



level.4 - The Leaders and the Led

Written by: Ao Jyumonji Illustrations by: Eiri Shirai



"I should have stepped in sooner. To tell you the truth, I was watching. When you two left the bar. Something struck me as wrong, so I followed you. Then, well, you know what happened."

"Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart...!"

It was... not Lightning. The chant was similar, but it was a different spell. A flash of light. Rumbling. Lightning fell. No, a bundle of lightning might have been a better way to describe it. "Erm... By your place, you mean..."

"The Day Breakers."

"Will you come join my place?" Soma asked. *"...Come again?"*

This is a fork in the road, Haruhiro thought. It's a turning point in our lives.

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash — "The Story So Far'

"Awaken."

On hearing that word, Haruhiro awakens to find himself in the unfamiliar world of Grimgar. In order to survive, Haruhiro and the others are forced to live as volunteer soldiers. Despite losing Manato, the central figure of their party, Haruhiro and the others add a new priest, Merry, to their group, and succeed in avenging him.

After challenging themselves by going to the Cyrene Mines, where they defeat Death Spots, an offer comes up for Team Haruhiro to participate in an attack on Deadhead Watching Keep, curretly occupied by orcs. Haruhiro is hesitant at first, but when he learns that a new volunteer soldier who seems oddly familiar to him, Choco, will be taking part in the operation, that gives him the impetus to decide he will participate.

The battle for the keep is incredibly violent. Volunteer soldiers fall one after another, Choco among them. When the hard battle comes to an end, Haruhiro and the others have worked with Renji and his team to fell the orcish leader. However, before they can savor the sweet taste of victory, Moguzo, who was standing in a daze, collapses.

Even so, the adventure continues.

Characters HARUHIRO U M Airheaded soothing-type. Class -Sleepy eyes. Class -Speaks an iffy sort of Kansai dialect? Passive-type. Provisional leader. Thief Hunter R 2 A N H O R Δ U Class -Selfish, flaky joker. Shy and withdrawn. Class -Dread Hard worker with little presence. Mage #1 most unpopular. Knight M O G U Z O

E R R Cool beauty. Has more experience Class as a volunteer soldier and is a little Priest more of an adult.

Bear-type. A somewhat slow, but reliable, bear.

Class -Warrior

Other Characters

Team Renji

Ron — Class: Paladin — The Team's No. 2. Sassa — Class: Thief — Flashy woman. Probably an M. Adachi — Class: Mage — Wears glasses. Chibi — Class: Priest — Mascot.

Day Breakers

Kemuri - Class: Paladin - Dreadlocks. Pingo - Class: Necromancer - Age unknown. Shima - Class: Shaman - Healer and big sister. Lilia - Class: Sword Dancer - Tsundere elf.

R E N J Head of Team Renji. Wild Class · beast-type. Dangerous. Warrior Μ A N A T 0 Kept the party together. Class Was a good guy. (Past tense) Priest S 0 Μ A

Started the Day Breakers Clan. Class – Seems to have some objective. Samurai

Other

Kajiko - Class: Warrior - Terrifying beauty. Shinohara - Class: Warrior - Clan leader. Kuzaku - Class: Paladin - New guy.



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It looked like the orc attendants had all been killed. Shihoru was crying tears of relief and Yume was hugging her, saying, "There, there. You did great. Just great," as she patted her on the head.

"Can you get up?" Merry asked.

Yeah, no, I can't. Haruhiro was about to tell that lie, because it seemed like Merry would treat him gently if he did. But he didn't.

"I can manage, yeah," Haruhiro said, getting up. "Though, really, before you help me..."

Why's he just standing there? Haruhiro wondered.

Everyone was dancing, chatting, having their priest treat them, or doing something, but Moguzo was just standing there.

There's something weird about it, Haruhiro thought.

Moguzo wasn't holding his sword. His arms were slumped at his sides.

It's incredible that he's standing at all, though, Haruhiro thought. I'm amazed he can stand. That he managed to stay on his feet. Especially in that state. Like, his helmet, it's not just crushed, it's not even fully on. There's blood dripping off him here and there, too.

Suddenly, Moguzo slowly fell over. Like when something big and heavy suddenly loses its support and collapses. That was the sort of fall it was.

Merry gulped.

"...Moguzo?" When Haruhiro called his name, Moguzo slowly got to his feet. "Wh-What was that for?"

Haruhiro calmed himself, letting out a sigh. That surprised me. For a moment there, I was really panicking. I thought something happened that we can never let happen. There's no way it would have, though.

"Don't scare me like that, Moguzo," he said.

"Sorry, sorry." Moguzo let out an embarrassed laugh and scratched the back of his head.

Still, he sure is bleeding a lot, Haruhiro thought. With all that blood, it's

impossible to tell what kind of face he's making. But, well, it looks like he's fine somehow.

"Thank goodness..." Haruhiro murmured, closing his eyes.

He covered his face with his hands. I think I'm gonna cry.

"Really, thank goodness..."

Seriously, I don't know what I would have done. If that ever happened, we'd be screwed. So screwed.

It'll never happen, though.

Like, no way. It couldn't. Not a chance.

"Thank goodness..."

I think I'm gonna cry. Wait, no, I already am. My hands are wet. The hands covering my face. That's just how relieved I am. Seriously, what a relief. Thank goodness. Just thank goodness. Honestly—Honestly, I thought he was a goner. I think I vaguely remember having a dream like that. Though, I don't know when I'd have had time for a dream like that. I wonder. Was it something like a prophetic dream? Like, maybe I had a dream like that last night? A dream where he wasn't okay? That's so weird. Having a dream like that. It's weird. Anyway, thank goodness. Moguzo's covered in blood, but, still, thank goodness. If nothing else, I'm glad he's all right.

"Thank goodness..."

Haruhiro heard a voice. His own voice. He moved his hands.

Dark. It's pitch dark. A room. It's our room in the volunteer soldier lodging house. Was I sleeping? I was asleep. That means...

He didn't want to think it. But... he wanted to check, had to check, so he sat up.

