



「はじまり」にまつわる七つの物語

SEVEN STORIES ABOUT THE "BEGINNINGS"

**TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN
RAWS: RIDIA**

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CHAPTER 1:

CHABUDAI CONFERENCE - PLUS ONE (FURUHASHI HIDEYUKI)

"The old Shiro!"

As he opened the dormitory door, a girl in her underwear jumped up to him.

"H-hi... Ameno-san."

He knew it was a sign of affection, but he still hadn't gotten used to it. Toru waved back hesitantly.

"It's Neko!"

The girl jumped out of the way with the movements of a real cat and ran back into the room.

"Here comes Shiro! The old Shiro!"

The cheerful words were answered by the serious voice of a young man.

"Neko, don't keep calling him that. Respect his personality."

"Kuro is saying something very difficult again... Shiro is Shiro, they're both Shiro!"

"That's not what I mean. Currently, we should call Shiro the "current Shiro", and the "past Shiro" you're talking about is..."

With that, a young man appeared in the doorway. With his long, black hair tied back in a ponytail and his proper movements, he looked like a samurai from a period film.

"Sorry, Hieda Toru. We're still a little confused too."

"No, you can call me whatever is easiest for you, uh... Yatogami-kun."

"It's fine to call me "Kuro". Well, you can call me that whenever you want."

"Yes, someday..."

How many times has this happened already? This awkward exchange repeats itself every time he visits. But it's already familiar to him.

The young man's name is Yatogami Kuro, and like the girl from before, Ameno Miyabi, he lives in a room in the Ashinaka Academy dorm.

The other owner of the room, a young Caucasian man with silver hair, poked his head around the corner.

"It's you, Kuro. It's about time you stopped acting like an outsider. Right, Toru-kun?"

Adolf K. Weissmann. He's a new teacher who will officially take up his position this spring and is currently preparing for his new life with the other two.

Weissmann, Yatogami Kuro, and Ameno Miyabi. These are the three residents gathered in this room. Although they are of different genders and ages:

Ameno Miyabi = "Neko".

Yatogami Kuro = "Kuro".

Weissmann = "Shiro".

They call each other by nicknames, and their close relationship makes them seem like a kind of family.

If that's the case, what position does he hold, being frequently invited to this room and sharing meals and such? Who the hell is he?

Who does "Neko" call "the old Shiro"?

Who does "Kuro" call "Hieda Toru"?

Who does "Shiro" call "Toru-kun"?

If he had to say it, the slightly formal "Hieda Toru" would be the closest thing to shyness. Thinking about it, he doesn't think he's ever been called by his name in a friendly way or recognized as "himself".

In short, he may have been a transparent being without a true identity, both in the past and now.

As he idly pondered this...

"What's up, Hieda Toru? Come in."

Yatogami Kuro called out to him.

"Ah... Excuse me for interrupting."

Coming back to himself, Toru bowed to Kuro again.

"Sorry for inviting me to dinner so many times."

"Well, sorry for calling you to an awkward table so many times, but... actually, I have a favor to ask before dinner today."

Kuro said, frowning.

"This is embarrassing, but... our conversations have become a bit tense. I'd like to hear someone else's opinion."

"Conversation...?"

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Weissmann, Kuro, and Miyabi were sitting at a low round table. With Hieda joining in, the "discussion" resumed.

When he asked what they were talking about, it turned out to be a very trivial matter.

First of all, these three people, almost like a family, only recently started living together. They first met around the time of the "Gakuen Island Incident" late last year and spent a few days together, but then had a gap of about a year before seeing each other again, just before the recent "Paranormal Ability Incident". That was just recently.

After the various incidents were resolved, they started living in this dormitory, but it hadn't even been a month.

Toru had heard about it beforehand. And then...

They were "comrades in arms", so to speak, who had been involved in serious terrorist and disaster-like incidents, and together they had been on the brink of death. Although they shared such a strong bond, as the days passed together, they began to notice several inconsistencies in their daily lives.

They each had different upbringings, but Weissmann and Miyabi, in particular, had no idea how to manage their own living space. Everything was neglected.

So cooking, laundry, cleaning, shopping, taking out the trash, and tidying up... Kuro gave instructions on general household chores, but...

"We came to the conclusion that Kuro should take care of those things himself."

Weissmann scratched his head.

"Hmm, exactly. Kuro should do everything.", Miyabi said.

Kuro remained silent.

"Uh, that's not right."

"Well, I don't think it's right. But Kuro is better at everything, and it's as if he's saying, 'It's faster to do it than to explain it.'"

For every task, like cooking and laundry, Weissmann opined, "Kuro would do it better.", and Miyabi nodded, saying, "Exactly.", so Kuro ended up doing all the housework for the three of them.

"No, that's... the tyranny of the majority vote."

"Sure, that's how it is for the moment. For now, we'll just trust Kuro and learn as we go."

"You're so careless.", Kuro said with a sour face.

"You guys are going to leave this unresolved again."

"Well, I can't say it's not true. Hahaha.", Weissmann said.

"Hmm, exactly like that.", Miyabi said.

Here the conversation stalled again. The dense atmosphere seemed to overwhelm him as well.

Finally,

"Hey, Kuro. What would Ichigen-sama say in a situation like this? Why don't you ask?"

Weissmann suddenly intervened.

"Eh, Ichigen... ah."

Toru had heard that name before. Miwa Ichigen, Kuro's teacher and adoptive father. Although he has passed away, Kuro respects him deeply and often remembers his late teacher's words and uses them as a guide for his actions. It seems to be a kind of routine that encourages Kuro, who tends to stagnate due to his seriousness, to take the next step.

"All right. If you keep bringing it up like this, Ichigen-sama won't be able to rest in peace."

Kuro shook his head.

"I decided on my own to join you. It's my will, but it should also be yours. I won't tolerate you acting like it's none of your business."

"Ah..."

Toru understood the true nature of the subtle discomfort he had felt during the conversation.

Slowly, he raised his hand and asked for permission to speak.

"Uh... Don't you mind doing the housework?"

"Eh?"

With Kuro's attention, Toru continued.

"Just like you, you want everyone to value a dignified life. That's what you're trying to say, right?"

"Mmm..."

Kuro tilted his head slightly and finally murmured.

"Well, I guess that's how it is."

"Ah, that's right. Both Kuro and we confused "I will, I won't" with "I think, I don't think". I see, we have to phrase it properly."

Weissmann straightened up and turned to Kuro.

"Kuro, thank you for always making us delicious food. And for keeping our room and clothes clean. Come on, Neko, you should thank him properly."

"Huh? Mmm..."

Miyabi tilted her head when Weissmann prodded her. She probably thought, "He's giving me something difficult again.". After thinking about it for a while, she murmured.

"The food is... delicious."

"...Okay."

Kuro stood up.

"You can't do it all at once. First, you need to be mindful of your daily behavior and have a grateful heart. Then, little by little, you'll get used to it."

With that, he headed into the kitchen.

"Oh, are you preparing dinner?", Weissmann asked.

"Dinner!" Miyabi said.

"Uh... can I help you with anything?"

Toru tried to get up from his seat.

"No, the guests can sit and chat."

And with that, Kuro stood up and began working alone.

He must have made the preparations. He quickly grilled the fish, served the rice and miso soup, sliced the pickles, and finished serving dinner in no time. With the skill of a professional chef, it certainly seemed like it would be better to leave everything to him than to an amateur.

"Thank you, Toru.", Weissmann said softly.

"With us, it's as if we're passing the problem on to Kuro."

"So you needed an ally for Kuro-kun..."

"It's good to have someone who's an ally, someone understanding, or someone who gives a fair assessment."

"Sure, I try to be fair, but..."

Kuro, holding a plate of grilled fish in both hands, interrupted the conversation.

"However, when it comes to family, I sometimes lose my composure. Hieda Toru, your opinion is valuable."

Kuro bowed to Toru.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd continue watching over us."

"I see. That's my role... I suppose."

A transparent being who is nothing but air wherever he is; that's how he considered himself, but perhaps that's not all bad.

An ethereal spectator who slips into the middle of this makeshift "family". Above all, he feels that therein lies his position, or rather, the meaning of his presence.

"Well, now that we're all convinced, let's eat."

"Ah... yes."

"Okay!"

"Let's have dinner!"

The three and one clasped hands.

"Itadakimasu."

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"Since we've become quite friendly, I'd like to discuss Hieda Toru's nickname after this meal. Of course, the decision is his, but first we should share our opinions."

While chewing on his grilled fish, Kuro said this.

"Meow, meow? Another complicated thing..."

Neko pouted.

"Well, everyone, you can call me whatever you want..."

"Come on, Toru-kun."

Weissmann gave a wry smile to the confused Toru.

"Kuro wants to decide important things together."

CHAPTER 2: BEFORE ARRIVAL (TAKAHASHI YASHICHIROU)

Behind the Kagiroyi Trade Association market, a forced evacuation site established before the war to prevent the spread of fires during aerial bombing raids, now sprawls like a vacant lot.

Right now, the cheers of children playing baseball fill the air. Although it's a makeshift baseball field with lines etched into the ground and a blackboard above it, once the game starts, it becomes its own stadium. The sport, or perhaps the competition, excites them.

On one side are the children who live near the market:

"Let's go!"

"One more strike!"

"Do your best, big brother!"

And the coach (who does nothing but boo), the "Red King," Unno Yutaka.

"Hey! You know what awaits you if a new face like that hits you!"

The other group consists of about half of the Biribiri group, who are temporarily under the custody of the Kagiroyi group.

"Go for it!"

"Don't miss!"

"Home run! Home run!"

And the coach (who taught them the rules and much more), Tamataro Okuma.

"Aim well! Keep your arms together and hit accurately!"

Everyone wore only their uniforms, sneakers, and caps. All they had was a hard ball that Unno had brought from somewhere, but some gloves were worn and others were missing, and their bats were just pieces of sticks painted red.

There was no pleasant sound when the ball was hit.

They stumbled when it was hit and faltered as they ran.

They caught it, juggled it, and threw it wildly.

It was all difficult, but everyone tried their best and had a lot of fun.

The two most excited:

"You bastards! Where are you throwing it?"

"Good hit, keep it up!"

While the coaches shouted at both ends of the clearing, the children enjoyed the joy of hitting the ball and the frustration of being hit. It was a completely peaceful and normal scene.

Todokoro Suwako watched them from a distance. She wasn't very fond of sports, but she let out an apathetic yawn.

"Waah..."

"Are you bored, Todokoro-san?"

Suddenly, the "Gray King" Otono Benji appeared next to her. He was carrying an accordion and some luggage, so his feet felt a little heavy.

Immediately after the recent incident, he had planned to disappear with his Kirinoichi group, but the "Golden King" Kokujoji Daikaku, noticing, said to him, "Once the situation has calmed down, we Kings want to make an arrangement for future generations. Could you wait to leave until then?"

He remained there, and for a little less than a month, he was on the fringes of society. Since it was a familiar face, Suwako could complain sincerely.

"Yes, I guess I yawned a lot. After all, the Kagiroyi group only deals with boys. All the girls went with Iku-chan to Chika-san's house."

Otono rolled his neck slightly to avoid the pain.

"You went out to play last week, right? You can go as often as you like."

"Yes, but the stronghold of the men in blue... it was uncomfortable."

"Hahaha. Well, I guess that makes sense."

The men in blue suits, commonly known as the "Fourth Legal Affairs Bureau", also house about half of the "Biribiri Group" in their headquarters, the majestic guesthouse.

For Suwako, a yakuza, entering such a public place (a place she calls "respectable") is intimidating, but the surroundings are filled with men in blue suits. As much as she likes Chika, it's hard to say it's a place where she can relax.

Taking pity on her, Otono stroked the luggage he was carrying and offered to help.

"Well, I've been asked to look after this guy tomorrow, so I'll ask Chika-san to bring Iku-chan and the others over to play."

"Really, bro?"

The effect was immediate, and Suwako's eyes sparkled through her dark glasses.

(This guy is a big responsibility.)

Otono thought as he secretly laughed bitterly.

One of the children spotted him (a thin, tall man covered in bandages) and stood out.

"Oh, it's the bandage man!"

He yelled loudly, forgetting about the ball.

The joy of the moment quickly spread.

The children ran toward him, saying in unison,

"Uncle!"

"It's a picture book!"

"Give me candy!"

"What's up today?"

Otono slowly put down his bag and handed it back generously.

"Wait a minute. Todokoro-san, can I have some candy?"

"Sure. Look, the candy won't escape, even if you don't push it!"

After receiving a container, Suwako began distributing the sweets to the children. They aren't solid, round candies, but "taguri", made with starch syrup on a stick.

Normally, these sweets are sold by attracting customers with Kamishibai (paper theater), but Otono's is just for entertainment, so there's no charge.

Seeing young children in the crowd, whether they are neighbors or the Biribiri Group, competing for the sweets, complaining about how much or how little there is, giving them to someone or accidentally dropping them, and harassing Otono, who is setting up the Kamishibai stand, is truly noisy.

Surrounded by such enthusiasm, Otono spoke in a relaxed voice.

"These kids are pretty good, right?"

Suwako first looked at the many smiling faces...

"....."

Then, she looked at the two of them, who, lured by sweets and a movie, had abandoned the heated match, and chuckled at the two "brats" who weren't so different from each other.

"Well, I don't dislike them."

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Immediately after the incident, the treatment of the "Green King", Tsunogui Iku, and her retainers, the Biribiri Group, was a matter of debate. Kokujoji Daikaku didn't take their achievements or positions lightly, so the decision to institutionalize them and provide them with proper care had already been made.

