

#8

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ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST





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8





THE GIRL WITH THE
TRADEMARK HAIRBAND
SHEA

THE BEAUTIFUL BLONDE-HAIRED
TRANSFER STUDENT
YUE

ARIFURETA SCHOOL LIFE

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Chapter I: The Hero Returns

It was a truly surreal sight. Hundreds of beastmen stood huddled together, pinching their cheeks or slapping their faces or staring out the window in disbelief. The wind howled past their ears and an endless sea of clouds spread out beneath them. From the few gaps in cloud cover, they could make out the ground speeding past them at an unbelievable rate. Unbelievable as it seemed, they were actually flying through the sky.

More specifically, they were riding Hajime's gravity-manipulating airship Artifact, the Fernir. He had attached a large gondola to its bottom, which was where they were currently stationed. The reason they were riding the first airship in Tortus' history was because of another historical event that had concluded just yesterday. All of Hoelscher's slaves had been freed following a battle that would later come to be known as "The Haulia Rebellion" or "The Crimson Ball" by the people of the empire.

Shea's father, Cam, had led the Haulia in an attack on the empire's capital and felled it in a single night. He'd demanded the emperor free all of the empire's slaves, and those former slaves were now riding Hajime's Fernir back home to Haltina.

Hajime had actually already set up a warp gate in the sea of trees, so he could have teleported them all home instantly if he'd wanted to. The reason he'd chosen not to, and instead brought Fernir down outside the capital was because he'd needed to make a big show of the whole emancipation. Basically, he'd wanted to emphasize to the citizens of Hoelscher that freeing all the slaves really was something that god himself had decreed. And it had worked as intended. Seeing a giant flying ship descend to take the beastmen back home had left the empire's residents in awe.

Naturally Hajime was just using god's name. In truth, Ehit had nothing to do with this. Hajime was just following through with his principle of "When in doubt, just pin all the blame on god." Whether or not Ehit took issue with that

wasn't something Hajime particularly cared about. At any rate, while it did make for an impressive spectacle, moving an Artifact as complex as Fernir took up a lot of concentration.

“Aaah...”

Hajime sighed lazily as he lounged on the bridge's sofa. He didn't look like he was concentrating in the slightest. His arms and legs were sprawled across the sofa, and he looked more like an office worker on break than someone piloting an airship. However, the fact that he was enveloped in layers of crimson mana made it obvious that even now he was still expending a lot of energy to drive Fernir.

In truth, he was actually having a bit of a hard time. The more weight there was loaded on Fernir, the more difficult it was to pilot. That being said, his posture, combined with the fact that he was surrounded by beautiful girls, made it seem like he was just lording his superiority over people.

“Oi Hajime Nagumo, don't you think you're being rather rude, relaxing like that in front of the emperor?”

The bridge's door slid open with a mechanical whir, and Hoelscher's emperor, Gahard D Hoelscher, strode into the room, glaring angrily at Hajime. With Yue and Shea to either side of him, and Kaori behind him, Hajime really did look like a king indulging in his harem. Especially considering how closely the three of them were sticking to him. They claimed it was so they could keep replenishing his mana, but everyone knew they didn't need to be glued to him to do that. Considering that Hajime was burning through vast quantities of mana each second, and operating an extremely complicated machine on top of that, one could say he was training seriously, it just didn't look like that at all. It was a bit of a shame, really. Neither Gahard nor any of the other people present realized just how much effort Hajime put into getting stronger.

“I wish I could be the— Ahem, you shouldn't act so indecent in public, Nagumo-san.”

“Liliana-sama, your letting your real intentions slip again.”

The princess of Heiligh, Liliana S B Heiligh, and her maid Helina followed in behind Gahard. The reason she was also coming along to Haltina was because

she needed to be a witness to Gahard's oaths.

The battle the other day hadn't been between the empire and Verbergen, but between the empire and the Haulia, which was why Gahard needed to head to Verbergen and swear the same oaths he'd given to Cam. That had been one of Cam's conditions, after all.

The other people in the room included Kouki Amanogawa, Ryutarou Sakagami, Shizuku Yaegashi, Suzu Taniguchi, and Tio, who was lying on the ground twitching in pleasure. The reason she was on the floor this time was because she'd tried to leap into Hajime's arms a few moments ago. Disgusted by the perverted dragon's antics, Hajime had reflexively kicked her away, then strangled her until she nearly fell unconscious. As she seemed to be enjoying it, no one had bothered to stop him. In fact, her ecstatic expression had caused everyone to look away in disgust.

Following Liliana's remarks, Shizuku and the others started to rebuke Hajime as well. Unwilling to listen to their nagging, he quickly changed the subject.

"Gahard, did you finish exploring the ship?"

"Yeah. This thing is insane. I don't even understand how this giant lump of metal can fly. Either way, this is one hell of an Artifact you made! Oi, Hajime Nagumo. Make one for me too. I'll pay you as much as you want."

Gahard settled into the sofa across from Hajime, his eyes brimming with excitement. Hajime frowned in annoyance.

"I don't need money. Give it a rest already. This is the only time I'm letting you ride Fernir. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Come now, don't be like that. I'm just asking for one measly ship. It can even be a small one."

"There's nothing in it for me, so no."

"Mrr, fine if you don't need money how about women? One of my daughters is of marriageable age now. Her name's Tracy, and she's a bit of a battle nut, but she's definitely a looker. She'd make a good addition to your harem, right? What do you say?"

Gahard seemed to think Hajime was a hardcore womanizer. Considering how Hajime was surrounded by three girls at the moment, it was a hard claim to deny. That being said, the last thing Hajime wanted was Gahard's battle-crazy daughter pushed onto him. He looked disdainfully down at Gahard, but before he could refuse, his harem came to his defense.

"I'll turn you into ash if you try." "I'll crush you!" "That was a joke, right emperor? Right?" "Please don't put Nagumo-kun in the same category as you, Your Majesty." "Absolutely not! I won't allow it! Hajime-kun belongs to me!"

Hajime shrugged and continued.

"There you have it."

"Tch, showoff... Hm? Wait, did I hear Princess Liliana's voice mixed in with the rest?" Gahard clicked his tongue, then suddenly turned back toward Liliana. The others followed his gaze.

"Huh? O-Of course not. You must have been hearing things."

"Kuku. Come to think of it, you ignored Baius entirely during the ball too. Though you seemed to be enjoying yourself dancing with a certain someone. Hey, Hajime Nagumo. Just how fast do you work? Even I'm getting tired of seeing everyone fall for you."

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying, Your Majesty!? N-Nagumo-san and I don't have that kind of relationship. Isn't that right, Nagumo-san?"

"Yeah. Hell'll freeze over before that happens."

"You didn't have to be so blunt about it..." Liliana's shoulders slumped. She sulkily looked away, making it obvious that she wasn't against the idea of being Hajime's lover. Though, everyone who'd seen her dance at the ball had already known she was enamored with him.

Naturally, Hajime wasn't oblivious either. Yet he'd still shot her down without mercy. Yue and the others gave Liliana sympathetic looks, then turned to glare at Hajime.

"Why're you all looking at me like that? Besides, the princess' already engaged. I mean, her fiance got beheaded, but she still needs to get married to

someone from the empire, right? Gahard'll just find another prince for her to marry."

"Oh, about that..."

Liliana trailed off, and Gahard turned to Hajime with a bitter expression.

"To be honest, my family's in no position to be making political ties right now. We're kind of busy dealing with these cursed necklaces that'll kill us if we break our oaths." He pointed to the ruby dangling from his neck. The Necklace of Vows was an artifact that forced its wearer to adhere to any oaths they made. It carved the vow into the pledger's soul, so any attempt to break their promise or take the necklace off caused them to go insane and die.

"According to our contract, if my subjects try to attack beastmen, we won't lose our lives as long as we punish them for it. But that doesn't change the fact that the entire empire is being held hostage. I need to make radical changes to our government and start imposing strict punishments on my people. On top of that we still have to inform the rest of the empire about our new policy and find a way to free all the remaining slaves. Me and my family are too busy to think about marriage." Gahard leaned back in his seat and scratched his head.

"And it's not like I can marry the princess off to someone who might die at any minute. Besides, without slaves we've lost our biggest supply of labor. Your speech might have worked for the capital, but I guarantee the other cities will riot. My soldiers are going to be busy getting the empire under control, so we wouldn't be able to send reinforcements to the kingdom anyway. If anything, we're the ones who need help now."

"I see. So basically, the princess isn't getting married anymore."

"More or less. Once things calm down and the imperial family isn't in danger of being wiped out, Prince Lundel will probably be old enough that it would be better to give him one of my daughters to cement our alliance instead."

Hajime and the others nodded in understanding. Incidentally, the reason Gahard's family was willing to follow along so obediently was because one of his relatives had tried removing their necklace earlier. As expected, they'd gone crazy, rampaged around the palace for a few minutes, then fell limp, like a doll with its strings cut.

“That’s wonderful, Lily!”

“Yeah... I don’t know if you’ll be able to marry someone you truly love now, but at least you’ve bought yourself some time.”

“Yep! Isn’t it great, Lily!?”

Kouki, Shizuku, and Kaori all said excitedly. Even Yue and the others congratulated Liliana on getting her engagement annulled.

“Th-Thank you,” Liliana replied awkwardly. While she was glad she didn’t have to get married to Baius anymore, his father was sitting in front of her, and Baius himself had been decapitated the night before. Still, she was happy she wouldn’t have to deal with the man who’d tried to rape her anymore. Normally she hid her feelings, but this time she let her happiness show. Even Gahard couldn’t help but smile.

“Anyway, that’s how it is. So Princess Liliana’s free to do as she pleases. Hajime Nagumo. If you really want her, I’ll use my authority as emperor to make it happen.”

“Wha!? Your Majesty, what are you saying!? I-I don’t...” Shaken, Liliana looked to her maid for help.

“This is your chance, Princess! Make him yours!” she replied excitedly.

Not noticing Yue’s dangerous glare, Liliana looked bashfully toward Hajime. The slight blush that colored her cheeks gave her just the perfect amount of cuteness. Naturally, Hajime wasn’t fazed by it in the slightest. Her charms did nothing to sway him, and he casually turned back to Gahard.

“And in return you want me to make you a ship, right? How many times do I have to say it, there’s nothing in that for me. In fact, I’d only be losing out in an exchange like that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Nagumo-san!?” Liliana screamed. Hajime ignored that too.

Shocked, Gahard replied.

“Come on, we’re talking about the princess of a kingdom here! How can you call yourself a man if you don’t want her!?”

“Don’t lump me in together with you. I’m not trying to collect a bunch of girls here. If anything, the fact that she’s a princess would make things more of a pain.”

“Heeey, over here! I’m still here you know! Please stop talking about me like I’m not in the room! Listen to me!”

Liliana waved her hands in the air, trying to remind people she existed. Unfortunately, she was still ignored.

“You really have no interest in authority, huh? Or perhaps you’re just not interested in the princess.”

“Both.”

“Okay okay, I get it, you’re ignoring me. I’m not important enough for anyone to listen to. I guess it’s because you’re not interested in me, huh...*Sniffle*... Even though I’m the princess...” Tears trailed down Liliana’s cheeks and the hope vanished from her eyes.

“Liliana-sama... you poor thing...”

“Lily... Even though you’re the princess. I’m so sorry...”

“L-Lily! I’ll listen to you! Please, cheer up!” Helina dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief while Shizuku and Kouki tried to console her.

Hajime watched them out of the corner of his eye while simultaneously monitoring Gahard’s reaction. Seeing as he had no intention of giving up, Hajime sighed and spoke.

“Right now, there’s nothing I want so give it up. Maybe you’ll stumble across something you can use as a bargaining chip later... so just wait until them.”

“Nnngh, is there really nothing you want? Nothing I can do for you? Tell me truly. All humans want something. The only people who say they want nothing have stopped being human, or are plotting something. Then again, I suppose you are a devil.”

“You trying to pick a fight? Well, I guess I get what you’re saying. But...”

Hajime wrapped his arms around Yue and Shea.

“As you can see, everything I want is already in my arms. What else could I possibly ask for?”

So stop wasting your time trying to negotiate. Yue snuggled up to Hajime, while Shea was still in shock over the fact that Hajime had hugged her just as tight as he’d hugged Yue. A second later, her ears and tail started twitching happily, and she hugged Hajime back. Her eyes met Yue’s and the two of them giggled happily to each other.

“Ah, so that’s how it is. Tch, I can’t stand to watch this flirting. I’m going up to the deck for some fresh air...”

Gahard got to his feet with an annoyed huff and stalked off. Hajime once again leaned back into the sofa and returned to looking like he was doing nothing. Shizuku and Suzu snuck bashful glances at him, while Kouki and Ryutarou were unable to look at him. Flirting so openly had made the atmosphere rather awkward. It didn’t help that Liliana was looking up at the ceiling with dead eyes. However, the girl standing behind Hajime and the one at his feet were unaffected by the uncomfortable atmosphere.

“Uuu, how come it’s only Yue and Shea!? H-Hey Hajime-kun, when you said everything you wanted was already in your arms, you meant that figuratively, right? It’s not just Yue and Shea you care about, right?”

“M-Master. I understand it’s an odd request to make moments after being kicked by you, but would you please embrace me as well? I, too, wish to be in your arms...”

Kaori hugged Hajime from behind while Tio lifted herself off the ground and begged. Yue lifted her head off Hajime’s chest, looked at the two of them, and said, “Too bad.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean!?”

“Wha!? I cannot let that go unchallenged, Yue!”

Kaori and Tio bristled at Yue’s remark. Yue tilted her head and put a finger on her chin, thinking. Then she pointed to herself and Shea.

“Winners.”

Then she pointed to Kaori and Tio.

“Losers.”

She then went back to nuzzling Hajime’s chest. It was at that point that Kaori snapped.

“Fufufufu...You’re a weird one, Yue. Sometimes you say things that just don’t make any sense... Did you hit your head somewhere?”

Kaori swayed back and forth, and her sword-wielding demon stand flared to life behind her in a flurry of wind and snow.

“Indeed, there appears to be something wrong with Yue. It falls upon us to correct her, Kaori.”

Tio staggered to her feet. A black dragon wreathed in an aura of pitch spread its wings and roared behind her.

“And there’s one simple way to do that.”

“Indeed, when something is broken...”

“You beat it back into shape!” “One must beat it into shape!”

Fighting spirit started oozing out of the two of them. Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu hugged each other tight, terrified of the pressure Kaori and Tio were emitting.

“I-Is that really Kaori?” Kouki muttered.

Yue once again lifted her head off of Hajime’s chest and grinned faintly at the two of them.

“Don’t do it. You know you don’t stand a chance if I got serious, right?”

It really irritated them to hear that familiar phrase come from Yue’s mouth.

“Bring it on!” “I’d like to see you try!” As expected, neither of them were backing down.

“Mmm, do your worst.”

Yue provoked them even further. Dark clouds formed behind her, and her trademark lightning dragon appeared to complete the trio.

“W-Wait, you three! Calm down! And Nagumo-kun, don’t just sit there, help me stop them!”

Shizuku desperately tried to mediate between them. Unfortunately, even though they should have just been illusions, the pressure coming off of the demon, black dragon, and lightning dragon was all too real. She backed off and looked to Hajime for help. However, Hajime’s response was none too promising.

“Can’t do it. Too tired...”

He sunk deeper into the sofa. He obviously wasn’t going to move. In the first place, fights like these were an everyday occurrence. It was how the three of them communicated, really. Hence why Hajime didn’t particularly mind.

“Y-You lazy little—”

Shizuku, who wasn’t privy to the background behind their fights, fumed at his response. Just then, one of the fighters asked for her assistance.

“Shizuku-chan, I’ll leave the vanguard to you!”

“What!? Why do I have to get mixed up in all this!?”

And so, Shizuku was smoothly integrated into their quarrel. Seeing that Kaori had enlisted reinforcements, Tio decided to find some of her own.

“Come, Princess. We shall wade into battle together! You are a master of barrier magic, are you not? I shall need yours and Suzu’s assistance!”

“Wait, you want me!? Why!?”

“Did you just include me!?”

The perverted dragon grabbed the two crying girls and hauled them into the fray using her monstrous strength. She looked almost like a mother disciplining her children.

“Even though I’m the princess... no one listens to me...” Liliana mumbled sadly. She looked to her maid for salvation, but Helina simply cheered her on.

“Go for it, Liliana-sama! This is your chance to make yourself his wife!”

It appeared not even her maid understood her. Liliana once again reverted to

looking at the ceiling with dead eyes.. Suzu, too, beseeched Kouki and Ryutarou for help, but they both awkwardly averted their gazes. They had no desire to get in the middle of a fight between these girls. It wouldn't do for guys to butt in, after all.

“Are you really abandoning me!? You are, aren't you!? I won't forget this!”

Poor Suzu was doomed to the same fate as Liliana.

“Shea, be my vanguard.”

“Roger! I won't let anyone get close to you, Yue-san! I'll turn them all into mincemeat!”

Shea was raring to go. Her bunny ears stood straight up and her lips curled up into a fearless smile. She smacked her fists together, causing a shockwave of mana to ripple outward. Yue smiled at Hajime, much like a wife smiling at her husband before marching off to war. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around, normally?

“I'll be going, Hajime. It's time to teach them the difference between us.”

“Yeah, have fun. Just don't break anything.”

“Will you give me a reward when I come back?”

“Yeah, so don't take too long.”

“Okay...”

Their little exchange riled up Kaori and Tio even more. They could hardly hold back their bloodlust. The group filed out of the bridge, taking their unwilling conscripts with them. Above the clouds, the weather was always clear. Which made every day a good day for fighting. Before long, the sounds of rumbling thunder and exploding breath could be heard outside. Kouki and Ryutarou both jumped every time there was another bang. *Is it really okay to leave them alone like this?*

“They sound like they're having fun.”

However, Hajime remained utterly unconcerned.

“You're fine even after hearing all that!? Ngh, so this is the difference

between me and Nagumo.”

“Uhh, I don’t think that’s quite it. Just calm down, Kouki.

Kouki ground his teeth, frustrated that he was getting worked up while Hajime continued lying on the sofa. Meanwhile, Ryutarou just sighed. His voice carried through the bridge which had been emptied of all but the guys.

The sea of trees came into view around the same time that Yue and the others’ bout came to a close. The beastmen, terrified by the sounds they’d been hearing for the past few minutes, eagerly crowded near the front of the gondola. Oddly enough, a few of the beastmen could have sworn they’d heard the emperor’s screams during the fight, but they chalked it up to their imagination.

They arrived just as the sun was finishing its trek below the horizon. Verbergen’s streets were filled with warm, natural light emitted by torches placed at regular intervals. The torches were created from a wood that burned easily and last a long time. There was also a plethora of lamps that used caged phosphorescent insects for light.

Thanks to Kaori’s assistance, Verbergen’s recovery had progressed quite smoothly. It now resembled the same fantastical city of fey illusions that Hajime had been awed by on his first trip to the city. At a glance, it almost seemed as if the demon army’s invasion and the empire’s assault had never happened. One would have expected that all of Verbergen’s residents had returned to their former, peaceful lives and were happily spending time with their families. And indeed, that’s how it should have been.

“Does anyone know how many supplies the western settlements have left!?”

“Have you guys still not finished allotting everyone houses!? We don’t have any time, hurry it up!”

“Eeek!? One of the Haulia— Oh, you’re just a normal rabbitman...”

“Stop gushing about Kaori-sama and get back to work, you slackers!”

The city was as busy as Fuhren’s streets on market day. Everyone, regardless of age, race, or occupation, was working on some task or another. However,

while they were clearly busy, no one appeared to be panicking. In fact, they all seemed strangely hopeful. One of Verbergen's elders, the elf Ulfric Heipyst, watched the proceedings through an open window and sighed. He let the night breeze wash over his face for a few seconds longer, then rubbed his eyes tiredly. He once again looked down at the documents in his hand, his expression unreadable. The documents were reports on how to integrate a few thousand of their brethren back into Verbergen's cities, and requests for all manners of supplies and personnel.

"Hey, Cam. Are all they all really coming home?"

At Ulfric's muttered question, a figure materialized in the room, as if it had appeared out of thin air.

