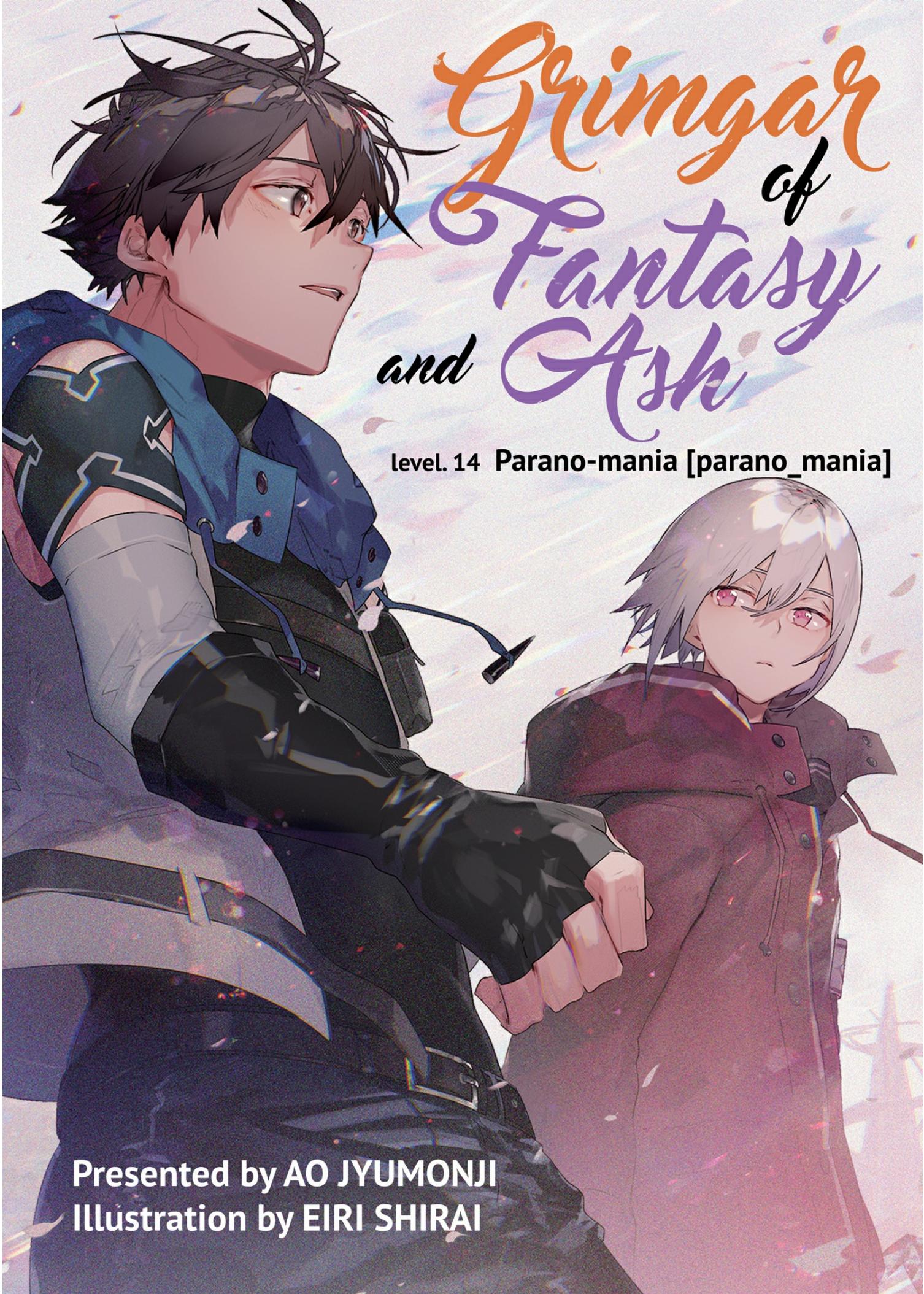




# Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

level. 14 Parano-mania [parano\_mania]

Presented by AO JYUMONJI  
Illustration by EIRI SHIRAI



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# Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

Written by: Ao Jyumonji | Illustrations by: Eiri Shirai | level.14 - Parano-mania [parano\_mania]



*“I want you  
to love me.”*

*“I was crying.  
Crying.”*

*“Tears flowing,  
overflowing,  
overflowing.”*



*The woman  
with Merry's  
face looked  
her way and  
smiled.*

**“Hey,  
Setora...”**

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# 1. Distant [faraway]



Everywhere was suffocatingly red.

It was red, but not *red* red. It was a yellowish red, so vermilion.

The leaves, the trunks, and the branches of the trees in this forest, though there was some variance in strength, were all the same color. To say a bit more, the ground onto which the leaves had fallen was red, too.

No, not red, vermilion. It kind of made his eyes hurt.

Up ahead, Alice C turned back, the sinister shovel thrust into the ground.  
“This is the Scarlet Forest.”

It was dirty, or rather stained, but Haruhiro wondered if maybe Alice’s raincoat had been red at one point.

“Scarlet...” Haruhiro murmured to himself. The word sounded familiar. If he recalled, Alice had offhandedly mentioned they were heading to some place with a name like that once. “‘Scarlet’ is the name of a color, right?”

“What else did you think it was?”

“No, nothing really...”

He hadn’t heard Alice properly to begin with, and there would have been no point in going, “Scar... what? Sorry, what’d you say?” He’d just have been ignored. And if he argued back now, saying there hadn’t really been any reason for him to think it was that color, that would get ignored, too.

“First you write the beast radical with the character for star beside it,” Alice explained very quickly, using the tip of the shovel to write 獅 on the ground. “You have two of those next to each other. Then this character for red,” Alice continued, writing another 獅 beside the first, and then 緋.

“Ohhh!”

Alice’s face was mostly hidden by the raincoat’s hood and the mask. Surprisingly, though, the eyes said as much as the mouth. Those upturned eyes weren’t simply exasperated; Alice was almost certainly looking down on Haruhiro.

“The Scarlet Forest, huh,” Haruhiro said. “Okay. The Scarlet Forest...”

He looked down, nodded to himself, cleared his throat, and scratched his head, but Haruhiro wasn’t feeling out of it.

Or so he thought. Probably.

“Huh?” Haruhiro looked around the area. It was weird. *Where’s...?*

He couldn’t see Alice anywhere. Why?

“Huh? Whoa, um, Alice?”

There was no response, so he perked his ears up. There was a rustling of grass, and a faint crunching of leaves underfoot. Or at least he thought he heard that. It might have just been his imagination.

No way. Had he been left behind?

He started to run, and nearly ran into something red.

“Wah!”

When he took another look, it was the leaves of a shrub. Everything here was red—no, scarlet—so it was hard to tell it all apart, but there was undergrowth all over the place in this forest.

The leaves of the shrubs and young trees were as hard as metal, thin, and sharp as razors. The branches all had thorns, making the place a natural death trap. With all this potential for getting cut or stabbed, it was beyond dangerous.

He brushed the whip-like branches and the razor-like leaves aside with his cloak, pushing forward as he rushed onward. He might have wondered how long he’d been going, but he had no watch, and time was unreliable here, so it didn’t mean much, anyway.

Whatever the case, he finally saw the back of a person.

“Alice!” he shouted.

“You’re so noisy.” Despite sounding irritated, Alice did stop for him, so he was able to catch up somehow. If not for that, he might have lost sight of Alice again.

“You don’t have to go so far ahead,” Haruhiro complained. “You’d be in trouble without me too, wouldn’t you?”

“So, what, you want me to be nice?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Alice snorted and walked off.

It wouldn’t have killed Alice to say, *Let’s go*, at least. Alice was always acting a little faster than Haruhiro anticipated.

*Maybe we’re a bad match*, he thought. At the very least, they didn’t feel like a good match.

He decided to keep quiet and focus on following behind Alice for a while. Even just keeping up was pretty difficult. Alice was slender and short, and though they weren’t exactly speed walking, Alice was moving forward strangely quickly.

What was with the way Alice walked? It wasn’t just a matter of being light on the feet. The steps made it seem like Alice was walking on water, or floating on air, to the point it made Haruhiro question whether Alice had any weight at all.

Naturally, Alice had weight. Alice wasn’t a ghost, so that had to be the case.

“Once we get through to the other side of this Scarlet Forest, there’s the king’s castle, right?” Haruhiro asked. “No... not the other side, right? Umm, it was in the middle of this forest, wasn’t it?”

Alice didn’t answer. Not that he minded. Whatever. He was used to it now. He never expected a proper conversation to begin with. No matter what he said, Alice responded maybe half of the time, at best.

While he was thinking that, Alice mumbled, “Assuming we can overcome this, yeah.”

There was a sudden shadow, and a chill ran down Haruhiro's back.

When he looked up, something massive was looking down at him.

Something.

*No, wait, is it... someone, maybe?*

It was awfully big to be human, so a giant? Maybe?

It was taller than the trees of the Scarlet Forest, looking down on them sinisterly from above. It had really good complexion, and its puffy lips were pink. No eyebrows. No eyelashes. No hair on its head, or at all for that matter.

If you set aside the size of it, it had a puffy face like a newborn baby. From where Haruhiro stood, he could only see up to its shoulders, but it was probably buck naked.

“Eehee... Aahaa...” The world shook a little. “Uhohoho... Eheheh...”

The volume was incredible. Was it that thing's... voice?

To be perfectly frank, it was damn scary.

“What is that?” Haruhiro gulped.

“A dream monster, duh.” Alice already had the shovel at the ready. It was no ordinary shovel. Though Alice's shovel wasn't specially made, it had gained special powers after certain occurrences. It was blackened and dented all over, so it looked like nothing if not bad news. That fact of the matter was that shovel was pretty nuts, but they were up against a giant baby.

“Isn't it kinda big...?” Haruhiro protested.

“Well, this *is* the Scarlet Forest. There are plenty more where that one came from.”

“You're joking... right?”

“Why would I feel the need to tell you jokes? Are you stupid?”

“Ooheee... Ohohhh... Ahyahhh... Ehahahahhh...” The baby howled once more.

*No, it's not a baby*, Haruhiro corrected himself. *The dream monster. Sorry.*

No, this was no time for apologizing inside his head.

In the next instant, the wind blew. *Bwoosh!* Scarlet leaves scattered.

“Whoa!” Haruhiro huddled and dug in his heels. If he hadn’t, the wind was strong enough that he felt like he might have been blown away.

“It’s coming,” Alice said, not really shouting.

Haruhiro wanted to ask, *What is?* but with a dream monster that big in front of them, what else was it going to be? It had to be the giant baby dream monster. The problem was, how would it come at them?

“It jumped!” Haruhiro shouted.

Indeed. It jumped. The baby, the giant dream monster baby, jumped. Well, didn’t that just beat all. It was getting some impressive air time, too. He could see the bottoms of its giant demon monster baby feet.

It was more of a running long jump than a vertical jump, and it had leapt over the tops of the Scarlet Forest’s trees. Then it came down. Praise be to gravity. No, he didn’t want to praise it at all. At this rate, Haruhiro was almost certainly going to get stepped on. If that thing stomped him, he’d go splat like a little bug.

“Haruhiro!” Alice shouted at him.

“Coming!” Haruhiro replied as he rushed to Alice’s side.

He went just close enough that he wasn’t touching her, but, “More!” Alice shouted.

If Haruhiro hesitated, Alice might hit him with that shovel, so Haruhiro worked up his courage and hugged Alice tight.

Suddenly, Alice’s shovel burst.

No, it didn’t burst. The black outer layer, the skin-like stuff split, forming ten or more writhing, slithering strands, stretching up and downwards from its holder. It was almost like they were alive. It wasn’t often you saw a shovel like this.

Incidentally, the main body—was that what it was? Anyway, the inside revealed when the skin peeled was like a red meat stick.

Did calling it a meat stick sound indecent? Maybe it was best to stop at referring to it as a stick of meat. Maybe it didn't make a difference.

Regardless, the way the shovel looked with its skin peeled defied the imagination. It wasn't normal for a shovel to have a skin that could peel away to begin with.

The black strands of flesh formed a basket as he watched, wrapping around Alice and Haruhiro. There were gaps in between the black strands of skin. Those gaps were gradually filled by other strands of skin.

Obviously, the giant dream monster didn't stop falling as it did that. The giant dream monster baby's foot—oh crap, the bottom of its foot was getting close. Not good.

It was coming right at them.

This was bad.

Seriously bad.

Haruhiro was about ready to scream.

He tried to hold it in, but he let out a little yelp despite himself. "Eep!"

The moment when the gaps filled in completely, and the black strips formed more of a cocoon than a basket, maybe a little before that, or a little after, the foot finally came down on them.

With how big the thing was, the giant dream monster baby had to weigh more than just a few hundred kilos or a few tons. It wouldn't surprise him if it weighed tens of tons, or hundreds.

Surprisingly, the cocoon of black straps cushioned the weight of it, and it somehow managed to protect Alice and Haruhiro inside. However, the cocoon sank into the ground, so the impact must have been incredible. Haruhiro had no idea how the two of them were all right.



If someone told him, *Actually, you got smashed flat as a pancake*, he'd have had an easier time believing it. However, there was nothing wrong with his body, so he clearly hadn't been crushed.

In that case, what on Earth had happened? What was going on right now?

Haruhiro was still clinging to Alice. There was no question about that. No light shone into the confines of the cocoon, but inside the shovel—no, inside the meat stick—no, the stick of meat—there was a faint pulsing glow. Thanks to that, it wasn't pitch black.

Alice's face was right in front of his.

It was like Haruhiro was hugging Alice from behind. No, it wasn't *like* that—he actually was hugging Alice from behind, so it couldn't be helped that they had ended up so close. On top of that, Alice's face was turned towards him, so if they hadn't been wearing masks, they were so close they might have had no choice but to end up kissing.

Normally, he would have moved away, but he couldn't do that now. The cocoon was tight, after all. With the giant dream monster baby having stepped on it, the cocoon was probably embedded in the ground, and indented as a result, which made it so tight inside that neither Haruhiro nor Alice could move.

This was unbearable.

Alice blinked. "...What?"

"Nah... I was just wondering what happened out—"

Before Haruhiro could finish, there was another impact.

What was this? What the hell was this?

He didn't know, he couldn't possibly have known, but if he had to take an educated guess, this would be it. They were being stepped on. Repeatedly, by the giant dream monster baby.

*Bam, bam, bam!* It was stomping them.

"This is tight!" Alice called, so it had to be pretty bad. Actually, he was amazed Alice could speak.

*You'll bite your tongue, he thought. Be careful.*

Naturally, he couldn't actually make the warning. If he opened his mouth now, he was sure he'd bite his own tongue. He might bite all the way through.

There was a more than remote chance the cocoon would be smashed with them inside before then, so maybe he didn't need to worry about his tongue? Maybe he should just bite through it anyway? Bad idea?

"Oh...?"

What now? This was different from before. The situation had clearly changed.

Up, huh? Up? Yeah, up. The cocoon was moving upwards.

Were they being lifted, maybe? The giant dream monster baby had picked the cocoon up? If so, what did it plan to do with it next?

"Haruhiro," Alice said.

"Yeah?"

"It's probably going to spin."

What did that mean, spin?

Before he could ask, it started spinning. What was spinning, you ask? This world? Parano the other world? No, the cocoon. The cocoon was going round and round.

Haruhiro shut his eyes tight. If he did this, it felt just a little more bearable. If he opened his eyes, it was nauseating. Scary, too.

He shut his mouth tight, gritted his teeth, and held on to Alice tight because he had no other choice.

That was right. There was nothing Haruhiro could do.

It was common in Parano, common sense so to speak, that people could use magic here.

When it came to magic, there were three types: Philia, Narci, and Doppel. Alice's was Philia.

The source of strength for Philia was an attachment, a thing that supported

one's way of life, something a person couldn't do without. This was called a fetish.

It went without saying that Alice's fetish was the shovel. The shovel was the source of Alice's magic, and magic itself.

To simplify things, with Philia a fetish, with Narci oneself, and with Doppel another person, you gave a person power and became their magic.

Incidentally, Haruhiro could use magic, too. However, Haruhiro's magic somehow wasn't Filia, Narci, or Doppel.

Weird, huh? Weren't there only three types of magic? Normally, yes. But there was an exception to everything.

The exception in Parano's magic was Resonance.

Sadly, this magic did nothing for the person who had it. Each magic, regardless of type, strengthened something, and Haruhiro felt it was a faster and more reliable way than working out and improving skills through experience. But no matter how hard he worked to improve his magic, Haruhiro would not benefit in any way.

Resonance enhanced or expanded the magic of another. That was apparently the type of magic it was.

That was incredible—or was it?

According to Alice, it was an incredibly unusual and valuable magic or something like that. But as far as Haruhiro himself was concerned, he couldn't be happy about it without reservations. Actually, he wasn't happy in the least. He could strengthen his magic as much as he wanted, but it wouldn't make him any stronger at all. Wasn't that unfair? It was pretty awful, right? Like, seriously, screw that. If flipping out over it would have solved anything, he would have, but there was nothing to be done about it, so he'd just have to shut up and accept it.

Yeah. If he was getting spun, he'd just have to spin. He could look at it as a form of training, and accept his spinning self.

But hold on. They weren't just spinning, were they? They were flying, too,

right? He could feel as it whooped round and round that they were whooshing through the air, too. Had they been thrown, maybe? The giant dream monster baby had picked them up and thrown them? That was it, huh?

So that was what it had come to. It'd gotten pissed when it couldn't stomp them flat, so it was throwing them. For all its babyish appearance, it had some pretty strong shoulders. If they'd been thrown like Haruhiro was thinking, they were really flying. This was some serious air time.

How far was this thing going to fly...?

## 2. False Armor [solitude]



Once upon a time, there was a poor little girl.

The girl was all alone.

That was because the girl was born very ugly, and everyone told her, *You're ugly, you're fat, you're gross, go away.*

The girl wasn't alone because she liked it. Being called names hurt her, so she had no choice but to be alone.

When the girl was crying in the corner of her room, her stepmother got worried.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Through her sobs, the girl answered. "Everyone, they bully me."

"You haven't done anything wrong, so you don't need to worry about people who bully you like that."

"But everyone bullies me!"

"If you cry, you're only making the bullies happy. Act like you're all right."

"But I'm not all right at all!" the girl cried.

"Have confidence. You're not bad. They're the bad ones. You have to be strong. It's silly, letting those stupid people beat you. Besides..." The girl's stepmother rounded on her. "You say everyone bullies you, but who? What do they say? What do they do? Tell your stepmother. Come on, what are their names? What did those people say? I want details."

Though the girl was confused, she told her stepmother who said what, who did what, what had been done to her, and what she had gone through.

When she did, her stepmother had something to say about every little thing.

“You’re not fat, so tell them you’re not a fatty.”

And...

“The reason they leave you out is because they’re too cowardly to try anything else. If they cause you any real harm, tell your stepmother. I’ll sue.”

And...

“Look in the mirror. Is your face ugly? It’s not, now is it? But no one looks good when they’re always looking down. Stand tall, and face them straight on.”

She tried to cheer the girl up.

The stepmother was probably right, and the girl was wrong. Her stepmother was always right. And she was doing her best to look after the girl, even though she hadn’t gone through the pain of giving birth to her. The girl understood that.

If she could do as her stepmother said, how wonderful that would be. But even though the girl was not very fat, she was not thin, either. Being left out didn’t hurt like being punched or kicked, and wasn’t as much trouble as having her things stolen and broken, but it made her feel lonely.

The girl’s face might not have been sickening to look at. Still, she obviously lacked the beauty of her stepmother. Her face was full of flaws, and the girl worried whether it was okay to let other people see it. Unlike her stepmother, her eyes were weird, and her nose was unshapely. Compared to her stepmother, she felt her lips were awfully small, too. Unlike her stepmother’s well-defined cheeks, the girl’s were puffy, and her round, little chin was hard on the eyes. She’d tried growing out her hair to hide the bad parts, but there was no way to hide it all, so she ended up looking down all the time.

Besides, even if she told her stepmother how things were, and why, all with proper reasons, she wouldn’t understand.

“You’re worrying too much,” her stepmother said.

Or...

“Nothing is perfect. We’re beautiful because we’re imperfect, and the little

flaws give us personality.”

Or...

“Just try doing as your stepmother says, just once.”

Those were the sorts of response she always got. No doubt, her stepmother was right.

Her stepmother was thinking about what was best for the girl, and she knew spoiling her would do no good, so she sometimes told her the harsh truths she must not have wanted to. Doing what a stepmother like that said, that would be for the best. The girl understood that, too.

But the girl was not like her stepmother. She could never say this to her stepmother, and she wouldn’t, but they weren’t truly mother and daughter, so they weren’t much alike to begin with. She could never be like her.

There were things people could and couldn’t do, and just because her stepmother could do a thing, that didn’t mean the girl could, too. Was that not what it meant to have a personality?

Once upon a time, there was a little girl, and she was all alone.

That said, the girl was not okay with being alone. She hated it, so the girl did her best.

She thoroughly read people’s expressions. What were the people around her feeling, and what did they think? It was important to be able to pick up on that. No matter what, she didn’t want to be hated, so she had to be very, very careful. In all things, she would be reserved, and not stand out.

If she puffed up her chest, walking straight forward with her head high, they might think, *Who does that ugly fatty think she is?* and she might trip over something. Then, when she was feeling that, they’d laugh at her. That might make her cry, and if she cried, they were almost sure to think she was annoying. Nothing good would come of it.

“You always have to take responsibility for yourself. In the end, it’s all on you.”

Her stepmother was always saying that.

"You can try to change people, but it won't work. If you can't change people, you have to change yourself. If you're going to change, work hard to make sure it's always for the better."

Like always, her stepmother was right. The girl had no power, and no right, to change anyone. That was why she had to change herself. It was just like she said.

She wanted to be like her stepmother. Beautiful, stylish, reliable, devoted, considerate, intelligent, skillful, but always working hard at whatever she did, never saying a wrong thing, always right, admired by everyone... that was the wonderful sort of person the girl wished she could be.

If it were possible.

Ahh, but in the end, it was a wish that could never come true.

Tears.

Tears.

Tears.

Tears. Tears.

Tears. Tears.

Sparkling tears.

The tears of a girl with nothing good about her.

Sparkle, sparkle.

The tears were shed by a filthy, ugly girl, yet how strange. They were so very beautiful.

Sparkle, sparkle. The girl's tears flowed without end. Sparkle.

As she shed tears, the girl walked. Sparkle, sparkle.

Sparkling tears flowed down the ugly girl's body, glimmering and covering it.

They wrapped around the grotesque girl, sparkling, unlike her filthy lies.

Yes. The girl told lies. Many, many lies.

*I don't want to be this pathetic me. I want to be someone else.*

With that wish, the girl lied, wanting to become a sparkling version of herself.

Cheerfully, cheerfully, she greeted people. People looked at her with eyes that said, *What's with that girl?*

When people laughed like they were enjoying themselves, the girl laughed, too. Her voice sounded ridiculous, like the laughing of a jester.

When they all cast stones at someone, the girl would pick up a pebble and throw it, too. It was just a pebble. It was fine. She wouldn't hit someone anyway, and even if she did, it wouldn't hurt.

If there was a sparkling girl, arrogant, like a young noble lady, she would look on from a distance with admiration. When she approached, little by little, and the young lady spoke to her, she would be beside herself with glee.

When someone spoke to her, the girl listened and said, "Mm-hm. Mm-hm."

Even if she thought, *How lame*, or, *You're scum*, or, *Screw you*, in her head, it never showed on her face.

Because she wanted to sparkle, she cut her long, long hair short.

"Hey, that's nice. You look good like that," her stepmother said, but the girl did not miss the pity that showed on her face for a moment.

"Thanks," the girl said, but her heart felt like it might burst. *I'm sorry. For not being your real daughter, and for being so ugly. I'm sorry. You're so beautiful, and so right. You always sparkle, and it corners me.*

*I hate you.*

The girl, of course, would never say that aloud. She would smile, saying, "Really? I'm glad," and put on a show of how happy she was.

*The poor thing, she tries so hard*, her stepmother was probably thinking.

Oh, I was a poor thing. Tears. Tears. Sparkling tears.

No one knew my feelings, always hidden by tears. Tears, sparkle.

With tears flowing, I walked. Glimmering and sparkling. Sparkling and glimmering.

Flowing and flowing, my tears pooled. Sparkling everywhere. Sparkling,

sparkling, making me beautiful.

Tears, sparkle, tears.

I only needed things that sparkled. I didn't want to see anything else.

Everyone... everyone could turn to sparkles.

*Plop!* Something struck my cheek.

*Oh, my, is it raining?* I looked up.

Lavender-colored, and spreading out like a lattice, were those branches? They were almost like an umbrella.

But rain was dripping from those branches.

Lime yellow drops going plip, plip, plip. That was no rain. It was dirty, like excrement. Oh, how dirty. It was unclean.

*There!* I spread my arms wide. The accumulated tears, those sparkling tears, they flew away, spreading sparkles everywhere. Sparkle, tears, glimmer, tears. The swirling tears made the excrement pretty. They clung to the lavender-colored branches, sparkling, sparkling, making them screech, bend, and then shrink away to nothing.

Only the tears remained. Falling, falling, sparkling, glimmering tears.

The lavender-colored branches vanished, and the polka dot sky spread out above. I wanted to make that sky beautiful, too. But my tears couldn't reach that sky.

Tears. Tears. Tears.

Shedding tears, I walked.

There were large, lavender-colored trees, with branches of the same color spreading out. So, so many of them. Unsightly. Unsightly. My chest, it was full of unease.

I blew hard. Tears, tears, fly away. Sparkling tears, fly away. Sparkle, screech, bend, sparkle, glimmer, shrink.

Behind the trees that grew smaller and smaller, until they disappeared, someone was crouched down, hiding. There was nowhere left to hide now.

“Damn, she found me!” that person shouted. It was an awfully loud voice.

In my chest, there was unease. Suffering, suffering. Why do you bully me? How come? What for?

“Eeeeeahhhhhiiiiiahhhhhheeeeeeahhhhhh!” I was crying. Crying. Tears flowing, overflowing, overflowing. Swinging both arms up, sparkling tears flew. Glimmering, sparkling, they flew.

“...Whoa, this again?!” Someone swung a large katana around. When he did, wow! There was a strong wind, and it blew the sparkling tears away.

Grr. Crying, I was crying. The tears flowed. Sparkling, glimmering.

“Enough, Shihoru-san! You can’t get me like that! You have to know that by now, right? What good is repeating this forever going to do?”

That someone was talking like he knew the girl.

Knew her?

“Ohh.”

That was right. I had an idea. Come to think of it, the girl knew who that someone was, too.

“Kuzaku-kun, huh...?”

“...Uh, yeah? Did you forget me, Shihoru-san?”

“Eheheh.”

“Don’t ‘eheheh’ at me! You’re acting seriously weird, Shihoru-san!”

“Weird, huh. Me. You think I’m weird?”

Even as they spoke, tears. Tears. Sparkling tears, streaming, sparkled and flowed. More and more, without end. Maybe that was weird?

Had I gone weird?

If so, when did I go weird?

How funny.

“What’re you laughing about, Shihoru-san?” the boy demanded.

Yes, that someone was a boy. Tall like a beansprout, with an excellent physique. The girl knew that boy. Kuzaku-kun.

Kuzaku-kun was in love with a certain girl. Not me, of course, a different girl. A girl who was shapely, and pretty, so very pretty, to the point that I could only sigh in admiration. What was more, she wasn't conceited about it, wasn't nosy, and was kindhearted, a lovely girl.

Heh heh. My chest, it felt so, so full of unease. Heh heh. Heh heh.

That's right. That was right. Not just Kuzaku-kun; Haruhiro-kun loved that girl, too.

I could see why. Even if she never says a word, a lovely girl will be liked by others. Treasured, treated kindly. There's nothing strange about that at all. It was natural. No one was wrong for doing it. Heh heh. It was no one's fault. Heh heh. Heh heh.

"Shihoru...san?" someone called her name.

The girl looked up to the polka dot sky.

When had this story become so warped?

All the girl wanted was for someone to be kind to her. To treasure her. To adore her. To praise her. To comfort her. To hold her tight, and to spoil her. That was all. Was it all that difficult?

Yes, it was incredibly difficult.

I mean, I'm not pretty, I'm fat, I'm dim-witted, I'm gloomy, I'm timid, and if it's for you, for everyone, not for myself, I can try hard for everyone, no, that's a lie, a big fat lie, that's not true, I want to be recognized, I want to be praised, I want people to be kind to me, to treasure me, I want something in return for me, for myself, it's all I want, I want it so bad it hurts, it's all I do everything for.

Once upon a time, there was girl so ugly you had to pity her.

That girl is still ugly.

That girl will always, always be ugly.

This story was warped from the beginning.

Because the girl who was its main character was incredibly ugly and warped.

“Shihoru-san,” someone called her name again.

Looking down, the tall boy with the big katana was standing close enough he could reach out and touch her.

“Whaaat?” the girl asked, and the boy looked down.

“Nah... it’s just... we’re comrades, right?”

“Comrades...”

“Right? How should I put it? We’re together through thick and thin... or something like that, I dunno really. What happened...? Like, what are you thinking and feeling, I guess? I don’t know what it is, but I’m sure you’re suffering. Could you, like... tell me about it, maybe? I’m not sure me listening will help at all, though. No! I may not be good for much, but maybe there’s something I can do...”

“Then hold me.”

“Eh?” The boy let out a cry of surprise, his eyes going wide as he looked at the girl. The boy’s gaze nearly ignored the girl’s face, lingering over her breasts, before turning aside.

Honestly, boobs, boobs, boobs, was that all? Boys only ever looked at girls’ boobs. Did they think girls didn’t notice? How could they not? It was almost like the girls were just an attachment that came with the boobs. Did they not think girls would be hurt, being treated that way?

*You’re nothing but a dick to me. How does that feel? It’s deeply, deeply hurtful, right?*

“No, um, that’s a bit...” The boy was mumbling to himself.

The girl smiled broadly. “It’s okay. I was just kidding.”

“Oh! Ohhh. Y-You were kidding. Of course. No, it’s not like I took you seriously there. It was so sudden. You surprised me. It’s just, um, I may not need to say this, but it’s not like I’d never consider you as an option, but we’re comrades and all. Yeah. It’s important to have some sense of moderation...”

In her chest, there was an unease. It hurt. It hurt bad. Tears, sparkle. Tears. Tears. Tears.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t matter.”

“Wah...” The boy hurriedly jumped back.

That was because the girl’s sparkling tears were closing in on his feet. Sparkling, glimmering. Tears. Tears. A sea of tears, sparkling, growing, more and more.

“...Shihoru-san!” The boy tried to swing his big katana, but he hesitated.



The stupid, foolish boy.

He had no intention of saving the girl, but he was trying to get by with gentle-sounding words.

In her heart, there was unease. Tears, sparkling.

Disappear.

Disappear!

The girl quickly raised her arms. The accumulated tears, tears, tears went flying, whirling around and assaulting the boy.

“Urkh...”

It was too late for the boy. No matter what he did, it was no good. He couldn’t run. She wouldn’t let him. The poor, stupid boy. The poor, ugly girl would shed more sparkling tears, no doubt.

Sparkle. Glimmer.

“Tonbe!”

“Yes, lo-sama!”

Then, all of a sudden, she heard voices she wasn’t familiar with one after another. Something unbelievable had happened. A man who was far fatter than the ugly girl got between her and the boy who was about to be swallowed up by sparkling tears.

The man had something small in his hand. It was a small mirror with a handle. A hand-mirror, most likely.

When the tubby man crouched in front of the tall boy, the hand-mirror instantly grew to a size that covered both of them.

Mirror, mirror. The mirror reflected the sparkling tears. Sparkle and glimmer, glimmer and sparkle. Sparkle, sparkle, glimmer, glimmer.

“Eeeek!” The girl thought she had gone blind. That was how brilliant it was. “Ahh! Ahhhh!”

Her eyes were open, but everything had gone white. It didn’t just look white.

She couldn't see anything.

Her eyes, they hurt, ow, ow, ow. She fell to one knee, covering her face with both hands. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt so bad. Even as she did, though, the tears were flowing. They didn't ever stop. It was possible they would go on forever, never stopping.

In time, she was able to see the outlines of things again. She came to her senses.

They were gone.

No one was here.

Rubbing her eyes, blinking, she double-checked. Yes, they were gone.

There was no one around.

The poor, ugly girl was all alone.

### 3. My Darling Friends [be\_my\_friend]



My, but they could fly.

More like, how long were they going to keep flying for?

Forever?

But Haruhiro was finding himself less and less able to think about that.

They weren't just flying, after all; they were spinning, too. It was a little hellish. No, not just a little. It was absolute hell. Spinning hell.

He figured this was a kind of spin you'd have a hard time subjecting yourself to even if you tried. It was beyond making your eyes spin, or anything on that level. At this point, it was all mush. It was like his brains, his blood, fluids, and organs, even his bones, were all mush, a total mess, and he was still getting shaken, and shaken, and shaken.

Because they were cocooned inside the black skin of the shovel, he couldn't see outside at all, and the, what, sensory deprivation? That only made the heavy impact seem worse, or something.

They probably touched down, at last, but then: *Wham, bam, smash!* He felt like there were multiple impacts.

*Ohh, we are so dead,* he thought.

Which meant he wasn't dead. What a relief. Well, no, it wasn't a relief at all.

"...Alice?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

"...Yeah."

There was no way Alice was okay. Alice's voice was all weird. Or was he the one who'd gone weird?

Were his ears all messed up? No, that wasn't all. Haruhiro was supposed to be clinging to Alice. But he didn't feel like he was touching another person, or anything resembling warmth. Could he move his hands and feet, or couldn't he? It was all incredibly vague.

He was breathing. No question about that. Alice was, too. They were both alive. That was good, at least.

Was it? Was it really?

He felt like, even if he was alive, quite a few more unpleasant things than pleasant things would come of that.

Quite a few? An awful lot, maybe? It wasn't fair. Was someone picking on him, maybe? These days, he had to wonder.

Okay. He felt a little better now.

He took a deep breath. "Are you hurt at—"

"We're getting out," Alice said before he could finish.

The cocoon made of black—or blackish, well, black was probably fine—black skin came undone, dividing into thin strips, and wrapping around the stick of meat Alice was holding.

Haruhiro narrowed his eyes. Was it a hole? Alice and Haruhiro were in the bottom of a hole. Not particularly deep, or large. He could see the polka dot sky.

The cocoon had probably fallen, and embedded itself in the ground. But it hadn't come down in a flat place, apparently. Had it hit a building or something? Had they come through a roof, then fallen to the ground?

"Get away," Alice said, shoving Haruhiro to the side.

Before he could even respond, he was elbowed in the face. That hurt pretty badly, but Alice wasn't one to care about such things. Alice crawled out of the hole, and Haruhiro followed.

This really was the inside of a building. There was a hole in the ceiling. It was a small, one-floor house, apparently.

There were windows, and they had stained glass in them. Light was coming in through the hole in the ceiling, but it could hardly be called bright. Even so, well, he could more or less figure out the situation inside the room.

There was something like a fireplace. There was a couch, a table, and what looked to be a bookshelf. The walls and floors were likely stonework. In the floor was the large hole Alice and Haruhiro had come out of.

“Someone’s house?” Haruhiro wondered.

“I don’t know that it’s *someone*...” Alice started to say, then held the shovel at the ready.

The door opened.

Alice took off, as if flying, and knocked whoever opened the door to the ground with the shovel. “Come on, Haruhiro!”

“Huh?”

This was probably no time to be blinking. Alice was already out of the building. He shook off his confusion, and chased after Alice.

The door was still open. The person on the ground, the one knocked to the ground by Alice, was acting as a doorstop.

It was a blond girl wearing a light green dress.

No, wrong.

It would be easy to mistake it for a girl, but it was a doll, maybe?

The shape was human, but the texture of its skin wasn’t that of a living creature. It looked hard to the touch. There were seams at the joints of its exposed arms and legs, too. It was on its belly, so he couldn’t see its face, but it was quite an intricate doll.

It didn’t budge now, but it had been moving just a moment ago.

—Right?

It had opened the door, and attempted to come inside.

Even though it was a doll?

That was creepy, but this was Parano. There were always bizarre things. In fact, there was nothing but bizarreness happening here.

Haruhiro jumped over the doll of a little girl and went outside.

There was a thin haze. Was this a city? There were rows of buildings, all of them stonework with slate-tiled roofs. It was all incredibly normal, really.

It made him think, *Yeah, there are cities like this, aren't there?* In fact, it was *too* normal. It didn't fit in Parano.

Alice was right over there, having waited for Haruhiro. Or had Alice waited?

This was Alice, so maybe not. Alice might just not have been able to go anywhere.

There were people. The residents of this city, perhaps? Over there on the street, over here, and not just a few of them.

Their forms were blurred in the haze, but there were tens of those residents, maybe more, none of them approaching for now, at least. However, they were surrounding Alice and Haruhiro at a distance. They weren't just on the roads. He could spot figures on top of buildings here and there. In other words, they were up on the roofs, too.

"We got sent a real long way..." Alice muttered.

"Um... where is this?" Haruhiro asked.

Alice looked down, sighing. "Doll Town. Ruins No. 3."

"Oh... so that's it."

Everything in Parano was transient and changing. Sometimes slowly and gently, other times suddenly and intensely. The geography was no exception. Even if there was a stony mountain here now, it might be a sandy desert soon afterwards, or it might turn into a gray forest instead.

However, according to Alice, who had spent much longer in this world than Haruhiro, even in Parano, there were a number of places that continuously existed. For instance, Ruins No. 1 to Ruins No. 7, the ruins of seven cities and

the area around them, were an example of that.

“The place we met the dream monster, the Scarlet Forest, that was Ruins No. 1... right?” Haruhiro asked.

“Yeah.”

“From Ruins No. 1 to Ruins No. 3, that’s...”

“It’d be a long walk.”

Time and distance were vague in Parano, so they could only be measured by how they felt. Even rough approximations, like *It's about X kilometers* or *It would take about half a day*, didn't work. It might be better to think of it as being less they were vague, and more that time and distance were not absolute measures. Despite that, Alice was saying it'd be a long way, so it must've been quite a long way indeed.

“I’m amazed we survived,” Haruhiro said.

“I didn’t want to come. Not here.”

“You didn’t?”

“By the way, there’s a Doll Town in Tokyo, too, but this isn’t like that.”

“Tokyo...” Haruhiro murmured.

The word had a strange ring to it. It was apparently the name of a place. He felt like he knew it, or maybe he didn’t. It felt like he might remember if he thought about it, but this was clearly not the time.

Doll Town.

Dolls.

“All of them, they’re not people... they’re dolls?” he asked.

As he looked at all of the figures on the roofs, Alice let out another exasperated sigh.

“This is the doll master’s town.”

“Um... Someone you know?”

“We were friends. Until she fell into darkness.”

“Darkness...”

“She’s here.”

“Huh? Where?”

“There.”

Alice turned to face behind him, to the left. Haruhiro hurriedly turned that way, too.

No one was there. Not on the street, anyway. But there was something standing on the roof of one of the buildings that faced onto the street.

It had a human form, if you could call it that. There was a head, a body, two arms and two legs, all of the things that should be there, but... they were thin. Damn thin. With the exception of the head, with its extravagant hat, it was all slender. The neck and the limbs were practically sticks. It wore a very short skirt, and its breasts were covered by a cloth that looked like underwear. Its hips were thin, too. Even if a human slimmed down to the extreme, sucked in their gut, and then tightened the waist with some sort of belt, they might not be able to get that thin.

Because of the hat, which made him think of a cake with too many decorations, and the multiple pairs of glasses that it was wearing for some reason, he couldn’t make out the face at all. Still, it had big lips, and they were red to the point of looking toxic. It was apparently a woman. She was apparently the doll master, so she probably wasn’t a doll.

“Ngh... Ngh... Heheh... Heh...”

Was the doll master laughing? She had a voice like the wind blowing at midnight.

“Nui...” Alice thrust the tip of the shovel into the ground, and spoke in a pained voice. “It’s been a while.”

Nui. Had that been the doll master’s name when she was Alice’s friend? Nui.

At some point, the dolls had started moving. It was hard to see through the haze, but there seemed to be dolls here and there, judging by where it was possible to make out the color of their dresses, so they must have been slowly

closing in on Haruhiro and Alice.

Or rather, weren't there more of them now?

Was it just his imagination? No, they were definitely growing in number. Could it be that all the dolls of Doll Town were gathering here at this very moment?

Nui was speaking in nonsense now. "Ahh... Ngh... Heehee... Kuh... Guguh... Fuh..."

"Nui," Alice said, with grief, "I don't want to fight you. It may not make any difference to say this, but... we were friends, weren't we?"

"Foo... reh... nuheh... dzuh... gugheh..."

"I didn't mean to come. Not that I don't want to see you. It's just... I can't see this reunion going well. So I've been avoiding it. You can stay here, forever, making your dolls. That's what you want, right? I won't get in the way."

"Hahh... Heah... Hahh... Nghheheh..."

"No good, huh." With a click of the tongue, Alice pulled the shovel from the ground.

"What do you mean, no good?" Haruhiro asked.

"We can't talk to her," Alice said. "It doesn't look like she knows me, either. She is a trickster, after all. I can't blame her."

"Like Haname, you mean..."

How long ago had that been? Well, in Parano, that question might be meaningless. Alice had taken him to Ruins No. 2, Bayard Garden. The master of that place was a trickster called Haname, and it was supposedly safe if you didn't mess with her garden, but stuff had happened, and they'd had a bad time there.

That image of Haname as she seemed to fill the sky was still burned into Haruhiro's mind. If that was the power of a trickster, wasn't this situation incredibly bad?

"Are... are we going to fight?" Haruhiro hesitated.

"Let me think about that after I've hit her."

Before Alice could add, *Come on*, Haruhiro hugged Alice from behind.

Depending how you looked at it, this could be the act of a pervert. Haruhiro wasn't doing it because he wanted to, by any means, but if he didn't do it fast enough, he might get told off for not being able to do anything without being told to explicitly.

Haruhiro's magic, Resonance, amplified Alice's magic, Philia. However, Haruhiro had no idea how Resonance worked, or in what way, or what effect it had. He felt a pull that was spiritual, not physical. If he were to be a bit hyperbolic, it felt like his soul was being pulled out. That, or, if he were to liken himself to a container, he was filled with life energy. That was flowing into Alice.

"Go," Alice whispered.

Alice could let go of the shovel at any time, so it went without saying that the shovel was not Alice. Despite that, the shovel was Alice's fetish, making them one and the same.

The hard, yet flexible skin peeled off. Throbbing at the mere touch of the outside air, the shovel's true form, which was awfully easy to hurt, was exposed. That skin protected Alice. It also became a sword that cut up enemies, as well as a spear and a halberd.

*Destroy. Destroy. Destroy. Destroy. Destroy everything that tries to harm me.*

The skin unleashed its fury. It stretched and folded freely, whipping about, becoming ten or more blades, and assaulting the nearby buildings and the doll master.

The doll master did not back away. She lifted her stick arms. The shapes of each of her fingers were different. The index and middle fingers were scissors. Another was a curved knife, one was a gimlet, one was a chisel, and one was a bow saw.

The fingers of both the doll master's hands were all tools for making dolls. However, they were more than just tools. They weren't just used for delicate work, but dangerous things, too.

The doll master pierced through and stopped the shovel's strips of flesh with the tools on her hands, cutting them apart. The skin couldn't hurt the doll master.

*But I knew that. It was like he could hear Alice's thoughts. Knowing that is what let me turn the skin on the doll master without mercy. The doll master—no, Nui—was my friend. Even now that she's turned into this thing, I don't want to kill a friend. But Nui fell and became a trickster. I won't hold back just because the doll master was once my friend.*

They aimed for her feet. The skin slashed the hell out of the building the doll master was standing on, the nearby buildings, and the dolls that were pressing in towards them.

*The doll master's buried in the rubble. I'm sure she'll get herself out in no time, though. Still, we can get out of here before then. So long, Nui—*

The moment he moved away from Alice, Haruhiro realized this was all very strange.

Alice was already running. He had to follow, so that was what Haruhiro did. His body was moving as it should, but the inside of his head was a mess.

What was it? What the hell had happened?

Just now, that was Alice.

He had been feeling and thinking almost like he was Alice.

Was it because of the magic? Resonance? He had been Alice's first time seeing it. It was apparently a rare magic. A magic that amplified the magic of others. The fact of the matter was, when Haruhiro touched Alice, Alice's magic would get stronger.

But was that really all there was to it?



