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Singer's Dark

埋められた闇と少女

角川スニーカー文庫

Sugar Dark

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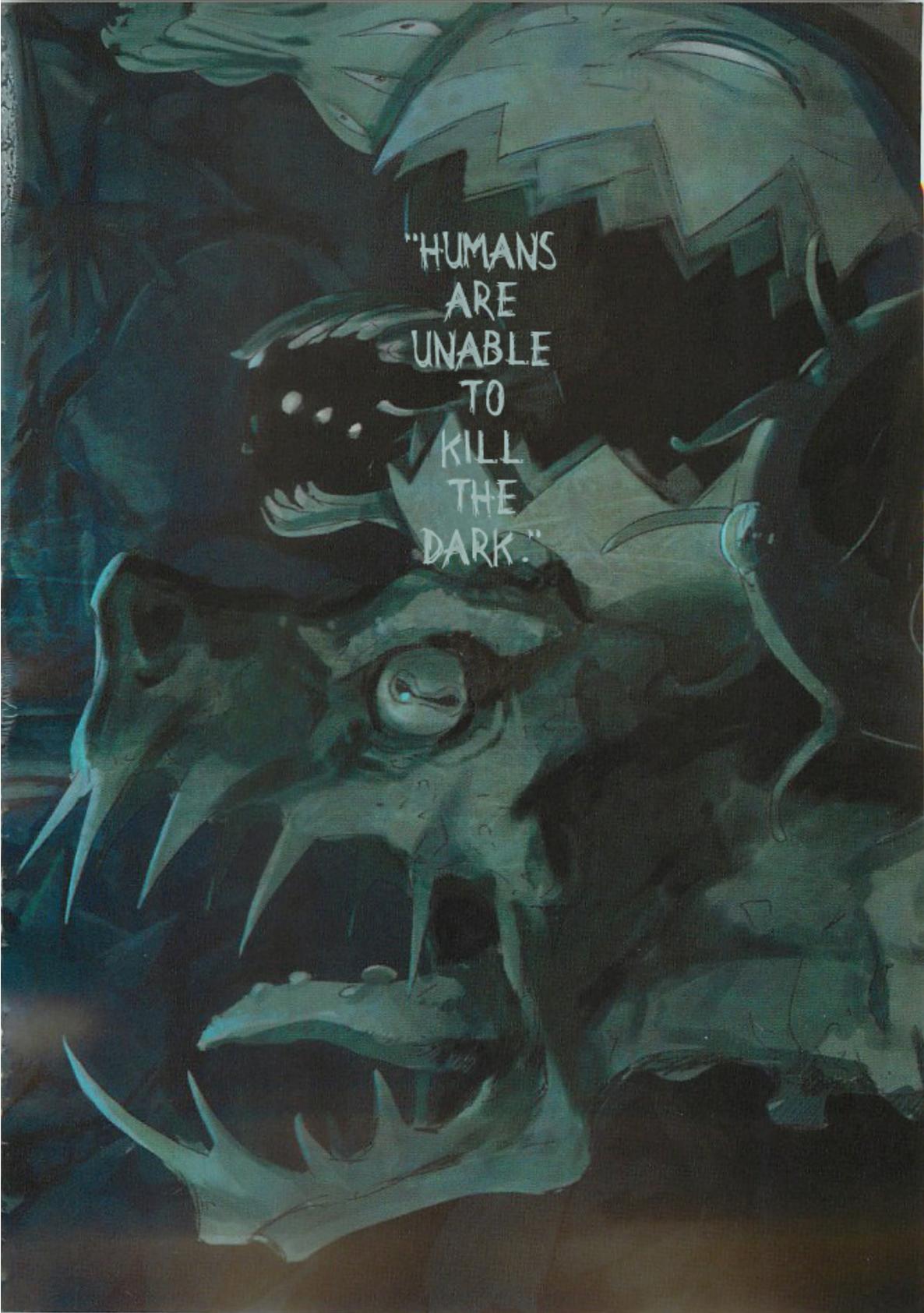
"HEY,
DIGGER-KUN,
WELCOME
TO THE
PUBLIC
CEMETERY!

BY THE WAY,
DO YOU KNOW
WHAT'S BURIED
UNDER THIS
GRAVEYARD?

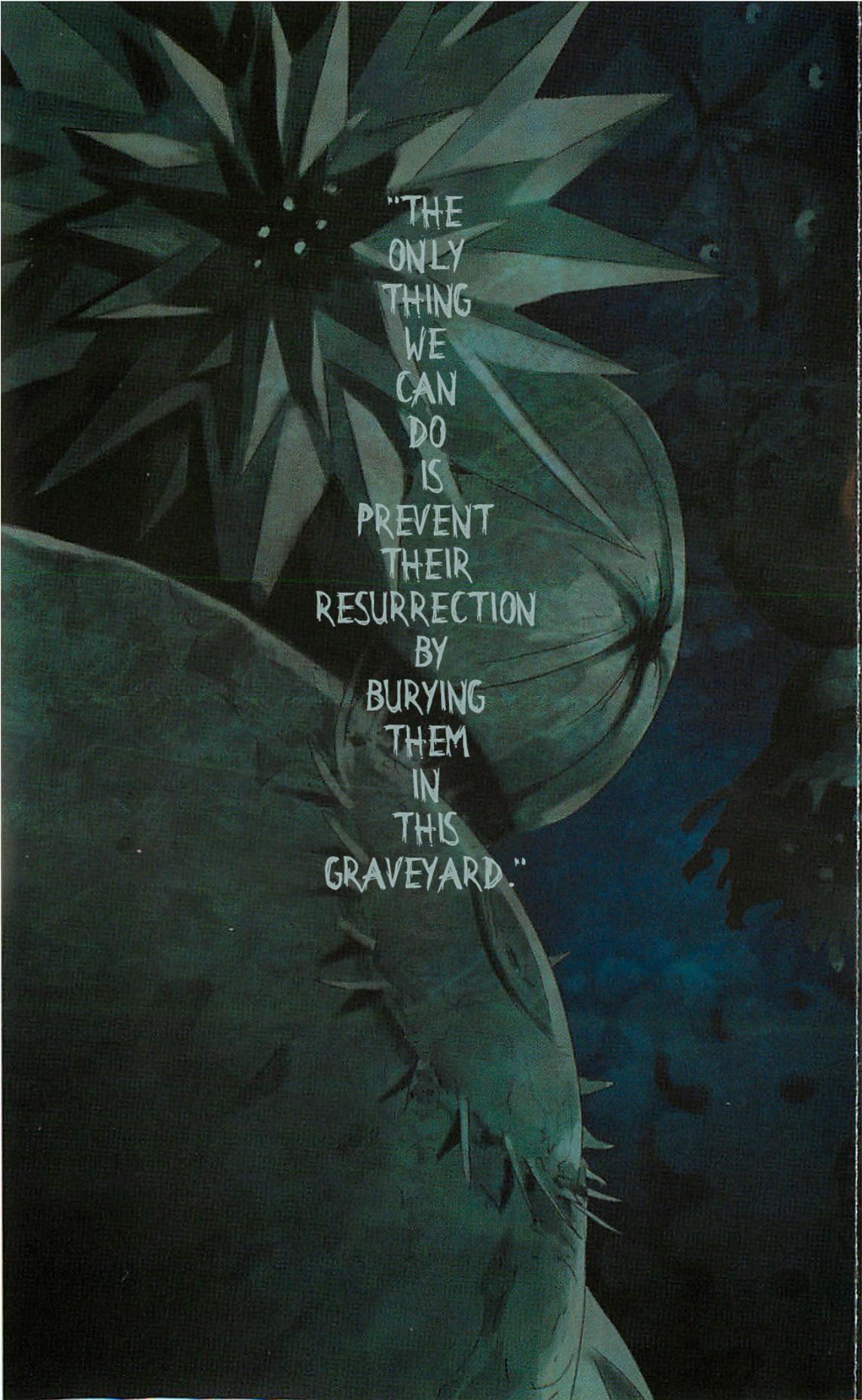
...THE DARK."

Crow

1. [< ㄥ/kun] is an honorific ending used with young boys or simply to denote familiarity or closeness.



"HUMANS
ARE
UNABLE
TO
KILL
THE
DARK."



"THE
ONLY
THING
WE
CAN
DO
IS
PREVENT
THEIR
RESURRECTION
BY
BURYING
THEM
IN
THIS
GRAVEYARD."





"I'VE
BEEN
ALONE
FOR
SO
LONG.
I HATE
THE
PAIN.
I HATE
IT..."

Meria

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Prologue

The stars had already disappeared.

Far off in the distance, the eastern sky was brightening and the trees, concealed by the black of night, were finally regaining their color.

He was out of time.

On the ground a boy was fighting against a strange-looking monster. The creature stood on one side, shaped like a long, giant serpent, although its body was composed entirely of blades. And the boy stood on the other side, his whole body drenched with his blood.

But the snake-like creature was the only one on the verge of death.

The boy carelessly stepped forward and the monster, barely able to move and dying, pierced one of its blades through his chest. That was its final act of resistance.

To the side of the creature's still corpse, the boy heaved a ragged breath as an excruciating pain raged through his body. Fighting that monster couldn't really be called a fight. He had only done it in *her* place, to make himself feel better.

But this was no time for rest.

Once he put on the coat he had hidden under the ground, he grabbed his shovel. The familiar grip filled him with courage, like an old partner offering reassurance.

Leaving red footprints on the ground, he hurried towards the grave. His feet felt heavy, as if they were being dragged down to the earth. He cursed his sluggishness.

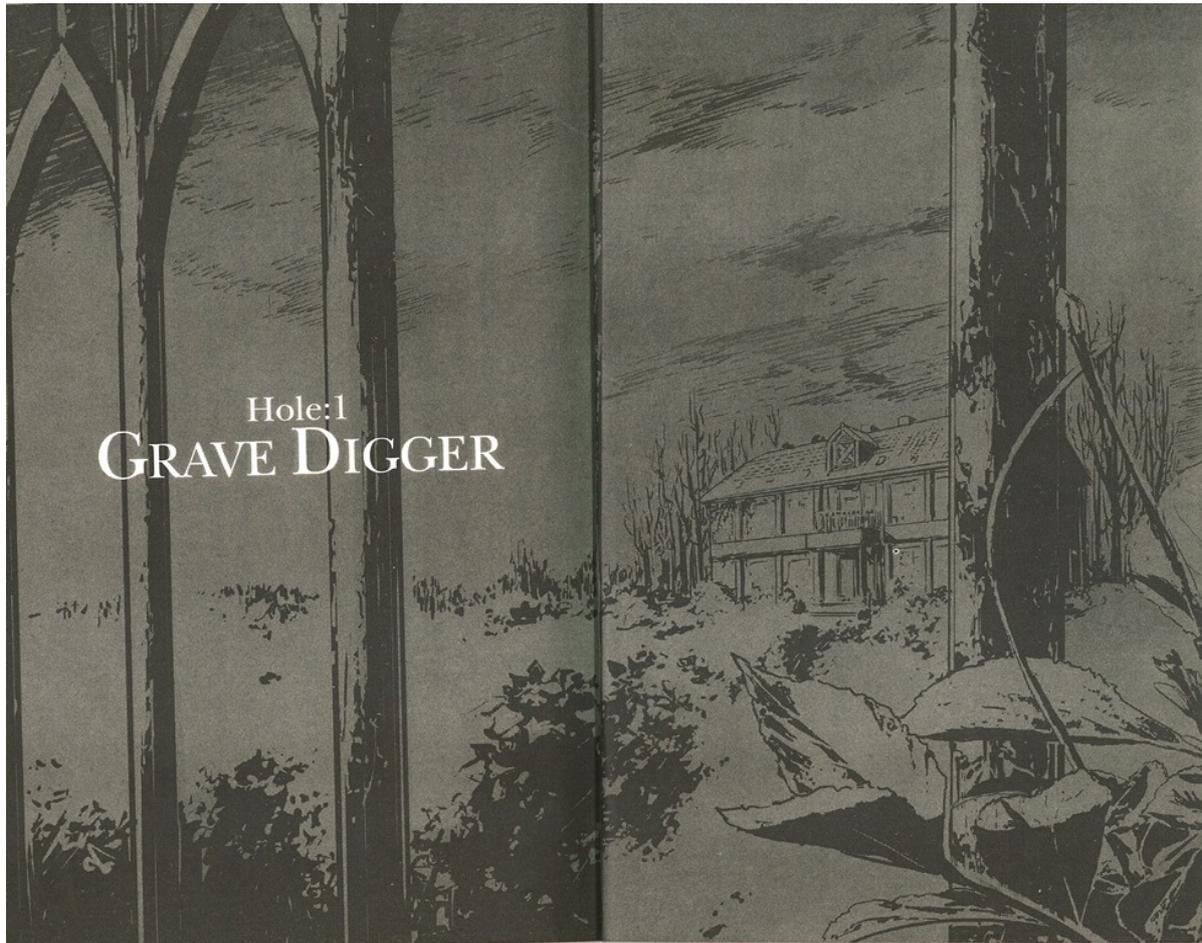
Struggling against the pain, he finally managed to reach the side of the grave. He came to a stop and thrust the shovel into the ground. But after only a few scoops, he threw down the shovel, dropped to his knees, and like a mole, used his hands to remove the earth.

Underneath the dirt, his fingers eventually coiled around some strands of reddish-brown hair. In the grave he saw his beloved, sleeping so silently as if she were dead, with streaks of tears on her cheeks.

It was only natural. After all, what he had done to her was terribly cruel. Yet now he was going to do something even worse.

Selfishly, the boy prayed, "I hope she'll forgive me."

Hole 1: Grave Digger



Chapter 1

The ground beneath his feet was wet and all around him he could hear the sound of stirring trees and the cries of birds. Although the boy was wearing a blindfold, he quickly realized that he had been dropped off near a forest.

After being released from the stench of the paddy wagon's old leather canopy, filling his lungs with fresh air was almost like a sweet feast. Even thinking about before he had been arrested, he couldn't recall ever having breathed such wonderful air as this.

However, the moment the boy was about to take another deep breath, he was kicked hard in the back.

“Walk, prisoner 5722.”¹

Called by his name, he followed the officer’s directions. The boy was fairly taller than average, and his body had such a thickness that by only looking at his shadow on the ground, he appeared to be a full-grown adult. But, things like his mouth, his unblemished tanned skin, and his faint body hair made it clear that he was obviously still a young boy.

“Where am I? No, better yet, where am I headed?” The boy muttered in a low, husky voice.

He wondered if this blindfold was concealing the internment camp, and also how many hours he had he been in the paddy wagon. No one had bothered to tell him where he was going. However, he also hadn’t dared to ask. Yet, for argument’s sake, even if he had, he knew that there were only two possible responses. Either he was replied to in a suitable manner or he had his face shoved.

In his head, walking while being unable to see was difficult, but in reality the road was flat. Since he couldn’t depend on his eyesight, his other senses were working much more than usual to collect information about his surroundings. His hands were handcuffed and right in front of him a military police officer was on the other end pulling him forward. Unlike himself, that guy showed no signs of being human.

¹ For the term slave, in the original Japanese it was written [オリッド/oriddo]. Later when the boy first meets Karasu, it is explained that this term is an old slang used for slave oarsmen on Galleys. Possibly a combination of the word Oar 「オール/ouru」 and slave 「どれい/dorei」

The boy could feel the glorious rays of the early summer sun, and he breathed in the naturally fragrant air of the forest trees. Though he sometimes stepped on weeds, he never tripped or stumbled over errant roots. This place didn't seem like a wild, untamed wilderness.

But, it was strange.

What is this place?

His heart was pounding.

Although he couldn't say for certain, he did feel that the ground he was treading over did not resemble anything he had encountered in his 16 years of life.

Memories and images of the scenery he had traversed and the scenes he had witnessed floated about his mind. His old hometown's beech wood forest, the brickwork and stoned paved streets in his town. He saw the snow covered nameless roads and the lone soldier continuing to dig out trenches in the wasteland.

No matter where you went, you could see the tracks of their tanks. The scent of oil, coal and sand hung in the air. He noticed the grooves of the supply unit's carts, and also the sight and smell of horse manure scattered about. The remains of the destroyed military encampment were littered with traces of burst explosive casings. There was also the smoke of gunpowder...and the stench of burning, human flesh.

Sweat oozed out from his pores. One of the beads trickled down to the collar at his neck, a shackle that prevented him from escaping. Though it irritated him, there was no use wanting to remove the irons. Neither the cuffs on his wrists or the collar at his throat allowed him to do as he wished. What's more, although his legs were unfettered, he noticed that trying to lift his thighs was becoming excruciating painful and he could feel his legs growing heavy.

He didn't want to go any further.

Yet, unexpectedly within the darkness of his blindfold, a strange impulse mounted in his chest. As he walked in shoes which were de-laced to prevent potential suicides, he was starting to think that the land he was walking across wasn't sparsely covered with weeds like the hairs in his beard.

It's like I'm walking on top of something...

The rope binding his wrists pulled taut.

The officer stopped and sharply cluck his tongue. The boy's body stiffened in response, preparing for a further thrashing. However, the pain never came. Instead, the blindfold was roughly ripped off his face. The boy's pupils had gotten so used to the darkness that the sudden early summer rays bearing down on him were quite violent. He twisted away as if he had been slapped, covering his face, which only made the officer sneer.

"Eyes up, brat."

Blinking, the boy did as he was told.

His vision was blurry, white and hazy.

The first thing to come to focus was his guard. As he had expected, the man looked like he was in his 30s with a lean, long and thin face. The next thing to enter his vision were the damp ground and the overgrown greenery...then came the graves.

Graves. Graves. Clusters of graves. Within the forest clearing were lined countless of the monuments of death. The stones came in various different shapes and sizes, and even the intervals between each were strangely irregular. There were stones separated by a distance of about ten steps, all the way down to one stone which thrust up from the ground isolated from the others. Half even seemed to be buried in the forest. Some of the gravestones were made from fresh new granite and some of the graves had been eroded by the rain, their epitaphs and inscriptions no longer legible. There was no sense of uniformity or order in this place.

“Could this be...?” In a young voice oozing with shock, he continued to ask his guard, “By any chance did you have me walk here just to save yourself the trouble of transporting my corpse?”

Laughing, the man replied, “So what if I did?”

“Then I guess this would be yet another tragedy based on a false claim.”

In response the guard kicked him in the pit of his stomach.

Although he doubled over in pain, the color in the boy's face remained mostly unchanged as he presented a bitter smile. Since he had been told that he would receive a life sentence, he had never thought he would be executed here.

Heh, I bet this guy wouldn't even be punished if he killed me.

"Anyway," the jailer continued, "this is the place where you're going."

With a bony index finger, the guard pointed in the direction they were to travel. At one of the corners of the border between the forest and the graveyard, the boy caught a glimpse of a mansion and its white walls. It was barely visible, as if it had been buried within the thick green of the broadleaf trees. As far as he could see, it looked like a place where only one person lived.

As they drew closer to the mansion, the boy being pulled forward by the rope wrapped about his cuffs, he realized that the walls weren't painted white. The color was actually the white of recently quarried stone. The building also wasn't that big, but its perimeter was completely surrounded by a palisade² of black iron without a trace of rust. The countless tops of the fence posts each appeared like the tip of a spear, all pointing to the sky as they warded off thieves. The gate's side entrance, an iron door almost blending in with the iron posts, had been firmly shut. Naturally, there was no welcome party to take them in.

²
Tall iron fence

The boy started to doubt whether anyone even lived there. The area did not give even a hint that there had been any recent activity. Between the fence and the building was a small garden, which although fully weeded, was flat and featureless with not even one tree or shrub. There were neither fountains, nor sculptures and he couldn't even find a line for drying clothes.

Yet, instead of those things, there was a mechanized buzzer and receiver to the side of the iron entrance. People of the lower classes did not have access to things like telegraphs, to say nothing of the entranceway it was furnished within. When it comes to telegram machines, even though he had seen them often during his military service, just like tanks, they were tools only utilized by their specialist officers. People like him, people that were just "battleground moles"³ had no opportunity to touch these kinds of things.

Wow. Shockingly this place is quite luxurious, the boy thought in surprise, keeping his opinion to himself.

The guard, unfamiliar with how to handle the device, awkwardly pushed the buzzer. He then picked up the receiver attached by a long and narrow cord.

"This is the Filbard military police, Warrant Officer Barrida. As arranged, I have escorted prisoner 5722."

After a little while, a seemingly old man responded in a terribly hoarse sounding voice.

³ Probably cannon fodder.

“We were expecting you. Thank you officer, we greatly appreciate your service.”⁴ The receiver’s volume seemed so loud that the boy standing behind the guard had no problem catching what was being said.

“At the current time, Officer, your duties have concluded. Since we will now manage the current situation ourselves, we no longer wish to inconvenience you. Please, we hope that you will encounter no difficulties on the road home. Safe journeys and we hope you remain in good health.”

Hearing this, the long-faced guard’s expression seemed to twist with anger. No matter how politely the words were spoken, to be turned away and denied entry like a simple peddler of goods seemed to wound the warrant officer’s pride. In a griping voice the guard replied.

“But my duty is to personally make sure that the prisoner has indeed been escorted. I would like you to open the door for me. And for starters, isn’t it rude to not even show your face?”

“We appreciate your response. However, while we are grateful you took the trouble of coming here, the prisoner’s work papers have already been signed by two parties, myself and your military. Furthermore, regarding the content of that agreement, I do not recall there being a clause that requires you to hand the boy over directly....”

“But...” though the officer refused to back down, before he could insist further, the voice from the receiver cut him off.

⁴ This character’s dialogue is written with extremely polite Japanese. I tried my best to translate this into English, but the prevalence of formal honorific language has diminished greatly in English. Overall, the speech should sound slightly archaic.

“Pardon me, soldier. Are you Warrant Officer Barrida Clemens attached to the East Filbard area of the Racksand prison camp?”

“Um, that’s right...” The guard responded suspiciously to the unexpected name confirmation.

Whoever was on the other side of that receiver, spoke with as much courtesy as their voice allowed.

“Although it is for your convenience, at our discretion please allow us to make arrangements for you to visit the restaurant at the foot of the mountain called ‘The Cat’s Earpick’. There you will be able to enjoy your time with the woman of your fancy. Of course, drinks and other services will be fully paid for and provided. And since your return to the detention camp will probably be delayed until the next day, we shall inform your superiors of the situation. So, what do you think about this offer?”

Suddenly presented with such a blatantly obvious consolation, the horse faced officer, lost in a wide blank stare, blinked⁵. Changing the subject as if the dispute had been resolved like an enemy who had just received their final blow, the hoarse voice continued.

“As for the boy, is he wearing a collar?”

“Uh huh...” the officer decidedly did not hesitate for long. “That’s right.”

⁵ I translated the phrase ニンジン as “Consolation” here, but the full phrase is 突然この上なく判りやすいニンジン差し出され。

Dejectedly, the guard hung up the receiver and helplessly muttered into the air, "I don't want to be in this gloomy place anymore. He turned around and the moment the boy entered the guard's line of sight, the guard's face shifted into one of embarrassment.

Then, seeming to recall the fact that he was looking at a worthless prisoner, the guard spat at the boy's feet.

"Hey, Superior officer killer, don't even think about running!"

As if he were throwing away a cigarette butt, the guard released the end of the rope wrapped around the boy's handcuffs.

"Once a month, there will be a fixed inspection. If there is any problem, you will immediately go right back to the detention camp. Also, as long as your employer is even a little dissatisfied with you, he will be okay with the idea of keeping the collar on. Besides, no matter where you are, there is nowhere to run.

Laughing, the boy replied, "If I were to hide under the ground, it feels like I wouldn't be found no matter who was looking."

Hearing this, the officer roared with laughter. His mood appeared to have improved 100 times compared to the last several minutes. Judging from the horse-faced guard's face, the boy could tell there was probably going to be many brief and unexpected visits.

The man withdrew the handcuff key from one of his uniform pockets and flung it into the courtyard. Then, with a gait that almost looked like he was walking down steps, he made his way back to the paddy wagon.

And so with his handcuffs still on, the boy was left in front of the iron door.

He wondered what to do now; after all he had heard nothing from his captor.

Well, whatever happens now, I'm sure in the end it won't be very good.

As he approached the iron gate entrance, trampling leaves beneath his feet, a high pitch "Caww" screeched in a deep voice above his head. Looking into that direction he saw a giant crow spread its wings, its recent flight shaking the branches of the trees. It was hard to believe that this bird with its ominous cry could possibly be related to birds like the hummingbird or the tree sparrow.

He recalled the words the guard had said just a few minutes ago. "I don't want to be in this gloomy place anymore."

—The boy absolutely agreed.

Even now, the strange feeling that had welled up inside him when he was still blindfolded had not dissipated. He again took a look around his surroundings. The weather wasn't too hot. And probably a typical person would find standing within the early summer sunlight and breathing in the fresh air filtering in through the trees to be quite agreeable. Nevertheless, the boy and the officer both shared the same opinion. It wasn't simply the fact that there

was a graveyard; there seemed to be something in this place that made humans uneasy.

Once again, this time using his eyes, he confirmed the ground that he was walking on.

This place is unpleasant. Well, it's no wonder since I feel like I'm walking on the backs of corpses.

When the officer's figure had completely faded into the distance beyond the graveyard, the iron door slid open by itself. With a clank, the sound of heavy metal crashing together reverberated through the air.

Then about 30 steps from his position, from the building's entrance covered with detailed engravings, a black dog suddenly poked out its snout from behind the doorknob. The dog was larger than any dog the boy had ever seen. If he had to say, the dignified appearance gave him the impression of a wolf, but its thick coat of fur had been thoroughly combed. In addition, within its eyes there was a calm radiance that was only present in well-trained dogs. However, above all, watching it approach without its paws making a sound was elegant.

As the black dog held the key that the guard had thrown away in its mouth, the boy stood completely still, his gaze fixed on the creature. From his distance he couldn't tell at all whether or not this creature was hostile or friendly.

"Please come in, Prisoner 5722. That dog will serve as your guide." The voice came from under a hood used to shield the hanging receiver from the rain. The hoarse man spoke as if he were looking right at the boy.

The dog then faded back into the darkness of the entranceway. Even though the dog was massive, within the space of one of its body lengths, the boy could see absolutely nothing within the mansion's dark interior.

He told me to follow, but...

There was no one guarding him, nor was there anyone pulling him forward by a rope. Yet, even though his jailer had been turned away from the door, was he really that unguarded?

No, rather. Should he have just been grateful that the dog wasn't holding the rope in its mouth?

Even for a prisoner, wearing a collar and being dragged forward by a dog as if they were holding his reins was far too pathetic. Of course, he didn't think the dog understood that feeling.

Soon after entering the terribly dark and windowless mansion, he couldn't feel anything other than the chilly air. But, once his eyes readjusted back to the darkness he noticed he was at the entrance of a somewhat narrow hallway lined with something like oil lamps leaking out weak light.

After waiting for the boy to start walking, the dog proceeded to lead him down the hallway and he followed after the creature as if being pulled forward. There was a high quality looking carpet with geometric patterns spread out across the floor. In fact, seeing his dirty shoes leave footprints on its surface made him feel that he was committing some kind of crime.

“Welcome to the Mass Grave.”

The voice echoed the moment he treaded into a large parlor. It was the same hoarse voice that had silenced his guard a little while ago.

The lamp fixtures that decorated and illuminated the room were made from a cut glass so beautiful that his sense of value couldn't comprehend how extravagant they were. There was also a statuette of a human with wings extending out of his back, an oil painting of a girl and her pet standing at the lakeshore, and fine golden candlesticks decorating the parlor. And resting in the center of the room was a large leather easy chair. On its cushion sat a stoop, extremely small statured old man. Although the boy wanted to hide his feeling of unease, he his mouth opened and he spoke.

"You're the owner of this place?" The boy asked the question, but he didn't think the man looked the part.

Then without even realizing it, the boy's eyes gravitated to the man's nose. No, more accurately, the place where his nose should have been. In this old man's case, the stump of a nose looked like it had been scraped off, and now all that remained in the center of his face were two deep holes. Yet even more unsettling were his difficult to read, smallish eyes. He completely looked like a goblin straight out of the fables of old. Still, he did seem to wear his tail coat stylishly.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. My name is Daribedor. You may think of me as this place's caretaker. As you might have already guessed, it has been decided that from today onward you shall work in this place."

The boy's had planned to purposely speak in a cynical way in order to trick the old man into revealing the truth, however Daribedor's polite attitude never crumbled. By intuition alone the boy knew this man was not the likeable type.

He then asked, "But, what exactly am I supposed to do now?"

Hearing that, the old man with a made a strange, wry smile and said, "Don't you think there is only one thing prisoners have to do in this place?" Then from the holes where his nose should have been, the old man snorted derisively.

Chapter 2: Part 1

*Prisoner.*¹

Originally, the way jailers said the word was a reference to slave oarsmen on ancient galleys. Since the slaves mostly toiled on commercial boats, the phrase has continued to be used for grueling work environments. However, in the present where instead of oars, boats are powered by steam engines and paddle wheels, all criminals serving out their sentences are collectively referred to by the term. According to the law, all prisoners without exception were forced to undertake an assigned labor, without exception.

The prisoners had to do such tasks as: butchering animals, disposing of excrement and waste, mining for minerals, and clearing wildernesses. Due to the difficulty and grueling nature of the labor, there were very few people assigned to the tasks that had actually wanted to do them. And in the case of life imprisonment, in particular, prisoners were forced to toil until the end of their lives without the chance of parole.

...The shovel the boy had been provided with was only one pinky's width shorter than the ones he had used in the past. The shaft was made of extremely dried and hard plain wood, and acid-resistant steel had been used for the blade and the handle. It looked completely new, as if it had been brought here straight from the factory.

¹ Oriddo

It had been three days since the paddy wagon had brought him to the public graveyard. And whenever the boy named “prisoner 5722” wasn’t sleeping, he was using that shovel to continue digging holes.

His living space was the complete opposite of his high quality shovel. As for his bed, he had been provided with some space in the decaying stable at the back of the estate. The straw that had been spread across the floor was stale and although it looked like horses hadn’t been raised there in a very long time, on each of the discolored wall’s wooden posts, the characteristic stench of livestock lingered.

Shortly after the sun appeared, the old man and an old woman turned up. Other than the clothes, the hair, and the hooked nose, which looked like an old witch’s, they looked exactly the same. However, compared to the man who didn’t drop courtesy for the sake of decorum, the woman, with a face that looked like dealing with a horse would be far less objectionable, spat out, “Get up and do your job, you little wretch.”

So the boy put some hard bread and extremely strong, salty soup into his stomach and made his way to the graveyard. And in the midst of the harsh sunlight, he put up with the discomfort and continued to dig graves for somebody’s future corpse.

To tell the truth, from the moment the blindfold had been removed....in other words, the moment he realized he had been taken to this graveyard, the boy had a vague hunch that this same fate would probably happen to him. At any rate, this hard labor suited him. He was already accustomed to it. That’s because digging holes and trenches was the primary responsibility of the foot soldiers.

...he wondered how many knights had been moved from the front lines of the battlefield and reassigned to be foot soldiers. As firearms developed after the industrial revolution, knights, pike men and bow soldiers all across the board were deprived of the opportunity to be useful. Since all foot soldiers were armed with firearms as a result of mass production, there was a large demand for some cover to shield their bodies from the hail of bullets. And because it was convenient, the foot soldiers had spread out endlessly...and with shovel in hand they proceeded to dig out large swaths of land. Thus the so called "battleground moles" were born.

Having just dug out a rock the size of his head, the boy cursed the thick tree roots at his feet. At the same time, he offered a silent prayer to the human bones that no one could possibly know. *No matter if it's a wilderness, a level plain, the edge of a forest, or an abandoned wheat field, I pray that my Mole companions, no matter where they are...no matter where they are...I pray they are still digging too.*

Back then, he had been glad the military shovel given to him had extended the length of his arm. His body remembered that length. And so for the boy neither the heat rash developing under his collar nor the whorl of hair on the back of his head scorching in the direct sunlight were as unpleasant as the new shovel the old man had given him that was just a pinky's width too short.

Nevertheless, a big hole like this probably wasn't required just to bury one person.

He took a breather for a while and looked down at his work. As ordered he had dug the hole, but it seemed big enough to fit a small house.

“If a curled up human corpse were buried here, they probably wouldn’t even need a 10th of the space. Maybe they are planning to use an extremely large coffin,” he muttered to himself.

Or, as fitting a place called “The Mass Grave”, the boy wondered just how many people they planned to bury in this hole.

After a large battle there would be many corpses coming here...was that why he was here?

Well, however they want to use these holes is none of my concern.

There was something else he should be thinking about, something else he should find out.

For the three days since he had arrived, the only thing he thought about as he dug was escape. Strangely, it seemed like at this Mass Grave he was the only prisoner being made to work.

His warden...no, although it looked like he was watching the boy 24 hours a day, if Daribedor happened to do something then there would be no one who would know where the boy was. If somehow the boy were able to conceal himself, then wouldn’t he be freed from this foolish existence of digging holes? However, if he wasn’t able to get out of there, then for the whole remainder of his life-sentence he would be forced to waste his life doing forced labor as “Prisoner #5772”.

“This is not a joke”, he muttered over and over as he dug.

