

No, well... If that’s what Akira-san says... it’s the right answer—I guess. Probably.

The original hydra had been pushed to the brink by Soma and the others, leaving it with only three tentacles left completely intact. It was using those tentacles to jump and run around. Once the remaining tentacles were chopped up, it wouldn’t even be able to do that.

That hydra would be taken down soon. Even if the new hydras came, it wouldn’t change that. They could just take them down one at a time. Akira-san must be confident about that. If he had Soma and the others, they could kill them. He must have made his decision having accounted for that.

Haruhiro used the back of his hand to wipe the area around his mouth and looked around.

Hydras.

There was one to the south, one to the east, and one to the southwest. That was three that he could see. But he couldn't say for certain that there wouldn't be more coming after them. Besides, as he had expected, there were more than just the hydras. He saw white giants, too. And cultists. Some portion of those would come swarming to attack the volunteer soldiers, no doubt.

Are they planning on using them? The thought suddenly occurred to Haruhiro.

Between Soma, Akira-san, and their parties, they could defeat the hydras. They didn't need the other volunteer soldiers' strength. Despite that, Akira-san had egged them on and convinced them to stay. If the lesser enemies got involved in their fight, it would complicate things. Were they planning to use them to deal with the small fry?

No, no, Akira-san wasn't that kind of guy. That was the sense that Haruhiro got. Akira-san was a great man, and a good person. He wouldn't use others as disposable pawns. He was so accepting and considerate of others, he was completely perfect—

Was he really?

He used to be a coward. That's what Miho had said. Even though he didn't look like it at all.

Akira-san seemed so kind. He was strong, reliable, and if anything happened, it felt like he would protect them, like a father—but would he really?

Akira-san wasn't the genius type. There had been those more talented than him, but they had all died. Akira-san had survived to grow stronger. That was what Gogh had said.

How had Akira-san survived? Hadn't he occasionally been forced to make harsh, even cold decisions? Hadn't he grown stronger because he could do that, and so he'd survived?

Haruhiro turned back, and then, as casually as he could manage, he asked Gogh, "What do you think our losses will be?"

"Oh, you're that type, huh." Gogh raised one eyebrow. "That's a little bit unexpected."

“What do you mean?”

“I had taken you for the emotional type. I don’t know you that well, so that was just my impression. If you’re able to calmly calculate losses, you might actually be more suited to be a commander than I would have thought.”

“...You still haven’t answered my question, though.”

“It’s luck.” Gogh spun his index finger in a circle. “If our luck is bad, even we could die. That’s how it works. There’s no way to tell how many people will die. Of course, I have no plan of dying here. If you want to survive, too, then I suggest you stay by our side.”

“That’s no good,” said Haruhiro.

“Huh?”

“It’s no good.” Haruhiro sighed.

It feels like the blood is gonna rush to my head. Don’t get emotional. It’s not that I’m mad. It’s just, that’s not it, he thought.

“If you claim you survived because you were lucky, you can only say that in hindsight,” he said. “There are actually a lot of factors that go into it, aren’t there? Would you call being used as a disposable pawn by someone else part of luck? I don’t see it that way. I have cases where I think, ‘I only survived thanks to that guy,’ or, ‘I’d have died if things had happened this way.’ That’s not luck. It’s thanks to someone, or something.”

“So what?” Gogh was smiling slightly. “What is it you want to say?”

“I dunno that I can word it very well, but...”

“Just get to the point. I hate beating around the bush.”

“J-Just—I was thinking, wouldn’t it be possible to try to minimize the number of people who die? Yeah, I’m sure the strong ones might survive. It may mean that the ones who survive are strong. But even if they’re weak, or unlucky, aren’t people still alive?”

“Why should we have to go to the trouble of taking care of the weak and unlucky?” Gogh asked.

“I don’t think you have to take care of them...”

“Damn straight. We’re not philanthropists, and we aren’t running a charity here.”

“S-Still, if there’s something you can do, please, do it.”

“What for?” Gogh asked.

“I mean, if they die, it’s all over!”

Haruhiro bit his lip and shook his head. If he were smarter, might he have been able to come up with a convincing argument and persuaded Gogh? Or was Haruhiro's thinking misguided to begin with?

"Once you die, there's nothing left," he explained. "For that person, at least, the door to every possibility is closed. So, is it that strange that I want as few people to die as possible? If there's no other way, then so be it, but if you've got something you can do, I think you ought to do it. Isn't throwing away people you don't know as sacrificial pawns just taking the easy way out?"

"You're saying we should deliberately take the harder path?" Gogh demanded.

"I think it would be better that way."

"You're so green." Shima chuckled. "I don't mind that, though."

"But Haruhiro-kun." Miho stared Haruhiro in the eye. "What can you do? You don't want sacrifices. That's fine, but what can you do about it?"

"No, that's..."

It was a strangely intense stare. Haruhiro almost looked down despite himself, but he managed not to somehow. With upturned eyes, he just barely managed to withstand Miho's gaze. That was the best he could do.

"No... there isn't anything I can do. Not really. If there were, I'd be doing it. That's why I'm asking Gogh-san, though."

"Oh, my." Miho's eyes opened a little wider.

"You're preposterous." Gogh frowned and shrugged. "I don't think that honesty of yours is a virtue. Not one bit. But it's something that, at some point, we lost. It's good to go back to our roots every once in a while."

"Soma's instincts may have been right, you know." With those mysterious words, Shima leaned in close to Haruhiro. Something smelt incredibly good.

Wait, isn't she a little too close?

"We're searching for a way back to our original world." Her voice was an almost breath-like whisper.

Haruhiro held his ears and backed away despite himself. "...Huh? Original? What do you mean, a way back...?"

"Forget that for now." Shima brought her index finger to her pursed lips. "We'll discuss that some other time. First, we've got to get out of here, right?"

"This was your idea," Gogh said, pressing a finger against Haruhiro's

forehead. “Even if you can’t do anything, if you just scramble to run away, I won’t stand for it. You’re sticking with us until the end. You’ve got to give us at least that much.”

“Oka—”

He was about to immediately agree, but then he snapped to his senses. This wasn’t only Haruhiro’s problem. It affected his comrades, too. Haruhiro was the party’s leader.

