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ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAI SAIKYU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST



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"I SEE.
THIS IS THE
PLEASURE
A VAMPIRE
FEELS WHEN
DRINKING
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MUST SAY,
IT'S QUITE
SOMETHING."

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Chapter I: The Demon Lord's Invitation

Bright sunlight poured down from the heavens. Under normal circumstances, the warm light would have been a reward for escaping the Schnee Snow Fields, which was perpetually trapped in winter. Especially if the people in question had just cleared the Frost Caverns, the final labyrinth left to conquer. However, Hajime and the others found that welcoming light blocked by an army of gray dragons flying overhead.

Freid Bagwa, commander of the Garland Empire's demon armies, led the flock, riding his white dragon, Uranos. A grinning Eri Nakamura hovered behind him. Her hair had turned gray, and there were now gray wings sprouting from her back.

Tch. Of course there'd be more of them... Hajime thought to himself as he looked at the most dangerous element of Freid's army, five hundred apostles. They filled the sky, their silver wings glimmering as they absorbed the sun's light. Even though it was still midday, they looked like stars speckled across the night sky.

Though the apostles were all beautiful, the fact that they looked identical and had the same expressionless faces made them more terrifying than charming.

"Hold your horses, Irregular. We aren't here to fight."

"Really? It sure looks like you're here for a fight, coward," Hajime snorted dismissively, and Freid narrowed his slit-like eyes.

For someone who wasn't there to fight, he had brought a large force with him. Freid knew perfectly well what Hajime was implying.

"So you don't even feel safe enough to talk unless you bring this many bodyguards with you?"

"I'm simply taking the appropriate precautions for dealing with an insane monster like you."

Freid couldn't have Hajime whipping out a weapon like the laser he'd used to

reduce the demon army to ash during the invasion of Heiligh. The only way Freid could hold a conversation with Hajime was if he brought an army so strong that Hajime couldn't instantly obliterate it.

Still, while Freid's voice remained calm, he couldn't hide the emotions simmering underneath.

"If you're here to talk, then calm the fuck down. The look in your eyes says you're dying to kill me," Hajime retorted with derision.

Not only had Hajime ruined all of Freid's missions, but he'd also killed thousands of Freid's comrades. The demon general's rage was understandable. In fact, it was little wonder he couldn't hide his desire to murder Hajime.

While the two of them exchanged snide remarks, Hajime surreptitiously activated Riftwalk and started formulating a plan.

Now then, how should we handle this?

He could tell that his comrades were on edge thanks to this unexpected encounter.

Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori were veterans of a thousand battles by this point, and they were ready to fight at a moment's notice. However, the rest of Hajime's party wasn't.

Kouki was still shaken by the fact that he'd been unable to conquer the labyrinth, and had even ended up attacking Hajime, so the sudden arrival of Freid and Eri had thrown his thoughts into total chaos. In fact, he was so rattled that he couldn't even formulate a response to the repeated confessions of love Eri kept showering him with while Hajime and Freid talked.

Suzu, whose entire reason for challenging the labyrinths had been to meet with Eri again, was dumbfounded as well. Their reunion felt all too sudden.

Shizuku and Ryutarou had managed to at least draw their weapons, but the overwhelming pressure emanating from the apostles had left them frozen in place.

For a moment, Hajime considered a temporary retreat. After all, here was an invisible barrier that separated the Schnee Snow Fields from the rest of the

world.

A perpetual winter where a blizzard constantly raged existed within the barrier, but the warm climate of the southern continent returned as soon as they took one step out of it. Not a single snowflake drifted outside the barrier. It was like the blizzard was a white wall separating the two zones.

If they went back into the Schnee Snow Fields, Hajime and the others would be able to hide themselves decently well. Unfortunately, Hajime doubted they would be able to buy enough time for him to use the Crystal Key to teleport them somewhere far away.

“Don’t try anything. You’ll only be wasting your time,” an emotionless, inflectionless voice cautioned Hajime.

The apostle next to Freid looked down at him with her glassy eyes. It was as if she’d read his thoughts.

Guess they’re not gonna let us run.

Uranos beat its wings once and glided forward. And as the wind whipped around him, Freid declared, “I bear a message from the Demon Lord. ‘Come to my castle. I have prepared a reception for you.’”

“What, so the Demon Lord’s inviting us over?”

“Yes, and we are here to escort you to him.”

Well, that’s a surprise...

It seemed Freid really wasn’t there to fight. Hajime had really thought Freid had appeared with his army of apostles to crush him once and for all. After all, the fact that the Holy Church’s apostles were working with Freid proved that the demons and Ehit were connected in some way. It was only natural to assume they’d come to avenge Noint.

Freid nodded in an exaggerated manner and added, “Normally the likes of you would never be granted the honor of an audience with our god.”

“Your... god? You make it sound like the Demon Lord and your god are the same person,” Yue muttered quizzically. Freid turned towards Yue, an ecstatic smile spreading across his face. A moment ago, he’d been struggling to contain

his rage, but his expression was suddenly full of joy.

“That’s right. Our king is undoubtedly a god. He is the one and only kin of the great creator, Lord Ehit.”

The Demon Lord’s name was Alva. Until recently, the demons had simply seen him as the head of their country, and as a shaman who received oracles from their god. The other nations had believed that was all he was as well. But in truth, the Demon Lord had been a medium for their god, meaning his orders were the direct word of god. This was something that not even Freid, the most important man in the country after Alva, had been aware of until the apostles had descended upon the capital.

“For thousands of years, god has been on our side. And now he’s even summoned his apostles to aid us. He chose to bring his salvation to us demons! Do you understand what this means!?”

Freid spread his arms wide, looking like an orator addressing a crowd.

“It means we demons are the chosen flock who are destined to inherit Tortus. It is we who deserve to rule this world!”

Freid’s speech rang out through the plains.

Chances were the demons had cheered loud enough to be heard across the country when he’d given this same speech to them in the capital. But of course, no one present was impressed by his words. In fact, Hajime simply cleaned his ear with his pinky, looking bored.

The fury returned to Freid’s eyes, but before he could say anything, Tio stepped forward. Then, she shot a quick glance back at Kouki and the others to see if they’d recovered from their shock.

At some point, Shea had gone over to Suzu and Shizuku, while Kaori was now next to Kouki and Ryutarou. The two of them were probably trying to calm the others down while Hajime and Yue conversed with Freid to buy time. Tio realized they’d need to stall a little more, which was why she’d stepped forward as well.

“May I ask you something?”

“What do you want, survivor of the dragonman race?”

The inflection vanished from Freid’s voice, and his expression went blank. The way his emotions swung from one extreme to another in the span of a few seconds seemed wholly unnatural. It was enough to make Hajime wonder if he’d gone mad.

“You have conquered two labyrinths yourself. Shouldn’t you be aware of the true nature of this world by now?”

At that, Shizuku and Kaori looked up in surprise.

That’s right, Freid should know that this world’s gods are evil... Kaori thought to herself. Anyone who’d conquered a labyrinth had to have seen the messages the Liberators had left behind.

Hajime and the others had already heard the story half a dozen times, so they’d ignored the paintings and statues in the Frost Caverns that explained the truth, but Vandre Schnee had also left behind records of the Liberators’ struggle.

Moreover, Vandre Schnee had been a demon, albeit one of mixed blood. Plus, he’d been related to the Demon Lord. It was strange that Freid would side with Ehit when he knew that one of his proud ancestors had joined forces with other races to overthrow Ehit.

Freid picked up on that implication, and he replied coldly, “What makes you so certain their words are the truth? Why don’t you doubt what the Liberators, nay, the Mavericks, told you?”

“I see. So you believe their tale to be false, then,” Tio mused.

“Well, it’s not like they provided any real proof,” Hajime pointed out with a shrug.

Shizuku and the others turned to him in surprise. They’d thought that Hajime had believed the Liberators’ words.

In truth, Hajime didn’t care one way or another if the Liberators were telling the truth or not. It didn’t matter if Ehit was good or evil, or even really a god. The only thing on his mind was if Ehit planned to impede his path.

Of course, Freid seemed far more invested in the veracity, or lack thereof, of the Liberators' words.

"In that case, Freid, what makes you so certain their claims are false? Was Ehit not meant to be your sworn enemy? Why do you now follow him?"

Originally, the demons hated Ehit, since he was the god humans worshiped. It was strange for Freid not to believe that Ehit was the root of all evil in this world. If anything, he should have felt vindicated that demons were indeed in the right when he learned the Liberators had all united against Ehit.

"Fools. Why can't you understand that this has all been part of Ehit's grand plan? Everything until now was a trial we had to overcome in order to gain the honor of following him."

"Oh, I get it now," Hajime said as he nodded in understanding. Of course, he wasn't agreeing with Freid. He just understood the demon general's true nature at last.

The idea that Ehit was actually the god the demons should be worshiping, and that everything thus far was a trial was ridiculous. It flipped everything the demons had believed in on its head, but most importantly, it meant that all the soldiers who'd been sacrificed in the name of their holy war had actually died in vain, since Alva was linked to Ehit. Freid knew better than anyone how many men and women had given their lives for the cause. And yet, he accepted this new reality without complaint.

"I pity you," Hajime muttered quietly.

Somewhere down the line, Freid had lost his way. Of course, that was just speculation, since Hajime had no idea what kind of person Freid had been in the past. However, the current Freid closely resembled Ishtar and the other bishops Hajime had met. After seeing the fanatic devotion in Freid's eyes, he was certain the demon had been corrupted.

Hajime's words had been soft enough that there was no way Freid could have heard him. But the demon could tell what Hajime was thinking from his body language. The fact that his sworn enemy pitied him infuriated Freid. That was the last thing he wanted.

But just before his rage boiled over, Eri stepped in.

“Come on, Freid, cut the pointless chatter and get this over with already. I want to snuggle with Kouki-kun as soon as possible.”

“Tch... I know...” Freid clicked his tongue and wrestled his emotions under control. At the same time, Suzu finally recovered from her shock enough to confront Eri.

In a trembling voice, she said, “E-Eri! I... really wanted to—”

“Hm? Oh, you were here?”

“Ah—”

Eri’s dismissive tone hurt more than any insult could have. She looked down at Suzu as if she were a pebble on the road and not her former best friend.

Of course, Suzu had been expecting that, but it still hurt. It felt like she’d been stabbed in the heart. But even so, she didn’t give up. She’d promised herself she’d never avert her gaze from the truth again.

“That’s right, I’m here. I wanted to meet you, Eri.”

“Hah... What, so you could chew me out? Go for it. But don’t expect me to pay attention.”

“N-No! I just wanted to have a proper conversation with you!”

There was so much Suzu wanted to say, and so much she wanted to ask. She wished she could just pour everything out at once. But their reunion was so sudden that she still hadn’t figured out how to put all of her feelings into words.

Unfortunately, before Suzu managed to organize her thoughts, Eri turned her gaze back to Kouki. It was clear from her attitude that in Eri’s eyes, Suzu had long since exhausted any use she might have had, so she didn’t care the least bit about her anymore.

“Eri, you bitch! You can’t just—” incensed on Suzu’s behalf, Ryutarou started shouting at Eri, but she ignored him.

“Kouki-kun! What do you think of my new look? I’m way prettier than before, aren’t I?”

Eri's voice dripped with a toxic sweetness. A warped smile spread across her face and she twirled around midair. There was no indication that she'd even heard Ryutarou.

Suzu grit her teeth and gripped the hem of her skirt. Shizuku gently hugged her in an attempt to console her, while Kouki just stared at Eri in a daze.

"E-Eri... What happened to you?"

"Oh, the Demon Lord made me waaaaaay stronger. I just want to spend the rest of my life with you, but there are all these worthless parasites that keep getting in the way. Luckily, there's nothing to worry about now! I'm strong enough to get rid of all the garbage around you! We'll be together foreeeeeeeeever!"

"E-Eri..."

Eri cackled maniacally, her now-gray hair whipping in the wind. Kouki couldn't think of anything to say. Since revealing her true nature at the palace, she'd only gotten worse. What little shred of humanity she'd retained back then seemed long gone.

Shocked, Shizuku quietly muttered, "What's happened to you?"

A few gray feathers fell from Eri's wings. As they touched the ground, they obliterated the grass and ground around them, creating tiny holes. It seemed like Eri possessed the same disintegration ability that Noint once had.

"You're... not the same as me. You haven't transplanted your soul into a new body. Instead, you've had your body modified..." Kaori muttered, her expression pained.

This time it was Freid's turn to step in.

"That's enough small talk. It's time you accepted the Demon Lord's invitation. Just so you know, Irregular, you don't have the right to refuse."

The gray dragons howled in unison, attempting to cow Hajime and the others into submission. The apostles increased the pressure they were applying on the party as well.

However, none of those intimidation tactics had the slightest effect on

Hajime.

“Fuck off,” he spat. Hajime had no idea what the Demon Lord wanted with him, but he had no obligation to meet with him, either. If anything, the invitation was most likely a trap.

He couldn't think of a single good reason to follow Freid, which meant it was time to fight. And so, he casually drew Donner and Schlag.

Red sparks ran down the revolvers' barrels.

“What kind of idiot would head straight into the enemy stronghold when they know it's a trap? If we're gonna fight anyway, we're better off fighting here. Let's settle this once and for all, Freid!” Hajime roared as he grinned fearlessly. He didn't seem the least bit afraid of the fact that there were five hundred apostles before him.

In truth, he intended to kill them all. Of course, he realized it would be his hardest fight yet. Chances were, he wouldn't come out unscathed.

Still, he wasn't the same person who'd fought Noint months ago. After mastering evolution magic, he'd heavily upgraded his arsenal of artifacts. Moreover, he'd learned Limit Break's one derivative skill, Overload. Plus, he'd also experienced numerous difficult battles since then, and he'd spent countless hours running simulations for when he'd next have to fight an apostle.

Besides, he had Yue and the others by his side this time. As long as they were with him, he knew he could overcome anything.

More than anything, though, he'd finally found a way home. At long last, he had the means to fulfill his promise of showing everyone his homeland. As such, there was no way he was letting his dream die here.

His comrades appeared just as determined too.

“Mmm... I'm tired of seeing you pop up all the time. Just die already,” Yue muttered.

“Hehehe! Right now, I feel invincible! I'll flatten you all into pancakes!” Shea shouted cheerfully.

“There's no way I'll lose to a bunch of puppets!” Kaori declared.

“How splendid. Thank you for granting me the opportunity to crush another one of god’s plans before we leave,” Tio purred.

Everyone’s mana began to swirl around them.

Hajime briefly glanced over his shoulder. Suzu twitched in surprise when she saw the look in his eyes.

He was silently asking her, “Are you prepared?” But he wasn’t asking her if she was prepared to fight her former best friend. Instead, he seemed to ask if she was prepared to fight to get her back.

“Shizushizu, Ryutarou-kun, Kouki-kun! Lend me your strength!” Suzu flicked her twin fans open, her gaze fixed on Eri.

“Heh, you know it. Let’s get this show on the road!”

“Of course, Suzu. I’ve got your back!”

Ryutarou and Shizuku instantly readied their weapons. Kouki said nothing, but he drew his sword as well.

But just before they began their attack, Freid shouted, “Hold on a second, you goddamn monster!”

Freid was honestly amazed that Hajime still wished to fight despite the clear difference in strength, so he pulled out his trump card.

A portal filled with light suddenly opened up in front of him. He’d created a spatial gate. It was a perfectly functional shield if he needed it, but that wasn’t why he’d opened this portal.

“Huh? The inside of a room? Is that the Demon Lord’s castle?”

Hajime could see a marble floor and a number of ornately engraved pillars beyond the portal. A luxurious red carpet rested between the two rows of pillars.

The room was massive, and the gate had been opened up somewhere near its ceiling to give Hajime and the others a full view of the room.

The gate traveled toward a spot next to the throne in the back of the room.

Gradually, a shocking sight came into view.

“I never said you were the only ones who were invited,” Freid drawled.

“Ahahahaha, everyone looks so beat uuuuuup! That’s what you get for trying to fight back.”

A large cage had been placed next to the throne. The dark metal bars gleamed faintly, showing traces of magical enhancement. The people in the cage were sprawled across the ground, their bodies battered and their clothes disheveled.

“Guys! Sensei!”

“They even took Lily!”

Liliana, Aiko, and all of Hajime’s classmates were there.

Kaori and Shizuku cried out in distress. Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu looked shaken as well. Their reactions were only natural. Judging by how beat up everyone looked, it was obvious Aiko and the others had tried to fight back against the apostles that had come to abduct them. Nagayama and Aiko’s other self-proclaimed bodyguards were in especially bad shape.

Nagayama, Kousuke Endou, Yuka Sonobe, and Atsushi Tamai were barely even conscious, and they looked to be on the verge of death.

Aiko and Liliana had done their best to treat the four’s wounds, and their hands were slick with blood.

The students who hadn’t put a fight at all were physically better off, but they were all huddled in a corner, cowering in fear.

Furious, Ryutarou roared, “You fucking bastard! You call this an invitation!? You took our friends hostage! Let them go right now!”

Kouki, who’d been relatively docile since the group had left the Frost Caverns, finally regained some of his old vigor. His voice shook with rage as he turned to Eri and shouted, “Eri, you know this is wrong! Let everyone go!”

“Woooooow, you’re so nice, Kouki-kun. Hehehe, but I’m afraid I can’t do that!”

“Eriiiii!”

“Ahaha, I love how passionately you’re calling my name! Don’t worry, Kouki-kun. You’ll be allllll mine soon enough!”

Though they were talking to each other, Kouki and Eri weren’t really having a conversation. In fact, Kouki’s words weren’t even reaching Eri. In her mind, the only Kouki that existed was the one who listened to her whims.

Realizing that reasoning with Eri was out of the question, Kouki grit his teeth and leveled his sword at Freid. Just as he prepared to try and argue a different angle, two loud bangs interrupted him.

“Ah!”

“Wawawah!?”

Two streaks of red light shot toward Freid and Eri from impossible angles.

Two apostles instantly came forward to block the two of them. They crossed their swords in front of themselves to stop Hajime’s two bullets.

“Ah!?”

“His power has increased yet again...”

The apostles raised their eyebrows in mild surprise. Each of Hajime’s bullets had been powerful enough to blow a hole in one sword and leave deep cracks in the other. Chances were even an apostle had no chance of blocking more than one bullet with their swords. Cold sweat poured down Freid’s forehead, and Eri’s expression stiffened.

“W-Wait, stop! Please! You promised to leave Eri to me, remember, Nagumokun!?”

“Calm down, Taniguchi. I was using the flat end of the bullet.”

“That only works for swords!”

Suzu grabbed Hajime’s arm and tried to force it down. However, her body weight wasn’t enough to even slow Hajime, and he swiftly pointed his revolver sideways.



A small, palm-sized gate opened right in front of the muzzle. There were a total of four portals around Hajime, connected to four portals arrayed around Freid and the others at various angles.

This was a new combination attack he'd developed with Yue. By firing through the portals, he could still aim at Freid while avoiding the gate the demon had opened to the throne room.

Judging by the position of the gates he'd fired from, he had aimed for Eri's shoulder, so he wasn't lying to Suzu when he said he was holding back. That being said, a bullet powerful enough to shatter an apostle's sword would probably tear off more than just an arm if it actually hit Eri.

Naturally, he hadn't held back against Freid at all, and had been aiming for his head.

"You're insane!" Freid shouted.

"And you're a moron. You should know by now that those guys aren't good hostages."

The sound of Hajime's gunshots must have reached the people beyond the portal, since Aiko and the others were looking around in confusion. Hajime spared them a quick glance as he pried Suzu off his arm.

"It's not like you even said you'll guarantee their safety if we listen to your demands. Not that I'd believe you if you did, mind you."

He said that mostly for the benefit of Suzu and Kouki.

"Besides..." he muttered, his eyes glinting dangerously as he glared at Freid. "We can still accept the Demon Lord's invitation after we slaughter all of you."

Hajime was more than willing to storm the Demon Lord's castle after killing Freid. Sure, it was true that having his classmates taken hostage wouldn't stop Hajime, but he was at least willing to go save them after he'd finished dealing with Freid. That alone showed that he'd changed compared to when he'd first left the Great Orcus Labyrinth. That change didn't escape Suzu, who'd fallen to the ground after Hajime peeled her off, or any of the others. Though, they didn't know quite how to react to it.

“I know,” Freid replied, narrowing his eyes. He pulled on Uranos’ reins and put some more distance between himself and Hajime.

“I haven’t forgotten what happened at the capital of Heiligh, which is why I’ve prepared one last trump card,” he explained as he sneered derisively at Hajime.

If Hajime’s classmates wouldn’t serve as effective hostages, then he simply needed someone who would. And he was certain he’d found the perfect person.

Unsurprisingly, his guess was right on the money.

The gate in the throne room moved again, to the other side of the throne. There was another small cage behind the pillars... that had Myu sitting inside it.

The moment Hajime saw her, he unleashed a wave of bloodlust so overpowering that everyone fell silent.

“Ah...!”

Freid’s breath came in short gasps, and goosebumps rose on his arms. His instincts screamed at him to run. The fact that they still functioned in the face of such wrath proved that he was one of the stronger beings in the world.

Freid’s gray dragons plummeted to the ground, flailing about madly. Their puny minds had been unable to withstand the fear Hajime had instilled in them in that moment, driving them insane.

Though they knew his anger wasn’t directed at them, Kouki, Ryutarou, and even Shizuku took a few steps back, their expressions pained. Suzu, who stood the closest to Hajime, started backpedaling away as fast as possible.

Seeing how even the apostles were grimacing, Eri hurriedly scurried behind them. Freid, on the other hand, managed to barely preserve his pride by biting his lips so hard the pain drove away the fear.

“Hajime!”

“Yue...”

Hajime managed to calm his rage somewhat thanks to Yue calling out to him.

He quickly pulled the Compass of Eternal Paths out of his pocket and

activated it.

He asked it to show him what direction his precious daughter, who he'd promised he'd come back for, was.

"So it's not a trick..." Hajime muttered, looking stricken. At that, Shea and the others were forced to accept that Myu was truly inside that cage.

"Oh no, Myu-chan!"

"They even kidnapped Remia-san!"

"How craven."

Indeed, Remia was being held captive together with Myu. The two of them were huddled together, trembling in fear. Though, neither of them were crying.

"Looks like you've confirmed they're real," Freid croaked. He didn't even have the presence of mind to ask about the curious artifact Hajime had used. Instead, he grit his teeth and looked cautiously down at Hajime, not even bothering to wipe away the sweat that dripped into his eyes.

It felt as though he would die if he took his eyes off of Hajime for even a second.

"Were *you* the one who told them about my relationship with Myu?" Hajime asked pointedly, staring directly at Eri. She was trying to hide behind the apostles, but his gaze clearly met hers.

"H-Hahaha... Who knows?"

She tried to maintain her usual haughty attitude, but her face was pale, her expression was stiff, and her voice was trembling. It was obvious she was terrified of Hajime.

Of course, he knew the answer without even asking. Neither Freid nor the apostles knew anything about Myu, so Eri was the only person who could have possibly told them.

"What does it matter how we found out? Will you accept the invitation or not, Irregular!?" Freid asked, trying to sound as imposing as possible under the circumstances.

However, Hajime looked at Freid as if he were nothing more than an insignificant insect. He was still oozing bloodlust from every pore, though not as strongly as before. His fury was a quiet, controlled one now. However, that just made it all the more terrifying. Freid felt as though the abyss itself was staring at him. His breath caught in his throat, but he didn't even realize he'd stopped breathing.

After a brief silence, Hajime said, "I'll accept your damned invitation."

"Finally, you see reason," Freid said as he sucked in a relieved breath. Believing that he once again had the upper hand, he scoffed at Hajime.

He used metamorphosis magic to get the gray dragons back on their feet, then started constructing a gate large enough for everyone to pass through.

Hajime calmed down and restrained his bloodlust, and Kouki and the others sighed in relief.

After a moment, Yue spoke to him in a quiet voice and asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah. We could save her if we used the Crystal Key, but it'll take time to activate. And they know we can teleport with spatial magic."

"So they've probably set up countermeasures?" Kaori mused.

"We mustn't take any undue risks. Your teacher and classmates can at least put up a fight, but Myu and Remia are powerless. They would be unable to buy even a few seconds should the need arise," Tio explained.

If he wanted to, Hajime could use the Crystal Key in conjunction with the Compass of Eternal Paths to teleport to the Demon Lord's castle instantly. However, the Crystal Key was powered by concept magic.

In exchange for being effectively omnipotent, concept magic took an absurd amount of mana and a long time to cast. And speed was the most important factor during a hostage scenario, so it was the least suitable magic for the task.

"Hey, Nagumo-kun. What do you think the Demon Lord wants?" Shizuku asked, walking closer to Hajime.

"Dunno. But he might know we've found a way back home now that we've

conquered all the labyrinths.”

“Do you think...?”

It made sense that the Demon Lord, an accomplice of Ehit, wouldn't want the pawns Ehit had summoned to return home without permission.

That being said, since Hajime had yet to develop concept magic that could prevent them from being summoned against their will, Ehit could call them back if he really wanted to. Granted, Hajime had no idea how much effort it took a god to summon people, so it was possible Ehit wanted to avoid such a scenario.

“Amanogawa.”

“What is it, Nagumo?”

“What're you going to do from here on out? You should probably make up your mind quickly.”

“What do you mean?” Ryutarou asked.

“Ehit was specifically looking for a hero when he summoned all of us.”

“So you think I'm the one he wants to keep here at all costs?”

“It's possible. Either way, I doubt Nakamura's gonna let you escape that easily.”

“.....”

In essence, Hajime was asking if Kouki wanted to come back with him, or stay and fight god like he'd initially claimed.

After suffering such a humiliating defeat in the Frost Cavern's trial, it was possible Kouki's determination had been broken.

“You're free to choose whichever path you want. But make sure you're fully committed to whatever decision you make.”

“Believe me, I know.”

Ryutarou and Suzu shot Kouki worried looks. Though, Shizuku and Kaori seemed more concerned by the dark look in his eyes.

“Yue, Tio. If we get into a fight, focus on protecting Myu and Remia.”

“Mmm... I won't let anyone lay a finger on them.”

“You can count on me. I'll defend them with my life.”

“Shea, you go wild. I want you to annihilate everyone who stands in our way.”

“Aye, aye! I'll make them pay for everything they've done!”

While Hajime discussed strategy, Freid finished constructing his giant portal.

“Before we go, I'm going to have to ask you to leave your weapons behind, Irregular.”

“Excuse me?”

“I also have some handcuffs here that will seal your mana.”

“.....”

Freid pulled out a pair of handcuffs that looked identical to the ones Aiko and Kouki had been forced to wear in the capital.

Freid had claimed this was an invitation, but he was treating Hajime and the others like prisoners. He narrowed his eyes and tossed the handcuffs in front of Hajime.

“Put them on yourself.”

Freid's sneer was uglier than ever. He clearly held a grudge over all the times Hajime had humiliated him.

He didn't use to be such a petty person, I don't think... I wonder if getting his ass kicked over and over changed him? Hajime thought absently.

Or wait, maybe becoming a religious fanatic made him like this?

Regardless, there was no way in hell he was putting those on.

“In your dreams, moron,” Hajime replied as he stomped on the manacles, crushing them underfoot.

For a moment, Freid looked taken aback, but then he furrowed his brow in irritation and screamed at Hajime, “I told you before, you don't have the right to refuse! Or do you not care about what happens to those two dragons!? We won't show any mercy to those two inferior mongrels if you cross us!”

“Did you honestly believe you could control me just by taking Myu and Remia hostage? Haven’t you realized that you’re using a double-edged sword here?”

Hajime’s voice was calm, but also cold as ice.

“What do you mean, double-edged sword?”

Hajime hadn’t tapped into his mana at all, and he wasn’t even using the intimidating power of his bloodlust anymore. Yet for some reason, Freid felt that Hajime had his heart in a vice-grip. One wrong move and he wouldn’t live to see the next second.

“Right now, the only reason you’re alive is because you have Remia and Myu. But if you hurt a single hair on their heads—”

Hajime glared at Freid from underneath his white bangs.

“I won’t stop at just killing your soldiers. I’ll...”

Hajime’s hair stood on end, and he pointed a pale finger at the gate Freid had constructed.

“...massacre every last man, woman, and child living in the demon empire, regardless of their affiliation.”

That was simultaneously a declaration and a promise. Hajime really wouldn’t stop until he’d eradicated the demon race from Tortus. Freid’s irritation vanished in an instant. It seemed as though the very air around Hajime had gotten darker.

Freid wanted to believe such a feat was impossible, but knowing Hajime, he’d do it. A shiver ran down the demon general’s spine. He reflexively pulled on his mount’s reins, and Uranos shied back.

“If you want me to give up my weapons, you’re gonna have to pry them out of my cold, dead hands. So, if you don’t wanna fight here, you’d better rethink your demands.”

Normally, the protagonist of a story was rendered powerless when the big bad took someone they cared about hostage. But that wouldn’t work on Hajime. He would never leave himself without the means to save Myu just for the momentary satisfaction of knowing no one would hurt her right away.

Even if it meant the people he cared about got hurt, Hajime would prioritize eliminating the enemy.

If he gave up his weapons, it was possible Freid would just kill all of them. In which case it was better to fight, even if that ran the risk of Myu getting hurt. After all, his comrades could use spirit magic and restoration magic. If the worst were to happen, he would still be able to revive Myu, as long as he got to her in time.

Of course, he didn't *want* Myu to get hurt. If possible, he wanted to rescue her before she even felt the slightest bit of pain. But if that was no longer an option, Hajime would choose to fight rather than surrender.

Thinking about it rationally, Hajime's choice was a cruel one. True, he needed his weapons and his mana if he wanted any hope of making it out of the Demon Lord's castle alive, and Freid knew better than anyone how aggressive Hajime was. But even then, a normal person would prioritize the hostages' safety over everything else. Thoughts like, "It doesn't matter what state they're in, as long as they're not dead by the time we rescue them," would never cross their mind. Especially if the hostages in question were some of the most important people in the world to them.

Realizing just how far gone Hajime was, Freid muttered, "You're... insane."

If Hajime's foe was going on the offensive, then he would too. He'd throw away any notion of trying to protect those important to him. It'd be a race to see which side could annihilate the other.

Indeed, anyone with a mindset like that could hardly be considered sane.

"H-Hey, Freid! You're overstepping your bounds! The Demon Lord never said we had to bring them back unarmed! Don't push your luck, Nagumo's crazy strong!"

"But bringing this monster to His Highness as-is is far too dangerous!"

It appeared demanding that Hajime surrender his weapons had been Freid's idea, not the Demon Lord's.

Hajime glared at Freid, but before he could say anything, an apostle flew between them.

“Freid, cease this pointless posturing. Whether the Irregular is armed or not matters little to your lord. Besides, so long as we are here, the worst will not come to pass. Our very existence shall serve as a deterrent for the Irregular.”

Now that Freid had been converted, being told that by an apostle was enough to shut him up. Though he wasn't happy about it, he reluctantly nodded, giving in. The apostle then turned to Hajime.

“Irregular. My name is Hearst.”

Her face was as expressionless as all the other apostles'. However—

“We have thoroughly analyzed the battle between you and Noint. Do not think you will be able to defeat any of us ever again.”

For the briefest of moments, her eyes seemed to glimmer with hate and rage. Or at least, that was what it felt like to Hajime.

“Just hurry up and take us to the castle already,” Hajime said coldly with a dismissive jerk of his chin.

Freid started seething at his disrespectful attitude, but before he could do anything, Eri jumped into the portal.

The apostles lined up on either side of it, opening up a path for Hajime and his friends. He walked up to the portal without hesitation.

Right before he stepped through it, something inside his hand flashed. But it happened so quickly that the only one who noticed was Yue, who was standing next to him.

To Hajime's surprise, the portal didn't take him directly to the throne room. Instead, he found himself in a wide terrace somewhere else inside the castle that was large enough to accommodate hundreds of people.

Upon turning around, he saw the demon capital spread out below him. The buildings' roofs were rust-red, but other than that, the structures looked identical to those of Heiligh's capital.

Most of the apostles and gray dragons that filed in after Hajime and his friends flew down to the city.

“Come this way. And you better not try anything,” Freid said curtly as he dismounted Uranos and sent the dragon away. Around fifty apostles had remained behind to guard the party, and they got into formation behind Hajime and the others while Freid led the way.

The Demon Lord’s castle appeared absurdly huge. Hajime, Shea, and Tio walked at the head of the group, while Kouki, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou huddled together behind them.

As they walked down one massive hallway after another, Eri crooned, “Kouki-kuuuun, hold meee. That monster’s scaring meeeee.”

“E-Eri, have you really—?”

She grabbed Kouki’s arm and pressed her body close against him. Then, she leaned in close and started whispering something into his ear.

“E-Eri, listen! I—” Suzu stammered, desperately trying to grab Eri’s attention. However, Eri was focused solely on Kouki, so she gave no indication that she’d even heard Suzu.

A seductive smile graced her face, and a manic, obsessed look dwelled in her eyes. Honestly, it was painful for Suzu to see her like this.

It seemed Eri only had eyes for Kouki after all. She didn’t seem the least bit guilty about betraying her classmates or taking them hostage.

Seeing how selfish Eri had become, Suzu’s face twisted in anguish.

“Hey, Eri! Suzu’s talking to you!” Ryutarou shouted, unable to bear seeing Suzu look so sad. He reached out to grab Eri by the shoulder, but—

“Do not lay a hand on her,” one of the apostles said as she stepped forward, and pointed her sword at him.

Ryutarou turned to Kouki for help, but Kouki had his hands full dealing with Eri and didn’t even have the time to spare Ryutarou or Suzu a glance.

“Suzu. I know it’s hard, but hold it in for now.”

“Shizushizu... Yeah, I know. Thanks for getting mad on my behalf, though, Ryutarou-kun.”

“Tch... Don’t mention it. I swear I’ll find some way to let you two talk.”

Sighing, Suzu and Ryutarou stepped away from Eri.

After turning a few more corners, the party finally arrived at their destination. A pair of massive double doors stood at the end of the hallway. Judging by how ornate they were, it was clear the throne room lay beyond them. The carving on the doors showed an elaborate sun shining rays of light onto the demon capital.

Freid gave a signal to the pair of demon guards waiting outside the throne room. In response, they placed their hands on the doors, and the rays of light began to shine. A second later, a loud creaking noise resounded and the doors swung inward of their own volition.

The throne room looked the same as it had from the portal Freid had shown Hajime and the others. A lush red rug lay between two rows of magnificent pillars. There was a raised platform at the back of the room, and a gaudy throne atop the platform.

Keeping their impatience in check, Hajime and the others slowly made their way to the empty throne. As they drew closer, they saw the cages holding their friends captive.

Naturally, that meant their friends could see them too. The first to notice them was Aiko. Her eyes went wide, and she squeezed Liliana’s hand to grab her attention. The princess turned around and gasped when she saw Hajime and the others.

A few seconds later, all of their classmates noticed as well.

“N-No way. They really came.”

“Look, Yuka! It’s Nagumo-kun!”

The first people to speak were Nana Miyazaki and Taeko Sugawara. Tears of joy filled their eyes as they pointed Hajime and the others out to Yuka, who was lying on the ground. Kentarou Nomura, Akito Nimura, and Noboru Aikawa also pointed the party out to their friends, Juugo, Kousuke, and Atsushi. But a second later, their expressions clouded over when they saw that Hajime was surrounded by dozens of apostles.

“Nagumo-kun...” Aiko whispered in a trembling voice. Among the captives, she was the only one who’d seen Hajime’s battle with Noint up close. She knew firsthand how strong even one apostle was, so seeing fifty at once brought her to the depths of despair. However, that despair lasted only a moment. The second Hajime turned to her and nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders, she immediately felt reassured.

A second later, Myu and Remia noticed Hajime’s arrival as well.

“Daddy? Daddy!”

“Hajime-san!”

Myu’s smile shone as bright as the sun, while Remia looked like she’d finally been freed from a nightmare.

Upon seeing that both of them were fine, Hajime’s expression relaxed a little. He smiled reassuringly at both of them and said, “Myu, Remia. Sorry for getting you guys caught up in my mess. Don’t worry, I’ll get you out of there soon.”

“It’s okay, Daddy, I’m fine. I knew you’d come. Don’t lose to the bad guys, okay!?”

“I’m fine as well, Hajime-san. Please worry about yourself first.”

Neither Freid nor the army of apostles scared Myu. She had absolute faith in Hajime. As long as he was here, she knew everything would turn out just fine.

Remia, on the other hand, still seemed frightened, but she managed to put on a brave front to avoid worrying Myu.

Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Tio tried to reassure Myu and Remia as well, but before they could say anything, a booming voice echoed throughout the throne room.

“The bond between parent and child is always a beautiful sight to behold, no matter the era.”

The wall behind the throne began to glow, and a single silhouette could be seen behind it.

“There was someone just as important to me, once. Though in my case, it was my niece.”

Yue twitched slightly as the deep, clear voice filled the hall. She recognized the voice, but she couldn't quite remember from where.

Right as Hajime started to ask her what was wrong, the wall became transparent, revealing the voice's owner. He was a handsome, middle-aged man with slicked-back blond hair and crimson eyes. His clothes and cape were mostly black, with complex gold embroidery. The top few buttons of his shirt were open, and he looked surprisingly sexy for his age. He exuded charisma from every pore, and it was obvious from his demeanor that he was ridiculously strong.

Hajime was willing to bet money that he was the Demon Lord. Alva, one of Ehit's kin. And yet, his smile was so gentle that it was hard to believe he was a leader, let alone the avatar of an evil god.

Of course, Hajime hadn't forgotten that he'd taken Myu hostage to bring them here. And so, he narrowed his eyes dangerously and opened his mouth to speak. However, someone beat him to the punch.

It wasn't Freid, nor was it the Demon Lord. No, it was Yue of all people.

"I-Impossible... How..." she muttered in astonishment.

"Yue?"

Yue covered her mouth with a trembling hand. She looked aghast, as if she'd just seen a ghost. This was the first time Hajime had seen her so shaken.

Just as he prepared to reassure her, he had a sudden realization. The Demon Lord's hair and eyes were the exact same color as Yue's.

No way. That's not possible... Unfortunately, Hajime's conjecture was proved right by the Demon Lord's next words.

"Long time no see, Aletia. You're as cute as always."

The affectionate look he gave Yue made it clear they weren't strangers, and no one except Hajime and the others should have known Yue's old name.

"Uncle..." Yue muttered, leaving no doubt as to the Demon Lord's identity.

Everyone stared at Yue in shock, then turned back to the Demon Lord. At first they were in disbelief, but after seeing how much the Demon Lord and Yue

resembled each other, they began to think maybe he really was her uncle.

Yue's hands trembled, and her legs looked ready to give out beneath her.

The Demon Lord looked down at her with kind eyes and replied, "Yes, it's me, Aletia. I imagine you must be surprised. But I'm relieved to know you haven't changed over these past three hundred years."

The Demon Lord's words overflowed with love. Yue must have seen something of the uncle she remembered in his expression, since she took a hesitant step backward. A second later, she felt a warm hand cup her cheek, and she gradually returned to her senses. Turning around, she saw Hajime standing next to her. Though his gaze was fixed on the Demon Lord, the hand on her cheek made it clear he was there to support her.

Relieved, Yue sucked in a deep breath. She hadn't fully recovered from her shock just yet, but she was able to function again now.

Just as she was about to address her uncle—

"Alva-sama?" one of the apostles called out to him. Though the apostle's voice was as devoid of emotion as always, her tone was clearly questioning. It appeared she hadn't expected the Demon Lord to treat Yue in that manner.

It wasn't just the apostles that were surprised, either. Freid and Eri looked taken aback by the unexpected development as well.

However, the Demon Lord said nothing. Instead, he raised a hand toward the apostles, still smiling.

A second later, a burst of mana shot out of his palm. His mana was a similar color to Yue's, but its golden hue seemed a bit darker than hers. The mana burst lasted only a second, but it was powerful enough that even Hajime was stunned speechless.

As the light began to fade—

"Huh?"

"What? What the!?"

Ryutarou and Suzu turned around in surprise. Though the others were silent, they too were shaken. Freid, Eri, and the fifty apostles were all lying on the

ground, unmoving.

“E-Eri!”

“Suzu, calm down. They’ve just lost consciousness.”

Suzu started running toward Eri, but Kouki held out a hand to stop her. He’d already checked to make sure Eri still had a pulse.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Hajime asked, snapping everyone else out of their shock. He glared warily at the Demon Lord, but the Demon Lord simply snapped his fingers in response, looked around for a few seconds, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ve cast a barrier to deceive the surveillance devices in this castle. The apostles outside should be seeing a different scene from what’s actually happening, so we don’t have to worry about them showing up.”

Hajime’s Demon Eye did indeed pick up a faint dark-golden barrier covering the throne room.

“Answer him. What’re you planning?” Yue asked, confused by her uncle’s inexplicable actions.

He smiled gently at Yue, then gave Hajime and the others a friendly wave. After that, he turned to the captives and lowered his head in apology.

“I understand you’re confused. It’s only natural for you to be wary, so I’ll be blunt. I am Dienleed Galdea Vesperitio Avatarl, the ruler of the Garland Empire, and former prime minister of Avatar, the vampire kingdom. Moreover, I am an enemy of god.”

Dienleed’s words echoed solemnly through the throne room. Truly, they were a bolt from the blue. But the sincerity in his gaze gave everyone the impression that he was telling the truth. Or, well, almost everyone.

In a trembling, confused voice, Yue shouted, “No... this can’t be. You’re lying. Dienleed can’t possibly be alive!”

“Aletia, your confusion is understandable. Necessary though it may have been, I did something unspeakably cruel to you. And now here I am, in a situation that defies all logic.”

“Don’t call me Aletia! Stop pretending to be my uncle!”

Yue sounded more worked up than Hajime had ever heard. The man calling himself Dienleed smiled sadly. That seemed to anger Yue even more, and she thrust out her hand as a torrent of mana swirled around her.

After her experience in the Frost Caverns, she’d come to accept that maybe her uncle had his reasons for sealing her away, but that didn’t change the fact that he had sentenced her to three hundred years of darkness. Regardless of the circumstances, he had betrayed her trust. There was no way Yue could forgive him so easily. Especially not if he suddenly showed up three hundred years later and started treating her with the same affection he had before he betrayed her.

If anything, it was surprising Yue hadn’t lost it sooner. Before she knew it, she’d unleashed a Draconic Thunder at Dienleed.

The golden dragon howled in rage as it closed in on him. However, he didn’t look the least bit perturbed. He simply snapped his fingers, and a wall of light rose up to protect the raised platform the throne stood on. It didn’t even waver as the dragon slammed into it.

Dienleed completely ignored the clash as he addressed Yue. Though she truly did want him dead, the kindness in his voice still tugged at her heartstrings.

“Aletia Galdee Vesperitio Avatarl. The wisest, most beautiful queen in Avatar’s history, as well as my niece. I am indeed your uncle. Have you forgotten? I used to be a powerful monster user in my own right.”

“What are you—?”

“Surely by now you understand what that means. Why do you think I was able to create and tame such powerful monsters?”

“Ah... You could use ancient magic... metamorphosis magic.”

Dienleed smiled proudly, like he used to when Yue did well in her studies. Conflicted emotions warred within Yue as an overwhelming sense of déjà vu assailed her.

“Incidentally, I’m capable of using restoration magic as well. Unfortunately,

my affinity for it is quite awful, so it's of little use to me. However, my affinity for metamorphosis magic is high, so I was able to modify and strengthen my body to extend my lifespan. That's why I'm still alive today."

"Yue, calm down."

"Hajime..."

When Yue had unleashed her Draconic Thunder, Hajime had surreptitiously fired a few shots at Dienleed as well. However, his railgun-accelerated bullets hadn't been able to so much as scratch Dienleed's light barrier. There was no point in wasting their mana, so Hajime laid a hand on Yue's shoulder to calm her down.

Judging by how hysteric she was, she probably wasn't even using her mana efficiently. Panting, Yue slowly managed to get her emotions under control enough to disperse her Draconic Thunder.

Hajime's presence barely kept her in check, though, and her voice still trembled when she spoke.

"Freid Bagwa said your name was Alva, and that you were related to Ehit. He said that you've been controlling the demon empire for millennia!"

Of course, the fact that Dienleed had been Avatar's prime minister three hundred years ago meant there was a contradiction between Freid's claim and the reality standing in front of Yue.

Calm as ever, he replied, "Freid's words are the truth. I am indeed Alva, but at the same time, I am not."

What kind of philosophical bullshit is this? Hajime thought.

Yue's expression grew darker, and Dienleed smiled sadly before launching into his tale.

"The being known as Alva has aided Ehit since the age of the gods."

Dienleed went on to explain that Alva's loyalty began to waver as he watched Ehit commit atrocity after atrocity over the millennia. After a few thousand years, his feelings had flipped, and he found himself determined to take Ehit down.

“But as Alva was one of the lesser gods born from Ehit, he never had any hope of defeating him. Thus, he concocted a certain plan. He would go down to Tortus and serve as the world’s Demon Lord. He told Ehit that he would help the creator manipulate Tortus’ history and craft interesting situations to appease his boredom. On the surface he did exactly that, but all the while he was looking for a way to defeat Ehit. However, gods have no physical bodies of their own. For Alva to accomplish anything on Tortus, he needed a medium to inhabit.

“Those mediums ended up being the Demon Lord and his descendants. Freid may not have understood the full picture, but nothing he said was an outright lie. One thing he didn’t understand, though, was that the people Alva possessed did not have their original personalities erased.”

“Does that mean you were chosen by Alva as well, Dienleed?” Yue asked as she shot him a suspicious glance, and Dienleed nodded.

“Alva was elated to have me. My affinity with him was perfect, and I was an ancient magic user who knew the true nature of this world.”

As comrades who shared a common goal, they’d been able to use their unique relationship to avoid Ehit’s watchful eye and his apostles.

“Alva is in me even now, and he’s done so much to help me. Our two souls share this one body. That’s what I mean when I say I both am and am not Alva.”

Dienleed placed a hand on the back of his throne and paused to make sure everyone was following along thus far.

Her expression conflicted, Yue asked, “Since when?”

“A few years before you took the throne. Until then, I’d felt powerless to resist Ehit even though I knew the truth. But after I met Alva, everything changed. I had a mission.”

“What mission?”

“To bring down the wicked god who toys with this world. Of course, it was extremely difficult to keep him and his apostles from catching wind of our plans. There were multiple times where I had to do truly distasteful things to maintain my cover. Is there anything else you wish to ask?” Dienleed inquired

with a smile. That expression of his reminded Yue of the time he used to be her tutor.

His kind voice, combined with the things she'd realized in the Frost Caverns, caused her to hesitate.

Maybe he really... she thought to herself. If Dienleed really was telling the truth, there was one thing she wanted to know above all else, one thing she absolutely had to ask.

"Why did you betray your homeland? Why did you betray me?"

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't ask for an apology! I asked you why!"

Dienleed's eyes filled with regret.

Yue grabbed the hand Hajime had placed on her shoulder and clung to it for comfort.

Shea and the others crowded protectively around Yue, while Tio gave Dienleed a piercing glare. She wouldn't let any falsehoods slip past her.

"Aletia, your talent eclipsed that of everyone else's. No one could even come close to matching your magical abilities. Even I, who could use ancient magic, stood no chance against you. But that strength of yours was too conspicuous. It attracted unwanted attention, the same way the young man standing next to you, Hajime Nagumo, has."

"So that's why they all called me an 'Irregular'?"

"Correct. Do you recall, Aletia? Back then, most of Avatar's influential nobles had been converted to followers of Ehit. Even your parents had turned. You may not have realized the implications, but surely you'd sensed that something was off."

"I remember. You argued so often with Father about how I should be brought up. In the end, you had your way and became my tutor. That's why I grew up learning almost nothing about religion." Yue nodded as she said that, a bitter expression on her face.

Dienleed nodded back and said, "I wasn't sure whether or not the Liberators'

words could be trusted back then, but even so, I didn't want you to be indoctrinated. I wanted to protect you. But keeping you away from religion ended up backfiring on me."

"Because Ehit doesn't like pawns who don't move according to his will?"

"Precisely. Ehit started sending skilled assassins after you. Your immortality wasn't perfect, and after hearing just how terrifying Ehit was from Alva, I—" Dienleed cut himself off at that point, shook his head, and admitted in an ashamed voice, "I wasn't confident I could protect you.

"I also didn't want to lose such a potentially powerful ally, so before you could be assassinated in earnest, I sealed you away and pretended I killed you myself. I planned to release you once I could openly rebel against Ehit."

"....."

Yue's uncle hadn't betrayed her. In fact, he'd tried to protect her. Part of the reason for that was because he'd wanted a trump card to use against Ehit, but he'd also truly loved his niece and wanted to keep her alive.

The small hints Yue's copy had dropped back during the trial supported that narrative as well. She could no longer say with certainty that Dienleed was her enemy.

Moreover, she wasn't sure how to take Dienleed's confession. It felt like she was overlooking something vital, but Dienleed's kind words had made a mess out of her thoughts. Unable to process the sudden revelations, hesitation and uncertainty filled her gaze.

In a meek, trembling voice, she asked her final question, "What about the hostages? If you really are Uncle Dien... If you really haven't betrayed me, then why did you...?"

Her tone sounded almost accusatory, and Dienleed frowned sadly when he heard it.

"You're right," he muttered and snapped his fingers thrice.

The light that had been surrounding the bars of the prisoners' cages vanished and the locks on the doors clicked open.

Confused, Myu and Aiko tentatively opened the doors of their respective cages.

“I knew you wouldn’t agree to meet with me unless I went this far. Besides, I knew if I kept them close by, I’d be able to protect them if Ehit tried anything. As for their injuries, please forgive me. It was the apostles who went to capture them, and I couldn’t openly heal your friends in their presence. I did order them to capture everyone alive at least. After all, they may become my comrades very soon, Aletia.”

“Your... comrades?” Yue parroted back, her brain too fried to think.

If Dienleed was telling the truth and her beloved uncle had been forced to seal her away because he had no other choice, then what he said made sense. Hajime held up a hand to stop Myu and Aiko from exiting their cages just yet, while Shea and the others gave Yue a worried look. But her attention was focused solely on Dienleed.

“Aletia, please believe me.”

The Demon Lord walked down from the podium holding his throne.

“I always have and always will love you. Not a single day has gone by over these past three hundred years where I haven’t thought of you.”

“Uncle...”

Dienleed smiled and walked up to Yue, saying, “That’s right. It’s me, Uncle Dien. My beloved Aletia, the time has finally come. Please, lend this foolish old man your strength. It’s time we put an end to everything, once and for all.”

“You want me... to help you?”

“Let us vanquish Ehit together, much like we did to all of Avatar’s enemies. Ehit is preparing to put an end to this era. He’s already reset the world multiple times in the past. Watching civilizations grow and develop, then destroying them all in one big cataclysm is his hobby. But that all ends here. As luck would have it, you’re far stronger than you were in the past. Moreover, you have so many friends capable of using ancient magic. Together, I’m sure you can hold your own against even Ehit.”

“.....” Yue furrowed her brows, her words catching in her throat.

Dienleed spread his arms wide and moved in to embrace her. And that action brought back another one of Yue’s memories from three hundred years ago.

Whenever she did well in class or mastered a particularly difficult spell, Dienleed had always praised her and patted her head. He’d seemed more proud of her achievements than even she did. And whenever she’d gone to tell him about something good that had happened to her, he’d hugged her just like this.

Yue’s uncle was alive, and he hadn’t betrayed her. The man she’d loved more than her own father closed in on her for a hug.

Slowly but surely, Yue began to believe that he was someone she could trust again. Smiling, Dienleed whispered, “Come, Aletia. Together, we can—”

However, before he could finish, a loud boom interrupted him, and a flash of light streaked toward his skull. He didn’t even have time to react before Hajime’s bullet pierced through his brain and made his neck snap back.

Everyone stared in disbelief as Dienleed’s body slumped to the ground. He wasn’t even twitching. A strained silence spread through the throne room as comprehension dawned on the onlookers.

The sound of a revolver cocking finally snapped everyone out of their reverie. They turned toward the source of the noise, their necks creaking like badly oiled doors.

As they’d all expected, Hajime was standing there, Donner held at the ready.

“Fuck you. I should tear you limb from limb,” he spat, looking absolutely pissed.

Aiko and the students’ jaws dropped open. As sudden as Dienleed’s confession had been, it had seemed like he was sincere about joining Hajime’s side. While they weren’t aware of all the details, the students had at least understood that Dienleed had done some cruel things to trick their true enemy and that the Demon Lord was an ally who’d been willing to free them. But then, Hajime had gone and shot him in the head.

Not satisfied with just that, he started shooting the corpse in the heart, the limbs, and everywhere else. Once he finished pumping Dienleed full of lead, he whipped out a few dozen of his bolas and tied the Demon Lord's corpse up.

“Hiyaaaaaaaaah!”

While Hajime was doing that, Shea let out a war cry and dashed straight toward Freid. As soon as she reached him, she slammed her warhammer into the back of his head without hesitation.

Naturally, Freid's head got smashed to a pulp, and the floor underneath him caved in. Blood sprayed from his decapitated corpse in a rather gory fashion.

“Umm, I guess I'll join in— Take this!”

Kaori turned to the collapsed apostles and started shooting her silver feathers of disintegration at them. In seconds, all of them had huge holes in their chests.

None of them showed any hesitation or mercy. They just one-sidedly slaughtered their quarry.

But the other students couldn't afford to stay zoned out forever... because Hajime had set his sights on Eri.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Panicking, Suzu ran over to Hajime, her arms raised high. She looked like a minor NPC trying to take on the final boss. When she reached Hajime, she wrapped her arms around him and looked up at him with pleading eyes.

“You promised, remembereeeeer!?” she shouted, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Sighing, he reluctantly settled for just restraining Eri with his bolas.

“Shea, you get Myu and Remia! Kaori, take care of Sensei and the students!” Hajime roared as he tied Eri up.

“Aye aye, sir!” Shea replied with a salute.

“Okay! Don't worry guys, I'll heal you right away!”

Myu had been watching the proceedings with dumbfounded awe up until that point, but the moment Shea ran over to her shouting, “Myu-chan, I've come to

rescue you!” her expression brightened up and she leaped into Shea’s arms. Remia followed suit at a more dignified pace.

Meanwhile, Kaori flew over to Aiko and the others and started healing them with restoration magic. Silver light rained down on Yuka and the others, healing their wounds in an instant.

It was then that Shizuku and the others finally returned to their senses and started grilling Hajime.

“N-N-N-Nagumo-kun, what did you just do!? That was Yue’s uncle, wasn’t it!? Kaori, hurry up and get back here! If you use restoration magic, maybe we can still save him!” Shizuku shouted, panicking.

“Shit, he doesn’t have a pulse. This dude’s totally kicked the bucket. Shea-san and Kaori went all out, too...” Ryutarou muttered after checking Dienleed’s vitals.

“Nagumo... I knew it, you really are a...” Kouki whispered, looking down at the ground. He looked oddly calm, as if he’d expected Hajime to pull something like that.

Hajime turned to the three of them and Suzu, who was still clinging to him, and shouted, “Taniguchi, you secure Nakamura! Yaegashi, Sakagami, pull yourselves together and help Taniguchi out. Who knows when Nakamura’ll wake back up. Don’t let her try anything funny!”

Panicking, Suzu backed away from Hajime. Shizuku and Ryutarou looked from Dienleed to Yue, then did as he asked and took up positions around Eri.

Hajime took out his Crystal Key and began pouring mana into it.

“Stop spacing out, Sensei! As soon as I’m ready, I’m sending you all back to Earth! Get the students together!”

“O-Okay! Wait, what!? Back to Earth!?”

“Princess, you better join them. Unless you wanna stay here, that is!”

“I-I really don’t want to spend another minute here, but— Oh, whatever!”

Aiko, Liliana, and the students started scrambling about.

They were going to Earth. While they understood what Hajime had just said, it was so sudden that they were still processing the fact.

Since Myu, Remia, Liliana, and all of Hajime's classmates were together, he could send them over all at once. Normally he would have waited, but Earth suddenly seemed like the safest place for them. Of course, he still hadn't been able to craft concept magic that prevented Ehit from summoning them all again, but he thought it a better choice than anywhere in Tortus.

According to Tio, this hero summoning had been the first in five hundred years. Chances were, it took a lot out of Ehit to call people from another world.

Unfortunately, Hajime didn't have the time to explain that to everyone. They were in the middle of enemy territory, and there was no telling when the army of apostles would return.

"Nagumo, what the heck is going on!?" Nana screamed.

A second later, Taeko shouted, "W-We're going back? Th-That's so sudden!"

Hajime ignored both of them and focused on gathering enough mana to open a gate back to Earth. The whole time he kept his gaze fixated on Dienleed, not dropping his guard for a second.

"Tio, did you see that?"

"I did indeed. It would be hard not to with how much time he gave us. I have never seen a soul like that before. It was like a spider's nest. No, perhaps the word parasite is more apt. Regardless, it was abhorrent."

"Agreed. Do you think you can bind his soul using spirit magic? While it's still stunned, if possible."

"Leave it to me. The same spell you used to create the Necklace of Vows should work here as well. It may take some time, but I should be able to do it."

"Don't let your guard down."

"H-Hajime..." Yue muttered as Hajime's conversation with Tio wrapped up. He turned to her as Tio carefully walked over to Dienleed's corpse.

Normally, someone would have been devastated if the person they loved shot a member of their family. Especially since, in this case, it had turned out that

Dienleed hadn't betrayed Yue after all.

Hajime kept Donner trained on Dienleed's corpse and replied, "Thanks for buying us the time we needed to see through his true identity, then luring him out of the barrier... I know it must have been a hard conversation to have, but don't you look a little too shaken, Yue?"

Hajime's voice sounded sharp with irritation, but his eyes were gentle and there was a faint smile on his face.

"I knew you'd figure it out on your own eventually, Yue... but I guess considering how harsh your past was, it's only natural you got deceived for a moment. Still, I'll never forgive him for spouting all that bullshit. No way I was gonna let him keep tricking you after that."

"Bullshit? What do you mean?"

"Think about it rationally, Yue. If he really loved you, then why didn't he come visit you even once over the last three hundred years?"

Thinking back on it, Yue realized Dienleed's story was full of holes.

Even if he'd wanted to make sure no one found out Yue was still alive, there had been no reason to keep her wallowing in despair all alone. In fact, if he really was a rebel who'd harbored a god inside him, it should have been a piece of cake to go back to where he'd sealed Yue and tell her he hadn't truly betrayed her. If he'd sealed her that deep in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, that meant he'd been strong enough to clear it.

"The story about him being a rebel's bullshit, obviously. If he'd really cleared multiple labyrinths, there's no way Freid's the only person he managed to help through one after three hundred years. Unless he's totally incompetent, anyway."

And there's no way your uncle was that incompetent, right? was the unsaid implication behind Hajime's words. Yue shook her head, the gears in her brain finally turning again.

The only possible explanation was that Dienleed hadn't been trying to gather other rebels at all.

“But then, why did he act exactly like the uncle I remember?”

That was the main reason Yue had been fooled. This Dienleed had managed to copy the real Dienleed’s mannerisms perfectly. Moreover, he’d talked about events only the real Dienleed should have known.

But even as she muttered that, Yue realized the answer to her own question.

“Wait... this is hardly the first time something has read our memories.”

Sighing, Yue smacked her forehead.

As she bound Dienleed’s soul with spirit magic, Tio voiced her hypothesis, saying, “I suspect that initial flash of light that incapacitated the apostles was the same spell that scanned our memories.”

“Mmm...”

After reading Yue’s memories, the fake Dienleed had come up with a somewhat plausible explanation. He’d then backed that up with very convincing acting. Yue had already wanted to believe her uncle hadn’t betrayed her, so it hadn’t taken much to fool her.

“Rest easy, Yue. Master and I both examined this man’s spirit from every angle. There is undoubtedly just one soul in this body. And it is far too soiled to belong to your uncle.”

After they’d obtained evolution magic, Hajime had upgraded his Demon Eye with spirit magic to allow him to see people’s souls as well.

On the other hand, Tio used the unique properties of her dragon eyes as well as her vast experience to see through the true nature of things.

Yue had complete faith in both of their judgment, so if they were saying he wasn’t her uncle, then this wasn’t her uncle. Of course, she still had quite a few questions. For starters, why did the fake Dienleed have the exact same build and appearance as the real one? And why was he trying so hard to win her over?

However, all of those questions would be answered once they scooped the memories from the fake’s soul. And if it just so happened to be her real uncle’s body, they could always fix it with restoration magic.

Indeed, the entire reason Hajime hadn't annihilated the fake Dienleed beyond repair was because he'd taken that possibility into account.

"Besides..." Hajime muttered darkly.