This situation is definitely not a joke. I've got to escape from this place. This gloomy, depressing place...

Compared to the usual shackles and prison bars he had during his trial, the lax restraints at the Mass Grave were a good opportunity. First he would somehow sneak away from this place. Then he would go by a new name, become a different person, and start over in a place where groups like the military or the police couldn't reach...

As the boy toiled, thinking only of escape, his third day of work became night. The graveyard in the wake of the sun's disappearance was eerier than ever. In the decaying stable, wind blew in through the cracks, making it excessively chilly. He doubted the idea of him needing something like a lamp or candle had crossed anyone's mind at that estate. So, whenever the clouds covered the moon and the stars, his stable was completely enveloped in darkness. It was the exact same condition as when he was blindfolded. He had no choice but to pull up his blanket. Hell, even falling asleep on the first night had been difficult, and if he had to confess....scary.

There are no such things as ghosts. In his mind he understood that.

However, in the midst of the total darkness where there was no one but himself, with the old hinges creaking and the creepy, ominous sound of the wind blowing into the stable through the cracks, he couldn't help but think someone was approaching.

Of course if he jumped up and strained his eyes he'd be able to confirm that there was no one there. Still, as this feeling came back again and again, he started to doubt whether or not he truly didn't believe in things like ghosts or spirits slipping out of their corpses.

Well, at the very least this place wouldn't be troubled by corpses holding onto regrets.

Although he had been frightened, for two days his fears proved to be nothing but a waste of time.

Fortunately, (well whether it was fortunate or not he didn't know, but) on this third night there was not a single cloud, and the moon was bright. It was so bright he could clearly see the tip of his toes, making it an ideal night to take a walk.

The boy rose out of his bed of straw and sheets. As he stood, the black dog, which as usual was sprawled across the ground at the entrance of the stable, looked his way.

"I'm just taking a piss. You probably don't go in your own bed right?" The boy said, lightly waving his hand. The dog then exited the stable with the boy following closely behind.

It's a courteous, albeit scary looking dog, but it does seem to understand what I say.

This reminded him of the two big problems he had regarding his escape.

The collar around his neck and also...this dog.

No matter what the boy did, the black dog named “Dephen” was always watching. And even if the boy wasn’t directly in the dog’s sights, he felt like he was always within the dog’s area of perception. So if the boy tried going anywhere, eventually “Dephen” would be at his back, following.

“By no means should you think about escaping,” Daribedor had said to him on the first day. “Dephen here is an excellent grave keeper. At the same time, he is also an unparalleled hunting dog. His sense of smell and his fangs make him worthy of being a jailer second to none.”

A dog as my jailer? At first the boy was only half convinced but...

For the three days he had been under watch, this dog had performed its task to a high standard of excellence. In the distant past, humans had often fought directly with hounds and it had been difficult to win those struggles without suffering any injuries. Even though the boy didn’t really know what would happen if he could succeed in a surprise strike against the dog with his shovel, it didn’t matter because the dog never came into a suitable striking range.

It would have been good if Dephen lost its vigilance when it was feeding. Nevertheless, even though only a few scraps of bread had been thrown at the boy, that dog would certainly still be able to locate him by the lingering scent.

After relieving himself, the boy didn’t directly return to the stable. Instead, he aimlessly walked by the mansion’s side fence. He was reluctant to head towards the graveyard. Even the sound of the leaves rustling in the wind made him feel uncomfortable.

But...obviously nothing was going to come out in the night, right? Nothing like a legless guy, or something like that.

Well, even if he decided to postpone his escape, it was necessary to know something about what the graveyard looked like without the sunlight. In case he escaped in the middle of the night, he would have to cut through the unknown dark forest no matter which direction he went inand that would probably be suicide. Yet, even provided he could walk the distance, he didn't know if he would be able to actually reach the nearest town. Even if he were able to find some tire tracks, and that was being optimistic, he would still need to follow a roadway. And in order to go down a roadway he would have to leave the graveyard.

That's alright. There are no such things as ghosts. Besides, wasn't I far more terrified back when that gun turret was pointed at me?

After that thought passed through his head, the boy used the same cautious stride as when he was blindfolded and stepped into the graveyard. The innumerable gravestones bathed in the moonlight, creating a blue shine that stood out in the middle of the darkness. But at the same time, the actual color of the weathered stones made him think of bones.

He had planned to learn the ins and outs of the mass cemetery, but since his vision couldn't penetrate the deep darkness, he instead started to feel that the graveyard was far too vast. No matter which direction he faced, he saw the same gravestones scattered about with the thick black forest in the distance. And since he'd been lead in various directions when blindfolded, the boy was sure he wouldn't be able to find his way back to the stable. Still, strange as it was, the fact that the unsympathetic black dog was always following behind him was actually reassuring.

“Prisoner, whether or not you’re relieved about your jailer leaving, rest assured this jail hound will accompany you.”

As he thought about Daribedor’s words, a bitter smile involuntarily leaked out.

Look, it’s alright. This place may have a touch of those ghostly superstitions, but in the end ghosts are things that only come out in stories.

As the wind blew, he walked through the graveyard, his spirit somehow invigorated.

Of course he was aware that this was a bluff. The nape of his neck beneath his collar, and even his two muscular arms had Goosebumps. *This is far enough for today...I should continue tomorrow...* with each step these gentle thoughts crossed his mind.

Suddenly he noticed he was standing in front of the hole he had dug earlier that day. From his position it looked like some sort of cellar could be constructed within the massive hole. The moonlight didn’t reach the bottom and the darkness seemed to be like a liquid, pooling at the bottom... there was also no inscription on the gravestone. It was a grave that didn’t belong to anyone.

During the day he had wondered who would be buried in the hole.

And now, questions about what would happen to him after he died welled up in his chest.

If he had broken one of the rules within the confines of the detention camp, he would have been informed in detail of the penal code. But no one had told him what would happen if he died here. For example, if his escape was unsuccessful and he died from having his windpipe gnawed by the black dog, would his body be buried in this graveyard afterwards?

To the boy it seemed pointless, since there was no one who would grieve for him. Plus, before at the trial it was decided that the boy's name, the name his father had given him, would be revoked. So there probably wouldn't be a name on his tombstone, anyway.

The gravedigger has no grave of his own.

That sarcastic thought once again made him smile bitterly. But he didn't know whether he should feel sad or frustrated by the situation. The feeling was vague and left him feeling empty. In fact, the emptiness resembled the darkness within the deep grave.

While he listened to the sound of the sudden wind, he thought he heard something else. It sounded like rustling clothes...like something was moving.

Twisting his head at the sound, the boy noticed that the dog had disappeared without him knowing.

Cold sweat ran down the back of his neck.

Finally left alone, the boy remembered just what kind of place he was in. And so like a person with a guilty conscience, he hastily checked his surroundings.

The group of tombstones surrounding him...

The giant hole at his feet...

The rustling dark forest...

The slightly, waning large moon...

And also, just barely in his field of vision...

There was something there.

Other than me, what could possibly be in this remote graveyard in the middle of the night?

..... His mind went blank.

Whatever it was, it was about the size of a human wearing a nearly black, dark, navy hood. Its overcoat reached down to its feet and fluttered in the wind.

Wraith². Wight³. Shade⁴ ...the eerie fables of ghosts that the adults had thoroughly indoctrinated into him when he was small raced within his head.

The hood created a shadow, preventing the boy from seeing the person's face. However, he was certain it was at the very least aware of him. After all, it was coming right towards him.

Should...I....run?

It was difficult to breathe. He didn't run, but only because his body completely didn't hear his mind urging it to flee. His fear took over, causing him to panic, his mind completely blotted out. His legs were frozen, as if he was a soldier in front of a thrown grenade. He felt violently dizzy, shaking in that spot. Maybe it was some benevolence or mercy from the heavens that his bladder was empty.

Swaying slowly side to side, the approaching person's pace was actually quite slow, but the boy could by no means sense that.

Am I... passing out...

² 死霊 with レイス Furigana. A Wraith is a visible spirit

³ 悪魂機鬼 with ワイト Furigana. A wight is an archaic term to refer to a supernatural being.

⁴ 影魔 with シエード Furigana. A shade is a specter or ghost.

It was a strange sensation. He must run. It was the only thing the boy thought about. He must run. From that ghost...from this graveyard. Even though his legs felt like they were rooted into the ground, he poured all his remaining energy into the limbs and urged them to move.

But the next moment the power drained from his knees and with a jerk he fell. As he tumbled downwards, for some reason he felt the distance to the ground was farther than it should have been.

Nothing good happened after all.

In the middle of the graveyard, in the middle of the night, the boy lost consciousness.

...but a slight moment before all faded to black, within the hood of that creature, he thought he saw a white face.

Chapter 2-2

...His oldest memory was of a sound. Off and on he could hear a high pitched *Kiin.kiin* coming from the area next to his small room. He had been looking at an old-looking ceiling, something he was all too familiar with...his house's ceiling...his hometown home's ceiling.

Trying not to wake his sleeping brothers next to him, the young boy quietly slipped out of bed. With his feet on the floor his field of vision was much lower than it was now.... He was only faintly aware that it was a dream of his childhood.

Kiin...Kiin...

He soon realized what the sound really was. His stonemason father was swinging a chisel and hammer.

The young boy stared fixedly at his father's rounded back as he sat on a small stepladder and poured all his mind and energy into carving the stone.

In truth he couldn't really recall his father's voice. But he did remember that he was a stubborn and quiet person. Actually, he was extremely quiet...very much like a rock. Perhaps if you faced a stone for a long time then maybe your body and heart would become just as hard. His father's shortly trimmed beard seemed to be prickly like the scrubbing brush he was used to using. And the palms of his slightly dirty hands were as coarse as elephant skin.

Then there was his height. The man was by no means taller than the boy's current height. In fact, if he thought about it now, it was probably strange that someone as tall as him was born to such a small statured man. However, in the midst of his memories he remembered his father appearing big enough. And looking at his strong and solid frame left a strong impression.

As the boy continued to motionlessly stare upwards at his father's back, his father turned his head towards him.

"XXXXX, can't sleep?" he asked, calling the young boy's name.

He couldn't accurately recall the sound of the voice, probably because it was a dream. And the voice he did hear faster than how his father would have spoken. Even so, the boy felt a sense of relief. Most likely because his father had called out his name...

#

Since when did I start having dreams of my father..., the prisoner thought in the middle of his slumber.

He quickly woke up... If possible, he had to get ready for today's work before that old noisy woman came back. Yet, for some reason he was so warm and comfortable that he didn't feel like getting up. It was similar to the great feeling when your senses and consciousness started to fade in a pleasant bathtub. And so for just a little bit more, he figured it was okay to continue dreaming about his father.

He could taste dirt in his mouth.

Getting an unpleasant feeling, the boy opened his eyes.

However, despite his intents, for some reason his left side was completely dark. He tried to blink, but a sharp pain shot into his left eye. And as he lay on his side, to his right he could see a dirt wall right in front of him.

“What is...?”

With a start, he rose up and instead of being on a futon, dirt, of all things, tumbled off his body. Half of his body was buried beneath the ground...no, rather it had *been* buried. The fact that the boy was now within the very grave he had dug out earlier was no joke at all.

That's right, I passed out.

Before he even understood the situation above him, clumps of dirt poured down and covered his head. “Waah, what the, ugh.” Spitting out the foreign substance, the boy looked up.

“You were alive?” said lips the color of cherry blossoms.

The blade of a shovel, which looked just like the same new tool the boy had received, seemed to shine a bright silver as the moonlight reflected off the metal. On the blade sat the next load of dirt, but was more interesting was the girl holding the shovel and looking down at him from the lip of the hole.

“ ... ”

The dark navy cloak the girl wore was definitely the same as the one he saw before fainting. And what he had seen through her hood had certainly appeared to be human, but in reality, it was beautiful. At least he thought so. For a reason other than fear, the sight of her made him forget to even breathe.

For a time, she looked mysteriously at the motionless boy in the hole. But then she slightly tilted her head to the side and asked, "Or are you moving despite being dead?"

"...What are you talking about?" the boy blurted out in response to the extremely strange question, his rigid demeanor completely gone.

Her voice was slight and beautiful; her dark blue eyes seemed to be full of suspicion, and from her hood spilled out silky reddish brown hair. In his 16 years of life he had never seen a creature so beautiful. And he thought he would never see anything more beautiful in the future either.



...Wait. Don't get angry. Have you forgotten where you are? The boy asked himself, squeezing his eyes shut.

Trying to calm his thrashing heart, a great number of questions welled up within him.

Needless to say, the girl's expression looked like she hadn't seen him working in the graveyard the past few days. Even with just a short glance, he believed he could never forget her face. But what in the world was she doing at this hour in this place? No, his body felt it was unnatural for a girl to be alone in the graveyard by herself at this hour.

She looks like a human, but I can't say with certainty that she's not just a beautiful ghost

No, for starters...

"Who are you?" the boy asked, standing to his feet.

The hooded girl, as expected, looked at the boy with a mysterious gaze. Although she didn't look panicked or frightened, her expression seemed to be a cross between confusion and interest. It was as if in the middle of walking along the road she happened to come across a chick hatching out of an egg.

At first the girl said nothing, but when he was starting to wonder whether her silence was due to her not understanding the question, she finally said, “Meria Mass Grave¹”

It took him a while to understand that that series of words was her name.

“Meria?” In order to confirm, he repeated the name and the girl nodded slightly.

Continuing, the boy asked, “What in the world are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

The girl answered, “It’s only natural, since I’m the grave keeper.”

As if those few words completed her explanation, the girl...Meria said nothing more.

No longer able to endure her silent gaze, the boy averted his eyes and decided to focus on crawling out of the hole. As he worked to climb out of the hole which was about the same depth as his height, he eventually noticed his messy footprints where he had lost his footing.

¹ The kanji reads Meria of the Mass Grave, however the katakana stylizes her name without “of/ the”. I believe the author wanted the name to sound like an actual name, however the actual Japanese makes “mass grave” sound more like a title than a surname.

It seemed like the moment he thought Meria was a ghost and tried to flee, he fell, and incidentally hit his head and lost consciousness. It was probably also the reason for the stiff pain in his neck. There was definitely nothing more unpleasant than that pain. Well, the fact that the girl was barely paying attention to his struggle made his skin burn. So with a flushed face, he climbed the hole's slope.

Once his feet finally touched the surface, he stood and found himself looking down at the girl who was now looking up at him. Standing side by side the girl came up to about his chest. For a girl he could say she was rather ordinary in that respect.

They were either the same age or she was a little younger than him. Her small body from her head to her ankles was completely covered by her plain dark navy coat and other than her face, the only part of her that was exposed to the open air was her bare white feet.

"...And you are?" the girl asked, tilting her head to the side.

His image was reflected in her clear blue eyes, which were like the surface of a lake with no waves.

Who are you?

That question and her straight gaze seemed to pierce directly into the depths of his mind.

Well...who am I...after all? He wondered how he should respond and multitudes of potential candidates rushed around in his mind.

The third son of a stone mason, a battleground mole, a superior officer killer, prisoner #5722. And now the nameless gravedigger. Each of those names was correct and they certainly represented him.

But...

For me, what do I want to be called?

“Muoru”.

It had been taken away...his real name...

“My name is Muoru Reed.”²

...when he was born....it was the name his father had given him.

That word was different than the dirt that had been in his mouth. He was able to spit it out without feeling uncomfortable or out of place.

If he thought about it, it was a foolish name. But as long as a person’s memory didn’t fade away, it was impossible to snatch away their name.

² Muoru is the Japanese spelling of Mole. The pun works because of the wealth of loanwords in Japanese, however it seems a bit odd for a boy to be named Mole in English, so I kept the Japanese phrase.

“Muoru, huh?” As if mimicking his previous dumbfounded expression, she repeated back the boy’s name.

The boy took a step back, distancing himself a bit from the girl.

Then, as if protecting his heart, he grabbed his chest.

Why am I this surprised when she only said my name?

Surprised that he was even shocked by such a thing, he forcibly searched his mind for the reason. Maybe, although he could say it, he had completely forgotten what it was like to actually hear his name.

That must be it. It was the only reason.

The girl again leaned her head to the side, her glossy hair slightly swaying in front of her chest.

“So then, what were you doing?” the girl asked him.

“I was just...Pihhhh.....”³

³ 「小便」 The book has しょ...う written down, And since he was urinating, it is probable he was trying to save face a little.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Pih?” Meria asked with a pretty voice, repeating back to him the partial phrase he was hesitating to say.

“Relieving myself,”⁴ Muoru rephrased, his chest tight.

“Right.” The girl nodded, and as she did, in the space between her hood and her hair, he caught a glimpse of her thin collarbone.

“Ah, umm...” Mumbling, he searched for words.

Though there should have been many questions he should ask, the thoughts in his head were strangely, revolving slowly, and he couldn't recall any of them. Fixing his eyes on the girl, he could feel his mind grow slightly numb, like the time he was drunk on alcohol and the smell of flowers⁵. However, it was the first time he had ever experienced this sensation from just talking to someone. And that was far from unpleasant....

⁴ [手洗い] A polite phrase for toilet, and most likely a polite way to say he was relieving himself.

⁵ I believe this is a drug reference.

Suddenly the girl turned away.

“Well then....” Meria said, briskly starting to walk away as if she had lost all interest in him

“Wa...wait a sec!” Muoru shouted impulsively.

“.....?”

“No....that,” although it was good to tell her to stop, as usual his only half functioning mind had no idea what to say next. She looked back over her shoulder at him. With her hood only half concealing her profile, the girl gazed straight at him, unblinking, as if the two of them were children seeing who could stare longer.

He didn't know whether she was being too conscientious or not, but even though the boy could not even string together two words, the girl motionlessly waited for him, as if time had stopped.

“...That shovel, it's mine. Sorry about this, but could you leave it there?” He asked, in a tone lacking confidence as he pointed to the shovel.

Meria had been holding the boy's shovel, but after he had spoken, as if she had finally remembered, she looked down to her hands. Then she glanced at Muoru's hole she had started to fill earlier, before turning back to the boy.

“Did you dig this hole?” she asked.

The boy nodded yes and Meria, with an expression in her eyes that was difficult to read, continued to stare at him.

Then without warning she rushed towards him, almost stumbling from the speed. But before crashing into him, she stopped herself about a step away and held out the metal shovel. Reflexively, the boy accepted the shovel. As before, no wisecracks or quips came to mind.

Instead he said, "Thank you".

Although he felt that politeness wasn't necessary when having his own property returned to him, at any rate, he wasn't able to say anything else.

"..."

The girl for some reason rapidly blinked her eyes. As she looked at him, he could see the reflection of the beautiful moon. Then suddenly, as if retreating, she distanced herself from him.

"Goodbye," the girl said. "ummm.....Muoru?"

"Yeah..."

As the boy remained there dead still, Meria, without turning around, walked away.

Muoru stared on at the outline of her cloak, but after a while it faded into the darkness.....like a ghost or something.

Chapter 3

As the earthworm was pulled out of the ground, the unlucky creature was chopped in half at its stomach and died.

Although it probably was nowhere near the same level as an actual mole, even a battleground mole like Muoru was still accustomed to seeing worms every day. Of course as the worms suddenly appeared in the grave, he often accidentally bisected the creatures.

Yet despite the frequency of the event, today Muoru was captivated by what should have been just a common sight. He didn't know why he was so enthusiastically staring at the worm's dried up corpse, but in the end he dropped it to the ground.

Since today he was made to dig a new hole, perhaps he had been mistaken when he thought the grave he had partially dug yesterday would belong to him. Thankfully, this time it was just a hole for one normal sized human. However, as he dug deeper, he had to transport the dirt further and further away from the hole, to the point where the amount of time he was transporting dirt became much longer than the amount of time he was digging.

As for the size of this large hole, well... he had already noticed four worms that he had struck. Also, as if he were a fool, the depth he had to dig was demarcated with a long wooden ruler bound with a black piece of cloth. According to that guide, today's assignment was approximately 1 and ½ meters.

...but Muoru noticed that for that assignment he had dug about the length of his knee to his foot too deep. Incidentally, his lack of attention also led to him missing the ground repeatedly and striking his foot with the shovel.

“Stop daydreaming and focus,” the boy muttered out loud, purposefully hitting himself in the head.

No matter how hard he tried, he hadn't been able to fully concentrate all day. Or perhaps he should say he felt his thoughts weren't focused on his task. Even though his body was digging, it felt like his mind was still half asleep.

By the time he finished digging the hole the sun had already set. For Muoru, today's work took far too long. He wasn't particularly trying to push himself, especially since there was no one coming to praise him...to say nothing of how his treatment wasn't improving. On the other hand, he was still unwilling to cut corners, which he figured was probably not the best decision.

“Mr. Prisoner,”¹ Muoru heard Daribedor say just as he was starting to tidy his equipment. “It seems that you have just finished,” the old man continued, looking down at Muoru's completed hole.

“Yes, well...”

¹ 殿 dono is an honorific phrase used in formal correspondence or to people hierarchically beneath you. I believe in this case Daribedor is being extremely polite, which fits with his character so far.

That's right, it was a cinch! He forcibly contained the sarcastic quip in his throat. His feeling that it would be difficult to deal with this nose-less old man hadn't changed since their first meeting.

"I know you're probably tired, but now I would like you to help with the burial.....oh don't worry, just putting dirt on something is simple. As for the place, it's where you were digging up till yesterday, so you don't require directions right?"

"No, I got it," Muoru answered curtly, walking away with his shovel in hand.

"...Ah, right, right."

However, as he was leaving, Daribedor yelled for him to stop.

"As your predecessor living on this land, I have one word of caution. Even for prisoners, if you don't want to enter the holes you dig, it would be better to restrain yourself from prying excessively into matters."

"...?"

Whatever story he was mentioning, Muoru didn't understand. But before he could inquire about the meaning, the old man quickly went back towards the mansion.

As he walked, Muoru pondered what the man could have meant.

...Perhaps he was aware of how he had been ambling about yesterday, looking for a way to escape.

Then the encounter he had popped into his head.

Meria.

The girl who went by the name of Meria Mass Grave.

If he were to believe what she had said, then she was this land's grave keeper.

However, he didn't intuitively know specifically what tasks the position of "Grave Keeper" was responsible for. As for digging holes, he was already doing that, and the caretakers of this cemetery were the humans in the mansion, Daribedor and the others.

If he were to speculate, perhaps the grave keeper was charged with protecting the graveyard from robbers or people trying to steal the contents beneath the gravestones. But even if he could clearly say that was the case, he didn't see her being a fit for such a violent confrontation. Yet, although her words and speech were like something from another world², in Muoru's eyes she was quite normal and appeared to be nothing but a powerless girl...well, maybe it was hard to say that her appearance was simply normal.

² 浮世場慣れている部分 I think this should be translated as an Ivory Tower= a place secluded from the normal world, sometimes where scholars study and look down upon the world. So, I translated it simply as "another world".

At any rate, even tonight she should be conducting a search of the graveyard. Well, at least Muoru thought so. Every night, the girl seemed to be patrolling the area or something, which was also something he would have to factor into his calculations when he was escaping. And for that reason, Muoru proceeded to check whether Meria was there or not.

But as he advanced into the graveyard he could see people gathering in the distance. There were many men gathering in large numbers around the hole Muoru had been digging until yesterday.

They're probably having a burial.

...However, from the edge it didn't appear like any type of melancholic event. Although it was a burial, Muoru didn't feel a fragment of sadness that should have been natural for such an occasion. There wasn't even any wailing or weeping.

As he tried to approach closer, he could see that the people were wearing mourning clothes like black suits and coats, and...their faces were covered by white painted masks. The white masks were completely expressionless, except for the area of their eyes which could be seen through the masks' threadlike slits. They were very much like masks of death. And although the people's physical bodies were different, the masks were all the same.

What kind of event is that? They're probably not having a masquerade ball in a graveyard, thought Muoru. Of course, the mole boy had never attended such a party.



*...Maybe it's bad manners to show your face or something like that.*³

Although he was suspicious of their purpose, the boy bowed slightly towards the people who seemed to have noticed him and continued his approach...that was when he saw something strange.

In the middle of the giant grave that the girl had partway buried him within yesterday, now...the hole had been filled with the head of a giant beast.

When he first laid eyes on it, he didn't immediately exactly understand what he was looking at. That was understandable of course. Whatever it was, it was something outside of his everyday knowledge. In a rush he rubbed his eyelids, praying that what he saw had been a hallucination. He then opened his eyes one more time.

He could see his face reflected in the creature's large, gigantic eyes, like those from a human-sized head.

Now there was no doubt, the thing being buried in the grave was definitely the head of a gigantic monster not from this world. No, to be more precise, it was a gigantic, enormous monster whose body was entirely composed of its massive head. What was even harder to believe was that under the monster's densely furred jaw, where on a human there should have been a neck, there was something like a lizard's body growing out. Compared to the enormity of its head, its lizard body was laughably small, but even so it appeared to have strong muscles and vicious looking claws.

³ 素顔を見られちゃまずい連中だっていうことか？

The creature's body had been pierced all over with stake-like spears, and its jaws and sides were hedged and bound with barbed wire. The monster was completely unable to move. Yet still the sight of it filled Muoru with extraordinary fear. He didn't think THAT thing was really dead. Even now he got the feeling that if its restraints were broken then it would come bounding towards him.

“...”

A strange voice leaked out from his throat, but in the end Muoru regained his composure. Cold sweat was gushing out of his body, and the center of his face was hot, as if it were burning. His knees shook as he trembled. He didn't know what he was looking at, but he did understand that such an unbelievably dangerous creature like this was not something that humans normally encountered.

Seeking help, he looked over to the people at the perimeter...but the masked men standing to the side in a straight line seemed to be shrouded by a dark pane of glass, preventing Muoru from meeting any of them eye to eye. From that line one person stepped forward and approached the boy.

“Well, get the dirt,” ordered a muffled voice from behind the mask.

Not understanding what the man had meant, Muoru stared vacantly back. Then he recalled that he was gripping his shovel tightly in his left hand.

“Quickly!” the small-framed, masked man said in an irritated voice. “Hurry and bury it!”

Standing at the edge of the hole, the boy prisoner hesitated. He felt like he was standing at the entrance to hell.

“Quickly,” the masked man urged multiple times. “Quickly, quickly.”

Muoru thrust his shovel into the piles of dirt he had previously made and wildly scooped the dirt into the hole. He didn't see his hands or his body... the only thing in his sights was that damaged monster.

What... is this? What in the world... is this?

He hadn't heard of this kind of existence outside of fables. It had a distorted, twisted form that ignored the laws and standards of this world. For example, its jaw could probably eat a head like Muoru's in one bite. Just a tenth of its outward appearance was terribly fiendish, and certainly it would enjoy savoring the taste of humans.

Although he was just repeating the movement he should have been used to over and over, before he knew it he was out of breath. While the boy repeatedly took shallow, ragged breaths, something seemed to possess his hand to continue moving. There was no distinction between white and black in the monster's eyes, only the dull color of bile. But more noticeably was that around the large eyes, there were many small eyes close to it.

And now the boy felt those eyes were looking at him... all the way down to the last one.

Half in a daze, he continued his work. When he finished dumping the final scoop, the state of the ground looked almost no different from the surrounding area. No one would ever think that a monster like that was buried there.

Suddenly the graveyard he was in seemed to expand, stretching outwards.

No way... are creatures like that the only things buried here? Beneath these gravestones, are all the corpses from these monsters?

Although his fearful questions raced about his head, there didn't seem to be anyone who could answer them. From the group of masked men one moved towards the place where Muoru had buried the giant thing with a head twice as big as his. The man set down a cross-shaped gravestone that he was carrying on his shoulder, and at that moment Muoru felt a groan emit from the ground.

It didn't seem like the masked companions felt it was necessary to offer things like scriptures or offerings to the monster, and so they watched silently until the gravestone was finished. Then once it was done, they left.

In the distance Muoru could faintly hear the sound of exhaust being expelled from a large-sized vehicle somewhere in the direction of the graveyard entrance. But the sound quickly faded away, leaving Muoru all alone and staring at the ground in the same dazed state as when he was digging the hole.

Although he felt like he was in a nightmare, he couldn't seem to wake up no matter how much time passed.

Is this...real? That kind of thing?

Muoru needed someone to pat him on the shoulder and tell him that it was all just a joke. But even if he waited for the setting sun to drop beneath the canopy of trees, they would not appear.

His head was boiling, and flat-out couldn't think about anything. It was all too bizarre.

...If he tried to think calmly, that kind of monster probably didn't exist. Yeah, that's right. Perhaps I should try and dig. If he dug out the hole, certainly nothing would come out. It was all just a hallucination.

The boy picked up his shovel and thrust it into the ground. However, when he lifted up the first load of dirt...his hand stopped and his mood cooled. If he tried to put it into words, he would have said it was absurd to feel this way.

It doesn't matter what was buried here, once it gets too dark I won't be able to see what's down there anyway.

With the power draining from his hand, his grip loosened on the handle and the dirt spilled out to the ground.

....should I go back?

....to where?

He could hear the sound of his teeth grinding. Go back? He was a prisoner. This was where he was being imprisoned, a slave forced to labor. He was not able to leave from this place. And even if he did there was nowhere he could return to. He supposed the run-down, dilapidated stable with his bed was the graveyard's only bonus but other than that, where could he really go?

Why am I hesitating?

Well, move...

His right leg felt very heavy, but he made it move one step forward. But, his toes weren't facing the stable, they were pointing towards the entrance of the graveyard. And after forcing himself to take that first step, the next step was much easier.

He threw away his unpleasant shovel and with all his energy broke into a dash, as if he were running away from a destroyed military camp.

Although he didn't have any destination or plan in mind, and even though he could get injured, he forced all of those thoughts out of his head and with reckless abandon, ran, ran, and ran. The only thing he knew was that with each step he distanced himself bit by bit from that monster.

Running with all of his energy was not enjoyable. Yet, despite the deep darkness and the unreliable moonlight, he did feel as if the world were getting brighter, as if the sun were rising in front of him.

But soon he came to realize that his hope for escape was nothing but an illusion.

He hadn't advanced very far, in fact he hadn't even left the graveyard, when he felt some sort of wind approaching from behind. The only thing the boy imagined it could be was that gigantic headed monster, having succeeded in crawling out of its hole and now chasing after him.

The fear brought him to his senses and in response he pushed his body past its limits and bolted forward. He was completely like an herbivore fleeing from a carnivore, except he was already pathetically running out of breath. Whereas digging holes was the specialty of moles, his running stamina was woefully insufficient.

Then, feeling that the pursuit was about to end in one way or another, Muoru mustered up his courage and twisted around.

And without a doubt, a black creature was behind him. However, it wasn't even a tenth of the creature he had buried earlier.

Instead, it had rapidly moving limbs and a tail like a feather duster....then Muoru's right leg twisted so much that he felt it had caught on fire.

In a rush the creature blew past him and gravity yanked Muoru downward. He crumbled into a twist and tumbled forward.

"Ugh...damn dog!!"

Muoru extended his arm in an attempt to break the dog's neck, which currently had the boy's thigh in its mouth and was responsible for dragging him to the ground. However, the instant he touched the black fur his world was once again turned upside-down. When he was learning martial arts in the military, he had to learn how to properly receive a throw from an instructor without injuring himself. But, as the dog twisted him about, Muoru was unable to slap out⁴ and ended up violently kissing the earth. There was a strange, white pain when his nose hit the ground. Trying to endure the pain, he clenched his fists and thought, *I'm going to break this dog's skull with my leg.*

"Dephen, stop!"

The voice came from far away.

It was a firm and serious young woman's voice.

The dog's movement stopped. The power drained from its jaw and there was a wet, suction sound as its fangs separated from the boy's thigh. A red liquid pooled to the surface and after a few seconds, blood freely flowed out of the now severed vessel.

⁴ Slap-out, a technique where the receiver of a throw literally slaps the ground to lessen the force of the fall and have the hands absorb most of the impact.

Once he was confident the dog wouldn't come and attack him again, Muoru inspected his rather disgusting wound. His hemp pants had been ripped like paper and beneath he could see holes bored into his leg. Looking to the dog he saw fresh meat hanging from its jaw. And since his body was still surging with adrenaline, he didn't feel anything but a hot numbness; however he knew that such a dirty wound like this would definitely hurt later on.

"Damn it," the boy muttered.

"Muoru?"

The dark hooded girl walked to the side of the dog in order to confirm his identity. And although it wasn't his intention, once again they were in a position where she was looking down at him, just like last night.

"....does it hurt?"

The girl stared at the boy's blood-soaked right leg without a flinch.

Muoru silently looked back to his wound, wondering what she thought of him not answering. For a while the girl stood still at the boy's side and then finally, as if speaking to herself, she sighed.

"I don't like pain," she muttered.

With a jolt, Muoru jumped to his feet.

The girl's face had a slightly perplexed expression. More than his wound, she seemed to finally notice that Muoru's state was different from yesterday.

Muoru stared fiercely at the scowling girl. And in return the girl seemed restless, looking at him with hostility in her eyes as if he were a wounded beast ...*was it really hostility or was it fear?*

"You said that you were this place's grave keeper," Muoru said in a menacing tone. "If so, then don't you know what is buried under this ground?" As he shouted the words, he pointed to the ground.

The emotions had been boiling within him and the fear he felt towards that mysterious monster had arrested his thoughts. He could also feel the hot throb in his right leg, all of which were snatching away both his calm composure and cool sense of reason at the roots.

