



GROUND ZERO: FRAGMENTS

CHAPTER 6: EVE OF A DREAM

TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K-PROJECT WORLD

"Huh? How did you get to be "King"?"

After finishing cleaning up after lunch, vacuuming the area around the dining table, collecting and folding dry clothes from high above the ground, he finally had some precious down time, as he was definitely a sun fanatic. Iwafune Tenkei, who was enjoying daytime drama reruns with his beloved canned beer in hand, turned away from the television and frowned.

The one who asked the question was Sukuna Gojo. He was lying on his stomach and operating a handheld game machine, but he mumbled, "It's clear now. Override game.".

Then he suddenly sat up and turned to Iwafune.

"Speaking of which, Iwa-san, how did you become the "Grey King"?"

He asks abruptly.

There is no doubt that it was a random question that had no context. However, it seemed like it was a topic that piqued Sukuna's interest. He gave Iwafune a curious look as Iwafune frowned as he interrupted his break.

It's more,

"Oh, come to think of it, I don't know. The reason why Iwa-san became "King". Even though he is by my side."

Even Mishakuji Yukari, who was doing his daily yoga routine, came up with the subject of Sukuna. He released his pose, let out a small sigh, and looked at Iwafune, a vainly sexy look. Iwafune peeked out from the top of his head and said, "Excuse me.".

"It's a tacit understanding that "Jungle" doesn't pry into the past."

"It's a player's saga to exploit loopholes in the rules."

"My life is not a game."

"It's boring, Iwa-san. We're friends."

"Even I don't know anything about your past."

After answering bluntly, Iwafune drank a can of beer. His gestures and expressions clearly seemed troublesome, but Sukuna and Yukari didn't give up. Even the Kotosaka parrot was flapping its wings at him.

"Right now, you're working with Nagare to play a supporting role, right? Iwa-san is also a genuine "King", right?"

"Chosen by the Slate, one of the seven great kings. Normally, you shouldn't be in a position to go underground and focus on household chores, right?"

"It's too much."

"First of all, didn't you have a different name in the past? What is it? Birds aren't chickens, they're even cooler."

"Parrot! Parrot!"

"No, parrots aren't particularly cool, are they?"

"Gah! Sukuna is terrible!"

"Writing it in kanji is cool, isn't it? Parrot."

"Yukari! Great! Sukuna, nonsense!"

"Okay. Kotosaka, shut up."

Sukuna frowned at the noisy Kotosaka, and Yukari responded as he laughed.

"Huh, "Grey King" Otori Seigo."

"That's right! Like a phoenix! Also, in terms of how long you've been a "King", it should be the second longest after the "Golden King", shouldn't it?"

"That's right. In the past, the two people who were involved in the Kagutsu Incident, the predecessor "Blue King" Habari Jin and the previous "Red King" Kagutsu Genji had an existence and eyes that were side by side. The mysterious "Grey King" who left his name in a turbulent era... If I were to compare him, I would be like Nobunaga, Hideyoshi or Ieyasu..."

"Hmm, well, if you go that far, something will be different. Even if you say so, he's an old drunk."

"Yes."

"You guys..."

Seeing his young allies teasing him, Iwafune became upset and bitter. Then, remembering the two "Kings" in his memory, he finally grabbed the top of his head.

"I just wouldn't go with those monsters. It's because they stopped being human, especially Kagutsu."

"To put it bluntly, Nagare and Iwa-san aren't "Kings" either."

"The "King" is a human. Tentatively."

"But it's refreshing to be able to comment on Kagutsu Genji like this. I'm embarrassed to say that I'm one of those people who lived in that time, right? It's hard to express, but... "Kagutsu Genji" is "Kagutsu Genji" not no matter how far you go. It's more like a pronoun than a person's name or nickname..."

"Is that correct?"

"Eh?"

"Didn't I tell you? He stopped being human... Really."

Speaking in an unusually low voice, Iwafune tilted a can of beer.

Even after more than ten years, it was still a difficult question to handle. God or devil. Paranormal phenomenon. "Something" demanded by the times or by "the world". Something that transcends the individual will.