Shizuku and the others had started to calm down thanks to Tio's explanation. Aiko and the students were also relieved to learn that Hajime hadn't just gone on another wild rampage. However, Hajime himself was anything but calm. He sucked in a huge breath and shouted angrily, "How dare he call you 'my dear Aletia'! Yue's Yue, no one else!"

Everyone present gave Hajime an exasperated look. Still, he wasn't done venting just yet.

"Stop using the name she abandoned, you old bastard! And who gave you permission to hug her, huh!? Try that again and I'll tear you limb from limb and dump your corpse into the ocean!"

"So you were just jealous!?" Shizuku, Aiko, Liliana, and Yuka shouted simultaneously. It was impressive that Yuka had managed to work up the energy to yell, considering how beat up she was.

Hajime's rage was understandable, though. It was one thing if Yue's actual uncle had been trying to hug her, but this Dienleed was just some fake who'd insisted on using the name Yue had discarded. And so, as far as he was concerned, he was justified in his actions.

"H-Hajime... Jeez..." Yue muttered as she fidgeted bashfully. Her earlier hesitation was gone, and a faint blush was spreading up her cheeks. The atmosphere relaxed considerably, and it was clear the two were about to start flirting.



“Hajime, I’m sorry... I acted really lame back there, didn’t I?”

The more she thought back to her exchange with the fake Dienleed, the more ashamed Yue felt. She had noticed that he sounded abnormally charismatic, but she’d let his honeyed words win her over anyway.

Besides, even if that had been her real uncle, she shouldn’t have taken his hand. Sure, her past was unbearably painful, and she would never forget her uncle’s betrayal, but the happiness Hajime had given her was worth far more than coming to terms with her old memories. Most important of all, she’d made a promise.

She should have paid more attention to the warmth of Hajime’s hand on her shoulder when she’d been speaking with the fake Dienleed. If she had, she might not have been fooled so easily. Honestly, Yue felt like slapping herself.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I know how badly your past still haunts you, Yue.”

“Mmm... I love you, Hajime.”

Yue nuzzled against Hajime’s arm, then turned to Shea, Tio, Kaori, and Myu.

“I love you guys too... Thanks for staying by my side.”

The reason Shea and Kaori had remained on their guard the entire time, as well as the reason Tio had used spirit magic to probe Dienleed’s soul without any prompting, was because, just like Hajime, they too cared about Yue from the bottom of their heart and wished to protect her.

“Hehehe, don’t mention it! I knew from the start that this fucker wasn’t Yue-san’s real uncle!” Shea proclaimed.

“Wait, really? I just kept my guard up because it looked like Hajime-kun was on edge,” Kaori replied.

“In truth, even I was not certain until I checked his soul with spirit magic. How could you tell so quickly, Shea?”

“I had a gut feeling!”

“Mmm... I knew we could count on you, Shea.”

At this point, Shea was so broken she could see through all manner of deception on instinct alone.

“Besides, I couldn’t stand how he kept acting like he knew everything about you, Yue-san!” Shea added hotly. It seemed she had been jealous of the fake Dienleed too, just like Hajime.

Around the time that Kaori had finished healing everyone, and Hajime moved to embrace Myu, Tio let out a pained grunt.

“Gah!?”

Turning around, Hajime saw Tio fly across the room and slam into a pillar. The pillar crumbled from the force of the impact, and Tio collapsed amidst the rubble.

“Tio!”

“I’m fine, don’t worry! Ngh...”

Tio struggled to her feet, but then instantly dropped to her knees. It was rare for her, of all people, to take so much damage she couldn’t instantly bounce back from it. As she coughed up blood, Hajime instantly turned around and fired at the enemy who’d sent Tio flying. However—

“Good grief, that really blindsided me. I can’t believe it took this long to heal.”

The fake Dienleed clapped as he rose to his feet, sneering all the while. Hajime’s bullet slammed into the barrier of light that appeared in front of him and crumbled to pieces.

“I thought you might hesitate when it came to attacking your girlfriend’s most important relative, but it seems my plan backfired. I forgot how petty and jealous humans could be.”

There was no warmth in Dienleed’s voice anymore. In fact, it was full of scorn and disdain. His clothes were in perfect condition again, and the bullet hole in his forehead had disappeared. Were it not for the destroyed bolas lying around him, Hajime might have thought this was an illusion.

“To think you would be able to stabilize Yue’s mental state as well. My lord won’t be pleased, but it looks like I have to go with plan B here.”

“Who are you? Alva?”

“In the flesh. Or well, not quite, since this body belongs to the real Dienleed.”

“You hijacked his body?” Yue asked in a harsh voice, mana gathering around her right hand.

Dienleed, or rather the evil god residing within his body, smirked.

“You make it sound like I’m the bad guy here. I simply put this worthless body to good use. If anything, you should consider it an honor that I, Ehit’s faithful servant, deigned to continue using Dienleed’s body after his death,” Alva said, then shrugged his shoulders and shook his head and continued, “Especially after how disrespectful he was. Even on the verge of death, he hid the fact that he sealed you away instead of killing you, and that he’d obtained the power to use ancient magic.”

“You’re the one who killed Dienleed?” Yue asked, her voice dangerously low.

“And if I am?”

“Answer the question.”

Yue’s hands started to emit golden sparks. Her crimson eyes burned with rage, and a super-dense gravity sphere formed around Alva.

However, Alva seemed unperturbed by the gravity magic closing in on him. Smiling arrogantly, he said, “Are you sure you want to do that? What if Dienleed’s soul is still alive somewhere inside this body?”

“That’s not possible. You won’t trick me again.”

Yue had no reason to believe her enemy’s words. Not after Hajime and Tio had confirmed there was only one soul in the body.

“You should get better at lying, you third-rate god,” Hajime spat.

“I’m gonna smash you to pieces!” Shea shouted.

They stepped protectively in front of Myu and Remia and glared at Alva.

Hajime motioned to Kaori with his eyes, and she nodded, going over to protect Aiko and the other students. Meanwhile, Shizuku, Ryutarou, and Suzu all readied their weapons.

Dienleed sighed as he looked around the room, then said, “Let me tell you what Dienleed’s final words were. Right before he died, he left behind a message for you, Vampire Queen.”

“I’m tired of your lies.”

Yue brought her gravity sphere down on Alva just as Shea leaped forward and Hajime squeezed his revolvers’ triggers. Out of consideration for Yue, he held back just enough to let Alva say his piece. Later, though, he would come to regret that decision.

Of course, in the moment, he believed it was important to buy as much time as possible to open a portal to Earth, and Yue felt the same, which was why she didn’t shut Alva up immediately. But what they should have done was gone all-out from the very beginning.

Even if that meant obliterating Dienleed’s body and forever losing the opportunity to learn about his death. Even if that meant destroying one of Yue’s wishes... Hajime should have never let Alva speak.

“Aletia. This is all your fault. You deserve to suffer a painful death for your sins.”

“Huh!?”

Yue didn’t know what kind of magic Alva had used, but suddenly, a scene of the past flashed through her mind. Mountains of vampire corpses littered the battlefield. Dienleed was the only one standing, and he howled in rage as he coughed up blood. His eyes burned with hatred, and it seemed as though he was staring across time directly at Yue.

A sharp pain lanced through Yue’s chest, and she started gasping for air. And the moment her offense faltered, the enemy struck.

“Luminous Nova— Overcharge!”

Kouki immediately activated his Limit Break and blew away his three friends.

“Hm!?”

A second later, silver light rained down from the ceiling, directly at Yue.

“Ahaha, take this! Crazy Moon... full power!”

A flickering black moon suddenly appeared in front of Yue. It was one of the strongest dark magic spells, which separated the target's consciousness from their body for a few seconds. The source of the spell was, of course, Eri. But not the Eri that was lying bound on the floor. No, there was another, unhurt Eri who'd seemingly appeared out of thin air.

For a few seconds, Yue was rendered completely defenseless.

"You will never reach me," Alva intoned. Then, he snapped his fingers, and Shea, who'd been charging toward him, was sent hurtling backward. At the same time, a barrier appeared around Yue to confine her.

"Void Fissure!"

Like Eri, Freid also suddenly appeared and launched a spatial magic attack at Hajime.

"We shall neutralize the others."

Ten apostles teleported in and launched a concentrated barrage of feathers at Kaori and the other students.

The enemy's coordination was perfect. Hajime didn't even have time to curse. He immediately activated Riftwalk and started processing the situation. His surroundings became devoid of color as each second stretched out to eternity, granting him precious thinking time.

The black moon and barrier were keeping Yue locked in place as the barrage of silver light rained down on her.

There was another barrage of silver light bearing down on Aiko and the others as well, with only Kaori available to protect them.

Another contingent of apostles was heading toward Shea and Tio, and Eri and Kouki were chasing after Shizuku, Ryutarou, and Suzu, who'd been blown away to the center of the throne room.

On top of all that, there was also a series of spatial explosions heading straight for him.

Hajime couldn't stop everything. The enemy's main target was likely Yue, so he wanted to save her at least. However, the moment he looked at her, he

changed his mind. It was clear from the resolute look in her eyes that she wanted him to prioritize protecting Myu and Remia over saving her. The silver light was nanoseconds away from swallowing her up, but unlike her, the two dragons were powerless.

“Goddammit!” Hajime cursed, making up his mind. As much as he wanted to run to Yue’s aid, he couldn’t betray the trust she’d placed in him. And so, he summoned his shield and extended his prosthetic arm to grab Myu and Remia.

A second later, Freid’s spell struck. The spatial explosions slammed against Hajime’s shield, and he could feel the impact in his bones. His shield instantly started emitting mana shockwaves of its own, blunting the force as much as possible. He also activated Diamond Skin to further bolster his defenses. But even then, Freid’s Void Fissure was strong enough to knock the wind out of him.

Rather than try to dig his heels in, Hajime let the shockwave blow him backward. He hugged Myu and Remia tight to protect them, and Myu screamed as they flew back.

Before they hit the wall, Hajime dug his shield’s spike into the ground to slow them down. He managed to kill their momentum and stopped them from slamming into anything, so he safely landed on the ground.

“Myu, Remia, are you okay!?”

“Ah...” Myu groaned, her eyes spinning.

“I-I’m fine,” Remia managed to croak out.

Fortunately, both of them were unhurt. As Yue had requested, Hajime had managed to protect both of them. After making sure they were okay, he looked back at the center of the throne room, where the battle continued.

Shea had just sent a number of apostles flying by slamming Drucken into the ground and creating a massive shockwave. Kaori was covering Aiko and the others with her wings as the apostles’ feathers slammed into her back. Tio kept them from getting any closer to Kaori by firing her breath at them. Shizuku was managing to hold her own against Kouki, while Suzu lay unconscious at the foot of another pillar. Ryutarou stood protectively in front of her while trading blows with Eri, who’d come to finish Suzu off. All of that meant—

“Ah!”

There was no one to protect Yue as the silver light engulfed her.

“Yue!” Hajime shouted, his face lined with worry. Shea and the others looked concerned as well.

Eri’s Crazy Moon and Alva’s barrier were gone, but the sudden barrage of light had become the cage trapping Yue in place. She tried to punch her way through the pillar of light, but it rebuffed her attempts. She then tried to shout something to Hajime, but her voice failed to make it through the light.

She narrowed her eyes, and a second later, a massive spatial explosion rocked the pillar.

“Ah!?”

But to Yue’s surprise, not even spatial magic put a dent in it. She tried opening a portal to teleport out, but again, her spatial magic fizzled as it tried to pass through the light.

“Tch. Myu, Remia, don’t move from this spot!”

“Daddy...”

“Understood, Hajime-san.”

Hajime hid Myu and Remia behind a nearby pillar and deployed his Cross Bits to create a barrier around them before running to help Yue.

“Hehehe. I’m afraid I can’t have you interfering, Irregular.”

Alva smiled when he saw the desperation in Hajime’s face and snapped his fingers again.

A few dozen more apostles appeared, along with an army of monsters that resembled the ones Hajime had fought in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. They were accompanied by a contingent of Eri’s enhanced undead soldiers as well.

The soldiers headed for Shizuku and Ryutarou, while the monsters headed for Kaori. All the apostles, including the ones that had been attacking Kaori, went straight after Hajime.

“Get out of my way, you puppets!”

Crimson mana began to spiral around Hajime. He'd activated the Limit Break's one and only derivative spell, Overdrive. And as he did so, he imbued his mana with shockwave properties to turn the activation of the spell itself into an attack.

The four apostles that were closest to him were blown away. Still, the apostles were Ehit's ultimate soldiers, and they wouldn't let Hajime get past them that easily.

Four new apostles flew in to take the place of those that had been defeated.

Hajime summoned three more Cross Bits as well as his Orkan, then unleashed a barrage of explosive shotgun shells and missiles at the apostles. His weapons were far stronger than before, thanks to evolution magic, and the apostles didn't come out of the barrage unscathed. That being said, they were tough enough to avoid being killed instantly. Moreover, their disintegration magic was powerful enough to keep Hajime at bay.

Realizing he wouldn't be able to get through fast enough if he focused on defense, Hajime grit his teeth and prepared to break through by force. He activated both Supersonic Step and Diamond Skin and tried to force his way past the apostles with his shield.

"We've already analyzed your movements! A suicide rush like that won't work!"

"Tch...!"

Two apostles circled behind Hajime, and the four of them slashed at him from all sides, their swords imbued with disintegration magic.

"Hiyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Shea swung Drucken, which was now in flail mode, at the two apostles behind Hajime, sending them flying.

She then jerked its chain backward, reeling the hammer's head back in as she landed next to Hajime.

"I've got your back!"

"I knew I could count on you, Shea! Thanks!"

Hajime once again charged towards Yue. Unfortunately, the apostles he'd hit with his barrage were mostly unhurt. Their swords had been destroyed, but they used their bodies to physically block Hajime's path. However, he tackled them with his shield and bowled right through them.

"Don't underestimate me, you emotionless dolls!"

"Ngh, just how powerful is he?"

Hajime was using Diamond Skin in conjunction with Steel Arms to harden himself, while also unleashing explosive blasts from his prosthetic arm and mana shockwaves from his entire body. On top of that, his Cross Bits were firing at the apostles' feet to keep them off-balance.

With all that, even four of them couldn't stop his headlong rush. That being said, they still had the advantage of numbers. Every time Hajime bowled through a group of apostles, another group came to take their place. Moreover, they started circling above and behind him to attack from all sides.

It took everything Hajime had just to keep himself from being overwhelmed by the apostle army. Before long, his charge ground to a halt. There wasn't even forty meters between him and Yue, but it felt like a continent separated them with how many apostles stood in his way.

And worse of all, it wasn't just Hajime who was having a tough time.

"Everyone, huddle together! Make sure you stick close to me!" Kaori's voice sounded uncharacteristically strained. Monsters bore down on her from all sides.

She thought she'd be able to immediately rush to Hajime's aid once the apostles stopped focusing on her, but it turned out that wasn't the case. Not only did the monsters outnumber her a hundred to one, but each one was exceptionally strong. They resembled the demon-led chimeras Kaori and the others had faced in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, but they were far stronger. Their special magic had evolved from camouflage to high-speed healing, making them difficult to kill.

She managed to cut down any that got close with her twin swords, but unless she dealt a fatal blow, they kept on coming regardless of how much damage

they took. And unfortunately, her disintegration feathers weren't too effective, so she needed multiple barrages just to push them back.

Only her disintegration cannon could effectively kill clumps of monsters at once, but there were so many that taking them down a dozen at a time just wasn't enough. Every single time Kaori created a hole in their formation, they swarmed together and plugged it up. Worst of all—

“I-It's too hard to aim!”

Kaori was on the right side of the throne room, while Hajime and the others were in the center, past the pillars.

If Kaori started blasting her disintegration cannon at random, she ran the risk of destroying enough pillars to collapse the room. Plus if she didn't aim carefully, she was liable to get in Hajime's way.

Of course, even with her disintegration cannon restricted, Kaori was more than strong enough to annihilate the army of monsters, given enough time.

The problem was, she also had to protect Aiko and the students while fighting. And there were so many monsters that she couldn't let her guard down for even a second, or one might slip past. Aiko and the others had none of their artifacts, nor were they in any position to draw magic circles for their spells. Thus, they were completely reliant on Kaori for protection. That was the main reason Kaori couldn't go on the offensive.

“Kaori, I'll get a barrier up right away!” Liliana said that, then bit her thumb hard enough to draw blood. She was probably planning on using her blood to draw a magic circle. However, there wasn't enough time.

“Shirasaki-san!”

“Kaori!”

Aiko and Yuka both shouted out a warning. Goosebumps rose on Kaori's arms as she looked up and saw a flock of gray dragons circling overhead.

“Ah!”

Realizing she had no way to shoot them down in time, Kaori turned back to Aiko and the other, then wrapped her wings around her classmates like a

cocoon. Imbued with disintegration magic as they were, her wings managed to block the barrage of dragonbreath, but now Kaori was pinned in place.

“They’re not letting up.”

The attacks weren’t coming just from above, either. The dragons were attacking Kaori from all angles. It seemed the monsters had just been there to buy time until the gray dragons had completed their encirclement.

The breath attacks were so concentrated that Kaori had no opportunity to counterattack. Individually, the gray dragons’ attacks were far weaker than the apostle’s disintegration cannons, but there were just so many of them.

Are they trying to deplete my mana by forcing me to defend?

Kaori looked down at the terrified students huddling beneath her wings. Aiko, Liliana, and Yuka were scared as well, but they were still desperately trying to think of some way to help her.

I have to protect them. Hajime-kun finally found a way back home! I have to protect them so we can all return together!

After strengthening her resolve, Kaori focused her attention on her surroundings. She needed to snipe her enemies perfectly with her feathers despite not having any visual data to rely on.

Meanwhile, Shizuku and Ryutarou were having a tough time as well.

“Ngh! Kouki, come back to your senses! Don’t you realize what you’re doing!?” Shizuku shouted in frustration as her katana clashed with his sword.

“You’re the one who needs to think clearly, Shizuku.”

“What do you mean!?”

“Didn’t you hear what Dienleed-san said? He was just doing his best to save this world, but Nagumo went and shot him! That’s unforgivable!”

Shizuku’s expression stiffened. Kouki definitely had a bad habit of believing only the things that fit his worldview, so it was possible he’d really believed Alva. But then a second later, another possibility floated to the forefront of Shizuku’s mind, and she grimaced.

“Dammit! Eri, this is your doing, isn’t it!?” Ryutarou shouted, coming to the same conclusion that Shizuku had. In the Frost Caverns, Kouki had been deceived by his double, and this time he’d been tricked by Eri.

Ryutarou crossed his gauntlets in front of him, blocking Eri’s sword swing. She grinned wickedly and replied, “How rude! I just gave him a tiiiiiny suggestion, that’s all. Kouki-kun’s the one who chose to believe it.”

It appeared Eri had tampered with Kouki’s mind so that he only believed parts of what Alva had said.

“Goddammit Kouki, pull yourself toge— Gaaah!”

Eri knocked Ryutarou, who should have had an overwhelming advantage when it came to raw strength, back with a simple roundhouse kick. He slammed into the pillar next to Eri and coughed up blood.

“Kouki, didn’t you hear Nagumo-kun’s explanation!?”

“It’s no uuuuuuuuse. I’ve already bound his soul.”

“What? Gaaah!”

Though Kouki hadn’t obtained any ancient magic, he was still a force to be reckoned with when he used Limit Break. Shizuku’s concentration slipped for a moment when she heard Eri’s words, and he took advantage of that to punch her in the solar plexus. She slid across the floor, her breath coming in short gasps. Grinding her teeth in frustration, she staggered back to her feet.

Guffawing, Eri said, “I haven’t just been playing around since I left you guys, you know? I worked hard to make sure I could make Kouki-kun into the ideal Kouki-kun. Aren’t I such a good wife?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you see, my Spirit Binding spell doesn’t just work on dead people. I can use it to control the thoughts and feelings of the living as well! It lets me enslave any soul I want.”

Shizuku and Ryutarou glared at Eri, who’d walked over to Kouki and lovingly ran a finger down the nape of his neck.

“The best part is, they don’t even realize they’re being controlled. By planting

suggestions in their mind, I get them to unconsciously ignore the things I want them to ignore! Right now, the only person Kouki-kun believes is me! I'm his one and only heroine!"

"So that's why you kept clinging to him the whole time..." Shizuku muttered through clenched teeth.

How did I fail to notice she was using Spirit Binding right in front of me?

The most terrifying part was that Eri had managed to create something akin to spirit magic all on her own, and then refined the spell to the point where the incantation didn't even sound like an incantation. It showed the depth of her obsession with Kouki.

Right now, Kouki wouldn't listen to anything anyone other than what Eri said. Worse, he believed the ideas came from him, not her. The longer Eri's spell lasted, the more twisted Kouki's personality became. Eventually, he would turn into the kind of person Eri manipulated him to be. In fact, he already believed that Dienleed and Eri had been secretly working to save the world, and that he was fighting for justice. Hajime was evil for getting in Dienleed's way, and everyone who followed Hajime was a brainwashed victim who needed to be saved.

Eri hadn't put the latter suggestion into his head; Kouki had extrapolated it all on his own. Her spell was perfect for someone like Kouki, who always looked for affirmation that his views were correct. He'd likely fallen under her trance with ease.

Shizuku glanced over to where Yue and Kaori were struggling.

"Oh no, you're not going anyyyyyyywhere."

Before she knew it, Shizuku was surrounded by Eri's undead beastmen warriors.

"How could you...?" Shizuku muttered when she saw them.

"Eri, are there no lows you won't stoop to!?" Ryutarou fumed, his eyes burning with rage. Kouki, however, seemed unfazed by the appearance of the undead soldiers.

“Shizuku, Ryutarou, Suzu. This might hurt a little, but bear with it. Eri will cure your brainwashing soon enough, don’t worry.”

“You moron! Do you feel nothing after seeing what she’s done!?” Shizuku shouted, gesturing to the undead. Kouki just sadly raised his sword and prepared to charge.

The fact that he didn’t even spare the undead a single glance pissed Shizuku off to no end. After all, they were all people he should have recognized. Shizuku and Ryutarou certainly did.

They were all the knights Eri had killed and then revived back in Heiligh’s capital. The same knights they’d trained with, traveled with, and dungeon delved with. Their bodies had been modified with beastmen parts and their empty eyes showed no emotion. It was obvious that Eri saw them as nothing more than tools.

Their fate was both tragic and pitiful. Shizuku couldn’t even begin to describe how sorry she felt for them. And Kouki should have felt the exact same way. No, since Kouki was the Hero, he’d spent far more time with the knights. His sadness and anger should have far surpassed Shizuku’s.

She wanted to believe that he would feel *something* despite being under the influence of Eri’s spell. But Kouki didn’t spare them a single glance, even after Shizuku explicitly pointed them out. In the end, he only ever looked at himself.

An overwhelming sense of disappointment welled up within Shizuku, but there was no time for her to dwell on it. The undead soldiers began charging at her, and she knew there was no room for hesitation. If anything, defeating them would be a mercy. She had no doubt the knights wished for release as well. But even though she understood that in her head, it was still hard to come to terms with it in her heart.

“Come forth, Heaven Crusher!”

A dozen barriers appeared in front of Shizuku and Ryutarou as they wavered. It appeared Suzu had regained consciousness. Looking back, Shizuku saw that she was on one knee with the Gate Key Hajime had given her glowing in her hands. It opened a portal to the sea of trees, where Suzu’s familiars awaited.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A horde of tigers, wolves, and serpents rushed out of the portal.

“Oh? Is this why you were pretending to be unconscious the whole time?”

“That’s right! I’ll at least buy enough time for Nagumo-kun to save everyone!”

Suzu brandished her fans, ignoring the blood dripping down her forehead.

Healing magic rained down on Shizuku and Ryutarou. They both dropped into fighting stances behind Suzu’s barrier, then took a few deep breaths. Pushing down their emotions, they steadied their resolve and prepared to cut down the knights who had once been their friends.

“I’m gonna knock some sense back into you, Kouki!” Ryutarou roared.

“Sorry, Eri, but I might have to cut off a few of your limbs,” Shizuku said coldly.

“Hahahaha, don’t you seeeeee? You’re just wasting your tiime!”

Grinning, Eri turned to where the fiercest fighting was. And upon following her gaze, Shizuku saw that Hajime and Shea were slowly making progress against the army of apostles.

At least ten apostles were lying on the ground, either dead or incapacitated. Each one was a walking natural disaster, yet Hajime and Shea had taken ten down while suffering only minor injuries.

Shea’s enhanced Future Sight skill, Prophetic Visions, her still-evolving body strengthening abilities, and the countless simulations Hajime had run against Noint were all combined and turned the two of them into an unstoppable duo. With each passing second, their skills improved, allowing them to more efficiently dispatch the apostles. Moreover, their coordination was impeccable.

“Hajime-san, double-up!”

“You got it!”

Hajime slung his shield over his back and planted his feet firmly into the ground. Shea then swung at the shield with all her might. Crimson and pale blue shockwaves spread out from the point of impact, blowing away the

approaching apostles.

Drucken's ability to create mana shockwaves combined perfectly with Hajime's shield, which was able to amplify those shockwaves due to its reactive armor.

The two of them were in perfect sync. And they were barely ten meters away from Yue now.

"Tch... Stop right there, Irregular!"

One of the apostles charged Hajime's flank, moving so fast that afterimages trailed after her. The apostles had managed to momentarily halt Hajime's advance, but now they were being pushed back despite having even more numbers than before. While only ten or so of them had been killed, the fact that they were unable to stop Hajime was unacceptable. Indeed, many of the usually emotionless apostles looked quite angry.

As the apostle raised its swords to cut Hajime down, Shea suddenly jumped into the fray.

"You better not forget about me!"

She swung Drucken at the apostle, sending her flying out of the castle. The biggest reason the apostles could no longer stop Hajime was because the rampaging rabbit girl kept getting in their way. Her body strengthening was powerful enough to surpass the apostles' strength and speed with ease.

"Get the fuck out of my way!" Hajime shouted, sending three of his Cross Bits forward. They self-destructed the moment they reached the apostles, forcibly splitting apart their defensive line.

"Alva-sama, he's too strong..." Freid muttered in a trembling voice as he watched the apostles get torn apart.

"I can't believe he can fight so many apostles at once..." Alva replied, looking almost impressed. The two of them raised their hands simultaneously, and Freid unleashed a spatial explosion, while Alva let loose a three-meter wide blast of dark golden mana.

"I won't allow you to interfere!" Tio shouted, flying down in her dragon form.

Transforming in an enclosed space made Tio the perfect target. The throne room was large, but not that large. Of course, Tio clearly understood that perfectly. The reason she'd transformed was to protect Hajime with her scales.

“Nnnnnngh!”

Tio deployed multiple wind barriers to try and disperse the force of the blow, but Alva and Freid's magic proved to be far too powerful. Her beautiful black scales shattered, and blood spilled from her exposed flank.

“Tio, don't push yourself too hard!”

“Tio-san!”

Tio ignored Hajime and Shea's warnings and fired her breath at Alva and Freid. Alva's barrier blocked it with ease, while Freid continued pounding away at Tio's scales with his spatial magic.

While gritting her teeth to resist the pain, Tio shouted, “If now isn't the time to push myself, then when is!? Hurry!”

Tio summoned a barrage of fireballs and wind blades to temporarily keep the apostles at bay while continuing to fire her breath at Alva.

“That light isn't normal! You must rescue Yue as soon as possible! Fear not, Master, I have no intention of dying before you accept my love!”

“Oh, jeez. Fine, Tio, I'll leave these guys to you. And thanks!”

“You can count on me!”

Tio continued pinning Alva in place with her full-powered breath attack, using her body as a shield all the while.

Making the most of her sacrifice, Hajime charged forward, heedless of the spells that pelted him. He only had five meters to go.

“I'm not letting a single one of you get past me! Bring it on, bitches!” Shea shouted, turning back to the apostles chasing Hajime. She kept the apostles that made it past Tio's barrage in check by using a combination of her explosive shotgun shells and Drucken's flail.

After a few seconds, she started spinning her flail in front of her, creating a

small typhoon to blow enemies back. However, Hajime didn't bother looking behind him and instead focused solely on rushing forward. He fired all of Orkan's remaining rockets and summoned his spare Cross Bits to push his way past the final wall of apostles.

"Yue!"

"....."

He finally arrived at Yue's side. And as he emerged through the smoke and flames, Yue slammed her hand against the wall of light and tried to shout something to him. But even from so close, he couldn't hear her.

She was panting heavily and shaking her head while clutching her chest with one hand. It looked like she was trying to shake something off, but Hajime couldn't tell what. Still, it was clear the silver light that was pouring incessantly down on her was not good in any way.

"No wall of light's stopping me!"

Hajime tossed aside Orkan and his shield, then had his Cross Bits set up a barrier to make sure he wasn't disturbed. After that, he pulled his pile bunker out of his Treasure Trove.

He stood there and impatiently waited for his evolution-magic enhanced pile bunker to charge to maximum power. And after a few seconds, red sparks started running down its length, indicating that it was ready.

"Yue, back up!"

The moment he said that, he pulled the trigger.

A deafening bang echoed throughout the throne room, and the pile bunker's jet-black spike shot through the pillar of light.

Yue's magic couldn't even touch this, so how did my pile bunker pierce it so easily? Hajime thought to himself.

Whatever, I can worry about it later.

He pulled back his prosthetic arm and punched the cracking pillar of light with all his might. There was a sharp *crack* as the pillar shattered. Silver light flooded out, shining so brightly that for a moment it obscured Hajime and Yue from

view.

“Yue!”

Hajime swept the motes of light away and reached a hand out towards Yue. His eyes clearly displayed his intense unease. Even though he'd saved Yue, he felt more concerned than ever.

“Yue.”

“I'm here...” she replied the second time he called her name, and he felt his hand latch on to her arm. A second later, he pulled her and Yue came tumbling out of the overflowing silver light.

Hajime hugged her tight and whispered, “Thank god. Yue, are you okay?”

“Fufufu. I'm fine. In fact, I'm feeling better than ever.”

“Huh? Yue? Wait, you—”

Hajime narrowed his eyes as he looked down at the girl in his arms. A moment later, a chill ran down his spine and he quickly tried to jump back, but he acted too late.

“Gah... You bastard...”

“Ufufufu. You have no idea how wonderful this feels, Irregular. It has been eons since I last manifested in this world.”

The person standing before him looked and sounded like Yue, but it most definitely wasn't her. And whoever it was had just thrust their arm through Hajime's stomach. Yue's hand went all the way through, exiting out of Hajime's back. The normally pale arm was coated in his red blood.

The very next moment, the silver particles of light surrounding the two of them flew upwards and vanished into the ether.

Shea had been keeping a wary eye on the apostles that had suddenly stopped moving, but the moment the light vanished, she turned to Hajime and Yue. And when she saw Yue's hand sticking out of Hajime's back, her jaw dropped open.

Hajime instantly used a mana shockwave to try and push Yue back. He knew that as long as some unknown entity was possessing her, he couldn't afford to

stay close. However, he wasn't able to take more than a step before—

“I order you in the name of Ehit... Stop moving.”

“What!?”

Hajime blinked in confusion as his body submitted to Yue's command. It felt as though all his nerves had been cut off from his brain.

Yue, or rather, Ehit, smiled sweetly at him.

Hajime knew that smile. It wasn't Yue's usual smile, but he'd seen it once before. It was the same smile he'd seen on the statue of Ehit in the main cathedral, back when he'd first been summoned to Tortus. The smile was just as repulsive as he remembered.

Ehit casually pulled his arm out of Hajime's stomach... and a fountain of blood gushed from the hole. As Ehit bathed in Hajime's blood, he brought his hand to his lips and licked it.

“I see. This is the pleasure a vampire feels when drinking blood. I must say, this is quite something. I had planned to make you suffer an agonizing death, but perhaps I should keep you around for your blood instead,” Ehit said with a sneer.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Hajime screamed, squeezing out every last ounce of strength in his body. Yet more blood spilled from the gaping wound in his stomach, but he didn't seem to care. His mana glowed bright crimson as he pushed his Overdrive spell to the limit.

A second later, there was a loud *snap* and Hajime regained his freedom. He swiftly backed away and aimed Donner at Ehit.

He knew Yue's body was immortal, so his priority was restraining Ehit, not harming him.

“Tch...”

However, Hajime's railgun-enhanced bullets failed to reach their target. Though they possessed enough force to blow through the apostles' claymores, they stopped inches from Ehit's face.

“My my, I didn't think you would be able to break free from my Divine Edict. I

suppose I should have expected as much from an Irregular. Thunderlord's Judgment!"

Twenty-four spheres of lightning appeared around Hajime. They coalesced into thick pillars, boxing him in from all sides. He'd experienced this spell once before when facing off against the hydra at the bottom of the great Orcus Labyrinth. However, Ehit's version of this spell was far stronger and faster.

The lightning flashed bright enough to blind everyone in the throne room. And a second later, a thunderous roar split everyone's eardrums.

Shea, who'd been busy dodging the apostles' attacks, and Tio, who'd been forced to cancel her transformation after taking too much damage, were blown away by the spell's shockwaves.

Still, they instantly bounced back and ran toward Hajime.

"Hajime-san!"

"Master!"

"Hajime-kun!"

Kaori dismissed her barrier and started running to Hajime as well. Unfortunately, the electric current around the point of impact was so strong that no one was able to get close.

As the lightning faded, Hajime's smoking figure became visible again. His Cross Bits had been flattened with gravity magic, and his body was glowing faintly thanks to his Diamond Skin.

It was hard to believe anyone could have survived such a powerful blast, but Hajime was still standing. Using Overload had boosted his defenses enough to save his life and keep him conscious. His body was covered in burns, but he grit his teeth and glared at Ehit with a burning hatred.

"I knew you'd withstand that, Irregular. But I imagine your reflexes must be dulled after suffering so much damage. Void Fissure."

Hajime's instincts screamed at him to run, but the electricity had momentarily paralyzed his reflexes.

Of course, they recovered in an instant, but that brief delay proved fatal. The

space around Hajime warped, and he realized there was nowhere left to run. Cursing, he activated Diamond Skin once more.

A second later, spatial blasts assailed him from all sides.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The force of a concentrated Void Fissure was immense. Hajime’s Diamond Skin was broken in seconds, and his bones began to crack. His legs gave out, and he was forced to drop to his knees. All of the spells Ehit was using were ones Yue had in her arsenal, but they were far stronger than when Yue cast them.

“You’re mine!”

“Get away from Hajime-kun!”

“How dare you use Yue’s body and Yue’s magic to harm Master... I’ll end you!”

Enraged, Shea, Kaori, and Tio charged at Ehit. But they didn’t get very far before he stopped them in their tracks.

“I order you in the name of Ehit... Genuflect!”

“Ah!”

“Kyaaaaaa!?”

“Nuwooh!?”

That one word forced the three of them to ground by some invisible power.

“Bestial Advent.”

The floor around Shea and the others rose up, morphing into a pack of stone wolves. The wolves restrained the three girls with their limbs, ensuring that they wouldn’t move. Shea and the others grimaced as the wolves’ claws raked their shoulders and backs.

“I’ll blast these all to—”

Kaori tried to unleash a barrage of disintegration feathers. But before she could, Ehit said, “I order you in the name of Ehit... Cease functioning.”

“Ah...”

At Ehit's command, the light drained from Kaori's eyes and her body went limp. Her twin swords clanged to the floor, and she lay stock-still, like a doll.

Seeing his comrades rendered powerless, Hajime let out a bestial roar. Blood spilled from his mouth and his body was clearly at its limits, but he rose to his feet nonetheless.

However, Ehit didn't feel the least bit threatened by his ferocious act.

"Be crucified."

The space above Hajime twisted into the shape of a cross. The cross Ehit had created out of space itself looked perfectly transparent, as if it was made of glass. Despite its fragile appearance, though, it was rather deadly.

"Gaaah!"

It dropped down on Hajime, forcing him back to the floor.

He lay there in a pool of his own blood as the pressure aggravated his wounds and made him bleed out faster. The cross pressing down on him was like his gravestone.

Suzu hurriedly created a dome-shaped path made of barriers for Shizuku and Ryutarou.

"Help Nagumo-kun, guys!"

"Nagumo-kun, Kaori!"

"What the fuck is going on here!?"

Suzu's familiars had been trying to chip away at Eri's undead soldiers using hit and run tactics, but they were slowly being overwhelmed. Their fight was a fair distance away from Hajime and the others, so Shizuku and Ryutarou were worried about leaving her on her own. However, it was clear that Hajime and Kaori were in dire straits, and needed as much help as they could get.

However, Ehit didn't allow them to get close.

"Behold visions of your death."

"Ah!?"

"Ngh..."

“Hiiiiii!”

Shizuku, Ryutarou, and even Suzu’s faces paled and they crumpled to the ground. A second later, they started patting their necks and legs and chests with trembling hands.

Thanks to Ehit’s command, they saw visions of their necks being chopped off or their hearts being pierced. Unfortunately, confirming that their bodies were still whole didn’t bring them any relief. It appeared they’d lost all sense of touch and were unable to tell illusion from reality.

“Hmmm. This body is quite impressive. It will serve as a most suitable vessel for me.”

Hajime and the others had all been defeated with horrifying ease.

Looking satisfied, Ehit experimentally flexed his fingers and said, “Thank you for freeing my chosen vessel, Irregular.”

“Ngh... Gah.”

Ehit strode over to Hajime, his boots clicking loudly against the marble floor.

Hajime tried to remotely manipulate his Cross Bits, but they were under so much gravity pressure that they couldn’t move. Turning around, he saw that the Cross Bits that had protected Myu and Remia had been disabled as well. There were tears in Myu’s eyes, while Remia hugged her with sheer terror on her face.

Aiko and the others had tried to help Hajime as well, but they’d been stopped by a wall of apostles.

Hajime attempted to pull a large number of explosives out of his Treasure Trove and blow them up. He was confident he could use Diamond Skin to protect his vitals, and as long as he was alive in some shape or form, the Ambrosia would be able to heal him. Unfortunately, Ehit predicted Hajime’s actions and snapped his fingers the moment he opened his Treasure Trove.

The ring on Hajime’s finger vanished and appeared a second later in Ehit’s palm. And it was joined by several other similar rings. Namely, the ones connected to Shea and the others’ Treasure Troves. Ehit had managed to teleport everyone’s rings with pinpoint accuracy without opening any portals.

That wasn't all, either. A moment later, Donner, Schlag, Orkan, Hajime's shield, his Cross Bits, Drucken, Shizuku's katana, Suzu's fans, and every other artifact Hajime had created started orbiting Ehit.

"These are some splendid artifacts. The things you have inside these rings are quite intriguing as well. The world you come from must be an interesting place."

Ehit closed his fist around the rings. And after he did, his hand began to glow, and when he opened it again the rings had been crushed.

"I have grown tired of playing with this world. I would have left sooner, but traveling across worlds as a mere soul is quite difficult. But now that I have this wonderful vessel, I should be able to enjoy myself elsewhere."

Chuckling, Ehit's lips curled up into a smile that Yue would never make. He tilted his hand, letting the remnants of Hajime and the other's Treasure Troves tumble to the ground. But before they even reached it, they turned to motes of light and vanished.

The items stored within didn't appear, so Hajime assumed Ehit had destroyed them as well. He could only watch on in impotent rage as Ehit destroyed the rest of his artifacts one by one.

"Oh, I almost forgot."

Ehit turned to Hajime's prosthetic arm, his expression making it clear he hadn't forgotten for even a second. He snapped his fingers again, and the arm crumbled apart as well. Hajime screamed in pain as the prosthetic nerves he'd created to help him better control the arm were destroyed along with it. With that, he'd lost every single one of his artifacts.

Sensing that the battle was truly over now, Alva and Freid ran over to Ehit and dropped to their knees.

"It was an honor to be present for your advent on this plane."

"I am deeply humbled to be in your presence, my lord."

"Mhm. Well done, you two."

Overcome with joy, the two of them began to tear up. On the other hand,

Shea and the others sunk down to the depths of despair. Yue's expressions were subdued, but she always had a gentle look about her. Now, though, her face was contorted into a haughty grin.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah... Transmute!"

"Hm?"

Crimson sparks ran across the ground around Hajime, causing it to sink a little.

"You really don't know when to give up, do you? A normal person would have died by now. Hmm, perhaps I should have chosen you as my vessel. I got a little hasty when I learned the vessel I originally planned on taking had finally been rediscovered after three hundred years. Then again, this body is still far more suited to magic than yours."

Since Hajime was being restrained from above, he'd hoped to transmute the ground and escape from below.

"I order you in the name of Ehit... Be still."

The crimson sparks began to fade, and the ground stopped sinking.

"It's not over yet!"

And yet, Hajime refused to give up. With ungodly determination, he once again focused his mana.

The fading sparks were granted renewed life as he struggled against Ehit's command.

"Oho... To think you could resist my Divine Edicts to such an extent."

"Uwooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

The ground began to sink once more. Moreover, the area that should have been outside Hajime's effective Transmutation range began to crack.

A low rumbling began to fill the room. Hajime's mana started to throb like a heartbeat, and with each pulse, it grew stronger.

Beneath his bloodstained bangs, Hajime's eyes glimmered with an indomitable resolve. Despite how hopeless the situation was, he still hadn't given up. It was as if he didn't even know the meaning of despair.

Moments later, Hajime seemed to overcome some invisible barrier and he shouted, “Transmuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuute!”

His crimson mana became more vibrant than ever before, and its light spread throughout the room.

A glowing sword rose from the floor, as did several floating spheres, each five centimeters in diameter.

“My lord!”

“Why won’t you just die already, you damned Irregular!?”

Even though he was on the verge of death, Hajime’s struggles were enough to scare Alva and Freid. They quickly dashed forward to finish him off.

But Ehit simply held out a hand to stop them and muttered, “So you’ve managed to surpass your limits yet again. I can’t believe you managed to instantly imbue your creations with ancient magic... I suppose this means you transcended the limits of your own talent? That’s a rather rare skill.”

The sword Hajime had created could slice through space, while the spheres were enchanted with super-compressed gravity magic. He’d also been able to create something similar to the wolf golems Ehit had made with a combination of spirit magic and metamorphosis magic.

Thus far, Hajime hadn’t been capable of doing anything like that.

That being said, it still wasn’t enough.

“It really is a shame to lose such a valuable sample. However, you need to learn your place.”

Ehit emitted a faint silver light, then spoke in a voice dripping with power and said, “I order you in the name of Ehitruje... Disappear!”

“Ngh. Goddamiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!”

An inviolate force began to impress its will on the world itself. In accordance with Ehit’s command, the new artifacts Hajime had created began to break apart. His silver light started encroaching on Hajime’s crimson sparks as well, but they refused to vanish. Though their luster faded, Hajime continued resisting with all his might.

“You still haven’t given up? How much despair must I inflict upon you before you accept your fate?”

“Of course I haven’t given up! I’m gonna fucking murder you and get Yue back! I won’t stop until then!”

“Heh, really now? Then I suppose I better finish you off for good. I now understand why my command didn’t kill you instantly, so there’s nothing more to be learned from you.”

Ehit smiled happily down at Hajime, who was coughing up blood as he struggled to fight back. Then, he raised his hand and cast Yue’s favorite spell.

“The five elemental dragons... I must say, this vessel came up with some rather interesting magic. I’m quite fond of this one.”

Dragons made of wind, lightning, stone, ice, and fire appeared around Ehit. Each one was far larger and more imposing than the ones Yue summoned. And on top of their increased strength, they absorbed the surrounding mana and transferred it to Ehit.

The dragons reared their heads, their cold silver eyes glaring down at their targets.

Myu, Remia, Aiko, Liliana, Shizuku, Suzu, Ryutarou, Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Hajime.

Ehit planned to make sure not even a trace of Hajime and the others remained. He had enjoyed his fill of Hajime’s suffering, anger, and hatred, and now he was ready to see him despair before his end.

With every ounce of his being, Hajime shouted, “Yue, come back to us!”

“Hmph, relying on your girlfriend to save you? You’re just wasting your breath. This vessel belongs to me now.”

“Yue! I know you can hear me! Yueeeeeee!”

Ignoring Ehit’s provocations, Hajime continued shouting the name he’d given the girl he loved.

Irked by Hajime’s disrespect, Ehit frowned and raised a hand. He simply had to swing it down. The moment he did, Hajime’s life would be well and truly

forfeit. But before he could—

“What the!?! What’s happening to my mana!?! My body won’t... Impossible!”

Ehit staggered backward, his arm still raised. His eyes opened wide and he looked down at himself.

His control over his mana faltered, and the five dragons began to flicker.

Alva and Freid looked shocked, as did Shea and the others.

A small voice whispered, “You will not hurt my friends.”

It felt as though the words were being fed directly into everyone’s minds, like with telepathy. The pitch of the voice was the same as Ehit’s, but Hajime and the others instantly knew it didn’t belong to him.

“Yue!” Hajime shouted happily, and Shea and the others followed suit. Everyone’s expressions brightened in an instant.

“Ngh, damned cocky mortals! I order you in the name of Ehitruje... Recall your worst nightmare!”

Hajime and the others were forced to remember the most painful moments of their lives.

The effect wasn’t something that could control them completely, but they couldn’t exactly ignore it either. Plus, it worked on Yue’s consciousness as well as everyone else.

Sweating, Ehit wrested control of Yue’s body out of her hands. And once he’d subdued her consciousness, he looked down at his palm in disgust.

“Alvaheit. I’ll be returning to the Sanctuary. I had hoped to take control of this vessel while she was still being deceived by you, but alas. As she is now, I can’t fully control her, even with my immense powers. I need to make some adjustments on this body.”

“M-My lord. I am terribly sorry for failing you...”

“No matter. It shouldn’t take more than three days to achieve full control. I’ll leave cleaning the trash up to you. Freid, Eri, follow me. As promised, I shall grant your wishes.”

“Yes, my lord. As you command.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming. You’re gonna make me a world where I can be all alone with Kouki-kun, right? As long as you do that, I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Like hell I’m letting you get away!”

A small snapping noise echoed as Hajime’s gravelly voice boomed. To everyone’s surprise, he’d managed to rise to his feet. Although Ehit’s cross was still bearing down on him, he stood strong.

“Cease your unsightly struggling,” one of the apostles said as she shot forward with four of her comrades. Hajime was already on the verge of death, and the five apostles were able to easily subdue him. They slammed him to the ground, causing yet more blood to spurt from his wounds.

But there was one other person there who loved Yue as much as Hajime, albeit in a different way. Shea’s pale blue mana spiraled out of control as she struggled against the order Ehit had placed on her.

“Yue-san! Yue-san! Dammit, move, you stupid body! Moooooooooooooove!”

“Impossible. How can someone who isn’t even an Irregular resist Ehit’s Divine Edict!?” Alva exclaimed in surprise.

The wolf golem’s claws dug deeper into Shea’s skin, but she ignored the pain and slammed her fist into the ground. An explosion of mana erupted from the point of impact, blowing it away.

Having freed herself through willpower alone, Shea leaped after it. With a single backhanded punch, she pulverized the stone golem. And as its fragments rained down, she dashed toward Ehit, determined to reclaim Yue from the god.

Anyone who saw her demonic visage was hard-pressed to believe she was really from the peace-loving rabbitman race.

“Void Fissure!”

“Stop wasting our lord’s time.”

Freid’s spatial blast hit Shea square in the chest. She’d been able to resist Yue’s Void Fissure when the two had fought, but Yue had been holding back. The Void Fissure Freid had prepared in case Hajime showed yet another

inexplicable burst of strength was far stronger.

“Nnnnnngh!”

Shea’s charge ground to a halt. But that was all. Freid’s Void Fissure didn’t tear her to pieces as he’d expected. In fact, it wasn’t even enough to bring her to her knees.

That being said, it was enough to stop her. It took everything Shea had just to remain standing amidst the spatial impacts wracking her entire body. And as a result, she was unable to defend herself when Alva’s magic blast came hurtling at her.

He’d condensed his mana so much that it possessed physical mass, and it hit Shea with the force of a dump truck. Unable to withstand the impact, she was sent flying across the room. She smashed straight through several pillars and slammed against the wall with enough force to rock the castle. Rubble from the damaged wall fell down, burying her.

Shea lay unmoving on her back, blood dripping from the various injuries she’d received.

“Shea! Damn you!”

“Ngh! Why is it so difficult to move!?”

Shizuku and Tio struggled with all their might, but they were unable to lift a finger. It was as if they’d been rooted to the spot.

“I’m afraid I need to take my leave now, ladies, Irregular. There’s a pressing concern I need to take care of that takes precedence over you.”

For the past minute or so, Ehit had been focused only on his trembling hand, which was still raised high in the air.

Another pillar of silver light rained down, but this one created a circular hole in the ceiling as it descended.

As sunlight filtered into the throne room, everyone looked up in awe. High up in the sky, far above the castle ramparts, was a swirling vortex of silver light. It looked like a mini-galaxy, and loath though Hajime was to admit it, it felt divine.

“Oh yes, allow me to give you one last parting gift. You have three days. Three

days from now, I will dye this planet red with the blood of all mortals. It is the final game I have planned for Tortus.”

Sneering, Ehit looked down at Hajime as he floated up into the sky.

“I’m looking forward to seeing what wonderful games I can play with your world. Though, I suppose since you’ll all be dying here, none of that matters to you.”

“Wait... Give Yue back...” Hajime muttered in a hoarse voice. Then, he raised a hand up toward Ehit, but one of the apostles instantly knocked it down. Undaunted, he tried to drag his feet forward, but Alva crafted a spatial prison to lock him in place.

Hajime should have long since died of blood loss, yet he continued struggling. Despite all he’d been through, his will remained unbroken.

For the briefest of moments, the apostles recoiled in fear at his unbending spirit. Wary of anything else he might try, they used disintegration magic to destroy the transmutation magic circles Hajime had sewed into his clothes.

Meanwhile, Tio and the others struggled to escape Ehit’s Divine Edict, but they remained motionless. Aiko and the students were also powerless to do anything in the face of the apostles and monsters that had them surrounded.

Everyone could only watch helplessly as Eri spread her wings and flew upward with Kouki. She whispered something into his ear and he nodded in understanding. Resolved, he looked down at Shizuku and the others. Chances were, Eri had told him some story that conveniently matched up with how he wanted the world to be.

Suzu, Shizuku, and Ryutarou all shouted at him, but their voices failed to sway his heart.

When the swirling silver galaxy gate was only inches behind him, Ehit spread his arms wide and cast his gaze over the demons in the capital. His pose was identical to the statue of him Hajime had seen in the cathedral.

Yue’s unparalleled beauty combined with his divine silver mana was enough to capture the hearts of every demon who saw him. They immediately dropped to their knees in worship. This was the birth of a new legend.

After a brief moment of silence, the demon capital erupted in cheers. Then, all of Ehit's apostles, Eri's undead soldiers, Freid's monsters, and the demons waiting in the capital floated up to join him.

It seemed most of the demons had been informed beforehand that this day was coming. As they relished the moment they became god's chosen race and ascended to heaven.

Ehit turned to Hajime and spoke with a disdainful expression that didn't fit Yue's features in the slightest, saying, "Farewell, Irregular. Your rather adorable antics alleviated my boredom, for a time. I must say, you were one of my favorite pawns."

He then turned his back on Hajime and vanished into the silver portal.

"Yue! Yueee!"

Hajime reached his hand out, but it was all in vain. The warmth he'd hoped to grasp was no longer in this world.

Chapter II: The Tiny Hero

Loud footsteps echoed through the nearly-deserted throne room.

Only Alva, ten apostles, five of whom were restraining Hajime, and thirty of Freid's monsters had remained behind to finish off Hajime and the other students.

The majestic hall felt eerily silent, a stark contrast to the cheering heard outside.

Hajime's screams of despair had left everyone, except Alva, speechless.

"I can't believe you're still breathing. Just how tenacious are you?" he spat as he strode over to Hajime. Burning hatred dominated his disdainful sneer. He despised Hajime for ruining the perfect welcome he'd prepared for his lord and master, Ehit.

Hajime's gaze was cast downward, so he didn't react at all to Alva's vitriol. Alva couldn't feel anything from him. No bloodlust, no hatred. And considering how much blood he'd lost, it wouldn't have been surprising if he'd just died.

"Hmph, you're pathetic," Alva stated as he stomped on Hajime's head and dug his heels in.

Aiko and the others could only watch on in helpless despair. The students who'd remained holed up in the castle had already given up. They were either sobbing silently or watching on with vacant eyes. However, there was one student who still had some fight left in her.

Nagumo... Yuka thought, balling her hands into fists. Her teeth were clenched and there were tears in her eyes. It looked as though she felt Hajime's pain herself. She'd only just been healed from the brink of death, but she burned with righteous anger.

In Yuka's eyes, Hajime was an invincible superhero. The Hajime she knew could take on any enemy with a fearless smile... and save her no matter how dire the circumstances looked. In fact, he'd saved her life twice already, first

from the Traum Soldiers in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, and then again in Ur.

I still haven't done anything to return the favor. I know I'm weak... and useless... but even so... Like the other students, Yuka's gaze was cast downward and her expression was hidden by her bangs as she mulled over such thoughts.

The remaining apostles and monsters kept the rest of the students at bay, ensuring they made no move to assist those who were fighting. But it wasn't like they were keeping a particularly close eye on them. They actually had their backs turned to the students, and were only making sure they didn't do anything to get in Alva's way.

Kaori was with the other students as well, but she remained motionless after Ehit's edict. Plus, one of Ehit's wolf golems was keeping her pinned, so the apostles weren't wary of her. One of them had confiscated her twin claymores, as those hadn't been destroyed by Ehit like everyone else's weapons, but that was all. Her attention was otherwise focused solely on Hajime.

Among the remaining apostles, two stood next to Alva to protect him, one stood watch over Shizuku, Ryutarou, and Suzu, and one kept an eye on Tio. The monsters, on the other hand, kept their distance, and mostly just blocked any potential escape routes the students might try to use.

In short, no one was paying any attention to Yuka or the others. The apostles didn't consider them a threat. And honestly, they weren't wrong. Even on the verge of death, Hajime was far more dangerous a foe than Yuka, Aiko, Liliana, and the other kids combined.

Yuka closed her eyes, her mind racing. Ignoring the sweat running down her eyelids, she desperately tried to find a way to turn the tables. After a few seconds, she came up with a plan. Once she made sure Alva's attention was still fixated on Hajime, she quietly began to move toward Aiko.

"Ah!" Aiko yelped the moment Yuka grabbed her hand. The solid presence of Yuka's hand helped pull Aiko out of her daze.

"Keep your voice down, Ai-chan-sensei," Yuka whispered.

"S-Sonobe-san?"

Given the current circumstances, Aiko was the only one who could save them.

“Sensei, do you have enough mana to cast that one spell you told me about before?”

“Which one?”

Yuka quickly summarized her plan to Aiko. The moment Aiko realized what Yuka wanted to do, her eyes widened in surprise. She stared at Yuka in disbelief. However, when she saw the unwavering determination in Yuka’s eyes, she swallowed her protests.

A second later, she cast away her own doubts and gathered her resolve. As she nodded confidently, Nana and Taeko sidled up to Yuka.

“Y-Yukacchi? I brought Endou over, but...”

“What’re you trying to do, Yuka?”

Kousuke cowered behind them. It looked like they’d noticed the hand signals she’d been giving them while talking to Aiko.

There was no telling when the apostle would turn back and spot them conspiring, so Yuka quickly backed away from Aiko once she was done explaining the plan. Meanwhile, Aiko surreptitiously scooted over toward Liliana.

“Wh-What’s going on, Sonobe?” Kousuke asked timidly.

“Listen up, Endou. There’s something I need you to do.”

She pulled Nana and Taeko close so that they’d hear her plan as well, then started whispering into Kousuke’s ear.

Like Aiko, Kousuke was shocked at first when he heard Yuka’s plan. But his ensuing reaction was nothing like Aiko’s. Looking defeated, he whispered, “Don’t be stupid. There’s no way we can pull that off.”

“We have to try. And you’re the only one who can do this.”

“Y-You’re expecting way too much from me! Remember what happened at the royal palace!? I couldn’t do anything! I was useless! How can I outwit those apostles when I couldn’t even sneak past some demons!?”

“Not so loud!” Nana whispered furiously.

A second later, one of the apostles turned around. Luckily, Yuka and the others had already turned their gazes downward. And in an attempt to sell the deception, Yuka muttered, “Are we really going to die here?”

The apostle spared Yuka a brief glance, then turned back to face Hajime. And as soon as she did, Yuka grabbed Kousuke’s arm.

“I can’t do it... I’m not strong enough...” Kousuke whispered weakly.

“I don’t want to let everything Nagumo’s done for us go to waste.”

“Ah... What do you...?”

Yuka’s words struck a chord with Kousuke. He looked up into Yuka’s eyes, and saw the fear in them. In fact, upon closer inspection, he realized her face was deathly pale and her hands were trembling. And yet, he also saw indomitable resolve that was pushing her to keep going despite her fear.

“I don’t want to let the lives he saved end here. What about you, Endou? Do you really want to give up without a fight?”

“.....”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kousuke spotted Aiko and Liliana speaking to Jugo, Kentarou, and Atsushi. Everyone seemed terrified, but they hadn’t given up. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, thinking back to the time when the knights had entrusted him to call for reinforcements. After escaping by the skin of his teeth, he’d run into Hajime and been saved by him. He then thought back to the night of Meld’s death.

Kousuke had looked up to Meld. The knight captain had been the older brother he’d never had. Honestly, he still hadn’t gotten over Meld’s death. Ever since that night, Kousuke had been drifting aimlessly through life. Thanks to that, when the apostles had raided the royal palace, he’d barely been able to put up a fight. They took him out in a single blow, even. And so, he knew that if he gave up before even trying this time, it would be like a slap in the face to Meld, who’d given his life to protect Kousuke.

Coming to a decision, he opened his eyes and whispered, “I’ll do it.”

The resignation in his eyes had disappeared. For the first time since Meld’s

death, Kousuke hid his presence completely.

Unaware of Yuka's plan, Alva looked triumphantly down at Hajime and crowed, "Heh, I can't believe how docile you are now. Did your mind give out before your body?"

At that exact moment, someone dashed out from the throng of students. One of the apostles reacted immediately, grabbing them by the neck.

"Ngh! Wait, there's something I want to ask you!" Liliana shouted, her face twisting in pain.

Surprised, Alva looked up at the sky to check something.

"Hmm, well, it looks like it'll take a while for all the demons to get transported. Very well, Princess. Seeing as you won't live much longer, I'll indulge you."

Alva waved his hand, and the apostle let go of Liliana. Tio and Shizuku turned to her in surprise.

Liliana cleared her throat and asked in a dignified, regal voice befitting of a princess, "What did Ehit mean when he said this would be the final game? And what was that about looking forward to seeing what other worlds were like? Is he planning on killing all humans?"

"No," Alva replied flatly.

Liliana was taken aback by that response, but only for a moment.

"It's not just all humans. My lord intends to destroy this world itself."

"Ah..."

"In three days' time, he shall summon an invincible army from the Sanctuary. With it, he will slaughter everyone. Humans, beastmen, and all other living creatures. He shall destroy this world in much the same way he turned the western continent into a wasteland in order to gain the mana needed to create the Sanctuary."

"What!? You mean the Grand Gruen Desert was... Ehit's doing?"

None of the history books Liliana had read mentioned that.

Enjoying Liliana's reaction, Alva sneered and replied, "You should be honored, Princess. Your Heiligh Kingdom has been chosen as the hallowed ground zero. Keep your eyes on the Divine Mountain. As soon as the gate at its summit opens, your citizens shall be the first to die at the hands of the god they put their faith in!"

"You're insane... Every last one of you gods is insane."

"I am simply following my lord's will. By stealing the mana from this world, we will finally have enough to transport the Sanctuary to a new one! And then, my lord shall become the one true god of the next world he visits!" Alva cackled, his laughter reverberating throughout the room. After that, he spread his arms wide and looked up at the sky in pure ecstasy.

Shizuku's face stiffened as she realized what that meant. Her friends and family back home would end up suffering the same fate as Tortus. They would become Ehit's playthings until he tired of them and killed them all. She couldn't allow that. But unfortunately, there was nothing she could do. Trembling in rage, Shizuku cursed her powerlessness.

However, there was one thing she'd forgotten. In Shizuku's mind, Aiko had just been someone she had to protect, so she'd forgotten that her teacher was also capable of using ancient magic. Alva was also ostensibly aware of that fact, but she was so weak that he hadn't been paying any attention to her this whole time.

"I won't let that happen!" Aiko shouted, drawing Alva's attention to her.. Blood dripped from her arms, and Aiko had used that blood to draw a complex magic circle on the back of her hands.

"Bring light to the souls who have lost their spark— Soul's Repose!"

Aiko pressed her hands against the floor, her pale pink mana spreading throughout the room. Soul's Repose was a spirit magic spell that removed all negative status effects on its targets.

The pink light suffusing the room signaled the start of the students' counterattack.