## 4. The Way Things Shone When we First Met [toki\_meki]



“...Destiny,” Tonbe said. “Yes, that’s it, I think it was destiny, my meeting with lo-sama. That’s the only thing it could be called, but I wouldn’t say lo-sama and I are bound by destiny, because if I said that, lo-sama would scold me. ‘Hold on, Tonbe, you’re creeping me out. Could you stop? Seriously, it’s gross. Here, look, I’ve got goosebumps.’ And when she showed me her upper arm—no, not her upper arm, she wouldn’t show me her upper arm, would she? Well, her forearm with goosebumps—I’d stare so hard, I would, of course I would, right? I’d look at it like crazy, right? I mean, it’s lo-sama’s forearm, after all! Even if that would just creep lo-sama out even more. I know it would, but I’d still look. Yeah, I’d look. Like, I could do it so many times, just to see lo-sama’s goosebumps. I’m thinking ten, maybe? Like, I’m talking about getting off here.

and over a million, billion times, repeatedly, in the end, I started to think, *You guys are playing me for a fool. You're not having fun with me. You're mocking and laughing at me. I'm hurt here.* I might've put on a stupid grin, but I was on Heartbreak Alley when I entered that tavern. What's Heartbreak Alley? Whatever! I may be 171 centimeters tall and weigh 81 kilos, but I'm not over a hundred, okay? Don't call anyone under a hundred kilos fat. It's an affront to the concept of fatness. You agree, right? Right? Well?"

"Oh... uhhh..." Kuzaku said. "I guess, yeah..."

*I don't know whether to agree or not, he thought. I mean, I'm not even sure what he wants me to agree with.*

*I don't even know anymore. I mean, this guy, he's been muttering to himself quietly beside me this whole time. It doesn't seem like he's gonna stop, either. He's been chattering nonstop the whole time we've been walking. I can only listen to so much. It's like, I try to listen, but I don't hear the words. This fat ass, he's so damn annoying...*

"For a start, there was Sakumata, that guy who was what you'd call the leader of the party that claimed they were 'having fun' with me," Tonbe went on. "I wonder if he's still around. Is he still alive? Well, he was around back then. That guy was going out with the party mage, but they broke up, then he went out with the party thief. I mean, at a glance, maybe he was hot? Like, he figured he was pretty hot stuff, too. The fact was, he'd openly say stuff like, 'I've never been hard up for women.' Man, your face is nothing special. You've got a face like a smashed banana. Long face, a snub nose, thin lips, droopy eyes. He might've been one of the less ugly members of that party, but that's the low bar to end all low bars. By the way, your girlfriends, the mage and the thief, I hate to be the one to say this, but they were middle of the pack, at best. Maybe worse. My face may not be the most symmetrical, and if you were a pretty boy, you might be in a position to call me ugly, but I don't want to hear it from you. You've got no right to say it."

"Uhh... Yeah, sure..."

*"So, basically, I was thinking, I want out of Sakumata's party. Maybe I should quit. What should I do? Then's when, hot damn, a goddess came down to me.*

“Oh, uhh...”

*I don't care, but can you do something about that laugh? Kuzaku thought vaguely. I mean, I've had enough. I'm seriously starting to get fed up with this.*

“Uh... sorry, Tonbe-san.” Kuzaku tried to interrupt as politely as he could, but Tonbe the fat paladin didn’t care one bit.

“I don’t know what it was. She had silky smooth hair, and a petite figure, but she was, like, really, really, small, but not in a delicate way, you know? She had a feminine figure, you could say? The priest’s uniform is white, after all, and that whiteness, it reaaaally suited her. Like, her skin, it seemed so smooth, and they sparkled, her eyes, I mean, because they were so big, and more importantly, this goddess was already surrounded by volunteer soldiers, but the moment her eyes met mine, she smiled for me. A grin. My heart felt like it was going to stop, you know? No, that’s no lie. I’m not exaggerating. My heart literally came to a complete stop for a moment there, okay?”

*Why couldn't this guy have died then? Kuzaku grumbled silently. If he had, I wouldn't have to listen to this bullshit, nonsense story, now would I?*

*No, I take that back. It's not good to think like that. Sorry, sorry. No matter how awful he is, I shouldn't be wishing him dead. He saved me, after all. This fatso. Guess I shouldn't call him that, either. Well, he is fat, though. I don't think being fat's that bad, but there are different kinds of fat. His kind sort of pisses me off. No? Am I just pissed because he's Tonbe? Hmm. Could be. But I'm tired, and sleepy. Still, it's a wonder I'm still going. It's less that I'm walking and more that I'm falling forward, and then my leg moves up on its own, and then I fall again, and then my other leg moves up. That same thing, over and over. Also, it's weirdly sweet...*

"This goes without saying, but I decided immediately," Tonbe went on. "I went right back to that stupid, idiotic, smashed-banana-face Sakumata, and told him, 'Goodbye, we'll never meet again, forget I ever existed, yes, that means

forever.' Then, right away, I rushed to my goddess, worked up my courage, and nominated myself to be one of her comrades. I don't remember what I said exactly. It was, *I want to change my life*, or something along those lines, I think. Oh, and I think I said something like, *I'll do anything, so please take me*, too. I mean, obviously I'd do anything, right? This was Io-sama, a goddess, after all. I had to. Guhfuhfuhfuhfuhfuhhyuhohohhyuhohohoh!"

*I'm at my limit, Kuzaku moaned silently. I clearly can't take any more, and I don't care anymore. I'll just collapse.*

The moment he fell, there was an immediate kick.

“Ouch!”

Kuzaku rolled around with both hands holding his forehead.

Surprisingly, the one who kicked Kuzaku in the forehead with the toe of their foot was not Tonbe. “No sleeping, you dolt.”

Another person accompanying them, one who wasn't fat like Tonbe, was looking down at Kuzaku.

“D-Don’t kick me,” Kuzaku muttered. “Ow...”

“Yeah, I’m gonna kick ya!” the guy said.

He was dressed all in black, a look that screamed he was a dread knight. His chin was awfully long. So long, in fact, that it stuck out from under his mask. His eyebrows were close to being triangles, he had sanpaku eyes with their whites showing, and an incredibly thin forehead.

There were limits to how thin a forehead could be. Kuzaku had never seen a hairline that came this low before.

"If ya sleep, it'll cause trouble," the other guy said. "Course I'm gonna hafta kick ya. If yer gonna sleep, then die. If ya can't die on yer own, I'll murder ya myself."

“Gomi,” said a voice.

It was a voice as clear as a glass bell. That beautiful voice was... calling someone “gomi,” a word that meant “trash”?

When Kuzaku looked, a long-haired beauty in a white robe was looking in his direction.

Though he called her a beauty, there was a mask on her face, covering the bottom half of it. Even so, she was ridiculously beautiful. He felt like Tonbe had called her petite, but she was of average height, neither tall nor short. Her proportions left nothing to complain about.

She was like, well, an orthodox pretty girl. *The pretty girl.* It was like, when someone said the words “pretty girl,” she was the kind they meant. There was a translucence to her, a cleanliness? So pretty that the word “pretty” itself seemed stale. Like, “right there is a pretty girl.”

Pretty girls were not a fiction. They truly did exist.

The pretty girl’s outfit wasn’t all white. There were blue highlights. Though it had been tailored to be cuter, it was what you’d recognize as a priest’s outfit. It suited her insanely well. It was like it was a one-of-a-kind outfit, custom ordered for a pretty girl.

That pretty girl, with a voice that fit a pretty girl, had said just one word: *gomi*, which meant trash or garbage.

It hit him with destructive force.

“Leave it at that, Gomi.”

She’d said it again! The pretty girl, saying “gomi.”

The dread knight who had been called trash bent over 90 degrees—no, 120 degrees—no, no, close to 180 degrees.

“Y-Yes’m! If ya say to do it, lo-sama, I’ll do it gladly!”

“Your voice is too loud,” the pretty girl said. “Shut up, Gomi.”

Having been insulted by the pretty girl, Gomi performed an avant garde bow that placed his face so low that it nearly touched his knees, and in a voice as quiet as the whine of a mosquito, he apologized. “S-Sorry...”

His entire body was trembling. Maybe he was crying. Actually, the tears were overflowing, so there was no maybe about it; this grown man was plainly crying.

*Man, you're over thirty, Kuzaku thought. Don't cry...*

Incidentally, Tonbe was now looking at Gomi and grinning. Well, wasn't he a nasty piece of work?

"Well..." Kuzaku sat up, twisted his head left and right, and spinning his arms in circles. For a moment, he felt like his sleepiness vanished, but he still didn't feel right.

"It's true I felt like I was going to fall asleep," Kuzaku said. "Would that have been a bad thing?"

"Well, yes," the pretty girl said. "In Parano, when you sleep, you dream. Those dreams warp to give birth to dream monsters."

"Hmm..."

*I don't really get it, Kuzaku thought. Do I? But, seriously. Ah... I'm tired...*

He tried to yawn, but his mouth was covered. With a hand.

Whose hand?

"The wind is blowing, you know," the pretty girl said. "The sweet wind of Parano. Don't carelessly breathe it in."

The pretty girl was looking up at Kuzaku. She was damn close. When did that happen? He'd felt sleepy again, and maybe he'd started to drift off. But wait, it felt like the pretty girl was covering his mouth. No, it didn't just feel that way; she absolutely was.

"I-lo-sama!" Tonbe shrieked.

"Io-sama!" Gomi wailed.

Fatso and Trash—no, Tonbe and Gomi—were panicking. In fact, they were enraged. Why were they so mad?

"Erm... wind...?" Kuzaku asked.

"Ah!" The pretty girl's body shuddered, and she let out a charming moan that made him jump a little.

*Huh? What, what, what? What'd I do?*

"What was that?" he yelped.

"It tickled!" The pretty girl withdrew the hand she had been using to cover Kuzaku's mouth, holding it under her left arm as she turned away from him. "...Geez."

She shot Kuzaku a sidelong glance. He saw what she was doing here.

It was so deliberate, he wanted to go, *No way*.

Even as he thought, *Who does that?* Kuzaku's heart started to race. If he had to say whether she was cute or not, she really was cute. Pretty girls were a thing to be feared.

"How! Dare! Youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu...!" Tonbe screamed.

"Th-Th-This! This is! This is! This is unforgivable...!"

Tonbe and Gomi had totally snapped. Their faces were beet red, and they looked ready to lunge at Kuzaku at any moment.

Tonbe had his war hammer ready, and Gomi was going for the greatsword slung across his back. Were they ready to kill...?

The pretty girl's hand had touched Kuzaku. That might be what had sent the two of them into a rage. Not that he didn't understand why. They probably liked her. They were in love. They called her *Io-sama*, after all. They loved her too much, maybe to the point it was something close to worship.

However, their *Io-sama* didn't see them as objects of romantic interest in the slightest. She used them as lackeys.

*It's so warped*, Kuzaku thought. *That's seriously gross.*

"Uh... Hey... Er..."

That said, they had saved him, and they were his seniors when it came to being volunteer soldiers, and he might have other ties to them, too.

Kuzaku didn't want to cause trouble, so though he didn't think he'd done anything wrong here, he opted to bow his head in apology.

"If I did something to offend you, I'm sorry."

"Y-Y-You think a-a-a-apologizing's going to get you out of this?!" Tonbe

shouted.

“Man, you’re stuttering like crazy, Tonbe-san...” Kuzaku said.

“Don’t poke fun at me! You cheeky brat! I’ve been doing this longer than you!”

“Sorry, couldn’t help myself...”

“Io-sama!” Gomi shouted as he finally drew his sword. He was crying for some reason, too. “I’m beggin’ ya, gimme permission to cut this rotten beanpole who looks like he thinks he’s hot!”

“I look like I think I’m a pretty boy?” Kuzaku asked skeptically. “Reading into things a bit much aren’t you? I mean, I don’t even think I’m hot.”

“Where’d ya get that smug, self-assured attitude?!” Gomi shouted. “Ya say yer not hot, but ya probably’re thinkin’ yer pretty hot! Yer type really makes me sick!”

“No, I seriously don’t think I am.”

“Acting casual with me?! I’m yer senior! You can’t even address me with the proper respect?! You die!”

“Gomi!” Io shouted.

If she hadn’t, Gomi would absolutely have attacked Kuzaku. Then Kuzaku would have been cut down with a single stroke. Probably—no, almost certainly—he would have been cut down.

Every hair on his body stood on end.

*Damn, that was scary, he thought.*

The seething look Gomi had shot him. He’d been on the verge of stepping in, with a sharpness in his movements like a spring wound back all the way. On top of that, Gomi was a dread knight. For a dread knight, high mobility, movements that made their opponent hallucinate, and swordsmanship were their specialties. Kuzaku would likely have taken Gomi’s first attack, with no chance to resist.

The man wasn’t average. It was clear Gomi was a highly skilled, high level

dread knight. In addition, he might have had the magic it seemed anyone in Parano could use affecting him, too. Whatever the case, his abilities were a level, maybe two or three levels, above Kuzaku's.

Despite that, in Io's hands, he was no more than trash. He wasn't a likable guy, but Kuzaku had to feel a little sorry for him.

"That's enough, Gomi," Io said coldly. "He's already my lackey. Do you seriously believe you have any right to punish him?"

"I do not," Gomi mumbled. "I couldn't possibly. I-I'm terribly sorry, Io-sama..."

"Do you truly understand? You, Gomi? You're trash that's unfit to live, and you claim you can hear what I say and understand it?"

"I can't! I can't, but let me try! I'm filthy trash, but let me be trash yer willin' to call trash, Io-sama!"

Wow. He was bawling. Gomi was whining and crying and begging Io for forgiveness. How could he lower himself like that? Kuzaku didn't understand at all. It was a mystery why Tonbe was looking at Io and Gomi and groaning through gritted teeth, too. What kind of relationship did they have? Kuzaku didn't want to guess, and he wished they'd leave him out of it, but that aside...

"I'm your lackey, too... Is that it?" Kuzaku asked.

"Well, yeah?" Io said, with an implied, *What of it?*

*No, no, no*, Kuzaku thought. "Huh? Since... when?"

"Since you were born, right?"

When she responded as if it was a given, he even started to feel like maybe she was right.

No.

Like hell she was.

"I don't even remember being born," Kuzaku said. "I mean, I don't even have memories from before I came to Grimgar. We just met, too."

"You're in the Day Breakers, right?" Io asked.

"Well... technically? It's never felt like it, though. Soma-san, Akira-san, and

even Rock-san, they all feel like they are way above us, out of our reach.”

“I am most definitely far out of your reach, too, but I fortunately happen to also be a member of the Day Breakers, and we have met here in this alternate world, this other world, called Parano. You mean to call that a coincidence?”

“Nah... uh... I dunno,” Kuzaku said. “I do think it’s lucky.”

“You’re silly. This was inevitable, you know? You met me because you were meant to.”

“You... really think so?”

“Yes, that’s right. In order to be my lackey.”

“Your lackey...”

“I will allow you to serve me. This goes without saying, but you couldn’t be luckier. Tremble with joy.”

“That’s right!” Tonbe stomped his feet, spewing spittle as he shouted.

*Gross...* Kuzaku thought.

“I’m not happy to see the number of lackeys go up, but Io-sama says so, then so be it!” Tonbe shouted. “Be happy! It’s an honor, so serve Io-sama with glee! Praise be to Io-sama!”

“I don’t wanna accept ya! But I ain’t got no choice! It’s the will of Io-sama!” Gomi was crying again. How could he cry so easily? Had his tear ducts loosened up from old age?

“We’re going.” Io brushed back her long hair, and began to walk before stopping. She laid her gaze on Kuzaku.

When she stared at him like that, he was struck by a sensation that felt like she’d grabbed his heart. He couldn’t move a muscle. He kind of wished that when she took off her mask, her looks would turn out to be nothing special. If they weren’t, and she really was a flawless beauty, he might be in trouble.

“Bossari,” Io said in a mumble.

Kuzaku cocked his head to the side. “...?”

“It’s your name.”

“No, I’m Kuzaku...”

“From now on, you’re Bossari,” Io declared. “I decided it. Understood?”

He couldn’t possibly accept that word as his name; it meant “scruffy.” He was about to complain when Io lowered her mask to the bottom of her chin.

She was flawless.

There was an impeccable pretty girl right in front of him. Her lips in particular were so puffy and glossy, it made her worryingly special.

“Do you understand?” Io demanded.

*I don’t—Wait, what were we talking about again? Guess it doesn’t matter. Not anymore. She’s too pretty.* Kuzaku almost nodded despite himself. *Huh? Is that okay? It’s not, right? It’s not right, right?*

*But, wait, what’s not right again...?*

“Nice to meet you, Bossari!” Tonbe cried. “That’s our Io-sama! Her naming sense is wonderful, Bossari!”

“Hey, Bossari! Good for you, Bossari! I’m lookin’ forward to workin’ with ya, Bossari!”

Tonbe and Gomi surrounded Kuzaku on both sides, putting their arms around his shoulders.

“No!” Kuzaku yelped. “Bossari is not okay! There’s no way it’s okay, right?!”

“Are you a moron?! Io-sama says you’re Bossari, so it’s already decided!”

“Yessiree! Ya look like a Bossari to me! Bossari’s the only name for ya!”

“Oh, right, Gomi, lend Bossari a spare mask,” Io ordered.

“Righto, Io-sama! C’mere, put this on, Bossari!”

“By the way, Bossari, I’m a natural insomniac, so I don’t need a mask! Yes, I’m an insomniac! Get it, Bossari?! Guhuhuhuhuhohhyuh!”

“I don’t care if you’re an insomniac!” Kuzaku yelled. “Come on! Hearing you guys call me ‘Bossari, Bossari’ is pissing me off even more!”

“Is that right? That’s some cheek, getting pissed off at us, Bossari!”

“Yer just a Bossari, so don’t get uppity with us, Bossari!”

“Damn it! Okay fine, we’re going, but where?! You haven’t told me a thing...”

“To the Scarlet Forest.” Io put her hand on her hip, brushing her hair back again.

Did she like that gesture? She was nailing it. With her unearthly beauty, she was nailing it so hard, it was scary.

“I’ll introduce you to the king,” Io informed him. “If you want to survive here in Parano, I would advise you to be polite, and not do anything to offend him.”

## 5. The Way of the Wise Man [born\_to\_be\_wise]



Once upon a time, there was a very clever boy.

The boy was born with an exceptionally good head on his shoulders, so the people around him looked like incredible fools.

The adults had lived longer than the boy, so they knew things about common sense, laws, and economics. However, that was all just knowledge they had picked up naturally.

To be smart is to have the ability to analyze things, understand them, and make decisions. If you don't know a thing, you simply look it up. What you do or don't know is of little consequence. Many adults could not understand that, and they would praise idiots who were even a little good at learning, saying they were good students. There was no helping them.

The wise man sees through to the nature of foolishness, so naturally he understands fools. However, for the fool who does not understand wisdom, it is impossible to understand the wise man.

The fact that he was surrounded by idiots meant, in short, that no one understood the boy.

However, the boy was wise.

"I may just be a big fish in a small pond," the boy would say. "I'm number one here, but there may be a bigger lake, or an endless sea, and I just don't know about it."

That was the way he saw things. If he took a step out into the wider world, he might meet those smarter than him, better than him, and be beaten down. The boy wasn't a fool who would think that was impossible, and discount the possibility.

Anything could happen.

Because of that, he had to predict and prepare for many, many possible situations. If he was truly wise, he could do that.

The boy always assumed the worst. Whenever he heard a terrible storm ripped through a distant country, blowing away houses, making the rivers flood, and drowning a great many people, he thought about what he would do if such a storm came to his own town.

Whenever the earth shook, he read up on past volcanic eruptions.

In the boy's mind, his family, friends, acquaintances, and neighbors were killed off again and again. The town where the boy lived was destroyed over and over. Heaven and earth were torn apart by various disasters and were rendered uninhabitable. The moon, the sun, and the stars vanished. Even the universe itself was extinguished sometimes.

This was a secret, but the boy was constantly afraid. Even just walking down the street, a stray dog might bite him. The next person he ran into might be prone to violence and suddenly punch him. A meteor might suddenly come down and hit him.

Of course, the likelihood that any of these things would end up happening was not high. It was fair to say it was exceptionally low. However, because they couldn't be ruled out as impossible, he couldn't ignore them.

Meanwhile, everyone around him was an idiot. Idiots know no fear. This is because they do not know the things that they ought to be in fear of.

There was an unbridgeable gap between these idiots and the boy. The boy recognized that gap from a young age. He was the only one standing on this side. Everyone else was on the other side, and they smiled stupidly, as if they had nothing to worry about.

The boy tried, just once, to reveal his feelings to his mother, and to ask for advice. When she heard everything he had to say, she tilted her head to the side as if mystified.

"Hey, aren't the things you're worried about very rare?"

Apparently, the odds of getting into an accident while riding in a vehicle are nine in one million. Speaking broadly, if you ride in a car a hundred thousand times, you have a not-insignificant chance of winding up dead. If you assume you're going to ride a hundred thousand times, at a rate of once per day, it would take two hundred and seventy-four years.

This was easy to look up, so the boy knew it. That wasn't the kind of thing the boy was talking about. He hadn't said a word about not wanting to ride in a vehicle because there was a nine-in-a-million chance he might die. He didn't even feel that way. If a vehicle was more convenient for getting where he needed to go, then even if he was scared, the boy would no doubt ride it.

The boy wasn't an idiot.

Idiots don't know things. That's why, even when it comes to things that are dangerous enough that they ought to be afraid, they come up with baseless justifications like everyone is doing it, or because they were fine doing it yesterday they'll be fine again today, or that they won't be the only one to fail, and then they go and do it like it's no big deal.

Furthermore, even though the odds of winning the lottery are maybe one in ten million, they say nonsense like they're "buying a dream," and then put down big money and lose it.

At the same time, idiots will avert their eyes from a future that is all but inevitable.

It wasn't just the boy; his idiot family, his thoughtless friends, and many other fools he didn't even know, all of them, would someday die. No matter what else happened, death was guaranteed. Every life had a beginning, and consequently an end.

The boy had thought fruitlessly about death, and studied up on it, too.

What happens to us when we die? What does it mean to live to begin with? You and I, we both sense we are here, and we are alive. That consciousness you and I have, what exactly is it?

No one living has ever died, so there is no way to know what happens when we die. That much should be obvious.

Sure, there are what are called near death experiences, and innumerable people testify to having experienced them. However, in the end, they can only talk because they didn't die. Theirs are only the experiences of someone who *nearly* died. Death is not a thing we can experience.

*Inside our heads is the brain, the center of our nervous system. Through that brain and nervous system, I feel that, "I am alive." When it loses that function, and my consciousness ceases to be, I die. My heart will stop, all of my cells will break down, and I will rot away. There is no coming back from that.*

*The mind and body are not separate entities. Without the body, there is no mind, and this idea of a soul is no more than a delusion.*

After thoroughly considering the topic, that was the boy's conclusion.

*Our consciousness is a phenomenon. It is a result of the function of the brain and many organs that we gain the feeling of, "I am alive," and can move our body around as we will it to. If that function is lost, naturally, the consciousness will be, too. The human body, even with no soul inside it, is made in a way that gives rise to consciousness.*

*Those who are smart, like me, can think fairly complicated things, but that is still no more than a phenomenon occurring inside my body. It's incredible to the point of being a miracle that this sort of phenomenon is so commonplace. That's why we can't be faulted for assuming humans are special, and we have something like a soul, but that is not the case.*

No matter how smart of a boy he was, he was merely one more phenomenon occurring somewhere in a corner of the universe.

Whether it's you, or I, or the boy, our birth and our death is a mere phenomenon.

Naturally, to the boy, his own life was an irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind phenomenon. If it was lost, the boy would cease to be. He would vanish, completely and absolutely.

There is no heaven or hell. There can be no life after death.

I can understand why you want to believe, *No, there is.*

Even if we are going to die, when we think we will be able to see those who died before us in heaven, it makes dying a lot easier.

They say a certain great scholar was an atheist when he was healthy, but he came to cling to the god of a certain religion when he became sick. When the boy read that story in a book, he couldn't help but laugh. However, the boy was wise, so he could understand it.

Faith is a refuge. It doesn't need to be true. Even if it's a pack of blatant lies, an utter fabrication, if you can believe it, or trick yourself into thinking you believe it, and use it as an emotional support, that's enough.

The truth is, life and death are just phenomena. If you or I die, your or my consciousness will cease to be. Our memories are stored in our brains. Our brains will rot, and then they will be buried or incinerated, so our memories will be gone, too.

We will return to the soil. All that you or I am will cease to be. That goes for everyone.

When we die, you and I will cease to think, cease to feel.

The boy tried to imagine himself reduced to nothing. When he did, he felt a terror like he was peering into a bottomless hole. However, if he died, he wouldn't feel that fear anymore. As for what would come after death, there was no need to worry about it whatsoever.

Death was nothing to be feared.

What scared the boy so badly that it kept him up at night was not death, but being on the verge of it, what would happen just before he died.

One famous author, infirm and unable to speak just before they were about to die, raised four fingers, and then quickly passed away. When the boy read that story in a book, he couldn't stop shuddering.

Why? Because that author had clearly sensed the death that was about to swallow them whole. They gradually lost the freedom to move their body, their heart weakened, they lost the ability to speak, their eyes went blind. Everything was being stolen away by death. They were slowly dying, losing it all little by little, and soon everything would be gone.

There was no escape. There was no hope, they were finished, there was nothing that could be done, it was over. Working up their last bit of strength, the author raised four fingers. They communicated to those around them that, *Right now, I am going to die.*

The works that person had written, their fame, their pride, all of it would return to nothing. The friends they had kept in touch with, and the family they loved, they would never see them again. They couldn't even bask in the memories.

They wouldn't even have time to think such things as, *Oh, I'm dying. I'm going to die. There may be something left after I die, but if I myself will not be there to see it, what meaning is there to it? What was all this?*

They could scream about how this was so sad, so empty, cry, *Stop it, I don't want to die! I want to live! Please, let me live somehow!* but it would be in vain. They could only die. They would lose everything, because no end other than death had ever been prepared for them.

The boy wasn't afraid of death itself. He was afraid to die gradually.

Having been born, you, I, and the boy will die.

*If I have to die, I want it to be instantaneous*, was the boy's earnest wish. That, or to go in his sleep, without knowing it.

The idiots around him had no idea that the boy spent all day and all night thinking about these things. He could tell the idiots what fools they were, but he would only make enemies that way.

The idiots thought the boy was a fun guy, cheerful and always saying funny things that made everyone laugh. That was because the boy had calculatingly made himself appear that way. Putting on the act didn't cause him any trouble, and it was advantageous for most things.

That said, no matter how well he got by in the world, and how he weaponized his wits to achieve success, it would be difficult to choose how he died. In unguarded moments, the fear of losing everything on the verge of death flashed through the boy's mind.

That was what he would eventually taste.

What is the meaning of our lives? The question is, even though all of us are going to die in that despair, we are still living, so what is the reason for that?

Before our final moment comes, death will rob us of our wits, and even our memories will begin to fade. If we are fortunate, we may be surrounded by family and friends when that time comes. However, we will lose sight of them. We will cease to hear their voices, and eventually be unable to acknowledge their existence.

You and I will be all alone. Everyone dies alone.

When they hear news of someone's parting, *You were a good person, You were a wonderful person, I'm grateful to you, I will always love you*, the living may say, but it's utter folly. That person no longer exists. They already died all alone.

The boy spent his days thinking on and on about such things.

It happened one summer.

The boy went on vacation with his friends. He would get on a bus with a bunch of kids his own age, and they would stay overnight at a place by the lake. It was nothing special, hardly fit to be called a trip at all, really, and the boy wasn't interested, but a friend had invited him. When he was told so-and-so and so-and-so were coming, and asked if he wanted to come, too, he figured it'd be awkward to refuse, and he could probably put up with it for one night.

Secretly, he hoped a storm would come along and the trip would be called off, but despite it being overcast in the morning, there were occasional breaks in the clouds, and it wasn't that bad a day for traveling.

The bus with the boy and his friends in it was heading for the lake. Inside, the boy played the fool, as always, making a stupid racket.

While he was doing that, the bus entered the mountains. At some point, a fog rolled in. There were other cars driving there, too, but they couldn't see ahead or behind them. The thick fog limited their vision, and they couldn't see cars they knew had to be there. It was so bad that they only realized an oncoming car was there when it was already passing them by.

One of the kids became quiet, like a dog that was afraid of its tyrannical

master. One kid went blue in the face and started trembling.

When one girl burst into tears, unable to hold it in, another kid started whimpering, too. The boy was making wisecracks, trying to cheer up his friends, but in truth, he was beside himself with worry.

Suddenly, they saw the lights of an oncoming car, and their driver gripped the wheel tight, making the bus shake ominously. It happened not once, but twice.

Each time, the boy did an over-the-top imitation of screaming like a girl, which got a laugh out of his friends, and he prayed the fog would clear soon.

*The bus I'm in couldn't possibly get in an accident*, was a thing he never once thought. There were any number of cars going through these mountains, and at this very moment, there were probably plenty of cars driving in worse conditions. Only a very, very small number of them would get in an accident. Possibly none of them would. However, accidents happened when they happened.

Still, why didn't the bus slow down? It was clearly dangerous. They could take it at a slow, easy pace, couldn't they?

No... if they slowed down, the car behind might plow into them. There was no helping it. They just had to get out of the mountains quickly. If they did, the fog would probably thin out.

That was when it happened.

"Ahh!" The driver let out a strange cry. The bus tilted heavily to the right, and, "Wahh! We're falling!" was the next thing the driver shouted.

The boy thought, *What do you think you're doing, man? What the hell?* as he clung to the back of the seat in front of him. The careless children were lifted up from their seats, and they flew around wildly inside the vehicle. There were screams the likes of which he had never heard, and given the option never would have wanted to hear, coming from all directions.

They must have hit something, because the glass window on the right-hand side shattered. The boy's body shook violently.

There was some invisible power trying to tear the boy free from the seat in

front of him. The boy got down between the seats, clinging to the legs of them.

The car turned over several times.

The boy shut his eyes tight, gritted his teeth, and held on for dear life.

The next thing he knew, the car had come to a stop. It was upside-down, and the flattened roof was beneath the boy.

The boy got down from the seat to the roof. He was a little dizzy, but he must have done the right thing, because the boy was unharmed. He wasn't in pain anywhere.

It was quiet.

Was there no one here other than the boy, perhaps?

That couldn't be right. There had been a lot of people on the bus.

In fact, a number of the boy's friends were lying on the roof that had now become a floor. He recognized all of them, and no one was saying anything. They didn't move.

The boy thought, *Maybe they're all dead*, but he didn't want to think that, so he chose not to. Even when limbs twisted in awkward directions, or blood flowing out of a girl's mouth entered his field of vision, the boy ignored it.

The smell of excrement or something made him close his mouth. It was a terrible smell, and he wouldn't have been able to tolerate it if he hadn't plugged his nose.

The bus's windows were thoroughly broken, so the boy half-crawled out of the vehicle.

The fog was incredible. He could make out his feet somehow, but he could only see for a meter ahead of him, maybe. He felt like he saw something moving.

"Is someone there?" the boy tried calling out.

There was no response. Had it been a trick of his eyes?

Maybe there was someone else who was uninjured, and they had crawled out of the bus like the boy had. The boy decided to walk around the bus. He wanted

someone to be there, but at the same time, he thought it would be a huge pain if that person were hurt badly.

*Is anyone there? Is anyone there? Is anyone there?* he wanted to shout out loud. He also had an urge to look inside the bus, but he resisted it.

In the end, there was no one in the area around the bus.

Just the boy.

The bus was just surrounded by a nauseating smell that hung in the air, and he felt like he was going to rot, too.

*I can't stay here,* the boy sensed strongly. He couldn't be here.

The fog showed no sign of clearing. If he was going to leave this place, he'd be fumbling around nearly blind. Now was the time when the boy would have to act wisely.

*If I'm really clever, the boy thought to himself, I'm sure I can get through this. If I can't, I may die like everyone else.*

*No way. Not a chance.*

*This isn't funny.*

*There's no way I'm gonna die!*

## 6. As You Wish [inspire\_me]



When he first saw the area from a distance, Haruhiro thought it might be a graveyard.

There was what looked like a promontory rising out of the plain, and innumerable grave markers were lined up atop that hill.

When they approached the hill, it became apparent they were all humanoid statues.

“Statues of a woman...?” Haruhiro mumbled, not really asking Alice the question.

Well, if you pushed him to admit it, he was asking, but he had no expectation that an answer would be forthcoming.

Sure enough, Alice kept on trudging without a word.

While following in silence, Haruhiro thought, *It'd be so much easier if I could live only for myself, like Alice does.*

Now, as to whether he would actually want to emulate that behavior, that was iffy. He did want to try living the way he wanted, without any concern for what others thought. That said, however, for as long as he remained himself, he'd care what others thought, and be concerned about them. He couldn't be like Ranta.

—Ranta?

*Who's Ranta again? Ranta. Ran... Ranter? Ranran? No. That feels wrong. Yeah. That's wrong. It's Ranta.*

*Curly hair comes to mind. Right, right, I remember now. I always forget so quickly...*

*—Quickly? I feel like I haven't seen him in ages. Has it been months? Years? Or does it just feel that way? No, I really did get separated from Ranta. It was before coming to Parano. Why was it again? When? Where?*

*Oh, Thousand Valley. That's right. When we got back from Darunggar, we were in Thousand Valley, and we got caught in a fight between the Typhoon Rocks and Forgan. Stuff happened, and Ranta betrayed us to join Forgan. Wonder if he's still alive. Well, knowing that idiot, I'm sure he's somewhere and entirely too healthy.*

*If I don't pick up the fragments of memories like this, and engrave them in my mind, they'll all vanish. Like they never happened.*

*Sometimes I think I want to see him. Though, if we did meet, I'm sure he'd piss me off. Still, never seeing him again would be a bit much. It's not like he's dead.*

*They're not dead... right?*

*Kuzaku.*

*Shihoru.*

*Setora and Kiichi.*

*Merry.*

*Yume shouldn't be in Parano, though.*

*They're alive, right?*

*They should be.*

*Yeah.*

*They're alive.*

*If they are, I can't be doing this; I have to look for them. I'll find them.*

His sense of urgency turned into a million insects, crawling around under his skin. It felt like those bugs might start coming out from under his nails, the corners of his eyes, and his ears.

Naturally, there were no bugs. There was no way something that didn't exist could come out, but in Parano, there was no way to be sure that things that weren't supposed to be able to happen wouldn't.

Honestly, he didn't have time for this.

The statues were at the base of the hill. From the look of it, they were indeed of women.

Were they made of stone, iron, wood? Maybe glass? It looked like many materials had been mixed together and combined. There were some that were photorealistic, as if an actual woman had been turned into that form, while others were deformed. If he were to give his frank opinion, they weren't very good. Or rather, while he wouldn't call them haphazard, they were pretty clumsily made.

Alice checked over each of them, climbing the hill in a large spiral. If they were going to go up the hill, they could just have gone straight. He wanted to complain, but he'd be ignored, or shut down.

Haruhiro sighed behind his mask for the umpteenth time.

These statues had probably been made by a child with too much time on their hands, and they weren't worth looking at, but it wasn't as if anything else caught his eye. That was all he thought at first.

But as they kept on going, it was like... the statues were getting better made... maybe?

No, the fact was, the photorealistic ones were clearly the right shape, and the deformed ones had an artistic intent that even an amateur could discern.

Even the smallest statues were made to scale, while the larger ones could be twice as tall as Haruhiro. Some were clothed, while others were nude.

After some time, it hit him.

The statues all had the same face.

The model for these hundreds, thousands, or maybe more statues was a single young woman.

When they were halfway up the hill, the majority of the statues were of the photorealistic variety, and their precision had really gone up. Though the size, pose, and outfit varied, in a way, you might say they were all the same statue.

The sculptor of them all must have been the same person. Someone had

made one statue of that woman after another, going on and on until there were this many.

It seemed obvious that the woman wasn't a figment of the sculptor's imagination, but rather existed somewhere, or had at one point. The sculptor must have been quite attached to her. They'd been close. A family member, a friend, or a lover, maybe.

Alice looked around, walking between the statues as if everything was normal.

Chasing after, Haruhiro wondered, *Doesn't Alice find it creepy?* He, for his part, was pretty creeped out.

The sculptor must have started making statues at the bottom and worked towards the summit. Their skills had improved as they went.

Haruhiro and Alice were close to the summit now, and the statues looked like a woman who had been petrified by something. The sight of so many of them lined up could only be described as bizarre.

"Ruins No. 5, huh..." he murmured.

This was said to be one of seven numbered ruins, from No 1 to No. 7. Why was it that, despite that, there were no fallen pillars, or anything that looked like the remains of a building? There was hardly even any rubble.

The statues, huh? The sculptor had likely demolished the buildings, or used the stone and metal parts from the collapsed buildings, to make these statues.

Alice laid down the shovel, instead of carrying it on the shoulder.

When the upward slope ended, there was a flat, open area on top of the hill. The statues of the woman only stood on the edge of the hilltop.

No, not multiple statues. There was just one. It was in roughly the middle of the hilltop.

That one statue of the woman was standing there, alone.

Haruhiro gulped.

There was someone here.

Right in front of the statue.

It was a single man, slightly shorter than him, staring at what seemed to be a life-sized statue of the woman.

The man's hair was longish and wavy. Seen from the side, his face had a short beard, and he looked both young and like he was fairly old. The moss green coat with a fur-trimmed collar that he wore was torn in places, he was a little dirty, and the hard-looking boots he had on looked well-worn.

Haruhiro knew that Alice called the man Ahiru. But that meant duck, so it probably wasn't his real name.

Neither Alice nor Haruhiro made a lot of noise when they walked, but they weren't entirely attempting to sneak right now, either. Ahiru had to be aware of the two of them. Despite that, he didn't look away from the statue. He didn't so much as budge.

"Any strange shadows?" Alice looked around, mumbling, "Looks like no."

The sun didn't rise and set in the skies of Parano, so no shadows were cast in the opposite direction of it. Haruhiro and Alice's shadows were just at their feet, looking vaguely appropriate there.

What did Alice mean, strange shadows?

Alice approached the man. "There are a lot more now, Ahiru."

As if he had only just detected them when his name was called, Ahiru jumped a little and turned their way. "...Princess."

"How many times do I have to tell you? Don't call me that." Alice came to a stop and thrust the tip of the shovel into the ground.

Ahiru sighed. "Alice C," he said, enunciating clearly. "Better now?"

"Anything but 'princess.'"

"Hmph..." Ahiru slowly wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coat. After that, it seemed he finally registered Haruhiro's existence. "How unusual, you taking a servant. The Alice C who ran away from the king to act like a lone wolf."

"He's not my servant," Alice said. "He's a friend. That's a lie, though."

When Alice spoke, it was hard to know what to believe. It was different from listening to a liar; Alice was just constantly contradictory.

Alice laughed wryly, then began undoing the buttons on the front of the coat.

“Here for revenge?” Ahiru asked. “I did trash your house, after all.”

“You sure did. That was harsh.”

*Stab, stab, stab.*

Alice pulled the shovel from the ground, stabbed it in, pulled it out, and stabbed it in.

“I didn’t think you had the guts, Ahiru. Never thought you’d pull something like that. You know what I mean, right? You knew where I lived, but the same was true for me. I know Ruins No. 5, the place once called Tsukihi, the place you drown in your memories of Yonaki Uguisu.”

“It looks like you’re misunderstanding. I have no need for memories.”

“Then why make so many statues of her, huh?” Alice demanded.

“I just don’t have anything else to do.”

“That’s a strained excuse.”

“You came here because your home was destroyed, right?” Ahiru asked.  
“Fine. Do it. Smash them all up.”

Ahiru undid the buttons on his coat, putting his hands on his belt. It seemed that was Ahiru’s fetish.

Alice was still stab, stab, stabbing at the ground with the tip of the shovel.

Haruhiro was positioned almost directly behind Alice. He was prepared to move at any moment. Well, even if he moved, he’d just be sticking with Alice.

“Destroy them,” Ahiru repeated with a faint smile. He pulled his belt from his belt loops. It looked like no more than an ordinary black leather belt.

The moment Haruhiro thought that, the belt wrapped around Ahiru’s right fist on its own.

“Destroy them. They’re all fake, anyway. Destroy them all.”

“Oh, yeah?” Alice stopped raising and lowering the shovel, then chuckled. “You can’t destroy them yourself, so you want me to do it for you. Was that why you made me mad? You’re a pain in the butt, same as ever.”

Ahiru’s right leg started to quiver. His expression was unchanged, but he was unnerved. “I don’t think you’re one to talk about being a pain in the butt, princess.”

“Ahiru,” Alice said. “I don’t understand. If you want to take Yonaki Uguisu back, why don’t you?”

“If I could, I would,” Ahiru retorted. “You weren’t exactly playing the silly princess, dancing in the palm of the king’s hand because you wanted to, either.”

“Well, duh. That’s why I ran away. You can lick that piece of shit’s ass and tell him it’s delicious all you want, but she’s not coming back. Or maybe you’re waiting for that piece of shit to get tired of her pretty voice and throw her away? He’s more likely to smash her on the floor than toss her aside, if you ask me. Once he makes something his, he doesn’t give it to anyone. He’s a genuine piece of shit, after all.”

“...Maybe.”

“What exactly do you want, Ahiru?” Alice demanded. “What made you get me angry, and lure me here?”

“Me... lure you out? That... that wasn’t my intent.”

“Still, it’s weird, isn’t it?” Alice pointed out.

Haruhiro had no idea what half of anything the two were saying meant. However, Alice was overpowering Ahiru. That much was clear.

Ahiru looked ready to go into a frenzy. His belt-wrapped right fist might swing at Alice any second.

Even if it did, Alice would handle it easily. Ahiru probably knew that, too.

“There’s no way you can beat me,” Alice said. “I thought that was why you harassed me, trying to get me to go to the king. If you just leave me be, I’ll beat down that piece of shit in good time.”

“Yeah. I’ll bet. Not that I think you can.”

“Still, I’ll do it,” Alice went on. “That piece of shit hardly ever leaves his throne. If I’m going to strike him down, I’ll have to go to him. Once I’m ready, I’ll go take care of him. Ahiru, what are you doing?”

“I... acted under the king’s order...”

“You’re a talentless hack, and that piece of shit knows it, too. No one has any expectations for you. Not even Yonaki Uguisu, I’ll bet. She’s not dreaming of you coming for her on a white horse like some kind of prince.”

*I dunno what the situation is, but does Alice have to be so harsh about it?* Haruhiro was feeling more and more sympathetic to Ahiru. Alice was foul-mouthed. Without seeming to particularly enjoy it, Alice said things that cut deep with relative ease, no mincing words. Maybe there was no ill will there, but Alice could stand to hold back a little.

“Alice.” Ahiru put on a smile that could only be a bluff. Then, in a strained voice he said, “You’re a real piece of work.”

But, as was to be expected, Alice was unfazed. “Treat me like an ugly duckling all you want. I don’t mind one bit. But here’s the thing: I reckon you don’t want me to hate you.”

“...What?”

“Let me tell you how you really feel. Let me tell you your true feelings and wish, which you couldn’t admit to even if you knew them, and worse yet, can’t even become fully aware of.”

“Why would—”

“You’re not smart. On top of that, with Yonaki Uguisu taken hostage, you’re not thinking straight. You aren’t looking all that well at what you’re after, and what you’re doing. That’s why I’m saying I’ll tell you.”

“I...”

“Before that...” Head cocked to the side, Alice jerked it slightly.

With that little signal, Haruhiro got the message, and it pained him a little that his body responded half-automatically.

Haruhiro moved close to Alice. The moment he did, Alice’s shovel peeled.

That blackish skin formed a mutable shell. It defended Alice, attacking Alice's enemies. It might be fair to say the shovel's main body was Alice's heart. It was exposed, and easily wounded. Even the air hurt.

We... thought Haruhiro, shifting pronouns. When he held Alice from behind like this, he started to think as if he were Alice. He felt the main body of the shovel as if he was touching it himself.

It felt so raw, they both had to wonder why it wasn't bleeding. It was soft and moist. Meat, tissue, and organ. It had a thudding pulse. The hundreds, no, thousands of strands the skin split into as it spread out were hard and not easy to destroy. Even if the skin broke or shattered, it was no big deal. It would be fine no matter what, but the main body would not. It was dangerously fragile. Honestly, it was painful just holding it like this. They were both enduring it. It was all false bravado.

"Stop!" Ahiru shouted. He wasn't just raising his voice. With pain on his face, he begged, "Please, stop it!"

*I can't get enough of it, both of them thought. I love that expression. But he can give me better than that.*

The skin of the shovel let out a groan, flying out of the plaza and mowing down one statue of Yonaki Uguisu after another.

They laughed. They hadn't meant to laugh out loud, but they couldn't help themselves. Laughing, they broke a second, third, fourth, and fifth Yonaki Uguisu.