However, their abilities and aptitude for society... in other words, the question of whether they could lead normal lives without causing trouble to others made Kokujoji hesitant to take the easy way out and force them all into an institution. It would be enough for someone with the same skills to supervise or educate them, but he and his ministers are currently busy with the project to secretly take over Japan, and no one has time to waste.

To the troubled "Golden King", the "Blue King", Somei Nazumi, made a proposal:

"I have a brilliant idea that will easily put an end to your troubles."

In other words, half of them will be in charge of the "Red King" and the Kagiroyhi Group, and the other half, the "Blue King" and the "Fourth Legal Affairs Bureau".

Unno immediately agreed, simply because he had fought alongside Iku.

"Okay. I'll feed you until you're full, right?"

Chika also seemed enthusiastic as she agreed.

"I understand. This isn't the first time I've molded a child like this into a "human form."

"I suppose it's because of the days you spent with me, right?"

Ignoring Nazumi's pretentious question, Chika took Iku in, and Miya, the other girls, and the quiet boys were taken in by the "Fourth Legal Affairs Office".

In contrast, boys her own age, or even more energetic and mischievous, were taken in by the "Kagiroyhi Group".

They were to spend a few months there, or even less, depending on their behavior, to test their ability to adapt to everyday life. However, the children involved ignored Kokujoji's serious intentions and spent their time as they pleased in their respective homes.

As a result, no one caused trouble in vain.

Because everyone was hungry. Because they didn't know what to do other than steal.

That was the only reason the Biribiri Group caused trouble.

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The blue-robed men, also known as the "Fourth Legal Affairs Office", live on the same grounds (or rather, on a corner) as the main guesthouse, whose use has not yet been authorized. There are two main buildings: the "Seieisha", which also functions as a dormitory and workplace for the office staff, and the dojo where the staff practices martial arts.

About half of the Biribiri Group, including Tsunogui Iku, sleep and wake up in the dojo. Chika, who was in charge of supervising them, surprisingly only imposed two "rules".

One was to get up punctually and go to bed at the correct time.

Another was to dress appropriately.

That was all.

Both boys and girls are given uniforms, and the staff teaches them how to use them (they also wear work clothes or uniforms for everyday use). Iku, Miya, and the other children obeyed the rules, with one condition: they could eat until they were full.

After a few days of living like this, the girls were bored, so Chika taught them how to lay out their futons and bathe. Then, at the newly opened dojo, the officers' training continued as usual. The children soon began imitating out of curiosity, and Chika had them practice a simple kata, claiming it would make their food tastier.

Soon, the children began accompanying the staff in their daily work and even helping out on occasion. Without realizing it, they had begun to learn various things to pass the time between meals. Chika had only scolded them three times during that time, about entering the main building, handling fire, and fighting with proper strength.

Iku and the Biribiri Group spent their days worry-free.

"You won't improve if you just swing it any way you want!"

Following his previous habit of caring for children, training outdoors on sunny days, he roared at the blue sky.

"Swordsmanship is based on logic, use your head!"

Although he is violent, he seems to be well-liked by the children, and several people gather around him to imitate the movement of the wooden sword. However, even a movement as simple as swinging it downward is quite difficult for a child.

Iyoda, watching them fight, gave them a few words of advice.

"If your right elbow points outward, it will lose strength. Try pointing it slightly downward."

Although his instructions were not very dignified, they were precise.

The children knew how effective they were, so they followed them obediently.

At that moment, Hakizawa, Nizuka, and Hentani arrived with several children.

"Iyoda-kun, Hoizumi-kun, how about taking a break?"

"It's sunny today, but if you play too much outside, you'll catch a cold."

"We're done working, so it's time for a snack!"

The children were carrying bamboo brooms and winnowing baskets. They (including the office staff) are not allowed to touch the inside of the main building, so they were cleaning the surroundings as much as possible.

Iyoda nods as he watches the sun rise.

"That's right. Then let's take a bath and then go to the dojo to get something to eat."

"I'm on duty at the baths today. Anyone who wants to help, come!"

Hoizumi ran out, leading several others who responded with an energetic "Yes!".

"How nice. If the bathroom were bigger, we could all use it together."

"There are girls too, that's not very sensible, Hakizawa-san!"

"Well, if you want to say it, perhaps it's being polite?"

Away from all that noise, a quiet study session was taking place in the dojo.

Since Chika didn't make any demands on learning attitude (apparently, there was a precedent: a "naughty boy who was also a child prodigy" with bad behavior), the children could touch the letters and images however they liked, whether lying down, leaning against the wall, leaning forward, or buried in mountains.

Except for those that are clearly contrary to public order and morality, ancient classics, picture books, graphics, magazines, and even manga are crowded onto large shelves and used as teaching aids.

"Toneyama, how do you read this?"

"It's called omokage. It's like an image that comes to mind."

The people in charge of instruction here are Toneyama and Rokugo.

"I wrote it and I did it."

"Yes, you have a lot of energy. Let's try writing a series of characters in a straight line now."

There was a very pleasant atmosphere in the study group, full of quiet children.

Among them, the one who seemed particularly enthusiastic was Tsunogui Iku, the "Green King". She had only been learning for a few weeks, but she was already getting used to sitting upright.

The books stacked on the large desk were the "Great Learning", "The Doctrine of the Mean", "The Analects", "Mencius", as well as the "Book of Changes", the "Book of Songs", the "Book of Documents", the "Book of Rites", and the "Spring and Autumn Annals"... the Chinese classics known as the Four Books and the Five Classics.

Other dictionaries and Japanese annotated books were scattered across the desk.

"Divine mandate is called nature, natural inclination is called the path, cultivating the path is called teaching... is this what the King is talking about?"

Looking at the document, Iku asked the teacher in front of her.

The teacher, Somei Nazumi, searched for words that would convince the young woman.

"The mandate of heaven and following one's nature are similar. But what about cultivating the path? I don't think we've let go of our power to that extent to apply it to ourselves."

"... "Contain" could be the opposite."

"Hmm, what an interesting way of looking at things."

The two Kings began their hundreds of debates.

Iku's educational policy, presented by Chika, is extremely rational.

"First, you need to know the principles and standards of how humans move. You can see who you are by finding similarities and differences within yourself. The more you know and find, the clearer the picture will be. If you can recognize yourself and others, you will naturally see how to behave."

The Four Books and the Five Classics are examples of values deeply rooted in people, and the conversation with Nazumi is a hypothesis and a verification. For Iku, both were important tasks to explore her vague self-image.

But there are also more important things. Her friendship with Miya, who burst into the dojo like a whirlwind, was one of them.

"Iku-chan! Chika-san will make you matching clothes!"

"Really?"

Iku stood up, happier that they matched than that they were wearing Western clothing.

Chika, dressed in a kosode kimono and haori, appeared behind Miya and handed her a furoshiki-wrapped bag containing her prize.

"I've ordered fabric. Choose your favorite colors."

"Yes!"

Iku screamed and ran like lightning, pushing them.

Several girls chased after her, saying, "Great! I want one too."

Silence returned to the dojo.

"....."

With the heated discussion abruptly cut short and Nazumi left at his desk, he had no choice but to pull his own documents from his pocket.

Of course, the reason the Somei couple and all the other members of the agency are gathered at the guesthouse isn't because they're on vacation. They're undergoing a trial period to change their organizational structure, shifting from a style of constant street patrols and surveillance to an emergency response style that responds to general police reports.

"....."

The conflict with the Nanakamado Intelligence Agency was over, and the largest incident in terms of supernatural crime (or, rather, disaster) had just occurred, so the proliferation of stray animals had remained calm for almost a month. While this was limited to supernatural abilities, the security situation had remained calm.

After analyzing all of this, he proposed to Kokujoji to take charge of the Biribiri Group.

However, there were also unexpected developments.

The drastic reduction in the time he spent with Chika was the most significant of all.

"...Cough."

Losing focus, Nazumi stuffed the documents into his pocket.

He decided to correct his oversight, even if it was a bit annoying, as it should have been a foreseeable situation. Determined in his mind, but anxious from Toneyama and Rokugo's perspective, the "Blue King" Somei Nazumi followed his wife.

There's no need to go into details about the disastrous results.

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The "Tokijikuin Temple", with the move to Nanakamado.

The "Golden King's" ministers, already busy conquering Japan, are taking full advantage of their superhuman strength and speed. Heavy machinery lined up in a

dangerous row in the garden to dismantle the underground facility that sealed the "Slate".

After slipping through the gap, young Nangu fell to his knees in the hallway outside Kokujoji Daikaku's office. He is not yet an official servant of the "Golden King"; he only serves as an attendant like any ordinary person, but no one in "Tokijikuin" underestimates his skill.

He murmured softly, his voice only reaching the room through the shoji screen.

"Daikaku-sama, a telegram has arrived."

"Come in."

As expected, he quietly opened and closed the sliding screens before entering the room and respectfully handing over the telegram. Kokujoji Daikaku stood up from the documents he was approving and looked at the text he had received. He read it carefully for a few minutes before emitting a deep grunt.

"I see."

"Is there a problem?"

There was an unusual hesitation in the response to the question.

(Is it really that important?)

As Nangu prepared himself, another strange and confused voice returned.

"All right. Return to your original work."

"Eh..."

One should be considerate of one's master's feelings, but one should never guess.

Following the rules of an attendant, the boy bowed and left the room.

Kokujoji thought for a moment, then stopped in front of a map taped to a corner.

It was a world map with the Pacific Ocean in the center.

(Hmm, I thought so.)

On his face, the expression he had almost shown to young Nangu... a complex expression formed that was both a smile and a tragedy.

The content of the telegram was a report on the course and speed of a certain flying object.

It had been circling the Atlantic Ocean for the past few days, but had changed course and was heading west.

What would happen if the course and speed didn't change?

After how many days, which country on the west coast of the Pacific Ocean would it reach?

It was easy to guess.

(It's hopeless.)

In an instant, Kokujoji wanted to draw a line that reached Japan, but he quickly regained his composure.

Trying to remain calm and free from unnecessary emotions, he mentally formulated his plan of action.

Ignore the United States' actions and don't intervene.

The Japanese government will treat this as an unexpected and unforeseen situation.

Leave the response to the US military stationed there, and "Tokijikuin" will not move until it enters airspace.

After discovering this, he explained to the outside world that "it is impossible to interfere with that ship".

(That's all.)

After thinking about it, he suddenly thought:

(That's right, maybe we should meet at this time and date... if all goes well.)

He dreams that he's in a good mood, but quickly dismisses it.

(He won't come down... but maybe I can prove it to him.)

Kokujoji just observed reality.

He chose the reality that was closest to his ideal out of all the options.

(I'll be prepared for an emergency message.)

Well, this time it really is official business, he told himself, and marked the date on his calendar.

January 20th.

CHAPTER 3: A SMALL WORLD (RAIRAKU REI)

While boiling the soba noodles Totsuka had made, Kusanagi muttered to himself,

"You really do start all sorts of things. Next time, soba?"

Totsuka, who was preparing a colander for the soba noodles, tilted his head slightly.

"Isn't making soba noodles a common hobby? I think Kusanagi-san would like it too."

"Well, if you get into it, I might get involved too. I have no plans to, though."

"Kusanagi-san, you're a bit lazy with hobbies."

"You're too lazy with hobbies. You start everything yourself."

Ignoring Kusanagi's puzzled look, Totsuka laughed slightly.

"But isn't it fun? Starting something you've never done. It feels like a whole new world has begun."

"That's an exaggeration."

Kusanagi gave a bitter smile, but he couldn't quite understand what he was thinking.

Learning things you didn't know, playing things you've never played before, and learning to enjoy them. Something new.

Kusanagi remembers the freshness of starting something new and the feeling of discovering a new world.

However, starting something new requires energy and stamina. Furthermore, Kusanagi is aware that he's the type who "gets hooked if he gets hooked", so he was cautious about the time and money he would have to spend if he did get hooked. Totsuka's claim that he's "a bit lazy when it comes to hobbies" wasn't wrong.

"Kusanagi-san, appreciate and delve into each world."

Totsuka said this as if he'd read Kusanagi's mind.

"Really?"

"Like alcohol and food."

"Well, that's work, you know?"

As he watched the soba slowly swirl in the boiling pot, the stove timer rang.

The boiled soba was rinsed with cold water. Next to him, Totsuka was serving soba soup made with thickly sliced bonito flakes into cups for each person.

"Everyone, it's soba time!"

As he carried a mountain of soba noodles that didn't fit the bar's atmosphere, the HOMRA regulars cheered.

"Finally, it's ready! My soba!"

Kamamoto took up his chopsticks with even more joy. It seems that this time, Totsuka went to make soba noodles with Kamamoto. Sometimes Totsuka starts a new hobby alone, but often he involves his friends.

Kamamoto scooped up a mound of soba noodles with his chopsticks, dipped them in the soup, and slurped them down.

"Delicious! All the effort of making soba was worth it!"

"Kamamoto, you ate too much at once!"

Yata elbowed Kamamoto in the stomach.

"You said you were going to start making soba noodles with Totsuka-san as a hobby, but in the end, what you like isn't making them, but eating them!"

"I can't deny it! The truth is, I'm content to be the one eating the noodles other people make for me!"

Totsuka laughed at Kamamoto's statement.

"Kamamoto is strong, and he seemed to be good at making soba."

"But my taste for soba has grown —or rather, my appreciation for it has grown— so I'm glad I came!"

Kusanagi also extended his chopsticks, laughing at the exchange between Kamamoto and the others.

After examining the freshly made soba with his eyes, he slurped it up.

Although they had some irregularities in the thickness, the noodles had a smooth texture and a strong buckwheat aroma that made them delicious. This could be the beginning of a new world, Kusanagi thought, remembering Totsuka's words. It wasn't the time to delve into the world of soba making, but it piqued his interest.

