Hole 1: Grave Digger

Chapter 4-1

…For just a little bit, Muoru retraced his memories.

He was in the middle of that chamber room at the Rakasand detention camp. It was the day he received the guilty verdict, around the time he was waiting for the people behind him to reject his sentence.

As had been previously expressed, the great majority of guilty people were forced to engage in prison labor. But of course there were exceptions, for example in the case of the prisoner who had plotted to kill royalty and didn’t have a body suitable for labor.

That man didn’t have a right arm, a right shoulder, or a right ear. He was known as the Railway Bomber and was imprisoned in the cell in front of Muoru. But, Muoru didn’t know his name. Just like how Muoru went by the designation, prisoner 5722, that man had had his original name taken away and was now death row inmate 367.

Housed in the same hospital as his other victims, he miraculously survived, but he had lost the majority of the right side of his upper body. And as a result, it was easy to come to the conclusion that he had been the culprit.

Muoru remembered the man telling him with a smiling face, warped by his pain, that if he were to die in that state right there, it would have been pleasant.

Although the boy couldn’t tell whether the man had turned 40 or not, they did have the same robust body type. And even though he had suffered that serious injury, the man talkatively complained about the food and demanded alcohol in the same way as the other prisoners.

Due to the construction of the hallways, the detention camp carried sounds terribly well, and even that prisoner’s voice boomed down the halls. The surface of his spirit and mind appeared healthy…up until the moment his execution was announced.

Three days later…one of Muoru’s half-smiling jailers said that after he saw the state of the death row inmate, he thought the man seemed to have become an entirely different person.

The hair remaining on his left side had become white, and it looked like he had aged more than 20 years all at once. If someone tried talking with him they wouldn’t receive any sort of normal response. And he no longer seemed to feel any excitement from eating.

He just picked at his wounds, making the people in the surrounding chambers wince in disgust.

It so happened that prisoner 5722 was able to see this change happen right before his eyes.

After going through with the suicide bombing, he should have been prepared to die. And quite so, he should have assumed he would die if his plan had gone according to plan, but whether it was due to karma or just his fate, he narrowly escaped from death. But now, he was being cornered by the fear of his approaching death, moving with the swiftness of a clock’s second hand. Even so, on the morning of the third day, a strange thing happened. As Muoru woke up, Death Row prisoner 367 raised one hand and greeted him with a wide grin.

Although the whiteness of his hair, nor the wound he picked at hadn’t changed, his demeanor appeared the same as before he had received the announcement for his execution. And in his eyes there was no sign of madness…on the contrary it seemed like he had found some sense of peace.

He wondered if there had been some kind of psychological change within death row inmate 367’s mind during those three days….but there was no way of knowing that then, and there never would be in the future.

The corridors of the detention camp carried sound extremely well. Certainly they were purposefully made for a moment like this.

Muoru heard the sound of the gunshot that ended death row inmate 367’s life clearly, as if he had been straining his ears to their limits.

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The dawn brushed away the darkness, and the countless gravestones and trees cast long shadows on the ground. The morning dew glittered, as if decorating the nameless weeds with the skilled craftsmanship of jewelry.

Even though Muoru was aware of the strangeness within the graveyard, the sight of the morning had not changed even a little. The same could be said about his life. The old hag would kick him awake, and then he would cheat his stomach with some poor excuse for food, after which he would toil in the graveyard, digging holes.

However, up until yesterday and even today, there had barely been any changes to his work.

…the tip of his shovel struck something hard.

As he removed the dirt, the gigantic bile-colored eyes appeared, glaring at the boy who had disturbed its sleep.

That hallucination came unexpectedly and from the side it would have just looked like the boy with the muscular arms had suddenly froze in place. But for Muoru, each time he saw that hallucination, cold sweat dripped down his body. That fear was not a laughing matter.

Of course, his mind tried to figure out just what that thing was he saw yesterday. But, just as it had been at the detention camp, there was, as expected, no one here to explain the essential information he needed to know. At least if someone gave him a hint or something, maybe he wouldn’t keep seeing that illusion in the ground…. At this rate, soon the creature would probably turn up in his dreams.

And after smirking to himself dozens of times in a self-deprecating manner, suddenly…

“Yo, prisoner gravedigger,” an unknown voice called out to him.