"Nice one, Ai-chan-sensei! Suzu, Ryutarou, protect Myu-chan and Remia-san!"

Shizuku shouted.

“But we lost our artifacts!”

“We’ve still gotta try!”

The mental damage caused by seeing their own death, as well as their physical exhaustion, had left Suzu and Ryutarou in a daze, but Aiko’s spell galvanized them into action. A short distance in front of them, Tio had recovered as well.

“He called this power Divine Edict, did he not? I’m impressed you managed to overcome such a powerful suggestion through willpower alone, Shea.”

Smiling ruefully, she rose to her feet. Still partially transformed, she grabbed the wolf golem that had been restraining her with her tail and flung it at Alva.

He casually shot it down with a magic blast, then turned to where Shea previously was. But he only saw a pool of blood under the rubble.

Shea herself was nowhere to be found. But the surprises didn’t stop there.

“Ah! How did you—?” the apostle guarding the students exclaimed, turning around in surprise.

“Eeek!” Kousuke yelped. He had both of Kaori’s claymores in his hands.

The apostle looked down at her waist and saw that the claymores were missing. Unbelievable as it seemed, Kousuke had managed to hide his presence well enough that even an apostle had failed to notice him.

Despite the fact that he was trembling in fear, he showed the same guts he had when he’d fled the Great Orcus Labyrinth, avoiding all the monsters standing in his way.

“Caaatch, Yaegashi!” he roared as he tossed one of the claymores to Shizuku.

“Oh, this is shaping up to be rather entertaining. Take care of them for me,” Alva ordered the apostle.

“As you wish,” she replied, flying forward. She planned to atone for her mistake by slicing Kousuke in half. Her claymore glimmered with a deadly silver light as she swung it down. Kousuke backpedaled as fast as he could, but he

wasn't able to get out of range.

“Hmph!”

“Ah! Shea Haulia!? How many times will you get in our way!?”

Right before the apostle's sword cut through Kousuke, Shea grabbed the remaining claymore from him and blocked the blow. She then pushed the sword back and slipped under the apostle's guard, not giving her enough time to follow up with her second claymore. While the apostle was still off-balance, Shea planted her foot into the ground and elbowed her hard in the stomach. The apostle doubled over as she was sent flying by the force of the blow.



“Your name’s Ayako Tsuji, right? Thanks for healing me! Also, I don’t know your name, but thanks for grabbing this sword off her!”

“Y-You’re welcome,” Ayako, the healer of Nagayama’s party, stammered.

“Um, we’ve met before, you know...?” Kousuke muttered.

He was the one who’d snuck past the apostles and brought Shea back to Ayako so she could heal her.

But of course, his lack of presence was a double-edged sword, as Shea had clearly forgotten their previous meeting.

Regardless, she had more pressing matters than searching her memories for Kousuke’s name.

“Sensei-san, use your spirit magic on Kaori-san!” she shouted.

“O-Okay!”

Shea strengthened her body to the max and charged forward. She plowed through the golem holding Kaori captive without slowing down at all, then continued toward Alva.

Meanwhile, Liliana put up a barrier to try and distract the apostles for a few seconds, while Jugo ran over and brought Kaori back for Aiko and Ayako to work on healing her.

“I’ll keep Alva busy! You guys rescue Hajime-san!”

“Roger!”

“You can count on us!”

One of the apostles guarding Alva moved forward to intercept Shea, but he held out a hand to stop her. He was annoyed by how lightly Shea seemed to be taking him.

“Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Shea screamed as she swung her sword down, taking advantage of the apostles’ lack of action. A massive shockwave rippled across the throne room.

“No rabbitman should be this strong,” Alva mused with a composed expression. Shea’s sword had stopped inches in front of his face thanks to his

light barrier.

“And I’m gonna keep getting stronger, too!” Shea proclaimed as she sliced at the barrier over and over and over. It was impossible to count how many attacks she’d unleashed in the span of a second. She was swinging so fast that the claymore became little more than a silver blur.

“No matter how many times you try, the result won’t cha— Oh?”

“Go to hell!”

Alva didn’t even have time to be surprised. By the time he noticed his barrier was cracking, it was too late. A second later, the sound of shattering glass filled the room as his light barrier crumbled. Seizing the opportunity, Shea leaped forward and aimed a roundhouse kick at his head.

Alva may have been weaker than Ehit, but he was still a god. With uncanny speed, he brought his arm up to block. But he couldn’t absorb the full force of the blow, so Shea’s kick sent him flying straight through the throne and into the wall behind it.

The two apostles who were assigned to guard him prepared to rush Shea, but he stopped them again.

“Don’t bother. I’m going to personally make her suffer for having the gall to kick a god,” Alva stated angrily as he jumped to his feet, blowing aside the rubble that had fallen on him.

In response, Shea rested her claymore on her shoulder and said, “Bring it on.”

There was so much pale blue mana swirling around her that it looked as though she’d just cast Limit Break.

As she charged toward Alva, Tio and Shizuku stared down the two apostles who were keeping them in check. They needed to get past them if they wanted to rescue Hajime.

As the apostles launched their disintegration cannons, the two of them simultaneously cast the same spell.

“Limiter Removal!”

Tio’s clear black mana and Shizuku’s navy blue mana ballooned in size as they

powered themselves up with evolution magic.

Shizuku stayed low to the ground as she dashed forward, ducking under the apostle's disintegration beam.

On the other hand, Tio didn't even bother to dodge and crossed her arms in front of her to block the attack. Her sleeves were destroyed, but the light of incineration failed to harm her flesh, which was protected by her black scales. Her scales were so thick that her arms looked twice their normal size.

Tio had combined evolution and metamorphosis magic with her natural draconic disposition to harden herself far past her natural limit. Her defensive power far exceeded that of anyone else's. Not even the apostles' disintegration powers could pierce her multi-layered scales.

"Shizuku, you need to break through! I'll be your shield!"

"Got it."

Shizuku was already using her unique footwork to slip past the apostle's guard. The apostle desperately tried to follow her movements, but before she knew it, her world had been flipped upside down. Shizuku had managed to grab the apostle's arm and throw her over her shoulder.

As she sailed through the air, the apostle saw Shizuku's claymore heading straight for her neck. It was one of the Yaegashi Style's secret techniques, Mirrored Lightning. Against normal enemies, it guaranteed a kill. Shizuku knew it wouldn't work as well against an apostle, but she was hoping she'd at least be able to deal some decent damage with it. The force of the blow sent the apostle flying, but instead of landing on the ground, she flapped her wings to regain her balance in the air.

A second later, a pebble flew straight at her eyes. It was another one of the Yaegashi Style's techniques, Fang Flight. Shizuku had never possessed much physical strength, but evolution magic had helped boost her parameters significantly. The pebble struck the apostle right in the eye. Shizuku had expected the combination attack to do something at least, but...

"I guess it's not going to be that easy," she muttered.

"Correct," the apostle replied coldly. Her eyes and neck remained unscathed.

There wasn't the slightest indication that Shizuku had inflicted any damage on her.

The apostle flapped her wings once, sending a barrage of silver feathers at Shizuku.

Shizuku ran forward, using her No Tempo to weave her way through the feathers. Occasionally, she used her claymore to block the ones she was unable to dodge.

"Get down!" Tio shouted, unleashing a breath attack at the apostle.

"Ngh!"

Shizuku dived forward and slid across the ground, narrowly avoiding the black breath.

The apostle lazily circled upward, dodging the attack as well. But she was unable to escape Tio's follow-up breath attack and was forced to cross her swords in front of her to block.

Enhanced as it was by evolution magic, Tio's breath was powerful enough to slam the apostle against the wall.

Alas, by helping Shizuku, Tio had left her own apostle free to attack her.

"Tio!"

"Don't worry about me! Focus on rescuing Master. We need to buy enough time for Kaori to recover! That's the only way we can survive this crisis!"

Scales grew to cover her entire body, making Tio look like a human-shaped dragon. She was using metamorphosis magic on herself while under the effects of Limiter Removal. The partial transformation appeared to cause her pain, but Tio was able to use her Pain Conversion to bolster her defenses, allowing her to further resist the apostle's disintegration cannon.

While Tio kept both apostles busy, Shizuku used Supersonic Step to dash past the apostle firing on Tio. It quickly turned its attention to Shizuku and launched a volley of feathers at her, but she grit her teeth against the pain and continued her headlong rush toward Hajime.

However, a second later, another apostle appeared in front of her. Its

stomach was caved in, making it obvious it was the one Shea had blown away a while back. By the time Shizuku's brain registered what was happening, the apostle's sword was already on its way down.

Shit!

"Heaven Crusher!" Suzu's desperate voice called out, and multiple orange, disc-shaped barriers popped up in front of Shizuku, deflecting the blow.

Sweating profusely, Shizuku watched the sword pass by inches from her neck. But there was no time to waste, so she pushed the close shave out of her mind as she resumed her charge.

Though she had no artifacts and was dozens of meters behind her, Suzu had managed to accurately send out barriers to protect Shizuku while also keeping Myu and Remia safe with a Hallowed Ground.

Shizuku had no doubt that Suzu's hands were drenched with blood, since she was using it to draw the magic circles necessary to keep casting. The only way Shizuku could repay Suzu's sacrifice was by fulfilling her mission.

As she slid under the apostle's legs, she launched an upward thrust. And just as she'd anticipated, the apostle used her second sword to block the strike.

"Hah!"

"Ah!"

Having predicted the apostle's move, Shizuku planted one hand on the ground and launched a back kick at the apostle's crotch. She looked like an eagle stretching its talons out toward its prey, except upside-down. Unsurprisingly, the name of the technique she was using was called Reverse Eagle Talon. But Shizuku's foot passed straight through the apostle, making it clear she'd only hit an afterimage. The apostle knocked Shizuku's sword back and circled around behind her for a horizontal swing.

But right before the claymore cleaved her in two, Shizuku made her move.

"Hiyah!"

Using the centrifugal force of her kick, Shizuku did a side flip and leaped over the sword. Still spinning, she used her other leg to launch another kick at the

apostle's head.

This was the follow-up technique to Reverse Eagle Talon, Double Rake. Her second kick connected, sending the apostle tumbling through the air.

The apostle gasped in surprise as she hit the ground.

I can do this! Shizuku thought to herself as she watched Tio suppress the other two apostles out of the corner of her eye. She'd made it past one apostle, and there were no others in her path.

“What!?”

A second later, though, chills ran down her spine and Shizuku reflexively threw herself to the side. A blast of silver light shot past where she'd been, leaving deep gouges in the ground. She'd evaded the first attack, but Shizuku's instincts told her she wasn't in the clear just yet.

As she rolled forward, a claymore thrust at the air inches behind her. She then crawled to the side on all fours, narrowly avoiding a barrage of silver feathers. And as a result, she was forced back to where she'd been minutes before.

The two apostles who had been guarding Alva blocked the path in front of her, and the apostle she'd kicked away waited behind her.

The situation appeared hopeless. But unless she overcame it, she wouldn't be able to rescue Hajime.

He's the first boy I ever fell in love with. And he's saved my life so many times before. I'll gladly go through hell, if that's what it takes to repay my debt to him. So what if I don't have my weapons? So what if I'm up against apostles? That's no reason to give up! This time, it's my turn to save you, Nagumo-kun! Shizuku psyched herself up and glared at the apostles.

If nothing else, she needed to buy enough time for Kaori to recover. Even if she couldn't rescue Hajime, once Kaori was back in commission, they could turn things around. That was how much trust Shizuku had in her best friend.

“Huh?”

The apostle suddenly turned to where Aiko was healing Kaori, as if Shizuku's thoughts had somehow transmitted to her. Then, while moving fast enough to

leave afterimages in her wake, she shot toward Aiko and the students.

“St-Stop right there! If you want to get to her, you’ll have to go through—”

“The two of us are more than enough to handle you.”

The two remaining apostles fired their disintegration cannons at Shizuku. One of them blocked Shizuku’s path, while the other aimed directly for her.

“Don’t allow yourself to get distracted, you fool!” Tio shouted, running toward Shizuku. She used her bruised and battered body as a shield to protect Shizuku from the blast aimed at her. Blood spurted from the new cuts the disintegration cannon caused, but Tio nevertheless successfully extricated Shizuku from the path of the blast.

A second later, thousands of silver feathers rained down on the two of them.

“Ngh! Hallowed Ground!”

Groaning in pain, Suzu immediately created another top-class barrier to protect them. It took a lot out of her to create a second Hallowed Ground dozens of meters away. And she had no artifacts to aid her.

Tio quickly deployed a barrier of her own to reinforce it, but the feathers easily broke down their defenses, so a few punched through and hit Tio directly. She quickly used restoration magic on her damaged scales to keep her vitals intact, but using three types of ancient magic at once taxed her greatly.

Shizuku watched with an anguished expression as Tio grit her teeth against the pain.

Am I so weak that I can’t even slow the apostles down!?

Aside from Hajime and the others, Shizuku was the only one who could use evolution magic. She’d believed that she could at least buy some time, even if Ryutarou and Suzu couldn’t. But it turned out that she was just as powerless as them.

“Don’t give up, Shizuku! You’ve only truly lost the moment your heart gives in!”

“Ngh! I know, I know!”

Holding back her tears, Shizuku waited fervently for a chance she wasn't even sure would appear. No matter what, she wouldn't give up. After all, she knew that was the source of Hajime's strength. Both she and Tio had been attracted to him because of his indomitable spirit.

A second later, Tio and Shizuku's prayers were answered as a new pillar of light shot up from the spot Aiko and the other students rested.

"Get away from my friends!" Kaori shouted, unleashing a disintegration blast at the two apostles.

"Kaori!"

"Shizuku-chan!"

Kaori's strength exceeded that of regular apostles, and thanks to Aiko, she was back in perfect shape.

A few minutes before Kaori revived, Yuka and her party desperately fought to protect Aiko. Fifteen or so of the thirty monsters in the throne room had charged forward to keep her from healing Kaori. Though that was only half their number, they were still a significant threat. Freid had taken all of his gray dragons back with him, but the chimeras he'd left behind still proved to be plenty strong.

"Ayako, transfer your mana to Lily! She needs every drop she can get! If her barrier breaks, we're done for! Mao, you use all your support spells on Lily, too!"

"O-Okay!"

"B-But I've barely got any mana left!"

With tears in their eyes, Ayako and Mao Yoshino poured what little strength they had left into supporting Liliana. Mao's job was Rejuvenist, which specialized in support spells.

"Dammit, these guys heal from petrification in seconds!"

"My illusions don't work on them, either! And any debuffs I cast get removed right away!"

“Saitou, Nakano! You two are mages too, aren’t you!? You’ve gotta help!”

Kentarou, whose Job was Geomancer, kept casting petrification magic on the monsters, but it had little effect. Akito, who was an Illusionist, tried manipulating the monsters into attacking each other, but that failed as well. Meanwhile, Nana, who was a Hydrosophist, fired ice spears one after another to push the monsters back.

The frontline fighters among the students were powerless without their artifacts, and the rearguard mages were forced to draw magic circles with their blood, meaning their spells weren’t as effective as usual.

Still, jobs like Pyromancer and Aerothurge were extremely valuable. However, Yoshiki Saitou, the class’ Pyromancer, and Shinji Nakano, the class’ Aerothurge, simply cowered in terror with the other students who’d holed up in the castle the whole time instead of participating. The deaths of their friends, Daisuke Hiyama and Reichi Kondou, had stripped them of the will to fight.

“Jugo, don’t push yourself too hard!”

“It’s not like I’ve got a choice right now!”

Kousuke and Jugo, the only two frontliners capable of holding their own against the monsters without artifacts, were covered in injuries. Jugo especially, since most of his techniques were based on judo, which required getting up close and personal. Worse, Ayako couldn’t heal them, since she had to focus solely on Liliana.

“Dammit, if only we had our weapons!”

“I know how you feel, but don’t do anything rash. Nagayama’s only still alive because of how tough he is, and Endou can use his stealth skills to stay out of danger. The rest of us would get ripped to shreds if we went out there. Our job is to protect Ai-chan with our lives if any monsters get through!”

“I know, but still!”

Atsushi and Noboru grit their teeth in frustration. Meanwhile, Yuka threw the stones Kentarou made with his earth magic at the monsters to support Jugo and Kousuke. Honestly, she wished Ryutarou and Suzu could come assist, but she knew the two of them had their hands full already.

Suzu was busy protecting Myu and Remia, while also using her barriers to keep Shizuku safe, and Ryutarou was facing off against the five monsters trying to rip Suzu apart.

The last ten monsters still guarded the exits, but there was no telling when they might join the fight.

What's wrong, Nagumo!? Why won't you fight back!? Don't tell me you're already... You better not have gone and died without us! I won't forgive you if you leave us behind!

Right as Yuka started thinking that—

“Shit! This isn't good, Sonobe! She's coming for us!” Kentarou screamed hysterically.

Yuka didn't need to ask who he was talking about. The fear in his voice made it obvious he meant the apostle. He'd learned first-hand how terrifying they could be when one had beaten him senseless back at the palace.

“Nomura, Nana! Focus your attacks on the—” Yuka tried to bark out orders, but before she could finish, a silver flash shot toward the students.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Liliana screamed as the attack pushed against her barrier. She managed to hold out for only a second before it shattered it.

“Sensei!”

The silver flash continued toward Aiko and Kaori, its power undiminished. Taeko tackled the pair, barely pushing them out of the attack's path. A shiver ran down her spine as she watched the blast obliterate the ground where Aiko and Kaori had been mere seconds before.

The students had lost the protection of Liliana's barrier, so both the apostle and the monsters flooded in toward them.

I have to at least save Sensei... or we're done for!

Pushing down the fear that threatened to engulf her, Yuka tried to force her way between Aiko and the apostle. Not even seeing Yuka as a threat, the apostle lazily swung her sword, as if cutting down a weed.

“Not so fast!”

A flash of silver light shot toward the apostle, sending her flying. A second later, countless silver feathers rained down on the monsters, riddling them full of holes.

Kaori had finally been revived.

“Sensei, Yuka-chan, guys, thanks for saving me!”

She had no intention of giving the monsters enough time to heal. While they struggled to recover from the initial barrage, she rained down yet more feathers on them, annihilating them completely.

“Shirasaki-san! I’m going to keep casting Soul’s Repose on you, just in case. It might make it harder for you to fight, but...”

“If it’ll keep them from paralyzing me again, it’s worth it!”

Kaori swept her gaze across the battlefield and picked out the important details. It looked like Hajime had been defeated, Yue was nowhere to be seen, and everyone was heavily injured. The anger she felt when she saw her friends hurt was so great that even Aiko’s Soul’s Repose couldn’t dampen it.

The moment she spotted the apostles bearing down on Shizuku and Tio, she fired her disintegration cannon at them.

Drawing strength from the cheers of Aiko, Yuka, and the other students, Kaori kept on firing until she forced the four apostles attacking Tio and Shizuku to back off.

“Are you two okay!?”

“Don’t give them a moment to rest! If we’re forced on the defensive, we’ll be overwhelmed!” Tio replied. Though she was covered in blood and barely standing, Tio told Kaori to prioritize attacking over healing.

Upon seeing the resolve in her gaze, Kaori nodded immediately and resumed her assault. She launched another disintegration blast at one of the apostles, who countered with a disintegration blast of her own. While the two beams competed for superiority, another apostle closed in on Kaori. However, Kaori refused to be done in so easily.

“I’ll never lose to mere puppets like you!”

As she tried to convince herself she was different from them, Kaori’s silver mana slowly began to take on a light purple tinge. The evolution magic she’d obtained had granted her strength that surpassed other apostles.

Her purplish-white mana pulsed and her disintegration blast overwhelmed that of the apostle’s.

“To think you would surpass us, despite using the body of one of our sisters...” one of the apostles muttered in bewilderment as Kaori’s attack engulfed her.

“Your carelessness will be your undoing!” Tio exclaimed, striking at another one of the apostles that was trying to circle behind Kaori.

“Even if I can’t beat you guys, I can at least distract you!” Shizuku shouted.

“To think a mere human would reach such heights...”

After catching her quarry completely off-guard, Tio managed to drive her scale-covered arm right through the apostle’s chest. She’d wrapped a compressed version of her breath around her arm, granting it far more penetrative power than normal. As she pierced the apostle’s heart, she crushed the mana crystal that powered it. The reason Tio had been able to hit the apostle so easily was because Shizuku had struck from the apostle’s blind spot, distracting it for a moment.

When Tio pulled her arm back, the apostle slumped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. It was well and truly dead.

In the span of a few seconds, Kaori, Shizuku, and Tio had managed to slay two apostles. Considering how unbelievably strong each one was, that was a huge victory.

However, that victory was short-lived.

“Sheesh, what a waste of time. My strength may be a mere fraction of my lord’s, but I am still a god, you know?”

Kaori, Shizuku, and Tio looked toward the source of the voice. They’d been so focused on their own fight that they hadn’t realized Alva and Shea’s had ended.

“Shea!” the three of them shouted simultaneously. Then, they watched as Alva lifted up a powerless Shea by the neck.

Though she still seemed conscious, she lacked the strength to struggle against his grip. Blood pooled at her feet, and it was clear she was on the verge of death.

The three of them were momentarily distracted by Shea’s plight... which proved fatal.

“I order you in the name of Alvaheit— Stop.”

Alva’s Divine Edict ate away at Kaori’s soul. Thanks to Aiko’s Soul’s Repose, Kaori didn’t lose consciousness immediately, but Yuka, Suzu, and the other students all stopped in their tracks. However, his wasn’t as strong as Ehit’s, so even Tio and Shizuku would be able to break free of their own accord, given time.

Unfortunately, the apostles refused to give them even a moment to resist. They created magic circles with their feathers and rained lightning down on the trio. Tio’s scales and Kaori’s apostle body were both highly conductive, so the lightning was exceptionally effective against them.

Alva also tossed Shea into the lightning storm, making doubly sure that she wouldn’t make a comeback.

“I also order you— Accept your punishment.”

The four of them had instinctively started emitting mana to protect themselves, but they stopped upon hearing Alva’s command, screaming as the lightning struck their unprotected flesh. By the time the storm passed, the four of them were twitching weakly, their bodies covered in burns.

That was the reason Shea had lost to Alva. She could fight his Divine Edict. In fact, it only took her a second to break through it. But that second was precious time lost, and slowly but surely, Alva had been able to pile more and more damage onto her.

“Now then. I’ve had my fun, so I suppose it’s about time we wrap things up,” Alva declared. From the looks of it, most of the demons had finished filing through Ehit’s portal.

As Alva looked up at the shining gate leading to the Sanctuary, he dispersed his mana across the room. Dark gold motes of light suffused the air, and a large, complex magic circle began to form on the floor.

“The least I can do to atone for my failures is present your mana to my lord.”

Before he'd left, Ehit had claimed he would steal all the mana in Tortus. Hajime and his comrades possessed an unbelievable quantity of mana, so stealing all of it would probably be enough to make up for Alva's blunder.

Indeed, the reason Alva hadn't killed everyone instantly had been because he'd wanted to give their mana to Ehit. Of course, he'd also wanted to vent his anger against Hajime and the others, as well as kill time while the demons evacuated, but that had been the main reason.

“All of you have extremely high-quality mana. I'm sure my lord will be pleased with this offering. Though... there are a few of you here who are utterly worthless.”

As the magic circle neared completion, Alva's motes of mana started wrapping themselves around everyone. Mana shouldn't have had any physical sensation, but for some reason, Alva's mana felt repulsive to the students.

Smiling, he rested his gaze on Myu and Remia. And with a snap of his fingers, a portal appeared underneath them, teleporting them into the air in front of Alva. They fell unceremoniously to the ground, grunting in pain. It happened so fast that Suzu didn't even have time to react.

Alva snapped his fingers again, and Myu floated up toward him. He must have released his Divine Edict against her, since she was able to shout again.

“M-Mommy!”

“Stop! Release my daughter at— Agh!”

As Myu struggled in vain, Remia tried to reach for her daughter. But the Divine Edict was still working on her, so she couldn't even stand. That being said, she still managed to croak a few words out, as well as move her hand a few inches. It was honestly impressive that a normal person like her had even accomplished that. However, even the strength of a mother's love was worthless in the face of Alva's cruelty.

“You’ll be dead soon, anyway. The least you can do is be useful during your final moments.”

He left Myu hanging in midair and walked over to Hajime, who hadn’t so much as twitched the entire time.

“Behold, Irregular! This is your punishment for defying god!”

Hajime had gotten in the way of Ehit’s games, and then he’d gotten in the way of his descent onto the mortal plane. And so, Alva planned to make him pay for his sins by killing his beloved daughter in front of his eyes.

“Daddy! Daddyyy!” Myu screamed for help, but Hajime remained unmoving. No one else did anything, either.

Shea and Shizuku were too badly injured from the lightning storm to move. Tio and Kaori weren’t in much better shape, either, and they were still struggling to overcome Alva’s Divine Edict. Naturally, everyone else was utterly helpless.

Before long, the magic circle was complete... and everyone felt Alva’s mana draining away their life force. Alva brushed his hand against the back of Myu’s neck, his fingers carrying the promise of death.

“Now, raise your head, Irregular! I know you’re still alive!”

Alva had purposely exempted Hajime from his Divine Edict.

He cackled maniacally, his voice echoing throughout the room. It was then that he noticed his voice was the only sound in the room. Bewildered, he closed his mouth and listened.

Silence reigned. And it felt unnaturally complete, seemingly encompassing more than just sound.

Looking down, Alva realized he couldn’t feel anything at all from Hajime. And there was something terrifying about that. The five apostles restraining him hadn’t let their guard down for even a second, meaning he was undoubtedly alive and conscious, but...

At the same time, Shea and the others felt chills run down their spine. Their instincts screamed at them to run. At first, they thought Alva and the apostles

were up to something, but then they realized that wasn't it. This primal fear was being caused by something else.

"D-Daddy?" Myu whimpered, looking about as scared as everyone else.

Annoyed, Alva signaled to the apostles with his eyes. They nodded, and one of them grabbed Hajime's hair. For a moment, she hesitated, surprising Alva. But then she made up her mind and pulled Hajime's face up.

"Ah!" he gasped. The moment he met Hajime's gaze, Alva instinctively took a step backward. Moreover, for the first time in thousands of years, he made an elementary mistake. He momentarily lost control of his mana. And as a result, Myu broke free from his restraints and dropped to the ground in front of Hajime.

Alva immediately thrust a hand toward her and began recasting the spell to lift her up, but then stopped midway. To his utter surprise, his hand trembled. It trembled in fear. And the source... was Hajime's eye.

Within Hajime's shrunken pupil, he saw... nothingness. His eye was darker than darkness itself... and deeper than the abyss. Alva couldn't sense the tiniest shred of light within it. It was the eye of a true monster. Alva could feel it dragging him in, inviting him to madness. He feared his very existence would be erased if he stared into it for too long.

"K-Kill—" spurred on by an impulse he didn't fully comprehend, Alva tried ordering the apostles to kill him immediately. Hajime was on the verge of death, bereft of all his weapons, and should have had his will completely shattered by the loss of Yue. And yet, Alva felt as though he was more dangerous than ever.

The apostles moved instantly, as if they'd been dying to get permission to kill Hajime. Impossible as it seemed, they too feared him. One of the apostles wreathed her hand with disintegration magic and sliced at Hajime's neck. However, she'd acted too late. Alva had given Hajime far too much time.

The eerie silence that had filled the room vanished. Crimson mana erupted from Hajime's body, looking like a giant torrent of blood. The sight made goosebumps rise on everyone's arms, and it felt as though the gates of hell had suddenly been thrown open.

In a deep, dark, despairing voice, Hajime rasped, “I’ll destroy everything!”

His words were a curse. A curse that rejected this world in its entirety.

Realizing they were in danger, the apostles restraining him suddenly leaped back. But they were too late. There was a strange popping noise, and three of the five apostles were sliced in half. A flash of light later, they were cut into quarters, and after a few more flashes of light, they’d been torn to pieces.

In the span of a few seconds, Hajime had reduced three apostles to ash.

Everyone was stunned speechless. No one had any idea what had just happened.

“Alva-sama, please fall back!”

The remaining two apostles grouped in front of Alva to protect him.

Crimson mana swirled around Hajime. It looked as though he was surrounded by a whirlpool of monster blood. His face was deathly pale, and his expression was more emotionless than the apostles’. Blood still dripped from the open wound on his stomach, and it was a wonder he had any left in his body.

“D-Daddy? Are you okay? You look really— Eeek!”

Hajime’s mana pulsed, knocking Myu away from him. Normally, he would never have treated her so roughly, but right now he didn’t even spare her a glance.

“Fall back, you say? Don’t be ridiculous. Why should a god like me retreat from a human!?” Alva proclaimed, ignoring the apostle’s warning.

Confident in his powers, he glared at Hajime and commanded, “I order you in the name of Alvaheit, kneel befo— Aaaaaaaaagh!”

“Alva-sama!”

Without warning, Alva’s outstretched arm was separated from his body. The dismembered limb sailed through the air, and a second later, it was sliced to ribbons just like the apostles who’d died earlier.

Seeing that, one of the remaining apostles grabbed Alva and tried to flee.

Normally, Alva would have been able to heal a severed limb in no time, the

same way he'd healed from being shot in the head. But at that moment, he looked utterly bewildered. Pain was a signal the body sent the brain to let it know something was wrong. However, most physical damage wasn't actually capable of harming Alva, since he was a god. His body didn't register most wounds as a threat.

That was the first time he'd truly been injured in thousands of years, and it took a moment for him to realize this sensation was pain. The body he inhabited was nothing more than a vessel. If it was damaged, he could just repair it, and if it was destroyed, he could simply move to a new one. Thus, there shouldn't have been anything in this world that could truly harm him. And yet, he was in pain.

“H-How!? What's happening!?”

“He's using superfine threads... no, perhaps it would be more accurate to classify them as chains. Anything that touches one gets severed instantly, then obliterated. No defense seems to protect against it.”

“Wh-What in the world...?”

Once it had been pointed out to him, Alva barely made out the thin chains whirling around Hajime. From the looks of it, he'd transmuted them out of the floor. When he'd lost his arm, a small chain had risen from the floor to slice it.

“What nonsense is this!? If he had an artifact this powerful, why didn't he—?”

Why didn't he use it earlier!? Why did he let Lord Ehit go!?

Questions presented themselves one after another, but Alva didn't have time to ponder any of them. Not that he would ever have even considered the possibility that Hajime had, without any of his magic circles, not only managed to create the chains while pinned to the ground, but had done so without letting anyone sense the flow of his mana.

Alva looked pretty undignified for a god as he scrambled away from Hajime, his jaw still hanging open.

“We do not know the particulars of his new power, but it is clearly a dangerous threat. Alva-sama, please retreat! We'll buy time for—”

“Ah!”

One of the apostles' heads flew off, followed by both of her arms. As her body toppled to the ground, it was sliced to pieces until there was nothing left.

Three other apostles launched a torrent of feathers at Hajime from behind, but he didn't seem the least bit concerned. The attacks all fizzled into nothingness as they drew closer to him.

The crimson light spiraling around him wasn't just mana. His superfine chains were inside it as well, coiling around him like a protective shell.

“Stop him!” the apostle guarding Alva shouted. In response, all the monsters in the room charged at Hajime. They were nothing more than bait to buy time for the other four apostles to find an opening. Moving fast enough to create afterimages, the apostles circled Hajime.

Meanwhile, Alva grit his teeth and attempted to fly up to the portal in the sky.

“Where do you think you're going?” Hajime muttered flatly.

“Wha—? When did you...?”

Countless dark crimson chains rose up from the ground to chase after Alva. If even one of them touched him, it would mean instant death. They overtook him and formed a dome-shaped ceiling to keep him trapped within the throne room. Hajime had created a cage of death around Alva.

The dark golden magic circle that had been draining the students' mana disappeared and the throne room was suffused with crimson light.

“Oh no... This doesn't bode well. Kaori, get them to the floor below!” Tio, who'd finally managed to shake off the effects of Alva's Divine Edict, shouted desperately.

For a second, Kaori didn't understand what Tio was trying to say. But when she followed Tio's gaze and saw Aiko and the others huddling in a group, it clicked.

A shiver of fear ran down her spine, and she also struggled against Alva's Divine Edict to launch a huge barrage of feathers. The feathers whizzed past the apostles battling with Hajime and cut a large circle in the ground around Aiko

and the others. They screamed as their section of the floor fell to the story below, but that saved them from being trapped in Hajime's crimson chain cage.

After making sure they were safe, Kaori turned around and shouted, "Myu-chan, Remia-san!"

She flew over to the two of them and hugged them protectively.

"Kaori-onee-chan, why's Daddy...?"

"What happened to Hajime-san?"

"Don't worry, everything will be just fine."

Kaori forced a smile onto her face to try and reassure Myu and Remia. But she, too, was silently praying for Hajime's safety.

Meanwhile, Tio grabbed Shea and Shizuku, then carried them over to where Suzu and Ryutarou were. As she reached them, another apostle fell to the ground, cut to pieces along with her claymore. The whole time, the monsters were being slaughtered in droves as they rushed Hajime.

"Wh-What's happening!?"

"What's gotten into Nagumo!?"

Suzu and Ryutarou both looked bewildered.

Standing protectively over them, Tio narrowed her eyes and explained, "Master is likely using concept magic."

However, that only served to deepen Suzu and Ryutarou's confusion.

"B-But I thought he could only use concept magic when he was with Yue-san?"

"Yeah. Didn't you say he'd need a desire as strong as his wish to go home to use concept magic again, Tio-san!?"

"It is precisely because he lost Yue that he managed to reach this level. You heard what he said as well, did you not?"

The two of them stared blankly at her for a second, then shivered in fear as they realized what concept Hajime must have actualized.

His bottomless rage at having lost Yue had coalesced into an overwhelming apathy. What value was there in a world devoid of his beloved? What reason was there to continue existing in a world without Yue? In Hajime's mind, there was none. He wouldn't forgive this world for stealing Yue away from him. Nor would he accept the existence of such a world.

That was why he'd been able to cast concept magic that erased the very existence of everything his chains touched. Hope had driven him to create the Crystal Key, but the complete opposite feeling, despair, fueled his current concept magic.

Sorrow colored Suzu and Ryutarou's expressions as they realized just how deep Hajime's anguish ran.

"I suspect anything those chains touch will be removed from existence. Unfortunately, I lack the strength to evacuate you to the floor below with the others. Do not stray from my side no matter what."

Tio's conjecture was right on the mark. Hajime's concept magic was based on evolution magic's ability to manipulate information. Specifically, anything the chains touched had the information that made up their existence overwritten. In the eyes of the world, they went from "exists" to "doesn't exist."

It looked as though the chains were cutting through things, but in truth, anything they touched had its existence erased.

It was little wonder that Alva was afraid of them. Hajime's erasure was so absolute that even restoration magic couldn't fix the wounds it caused. Alva realized that on an instinctual level, which was why the chains terrified him so.

While Tio was explaining things to Suzu and Ryutarou, the fight came to an end.

"Alva-sama, I'm sorry we failed y—" the final apostle muttered as she was erased from existence. It was strange to see the apostles, Ehit's strongest soldiers, taken down one after another like they were nothing.

There was no physical way out for Alva. Hajime's chains had already covered every inch of the throne room. Therefore, his only hope was to teleport out with spatial magic. He fired blasts of mana at Hajime while he attempted to

open a portal.

“Dammit!”

However, Hajime just sent one of his chains at the portal Alva opened, destroying it.

The remaining few monsters ignored the attack order they’d been given and started to flee. But there was no escape, and Hajime made short work of them as well.

Alva was the only one left standing.

Impossible... This can't be happening! That power of his is far too dangerous. I must find a way to escape and report this to my lord!

Alva put as much distance between him and Hajime as possible.

Those chains are more than just an affront to Lord Ehit, they're an affront to all of creation... he thought, fear etched all over his face.

The only way out is if I... Alva’s thoughts solidified as he glanced over at Myu. He needed a hostage if he wished to survive. If he could make Hajime hesitate for even a second, he’d be able to summon a portal and escape.

“You damned heathen!” Alva screamed as he unleashed his strongest spell. A blast of lightning so powerful it even damaged the caster shot toward Hajime.

Blinding white light filled the room, followed by a deafening roar.

Alva dashed toward Myu while Hajime was ostensibly occupied, but—

“Huh? Aaaaaaaaah!”

The moment he stepped forward, his remaining arm and both his legs were lopped off. The ease with which he’d been dismembered was astounding.

Alva tumbled to the ground, his screams echoing through the throne room. He hadn’t felt pain in so long that he had little resistance to it, and he couldn’t magically numb it, either. The reason for that was because each time Hajime cut off a part of Alva’s body, he also cut off a part of his soul.

Delirious from the pain and hovering on the edge of unconsciousness, Alva screamed in a trembling, panicked voice, “W-W-W-Wait! Please, wait! Wh-

What do you want? I can grant any desire you wish! I'll even negotiate with my lord if that's what it takes! I know Lord Ehit will listen to me. You can... You can even have the world if you want! I'll tell him to give you the right to rule this world however you please! So please, spare my life!"

Alva begged for his life, but Hajime didn't stop walking forward. He'd become the incarnation of death, and not even gods were safe from the reaper's scythe.

Hajime looked down at Alva, and the god shivered at the vast emptiness in Hajime's eye. For the first time in his long life, he felt true fear.

His mind went blank, and he could only stare absently as the chains closed in on him from all sides. None of the dignified grace he'd had earlier was present, and he looked more like a zoo animal than a god as he watched his spherical cage slowly constrict around him.

The chains that made up the cage began sliding past each other, making it look as though the sphere was rotating as it shrunk.

It was clear that Hajime planned to slowly grind him away into nothingness. As he imagined what it would feel like to have his soul shaved away little by little, he finally snapped.

"I'll pledge myself in service to you. You'll be my new lord! I swear I can be useful! So please, I'm begging you!"

His fear of death overrode his pride as a god, and he started groveling. Right before the chains touched him, Hajime stopped shrinking the cage and looked down at Alva.

"Do you want to live that badly?"

"Huh?"

Hajime's voice sounded cold and robotic.

Normally, Alva would have realized Hajime had no intention of sparing him, no matter what he said. He'd toyed with thousands of people the same way Hajime was toying with him now. But he was too desperate to notice.

"Y-Yeah, I do. I don't want to die."

"I see..."

Again, Alva failed to notice the utter disinterest in Hajime's voice. Convinced that he'd been saved, Alva smiled in relief.

Tio and the others almost pitied him. It was clear to everyone else that Alva's fate had long since been sealed.

"Then die."

"Huh? Wh-Why!? No, stop—
Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahg!"

The cage contracted excruciatingly slowly, torturing Alva as it annihilated him.

No one said a word as Hajime carried out his sadistic execution. Being eaten alive by one of Yue's dragons was surely a better fate than this.

Unable to bear watching any longer, everyone averted their gaze. Eventually, Alva's screams faded away, and one of Tortus' gods was dead.

"Hajime-kun!"

"Master!"

Kaori and Tio ran over to Hajime as the chains that had crushed Alva and the chains covering the room began to vanish. However, Hajime didn't turn their way. Looking as though he hadn't heard them at all, he cast his gaze up toward the portal Ehit had opened.

A second later, a few chains gathered around him, and Hajime leaped up toward it. The only thing he was interested in was getting through it and into the Sanctuary.

There were still demons filtering through it, riding on the backs of large eagle-shaped monsters. From the looks of it, only fifty or so remained. Half were demon soldiers who served as the rearguard for this mass migration, and the rest were women, children, and the elderly.

"Hm? Wh-What's that?" one of the demons muttered, looking down at the palace.

"Isn't that...?" another whispered.

They saw a small streak of dark crimson shooting up toward them like a

meteor. It only took them a second to realize that it wasn't a demon, and they quickly started shooting magic at it.

Because they kept their incantations short, they were only able to fire basic spells like ice spears and fireballs at Hajime. Naturally, such weak magic posed no threat to him, and a single swing of his existence-erasing chains was enough to annihilate the spells.

“What the!?”

“S-Stop right there!”

A few of the soldiers turned their eagles around to block Hajime. However, he barely took notice of them as he plowed forward. The three soldiers and their eagles were erased instantly, and Hajime's speed didn't even drop.

The demons stared on in shock as their comrades were sliced to pieces. No one else moved forward to stop Hajime as he charged toward the gate.

However—

“Uwooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

The gate pulsed as soon as Hajime reached it, blocking him from accessing the Sanctuary.

No matter how loudly he screamed, no matter how much mana he threw at it, no matter how hard he beat against it with his fist, the gate refused to let him in.

He debated trying to pierce through the barrier with his chains, but he was worried they might destroy the gate entirely if he did. That being said, it was clear Ehit had designed the gate to only let those he wanted through.

“Fool. Only us demons, the chosen race, are allowed into Lord Ehit's divine Sanctuary!”

“Stop wasting your time and accept your punishment, you damned heretic!”

All of the demons, even the women and children, started raining magic down on Hajime. He didn't even try to block the attacks, and his back was soon covered in cuts and burns.

His attention was focused solely on the gate. Nothing else mattered at all.

“Let me through! Let me throuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh!”

The demons faltered, shocked that Hajime would continue charging mindlessly at the gate despite how badly they’d injured him.

A second later, though, their shock turned to anger as the gate began to dim.

“You damned monster! Because of you, the gate’s closing!”

“H-Hurry! We need to get through before it closes for good!”

The demons started rushing the gate. As they charged forward, they rained down even more powerful magic on Hajime in an attempt to kill him.

“Master! What are you doing!? Do you have a death wish!?”

However, Tio caught up to them just in time and blocked the magic with a combination of her scales and a magic barrier.

A second later, the galaxy-shaped gate faded away into nothingness.

For a moment, silence reigned, but then the demons’ wrath returned in full force. They began chanting incantations for higher-level spells, though Hajime ignored them completely. He just stared blankly at the spot where the gate had been a second ago, looking defeated.

“Blast! We should escape for now, Master!”

Tearing up at the look of abject despair on Hajime’s face, Tio slung him over her shoulder and descended back to the palace. She treasured Yue as well, so she understood all too well how Hajime felt. Indeed, the loss of Yue had left a gaping hole in her heart. But right now, Hajime was on the verge of death. In fact, it was a miracle he hadn’t died already, so there wasn’t a moment to waste.

She understood how strong Hajime’s desire to save Yue was, however, she also knew that if she didn’t get him treated right away, he really would die.

“Master, please, you need to think of your own well-being first!”

Noticing that Hajime had swapped his attention to the demons chasing after them, Tio grit her teeth and tried to get through to him. He didn’t reply, but she

nevertheless continued flying toward the throne room where Kaori waited.

“Hajime-kun, Tio!” Kaori shouted, running over the moment Tio landed.

Looking around, Tio saw that Kaori had already finished healing Shea, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou. Aiko and the others had made it back to the throne room, while Remia and Myu remained by Kaori’s side.

Though Kaori had wanted to chase after Hajime the moment he’d left, she’d controlled her impulses and focused on healing Shea and the others first. That way, everyone would get the chance to go after him together. But in the end, it turned out there was no need to chase him, since Tio had brought him back.

Tio’s knees buckled as she hit the ground. She’d been badly injured, but she’d still chased after Hajime because she knew someone had to be by his side. Unfortunately, her draconic endurance had given out at last, and she was at her limits.

“Ngh, I’ll be fine! Heal Master first!”

Despite her injuries, Tio implored Kaori to focus on Hajime. For his part, Hajime simply stood silently next to Tio, his mana still raging as fiercely as before.

“Hajime-kun, please stop burning so much mana! If you keep this up, you’ll actually die!”

Concept magic required unbelievable amounts of mana to cast, and Hajime was still under the effects of the Limit Break he’d used. Even if Kaori healed his physical wounds, if he didn’t calm down, he’d die from mana overuse.

Sadly, Hajime failed to respond yet again. His gaze remained fixed firmly upward.

Despite feeling dismayed that her words hadn’t gotten through to him, Kaori grit her teeth and started casting restoration magic on him. However, she was interrupted as a number of figures blotted out the sun, casting dark shadows over everyone.

“An apostle!? I didn’t realize any were still left on Tortus!”

“Oh, thank goodness! I was worried we were trapped here for a moment!”

“Wait, there are humans... and even beastmen with her? Well, no matter. O great apostle, please pass judgment on these heretics and guide us to Lord Ehit’s promised land!”

The twenty demon soldiers and thirty civilians slowly descended into the throne room.

“I won’t let you lay a finger on anyone!”

“Everyone, get behind us!”

“It’s just one problem after another.”

Kaori, Shea, and Shizuku warily eyed the demons as they stepped protectively in front of the others, but it seemed there wouldn’t be any need to fight.

Before anyone could react, all of the eagle monsters’ heads went flying. The demons then tumbled off the monsters’ corpses, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

The soldiers managed to land on their feet, but that wasn’t enough to save them. The person who’d told Kaori to kill everyone was cut to ribbons the moment he landed, and blood spurted out of his dismembered body.

The other soldiers didn’t even have time to ask what had just happened before Hajime annihilated them as well with his chains.

There were a lot less of them than there originally were, and they weren’t completely destroying the demons like they had the apostles. Instead, chunks of blood and flesh remained, making the scene look far more gruesome than before. Nana, Taeko, and many other students screamed at the horrific sight. Others went pale-faced and started throwing up.

Eventually, the surviving demons realized it was Hajime who was killing them, and they angrily turned to him.

“Ah...”

But the moment they saw his eye, they let out terrified gasps and staggered backward. Their courage left them, and they lost any desire to fight.

“R-Run! We have to get out of the castle, or—” the final soldier shouted before Hajime parted his head from his body.

Hajime's glowing, dark crimson chains looked like the heads of a hydra. Like a deer in headlights, the demons could only stare blankly at the wriggling chains that held the touch of death.

"Die," Hajime whispered. Though his voice sounded soft, all of the demons clearly heard the curse he cast upon them.

"L-Lady Apostle! Please save us!" an old man wearing luxurious robes shouted to Kaori. Judging by his clothes, he was a noble of some sort, and he was standing protectively in front of an old woman who was likely his wife. His voice snapped Kaori out of her reverie.

"H-Hajime-kun..." she muttered, reaching out a hand to stop him.

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Unfortunately, before she could say anything more, the old demon lady let out a blood-curdling scream. Hajime had just decapitated the old demon. And before his head even hit the ground, it was chopped to pieces and removed from existence.

"S-Stop! Hajime-kun!"

"Hajime-san, these people are no longer our ene—"

"All of you, surrender! Get on your knees and put your hands in the air!"

All demons possessed enough magic to fight, but these people were civilians. Though they considered Hajime a hateful heretic, they'd lost the will to fight the moment the soldiers and monsters had been defeated.

Kaori and Shea stepped forward to restrain Hajime, while Shizuku implored the demons to show they had no intention of fighting.

While they talked, the old woman's screams vanished, along with the rest of her. A young man filled with righteous fury stepped forward to take revenge, but he too was cut in half and turned into a puddle of blood.

"W-We surrender!" a young father stepped in front of his child and dropped to his knees, admitting defeat. The others followed suit, falling to their knees and putting their hands into the air.

They were fanatical followers of Alva and elitists who believed they were the

chosen race, but they bowed down in front of a human all the same. That showed just how terrifying Hajime seemed to them. However, even their surrender wasn't enough to appease Hajime. There was a sickening thud as a middle-aged man at the edge of the group was sliced in half and his body hit the ground. His face showed a mixture of surprise and despair as the light vanished from his eye.

“Wh-Why...?” one of the demons whispered in anguish. The dead man's wife stared at his corpse in horror until seconds later, she joined him in death.

Hajime had no intention of stopping just because the demons had surrendered. And that shouldn't have come as a surprise, considering that the impetus driving him forward was “I'll destroy everything.”

In that moment, nothing in the world had any value to Hajime. Or at least, he'd convinced himself of that fact. Whatever the case, he wasn't interested in taking prisoners, and the mere existence of these demons was an eyesore. He had no compunctions about slaughtering anyone and everyone that appeared before him.

The demons began to despair. Kaori, Aiko, and everyone else was stunned speechless by his display of brutality. They all wanted to stop him, but they weren't sure how to get through to him in his current state.

Hajime looked down at the man who'd first announced his surrender. Or rather, he looked down at the child clinging to the man's legs. And upon realizing his son was the next target, the man turned around and hugged him.

Shea, Kaori, Shizuku, Tio, Aiko, and Liliana all sprinted forward to restrain Hajime, but a certain someone got there before all of them.

“Stop it, Daddy! Go back to the usual Daddy!”

Myu barred his path. She stepped between Hajime and the two demons and spread her arms out wide. There were tears in her eyes, and she was trembling in fear. Her expression looked as stiff as a board, but the determination in her eyes was unwavering.

“Move,” Hajime said in a voice as cold as ice. He had never spoken in such a tone to Myu, so her heart felt like it was being gouged out with a rusty spoon.

She wanted to curl up and start crying, but she remained strong.

“I-I won’t!”

No matter what happened, Myu wouldn’t budge. She couldn’t allow her beloved daddy to kill these people. Not only because it was wrong, but because she couldn’t bear to see him take his suffering out on others.

There was no way she could sit back and do nothing when he was in so much pain. Myu kept her eyes locked on Hajime and slowly worked her facial muscles into a smile. Tears still spilled down her cheeks, and her smile looked unbelievably stiff. But even so, no one would disparage that smile. Everyone knew who Myu was trying to emulate. After all, it was the same fearless smile Hajime made when he was up against unbeatable odds.

Myu idolized that smile, just as she idolized the person who’d taught it to her.

“My daddy isn’t this lame! The real you is way cooler than this! And way stronger!”

Everyone watched Myu with bated breath. She looked as gallant as a storybook hero, standing up to Hajime without backing down an inch.

The small hero stared down the monster of the abyss, and even the demons were moved by her unbreakable will.

“I won’t lose to you when you’re like this. Right now, even I’m stronger than you, Daddy!”

Myu was determined to get the Hajime she knew and loved back. She wasn’t going to let him keep looking at her with that dead, defeated eye. She’d grab his hand and stop him before he went so far he couldn’t turn back. Myu looked directly into Hajime’s empty eye, something that even Alva had shrunk away from doing, her gaze unflinching.

“Ah...”

After a few seconds, she finally elicited a reaction from Hajime. No one else’s words had been able to reach him, but thanks to Myu, Hajime’s expression changed for the first time since Yue’s disappearance. His mouth curled into a frown, signaling his defeat. But as always, Hajime refused to give up.

“I won’t say it a third time. Move.”

“Hajime-kun,” Kaori said, walking resolutely up to him. Then, she grabbed him by the shoulder, wheeling him around.

Giving him a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, she commanded, “Grit your teeth for a second.”

“Agh!”

She’d punched him in the face with all her might. Hajime somersaulted through the air and fell to the ground, turning into a crumpled heap. He managed to struggle back to his knees, but he no longer had the strength left to stand.

Kaori looked down at him, her expression a mixture of sadness and anger.

“Wake up already, Hajime-kun! How long do you plan to sit there, wallowing in misery and self-pity!?”

“Ngh...”

“Do you have any idea how pathetic you look, taking your anger at losing Yue out on Myu-chan, your own daughter!? What would Yue say if she saw you now? Actually, I guess you don’t care, since you’ve already given up on getting her back, huh?”

Surprise colored Hajime’s eye. He opened his mouth to retort, but Kaori spoke first, stopping him.

“I heard what you said loud and clear. ‘I’ll destroy everything.’ I bet you thought a world without Yue was worthless, didn’t you? But that means you’d already given up on ever getting to see her again! You decided to destroy everything because you’d given up on getting her back!”

“.....”

Light slowly returned to Hajime’s eye as he regained his senses. The dark crimson glow of the chains surrounding the demons began to fade. And as it did, the blood-colored mana turned brighter and more vibrant.

Kaori squatted down in front of Hajime and said in a determined voice, “I’m going to go rescue Yue. I’ll bring her back, no matter what it takes. What about

you, Hajime-kun? What are you going to do? Sit here and execute every single one of these demons who've already surrendered? Have you really given up on Yue? *Can* you give up on her?"

"...Hell no," after a long silence, Hajime finally answered her question.

Kaori gave him a stern glance, while Myu still glared at him from behind. Their clear gazes were like a gust of fresh wind, clearing out all the negative emotions that had been piling up in Hajime's mind.

A moment later, he felt an impact on the top of his head. Turning around, he saw Shea standing over him, an angry frown on her face.

"You can show us your uncool side, but when you're in front of Myu, you've gotta be the amazing dad she thinks you are. This is your punishment for making her cry!"

"I can't argue with that..." Hajime muttered, accepting Shea's scolding. His chains crumbled away, and his mana stopped swirling around him.

"Don't think you will be able to escape my punishment, either."

"And this is from me."

Tio and Shizuku punched Hajime as well. Both of them looked deeply relieved to see Hajime turn back to normal. He scratched his head awkwardly, thinking back to how defeatist the concept magic he'd cast earlier was.

"Sorry... I almost crossed a dangerous line back there."

"There's no need to apologize, Master. Everyone loses themselves in anger sometimes. Besides, even if you weren't conscious of it, you made sure to keep your chains away from us."

"Come to think of it, was the reason you protected all of us because you knew Nagumo-kun wouldn't attack us if you were there?" Shizuku asked thoughtfully.

"Who can say," Tio replied evasively, and Shizuku shot her a glare.

In truth, Shizuku's guess was correct. Tio had believed that no matter how enraged he got, Hajime would never try to erase the people he cared about. Though, the only people she was confident he truly cared about were herself, Shea, Kaori, Myu, and Remia.

She'd suspected he cared about Shizuku and Aiko a decent amount as well, but she wasn't certain he'd avoid harming Suzu, Ryutarou, Liliana, Yuka, or any of the other students. That was why she'd had Kaori evacuate the students, and protected Suzu, Ryutarou, and Shizuku herself. The reason she'd had Kaori protect Myu and Remia wasn't to keep them safe from Hajime, but to prevent Alva from taking them hostage.

In fact, Myu had been the closest to Hajime at that time, yet she'd come out unscathed. His mana had blown her away, but that was all.

Suzu, Aiko, Yuka, and Liliana all seemed unsure how to react to the fact that Hajime didn't care about them enough to spare their lives, but they too were glad that he had returned to normal.

Kaori cupped Hajime's face in her hands and looked into his eye. Her expression was unbelievably gentle, a stark contrast to the angry look she'd been giving him seconds before.

"It's not like this is over, right?"

"Yeah. It's like you said."

"You're not alone, Hajime-kun. You've got us with you, and most importantly, you've got Yue. She might not be here physically, but she's here in spirit. I bet... no, I'm certain that she's still fighting Ehit so that she can return to you. I mean, it's Yue we're talking about here. There's no way she'd lose to some shitty god."

"Yeah, you're right. She saved us when Ehit was about to kill us, so she's probably still messing with him."

"Exactly. No one's as good at bullying people as Yue."

"You do know that the only person she bullies is you, right?"

Hajime and Kaori smiled at each other, and after that, he finally let the tension drain from his body.

He then cast his gaze over everyone else and said in a sincere tone, "I'm sorry."

Once that was done, he turned back to Myu, who'd been waiting eagerly for her turn. As their eyes locked, Hajime thought about apologizing to her as well,

but then realized there was something more fitting he could say.

“Myu.”

“Daddy...”

After a brief pause, Hajime continued in a voice laden with emotion, saying, “Thank you.”

He gave Myu the kindest, gentlest smile he could. Hajime was honestly proud that a girl as strong as Myu looked up to him like a father.

When she saw that smile, Myu burst into tears of joy.

“Daddy!” she exclaimed as she ran into Hajime’s arms, relieved that the father she knew and loved had returned.

“W-Wait, Myu, I— Gah!”

She dove into his chest with all her might, delivering a blow more powerful than even Ehit’s. Drained well past his limits, Hajime fell backward and slammed his head against the ground.

“Oh, shit...”

The tiny hero had saved the monster of the abyss, and she also finished him off. Myu hadn’t been kidding when she said she’d be able to beat Hajime in his current form. Like Hajime, she made good on all her promises.

After receiving such a decisive blow, Hajime’s eyes rolled up into the back of his head and he lost consciousness.

A second later, Myu looked down at him and shouted, “Daddy? Daddy!? Open your eyes, Daddy! You’ll die if you sleep!”

“M-Myu, stop hitting Hajime-san!”

Shea rushed forward to stop Myu, who kept slapping Hajime’s face.

“Oh no, Hajime-san’s not breathing!”

“This isn’t good! His pulse is growing weaker... Wait, it just stopped.”

“Kaoriiiiii, hurry up and use restoration magic on him!”

“On it! Tetragrammaton! Wait... his wounds are healing, but his heart still

isn't beating? Is he dead!? Did I heal him too late!?"

"Awaawawawaa! Calm down, Shirasaki-san! We need someone who can use spirit magic!"

"You need to calm down too, Ai-chan-sensei! You can use spirit magic, remember!?"

"Sh-Should I kiss him!? I read in a book that princesses wake up when a prince kisses them! If that's true, the opposite should work as well, right!? I'm a princess, so maybe I can save him!"

Despite the severity of the crisis, none of them seemed to feel much of a sense of urgency.

Meanwhile, one of the demons muttered, "Umm... what should we do now?"

They were scared of what might happen to them if they tried to run, but also scared of staying. Still, at least if they stayed, the tiny hero would protect them.

They tried to grab Kaori and the others' attention, but naturally, no one paid them any mind. Resigned, they decided to wait for the commotion to die down.

Chapter III: An Instigator Worse than God

Hajime felt himself sink to the bottom of a deep, dark ocean. As he descended, he heard a group of familiar voices break the deathly silence.

“Da— do— die!”

“Haji—!”

“Open your— Hajime—!”

Desperate voices sent powerful ripples through the ocean. And something in the back of his mind told Hajime he needed to answer them. The compulsion grew stronger by the second, but his body felt like lead. Even moving proved to be a herculean effort, and it seemed easier to just lay back and let himself sink.

Is that... a warm light?

Sunlight filtered into the dark water, bringing with it an all-encompassing warmth. The moment it touched him, Hajime felt reinvigorated, and he was able to beat back the drowsiness that had crept up on him. His consciousness rapidly floated to the surface, and—

“Daddy!”

“Hajime-san!”

“Hajime-kun!”

“Master!”

“Nagumo-kun!”

Hajime opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was four beautiful women and one cute girl staring down at him.

Myu, Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Shizuku. There were tears in their eyes, and relieved smiles on their faces. Hajime knew just how worried they must have been, and so, he smiled apologetically at them.



“Sorry for making you worry. I didn’t realize I was that close to death... Guess that warm light must have been Kaori’s restoration magic. Thanks.”

“Your heart stopped for a few minutes, so I thought... that you were... Thank goodness you’re alive!”

“W-Wait, my heart stopped? Damn, then I really would’ve been a goner without you.”

Kaori broke down in tears, which prompted Shizuku to gently hug her.

“You were actually dead for a few minutes there, you know that? Tio had to use spirit magic to keep your soul bound to your body,” Shizuku explained, her face still pale.

Shea sidled closer and helped Hajime struggle into a sitting position. As he got up, he realized there was a crowd of people standing behind her and the others.

Suzu, Ryutarou, Aiko, Liliana, Yuka, and Remia all stared at him. They, too, looked immensely relieved.

Was I really in that bad shape? Hajime wondered as he shot Tio a questioning glance.

“You had taken so much damage that I could barely attach your soul to your body. For a moment, I was terrified I’d acted too late. It was the scariest moment of my five-hundred-year long life.”

“Seriously?”

Hajime had continued using Limit Break for so long that the recoil had caused damage to his soul as well as his body. He’d been so weakened that even his soul had been on the verge of death.

“You have your teacher to thank for saving your life. She cast spirit magic to repair your soul while I kept it from leaving your body. If Kaori, Sensei, and I weren’t all here, we would have failed to save you.”

Tio shook her head, driving that what-if scenario out of her mind. In response, Hajime took her hand into his own and silently expressed his gratitude. He then turned to Aiko, who was watching him with tears in her eyes.

“I owe you big-time, Sensei.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I’m just glad you’re still alive, Nagumo-kun... That’s more than enough for me.”

“Man, do you have any idea how worried we were, Nagumo!? Ai-chan-sensei didn’t help because she wanted to get any favors out of you or anything!” Yuka shouted as Aiko buried her face in her hands. Tears streamed down her face as well, making it clear that she wasn’t actually mad.

Nana and Taeko glared at Hajime and grumbled, “You need more tact, Nagumocchi!” “Yeah, girls are delicate creatures!”

“I can’t believe you, Hajime-san! What would I say to Yue-san if something happened to you!?”

“Shea...”

Shea punched Hajime on the shoulder. She looked uncharacteristically down. Even her bunny ears were drooping. That was surely a sign of just how close to death Hajime had been.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the guy who can walk out of any situation alive, no matter how desperate? At least, that’s who you are to me, Nagumo-kun, so please don’t betray my trust in you,” Shizuku said with a small smile. Though her smile was genuine, her hands were still shaking.