When he turned around, Ranta laughed and gave him a bitter look. “If you hadn’t said it, I was gonna, baldy.”

“There’s noooo way that’s true.” Yume puffed up one of her cheeks.

“I’ve already decided I’ll follow you.” Kuzaku was like a big, loyal dog at this point.

“Me, too.” Merry smiled and nodded.

“...I think it’s fine.” Shihoru gave him an awkward smile, too.

“Umm, umm, what about all of us?!” Kikkawa glanced to Mimorin and Anna-san, then looked around restlessly. “Whaaaa?! Where’s Inuicchi?!”

“That half-wit’s been gone for *looong* time now, yeah?!” Anna-san shouted.

“Seriously?! Like, I never even noticed,” said Kikkawa. “Well, whatever! He’s prolly alive! As for us, well, I guess that’s up to Tokimune, huh?”

“Sadly,” Mimorin nodded.

“Oh, good grief. What a pain.” Gogh looked Haruhiro and the others over quickly. His expression made it look like he was fed up, but there was a life in his eyes that hadn’t been there a little while ago. “For the time being, you’ll be escorting Miho, Shima, and myself. Stay close to us, and do as I tell you. I’ll teach you what it means to walk a thorny path. Starting now, we’re going to withdraw, keeping casualties to a minimum. We’ll slip past the giant god somehow and escape from the Dusk Realm.”

9. If There Is Light There



Haruhiro and the others were hardly doing anything. They were just following Gogh and the others. Yet, still, it was a gruesome experience.

Once Gogh accepted the change in policy, Akira-san immediately took back everything he had said before and had them head for the initial hill.

But Akira-san, Soma, and their group didn't run away. They couldn't afford to. The first hydra soon had the last of its tentacles chopped up and was left unable to move, but three new ones arrived. There were cultists and white giants rushing in, too. They had to pull back, knocking the fight out of these enemies as they went.

They would use the volunteer soldiers as their wall and shield while they took out the dangerous enemies. Once enough of them were dealt with and the situation had calmed down, they would retreat. That had probably been Akira-san's strategy. However, they had turned that around completely, and now Akira-san and the others were acting as the rear guard so that the volunteer soldiers could escape.

If Haruhiro hadn't objected, it probably wouldn't have been this way. No, not probably. It definitely wouldn't have. In other words, Akira-san, Soma, and the others were having a hard time because of Haruhiro.

Akira-san, Branken, Kayo, Taro, Soma, Lilia, and Kemuri—none of them complained. They repeated the process of hitting an enemy and retreating a little, striking down an enemy and falling back, shooting or blowing away an enemy and withdrawing slightly, all in silence. Miho and Gogh would occasionally let loose a spell and pulverize an enemy, but not often. They were likely conserving their power in anticipation of a long battle.

Tokimune and Tada were eagerly assisting them, but Haruhiro's party, as well as Mimorin, Anna-san, and Kikkawa, were only good for forming a wall

of flesh in front of Gogh, Miho, and Shima.

Haruhiro wasn't just feeling frustrated, he was also having trouble not feeling sorry for the trouble he was causing them.

Also, he was scared.

I mean, there were three hydras and around ten white giants, on top of dozens of cultists, possibly more, all of which were persistently swarming at them.

When it was just the cultists, Akira, Soma, and their party members could strike them down with a single slash of the sword or katana, blow of the ax, or shot of the bow. But when it came to white giants, that obviously wasn't possible. The hydras didn't just attack them directly with their tentacles; they would also slam the ground with them to cause it to cave in, or to send dirt flying at them and interfere with their movements. It was pretty nasty.

Even though they were already being forced to fight an incredibly hard battle while retreating, Akira-san and the others didn't let the enemies get anywhere near them. Thanks to that, for now at least, Haruhiro and his party hadn't been touched by the enemy. Still, between crying when he got dirt flung into his eyes, and tripping and almost falling over, he was having a lot of trouble—or rather, it was embarrassing and he felt pathetic.

"I'm getting a bit worn out," Akira-san muttered as he dodged one white giant's fist and cut a Pansuke who attacked him clean in two. "It's not easy getting old."

"Huh?" Soma lopped off a hydra's tentacle and turned to face Akira-san. He seemed astonished. "Are you that old, Akira-san?"

"If you think about it, isn't it obvious he's just exaggerating to make a joke at his own expense?!" Lilia scolded Soma while cutting down two or three cultists.

"Gwahahaha!" Brankен swung his ax and pulverized a four-meter class white giant's left knee. "That's an elf for you! They look delicate, but they lack delicacy!"

"I don't want to hear that from a hairy dwarf!" she shouted.

"Don't fight with him, Lilia!" Soma cut off another tentacle as he chided her. "A dwarf's just not a dwarf without a beard. You need to think more about that."

"Ohh. You have a point—" Kemuri incredibly managed to block a six-meter class white giant's punch with that large sword of his. "A dwarf's gotta

have a beard!"

"You all sure seem to have it easy!" Kayo wasn't swinging her sword very much. Instead, she was weaving between the enemies and causing them to hit one another. "I don't have the energy to spare for chatter!"

"Mom, please, take a little rest!" Taro fired off one arrow after another, hitting cultists in their one eye. "You can leave everything to me!"

"Man, the enemies just keep on coming!" Tokimune's white teeth were sparkling, but he looked even more tired than Kayo did. "It's fun, though!"

"Don't strain yourself!" Tada was the opposite. The more enemies he slaughtered with his warhammer, the sharper his moves seemed to get. "I'll do it! I'll kill them! Hahahaha! I'll take all of these punks! I'll smash every last one of them to death!"

Haruhiro hadn't said a word in a while now. He didn't think he should say anything, either. He felt like he'd drunk lead or something, because there was a heavy weight sitting in the bottom of his stomach, and it hurt. His body, well, it felt heavy, too.

Why? Why had Akira-san and the others agreed to go along with Haruhiro's opinion? There was no reason they'd needed to. He wished they hadn't. If, back then, Gogh had said, *What are you saying?* and refused, Haruhiro could have immediately said, *Oh, I'm sorry for being cheeky*, and backed down with an apology.