Muoru, as if he were a fish that just had a rock thrown at it, turned around in a flash. Behind him, about ten or so steps away, a small-statured boy sat atop a gravestone. He didn’t recognize the child, and the fact that the person had caught him unaware made him uneasy….wait, boy?…no, girl? He couldn’t really tell. Their face and their body were still like a child, lacking any secondary sexual characteristics to distinguish their sex.

They had black bobbed hair coming down to their chins, and they were wearing a childish yellow cape. Slender legs stuck out from their checkered shorts, and despite not wearing socks, for some reason they were wearing army boots.

“Who are you?” Muoru asked without trying to hide his suspicion.

“Oh my, you say such unfriendly things. You probably met me and the others yesterday, right?” The person tilted their head in Muoru’s direction and lifted up the edge of their lips tightly in a friendly smile. “What am I saying? It’s understandable that you don’t recognize me in this state. Here…look at this.”

The person thrust their hands into their cape pocket…and pulled out a white mask. Of course, it was crazy to think he didn’t remember it.

Goosebumps ran down Muoru’s spine. The memory it reminded him of was like a nightmare. Despite there clearly being a slender child before his eyes, for the moment he couldn’t see anything other than the face of that gigantic beast.

That’s right, remember…. Although I was digging holes, didn’t I sense those seemingly difficult to walk-in shoes approach?

If the person saw Muoru’s face stiffen, they continued on without seeming to notice. “It’s good that you have completed the first stage of your work, but it’s indeed break time. If it’s alright with you, how about a drink?”

Strangely, as they spoke in a mature fashion, they stuffed the mask back into their pocket and took out a liquor bottle instead. The amber colored liquid was down to the label.

Without saying a word, Muoru returned to his digging. He didn’t think there was any reason for him to get involved with this person.

“Ah, are you ignoring me? Yeah, you’re ignoring me. And after all your trouble I was actually thinking about telling you about the thing you saw yesterday.”

As he considered whether or not to let their offer slide, the child-like person lifted up their chin as if offended and sat cross-legged atop one of the gravestones. They had the liquor bottle in their mouth, and then removed their hand, supporting the bottle with only their lips and teeth as they loudly chugged the liquid.

And from time to time those eyes stole glances his way.

Muoru sighed in disappointment. This brat wanted to talk and there was nothing he could do about that. And even now, whether or not he wanted to know more about those creatures didn’t mean he wanted to be asked about them. However…

“If you tell me that information, will something good happen to you, like you’ll get a reward or something?”

His question was to see just how serious this person was about telling the truth about the situation. And though there was a lot he didn’t know about the monsters, this person was extremely suspicious. For Muoru, no matter how many monsters there were in the world, he wasn’t able to stomach someone placing their butt on a gravestone.

They removed the liquor bottle from their mouth and with a slightly red face said in a shocked voice:

“….Well, you’re a deeply skeptical mole huh? Do you eat fried worms or something?”

Muoru answered flatly, “Salty soup is enough for me.”

Hearing his response, the person on the gravestone leaked out a grand sigh, but soon they regained their composure with a smile.

“Yup, good things will happen,” they said.

“So there was something.”

“Right, but as for why…” They jumped up, standing on the gravestone with their feet and hands spread wide. “Well, for now let’s just say I’m overly stubborn like you; I just love planting half-truths in people’s minds.”

Then, as if they were somehow impressed by what they’d said, the child-like person silently looked down at him from the tombstone. Yet the person’s height wasn’t even half as tall as Muoru. So even with the extra height of the tombstone, they were only barely able to look down at him, now only a bit taller than Muoru.

Unconsciously, a laugh slipped out of Muoru’s mouth, but he tried to mask it as a yawn.

Well, that’s probably good enough to get them to talk.

Of course, whether or not he believed what they said was a different story.

“Okay, so are we going to talk about what happened or not…ah, before that…” Muoru jabbed his shovel into the ground, using it as a cane to take the pressure off his still injured right leg. Then he asked, “What’s your name?”

The person pulled back the bangs of their jet-black bobbed haircut, showing Muoru their face. “I’m Crow,” they said, “Look at my hair, isn’t it just like the color of a crow’s wings?”[1]

Muoru rolled his eyes and smiled bitterly. He didn’t feel the need to retort. No matter how you thought about it, “Crow” was a false name.

Once again sitting on the gravestone, the self-proclaimed “Crow” asked back, “And who are you?”

For a moment the boy was unsure what to say. Frankly he had no interest in honestly giving his real name. Then suddenly the name Crow had called him earlier popped into his head.

“You can call me Mole,” Muoru answered.