Hajime was once again reminded of how much Shea and the others cared about him. Disgusted by how pathetic he’d been acting, he shook his head.

He had almost betrayed everyone’s trust in him. Yue, Shea, Tio, Kaori, and everyone else had done so much to help him regain his humanity after he’d dropped into the abyss, but he’d almost thrown it away.

Hajime looked at each of his comrades, meeting their gazes one by one.

“I’m really sorry for making you guys worry. Thanks for saving me, guys.”

When he’d left the abyss with Yue, he’d assumed the two of them would be fighting against the world all alone. But before he knew it, he’d been surrounded by people who cared for him and were willing to fight by his side. And so, he couldn’t afford to lose again. Not just to his enemies, but most

importantly to himself.

Looking up at the sky, Hajime swore that he would never give up again. Yue was waiting for him somewhere up there, after all.

Shea and Kaori felt simultaneously relieved and a little sad as they looked at his expression. Unable to bear the silence, they tried to call out to him, but Myu beat them to the punch.

“I’m sorry, Daddy... Are you okay now?” she asked hesitantly while sitting in Remia’s arms. It appeared she thought she was responsible for nearly killing Hajime with her tackle. Her eyes had turned red from crying, and her expression was still full of worry.

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for, Myu. You didn’t do anything wrong. Thanks again for stopping me. You really are stronger than me now.”

Hajime held a hand out to Myu, his expression exceedingly gentle. Ryutarou and the other male students were shocked that Hajime could even make an expression so kind, while Yuka and the girls blushed slightly.

Myu wriggled out of Remia’s arms, ran toward Hajime, and replied, “Hehehe... That’s because I’m your daughter!”

She hopped onto Hajime’s lap and buried her head in his chest, then nestled against him, smiling happily.

Hajime patted her emerald-green hair and looked up at Remia with an apologetic expression. Remia could tell what he was about to say and just as he opened his mouth, she cut him off.

“I told you before, you have nothing to apologize for, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, I guess you did...”

Remia refused to let Hajime apologize for getting her and Myu wrapped up in this mess. Because there was nothing to apologize for. It was only natural for a mother to want to keep her daughter safe. But Remia knew how happy Myu was with Hajime, and she didn’t want to deprive Myu of that happiness. Besides, she knew now that Ehit would eventually have tried to kill her and Myu even if they hadn’t been involved with Hajime. Most importantly, she was

proud of Myu for standing up to Hajime. She couldn't see herself and Myu as just victims anymore.

Hajime picked up on the implied meaning of her words and raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think there's any other kid out there as strong and kind as Myu. I bet even god wouldn't stand a chance against her. Remia, your daughter's the strongest girl in the world."

"Fufufu. Oh, I know. She has the world's coolest father, after all," Remia said that and smiled, blushing.

An amicable silence followed as everyone began to calm down. After a few seconds, though, Kaori and Shizuku exchanged troubled glances.

"Umm, Remia-san? Could you get away from Hajime-kun now? Pretty please?" Kaori asked with a menacing glare.

"Y-Yes, stop sticking so close to him..." Shizuku muttered awkwardly.

Emboldened by Kaori and Shizuku's words, Aiko and Yuka decided to voice their complaints as well.

"Why does it look like they're the perfect family? It's not fair..."

"Do they have to do this in front of all of us? It's so awkward to watch..."

Hajime, Remia, and Myu did indeed look like the embodiment of an ideal family.

"Oh my. Does it really look that way to everyone, Darling?"

"Don't you get started too."

Tio and Shea shivered as they glanced at Remia.

"R-Remia truly is unbelievable. Even my dragon eyes cannot tell if she is in love with Master or simply teasing him. That smile is unfathomable."

"I-I should say something, right!? As Hajime-san's girlfriend, I need to protect him! What if she tries to sneak in a kiss while no one's paying attention like Liliana did!?"

"What!? I didn't try to 'sneak' in anything! I just wanted to help save his life! I

didn't think it'd be nice to experience being a storybook princess or anything!"

"You're digging your own grave, Princess. Anyway, what the hell did you try to do to me while I was unconscious?"

"Sheesh, you really love romance novels, don't you, Lily? Don't worry, Hajime-kun. If you want a kiss, I'm always here!"

"That's not making me any less worried..."

Kaori tried to go in for a kiss, which prompted Shea to do the same.

Hajime could tell everyone was forcing themselves to try and act cheerful, though. There was a hollowness in their words and actions that was hard to miss.

The reason for that was obvious. A key member of their party was still missing. Kaori's rival, Shea's best friend and mentor, Tio's irreplaceable comrade and fellow magic aficionado, and Hajime's beloved, Yue wasn't among them. Hajime wasn't the only one who missed her.

Now that the immediate threat had passed, the loneliness brought about by her absence was beginning to set in. Everyone avoided saying her name. They joked around to keep themselves from thinking about the fact that she was gone. Those who weren't particularly close to Yue didn't say anything out of consideration for those who were.

Indeed, Jugo, Kentarou, Nana, and the other students watched Hajime and the others joke around with pained expressions on their faces.

Just then, Myu perked up and said, "Are we all kissing Daddy? Then I'll kiss him too!"

"Uwooooh!?"

Kaori had held onto both of Hajime's hands, so he had no way to push Myu away. He fell backward in an attempt to avoid Myu's kiss, but she fell down with him. By turning his face away, he just barely managed to get her lips to touch his cheek instead of his lips.

After a moment of stunned silence, the students started whispering heatedly to each other.

“That was close, but I made it,” Hajime said, cutting through the chatter. He absolutely did not want his daughter’s first kiss, or any kiss really, to be with him.

He repeated himself as he pulled Myu off him, determined to get everyone to believe him. He knew family members kissed each other on the lips in Europe, but he was Japanese, as were all the other students.

“You didn’t make it at all!”

“He’s guilty, your honor!”

From a distance, it probably still looked like Myu had pushed him down and kissed him on the lips.

Blushing, Aiko and Liliana covered their faces with their hands. Though, they made sure to spread their fingers out enough to let them peek, like usual. Liliana was a 14-year-old girl who had yet to experience any romance, so it was understandable for her, but Aiko was a fully-grown adult in her mid-twenties. Yuka, Nana, and Taeko all gave Aiko exasperated looks, but they refrained from commenting.

“Oh my. Our daughter’s so bold, Darling. Ufufu.”

“Calm yourselves, Kaori, Shizuku. This is simply the naive innocence of a child, nothing more,” Tio said with an exasperated sigh as Remia took Myu back into her arms.

In truth, most of the students also understood that Myu was just an eager child who adored her dad.

Though there were only a few of them, namely the male members of the Aiko bodyguard squad, who muttered things like, “Damn lolicon...” and “Holy shit, Nagumo-san, you’ll go for anyone, won’t you?” Naturally, the girls gave them sharp glares.

Realizing they’d overreacted, Kaori and Shizuku blushed and shrunk back.

However, there was actually a deeper reason behind why Myu suddenly went to kiss Hajime.

“Mrrr, why did you run away!? I just wanted to make you happy in Yue-onee-

chan's place, Daddy!"

"Myu..."

Everyone had been tiptoeing around mentioning Yue, but Myu just blurted out the main issue at hand.

Shea and the others looked taken aback as they realized why Myu had tried to kiss Hajime.

"You, Shea-onee-chan, and everyone else look sad, so I'll kiss all of you to make you happy again. That's what kisses do, right?" Myu said with a smile. She'd heard that from Yue, and her current demeanor was strikingly reminiscent of Yue as well.

Was she trying to emulate Yue to cheer us up? Hajime thought to himself as Myu cast her gaze to Shea and the others. They were all surprised by how much she resembled Yue, but considering how she'd emulated Hajime earlier when she'd stood in his way, it made sense.

"Children learn by watching their elders, I guess..." Hajime muttered to himself. That was just a sign of how much Myu had valued her short time with Yue. She'd been watching Hajime, Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori far more closely than any of them realized. And she'd learned how to be strong from all of them.

"Daddy, do you know what Yue-onee-chan told me?"

"What?"

"She said that together, you and her were the strongest in the world. But now that Shea-onee-chan and everyone else are here..." Myu paused as she looked over at Shea and the others. "...you're invincible!"

Myu puffed her chest out proudly, as if she was the invincible one. Back in Erisen, Yue had indeed taught Myu that.

Overcome by emotion, Shea, Kaori, and Tio all looked up at the sky.

"Hurry up and bring Yue-onee-chan back, okay, Daddy?"

"Heh, you got it. When I bring her back, she might think she messed up and feel sad, so be sure to kiss her for me too."

“Okay!”

Myu raised her hands into the air and waved them excitedly. In her mind, it was a given that Hajime would be able to bring her back. She didn't have an iota of doubt that he'd succeed.

After a few seconds, Shea and the others nodded as well, their resolve rekindled. This was no time to be wallowing in despair or fooling around to make themselves feel better. They'd gone and lectured Hajime about giving up, but they'd been acting just as foolish.

Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Shizuku all smiled at Myu.

“I really can't hold a candle to you, Myu-chan.”

“Hehehe, Myu-chan might actually be the strongest out of all of us.”

“Indeed. I suppose I should have expected no less from such a brave hero.”

“I'm kind of scared to see what kind of person she'll become as she grows up.”

Everyone shivered a little at Shizuku's rather apt comment. If she continued learning from everyone around Hajime, she'd grow up into a free-spirited yet kind girl who was fearless in battle, extremely seductive when she wanted to be, and likely as beautiful as Remia. It was a terrifying combination. The real problem, though, would be if she was influenced by a certain *deviant* member of Hajime's harem.

Everyone turned simultaneously to Tio.

“Wh-What? Why are you looking at me as though I'm some pitiful creature? If you keep this up, I'll get aroused!”

You can learn anything else from us, but please don't inherit Tio's pervertedness, Myu... Hajime and the others thought.

Chasing thoughts of that cursed future out of his mind, Hajime narrowed his eyes, his expression growing serious. He then got to his feet and looked to an empty spot in the throne room.

“Looks like I can do it after all...” he muttered, then cast Transmute.

Bright crimson sparks concentrated on the floor in front of him. A few seconds later, a sword made of stone rose out of the ground. Though it was made from the same dull stone as the floor, it appeared unbelievably sharp and had a polished sheen to it.

Hajime was almost completely drained of mana. He couldn't infuse his creations with regular magic, let alone ancient magic. In other words, the sword was just a sword, nothing more. However, that plain stone sword looked as intimidating as an ancient, legendary artifact.

Hajime looked the sword over for a few seconds, then nodded in satisfaction and turned to the group of demons who huddled together in a corner of the room. Their faces stiffened nervously the moment they noticed his gaze.

"Hajime-kun..." Kaori muttered, shooting Hajime a stern glare.

He gave her a sidelong glance, then turned back to Myu, who was still in Remia's arms, gave her a small smile, and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "I won't do anything bad, don't worry." His eyes lacked the emptiness they had earlier, so Kaori and the others breathed a collective sigh of relief. Myu smiled as well, so he turned on his heel and sauntered over to the demons.

"Well, I don't expect you to know much, but tell me everything."

"Wh-What do you mean? We don't know—" the man who'd protected his son earlier stammered.

"If you don't know anything, that's fine. But I don't recommend lying to me... or staying quiet. Of course, you can defy me if you want, but... I'll make anyone who does pay dearly. If you value the lives of those next to you, you better do as I say."

Hajime rested his sword menacingly on his shoulder and spread his legs wide.

"He looks like a gangster..." Kousuke muttered quietly a short distance behind him.

"Shut up, moron! What if he hears you!? Do you wanna be another one of his victims!" Kentarou whispered furiously.

"W-Will you let us go if we answer honestly?"

“Excuse me? Do you think you’re in any position to negotiate? Whether I let you go or not depends on my mood, so you better not piss me off. Freid and his soldiers have already tried to kill us a bunch of times. You should be grateful I’m not cutting you down where you stand.”

“Isn’t he acting the same way as before!?” Mao asked in a terrified whisper.

Ayako whispered back, “Look, just do your best not to piss him off, okay!?”

Hajime ignored his muttering classmates and stared calmly down at the demons. The demons didn’t feel the bone-chilling fear he’d inspired when his eyes had been devoid of all emotion. But this violent, tyrannical side of him was terrifying in its own way.

“Tell me everything you know about the Sanctuary. Also, you asked Kaori... uh, that apostle over there to open the gate for you, didn’t you? Does that mean apostles can open the portal to it by themselves?”

The demon father chose his words very carefully.

“All I know about the Sanctuary is that it’s the promised land our god has prepared for us demons. Supposedly, once we enter, we’ll ascend and become a greater race. Divine angels in service to our lord.”

“What else?”

“I-I don’t know anything about the portal leading to it. I just assumed an apostle could help us...”

“Oh, really? You’re not lying to me, are you? You can only protect one thing here, your kid or your faith, so you better choose wisely,” Hajime crouched down and poked the man’s cheek with the flat of his sword as he said that. His son let out a tiny scream and looked up at Hajime in terror.

“He’s worse than the yakuza...” Yoshiki muttered.

“If anything, he deserves to be called the Demon Lord,” Shinji added.

Hajime made a mental note to beat the two of them up later.

“You look so cool, Daddy!” Myu shouted. And suddenly, Hajime decided he could forgive his classmates after all. Yuka and the others looked shocked at Myu’s outburst, but Hajime couldn’t care less about what they thought.

Naturally, the demons were too scared to pay attention to the muttering going on behind Hajime, and the man he was threatening broke out in a cold sweat as he desperately tried to placate Hajime.

“R-Really, I swear! Telling you doesn’t go against my faith, so I have no reason to lie! This really is all I know! Please, spare my son’s life!”

Hajime glanced back at Tio. Among his comrades, she was the one most suited to reading people. Tio nodded to Hajime, confident that the man was speaking the truth.

“Tch, you’re useless. What about the rest of you guys?”

“Th-That’s all I know, too...”

“S-Same...”

“Please, at least let our children live.”

Hajime rose to his feet and thrust his sword into the ground. He then circled the group, eyeing each demon as he passed.

The sword cut through the floor like a hot knife through butter, and the demons either stammered that they didn’t know anything or pleaded for their lives.

“Nagumo’s totally the bad guy here, isn’t he...?” Nana muttered.

Taeko breathlessly replied, “The way he acts is so dreamy.”

“Wait, what!? Taeko!?” Nana exclaimed in shock.

You guys are really making it hard to look intimidating here... Hajime thought to himself, annoyed. And after another minute or so of questioning, he let out a disappointed sigh.

“Haaah, guess I should’ve expected this. You guys are all civilians, after all.”

He shook his head, and for a moment, the demons were worried he’d kill them for not being helpful enough.

A second later, crimson sparks shot across the floor underneath the demons. Some of the demons tried to run, but they soon realized their legs wouldn’t move. Looking down, they saw that the floor had risen up to lock everyone’s

feet in place.

“Stay there, and stay quiet. If any of you try any funny business... well, I’m sure I don’t need to spell it out for you.”

“U-Understood.”

The shackles were brittle enough that the demons could break them with magic if they tried. But it was obvious from their expressions that none of them dared to attempt it. If anything, they were relieved that he wasn’t going to kill them. And his classmates were also relieved that they wouldn’t have to see any children die.

Hajime left the demons where they were and moved to the center of the throne room.

Shea, Kaori, Tio, Shizuku, Liliana, and his classmates followed after him. He tapped his foot on the ground and three circular tables rose from the ground. They were arrayed in a triangle, and each one could seat eleven people.

“Sit down, guys. It’s time to discuss our next course of action,” Hajime said as he half-collapsed into a chair himself.

He’d only just been brought back from a state where his soul was so drained it had nearly disintegrated. He was almost completely out of mana too, so even something as simple as transmuting a few tables left him exhausted.

Honestly, he wouldn’t even have bothered, but he felt as though this discussion was too important to have sitting on the ground.

Shea, Tio, Kaori, Shizuku, Suzu, Aiko, Ryutarou, Liliana, and Remia, who was still carrying Myu, joined Hajime at the first table.

Yuka looked longingly at the remaining seat at table one, but she joined her friends at table two. Nagayama and his party also sat down at the second table.

Yoshiki, Shinji, and the students who’d remained in the castle the whole time hesitantly sat down at table three.

Hajime took a moment to look everyone in the eye before beginning the meeting.

“First of all, let’s organize the intel we have. We know the god the church

worships, Ehit, has taken control of Yue's body. But Yue's still in there, fighting to regain control. According to Ehit, it'll take him at least three days to fully wrest control away from her."

Hajime's classmates looked away awkwardly as he talked candidly about Yue's abduction. Most of them knew how deeply he cared for her. They'd only seen the two of them interact for a day or so, when Hajime had saved them from the demon invasion of the capital, but that had been enough to impress upon them just how close the two were. Besides, all of them had heard Hajime's forlorn scream when Ehit had taken Yue's body up to the Sanctuary.

"We'll have to break into the Sanctuary if we wanna get Yue back. The problem is, no one knows how to open that gate," Shea said, picking up where Hajime had left off. Her tone was even... and her expression resolute.

Myu had rekindled everyone's determination.

"It's probably safe to assume that only the people Ehit designates are allowed through, right? That means we'll need to find some way to force our way past his protections," Kaori mused.

"Yeah. He also said he'd return in three days to destroy the world, and that his army would appear on the Divine Mountain. Chances are he'll be sending an army of apostles at us."

"I suppose it would be apt to consider that the final battle, then. Ehit's goal is to suck Tortus dry and use the mana he steals from this world to transport the Sanctuary to Earth, Master's world."

Honestly, Ehit's plan sounded unbelievable. In fact, a bunch of the students still couldn't believe it, even though they'd heard his declaration for themselves. Even Yuka, Nagayama, and the other students who'd been fighting on the frontlines just silently listened to Hajime and his comrades talk.

Aiko, however, hesitantly raised her hand into the air, asking for permission to talk. In response, Hajime and the others fell silent and turned to her.

She sucked in a deep breath to calm her nerves, then said, "Nagumo-kun. When you first shot Alva, you told us to get ready to return to Earth, right?"

"Yeah. You've got a good memory, Sensei," Hajime replied with a rueful smile.

Oh yeah, he did say that, didn't he!? his classmates thought, their hopes rekindled.

“H-Hey, Nagumo! Does that mean you found a way home!?”

“That means we can just run away to Earth, right!? Can we go back right away!?”

The students from the third table all looked expectantly at Hajime. Yoshiki and Shinji were so excited that they'd bolted to their feet. They'd been holed up in the castle this whole time, so it wasn't surprising that they'd jump at the chance to run.

Yuka, Kousuke, and the students from the second table who'd been fighting looked surprised as well, though.

Hajime waved his hand dismissively and said, “I did manage to create a way back home, but Ehit destroyed it with all my other artifacts when he smashed my Treasure Trove. I can't send anyone back right now.”

“N-No way!”

“Can't you just make it again!?”

Yoshiki and Shinji bore down on Hajime, desperation etched on their faces. The other students from the third table started shouting about how they wanted to go home as well. Their will to fight had been broken from the start, so all they could cling to was the hope of escape.

Unfortunately, Hajime couldn't have cared less about their feelings. Annoyed that his discussion was being interrupted, he grabbed his stone sword and got to his feet. He was probably planning on silencing them all with a quick whack with the back of the sword, since even that would have been enough to put them out of commission for a while.

“Everyone, calm down! Panicking won't get you anywhere!” Aiko shouted, pacifying the students. She could tell that Hajime was getting angry, and she didn't want them suffering his wrath. Her desperate entreaties, combined with Hajime's menacing glare, was enough to quiet the students. Though, they still looked a little pale.

Once they were quiet, Aiko said, “Listen, everyone. I understand how you feel. Really, I do. I want to go home too, and I want to reunite you all with your families. But for now, please just stay quiet and listen to what Nagumo-kun has to say. Complaining won’t get us any closer to escaping this mess.”

Though they looked unconvinced, Yoshiki and Shinji reluctantly returned to their seats.

After making sure that everyone had calmed down, Aiko asked, “What I wanted to ask was if that artifact was powerful enough to take us to Earth, wouldn’t it be able to take us to the Sanctuary as well? Do you think you could remake it?”

“You bring up a good point, Sensei. It’s true, the Crystal Key could probably have opened a portal to the Sanctuary. Unfortunately, it’s not easy to make. I needed Yue’s help to make it the first time, and I don’t think I can remake it without her.”

“I see... I’m sorry...” Aiko whispered softly, worried that she’d asked something insensitive. Hajime gave her a reassuring smile, making it clear that he wasn’t bothered.

A second later, Shinji asked in a loud voice, “R-Really!? Are you sure you’re not just saying that because you’re prioritizing her over everyone else!?”

“N-Nakano-kun!” Aiko yelled indignantly, but the other students from the third table were all giving Hajime suspicious looks too.

Sighing, Hajime decided it was about time to remind the narrow-minded kids where they stood.

“Of course I’m prioritizing her over everyone else,” he growled in a cold voice.

“Wha—?”

Before the students could respond, Hajime continued, “What the hell gave you guys the idea that I’d care more about getting you to safety than getting Yue back? Besides, even if I did, it wouldn’t change anything. Stop lying to yourselves and take a cold, hard look at reality.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“You all heard that shitty god. He said he’s targeting Earth next. Unless we get Yue back and rip him to shreds, there’s no future for any of us!”

Everyone, even the students from the second table, turned toward Hajime, looking as though they’d just been slapped in the face.

As the reality of their situation set in, a few of the students started crying. Others slumped onto the table, giving up entirely. Tio clapped her hands to grab everyone’s attention and brought the discussion back on topic.

“Now now, we don’t have much time. Master, let us continue the meeting. When all is said and done, what is it you propose we should do?”

After thinking about it for a few seconds, Hajime replied, “When I used my existence-erasing chains, I managed to destroy a part of the gate leading to the Sanctuary. In other words, that gate isn’t invulnerable. As I am now, I might be able to make an inferior version of the Crystal Key that can forcibly unlock the portal for us.”

“Oho, so you plan to force your way into the Sanctuary when Ehit opens the gate again in three days’ time.”

“If he opens the gate sooner to see what’s taking Alva so long, we won’t even have to wait,” Kaori said in a joking tone.

It was then that Suzu spoke up for the first time since the meeting started.

“Do you really think you can win?” she asked in a weak voice.

Come to think of it, this is the first time she’s said anything since I woke up... Hajime thought absently. Normally, she was a bundle of energy and the most talkative member of the group, but this whole time she’d been looking down with a dark expression.

Ryutarou looked similarly despondent. It was rare to see the loudmouthed musclehead looking so meek.

Hajime turned to the two of them and said, “Yeah.”

The casual confidence he displayed irked Suzu to no end. She gave Hajime a sardonic grin, an expression no one had seen her make before, and spoke in a provocative tone, saying, “Even though you got your ass handed to you this

time?”

“Yeah. Even though I got my ass handed to me, I’ll beat him next time.”

“Tch... How? How can you be so sure!? He just has to say a word and we can’t even lift a finger! He’s way stronger than all of us combined, and he’s got a huge army of apostles to boot! That guy’s a bona fide monster!”

Suzu shook her head, her pigtails swinging wildly. It was obvious her spirit had been broken. Not only had Eri completely ignored her attempts to engage her in conversation, but the familiars she’d been so proud of had been ripped to shreds by Eri’s undead creations.

Suzu had done everything she could. After resolving to speak with Eri once more, she’d begged Hajime over and over to take her with him to the next Labyrinth. She’d overcome all of its grueling trials and become so much stronger for it, but everything she’d built up had been destroyed with maddening ease by Eri and her necromancy.

Moreover, the illusions she’d seen when Eri had ordered her to see herself die still burned vividly in her mind. She clearly remembered her limbs being torn apart, her insides being gouged out, her head being separated from her body, and the all too real pain that had accompanied those visions.

She would never be able to forget the visceral sense of watching her life bleed out of her for as long as she lived. Few people were strong enough to bounce back after experiencing such a traumatic event. And the mere thought of going through that experience again made her breath come in shallow gasps and caused her entire body to tremble in fear.

Hajime knew all of that, but he casually replied, “So what?”

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘so what’!?” Suzu roared as she finally looked up, glaring at Hajime with tears streaming down her face. But to her surprise, his expression appeared dead serious, a stark contrast to the nonchalant tone he’d been using.

“We’re up against an insanely strong monster. Not only that, but we’re outnumbered a hundred to one. You’re right, it’s not gonna be easy. But you’re forgetting something important. Remember, I was powerless like you once.

Everyone branded me a worthless loser, but I managed to crawl my way back out of the abyss.”

“Ah...” Suzu gasped.

The others who’d been despairing, certain that they were doomed, all looked up as well.

“I had no one to help me, no food, and there were monsters everywhere. Plus, on top of all that, I had no aptitude for most magic... and I lost my left arm right after I woke up. But even so, I still made it out alive.”

Hajime’s voice was deathly quiet, but it echoed clearly through the throne room.

Before they knew it, all the students were hanging on to Hajime’s every word.

“This fight is no different. It doesn’t matter if I’m up against god and his army of apostles. I’m going to survive and come out on top. That bastard failed to kill me, and he even revealed a bunch of his trump cards.”

A feral gleam appeared in Hajime’s eyes. His lips curled up into a fearless smile and he bared his teeth.

Everyone gulped quietly as his bloodlust washed over them.

“I’m gonna get Yue back and kill that fucker. He had the upper hand last time, but now the tables have turned. I’m the hunter, and he’s the prey. I won’t rest until I’ve obliterated every trace of him with my own hands. I’ll chase him to the ends of the world, if I have to. That self-proclaimed god thinks he’s special, but I’m gonna teach him who the real monster here is.”

Hajime’s eyes burned with determination.

It was only now that the other students realized that Hajime had never truly been weak. True, he hadn’t had ancient magic or an array of artifacts back then, but the strength of his heart had been the same. He had been physically weak, but his heart had been stronger than anyone else’s. He’d made the impossible possible solely through the force of his unwavering resolve once already, so there was no reason he couldn’t do it again.

“Taniguchi, if you think this battle’s hopeless, then close your eyes, plug your

ears, and find somewhere to hide. I'll take care of everything for you."

Hajime wasn't saying that out of consideration for Suzu. No, he was testing her. He wanted to know if she was really okay with letting her journey end in such a pitiful fashion. Even though she'd come to save Eri, she hadn't been able to get through to her at all. If she was going to give up, then Hajime planned to finish Eri off with the rest of his enemies while Suzu cowered back on Tortus.

On the other hand, if Suzu was still determined to get Eri back, then he'd continue to keep his promise.

While Suzu deliberated on the matter, Hajime turned to Ryutarou and Shizuku. He didn't say anything, but they knew what he was asking them. Now that Kouki had betrayed them, Hajime would be forced to kill him if they didn't come along.

For a while after that, everyone remained silent. Shea, Tio, Kaori, Aiko, Yuka, and Liliana all waited solemnly for Suzu, Shizuku, and Ryutarou to make their decision...

After a few minutes, Suzu finally opened her mouth. The hesitation in her voice disappeared, and her eyes glimmered with determination.

"There's no need for that, Nagumo-kun. I'll take care of both Eri and Kouki-kun. It doesn't matter if they're in the Sanctuary or another dimension entirely, I'll bring them both back!"

A confident smile spread across Suzu's face.

Moved by her stunning display of determination, Ryutarou shouted, "Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Okay, that's enough moping around! I won't let myself be outdone by you two! I'm the one who'll beat Kouki back to his senses!"

He then smacked his fist into his open palm and made a ferocious grin.

Shizuku smiled as well and added, "You're right. I won't be satisfied until I give Kouki a good punch or two. Plus, I need to wipe that smirk off of Eri's face."

Hajime smiled slightly at the three of them and replied, "Good. Then you'll be coming with us when we invade the Sanctuary. I'll leave Nakamura and

Amanogawa in your hands. However, don't forget—”

“We know. We won't give up halfway this time. Thanks for bringing us back to our senses, Nagumo-kun.”

“Yeah, thanks, Nagumo.”

Suzu and Ryutarou voiced their gratitude to Hajime. Blushing, Shizuku followed suit and said, “I'm grateful as well, Nagumo-kun. But you know, I planned to go with you even if Kouki hadn't been abducted. Wherever you go, I'll follow... no matter what.”

“I see...” Hajime trailed off, unsure how else to reply.

This really isn't the time to be flirting, you know?

But while Hajime felt exasperated, Kaori looked proud of Shizuku. Probably because Shizuku was finally doing things for her own sake, rather than to help others.

Shizuku's words had caused a stir among her classmates as well. Most of the boys were too dense to figure out what was going on, but Jugo, Atsushi, Yoshiki, and Shinji's jaws hung open.

Naturally, all of the girls picked up on Shizuku's true feelings. Yuka kept looking from Shizuku to Hajime and back again, while Aiko seemed shocked. Nana and Taeko were muttering things like, “So he's gotten Shizukucchi too now, huh?” and “Nagumo-kun's a modern-day Don Juan!”

Everyone seemed to be forgetting that this was meant to be a serious discussion. Fortunately, Liliana raised her hand and attempted to bring things back on track.

“Excuse me, Nagumo-san!”

“You don't have to yell, Princess. What's up?”

Of course, the real reason Liliana had spoken up was because she didn't want to be left out of Hajime's harem, but naturally, she didn't say that. After all, she was trying to look competent at the moment.

“Ahem... It sounds like you'll be taking all of the strongest fighters with you to the Sanctuary, but if you recall, Alva said that Ehit's armies would invade Heiligh

first.”

“Yeah.”

“The capital’s barrier won’t last long against an army of apostles. I know you don’t care about the kingdom’s people, but couldn’t you at least provide us enough assistance to hold out while you to defeat Ehit?”

Liliana was understandably concerned about the safety of her subjects. The only way she could see them surviving was if they abandoned the capital and fled as far as possible in the three days they had. But she also knew it would be impossible to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people in time. Especially considering how fast the apostles were. She didn’t know how long it would take Hajime and the others to kill Ehit, but she had no doubt thousands would be massacred while he was fighting.

Grateful that Liliana had restarted their actual discussion, Hajime nodded and replied, “I’m glad you brought that up, since it’s something I wanted to discuss.”

“It is? Does that mean...”

“I hate Ehit. That bastard pisses me off. And so, I’m not gonna let a single thing go his way. Honestly, I don’t give a damn about the people living in Tortus. But if that fucker gets his kicks from slaughtering innocent people, then I’ll do everything I can to make sure that doesn’t happen. I’ll make sure I ruin every last one of his plans.”

Hajime chuckled darkly, and most of the students scooted a few inches away from him. His smile appeared far too evil for most people who weren’t Shea, Kaori, or Tio to enjoy. In fact, even Liliana felt a little creeped out.

“U-Umm, does that mean you’ll help defend us against the invading apostle army?”

“I have a plan, yeah. If we bring the armies of every nation together and give them a bunch of my artifacts, they’ll be strong enough to hold off the apostles. It’s gonna be tough getting all the countries to work together in three days, which is why I need your help,” Hajime turned to the second table as he said that, and Yuka and the others all nodded resolutely.

Surprisingly, some of the students from the third table seemed raring to help

as well. Hajime's fighting spirit seemed to have rubbed off on everyone.

"Heiligh's in a state of chaos after the apostle raid, but thankfully, they only kidnapped us, so the knights and soldiers are mostly unharmed," Liliana mused, resting her chin in her hands.

"However, there's a limit to how many troops we can mobilize in three days. Even if we do manage to unite the nations and raise a large army, can you really craft enough artifacts to arm everyone?"

"Yeah, I can," Hajime declared confidently, and Liliana gave him a surprised look.

"I've already set up portals in the kingdom, the empire, and Verbergen. Remember the one I threw... uh, sent you back to Heiligh in? I'll create some artifacts that'll help you travel quickly and send them through each of those portals. That way, you'll be able to visit the other countries and set up portals for me there as well."

Once they were all set up, Hajime would effectively be connected to every major location in Tortus. Liliana looked simultaneously relieved by the fact that Hajime had a concrete plan, and angry that he'd brought up that time he'd tossed her headfirst into the castle's cafeteria.

"But Master, weren't all of your artifacts destroyed? Even if the Gate Keyholes are unharmed, all of your Gate Keys are gone now, aren't they?"

"Actually, I hid a few key artifacts underground at the border of the Schnee Snow Fields right before we traveled to the Demon Lord's Castle."

"Truly!? Then the Gate Keys are safe?"

"Yeah. Unfortunately, I brought the Crystal Key with me, since I thought we might need to use it, but I left the Compass of Eternal Paths, all the crests we got for conquering the labyrinths, the Gate Keys, and a few vials of Ambrosia back there. Oh, and Kaori's body, too. It's preserved in an ice coffin."

"Hang on, Hajime-kun! Does that mean you were planning on leaving my original body behind if we had to make an emergency escape!? You even left the compass behind, so we couldn't have gone back for it!"

Hajime had already pinpointed the location of Earth back in the Frost Caverns, but he hadn't used it to plot the location of Tortus. Kaori started tearing up, and Hajime awkwardly averted his gaze.

"I didn't have a choice, okay? For what it's worth, I left a beacon there to help me find the place again. Plus, as long as we had the Crystal Key, we'd technically be able to make it back."

"What if finding the way back took so long that the ice melted and my body got buried in dirt!?"

"You could just use restoration magic to fix it. Besides, if I'd actually brought your body with me, it would've been destroyed like everything else."

"Ugh, you're right. Thanks for keeping my body safe, I guess, Hajime-kun."

It appeared Kaori's original body was fated to suffer no matter what happened.

Shea gently comforted Kaori, who looked eager to recover her body as soon as possible, while Liliana moved on to her next question.

"I understand the plan now... but there's still one big hurdle left. Will we really be able to convince people that the world is ending in three days and that we need to work together to prevent it? I mean, people might brand us heretics, since our enemies this time around are Ehit's apostles."

"I'm thinking restoration magic will help us with that."

"It will? How?" Liliana asked as she cocked her head to one side.

Kaori immediately picked up on Hajime's plan, clapped her hands together, and said, "You want to show them scenes from the past, don't you? Just like the visions we saw in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine."

"Yeah. I want you to recreate what happened here with restoration magic. And then, I can record it all in my artifacts. After that, we can show those recordings to the leaders of all the countries. I bet the people we've talked to before will believe us. Catherine in Brooke, Ilwa in Fuhren, Roa in Horaud, Lanzwi in Ankaji, Ulfric in Verbergen, and Gahard in the Empire. They're all pretty influential, so they should be able to gather a bunch of troops."

Including Liliana and the Adventurer Guild's guild master, Hajime basically had connections to every major power in Tortus.

Honestly, Liliana was amazed he'd met with so many people. This would make convincing everyone a lot easier, and she quickly started calculating how to approach each nation.

"Everyone in the kingdom believes the story we created to cover up the destruction of the main cathedral, so convincing them that this is the work of that same evil god shouldn't be hard... Most of the empire's subjects aren't very pious to begin with, so they'll probably believe Ehit's evil easily enough... Ankaji's lord was willing to let himself be branded a heretic to defend you, Hajime-san, so he won't take much convincing either... Verbergen trusts us, since we helped free the beastmen slaves in the empire... And it seems like you have influential friends within the Adventurer Guild... This might just be possible."

Things weren't looking as hopeless as they'd originally seemed. Liliana found it rather ironic that Hajime had built up such powerful connections despite claiming that he didn't care about the people of this world.

"All that's left is... Oh yeah! Just in case, we can have Sensei start giving speeches to rouse the people."

"Huh!? Wh-Why me!?" Aiko asked, trembling like a leaf. The last thing she wanted was even more people worshiping her.

"Because you're the Fertility Goddess. 'Rise up, my brethren! The evil fake Ehit has sealed the true Ehit and is bringing his army of counterfeit apostles to subjugate the people of Tortus! We must band together if we wish to stop his evil ambitions! Fear not, for the Fertility Goddess fights with you!' See, I even figured out your speech for you. Good luck, Sensei."

"Don't just send me off like that! Where did you even come up with such a bold lie!? If we were in Japan, I'd be contacting your parents about this!"

"Don't be so uptight, Sensei. You're the one who sowed these seeds, so it's time you gave them water and reaped the harvest. Your Job's Farmer, remember?"

“When did you learn to be such a smooth talker?”

Your Job should be Rabble-Rouser, not Synergist! Aiko thought to herself. From the looks on their faces, it seemed her students agreed with her. In fact, the way Hajime planned to manipulate the people of the world wasn't too different from what Ehit had done for centuries.

A few of the girls from table three seemed enamored by his crafty ways, but fortunately, their fellow classmates were hard at work bringing them back to their senses.

Aiko sighed to herself. She realized it was an effective strategy, and it would likely be necessary to save the people of Tortus, but she still didn't really like it.

Hajime gave her a troubled smile and said, “Even if we gather all of Tortus' nations together, they won't be any help if they're just a disorganized mob. They'll need a symbolic leader everyone can unite under. None of the kings or emperors are popular enough to fill the role. Only the Fertility Goddess can do it. I need you, Aiko-sensei.”

“.....”

At this point, Aiko was trembling so much that she looked like a chihuahua. However, Hajime's words seemed to have gotten through to her, and she kept stealing covert glances at him. Judging by how red her cheeks were, she clearly didn't see him as just one of her students any longer.

“N-Nagumo-kun. You called me Aiko-sensei just now, didn't you?”

“Is that bad?”

“N-No. It's just, you always call me just Sensei, so I...”

“I do?”

Aiko seemed to be wrestling with some inner conflict. But after shaking her head a few times, she looked over at Shizuku, then sucked in a deep breath.

Unaware that the students were all staring at her and her rapidly changing expressions, she turned back to Hajime and said, “Could you... say that last part one more time?”

Her face was flushed, and there was a longing look in her eyes.

“The last part?”

“Yes. But drop the Sensei this time.”

Weren't you the one who said you'd never cross the line between teacher and student? Hajime thought with a stiff expression.

There was a loud clattering noise as Yuka got up from her chair. She wasn't the only surprised one, either. The rest of Hajime's classmates started muttering amongst themselves, saying things like, “Wait, seriously!? When did Sensei fall for Nagumo!?” and “N-Not you too, Sensei! Please tell me I'm dreaming...” and “I expected no less from Hajime-sama...”

Atsushi, Noboru, and Akito all grit their teeth, holding back a burning desire to beat Hajime to a pulp.

Unfortunately, Aiko was too nervous to pay attention to any of her students' voices. Knowing that she was days before a decisive battle had given her the push she needed to be honest with herself. As a teacher, she was willing to sacrifice herself for her students if that was what it took. However, she didn't want to die without confessing her feelings to Hajime. That was the one thing she couldn't stand. Naturally, her resolve had hardened considerably, which was precisely why Hajime couldn't dismiss her out of hand. If she got depressed right before the final clash, she was likely to make a bunch of fatal mistakes. She was a master of messing things up, after all.

The students all shot Hajime stern glares, imploring him not to do anything rash. Sighing, he realized he didn't really have a choice.

“I need you, Aiko.”

“Okay, you can count on me! I'll get everyone so riled up that they'll be cursing Ehit's name! I'll show you what a teacher can do once she gets serious!”

Teachers are supposed to mitigate conflict, not get people all riled up... Are you sure you understand your job? Hajime thought to himself, averting his gaze from Aiko.

He could hear the students muttering things like, “A-A student-teacher relationship!? What is this, a light novel!?” and “Forget Alva, he's the real Demon Lord!” and “Don't look at him. If your eyes meet, you'll get pregnant!”

Incidentally, Suzu made that last remark. Hajime made a mental note to punish her for it later.

“A-Ahem! I’ll be doing my best as well, Nagumo-san!” Liliana said, interrupting the students’ chattering. Her face was red as well, and there was an expectant look in her pretty blue eyes.

Why is everyone choosing now to do this? We’re deciding the fate of the world here. Maybe I should throw her through a portal and send her back to Heiligh?

“Yeah, I’m counting on you too, Princess.”

“I’ll do my best!”

“I heard.”

“I’ll do my best!”

“.....”

“I-I’ll do my best... Hic...”

“...I’m counting on you, Liliana.”

“Call me Lily.”

“Ugh... Fine, I’m counting on you, Lily.”

“I’ve got you covered! Leave everything to me! I’ll use my popularity and authority to get all the citizens dancing on the palm of my hand!”

That’s not something a princess should be saying. Imagine what the people would think if they found out the princess they loved thought they were all brainless dupes.

It was at this point that all the students realized Liliana had indeed offered to provide CPR to Hajime because she wanted to kiss him.

Just then, Yuka groaned and clutched her sides. From the looks of it, Nana and Taeko had just elbowed her.

“Come on, Yukacchi, it’s your turn!” Nana whispered.

“L-Like I said, it’s not like that!” Yuka protested hotly.

“Oh please, enough with the tsundere act. Just go for it, Yuka,” Taeko said.

Hajime was having a hard time believing all these students had been in the depths of despair mere moments ago. Everyone was joking around, and they looked genuinely relaxed.

“Okay, listen up. I’m gonna go over the plan one more time,” Hajime said with a sigh. He didn’t do anything to ruin the relaxed atmosphere, though. It was better that everyone was in high spirits, rather than brooding over the potential destruction of both Tortus and Earth. It was normal to have the response the students from table three had when Hajime had first told them about the impending destruction of Earth. But he knew now that ignoring their concerns would only cause problems down the line. Letting them stew in their hopelessness and despair would only lead to more traitors like Shimizu and Hiyama.

Judging by how quickly Aiko and Liliana’s expressions had turned serious, Hajime guessed that they’d been acting the way they had to contribute to lightening the mood. Though, he suspected their feelings for him were real.

Regardless, once Aiko and Liliana got serious, the other students calmed down as well.

Hajime made sure everyone was paying attention, then said, “My top priority is getting Yue back. In order to do that, I’m going to invade the Sanctuary when Ehit sends down his armies three days from now. I’m leaving how to deal with Nakamura and Amanogawa in Taniguchi’s hands. The rest of you guys will be fighting the apostle army.”

Hajime paused to make sure everyone was following along so far. Like he’d thought, most of his classmates looked terrified at the prospect of fighting apostles, but they were at least willing to hear him out now.

“So, now we go over what to do over the next three days. Personally, I’m going back to the bottom of the Great Orcus Labyrinth. It’s got all the raw materials I’ll need to mass-produce a bunch of artifacts. Kaori, I want you, Myu, and Remia to come with me to help out.”

“Sure, Hajime-kun.”

“Okay! I’ll help lots!”

“If there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Kaori, Myu, and Remia all nodded.

Hajime mostly wanted to keep Myu and Remia with him to prevent Ehit from taking them hostage again, but he did also need someone to take care of his natural needs while he focused solely on crafting.

“Shea, can you go to the Reisen Gorge in the meantime?”

“Oh, I see. You want me to ask Miledi-san for help, right?”

“Yeah. She flushed us out last time, so I don’t know where the shortcut to take you straight back to her is. If the fountain in Brooke doesn’t react to her insignia, you’ll have to conquer the labyrinth again...”

“No problem. I can clear it in half a day now. That labyrinth’s child’s play after everything else we’ve been through.”

“I figured you’d say that. Well, I’m counting on you.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about!”

Hajime smiled to himself, thinking about how the once-worthless rabbit had grown into such a reliable comrade. But this was no time for reminiscing, and his gaze lingered for only a moment before he turned to Tio.

“Tio.”

“I can imagine what it is you would ask of me. You want me to return to my village, no?”

“Yep. Let your brethren know the time has come.”

“I see. I suppose it has. We dragonmen can no longer afford to hide in the shadows,” Tio said that, then placed a hand on her chest and closed her eyes to sort out her feelings.

In an unbelievably gentle voice, Hajime replied, “I told you before that we’d make a new promise, but I guess that’s not really necessary anymore, huh?”

“Ufufu, don’t be ridiculous. Do you think I would relinquish such a valuable boon? Since you brought it up, why not make that new promise with me here and now, Master? Promise me that we’ll grab hold of an ideal future together.”

“That’s a pretty vague promise... but sure. I promise we’ll grab hold of the best possible future for all of us. So Tio, will you...?”

“Of course! My path is your path, Master. I, Tio Klarus, shall follow you to the ends of the earth!”

Hajime and Tio smiled at each other as they exchanged vows. Though their dynamic was a little different from Hajime and Yue’s, it was hard for anyone else to get between the two of them.

Next, Hajime turned to Shizuku and said, “Yaegashi, please travel to the empire for me. I’ll give you a few Gate Keys leading to Heiligh, so convince Gahard to send his forces over.”

“I don’t mind, but... why me?”

“Because you’re a good negotiator. Plus, Gahard’s got a crush on you. He’ll be more likely to listen to you than anyone else.”

Hajime was indirectly responsible for forcing Gahard to wear the Necklace of Vows and free all the empire’s slaves, so he highly doubted the emperor would be too happy if he paid a visit. Shizuku was the only person who was both good at negotiating and strong enough to take care of herself in a fight in case Gahard tried anything. However, she wasn’t happy with that explanation.

“I get what you’re saying, but... I can’t believe you’re asking me to take advantage of another man’s crush when you know how I feel about you. I know the situation is dire, but still.”

“My bad. If it makes you feel any better, you have permission to use my name to scare him off. Feel free to tell him that if he lays a hand on you, Hajime Nagumo won’t be happy.”

“Th-That’s not fair. I can’t even be mad at you when you put it like that.”

Blushing, Shizuku accepted the job Hajime gave her.

“Sensei, you and Liliana head back to the capital. Gather as many troops as you can and start giving speeches to raise morale. Make sure everyone is brainwashed enough that they’ll fight apostles without hesitation. Also, the main battlefield will probably end up being the plains outside the city. Ehit’s

armies are going to be flooding out of the Divine Mountain, so you won't be able to fight within the city's walls."

"We'll have to evacuate the residents, then. Even with the help of your portals, it'll be tough to move everyone out in just three days."

"Well, I'm gonna have to open up a portal connecting the kingdom and the empire anyway, so we can make use of that. You can move the citizens to the empire while they send their soldiers over. I'll create more portals as time passes, so you should be able to accelerate the evacuation."

"But Nagumo-kun, isn't it a bad idea to fight on the plains, considering the apostles can fly?"

"Don't worry, Sensei. Remember how I said I'd strengthen your armies? I wasn't just talking about giving everyone stronger equipment. I'm planning on sending over large-scale weapons as well, like anti-air guns and mobile fortresses and stuff. Also, Nomura..."

Kentarou let out a squeak of surprise at being addressed directly. He'd thought he was completely under Hajime's radar.

"You're a Geomancer, right?"

"Huh? Y-Yeah, why?"

"I want you to round up all the craftsmen and mages with earth magic aptitude in the capital and work with them to make a castle. You might not be able to make it in one night like Hideyoshi, but you've got three days, so just do it."

"W-Wait, this is a huge responsibility! I don't know the first thing about architecture... How can I make a castle!?"

"That's why I told you to round up all the capital's craftsmen. Let them make the blueprints. You just have to use your magic to build according to their specifications. I'll make some unique artifacts for you later, so use those to mold the plains into a suitable defensive battlefield."

"I guess I'm the only one qualified for this job, huh? Fine, I'll do it," Kentarou replied with a pale face. His party members were giving him words of support,

though, so Hajime figured that he'd be fine. He then turned his attention to Yuka.

"Sonobe."

"Hwaaah!?"

Like Kentarou, Yuka hadn't expected to be singled out. She jumped out of her seat for the umpteenth time that day and shouted, "Wh-What do you want!?"

"Why do you sound so angry?"

"She's just trying to hide her embarrassment," Nana replied helpfully.

"Anyway, I want you to be the leader of all the other students."

"Huh? What? No way! Why me!?"

Hajime gave her an expectant look and said, "You're the most suited to leading out of everyone I know... What, am I wrong?"

Yuka felt conflicted. On one hand, she was happy that Hajime thought so highly of her, but on the other, she wasn't sure she could handle such a heavy responsibility.

"I agree! I think Yukacchi's the best choice! She's the one who rallied everyone earlier, too!"

"Hey, Nana!"

"Hm? What do you mean?" Hajime asked as he cocked his head. In response, Aiko explained how Yuka's quick thinking was what led to their counterattack against Alva.

"I see..." Hajime said with a thoughtful nod.

"I guess I should thank you as well. I owe you one, Sonobe."

"I-I didn't really do much," Yuka stammered, averting her gaze. Hajime's kind smile was too much to bear. Shea, Tio, and Kaori started thanking her as well, and she blushed bright red as a result.

"Anyway, this just proves you're the best choice to lead everyone. I can't imagine anyone else would be able to formulate a sound plan in a situation like that, much less get everyone to follow it."

All the other students nodded in agreement. They trusted her with their lives now, and even Shea and the others respected her. Moreover, Yuka was the one who'd taken care of all the other kids who'd stayed behind at the castle. The students on the third table were especially fond of her. They knew she'd always done her best, even when she'd been beaten down by despair. In fact, they already treated Yuka as their leader. She was far more reliable than a faraway Hero who fought on the front lines.

“Looks like everyone else wants you to be their leader.”

“Urgh... B-But...”

“It's gonna be hard coordinating everyone and looking after their mental state in the middle of a war, but I know you can do it.”

“.....”

Yuka looked down, unsure of herself. Nana and Taeko tried to encourage her, saying things like, “Don't worry, Yukacchi! Just think of it as having more people in your squad!” and “We'll do our best to help out!” but the weight of the responsibility felt too much to bear.

“You'll be fine,” Hajime said suddenly, and she raised her face to meet his gaze. There was a nostalgic smile on his face and he added, “You've got guts.”

“Ah...”

Those were the exact words Hajime had told her back in Ur. Yuka was surprised he remembered such a minor event.

“Fine, whatever! I just have to do it, right!? Just watch, Nagumo! I'll show you!”

“What's the point in showing me? You're facing the apostles, remember?”

Blushing, Yuka sat back down. Nana and Taeko elbowed her relentlessly with smug grins on their faces.



With that, all of Hajime's classmates were united in heart and soul. There was nothing left to say to her, but Kaori, Shizuku, Aiko, and Liliana were all glaring at Yuka all of a sudden.

Hajime ignored the four of them and started doling out assignments to the other students. He figured they'd be less likely to brood if they had something to do. Besides, even the students who'd been holed up in the castle the entire time had far higher stats and far stronger abilities than most people in this world. So long as they were given proper direction, they'd be a huge help.

Eventually, Hajime turned to Suzu and Ryutarou.

"Taniguchi, Sakagami, I want you two to go back to the Haltina Woods. Tell the Haulia and the top brass at Verbergen what's going on, then bring back anyone who can fight to the capital. Once that's done, contact me. I'll take you guys to the depths of the Orcus Labyrinth, where I want you to tame as many monsters as you can. Be sure to spend time strengthening the familiars you make as well. I'll craft a few artifacts for them, so they won't get done in as easily this time."

"Sure thing!"

"Hell yeah!"

Hajime answered any questions people had and hashed out the finer details of his plan before finally calling the meeting to a close. This would likely be the busiest three days of his life. He cast his gaze over all the other students, judging their resolve.

Based on their expressions, they were all determined to do everything in their power. It was a far cry from the sniveling cowards they'd been an hour before. However, Hajime felt as though this still wasn't enough. What they needed wasn't the drive to survive, but rather the desire to win. They needed the mettle to raise their faces to the heavens and spit on god. And so, he decided to give a small speech.

"We're up against a guy who calls himself a god, someone who has more than enough power to back up that claim. Not only that, but his army's scary as hell. He's got insanely strong monsters, powered up undead warriors who fear

nothing, and hundreds of apostles.”

Hajime didn't raise his voice, but everyone could feel the force behind each and every word.

“But that's all. He's not invincible. He's not immortal. You guys can all kill gods and apostles, the same way I did. He's looking down on us, but mortals have the potential to surpass heavenly beings.”

Hajime was missing an arm, an eye, and his hair was bleached of all color. His scars were proof of the painful path he'd walked to make it this far. Though he'd been labeled powerless by his peers, he'd crushed countless monsters, made their strength his own, and crawled back up to the surface. And that was precisely why he was able to take even this defeat, where the most important person in his life had been stolen from him, and turn it into a new source of strength. The students all understood instinctively that this man was someone who could do the impossible.

As Hajime continued his speech, their hearts began to tremble with a burning passion.

“Don't bother fighting for the sake of the world or for peace or other abstract ideas like that. I'm fighting because I want to get my beloved Yue back, so all of you should find your own reasons.”

Why are we fighting? the students asked themselves. For most of them, the answer was simply that they didn't want to die.

“Those reasons don't have to be grand. It doesn't matter how small they seem to you, what matters is that they're yours. Maybe you just wanna go home. Maybe you just wanna see your family and friends again. Maybe you really fucking hate Ehit. Maybe you just don't wanna die. It doesn't matter what the reason is.”

For a lot of the students, it felt as though something just clicked into place. They'd been afraid because of how huge the scale of this battle seemed, but that fear had suddenly begun to fade.

“Survive. Fight for what you believe in... and survive!” Hajime's words echoed through the throne room. And they were filled with a fiery passion, a steadfast

resolve, a chilling calm, and a breezy casualness all at once.

“If there comes a time in everyone’s life where they need to stand up and fight for what they believe in, then for us... that time is now. Set your souls ablaze, everyone! Fight, and survive! If you can manage that, I’ll reward you all with a ticket back home!”

Everyone’s hearts pounded rapidly. They raised their fists into the air and stamped the ground with their feet.

Hajime smiled fearlessly, and said resolutely, “We’re gonna win this.”

Cheers filled the room, flooding out every other sound.

Chapter IV: Preparing for the Decisive Battle

A lone figure stood in a large room that was dimly lit by green glowstone. A massive pair of double doors opened behind him. There were two rows of pillars in the room, spaced apart at even intervals.

The wide space was reminiscent of a temple. But its solemn majesty was marred by how badly damaged the room was.

The figure silently stared at the room's far wall, envisioning the object that had once rested there.

A hesitant voice called out to him from behind, interrupting his reverie by saying, "Hajime-kun."

Hajime looked over his shoulder and replied, "Kaori. How's it looking?"

"Everything's going smoothly. In fact, I even managed to get more materials than you asked for. Thanks to the compass, I can instantly tell where the best ore deposits are located. And none of the monsters here are a threat."

"Well, you do have the body of an apostle, so that's no surprise."

A day had passed since they'd left the Demon Lord's castle.

Hajime had shoved all the demons in a special prison he'd found in the castle that cut off all magic, then locked them in there with a week or so worth of food. After that, he returned to the Schnee Snow Fields to dig up the artifacts he'd hidden earlier. And once that was done, he'd immediately teleported to Heiligh, where he'd downed all the mana potions available, as well as had the nation's best doctors provide him with their mana.

Meanwhile, Liliana had explained the situation to her subjects and gotten everyone ready to evacuate.

He'd also taken everything of value from the capital's warehouses to craft the artifacts people needed right away, including the high-speed travel ones he gave to the emissaries who needed to visit other nations.

Once he finished all that, he'd returned to the Reisen Gorge and used Oscar's ring to open up the shortcut leading to his house at the bottom of the labyrinth. He'd left Myu and Remia there, then gone resource collecting with Kaori.

He'd already restored his Demon Eye and prosthetic arm with the materials he'd found in Oscar's workshop. And so, he'd chosen to use his extensive knowledge of the labyrinth combined with his Synergist skills to find good spots to excavate while Kaori made use of the Compass of Eternal Paths. They gathered materials at a breakneck pace, and in just a day they'd already amassed several dozen tons of ore.

"It's a shame I couldn't find any Divinity Stones large enough to produce Ambrosia... The ones outside Oscar's house were marble-sized at best."

"Well, it is a legendary treasure, you know? If anything, I lucked out by finding the one I did so early on in the abyss. The fact that you even found small fragments of them is good enough. Nice work."

"I'm glad I could help," Kaori said with a smile. Then, she handed her Treasure Trove over to Hajime, stood beside him, and examined the mound of rubble piled up by the far wall.

"This is where you first met Yue, isn't it?"

The half-melted pile of metal was all that remained of the cube that had trapped Yue for centuries.

Hajime nodded, his eyes vibrant and clear. Gone were the dark emotions that had eventually sublimated into a nihilistic rejection of everything. Instead, his eyes were full of hope as he recollected fond memories.

"When I first saw her, I thought I'd stepped into a horror movie or something. It was pitch black, and the only thing I could see was her crimson eyes staring at me. And then, when I got closer, I saw her hair was long and wispy, like a ghost's. You know, when Yue first cried out for help, I almost just shut the door on her and moved on. I thought that nothing good could've come from getting involved with a dangerous girl like her."

"Hehehe... I guess it must've been pretty weird to find a girl down here in the middle of the abyss."

“I know, right? Besides, back then the only thing I cared about was surviving. Thinking back on it now, I’m surprised I even bothered to help her at all.”

Kaori chuckled again and stated, “And now she’s so important to you that you’d destroy the world to get her back. Life sure works in mysterious ways, huh?”

“Tell me about it.”

Hajime and Kaori closed their eyes as the conversation came to a close. They both thought about Yue in that moment. She was the girl he loved most, while she thought of her as a dear friend.

The two of them eventually opened their eyes at the same time, their pupils burning with fierce resolve.

“We’ll get her back,” Kaori whispered.

“Yeah, no matter what,” Hajime replied.

They quietly tapped their fists together after hardening their resolve.

“Oh yeah, uh... I’ve been giving this some thought and...” Hajime suddenly mumbled those words awkwardly.

“Hm? What’re you talking about?” Kaori asked with a puzzled look.

“Kaori, I think you should stay back here when we head to the Sanctuary.”

“Huh? Why...? Oh. You’re worried Ehit might deactivate me again?”

For a moment, Kaori was so hurt that tears sprung to her eyes, but then she caught on to Hajime’s reasoning.

“Yeah. I have come up with some artifacts to resist his power, but I’m not sure how effective they’ll be. He’s the one who made that body of yours, so it’s honestly hard to tell.”

“You... have a point.”

Kaori understood where Hajime was coming from, and his concerns were valid. Plus, if she returned to her original body, she wouldn’t be strong enough to survive within the Sanctuary. That being said, it still hurt being told that she shouldn’t accompany him to the final battle. Kaori’s desire to get Yue back was

just as strong as his, after all.

Hajime saw her pouting and added, “Please don’t make that face. Look, even if we get Yue back, it won’t mean anything if the students down here die, right? I mean, I might not care, but I’m sure you’d be sad. Besides, I need someone to protect Myu and Remia. I plan to leave them here, in Orcus’ house, but there’s no guarantee even this place is safe.”

“Ughhh,” Kaori groaned. But she couldn’t argue. Aside from Hajime, Shea, and Tio, she was the only one capable of fighting apostles on equal footing. Besides, since Hajime had spread propaganda that claimed the attacking army was composed of “fake” apostles led by a fake Ehit, it would help morale for Kaori to stand on the frontlines as a “real” apostle.

Most important of all, Kaori’s main strengths lay in healing. Hajime could give the armies of Tortus the firepower they needed to fight on equal footing with Ehit’s forces, but he couldn’t replicate Kaori’s magical abilities. If she stayed back, she’d be able to keep casualties to a minimum. The more she thought about it, the more she realized Hajime was right.

“Haaah, I guess I have to. It doesn’t sit right with me, but I don’t want to burden you guys. Plus, there are a lot of people I want to keep safe here, too... Fine, I’ll protect everyone until you guys return. And I won’t let anyone lay a finger on Myu-chan or Remia-san, I swear!”

“Thanks. It’s reassuring to know you’ll be here to protect everyone.”

“Yep, you can count on me,” Kaori said with a somewhat forced smile. But a second later, she realized something and her smile became genuine.

“Mhm, you can definitely count on me! I’ll protect Ai-chan-sensei and Lily too!”

“Why’re you bringing those two up?”

“Oh, and I’ll keep Yuka-chan safe as well, of course!”

“What does Sonobe have to do with any of this?”

“Don’t you think it’s time you stopped playing dumb?”

“.....”

Kaori gave Hajime a Yue-tier glare and muttered loud enough for him to hear, “There’s a bunch of other girls who look like they’re infatuated with you now... I can’t believe you’re such a womanizer, Hajime-kun. I haven’t even become someone special to you yet, but you’re already adding more girls to your harem. I’m gonna tell Yue when she gets back.”

Kaori gave Hajime a petulant look, and he raised an eyebrow. He wasn’t annoyed by her attitude or anything. Honestly, he was more surprised at himself for wanting to deny what she’d just said.

Hajime squatted down and reached for the mound of crumbled sealstone that had once been Yue’s prison.

“You know, I really felt that punch back then. Pretty sure that was what snapped me out of it.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean when you went all edgy? Uh, sorry about that. It must have hurt, right?”

It took Kaori a second to figure out what Hajime was referring to, but once she did, she looked down apologetically.

Vivid crimson sparks skittered across the floor. Hajime had used his transmutation on the pile of sealstone. Back then, destroying the prison had taken every ounce of strength he possessed, but now the sealstone’s mana-resistant properties didn’t seem to affect him at all.