That would have been better—Maybe? Maybe not? He didn't really know, but either way, this was hard on him emotionally. Just being here at all. He felt like he didn't belong here. But he was the one responsible for it.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, I want to just charge in, he thought. If he could charge into the enemy and get killed, that might make him feel better. Of course, he wasn't going to, but he wished from the bottom of his heart that he could be less sensitive. He questioned why he was here every few dozen seconds.

If someone died doing this, he'd have no choice but to commit seppuku. No, the moment anyone was hurt, he might reflexively stab his own dagger into his stomach.

"What's wrong, kid?" Gogh suddenly caught him by the back of the neck. "You've been looking around anxiously for a while now. Are you not feeling well?"

No, he meant to answer, but he wasn't sure if his voice came out or not.

“Augh!” Ranta banged on his own helmet in frustration. “Don’t get so deflated, Parupiro, man! You’re throwing me off, too!”

“W-Well, sorry for getting deflated!”

“You better be sorry, you know?!” Ranta shouted. “We’re proper members of the Day Breakers, got it?! Th-Th-Th-Th-There’s no need to act so hesitant with them, you moron!”

“You sound pretty hesitant there yourself, pal...” Haruhiro said.

“That’s because I’m super humble, not like you with your hypocritical fake politeness!”

“Members, huh....” Yume mumbled.

“W-We are, you know?!” Ranta glanced to Miho and Shima. “Right...?!”

Miho and Shima both just giggled and didn’t answer him. Well, that was probably intentional. He was being teased, but Ranta responded back with a pervy laugh. He was an idiot, and a creepy one at that.

Members, huh, Haruhiro thought. *Well, yeah, we are, but...*

We’re not cut out for it, Haruhiro ultimately ended up thinking. *The way we are now, we’re too unripe, we lack the strength, and its pretentious to call ourselves Soma or Akira-san’s comrades. Even looking at the future, we’ll probably never be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them. Maybe this feeling of inferiority will never go away?*

Even if he had to bluff and force himself, would it be best to present himself like a member? No matter where he went, he would always be himself, so did he have no choice but to push through using his current style?

His stomach hurt. It wasn’t feeling stretched; it felt like it had scrunched up real tight. He felt like he was going to puke.

The way Soma and Akira-san fought was vivid, wild, and fierce. It was so incredible it could only be called artistic, and it hurt to watch. He didn’t want to see, but he had no choice but to look. He wanted to cry out, *Please, just give me a break already.*

A break? From what? Haruhiro didn’t know. No, he did. Basically, he wanted to run away. He wanted to flee from this situation. He didn’t want to be here. Not for another second. There was no threat to his well-being.

Haruhiro wasn’t the one facing danger; it was Soma, Akira-san, and the others. That was hitting him really hard.

“When you’re watching from the rear, it’s frustrating, isn’t it?” Gogh let out a throaty laugh. “I was frail as a mage, and that hasn’t changed since I

became a priest.”

Haruhiro was taken aback.

If he thought about it, Merry and Shihoru might have been feeling this way all along. Those in the rear being defended by their comrades were under a different kind of stress from those exposed to the threat of death on the front line. Haruhiro had never had this perspective before. Until he was actually placed in the same position, it was hard to see it. That might have just been how it was.

It just shows that any experience can come in handy. It expands your field of view. That's a positive. Right. I need to try thinking positively here. Yeah. It'd be nice if I could think that way.

“...I can't,” he murmured.

For now, just hanging on was the best he could do. While he was enduring, time went by. The initial hill was getting closer. That was the one thing he had to encourage him: this suffering would end. That was his one hope. He wanted to have everything else wait until this was over. He could regret, and repent, and apologize later.

He certainly hadn't forgotten that the final, and perhaps the greatest, barrier to their escape was waiting for them at the initial hill. It was just that he was trying not to think much about it.

Haruhiro looked to the initial hill for the first time in a while, then gazed up towards the heavens.

No, it wasn't the heavens he was looking at.

“The giant god!”

Its total height was estimated at three hundred meters. It didn't only touch the heavens, it seemed to be covering them up.

How much farther was it to the initial hill? One kilometer, thereabouts? Closer than he had thought. Before he realized it, they had gotten awfully close.

The giant god was right in front of it. Not just standing there. It was moving. It was moving, you know? It was walking, or treading in place rather. The tremors were incredible. It was like it was trying to stomp on ants.

To the giant god, humans probably looked like ants.

The volunteer soldiers who had fled first were running around, desperate not to get stomped. There might even be some volunteer soldiers who had avoided the giant god's stomping and managed to escape from the Dusk

Realm. Or there might not be. It was impossible to say, but without taking the long route around or passing between its legs or around its feet, reaching their objective was impossible. They'd have to do it.

For Soma's and Akira's parties, the Tokkis, and for Haruhiro's party who were, technically, also part of the rear guard, they had to pull that off while defending against the enemy, or after quickly breaking away from them.

Did they have any hope of succeeding? Or not? It didn't seem like it...

"Akira-san!" Soma shouted as he swept down several enemies with one swing. "When I give the signal, please go!"

"Got it! I'll take you up on that kind offer!"

"Tokimune, Haruhiro!" Soma shouted. "You guys, too!"

"Roger!" Tokimune called.

Tada clicked his tongue and slammed his warhammer into a cultists' head. "You want the main dish and now the desert all to yourself?! You greedy pig!"

"You already had enough, yeah?! *Fucking Tada!* Anna-san is *heavy* tired!"

"Well, if that's how Anna-san feels, I guess I have to! I'll back off for you this time!"

Haruhiro didn't answer one way or the other. No, of course, he wanted to escape the moment he could, but was this okay? Gogh had told him to stick with them until the end. He'd thought that maybe he was obligated to. Still, though, shouldn't he obey Soma? ...Which had priority?

While he was wondering, the time to choose closed in on him. Or rather, it arrived.