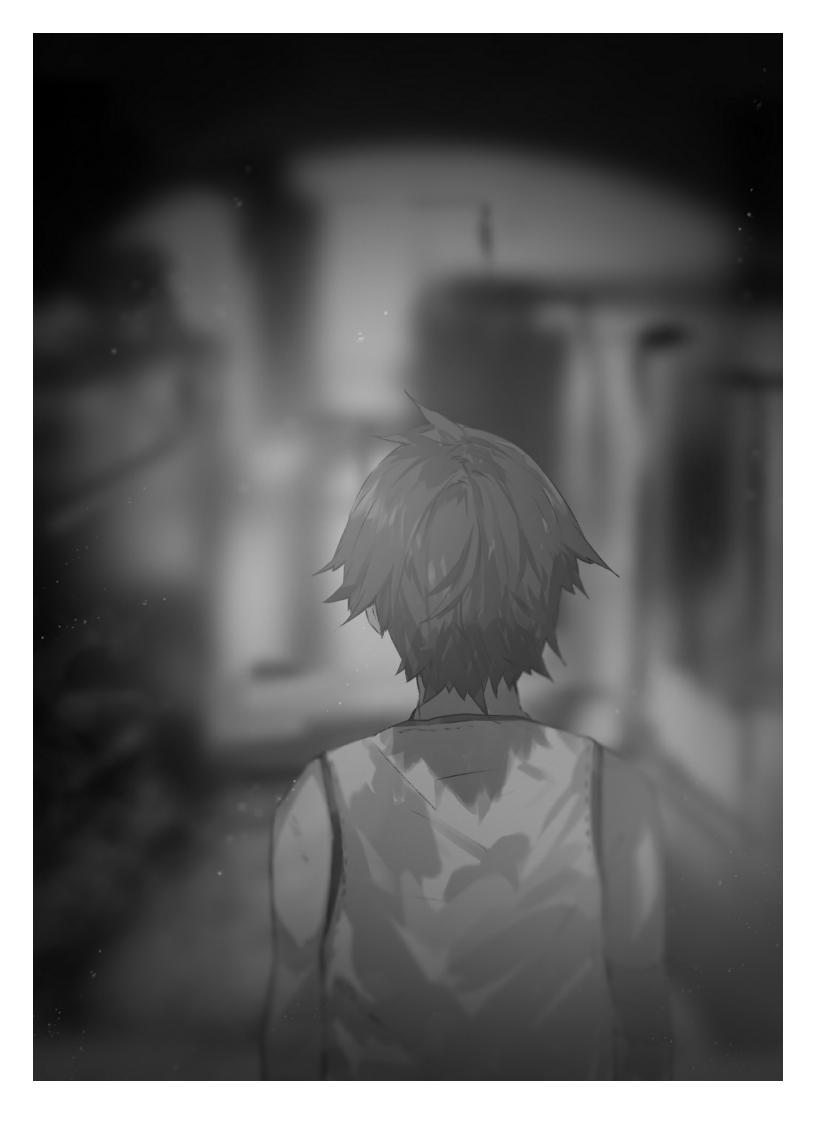
There were two bunk beds in this room. Ranta used the upper bunk of the other bed.

Ranta's there. He's snoring. And on the lower bunk—He's not there. No one is. It's empty.

He's not there.

Moguzo's not there.

He isn't anywhere anymore.



1. The Unbearable Heaviness of Reality



It's terrible when a person dies.

In the end, Haruhiro had probably never imagined that he would be forced to experience that again.

Of course, he had thought it was a possibility. He had probably thought about it more seriously than any of his comrades, and he had feared it from the bottom of his heart.

But the death, the loss, that Haruhiro had expected wasn't like the reality.

This was very different from what happened with Manato. That time, it had come without them really understanding what was happening, and by the time they had noticed, all that was left was pain.

They had carried the body back to Alterna, had the body burned at the crematorium, then buried his ashes on the hill where the tower with no entrance stood. Those memories hadn't blurred in the least, but it all went by strangely quickly. That was probably because Renji and the others had helped them out, so things had moved along without any hitches.

However, from there on, it was terrible.

Haruhiro's comrade, his friend, was dead. They had burned him, reducing him to ash and bone, and now he rested eternally on that hill where no one would disturb him. Moguzo was lost to Haruhiro and his friends now.

Though Moguzo was gone, there were still traces left behind that showed he had once existed.

His equipment, for instance.

There was his heavily dented plate armor and his crushed helmet, along with

The Chopper, that sword they had taken off Death Spots. They couldn't burn those things with him. Even if they had wanted to, they were made of metal, so it was physically impossible.

Even so, they couldn't just throw them out, either. But if they were going to keep them, they didn't have the space.

"...For now, we could put them on deposit... maybe," Shihoru said.

No one objected to Shihoru's proposal. However, when they went to the Yorozu Deposit Company, they discovered a serious problem.

"Yes, it is possible for you to deposit items other than money with our company," said the fourth Yorozu, a young girl wearing a gaudy red and white outfit accented with gold along with a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. She tapped her gold pipe on the counter. "When you deposit money, the deposit fee is 1/100th of the amount deposited. When you deposit an item, it is 1/50th of the appraised value. But even without an appraisal, I can tell you that that helmet and armor are worthless."

"Huh...? Why?" Haruhiro asked.

"Do you need it explained to you, insolent one?"

Ever since the first day they'd met, Yorozu had kept calling Haruhiro "insolent one." It was awful.

"That helmet and armor are useless," she said. "Even if you were to spend the money to repair them, I question whether they could ever be useful again. Anyway, I suggest you go to a blacksmith and have them take that scrap metal off your hands."

"Hey, you! Watch your tongue...!" Ranta screamed.

Haruhiro did at least hold Ranta back from jumping over the counter, but he felt the same as Ranta did.

Scrap metal! What're you calling scrap metal? That's my comrade's armor, I'll have you know! It's a memento. You can't call it scrap metal. You don't know a damn thing, so don't give me that crap!

However, that wasn't quite true.

Yorozu narrowed her eyes, then shrugged her delicate shoulders. "They are mementos of your comrade, correct? Information of all sorts tends to find its way to the Yorozu, you see. I am aware of your situation, but at this company there are some rules that even the fourth Yorozu cannot bend. No matter what the reason, we cannot give you special treatment. You cannot deposit items that are of no value with our company. Our warehouse space is finite, after all. If those items are so precious that you cannot bear to dispose of them, then you should take care of them yourselves."

There was nothing Haruhiro could say back to that. If the items were so important to them, they could take care of them themselves. No, not just could —*should*. Yorozu was absolutely right, and it would have been wrong to fault her for it.

"...Well, how about the sword...?" asked Shihoru.

Yorozu nodded. "That, you can deposit with us, of course. However, it once belonged to *the* Death Spots, did it not? It will not be cheap."

When they had one of the specialist clerks appraise it, it actually did come out to an incredible price. It was 25 gold. The deposit fee would be 1/50th of that, so 50 silver. While it wasn't beyond their means, it was enough to give them pause.