"How many times are you going to ask that question? Nothing I say will be able to confirm it for you. So stop worrying and get back to your preparations," Cam Haulia said sharply.

Cam and the others had returned to Verbergen ahead of time using one of Hajime's portals. They'd needed to warn the city of the beastmen's upcoming return, so they'd be ready to hold them all. Thanks to the telepathy stones that only the Haulia could use, they were able to quickly inform all of Verbergen and its outlying settlements. Incidentally, the reason why Cam had been hiding his presence was because it had become a hobby of his.

Ulfric smiled wanly and said, "I know. But it's just so hard to believe. To think the empire, of all people, would release all their slaves..."

"Well you'll be able to see the truth for yourself in a few hours. It's not like I don't get where you're coming from. If it weren't for our boss, we wouldn't have been able to come this far either."

"By boss... you mean Hajime Nagumo, don't you? If what you say is true, he's saved not only my granddaughter's life, but the lives of all beastmen everywhere. We owe him a debt we can never hope to repay..."

"Boss doesn't want you to repay him anyway. Now get back to work. You've still got a bunch of reports to sort through."

At Cam's blunt words, Ulfric turned to look at him. The rabbitman was looking

off into the distance, likely conversing with his comrades via Telepathy, yet he had no openings. In fact, he was wrapped in a dignified aura, befitting his status as chief of his tribe. It was hard to believe he hadn't even been noticeable moments ago.

To think this is the same man who prostrated himself before me only a few months ago, begging me not to execute his tribe... It was hard to fathom. His former gentle nature was nowhere to be seen. Now the air around him was so sharp it felt as though just touching him would cut you. And Ulfric had seen firsthand what happened to anyone who opposed him.

When Cam and the others had first returned to Verbergen, the elders, Ulfric included, hadn't believed their report that they'd defeated the empire and forced them to free all of its slaves. Their doubts were understandable. After all, it was unthinkable that a single clan would be able to take on the might of the empire and survive, much less achieve victory.

Sure they might have taken out an elite unit of bear-men in the past, and also saved Verbergen from the demon onslaught, but defeating an empire was on a completely different level. It was a difficult claim to believe. Most of the elders had dismissed Cam's story and his request that Verbergen prepare to receive the thousands of beast-men that would be returning as falsehoods. Some of them even went as far as to say that the Haulia were still holding a grudge over the fact that Verbergen had exiled them and at one point attempted to execute them, and that this was all part of some elaborate revenge plot. That had been a mistake.

Zel, the tiger-man elder, had gotten heated up and accused Cam and the others of plotting rebellion. He then had unsheathed his weapon, which had led to the incident that nearly saw him beheaded. Haulia had sprung up out of nowhere, and ended the fight before it even started.

Zel had found himself with a short sword pressed against his windpipe, and it was only thanks to Ulfric stepping in and mediating that he hadn't lost his life then and there. Still, the fact that a seasoned warrior like Zel hadn't been able to do a single thing, and that the Haulia had slipped past all of the elders' guards proved that the Haulia were far stronger than the elders had given them credit for.

The elders were forced to accept that maybe there was some truth to the Haulia's claims that they'd toppled the imperial capital. After what they'd seen, they had no choice but to believe. Besides, no one wanted to argue with the Haulia when they were that scary. More than one elder had wet their pants when they saw the Haulia pop out of nowhere.

Regin, the bearman who'd led the ill-fated raid on the Haulia, had been guarding the hall and had broken out in a cold sweat and hidden in a corner when they'd appeared. For nights afterward, he'd been tormented by nightmares where rabbits chased him down and killed him over and over. After seeing one of their strongest warriors cower because of the trauma he'd received at the Haulia's hands, the elders quickly bowed their heads and quietly listened to what Cam had to say.

Just thinking about that incident left Ulfric in a cold sweat. He looked back down at the documents Cam had told him to start working on, but before he could start someone walked into the room.

"Grandfather, we've gathered enough emergency rations. This is how much is left in our granaries now."

A gentle voice, like the pealing of a bell, interrupted Ulfric. His granddaughter, Altina, handed him another sheaf of papers. She had long blonde hair that reached down to her legs, and pure green eyes that looked like the depths of a forest. Her skin had regained much of its lost luster after she'd been rescued by Hajime and brought back home. After returning to Verbergen, she'd enthusiastically thrown herself into work, helping Ulfric with his duties. Still, Ulfric was worried the kidnapping incident had left deep scars on Altina's psyche. She was just a young girl, after all.

"Thank you. But Altina, it's only been a few days since you came back. You don't have to push yourself so hard. Why not rest for a bit?"

"I'll be fine, grandfather. Our comrades are coming home, I can't just sit around doing nothing."

Altina gently but firmly reassured Ulfric. Seeing her dazzling resolve, Ulfric couldn't help but be amazed. Though she'd been raised as a sheltered princess, she was far more capable than her upbringing would suggest. She possessed

quite a bit of grit too. And if Ulfric was honest with himself, he did appreciate the help. It warmed his heart to see the granddaughter he'd written off as dead being so lively, but at the same time— *Fidget, squirm, glance*

There was obviously something on her mind. From what Ulfric could tell, she was elated about something.

Where did that serious expression from earlier go? Ulfric followed her gaze, and realized she was staring at Cam. He sighed wearily and made his point.

"Altina, if you're worried about him why not just ask Cam?"

"I-I don't particularly care about what Nagumo-dono's doing or..."

"I never said I was referring to Hajime Nagumo."

"Grandfather, please don't tease me like that!"

Ulfric grinned, but inwardly he thought, *Surely she hasn't truly fallen for him?* It was a worrying prospect to consider. Thanks to her personality, status, and looks, Altina had had many suitors, but she'd turned them all down. Supposedly the reason she gave each of them was that she had wanted to inherit her grandfather's position and devote herself to serving Verbergen.

This was the first time Ulfric had seen her look like this. He couldn't help but be a little concerned, and his overprotective side came out a little.

"Mmm. While Hajime Nagumo may have saved your life, you would do well to remember he doesn't consider you anyone special. Furthermore, the ones who actually rescued you were the Haulia, not him. Personally, I don't think he would make a good match for you..."

"Like I said, I'm not interested in him! Sheesh, I was just wondering when he'd come back with all the other beastmen. That's all!"

Altina huffed and looked away. It appeared Ulfric had touched a nerve. Or rather, Altina was just trying to hide her embarrassment at having been seen through.

Sweating, Altina tried to sneak out of the room before her grandfather interrogated her any further. *At least she's not aware of her own feelings yet.* Ulfric thought with a weary sigh. If she actually tried to chase after him, she'd

have an impossible road ahead of her. Ideally, Ulfric wanted his granddaughter to pick the safer road.

To his surprise, Cam called out to Altina as she ducked under the doorway.

“Lady Altina.”

“Huh? Wh-What is it, Cam-san? Did you need something?”

A knowing smile played across Cam’s lips, and Altina instantly went on guard.

“Our boss may look like he has a harem of girls surrounding him, but in truth he’s only interested in one of them. And she’s the only one who’ll ever be truly special to him. If you want to have even a chance of reaching his heart, you’ll have to invest a lot of time and effort into gaining his trust.”

“U-Uh... okay?”

Cam’s lips curled even further upward, and he grinned triumphantly.

“By the way, the person closest to becoming the next special person to him is my daughter—Shea. After all, the only reason he assisted us and made an enemy out of the empire was because he didn’t want her smile to vanish.”

“I-Is that really true!?”

“It is. Our boss was willing to take on an entire empire for Shea’s sake, and Shea’s sake alone. Fufufufu.”

“Ah!”

It was obvious what Cam was implying. “You don’t stand a chance against my daughter!”

Incidentally, Altina was the same age as Shea, 16. So naturally, Altina felt a little angry when Cam told her she didn’t even stand a chance against someone her own age.

“Shea-san... is that girl with pale blue hair, isn’t she? This may be arrogant of me to say, but I don’t see how I’m inferior to her in any way. It’s true that she may have spent more time with Nagumo-dono than me, but... given time I’m sure...”

“Oh no. You see, our Shea’s more special than you think. I’m only warning you

now so you don't waste your time. If you waste your time chasing after an unattainable dream, you'll grow old alone, you know?"

"Well I don't need your advice!"

"Haaah... Cam, please stop teasing my granddaughter..."

Ulfric sighed as he saw Cam's childish smirk. The reason Cam had bothered poking his nose in at all was because he wanted to help his daughter out a little.

When Shea had first left with Hajime, it was obvious to everyone that her crush was a one-sided affair. But when he'd seen them the night before the battle, the two of them had been much closer. After facing so many hardships together, it seemed their bond had grown. Their relationship had progressed to the point where another push from Shea would be enough to get Hajime to fall for her.

And so, Cam hoped that by provoking Altina into trying something drastic, it would nudge Shea into taking that final step. Of course he knew that were his daughter to ever find out she'd be furious with him, but he still wanted to support her.

Seeing as he'd succeeded in riling Altina up, Cam chuckled to himself. The fact that he was willing to use an innocent maiden's first love—even if she wasn't aware of her own feelings—to further his own agenda proved that he was every bit the devil his boss was.

Just then, the three of them heard a commotion outside. It was different from the usual tumult of people working; something strange was clearly going on. In fact, some people were even yelling.

"What's going on!?"

Ulfric ran over to the window and looked outside. Seconds later, he realized what the source of the commotion was.

"A pillar... of light?" A beam of light far brighter than any the sun could produce rained down from above the trees and illuminated Verbergen's main square. Ulfric stared in awe, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. Behind him, Cam reassured him in a calm and arrogant voice,

“Don’t worry, Ulfric. That light means Boss’s here.”

The intense beam of light shining down on the city square was Fernir’s searchlight. Verbergen’s residents scurried away from the light as fast as they could. Once they were safely under the cover of darkness they looked up timidly to see what was going on. The soldiers gingerly unsheathed their weapons, determined to die in the defense of their homeland.

Hajime’s massive airship descended on the now-empty square, snapping branches and crushing leaves as it passed through the trees.

Naturally, none of the beastmen knew what an airship was, so they were worried that some new kind of monster had showed up in their midst. Hajime slowly lowered the gondola attached to Fernir to the ground, then with a shower of red sparks, separated it from the main ship. He then landed the airship itself next to the gondola.

After seeing that, the citizens of Verbergen realized they weren’t dealing with a monster. But then what were they dealing with? And what did it want with them?

Even if it wasn’t a monster, there was still plenty of reason to be afraid. All of Verbergen’s residents nervously watched Fernir to see what would happen next.

After a brief pause, there was a loud clang, and the front and back of the gondola slid open. Everyone shrunk back, including the soldiers. Their ears stood on end, and every beastman with a tail had it tucked firmly between their legs.

As the citizens watched, a single figure stepped out of the gondola’s dark depths. Naturally it was no monster, but a timid-looking rabbitman. Her ears drooped a little as she saw everyone staring at her with grim expressions on their faces.

That was the kind of reaction most people expected from a rabbitman, not the boundless bravado shown by the headhunting Haulia. Once they realized they weren’t up against an unknown monster, the residents of Verbergen relaxed somewhat. After a few more seconds, it finally hit them.

“They really came back...” Someone muttered.

Many of the residents still hadn’t been fully convinced, but now they realized that their dreams had really come true. Starting with the rabbitman, former beastmen slaves started pouring out of the gondola. They were finally able to step foot on the homeland they had thought lost to them forever.

As they walked out into the square, they examined their surroundings in disbelief. It still didn’t feel real to them. But it was the same crisp air they’d used to breathe, the same trees that had given them a sense of security, the same nostalgic lamps that lit the streets, and the same friends and family they thought they’d never see again.

Their surroundings forced them to accept that this was reality. They’d really come home. The residents of Verbergen were just as amazed. A woman in her mid-thirties timidly stepped forward, her dog ears drooping. With tears in her eyes, she called out to one of the young dogboys that had exited the gondola.

Upon hearing his name, he looked up, and tears sprang to his eyes. He was the same boy that Kouki had tried to save back at the capital. He ran over to the woman and screamed.

“Mom!”

The woman knelt down and scooped the boy up into her arms. She hugged him tight, as if trying to make sure he was really there, and not just an illusion. The two of them wept openly, rejoicing at this reunion they thought would never come.

That seemed to be the signal for everyone else, and beastmen from both sides rushed toward each other, crying tears of joy. Friends, family, lovers—each time a group was reunited, another deafening cheer rang out. The streets of Verbergen were more lively than ever. Rarely had this tranquil capital been the sight of such boisterous cheering.

Amidst the chaos, Hajime and the others descended Fernir’s ramp. When the elders spotted them coming out, they all rushed toward Hajime at once.

“Hajime Nagumo... you really know how to make an entrance.”

“Ulfric. Yeah, that probably just made more work for you, huh. Sorry about

that.”

Ulfric smiled wanly as he looked up at the broken tree branches Fernir had left in its wake. Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly and apologized.

Using so much mana had left him drained, and unable to control Fernir as precisely as he would have liked. That being said, walking all the way back or sending all of the freed beastmen back in groups through portals both would have taken more time, and been more of a pain. Especially since Verbergen was difficult to locate. Hajime had only known where it was because he’d given Cam an Artifact that broadcasted its coordinates at all times. Naturally this meant he’d been planning on landing Fernir inside the city the whole time. Despite his apology, he’d done this on purpose.

In some ways, he was a little insane. After all, when he’d first visited the city he’d found it unbelievably beautiful. Yet he had no compunction about destroying its scenery for the sake of convenience. Though for once, it appeared he did at least feel somewhat remorseful. He turned bashfully to Kaori and asked for help.

“Sorry Kaori, but could you fix this up for me?”

“Thank goodness. It looks like you haven’t gone completely insane yet.”

Wait, did she just casually insult me? Hajime was surprised by her shift in personality, but he didn’t want to get burned so he didn’t mention it. *And is it just my imagination, or are Yue and the others snickering too?* Kaori raised her hand toward the shattered foliage and spoke a single word.

“Tetragrammaton!”

Tetragrammaton was a spell that restored any object to its original state. In seconds, the bent and broken trees had returned to their original shape. No matter how many times Hajime saw it, he couldn’t help but be amazed by the spell.

Furthermore, Kaori truly did look divine, wrapped in glowing silver mana. It rose up from her in a spiral, that ascended past the trees and high into the sky.

“Whoa, our Kaori-sama just performed another miracle!”

“All hail Kaori-sama, Verbergen’s goddess!”

The beastmen started cheering for Kaori. Some of them even knelt before her, tears streaming from their eyes.

“Stop! Please, don’t look at me like that! I don’t want to be worshiiped!” Kaori ran from beastman to beastman, forcibly hauling each one to their feet.

“It appears yet another goddess has been born. I must say, it’s quite a surprise to see so many new deities popping up on the continent where only a single god is meant to be worshiped. First Aiko-dono, now Kaori.”

Hajime couldn’t tell if Tio was moved, or just nonplussed. She was the one who’d obliterated the head temple along with Aiko after all. On the other hand, Yue stroked her chin and made a comment.

“Mmm... So this is how you’re going to pick a fight with god. I like your style, Hajime.”

“Thanks, Yue. You know, I feel like something like this happened back in Ankaji too.”

“Oh yeah, I remember. The citizens made a ‘Kaori-sama fan club’ or something.”

Said fan club’s present president was the duke of Ankaji’s son. He was probably fervently praying for a chance to meet Kaori again.

“Kaori’s... really grown.”

“You sound like her mom, Shizushizu. Also don’t you think it’s kind of dirty for Kaorin to gain fame for fixing things Nagumo-kun himself broke?”

Suzu pointed out the harsh truth to Shizuku, who was starting to get emotional. *She’s got a point!* Kouki and Ryutarou thought simultaneously. Though the beastmen were supposed to be nonreligious, it really did seem like they would soon convert to the church of Kaori. Amidst the chaos, Altina came up to Ulfric and whispered,

“Grandfather, Isn’t it about time we...”

Altina nodded to the last party descending Fernir’s ramp—Gahard, Liliana, and her royal entourage. Of the three, Gahard was unrecognizable because of

the mask he was wearing. In order to prevent any information on Verbergen from being leaked to the empire, Hajime had made him a golden mask—in the same power rangers style as he had the others—that blocked out all light and sound.

Though his face wasn't visible, Altina could tell that he and Liliana were both high-ranking nobility just from their attire, and the fact that they had attendants following them. Since Cam's claim all the slaves had been freed proved to be true, the elders realized his insistence that he'd forced the emperor to surrender must have been the truth as well. And so, while Gahard looked like nothing more than a masked pervert, they were able to guess he was indeed the emperor.

All of Verbergen's leaders had been informed of Gahard's arrival, but none of the citizens had. They had feared that someone might try to kill the emperor had they made that information public. Especially now that he'd arrived in this ridiculous mask. Verbergen's citizens would probably think he was trying to make fun of them. The last thing Verbergen's elders wanted was the emperor dead. Even if they despised him, they needed him alive and bound to the Haulia's contract if they wished for peace with the empire.

It was also for that reason that Altina was in a hurry to get Gahard out of the public eye. Though her worries weren't nearly as great as her confusion. *Why on earth is the emperor wearing such a ridiculously colored mask?* Next to her, Shizuku twitched. As the infamous pink ranger, seeing that mask brought back unpleasant memories.

"Hmm, I suppose you're right. Hajime Nagumo, no, Nagumo-dono. Cam has already explained the situation to me. Though I find it hard to believe, it appears our brethren have truly been freed from the empire's grasp. As Verbergen's representative, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"You're thanking the wrong guy. It's the Haulia who did this, not me. Try not to forget that, will you?"

Hajime casually waved off Ulfric's thanks as he put both Fernir and the gondola into his Treasure Trove. The beastmen who'd been busy celebrating blinked in surprise as two massive objects vanished right before their eyes. They

then focused their attention on the group the elders were talking to, Hajime and the others.

“I can’t tell if you’re trying to be humble, or really speaking the truth. Regardless, it’s not like you,” Ulfric replied with a wry smile.

“At any rate, I understand. I’ll give my thanks to the Haulia. Though I find it hard to believe that the weakest of all races, the rabbitmen, were able to defeat the empire... I suppose if you live long enough you really do live to see everything. This is certainly a historic moment for Verbergen.”

Ulfric turned to his people and declared that it was the Haulia who’d defeated the empire and rescued everyone’s friends and family. Upon learning who their saviors were, the residents all turned to Cam, who was standing next to Ulfric. They were looking at him not with scorn, but with the unique mixture of respect and awe reserved for heroes.

Even though the Haulia had been forced to flee from their home, lost many of their brethren, had been exiled from Verbergen upon their return, and had been considered traitors by most residents of the city, now they were being treated like heroes. Shea felt an swell of emotion as she watched her dad bask in the cheers of the people. She was so happy, and so proud. As tears pooled in the corner of her eyes, she felt someone take hold of her hand.

“Yue-san...”

“Mmm...”

Yue didn’t say anything. But just holding Shea’s hand was enough to convey her feelings. Shea turned to Yue and saw her looking back with a more gentle expression than she ever had before. Her bunny ears hopped back and forth.

“Why not stand with him?” Hajime said casually.

Even though she’d started out as a worthless rabbit, she’d conquered numerous labyrinths alongside Hajime. The number of trials she’d faced were far greater than anyone here. She had just as much right to be hailed a hero as her father did. *Show them how far the girl they called a monster’s come*, his gaze seemed to say.

His supportive attitude came as such a shock to Kouki, Shizuku, and Liliana

that their jaws dropped open. They'd never seen Hajime act that kind to anyone other than Yue. Upon seeing his expression Kaori grumbled to herself and lapsed into thought, while Tio looked on happily and muttered "Oho." Heartened by her comrades' support, Shea smiled and said "I'll be going then!" She boldly strode forward and stood next to her father.

However, to her surprise, Cam ignored her. He seemed to be pondering something as he observed the expressions of his fellow beastmen. After a few seconds, a crafty grin spread across his face. He raised his right hand high, and in an instant, there were Haulia all around the square. There was no visible cover nearby, and it looked as if they'd popped out of thin air. They lined up in front of Cam and stood at parade rest. All around, the residents started muttering to each other.

"Whoa, where'd they come from!?" "How'd we miss them!?" "Hiii not them! Someone get me my medicine!"