"Now, go!" Soma lowered his hips and took a position with the flat side of his katana touching his shoulder. There was an abnormal power swelling up inside his entire body. It looked like the orange-colored light of his armor had grown stronger, too. "Hahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

There were a number of cultists, of hydra tentacles, and of white giant body parts that were not so much slashed as pulverized and their chunks, shards, fragments, innards, and bodily fluids were scattered over a wide area. It was Soma. There was no question that Soma had done it. Had he charged in and swung his katana? He must have. But was that all it had taken to do all that? It wasn't. It couldn't have been.

But the reality was that one swing from Soma had wrecked a large

number of enemies who were now all dead at worst, or unable to continue fighting at best. With one strike, Soma had put a big hole in the force of enemies pursuing them.

Lilia and Kemuri didn't miss a beat before going into that hole and widening it. No, it wasn't just Lilia and Kemuri. Shima. Even Shima went with them, swinging around a weapon that looked like a metal whip. Was that sexy older girl going to fight in that bewitching outfit?

Then there was one more. The masked man with the needlessly long arms who was wearing the bizarre armor charged past Shima and into the midst of the enemy.

Zenmai the golem. He had no weapons. Or rather, both his arms were armored with metal and could be used either as swords or hammers.

"Uhuhuhuh... Aren't you going to run away, you trash?"

The eerie voice came from beside him. Haruhiro turned to look, startled, and there, with a childlike physique and boyish face, but eyes reminiscent of a bottomless swamp, was the necromancer, exuding a miasma-like presence.

"You're in the way... Get lost already..." Pingo said.

"Y-Yessir! S-S-S-S-Sorry!" Haruhiro yelled.

Right. That's right. If Soma says to run, it's time to run. We have to. We're late. We've fallen pretty far behind. Soma was just too incredible. No, now's not the time for excuses.

"L-L-L-L-L-L-Let's go, guys!"

Oh, crap. I'm panicking pretty badly. I can't see my comrades' faces properly, either. I didn't hear their response. But we've got to run. Is everyone coming? I feel like they are. Ranta and Yume, and Shihoru, and Merry, and Kuzaku. What about the Tokkis? What about Akira-san and his group? I can see their backs up ahead. They're pretty far, huh? We really have fallen behind. What am I doing?

Mimorin turned back and shouted something.

The giant god. It's close. I keep looking up. It's raising its right foot. Is it trying to stomp us? Better avoid it. Need to run. At full power. Full burst. Run away at top speed. Who cares what direction? I don't wanna get stomped.

That was all he thought as he dashed. There was a rumbling, an incredible shaking of the ground, and he almost tripped. From that, he knew he apparently hadn't been stepped on. If he got stepped on, there would be no more tripping, no more anything.

He could see now why the volunteer soldiers had been running back and forth. They had to head for the hole in the initial hill. In their heads, they knew that, but they couldn't do it.

It was the giant god. The giant god was scary. They had to run from it. That was the sole thing occupying their hearts. Their bodies were prioritizing that whether they wanted them to or not.

On top of that, visibility was bad. Every time the giant god stepped on the ground, a cloud of dirt rose up. It was raining dirt and sand. In the most extreme cases, they couldn't see more than a few meters in front of them.

Which way should he go? Where was the initial hill? Haruhiro quickly lost sight of Akira-san's party and the Tokkis. That meant he no longer had his guides. He nearly stopped. But he couldn't just stop. If he stopped, he would surely be stepped on. If he was stepped on, he'd be crushed flat before he had time to think, *I'm gonna die*.

“Who...?!” someone shouted.

Yeah, you said it. Who was it? Haruhiro couldn't help but think while feeling like he was going to puke up bloody vomit. *Who thought it was a good idea to try and defeat the giant god?*

Well, yeah. It was Tokimune. Not like saying that now is going to help. There's seriously no helping this. No helping this at all.

“Everyone's here, right?!” he shouted while tasting dirt in his mouth.

“Yeah!” He heard Ranta's voice.

“Here!” Yume followed.

Kuzaku said, “Yep!”

Merry said, “I'm okay!”

But he didn't hear Shihoru.

No way, seriously, don't do this to me, please.

“Shihoru? Shihoru?!”

“...Yes!” she called.

Oh, good. She's here. Thank goodness. My eyes hurt. This dirt is awful. It's hard to breathe, too. Run.

He still had no choice but to run. He was running pretty much blind, but there was nothing else they could do. He didn't even have a good grasp of where the giant god was anymore. He could hear a *zushing, zushing* sound, so they couldn't be that far from it, and he was more or less certain that it was still close.

From the incline and the white pillars around them, it felt like maybe they were climbing the hill? If they were, it was luck. They hadn't come this far because he was aiming for it. It was a coincidence. With good luck, they might escape from the Dusk Realm.

"It's a hole!" Yume said.

She was right. The hail of dirt and sand had let up just enough that they could see a hole up ahead. There were volunteer soldiers rushing inside it, too.

It was the hole. The hole. The way out.

Suddenly, courage welled up inside him, and, *We're saved*, he thought. *Now we're going to make it. We don't have to die. We can live.*

Haruhiro tried to speed up. He'd been running as fast as he thought he could all this time. Could he run any faster than this? He felt like he could. Was it the rush of adrenaline? Humans were amazing.

"Oh, crap!" Ranta shouted.

Suddenly, someone pulled on the back of his cloak, so he wasn't able to unleash that speed that went beyond his limits. Ranta. It was Ranta's fault. Because of Ranta, Haruhiro tripped and fell. No. It wasn't Ranta's fault. It was thanks to Ranta.

Ranta might have just saved Haruhiro's life.

If he had kept running like that, something bad would have happened. Haruhiro hadn't noticed it at all. His focus must have been taken up by the explosion of thoughts and emotions when he believed that they could get out, they could escape, they could live. He hadn't been looking at all.

It was the giant god. The giant god's right foot, or maybe its left foot, came down on the hill, right where that hole was.

"Noooooooooooo! Shihoru let out a scream.

"It's go—" Merry couldn't even finish the word.

"Whoa..." Kuzaku fell back on his rear end.

"No way of goin' home now, huh..." In blank amazement, Yume said something that hit the bullseye. Probably because she was an archer.

...No, no, no, no, no.

"W-W-We've gotta run!" Ranta was about to take off somewhere, then his shoulders slumped. "Wait, wh-where do we even go?"