"Yume's thinkin' maybe we don't need to decide right now..." said Yume.

Haruhiro agreed. Practically speaking, putting it off still left them with the problem of what to do with the items. It felt like, in the end, they were going to have no choice but to deposit it anyway. Still, they didn't need to decide immediately. They could do it tomorrow, the day after, or even later. They had other things that they would need to do.

Yorozu said, "While you're here, out of concern, let me ask you, what do you wish to do with the deceased's assets?"

"Assets?" Haruhiro asked.

"The deceased had money on deposit with our company. Only he himself would normally be able to withdraw it, but in the event of death, it is possible for someone else to do so by going through the proper procedures." "Huh... Really?" Haruhiro asked.

"Specifically, you would have to go through the Volunteer Soldier Corps office to acquire a death certificate and a certificate granting you power of attorney, both issued by the margrave," she said. "On confirmation of those documents, our company will return the deceased's assets to his legal representative."

"The office... Certificates..."

"For your information, at present, we are unable to disclose any further details regarding the deceased's assets," Yorozu informed them.

How much did Moguzo have saved up? Haruhiro wondered. He bought armor whenever he had the money to, and his meals cost a lot, so he can't have had much in savings. Still, I feel like it'd be sloppy to just leave it. When we lost Manato, we didn't know left from right, so we couldn't handle it properly. This time, I want to do things right. I have to.

Was Haruhiro the only one thinking that?

The day after they went to the Yorozu Deposit Company, Haruhiro visited the Volunteer Soldier Corps office on his own. Ranta wouldn't get out of bed, and Haruhiro couldn't get a clear response when he tried to call Yume and Shihoru. As for Merry, she wasn't even in the same building. Haruhiro had had no choice but to come alone.

When he went to talk to Britney, a.k.a. Bri-chan, about the paperwork, Britney called out to him first.

"Oh, it's you! Fabulous timing. Let's talk bounty money. Huh, what's that, you say? You never went to the meeting to decide how it would be divided, you say? I hear that caused some trouble for them. Renji and Kajiko, that is. Well, I'm sure you were too busy worrying about other things to attend. Still, it's times like that when you need to get in there and stake your claim, otherwise you'll lose out, you know?"

"...Bounty money," Haruhiro muttered. "-Wait. Huh...?"

They had already received the payment for the order when they had returned to Alterna after the operation was complete. The rest of the balance they were owed came to 80 silver each, paid in the form of military scrip: thin copper chits issued by the Frontier Army.

"Ah," Haruhiro realized. "Do you mean for the keeper, Zoran Zesh, and the sorcerer, Abael...?"

"Yes, for them." Bri-chan licked his black lips and closed one eye.

Oh, please, stop, thought Haruhiro. *Don't screw around with me now.*

"Zoran Zesh was 100 gold, Abael was 50. That's 150 gold total," Bri-chan said. "The way I heard it, you and your party took out Abael almost entirely on your own."

"Ah... Well, yeah... I guess. Now that you mention it, maybe we kind of did."

"That said, in cases like that, things are generally split evenly," said Bri-chan. "There'd be squabbling otherwise."

"Well... you could be right about that. I wouldn't know."

"What's the matter with you?" Bri-chan demanded. "You really distinguished yourselves there. Aren't you happy?"

"Happy...?" Haruhiro almost burst out laughing. Not because he thought it was funny, of course. No, that wasn't it. How would he put it...

All he could do was laugh? No, that wasn't it, either. Like, "Don't you get it? Are you stupid?" Like, "I'm gonna send you flying."

Haruhiro looked downwards, clenching his hands into fists. "...No, I don't think I'm happy."

"I can see that." Bri-chan sighed.

Haruhiro was still looking down, so he couldn't see the expression on Brichan's face. He didn't really want to see it, either.

"Regardless, you have a right to a share of the reward money, and I'm holding onto your share. According to Kajiko, Renji basically steamrolled her, but you get 60 gold."

"Sixty?!" Haruhiro gasped.

He couldn't help but be shocked by that number. He felt like he'd suddenly woken up from a dream.

Oh, if only it had all been a nightmare. How glad he would have been.

"Sixty gold—you mean, like, 60 gold coins...?" he stumbled.

"That's right," said Bri-chan. "Or, if we convert it to silver coins, 6,000. Divide it by six—no, five—and you each get 12 gold."

"Twelve..." Haruhiro murmured.

It touched a nerve the way Bri-chan had corrected himself from six to five, but it was such a large amount of money that it still hadn't sunk in that it was real just yet.

But I'm not happy, Haruhiro thought. Not happy at all.

"...We'll take what we can get, but..."

"But?" Bri-chan demanded.

"No... We'll take it. Gratefully. It's better to have money than not to, after all. Having it's not going to hurt us. Ah, but before that—"

"A death certificate and power of attorney, right?" asked Bri-chan.

"Yeah."

"It'll take a while."

"It will?" Haruhiro asked.

"It has to go through the bureaucrats, after all. Be prepared for it to take ten days. I'd guess around seven, maybe. They almost never issue them within six days. What? You look like you just want to get this over and done with."

"...Honestly, I may feel that way a bit, yeah," said Haruhiro.

"It's not going to be that simple. If you were blood relatives, you could go to Tenboro Tower and sign the papers yourself. But volunteer soldiers aren't family. If he'd been married, it would be a different matter."

"Married..."

That was another word that just didn't feel real, and Haruhiro couldn't help but think about how Moguzo would never be able to get married.

He never can. Because he died. It feels like a lie. I lifted Moguzo's motionless

body with my own hands, carried him all the way to the crematorium, and even saw the bones and ashes that were left afterwards, and I still can't believe it. I don't want to believe.

"He wasn't yet, right?" Bri-chan asked. "Married, that is."

"...Yeah, he wasn't."

"For a volunteer soldier who's single, they're without any relatives, so the Volunteer Soldier Corps office is the one that confirms their identity. I'll need signatures from all of you."

"Huh? Not just from me?" Haruhiro asked.

"Yes. The whole party," said Bri-chan. "And I'll need you all to sign it in front of me. That's the law."

"So, then ... " Haruhiro began.

"Come back later."

As he walked away from the office dejectedly, Haruhiro was at a loss for what to do. Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru would be fine. But what about Merry?