"H-Huh? Dad? What are you—"

"Listen up, my brethren!"

Shea trudged back to Hajime and the others, a dejected expression on her face.

"I knew it. I knew dad would ignore me right when it mattered most," she muttered sadly.

Hajime and Yue stroked her ears and comforted her. Cam didn't even seem to notice Shea's sad expression as he glared sharply at the people of Verbergen—specifically the rabbitmen.

"For centuries have we been scorned, humiliated and disparaged. Hear me! For the first time in history, we were able to defeat the empire. But know that no peace lasts forever. Before long, your futures will be threatened once more."

The hundreds of rabbitmen in the crowd started shivering in fear. They looked to Cam in supplication, begging him to prevent those horrible days from ever returning.

"And once it is, your lives will go back to the miserable existences they were until yesterday. And that's not all. Next time, your friends and family who

escaped will be captured too.”

This time all of the beastmen looked down in worry.

“Are you willing to accept that?”

Of course not! They thought simultaneously. No one wanted to return to those days where they’d been beaten and humiliated on a daily basis, where they’d had their pride stepped on over and over. Nor did they want any of their fellow beastmen to taste that same pain. But what could they hope to do about it? Seeing everyone’s downtrodden expressions, Cam raised his voice and continued.

“Of course you’re not! So the question is, what are you gonna do about it? The answer’s simple. If you want to protect the people close to you... then fight. If you’re tired of just resigning yourself to your fates... then stand and fight. If you want to change the way the rabbitmen are treated... then fill your heart with rage! That’s what we Haulia did! Rabbitmen are *not* the weakest! So long as you have the resolve, you can grow as strong as you want! We’re living proof of that!”

Someone in the audience gasped. Everyone was once again reminded of the fact that their savior hadn’t been some special, all-powerful being, but one of their very own clans. One by one, the rabbitmen lifted their heads.

“Remember the humiliation you suffered at the empire’s hands. Don’t just take it lying down! Protect those you love with your own two hands! If you have time to lament your fate, then spend that time sharpening your fangs! Light a fire in your heart and *fight!*”

The faintest glimmers of hope began to shine in the eyes of the rabbitmen. Their drooping ears stood on end, as if they’d been imbued with new life. Cam’s lips curled up into a grin.

“If you don’t know how to fight, we’ll teach you. If you have the will to resist, if you desire power, come to us. The Haulia will welcome you with open arms!”

With that, Cam ended his speech. The Haulia lined up in front of him all smiled fearlessly. Their eyes seemed to be silently inviting the others to join them. Cam gave a second hand signal. Like ninjas, the Haulia dispersed and

vanished into the darkness.

Upon seeing such an impressive display, the rabbitmen in the crowd grew even more determined. A few of the younger ones looked ready to run out and join the Haulia this instant.

Cam chuckled to himself. *Perfect, now we've got more fresh recruits! Once they've signed up, I won't let any of them escape. They'll be stuck in boot camp hell until they're one of us!*

"Sorry for interrupting your conversation, Boss. This was just the perfect opportunity to scout out some new talent."

"I-I see. I don't really mind, but..."

Hajime trailed off. For some reason, the thought of the Haulia propagating didn't sit well with him. Even though the root cause of the Haulia's transformation was him, he didn't necessarily want Haltina to become filled with bloodthirsty rabbits. Cold sweat poured down his back as he realized far too late what kind of monsters he'd unleashed into the sea of trees.

"And so, the kind rabbits of the forest went extinct..."

"Please don't say that, Yue-san! As a member of the original Haulia, I won't be able to show my face here if that really happens!" Shea screamed in despair.

In the near future, the kind and timid rabbits of Haltina would most likely be replaced by wild, aggressive rabbits who loved nothing more than beheading people. If anyone ever asked her in the afterlife "Who was the one who turned the rabbitmen into killing machines!?" she would have no choice but to say: "My husband and my dad."

Her embarrassment was certainly understandable.

"Mmm. At any rate, we should probably head inside. Altina, if you would be so kind as to guide us."

Ulfric was just as terrified of the Haulia multiplying as Hajime, but he managed to put the thought out of his mind and returned to the matter at hand. His composure was commendable. While the other elders, especially the bearman elder, looked ready to faint, he alone maintained the presence of

mind to lead everyone back on topic. There was a reason he was the eldest of the elders.

“This way, Nagumo-dono. I’ll take you to the conference hall. Come, follow me.”

For some reason, Altina smiled and held her hand out to Hajime. She’d fallen for Cam’s taunts hook, line, and sinker. Naturally, Shea stepped in and slapped Altina’s hand out of the way.

The two of them locked eyes. Sparks flew between the two of them.

“Thanks so much for guiding *us* Altina-san.”

Shea smiled at Altina. It was a warm smile, befitting of a rabbitman of Haltina. However, her bunny ears betrayed what she was really feeling. They were projected outward in an attempt to intimidate Altina.

“No problem, Shea-san. But the crowd’s rather dense, so I think it would be best if we held hands. It wouldn’t do to get separated, would it?”

Altina smiled back. It was a warm smile, befitting of a princess of Haltina. However, her pointed ears betrayed what she was really feeling. They were twitching rapidly in protest.

Everything’s going according to plan. Cam grinned to himself, something Hajime didn’t miss. He guessed what was going on, and gave Cam a smirk that could cause nightmares. A torrent of cold sweat poured down Cam’s forehead, and his grin vanished. He gave Cam the evil eye, and pointedly took Shea’s hand.

“Ah...” she gasped. A second later a smile split her face and she hugged Hajime’s arm.

Surprised, Altina looked up at Hajime. His gaze was colder than ice. He didn’t seem the least bit happy that a beautiful girl like her was trying to flirt with him. “Just take us to the conference hall already,” his eyes said.

Crestfallen, Altina dejectedly led them out of the square. She’d known from the start that she had no chance against Shea, who’d gone through all sorts of hardships together with Hajime, but she’d still wanted to have hope. And

Hajime had crushed that hope so ruthlessly that everyone aside from Yue gave him a somewhat reproachful look. While they didn't want any more girls vying for his affection, they still thought he could have been nicer about it.

When they arrived at the hall, the elders took their customary seats at the head of the room. Cam and a few of the Haulia sat across from them. They sandwiched Gahard between themselves, and Hajime, who'd sat to their right. It was only when the emperor himself confirmed that he had indeed surrendered to the Haulia and agreed to their demands that the elders finally had to admit this was all real. They all reacted to this historic event in different ways. Some howled with joy, others looked up at the roof, while yet others covered their eyes and sighed deeply.

One of the elders, the tigerman Zel, narrowed his eyes and glared at Gahard. He didn't like how the emperor was still smiling fearlessly despite being smack in the middle of enemy territory.

"For a defeated emperor, you sure look pleased with yourself. Do you even realize how much most of the people here despise you? You don't honestly think we'll let you go home in one piece, do you?"

Zel's pupils narrowed to slits, and he made no effort to hide his hatred. Bloodlust oozed from his every pore. Most of the other elders and beastmen soldiers in the room were the same. Gahard was their sworn enemy. It was impossible for them to stay calm in this situation. However, Gahard didn't seem the least bit perturbed by their glares.

"Of course I do. There's no way you'd dare to kill me. Unless you're all just a pack of morons anyway."

"What was that, you bastard!?"

Ulfric held out a hand to hold Zel back.

"Calm yourself, Zel. I understand full well how you must be feeling. But remember, the reason the Haulia brought Gahard here was to prove to us that his oaths are as binding as they claim. If we kill him here, the victory the Haulia risked their lives for will become meaningless."

“Grr...”

Zel’s face twisted in frustration, and he slammed a fist into the ground. Gahard simply harrumphed in response. The atmosphere in the room was quickly becoming dangerous. In an attempt to smooth things over Ulfric gave Gahard a warning.

“Gahard, you will afford us the proper respect. Or else we may have to become the morons you claim we are. Many of the people here are having a difficult enough time holding their emotions in check as is. Know that that is the extent of the pain you caused us.”

Ulfric’s voice was even, but his words carried weight. Enough weight to wipe the smirk off Gahard’s face. He had lived longer than any other beastman in the room. That also meant that he’d experienced the most pain, the most suffering, the most anger, and the most hatred.

Gahard stretched his legs lazily and observed Ulfric for a time. Finally, he straightened his posture and spoke.

“If you want my respect, then draw your sword.”

Ulfric looked at him suspiciously, and Gahard explained,

“I, along with everyone else in the empire, only pay respect to the strong. If you don’t like my attitude, then make me obey by force. Petty words alone mean nothing to the emperor of Hoelscher.”

Gahard felt absolutely no remorse about enslaving beastmen. Unlike Heiligh, he didn’t look down on them because they were an inferior race that couldn’t use magic and had been abandoned by god. Nor did he have any issue with their bestial nature. He simply looked down upon them because he considered them weak.

“I didn’t lose to the beastmen of Verbergen. And so, I have no obligation to show you any respect. The ones who risked their lives to defeat me are the Haulia, and the Haulia alone! It’s only their strength that I recognize!”

Gahard’s spirited shout sent tremors across the room. His stare clashed with Ulfric’s, and invisible sparks danced through the air. The tension in the room was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The two of them were engaging in a

silent battle of wills. In the end, the one who broke this strained silence was none other than Hajime.

“Oi, Gahard. You’re making everything a huge pain, so you can go back now.”

“Huh?” As always, he didn’t even bother trying to read the atmosphere.

Ulfric looked at Hajime in confusion, while a suspicious frown formed on Gahard’s face. Ignoring Kouki and Liliana’s incredulous looks, Hajime grabbed Gahard by the scruff of his neck and opened a portal in front of him using spatial magic. Beyond the portal, the familiar landscape of the imperial capital was visible.

“H-Hey! You’re not really gonna just throw me outta here are you!? Wasn’t this supposed to be a historic meeting between our two countries!? I can’t believe I’m the one saying this, but read the damn atmosphere for once!”

“Like I give a shit. I only brought you here so you could testify to the elders. I’m not here to babysit your meeting. I was gonna have to send you back eventually anyway, so there’s no point in waiting.” Hajime didn’t bother waiting for a reply, and further drove his point home.

“You guys have had different values and been at odds with each other for centuries... It’s not like a single talk’s going to make all the bitterness and resentment magically go away. Or are your feelings really that shallow?”

In truth, Gahard and the elders’ discussion was going nowhere. They wanted him to show remorse, or at least promise to change his ways, while he continued to assert the righteousness of his doctrine to the bitter end. They were two parallel lines that would never cross. It would take a number of long conversations by level-headed leaders on both sides to work through the massive gulf between races, governments, and ideologies. And Hajime had no interest in sticking around to wait for them. Like Gahard had said, it was the Haulia who had defeated him, not Ulfric and the others. He was only here to corroborate their story as per his contract. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Ngh, you do have a point, but...”

“And so, I’m gonna send you back before you start a fight.”

“You bastard, don’t treat me like some rebellious kid! Hey, stop pulling! Let

me go!”

Hoelscher’s emperor struggled with all his might, but he was no match for the inhuman strength of Hajime’s artificial arm.

“Nagumo-san, that’s the *Emperor* you’re holding by the scruff of his neck. You shouldn’t treat him like that~”

“Why do you look so happy about this, Princess Liliana!?”

Liliana remonstrated Hajime in a singsong voice; she clearly wasn’t the least bit mad about his treatment of Gahard.

“Even an emperor’s just a kid to Nagumo-san~ I’m not the only one he treats like that~” Liliana hummed softly to herself in an impromptu tune. Were she to give a name to this new song, she would have called it “Comrades in arms.”

“Lily... Oh, you poor thing.”

“Hajime-kun, you could at least be a little nicer to Lily!”

Shizuku dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, while Kaori tearfully pleaded with Hajime. Unable to watch their princess, Helina and Heiligh’s royal guards turned away. Reality was too cruel to their poor mistress.

Even Yue felt so bad for Liliana that she tried to heal the princess with spirit magic. One of spirit magic’s signature spells was one that stabilized a person’s mental state. A sympathetic golden light washed over Liliana. However, it appeared to have no effect, and she continued singing her deranged song.

Desperate, Tio tried to help with her own spirit magic. It was just as ineffective, however. The princess had been scarred deeper than anyone expected. Even Gahard gave her a pitying look. He then turned to Hajime and said,

“See, look. It’s because you don’t treat royalty with the respect they deserve that your princess ended up like this. Now hurry up and let me down—”

“Not my problem,” Hajime replied bluntly. Then, without warning, he threw Gahard through the gate.

“I won’t forget this, Hajime Nagumoooooooooo!” Gahard yelled as he vanished. Hajime’s irreverent treatment of Gahard had given Verbergen’s elders

a vicarious sense of satisfaction, temporarily satiating their desire for revenge. Kouki was the first to realize this, and he leaned close to Ryutarou and muttered,

“Don’t tell me this was his plan from the start?”

“Nah, I think that’s just how he is.”

“I’m with Ryutarou-kun on this one.”

Though neither Ryutarou nor Suzu agreed with him, Kouki still wasn’t convinced. It was only when Hajime then tried to throw the still humming Liliana through the same gate that Kouki was forced to admit defeat.

Fortunately for Liliana, she narrowly managed to convince Hajime that she still had unfinished work here and that he couldn’t send her back just yet.

Like she did with Gahard, Liliana explained to Verbergen’s elders what had happened in the kingdom along with the truth about Ehit. She then went on to discuss what kind of relationship she wanted to have with Verbergen in the future. While the kingdom hadn’t kept slaves like the empire, it was only because they’d considered beastmen subhuman. Naturally, the beastmen were aware of that too, and it made it difficult for talks to proceed smoothly. However, the beastmen still had less hatred for Heiligh than they had for Hoelscher, meaning they were at least willing to hear Liliana out.

“Haaah, fine. We’ll go exploring Verbergen for a bit, so just find me once you’re done talking. And don’t cause any trouble, Princess. If you make a scene, I’ll throw you back to Heiligh on the spot.”

“Nagumo-san, I’d like to remind you once again that I *am* the kingdom’s princess.”

“And?”

“Yes yes, I already know you don’t even care about status or royalty. It’s my fault for expecting anything different from you. Fufu, I guess you just throw princesses back into their castles on a daily basis. Ahahaha.”

Liliana was obviously sulking. It would be a difficult road, conveying the love that had blossomed during the ball. In an attempt to cheer Liliana up, Helina

brought her one of her signature teas, while Shizuku and Kaori comforted her.

Meanwhile, Kouki and Liliana's guards glared at Hajime, but he ignored them.

In truth, Hajime had long since guessed Liliana's feelings for him. He'd had to have been colossally dense not to figure it out after the dance. But he had no desire to nurture those feelings, so instead of treating her with halfhearted kindness he just cut her off at every turn. Whether that was because he was loyal to Yue, or just because he was cold by nature was anyone's guess.

He sighed wearily to himself and turned to Cam.

"Cam, it looks like the princess wants to keep talking with the elders, but what about you guys? If you're not planning on staying, could you guide me back to your village? Driving Fernir across half a continent with thousands of people on board was exhausting. I want to rest for a bit."

"Hmm. Well you will be challenging the labyrinth starting tomorrow, so rest certainly would be a good idea. We'll take you back, Boss."

Cam still had to take care of inaugurating all the new recruits and leading the Haulia left in Verbergen, so he decided to have one of his men guide Hajime and the others. But before he could snap his fingers and call his subordinates from the shadows, he was stopped by Ulfric.

"Please wait, Nagumo-dono. We have yet to repay you for all you've done for us. Would you mind staying here just a while longer?"

"Like I said, thank the Haulia, not me. They're the ones who did this."

"Naturally I intend to reward them as well. However, that doesn't change the fact that we owe you a great debt. We wouldn't be able to live with ourselves if we didn't at least do *something*."

"I mean if you want to believe you owe me, you're welcome to think that, but... There really isn't anything I need right now."

"Mmm... Then at the very least, let us provide you lodging and food while you're here... Would that be acceptable?"

Hajime shot a questioning glance back at Yue and the others. None of them seemed to mind, and Shizuku and Suzu looked like they wanted to stay and

explore the beautiful capital filled with fluffy beastmen. All the other elders seemed like they were fine with it as well. In fact, they showed none of the hostility that they had to Gahard, or any of the wariness they were showing Liliana. When it came to Hajime, it seemed all of the elders loved him. From the bottoms of their hearts, they seemed to sincerely want Hajime to stay.

Looking at it objectively, Hajime had rescued countless beastmen, had healed all of their injuries and even repaired their city. Furthermore, so long as none of the beastmen opposed him, he wouldn't hurt any of them. Compare to when he'd first met the elders, they had a lot more reasons to like him. However, Hajime hadn't done any of this to earn their goodwill, so it made the situation a little awkward. Still, he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"If that's what you want, then I guess we can stick around," Hajime said with a shrug.

Ulfric breathed sigh of relief, then turned to Cam.

"Now then, Cam. Though you were exiled from Verbergen, you saved our capital, and then went on to defeat the empire and force them to return our enslaved brethren. These are debts that must be repaid. To begin, I would like you to know that the elders have unanimously agreed to rescind the Haulia's exile. That was decided in the meeting following the demons' attack. You and your clan are free to visit Verbergen as you please. If you so desire, we would even be willing to create a residential quarter for your kin."

To think the elders would actually reverse their old decision, Hajime thought with some surprise, I guess that's just how big Cam's achievements were.

However, Cam's response was surprisingly lackluster. "I see," was all he said flatly. He didn't seem particularly happy about no longer being exiled.

Ulfric cleared his throat awkwardly and went on to list the other rewards Verbergen's elders had decided to bestow upon the Haulia.

"Furthermore, I would like to propose that the council open a new seat to be filled by the current head of the Haulia, Cam Haulia, as a reward for his meritorious service. Do the other elders agree?"

The other beastmen in the room looked at Ulfric in shock. For the past few

centuries, the number of elders and the clans from which those elders were chosen had remained unchanged. The elves, tigermen, bear-men, foxmen, dwarves, and harpies were the six most prominent beastmen races, and the ones from which elders had traditionally been chosen. For the rabbitmen to be included into the council of elders would be a historically unprecedented honor.

The other elders conferred with themselves for a few seconds, then nodded to each other and unanimously confirmed Ulfric's proposition.

"Well, there you have it, Cam. Will you accept this seat on the council?"

"Absolutely not."

"...What?"

The elders' jaws dropped open. Considering the festive atmosphere, they'd all been accepting Cam to agree. But he refused without a second thought. It made no sense to the elders.

"May I ask why?"

Ulfric quickly recovered. He kept his voice level even as he wondered why anyone would want to refuse the greatest honor a beastman could be awarded.

"It's not really a question of why. In the first place, you guys seem to be under a fundamental misconception about our position."

"And what would that be?"

"You probably think our goal was to save all the beastmen, but that was just an unintended consequence of our true aim. The reason we attacked the empire was to save our brethren, the other rabbitmen. In all honesty, I could care less about all the other beastmen."

"What did you just say?"

The elders looked at Cam in disbelief.

"Don't get the wrong idea here. We Haulia aren't your allies. If you let our victory get to your head and start thinking you might stand a chance against the empire yourselves, our next targets will be you. We won't allow you to act recklessly and cause us or our boss any trouble."

That wasn't a threat. It was a mere statement of fact. Cam's tone made it clear he really would raze Verbergen if he felt it necessary. After all, if the other beastmen did something to Gahard or his family, it would destroy everything Cam and the Haulia had fought for. Without their contract with the empire, all that awaited the rabbitmen was a dark future. And while Cam's decision was a rational one, the blunt way in which he said it made it difficult for Verbergen's elders to swallow.

"Y-You would turn your blades on your own people!? Are you insane!?"

"Hmph, you other beastmen persecuted us rabbitmen as much as the empire did. Don't try and pretend like we're old friends. Well you can if you want, but it won't change anything. Point is, we fight only for the sake of securing a better future for rabbitmen. You'd do well to remember that."

Cam resolutely stared down Ulfric and the others. At the same time, he gave the Haulia behind him a thumbs-up over his shoulder, as if to say "I sure told them!" His subordinates returned his thumbs-up and grinned in satisfaction. They were all thinking the same thing. *Don't think you can trick us into joining your council and then use our strength however you please, you damn cowards!*

Part of the reason Ulfric had invited Cam was because he *had* wanted to add the Haulia's strength to Verbergen, so he couldn't deny it.

