



## **GROUND ZERO: FRAGMENTS**

### **CHAPTER 7: THE END OF DREAMS**

#### **TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K-PROJECT WORLD**

It looked like a typhoon.

A large typhoon. A deadly storm that rained fire instead of rain.

As if the change in air pressure signaled his approach, he could clearly feel his approach. Facing the approaching destruction, the "Grey King", Seigo Otori, sighed for a long time.

"Didn't "Scepter 4" arrive on time? Habari... No, it's wrong to blame you."

The gray clan "Cathedral".

In the central chapel of the church, Otori knelt before the cross and offered a deep prayer. As he did so, he endured the current situation with his entire body.

A strong pressure that could crush him if he let his guard down even a little. In the midst of that, he repeated to himself many times what he should do.

Seigo Otori's mission was to protect.

Help the weak, the people gathered in the sanctuary. But that was it.

"What's the answer to "Purgatory"?"

"Ah, no. Even those who went directly to them lost contact."

"What about "Tokijikuin"?"

"They said they would send urgent reinforcements. However, whatever happens, right now..."

"I guess so."

The aide's report was bitterly self-critical.

He knew it. Otori stood up suddenly and turned his sorrowful gaze to the cross. However, he immediately walked away and turned his back on the metaphysical paradise.

"I'm leaving. I'll give you as much time as possible, so proceed with the evacuation with all you might."

"Please wait! Please, 'King', let's evacuate together!"

The helpers correctly understood that Otori's words amounted to a testament. He pleaded while twisting his body... but Otori just smiled silently.

He didn't answer directly.

"Leave it to me."

After saying that, he left the chapel without hesitation. He doesn't look back even when he stops calling him out.

He knew that this "situation" was due to the intentions of the "faceless man".

However, since the "faceless man" was dead, there was no turning back. No, even if he had lived, he would have been defenseless. It was a "situation" created by such a genius, betting his life, his existence, entirely. It was ridiculous to think that he was inferior in resolve to him, but he had to admit the fact that he wasn't one step closer to insanity.

However, it is up to each one how responds to the "situation" is forced into. He didn't know how far the "faceless man" scenario went, but Otori simply followed his own beliefs.

He left the church.

In the sky high above his head, he enshrined a supernatural giant sword. It was neither black nor white, but a greyish "Sword of Damocles". A strong mist barrier had already been deployed in the surroundings. Sanctum, the sanctuary of absolute defense, the authority of Otori, the "Grey King". However, Otori's expression twisted at the feeling that the myth of "absolute" would collapse that day.

He headed to the edge of Sanctum.

The surrounding area was already screaming. Scared, lamenting and confused by impending death. Meanwhile, the Otori clansman desperately tried to lead the evacuation.

Even in the face of danger that threatened their lives, the clansmen were doing what they should with sincerity and resolve. It was a waste of clansmen for him. Responding to that belief was also Otori's mission.

He wanted as many people as possible to survive. That's why he was taking action.

Then, he came to an open six lane street. It was a vague "city" boundary. But at that moment, a thick fog, more than ten meters high, got in the way of what should have been an ambiguous boundary.

It was a wall of mist built by Otori. A shield with supernatural abilities that confused foreign enemies, crushed them, and engulfed them in smoke. But how much help would the Gray Mist, which had protected him and his clan so many times, be of any help this time?

"...No."

He was wrong. It was not enough to simply rely on the "power" obtained from the Slate. He had to do it himself.

Otori slowly raised his right hand and yanked it down.

At the same time, the wall of thick fog blocking the front split left and right like Moses' flight from Egypt, opening the way.

A heat waves rushed in.

Heat and fire were emitted by a group of men, all dressed in dark suits, who slowly approached the other side of the mist.

They were strange people.

Some were burning with anger, some were laughing, some were staring persistently, and some were crying.

"Purgatory".

Like Otori, they were the members of the Apostle Clan of Fire and Destruction, who were chosen by the Slate and crowned as the "King".