Now that I think about it, up until now, we've never really talked about plans, thought Haruhiro. We just gathered at the north gate every morning, as if that was the natural thing to do. After Moguzo died, did we talk at all about what to do the next day? Wait, no, that's just it. The day it happened, we had to take care of the burial and stuff, so Merry stayed in Yume and Shihoru's room that night. I think it was around noon, the next day. When I saw her at the lodge, we got talking about what to do with Moguzo's things, then we went to the Yorozu Deposit Company... and when we split up in the evening, I don't feel like the topic of what to do the next day came up.

I wonder what Merry's doing, he thought. Yume and Shihoru might know where Merry's renting a room. Guess I'll have to try asking. Actually, it might be better to have Yume and Shihoru go instead of me. At times like this, it might be better if they were all girls. Either way, I need to find a way to get in touch and meet up with her.

Haruhiro was holding onto a chit for 60 gold. He needed to split it between

five people.

—Five, huh. Five people. One short. Split it five ways...? I can't split a chit. I've got to exchange it for money first. If I recall, I should be able to trade it in at the Yorozu Deposit Company. I wish we'd gone to the office before we went to Yorozu's. Still, we only found out about the procedure we need to go through from Yorozu, so I guess it wouldn't have worked.

"Ahhh…"

As Haruhiro dragged his feet down the road back to the lodging house, he started to feel sick of everything.

"What a pain..."

I want to stop and stand still. I want to crouch down and clutch my head. I want to curl into a ball and stay like that forever.

Suddenly, he remembered Choco. He'd totally forgotten. Haruhiro was appalled with himself.

I'm seriously terrible. So terrible, all I can really do is laugh. Choco died, didn't she? Choco's party, too. They were probably wiped out. I wonder what happened to Choco. Did someone give her a proper burial? The plan was driven by the Frontier Army to begin with. I doubt they'd leave bodies lying around after the battle.

Burial.

Burial, huh.

We burn them, reduce them to bones and ash, then bury them up on that hill, but what good does it do? Nothing really comes of it. It's just that, if we don't cremate them, No-Life King's curse will turn them into zombies. It wouldn't sit right with me to let Choco come back as a zombie. I don't want that. Absolutely not.

For those who've died, they aren't able to do anything about the bodies they leave behind. It falls to the living to do something about it for them.

Did we manage to handle things right? Are we handling things right? What do you think, Moguzo? Isn't there more we could be doing? Like, some way you'd

wanted us to do things? Or were there things you wouldn't have wanted us to do? We're not doing anything wrong, are we?

I can ask, but he won't answer. Moguzo's gone. Choco's gone, too. They're dead.

It doesn't feel real, but they're dead.

That's no lie.

It's the truth.

"We never should have gone..." he murmured.

The order. We never should have accepted it. Neither should Choco and her party. It was too much for us.

"Who was it who brought up the idea...?" he asked himself.

It was Ranta. Damn him.

"...But I was the one who made the decision."

If Haruhiro hadn't voted in favor, they might not have accepted the order. No, there was no "might" about it. They probably wouldn't have.

If he hadn't talked with Choco about how her party was going to accept the order, Haruhiro probably wouldn't have convinced himself to do so. Back then, he should have done whatever it took to stop Choco. He should have told her that it was dangerous. It was reckless. That she couldn't go.

If her party hadn't been willing to change their minds, she could have left them. He should have persuaded her to. Haruhiro should have voted against. No matter how much of a fuss Ranta would have kicked up about it. They couldn't handle what they couldn't handle. It was too dangerous. The risk was too great.

But, at the time, Haruhiro had thought the risk wasn't that high, so he'd voted in favor.

I know, he thought bitterly. Hindsight is always 20/20. Once something like this happens, it's natural to think that everything I did was a mistake. I want to blame someone, even if it's myself. Even though that's pointless. No matter what I do, Moguzo's not coming back.

Haruhiro looked up to the sky.

What time is it now? Around three o'clock in the afternoon. It's awfully sunny. I dunno what to say. It's a sunny day, Moguzo.

"I just have to keep looking forward, don't I?" he asked himself. "There's nothing else I can do..."

The sky's so beautiful, it almost seems like a joke.

Haruhiro covered half his face with his right hand. It stung his eyes.

2. Feelin' Funya-funya



Yume was feeling real funya-funya.

What was funya-funya?

Yume didn't really know that herself, but she was feeling funya-funya, so funya-funya was all she could call it.

Because she was feeling funya-funya, she didn't even want to get up. That was why Yume was lyin' face down in the bottom bunk of the bed in her room at the volunteer soldier lodging house.

Once in a while, she'd roll over. But because she was feeling funya-funya, even turnin' over was a chore.

In fact, for a long while now, she'd needed to pee and had been holding it in. She knew she should go to the bathroom. Actually, she had to. That was something she knew for sure, but because she was feeling funya-funya, she couldn't motivate herself to go.

"Yume," Shihoru called out to her.

Yume wanted to respond. But she was feeling funya-funya, so even raisin' her voice took a lot of effort.

In the end, she just went, "...Mmm?"

"...Are you hungry?" Shihoru asked.

"Nnnn…"

Yume wonders about that, she thought. Yume doesn't think it's that she's not hungry at all. If Yume was gonna eat, she could probably eat a whole lot, y'know? She just doesn't really want to eat. Well, if Yume doesn't eat, Yume's fine with not eatin', I guess. "....Nnnn," she said.

"You have to eat," Shihoru protested. "Not eating's bad for your health, I think..."

"Nnnn..."

"Yume?"

"Mmm?"

"Are you listening?"

"Mmm..."

This's no good, Yume though to herself while feeling funya-funya. Yume needs to give her a proper response. Yume knows that, but she just can't do it.

Yume's not doin' this to mess with her. Yume just doesn't have the energy. It's not just her body, y'know. Yume's feelings are all funya-funya, too.

"...Give me a break," Shihoru muttered, in a real tiny voice. It was a real tiny voice, so it was hard to be sure if she'd meant for Yume to hear it or not.

Either way, Shihoru was definitely irritated. She sounded angry, the way she said it. It was the first time Shihoru had spoken like that. At least, Yume had never heard her do it before.

Yume rolled over to look at Shihoru, who was sitting on the bed next to her. Shihoru was looking downwards, hanging her head.

"...Sorry," Yume said.

Hearing the apology, Shihoru shook her head back and forth. "...No... I should apologize."

"But you've got nothin' to apologize for, Shihoru," Yume said.

"But...."

"Shihoru, you've done nothin' wrong."

"That's not... true."

"You haven't."

"I can't say ... I agree."

"Oh, yeah?" Yume asked.