He understood that the rage towards her was just him venting and it was mostly unreasonable, but as usual the girl just looked at him with her eyes as clear as a lake. He had no idea whether or not she could show another expression.

However, that beauty and that transparency irritated him.

"Whatever that is, tell me! ...or are you friends with that thing?"

As if going to strike her, Muoru reached forward and grabbed her by the lapel....no, he tried to grab her lapel. But once the boy's big hands touched her, she immediately tumbled to the ground with a weak, "Ah".

There wasn't any resistance, just like thrusting a hand into water.

She had fallen down way too quickly, and since Muoru had mostly been standing on one leg to shield his injury, when she unexpectedly collapsed Muoru also lost his balance. His knees struck the ground, and then his posture pitched forward and placed him right on top of the girl's face-up body.

...It was as if he had been trying to knock down the girl.

Practically squashed, Muoru was finally sure that the girl had a body, weight, a human smell...and warm skin. The girl blinked like she didn't know what happened. And while Muoru lay on top of her, their bodies touching from about their elbows to their fingers, she stared into his eyes.

As for Muoru, he froze just like a child shocked from dropping a plate to the floor. He didn't plan to do this. It was an accident....but still he probably did hurt her. Thinking that, the boy finally returned to his senses.

"You smell like the sun..." the girl, completely covered by the boy's shoulder, whispered at his cheek.

Hurriedly, Muoru moved off her body.

"I'm...I'm...sorry. Did you hit your head or something?" Forgetting the inquisitive attitude he had showed her earlier, the words suddenly poured out of his mouth. His worked up emotions had disappeared and he seemed to have returned to his usual self.

Muoru thought about trying to help the girl up, but when he attempted to lift his own body he found that he couldn't. The wound he had forgotten about on his right leg had grown heavy and a severe pain shot through his body to the center of his head.

He managed to get his body into a squat, but he was unable to contain his groan of pain. For a time, he wasn't able to think straight and the pain seemed to black out his other senses. Until the pain died down, there was nothing he could do but wait still. He clasped his eyes shut, clenched his teeth and without moving, silently endured the pain.

After a while, he lifted up his now sweaty face, but Meria had already disappeared.

"Well, that's not surprising."

After what he did, it made sense that she would be cautious of him. He probably would have apologized had he not still been angry with that damn dog...but...despite obviously paying for his mistakes, for some reason he felt bitterness in his mouth. He regretted his actions and felt guilty about his indiscretion with Meria.

Trying to hold back the flow of his ruptured blood vessels, Muoru once again checked the condition of his thigh.

His right pant leg had been shredded into pieces and the fabric was soaking with blood. He could even see the horrifying teeth marks in his flesh. Yet fortunately, even though the bite marks went deep, it didn't seem like any of his primary arteries, bones, or nerves had been touched....However, he did feel uneasy. Seeing the dog's tough jaw, he knew that if it had really

mustered its strength it probably would have easily been able to feast on his thigh.

Just as he was thinking that, he turned his head and saw the black beast calmly sitting on its haunches, the scent of blood not arousing him in the slightest. It was entirely as if a few minutes ago they hadn't been fighting. The edge of the boy's mouth stretched into a thin smile.

Ha ha...so you took it easy on me.

Even if it had just been a joke when Daribedor claimed the dog was a "superior hound", Muoru had to admit the title was quite apt. The dog was really a nuisance, and it was about a hundred times more formidable than a human guard that would often doze off. And whether or not Muoru's actions had been a good rehearsal for his escape, the price for the practice made him grimace.

...However, if he left his wound alone like this he was sure it would fester. Even though he didn't wish for a clean bandage or a disinfectant, at the very least if he had some kind of alcohol, then he would be able to wash both his wound and the inside of his mouth. But it didn't seem likely that the stingy, old woman would hand over those kinds of things for a prisoner who had failed to escape.

And so his future looked miserable. Especially since he felt that even if he returned to the stable in his current state, much more than one night would pass if he fell asleep.⁵

⁵ Interesting phrase, but I believe Muoru believes he may die.

As he stood there for a while, considering giving up, suddenly across the graveyard he saw an orange light slowly swaying back and forth and drawing closer.

...If he were the person he was a few hours ago, then he might have made a big fuss over it being a disembodied soul or something.

But, he didn't get scared like he had yesterday. This was definitely a situation where being scared was beneficial, but where did his fear go?

...Well he was afraid of something much more than ghosts and whatnot...and they were buried beneath his feet.

He tried waiting a little longer and saw that the light was leaking out of a square hand lantern. *That's right. There was no way that warm colored light could be a disembodied spirit.*

As the lantern approached, it turned out it was being held in the left hand of a dark robed human. Surprisingly, it was Meria Mass Grave. The girl surely wasn't moving quickly, but the sight of her stride was enough to make him stop breathing. Still he was most likely worrying over nothing; his shortness of breath was probably just due to him being out of shape.

In Meria's opposite hand, she was holding a small wooden box.

After a short silence, the girl squatted right next to the boy, placed the lamp on the ground and held out the box. Even before he took it, Muoru could faintly smell the scent of disinfectant solution

Once in his hands Muoru realized that he felt anxious about applying the antiseptic solution to his wound.

Ever since she had arrived she had been silent and Muoru was unable to read what kind of emotion there was in her large eyes...Eyes that were staring directly at him. After handing over the medical supplies she didn't try to run or anything, nor was there any sign of fear on her face. And because she was squatting down, the bottom of her cloak curled a bit upwards, revealing her lower leg, with skin as smooth as porcelain.

"Is it okay if I use this?"

Although it would have been very interesting if the girl said no, Muoru still thought it was best to ask. The girl affirmed his question with a nod.

"Thanks for the help."

Within the box were a full array of products such as gauze, absorbent cotton, disinfectant, compresses, and things to warm the wound, all methodically supplied. And they were all new with no traces of used products in the box.

Muoru once again wiped the blood with the cloth of his right pant leg, and then he placed the cotton soaked with disinfectant on the wound. The alcohol stimulated his nerves with a stinging pain.

Meria was quiet, staring at him transfixed as if she were looking at a rare theatre performance or something.

For some reason he was unable to calm down and as a result the hand that was applying his bandage clumsily fumbled around. Plus, he didn't like the fact that she could hear his wild breathing.

After he managed to finish his treatment, he returned the wooden box to Meria and the girl rose to her feet.

Then quietly she said, "I am not The Dark."

"...the...da...?"

The boy tried to parrot back the unfamiliar phrase she had used, but then he recalled the words that had come from him the moment he had pushed the girl to the ground... *"Are you friend's with that thing?"*

The next moment, as if the fuel had been cut, there was a "whoosh" and the flame disappeared. Since his eyes had gotten used to the light, once he was again engulfed by the darkness, he suddenly lost sight of the girl.

Then, quicker than Muoru was able to say anything, from somewhere he heard her say, "Good bye."

That monotonous voice sounded terribly lonely. But was that impression just a trick of the mind...or was that just what he wanted to hear...?

Whichever happened to be true, the boy had been left all alone, and there was no one he could ask.

Chapter 4-1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After going through with the suicide bombing, he should have been prepared to die. And quite so, he should have assumed he would die if his plan had gone according to plan, but whether it was due to karma or just his fate, he narrowly escaped from death. But now, he was being cornered by the fear of his approaching death, moving with the swiftness of a clock's second hand.

Even so, on the morning of the third day, a strange thing happened. As Muoru woke up, Death Row prisoner 367 raised one hand and greeted him with a wide grin.

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

...the tip of his shovel struck something hard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So there was something.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You can call me Mole," Muoru answered.

"Good, so the Crow and the Mole then." Crow giggled delightfully. "Hey Mole-kun². I like you. So, we should be friends. How about it?"

"I refuse," Muoru immediately replied.

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

"...ummm."

² Kun is casual honorific usually used with boys.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Muoru answered, "Did the amount of food distributed increase?"

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

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

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

"It wasn't just *not bad*."

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

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

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

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

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

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

As if surrendering, Muoru shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“For your information, I’m not talking about those pill bugs³,” Crow said in a teasing voice.

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

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

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

Then Crow’s originally happy demeanor vanished.

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

“They are called various names, but each correctly identifies the same thing: mankind’s worst enemy. These things do not have what we call life. Just like the words suggest, they are undead. Even if you cut them, burn them or chop them into very small pieces, like a joke they will come back to life...

³ Also known as roly-polies in the US.

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

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

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

"...Wha...really?"

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

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

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

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

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

“Umm, what are you trying to say?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Muoru responded with silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crow smiled in satisfaction.

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

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

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

⁴ 鳥が三歩で息を忘れるのは本当か？

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the grave was not an inescapable cage.

That's right...

What should I do?

That was the only thing that was important.

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

What to do?

What should I do?

What do I want to do?

Chapter 4-2

“...Hand,” the girl commanded and in response the black dog placed its forearm, about the size of her own, onto her white palm.

Once again Muoru encountered Meria in the graveyard as the sun was setting...no, he didn't encounter her, he met up with her. This meeting was different than the first time he was looking up at her from the bottom of the hole, or the second time when he had been running away from the dog. This time it was intentional.

Even if everything Crow had said was true, his task of digging graves stayed the same. For Muoru, there was no major difference between digging graves for humans or monsters. And it looked like his work wouldn't change for the rest of his life. That...wasn't a joke.

I must escape.

But in his current state, he thought that dog at her side having the back of its ears scratched was much more of a menace than the monsters buried in the graves.

Looking at Dephen made his leg throb. Although thanks to Meria his wound hadn't festered, at the moment running was probably impossible. However, even if he was able to run again, last night's events would only repeat themselves.

Plus there was only one way out of the graveyard, so if he kept an eye on the path it would eventually lead to his escape. Now if he could make a wish, he'd ask for a map.

But then there was the collar.

Not the black dog's, but the one attached to his own neck. Even though recently he had gotten so used to it that he forgot all about it, somehow he would still need to get rid of it. Though only his prisoner number was inscribed, the collar seemed to scream, "I'm a prisoner!" as he walked. Of course the military police and local sheriffs would capture him out of a desire to accumulate good points with their superiors or peers. However, by the same token he couldn't carelessly go out in front of people, out of fear that they would report him.

Although it would have been great to have that collar removed from his neck, naturally the people who attached it seemed to have been well aware of that fact. As a result, the core of the leather collar used a unique fiber called "Witch's thread." For hundreds of years assassins, swindlers¹, and the like had habitually used this material for various purposes. It was thin, but extremely tough to the point where even high quality pliers or shears can't sever it.

¹ In hirigana it readsいかさま師 which is swindler/cheat, but the kanji reads魔法使い which is a witch

And to make matters worse, as they were telling Muoru that his prison sentence would be longer than five years, the collar was surgically connected to his right carotid artery. If any prisoner tried to force the collar off, their carotid artery would be severed by the “witch’s thread” as easily as cutting a boiled egg, ending their life. Since assassins originally had used the string as a garrote, its reliability was guaranteed.

Fortunately, for the most part Muoru wasn’t bothered by it anymore. But there were some prisoners who couldn’t endure the serious threat of death constantly attached to their blood vessels...they went mad and ended up ripping off their collars. One of the bald physicians had tried to intimidate him during the surgery by telling him that this insanity claimed the lives of five or six people a year.

But even if the collar was successfully removed, he would still feel isolated and helpless.

His mother, his father, and his brothers should be alive, but by no means did that mean he could return home. However, even though he’d be lying if he said he didn’t want to see them, it had already been five years since he left home and he wasn’t suffering from homesickness or anything like that.

Fundamentally, since he had been neglected when he was being raised, he couldn’t really count on them to help him because they had never expressed any kind of loving sentiment. And more than that, not only would his returning home now after such a long time inconvenience his family, but they probably thought it would be better if they never saw him again for the rest of their lives.

It was strange but he wasn't very sad about that. Probably, that was because there were a lot of more important things he should be thinking about. Or perhaps he might just be a cold person. However, the boy understood that there was a big difference between a third party getting involved in his situation or not.

And the first...no, the only handhold he seemed to have was Meria.

He was aware that she was mysterious. Even her personality was vague. But yesterday she had given him medicine, and even though he was a prisoner she wasn't avoiding his area of work. There was absolutely no way she could be a bad person.

Plus, if he got information from the girl known as the grave keeper and if she was able to cooperate with him for even a little bit, then the chances of him successfully escaping would probably increase.

Of course, he and the girl were just strangers in this place who only knew the other's face. So, if he suddenly tried to ask something like, "I want to escape, will you help me?" far from cooperation, she would most likely send him back to the internment camp. But the best method of approach was for him to somehow get her to drop her guard. If that happened, then in the end she would voluntarily help him.

This type of thing, ah, what was it called? It was a word he didn't normally use, but once it came to him he made a tight fist. *Right, ensnare.*

And now that his objective was decided, he felt it was much better to take action than just crouching there thinking about it. So Muoru returned to the

graveyard during the night and took a position where he could ambush Meria and startle her slightly, but...

“Muoru?”

Crouching on the ground, the light brow-haired girl called out the boy’s name while petting the dog at her side and staring uncertainly in his direction.

After hearing her call out his name, Muoru hesitated about what to say.

“Umm...that...ah, um, nothing,” the boy stammered and again a silence fell between the two.

It’s not nothing, Muoru!

Muoru beat himself up over not being able to think of any good words. His future freedom hung on whether he was able to skillfully grab her attention or if she denied him.

He thought about bringing up the pleasant conversations he had with his fellow soldiers surrounding the base campfire. But then he realized the gist of those jokes involved the veteran tank pilots boasting about how great their *rifles* were.

Crouched at a slight distance away from him, the girl mysteriously watched him struggle to speak, his face dumbfounded and his throat choking on his words.

Her eyes were as dark as the cold sea, and the blue was so deep a color that they seemed to suck him in.

Again there was silence. But there was nothing he could do; the girl in front of him simply left him at a loss for words.

Those eyes stared at him, waiting for him to speak, but his head was completely blank and no thoughts came to mind. She was totally different than both those military police officers who just did their service with sulking faces, and Crow who spoke far too casually, as if they were good friends.

Then suddenly he realized the one fundamental fault in his previous tactic.

How exactly was he supposed to go about ensnaring a girl?

Muoru Reed, private E-1, master of the battleground moles.

At any time, no matter the weather, the moles were ordered to dig holes nonstop. With just their durable clothes they were able to crawl along for more than five kilometers. And they were able to take apart and clean their military rifles in a blink of an eye.

But he had no idea how he was supposed to get his hooks into the girl in front of him...

“Meria...”

That was the extent of his words. His tendency to keep quiet couldn't handle anything more than that.

He gulped loudly. *How long was he going to be nervous?* He hadn't even thought that just swallowing spit would cause such a loud noise.

Once his thoughts were decided, immediately he said, "Would you like to be friends?" words he felt he had heard somewhere else.

The girl blinked a few times then asked, "What?" in a small confused voice.

I shouldn't have asked that.

He failed. He broached the topic completely wrong. In a rush his face and head turned red, just like the time he had chugged some strong alcohol in one gulp. The impulse to immediately grab a pistol, put it to his temple and blow out his foolish brains welled up inside him.

While the boy was thinking about fainting in agony for his ignorance, the nearby girl on the other hand looked like she hadn't even understood his words, blinking again and again. But then with the slowness of sand falling in an hourglass, her cheeks flushed a deep vermilion.

And after a little while she looked away from him and said, "...I can't."

It was the first time she had spoken without meeting his gaze. He could see that the earlobes protruding from the edge of her hood had turned a deep red.

It was strange, but even though she had clearly refused him, Muoru felt relieved.

Laughing at himself he asked, "Why?"

Meria stood with her profile facing him as she answered. "It's because I don't understand. When you say friend, what do you mean?"

"...Well that...um, even I can't give you an exact definition."

Muoru also looked away, thinking for a bit before explaining somewhat incoherently. "Friend, well, um...it's one step past acquaintance...what is it...Mutual? No more than that... in order to know each other better two people think about getting closer...kind of like that."

Basically everything he said to Meria was equivalent to the phrase, "Let me get closer to you."

Overflowing with embarrassment, Muoru was unable to continue his explanation any more than that.

Then as if tossing around an idea in her head, she hung her head in silence. While he waited, Muoru watched as the flickering light from the lantern she had placed on the ground made the shadow of her jawline waver erratically.

Before long the girl lifted her face, but it was not to take back her previous refusal.

“Where did you come from, Muoru?” she asked him.

After a moment’s hesitation he answered, “Rakasand’s detention camp.”

“Rakasand?”

“Ah, it’s in the East kingdom. You’ve never heard of it?”

Meria’s red face nodded deeply. “I have never left this place”.

Muoru was perplexed for a moment, so like peeking through a hole, he stared at her white neck. Of course, there was no evidence that she was a prisoner here so that made it a bit difficult to believe her. But at the same time it did make a lot of sense.

I get it. She truly has been separated from the world.

There was one thing he slightly believed from the story Crow had told him before. Before steam engines were invented, in other words until just 100 years ago, the best method of travel over land was horses. Other than that

the only thing you could do was walk. In that time, common citizens were not able to think about traveling. That's precisely why they not only didn't go on military campaigns, but for the most part they seemed to never leave their hometowns.

Even now, if a person lived in some kind of country or farm village, it probably wouldn't be that uncommon...

Looking up at the boy, the girl asked, "And so, tell me...what kind of place did you come from Muoru?"

After that for a while, the two of them talked with the lantern light flickering between them.

Meria listened to each of Muoru's words seriously, but asked a question if there was something that interested her. .And as she asked him questions, Muoru, even by his usual standards, answered quite clumsily.

Like the time he was around alcohol he was very talkative. He told her about the town where he was born, his family, what type of thing a tank was, the importance of strategically placed trenches, his favorite rations, how cabbages grow...

What am I talking about? I don't talk about these things to friends, nor anyone for that matter.

He was able to handle her questions, but just feeling Meria's focused gaze on him made him feel strangely embarrassed. However, at the same time it was a little creepy.

He used a branch to draw a map on the ground, and looking up to the sky he pretended to reminisce, but didn't meet the girl's eyes. That was when unexpectedly he understood how to squeeze out some words from her.

In addition to him already having a plan, Meria seemed to be a superb listener. Claiming to have never left this graveyard, she occasionally didn't understand the premise of some of his stories. Yet, even though the boy's explanation was difficult, Meria displayed a keen ability to surmise the heart of what he was trying to say.

...but it did take a little effort for her to understand the concept of "domesticated animals".

He told her the story of how the campaign cooks had prepared a whole piglet roast as a treat for him and his fellow soldiers during a victory celebration. Muoru recalled the fragrant scent of the animal fat and herbs and started to realize his failure to notice the drool accumulating in his mouth. But Meria was not interested in the food's flavor or how it was prepared; she instead expressed interest in what he talked about next.

"After that did that "pig" receive a proper burial?"

"No... I wonder if we used the bones to make dashi."

"Dashi?"

"Put the bones into a huge pot and stew them for a long time. Eventually it'll turn into something like a soup stock."

“You even eat the corpse? That’s...cruel,” she muttered sadly, looking dejected by the conversation.

But for domesticated animals, they don’t think it’s cruel, they don’t think much of anything.

With great effort Muoru tried to explain. Somehow he tried to persuade Meria that the animals existed to be raised as pets in order to be eaten (or in order to be killed), but the right words wouldn’t come out. For him it was common knowledge that seemed extremely natural, but he couldn’t think of any other words that would make her understand.

The conversation went off on a tangent before he knew it. Some of the girl’s crazy questions would cause the topic to once again fly off in the wrong direction, then due to his misunderstanding, the conversation would plunge vertically to the earth and suddenly they had returned to the topic they were discussing before.

And if he figured out how to say something even slightly eloquently, unexpectedly it would teleport away...and so on, until again the conversation became as derailed as a car which had long since been unable to move. So, in the end he couldn’t clear up her confusion.

However, thanks to the tangents, their conversation kept going, not ending abruptly. Muoru felt that was quite miraculous...

“...I think I basically understand,” she said as she stood up. The moon within the distant clouds had moved to the middle of the sky.

The girl's calm quiet profile strangely appeared to tense. It was completely as if she had just grasped some groundbreaking truth.

"The Dark, they don't exist in the world you come from, huh?" Once again the word that the girl had said yesterday came out from her lips.

He was having trouble guessing the meaning of that word.

"That's right," he muttered.

The boy looked up at the girl.

Within the dim moonlight, the girl's face, hidden within her hood and looking dejectedly down to the ground, was beautiful. It was something he didn't think was from this world.

Staring at her at that moment, Muoru was unable to stand, though the reason was not related to the injury in his leg.

And even though she never showed those emotions on her face, within the inner part of her calm eyes, he could clearly sense that her inward feelings were being shaken up.

—Just like the shock he had felt when he learned of that monster's existence.

–The idea that there was a world where that monster didn't exist was just as shocking to that girl who had lived here for so long.

The two were very similar, and that was exactly why they were absolutely different. Just like how the moon and the sun never crash into one another, their separation couldn't be helped.

The cold, summer, evening breeze blew above the countless gravestones lined up on the ground.

“It's about time for me to leave”, Muoru said, jerkily standing up.

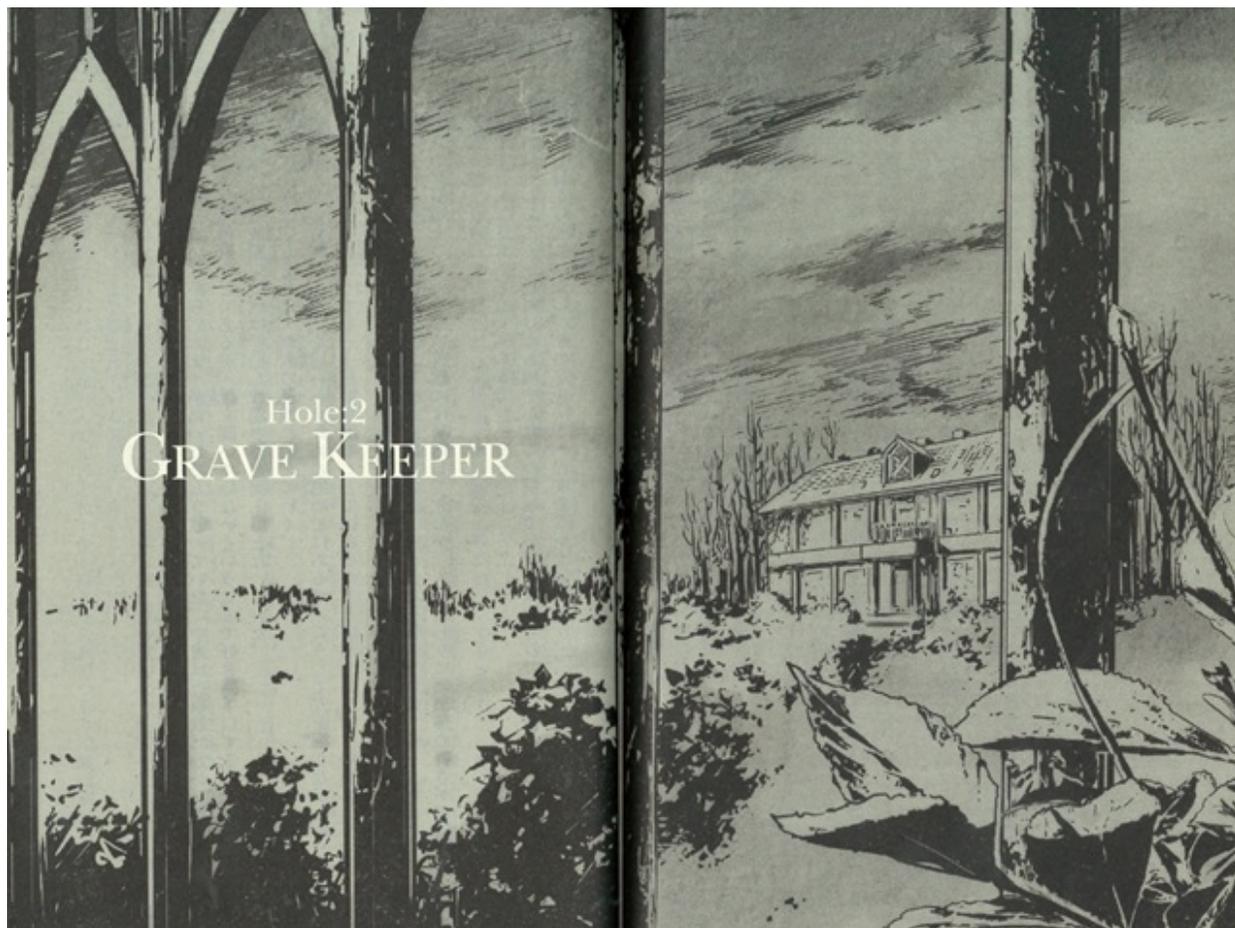
“Tomorrow I'll also be digging holes from the morning onward.”

He could see Meria nod.

“...see you,” the boy said once again expecting her to nod.

But there was no response.

Hole 2: Grave Keeper



Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At a glance it did not seem to be a necessity in this quiet graveyard. Plus if he wanted to protect himself from that monster, an iron helmet probably wouldn't be enough. But for some reason Muoru really liked that headgear. It brought back memories such as the first time him and his fellow young soldiers, all around the same age and rank, had touched a rifle and boasted about future heroism. Now looking back on that event with slightly disillusioned eyes, he remembered he'd worn a helmet that entire day and even as he slept.

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

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

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

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

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

"Far from it, actually you're increasingly working harder. That's good."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“...what do you mean?”

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

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

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

...that was exactly right.

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

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

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

“Yup, I think this is a human grave.”

“Get off. Right now.”

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

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

“Why is that?”

“Why is what?”

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

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

“Do you remember that those things are immortal?”

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

Gradually the boy noticed the uncomfortable feeling with those words.

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

Muoru was silent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crow nodded and gave a weak smile.

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

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

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

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

“Don’t say such scary things.”

“You’re not shaken are you?”

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

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

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

Exactly like this place...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah, that's right.”

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

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

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

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

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

"So don't think it's a lie that the world completely didn't know."

"Huh? It's true?"

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

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

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

Then Crow giggled.

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

“Qualities?”

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

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

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

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

“No, it’s nothing.”

“What...what are you saying?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-He was frightened of the night's darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good grief, who did Crow say was tough?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yo, what are you doing?”

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

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

...

...Silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...Was it like a part of something?

"What is...that?" Muoru asked, shuddering.

However, Meria with her head hung said in a small voice, "I can't..."



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

There were flies flying about the waterside.

It was something he hadn't noticed until then. That is, he felt it was the first time he'd seen insects since he came to the graveyard, which was a little surprising. Especially since only a bit before his tenure at the graveyard, there hadn't even been a day where he didn't see flies.

"Wherever lots of people gather, flies and merchants will come without fail." He had forgotten the person who'd said that, but certainly a large family in the middle of an expedition would have flies buzzing all over.

When it came to the military, the excrement from people and horses, the large amount of thrown away food or scraps, and the corpses created an environment that didn't lack in feed for the insects. Incidentally, other than digging trenches, digging out holes to be filled with that stuff was also one of the moles' responsibilities.

And refusing to succumb to the lively flies buzzing loudly about, the military camps were also visited by village merchants who had purchased permits from the upper ranks.

The man sent from the merchant's guild had a horse-cart fully-loaded with luxury indulgences, like tobacco, alcohol, chocolate bars, newspapers, playing cards, bulletproofing charms, sunglasses, and changes of undergarments, all of which the soldiers would distribute around wherever they made camp.

The days that were particularly hectic were immediately after paydays or on days when the merchants came with sexy photos of famous actresses. Both caused a flood of rough, uncultured guys to break out into scuffles, so the MPs¹ were dispatched to prevent the fist fights and force people into lines.

One thing that was interesting though was the merchandise. Though 100% of the clients were certainly men, the horse carts also had other products like perfumes and lipsticks, clearly female products no matter how you thought of it. Depending on the cart some even sold various clothing accessories.

Naturally, for a long time Muoru had wondered what kind of soldier would buy and use these products. But one day that mystery was solved when he stumbled upon one of his superiors after they'd gotten their hands on their pay. With a smile, his superior had bought some earrings. Then he walked right from the horse cart straight back to the tents set up at the rear of the camp.

Of course, buying a permit in order to sell merchandise during a military campaign was not just the right of the merchant's guild. There was also another tent called the "Heroine guild"², clearly made from a flowery patterned cloth different from the material the soldiers used.

He didn't know his superior's intentions, but Muoru assumed he'd gotten the merchandise as a way to woo a sweetheart or something.

¹ Military Police

² Brothel

Be that as it may, that merchant's horse cart was not coming to this graveyard and even if it did Muoru was broke. Plus, he couldn't imagine Meria getting excited about receiving things like lipstick or perfume as a present.

Well, that may just be a problem with my imagination.

The girl was different from the usual female. Even for Muoru, who had only used his military allowance to buy envelopes or a little bit of alcohol, understood that much.

And hearing about his troubles, Crow added, "The heart of a skeleton".

Just before making that statement, he'd been worrying excessively about his inability to close the distance between him and Meria, and the seemingly unoccupied Crow discussed the topic with him absent-mindedly.

The more he thought about it afterwards, the more he thought he'd made a mistake. The topic at hand was an ideal source of teasing for someone like Crow, who was the type of human who seemed to jump up with all their energy if they felt something seemed a bit fun.

"So that's it... that was what you refused to tell me earlier," Crow hummed out without even trying to hide their cruel-looking smile. "Good grief, I wish you had come to me about this earlier. This mole has become interested in the opposite sex!"

Well Crow seems to be in high spirits.

Crow's misunderstanding wasn't enough to warrant correction. He was getting close to Meria precisely because he needed a way to escape, nothing more and nothing less. However, if he tried to correct Crow's repeated misunderstanding, it was clear as day that he would become even more of a target for teasing. Though he was reluctant, there was nothing he could do but let the misunderstanding continue in this way.

"Well, other than presents, it is also fundamental to praise her good points. For example, if it was me who had their hair complimented, I'd be happy."

No one was asking about you.

Resisting the desire to retort that way, Muoru instead did a mental simulation. Meria appeared inside his mind and spoke. Fortunately he had an abundance of things he could compliment her on. And of course because it was his imagination, his words didn't get jumbled up. *Yo Meria, your hair is beautiful as ever. Thank you Muoru. It makes me so happy to hear that.*

"...No, that wouldn't happen. She definitely wouldn't be happy."

Crow directed a look full of sympathy at the boy frowning alone.

“Yeah, yeah, Meria-chan right? I can’t come here except during the day so I’ve never met her, but somehow she seems like a rather difficult person.”

...That really was true. However he just couldn’t say things like, “you’re being unreasonable, so stop it.” *Maybe he was in fact a good guy*, Muoru thought, somewhat ignorantly.

...somehow it seems like even I’m really giving up.

Then instead of comforting him, Crow said something strange. “Hmm, that makes sense. In other words, maybe the girl has the heart of a skeleton.”

“The heart of a skeleton?” Muoru asked back without thinking.

Crow’s eyes suddenly narrowed, and like a hypnotist they spoke in a way that was completely fascinating.

“Look, try to imagine the interior of a skeleton’s left breast. Flesh and organs intertwine. And behind the white ribs...”

Crow abruptly closed both of their hands together, as if right before giving a cheer.

“It’s hollow,” Crow continued.

Muoru exhaled, as if being lied to.

“What are you talking about?”

“The trouble with your comprehension is not just with your ears.”

Crow placed a hand to their chest and spoke in a mysteriously serious tone.

“I think even you have experienced this- Haven’t you ever felt your heart jump when hearing something wonderful or shocking? Right, if I were to guess, those important words reach far deeper than just your outer consciousness.

...But the girl you’re thinking about, she doesn’t seem to have that kind of feeling. No matter what you say to her, I think your words may never reach her heart, just like as if she didn’t have one.”

Hearing that, Muoru unconsciously bit his lip.

“Ah hey, hey, don’t feel down like that. This is nothing more than my own, arbitrary guess. It might simply be that she has bad social skills right?”

“...If that’s true, then great. But really, I get the feeling that it’s useless no matter what.”

Laughing at the boy's timidity, Crow said, "Well, let's confirm whether the girl has a heart or not."

"Huh?"

The girl is a human so physically she definitely has a heart. Meaning this "heart of a skeleton" should have just been an analogy. Yet Crow had just said they should confirm it...a statement that completely bewildered Muoru.

"Yes, so close your eyes," Crow said and Muoru unconsciously obeyed.

Then Crow, as if casting some kind of spell, said, "Look, try to imagine the girl's left breast. Under her clothes, her undergarments, her skin, her flesh, her bones, under all of that. Is there really a heart? Shouldn't we try and confirm? How you may ask? Well, it's simple. Touch her directly with the palm of your hand, and if you feel the beating it's okay. However, if your fingers were to undo her clothes and expose the swell of her chest you may love it..."

"..."

Crow grinned and pointed at Muoru's face.

“Oh, my Mole-kun. You’ve got a nosebleed. Perhaps you’re imagining something perverted.”³

“Fu...Fu... Fuck you idiot! I am not thinking that! I’ll bury you!” Muoru shouted as he covered up the area beneath his nose with his hand, which only made Crow laugh.