Meanwhile, the people around Hajime all simultaneously turned to glare at him. Cam's statement bore a striking resemblance to Hajime's ideology of protecting what was important to him and ignoring everything else.

"You make it sound as if the rabbitmen are walking down a different path than other beastmen."

"I'm glad you're so quick on the uptake, Ulfric. That's exactly it. From now on, rabbitmen will only be following their own rules. We have no interest in joining with Verbergen, and thus being subjected to the nation's laws and regulations."

Short-tempered as always, Zel bristled at Cam's haughty remarks. He didn't take kindly to Cam's dismissal of Verbergen and the elders. Cam maintained a neutral expression, but the Haulia behind him responded to Zel's physical posturing by attempting to intimidate him in kind. Ulfric, who'd been thinking to himself this whole time, sighed wearily and gave Cam a look similar to the

one he'd given Hajime when they'd first met.

"In that case, Cam. How about we recognize the Haulia as a tribe equal in status to the nation of Verbergen? Naturally, you will retain your right to claim a position on the council if you so wish. This way, you won't be obligated to follow Verbergen's customs, or any of the council's decrees. On top of that, you'll still be able to influence our policies."

"Hoho... Now that doesn't sound to bad." Cam's grin made it clear that he'd been hoping Ulfric would say that. In truth, he'd wanted an alliance with Verbergen in order to prepare for the eventual, inevitable invasion from the empire. However, had they joined Verbergen as just part of the council, they would have been bound by the city's laws and unable to move as freely as they wished. They could have of course ignored the council's decrees and done as they pleased anyway, but that would just destroy their relationship with Verbergen. That was why Cam had believed his best options were to either form an alliance on equal grounds, or remain a separate, neutral entity.

Naturally, Ulfric's proposal was met by complaints from the other elders. They thought he was giving the Haulia far too preferential treatment. In response, Ulfric just sighed and stated the fact to them.

"They defeated the empire on their own. Verbergen would never be able to manage that even if we mustered every soldier we could. I'd say that's a good enough reason to treat them as equals, wouldn't you? Besides, if we do nothing we'll lose any connections to the Haulia that we might have had. I'm sure you all aren't so foolish as to see how harmful that would be to us. If we welcome them as allies, we'll be able to reforge the bond of trust that was lost when we first exiled them. These concessions are a paltry price to pay, considering what they've done for us."

The elders grit their teeth in frustration, but none of them could come up with a valid argument against Ulfric's reasoning, or a better alternative. So in the end, they swallowed their pride and agreed to Ulfric's proposal.

"There you have it, Cam. As the council agrees, we will henceforth welcome you as an allied clan. I trust you have no objections?"

"Well whether you'd agreed to recognize our independence or not, we would

have done what we wanted regardless. Still, we're fine with that. Oh yeah, we're claiming the land around the Grand Tree and the patch of forest to its south as Haulia territory. So from now on, don't let anyone go there without permission. We can't guarantee the safety of any trespassers."

Cam really didn't know when to quit. On top of everything else, he was now claiming land for his new nation. Even Ulfric couldn't help but twitch a little at that.

Next to Hajime, Shea buried her face in her hands. Her father's arrogance was an embarrassment. Her rabbit ears folded over themselves in an attempt to block out his words.

After a few more rounds of negotiations, Ulfric and Cam finally came to a settlement they could agree on. Hajime left the exhausted elders to work out the details of the alliance and went to see what his accommodations in Verbergen were like.

As he left the conference hall, he found the citizens still reveling in the streets. Finally free to explore the city as they wished, Kouki, Ryutarou, Shizuku, and Suzu all eagerly ran off into the crowd. It was the first time Hajime had seen them so cheerful in a while.

Hajime also thought he saw a group of crazed Kaori worshipers out of the corner of his eye, and he decided to give them a wide berth. Just in case, Kaori put on a pair of sunglasses Hajime had made for her, along with a ski mask and a knitted cap. For some reason, the unorthodox getup suited her well.

A few hours after that, Liliana finished up her talks and decided to go back to the kingdom. Recent events meant she had a lot of work waiting for her back home. The kingdom would need a new direction if it was to survive. Unfortunately for her, her return trip was as unceremonious as Gahard's. Originally Hajime had just opened up a gate and waited for her to walk through. However, she'd just stood nervously in front of it, fidgeting. She had obviously wanted to say something to Hajime, as evidenced by the cheers Helina and her guards sent her way. But he had no time for her crush, so Hajime had just thrown her in before she could do anything.

As she'd vanished through the portal Liliana had screamed, "I don't care if you

don't treat me like a princess, but at least treat me like a girl!" At the very least, it had sounded like she'd yelled that. Hajime preferred to believe he'd just imagined it though.

That night, Verbergen's celebration had dragged on, and the sounds of residents partying could still be heard despite the late hour. Meanwhile, Hajime, Yue, Kaori, and Tio were relaxing in the room they'd been given.

It was just the four of them, as their lively rabbitman companion was nowhere to be seen.

"Shea's late."

"Mmm... She said she was just going to visit her family, but..."

"Are the Haulia holding their own victory celebration?"

"Hrm. Well, I am certain there is no need to worry about Shea. Even if something were to happen, she would no doubt blow it away with her monstrous strength."

Hajime and the others nodded in wholehearted agreement. None of them looked too worried to begin with. Hajime was nodding off in Yue's lap, and was practically asleep already. In fact, he would have already been in dreamland, but for some reason something kept nagging at him. Not even Yue's lap pillow could calm him down.

Sensing his vague feelings of unease, Yue smiled and gently ran her fingers through his hair. Kaori and Tio shot her jealous looks, but before they could say anything, someone opened Hajime's window from outside.

"My apologies for intruding so late, Boss."

"What's up, Cam?"

Cam casually vaulted Hajime's window, which was a good ten meters off the ground. He then dropped to one knee and continued.

"Boss, I know you need your rest, but would you be willing to accompany me for a short while?"

"At this time of night?"

“Yes. Please.”

Hajime scrutinized Cam. It was rare for the rabbitman to be so curt, or so insistent. However he knew it wasn't an emergency, since Cam didn't seem the least bit flustered.

“Did you run into some kind of trouble? Do you want our help too?”

“No, that's not quite it.”

Cam smiled cryptically at Kaori. Realizing what this must be about, Yue nodded to herself and turned to Kaori and Tio.

“Kaori, Tio. Do you want to give Hajime a lap pillow?”

Her question caught them off-guard. *Why ask this now?* That being said, there could only be one answer.

“Really? You'll let us try too?”

“Hrm? Of course I wish to.”

Seeing their hopeful responses, Yue grinned and spoke up in a mocking tone.

“Just wanted to know.”

“.....” “.....”

Veins bulged on Kaori's and Tio's foreheads. The sight of Yue snickering at them irked them to no end. Then, as if to deliver the final blow, Yue hugged Hajime's head in a lavish display of affection.

“Are you trying to pick a fight, Yue?”

“Fufufu, I consider myself a tolerant person, but even I have my limits.”

“You wanna go?”

The two flared up at Yue's provocation, and they soon continued the fight they had began that afternoon. Incidentally, that afternoon's battle had ended in Yue and Shea's victory.

“If you can catch me, I'll let you sit next to Hajime for a day.”

“Really!?” “Do you... truly mean that?”

Yue didn't want to destroy Verbergen with an all-out fight, so she proposed a

game of tag instead. One with a very enticing reward for the victor. Kaori and Tio both felt adrenaline start pumping into their system.

After making sure they were engrossed in the challenge, she transferred Hajime's head to the pillow and stroked him one last time. She then hopped gracefully over to the window and did a pirouette as she landed. Hajime was still confused by this sudden development, but he realized what was going on when Yue gave Cam a surreptitious wink. While Hajime didn't know what to make of her "consideration," Cam clearly appreciated it. He bowed his head in thanks.

"Mmm... Let the game begin." With that, she shot out of the window and vanished into the starry night sky.

"Ngh, mark my words, I'll catch you this time!"

"Fufu, this is one challenge I have no intention of losing!"

Two spirited yells filled the room as Kaori summoned her glittering silver wings and Tio sprouted dragon wings from her back. The two of them leaped after Yue, but then simultaneously turned back. Kaori looked a little reluctant, while Tio winked casually at Hajime. Then, the two of them threw themselves into the case.

"Everyone sure likes Shea, huh?"

"As her father, I'm proud she's so cherished."

Hajime and Cam smiled at each other. Then Hajime followed Cam out of Verbergen and into the sea of trees... toward the old Haulia village.

A lone girl stared up at a large, gnarled tree. Its roots were so thick that they were bulging out of the ground. She neither moved nor spoke; just silently looked up at the tree. Her usual cheerful demeanor was nowhere to be seen.

From the side, her face had a mystical beauty to it, and the effect was heightened by her pale blue hair fluttering in the breeze. Anyone who saw her at this moment would undoubtedly be smitten.

That girl, Shea, felt someone approaching, but she didn't turn around. The newcomer seemed reluctant to break the silence, and he walked up to her as

quietly as possible.

“Hajime-san.”

“Yo.”

Shea casually called out to Hajime, so she’d obviously been expecting him.

He continued walking until he was shoulder to shoulder with her. And for a few minutes, the two of them just looked up at the tree in companionable silence. Finally, Shea opened her mouth.

“Did Dad bring you here?”

“Yeah. He already left though.”

“Fufufu, he’s more perceptive than he looks.”

As one might have guessed, Cam’s business with Hajime had been to bring him to Shea. Alone, if possible. Yue had guessed as much, hence why she’d challenged Kaori and Tio to that contest. It was the best way to get everyone else out of the way.

Of course, Kaori and Tio had figured it out right before they’d left too. However, they’d been willing to permit Shea some time alone with Hajime.

“Is this where your mom’s buried?”

“Yes. Under the roots of this tree.”

It was customary in Verbergen to bury the dead under the roots of trees. Supposedly that way they could once again become one with nature. Having fulfilled their purpose in life, beastmen were returned to the forest in death, so that they could create new life and ensure the continued prosperity of the woods. All beastmen respected the circle of life and death. The tree in front of Shea had a small gravestone marking the location she was buried.

“I wanted to be a hero.”

“Hm?” Hajime tilted his head quizzically.

However, Shea kept her gaze on the tree and continued.

“I wanted to be able to protect my family. I was tired of running and hiding all the time. If I became a hero, I could fight back anytime someone tried to take

away the people special to me. I could protect everyone.”

“.....”

“That was something Mom told me when I was young. No matter what happened to her, she always had the same determined passion.”

Even though she’d been a member of the weakest race, and ill to boot, Shea’s mom, Mona Haulia, had possessed an unshakeable will. It was why Shea had respected her so much.

“That explains how you ended up the way you did.”

“Ehehe!” Overjoyed, Shea finally turned to look at Hajime, who was staring respectfully at the tombstone.

Mona had wished for her daughter to grow up strong. And she had, in both body and mind. Shea hadn’t inherited just a powerful body, she had also inherited her mother’s unbreakable spirit. Even Hajime had to admit her determination was unbelievable.

Shea smiled bashfully and blushed. Then, she turned back to the massive tree and spoke.

“Mom, you were right. The world’s a harsh place, but sometimes it can be really nice to you. I finally found the person you said I would. I’ll introduce you to him. His name is Hajime Nagumo... and I love him very much.”

Mona had once told Shea that there were definitely people out there in the world who could understand her. And that when she met one of them, it would change her life. Even though Mona couldn’t see the future, her prediction had been one hundred percent accurate.

I guess I still have nothing on you, Mom. I wonder if I’ll ever manage to become as awesome as you? It would definitely take a lot of effort to get there. There was at least one thing she’d already achieved though.

“Oh yeah, Mom. Me, Dad, and all the other Haulia became heroes!” Shea wondered what kind of reaction her mom would have to that if she’d still been alive. Would she have smiled proudly at them, or scolded them for being so reckless?

She closed her eyes, losing herself in thoughts of her mom.

After a few seconds, Hajime spoke up.

“I’m grateful.”

“Huh? Hajime-san?” Shea opened her eyes and turned back to Hajime. He was still looking up at the tree, and Shea realized he was talking to her mom, not to her.

“When Yue and I crawled out of the abyss, we were ready to take on the world with just the two of us. Even if it meant we’d be alone forever, we were still determined to overcome everything fate might throw at us... But you know, if we’d kept going like that, life probably wouldn’t be as fun as it is now. The one who brought color to our dull journey, our empty hearts and our boring lifestyle was without a doubt, your daughter.”

“Hajime-san...”

Shea choked up. However, Hajime simply smiled softly and kept going.

“Thank you for bringing Shea into this world.”

Shea looked up at the sky. It was the only way she could keep the tears in her eyes from spilling out.

The two of them stood there in companionable silence, looking up at the great tree. Even the bewildering fog that normally confused interlopers seemed to be gently wrapping itself around them.

After a few minutes, Shea finally responded.

“Umm, Hajime-san?”

“Mmm?”

“Thank you. I don’t really know else to say it, but... really, thank you so much.”

There was so much she had to thank him for. For saving her family, for taking her along on his journey, for fighting an entire country for her sake. For entrusting his back to her, and bringing her along to even the most dangerous of trials. For trusting her so much. And finally, for spending time with her

together in front of her mother's grave.

Embarrassed by Shea's sincere gratitude, Hajime averted his gaze. It was unusual for anything to get to him.

"Yeah, you better be thankful. I'm still counting on you to help me with the remaining labyrinths."

"Fufu. Can't you just say 'you're welcome' like a normal person?" Shea snickered. However, her expression then grew serious and she posed a question.

"What will it take to repay you, Hajime-san?"

"You already thanked me, didn't you?"

"But those were just words. I want to do something meaningful for you. What can I do to make you happy? If it's for you, I'll do anything. I mean it..."

Her bunny ears twitched back and forth as she sidled up to Hajime. Her burning, passionate gaze made it clear what she was hoping to do. Hajime wasn't so dense that he didn't pick up on that, but his only response was to smile wanly and respond coyly.

"Just keep smiling like you always have, you airhead. It's thanks to you that we're always having so much fun."

"Jeez, why'd you have to add that airhead bit!? Besides, didn't you hug me and say you cared about me in front of the emperor? This is where you're supposed to jump on me and say 'Alright then, you can thank me with your body, Guhehe!' Can't you read the mood even a little!?"

"I think we need to have a talk about what exactly your mental image of me is."

"An earnest, spineless wimp."

"Can't we just cut it off at the earnest bit?" Shea puffed her cheeks out into a pout. She then hung her head, and her rabbit ears drooped over her face.

"Joking aside, I really do want to thank you. You've helped me so much, but I haven't done anything back for you. Both you and Yue-san keep saying it's fine as long as I keep smiling, but I just do that naturally because being with you

guys makes me happy. That's not really thanking you at all."

"I said it before didn't I, you've already done more than enough."

"Mrrr, that's not good enough. I want to do something tangible for you both. But no matter how hard I think, I can't come up with anything. And since you said you don't want my body... even though you said you cared about me..."

"Come on, stop sulking about that already..." Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly. He understood Shea's feelings, but he really did feel like she'd done more than enough for him already. She'd stubbornly stuck with the two of them, even when the journey got so harsh she was reduced to tears. And it was thanks to that Hajime and Yue hadn't been alone. If anything, he was the one who owed her. Still, he knew telling her that wouldn't change her mind.

"This would be so much easier if you just fell for me, Hajime-san. I'd service you every night... Haaah, oh well. I guess I'll just have to work even harder to pay you back during our journey."

"Yeah, I guess."

Shea shrugged her shoulders, and Hajime smiled awkwardly. She looked up at the sky again and saw a glimmer through the fog.

By sheer coincidence, the fog had grown thin in the area above them, and the light of the moon reflecting off the water drops in the air had become visible.

"Hajime-san, Hajime-san. Can you come with me for a second?"

"Hm? Sure."

Ears flapping wildly, Shea started leaping her way up the large tree. Hajime lithely followed after her, using the tree's hollows and branches as hand and footholds.

They kept going until they broke through the foliage at the top of the tree. Normally the top of a tree had only thin branches, but here a number of them had twined together to create a cavity sturdy enough to seat people.

"The reason we buried Mom here was because this was her favorite spot."

"I see, so this was like her secret base."

The two of them picked their way over to the natural sofa and sat down next to each other.

“Look up there, Hajime-san. You can see it pretty well tonight!”

“Hm? Whoa... This is... amazing.”

The fog above them had thinned out considerably. They could see the sea of clouds that lay beyond the mist. The fog was dense around where Hajime and Shea were sitting, but it thinned out sharply above that. What little remained reflected moonlight from all different angles, making it appear as if the veil of fog was shimmering. Seemed almost like someone had thrown a million jewels into a pure white sea.

“You barely ever get to see it this well. But this view used to be Mom’s favorite. We’re pretty lucky the fog was thin today.”

“Don’t give me that cliched crap.” Hajime was certain of it. Somewhere up from heaven, Shea’s mom had performed this miracle for her. It was her reward to her daughter for hanging in there so long. Hajime explained as much to Shea, and her bunny ears flapped back and forth in a mixture of embarrassment and joy.

For a long time, they just sat there and stared at the sparkling mist. Then suddenly, Hajime turned to Shea. Her hair was shining as brightly as the sky above. The pale blue strands fluttered in the wind and caught the moonlight perfectly. As he stared at her profile, Hajime idly thought back to when he’d hugged Shea and Yue in front of Gahard earlier. In truth, he’d done it almost unconsciously. But before he’d realized it, they were both in his arms.

He could still say with absolute confidence that Yue was the only one he thought of as “special.” But the reason he’d hugged Shea as well was most likely because— Hajime cut off his own train of thought and smiled forlornly to himself. He finally realized how selfish he was being.

Though he kept telling himself no one could be as important to him as Yue, he still wanted Shea all to himself. He had no idea when it had happened, but he knew now that he cared a lot more about Shea than he thought. Enough that he’d unconsciously hugged her alongside Yue.

While no one would ever matter more to him than Yue, he could no longer deny what he felt for Shea. And now that he'd admitted it to himself, he couldn't pretend he didn't have these feelings. In which case, shouldn't he at the very least treat her the way she wanted? After all, she'd worked so hard to stick with them, even when she'd barely had any strength at all.

"U-Umm, Hajime-san? Is something wrong? You've been staring at me so long it's getting kind of embarrassing..."

As Hajime returned to his senses he realized Shea was blushing and fidgeting awkwardly. Her bunny ears were drooping too, though they occasionally perked up in Hajime's direction every few seconds.

Hajime smiled and stretched out his hand. He reached over to Shea's ears and patted them gently.

"H-Hajime-san?"

"Hey, Shea. Can you do something for me?"

"You're... asking me for a favor? Of course! I'll do anything!"

Surprised, Shea still eagerly jumped at the opportunity to pay Hajime back.

"Uh, it's nothing that grand. I just want to lay down for a bit. Is it cool if I sleep on your lap?"

"You don't even have to ask. Here, you can use it whenever you want."

"Thanks."

Shea looked a little disappointed for a second, but then smiled and patted her thigh, inviting Hajime to lay down. Hajime smiled again and rested his head on her legs.

Since Shea was in a mini-skirt, as usual, his head was touching her bare thighs. Their warmth and softness enveloped the back of his head. A sweet scent, similar to the one Yue had, wafted across his nostrils.

"Fufu, I know Yue-san does this all the time, but I feel kind of bad for Kaori-san and Tio-san."

"It's just a lap pillow, you don't have to feel guilty about it or anything."

“Jeez, you can’t say stuff like that. Those two are working so hard to get you to fall for them, Hajime-san. A lap pillow, or even spending time alone together like this is really important to them. Really, why don’t you just give up and fall in love with them already?”

“I don’t suppose I could convince any of you to give up yourselves?”

“Nope~”

“Figures.”

Shea gently brushed Hajime’s hair. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of her fingers on his scalp. At the same time, he ran his fingers through Shea’s hair, as if to return the favor.