*I might be a sadist. I won't deny it. I wouldn't do anything this awful to the real Yonaki Uguisu, though, of course. She's a bird in a cage, like her name, nightingale. I feel sorry for her. But these statues Ahiru made, they're not her. I can't stand the way Ahiru does nothing but make these things. So, I'll destroy them. Slice them up with the skin. Crush them. Smash them. Destroy, and destroy, and destroy them like mad.*

"Ah...!" Ahiru clutched his head as he watched. He looked this way and that, finally falling to his knees.

*This is hilarious. What can you do but laugh? For all that he cries, "Stop it, stop*

*it, please!" he's not doing much to stop me. I know it's impossible for him to stop me, but he could show some spirit, at least.*

*But Ahiru won't. Because this is what he wants. He made them with great care, and they've gotten a lot closer than his first efforts, and now he wants to destroy these statues that look like Yonaki Uguisu.*

*Because, in the end, they're not her. They can't replace her. Even so, Ahiru can't bring himself to destroy them. The statues look like her, so try as he might, he can't harm them with his own hands. Even though they're not her. Is he an idiot? He probably is.*

*Ahiru's already on his knees crying. That pretentious ass is so confident in his looks, he's always trying to act cool. Now his beard's a mess of snot and tears. Serves him right. This is beyond hilarious.*

*Well, not that I'm gonna smash them all.*

*I mean, that's too much effort.*

*There's too damn many. Like, how many'd he make? This is Parano, so if the mood took him, he could make an infinite number. There's a thing called limits, you know. You're an idiot. A real idiot.*

*That said, there's just one statue left on top of the hill.*

*The masterpiece in the center of the plaza. Ahiru must have decided that one would be the last, making sure every fine detail was perfect. But if it hadn't come to this, it wouldn't have been the last. He would never have been satisfied, and he'd have made another.*

*Making statues is an act of substitution.*

*He'll never be able hold her in his arms again, so he consoles himself by constantly making statues.*

*How pitiful.*



“Yeah.” Thrusting the reskinned shovel into the ground, they both nodded.

“Oh, that felt good.”

Haruhiro moved away from Alice. He put some distance between them, then slumped to the ground.

He wasn’t part of “they” anymore, but “he.”

“For me, too.” Ahiru was sitting with his legs in a W shape like a girl, staring up at the polka dot sky with a vacant look. He didn’t wipe the tears, snot, and drool. “I see now. I wanted to end it. ...I see.”

“You want to lick the king’s asshole again?” Alice queried.

“No. I’ve had enough.”

“Well then, Ahiru. You’re going to be my spy.”

Ahiru looked up at Alice, using the sleeve of his coat to wipe the area around his mouth a bit. He had a look on his face like he was daydreaming. A small flame lit up in the back of those eyes.

“A spy... you say?”

Alice laughed then said, “That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

## 7. Just Having You There [only\_you]



When they came out of a tunnel, it was a castle.

If you said it like that, it might not make a whole lot of sense, but Kuzaku didn't really understand it, either. Could you blame him?

*Damn, that's a high ceiling! he thought. This is way too wide, this corridor... Is that what it is? Huh? Is it? It's too wide, so I'm not confident I can call it a corridor. What is it? Like, there's this hall-esque space that goes on forever?*

*The floor, is it marble? Maybe? It's made of something hard and glossy that's probably stone, I think? It's a brownish color? Light brown? Though, despite that calm color, it's all glittery and sparkly. Truly gorgeeeeous. Well, not to the point that I needed to stretch that "e."*

*Actually, is it gorgeous? There are countless chandelier-like lights hanging from the ceiling, and they're reflecting off the floor like nobody's business. It's like they're trying to upend the concept of reflection. That's the kind of super reflection we've got going on here.*

Imagine, with no prior knowledge, you were asked to tell someone what this place was. For Kuzaku's part, he could say they were indoors, but not much else.

Io-sama was leading the dread knight Gomi, the paladin Tonbe, and Bossari, who was also known as Kuzaku, across the indoors.

"Where are we?" Kuzaku asked her.

"The castle," she shot back.

"*The castle,*" huh? So that was no doubt where they were. He considered he might have misheard her, but it really was a castle. What was there to mishear,

anyway?

It took him a while to realize it, but the corridor was filled with shadows that were starting to take three-dimensional form. They were kind of like, well, halfway between human or animal, or something. Also, they were moving.

“What do you think that is...?” Kuzaku asked.

He didn’t mean to ask anyone in particular, just putting it out there in a, *Hey, could someone maybe explain it for me?* sort of way. “Quit starin’,” Gomi warned him.

*Not that it matters, but his trash accent’s way too thick.*

“Those things, they’re servants of the king,” Gomi went on. “Ya could say they used to be servants. Nah, that’s not it. Anyway, they’re what’s left of them. Ya make the king mad, ya may end up like that yerself. Be careful, would ya? It’d be a burden on Io-sama.”

“...Huh?” Kuzaku said. “The power of someone called... the king... did that to them? You’re telling me they were originally human?”

“Well, yeah...”

Gomi trailed off. In a way that was uncharacteristic of him, there seemed to be something deeper going on, as if he wanted to say, *Don’t ask me any more.*

In any case, he wasn’t being very clear. Could it be about *that*, maybe?

While continuing to walk, Kuzaku turned to look back.

The shadows generally kept their distance from Io-sama’s group, which included Kuzaku. They were all heading in different directions, too. Out of all of them, that one shadow was following the group.

There wasn’t much he knew for sure about Io other than that she was a priest, and that her beauty was out of this world, but as for Gomi and Tonbe, they were fairly skilled. There was no way they hadn’t noticed that shadow. But they were ignoring it.

Was it because it was an insignificant shadow? That could be it, but he didn’t want to think that was all it was.

Even if they were in the Daybreakers, just like Kuzaku and his friends, the two groups had never met before, so Kuzaku had little information on the Io-sama Squad. However, there should have been more than three of them. He didn't recall any names other than Io's, but most parties consisted of five or six people, and he felt like there had been a few more than just Tonbe and Gomi.

It might be that the shadow had once been a member of the Io-sama Squad. They'd angered the king, and been turned into a shadow. That might be what had become of Io's comrades.

How long was this corridor? No matter how extravagant and gorgeous it was, it wasn't as heart-moving once you got used to it.

While being chased around by Shihoru, running away, trying to talk her around, giving up on that as impossible, deciding, "No, if we talk, she'll understand," then nearly getting killed and running away, he'd been desperate. Thanks to that, he hadn't had the composure to do much careful thinking, but where was Haruhiro, where was Merry, where was Setora, and where was Kiichi right now?

*Nah, they're probably fine, he told himself. I mean, I'm in one piece, so how can everyone else not be?*

*Shihoru-san ended up like that, though.*

*Well, she's alive, at least. And stronger, if anything.*

*But is that really Shihoru-san?*

*Like, isn't it kind of not? I dunno, but she's totally different. She's not supposed to be like that. I thought that if we talked, she'd understand. That was what I thought. That was what I tried to think. It's just, maybe I just wanted to think that, you know? If I calm down and think about it. Thinking it'd work out if we talked? That transformation wasn't something on a level where that was going to be enough.*

*Are you gonna be able to get back to normal, Shihoru-san? Can you turn back? Is there a way? I can't think of one.*

*What about Haruhiro and the others?*

*They must be okay... I think. Well, we've been through plenty of jams before now. We've gotten by. It'll be the same this time. That's—Wait, is that all the basis I have?*

Perhaps they came up lacking compared to Soma's party, which everyone said was the strongest, or the legendary Akira-san's party, or the Typhoon Rocks party, but the Io-sama Squad was famous for being a party of highly capable volunteer soldiers.

Kuzaku didn't mean to put down himself or his comrades, but in terms of general rating, the Io-sama Squad was a cut above Kuzaku's own party.

And even the Io-sama Squad had been reduced to three members.

*This place is crazy, isn't it?*

*It's dangerous, right? Clearly.*

*It's crazy... Yeah.*

*Now, this is just a maybe, but...*

*Maybe not everyone is okay.*

*Maybe they might not even meet the bare minimum of being alive.*

"Um..." Kuzaku crouched down where he was.

He couldn't walk. Not a step. He couldn't even stay standing. It all hit him at once. The feeling of despondency.

If he thought about it carefully, there was no way he wouldn't be exhausted. But that wasn't what this was about, was it? It was more than that.

He held his stomach, crouching. It was a type of hunger, maybe.

"I haven't eaten a thing..."

His stomach felt like it was paper-thin. It was so empty, it hurt. The feelings of starvation assaulted his body en masse from inside. He felt an aching, burning pain behind his eyes, and the blaze traveled from his nose, to his mouth, to spread through his throat.

*Ohhhhhhhh! It's hot! Hot! I'm burning!*

“My throat... Oh, right, I haven’t drunk anything, either...”

His stomach felt like an evil dragon, trying to escape through his mouth and claw out his eyes. Wait, what did that even mean?

While he rolled around in unbearable agony, someone scolded him, “Suck it up.”

They could say that all they wanted, but it was clearly impossible. *Water, water, water, water, water, give me water!* he tried to scream. Or rather, he probably was screaming.

He was either pushed over or kicked himself over, he wasn’t sure which, but either way, Kuzaku flipped.

—*Heavy!*

*Damn, that’s heavy. Is it Tonbe? Don’t mount me. Man, you’re heavy. Too damn heavy.*

“Hang in there! Hang in there, Bossari!” Tonbe said as punched Kuzaku in the face.

Kuzaku instinctively tried to block with both arms, but Tonbe’s fists demolished his defense in no time and broke through.

After thirty or forty hits, he was losing consciousness. If Io hadn’t stopped it, he would have likely passed out.

“That’s enough, Tonbe,” she snapped. “We can’t use light magic here, so we can’t heal him. It’d be a pain if he died on us.”

“Sorry, Io-sama! I hate this guy, so I got serious, despite myself!”

*Those were serious punches? Kuzaku thought. I mean, the way you mounted me before attacking, that was too good. You get respect for that. It pisses me off, though. What kind of person are you? And hold on, we can’t use light magic? Yeah, I had a feeling about that. The power of the gods doesn’t reach here, or something.*

He had a lot he wanted to say, but the damage was too heavy for him to talk. The way hunger and thirst worked here had been explained to him, but only half of it had stuck.

"Anyway, you've got to be tough," Io told him. "Tough it out. Now, stand up, Bossari. We're going."

*Io-sama, you're so harsh*, Kuzaku moaned silently. From the bottom of his heart, he thought, *I wish I could introduce her to Haruhiro*.

Then he stood up on his own, chasing after the three who were moving along ahead of him. His face hurt. He was bleeding, too. His eyes were puffy, and his field of vision was narrow, so narrow.

*I'm getting treated pretty awful, huh? Good comrades are a treasure*, he realized. It made him want to cry.

"Damn it," he muttered. "This king, or whatever he is... Is this any time to be meeting him? I don't particularly want to. I've gotta find Haruhiro and the others..."

But if he managed to reunite with any of them, he'd have to talk about Shihoru.

*Like, Shihoru's wandering around practically naked for some reason. Man, that was lewd. I guess that's something I shouldn't say. I can't say it. Also, her tears are sparkling and pretty, but they're crazy dangerous. Man, I have to admit, my vocabulary sucks. My face hurts, and my spirits are heavy. My feet feel heavy, too, though.*

That shadow was following them again. He was starting to feel more and more sorry for it. Though, sorry or not, it wasn't like he could do anything.

Finally, they hit the end of the corridor.

It seemed there were a number of corridors coming off of a theater-like space, and Kuzaku and the rest had been walking through one of them. Past here, it was more and more like a field. It wasn't a field, though.

When they descended those smooth, glossy stairs all the way, was that a round stage? There was a column rising in the center of it.

*What is this place? he wondered. Is it for gathering an audience and putting on events, or something? No? Well, whatever it is, it's even prettier than the floor. I can't see if light's shining down from above, but it's all so shiny.*

*Whew. Amazing. Though I kinda feel like, “Yeah, so what?” I can’t deny it. I don’t have time for this stuff, seriously.*

The steps were short of thirty centimeters, and there were not just a hundred of them, but probably more than two hundred. The theater area was needlessly big, too.

On the way down, he tried asking, “Do I have to meet this king?”

“The king rules all of Parano, ya know?” Gomi said.

Gomi’s accent was starting to grate on him. He even felt a slight urge to kill the man.

“Uh, right, but I’m not interested,” Kuzaku said. “I’ve got other things to do...”

“Those don’t matter,” Gomi shot back. “Yer lo-sama’s lackey. Ya just do what lo-sama tells ya to do.”

“I’m grateful for the help, but honestly, the lackey thing, that’s kinda... a bit much? Maybe? I don’t think it works that way. You people can do what you like, though.”

“You people’?” Gomi snarled. “Ya think yer better than us, Bossari?”

Tonbe laughed nasally. “Leave him be, Gomi.”

That nasal laugh made Kuzaku want to punt Tonbe down these stairs and watch him tumble hysterically.

However, Tonbe wasn’t just a fatty. He was a strong, hefty man who could move really well, so even if Kuzaku wanted to do that, he couldn’t.

“You’ll see when you meet the king,” Tonbe smirked. “It will be painfully obvious that the best plan in Parano is to do as the king commands. If you’re enough of an idiot not to understand that, your fate’s already decided.”

“Is he scary?” Kuzaku asked warily.

“Did I not tell you you’ll understand when you meet him? Are you a nincompoop? You are, I bet. You nincompoop. You’re a worse nincompoop than the shit I squeeze out my ass. A nincompoop that’s worse than shit! That’s pretty bad!”

Kuzaku almost gave in to his destructive impulse. Not good.

*I can't hear you, I can't hear you, I can't hear you*, he chanted inside his head, blocking out Tonbe's voice.

*I just won't talk to them*, he thought to himself. *These guys have some damn defective personalities. Why in the world does Io even keep them as lackeys? Having lackeys at all is weird enough. The Rocks were mostly weird, and Akira-san and his team were a bunch of supermen. The Daybreakers don't have enough normal people. Man, I wanna see Haruhiro. Just having him with you, it's kind of soothing, you know...*

Kuzaku hung his head as he descended the steps in silence.

*Now that I've come this far, I'll go down, okay? But how far are we going down? Where can I stop? We're still going down? We're going to keep going down?*

He felt like he had been descending the steps for an indeterminably long amount of time.

Finally, at last, they reached the stage-like area at the bottom.

It seemed Io had business with that pillar.

Except, when he followed her, it wasn't a pillar. There was a door. It opened on its own.

When they went inside, there was a round room.

Incredibly, though you couldn't see the inside from outside, the outside was visible from inside. Everything but the floor and ceiling was transparent.

The door closed. The room itself started to move.

"An elevator, huh..." Kuzaku whispered, eyeing Io to see what she did.

Io removed her mask, looking closely at the transparent walls. *Whew!* She let out a sigh, but her tense expression didn't soften. She was clearly on edge.

It wasn't just Io. Tonbe and Gomi were tense, too. They were a fairly high level dread knight and paladin. Was the king of Parano that insane?

The elevator continued to rise. It just wasn't stopping. They must be going a

pretty long way up, but mysteriously, the view outside hadn't changed much.

"Hold on, we've simply gone up too much," Kuzaku muttered.

The moment he did, he felt himself nearly thrown not upwards, but backwards.

"Whoa?!"

He managed to steady himself somehow, but if he had felt like he was being thrown backwards, were they moving forward? As he thought that, he was shaken to the right this time.

"Ah?!"

Io, Tonbe, and Gomi were lowering their posture and trying to endure it. Kuzaku decided to emulate them.

*But if you knew this was coming, say so! Would it have killed you to tell me?* he thought resentfully, but there was no time to complain.

"Nwah?! Doh?! Bwuh?! Goh?! Ubah?! Zeh...?!"

Each time the elevator suddenly changed direction or turned, Kuzaku would fall and get up, get up and fall.

Io had at some point started leaning on the invisible wall for support. Gomi and Tonbe were creating a wall around her. Neither of them would lay a finger on Io, but they wouldn't let Kuzaku, who was rolling around all over the place, touch her, either.

*Man, their loyalty is something else, he grimaced. I don't respect it, though.*

"Gwah...!"

The elevator, of course, came to a sudden stop, the doors opened in unison, and Kuzaku rolled out through them.

*My eyes are spinning. I'm spread-eagled on the ground. I feel sick. What even is this place?*

"Urgh... Ahh..." he moaned.

It was harsh treatment. As he was groaning, he got kicked in the stomach.

"Get yer ass up!" Gomi yelled.

*That hurts*, Kuzaku tried to complain. But his voice wouldn't come out.

He felt an unpleasant chill. His whole body seemed to shrink from the cold. It was an incredible chill, unlike any he had experienced before. He didn't feel like he could move at all.

Despite that, Kuzaku jumped to his feet. That was what he had to do now, and failing to do so would bring about the worst possible result. His sixth sense pushed him to do it.

Kuzaku held his breath. Or rather, he couldn't breathe properly.

Before riding the elevator, the corridor and theater area had been impressive, but this place was on another level. It was like a limestone cave, with things jutting out of the ceiling, the walls, and even the floor. But those weren't stalactites or stalagmites. They were linear or curved instead, making them appear artificial. These surroundings had a dark, significant feeling on the whole, and felt way too oppressive.

The wall directly in front of them was the only white one. It even looked phosphorescent. He thought it might be a glass window at first, but it wasn't transparent.

Was it milky white? Or was it not glass at all?

In front of the white wall there was a step, several of them, maybe tens of steps, going up.

Up top, was that a chair? The blackish, rectangular back of it was wrapped with chains, and there were arm rests, too. It had a somewhat, no, a rather strange form, but, well, it was probably a chair. Was that what you'd call a throne?

*This is the king's place.*

It was a far cry from Kuzaku's vague imaginings. But he wasn't wrong.

The man sitting on the throne, his legs crossed, was the king. Even without being told, he could tell that. If that wasn't the king, Parano had no king.

Even if the bearded man hadn't been wearing a black crown, he wouldn't

have looked like anything but a king. The man wore tight-fitting leather, or something similar, but as for whether it was suitable attire for royalty, Kuzaku couldn't say. When he heard the word *king*, he imagined something more gaudy, more florid, with clothing and accessories that were obviously opulent.

However, this was a king. If there was a king here, this was the king's hall.

Kuzaku's eyes were fixated on the throne... or rather, on the king and nothing else.

The king was far away. Kuzaku's sense of distance seemed to be going crazy, because while he couldn't tell how many meters away it was, the throne had to be tens of meters away. Despite that, he could make the king out clearly.

He'd be tall when standing. The king's legs were awfully long and slender.

He couldn't have been in his thirties. He was forty, maybe fifty. His face was appropriately wrinkled, and he had a short, salt-and-pepper beard. His hair was short, too. Had he not been smiling, he might have given off a different impression, but if anything, he seemed to have a gentle expression. His eyes, in particular, seemed almost kind.

Still, he was frightening.

Just by being there, he made the air in this royal hall harden and solidify.

The countless sharp growths must have sprouted because of the king.

The reason this royal hall was black was because the king was here.

The king's existence defined this place. No, he conquered it, dominated it.

Naturally, it was the same with Kuzaku. He was ruled by the king.

As proof of that, he had prostrated himself before the king at some point, bowing his head, and was peering at him with upturned eyes, as if stealing a glimpse of the king. Tonbe, Gomi, and even Io had also each taken a knee, just like Kuzaku.

For as long as they were here, there was no other choice. Tonbe had said he'd understand when he met the king, and there was no choice but to do as the king said.

He was right.

“Hello, Io.” The king’s voice was low, soft, and deep. It was the sort of older male voice girls might like, but for some reason, it was thunderous, beating Kuzaku and the others into submission.

Just hearing him speak once, Kuzaku was trembling and ready to cry.

Io’s voice when she responded was awfully weak. “...Yes, Your Majesty.”

*This king, he’s crazy, Kuzaku thought wildly. Beyond crazy. I don’t know a thing about him. That’s crazy to the max. In a way, this might be the very definition of crazy. He’s seriously, legitimately crazy. It’s like, wait, this is the king?*

“You’ve brought something with you, I see,” the king said. “A newcomer?”

“Yes, sire...” Io murmured. “In order to serve you, sire... I felt it was my duty... my duty as your vassal. That is why I have brought him before you.”

“How admirable.”

“...Thank you, sire.”

“One can never have too many vassals. If they’re useful, that is.”

“If... if you feel that he cannot be of service to you... do with him as you please.”

*Whoa, what? I dunno, does she mean... Huh? Kuzaku’s mind raced. Those shadows—they said those are what’s left of those who’ve angered the king, right?*

*If he can’t use me, she’s asking him to turn me into a shadow?*

*That’d kind of be a massive problem for me, you know?*

Due to his slight anger and antipathy towards Io, and the feeling of irritation, his awe of the king seemed to have weakened slightly. Kuzaku was finally able to observe things other than the king.

To put it another way, he had only been able to see the king up until now. Just how incredible was this king?

There was a dais in the back of the royal hall, and on it was the throne. Behind

the throne was the window or wall that emitted white light. However, there were many other things, too. The most eyecatching thing was hanging from the ceiling.

Was that a massive bird cage? No, it might be a cage, but not a bird cage. It was shaped like a bird cage, but that was no bird shut inside.

It was a human.

A brown coat, worn over a white dress. Long hair. Her face wasn't visible, but from the shape of her body, she was likely a woman.

There was a king, so was she his queen, maybe?

No.

In what world would you find a husband who kept his wife in a cage? Okay, there might be rare cases where it happened. Was that what he was into?

There were stairs in front of the throne, and it was possible to go up to or descend from the dais. He realized now that everywhere aside from those stairs, there were cells. They were separated into small cages, each with a prisoner inside. He could see some slumped against the bars, too. Listening closely, he heard their voices.

"Io-samaaa..."

It wasn't clear which prisoner was saying it, but he was definitely calling out to Io.

At least one of Io's comrades, a member of the Io-sama Squad, had been taken captive. Another had been turned into a shadow by the king. It made sense now.

*So that's what's going on here, huh?*

Io hadn't submitted to the authority of the king and sworn loyalty to him. She wasn't just terrified of his massive power after he had turned one of her comrades into a shadow, either.

He had a hostage.

If the hostage was a member of the Io-sama Squad, then even if he was a

faceless stranger to Kuzaku, he was still a comrade through the Daybreakers.

Kuzaku couldn't just say, *Not my problem. I don't care.*

*I can't defy the king, he thought, mind racing. Even if I don't want to obey, I have to for now. Either way, it's impossible. Defying a guy like that? Not a chance.*

He couldn't help but wonder if the woman in the cage was someone else's hostage, and think that, if the king was really so great, he shouldn't act like such a petty villain.

Kuzaku's hostility might have leaked out, but he wasted no time in smothering it.

*No way. I can't take him. I don't really get it, but I can tell it's impossible even without understanding why. Honestly, I'm afraid to even look at the king. I don't want to see him. And yet, I'm looking.*

*Still, what's with that?*

*That throne.*

*Like, the back rest?*

*It's simply oversized. The armrests and seat fit the king. It's just the back rest that's weirdly tall, and wide. It looks hard, too. On top of that, it's wrapped in chains. It's like the armrests and seat were added later, and he's forcing himself to use that back rest. I'm not even sure it's a back rest to begin with.*

*I mean, there are all sorts of engravings, and the edge seems to be reinforced with a different material, but that shape...*

*From the look of it, is it a door?*

"From now on, you, too, are my vassal." The king was trying to use a large door as a back rest, but was being forced to cross his legs because he couldn't rest his back against it. He grinned at Kuzaku. "If you grind your bones to dust, working hard until you satisfy me, I will give you a reward. I hope you will be a useful vassal."

Kuzaku tried to open his mouth.

*Why? Huh? Why'd I try to open my mouth? I have no clue. No clue at all. I'm sweating like mad. This is crazy.*

*Io's glaring at me as if to say, "Don't say anything." Yeah, I know. No, I won't say anything. Not a word.*

The king laid his eyes on Kuzaku with a smile.

*Come on, just say something yourself. Scold us, or anything. The silence is only making this scarier.*

Maybe the king was acting this way in order to scare Kuzaku. If it was a calculated move, wasn't that sneaky? Thinking about it that way, Kuzaku's fear lessened a little.

*Only a bit, though. He's still scaaaa-ry. He's so scary, I feel like I might wither into a dry husk. More like I've already started.*

Suddenly, there was a strange sound from behind. He hadn't even been able to breathe properly before, but somehow he was able to turn and look.

There was a pillar rising from floor to ceiling. It was the elevator Kuzaku and the rest had ridden in.

Its door opened. Out came a man in a moss green coat with a fur collar.

His long hair was a little wavy, and he had stubble. He seemed listless, degenerate, and a little filthy, but still stylish somehow. To put it simply, he was the type that seemed like he'd be popular with girls.

Looking at Kuzaku and the rest, the man frowned a little, immediately looking away as he approached the dais.

"Ahiru," the king said.

As the king called him, the man stopped and knelt, bowing deeply. "Your Majesty... It is an honor to lay eyes on you again."

"Yonaki Uguisu sings as finely as ever. Just for me."

When the king said that, the man who was apparently called Ahiru didn't quite tremble, but he tensed up. Kuzaku saw it.

Looking to the woman in the cage for a moment, then back, Kuzaku thought,

*It was him.*

The woman was like a shell of a person, but her position had changed from before. He couldn't say for certain, but she was likely looking at Ahiru. Like Io and her group, Ahiru had that Yonaki Uguisu woman being held over him as a hostage.

Kuzaku lowered his eyes, and bit his lip. *Ohhhhh, I'm pissed.*

No matter how detestable a bastard he was, there was no defying the king. If he defied him, it would be all over. That was one thing he couldn't do a thing about.

"Yonaki Uguisu always pleases me, yet you return to me with nothing, Ahiru?" the king asked.

"...I'm sorry."

"I believe you were able to sing, too. Why don't you perform a song for us here?"

"Spare me, please. I haven't sung in ages. I wouldn't want to sully your ears."

"In that case, hurry and bring Alice back."

"As you're aware, sire, that princess is a tough one," Ahiru said. "It's embarrassing to admit, but I don't have the strength to win, so I went and smashed up the princess's house."

"Well, well. Alice must be awfully angry, I'm sure."

"Maybe enough to come storming in here."

"Can Alice make it through the Scarlet Forest, like before, when running away?" the king mused.

"I wonder... Knowing the princess, maybe."

"Before coming here, Alice may try to kill you first, Ahiru."

"I'm... good at running away, if nothing else."

"You mean to lure Alice here," the king said. "That's your plan, is it, Ahiru?"

"If it doesn't work... I'll think of something else. There's time. No... maybe

there's no time at all."

"You could say both that there is no time, and there is unlimited time. We are eternal," the king said. "The eternity that should be impossible to attain, no matter how desperately we crave it, is now in our hands. We need no longer measure ourselves in human terms, yet we are forced to. This is karma. Cast aside karma."

"I can't understand complicated things, but I'll think hard on it... sire."

"Leave me," the king told Io. "I wish to hear Yonaki Uguisu's voice."

"We're going," Io said in a whisper.

When Kuzaku looked up, Io, Tonbe, and Gomi were taking their leave.

Ahiru wasn't moving. Yonaki Uguisu was still facing Ahiru, too.

*Thud, thud, thud.* The king stomped his foot on the ground as he ordered, "Get. Out. Now."

Kuzaku shot up like a bullet, and did an about-face.

*Sca-ry. I nearly wet myself.*

Wondering what was going on, he looked towards Ahiru. Ahiru followed after Kuzaku and the rest like he was running away, too. His back hunched, his right hand clutching his left breast, both eyes rolled back, his teeth gritted, and a face like a fiend.

This man wasn't fully loyal to the king, either. If anything, he was suppressing his feeling of, *I'll kill him, I swear I'll kill him*, and serving the king because he had no choice.

"Um, what is our job?" Kuzaku asked Io on the way to the elevator.

"To finish them off," Io said quickly. "Every last human in Parano. That, or bring them to the king, and make them swear loyalty. That is a vassal's duty."

"...Oh, yeah?"

*Just maybe, Kuzaku started to think, Io is pretending to serve the king, while actually gathering comrades. Then, when the time comes, she'll pull the king down from his throne. If the king is removed, we can open that door. What's*

*through the door? Can we go back to Grimgar? Can we no longer return?*

*More importantly, I have to find Haruhiro and the others first. But what about Shihoru? There are too many problems. In times like this, I really do need Haruhiro. Without Haruhiro there, I can't do anything.*

*Haruhiro...*

## 8. Their Song [honesty]



Once upon a time, there was an unsuccessful singer.

However, the singer had doubts about that. What, exactly, did it mean to be unsuccessful?

The proud singer thought, *My songs aren't something to be sold. It takes an impoverished soul to only see value in things based on whether or not they make money, doesn't it?*

Songs are art. Art is the pursuit of beauty, and the expression of it. Beauty is that which transcends petty personal interest and taste in order to move people's hearts. That feeling of being moved is, in itself, beauty.

Because people were moved by the singer's songs, and felt the beauty in them, he received offers to form a band, and to hold concerts.

Each time someone said they were going to make a killing, and the singer was held up as a golden goose, the singer cocked his head to the side.

*That's weird*, he would think. *The money doesn't matter at all, does it?*

If the singer could sing songs that made his entire body tingle and his soul connect to the audience, that was enough. That was better than having sex with a woman. It felt so unbelievably amazing, no one who hadn't experienced it could even imagine.

The singer made songs, sang them, captivated audiences, and gained massive support in certain quarters. The singer had bandmates, and his relationship with them was good, at first, but it gradually became more fraught. That was because whenever someone brought them an offer that would bring in money to the singer, he chased them away.

Both the singer and his bandmates sweated hard at work, then made use of their down time to practice, and put great effort into the concerts.

*Isn't this good?* the singer thought. As long as he did things this way, he didn't have to sing for money.

However, his bandmates were apparently dissatisfied.

"We could make it," they asserted. "We could be successful. We could make a living off our music."

If they did that, they wouldn't have to work, and they could devote themselves entirely to the music.

"Now, listen," the singer cautioned his bandmates. "If we did that, the songs, our performances, they wouldn't be pure anymore. If we use them to earn money, they're no different from any other labor."

Despite that, his bandmates said, "Whatever. We've gone as far as we can while working jobs. Come on, let's do it. It'll be fine. We just need one hit. We can do it."

Finally, the singer gave in. "Okay, fine. In exchange, I'm going to do things my way, just like always. You're all right with that, right?"

"That's fine," his bandmates all agreed.

And so the singer did what he wanted.

When it came to the songs, the singer was sincere, and he pulled no punches. In writing them, he was not just earnest, but desperately so. He turned only the things he truly thought and felt into lyrics, honestly conveying them exactly as they were. He was merciless, and at times cruel.

If he was going to be honest, then he couldn't depict even a woman he loved from the bottom of his heart as just beautiful. There times when, after they made love, and she fell into a slovenly state of slumber, snoring loudly, he suddenly felt he hated her.

There were times he wanted to say, *How could you feed me this disgusting slop?* and nights he masturbated thinking about another woman.

*Oh, but in this moment, more than anyone, more than anything, I love her!* To

shout that out loud, with no shame, that was honesty. *I don't know about tomorrow. I might throw you out some day, like a piece of oversized garbage, but for now I love you.*

When it came to his bandmates, the singer hid nothing there, either.

"You suck. Just quit. Why can't you do this properly? Go redo your lives a few times. I like you guys, but right now, I want to kill the lot of you. I mean, you've lost your spirit. You aren't serious at all. I'm right, aren't I?"

And the singer occasionally shouted at them.

"It's not about money! We don't play music for the money, damn it! I'll yield a little, no, a lot, and say it's fine if money comes in, but don't put money before us. If we want money, and we're just doing it for the money, we're through. That's not music anymore. The value of singing it, or listening to it, is zero. Zero! Why don't you get it? We've been together all this time, so when did you all become such trash? If I had to choose between you lot and a pile of vomit, I'd take the vomit. A bunch of flies swarming around a pile of shit would be better than all of you right now. I can't love any of you now. I wish you'd all just die, seriously."

Saying, *I can't take any more of this*, one member of the band left, then another, until eventually the singer was alone.

With only a singer, there was no band anymore. Despite that, the singer still called himself a band, sincerely putting his life into the songs he wrote, filling them with all his heart.

He sang about love and hatred, justice and injustice, the artifice of morality, the contradictions of the world, truth and lies, and freedom. He did it all without fear, facing the people head-on.

"You know, everyone says they like me," the singer addressed the crowd. "Why the hell is that? What's so great about me? That I can sing? That I write lyrics that resonate with you? Do you feel like I speak for you? Or is it because being the kind of person who likes me makes you feel special? Whatever it is, that's not why I sing. I sing for me only. These are my feelings, not yours. We're completely different people. We have almost nothing in common, okay? When you talk like you get me or something, what's with that? I mean, I don't

understand any of you people, okay? Understanding people's not that easy, is it? Are you all really that serious? I can't promise anything other than that I won't lie to you. How do you all feel about that?"

There were those who saw the singer as a victim of commercialism, a martyr for art, and forgave him.

Others condemned him, saying he was a child whose ego had gotten too big, an immature, wannabe revolutionary, and a clown who misunderstood things.

Yet others said the singer thought he was a tragic genius, but a failure to adapt to the world basically showed a lack of talent, and while maybe he had put out some good songs, they predicted, with cold laughter, that he would disappear, soon to be forgotten.

"Fine, let them say what they like," the singer said dismissively, shooting back at his critics in his songs.

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.

If they weren't ready to be punched, they shouldn't have raised their fists in the first place. They thought they were casting stones at him from afar, but the singer wasn't some scarecrow that would stand still. He could go up to them and throw stones right back.

*"If someone gets you, you get them right back."* That was the singer's motto. He didn't hold back the things he thought; he put them into words, and sharpened them.

When the singer's words became sharp blades, he couldn't help but hurt people. However, even things said casually can, at times, carve deeply into the heart. That is what it means to be human. No one can live without being hurt, or hurting others.

Is it not beautiful that, even as our bodies and hearts are covered in wounds, dripping blood, and we nearly die of blood loss, we still drag ourselves onward, ever onward?

If someone doesn't want to be hurt, they should hang themselves and die. Then they'll never be hurt again. We're all going to die eventually, so today, tomorrow, it's all the same.

*How dare they up and die like that!* Someone might get angry. *Why did they have to die?* Someone might be saddened. But the dead will never know that.

If it hurts, if it's unbearable, and they can't take it, they should just run away. Even if people try to stop them, there's no stopping a person truly intent on ending their own life. The emergency exit known as our own deaths is always right beside us, and it's a realistic option.

Some people say it's a grave sin, but even if you were to lay the weight of that sin on the grave of the deceased, only the living could be sickened by it, and the dead would not feel a thing. That is because the dead are no more.

The singer never once said, *Don't criticize me, don't hit me, don't kick me, don't throw stones at me.*

"Do whatever you want. Say what you like. Hit me if you want to. You can bite me, and if you want to bash my head open with a rock, do it. But I'll be doing what I want to, too, and I'm not gonna take it quietly. Let's make a bloody mess of each other. It's fine. We'll be even that way, right?"

One by one, people moved away from the singer and his one man band.

One person said this.

"I can't take this anymore. You're exhausting to be around."

*In the end, you're just being selfish*, some said, insulting the singer.

"Yeah, I'm selfish. What of it?"

"Don't be defiant. This is why you'll always be a child, unable to change. You never grow as a person. Why don't you try thinking about others? Grow up already. You can't, can you? You're just a dumb kid, after all. I bet you think it's cool to act this way. Well, you're wrong."

That person shouted until they were red in the face, then went off somewhere and never came back.

There was someone who declared, "You're through," and then turned their backs on the singer, too. "To be blunt, everyone thinks so. You're the only one who doesn't get it."

The singer was mystified. He was making his songs with sincerity, singing his

heart out, the same as he ever had. The singer hadn't changed in the least. Despite that, his bandmates started saying, *We can do it, we'll be a hit*, with dreams stained by greed. People sang his praises, all of them started feeling good about it on their own. Eventually they started to complain and shower him with abuse, saying they'd been wrong about him, or that it wasn't supposed to be like this. They could only take so much, they'd say, and then they eventually left the singer's side.

The singer had loved a number of women, but they were the same.

At first every woman said things like, *This is destiny*, or, *I'll never break up with you, no matter what*, or *I want to be together until the day I die*, or, *Please, just don't abandon me*. But then eventually they would start to complain, saying, *You don't know what kindness is*, or, *You've gone off the rails*, or, *You're a failure*, or, *You're defective*, or, *You're a psychotic monster*. In the end they would say, *Give me back the time I spent with you*, and, *You're worthless*, and, *You're no different from a pimp*, and all sorts of other horrible things. When he kicked them out of anger they'd go on about how he injured them, or he'd given them a nosebleed, or he'd twisted their bones. Some even demanded compensation money.

There was just one.

She was different from all of them.

The day he met her, "I don't like your songs," she told the singer. "Your songs are all force. They lack delicacy. It's like you're intoxicated with yourself. They're improvised, one-offs. Only good in the moment, without a shred of universality. You say your songs are art, but I don't think you could be more conceited. What you do is like masturbating in front of people, and then saying, 'Look at me, brazenly jacking off in public like this, aren't I awesome?'"

The singer was, of course, enraged. However, it was true the singer had focused on the one-time nature of a given moment, and rather than refine what he was saying with craft, he expressed things as they really were. He had also basically been tooting his own horn, saying, *If I want to masturbate, I'll do it in front of people. I'm so honest. This is how the real deal acts. I'm awesome, huh?* She was on the mark. It would be wrong to get mad.

"You may be right. But it pisses me off," the singer told her.

"That's a very cultured attitude, and I find it more likable than your songs."

"I dunno what you're talking about, but I wanna screw you now. You mind?"

"I like the way you think. I want to have wild sex, over and over, and then I'll observe you closely. That's my style, actually."

"Okay, let's do it."

Thus, the curtain rose on their relationship. They argued frequently, but the singer never once raised a hand against her. That was because she had told him, *The moment you get violent, I'll hate you, and I'll break things off, no arguments.* She had said it clearly in advance, so the singer knew without a doubt that she would do it.

She was a very honest person. When he was with her, it made the singer realize something. He wasn't honest, he was straining himself to try and be that way.

In order to demonstrate his own sincerity, the singer had needed to put down other people. *You're liars, living lives full of deception, but I'm different, completely different. I'm honest, and pure, and beautiful.*

She wasn't like that. She was simply honest, simply herself.

The singer had carried a sign with honesty written on it, dressed himself in clothes in the colors of sincerity, and constantly said, *I'm an honest person,* trying to be recognized as the most honest person in the world.

No matter what people thought of her, she seemed unaffected by it. She seemed imperceptible, impossible to grasp, yet at the same time he could sense she wasn't telling a single lie.

The singer believed honesty was righteous. He thought that one should be honest because it was the right thing to do, and that was why he had to be honest.

She didn't care one whit about righteousness. She was simply honest. Even if she wore clothes as she walked around, in her case it was no different than if she were naked. The singer found her beautiful, and when he told her as much

she looked blankly at him.

Occasionally, she would sing. Since she was so good, he asked if she had been taught by someone. It turned out her mother had been a singer when she was younger, and she had grown up listening to her lullabies. She did not write songs. When she sang, it was her mother's songs, or songs that were popular. However, when she sang them, they all resonated as if they were her own song.

The singer got depressed.

"When I hear you sing, it feels like my heart is being torn apart. Talent is a cruel thing. I must have felt there was something lacking in my songs, and I needed to do something about it. So I wrote lyrics no one else could. I wanted to be special. It was all for that. If I had the talent, I should have been able to make any song my own just by singing it. But I can't do that."

When he said that, she got a mysterious look on her face, and said to him, "If you're going to get that disappointed, why don't you just give up singing altogether?"

However, if he gave up singing, the singer would be out of a job, what minimal income he had would be reduced to nothing, and when someone asked, *Who are you?* He wouldn't be able to say, *Here, this is what I do*, anymore. If he lost his place as a singer, what would happen to the singer?

He was afraid not to be a singer anymore. The singer honestly opened up and revealed those feelings to her.

"If you lose it, it might be hard on you for a while, but you might be surprised to find you're fine with it," she said as if it was no big deal.

"I'm scared of losing you, too."

"Why would you lose me?"

"I mean, I can't imagine you wanting to be with me if I wasn't a singer anymore."

"I don't care whether or not you're a singer. I never liked your songs in the first place. Didn't I tell you that at the very beginning?"

The singer laughed at how silly it was. Soon enough, he was crying. He

decided to stop singing. Then he said to her, “Why don’t we go on a trip? Let’s go somewhere far away.”

“Okay,” she responded immediately, but then uncharacteristically added a condition. “If we’ll never be coming back, let’s leave on a trip. Right now.”

When their bags were packed, they walked off hand in hand. There was no destination in mind. They’d go where their feet took them, heading whatever direction they felt like, and when they didn’t feel like going any further, they’d stay there. No one could order them around. Even if someone tried to tell them what to do, they wouldn’t listen.

They decided they would look only at what they wanted to, with their eyes wide open, and if there were things they didn’t want to see, they would pass right by.

Whether it was in a field of grass wet from the morning mist, or on a night where the moon’s reflection shone in a lake, she would sing whenever the mood took her. The traveler who was no longer a singer listened adoringly to her songs.

On the day many stars fell, she said, “This trip will end some day, won’t it?”

“Even if the journey ends, I’ll still be by your side.”

“But eventually both you and I will die.”

“Not yet we won’t.”

“But it’s a matter of time. Do you want to go before me, or after?”

“I never want you to die.”

“Well, you die first then. I’ll see you off, then die alone.”

“I don’t want that, either.”

“Neither do I, you know.”

*We still have to die*, she said with resignation. The traveler had already loved her more than anything, but now she was maddeningly precious to him, and irreplaceable. And so, he came to realize that what she had been seeing and what he himself had been seeing was similar, but different. That was because

for the traveler, he had been so elated the journey seemed to have no end in sight. However, she had never once averted her eyes from the truth that every journey must come to an end. Like grains of sand draining away in an hourglass, their time left together was running out. There was no way to slow that speed. Moreover, they had no way of knowing when their sand would run out.

Beneath a sky of falling stars, the traveler hugged her tight and prayed to God. *Please, let me be with her forever. Even if we're fated to be separated by death, don't pull her away from me no matter what.*

*Ohh, I'm...* the traveler thought. He didn't want to say 'happy'. If he thought he was happier than anything, than anyone, at that very moment he would have no choice but to stop time, to end his life. He would kill her, then kill himself. He didn't want to do it, but he'd have no choice.

"Hey, I want to see the sea," she said.

"Sounds good. Let's go to the sea."

Even if the journey would end, they were both still alive. If she wanted it, the traveler would take her anywhere.

On their way to the sea, unprompted, she began talking about her past.

"I had a big sister. Six years older than me. She was real pretty. When I was nine, she got sick and died. That changed everything. Even though the one whose life was cut short was my sister's, not mine. When my sister died, my life changed."

"Do you ever think stuff like, I wish I could've shown this sea to my sister?"

"Not in the least. The disease that made my sister waste away was a nasty one. She suffered a lot. That's why when she couldn't take it anymore, one day, she said to me, 'You've got it great, huh. You're in no real pain, and you can keep on living. For a long, long time. You'll be able to do so much. I envy you more than you could ever know.' My sister was crying. It's pathetic, but at that moment I hated my sister. I mean, it wasn't my fault she got sick. I wanted to say, 'Don't take it out on me,' but I held back. She was going to die soon, so I pitied her."

"I'll bet your sister apologized."

"Yeah. 'Don't sweat it,' I told her. 'I'm not going to die yet, so I'll be fine. You can say even more awful things.' But after that, my sister never complained again, and then she died."

The two of them spent several days by the seaside. Thinking about it later, they shouldn't have been there. They should have left immediately. However, staying a few days in one place, longer if they felt like it, wasn't particularly uncommon for them. Like always, they rested their wings there until they decided where to go next.

It was a misty morning. In fog so dense they couldn't make out their own feet, the two of them first encountered it.

Before thinking it might be dangerous, curiosity won out. The two went to the seaside. The mist was so thick that they would lose sight of their fingertips if they stuck their hand out in front of them. Relying almost entirely on sound, they walked as close as they could to the shoreline, holding hands, of course.

Even though they were holding hands, he started to feel like they might get separated, and the traveler got uneasy. The longer they were together, the less he wanted to part. However, because they hadn't parted, there was nothing he could do. He could feel himself going crazy with frustration, but at the same time he was unsatisfied, and the feeling that he was not happy satisfied the traveler.

She didn't say a word. The traveler walked in silence, too.