“Wow, how amusing. This is the first time you’ve responded to me like this, Mole-kun!”

...It was a complete and utter mistake to discuss this with Crow.

...Well, there was no one else who seemed to be able to discuss Meria with him.

In the end Muoru knew he couldn’t use a present, nor did he think she’d understand his compliments. That being the case, at least he should worry about doing something she wouldn’t hate. It was an incredibly timid way of thinking, but currently Muoru couldn’t make any other decision.

Next to the run down stable, where he slept, there was a reservoir that seemed to have originally been used to give water to the horses.

3 In Japan there is a pseudo belief that thinking lewd thoughts will cause a nosebleed (this is prevalent in anime). Technically the translation is “you have a lewd look on your face”, but that doesn’t mesh with the idea of a nosebleed, which is why Muoru covers the area under his nose in the next line.

Waking up earlier than usual, Muoru went there, filled an old cracked bucket with water and dumped it on his head. In the middle of the uncirculated reservoir water, mosquito larvae floated about. He didn't even notice them as he put the bucket back into the water and repeated the action.

The water was lukewarm, and it had the faint smell of mold, but it had no problem waking his absentminded face.

"Listen Mole-kun, even at the best of times you're covered with mud on a regular basis," Crow had said earlier while handing over a razor for him to shave with. "At least when you're not digging holes you can try to bear in mind good hygiene. No matter how much you don't display your true behavior, there won't be any girl who'll like you if you're unhygienic."

It was completely none of Crow's business. Then again, were there actually people who cared if moles were covered in dirt? To say nothing of girls....

Grumbling complaints about the insinuating Crow, Muoru nevertheless shaved his beard and thoroughly removed the filth from his body.

In the distance the east sky was starting to brighten, but the sun still hadn't shown its face. On the other side of the sky, the moon was just barely visible.

Although it was a good idea to put on clothes after drying up, he felt a little lost not having something to do.

He still had time before he had to start working. However, after making the effort to bathe, he couldn't bring himself to go back to bed. So, he willed his legs to take him towards the graveyard.

-How's Meria doing? Suddenly that question floated into his mind. He always went to bed before her so he didn't even know what time she left the graveyard. Was she still guarding the graveyard? Muoru walked with those thoughts on his mind. But then even if they did run into each other, he had no idea what they should talk about...

As he traveled from the graveyard to the stable, there was no way he could miss the side of the mansion on the way. Like usual he passed the side of the black iron fence, but this time he could hear water coming from about where the small garden was.

Ordinarily he would have been on the verge of thinking it was someone watering the plants, but then he recalled that the mansion's garden was flat and definitely had no shrubbery at all.

He was sure it was just the running water and pipes at the back of the residence. So, he light-heartedly went around to the back.

Meria was there.

She was kneeling at the center of the garden on a nook paved with concrete. To the side there was a thin pillar with a faucet attached to the tip. A somewhat blue hose was plugged into the faucet, and her white arm was holding that hose around the middle and hoisting it over her head. From the tip of that hose water poured out and washed over her whole body. And her appearance from behind...was just like when she was born.

Just before dawn, in a world still showing signs of darkness, the girl was washing her body.

...Isn't this strange? The boy was confused.

Her hair that was always covered by her hood went down to just above her waist. And that dripping wet light brown hair clung to her white skin.

Skin that was completely bare, from her hair all the way down to her feet.



...Strange, it was a contradiction...Why despite that slender figure...why with that seemingly soft skin...?

“Muoru...?”

Whether or not she'd felt his gaze, he didn't know, but in that moment Meria turned to look at him over her shoulder. The completely defenseless girl's line of sight and the rigidly still boy's gaze mingled across the iron fence.

Then the girl tossed away the hose and covered her small chest. The girl lowered her head, and water dripped down from her narrow chin, hair, the tip of her elbow, and other places.

“I'm..I'm sor...”

The next moment, a terrible growl erupted from the thicket and the dog jumped out. It had jumped out with enough force to rip him to shreds. So without clearly saying his apology, the boy ran away.

I never figured I'd see Meria bathing there, Muoru thought as he desperately moved his legs.

Perhaps, I'm just dreaming, just like every night...?

He wasn't sure about that, but there was one thing he knew wasn't a mistake. Though he hadn't intended to see her there, now that he had, she would probably hate him even more.

Chapter 3

The graveyard prisoner dug holes.

That was his job—his duty.

The size of the holes were designated and marked by four cuts in the ground. But for some reason he could only find one of the markers today.

Maybe it was some kind of mistake, he thought, as he looked around the ground at his feet. Yet he still couldn't even find another marker.

Being at the edge of the mass graveyard, the gravestones surrounding him weren't densely arranged. It was much different than the uniformity of a city's housing complex; here the graves were sporadically placed.

What does it mean?

Rapping on the shovel on his shoulder, the boy glared at the ridiculous single marker. Did Daribedor make a mistake? He placed his foot atop the meaningless rivet and looked up...

“...”

At that moment he finally noticed the second rivet cut into the ground, but it was extremely far from where he was standing. Thinking it was preposterous he went to check. Strangely, it was placed at the distance where the third or fourth rivet was usually placed. And if the marker really wasn't a mistake, then this hole was double the size of the first hole he'd made to bury that giant headed monster.

Muoru's spirits fell. *How much effort is it going to take for me to finish this one?*

Then he grew terrified. *...how big is this one that it needs to be buried in a hole this big?*

Not only did he realize the time and effort it would require, he also understood the answer to his second question. It was only natural, after all. Even though the monster would have to be smaller than the hole he was going to make, the hole was still large enough to hold a pile of three tanks or more.

"The monsters have infinite variations of size, but what they share in common is they are stronger the bigger they are." He remembered Crow's words from before as he tried to get to work. Was Crow and the people they were with planning to fight with the thing that was supposed to go in the grave he was digging? If so they would have to pray for safety since by Crow's own admission the monsters were undying.

Sighing, Muoru stabbed his shovel into the ground and lifted out his first scoop of dirt. With that same action he scooped again, then another scoop, another scoop, another scoop, scoop, scoop, scoop...

...and despite how many times he'd repeated that action, by the time the day grew dark the hole wasn't even halfway finished.

Even though he'd gotten used to the activity, as one would expect he was tired. After all the effort he made that morning to wash away the dirt at the reservoir, he'd completely returned to the filthy state he'd been in before. Even though he was a prisoner, now he felt like his condition was some kind of punishment. But if that were the case, what exactly was the punishment for?

That was a false charge. I didn't really do anything bad. He touched his chest with his hand and recalled the sight he'd witnessed that morning.

At the same time, he felt a part of himself unintentionally harden.

Although it had been an accident, peeking at Meria as she bathed was certainly criminal.

He'd wondered all day what was the best way to speak with her if they met. Without a doubt, the first thing out of his mouth should be an apology. What he had done was shameful; there were simply no other words to describe it.

With that resolve, he went back to the reservoir and washed up. However, it seemed like the dirt had already fully permeated into his kneecaps and the tips of his fingers, and so no matter how much water he poured on his body, he could never get rid of it. But in order to cool his head, he fervently dumped the water on his head over and over again like some kind of religious ascetic.

Soon after, he headed off towards the graveyard, and in the distance he could see the familiar orange lamplight floating in the dark of the night. It approached him with the same languid speed it always had.

Good, maybe she's not that mad.

If she was angry she wouldn't try to meet him. That simple line of logic reassured him.

"Meri..." but as he tried to speak she halted, still quite far away. Still feeling guilty, Muoru made no move to draw closer.

"..."

"..."

An uncomfortable silence fell upon them. *It's no good if I can't properly apologize.* Muoru tried to open his mouth but before he could say anything Meria spoke.

"For a little while, don't come out at night."

The inside of his nose popped in pain and Muoru felt like kicking himself for feeling relieved.

“I’m sorry. I guess you’re mad after all,” he said hanging his head in shame.

Meria, whose face was wrapped by her hood, shook her head. “I’m not mad.”

The girl’s behavior seemed to be saying, “You don’t need to apologize,” to the boy.

“I’m really sorry, it wasn’t on purpose! Occasionally I wake up early and go for a walk. I heard some water and it caught my interest then...No really, I didn’t intend to peek at you, yet still I saw you there...”

Muoru’s face was turning red. Halfway through his explanation his words had devolved into rambling to the point where he didn’t even know what he was trying to say. It was like he had the demeanor of an elementary school child.

“...please, for heaven’s sake...” Muoru said, but his desperate words didn’t seem to reach the girl.

“I’m not mad or anything, so please. For a while, just stay in the stable at night. By no means go outside. Please, I’m begging you....”

She grabbed the edge of his cloak so tightly that the color drained from his fingers. And in that grip she did nothing but plead for him to remain inside, over and over again.

So not having a choice, for the days after that Muoru would return to digging the giant hole during the day. Then at night he would spend his time in the stable, his mind worrying endlessly as he stared at the crumbling tattered wall to pass the time.

He had no idea how long the girl had meant by “for a while” but she had only said not to go out, that didn’t mean she had broken off relations with him.

If what he thought was true then just as the words “for a while” implied, soon the suspense and anticipation would die down.

...but for two or three days nothing could be done about his body itching with impatience. *Could it really not have been helped? It was unintentional....* That excuse had once again begun to make its presence felt inside his mind. And the only way to quiet those thoughts was to hear directly from Meria. That’s right, even though he didn’t feel like he could properly say what he wanted to her, there was nothing else he could do.

Then one night he unexpectedly heard the dog’s howls coming from the direction of the graveyard.

Unable to relax for some reason, Muoru tried leaving the stable.

The completely cloudless, starry sky looked just like usual; as if there had been no changes in the two days he’d stayed in at night.

But...why? Why is my skin prickly with goosebumps?

The boy tried gently rubbing his arms. He'd gotten used to the graveyard at night, so it wasn't that his day-dreaming was causing both his fear and the goosebumps. *...it is probably just my imagination.*

But he couldn't trust his feelings about the current atmosphere if his mind was deceived by misapprehension.

Then something happened. If an earthquake, as the name implies, is a phenomenon where the ground shakes, Muoru thought the area seemed to be trembling slightly. He would describe the feeling as being the same as watching a giant tsunami rise over the horizon. Within that wave were a swarm of possibly countless enemy soldiers, now vigorously rushing towards him, preparing to attack.

Maybe he was feeling the beginning of a premonition or something. *No.* Whatever the feeling was foretelling, it was going to happen soon.

With those feelings he returned to the stable, but he didn't think it was possible to wait completely still until the morning-

Maybe I should get ready to run or something.

Right after thinking that, Muoru ran out of the stable and rushed towards the mansion's gate. At a glance he thought the night graveyard was nothing more than ordinary. On the sloping, wide ground the ground was sprinkled not with humans, but gravestones. The wind made the forest trees howl, and the entire area was shrouded in darkness.

Muoru ran towards the large tree growing in the direct center of the graveyard. He wasn't very skilled at climbing trees, but if he were able to climb it then he'd probably be able to look out over the entire graveyard.

But when he finally arrived at the root of the tree out of breath....he saw *it*.

It was his second experience where his brain was unable to grasp what he was seeing.

Muoru couldn't quite single out the previous memory as he stood confronted with a creature that wasn't something you saw in the everyday world. The first experience had been quite recent. It was when that giant-headed monster was bound hand and foot and buried.

Now.

In front of his eyes now was an extremely gigantic sack of flesh.

If he forced his eyes to look up he'd see that the distorted, spherical, soft mass of folded over flesh resembled the head of an octopus...but octopuses didn't come this far inland, they should have eyes, and they definitely weren't bigger than a two story building.

It was a monster.

Or as Crow said, a devil. Or as the gravekeeper girl said, The Dark. And this one was even bigger than its companion, the other giant-headed monster he'd buried.

But this was different from that time. This time, it wasn't bound or anything like that. This one had moved. The giant fleshy octopus-like head was not supported by eight legs with suction cups...no its legs were harder, just like a beetle's, and they only helped make the monster look bigger.

The tip of each leg abnormally tapered to a sharp point and looked like a claw, depending on how you looked at it. Of course it wasn't natural for it to have things like a rough and bony claw anywhere on its body. And as for the number, countless legs of varying lengths extended out from the bottom of the sack of flesh, all wriggling restlessly like the legs of a centipede.

It was extremely bizarre and creepy and he definitely got the feeling it wasn't a creature of the natural world.

That creature was facing ahead, where...Meria was.

Muoru forgot to breathe.

She wasn't running or trying to escape. Rather, she and the monster were facing each other.

Even with the hooded cloak wrapped about her, she still appeared to have a slender body, which in front of that monstrous giant beast looked terribly tiny. And even from his far distance, Muoru thought he could see the same quiet expression she always had on her face.

The monster brandished one of its legs like a sickle.

Run, he tried to say, but his voice wouldn't come out.

But whether he shouted or not made no difference. It was already too late.

The leg wagged side to side like a reptile's tongue, the end equipped with its sharp claw.

Then... the girl's left hand twirled over and over in the air like the tip of a broken sword, before hitting the earth and rolling on the ground.

There was a feeble, tiny scream.

And though it wasn't loud, *it couldn't possibly be that loud*; the sound of her voice still pierced Muoru's eardrums.

In the next moment four of the creature's tentacle-like legs, extended and pierced Meria's body. Her screams soon disappeared. There was a claw stabbed through her body, right below the throat she needed to scream. The other scythe-like claws were stabbing through her right arm, her left thigh, and through her navel...each of the four jutting out from her body from their tips to their centers.

Then the monster used those four extended legs to lift her up into the air. Blood rushed out of the girl's mouth, and one moment later, as if her body couldn't hold it in, a large amount of the red liquid spilled out from the lower half of her body.

The monster shook the helpless girl in the air and hurled her body to the ground. As it threw her body, its claw that was pierced through her navel split her open to her inseam, allowing her abdomen and entrails to spill out from her body like a long tail. Then she hit the ground, her blood splattering the surroundings as if the monster had just crushed a fruit full of juice. And on the earth her intestines painted an arc on the ground.

Meria...

She was still alive.

She was sobbing.

No matter how muscular or strong a man was, they'd definitely cry after receiving terrible injuries like those. Of course, it wouldn't be strange for them to die before crying, since they were in other words, fatal wounds.

...but despite all that, the girl stood.

At first she was unsteady, resting her hands on her knees. But then she straightened up and her legs stood firm.

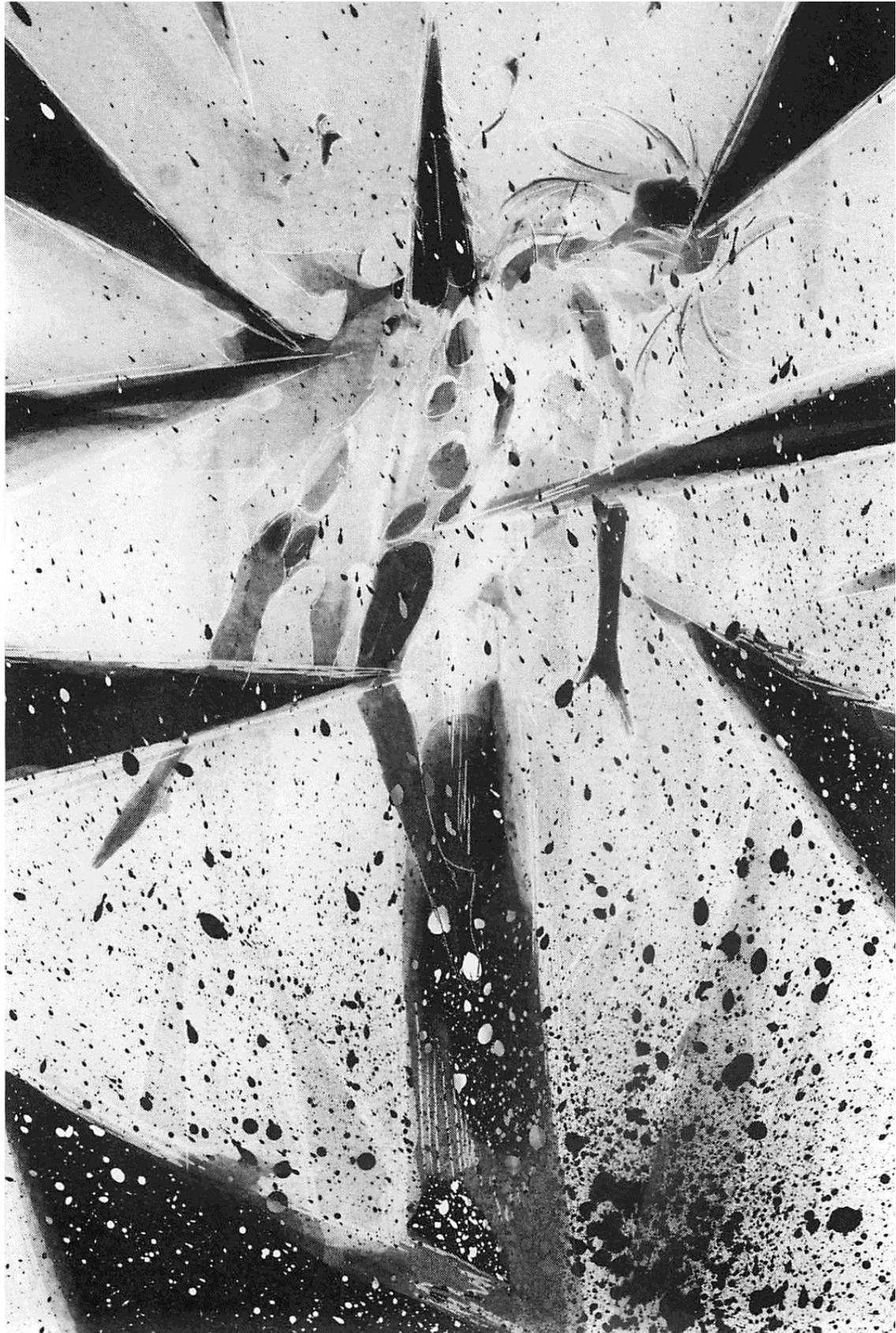
Then the boy saw something that was more unbelievable than even the monster.

The guts that had spilled out of her torn abdomen wriggled like worms and crawled back inside her body. Then after everything that should have been hanging outside her body was once again inside her body, the grievous wound splitting her from her inseam to her back automatically sealed itself up, stopping the bleeding.

That wasn't all; her left hand that had been ripped off at the beginning of the assault rolled across to her body as if pulled by a magnet. It then crawled up her leg, stomach, chest, and back, before joining with her wrist, restoring her to two complete arms. It was as if she was a doll and her hand and body were being stitched back together by some invisible tailor.

Witnessing that unbelievable spectacle made Muoru recall the words Crow had said to him once. *"These things do not have what we call life. Just like the words suggest, they are undead. Even if you cut them, burn them or chop them into very small pieces, like a joke they will come back to life..."*

Meria was pierced multiple times, and her body was split apart. And each time she was injured she would mutter a scream as if giving up...but then her ripped arms and legs, her scooped out organs, her split apart torso, and her smashed-in head, would all return back to how they were before. No matter what kind of injury she received, it couldn't kill her. However, like someone who took pleasure in grisly homicide, that giant monster wielded its edged tentacles and continued its slaughter on Meria for what seemed like forever.



Underneath the shining moon and the stars, on a ground that seemed to stretch on forever, the unnatural monster continued to ravage Meria's body. It seemed like the cruelty would never end, but as time went on the monster's energy seemed to be gradually weakening...

The reason was simple.

Its moving legs were decreasing.

Underneath the giant's mass there still seemed to be countless sharp legs sprouting out, but now more than half were not moving. One by one the legs that should have been wriggling restlessly, suddenly stopped and never moved again.

But they weren't stopping randomly. In fact, looking closer it seemed like the legs that stopped moving were always the ones that touched Meria.

He had no idea why, but as for the facts: the girl approached and whenever the monster's legs wounded, cut, or pierced her they would eventually stop moving and hang loosely as if the nerves inside had been severed. Gradually the monster's energy depleted to the point where the remaining legs could not support its mass. And when the mass of flesh crumbled to the ground, it caused a tremor that rocked the earth.

If this were what was normally considered a fight, then it would only be natural for there to be an overwhelming difference in strength between the monster and the girl. If the monster had been confronting Muoru, even if they fought a million times, he'd probably die each time. And truthfully there really was a gigantic difference in strength between the girl and the monster.

Still, the hideous, fiendish monster was unable to kill the girl who was as thin as a plant stem; in fact its body was weakening bit by bit. It was like a rock, weathered down through long months and cycles of endless rain.

Of course, since it was a giant, the speed in which it weakened was terribly slow.

Until finally the last leg stopped moving.

The chunk of folded flesh, larger than any kind of statue, now couldn't even struggle with something like an ant. As the extremely violent creature stopped moving, though it was strange to say, it seemed to look despondent and discouraged, like a patron at a festival that had just closed.

Covered in blood despite not having a wound on her body, Meria slowly, with the same slowness she always showed, stepped up to the monster and touched its flesh with her right hand.

The atmosphere vibrated without a sound. It wasn't a change he could see with his eyes, but, it did become quiet. So quiet, it was like the world had stopped.

The creature didn't move an inch. Meria crouched to the side of the creature, limp with fatigue. She took ragged, deep breaths over and over again. And even though she was still alive after being stabbed, pierced, and ripped apart her pale profile now looked like a corpse.

"...Muo...ru?" the girl looked up with a face dripping with tears.

The boy didn't try to hide the sound of his footsteps.

Looking at him, Meria stopped crying. No, it was probably better to say she held them back.

He didn't know why she did that. Especially since it would have been much easier to understand her if she'd sobbed on him like a child.

Should I approach or should I leave?

...The only thing he could think of was getting closer to her.

But before the reason he hadn't shouted was self-defense.

If he'd shouted, "run" that monster would probably have turned its weapons on him and killed him the moment after it killed the girl. That's why he couldn't shout – why he didn't shout. And really, there was nothing wrong with that hypothesis; it just didn't include the possibility that Meria would still be alive.

He painfully regretted what he did, but it was difficult to excuse himself for running away just to save his own skin. But despite what others may think, he really didn't intend to run.

...but, "Meria." There was no energy in his voice.

The girl's expression as she held back the tears was harder than any kind of mask, and Muoru was unsure whether or not she could take it off.

-Are you okay?

- Are you hurt?

-Tell me, what in the world are you?

Those questions flitted through his head but if he asked them he didn't think they would ever get through to Meria.

After defeating that monster, trembling with pain, being scared, being wounded, and now covered with blood and hanging her head in shame, what could he possibly say that would be good...? He didn't care who it was, he just wanted someone to tell him.

"...Want to be my friend?"

“...What?”

The boy forcefully grabbed Meria’s right hand.

The right hand that had finished off the monster.

“Even though you rejected me the other day, I’ll let that slide,” Muoru said, pretending to reminisce as he smiled awkwardly. Just like when he’d asked her before, Meria blinked as if it was amusing or something.

“It’s not really fair to say no a second time after you’ve rejected someone once already.”

Like a magician who can captivate the hearts of children by producing a flag from their palm, Muoru spoke with the same smooth, talkative manner he usually used. But more importantly, Muoru was bestowed with composure, and if he continued with that tone and look, even his kindness would ooze out of his demeanor.

“...Well, am I right?”

There was no change in Meria’s expression. She didn’t say anything, nor did she even shake her head from side to side. She just stared at the ground.

Looking at her was like watching the liquid start to spill over the edge of a cup filled to the brim. And then from her wet eyes a single tear ran down her cheek.

“Are you unable to stand?”

The girl nodded, a tear falling down her face with the movement.

Muoru craned his neck to the side and averted his eyes from Meria’s body as much as possible. He then let go of her hand and swept his strong arms under her legs. He placed his right arm behind her knees and his left under her back as he scooped her up into the air.

“...Wha, what are you doing?” the girl cried out flustered.

“You probably need to wash up. And after that change clothes, and stuff like that,” Muoru just replied in a direct and flat tone.

Even Muoru knew what carrying her body must have looked like, but he didn’t think this was the time to worry about it.

Well...she probably wasn’t a princess or something.

Having said that, Meria blushed, as if she finally noticed her appearance.

Even though there were no wounds on her body, her clothes were in tatters. The black coat she always wore had been ripped to shreds and only bits of it clung to her body like the fragments of a shell on a chick that just hatched; a state that could be called “barely clothed”.

The condition of her clothing led to the mystery of what was inside her thick, dark shade of a robe finally getting solved. It looked like she was wearing nothing but a thin dress as her undergarment. Nevertheless, the girl in his arms had very little fabric left to cover her important parts and what did remain was stretched tightly, exposing her relatively longish legs more than halfway up her thighs. All of which made it difficult for Muoru to know where to cast his eyes.

If only there weren't blood stains running down her skin...

Being able to think those foolish thoughts was probably a sign that he'd finally calmed down from before.

A few minutes after he started to walk, Meria asked with a timid voice, “I'm not heavy?”

Although her voice seemed to be cracking, it wasn't frail. Her life didn't seem to be in danger, but she probably wasn't completely safe. Her cheeks looked like they were suffering from a rush of blood to the head caused by fever, her breathing was labored, and he could feel her heart was beating terribly fast through his hands on her back.

...the girl was certainly not usual. However he didn't want to be a hindrance and pry too deeply. So as best as he could, Muoru tried to put her at ease.

“Even if you were three times heavier, I'd still be okay”

Her body was uncomfortably slender, to say nothing of its lack of weight. *Or maybe I have more energy in my arms because I'm nervous.*

“...”

Meria looked away and sighed quietly.

Even though she was covered in blood, her profile was still beautiful. Her expression appeared meek, but he could sense she was certainly thinking desperately about something.

As he walked, all of his concentration was focused on Meria, as if his field of vision were sown to her. He looked at her long eyelashes, her eyelids, her white and scarlet colored cheeks, and her pink lips. And if he were to bend down just a little, he'd be close enough to touch them.

Instead he listened.

Those lips were muttering something incoherently, barely making a sound.

And as a deep emotion spread across her face..."Maria," the girl called out someone's name.

Those words weren't meant for him, he had no doubts about that. And not only did Muoru have no idea what the name was, but Meria's mind seemed to be somewhere else.

The name had sounded similar to other female names, a connection he pondered in his mind over and over....

But, then she fell silent.

All the power had left the girl's body, as if she'd fallen asleep. For a moment he thought his arms could feel a change in her body, but that thought quickly blew off into the horizon.

As she wasn't taxing his muscles, he realized he should walk carefully so he didn't shake that much.

As a result, walking to the mansion's gate must have taken several minutes.

But for Muoru, he felt the time he spent carrying the girl across the long distance to the gate passed in an instant.

Then he sat Meria on the ground, her body still paralyzed from exhaustion. The first time he was dragged here was when the military police had picked up the receiver, as if it was some great accomplishment. He had wanted to look, but he couldn't, so now he didn't remember how to use it.

Two or three times he heard a tuning sound like on a radio come from the receiver. *It probably only worked by having the other side call...however, there was no one who came to answer.*

"Is right here okay?"

Meria took out a key and pointed towards the side entrance.

"But..." Muoru said perplexed.

"- Mr. Prisoner, you found her." A voice said from behind Muoru.

Daribedor looked up at the boy without trying to hide his unusual and unpleasant expression.

"Since right now there is a demon in the graveyard waiting to be buried, I would like you to please attend to your vocation for me," the old man said.

"But she's injured..."

“Injured?” The man interrupted, then like an imp bent backwards and released a roar of laughter into the air. “Where?”

Meria, crouching with her head hung, didn’t have a single injury on her body after all.

“She...”

“It’s okay if you don’t know.” The noseless old man grabbed the girl’s arm and though there was no difference in their sizes, he dragged her beyond the iron gate. Muoru tried to follow, but the black dog came out and intercepted him.

In the end, he couldn’t even see Meria as she was drawn into the house.

Then, he remembered the “vocation” that the old man had mentioned.

—Burying that monster. Whether he agreed or not, that was the prisoner’s job.

Chapter 4

Muoru was in the middle of the dark.

He imagined he was staring at the wooden wall running with rain water. Around him, he could clearly hear the sound of water dripping as if there was a hole in the ceiling. Lying down and grabbing one of his knees, Muoru's thoughts meandered.

...how long has it been since there was livestock in this stable?

Judging by the condition of the walls that had been exposed to the wind and rain, and the damaged interior, it would seem like it'd been a long time since the structure had undergone any maintenance.

But despite the condition of the stable, the mansion was likely a new building. Even though he'd heard the graveyard was on an old plot of land, the mansion was either a new building or it had been totally reconstructed from scratch.

However, back in the stable the ceiling and the support pillars were rotting and falling apart, to the point where they were almost unusable. Yet, if he were to guess from the still usable floor space, he'd say the barn was probably large enough to house ten riding horses.

It may have been empty now, but that didn't mean the stable was built for no purpose. Muoru had no idea how long ago it was, but at one point there were definitely horses in the stable.

–Since ancient times humans and horses had lived together.

It was as if the beautiful herbivores had been mistakenly made by the gods solely for the purpose of being ridden by humans. In the past they excelled as a method of transportation, they helped with tilling the fields, and during wars they rode with their owners into the battlefield. The unit of measurement “horsepower” remained from that era and it was still widely used and recognized.

However, nowadays the value of horses has continued to decrease.

From the advances in science and the subsequent invention of new technology, horses seemed to have been replaced by vehicles and railways for all the industry duties they had once been considered useful for. Since humans were always looking for ways to increase efficiency, horses, which have been mankind’s companions since before recorded history, have been disappearing from the limelight.

There was even a car at this graveyard mansion. Muoru had seen the blackened and seemingly high class vehicle zoom about more than once.

Certainly the removal of the livestock and domesticated animals from the stable followed the arrival of that car. And now that stable served as the residence of the gravedigger instead.

Since the first day he'd stayed and slept there, Muoru had noticed many remnants from the previous gravediggers. There was a long black strand of hair whose owner's sex he couldn't determine, some strands of brown frizzy hair, an impression in the straw he slept in, and various, dirty scraps of clothing. They were all scattered about the stable inconspicuously and at the moment Muoru could not see them.

He crouched motionlessly in the dark stable, devoid of even a trace of a light source. And since he couldn't see, he became acutely aware of the nature surrounding the building. If he tried to walk out into the graveyard it would be just like when he had been blindfolded in the past.

In the middle of that darkness he held out his hand in front of his face. Though he couldn't see, by touching something with his fingers he could adequately imagine whatever was in front of him.

...Already two days had passed and Muoru could still clearly remember the feeling of touching that monster.

#

Graced with an electric lantern lent to him by the old woman, Muoru took his shovel and returned to the graveyard.

Inside the lantern, which resembled an insect cage, was a battery and lighting equipment composed of a metallic alloy of copper and zinc. And from the mortar sealed front of the box, the lantern gave off artificial white light at the flick of a switch. It didn't need coals or oil to light up the surroundings, making it a valuable and convenient tool.

If this had been under normal circumstances, Muoru would be delighted to get his hands on such an apparatus.

But now...

He was in the graveyard in the middle of the night. Beneath him was the trackless path he and Meria had returned to the mansion on a few days ago. This time though he walked alone, carrying his shovel as usual and the lantern. The trees were rustling around him as he neared the rows of graves, all beneath a half moon that was wrapped in sparse clouds.

The wind blowing against his skin was only lukewarm, but there were still goosebumps on his arms. Sweat dripped down the entire length of his back, and he found it difficult to breathe.

Before he had grabbed Meria's blood-covered hand and they had talked for a little while...just for a little bit. But even then he felt like he had encroached upon something that she was trying to hide. When she was leaning against him, it was the first time Muoru had ever seen her nervous.

But now...

His fickle feelings once again completely froze him in place.

If it were just a bad dream or something, then it'd be okay... He thought, trying to console himself...but unfortunately there was no longer a thread of a chance for him to escape.

Since that monster was so terribly big it had already entered his field of vision. Instinctively he wanted to look away.

Yet looking away made no difference. Whether he chose to look or not, *it* was still there.

A short, yet massive shadow was cast on the slightly sloping graveyard ground. And it didn't move an inch. The monster casting the shadow was similar to the images in picture books, something like a giant ocean monster...though now as a corpse it seemed like the spectacle of the creature had come to an end.

Muoru's legs stopped about fifty paces away from the monster.

What am I doing? I shouldn't have to approach that. I should be running away from it.

"Mankind's natural enemy." The meaning of the phrase was becoming more and more clear to him.

Since before written history, over many thousands of years, mankind had lived in fear of those things, of them. It was true that for several hundred years humans had prospered a bit and were no longer consciously aware of those monsters, but deep down in their bones the memory and the fear of them persisted.

Both Muoru and the horse-faced MP, who had escorted him, both felt it when they first arrived here. Without saying anything, they both could feel the ominousness in the air. At the time, Muoru had thought it was a result of the image of a dark place the word “graveyard” conveyed.

But the reality was completely different.

Probably the moment he arrived at the graveyard his body understood the truth. In fact whatever the feeling was, it was able to grasp this truth better than even his standard five senses could.

And now, he knew that monsters which could kill him easily were sleeping under the very ground he was standing on.

Shit, this is no joke.

The boy finally became aware of the impossibility of the task before him.

From now on I...

Now he had to bury that thing.

But first he had to move it to the hole it had taken him forever to dig. And in order to push it along the ground, he'd have to get closer and touch it.