Shihoru hesitated. "...From here on... what are we supposed to do?"

"Hmm…"

Yume tried thinking. But she couldn't think straight. Her thoughts would just suddenly stop.

Still, she kept thinking. Yume was thinking desperately, at least by Yume's standards. She tried to find the words.

"Hey, Shihoru."

"Yeah?"

"Yume, she's not good at handlin' this sort of stuff," said Yume. "What do you call it...? Hard stuff, painful stuff, she really hates it. Everyone does."

"...Yeah."

"Well, listen, this is just an example, but imagine it rained really hard."

"Okay," Shihoru said slowly.

"So, it's rainin' real hard, and you can't walk around outside, so you've gotta stay indoors, y'know. Well, the thing about rain is, even if you ask it to stop, it's not gonna."

"Yeah," said Shihoru.

"It's like, who would you even ask?" asked Yume. "So, at times like this, there's really no helpin' it, y'know?"

"There's no helping it..." Shihoru murmured. "You think so?"

"Hmm, well, you could say we couldn't help things turnin' out like this, and now that they have, there's no helpin' it. That's what Yume meant. It all feels like it's gotta be a lie, though. Yume never thought things'd turn out like this, y'know."

"Yeah... same here," Shihoru said sorrowfully.

"Why didn't Yume think of it?" Yume asked. "It's not weird at all that it happened, y'know. Yume should've known that."

This wasn't the first time it'd happened. It was the second.

But, still, she hadn't even imagined it, that they could lose a comrade.

That Moguzo would die.

"Yume's so stupid." Yume lay on her front. Her whole body felt funya-funya, and awfully heavy. "...Yume, she's too stupid, y'know. Because Yume's too stupid, that's probably how things ended up like this."

Shihoru didn't say anything.

Yume was gettin' kind of tired. But she was sure she wouldn't be able to fall asleep. Yume tried lyin' on her back. Her body felt even more funya-funya than before, and heavy.

She didn't want to move. She didn't think she'd be able to move for a while.

3. Unlimited



"Hey, Pops! Add another order of soruzo!" Ranta shouted, spraying noodles and broth from his mouth as he did. He raised the index finger on his left hand, too.

In the village of stalls next to the craftsmen's town in the southern district, there was a stall that was the only place in Alterna where he could get a noodle dish called soruzo.

Soruzo was a dish of meat thrown into a salty broth with yellow noodles that were made by kneading wheat flower and then cutting it thinly. If someone were to ask him if it was delicious, he'd've had a hard time saying definitively that it was. It was the sort of dish that tastes would probably be divided on. Especially for that first mouthful.

However, every time he ate it, it became more and more delicious to him. Once some time passed, he'd begin to crave it again. After all the times he'd eaten it, he was completely entranced with the stuff. Once every ten days—no, every five—no, no, if possible, every three days—he wanted to eat it.

There was a pile of large bowls stacked up in front of Ranta.

Seven, in total.

Ranta was about to polish off his eighth bowl of soruzo. The ninth bowl that he had just ordered would be coming out soon.

Freshly-made soruzo was hot. Damn hot, in fact. But Ranta didn't want to waste time blowing on it, so he dug right in.

He'd burned the inside of his mouth. Honestly, he couldn't even tell what it tasted like anymore. His belly was hurting, too. He was starting to look like a pregnant woman.

At this point, eating was nothing but suffering, but Ranta didn't stop. This last sip would finish his eighth bowl.

"—Bwahh....! I sure ate!" he exclaimed.

At that same moment, the ninth bowl arrived. When the heavy steam from it washed over him, he got dizzy.

The scent from that perfect harmony of chicken bones, pork fat, onions, and carrots should have whet his appetite for more, but it only gave Ranta heartburn now.

"Kid, are you okay?" The old man running the stall peered at Ranta's face.

Ranta gave him a nod, wiping his face off with one hand. It was a mess of sweat, and snot, and more sweat. He must have looked awful. But, damn it, he didn't care.

"-Okay!"

Ranta got to work on his ninth bowl. With each noodle he slurped down, he felt a little nauseous. When it felt like it was all going to come back up, he quickly covered his mouth.

—I'm not gonna puke.

I swear I won't puke.

Like I'd let myself do that.

I've gotta eat. I'll eat, and eat, and eat some more. I'll eat everything.

"Someday, let's do it. Open a restaurant."

Ranta's comrade's—no, his partner's face came to mind.

That time, Moguzo... he thought. Seriously... seriously, he had a better look on his face than I'd ever seen before.

"But, me, I don't want to open a soruzo place, I want to make ramen. I'll save up money, study, and when I can make ramen that tastes just right, let's do it, let's open that restaurant."

"....Sure."

Ranta could respond all he wanted, but it wouldn't reach his partner.

All I can do is eat. Right now, I've just gotta eat. I'm gonna slurp away like crazy at the soruzo my partner loved. I'll eat all I can eat. I'll eat even once I can't eat. Even if I'm full, even if I don't want to eat anymore, I'll just keep eating. Eat. Eat, damn you.

"Urrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

Because, man.

Because.

—Because.

"Becaushe shyou can't eat anymorshe...!" Ranta wailed.

Right, partner? he thought, grief-stricken. *No matter how much you want to eat, you can't eat anymore.*

Ranta was going to eat his partner's share. What was the point in that? Like he cared. He didn't know what the point was. It didn't matter. Ranta just thought it was what he ought to do. He couldn't help but think it, and so he couldn't bear not to do it.

"Gwehhh...! Pops! One more bowl!"

"B-But, come on, kid," the geezer protested.

"It's fine! Just hurry up and give it to me!" Ranta shouted.

"O-Okay."

"Bowl number nine!" Ranta screamed.

Just a little more, and he'd be done with his ninth bowl. Ranta spurred himself to go faster. He was trying to speed up, but for some reason the amount of noodles just wasn't going down. His hands stopped. A dark wave of nausea struck. He couldn't breathe. He felt like he was going to suffocate.

Then, he suddenly realized. There was a lot of noise around him. When he looked, there were craftsmen and volunteer soldiers all around him.

What? They're all staring at me. What for ...?

"Hey, that guy, his next bowl'll be his tenth, you know?" someone pointed out.

"Whoa ... Seriously ...?"

"No way."

"Is that normal?"

"I couldn't do it..."

"Awesome..."

"I mean, isn't that crazy?"

"Still, he'll start struggling soon."

"You said it."

"Of course he will. Ten bowls? I don't think he can do it. I just can't see it. Not ten bowls. That's tough."