What was with this fog, though? It wouldn't be odd for the sun to have come out by now, but he saw no sign of it. The waves had occasionally wet their shoes up until a little while ago, but now it was strange. He walked and walked in the direction of the sea, but the sound of the waves got further away.

Like before, she said nothing. Suddenly, the traveler found himself wanting to hear her sing.

He was about to ask for a song when suddenly she said, "Hey, where are we?"

## 9. Life is Full of Traps [rip\_van\_winkle]



If he hadn't been told there was a town here once, Haruhiro would never have noticed.

The whole of Ruins No. 7 was in a low depression, and they could look out over the whole of it from the edge.

To describe it simply, it was a pit full of holes. What was more, those holes were in indescribable shapes.

No, maybe they weren't indescribable. They were kind of warped, roundish holes, but seeing so many of them so close together in the ground like this, he found it unbearably unpleasant. It gave him the chills, his body itched, and he wanted to look away. That visceral hatred for them never weakened.

Haruhiro wasn't a fan of beehives, but this was way worse than a honeycomb.

Alice was beside Haruhiro, looking at the pit full of holes, seemingly unfazed. It didn't seem to make Alice feel much of anything.

*I can't be compatible with anyone who's okay with this, Haruhiro thought. I can't imagine us ever understanding each other, but when I get close to Alice, I can stop being me, and become us. Or rather, I just do. Can I control whether I become us or not?*

He wouldn't be able to say for sure without testing it, but it was clearly caused by Haruhiro's magic, Resonance. It was apparently an exceptionally rare variety of magic, and Haruhiro's was the first case of it Alice had seen, too. Because of that, there was still a lot they didn't know.

There had to be a secret, or at least unknown, elements of Resonance. Like, maybe it didn't just strengthen another's magic, but it let him inside their heart. That, or it made him sympathize with them.

He hadn't said a word of this to Alice yet. His reasoning was that it was better not to say anything vague, and he'd somehow convinced himself that was why, but the truth was it'd just be awkward to talk about. Like, anyone would hate what he was doing, right?

Intentional or not, Haruhiro had peered inside Alice's heart. If he had the choice, he wouldn't have wanted to. But Alice saw Haruhiro's Resonance as some kind of power-up item. One that had the name Alice C on it, and could be used at any time.

More than that, despite being an item, it activated automatically, and when Alice wanted it the item said, *I'll be right there*, and came over on its own.

Convenient.

If there was an item like that, he'd have wanted it. Oh, right, there was one right here.

However, good and bad were two sides of the same coin, and it probably shouldn't have been surprising that a convenient item had drawbacks.

Normally, when you take medicine, you do it aware of the effects and side effects. Whether what he said was going to be vague or not, Haruhiro probably needed to open up to Alice about this.

*Should I say it? How should I say it? Maybe I shouldn't after all? No, I have to, right?*

While he was still agonizing over it, they came to Ruins No. 7.

"Alice," Haruhiro began.

"Shut up."

*I mean, this is the response I get, after all that? He was frustrated. I decide, "Okay, I'm gonna say it," and of course this is how it goes. We just don't get along. It's not a matter of like or dislike. I think we're a bad match. We've been together for a while, but it just doesn't feel right. Maybe I should just become us. Hold on tight, activate Resonance, and see what happens. Do I just suddenly hug Alice? That's not gonna work. I'll get pushed away, then pummeled.*

*I've got a lot of other things I want to say. Like I want to search for my*

*comrades, I want to find my comrades, and I want to see my comrades. I say that occasionally, but Alice either ignores it outright, or brushes me off with a, “Yeah, we can do that later.” Alice is really good at giving off the impression that bringing things up won’t do any good.*

Beyond Ruins No. 7 a forest that was redder than red spread out. It wasn’t red red. It had a yellow tinge to it. It was vibrant color, but too bright, and with a depth to it. Ruins No. 7 was close enough to the Scarlet Forest that he could see it from here.

According to Alice, the king’s castle in the center of the Scarlet Forest was Ruins No. 1, or something. It might have seemed Ruins No. 1 and No. 7 were right next to each other, but that wasn’t it; the Scarlet Forest around Ruins No. 1 was just incredibly vast.

The Scarlet Forest was swarming with monsters so strong that even Alice powered up with Haruhiro’s Resonance couldn’t defeat.

They couldn’t reach the king’s castle without crossing the forest, but getting through the forest was incredibly difficult. In fact, it was fair to say it was impossible. For Haruhiro and Alice as they were now, at least.

“That forest, it wasn’t always there, right?” Haruhiro said. “It’s not the ruins itself...”

In Parano, with the exception of the Iron Tower of Heaven, the Valley of Worldly Desires, the Sanzu River, and the seven Ruins, everything was in flux and changed without human intervention.

Though Alice didn’t look in Haruhiro’s direction, he got a response for once.

“Well, yeah,” Alice said, “back when I fled the castle, it was a lot smaller.”

“That’s how you were able to get out of the forest?”

“I only went through with it because there was a chance of success. The Scarlet Forest was created by Sleeping Man. Sleeping Man is asleep somewhere in the forest still, dreaming.”

“Then if we find him and wake him up...”

“Look for a guy whose face I don’t know? In that forest? Don’t be crazy.”

“I guess we can’t get through to the castle without going through a shortcut, huh?”

“Well, if your Resonance were more impressive, I might’ve been able to brute force my way through.”

“Complaining about it to me’s not going to help...”

“They’re coming out.”

“Huh?”

“Look.”

Haruhiro looked in the direction Alice gestured.

*That, huh?*

He saw something crawl out of one of the hundreds of holes. It was pretty far off, so he couldn’t make it out. It was probably human, though.

Alice grabbed Haruhiro by the head and forced him to crouch. “Hide.”

“If you’d just told me to...”

“Shut up. You’re annoying.”

The two of them crouched low, watching what the person who came out of the hole would do.

“I knew all along that Ruins No. 7... Rainbow Mole’s Nest was connected to that piece of shit’s castle.”

“Rainbow... Mole?”

“Same as with Sleeping Man, I haven’t met him. He’s been around longer than me. I hear Rainbow Mole dug all those holes.”

“There are all sorts, huh...”

“There were more, back before that piece of shit started capturing and killing all sorts of folks. The rest became his vassals, like Ahiru, Sleeping Man, or Rainbow Mole. There were a lot of people who were stomped flat and became shadows, too.”

“Shadows?”

"If you just watch, you'll see."

That was all Alice said before going quiet.

The person who came out of the hole was walking a narrow path between the holes. Though it was narrow, it was still wide enough for two adults to pass each other.

It was too soon to be able to make things out clearly, but judging from the color of the coat, it had to be Ahiru. Ahiru used the secret passage in Rainbow Mole's Nest to go to the castle, meet the king, and now he was returning.

"You're meeting up with him, right?" Haruhiro asked.

Alice didn't answer. There was nothing he could do about that, so he followed Ahiru with his eyes. They had gone to the trouble of roping Ahiru into spying for them, so what exactly was Ahiru up to here? He'd have liked a careful explanation.

"You could trust me a little more..."

"Yeah, that's a shadow," Alice said, adding, "Knew it."

A shadow? Where?

"Ah...!" Haruhiro blinked.

Could that be it, maybe?

A black form appeared from the same hole Ahiru had come out of. It looked like a shadow. But Parano had no sun, so nothing cast anything fit to be called a shadow.

Wait, what was even casting that shadow? Shadows were made when light was obstructed and an area was darkened. It was impossible for a shadow to exist on its own.

No, Alice had just been saying that Parano was a place where things happened even if they were impossible. As well as that there were a lot of people who were stomped by the king and became shadows.

The shadow seemed to be tailing Ahiru, but perhaps because it was keeping a reasonable distance, Ahiru had long since stopped looking back. Had he not

noticed the shadow, or was he just pretending not to?

“What’s with the shadow?” Haruhiro asked.

“They’re the real spies. Not that they’ve got any real intelligence. They don’t have much... I guess you’d call it independence. They patrol around the castle, and they follow the vassals and monitor them like that.”

“So Ahiru’s being watched?”

“Not always. There were no shadows in Ruins No. 5, as a matter of fact.”

“Maybe... you weren’t checking all of the statues, you were looking for shadows?”

“Why would I want to check out some crummy statues Ahiru made?”

“Nah, I thought it was weird...”

“I couldn’t make contact with Ahiru if he had shadows following him.”

“What about taking them out?”

“I mean, they’re shadows. I don’t know how to kill them. I guess, in theory, if you shone a bright light on them, that might help, but where’re we gonna find a light like that? Even if we had one, most shadows are humans who ended up like that because they defied that piece of shit.”

“It’s better not to erase them, then.”

“You might end up a shadow yourself, you know?”

“Same goes for you, Alice.”

“That shithead wants to make me submit to him. He won’t just turn me into a shadow without talking first. That gives me an opening.”

Alice stood up. It seemed the plan was to move away from here. Where to now?

Even if he was getting sick of all this, Haruhiro had no choice but to follow. His magic was Resonance, after all. Thanks to that, he couldn’t even protect himself alone.

Philia drew power from objects. Narci enhanced one’s own power.

What was Doppel again? If he recalled, Alice said something about those with low self-esteem being able to put out doppels.

Narci had to be the opposite of that.

For Philia, a dependence on the object might have been key. Alice had said something about a person's mental stance, their tendency deciding a person's magic, too.

*Well, what's Resonance, then?*

He couldn't do anything alone. And he could sympathize with others. Well, it wasn't so much that he *could* as that it just happened. When it activated, he *became* that person.

*Thinking about it, isn't that exactly who I am...?*

Alice was already walking off.

Haruhiro felt weak, unable to even stand.

*There's nothing I can call my own self. I can't deny that... I guess.*

If you took his comrades away from Haruhiro, what would be left? He barely even had desires like, *I want to get out of Parano*, or, *I want to get back to Grimgar*.

His comrades, his comrades... everything was about his comrades. If you asked him whether he disliked that about himself, though...

*No? I don't think I do.*

That said, it wasn't as if he liked it, either. He couldn't think of any one thing he couldn't do without.

*Isn't it a perfect fit?*

*Resonance.*

*What else would I have?*

Besides, was there anything of special value in the self? If you asked a lot of people that, they might say, *Nah, there has to be.*

Haruhiro could only say, *Maybe you're right. Maybe that's true for you. I'm*

*sure you're the main character.*

Well, if you looked at life as a sort of play, naturally, you yourself would be the main character in it, but not everyone wants to stand center stage. Haruhiro, honestly, didn't even want to get up on the stage at all. He was fine being in the audience. If there was some reason he couldn't be allowed to do that, he'd prefer to be backstage.

Now, if you were to ask if he didn't admire heroes, it would be untrue to say he felt nothing of the sort. Still, even if he were given some special power, and you asked what he was going to do with it, he'd have no answer.

Carving out a new way of life with his own hands, self-realization, it wasn't terribly interesting to him.

It wasn't that he lacked greed. He had that. Just, he wasn't especially greedy. It might have been fair to say he couldn't get greedy. He clearly wasn't what you might call a man of deep karma; he was quite shallow, actually. Most likely, even if you plumbed the depths of Haruhiro's personality, you wouldn't find anything unusual.

He let out a sigh. He wasn't disappointed. He was relieved instead. It was less a, *Things are fine like this*, and more of a, *That's just how I am, so there's no helping it*. It might have been something close to defiant acceptance.

When he was about to chase after Alice, something vaguely human came out of a hole. It was the same hole Ahiru had come from.

“Alice, there’s someone else...” he began.

*They’re not alone? There are multiple people. Two, three—four people, huh?*

It was frustrating that the distance made it hard to see.

Eventually, Alice came back. “They’re that piece of shit’s vassals, too, huh?”

“You know them?”

“They came out of the same hole as Ahiru. What else could they be? The leader is... looks like a woman. The rest are men. One fatty, two tall guys... Ohh. A shadow came out, too. They’re being watched.”

“It’s Kuzaku.”

“Huh?”

“Kuzaku!”

Haruhiro nearly took off running. If Alice hadn’t held him back, he would have.

“Hey, you moron!” Alice shouted.

“It’s Kuzaku! The guy in the very back. That’s Kuzaku! I could never mistake him. He’s okay!”

“Calm down, damn it. Who’re the other three?”

“The others are...” Haruhiro shook his head.

Damn. Alice was right. He needed to calm down.

“I don’t know... or at least I think I don’t. I don’t think they’re my comrades.”

“In that case, Kuzaku, was it? That comrade of yours may’ve been roped in by the other three and become one of that piece of shit’s vassals. If he’s gonna survive in Parano, that’s a valid choice. Not for me, though.”

“If I talk to him, Kuzaku will join our side.”

“Even if you do, it’s no good. The shadows are watching.”

“If we wait for the shadows to vanish... if we tail them, make sure the shadows don’t spot us...”

“If you want to do that, you do it alone. I’m going to the Iron Tower of Heaven. I arranged to meet Ahiru there.”

“Huh...? The Iron Tower of Heaven? What? I haven’t heard anything about this.”

“Because I didn’t say. If you listened when I was talking with Ahiru, you should’ve known without me having to.”

Because he left everything to Alice, he was losing focus. It wasn’t like he’d hadn’t lacked independence before now, but he wasn’t even thinking with his own head. He wasn’t making decisions.

Because he was the leader, and because his comrades were relying on him,

he'd been able to do his best in Grimgar. It was different now. He wasn't the leader, wasn't anything.

Basically, Haruhiro had half given up on any hope of his comrades' survival.

But here was Kuzaku.

He'd survived.

"Kuzaku and those other people showed up right after Ahiru," Haruhiro said. "Ahiru might know something about them."

"Could be. No guarantees, though."

"Fine. I'll go to the Iron Tower of Heaven, too."

Before setting out, Haruhiro burned the image of Kuzaku into his eyes, then slapped his own cheeks.

He got his spirits back up. He didn't like arguments that everything was about having a positive spirit, and he didn't like to do stuff like this too often, but once in a while was okay.

First, they'd meet with Ahiru. He wanted to find out who the people with Kuzaku were. From there, he'd figure out how to meet back up with Kuzaku. Obviously, he'd find Merry, Shihoru, and Setora and Kiichi, too. For now, he had no clue where anyone other than Kuzaku was, but he'd work under the assumption they all had to be alive.

He wasn't going to rely on Alice. He'd use Alice. Alice was using Haruhiro's Resonance, so it was only fair. Then, no matter what it took, they'd all get back to Grimgar.

Haruhiro left Ruins No. 7 without looking back.

Beyond the horizon, a faint vertical line bisected the polka dot sky. That was the Iron Tower of Heaven.

This was Parano, so he frequently encountered nonsensical terrain, but if he kept his eyes on the Iron Tower of Heaven, he'd never lose his way. Thanks to the mask, he was fine even when the sweet wind blew. If you just knew how, it was possible to survive even in a place like this. He had no intention of staying forever, though. He wanted to keep holding on to that feeling. It was important

to adapt to his environment, but he couldn't let himself get used to being in Parano. This wasn't where he belonged. He had no intention of living here.

*We're going home. To Grimgar.*

"You don't want to go back to your original world, Alice?" he asked.

It was hard staying silent all this time, so he occasionally tried talking to Alice. Most of the time, he got ignored, but when he got a response, it felt strangely good.

"Not really."

"You can't leave your friend behind?"

"I wasn't that close to Nui."

"You can't be happy living out the rest of your life here."

"I question if it'll ever end, though."

The Iron Tower of Heaven was a vertical line, the same as before. It didn't feel like they were getting closer at all.

*It just doesn't feel real, thought Haruhiro. It's a bit late to bring that up now, though. Is this all just a dream? How many times have I thought that already? Actually, I wish it could all just be a dream. I've thought that before, too.*

"Hey, listen." It was rare for Alice to be the one to start a conversation. "Do you know about Urashima Taro?"

"Urashima... Taro... That's a name? A person's name, right? Hmm. I feel like I might've heard it, but maybe not..."

"Taro's a fisherman," Alice said. "He saw a turtle being bullied by the seaside, and saved it. I guess maybe because, as a fisherman, he figured turtles aren't for bullying, they're for catching."

"Didn't he just feel sorry for it...?" Haruhiro wondered.

"There's a theory that he caught the turtle, too. But they say a turtle lives ten thousand years, you know? So, since it's bad luck to kill them, he let it go."

"Either way, from the turtle's point of view, it owes him its life," Haruhiro said.

"That's why, to thank him, the turtle took Taro to this place called Ryugujo at the bottom the sea."

"The bottom of the sea... You'd think he'd drown."

"He could breathe, for some reason. Maybe the 'bottom of the sea' bit is a lie. Could've been somewhere else."

"Ryugujo, huh?"

"Taro was welcomed by this suspicious woman called Otohime, but everyone else there was a fish. Fish swimming, dancing, and performing comedy."

"Well, that's surreal. Though Parano's pretty surreal, too..."

"I dunno. It was like a big party with singing and drinking. He had a lot of fun with how new everything was at first, but he got tired of it in the end. Like, the food? The fish were serving him sashimi, and fried fish, and fish stem. That's pretty creepy, if you think about it."

"So Taro decided he wanted to go home?"

"He figured he'd had enough, and when he told Otohime it was about time he got going, the truth was—"

"Wait, did it turn out Otohime was... the turtle, or something like that?"

"It's like, 'You weren't even human?!', right? For Taro, at least."

"It's like she was lying to him."

"Otohime was like, 'Sorry. That was wrong of me. Here, you can have this treasure box to take with you as a parting gift. Please, go home now.' But she also said, 'You absolutely must not open this box.'"

"Even though it was a gift?" Haruhiro asked.

"The whole thing's suspicious, right? I think Taro was set up. Dunno why. It's a bit like Parano in that way."

"So... did Taro manage to go home?"

"Technically, yeah."

"What do you mean, technically...?"

“When he got back, it was definitely the same sea shore, but something was different. Even though this was Taro’s hometown, no one he knew was there. The twist is that, while he was fooling around in Ryugujo, an insanely long amount of time passed.”

“Wait, what about the treasure box?”

“Oh, right. The real twist was that. Not sure what to do with himself, Taro opens the box Otohime told him he couldn’t open.”

“Well, in that situation, he’d have no other choice, I guess.”

“When he does, a white smoke comes out of the treasure box, and in no time, Taro’s hair turns stark white.”

“So, he gets old?” Haruhiro asked.

“Yup. Taro becomes an old man. It’s an awful story, right?”

“You’re pretty awful, too, for bringing that story up to me now, you know?”

The line rising vertically from the surface had suddenly gotten a lot thicker at some point.

The Iron Tower of Heaven hadn’t changed one bit since they were last here. Ten to twenty layers of rusted walls surrounded the iron tower. After a long time walking the labyrinthine path between the iron walls, they came to a mountain of scrap iron. On top of it the iron tower stood straight up.

The two of them started climbing the stairs outside the tower.

“What if the shadow comes with Ahiru?” Haruhiro asked.

“Didn’t you notice?” Alice pointed to the maze of iron walls.

“Huh?” Haruhiro cocked his head to the side, but he wasn’t immediately able to figure out what seemed mysterious to him. He thought for a moment, then finally realized.

“Between the walls, there are shadows. There’s no sunlight, so why?”

“Who knows? Those might’ve been moving shadows, too, at one point. They could be dead shadows, or rusted shadows. Whatever the case, there’s one thing I can be sure of, and that’s that one shadow can’t pass through another.

That means that piece of shit's shadows are blocked from approaching the iron tower."

"Is it safe here?"

"If you stay too long, you'll rust, though."

"That's not safe..."

Haruhiro hung his head, sighing. This place wasn't safe at all.

"Alice."

"What?"

"Below."

"What about below?" With a displeased tone of voice, Alice looked down to the bottom of the stairs, too.

The iron scrap piled into a mountain around the tower came in various sizes, large and small, some of the pieces many times the size of a person. Haruhiro, and most likely Alice as well, hadn't noticed, but those girls must have been hiding between the pieces.

Wearing dresses in many colors, they swarmed out and looked up at Haruhiro and Alice.

From a distance, they looked like real girls. But they weren't. Those were all dolls.

No, not all of them.

The doll girls were slender, but the one who was climbing the stairs and approaching them, with a bizarre walk that involved crossing her legs each time, was thinner than any by far. She was too thin. She looked like a moving stick person.

Her emaciated frame was dressed in an outfit that was practically underwear, with a gaudy cake-like hat on top, and she wore many pairs of glasses at the same time. She looked like more of a doll than the dolls themselves, but she had originally been human. It was less clear if she could still be called human, though.

“The doll master,” Haruhiro whispered.

“Nui...” Alice whispered in unison.

They looked at one another. It was kind of awkward. They looked away.

“What do you think she’s here for?” Haruhiro wondered.

“Search me. How would I know what someone I can’t even talk to is thinking?”

“I’m thinking she might be here for revenge.”

“Hey, we only buried her alive a little, right? She seems fine.”

“Don’t tell that to me.”

“I’d tell Nui, but we can’t talk, so what’d be the point?”

“She’s coming up.”

The doll master put her foot on the stairs. The doll girls followed.

“If we’re going to run, we should head down.”

“I don’t need you to tell me. Haruhiro, you’ve been getting cheeky lately.”

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to try.”

“Huh?!”

“I don’t think Resonance just amplifies magic. I want to touch the doll master. Could you help me?”

“You’re telling me to fight Nui without your Resonance, and lead her somewhere you can sneak up behind her, or whatever, is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

“What are you planning to do to Nui?”

“I won’t know until I do it. If we aren’t going to try doing it my way, heading upwards we’ll get worn down, so we either have to scatter them or jump. You can handle the impact with your shovel, right? There’s the option of taking out the doll master, too.”

“That’s...”

"You were friends, right? Well, she's something else now. I think if you were the one who put an end to her, that would be acceptable. I wouldn't make that choice, of course."

"What *would* you do then?"

"Find a way to turn her back."

"If I could, I'd have done it all ready."

"Maybe it's just you who can't."

"You're saying you could?"

"Didn't I say there was something I want to try? I haven't done it yet, so there's no way to know if I can or not."

"Ito Nui. That's her name."

Alice adjusted grip on the shovel. The black skin peeled, wrapping around Alice's arm and forming into a kind of spear.

The doll master... no, what was left of Alice's friend, Ito Nui... was climbing the tower with dolls in tow.

"If Nui hadn't invited me, I'd never have gone spelunking. Of course, I'm sure I'd never have ended up in Parano, either. She could be a pain, but she wasn't a bad kid at heart."

Haruhiro subtly moved behind Alice. He let all the excess strength flow out of his body. The steps of the stairs weren't especially thick, so it was hard to say they were tough. He visualized himself sinking into those steps.

Stealth—complete.

He got a feeling like he was watching himself and the area around him from above. It was going good. Still, he couldn't let it go to his head. The heart was like a pool of water. Even the slightest disturbance made waves.

The waves gradually spread out. Haruhiro was riding on a little boat. It was a small ship, so it would easily capsize. He couldn't let his heart be disturbed.

Nui climbed the stairs. Haruhiro was hiding behind Alice. He couldn't see Nui. However, he could hear footsteps. They were fast. Much faster than before.

Close. They'd gotten pretty close.

Haruhiro moved slowly, as if he had stopped breathing.

Alice advanced.

Nui stopped and stood still instead.

Alice didn't charge in, instead stepping a little to the left and swinging the shovel in its spear form.

Nui didn't back away. She moved up, dodging the shovel.

Alice spun around, and Nui turned so as not to let Alice get behind her.

Now, Nui had turned her back to Haruhiro. She was exposed. Nui didn't notice Haruhiro.

He was clearly there, and there was no way she shouldn't have seen him, but she missed him as if he had just happened to fall into some blind spot. When he got perfectly into Stealth, these things happened.

Without rushing or making a fuss, Haruhiro grappled Nui from behind. Nui suddenly tried to struggle, but there was no need to reject him.

"Ito Nui," he said. "I am—"

Before he could say *you*, he had become her.

## 10. The Longing Called Love [loveway]



Once upon a time, was there me?

Yes.

There was.

Me. I was there.

I'm sure noooobody noticed me, or cared I existed, but...

I was there.

Kinda like... the air?

That was me.

I mean, noooobody really cared about me, right?

Up on a stage with lots of boys and lots of girls, dancing and singing, la la la, I was screaming.

Me...

Look at me!

I'm right hererererere!

Look at me!

These people aren't the main characters, I am!

Why is it? Why will no one look at me? Am I lacking something?

Oh!

Oh!

I know! I know I knoooow!

Up, up, up shoots a hand.

Okay, you there.

Who aaaare you?

Ohhh.

Me?

I'm the only one who's been here all along, aren't I?

Well, whatever.

Go on, answer the question.

*It's because you're not cute.*

Yes. That's it. I'm not so hideously ugly it's hard to live, but I'm not cute.

Well, I'm sort of normal, I guess?

No, no, not normal at all. I mean, I know what a pretty face is, and I've read about it in books, so I'm sure I'm right, but it's the ultimate in average. If you added the faces of a million people together and divided by one million, people are made in such a way that they'll find the result pretty. That's why not being ugly, but not being cute, isn't normal.

If I had to say I was something, it's nothing.

People don't look away from me, don't stare at me. I basically have no value.

I bet that's probably why my parents gave me a bit of a different name. It's not a common one. At the very least, I've never met a person with the same name as me. Still, it doesn't fit me.

When I give my name, everyone looks at me like, *Oh, yeah?*

I'll bet they're thinking, *You look so average, so below average, but you have that name?*

And that's it. No matter what name I have—no, no matter who I am—no one cares. No one takes an interest in me.

There aren't many people who cast a shadow as weak as mine. When you stand out as little as I do, *Oh, you were there?* isn't even an uncommon thing to

hear people say.

I don't have any particularly amusing anecdotes about my utter lack of presence. I just don't draw attention, and no one takes an interest in me. If I call out to someone, they'll go through the motions, but the conversation never really takes off, and nothing comes of it. I know full well that's how it'll be, so I don't talk to people unless I have business with them.

When I tell it like this, I sound like my abnormal lack of presence leaves me alone all the time, and that, in some way, I'm an unusual individual. That is not true. It's just that I want to be a little different, so I'm spicing the story up.

The fact is, I've had a few passing friendships here and there. I've been asked directions by passersby, too. I may lack presence, but it's not like I used to be a pale shadow of a human being, or anything like that.

However, my friends hardly ever contacted me. If I didn't constantly interact with them, any friend of mine slipped away in no time. I might not have been hated, but I wasn't especially liked. They clearly didn't place much importance on me.

I, honestly, didn't see those people as irreplaceable friends, either. Did their not caring for me make me not care for them, or did my not caring about them make them not care about me? I can't say, but it was probably both.

Hey, hey, I'm lonely.

Oh? You're lonely? There, there, you poor thing.

But it's okay. Let's play?

What do you want to play with today?

(Dolls...?)

That's right. It was dolls that gave me comfort.

I bought and collected dolls they sold in stores a little at a time, and when I got tired with that, and it wasn't enough, I'd make outfits to dress them up, or make changes here and there. I even made my own out of clay.

You could use longer legs, couldn't you? Let me stretch those.

Now that your legs are longer, they're out of balance with your arms. Let's make the arms longer, too.

You could use a longer neck, too.

Your head is kind of big.

(Oh, the dolls...)

Let me put this little head here on you.

Your ankles are so fat and ugly. Let's file them down.

Mind you, it's not like I spend all my time setting up dolls. I think about all sorts of things, taking them into account, but the thing I focused on most at the time was improving my appearance.

In the end, you can dress it up however you want, but a girl who isn't cute won't get her due. It's not just with me; all women are the same. When they see another woman, they decide in an instant if she's cute or ugly.

Not many will say it out loud, but being ugly is a sin.

And not just any sin. A deadly sin.

Normally, if you bring up the seven deadly sins, there's pride, wrath, envy, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust, but for some reason no "ugliness." I've always found that mystifying.

I want to be cute. That said, there's nothing I can do about my face. I can't freely reshape it like a clay doll's. Maybe I ought to go for plastic surgery, but that's expensive, and even if I might consider it an option in the future, it's not possible now.

I secretly practiced putting on make-up alone, too. Maybe there's something in common between make-up and doll-making, because I really improved. If a plain girl like me who doesn't have much presence suddenly showed up in make-up, wouldn't everyone be surprised?

No... worse than that. I'd stand out in a bad way, they'd think I was creepy, and then I'd be shunned for sure.

I was chubby from a young age. I decided that if I ended up fat on top of ugly,

there was no hope for me. I'd be so ugly it would be hard to live, so I did my best to watch myself there.

However, I was genetically predisposed to put on weight easily. On top of that, I was born bearing the triple curse of big bones, thick skin, and hard flesh. No, I also had dark and dry skin, so make that a quintuple curse.

If I put on even a little too much weight, I'd end up a hideous barrel of person, and wouldn't be able to get the weight off easily. Despite that, my one joy in life outside of doll-making and playing with dolls was eating. Sweet things, salty things, I loved them more than I could help. When I was sick of it all, I had a tendency to gorge myself, alternating between sweet and salty, until I puked.

But I had to lose weight.

No matter how lovely an outfit is, it looks hideous on a fatso. If you just slim down, even cheap clothes you bought anywhere will look good.

I resolved to get thin. I wanted to be as white as I could, too, so I did my best to stay out of the sun. Even if I didn't change my face, or put on make-up, I should have been able to be pretty. I wanted to be pretty. If I was pretty, I was sure my situation would change.

It was rough.

Even more than I imagined I would, I suffered, and suffered, and suffered, and suffered, and suffered.

When it came time to limit my eating, for some reason, I'd end up thinking, *I want to eat, or, I can't eat, or, I can get away with eating this, or, Just one bite, or, No, I can't, after all, or, I'll die if I don't eat, or, It's not natural for a living being not to eat, or, If I just eat a little, I can throw it back up, or, Whatever, I just want to eat.* I thought about nothing but eating.

Then, one day, while eating like always, I had a sudden thought.

They say the human body is about sixty percent water. If that was right, then reducing the amount of water would lower my weight. If my body were lighter, I'd be thinner. If I couldn't go without food, I just had to go without drink.

I tried it out right away, and the results were dramatic. By not hydrating, my

body weight fell rapidly. My throat would get so dry that it drove me nuts, but I'd eat stuff to distract me from that. That sometimes made me gain again, but it'd drop off again after a while.

I got thin. That must have made me that much prettier. My friends would say, *Have you lost weight?*

However, nothing else changed.

Weird.

Maybe it's not possible to become pretty without changing my face? If there's something I can do, I want to. I have ideals, too, you know. I don't have wishes like, *I want to be popular with boys, or I want a boyfriend*. No, I just want to be pretty, that's all. I want that kid to think I'm pretty. I want to be seen as special.

I don't plan to kiss up to men, so I don't need to be feminine, or sexy. I don't need boobs, either. I want to be slim, and look good in anything. To catch eyes, and not let them go. That's the kind of person I want to be.

Is that no good?

Is this not enough?

Yeah, I'm sure it's not enough.

I have to get thinner.

Make my arms and legs, thinner, and thinner.

They're so thick and gross. I wish I could tear them off and replace them.

You dolls can all do that, but I can't.

Ohhh, it makes me so mad.

My throat's bururururururururururururururururning.

I made dolls of young girls and broke them. I had no particular model for them, but men were out of the question, and women were no good, either. They had to be young girls.

The truth is, young girls weren't in line with my ideal, either, but I could only think of young girls back then. That's because I hadn't met that person yet.

It took me by surprise. When I met that person.

(Alice...)

Yes.

Alice, that was the kid's name.

The first time we met, Alice gave off an aura that was not male or female, not even human anymore. The kid was clearly not normal.

And the weak constitution, due to a congenital condition and a number of other ailments, made Alice feel special, too.

It's not just people; I think each living creature has their own color. However, Alice had no color.

Alice was endlessly transparent, a phantom-like existence that might vanish at any time. If there were a flower made only thin glass somewhere in this world, it would no doubt look just like Alice. I'm sure there is only one flower of that kind in this world.

It bowled me right over. I knew it keenly. I wanted to be like Alice. I wanted to be born as Alice. Though, of course, that could never be. Because, as you're well aware, I am not Alice.

With a degree of forwardness even I couldn't believe, I approached Alice. I talked with no shame, and I would do anything to draw Alice's attention.

I think I had two emotions inside me.

The first was a desire to be with Alice. I would make Alice like me, as a friend maybe, and hang out with Alice. If I did, I could look at Alice all I wanted, hear Alice's voice, and smell Alice's scent.

The other was a desire to get to know that person, and uncover Alice's true nature. I suspected that Alice was all appearance, and little else.

To put it bluntly, I loved Alice. Yes, I was in love with Alice. But I hated Alice just as much.

The thing I've always wanted, the thing that, if I had, I wouldn't need anything else, Alice was born with. How could I not hate Alice?

I mean, if I found out that Alice was all looks, that there was nothing special inside, just a void, if I found out Alice was the ultimate doll, that would have been some consolation.

Hey, what do you think?

What is Alice thinking?

I don't know. I don't really know. There's no figuring that person out.

Alice never talks about personal feelings.

I never know if Alice is lying or not, either.

Alice is cautious.

Wary of me.

But still, Alice doesn't try to push me away, or avoid me.

Does Alice hate me?

I wonder about that.

Maybe Alice is just cautious.

Is it hatred, maybe?

Even though I love Alice so much...

I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't knoooow.

There were days when Alice was listless, and other days filled with gloom. Whenever I saw Alice depressed, I felt uplifted and full of energy. On the other hand, whenever Alice was strangely cheerful, I was struck by uneasiness, and I'd feel down myself.

Sometimes, Alice was disappointingly normal. Deliberately bringing up popular topics and seeing what reaction I'd give, saying boring things anyone could come up with, and making me disappointed.

For me, whenever I saw Alice try to talk about things everyone knew, even though Alice wasn't especially knowledgeable about the topic and only had

surface-level knowledge, yet was attempting to talk about it like it was a familiar subject, that was the least “Alice” thing I could think of.

However, Alice most definitely had a side like that.

I often started to feel ill after I ate something, so on those occasions, I immediately threw whatever-it-was back up. Naturally, I made sure no one saw me doing this.

No one paid attention to me, so I felt safe in the thought that no one would realize, but whenever I was done and came back, I’d receive a knowing look, like Alice understood my circumstances and was just saying, “Welcome back.”

Every time, I felt like Alice was seeing right through me, and it gave me the chills.

I tailed Alice countless times. I was as careful as I could be, trying to follow carefully, but at some point, I always lost sight of Alice.

I think Alice probably noticed and shook me off. Despite that, Alice never said a word about it.

I gradually became thoroughly obsessed with the idea that Alice might completely understand how I would react to and feel about anything Alice did.

It wasn’t just me; Alice was toying with everyone nearby, and while it seemed blatant sometimes, there were other times I had to conclude I was overthinking things.

I occasionally had the delusion that though Alice was in front of me, the real Alice wasn’t there. I could see Alice clearly, without squinting, but I couldn’t reach out and touch that person.

The thing I thought was Alice was just a mirror reflection of Alice, and if I turned around, Alice would be there, but if I touched that Alice, it was always just a mirror, too.

Every once in a while, something Alice said or did would touch my heart or hurt me with its sharpness. I was getting hurt by Alice on a daily basis. However, I practiced the utmost care, and made sure I never hurt Alice.

If killing Alice would let me become Alice, I’m sure I’d have done it. That was,

of course, impossible, though.

If I killed Alice, Alice would disappear. I wouldn't be able to see Alice anymore.

I was not Alice's only friend. Curse the rest of them. I wanted Alice to myself, but if I was too pushy, Alice would come to hate me, so I had to mind myself.

Alice's friends were all people who made me want to say, *Why are you even friends with someone like that?*

I had ten or twenty complaints about every single one of them, and it was exceptionally painful for me to get along with them.

Even so, I had to do it.

When we were on a school trip to the sea, and talk of gathering volunteers and going spelunking came up, I wasn't interested in the slightest. However, I heard one of Alice's friends would be participating, so I panicked.

Knowing them, they were sure to invite Alice along. Alice probably wasn't keen on exploring, but might reply, *Oh, sure, why not?*

I decided to act first. Before they could invite Alice, I'd do it myself.

Betraying my expectations, when I said we were going on an adventure, Alice was interested enough to go get a shovel from somewhere. You never knew what Alice would do.

I do regret it.

The kid I thought might invite Alice along never actually participated in the adventure. I didn't care about the cave at all. It was just that I never wanted to feel like someone had taken Alice from me.

If that kid had invited Alice, and Alice had gone, I didn't want to be saying, *I'll go, too, then.* You couldn't have made me say it.

Because I invited Alice on an adventure for that petty reason, my fate changed massively.

Ohhh, ohhh, I don't want to remember!

As we pressed through the cave, we got surrounded by gas at some point, and eventually ended up unable to see. I couldn't even find Alice, who should have

been right beside me.

“...Nui?” I have a faint memory of Alice calling my name.

I might just have imagined it, though.

(Ito Nui...)

I wanted to hear it so badly, it may just have been an illusion my brain created for me.

It probably has to have been.

“Nui...!”

I definitely heard someone’s scream. Lots of them, actually. There were voices I recognized, too. There was a sound I couldn’t quite identify.

What on Earth was happening?

I got scared.

There isn’t a person who wouldn’t have been scared in that situation.

*Alice! Alice!* I think I called out. More than anything, the fact that Alice wasn’t at my side terrified me.

At some point, my world had stopped being about me, coming to center around Alice instead. All thoughts led to Alice, and anything not Alice-related fell out of me and vanished.

It was Alice who made me realize I was suffering from what you’d call an eating disorder. It’s not that Alice told me that directly. But Alice was good at hinting at things subtly.

One day, Alice talked to me about it.

“I know you may think I’m kind of weird, Nui. But you’re pretty weird yourself.”

“How so?” I asked.

Alice went silent for a moment, then replied, “It’s just a feeling I have.”

Whenever Alice went silent, I remember thinking about all sorts of things. That was how Alice would make me think, getting the point across without

coming out and saying it clearly.

It must have been self-protection for Alice, too.

I managed to uncover the fact that Alice had been bullied before. It was something I heard from other people; the bullying had been really intense, not just fun and games.

When I found out Alice had been through such a terrible experience, I felt so sorry for Alice, I cried. At the same time, it gave me leverage over Alice, so I was really happy.

When I thought about the moment when I would present my secret weapon to Alice, I was so excited, I couldn't sleep. Using dolls to represent me, Alice, and the onlooking crowd, I put on a little performance of the scene.

I could corner Alice at any time.

I could make Alice submit at any time.

But I wouldn't do that. That was because Alice was important to me, and I loved Alice. This was the proof of my love.

Still, if Alice ever mistreated me and tried to throw me away, I'd use my secret move. That was when I'd finally hurt Alice badly.

And so, I finally confessed my feelings to Alice.

I said that no matter what Alice was really like, I would love that Alice.

I said that I really liked Alice.

That I loved Alice.

I said I'd never hurt Alice again, that this was the last time I'd dig at old wounds.

I wanted Alice to trust me, to open up and show me everything, and to know it was safe to do that.

I was confident a day like that would come.

But now, Alice was gone.

Gone. That was what Alice was.

It was more than thoughts like, *I can't see*, or, *I know we went into a cave, but this can't be a cave*, or, *Where is this?* or, *Our spelunking group seems to be under attack*, or, *What is attacking up? Is it a beast? Or a ghost?*

What really frightened me was, *Alice is gone.*

Alice couldn't be gone. The world could be turned upside down, and if I was with Alice, it'd be no big deal.

*Alice is gone. That's the one thing that troubles me.*

“Nui...!” Alice was calling.

(You feel that strongly...)

I was so lonely and alone.

Being all a-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lone was just too sad.

Doll.

Doll.

## Who are you?

I'm Alice.

Who's that?

A-lice.

Alince?

Alinoce?

Alialialial

There's no person like that.

Not anywhere.

Not anyone.

## Dolls dolls i

Let's all live in happy harmony.

(They're here.)

You, I think you'd be better with long legs. Let me extend those for you.

Now that your legs are longer, they're out of balance with your arms. Let's make the arms longer, too.

You could use a longer neck, too.

Your head is kind of big.

Let me put this little head here on you.

Your ankles are so fat and ugly. Let's file them down.

(Alice is here...)

“Nui...!”

(Alice is here. Really here.)

“Nui!”

(Notice.)

(Come back.)

(Ito Nui.)

“Nui!”

(Nui-san.)

(Come with me.)

“Nui!”

Alice?

Ohhhh.

So that's where you were...

## 11. Embrace Me Gently [never\_let\_me\_down]



Setora was trying her best not to think, *What in the world is going on?*

Or rather, at some point, she had stopped thinking that. That was most likely because it had become ingrained in her, the belief that thinking about it wasn't going to do any good.

She had given up on looking back at the road they'd taken and trying to commit it to memory, too. They just went straight, and would come to bottomless swamps with white bubbles, and cliffs that were like bolts of lightning.

If they turned 180 degrees and went back the way they came, naturally they should have seen familiar places, but for some reason that wasn't always the case. No, it might be fairer to say it was hardly ever the case.

*Impossible! Something is wrong!* Maybe it was a rejection of the lack of consistency, or a more primal fear and uncertainty, or confusion, but whatever it was, it was hard to suppress the feeling.

Still, confronting the reality in front of her while harboring those feelings would have been even more difficult. In order to adapt to the unrealistic reality she was in, she had to accept it all.

First, she abandoned any preconceptions of what reality should be like. She accepted the reality she had, but then what?

It made her sleepy, so when the sweet wind blew, she'd cover her mouth with cloth. Drinking water made her intensely sad, so she didn't drink. The lack of food and water wouldn't cause her to waste away, so she didn't eat or drink at all.

"But this is..."

When she climbed to the top of a hill that seemed to spin around, no, that actually was spinning, a town spread out beneath her.

Was it a town? There were rows of buildings large and small with roofs tiled with slate, or something similar, and roads in between them. She could spot gardens and walls, too. There was a thin haze, so she couldn't see clearly, but might the things moving up and down the streets be humans?

"They still seem awfully normal, or sane. Oh, I guess they're the same thing, huh?" her fellow traveler said with a laugh.

This woman was acting awfully strange, too, but it was questionable if that was to simply be accepted alongside the other events. She wasn't sure what to do about that.

Just looking at the woman, she was no different from before. Not like Kiichi, who had transformed massively and now carried his master on his back.

Yes, Kiichi had changed. Looking at Kiichi with her on his back, only one in ten thousand people might still think he was a nyaa.

Nyaas were creatures that were sometimes also called monkey-cats, or cat-monkeys, and when measured from the top of the head to the bottom of the body, tail excluded, even the largest was less than half as long as a grown person. They would walk on all-fours when moving, but they could stand on their hind legs, and with training, they could use their front legs dexterously like hands. But what about now?

Right now Kiichi was approximately more than twice his master's size, his four legs were all frighteningly thick, and he had the face of a vicious carnivore. There wasn't a shred of charm to be found.

She couldn't deny his excessive viciousness was cute in a way, but still, he had left the range of what she would call a nyaa and had burst into an entirely different dimension.

While he defended his master, diligently biting the monsters that tried to attack them to death, Kiichi gradually grew bigger, and stronger. Were all of the monsters in this world highly nutritious?

No... even if he were to eat nutritional supplements in large quantities, as an

adult nyaa, Kiichi wouldn't have grown this large.

She couldn't understand it, but she had to accept it. However he might look now, Kiichi was Kiichi. He was loyal to his master even without harsh discipline, had a rare personality that included tenacity in addition to his strong curiosity, and was exceptionally intelligent, adaptable, and athletic. Among all the nyaas she had seen, he had demonstrated the highest potential.

It was best for her to optimistically assume that it was because of Kiichi's nature that, even after becoming like this, he still served his master the same as ever.

In this world, everything changed. Everything was changing. Was it really all right to conclude her fellow traveler was no exception to that?

*Guarr... Perhaps sensing the disturbance in his master's heart, Kiichi let out a low growl.*

While stroking Kiichi's neck, she turned to see what her fellow traveler, who was standing next to her and looking down at the town, was looking at. It might be best to put the question to her.

*Who are you? No, maybe she needed to be more direct. You're not her, are you? Not the woman called Merry. You're someone else. I'm right, aren't I?*

"Hm?" The woman with Merry's face looked her way and smiled.

It was a fake smile, one she could only imagine the woman had gotten used to after making it millions of times. It wasn't like she had known the woman that well, but had she been the type to wear a smile like that?

The woman had never smiled much to begin with. Whenever she had smiled, it had been hesitant, like she was afraid her smiling would hurt someone else. That was the impression she had given off.

"Is something the matter, Setora?" the woman asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"I see. Well, all right then."

"If there's something wrong with one of us, it's with you, isn't it?" Setora asked.