His body and heart froze just thinking about it.

There is no way I could do that...huh, what's that smell?

Suddenly, he could smell the stench of something like rotting fish. Muoru, who had been devoting all his attention to the monster, looked away, as if he were running away, to search for the source.

What in the world, why have I not noticed it until now?

He looked at his feet illuminated by the lantern light.

The surrounding soil...was stained and soaked with a red liquid.

His mind couldn't think of anything else, it had to be the blood that was spilled from Meria's body.

He clamped down his mouth, closed his eyes, and then made his legs carry him forward towards the monster.

Muoru didn't know whether it was "The dark" or just a devil.

Now that fallen, *gigantic* monster was dead...no, he didn't know if it was alive or not. But regardless if the expression "its existence was undying" was appropriate, for the time-being the giant mass of flesh was completely motionless.

If it really can't move, then no matter how often they were called "mankind's natural enemy" it shouldn't be able to harm me, right?

Relying on that fact, Muoru endured the pain in his chest and continued his approach.

He walked with a shaky gait, as if he were crossing a suspension bridge where the rope had been severed.

His closed eyelids had plunged his vision into complete darkness, but despite that, he advanced bit by bit.

Something small hit his cheek.

Muoru in a laughably, comical display of surprise opened his eyes.

As he did, he found himself now standing face to face with the monster.

“...uh.”

Without twisting away from *IT*, he wiped his cheek with the back of his right hand.

Not only did sweat seep into his mud covered glove, but also a drop of coolness.

It seemed like before he knew it, the clouds had rolled in and darkened the sky. Which meant what was now on his cheek was probably the first drop of the rain.

Even as he craned his head backwards to look up at the night sky, the monster's body never left his field of vision. The soft and flabby sack of flesh was easily more than twice Muoru's tall height. And it had a trunk much wider than him with countless clawed legs. But while it had those things, the eyes and mouth that were expected of creatures were nowhere in sight. And within the giant sack of flesh, whose ugliness reminded him of boneless creatures like leeches and octopuses, he was unsure if there was something actually stuffed inside.

He was close enough that he could touch the monster. And just looking at it for a moment was rewriting his beliefs that such a creature couldn't exist. There seemed to be no limit to the swell of unpleasant feelings he had, and as if triggered by his emotions, a blood vessel in his forehead throbbed, inducing a sharp pain in his skull.

At his feet the monster's legs were spread like a spider web. All of its countless legs were longer and thicker than a giant serpent which could strangle a bear to death. On top of that, springing from the tip of each of the legs was a claw like an executioner's sickle, all of which looked sharper than any blade he'd ever seen.

And on those sickles he could see Meria's blood clinging in thick globs.

It was too late to stop himself from thinking about that now. A little while ago a countless number of the monster's claws had been ripping through her body, each more than enough to kill her. And each one of those blows that had mutilated Meria's body was seared into Muoru's pupils.

But now he had to touch and move that monstrous creature.

Even though he had drawn this close, it was still a ridiculous idea.

In fact, the idea was driving him crazy.

The blood on its claws was the same blood that clung to Meria's hand when he had grabbed it

-Whatever secret the girl had, he didn't know.

Yet, even if he asked her, she most likely wouldn't tell him. And if she did, it would probably be something that he couldn't understand.

One thing was certain though. Meria, a single girl, had opposed that monster.

With those thin limbs, and that small body...

Muoru didn't quite know what to call the force that compelled his body into motion. Willpower? Backbone? Regardless, he placed his hands on the monster's core and pushed with all his strength.

What he felt through his gloves was not warmth or coolness, nor was it softness or hardness. Rather, it was the completely weird sensation of thrusting a hand into the innards of a corpse.

Shaking violently, the sack of flesh tilted.

From the vibration, Muoru thought the monster had woken up.

Looking at his hands, he thought he could see the thin gloves eroding all the way to his flesh.

But there was no erosion, just a problem with his mind.

Resist, he thought. Resist, resist, resist, resist....

He was surprised by a burning sensation in his eyes. His vision was blurring and something hot ran down his cheek.

Muoru wasn't sure when it had started, but his eyes were tearing up.

"Aaaagh!!" the boy screamed in irritation. However, instead of giving up he borrowed from his despair and once again pushed against the giant monster.

As Muoru mustered as much strength as he could, the grotesque body started to advance forward, the sound of the movement as loud as a landslide. Muoru put everything he had into his arms, even digging his toes into the earth to brace himself, but in the end he was only able to move the monster a little bit.

Throwing his shoulder down and pitching forward, the boy continued to push.

-All while the thick landslide sound continued.

-All while he continued to endure the unpleasant feelings spilling out of his body.

-All while his shouts, sounding like someone was vomiting, echoed through the graveyard.

But Muoru was the only person there to hear his shouting. And as he continued to push against the grotesque body, gradually the rain striking his back increased in intensity.

#

While he listened to the sound of the rain leaking through the stable — No, while he crouched beneath the still secure and non-leaking roof, Muoru stared into the darkness.

It rained non-stop for two days.

When it was just a passing shower, the rain didn't hinder his work. Since it was summer, when the temperature lowered it was actually easier to pass the time. But he couldn't walk through the graveyard at night. With the clouds hiding both the moon and the stars, he couldn't even see what was right in front of his nose.

However, when he didn't go outside his face wore a different, pleasant expression. He figured there was a lot to think about...and that he needed time to collect his thoughts.

With the changing of the times the horses had disappeared from the stable. Yet, even after departing they still left traces. And so thinking about the possible other gravediggers that had lived in the stable before him, Muoru wondered, *where in the world did they go?*

Once Crow had said to him, *“No matter how many people are employed to dig holes, since they are unable to tolerate the existence of the demons, they will soon become useless.”* At the time he’d ignored the words, but now Muoru felt he had firsthand evidence that Crow’s words were true.

Suddenly there was a knock on the stable door.

It was a small sound, but definitely not something that occurred naturally. In fact, being so accustomed to the quiet sound of the rain leaking, the tiny knock was enough to startle him.

“Muoru.”

But after two days, the moment he heard that voice his shock turned into relief.

There was only one person in this whole graveyard who called his name like that.

The door opened quietly and Meria entered, leading with her lamp. The device’s weak light dyed the room orange. She remained silent the whole way from the door and even when she eventually sat down.

Since the ceiling was rotting and riddled with holes, in order to avoid getting soaked by the leaking drops of water, the two of them had to sit so close that their knees were touching.

Her face was mostly concealed by her hood, but she didn't even try to meet his gaze. *She probably came here without an umbrella*, Muoru thought as he looked at her dripping wet bangs and slightly damp cloak.

Like usual, Muoru was too nervous to really speak. There were endless questions he wanted to ask: Was her body okay? Did she forgive him for the peeping incident? Who exactly was "Meria" and what in the world was a gravekeeper? But, he was unable to put any of them into words. In fact, he never thought Meria would visit the stable in the first place. There was no reason to think she'd forgotten what happened, but as he took another look at her from a much closer distance...

"Is something wrong Meria?" the boy asked, his thoughts running wildly.

Meria withdrew her left hand that she was hiding in her cloak. She was holding a very large apple.

Speechless, Muoru just sat there as the girl seemed to squeeze the fruit before eventually handing it over.

"I can have it?" he asked suddenly, just like when he'd borrowed the first aid kit before.

But this time Meria didn't nod or do anything. The only thing she did was continue to hang her head and hide her face.

Thinking it couldn't be helped, Muoru looked down to the fruit in his hand. It was large and magnificently ripe, and its weight seemed to suggest it was full of juices. Personally, he liked all fruits except pineapples so technically this apple was the first treat he'd received since he'd arrived at the graveyard. Honestly speaking, it had been a while since he'd even had an apple that hadn't been touched by worms.

"Ah..." The girl opened her mouth at last and Muoru looked up.

"I will be your friend," she said, shutting her eyes as her face turned redder than the apple he was holding.

Muoru again looked away as if someone had struck his cheek.

Somehow looking at her directly embarrassed him more than watching her bathe.

Though the words were different, the feeling behind them was like she'd just confessed her feelings for him.

...Was it really similar?

Unable to bear the embarrassment any longer, Muoru asked, "Um, Meria?" The words sounded like a protest and the girl instantly sat up straight.

I should speak as gently as possible.

Although he was troubled by the situation and the effort he wasn't accustomed to, he continued. "I don't know why I have to think this is so embarrassing. But being friends is not that big of a deal so it'd be okay if you just say "yeah or sure". Those words should be okay don't you think?"

Meria slowly opened her eyes with the same slowness as the moon rising into the sky. Quietly he watched her long eyelashes flutter.

The girl's blue eyes slowly looked to his.

Muoru found himself looking away from her more and more. He was again feeling the impulse to touch her hand...and he desperately thought he needed to kill that feeling.

Still looking at Muoru, Meria eventually nodded once. "Sure".

Muoru lifted his face.

Then as if suddenly switching from offense to defense, she quickly started to hesitate.

"Sor... sorry. I came suddenly."

“It’s okay, I wasn’t sleeping,” he said, but she didn’t seem to be really listening.

“But, it was just that. No matter what, I wanted to tell you that.” The moment she stopped speaking, Meria jumped to her feet with a rare display of agility and a face once again turning red.

Looking at her back as she started to cross the stable, Muoru said, “Thanks....for the apple.”

Meria nodded once. “Sure”

With her hand now on the doorknob, Muoru asked another question to her turned back, “You said don’t come out for a while, but is it alright now?”

Meria nodded once and the boy forced a smile.

Then she was gone.

Alone again, Muoru chewed on the apple in the dark. The fruit was juicy, sweet, and it smelled good.

Chapter 5-1

Muoru definitely felt he was in “midsummer” as he looked upon the graveyard flooded with the glaring noon light.

The ground had darkened as if it had forgotten all the rain that had fallen up till yesterday. And due to the sun burning the growing vegetation and moss, a choking smell of greenery hung in the air.

Muoru placed down his shovel and walked to the graveyard empty-handed.

It wasn't that he was skimping on his job; he'd followed his instructions and in fact he'd only stopped digging a little while ago. He wasn't trying to prolong his work either, but if a person didn't take occasional breaks in this heat, they'd be in danger of heat stroke. Generally speaking, if it was one of his mole companions, in this type of weather they'd faint without any hope of being discovered. And in the worst cases there was even the possibility they could die of dehydration.

Well, there may be a dog, but basically I'm the only human here.

Even so, if he took a break he didn't know whether it was better to go back to the stable for a bit or simply lie sprawled out under the shade of a tree, looking idly at something. For the moment however, his feet were taking him towards the place he'd buried that monster several days ago.

Naturally he didn't feel like going there, but despite the fix he was in as a result of the work he was made to do as a punishment for the false charge, he felt compelled to check on the status of his work.

That level of rain shouldn't have washed away the soil after I'd packed the ground so firmly.

When he arrived at the grave, Muoru saw something that hadn't been there when he'd been digging several days ago.

It was a gravestone...

Someone must have set it up when the rain let up.

...that's right. Since they weren't just dumping a simple corpse into a hole, a gravestone was necessary. But though at the time he'd been desperately pouring all of his energy into burying that gargantuan monster, he hadn't even given that idea a single thought.

Maybe Daribedor arranged for someone else to set it up.

He drew closer and examined the stone. The slab came up to his hips with corners that had been shaved down to make rounded edges. The material also had the cheap quality like some kind of grey andesite. On its face was an epitaph, but there were only various numbers carved into the stone, no name.

This wasn't made by a very good stonemason, Muoru thought as he traced his finger across the top carved seal. My father was definitely more skilled than this.

However, just like how he could barely remember the sound of his father's voice, the last time he'd seen his father's work had been ages ago. If he were being honest with himself, he felt the memory had faded away to the point where he could not fairly compare it with the stone in front of him.

In addition to the current year, there was also what looked like a number denoting measurement on the stone face for some reason. It seemed to indicate the size of the monster buried beneath his feet.

To be sure, if something went horribly wrong and the monster was dug up, it definitely wouldn't be a laughing matter.

Muoru again stared closely at the epitaph. The following narrow and long sentence seemed to describe the monster in detail.

"Huh? Mole-kun, you can read?"

"...so, where in the hell do you spring up from?" Muoru said, his face lacking either amazement or resignation as he reoriented himself to face Crow, who had yet again managed to sneak up on him.

They were wearing their usual outfit with the familiar black bobbed hair, the yellow cape, the checkered necktie and matching shorts, along with the tough army boots. At a brisk pace Crow crossed over to Muoru, hopped into the air and sat atop the new monster's grave.

"It's simple. I swoop down from the heavens. I am just a bird after all."

The boy sighed; Crow didn't even have wings on their back.

Muoru then lightly shook his head and in an unusual action from himself, sat cross-legged on the ground.

"Hm, what's wrong? It's not good if you don't drink enough water. You'll get heat stroke."

"No, my head's just tired... I'm using parts of it I usually don't use after all."

He rarely went to school and he couldn't read without stumbling like an infant; the same was true for his writing. However, just knowing some specialized words, understanding numbers, and being able to sign their name onto a pay slip receipt or attendance sheet was enough for a soldier tasked with doing manual labor to be able to function properly. Reading books or maps and thinking about things like tactics were not his responsibilities.

"Yeah, amazing, amazing..." Crow said while clapping, though their applause lacked any energy.

Feeling like he was being made fun of, Muoru glared at Crow. But then Crow looked to the heavens and said, "I can't read or write at all."

Muoru didn't know what to say. He was a bit surprised to hear Crow say that.

He'd heard that long ago paper was something with an extremely high value. Unless one was a scholar, nobleman, bureaucrat clergyman, or something of that level, things like bound books were an impossibility and something that person simply wasn't fated to use.

And even now there certainly were children who were never exposed to information due to their area not having a school. In poor farming villages children were still quite precious for hard labor and so it was preferable for many of them to engage in more practical endeavors, rather than reading and writing.

...but.

He found it impossible that Crow couldn't read after they had explained in torturous detail how the existence of those monsters had somehow affected entire civilizations.

"Pah..."

“Ah, you’re already making fun of me!” Crow replied, as if suffering from indigestion. They looked angry, with their cheeks puffed out. “But it’s okay. Even birds have many friends. And I have real smart friends too. If I ever needed help, I’d simply have one of them read it for me.”

That was Crow’s character, thinking they knew tons of people.

“Don’t sulk...it’s bad, and a bit unlike you,” Muoru said.

“Well...right back at you. I mean, don’t you think it’s surprising that you can read better than me? I don’t think that’s fair. So, why?”

“Why...that’s a good question. My family was definitely poor so I wasn’t really able to go to school. And even though I never asked, it felt like my brother wanted to teach me. If I think back on those memories, I guess my brother could only somewhat read and write.”

“Wow, it sounds nice to have a great older brother...is he well?” Crow asked cheerfully.

“Well, I’m not sure how he is. I think he’s still alive but it’s already been over four years since we’ve last seen each other,” Muoru said with a shrug.

His eldest brother should be at their father's home, training to follow in his footsteps. Even with the passing of the times, and with the amount of stonemason work fading along with the influence of the temples, he was probably still working in some fashion.

His second eldest brother had entered the military before he did. Since they belonged to the same company Muoru thought perhaps they'd cross paths, but unfortunately his brother seemed to have been garrisoned far away and so they never saw each other.

And now I've become this... I'll probably never see either of them again for the rest of my life.

"That is....lonely huh?" Crow asked, awfully sympathetic.

"Well, that may be so. But we're all adults now. And no matter how good or most likely bad our relationship is, my brothers would never put themselves into the same kind of ditch as me."

"...But...it's not good that your family was pulled apart." Though Muoru had already resigned himself to that reality, Crow's statement still bothered him.

"If you feel like that then you shouldn't become an adult. Being unable to see your family even if you want to would probably be sad for you huh?"

“About that, well... in the end everyone eventually has to say goodbye someday. But, won't you won't be able to see them again if you die?”

“Well, that's right....I guess.” Even if Muoru understood in his mind, his emotions didn't try to agree.

Looking at the dark expression on Crow's face as they sat with their legs dangling and their eyes pointed to the ground, Muoru could clearly see Crow's irrational inner thoughts pushing to the surface.

He had an unusual feeling as he looked at Crow. For Muoru, Crow was more of a mystery than Meria, which meant he couldn't trust them. And even though Crow spoke to him in a friendly manner, it was probably because they were hiding something. He felt that way even now.

“By the way, you said that you had a lot of friends outside this place,” Muoru asked suddenly, causing Crow to look up with a start, not even a single bead of sweat on their face.

Even in this damn heat, Crow is completely unaffected. I'm jealous.

“Um, well about that.” Crow was a mysterious unknown. Everything Crow said was suspicious to the point where Muoru had no idea if it was okay to believe them.

However when Crow had said, "It's not good that your family was pulled apart," Muoru got the strong impression that those words were actually Crow's true feelings. And it was a plus that the words weren't bad. Nevertheless, just because for a moment Crow had spoken the truth, it didn't mean Muoru could trust everything else Crow said.

But one thing Muoru thought was that if something was available, then it should be used.

So looking at Crow, he said, "If it's possible, I've got a favor I'd like to ask..."

#

That night when the rain lifted, it was the first truly clear night in a long time where it was possible to see stars covering the entire sky.

Muoru had been taking a short nap in the early evening, stretched out on his straw bed. He was facing up towards the holes in the dilapidated stable's ceiling, looking through them at the night sky.

It was a good night, he thought.

Even the temperature had fallen to cool levels. Plus, with the current amount of starlight, he'd certainly have no trouble seeing where he was going outside.

And probably even tonight Meria was alone in the graveyard.

Muoru couldn't really think of a reason why he didn't go and see her. She even said it was okay for him to come.

...but something was keeping him from taking action.

He was always tense. The girl was an important foothold for his escape plans, yet not knowing the best way to talk with her, he was nervous about the possibility that she hated him. But though he lacked the experience of talking fluently and was not very skilled at it, he couldn't fail. And so, he was tense. He was always tense.

He also felt like there was a giant hook caught in his chest, locking his legs still.

“What do you want to do Muoru and what is the best way to do that?”

Whenever he felt like he had reached his limits, Muoru would always simplify the situation by using that phrase to collect his thoughts. Only focusing on trivial matters to the point where he missed more important things was the pinnacle of stupidity.

However, right now he felt like he was swaying from his own warning. He was also starting to question his own behavior...and that doubt was becoming the hook in his chest.

I should be sure.

Getting close to Meria was not the “more important thing” he was supposed to be focusing on. It may have been a method for his escape, but it was certainly not his goal.

Muoru slapped his cheeks with both hands.

It may not get rid of the hook, but as long as there are no misunderstandings it should be alright.

“Alright, let’s go,” he purposefully said out loud as he stood, opened the door with its creaking hinge and went outside. At the corner of his vision he could see the dog’s body sluggishly rise up, then follow behind him without its feet making a sound.

Once Muoru decided to go, his legs and feelings felt lighter, as if his worries from a little while ago had in a moment gone quiet. He forced a smile.

This is definitely strange if I say so myself.

He hadn’t even walked that far when the dark bushes near the stable rustled. But there was no wind.

Muoru jumped in surprise, as if an enemy were about to ambush him.

Then it started to come out.

Cautious and ready to bolt into a run at any moment, Muoru stared in the direction of the sound. A black robed figure was peeking at him from the shadow of a tree, like a ghost.

“Meria?”

“Oh.” As the figure emitted what sounded like a small scream, it suddenly hid back behind the trunk of the tree.

Even with just a glance of her profile, when coupled with that voice there was no mistake that Meria was the person in the shadows. But he had no idea why she was hiding in the first place.

A strange silence fell upon the area.

“Umm...”

Unable to decide what the right move in this situation was, Muoru stood still. He had planned to head towards the graveyard, but he didn't need a person to guide him there. Granted, her being here definitely helped him out by cutting down on the time he would need to search for her, but something told him she was here for a different reason.

Hidden in the shadow of the tree, the girl kept on peeking out from the darkness, as if observing his movements. Muoru got the feeling that she really wanted to call out to him, but for some reason she couldn't.

She was acting like some kind of small animal, timidly hesitating as it looked upon something unknown that had captured its attention. Muoru even felt that if he clumsily reached out to her, like an animal, she would scurry away in a dash.

Or perhaps could it be that...

Neither one of them could approach the other or call out. They were only ten steps apart, but despite their eyes locking onto one another they were both unable to communicate their true intentions....Muoru wondered just how long they stood like that.

Then before long, Meria finally stepped out from behind the tree, as if she had been beaten in some sort of competition.

"I just happened to be passing by," she said, though not to Muoru, it was more so directed at her toes.

Muoru remained silent. He couldn't think of anything to say in response. It was way too clear that she had tried to make a joke to mask her behavior. But it was so hard to imagine Meria telling a joke that Muoru didn't know whether it was okay to laugh or if it would be better to say something funny back.

But as Muoru silently stood indecisively, the girl continued, "I'm sorry... that was a lie." Her hood was hanging low over her face, concealing her features and muffling her voice.

You didn't just happen to pass by.

However, he couldn't bring himself to ask, *So then, why?* Even without asking though, he had some hypotheses of his own.

He thought back to the times they had crossed paths before. Even two nights ago when Meria had visited the stable she had a clear purpose for coming. But looking at her demeanor today, she didn't seem to have any specific reason for being at the stable.

So, basically....

...did she come just to see me?

Or in other words, did she want to spend time with me?

“Ah, um, hey,” Muoru said, his voice suddenly going high-pitched, making the dog’s ears twitch. Even he thought the sound was unexpectedly loud, which perhaps explained why Meria retreated back a step, as if his voice was repelling her.

“The apple,” he hurriedly continued, in an attempt to stop her from running off.
“It was delicious.”

Looking away from Muoru’s gaze, Meria nodded. “Yeah.”

Chapter 5-2

“The strange guy often comes around noon.”

They were free to sit anywhere they wanted in the sprawling, vast graveyard grounds, but probably due to human nature Muoru found himself sitting next to a tree.

Underneath the starry sky that seemed to stretch on forever, he and Meria sat side by side on the root of an elm tree.

“A strange guy?” Meria craned her neck at Muoru’s words.

“Ah, what’s a good way to describe them? I mean, I don’t even know if they’re a boy or girl. Oh and by the way, Meria, do you know anything about the monster hunters wearing masks?”

Other than the time Crow had talked to him, there had been several times up till now where he’d been rounded up by the group of masked people for a burial. But other than giving him simple instructions they never talked to him. And what’s more, those times didn’t even seem like the atmosphere for conversation.

Certainly people like Crow were an exception among exceptions.

“Um...” Meria scrunched up her face, as if painstakingly scrutinizing Muoru’s question.

“I know a bit about them, but it’s difficult to say. I’ve been told that they come and go in order to mark The Dark, but they never show their faces or speak. At least not to me...”

–If they don’t talk to you and they don’t talk to me either then...

“Well, who?”

Silence answered Muoru’s question and Meria, with a troubled expression, turned away.

This is what always happens, Muoru thought as feeling of both dejection and discouragement spread through him. In times like these, no matter what he tried to ask, it was useless. She had completely shut down and he couldn’t force her to respond. And it would be a terrible waste to sour their relationship by pressing the topic of Crow, despite all the effort it took to just get their relationship to this point.

I’d have to repeat everything...

The night was significant because it was the time he could attempt to get useful information out of Meria. But though she was a skilled listener, she didn't really try to say anything herself. Up until now he'd been painstakingly talking about himself and the outside world as bait, even though he was unsure whether or not he could really maintain the conversation. But after one month of talking about himself, it was only natural that he was running out of material. So, tonight he'd tried changing it up a bit and talking about Crow- yet it didn't matter, the result was the same as always.

Unsure what to say next, Meria suddenly looked up and said, "Forgive me."

"Huh?" Muoru asked, bewildered by the unexpected apology.

"Muoru, you always work all day long. However, even though you must be tired you still come out to see me at night..."

"..."

"But, after all that I never know what I should say..."

"Why is that?" Muoru asked back in a somewhat challenging manner. Meria's way of speaking was slightly irritating him. "Why can't you talk?"

The fact that she cared at all about him being tired and whatnot was annoying. After all, he wasn't doing anything more than the same kind of monotonous work he was accustomed to. With that kind of work all he needed was physical strength. Even more so, the fact that she was worrying about him angered him much more.

After hearing Muoru's slightly harsh words, Meria looked like she was about to cry. "But," she started, "I feel..."

"Huh?"

"I feel you hate me." She looked away immediately, waiting for his judgment.

The question was so shocking that Muoru's mind fell into a state of half-suspension. He felt like he'd heard a similar story somewhere before. Granted, the two stories didn't exactly mirror one another, but it did seem like they came from the same tree. No, it wasn't just a story he'd heard before, but it was something he was guilty of as well.

But even though Muoru had always been uneasy about whether she hated him, he never imagined that the girl was thinking the opposite.

"Oh, I feel the same way." The words seemed to pour out of his mouth without his consent, possibly due to the unknown emotions stirring inside him.

"What?"

“If one of us is doing the hating, then it is definitely you who hates me. Me however...”

Meria’s blue eyes opened wide and as she strangely cocked her head deeply to the side, she asked, “Why? What did I possibly do to make you feel that way?”

“Uh...” the boy hesitated. He thought he shouldn’t speak; however, at the same time he felt that staying quiet only made the situation more awkward.

In attempt to escape from Meria’s gaze he looked away and continued. “No, what I meant was...I saw you bathing.”

Meria’s skin was more transparently white than any person he had ever seen in his life. But in an instant everything from her ears to the back of her neck turned scarlet.

“Th....that...” and each time she tried to say something she only became even more red.

Eventually, she covered her face and fell silent before she was able to say anything intelligible.

Muoru bit his lip hard.

He was starting to hate himself. And for some reason he was starting to feel ashamed of his actions. When it came to digging his own grave, the work he did during the day was plenty.

But...

“But...” he said, forcing himself to shake off the feeling of self-loathing rising in his chest.

It may have been mostly out of desperation, but as he’d told himself when he left the stable, his primary reason for talking to Meria was to get information out of her.

Though he thought it had mostly faded away, he still felt a bit angry. Perhaps it was because Meria seemed to be falsely accusing him. So, borrowing from the embers of that anger, Muoru continued.

“I know it’s just an excuse, but at the time I really didn’t do it on purpose. Besides, it’s a bit your fault too. The mansion probably has its own showers. So, why then did you have to wash up outside?”

Meria blinked. “But, I’m not allowed inside the house.” Even though what she said was so unexpected, she maintained a flat tone.

“What?” Muoru asked. “Well, where do you sleep?”

For a moment Meria looked like she was thinking about what to say, but then she pointed to the ground.

After thinking about it for a moment, Muoru asked, "In a basement?"

Meria nodded.

"That's um..." the boy hesitated.

How in the world was he supposed to interpret that? It sounded strange to him. And even though it might have been just his impression, he felt that a person living underground was not common. Generally, people with good social status didn't sleep beneath the ground.

Really, no one slept underground, besides maybe soldiers on the battlefield who slept in trenches at the front lines after an enemy explosion went off.

However, Muoru had his doubts about what she'd said. If he collected all the bits of information he'd gotten about the mansion, it didn't seem like the basement was directly connected with the building. And more specifically, that would mean she didn't have the right to come and go into the building as she pleased. If so, wouldn't that make her just like a prisoner?

"I'm not angry," Meria said. "I even said so the other day. You haven't done anything particularly cruel or painful to me, Muoru."

Tossing around his thoughts concerning the basement, Muoru snapped to attention and listened carefully to her words. As she looked at him with the hem of her dark blue robe tightly gripped in her hands, her cheeks once again flushed.

“But, but...that...was embarrassing, but...”

“I’m sorry.” He had to apologize. Even if he hadn’t intended any of it, he still felt that looking was mean. “Lo...look, that’s that. But they say that forgiving one another is important. If people don’t call a ceasefire then the war will never end...so since we’re the same in this matter, what do you say we call a truce?”

As soon as he was finished, he felt like he’d committed another mistake. *I shouldn’t have said that.*

Not only did it seem to suggest that they should stop the conversation already, and that it’d be okay if Meria didn’t talk anymore, but at its core it also seemed to suggest that she should stay away from him.

But for some reason Meria didn’t simply nod in agreement to his proposal.

Why?

There was some kind of confusion between the two of them. He clearly understood that she wasn’t angry about him bringing up the peeping incident again, but her silence now didn’t make him very optimistic.

Yet why did it look like Meria was worrying so hard over this? Most likely she was hesitating about something, even though just the other day she'd seized the courage to say to him, "I'll be your friend."

Before she'd expressed her concern that she didn't know what a friend was. She probably still wasn't sure. But about that...

"Ah." Muoru suddenly remembered what he'd said to her the first time she'd worriedly declined his offer.

Friend, well, um...it's one step past acquaintance...what is it...Mutual? No more than that... in order to know each other better two people think about getting closer...kind of like that. In reality, Muoru didn't really know what he was talking about. He'd just given her an answer on the spur of the moment.

-That night, it felt like so long ago.

Since then Meria had heard a lot of his stories; he often rambled in a disorderly way, but he did indeed talk a lot about himself. In fact, in many ways he felt Meria knew the person "Muoru Reed" better than anyone else.

But when it came to her, he found it difficult to say he knew anything at all about her.

And about that, doesn't she feel the same way? Doesn't Meria want me to know more about her?

He was being self-centered, and maybe his thinking suggested an inflated ego. But at the same time he didn't feel the thoughts came from his conceitedness. In fact, he felt like Meria's feelings were being directed at him. And if that were true, wouldn't that mean that Meria had definitely come out to see him?

Before he'd felt there was a deep chasm between the two of them. A hole which couldn't be filled by any means. And at first he thought the day she would talk about herself seemed far off in the future.

But when they parted ways that night and Muoru said to her, "See you."

With a slight wave of her hand, Meria replied, "Yeah...see you."

So maybe, that day was surprisingly close.

#

Soon however, cold water was thrown on Muoru's high spirits.

As Muoru tried to return back to the stable, Daribedor ambushed him in front of the mansion. The old man placed an electric lantern, with its blinding white light, at his feet.

He lifted his right arm slightly and drew closer. “You’ve grown quite close to the girl haven’t you?”

There was a hard, clicking sound. It was a sound Muoru was quite accustomed to, though he hadn’t heard it in a long time...a firing hammer.

Daribedor was aiming a black revolver at Muoru and even in the darkness Muoru could clearly see the shape of the small muzzle. Though the bullet would be small, it would still be enough to kill a human.

“If so, is there anything wrong with that?” Muoru asked cautiously. It was tempting to think the old man hadn’t noticed his meetings with Meria. But the real problem wasn’t that he was aware of the situation, it was how he’d judged it.

His employer Daribedor had the right to deal with him, with any prisoner, however he pleased. And so whatever job he made Muoru do, no matter how many days he withheld food from him, and whether he sent the prisoner back to the detention center or not were all perfectly within his power. And in the worst case scenario, so would shooting him dead in this place.

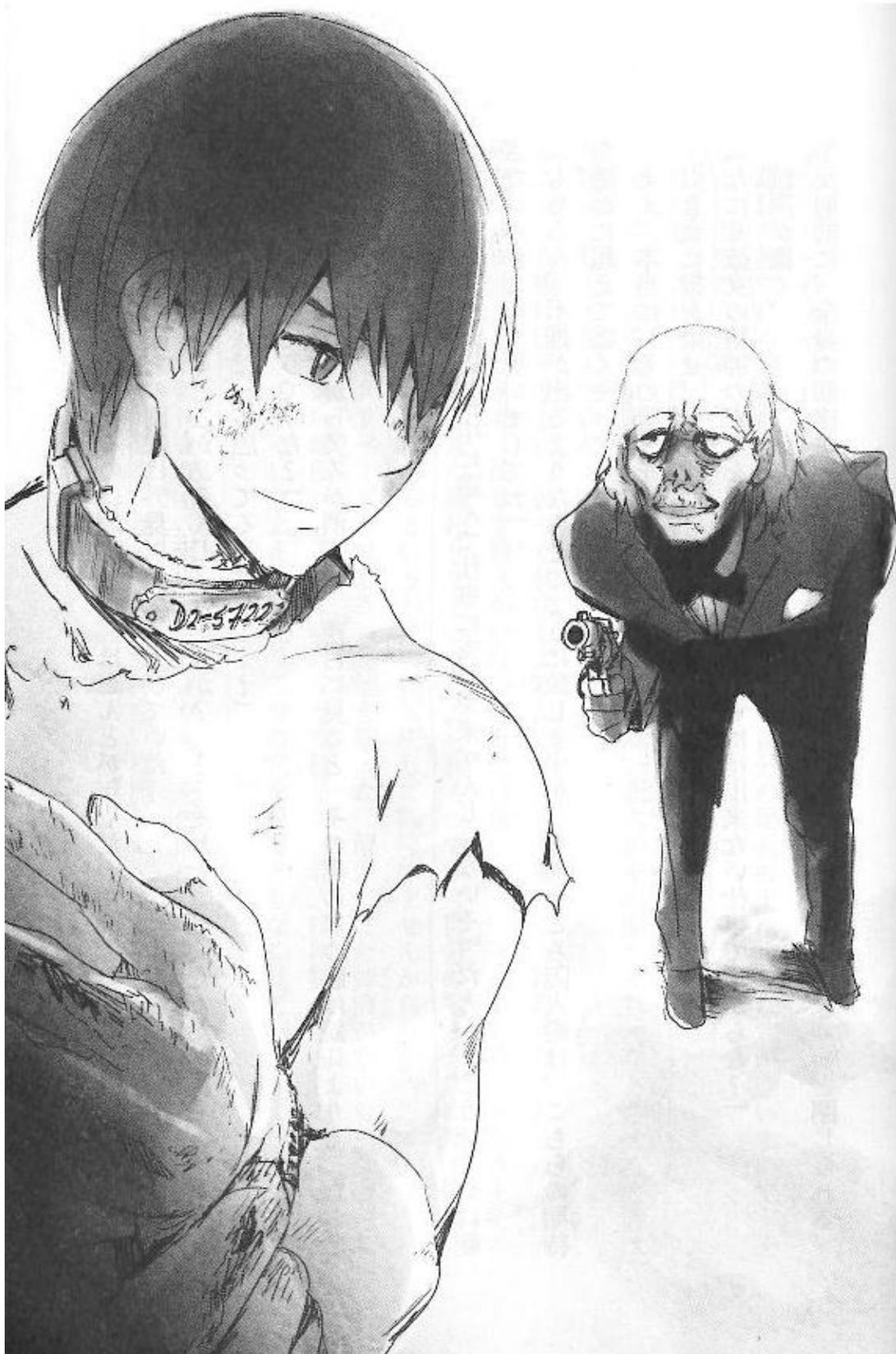
I don't plan to simply kick the bucket like that.