The moon shone bright overhead. Despite her happy-go-lucky attitude, the mysterious light of the moon suited her oddly well. The stronger its light, the brighter her hair and smiled shined. Anyone who saw her now would have fallen in love at first sight. The two of them snuggled closer, enveloped in a wreath of fog illuminated by the gentle light of the moon.

Had anyone seen them, they would have likely clutched their heart and gone HNNNNNNGH. That was just how cute they looked. In fact, right now the two of them were surrounded by an atmosphere similar to the one Hajime and Yue created when they were together.

Sadly, Shea herself didn’t realize that she’d finally achieved what she’d always watched jealously before. After all, she was still a worthless rabbit in the end. Regardless of whether or not she realized it though, the atmosphere was there. The two of them sat there like that until the thick fog rolled back in, and blotted out the sky of artificial stars.



Let us turn back time to a short while before Hajime threw Liliana back to Heiligh via his portal. Back when it was still evening, a good hour or so before dinner.

A single girl walked across the palace courtyard, toward the mess hall. She had chestnut-colored hair, slit-like eyes, and a brace of daggers hanging from her coat— Yuka Sonobe. After Eri's unexpected betrayal, the death of one of her classmates, and Kouki's departure, many of her classmates had almost given into despair. It was only thanks to her stellar leadership that they were still holding on.

Yuka didn't really see herself as a leader, but now that Kouki was gone, she had filled in the void he had left naturally. Not only was she the one all the students went to when they needed help, she was also assisting Heiligh's soldiers in rebuilding the city, and resolving any disputes that cropped up. She was also helping shore up public safety, and many of the students looked up to her as a role model. It wasn't just the students either. The new pope, the queen, and even the prime minister came to Yuka for advice. On top of that, she served as the head of the pope's guard whenever he needed to leave the palace.

"Haaah, I'm hungry..." Yuka had spent the past few days running around the palace and was starting to get exhausted. Her stomach growled loudly, complaining about the inadequate nutrients it had been receiving recently. *No one heard that, did they?* Yuka blushed and glanced around her. To her chagrin, there was someone nearby.

"Ahaha... Are you going to get dinner, Sonobe-san?"

"Ugh, you heard that didn't you, Ai-chan-sensei?"

Aiko walked out of one of the nearby buildings and into the courtyard. Though Yuka looked embarrassed, Aiko just smiled gently. In truth, Aiko was on her way to get dinner as well. The two of them walked side by side and chatted about recent events.

"You look pretty worn-out, Sonobe-san. Are you sure you're not pushing yourself too hard?"

“I’ll be fine. I just never thought kids could be so demanding.”

“What happened?”

According to Yuka, all the children that had been orphaned in the recent demon invasion were being taken care of by the church, and the new pope had asked for her help in comforting them. Of course, Yuka had had absolutely no idea what to say to kids who’d lost their parents or relatives. She was barely 17 years old herself. However, despite her protests, the new pope had dragged her into the capital’s church and gathered all the kids. Once he had their attention he’d said, “Alright everyone, I brought the super-pretty super-strong Apostle of God here for you!” It had been quite an ordeal.

The speech Hajime had drafted and Liliana had delivered had hidden the truth from the citizens, and so most of them still believed that Yuka and the others were Apostles of God. And so, all the children had looked up to Yuka with reverence.

“S-So what did you say to them in the end?” Aiko asked, trembling slightly as she imagined the pressure Yuka must have been under.

Unfortunately, Yuka looked off into the distance and replied dimly.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yep, nothing. I couldn’t think of anything to say. ‘Cheer up?’ ‘Your dead parents are watching down on you from heaven together with Ehit?’”

Now that she knew the truth, those words sounded too hollow to Yuka’s ears. She couldn’t bring herself to say that to the kids. And so—

“I juggled instead.”

“You... juggled? As in threw balls in the air and caught them?”

“Well technically it was ten of my knives, but yes.”

“That sounds terrifying! What prompted you to do something like that!?”

Yuka tore at her hair and looked tearfully up at Aiko.

“I had no choice! I couldn’t think of anything to say, and they were all looking

at me like I was their last hope! So then I totally lost it, and before I knew it I was juggling!”

“Oh my!” Aiko exclaimed, and shivered a little, thinking about how that must have felt.

“What did the kids think?”

“They totally loved it!” Yuka got so swept up in the excitement that she started adding more and more knives. Once she’d exhausted the 20 she carried on her, she’d added the nearby cutlery shop owner had suddenly started throwing in knives of his own, and by the end of it she’d been juggling a full 100 knives at the same time.

It had been quite a spectacle, seeing her throw knives several meters into the air, and catch each one with unbelievable dexterity and grace. She’d gone so fast that she’d looked like a knife-spewing fountain. Thanks to that, the kids had forgotten their sorrow for a while and watched with rapt attention. Her job wasn’t Acrobat for nothing.

Yuka’s impromptu performance had attracted kids from all around the neighborhood, and she’d had a huge crowd watching before long. However she couldn’t find a way to bring the show to a close, and she kept on being badgered by the kids to keep going.

“That sounds like... quite the ordeal. My condolences, Sonobe-san.”

“Thanks...”

Aiko smiled sympathetically at Yuka, who was hanging her head in exhaustion and decided to change the topic.

“Simon-san sure is a troublesome person to deal with, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, I’m a little worried that our new pope is such a proactive old man.”

The new pope that Yuka was referring to was none other than Simon Levellair. He had originally been a bishop in the central church before he’d been banished for speaking out against beastman discrimination. Then, at Liliana’s request, he had returned. He was an odd man, one who liked to play pranks and run away from responsibility whenever the opportunity presented itself. More

often than not, his granddaughter Sibyl was forced to chase after him and drag him back to work. Despite being over 70 years old, he ran faster than anyone thought possible for his age.

However, he had proven himself worthy of Liliana's recommendation. Unlike the old pope Ishtar, he was no fanatic. On top of that, he was a very tolerant leader.

"Oh yeah, didn't you go to Simon-san for advice before too, Ai-chan-sensei?"

"Huh? Oh... yes, I suppose I did." Aiko seemed reluctant to reply. When Aiko and Yuka had first met Simon, they hadn't been aware that he was one of the candidates to be pope. They were only brought together by coincidence, but as they kept talking to him, both of them naturally started trusting him enough to open up about the worries they held deep in their hearts. Much to their surprise, he'd had very useful advice for both of them. Afterward, when they'd seen him ascending the altar to accept the pope's scepter, they'd both exclaimed, "Wait, he's that old man from before!" That was when they'd learned they'd both consulted him about their problems.

Seeing Aiko's hesitation, Yuka tilted her head and replied casually.

"I guess you've got your own issues too, huh Sensei?"

"Of course I do. I may be your teacher, but I still have a lot of learning to do myself. All I've been doing since we got here is making mistakes and worrying about everything."

Aiko knew this wasn't the kind of thing she should be burdening her student with, but she ended up saying it anyway. She smiled bitterly at Yuka, and Yuka smiled bitterly back.

"Sorry for always making you worry about us."

"Huh?" Aiko replied with a blank look.

"Huh?" Yuka replied with the same blank look.

"Aren't we the things you're worried about?"

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes you are! I mean no, you're not!"

"Which is it!?"

In a sense, it was true that one of her students was what was causing Aiko all this worry. However, it was a very personal worry, directed toward one male student in particular. But of course, what Yuka had been asking was whether or not it was all her students as a whole who were worrying her.

Accidentally agreeing to that had stung her consciousness, so she'd denied it right after. However, her muddled responses only made Yuka more confused. *I can't let her find out how I feel about Nagumo-kun!* Aiko desperately tried to find a way to change the subject.

"By the way, what was it you were worried about, Sonobe-san!? I'd like to help you out as well! Go ahead, tell me what's bothering you!"

"Why do you sound so desperate!?"

"I'm not desperate! You're just imagining things! Regardless, that's enough about me! Hurry up and tell me what you're worried about!"

"B-But I already found a solution."

"Couldn't you like, make it a problem again?"

"Do you even realize what the words coming out of your mouth are right now, Ai-chan-sensei!?" It was obvious to Yuka that Aiko was forcibly trying to change the topic. *What kind of crazy thing did you talk to Simon about, Ai-chan-sensei!?*

As usual, Aiko's efforts only resulted in her going around in circles. Yuka realized she'd need to get Aiko to stop panicking before she made any sense.

"Ai-chan-sensei! Calm down!" Yuka gathered her resolve and slapped Aiko on the face.

"Hawawa!" Aiko exclaimed, and slumped to the ground. And after a few seconds, she finally came back to reality and spoke up.

"Sorry, Sonobe-san. That was very unbecoming of me."

"I-It's fine. I'm sorry for hitting you."

They both fidgeted awkwardly. After Yuka helped Aiko up, she decided to tell Aiko what had been bothering her in an attempt to smooth over the awkward atmosphere.

“Umm. So you know how Nagumo’s helped me out a lot, right?”

“Huh!? Y-Yes?”

Aiko twitched when the word Nagumo came out of Yuka’s mouth. However, Yuka was too embarrassed at revealing her own feelings to notice.

“So I was wondering how I could repay him for everything he’s done...”

“I-I see. That’s what you asked Simon-san for advice with?”

“Yeah, basically. In the end though, he just helped me realize I don’t need to do all that much. I’ll just treat Nagumo to my family’s—”

“Your family!? You’re going to introduce him to your parents!? What are you thinking, Sonobe-san!? Y-You can’t do that! As your teacher, I absolutely cannot condone any illicit sexual relationships!”

“You’ve got it all wrong! I was just saying I wanted to treat him to my family’s western-style cooking!”

“So you’re planning on making fall for you by going through his stomach!?” Aiko bore down on Yuka, her eyes spinning. And in response—

“Ai-chan-sensei, calm down!” Yuka ended up slapping her again.

Aiko slumped to the ground once more. After a few seconds, she finally came back to reality and apologized.

“Sorry, Sonobe-san. That was very unbecoming of me.”

“I-It’s fine. I’m sorry for hitting you.”

Another awkward silence descended between them. Yuka helped Aiko up and decided to change the subject again in an attempt to dispel the gloomy mood.

“Ai-chan-sensei. I know that you’re dealing with a lot right now, so if it’s okay with you, why not share your worries with me? I’m here for you, so don’t push yourself too hard.”

“...I really am sorry for acting out like that.”

The evening sun cast their entwined shadows far to the east. It was a touching moment, seeing student and teacher together like that. Though it was difficult to tell who was the teacher and who the student.

Afterward, Yuka took Aiko's hand and led her to the dining hall. Since it was still a little too early for dinner, the hall was mostly deserted. They'd decided to eat a little early mostly because of how insistently Yuka's stomach was grumbling for food.

Yuka looked around the room, searching for a place to sit. As servants would bring them their food once they'd settled in, they were free to sit anywhere. As she was looking, Yuka spotted a few of her classmates sitting in a corner.

"Hey there. Eating dinner with the rest of your party today?"

Jugo Nagayama, Kentarou Nomura, Ayako Tsuji, and Mao Yoshino appeared to be in the middle of an early dinner. Jugo turned around and waved a greeting at Yuka.

"Hey, Sonobe. Good work out there. You too, Sensei. Did you guys come here for dinner too?"

"Pretty much. I'm starving, and I happened to run into Ai-chan-sensei on the way," Yuka said, then raised an eyebrow and continued, "Anyway, what's up with all the serious expressions, guys? Did something happen?"

"Well..." Jugo fell silent, trying to decide how best to word his concern.

After a bit, Yuka turned back to Aiko with a smile and gave her a thumbs-up.

"We did it, Ai-chan-sensei! Now there are more lost lambs who need your sage advice! Aren't you glad!?"

"Umm, Sonobe-san? Could you please forget all about that conversation? I'm not *that* desperate to find someone else to help..." Aiko's smile stiffened.

"Really?" Yuka replied dubiously, then turned her gaze back to Jugo.

"By the way, where's Endou? He's part of your party too, isn't he...? I don't see him anywhere, though."

For some reason, Jugo looked up at the sky with a forlorn expression, while Kentarou covered his face. Ayako and Mao both smiled sadly.

Upon seeing all that, Aiko's expression grew serious, as did her words.

"Come to think of it, I didn't see him at breakfast either. He's been looking

pretty down recently...”

“Yeah, ever since that day...” Kentarou muttered glumly.

“Yeah Ever since Nakamura... well, you know... Actually, ever since he found out about Meld-san’s death...”

“Meld-san...”

Aiko and Yuka’s faces fell. He’d been their mentor, someone they’d all looked up to like an older brother. Among the people of this world, the knight commander was the one they’d trusted the most.

“He was probably the last person to talk to Meld-san before he died...”

“Wait, really!?”

“That’s what he said, anyway. Apparently, he ran into him on his way back from the bathroom the night he died. Meld-san had looked really scared back then, according to him. He hadn’t thought too much of it at the time, but now he blames himself for not noticing...”

It was only afterward that he realized that was the last time anyone had seen Meld alive. In other words, he most likely had been the last person to talk to Meld before he died.

After a while, Jugo sighed and continued.

“Back when we were ambushed by demons in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, we all told him to escape alone. Since he was the only one capable of making it back to the captain safely.”

“I heard about that. Didn’t all the knights except Meld-san die during that fight?”

“Yep... All to let Kousuke escape to the surface.”

Everyone closed their eyes in respect for the departed knights. Then, Ayako and Mao smiled faintly and added their peace.

“After that incident, Endou-kun grew really attached to Meld-san.”

“He was really glad the captain survived the Orcus assault.”

Which was exactly why he was having such a hard time accepting his death

now. The man he'd looked up to, the man who'd survived countless other death traps, had finally died. Worse, Kousuke had even noticed there was something off about Meld when he'd last seen him. He blamed himself for not paying attention, for not sticking with the captain when he should have.

Looking at it rationally, it was obvious that none of that was his fault. But he couldn't help but be tortured by the thought that he might have been able to save Meld.

"Is it really that bad?" Yuka frowned slightly as she said that.

Kentarou shook his head as he started speaking.

"Worse. The fact that you two noticed he's gone shows just how bad it is."

Yuka and Aiko tilted their heads quizzically. In response, Jugo and Kentarou said some rather harsh things about their longtime friend.

"Listen up, Sonobe. Kousuke's so good at blending in with the crowd that no one even remembers he exists. I'm not talking about just his job here either, he was like this even back on earth."

"I mean, you're not wrong, but..."

"We're talking completely unnoticeable here. Even automatic doors didn't open for him."

"Okay?"

"Even the two of us thought he might be a spirit or something for a while. We even went to look for proof."

"Uh, Nakamura, Nagayama, you guys *are* his best friends, right?"

Both of them ignored Yuka's question.

"But there's one time when he becomes more noticeable."

Though with how easy he was to miss normally, his version of becoming more noticeable just meant people remembered he existed more often. He didn't start standing out or anything.

"Umm, is that when he gets depressed?" Judging from the way the conversation was headed, Yuka guessed that was probably the case.

“Yeah, but only when he gets so depressed his heart breaks. I think the last time it happened was...”

“Middle school, wasn’t it? He’d finally worked up the courage to confess to the girl he’d sat next to all year, and she’d just said ‘Uh, what class are you from again?’ He stayed shut up in his room for a while after that.”

“Whoa, no way.”

Jugo’s story was enough to move Ayako and Mao, who hadn’t even known him at the time, to tears. They shook their heads sadly.

“But you know, it’s kind of weird. Even though we’re in the same party as him, we always forget he’s there. It’s only when he’s gone that we remember him.”

“Yeah. To be honest, it’s kind of strange to hear anyone ever go ‘Wait, where’s Endou-kun?’”

Yuka almost responded with “It’s almost like Kousuke Endou’s some kind of alien,” but she knew what was and wasn’t okay to say, so she held her tongue.

Yuka and Aiko joined Nagayama’s party for dinner, and they spent their time trying to find ways to cheer Kousuke up. Along the way, the conversation got derailed with tales about how he’d been left behind on family trips, and even on school field trips. By the time dessert rolled around, it was hard to tell if they were still thinking of ways to cheer him up, or just swapping stories about his past.

Suddenly, a hole appeared in the wall closest to their table.

“Wait, isn’t that the portal Nagumo left here when—” Before Yuka could finish, Liliana tumbled out of the gate.

“At least treat me like a womaaaaaan!” She screamed as she fell. She landed cleanly on the table and slid easily down its polished surface. Everyone hurriedly picked up their plates, keeping their dessert safely away from Liliana’s face. She came to a screeching halt right in front of Yuka. The way she held her hands out in front of her in the classic falling pose was a work of art.

For a few seconds, everyone was stunned silent. Finally—

“Nagumo-sama, I can get—” Helina screeched as she came through the portal

after Liliana. “Home by myself,” was probably the end of the sentence she’d wanted to say. She also slid across the table and came to a stop right next to Liliana. Unfortunately, they were the only two with graceful landings.

“Your Highness, please get out of the waaaaaay!”

“God damn iiiiiiiiiiit!”

Liliana’s imperial guards were chunked through the portal one after another. It appeared the perpetrator of this incident had been gentler with Liliana and Helina than he had with the others. The imperial guards flew through the air with far more force.

“Liliana-sama, please get out of the— Bwah!”

“Wait, I— Gah!”

They rolled into Liliana and Helina with the force of a bowling ball and carried them straight off the table. Liliana found herself pinned to the floor under her own guards. Considering all the armor they were wearing, it must have been pretty heavy. The princess groaned in pain.

At the same time, the portal that had opened from the painting on the wall vanished.

“Liliana-san, are you alright!?” Aiko said, then rushed over to Liliana’s side. The imperial guards all apologized, pale-faced.

“We’re sorry, Your Highness, but surely that eyepatch demon is to blame for this!”

Ever since they’d seen his antics in the empire, the imperial guards had taken to calling Hajime “eyepatch demon.”

“D-Don’t worry, I understand. And my body’s fine. It’s my heart that’s broken...”

“How could he just throw a princess out like that...” Liliana muttered with dead eyes.

Yuka could more or less guess what had happened, and gave Liliana a sympathetic look.

“Nagumo’s one hell of a dude...” Kentarou muttered.

“He’s probably the only person in the world with the balls to throw a princess out like that,” Jugo added, half-impressed, half-angry.

“Umm, welcome back, Lily?”

“Oh, Yuka-san. And everyone else as well. As you can see, I’ve returned home.”

Liliana got to her feet and curtsied. She didn’t even try smooth over what had just happened.

“Liliana-sama. I’ll go tell your mother, Luluaria-sama, that you’ve returned. It will take some time to gather all the ministers for an emergency meeting, so why don’t you get something to eat in the meantime?”

It was only going to take time because the kingdom’s ministers would be too shocked by Helina’s report to think for a while at least. She suggested Liliana stay here, so that the princess could tell Aiko and the others personally what had happened. Liliana gratefully accepted Helina’s proposal and sat down next to Aiko.

Meanwhile, Helina ran off to report to the queen, while the imperial guards returned to their stations to make their own reports. Once fresh guards had come to replenish Liliana’s honor guard, she explained what had happened during her journey.

“Holy shit, Nagumo’s insane.”

“No wonder those guards are calling him eyepatch demon now.”

“W-Will Amanogawa-kun and the others be alright going with him? And did he seriously make them all wear masks?”

“Is Shizuku’s stomach doing okay? She must be getting ulcers from all that worrying.”

Kentarou, Jugo, Ayako, and Mao all looked pityingly to the east.

And to ease the tension, Aiko smiled wanly and provided some comforting words.

“But isn’t that great for you, Liliana-san? I don’t like speaking ill of the dead, but at least you won’t have to marry that horrid prince.”

“By the way, Lily. How come you never told us about your engagement plan when you left? I mean I guess it has nothing to do with us, but... if you don’t tell your friends these things, how are we supposed to help you?” Yuka pouted a little.

Liliana blushed a little in embarrassment and responded.

“Aiko-san, Yuka-san, thank you so much for worrying about me. At any rate, the kingdom’s going to be busy repealing the discrimination laws it has against beastmen. We can’t have it turning into a hotbed for illegal slavery. Things are going to get busier than ever here.”

“We never had anything against the beastmen to begin with, so we’re glad you guys are going to stop discriminating against them too. I’m sure the more devout followers of Ehit will have a hard time coming to terms with the decree, but Simon-san’ll be able to help with that.”