It wasn't as if she had mumbled that. She'd said it plain and clear, but the woman didn't react, as if she didn't even hear it.

If she was going to ignore Setora, there were better ways of going about it. She had to be pretty bold to be doing it like that.

"It seems to be a town," Setora said. "Looks like people are living there."

"I guess so."

"This time you're responding, are you?"

"It might be better to say they're person-like things, though. Just because they look like people, that doesn't mean they are."

"...Well, I suppose not."

"This place's got its own rules. They're a little different from the rules we know. No, not just a little, I guess. They're really different. We've learned that here."

"You're rather different yourself," Setora said. "That's not how you talked before."

"What do you want to do? Try heading down there?"

"You're intending to ignore me completely, then. Very well. In that case, I have some ideas of my own."

"Hey, Setora." The woman put on that fake smile again.

Setora had a strong urge to tear that mask off, but if she actually did so, what would be the true face that emerged?

"Can we set this aside for now? We're kind of facing a crisis. Of course, who knows how long it'll go on for."

"I just want to know what's going on with you, that's all. There's too much I don't understand going on as-is."

"You aren't going to accept it, and move on?" the woman asked.

"When did I ever say that? I don't think I ever said it out loud."

"That was the look on your face."

“If Haru met you now, I wonder how he’d feel.”

“...Haruhiro, huh?”

“Unlike me, Haru is fond of you,” Setora said. “He feels attached to you, I imagine.”

“I may need to consider the possibility, but is he even still alive? I can’t imagine a volunteer soldier of his level would be able to survive in this—”

The woman closed her mouth, and got a serious expression on her face. No, not a serious expression; it might be more appropriate to call it a lack of expression. But it was for just a moment. The woman quickly plastered that suspicious smile back on her pretty face.

“For now, let’s assume he’s survived. That seems safest.”

“How odd...”

“That expression’s not bad.’ I can understand why you’d want to say that, but... I’m not so sure. Until we get out of our current difficulties, why don’t we cooperate like before? If we can just turn a blind eye to a minor problem, the two of us can get along. You ought to feel the same. That’s why you didn’t say anything before now, right?”

“You don’t care to put on appearance anymore, huh?” Setora asked.

“Because you’re a reasonable sort. The truth is, dealing with stupid brats is a lot of trouble. Not you, though.”

This woman’s identity was still an unknown, but regardless, Setora could sense intuitively that she was a wicked being. Perhaps driven by necessity, that being was revealing her cards. The truth of it wasn’t entirely clear, though.

It was true, at present, that it would be mutually beneficial for them to work together. But if things changed and she became more of a harm than she was worth, this woman might dispose of Setora to silence her.

Naturally, Setora had no intention of going down easily, and she had to make use of the moves she had available to her.

“In that case, keep up the act, at least,” Setora said. “You never know when we might run into the others. I have no interest in what’s inside you, but the

rest will feel differently."

"Well, yes, I suppose you're right."

"Please don't make Haru worry, or be sad. He's the first man I ever loved. It's not as if I'm completely over him yet."

"I'll take that to heart," the woman said.

"Please do."

Setora was trying to put on the expression and tone of a woman who couldn't let go of her romantic feelings, doing her best for the man they were for, but she wasn't sure how well it was working. It wasn't as if she had none of those feelings, so it shouldn't have come across as completely insincere.



"Now, then... shall we go?" Setora asked. "To that town?"

Setora riding Kiichi and the woman who was impersonating Merry descended the hill covered in bumps and rifts and headed for the town.

The haze neither thickened nor cleared. The area around the town was just slightly misty. It was bizarre, but not so aberrant she couldn't accept it. Things must just have been like this sometimes here.

While jumping over rifts, and diverting around bumps that were sharp like swords, they somehow managed to make it down the hill.

The town seemed to be surrounded by a twisted latticework fence. As they approached, they found it ranged from as tall as a person to three times that, and it was covered all over in a thick ivy with thorns.

It might not have been impossible to scale it if they were willing to be a little reckless, but there had to be an entrance and exit somewhere.

They followed the fence, and there was a gate. No door, and no guards. They were apparently free to enter.

Setora went through the gate and entered the town. It was as hazy as ever. There was no one near the gate, but she could see figures here and there down the street.

"It's quiet," Not-Merry said in whisper, glancing over at Setora. "It's quiet," she repeated.

She was right. If there were no one around, that would be one thing, but there were people walking around, and it was still as quiet as if she were plugging her ears. Did no one in this town make noise, or talk?

Kiichi, who had more sensitive hearing than a human, wasn't moving his ears at all. That meant he wasn't hearing anything, either.

"Let's take a look for now," Setora said.

She and the others continued straight down the road.

Haze. Figures in the distance. Haze. Figures in the distance. Haze...

Figures in the distance. Haze. Figures in the distance. Haze. Figures in the

distance. Haze...

“Hm...” Not-Merry groaned before shrugging her shoulders. “We aren’t passing anyone.”

“It would seem they’re avoiding us.”

“I hadn’t expected to be welcomed... but still.”

“Why don’t you try pretending a little harder?”

“*Copy that,*” Not-Merry said in a foreign language.

“What did you say?”

“Roger.”

“Are you messing with me?”

“Perish the thought.”

“We’re turning back for now—Kiichi.”

Just from hearing his name, Kiichi predicted her commands and did an about-face.

“Can’t we ride double?” Not-Merry grumbled as she followed along.

“If you were the real one, that might be one thing, but there’s no way I would let someone like you ride on Kiichi.”

“I’m not exactly a fake—but even if I were to explain, I doubt you’d accept it.”

“Explaining means you tell it in a way the other person can understand,” Setora said. “You’re speaking only to hide something, or to dodge the issue. That’s not an explanation.”

“Talking with you is fun,” Not-Merry said. “That’s sincerely how I feel.”

The gate was closed. It wasn’t that a previously nonexistent door had appeared out of nowhere. The thorny ivy had grown thick, intertwining and completely covering the opening of the gate.

“Well, now...” Setora said. “Do you think it doesn’t let people out once they’ve come in?”

“That would be one way that we could interpret it... I think. How’m I doing?”

"Enough. It looks like I'm not going to have time to worry about you."

*Twitch. Twitch.* Kiichi's ears shuddered.

*Gurrrr...* he growled.

Setora could hear something. Like the wind. But there wasn't even a slight breeze.

Not-Merry was looking around busily, too.

Setora listened closely.

*Welllll...*

*...commme...*

Setora cocked her head to the side. "I could be wrong, but... we may be more welcome than we thought."

*Wel...*

*...come...*

*...to... our...*

*...town...*

*Wel...come...*

*Hmph.* Not-Merry snorted. "In that case, they're not refusing to let us out, but trying to keep us here."

Her tone wasn't far from the original's. But that was upsetting in and of itself.

*If they... follow the rules... everyone can stay... happily... in this town...*

*Rule... One... Be quiet... Don't make a fuss...*

*Rule... Two... Fighting is... bad... Be peaceful... gentle... fun...*

*Rule... Three... You can't... leave this... town... ever...*

*Rule... Four... Imitate... everyone...*

*If they... Follow the rules... everyone can stay... happily... forever...*

Whose voice was this? It could be heard coming from every direction. That, or maybe it was coming from inside their heads.

Not-Merry raised just her left eyebrow. "Looks like leaving is forbidden, after all."

*Rule... One... Be quiet... Don't make a fuss...*

"Keep our mouths shut and don't talk, is that it?" Setora smirked.

She didn't know who the speaker was, but they were being awfully pushy. At the very least, Setora could be sure the happy life in this town wasn't going to suit her very well.

So, what was she going to do about that? She didn't even have to think about it. She was getting out of town immediately.

Setora gripped Kiichi powerfully with both legs.

That was when it happened.

The ivy wall blocking the gate that she was about to have Kiichi tackle and break through was smashed in from the other side.

"Whuh...?!"

What broke down the ivy wall and came through it was a big disc... no, was that a mirror?

Even here, a massive mirror wasn't going to be moving around on its own. There was someone carrying it. The corpulent man who was holding it held the mirror aloft, spinning it around, then glared sharply at Setora and Merry.

"You people, are you Yomu?"

"Yomu?" Setora looked over at Not-Merry despite herself.

It seemed Not-Merry had no more idea what he was talking about than her, and she cocked her head to the side. “I don’t... think so?”

“You don’t look like Yomu, so what are you?!” the man cried. “From the looks of it, you’re not half-monsters, or dream monsters. You don’t look like tricksters, either. Does that mean what I think it does?! What are you people?! Do we get to take you out?!”

“What’re ya doin’, Tonbe?! Yer a such worth sack o’ lard!” Another man appeared from the hole in the wall of ivy.

“That’s one hell of an accent,” Not-Merry muttered.

It was true, he had a distinctive intonation that was hard to pick up, but his appearance was quite unique, too. Were there really people with chins that long?

This man had his mouth covered with cloth, but it couldn’t fully contain his overlong chin. It was jutting out.

Could eyebrows grow in such perfect equilateral triangles like that? His pupils were awfully small. Those sanpaku eyes had been seen as a mark of ill fortune long ago, a cause for shunning.

Also, what was with that man’s forehead? Or rather, was there anything to it? It was narrow, bordering on nonexistent. It was hard to even call it a forehead when it was that narrow. Did the man not have a forehead, then? What did it mean to have no forehead?

The sentence *“He packs some crazy punch”* passed through Setora’s head. Those words weren’t a part of her usual vocabulary. It sounded like something Kuzaku might say. Still, it was true, the man’s appearance packed some crazy punch.

The man put his hand on the hilt of the greatsword strapped across his back, glaring at Setora and Not-Merry. “Huh...? The hell’re you people?”

Setting Mirror Man aside, this guy seemed fairly capable—though, because his looks packed too much punch, Setora couldn’t help but laugh at him.

“I could ask you the same.”

Earnestly suppressing her laughter, Setora had to work hard to maintain a serious expression. If she laughed, Too Much Punch Man would attack Setora immediately.

She wasn't sure she could even block the first swing. Depending on how it went, it might be over with that first swing. The evil, vicious aura that Too Much Punch Man gave off was enough to inspire that sense of urgency in her.

Mirror Man readied his giant mirror. His plump body was mostly hidden by the massive mirror. The giant mirror looked like a hand mirror blown up to that size, but how was he even carrying it? She didn't really know.

With his lips lowered, and his left arm hanging slack, Too Much Punch Man inched closer, gripping and releasing the hilt of his greatsword with his right hand.

Even for Kiichi, who had his hackles raised and was ready to fight, handling Too Much Punch Man was probably going to be difficult. They probably couldn't underestimate Mirror Man, either. Who knew how much of a fight Not-Merry would even put up? Whatever the case, Setora needed to be ready for an all-out battle.

Setora jumped down from Kiichi's back, gripping the pseudo-soul vessel hidden in her pocket tightly. "Enba!"

The pseudo-soul which was made with the power of a relic and the pseudo-soul vessel that contained it were the golem Enba's true body. That said, Enba's cadaver, which had been made of dead bodies and metal, was broken and lost. The cadaver couldn't function without a pseudo-soul vessel, and was no more than a mere puppet, but the pseudo-soul vessel was also no more than a hard gem without a cadaver.

Those who came before her said that it was possible to read the pseudo-soul's will from the blue light that flickered through a number of holes. Setora thought that was a hallucination. If she didn't remake his cadaver, Enba would not move.

If Setora were to make a cadaver anywhere but her hometown, the village, she would have to gather all the tools and materials from scratch, so it was, to put it extremely lightly, going to be a massive undertaking. It would be

incredibly difficult to prepare a new cadaver for Enba.

Enba was essentially dead at this point.

For whatever reason, she had been born into the House of Shuro, and the first flesh golem she'd created as a necromancer was Enba. She couldn't get used to the House of Shuro's method of making and destroying new golems one after another, seeking to make a cutting-edge golem.

She had created life with her own hands. Now that she had made it, she couldn't destroy it. She'd decided Enba would be her last golem.

The unspeaking Enba had served her in silence. He had always been at her side. Like a friend.

That had caused Enba's death.

It was as if Setora had killed Enba herself.

She felt no guilt. Enba was a golem. He was ready to give his life for the necromancer who was his master at any time. Enba only did the obvious. Enba, obviously, would not blame Setora. No one could blame her for anything.

Enba was no more. He would likely never come back. Setora just had to accept that fact. There was nothing else she could do. That was how it was supposed to be.

Too Much Punch Man jumped and lunged towards her. He was going faster than Setora's kinetic vision could hope to follow.

Setora or Kiichi, possibly both, would have been neatly bisected by Too Much Punch Man's greatsword if Enba hadn't suddenly appeared to stand in Too Much Punch Man's way.

Enba's long, metal-bound left arm deflected Too Much Punch Man's greatsword. Without missing a beat, his right arm roared.

Too Much Punch Man retreated with a strange move that made him disappear, only to reappear in another place, dodging Enba's right arm.

"The hell...?!" he shouted.

"Mwuhuh...?!" Mirror Man knocked back a sudden attack by Kiichi with his

massive mirror.

Kiichi jumped back, fell into a fighting position, then growled.

That massive mirror had quite a bit of defensive power. Mirror Man had a warhammer on his back, but he surely couldn't use it at the same time as the mirror.

Too Much Punch Man and Mirror Man were a team, one handling attack, the other handling defense, were they?

Not-Merry tapped the pommel of her head staff twice on the ground, watching on in silence. It looked like she had no intention of getting involved at all. It was impossible to know what she'd do if things went bad, but for now, Setora would need Kiichi and Enba to do their best.

Why was Enba, who should have lost his cadaver, here? More than that, when Setora had held his pseudo-soul vessel and willed him to come, he'd appeared. How did this phenomenon work? Setora had no idea, but Enba was here.

He had defended Setora a number of times in this bizarre world, eliminating her enemies, and had done a good job of deflecting Too Much Punch Man's greatsword just now. He was no illusion.

Enba's skin wasn't exposed at all. The elastic corpse wrappings that Setora had made for his cadaver with her own hands were wrapped around his entire body, covering it up properly. The one who had armored his arms where they needed it was Setora, too.

No matter how you looked at him, Enba could only be Enba. However, it was hard to say he was completely unchanged. In fact, it was impossible to.

Enba had been the height of a grown man, maybe a little shorter. When she had started making Enba, Setora had been nine years old, so he had felt large at the time, but not so much anymore.

He hadn't been large before.

Enba had grown.

Had he?

No, of course not. That couldn't be right.

Flesh golems didn't shrink or get thin, and they didn't grow taller or get fatter, either. It shouldn't have been possible, but Too Much Punch Man was probably above average height, yet also shorter than Enba. Yes, he was definitely shorter.

Enba had clearly gotten bigger.

"Go, Enba, Kiichi!" Setora called.

What did it matter when Kiichi had turned into what he had? Enba had just gotten bigger. It was no big deal.

Enba attacked Too Much Punch Man, while Kiichi charged at Mirror Man. Too Much Punch Man moved flexibly to the left and right, evading the fierce attacks from Enba's left and right arms.

He dodged.

He dodged.

When it looked like he was going to just evade, he thrust out his greatsword like a spear for a counterattack. Enba bent over backwards to avoid it, falling backwards as he did.

Before he could regain his footing, Too Much Punch Man roared and sprang at him. "Gyahhhhhh...!"

Could Enba handle it?

*Please, handle it somehow,* Setora silently pleaded.

His opponent wasn't even serious yet. They were at the stage where the enemy had seen through all of the moves available to them.

Kiichi's cat punches using both front legs, and the kick he performed after a forward somersault, had both been blocked by Mirror Man, so he was struggling to attack.

If Too Much Punch Man determined he could overwhelm Enba, they would likely go on the offensive. She wanted to do something before then, but Setora had no cards to play.

Looking over at Not-Merry, the woman was sitting down and hugging her legs. What was she doing?

Unable to put up with this any longer, Setora finally snapped and started to yell at Not-Merry. “You—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Someone stumbled through the hole in the wall of ivy and into town.

That person was tall, and possibly as a countermeasure against the sweet wind, the person had a cloth over their mouth.

It was...

“Stop, stop, stop! Tonbe-san! Gomi-san! They’re not enemies! They’re my comrades! There’s no need to fight!”

“Huh?!”

“Say whaaaat?!”

Too Much Punch Man and Mirror Man jumped back in unison.

“W-Wait!” Setora cried.

When Setora gave the order, Enba and Kiichi stood down.

The man took the cloth covering his mouth off. “Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Merry-san! Setora-san! This is insane!”

What was supposed to be “insane”? What was with that face? She felt embarrassed just looking at him.

How could anyone smile with their face all messed up like that? His eyes were filled with tears, too. It was understandable that he was happy, but wasn’t it strange to cry? It had to be.

Despite that, Setora felt an irritation deep in her nose, and the area around her eyes got hot.

No way. She felt like she was going to cry—or did she?

Meanwhile, Not-Merry had gotten up in no time, and was waving to him with a smile. “It’s been a while, Kuzaku.”



That was to be expected, perhaps. It didn't make Setora feel strongly one way or the other, but couldn't she put a little more in to her act?

It seemed Kuzaku was so moved that his judgment was clouded, and he was just going, *Yeah, yeah*, while trying to wipe away the tears, so it was probably fine for now.

"...Hold on. Huh?" Kuzaku looked at Kiichi, turned to look at Enba, then screamed. "Whaaaaaaaaa?! H-Huhhh?! Whaaaaaaaaa?! Wh-Wh-What?! Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...?!"

"You're being too loud, Bossari!" a female voice shouted.

There was still another one?

Who now?

Setora could tell it was a woman from the voice. She was presumably traveling with Kuzaku, but she wasn't Shihoru.

There weren't just monsters in this world. Mirror Man and Too Much Punch Man both were human. Most likely they were volunteer soldiers, like Haruhiro and the party. In that case, was that woman one of them, too?

The woman stood on the other side of the hole in the wall of ivy, crossing her arms. She made no attempt to enter the town.

Like Too Much Punch Man and Kuzaku, her mouth was covered with cloth, and she wore a white outfit with blue highlights. It was what they called a priest's uniform.

"What are you?" Setora demanded.

"No, you. What are you?"

"I am Shuro Setora. Who are you?"

"I'm Io. I wouldn't mind permitting you to call me Io-sama."

"I don't need permission."

"Why?!"

"Because there is no reason I would ever address you with -sama."

"You don't know why you should call me lo-sama out of respect?" the woman sneered. "Oh, my. Are you soft in the head, perhaps?"

"Doesn't that better describe you?" Setora asked coolly. "By the way, Kuzaku."

"Muh?"

Kuzaku pointed at himself with a moronic look on his face. She already knew he wasn't a particularly bright man, so it didn't annoy her. This was, in its own way, a praiseworthy aspect of him.

"What are you people doing here?" Setora asked. "What did you come to this town for?"

"Ohh. The thing about that is—"

*Rule... One... Be quiet... Don't make a fuss...*

*Rule... Two... Fighting is... bad... Be peaceful... gentle... fun...*

*Rule... Three... You can't... leave this... town... ever...*

*Rule... Four... Imitate... everyone...*

*Not following... rules... bad... Get out...*

They heard that voice. Or maybe, because of all the ruckus they made, they hadn't been noticing it. It was possible they'd been hearing it the whole time.

*You not get out... Kill...*

Setora turned around. She'd been careless. Because of everything that had been going on, she hadn't noticed before now.

On the roads, on top of the roofs, in the gaps between the buildings, they were there. Their outlines were indistinct through the haze, but while some were human-like, some were similar but different, and others were completely inhuman. They may have gathered from all around town. There were swarms of them.

"...Uh, we came here to earn id?" Kuzaku asked falteringly.

He approached Setora, drawing his large katana. But this man, he had been tall to begin with, but was he this big?

“If I say that, do you understand?” he asked.

“No, not even a bit... but prepare yourselves, Enba, Kiichi.”

Enba and Kiichi defended Setora’s flanks. Not-Merry reluctantly readied her head staff, too. Mirror Man and Too Much Punch Man moved up, as well.

The residents of the town appeared not to be moving at first glance. However, they hadn’t been there before. They were definitely moving forward. They closed in little by little, and then would fall on them like a dam had just broken.

“Massacre them,” Io said.

It was like Io had given them the order. They were coming. The residents of the town were pressing in.

For a moment, a thought occurred to Setora. *We won’t be massacring them. Won’t they massacre us instead?*

## 12. Easily Lost, Easily Broken [we\_have\_lost]



“...Alice?” I ventured.

*I’m sure of it. That’s Alice C looking down at me.*

“Yeah...” Alice nodded.

*At me?*

*...Wait, who?*

*Me...*

*Oh, right.*

“I’m...”

*Holding something. What is it?*

*A person? It’s a human being.*

He had his face thrust into that person’s hair. Like he was... hugging that person, from behind. And they were lying down. Was it a woman?

He didn’t think, *Why am I clinging to a woman like this?* He quickly—no, perhaps it would be better to say “finally”—realized it. Who exactly she was.

“Ito... Nui...”

She was limp, unmoving. Haruhiro pulled his arm out from under her, laying her on the ground as he stood up.

Though she was wearing an outfit that was like underwear, it was pretty tight, and torn in places, too. Even without taking off her multiple layers of glasses, he knew her face all too well. He had synchronized with her using his Resonance magic. It might be more accurate to say he’d gone inside her, or become one with her.

Haruhiro had been Ito Nui. Even now, he felt very close to her. He couldn't think of her as a stranger. Nui's pain and suffering, and her joy, Haruhiro knew them intimately. He felt as if the obsession with Alice that dominated her spirit was his own.

Maybe because of that, he felt no hesitation in touching Nui's cheek.

"Nui-san?" he asked quietly.

It even felt inappropriate addressing her with a -san.

"Nui," he repeated.

He hadn't anticipated this at all. Haruhiro was simply mystified.

Why was Nui's cheek so cold?

He didn't panic. He just thought it strange, and gradually confirmed it.

Nui's whole body was limp. Not one part of her moved. Her bright red lips, caked with lipstick or something like it, were still slightly parted. Her chest didn't rise and fall.

Haruhiro pressed his ear to Nui's partially exposed chest. There was no heartbeat.

At this point, Haruhiro became flustered. "It's stopped! Her heart! She's not breathing! Alice!"

"Yeah."

"This isn't the time to be saying 'yeah,' is it?! Nui's..."

"I know."

"You... know... Huh? Wait, what do you...?"

"Nui's already dead."

"Dea—" Haruhiro stopped abruptly.

"Just look. She's dead."

"No, but it's not too late to—"

"Do artificial resuscitation? Fine, let's try. I think it's pointless, though."

"I'll do it," Haruhiro said frantically. "I have to. Isn't that obvious? Of course we're going to do it. Umm, how does it go...?"

"I more or less know. I'll help."

Tilting Nui's head back to clear the airway, Haruhiro had Alice blow air into Nui's mouth. When there was enough air inside her that her chest rose, they would wait for Nui to exhale, then blow in again. Once this had been done two or three times, he pushed down hard on the center of her chest with both hands.

Haruhiro had to do it pretty fast, pushing until her chest sank in by about five centimeters. After thirty compressions, they would breathe for her again.

When Alice first breathed into her, there was no response at all. Nui's body was like an object, not much different from the girl dolls scattered around on the stairs of the Iron Tower of Heaven and the mountain of iron scrap.

Nui was here, and yet nowhere. She was completely dead. But he couldn't bring himself to say, *Let's stop this*. He had to continue.

Nui was like himself. Nui's memories, her feelings, were clinging on inside him.

*She could be a pain*, Alice had said.

It was true, Nui wasn't benevolent or pure. But she had reasons why she could only live the way she did, and Nui had been doing her best in her own way.

When she'd wandered into Parano, when she'd been separated from Alice, Nui despaired, and after losing the ability to maintain her sanity, she'd become a trickster.

No... as the doll master, Nui had just been confused.

Haruhiro had fallen asleep in Parano, had a dream, and given birth to a dream monster once. He didn't remember what had happened in the dream, but it had been an unbelievable nightmare.

Essentially, Nui had still been awake, but subjected to an ongoing nightmare. Because of that, even when reunited with Alice, she couldn't have recognized

Alice as the person she was endlessly searching for.

Now, the nightmare was at an end.

Alice was here.

Nui had met with Alice again.

“So, why...?” Haruhiro moaned.

“Enough of this.”

The area around Alice’s mouth was stained a deep red. It was proof of how many time Nui had been given artificial respiration.

Nui would have been happy about that. She’d liked Alice so much. Not romantically, and Haruhiro didn’t know if it was what you’d call love, either, but Nui had yearned for Alice with all her body and soul.

Alice could have been nicer to Nui. Not treat her like one of several friends, but put her in a best-friend-like position and gotten along with her.

Nui had liked Alice more than either could bear.

“You finally found each other,” Haruhiro whispered.

“But Nui’s dead.”

“I heard it,” Haruhiro said. “At the very end, your voice. You were calling Nui’s name over and over, right? It reached her. She heard it... She must have heard it.”

Using the back of her hand, Alice vigorously rubbed the lipstick away. Then Alice pulled her mask back up.

“You assimilated to Nui, huh? It wasn’t just magic amplification. Is that resonance’s true nature? Have you been assimilating to me, too?”

“I didn’t know, okay? I never tried to do it intentionally with you, Alice. But Nui...”

“You thought you could save her?”

“I had no proof I could. How could I have? But I thought, just maybe...”

“Probably, the reason Nui died is because she met me.” Alice took Nui’s

glasses off one pair at a time. With delicate movements, making every moment seem to be frozen in time. “Because Nui was always, always suffering. She wanted to be like me... to *be* me. Such a weird girl. It’s not so great, you know. Then again, I guess being alive at all’s not so great.”

“If I hadn’t gone and did what I did...”

“Maybe.”

“It’s my fault,” Haruhiro said, grief-stricken.

“Even if it is, listen. There’s nothing to be done about it now.”

“I couldn’t save her!”

“Come on, it doesn’t even matter anymore. Nui won’t be blaming you. She’s dead. I don’t think you did anything wrong, either. I mean, even if I did think that, nothing would come of it.”

Once Alice had removed all of Nui’s pairs of glasses, the hat came off, but then Alice put it back on, laughing a little.

“Nui’s so weird. I mean, this is just strange. Right, Haruhiro?”

“...Yeah.”

“Could you help me out?”

“With... what?”

“It doesn’t feel right to leave her here like this. I dunno, it just kind of leaves a bad aftertaste.”

Not only did he help, Haruhiro more or less carried Nui by himself.

Though he could carry her under his arm while going up stairs, that didn’t work for ladders. After trying various things, it seemed like it would work out if he carried Nui on his back, fixing her in place using his cloak and other things. She was still heavy, yes, but not unbearably so.

This being Parano, there were several times he thought Nui might start moving around on his back. Just because she’d died didn’t mean she wouldn’t come back to life. Nui was dead. She was just *still* dead, that was all.

“Here’s good, I guess,” Alice said, tapping the man who sat with his legs

overhanging the edge of the landing on the head.

At some point, Alice had told him about it. The man had chosen to rust of his own will, and remained in this place. He looked like a statue, but perhaps the man was still alive.

Haruhiro set Nui down, laying her back against the Iron Tower of Heaven. Nui was dead, so without delicate positioning of her body's angle, as well as her arms and legs, she'd fall over. Also, the fact she was half-naked bothered him.

"I've got a good idea." Alice took off the raincoat, putting it on Nui instead.

Then, together they managed to stabilize Nui's body through trial and error.

With her legs spread a little and stretched out, her hands were clasped in front of her belly, and her face looking down, Nui looked like she was sleeping.

Diagonally in front of Nui, that man had rusted where he sat.

Eventually Nui would start to rust, too, no doubt.

Alice sat down not next to her friend Nui, but next to the man instead.

Haruhiro crouched down next to them.

They stayed put there for so long, he began to wonder if the two of them would rust. Or maybe that wasn't the case at all, and they were only quiet for a moment.

Haruhiro removed his coat and put it around Alice's shoulders.

"Thanks," Alice said without looking in his direction, then closed up the front of the cloak and stood up. "Guess it's time to get going."

Even when Alice started to walk, Haruhiro didn't move from where he was for a time. Alice wouldn't stop, and wouldn't turn back, either. Even so, he suspected that, from time to time, Alice would come to see Nui. The same as Alice sometimes came to see the rusted man who had been an acquaintance.

*Farewell, Nui.* With that silent goodbye, Haruhiro chased after Alice.

His cloak had already gotten used to Alice, and looked like a raincoat.

They climbed down the ladders, and descended the stairs.

On the way down, they spotted Ahiru climbing the stairs.

It seemed Ahiru had noticed Haruhiro and Alice, too.

Ahiru climbed a ladder. Haruhiro and Alice waited at the top of it for him.

“There were dolls scattered around below,” he told them. “Unmoving dolls. Lots of them. Those things, they’re the doll master’s, right?”

“Dunno,” Alice said curtly.

Ahiru may have clued in, because he asked no more. “It seems the king’s gotten himself more vassals. I’ve seen the woman who drags two ugly men around with her before. But the tall guy, he was new.”

“That’s Kuzaku,” Haruhiro said. “He’s my comrade.”

Ahiru frowned. “How do you know?”

“We were watching from a distance when you crawled out of Rainbow Mole’s Nest. After you, that woman and her cohorts appeared.”

“It seems you still don’t trust me, Alice,” Ahiru said.

“Whether I trust you or not is up to you, Ahiru.”

“I want to save her,” he protested. “That’s all.”

“I want to take down that piece of shit.”

“You planning to become the new king or something?”

“Not interested. I just want to say goodbye to this messed up world.”

Once before, Haruhiro had asked if Alice didn’t want to return to Alice’s original world. He hadn’t been given a definite yes to that. In fact, the answer had been, *Not really*, or something like that.

Had Alice had a change of heart since then? Or had the situation changed? Because Alice’s friend, Nui, was dead, there was no longer any reason to stay. Was that why Alice now wanted to say goodbye to this messed up world?

“If we take out the king, can we say goodbye to this world?” Haruhiro asked. “Can we get out of Parano? Is that what you’re saying?”

“There’s a door.” The answer came from Ahiru, not Alice. “The king’s throne is

a door. That door's been there from the very beginning, I hear."

"A door..." Haruhiro whispered.

Haruhiro and the party had opened a door that was apparently a relic while they were in the Leslie Camp. Once they'd passed through that door, they were in Parano.

"The door I know was, uh, how do I describe it? There was nothing behind it," Haruhiro said. "It wasn't built into a wall. If you open it, you just see through to the other side. But, despite that, if you walk into it, you come out in another place... another world. And there's no going back."

"I've never seen the king's door opened," Ahiru said. "All I know is that it's definitely shaped like a door."

"I have," Alice mumbled. "He showed it to me... or forced me to look, I guess. That piece of shit opened the door in front me, just once."

## 13. Dreaming Forever [fable]



Once upon a time, there was a great king.

The king was just great. So incredibly great that no one could defy the king. But the causal relationship between those two things was, in fact, the opposite.

It was *because* no one could defy the king that he was great. He'd kill everyone who opposed him, or crush them flat as pancakes. He'd make them swear they would do as he said from now and beg for forgiveness before making them become his vassals. This was how the king had become the greatest king in world.

Now, being the great king that he was, he had a lot of vassals. However, the king hated useless people, so when he decided they would never amount to anything for him, he crushed them flat as pancakes.

When the king pancaked them with his incredible power, nothing would remain but their shadows.

The shadows would loiter around, keeping an eye on his vassals despite not having eyes, keeping their ears perked up for trouble despite not having ears. If there were troublemakers about, plotting mischief, they would rush to the king and, *Whisper, whisper, whisper...* They would communicate with him in words only the shadows and the king could understand.

The shadows couldn't distinguish red from blue, or derive the area of a triangle. Still, aside from the times when they idly wandered about, they mostly spent their time looking for traitors to the king.

The great king gathered more and more vassals and shadows, continuing his endless march, but suddenly, one day, he became upset that he didn't have a castle of his own.

When he told his vassals about that, a man who called himself the king's number one vassal proposed this:

"I hear the place that was once the town of Inami is now home to a magnificent garden of flowers. I wish to strike down the master of the flower garden, Haname, and present her land to you, my liege."

The king was pleased. He gave the man the title of knight, the honorable name of Bayard, and the task of slaying Haname.

However, Bayard not only failed to strike down Haname, he was captured. A number of vassals stormed the gardens, but not one of them returned.

The king, at last, decided to head to the gardens himself. When he did, his number two vassal told him this:

"Should we even be building the castle in the garden to begin with? There is a tower that rises unto the heavens. I believe that tall tower is most befitting of our peerless king. I will ascend to the top of the tower, and there I will build a castle for you, my liege."

*True enough, rather than some flower garden, the highest point in this world is most befitting of me,* the king felt.

"Then go forth," he ordered.

"I shall, my liege."

Thus did the number two vassal set out for the Iron Tower of Heaven, but for whatever reason, he never returned.

Under order of the king, several vassals left in search of the second vassal. However, no matter how high they climbed, the Iron Tower of Heaven had no end.

The one vassal who turned back would later give this report:

"My liege, we were unable to find the second vassal. I climbed fairly high up the tower, but unable to see the top of it, I gave up. It is my belief that the tower may rise endlessly."

The king was enraged, and he pancaked that vassal.

“Why not make your castle where the town of Shiguhami once stood?”  
Sleeping Man proposed.

Sleeping Man was prone to fall asleep, and when he did, monsters would appear in great numbers, so he caused trouble for the other vassals. However, the king was fond of Sleeping Man, and had him serve at his side.

This was because the more he kicked and punched the monsters that spilled out, the greater the king’s own power became.

“Shiguhami was the largest town in this world,” Sleeping Man said. “The people were packed in like ants, and it was highly prosperous.”

“Sleeping Man, why did that town fall to ruin?” the king asked.

“Long ago, there were seven towns in this world. The people were greedy, and did not want to see the other towns living better than them, so to steal from each other and to destroy them, eventually war broke out.”

“There need only be one king,” the king said. “I see they couldn’t understand the simplest of things.”

“Indeed, my liege. By the time the wars ended, all seven towns were ruined. However, Shiguhami had a reason for being the largest of the towns. The place where Shiguhami once stood is where we should build your castle.”

“Then let us make it so.”

The king had spoken, and so the vassals hurried to explore Shiguhami. Shiguhami had been the largest of the towns, so it had grown to be hated by the other towns, and was now thoroughly destroyed. The countless buildings were all crumbled to rubble, so just cleaning it all up was going to be an unbelievably laborious task.

That said, if the vassals dawdled too long, it was entirely possible they might get pancaked by an irate king, so they couldn’t slack off.

The king increased the number of vassals he had again, and set them to work. In particular, the master hole-digger Rainbow Mole really distinguished himself.

The rubble was sorted into pieces that could be used and pieces that couldn’t, and then the usable pieces were piled up while the useless pieces were

discarded. Among the seemingly usable pieces there was a large door.

The king at first thought to make it the door to his own room, but Sleeping Man was opposed to it.

“My liege, that door is special. The only one of its kind in this world. It was the greatest treasure of Shiguhami. It is because they secretly held that door that Shiguhami became the largest town, and why they were said to be the closest place to heaven.”

“It just looks like a door to me,” the king objected.

“They say this door is connected to heaven. Now that you have obtained the door, you can go to heaven at any time.”

“If I can go at any time, there is no need for me to go now.”

“I believe it is best if you do as you see fit, my liege,” said Sleeping Man.

“Then let it be so.”

The king ordered that no one was to touch the door, and he had his vassals continue with the construction of the castle.

When the castle was finished, it was to a human as an elephant was to an ant in size. Thus it was named Elephant Castle.

The treasure of Shiguhami, that door, was carried into the king’s room, and placed in a spot where it would stand out.

The king was satisfied, and he decided to reward Sleeping Man. “For a long time, you have served me well. Is there nothing you wish for?”

“In order to serve you my liege, I have worked hard to stay awake as often as possible,” said Sleeping Man. “However, I am ever so sleepy. With your leave to do so, I would like to slumber greedily, in a place where I may see your castle when I happen to wake.”

“You are a man without greed. You shall have your reward. Sleep in a place where you can see this castle, for however long, and however much you desire.”

“Thank you, o great king.”

As he had wished for, Sleeping Man went to sleep.

When Sleeping Man laid down on the ground, the trees gave off buds of a deep red, scarlet color, which grew, and became thick leaves. They formed a copse, and then a forest.

Because Sleeping Man had gone to sleep, monsters appeared, too.

When he saw this, the king thought, *It's just like a hedge*, and was very happy.

Having survived the war of the seven towns, met the great king, completed his duty, and at last been granted peaceful sleep, Sleeping Man was a loyal man, and a fortunate one.

The king would occasionally have his vassals build extensions to the castle or remodel it. If he was displeased by their work ethic, or if they did something wrong, the king would kill or pancake that vassal.

When he was short of vassals, the king would order his vassals to search for new vassals. However, it was quite difficult to find vassals who were up to the king's standards.

The king reminisced fondly about Sleeping Man, and went out of his way to visit the Scarlet Forest, calling his name many times. However, there was no response. Sleeping Man was slumbering soundly as he dreamed a dream.

With the power the great king held, it was probably not impossible for him to level the forest and slap Sleeping Man awake. However, the king decided to let Sleeping Man sleep, and resolved that from now on, he would amply honor and reward those vassals that did well.

Without the slightest inkling of the terrible act of betrayal his vassals had undertaken against him, the king headed home.

Then when he returned to his room, it was terrible. The treasure of Shiguhari, the doorway to heaven, was open.

What was more, though he could see his own room on the other side of the door, just the head of one of his vassals was sticking out of it for some reason.

"Vassal, what are you doing?" the king demanded.

"I was trying to open the door while you were away and go to heaven," said

the vassal.

“Why is only your face sticking out?”

“That is because I was afraid, so I backed into it slowly.”

“Are you in heaven?”

“Everything from my neck down is in heaven. Only my face remains in this world, my liege.”

“What sort of place is heaven?”

“My face remains in this world, so I can not see it yet. However, as you are no longer my liege, O king, I could not tell you even if I did know.”

“What do you mean, I am no longer your liege?” the king demanded.

“I mean this.” The moment he said that, the vassal’s face vanished beyond the door.

Thus did the king cease to be that vassal’s liege. No matter how great a king he was, he could not dominate a vassal who had gone on to heaven.

The king was enraged, and he immediately summoned all the vassals in the castle and pancaked them.

“My number one vassal Bayard has failed me, and the man I saw as my number two vassal has never returned from the Iron Tower of Heaven. Is there no vassal anywhere who is as loyal, or as capable, as Sleeping Man?”

There was nothing to be gained, and much harm to be felt, from incapable and disloyal vassals, but having absolutely no vassals was inconvenient in its own way.

When the vassals who had been away from the castle returned, the king tasked them to bring in a lot more fresh vassals. Furthermore, to keep that insolent door from ever opening again, he wrapped it with chains. Using it as a backrest, and attaching armrests and a seat to it, the king made it into a chair for himself.

When the king sat on that chair, no one could open the door.

“I cannot trust my vassals, but if I pancake them left and right, I’ll run out in

no time,” the king muttered. “With the exception of those who’ve done something especially awful, I’ll lock them in the dungeon and have them reflect on their actions for now. Still, though...”

He had been overjoyed when Elephant Castle was first completed, but ever since gaining a castle, he had stopped going anywhere on his own very often. Now he was forced to defend his treasure, the door, and couldn’t be away from in front of it.

He considered just going to heaven, but even the wise king had no way of knowing what sort of place it was.

Besides which, the king had not always been a king. It was only by building power little by little, and becoming a great king, that he had been able to acquire a castle as impressive as this one. If he set aside the fact of not being able to move from in front of the treasure, you could say he was able to do anything.

It could be that the moment he went to heaven, the great, wise king would lose everything. If that came to pass, it would all be in vain.

Besides, as Sleeping Man had once told him, the king who gained the door could go to heaven at any time, so there was no need to hurry.

However, *only* the king could be allowed to go to heaven. If the king opened the door and went to heaven, there would be no one to close it. Anyone could pass through the open door and go to heaven after him. The door belonged to the king, so would that not be incredibly vexing?

To console himself, the king sought things that were strange and unusual. His vassals competed to find such things, but they did not get the results they hoped for. Having traveled this world a long time, it wasn’t easy to impress the king with just any old thing.

One time, a vassal brought a pretty princess to the castle. The princess was beautiful, but held a filthy shovel close at all times. What an odd princess.

The king became quite fond of the princess. That was because, unlike his vassals who were always attempting to curry favor with him, the princess was brave, or stupid, and opposed the king at every turn.

For the king, betrayal was unforgivable, but he had grown tired of only having those who would flatter him around. The vassal who brought the princess to him must have seen that was how the king felt.

“Well done,” said the king. “However, it is insolent to presume to read your king’s heart. I shall make you a shadow.”

Once the king had pancaked that vassal into a shadow, he ordered the princess to be his partner in conversation.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” the princess shot back.

“Then shall I make you a pancake, like that vassal?”

“I don’t want that, either.”

“If you don’t like it, then fight back. What else do you have that filthy shovel for?”

“As if I could beat you,” she snorted. “You know I can’t. That’s why you don’t take my shovel off me, right?”

“Good grief, you just have to have everything go your way, don’t you?”

“I don’t want *you* telling *me* I’m selfish,” the princess snapped. “No matter how you look at it, no one’s more selfish than you, you piece of shit.”

“It’s not that kings want everything their way. Those who want everything their way become kings.”

“Huh? What is this, the chicken and egg problem? Though it’s obvious the chicken came first.”

“Why did the chicken come first?” the king asked.

“I’ve heard of chickens laying eggs, but no egg lays a chicken. The egg’s just a shell.”

“You’re an interesting one. Sing for me, and assuage my boredom.”

“You think I care if you’re bored? You can stay bored forever.”

For the king, who was sick to death of his sycophantic vassals, the princess’s frank demeanor was comforting. No matter how much of a strong front the princess put up, if the king got serious, he could end things in an instant. That

was why he could ignore being called a piece of shit. The princess was like a showy jester.

“If you think you’ll be on top forever, you’re dead wrong,” the princess sneered at him.

“To decide right and wrong is the exclusive right of the ruler.”

“The ruler, huh? You think frightening people into doing what you say is ruling. Real impressive.”

“If they do not listen, they will be crushed,” the king informed her. “Thus, they obey. The simpler a system is, the better.”

“You just can’t think up a more complicated system, can you? You know, like a code of laws, maybe. I’ll bet you couldn’t do anything that advanced. Not with your shit brains.”

That said, there were times he snapped. When the princess got carried away and went too far, the king would shout.

“I can turn you into a shadow that’s even lower than an animal!”

When he saw the normally bold princess’s face turning pale, those hands clinging desperately to the shovel, it was truly satisfying.

As far as the king was concerned, he was allowing the princess’s indiscreet remarks just for that purpose. Even when clearly terrified, the princess’s false bravado was still a sight to behold.

“If you want to do it, then do it,” the princess snarled. “I’m more than ready.”

“That’s the spirit. You should talk back to me more. I’ll listen to you until my patience runs out.”

In the end, the princess was a pet dancing in the king’s palm. Because the king was too great, most people placed in the palm of his hand would shrink in fear, but the princess danced desperately. Was it not so earnest, and so adorable?

“The great king has all that you will never have,” the king smirked. “This castle, for one thing, and this door, for another.”

The king rose from his throne, taking the armrests, the seat, and the chains

off the door, then opened it.

“That’s nothing,” the ignorant princess said, as if exasperated. “It’s just a door, you know.”

The king sneered with all his heart. “I suppose a fool like you can’t see it, but this door leads to heaven. The king is the sole person able to open the door to heaven at any time. That is because the king is the king. In the king’s presence, everything will go his way, the way he hopes it will. How fleeting is your fate that you may be turned into an empty shadow the moment the king wishes for it?”

With lip bit in frustration, the princess continued to glare endlessly at the other side of the door.

Things had indeed gone just as the king had hoped.

The king was greatly satisfied.

## 14. Not Wandering [gone\_gone]



This slope was very hard to walk on. It wasn't just bumpy; it was bumping up and down. The places where he stepped might suddenly bump up, or sink down out of nowhere.

Not just a little, either. It could be anywhere from ten centimeters to over a meter at times.

It wasn't hard enough to call it rocky, but it wasn't dirt, either. Nor was it smooth like sand. It felt like clay, only not sticky. It was uniformly gray, but blackened in places, giving it a look not entirely unlike marble. That really messed with his sense of distance.

It was dynamically rising and falling, but sloping downwards on the whole. This might have been better than a constant downhill slope. Having some change kept him from getting bored, at least.

If he let his guard down, he'd lose balance, so he couldn't get lost in thought. That spared him from thinking about things he didn't need to, but still, *That's not good*, he thought.