"Somewhere!" Haruhiro responded immediately.

Somewhere? Where's that? I don't know. We're screwed. But this is

where I've got to dig in my heels, or rather, this is where digging in my heels won't do any good but I've got to do something, or rather it all seems kinda pointless and there's nothing but despair and I want to cry.

The rain of dirt and sand soon started in earnest once more. He couldn't see a thing. For now, he was just going to race down the hill.

The footing was bad. Really bad. Beyond bad. His foot got caught. He tripped, or rather fell. He scrambled to keep going.

If one of his comrades was in reach, he grabbed them and either pushed or pulled them along. In turn, they pulled him along, too, and helped by pushing him from behind. When one of the giant god's feet landed nearby, they called out their comrades' names and checked if everyone was okay.

The first order of business was to get out of range of this rain of dirt. That became his goal. He couldn't think of what would come next, and he didn't need to.

The giant god didn't seem to have any intent of leaving the initial hill, so though it came at risk of life and limb, Haruhiro and the party eventually reached their goal. Once they did, a new difficult problem presented itself.

Enemies.

They encountered cultists, and were forced to decide whether to fight or flee.

If there had been one or two enemies, they would gang up on them and kill them quickly. But cultists and white giants from all over the Dusk Realm were on the move towards the giant god. In other words, it seemed they were gathering at the initial hill.

Haruhiro and the party, on the other hand, were trying to get away from the hill. That meant they were inevitably going to bump into enemies, and if they stopped to fight, the enemies would come one after another until they were the ones outnumbered.

Haruhiro decided to flee. He ran in the direction where there were no enemies.

He soon started to regret it, thinking it might have been a mistake. The number of cultists chasing them was gradually growing, and soon there would be more than ten. If he thought about it calmly, this was a situation that would inevitably end in them being defeated and wiped out.

It's my own fault, thought Haruhiro. Because Haruhiro had made the wrong choice, everyone would die. In this awful place.

Where was this place, even? He could see the giant god going on its rampage near the initial hill, so he could get a rough grasp of his location. Only a rough one, though. There weren't a lot of geographical features or buildings in the Dusk Realm that could be used as landmarks, so it was hard to pinpoint their current location. Difficult though it might be, that didn't stop him from guessing.

Ranta was at the very rear of the group, behind Shihoru, who was totally out of breath. That was deliberate, no doubt. He was protecting Shihoru. The guy had some good in him after all.

Haruhiro was at the head, with Yume, Kuzaku, and Merry behind him in that order. This wasn't a marching order he had decided on. It was one they just ended up with.

The cultists weren't that fast. They also showed a hesitance to keep chasing after Haruhiro and the party. If the party had more energy, they might have been able to shake them off. Thanks to that, they had been spared. So far, at least.

It was only a matter of time, though. Shihoru, for one, was getting close to her limit. If any of them, not just Shihoru, were to stop, they'd have to fight. If they fought, he figured there was an eight to nine out of ten chance they'd lose.

The truth was, he had one plan. However, he couldn't say it was very feasible. The odds were pretty low, he had to admit.

When he looked back, the number of pursuers had gone up again. Were there fifteen? Sixteen, maybe?

If only Kuzaku had his shield. No, it wouldn't have made a difference. He wanted to call out to his comrades. To do something to encourage them.

What could he say? When at best it was just going to give them temporary peace of mind? If Haruhiro, Kuzaku, and Ranta worked together, could they hold off the enemy for a few minutes? While they did, Yume, Shihoru, and Merry would get away—They'd get away, and then what? Should they try their luck on an all-or-nothing battle while he was still able to think straight like this?

It was sixteen against six. They weren't just Pansukes—there were one or two Tori-sans, too. They couldn't win, could they? No way, right? Maybe they had, like, a one percent chance? Could he bet on that one percent? Were they going to die, right here?

Instant death from being stepped on by the giant god would have been easier.

“Hey!” a woman’s voice called out. It wasn’t Yume, Shihoru, or Merry. *Where was that from?* Haruhiro looked around.

There was a depression up ahead on the left. Something jumped up out of it. It was a person. Two people. A man and a woman. The woman was tall. They were both in pretty incredible outfits. The woman’s in particular was crazy.

There wasn’t that much skin exposed overall, but the bits that were exposed were all ones that would make you think, *Wait, you’re showing that?* Was she showing them on purpose?

Also, there was her figure. Her breasts, her butt, her thighs... they all had the perfect amount of meat on them. She also had an hourglass figure and long arms and legs. Gorgeous curly hair. Her appearance was as gaudy as gaudy could be. Harsh eyes with large pupils. Deep-red lips.

She was a dominatrix. That was the only word that came to mind to describe her.

“We’ll save you, so lend us a hand!” the dominatrix called.

The man shot past Haruhiro. He had white hair, and the lower half of his face was covered by a mask. He was wearing tight-fitting black clothes, or armor, it wasn’t clear which, and he raced along on all fours like a dog.

Why did the man have a collar on? It was like he really was a dog.

An unfamiliar man and woman... was not what these two were. Haruhiro had never spoken to them before, but he’d seen them. They were an unforgettable pair. They were a little famous in this business.

Lala and Nono.

The dominatrix was Lala, and the white-haired man with the collar and mask was Nono.

Why were they here? There was no way of knowing that.

Nono passed by Ranta in no time flat, then attacked the cultists. The way he attacked them was just like a dog. Nono slipped under the cultists’ outstretched spears, then bit one Pansuke in the throat—or that was what it looked like. But Nono’s mouth was covered by his mask. He couldn’t bite like that, and he wasn’t a dog, he was a human. He didn’t bite the Pansuke. He’d drawn a knife from his hip just before he’d jumped, and stabbed it into the cultist’s face.

They say there's no reward without risk. Well, Nono set out to prove that. It went without saying that going right into the middle of the enemy group was dangerous, but it was hard for the enemy to deal with, too.

Especially since the Pansukes' weapons were long spears. If Nono got in close, they had a hard time fighting back. What was more, Nono was nimble like a cat rather than a dog. He instantly closed in and made contact, then delivered a death blow with the knife in his right hand.