"With Totsuka-san, you have more opportunities to try things you've never tried before.", Akagi said as he added wasabi to the soba soup.

"We went together the other day to play a very obscure sport, right? Bicycle soccer."

"Bicycle soccer! I thought there was something like that and it sounded fun, so I invited Yata, Shohei, and San-chan to the club Murai-san runs."

"Who is Murai-san?"

Kusanagi joked with Totsuka about his mysterious acquaintance and murmured the same impression as Totsuka: "Is there something like that?"

"It was more fun than I thought!"

Yata said in a cheerful voice.

"At first, it didn't seem logical to play bicycle soccer, but it was actually quite fun dribbling with the front wheel, moving your body and the bike like that, and then shooting the ball!"

"Yata is used to using the skateboard as if it were part of his body, so he was good at bicycle soccer, right?"

"No, I don't understand how to play bicycle soccer!"

Bang! Bando slammed the table.

"Hahaha, San-chan, you fell over and over again!"

Bando glared at Akagi, who was smiling brightly beside him.

"Bicycles are for transportation, not for playing soccer!"

"Shohei was pretty good, but Bando was pathetic, really."

Yata roundly criticized Bando and shouted, "Don't call me pathetic!"

"Did you play anything?"

"Yes. Cycle soccer is played two against two on an indoor court. I won because I was paired with Yata."

Totsuka responded to Kusanagi's question with a peace sign.

"Totsuka-san was good with tricks! Shohei doesn't stand a chance against us with that baggage that is Bando!"

"Grrr...!"

"I had fun playing with you, San-chan!"

Shohei's comforting words must have hurt his pride even more, because Bando turned away with a frown, which showed he was very angry.

"You're playing strange games again. The three of us went camping the other day.", Chitose asked, and Dewa nodded as he added a generous amount of scallions to his soba.

"Chitose said she wanted to practice before asking a girl out, so Totsuka and I went out together."

"When you're with a girl, you want to set up a tent smartly and have her back you up, right?"

"I heard Yuna-chan liked nature, so I was excited, Chitose."

"Who's that Yuna-chan?"

Kusanagi interrupted again.

"Chitose, you weren't very good at setting up a tent."

"That's why you went to practice. Dewa is good at that sort of thing, and Totsuka-san liked camping as a hobby."

Totsuka seemed to have remembered something and said, "That's right.", putting down his soba cup.

"I've gone camping many times, but we played a game we've never played before!"

Chitose looked bitter at Totsuka's words, and Dewa looked away awkwardly.

"What did you do?"

"There was a family camping nearby, and when we saw the kids blowing bubbles, we decided to make some big ones ourselves."

"I'm saying it happened because Totsuka-san befriended the kids and got excited!"

"But Dewa got really excited and started researching the composition of the bubble solution, right?"

"I was right! Dewa, you're showing your obsession where you shouldn't!"

Dewa pulled down the brim of his hat, looking embarrassed.

"It was surprisingly deep when I tried it."

"Chitose also put a lot of effort into making the bubble-making tools."

"It was strange watching three grown men playing with bubbles! The parents were scared! But the children seemed excited, and it reminded me of my childhood!"

"In the end, we made bubbles big enough to fit Anna in! We also put some red power in them and created bubbles that glowed red-hot."

"What were they doing?"

Kusanagi was astonished by the waste of his supernatural power, but Anna looked at him, imagining the scene, and said, "That's nice."

"I wish Anna had been there at least..."

Chitose sighed.

"I went to a pottery class with Anna!"

"Isn't that a nice place to take such a cute little girl?"

Chitose looks at Totsuka with a disapproving look.

"Shige-san owns a pottery studio, so I went there to try it out."

"Who's Shige-san?"

Fujishima leaned forward slightly next to Kusanagi, who commented attentively.

"It was fun. I want to do it again."

"Fujishima, you were making a vase with a craftsman's face, right?"

Eric looked at Fujishima with a bitter smile.

"Shige-san also praised you and said you had something interesting. I thought about becoming your apprentice."

Fujishima didn't change his expression when Totsuka said that, but he didn't seem completely opposed to it as he moved his hands as if turning a potter's wheel.

"The time I spent in front of the clay calmed and cleared my mind."

"Fujishima, you've really entered a new world."

Eric shrugged slightly.

"I wasn't too keen on it, but it was quite fun creating something with my own hands."

"The plates you made, Eric, were beautiful."

After Anna said that, Eric blushed slightly and looked away.

"Ah.", Kusanagi guessed that the plate with the cat image that had somehow become attached to the cupboard had been made by Eric.

"Anna made a beautiful cup, right?"

Anna nodded when Totsuka said that.

"It was fun to make. I also got to see the kiln where it was fired. The inside of the kiln was dyed red and it was beautiful."

"Shige-san's kiln isn't electric; it's wood-fired! I wonder if we could make a pot with King's flames if we put them in the kiln."

Everyone's gaze shifted to Suoh, who had just finished his soba and was smoking after eating, at Totsuka's offhand comment.

Suoh was probably unaware of what they were saying. He raised his eyebrows in confusion at being suddenly drawn to their attention.

"Ah?"

"King, why don't you try pottery?"

Totsuka gave a somewhat exaggerated explanation.

"Do you think he'll do it?"

"I don't think so! But if it's just a matter of putting fire in the oven, I think he'll have a chance."

Totsuka laughed.

"It would be fun if King had a new hobby to take up!"

Then the conversation turned to what new hobbies they wanted Suoh to try. Everyone in Homura was happily contributing ideas and rejecting them, including Totsuka, while Suoh watched with complete indifference.

"Mikoto-san is cool no matter what he does, but I want him to do something really cool!"

Yata was giving a pointless speech.

Kusanagi picked up the empty soba basket and stood next to Suoh, lighting a cigarette.

"The beginning of a new world, you know?"

He muttered, and Suoh looked at him questioningly.

"That's what Totsuka said. Starting something you've never done before feels like starting a new world."

Suoh exhaled a long stream of cigarette smoke in acknowledgment.

"Yes, after hearing what these guys say, it seems like starting a new world is surprisingly easy... but I don't have the stamina for it."

When Kusanagi said that, Suoh burst out laughing.

"Are you overwhelmed with this bar and these guys?"

"Yes. There are a lot of things we need to protect."

"You've started something troublesome."

"Aside from the HOMRA Bar, you were the one who founded the Red Clan, Homra, right?"

Kusanagi narrowed his eyes and glared at Suoh.

But it's true that his life has already seen the beginning of a much larger world. Just taking care of the world he's created may be enough to fill his capacity.

Totsuka is the type to try many things and then get rid of everything he doesn't want to keep.

But Kusanagi is the type to only have what he can afford from the start.

Kusanagi may be hesitant to have something unnecessary because he already achieved what was important to him from the start.

"Hobbies aren't something to take so seriously."

"You're right. Why don't you find a healthy hobby, Mikoto?"

"Shut up."

In the middle of the bar, it seemed a band had sprung up as a hobby they wanted Suoh to try.

Opinions flowed. Some said it would be great if Mikoto played drums, and others said a band was something frivolous for Mikoto.

This led to a conversation about Totsuka's newfound passion for the guitar, and after being told they would monitor his progress, they gave him an acoustic guitar.

"Let's play a song.", Totsuka said, and began strumming enthusiastically.

He's really skilled. That was what he thought again. The sound resonating through the bar was pleasant.

The sound Totsuka played was soft. It was a melody he'd never heard before, so it could have been composed by him.

Kusanagi doesn't dislike music either. Although he doesn't plan to start playing it himself.

Listening to the sounds like that wasn't so bad, he narrowed his eyes silently.

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"It's fine to start anything, but Totsuka left them unfinished..."

Muttering to himself, Kusanagi watered the bonsai and trimmed the branches that grew unevenly with pruning shears.

It's been quite some time since Totsuka passed away, and he's grown accustomed to this task.

While tending to the bonsai, he felt like rearranging Totsuka's belongings.

He wiped the camera with a soft cloth, checked the projector, and took out all the hobby items he'd played with and had grown tired of, dusting them off, and putting them back.

"Fishing rods, sewing tools, paints, outdoor gear... what are they? And this? Isn't it trash?"

He probably used them for some hobby, but Kusanagi thought there were a lot of things that looked like trash or whose purpose was unknown, but he didn't throw them all away and put them back.

Well, he could sort them again sometime.

After finishing his work, he decided to take a break and make himself a glass of mizuware. He left the counter and sat on a stool to drink the cold mizuware, when he suddenly saw a guitar leaning on the edge of the bar.

"...The camera and the guitar were his thing until the end."

Kusanagi approached the guitar, still holding the mizuware.

This guitar is displayed as an interior decoration, so it receives regular maintenance. Therefore, it isn't covered in dust or has damaged strings.

For some reason, feeling this way, Kusanagi put down the watered-down cocktail he was holding on a nearby table and picked up his guitar.

He leaned back on the stool and picked up the guitar. As he plucked the strings, a nostalgic sound emerged.

Because he'd often seen Totsuka practice the guitar when he was a beginner, he knew the basic chords.

But when he tried it, the sound didn't come out as expected, so he grew frustrated and looked up guitar practice videos on his PDA.

"Hmm... I see. So it's easier if you do it this way. The sound is definitely clearer than before. So..."

"Izumo?"

Kusanagi stopped what he was doing when he heard the voice.

Anna and Yata had entered the bar unnoticed and were nearby.

Although the sound of his guitar made it difficult to hear, he was so absorbed that he didn't notice. Kusanagi smiled, embarrassed.

"Oh, okay. Welcome back."

Yata asked Kusanagi, who was holding the guitar, a simple question.

"That's Totsuka-san's guitar, right? Are you going to start playing the guitar too, Kusanagi-san?"

"No. I just played it a little while tidying up Totsuka's belongings..."

He was about to respond out of reflex, but suddenly stopped.

"But isn't it fun? Starting something you've never done. It's like starting a new world."

"You've started something troublesome."

Totsuka and Suoh's words came to Kusanagi's mind.

The three of them once welcomed the beginning of a new world. It was a world too big for Kusanagi, and the colors of what he had seen before changed completely. There were many fun and difficult things, and he felt like his life was focused on appreciating what he had learned there, and that he didn't have time to add more burdens to his other small burdens...

But..."

Ding Kusanagi strummed the guitar vigorously.

"Yes. It was fun when I tried it out. Maybe I should start playing the guitar."

Anna smiled softly and nodded.

"I'm really looking forward to hearing Izumo's music."

"Well, I don't know how long that will last, though."

"I'm sure Kusanagi-san will keep it up. When you like something, you like it."

Kusanagi smiled.

"You get it, Yata-chan."

It would be great to welcome the beginning of a new little world.

CHAPTER 4: SHARE HOUSE, BLUE MARINE (KABEI YUKAKO)

The living and dining rooms on the first floor were an open space with an open ceiling. The dining room was based on a clean white color palette, and the open kitchen, with its sophisticatedly designed kitchenware and spices, looked like the backdrop for a cooking

video. A pure white dining table would be perfect even for a Western-style brunch. A state-of-the-art coffee maker, like the ones you see in a corporate project.

Everything was illuminated by a soft, almost innocuous, glowing light.

Fushimi wanted to find a dark, narrow space.

"Wow, how elegant!"

Hidaka was the one who expressed his thoughts directly. Kamo said, "Oh.", and seemed immediately interested in the kitchen.

Glancing at the living room, he discovered it was inspired by blue. Navy velvet couch were arranged around a low, glass-topped table. Beyond the window that took up almost the entire wall, there was a wooden deck overlooking the sea. A fabric hammock could also be seen facing the sea.

"Is everyone here?"

The thing wrapped in the hammock, like a caterpillar, spoke. Needless to say, the deep voice could be heard through the glass window. The hammock swung like a pendulum, and Munakata landed on the wooden platform. He was wearing teardrop-shaped sunglasses and an open-necked shirt with a strange pattern. He took off his sunglasses and stuffed them into his shirt pocket as he entered.

"Your rooms are on the second floor. The rooms are laid out the same way as the Seiun dormitory."

"Phew! So the captain will also be living with us?"

"Domyoji-san!"

Domyoji's sincere reply was hidden by a panicked Enomoto.

"I also reside in the Seiun dormitory. I need temporary accommodation."

Just yesterday, the Seiun dormitory became unusable. A breakdown in the drainage system caused a sewage backup, resulting in a major disaster. The water flooded the floors. The first floor, where the dining hall is located, was closed. There was no direct damage to the rooms on the second floor or above, but the bathrooms and toilets are unusable, and the living room has a foul odor.

The Seiun Dormitory's facilities were old, and residents had been complaining about them for some time. It was decided to take the opportunity to do a complete renovation while the dormitory was being repaired.

Fushimi had insisted that Munakata at least renew the plumbing and install the air conditioning, but it had taken years of hard work. Maybe five years?

The time had finally come to realize his long-held dream.

The renovation work is scheduled to last about three months. During that time, the dormitory residents had to move into temporary housing, and "Scepter 4" rented several buildings. In the end, each person arrived at the dormitory assigned to the special forces with only a suitcase.

"It's more like a shared house than a dormitory, right?"

Benzai's words made Fushimi think about the term. He thought it was a concept he'd never have to deal with, but now that he mentioned it, it was true.

"Why is temporary accommodation a shared house?"

"We had to quickly arrange accommodation for everyone, and this was one of the ones we were able to rent."

Munakata answered Akiyama's obvious question seriously. With a bright, innocent light in his clear eyes, he said,

"I'm really looking forward to living in a shared house with the special forces."

Where did he hear that? A shared house is a pain.

"Oh, I remember. Last month, I was watching a video about living in a shared house, and the captain was standing behind me and asked me what it was like."

He heard Fuse whisper to Goto, who was standing next to him.