The black hordes approaching from far away could only be mistaken for demons from hell. Following the laws of purgatory that were not of this world, they were trying to invade the Sacred Garden.

"...Ha."

Otori snorted as if to cheer himself up.

He raised his voice, though he knew it was useless.

"From now on, "Cathedral" is a tributary of the royal authority! Those who enter without permission will perish! This is the final warning. Withdraw!"

Of course, it was useless.

After waiting a few seconds, Otori relaxed his shoulders slightly.

He then slowly reached his right hand between his waist and pulled a single revolver from an old holster.

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Bam!

A dry sound and a vibration ran through his body like the beating of a heart.

A bullet was ejected, sucked into the distance, and smoke from the explosion shook the ground.

The greatest characteristic of "Purgatory" was its contempt for life. All those who were fascinated by Genji Kagutsu, the "Red King", yawned and threw away their lives out of boredom.

A debauchery that burns his own life and destroys the lives of others around them. Each of them was a single bullet that wanted to burn in an instant.

And at that moment, Otori was completely destroying the pitiful swarm of bullets with bullets with supernatural powers.

Every bullet fired from Otori's gun became a cannonball. Otori overwhelmed the enemy with firepower, like a heavy tank destroying infantry.

The "King's" arrow flew.

A soldier died.

There was no mercy or piety, just efficient work. Beyond the fingertips that squeezed the trigger, many lives exploded and disappeared. Otori was not a cleric in the official sense, but a so-called "Moguri", but that did not mean that it was an acceptable act. He should go to hell. Still, Otori was willing to commit crimes if even one of the people he protected could be saved. Behind Otori, there were innocent people who only trusted him. Not a single strand of their hairs would be burned by the red fire.

Explosive smoke danced, fire danced, blood and flesh shattered, and mist was disturbed. Dodging the approaching scorching chin with a mist of supernatural power, enveloping it, and then simply pulling the trigger, he continued to pull.

"....."

The bullets are over. Silently and fluidly, he reloaded the revolver. He didn't even remember how many times. It did not matter. He had a lot of ammunition. Whether it was a full day, two days, or three days, he was prepared to see it through to the end.

Shoot, shoot, shoot.

Kill, kill, kill.

Amidst the roar and scorching heat, Otori acted cool and racked up kills. Still, the "Purgatory" march did not stop. Angry, laughing, silent, crying, they never stopped coming there.

The simple fact is that "Purgatory" was a gathering of eccentrics, but even so, the guard was down that day. His true nature, his essential "way of being," seemed to be exposed.

He didn't understand it.

At the same time, he felt that he knew something.

Those guys probably lived like that. That "ardor" towards death was probably their lives. Don't think about it, Otori told himself. All he needed to keep in his heart was his own mission. At that time, other distractions were not only useless, but also harmful. Otori mechanically squeezed the trigger.

At that moment, an explosion was heard.

It wasn't Otori's shots. Far. It was in the direction of nine.

Otori stared. In the distance he could see the walls of mist breaking apart. He didn't break through with a direct attack, but he slipped. An internal orientation, or a conspiracy. Of course, it had to be both. In any case, a red presence had invaded the Sanctum, Otori's shrine, though it was only a small part of it.

It seemed to be a detachment from "Purgatory". Furthermore, the "pressure" transmitted was greater there than that of the clansmen in front of him. There was a controlled presence that was not typical of "Purgatory", he could feel the "will" of the "unit".

"No way?!"

Was the enemy in front of him a distraction? However, it was hard to imagine that "Purgatory" would use such a strategy. He was about to make a quick decision, but before he could come to a conclusion, a man appeared in his mind.

Executive of "Purgatory", Hitoshi Soma. The number two of the clan and staff officer. If it was that man's command... it was very possible.

"Shit!"

After the invasion of "Purgatory" was revealed, Otori immediately prepared multiple escape routes. The wall of mist broke around the main route.