"Yeah, that has to be too much."

"Not ten bowls."

"Hmph..." Ranta snorted. He felt something weird when he did. Was there something caught in his nose? He went fishing for it, and it turned out to be a soruzo noodle. He considered throwing it away, but his partner never would've done that. Ranta threw the chunk of noodle he'd excavated from his nose back into his mouth.

"Hey, take a good look, guys," he said proudly. "Ten bowls? That's not even an obstacle to me. It'll be easy. This is nothing."

—I'm going for it.

Getting himself back in gear, Ranta rapidly polished off his ninth bowl. The tenth was coming. He felt dizzy, but that was no big deal.

"Bring it on!" Ranta stood up and brought the bowl to his mouth, pouring the damn hot noodles and broth together into his stomach. The crowd roared. Encouraged, or egged on, by those cheers, Ranta finished that tenth bowl in a little over ten seconds. Not just the noodles and other ingredients—every last drop of the broth, too. "How do you like that, huh?!" he screamed. "Pops, get me the next one!" "Comin' up!" the old man called.

"Wooooo!"

"He did it!"

"This guy's incredible!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Keep going!"

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"Go as far as you can!"
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"Go!"

"Do it!"

"Damn straight!" Ranta shouted, giving the thumbs up. "I'm Ranta! All of you, shout my great name!"

"Ranta!"

"Ranta!"

"Keep it up, Ranta!"

"Ranta!"

"Ranta...!"

"Pops, hurry it up!" Ranta bellowed.

"Righto! One bowl, ready to serve!" the old man called.

"Wahahahahaha! Eleven bowls!" With a laugh, Ranta started on his eleventh bowl of soruzo. For a moment he wondered why he was doing it, but what did he care at this point.

Eat. I'm gonna eat.

Watch me, partner.

Even if this is all I can do.

"Bwuh!" Ranta suddenly choked on something. A noodle shot out of his nose, and the crowd burst out laughing. He nearly snapped at them, but Ranta let out a big laugh instead.

Just how much can I eat? I'll take this to the limit. I'm eating 'til I drop.

Because someday, I'm gonna open up a restaurant. It'll be a ramen joint, not soruzo, just like my partner wanted. I've already decided on the name. It'll be Ranta & Moguzo's Ramen Shop.

No, make that Moguzo & Ranta's.

4. The Conditions for Being the Worst



-Don't you think you've had enough?

It felt like someone had said that to her. Who? Probably the man next to her. She had no idea who he was supposed to be. Or what his face looked like.

She squinted her eyes and looked at him. He was too blurry. What was with this guy? Why was he sitting next to her? She didn't get it.

"...Who are you?" she asked.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'who'?" he asked.

"What are you doing there?" she asked.

"No, don't ask me what I'm doing here, we came here together, remember? To this place."

"You and who ...?"

"Me and you, Merry."

"Why?" she asked.

The man looked exasperated. "Somebody's had too much to drink ... "

"Who has?" she asked.

"You, of course."

"Have I...?"

Merry paused for a breath, then lifted her cup. She tried to take a swig, but it was empty.

— "This place"? What kind of place is it? She looked around. Oh, it looks like a place that serves alcohol. It's small and cramped, and the only seats are at the

bar. It's an unfamiliar place, one I don't recognize.

When she thrust her cup out towards the man on the other side of the counter, who seemed to be the proprietor, and was about to say *Give me another one*, the man next to her grabbed her by the wrist.

"I'm telling you, it's time to stop."

"...Leave me alone," Merry murmured.

"Like I could," he shot back. "Do you have any clue how much you've drunk?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "So what...?"

"No, not 'so what.""

The man looked at her like he was fed up. What right did some guy that she didn't even recognize have to act like she was being a bother to him? It made her mad.

"...Fine, I don't need it, then."

Merry stood up. She stumbled a little, and the man caught her, but she brushed his hands away.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

"You looked like you were gonna trip," the man explained.

"So what?" she snapped. "If I trip... what's wrong with that?"

"It's not good."

"Don't try to push things on me like that."

"Like what?" the man asked.

"The way you think... I don't care what you think about me..."

What am I trying to say? What am I saying? I guess it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter.

Merry left the bar.

The next thing she knew, she was somewhere else. It was dark. She was on the street.

"...Huh?" she mumbled.

My staff isn't here. Did I forget to take it with me? Where did I leave it? I have no clue.

"Hey, are you okay?!"

Who could that be? Oh, the guy from before. Why is he here? What's he following me for?

"What do you want?" she demanded.

When she asked, he gave her an indignant "Huhh?!"

He went on, "That's some way to talk to the guy you've made treat you at two places now."

"Treat me...?" Merry asked unsteadily. "What are you talking about?"

"Your drinks. You never paid, you know. I covered it all, Merry."

"Why do you know my name?"

"Because you told me, obviously."

"I did...? I'll pay..."

She didn't really get it, but she didn't want him grumbling at her over it. Merry tried to pull out her money. If she gave him what she had on her, the man would probably be satisfied. Her hands were unsteady, though. Not just her hands, her legs were, too. She couldn't stand.

When she felt like she was going to collapse, the man caught her in his arms.

"That's not it, Merry," the man said. "I'm not telling you to pay me money."

"...Let go."

"I don't want to," he said.

"I said, let go—"

Merry tried to escape from the man's embrace. She couldn't push him off her. The man's arms were wrapped tightly around Merry. He brought his face close to hers. Merry put her hand on his chin and pushed upwards.

"I'm telling you...!"

"Shut up, bitch!" the man shouted. "After we've come this far, there's no way I'm letting you go! I know you were looking for this, too!"

"What?! Looking for what?!"

"You were frustrated, so you thought you'd play around with me, right?! I can figure out that much!" he yelled.

"Play around ...?"

What's this guy talking about? He's not making any sense. Play? I'm not in the mood. Doesn't this guy know what happened?

Suddenly, she felt cold inside.

"....What did I tell you?" Merry murmured.

"Huh?! What, you ask? Just your name, and... Well, just small talk ... "

"Whew."

That's a major relief. If I'd opened up to a guy like this, that'd be awful. Even if I am drunk—Hey, wait.

Merry was drunk, and she was more than just tipsy. She was absolutely, totally, falling down drunk.

I'm in danger, she realized. The state I'm in, and this situation. I'm definitely in danger. I need to run.

Merry headbutted the man as hard as she could. He cried out in pain and flinched, but he didn't let go.