As he turned the rubble into stacks of palm-sized cubes, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “That punch shook me to my core. And so did the words you said.”

“Uh, umm, I might have gotten a bit carried away...” Kaori mumbled and fidgeted about as she prepared for a scolding. However, Hajime’s next words caught her by surprise.

“I’m pretty sure no one else could have moved my heart like you did.”

“Huh?”

“Well, I guess Shea and Tio might have been able to, but that’s about it. If anyone else had done the same thing, it wouldn’t have worked.”

“You mean...”

“I guess you’re more special to me than I realized.”

“Hajime-kun...”

Hajime finished processing the sealstone and rose to his feet. Sure, he’d come here to reminisce, but his main objective had been to secure a large supply of sealstone.

Kaori looked up at him, and his kind expression reminded her of the old Hajime she’d known before he’d fallen into the abyss. That made her heart start to beat faster.

“Thanks, Kaori. Thanks for always thinking of me. I figured I should say that before I go off to kill a god.”

“Don’t say that. You make it sound like you’re never coming back.”

“Haha, I guess that did sound a little ominous. Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

Kaori shook her head and replied, “It’s fine. I should be thanking you, too. Your words made me really happy.”

Kaori knew it was too soon to celebrate. But still, she was happy that her feelings had finally gotten through to him, and that she’d become a source of strength for him. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she told herself she wouldn’t cry before the decisive battle and lightly joked, “Hehehe, I’ll have to brag to Yue when she gets back. I wonder what she’ll say when I tell her I finally reached the same level as Shea?”

“She’s just gonna bully you again, you know that, right? I dunno why, but she really likes messing with you.”

“Ugh, it’s probably because she likes seeing my reactions. Just thinking about what she’ll do is making me mad. I need to find a way to get back at her before she returns.”

“I can already tell she’s gonna turn the tables on you and make you go crying back to Yaegashi.”

“Jeez, why do you look so happy about that, Hajime-kun!?” Kaori yelled and

puffed her cheeks out. Hajime simply chuckled and shrugged his shoulders in response.

The conversation died there, but the silence was far from uncomfortable. The two of them stood side by side, reminiscing about Yue.

After a few minutes, Kaori suddenly muttered, “Oh yeah... There’s something I’ve been wondering about. Hajime-kun, is it just me, or have you been transmuting this whole time without any magic circles?”

It hadn’t been important enough for Kaori to bring up earlier, but she had seen Ehit destroy all the magic circles in Hajime’s shoes and clothes.

Wait, doesn’t that mean he made his existence-erasing chains without any magic circles?

“Oh, right. I forgot to tell you that I can do the same thing as Yue now. All I have to do is imagine the magic circle in my mind to cast my Synergist spells.”

“Wait, when did you learn a skill like that?”

Hajime tossed Kaori his Status Plate. He’d gotten a new one at the royal palace to replace the one he’d lost. Kaori caught it, and her jaw dropped open when she saw what it said.

“It’s one of the Synergist job’s derivative skills. It’s called Image Composition. It lets me use imaginary magic circles to cast spells. Apparently, that’s the final derivative skill of my job.”

Hajime had pushed himself to the limit in order to resist Ehit’s Divine Edict, and in doing so had reached the peak of Synergy through willpower alone. However, that wasn’t the only new ability he had obtained.

“Umm, Hajime-kun? What about this skill here? Transcendence, I mean. It seems to be one of Limit Break’s derivative skills.”

“Oh. Put simply, that skill raises the limit of my talent.”

It didn’t increase any of Hajime’s stats, nor did it grant him any special abilities. However, it vastly increased the cap on all of those things by upgrading his latent talent. His new theoretical maximum was far higher than any human was capable of. Given time, his strength could surpass the power of the gods.

It was a skill only true masters of their craft could acquire. Hence why its name was Transcendence. It boosted the natural talents someone was born with to an immense degree and granted the wielder an average person's talent in fields of magic they had no affinity for.

However, it was such a difficult skill to use that it was unlikely anyone would be able to activate it more than once in their life, even if they acquired it.

“There's one thing I'm sure of now that I have that skill. My Synergist abilities have finally surpassed Oscar Orcus'.”

That was why Hajime had been so confident that he'd be able to make enough weapons for everyone within three days, as well as create an inferior version of the Crystal Key all by himself. If he combined his strengthened abilities with evolution magic, he would be able to surpass the greatest Synergist in history, Oscar Orcus.

“Before, I had a hard time transmuting sealstone. Because it dampens magic, I couldn't even keep much of it in my Treasure Trove. Though, I guess I wouldn't have kept it even if I could've, since it seemed to bring back bad memories for Yue. Anyway, the point is, I can easily mold it however I want now.”

“I-I see... Hehehe, I guess Ehit really messed up by not killing you when he had the chance.”

“Yep. By the way, I'm planning on making a unique artifact for you too, Kaori.”

“I'm looking forward to it.”

While they talked, Hajime finished storing all the sealstone inside his Treasure Trove. And with that, he finally had enough raw materials to begin the real work.

It was time to start mass-producing weapons. But just as he turned around to leave, Hajime spotted something out of the corner of his eye.

“Hm? What's this?”

There was a small crest engraved onto the floor where the sealstone had been.

“What did you find, Hajime-kun? Is that... a crest? It looks just like the one we

saw in the Frost Caverns. Vandre Schnee's..."

Kaori cocked her head to one side. Hajime nodded and took out the teardrop-shaped pendant they'd received for clearing the Frost Caverns. The moment it left his Treasure Trove, they noticed a change.

"Are they... resonating with each other?"

A high-pitched whining noise filled the room. And a second later, the pendant and the crest on the floor both began to vibrate.

Hajime felt a tug in his palm and looked down to see the pendant slowly inching toward the crest. Upon closer inspection, he noticed a small hole in the crest just large enough for Vandre's pendant.

"Kaori, just in case, get back."

"O-Okay. Be careful."

Kaori took a step backward, and Hajime placed the pendant into the depression. A moment later, the crest began to glow... and a metallic grinding noise resounded as a section of the floor rose. It formed a stone pillar about thirty centimeters in diameter and stopped rising once it was about waist-height. A section of the pillar slid back to reveal a small opening.

"I never knew there was something like this here. I guess you wouldn't be able to open whatever this is without first beating the Frost Caverns..."

"It seems that way. Since it was right underneath Yue's prison, I get the feeling this is something related to her."

Sitting inside the pillar was a colorless, transparent jewel the size of a pinball. It looked like a miniature version of the crystal balls seers used. Hajime picked it up and examined it from all sides. And after a few seconds, he figured out what it was.

"This is that same projection artifact Oscar and the others used to play the messages they recorded to the people who cleared their labyrinths."

"I see... There's only one person who would leave something like that here."

"Let's see what the message says."

Hajime channeled a little mana into the crystal. Dark golden light filled the dim room, blotting out the illumination of the green glowstones.

Hajime and Kaori squinted, and a familiar figure emerged from the whirlpool of light. The message he delivered was filled with resolve, repentance, and overflowing love. And at the end, he made one deeply moving, heartfelt wish before disappearing.

The light began to fade, leaving Hajime and Kaori alone with their thoughts. Kaori's face was streaked with tears. It was difficult to describe what exactly they were feeling, but the message had left a deep impression on them.

"We have to show this to Yue..." Kaori muttered.

"Yeah, definitely. Kaori, you keep this. I don't want to risk this getting broken when we invade the Sanctuary."

"Sure. I promise to keep it safe."

Hajime handed the crystal to Kaori and she held it close to her chest.

"Now then, we don't have much time. Let's head back so I can start mass-producing artifacts."

"It's weird to hear that when normally, nations would go to war over just one artifact."

Hajime shrugged his shoulders and took one last look around the room where he'd first met Yue. When his gaze reached the spot where she'd been sealed, he closed his eyes for a brief moment. He then turned around and left the room without looking back.

Kaori gracefully followed after him. She closed the doors behind them, plunging the room into darkness once more. However, the darkness that filled the room was warm and inviting, not cold and desolate.

Hajime and Kaori returned to Oscar's house, which was hidden in the deepest section of the labyrinth.

Oscar had carved an alcove out of the slate-gray rock for his house and the surrounding garden, and the moment Hajime and Kaori stepped into that

alcove, Myu poked her head out of one of the house's third-floor windows and smiled at him.

"Daddy, Kaori-onee-chan! Welcome back!" Myu exclaimed as she ran down the stairs, out of the house, and jumped into Hajime's arms.

"I'm back, Myu."

"We're back, Myu-chan."

Hajime and Kaori had spent the whole day gathering ore, so Myu had felt lonely. Though neither Hajime nor Kaori had gotten any rest since leaving the Demon Lord's castle, Myu's dopey smile was enough to blow their exhaustion away.

As they walked into the house, the sound of slippers slapping against the floor echoed across the walls. A moment later, Remia walked into the foyer. She was wearing an apron over her dress and had a ladle in one arm.

"Welcome home, Dear. And you as well, Kaori-san. I'm glad to see you're both safe."

"Th-Thanks," Hajime stammered.

"Excuse me? 'Dear'? You're doing this on purpose, aren't you, Remia-san?"

"Would you like dinner, a bath, or your wife and daughter?"

"Okay, you're definitely doing this on purpose! Stop using those cliched lines! Also, don't just casually include your daughter in that!"

"Oh my, Kaori-san. I was simply asking if he wanted to spend some quality family time with us. Ufufu, what in the world were you imagining?"

"I-I wasn't imagining anything weird! Really, I mean it!"

"In that case, Dear, would you prefer having Kaori-san instead?"

"What!? M-Me!? Quit teasing me, Remia-san!" Kaori yelled that and glared at Remia, who just chuckled. It seemed her true goal had been to fluster Kaori, not Hajime. Older women like Yue and Remia loved bullying Kaori.

Hajime gave Kaori a sympathetic pat on the shoulder and said, "Look, let's just leave it at that, Remia. We don't have much time, so I'm afraid I'll have to head

straight to the workshop. Please bring my food there.”

“I see... You haven’t slept at all, but I guess I can’t really ask you to rest. If you don’t push yourself here, we won’t survive what’s coming.”

She’d tried joking around with Hajime and Kaori in an attempt to get them to relax, but unfortunately, it hadn’t worked. Though she was worried about their wellbeing, Remia knew there wasn’t any time to rest.

“Very well, I shall bring you your food once it’s ready. Oh, the princess left a message for you as well. She said things are progressing smoothly.”

Remia had been handling all correspondence while Hajime was out gathering materials. Shizuku had already succeeded in convincing Gahard to join the alliance. And with the queen’s help, Liliana had convinced the capital’s residents of the danger they faced, then started evacuating them to the empire while the empire’s troops teleported in.

Construction of the fortress was ahead of schedule as well.

I guess focusing on getting Nomura and the other builders’ artifacts done first was the right call.

Hajime had, much to Liliana and the nobles’ chagrin, raided the royal treasury and transmuted all the artifacts within it into artifacts suited to Kentarou and the other earth magic specialists.

Remia had also received a message from Verbergen. It appeared Suzu and Ryutarou had managed to convince Ulfric and the other elders to join the fight. As for the Haulia... Well, they hadn’t even taken any convincing. Once their preparations were complete, the beastmen would travel through the portal to Heiligh.

“I see... Looks like everything’s going better than planned.”

“Aiko-san’s speeches apparently helped a lot. The people love the Fertility Goddess. She even used the portals to travel to the empire and Verbergen to give speeches there as well. Plus, it helped that the new pope sanctified this as a proper holy crusade.”

“The new pope’s some old dude the princess specifically brought over from

the middle of nowhere, right? Well, he's the leader of the church now, so I guess it makes sense that people would listen to him. If he's backing Sensei, it makes sense that no one would doubt her."

Liliana had a surprisingly good eye when it came to judging people's character. Not only that, but she was a skilled leader as well. Hajime had to admit she was far more competent than he'd given her credit for. She was resolved to save her country, and though she lacked experience, the queen and her advisors were there to assist her. There was no one better suited to lead humanity during this crisis than her.

"What about the people I sent to the other nations?"

"There has been no word from them, I'm afraid. Nothing from Tio-san, either."

"Well, I didn't expect much. Even with artifacts, you can only travel so fast."

There were a few students, as well as several knights, working directly for Simon, the new pope, who had traveled to various regions as official Heiligh ambassadors. They all used Skyboards, a new artifact that Hajime had developed. As the name suggested, they were surfboards that let the user surf through the sky. They wrapped the user in a spatial magic barrier to cut down air resistance and used gravity magic to emulate flight. Their average cruising speed was around 200km/h, though those with larger mana pools could accelerate them to 300km/h. However, they took a lot of mana to operate, and average people needed frequent breaks when using them. Still, Hajime surmised that everyone should have reached their respective destinations around now. Once they did, they could easily open a portal back to Heiligh and return instantly.

"Thanks for the update. And sorry for making you take over communications. I know you're not used to this kinda stuff."

"You have nothing to apologize for... If anything, I'm happy I can help in some way. I owe you so much... And I am your wife."

"You're definitely not my wife."

"Now now, don't sweat the details."

“This is a pretty damn big detail.”

“Ufufu...”

“Uh, umm, anyway...” Hajime backed down, realizing that he had no means to break through that smile of Remia’s. He also didn’t want to argue in front of Myu. And honestly, Remia seemed to be enjoying the act, so he saw no reason to force her to drop it.

Well, as long as Myu’s a part of my life, we’re basically family... Hajime justified his decision to himself, then passed Myu over to Remia. He gave her head one last pat before heading over to Oscar’s workshop.

The workshop was large enough to fit a football field. It also had a bunch of tools that facilitated efficient transmutation, making it the perfect space for a Synergist.

Once inside, Hajime pulled a veritable mountain of raw materials out of his Treasure Trove and said, “Now then, let’s see how much we can accelerate things. Kaori, I’ll need your help.”

“Sure thing! Leave everything to me!”

Hajime transmuted a giant crystal pillar in the center of the workshop. Kaori circled to the other side of it and the two of them looked at each other through the transparent pillar.

Hajime wanted to at least partially alleviate the time crunch he was under, which was why he’d asked Kaori to accompany him. She was the most proficient user of restoration magic, which controlled time.

“Ready? Let’s do this— Transmute!”

“Chrono Rupture!”

Crimson sparks and pale violet light intersected at the center of the pillar.

Chrono Rupture was a restoration magic spell that stretched out time. Because of how entwined it was with the true nature of restoration magic, it was one of the hardest spells to master. In fact, it was impossible for normal humans to ever acquire it.

In the same way that Hajime had overcome his limits and unlocked

Transcendence, Kaori had reached new heights with her restoration magic. What they were attempting was only possible because they were both masters of their respective fields.

Hajime's crimson sparks ran down the length of the pillar, binding Kaori's violet mana to the crystal. After a little while, her hair started whipping around her head slower than usual. Everything in the workshop seemed to lose its color.

"Ngh... Hajime-kun."

"That's enough, Kaori. Good job."

Kaori doubled over and rested her hands on her knees, panting. Though they'd only been casting for a few seconds, they'd used up a lot of mana.

"Haaah... Haaah... D-Did it work?"

"Yep. From the looks of things, I can stretch time to about... a factor of ten. If I was by myself, I would have been lucky to even make time move twice as slow. Thanks. This'll make things a lot easier."

"Haaah... Thank goodness."

Hajime smiled tiredly. The transparent pillar now exuded a faint crimson light. Kaori blushed at the praise and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now that we made it, we should probably give it a name... Hyperbolic Time Chamber sounds good, right?"

"You shouldn't steal names like that. Why don't we just call it Hour Crystal?"

"But that doesn't sound as cool..."

"Jeez, who cares about how cool it sounds? Come on, get to work! I'll go get more ore for you!"

"Fine..."

Despite feeling unhappy with Kaori's naming sense, Hajime nevertheless nodded and activated the Hour Crystal. Like before, everything in the workshop became slightly less colorful. So long as the crystal was active, time within the workshop moved ten times slower than the outside world. One hour inside it

equaled only six minutes outside.

Myu and Remia suddenly walked into the workshop at that exact moment.

“Daddy, we brought you food!”

“Oh my, it feels rather strange in here.”

Remia was carrying a tray piled high with sandwiches. She’d made food that was easy to eat with one hand so as not to disturb their work. Hajime motioned to Remia to wait a moment, and she retreated to the workshop’s entrance together with Kaori and Myu.

“Well, Oscar Orcus, it’s time to prove that I’ve surpassed you,” he declared with a confident smile.

In many ways, Oscar was Hajime’s mentor. Not only had he granted Hajime creation magic, but he’d also left behind an enormous amount of research notes and artifacts. Though they were separated by millennia, Hajime considered Oscar his master. And like any good student, he wished to surpass his master. After all, if Hajime wished to achieve what Oscar and the Liberators couldn’t, he had no choice but to do that.

“Transmute!”

Crimson sparks filled the entire room. They made it look as though the workshop was studded with bright red rubies. The magic circles Oscar had drawn all began to glow as they activated, and Hajime engraved new ones into specific locations to add to the design. Magic circles dotted the ceiling, the walls, and the floor. Once he had finished them, he crafted one massive three-dimensional magic circle to encompass all of them.

A second later, the mountain of ore began to undulate.

Hajime had used Ore Desynthesis to refine the various metals he’d gathered, then activated creation magic to imbue each one with the appropriate magic. He’d also made use of Accelerated Transmutation to continually speed the process up.

Refined ingots enchanted with ancient magic appeared one after another. And the moment each one finished, it vanished because another one of the

magic circles was teleporting each ingot to its designated location.

Hajime then personally took those refined ingots and started transmuting them into all sorts of equipment. In seconds he'd made a sword, a shield, a spear, a helmet, a suit of armor, some bullets, and a few other weapons. He swiftly appraised each one to make sure there were no defects, then sent each type of equipment to a different magic circle.

Once that was done, the refined ingots started getting teleported to those magic circles, which then used the model swords, shields, *etc.* to create duplicates using the newly arrived materials. Moreover, the completed duplicates were sent to another circle that opened up a portal in the ground to transport them to the kingdom.

"H-Hajime-kun... Did you just...?" Kaori muttered absentmindedly, staring at the workshop in awe.

"Yeah, I turned the entire workshop into a huge artifact. It's an automated weapons factory now."

Indeed, the whole process wasn't too different from factories back on earth. So long as there were enough materials, the original weapons that served as blueprints remained in place, and Hajime kept supplying the factory with mana, it would continue refining, crafting, and teleporting equipment indefinitely.

No wonder Hajime-kun seemed so confident when he said he could make enough weapons for everyone.

The concept of mass production probably hadn't existed in Oscar Orcus' time. This was a style of Transmutation only someone from a post-industrial society like Hajime could've created. And best of all, time moved ten times slower within this workshop, so dozens of artifacts popped through the kingdom's portal every minute. Hajime had no doubt Lilia was staring at the growing pile of legendary-tier artifacts with awe.

"I can leave this alone and it'll keep chugging, so I guess I can afford to take a short break. Remia, Myu, sorry for the wait. Let's eat now."

"O-Okay!"

"Oh my, I'm not sure the proper words to express my amazement even exist."

Remia's reaction was hardly surprising. A second ago, Hajime had been surrounded by magic circles glowing in geometric patterns, waving his hands like a conductor leading an orchestra. He'd seemed like a magician from a fairy tale, creating wonders one after another with just a snap of his fingers. But now, he looked like a normal boy again as he reached for a sandwich and muttered, "Man, I'm starving."

Hajime spent an hour recharging, though he continued transmuting simple things while he ate. Once he'd consumed enough food to last him a day he said, "Okay, now I need to start making Sensei and everyone else's special artifacts. I've also gotta make some of the bigger weapons that shoot down huge groups. Kaori, can you get me some more ore?"

"Of course! But Hajime-kun, make sure you rest properly once you're done. We've got tons of time now, thanks to the Hour Crystal."

"Yeah, I know. Myu, Remia, I want you guys to stay in contact with the others. Time moves slower in here, so I might miss important developments. Let me know if anything happens. I'll be too focused on work to notice on my own."

"Okay!"

"Very well. When should I next bring you food?"

"Two hours from now should be good."

"That'll be almost an entire day for you. Are you planning to work the whole time?"

Remia gave Hajime a worried look, while Kaori smiled threateningly at him.

He awkwardly averted his gaze and retorted, "Look, it's going to take everyone time to get used to their new artifacts. If I don't send them over as soon as possible, they might not be able to use them to their fullest."

He had a point. The faster Hajime got everyone their specialized artifacts, the more proficient they'd be with them.

Kaori and Remia nodded reluctantly, though they still looked worried. But before they could say anything else, Hajime started transmuting.

"There's no guarantee this house is entirely safe. It's possible Ehit or someone

else might take control of people we know and send them here to attack us.”

However, the chances of that seemed exceedingly slim. Ehit had called this his final game. He didn't see the destruction of Tortus as a war. In his eyes, it was just a way to stave off boredom. Due to that, Hajime doubted he would go through all the trouble of pinpointing his location and sending assassins after him.

That being said, it was still better to be safe than sorry. And so, he decided to create the prototype for a new weapon he'd designed. That way, Remia and Myu would have some protection.

Hajime visualized the structure in his mind, then projected a hologram of that visualization into the center of the workshop. As the hologram solidified, he waved his hands like a conductor again, and crimson sparks jumped around the mountain of ore.

The mountain wriggled like an egg that was just about to hatch. Beams of red light shot out from the center, and a pair of arms reached out of it. They pushed away the mountain of unrefined ore, revealing a three-meter tall metallic creature with eight legs. Its upper body resembled an asura, with six arms and a demonic face.

Deadly weapons jutted out of its back and torso, while its eyes gleamed crimson, as did the large jewel encrusted in its chest.

“Y-You just keep making crazy things one after another, huh?”

“Woooooow, it's so cool!”

“Huh? Y-You think this looks cool, Myu? Your mother's a bit scared of it...”

Kaori and Remia looked a bit creeped out, but Myu's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Hajime grinned at Myu, handed her a small ring, and said, “This golem's made mostly of ore, but it uses a few monster parts and is powered by a mana crystal, so it's half-monster. Normally, you control it with spirit stone, but you can give it verbal commands too, if you want. It's been programmed to listen to anyone wearing that ring.”

The golem was a living weapon that was a mixture of monster and machine. However, it had no will of its own, and wouldn't move without orders. Hajime had created it by combining creation magic with metamorphosis magic.

He'd gotten the idea for it from the scorpion monster he and Yue had fought when they first met. That thing had been powered up by ore in its carapace, but since Hajime was a Synergist, he'd done the opposite and created a machine which he'd upgraded with monster parts.

"You're giving it to me?"

"Yep. This is your personal golem, Myu. No one else can use it."

"Mine... and mine alone...Whoaaaaaa..."

Myu really took after Hajime. The idea of a special weapon only she could use got her blood boiling.

The ring absorbed mana from the surroundings, much like the equipment Hajime had made for the Haulia. It was also enchanted with spirit magic to ensure that once a user was registered, no one else could use it. Hajime had meant it when he'd said this golem belonged solely to Myu.

Remia seemed to want to tell Myu to put the golem back where it came from, but she couldn't find the heart to.

"Well, Myu, I'm counting on you to keep watch now!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Myu said that and gave Hajime a crisp salute, which made Remia and Kaori burst out laughing.

He then turned to them with a smile and said, "I'm counting on you two as well. I'm gonna need to concentrate, so unless it's an emergency, don't come back until two hours are up."

They nodded to him and strode out of the workshop. Myu followed behind them, sitting on the shoulder of her new pet golem.

Once they were gone, Hajime's smile vanished, and he looked up at the ceiling. Loneliness and anger marred his expression.

After a few seconds, he took out the small shards of Divinity Stone that Kaori had been able to find. He also withdrew all the ore he'd collected from his

Treasure Trove.

“Yue...” he whispered, his voice full of too many emotions to count.

A second later, a whirlpool of crimson mana erupted from him.

One hour later (in normal time).

“Ahhh,” Hajime groaned softly as he soaked in the bath where he’d once climbed the stairs to adulthood with Yue. He looked like a zombie.

It hadn’t been two hours yet, and Hajime hadn’t finished making all the artifacts he’d planned to. And yet, there he was relaxing.

“Daddy!” Myu shouted, tottering over to where Hajime was. He smiled gently at her and like always, she jumped at him. He hurriedly got to his feet to catch her.

“Hey, that’s dangerous, Myu.”

“Hehehehe... I’m sorryyy.”

It was obvious from her tone that Myu wasn’t the least bit sorry. Shaking his head, Hajime slowly lowered her into the bath to let her get used to the temperature.

She let out a sigh of contentment and closed her eyes. Myu looked absolutely adorable, and Hajime started combing his fingers through her emerald-green hair.

In response, she smiled and let him have his fun for a few seconds before suddenly frowning and shouting, “Wait, no! Bad Daddy! I still haven’t forgiven you!”

“I said I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to make you guys worry.”

“I don’t believe your sorries anymore!” Myu shouted as she puffed her cheeks out indignantly and pointed up at him. The effect was ruined somewhat by the fact that she was still sitting on Hajime’s lap, though.

The reason Hajime was relaxing was because a few minutes ago, Remia had entered the workshop and found him collapsed on the floor... in a puddle of his

own blood.

Naturally, she'd screamed when she'd seen him covered in cuts and bleeding from every pore, so Myu had rushed in. When she'd seen the state Hajime was in, she'd started sobbing.

Remia had hurriedly contacted Kaori, who'd rushed back and used restoration magic on Hajime. His injuries had been almost as bad as they were back at the Demon Lord's castle, and it had taken all of Kaori's considerable healing prowess to bring him back from the brink of death. When Hajime had finally opened his eyes again, Kaori had breathed a sigh of relief. But the first words out of his mouth had been, "Did it work? Yes! My trump card's finally complete."

Obviously, Kaori, Remia, and Myu had gotten quite angry and gave him a long lecture about taking better care of himself, but Hajime had just brushed them off, saying, "My bad. But I'm fine now, don't worry."

Not only that, but he'd also tried to go straight back to work, since Kaori had been kind enough to share her mana with him.

That was the last straw. The three girls had lost their patience, dragged Hajime out of the workshop, and forced him to take a bath and rest for a bit. They knew he wouldn't let himself rest if he stayed in the workshop.

"It's my job to watch you! No working in the bath!"

"Look, even I wouldn't do something that inefficient."

Hajime was telling the truth, but Myu didn't look convinced. His latest stunt had truly damaged her trust in him.

"I'm going to be watching you in the workshop, too!"

"Seriously?" Hajime murmured as he leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. He didn't feel like he'd pushed himself too hard. If anything, he'd just done what he needed to do. But as a result, he'd nearly died and needed Kaori to save him, so he couldn't really argue.

That being said, he had no intention of stopping. If he didn't do everything in his power to make this rescue plan a success, he wouldn't be able to live with

himself. He was going to pour every ounce of his being into this final battle.

If it was for the sake of getting Yue back, no price was too great. However, he wasn't sure how he could explain that to Myu in a way she could understand.

Myu stared at him for a few seconds, then smiled and said, "Daddy, when Yue-onee-chan comes back, let's all take a bath together! I want you to make a bunch of bath toys!"

She splashed around in the water to emphasize her excitement.

"I can't do anything to help, but I can think of all the fun things we'll do later! So let's play lots when Yue-onee-chan's back!"

"Myu..."

Hajime was perceptive enough to understand why Myu had suddenly brought that up. He'd been wondering how he could explain himself to her, but she'd seen right through him all along.

Even though she was powerless to help, she was still doing her best to find some way to ease her beloved father's worries. And in order to cheer others up, she first had to act cheerful herself.

Myu was a strong girl. She had absolute faith that if she told Hajime about her hopes for the future, he'd make them all come true. And that meant he couldn't afford to kick the bucket here.

Upon seeing her cheerful smile, Hajime scratched his head, smiled right back at her, and said, "Yeah. We'll do all sorts of fun things once Yue returns, so make sure to think of some good games. I'll come up with a lot of interesting toys, too."

"Okay..." Myu replied, emulating Yue's speech quirks. She sounded so cute that Hajime started unconsciously patting her head.

The loneliness he'd been holding in this whole time lessened just a little, and Hajime was able to truly relax for the first time since Yue's abduction. But just then, Remia and Kaori walked into the bathroom.

"My, it seems like you two are enjoying yourselves. Mind if we join you?"

"H-Hajime-kun, I-I hope this is okay."

“I figured this was gonna happen when Myu came in.”

They had both wrapped towels around themselves, but those towels weren't covering much. Unsurprisingly, they were blushing with embarrassment.

Technically, this wasn't Kaori's real body, but she was still embarrassed about being seen naked. Normal apostles were so artificially perfect that they looked terrifying, but she somehow looked beautiful.



However, she wasn't exuding sex appeal the way Remia was. Remia even let out a quiet moan as she dipped her toes into the water, accentuating her charm. Any guy other than Hajime wouldn't have been able to control themselves. Of course, Remia would never take a bath with a guy like that in the first place.

"Should I get out?" Hajime asked pointedly. Though, it hadn't even been five minutes since he'd started his bath.

A hint of worry crossed Remia's expression and she hurriedly replied, "If we're bothering you, we'll leave. But I feel like you shouldn't be alone right now. If you're by yourself, you'll end up thinking depressing thoughts, won't you? I just thought it would be easier for you to relax if we were all here by your side. You can't overcome sorrow through willpower alone."

"....."

Hajime had no room to argue, seeing as Myu had just been trying to cheer him up. Besides, when he'd been left to his own devices, he'd pushed himself so hard he'd nearly died again.

"You need to be with people who care about you when you're feeling down. When I thought you died, it was Shizuku-chan who helped me pull through. I know I can't replace Yue, but I still want to be there for you. If I don't do at least this much, then Yue will mock me forever."

Smiling, Kaori walked over to Hajime's side. Without Shizuku, she definitely would have given into despair when Hajime fell into the abyss. And so, she knew that Hajime needed someone better than anyone else.

Hajime couldn't bring himself to refuse the girls' kindness, and he smiled tiredly at them.

"Thanks. Honestly, if I don't pull myself together, Yue'll be mocking me forever, not you."

"I can't imagine her ever making fun of you."

"Ufufu. Yue-san loves you too much for that, Hajime-san."

The three of them chuckled as they reminisced about Yue.

“Mrr...” Myu murmured.

“Hm? Looks like Myu’s getting sleepy.”

Her eyes were half-closed and she was resting against Hajime’s chest. She hadn’t slept a wink since they’d left the Demon Lord’s castle, so it was amazing she’d lasted this long.

“Guess I should clean her up and put her to bed before she conks out.”

Hajime hadn’t spent too long in the bath, but he felt refreshed all the same. He was still planning on taking a short nap in the workshop to regain his strength, but his mental exhaustion had disappeared entirely.

Smiling, Remia noticed Kaori was glancing nervously from Hajime to the shower area. After a few seconds, it suddenly hit her.

“Very well, then. In that case, Hajime-san, why don’t you let me wash your front for you while you wash Myu?”

“I can wash my back my— Wait, did you just say front?” Hajime said that in an icy tone and glared at Remia, but she just smiled warmly at him.

“Yes, I imagine Kaori-san would like to wash your back. Isn’t that right, Kaori-san?”

“What!? Remia-san, what’re you saying!? Y-You can’t wash h-his front!”

“My, would you prefer to do it instead?”

“M-Me!? W-Wash Hajime-kun’s f-front...?” Kaori mumbled those words as her gaze slid down to a particular body part of Hajime’s. Shortly after that, her face went beet red.

“Morons. No way I’m letting you guys wash me.”

“But Hajime-san, think of how much Kaori-san has done for you. She’s working so hard to get you more materials, too... Don’t you think she deserves a reward?”

“Remia-san... Thank you...”

“You’ve got a point, but I’m not Tio. Only perverts would let someone else wash their dick.”

“I’m sure Kaori-san would consider it an honor, though...” Remia said that as she turned to Kaori, who averted her gaze. Judging by Kaori’s expression, she agreed with that sentiment.

“Kaori... I misjudged you.”

“Please don’t give me that pitying look!” Kaori said that, then squatted down and hid her face underwater.

Sighing, Hajime got up and took Myu over to the shower area. As he left, he heard Remia say, “Kaori-san, I heard from Myu that ‘Kaori-onee-chan is an assertive woman.’”

“Myu-chan said that!?”

“Now is the time to be assertive, is it not?”

“W-Well... Wait, why does it have to be now!?”

“Very well, I shall compromise here. The three of us can wash Hajime-san’s front together.”

“I guess it’d be less nerve-wracking if we all... Wait, what!? Did you just say the *three* of us!? What on earth do you plan on making Myu-chan do, Remia-san!?”

“Oh my... Ufufu...”

“You can’t just laugh this one off!”

Poor Kaori. Everyone likes messing with her.

The scary thing was that despite her complaints, Kaori seemed to enjoy being teased. Even when Yue pulled pranks on her, it looked like she was having fun.

I guess Yue’s conditioned her to enjoy being toyed with.

Of course, Hajime would never say that to her face. Still, he was glad Remia was helping Kaori cope with her loneliness the same way she’d helped him.

“When Yue gets back, Kaori’s life is going to be hell, huh?”

“Mrr?” Myu groaned and groggily looked up at Hajime while he washed her hair.

Your mom and Yue have a lot in common, it seems.

About a day later, Shea arrived.

“Hajime-san, I’m back!” she shouted as she burst through the door of Hajime’s workshop.

Judging by how excitedly she was hopping up and down, Hajime guessed her mission to enlist Miledi Reisen’s assistance had been a success.

Her eyes sparkled with joy when she saw that Hajime had managed to remake his prosthetic arm and eye.

Smiling, Hajime turned to her.

“Welcome back, Shea. I take it you were able to find Miledi?”

“Yep! Apparently, some apostles went to attack her before I got there, but...”

“Seriously? Did she come out okay?”

“Yeah, she wiped the floor with all of them. Her private room and golems were all fine. It turns out she’s really scary when she’s fighting for real.”

“I guess it makes sense, since she’s a Liberator and all.”

“Exactly. Unfortunately, Miledi-san said she can’t leave her labyrinth without careful preparation, so I wasn’t able to bring her back. But she said she’d be there for the final battle, along with her golem army.”

Shea had a wistful look in her eyes as she said that.

I can’t believe someone as unbelievably annoying as Miledi actually sat down to have a serious conversation with Shea.

Noticing the incredulous look on Hajime’s face, Shea smiled sadly and said, “I know what you’re thinking, but she might finally be able to achieve her ultimate dream. When I told her we were planning on bringing down Ehit she looked... happy isn’t really the right word. Sorry, I can’t think of a good way to describe it.”

“I see... It’s probably not something that can be put into words.”

Miledi Reisen was the leader of the Liberators. Even after her comrades had

died, she'd transferred her soul into a golem and continued waiting deep in that ravine for thousands of years. No matter how things ended up, she'd spent her entire life working up to this decisive battle. Hajime doubted anyone living in this era would be able to understand her feelings.

“Oh, but she started acting super annoying again pretty fast. She was only quiet for a minute, then she started saying crap like, ‘I see, I see, so you came here to beg for my help. Well, I guess I am the world’s prettiest and smartest mage. It sure is tough, having people ask me for help even after all these millennia. But don’t worry, I’ll save you guys! You better be grateful! Go on, get down on your knees and prostrate yourself before me!’ So I brought her down with a heel kick and reminded her of her place. By the time I left, she was the one prostrating before me!”

“I-I see.”

“Anyway, she said she needs to preserve her strength before the final battle so since I couldn’t bring her over I nabbed all the stuff that looked useful from her labyrinth.”

Shea grinned mischievously as she patted the bulging sack slung over her shoulder. Hajime had no doubt she'd basically robbed Miledi the same way he had when they'd first cleared her labyrinth. He could just imagine Miledi crying in a corner while Shea looted the place.

“How about you, Hajime-san? How are things on your end? I heard from Remia that time moves slower in your workshop and you’ve already spent ten days in here.”

Shea looked around the workshop, her ears twitching excitedly as she watched the automated production line create countless weapons and teleport them away.

“I’ve been making sure to eat and sleep, so I’m in perfect condition now. As you can see, artifact production is going smoothly. More importantly, what’d you bring back from Miledi’s place?”

“For starters, this thing,” Shea said as she sat down on a nearby chair and put a small white marble on the table. “This is the anti Divine Edict artifact.”

“Err, what are you talking about?”

Is that supposed to be its name? Even the names she gives things are annoying. Maybe she just does this to tick Ehit off.

Fortunately, the artifact itself had been made by Oscar, and like all things Oscar had made, it was high-quality.

Still a little put off by the name, Hajime picked up the marble and started analyzing it.

“Wow, this is impressive. It’s basically an interference device.”

Shea cocked her head inquisitively.

“That Divine Edict of his is just a really powerful spirit magic spell. It imprints the caster’s will onto the soul of the target, forcing them to obey all commands. The reason Ehit prefaces each of his commands with his name is because it provides a locus for the spell and forces the target’s attention onto him.”

“I see... Is that also why the spell gets stronger when he uses that longer name?”

“Yeah, I’m guessing that’s his true name. Which is why this... this... Fuck it, I’m not using that stupid name Miledi gave it!”

“Why don’t we come up with a new name for it?”

It was impressive how Miledi managed to annoy Hajime even when she wasn’t there.

“Hmm, let’s call it Soul Shell for now. It surrounds the user’s soul with their own will, dispersing the force of Ehit’s commands.”

“Oh, so that’s why you called it an interference device.”

“Yeah. Oscar even thought up a contingency in case the artifact gets stolen from you too. With this, we’re one step closer to beating Ehit. Good work, Shea.”

“Hehehe, I’m glad I could help.”

Hajime smiled at Shea, and her ears flopped back and forth happily. Really, he should have been thanking Miledi for handing this over, but Hajime refused to

thank her for anything. Shea probably felt the same way.

“Oh, I got this too.”

“A dagger? It feels pretty powerful. What’s it—? Holy shit.”

The next thing Shea brought out of her sack was a small dagger with a black sheath. Hajime gasped in surprise as he unsheathed the dagger and stared at its sky-blue blade. It looked as though the blade had been molded out of sapphire.

He could tell from a glance that this wasn’t one of the few holy swords passed down through Tortus’ history. No, the oppressive aura emanating from the blade was something only concept magic could produce.

“It’s called the Godslayer Dagger. The concept magic it’s imbued with is the ability to kill gods.”

“I guess this is one of the three concept magic artifacts Lyutillis said the Liberators were able to make. Tch, I can’t believe Miledi was hanging onto it this whole time. If she had something like this, she should have given it to us from the start.”

“I told her that too, but she just said ‘Huh? Didn’t you say you weren’t gonna bother killing god? Why would I give a *god* killing weapon to someone who’s not interested in fighting god? Now, if you want this, you better lick my boots and apologize for blowing up my room last time! Maybe then I’ll think about giving it to you, mwahahaha!’”

“I see...”

“Yep. But don’t worry, I hit her with that lariat move you taught me and blew up her room again to remind her of her place. She upgraded her defenses since the last time we saw her, but it wasn’t enough to escape my iron fist! Hehehe, making her bow down before me felt so good!”

“I-I see...”

Man, Shea’s become vicious. I probably shouldn’t let her get close to Miledi again, huh?

Hajime didn’t want to see Shea turn into a merciless tyrant who beat up anyone who annoyed her. Naturally, he didn’t realize the irony in that wish.

“By the way, the third artifact they made was called the Arrow of Boundaries... and it was what they used to open a path to the Sanctuary, but it was lost when they were defeated.”

The Liberators had made a few inferior copies of it though, and Shea had brought one of those back. Of course, the inferior version wasn't capable of forcing open a path to the Sanctuary, but combined with Hajime's inferior version of the Crystal Key, it might just be enough.

“Oh yeah, Miledi-san warned me that the Liberators were chased into hiding by the people of the world before they got a chance to fight Ehit, so she's not sure how effective the Godslayer Dagger will be. But she said that it absolutely won't harm Yue-san's soul, so we should be able to make use of it.”

“That's reassuring. I designed a trump card of my own, but the more options we have the better. If this dagger won't hurt Yue, then it's definitely worth keeping around.”

As Hajime slipped the dagger back into its sheath, Shea frowned unhappily and said, “Though I wouldn't trust it too much. Apparently, the Liberators made this while wasted. They were mad that they weren't able to use their god killing concept magic on Ehit, so they started drinking and began competing to see who could come up with the best insult for Ehit. Eventually, they passed out... and when they woke up the next morning, this dagger was sitting on the table.”

“Are you telling me they made this by mistake?”

“They weren't thinking straight by the time they crafted this, so the only emotions packed into it are ‘Die, Ehit, you fucking bastard.’ That's why it won't harm anything except him.”

“Now that I can believe. I feel like I know how those guys must have felt. This is gonna help a lot in getting Yue back safely. Miledi may be an annoying bitch, but I guess I should thank her after all this is over.”

“I know, right? Though I feel like I'll end up beating her up again once I'm done thanking her.”

Hajime and Shea sighed as they envisioned Miledi's irritating smile.

Seeing that that was the last of Shea's presents, Hajime dumped the artifacts

into one Treasure Trove, then brought out another.

“Here, I made a new Treasure Trove for you. I put all the new artifacts I made for you in it, including a new hammer.”

“Hell yeah! I’ve been waiting for this!”

Shea’s ears perked up and she immediately summoned her new weapon, Villedrucken.

“Hauuuuuuuuu. I missed the feel of cold, hard metal in my hands. Nothing beats flattening enemies with a giant hammer.”

“You’re starting to scare me.”

Shea rubbed her cheek against the warhammer, an ecstatic expression on her face.

“Oh, you’re back, Shea-onee-chan! Welcome back!” Myu said with a smile as she poked her head into the workshop.

Smiling, Shea turned around and said, “Myu-chan! I’m ho...me?”

Her smile stiffened when she saw the many-legged golem Myu was riding.

“Umm, Myu-chan, where did you get that creepy-looking golem?”

“Daddy made it for me! This one’s called Bell-chan. That one’s Sa-chan, the one over there is A-chan, the one next to it is Lu-chan, that one’s Ma-chan, and those two are Lebi-chan and Baru-chan!”

“How many do you have!?”

A shiver ran down Shea’s spine as more golems filed in behind Myu. There was something inherently creepy about them that repulsed her.

“I made one to guard Myu and Remia, but these guys are more versatile than I thought, so I ended up making a few more. Honestly, even I don’t understand how they’re so strong, and I made them.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing!?”

Their full names were Belphegor, Satan, Asmodeus, Lucifer, Mammon, Leviathan, and Beelzebub. Myu had come up with all of them, as well as their nicknames. Hajime wanted to believe it was just coincidence that a girl only four

years old had come up with the names of the great biblical demons, but with Myu, you could never be sure.

“Myu, remind me again where you came up with those names?”

“Mrr? You’re so weird, Daddy. Bell-chan just looks like a Bell-chan, Sa-chan looks like a Sa-chan, and everyone else looks like their names too. That’s all.”

“Uh, yeah...”

“These things are definitely bad news, Hajime-san!”

Hajime was beginning to seriously worry that some ancient horror had possessed his daughter.

“Guys, say hi to Shea-onee-chan!”

“Eeek!”

Shea shrieked as the golems all struck a pose and shot out rainbow-colored smoke from their backs. They were like a power rangers unit made up of the seven deadly sins.

“Hajime-san, why are they posing like that? It doesn’t look like Myu-chan’s ordering them to. Did you design them to do that?”

“This isn’t my doing. Also, Myu isn’t skilled enough at controlling them to make all seven do different poses like that.”

“I don’t trust those golems, Hajime-san!” Shea exclaimed as she pointed ominously at the golems, her hair standing on end.

“Look, I get where you’re coming from. Honestly, I’m starting to worry I added too many monster parts to them and they’ve become autonomous now. But I mean, just look...” Hajime said with a helpless shrug.

“They’re all really cool, right!?” Myu said with a beaming smile, and the golems visibly blushed. They were Myu’s loyal pet dogs.

“Myu’s in love with them, and they’re not malfunctioning in any way. In fact, they’re stronger than I expected them to be. I feel like it’d be wrong to scrap them.”

“What if some of Ehit’s goons are possessing them?”

“Yeah, I thought of that too, so I tried insulting Ehit a bunch in front of them, but they didn’t react. I even showed them recordings of Ehit’s descent in the Demon Lord’s castle and made them smash the recording devices.”

The golems had been more than happy to step all over the videos of Alva and Ehit. Their enthusiasm had honestly surprised Hajime. He guessed they had a deep-set hatred of Alva and Ehit now, since the videos had shown the two of them hurting Myu.

Of course, Ehit had been possessing Yue at the time, so it meant Hajime had been forced to watch the golems happily stomp all over pictures of her.

“Well, I guess that proves they’re not Ehit’s pawns at least.”

“Yeah, no one who follows that guy would dare step on pictures of him. My guess is the monster parts of the golem are developing personalities of their own.”

The real reason Hajime had made more was because he’d been confused as to why his first had started becoming more autonomous. But every subsequent one he’d made ended up doing the same thing, and before he knew it he’d made seven without coming any closer to understanding what he was doing wrong. The golems from the eighth onward had all functioned as intended too, like mindless drones.

“Oh, right! Daddy, I came here to tell you that Kaori-onee-chan and the others came back!”

“Ah, thanks for letting me know.”

“Mhm! Oh, but Suzu-onee-chan was acting kind of weird.”

Suzu and Ryutarou had completed their mission in Verbergen about half a day back and had been here in Oscar’s labyrinth since. Right now, they were taming the monsters of the abyss, with Kaori guarding them while she collected ore.

Are they having trouble turning the monsters into familiars or something?

Hajime explained to Shea what Kaori and the others were up to and headed for the front entrance with her.

“Shea, you’re back! I take it everything went well?”

“Yep! Nice to see you too, Kaori-san!”

Smiling, Kaori ran over and hugged Shea. However, Suzu and Ryutarou remained standing by the gate that divided Oscar’s house from the dangerous labyrinth. They seemed reluctant to step past it.

“It’s nice to see you safe and sound, Suzu-san. Were you able to convince my dad— I mean, the Haulia clan and Verbergen’s elders to join the fight?”

Seeing as they weren’t moving, Hajime and the others walked over to Suzu and Ryutarou. As they got closer, Hajime could see Suzu was looking anywhere but at him, and he heard Ryutarou quietly mutter, “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Umm, things went well, Sheashea. The people of Verbergen never believed in Ehit to begin with, so when we told them the fate of the world depended on this battle they believed us right away.”

“Yeah. Some of them were worried they wouldn’t stand a chance against Ehit’s armies, but when we told them they’d have your artifacts, Nagumo, they changed their tune. The Haulia... are with us too, I think?”

“What do you mean, you think?” Shea asked with a suspicious look.

Ryutarou flinched visibly... and after a few seconds of waffling, he finally made up his mind and said, “Okay, so they’re down to fight, but, umm... when I told them we needed their help, they broke down in tears.”

“My dad did?”

“Not just him, Sheashea. The whole clan did. Then, they started chanting ‘Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!’ which was what really scared us. Apparently, they’re extremely moved because they get to finally fight by their boss’ side. Their chanting was so loud they pushed back the mist a little bit, even.”

“.....”

“I never realized this is what happens when you train people Sgt. Hartman style. Their eyes were bloodshot... and they looked so happy at the prospect of killing people. All the animals in the vicinity passed out because of how strong their bloodlust was. Some of them even had heart attacks.”

“I’m sorry my family’s so crazy.”

The color drained from Suzu and Ryutarou’s faces and they started shivering as they recounted their encounter with the Haulia. The rabbitmen had managed to strike terror into their hearts.

Honestly, the Haulia had reminded Suzu of the religious fanatics that believed wholeheartedly in Ehit. Except the cute rabbitmen all put their faith in Hajime instead.

Sometimes, I wonder whether or not Nagumo-kun’s worse than Ehit, she thought to herself.

For the Haulia, there was no greater honor than fighting alongside Hajime. The fact that Hajime was personally asking for their help was enough to bring many of them to rapture.

“Those guys are probably excited as hell. I just hope they don’t cause trouble for the other nations in the alliance...”

“I can’t imagine how many ulcers Ulfric is going to have by the end of this.”

“Oh yeah, Sheashea, Nagumo-kun. Ulfric-san’s already taking a bunch of stomach medicine.”

“.....”

Shea’s ears drooped, while Hajime awkwardly averted his gaze. They had no doubt at least part of Ulfric’s worries stemmed from the fact that his daughter had become a pervert. Moreover, since Shea refused to give her the time of day, she’d taken to sneaking into the Haulia’s village so that Cam would “punish” her.

Hajime and Shea knew they were directly responsible for this, so after exchanging a quick glance, the two of them unilaterally decided to change the subject.

“Anyway, Taniguchi, have you been able to tame any strong monsters!?”

“Myu-chan said you were acting weird... Is everything okay!?”

“Urk...”

Now it was Suzu who awkwardly averted her gaze. And so, Hajime turned to Ryutarou instead.

“I didn’t get a single one! Turns out I’m not really good at the whole taming thing,” Ryutarou replied with a self-deprecating smile.

Hajime fired a rubber bullet at him and gave him a cold glare as he clutched his forehead and writhed around on the ground. Before he could dish out any more punishment, however, Kaori grabbed his arm and shouted, “W-Wait, wait, wait! It’s not like they didn’t make any progress at all! Suzu-chan was able to tame a few familiars and Ryutarou-kun learned of a new way to use his metamorphosis magic!”

“Oh? If you guys are getting somewhere, why didn’t you say so?”

Hajime turned back to Suzu, who gave a little start and broke out in a cold sweat.

“W-Well, I do feel like I’ve gotten a lot of strong monsters, but...”

“What’s the problem?”

“Umm, so one of the monsters I tamed is a giant centipede that shoots out acid.”

“Oh, that guy. There’s a similar monster in early floors, but this one’s a lot stronger. Instead of using its body parts as projectiles, it can just straight up shoot acid from its torso. I got pretty freaked out the first time I saw one.”

“S-Same. I also tamed this large bee that can fire explosive needles.”

“I remember those too. The things they shoot out are more like mini missiles than needles. I nearly got engulfed in flames the first time I fought one.”

“Another monster I tamed is an ant that can burrow underground.”

“Those guys are really good at surprise attacks.”

“Also, I tamed a praying mantis that shoots wind blades from its legs.”

“What else?”

“A spider and a moth.”

“Why all the bug-type monsters?” Hajime asked with a curious look.

Suzu covered her face with her hands and started sobbing.

“I don’t know! For some reason, the only monsters my metamorphosis magic works on are bugs! There’s something wrong with this labyrinth! In the forest, I managed to make so many cute furry friends!”

It appeared she wasn’t doing it on purpose. Suzu had only made all the bug monsters her familiars because she’d had no other choice. Hajime couldn’t help but feel pity for her.

All the monsters she’d tamed looked utterly disgusting. But the monsters there were far stronger than anything living on the surface. While they might not be able to handle fighting apostles, they’d at least be an even match for Freid’s monsters and Eri’s undead warriors.

“Err, on the bright side, maybe your enemies will be creeped out by them too and show an opening?”

It was rare to see Hajime console anyone, much less someone not part of his harem. However, his sympathy only hurt Suzu more, making her crouch down and begin doodling in the dirt.

“Are you saying I should show these to Eri? I want to talk to her, not scare her away. *Hic...* Everyone’s going to think I’m disgusting now...”

“Th-That’s not true, Suzu-chan! Besides, you were able to get one furry familiar, right!?”

In Kaori’s desperate attempt to cheer Suzu up, she accidentally blurted out something she shouldn’t have.

Panicking, Suzu got to her feet and shouted, “You were supposed to keep that secret, Kaorin!”

She shot a surreptitious glance at Hajime, something that didn’t escape his notice.

“Huh? What do you mean, secret? What’s going on here, Taniguchi?”

“Eeek!”

Hajime glared coldly at Suzu, and she hurriedly backpedaled away from the gate. She then turned around and huddled protectively over something.

Hajime narrowed his eyes, his expression making it clear that Suzu was in for a world of hurt if she didn't talk. Suzu did her best to avoid meeting Hajime's gaze, while Kaori smiled awkwardly.

Before Hajime could ask again, Myu suddenly said, "Hm? What's that, Bell-chan? Huh? There's a strong monster past the gate?"

It appeared Myu was capable of communicating with her golems now.

"You've gotta be kidding me..." Hajime muttered. He cleared his throat loudly and turned to Myu.

"Umm, Myu. I don't think Bell-chan can talk..."

"What do you mean? Everyone can talk. They can move on their own, too. Come on, Daddy, you should know this."

"I should? H-Hey, Shea, Kaori, Taniguchi, Sakagami, am I just tired? Are those golems actually talking?"

Everyone shook their heads in response.

Hajime rubbed his temples and asked hesitantly, "By the way, what exactly did the golems say?"

"Umm, Sa-chan said, 'That bastard's got a nice fighting spirit.' A-chan said, 'Yeah, he's got guts. It looks like he'll take on anyone that looks strong, no matter who. But he really needs to learn his place. A punk like him should be bowing down before the princess.'"

"They talk in full sentences?"

"Oh, and Lu-chan says to you, 'Don't sweat the small stuff, Master. Love and peace is all that matters.'"

"Seriously!?"

Hajime was growing more afraid of his creations with each passing minute.

Did I infuse these guys with spirit magic by accident? Or did some wandering spirits go inside them when they were created? I feel like I didn't make any mistakes, but...

The scariest thing of all was that Myu seemed to consider the golems' actions

natural. Though, the fact that a girl as sensitive to malice as her wasn't afraid of them probably meant that the souls inhabiting these automatons were benign.

They all call her "Princess," too... I can probably trust them to watch after Myu, but...

"Daddy, there's a bunny here!" Myu shouted as she peeked over the gate to see what Suzu was trying to hide. She put her hands on her head and did a bunny ear imitation.

"Hm? Yeah, of course there's a bunny here," Hajime said, turning to Shea. She waved her ears back and forth, emphasizing her bunny-ness.

"No, I mean a fluffy white bunny!"

"Yeah, I know. Taniguchi isn't really doing a good job of hiding it."

Sighing, Hajime turned to Suzu. She could tell from the look in his eyes that the jig was up. But she refused to give up the creature in her arms. In an attempt to smooth things over, Kaori said, "U-Umm, Hajime-kun. H-He's not a bad bunny, really. In fact, he's special. He really admires you and..."

"Huh? He... admires me?"

Realizing this might be her one chance to save her furry friend's life, Suzu shouted, "Yes, he does! Besides, what happened isn't his fault, so please don't shoot him when you see him! He's the only cute thing that my metamorphosis magic worked on! Please!"

"Now I'm just confused," Hajime muttered.

Smiling wanly, Ryutarou signaled for Hajime to follow after him.

Hajime stepped past the gate and took a look at Suzu's bunny. It had long ears and dark crimson eyes. Red veins crisscrossed the rabbit's white fur. But they didn't pulsate like those of other monsters, and instead glowed softly.

The most striking feature of all though was the bunny's abnormally large legs. Though it looked slightly different from the ones Hajime remembered because Suzu had tamed it, the major features were the same.

"Kyu!"

The bunny's cry was no different from what he remembered either. This rabbit was undoubtedly the same species as the one that had damaged Hajime's left arm and nearly killed him before the bear appeared. Of course, it wasn't the exact same rabbit, since Hajime had gotten his revenge on that one.

The reason Suzu had tried to hide it from Hajime was because she was worried he'd slaughter it on sight.

"It's not like I'm gonna kill your familiar just because it's from the same species that attacked me."

"R-Really? Do you mean it, Nagumo-kun? I can keep him?"

"He's not a dog, and I'm not your dad. Though, don't these guys live on the earliest floors? Don't tell me you went all the way up looking for a cute monster you could tame... Actually, I guess you wouldn't have had enough time for that."

But then, how'd she run into that guy? Hajime shot Suzu a questioning glance as he thought that, but before she could answer the rabbit leaped out from behind her and hopped over to him. It had been watching him warily and keeping its distance, so Hajime was surprised by the sudden change in attitude. He grabbed the rabbit by the ears and lifted it up to eye level.

"Kyu! Moku! Ukyu!"

It wasn't trying to attack Hajime, but he couldn't exactly tell what it was trying to do.

He gave it a puzzled look, and Suzu stepped forward to interpret.

Metamorphosis magic allowed the user to understand a little of what their familiars were thinking and feeling. The degree to which they could depended on the strength of the familiar and how long the person had been with it. Unless they'd spent years with a familiar, they could only get a vague understanding of its thoughts.

Under normal circumstances, anyway.

"Umm, he's saying, 'My king, it is an honor to finally meetcha! When I realized I could become even stronger by pledging myself to your comrade, I willingly

became her familiar. I can't wait to fight with ya. A-Also, would ya be so kind as to grant me a name, my king?' Don't give me that incredulous look, that's really what he's saying!"

"Okay, even if it is, why're you adding the weird accent?"

"Because that's how he sounds to me!" Suzu protested, her face bright red.

Everyone turned back to the rabbit. It certainly seemed possible that was what it was saying, judging by the look in its eyes. They seemed to be pleading with Hajime.

"Okay, well, we're wasting time out here. Let's get back into the workshop first."

Why are all these crazy things happening right before the final battle? I guess they're mostly good things, but still...

Hajime returned to his workshop, a worried expression on his face.

Once everyone was inside, Hajime activated the Hour Crystal and sat down at the main table.

Remia brought everyone tea, then went back to the kitchen with Myu to make dinner. Suzu took a sip of her tea before she began explaining how she'd met this rabbit.

At first, Suzu had been depressed that the only monsters she could tame were insects, and was losing her motivation to keep going. She managed to tame a flock of pretty butterflies at the very end, which brightened her mood somewhat, and began the journey back to Oscar's house. As she was going back, she spotted a strange rabbit. It was warily hopping from shadow to shadow, doing its best to stay out of sight. That in and of itself wasn't strange, but the way it did so felt oddly human.

Not only were its mannerisms strange, but it was also a known fact that monsters never left their home floor. However, this rabbit hopped down the stairs to the next floor without hesitation. That put Kaori on edge and she got ready to eliminate it, but then something unexpected happened. The rabbit spotted Kaori and the others, but instead of attacking, it seemed happy to see

them.

Its ears started flopping back and forth, and it even broke out in a cheery jig. It looked relieved too, as if it had finally found safety.

It cautiously made its way over to the party, making sure not to make any sudden movements. The way it had hesitantly looked at Kaori and the others, as if asking whether or not it was okay to get any closer, had been so cute that Suzu was instantly smitten.

After taming all these insects, she'd finally found an adorable rabbit... One that wasn't hostile, even.

Kaori had still been on guard, but Suzu ignored all warnings and ran over to the bunny. She held a hand out to it and declared, "I've made up my mind! Please be my familiar!"

Incidentally, her first impression of the rabbit had been that it was a creepy creature she didn't want to get near.

Regardless, the rabbit had been taken off guard by Suzu's sudden confession, and it cocked its head in a very human way.

Seizing her chance, Suzu had started gushing about all the reasons why the rabbit should become her familiar. The way she'd talked, she'd sounded like a creepy stalker who'd cornered her favorite idol.

"I'll feed you three, no, four times a day and make sure you have a nice place to sleep. I'll give you weekends off and even give you a salary! If you need more time off, we can negotiate! Not only that, I'll use my metamorphosis magic to upgrade all of your stats! You'll become way stronger! You won't find an opportunity like this anywhere else! This is your one chance to find a wonderful home, comrades you can trust, and a once-in-a-lifetime powerup!"

Kaori and Ryutarou had both been flabbergasted. For starters, they doubted this rabbit could even understand Suzu. Indeed, it could not, and Suzu turned back to Kaori and begged her to use spirit magic to let them converse.

Reluctantly, Kaori had activated Soul Contact, not expecting it to really work. But to her surprise, not only did this rabbit have a will of its own, it was highly intelligent as well. Most monsters acted primarily on instinct, but not this one.

In fact, it had been audibly excited when Suzu explained she'd be able to make it stronger.

Lured in by the promise of power, the rabbit entered into a contract with Suzu and became her familiar. And once the contract was sealed, Suzu was able to understand it better and asked it what it was up to. Apparently, this rabbit was indeed one of the Kickmaster Rabbits that inhabited the first floor of the abyss, but it had desired strength and set off on a journey to train itself. When Suzu had met it, it was already strong enough to take on the monsters on the 80th floor of the abyss. And it was all thanks to Hajime that it had become this strong. More specifically, it was thanks to the Ambrosia Hajime had left behind.

This Kickmaster Rabbit had drunk the small puddle of Ambrosia remaining in the small cave Hajime had used as his base of operations on the first floor.

The Ambrosia had granted the rabbit a massively increased mana pool and the ability to think for itself.

Now that it had gotten a taste of heaven, it was hooked. After it drank all the Ambrosia in Hajime's former base, it began wandering the corridors, searching for more. It beat down any monsters that got in its way until finally, it ran into the Claw Bear.