Such an indescribable existence turned out to be in the form of a human being, or perhaps it was two people who were incarnated in this world. They moved with something different from reason in the human world. At that moment, he honestly whispered to himself that even the thought of Kagutsu's existence would destroy one's life.

If that was the original "King", then it would definitely be an imitation.

When,

"Sukuna, Yukari. Please leave it at that."

The "King", who was looking at the screen while he was sitting in his wheelchair as usual, spoke.

The "Green King" Nagare Hisui.

"Iwa-san's past belongs to Iwa-san."

His gaze was still fixed on the screen, but his voice seemed to be a little louder than usual.

After being reprimanded by Nagare, the two closed their mouths somewhat awkwardly, like children being scolded by their parents. Yukari, in particular, seemed to have honestly

acknowledged his own innocence and silently expressed his gratitude towards Iwafune with an elegant gesture.

However, Sukuna did not seem convinced.

While he acknowledged everyone's stance not to go beyond what was necessary, he still couldn't hide the fact that he wanted to know more and to be taught in particular. It could be seen that "smells like water" was written on the face of the boy, who was still very young.

Cursing, Iwafune suppressed a wry smile.

Honestly, it was a hassle. However, there was also a part of him that didn't want to take the boy's attitude lightly.

In the end, Iwafune shrugged and said:

"Sorry, but I don't have the kind of dramatic "trigger" you guys were hoping for. I don't know why, but my consciousness faded and before I knew it, I became a "King". I don't even know how that happened."

"Huh? So pitiful..."

"Don't be rude. Even if you say something like a king, there are many things to do."

Some of them must have become "Kings" after living such a dramatic experience. For example, Nagare Hisui who was in front of them. In terms of drama, he is probably one of the most prominent awakenings among the successive "Kings".

Unfortunately, he was not like that.

"Actually, why did they pick me? Slate may be unexpectedly suitable for the job."

Iwafune let out an innocent self-deprecation and bowed his head.

But,

"Negative."

Nagare responded immediately.

"Considering Iwa-san's achievements, the Slate certainly chose the "King"."

"Stop. If someone had been elected around the same time and in a similar position, I'm sure he would have done much better than me at the time. In fact, I was left with nothing."

"Negative. The chance of someone other than Iwa-san achieving what Iwa-san did at that time is so small that it can be objectively ignored."

Looking at the screen, Nagare said that nonchalantly, but with a firm tone. After snorting, Iwafune replied, "Thank you."

"After all, I don't know very well."

Sukuna grunted in boredom. "I'm sorry." Iwafune said, going back to his usual pace and tipping a can of beer.

Suddenly though,

"Ah. That's right..."

And unconsciously he was unearthing memories that he had long forgotten.

"Huh, "generate" is ambiguous, but... how should I put it... there was a bit of "foreshadowing"."

At the monologue he let out while he blinked, not mentioning Sukuna and Yukari, even Nagare was surprised and looked away from the screen.

"This is the first time I've heard of it. An omen, huh? What would you become a "King" of?"

"Ah, no, I don't know, it was the day before Slate called me, but was there a "strange thing"?"

"Strange thing?"

Nagare repeated on the urge to lean forward. Whatever will happen, the person most interested in Iwafune's past was none other than the "Green King". Kotosaka yelled "Nagare! Watch out!", but neither Nagare nor Sukuna nor Yukari listened.

Iwafune stroked his beard.

"Hmm... Still, I'm pretty sure I was drunk at the time, so I'm not sure how accurate my memory is..."

"Huh? Iwa-san, have you been drinking for a long time?"

"Don't be stupid. At that time, I was suffering from the harshness of the real world."

"Okay. What was that "strange thing"?"

While Sukuna was shocked, Yukari leaned forward and asked. Although Nagare did not urge Iwafune, his eyes shone with curiosity and anticipation.

Though Iwafune was a little taken aback, he shifted his position, sat cross-legged, and stared into space for memories.

"That's right. That was before he made me "like a king", so that was when I was still in charge of welfare at the city hall."

"Huh?! Welfare?! I mean, Iwa-san, were you an official?!"

"Ah, but somehow, I get it."

"Yeah. I've heard of that work history."

"Isn't that a lie? Did a drunk like you comb hair? Did you shave every day and wear a tie?"