"It's because of Fuse. It can't be helped.", Goto said calmly.

"It can't be helped.", Fushimi said, staring at them and gritting his teeth.

Although he had strong values, this man was strangely open-minded and curious about new things he saw and heard. In the past, team members would often fall for his words: "Oh, what's that?! That's interesting."

"Shall I make something tonight? I'm curious to know what the stove feels like. It's my first time using this kind of stove."

"No, no. It's not my job, and I don't mean to bother you, Kamo-kun. To celebrate the first day living in the share house, let's have a barbecue tonight. The wooden deck is equipped with every amenity."

"Barbecue party!" Of all the words in the world, "barbecue party" is one Fushimi hates like a caterpillar.

If it's with Munakata, it's a hundred times worse.

"I'm not participating. I'll stay in my room. If they force me to participate, I'll stay at a business hotel."

"Hey, Fushimi-san."

Ignoring the cold voice, he shouldered his luggage and headed for the stairs.

"Anyway, they'll eat all the meat, so there'll only be vegetables left. Hyenas!"

When he spoke out against the "Domyoji Squad", Domyoji pouted and fell silent, and the others seemed to give up and no longer bothered him.

The fragrant smell of roasting meat, along with the smoke rising from the outside wall, drifted in through the cracks in the window, and he stubbornly remained in his room, irritated.

After the bustle outside finally subsided, there was a soft knock on the door.

"Fushimi-san.", came Akiyama's voice. "Are you hungry? I left you some things to eat, why don't you come down?"

He was hungry, and it was too much to resist. He went down to the first floor as Akiyama urged.

Kamo, who was in the open kitchen, brought out a plate and said, "Oh, Fushimi-san. Here you go."

There was only meat, sausage, and corn. He accepted the plate without thanks, uncomfortable knowing that "Fushimi-san would eat something", even though she hadn't explicitly told him so.

These days, he can even eat green peppers. He muttered to himself.

The others were gathered around a low table in the living room. Benzai sat on the floor, clutching the table, while Domyoji, Enomoto, Fuse, Goto, and Hidaka hugged the couch cushions and yelled at him.

Fushimi was fed up and narrowed his eyes, wondering if they would continue playing together without returning to the room.

"Ah, Benzai, no, no, if you take that out, it's dangerous! Here, here. It's safer here."

"Shut up, Domyoji. Let me go at my own pace."

Opposite Benzai, Munakata sat upright. His back and legs formed a perfect right angle. On the low table between them was a wooden tower-shaped toy.

The name of the party game, in which you stack finger-sized blocks and remove them one by one without letting them fall, is...

"Jenga, huh?"

"Fuse brought it over, and everyone was more engrossed than I expected."

Akiyama nodded with a wry smile.

"Have you ever played it, Fushimi-san?"

"Yes."

When he was in Homura, Totsuka brought it over, and everyone was excited.

"I'm a bit clumsy and unprepared for this. Benzai is the best of us. Well, his head is much better than mine."

"That's true."

There's no way Munakata isn't good at it. It's the kind of game that makes the most of his abilities.

In the first round, everyone participated, and Hidaka, who usually makes grand gestures, was the first to collapse and received the penalty of "cleaning the shared house garden".

In the second round, Domyoji, who hadn't focused, also collapsed and received the penalty of "bringing something appropriate for the shared house".

Kamo, who is good at making elaborate decorative cuts in the kitchen, and Akiyama, who is versatile at work, are clumsy with games, and collapsed in the third and fourth rounds, one after the other.

Fuse, who knows the tricks as an owner, was eliminated in the fifth round; Goto mysteriously performed well in the sixth; and Enomoto, who is good at games in general, showed his determination and made it to the seventh round... and so on. As a result, one by one they "lost", and the battle came down to a one-on-one duel between Benzai and Munakata, who remained until the end.

The tower was already quite chipped, and it wouldn't be surprising if it collapsed at any moment.

Benzai, who usually has a cold expression, looked unusually tense, and his silky hair was tied back in a bun like Kamo's, showing his seriousness.

"What's wrong, Benzai-kun? You're taking too long."

Munakata, on the other hand, urged Benzai calmly. Benzai timidly reached for the tower. Just after he pulled out one of the blocks, the tower collapsed and a loud bang hit the table.

"Ahhh."

Domyoji and the others, who were leaning forward on the couch, looked up at the sky and put their hands to their heads. Benzai collapsed and banged his head on the table in frustration.

"The special forces have been wiped out? That's a bit pathetic."

Only Munakata stood up and clapped with a smile.

"No, Fushimi is still here!"

"Fushimi-san! Defeat the captain!"

Fushimi, who was trying to eat meat in the dining room without getting involved, was chosen.

"No way. Why should I join the party-goers' fun club?"

Fushimi immediately refused.

"Oh, Fushimi-kun, aren't you any good at it?"

"Huh? I'm actually pretty good at it."

When Munakata said that, he responded reflexively.

He knew 100% that he was provoking him. It's his usual tactic. He knew 100%.

"Damn it."

He bit into a piece of meat, abruptly put down his plate, and left the dining room.

"Get out of the way."

He pushed Benzai aside and sat cross-legged across from Munakata.

"I'm counting on you, Fushimi-san!"

"Only Fushimi-san can beat the captain!"

Domyoji and the others cheered irresponsibly around him.

"Hmph. I'll play against you."

When he played with "Homura", the players were basically all rude and careless, so the game didn't last long and wasn't fun. He remembers the looks on the faces of particularly rude guys who knocked down the tower in an instant and got angry.

Munakata didn't mind that.

Benzai rearranged the tower. They faced each other on top of the tower.

"You go first."

Munakata relaxed and conceded the first move. A sudden sense of déjà vu crossed his mind.

"Oh, weren't you good at it?"

Munakata had taunted him with the same words, and had sat across from him like that, remembering the day he had his first serious conversation with him. He was still a boy, about 16 years old.

It was so quiet that even the ticking of the wall clock could be heard.

Fushimi held his breath, pushing a block on the center rung of the tower with his fingertips and experimenting with slight movements.

There are only two blocks left on that level. There's only one block left on each level.

Ok. He could do it. Holding both ends of the block with his thumb and middle finger, he suppressed the trembling in his fingers and gently pulled it out parallel to each other.

The tower showed no signs of collapsing.

The people around him, who had been holding their breath, relaxed with relief.

"It's incredible... I mean, the captain, but also Fushimi-san."

Enomoto muttered in a hoarse voice, as if he were the one who was nervous and tired.

Neither side gave in easily, and the battle continued for a long time. Only one or two pieces remained on each level, and the tower remained in a state of absolute balance. The blocks that had been removed piled up on top of the tower, making it taller and thinner, creating a shape that evoked a strong sense of unease.

Fushimi placed the block he had just removed on the top layer. Carefully, so his fingers wouldn't tremble.

As soon as he let go, the tower shook. "Waah!" exclaimed those around him, and they all raised their palms to support the tower as if sending their thoughts.

After a few seconds, the shaking stopped and the tower regained its stability.

Everyone let out a deep breath, but even their breath shook the tower, so they held it quickly.

"Very well. Now it's my turn."

Munakata alone didn't seem to have weakened his nerves even a millimeter.

What the tower's current structure was like (in 360 degrees and its internal structure) and which blocks could be safely removed) it was as if he understood everything perfectly, and without the slightest tremor in his fingers, he extracted one with an easy movement and, just as easily, placed it next to the block Fushimi had stacked on the top row.

The whole time, the tower remained motionless, as if glued.

"You used your power to fix it, didn't you? It's impossible!"

Even though it was so sparsely populated. Even when Fushimi prevented him, Munakata didn't seem bothered and simply said, "No way.", He shrugged playfully.

"Even if I tried, would I have the power to do it?"

Behind his glasses, his eyes narrowed, and a self-loathing expression appeared. A faint wrinkle rarely seen on the thick skin of his mask.

"Huh...?"

A murmur spread through the group.

Since the Dresden Slate was destroyed, the power of their supernatural powers has been gradually weakening.

Munakata's power as King, who even controlled the "Green Lightning" capable of destroying Mihashira Tower, has weakened so much that he can't even hold up a toy tower with a mass only one hundred thousandth of that gigantic tower's.

"Well, I haven't tried it yet, so I don't know. Now it's Fushimi-kun's turn."

In the quiet atmosphere, Munakata calmly urged him.

"Uh, ah... yes."

Munakata said something strange, and his concentration was broken. He returned his focus to the tower in front of him. He reached out to reach the block he had his eye on, but his fingers trembled, and he couldn't touch it.

"Fufu. If you're getting nervous over a stressful battle like this, Fushimi-kun still has to put in the effort."

"Huh? Did you say that to shake me off?"

As he raised his head, the tip of his fingernail touched the block.

"Ah!"

At that moment,

Ring.

A call rang out from everyone's chest and waist. It was an emergency call.

The shrill screams drowned out the sound of the tower collapsing. No one paid attention to the blocks scattered on the table as everyone took out their own PDA.

"There's been a chain reaction and a fire on the Shuto Expressway. The Strain is out of control."

Akiyama read the report.

"The Strain is still out of control on the Shuto Expressway. It can't seem to control its own speed."

"It's calmed down lately, geez."

"Come on."

"After all, it's work."

Everyone spoke in their own way, and the conversation continued.

Fushimi also reviewed the report that had arrived on his PDA. He concentrated on working at full speed.

"Is Lieutenant Awashima in the girls' dormitory? I'll have her take command at the barracks and go straight to the scene. We'll set up the capture formation while we're in the car. Consult the details with the lieutenant and coordinate."

He jumped to his feet and gave orders without even looking at the toy.

"Captain."

He turned to Munakata.

"Yes."

Munakata stood up and pushed up the bridge of his glasses with his middle finger. His voice was as clear and firm as ever.

"Everyone, put on your uniforms and get ready to go."

"Yes!"

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In the end, a week later, Fushimi "returned" to the shared house. It's unknown if it was a coincidence, but there had been a series of out-of-control incidents involving Strain, and special forces had to be sent in to deal with them. There had been a lull lately, and it seemed like it would continue to subside, but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

At the Seiun dormitory, even when they were occupied, they could still shower and take a nap, but the shared house was on the Boso coast, so it was too far to go to the Boumon barracks.

It was easier to stay in the barracks.

"Oh, Fushimi-san. Good work."

"We'll go out again."

Akiyama and Benzai took their places at the entrance.

"I made some snacks for you, so feel free to eat them."

Kamo followed, taking off his apron and putting on his uniform.

"Oh... thanks for your effort."

Fushimi walked past Kamo and into the dining room.

On the counter in the open kitchen, thick rolls covered with plastic wrap were stacked in a neat bundle. Pork soup was also being prepared in a pot.

"Thank you for your effort.", he murmured, once again, with complete sincerity.

A week has passed since the first day of work at the share house.

The atmosphere has changed completely from the first day. Members return one after another and then leave in a hurry.

The hammock on the balcony has been converted into a clothesline, and the dirty clothes they brought are piled on the living room couch.

Maps, documents, and confiscated artifacts from the metropolitan area are scattered all over the low table.

Although "Scepter 4" is moving toward a paperless system, the share house doesn't have the same atmosphere as the barracks, so he is often forced to use paper. Incidentally, the coffee maker seems to be the only thing that works properly.

The sushi roll's ingredients were long-lasting, such as egg, dried pumpkin, and sakura denbu.

If mass food poisoning were to occur from raw food left out during this busy time, it would be no laughing matter.

Fushimi was grateful that all the ingredients were edible, so he bit into the whole sushi roll.

Hidaka was snoring, buried under the dirty linen on the couch. He was still holding the sushi roll he'd been eating.

Footsteps sounded from the top of the stairs, and Enomoto came down with a towel covering his washed hair. Goto also appeared behind him.

"Fushimi-san, are you taking a break too? Hidaka, Goto, and I will be back in about two hours."

"Enomoto, can't we have the same internet environment here as we did back at the barracks? It's a waste of time having to go to the barracks every time to operate it."

"I think it would be difficult to build the same level of security as the barracks. It would make sense if we used it long-term, but it's only for a short time."

"That's true."

He sighed. After the "Jungle" attack, the security level of "Scepter 4" was raised, and access to information from the outside was significantly restricted.

Unless a hacker of Hisui Nagare's caliber reappears, this may be an unfounded concern, and it's likely that such a person will never appear again... probably.

"Where's the captain? In the barracks?"

"Yes. I think he probably hasn't been back even once. He must be disappointed because he was looking forward to living in a share house."

A box of a party game other than Jenga lay unopened in a corner of the living room.

It was Twister (He knew this because Totsuka had brought it earlier). According to Enomoto, it was something Domyoji had bought as a punishment game and that "it would be ideal for a share house".

Then, for some reason, there was a huge stone the size of a man's arms.

"Why a stone...?", Fushimi asked, his face twisted as he looked at him suspiciously.

"Hmm. I bought that. I'm going to bring it back as a souvenir from Chiba."

Goto replied.

"Is that stone a souvenir from Chiba...?"

"It's a Chiba-style stratum. It's just a replica of an ornament. Look, there are little crab and shell fossils buried in the stratum, and they're really pretty."

He ignored him mid-conversation.

"It was a nice share house, but it was a waste for us. I'm starting to miss the Seiun dormitory. I hope the renovations are finished soon."

"The Seiun mentality is ingrained in everyone. What's so great about that dormitory?"

"But isn't the same true for Fushimi-san?"

"The internet environment is a hundred times more comfortable."

"You're not being truthful."

Enomoto chuckled, so he clicked his tongue louder, and he shrugged and said, "Sorry..."

+++++

A week later, they returned to the Seiun Dormitory.