Otori clenched his teeth.

He then engaged the enemy in front of him and fired the remaining two shots in the magazine barrel in rapid succession.

The explosions chained together and the smoke swirled violently. Without even having time to see the result, Otori turned around and started running in the direction of the detachment that had launched a surprise attack.

However, his legs soon stopped.

The smoke caused by Otori's attack was absorbed by the rising heat wave and dispersed in an instant. The wave of heat surged like a raging wave, covering Otori's entire body.

Otori involuntarily turned around at the burning air and at the "sign" of even greater heat.

He then saw it.

"Kagutsu..."

Even the words that should have been embedded in his body didn't come out.

In that place was hell.

There were ruins, death and evil.

The "King" was there.

And then there was "something" that surpassed human understanding, melting and burning them all.

Beyond the gaping wall of mist. What he saw was a sea of flames. A scene from purgatory that resembles a religious painting. In the middle was the silhouette of a red and black pillar. At least the form looked "human". That fact turned out to be a bad joke or something.

Otori sighed in resignation.

He was there.

The owner of "Purgatory".

The "Red King" Genji Kagutsu.

Advancing until just before the attack might have been a distraction just as Otori had imagined.

However, that was, after all, the realm of "people". It was something that Otori and Soma thought stupidly, and it was not something that they knew. He shouldn't mind the speculation of "people".

So it couldn't be helped. Unfortunately, the frustration resolved itself naturally.

He regained his composure. On the other hand, his preparation "team" increased by one.

They had met before. He expected that from his experience. Exaggerated even by himself.

But apparently it was not enough. That was completely beyond his expectations.

So, as expected, it couldn't be helped.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it? God..."

The slowly approaching signs of fire, death, and destruction made the concept itself feel deadly. Both reason and instinct understood that it was "different."

In other words, Seigo Otori's life would end there.

Nevertheless...

It was surprising to him, and he was proud of it, but...

Otori was unwavering in his determination to protect.

That absolute mission supported Otori even in the face of an unprecedented threat.

Delight filled his brain. As "King", he seemed to be able to accomplish his mission. He seemed to be qualified for it. Conveniently, fear, sense of danger, common sense, and survival instincts were paralyzed in the face of unreasonable existence. In that case, he wouldn't think too much, just buy some time. To keep people alive, even for a fraction of a second, he would stop that. All he had to do was put all of his soul into that spot. That simple and direct conclusion gave Otori unexpected relief.

He couldn't put out that "fire" by himself. But he had no intention of giving in to despair. It was not black or white, win or lose. From the beginning, it was Otori Seigo's destiny to walk down that narrow path.

"Well. Do you want to do it...?"

Otori straightened his back and faced the distant ruin head on. He laughed, but it was even exhilarating.

He never dreamed that he would lead a life like that.

It wasn't bad at all. Otori thought honestly and smiled brightly.

But...

"It's useless! Otori!"

A cry of restraint was released from behind. Hearing that familiar voice, Otori flinched and turned around.

A person with a cane in his hand was running towards him. Otori asked him to be his right arm, and he was the only person he could trust "Cathedral" after his death. One of the executives who built the clan together with Otori. Otori's partner.

With Otori facing inevitable death, losing him was the same as losing the clan's future.

"Idiot! Run away!"

Otori's throat was hoarse, but his partner didn't hear a word and ran towards him.

Confusion spread throughout his body, causing confusion in his judgment. As if to take advantage of that fatal gap, of course, he shouldn't have paid attention to such a trivial matter, but a powerful wave of heat surged up like a tsunami.

Otori reflexively unfolded a barrier of mist. The heat waves easily covered the barrier and dragged Otori and his partner along with the barrier.

Hot and strong.

If he hadn't stopped breathing immediately, his lungs would have burned. Otori's body was at the mercy of being swallowed by a pyroclastic flow. Still, he desperately defended himself and his companion who screamed with the mist.