Alternatively, he would punch them with his left fist. He'd wrap his arm around their necks and snap them. He used one Pansuke he had in a pinion as a shield against the Tori-san's Thunder Sword Dolphin. Then he pushed the Pansuke towards the Tori-san and instantly killed another Pansuke.

"Don't just stand there and gawk!" Lala called.

While they were focused on Nono, enemies had come to attack Lala, too. The dominatrix wasn't a melee fighter like Nono. She used a bow. It was pretty short. She nocked a short arrow to her short bow and fired.

Nocked an arrow and fired.

Nocked an arrow and fired.

Yume could use Rapid Fire, but nothing like this. It was fast. Too fast. Also, close. Lala was firing at close range. Firing like crazy.

"Oh?! Ohh?! Ohhhh?!" Ranta lifted up his Thunder Sword Dolphin and charged at the enemy.

"Uh...?" Kuzaku looked to Haruhiro.

"D-Do it! Go!" Haruhiro nodded and went after Ranta.

It was a bit sloppy, but they couldn't let this chance slip away. The enemy were clearly panicking. If they didn't strike now, when would they?

Push. We have to push and push, and of course we're exhausted, but we'll squeeze out what strength we can and push like crazy.

Of the sixteen, Nono probably got four or five, and Lala shot just as many. The rest were finished off by Haruhiro and the rest on pure momentum. Before the last of them went down, Nono had already started collecting Lala's arrows for her.

With the enemies gone, Lala accepted her arrows back from Nono and then immediately ordered them all to, "Run!"

It didn't feel like they had a choice in the matter. If they disobeyed her, something horrible would probably happen to them. They wouldn't get off with just a spanking.

“Wh-Why?!” Haruhiro asked as he chased after Lala and Nono.

“Why what?” Lala responded without turning back.

“No, it’s just, Akira-san said it looked like you two had run away...”

“You make it sound so bad,” Lala said. “Our horse-dragons got crushed, so we had no choice but to lie low.”

Lala and Nono had ridden horse-dragons from Grimgar into the Dusk Realm. Now they were on foot. It was probably true that their horse-dragons had become unable to move and they’d abandoned them, or they had been killed by enemies.

“Err, um... Where are we going now?!” Haruhiro yelped.

“I have an idea,” said Lala. “If you can’t keep up, we’ll leave you behind. Nono, carry the mage girl.”

Nono silently nodded, rushed over to Shihoru, quickly put her on his back, and caught up to Lala in the blink of an eye. She talked tough, but maybe she was a surprisingly good person? But she might also have been planning to sacrifice them if the time came. Even if that was the case, the two had saved them, so they couldn’t really complain.



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That was right. They were saved. For now, at least.

I have an idea, Lala had said. If that was true, they had some hope at least.

Haruhiro looked to his comrades. Every one of them, without exception, was covered in sweat and snot, caked with dirt and dust, and was an exhausted mess. That they were still alive like this, and they weren't even injured that badly, was kind of hard to believe. He was so relieved, his strength almost gave out on him.

—*No. Don't let your guard down. Not yet. We're just getting started. We have to live. Live on. Survive. All of us together. What can I do to make that happen? What should I do? Follow Lala and Nono. I have no other plan, so that's all I can do right now. Just stay cautious, don't do anything I shouldn't, and conserve stamina as much as possible. We're running right now, but we're only going at double time. Nono is carrying Shihoru, so we're more than able to keep up.*

Lala occasionally stopped and crouched down, signaling for the others to get low to the ground, as well. Nono immediately obeyed her, of course, and Haruhiro and the others followed his example.

Lala must have either had really good eyes, or an incredible sense for danger. Even when the enemies were pretty far off, she detected them first and tried to avoid them. To keep the enemies from finding them, they avoided elevated terrain, choosing lower spots to travel along. Once Shihoru was able to walk on her own again, they started ambushing cultist groups and wiping them out whenever they outnumbered them.

There was no idle chatter. When they made it through the lowlands and ran straight into a group of cultists and white giants, Ranta opened his mouth wide and shouted, “Whoa!” for the first time in a while.

Lala chose to flee without fighting. Fair enough; while there were fewer than ten cultists, the white giant was a threat, even if it was only in the four-meter class.

Lala and Nono kept picking up the pace. Did they plan to use Haruhiro’s party as bait while they escaped on their own? He couldn’t even get mad about it. To those two, Haruhiro and the others must have just been insurance in case things went wrong. He’d thought that from the beginning.

But it wasn’t like Haruhiro hadn’t been thinking at all.

“Lala-san, I have an idea!” he called.

For a moment, Lala turned back. There was no response.

If you're going, go, he thought. *I don't mind.* He was grateful to Lala and Nono. Thanks to the two of them, they had found time to catch their breath. Even if the two abandoned them now, they'd manage. At the very least, they'd struggle to the bitter end. He'd recovered enough that he could think that way.

“This way! Come on!” Haruhiro called. “Everyone, follow me! Keep trying!”

When Haruhiro changed course, Lala turned back again. She might be having trouble deciding.

Do what you want, he thought. He had been keeping a careful eye on their present location on the way here. If Haruhiro hadn't gotten it wrong, this should be the right place.

“Damn those two!” Ranta spat.

Lala and Nono had vanished out of sight. They really had run off, huh? It wasn't like that didn't disappoint him.

“Don't let it bug you!” Haruhiro called. “It's fine! Leave it to me!”

“That doesn't sound like you at all, Parupiro! You don't say things like that!”

Oh, shut up. I know that much. He pisses me off. But, well, it's Ranta. That's nothing new. Like always, don't worry about what's done. Focus on now. Pour everything into this moment. I'm gonna live. Here, in the now.

Run along the easy paths, where it isn't too uneven, and just don't get my directions wrong. Everyone's keeping up. Shihoru looks like she's having a hard time, though. Keep going. Seriously, keep going. We're almost there. We got lucky. It's not far now.

“I get it!” On their left-hand side, on an elevated spot that was like an embankment, Lala and Nono suddenly appeared. “So, that's what you're doing! If it works, I'll praise you for it!”

Had they not run away after all? Haruhiro grinned at Lala.