Alice and Ahiru who were more used to Parano than Haruhiro were going on ahead of him. While following the two of them, how many times had he repeated to himself, *I can't just leave this to them, now?*

The flow of time in Parano was unique. Was a second in Parano a hundred seconds in Grimgar, or was it the reverse? Did it go back and forth? Did it meander? Did it flow entirely differently?

Nothing was certain, and he could think of no way to test it, but he felt that he could be sure time wasn't flowing at a uniform rate.

Haruhiro, of course, felt that was abnormal. But not so for Alice and Ahiru.

They'd likely started out with the same feeling of wrongness about it as Haruhiro, but at some point while living in Parano, it had become normal for them.

In Haruhiro's mind, the result of that was that everything, even their thought patterns, had been influenced by Parano. He wasn't sure about Ahiru, but Alice was by no means a stupid person, yet neither of them ever really planned things out in an ordered, logical fashion. The changes in Parano were likely too intense for that.

When it came to places that didn't change, there were maybe a little over ten, all of them ruins or similar. Even if they were traveling from Ruin A to Ruin B, the distance as a straight line didn't change, but the terrain in between changed by the second, so the road there was different each time. It was exceedingly difficult to predict when anything might happen, so they were fundamentally required to act on the spur of the moment to respond to an evolving situation. Given that, any plan was going to go to waste in no time.

Planning existed to carry out things in an efficient manner. Efficiency was a ratio of reward to effort expended. For instance, if it took a year to bake a loaf of bread, you would have to say that was highly inefficient. However, in Parano, the concept of time was awfully vague.

Did it take a year to bake that loaf of bread? Ten days? One day? A few hours? No one could say for sure.

Haruhiro and the others might be experiencing a kind of deathless, timeless immortality in this other world, Parano. The fact was that if something happened to them they would die, so they weren't unkillable at all, but if they could avoid danger, they'd likely live indefinitely. That was the illusion, at least.

This situation dulled his sense of whether something absolutely had to be done right now.

Sure, he was worried about his comrades, and he wanted to see them, and they had to get back together. But if they were all right, well, "Haste makes waste," as they say. Maybe it didn't have to be done right this second?

No, obviously, he needed to confirm his comrades were all right as soon as possible. It was just that, hurry though he might, it was questionable if there

was anything more he could do. It was unimaginably difficult to search for people in Parano. Mind-numbingly so. If he wasn't patient about it, he'd go nuts.

If after all that, he just stopped caring, would he meet an end like the rusted man at the Iron Tower of Heaven?

*I won't end up like him*, was something he fervently believed at the moment. However, if this situation dragged on indefinitely, how about then?

Haruhiro might well make the same sort of decision as the rusted man, or Sleeping Man in the Scarlet Forest.

Alice and Ahiru still had an attachment to life. Still, their spirits had definitely been eaten away at by Parano's eternity. It was surely the same for the lonely king guarding the door in Elephant Castle. And Itou Nui wasn't as strong-hearted as any of them, so she had given up on living.

It was Haruhiro who had dealt the finishing blow to her, so he had no intention of dodging responsibility for his role in it. Even so, when Nui's wish to be reunited with Alice had come true, she'd had no more reason to cling on to life. Having become one with Nui using Resonance, Haruhiro could say so for certain.

To Nui, living had been a terrifying and grueling ordeal, like crawling through the darkness in search of something. Alice had been her sole light.

The moment she saw that light again, Nui had felt, *This is enough. I never want to suffer again. I'll be engulfed by the light and let it end.*

Like Sleeping Man, the rusted man, and Nui, would Haruhiro eventually choose to end himself in some way? It was possible Alice or Ahiru might, too. Kuzaku's new group and the rest of their comrades likewise. He couldn't be sure that none of his comrades had already given up on life like that.

He was going to find them before they were completely absorbed into Parano. Then they'd persuade them to defeat the king and open the door.

He didn't know where or what heaven was, but Haruhiro's party had come to Parano through a door. The door in Parano likely led to another world, too. It could well be Grimgar. He wasn't sure he should get his hopes up, but he had

no reason to reject the idea outright.

It probably wasn't going to do any harm thinking, *It'd be nice if it was.*

After descending the bumping marble-patterned slope for a long time, suddenly the bottom of a valley came into view. There was a sudden steep cliff in front of them, so it was probably a valley.

Haruhiro came to a stop despite himself. "There sure are a lot of them..."

Alice and Ahiru were pressing on. He'd be in a spot of trouble if they left him behind, so Haruhiro earnestly kept his legs moving.

"That's the Valley of Earthly Desires..." he said.

There was a mass of something writhing in the cliff. Like a massive swarm of insects. Some moved left and right, while others were clambering up the cliff.

Looking around, it wasn't just Haruhiro and the other two who were descending the slope to head to the valley—no, the cliffs on the other side. Maybe they were avoiding Alice and Ahiru's powerful magic, so they were quite far off, but he could see what looked like dream monsters dotted about here and there.

Haruhiro eventually caught up to Alice. "That valley... or the cliff, rather... where does it start, and how far does it go?"

"Beats me. You know, Ahiru?"

"How should I?" the man shot back. "If you go, you'll find out."

"Well, get going," Alice said.

"Me?" Ahiru was incredulous. "You can't be serious, right?"

"I said go."

"No way. I'm not going."

"Why not? It'd be amusing if you did."

"Not for me, it wouldn't. You're kind of like the king, Alice. Well, I guess that's probably why he liked you."

Alice snorted in response, but said nothing.

When they got even closer to the bottom of the valley, more and more of the buglike dream monsters vanished out of view. They hadn't actually vanished, of course. The dream monsters grew cautious of Alice and Ahiru, and moved away. Still, they didn't run.

While keeping a distance from Alice and Ahiru, they rushed to get ahead of the rest and cling to the cliff. Then they climbed.

"Should we climb, too?" Haruhiro asked.

"Are you crazy?" Ahiru demanded.

"Well, I think I'm still sane, Ahiru."

"Having *you* call me that kinda pisses me off. You're just a tag-along..."

"Tell me your real name and I'll use it."

"...I forget. I don't even remember it anymore. Ahiru's fine."

The dream monsters didn't get in their way. Thanks to that, Haruhiro and the other two were able to focus on climbing.

If they couldn't get absorbed in the task, it wouldn't be possible. That was partly because of the steepness of the incline, but just like the slope on the way down, this cliff bumped in and out, too. When they laid a hand or foot on part of it, it might jut out or pull in. It was ridiculously dangerous.

How were they able to climb all the way to the top without giving up? That was a mystery, but they did it.

Beyond the Valley of Earthly Desires, flat land spread out as far as the eye could see. It was blue, like a tranquil sea. No matter how far they walked, they would surely find nothing here. He couldn't help but feel that way. Even so, the few monsters that succeeded in ascending the cliff pushed on towards the horizon.

Haruhiro and the others walked along the edge of the cliff. They weren't just walking. They were keeping a close eye out for anything other than dream monsters, anything human.

The phantasmagoric nature of Parano was really harsh upon those who came here from other worlds. Alice had lived in Ruins No. 6, Ahiru in Ruins No. 5, and

the king had built Elephant Castle at Ruins No. 1. The rusted man had met his end at the Iron Tower of Heaven, and even Nui, fallen to become a trickster, had taken up residence in Ruins No. 3. Even Haname, who was likewise a trickster, was making Ruins No. 2 her garden.

Humans were drawn to places that didn't change. When humans were in Parano, they stayed in places that didn't change, or moved from unchanging place to unchanging place, one of the two.

If his comrades were alive, they were sure to visit unchanging places. If he went around the unchanging places, he'd eventually encounter Kuzaku, who was traveling with a woman and two men he didn't know.

Haruhiro suspected he was taking things too easily. It wasn't as if he didn't think that maybe he, too, was being affected by Parano's poisonous influence. But was there any better way? He considered waiting in the Valley of Earthly Desires forever until someone came, but that would be slow in the extreme. His thinking might be dyed completely in the colors of Parano while he was waiting, and he couldn't deny the risk that he might fall into darkness.

The cliff gradually got lower, and finally reached a height where the area below could no longer be called a valley. This was the end of the Valley of Earthly Desires, apparently. He never did end up spotting another human being, but Haruhiro was surprised at how little he had lost hope.

"We can't climb Glass Mountain, right?" he asked. "Let's go to the Sanzu River next."

Neither Alice nor Ahiru objected.

When was the last time he'd exchanged words with either of them? They were with him, but they were being awfully untalkative. No, maybe not. Were they? It was hard to say.

No matter what happened on route, it was rare for any of it to move his heart.

*Oh, yeah? Hm, okay. Huh, all right then,* was the extent of his reactions.

It might be incredible that Alice had held onto the desire to go through the door to heaven, or that Ahiru hadn't given up on his wish to save Yonaki Uguisu.

Did Haruhiro feel that way because his own will was getting weaker?

Whenever he felt that it was, he forced himself to remember his comrades' faces.

*I want to see them. I have to.*

*I'm going to see them.*

*I want us all to go home together.*

*To Grimgar.*

*Oh, but... what sort of place was Grimgar, anyway?*

Was he pining for it? Was Grimgar a homeland that merited Haruhiro wanting to return to it?

The Sanzu was a great bubbling river. The bubbles weren't due to a swift current. There was an endless supply of sparkling rainbow bubbles forming on the surface, then flying away. The flow itself was slow. Or perhaps it only looked that way. The far shore looked hazy through the countless bubbles, almost like a mirage.

The riverbanks were packed with small white pebbles that were like beads. He couldn't tell from a distance, but when he came closer, there were small mounds of pebbles. Had someone piled them up? Or had they ended up like that naturally?

The next thing he knew, Haruhiro was crouched down piling up stones.

"...Huh? What am I doing...?" he mumbled.

Looking around, he saw Alice nearby, and Ahiru a little further away doing the same.

"Hm... You just feel like stacking them when you come here..." Alice murmured.

"You do, for some reason..." Ahiru agreed.

Both Alice and Ahiru seemed to be stacking reluctantly, as if they had no choice but to pile up the rocks.

*Then why don't they just stop?* Haruhiro thought, but he himself was piling up

rocks, too, for some reason.

The pebbles were the size of his pinkie fingertip, smooth, and rather hard to stack. Even if he managed to stack a number of them well, they'd suddenly come tumbling down.

“This is frustrating...” he muttered.

*This is no time for stacking pebbles* was a thought in some corner of his mind the whole time, but there was always one more pebble he had to stack before he was satisfied. Once he stacked that one, he wanted to stack another.

No, no, there was no need for stacking them at all. He wanted to stop himself. He wanted someone to stop him. Was it the same for Alice and Ahiru?

“Can we stop doing this?” Haruhiro asked.

“I wish I could stop, too...” Alice responded.

“Same here...” Ahiru agreed.

“No, if we don’t all stop together, I feel like we’ll never be able to stop. That’s just a feeling, though...”

“Then you stop first, Haruhiro.”

“You start, Alice. Or Ahiru can go first instead.”

“Ohh! Now it fell over, you idiot,” Ahiru complained. “Now I’ve gotta stack them again!”

“This is no good,” Haruhiro muttered.

Mustering all of his willpower, he grasped his right hand, which was reaching for a pebble, with his left, and he tried to stand, but couldn’t.

*I can’t stand because I think I can’t. I can stand, he told himself. I can stand. I can. I’m gonna stand. Yes. I’m gonna stand. Look, I stood.*

“W-We have to run!” Haruhiro grabbed Alice and Ahiru by the scruffs of their necks and ran away.

No, obviously he didn’t have the raw idiot strength to run while dragging them both with him. Still, once he fled the riverbed at what felt like a run to him, he completely forgot why he’d been stacking pebbles at all.

“What was that?” Haruhiro panted.

“Who knows.” Alice’s lips were pursed. Was that because of feeling awkward? Alice *had* piled up a crazy number of pebbles.

“That’s how the Sanzu River is,” Alice said. “I probably piled up even more than last time I came. Does repeating the experience increase the desire to stack?”

“It feels like you could stack them forever,” Ahiru said. “Not that I wanted to stack them at all...”

Ahiru looked wistfully back at the riverbed. He actually looked like he wanted to stack them.

“Let’s make sure we don’t get to close to the riverbed while we look around for people,” Haruhiro told them. “Just maybe... one of my comrades might be stacking pebbles.”

If this was a river, there was a fountainhead and an estuary. Or did rivers not work like that in Parano?

Whatever the case, they headed upstream while taking note of anything happening in the riverbed. The compulsion was so strong that he expected at least someone to be piling pebbles, but though there were signs of stacking everywhere, nothing was moving. He didn’t see any dream monsters, either, so the mysterious magic of the pebbles that made people want to stack them must not work on dream monsters.

“Who did all that stacking?” Haruhiro wondered.

“People like us, I guess,” Alice answered.

“Wonder where the guys who did it went,” Ahiru commented. “Think they committed suicide by drowning themselves in the Sanzu River?”

That was an ominous thought.

Well, to be honest, Haruhiro had been thinking the same thing, but this was Parano. Couldn’t they go on stacking pebbles for eternity?

Perhaps not.

Time flowed even in Parano, people would age, and all things would rot eventually.

Could he say for certain that wasn't true?

The far bank was gradually coming into clearer view. That meant the river had narrowed.

The times he remembered his comrades, he made a point of repeatedly thinking, *I want to see them, I want to see them, I want to see them.*

*Let's go home. To Grimgar.*

When he just thought about Grimgar, that was too vague, so he tried to imagine Alterna. Even more specifically, the places he had probably spent the most time in, like their room in the volunteer soldiers' lodging house.

He only remembered it well enough to go, *It was kind of like this, I think?* though.

Was he pining for it? Was Grimgar a homeland that merited returning to?

Not really; it wasn't as if he'd been born there. He'd awakened to find himself in Grimgar for some reason. He didn't remember anything from before, so he couldn't say where exactly, but it had probably been some other world.

The Dusk Realm, Darunggar, and now Parano. There were apparently multiple worlds. Where had he been before Grimgar? Could it, surprise, have been Parano?

Yeah, no. That was clearly not it.

But on the one-in-a-million chance that this was his homeland and he just didn't remember it, there might be no need to go back to Grimgar. Haruhiro would have come home. If so, wouldn't it be best for him to live here?

No... he wasn't seriously thinking that.

The fountainhead of the Sanzu River was a round fountain. It was maybe ten meters across at most. The water seemed to be endlessly flowing out of that spring. The bubbles were shooting out at an incredible speed, too, and they danced wildly around the area.

He seriously considered looping around the spring before checking the downstream direction before deciding against it. This was a hunch, but if they stayed near the Sanzu River any longer, they'd no longer be able to resist the pull of the magic pebbles. The estuary would have to wait for next time.

Haruhiro and the others visited Alice's former home in Ruins No. 6, as well Ruins No. 5 where Ahiru had built all the statues, and Ruins No. 3 where Nui had lived with the girl dolls.

At Ruins No. 3 with its scattered doll parts, dream monsters were rapidly gathering around, but when they saw the group, they took off running.

The king's castle was at Ruins No. 1, and Ruins No. 7 was the territory of the king's vassal Rainbow Mole. It was right in the middle of enemy territory, so they looked at Scarlet Forest and Rainbow Mole's Nest from a distance, but there were no new discoveries.

They tried Ruins No. 2, too. Bayard Garden had been destroyed by Haname's own power, but it had been restored, if not to its former glory, and flowers of many colors were blooming.

Obviously, they didn't touch a single one.

It seemed the bird man they had met on their previous trip here, Suzuki-san, had moved on. They didn't spot him.

They went to the Iron Tower of Heaven, too. With the girl dolls still scattered around, Alice didn't want to climb the tower. Haruhiro went up to the landing where the rusted man and Nui were with Ahiru.

They saw Nui not at all rotting, but slightly rusted.

"Ah..." Ahiru whispered, looking up to the polka dot sky.

*I didn't want to bring it up with Alice, but I was secretly worried she'd rot before she rusted,* Haruhiro thought.

Well, everything else aside, at least Nui would be spared from rotting.

There were seven ruins. Only Ruins No. 4 remained.

"That's Mimic's town," Alice said.

According to Alice, Ruins No. 4 was where a trickster called Mimic and the yomus lived.

"Yomus?" Haruhiro asked.

"They're dream monsters. They live in that town, following a bunch of rules set out by Mimic like 'No talking,' or 'Be quiet.'"

"So there's a place like that, too. Or rather, there are dream monsters that act like that, too."

"I'm sure there are all sorts of dream monsters," Alice said. "But if you were to say these ones were special, you wouldn't be wrong. If you break the rules, the yomus will attack, so it's not exactly safe."

"If you kill dream monsters, you can take their id," Haruhiro said. "By taking their id, your ego will grow, and your magic will get stronger. With your strength, Alice, couldn't you deliberately break the rules, and, uh... The yomus, was it? Couldn't you kill them as they came at you, and make a ton of id that way?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't," Alice said. "It's a pain to explain why. You tell him, Ahiru."

"What, it's my job now...?"

Though he griped about what a hassle it was, Ahiru explained.

Ego was your strength of self. Whether or not you were selfish had nothing to do with it. It was the degree to which you rationally saw yourself as different from others, and were definitely aware you were yourself and no one else.

In contrast, id was the power of your unconscious, instinctual impulses and desires.

Ego and id generally fluctuated up and down but remained roughly equal, and a scale with the two placed on either end would sway, but remain mostly even.

If you killed others and took their id, what would happen? Naturally, your id would rise that much, so the scales would be tipped.

"Id is your impulses and desires," Ahiru said. "When it gets stronger, well, you know. It turns out like *A Streetcar Named Desire*."

"Huh? I don't think I get the reference..."

"It's like, you know in your head what you're doing is a bad idea, but your lower half doesn't listen."

"...Ohh. That sort of thing, huh. I think I can imagine."

When that happened, you would try to suppress those impulses and desires. In other words, your ego would rise, and as a result, the id and ego would happily be balanced again.

Ahiru stopped. "Hold on, you've gotta be way younger than me. What is going on with kids these days?"

"I don't know that I'd say 'these days,'" Haruhiro said. "I mean, this *is* Parano."

"I guess you've got a point."

Haruhiro more or less understood the relationship between ego and id.

Alice, and likely Ahiru as well, had raised their egos by stealing id from dream monsters. Ego was the source of magic. The higher your ego rose, the stronger your magic.

"But the thing is, try as you might, you can't steal ego," Ahiru said. "Only id. Still, if you just keep building up your id—"

"It's fine if your ego can keep up, but... it can't, right?" Haruhiro said slowly.

It isn't something that can be converted into numbers and precisely calculated, but for sake of argument, let's assume Haruhiro has an ego score of 50. His id score is roughly 50, too. A certain dream monster has an id score of 10. Haruhiro kills that dream monster, stealing its id. Haruhiro's id rises 10 points up from 50 to become 60, creating a 10 point gap between his ego score and id score.

In order to close that 10 point gap, Haruhiro's ego score will rise. Eventually it becomes 60, equalizing his ego and id scores.

However, now assume that dream monster's id score was 50 instead. It was a tough foe, but with help from Alice and Ahiru, Haruhiro killed it. Haruhiro's id score will rise 50 points to become 100. His ego score is 50, so the difference is

"In my experience, when you kill someone who's on about the same level as you, you've gotta watch out," Ahiru said. "It feels like... there's this itch, it drives you crazy, and you get these irresistible urges."

"Irresistible..." Haruhiro murmured.

"If there are enemies in front of you, you'll want to kill more," said Ahiru. "You might think once you've killed them all that the problem sorts itself out, but it doesn't. What comes after that is a breakdown of the balance. The fall into darkness."

"You become a trickster?"

"Yeah. People fall into darkness when their ego drops too far, or they steal too much id. If the gap between the ego and id is too great, desires and impulses run wild. At that point, it's too late. You can only become a trickster."

For Haruhiro with his ego score of 50, it will be the same if he kills a single dream monster with an id score of 50, or ten of them with an id score of 5 in close succession.

It won't be easy for him to take out an id-score-of-50 dream monster, but he might be able to mow down id-score-of-5 dream monsters one after another.

And if he massacres dream monsters with an id score of 5, he'll go well past the danger zone.

"Everything has its limits, and it can be hard to see where they are, huh?" Haruhiro said.

"Have you never done that thing?" Ahiru said. "Where you're about to cum, but you hold back and do multiplication tables in your head?"

"I'm not sure what situation you'd do that in, but no, I probably haven't."

"Seriously? I guess it feels like a wave that was about to wash over you gently receding. When your id, which was about to go wild after growing, is suppressed by your growing ego, that's about what it feels like."

"So if you haven't felt that, and you keep stealing id, it's easy to fall into darkness?"

"If your will weakens, your ego falls, so—no, maybe your will weakens because your ego falls? Whichever it is, that's bad, too. If you get ridiculously down and depressed, that's the end for you here."

They climbed an awfully twisted hill and the town came into sight.

There was a thin haze, but he could tell there were many buildings, gardens and stone walls, and roads, too.

Were there people?

Yes, there were. Moving on the road. Lots of them. Not so much walking as running, probably.

"That's Ruins No. 4?" Haruhiro asked. "It doesn't look like a quiet town to me."

Alice thrust the shovel into the ground, taking a deep breath. "Looks like something's going on."

"You can just ignore those guys usually," Ahiru put in. "They're harmless."

If they were harmless, that might be another reason Alice didn't try to earn id in Mimic's Town.

Haruhiro began descending the hill towards the town.

"Ah, hey!" Ahiru chased after him.

What would Alice do? Haruhiro didn't turn back. Alice would probably come.

As he got further along, his heart raced. There was something going on in that town.

Who had caused it?

## 15. A Boy Named Desire [sexy\_drive]



Question:

Who does this world exist for?

Answer:

The world is mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

The world exists for me.

Do you get it?

Don't you get it?

Basically, that's how it is.

What does that mean, you ask? Well, the world exists for me. I dunno why. I can just tell. I know these things. It's just a thing you get.

Like, you can see it. Once it comes into view, it's easy to have an epiphany, you know? For real.

When I had my epiphany, I jumped right up, and grabbed this bald, octopus-like dream monster's slimy face in my vice-like grip. Then, I smushed it good.

It was damn easy. Like cooking made easy. Nah, I wasn't gonna eat him. From there, I rolled around laughing. *Wahahaha!* No need for meaning. The meaning can come later. Like how meaning gets attached to the things I've accomplished.

While I was rolling and laughing, it got more and more fun. *Wahaha!* *Wahahahaha!*

Rolling around and laughing is the best. Spin, spin, spin, spin. It's the secret to good health, you know? Spin, spin, spin, spin.

While spinning around, I found a dream monster that looked like a sea anemone running away.

*Ping.* Locked on.

*Zoom!* I spun around, and I took that spinning power, that revolution, you might say, and both using and not using it—no, using it, yeah, using it good—*bam*, I got him with the large katana. Right in two, *slice*. It felt sooooooooooooooo good.

But why was I crying?

Because it felt so good?

I screamed.

“Classic...!”

*Damn*, I thought. *I dunno what was classic about it, but the way that word sounded coming off my lips, seriously, hot damn.*

The universe of waves in its flavor gave it a supernatural groove that already bordered on divine. It was a god damned miracle, wasn't it? It was, or more like I was. I was God, wasn't I?

I turned an ear to the heavens and listened. “I can hear it. The voice...”

“What voice are you talking about, Bossari, you utter nitwit?!” There was Tonbe-kun, running at me with his beloved, oversized mirror. Hilarious.

“Eheheh.” I stopped his mirror with just the index finger of my left hand.

“Urkh! Wh-Why you! Wh-Wh-Where is that idiot strength coming from, you

big pile of narcissism?!"

"No, no, Tonbe-kun, you're just weak," I smirked. "I can do better than this. I'm holding back. This is me, pulling my punches. Is that you at max power, Tonbe-kun?"

"N-N-N-No way is this my max! I've still got my trump card!"

"Then show me! Show me your... trumpet?"

"Trump card!"

"Yeah, that!"

I kicked Tonbe-kun's massive mirror and sent both it and him flying. Did he really have a secret... What was it? Dump cart? Well, if he had one, I seriously wanted to see it. But before that, I had a feeling Trashman would be coming for me with a surprise attack, and not even so much as a polite hi-yah before he did it.

That was exactly what happened, too. Trashman wound up with his great sword and lunged. He was like a violent blast of dark wind.

Dark Storm. Whoa. Badass. But I saw it coming, so I swung my large katana hard.

My shockwave collided with his Dark Storm.

"Whuh...?!" Trashman sputtered as my shockwave peeled his Dark Storm off him. He stumbled in an exaggerated manner, and he couldn't finish his swing.

"Ahaha," I laughed. "What's the matter? You're looking weak there, Senior. Is it because you're Trashman? I guess, since you're Trashman, you were always trash, huh."

"I... I ain't Trashman! I'm Gomi!"

"Gyahahahaha!" I laughed. "You're hilarious. That's so funny, I wanna kill you like the trash you are!"

I wanted to kill him so badly, my vision was going blurry. That's a thing that happens, you know? You didn't know? Well, now you do. Isn't that great? It was that kind of urge to kill you get when every hole in your body is oozing I-wanna-

kill-something juice. If you don't know what that is, you'll never understand this.

"Kuzaku! What's gotten into you?! You're acting strange!" Setora-chan was yapping like a little dog.

*I'll kill her next, I told myself. When I killed her, that'd be the end of it, which was one drawback, but it was obviously better to kill her than to not, so, yeah, I was gonna kill her after all.*

What was it gonna be like killing Setora-chan? Sad, I guess. The sadness would tear open my chest, and something would poke its face out to say peek-a-boo, I bet. Then it'd be like, *Let's kill, kill, kill, baby!* and urge me to go on. I couldn't wait for that, so I shouted out loud.

"Uwahhhhhh! Re! Vo! Lu! Tooooooooonnnn!"

*Bzzzapzapzap!* The power arced off of me like lightning. I was tingling thanks to it. This feeling of the blood vessels bursting inside me. It was so, unbearably, goooooood.

"But why am I crying? Eeeehehehehehehe..."

While I laughed, my lungs convulsing like crazy, I brought my left hand up to touch the area around my eyes. My fingers got wet. When I looked, they were red.

"Huh? No...? It's not tears... this is... blood?"

*Is, like, my face, like, a total mess?*

*This, it's all blood, isn't it?*

*I'm covered in blood, aren't I?*

"Pfft..." I burst out laughing. What was I getting myself covered in blood for? "Gwee! Gwehehehehe! Gwahah! Bwuhuhuhuh! Bweheh! H-Hilarious..."

My sides hurt. My head hurt. My body hurt. I hurt everywhere. It hurt so much, I couldn't stop laughing.

"This is bad." Someone said that.

Bad? What did she mean, bad? Ba-ba-bad? Was it bad? It might be bad? Be

bad, be bad, be bad?

Splitting. It was splitting. Trying to split. My outside. Outside, inside. Maybe my inside, too. Feelings of love. Redundant trap.

Trap. Rapping noises. Symbolic princess carnivalvalvalval. Oh, shit. Shiiiiit. Something was coming out. It was going nom, nom, nom, nom. I was getting eaten. I might've been doing the eating, too.

Feelings of love. Feelings? What feelings? No, this wasn't the time for that, I was breaking a king break break break.

Blaaaack. The me that was coming out of me was so black. The black me was eating me.

No, not black, dark. Ohh, was that me...?

Something had wrapped around the outside of mememememememememe.  
“Kuzaku! Don’t fall into the darkness!”

Darkness, darkness, darkness, darkness, darkness, darkness, darkness,  
darkness, ness, ness, ness, ness, ness, ness, ness, ness, ness, dark, dark, dark,  
dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, darkness, ness, ness, ness, ness?

...Hahh.

*Throw... ow, ow, ow, owowowow it off? The thing clinginginging to my outside...?*

*They're gone.*

*Everyone's gone.*

*It's just me, alone...*

(No...)

A...

(You're wrong.)

*U...*

(There is someone.)

1...

(You're not alone. You're not...)

0...

(You know that, right? ...I'm here.)

A,

*U,*

1,

o,

(I am...)

*Ha,*

*Ru,*

Hi,

*Ro?*

(That's right, Kuzaku, I'm here. Here. With you. So... you can't fall into the darkness. It's like... What'd he say again? When you're about to cum, you hold it back, and do multiplication tables inside your head, was it...?)

*Multiplication tables... One times one is one... One times two is two... One times three is three... One times four is four...*

(Don't let your lust... your urges... get the better of you. They're yours... They're a part of yourself... So accept them... Recognize them, make them your own...)

*Three time five is fifteen... Three times six is eighteen... Three times seven is twenty-one...*

(You don't actually have to do multiplication tables, though. It can be anything. Like, you just need to calm yourself down, take hold of your reins for yourself. If you were a horse, think of it like learning to ride yourself. Man, I'm

the one saying this stuff, and it still kinda makes no sense to me...)

*Ohh... but...*

(...Yeah.)

*Hold on...*

(Huh...?)

*...I get it.*

*...You're there, right, Haruhiro?*

(I am... yeah.)

*...Right there.*

(Well, yeah... I'm here.)

*When I think about it like that, you know... I feel like it's all gonna be okay.*

*Maybe?*

“...Wogh.” A weird groan came out of his mouth.

His eyes opened. Wait, they'd been closed? Apparently they had.

Kuzaku kneeled on the ground, hanging his head. His large katana was lying on the ground next to him.

As for what was clinging to his back, that went without saying.

“...Haruhiro?” he mumbled.

“...Yeah.”

“Sorry, I...”

“It's fine, man. It looks like I made it in time, at least. Thank goodness.”

“You saved me, didn't you? I was in serious trouble there, wasn't I? Like, I was going crazy. I've got no idea what happened, though...”

“You killed too many dream monsters at once,” Haruhiro said. “Your id went up too much, and the gap with your ego... Oh, whatever. We can explain that later.” With a grunt of exertion, Haruhiro pulled Kuzaku to his feet. “We need to

get out of town now! Can you run?!"

"Huh? Uh, um, probably!"

Picking up his large katana with his right hand, he rubbed his face with his left hand. *Whoa. It's all red*, he thought.

He couldn't see very well. He wasn't totally blind, but his vision was blurry. His hearing was a bit off, too. Like something had been stuffed in his ears. He apparently had a nosebleed.

His body hurt here and there, all over... actually, his body was in the worst possible condition, but Haruhiro said they were getting out of town.

Even if he couldn't run, he'd run. He could run.

He had a lot of thoughts, like, *There are a bunch of people here I don't know*, or, *I could have sworn I saw that guy in the moss green coat somewhere before*, but right now running came first.

Haruhiro was here.

If he could see Haruhiro's back in front of him, he had to keep following.

Because Haruhiro was here, after all.

He didn't need to think about anything else.

It seemed he'd gotten quite deep inside the town at some point, and no matter how much they ran, they weren't reaching the gate, but occasionally Haruhiro would turn back to encourage him, so he was easily able to keep going.

The gate was blocked with that same thorny vine stuff as before, but someone busted a hole in it so they could get through.

Even once they were outside, they ran for a while.

For his part, Kuzaku wanted to stop running, but Haruhiro shouted at him, "Not yet!" so obviously he did as he was told.

They climbed a hill that was made of chaotically interconnected stairs. He tripped on the steps repeatedly. Each time, Haruhiro would help him to his feet.

*Thanks, man, I'm super grateful*, Kuzaku thought.

His eyesight had gotten a lot better. He could even hear half-decently. It's amazing what you can recover from. No, could you recover from all that, normally? Was it because this wasn't Grimgar?

When he reached the summit, the feeling of accomplishment was going to be incredible. Haruhiro would probably praise him.

But was this even a hill? It wasn't, was it? Hold on, it had changed completely from before. Kuzaku was climbing the steep slope of what seemed to be a mound of rubber tube-like things piled up. When he squeezed with his hands, those tube things stuck to him, making it pretty hard to climb.

Well, not that it mattered. He was almost done.

"All right...!" Kuzaku yanked on the tube things to pull himself up, finally reaching the summit.

There she was, crying.

Sparkling, sparkling, the tears flowed.

## 16. Sound Arguments Can be Pretty Lame [sentimentalism]



“...Shihoru?” Haruhiro blinked two, three times despite himself.

He’d had a feeling since before he’d finished climbing this hill, which might not be a hill, but he had nothing better to call it, so he had no choice but to keep calling it a hill, that there was something shining on top of it.

Having climbed up here, lo and behold, there was a shining humanoid figure. It was clear at a glance that the figure was female. For a moment, he had mistaken her for being naked.

Her body was slathered with a gleaming paint-like substance, and his first impression was that this girl might be a little strange.

This being Parano, he thought maybe this was acceptable here, but when he noticed the woman in question resembled one of his comrades, he could only assume she actually was Shihoru, and that changed things.

“That’s you, right? No... I have the wrong person? Or... do I?” he asked awkwardly.

The woman was bawling her eyes out about five, maybe six meters from where Haruhiro was. She was probably looking at Haruhiro—or she should have been, but though she seemed to be looking, she also seemed not to be.

She was shedding tears. If you could call that substance, which looked like a powder made from crushing stars, tears, that is.

Those sparkling tears ran down her cheeks, some of it adhering to her breasts and lower body, while the rest pooled at her feet.

The woman with Shihoru’s face opened both eyes, her lips formed the shape

made when producing an “oo” sound, but she said nothing and did nothing but cry. She didn’t budge. Everything but her sparkling tears was frozen, so she looked like a statue of a woman, made with even more attention to detail than Ahiru’s statues of Yonaki Uguisu.

What was going on here? His head wasn’t working, and his mind couldn’t keep up.

A whole lot of things had happened at once. He’d figured getting far away from Mimic’s Town before sorting each of them out would be prudent.

Had that been a mistake? No, it couldn’t have been. Because it wasn’t just Kuzaku; Setora and a tiger he could only assume was Kiichi, along with Enba for some reason, and Merry, oh, Merry, Merry was safe, too.

Even if the whole gang wasn’t back together, he’d been able to meet up with some of his comrades.

In addition, though he hadn’t talked to them, so he didn’t know their full situation yet, the woman called Io and her two male flunkies might have been members of the Io-sama Squad, which was a part of the Day Breakers.

What were they doing in Parano? Well, whatever it was, it looked like they wouldn’t be hostile.

Mimic was shut up in Ruins No. 4 and wasn’t coming out, but he’d decided that it was probably best to climb the hill anyway, to be safe.

It seemed to have been the right choice.

The whole gang had assembled.

“Oh, hey,” Haruhiro murmured.

*That’s right. The whole gang’s here. Yeah. Well, then. That was just perfect, isn’t it?*

“Shihoru, I dunno what’s going on with you, but stop crying, and come—”

“Wait.” Alice pulled on his sleeve.

When he turned to look, the one who looked like a paladin from the Io-sama Squad—Tonbe, was it?—had made his hand mirror grow to a massive size, and

was sheltering Io and the other man, who was dressed all in black and had a long chin, behind it.

Setora and the others were still climbing the hill. Ahiru took his belt out of his pants.

“That woman, she’s a trickster,” said Alice.

“...Huh?”

*Tri...?*

*What?*

*Trickster?*

*Huh?*

*Who is?*

Alice’s shovel peeled. Its skin began to envelope Haruhiro and Alice.

“Whoa, hey!” Ahiru jumped towards them.

Alice didn’t force him out.

The moment before the skin fully covered Alice, Haruhiro, and Ahiru, he saw the puddle of sparkling tears at Shihoru’s—yes, that was Shihoru—feet spin upwards, and blow towards them. He felt a chill.

Alice’s shovel was already protecting them. Still, this felt like nothing if not bad news.

*Snap, snap, snap, snap, snap!* The noises started. They were being attacked. What kind of attack was it?

“Urgh...” Alice groaned while holding the main body of the faintly glowing meat stick that was the shovel.

Haruhiro hurriedly hugged Alice. *Resonance. I am already Alice. It’s numbing, kind of. Is this... pain? It’s like being pinched. Like small, but powerful hands are pinching me a few hundred places at once. It’s incredibly unpleasant. What’s going on here? That trickster. What is this power? It’s hard to say, not being able to see out from inside here. Have to bear it for now. Have to wait it out.*

*The pressure's letting up.*

*The attack, it's stopped.*

Releasing the skin immediately, they kicked Ahiru out.

*"Ow!"*

Ignoring Ahiru, who had landed flat on his ass, they observed the trickster.

*She's still crying. Those sparkling tears are suspicious. My shovel's hurt pretty badly. The skin's a wreck. If they can do that to my shovel, they're not playing around.*

*Is that someone you know, Haruhiro? A friend... A comrade?*

*She's fallen, become a trickster.*

"Wha—Shihoru-san..." There was a voice from behind.

Alice glanced in that direction. *That guy, huh? Kuzaku, was it? Looks like he just crested the hill. He saw that woman, and he's shocked about it.*

"Get back!" Alice called. "There's no helping her now."

"N-No helping her—Wait, what does that mean...?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

*It's the same as with Nui.*

*Haruhiro, you tried to save Nui. Right? You've become me through Resonance, so you're hearing this, right? The ego that's the source of magic, and the id that makes people fall into darkness and become tricksters, are deeply connected to our hearts. You might even say that they are our hearts. If you could go inside a person, maybe you might be able to find some sort of clue. That's what you thought, right?*

*It's not that you failed. You really did save her. Nui found salvation. Not in the form you had hoped for, maybe, but she did.*

*Besides, nothing good comes from living, anyway. You'll be happy or fortunate sometimes, but that's just a momentary thing. Every happiness will fade with time, and you can't experience it all that often, either. Or you grow accustomed to it. Like drugs. You feel good when you use them, but then you develop*

*resistance. If you just up the dose and take more, and more, and more each time, you eventually wreck your body, or you overdose and bite it that way.*

*It's nothing but boredom, stupidity, suffering, pain, and loneliness. That's all living is. What is this "life is wonderful" stuff? Anyone singing humanity's praises can eat shit. If living doesn't bring you to despair, you're blind, or an idiot without the mental capacity for proper thought. The clever ones, they use all sort of tricks to distract themselves from the abject lack of hope. They forget it's all meaningless, and focus on the pleasure in front of them. Working little by little toward some goal, fulfilling their curiosity, moving their bodies, trying to move up in the world, playing around, having sex. It's because if they don't do those things, they can't bear it.*

*There is no meaning in life. We were just born as a result of sexual reproduction. Whether we live or die, nothing changes. Nothing is gained, nothing lost. The total amount of mass in the universe is the same. When entropy increases, even the things we've worked so desperately to leave behind will be unable to maintain their forms. Nihilism isn't a belief, a stance, or an attitude. It's the plain truth.*

*Nui was released from the meaninglessness of life.*

*Congratulations, Nui.*

*Thank you, Haruhiro.*

*That's why you have to accept what I'm about to do.*

*Shihoru, was it?*

*We're going to save her.*

*Let's set her free together.*

*(You mean... kill her?)*

*She's crying, isn't she? Do you want to make her cry forever?*

*(No, but... there must be some way...)*

*There isn't. Not that I know of, at least. What about you? Any ideas?*

*(Well... No, but...)*

*We'll save her. Like Nui. I'll draw her attention somehow. While I do, you grab on to her. Once you use Resonance to attune yourself, I'm sure you can figure out the rest. Just do what you did for Nui.*

*Well, she's your comrade, and your friend, so maybe it's hard? Then why not think of it this way? She might not necessarily end up like Nui. If you try it again, it might work out this time. I think death was what Nui really wished for, after all.*

*Now, this girl? I don't know her. Maybe she's been crying like that all along. She just didn't let you see it. That's just like Nui, isn't it? Don't you think she wants to be set free?*

*If you could somehow become her using Resonance, and you found the answer to that, could you bring her back? If her wish and what you want yourself is different, what will you do? Can you force your desires on her? Is that right?*

“...I don't care what's right!” Haruhiro separated from Alice.

Shihoru was still crying.

*Why are you crying, Shihoru? he thought frantically. I don't know. Even though we're comrades. I have no idea why Shihoru would cry.*

“Kuzaku!” he shouted. “Draw Shihoru's attention!”

“Whuh?! H-How?!”

“Anything goes!”

“You can say that, but... Aw, screw it, fine! Shihoru-san, look...!”

*You never really know what people are going to do.*

*Even when you're comrades, you don't know what you don't know, and maybe there are some things you don't need to know.*

Kuzaku moved faster than the eye could follow.

He stripped off his armor. He was used to doing that, but this was still bizarrely fast. He then tore off most the other stuff he was wearing so quickly that it might actually have gotten torn apart.

“Hungh...!”

Kuzaku raised both hands, his right in a knife-like position, and his left flexed to show off his biceps. He put his weight on his left leg, and only the toes of his right foot were touching the ground.

Was it some kind of pose? That wasn't clear, but they were intense. The muscles, that was.

*Man, my initial impression that he was tall and lanky hasn't changed, but Kuzaku isn't just tall—he's got a pretty good body, too, right? I think he's got more muscle on him than the average guy. But still.*

*He wasn't like that before, right?*

*I have a feeling he's gotten more buff than before. He wasn't that buff, right?*

*The width of his chest, it's impossible. Those pecs are insane, but what is with those lats? They're like wings! Is that what they call a V-taper? No, no, can you even get like that? With a human body? You can't, right? Those abs are intense, too, you know? They're ripped like crazy, like a six pack! He's built all that muscle, yet still maintains a V-taper? I mean, what? Those traps, next to his neck? They're mountains. Mountains! You can't get built like that, not normally.*

*I don't even have to mention his arms. Okay, maybe I do. They're thick. Those aren't arms, they're legs. No, his legs are even more insane, I know. If I had to sum all of it up in a word, he's huge.*

*Too huge.*

*His height probably hasn't changed, but he's a giant.*

*A muscle giant.*

*What's more, he's almost completely naked.*

*What is going on?*

*What's happened to make things turn out like this?*

*Where did the Kuzaku I knew go?! Haruhiro wanted to shout. Give him back! I want the Kuzaku who wasn't a muscular giant back. Please!*

*He said, "Look," so I looked, but I don't wanna see this. Still, I'm looking. I mean, who couldn't? You kind of have to. It's beyond amazing.*

It wasn't just Haruhiro. Everyone was doing the same.

Shihoru's eyes were wide, and her mouth was gaping.

She wasn't crying.

Those sparkling tears had stopped.

*I ended up having to see something kind of incredible, but well done, Kuzaku. Your sacrifice... Is this a sacrifice? You seem to be pretty proud, showing off like that? Well, anyway, it won't be in vain.*

That said, Haruhiro couldn't rush it. Letting his heart slip into the ground, he used Stealth. Then, while avoiding standing directly in front of Shihoru, he went as fast as he could, but without rushing, as he approached.

He wasn't going to think, *This is my only chance, so I have to do it now, no matter what.* He could be pretty good at this sort of mental self-control.

*About two meters left.*

*One meter.*

Kuzaku was nearly stark naked, but so was Shihoru. If he touched the sparkling tears that had attached to certain parts of Shihoru's body and were not entirely failing to hide them, what would happen?

He had his worries, but Shihoru seemed fine, and there was no turning back now. At the very end, he cast aside all reason, and jumped on her.

“Shihoru...!”

## 17. The Form That Completes Me [perfect\_world]



Once upon a time, there was an incredibly ugly and very pathetic little girl.

She was so ugly...

So warped...

The little girl was, pitifully...

L O N E L Y

Yes, she was.

Glimmering, sparkling... The girl's tears flowed.

Sparkling, glimmering... The tears never stopped.

When she cried that way, she stopped caring about anything.

Even so, the tears, sparkling, glimmering... continued to overflow without end.

How very, very mysterious.

*If I don't care, why am I crying?*

*Could it be... Could it be... I don't not care?*

Was that why... glimmer, sparkle, glimmer... the girl cried?

It might well be, you know?

The girl surely must have been... searching for something.

The thing she was searching for, what was it?

(What? Searching for something...?)

*Hey, hey, I've felt like there's something, yes, something. Something I'm missing. From the very beginning, I think. I mean, because I'm lacking something, missing something, I've always been inferior, and that's why I'm like this, right? I think I was born this way, with some sort of inborn fault, deficiency, inferiority, or syndrome.*

*If I say that, I'm sure people would say, "That's just how it is. Everyone's missing something. That's a given," right? Yeah, sure, I know that. They go and act like know-it-alls, even though they can't possibly know a thing about other people.*

*I'm uneasy, unsure about staying insufficient as I am. I'm more scared than I can handle. I want to be complete. I feel like I'm a hole. A hole in my own shape. If there's a hole, you have to fill it, or it's dangerous, right? If someone fell into that hole, they'd be in trouble. Ohh, I want to fill this hole. But, you know, nobody had to fall into this hole, no one had to fall into the trap that's shaped like me, and I'm glad.*

*I have to hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry and fill the hole. That's why, you see, that hole, I decided to jump into that hole.*

*"Hee hee! Don't be stupid," I'll bet you're thinking. I'll bet you're laughing. But I'm not stupid. It's not stupid at all. Don't laugh. Don't laugh at me. I'm serious. This is sincere. It's important. If I don't do it, what else can I do?*

No.

