Hole 2: Grave Keeper

Chapter 1

By any measure Muoru’s singing ability was seriously lacking.

Alone as he swung his shovel, Muoru sang a smattering of songs, from things like popular tunes he’d heard on the radio to bits from his marching chants. And since no one could hear him, he sang the words the way he wanted; that is, his voice was off key and sometimes he would even make up words.

Though his voice was loud, it seemed to disappear into the uninhabited graveyard.

The singing was his only comfort, helping him to forget his dislike of the idea that he would have to toil with these corpses forever. And though he was continuing to dig holes, he was in good spirits, as if he had returned to the past, more specifically, the condition he’d been in one month ago.

The only things he was lacking compared to that time were people to harmonize with and a helmet.

He had started to get used to his short shovel and the collar that could not be parted from his neck, but now he started to notice the lightness at the top of his head.

No matter what I do, it’s obvious that I’ll probably never get my hands on a helmet.

At a glance it did not seem to be a necessity in this quiet graveyard. Plus if he wanted to protect himself from that monster, an iron helmet probably wouldn’t be enough. But for some reason Muoru really liked that headgear. It brought back memories such as the first time him and his fellow young soldiers, all around the same age and rank, had touched a rifle and boasted about past acts of alleged heroism. But now looking back at those boys with slightly disillusioned eyes, he remembered they’d all worn their helmets the day they received them, even as they slept.

Since then, particularly during a military operation, he was never apart from his helmet even if there wasn’t an enemy within the surrounding ten kilometer perimeter. Admittedly, Muoru understood it was a bit strange to feel that way, but perhaps there was hope and a sense of security that came from the helmet protecting the most important part of the human body. After he became a grave digger he tore a sheet into pieces and wrapped it around his head in efforts to prevent heatstroke. But that thin cloth was completely unsatisfactory

“Mr. Prisoner, thank you for your hard work.” Coming from behind Muoru’s back, the old man’s voice cut into Muoru’s song. “You seem to be alright even though you’ve seen those things.”

Completely as if he were inspecting the administering of a medicine in an animal experiment, Daribedor looked Muoru over with his small eyes.

Muoru slightly scowled. His right leg was wrapped with a seemingly yellowing and dirty bandage imbued with the bodily fluids oozing out from his wound…

Then he recalled the girl who lay under his arms after he’d knocked her down in a panic.

“Far from it, actually you’re increasingly working harder. That’s good.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m not curious,” Muoru said. Then trying to insert a slight probe into his words he continued, “For example those things… where did they come from?”

“Where….that’s another philosophical question.” The old man’s mouth twisted, one could even say he made an unsightly smile. “You probably wouldn’t ask questions like ‘where do humans come from’. Isn’t this the same kind of question?”

“Mostly from a woman’s stomach,” Muoru jested, but Mr. Daribedor was not amused in the slightest.

Not even trying to hide his displeasure, Mr. Daribedor started to return to the mansion, saying the following, “Well, I understand why you’re not afraid of them. It’s because of those people who frequently appear at night. Though it may be disappointing, it is much better to refrain from excessively going out at night. It would be a problem for this place if you were killed after all the work you’ve done.”

….Crow as usual liked sitting on top of gravestones. And after hearing the story about Daribedor from Muoru, they giggled mockingly.

“That old man is terrible. It’s like, no matter how many people are employed to dig holes, once they become unable to deal with the devils, they soon become useless.”

Reaching the limits of his endurance, Muoru readily ignored Crow’s meaningful leer and asked, “Do you know each other?”

Crow shrugged and answered, “Well, honestly speaking, I hate that man. Be that as it may, he’d take care of us in this graveyard if you and I were to die.”

“…what do you mean?”

“What, I didn’t say? Even people who know about the devils’ existence are able to be buried here.”

Muoru slightly hesitated, his questions piling on top of another. “Wait! Aren’t only monsters buried here?”