This rabbit had, in fact, witnessed Hajime's fight with the Claw Bear, so it had assumed it had nothing to fear. Little did it know that monsters in this labyrinth regenerated after a set period of time.

It fought valiantly against the Claw Bear, determined to continue its quest. Normally, a Kickmaster Rabbit would have instinctively tried to flee from something as powerful as a Claw Bear, resulting in it getting chased down and killed. But the Ambrosia had given this rabbit the power of thought, and it realized the only way for it to survive was to fight and win. And as a result, it made it out of the encounter alive.

During the fight, it spent every second thinking, analyzing, and planning. Even when the Claw Bear had it on the ropes, it didn't give up, and eventually, its fierce determination had allowed it to unlock a derivative skill for its special magic, which helped it clinch victory. And as it looked down at the corpse of this floor's ruler, the rabbit realized something. Creatures grew stronger by

surpassing trials like these.

The next day, the rabbit embarked on its journey to become strong. Its ultimate goal was to find Hajime, its king, and the one who'd granted it power. It wanted both to thank him and to show him how strong it had become.

After that, it would travel across the world and fight against the strongest creatures it could find to sharpen its own skills.

Back then, Hajime hadn't possessed convenient tools like his Treasure Trove, so he'd been forced to leave behind whatever excess Ambrosia spilled from the Divinity Stone that he couldn't store and carry with him. The Kickmaster Rabbit continued finding the places where he'd stayed, and by drinking what little Hajime left behind, it grew stronger and smarter. Eventually, it grew powerful enough to go toe to toe with the monsters on the 80th floor and had the intelligence of an average person.

"What the hell is this, the plot of a light novel?"

"Kyu!"

Hajime honestly felt like he'd just read a light novel series starring this rabbit as the protagonist.

"Hahaha, he really is amazing. I let him fight a little to test his skills earlier, and thanks to my metamorphosis magic, he's strong enough to fight the monsters on the 90th floor one on one."

"He's so fast I can't keep up with him. Also, the way he moves is kinda like Shizuku. I bet he can use No Tempo and shit too. He can even send out shockwaves with his kicks."

"I see..."

Hajime was too exhausted to point out the absurdity of all this.

Smiling shyly, Suzu asked in a timid voice, "Umm, so that's why he wants you to give him a name, Nagumo-kun. It has to be you not me, so please?"

"Well, if nothing else, it's a good thing you've got a strong familiar to help you out. But man, this is even more tiring than when I was fighting Ehit... and he wants me to pick a name too..."

Hajime looked down at the rabbit, which had hopped up onto the table. It looked expectantly back up at him.

“How about Miffy?”

“Rejected,” Kaori replied immediately. She wouldn’t allow Hajime to steal names from mascot characters from back on earth. Especially not cute ones like Miffy. No way Miffy would kick bears to death.

Sighing, Hajime offered a few more suggestions.

“Fine, Peter Rabbi—”

“No way.”

“Udonge.”

“I don’t know where that’s from, but I just know you’re ripping something off again. Take this seriously!”

I am taking this seriously, though...

Exasperated, Hajime threw his hands into the air and said, “Oh, whatever. Let’s just call him Inaba, then. He looks mostly like a rabbit.”

“Isn’t that too cliched? That’s like calling a dog Spot. Can’t you think of a cuter name?”

“All my other familiars are disgusting insects, so I’d prefer a cuter name for the bunny...”

“Wait, what does Inaba have to do with rabbits?”

Kaori and Suzu weren’t happy with the name while Ryutarou, who was ignorant of most old Japanese myths, didn’t get the connection at all.

However the rabbit in question... “Kyu, kyuu!” seemed rather taken with the name Inaba. It hopped around the table, its crimson eyes sparkling with excitement.

“He seems happy with it at least.”

“Well... if he likes the name, then I guess it’s fine...”

“Aww. Inaba-chan, huh...? I guess it’s a cuter name than I first thought?”

“Hey, guys, can someone explain what Inaba has to do with rabbits? Please?”

Reluctantly, Kaori and Suzu accepted the name Hajime had chosen. Meanwhile, Ryutarou tugged on Suzu’s sleeve and begged for an explanation, but Suzu ignored him. She didn’t have the patience to teach a musclehead like Ryutarou.

Shea turned to Inaba and smiled at him. She probably felt an affinity to the bunny as a fellow lagomorph-adjacent race. Since Hajime had already confirmed he didn’t have a problem with the rabbit, she reached out to pet him.

“Good for you, Inaba-chan. Since we’re both bunnies, let’s be—”

“Kyu!”

There was a sharp crack as Inaba kicked Shea’s hand away. Everyone stared at the rabbit in shock.

As Shea stiffened in surprise, Inaba looked up at her ears, then smirked dismissively. Her surprise quickly turned to anger, and she turned to Suzu with a menacing smile.

“Eeek, c-calm down, Sheashea!”

“I am calm. Now, tell me what that cheeky little brat said.”

“U-Umm, well...”

“Suzu-san?”

“Eeek! H-He said, ‘Ya think yer droopy little bunny ears are enough to satisfy my king? Psh, yer getting a little too big for yer britches!’ Wait, don’t get mad at me, he’s the one who said it!”

I’m the only bunny my king needs! was the sentiment conveyed by Inaba’s haughty expression. Shea’s chair clattered to the ground as she rose to her feet, folded her arms, and glared intimidatingly down at Inaba.

“You’ve got balls, challenging me. Looks like I’m going to have to teach you a lesson. The only bunny worthy of Hajime-san is me!”

“Kyu!”

Shea's magically strengthened fist whizzed past Hajime's nose. She struck so fast that her fist's friction with the air created a burning smell that lingered for a few seconds.

Inaba deftly jumped out of the way, then used his Aerodynamic skill to change trajectory in mid-air and launch an axe kick at Shea. She crossed her arms in front of her to block the blow. The shockwave created by the impact was powerful enough to knock Suzu out of her chair and spill Ryutarou's tea all over him.

Inaba landed on Hajime's head with a backflip, and Shea launched a kick at him. Hajime got a good view of Shea's panties while Inaba countered with a kick of his own. Another powerful shockwave surged out from just above Hajime's head, ruffling his hair.

Shea and Inaba took their fight outside the workshop to avoid breaking anything and started clashing even more fiercely.

"Calm down, you two! No one—"

"I need to teach this rabbit its place! Hajime-san's personal bunny is me... and no one else!"

"Kyu, kyu!"

"This isn't a contest, you know!? Stop acting like dogs fighting over who's the alpha!"

Kaori chased after them, trying to break the fight up.

Meanwhile, Remia just smiled and said, "Oh my, they sure seem to be getting along."

Myu exclaimed, "Bunnies are so cool! Huh? You want to fight them too, Sa-chan? But you need my permission? Sure, you can do it!"

One of Hajime's golems joined the fight, and the sounds of explosions were added to the din.

Hajime ignored the commotion and turned to Suzu.

"Hey, Taniguchi, take these. They're artifacts for your familiars. You'll be able to summon them instantly with these, without having to open a portal for them

to come through. By the way, Sakagami, you said you discovered a new use for your metamorphosis magic, but what exactly did you learn?”

He spread several artifacts out on the table. One was a specialized Treasure Trove designed for holding and transporting monsters, which he'd called the Monster Orb. (Though, in his head, he just referred to it as a Pokéball.) He also brought out a belt to hold the Monster Orb and a regular Treasure Trove, as well as upgraded versions of Suzu's fans and Ryutarou's gauntlets.

The two of them poked their heads out from the table they'd been hiding under.

“H-How can he be so nonchalant about this...?”

“He'd probably lose his mind if he didn't learn to just ignore this stuff. I know your pain, man.”

Suzu looked at him in awe while Ryutarou smiled sympathetically. The two of them took their seats again and began equipping the artifacts Hajime gave them.

Ryutarou explained what his new way of using metamorphosis magic was, which left Hajime utterly flabbergasted. While he couldn't believe such a barbaric application of metamorphosis magic was effective, he nevertheless sighed and started making new artifacts to match Ryutarou's new style.

It was one hour before the clock would strike midnight, signaling the start of the day of Ehit's invasion.

Shea, Kaori, Suzu, and Ryutarou had spent the entire time in the workshop with the Hour Crystal, training with their new artifacts.

Kaori, Suzu, and Ryutarou had just left for the surface, while Hajime and Shea were going over their final preparations.

“Tomorrow's the day...”

“Yeah. Though, Ehit never specified the exact time he'd start.”

If Ehit had meant exactly three days from the moment of his declaration, then there were still about twelve hours left.

Of course, it was possible that he'd attack as soon as the day started or just before it ended too.

"Hajime-san."

"Yeah?"

"Even if something does happen to me, I'm sure you and Hajime will save me, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Is that something Yue said?"

"Yep, back when we were in the Frost Caverns. I told her that we obviously would."

Shea slipped a ring, her new Treasure Trove, onto her finger and added, "These three days... I know we needed them to prepare, but they were also the only three days Yue had to fight back."

"Yeah, you're right..."

Ehit had claimed he needed three days to gain full control of his vessel. Meaning in three days, he would be able to force Yue into a position where she couldn't resist.

No one had mentioned it aloud, but they'd all been wondering what state Yue's soul would be in when they found her. They knew they had to be prepared for the worst, just in case.

"But you know, I still believe. I believe that Yue-san's safe. I'm sure she believes we'll come for her too."

"Definitely. This is Yue we're talking about. Besides, you just beat her back into shape the other day. There's no way her soul would lose to some self-proclaimed god. Even if he makes it impossible for her to fight back, I guarantee you she'll be watching like a hawk, waiting for an opening."

"Hehehe, you're right. But the enemy we're up against this time is really strong. We'll need to be prepared for death if we want to have any hope of beating him."

"What're you trying to say?"

Shea turned around and met Hajime's gaze. Her eyes were burning with anger at having her best friend stolen from her, determination to bring her back, and an unwavering fighting spirit.

In a resolute voice, Shea declared, "I'm going to get Yue-san back, no matter what. It doesn't matter how hard I have to push myself or how reckless I have to be. If I can't save Yue-san, then I'm better off dying and taking down as many people as I can with me. That's how much she means to me."

"I see... And?"

"Please don't stop me from doing anything crazy. I want you fighting by my side Hajime-san, not worrying for my safety."

Depending on how you looked at it, it could be said that Shea was asking Hajime to die with her. She couldn't stand a future where she was alive, but Yue wasn't. And she was asking Hajime to die with her in the case that they couldn't get Yue back.

It was the kind of thing a story's main heroine should never say, but Hajime wasn't the least bit put off by her request.

"Isn't it a bit late to be asking me that? We already decided we'd share the same fate ages ago. Either we all make it out together, or we all die together. Don't worry Shea, I have no intention of sacrificing myself just to let you escape, so you better not chicken out and take those words back later."

Hajime grinned provocatively at her. Despite how harsh his words might have sounded to an objective bystander, they were exactly what Shea wanted to hear. Her bunny ears flopped back and forth, and a huge grin spread across her face.

"Of course! I just wanted to let you know. If you suddenly shouted something stupid like, 'Survive Shea, even if it's just you!' at the last second, that would really ruin the moment."

"Well, according to the guys in my class, I'm more of a Demon Lord than the actual Demon Lord. And you know what they say, no one runs from the Demon Lord."

While Hajime had been holed up in his workshop, the story of how he was

more evil than the Demon Lord had spread across Tortus.

Originally, the term Demon Lord referred to the ruler of the demon race, but in Hajime's case, people were calling him that because he was a demon (a horrifying avatar of death and destruction) and a lord (someone who used his might to force people to do his bidding.)

Hajime's classmates had already popularized the nickname, and now people all over Tortus referred to Hajime as a Demon Lord.

"Anyway, none of us are going out in a blaze of glory. We're gonna get everything we want and beat the shit out of anything that stands in our way."

"Hahaha, I knew you'd say that, Hajime-san. But you know, those are exactly the kinds of lines a Demon Lord says. I think it's a fitting nickname."

Smiling, Shea swung Villedrucken in a wide arc, then hefted the hammer onto her shoulder.

"Let's hurry up and get Yue back so we can finally have our threesome!"

"That just killed the mood, you horny rabbit."

Shea strolled out of the workshop, humming happily to herself. Sighing, Hajime shrugged his shoulders and followed after her. But despite his exasperated expression, it was clear from the look in his eyes that he truly loved and trusted Shea.

Remia and Myu were waiting for Hajime by the foyer.

Hajime had instructed the two of them to remain here until the fate of the world was decided.

However, Myu's golems would be coming with him.

A while back, Remia and Myu had asked Hajime to at least let them go to the fortress so they could support the soldiers on the frontlines. Neither of them had wanted to sit back and do nothing during the fight to get Yue back.

Hajime hadn't allowed it, though. He knew he was being selfish, asking them to remain safe while everyone else fought, but he didn't care. However, Myu had thrown a huge tantrum and even Remia had looked uncharacteristically depressed, so he'd compromised a little.

Since the golems he'd created could share what they saw and heard with their master, as well as be controlled remotely, he'd told them to help the war effort by operating his golems from here.

Of course, that meant this would be the last time he saw them in person until the battle was over.

"Daddy..." Myu mumbled as she ran over to Hajime and looked worriedly up at him.

He squatted down until he was eye-level with her and looked quietly at her. The two stared into each others' eyes for a few minutes, after which Hajime said, "Well, I'm off."

"Okay!"

Nothing else needed to be said between the two of them.

"Hajime-san, Shea-san, please be careful. I'll be waiting here for your safe return."

"Aye aye. You know, Remia-san, you're really good at pulling off the whole 'housewife seeing her husband off to war' act. You even got my heart beating a little faster."

"Shea, do you just get horny for everyone now?"

"My, thank you for the compliment. Do come back so I can welcome you home as well."

"You got it," Hajime replied casually.

"Of course!" Shea said confidently.

The four of them came together for a hug.

With that final farewell, Hajime and Shea left the Great Orcus Labyrinth behind.

The moment Hajime and Shea stepped out of the portal, Shizuku ran over to them.

"You're finally here. The leaders of all the countries are waiting for you. Follow me."

That was the only greeting she gave before turning on her heel and stalking off. She appeared to be in a bad mood. Hajime and Shea exchanged confused looks as they followed after her.

It was nearly midnight, but it looked like it was mid-afternoon. Lights too bright and too big to be stars twinkled in the night sky, illuminating the surroundings. They were artifacts Hajime had sent up to allow construction to progress through the night, and to give the defenders an edge if the battle dragged on into the night. The plains outside Heiligh's capital looked like a football stadium with all the bright illumination.

The capital and the Divine Mountain were giving off no light of their own and were cast in deep shadow. It was strange to see the city that was normally so bright like that.

"Where's Kaori?"

"She's with our classmates. Suzu and Ryutarou are with her, too. You sent a second Hour Crystal with her, right? Everyone's been using it to get as much training time with their artifacts as possible."

The plain was bustling with activity. Soldiers and knights ran from place to place, while smiths, merchants, engineers, and all sorts of support staff worked furiously behind the scenes.

Layers of trenches, bulwarks, and small pillboxes equipped with massive anti-aircraft guns protected the main fortress, which towered above everything else at the center of the plains. It was made of a material that looked like red brick, but was actually extremely dense and hard ore from the abyss. Though it appeared crude, its sheer size gave it an intimidating presence. Frankly, it was hard to believe it had been built in just a few days.

"Oh? Nagumo! You're finally here!" Kentarou called out as he came out of the fortress' main gates. He ran over to Hajime, with Ayako following closely behind him.

"Nuwooooooooooooooooooh, if it isn't Master Nagumo!" another voice called out to Hajime. It was also familiar. There was an explosive roar, and the surrounding soldiers drew their swords in alarm. The sound was loud enough that it made Ayako faint, and Kentarou hurriedly grabbed her before she fell to

the ground.

“Your name was Volpen or something, right? If I recall correctly, you’re the kingdom’s finest Synergist...”

“Ooooooh, you remember me!? You really are a good master.”

“I don’t remember ever becoming your—”

His words were drowned out by the sea of Synergists yelling, “Master! Master!”

The world was on the brink of ending, but they hadn’t changed a bit. Back when Hajime had visited the capital, they’d chased him so doggedly that he hadn’t managed to escape no matter what he tried. Moreover, the new artifacts Hajime had sent over had made them worship him more than ever before. You could tell from the ecstatic look in their eyes that they saw him as their god.

Hajime zapped them all with Lightning Field and extricated himself from their encirclement, then turned to Kentarou and Ayako.

“Nomura, good work. The fortress looks perfect.”

“Th-Thanks. All I did was cast my magic where the architects told me to. Though, I’ve gotten way better at using earth magic now.”

“I’m amazed, too. All I did was focus on healing Nomura as much as possible, but now my healing magic is as good as Kaori-chan’s was in the beginning.”

Smiling bashfully, the two of them held up the wand-shaped artifacts Hajime had given them as if to say their growth was all thanks to him.

“I take it... you had no problems on your end?” Kentarou asked hesitantly, looking at the golems by Hajime’s side. They struck a fancy pose, which almost made Ayako faint again.

Looking around, Hajime realized they’d become the center of attention. Volpen’s outburst and the existence of his golems had caught the eyes of all the nearby soldiers. Everyone was looking at Hajime with awe and respect.

Just then, Shizuku chimed in, saying, “Nomura-kun, Ayako, you guys can talk later. Lily and the others are waiting for Nagumo-kun to start their war council.”

“O-Oh yeah, sorry for holding you up.”

“Y-Yes, sorry... You’ve gotten bold, Shizuku...”

Shizuku grabbed Hajime’s arm and smiled faintly at Kentarou and Ayako. She made sure to press up against him, so that his arm was squished between her boobs.



Kentarou awkwardly averted his gaze and Ayako blushed visibly. Still smiling, Shizuku dragged Hajime away.

Many of the empire's soldiers groaned in dismay, but Shizuku paid them no mind. She was blushing too at the boldness of her own actions, but she looked particularly pleased with herself.

“Yaegashi, did something happen?”

“Is this Shizuku-san's sexual awakening!?” Shea exclaimed.

It was extremely unusual for the usually demure Shizuku to act so assertive, at least when it came to romance.

“Call me Shizuku. I don't want you using my last name anymore. I'll call you Hajime, too.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku sighed tiredly and added, “Look, the emperor was being really pushy. He kept trying to find excuses to spend more time with me, and those excuses were all really good, so I couldn't just brush him off.”

From the looks of it, Shizuku was in a foul mood because of how persistent Gahard had been.

“I told you if he was being a pest, you could just use my name.”

“I did. I told him the m-man I l-love is you, Hajime.”

“Damn, you just said it straight, huh? So, what, did he keep trying? I told you to call me if that happened.”

Shizuku's expression went from annoyed to troubled as she replied, “I didn't want to bother you over something so trivial, H-Hajime. You're the key to winning this war, so I figured it was better not to distract you from your work.”

“You don't have to worry about me. Besides, it'd only take a few seconds to open up a portal and give him a taste of my rubber bullets.”

“Hehehe, I didn't call you because I knew that was what you'd do. Even if you did use non-lethal bullets, it would be a diplomatic issue if you attacked one of the most powerful nation's leaders. But in return, you better let me flirt with

you now that you're here. I plan to show off how close we are to the emperor."

"I see. That's why you hugged my arm like that in front of all the imperial soldiers, huh?"

"Yes. Anyway, those are my reasons, so please let me monopolize Hajime for a bit, Shea."

"I guess I can't really refuse. Hehehe, I'll just have to settle for Hajime-san's prosthetic arm, then!" Shea exclaimed as she hugged Hajime's prosthetic arm and squished her boobs against it as well. To the soldiers, he looked like some impertinent brat showing off his harem to everyone else, but even the ones who didn't know who he was were too intimidated by his golems to say anything.

Kentarou and Ayako exchanged glances as they watched the three of them saunter away, unconcerned by the soldiers' jealousy.

"He's a Demon Lord alright."

"Definitely."

The two of them nodded in agreement.

The moment Hajime entered the council room, everyone started talking.

He stopped by the entrance and surveyed the room. The first thing he noticed was the large circular table in the center. A three-dimensional map sat atop it, showing the relative positions of the Divine Mountain and humanity's fortress. There were several markers placed around the fort, depicting the locations of supply lines and key strongholds.

Sitting around the table were the leaders of the world's various nations, along with their closest aides.

The person sitting closest to the entrance was Aiko Hatayama, the Fertility Goddess. Next to her was Yuka Sonobe. Then came Heiligh's princess, Liliana S. B. Heiligh, her new Knight Commander, Kuzeli Reil, the newly appointed pope, Simon L. G. Levellair, his deacon, Sibyl L. G. Levellair, and the commander of the Templar Knights, David Zahler. Moving clockwise from the princess' retinue,

there was Ankaji's duke, Lanzwi F. Zengen, Hoelscher's emperor, Gahard D. Hoelscher, Verbergen's chief elder, Ulfric Heipyst, the Haulia clan's leader, Cam Haulia, Cam's aide, Altina Heipyst, the Adventurer Guild's leader, Barus Laputa, his secretary Catherine Walker, the gold-ranked adventurer representative, Crystabel, Fuhren's representative, Greil Cudeta, his aide Will Cudeta, and the head of the Fuhren branch of the Adventurer's Guild, Ilwa Chang. There were also a few other leaders of major nations as well as their generals and advisors.

They all turned expectantly toward Hajime, but their expressions stiffened when they saw Shizuku dangling from one arm and Shea from the other. Though he hadn't arrived late, it still irked them that he'd showed up after the world's most important people... and with a girl on each arm to boot.

Aiko, Liliana, and Yuka were used to his behavior, but they were irked for a totally different reason.

"Nagumo-kun, it's not... proper to walk around with a girl in each arm like that! As your teacher, I cannot condone such lewd behavior!"

"Wh-What she said! Are you trying to show off your girlfriends to us!? Even though every time I try to approach you, you just ignore me!?"

"You suck, Nagumo!"

"Oh, is this the boy you told us so much about, Aiko-dono, Yuka? I must say, I'm rather jealous. To think he has sole dominion over so many lovely ladies' boob— Gwah!?"

"Grandpa, please act more like a pope! You're embarrassing me!"

Before Simon finished his sentence, his granddaughter smacked him upside the head, and he collapsed onto the table. Blushing, Yuka circled over and smacked Simon as well.

"You really piss me off, Hajime Nagumo! You're showing off how close you are to Shizuku just to anger me, aren't you!? Well!?"

"That's our boss for you! Even after his beloved's been kidnapped, he's got plenty of women to spare! Is this your way of getting us pumped up for the big climax, Bo— Bwah!?"

Hajime silenced Cam with a rubber bullet before he said anything stupid.

Why the hell is Cam even here? Did rumors of his deeds spread so far that all the world powers respect him and the Haulia now? I know they beat down the empire and got rid of the beastmen slavery system, but still... Maybe they invited him because they're scared of letting him out of their sight?

While Hajime pondered over Cam's presence, Shizuku blushed and gracefully disentangled herself from him. However, she continued clutching his sleeve with the tips of her fingers. Her actions only served to anger Gahard more, and he looked ready to leap at Hajime's throat.

On the other hand, Shea had already let go of Hajime and buried her face in her hands. She was embarrassed by her father's unceremonious antics. Also, it hadn't escaped her notice that Altina had come as Cam's aide, not Ulfric's.

The moment Altina spotted Shea, she started panting heavily, staggered over, and said, "W-We're finally reunited, best friend!"

That terrified Shea enough to flee the room.

"Aaah, where are you going, Shea!? Wait for meeeeeee!" Altina roared as she suddenly sped up and chased after Shea.

As he watched Cam and Altina, Ulfric took a few pills out of his pocket and swallowed them. Hajime had no doubt it was stomach medicine for his ulcers.

Hajime and Shizuku headed for their seats, which were situated next to Aiko. Once they were seated, Hajime pointed to Gahard and said, "The reason Shizuku's acting like this is all your fault. You're to blame here, Gahard."

"Y-You little... Brazen as always, I see."

"I heard you kept trying to flirt with Shizuku while I was gone. Either give up now, or I'll rip your balls off."

"Oh my, are you planning on giving me new friends to play with, Hajime? What a nice present! You really do love me!" Crystabel exclaimed, their muscles rippling underneath their frilly dress. Hajime ignored Crystabel entirely, while Shizuku tenderly stroked Hajime's back.

Cowed by the threat of castration, Gahard slinked back to his seat and silently

looked down at the table. He did his best not to look at Crystabel. Gahard was known for being an open-minded emperor, but he sure didn't look like one now.

Crystabel's existence awoke some primal fear within him, the same way it did to Hajime.

"Actually, wait. Why's this crazy clothing store owner here, anyway?"

Hajime had a feeling this meeting would be more exhausting than the fight for the fate of the world.

Most of the world leaders just shook their heads in defeat, so Barus smiled wanly and said, "Crystabel is retired now, but they were originally a gold-ranked adventurer. Despite being retired, they're still the strongest adventurer the guild has ever seen."

Upon hearing that, Hajime turned to Catherine. She looked like an unassuming, plump old lady, but Hajime knew the truth. In the past, she'd been one of the guild's greatest teachers, and had taught Ilwa and many other guild officials everything they knew. She was undoubtedly present because they needed her sharp insight.

"Hahaha, it's no lie. Crystabel is indeed the guild's strongest adventurer. They retired when I did, and we moved to Brooke together. Their dream was always to open a clothing store, so they'd been looking for a chance to leave the guild for a while."

"No matter how strong I am, though, my heart is still that of a fragile maiden's, Hajime-kyun!" Crystabel proclaimed as they winked at Hajime, which caused him a great deal of mental damage.

Hajime fixed his gaze firmly forward and refused to respond to Crystabel.

"Ai-chan-sensei! Hajime's started hyperventilating! You have to save him with your spirit magic!"

"O-Oh no! Bring light to the souls who have lost their spark! End this nightmare with your radiance— Soul's Repose!"

Aiko's chant was even longer than the time she'd dispelled Ehit's curse, which

fortunately made her spell strong enough to bring Hajime back.

“Uhhh, can we get this meeting started now?” Lanzwi asked with a stiff expression.

That finally brought an end to the fooling around. The main purpose of this meeting was to get all the world leaders acquainted. Hajime wouldn't even be part of the fight on Tortus, so there was no need to discuss strategy or the like.

Fortunately, since demons had been the humans' common enemy for centuries, most countries had treaties in place to work together in times of emergencies. Of course, nations still squabbled amongst themselves occasionally, but they all banded together when things got serious.

The same was true for the Adventurer's Guild and the church, and there was already an existing protocol for how to coordinate everyone's armies.

Of course, now the beastmen were joining in as well, but Liliana and the others had already hashed out how the beastmen and human armies would work together. It would be impossible to get the two armies coordinated, since beastmen had been discriminated against for centuries, and Verbergen had no contact with other nations. For that reason, consolidating the beastmen's chain of command into the greater structure of the human army wouldn't work.

Instead, it had been decided that the beastmen would function as an independent strike force under the command of Verbergen's elders.

Yuka and the other students would also be an independent strike force. Aiko would work with them, using her spirit magic to assist the troops at the fronts. Though she was a symbolic leader, she had absolutely no experience commanding soldiers, so it didn't make sense to make her a general.

The soldiers had plenty of practice with the guns and cannons Hajime had sent over as well, so they were more than ready for combat. If anything, they were having more trouble using the swords and armor he'd sent over than his cannons.

It was hardly surprising. Guns and the like were designed to be easy to use, and they functioned uniformly regardless of who used them. Practice was necessary to get things like efficient reloading and good aim down, but as long

as you taught someone the basics, they'd at least be able to use such weapons. Plus, Hajime had even sent over artifacts containing video recordings of how to use all of his weapons, making it possible to teach large groups of soldiers how to use them all at once. He could hear people practicing shooting cannons in the distance, and it sounded like most people had the basics down.

In other words, there was nothing really for Hajime to do. This meeting had mainly been called so that the leaders of the world could talk to the man who held the world's fate in his hands before the decisive battle.

Unperturbed by the attention he was receiving, Hajime turned to Liliana and looked her over.

"Still... I'm surprised everyone decided you should be the supreme commander, Princess."

When Lanzwi had first told him that, Hajime's jaw had dropped open. It made no sense to appoint a novice like Liliana the supreme commander when there were so many skilled generals like Gahard present.

"Err, well... honestly, I thought Gahard would get the job too. Also, call me Lily, not princess."

"I mean, I'd do it if I was the only man qualified for the job. But you've got what it takes to lead too, Princess. This is a once in a lifetime fight, so I wanna be out there fighting for it. I'm the emperor of a military nation, remember?"

"Military nation or not, no emperor should be out in the trenches. Though, I guess the princess is probably the best choice if you wanna raise everyone's morale..."

"See, you get it."

"I told you to call me Lily, not princess..." Liliana muttered in a small voice, but Hajime ignored her.

He could see where Gahard was coming from. In a battle like this, tactics and maneuvers would only have an impact at the very beginning. It wouldn't be long before things devolved into a melee. The apostles were all individually quite powerful, and they didn't seem to adhere to formations or the like. In which case, it made sense to prop up the most popular person as the supreme

commander.

Liliana knew better than anyone that she lacked the experience for the role. However, she had at least learned military theory as part of her studies. She'd have a retinue of skilled officers to support her on the tactical front, and she had the unbreakable will needed to rouse a massive army. In that respect, she was the best suited for the task. No one else was as charismatic or as determined as her.

When the kingdom had been in danger of collapsing once before, she'd fled the capital alone and traveled a long distance to seek Hajime's help. Not only that, but she'd then unveiled the conspiracy of the fake god to the people. Of course, that had been part of Hajime's script, but the people still believed her. She'd also traveled the world with the Fertility Goddess to warn the people of the impending danger. And all that at the tender age of 14, no less.

She'd told her people to run, while she herself had declared that she would remain behind to fight. She'd asked her knights and soldiers to join her, but had made it clear that she would fight even if she was alone.

On top of that, she'd prioritized Lundel's life over her own and told him to seek safety. She'd entrusted the future of the kingdom to her beloved younger brother, as well as her mother, who she'd also asked to evacuate.

Liliana had been a popular princess even before all that, but when the people had seen her sacrificing herself for them, they'd been moved to tears. The kingdom's soldiers' morale had jumped through the roof. They were all willing to lay down their lives for their dear princess.



“Mass psychology is a scary thing, but I think what was even scarier was watching Liliana-san chuckle to herself about how she had the people dancing in the palm of her hand when she thought no one was looking,” Aiko mumbled with a distant expression. She’d been traumatized by how easily people were manipulated by those with ulterior motives. Kuzeli was aware of Liliana’s true personality as well, which made them nod sadly in agreement.

“Excuse me? You were manipulating people just as much as I was, Aiko-san! My words only hold sway over the kingdom’s subjects. You’re the one who whipped all of Verbergen’s and the empire’s soldiers into a frenzy, so you don’t have any right to talk!”

“I-I’m not like you! I just followed the handbook Hajime sent me!”

Cam gave Hajime a thumbs-up at that. At the same time, Ulfric and Gahard glared at him in annoyance.

“Of course he was behind it...” Ulfric muttered.

Incidentally, Aiko had gone above and beyond with her speeches. Even though he hadn’t instructed her to, she’d used spirit magic to increase the persuasiveness of her words. And as a result, people’s faith in her had grown exponentially. They’d developed a burning hatred for the “fake” Ehit.

Hajime had a sneaking suspicion that once Ehit was gone, the people would worship Aiko as their new god.

Aiko and Liliana were both terrifying. Aiko because she was willing to use spirit magic to manipulate people, and Liliana because she could manipulate people even without spirit magic.

While Aiko and Liliana argued over who was a worse person, Gahard and Ulfric looked wearily at each other.

“Both that princess and that goddess are terrifying. In all my time as emperor, I haven’t met anyone as scary as them.”

“Tell me about it. I guess we were right to fear humans...”

Despite the years of oppression that separated the two leaders, Gahard and Ulfric seemed to be bonding.

What was truly impressive about what Liliana and Aiko had accomplished, was that it wasn't brainwashing. And that meant the soldiers wouldn't suddenly come to their senses and flee if things started looking grim.

The princess, the Fertility Goddess, and the Pope had all confirmed that this was a holy war, which gave everyone a sense of camaraderie and purpose despite being from separate nations. These soldiers weren't fighting because they'd simply been ordered to, but because they truly believed it was the right thing to do. Future historians would probably be in awe at how such a cohesive alliance had come to be.

Knowing that everyone was united gave Hajime hope that the war on Tortus wouldn't be a one-sided rout, and he nodded in satisfaction. He then turned to Liliana and Aiko, who were still fighting. Despite how childish their motivations were, he nevertheless owed them his thanks.

"Hey, Sensei, Princess. Give it a rest al—"

"Don't call me 'sensei,' call me Aiko."

"It's not princess, it's Lily."

"I see you two are in perfect sync."

The knowledge that they might die tomorrow was making Aiko and Liliana more assertive than usual.

"I guess the people who usually bottle their feelings up really go to extremes once they cut loose," Shizuku mused with a rueful smile.

Like you're one to talk... Hajime thought with a sidelong glare, and Shizuku suddenly blushed as she realized what she'd said. She wrapped her ponytail around her face to hide her expression, and Simon the pope suddenly butted in on the conversation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I believe we should end the appraisal of our savior here. What say you?"

"We didn't ask for this meeting because we wanted to 'appraise' him, Your Eminence," Lanzwi said with a shake of his head.

"All I wanted was to see what kind of person the man who'd saved my

dukedom had become. That's all. I had no doubt our hero would become the world's hero eventually."

Lanzwi planned to personally lead his troops into battle. He'd left his son Bize behind in Ankaji so that he could take over in case he died.

Wearing the armor Hajime had fashioned for him, he said in a gentle voice, "Nagumo-dono, the warriors of the dukedom aren't here because we wish to save the world."

"What do you mean?"

"We heard that your goal is to crush this evil god and put an end to his ambitions. In which case, our reason for fighting is the same. You can count on us, Nagumo-dono. We won't let that accursed god trample over us. We'll fight, survive, and lord our victory over him... It's the least we can do to repay your kindness."

"Hahaha, that's one hell of a reason to fight."

Hajime was taken aback by Lanzwi's declaration, but he couldn't deny it made him a little happy.

Catherine rested her cheeks in her hands and added, "From the moment you walked into my office, I always thought you'd do something big... but I never imagined you'd end up deciding the fate of the world. I consider it an honor that I was the one to handle your guild registration."

"You really helped me out a lot back then. Thanks to that letter you wrote, we managed to pass through Fuhren easily."

Ilwa sighed and muttered, "When you showed up in Fuhren, I had a feeling you were hiding some big, world-changing secret. Did you know some people thought you guys were my personal assassins...? It's embarrassing to think about now, considering how much stronger you guys are than me."

"However, it was thanks to your sharp insight that my son survived, Ilwa. Had you not offered that quest to Nagumo-dono, he would almost certainly have died," Greil Cudeta said, then bowed to Hajime.

"Nagumo-dono. When you accepted the quest, you asked for access to all my

connections as a reward, did you not? Well, I used them to bring all of Fuhren here to fight for you. I promise to provide you my full support. Though, I suspect at this stage, it won't amount to much."

"Nah, I'm counting on you guys too. It really means a lot to me that you and your warriors are willing to help support the war effort on the ground."

Normally, a noble from the kingdom like Greil wouldn't have been Fuhren's representative. But his family had served as diplomats for generations, and he'd offered financial and logistical support to it during times of war. That, combined with the fact that he knew Hajime, had been enough to convince Fuhren's rulers to send him as their representative.

He'd brought as many funds and resources as he could to help Hajime in his invasion of the Sanctuary, but he'd learned during the meeting that Hajime didn't need any material help.

Will stepped forward from behind Greil and said, "It's been a long time, Hajime-dono."

"Long time no see, Will. You sure you should be here? Shouldn't you stay somewhere safe in case the worst happens, and you need to inherit the family name?"

"Don't worry, I'm the youngest son of the Cudeta family. Besides, I wanted to come. I want to do what I can for the people who are fighting for our future."

"I see you're still kind to a fault."

Hajime shrugged his shoulders dismissively, but Will shook his head and replied, "That's not quite true. Remember how you told me back then that I would eventually realize there was meaning in me surviving? I think the reason I survived was so that I could be here for this day."

Oh yeah, I did say that... Hajime thought back to the time he'd first found Will huddled in the back of a small cave. Will had cried about how he hated himself for being happy that he'd survived when all of his comrades had died.

"If you feel bad for your dead comrades... then live on. Even if you have to crawl on the ground dredging for scraps, survive. As long as you keep struggling... eventually, the day will come when you realize there was meaning

in you surviving this day.”

Surprised, everyone turned to Hajime.

“That was what you told me, wasn’t it, Hajime-dono?”

“Yeah... You better survive this fight so you can keep searching for that answer in the future, Will.”

“Of course! I can’t die and leave my mom behind!”

“I didn’t know you were such a momma’s boy.”

“As his father, I’m ashamed to say I couldn’t help him grow out of it. Though, I suppose it is partially Zaria’s fault for being such a doting mother.”

“Like father like son, I guess,” Hajime said, and everyone laughed. As the laughter died down, Gahard, Ulfric, Lanzwi, Barus, Simon, and Cam offered a few words of support.

“You better not fuck this up, Hajime Nagumo. We’ll take care of the enemies on the ground, so you better slaughter that shitty god for us.”

“We entrust our fate to you, Hajime Nagumo.”

“Leave the evil god’s army to us. We won’t let things go his way.”

“Don’t forget, you too are a gold-ranked adventurer. Do the guild proud, Hajime Nagumo.”

“I shall be praying for your success, child of liberation. May your victory pave the way to reform the teachings of our church.”

“Hey, Boss, this battle’s gonna go down in history, right? It’ll be an honor to fight with you, even if we’ll be on different battlefields. I hope you’re ready to see us go all-out!”

Moved by their leaders’ confidence, the knights and soldiers present at the meeting all cheered.

Hajime got to his feet and silenced them all with a solemn wave of his hand. He didn’t look intimidating exactly, but he was emanating a heavy pressure that couldn’t be ignored.

“That bastard pissed me off, and now I’m gonna kill him. That’s all there is to

this fight. But because of that, Tortus will live to see another day.”

Though his voice was quiet, it carried weight. A dangerous gleam entered his eyes as he added, “An evil god with a divine army? Don’t be ridiculous. That fucker’s just some loser who thinks he’s all-powerful. There’s no reason to be scared of him.”

Hajime’s words stirred everyone’s hearts, fanning the flames of their fighting spirit.

“Humans and beastmen are way stronger than he thinks.”

Every mortal race remaining on Tortus had combined their strength for this crusade. It would be the greatest battle in history. And it would also undoubtedly be the most grueling one.

“That bastard won’t be able to crush us.”

Hajime was certain that humanity would emerge victorious. And his unwavering confidence helped instill that belief into everyone else.

“Show that arrogant asshole just how tough we mortals can be! We’re gonna crush his ambitions and make him regret ever underestimating us! Isn’t that right?”

A playful smile spread across his face as Hajime ended his speech with that question. Everyone silently exchanged glances, and a few seconds later, similar smiles appeared on their faces as well.

The leaders of the world’s greatest nations felt as though a great weight had been lifted from their shoulders, and their spirits soared. Just then—

“U-Urgent report!” a young messenger exclaimed, bursting into the room as they did so. Everyone drew their weapons, thinking Ehit had begun his assault, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“A bunch of dragons have appeared from the central teleportation circle! The dragonmen have come to our aid!”

The messenger’s expression was a mixture of hope and awe.

“Hajime,” Shizuku whispered.

“Yeah, looks like she made it.”

Smiling, Hajime headed out to greet his favorite masochistic dragon.

As he exited the fortress, Hajime looked up at the sky. The dragons were backlit by his artificial lights, so he could only make out their silhouettes.

He and the other members of the war council headed out to the open plains and found Shea, Kaori, and his classmates were already there. It appeared they'd completed their training and had headed out to greet Tio as well.

A large crowd of soldiers had formed around the dragons, and Hajime and the others were having a hard time making their way to them.

Normally, people got out of the way when they saw Kaori, but they were so excited by the spectacle in front of them that they didn't even notice she was here. No one was afraid of the dragons either, since Simon had told everyone ahead of time that the dragonmen hadn't died, and that they'd been fighting against the evil Ehit in secret for centuries.

Gahard stepped forward and bellowed for the soldiers to make way. As expected, that was enough to get people to open up a path for them.

Hajime strode forward and spotted several grizzled dragonman warriors resting in the center of the clearing. A familiar black dragon stood in their midst.

“Master! Your devoted servant has finally returned to you! Praise me for my accomplishments!”

The moment she spotted Hajime, Tio returned to her human form and leaped at him with a look of longing in her eyes.

Naturally, he drew Donner and shot her in the forehead with a rubber bullet. She sailed through the air, somersaulting thrice before crashing into the ground.

“Thank you very much,” she moaned softly as her head slammed against the dirt.

The ensuing silence was so absolute that even the crickets stopped chirping. Everyone watched, at a loss for words, as Tio writhed in pleasure, an ecstatic

expression on her face. It was an unbelievable sight.

“Haaah... Haaah, it’s been three long days since I last experienced such wonderful pain. I have been longing for this... Fwaaah...”

“Welcome back, Tio. It’s nice to see you managed to bring everyone in time. I didn’t think you’d all teleport in your dragon forms, though... That was quite an entrance.”

The dragonmen had been scrubbed from history by Ehit. For five hundred years, they’d hid in the shadows, waiting for the day someone would appear to challenge god so they could fight together with them.

Now Hajime was here, and they’d left their hidden northern island to return to the continent.

Panting, Tio sprung back to her feet and elegantly brushed her bangs out of her face. It was amazing how she could go from being creepy one second to refined the next.

“Ufufu, indeed. It seemed fitting to make a grand entrance to help raise morale.”

Tio snapped her fingers, and the dragons in the air roared one after another. The earth shook from the force of their howls.

Meanwhile, the six dragons that had been surrounding Tio began to glow, and they transformed back into humans. They were all large, muscular men, and they wore similar kimonos to Tio’s.

What set each of them apart was their hair color. One had flame-red hair, another indigo blue, yet another deep amber, the fourth purple, the fifth white, and the last one jade green.

Each man looked quite handsome, and it was obvious from their demeanor that they were all hardened warriors. The surrounding human soldiers burst out into cheers, relieved to know that the ancient dragonman race had arrived to fight with them.

“Splendid. If only my late mother and father could be here to see this grand spectacle.”

“What’re you talking about? If you wanna show them something, you should show them the sight of our victory.”

“Oho, I suppose so.”

Hajime gently patted Tio’s shoulder as tears welled up in her eyes. It was honestly hard to believe she’d been panting like a pervert a few seconds ago.

Sighing, Shea stepped forward before the two of them could start flirting and confuse the onlookers even more.

“Welcome back, Tio-san. Listen, please try to restrain yourself for now. We’re used to the relationship you two have, but everyone else is looking at you guys like you’re weirdos! First you start getting horny when he shoots you, and now you two are flirting!”

“Now that I think about it, Hajime-kun’s really bold, isn’t he?”

“He’s settled into the role of Tio’s master. I’m kind of scared by how natural their interactions have gotten, and how used to them I am now.”

Kaori and Shizuku chipped in with their two cents as well, but they realized trying to explain common sense to Hajime and Tio was pointless when they gave Shea and the others puzzled looks.

Before they could ask Shea what she meant, the handsome middle-aged dragonman warrior with red hair stepped forward. He looked so majestic that even Gahard and Ulfric felt the urge to kneel to him. They straightened their backs and fixed their collars, suddenly feeling nervous.

Everyone could tell at a glance that this man had the bearing of a king. Hajime alone appeared unaffected, however. He nonchalantly met the man’s gaze, and the red-haired dragonman narrowed his eyes. He didn’t seem displeased, though. If anything, he was impressed with Hajime’s mettle.

The two briefly looked into each other’s eyes, then the man turned to the leaders of the various nations and said, “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, rulers of Tortus. I am the chief of the dragonman tribe, Adul Klarus. We have come here to aid you in your struggle against god. I look forward to fighting alongside all of you.”

His voice wasn't exceptionally loud. In fact, it was quite soft, but even the soldiers at the very back of the crowd were able to hear him. His cordial tone brought everyone an overwhelming sense of relief, as if they were safe now that he was here.

A simple greeting from Adul had been enough to boost everyone's morale.

Holy shit... Gahard thought, looking up at the dragonman chief in awe.

"I see. So this is what a real dragonman is like..."

"Excuse me, Master. What are you implying here?"

Even though Adul was strong enough that he'd once ruled over all of Tortus, he shook hands with Liliana and the others as equals. He was humble, wise, and kind. He was exactly what Yue had envisioned the dragonmen to be like.

Meanwhile, the one Hajime and the others knew was an utter disgrace. They all looked pitifully over at Tio, then shook their heads sadly.

"Tio-san, he's implying exactly what you think."

"But why!? What could possibly be wrong with me!?"

"I'm sorry, Tio."

"Why are you apologizing!?"

"I... can't really defend you either. Sorry."

"Please, Shizuku! Say something, anything! When you look away like that, it hurts more than any insults ever could!"

"There you have it, Tio-san."

"The saddest part is that you're really cool when you go into Super Tio mode, too."

"Suzu, Ryutarou... I see you've grown cheeky in my absence..."

Unable to watch everyone tease Tio, the blue-haired dragonman stormed up to Hajime and the others. He glared at everyone in turn, stopping when he reached Hajime.

"You bastard. What the hell did you do to the princess?" he asked in a low

growl.

Confused, Hajime glanced back towards Liliana. Everyone, himself included, associated the title of “princess” with her. He couldn’t even begin to imagine why the isolationist dragonmen would care about anything he may or may not have done to Liliana. Gahard and the others looked to her as well. However, Liliana couldn’t think of anything Hajime might have done either, and she shook her head.

“What are you looking at!? I’m obviously referring to our princess, Tio-sama!”

At that, Hajime and the others stiffened. And after a few seconds, they all turned to Tio.

Tio blushed and looked away. She was acting like a kid who’d just been embarrassed by her parents in front of her friends.

Still in shock, Hajime muttered, “Y-You’re a princess?”

Shea added, “N-No way...”

Kaori whispered, “I see... Tio’s a princess, huh...?”

Shizuku muttered, “Wait, so she’s just like Lily?”

After an extended silence, the four of them gave Tio a pitying smile and said, “It’s okay, Tio.”

“Don’t worry, Tio-san.”

“Everything’ll be fine, Tio!”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Tio!”

The pity in their eyes was unbearably painful.

“What do you mean everything will be fine!? Besides, I told you before that I was royalty!”

“Oh yeah... Sorry, Princess Tio, I totally forgot.”

“Yeah, sorry, Princess Tio. Don’t worry, I’ll call you Princess Tio from now on so I don’t forget again.”

“Yeah, it must have just slipped my mind because of how perverted you are.

But it's okay, Princess Tio, I'll remember for sure this time!"

"Y-You're a really cute princess, Princess Tio! The world's a big place, so of course it makes sense that there'd be princesses like you out there!"

Tio's face was beet-red, and tears were streaking down her cheeks.

"Stoop! Do you have any idea how embarrassing this is!? Please, I beg of you, continue addressing me the way you used to! This shame isn't even arousing!"

First you get mad that we don't respect you as a dragonman... and now you're begging us to stop calling you princess? Make up your mind! Hajime thought with a grin.

"What's the big deal, Princess Tio? It's a cute nickname. I think Princess Tio sounds wonderful. If anything, I should've started calling you Princess Tio earlier. I'll make up for it by saying Princess Tio a bunch now."

"Please stoooooop!" Tio yelled as she squatted down and covered her face with her hands. She was blushing to the tips of her ears.

Hajime crouched down next to her and continued whispering "Princess Tio" incessantly into her ear. Hanging around her had fully transformed him into a total sadist. This was yet more proof that he was the only one fit to be Tio's master.

The blue-haired dragonman glared daggers at Hajime and the others.

"You bastards, how dare you humiliate the princess like this! I knew it, you've been torturing her to force her into being your obedient slave. That's why she ended up like this!"

The dragonman's accusations reminded Hajime of how a certain hero always jumped to conclusions and misunderstood things as a result.

Tio smiled wanly and said, "Cease, Ristas. These are my precious comrades. We may be close, but that does not mean you can disparage them like this."

"P-Princess!? Have you lost your mind!? Please, come to your senses!"

"Hmph, what gives you the impression that I have lost my sanity?"

She gave Ristas a patronizing look, which made the young man snap. The anger he'd been doing his best to hold in check spilled out in a torrent.

"Our princess wasn't such a pervert before!"

"Good point," everyone said simultaneously, as if they hadn't considered that. Indeed, Ristas had a point.

"Before she left the village, she was a wise, kind, and noble princess. Everyone loved and respected her! She wasn't the kind of person who'd get aroused from being slapped, or derive joy from being insulted! It's obvious that all of you... no, that boy over there she refers to as Master did something horrible to her!"

"Good point," everyone repeated, nodding in agreement. There was no argument to be made here.

Judging by what Ristas had said, Tio had been a model princess back when she'd been living in the dragonman village. But when she'd returned, the graceful, regal princess everyone had known had turned into a pervert. It was hardly surprising that Ristas was so upset. In fact, everyone except Hajime sympathized with him.

The other dragonmen were doing a better job of controlling their emotions than Ristas, but it was obvious from the way they were glaring at Hajime that they all shared his line of thought.

Before Ristas could yell at Hajime any further, Adul spoke in a commanding voice, saying "That's enough."

"B-But Chief!"

Ristas couldn't just back down here. The other dragonmen looked like they sympathized with him over Adul, too.

"Tio's transformation indeed came as quite a shock to all of us, but..."

"If you think so too, then why are you stopping me!?"

"I may be old, but I'm not so senile that I can't understand my granddaughter's feelings. Tio values her bonds with these people, and it's clear that she truly loves this young man here. Do you doubt my judgment?"

Ristas hung his head, unable to argue with that. Adul then turned back to Tio

and said, “I always knew that you were tired of the boring life in our village, Tio. I also knew that it was only your sense of responsibility to us that prevented you from following your desires and exacting your vengeance on the god who had wronged us so.”

“Grandfather...”

“The real reason you left for the continent was not because it was your duty to investigate. You were hoping to find something out there that would change this stalemate we were forced into. And it seems you did indeed find what you were looking for.”

Adul smiled kindly at his granddaughter and Tio nodded bashfully.

“In which case, we have no right to be angry at your new comrades. If anything, we should be grateful. It’s clear from how proudly you spoke of them that you treasure them dearly. I have never seen you look so happy as you did when you told us all about them.”

Hajime and the others turned to Tio. Embarrassed, she hid her face with her sleeves. The gesture was so cute that even Shea’s heart skipped a beat.

Ristas still appeared to want to argue, so Adul turned back to him and said in a stern voice, “Besides, Ristas, it’s not very mature of you to yell at others because you’re jealous.”

“I-I’m not—”

“Why do you look so surprised? Everyone in the village knows you trained so hard because Tio said she would only marry someone stronger than her. Even a fool could see you were smitten with her. Especially since you only challenged her fiance candidates to duels.”

Hajime turned to Tio, who was smiling awkwardly. It appeared she had been aware of his true feelings as well.

Noticing Hajime’s gaze, Tio turned to him and shrugged. She quietly let him know that the other men standing around Adul were the others who wanted to be her fiance.

Seeing how closely Tio was sticking to Hajime, Ristas and the other fiance

candidates narrowed their eyes dangerously.

“Wow... I didn't know you were so popular back home.”

“Oh? Feeling jealous?”

“Nah, I'm just amazed these guys didn't give up on you after learning you're a huge pervert.”

“Ngh! Ristas and the others can't casually insult me the way you do, Master!”

Shea and the others gave Tio exasperated looks, while Adul excused himself from Liliana and the other leaders so he could walk over to Hajime.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Hajime Nagumo-kun. I have heard much about you from Tio. She also showed me your battle at the Demon Lord's castle. I never imagined there would be those out there strong enough to slay gods. Even the might of every dragonman combined would not be enough to achieve such a feat.”

“Nice to meet you, Adul-dono. I'm sorry I awoke such a strange fetish in your granddaughter. I realize this is the night before the final battle and probably not the time for this, but you may punch me once if you wish.”

Hajime's classmates started muttering to each other, saying, “Someone use healing magic on Nagumo!” “The Demon Lord's confused!” “Oh no, if he's lost it, then humanity's done for!”

It was a surprise that Hajime would willingly let anyone hit him, but it was even more surprising that he was speaking to Adul with respect. Little wonder his classmates were so shocked.

Violet light rained down on Hajime. Kaori had just cast healing magic on him. Shea had also drawn Villedrucken and it looked like she was about to try to literally knock some sense back into Hajime. Meanwhile, Shizuku covered her face with her hands, unable to bear watching any longer.

Even Tio was stunned. Hajime's face twitched and he suppressed the urge to hit his friends.

“Hm... You're quite different from what I was led to believe... but judging by your comrades' reactions, this is unusual for you.”

“You’re the last family member Tio has left. If you were just the chief of the dragonman tribe, I wouldn’t bother using honorifics with you, but you’re her grandfather.”

“Oho, so you respect me because I am Tio’s grandfather, not because of my position. Hahaha, how interesting.”

A broad smile spread across Adul’s face. His dignified majesty vanished and he suddenly looked like a jolly old man. He seemed rather pleased with Hajime’s statement.

Tio smiled as well, now that she understood the reason for Hajime’s strange behavior.

“In that case, I think I shall call you Hajime-kun. Hajime-kun, I have no intention of punching you. As I said before, all I want is for Tio to be happy. As long as she’s smiling from the bottom of her heart, I have no reason to hurt you. In fact, I’m glad that you were able to win over my stubborn granddaughter’s heart. It’s a feat no one else has managed these last five hundred years.”

“I... see?”

Hajime hadn’t been expecting such a broad-minded response. He thought Adul would have wanted to hit him for sure.

“Mmm. If she’s happy, it matters not what her fetishes are. More importantly, there’s something I need to ask you about the vampire princess.”

“About Yue?”

“Yes. It came as quite a surprise to learn that she was still alive. I must say, it’s a rather strange twist of fate that my granddaughter ended up falling in love with the same man as the vampire princess. She is the one you love more than anyone, correct?”

“Yes, she is.”

Adul nodded, unperturbed by Hajime’s immediate response. The other dragonmen were pretty pissed, though. Ristas especially looked ready to launch into another tirade. He clearly thought Hajime was a monster for claiming to love another woman when he had Tio.

“Well, I’m rather fond of my granddaughter. When her parents fell during the great battle five hundred years ago, I swore to myself that I would protect her no matter, which is why there’s one thing I need to ask you before you leave for such a deadly battlefield.”

Adul stared at Hajime, his dragon eyes poised to see through any potential falsehoods.

Hajime adjusted his collar and straightened his back, determined to answer as sincerely as possible.

“How do you feel about Tio? Even if she loves you, if you do not reciprocate those feelings, then I’m afraid I cannot allow her to go with you. As her grandfather, I am only willing to entrust her to someone who cares for her as much as I do or more.”

“I understand.”

Hajime could feel the weight in Adul’s words. This could have been the last time he ever saw his granddaughter. It was entirely possible he would die during the battle, so he wanted to make sure he was doing the right thing by leaving Tio in Hajime’s care.

Hajime’s gaze swept over the other dragonmen, Shea and his comrades, and Adul before finally coming to rest on Tio.

Overwhelmed by the force of his stare, Tio involuntarily tried to take a step backward. But before she could, Hajime wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her close... as if to make it clear to everyone that she was his woman.

Tio’s face grew even redder, and she looked so dainty that it was hard to believe she was a raging masochist.

Hajime looked back up at Adul, and said in a firm, unyielding voice, “Recently, people have been saying that I’m more evil than the Demon Lord.”

“Oho?”

“I don’t know if they’re right, but it’s true that I always get what I want, no matter what it takes, and that I kill anyone who gets in my way.”

The surrounding soldiers and Hajime’s classmates started muttering furiously

to each other again, but Adul listened quietly.

“I want Tio.”

Tio twitched in Hajime’s arms. She looked up expectantly at him with her beautiful golden eyes.



“I want to show her my home, and I want to keep her by my side. It doesn’t matter how she feels. I won’t let her run away from me now. I won’t deny that Yue is the person I love most, but I love Tio too. I know it’s selfish of me to say this, but still...”

“Go on,” Adul said in a rumbling voice. He looked so intimidating that the people nearby began backing up.

Hajime glanced at Ristas and the other dragonmen before turning back to Adul and showing him his trademark fearless smile.

“Tio belongs to me now. If you don’t like that, then you’ll have to steal her back from me. I’ll accept your challenge anywhere, anytime.”

The other dragonmen stared at Hajime in shock. Even the human soldiers were stunned. Shea, Kaori, and Shizuku had expected a response like this, so they just looked exasperated. But of course, they couldn’t imagine not having Tio by their side, either, so they were glad Hajime was fighting to keep her.

Adul looked from Hajime to Shea and the others, then said, “You certainly are like the Demon Lords spoken of in fairy tales... unbelievably strong and unbelievably inconsiderate. Heh, so my granddaughter was seduced by a Demon Lord, eh? The same Demon Lord who is now going to save the world. Gahahaha!”

Adul stopped pressuring Hajime with his gaze and burst out laughing. And once his laughter died down, he looked over at Tio and nodded to himself.

“What a wonderful expression. You never made a face like that back in our village. I see you are not only loved by many, but love many in turn.”

“Indeed, Grandfather. I love not just Master, but Yue and the others as well. And I can say with certainty that they all love me. They have blessed me with so much that I feel as though I could slay Ehit on my own if need be.”

Adul’s smile widened, and he straightened his collar the same way Hajime had earlier before bowing to him.

“Very well. Demon Lord, I entrust my granddaughter to you. Take as good care of her as you would your beloved.”

“I’ll stay with her until I die. I swear it.”

Adul nodded, a relieved look on his face. He then turned on his heel and went back to where Gahard and the others were waiting. It looked like they couldn’t believe what had just happened.

“If I called my mother over and asked her to grill Nagumo-san, would I have a chance with him as well?”

“Liliana-san, I think that would only earn you the wrath of your mother... Though, I understand how you feel.”

Liliana and Aiko gazed at Hajime, longing in their eyes, hoping he would say something about how he loved them as well. Kuzeli and Catherine dragged the two lovestruck girls back into the fortress with everyone else, but they kept shooting surreptitious glances at him until they were out of sight. Naturally, Hajime ignored them completely and did his best not to meet their gazes.

“Holy shit. Nagumo really is a Demon Lord.”

“I can’t believe one of my classmates ended up with a harem.”

“I suddenly feel like I can’t die until I sock Nagumo in the face. No way I’ll let those apostles get the better of me.”

Atsushi, Yoshiki, and the other guys started burning with jealousy.

“It looks like he’s going to be adding a few more girls to his harem, too!”

“He can’t keep getting away with it!”

The girls were excitedly discussing Hajime’s latest stunt, but their leader, Yuuka, appeared rather sullen.

Many of the soldiers who’d watched the exchange were chattering about it as well.

Sighing, Hajime grabbed Tio’s hand and tried to escape the circle of onlookers. As they pushed through the crowd, Tio’s dopey grin suddenly vanished, and she whispered into Hajime’s ear, saying, “Master, I’m very, very happy to hear that you love me, but there is something I must know. You didn’t choose to tell me now because you’re afraid we may not survive this battle, did you?”

Had that been the reason, Tio planned to lecture him thoroughly. It was cute how she could be such a masochist while also playing the part of the mother who took care of the party.

Hajime looked resolutely into Tio's eyes and replied, "The only people who'll be dying tomorrow are Ehit and his lackeys. There's no way in hell this is where our story ends. I just didn't want to give your grandpa a half-assed response, that's all."

"Ufufufu, I see. Then all is well. I suppose this means we need to hold an orgy once we get Yue back."

"Why do you and Shea always have to kill the mood like that?"

Kaori, Shizuku, and several of Hajime's classmates shot Shea scathing looks. She simply averted her gaze and whistled innocently in response.

After they escaped the crowd, Hajime and his comrades headed to the fortress' rooftop.

Once he got there, he transmuted a pool chair for himself and kicked back while he waited for Ehit's armies to arrive.

Meanwhile, Tio, Kaori, Suzu, Aiko, Yuka, and all of Hajime's classmates continued training with their new artifacts. They used the Hour Crystal to squeeze out as much time as they could.

There were still a few hours before dawn, but everyone was too nervous to sleep. Fortunately, Hajime's lax attitude helped prevent people from getting so stressed that they tired themselves out. Simply watching him lean back in his chair and close his eyes was enough to calm everyone's nerves. Thanks to the atmosphere he created, there were a lot more people who felt comfortable approaching Hajime.

The first person to talk to him was an old merchant dressed in expensive clothes. His dark brown hair was tied up in a ponytail, and he'd brought a beautiful girl around Hajime's age with him.

"More, what are you doing here?" Hajime asked when he spotted him.