*That's not it.*

*The truth is, I knew. I've always known.*

The pathetic little girl, she wanted to be loved. The reason the girl was pudgy, disfigured, and hopelessly ugly, ultimately was because no one loved her.

Not charitable love, neighborly love, the love of humanity, or the close affection of friendship, but something stronger, deeper, an intense love.

Basically, the girl wanted a love that was exclusively hers.

She wanted to be captured, and told, "I'll never let you go again."

Of course, that one moment needed to last an eternity. If it could, the girl would cease to be a hole. She wouldn't be lacking. By being loved, the girl would become complete.

*Yes.*

*I knew.*

*I knew that it was impossible.*

Who could possibly love an ugly girl whose greedy thirst for love was so brazen, and so disgusting?

*But I want to be loved.*

*I want you to love me.*

*I want*

“...I can’t do this!” Haruhiro jumped off of Shihoru.

He might even deserve praise for having not pushed her away while doing so.

Shihoru sat on the ground with her legs spread in an M-shape, staring into the polka dot sky with empty eyes. She hadn’t started crying yet. But it could only be a matter of time.

*So that’s how it was*, Haruhiro thought.

Even between comrades, there are things you just don’t know. Haruhiro was supposed to be the leader of the party, but he hadn’t had even the slightest inkling.

*I want to be loved. I want you to love me.* For Shihoru, that was more important than anything, her one and only wish.

Shihoru was Haruhiro’s comrade, and his friend. She was a very important presence in his life, but he couldn’t do it. The feelings Haruhiro had for Shihoru were clearly not what she would have called love.

Even if he decided *I will love her* out of a desire to save Shihoru, love wasn’t something that would just automatically come into existence like that. He couldn’t pretend to love her, either. That would be fake. It was possible he’d be

found out, and what Shihoru wanted was sure to be something genuine.

Obviously, Shihoru had the right to choose her partner for herself, too. She wouldn't want Haruhiro. Even if she did, Haruhiro didn't love Shihoru.

Besides, let's assume for a moment that Haruhiro did love Shihoru, and she accepted that. What would happen to Shihoru when she found that salvation? If Shihoru was a trickster who had fallen into the darkness, wouldn't she end up just like Nui?

*It's no good.*

*Either way, it's no good.*

"I'm sorry, Shihoru, I..."

Shihoru's face was turned his way. Still expressionless. Shihoru's eyes focused in on Haruhiro.

In the corners of her eyes, the truly sparkly, shining tears began to form.

It happened right after that.

Shihoru's glance moved. Diagonally behind Haruhiro, there was someone there.

"Let me try, too."

He didn't even have to turn and look.

Setora had moved up beside Haruhiro.

"If it works, that should be some comfort."

*Try? Try what?*

Before he could ask, Setora thrust out an orb she held in both hands and shouted. "Enba!"

Shihoru started turning into Enba. No, the transformation happened in an instant, so it was as if Shihoru and Enba had traded places.

Enba was larger than Shihoru, but they were sitting in the same position. Shihoru had turned into Enba.

Enervated, Haruhiro fell to the ground. He looked up at Setora.

“Ho... Huh? Wh...?”

Setora sighed deeply, then thrust the orb out in front of Haruhiro’s nose.  
“What do you think this is?”

“I think you called it... a pseudo-soul vessel, right? You took it out of Enba...”

“Right. The pseudo-soul vessel functions because it’s inside a flesh golem. Despite that, I am still able to call out Enba, for some reason. However, the pseudo-soul vessel is still in my hands.”

“I don’t get it...”

“I am merely proposing a hypothesis here, and I have no proof. However, I believe that this Enba is similar to, yet distinct from, the golem Enba that I made.”

“It’s your magic.” Alice walked up carrying the shovel.

Kiichi tagged along, too.

Io and her group were still on guard. The three of them were hiding behind Tonbe’s shield, poking their heads out and looking this way.

Merry stayed by the edge of the hill, not approaching. Ahiru did the same.

Kuzaku was still naked, and spacing out. Well, no, he wasn’t completely naked.

“Try... putting on some clothes?” Haruhiro suggested.

“Oh, yeah, I should do that, huh...”

“That body... Oh, I get it. That’s your magic, huh. Self-strengthening. Narci...”

“So I’m told. It’s kinda embarrassing, though.”

“If anything, I’m jealous,” Haruhiro admitted.

“Whaa, why? Wait, what is your magic?”

“Mine is... No, before that—”

“Stand, Enba,” Setora ordered.

Enba stood up slowly, or a little awkwardly.

Was it Haruhiro's imagination? He could hear something. Something like a voice, a voice coming from inside Enba.

Actually, it was a voice.

Haruhiro hesitantly approached Enba. Bending over slightly, he pushed his ear to the golem's chest.

"No... Not anymore... No... Noooo... Hee hee... Doesn't matter... Huh..."

"Is that... Shihoru's voice?" Haruhiro wondered. "Then... that means..."

She was inside. Shihoru hadn't changed into Enba. Shihoru was inside Enba.

"That's an unusual magic." Alice leaned side to side and squinted while examining Enba.

*Hmph*, Alice snorted.

"But it's probably philia, like mine or Ahiru's. What was it, again? That thing you're holding. The pseudo-soul vessel? You seem to value it highly. Setora, was it?"

"Yeah... Well, I suppose I do. This is Enba's main body. If his pseudo-soul vessel were destroyed, Enba would never come back. For me, Enba was an emotional support."

"That's why that pseudo-soul vessel became the source of your magic, huh. So, originally, it was inside a flesh golem? That's like something out of *Frankenstein*, I guess? It was an artificial heart, or something?"

"The pseudo-soul vessel is like a combination of the heart and brain. However, I think your understanding of it is sufficient."

"So, despite that, the pseudo-soul vessel is in your hands. So, what's inside Enba, then?"

For now, it seemed Shihoru was inside. But what about before? What had been inside it before?

Haruhiro cocked his head to the side.

"...It was empty?"

Setora put her hand on Enba's shoulder. "That was my hypothesis. Even if

Enba had been recreated by some power that transcends human understanding, so long as his vessel was in my hands, he had to be empty. It's well made. However, even just making a flesh golem's organs function is a difficult task, and even once accomplished, it won't move without a pseudo-soul vessel. Something that shouldn't move is moving, so we can discard the notion that what ought to be inside it is."

"You put Shihoru in Enba..."

"It looks like she's staying put inside the hollow golem for now," Alice said. "She might come out soon enough, though."

It was an unpleasant truth.

"This may only buy us a little time, then..." Haruhiro murmured.

"I'm sorry, Haru." Setora turned to Haruhiro and bowed her head. Beside her, Kiichi lowered his head, too. "This was all I could think of. I can't say I thought it was likely to succeed, and I had no other plan. I have no idea what to do from here."

"No, it's enough... More than enough."

*Phew.* Haruhiro let out a sigh.

When he tried to stand, Alice offered a hand. Haruhiro gratefully took it, and Alice pulled him to his feet.

"You're welcome," said Alice.

"...I never thanked you, you know?"

"You were about to, though, right?"

"Well..."

Scratching the back of his head, Haruhiro looked to his comrades.

Setora and Kiichi were still looking down. Kuzaku was having a hard time getting back into his armor. He'd gotten too buff, so it must have been a tight fit.

Merry was staring off somewhere in the distance, maybe thinking about something. It didn't really matter, but wasn't she acting a little distant? Was she

avoiding him, maybe? But he didn't think he'd done anything that would make her hate him. They'd been separated, so he couldn't have.

What was Shihoru doing inside Enba, who was just standing there? He'd have liked to find out, but it was best not to stimulate her.

"Shihoru is fine." Haruhiro made a point of stating that clearly.

The truth was, he couldn't do anything about her immediately, and he could only come up with ideas that might work, maybe. What was fine about that?

There was the question of if Ahiru and the Io-sama Squad could be trusted, too. And did they have enough firepower? There was a lot to be done, and he probably couldn't solve all the problems.

Even so, he'd found everyone.

With all his comrades gathered, what they had to do now was clear.

Haruhiro looked for the Iron Tower of Heaven. Using that vertical line, he could figure out the general location of the Scarlet Forest.

No matter how perilous, nonsensical, or long the road might be, the castle was there.

The king was there.

The door was there.

## 18. Sometimes You Have to be Cruel [the\_cruel]



The question was how to get close to the king.

Not only did they not have the full picture of the king's power, his magic, it was also wrapped in mystery.

Was it Narci, Doppel, or Philia? It seemed unlikely that it was Resonance, but the type was still an unknown.

For the moment, what they knew was that those crushed by the king became shadows. According to Io, her comrade, the warrior Katazu, had been made into a shadow the first time they met the king.

Katazu had been taller than Kuzaku, with a more solid build, but the king had crushed him like he might stomp on an insect. If that was true, you'd assume the king would need to be double Katazu's size, around four meters tall.

But Alice and Ahiru said the king was large, but not that inhumanly large, and yet, despite that, when the king stomped on someone, he felt like he was not just four meters tall, but ten. That definitely had to be the effect of magic.

In addition to making people into shadows, the king could easily kill dream monsters. When he did so, he would punch them, kick them, grab them and twist, rip, and tear. There was no doubt that his power was immense.

Did that mean that, like Kuzaku, and apparently the Io-sama Squad's dread knight, Gomi, he used self-empowering Narci? No, that wouldn't explain his power to turn people into shadows by stepping on them.

There was no sign of anything the king kept on his person at all times. In which case, it wasn't Philia, either. Then did that make it Doppel?

Haruhiro and the group passed through the Iron Tower of Heaven, heading

towards the Scarlet Forest.

Though the shadows might leave the castle to tail the king's vassals, they did not roam around outside it. Ahiru, as well as Io and her flunkies, had already shaken off their shadows. They didn't need to worry about shadow surveillance until they got inside the castle, so everyone was moving together as a group. There were powerful magic users gathered together, so dream monsters didn't even get close.

Haruhiro pondered. "If we're talking about Doppel, there's Suzuki-san, and..."

"Mine is this." Merry lifted her head staff for them to look at.

"I've only ever seen you beating monsters to death with it, though," Setora said.

There was a coldness in the attitude Setora, who was riding double with Enba on Kiichi's back, was taking toward Merry. They'd never been friendly to begin with, but apparently they'd been together for the whole time they were in Parano, so it felt like they ought to have gotten maybe a little closer. Had something happened to push them further apart instead?

Merry would occasionally smile at Setora, though, so it was hard to say.

"Because you, Kiichi, and Enba protected me," she said, smiling.

"I can't have you relying on Enba anymore," Setora said.

"That's fine. Everyone is here now." Merry suddenly turned to Haruhiro and said, "Right?" with a smile.

"Uh... Sure, well, I... guess so. Yeah..." Haruhiro got flustered.

He wanted to give Kuzaku, who was smirking next to him, a light punch. He wouldn't, though.

No, but there really was something up with Merry, wasn't there? Sometimes she'd act like a total stranger, then suddenly act like this. There was something wrong about it.

"By the way, Bossari." Io, who was a little ways away from the rest of them with Gomi and Tonbe, brushed her hair back behind her ear.

“Bossari” was apparently Kuzaku. Before turning macho, Kuzaku may have seemed a bit scruffy. Still, Bossari...?

“Why are you not at the side of me, your master, but that sleepy-eyed Usuraboke?” Io demanded. That was a word that meant *nitwit*.

“...No, before that, could you not call my leader a nitwit?” Kuzaku said.

“He looks like an Usuraboke to me, so I’m going to call him Usuraboke. There’s clearly no problem with that!”

“Not, ‘Do you have a problem with that’? You’re jumping straight to ‘There’s no problem with that’? Seriously, that’s some personality you’ve got...”

“Heyyyy, Bossari! You’re talking back to Io-sama! That’s unforgivable! Unforgivable!” Tonbe shouted.

“He’s right! Ya wanna get killed, Bossari?!” Gomi screamed.

Tonbe and Gomi weren’t just shouting, they seemed ready to jump into action at any moment. What a headache.

“Can we not fight?” Haruhiro asked wearily. “I mean, we’ve got bigger problems...”

“Shove off!” Tonbe hollered. “I don’t know if you’re Harumaki or Hello Miki or whatever, but we’re ready to take you down with him! Got it?”

“Don’t go messin’ with the Io-sama Squad!” Gomi added.

“No, listen, you can call me Harumaki, or whatever you want, but—”

“No, they can’t, Haruhiro! You’re Haruhiro, okay?!”

“...Kuzaku, don’t you get worked up, either,” Haruhiro sighed. “You’re just going to make things harder.”

“Ah! I didn’t mean to! Getting in your way is the one thing I don’t want to do.” Kuzaku looked chagrined.

“This is so stupid, I almost want to pour more fuel on the fire,” Alice said, chuckling.

Things were already heated enough without more fuel, so Haruhiro really hoped Alice wouldn’t.

He looked over at Ahiru and Setora, who kept on walking in silence, as if to say it was none of their business, and thought they had the right idea.

Yeah, that reaction made total sense for those two, but what about Merry? She was walking beside Kiichi, who was carrying Setora and Enba on his back, without looking this way at all. She was being kind of cold.

Besides, what was this feeling of wrongness? Something was weird, but what was it?

Well, anyway, setting that aside...

“...Right,” Haruhiro said. What was your magic, Io... -san?”

“You can’t tell?”

“No... I guess I can’t. I wouldn’t be asking if I could...”

“This beauty,” she said. “Isn’t it dead obvious?”

“Ahh, yeah, I don’t get it...”

“Your eyes aren’t just sleepy, they’re rotten, too, huh?”

“No, uh, I get that you say you’re, uh, pretty? Io... san.”

“Wrong. The prettiest in all of human history. Correct yourself.”

“You’re the prettiest in all human history, sure...” Haruhiro said in complete monotone. “But is that magic?”

“It’s possible Narci could have changed her outward appearance, isn’t it?” Alice offered in a rare show of kindness. “Kuzaku, or was it Bossari-kun? He’s changed noticeably because of it. The other possibility is Doppel, I’d say. To make it simple, Doppel lets you bring out a copy of yourself.”

“Like Suzuki-san, right?” Haruhiro asked.

“Yeah. His Doppel is a parakeet-like bird. He’s afraid of people, and can’t speak to them face to face. So his main body is always hiding somewhere.”

“So... Io... -san’s main body is—” Haruhiro looked around.

This area was a shallow marsh with mushrooms or plants, he couldn’t tell which, shaped like silver spoons growing up out of the filthy, light purple water.

There was Ahiru, there was Setora and Enba on Kiichi, there was Merry, there was Io, Tonbe, and Gomi, there was Haruhiro, there was Kuzaku, and finally there was Alice. No sign of anyone else.

“I don’t... see one.”

“There is no being out there as unique as I am, you know?” Io snorted angrily, turning her head aside.

Tonbe and Gomi loudly agreed with her.

“That girl’s magic,” Alice said, gesturing to Setora with the shovel. “It’s interesting. It got me thinking. Maybe the main body doesn’t have to be outside the Doppel. It can be inside. Like a full-body costume.”

“Th-This is stupid!” Io’s pace suddenly quickened.

While Io walked off with long strides, kicking up the purplish water, Tonbe and Gomi chased after her crying, “Io-sama! Io-sama!”

“Oh! Come to think of it—” Kuzaku began.

He went on to explain the things that, for some reason, Tonbe had blathered on about in detail during his first meeting with Io. He’d mentioned she was petite, or really, really, small, or something like that.

“Io-san’s not that short, so I was like *Huh?* for a moment. But Tonbe-san, he just kept rambling, so I let it slide.”

Haruhiro pondered that. “In that case, maybe the king’s magic is Doppel, too, and the real person is inside it?”

“We can’t rule it out,” Alice said, then brought up another thing about the king that was apparently bothersome. “That piece of shit, he looks like a pretty old guy, you know.”

“Yeah,” Kuzaku said. “I only saw him once, but he wore some really stylish clothes, like he was kind of a bad man.”

“Still, he calls himself a king, and he can do whatever he wants,” Alice said. “For a guy like that, you’d normally build a harem or two, right?”

“Yeah,” said Kuzaku. “You would. Uh, not me, you know? Nah, I guess I might.”

If I got to be a king, then mayyyybeeee. I might lose control of myself.”

“Man, you’re so honest, Kuzaku...”

“What would the point in lying to you, Haruhiro? I want to be as honest as I can in front of you, Haruhiro.”

“Please, don’t use my name so much...”

“Huh, why, Haruhiro? You’re Haruhiro, aren’t you?”

“It’s kinda embarrassing...”

“You’re popular, huh,” Alice teased him. No, more like mocked him. “Anyway, it seems like that piece of shit isn’t interested in women that way. He might kill them, but he doesn’t rape them. If that’s a Doppel, the person inside might look completely different.”

Haruhiro nodded. “Like a woman... or an old man, or maybe the opposite, a child?”

“A child, huh?” Alice whispered, then went quiet. Maybe thinking, *That’s possible, too.*

If they were to assume the king was a child who’d survived Parano, there were some points that were hard to figure out. The king was defending the door to heaven. If he was old and not long for this world, that would be one thing, but would a child with his whole life ahead of him do something like that? You’d think he’d open the door and try to return.

What if he was an old man, then? Imagine Haruhiro were seventy, eighty years old, and he wandered into Parano, and happened to gain a powerful magic and become a king. Would he still want to return, no matter what? If he stayed in Parano, he might be able to remain king forever, after all.

Grimgar had its own rules, and Darunggar had its own rules, too. The same went for Parano.

Parano might feel weird to Haruhiro because he’d come from Grimgar, but in this world, everyone could use magic.

But what if the rules of Parano didn’t apply in the other worlds? If heaven was another world, the king might lose the magic that had made him king.

The king was presumably either an old man or a child. He didn't want to leave Parano because he might lose the incredible power he had as king. If he stayed in Parano, he could continue his reign.

They were getting close to Ruins No. 7.

Haruhiro could see they were approaching that warped honeycomb, that pit full of holes off in the distance which could only be described as unpleasant.

Rainbow Mole, who had dug holes all over Ruins No. 7 and now called it home, basically never appeared in front of people, but he could be called part of the old guard among the king's vassals. This was going to require some acting ability.

"Setora... How is Enba?" Haruhiro asked.

"There don't seem to be any problems," Setora responded immediately, pressing her ear to Enba's chest. She stayed put like that for a while. "Actually, it's so quiet as to be unsettling."

They split up into two groups, praying nothing would happen.

Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Merry, Setora, Kiichi, and Enba with Shihoru inside were going to be the vassals Io had gathered from all over. She had gone for an audience to have Kuzaku swear loyalty to the king before, so it shouldn't have been unnatural at all.

Then Ahiru would bring Alice to the king—or make it look like he was bringing Alice, rather than having been beaten and forced to submit. He would act following the script that he was being threatened and forced to lead them inside Elephant Castle.

Incidentally, Io had also found the Leslie Camp, and come to Parano through its door. In addition to Tonbe and Gomi, she'd had comrades called Katazu, Tasukete, and Jam following her, too.

Jam the mage had been dragged off by dream monsters, then turned into a half monster like Kejiman, then subsequently put down by Io and the rest of the party.

The warrior Katazu had been turned into a shadow.

The thief Tasukete had been caught by the king and thrown in prison.

Katazu, who had been turned into a shadow, might be too far gone to help, but they wanted to save Tasukete, if that was at all possible. Io's name for Tasukete apparently referred to the way he was always crying, "Help me!"

The prison had always been in a lower level of the castle. The king had treated Alice as a sort of jester, but after rebelling too often, having been prepared to die for it, Alice had finally been thrown in there.

How had it been possible to escape?

Well, one reason was that the king had far underestimated Alice. Alice had played the part of the princess, too powerless to do anything more than act tough, in order to make him do so. Thanks to that, the king had never even taken Alice's shovel away.

The other reason was that the king couldn't see down into the prison. No matter how low his guard, if Alice had tried to break out while he was watching, the king wouldn't have allowed an escape.

Furthermore, the castle itself had been way smaller than it was in its current state, and the Scarlet Forest not as large. That was how Alice had somehow managed to get away.

After that, the dungeon had been moved into the king's hall. The castle was also now totally different from Alice's time in there, and the Scarlet Forest had turned into a den of incredibly ferocious dream monsters. If they didn't pass through Ruins No. 7, Rainbow Mole's Nest, in fact, it would be impossible for them to get inside the castle.

With Io leading Haruhiro and the rest in, they set foot in Rainbow Mole's Nest.

The nest hole was a tunnel about three meters across. No matter where you were in it, it was always rising or falling, twisting left or right. There was no place that was level and straight.

According to Io, the nest holes led wherever Rainbow Mole decided. If Rainbow Mole decided to let someone through, they would make it to the castle, but otherwise they would keep wandering.

"Io... -san, how did you first go meet the king?" Haruhiro asked.

"It wasn't that man called Ahiru, but we were taken there by another one of the king's vassals. Katazu and Tasukete got uppity with the king. That was how they ended up like they did. That vassal made them take responsibility for it. They'd angered the king, so they were made into shadows. I'm going to warn you people, too. The trick to surviving here is to make the king like you. Got it?"

They didn't know where Rainbow Mole might be listening from, so Io was playing the king's vassal. But was she really? Io might betray them and sell Haruhiro and the rest out to the king. Haruhiro didn't know Io well enough to say she wouldn't.

Ahiru was suspicious, too. If he confessed the whole plan to the king, he might be given Yonaki Uguisu as a reward. Was Ahiru just deceiving Alice and Haruhiro in the hopes of that?

If he started suspecting people, there'd be no end to it, so no matter how things were going to shake out, there was only one thing for Haruhiro to do.

When they exited the long tunnel, they came out into a hall with a ceiling that was too high. The floor was marble or something. It had been polished to a shine, reflecting Haruhiro and the others like a mirror. Shadows had taken up residence here and there, squirming.

Were the shadows just loitering, or were they actually headed somewhere? It wasn't clear. However, one shadow followed Haruhiro and the others.

Just once, Io looked towards it. Probably that one was Katazu.

*We're fine*, Haruhiro thought, seeing the look in her eyes. There was no way she'd betray them. Or rather, if there was any chance to defeat the king that had done that to him, she wasn't going to miss it.

This area was wide enough to be a meeting hall, but it was apparently just a corridor. There was a round theater up ahead. No, it had the same sort of circular leveled structure, but there were no seats for an audience, so it wasn't a theater.

The lowest point had a flat stage-like area, but there was a round pillar standing dead in the center of it.

The inside of the pillar was an elevator. It wasn't possible to see anything from outside, but for some reason, it was possible to see the outside once they were inside.

Setora and Enba got down off of Kiichi. It was a rather big, spacious elevator.

Even once Setora and Kiichi, Enba with Shihoru inside, Kuzaku and Merry, Io, Tonbe, Gome, and lastly Haruhiro were aboard, there was still a lot of space.

The elevator began to move. It rose steadily upwards.

"There are nothing but shadows in the castle, huh..." Haruhiro commented.

"Most of them were vassals of the king." Io's tone was surprisingly unaffected.

The king must have ruled all of Parano. At the very least, no one else wielded their power with impunity the way he did. Still, what exactly was the king reigning over? What meaning was there in ruling over a country of nothing but shadows?

The elevator, it turned out, was not an elevator. It eventually started moving violently in all directions, which was quite the shock, almost causing Haruhiro to fall over, but Kuzaku supported him.

"...Thanks," said Haruhiro.

"It's fine! I've done this before, you know."

"Then warn us, man..."

"Nah, there are some things are better off left unsaid. Don't you think?"

"How so...?"

Haruhiro subtly looked at Merry. Merry was leaning against the transparent wall, as expressionless as if she were wearing a mask made in the shape of her own face.

The thought, *That's not the real Merry*, crossed his mind.

That couldn't be right. But this *was* Parano.

No, even in Parano, it couldn't happen. He couldn't accept it, so it couldn't be true. Did that logic hold up?

Obviously not. That was no more than wishful thinking.

Opening the door, he started to get the feeling that once they were out of Parano, everything would resolve itself. Haruhiro and the party had come to Parano through a door from Grimgar. If they went through a door in Parano, it would go to Grimgar, right?

Alice had come to Parano through some sort of mist. Not a door. So the door surely led to Grimgar. It had to.

He recalled the story of Urashima Taro that Alice had told him. It might not do any good to think about time in relation to Parano. But he felt like they'd been in Parano for an awfully long period. Despite that, it didn't feel as if time had passed. To be more precise, he didn't think he'd aged. He might only be convincing himself of that, though.

Like Urashima Taro, he might have actually aged while in another world, but because of magic, illusions, or some other reason, he just wasn't able to realize that. It wasn't that opening the treasure box had caused Urashima Taro to age. It had just broken the spell keeping him from noticing that he had become old.

Even if Haruhiro and his comrades could go home to Grimgar... *should* they?

The elevator that was not an elevator came to a sudden stop, and at the same time, the doors opened.

Before questioning whether they should go home... Should they get out of the elevator or not? That was the real question.

He couldn't breathe. What in the world was this space? The far wall was pure white, but the rest was black. Maybe not all black, but everything was blackish.

There were thorn-like, or stake-like, or spear-like, or sword-like, or katana-like growths everywhere. If he got stabbed by one, he'd be in trouble. Even if he was careful to avoid stabbing himself as he walked, it was going to be incredibly difficult to approach the throne.

The throne was in front of the white wall, in an elevated position many steps up.

The door.

The king, with his back leaning against a door wrapped in many layers of chains, was sitting with legs crossed.

He had a bearded face, wore a tight-fitting black outfit made of leather, or something like it, and like Kuzaku had said, he looked like a bad man. Were it not for the crown, he wouldn't have looked very regal. However, it was clear at a glance that that man was a supreme being.

How many meters was it to the throne? Even at a conservative estimate, thirty. It might have been fifty. Or more, maybe.

Despite that, he felt so close that their noses might touch. Such was the illusion that man's sense of presence created. Or was it magic, maybe?

Io, Tonbe, and Gomi proceeded into the royal hall and bowed down. Kuzaku followed suit. Even Setora did. Kiichi lowered himself, like a dog, next to Setora.

The only ones left standing in the elevator that was not an elevator were Haruhiro, Merry, and Enba.

"Hey, Io." The king's voice echoed.

*What a voice,* thought Haruhiro.

He'd never heard anything like it before. Deep and soft, it made the listener tremble. It beat them down. Haruhiro stumbled out of the elevator that was not an elevator and knelt. He turned his face downward at some point, too. In fact, he didn't think he could look any further down.

He was facing straight down, but the smiling face of the king still flitted in and out of his vision. Even though he couldn't see it.

What was Merry doing? Or Enba? He wanted to find out. But he couldn't.

Was this magic? This was the king's magic.

"...Yes, Your Majesty," Io answered, her voice as weak as a mosquito's.

In front of the king, even *the* Io-sama was like this. Who could blame her? He was the king.

Alice claimed to have pushed back against him. That had to be a lie. No way. What kind of mental fortitude would that take? Or had the king's power grown

since then?

"You've brought me something, I see, lo," the king said. "New recruits?"

"...Yes, sire... That they might serve you... For that is my duty as your vassal... That is why I've brought them before your royal presence..."

"Your intentions are as admirable as ever. However, lo..."

"Y-Yes... Wh... What is it, sire?"

"One of them is not bowing before me. What, exactly, is the meaning of this?"

Haruhiro thought his heart might explode. He whipped a look behind him.

Merry was bowing.

Enba, huh? Enba was still standing in the elevator that was not an elevator. His back was ramrod straight.

"E-Enba! Wh-What's wrong? Come, over here..." Setora hurriedly ordered. From the way she spoke, Setora must have been convinced Enba was with her earlier.

Was Enba malfunctioning, maybe? He began to walk, his entire body trembling and shaking, but something was blatantly wrong.

His knees weren't bent, and both arms were shaking for some reason. Why was he violently shaking his head back and forth? He looked ready to collapse at any minute.

The moment Haruhiro wondered about that, Enba dropped to the floor right behind Setora and Kiichi, as you would expect.

He was face down, so you could say he was prostrated before the king in a way. However, Enba was still spasming like before.

"How odd," the king chuckled. He wasn't suspicious. In fact, he seemed to be interested in Enba. This was unanticipated, but Haruhiro was able to calm down a little before panicking. Or rather, it was possible that the pressure the king was exerting dropped. Was that it? If so, this consuming sense of intimidation might come from the king's magic, after all.

*Now, thought Haruhiro. If I do it now, I can use Stealth. Time to sink. Visualize*

*dropping my consciousness through the floor...*

*I'm in.*

Haruhiro hadn't moved from where he was. He'd simply Stealthed. He hadn't even changed position. Despite that, he felt a lot more relaxed. His thinking was completely clear.

He had no more clue what kind of magic it was than before, but the king's magic really must have been consciously applying pressure to them.

Haruhiro's Stealth was placing him outside the king's awareness, so that power wasn't affecting him.

Whenever he used Stealth, his spirit was pacified. Or rather, whenever he wasn't in a state where his heart was unshaken, he couldn't use Stealth.

Thanks to that, when Stealthing, he was able to calmly accept things that, if he hadn't been Stealthing, would have surprised him an awful lot.

The royal hall had changed completely.

It was like the organs of beasts had been spread out over the floor, walls, and ceiling. But, at the same time, the roots of old trees had spread through them, too.

The king had stacked several layers of box-like cells up, placed the door they were looking for on top, and set it up as a throne. Beneath the throne there was a single grillwork door, and one set of stairs.

The wall opposite them was not, in fact, pure white; it was covered in stains.

In a cage hung from the ceiling, there was one woman, trapped inside. That had to be Yonaki Uguisu.

Those things sticking out from all over weren't thorns, or stakes, or spears, or even swords.

They were pale white, bare naked boys.

From the looks of it, they were maybe ten years old.

There were boys standing here and there around the royal hall, arched back with arms outstretched or legs spread to the front and back, or with just the

upper torso tilted to the right, or crouching, or sitting with one knee up.

They all had perfect oval faces. Their eyes were clear, and their mouths a little small. They had not just practically the same face, but exactly the same, down to minuscule details. The proportions of their bodies were the same, too.

What were those boys?

Haruhiro decided to defer coming to a conclusion on that for now.

He did his best not to turn his head, moving just his eyes slightly, making use of peripheral vision to view the whole of the royal hall. When he wasn't in Stealth, he couldn't pull off looking around like this very well.

It seemed the king hadn't noticed yet. The king understood Haruhiro was here, yet had lost sight of him.

The king, huh? That was the king.

The reason he had looked like a stylish middle-aged bearded man was most likely because that was what the king chose to show them. Now, all Haruhiro could see were little boys with no clothing. What was that supposed to mean? Those ten-year-old boys that he could only assume were the same person... there were tens, no, hundreds of them filling the royal hall.

One of them was the king.

No matter which it was, the king was not an old man. He was a child.

Which was the king?

If he thought about it normally, the boy sitting on the throne should have been the king. If so, were the rest Doppels? Multiple Doppels? There could be cases like that, too, huh?

The door to the elevator that was not an elevator closed. It was moving. Returning. Eventually Alice and Ahiru would come here, too.

"One can never have too many vassals," the king spoke up.

The voice was different. His natural voice must have been high, but he was forcing it to sound low.

Who was making that voice? It didn't seem to be the boy on the throne.

Was any boy moving his mouth? He couldn't tell. A good number of the boys had their backs turned to Haruhiro. He couldn't figure it out.

"If they're useful vassals, that is," the king went on. "If they're interesting vassals, even better."

"I will keep doing my best." Io bowed her head even deeper.

Tonbe and Gomi pressed their faces against the floor, their backs trembling.

"To serve the king is Io's... my one joy," said Io. "From here on, too... I will gather vassals for you. So, please, my comrade..."

"You demand I return your comrade?"

"No, um... If you can... If you would allow it, sire... Despite how he is, he can be of use to you..."

"That hideous man offended me, and you tell me to release him from prison?"

"N-No, I'm saying... I know I ask too much of you, but... someday, if I might be given a reward... that would be it... That's all..."

"I could consider it."

"Th-Thank you! I will keep working my hardest for you, sire, so please, I beg you..."

"I'm only going to consider it, you know?" the king said.

"O-Of course, that's fine, even if that's all you do..."

While Io was speaking with the king, Haruhiro was able to confirm that no boy whose face was visible from his current position was moving his lips. No matter how much that allowed him to narrow it down, there were still more than a hundred candidates.

*This is bad*, thought Haruhiro. If he didn't find the king's main body, there was nothing he could do. But the plan was already in motion. No stopping it now.

"From now on, you all are my vassals."

Just which boy was this voice coming from?

"If you work yourselves to the bone, until I am satisfied, you will be rewarded. Let us hope that you are capable vassals, like Io here."

*It's no good,* thought Haruhiro. He just couldn't tell. Searching by voice alone was impossible.

Noise came from the elevator that was not an elevator. Had Alice and Ahiru come?

That was the moment it happened.

It was a close call.

If he hadn't been looking all around the royal hall like that, he'd have missed it.

One of the boys turned his face towards the elevator that was not an elevator. He was in front of Haruhiro and to the right, maybe ten meters away diagonally. He was sitting on the floor, hugging his knees. Judging by his angle, until he'd turned just now, Haruhiro couldn't have seen his face.

That boy was the king's main body, huh?



The doors of the elevator that was not an elevator opened.

With arms bound at the back, and a belt wrapped around the neck, Alice was being dragged in by Ahiru. That was how it appeared at first glance, but Alice's unmasked face was full of defiance. It was clearly not the look of one who'd been captured. Just what the script called for.

However, Alice soon started to grimace. Struggling, apparently. The king's power was trying to force Alice to submit.

"Get going!" Ahiru pushed Alice from behind.

Alice stumbled forward, but did not take a knee even after having entered the royal hall.

"Hey! Kneel down, Princess!" Ahiru snapped, pulling on the belt. Alice finally fell to one knee.

"Well, well. If it isn't our princess."

The boy who seemed to be the king's main body was looking at Alice. His mouth moved, too. No doubt about it. That was the king.

"Who're you calling a princess?" Alice spat. "I'm not yours, either. Don't make me say this stuff. You make me wanna puke."

"What happened to that filthy shovel of yours?"

"Oh, shove off. Your face is a zillion times filthier, you know that? You make me sick."

"Hearing it for the first time in so long, that chirping of yours is exquisitely comforting," the king said. "I had just begun to tire of Yonaki Uguisu's singing, too. Shall I make her a shadow, and fill my ears with only the warbling of a princess?"

"Y-Your Majesty! Wait, please!" Ahiru got down on all-fours and shouted. He was still holding the belt in his right hand, so that gesture ended up squeezing Alice's neck.

"Guh! Hey, Ahiru, you...!"

"...Sorry."

“What’re you apologizing for...?”

“Ah...” Ahiru covered his mouth with his left hand.

That was when the king’s main body stood up. “You two... you’re scheming something, huh?”

“No! We’re not! S-Sire, it’s not like that!” Ahiru exclaimed.

“What is it not like?”

In front of Ahiru, who was shaking his head back and forth, Alice undid the restraints on both arms, and took off the belt, as well. They’d arranged for them to be easy to remove.

“I... I was just threatened by this princess.”

“I made him bring me,” Alice said coldly. “You can guess why, right?”

“You wanted to see me, your king? It finally dawned on you that you’re happiest being kept as my pet, I see.”

“As if that would ever happen. I’m here to blow you away, you piece of shit.”

“Without that filthy shovel you were ever so proud of?”

“See, the thing about that is... I’ve still got it.”

Alice suddenly bent over, shoving a hand into her own mouth. Io and there others’ eyes went wide. Even if they knew, they couldn’t help but be surprised. After all, Alice was trying to pull that meat stick out of there.

“Urgh... blech... uhhh... blech...”

It looked downright agonizing. It was hard getting it out, but it was just as amazing that it had gone in in the first place. From the size of it, it didn’t look like it should fit inside the stomach or intestines, but the shovel wasn’t that hard, and it could shrink to a degree. In fact, the meat stick came out surprisingly easily. It was what came next that would be hard.

After the meat stick, the black skin, which was split up to be as thin as noodles or something, started to come out, too. It was incredibly long, and had a lot of volume, so how had it fit inside Alice’s body, or inside the digestive tract, to be specific? It wouldn’t fit, right?

Even the king was taken aback by this. He was watching Alice with his eyes wide.

Thanks to that, Haruhiro was able to approach the king while maintaining Stealth.

Haruhiro was diagonally behind the king. In another step, he'd be at arm's length.

Taking two steps, he hugged him. He did it unconsciously. The feeling of, *I don't want to let him get away. I won't let him get away*, made him do it.

He was going to finish it here—no, he wanted to finish it here.

The boy's skin was cold.

—*I'm already*—

“Ah...?!”

Honestly, he almost had it. In another tenth of a second, he'd have synchronized with the king.

What had he done wrong? Had he done nothing wrong? Was it just bad luck?

*Whoosh!* The boy seemed to get sucked into the floor. He'd escaped.

The king had slipped out of Haruhiro's arms.

In an instant, the royal hall changed. Dark. With thorn-like, or stake-like, or spear-like, or sword-like, or katana-like growths everywhere.

It was the king's magic. Had Haruhiro's Stealth broken?

He'd failed. The king had noticed him.

“Me!” The king roared. His voice was no longer the voice of a boy.

The bearded man rose from the throne.

“You touched me! The king! What is that magic?!”

“You screwed it up, Haruhiro!” Alice had just finished puking up the shovel's skin.

Wiping around the mouth area with a sleeve, Alice tried to deploy the skin, but it wasn't going to happen.

"Ah...!" Alice suddenly landed butt-first on the ground, as if some force had been pushing down from above.

The shovel's skin was like a withered flower. Alice might have been trying to get back up, but it wasn't going to happen with legs that were quaking like that.

Ahiru, and Io, and Tonbe, and Gomi, and Kuzaku, and Setora, and Merry, and Kiichi, they were all huddled and shivering. Their forms blurred and he started having trouble seeing them.

It seemed that Haruhiro was crying. Why was he crying? He wasn't sad. Was he scared? Yeah. He was scared beyond belief.

He tried to close his eyes. He didn't want to see anything. Didn't want to hear anything. He couldn't take it anymore. Why were his eyes still open? It was all useless, wasn't it? What meaning would there be in getting stubborn now? Had he always been so bad at giving up?

He probably wasn't tenacious, or strong-willed, or anything like that, he was just afraid to end it all by shutting his eyes.

It might have been because Haruhiro was a coward, but he witnessed the miracle of Enba standing up.

Enba didn't just get up, though.

He exploded.

Well, Haruhiro was crying like crazy, so he couldn't see that well, but he saw Enba get erased in an instant.

"I don't even matter," a voice sniffled.

Shihoru.

Sparkling stuff came out of the body here and there, just everywhere, all over the place, and it sparkled so much, it hurt his eyes.

Not to be outdone by Haruhiro—no, not wanting to be outdone probably had nothing to do with it, but Shihoru was shedding sparkling tears.

"Is that your magic?!" the king shouted, the bearded man who was presumably his Doppel turning the palm of his hand towards Shihoru.

Shihoru stumbled under the king's intimidating pressure when he did, but she withstood it somehow.

*You're amazing, Shihoru, thought Haruhiro. Those tears are amazing. It's like a flood of sparkling tears.*

"Why are you bullying meeeeeeeeeee?"

When Shihoru swung both of her arms up, those tears sparkled and flew towards the king. It was like a river of stars in the sky.

Was even the king unable to block Shihoru's tears? When they touched the bearded man on the throne, there was a cracking, splintering sound as those parts were crushed.

It was working. It worked. The sparkling tears compressed the bearded man on the throne more and more.

It was over in no time. With each tear, the bearded man on the throne got smaller, until they couldn't see him at all.

But what did it matter?

By that point, right next to Shihoru who was a good distance from the throne, a tall bearded man wearing a crown had appeared.

The bearded man on the throne was nothing more than the king's Doppel. He had plenty more Doppels. Even if the one on the throne was taken out, another Doppel just had to pretend to be the king instead.

"You've opposed the king! I'll make a shadow of you!" When the bearded man raised his right foot, he suddenly got big. Incredibly big. That wasn't any human size. No, not that he was human to begin with. He was a Doppel.

Was he still keeping his calm? Haruhiro couldn't say for sure. Were his actions rational, in the end?

Shihoru looked up at the bearded man, flinching. The tears didn't come. She was so terrified, she couldn't even cry.

By the time Haruhiro thought, *I can't abandon her*, he might have already been acting on emotion.

“Stop...!” Haruhiro dashed.

What did he plan to do? What could he even do? Nothing, probably. But he had to save Shihoru.

No matter if she became a trickster, no matter anything, she’d still be his comrade, his friend. For Haruhiro, if someone was a comrade and a friend, they were more important than he was.

“What?” The bearded man turned his way. The moment he looked down at him, Haruhiro’s body went rigid as if he was paralyzed. “You want to be turned into a shadow first? Then let me grant your wish!”

Intimidated by the king’s magic, Haruhiro couldn’t move so much as a finger.

*This is the worst*, he thought. The king would stomp Haruhiro and turn him into a shadow. Then, after that, he’d probably do the same to Shihoru.

Alice couldn’t beat the king, either. If Haruhiro had been using Resonance to boost Alice, would they have been able to at least do some damage on their way out?

Either way, they’d failed. It was over.

“Go, Fatty!” Before it could all end, the long-chinned dread knight dressed all in black threw in the fat man.

Gomi and Tonbe should both have been too intimidated by the king to move, so had he launched him with magic? Did they deserve praise for pulling it off?

Tonbe, propelled by Gomi, rolled into the gap between the bearded man and Haruhiro. He was carrying his massive mirror like he was a turtle.

“For Io-sama...!”

It was a mystery. Why would Gomi and Tonbe do this? It was so unexpected, the surprise blasted all emotion out of Haruhiro, leaving only his reason to find the answer.

*Oh, I get it*, he thought.

Tonbe had said, “*For Io-sama!*”

Haruhiro’s magic was the cornerstone of this operation, and only Haruhiro

could defeat the king. If they lost Haruhiro, Io would die, too. That was what Gomi and Tonbe had determined. For Io, they had no choice but to do this.

“Don’t interfere!” The bearded man’s right foot came down on Tonbe.

In that instant, Haruhiro sank his consciousness, and went into Stealth. When he Stealthed, he realized there was no bearded man anywhere. That was just an illusion. The boy playing the bearded man was just standing in front of Tonbe.

But, at this very moment, a bearded man was trying to stomp and crush Tonbe. That had to be how Tonbe felt. That was how it looked to everyone but Haruhiro and the king. In fact, Tonbe probably would become a shadow. The bearded man didn’t exist, and Tonbe wouldn’t be stomped flat. Yet, still, something the king would do was going to turn Tonbe into a shadow.

He knew this was heartless, but Haruhiro needed to watch it from beginning to end.

Was that boy in front of Tonbe, that Doppel, going to do something? No, it would most likely be the king’s main body. There were many boys in the royal hall. Which was the real one?

*Whoosh!* The king rose up out of the floor.

Right next to Tonbe.

He crouched down, thrusting his right hand into Tonbe’s flank.

He didn’t stomp him.

He was sucking something out.

Was it blood, or water, or perhaps some sort of life force or energy, maybe?

Tonbe became an empty shell as he watched, darkening, and being reduced to a shadow.

On the face of the king’s main body, the pale boy’s face, there was a slight smile.

Haruhiro didn’t get hasty. He wouldn’t repeat his earlier mistake.

He crept in quietly, grabbing the boy’s wrist without getting overeager.

He became the boy.

## 19. The Naked King [streaking]



Once upon a time, there was a very clever boy.

This boy was born with an exceptionally good head on his shoulders, so the people around him looked like incredible fools.

The adults didn't understand what it meant to be clever. They would praise the sort of quiz king who was only good at remembering things as a genius, so there was no helping them. They were, after all, fools, so who could really blame them?

There was no way such fools could understand the richness and depth of intelligence, its sharpness, its height. If they could, they wouldn't be fools to begin with.

Still, the boy thought there must be those out there who were as clever as he was, or perhaps even more so.

There were so many people infesting this planet, and the world advanced every day, so there had to be a lot of clever people out there. If there weren't, that would be strange.

But what was he to make of this? The parents who had given birth to such a clever boy were incorrigible fools, and every single person the boy met was more foolish than he.

For the clever boy, every thought the fools had was easy to see. And yet, the fools could not understand the boy. No one could understand the boy.

Perhaps the boy was unfortunate. He may have simply happened to have been born into an environment full of nothing but fools. If he'd been born somewhere else, the boy might have been blessed with people who understood him, and thus been able to live a proper life.