“What are you saying Mole-kun? Isn’t what you are digging now human-sized?”

…that was exactly right.

He had dug multiple graves, but since the burial of the monster, none had been designated to be as large. After hearing how strong the big monsters were, he didn’t feel like it was a worthy to question to ask if the smaller ones were more peaceful.

Crow continued, “Why in the world do you think this place is called a “Mass” graveyard? It’s simple. It’s for humans and devils. The name comes from the fact that their two incompatible existences are both buried here…but as for humans, it’s not common for them to come here except under special circumstances.” A non-childlike, sarcastic smile spread across Crow’s face.

“So…for example, what about the grave you are sitting on?”

“Yup, I think this is a human grave.”

“Get off. Right now.”

“Haw…” Crow pouted, making a commotion with their feet, until Muoru raised his shovel threatening them into obedience.

“Ah, you’re such a good guy. You don’t seem like a prisoner at all,” Crow said as they placed their feet on the ground and sighed deeply.

“Why is that?”

“Why is what?”

“It seems strange. To borrow your words, those monsters are mankind’s natural enemy right? Why did your companions have to bury it so courteously?”

Having lost their seat, Crow sat cross legged on the ground. Like a child they wanted to sit quickly. No, that wasn’t right. Even though he’d seen their child-like appearance many times, sometimes when they spoke he completely forgot.

“Do you remember that those things are immortal?”

“Ah,” Muoru nodded. Crow had definitely said that. “These things do not have what we call life. Just like the words suggest, they are undead. Even if you cut them, burn them or chop them into very small pieces, like a joke they will come back to life…”

Gradually the boy noticed the uncomfortable feeling with those words.

Reading the change in their expression, Crow continued. “Right, it’s strange right? Burials are courtesies you conduct for dead things. Yet, in spite of that, in this land we are burying enemies that somehow cannot die… Of course, just because we give them a memorial service doesn’t mean we sympathize with them.”

Muoru was silent.

“Before you guessed that ‘hunters’ exterminated those demons. That’s right. Hunters certainly fought with the demons. However, they couldn’t exactly finish the job.

But for example, if the humans from ages ago were able to wield the same type of power that “demon hunters” had when they hunted down these monsters with rifles, then I think mankind then would have had the same access to the prosperity humans have now.”

That’s right, Crow had definitely said that in their previous conversation. They had said that the monster’s existence was an obstacle to the advancement of civilization.

“As humans we can’t kill those things. Well, if they are bound head and foot then they won’t be able to seize anyone or anything. But that’s the best we can do. Unfortunately…”

With a face full of remorse, Crow bit their lip.

“Wait, isn’t that exactly why it’s strange?” Muoru interjected. “Didn’t you say something the other day about how people were able to acquire a method to defeat these monsters?”

“Ah, yeah, that method is at your feet now.”

“So, the beasts buried underneath this graveyard are allegedly immortal. Haven’t you heard of a method to destroy them?”

“You don’t get it huh? Hey look at this.” As if playing in a sandbox, Crow rapped on the ground.

“There’s something more to these things than just having a physical body. If you constrict them you’ll be able to prevent them from moving. But even if you try to drown them in water or bury them in a hole, eventually they will break out from their confinement and resume their slaughter.

Then it seems that one day someone tried burying them in a human grave. “

“…so you’re saying after the burial they can’t come back to life?” Muoru asked, finally picking up on what Crow was saying.

Crow nodded and gave a weak smile.

“Although your question ‘why don’t the demons come back to life if they’re buried in a graveyard,’ has been asked before, I don’t know. Even great scholars don’t know. However, maybe for starters it’s because these demons exist in bodies we don’t understand.

Since they’re so different from the living creatures of this earth, there’s even some sort of story that says they came from the moon. The guy who first tried to bury it in a graveyard….well, maybe he planned for it to be some kind of joke or something.”

“So, back then the first guy to ever eat sea slugs intended for this all to be a joke,”(1) Muoru said laughingly at Crow, even though the child-like person had a mysterious, miserable-looking expression.