“Business, what else? Though, at the moment, I’m offering all of my wares to the soldiers for free.”

“So you’re trying to win favors with all the nation’s bigwigs, huh? Guess you’re more interested in profiting after the war than during it.”

Some of Hajime’s classmates turned to eavesdrop on his conversation. Shea and Kaori had both met More, so they explained Hajime’s relationship with him to the others.

More raised an eyebrow, impressed by Hajime’s insight.

“I suspected so when I first met you, but it seems you really were one of the heroes summoned by the kingdom. I believe it was fate that first brought us together, so I hope you’re willing to work with me in the future.”

“Is that all you came here to say?”

“Every action you take drastically affects the future. Once this war ends, what do you say to using your otherworldly knowledge to open up a business here? Naturally, my trading company will offer you its full support.”

“You never give up, do you?” Hajime asked with an exasperated look on his face. Still, the fact that More was thinking about the future meant he was certain Hajime would succeed, so his visit had pleasant undertones.

“Oh yes, I brought my granddaughter with me this time. Allow me to introduce you.”

The beautiful young girl gracefully stepped forward and curtsied to Hajime.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Hajime-sama. I am Samia Nos, the official secretary of the Nos trading company. If you ever wish to open up a business, I am willing to assist you.”

“Okay, time’s up, get out of here!”

“Thanks for coming, but Hajime-kun’s a busy guy! The exit’s that way, so please use it and leave!”

Realizing what More and Samia were after, Shea and Kaori hurriedly stepped in to stop another girl from entering Hajime’s harem.

“Dammit, that girl’s so cute!” Yoshiki grumbled.

In response, Shinji said, “It’s all about fame. If we can rack up some achievements during this battle, we’ll get chances like that!”

While the two of them talked about such trivial matters, new visitors appeared.

“Are you in the middle of something?”

“I can’t believe you guys are so relaxed right before the final battle.”

A familiar tigerman walked up to the rooftop, followed by a young harpy woman and a middle-aged bearman.

Shea’s bunny ears perked up as she saw them and said, “Oh? It’s elder Mao, the captain of Verbergen’s guards and... the bearman my family—”

“Eeek, a Haulia!”

The burly bearman warrior, Regin, crouched down and covered his head.

Everyone silently turned to Shea.

“I-It’s not my fault! Dad’s the one who traumatized him!” she stammered.

Hajime looked up at the sky and muttered, “Your name was... Gil, right?”

“I’m amazed you remember me. I’m nothing more than the captain of Verbergen’s guards,” Gil responded as he smiled bashfully. He was the first beastman Hajime had seen both times he’d visited Verbergen.

“Actually, Gil is now one of our generals, Nagumo. His rank is second only to the supreme commander of the army, and there are only five generals including him.”

“Huh, you’ve sure come far.”

“It’s all thanks to you. The truth is, I begged Mao to allow me to accompany him because I wanted to speak to you.”

“What did I do?”

Mao explained that after the demon army had attacked Verbergen, they had needed to select a new general to replace the one who’d died. The reason Gil

had been chosen for the position was because he'd been able to calmly handle the situation with Hajime the first time they'd met.

The only reason Verbergen still existed was thanks to Hajime's training of the Haulia. Because of that, the elders decided that Gil, the man who'd done a good job of handling Verbergen's first encounter with Hajime, was best-suited to be the new general. He was already strong enough, and his calm decision-making proved he had what it took to lead.

"Once this battle is over, the relationship between beastmen and humans is going to change drastically. I don't know how things will end up, but I hope you'll be willing to help us again if the need arises. I'll be praying for your success."

After saying his piece, Gil stepped back and allowed Mao to talk. As always, he was forthright with his words. Mao smiled awkwardly and said, "This battle will go down in history. I realize this is a tall order, but please allow me to interview you once it's over, Mister Nagumo."

Mao was the head of Verbergen's newspaper, as well as one of the council's elders.

Smiling, Hajime replied, "Not happening."

"Why not!?"

Because you always fudge the truth in your articles, duh!

Hajime had witnessed firsthand how Mao fabricated and embellished stories to make his paper sell.

"I've already started advertising that the next issue will have an interview with you! It's going to be titled, 'Victory Special! A Bright Future Awaits Nagumo's Mistresses! Follow These Easy Steps, and You Can Join His Harem as Well!' What do you think? Doesn't that pique your curiosity!?"

"It piques my desire to kill you."

To Hajime's surprise, most of his female classmates perked up when they heard Mao's words. It seemed her newest article would be in high demand. Just then, another visitor appeared.

“Shizuku-oneesamaaaaaa!”

“Ahhh, how did you find me!?”

“I got here by following your scent.”

The female knight who jumped into Shizuku’s arms was one of Liliana’s former bodyguards. Because of all the scandals she’d caused, she’d been continually demoted and now her rank was the same as a common foot soldier’s.

She adored Shizuku to the point where she’d been willing to cast dark magic on Gahard to keep him away from her precious older sister. Naturally, she was a member of the secret society of crazy Shizuku stalkers, Soul Sisters.

“*Sniff, sniff...* Aaaah, it’s been so long since I last smelled your fresh scent! Haaah... Haaah!”

“Hajime! Save me, Hajime!”

“Hm? You’re calling him Hajime now? Not Nagumo-kun, but Hajime? Nagumo, you bastard!”

The knight removed her face from Shizuku’s bosom and glared at Hajime. Yuka and the others screamed and backed away. The knight’s expression was so terrifying that they felt goosebumps rising on their arms.

Sighing, Hajime snapped his fingers. A second later, a few Haulias emerged from the shadows. Cam reverently bowed to Hajime and asked, “Your orders, Boss?”

“No one will miss a single knight. Dispose of that eyesore. Oh, and get rid of the phony journalist while you’re at it, too.”

“Yes, sir!”

“What did I do!? Wait, Cam-dono, please don’t! Nooo!”

“So this is the violent rabbitmen clan that everyone’s been talking about. Fine by me. I’ll show you that our Soul Sisters are more than a match for your squad of personal assassins, Nagumo!”

Mao immediately fled, while the young knight tried to cast a dark magic spell

on Cam.

More Haulias gathered on the rooftop, surrounding their prey. They started chanting, “Cut off their heads!” while Shizuku desperately tried to stop them from doing anything too extreme.

However, even after Mao and the knight were dealt with, the visitors kept on coming. David and the other knights came to ask Hajime about his relationship with Aiko, Crystabel and their disciples tried to flirt with Hajime, and so on. In truth, most of the people who had become Crystabel’s disciples were former men whose balls Hajime and Yue had crushed. When Hajime learned he’d contributed to the creation of more Crystabels, his soul almost left his body.

After the mass of crossdressers left, several dragonmen came to challenge Hajime. Tio’s wet nurse, Venri, also appeared to have a private talk with her. Judging by her expression, Tio’s sudden change had caused her quite a shock.

At some point, Hajime’s classmates had stopped training and started watching him deal with the plethora of visitors.

“Despite the cold front he puts up, he’s still surrounded by people...” Yuka muttered, a faint smile gracing her face.

Come to think of it, he was like that back in Japan.

Before they’d been summoned, Hajime had still been popular, in both a good and a bad way. Kaori and Shizuku had always talked to him, while Hiyama’s group had always bullied him.

“He’s always been that kind of guy. We just never noticed,” Ryutarou replied casually.

“You think Nagumocchi can win?” Nana asked hesitantly while turning her gaze toward Yuka. Everyone else shortly followed suit.

She looked each of her comrades in the eye and said, “Of course.”

A confident smile spread across her face, and the other students simply smiled back at her.

Eventually, dawn arrived. The sun’s rays crested the horizon, causing

everyone to cast long shadows. Warm light suffused the air, and right when the sun became fully visible, Hajime opened his eyes.

“They’re here.”

A second later, dark crimson mana filled the air, blotting out the orange sunrise. Something inherently repulsive mingled with the light, and it magnified the fear and unease everyone felt. Monsters’ eyes had the exact same light, which probably explained why it felt so creepy.

The sun was nothing more than a small dot in the sky now, its light completely eradicated by the torrent of dark crimson. The air creaked and the earth shook.

Everyone’s gazes were drawn to the top of the Divine Mountain.

“The sky... is cracking...” someone muttered. There was a deafening boom, and the sky above the divine temple fractured like a pane of glass.

The time had come at last. Ehit was here to end the world, while the mortal races were determined to put an end to his tyranny. No matter how it ended, this would be the final battle.

Chapter V: An Unparalleled Declaration of War

“This is the supreme commander of the allied forces, Liliana S. B. Heiligh!” the artifact Hajime gave Liliana amplified her voice, projecting it across the entire battlefield.

“The time for the final battle has come! All units, take up your posts at once!”

Her booming voice lit a fire under the soldiers, and they started scurrying to their positions. This wasn't the time to be watching in awe; the fate of Tortus rested in their hands.

The cracks in the sky grew larger, and just as the soldiers finished deploying, it shattered.

A giant hole appeared in the sky. It was undoubtedly the same gate Ehit had used to transport the demons three days ago, but it looked distinctly different.

The gate back then had been surrounded by radiant silver light, but this one was pitch black. On top of that, it appeared to be emitting an ominous miasma from its edges.

What appeared at first glance to be black rain was actually a horde of monsters that spilled out from the gates of hell. They landed atop the summit of the Divine Mountain, covering it in its entirety. There were so many of them that they could be seen by the naked eye, despite the fact that the summit was 8000 meters up. Though Hajime couldn't get an accurate count, he guessed there were millions of them up there.

The massive army of monsters rumbled down the mountainside like a dark avalanche. And they were nothing more than the vanguard of Ehit's army.

Next, a torrent of silver poured through Ehit's gate and streaked through the bloody crimson sky.

“That certainly is a lot of apostles...” Liliana muttered as she glared at one of the artifacts that showed her a close-up of the sky from her command center.

Hajime had left her several screens that were linked to different areas to help her keep an eye on the overall situation. The largest of them showed the neverending stream of apostles flying out of Ehit's gate, and the officers in the room with Liliana shivered in unison. They were protected by the world's best barrier mages, but they didn't feel at all safe.

Liliana quickly scanned the other screens as well, then activated the telepathy stones attached to one of them.

"Emperor Gahard. Don't rush ahead of your army. You're not allowed to die until this battle is over."

Gahard had taken his personal retinue of soldiers and advanced past the vanguard, so Liliana reined him in.

Pleased that Liliana had already settled into the role of commander, Gahard grinned and replied, "Hah, who died and made you boss? Oh wait, I guess we did. But still, if the alliance's strongest warrior doesn't fight on the front lines, we won't stand a chance. Even if I die, it'll just make my soldiers fight harder to avenge me. The only person we absolutely need to keep alive is you, Supreme Commander."

"Good grief... Well, we're about to send out the goddess and the sword. Make sure you stick to the plan."

"You got it!"

Liliana then contacted Lanzwi, Ulfric, Cam, Barus, Crystabel, Kuzeli, Simon, and David, offering each of them a few words of encouragement.

"Remember everyone, we're risking our lives today so that we can have a tomorrow!"

The hardened warriors all shouted in approval, while the officers that had been cowering in the command room regained a bit of their composure.

Liliana had really grown into the role of supreme commander, and she looked more imposing than ever before.

"All units, brace for impact!"

She wasn't saying that because Ehit's armies were about to reach them, but

because the goddess and the sword were about to act.

“Members of the alliance, brave warriors who have decided to fight to save our world! There is no need to fear! We have the protection of a true god on our side!” Aiko shouted from the fortress’ rooftop, her voice amplified to echo across the battlefield as well.

“The true god shall protect us from this evil imposter who wishes to eradicate humanity from Tortus. All of you standing here today are true heroes! As the true Ehit’s messenger I, the Fertility Goddess, anoint you all as divine valkyries!”

The soldiers’ morale skyrocketed. The knowledge that they were Aiko’s divine valkyries caused their hearts to soar.

“Justice is on our side! On this day, none of us shall know defeat! Shout it with me, brave heroes! The only thing waiting for us at the end of this battle is victory!”

The earth shook again as 500,000 soldiers stamped their feet on the ground, creating a rhythmical beat. Together, they shouted, “Victory! Victory! Victory!”

“Glory to humanity! Death to the evil god who opposes us!” Aiko screamed.

“Glory to humanity! Death to the evil god who opposes us!” the soldiers parroted.

Aiko desperately tried to remember what else was in the speech notes Hajime had written for her while fulfilling her duty as the army’s goddess.

“We have nothing to fear from this evil god’s lowly minions! Behold as our sword strikes them down!”

A quiet voice responded, “Your wish is my command, O Goddess.”

The soldiers watched as a figure rose up from behind Aiko. He had white hair, an eyepatch covering one eye, and wore a black coat. The man who held the fate of the world in his hands had finally joined the stage. Hajime floated up a few meters, then raised a palm-sized diamond high into the air.

The diamond emitted a dazzling light, looking almost like a second sun. From the soldiers’ point of view, it looked like Aiko had suddenly been wreathed in a halo. Of course, this was all just an act to make things look more impressive

than they were. And naturally, it was also one of Hajime's ideas.

A devilish grin spread across his face, and a section of the crimson sky flashed. A second later, a sphere of pure light descended onto the Divine Mountain. And as it hit the peak, there was an ear-splitting roar followed by a blinding burst of light.

Shortly after that, an earthquake rippled across the plains. Shockwaves powerful enough to warp the very air shot out from the epicenter of the impact. When the shockwaves reached the army, the grand barrier that Liliana had moved here from the capital activated, protecting the soldiers. But while Hajime had upgraded the barrier, it still creaked in protest as it absorbed the shockwaves. And it couldn't stop the earthquake, so many people ended up falling to the ground.

Even as they lost their balance, the soldiers kept their eyes trained on the Divine Mountain.

"Holy shit. The mountain shattered..." someone muttered.

That was no exaggeration. A chunk of the mountain had been blown apart, along with the hundreds of thousands of monsters that had been in that area.

Hajime wasn't done yet, though. The sky flashed again, and more burning spheres of light pelted the Divine Mountain, blasting through it as though it was as fragile as a sandcastle. It was as if Hajime was summoning the apocalypse.

Those spheres were called Gravity Meteors. Though they had the destructive power of missiles, they were just lumps of metal that fell from the sky. However, each one weighed a couple tons, and they dropped from an unbelievable height. Thus, the laws of inertia made them far more powerful than any bomb. Moreover, they were enchanted with gravity magic, which allowed Hajime to alter their course as he pleased and target his enemies with pinpoint accuracy.

Tortus' greatest mountain became a pile of rubble in a matter of seconds.

If you're gonna rain monsters and apostles down on us, then I'm gonna rain meteors down on you.

That was the sword Hajime had prepared for the alliance. Ehit had been kind

enough to tell Hajime where his armies would be appearing, so Hajime had decided to obliterate his staging area. It was the perfect jab at Ehit's arrogance.

It was only thirty seconds into the decisive battle, but Hajime had already called forth a cataclysm powerful enough to obliterate the Divine Mountain.

“.....”

The soldiers watched on, speechless, as the dust cloud from Hajime's assault rolled over them. They were trembling, not in fear, but joy. Burning with bloodlust, the soldiers let out a triumphant howl.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Their voices were powerful enough to push back the cloud of dust enveloping them.

“All hail Aiko-sama! All hail the Fertility Goddess!” they roared.

Meanwhile, the apostles stopped in their tracks and watched the Divine Mountain crumble. Even these emotionless warriors were shaken by Hajime's overwhelming might. But Hajime wasn't done yet. His diamond glowed even brighter.

“I hope you didn't think that was all I had up my sleeve. I'll burn your wings off and make you tumble to the ground, just like Icarus, you worthless puppets!” he snarled, and the sky above the apostles split apart as pillars of light rained down upon them.

Hajime had perfected his satellite laser artifact, Hyperion, and created seven of them in total. He'd christened the upgraded versions Pulse Hyperions.

Seven pillars of light, each taller than the tower of Babel, swallowed the army of apostles. Thousands of them were caught by surprise and incinerated before they could even react. Of course, thousands more coated their wings with disintegration magic and used them as shields. But even their powerful magic couldn't stop the light of destruction.

Hajime had strengthened the lenses that focused his Pulse Hyperions' light beams, and the heat each beam contained was immense enough to turn the apostles' unnaturally sturdy bodies to ash.

As the light faded, the apostles who'd been lucky enough to be outside the pillars' path and the newcomers who'd just come through the gate were forced to regroup and rethink their strategy.

Hajime was a far greater threat than they'd anticipated. The only way to fulfill their objective was to destroy his artifacts. Realizing that, all of the apostles simultaneously shot upwards.

“Oh, still hungry for more? Don't worry, I've got enough blasts to fill you all up!”

Hajime viewed the oncoming apostles through the farsight stone he'd loaded onto his lasers, and grinned. His diamond flashed again, and a section of each of his Pulse Hyperions split into ten pieces. Each piece looked like a triangle studded with crimson jewels.

The apostles watched these triangles fall with a bemused expression, but they determined that getting within firing range of the lasers took priority, so they ignored them. It honestly wasn't a bad choice to go for the main weapon rather than the auxiliary parts, but they really should have been warier of Hajime's tactics.

The Pulse Hyperions fired their second volley. The apostles barrel rolled out of the way, then flew up close enough to hit the satellite lasers with their disintegration beams. But just before they could launch their counterattack—

“Ah!? How—?”

A tiny beam of light perforated one apostle's chest, while another lost their head to a similarly-sized beam. Both beams had come from behind.

The apostles that survived the first barrage looked below in shock.

“Is this the work of those smaller artifacts from earlier?” one of the apostles muttered as she looked at the ruby-encrusted triangles surrounding her.

They were called Mirror Bits, and Hajime had equipped each of his Pulse Hyperions with ten or so to protect them. They used spatial magic to bend and reflect the main satellite's huge laser and strike approaching targets from all angles.

It didn't take long for the apostles to realize how dangerous that was for them.

The Pulse Hyperions launched their third volley, but this time it was a scattered one rather than a concentrated barrage. The apostles were still able to react, but dodging had become impossible.

“Oh no—”

The Mirror Bits continued bending the smaller lasers, creating a prison of superheated, hyper-focused light. And the lasers didn't just change direction when they reflected off a Mirror Bit, either. They also swerved in unpredictable patterns when two lasers collided with each other. There was no safe place for them to retreat within this web of death.

Hajime had created a perfect kill zone for any foe foolish enough to fly close to his weapons.

The apostles hurtled to the ground as the lasers burned their wings to ash.

“You came up with some pretty cool things, Vandre Schnee. Actually, I guess the credit should go to Oscar Orcus?”

The idea for the Mirror Bits had come from the superheated laser part of the trial in the Frost Caverns.

After thanking the two Liberators, Hajime looked up and said, “Well, looks like it's time for the grand finale.”

He then twirled his diamond with a smile, sending one last present to the apostles struggling desperately against his Pulse Hyperions.

Each Hyperion dropped a small jewel that fell to meet the few apostles that had managed to use numbers and brute force to push their way past the laser prison.

“Disappear, you eyesores.”

Seven suns winked into existence in the dark crimson sky.

The jewels were another special artifact Hajime had installed into his Pulse Hyperions called Rose Helioses. They were light bombs made by focusing an enormous amount of sunlight and compressing it inside a specially crafted

Treasure Trove. The satellites got their light from a similar Treasure Trove, but the Rose Helios used its energy to create a heat explosion instead of acting as lenses.

Due to how volatile they were, Hajime could only load one Rose Helios onto each Pulse Hyperion, but the tiny spheres were immensely powerful. The seven concurrent explosions were stronger than a nuclear detonation, and they created a miniature solar flare.

For a brief moment, the world went white. But a second later, shockwaves made of heat and energy rippled through the air.

The apostles that had tried to destroy Hajime's Pulse Hyperions were reduced to ash, and the newly arrived reinforcements from Ehit's gate were blown away. The cloud of dust that had covered humanity's fortress was dispersed by the shockwave as well. Had Heiligh's prized barrier not been active, the entire alliance army might have been destroyed by that shockwave alone.

"Whoa, that's one big explosion."

"I guess Hajime-kun's strong enough to change the world's geography when he's not holding back..."

"He basically did the earth equivalent of leveling Mt. Everest and then detonating a bunch of nuclear bombs all at once. We better keep a close eye on him once we return home."

"Looks like you're gonna have a hard time keeping him in check, Shizushizu. I'll do my best to help, since I don't want Japan to get blown up, either."

"It's too late for Tortus, huh...? First thing I'm doing when we make it to the Sanctuary is beat Kouki senseless. I'm worried if I don't get to him first, Nagumo will wipe him off the face of the planet."

Shea and the others smiled wryly as they watched Hajime decimate Ehit's forces.

They had known from the start that Hajime was planning on launching a preemptive strike, and they'd known about his meteors and lasers as well. But even then, they hadn't expected that he would be able to obliterate an entire mountain and create fake suns in the sky for a few seconds.

A short distance behind Shea, Tio turned to her grandfather and said proudly, “What do you think, Grandfather? My future husband is amazing, no!?”

“He, uh, certainly is amazing, yes.”

Tio puffed her chest out while Adul just watched on in awe. The other dragonmen were similarly nonplussed. Ristas was so shocked his knees had given out.

Some of the students and soldiers had actually fainted because of how overwhelming the spectacle had been. The only other people who weren't stunned speechless were the Haulia. The murderous rabbitmen were all whooping in excitement.

“Hell yeah! That's our boss for you! Always doing the impossible!”

“Boss! I love youuuuuu! Please fuck me!”

“All hail the Rondo of Red Death!”

“Bow before the White Fang Hurricane, you maggots! Hahahahaha!”

“Wait, you guys! The titles we came up with before aren't cool enough to express his awesomeness at this point! We need a better name!”

“How about ‘Demon Lord of the White Night, Bringer of the End’!?”

“We have to work red or crimson in there somehow! It's Boss' trademark color! What about ‘Crimson Godslaying Emperor’!?”

It seemed that by the time this battle was over, Hajime would have a new slew of edgy nicknames.

While the Haulia were cheering, Aiko addressed the soldiers. Doing her best not to laugh at Hajime's new nicknames, she said in a commanding voice, “Behold the might of our sword! With him by our side, our victory is guaranteed!”

“Victory! Victory! Victory!”

Gahard chuckled to himself as the soldiers regained their morale.

“Alright, you lot, draw your weapons! Aim for those pesky flies in the sky! We can't let the goddess' sword take all the credit! Remember, you louts are all

heroes today! Fight to the bitter end! Don't stop until every last enemy has been buried beneath our feet! It's time to show this bastard the might of humanity!" the emperor roared in a voice loud enough to carry across the battlefield. He didn't even need a voice-amplifying artifact.

"Yeaaah!"

All of the soldiers cheered and started aiming with the heavy weaponry Hajime had provided them. Their morale was as high as it could possibly go. There wasn't a shred of fear in the warriors' eyes, and they were shivering with anticipation.

The surviving apostles hurriedly regrouped, while yet more continued to pour from the gate. Alva hadn't been kidding when he said Ehit had an almost limitless supply of them.

The real battle between mortals and the gods was about to begin.

"That was a great speech, Sensei. No wonder everyone worships you."

"Nagumo-kun... I'm no longer sure how to feel about what I've done," Aiko replied, looking a bit conflicted as she returned to where Hajime was waiting. She wasn't sure if she should praise Hajime for coming up with a speech like this or reprimand him.

As she rubbed her temples, Hajime handed the diamond that served as the Pulse Hyperions' control panel over to her. She gingerly accepted, looking down at it as if it were a bomb.

"Only a goddess is fit to control the light that rains down from the heavens. Don't worry about breaking the lasers, by the way. I don't mind if they get destroyed."

"Okay... Stay safe out there, Nagumo-kun," Aiko said, steeling her resolve.

Hajime nodded in satisfaction and turned to Kaori.

"Your face still looks like an apostle's, but everyone will be able to tell it's you now because of your hair. Black hair definitely suits you best."

"Hehehe, really? Then I better end this war quickly so I can get my old body back."

Kaori was still using Noint's body, but she'd dyed her hair black using one of the appearance-changing artifacts Hajime had made. They didn't want anyone accidentally mistaking her for an enemy, so that made sense.

Her combat uniform was also dyed black, as were her wings. She looked kind of like a fallen angel. In a way, it was a fitting appearance for an apostle who served the Demon Lord.

"I'm counting on you."

"Don't worry, we'll be fine. I'll protect the place you need to return to, Hajime-kun. I won't let anyone lay a finger on Myu-chan or the others, so... you better bring Yue back."

"You bet. Just you wait, I'll bring Yue back and we'll tease you until you drop."

"Mrrr, Hajime-kun, you bully!" Kaori puffed her cheeks out angrily as she said that, but her eyes were still smiling.

Hajime smiled softly at her. His faith in Kaori was absolute.

Shea, Tio, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou walked up to them.

While Kaori and Shizuku shared an intimate hug, Hajime activated his telepathy stone and contacted Liliana.

"Princess, you better make good use of my anti-apostle artifacts."

"Don't worry, I will. You can count on me. Also, after we safely get through this, can you please start calling me Lily? I'll be praying for your success, Hajime-san."

Even at such a critical juncture, Liliana wasn't letting up on her efforts to join Hajime's harem. Smiling to himself, Hajime ended the transmission and connected his telepathy stone to Cam's.

"Cam. I only have one thing to say to you. Go wild."

"Hehehe, now that's the kind of order I wanted to hear. Aye aye, Boss. Hurry up and kill Ehit. We'll be waiting for you."

Hajime couldn't see them from his position, but he had no doubt the Haulias were grinning from ear to ear.

“Sonobe. You’ll be saying goodbye to this world soon, so make sure you enjoy your final party in Tortus.”

“How can we possibly enjoy this, you moron!? Sheesh... You better come back safely, Nagumo.”

“You got it. Oh, and Endou.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Kaori might be our ace on the ground, but you’re our joker... our trump card. Don’t get scared. As long as you remain confident, no one stands a chance against you.”

“If that’s what you think, then I guess I’ve gotta live up to those expectations. Don’t you worry, I’ll take care of anyone who tries to get close!”

Hajime could hear the excited muttering of his classmates through his telepathy stone. His words had far more of an impact on his classmates than he’d realized.

Noticing that Gahard, Ulfric, and the other world leaders were also listening into his transmission, he spoke in a casual tone, saying, “Well, guess I’m off to go kill god.”

Despite how nonchalant he sounded, everyone had absolute faith in his words.

Gahard and the others smiled. Hajime’s words resonated in their hearts. They were scattered across various points of the battlefield, but their hearts were one.

Hajime cut the transmission and leaped into the sky with one of his skyboards. Using that artifact was far faster than jumping 8000 meters up with just Aerodynamic.

His companions followed suit, and the six of them left a multicolored trail in the sky as they flew upward. Far below, Hajime could hear soldiers cheering him on with words like, “Go get ’em, Sword!” and “All of humanity’s depending on you guys!”

Before they got very far, however, a group of apostles appeared to bar their

path. It was clear from their wary attitude that they were scared of approaching Hajime.

His lips curled up into a smile, and a dangerous glint entered his eyes.

“Hah, cowards. Wimps like you can’t stop us!”

Over twenty apostles brandished their swords at Hajime, but he didn’t slow down in the slightest. In fact, he sped up. And as he did, he summoned a giant artifact into the sky.

“I’ll tear you to shreds!”

A crimson whirlwind erupted from his weapon as streaks of light shot out of it. The apostles’ disintegration-magic enhanced swords and wings were not enough to protect them against it, and their defenses crumpled like paper.

In an instant, all the apostles died. There was a high-pitched whirring noise as the barrels of his new railgun-enhanced Gatling gun that fired pile bunkers started to spin. The pile bunkers it shot out were half the size of his dedicated pile bunker artifact, but they were still way more powerful than bullets. Of course, they lacked the range of bullets, but when it came to slaughtering apostles at close range, it was a far more fitting weapon.

As he was now, not even apostles stood a chance against Hajime. They lacked the wisdom to adapt to sudden changes, they hadn’t trained like hell the way Hajime had, and most of all... they didn’t have his unshakable determination. Realizing they couldn’t stop his momentum, the apostles circled around to Hajime’s flank and tried to catch him in a pincer attack instead.

“Don’t think Hajime-san’s the only one who can fight!”

“Indeed! Leave your flanks to us, Master!”

Shea and Tio instantly moved to intercept, but before they could do anything, a few blasts of light shot up from the ground, blowing the heads off the apostles.

“Huh?”

“Wh-What was that?”

Shea and Tio looked blankly at the dead apostles tumbling to the ground.

Hajime and the others also turned to see where the light had come from. Only Shea, who had insanely buffed physical attributes, and Hajime, who had the Farsight skill, could see who was giving them a thumbs-up from the fortress 5000 meters below.

It was Par, the young Haulia boy who'd decided he wanted to be called Baltfeld the Executioner. He was standing next to one of the massive anti-air rifles Hajime had affixed to the fort's roof. The rest of the Haulia sniper squad was there as well, and they were firing away with wild abandon.

These were guys who could hit a target a hundred meters away with a crossbow. But now, they were wielding railgun-enhanced sniper rifles that had Farsight and Foresight enchanted onto their scopes while wearing goggles enhanced with Riftwalk. Their sniping range had been increased considerably.

That being said, Hajime was still amazed they were able to hit things 5000 meters away. On top of that, it was clear from Par's thumbs-up that he was actively working to clear out any enemies getting in Hajime's way. That meant he was sniping enemies in extremely close proximity to Hajime and the others without missing a beat. He continued sniping the apostles that were trying to pincer Hajime, but eventually, they started dodging his shots. Still, his accuracy was terrifying enough that they didn't dare get close to Hajime and the others. If they stopped for even a second to attack, they'd be shot out of the sky.

"Why is my family so insanely strong?" Shea lamented.

"You may no longer be the only special existence among your clan, Shea," Tio replied with a smile.

"How is it that everyone who spends time with Hajime ends up insanely strong..." Shizuku groaned.

"H-Hey, Shizushizu, we're still normal, right? We haven't been infected by Nagumo-kun's insanity, right?" Suzu asked timidly.

"I dunno about you, but it's probably too late for me," Ryutarou muttered.

The reason everyone was able to banter so casually was because of how much support they were receiving from the ground. It wasn't just the Haulia sniping squad that was helping them out. Liliana was directing a bunch of other

soldiers to cover them as well. They fired barrage after barrage of missiles into the air, using the weapons' wide-area explosions to prevent the apostles from grouping up.

Of course, the apostles were powerful enough that a few were able to weave their way through the hail of missiles and bullets. But they weren't able to arrive in enough numbers to even be a threat to Shea and Tio. The two of them rebuffed any apostles that got close, allowing the party to continue surging forward.

"We're through! Keep those puppets at bay, guys!"

At long last, Hajime and the others reached Ehit's divine gate, which looked more like the gates of hell. Hajime put his Gatling pile bunker away and took out his inferior version of the Crystal Key. It had the same translucent glow as the old one, but this one looked like a dagger instead. He adjusted his grip on the hilt and charged toward the gate.

"Tch, even if it looks different, it's still as sturdy as before."

Hajime slammed the dagger into the gate's entrance, and a crimson ripple spread outward. The miasma surrounding the gate weakened slightly, and the barrier protecting the gate shook.

After a few seconds, part of the gate lost its miasma entirely, and apostles stopped appearing from that section. But the gate was huge, and there were still apostles pouring out of every area not affected by the dagger.

"Get lost!"

"I won't let you get in Hajime's way!"

"Suzu, Ryutarou! Take care of the enemies below us!"

"On it! Hallowed Ground!"

"Let's go for broke!"

Shea transformed Villedrucken into shotgun mode and started firing explosive slugs on full-auto, while Shizuku cut down the apostles' feather barrages with her black katana and Tio mowed down some with her breath. Suzu swung her fans in a wide arc, creating a dome-shaped Hallowed Ground to protect Hajime

while also spawning multiple barriers below him to slow attackers from that direction. As they struggled to push past Suzu's barriers, Ryutarou fired at them with the shotgun Hajime had given him. And on top of all that, they still had support from the ground.

"I'll cover you!" Aiko shouted via telepathy before sending several Mirror Bits down. They deployed a laser net around Hajime and the others, preventing the apostles from getting close.

"I'm not gonna let you lock me out this time!"

Hajime's crimson mana spiraled around him in a violent storm as he activated Limit Break and pushed every ounce of power he had into the crystal dagger.

After just a few seconds, the tip pierced through the gate's barrier. However, dark mana rose from within to try and push it out.

As Hajime warred with Ehit's mana, the apostles desperately tried to push him back. From the ground, the area around the gate looked like a giant silver cocoon due to the many apostles flying around it. Honestly, it was impressive that Shea and the others were able to keep them at bay. That being said, it wouldn't be long before the apostles' sheer numbers started pushing them back.

"Uwooh!" Hajime screamed, his mana glowing even brighter.

The dagger pushed a few inches deeper into the gate, and the black mana opposing it flickered. There were cracks in the gate's barrier now, but it still refused to open.

Finally, one of the apostles managed to make it to Hajime. She had lost half of her body to the Mirror Bits' lasers, but she'd at least managed to graze Hajime's cheek and arms with her wings before dying.

Shea and the others were covered in small wounds as well. Fighting in such a tiny area while defending someone was taking its toll. Cracks began to appear in the crystal dagger as well as it neared its limit.

Am I not gonna make it? Is my power really inferior to Ehit's? Had Hajime been a normal person, such pessimistic thoughts might have crossed his mind.

But if he was at all normal, he wouldn't have been in that position. Besides, none of the people who'd followed him were normal, either. Despite their wounds, despite the overwhelming disadvantage they were at, they shouted words of encouragement that showed the absolute faith in him.

"You can do it, Hajime-san!"

"I believe in you, Master!"

"Don't worry, I know there's nothing that can stop you!"

"You've got this, Nagumo-kun!"

"Shatter that shitty barrier, Nagumo!"

Smiling, Hajime replied, "Of course I've got this. I already told you, I'll destroy anything and everything that gets in my waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!"

Hajime pulled an arrow out of his Treasure Trove. It was the inferior version of the Arrow of Boundaries Miledi had given Shea.

He gripped it in his free hand, poured all of his mana into it, and stabbed it into the crack his dagger had created.

A sharp snapping noise resounded as the barrier finally shattered. Hajime's dagger and arrow sunk into the gate without any resistance. The mana surrounding the gate writhed, as if in pain.

Yue... Hajime thought with all of his might, providing direction for his weaker Crystal Key. He then twisted the dagger like a key... and the path opened.

The space around the dagger warped, forming an elliptical portal. A second later, both the dagger and the arrow shattered... and their glittering fragments fell to the ground below.

A feral smile spread across his face due to the success and he shouted, "Come on, guys!"

His prey was in sight now, and he wouldn't let it escape.

"Coming!"

"Of course!"

"Roger!"

“Okay!”

“You got it!”

Elated, Shea, Tio, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou nodded to Hajime. Together, all of them leaped into the small crimson portal that had appeared within the giant black gate.

Surprisingly, none of the apostles followed after them. Frowning, they simply watched as the gate Hajime and the others had gone through slowly closed behind them. And after the portal disappeared completely, they returned their gazes to the ground below.

Hajime and the others were no longer inside the silver cocoon protecting the gate. They’d finally reached Ehit’s Sanctuary.

Everyone in the alliance army cheered, and in response, the apostles swept down to put an end to the hopes of the mortals fighting below.

From that point on, humanity had to fend for itself, since Hajime was no longer around to assist them.

Extra Chapter: The Day All Dragonmen Cried

The ocean stretched out as far as the eye could see.

Set deep within the glimmering expanse of blue was a solitary island. There wasn't even a shallow reef within a hundred-kilometer radius of it. It was well and truly isolated from the rest of the world. A lone woman stood atop a rocky overhang jutting out of the island's southern tip. She wore an azure kimono and had shoulder-length hair of the same color. She appeared to be in her late forties and carried herself with the elegance of a noblewoman. She fervently stared southward, her hands clasped to her chest in her prayer.

"Princess..." the woman muttered. She was Venri Colt, and her family had served Tio's for generations. She had been Tio's wet nurse and had taken care of Tio after her parents had died.

Ever since Tio had left on her journey, it had been her daily routine to visit that spot and pray for Tio's safety. When Tio had claimed that something strange was happening on the mainland and offered to investigate, Venri hadn't tried to stop her. Though she loved Tio like her own daughter, she also had absolute faith in her strength.

Still, she couldn't help but worry. And as she gazed at the horizon, a messenger ran up to her.

"Venri-dono! Cartus-dono sensed the princess' mana heading this way! She's coming—"

Before the messenger even finished, Venri transformed and took flight. She raced southward as fast as possible, her azure scales scintillating in the noon light. She opened her eyes as wide as they could go and desperately scanned the horizon for a black speck.

It was only after she'd gone a hundred kilometers or so that she remembered Cartus' Job was Observer, which allowed him to see across immense distances.

I may have been a tad hasty... But just as she thought that, she spotted

something.

“P-Princess!?”

Venri could never mistake that distinctive luster of Tio’s obsidian-colored mana. But to her surprise, it wasn’t a black speck she spotted in the distance. Instead, she saw a whirling, pitch-black tornado. The tornado was perfectly horizontal and tapered at the front. It was still a few kilometers away, but was approaching at blistering speed.

Venri had spent more time with Tio than anyone else, so she could say with certainty that the princess was moving faster than ever before. Even the storm dragon, the fastest dragonman in the village, couldn’t achieve that velocity.

“Hm? Is that you, Venri!?”

“Y-Yes, Princess! Thank goodness you’ve returned safe...ly?”

Tears welled up in Venri’s eyes as she laid eyes on her surrogate daughter for the first time in months. However, those tears vanished the moment Tio dispelled the tornado and Venri saw what she looked like.

“P-Princess, why do you look like—”

“Fear not. I simply adjusted my form to be more aerodynamic for travel.”

Venri couldn’t believe what she was hearing. A dragonman’s transformation was set from the moment of their birth. Of course, that form grew as they did, but its shape was supposed to be immutable. And yet, the Tio in front of Venri looked much more sleek and slender than the form Venri remembered, and each of Tio’s scales had streaks of lighter black running through them.

“I shall explain later. My apologies, Venri, but I am in quite a hurry. Would you be willing to share some of your mana with me? It took a lot of practice to perfect this form while flying, and I expended more mana than anticipated,” Tio said in a haggard voice.

Venri snapped back to her senses and hurriedly gave as much of her mana as she could.

“Thank you. Come, Venri, cancel your transformation and get on my back.”

“What!? I could never do something so presumptuous!”

“Argh, now is not the time for decorum, Venri! As your princess, I command you to ride me!”

“Urgh... How will I ever face my ancestors after this? A servant should never ride her master!”

“Haaah, if anything I would consider that a reward.”

“Uh, Princess? What did you just say? And why did you suddenly start panting?” Venri asked as she hesitantly canceled her transformation and got onto Tio’s back.

Tio didn’t bother to answer and instead wrapped Venri in a wind barrier.

“Let us be off! I shall convert the pleasure from being stepped on into the strength to fly faster!”

“Huh!? Princess, what in the world are you—? Waaah, you’re going too faaaaaaaaast!”

Tio shot forward, creating that same black tornado she had before. She moved so fast that even her wind barrier couldn’t fully protect Venri from the air resistance.

In less than ten minutes, Tio reached the island.

“Welcome home, Tio-sama!”

“It is a relief to know that you’re safe!”

“Princess, what was that form you took earlier?”

“Hey, make way for the princess! She must be tired from her long journey. Let her rest!”

The dragonmen of the village gathered around the coast, both excited and confused by Tio’s sudden return.

Tio canceled her transformation and addressed the crowd, saying, “Thank you for coming out to welcome me! I have returned at long last!”

Tio’s smile was tinged with exhaustion, and Venri lent her a shoulder to lean on.

“Princess, I shall ready your bedchambers at once. Come, let us return to the

mansion so you can rest.”

Tio shook her head at Venri upon hearing those words.

“No, I am afraid there’s no time for that. I bear urgent news. Venri, where is my grandfather?”

“I am here.”

A regal dragonman with scarlet hair made his way past the crowd and walked up to Tio. He was Tio’s grandfather and the chief of the village, Adul Klarus. Though the dragonmen kingdom had fallen centuries ago, everyone still treated him like a king, which was why the moment he stepped forward, the muttering of the crowd died down.

Staggering slightly, Tio waved Venri away and did her best to stand straight.

Adul gasped when he saw the look in Tio’s eyes.

“Grandfather— No, Chief.”

“Tio...”

The two of them gazed silently at each other for a few seconds. All the other dragonmen waited with bated breath for Tio’s next words.

The only sound was of waves crashing against the shore, and weeds rustling in the wind. Finally, Tio opened her mouth and said in a voice laden with emotion, “The time has come.”

“Ah!” Adul gasped as his eyes widened in shock. Though they knew they were being disrespectful, the other dragonmen started muttering to each other again.

Adul sucked in a deep breath and scrutinized Tio with his slitlike, draconic eyes. He’d decided to appraise her not as her grandfather, but as the man who carried the fate of the dragonman race on his shoulders. The stern look in his eyes appeared far more imposing than Tio remembered.

I thought for a moment that she might have changed because that accursed god did something to her... but now I see that is nothing more than a sign of her growth.

After confirming that Tio was free of Ehit's influence, Adul smiled.

"Did you hear that, everyone? Gather the rest of the villagers in the central plaza. Tio has a message for us that will decide the future of our race!"

The dragonmen fell silent again as realization washed over them. Doing their best to contain their excitement, they started migrating to the central plaza.

"Tio, eat something before you speak to the others. It would be a disservice to give your report while exhausted."

"I suppose so. There is an awful lot I must tell everyone, so a short break would do me good."

Adul smiled kindly at Tio, returning to the role of grandfather instead of village chief. He then gently placed a hand on Tio's shoulder and said, "You must have met some truly splendid people on your journey. You look more like Orna than ever before."

"How—? I see you are perceptive as ever, Grandfather."

"P-Princess? Don't tell me you..."

Blushing slightly, Tio covered her face with her sleeve. Adul grinned playfully at her, while Venri looked aghast.

At this moment none of them realized the "splendid people" Tio had met on her journey had influenced her in worse ways than Ehit ever could.

While Tio was eating, the 300-odd members of the dragonmen village gathered in the town's central plaza. Excited chatter filled the square as they speculated on what Tio had discovered during her investigation.

Other dragonmen had left on scouting missions before, but none had ever returned with a report so important the entire village needed to hear it.

"Brethren, listen well," Tio declared as she walked up to the raised dais in the center of the square. Normally, it was only occupied during festivals, but today she would give her speech from it. Adul and Venri walked up a few seconds later and sat down on either side of her.

"The world will soon undergo a momentous change."

The dragonmen frowned angrily, thinking that Ehit was about to reset history for his own amusement again. The last time he did that, the dragonmen kingdom was destroyed and the few surviving dragonmen were forced to retreat to this hidden island.

Little did they know that Ehit was up to something far more insidious.

“Ehit does not intend to reset civilization as he’s done so many times before. This time, he plans to wipe out all mortal races and destroy the world of Tortus! Once that is complete, he plans to move on to a new world and repeat his atrocities there!”

The dragonmen looked visibly shaken.

“Words alone are not sufficient to convey the gravity of the situation. Therefore, I have recorded one of the battles that I fought in alongside my comrades! Watch closely, and know that there is still hope for Tortus!”

Venri’s jaw dropped open and Adul narrowed his eyes as Tio pulled a small, white card out of her pocket. It looked like an oddly-colored Status Plate, but when she raised it high into the air—

“Unbelievable... How on...?”

Adul watched on in awe, as did the other dragonmen.

The card projected a holographic vision into the air. It started with Hajime and the others confronting Freid and the five hundred apostles at the edge of the Schnee Snow Fields. When he had gone back to retrieve the artifacts he’d hidden there, Kaori had used restoration magic to recreate past events, and Hajime had transcribed that vision into one of his artifacts.

Even though they knew it was just a vision, the dragonmen gulped nervously, overwhelmed by the might of Ehit’s army.

“To think Ehit possessed so many of those emotionless monsters. A single one of them was strong enough to defeat me.”

“So you did indeed fight against one of them in the battle you feigned your death in, Grandfather.”

Adul had fought an apostle once before. Everyone thought he had died

fighting it, but in truth, he had faked his death and brought as many refugees as he could to the hidden village he had secretly created.

“Tio... Who is this young man?”

“His name is Hajime Nagumo. He’s one of the youths who was summoned by Ehit from another world.”

“Ah, so he must be the fabled hero,” one of the dragonmen muttered, and others nodded in agreement. However, Cartus, who was sitting in the front row and was one of the dragonmen elders, shook his head.

“No, he is not the hero... he is the Synergist of the hero’s party.”

“What!? Are you serious, Elder Cartus!?” Ristas shouted, his indigo-blue hair splaying out behind him. The other dragonmen looked equally surprised.

None of them believed this strong-willed white-haired boy possessed one of the weakest jobs in the world. How could a mere Synergist, a job that wasn’t even useful in combat, look so confident when up against an army of apostles?

“Yes, Master is no hero. He is nothing more than a Synergist. However, he was able to climb his way out of the deepest depths of the Great Orcus Labyrinth using nothing but those meager Synergist abilities. On top of that, he defeated an apostle in a one-on-one duel. As a result, he is someone Ehit considers an Irregular.”

“He defeated an apostle by himself? I see now why Ehit sent such a large force to subdue him. Hahaha...” Adul chuckled weakly. He was half-amazed, half still in disbelief. Everyone was so busy processing this bombshell that they didn’t register that Tio had just referred to Hajime as “Master.”

Well, everyone except Venri. She glanced at the princess, who was still looking gravely down at the other dragonmen.

Did she just call that young man... m-master? Am I just mishearing things?

“Standing next to him is the strongest vampire princess in history, Aletia... Though, she goes by the name Yue now.”

“So she did survive...”

“Indeed. She was sealed within the abyss. Master rescued her from her

prison.”

“I see... Hm? Tio, did you just—?”

Thank goodness you noticed as well, Adul-sama! The princess is saying strange things, isn't she!? Please, get to the bottom of this!

Venri silently pumped a fist into the air, hoping Adul would press Tio.

“That rabbitgirl is also an Irregular. Her name is Shea Haulia, and as far as I can tell, she is the only beastman alive today that possesses any amount of mana. The young brown-haired boy behind her is the hero, but if you ask me, Shea is far more deserving of the title than he is.”

“Hrm, I-I see...” Adul muttered, cocking his head. Tio shot him a questioning glance, but he didn't say anything, so she continued talking proudly about her other comrades, Kaori and Shizuku. Venri gave Adul a disappointed look, but he just assumed he must have misheard and didn't press Tio further.

Airos, Ristas, and the other young men who were romantically interested in Tio shot each other questioning glances as well.

“Is Master some kind of nickname for one of her comrades?” one of them whispered. None of them imagined she would refer to a man as her actual master, so they were confused.

The dragonmen continued watching and when Hajime said the line, “I'll massacre every last man, woman, and child living in the demon empire, regardless of their affiliation.” they all felt a shiver run down their spine.

They understood Hajime's wrath, since they too had experienced having their friends, family, and loved ones held hostage by Ehit, but he looked so furious that all the dragonmen were a little scared of him. All of them except Tio, anyway.

“Haaah, haaah, h-how wonderful...” Tio panted, an ecstatic expression on her face.

“Princess!?” Venri shouted, unable to remain silent any longer.

She had never seen the princess looking like this. Her shriek brought Adul and everyone else's attention back to Tio, but unfortunately, she'd already switched

back to her more serious self.

How has no one else noticed how strange the princess is acting!? Venri thought, slapping the floor in frustration.

Unfortunately, the events unfolding within the projection were too captivating, and Venri couldn't find an opportunity to bring up Tio's strange behavior.

The dragonmen all clenched their fists when Ehit stole Yue's body, and they felt their eyes tear up when Hajime let out his wail of sorrow. When Ehit declared he would destroy the world in three days, their anger flared, and they watched in awe as Tio and the others struggled against Alva, who had remained behind. Then, they were stunned speechless when Hajime recovered and destroyed Alva and the apostles with his existence-denying chains.

Before she knew it, Venri was invested too, and she didn't even notice that Tio called Hajime master multiple times during the fight.

Finally, the projection showed Hajime and the others' conversation after he was healed, and the dragonmen finally understood why Tio had suddenly returned to the village.

"I see... It is exactly as you say. The time has come," Adul spoke solemnly, and the other dragonmen nodded resolutely. They had been preparing for this moment for centuries, so of course they were ready. They knew what had to be done.

"My brethren, the time to rise up has finally come! We survived that horrific day so that we could strike back now!"

Adul rose to his feet and placed a hand on Tio's shoulder. The two of them nodded to each other, and he then stepped forward to address his people.

"Prepare for war, my friends! This battle will decide the fate of—"

"Nhaaah, that feelsh amayshing! Give me more, Master! Just a little more... and I will be able to climax like never before!"

"Oh, you like that, you pathetic excuse for a dragon! Fine, have some more!"

Tio had forgotten to turn off her artifact, so it was now displaying what had

happened in Hajime's room after.

Shocked, everyone turned their gaze back up to the projection in the sky.

Tio was sprawled on the ground, basking in Hajime's sadistic whipping. There was a sharp crack as Hajime slapped Tio's ass with his spiked whip once again, and the Tio in the projection moaned in ecstasy.

Drool spilled from her lips, and her breath came in short gasps. A short distance away, Shea and Kaori were shaking their heads in disappointment, while Aiko, Yuka, and Liliana watched with unbridled curiosity, their faces beet-red. In order to increase her efficiency to the maximum, Tio had asked Hajime to punish her and turn that pain into mana using her Pain Conversion skill.

"Here comes the last one, you pervert! You better enjoy it, bitch!"

"Thank you so muuuuuuch!"

For the finale, Hajime slapped Tio's ass with his open palm, and she shivered in delight. He then tenderly hugged Tio and helped her to her feet.

"Alright, that should be good. Think you can make it, Tio?"

"Haaah, haaah, th-that was amayshing. I could even go to the end of the world for you now, Master," Tio smiled contentedly as she said that, heedless of how pathetic she looked.

"Whoops. I forgot I recorded our private moments as well. My apologies, everyone."

Tio had recorded her spanking session so she could watch it again later. She was a pervert through and through. Amazingly, she only seemed mildly embarrassed by the fact that her family had seen her getting off to being whipped. Her fellow dragonmen all slowly turned to look at her.

Absolute silence fell over the plaza. This was the quietest it had been in five hundred years.

Finally, one of the braver youngsters, Ristas, blurted out, "Who the hell are you!?"

Normally, such a disrespectful outburst would have been severely punished, but no one scolded him. After all, they were all thinking the same thing.

“P-Princess, there is something I absolutely must ask you!”

“Wh-What’s the matter, Venri? That is a rather alarming expression you are making.”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who was making such a disg— I mean, ecstatic expression while being whipped!”

“Did you just call the lord you serve disgusting? Haaah, haaah...”

“Stop panting! This is serious! You said that boy’s name was Hajime Nagumo, correct!? What is your relationship with him!? You called him master, didn’t you!? Tell me everything!”

Venri hadn’t scolded Tio since she was a child, but despite her angry tone, Tio just puffed her chest out proudly and declared, “A most wonderful question! Allow me to properly introduce him. Hajime Nagumo is my one and only master. I, Tio Klarus, have dedicated both my body and my heart to him!”

Her voice echoed through the plaza... and all the birds flew away in fright.

“I-Impossible! Is this some kind of joke, Princess!?” Airos screamed, a pleading look in his eyes. Among those wishing to become Tio’s fiance, the deep green storm dragon was the strongest, and thus the premier contender for the title. Naturally, he was the most shaken to hear she’d already found a mate.

“This is no jest, Airos. I do apologize to you, and all the others who wished to marry me, but I have already found the man I wish to spend the rest of my life with. Please, try to understand.”

“You want to be with that awful bastard who was whipping you!? Are you insane!?”

Honestly, Airos had a point. Everyone thought Tio must have lost her mind.

However, Tio simply looked nostalgically off into the distance and said, “As I told you all before, the only condition for marrying me is to be stronger than me. However, in the five hundred years I spent in this village, none of you were able to so much as scratch my scales. I had all but forgotten what pain was.”

“Th-That may be so, but—”

“But Master was different! When I was being controlled by that unsavory

brat, he beat me to a pulp! He tore at my nails, clawed at my gums, shot at my wings, and did everything he could to exploit my weak points! Not only that, he was able to smash my scales head-on, and was even able to withstand the might of my breath!”

Though Tio was praising Hajime, no one was impressed. Her ecstatic expression and the way she hugged herself as she gushed about him creeped everyone out so much that they couldn't really pay attention to what she was saying at all.

“Best of all, Master pounded his thick, hard black stake into my arse! He didn't stop even when I begged for mercy, and by the end, my hole was a gaping mess! Truly, that was one of the turning points of my life. I get shivers just thinking about it even now! Oh, Master, I love you so much!” Tio shouted, gazing southward all the while.

“R-Ristas! Pull yourself together!”

“Oh no, he's not breathing! The shock must have given him a heart attack!”

“Airos? Hey, Airos! Come back to your senses! I'm not the princess, stop hugging me!”

Half of the men passed out from shock like Ristas, while the other half had lost their wits like Airos.

The children started crying, and the women looked up at the heavens in despair. Most of the elderly looked as though their souls had already left their bodies. The dragonmen had been defeated, and the war hadn't even begun.

“Adul-sama, the princess has clearly lost her mind! Someone must have used dark magic to change her... Adul-sama?”

The dragonmen had hoped that Adul might be able to turn Tio back, but he seemed completely unresponsive.

“D-Did he pass out while standing?”

Adul's eyes had rolled up into the back of his head, and he wasn't moving at all.

“Venri-sama, you're our last hope!” another dragonman shouted, turning to

her.

“Fufu, everything will be alright now, Princess. I’m here for you.”

However, Venri was talking to a tree as though it was a young Tio. Not only had she lost her senses, but her memories had regressed as well.

“What is with all of you? I thought you would be happy to learn I have finally found a husband...”

“How are we supposed to be happy about this!?” the women shouted in unison. The men were already a lost cause, and they didn’t react at all.

Eventually, Cartus managed to calm everyone down, and told Tio, “Go find something else to do while everyone readies for battle.”

He was completely disillusioned with Tio now and treated her like she was an eyesore.

She slinked away, muttering, “I thought... you would be able to accept the new me...”

While the others prepared, Tio took a walk around the outskirts of the village. She visited the places she’d played in as a child, her old training grounds, the mystical clearing she’d found in the forest where the moon appeared closer than it did anywhere else, the beach where the villagers often held parties, and many other spots that held fond memories.

Though this village had been hidden away from the rest of the world, it had still been an enjoyable place to live. For five hundred years, Tio had lived peacefully here surrounded by people who cared for her. However—

“It was a stale life.”

She couldn’t help but feel that way. Compared to the exciting days she’d spent with her new comrades, her life in this village had been lackluster.

She had only been gone for a few months, but so much had happened that her hometown felt like a faded memory. The few months she had spent with Hajime and the others seemed longer than the centuries she had spent here.

At some point, Tio’s legs naturally started taking her westward. As she

trekked through the forest, following the sound of the waves, she found herself at a small graveyard. There were only a few simple gravestones hidden among the dense undergrowth, but they were all well-tended.

Everyone had wanted to put the gravestones in a less dreary place, like on one of the island's many promontories, but this was supposed to be a hidden village. Everything within the village's boundaries was protected by a magical barrier, but the rest of the island was not. If the dragonmen had made their graveyard somewhere more conspicuous, they risked the chance of someone else finding it. They couldn't lay their dead to rest in the sea, either, since it was always possible a corpse might accidentally wash up somewhere people lived.

In the end, they had been forced to make their graveyard here. Still, this was a holy place to the villagers. It wasn't just where the villagers who had died were buried, but also where the souls of those who had died during the fall of the kingdom were honored. The dragonmen believed their spirits resided here, even if their remains didn't.

"I have something important to tell you, Father, Mother," Tio whispered while walking up to a large white gravestone at the very back of the graveyard.

This was the memorial that had been erected to honor the people who had died on the eve of the kingdom's fall. The names of Tio's father, Kharga Klarus, and her mother, Orna Klarus, were engraved into the stone, and it was surrounded by a low fence.

Tio spoke slowly, telling her parents about all the things she'd experienced after leaving the village, as well as all the things she felt. She went on and on until her voice grew hoarse. Finally, she said, "You were right, Father."

"One day, eventually, someone will appear who can strike them down. Of that I am certain..." That was the prediction Tio's father had made the night the kingdom fell. In the end, it had proved correct.

"I truly believe I've lived this long in order to meet Master," she said with an awkward smile.

"At first, I only stayed by his side because I wished to use him and because my instincts told me I needed to keep a close eye on him. I was not in love with him, not in the slightest. Instead, I was motivated by my burning desire for

revenge.”

Tio curled her fingers into a fist and pounded her chest.

“But as I traveled with him, I realized his desire for destruction was as fierce as mine. In fact, I began to fear he might bring about an even greater disaster than the gods. At the same time, though, I thought I might be able to steer his destructive impulses towards annihilating Ehit and his ilk. If he could achieve that, I cared not what happened to him after.”

Tio looked down guiltily for a second, but the moment passed and she raised her face once more. There was a soft, genuine smile on her face, and her eyes shone with the kind of covetous desire only a dragon could possess.

“And yet... once I opened up to him, he accepted all of me. My desire for revenge, the responsibilities I bear on my shoulders, and the mission I inherited from you. But even though he accepted me, he didn’t try to protect me. Nor did he try to fulfill my dreams for me. No, instead, he poured his heart and soul into crafting the strongest weapons he could for me and told me to accomplish my dreams myself if I cared so much about them. Hahahaha...” Tio chuckled to herself.

In fairy tales, after the prince saved the princess from ruffians, he often promised to protect her forever, but Hajime had done nothing of the sort. Instead, he’d given Tio some dangerous toys and told her he’d back her up.

“I was drawn to his unshakable resolve, and I fell for his kindness. Despite how mercilessly he berated those around him, I could tell that at his core, Master was a kind man. It truly is a shame you aren’t alive to meet him... Don’t you agree, Grandfather?”

Tio looked over her shoulder with a smile. Adul was standing at the edge of the graveyard, quietly watching her.

“I have not lost my mind, as some of the younger ones seem to believe. I happened to discover a new fetish I did not know I possessed, that’s all.”

“That’s all? It’s that trivial?” Adul replied, a conflicted expression on his face. He gently massaged his temples as he walked up to Tio. Of course, he knew that Tio had sensed his presence from the very start and that her words had been

directed at him as much as her deceased parents.

Honestly, Adul wanted to prostrate himself in front of Orna and Kharga's grave and beg for their forgiveness. He couldn't believe he had allowed their daughter to end up like... that. He felt personally responsible for failing them. But after hearing Tio's heartfelt words, he realized that wasn't an option.

"I suppose I have to accept what you've become," Adul said with a wan smile.

"Thank you, Grandfather. Now I can introduce Master to you in Mother and Father's place."

"Must you call him master?"

"Absolutely! Because he is indeed my master!"

"Kharga, Orna, I'm so sorry."

"Why are you apologizing to them!?"

"I must apologize to you as well, my ancestors."

"Surely my new proclivities aren't that horrible!? Please stop acting like this is the worst thing that could have happened, Grandfather!"

Adul covered his face with his hands to hide his tears.

Tio pouted at him for a few seconds, but then her expression grew somber and she said, "Grandfather, I couldn't protect her."

Adul gave Tio a sidelong glance. After seeing that recording, it was obvious who Tio was talking about.

"I am no guardian. Just a pathetic disgrace. I thought I had grown stronger, but in truth, I haven't changed at all. Once again, I failed to protect those close to me."

Tio hadn't been able to do a single thing when those monsters had defiled her mother's corpse and slaughtered her father. All she'd done was watch while Venri led her away.

She had sworn that this time she would protect those close to her, but even though her strength had surpassed that of Adul's, she had still been unable to prevent Ehit from kidnapping Yue.

“I wish I could have taken her place,” she whispered. However, Adul heard every word. He had spent enough time with his granddaughter to know how she thought.

The silence stretched on for a few minutes, but eventually, Adul said in a hesitant voice, “I heard from Venri that you can freely change the form of your transformation.”

“Hm? Oh, yes, that is the power of metamorphosis magic.”

“And in that battle you showed us earlier, you freely manipulated your scales without transforming, did you not?”

“I suspect that was the power of evolution magic, though I was so desperate at the time that I am not quite sure what I did. My transformation has grown stronger as well, but... Grandfather? What’s wrong?” Tio asked, noticing that her grandfather’s expression had grown more thoughtful the more she said.

After agonizing over something for a few long minutes, Adul finally let out a long sigh and said, “I suppose it shouldn’t be a problem for you as you are now.”

He motioned for Tio to follow him, then walked out of the graveyard.

“Where are we going, Grandfather?”