"Now you've gone and done it! No more Mr. Nice Guy!" he screamed.

"Ah—" Merry gasped.

He lifted her up. Her feet weren't touching the ground. Merry thrashed around like her life depended on it. However, the man's grip didn't loosen.

What was he planning to do with her? The man seemed to be carrying Merry somewhere. It was dark and she couldn't see very well, but he was trying to take her down a narrow alley.

When she tried to scream, he covered her mouth. Merry bit his fingers. The

man groaned in pain, throwing Merry to the ground. Merry landed on her butt, then hit her head on something.

"....Ouch... Ow..."

Her eyes were spinning. She needed to get away. She crawled away from him, but he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her into the alleyway, forcing her onto her back. He held her down, covering her mouth again.

Am I going to get raped? she thought. Here? By this guy?

No. Don't be ridiculous.

Merry kneed the man in the groin. "Take this!"

"Augh—" he gasped. "...D-Dammit! Why, you...!"

He punched her. In the face, with his fist. For a moment, she lost consciousness.

When she came to, he was trying to strip her out of her priest outfit.

I may not be able to do anything, Merry thought.

Maybe this is karma.

I mean, I let him die.

I let a comrade die, again.

Even though I'm a priest.

I'm responsible for protecting my comrades' lives, but I couldn't.

Merry couldn't even say she'd done the best she could. She had made a mistake.

Literally, a fatal mistake.

Protection. It was the most basic of basics for a priest who was moving from the beginner level to the intermediate level. This light magic spell boosted the physical abilities and resistances of the target, as well as their natural healing ability. It was vital that Protection not be allowed to wear off in combat. Little differences like that could mean the difference between life and death.

In a fight, there were any number of things that could happen. That was why,

the instant the thirty minute duration expired, it was time to recast Protection. This was something every priest had to know. It was something they had to never forget. And yet— "Just give up already!" The man laughed perversely, pulling on her uniform. The sound of a seam tearing echoed through the alley. "I doubt this is your first time! This'll be easier on you if you try to enjoy it…"

"Yeah, no. There's no way she could enjoy this," another man's voice broke in.

The scumbag on top of her turned his head to look at the newcomer. "Huh...?"

"Sorry, but I'm not gonna hold back, okay?" the new man said.

"Wait—"

"Hah!"

The scumbag keeled over. He fell on top of Merry, but the other man was quick to pull him off of her.

"...Huh?" Merry asked, dazed.

I have no clue what just happened.

It looks like I've been saved, but why? Who is he?

"You okay?" the guy asked. "Can you get up?"

Merry was silent. The man who saved her from the scumbag sighed and scratched the back of his head.

"I dunno what to say... I'm not gonna try anything weird, okay?" he said. "Are your clothes and whatnot all right?"

He's awfully blunt, Merry thought. But he did save me from a tight spot. That much is certain. If he hadn't come along, who knows what would have happened to me? Well, I probably would have been raped.

Merry sat up, fixing her clothes. The sleeve of her priest outfit was torn. It was probably dirty too, but fine other than that.

"...I'm sorry," she mumbled. "Thank you."

"Sure," the new man said. "Uh. Well, if you're fine, I guess that's all that matters."

The alley was dark, so she could barely see the man's face. However, there was something—his voice, maybe? It sounded familiar. That, and the way he was dressed. The man was rather tall. Did Merry know him?

"Er..." the man said, taking half a step back. "I won't say anything. I'm not going to tell anyone about this. You'd probably prefer it that way, right?"

This man probably knew Merry, too. It sounded that way from the way he was talking.

"You're..." she said fuzzily.

"Me? Ah," the man said. "The name's Kuzaku. Not that you'd know it..."

True, the name Kuzaku wasn't ringing any bells.

When Merry stood up, Kuzaku took another step back. He seemed to be trying to keep his distance. Maybe he was trying to show he had no intention of doing anything to her.

Merry looked down at the scumbag beside her. Kuzaku must have hit or kicked him hard enough to knock him unconscious. Merry could have kicked him once or twice herself, but she decided against it.

She left the alley. Kuzaku was a little ways away from her. Thanks to the moonlight, she could see his face better now. She finally recognized him.

"At Deadhead, you were in Green Storm Force with us..." she murmured.

"Ah. Maybe you do remember me, then?"

"But..."

"I nearly died," Kuzaku said, looking down. "...But I didn't. Someone healed me, and when I came to, I was the only one left, you know."

"...I see."

"Um," Kuzaku said uneasily.

"What?" Merry asked.

"Sorry," he said. "I should have stepped in sooner. To tell you the truth, I was watching. When you two left the bar. Something struck me as wrong, so I followed you. Then, well, you know what happened." "...I must have been pretty awful," Merry mumbled.

"Nah," he said. "Not really. I mean, I was drinking, too."

"Kuzaku-kun." Merry bowed her head. "Let me apologize one more time. I'm sorry. And thank you."

Kuzaku fell silent for some time.

Then, finally, "...Okay," was all he said in reply.

"Goodbye," Merry said.

She raised her head and quickly walked past Kuzaku.

Of course, I still haven't sobered up. I'm nauseous. Just how much did I drink? I don't remember at all. Too much. This is the first time in my life that I've drunk so much that I can't remember what happened.

That guy should have messed me up while I still didn't know what was going on. If that'd happened, maybe I'd have been satisfied. Maybe I drank so much because I wanted that to happen. Maybe that's why I didn't chase off that scumbag when he came up next to me.

Kuzaku got in the way. He didn't need to get involved. But, if that scumbag really had raped me... Just the thought of it makes me sick. Disgusting. I can't stand people touching me. He touched me a lot. He groped me all over. He's the worst. This is the worst.

"Ugh..." With an unbearable wave of nausea sweeping over her, Merry stopped walking.

She wanted to throw up. But she didn't. She couldn't. She crouched down. She felt awful. She wanted to die. She just wanted to lie down and die. After all, others already had died.

Here was an incompetent priest who let her comrades die not once, but twice, and she had the gall to think that she wanted to just lay down and die. How could she think that?

"...I'm the worst," Merry mumbled.

5. This Mess



It's the middle of the night, that much I know, but what time is it now? Haruhiro thought. That's not clear to me. All I know is that we've been here for quite a while.

They were on Flower Garden Street in the northern district of Alterna. Why was it called Flower Garden? Haruhiro had no idea, but maybe there had been flowerbeds or something similar along it a long time ago.