Scribbling on the ground with their pinky, Crow answered. “Well, this is just my hypothesis…Perhaps if the people who were killed by those monsters held a grudge then maybe the things tied up here would be unable to reanimate.”

“Don’t say such scary things.”

“You’re not shaken are you?”

“I don’t know, I just don’t like ghosts,” Muoru said with conviction.

Crow lifted their face and puffed out their soft-looking cheeks.

“I wonder…” While doing that childish action, again they said something even an adult wouldn’t say. “Well…even if their power is sealed that doesn’t mean they can be buried in any graveyard. It has to be old land, land with power; the type of land that has been protected by humans, and has continued to serve as the opposite of a human cradle for a long time. That kind of land has become the eternal prison of those things.

Exactly like this place…”

Remembering his discomfort, Muoru asked, “Well, by any chance is this not a terribly important place?”

Crow laughed. “Yeah, it’s one important place. And of course, there are other graveyards that exist for the purpose of defeating the demons. It is exactly because this task is so important that insurance is necessary. If there were only one place, for example this place, and if it were to be destroyed then those demons would come back to life and there would be nothing we could do.

“…Well, for the most part the other places have been disguised, and ordinary people are prohibited from entering to protect them from entering without any knowledge of what lies beneath.”

That makes sense, maybe that’s why no one seems to be visiting the graves here.

The fact that there were no visits by ordinary people was a negative factor, decreasing his chances of finding a clue as to how to escape. Still…

“It is strange, but…” Although he understood what Crow was saying, Muoru was currently concerned with something else. “Until probably a hundred or so years ago, humans lived in fear, without any method to kill these monsters, right? If that’s true, then why were people unaware of these monsters’ existence? At the very least I and the people around me shouldn’t have been completely in the dark.”

“That’s simple. You didn’t need to know,” Crow said, nodding quickly as if making a hasty promise.

“Losing their overwhelming immortality their numbers are decreasing much more rapidly than in the past. One thing that’s interesting is the demons seem to understand their disadvantage. Now they aren’t just refraining from hunting or luring out humans, they don’t appear before them at all.

“And, by all means we’ve observed this tendency. The monsters are not increasing. So you could say that them not dying is some kind of weakness- Take for example a military force. No matter how strong they are, without supplies they are probably quite weak, right?”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Crow’s analogy was indeed quite easy to understand, so the boy above the moles responded with a deep nod.

Strictly speaking, the military forces composed of humans and the monsters were probably different, but in either case after losing their total strength they would both be unable to revive themselves. And soon after that it would be obvious that they were gradually getting worse and worse.

“Yeah, it’s that, “Crow continued. “After all the effort it took to decrease the number of demons, the injuries also became fewer. Gas and electric lights were developed and now even if the sun sets standard activities are able to continue.

As long as people are scared of the fading threat of darkness, that fear will have an effect on industry and economy. So as a result, the countries thought it was preferable to keep the monsters a secret. Call it the dark living in the dark.”

Muoru, still not persuaded, had been biting his lip. Crow then continued their explanation.

“So don’t think it’s a lie that the world completely didn’t know.”

“Huh? It’s true?”

“Well, let me ask, how was the first night you came to this graveyard? You weren’t scared, right? Why not?”

“Well about that…it’s because when I was a child my mother, terrible aunt or someone had completely terrorized me. They talked about things that come out of graveyards at night, ghosts, evil spirits…zombies and things like that.”

“See? Aren’t those all the same things then, ‘creatures that harm humans’? It seems that the stories involving the devils have changed a bit in the same way as the names they were called.”

Then Crow giggled.

“Well, due to the extreme level of secrecy it is difficult just to find someone who can dig holes in a graveyard, without that person losing their sanity. And if that person goes to the graveyard, it is likely that they have certain qualities.”

“Qualities?”