"No, uh...!"

Otori developed a thick fog like tar, resisting the torrent of red. Both feet on the ground. The soles of his shoes slipped violently, but he finally stopped himself. Otori manipulated the mist and shook off the wave of heat surrounding him.

He reloaded and reloaded his favorite weapon at lightning speed. With both hands sticking out, he aimed beyond the open walls.

He fired all the bullets.

Rapid fire at God speed synergizes military power and destruction. Six bullets hit almost simultaneously. Like an airstrike from a bomber, a roaring sound and impact swept through the surroundings, and smoke rose in the distance.

The hidden power of "harm" inherent in the "Grey King", which was originally intended to be "protection".

However, the smoke from the distance was expelled at a speed that exceeded the speed of expansion.

A red flame burst out violently.

Then, after thinking that it had exploded, he suddenly sank to the ground as if he had lost motivation.

Otori never looked ahead.

Beyond the disintegrating mist, he could still see the unchanging sea of flames and the unchanging silhouette. It was as if those attacks and counterattacks had never happened. He could feel the disappointment weighing down on his entire body. Otori swallowed his overflowing pain.



He felt that he was seeing a mythical giant who crushed the earth with a single sneeze. Otori reloaded the weapon as he laughed in his heart. There was no last moment in that movement.

It was very bitter.

But that was the reality. There was no change in the given resolution. There was only what he had to do.

Then his partner gasped and coughed from behind. In other words, it was proof that he was breathing. It was proof that he was alive. Otori once again shouted at his partner behind him without turning around.

"Do you understand? Run away now. I don't want you to die. After that..."

He didn't know if he was trying to say: Leave it to me.

Otori kept looking into the distance, bracing himself for the next heat wave.

"Eh?"

His entire body stiffened. He was so focused on the front that he couldn't resist one bit.

Otori's consciousness was forcibly harvested.

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Otori, who boasted such mighty power, collapsed as if he were a normal young man who could be found wherever he looked. Looking at the "King" who was lying on the ground, the man trembled and blamed himself for what he had done.

But that was only for a moment. Before his eyes, infallible death was approaching step by step. The man threw away the stun gun he was given, at least it looked like a commercially available one, and carried an unconscious Otori over his shoulders. Then, without leaning on the cane, he frantically left the place.

As explained beforehand, the "Red King" showed no interest in him running away, even in the unconscious "Grey King". By taking the appointed route, the man escaped death, which should have been infallible, with astonishing ease.

The man walked out of "Cathedral" as he carried the "King" on his shoulders.

Eventually, his physical strength gave out and the man stopped and lowered Otori to the ground. Looking back the way he came as he gasped, he could see that the clan he belonged to, the dependent territory, was stained with red fire.

The man's body trembled once more at the size of what had been destroyed. He was about to be overwhelmed with great regrets... but he knew that even if he could do it all over again, he would make the same choice.

He wanted to save Otori, even if it meant abandoning his comrades and the people he protected, and betraying the trust placed in him. To this man, Otori was like a son.

"Forgive me..."

Immediately after muttering that, he felt ashamed of himself. He shouldn't allow himself that. He didn't even have the right to ask for forgiveness. He had no choice but to bear that sin.

That was why...

"Oh, God."

At that moment, what came out of his mouth was not a plea for forgiveness, but only a pure prayer.

However, as if he answered that call, the cell phone in his pocket rang.

The man shook his entire body. After a few seconds of stiffening, he pulled the cell phone out of him like he was touching a burned stone.

However, before he could operate on it...

"Hey, looks like it went well."

He heard a voice from the other end of his cell phone.

More precisely, he did not know if it came from his cell phone. Anyway, he heard voices. That alone was weird enough, but what was weirder than anything else was that the person he was talking to was already dead. The man was present with Otori at the time of his death. Despite that, he could hear a familiar voice from his cell phone and it didn't change at all.