His facial expression hardened without thinking. He had various injuries but luckily or unluckily he’d yet to experience getting shot. And so though he couldn’t imagine what kind of pain it would be, judging by the caliber, unless it went terribly awry he felt it should certainly result in instant death.

If that's true...

With the gun pointed at him, the small old man showed the most repulsive smile.

“I’m not that worried about that. Rather, I’m impressed you were able to win her over. It seems like you have an impressive ability for deception, isn’t that right?” Daribedor laughed loudly, an irritating sound that was getting on Muoru’s nerves.



...was he reprimanding me for seeing Meria?

Despite resenting Daribedor for saying whatever he liked without knowing about any of the hard work it took for him to get this far with Meria, Muoru remained completely stoic.

The old man's cheap attempt to provoke him was annoying. But he'd had a lot of experience with that kind of thing. In fact, his ability to maintain an emotionless expression and tolerate the jokes from most of his older army companions helped make him more mature than his looks seemed to suggest.

If I'd known, would there not be a problem? Or...would Daribedor have an issue with me regardless of what I did?

"You look like you want to say something," Daribedor said, the smile vanishing from his face. In the dark, the wound where his nose should have been seemed like a darker hole than even the muzzle of the gun.

Muoru answered, "Not really...I just don't think you ever warned me that playing around in the middle of the night would interfere with my work."

"Of course, I'd only do that if there seemed to be some kind of deficiency. But Mr. Prisoner, you surpassed my expectations long ago and have done extremely well. Yes, really far beyond your duty..." As he spoke his finger rested on the trigger. "At any rate, preserving the tranquility of that girl's heart is not a job we can do."

A gunshot roared through the air.

Reflexively all the muscles in Muoru's body stiffened and unintentionally he squeezed his eyes shut.

In less than a second the boy understood he hadn't been hit. There was not a wound anywhere on his body.

He opened his eyes and saw a small hole in the ground at his feet. Steam was rising up from it and mingling with the gunpowder smelling air.

"However, can you remember this for me?" Daribedor smiled again, making a literally, terribly warped expression on his face. "It's unnecessary to think about using the girl to try and escape. Even if you use her, it would by no means change anything...No, rather if I felt like it, I could get another laborer as many times as I'd like. And you are by no means the first gravedigger to be buried in the hole they've dug."

Daribedor fired another bullet, creating another hole in the ground, this one being much closer to Muoru's toes. Then with a satisfied look, the old man went back into the mansion.

Muoru remained there motionless, his eyes locked onto the two holes at his feet but his mind not really registering them.

....tranquility...?

Ringing in his ears more than the sound of the gunshot or even any kind of threat Daribedor had made, was the phrase he'd used to describe Meria.

And for a long time after Muoru stood in that spot, pondering what the old man meant.

Chapter 6

What do I want to do?

And what should I do in order to achieve it?

Muoru found himself asking the same questions over and over. Probably it was because when it came to achieving his objective, there weren't a whole lot of options to choose from.

I must escape.

How many times had he muttered that since coming here? It was an expression that should have acted as a propellant to continue his thoughts, but now in order to erase his indecision it filled his mind.

Right, I must get out of here.

But, wasn't the very situation of me becoming a prisoner a bit strange in the first place?

#

“Hey, tell me Muoru, what kind of crime did you commit?” The girl asked as she gently touched his collar with the tip of her finger.

Reflexively, Muoru backed up into the tree, fidgeting slightly at her touch. He wanted her to forgive his uneasiness, but at the same time he was well aware of how the collar had been attached to his skin and the possible implications should it be removed. And even if he trusted Meria, if by accident the collar were dislodged his life would end.

And after that Muoru was strongly reluctant about the topics she tried to talk about. But Meria was serious. No, that wasn't quite right. Though she'd only joked around once up till now, her eyes now seemed to shine brighter than ever. He felt Meria wasn't simply curious, she was eager to know more.

With difficulty, as if his lips weighed a ton, Muoru said, “Murder. That's why.” Well, that was what the world thought and what was written in the courthouse's record of the trial.

One morning his superior 2nd Lieutenant Hedger Reeve was discovered dead in the corner of a trench. Because of both the neighboring country's self-defense force, who didn't try to come out of their fortress, and the top brass on his side, who didn't try to force their way through the enemy's defenses, the war situation was mostly at a standstill. So the murder of the 2nd Lieutenant of the 16th infantry unit caused quite an uproar. During all that unrest, the disappearance of a 2nd-class infantryman's favorite shovel seemed trivial at best.

Then about 30 hours after the body was discovered, the military police regiment's search dogs discovered the shovel in a dump of scrap wood. And it was stained with the 2nd Lieutenant's blood. Unfortunately, as a young off-duty soldier without an alibi that could be verified, in a week the Court Marshall was over and "Muoru Reed" was deemed the culprit.

In all honesty, the guy was really clever to use my shovel for the murder.

The boy who had become prisoner #5722 laughed.

It wasn't that there was an insufficient motive. Hedger Reeve was human garbage.

He wore things like looted sapphires and jingling dirty gold around his neck. And countless times he boasted about the terrible details surrounding how he got his hands on them. He was the worst drunk and would frequently beat his subordinates depending on his mood. He also loved dice and if he lost big he'd turn almost completely red and flip over the gambling table. Though he was the commanding officer of the moles he was never seen with a shovel in his hand. He usually, in his self-important way, observed the diggers from the cool shade.

The time when the 2nd Lieutenant was eventually buried must have been when Muoru was surrounded by cooking fires with his fellow moles and laughing again and again throughout the night. Really, it had to have been then when Hedger Reeve's corpse was buried in the corner of the battlefield.

The restrained boy insisted again and again both in the investigation and in the military court that, "I didn't do it, this is a false charge." *But, other than that was there anything else I could have done?* They were blaming him for something he knew nothing about. And of course, without an alibi or evidence there was no one who'd believe him.

"That's not true," Meria said, her calm voice seeming to shake the cemetery air as it called Muoru back from the depths of his dark memories.

"You absolutely didn't do that," she continued, looking straight at him. From her face, Muoru got the sense that she didn't doubt his innocence even a little...He felt she believed him.

"Aa," something like a yawn spilled out of Muoru's throat. He understood it as his resolve started to weaken.

In his head he recited his objective. *I must escape...* then a second time...and a third.

Then tearing away from the girl's blue eyes, he said, "Thank you. If you were the judge, I would have definitely been found innocent." He then smiled to drive away the doubt swirling about in his chest.

Of course if he were acquitted then he'd never have been sent to the graveyard and he wouldn't be meeting with Meria every night like this.

“Well, truly you’re not someone who should be here,” Meria muttered with a sinking expression. Somehow even she seemed to feel the same way he did.

As was expected, Muoru wondered how he should react to her words....how he should react to the expression on her face.

Suddenly his mouth moved automatically, “Hey, this is just hypothetical, but...,” he said, not looking at the girl. “If I tried to escape from this place...if you’d like...”

Noticing that he was probably about to blurt out something he shouldn’t, he promptly stopped talking. As he hesitated to continue he could feel Meria’s gaze. Then to ease her gaze he finally told her.

“It’s completely up to you, but...if at that time I tried to escape, would you want to run away with me?”

Meria blinked a few times then looked down to the ground.

Conversely, Muoru felt calm as he carefully and silently watched her reaction.

The words had jumped out his mouth as if they had a will of their own, but in the end he didn’t think his invitation was so bad. But though he didn’t have any clear grounds to prove it, Muoru did think that Meria wouldn’t snitch on him to Daribedor even if he revealed his desire to escape.

Though he'd thought about it many times, his idea to escape was still not something one could call a plan. However, whatever form he sought assistance in, certainly when he ran away from the graveyard the plan would involve Meria. If that was the case, then he thought that there would also be some kind of benefit for Meria as well.

Even though I don't have an exact plan, it's probably a good idea to place Meria at the center of the scheme, right?

Maybe her existence wasn't entirely a hindrance. . .

While he was aware that was an overly-optimistic thought, he couldn't ignore the fact that somewhere inside his heart he was hoping it were true.

He could easily imagine that the girl had received either the same treatment, something similar, or worse at the mass graveyard.

Mankind's natural enemy, the monsters that went by numerous names.

The gravediggers before him had certainly met their end, being unable to handle the terror sleeping beneath their feet and the repulsiveness of those they had to bury.

And that was definitely not a story limited to the grave digging.

He recalled- the figure of Meria's back as she stood in front of the monster made of a sack of flesh. Her arm that was torn off and flung away. Her torso that was stabbed through.

Right, Muoru already knew to what extent the grave keeper was made to suffer.

“...”

Without a change in her expression since his question, the girl remained completely quiet and still. Sometimes like she was shivering, her small lips quivered.

However, though the girl never said, “No,” Muoru did feel that at the end of her internal conflict words of rejection had entered into her mind.

Is there nothing else I can try?

Then like he had before, Muoru went to grab her hand...

But their fingers didn't overlap; she had dodged his hand.

“I'm sorry,” Muoru quickly said. “What am I saying? Forget it. I was just...”

“No,” Meria interrupted him. “It’s my fault,” she said shaking her head. “It’s not your fault...My feet...my feet can’t leave this graveyard.”

Muoru didn’t know how to respond.

Those words, somehow Meria sounded like she was being completely literal. It wasn’t that she had a psychological resistance or anything like that; truly she was saying that it was physically impossible for her to leave this place.

Why in the world was that?

“Muoru.” Hearing her call his name, Muoru looked up. “Can you come with me for a bit?”

#

With the girl holding a lamp and leading him, the two of them walked slowly through the late night graveyard.

Along the way they didn’t say a word.

More than his feet which were barely visible in the dark, Muoru focused his sights on Meria's back as she walked in front of him. Her small shoulders, the bulge of her shoulder blades beneath her clothing and most of all the back of her head, covered by her hood.

Why does she always have her hood up? The question suddenly sprung up in his mind as he stared at her.

It wasn't flattering and he felt it was a waste to conceal all of her beautiful hair except for a few bangs. He'd only seen her with the hood down twice. The first time had been when she was out bathing and the second time was when the monster had shredded her cloak. The first time, when she was soaking wet had been fleeting, the second time when she was covered in blood...not so much. And thinking about it more, he predicted he'd never be able to directly look at her again.

If I were to reach out now and remove her hood, I wonder what would happen.

As he was thinking that idea over, he was suddenly seized by a mix of impure ideas and mischievous urges....But, soon having second thoughts, Muoru slapped his face.

I know it was just a while ago, but I wonder if she's already forgotten how stupid I was before.

His thoughts went to a few minutes ago when he'd tried to grab her white hand, but only succeeded in clumsily grasping at the air. And really when he thought about that, he felt if he tore off her hood here for no reason, she'd probably react no differently than if he'd lifted up her skirt.

But someday I do want to see what she looks like when angry.

As he was thinking those foolish thoughts, the girl walking in front of him stopped.

A bit in front of them was the giant tree at the center of the graveyard. The thick growth of leaves at the top of the tree were blocking the moonlight and created a shadow on the ground.

And in front of the girl stood one tombstone. Although Meria had purposefully brought him here, she stood stock still and fell silent.

Standing behind the girl's back, Muoru read the epitaph.

On it was a date from two years ago, and-

"Ma...ri...a...?" It was the name of someone the boy didn't know.

It was a name that had slipped out from the girl's lips before.

“Maria was also a grave keeper,” the girl said exactly as the stone said.

“Is that your mother?” Muoru guessed, since the sound of the names resembled one another. However, the girl slowly shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

“...you don’t think?”

“Maria and I are nothing alike. And even though our ages were not that far apart, I have lived here since before I could remember, but, I have never met any kind of person who called themselves my mother.”

That quiet manner of speaking was no different than her usual tone, but as she stood there in front of the grave, from the sorrow of her hands as she entwined them as if she were reminiscing and her seriousness, Muoru was able to understand to what extent Meria longed for this person called Maria.

“Probably...I think ‘sister’ would be closest....that is if Maria allows me to say that.” Meria once again went quiet.

Muoru stared at the girl. Though he should have gotten used to her appearance, even now Muoru felt her profile was beautiful. And her furrowing brow above her shut eyelids seemed to express the hesitation in her heart.

Muoru finally felt that the time to ask her was now.

“What is a grave keeper,” he asked.

“A grave robber who steals the power of The Dark,” Meria answered.

The boy kept silent.

...He didn't know the reason why he was troubled. It was good that she'd answered him, but at the same time he didn't know what to do. And unable to think, no words came to mind.

While looking over her shoulder, the girl stared at his toes.

“Muoru, aren't you scared of me?”

He shrugged. Fortunately he was able to produce a proper answer.

“You said before that you're not those things' friend.”

“Did I?” The girl cocked her head to the side.

“Don’t you remember? It was the second time? The time...” he hesitated.

The second time he’d seen one of the monsters, the time when it was actively moving about above the ground, he’d largely lost his cool. And so recalling those memories was embarrassing.

Slowly turning around, the girl said, “Do you know the power of The Dark, Muoru?”

“Umm....just a bit.”

The Dark went by various names. They were devils. They were undead. And more simply, they were monsters. They didn’t appear except at night; they were immortal, and they were mankind’s greatest enemy.

He’d gotten that smattering of information from Crow, but even now Muoru didn’t know just how far he should trust them. Even though he’d had verified a bit of that knowledge with his own eyes.

-That included the girl’s body.

“Even I don’t really know what they are,” Meria said. “But the phrase grave keeper indicates people who have the power of the dark within their bodies.”

“Within?”

“Yeah. It’s just like you saw, they are neither alive nor inanimate....You see, for The Dark, their form is not important. I can’t really explain it well, but...take for example an apple. After you eat it, all that’s left is the core. So, then it’s no longer an apple right?” As the girl explained, sometimes she added small gestures to accompany her words.

“For living things, it is exactly because they preserve their body’s form that they are able to sustain themselves. If they lose their form, they become something different than what they were before they lost their form.

But, as for The Dark, think of them as movable clay with murderous intent. Whether The Dark are made up of a glass of clay or a bathtub full of it makes very little difference. They are not something that ‘will die’. So, no matter what ordinary method is used to damage them, they will always return to the form they had before....”

Then Meria panicked as if she noticed she’d caused him to misunderstand.

“But, ummm.... of course the clay is just a metaphor. The Dark don’t actually mix with one another. It’s not that. Rather The Dark repel one another.

Perhaps it’s correct to say that when touched by a powerful Dark of a higher order, weaker ones become choked up. Then they enter into a pseudo dead state.”

Muoru desperately turned the girl's attempt at an explanation over and over in his head, struggling to understand.

It was certainly something he'd heard in a first aid lesson. All living organisms if looked at under a microscope were made up of tiny, tiny particles called "cells". He didn't know why they retained their form instead of scattering, but at any rate he'd learned that animals had things like "bone cells" and "tissue cells" and those cells intertwined and all formed one living being.

But those monsters didn't seem to follow the same rules of life as other living things. Their bodies were made up of something that couldn't be killed or destroyed.

"I have a part of them inside me," Meria said as she pressed a hand to her chest.

"How?" Muoru asked. "You're human right?"

The girl gave a deep nod, then with her eyes still fixed on her feet she continued. "The Dark buried in this graveyard aren't resurrected. But, their bodies are beneath the ground...and....."

Meria looked up to the dense overhang of branches above.

“I was taught that buried under this tree is the strongest of all The Dark, something that could be called their king. From the seed that grew out of his body sprung out roots, and from that body the tree sucked out its nourishment and grew. And so within this giant tree and its trunk flow the power of The Dark it was formed from...And of course the same is true for its fruit.”

The instant he heard that, Muoru recalled when some time ago she was under the tree eating something.

-The clump that was so dark it was as if it were collecting the darkness. The fruit that was pulsing completely as if it had a mind of its own.

So, is she saying that was a mix of both a plant and the monsters?

“This giant tree bears only one fragment of The Dark. So, the grave keeper, me, eats this and steals their power. Stealing the greatest power makes me feel just like a grave robber. And with that power, even if the other Dark touch me or act hostilely towards me, in the end only they will become unable to move.”

“So to answer your question....I am human, but at the same time a part of me is the same as The Dark. So, I can't leave from the body buried beneath this tree....or in other words, from the mass graveyard.

And...I can't die.”

Seriously?

In a slightly surprised tone, the boy collided with the question that had been sitting in the corner of his mind for a while.

“Wait a sec; didn’t you say this so called Maria was also a grave keeper?”

If “Maria”, whom Meria felt was an older sister, was a grave keeper, then she also had stolen the power of the monsters. If so, then wasn’t it strange for there to be a grave for her here? The epitaph was made to mourn for a human who had died, but grave keepers shouldn’t be able to die...I’ve seen it with my own eyes.

Or, were there still things she hasn’t told me?

If that’s true, then Meria....

Can she also die?

“Maria...” with a pained, dreadful voice, like one a person would have if they were vomiting blood, she managed to squeeze out an answer to his question.

“Maria....killed herself.”

Like she was about to burst into tears, Meria’s lips trembled and when she continued it was at a hurried pace.

“When Maria was here I wasn’t a grave keeper. Under the limits of the power, two humans cannot be grave keepers at the same time. Even so, at the time I didn’t know why she had killed herself. But the first night after becoming a grave keeper, The Dark in the form of a six legged tiger heartily chewed on my right arm...”

The girl ran her hand along her right upper arm, close to her shoulder joint.

From her sinking expression the boy could tell that now in her mind she was playing back the memory of when the monster had plucked off her arm back then. She was reliving the fear she felt...and the pain.

“The pain....I hate the pain,” she said.

Under his clothes Muoru felt the wound on his right thigh throb. It was where Dephen had bit him when he tried to escape before. Without a doubt the giant black dog had taken it easy on him. Yet, despite its fiendish jaw, Muoru’s leg wasn’t torn off. And as the days passed he’d even been able to forget there was even a scar.

But immediately after the bite had happened, Muoru remembered a blindingly white pain had come over him. Even though the dog had taken it easy on him the pain from the bite had been almost unbearable. And if just that could hurt that much...

Why type of thing was a body that couldn’t die?

Just some time ago he'd seen the ghastly sight.

By the countless sickle-like legs of the mass of flesh monster, Meria was killed again and again. She was pierced. She was smashed. She was split open. She was torn apart. She was broken...she was killed.

They were injuries that should have been fatal. And whether it was extremely fortunate or unlucky, with injuries like that there was no need to ask about the victim's health. Having only one life, an ordinary human could not suffer more than one fatal wound.

...But in just that night, how many times did Meria's body taste the pain of death?

Certainly the wounds she'd received had disappeared, no matter how deep they had been. However, the memories couldn't be extinguished. The memory of the pain, the memory of the fear, they were unable to be alleviated and were building up like sediment.

It was like torture. And it was in terribly bad taste.

No matter who it was, one day they would become unable to tolerate that experience. And if someone had to suffer the pain equivalent to dying over and over again, then without a doubt they'd soon think death was preferable.

-Grave keepers can't die, Meria had said.

But that was a lie.

The grave keepers do die.

Their hearts die.

And they lose to Thanatos.¹

-Meria was no different.

“The girl dissolved in the sunlight,” the girl said in a cruel, matter of fact tone.

“As the east sky brightened, the stars disappeared. Though I wanted to stop her, I didn’t know what to do. Nothing I said was getting through to her, so I couldn’t do anything but watch.

Then the first ray of light struck Maria.

¹ The actual Kanji reads: The earnest desire to die. Thanatos itself is the personification of death in Greek Mythology. According to Sigmund Freud, it is also the Death instinct, or the desire to die.

Though the spring light should have been gentle, for Maria it seemed to be like boiling hot oil, and as her entire body was bathed in the light, like a worm she writhed on the ground. It seemed like the power of The Dark inside her was ripping her body apart....”

Muoru didn't know the person Meria was describing. So when he closed his eyes the sight he imagined in the back of his eyelids was instead a girl with reddish brown hair, burning up in the sunlight.

There was no way to confirm how accurate his imagination was, however one thing he was not mistaken about was that it had happened here....at this grave....at his feet.

“The girl enveloped by the light seemed to be extremely, extremely suffering. Yet despite that, she also seemed happy. To be able to die made her happy, that much I could understand as I watched from nearby.

But then Maria wept. She wept for me, the girl she was leaving behind. You see, she knew that after her body was destroyed I would become the next grave keeper.”

The girl lightly brushed the edge of the tombstone as she spoke.

“Then I buried her soulless corpse here.”

Silence.

Muoru couldn't find any...any...any....words to say. His feelings were massively shaken by this event which was something he'd never experienced in his life.

"I'm sorry, Muoru," she suddenly said.

Why did she need to apologize? Muoru's confusion again intensified. The person who needs to apologize is me...but...but...I...

The girl looked in his direction, but her gaze didn't meet his.

"You didn't come here because you wanted to, so I don't think you should hear these things..." She said, but then as she continued her tone was much more cheerful.

"Since becoming a grave keeper, I have been completely alone and nothing good has happened to me. I haven't been able to see the sun and...I've had a lot of painful thoughts. I can't go anywhere else so I thought just being able to guard this grave would be enough.

But I was never happy."

Using her hood to cover her face even more, Meria then placed her hand above her mouth.

“That was until you let me become your friend.”

Peeking beneath her hand, Muoru could faintly see Meria’s expression soften...and for the first time he also saw...her smile.

Muoru’s temples were pounding.

I will escape. Again he recited those words in his mind. *That was the only reason why I got close to you.*

In order to get someone who seemed to know the graveyard well to cooperate with him, he had to first get closer to the girl. That had been his plan and now the plan was in the process of bearing fruit.

She trusted him and she understood that he shouldn’t be here.

Just looking at that, there was no mistake in thinking that the matter was progressing to a great success. But...

If it’s such a success, then why do I feel this empty?

Is it just me covering up my feelings of hatred for myself?

To just achieve his important objective, there weren't that many options available to a prisoner like him. And everything would be for nothing if he weren't able to achieve his objective as a result of his methods. So he strongly asked himself:

What should I do?

What's the best way to escape from this place?

Those questions should have been the only important issues at hand.

However, even though he was well aware of this fact, he couldn't stop himself from wondering over and over again if there was anything he could do for Meria.

Chapter 7

Underneath the noon midsummer sun with a cloth wrapped around his head, the prisoner Muoru was digging a hole with the shovel he had already gotten used to.

He thrust the blade into the ground, scooped, lifted up, and dumped. Then he swung his shovel downwards again. The series of movements were never interrupted, like he had the precision of a machine and the smooth methodical motions of a wild animal.

“Gooood Morning Mole-tan.”¹

With a smile that showed a happiness seemingly coming from the bottom of their heart, Crow appeared and interrupted Muoru’s work.

“Mole-tan...?”

Muoru glared back at Crow with scorn in his eyes...but then his sights became glued to Crow’s head. Specifically, to the huge object atop their small bobbed hairstyle.

¹ “Tan” is similar to “kun” it is a cute title of endearment usually used for someone close to the speaker.

“You...that,” Muoru said with a groan.

“Uh-huh, it’s the thing I promised you. Look.”²

“Thank you³ ...no, I’m sorry, it’s just I didn’t think you’d actually bring it.”

“What are you talking about? It was no sweat. But really, I don’t understand why you wanted this...can you put it on for a bit?”

“Of course,” Muoru answered, tying the cord beneath his chin. The skin of his cheeks were automatically pulled upwards and started to itch.

Great, this is perfect. Of course he couldn’t do much with just that. But at the very least it gave him the appearance of being full of energy.

He felt like he wanted to participate in a Double Ten⁴ to use up his excess energy. However, besides his headgear, he had no equipment for the activity, or a course to run on. So he would just have to continue putting up with digging holes.

² It’s worth noting that Crow’s dialogue is written in katakana, this is to give the impression of childishness

³ This “San-kyuu” is a Katakana form of the English phrase “Thank you”. It is generally considered a childish phrase and in this case is meant to be sarcastic. However, after the pause, Muoru shifts to a more adult tone which is shown in the text by a switch to hiragana.

⁴ 20 kilometer Military march.

Amazed by how excited their actions were making Muoru, Crow sighed in disbelief.

“You really like that? What could that simple thing be good for?”

“Don’t worry about it. Someone who only likes shiny things probably wouldn’t understand.”⁵

“What? How did you know I like money?” Crow asked, leaning their head to the side. Then they laughed. “Money is great! Collecting it is fun! If you have money you can do anything! And of course it’s shiny, but I also love the fact that it’s enjoyable to use. Until you enter the next life, money is a good thing to have.”

This time, it was Muoru’s turn to be surprised.

He felt it was unpleasant for a child to say those kinds of things while wearing an innocent smile, like that of an angel.

Up till that point, Crow had been behaving as if they were making some grand proclamation. But then, Crow made an ugly smile and asked, “By the way Molekun, are things going smoothly with the girl?”

⁵ Shiny here refers to gold coins, jewels, or fancy possessions.

Muoru tried to show Crow a face of hesitation, as he stepped away from the grave he'd been digging until now. Then he beckoned over to Crow, as if inviting them to a secret conversation.

As Crow pranced their way closer, Muoru said in a small voice, "Ah, maybe you could say it's going well."

"Really...what happened?"

"I tried to be honest with her. That's all."

"Ah, is that right? And I thought the unfriendly Muoru was much more fun. Oh well, if it makes her happy then I suppose it's alright."

Muoru raised his arm to push Crow.

"Oy." Crow dodged his blow effortlessly, as if they were weightless. But then with the same force as if they had been bitten by a snake, Crow sank beneath the ground.

"Ey, wait a minute Mole-kun. What are you doing! My butt hurts!"

With a sigh, Muoru recovered his shovel. The hole Crow had fallen into, specially made by the mole, was narrow and deep. A child's body could be buried up to its head, but Crow's fingers could barely reach the edges of the hole.

"I didn't want to trick you like this, but it can't be helped. I unfortunately don't have many options to choose from. So, since I'm being honest about this, I hope you will be the same."

"What do you mean?" Crow asked with a face looking like it was about to burst into tears. "Aren't I a good crow? This kind of thing is cruel."

Without paying any heed to the complaints coming from beneath his feet, Muoru asked, "There are things you haven't told me, right?"

Crow's expression darkened.



“Let’s start with you. You show up way too much. The people who frequently come and go from the outside world are the employees from the food wholesalers. And if we don’t include them then we’d have to talk about your mask-wearing friends. They come about as often as the wholesalers. But even they don’t come as often as you. Plus, all of them seem to always go back and forth in a big trailer. So, I think it’s only natural for me to have questions. Now tell me, why are you the only one who can move about freely from this place?”

From the bottom of the hole, Crow smiled. “Well, well. You catch on quickly. It’s regrettable that you were only made to dig holes. Has anyone ever told you that?” Crow’s smile looked inhuman, as if their face had been cut from the edge of their lips to their cheeks.

“Okay then, why don’t we talk?”

Even Muoru smiled. Crow’s words were funny.

A good crow? What a joke.

It was well known that since a very long time ago, crows have had the reputation of being ominous birds.

#

Then evening came.

The boy was busy leveling the hole he'd used to intimidate Crow. For Muoru, filling holes was particularly more enjoyable than digging. All he had to do was place a loaded shovel above the hole, tip it, and let gravity do the rest.

He filled the hole until the dirt was level with the ground, then he used his shoes to lightly stamp out the traces of the dig.

That was exactly when he saw the small-statured Daribedor walk over.

"What's that, Mr. Prisoner?" The old man asked, staring curiously at Muoru's head.

"I found it. It won't be a problem right? I think it's a simple consolation for when I buried that monster."

"It's fine, I suppose."

"Okay, but other than that, can I be of any use? Do you need help with another burial or something like that?" Muoru asked as he placed his shovel on his shoulder.

Daribedor shook his head. "I came about tomorrow's work."

Then leading him outward, they eventually reached a massive unused plot of land amidst a jumble of tombstones in the graveyard.

Muoru already had a bad feeling about the assignment.

Daribedor bent down, drew some markers out of his pocket and stabbed the first into the ground at his feet.

“The hole will be from here...”

He walked with even smaller steps than Crow, but his feet didn’t stop. They never stopped. The two of them just continued walking and walking. For the longest time Daribedor didn’t even make an attempt to put down the second marker in his grasp.

Time seemed to be flowing frightfully slowly.

This is good, stop. Stop already, Muoru wished in his mind as he glared at the old man. He felt like catching the old-man off guard, rushing to him and yanking the back of his custom-made tailcoat to stop him.

“...to here,” Daribedor finished, eventually placing down the last of the four markers.

Muoru barely registered what he'd said. It was such a massive distance. It made the hole he was ordered to dig earlier for that fleshy monster seem laughable.

"Well, then. I know it's a lot to ask, but if you can, please begin tomorrow." After that brief statement, Daribedor politely bowed his head, turned back towards the mansion and began to walk past Muoru. The boy didn't really want to have any sort of close conversation with the old man, but as he passed...

"Am I burying an airship?" He couldn't help but ask.

Like a cicada, Daribedor laughed, and then he left.

It seems like I'll have to do it earlier than I thought.

Daribedor had told him it'd be okay to start tomorrow, but Muoru's body was already in motion. Though he was starting a little ahead of schedule, he knew he wouldn't be able to make that much progress, and yet he worked nonetheless. Soon he was forced to go back to the stable and fetch the cart he used for moving dirt.

The size was really absurd and it wasn't entirely a joke when Muoru asked if it were an airship. Of course he wasn't just talking about the hull of the ship, but also the streamlined air-sac stuffed with helium.⁶

⁶ Streamlined: Having a contour designed to offer the least possible resistance to a current of air, whatever, etc.; optimally shaped for motion or conductivity.

The bigger they are, the more power they have.

The first one he saw, the monster with just the face, was buried in a hole that could fit in the stable.

The one that had hurt Meria had been twice as large. It possessed a terrifying power, and was essentially immortal, to the point where it was doubtful that a company of elite tank corpsman could stop its movement.

And now, the hole he was digging was for something even larger than both of them.

And if that were the case, then just how powerful is the monster they expect to put in here?

He couldn't help but shudder. Did a monster like that really exist in this world? He felt like just one of them could lay waste to an entire country.

So in that case, did a grave keeper have to stop a single country's destruction – or more than that, were they supposed to prevent the death of humans with their very own bodies?

Muoru poured all his energy into digging out the hole and a mountain of dirt soon piled up before his eyes. In fact, by the time the sun had set, the dirt was taller than he was.

Muoru was grateful that there wasn't a cloud in the sky and that the moon was shining brightly. And perhaps, that night sky was also the reason why Meria wasn't carrying her usual lantern.

"Muoru...?" Meria asked with a doubtful voice as she came up to Muoru's side. It made sense since half of his body, up to his hips, was in the hole.

But when Muoru looked up, he noticed that she seemed to be looking strangely at something on his head.

Ah, that's right. Though he'd just received it today, he'd completely forgotten the feeling of it. It was something his head was used to. The item Crow had brought for sure didn't have a national emblem, but it was the same design and shape as the officially adopted equipment the infantry used. Even the size was exact, as if it had been fitted to Muoru's head with a tape measure.

"Ah, this?"

As Muoru was about to tell her its name, with difficulty she said, "A helmet?"

The two of them then moved and sat on the edge of the hole. Seated directly beside him, Meria seemed extremely embarrassed, but at the same time, she also looked somehow happy.

In that good mood, Muoru explained how incredible the helmet was. Since ancient times helmets had been used continuously to protect the body's most important part. As the current age came, the combination of steel and plastics made them both lighter and tougher. And with tank shells and grenades flying across the battlefield and spreading shrapnel with each explosion, protective gear for the body was essential. They could also, for the most part, protect a person from handgun bullets shot from mid-range or farther.

The lives of countless soldiers were saved from raining bullets because of these. And probably, even that leader⁷ who was sniped in an open car during a parade could have been saved if he'd worn a helmet. But of course, the battlefield wasn't the only place where helmets are considered necessary. They were also used in various ball games, sports, horse riding, when riding a motorcycle, at the construction site of a new mine...