After all, many members and staff were eagerly awaiting the prompt reopening of the Seiun Dormitory.

Unable to wait for the planned three-month renovation, they decided to restore only the sewage system and reuse the Seiun Dormitory.

Thus, the Special Forces' "new share house life" ended in just two weeks.

"I feel like I've come home!"

"It would be fine if it weren't for the sewage smell. I usually only go home to sleep."

Domyoji and Hidaka excitedly entered the house.

The first floor, which had flooded above ground level, has been cleaned (though no cleaner than before), and the smell of excrement that filled the building is no longer a problem.

Fushimi asked from behind him, observing the team members at the entrance.

"Are you disappointed?"

He heard a man's voice standing behind him.

"The truth is; I wasn't entirely sure about the renovation at first. I was thinking of simply demolishing the Seiun dormitory... If the Strain group continues to decline, the day will come when we disband "Scepter 4". Before that, I thought it would be refreshing to try living with all of you. I think it's time to start preparing for the end."

Fushimi looked at Munakata for the first time.

"Disbandment?"

"The decline of the remnants of the Dresden Slate's power, the decline of the citizen Strain group, and the decline of my power are all related."

"I bet it's true you can't even hold up a Jenga tower."

"Well. What do you think?"

"What do you mean by that?"

He was about to ask him, annoyed by his vague answer, when Akiyama and Benzai came running down the stairs. They'd left their things in the room and changed into their uniforms.

"Captain, Fushimi-san."

"I have something to attend to, so I'm going to the barracks."

The two hurriedly passed each other and left. Munakata tilted his head in some exasperation and dismissed them.

"Oh, my! I've heard that working hard is no longer considered a virtue these days."

"We take pride in our work, we have a sense of mission, and we do our best. I think that because there are people like that, some can survive without being hard workers. That doesn't mean our boys are envious of those who aren't."

"Oh. I never thought Fushimi-kun would say something I would say."

Munakata gave a mocking or pleased chuckle that could be interpreted either way.

"So, Fushimi-kun, whose side are you on?"

(Don't ask unnecessary questions. Since you're here, you should know.)

"Please offer more benefits."

He let go and deliberately took a few sharp steps as he entered. It was irritating to feel nostalgic for the creaking floor of that house, something he hadn't heard in two weeks.

CHAPTER 5: NEW GAME (SUZUKI SUZU)

"New features for "Jungle"?"

Sukuna repeated what Hisui Nagare had said.

As always, at the secret base of "Jungle". Iwafune was drinking, Yukari was busy with beauty treatments, and Kotosaka was taking a nap in a birdcage. Sukuna, who was playing a game, paused and looked at Nagare.

"Why a new feature now?"

"Lately, we've noticed a decline in the number of active users. We're considering implementing measures for users below G rank."

"Hmm...? Okay."

"I'll leave that to Nagare-chan."

"Me too."

The executives responded indifferently. Nagare blinked once and then said softly,

"You're not very interested in listening... Well, okay. I expected it. Here's the feature I'm going to implement."

At that moment, a hologram appeared in the air.

The words "Meta Jungle Alpha Version" appeared. The seven-color gradation made Sukuna tilt his head as he spun around.

"Meta Jungle... What is this?"

"We've developed a new game app as a new feature for "Jungle". It's still in alpha, but it's a MO action RPG with total immersion."

Sukuna's eyes widened in surprise.

"Total Immersion! Are you kidding me?! I've never heard it was possible with current technology!"

"By sending electrical signals to the brain using paranormal powers, it puts you in a hybrid state between wakefulness and REM sleep. It's the same state as a lucid dream, but by linking it to a game program, you can immerse yourself in the game world."

He sucked in his breath. Sure enough, Hisui Nagare is the "Green King", the "King" who controls electricity and networks. And the brain is also a network made up of electrical signals. With his powers, perhaps even Total Immersion technology is possible.

And then, Iwafune raised his hands in surrender.

"Sorry, I don't understand. What's this total immersion thing?"

"It's a technology that allows you to enter a virtual reality world without losing your five senses. Simply put, it means you can enter the world of a game."

Nagare answered simply, but neither Iwafune nor Yukari seemed to understand. That frustrated Sukuna.

"It's the kind of amazing technology that only comes from science fiction! They say it will take decades to become a reality! Entering the game and actually fighting dragons and demon kings, that would be the best!"

Sukuna stood up and leaned his face closer to Nagare's.

"Please, let me play! I just want to enter the game world, even if it's just once in my life!"

"Of course. I told you everything so you could try it out."

The arm attached to Nagare's wheelchair pulled out several earpieces.

"When you're ready, put this device on your head. It will start automatically..."

"Yes!"

Without a second thought, Sukuna snatched it from him and put on the headphones.

"Ah, Sukuna, wait a moment..."

Nagare started to say something, but the headphones were already on. Light began to fill Sukuna's field of vision.

Sukuna shouted, his heart pounding with excitement.

"Well then, let the game begin!"

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Before he knew it, Sukuna had landed in another world.

It was a desolate wasteland of reddish earth and sand. A cliff rose before him. A rudimentary torch was attached to the sheer rock face, and a cave yawned beneath.

He looked down at his body. He was wearing simple cloth clothes and rough leather shoes. Sukuna clenched his fists repeatedly and stomped the ground, muttering excitedly.

"Wow...! This is quite a dive!"

His hands and feet felt almost the same as in real life. By now, perhaps his sense of taste and pain had also been reproduced. As Sukuna searched for a suitable rock, several figures greeted him from above.

Iwafune, Yukari, and Nagare. They were all wearing the same clothes as Sukuna.

"Sukuna, please listen to the end of my story."

"You're right. That's why we had to chase you."

"That's typical of you, Sukuna-chan."

All the adults lectured him, but Sukuna's excitement didn't stop there. He apologized with a big smile.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist! So, Nagare, where can I get some weapons and armor?"

"I don't see any regrets. It's a shame."

Nagare sighed, and Yukari tilted hIS head slightly.

"What's the purpose of this game?"

"The genre is a hands-on action RPG. Your goal is to level up, collect equipment, get stronger, and defeat the final boss, the Demon King. You'll already have your starting equipment, and weapons will automatically appear upon entering combat."

As he explained, Nagare pointed to a cave.

"This is "Dungeon 000"; the name isn't decided yet because it's an alpha version, but we're thinking of making it the first dungeon users visit."

"So, we're going to conquer a dungeon. Great, how exciting!"

Sukuna smiled and moved forward excitedly.

"Ah, Sukuna. If you come a little closer..."

Before Nagare could finish speaking, a roar echoed from the depths of the cave.

A giant, slimy body emerged from the darkness. His copper-colored skin was covered by a thin layer of cloth around his waist. Blood pooled in the club he gripped in his right hand, and steamy breath escaped from his fanged mouth. The monster was modeled after a Japanese demon, but for some reason, it wore sunglasses.

Above the monster's head, the words "Kamamoto, Vanguard of the Flame" appeared.

"The enemy monster's design is inspired by a real person."

"It's the first boss! Go for it!"

At the same time as he shouted, a scythe appeared in Sukuna's hand. It was the same type of weapon he uses in the real world. Before he knew it, Yukari was standing next to him, holding a sword.

"That's right. First, let's see what you can do."

"Whoever lands the finishing blow wins, Yukari!"

With a belligerent grin on his face, Sukuna ran toward Kamamoto at full speed.

A few minutes later.

The four of them lay dead in the desert.

Kamamoto roared victorious and returned to the cave with a satisfied expression. Sukuna, face down, muttered in frustration.

"Hey, Nagare! What's wrong? You died in one hit!"

Nagare, lying on his back, replied.

"Kamamoto's attack power is high. It would be an instant kill for a level 1 stamina."

"I was dodging the opponent's attack and suddenly couldn't move."

"You ran out of stamina. When your stamina bar runs out, you can't evade for a while."

"I was standing there and suddenly died!"

"Iwa-san, you were hit by Kamamoto's area-of-effect attack. Observe the opponent's movement and dodge at the right time."

"It's your first time, so there's no way you could tell!"

Iwafune's protest, which sounded like a scream, was met with Nagare's simple reply.

"So you'll have to die and learn from it."

(I see.), Sukuna thought.

"It's a deadly game...!"

"Yes, I agree. I've adopted a format known as a high-difficulty action RPG."

And then the surroundings went dark. After a while, Sukuna and the others reappeared a short distance away. Their health had returned to full. They were back.

Kamamoto's roars could still be heard from the depths of the cave. If they got closer, they might fight again.

But...

Sukuna raised his index finger.

Just as he expected, a window similar to Nagare's appeared. Strength, Speed, Stamina. A familiar set of parameters, plus a map and an occupation tab. He opened the occupation tab at random, and this was what it said:

Sukuna: Level 1 Occupation: Unemployed.

"I'm unemployed!"

He shouted without thinking, but Nagare glared at him coldly.

"Sukuna started the game before I could explain anything. This is a game where you normally start by creating your character. Kamamoto isn't an opponent you'd face at level 1."

"Uhh..."

Sukuna was speechless.

Nagare was right. There was no doubt he was excited about his first full playthrough, but this was a "game". Only by reflecting, challenging, and surpassing yourself can you fully enjoy the pleasure of the game.

"...I understand. Well then, let's start with character creation."

Iwafune spoke suspiciously.

"Hey, what the heck is this "Charamake" thing? I don't play video games, so I have no idea."

"Leave it to me, I'll teach you everything!"

Sukuna yelled loudly and thumped his chest.

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Thirty minutes later.

The HP bar finally depleted, and Kamamoto, the Flame Vanguard, collapsed in the desert, groaning in pain.

Breathing heavily, Sukuna looked up at the words "ENEMY DEFEATED" floating in the air.

"Y-You finally defeated him...", Yukari pointed out with a giggle.

"Sukuna, just barely."

Sukuna glared at Yukari angrily, but, to his irritation, he couldn't respond. Unlike Sukuna, whose HP gauge had dropped below 10%, Yukari's hadn't decreased at all. Being a complete dive, a player's reaction speed is important. Since understanding the stamina system, Yukari hadn't been hit by an enemy attack even once.

"Hey, can we revive now?"

"Yes, let's do it, Iwa-san."

Meanwhile, Nagare and Iwafune were rolling on the ground again. Everyone had leveled up and chosen their professions, but Nagare, who was a rear guard, became a mage and Iwafune a priest, and they were knocked out with a single blow. Iwafune is hopeless, but it's disconcerting that Nagare, the game's master, was attacked.

A win is a win, though.

After Kamamoto disappeared, a treasure chest appeared on the ground. Sukuna approached it excitedly.

"Now, as for the loot..."

Opening the treasure chest, several gold and silver treasures caught Sukuna's attention. However, Sukuna isn't interested in money. The most fun part of a game is getting more powerful equipment.

"Great! I'll grab it!"

What Sukuna picked up was a giant scythe. For frontline classes (Sukuna is a warrior and Yukari is a swordsman), powerful weapons are an item that should be prioritized above all else.

Yukari also stuck his initial equipment sword into the ground and pulled a sword from the treasure chest.

"A haiku, a fairly straight sword... a close-up, I guess. I don't like straight swords, but hey, it's prettier than this stick."

Sukuna looked back at the two who had revived.

"What will you and Iwa-san do? There are a lot of wands!"

"I don't really know, so I'll leave it to you."

"Oh, yes. And Nagare?"

But Nagare didn't respond. He was staring at the menu screen, thinking about something. Sukuna frowned and called out again.

"Hey, Nagare! What's up?"

Nagare raised his head and blinked repeatedly as if he'd just woken up.

"Uh, yes. It's no problem. I'll choose a suitable wand myself."

".....?"

His reaction was, if anything, suspicious. Nagare was the only "Jungle" player at the same level as Sukuna, and yet he showed no interest in the items.

Well, Nagare is the developer and knows everything about this game, so maybe he's not as enthusiastic as he is. Thinking like that, Sukuna raised his scythe and pointed at the cave.

"Well, whatever! Let's go!"

Looking back...

He should have realized it at the time.

"Dungeon 000" was a dangerous area with magma spurting everywhere.

Red-skinned demons, like smaller versions of Kamamoto, roamed the area and attacked as soon as they found you. They had little control, but their individual attack power was very high, and Iwafune died four times before reaching the second boss.

The second boss was Yatagarasu. He was a difficult enemy who excelled at quick attacks thanks to his great speed. However, he couldn't match Yukari's reflexes, and Yukari defeated him after several attempts.

Sukuna commented, "Don't put a boss on the back burner that Yukari can barely defeat with his speed."

The third boss was Kusanagi of the Remnant Dust. He was a formidable enemy who used fireballs at long range and flaming whips at close range. With Iwafune and Nagare's support magic mitigating the damage, Yukari and Sukuna launched simultaneous attacks and somehow managed to defeat him.

Sukuna commented, "That's why he's so harsh!"

And then there's the final boss of "Dungeon 000", the "Royal Beast of Flame."

This boss, in the form of a red-haired young man, possessed immense offensive power, and with a single blow, Sukuna was on the verge of death, and Iwafune was brought to his instant death. In return, he had many opportunities and was defeated relatively quickly; but the problem was what happened next.

A phoenix appeared out of nowhere, revived him, and attacked again like a flaming lion.

The Flame Lion had many moves that were difficult to predict, so not even Yukari could react. The group was annihilated more than forty times, and it took them five hours to defeat it. When the Royal Beast disappeared with a roar, Sukuna was the only one left alive.

Sukuna murmured breathlessly.

"Finally... I defeated him!"

"Congratulations. You're amazing, Sukuna-chan."

Yukari, arms crossed, spoke in a refreshing tone.

"Oh, is it over? I died so early, so I was bored to tears."

Iwafune, pinned face down to the ground, said in a muffled voice.