“Such as being able to endure the situation where mankind’s natural enemy is drawing near, the quality of having strong nerves. To put it simply…they’re tough.”

“I’m not tough or anything like that,” the boy said flatly.

“What? I know you’re saying that you have no will-power like me, but you don’t have to be modest.”

“I’m not being modest or anything. Deep down I truly think that. If I was truly tough then I wouldn’t be…” Muoru cut himself off and looked away.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“What…what are you saying?”

Crow insistently wanted to hear what Muoru was about to say, but with a sour look on his face the boy stubbornly kept his mouth closed. He didn’t show his true face, just like a mole that burrows underground.

In the end Crow got angrier and stuck out their extremely red tongue in the boy’s direction.

“You’re an idiot mole-kun! Trying to look better than you really are!” Crow shouted as if they enjoyed degrading him. Then in the same way they had appeared, Crow abruptly went away.

Muoru heaved a heavy sigh. With Crow gone, Muoru was the only one left in the graveyard as the sun reached high-noon.

Though singing songs had been able to trick him into a different mood, he noticed that instead of song lyrics, more and more sighs were spilling from his lips.

Honestly speaking he had thought he was reasonably tough. And as for the military, even though it was just a bunch of assholes relying solely on their muscles, like an all-male household, he could only sometimes call them tough.

However, his confidence in his toughness had been rapidly fading since he had been brought to this graveyard. And nowadays it was to the point where he had to tell the childlike Crow not to misunderstand.

-He was frightened of the night’s darkness.

-The existence of these monsters had begun to take away his sanity.

-Recently, he worried that the grave keeper girl was absolutely nowhere to be found…

…and, that the girl must hate and fear him.

It’s understandable, Muoru thought, trying to interpret his own emotions.

It was natural to feel uneasy. That girl is my important…she is my important foothold in escaping from this place.

The other day when he was running wildly – the time he asked her to become his friend – he felt that he’d been able to converse quite successfully. But since then he was not able to respond at all. Either he was the only one stalling in the air as he fruitlessly spun his wheels, or he was crashing into the girl’s words of rejection.

As for Meria, since she always asked him as many questions as possible, she’d been mostly unable to tell him the things he wanted to hear, which Muoru thought was unfair.

“Why does she only show her face at night?” “What specifically does a grave keeper do?” When he threw those kinds of questions at her, she made a troubled face and shook her head.

When he saw her make that expression he grew anxious over the possibility that, perhaps she hates me. However if that were true she’d probably avoid meeting him face to face every night…So sooner or later the day would probably come when she’ll talk to me right? Would that day really come?

But where he was now, that day couldn’t be anything but very far away.

Good grief, who did Crow say was tough?

He laughed. Such a thing was ridiculous. If he was really what they called tough, then he probably wouldn’t have gone into a state where he couldn’t calm down just from thinking about a girl.

Anyway, though he hadn’t received an answer from the girl’s lips about friendship, he was able to find out how old she was. Fourteen years had passed in her life. Plus he had learned a bunch of other miscellaneous facts too, such as she liked ripe apples and hated the rain after her clothes were dirtied by mud.

However, in the end she still wasn’t his friend. And they never agreed on a specific time or place to meet up.

So as a result, when it became night Muoru went out looking for her in the graveyard.

Maybe it was inefficient, but strange as it was, the time he was searching for her wasn’t a bad thing. He even felt it was fun, though he couldn’t clearly say why. Even the graveyard, which in the beginning had been terribly frightening at night, was no problem for him now. In fact, just the light from the stars was enough for him to be able to walk. Humans’ power to adapt is incredible.

But the graveyard was excessively vast, and even though he’d gotten used to the sight of the gravestones and trees extending seemingly forever outward, he was still unclear about where he was. The first landmark he made was a giant tree growing roughly in the center of the graveyard. While remaining conscious of how to get back to the tree, he went searching for Meria, but tonight even though he walked about the graveyard, he was unable to find her.