“Good, so the Crow and the Mole then.” Crow giggled delightfully. “Hey Mole-kun[2]. I like you. So, we should be friends. How about it?”

“I refuse,” Muoru immediately replied.

“Really, that’s too bad,” Crow bellowed into the air without a trace of disappointment in their voice. Then, without warning Crow cryptically said, “30,270,000. Do you know what number this is?”

“…ummm.”

Muoru, who had only thought that he would be made to listen to the true nature of the monsters was caught off guard, and so he thought about it a little. But in the end he didn’t know.

“I wonder if it’s the contents of my wallet,” he said, trying to say something witty. But, he didn’t even own a wallet, let alone any money to put into it.

Crow cheerfully announced the correct answer. “It’s this country’s current population, according to the population statistics white paper from the Filbard General Affairs Bureau. Didn’t you know that?”

There was no way he could know that. Or perhaps he should say that apart from the number of allies or enemy soldiers, the population of the country never crossed his mind. As such, he couldn’t quite say whether it was large or even small. And to hear those words coming from the mouth of someone who looked like a child made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

“So the population from about 100 years ago was about 2,600,000. Well, due to how long ago that time was it’s difficult to know the exact number. Hey, don’t you think this is a bit incredible? In just 100 years the population increased by more than ten times. Why do you think that explosive growth occurred?”

Muoru thought about the question a little bit longer than the previous one. Although there was no evidence to support Crow’s number, for the time being he assumed it was correct. If indeed the population had increased more than ten times, then there would probably be a significant factor involved. For ants, provided there was one queen ant, they could create a colony, but it was not so simple for humans.

He was having trouble conceptualizing the seemingly giant number in Crow’s story, so he tried shrinking it to a scale that he could imagine. First he pictured a village in his mind with 100 people. What kind of factor would be sufficient to increase that population to 1000 in 100 years?

Muoru answered, “Did the amount of food distributed increase?”

For humans, no matter what they did, their first priority was always food. Like a car that can’t run without gasoline, if a human was not properly nourished they would not move. So, if the amount of people increased by a lot, then probably a lot of food was necessary. No, wasn’t it not the amount of food available, but rather the ability to harvest said food that determined the size of a population?

Crow gave him a big nod in response to his previous answer.

“Yup, not bad. ten points.” Then Crow laughed. “Of course a perfect score is 100.”

“It wasn’t just not bad.”

“That’s one point of view. Certainly due to the improvement of the seeds and manure, the number of seeds that could produce viable wheat increased. But at the same time, if the population of farmers increased, so too would the amount of farmland. If that’s the case then the general population couldn’t have increased tenfold. There are also various other factors involved. That’s why only ten points.”

“Did you say various?” Muoru pressed. It completely had no connection with the matter of the monster, but Crow’s skillful way of talking intrigued him. Plus, he felt it had been an awfully long time since he’d chatted with someone in a lighthearted manner like this.

However, Crow’s next words were unlike anything he had heard from all the different types of people he’d met in his life.

“Just like you said, due to the improvements in the farming industry the harvests increased. After that things like gas lights and electricity were put into practical use and there was a sharp increase in the human lifespan.

Steam engines were invented. So steam trains and boats were made, and from those advances the transportation network was established and movement became faster. Thanks to these things, the number of talented people, resources, and the mobility of information remarkably increased, and the death caused by famine decreased…”

Muoru was completely silent, prompting Crow to ask, “Are you following me?”

As if surrendering, Muoru shook his head.

“Well…if I minutely give you examples from everywhere then there won’t be any end to this conversation. But, if I had to lump all of those reasons together into one overarching factor, I’d have to say it’s the development of civilization.”

“Civilization huh…” the boy suspiciously repeated back that vague word.

“The development of civilization,” Crow continued. “In other words you could also say the increase in the quality of life…Look, you probably call refrigerators conveniences of civilization, right? As civilization expanded, through their greed they were able to generate a surplus of time and space for living. And as that happened, of course the humans had sex.”

At that point Crow stopped talking, maybe in order to see if their words had triggered a reaction in Muoru’s face. He however looked away and said nothing. Then Crow, as if fully satisfied, gave a smug smile.

“Well, needless to say, the amount of children increased. And thanks to advances in medicine, things like miscarriages and stillbirths remarkably decreased. Probably these events were due to people not washing their hands before surgeries, to say nothing of the fact that people didn’t receive anesthesia or even blood transfusions. It was because of these reasons that childbirth was a significant risk to women’s lives. Of course, over time things like the existence of bacteria beneath a microscope were discovered, and the research into immunizations advanced, leading to the average lifespan being extended about 20 years.”