"You did well, Sukuna. Let's move on to the next phase."

Nagare, sprawled out, said this, and Sukuna responded with wide eyes.

"There's no way I can do that?! Let's take a break!"

"Understood. Let's resume our actions in five minutes. Iwa-san, Yukari, please revive."

With that, the three corpses suddenly disappeared.

Sukuna sat down and sighed deeply.

A feeling of dull fatigue washed over him. But it wasn't unpleasant at all. The satisfaction of finally defeating an undoubtedly strong enemy made the fatigue pleasant. Thinking he could sleep well that night, Sukuna raised his index finger.

He scanned the menu screen.

A feeling of unease crept through him.

He checked the various tabs in order: Status. Items. Skills. Profile.

Options...

Thoroughly, thoroughly. No matter how hard he tried, nothing changed. "It" didn't appear anywhere.

Finally, with Nagare leading the way, the dead returned.

"Sukuna, have you finished collecting your loot? If so, let's move on to the next stage as soon as possible..."

"Nagare. How do I log out of this game?"

Nagare stopped.

Through the window of his index finger, Sukuna observed Nagare's expression. The "Green King" was calm and serene, always acting with precision and equanimity, like a machine. However, Sukuna knew Nagare had emotions, even if they weren't shown superficially.

Sukuna thought that what was vaguely visible on his expressionless face was "impatience".

Iwafune couldn't help but intervene.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

Sukuna replied calmly.

"I've been looking at the menu for a while, but there's no option to log out. In other words, I can't find a way to log out of the game."

"What? You can't log out? No, you can take off your headphones..."

"Who's going to take them off? Aren't we all asleep in reality?"

Yukari spoke softly, and Iwafune's expression turned serious.

Everyone's gaze was fixed on Nagare.

Nagare remained as expressionless as ever. But he wasn't making eye contact with anyone.

"To tell you the truth, I just realized. Or rather, I just remembered. I was so absorbed in the parameters and behavior of enemies, and the level design of dungeons and courses, that I forgot to add a logout option."

"Well, then, how do I log out of the game...?"

Iwafune's reasonable question unsettled Nagare.

"There's no way out of the game from the inside."

"Eh?!"

Iwafune dropped his staff and approached Nagare.

"W-what do you mean?! What are we going to do?!"

"Please calm down, Iwa-san. At this point, of course. This game is designed to end automatically upon completion. In other words, you can end it upon completion."

Yukari asked calmly.

"I wonder how long it will take us to complete the game?"

"Right now, we're at about 20%. It's already been ten hours since the game started..."

"By simple calculations, there are 40 hours left. But..."

Yukari moved his palm excitedly. He tilted his head.

"In the real world, we can't even hydrate ourselves. The "rule of three" states that it takes a person three days to die of dehydration."

"We're on complete rest, so it should be better than surviving. But even so, if we get dehydrated, who knows what effects it might have here?"

Nagare nodded vigorously at what they said.

"Yes. Either way, there's only one thing we can do. We have to finish this game as soon as possible. Let's move on."

Sukuna, Yukari, and Iwafune's gazes pierced him.

"You're right, but I don't know. It infuriates me greatly."

"Nagare-chan, I think you should start by saying "I'm sorry"."

"Maybe I made a mistake raising you... Anyway, Nagare, let me punch you when you come back to reality."

After saying that in unison, the three began to walk away.

Nagare, left alone, cleared his throat and followed them.

+++++

And now.

The four of them, Sukuna and the others, embarked on adventures in various fields.

"Dungeon 001", at the bottom of a dark, damp valley, colorless shadows stalk you.

"Dungeon 002", in a silver mountain range, airships crisscross the sky.

"Dungeon 003", in an imposing royal castle, blue-armored soldiers surround you.

It took them about thirty hours to reach the final boss room.

"Dungeon 004", the last dungeon is a shining golden spire. At its zenith, stood an old man.

Dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, his stern face reflected years of hardship, and although wrinkled, it brimmed with energy.

Sukuna shouldered his scythe and watched the old man intently.

"Is that the Demon Lord, the final boss? He doesn't look strong, but he'll probably launch brutal attacks anyway."

Then, Sukuna noticed something odd about the other three.

Yukari looked nostalgic, while Iwafune looked bitter, looking at the old man. Nagare smiled slightly. His eyes shone with an unusual fighting spirit.

The three began to argue.

"...Nagare, you know. If that old man was going to show up, you should have told him sooner."

"I guess Nagare-chan surprises you like this. I can't believe I'm running into you again."

"I'm sorry, Iwa-san, Yukari. I thought telling you in advance would make you nervous, so I kept quiet."

Sukuna felt a vague sense of detachment. It seemed everyone, except him, knew the old man.

"Who is that old man?"

Yukari replied as he silently drew his sword.

"It's Kokujoji Daikaku. The "Golden King". As far as I know, he's the strongest king."

"The strongest..."

Sukuna sucked in a breath. The word "strongest" carried unfathomable weight when spoken by Yukari, who had found beauty in battle and lived as a swordsman.

Iwafune nodded.

"I've known him since I was the "Gray King". No joke. Though I think Nagare knows him better."

Suddenly it hit him. He'd definitely heard of it. The "Green King" was defeated by the "Golden King"...

"He lost, right? Nagare, against that old man."

"Yes. Kokujoji Daikaku defeated me. Completely."

As he spoke, Nagare continued to advance.

"Kokujoji Daikaku is the strongest King. He'll no longer be a threat in the real world, but on the path we're traveling, a greater threat than him could stand in our way. I want to know if we can defeat him."

"Nagare..."

"Nagare-chan..."

"If it hadn't turned into a deadly game because of you, I would have been deeply moved..."

Nagare pretended not to hear Sukuna's murmured words.

"Then let's go. This is a rematch, with the full power of "Jungle" poured into it."

Since Nagare's words sounded like a declaration of war, the J-Ranks of "Jungle" readied their weapons.

The final battle was extremely fierce.

Just as Nagare had said, Kokujoji was undoubtedly the "strongest" boss. Every attack was lethal, and even a moment of miscalculation could reduce his HP by 90%. If you're unlucky with the behavior pattern, you often die instantly. It was an extremely unreasonable boss, almost a piece of shoddy gaming.

(But...)

After 30 attempts at total annihilation, they finally managed to reduce Kokujoji's HP bar to zero, but no one was happy. It was obvious he would revive, like every area boss up until then.

As expected, Kokujoji got up. He tore his carefully arranged kimono, revealing his muscular body, and launched another ferocious attack. Higher up in the tower, stars streaked across the golden night sky, and the occasional falling star inflicted devastating damage on the party.

(And yet...)

It was fun.

Even after 40 or 50 total annihilations, Sukuna still knew he enjoyed the game. There were definitely opportunities to be seized in the most insane succession of attacks. On many occasions, the support of other teammates saved him, even when he himself could do nothing about it.

Nagare's words were true.

That's a game everyone must conquer together.

And so, the sixty-second challenge...

Sukuna's body flew away after taking Kokujoji's punch. His health disappeared instantly, and the words "YOU DIED" appeared in his spinning vision.

But Sukuna didn't just die. In a draw, the tip of the scythe pierced Kokujoji's chest.

His stun reached its limit, and Kokujoji fell to his knees. With Iwafune's support magic in hand, Yukari seized the opportunity to unleash a flurry of attacks. Kokujoji's health bar quickly depleted. Twenty percent remaining, ten percent...

Still on his knees, Kokujoji raised both arms.

Spinning around, Sukuna gritted his teeth. Kokujoji had recovered from the stun and launched a wide-range attack. Neither Iwafune nor Yukari could dodge it due to the stiffness after the action. The golden glow exploded.

Iwafune and Yukari's bodies fluttered through the air like pieces of paper blown by a strong wind. After being annihilated more than sixty times, Sukuna knew without even looking at them that they were both dead.

They still couldn't make it.

Even with all these optimal moves and meticulous strategies, is "the strongest" still far behind?

That question, however, didn't turn into disappointment. A feeling of even greater euphoria filled him. It was the same as when he'd risen to J-Rank. The euphoria of challenging the impossible.

But then it was different. He was even more euphoric.

Perhaps because he wasn't alone. Perhaps because he had comrades worthy of his trust.

And now...

Among those comrades, one of the most trusted was emitting a green glow.

(Nagare...!)

One of the most powerful magic spells for a rearguard mage. It was a transformation spell that burned his own life and turned him into a green thunder beast.

Nagare, now transformed into a beast, dodged Kokujoji's area attack by leaping high. He then shifted his stance in midair. Kokujoji drew back his right fist and looked up at the sky.

Their green and gold gazes met.

The next instant, the two-colored glow triggered another explosion.

The green claw descended like lightning.

The golden fist roared like thunder from the Earth's crust.

A shockwave strong enough to split the world in two rippled through the tower's zenith.

Countless cracks ran across the ground, and dust filled the air. Swept away by the explosion, Sukuna's corpse tumbled.

Finally, the view cleared, and the two Kings appeared faintly.

Kokujoji stood up, his fists pointed at the sky.

At his feet, Nagare collapsed like a rag.

(What...!)

Just as he was about to scream, sharp claw marks appeared on Kokujoji's thick chest.

Golden sparkles spilled from the marks. The sparkles, like proof of life itself, soon enveloped Kokujoji's entire body.

The gigantic body of the "Golden King" transformed into a golden flash and disappeared.

Nagare staggered to his feet, and at the same time, letters appeared above his head.

"KING SLAIN"

"Nagare!"

Before he knew it, Iwafune had gotten up. Sukuna also noticed that he had regained control of his body. Together with Yukari and Iwafune, they rushed toward the battered Nagare.

"I did it. Thanks, everyone."

Nagare laughed weakly and gave a thumbs-up. Sukuna also rushed toward Nagare, laughing...

And punched him in the face.

+++++

"Kwaaaah, I'm glad you're all alive!"

Kotosaka's voice, which seemed on the verge of bursting into tears, greeted the four as they returned to reality.

Kotosaka had apparently been watching over the group, who had been immobile with the device on for about three days. Although he couldn't get them off, he was able to drink water and bring it to their mouths. Thanks to this, Sukuna and the others didn't become fatally dehydrated.

"Your life wasn't in danger. I'm relieved."

"Shut up, Nagare-chan?"

"Do you want me to hit you again?"

That exchange took place while savoring his porridge, but let's put it aside.

In the end, "Meta Jungle" was shelved. It was only natural after the incident, and it was too difficult for it to be a new feature for general users. A game that even someone with reflexes as good as Sukuna or Yukari could complete was no longer a game, but a training session. It would only cause more users to abandon it. Nagare seemed disappointed, but of course, he had no say.

And now, when it's all over,

Sukuna fondly remembers that adventure.

They overcame difficulties together, challenged formidable opponents, and achieved their goal. It was like a rehearsal for what happened next.

Red, blue, silver. Before them were all kinds of enemies. They joined forces and used their wisdom to defeat them. That process was truly a game. It even seems that "Meta Jungle" was the beginning of those days when they faced hardships alongside their companions.

There was only one thing that made it different from a game, there was no resurrection.

And it was for this very reason that Sukuna remembered that new game with such pain.

CHAPTER 6:

END OF THE BEGINNING, THE BEGINNING OF THE END (AZANO KOUHEI)

"It seems the pit is getting fuller and fuller. Is this really what they call fate?"

Otori Seigo forced a smile as he watched the victims fill the facility's former gymnasium.

Otori stood on the second floor of the gymnasium, in a hallway that ran along the wall of the arena. He could see the arena on the first floor and, of course, the victims gathered there.

Many of the victims were soaked, some with water dripping from their hair and clothes. The super typhoon that made landfall on the Kii Peninsula early yesterday morning expanded its strength as it moved up the Pacific coast and made another landfall on the

Izu Peninsula. This afternoon it made a direct hit in the Kanto region. The government's response was delayed, and damage is spreading to several locations.

However, not a single drop of rain fell on the glass panes installed in the hallway behind Otori. There was no sign of wind, and it was so calm that it was hard to believe he was in the path of a major typhoon.

However, from the window, he couldn't see what was happening outside. It wasn't the wind or the rain that was blowing, but a layer of fog that obscured everything.

"There you are! I've been looking for you."

A man appeared at the end of the hallway where Otori was standing. He was a large, muscular man, someone who'd think he was a professional wrestler. However, he was wearing a cassock. He'd always thought it didn't suit him, but now it wasn't anyone else's problem. After all, he was wearing the same clothes now.

The man, using his cane to propel himself, crossed the hallway, dragging one leg slightly, and approached Otori. Otori frowned when he saw that his shoulders were wet from the rain.

"You came out of the fog like that? Don't be reckless."

"I wanted to check it out. And there it was again, that great sword."

"Yes. I know. I can't see it, but I can feel it."

With that, Otori looked up at the ceiling of the gymnasium. To be precise, far away, beyond.

There, floating, motionless in the raging storm, was a single sword. A gigantic, gray sword that seemed unreal.

"...Sword of Damocles, hey... I'm sure you'll still be hooked on that old man's nonsense."

"Stop making fun of me. Kokujoji Daikaku is a middleman who controls the post-war political and financial world. I still cringe when I think about that time we were summoned."

"If that's the case, then I'm now a "king" like that old man, right?"

"Well, it's unreasonable to have something that big floating over your head, so you have no choice but to believe Kokujoji's explanation."

"Does that make your blood run cold?"

Otori joked, and the man snorted arrogantly.

"There are large nations that control a certain percentage of the world, and there are small nations that could be destroyed in the blink of an eye."

"No doubt."

"For starters, they're much scarier when you see them face to face. Look in the mirror, mirror."

"You're right."