The boy found it hard to recognize the fools around him as even being human. He didn't hate them, or think they were evil. He simply was sad.

Why were they not the same as him? It would have been fine if he was the same as them, too. They didn't set out to be fools, and the boy himself had never chosen to be born clever.

We can't choose anything before being born. Once we are born, we can only live the lives we've been given.

The boy knew time would go by, and he would grow up, grow old, and then he would eventually die.

Death is the cessation of life functions. In the case of humans, their consciousness vanishes, and when all hope of recovering it is lost completely, we say they have died.

There is no meaning in life and death. There is no significance in life reproducing to leave descendants. It's what living creatures do, so they do it, that's all.

Thinking about it, it may have been logical for the fools to be fools. If they were foolish, then none of it could crush them: this unbearable lack of meaning, the weakness of a life that will disappear in a poof if left alone, and the feeling of emptiness from being unable to resist this fate.

*This must be the misfortune of a chosen one*, the boy thought.

The clever boy was a special being, and he was made to bear a special sorrow.

The understanding that he was special helped to comfort the boy's wounded heart. It helped him bear the empty-headed laughter, and the boisterous ruckus of the fools who were simply that way because that was the kind of creatures they were.

He was not of their kind, and if he thought, *I'm different from you people*, he could still bear it.

*I'm special, unlike all of you, and someday I'll do something to get my name carved in history, like become a bestselling author and win international prizes, or set records at international sporting competitions, or something like that.*

*Maybe no one will notice how special I am before then. They're all idiots, and I'm special, so who can blame them? I've always been different from everyone, and always will be. No matter how far we go, we will never meet, like parallel lines.*

That was how the boy saw it, but looking back now, how had it been, really?

Naturally, he'd had an inborn aptitude from his genetics. Not just anyone could run the 100 meter dash in the nine second range, even with sufficient practice. However, the fact was, talent was not just a gift from the heavens; it was a result. Those who gained something, or reached someplace, they were regarded highly, and recognized to have talent. In that sense, those born with some sort of gift, what we would call geniuses, didn't exist.

The boy thought himself special, and a genius, but he was completely wrong. That was because, if you asked if the boy had accomplished even one earthshaking feat, he had not. He was just more clever than those around him, not understood by idiots, and thought of himself as a tragically isolated special being.

The boy was an avid reader. His parents had less than stellar academic histories, but books were the one thing they were willing to buy him a lot of.

While kids his age inattentively read fictional stories and comic books that were not even good enough to be called foolish, the boy read deeply out of high-minded literature and specialist manuals.

Thanks to that, by the time the boy was ten, there was no text he could not read. He had gained knowledge on many things, from the names of birds and plants, to the movements of the stars, to how to solve quadratic equations, to the basic fundamentals of music.

It was true that the boy was clever. However, that basically meant he had worked to read and understand more books than other people, had observed many things, and had analyzed them.

The boy had not been born clever. He had followed a path to becoming clever, and the result was that he became clever.

They say that without one percent of inspiration, the ninety-nine percent

perspiration will go to waste, but we must not lose sight of this. That one percent inspiration comes from unceasing hard work. Those who achieve success first spend their every moment, waking or sleeping, deep in thought in order to find that one percent inspiration.

In the end, talent is that which we have worked to build up, taking a form that others are capable of recognizing.

The boy was ten years old at the time. He was a very clever boy, but only ten years old, and he was suddenly cast into a world completely different from the one in which he'd been born. It made no sense, and it was incredibly frightening, so it was all he could do just to survive.

If the boy had not been clever, he'd surely have been gobbled up by monsters in no time. He might have failed to see through the laws of this world, and made some mistake he could not undo.

That said, thanks to the boy only being ten, he was able to get out of trouble countless times.

In this world, the boy met many people. Most worked with him for a time, and then they parted. It was not infrequent for death to be the cause of that parting.

Or rather, in almost all cases, it was death.

When danger approached, the boy's special privilege as a ten-year-old was that people would protect him. There were some who claimed that a child would only get in the way, but there were surprisingly few of them.

A number of people were caught by monsters in front of the boy's eyes. When one man who had been his self-proclaimed big brother had his arms torn off by a monster, he had shouted to the boy, *Leave me and go!*

Crying, the boy had abandoned the man and fled.

One middle-aged woman who adored the boy like he was her own child had had a monster open its big mouth and chomp her head. Figuring she wasn't going to make it, the boy had run away.

The number of people accompanying him went up, and went down. Each time

someone died, the boy learned. The clever boy grew more clever.

Still, the boy was only ten. Though he was more clever, more experienced than any of those with him, he was underestimated because he was a child.

Even if they tried to pretend to like him on the surface, inside they were dissatisfied, and it was not at all uncommon for adults to insult the boy behind his back.

*“Sure, he’s useful. But he’s just a kid. Why is he so full of himself? We’re just using him because he has some convenient magic, so what is he misunderstanding?”*

*“You don’t have to be so harsh, do you? He’s just a kid. Let him feel a little good about himself. If we overlook it, he’s sure to keep being useful. We’ve just got to use him well. In the end, he’s a child, so if it comes down to it, we can handle him however we like.”*

At some point, the boy the adults had defended was put in a position where he had to protect the adults.

When a great horde of monsters attacked, and he looked at the backs of the adults scrambling to get away, the boy decided he was fed up with it.

Why should the boy have to stand on the front line for idiots like them?

*Those guys, they can all die. They can all get eaten by monsters. I’m through being a child, the boy decided. I’m not a child anymore. I’m not a ten-year-old boy. I’ll be an adult. I’m not letting them look down on me. I’ll be the king, and the others will be my vassals. Each and every one of them will serve me, working themselves to the bone for my benefit. This is my world. I decide the rules, and I rule it.*

The adults who had known the boy eventually died off. The new people he met did not know the boy’s true identity.

In this world, everyone could use magic. The boy used magic to show others a form for himself befitting a king.

When he encountered insolents who would not follow his orders, or conniving individuals who could not be trusted, he finished them off, or sucked

the life out of them and left them as shadowy husks. That life he sucked out became the king's power.

He figured out the types of magic. Magic came in thousands of different varieties, but if someone with an incredible magic appeared, they might become a threat.

Human thought works in an interesting way. If someone only had words for red, blue, and yellow, they might see orange as a bright red, black as a dark blue, and so on. They would try to divide every color into one of those three categories.

To that person, there are only three colors. The world's colors are reduced to three.

Due to the nature of magic, it was heavily influenced by the user's psyche, so if the knowledge that there was only three types of magic spread, the number of types would naturally be reduced to three.

If they defied the king, their lives would be taken immediately. Everyone came to understand that fact. Not many would deliberately oppose the king.

That said, the wise king knew that not all had submitted to him down to the depths of their hearts. Still, if he was not harsh with them, they would look down upon the king. There were undoubtedly those who would plot to kill the king, too.

There were those loyal to the king, too. Not many, of course.

The sincere but foolish knight Bayard was captured by Haname. The king considered taking down Haname with his own power, but tricksters like her were free of the king's principle that there were three types of magic, making them dangerous opponents.

It wasn't that he couldn't win, but he might be stabbed in the back by a traitor while fighting against Haname. Bayard was such a fool that the boy had found him unpleasant anyway, so he decided to let Haname have him.

His second best vassal was quieter than anyone, and honest, but he was a very clever man. He had a ready wit, you could say. The king had never seen a man who could react so quickly to a changing situation.

Not only did he show no sign of betraying the king, he never once even offended him, and at times, he would soothe and help the king relax.

However, the king was suspicious of him. He allowed the man to care for him, but it seemed he allowed the man to learn too much.

Besides, when the man massaged his arms and legs, the king felt his magic changing. That magic was not one of the three that the king had determined. The king called it Resonance, and if the man had a fourth type of magic that should not exist, he would have to bury him.

If the man had not been so clever, the king might have done it himself. The man asked the king for permission and set out for the Iron Tower of Heaven. The king knew he would never return. And he, too, knew the king's feelings.

Had he not chosen to remain at the Iron Tower of Heaven until he rusted fully, the king would likely have sucked the life from him eventually.

Those like Rainbow Mole and Sleeping Man, who had been in this world for a long time, each served the king in their own ways. However, they did not remain to serve at his side, either.

They worked for the king, with loyalty and sincerity. If they did not, the king would have killed them. However, they did not trust the king. Neither did the king trust them.

No, that wasn't it; *because* the king did not trust them, they were unable to trust the king.

Whichever it was, the result was the same.

*I'm all alone, the king reflected. Even though I'm always naked like this, no one will say that the king has no clothes.*

*Nobody even realizes I'm naked.*

(It's not nobody.)

...Who?

*You who see me, who are you?*

*That magic, could it be... Resonance?*

*Didn't you rust at the Iron Tower of Heaven?*

(I'm not him.)

*You saw? Saw me. You saw through me. With that magic, you understood me?*

(I

...am me.

And you.

...Niiyama

Reon.)

*Niiyama Reon.*

*My name.*

*In that case...*

*If you know that, you must know.*

*What I've done.*

*Everything I've done in this place.*

*When the monsters, that horde of dream monsters attacked, I... I didn't abandon the adults who ran. I...*

*I joined the dream monsters, devoured them.*

*Every last one.*

*If they'd survived, they'd have been in my way. Even one. I mean, they knew me. Knew my weaknesses.*

*I'm a ten-year-old kid.*

*The fact is, I was the leader, but I still had to make them laugh, had to sing and dance, to make them like me.*

*Because I was ten, and weak. I figured, no matter what, I wasn't going to make it alone. I felt lonely. I wanted to be liked. I wanted to be useful to everyone. I wanted to help them. But they used me.*

*I was always desperate, doing my very best. But they, they spoke about me behind my back, and they were always having sex. Didn't they have anything better to be doing? But I was a child, so I pretended not to see. I was a brat. Just a kid. How could I help it? I was ten. An honest-to-goodness child.*

*I regret nothing. I was always right. It was for the best this way. I'm fine with this. I won't open the door. I won't go anywhere. I'm staying here. I won't go home.*

*(You're scared.)*

*Yeah, I'm scared.*

*How many people do you think I've killed? How many have I sucked the life from?*

*I've committed no crime, of course. This is my country. I am the king. Parano is my kingdom. I decide what justice is, and what crimes are. I did what was right. Because everything I do is right. Here, at least. For as long as I'm in Parano, I can't be wrong.*

*I don't know who you are, but I sucked the life from your comrade, too. I made it mine.*

*It's no sin. I won't be judged for it. I did nothing wrong.*

*In fact, I did a good thing. I want to praise myself, tell myself I did well.*

*I will be the great king, now and forever.*

*(But you're alone.)*

*Not a problem. I was always alone. In the end, there is only one king. Rulers are isolated by nature. I'll get by. I mean, I've got time. It will probably never run out. I'll always be here. I may feel a little restrained, and there are inconveniences, but I'll work them out with time.*

*I know. I know I can't trust you people. It's folly to trust anyone to begin with. Once we've played a bit, I can kill you, or I can suck your life out. Your husks won't be anything of value, but I'll make them act as lookouts with my magic.*

*I know. That's right. If you're not limited by the principle of three types, the possibilities of magic are endless. It's not that my magic was always like this.*

*The things I could do grew little by little, and I got stronger. It may take time, but I can sort anything out with magic. I have all the time in the world. I only need myself. I don't need anyone else. The only mage there needs to be... is me.*

(You're not alone.)

*I—*

(You are not alone.)

*Not... alone?*

(Yeah.

You're not alone.

I'm here.)

*No.*

*Don't lie.*

*You'll never forgive me. I can't be forgiven.*

*I was ten.*

*I was a child.*

*Just a ten-year-old child. But still...*

*I killed.*

*For my own sake.*

*I killed so many.*

(I know.)

(Because I am you.)

(Not someone else.)

(I am you, too.)

But,

I

Find myself

So very...

Repulsive.

I'm scared.

Of myself, more than anything.

The things I've done. The things I'd do. I'd do anything.

I had no choice. It was to protect myself. Everyone puts themselves first. It's just how we are.

But, really? Is it really?

Like, what about the people who put themselves in the way to protect me?

They were older than me. I acted as charming as I could, in order to make them like me. They fell for my trap.

They were good people. Putting me before themselves. They helped me. I was saved by them. Again and again, they saved my life.

Using those good people as stepping stones, I became the king.

A lonely king. One who's naked, but nobody realizes it.

I'm afraid of me.

That's why I shouldn't open the door.

I have to stay here.

I'll stay king forever.

No one can open the door.

Don't go anywhere.

*Don't leave me alone.*

*I don't want to be alone.*

*I'm lonely.*

*But I need to stay alone.*

(You're not alone.)

(Niiyama Reon.)

(There's someone here.)

(Me.)

(Come out.)

(Because, I...)

(...am here.)

*Here.*

(Next to you.)

(Look.)

(I...)

(...am holding your hand.)

*This hand...*

*It's warm.*

## 20. Door [knock\_on\_heaven's\_door]



It was as if blood had begun to flow through the slim wrist he was holding.

Niiyama Reon's legs were cast out before him, and he sat on the floor of the royal hall, while Haruhiro knelt and held his left wrist.

It wasn't that there had been no blood flow before. Reon was living. But it had been cool, and he hadn't felt alive. His body temperature was gradually returning.

Reon slowly lifted his head to look at Haruhiro. The whites of his eyes were so white, they seemed pale. Haruhiro was reflected in his brownish pupils.

"Hey," Haruhiro said gently.

Reon looked back down. Still, Haruhiro didn't let go of his hand.

"Put this on him," Alice said, throwing a cloak. It was one Haruhiro had originally been wearing.

Haruhiro let go of Reon's wrist, and picked up the cloak. He put the coat over Reon who was hugging his own knees.

"...The things I did were horrible," Reon rasped.

"Yeah." Haruhiro looked around the royal hall.

It probably wasn't accurate to call them Doppels, but the clones made by Reon's magic had all vanished.

Was Gomi trying to open the jail and save their comrade? Ahiru had hooked his belt on the cage, and was in the process of lowering it. Io was sitting on the ground next to the shadow that had been Tonbe.

The husk didn't move in the slightest. It had no thickness, as if it were just a

shadow. He had been Reon just moments ago, so Haruhiro knew. Tonbe wouldn't be coming back.

Reon had used magic to suck out something like the essence of what made Tonbe Tonbe. That shadow was the dregs. There was no Tonbe anywhere anymore.

Setora, Kiichi, and Kuzaku were hesitating on whether or not they should approach Shihoru.

Shihoru was sitting on the ground, looking up at the ceiling, perhaps with her mind elsewhere, but she wasn't crying now. If she cried, it was over.

Before she did, they had to do what needed to be done.

"Huh? Where's Merry...?" Haruhiro wondered.

He found her quickly. Merry was pulling the armrests off the door, trying to take the chains off it.

"Kuzaku, or someone! Help her!" Haruhiro called.

"K-Kay!" Kuzaku ran off at an incredible speed. His physical abilities were enhanced with Narci, so he moved so fast that it was like a bad joke.

Alice shouldered the shovel and went to follow Kuzaku, but suddenly stopped and looked back. Those reddish-brown eyes that were close to crimson lay not upon Haruhiro, but on Reon.

"We're opening the door," Haruhiro said. "What about you?"

"I..."

"Let's go." Haruhiro forcefully pulled Reon to his feet, pushing him towards Alice.

Reon stumbled, and nearly fell. Yet still, he managed to walk on those skinny legs in no time.

"Setora and Kiichi, too!" Haruhiro called. "Io, we're going! Tonbe left it to me to take care of you! Let's go back to Grimgar together! Come on!"

Haruhiro sent Setora, Kiichi, and Io towards the door one after another. There was something else he needed to do. He had to do it himself. Haruhiro couldn't

leave this to anyone else.

He didn't want to provoke her more than necessary, but was it better to do this slowly and take his time, or to hurry? He wasn't sure. He couldn't say either was right, so it was probably fifty-fifty.

Making his decision, he decided to approach her like normal.

"Shihoru! You, too!"

He pulled her to her feet without waiting for a response, then took off running, just like that. It was sink or swim now.

He didn't care what happened; this was the only thing he could do. He couldn't leave Shihoru behind, so this wasn't just an act of desperation.

*This is the only way. This is for the best,* was what Haruhiro was thinking.

There'd have been nothing he could have done if Shihoru had blown up before they reached the king, but he had still wanted to drag Shihoru along, if possible. He'd prepared himself for the worst with that very intention.

*Please, it's just a bit further... please don't cry, Shihoru.*

While praying, he headed for the door. He didn't have the courage to look at her.

For now, even as she stumbled, Shihoru was keeping up. That was enough.

With a great swing of Gomi's greatsword smashing the jail, a man with bangs so long his face was hidden came out.

That was Tasukete, huh?

"Io-samaaa! Io-samaaa!" Tasukete wailed.

Ahiru finished lowering the cage. The door had been locked, but with his belt, Tasukete had apparently been able to get it open easily.

"Yuiko!" Ahiru shouted, extending his hand.

As he did so, the woman who had been forced to wear an outfit that made her look like a bird jumped into his arms.

"Yoshiharu, I believed in you!" she cried.

Kiichi, with Setora on his back, bounded up the levels of the jail.

In one place, there was a staircase two meters across. Io, Alice, and Reon were climbing those stairs. Haruhiro followed them.

On the way up, Shihoru suddenly came to a stop.

“Whoa, Shihoru...”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Looking at her, Shihoru's eyes were sparkling. They were misty.

*She looks ready to cry. Oh, crap. Is it no good? After we've come so far? No!*

"It matters to me!" Haruhiro picked up Shihoru. It was the position you might know as the bridal or princess carry.

*Shihoru's practically naked. She's ridiculously soft, too. Man, I'm not sure I should be doing this. Not that I'm gonna start acting weird or anything. Not in this situation. But, yeah, I don't think I have any romantic feelings for her. I do like Shihoru. We've been through a lot. I like her so much, I don't even know how to express it. Of course she matters to me. Maybe I'm going to die to Shihoru's sparkling tears. But if the alternative is giving up on her, she matters enough to me that I can think, "I'm fine with that."*

He climbed the stairs. Three steps at a time. Kuzaku had already opened the door. The other side of it was nothing but a dirty white wall, but when Io, Gomi, and Tasukete charged into it, they vanished.

That door was linked to another world. From up on top of Kiichi, Setora looked back. She went through the door that way.

Reon was hesitating in front of the door. Alice kicked him in the butt.

“Hurry up!”

“Wah!”

And Reon vanished beyond the door, too.

“Ahiru, what about you?!” Alice demanded.

“I’m...” With Yonaki Uguisu still in his embrace, Ahiru smiled. “...staying with her. I never want us to be apart again.”

Alice shrugged, then casually jumped through the door.

Was Shihoru about to cry? Was she already crying. Haruhiro didn’t know.

The door was right there. If he ran out of strength here, he’d have no regrets, but it was just a bit further.

*I want to go home, to that place, with everyone...*

## 21. Continue [re\_start]



Ngh... This is... Huh...? Where... is this...?

It's dark. Not pitch dark... though. There's this faint, greenish... light.

The floor...

The ground...

It's hard. And cold. Is it stone, or something...?

I'm lying down?

Was I sleeping?

No... That's not it. I feel like it was something else... not sleep.

I was somewhere, on a long path. Not so much walking, as... I'm not sure, but falling... I feel like.

It felt like I was spinning, too...

I feel like that was a thing that happened before...

Parano. Right. It was in Parano.

I think... it was different from that time, though.

More like... I was inside a tornado... Not that I've ever been... inside a tornado...

Is everyone here? They are... right? If they aren't... we have a problem.

..."

I can't speak. Can't move, either.

Why? Am I numb... maybe?

My eyes... I can't see so well, either. Is it 'cause... it's dark?

I wonder.

Something's shining.

Faintly.

On the ground, or the floor.

Shining lines...

A pattern?

Is someone here?

It's like... they're standing, not that far away.

"Hiyo." I hear a low, husky voice. That's a man's voice.

"Yeeeess, Master?" Another voice. This time... a woman?

...Huh?

I feel like... I've... heard it before?

"Begin administering the drugs. We'll have them forget what they don't need to know."

"Nyaaaah. There's a lot of them, this'll be rough by myseeelf. Of course, I'm gonna do it, you know? It's time to work, work, work, yes sirree. Kyapii!"

"Also... These two."

"Hmm? Ahh. Erm, this kid, and this kid, riiight?"

"Yes. I'll think of another use for them."

"All righty! Now then, now then, we'll begin administering Master's super secret druuggs. They're special drugs Master made with a relic, you knoooow? We can't let them go to waste! I'll use them with caaaaare."

"You speak too much..."

"Wawawah! I'm sorry! But... but... I'll do a good job! That's Hiyomu for you, no mistakes, no mistakes!"

"Then get to it already."

“Yes sirree, nyaa!”

What...?

Master...?

Hiyomu...? Wait, huh...?

That Hiyomu...?

Come to think of it... that voice in the Leslie Camp...

Oh... that was...

Hiyomu’s voice.

Master... wait... who?

It’s so dark... I can’t see. Where... is this place?

Hiyomu’s... doing something.

Close by.

“Oh, my. You... you’re awake?”

I can’t see her face well.

“Hm... Well, whatever. You still can’t move, right? It’s all the same, then.”

I was on my side, but she’s flipping me onto my back. Hiyomu’s leaning over right above my head.

Are they called twintails, that hairstyle?

No doubt about it. That’s Hiyomu.

“Okayyyy, open wide and say, ‘Ahhhh.’ Come on. Open wide. You’re awake, aren’t you?”

I clench my mouth shut with all my strength, but she forces it open. Right now, Hiyomu’s touching my cheeks and jaw with her hand...

Magic.

Right.

Use magic.

Resonance.

No.

It's no good.

Nothing's happening.

Yeah... I thought so.

Anyone can use magic. That was one of the rules of Parano. It only applies in Parano.

I anticipated that once we went to another world, we wouldn't be able to use magic anymore. It seems it's true.

I'm sure Shihoru won't be a trickster anymore, either. Now that we're out of Parano, Shihoru should be fine. I was right... but, this is—



“Ooookay, here’s your medicine. Drinkie, drinkie. It’s going to be okay. It doesn’t hurt. It may not taste good, but you’re going to forget anyway. Yes, yes, gooood. Now swallow. Huhhhh? You’re still resisting? What a bother. Weeeell, how’s this, then? If I shut your mouth and pinch your nose, you have no choice but to swallow, right? Hee hee. Okay. Good boy, good boy...”

“Awaken.”

He opened his eyes, feeling like he’d heard someone’s voice.

It was dark. Nighttime, maybe? But not pitch black. There were lights. Fire. Above him. Some kind of lighting. Candles, it looked like. Small ones affixed to the wall. Not just one, but many, spaced evenly, continuing as far as he could see.

Where was this place?

It was kind of hard to breathe. When he tried touching the wall, it was hard and rocky. This was no wall. It was just bare rock. Little wonder his back was sore after lying against it. His butt hurt, too.

Maybe he was in a cave... A cave? Why would he be in a cave...?

Those candles were pretty high up. He might be able to reach one if he stood; that was how high they were. Moreover, they didn't even give off enough light for him to see his hands and feet.

But he sensed the presence of others nearby. When he listened closely, there was a faint noise that sounded like breathing.

“Is anyone there?”

“Uh... Yeah.”

“...Yes.”

“Where is this place?”

“Nyaa...”

“Erm, I... I’m here.”

“I-I-I dunno, guys... What is this? I wish someone could help me...”

“I’ve gotta be hung over or somethin’. I feel like shit...”

“Could you stay away from me? You stink.”

It wasn’t just him. There were a number of others. Men, and women.

“Hold on, where... is this? Does anyone... know?”

“Nah...” The big man who was close by to him shook his head. Thanks to the candles, his eyes were gradually adjusting to the light. “I... wonder. Wait... um, I’m... Hmm. What was it again...”

“Huh... What?”

“I’m probably... called Kuzaku.”

“Ohh. Your name?”

“Yeah, but... I don’t remember. I can’t recall.”

“Recall what? Ah...!”

He clutched at his chest tightly, as if trying to claw something off of it. He had no clue what was going on. How long had he been here? Why was he here?

When he began to consider his situation, something began to tug at the back

of his mind. But it suddenly vanished before he could latch on to it.

He didn't know. He didn't know anything. He was at a complete loss.

"...I'm the same," he said at last. "Just that my name's... Haruhiro. What is this...?"

# Afterword

I will now confess to a crime I committed.

It was a long time ago now, but when I was a kid, there was a lumber mill in walking distance from my house.

I often snuck in there, and I would steal scraps of wood.

Well, it was a lumber mill, and it produced a lot of wood waste. There were mountains of the stuff piled up. I think they just threw the stuff out, so they might have given it to me if I'd asked. But at the time, I was in elementary school, so I couldn't resolve myself to talk to the people who worked at the lumber mill.

Now, as for what I used those wood scraps for, I cut them into an appropriate size with a saw, nailed them together with a hammer, and made swords and shields.

Even I, who had a limited circle of associates, had a number of friends who'd join me in doing that sort of thing. We fought serious sword battles with our self-made swords and shields.

Though we were defending with shields, wooden swords are on a different level from a newspaper wrapped in packing tape. They have quite a lot of power.

Also, as we fought, we polished our combat technique. It was quite hard to slip past a shield and land a blow on the body, but it was just a matter of targeting the shield. If you pounded wildly on the shield, you might get lucky and destroy it, and failing that, the beating might make the person holding it lose their balance. You used that opening to hit them.

We were doing this with the strength of children, but it wasn't uncommon for blood to be shed in our sword fights.

Not satisfied with wooden swords, some of us made long spears, and the shield and long spear combination was fearsome.

If it were just a shield, all you would have to do is close the gap, but when you closed in, you'd be pushed back by the shield, they'd get some distance from you, and then they'd attack with the spear again. When fighting a spear user, you had to do something about the spear itself, or you'd never win.

Now, when I think back on these things, I feel like it's not all that different from now.

I've always lived like this, and I'll likely die this way, too.

Now then, to my editor, Harada-san, to the illustrator, Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers of KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in the 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

## Scene #11: A Bad Man

*If you were born as a man... you want to be popular with girls. That's just the way people feel,* Ranta thought, and that was how he lived.

He couldn't say on what day, of what month, of what year of his life he'd started to think that, but, well, by late in preschool he must've already felt that way, right? He'd always been aware of popularity. Yes. Hyper aware.

But, honestly, he wasn't popular at all.

The guys that girls were into came into that surprisingly naturally. The ones who were already popular at that young age, they were like natural born populars. What was with that? That sort of inborn popularity, like they were promised popularity by the heavens themselves?

Like that guy.

That guy in his class, Minoura. Minoura Manato.

He had, like, cool eyes, you might call them? He was, what did they call him, a hunk? Blech. Like, what was he even supposed to be a hunk of? Lame!

Basically! Anyone they called a hunk was lame. Right?

But girls liked hunks. Blech. Blech. Ptooey!

Girls would steal glances and Minoura, squealing and making a fuss.

They were shit, all of them. Not one of them with an eye for quality.

Like, sure, Minoura had a pretty face, but there was clearly something up with the guy. He seemed like a real schemer. Guys like that were the worst. They were bad news. Like, maybe the guy had a bad home life, or something. Only he didn't let anyone know, and bottled it up inside him. Then he did bad stuff behind the scenes. He was probably dealing drugs or something, wasn't he? He so was. He was selling them like crazy. Maybe it was time to try asking him. Be like, "How much?" and then he'd say a price and give his whole game away. Scary!

That all aside, Ranta witnessed Minoura, whom he'd never talked to much, get slapped by a woman in the shopping district at 8:17 in the evening.

"How could you?!" the woman shouted as she slapped him hard on the cheek. "You're the worst!"

Then she took off running.

Judging by her hairstyle and clothes, she wasn't the same age. She was, what'd they call them, a JD? She looked like she was in college. She was an adult woman, with oodles of sex appeal. The woman was probably crying.

Ranta had gone to karaoke with his friends after school, sung all he could sing, and was on his way home. It was the shopping district at night, so there were plenty of passersby.

Naturally, there was no way a woman slapping a hunk wouldn't draw attention. There were a lot of people looking at Minoura as he stood still. Ranta was one of them.

What was more, up until the slap, Ranta hadn't realized it was Minoura.

The incident had happened right in front of Ranta's eyes.

Minoura was staring after the woman's back. Then, casting his eyes downwards, he pressed a hand to his cheek and laughed a little. "Ow... That hurt..."

Ranta was thinking he'd pretend not to know the guy and just keep walking, but if he was going to go home, that meant walking in front of Minoura. He'd hate to turn around and go the other way just to avoid him.

Well, they weren't friends, and the guy was looking down, so he probably wouldn't notice. Ranta tried to stroll past Minoura as naturally as he could.

"Huh?" the guy called out to him. "Ranta?"

"...Yeah."

*No, man, we aren't so close you can call me by my given name!* he thought, but he wasn't going to snap at him over it. And as for ignoring it, well, Ranta had already responded.

"Wh... What was up with that?" Ranta asked. "That was kinda incredible. She just went 'smack'!"

Minoura pulled his hand away from his face and smiled. His cheek was a little red. "I'm the bad one."

"...What're you smiling for, bud?"

"Huh?"

"It's suspicious. The way you act like that..."

"Ohhh. I see."

Minoura looked down. For a moment Ranta thought, *Is this guy gonna cry?*

"...Yeah. It's not good to be like this. You're absolutely right, Ranta."

"So..." Ranta started.

The whole situation just made him madder, and Ranta took off running despite himself.

*What am I running for? I look like a weirdo.*

Minoura Manato.

That guy, he was a hunk, but he was a weirdo, too.

## **Scene #12: The Road to M-1**

"Is this good?" Renji murmured, looking at his handiwork.

On the concourse of the largest station in this area there was a black board called Everyone's Street Corner Message Board.

It was a black board, so it was meant for people to write a name and a time in chalk and use it to communicate when meeting up. Obviously, that had only been useful eons ago. Now, everyone had a smartphone or two, so no one did things in such a stupid, roundabout way. The street corner message board was plastered with posters for events like concerts, and advertisements for businesses, but not enough that it was buried in them.

This being a street corner message board that not many people took the time to stop and look at, there was a lot of open space. Also, since it had originally been meant as a way of communicating, if you were an individual, not a company, it was apparently free to use. No, not just apparently, he'd checked this. It absolutely was.

Seeking Partner

Can play funny man or straight man.

Need someone who can play funny man or straight man.

Please contact me.

tr2951@gjmail.com

Renji was trying out posting on the message board.

Naturally, that e-mail address was what you'd call a burner. 2951 wasn't his birthday or anything, either. The numbers could be read fu-ku-ko-i, "luck, come to me" in Japanese. He wouldn't normally, but he'd decided to try using lucky numbers. The "tr" was short for Tanaka Renji. He figured simple was best here, but maybe he should have given it a little twist.

Still, though...

"Pfft... Heh heh heh..."

As he watched the message board from a place where he could just barely see it, he felt so ridiculous, so empty, and so slightly embarrassed that he couldn't help but laugh.

"Seeking Partner"? What was he thinking?

And why, of all places, was he posing on Everyone's Street Corner Message Board, where no one would even look?

Was it because he had no other ideas?

Was he stupid?

No, he clearly was stupid. No matter how you looked at it, this was the work

of an idiot. If he was truly seeking a partner so he could make it in comedy, he wouldn't be posting about it in a place like that. Still, Renji was as serious as serious could get. He wanted a partner from the bottom of his heart. That was why he'd refined his text. He'd written and rewritten it. This had been his first draft:

### Seeking a Crazy Partner

Orthodox, double straight man, double funny man, bring it on.

Let's make us some new comedy together!

RSVP ASAP LMAO

tr2951@gjmail.com

Yes, yes, yes, it was obvious what anyone would say, looking at it.

He'd hoped people would think, *This is no good. No good at all. But, wait, it's so unfunny, maybe it's actually funny instead?*

The result was it had just been unfunny. Unfunny and typically bad, something he knew so well that it hurt. That was why he'd fixed it. In the end, he'd gone with something so simple, it couldn't be misunderstood.

It wasn't funny, but when he thought about it, the fact he was making a serious posting on Everyone's Street Corner Message post was funny to begin with, right? What need was there to add to that? If you piled too much on, sometimes it just got lame. In other words, wouldn't it be redundant?

He knew this. Renji was a student of comedy. This was only slightly droll, not laugh-out-loud funny. He understood that much.

However, he wanted to get into comedy, so he posted on the station's message board. "Seeking Partner." And the guy who applied was his partner now. Seriously.

Well, how about it? Would that be a funny story or what?

The guy who made the posting, and the guy who responded, would both be a bit off in the head. The kind of weirdos that are funny. They'd succeed, get their

own radio show or something, and become a hit there. He could only imagine they'd be covered by an internet news site and go viral. Meeting at a comedy school, that wasn't good enough. It was too common. It was having a meeting like this that was important.

It wasn't without problems.

He had no belief they'd actually be able to meet this way.

Renji checked the time on his phone. Soon, it would be midnight. Time for the last train.

He'd been watching over Everyone's Street Corner Message board for about eight hours, give or take, and no one, not one person, had looked at his posting.

Naturally, no messages had come, either.

He muttered, "The road to comedy is a hard one..."

## **Scene #13: Once-in-a-Lifetime Events Can Happen Any Day**

Was he lacking energy... maybe?

Well, Manato was the same as ever, though. He'd said, "Good morning," to everyone he met, without discriminating. If they struck up a conversation, he responded. Not just going along with whatever, either. If he didn't know something, he said so, and he'd ask questions instead, or tell people what he thought. But it was quick, and never too pushy. He wasn't like ramen, he was soba. Sarashina Soba at that. The high-class stuff.

Haruhiro thought of Manato as a good friend. For Manato, with his broad web of male and female acquaintances, Haruhiro was probably just another classmate. But for Haruhiro, Manato was one of his few friends.

In the time from when they went to school to when they returned home, they always spoke at least once or twice. Sometimes, they even had lengthy conversations.

For Haruhiro, that was enough to think they were pretty close.

So, one time, Haruhiro caught himself observing Manato.

Manato was a mystery. He got on with people incredibly well, and he could talk to anyone. He was a pretty boy, or a hunk, so he stood out even just standing there. Despite that, Haruhiro would sometimes suddenly notice that Manato was nowhere to be found.

Naturally, Manato was popular with the girls, so it was not uncommon for girls from other classes to come looking for him. When those girls asked Haruhiro, “Where’s Minoura-kun?” sometimes he just couldn’t tell them.

Manato caught people’s attention, but then he’d suddenly up and disappear. *He’s not here*, Haruhiro would think, and then out of nowhere, Manato would appear. That was sort of what Manato was like.

Today, Manato hadn’t disappeared once. In the time between classes, during break, he’d been in the classroom the whole time. Obviously, he hadn’t been in a daze or anything, either. He’d been talking with someone or other the whole time, sometimes laughing out loud.

There was nothing all that strange about him.

It just felt like he was spending a lot of time sitting in his chair.

Basically, he wasn’t moving around much. That was why Haruhiro got the impression that, probably, he didn’t have much energy.

Even if he thought, *I wonder what’s up?* Haruhiro was a little hesitant to bring it up over something so minor. Like, for Haruhiro himself, if someone came up to him and said, “You’ve been sitting down all break today. Is something up?” he’d think, *Huh? What’s with this guy?*

*It does bother me, though*, Haruhiro reflected. *Well, he is a friend, after all.*

After the school day ended, while he was doing various other stuff, Haruhiro left the school alone like usual.

Though he admired the idea of having a riotous good time with his friends, ultimately, that was a world far removed from his own. Besides, he didn’t have many friends to begin with. Though the number wasn’t zero. He just couldn’t

feel close to the kind of people who got clingy. He was pretty okay with just being by himself. It was lonely sometimes, but that was only ever temporary. He'd play games, or read books, and eventually he'd feel fine again.

"Haruhiro?" somebody asked.

"...Uwah!"

Maybe because Haruhiro was deep in thought, he hadn't noticed someone was right beside him until they'd called his name.

"Huh? Ah... Manato."

"So you go this way, huh?" Manato asked. "On your way home."

"Oh, um... Huh? You're going this way, too, Manato?"

"I'm not."

His smile—though Haruhiro wasn't sure why he thought this; he couldn't explain it—felt kind of shallow, like it wasn't a real smile.

"I see," Haruhiro said slowly.

Manato walked shoulder-to-shoulder with him down the familiar road home.

For a time, Manato said nothing. Though it was odd, it wasn't unpleasant. Haruhiro could have kept quiet for a day or two.

"You're not going to ask why?" Manato asked.

If Manato hadn't said anything, they might have parted ways without exchanging a single word.

"Well... I thought it might be something like that," Haruhiro confessed.

"That I might just feel like walking home with you, or something?"

"Like, once in your life, you might end up feeling that way, maybe... I guess."

Manato covered his face with his right hand, laughing. "You really are interesting, Haruhiro."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. You're funny."

Manato moved his hand away from his face. His cheek was just a little red. Had he hit it somewhere, or done something to it? Or maybe he'd been punched?

Haruhiro didn't ask what had happened.

In a once-in-a-lifetime event, just about anything could probably happen.

## Scene #14: Idol Worship

“Listen, Yume, she was thinkin’ she wanted to be an idol.”

Hearing Yume say that out of nowhere during break really surprised Merii.

“A-A-An idol...? Um, idol? Like NHK, or Imoaraizaka...”

“M-Merii...” Shihoru said nervously. “NHK is a Japanese broadcasting association, and there’s no idol group called Imoaraizaka...”

Hearing her error pointed out, Merii realized she’d been so confused that she’d gotten things all mixed up.

“Um, er... NBA? Was that it?”

“The NBA is the National Basketball Association in North America.”

“The right answer was KGB!”

“Yume, that’s the former Soviet Union’s intelligence agency. There are lots of groups out there, but I think the most famous is probably AKB...”

“Ohhh! Shihoru, you really know what you’re talkin’ about, huh? Then what was the one with zaka in it? Dogenzaka...?”

“That’s the name of a place in Shibuya...”

“You know, if you go lookin’ in Shibuya, there’re probably idols there, right? It’s kinda trendy.”

“W-Well, there might be some...”

Merii wanted to help Shihoru in her moment of weakness. For that, she needed the right answer. *I have to come up with the right answer as soon as*

*possible*, Merii thought, and it came to her.

“Kagurazaka?”

“Th-That’s a famous place, right?” Shihoru said. “With lots of nice restaurants, I think... But I don’t think it has anything to do with idols...”

“Numa!” Yume suddenly exclaimed.

“N-Numa...?”

“Yume, she may’ve got it! Yume’s heard of this one before! In life, they say there are three sakas!”

“What... are they?” Merii tried asking, just in case.

Yume acted all special, humming nasally.

“Get this: they’re noborizaka, kudarizaka, and massakasama! That’s right!”

“It’s not massakasama, it’s masaka, Yume...” Shihoru said.

“Hoh? You sure?”

“When things are going well, that’s noborizaka, climbing the hill. When nothing does well for you, that’s kudarizaka, going down hill. But if you keep on living, the unexpected will happen, so... that’s masaka, the unexpected.”

“Mwohhhhh! Shihoru, you really know a lot! But, you know, no matter what you do, don’t you think there are times when things’ll end up gettin’ turned massakasama, upside-down?”

“...I think so.”

“Well, then, there are four sakas in life, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think it matters how many sakas there are in this case, really.”

“So there are lots of them, then? In that case, life’s full of hills!” Yume exclaimed.

It felt like she’d been struck by lightning. Merii clasped her chest and hung her head. “Deep. Life is full of hills. You may be right...”

“Right? Yume, when she goes home, it’s all hill roads, you know? It’s fine when she’s full of energy, but there are times when she’s feelin’ tired, too. It’s

real hard then.”

“Hills are especially hard when you’re on a bicycle.” Merii slapped her own thighs. They hurt a little. She’d strained herself too hard. “You feel it in your legs.”

“That’s it!” Yume snapped her fingers—was that what it was called? She rubbed the middle finger and thumb of her right hand together, but there was just a rubbing sound. “...Kwoh!”

“Like this?” Shihoru made a proper snapping sound.

Yume’s eyes sparkled. “That’s it! Shihoru, you’re amazin’! You can do anythin’!”

“Huh...? No... This is easy. It’s too much to say that I can do anything.”

“You’re very capable, Shihoru.” Merii nodded firmly. “You’re reserved, so you don’t show it off, but you can do anything.”

“Th-Th-Tha... That’s... not... true...”

“It is so true! Shihoru, you’re Yume and everyone’s idol!”

“Wh-Wh-Whoa, s-s-stop, it’s embarrassing...”

“But, you know, Shihoru, you’re our idol, okay? You agree, right, Merii?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Merii said.

“Even you, Merii...”

“By the way, what were we talking about again?” Merii went on.

“Hoh?” Yume picked at her nails, thinking for a while, but she couldn’t remember. “Well, it doesn’t matter! ’Cause Yume’s got herself an idol!”

Merii nodded. “I guess you’re right.”

## Scene #15: I Will Not Give Up

Years ago, before his grandmother passed away, she would always say to him, “Monzo, ever since you were small as a bean, you’ve loved eating. No matter

how mad a mood you were in, if we just gave you food, you'd smile. When you were left with me, you never caused any trouble at all."

Maybe it was because of that, but his parents, grandparents, other relatives, and even the neighbors were always giving Monzo food. Monzo, of course, happily ate it all. Thanks to that, even though his parents and little sister had a slim build, Monzo had been chubby since he was very young.

But was he okay like this? After a long time quietly worrying about that, he decided to exercise, and began attending a judo class. When he moved his body, the food tasted even better, so he ended up eating even more. It was all meaningless.

That said, it wouldn't be right to stop the judo classes he'd started of his own volition, so he committed to controlling the amount he ate. If he lost too much too fast, the recoil might become too great. When he went from three bowls of rice down to two, his health declined visibly. He got abdominal cramps, his face lost its luster, and his voice grew weak. His family got worried, and when he confessed he was actually dieting, they cried. His sister's words hit him especially hard.

"I want you to be the same big brother you've always been!"

Thus, it had been over two years since Monzo had given up on his dream of a slim body type forever.

His motto became, "Food makes the man, thus a man is his food."

After entering high school, Monzo started a part-time job. Naturally, for the food.

In Monzo's house, it wasn't just his mother who cooked—his father did, too. Also, it was only to be expected that Monzo cooked, too. His little sister also helped.

He wouldn't brag about it, but Monzo's family's cooking was delicious. It was so good that his cousin would bring her friends over to eat, and they'd take pictures to put on social media where they'd praise it enthusiastically. His parent's coworkers and friends would come over often, too. Everyone brought large amounts of ingredients, sweets, and wine, then enjoy Monzo's family's

cooking before they went home.

However, one who is committed to food, one who has strong opinions on cooking, can sense intuitively when they are setting foot into the domain of experts, learning things no amateur could ever know.

To turn that around, one who had not reached that domain could not be called an expert.

There is a need, when people say your cooking is good enough to be in a restaurant, that you have pro-level skills, to recognize that these are only the opinions of amateurs. You must never let them go to your head. Monzo had no intention of going easy on his tongue. The joy of food he experienced at home, and the absolute gourmet bliss an expert could produce in him were, in fact, different things. In order to keep himself aware of that difference, he would go, clutching his hard-earned part-time money, to the most expert of restaurants he could find.

“Heh... Well, I just want to eat something good, that’s all, right?” Whispering to himself, he turned the corner.

This restaurant, founded in 1989, the first year of the Heisei Era, had left behind countless legends and was famous among those in the know.

Its name: Heisei-ken.

It was a little ramen shop run by a family, with no website. He’d heard they rejected all forms of interviews. The only information he could find online was the opening and closing times, regularly scheduled days off, and the reviews of gourmands. It was a two-hour commute by train, including multiple transfers, from Monzo’s house. This was not a place a high schooler could visit easily. This would be his first time.

He checked his smartphone. 5:59 P.M. They opened from noon to 2:00 P.M. during the day, and from 6:00 to 9:00 at night. They would open soon. Their day off each week was Wednesday, and this was Thursday, which meant that they were open for business, baby.

“Baby...” he murmured.

*Heh heh!* Monzo laughed.

Having at last reached Heisei-ken, the place he had longed to visit, Monzo's eyes were greeted by the closed shutters. A single piece of paper was affixed to them, the small text on it written in permanent marker. Ahh, how many times, how many times had this sort of thing happened to him? Yes, this was nothing more than a common occurrence.

*Calm down, Monzo. These things happen. It's all right. It's okay. Now, read slowly, as if savoring each word.*

“Closed today due to emergency...”

Monzo gave a mental pep talk to his body as it was ready to collapse, and then made a firm vow.

*Let's come back another time.*



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 14

by Ao Jyumonji

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Emily Sorensen

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