"What's up, Sukuna? Not bad at all, right? A public servant is important. For the good of the world, he works diligently day and night."

"No, stop it! I can't imagine it. Heh, it's too funny if I imagine it!"

Sukuna laughed as if something had happened. Iwafune felt his cheeks burn and pursed his lips dejectedly.

"Anyway! I was a social worker at the town hall and, partly because of my job, regularly ran a soup kitchen for the homeless. Well, to be more precise, I was helping out at a certain church where I cooked."

Yes, as soon as he said that bluntly, memories welled up in a way that even he didn't expect.

For various reasons, there are people who cannot save themselves. People who can't be called excellent, or rather have only glaring flaws, but are still "good" people.

He wanted to help people like that, he wanted to be strong to protect them.

At that time, he was seriously thinking about those things from the bottom of his heart.

That's why helping the church cook was more like a volunteer than an extension of his work. In fact, Iwafune was unnecessarily obsessed with it and looked bitterly at his colleagues in the government office. However, Iwafune's enthusiasm did not cool down even though he was a bit reluctant. He found joy in serving the helpless.

However, the church that Iwafune attended had a certain problem. The church, located in the center of the old town, was an obstacle to a large-scale redevelopment plan that came about by chance.

Looking at the big picture, the remodel must have been the "right" thing to do. It was clear that the project would generate enormous wealth, and that wealth would have enriched the lives of many people.

However, the priest in charge of the church was on the side of those who were not included in the "many".

Rather than a cleric, he was a large, muscular man who looked more like a professional wrestler. At the time, Iwafune was in love with him and at one point even considered him his life mentor. And he stubbornly refused to agree to eviction from the church and often clashed with the redevelopment faction.

Iwafune did everything in his power to help him, but he was unable to resolve the situation. On the contrary, he received strict orders from his boss to convince the priest. Needless to say, the city was also involved in the redevelopment plan. Iwafune, who was caught in a dilemma, was worried and gradually increased the amount of alcohol he drank.

That was when the priest was attacked by an assailant.

"Hmm? Wait, Iwa-san. Who was the assailant?"

"Huh? Don't you know? That's why you're a boy."

"Normally, you didn't know, in those days. Well, it's the people who were working to evict the people who lived there to buy the land."

Sukuna still bowed his head at Yukari's explanation.

"Did they want to take it with all their might? Wasn't it smarter to buy it? Ah, buy it as cheaply as possible?"

"I would have said so, but in any case, it's not a matter of money. It's for neighbors who don't understand money, no matter how expensive it is, to leave their land. Even Sukunachan wouldn't be willing to sell this hideout, no matter how much money has accumulated, right?"

"Oh, it is true..."

"I can understand why the priest refused to sell it if there were a lot of people who had nowhere to go if they lost that place."

"I see. Well, we are the same, we have nowhere to go."

"Actually, thinking about it like that, I don't think much has changed since the old days. Even now, I still "cook" for those pitiful people every day."

Yukari responded with a wry smile at Iwafune's words, while Sukuna asked, "Who's pitiful?".

In the midst of that, Nagare, who was fully aware of the fact that she was being served food, calmly said:

"Didn't you say the priest was attacked? Was your life in danger?"

"I didn't get that far. Well, I hurt my leg a bit, but I recovered quickly. On the contrary, I was on fire with fighting spirit."

Iwafune spoke lightly, but at the moment he was extremely serious. What appalling violence. Of course, the police also acted, but unfortunately they could not arrest the culprit, and in the end it turned out to be the crime of a bystander. That was it, the attackers were meticulously prepared.

Concerned about the priest, Iwafune convinced him to compromise, but he refused. And again, the owner's move ended with a dark raid.

Interfering with church business and intimidating surrounding residents. The assault on vagrants lining up at the soup kitchen and the intimidation of food providers. Various tangible and intangible harassment heated up over time. Iwafune desperately tried to defuse the situation, but all to no avail.

And finally...

They told him not to come back.

Yes, that's what the priest told him. Iwafune still vividly remembered his expression at that time.

He knew that he gave him that advice because he was worried about Iwafune. For Iwafune, however, the priest's words were a sword pointed at his helplessness. Although Iwafune relented, the priest's attitude did not waver. What was frustrating being that somehow Iwafune himself understood that the priest's judgment was correct.