“I see... So Simon-sama agreed to become our new pope, then.” Liliana breathed a sigh of relief. She’d left before Simon had announced his decision to take the post.

Yuka and the others then explained what had happened in the empire during her absence.

“I see. There’s still plenty of issues to deal with, but at least they’re all within expectations. And now that we have a new pope, we should be able to rebuild the church. Once that happens, the citizens will rally themselves too. Thank goodness Nagumo-san came up with that story.”

“It feels kind of bad to be lying to everyone like this though.”

“I agree, but the main culprit behind that incident is me, the Fertility Goddess everyone trusts so much. If they knew, their faith would be shaken,” Aiko said glumly. Everyone awkwardly averted their gaze.

“Honestly, I can’t believe he’s able to come up with such nasty lies on the spot. Lily, make sure you don’t let Nagumo brainwash you or anything.” Yuka said it somewhat jokingly, but for some reason, Liliana blushed at that.

“I-I’m not brainwashed at all... Besides, we’re not even close enough yet that he...”

“Not close enough yet?”

Yuka’s expression stiffened. Aiko, too, glared at Liliana.

“Oh, uh, it’s nothing.”

Liliana couldn’t meet their eyes. She wasn’t able to maintain a poker face, despite training for years to remain calm in all situations. Aiko’s lips twitched, and she asked a question in an ice-cold tone.

“Say, Liliana-san. Did anything happen between you and Nagumo-kun?”

“Wh-What could you possibly mean by ‘anything?’”

“Lily, you just bit your tongue, didn’t you?”

“Ugh,” Liliana groaned. However, she wasn’t a princess for nothing. She quickly regained her calm and cleared her throat.

“Please don’t misunderstand. There’s nothing between me and Nagumo-san. In the first place, he doesn’t even treat me like a woman. You saw how he just threw me back here, didn’t you?”

“Uh, yeah I guess.”

“How could I possibly have any feelings for such a savage person? I’m not Tio-san.”

Yuka nodded. Liliana had a point. *Thank goodness. I was worried for nothing.* Both her and Aiko thought simultaneously. Unfortunately, their original guess had been on the mark.

“Honestly, it’s unbelievable how mean he is to me. Even though he knows it’ll cause me problems, he makes a scene wherever he goes, and he doesn’t even tell me what he’s up to!”

“Umm, I get that you’re angry at Nagumo, Lily, so just calm down and—”

Liliana slammed the table a few times, which made Yuka hurriedly try to calm her down.

“Oh, I’m more than just angry! I mean, I’m grateful he saved me from Baius of

course. But he didn't even seem the least bit interested in me even after seeing me in my half-ripped underwear!"

"Wait, what? What exactly happened between you two?"

Liliana ignored Yuka's question.

"Well, I guess it made me a little happy when he said my dress looked nice. And when he danced with me it was the most fun I had ever had at a ball."

"Liliana-san, I really think you should explain what—"

"Can you believe it, though!? He said the only reason he saved me was because he didn't want to make Kaori sad! Couldn't he have just said he did it for my sake!? I suppose it *was* nice hearing he wouldn't let anything terrible happen to me, but still..."

"...."

Yuka and Aiko fell silent. They gave Liliana the same flat stare that Yue had a while back.



Jugo and the others turned to each other with knowing smiles. And finally, Liliana realized that she'd said something weird and looked from one face to the other.

"Umm, everyone? Is something the matter?"

Yuka pursed her lips and muttered, "Nagumo, you absolute moron," under her breath. Aiko looked angrier than anyone had ever seen her. Her cheeks were puffed out to almost comical levels. It was then that Jugo and the others all thought to themselves, *Not again, Nagumo!*

Later, at the emergency meeting Liliana called for she once again went on a rant about Hajime, and so the queen and other ministers all learned about her not-so-hidden crush as well.

"My my, you're finally growing up, Lily!" Luluaria was overjoyed that her daughter had finally found her first crush, but it seemed she was the only one.

"Th-That insolent commoner! Not only has he taken Kaori from me, but he's stolen my sister's heart as well!? I'll get you for this, you bastaaaaaaaaard!"

The future king's pained screams echoed throughout the castle.

Chapter II: Haltina's Labyrinth

Hajime's party walked swiftly through the thick fog, never once losing their way. Their destination was the entrance to the true labyrinth, the base of Sacred Tree Uralt. Normally, the fog around the tree was so dense that even beastmen couldn't find their way around it. However, the fog thinned enough for the path to be navigable every ten days.

Three days had passed since Hajime had first arrived in Verbergen, and the path had finally opened. Thanks to Ulfric's hospitality, the three days Hajime and the others had spent in the city had been rather pleasant.

Shea and Altina had constantly been competing for Hajime's affection, while Hajime had been busy further training the Haulia. Meanwhile, Ryutarou had found himself fitting in quite nicely with Verbergen's warriors. Kouki, on the other hand, had been hounded by all the former beastmen slave girls he'd helped free. Similarly, Kaori had been hounded by her cult members, and Tio had tried to hang around Hajime but had been constantly kicked away. Suzu, however, had found herself extremely popular with the beastmen children. And amidst it all, Yue had somehow found time to spirit Hajime away and have her way with him every night. At any rate, they'd been a fun three days. For everyone other than Shizuku, at least.

"Amanogawa, on your right."

"Ah—"

A pack of monsters burst through the mist. However, Hajime, Yue, Shea, Tio, and the Haulia didn't bother fighting back. They left it all to Kouki and the others. Hajime wanted to get them warmed up for the kinds of dangers they'd face once they were in the real depths of the labyrinth. Because the fog clouded their senses, Kouki and the others couldn't use the same tactics they had in the Great Orcus Labyrinth either. Though this was meant to be a mere warm-up, Kouki and the others found themselves pressed surprisingly hard. In fact, it was only thanks to Hajime's timely warnings that they were able to fend off their

enemies at all.

Kouki frowned in irritation, Ryutarou clicked his tongue in annoyance, and even Suzu and Shizuku seemed angry at themselves. Kaori, however, seemed as spirited as ever.

“Take that! And... this!”

She’d returned to fighting with Kouki’s party temporarily so that she could gain more experience fighting in Noint’s body. It appeared Noint’s senses were unaffected by the fog, so the area around the Grand Tree made for perfect practice. Kaori flapped her silver wings and unleashed a barrage of feathers. She had gotten much better at controlling her feathers, and they homed in on the monsters in front of her with pinpoint precision. Each one hit its mark and the monsters disintegrated under the merciless onslaught.

“Yaaah!” Kaori then bisected the one monster that had managed to close in with a single sweep of her glowing broadsword. She wasn’t able to use both at once just yet, but her skill with a single sword had improved considerably. Enough to the point where her job might be mistaken for Swordmaster, even.

“Looks like you’ve gotten pretty used to swinging that sword around. I guess you got a lot of practice in fighting with Yue every day.”

“Her stats are ridiculously high. If I don’t work harder, I’ll be left behind.”

Hajime and Yue watched as Kaori took a step back and sucked in a deep breath. Originally, Noint had managed to go toe to toe against Hajime at full strength, so Kaori still had a ways to go. But considering it had only been two weeks since she’d had her spirit transplanted into this body, her growth was astounding. Her diligence in training was coming in handy here. It wouldn’t be long until Kaori could move Noint’s body like her own.

“I’m not nearly good enough yet. I still can’t use offensive magic in battle, and I can’t activate my weapons’ disintegration powers unless I concentrate... I still haven’t been able to beat you even once, Yue.”

Kaori walked over to Yue and Hajime, pouting. She’d clearly overheard their conversation. And though they’d been praising her, she still couldn’t move this body the way she wanted to, and her frustration was making her snappy.

“Kaori. You can’t be serious. Not only do you have better physical stats than us, you can use disintegration abilities, and your affinity for every type of magic is perfect. Plus, you can cast spells without magic circles or incantations. Your swordsmanship’s already reaching crazy levels, and you’re still in the middle of improving it so it’s going to get even better from now on. Also, you’re a walking fortress who also can heal yourself instantly at any time... You’re so overpowered it’s ridiculous. What’s there to be unhappy about?”

Kaori couldn’t meet Shizuku’s gaze. Now that she’d had her abilities pointed out objectively like that, it did feel a little like she was whining.

“But I still can’t beat Yue or Shea... so if I’m overpowered, what does that make Hajime-kun and the others?”

“I don’t even know how to begin describing them...” Shizuku racked her brains, but in the end was unable to find a good descriptor for Hajime and the rest. And sensing her frustration, Kouki walked up next to her and provided words of comfort.

“It’s okay, Shizuku. Once we get through this labyrinth, we’ll be just as strong as Nagumo. Actually, since his job isn’t combat-related, we’ll probably be even stronger than him.”

“You got that right. I can’t wait to see what magic we’ll learn.”

“Yeah, we just have to keep trying and we’ll get there too!”

The primary source of Hajime’s strength had nothing to do with the ancient magic he’d obtained, but Kouki was oblivious to that fact. He, Ryutarou, and Suzu all looked raring to go.

“We’re here, everyone.” Shea looked over her shoulder as she said that.

The group hurried after her and found themselves in a clearing free of the thick mist that pervaded the rest of the forest. In the center of the clearing towered the same withered tree that Hajime had seen last time.

“So this is... the Grand Tree...”

“It’s freaking huge...”

“It... really is massive...”

Kouki and the others looked up in amazement. The tree was so tall they couldn't see the top of it, and so wide that its trunk seemed like a solid wall of wood. Hajime and Yue exchanged glances and smiled at each other. They'd had the exact same reaction the first time they'd come here. Hajime pulled the proofs of all the labyrinths he'd conquered out of his Treasure Trove and walked up to the lithograph in front of the tree. It hadn't changed at all since his last visit here. Each of the heptagon's verticies had one of the Liberators' crests drawn on it, and a depression on the back to insert whatever proof each labyrinth provided.

Hajime got down to one knee and started sorting through the five proofs he had. Curious, Kouki and the others finally tore their eyes away from the tree to see what he was doing. From this point on, not even Hajime knew what to expect. They were finally entering the lion's den. Hajime glanced sharply back at Cam.

"Cam, there's no telling what might happen next, so have the Haulia retreat to a safe distance."

"You got it, Boss. Good luck in there."

Since Cam had secured the area around the Grand Tree for the Haulia in his previous negotiations with the elders, he and his men had tagged along on the trip to the tree. Though it was a little vexing that he couldn't go any further with his beloved boss, Cam still gave Hajime a crisp salute and retreated back into the fog. Once they'd left, Hajime put Orcus' ring, the proof that he'd conquered the Great Orcus Labyrinth, into the first depression. A second later, glowing letters appeared above the lithograph.

—Four markers of strength. —The power of restoration —A beacon woven from bonds. —Only with those three ingredients in hand will the path to a new trial be opened.

"Looks like that's still the same as last time. I guess... I'll just use the first four we got."

Hajime inserted the proofs into their respective depressions. Reisen's ring, Gruen's pendant, and Melusine's coin. With each item inserted, the lithograph's glow grew greater. After Melusine's coin was in, the glow coalesced on the

ground around the stone tablet and shot in a straight line toward the tree. Once it hit the tree's roots, the Grand Tree began radiating its own light.

"Hm? Look, there's a crest on the tree now."

"Yeah. Do we have to use the power of restoration now?"

Just as Tio had said, a shimmering crest had appeared on the tree's bark. Yue walked up to it, placed her hand on the crest's center, and cast restoration magic. A light far more dazzling than the ones before rippled outward from the crest, and with a loud *whoosh*, climbed up the tree's trunk. Once the light had enveloped every inch of the tree, it started regaining its vitality.

"Ah, new leaves are growing in..."

Shea pointed and watched in awe as new leaves sprouted on the bare branches. It was like watching a video at ten times the speed. Even Hajime was moved by the wondrous spectacle. Within seconds, the tree's branches were coated in lush, vibrant leaves, and the tree itself had regained its former vitality.

A strong gust blew past, and the fresh leaves rustled audibly. At the same time, the tree's outer bark parted to each side, revealing a hollow grotto. The opening was wide enough that ten people could walk abreast. Everyone nodded to each other, then together they stepped into the cave that marked the entrance to Haltina's true labyrinth.

Hajime had been worried he would only be able to take people who had also conquered at least four labyrinths with him inside, but it appeared that had been a needless concern. No one was barred entry into the tree.

I guess it's just like the other labyrinths. As long as you can find a way in, it doesn't matter how you did it. After all, if you don't have what it takes to survive, you'll just die inside.

Hajime examined his surroundings. But so far, there didn't seem to be anything special inside the tree. Just a large, dome-shaped room.

"Is this a dead end?" Kouki muttered dubiously.

Before Hajime could reply, new bark started growing in around the entrance. The shaft of light illuminating the room grew narrower and narrower. Kouki

tried to rush back, but was stopped by a shout from Hajime. The bark closed around the entrance completely, and the party was trapped in darkness. Yue raised a hand to summon a light sphere, but her actions proved unnecessary. For a massive magic circle lit up beneath the group, illuminating their surroundings.

“Whoa, what’s going on!?”

“What is this!? What’s happening!?”

Calm down! This is just a teleportation circle! Get ready, there’s no telling what’s waiting for us on the other side!”

Hajime shouted out a warning to Ryutarou and Suzu just as the light enveloped them all.

“Where...”

As the light faded, a dense sea of trees sprang into Hajime’s view. For a moment Hajime thought they’d been teleported outside the Grand Tree, but then he realized they were still inside the labyrinth.

A sea of trees inside a tree... That’s about as weird as it gets.

“Everyone alright?”

Kouki shook his head to clear his vision and checked to see if his comrades were all safe.

“No problems here,” Shizuku responded. Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori all seemed fine as well, so the group started scanning their surroundings. Flustered, Kouki spoke up.

“Nagumo, we’re in the labyrinth for real now, right? Which direction do we take?”

There was nothing but trees in every direction, so it was hard for Kouki to tell which way led to their goal. In fact, aside from the clearing they were in, they could only see trees in every direction. To make matters worse, the sky above them was covered by a thick fog, so they couldn’t pinpoint their destination from the air either.

“I guess I’ve gotta look for them.” Hajime’s mutterings didn’t seem like they

were a reply to Kouki's question. And indeed, Hajime wasn't even looking at Kouki.

"If you say so. Anyway, I'll take the lead. If you see anything, let me know."

Kouki found Hajime's actions odd, but he put him out of his mind and marched forward. He still remembered Hajime's warning about how they wouldn't be granted the ancient magic unless they proved they'd helped overcome the labyrinth's trials. For that purpose, he wanted to contribute as much as possible.

As no one raised any objections, everyone in the group followed after Kouki—except for Hajime. For whatever reason, he hadn't moved from the spot he'd been teleported to. He glared coldly at the backs of his comrades. Noticing he wasn't following along, Shea turned back and looked questioningly at Hajime.

"Hajime-san, what's—"

Shea was interrupted by the sound of something cutting through the wind. Hajime had pulled three of his bolas out of his Treasure Trove and thrown them with inhuman speed. His targets were Yue, Tio, and Ryutarou. All three of them were too shocked to react, and his spatial magic-enhanced bolas pinned them in place.

"Hm!?"

"Master!?"

"What the hell are you doing, man!?"

The three of them struggled against the wires holding them down. Kouki looked at the three of them, dumbfounded. He then rounded on Hajime and shouted.

"Nagumo, what's the meaning of this!?" He glared angrily at Hajime. Shizuku and Suzu both gave him questioning stares as well.

"Hey, Nagumo—"

Hajime held out a hand to silence Kouki, then walked over to Yue. She looked up at him, puzzled. He unholstered Donner and pressed its muzzle against her forehead. There wasn't the slightest bit of warmth in his eyes.

“Hajime? Why—” Yue couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Neither could the others. Hajime pointing a gun at the girl he loved most? Impossible.

He must have gone insane... Kouki thought to himself. He rushed forward to stop Hajime, but before he could—

“Ah!?”

The sound of a gunshot echoed through the forest. Hajime had pulled the trigger without hesitation. He’d moved the gun from her forehead to her shoulder at the last second, but it didn’t change the fact that he’d really shot her.

“H-Hajime-kun!?”

“Wh-What are you doing, Nagumo-kun!?”

Kaori and Shizuku screamed at him to stop. They tried to pull him away, but Shea, who’d noticed that something was wrong, kept them away from Hajime. Kouki looked ready to jump at Hajime as well, but Hajime’s next words stopped him in his tracks.

“Answer me, fake.”

His voice was ice-cold. Kaori and the others shivered. Of course the temperature hadn’t dropped at all, but the murderous look in Hajime’s eyes had leeches all the heat from their bodies. It even felt like their surroundings had gotten darker. Cold sweat poured down Kouki’s back, and his breath came in short gasps.

“Who are you? Where’s the real Yue?”

“.....” The creature pretending to be Yue looked flatly at Hajime, no longer even trying to copy Yue’s expressions. Whatever the creature was, it wasn’t human. No blood dripped from the shoulder that Hajime had shot off.

There was another gunshot, and the creature’s remaining shoulder was gouged through. However, the fake Yue’s expression didn’t budge. Apparently, it didn’t feel pain. Its mannerisms were even more doll-like than Noint’s, so it was possible it had no will of its own.

“Don’t want to answer, huh? Or rather, looks like you don’t have the ability

to. Fine. Die.”

Hajime brought Donner back to the fake Yue’s forehead and fired a third bullet. Strange, squishy goop flew out of the back of her head. Shizuku involuntarily covered her eyes, but after a few seconds she opened them back up and realized what was splattering the ground wasn’t brain matter, but some kind of rust-colored slime.

Bereft of its head, the rest of Yue’s body dissolved into the same rust-colored slime. The slime was then absorbed into the ground until only a faint stain remained. Hajime then walked over to Tio and Ryutarou, and shot them through the head as well. Like Yue, the two of them turned into rust-colored slime and were swallowed up by the earth.

“Tch... I guess I should expect this kind of stuff from labyrinths at this point...” Hajime clicked his tongue as he holstered Donner.

“Hajime-san... does this mean Yue-san and Tio-san are...”

“They probably got teleported somewhere else, yeah. When we were getting transported, I felt the same kind of brain probe we get whenever we clear a labyrinth. Those red slime things probably got copies of our memories so they could act just like our real selves and stab us in the back when our guard was down,” Hajime spat. He was still upset that someone had dared to impersonate Yue. Shizuku and Suzu shivered as they heard Hajime’s explanation.

“I see... I’m surprised you were able to tell so quickly, though.”

“Yeah. I totally couldn’t see any difference. How were you able to tell?” Suzu asked, still a little pale.

Kouki waited eagerly for Hajime’s answer. He was worried about how the real Ryutarou was faring. Unfortunately, Hajime’s response wasn’t too helpful.

“That’s a tough one. All I can say is, the moment I saw her, I knew she wasn’t the real Yue.”

“.....” Everyone slumped in disappointment. Suzu, however, gave Hajime a curious look and asked another question.

“So then, how were you able to tell Ryutarou-kun and Tio-san were also

fakes?”

“Once I knew there was one fake, I used my Demon Eye to check if anyone else had been swapped. Unless you’ve got something similar, the only real way to know who’s fake and who’s not is to see if you can tell they’re acting different from usual, I guess.”

“I-I see... But then how am I going to tell Ryutarou-kun apart? All he has to do is talk like any old musclehead and it’ll sound like him.”

“Maybe that’s why he was one of the ones chosen to be replaced. Curses... Ryutarou...”

Suzu’s comments were rather harsh, but the fact that Ryutarou’s best friend agreed with them meant even he knew Ryutarou was a bit too simple.

Poor Ryutarou. Shizuku looked off into the distance sympathetically. For a moment, she imagined she saw Ryutarou’s figure in the sky, giving her a thumbs-up.



Shea's ears shot up as if she'd just thought of something, and she turned to Hajime. Eyes full of anticipation, she asked him a simple question.

"Umm, Hajime-san. Would you be able to tell if I was a fake with just a glance too?"

"Ah!" Kaori twitched a little when she heard that. She gave Hajime an intense stare and chimed in as well.

"What about me? Could you tell me apart too!?"

Everyone's gazes focused on him. Hajime didn't seem affected by the expectant atmosphere and responded bluntly.

"Dunno. I probably wouldn't be able to tell with just a glance."