Stretching out from the market, Flower Garden Street and its side streets had lodging houses running all the way up and down both sides of them. Near the entrance to the street there were a number of buildings that provided temporary accommodation for those passing through. As you got further from the market, the number of large buildings increased. Past those expensivelooking lodging houses with their majestic appearance, there were decent lodging houses, so-so lodging houses, and then finally the squalid outskirts filled with run-down old lodging houses.

Haruhiro and one other person were in front of a kind of decent lodging house not far down one of the side streets.

They had been standing in front of it at first, but now one of them was sitting with his back against the outer wall of the building. That was Haruhiro. The person with him was still standing.

They were both silent.

When had they last talked to one another? It felt like it had been a while. He didn't remember what they had said then, either. Neither Haruhiro nor the person with him were the talkative type. They were both reserved, you could say, or passive.

Hunching over and hugging one of his knees, Haruhiro thought, *That's why*. *That's why we're not a good match, probably*.

Neither Haruhiro nor his partner would take the first step, so nothing happened. The conversation never started.

This is awkward, he thought.

If the other person would say something, anything, to spark a conversation, he'd do his best to keep it going. The person with him likely felt the same way. They were probably both thinking, *Why aren't you saying anything? Say something!*

Okay, Haruhiro thought. I get it. Fine, I'll do it. I'll totally do it. I'm so going to do it.

"Um... er... Shihoru?" he ventured.

"...Huh?" she asked.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

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"...I'm fine."
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"Oh, you are."

"Yeah."

That was the end of it. He had worked up all the willpower he could muster to start that conversation, and it had died in no time.

What the hell? he thought indignantly. That's not fair. Put a little more effort in. This is communication, you know, communication. It's important, really.

Besides, why was he alone with Shihoru?

No... the reason, how it had happened, was clear. He had needed to get in touch with Merry regarding the paperwork and her share of the reward. Unbelievably, Ranta had eaten too much and couldn't move, while Yume had said she was too "funya-funya" to do it. Whatever that was supposed to mean. That was why he had left with Shihoru, who had been feeling fine and had known where Merry lived.

Merry was supposed to be staying in a women-only lodging house, so

Haruhiro couldn't very well visit her on his own. On that point, he was glad Shihoru had come with him. But only on that point.

It wasn't that he disliked Shihoru. But she was hard to deal with when it was just the two of them.

They were a poor match for one another. Haruhiro and Shihoru didn't go together very well. That's what it was. Basically, they weren't compatible.

Shihoru may have felt the same way as Haruhiro did. Haruhiro wasn't thinking that because they weren't compatible, there was nothing he could do, and it was okay to let things stay the way they were. He did, however, think that Shihoru could be doing more to try to make things work.

When they had first come to this lodging house, Merry hadn't been here, so they'd tried going to Sherry's Tavern, but she hadn't been there either, so they'd come back here. In all that time, Shihoru had barely spoken. If Haruhiro asked her something, she would say a few words in response. That was all. Haruhiro wasn't sure how he should feel about that.

Haruhiro unintentionally let out a sigh.

Maybe his question had come off the wrong way. Still, it may have worked to break the ice for them.

"....I," Shihoru said in a small voice.

Haruhiro looked up at Shihoru. Shihoru was hugging her shoulders and trembling slightly.

"...Listen... I... If I tell you this... you may think I'm a horrible person... but I'm mostly feeling fine."

"Feeling fine—wait, what do you mean by that?" Haruhiro asked, dumbfounded.

"I'm not... like everyone else," said Shihoru. "I'm not going through as much shock..."

"You... aren't?" he asked.

"Isn't that horrible of me?" she said. "Even I... think it is. If anything... more than being shaken up by Moguzo's death... I'm not that sad that Moguzo died... and I'm shocked at myself for that, and it depresses me. I realized... I'm really an unpleasant person..."

"That's not—"

—true, Haruhiro wanted to say, but could he really? *Moguzo died, yet she's* not that affected by it? That's crazy. I mean, he was one of us. We were together, through good times and bad. Moguzo was our precious, all-tooprecious comrade, and he was the core of the party. Why isn't she shocked by it?

Then again, Shihoru seems bewildered by that herself. She ought to feel a heart-rending, mind-numbing sadness and sense of loss, but she doesn't, and she feels there's something abnormal about that. She can't forgive herself for it, and she's suffering. —Oh, I get it.

It's Manato.

This was pure speculation, but it was probably because of what had happened with Manato.

Shihoru was probably in love with Manato. Manato, who she was head over heels in love with, died. That must have been harder on Shihoru than any of us. Of course, with Moguzo dying, Shihoru must have felt some pain, but it was nothing like last time.

People could get used to suffering. Even if they didn't want to, they naturally got used to it.

Because if they didn't, they couldn't go on living.

For as long as they were alive, things like this would happen. Because life was an endless cycle of things like this.

If it knocked them down every time, and they couldn't get back up, they wouldn't be able to go on living.

In fact—in fact, Haruhiro wasn't stunned and in a daze anymore, the way he had been just after they had lost Moguzo. He might not be doing a good job of it, but he was trying to move forward. He was thinking about how he wanted everyone to look towards the future. How, if they didn't, Moguzo wouldn't be able to rest in peace. Just like that, he was using his dead comrade to give himself the power to keep living.

Haruhiro was trying to live. Sneakily, greedily, tenaciously, he wanted to live.

Shihoru must have been the same. Manato's death had made Shihoru stronger. By becoming stronger, Shihoru was trying to live.

"Shihoru, you're not horrible," Haruhiro said. "You're not an unpleasant person. I'm glad you came here with me. That you're here with me now. I really do think that."

Shihoru was going to say something, but she closed her mouth and looked away. Her shoulders were still trembling. She might have been holding back tears. After some time, Shihoru sniffled just once.

"...Haruhiro-kun, I'm glad you're here. I think ... that, too."

"Uh, well... yeah," Haruhiro said. "That's better than you not wanting me here..."

Haruhiro covered his face with his hands. He felt incredibly embarrassed. He felt guilty that he was able to be bashful now. Honestly, whenever he ate, whenever he drank, whenever he slept, he wanted to apologize to Moguzo. Not that apologizing would change anything.

Someday, this prickling pain in his chest would fade, then disappear entirely. He would get used to this suffering.

He wanted to live, so he would get used to it so that he could live on.

"Merry sure is late," he said to cover his embarrassment. "Where's she gone off to?"

"...Really, I don't know Merry all that well, so... I couldn't say," said Shihoru.



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 4

by Ao Jyumonji

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Emily Sorensen

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