The priest was trying to protect the clumsy young man, but "well" he had no power to save himself.

After Iwafune left the church, he drank a lot of sake and then...

"He was shrouded in mist."

"Mist?"

In response to Nagare's question, Iwafune commented, "Of course, it wasn't my fault, was it?"

"It's a story from before I became a 'King'. Actually, the place where the church originally stood was a land where fog and mist often appeared. Also, since the harassment of landlords had increased, a lot was done denser and denser. Thanks to that, I was saved more than once or twice."

Even among the things that the landlord set up, the most vicious cases: attempted arson and attempted robbery. Others tried to fake accidents and ram them with trucks, but the dense fog that had formed nearby physically prevented all of them from being carried out. At that moment, the blood rushed to his head and he didn't have time to notice it, but when he thought about it later, it was a very unnatural phenomenon.

"Kamisama! Miracle!"

Kotosaka spread his wings and said that, without joking, he thought it was God's blessing.

However, that "god" was nothing like a "god", at least in terms of appearance.

He, at least back then, was a small existence, wounded, lost and wandering aimlessly.

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No matter how much alcohol he drank, the feeling of helplessness coursing through his body didn't seem to go away, and it only got worse. And then Seigo Otori thought the result was good.

He didn't want to be saved. He was drinking because he wanted to blame himself.

"Don't come again.". The words commanded by the priest echoed in his heart. He didn't know how many times he vomited and didn't remember how much he drank. His brain and his nerves were undermined by the alcohol, and his five senses were confused and twisted. In the blink of an eye, thunder roared 100 times in his mind, and on the other hand, a great discomfort like tar stagnated at the back of his stomach, endlessly piling up and hardening like the lead.

Anger, sadness, regret, depression. Even so, he still clung to himself. A myriad of emotions fused in alcohol, swollen and throbbing. What did he have to do? What should he have done? Were his wishes wrong? It wasn't bad, but wouldn't it come true?

He didn't know anything about the past or the future. Unknowingly, Otori moved away from the present and continued to move aimlessly.

That's right, Otori didn't remember when he got lost there. Time and place. He wasn't even sure if he was dead or alive then.

The first thing he noticed was the sound.

A soft but artificially produced tone with a somber tone.

The sound produced by an instrument.

His intoxicated awareness surfaced, and Otori realized that he was surrounded by a thick fog that prevented him from seeing even a few meters ahead. He stopped involuntarily and looked around in amazement.

Where was he? When he thought that, he saw a dim light beyond the thick fog. From there he could also hear the sounds of musical instruments. As a guest, Otori staggered in the direction of the lights and sounds.

And...

"What is this?"

When he barely noticed his surroundings due to the alcohol inhibiting his awareness, Otori was in the middle of a crowd of people coming and going.

No, he didn't know exactly if there was a person there. The fog had not cleared. However, beyond the thin veil formed by the mist, there were many writhing figures. Also, the street was lined with stalls with lights hanging on both sides. It looked like a festival scene.

However, the signs and atmosphere conveyed were clearly different from the festival. There was a more miscellaneous "vulgar" atmosphere, more vulgar than familiar. The place reminded him of the post-war "black market" he had heard of.

Of course, there was no such place in that area.

No, there shouldn't be.

"This is... what the hell..."

It was like a drunk's dream. Reason decided so, but for some reason Otori knew otherwise. He smacked his cheek to bring his sanity back, if only a little. However, the suspicious scenery in front of him did not change at all.

Then, it was time to put the bottle of sake from his hand to his mouth.

—— The world cannot be measured by black or white ——

Otori heard a voice and shivered.

He turned his head to find the direction of the voice, but he couldn't tell where it came from. He could feel his heart beating rapidly, regardless of the amount of alcohol consumed. There was a taboo feeling, like touching something out of this world.

And...

—— If you still want to go through the cracks, at least you'll be fine ——

It was a low and sad voice... yet it was a voice that made him feel a deep experience. No, or was it not a voice but a thought?

Otori's consciousness became intoxicated again. The thoughts sank gently into the bog of alcohol.

A narrow road that was neither black nor white.

Young Otori did not know what that meant.