While Muoru listened to Crow, the wound beneath the bandage on his right leg ached.

Naturally he had cleaned the wound last night. But if Meria hadn’t brought him the box of medical supplies, his wound would have started to fester. And at the worst he may have died from tetanus. Even though he wasn’t the best student at school, this was common knowledge even for a common mole like himself.

But more than 100 years ago there weren’t things like microscopes, and even physicians did not know of the existence of bacteria.

In that era, much more than now, no matter what kind of injury or sickness a person suffered, they could easily have died. The fact that this no longer happens is certainly what they call the advancement of civilization.

Yet after Crow’s fluent explanation of the various holes in his idea, while also summarizing what had happened in the previous 100 years or so, Muoru got the feeling that the miraculous tenfold growth of the population was improbable.

Reading the boy’s emotions by the color in his face, Crow continued their speech.

“Well…the real issue is this: Human history has continued uninterrupted for many thousands of years. However, why is it that after this era came to pass, suddenly civilization began to advance? To say it another way, why was civilization unable to develop before the so called, “Dark Ages”?

…It’s simple. It’s because there was some kind of obstacle preventing civilization from doing so.” Crow didn’t wait for the Mole’s response and continued, “The culprit is at your feet.”

Unconsciously the boy lowered his gaze and looked at his worn out shoes caked with mud and black insects crawling all over them.

“For your information, I’m not talking about those pill bugs[3],” Crow said in a teasing voice.

With a sour look, Muoru kicked up some dirt and responded, “It’s like they’re ants from a different world or something.”

…Honestly speaking, he was grateful Crow had inserted a joke into their conversation.

No matter how many burials took place, he could not completely wrap his mind around the reality that seemed to destroy all the common knowledge he had possessed up till this point.

Then Crow’s originally happy demeanor vanished.

“Devils. Undying monsters. Night horrors. Bizarre hosts. The Dark.” While bending a finger Crow stated each name with a face that looked like they were going to vomit.

“They are called various names, but each correctly identifies the same thing: mankind’s worst enemy. 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 the will come back to life…

Ah, I can see from your face that you don’t believe me. Maybe because it’s really dreadful to think about. Even if these monsters’ limbs were torn off and flung away, they would scurry back across the ground and stick back together. Such a spectacle would cause quite a bit of trauma, but I’m sure you’ll see it at least once.”

Muoru tilted his head and replied, “Well, I’ve already been shocked to the point where I can’t bear to dream…” Maybe it wasn’t worth worrying about, but something Crow said had curiously bothered him. Throwing in another topic he asked, “So as for limbs, you’re saying that the monster’s entire body is not just a face?”

“Yeah, they have an infinite number of shapes. But what they all have in common is killing humans. And they also hate the sun. Thankfully those creatures are completely unable to move beneath the sun. As for the rest…right…basically they are stronger the bigger they are. And going by that rule, the monster from yesterday was pretty formidable.”

“…Wha…really?”

“Well, things like names and appearances are not important. But what you have to remember is that for humans these are the worst enemy…In other words they can be called mankind’s ‘natural enemy’. These things kill humans, they don’t eat them. They kill them. Do you understand the difference?”

Muoru slowly nodded his head in shame. Even if he didn’t count the false accusation against him, when it came to killing, his soldier persona was second to none.

As soon as Muoru noticed Crow pondering what to say next, Crow suddenly started to tell an unpleasant story.

“For example, although it would be difficult, if you were able to imprison a lion into a pen with a large food supply, such as a mole, when the lion got hungry, no matter how hard it tried to resist, after about three minutes the mole would probably be killed. And the lion would have its meal. If that didn’t happen, the lion would probably die of starvation.

However, what if the lion was full? And within the same pen they tried putting in a mole and a horse’s carcass? Surely in that situation the mole wouldn’t be killed anytime soon.”

“Umm, what are you trying to say?”

“The only reason carnivores undertake such a troublesome task like hunting is because they have to do it in order to survive.

It is said that the only reason a carnivore would go through with such a troublesome task as hunting is because they must do it in order to survive. So by that logic, if a pet cat receives food from its master, isn’t it unlikely for it to purposefully sneak into the house next door and hunt mice?”