"....." "....."

If there were any crickets present, they would have all been chirping at that moment. Going by the flow of the conversation, Hajime should have said something like "Of course I could." But in standard Hajime fashion, he'd just given them a brutally honest answer. Shea and Kaori both glared at him, but he ignored them and briskly walked into the overgrown forest. The two of them sulkily followed after him.

"There's such a thing as having too much nerve, you know...?"

"K-Kaorin, Sheashea, cheer up!"

"Seriously, what does Kaori see in that guy?"

Hajime smiled wryly to himself as he heard Shizuku and Kouki's grumbling. In truth, he probably would have been able to tell Shea apart with just a glance, but if he'd said that Kaori would have gotten angry for sure. The best way to keep Kaori's demon stand from appearing was to stay quiet.

The party wandered through the sea of trees for a good two hours before they heard something. Mechanical whirring, similar to the sound an electric fan made when put on max speed surrounded them from all sides. There appeared to be multiple sources.

"Monsters!? Nagumo, we'll handle this, you just sit there and watch!"

“I guess this is your first labyrinth battle and all.”

Kouki, Suzu, and Shizuku all unsheathed their weapons. Honestly, Hajime thought they were letting their desire to prove themselves get the better of them, but if he babied them through the whole labyrinth there would be no point in bringing them here. So he just shrugged his shoulders and settled in to watch. This would be Kouki and the others’ first time fighting monsters from the true part of a labyrinth. Shizuku and Suzu both nervously readied themselves behind Kouki.

“This is the sound of wings! Everyone, please be careful! Flying monsters in the sea of trees are especially agile!”

“Good luck, Shizuku-chan, Suzu-chan!”

Shea gave them some helpful advice, while Kaori cheered them on. The swarm of monsters flitted between the gaps in the trees and charged the party.

“Eeek, these things are disgusting!” Suzu screamed.

Normally, she would have erected a barrier right away to protect her comrades, but the monsters attacking them were so disgusting on a biological level that Suzu couldn’t help but shrink back. The closest earth insect they resembled was bees, but they were the size of a human baby, and possessed hundreds of wriggling legs, much like a centipede. Their mouths resembled those of spiders, and they had seven composite eyes each. They had the same alternating yellow and black stripes over their bodies that honeybees did, and their stingers were coated in a toxic green liquid.

Hajime could see why one would be disgusted by such a gruesome creature.

“Suzu, keep it together!” Kouki yelled. Then, he used Supersonic Step to close the distance between him and Suzu, slashing down the bee-thing heading for her. However, the bee-thing easily dodged Kouki’s swing. As Shea had warned them, the insects were unbelievably quick. As it dodged out of the way, some of its green liquid flew off its stinger and splattered over Suzu’s face. She almost fainted then and there. Seeing an opportunity, the bee pointed its stinger at Suzu and rushed forward.

“I won’t lose in speed!”

Shizuku leaped forward and sliced through the bee-thing with her black katana.

“Suzu!”

“S-Sacred Shields!” Suzu finally sprang into action. She used her barriers to split the swarm of monsters in two, then created an opening to lead them down the path she wanted. Despite the tears in her eyes, she cast faster than she ever had before. She didn’t forget to cast healing magic on herself either. The green liquid clinging to her face vanished in a puff of light. Shizuku and Kouki then began cutting down their enemies, making sure to cover each other’s blind spots.

“Celestial Flash!”

The bee-things parted to either side, easily dodging Kouki’s favorite attack.

“Damn bugs, stop flitting around!” Kouki cursed. Their unbelievable agility made it seem like they were ignoring the laws of physics. The bugs then darted to either side of Kouki and launched a machine-gun barrage of poisoned stingers. They grew new ones after each one was shot out, so they could continue firing without pause.

“Sacred Shields, Sacred Shields, Sacred Shields!”

Thanks to Suzu’s timely reaction, Kouki was spared being skewered. Meanwhile, Shizuku used her speed to her advantage and cut right through the bee-things’ coordinated attack. After she’d thrown them off-balance, Kouki launched another powerful assault. However, he was only able to cut down a few of them. As they were currently beset by hundreds of monsters, they were a long way away from achieving victory. Compared to the monsters they’d faced so far, these bee-things were both stronger *and* more cunning.

“Shit, these guys are strong as those monsters the demons brought with them!” Kouki cursed again.

“Isn’t it the other way around? The demons’ monsters are probably based off of these,” Hajime replied casually.

Kouki frantically swung his sword as he thought back to the nightmare they’d faced in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. They were already being pushed hard right

from the outset. Seeing one of the bee-things about to skewer Kouki from behind, Hajime nonchalantly drew Donner and shot it down.

Kouki and the others had been all gung-ho about winning this on their own, but honestly, these monsters were beyond their capability to handle. In fact, they were being pressured so hard that a detachment of bee-things had broken off and started heading toward Hajime, Shea, and Kaori. The three of them easily struck down anything that got close.

“Dodge all you want, it won’t help!” With each swing of her hammer, Shea unleashed shockwaves that pulverized all the monsters in the vicinity.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this now!” Kaori had gotten much more accurate with her homing feathers as well. No matter how the bee-things tried to dodge, the feathers continued chasing them until they hit their mark. Kaori’s growth was so fast that each barrage ended up more accurate than the last. Kouki grit his teeth in frustration as he watched the trio out of the corner of his eye.

“Kouki-kun, this isn’t looking good! We’re getting overrun!” Tears streamed down Suzu’s face. She replaced her barriers each time one was destroyed, but keeping it up was draining her mana at a prodigious rate.

The intermediate-level light spell Sacred Shields was fundamentally a spell that focused on using multiple weak barriers instead of a single strong one, so it wasn’t too surprising that they were being destroyed so fast.

Still, Suzu was a Barrier Master. The Sacred Shields she deployed were on a different level than most normal ones. Regular monsters would need a few solid attacks to break one. Yet these bee-things were tearing through them like they were made of paper. Suzu was forced to recast her spells faster than ever before.

As time passed, Suzu’s exhaustion caused her concentration to slip, and the bee-things began to close in. Their gradual defeat was affecting Suzu on a psychological level as well.

Even Shizuku’s expression grew grim. As a fighter who relied on speed over strength, she was the best-suited to fight these bees. Indeed, her No Tempo was helping her shred the bees with ease. However, the true terror of these

monsters lay in their number. While Shizuku could easily take them one-on-one, she lacked the ability to destroy large crowds at once. Which meant that they were getting pushed back. Seeing Shizuku and Suzu driven into a corner made Kouki hasty, and he charged into the group of bees alone.

“My will is a blade! Light, heed my call and sunder my foes! Radiant Slash!”

White light swirled around Kouki’s sword. It then melded into his weapon and extended a full two meters from the tip of his blade. With his sword transformed into a greatsword, Kouki spun in a circle. Light trailed behind his blade as he spun, and he bisected the group of bee-things surrounding him. However, the cost for his temporary victory was high. He’d rushed into the thick of the monsters and used an attack that left him wide-open. The remaining monsters tackled him one after another.

“Ngh, you little!”

Kouki tried to back off, but the bee-things swarmed him. Their mandibles clacked loudly as they tried to stab him with their stingers. Fortunately, Kouki’s armor protected him, and the needles slid off harmlessly.

After a difficult struggle, Kouki was able to skewer the monsters dog-piling him and broke free. However, the remaining bee-things weren’t going to give him time to get back on his feet. Another group swarmed him, determined to keep him pinned to the floor.

“Kouki!”

“Uwooooooooooooooh!” He had no time to reassure Shizuku. Instead, he dropped to one knee and, with a mighty roar, swung his sword. Unfortunately, that was as far as he’d get to go. One of the bee-things ducked underneath his slash and latched onto his back. It brought its face close and tried to bite through Kouki’s neck.

“Wha—!?” Kouki words were cut short. Before it could kill him though, a red streak shot past, blowing its head clean off.

Kouki had no time to process what had happened. Neck still stinging, he hurriedly ripped off the remaining bee-things clinging to him. He might barely have escaped death this time, but their situation was dire. Another couple

hundred bee-things joined the group already fighting.

Kouki's expression stiffened. They were being utterly overwhelmed. Just then, he heard a calm voice next to his ear.

"Don't move, Amanogawa."

"Wha?"

A barrage of red streaks filled the air. It was as if a meteor shower had suddenly passed them by. Seconds later, a series of dull explosions sounded in the distance. After each explosion, another six streaks of light shot past. It was as if the bee-things were beset by a horde of crimson spears. Each streak of light shot through a monster without fail. This was one of Hajime's gun-kata skills, Ultra-Fast Quick Draw. He fired so fast that each round of six bullets had only one gunshot noise accompanying it. Furthermore, he'd perfectly calculated all the angles of his shots, so that occasionally his bullets ran into each other and ricocheted off to hit other monsters with perfect accuracy as well.

Incidentally, that happened to be another one of Hajime's gun-kata skills, Polygon Rebound. To an observer, it looked almost like the enemies were themselves willingly jumping into the bullets' paths. Normally, there would be a slight delay every time he reloaded, but because he teleported the bullets right above the cylinder and reloaded by spinning it rapidly, it took less than a second. Plus, Donner and Schlag would always be aiming in different directions and shooting down separate foes.

His skill with guns was practically godlike. In less than ten seconds, the hundreds of monsters lay dead. Kouki and the others watched, dumbfounded, as Hajime casually holstered Donner and Schlag, and walked over to the remnants of the bee-things. After examining them for a bit, he dropped a bombshell of a statement.

"Tch. Doesn't look like I'll get much for eating these..."

"E-Eating!? Nagumo-kun, you plan on eating these creatures? Are you serious?" Shizuku was shocked out of her reverie. She pulled a face and backed a few steps away from him.

"Did I not tell you guys? If I eat a monster stronger than me, I can learn

whatever unique magic it had. Oh, but don't try it yourselves. You'll die for sure."

The only way to survive eating monster flesh was to have the legendary Ambrosia on hand, and the willpower to stay sane after experiencing having your body destroyed and remade hundreds of times. Hajime's supply of Ambrosia had dwindled to almost nothing now, and restoration magic didn't heal someone from their injuries, it returned them to a previous state, meaning it was useless in this case.

Kaori's strongest healing spells might be enough for someone to eat it and survive, but it was still possible she wouldn't be able to regenerate their body before it was destroyed completely. Hence why Hajime didn't recommend it. For someone like Hajime, who'd already had his body transformed, regular healing spells were enough to keep him going after eating monster meat.

"Don't worry, we don't want to. But the more I hear about you, the crazier it all sounds..." Shizuku muttered, a troubled expression on her face.

While Hajime was reliable, the way he'd gained his strength sounded so painful that Shizuku couldn't find it in herself to be happy about it. If anything, she felt more pity than awe.

Hajime just shrugged his shoulders. This time, it was Suzu who asked him a question. Like Shizuku, she looked somewhat disgusted.

"B-But then, why won't you eat this one? I mean, I'm glad I don't have to see you cooking this disgusting thing, but..."

"Like I said, it has to be a monster stronger than me. These guys are too weak to get anything out of."

"I see. So these monsters are just small fry to you, Nagumo-kun. I get it now, ahahaha."

"Suzu, I get what you're feeling, but please come back to us. Don't break over just this."

Shizuku sighed and brought Suzu back to her senses.

"....." Kouki looked down at the corpses scattered across the ground and

curled his hands into fists. These monsters had nearly killed the three of them, and Hajime had single-handedly wiped them all out like they were nothing. Whether he liked it or not, he was forced to accept the difference in strength between them.

Though he kept a straight face, the inside of his heart was filled with negative emotions. Hajime noticed Kouki was just standing there and turned back to him.

“Amanogawa.”

“Wh-What?”

“For now, just focus on finding your friend. You can worry about everything else after you’ve done everything you can.”

“You don’t need to tell me. I know already.”

Though his tone was snappy, Kouki still took Hajime’s words to heart. With a weary sigh, he braced himself and considered where Ryutarou might have gone. After observing him for a few more seconds, Hajime shook his head and turned back to the monsters.

He’d already guessed what was going through Kouki’s mind right now. Jealousy toward Hajime’s strength, and mixed feelings of inferiority and impatience. All feelings that Hajime had once felt himself.

It was rather ironic that Kouki, the boy who had everything, would feel that way toward Hajime of all people. Thanks to his personality, Hajime had been able to overcome those emotions himself in the past. But he wondered if Kouki, who’d never experienced being inferior to others before, would be able to master himself as easily.

Well, I guess it’s not my problem. Hajime decided to just ignore Kouki’s issues. Besides, the fact that he’d told Kouki to focus on Ryutarou showed that he was being more considerate than he used to. For the monster of the abyss, even that slight concern was an improvement.

“Hajime-san, I got rid of the monsters up ahead.”

“All done here, too.”

Shea and Kaori, who’d gone off to eliminate the remaining monsters in the

area, returned triumphantly.

“Perfect. Let’s get going, then. Yue and Tio can handle themselves, but I’d still like to meet up with them as soon as possible. As for Sakagami... Well, let’s hope his luck holds out.”

“Hey, don’t you think you should care a little more about Ryutarou? I mean, I can get why you’d be more worried about your girlfriend, but...”

Shizuku gave Hajime a complicated look, while Kouki just glared at him. But they said nothing more, and the group set off in search of their missing comrades.

After another two hours or so of walking, the entire forest was suddenly dyed red. The air trembled, the earth shook, and great gouts of hellfire started consuming the forest. Earthquakes followed one after another, and it truly seemed like the end of the world.

The screams that Hajime and the others heard in the distance were likely the other monsters in this forest burning to death. Their cries were a mixture of fear and panic. And at the same time—

“Take that, you bastards! Burn with the whole goddamn forest!”

The owner of the crude voice that rang out was naturally none other than Hajime.

Yes, because he was the one carpet bombing the forest. He mercilessly fired rockets from the Orkans he held in both hands. Something had clearly gotten him riled up.

“U-Umm, Hajime-san, don’t you think that’s enough?”

“Y-Yeah, Hajime-kun. I’m sure all the monsters are dead by now...”

Shea and Kaori timidly tried to stop him as they watched him fire hundreds of missiles and use his Cross Bits to unleash a truckload of cluster bombs on the ground below. Hajime turned to them.

“Hm?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“We’re sorry for bothering you.”

The moment they saw his bloodshot eyes, the two of them hurriedly backed off.

“Aww... I’m scared. Shizushizu, stop hiiim.”

“You’re asking for too much, Suzu. I don’t want to die just yet. Besides, I don’t blame him for being angry...”

Suzu hid behind Shizuku, tears in her eyes. In response, Shizuku just sighed and patted Suzu’s head to calm her down. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that Kouki was still squatting on the ground and covering his eyes with his hands.

“My eyeeeeees! Damn you, Nagumo! What the hell was that for!?”

His current appearance resembled that of a certain colonel who loses his sight near the end of a certain series. Incidentally, the one who’d poked him in the eyes was Hajime.

As for why Hajime had nearly left Kouki blind and started burning down the forest in a crazed frenzy— The answer had to do with the monkey-like monsters he’d encountered a few minutes prior. They’d been armed with stone knives and clubs, and had used their superior dexterity to leap between the trees and run circles around Kouki, Suzu, and Shizuku. Like the bee-things, they hadn’t been any match for Hajime and the others, and they’d easily dispatched any monsters foolish enough to attack them.

The remaining monkeys had been scared off by that and had changed tactics. Unfortunately, that crude intelligence of theirs became their downfall. In an attempt to outsmart Hajime’s trio, they made a most unwise choice. Their unique magic was the same as the rust slimes Hajime had killed before, mimicry. And they’d possessed same memories of Hajime and his comrades that the slimes had. With their limited knowledge, they’d decided to transform into the person they thought would most rattle Hajime’s psyche... Yue.

One of them had transformed into a beaten, disheveled Yue, and the other monkey monsters had dragged her fake out for Hajime to see. As with the slimes, the fake Yue’s appearance looked every bit like the real thing. But of

course, Hajime was still able to tell with just a glance that the Yue they'd brought out was not the real Yue.

That having been said, the things they'd done to even a fake Yue were not something Hajime was willing to forgive. Not one bit. First, he'd used Supersonic Step to run over to Kouki and blind him. Since the fake Yue had looked like the real thing, he hadn't wanted to let any other guys see her in such tattered, revealing clothes.

At that point, Hajime was already on the verge of snapping, but the monkeys hadn't stopped there. Instead, they sneered and started pummeling the fake Yue with their clubs. It was then that she looked up at Hajime and begged, "Save me, Hajime..." Everyone present heard the sound of his reason crumbling when those words were uttered.

What followed was the carnage everyone was witnessing now. A devastation so thorough, it looked like the end of the world. Everything a good 500 meters in front of Hajime had been burnt to a crisp and charred monkey corpses littered the ground. The conflagration was so large, the other monsters living in the forest got caught up in it too.

Despite having completely lost it, Hajime was still careful to make sure the real Yue or Tio or Ryutarou weren't in the radius of his bombs. He kept a number of crow-shaped Ornises by his side to observe the surrounding area. However, the combination of being wreathed in hellfire and surrounded by crows made him look a true demon lord.

Tears were still pouring down the hero's eyes, so the only people available to stop him were two of the demon lord's sworn vassals, Shea and Kaori.

"Don't give up, you two! You're the only ones who can stop Nagumo-kun now!"

"B-But Shizuku-san..."

"Sh-Shizuku-chan... it's not that easy..."

"Don't give me your whining! Listen up! If you throw in the towel here, this entire forest'll burn to the ground! Come on, chin up! You can do it, girls! Remember, there's nothing stronger than a maiden in love!" Shizuku tried to

give the two girls a pep talk. In truth, she just didn't want to stop Hajime herself, so she was trying to get them to do it instead.

Seeing how desperate Shizuku looked, Kaori and Shea exchanged glances. They nodded determinedly to each other and leaped at Hajime the moment they saw him reloading his Orkans. They both grabbed one of his arms and appealed to his sensibilities.

"Hajime-san, this is enough! No more!"

"Shea-san's right, Hajime-kun! You need to calm down!"

Hajime turned to them, a displeased frown on his face. His expression resembled that of a disgruntled yakuza member. Still, the two of them had been traveling with Hajime for a long time. They continued gently persuading him to stop his assault, and eventually, he did start to calm down.

"Alright, I get it already. I'll stop."

Hajime shrugged his shoulders and called his Cross Bits back. He put them, along with his Ornises and Orkans, back into his Treasure Trove. Shea, Kaori, and Shizuku all heaved sighs of relief.

"Sorry for getting all worked up like that."

"It's okay, I got pretty mad too so I can understand."

"Yeah, those monkeys really are the worst. But I guess I should have expected as much from a labyrinth." Hajime smiled bitterly to himself while the two girls shook their heads. The two of them hadn't been unaffected by fake Yue either.

The three of them chatted casually for a bit longer, the scorched forest still smoldering in the background. Shizuku gingerly walked up to the group and said,

"Nagumo-kun, if you've finally calmed down, could you please heal Kouki's eyes?"

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot." Hajime turned to Kouki, who was still in tears. Tortus' greatest hero looked rather pitiful right now. Hajime gestured to Kaori, who nodded and cast healing magic on Kouki.

"I recognize this feeling. Am I being healed? Ah, I can see the light again..."

Kouki's expression relaxed as he was enveloped in light. Since he was on his knees and gazing up at the sky, he looked almost like a priest being granted a divine revelation.

After his sight was fully restored, he glared at the source of his pain. His furious expression ruined his natural good looks.

"Nagumo, what do you have to say for yourself?" Kouki did his best to keep his voice even, but his body was still trembling with rage. He was this close to snapping himself.

"Yue's fake appeared, barely clothed. I had no choice but to kill all other guys present. But since I didn't want to kill you, Amanogawa, I stopped at just blinding you. There's your explanation."

"Explanation my ass!"

Hajime's "explanation" did nothing to quell Kouki's wrath. And so, Kouki swung his sword through the air and screamed at him.

"Look, Amanogawa. I'll admit I probably should have held back more, but there was no way I could let another guy see my girlfriend like that. You have to admit... blinding you was the only option."

"Quit trying to make it sound like that's just common sense! I thought you'd crushed my eyes for a second there! Besides, we all knew it was a fake! It's one thing if it was the real person, but I can't believe you'd do that over just a fake."