They ran for their lives, the cultists and white giant trailing behind them. There were a lot of ups and downs here, and they couldn't see far ahead.

“Whaa...?!” Yume shouted. It looked like she'd figured it out.

The ground leveled out and their field of vision opened up.

Haruhiro spread his arms wide and went left. “Spread out! Don't step on them!”

There were nets with grass over top of them, but if you looked closely, it

didn't take long to figure out what they were. They were far from perfect, but if you knew nothing about them, they might be surprisingly hard to notice.

It wasn't long before he heard a falling sound behind him. When he turned back, one cultist had fallen right into a pit trap. There was a dip in the net and grass was dancing through the air.

Haruhiro, Kuzaku, and Merry were running on the left side of the hole, while Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru were on the right. One more cultist charged over the pit trap and fell in. The other cultists stood there, unable to move. The white giant might have tried to stop, but it was too late, because it pitched forward and fell in.

They hadn't been of any use in the attempt to defeat the hydra or giant god, but he was glad they'd dug them. Of course, that was only in hindsight. They'd gotten lucky. That really was all there was to it.

Good or bad luck could be the difference between life and death. By a small but decisive margin, Haruhiro and his party were still on this side. The side of the living.

The cultists who hadn't fallen into the pit were having a hard time deciding whether to pursue Haruhiro and the party, or what to do. Meanwhile, Haruhiro and the others ran as fast as they could, without hesitation, trying to put more distance between them.

By the time the cultists were out of sight, Lala and Nono were in front of Haruhiro. They were unbelievable. But Lala said she had an idea. They were planning to use him, so Haruhiro had every intention of using them, too.

"Weren't you supposed to praise me?!" he called.

"Try asking again in a hundred years!" Lala yelled.

So that was how it was gonna be, huh. She was acting every bit like the dominatrix she looked like, that Lala. Seriously, she was unbelievable.

Regardless, the other pit traps were far away, so they couldn't reuse the same trick. Haruhiro ended up spending time with his stomach hurting again. While it felt like they were gradually seeing fewer enemies, they couldn't let their guard down. When Ranta started yakking about stupid nonsense, he was noisy and annoying and that only caused more stress.

When Lala occasionally took a break, she would have Nono get down on all fours and use him as a chair. That would be fine on its own, but she made a point of crossing and uncrossing her legs, then posing in ways that accentuated her bust, so it was tempting to look. It wasn't like he really,

really wanted to see, but he couldn't help it, you know?

But what kind of relationship did Lala and Nono have...?

He didn't have the courage to ask, and there were other things he'd rather know first. Like where they were going.

He tried asking, but Lala wouldn't tell him. It looked like he'd just have to keep quiet and follow her.

Preparing himself for the worst, Haruhiro did just that. Lala and Nono made no attempt to run now. They walked. They walked, and walked, and boy did they walk.

Haruhiro and the party didn't have a timepiece. Lala would sometimes pull out a pocket watch during breaks. When he asked the time, she answered, "And what good would knowing that do for you?" So, while he didn't know the precise time, he thought they had probably been walking for more than a full day.

They were in a place that seemed similar to the valley where the volunteer soldier settlement had been set up. However, there was no spring at the bottom of this valley. No plants, either. It was a small, dry valley from the looks of it.

"We've walked around the Dusk Realm a fair bit," Lala said in a lilting, singsong voice as she descended the slope. "We've found a wide variety of different things. We sold most of that information, but we haven't told anyone about this place. The truly fascinating discoveries we keep to ourselves, you see. Only we know about them. Isn't that lovely?"

Every hair on Haruhiro's body stood on end. Lala and Nono might suddenly bare their fangs and try to kill Haruhiro and the party. That was the sense he got. Was it an unfounded worry?

Lala and Nono descended into the valley, seemingly unconcerned. However, it couldn't hurt to stay on guard.

When Haruhiro slowed his pace, his comrades seemed to notice and matched him. But when they reached the valley floor and saw what was there, all of that was blown away.

Beneath an outcropping that was like the overhang of a roof, there was an open maw. Thanks to that, they probably wouldn't have noticed it without descending to the valley floor.

It's a hole.

I'm sure it's not just any cave. What gave me that impression, though?

Haruhiro quickly realized the answer to that. It was the initial hill.

It had a similar atmosphere or appearance as the initial hill—no, what the initial hill had once been. It was gone now. But this was just like that hole, the exit.

Lala and Nono entered the hole without stopping.

Haruhiro and Ranta looked at one another. Ranta looked dumbfounded.

Haruhiro had a sleepy look in his eyes, no doubt.

“...Do you know what I’m thinking?” Ranta asked.

“No, I don’t,” Haruhiro said immediately. “I have no idea what goes on inside your head. I’m pretty sure it’d be bad news if I did.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Exactly what he said...” Shihoru took a deep breath. “Do you think this carries through back home?”

“Fweh?!” Yume’s eyes went wide and she let out a weird cry. “Curryru?! Where’s that?!”

“There’s no place called that, moron!” Ranta screamed. “Carryru, really! What the heck’s Carryru supposed to be?!”

“If you say Curryru, it’s gotta be curry roux, y’know?” Yume said. “Huh? What’s curry, again...?”

“It’s spicy...” Merry tilted her head to the side in thought. “...I think? I recall it was... food?”

“Oh, yeah.” Kuzaku mumbled. “There was something like that, wasn’t there? It was kind of brown... Brown...?”

“...It was.” Haruhiro nodded. He was watering at the mouth. The words Shima had whispered came back to him.

“We’re searching for a way back to our original world.”

Their original world.

He looked to the hole, then up to the many-colored sky.

We need to get back.

Haruhiro looked around at his comrades. Their faces were all filthy. It was kind of comical.

“Let’s go,” he said.

No one objected.

They walked into the hole single-file, with Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Merry, Yume, Shihoru, and Ranta as their marching order. It was pitch-black inside the hole. But there was light up ahead.

Lala and Nono were waiting for them. The light source was the lantern that Nono was carrying. Lala just smiled slightly, walking forward without a word. It was a meandering path. It wasn't steep, but it was on a downwards incline. They could feel a breeze. The air was flowing towards the valley they had come in from.