“Humans…it probably kills humans,” the boy hanging his head said bluntly.

“Right, but for the most part it’s not like they have a specific objective.” Somewhere within Crow’s words was a bit of sympathy.

“Certainly there is a large amount of people in our world who have cruel hearts, and as a result many tragic events occur. However, there are probably only a few people who kill just because they want to, right?

“Ah, isn’t that madness? Those people are not humans, they’re monsters.”

“That’s exactly right. Which is precisely why the things beneath your feet are also inhumane monsters.”

Muoru responded with silence.

“At any rate due to these bastards, for the previous thousand years humans were unable to consistently advance their civilization. Even if someone by chance invented something, either they had no means to talk about it, or they were killed before they could share their discovery. First of all, despite doing everything they could to survive, the common citizens were particularly limited when it came to their knowledge of these beings. Everyone was uneasy and didn’t know when these demons would come out in the middle of the night to kill them all.

Yet as those completely dark days passed by, somehow through a lot of effort the people were able to gather and store information for the future.”

Muoru had an objection to that last part but he remained silent. It seemed like Crow’s long story was about to come to an end.

“Changes in the power relations between humans and these demons started to occur, but that was 300 years ago. Then humans accidentally stumbled into possession of a way to defeat the immortal demons. And because of that, for the past 200 years the world has flourished in some way or the other. In fact, right now we are approaching an era of prosperity we have never experienced before.”

Muoru’s general feeling about Crow’s story was a bit vague, or perhaps he should say Crow’s words just took a lot of time to digest.

Probably that’s to be expected. For a prisoner who was no more than a young boy born to a poor mason, humans, civilization, devils, natural enemies and so forth were all concepts beyond his comprehension. Unfortunately his facial expressions revealed that fact. But before Crow could notice his expression, he said, “To sum up…” Muoru stroked his beard. “People like you successfully defeated that monster. Is that what you’re trying to say?”

Crow smiled in satisfaction.

“You understand well. Hmm, it seems like you actually have some brains, not just muscle.”

“Get off my back. Oh and by the way, is it true that birds forget to breathe after three strides?”[4]

“Hey! That’s cruel. Besides you’re mistaken.”

As he watched Crow take offense to his words, he could see nothing but the good points of a youngster. But there was probably no reason to think the young folk from the town would come all the way to a place like this and have a conversation like they just had. Plus there was that mask. What meaning did it have?

However, before Muoru could ask about the towns nearby, Crow said, “See you next time,” as if having finished everything they wanted to talk about.

Like a bird taking off, Crow jumped off the tombstone and like a child they waved, then ran off. And just like that they disappeared, like they had dissolved into the air.

The remaining boy sighed and rested his chin on the handle of the shovel he had spiked into the ground. While he stared at the evening light of the setting sun, he pondered Crow’s words.

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…Three days after it was announced that he would die by shooting, Muoru wondered if there had been some kind of psychological change in Death row inmate 367’s mind. But, now it was too late and there was no way to find out whether that was true or not.

But Muoru did learn one thing from looking at him from nearby.

No matter how beyond one’s capabilities a task seemed, Humans will be able to prepare their hearts provided they have sufficient time. At the very least that man was able to do so.

In the eyes of the people only fixated on his end, maybe it would appear to be nothing but meaningless complacency.

In either case, there are probably people who think that if a person is just going to die, that readiness would make no considerable difference.

However, did the prisoner walk by his own power to the execution area with his chest stuck out proudly and his head held high, like his usual demeanor? Or was he dragged down the hallway little by little, dripping urine as he wailed and cried….that range of possibilities proves that readiness could indeed make a difference.

But it goes without saying that for Muoru, Death row inmate 367’s situation was much more preferable. Of course, those monsters were not something that moles like Muoru tended to be able to handle. But more than that, his unease stemmed from the fact that there was nothing that could kill those things.

And the grave was not an inescapable cage.

That’s right…

What should I do?

That was the only thing that was important.

Even though he knew about the monster’s existence, like the sight of a graveyard that never changed, just knowing things like the monster’s name and its history would probably not change reality.

What to do?

What should I do?

What do I want to do?

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[1] This character’s name is くらす、but it’s supposed to be strange to be called Kurasu or Crow. If I translate as Kurasu, the similarity would be lost and it would just look like a Japanese name.

[2] Kun is casual honorific usually used with boys.

[3] Also known as roly-polies in the US

[4]鳥が三歩で息を忘れるのは本当か？