He picked up pebbles and twigs while he continued to walk, and then when his legs got tired, he was suddenly struck with an idea. He called out to Depphen who had been trailing him by a slight distance.

“You’ve got a good nose don’t you? Wouldn’t it be great if you helped me search?”

He was only half-joking when he made the request, but after a while he thought he saw the dog wriggle its nose before turning its body and bolting away into the darkness. With a start, the boy followed after him.

And tonight Meria was directly beneath that giant tree holding her knees.

It seemed like she was hiding in the shadow of the roots, but she didn’t seem to notice his arrival. The tree was so big that if men were to hold hands it would take five men to encircle it. And the exposed roots were just thick enough to hide her crouching figure. .

He felt calling out to her as she sat there would be the first time he’d ever initiated their meeting.

Perhaps she’s always been the one looking for me, the boy thought, imagining that pleasant possibility.

Muoru purposefully made a lot of noise with his shoes as he approached and the girl, as if shocked, hurriedly concealed her hands behind her crouched knees.

“Yo, what are you doing?”

Meria’s face was unusually flustered. She was like a child caught in the middle of trying to hide one of their mistakes.

Muoru looked at Meria’s legs. But not in a perverted way, the girl’s knees were covered by her coat and she was hiding something behind them with both of her hands.

…

…Silence.

With the two of them in those positions, the extremely awkward silence continued. It was clear that for her they’d met at an inconvenient time. However, though it was a common story, the thing the girl was desperately concealing only excited his curiosity. He even wondered to what extent she would hate him if he forcibly lifted up her legs.

Of course, I couldn’t actually do that to her.

He didn’t know whether or not she’d run out of patience with him as he stood there, but as if giving up she hung her head and took out the mysterious item from under her knees.

Filling up the palms of both her hands was a gloss-less chunk of deep black. Besides the color it had the imperfect spherical form of a peach and near the top were what looked like small teeth marks. If it had just been that it would have looked like nothing more than some kind of bad fruit but…

Muoru seized his chest at once. As if a door was suddenly opened without a knock, he had a recollection.

Before his eyes he saw someone hit by an explosive, and the unknown man in military clothing fell backwards.

His head along with his breastbone had been blown off, but underneath Muoru could see the man’s heart stubbornly beating.

As for the clump in the middle of the girl’s hands, the pulsing of the black fleshy part beneath the teeth marks looked just the same as that heart. Completely…it was completely the same.

…Was it like a part of something?

“What is…that?” Muoru asked, shuddering.

However, Meria with her head hung said in a small voice, “I can’t…”



He understood. Even if that was the only thing she thought to say, he knew what she meant. Basically, after a week of hearing her use it in response to various topics, he understood it as her way of saying, “don’t ask me that”

The intention behind the refusal stood in his way like a deep chasm which he was standing at the edge of. And on the opposing cliff was the girl. But as he tried to go to her side he realized that no matter how much dirt he threw into the empty space, the chasm would never be filled.

Meria brought the black fruit back to her lips, moving extremely slowly as if the boy wasn’t even there. She then began to eat.

Looking at the girl’s plain mouth, Muoru asked, “Is it good?”

He didn’t expect her to respond, but then with the fruit attached to her mouth, she slowly shook her head.

Even for her, today she was acting strangely. Although you could never give her the compliment that she always exhibited good social graces, this was the first time that Muoru felt she was clearly avoiding him.

‘Are you bothered by my being here?’ –, He was thinking about asking, but when he opened his mouth the only thing that came out was, “Well, let me have one word.”

Right. She considered him an annoyance. That he understood.

…But even though he understood it, to actually have it confirmed made his weak self feel hopeless.

Leaning his back against the trunk of the tree, the boy was at a loss.

And with the fruit still touching her lips, the girl sadly shook her head from side to side.

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(1) It seems like the question of who was the first person to eat Sea Slugs is a somewhat common mystery in Japan. In this case the author could be trying to say “some unknown person”