“To the mausoleum.”

Tio cocked her head quizzically. The mausoleum was where the spirits of Tio’s ancestors were enshrined. It was also a place revered by all dragonmen. The reason for that was because the first generation of the Klarus family were the ones who had created the scriptures of the dragonmen religion.

Back when people hadn’t been sure whether dragonmen were sentient people or beasts, the dragonmen had been persecuted by humans. However, despite their overwhelming might, they had looked to coexist with their neighbors rather than oppress them. The first head of the Klarus family had taken the initiative by bringing gifts to the other mortal races, but they repaid his kindness by slaughtering his wife. He was driven mad by grief and became a crazed beast. He was so powerful that people began to call him a harbinger of the apocalypse... and in the end, it was his own son, Adul’s grandfather, who

put a stop to his violent rampage.

Terrified by the dragonmen's strength, the other nations stopped persecuting them. Relieved, the dragonmen once again poured their efforts into forging bonds of trust with the other races and creating a kingdom where everyone could coexist in harmony.

By Adul's generation, that kingdom finally began to form... and by Kharga's generation, it was a flourishing utopia.

All dragonmen were taught this history as children, and when their education was complete, they visited the mausoleum to recite the dragonmen scripture in front of the statue of the first Klarus.

"Man or beast? That is something only we can decide for ourselves." In other words, the mausoleum held cultural and religious significance, but that was all.

"Why are we going to the mausoleum? Everyone should have finished their preparations by now, so should we not return to the vill—"

"Tio, why do you think your ancestor was called the harbinger of the apocalypse?"

Tio looked even more confused by that question.

"Was it not... because of his immense strength?"

"Yes, precisely. No matter how hard we struggled, Kharga and I were unable to alter the flow of history. And yet, our ancestor was so powerful that his strength alone ended the era of persecution."

"Ah..." Tio gasped.

"When his son led the dragonmen tribe to battle him, half of them died."

"Hold a moment, Grandfather! I never heard that!"

"Of course not. I saw no need to teach you that part of our history."

The extent of the first Klarus' strength wasn't important. What was important was learning about the tragedy of the dragonmen race, and the laws they bound themselves by because of it. If everyone knew just how strong he had been—

“If everyone knew, there might be those who begin to wonder ‘What did he do to grow so strong? Could I obtain that power for myself?’ Just as you are now.”

“Ngh... I see I cannot deceive your eyes, Grandfather.”

After reaching the mausoleum, Adul led Tio to the shrine in its center. They walked through a narrow passage, which opened up into a vast hall. The only thing in the hall was a lone altar... upon which stood a small statue of Tio’s great-great-grandfather.

Adul picked the statue up, sliced one of his fingers with a nail, and dripped some blood into the statue’s mouth. At the same time, he started feeding it his mana.

“Unbelievable... The statue was an artifact all along?”

“Correct. This statue is a seal. Within it is the calamity we dragonmen must never forget.”

As he spoke, the statue split in two. And a second later, an oppressively large wave of energy washed over Tio.

“Impossible! Isn’t this concept magic!?”

“I suspected it would appear that way to you. When I saw Nagumo-dono’s existence-erasing chains, I realized they were similar.”

A single scale was nestled inside the broken statue. It was the color of dried blood, and Tio felt an immense hatred emanating from it.

Tio felt her sanity being sapped away just by being next to it. In that respect, it was eerily similar to Hajime’s existence-erasing chains.

“This is one of the scales of our progenitor. It was the one thing my grandfather could not destroy, despite his best efforts. It grants immense power to any dragonman who touches it, but it also forces them to transform and destroys their mind, reducing them to a mere beast.”

Before the dragonmen elders had found a way to seal it away, there had been those who were lured in by the promise of power and ended up touching the scale. Naturally, they had all gone insane and needed to be slain.

However, exceptionally strong dragons, as well as those who carried the blood of the Klarus line, had been able to retain their sanity for a few minutes before being overwhelmed. Apparently, there were even a few who were able to regain their senses after being consumed, and took their own lives to prevent the scale from destroying them completely and birthing a second calamity.

“Eventually, we discovered a way to make a seal that could only be opened with a combination of a Klarus’ blood and their mana, then locked the scale away. From then on, we treated the statue as a symbol of restraint that all dragonmen must exercise... and ensured it would be passed down from generation to generation.”

“I suspect you’re not showing this to me now simply to impress upon me the importance of restraint.”

Adul nodded solemnly and replied, “With how strong you are now, you may be able to overcome the curse of our ancestor. If so, perhaps you can unlock the full power of this scale.”

“And by doing so, I will finally be able to put his grudge to rest, correct?”

Adul nodded again.

I see now why Grandfather was so conflicted.

This scale was a dangerous artifact, and if Tio wasn’t careful, she would be destroyed by it. Adul was fully aware of that, but when he’d seen how frustrated Tio was at being unable to save Yue, he had felt as though he had to offer her whatever power he could. Even though Yue was Tio’s rival in love, she hadn’t seemed even the slightest bit relieved that the vampire was gone. In fact, she had been determined to get Yue back no matter what it took.

Ultimately, Adul left the choice up to Tio, but he wanted to allow her to choose at the very least.

Tio looked up at him and said, “Hmph. I am Master’s pet masochist dragon. Pain is nothing more than a reward to me. Subduing this scale will be no problem at all!” Tio said lightly. But despite her playful tone, there was a firm determination in her eyes.

She grabbed the scale without hesitation. A second later, she felt as though

her blood was freezing in her veins as the immense power contained within the scale brought her to her knees.

“Stay strong, Tio! Or you will be engulfed!”

“Ngh, graaaaaah!”

Mana swirled around her like a noxious miasma. The hand she held the scale in was slowly being dyed a dark crimson. Her clear golden eyes began to cloud over.

“Tch! Tio, let go of that scale. It’s too much, even for you!”

Tio didn’t respond. The scale’s mana ballooned outward, rattling the entire mausoleum.

“It seems I have no other choice... You said one of your comrades could use restoration magic, correct?”

Adul wrapped his arm with his white-hot breath, preparing to chop off Tio’s arm. That was the only way he could think of to save her from the scale.

But just before he swung his blazing arm down, Tio shouted, “W-Wait, Grandfather!”

“Tio!”

With sweat pouring down her face, Tio looked up at Adul and smiled fearlessly.

“It seems our ancestor was a rather fierce man. I’m sorry, Grandfather, but could you ask the others to delay our departure? It will take some time to ease this poor soul’s sorrow— Limiter Removal!”

“Ngh, s-such power!”

Tio’s obsidian mana raged around her, beating back the blood-colored mana of the scale. The shockwaves created by the collision were so strong Adul couldn’t even approach Tio.

Meanwhile, Tio closed her eyes and began conversing with the soul of her ancestor, which was trapped within the scale.

Adul watched with a wry smile and said, “I see you have surpassed even me

now...”

After a few minutes, Cartus arrived at the mausoleum... and the other villagers started trickling in behind him. They had all seen the violent eruption of mana that had occurred when Tio touched the scale. Adul explained the situation to them, but he kept his eyes on Tio the entire time. He wanted to witness the moment his granddaughter became the strongest dragonman in history.

A day and a half passed, and finally, Tio unleashed a breath attack so powerful it blew away the dark clouds that had begun to gather around the dragonmen island. It was stronger than the final attack Kharga had unleashed, and it appeared to go so high it reached the heavens themselves.

Late that night, the dragonmen warriors gathered once more at the central plaza. Tio stood before them, looking more confident than ever.

After clearing the trial in the mausoleum, she had been so exhausted that Adul had needed to carry her back to the mansion. However, after spending a few hours under Venri’s ministrations, she was back to full strength.

“My brethren, we shall now head to the battlefield which will determine the fate of this world.”

Her words resonated in the hearts of everyone listening.

“It has been a long five centuries of living in hiding, but the time has finally come to announce our presence to the world once more! The people of Tortus need our help! We are their guardians, the keepers of the peace! We are the legendary dragonmen the world needs right now!”

Choked with emotion, the warriors raised their fists into the air.

“Once a dragon loses its benevolence, it is nothing more than a beast. But so long as the blade of reason is our weapon—” Tio chanted.

“We are not beasts, but dragonmen!” everyone roared in reply.

Everyone’s hearts swelled with pride.

Be noble in all that you do. Use your might for the sake of others.

That was one of the dragonmen's core precepts, and on that day, everyone knew they were embodying that ideal.

Tio deployed the artifact Hajime had given her, and a shimmering portal of light appeared in front of her. There was a burst of black mana, and she transformed into her majestic dragon form.

“If the world needs us, it is only proper that we respond! Let loose your roars, my noble kin! The day has finally come to free this world from the yoke of god!”

The dragonmen roared so loudly the entire island shook. They then transformed in quick succession and followed Tio through the portal.

As the human soldiers watched on in awe, the dragonmen basked in the joy of finally returning to the continent where they belonged.

Their princess' words had filled them with pride and determination, and many of them started to believe they'd just imagined that she was a masochistic pervert.

There was no way their regal, dignified leader was such a disgusting weirdo. But just as the dragonmen gave in to such thoughts—

“Master! Your devoted servant has finally returned to you! Praise me for my accomplishments!”

That was the day all dragonmen cried. They wept for their beloved princess, who they knew would never return.



Afterword

Hello everyone, chuuni lover Ryo Shirakome here.

Thank you so much for picking up volume 11 of Arifureta.

What did you guys think of it? It's basically the prologue of the final battle. I changed a lot from the web version to give the other students in Hajime's class a chance to shine. Since this is an isekai story where the whole class gets transported, I figured it was only right to make use of the original premise in some way. I hope I did a good job. It'd make me happy to hear if Yuka and Kousuke's triumphs got you guys excited, even if only a little.

By the way, as I was writing this, I realized there are still nine students who haven't gotten names and are basically forgettable NPCs. Honestly, I wasn't sure if I should suddenly make them relevant to the story or just accept that I won't be able to give everyone their time in the spotlight. In the end, I decided to give up on them, since this volume would end up thicker than a dictionary if I wrote cool scenes for everyone. But hey, maybe I'll get a chance to put them in the after stories...? A man can always dream.

On the other hand, I did at least get to bring back (almost) all the characters that have shown up in the series so far. I wonder if you guys remember them all... I think my favorite of the minor characters is the guild master.

His name's a little too similar to Hajime's new laser, and I feel like I kinda messed up by making them overlap, but it's too late to change either of them now. Everyone who followed me during the web serialization is already used to the old names, so I didn't want to change them. The guild master has nothing to do with lasers, and Hajime definitely didn't name his upgraded ones after him, so just consider it a funny coincidence and leave it at that.

Oh yeah, there were still several characters who didn't make it into this volume, but I tried to put as many of them as I could in the short stories. A couple of those stories include scenes I wanted to include when everyone was visiting Hajime up on the fort's roof, but couldn't. Incidentally, one of those

characters is probably going to end up in the battle maid group later, so pay attention to her. Those of you who've been following my updates on Narou probably know what I'm talking about, so definitely check the short story out.

Now then, it's time for the acknowledgments.

As always, a big thanks to my illustrator, Takyaki-sensei, the manga artist, RoGa-sensei, the artist for the Arifureta everyday manga, Misaki Mori-sensei, and the artist for the spin-off Arifureta Zero manga, Ataru Kamichi-sensei. And, of course, thank you to my editor, proofreader, and everyone else at the publishing company. This book only exists because of all your effort.

As always, last, but certainly not least, I'd like to thank all of you for supporting me by reading my books! There's not much left of the main story, but I'd love it if you would stick with me until the end!

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

Kaori's Yuri(?) Diary

At some point after conquering the Frost Caverns, Hajime, Shea, Tio, Shizuku, and Suzu were lounging around in Vandre Schnee's living room. Kouki and Ryutarou had left to explore the rest of the house. Ryutarou had invited him out in the hopes of lifting his spirits a little.

"Ufufu..." Yue chuckled as she returned after leaving for a bit.

"What happened, Yue?" Hajime asked, stunned. Shea and the others looked quite surprised as well. No one had seen Yue grin openly like that before.

"My plan worked..." Yue said excitedly, taking a small notebook out of her pocket.

"What prank did you pull this time?" Hajime asked, sounding resigned.

"That's a diary, isn't it? Wait, isn't that the one Kaori-san started writing because you were keeping one, Yue-san? Didn't you already steal it once and write your own entries?"

"I suppose we can't fault you, since we also wrote in it."

"How could you two do that!? Don't you know how wrong it is to peek at other people's diaries!?"

Shea and Tio awkwardly averted their gazes as Shizuku lectured them. In truth, the two of them had peeked at Yue's diary as well, so this had been their second offense.

"D-Does nobody respect Kaorin's privacy!?"

"You say that, Taniguchi, but it's only because we peeked at Kaori's diary that we learned she stole the clothes I'd left back at the palace. In a way, you could say her diary is evidence of her crimes."

"I didn't know Kaorin was such a pervert..." Suzu muttered, averting her gaze.

I guess Nagumo-kun has a point. Criminals don't deserve privacy.

Incidentally, Hajime had discovered that Yue and the others had all worn and even sniffed his clothes thanks to their entries in Kaori's diary. Needless to say, he'd confiscated them from Kaori and had kept them safe in his Treasure Trove since.

"Ufufu... She kept her diary closely guarded after that, so I haven't gotten any chances to read through it, but she finally let her guard down today!"

"Sorry to rain on your parade, Yue, but have you considered that this might be an immoral thing to do?"

"Hm? You're the last person I want to hear that from, Hajime. When was the last time you did something moral?"

"Ugh, you've got a point..."

"You should've seen that one coming, Nagumo-kun."

Sighing, Shizuku tried to retrieve her best friend's diary.

"Yue, it's not right to read other people's diaries. You should give Kaori her diary back and—"

"What belongs to Kaori belongs to me. Therefore, it's not someone else's diary, it's mine!"

"What kind of logic is that!?"

It was telling how Yue felt that way about only Kaori.

"I'm going to read Kaori's diary. I don't care if it sets the entire world against me, I'm going to do it!"

Yue plopped down on the sofa and glared at everyone. It was clear she was determined to read through the diary in her hands.

"I can't believe she's acting like she's in the right!" Suzu exclaimed, a shiver running down her spine. Hajime and the others were overwhelmed by Yue's determination as well, and didn't protest any further.

Yue looked as excited as a *Game of Thrones* fan finally cracking open a copy of *The Winds of Winter* as she opened the diary and flipped through its pages. And

in the end, Hajime and the others all huddled closer to take a look as well.

Day X, Month Y

I want Yue to kiss me...

Yue immediately slammed the diary shut. She had just unearthed a terrible secret. Hajime and the others all stared at her.

“Y-Yue, I didn’t know you had that kind of relationship with Kaori...”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong, Hajime! Please, believe me! There’s nothing going on between me and Kaori!” Yue sounded like a girlfriend who’d been caught cheating as she vehemently denied any wrongdoing.

“Sh-She probably just messed up! I bet Kaori meant to write that she wants Nagumo-kun to kiss her or something!”

“Y-Yes, exactly! That’s a genius deduction, Shizuku-san!”

Shizuku and Shea both looked extremely shaken by the knowledge that their respective best friends might be having an affair with each other. Considering how frequently Yue and Kaori were at each other’s throats, it certainly did seem strange that Kaori would want to be kissed by Yue. Yue gathered her resolve and turned the page.

Day C, Month B

Yue came *this* close to kissing me today, but in the end, she didn’t do it. Please stop being so mean, Yue. I can’t take much more of your flirting.

“Alright, fess up, Yue.”

“No, Hajime, we really aren’t like that!”

At this point, Hajime was convinced Yue was cheating on him. He gave her a disappointed look as she desperately clung to him.

“Y-Yue-onee-sama, I didn’t know you were bi...”

“Shut up, Suzu! And quit blushing and looking at me like that!”

Suzu unbuttoned her collar and bared her neck for Yue as if to say, “You can suck my blood any time.”

“I take it the constant fighting with Kaori is just a smokescreen, then, Yue? There’s no need to hide it, you know? Even Master would approve so long as you were upfront with him... Tell me, how far have you two gone?”

“Heavensfall!”

Tio was flattened by the force of Yue’s spell, but the grin never left her face. She moaned in pleasure as her head was pressed against the ground.

“D-Damn you, Kaori. To think you would set a trap for me...”

“If this is a trap, then I think we’ve misjudged Kaori’s personality all along. Her job should be Trickster in that case.”

“D-Does Kaori really have unrequited feelings for you? A-As her best friend, how should I react to that?”

“I know how you feel, Shizuku-san. But as their friends, we just have to accept them for what they are.”

Shea and Shizuku clasped their hands together and nodded to each other.

“Stop making this a thing!” Yue shouted, then started flipping frantically through the rest of the diary. She was hoping Kaori had written down that it was all a joke or something of the sort further in.

“I-If Kaori truly does love me... how should I respond?”

The reason Yue wanted so desperately to believe it was a joke was because she wasn’t sure how to act if it wasn’t.

Day F, Month G

I can’t lose hope. Now that we’ve found a way back home, everyone’s in high spirits. This is the best chance I’m going to get. I have to tell Yue now. I’m going to go take a shower, put on some makeup, and then—

Everyone stiffened. The date in that entry was today.

“Come to think of it, Kaori *was* writing something while you guys were all showering...” Shizuku muttered, and everyone twitched.

“I don’t hear the shower running anymore, so she must have finished hers...”

“She’s coming... Kaori’s coming! Wh-What should I do!? What should I say!?”

It was obvious Kaori was planning on confessing. In fact, she may have even been planning on doing more than just confessing. And Yue clearly had no idea how to take it.

“Should I approve of your relationship? Or should I be the stereotypical boyfriend and tell Kaori not to lay a hand on my woman? But I mean, it’s Kaori we’re talking about here, how could I say no? Gah...”

Even Hajime was at a loss. As they heard Kaori’s footsteps approach the living room, everyone unanimously thought, *We shouldn’t have read that diary!*

The living room door creaked open and everyone twitched again.

“Huh? What’s wrong, guys? Why do you all look so nervous?” Kaori asked, cocking her head.

While everyone was just staring silently at her, Kaori spotted the diary in Yue’s hands.

“Ah, that’s my diary! Give it baaaaaack!”

Kaori leaped at Yue, who let out a tiny squeal and shrunk back. Normally, she would immediately counterattack, but after what she’d read, she was too flustered to act. Kaori lectured the party at length about respecting her privacy, and when she finally stopped for breath, Hajime timidly asked, “Umm, Kaori, we really are sorry. But can I ask you something?”

“Wh-What? I haven’t stolen any more of your clothes, I promise!”

That’s a pretty weak promise considering how shifty you look right now, Hajime thought, but he quickly realized he had bigger fish to fry.

“You seem, uh... rather desperate to get Yue to kiss you. And you wrote here that you need to tell her something... What’s that all about?”

Kaori looked confused at first, but then she realized what Hajime was getting at. Blushing, she gathered her resolve and said. “I-I see, so you read all of that... Fine, I guess I’ll say it, then.”

“H-Hold on a minute, Kaori. I’m not ready to—”

Is she gonna confess right here!? Hajime thought in surprise.

“I want you to kiss me so I can become special to Hajime-kun!”

“I-I already have Hajime, so I don’t need— Huh? So you can become special to Hajime?”

Everyone, including Yue, blinked in confusion.

“Yes! I heard from Shea that when she became Hajime’s girlfriend, you kissed her and sucked her blood! In other words, that’s proof that you’ve accepted them! Shea said that only people who get kissed by you are allowed to be Hajime’s lovers!”

Everyone turned to Shea. The bunnygirl averted her gaze, scared to admit that she had indeed said that when Kaori had come to her for advice.

“That’s why I want you to kiss me, Yue!”

“At least you’re honest about it. But I’ll never kiss someone with such impure motives.”

“I’ll even lower my head to a bitch like you if that’s what it takes!”

“Bitch!?! You’re asking for it now, Kaori!”

Angry that she’d gotten worried over nothing, Yue lunged at Kaori. As always, the two of them started fighting. Meanwhile, Hajime and the others breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Assemble for the Final Battle!

The night before the decisive battle, there was a large crowd gathered on the rooftop of the main fortress. Everyone should have been asleep to rest up before the battle, but right now the boy who held the key to their fate, Hajime Nagumo, was on the rooftop because a bunch of people wanted to meet him.

Some just wanted a chance to see him before what they believed was the end, which was why they didn't hesitate at all to make bold requests or air their grievances against him. The woman speaking to him now was one such person.

"I'll be frank, Nagumo-sama. Please sleep with Liliana-sama!"

"Where the hell did that come from?"

The woman making such an outrageous request was Helina, Liliana's personal maid. Her dark brown hair and pure white apron fluttered in the wind. For some reason, she had come to the front line of humanity's greatest war in a maid outfit.

"More importantly, why haven't you evacuated?"

"I am Liliana-sama's bodyguard, as well as her maid. I'm quite capable in combat."

"You... are?"

Combat maids were a trope loved by otaku the world over. The moment he heard that, Hajime's expression changed. However, Helina took no notice of his transformation.

"Liliana-sama truly loves you. On top of that, if she became the mistress of the man who will save Tortus, Heiligh would gain a tremendous amount of influence. My own position would become more important, and I would receive a massive raise! For all these reasons, and more, I need you two to hook up!"

"You just want more money, huh?"

"I realize I'm being rather presumptuous, Nagumo-sama, but I've created a secret room in this fortress that's perfectly soundproofed. I'm certain Liliana-sama would be delighted if you took her there!"

"Why the hell would you make a secret room in humanity's ultimate fortress? That's such a waste of talent."

Undaunted, Helina did her best to persuade Hajime to sleep with Liliana. She maintained that she was doing this for the sake of her beloved princess, but it seemed to Hajime that she was pimping her master out more than anything else. That being said, Hajime couldn't deny that Liliana would probably be

happy about it. In fact, Liliana was currently shooting him covert glances from a corner of the rooftop, so she was clearly hoping he would accept Helina's proposal. Of course, Hajime had no intention of doing so, and he glared at Helina. Just as he was about to chase her away, a new visitor arrived.

“Stop! It would be inexcusable for you to consummate your relationship with the princess during such a dire time!”

It was David, the knight who'd been originally assigned to guard Aiko. The rest of his knights fanned out behind him.

“That's a knight for you. Please, tell her off some—”

“If you're going to sleep with someone the night before the decisive battle, Hajime Nagumo, it should be Aiko-sama and no one else!”

“What the fuck? And why the hell are you crying tears of blood? You're freaking me out, man!”

It wasn't just David. All of the knights had bloody tears streaming down their faces. Plus, they were trembling due to the effort of keeping their emotions in check. The whole sight was rather unpleasant. Aiko, who'd been watching Hajime argue with Helina with a growing blush on her face, suddenly went pale. All of Hajime's classmates that had been watching with her went pale as well.

“Now that we've learned the truth, we know that our faith is empty...” David moaned, and Hajime suddenly remembered that Aiko had told her all of her guards the real truth. That there was no good Ehit, only an evil one.

“But because Aiko-sama shared her wisdom with us, we've reached enlightenment! The only god worthy of our worship is her! As the Fertility Goddess' honor guard, we must throw away our personal attachments and devote ourselves wholeheartedly to Aiko-sama! She wishes to become your partner, which is why for her happiness, you must sleep with her, Hajime Nagumooooo!”

“Ugh, someone get over here and take these crazy zealots away!”

David and the others' devotion to Aiko had manifested in a rather twisted way. Hajime realized that learning the truth about the world must have come as a shock, but this was still a problem. Fortunately, someone answered Hajime's

call for help.

“You blockheaded brother of miine!”

With a spirited yell, the newcomer kneed David in the back of the head. The knight’s eyes rolled back into his head and his face hit the ground so hard he lost consciousness.

“Nagumo-sama, please forgive my elder brother for his rudeness. I’m Firim, his younger sister. I can take him away for you, if that’s still what you want.”

Firim was a beautiful woman in her early twenties, and she was dressed in a simple nun’s habit. Surprisingly, the woman strong enough to knock out a knight with one kick was a sister.

“Y-Yeah, thanks. I didn’t know he had a sister...”

“Yes, well, I was exiled to the remote regions of the kingdom for speaking out against beastmen discrimination. I only returned because Pope Simon called for me.”

It appeared this sister was quite bold in both words and deeds. According to her, she’d cut her ties with her family over ten years ago and had only now reunited with her brother after he’d renounced Ehit.

“So the first thing you do after seeing your brother after ten long years is knee him in the back of the head?”

“My apologies for showing you something so unseemly. But when we were younger, he always ridiculed me and called me a stain on the family name, so my resentment has been building up over the past ten years.”

“Well, it’s certainly... refreshing to see a sister who fuels her fists with anger.”

The beautiful blonde-haired sister fidgeted in embarrassment. The gesture would have been cute if not for the fact that David’s squadmates, Chase, Jade, and Joshua were all panicking behind her. It was honestly kind of scary that she didn’t turn around even when they started shouting things like “Captain, please open your eyes!”. “I-Is he dead?”, and “No, he’s just barely alive!”

No matter how awful David might have been to her in the past, he was still her flesh and blood brother, and she wasn’t even batting an eyelid despite

nearly killing him. Hajime's surroundings were in complete chaos now. Granted, they'd been that way for a while, but this was significantly worse. And yet, there was still an endless parade of people jostling to meet him.

"Y-Yo, white-hair. D-Did we come at a bad time?" one of the adventurers who'd just climbed up to the rooftop asked. Hajime hadn't recognized him at first, but there was only one person who called him white-hair, which helped him remember.

"You're one of the adventurers from Brooke, aren't you? Your name was... Gartima, right?"

"Haha, glad to see you remember me."

Looking around, Hajime noticed all of the adventurers were the ones he'd traveled with when he, Yue, and Shea had accepted their first request as members of the guild. Gartima had been the leader of the guards protecting the caravan going to Fuhren. He'd taught Hajime a lot about adventuring, but they hadn't been especially close or anything.

"What brings you guys here? Or did you just want to see me to say 'I can't believe that brat from back then is the same guy who holds the fate of humanity in his hands now!' like everyone else?"

"Pretty much. We're just extras in this whole thing, after all."

According to Gartima, there were a ton of people crowding around the fortress because they wanted to catch a glimpse of Hajime and Aiko. The two of them had become huge celebrities among the mortal races. A few of them were trying to pretend like they were Hajime's friends to get in, so the security outside was having trouble sorting Hajime's actual acquaintances from the rabble. Fortunately, Catherine and More both recognized Gartima and said that he knew Hajime, so they'd let him through.

"Honestly, I wasn't sure if you even remembered us, and it looked like you were getting a bunch of visitors, so I wasn't planning on coming up here at first. But these guys said they wanted to see you too, so I used my pass to bring them with me."

"Who're these guys?"

The people standing behind Gartima were all wearing deep robes that covered their faces. They clearly looked suspicious, but if they were here, it meant they'd been screened by security. As Hajime stared at them, they removed their robes with a flourish.

“What the hell are the guards out front doing!? Get your weapons, everyone, there are enemies on the roof!”

“How cruel of you, Hajime-kyun! We finally meet again and this is what you have to say to us?”

“This is supposed to be our touching reunion! The least you could do is hug us!”

The robes had been hiding a wall of sculpted, muscular bodies wearing frilly dresses.

“Starting from the right, we have the adventurer who confessed to Yue and had his balls crushed, Mariabel, the former black-ranked adventurer who had his balls crushed in Fuhren, Reginid, who now goes by Redbel, the prison guard who had his balls crushed during a torturing session, Nedeil, who now goes by Dibel, the adventurer in Horaud who—”

“I don't need these lengthy introductions! Do you have a grudge against me or something!?”

“Huh? No, of course not... Though, we were shocked to learn you crushed the balls of so many dudes. Honestly, it's caused us a bunch of trouble because all of these guys ended up becoming adventurers and started hitting on us...”

“I'm sorry! After I get Yue back, I'll tell her not to crush any more guys' balls!”

“We don't have a grudge against you, either, Hajime-kyun! In fact, we're grateful that you granted us the opportunity to discover a whole new world—”

“I don't care if you're Redbel or Dibel or whoever, just shut up! You all look the same now, it's fucking scary! I don't like that look in your eyes, either!”

Hajime knew he was just reaping what he'd sown, but he still couldn't believe he'd created this many monsters. Unfortunately, before he could drive them all away, Helina came back with another impassioned plea to bed Liliana. David

regained consciousness as well and started begging Firim to join Aiko's team of bodyguards, only to be suplexed back into oblivion. At the same time, the Haulia appeared out of nowhere to protect their precious boss' anal virginity, but after hearing Helina's speech, they were so moved that they started asking him to sleep with all of them instead. Nea, the youngest of the Haulia's assassin squad, was apparently very interested in being Hajime's devoted sex slave.

"Ehit needs to hurry the hell up and send his army down so I can head to the Sanctuary..." Hajime muttered, looking longingly at the Divine Mountain.

Myu's Demonic Army (Prologue)

Half a day had passed since Hajime had gone into his workshop and activated the Hour Crystal, which meant it had been about five days for him. He was currently taking a break and eating lunch with Myu and Remia.

"And that's why there are a bunch more people who want to marry Mommy now!"

Myu said excitedly, crumbs of food spilling from her mouth. She was regaling Hajime with tales of what had happened in Erisen after he'd left. Listening to her stories was the best rest he could ask for. Remia looked less happy with Myu's stories, since they mostly involved revealing her embarrassing secrets.

"U-Umm, Myu? Would you mind telling stories about something other than me?"

"Come to think of it, there were a lot of guys hitting on you while we were around, too. There's probably even more who thought they might have a chance after I left. Sorry, I guess my leaving caused you a lot of problems, huh?"

"O-Oh no, not at all. In fact—"

"That's not true! There were tons of guys who wanted to marry Mommy before too! Back then, she had a hard time saying no, but now she just says, 'I'm sorry, but I'm waiting for my husband to return to me, ufufu,' and everyone gives up!"

"Myuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu, didn't I just say to stop telling stories about me?"

Remia clamped a hand over Myu's mouth, forcibly shutting her up.

"You don't have to hide these things from me, you know? If anything, I'm glad you're using my name to make life easier for yourself."

"I-I'm sorry. If I didn't go that far, the men of the village would have forced me into a group marriage meeting..."

"A group marriage meeting? You mean a bunch of them want to marry you at once?"

"To be precise, there's about twenty of them. Apparently, there used to be 100, but they had some kind of tournament and thinned the numbers down to twenty. I really didn't want to get cornered into something like that, so I ended up saying I was waiting for you. I'm really sorry."

Hajime could see why Remia had wanted a concrete reason to turn them all down. At the same time, he was amazed by how popular Remia was in her village.

Blushing slightly, Remia moved her hand off of Myu's mouth and said, "Myu, why don't you tell some stories about your friends instead?"

She was clearly trying to change the subject, but Myu happily took the bait.

"Hey, Daddy. Did you know I made a new friend!?"

"Oh? I thought everyone in Erisen was already your friend?"

"They're not from Erisen! I met Seaman! He said he's your friend too, Daddy!"

"You meant Sea-san!? I guess I shouldn't be surprised, since he lives around there."

In a strange twist of fate, it appeared Myu had become friends with the same fish with a human-face that Hajime had met back in Fuhren, and then again in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. The two were sworn friends who called each other by the nicknames Sea-san and Young Haj.

"He said his wife scolded him and told him to go play with his kids," Remia mentioned casually.

"Seriously?"

“Personally, I’d rather he go somewhere else, since he teaches Myu a lot of strange things.”

Remia cupped her cheek with one hand and shook her head. Hajime thought Sea-san’s advice would be good for a growing girl like Myu, but Remia seemed to believe otherwise.

“Daddy, Sea told me that a man should always choose a wife that’s older than him, but not one who’s dom-i-nee-ring! He really knows a lot!”

“The hell is that guy teaching little kids?”

“Don’t worry, Daddy! Mommy’s an older woman, but she’s not dom-i-nee-ring at all! You’re not, right, Mommy?”

“Oh my. Of course I’m not, Myu. But I told you to forget all about that, now didn’t I?”

Remia’s smile was terrifying. Myu looked down apologetically and Hajime idly thought, *Honestly most guys would probably end up henpecked by—*

“Hajime-san, is there something on your mind?” Remia asked sweetly. Her sixth sense was uncanny.

“Uh, no, nothing,” Hajime stammered, averting his gaze. He ended up looking at Myu, and the two of them shared a nod of understanding.

“Oh my, are you two excluding me now? That’s not very nice.”

“Myu, do you have any other stories!? I’d really like to hear them!”

“Yeah, I have lots and lots!”

Father and daughter were in perfect sync. They deliberately avoided meeting Remia’s pointed glare as Myu continued talking about her friends.

“Umm, I also met D-kun!”

“D-kun? Hang on, is this person a boy?” Hajime asked, shivering all the while.

Are boys already hounding my cute little daughter!? I’m not gonna let some rando be Myu’s boyfriend!

He finally turned back to Remia, but she just smiled awkwardly and shook her head.

“I’m afraid I don’t know who this D-kun is, either. I’ve never seen them. Myu’s description is hard to understand, and according to her, they’re scared of everyone who isn’t her.”

“That’s hella sus. Hey, Myu, who is this D-kun?”

“Mmm, he’s floppy!”

“Floppy!?”

“Oh, and when you feed him, he goes ‘brrr’ and gets big!”

“That doesn’t sound like a normal lifeform!”

“He was as big as my hand at first, but in ten days he got as big as me!”

“Okay, now it just sounds dangerous!”

Aren’t you giving your daughter a bit too much freedom here!? Hajime thought, turning back to Remia.

“I thought it might be dangerous at first too, but I talked to Seaman-san a while back and he said that while this D-kun is indeed a monster, it’s gotten extremely attached to Myu. It even acts as her bodyguard when she’s out swimming.”

Hajime gently tried to suggest looking for other friends, but that caused Myu to immediately tear up and shout, “D-kun’s a good boy!”, so he gave up. It seemed Myu was able to communicate with this D-kun as well, which meant there probably wasn’t any danger.

“The truth is, when the apostle came to kidnap us, I saw it try to protect Myu. The sea suddenly got stormy and it shot a translucent tentacle at the apostle.”

“Seriously? Wait, hang on. The seas got stormy, it’s tentacle was translucent, and Myu calls it D-kun?”

Hajime’s expression went wooden as he thought back to what else shared all of those characteristics and he muttered, “I-It can’t be... M-Myu? Does D-kun have, like, a proper name?”

“Hm? Yep! He says it’s Devourer!”

“Oh my gooooooooooooood!” Hajime screamed in English, covering his face

with his hands and looking up at the ceiling.

Devourer was the name of the ancient monster that had attacked Hajime and the others after they'd finished making their way through the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. Hajime thought he'd burned it to ashes, but apparently, a fragment of the monster had survived. Moreover, it had been traumatized by Hajime and was now afraid of people.

How is it that all of Myu's friends end up being so weird? First my golems, then Sea-san, and now the fucking Devourer of all things? Come to think of it, when Myu first escaped into the sewers, she somehow ended up right underneath me and Shea... Maybe she has a knack for drawing weirdos to her.

"I guess that means it wasn't a coincidence that we ended up finding her. Her mysterious power reeled us in."

Still smiling awkwardly, Remia said in a conspiratorial whisper, "She's actually been like this for as long as I can remember. It's not just people, she attracted sea creatures even as a baby. She has more than a few friends who I've never seen, too..."

"I see..."

Hajime and Remia both looked down at Myu, who cocked her head to one side and stared blankly back at them.

"Well, I guess it's a good thing that our daughter is special!"

"Yes, indeed! My daughter is quite special! Ufufu!"

In the end, both of them decided it didn't really matter what this special trait of Myu's was as long as it wasn't hurting her.

"Yay, Mommy and Daddy are getting closer."

Indeed, a new bond had been forged between the two of them on that day. That bond wasn't exactly romantic, but they did see each other as family. Myu's eccentricities had brought them closer together as parents. If nothing else, they were determined to share the unique struggles of raising a girl like Myu.

"I'll be counting on you from here on out, Remia."

"Likewise, Hajime-san. I need you to have my back."

Granted, they sounded more like warriors exchanging oaths on the battlefield than parents, but regardless, Myu was happy to see them getting along.

Venri's DOM Checklist

In one of the rooms in the dragonmen village's largest mansion, Tio let out a small groan.

"Princess! Princess, what happened!?"

"Hmm? Venri? How... long have I been asleep!?"

Tio kicked off the covers and leaped to her feet. She'd taken off the kimono she'd been wearing on her return and was currently wearing a white nightgown.

"Rest easy, Princess. It has only been half an hour."

Tio breathed a sigh of relief. Because of the way she'd jumped to her feet, her nightgown was disheveled and most of her thigh was visible. Her breasts were threatening to spill out of the open collar as well. She obviously couldn't appear in public like that, so Venri walked over and fixed her appearance.

"H-Hrmm. Venri, I am old enough to fix my own clothes," Tio said as she squirmed uncomfortably and blushed a little.

"I do not know what transpired between you and Adul-sama in the mausoleum, and I'm not interested in asking. Seeing as Adul-sama didn't explain, it's clearly not something I should poke my nose into. However..." Venri trailed off as she looked up at Tio, tears in her eyes. "You're always so reckless, Princess. It is precisely because you're an adult that I can no longer watch over you while you jump headfirst into danger, so at least let me fuss over you while you're here."

Tio had returned physically unharmed from her trial in the mausoleum, but overcoming the artifact's malice had taken up so much of her energy that she'd collapsed from exhaustion. Adul had carried her back to the mansion, and all of the village's healers combined were unable to wake her from her slumber. Before she lost consciousness, Tio had said she'd be fine after a little bit of sleep, but her complexion had been so pale that Venri had feared Tio really had

died.

“My apologies for worrying you so. I should have taken your feelings into consideration,” Tio said bashfully. Venri was like a second mother to Tio, since she’d raised her after her real parents had died.

Venri pushed a cup of hot tea into Tio’s hands and said, “It’s fine. This is nothing compared to the time you told me you got engaged to an odious boy from the mainland.”

“Bwuh!?” Tio spit out her tea; a gesture very unbecoming for a dragon princess. She quickly wiped her mouth and turned to Venri, who was smiling ominously at her. There appeared to be some kind of malignant aura surrounding the old woman.

“C-Calm down, Venri. Master isn’t a bad person.”

“Everyone who gets hoodwinked by a scoundrel says that.”

“How dare you! Master is no scoundrel! He—”

“He was whipping my daughter’s behind with a wicked grin on his face.”

“That was my reward for—”

“You yourself admitted he was the reason the noble dragonman princess became a pervert,” Venri stated flatly. She steadily advanced on Tio, and Tio scrambled backward. Unfortunately, she didn’t get very far before she reached the wall. Cold sweat poured down her forehead and she looked anywhere she could that wasn’t at Venri. She resembled a kid who’d been caught doing something naughty.

“In the first place, that boy is already in a relationship with the vampire princess, is he not?”

“I-Indeed he is. The two of them were already a couple when I first met him, but—”

“In other words, your greatest wish is to have an affair with him. Surely you realize how immoral that is.”

“Bwah!? H-Hold a moment, Venri! That’s a very uncharitable way of framing —”

“Is it? Is it really? It’s true that I have my issues with that boy. In fact, I have my issues with you too for falling for such an unpleasant person! If your parents ever learned that you fell in love with someone because they were able to hurt you, they would cry!”

“U-Ugh...”

“And why do you call him ‘Master’!? It’s deplorable! What do you think a married couple is!? Marriage is about equality and moving forward together! I don’t recall raising you into a woman who would willingly place herself into servitude! Also—”

“I hate it when you go into lecture mode, Venri!” Tio shouted, flailing her arms like a spoiled child. She then dove back onto her bed and hid underneath the covers. If Hajime and the others saw her, they would have been shocked at how immature she was being.

“Get back out here, young lady! I’m not done talking! Your future depends on this, so you better hear me out!”

“Too bad! I’ve already decided what kind of life I’m going to lead! I’m going to live a life where I’m constantly punished by Master! Master, Yue, and I are going to build a family together! I’ll be their dog! Their pet dog!”

“H-How could you say something like that! The dragonman princess should never debase herself to the level of a dog! That’s it, you’re getting a spanking! If you like being punished so much, let’s see how you like it when I do it!”

“Wait, really?”

“Don’t look so happy about iiiiiit!”

Tio and Venri were causing such a ruckus that people outside could hear them, but no one dared to go and check on them. Meanwhile, Adul just looked resigned as he sat down with a bemused smile on his face. It honestly looked like his granddaughter’s sudden transformation had brought him enlightenment. It was a rather unfortunate way to level up, but he had indeed grown stronger just before the final battle as a result.

“Haaah... Haaah, you really are an obstinate little girl.”

“Do you understand how determined I am now?”

Venri dropped to her knees, unable to penetrate the comforter fortress Tio had built around herself. Tio’s natural proclivity for defense had allowed her to make a pointlessly sturdy pillow fort.

“Very well. It appears I have to resort to drastic measures in order to open your eyes.”

Curious, Tio poked her head out of the comforter. Venri took a piece of paper out of her pocket and unfolded it in front of Tio.

“What’s this? ‘A checklist of traits a man needs to be worthy of the princess: DOM edition.’ Wait, what’s a DOM?”

“It stands for deadbeat old man. I also have checklists for the ideal man, and for a decent compromise of a man.”

“Why in the world did you make these checklists?”

“I thought you might choose a terrible candidate, so I made these in advance. Worthless men often try to mooch off of beautiful, competent, and responsible young women like yourself.”

“Umm, Venri, you wouldn’t happen to be speaking from experience, would —”

“Let’s start going down the list! If anyone fills three or more of the ten boxes on this list, then they’re unworthy of you, Princess! I will not allow a union between you and such a man!”

“Hmph, very well. I shall prove to you that Master is not a DOM, Venri!”

Sparks flew through the air as Tio and Venri’s stares clashed.

“Trait 1: They’re short-tempered and quick to violence. Naturally, your ‘Master’ ticks this box!”

“Objection! Master is only truly violent against those who oppose him! It’s true that he often shoots people who make drab jokes or annoy him, but he makes sure to hold back so that he doesn’t actually harm them! Violence in this context would be true intent to harm spurred on by anger, correct?”

“Grr... I suppose you have a point. Let us move on to traits 2 and 3: Doesn't work, and is bad with money.”

“Master is a top-rank adventurer who has taken on jobs that range from protecting young children to rescuing a hero. Moreover, he never wastes money. In fact, he hasn't spent a dime on anything that wasn't necessary for his travels.”

“Grrrr... Fine, trait 4: Is a heavy drinker!”

“Hah! Master has the skill Poison Resistance, so he cannot get drunk even if he wished to. On top of that, he has no particular fondness for alcohol.”

“I-I've still got 6 more! Trait 5: Is a narcissist! Trait 6: Is overconfident! Trait 7: Is a womanizer!”

“Master has never boasted about his appearance or personality. In fact, he seems rather self-conscious about his 'edgelord' personality traits and appearance. So much so, in fact, that he hesitates to look at himself in the mirror. He has confidence in his fighting skills, but he has never overestimated his abilities. He analyzes his own capabilities objectively and formulates realistic plans. Even when against clearly weaker foes, he does not underestimate them in the slightest. Finally, if he was a womanizer, our lives would be so much easier. We wouldn't have to work so hard just to get him to accept our affections.”

“Trait 8: Often makes excuses and says things like “But, but!” Trait 9: Is all talk, no action!”

“He's the very opposite of both of those. He never makes excuses and speaks more with his actions than he does his words. You saw what he did at the Demon Lord's castle, did you not? What's wrong, Venri? You look rather defeated. Go on, list your final trait.”

Tio grinned triumphantly, and Venri grit her teeth. Despite Tio's prodding, she still didn't state the final trait. The reason being that number 10 was “Isn't kind to children.” The recording she'd seen earlier already made it clear how much Hajime treasured Myu. In the end, Venri was forced to admit that Tio's beloved Master wasn't a DOM, at least not by this checklist's definition. However, she still couldn't accept that outcome.

“I-I still won’t ever approve of the man who turned you into a pervert, Princess!”

“You’ve been insulting me off-hand this entire time, Venri, and I must say it’s quite nice. Haaah... Haaah...”

“Now that it’s come to this, I have no choice but to grill him myself! Come, Princess, you’ve rested for long enough! Let us be off so I can speak with this boy!”

“Ah, stop pulling! I’m still wearing my nightgown! Is this how you treat your princess!?”

Venri ignored Tio’s protests and continued dragging her out of the mansion. However, it looked like Tio was actually happy about being treated so roughly, which just caused Venri to sigh. Needless to say that once they made it to Heiligh, Venri grilled Hajime on the rooftop for quite some time. The crumpled pile of checklists in her trashcan made it clear what the result of said grilling ended up being.

Arifureta Fairy Tales: The Ugly Bunny

Deep within a certain forest was a rabbitmen village. One day, a bunnygirl with a pure white tail and ears was born in the village. As a rule, rabbitmen all had navy blue ears and tails, so the rabbitmen were quite surprised to see a baby like that. As they looked down at this clearly different girl, they all had their own thoughts to share.

“Wow, she must be a goddess or something if she was born with different-colored fur!”

“Yeah, she’s gotta be the chosen one! We should call her the Alabaster Abyss!”

“No, wait, her eyes are the same blue as a clear sky... We should call her the HEAVENSENT, in all caps!”

“Are you... a genius!?”

Apparently, none of them hated her for being different. In fact, they seemed

overjoyed. That night, the village held a party in the bunnygirl's honor. They believed she would grow up into a hero who would eventually go on a journey to save the world. Some of them even had the rather dangerous idea of becoming evil tyrants so that she would have someone to save the world from. Despite being a baby, the bunnygirl made a disgusted face when she heard the rabbitmen talk about committing evil deeds for the fun of it.

But as the blessed bunnygirl grew older, people began to treat her differently.

"Aww, why does everyone always leave me out of everything?"

Indeed, they started treating her coldly. They shot dirty looks at her differently colored ears and tail, which made the bunnygirl very, very sad.

"If you want us to be nicer, you need to give yourself a cool sounding name," one of the boys her age said curtly when she asked what she was doing wrong.

"Huh, but it's embarrassing to introduce yourself like that..."

"Ptooey!"

"Eek, hey, that's gross!"

The boy spit at her, and the young bunnygirl hurriedly leaped out of the way. She glared indignantly at him, but all the other rabbitmen children also seemed to think she was in the wrong.

"Man, what a buzzkill. I expected more from you, since you have white hair."

"She's so booring."

"She's the only one who doesn't want a cool nickname."

That was the reason the villagers were so cold to her. She rejected their custom of choosing edgy nicknames for themselves. Her hair color didn't matter one bit. If anything, it was a plus. But because she was lacking an edgelord's soul, the villagers who had put their hopes and expectations on her were disappointed.

"B-But no one in the other villages does—"

"They have their traditions, and we have ours."

"Gah! The rest of the world thinks this is embarrassing! I just want you guys to

act normally so people stop discriminating—”

“Since the beginning of time, justice has been something that hurts those who wield it, not protect it.”

“What kind of logic is that!?”

“If you can’t live by your principles, what point is there in living?”

“What worth is there in a life bereft of dreams?”

“Why can’t you understand that those who enjoy their lives are the ones who have the last laugh?”

“I can’t take it anymore, my family is just too cringe! I’m leaving this forest!”

“What!?”

Everyone was stunned, but the white-haired rabbit had faith in her decision. With how much rabbitmen valued solidarity, she was certain her village would follow her. She was the elder’s daughter, after all. And if they followed her out in the world, they would finally see how ridiculous their customs were and start living a more normal life.

“Chief! Chief! Our HEAVENSENT ETERNAL SKY is finally going to begin her journey!”

“What!? So she’s finally prepared to save the world!? Wonderful! Go, my daughter! Show them the might of the SUNSPECKLED MESSIAH!”

“Hey, call me if you need an evil supervillain to defeat. I’ll play the role perfectly!”

Tears welled up in the trembling bunnygirl’s eyes.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, it’s too late for my family!”

The villagers watched her run away with warm smiles on their faces.

After some time, the bunnygirl reached another village. She’d left with nothing but the clothes on her back, so she was starving by the time she arrived. The village she’d reached was a harpy village. Ever since she had been little, the bunnygirl had been envious of the winged race that could soar freely through the skies. Hoping that she might be able to find some work to pay for

her food and lodging, and perhaps even make a few friends, the bunnygirl approached the village entrance.

“Hm? Aaaaaah, a rabbitman! Why’s there a rabbitman here!?”

“Sound the alarm! We’ve got a crazy rabbitman on the loose!”

“Red alert! Everyone get to your battle stations!”

The bunnygirl turned on her heel and fled back into the forest. Tears spilled from her eyes as she sprinted away. She then tried to visit a catman village, but they threatened her with violence. After that, she visited a dogman village, but they started panicking and acting like the world was ending. Finally, she made her way to the beastman capital, but even the glorious city brought her no respite.

“Why!? What were the scouts doing!? How did a rabbitman get so far out of the quarantine zone!?”

Here, too, the people were acting as though a natural disaster had appeared. A lot of the words they used worried the bunnygirl, but if she was barred from this city too, then there would be nowhere left for her. So instead of asking about the quarantine zone, she tried to convince the guards that she was harmless.

“I’m not like the other rabbitmen! I’m one of the good ones!”

She put her hands next to her ears and did a cute little hop, but the guards weren’t buying it.

“You’re not fooling anyone! You think we’ll fall for that a second time!? We’re not morons!”

“You’re just trying to infiltrate this city so you can crush it from the inside! But we’re on to you this time!”

It seemed the bunnygirl’s clan had done some pretty awful things in the past. It was at this point that she realized there was no place for her in this forest. Sniffling, she left the capital behind. The poor bunnygirl decided to find a home outside the forest, but she soon realized that wouldn’t be easy.

“The outside’s a scary place toooooo!” she screamed, hiding behind a nearby

boulder.

It was hardly surprising, considering what had happened to her. First, vicious IMPERIAL SOLDIERS had found her and tried to make her into a slave. After that, a group of perverts tried to rape her. Then, she was chased by a pack of monsters. Her stomach was growling, and the realization that there was nowhere she belonged gnawed away at her. As she sunk into the depths of despair, she heard another monster approaching.

“I should just let it eat me. It’s not like I can fit in anywhere, anyway.”

Her ears drooped as she lost the will to live. But when she closed her eyes, she imagined how painful it would be to have her head split apart by a monster’s fangs. Before she knew it, she was moving again. Her survival instincts spurred her onward, and she leaped out of the way just before something shattered the boulder. Whatever had destroyed the boulder had also obliterated the monster that had been stalking her.

“Eeeek! Wh-What happened?”

Three people walked over to the terrified bunnygirl.

“Hm? Didn’t expect to see a person here.”

The voice was surprisingly casual considering the violence that had occurred a second ago. But the bunnygirl was too terrified to say anything.

A beautiful young girl with blonde hair leaned down and said, “What a strange rabbitman. You have mana? Hmmm, can you use magic?”

“I-I can’t.”

“Not even any special magic?”

“S-Special magic? I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The blonde-haired girl immediately lost interest in the bunnygirl. The man with the eyepatch hadn’t shown any interest in her from the start. But as she began to despair anew, the final member of the party said, “Haaah... Haaah... This rabbitman looks quite ragged... What horrible things happened to you!? Please, tell me in great detail!”

“Eeek, it’s a pervert!”

A black-haired beauty wearing a kimono crawled over to the bunnygirl on all fours. The bunnygirl's ears twitched and she reflexively punched the woman in the face. To her utter surprise, the punch sent the woman flying. She crashed straight through any boulders in her path and hit the ground so hard she made a small crater at the point of impact.

Oh no, they're going to kill me for this... the bunnygirl thought, sniffing.

Contrary to expectations though, the black-haired beauty just said, "A-Amazing. This is the first time I have felt such a powerful punch... Haaah... Haaah..."

She had a rapt expression on her face as she panted with excitement. Meanwhile, the boy with the eyepatch and the blonde-haired girl turned back to her.

"Damn, you're awesome. Was that body strengthening magic?"

"Mmm... If you have nowhere to go, would you like to come with us?"

For a moment, the bunnygirl doubted her ears. But when she looked up, she saw the boy and girl looking gently down at her, as if she was already one of them.

"You're just like us..." the blonde-haired girl said.

It was then that the bunnygirl had a revelation. She wasn't just a regular rabbitman with a proper idea of what common sense was, she was an insanely overpowered one who punched anything who got in her way. From that day on, she lived happily with her new comrades, occasionally beating up her former family members when they showed up as evil supervillains.

Arifureta Academy X: The Apostles' Days of Despair

Early one morning, during the early hours of dawn when no one was awake, two figures could be spotted on the lawn.

"Hurry, Hajime, hurry!" Yue said excitedly, looking surprisingly energetic for someone who habitually overslept and came to work late.

"There's no need to rush, Yue-sensei. The church isn't going anywhere."

Hajime smiled as he watched Yue cavort merrily on the lawn. The two of them were on the way to visit the church located next to the academy grounds. The god worshiped by this church was named Ehit, but he wasn't a piece of shit. Moreover, the followers of this church weren't especially hostile to heretics. In fact, their tenets preached love and tolerance to all people, regardless of race or creed. Despite all that, there was a reason why Yue wanted to come here so early in the morning.

"If we're not careful, that muscle-brained bunnygirl will catch up to us! It's only a matter of time before she realizes where we've gone."

"I can't deny that. She'll probably try every trick in the book to stop our marriage."

Indeed, the two of them were going to the church to fill out their marriage registration.

"Mmm... The last sister we visited was too stubborn. And Bishop Simon is always off on some journey or the other, so he's not here."

"To be fair, the old lady had a point. Normally, it's wrong for a teacher to marry their student."

Incidentally, the old lady from the last church they'd visited had forced Yue to sit down for hours with a sign that said, "Please don't talk to me. I'm reflecting on my actions," while she lectured her about proper decorum.

"But now there's nothing to fear! The old hag retired, and I've heard the new sister will do anything as long as your paperwork is in order!"

"Those aren't good rumors, you know? Besides, I've heard that even though she's supposed to be beautiful, she looks like an expressionless doll and won't even help you if you're not a believer."

"That's fine. In fact, that's perfect. The clergy should just follow the almighty vampire princess' orders without complaint."

"If you're so almighty, why did you end up getting lectured last time?"

"Mrrrrrrrrrrrr!"

Blushing, Yue angrily poked Hajime's cheek. But that just caused Hajime to

grin again. They continued flirting all the way to the church.

“By the way, Yue-sensei, won’t the sister still be asleep?”

“Hm? Why would that be a problem? If she’s sleeping, we just have to wake her up,” Yue said, looking confused as to why Hajime would even ask that. Her expression was so cute that Hajime completely forgot to explain why that would be a bad thing. Whenever he was around Yue, Hajime’s IQ dropped by 20 points.

To their surprise, they found the sister already awake when they entered the church. She was kneeling in front of the altar in heartfelt prayer. Her silver hair glinted beneath her veil, and it appeared she hadn’t heard the two of them. She radiated a divine aura, and Hajime could immediately see why people claimed she wasn’t human.

“Please let me find a new job. Please let me find a new job. Also, please kill my shitty boss, Ehit, in the most painful way possible. If you can’t do that, at least make him go bald. Also, make him incontinent and an insomniac, and give him gout!”

Hajime and Yue’s expressions froze, and they took a few involuntary steps backward. The sound of their footsteps alerted the sister, and she turned to them with a start.

“What might you two need this early in the morning, my not-so-lost lambs?”

Hajime wasn’t sure if the sarcasm he heard in the sister’s voice was real or just in his head. Regardless, now that he got a good look at the sister’s face, he had to admit she was indeed a beauty on par with Yue. Her features were perfectly sculpted, but—

“L-Look at those dead eyes...”

“Well, I have had to pull five all-nighters.”

Judging by how earnestly she’d been cursing her boss a second ago, Hajime guessed forcing five all-nighters on her wasn’t even the worst thing he’d done.

“So? What do you want? We’re not open yet. Did you just come to flirt in my church? If so, I hope you don’t mind if I exterminate you.”

“Is that really something a sister should be saying!?”

“Ah, excuse me for a moment.”

The sister completely ignored Hajime’s question and flicked her head back. Were it not for Hajime’s highly enhanced vision, he wouldn’t even have noticed what she’d done.

“H-How can anyone down an energy drink that fast?”

“I can’t believe someone with dead eyes like her can guzzle like that.”

“Caffeine is the ultimate nutrient. With this, I can survive another day.”

This sister was a real beauty, but the company she was working for was rotten to the core.

“My apologies, this last all-nighter made me a little crabby.”

“I think that’s more than just a *little* crabby!”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Noint Seraphim, the sister who was assigned to this church one month ago. You may call me Sister Noint.”

“It’s impressive how easily she ignores your comments...”

Noint cracked her neck in such a horrific fashion that Hajime and Yue wondered if she really was a living creature. Mustering her courage, Yue timidly handed the marriage registration form to Noint. The sister skimmed over it, then suddenly started crying.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s wrong, Sister Noint!?”

“It’s so nice that you two get to be happy. I’ll curse you and all your descendants until the day I die. I realize now that I’ll never find happiness myself, so I feel a little more of my heart get gouged out every time happy couples come to me with marriage forms. I honestly don’t know what I’m even living for at this point, but congratulations, you two.”

“This atmosphere is so awkward!” Hajime and Yue shouted simultaneously.

Yue reflexively retracted the marriage form and Hajime hurriedly offered Sister Noint a handkerchief.

“Oh? For me? You’re so kind...”

“It’s just a handkerchief! Just how starved for affection are you!?”

“I-Is this a roundabout confession?”

“Hell no! Are you really that desperate!?”

“How cruel. Don’t you realize that superficial kindness like this is nothing more than poison to someone like me!?”

“C-Calm down, Sister Noint. There’s nothing toxic about me offering you a handkerchief. You’re making me want to cry now!”

Hajime and Yue couldn’t help but pity Sister Noint as they watched tears spill from her dead, lifeless eyes. They then sat her down and kindly offered to listen to her story. Apparently, Sister Noint and all eight of her sisters were all so good at their jobs that Ehit had made them his direct subordinates and was working them to the bone.

“When I first heard I would be sent to the academy church, I was happy. I thought I would finally be able to work a job that wasn’t awful. I even harbored faint hopes that a promising young student would fall in love with me at first sight and propose.”

“S-She sounds more like a depressed wage slave than a pious sister.”

“But my asshole boss kept piling a bunch of extra work on me because ‘the academy church is in the center of the continent, so you can easily reach all these other places.’”

“I see you refer to your god as just an asshole boss now...”

“Moreover, this academy is a warzone. I get complaints day after day, and even though I have a bunch of church work already, people push the academy’s problems onto me as well.”

Hajime and Yue awkwardly looked away. They were the cause of most of the fighting in the academy. They exchanged glances, determined to do something about Sister Noint’s awful work environment. Just then, the door to the church opened and someone walked in.

“Hm? If it isn’t Hearst-nee-san. What brings you here from the main cathedral?”

It appeared this was one of the Seraphim sisters, Sister Hearst. Hearst's appearance was identical to Noint's, all the way down to the dead eyes. Hearst hesitated a bit when she saw Yue and Hajime, unsure of whether or not she should tell Noint her business in their presence. In the end, though, she decided to just say it.

"The truth is... I got a three-day vacation yesterday."

"Sorry, nee-san, but I think you're speaking in a foreign language I don't understand."

Hajime and Yue held back the desire to interject.

"I thought this might be some horrific omen myself, too. Honestly, I'm worried Ehit had some awful, evil, horrible overtime in store for me after this."

"This is completely unprecedented, so I understand how you feel. I'm honestly amazed the concept of vacations exists at all in this line of work."

Hajime and Yue covered their faces in despair. How could such an awful workplace exist?

"So, why are you here?"

"There's nothing for me to do at home."

"Ah, I understand. You have no friends to invite over."

"And if I go out, I'll be crushed by guilt because I'm having fun when I could be working."

"Ah, I feel the same on the rare occasions I don't have overtime and am allowed to go home before the sunset. I also get scared that the people around me might think I'm an unemployed bum."

"Indeed. So I thought I might come to this academy and try and experience a facsimile of youth."

"We were unable to enjoy our own youth, after all. My only memories are memories of work."

Please stop! I can't bear to hear anymore! Hajime and Yue thought.

Afterward, Yue used her power and influence to reform the Seraphim sisters'

workplace, while Hajime poured his blood, sweat, and tears into making artifacts that could make their lives easier. Unfortunately, this act of goodwill ended up making all nine of them fall for him, and they could occasionally be seen around the academy, staring silently at Hajime with their eerie, dead eyes.







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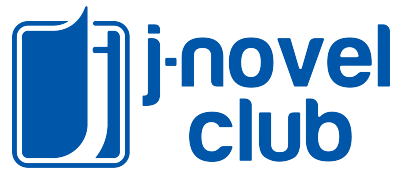
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Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest Vol. 11

by Ryo Shirakome

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