In other words, it was an "auditory hallucination".

That must be it.

"It was great that you were able to save the "King" as you wished. However, as expected, I wanted you to intervene a bit later. Even though I hit him to warm up, I didn't have enough time to adjust the "Red King's" W deviation. Well, the real thing comes after this."

"....."

The man could not understand the words spoken by the dead man's voice. The other side probably didn't tell the man either because he thought he could understand. In other words, it was a "complaint". However, the voice was clearly enjoying the "situation".

"The faceless man".

That "auditory hallucination" contained a different kind of madness and despair than the "Red King" that he had just glimpsed.

"Anyway, your job is done. Good job. Goodbye. Since it's a big deal, I'll give you one last piece of advice, but after this, you should run far away."

After saying that, the "auditory hallucination" disappeared.

While he was standing, the man slowly lowered the hand holding the cell phone and finally dropped it to the ground, it had never worked.

Before he knew it, all the blood had disappeared from his body. Although the fire spread a little farther, he couldn't feel the heat.

It was strange.

He wondered what he had done.

"Guh..."

Otori let out a low moan. The man came to his senses, shook off his sinister premonitions and great regrets, and carried Otori on his shoulders.

A car was parked up ahead. He would take Otori and leave that place. As for the advice they gave him, he would go as far as he could.

A few hours later, his beloved church clan disappeared from history and maps.

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The tomb was on a small hill far from the city.

It was a place where you could see the sea. However, until fourteen years ago, it was not the sea. The Kagutsu Crater. It was a fateful place that claimed many lives. The tomb stared at the excavated land and sea as if in mourning for the lost past.

"It's been a long time, comrade. Come to think of it, the last time I came here was for a funeral, so this is my first time visiting a grave."

As he spoke to the tombstone, Iwafune held out the bouquet he had prepared in front of the tombstone.

He opened the lid of canned beer that he also brought and placed it next to the bouquet. After that, he took out another bottle, opened it and made a small toast.

"If it wasn't for Kagutsu Crater, it would be a nice place with a beautiful view."

With so much irony in his mouth, Iwafune put his mouth on the can.

"The other day, I was asked to talk about the old days... but I couldn't help but remember. Well, it's a good opportunity... I have a lot of free time..."

Iwafune slowly sat down in front of the grave while he made some embarrassed excuses.

Sleeping in the grave in front of him were two priests who worked in a certain church. One was a strong and compassionate giant, and the other was a naive "Moguri" who drowned in undeserved dreams. They were both teacher and disciple, comrades in arms, and perhaps even father and son.

They both died.

Afterwards, he left behind a desolate shell that was only meant for good and sloth.

"It's been a long time. Actually..."

After saying that, Iwafune silently looked at the tombstone for a moment and tilted the can again.

"At that time, I couldn't forgive you. But... now I understand your feelings a little more."

Iwafune now has only one "King". The "King" that he helped and raised. He is the "King" who gave him a second life.

He wants to be the power of that "King". No matter what. The prayer that he once wished to save the weak was now directed at a single young man. So, he understood the thoughts of his partner at that time. The pain that tore through his body and the attachment he couldn't let go of.

"Well, you were tricked quite a bit, but it didn't change that you were adamant until the end."

Iwafune laughed, then slowly undid his smile. He stared silently at the tombstone with a piercing gaze.

If he was put in the same position as him, would he give everything to help the "King" as he did?

Everything, even betraying the will of the "King".

"It's a big deal, so let's go see it. What kind of decision will I make?"

After drinking the canned beer, Iwafune sat up, stretched out his body and looked out at the sea behind him.

The wind blew.

The weather was good. It was a comfortable place.

However, when he closed his eyes, what he remembered was the flames and mist of that day.

Otori Seigo died. However, his regret still burns slightly in Iwafune Tenkei.

"See you."

Bidding farewell, Iwafune left the tomb.

The future was still shrouded in a thick fog.