"...but why are you wearing it now?" Meria asked? Though she seemed to be enjoying listening to Muoru, it was her first question on the subject.

Muoru found it difficult to respond.

In the middle of the night, shade had no meaning, and of course bullets weren't flying towards him.

The reason I'm wearing this...

⁷ Most likely a reference to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, however it could also be referencing the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy.

“It feels good,” the boy answered.

“Really?”

Seeming to have honestly accepted his response, which he’d only said under pressure, Meria cocked her head to the side, envy written across her face. It was like she actually believed the helmet produced that kind of effect.

The boy started to correct himself, but he quickly stopped himself. Instead, he undid the strap beneath his chin, then with both hands held out the helmet towards Meria.

“Would you like to try it on?” he asked.

Meria’s eyes lit up. “Can I?”

Muoru nodded and then Meria casually removed her hood.

...Honestly speaking, the moment he’d been waiting for the longest time to happen, to see Meria with her hood down, was no accident. In fact, handing over the helmet had been his plan all along.

The hair she was hiding within the dark cloth spilled down from her shoulders to her back. Being so close to one another, he could also smell the faint scent of soap, but that wasn't the most striking feature. Illuminated by the moonlight, Meria's light brown hair sparkled beautifully, as if it had sugar woven into it.

Then, looking bashful, Meria faced Muoru and held out her hands to receive the helmet. Her arms were slightly spread wide, as if she were waiting for him to hug her.

...He couldn't do that, though he hated to admit it.

Meria was cute.

He liked her.

The way she hung her head to the side, the way she fluttered her eyelashes- each of her movements he couldn't help but love.

He felt like if he hugged her tightly now he'd end up stealing a kiss.

...but he couldn't do that.

As to why, he wasn't quite sure, and it was difficult to put the feeling into words. But when he handed over the helmet, looked at the girl's pale and delicate hands, then looked back to his own dirt-stained hands, the reason became clear.

She and I are from different worlds.

He really liked everything about her.

Not just her physical appearance, or her body- *though I'm certainly not denying that*. He liked everything, even her heart which Crow had said was like a skeleton's. And just seeing himself reflected in her blue, tranquil eyes made him feel like the insides of his arms were slowly twisting.

If someone asked why he felt that way, the only answer he could probably give was that her heart was burned into her eyes. He'd never felt this way before. And in his mind he was strongly considering how good it would be to really be hugged by her.

But, she was a grave keeper.

She'd taken in the power of the dark, couldn't die, couldn't go out into the sun, and couldn't leave the graveyard.

And he was prisoner #5722. But it was a false charge and he did not intend on spending the rest of his life here digging graves...*I won't do that that, no matter what.*

Since the helmet didn't fit her head, it nearly completely covered her eyes.

"It's heavy," the girl mumbled.

Muoru laughed. "Meria, your hair's caught in the strap."

"Huh?"

Muoru made his move and reached for the strap hanging beside Meria's neck and gently pulled it forward.

.... What he'd just said was a lie.

Muoru softly put his hand on the helmet as it slipped down on her head.

The edge of the helmet's lower half was now at her lips, completely blocking her sight.

Thinking she couldn't see anything, Muoru inched his body closer without making a sound. Then he kissed the helmet directly above her forehead.

"Muoru?"

“It seems like it doesn’t fit you after all,” Muoru said as he backed away and removed the helmet from her head.

Did she feel it?

His heart seemed to be beating with enough force to break his ribs.

If he was this flustered from just touching the steel, he wondered what would happen if he’d kissed her for real.

Fumbling with the strap, he peeked to his side and saw Meria staring at the helmet in his hands, a slightly regretful expression on her face.

She didn’t seem to have noticed what he’d done.

“Meria...” Muoru began, shifting his body to hide his reddening cheeks.

“Just like I’d said the other day, I came here as a result of a false charge. And the fact that I’ve become a prisoner is nonsense.” The girl silently nodded in agreement and Muoru continued. “So, I will escape from here. I will leave this place. And when I finish digging this grave – that will be goodbye.”

The expression Meria showed when she understood was the second most awful of the reactions Muoru had expected.

“Right...that’s better...for you.”

There was surprise on her face....and sadness.

Muoru felt a bit of sadistic joy that Meria was sad that he was leaving her. But the second most awful reaction also made him feel the most at ease.

Though there was no excusing the fact that he had a selective imagination, in truth he simply couldn’t imagine what would happen had his admission not gone over well and she backed away, crying or something.

But regardless of her reaction, what he had to do didn’t change.

There was no time.

Like it or not, he had to do it.

This was the last time he would dig a grave as a prisoner.

His only wishes now were that the plan would go well and that he’d be able to handle what came after.

Chapter 8

“It’s incredible that you were able to complete such a large hole in just four days.”

Realistically speaking, no ordinary person would think the giant hole was a grave just by looking at it. The result of all the digging, which caused Muoru’s arms to be swollen from the strain, looked like the excavation site of some historic ruin.

He already felt like the silver colored shovel given to him at his arrival had become something like a companion. Of course he’d only had it for a short time, but during that brief period it was by no means inconvenient. His previous shovel may have been made from good materials, but this one was much lighter. If he swung the shovel thousands of times a day, its light weight would definitely be helpful for his arms. And no matter how much he abused the tip, it never lost its sharpness. But most importantly, the blade was wide, meaning he could scoop up more dirt than before. And on the other side, the grip had been ingeniously designed to make carrying loads easy.

The thought of losing his companion after this hole, should he fail in his mission, made him sad. He thought it would definitely help him succeed. But of course, his primary driving force couldn’t be compared with his attachment to a shovel.

“Honestly, I truly appreciate your effort. You’re probably tired, so please head back and relax,” Daribedor said with a smile, but that smile was in no way a reward for Muoru.

Muoru went to leave, but then he remembered something and stopped himself.

“Ah, I would like to ask one thing,” Muoru said, looking over his shoulder and down at the small-statured old man. “Will it be better if I don’t sleep tonight? That is, does it look like I’ll have to work tonight?” The underlying question his words implied being: Will the monster be coming tonight?

“Perhaps. Well then, yes, that would be good.” The wrinkles around Daribedor’s mouth seemed to deepen.

Muoru gave a light nod then left.

That’s one less thing I have to trust to fate.

Yet at the same time, now he had a clear time limit.

Muoru washed himself at the reservoir, and then he passed the rest of the time the sun was out back in the graveyard underneath the giant tree.

He went to Maria’s grave close to the tree and placed a nameless flower in front of the stone. It was pretty much a weed, just something he’d picked in the area, but he supposed it was better than nothing.

He then stabbed his shovel into the dirt and put the flower into the ground.

When finished, Muoru rested his back against the trunk of the tree and watched the evening sun set for what might perhaps be his last time.

As the sun set into the distance, descending into the deep, dark forest, he thought it was big, warm, and even gentle.

At some point he nodded off and had a dream. In it he recalled his father's sturdy, strong back. It created such a sense of loneliness, that he wished he could see his father more every day. Until that point, Muoru had had no idea just how important he was to him.

Then night came.

The last night.

There was no need for Muoru to go searching; Meria came almost at the same time as the sun fell.

That night four days ago, she'd looked miserable after he'd told her they would be parting. Even the dark robe she was wearing seemed to be of a darker hue.

And now he was driven by the urge to comfort her as she stood before him, even if he had to tell a lie. But he couldn't. If he told her what he was thinking about doing next, she'd no doubt be against it.

And it was preferable that Meria didn't have a say in the matter.

...He was a really cruel person. And even if his false charge were cleared up, he'd still have to endure the fact that he hurt her as punishment.

If I had to punish myself for that, I wouldn't be just a normal prisoner. I'd put myself on death row for sure.

"Muoru," the girl called his name with a voice that seemed devoid of energy.

She then looked at the ground for a while, gripping her sleeves as if she wanted to say something. Muoru didn't dare try to look at her face.

Even then he felt that was cowardly.

"This is where we part ways," the girl finally said after the long silence.

"That's right."

"If this is the end...I have just one request." Meria lifted her head. Her eyes were watery, but her gaze was substantially strong. "Face that way," she said.

He didn't know what she intended to do, but in the end Muoru turned his back to her.

This can't be happening... whatever you do, don't stab me with a knife. The moment he had that foolish thought, he felt a light impact, like his back was hit by a large ball.

"Meria?"

He couldn't believe it. She had buried her beautiful face in his rugged back.

As his body stiffened, he heard her take a deep breath behind him.

"You smell like the sun," she said, but he didn't just hear her voice through the air, he also heard it through his skin. "I've longed for it for so long."

He felt the blood in his body begin to boil, but even more than that he could feel the warmth from Meria's nose and mouth pressing against him.

"I just stink of sweat," he said without thinking and feeling a little embarrassed.

"Be quiet," she said, like she was commanding a sulking child.

At night, the graveyard was silent. And with the two of them also standing quietly, the only thing he could hear was the girl's deep breaths.

Finally noticing her hand, Muoru realized she had crossed her hand in front of his navel completely unnoticed.

You're crafty. Muoru thought automatically. *In this posture, I can't hug you back without breaking your arm or something, right?*

Standing there in that position, Meria's breathing was like a sleeping child's.

Trying to preserve the silence, Muoru turned around and desperately suppressed the urge to hug her back. The feeling seemed to fade with the same slowness as the setting sun, and when it finally did completely disappear, he could hear the sound of his heart pounding below around the point where he felt the girl's warm breath.

Try saying it again, stupid bird¹, the boy thought, in his head cursing what Crow had said before.

¹ A very interesting phrase. The Kanji = Stupid bird, but the phrase references Albatrosses. An albatross in English is also a metaphor that means "a wearisome burden, such as inescapable guilt or responsibility." It is possible that the author was thinking of the English metaphor, but I think they were just calling Crow stupid. That would fit better with the "Muoru's cursing".

The girl is hollow, like she has the heart of a skeleton.

He didn't know how long Meria's face had been pressed into his back, but at the very least it was long enough to leave lines from his clothes on her blushing cheeks.

"Thank you," Meria muttered to Muoru after he turned around.

Terribly embarrassed, the two of them couldn't meet each other's gaze.

...But embarrassment wasn't the main reason why Muoru couldn't look into Meria's eyes

"This time you look away," Muoru said.

Still blushing, Meria nodded once and obediently followed his request.

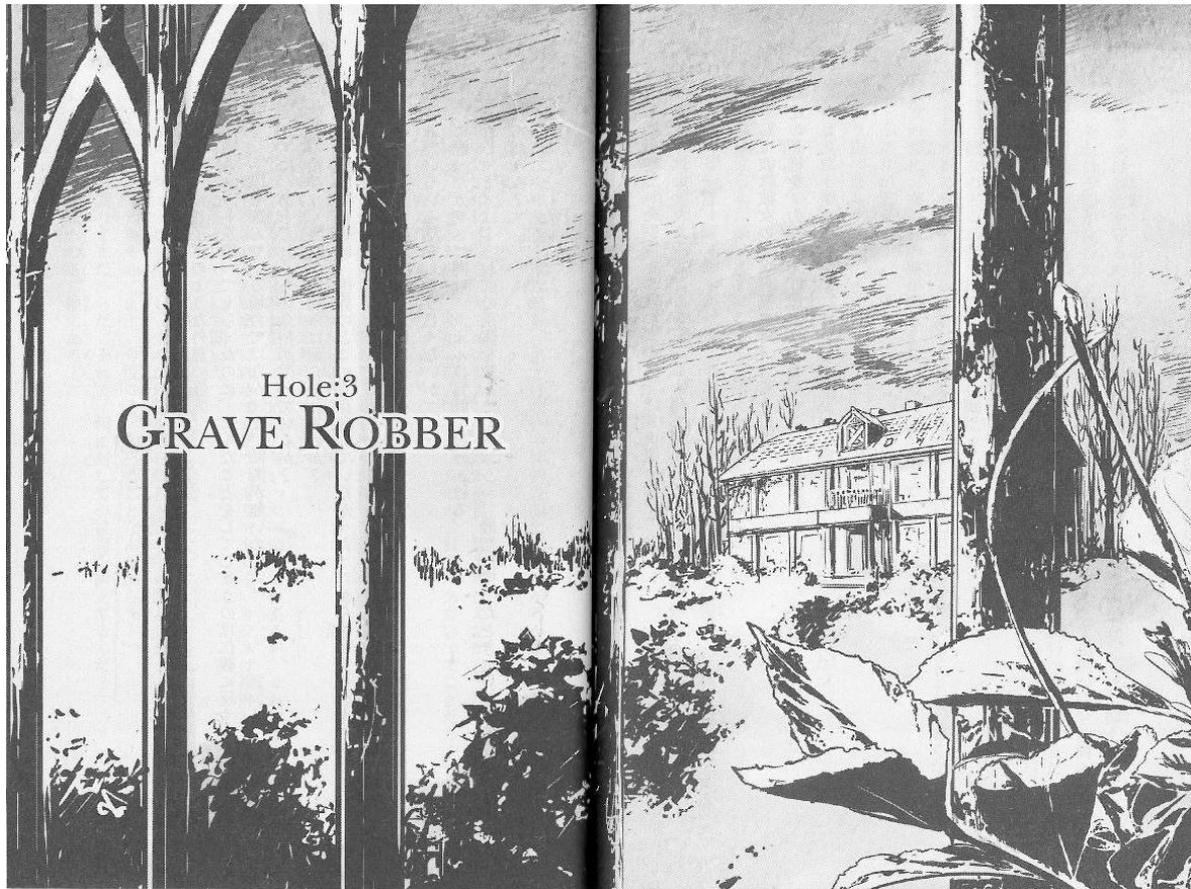
Muoru reached out to her dark hood and lowered it. The sight of her hair was like the beauty one would see when opening a jewel box.

He pushed his fingers through her hair, revealing the nape of her neck. The two of them both shivered the moment his fingers touched her skin and for a moment Muoru removed his hand. But then he took a deep breath to calm himself.

He then whispered a single word and put his arms around her slender neck.

...And snapped it.

Hole 3: Grave Robber



Chapter 1

The mole had dug a very deep trap hole; and inside Muoru had caught the strange Crow, who looked like a child. Even though Crow had given him the helmet, Muoru still tricked them into falling into the trap. He realized that the deception went against his moral code, but he had no other choice.

There was no time.

How much time did Meria have left?

And how much more pain can her heart endure?

There wasn't a tool in the whole world that could measure that, but even if there were, it would probably be better not to use it.

And so this was the second time he was going to talk about the pain Meria didn't need to suffer.

"Okay then, why don't we talk?" Crow asked.

Looking at the Crow he'd captured, Muoru launched his questions.

"Well then, first of all...I'd like you to tell me who you truly are. Was the mask you showed me back when we first met, a fake?"

"No, it's not a fake," Crow said, looking up at Muoru with an innocent expression and once again pulling out the mask from somewhere on their body.

"This is real. I got it from my "hunter" friends."

"What? So, in other words, you're saying that you're not one of those 'hunters'?"

“Your intuition is sharper than any claw, Mole-kun.” Crow dropped the mask and mocked Muoru the same way they usually did. Then Crow shrugged. “I apologize for lying. I thought it would make things easier...but it’s a bit difficult to explain my position.”

“It’s alright if it’s difficult. Just tell me, or I’ll bury you. I mean it!” Muoru scooped up some dirt and held it over the hole.

It may have been a threat, but if Crow screwed around anymore he was prepared to bury the lower half of their body.

Pouting, as if saying ‘give me a break’, Crow reluctantly spoke. “Well then...I’m a ‘representative from the victims’ association’ so to speak.”

Muoru shook the shovel and some clumps of dirt rained down into the center of the hole.

“Hey, hey cut it out! I’m telling you the truth this time.”

“Well, you sound like you’re screwing around. But if not, tell me, what type of suffering are you complaining about?”

“About the devils of course. Could there be anything else?”

“If you’re not joking about being a representative, then there ought to be others,” Muoru said, intending Crow’s words to be just another joke. However...

“Yes, there are others. Ten of them,” Crow replied quickly with a thin smile. “Why are you asking me about that anyway? You’ve already met them.”

“Are you talking about Meria?” Muoru asked right away. He couldn’t think of anyone else it could be. “Is she also a member of your imaginary victims’ association?”

“She qualifies,” Crow answered. “But, she’s different...she’s not a member yet”

“Why is that? Meria...”

There was no one who suffered at the hands of those monsters like the undying grave keeper girl...and even if there were they’d been killed a long time ago and were probably buried in a grave.

“Unfortunately our movements are limited to the day. Since that girl can’t come out into the graveyard except at night, we’ve never met. But, I can’t say I completely don’t know anything about her...” Crow was being vague and speaking in a roundabout way.

Muoru wanted to probe further into what they meant, but before he could ask another question –

“But I knew Maria well in the past. Definitely more than any other person around these days,” Crow said something he couldn’t ignore.

...The person he didn't know, the grave keeper who Meria said was like an older sister.

Why did that name come out of Crow's mouth? I mean, Crow seems to know the graveyard well, so it isn't that strange that they would know it, but still...

Attempting to hide his discomposure, Muoru turned his gaze away from the bobbed-haired person in the hole and sat down.

Then as he moved to sit on the ground cross-legged, he heard Crow say, "Why do you think Maria died?"

He quickly turned around. Just a second ago, no, just a moment before, Crow had been in the hole. But now they were standing to his side, their voice sounding like they were close enough to rest their chin on his shoulder.

How did you do that?

"Grave keepers shouldn't die. So then, how did Maria die?"

"She probably burned up in the sun."

"What, she told you that?" Crow seemingly surprised, blinked at the response that flew out of Muoru's mouth. "Yeah, it's just as you said. Well, it's not like she roasted like a sunny-side up egg or anything. That's one misunderstanding I should clear up."

“There is no way to kill The Dark. In fact, from the beginning, the concept of death hasn’t applied to them. They certainly hate the light, but if it touches them, their movement will only stop. They won’t die. And when night comes they would simply start moving again...and resume their killing of humans.

“But, despite the fact that sunlight is necessary for humans, the grave keepers who have stolen their powers will die if touched by it. Don’t you think that’s strange? Why do you think that is?”

“I couldn’t care less about that. What I want to hear is...” Muoru had started off curt, but then he trailed off, unable to get out what he really wanted to say...He was completely confused, unsure how he should try and continue, or what he should try and ask.

Crow sighed.

“Humans that consume a part of The Dark become grave keepers. So, although Meria is still human, at the same time a part of her is “The Dark.” Those two aspects are intertwined and they cannot be separated. And they both have an equal effect on her. So if light hits her then her grave keeper’s body would stop. Which would mean death for a human.”

Muoru craned his head to the side. “Stopping is death?”

Crow poked Muoru’s chest with their index finger.

“Can you stop your heart?”

Muoru laughed.

“Idiot, if I did that...”

I'd die...right, so that's what Crow meant.

“Right. Now it's not just your heart, but also your breathing, your brain, your nervous system, and everything else...See, the human body is in some way always moving from the time they were in their mother's womb until the last moments of their life. Even when someone is asleep, fainted, or unconscious, their body never stops. In other words, the concept of stopping is precisely how humans are able to perceive death.”

Muoru grabbed his chest. “Hmm, so if the monster's part becomes unable to move, so too do the grave keeper's heart, lungs and such- basically all of their human parts also stop moving. And as a result, they die...is that what you're telling me?”

“That's right.” Crow nodded.

Muoru bit his lip.

Many thoughts were racing around in his head. But overall he was mostly thinking about how far he should trust Crow's words.

All this doubtful talk was nothing more than guesswork. But then again who wouldn't be troubled by putting their weight on a potential trap suspension bridge.

...Still, Crow had an objective; and probably the only reason they got so close to Muoru was to achieve it.

Right....there was no other way...I'd have to do it...to her....with my own hands...

"Mole-kun, I want to hear how determined you are." Crow looked directly at Muoru. "You may not believe me, but I really like you Muoru. And I have an idea of something you can do for Meria, a way to help her. So tell me, how far are you willing to go for her?"

Muoru had absolutely no trouble answering.

Chapter 2

The night air was bitterly cold, making Muoru run his hands up his upper arms.

A humid breeze was blowing and above his head the leaves howled. Thin clouds hung in the dark sky far above, and even father above than that was the perfectly circular moon shrouded in a haze.

The thick mass of leaves blocked the moonlight, preventing it from reaching the giant tree's roots. Standing within that flickering shade made him feel like he was taking a step outside the human world and entering into the domain of darkness.

He kicked off his tattered shoes, stuck his fingers into a depression in the tree trunk, and relying on just his physical strength, started to climb. His limbs weren't used to the motion, and he clung to the tree like a frog, sluggishly making his way towards the top. He would have felt at ease if his palms could grip the opposite side of the trunk, but the tree with 'the strongest monster' underneath was gigantic. It was so big that if he spread his arms out wide and tried to hold it, there wouldn't be any bend in his elbows.

Muoru realized he wasn't good at climbing trees, but out of the things he had to do, this could definitely be called the easiest.

Find it...

He finally reached one of the branches jutting out from the tree. Though just a branch, it was thicker than the usual tree trunk. It was so huge that when the large-statured Muoru rested his entire body weight onto it, his body didn't stiffen in terror. He then stuck his head upwards into the overgrown dark leaves.

Surrounded by thick leaves that seemed to absorb the moonlight, he could barely see anything. In fact, he felt like trying to find something within the leaves was about as difficult as fishing out a ring that was dropped into a murky swamp.

No matter how much he strained his eyes, it was useless.

Left without a choice, Muoru started to search with just his palms and his instincts. He couldn't rush. From tip to tip, the total mass of the giant tree's branches could fill the entire mansion in the corner of the graveyard. Plus, he had to search from his position without changing his grip that much.

Determined, Muoru blindly pushed his way through the thick leaves and branches. It was like he had dove into a dark ocean and was roaming randomly about the water. The sharp, pointed branches scratched his cheeks and earlobes. And the detestable leaves even made it hard to breathe, to say nothing of the fact that he couldn't see anything.

Suddenly the sweaty bottoms of his bare feet slipped.

"Tch."

He grabbed a young branch at once and his body jerked, shifting the majority of his weight onto his left hand. A chill ran through his body. The ground was more than two meters down and if he were to break his foot or something at a crucial time like this, then he'd be the biggest fool in the world.

He carefully set both of his feet back on the branch and restored his balance.

Muoru then reached his right hand into the darkness above...and plucked a fruit.

He couldn't see it, but even in the dark he knew that it was the fruit he was searching for. The moment he grabbed it the fruit squirmed in his palm, like he had caught a living fish.

Slowly, Muoru shifted his position and dangled down from the branch with one arm. Then he jumped down. When he hit the ground, a rush of pain shot through his legs which numbed them slightly.

But he pretty much didn't feel any sense of accomplishment from his first task.

The next one though...

Muoru timidly held his hands out into the moonlight. In his grasp was the thing that would change his life.

The part of the monsters.

The dark fruit.

...The grave robber's harvest.

It was halfway between an apple and a peach in terms of general shape and size. But looking closely, it also resembled a heart with large arteries or something. As for the color, it looked like it had been painted jet black with squid ink. And even though it was a part of the monsters, no claw or anything like that suddenly sprouted out and attacked him while it was in his hand.

Could this tiny thing really grant humans immortality, but as a consequence make them unable to stand under the sun?

However, Muoru had touched something very similar to the fruit in his hands. It felt exactly like the monster's sack of flesh he'd pushed before; it wasn't hot, it wasn't cold, it wasn't soft, it wasn't hard, it felt exactly like an organ from a corpse.

Since he wasn't able to see at all, the fact that he had grabbed the fruit blindly in the dark had instinctually made him uncomfortable. And exposing the fruit to the light only intensified that feeling. The unpleasantness welling up inside him was similar to having to vomit something up from deep within one's body.

He felt like chucking the fruit away into a random direction. Instead however, he howled towards the moon and opened his mouth wide like an aggressive, carnivorous animal.

Then he bit into the fruit.

He imagined it would taste bitter like bad coffee, but it actually had no taste at all. It didn't have any juice nor smell like a normal fruit and he could barely even feel its texture in his mouth. From the moment it entered his mouth, whether it was on his tongue or going down his throat, all he felt was something like sticky mud expanding. It was like his mouth was full of flavorless glue.

Then a jolt of terror gave him goosebumps.

The contents in his mouth were wriggling like a worm.

A strong wave of dizziness assaulted Muoru and his instincts immediately took up their defenses. In an effort to get their body's idiot owner to throw up the extremely foreign substance, Muoru's immune system forced his throat to convulse.

Desperately, Muoru covered his mouth with his hand to stop the regurgitation. It was slow, but as he endured the discomfort, gradually....gradually the contents of his mouth started to disappear. Yet they weren't so much going down his throat as they were slowly wriggling itself into the walls of his mouth and permeating into his body's cells.

...before long the first change occurred, but it wasn't in his stomach. It was his feet.

They felt different.

And before he knew it, his legs became terribly heavy.

If he just stood normally, his legs weren't impeded in any way. But when he tried to walk, his ankles felt like they were shackled with an iron chain, or like someone had grabbed onto his legs and was pulling him down.

Thinking back on it, Meria had always been the same way. He couldn't recall ever seeing her run.

Could this be what having the dark inside you feels like?

He looked down at his feet.

The shadow that extended from them seemed like it was strangely getting bigger...and thicker. And from what should have been his shadow on the ground – rather, through the shadow as a conduit, he seemed to feel a giant presence coming from a deeper place.

....That's it.

It was just like the dread he'd felt when he first arrived at the graveyard blindfolded. The terror that he was walking over corpses, and walking over something much larger beneath them.

And now, a part of his body had transformed into a fragment of that. Neither walking nor lifting his legs could sever the connection he felt. And to make it worse, he even saw a hallucination where his core and his heart were being pulled downwards towards that darkness...Just like when Meria's limbs were torn off and automatically crawled back to her body and reattached themselves, Muoru felt like his body wanted to return to the body of the monster beneath the ground.

He was hesitating. Far more than ever, he regretted the fact that he couldn't undo what he'd done.

...But for Muoru there wasn't much to be confused about.

No matter how many signs, indications, and so on, if they got in his way he would consider how to deal with them. And if they weren't an obstacle, then this wasn't the time to be afraid.

He gave up and looked at his body.

There didn't seem to have been any other changes so far, but...he had to check.

From his pocket he drew out a piece of glass. He'd picked it up from the garbage, some small cylindrical piece of some kind of liquid bottle. It had been broken from the opposite end of the bottle mouth and was sharp and pointed.

Decisively, he swung it across the back of his left hand.

The pain was more or less what he'd imagined.

As if he'd nicked a vein, a depressingly thick dark blood spilled out and ran down his fingers. It was like he'd grown a second heart and a dull pain pulsed with each of his heartbeats.

Muoru looked at the wound with a complex look on his face. He was starting to get the feeling that he'd done something extremely stupid to himself-

Then within several heartbeats the wound sealed up and vanished.

The gash on the back of his hand sealed itself back to normal from the inside, like a pair of closing lips. It wasn't fast or shocking, his skin just automatically closed. And other than the sticky blood on the back of his hand, and the stinging pain, there was absolutely no trace of the wound.

Naturally he felt uncomfortable, but despite the remnants of the pain, his discomfort was more directed towards the wound that should have been there.

His lips curled into a twisted smile.

But of course it was absurd to think a scratch on the back of his hand was sufficient proof of his immortality.

And he absolutely couldn't fail at what he planned to do next.

So another more in-depth test was necessary.

Still undecided, he extended a finger, but then he wavered

It was only natural for there to be a far greater resistance to what he was about to do than when he had put the part of the monster into his mouth. Though he said it was just for confirmation, the action was the same as suicide. His fingers trembled. His whole hand trembled. He simply couldn't stop shaking.

Feeling his resolve begin to weaken, Muoru bit his lip and recalled the feeling of Meria's neck in his arms.

Then he thrust his fingers into the inner side of his leather collar, and with all his strength ripped it off.

The right artery attached to "the witch's thread" ruptured and a flood of blood rushed out from his torn neck.

Unexpectedly there was almost no pain.

However no matter how many times he tried to look down at his neck, the endless pure red liquid spilled out from a place he couldn't see. It was undoubtedly a sight that would make people faint.

The right half of his body was colored red before he knew it, and without thinking Muoru pressed his hand to the wound. Suddenly his vision started to dim... he was low on blood.

Naturally, instead of using paint, his body was using the oxygenated blood that should have flowing around his brain to stain the right side of his body.

...*This was bad*, he thought from the deepest area of his consciousness.

This was different from all the wounds he'd suffered up till now. He felt like he was going down. He couldn't fight it, nor could he resist it. In fact, the very places he should have been drawing energy from were disappearing. It left him feeling hopelessly powerless.

-Whether or not it was true, he felt like he was desperately drowning. And in the end even his consciousness started to fade. He lost his balance and fell to one knee.

It's no use, he thought in a daze.

Slowly his shoulders relaxed and with a lurch, he crumbled to his side with his tongue sticking out from his lips.

...then he realized... his vision had cleared without him even noticing it.

His anemia had faded.

The fountain of blood had stopped.

And his wound had closed.

He stood up straight, feeling just as strong as he normally did. He simply frowned at his blood-soaked clothes sticking to his skin.

But as Muoru stood there, with a body drenched in blood, slowly, a genuine smile leaked out from his lips.

Chapter 3

Muoru should have been aware of how unskilled he was at that sort of thing.

At any rate, he was only a mole specializing in the digging of trenches. He wasn't a public prosecutor or a detective, so racking his brains would naturally result in limited answers even if he just tried to guess.

But since he'd been brought to the graveyard he did have a lot of time to think about things as he dug holes. Plus, he'd heard some stories that had shed some light on his predicament.

So now he had new questions about his situation, with different hypotheses coming to mind regarding the potential answers.

First, I'd like to emphasize the fact that I didn't kill 2nd Lieutenant Hedger Reeve.

And I swear, my old companion, the shovel labeled "Case #50357: Dangerous weapon A", the item rolling around within the military court's evidence storage area, which was probably more like a junk room anyway, definitely wasn't what it looked like.

Someone else was the killer.

Hedger Reeve's true killer.

Somewhere in the world was the person who had removed Muoru's shovel from his sleeping area, hit Hedger's empty head once, discarded Muoru's bloody companion in the trash pile and then falsely blamed him for the crime.

During his trial no one had even satisfactorily looked into his potential motive for the murder. However, if the military police had asked his soldier companions for a bit of information, they would have probably gotten sufficient answers supporting their claim. Probably statements like, "Muoru was rebellious so he was often physically punished by the lieutenant" or "The lieutenant would knock over Muoru's food", or "The lieutenant made Muoru clean up the horse dung all by himself".

But, I wasn't the only one of Hedger's called good for nothing underlings who was the target of his bullying. In fact, there were most likely no ends to the amount of people who resented the lieutenant.

So, even the true culprit's motive stemmed from a grudge towards Hedger. Muoru didn't have any doubts about that hypothesis.

At first Muoru thought that the thought of killing the man had only come to him once or twice. However, thinking about it now he wondered, *was that really true?*

Did Hedger Reeve's true killer really send him to the world of the dead out of resentment?

...from here on out, his theory was nothing more than a guess. And though he was merely thinking 'hypothetically', *What if the true criminal's goal was to utilize the prison system to falsely accuse a young working mole and make him come here?*

Even Muoru was aware of how absurd that idea sounded.

But it went without saying that this graveyard was definitely an abnormal place. And on occasion, the common knowledge of the outside world was obscured. So, he could only make a judgment based on what he had personally seen and heard himself.

Which brought him to Crow's first piece of testimony- "That old man is terrible. It's like, no matter how many people are employed to dig holes, once they become unable to deal with the devils, they soon become useless."

Even working a simple job of digging holes didn't seem so simple here. And if there were many cases where the laborers soon became useless, then it was likely that Daribedor must have been looking for other people who, besides having physical strength, would be able to keep a secret and cause no further trouble in extreme situations. This meant that Daribedor probably didn't object to the idea of employing a former mole shackled with a prisoner's collar.

And...

Eventually death would come even for the grave keeper who stole The Dark's power.

And if multiple people couldn't be grave keepers at the same time then preparation was definitely important...perhaps, Meria was something like a spare for Maria.

So if possible, they found someone who seemed to be able to withstand dealing with those monsters. And if by chance the person was able to tolerate harsh labor then that was probably like killing two birds with one stone. Plus it didn't matter if they tried to escape, because with a part of their body changed to The Dark they wouldn't be able to leave the graveyard.

In other words, the reason I came here...

In the end that reason was mostly unrelated to his hypothesis.

Daribedor had made him dig graves, *in advance*.

That was where another piece of Crow's evidence came in. – "The demons seem to understand their disadvantages. Now they aren't just refraining from hunting or luring out humans, they don't appear before them at all."

It was only after he'd specifically finished the grave, that the flesh monster had come to the graveyard. So, in other words the attack had been planned. How in the world they did it he didn't know, but Daribedor or the masked people probably had a way to summon the monsters.

Of course, simply summoning it wasn't going to kill it. So in essence, calling the monster was no different than sticking one's hand intentionally into a lion's mouth.

But in this graveyard...there was a grave keeper.