After all, Otori was only a local government official until last month. He worked in the city hall's social welfare department, working for the underprivileged. The man in front of him was the priest of the church where Otori used to help out in the soup kitchens.

But then he overstepped his official duties and began serving the people, got involved in the expropriation of church lands, and then fought gangsters. Without realizing it, he had become a "king". It seemed like a joke.

Of course, he understood that what had happened to him was no joke. He was forced to understand when he was called to the Slate. The same was true of the fog blocking the typhoon outside. That fog was the result of Otori's efforts and an expression of his power as "King". Like the sword above his head, it was a truly supernatural power.

"A thick, impenetrable fog that gently envelops and protects the weak and poor. Is that something from a manga?", Otori said with a wry smile, ruffling his hair.

He looked down at the evacuees.

This country has recovered and developed from the depths of despair, nearly destroyed by war, at a pace that has astonished the world.

The most important person in this is the aforementioned Kokujoji Daikaku. He calls himself the "Golden King". This typhoon has already caused quite a bit of damage, but most of it will be recovered in a few days. This is the national strength this country now possesses.

However, due to the rapidity of this growth, it has left the weak behind, unable to adapt. While many citizens prosper and become wealthy, others fall into poverty and become weaker. Those who forge ahead do not look down on them.

One example is the people who have taken refuge in poverty. That's why they have fled to unofficial shelters like this one, with nowhere else to go.

These are people who originally belonged to a weaker social class. They must have lost their homes and jobs in that disaster. Not knowing what tomorrow will bring, they huddle together to survive in the present.

And yet...

"...I'm glad I found this place."

"...I guess so."

The refugees who had fled to the Shrine of the Mists sighed with a slight sense of relief. Although they were still unaware of his status as "King", they were grateful for his protection.

Otori was genuinely pleased to see this before his eyes.

"What are you going to do?"

"What?"

"You know, right?"

Hearing what the priest said, Otori sighed bitterly.

The words he had spoken earlier echoed in his mind.

My own destiny.

It was too biased and forced. What's more, the burden he carried was too heavy. It was a pressure he didn't understand and, frankly, didn't like.

But he had to admit... he didn't feel bad about being able to help people.

"If I'm the king now... I have no choice. I'm not that kind, but I'll try to create one. My own country. Is it a clan? I suppose it would be a gray clan."

As he spoke with resignation, Otori looked at the people below him kindly. The priest silently observed Otori's gaze from the side.

"I don't think I can abandon those people. I will establish the Otori Kingdom. Even if it blows away, I will try my best."

In fact, he was more than half overwhelmed by the situation. His lack of initiative is his weakness.

And, no matter what, his strength is that he takes things seriously when he starts something. When he said he would do his best, that was what he truly felt.

"I see.", said the priest, savoring his words.

"But, well, there probably isn't an Otori Kingdom. What should we do? What about the "Phoenix Kingdom"?"

"That name makes me doubt your sanity."

"Really? It's just a random idea, but it's not that bad..."

"Rejected. A request from the first citizen."

At first, not understanding the priest's response, Otori turned around with a dumb "Huh?" expression.

The priest said calmly,

"You're called a clan member? Hurry up."

After saying that, he continued, looking at Otori, who couldn't answer, stunned.

"Did you really think you could build a country without me? By yourself? How high are you? Have you forgotten Kokujoji's warning? Or is that stupid sword floating in the sky? If the King makes a mistake, it will fall and bring ruin. I can't leave a reckless fellow like you alone. I value my life too."

The priest suddenly became talkative. Besides, he seemed to be serious, which was quite irritating.

It was irritating, but...

But still...

Otori cleared his throat to hide his sentimentality and remained silent for a moment, considering what to say.

"So... I'm the Prime Minister."

"I suppose I'll be paid a salary."

"It will be paid as I progress."

"I was stupid to ask that."

After snorting, the priest puffed out his chest and laughed, showing his teeth. Otori laughed too. As he laughed, he realized, much more clearly than the mysterious sword hovering above his head, that he would probably remember this moment many times in his life.

It all starts here, right now...

+++++

"Begin."

"Hmm... well, I suppose. With this, we've managed to ensure a minimum standard of healthy and cultured living... right?"

Iwafune Tenkei stroked his beard suspiciously, while Hisui Nagare, sitting on a pile of folded cardboard, nodded exaggeratedly.

"I have no complaints. Especially not about this shack. I see, this underground passage was perfect as a "secret base", but it was unnecessarily large as a living base. By deliberately dividing it into the smallest possible space, it increases its functionality as a living space. Impressive. It was a blind spot. Congratulations!"

"My, my, it's hard to bring in the building materials."

A vast underground space that was once a key point for flood control. The walls, floors, and ceilings are made of inorganic concrete, and thick pillars line the ground, creating a world isolated from the surface. In the middle of it all stands a ramshackle-looking shack.

This is the sanctuary for the two of them, who will attempt to return.

"It's fine.", Nagare continued.

There was no falsehood in his words.

"It's too good for me, who have already lost everything."

"Because you bit Kokujoji. That old man would have died if we had left him alone."

"That's in doubt. We can consider whether the "Golden King" will die of old age or of natural causes if we leave him alone."

"...I don't want to think about that."

Iwafune shrugged, twisting his lips and laughing.

The direct reason they both fled so deep underground was because Nagare challenged Kokujoji and was defeated. Nagare is still alive because he didn't hold back, admitted defeat, and did his best to escape; or perhaps Kokujoji didn't want to bear the burden of killing a king.

In any case, Nagare is still alive, and Iwafune supports him. The "Green King" and the "Gray King", chosen by the Slate, will now enter a period of darkness.

"..."Jungle" has taken root underground and will sprout to the surface in the near future. This is where we will change the world."

Without hesitation or fear, Nagare expressed his determination. Iwafune also nodded sincerely to Nagare's words.

Iwafune and Nagare have been together for almost five years. The time they spent together has revitalized Iwafune's heart, which was supposed to be dead. It was a noisy but peaceful time that should not have been granted to a great sinner like him.

But that will change from now on. For Nagare, the time they spend together and their way of being have changed, and will continue to do so.

Perhaps the true beginning of their relationship is right now, in this place.

"The beginning always has to happen someday..."

Iwafune unconsciously fought the words that suddenly and unconsciously escaped him.

It all starts here. For Iwafune, this was the second time he felt his heart swell with excitement and anticipation for the future that still awaited him. And although the memories of the first time are still vivid, looking back, what wells up inside him isn't nostalgia for his youth, but a sharp pain and bitterness, a deep sense of loss that remains frozen and unmanageable.

Noticing Iwafune's reaction, Nagare tilted his head and asked, "Iwa-san?"

Iwafune shook his head and replied,

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's nothing."

He took a deep breath and exhaled deeply.

He closed his eyes, waited a few seconds, and looked not at the past, but at the present.

An unconscious "prayer" for next time was reflected in the old man Iwafune's eyes.

+++++

"Is it really that bad?"

"Yes."

Otori stifled a groan at the "Colorless King" Miwa's simple response.

Otori stood before the "Colorless King" in the chapel of the church that was the center of the Gray clan, "Cathedral". He had asked his companions to leave the room. It was too sensitive a subject to discuss openly.

What Miwa told him was a prophecy of impending doom. The possibility of an inevitable outcome.

It was the "Red King", Kagutsu Genji.

"It's just a possibility, right?"

"Of course it's true. But that doesn't mean we should take it lightly."

"Are you saying Habari is out of control?"

"No. He's done his job well, but... as a result, you could say there's a synergy developing between "Scepter 4" and "Purgatory". Things are accelerating."

"It's a bad joke."

"I hope it's just a joke."

Miwa responded calmly, with a lucid demeanor, and a certain resignation. Otori glared at him, then closed his eyes and massaged his eyelids with his fingertips.

If this man said that, it must be true. The current "Red King" is dangerous.

His power is immense, and it cannot be controlled, let alone predicted. After all, it's difficult even to communicate with him properly. Miwa's ability to predict the future is his power as "King", but he can't fully understand Kagutsu's actions.

He is a mass of power whose thoughts, desires, and actions are unknown. Furthermore, that power governs "destruction". That is the current "Red King", Kagutsu Genji.

"What about what you said before, that the "Green King" is working in the shadows?"

"The "Tokijikuin" are putting all their effort into it, but unfortunately, they haven't been able to locate him. The "King" is also unpredictable. It will be difficult to contact him unless he wants to."

"Your prophecy is also useless."

"Exactly."

Miwa immediately agreed with the somewhat sarcastic comment. However, for a moment, as he replied, he seemed to sense a sense of weariness.

Of the Seven Kings, Miwa is the one who is trying the hardest to avoid ruin.

"Sorry."

"No."

Miwa smiled slightly at Otori's brief apology.

There is a year's difference between Otori and Miwa. Although Miwa is older, Otori has lived as a "King" the longest.

As the "eldest", it is Otori who should fulfill the responsibilities of a "King".

But Otori was so busy protecting his own clan (the largest of the Seven Kings in terms of size alone) that he couldn't afford anything else. He did it for those he was determined to protect, but he couldn't deny that he was avoiding trouble.

However, if it was the duty of a "King", there was someone who must fulfill it more than anyone else.

"Even if you're in such a desperate situation, is Kokujoji still the same? Even if it's Kagutsu, if the "Golden King" is dealing with him directly, he can at least admonish him."

"Actually, it's difficult. The "Golden King" is the key. If he moves, various balances will be upset.", Miwa answered carefully and continued, "However..."

"The fact that the "Golden King" is keeping watch is a warning to the other Kings. I've said some rather dark things, but it should be possible to prevent destruction. I'm not as good as him, but I have no intention of losing."

Otori relaxed slightly when Miwa declared so decisively.

"You're trustworthy."

"I'm an unreliable prophet."

"But I'm sorry."

The two exchanged small smiles at Miwa's lighthearted comment.

For example, Otori could never have the feeling of a mission as grand as protecting the world. He thought he'd gained quite a bit of experience as a "King", but the feeling that it "wasn't his style" hasn't gone away.

On the other hand, his determination to do everything possible remains unchanged. Whatever the crisis, if it damages Otori's beloved "Cathedral", he will face it at the risk of his life.

As if understanding Otori's resolve,

"We have Kokujoji Daikaku, Habari Jin, and Otori Seigo. And I'm here. I don't know the position of the "Green King", but I'm sure we have enough combat power to prevent destruction."

He knew Miwa's words were somewhat comforting. Still, Otori nodded without hesitation, saying, "Yes."

"Well, I don't want you to rely too heavily on me, so basically, the three of you have to figure this out."

"We'll do what we can."

"Oh, wait. That silence and smile just now really scared me."

"Don't worry."

Miwa replied coldly, and Otori frowned, wondering if he had gotten too carried away.

However, suddenly...

"Come to think of it, that King from the beginning won't appear this time either? He has some connection to Kokujoji, right? If he's on our side, I think it would put us at ease a bit."

Although it was a blatant change of subject, Miwa didn't mind and replied, "That's right."

"I think he, the "Silver King", won't get involved in any conflict on Earth."

"Even if the world is destroyed?"

"Probably."

"He's a really strange guy. Perhaps he's already dead?"

"Probably not. The "Silver King's" power is "unchanging". He's an eternal being."

With that, Miwa looked up at the church's stained-glass window.

To be precise, he was looking beyond the window, up at the sky.

The "Silver King" has been in the sky for over half a century, under the rule of an airship that never lands. He has silently watched over all the Kings born since then.

The First King.

The King of the Beginning.

If he were to descend to Earth, could they prevent the impending destruction?

And when he wields his power, will he begin something new?

"The beginning of the end... that would be terrible."

Miwa grimaced at Otori's sinister words. Otori laughed and apologized a second time.

Then he looked at the other side of the stained-glass window.

"But... I wonder what kind of person the "Silver King" is."

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"The "Silver King" is in the Land of the Dead."

Iwafune reacted sharply to Nagare's words through Kotosaka.

Nagare gave a few more instructions to his clanmate, Mishakuji Yukari, who was leaving Mihashira Tower, and then disconnected from Kotosaka.

He took a deep breath and slowly leaned back, making the back of his chair creak.

Then he turned around in his chair and faced Iwafune.

"Listen, Iwa-san. It's a great achievement. We've found the current location of the "Silver King"."

"You say it was a great achievement... The occupation of Mihashira Tower failed, right?"

"I never intended to continue the occupation. It's rational to abandon it once everything necessary has been done. It's true that we failed to capture Kushina Anna, but now that we know the location of the "Silver King", there's no need to obsess over her."

His tone was as calm as ever, but it was clear he was quite excited. Iwafune, who was cleaning the secret base, stopped the noisy vacuum cleaner and shrugged exaggeratedly.

"You're still as obsessed as ever."

"I agree. As Yukari just said, as I always say, I'm a fan of the "Silver King"."

"But that doesn't mean you have to drag this retired old man along, does it?"

"I've explained this to you many times. I want him to listen to my plan. I'd also like to build a cooperative relationship with him."

"If you get too carried away, he could become your enemy."

"I've already explained this to you, but I designed my plan with that possibility in mind. I know it's not necessarily a necessary factor, but this is, so to speak, my selfishness."

Iwafune sighed as Nagare stated this in a cheerful tone. His appearance has evolved and his expressionlessness has intensified, but his personality hasn't changed since they first met, and he still retains that childish side.

"The selfishness of a king is useless."

"I deny it. Selfishness is the very essence of a king."

"Apologize to the kings of the world."

"I don't know about the royal families of the world, but the King of the Slate is like that."

"When you say that, everyone... it's a bit annoying to deny it."

A few faces came to mind, and Iwafune gave a bitter smile.

In fact, he's often puzzled over the Slate's choice. Of course, what bothers him the most is Iwafune's choice. After all, he's a failed king. Why did the Slate choose him then? And what does it think about him being here right now?

