

.hack//G.U. Ragtime translated by Falions

People...

The world itself...

All linked by some ineffable, invisible force.

Hearts and minds intertwine.

And thus... another new world comes into being.

Chapter 1: Even at the end of the journey the stars above us will guide our way!

When she first heard those words, Chika Kuramoto was in the pits of melancholy.

She had suffered long and hard for her second year final exams, and the finale of her adventure was in sight. The two boss monsters: math and science. She fought them to the death, became a ghost, and returned home. Total failure. Must redo. Dammit.

Chika threw herself onto her bed intending to nap, but her eyelids were heavier than expected. When she opened her eyes it was a bit past ten and the scenery outside her window was pitch black. She had overslept into the evening. She complained to her mom that she didn't wake her up, the opposite of her usual complaint of being woken up too soon.

"I woke you up, but you just fell back asleep," her mom said through a yawn. "Hurry up and eat your dinner so you can wash the dishes. I'm going to bed, 'night."

Chika ate her cold dinner alone, washed the cups and dishes, and then returned to her room once again to sleep.

The back of her head felt slightly numb. It was like an invisible headband was wrapped around her. She closed her eyes as her field of vision slowly blurred away. But she did not sleep. Her eyes just sat open. She had slept until 10pm--there was no way she was tired enough to sleep again. She lifted her neck up, stretched, and then took a deep breath.

The test was over, but she could not relax. A strange uneasiness washed over her. More than just test jitters, this was a strange feeling she had felt for many months, perhaps over a year, or even earlier than that.

Suddenly she felt like she was suffocating, so she ran over and opened the window. The night air filled the room. Come October, her little town in Hokkaido became quite cold. It was still fall, but didn't feel like it. While gazing out the window, Chika took a deep breath.

Long ago, or, rather, in elementary school, perhaps 5 or 6 years ago, there was a time when she still felt like she could become anything she wanted, achieve anything she wanted, that the world was her oyster. The way the world feels when you're a kid. But, as you get older, those feelings tend to get flattened out by reality. You start realizing you're not so special after all.

The red-marked wrong answers were the junctions that decided this. No good at world or Japanese history. Struggling in music and English. She had failed to fundamentally understand even the basics of math and science.

No wait, that's wrong, thought Chika. *This isn't what's bothering me.*

She couldn't explain it to other people because she wasn't quite certain of it herself. It wasn't something she was exactly conscious of either. However, the one thing she was certain of was that the feeling came whenever she found herself with empty time like this.

Confusion and impatience.

Think I can keep going this way? Is it OK if I stay like this?

Feelings of vague irritation.

And then Chika noticed something was shining in the corner of her view. The mobile terminal she had placed on her desk when she came home. Chika sat in front of her desk and picked up the phone.

Messages from her classmates overflowed in her notifications--asking how the test went, complaining about the test, cries of joy and cries of frustration, Chika took it all in as she scrolled down the screen. And then her hand stopped. The last message was from Nouichi Morino.

Nouichi was a friend she had made in the MMORPG *The World*, or rather, a fellow adventurer who was involved in the same incident that had occurred recently. In *The World*, however, he played a character called Silabus. In preparation to study for the test, Chika had told her friends in the game that she wouldn't be able to play for a while. And now, instead of complaining about the test like all her other friends, she felt she could talk earnestly with Silabus about how she really felt.

It's strange, she thought, that she could be more honest with people she's only known online without getting embarrassed. Her message to him said something to that effect after she had finished complaining.

Silabus was older than Chika, a confident guy who lived life honestly. He was always able to advise her in a straightforward way. He wrote back that he had felt the same way, that it was a growing pain everyone went through, and at the end of the message he added something he said he learned from a friend of his that, "if you sing this, you'll instantly feel better!"

He changed the font of the text and wrote:

Even at the end of the journey, the stars above us will guide our way!

Reading that, Chika gave it everything she had. She let all the air escape her and read it like she was singing an old ballad or reading a history textbook aloud--an overexaggerated tone.

The lyrics might help pump you up while playing an online game, but they had no value in real life.

This is silly as hell, thought Chika. How does this help me?

She shook her head in frustration, but then noticed that her heart had calmed down, if only a little.

It wasn't that she had completely changed her mind or anything, or that she had decided on some major change in her life either, but using up all that energy singing had simply somehow made her feel better.

Feeling the cold, Chika stood up and went over to shut the window. As she looked out again, she noticed the stars in the sky for the first time.

These were stars she was used to seeing, but tonight they seemed more powerful than ever. Chika stood for a moment, hand on the sill. In the middle of the sky she saw the north star floating in the void. Just around it was another star that didn't shine quite as bright, but still made itself apparent. That was the star that Chika had named her own character in *The World after*, Alkaid.

She poked her face out the window and took in the brilliance of the stars. She thought about her friends in the game, and the girl called Alkaid. Those friends are all out here, living their lives, she thought.

Somewhere in her, Chika felt a strange courage well up.

I'm not alone. I mean, the same stars shine above us all, right? We're all one under the same stars.



"I can do this, definitely," she said.