Even so, Muoru didn't know why or under what pretense they were luring the monsters, nor did he know if that act exposed the graveyard or the grave keeper to danger. *Could it possibly be for the sake of mankind or was that just wishful thinking?*

When he'd asked Crow about that they'd answered, "Even I want to know that these days. What I do know is that the people who take down the devils get a reward. And the bigger they are the more that sum jumps up. The masked companions make their living off that."

According to Crow, the reward surprisingly didn't come from a country or a temple organization, but from one human's wallet. The true identity of that person was largely unknown and even for the masked hunters it was half shrouded in mystery. But some reasons for only one individual to provide the rewards were that, there were no ties of obligation, and that they would give "a very fair payment" to the person who took down the monster.¹

The orphaned Meria and the others like her didn't even have a family register.² They were humans that didn't exist. So it must have been simple for Daribedor to deceive them with promises of a reward.

¹ "Very fair payment" This phrase is italicized in Japanese for emphasis. I believe it is supposed to show Muoru's skepticism with the current payment scheme run by Daribedor.

² Probably the same as in other countries, but in Japan everyone must register their identity with a so-called "family registry". This is basically a record of each family in Japan. Since it doesn't factor individuals but families, basically the author is saying Meria has no family. Which would explain why in Japanese she is called "Meria of the Mass Grave."

Even Muoru smiled in sympathy. It was a very easy story to understand. Although he'd only seen the inside of the mansion once, he could still recall the awfully extravagant furniture and decorations.

Provided a grave keeper like Meria was there, calling the monsters to the graveyard would generate a large amount of money for the caretaker.

As that flood of guesses rushed into his head, Muoru worried that the murderous feelings he'd once harbored towards Hedger were now burning in his chest for a different reason. And due to those feelings he now felt like his new companion in his hand was screaming to be used for a far more productive task than digging holes.

However, if he did that then this time around he'd be facing a genuine life sentence. And of course in that case there would be no chance to clear his name from the false accusation. And he wouldn't be able to disclose any proof he had for his previous theories. He had no money for a bribe. All he had was his own body and his feelings for Meria.

Chapter 4

Suddenly Muoru felt a shift in the atmosphere. He strained his eyes and scanned the dark graveyard, but he couldn't see any change. Then he looked towards the sea of gravestones, then the trees in the dark forest, but again he didn't see the bizarre giant-faced monster, nor did he see the sack of flesh monster with many legs, or anything that could be called their kin.

Am I jumping to conclusions or am I just too high-strung?

Muoru looked down at the hole he'd dug at his feet. It was so comically large that the average person probably would never think it was a grave. The grave looked more like a ruin excavation site or a large-scale underground trench. And Muoru felt that if a monster truly large enough to fill the hole approached, anyone would be able to recognize it no matter how far away it was.

But did that kind of thing really exist in this world?

At that moment, Muoru couldn't think of a single joke.

"Mr. Prisoner," a husky voice said.

The old man's nose-less face was pale as if he'd lost all his blood. He was gripping a black pistol in his shaking right hand, with a finger that looked like a withering branch resting on the trigger.

“Answer me! Where did you hide the grave keeper?”

Though the muzzle was pointed at him, Muoru barely glanced in the old man’s direction.

“You didn’t find her? That’s too bad.” The boy flashed a small, challenging smile. “I mean, how many places could there possibly be to hide here?”

“This is not the time to screw around. That thing is already coming here! It’ll-”

“Is that so? That’s....good,” Muoru interrupted, turning to face Daribedor directly. “Well in that case, why don’t you hide yourself? I don’t think the monster distinguishes between grave keepers, prisoners, or pigheaded old men.”

“You...your collar!” Daribedor scolded, noticing Muoru’s collar was off.

Though Muoru’s legs were extremely heavy, he took a long stride towards the old man. And a dry gunshot followed.

Daribedor fired two bullets, the first burrowing to the right of Muoru’s navel and the second drilling directly into the center of his stomach.

From that point, Muoru felt a cramping sensation, as if bizarrely powerful pliers were twisting inside him. Grunting through the pain, he grasped Daribedor's neck, and like he'd managed to do with Crow several days ago, he chucked the short-statured man into the deep hole.

Daribedor screamed. Maybe it was because of his hatred for the man, but to Muoru it sounded hideous. *Perhaps the fall broke one of his legs or something.*

Muoru dropped to his knees, clutching his open stomach with a smile on his face.

"I'm sorry...you're not injured, are you?"

A bloody froth came up Muoru's throat and bubbled out his mouth. The pain seemed to be coming from the ruptures within his body. Probably on the inside of the small opening in his torso, his stomach was ripped open causing his digestive acids to spill out and burn his organs.

Muoru could hear the man shouting out some profanities from the bottom of the deep hole and he wished he had something to shut him up. But since he'd made the hole with a water well in mind, no matter what the old man did, he wouldn't be able to get out of the hole without some tools to assist him.

"Ugh." Muoru lay down on the ground, groaning in pain.

This was probably the first time he'd ever experienced pain like this in his life.

Under normal conditions, something like a bullet would have been enough to kill him. But before long he became able to stand, and as soon as his legs were strong enough to support him, he left the hole.

Once again the wind seemed to have gotten stronger. And Muoru felt a chill as it blew on his blood-soaked clothing. The clouds were moving awfully fast. The wind blew through the trees, stirring up the branches and making the leaves cry out in a chorus.

Though Muoru's time was limited, he couldn't do anything but wait.

I haven't forgotten to do anything right? Muoru thought spontaneously.

Somewhere far away, Muoru heard Dephen howl. Crow had taken that damn dog somewhere during the day. He didn't know what Crow used on the dog, but when Crow's childlike hands caressed the animal, it became docile as if it had been castrated. Somehow those black pupils had even seemed brighter than usual.

Surprised, Muoru had asked Crow how they had tamed the dog, but Crow just laughed and jumped atop the dog's back. If Muoru had done that, Dephen would have probably bit off his crotch.

I wonder what Crow is doing now...

In the end, he felt Crow had completely evaded revealing their true identity. If he thought about it rationally, something as absurd as "The victims' association" was most likely just another makeshift attempt at deception.

But in order to steal the power from Meria – and so that she wouldn't be able to resist – it was necessary to keep Dephen from interfering.

All so that he could do...to Meria.

The wind was gradually getting stronger.

Muoru twisted his head and looked around his surroundings. Suddenly, the world shook as if an earthquake struck.

Though at first he thought it was just in his imagination, all of a sudden the feeling swelled in size like steam about to erupt. It was an overwhelming sensation, just like the night when his skin had gotten goosebumps after seeing the monster with countless legs for the first time. But regardless of when and from where whatever kind of wind came to attack him, he stood ready.

Then a metallic screech quickly touched his ears. It was definitely unclear and seemed to repeat over and over again like the creak of a warped gear or wheel. But it was clearly a terribly unpleasant sound.

The fierce wind tormented Muoru. And as his feet stumbled, for an instant his shadow seemed to blur. Then Muoru looked up and saw a darkness shroud the moon like an eclipse.

...Far above in the starry sky, a thin rift in the clouds, like smoke, wove its way downward. Inside that break in the clouds, *something* contorted its horrifically long body from side to side as it flew, wingless, through the air.

The wind was so strong now Muoru felt like he was about to be blown away, but in defiance he grabbed onto his knees and stared at the existence he would have to confront.

The creature in the sky was a giant serpent made of thousands of swords.

Maybe it was because of the far distance between him and his opponent, but from Muoru's perspective, watching the creature swim through the air seemed more elegant than unpleasant. Its bizarre body as it meandered its way down from the heavens was so large it initially seemed to cover the entire moon. But then its descent changed and it approached with the speed of a falling arrow. And as the distance between them shrank, the creature's shadow it cast on the ground seemed to grow without limits.

Its body was like a magnet dropped into countless, sharp sewing needles - *no that wasn't quite right* - it was more like it was made out of glossy, black hiltless double-edged swords. Though at a glance they certainly looked like needles from a distance, as they moved closer he saw that in actuality each of the blades was so large that Muoru couldn't possibly wield them, even if he used both of his hands.

Also the blades were vibrating with the same high speed as a chainsaw, giving the impression that they were like dense human hair covering a giant, long and narrow body. As the monster's body slithered back and forth through the air, here and there the swords rubbed against one another and emitted a high-pitched shrill. At the same time, violent blue sparks, like electricity, leaked out and followed behind the giant serpent as it soared through the air and cut through the night.

The sight of it descending headlong towards the ground was like a thunderous judgment raining down from heaven.

And Muoru was standing directly beneath it.

He was like a mole caught in a tornado or something. And the moment it made contact, his entire body felt disorganized like he'd been thrown into a giant mixer, scattering his consciousness. But before he lost all sense of where he was, he could still sense that he was smiling.

—It was a maddening pain.

But since it was the same pain Meria had experienced earlier, Muoru couldn't help but smile.

He loved Meria.

And if the two of them lived in different worlds, then he would go over to her world, even if that meant leaving the world of light, the world he'd lived in his entire life. None of that mattered to him... only her.

Despite all of the deception he had used, he and the girl were tied together now and there was no escaping that. But he was sure of one thing: after this there would be no more tricks and deception.

He really was smiling, even though it seemed like all of his methods, his objectives, basically his entire list of priorities had remarkably flipped. The only reason he had gotten close to her in the first place was to escape from this place. And now he'd chosen to remain so that he could stay close to her.

His body parts that were flung and scattered about were slowly reattaching themselves. Without even being able to look away from the attack, Muoru watched the faceless giant serpent use its body of countless blades to turn his body into tiny pieces.

The vibrating double-edged swords were terribly sharp and easily able to sever not only his muscles but also his bones like thread. And in just ten seconds Muoru was cut into a thousand pieces of meat. Then as his body slowly returned to normal, immediately it was ripped back apart. And it happened again. And again.

Muoru saw his insides dumped onto the ground. He saw the color of his organs and the color of blood in the distance. He saw the cross section of his bones and both his brain fluid and the jelly that had been protecting it. He was grateful he'd put down his helmet before the ordeal.

When his brain was split open, for a moment he felt trapped within a deep, pure red darkness as time seemed to move slowly. But soon after, the horrific pain forced him back into reality. It was like all of his wisdom teeth were leaving his skull in an act of rebellion.

However there was value in having the experience.

Muoru smiled as he screamed. Most people who tasted that kind of pain never returned from it, but Meria had certainly gone through the same experience too. And so maybe that was one way he could get close to her. Muoru smiled as those bizarre thoughts swam in his mind.

Then he screamed from the shock of having his body torn to shreds and flung all over the place. If he had the lungs or mouth to scream then he screamed, and if he had the limbs to writhe, then he clawed at the ground like a madman. And if he retained his consciousness then he thought of Meria. He thought of the color of her hair, her honest blue eyes, the taste of when he kissed the helmet on her head, the warmth of when she pressed her cheek against him, and the sound of her heart on his back. Those thoughts helped him maintain his sanity throughout the endless fatal wounds and suffering.

The instant his face was bisected like an apple, he saw that some of the blades of the snake's body had stopped moving, like they were dead. It was a sign that maybe the hell wouldn't go on forever. As his consciousness returned Muoru held that hope in his heart. He extended his fully attached right arm and tried to stop one of the swords from attacking him. When he grabbed the vibrating blade his fingertips burst open like popcorn, and a pain slipped diagonally down from his right shoulder to his torso.

This has to hurry up a little... Muoru thought as he vomited up frothy blood and tumbled to the ground. Countless of the giant serpent's swords still remained.

This needs to be settled by dawn. The blood loss was causing his consciousness to fade. It was like he was falling asleep. *I guess that's okay for now,* Muoru thought. Until the lower half of his body returned he couldn't move anyway.

Muoru opened his eyes and looked up. The clouds had dispersed without him even noticing.

And the starry sky was beautiful.

Chapter 5

“So tell me...what are you willing to do for her?”

Muoru replied immediately, “Whatever I can.”

Crow grinned. “Right. Now that’s a good answer...thank you.” Their tone was surprisingly warm, and compared to their usual provoking demeanor, it seemed...dare he say it, cute. Of course “cute” for Crow had a different meaning than what he thought of Meria.

Unconsciously, Muoru’s bent mouth opened to speak. “You’ve never shown me any kind of gratitude before.”

“Well, don’t sulk about it. I think your passionate heart is embarrassing.”

“Ugh, you,” Muoru groaned, swinging his arms at Crow in response to the insult, but for some reason he completely missed. He figured if he put all of his energy into his swing he’d at least be able to land a single blow. Crow sneered as Muoru exhaled in frustration, then jumped back onto the tombstone.

But their smile soon vanished. “If you’re ready to abandon your life as you know it,” they said in a sing-song kind of manner, “Then you must steal half of the girl’s power – half of the curse.”

“No problem,” he said.

There was not even a hint of confusion for Muoru. He was resolved the moment Crow had uttered those words. And maybe it was because of his conviction that he also felt a bit of hope.

The grave keeper and the mole. Though there was a hopeless gap between them, if the world thought they weren't supposed to be together then something needed to change. He was going to be the one to change it, and this method would grant him his wishes.

"But how do I do it?" Muoru asked.

"Essentially only one person can be bestowed with the power of the grave keeper, so if two people shared it together then the power would be halved," Crow answered as they crossed their thin legs. "But in order to do that, you'll have to kill her once."

Muoru couldn't believe his ears.

"Uh-huh."

...what was this idiot babbling about? For a moment Muoru was at a loss, but he quickly shook off that hesitation and said, "You want me to drag her out under the sun or something? ... I can't do that."

Crow laughed. "Well it doesn't matter to me if she doesn't die."

"So, as I thought..."

“You’re not a total idiot, so try using your head. There’s another way to block The Dark’s power. It may be weaker than exposing her to the light, but it’ll still work even at night. It’s a method that owes itself to this very place, where the souls of humans sleep. Please... think about it deeply. You should already know it.”

As Muoru stared at Crow, he bit his lips and started thinking.

He remembered all the conversations he’d had with Crow.

He thought about the graveyard that stretched out beneath his feet.

Then he looked at the shovel in his hands.

Then the gravestone Crow was sitting on.

Mass grave...a graveyard humans and monsters shared.

“You understand now, don’t you?” Crow asked, reading the change in Muoru’s expression.

Muoru nodded.

“Now then, this part is essential, so don’t forget it. If you do this and weaken her power, in the end—” Without hiding their large smile, Crow explained the rest of their plan.

After hearing it, Muoru turned completely red and spluttered out, “Is that possible?”

“It should be all right. And I think you’ll be happy when it happens.”

Muoru bit his lip again. It was frustrating that he couldn’t say no to Crow’s idea. So, with feelings of uneasiness leaking into his words he asked, “Is it really okay?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay....well Meria certainly won’t agree in getting you involved so you’d probably have to do it by force, but...” Crow stopped, their face warping as if trying to put up with some kind of pain. “Maria really valued Meria. She wished for happiness in Meria’s life. There’s no mistake about that- in fact when it comes to that and only that, I’m telling you the absolute truth.

“....However, Maria wasn’t very patient. No, it’s more like she didn’t have extraordinary willpower. The devil’s part inside of her, the disgust, the pain of not dying...they all proved to be too much for her to handle. And that’s why she ended her life.

“Sure, it’s easy to think that such a feeling couldn’t be helped, but....in the end the only thing she regretted was leaving her younger sister to such a horrible fate.

Perhaps it was just cowardice, but Maria was terribly worried for Meria, even though they weren't related by blood.

“And that is precisely why she can't sleep...so no matter what it takes, I want to grant Maria's wish. I want Meria to be happy.”

I feel the same way...

Although he'd went so far as to throw Crow into a trap to try and get information out of them, that was his only intent. The rules of the world he'd come from were quite different from those governing the monsters and the grave keeper. And they seemed like something people like him could do nothing about. Even if he tried to think about how to fight those rules, his choices were extremely limited. And so even now it didn't seem likely that he could save Meria.

Even so...helping Meria gain happiness would probably bring him happiness as well.

What would her face be like if I were able to remove the source of her pain and suffering?

If it were possible—even though he understood that it was unreasonably selfish, he still wished for such a future. And if someone could see him now, they would certainly think that such a wish could make him happy. Even though far from being unable to escape, as a trade-off he would never again be able to leave the graveyard again.

Would I really be happy?

Without much of a change in his expression, Muoru smiled. It was funny how he wasn't even trying to think about all the things he'd considered until now. Since coming to the graveyard he'd only thought about escaping, and before that he felt he'd passed each day only thinking about how to live longer. But in the past his only job was digging holes, regardless of which thoughts filled his mind.

"I'm sorry, Mole-kun," Crow said. "Perhaps after this...you and your body will have to go through a lot of terrible suffering." Crow then lowered their head in sympathy.

"Umm." Muoru laughed weakly, feeling a bit embarrassed about what he was about to say. "Thank you for worrying about me, but...for me, being here but unable to do anything is far more painful."

Chapter 6

The final stars disappeared.

Muoru couldn't even see the moon anymore.

In the pale sky the nearest star, the sun, seemed to be approaching. He could sense that giant celestial sphere rising up from right under the eastern horizon. And sure enough the first light of morning finally arrived, with his death following closely behind.

His body was already sensing his ominous fate. It was a sensation completely different from when the monster tore and scattered his body apart. In fact, the feeling was a pain which seemed like someone had directly stuck their hand into his back, grabbed a hold of the central nerves around his spinal cord and brain stem and squeezed them tightly.

The snake made of countless blades was gigantic. And powerful. Each of its double-edged blades had severed Muoru's body, inflicted fatal wounds, then became motionless, creating a process of death and rebirth that repeated throughout the night.

But despite the pain he felt when the last blade pierced through his chest, when Muoru realized that the blood spewing out of his mouth was gradually decreasing, he felt relieved.

I made it through.

The monster's long and massive body was now in the giant hole he'd dug out. And each of the creature's blades, which were densely packed together like the needles on a hedgehog, were stained red with Muoru's blood. The area that the monster had rampaged through not only had sharp gouges in the ground, like a trough had been used to plow the land, but also many of the graves had been mowed down in the attack.

However, now wasn't the time to bury it. Anyone could do that and besides, when the sun rose neither he nor the monster would be able to move within its light.

Hurry...

With his silver shovel in one hand, Muoru ran.

He ran to the place right beside Maria's grave, at the feet of the tree where the king of the monsters slept.

Well ...he tried to run.

The shadow of The Dark within him felt extremely heavy, like he was dragging a giant steel ball and chain. In fact, no matter how much energy he put into his legs, he couldn't move faster than a stagger. And trying to get his body to go a bit faster seemed to exhaust all of his energy. His cumbersome body made him click his tongue in frustration.

His surroundings were already so bright that there was no need for an oil lamp or an electric lantern.

How much longer until sunrise?

His mind was possessed with a wild impatience as if he had gone insane, but his body did not follow suit.

As best as he could, Muoru hurried and hurried and eventually managed to reach his destination. At first glance it didn't look like there was anything there. The only movement were the leaves rustling atop the giant tree to the side of Maria's final resting place.

But below his feet were definite traces that the earth had been disturbed...

Muoru carefully slid the tip of the shovel into the ground.

And scooped, and scooped.

...Yet on the fifth scoop, as if he could no longer tolerate the wait, he threw aside the shovel and dropped to his knees. Then like a genuine mole, he used both of his hands to claw at the ground.

He remembered the first time they'd met.

Don't forget. Don't forget the first time you met Meria.

He'd fainted in the middle of the night at the graveyard and awoke to Meria burying him in the hole he'd just dug out.

-It seemed like their positions then and now were reversed.

Muoru's fingers curled around a strand of light brown hair, filthy from all the dirt. Hair was a girl's life, so he couldn't help but feel guilty as he clutched the filthy strands...but, compared to everything else he'd done, dirtying her hair was probably low on the list of reasons why she'd hate him.

Still, she would probably consider all the things he'd done up till now preferable to what he was going to do next.

In the dim light of early dawn, Muoru dug out the girl he'd buried with his own hands.

It was all selfish.

All of it just to suit his own selfish desires.

He needed the power of the grave keeper and since more than one person couldn't have the power at the same time, he had to steal it from the current grave keeper, Meria. She was human, but at the same time a part of her was The Dark. Burying her body sealed her power and weakened her, or in other words, put her in a death-like state. But of course, he couldn't leave her like that.

Once he had dug out her entire body, he rested her back across his lap.

“Now this is essential. The final step-” he could practically hear Crow’s laughing voice.

There were many traces of tears on his beloved’s cheeks. Without thinking, he wiped them, but no matter how many times he repeated the movement his mud-covered fingers only made her dirtier. It was like a metaphor for his current situation, painfully repeating the same thing over and over again but to no avail.

He cupped his left hand under her chin and pulled her unconscious body towards him.

Then like a grave robber, Muoru stole a kiss.

Though his eyes were closed as he did it, the instant his lips touched hers, he felt a bright white light radiate inside his eyelids. He tasted dirt and the rusty iron taste of blood. But there was also another flavor, sweet and tart, like an apple.

Partly due to his anxiety over the situation, and partly due to his own desire for her, he unconsciously stayed in that position, in that kiss for a while. Then, using his right hand to prop up her lower jaw, Muoru gently opened her mouth.

And the darkness poured deeply and indulgently into her body.

...

...

...



Slowly, there was a sign that her closed eyelids blinked.

Burying Meria in the ground that the monsters were sealed within was the first measure needed to revive her from her death-like state. And then he only had to give half of the substance that had dissolved within him back into the body it was already familiar with. He understood those steps, and now he could confirm that Crow hadn't been lying. But the way he had to return The Dark was....

“Good morning, Meria.”

Meria instantly became aware of her surroundings and removed herself from Muoru's grasp. The clumps of dirt still attached to the hem of her robe dropped to the ground. Judging from her expression it seemed like she understood he had done something to her.

“Muoru...” She was staring at Muoru with a strained look on her face, like it was taking everything she had just to say his name.

Then she opened her mouth again, but seemed to hesitate, as if she didn't know what to say. Soon after she turned red, but whether it was due to the blood rushing to her face out of anger or out of embarrassment, Muoru wasn't sure.

However, despite being covered in blood and dirt, he broke out into a smile. He'd seen her crying, smiling, troubled, and embarrassed, but maybe this was the first time he'd seen her angry.

Why in the world do I think she's also cute when she's angry?

“My neck hurts.” Meria said with a stiff voice.

“I’m sorry.”

The moment he apologized, Meria lowered her head to the ground and took his right hand.

It really feels as if we’ve switched places.

The first night when he’d seen Meria’s secret, when he’d asked her if they could be friends, he had also taken her hand in the same way, except she was the one covered in blood.

“All because you were worried about me...”

As Meria looked at his hand, which was stained a deep crimson despite not having a single wound, she seemed to understand everything. The anger disappeared from her face and a look of sadness replaced it.

I don’t really want to see that.

Even so, an extraordinary relief was spreading in his chest.

“I never wanted you to have to experience that kind of pain, Muoru.”

“It wasn’t for you,” Muoru said with a smile. “It was for the money.”

The benefactor would pay him the reward for dealing with the monster. In the past that damn old man had embezzled all of the reward that should have gone to “Meria of the Mass Grave”. But no matter how many people Daribedor employed, prisoner 5722 refused to be put in the same position. And if the reward amount was really what Crow said it was, then he could *buy* his freedom...or maybe have a castle built.

Ignoring Muoru’s wide grin, Meria looked at him sharply and pinched the back of his hand, as if to say, “Don’t lie to me!”

That wasn’t really a lie, but it was only 10% of the whole truth.

Right, it wasn’t that much of a lie. But the fact that his actions had made it so that the warm hand now gripping his own wasn’t covered in blood was more than enough of a reason for his actions. Of course with her blue eyes staring at him he couldn’t possibly say that.

“You’re really not an honest mole.”

Meria and Muoru both looked up at the same time and saw Crow sitting atop a nearby gravestone, looking down at them.

“Wow, should I say that it’s been a long time, or that this is our first time meeting one another?”

The moment Meria recognized Crow's figure, her eyes widened in shock.

"...Y...You...what...?" Meria seemed strangely flustered, and the color completely drained from her face as if she'd seen a ghost or something.

"No, this isn't the first...your way of speaking and the color of your eyes is different...but why...why do you look just like Maria?"

Meria suddenly tried to stand, but because she'd been buried for so long her legs seemed paralyzed and soon she fell back to the ground. Crow then got off the gravestone with a smile on their face as they reached down towards Meria and offered their hand.

With a face mixed with confusion, Meria tried to grab Crow's small hand. But then Crow suddenly jumped back onto the gravestone without even taking a running start...making Meria's hand grasp nothing but air. Their movement had been graceful and smooth, like they were completely weightless. Yet this time neither Meria nor Muoru who was standing behind could even pretend they were surprised.

"Sorry, but though I may be Maria, I'm also not Maria—I'm Crow. All the tens of grave keepers who have killed themselves by burning up in the sun...I am a spirit born from the pieces their souls left behind. So again I am Maria, but I'm also not her.

"However, not only does it seem like her physical appearance has mixed with my own, but I've also inherited her heart....Which of course means I also deeply hold you dear, Meria, just like she did."

For a moment Meria's expression saddened when she realized the person in front of her eyes wasn't her older sister.

Soon, however, Meria slowly nodded in Crow's direction and said, "...right. You also tried to help me." Then a smile slowly appeared on Meria's face, as if the feelings in her heart were seeping out of her chest and flowing into her expression.

"That's it. That's the kind of face I wanted to see," A satisfied Crow said with a cheerful grin.

Calming down at last, Muoru said grumpily, "Come on, don't try and tell me that 'the victim's association' was a decent explanation. And by the way, don't 'so-called ghosts' usually come out at night?"

He realized that his complaints were a bit clumsy and a bit irrelevant, but he was still confused and he couldn't think of anything else to complain about.

"Yeah, I thought so too," Crow said, pointing to their chest. "I exist from the fragments of souls that were intertwined with the devils. And those souls all died under the sun. Perhaps that's why...our souls froze beneath the sun and now we cannot come out except during the day. And as a consequence, even though Maria appeared again as a ghost, she wasn't able to see her dear younger sister."

"I'm sure, it was because the Maria inside you was cursed," Meria said and Crow then smiled, as if they realized they had brought the punishment onto themselves.

Crow then turned to Muoru. “Well, crows are blind at night.”

“Good grief, you’re so full of it...” He was about to curse, but suddenly a severe pain rushed through his back and caused his body to shift slightly. The pain was different than when the monster was flinging about his limbs. This time he could feel the pain at the core of his heart.

Muoru then twisted his neck and saw the morning sunlight hitting his back.

Even though it was definitely the same light he saw every morning he’d woken up for the past sixteen years, now he felt the light was reflecting off a guillotine blade.

“Won’t looking at the sun destroy a mole’s eyes too?”

Of course he hadn’t forgotten that. The consequence of taking the power of The Dark meant a grave keeper would die if they stood in the sunlight. But...

Meria groaned slightly.

She was also in the sunlight. She was staring strangely at her own right arm extended out of the hem of her robe. Muoru, on the other hand, found it difficult to stand and slowly sat on the ground.

A bizarre and terrible pain raged through his body.

In fact, he felt just as helpless as the time when he'd removed his collar and a fountain of blood spilled out of his neck.

But, this time...

Meria blinked over and over again as she looked down at her body.

"Is it getting weaker?"

"Well then, the Maria within me has achieved her goal. So I'll let the two of you be alone for a while. Soon I'm going to need to settle the score with that damn old man." Crow looked at the two of them suffering on the ground and stood. "I'm sorry, Mole-kun. It seems like I used you."

Crow waved their hand and their small body disappeared into the air for real. Their departure was just as sudden as their arrival.

You didn't really need to apologize...we both used each other.

Crow: a strange person who could only come out in the morning; a ghost born from the souls of dead grave keepers. Crow's seemingly practical joke of an existence was a huge miscalculation for Daribedor. Even so, Muoru thought he should have still been able to accomplish everything without Crow's help... however, whether or not he could have done it as well was another story.

This body is a bit unwieldy... Muoru slowly balled his right hand into a fist, and then opened it.

The shadow on the ground changed with his movement. And naturally he felt connected to the monster's true form, resting deep within that darkness. It hated the light and was trying from within to stop Muoru's body from moving. Plus, the monster was causing an abnormal change in his body that also made it difficult to stand.

...but....

Within the presence beneath him, the monster that seemed to be inviting fear, there was also something else, something different.

I got it...it's Meria.

The reason the two of them were still alive was because they had shared the fruit of The Dark. As a result of the split in power, their human parts were trying to compensate and resist The Dark which was also fighting back...or at least that's what it felt like.

"Meria..." Muoru started to speak, but suddenly held his tongue.

Meria was looking out into the empty distance and for a while just moved one of her hands from side to side. Then like a pendulum that had lost its inertia, her hand slowly stopped with her palm held out towards the sun.

She smiled as if she were being tickled by the strangeness of the sunlight which she hadn't seen in years. It wasn't the best smile, in fact it was a bit clumsy as if she weren't used to the feeling. Still, seeing her so happy warmed his heart.



“It hurts but...I don’t mind it.”

Before Muoru’s watchful gaze the dawn light illuminated her beautifully. She was far, far more stunning than when he’d seen her under the comparatively dark moonlight. To him, it looked like her entire body from her dirt-stained hair, to her cheeks and her palms was glimmering with a pale gold.

I want to always see her smile, Muoru wished.

...But at that exact moment, Meria plunged herself into his chest and hugged him tightly, essentially dispelling his wish.

I wonder if there is anyone who can see her face now...

As he felt the sweet pain of the sun, he gently brushed his hand through her hair and placed his hand on her back.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, my name is Enji Arai.

Thank you for picking up “Sugar Dark”.

A certain respected author once told me, “Afterwords are absolutely superfluous and unnecessary.” But I won’t be following the words of that master writer, I think that after all the time and effort, like many others, I would like to use this section to superfluously explain why I wrote a story about a graveyard.

For people still enjoying the story, I think that there are *probably* no major spoilers, so if you don’t mind, please join me in this indulgence.

It’s a bit unclear when I first got the idea.

When I was still wearing school uniforms¹, I happened to be in a bookstore in Takadanobaba², standing by the magazine racks and reading a game magazine. I don’t really remember the title nor its contents, but there was an article about a game that was retro even then. In the article, one of the pages showed the player’s character in pixel art. It represented some kind of human character job³, which looked like a male mummy, and was called a “grave keeper.”

¹ The author is referring to anytime from middle school to high school when the vast majority of students wear school uniforms.

² A neighborhood in the Shinjuku area

³ Character classes for different characters in RPGs are referred to as “jobs”

Grave keeper.

That's right, a grave keeper was the same kind of job as a "warrior" or "mage".

...or at least that's what I thought then.

At the time I already started writing a novel, but (just like now) I was suffering from a lack of inspiration. So I labeled the idea of a grave keeper as important and stored it in the corner of my mind. By using the phrase as a base, my brain swelled with wild ideas.

Of course grave keepers showed up in graveyards, or places where people buried corpses.

Taking that idea a bit further, for example, in a game when a monster is defeated its corpse disappears on the spot. But if there really were monsters that attacked humans in our world, I don't think their bodies would disappear in an instant, even if they were killed. So in that case, wouldn't they need to be buried in a special place? And wouldn't the grave keeper at that location also need a special kind of power in order to fulfill their obligation?

...And so all of this led to me managing to write a story about present day mass cemeteries in Japan, despite the fact that I felt my ability to write on the topic was largely insufficient. So naturally my first memorable literary contribution as befitting a first attempt was rejected.

After that, as if I hadn't learned from my mistakes, my writings kept being rejected over and over again, eventually making my first rejection a distant memory.

It wasn't until about a year ago when my opportunity finally came.

The Sneaker Award's deadline was two months away and I was troubled by my lack of material. Until then my principle had been to never look back. No, truthfully speaking without trying to make myself look good, even though I would have been correcting a failed manuscript, I felt that all the time it would take in the revision would be less exciting than challenging something new.

Even so, the idea of a grave keeper from my first contribution was always in the back of my mind. And as I was running out of time, I thought, "I wasn't able to get published then because I lacked experience. But now, so many years have passed that I'd more or less probably be able to write something better."

Of course the story would never be accepted if I kept the content the same. After all, there was a reason I had failed in the past. So with those reasons in mind I changed the story, the background, the time, the graveyard, the monsters, maybe all of it. Basically I just tried remaking the story myself with only the premise of a mysterious graveyard and its grave keeper.

...Still, I never thought that I would win the grand prize.

To the selection committee who gave me the opportunity to show this story to the world. To the people who helped compile this text into a book. To Mebae-san who made the awesome drawings. To all the friends who always helped me out. And most of all, to those who read this book, thank you so much. I truly appreciate it.

As for my writing style, I've got some strong habits and you've also probably recognized I'm a fairly extreme kind of person. I think with all of my weak points, I'm still very much a beginner. I'm such a novice that I can't even sufficiently express my gratitude. But when I acquire enough skill, I definitely plan on returning your kindness.

Well then, we've reached the end, but it looks like I've been given the opportunity to write another story. That alone makes me extremely happy. For those of you who have read this book, I can't tell you how overjoyed I'll be if you also pick up my next work.

"The greatest masterpiece is always the newest work." So if you don't mind, as befitting that maxim I will strive with all my might so that we can surely meet again in "Sugar Dark" volume 2.

Enji Arai,

Nov, 2009

P.S.

Now, I'm preparing a website. There's still nothing there, but if you're interested then please check it out.

<http://www.araiengine.com>

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