"Well, if it was a success, we should celebrate. We also have to give Sukuna some fun, since he couldn't participate. Let's start preparing."

Iwafune put away the vacuum cleaner.

Iwafune opened the refrigerator to check the contents, and Nagare stared at him.

"Everything will be fine, Iwa-san. The "Silver King" is the "King of the Beginning". He will certainly bless us, as we are about to begin a new world."

"I hope so."

From the bottom of his heart, Iwafune responded without turning around.

This time, he would keep silent, deep in his heart, the sinister words he had spoken back then.

CHAPTER 7:

TO YOU, WHO SHALL WELCOME SPRING (MIYAZAWA TATSUKI)

Although it was a weekday morning, the large hospital, which has several departments, including internal medicine, pediatrics, dermatology, and surgery, was so crowded that the chairs in front of the reception desk were occupied.

Online reviews weren't very good. Some commented that the doctor's explanations weren't very clear, that the nurses weren't very efficient, and that the receptionist got angry when they asked how to use the payment machine. However, it was the largest hospital in the area and the medical standards were high, so many people came.

Especially with the arrival of spring, those who had endured well throughout the winter suddenly began to feel ill, as the ground turned muddy and the hospital became more crowded than usual.

The receptionists, already known for their unfriendly nature, lost what little hospitality they had as the paperwork mounted. The voices calling out patients whose turn it was became noticeably harsher.

The wait drags on, and the expressions of those sitting in the chairs remain somber. Some have their eyes closed, their brows furrowed, and they are constantly moving. Three elderly men look at their watches and ask, "Is it late yet?"

An air of irritation spreads through the waiting room like a gray mist.

The baby, sensing danger, began to cry. The mother, holding the baby in a baby carrier, tried her best to calm him down, but the baby wouldn't stop crying.

No one complains directly, but the irritation grows. Finally, a fight breaks out between a middle-aged man in a suit and a young man in a sweatshirt.

"Hey! Stop it! If you're going to cough, go somewhere else! This is not the place to see a doctor for infectious diseases!"

The middle-aged man complained to the young man. Although the latter was wearing a mask, he had been coughing for a while. There has been an infectious disease outbreak recently, so everyone is sensitive to various things. However, the young man had his own argument.

"What? I only have a larynx allergy! But you're the one who's been playing with the computer this whole time, is that okay with you?"

As the young man had pointed out, the middle-aged man continued to work with a dangerous attitude, the computer in his lap. He was undoubtedly typing loudly, and wouldn't be very well received in the hospital.

"What?"

"Don't come criticizing me!"

The two grabbed each other's necks and stared. The atmosphere began to get noisy.

At that moment,

"Stop it! How embarrassing!"

A loud, scolding voice was heard. The voice belonged to a young man with long hair and black clothes. He had been standing alone against the wall for some time, arms crossed and eyes closed, motionless as a statue. Because of this, many hadn't noticed his presence.

The tall young man nimbly approached and stood between the middle-aged man and the young man.

"Shame on you! This is a hospital!"

He grabbed the two men by the shoulders and pulled them apart. The middle-aged man and the young man leaned back and took a couple of steps back. However, both seemed angry at being reprimanded in public and forced to mediate.

"Who are you?"

"Ugh! Take that. Who do you think you are?"

This time, the two began attacking the young man. The young man looked bewildered and astonished. He never expected them to get angry at him, instead of being ashamed of his actions.

"Unacceptable!"

The young man was about to reprimand them again when...

"Kuro. Sit down."

A soft voice spoke. In fact, it was just a gentle hand on the young man's back. However, that was enough, and the thin but sturdy young man collapsed instantly.

Instead of the young man slumped in a nearby chair, a man of not particularly bulk and unimposing presence appeared on the scene, with an air of a spring breeze.

He wore an elegant Japanese kimono and a stylish hat.

He smiled and walked calmly between the hesitant middle-aged man and the young man.

He leaned slightly and extended his hand with a small movement. No one noticed, but a moment before, the middle-aged man's laptop, which he had left unsteadily, was about to fall from the chair to the floor. The man in traditional Japanese clothing caught it with a minimal movement, as if he had anticipated it.

Then,

"Here you go."

He carefully handed it back to the middle-aged man.

"Oh, ok. Thank you."

The arrogant middle-aged man thanked him without thinking. The man in traditional Japanese clothing continued,

"Your throat must be in trouble. Take care."

He also called to the young man in the hoodie. The words of gratitude seemed to come from the depths of his heart.

"Oh, yes."

The young man nodded, looking somewhat embarrassed. Without realizing it, everyone in the hospital waiting room was attracted by his demeanor. A calm atmosphere, like a clear spring sea, replaced the irritable and gloomy atmosphere from before. Without realizing it, the baby stopped crying and smiled.

The man in traditional Japanese clothing looked at them sweetly and then greeted the young man in black, who had staggered to his feet.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Kuro. Come on, let's go home."

Inviting him, they headed toward the hospital exit. Where they were walking. Beyond the automatic doors.

There, the cherry trees planted on the hospital grounds were in full bloom under the spring sun.

"...It's the perfect season."

A man walked with his hands in the sleeves of his crimson kimono, gazing at the cherry trees in full bloom.

His name was Miwa Ichigen. He was the Seventh King, the "Colorless King", and currently lived modestly in a village, composing haiku and tutoring neighborhood children.

Meanwhile,

"I'm sorry, Ichigen-sama!"

Bowing with all his might behind Ichigen's back, in a valiant stance, was his disciple, Kuro, also known as Yatogami Kuro, who was the King's vassal.

"Hmm?"

Ichigen stopped, turned around, and for a moment looked puzzled.

"Ah, you mean about before?"

He smiled faintly. Kuro raised his face and apologized for his failure with a fearful expression.

"If Ichigen-sama hadn't been here earlier, an unnecessary argument would have arisen. It was all due to my inexperience. Thank you for resolving the situation!"

"Hmm."

Ichigen scratched his cheek with his fingers and laughed awkwardly.

"It's nothing to apologize for... Kuro. You're serious, so sometimes you get too stiff. That stiffness can sometimes be a bit of a negative in situations like this. But..."

At that moment, Miwa Ichigen saw Kuro's gloomy face.

"Well, let me show you."

He smiled gently and extended his hand.

"Kuro. Shake hands. Shake hands."

He slowly extended his right hand. Kuro instantly understood Ichigen's intention, blushed, and shook his hand embarrassedly.

At that moment.

"Uh, oh."

Kuro's body leaned forward. Ichigen didn't exert any force. But even so, he gradually lost his balance.

The same phenomenon occurred when he placed a hand on Kuro's back and he slumped back in the chair.

Ichigen said:

"The human body is a strange thing. It unconsciously synchronizes with the person it's in contact with. If the other person is tense, you tense up. If the other person is relaxed, you do too. I'm relaxing right now, and you're relaxed. That relaxation is being transmitted to you."

"Yes, master."

Kuro replied desperately in a stiff voice. From the outside, it looked as if he was simply holding onto Ichigen's hand and trembling.

But from his perspective, that wasn't the case. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to stand. Ichigen's extreme body movements were unbalancing his center of gravity and posture.

Ichigen continued speaking calmly and cheerfully.

"It requires a bit of practice and skill, but it can be applied to multiple people without contact to a certain extent. That's the technique I used there. And if you change the vector a little more,"

At that moment.

".....!"

Kuro was stunned. His body twisted to the right. He rose into the air as if he'd done a somersault, and centrifugal force flipped him upside down, landing back on his feet in an arc.

His long hair fluttered as he fell a short time later.

Kuro's eyes were wide.

"T-this is..."

He gasped as he asked his master.

"Is it the power of a supernatural king?"

Ichigen let go of Kuro and shook his head with a smile.

"It requires some training, but it's only human strength. It's the so-called theory of ancient martial arts and its application. I'm sure you can achieve it one day."

It didn't seem like it at all.

Kuro was well aware of Miwa Ichigen's swordsmanship, but his martial arts skills were so divine that his respect for him intensified.

Perhaps sensing Kuro's feelings,

"No, I'm sure you can easily surpass me."

That was what Ichigen said. His words were bright and clear, but that clarity stirred concern in Kuro's heart.

He lowered his voice and asked,

"Umm, Ichigen-sama."

Overwhelming fear and a bit of hope.

"And what did the doctor say?"

Kuro had accompanied Ichigen to the hospital. Ichigen was silent for a few seconds. He clasped his hands and looked toward the row of cherry trees.

With a smile on his face,

"My illness is progressing, and I probably won't see the next spring."

At that moment, the wind blew and the cherry blossoms fell. Kuro couldn't move, for his beloved master seemed about to disappear at any moment behind the fleeting pink mist.

He couldn't even blink...

Ichigen continued to live the same life as before. He woke up and went to bed at the same time in his house, which was simple but had everything he needed.

He raised the children in the spotlessly clean living room, taught Kuro swordsmanship in the courtyard, and wrote haikus in his small room.

He grew vegetables in a nearby field, chatted with elderly neighbors, and strolled by the stream to gaze at the moon.

And from time to time, he went to the hospital.

From spring to summer.

It seemed as though everything would continue this way.

But at the end of summer, when the snowdrops stopped blooming and the mornings and evenings grew noticeably cooler, Kuro felt as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over him.

As Ichigen tried to pull a summer haori over his chiffon kimono, he realized that his body was getting worse by the minute, from the thinness of his arms, the papery whiteness of his cheeks, to his deep, clear blue gaze.

The number of hospital visits steadily increased, and so did the length of each stay. But, oddly enough, Ichigen never remained hospitalized for more than a day.

"I asked the doctor to leave things as they are. I won't pressure him."

Kuro didn't ask for details about the treatment plan he was discussing with the doctor.

His master was already facing the end of his life.

A king of noble character and a clear mind, he determined his own destiny by his own will.

Kuro believed that as a vassal, he could only obey him silently.

Showing no sadness or tears.

Strong, strong.

With each passing day, Ichigen grew weaker and weaker, and he devoted his whole heart and soul to caring for him.

Ichigen was emaciated, had a fever, and sometimes felt unsteady, but he tried to live as calmly as possible. He strolled through the nearby forest, composed haikus, and taught Kuro swordsmanship in the garden.

With the end of his life looming, Ichigen's sword took on a somber edge that was almost frightening.

But his natural personality didn't change, and he remained cheerful and carefree.

One night, lying in Kuro's bed and talking about what he would do after his death, Ichigen had the same radiant and cheerful expression.

"Kuro, there are some assets I've forgotten. I bought stocks when I was in the United States, and if you convert them to today's Japanese yen, it's probably about 500 million yen."

Kuro showed no particular reaction to the confession that he had forgotten such a large amount of assets. Ichigen was evasive, joking, or just naive, but there was something about him that made him seem that way.

Kuro took out a notepad and began writing down everything his master had told him with a serious face, trying not to miss a single word.

Ichigen's will basically stated that he wanted his inheritance to be donated to an appropriate charity working for the welfare of children, and for it to be administered.

"I've already discussed almost everything with my lawyer.", Ichigen explained. "There are just a few minor details left to resolve, so I'd like to ask you to take care of them."

After fully understanding the administrative procedures,

"I'll risk my life."

Ichigen looked at Kuro, bowing his head solemnly, amused. He coughed slightly. Autumn insects were chirping in the garden. Master and student were silent for a while.

Kuro was reluctant to leave. Ichigen sat on the ground, closed his eyes, and listened silently to the insects' chirping.

They both knew very well that their eternal separation would soon come.

Kuro kept his head bowed, his body trembling slightly. He couldn't move.

If he moved...

He felt like something was about to disappear. Ichigen opened his eyes wide and looked at Kuro gently.

"As for me..."

He began to speak slowly.

Unlike when they had first met, his voice was thin and weak.

"As a haiku poet, I love all the seasons in this country. But spring is the best. The new branches sprout and grow radiantly toward the sky. The buds swell, a sign that flowers will bloom. I love to admire and observe these possibilities that will grow in the future."

His voice was soft, strong, and warm, just as it had been when they first met.

Kuro knew it.

Ichigen was telling him that their farewell was near. He dug his nails hard into his palms, desperately trying to hold back his tears.

Ichigen continued,

"My life has been very good. I left something for the dazzling young branches and flowers that will bloom in the future. I feel the same way about Yukari, but I am truly relieved to have been able to entrust my future to you, Yatogami Kuro... your brilliant potential."

He felt joy.

Ichigen let out a deep sigh.

"I don't think I'll be able to see the cherry blossoms next year."

Kuro looked up, surprised. Ichigen held his gaze and smiled.

He said,

"But you'll look at the cherry blossoms for me. For me when I'm gone. If I can think like this, I can be at peace. Please, Kuro. Please keep weaving the future. For a long, long time."

So...

"It's okay to cry when you want to cry."

At that moment, Kuro's emotions erupted.

Overwhelmed.

Kuro clung to Ichigen. Ichigen hugged him lovingly.

The two remained like that for a while.

Kuro's sad, tearful figure and Ichigen's warm, loving face stood out in the dim light of the long autumn night.

Shortly after that night, Ichigen passed away.

A cherry tree blossoms in the courtyard of Ashichu Gakuen High School. It grows near the fence that separates the soccer field from the tennis court.

Right now, the soccer team is playing a red-on-white match, and the women's tennis team is stroking their rackets.

Young cheers.

Voices of determination. Occasionally, laughter joins in.

Fueled by their energy, the cherry blossom petals fall in a frenzy.

Beneath them, Kuro stood.

"Ichigen-sama.", he mentally said to his eternal mentor.

"The cherry blossoms are beautiful again this year. The season you love so much is beginning anew."

A smile spread across his lips.