As it left a strange and vivid impression, Otori's vision and thoughts were blocked by a dense fog.

The next day...

Otori woke up in the church, and after being cursed by the priest that he seemed to have swallowed a bitter bug...

"Aid."

They told him.

It was a funeral. One of the homeless regulars at the soup kitchen was found dead in the corner of the church grounds. It seemed to be a simple natural death, regardless of the owner. It was certain that the dead man was an old man, but it was difficult to guess how old he was. After all, the homeless man had old, severe burns all over his body, which he had covered with bandages. Despite the great physique of him, he was gaunt and thin.

There was no one among the wanderers who was close to the old man, and they had no idea what kind of person he was.

However, the old man, who was sound asleep, was holding a crude accordion in his arms.

He still didn't know if the sound he heard in the mist was the sound of an accordion.

In the afternoon of that day, the frustrated owners attacked the church that had finished the funeral of the old man.

There was no fog.

It was during the melee that Otori was chosen by the Slate.

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"Huh?! What is that? Is that the end? No explanation?"

"I told you. I don't remember well and my memory is vague."

"You became "King" the day after you got drunk, right?"

"That's it, I had a terrible hangover."

"Did you become "King" with a hangover?!"

Iwafune laughed lightly at Sukuna, who spat in disbelief.

Yukari, on the other hand, looked amused and smiled, "Fog, huh..."

As Nagare silently looked at Iwafune,

"Iwa-san. Otori Seigo. What happened to the person named Otori Seigo?"

"Oh, I know. Because I did a lot of research. Or rather, I'm surprised you knew."

"It's just a name. Or rather, I'm not even sure if that name is correct."

"I am the same. That is why, whether that was or not... is forever in the mist."

While exchanging glances, the two "Kings" confirmed each other with a few words. Yukari watched the situation with interest.

"Hey, I really don't understand."

"Anyway, after quickly defeating the attackers, I decided to quit my job and start working as a cleric under the guidance of a priest. That's how I came up with forming my clan."

"Huh, "Cathedral". It was a gigantic clan that embodied a kind of beautiful thing called "Relief for the Weak" as the real thing."

Following Iwafune's lines, Nagare spoke solemnly. However, Iwafune couldn't help but snort ironically at Nagare's words.

Just as Nagare said, "Cathedral" led by Iwafune was a powerful clan that wielded power second only to the golden "Tokijikuin" clan during their heyday. Indeed, it may even have been a kind of "independent state".

Kagutsu, of course, is a clan ruled by a "King" who was much more "King" than Habari. Territory of many weaklings and patrons. The garden of salvation of good people.

At the time, there were irrelevant rumors that he boarded to prevent "destruction". The reality was the opposite. A desperate escape after being trampled. A powerful and absolute impotence that could not be compared to the time when he was a civil servant.

"In the end..."

At that moment, Yukari said in a whisper with a disgustingly seductive and slightly provocative voice.

"For Iwa-san, what is really "important" is not the "chance" or "foreshadowing" of becoming "King", but the chance to 'descend' from the "King", is it not?"

Iwafune reflexively cast a sidelong glance.

That, though he wasn't aware of it, was such a sharp look that Yukari immediately changed his demeanor and slightly raised his hands as if he was apologizing for his mischief.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Iwafune replied haughtily to Sukuna, who was dumbstruck. As Nagare made a complicated smile, he returned his posture to the screen without saying anything.

Iwafune took a sip of the beer, noticing that it was already empty, he crushed the can with one hand.

He gave in to the intense emotions that instantly coursed through his body... and then slowly relaxed.

Apparently, it wasn't a thing of the past, even for him. Such a foolish discovery made Iwafune realize how inexperienced he was.

"Sukuna. Fill it up. Take it."

"Uh, no. Take it yourself."

"I told you about the old days."

"It's disappointing. If you want, tell me a more interesting story."

"Yes, yes. Then I'll respectfully pour it into a glass. Even with this, I'm confident in my drinking."

"Keh. Then serve it quickly."

Even as he cursed, Iwafune's memories kept going back to "that day...". Amidst his heart's denial, the memories he normally blocked out came back whether he liked it or not.

Scorching heat and icy despair.

Iwafune took a deep breath with his whole body.

He sighed for a long time.