It's the same, thought Haruhiro. Not just similar, but the same.

The path eventually straightened out. It wasn't going down anymore, either. It was level.

"We discovered the gremlins years ago," Lala suddenly said in a singsong voice. "We kept them a secret, though. But you guys found them, too, so we figured, well, okay. By the way, that wasn't the first place we encountered the gremlins."

"Huh...?" Haruhiro stopped walking despite himself. "It wasn't... there?"

"Right," she said. "They're very weak creatures. They breed fairly quickly, but they aren't aggressive, and they lack the power to fight back against predators. But they have a strange power, or a trait, and they're stubborn survivors. That's our hypothesis."

Lala and Nono didn't stop walking. Haruhiro hurriedly followed after them.

The path went on. There was a weak light up ahead. He could hear a rustling noise.

"They have the power to cross from one world to another," Lala said. "Or the power to find the seams between them. Either that, or the tendency to find and flee into them."

There. They were there. In the rock walls, there were countless holes large and small, and a bluish light shone out from inside them. They would be in those holes, or hanging from the edge of those holes, talking incessantly.

The nest. These were their homes. The ri-komo—no, the Gremlin Flats.

"But this is it." Lala turned back and puffed up her chest with pride. "This is as far as we've explored."

"Huh?" Haruhiro was so overwhelmed by the seemingly proud Lala that he took a half-step backwards. "W-Well then, do you know what kind of world this leads to, maybe...?"

"No clue," Lala said with a broad smile. "It's a total mystery."

Afterword

In the afterword for each volume of *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash*, I've usually ended up writing about video games, but I think I'll do something a little different this time.

As has already been announced, this novel will be receiving an anime adaptation.

I hadn't anticipated this at all, and honestly, when my editor, Mr. K, first told me it might be happening, I laughed it off as unlikely. I was sure that the project would just up and vanish. Even after meeting Director Ryosuke Nakamura, as well as Mieko Hosoi-san and all of the producers, I was still half in doubt.

When I read the script, it was very entertaining, and I admired what they had done. "Why, this *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash*, it's quite an impressive story. I wonder who wrote the original work. Oh, I did? Are you sure?" That was how disconnected I felt from it all. It just didn't feel real.

It's Mr. K and Mr. H of the editing department that deal directly with the anime production staff, so, in a way, it's like everything's happening off somewhere far away. It's hard for it to sink in. There was a lot of actual work involved for me, including checks and adjustments, as well as giving my opinion on things. Though I never calmed down, I was relatively clear-headed about it all. But, you know, I just couldn't calm down about it, and I still can't.

This project came about because someone liked the novel and wanted to make an anime of it, so I am, of course, grateful for and happy about that. In the process of meeting the production team directly and speaking with them a number of times, I saw the passion and the seriousness with which they approached the work. I was surprised and overwhelmed by how deeply and with how much detail they thought about everything, and I was sincerely pleased by the fact that the thing they were creating was based on my own original work.

There are many people involved in the production of an anime, and a lot

of money changes hands. It's on a completely different scale from a novel. Obviously, they aren't just doing all of this for their own entertainment, so I'm hoping it's a success for them.

This is all just a matter of my own mentality, but one day I noticed I was watching the anime of *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash* from a surprisingly objective perspective.

Why is that? I wondered. I quickly found my answer.

Fundamentally, I am the kind of person who, even when it isn't going well, and he is feeling pain and loneliness, can be happy so long as he is writing novels. I think being a novelist is truly my calling. But does it absolutely have to be novels? I don't think it does.

What I enjoy is imagining this or that in my head, and then capturing it in some form. Whether that's as manga, movies, pictures, music, I think anything would probably do.

However, if you have a pen and paper, or even just a PC these days, you can write. What's more, you can do it by yourself, no help from others needed. That's an important point.

I want to do everything by myself. I want to create something that's purely my own.

Well, I'm sure there are people who do it all by themselves with manga, but it's not as easy as with a novel. As for pictures, if there had been something that gave me the impetus to do it, I might have worked with them. I tried music, or songs rather, but I hated the sound of my own voice. With my voice, my songs wouldn't turn out the way I was imagining them. There's no helping that.

Due to various factors, I ended up choosing novels, which I could begin and complete entirely by myself. By the way, even with novels, when you think about the publication of the book, there are the editor and designers, the proofreaders, and the illustrator involved, as well. However, the first draft, I believe, belongs entirely to the novelist.

That's why I do as little to change my first draft as possible. Almost the only time I make corrections is when my editor or the proofreaders note a mistake or something contradictory and I feel there is a valid need to. My novels are mine and mine alone, and that's why I love being a novelist.

Because of that, I am very grateful to those who make my novels into books for me. I pay great respect to the talents of those men and women.

It's true that the anime for *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash* is based on my novel, but naturally, it is not my novel. It's something that Director Nakamura and many other people have worked together to create. It's absolutely not mine. If the anime turns out to be something wonderful, that achievement belongs to the people who created it. I only provided the original source materials. The anime is entirely their work.

I have ended up in a position where I can, directly and indirectly, see the incredible labor they put in, the skills they've developed, and the rare sense of taste that they have put to use in creating anime. I am the person with the greatest expectations for the anime *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash*, and also one of the people looking forward to it.

If my novel were not the original work, I wouldn't have had the chance to have these expectations and anticipation for it. That is a fact. In a broad sense, that may be because I am one of the creators. If there's anything I can do to make the anime a success, I will gladly do it. But, really, I'm a novelist, and the anime is not my novel. It's because I've drawn a firm distinction between the two in my mind that I'm able to wait for the anime with great expectations, and to look forward to it.

This is a first experience for me, and I'm having trouble keeping calm about it, but it looks like I'll be able to become one of the fortunate viewers of the anime *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash*. Because of my position, I've had a glimpse at the production process (which was incredibly fun me, too; the script, storyboards, roughs, everything, it was all incredible), and so I can say this with absolute certainty: It's going to be a really, really, really wonderful anime!

I've run out of pages.

To my editor, K-san, to Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers of KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in production and sales of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Ao Jyumonji



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by Ao Jyumonji

Translated by Sean McCann
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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