"Moron. Your eyesight's worthless compared to saving even a fake Yue from disgrace... It's like comparing a pebble and a diamond."

"My eyesight's worth more than a pebble!" Kouki lunged at Hajime, but Shizuku grabbed him and held him back.

"Anyway, it should be easier to search the place now that it's not covered in trees."

Hajime ignored Kouki and set off once more. His nonchalant attitude irked Kouki to no end, but Shizuku and Suzu managed to calm him down. Both Kouki and Hajime often had to be restrained by the girls around them. It wasn't something Hajime was particularly happy to have in common with Kouki,

though.

“Hm?” Before they got very far, Hajime sensed something coming straight toward them. Whatever it was, it was alone and running no faster than a trot. And judging from the mana Hajime sensed from it, it wasn’t very strong either.

Puzzled, he turned back to the forest. Shea had sensed it as well, and her bunny ears tilted in the direction of the trees. Kouki and the others could tell something was closing in from Hajime and Shea’s reactions, and they quickly readied themselves.

“What is it *this* time?” Kouki muttered. With a faint rustling of leaves, a goblin trotted out from between the trees. It had dark-green skin, a twisted, ugly face, and a small, childlike body. Also, it was only wearing dirty rags. Upon spotting Hajime and the others, the goblin let out a startled “Gyaah!” Then, it stopped in its tracks and stared at Hajime. Because of how its face naturally looked, it seemed like it was glaring. Or at the very least, Kouki seemed to think so.

“I won’t let you!” Kouki still hadn’t been able to contribute much to their fights, and that knowledge made him impatient. His desire to be even a little useful spurred him into action without considering the situation. He rushed toward the goblin, his sword held aloft. Yet despite the threat to its life, the goblin remained stationary. In fact, it seemed neither shaken nor aggressive. It simply stood there, blankly watching Hajime.

Kouki did note its strange behavior, but he had no intention of showing mercy to a labyrinth monster. Unwilling to let his guard down for even a second, he swung his sword with all his might. Seconds before his glowing sword sliced the goblin in two—

“What the hell are you doing, moron!?”

“Huh— Bwah!?”

Hajime leaped forward and knocked Kouki away with a rolling kick. Kouki screamed and went flying with such force it was like a dump truck had hit him. He crashed through a number of bushes and vanished from sight.

First a poke in the eyes, now this. Shizuku and Suzu were understandably shocked. They rounded on Hajime and chewed him out.

“Hey, Nagumo-kun, what do you think you’re doing!? This is completely uncalled for! Kouki was just killing a monster this time!”

“Yeah! Is Kouki-kun even alright!? It looks like you sent him flying really far.”

Even Shea and Kaori looked confused as to why Hajime had done that this time. However, Hajime ignored Shizuku and the others and focused his entire attention on the goblin. The girls, who had totally forgotten about the goblin in the commotion, drew their weapons and glared at it as well.

Just then, Kouki came barreling back into the clearing they were in. From the looks of it, he was unhurt. Though Hajime’s kick had looked flashy, he’d made sure to hold back. That didn’t change the fact that Hajime had attacked his own ally a second time, however. And honestly, Kouki looked ready to eviscerate Hajime.

“Nagumo, what the hell are you doing? This isn’t like last time, so you better have a damn good explanation for getting in my way. Or have you totally lost it and are protecting monsters—”

“That’s no monster.”

Kouki was so taken aback he stopped talking, and looked suspiciously at the goblin again. That was all the explanation Hajime gave as he knelt in front of the tiny creature.

Kouki and the others opened their eyes wide in surprise. Shea was the only one who’d guessed what was going through Hajime’s mind. “It can’t be...” she muttered.

Hajime looked the goblin in the eyes, and smiled happily, choosing to speak to it in an overly kind tone...

“It’s you, isn’t it, Yue?”

“Gyaaah!”

“What?”

Hajime’s unbelievable statement left Kouki and the others dumbfounded. However, Hajime took the goblin’s hand without hesitation and muttered something. “I knew it, it’s you...”

“I knew it... It *is* you...”

The goblin smiled and replied in a high-pitched tone.

“Gyaaah!”

“Umm, Hajime-san. Are you sure that’s Yue-san? All I see is a monster...”

“Y-Yeah, it looks just like a monster to me too. Is that really Yue?”

Shea and Kaori stared dubiously at the goblin.

“Gogya... Gugooo... Gyaaah!” The goblin cried, clearly trying to convey something. Its shoulders drooped as it realized it could only make unintelligible noises with its mouth.

However, Hajime understood Yue on such a deep level that even her goblin grunts made sense to him.

“Hm? Mm, so basically right after you’d been teleported you already looked like this?”

“Gyaaah! Gugooo.”

“So your physical body was transformed into something else...”

“Gugyaaah... Gyaaah... Gug.”

“I see... So you lost all your equipment too.”

“Gug... Gogooo.”

“And when you heard the explosion you thought it might be me? Well, you weren’t wrong, but...”

“Gyuuu... Gogooo.”

“You can’t use any of your magic? Well, as far as I can tell you won’t transform any further at least.”

“Gigigigagi.”

“It’ll be fine. This is probably part of the trial as well. If they made it impossible to clear from the start, it wouldn’t be a trial, right?”

“Gyuuu?”

“Yeah, we’re missing Tio and Sakagami too. They’ve probably been transformed like you. Into what, I don’t know... but no need to worry, Yue. We always figure something out in the end.”

“Gyaaah!”

Unbelievable as it seemed, Hajime was conversing fluently with goblin-Yue.

“.....” Kouki and the others watched silently. And eventually, still smiling, Hajime turned back and spoke to them.

“There you have it, guys. Also Kaori, could you try using restoration magic on her?”

“Waitwaitwaitwaitwait, what.”

“There’s something off here, Nagumo-kun. This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Hold up a second, Nagumo-kun. I can’t even follow what’s going on here!”

Kouki, Shizuku, and Suzu all interjected at the same time. Hajime gave them a puzzled look as if he couldn’t understand what there was to be surprised about. Shea on the other hand just mumbled “Yeah, yeah, I should have guessed this is what would happen,” with a resigned smile on her face. Kaori, meanwhile just whispered “This is too weird...” with a distant look.

“Don’t you think it’s weird? Like really weird? How are you able to understand her so easily!?”

“What are you talking about...? She’s speaking normally.”

“All I’m hearing is Gyaaah and Gogooo! Does that even count as a language!? How the heck do you get what she’s saying!? Nagumo-kun, did your Language Comprehension skill get upgraded too or something!?”

Shizuku and Suzu continued pressing Hajime. Him being able to understand the goblin was so incomprehensible to them that they were getting mentally overloaded. Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly, unable to really give them an explanation.

“I guess I’m just, feeling what she’s saying, or something? Like I can tell what she’s saying by the look in her eyes.”

“Well, the two of you *do* always get lost in each other’s eyes. Maybe you just spent so long doing it that you can talk through eye contact now. But you know, that’s still weird.”

“Isn’t it pretty normal to be able to do that with people you love?”

“No it’s not, Hajime-kun. You might think it is, but I can tell you for sure it’s not... What am I going to do? Becoming someone special to Hajime-kun keeps getting harder and harder...” Kaori’s voice grew uncharacteristically bitter. She couldn’t ever see herself reaching Yue’s level. The road ahead was beginning to grow uncertain.

Now that he understood the situation, Kouki’s anger faded away.

“Wait, Nagumo. How could you even tell it was her? The fact that you stopped me means you knew from the start, right?”

“Come on, shouldn’t it be obvious?”

At that, everyone simultaneously heaved a weary sigh. At this point, it wasn’t too hard to guess. Hajime then turned back to the Yue goblin and kept going.

“I’d never mistake Yue just because her appearance changed a little. That’s all there is to it.”

“I see...” came the monotone reply.

“Gyaaah!”

The others were already tired of this conversation. This was probably the one and only time Kouki and Shea were in sync. Also the only time anyone would see a goblin grin like that.

“Anyway, Kaori. Try using restoration magic on her.”

“Ah, umm, okay... Here I go, Yue. Tetragrammaton!”

White light rained down on Yue. As restoration magic was ancient magic, there was theoretically nothing that couldn’t be restored by its power.

“Gyaaah?”

“Huh? How come it’s not working!? L-Let me try again... Tetragrammaton!”

However, Yue remained a goblin. Kaori’s spell had properly gone off; the light

surrounding Yue and the steady drop in Kaori's mana was proof enough of that. Yet Yue remained unchanged.

"Why won't it..." Kaori muttered, dumbfounded.

"Gugyaaa..." Yue's shoulders drooped.

Shea and the others looked at her worriedly. Hajime folded his arms and tapped his forehead thoughtfully. There had to be a logical explanation for what was going on. Yue tugged on Hajime's sleeve and looked up at him with a worried expression. Since she was still a goblin, it looked more like she was glaring though. Upon seeing that, Hajime broke out of his musing and smiled reassuringly at her.

"It'll be alright, Yue. Like I said before, this probably isn't a trap, and since this is a trial they wouldn't want to eliminate us right at the start. There has to be some way to get you back to normal." Hajime's voice was filled with such confidence that Yue and the others smiled.

"My guess is restoration magic didn't work because whatever turned you into a goblin was another form of ancient magic. That magic circle probably had something special built into it."

Since we needed restoration magic to get in here, the labyrinth designer obviously factored in that we'd be able to use it. So they wouldn't have made a trial that could be easily beat with it. Hajime explained his reasoning to everyone, who nodded in agreement.

"In other words, if we keep going forward, we'll find a way to bring you back eventually."

"Gugyaaa..."

"Exactly, there's nothing to worry about. Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Try using this, Yue."

"Gigi?"

Hajime handed her a jeweled earring. Being transformed into a goblin had robbed her of the ability to use magic, but it appeared she could still manipulate her mana just fine. Meaning she could use artifacts. Yue poured

mana into the earring he'd given her, which was a telepathy stone, and finally voiced her thoughts.

"Hajime? Can you hear me, Hajime?" Her voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, much like Tio's when she was in her dragon form. They hadn't been apart for very long, but it still felt like it had been ages since Hajime had heard Yue's voice, so the sound made his expression soften, and he smiled. Kouki and the others had still been a little suspicious, but now that they were hearing Yue's voice, they had no choice but to admit that the goblin in front of them really was Yue.

"Loud and clear, Yue. It sucks that you got transformed... but I'm glad you're safe."

"Mmm... I knew you'd be able to tell."

"Of course. How long do you think I've spent looking at you?"

"Mmm... But I'm still happy. I love you, Hajime."

Hajime's smile grew wider. He'd been tense ever since learning about Yue's disappearance, but now he finally relaxed.

A human and a goblin stared into each other's eyes with more passion than any human-goblin pair likely had before. It appeared even when Yue was a goblin, Hajime was more than ready to flirt with her.

Meanwhile, the rest of the party's eyes glazed over. Eventually, Kaori grew impatient and coughed loudly to get Hajime's attention.

"Ahem! Can we get going now? Also, Yue, I'm glad you're safe."

"Mmm... I'm sorry Hajime loves me more than you even when I look like this, Kaori."

"Are you trying to pick a fight!? Because it sounds like it!"

No matter what she looked like, Yue was still Yue. If her voice hadn't been enough to convince Kaori, that abrasive personality of hers definitely was.

"I promise I'll get you back to normal, Yue-san! No matter what! So until then, just leave everything to me!"

“Mmm... Thanks, Shea. I can’t fight right now, so I’ll be counting on you.”

Yue’s goblin features twisted into a smile. It should have looked grotesque, but knowing Yue was inside made it seem charming.

Kouki walked over and spoke in an apologetic tone.

“Yue-san, I’m sorry I attacked you. I didn’t know it was you... and I almost killed you.”

“Mmm... It’s fine. Besides, I believed you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Wait, does that mean...”

“Because I knew Hajime would stop you.”

“I see...” Kouki’s hopes were dashed instantly. He let out a hollow laugh and trudged away. Shizuku gave him an exasperated look, wondering why he’d even thought for a second Yue might have been into him.

“Now we just need to find Tio and Sakagami... If they’re in the same state as Yue, then maybe we should hurry.”

If they’d been turned into monsters too, it was doubtful other monsters would attack them. However, they were still powerless in the middle of a labyrinth, which was never good.

At Hajime’s words, the others steeled themselves once more. They left the scorched section of forest behind and resumed their search.

Ten minutes later, they spotted something.

“Hajime-san... Even I can tell that must be Tio-san.”

“Yeah, it’s gotta be her.”

“Mmm... No one else acts like that.”

“Looks like we’re all in agreement.”

Hajime stared coldly at the spectacle in front of him. Like he was looking at filth. Shizuku and Suzu, on the other hand, were disgusted, while Kouki found the sight too repulsive to even look at.

“Gugyaaah! Gigyaaah!”

“Higiii!?”

“Gobuuu! Gobbb!”

“Buhiii!?”

Hajime and the others found themselves in front of a group of goblins. The swarm had ganged up on one of their own and were beating it mercilessly. However, they seemed more intent on tormenting the lone goblin than actually killing it. In fact, the goblin being ganged up on had no major injuries to speak of. Had that been all, Hajime would have just assumed it was a case of infighting, or bullying or something.

“She’s... really enjoying it, isn’t she?”

“A goblin making that kind of face is just wrong... That’d have to be censored if it was in an anime.”

“Nagumo... I admit my defeat. You’re a far more accepting man than me.”

“Please don’t put it like that, Amanogawa. You’re making it sound like I actually approve of her perverseness. The truth is, I’ve just given up on curing her...”

As Shizuku had so aptly pointed out, the goblin being tormented had an expression of ecstasy on its face. The only person who’d look that happy being beaten up was the party’s resident perverted dragon.

“Tio, you really... Sorry guys, it’s too late to save her. It’s a shame, but we’ll have to let her go.” Hajime shook his head sadly and turned on his heel. Yue and the others followed suit without hesitation. Even Kouki, who’d normally yell out “You’re going to abandon your own comrade!?” or something to that effect, remained silent. He still couldn’t bring himself to look at Tio.

“Gug? Gyagyaaa!” The perverted goblin finally noticed her comrades were here. She crawled out of the throng of goblins and rushed toward Hajime and the others on all fours, an expression of pure rapture still on her face. She looked more like a cockroach than a goblin, and even her fellow goblins backed away in disgust.

“Guygayagyagya!” Goblin Tio closed in on the party and leaped joyously at

Hajime. She'd gone from looking like a cockroach to resembling Lupin when he did his Lupin Dive. Though her goblin speech was unintelligible, Hajime guessed she was saying something like "Master, I missed you dearly!" So, naturally, Hajime's response was blunt and to the point.

"Get away from me, you pervert." He gave her a merciless uppercut with his prosthetic arm. There was an ominous crack, and Tio spun through the air four times before crashing into a thicket behind her. Unsurprisingly, she'd been smiling even as Hajime had hit her.

"Is she dead?" Goblin Yue peeked into the thicket and found goblin Tio lying motionless on the ground. Yue picked up a branch and poked Tio a few times. She twitched a little. Then, after a few seconds, she jolted upright and nonchalantly got to her feet. It appeared not even a labyrinth's spells could cure Tio's perversion.

"Gyagyagya! Gogogo Gugu! Gugya!"

Though Hajime couldn't understand Tio's goblin-speak the way he could Yue's, it was easy to figure out what Tio was trying to say. After all, the way she shouting and the fact that she was blushing and cupping her cheeks said more than words ever could. Plus, she kept sneaking glances at Hajime.

Now this is just blasphemous. Hajime reached for Donner. With some reluctance, Shea stopped him. Before Hajime could do anything more, Kaori hurriedly handed Tio a telepathy stone.

"Oh, a telepathy stone. Can you hear me now, Master? Thank you so much for greeting me with that exquisite uppercut."

"Tch, so you're just as sturdy in this body, huh? If only you'd died..."

"Mmm!? How merciless! Please, insult me more. Haaah... Haaah... As I suspected, I can't reach the true heights of ecstasy unless it's you, Master. Your faithful servant has returned. Feel free to berate and scorn this ugly creature to your heart's content!"

For her, being transformed into a goblin was just another fetish to indulge in. In a way, Hajime was right. It *was* too late to save Tio.

Tio threw herself at Hajime's feet and shouted, "Boil me or bake me as you

please!” Hajime, however, ignored her and slaughtered the group of goblins that had been beating on her. Once he was done, he silently walked off. The rest of the party had no desire to talk to Tio either, so they followed after him.

“A-Abandonment play? Oh, Master, you tease. Wait, are you truly planning on leaving me behind!? Stop, I cannot walk that fast! I’m still dizzy from your previous attack!”

Tio’s pleas rang out through the sea of trees. However, no one stopped for her.

Large, whip-like branches assailed the party. Razor-sharp leaves filled the air. Nuts and seeds bombarded everyone. Roots lunged up from the ground, their tips pointed spears. Each attack was powerful enough to be fatal.

The monster the party was currently facing was practically the same as the tree-monsters they’d faced in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. Apparently, it was called a Treant. However, the Treant they were facing here was much larger than the one they’d fought in Orcus. It was easily ten meters wide and thirty meters tall. Currently, the only people in combat were Kouki, Shizuku, Suzu, and some ogre-like creature.

“Graaaaaah!” The ogre let out a primitive howl and swung a boulder-sized fist at the Treant. Said ogre was, of course, Ryutarou.

During the course of their search, Hajime and the others had found a pair of ogres locked in a duel to the death. After observing them for a while, they’d come to realize one of the ogres was Ryutarou. The karate-inspired martial arts he’d been using had made it easy to tell him apart from the actual ogre. That, combined with the fact that he’d chosen to accept the other ogre’s challenge instead of run away, had convinced everyone that was Ryutarou. Only he could be that straightforward.

Furthermore, he’d been in such bad shape that had they found him any later, he might really have died. It was only thanks to Kouki jumping in and intervening that Ryutarou hadn’t had his skull bashed in. Once the other ogre had been defeated, Shizuku had given Ryutarou a long lecture about being reckless. It had been quite the sight, seeing a beat-up ogre sitting formally and

hanging his head in front of a little girl. The whole incident had been so surreal that Suzu had burst out laughing.

After they'd successfully met up with Ogre Ryutarou, Hajime and the others had resumed their search. Eventually, they'd found a large tree growing next to an altar. Upon their approach, the tree had sprung to life and started attacking everyone, leading to the present situation.

Judging from the Treant's strength, and the location they'd found it, it was likely this floor's boss. If the party wanted to advance to the next floor, they'd have to defeat it. The reason Kouki and the others had taken on the challenge alone was because he wanted to prove he could be useful. However, because of how strong their foe was, Kaori was providing healing support from the rear.

"Nnnnnngh! It hits like a truck!" A branch as thick as a tree trunk sliced through the air and headed straight for Kouki. He blocked it with his sword, but the force of the blow made him groan in pain.

Shizuku was unable to assist, as she had her hands full striking down the flying shuriken leaves. Suzu had to use her full arsenal of barriers to keep the party safe, while Kouki frantically searched for an opening from which to strike.

"Gah! It's no use. As long as Kaori's here we won't get worn down, but..." Shizuku unleashed shockwaves one after another, slicing down any leaf or branch that drew close. But she grit her teeth as she realized that she wouldn't be able to push any further.

Now that they'd experienced firsthand just how ferocious a labyrinth could be, they realized Hajime had been right when he'd said they would die if they challenged one on their own. Shizuku knew that without Hajime's help they would have died long ago. The confidence they'd built up during their time in the Great Orcus Labyrinth had been torn to shreds. Shizuku weighed her options, then yelled out her plan.

"Kouki! Use Divine Wrath!"

"I can't! It takes too long to chant!"

"Don't worry, we'll protect you! Trust in us!"

Kouki hesitated over whether or not to agree to Shizuku's plan. The Treant

they were facing was stronger even than the monsters the demons had brought with them. It was only thanks to Kaori's support that they hadn't been wiped out. But even with her help, a moment's lapse in concentration would see them killed. No sane person would leave themselves defenseless in front of such an opponent.

However, it was also true that their current strategy lacked the firepower to defeat the Treant. At this rate, they would eventually lose.

Besides... Kouki thought back to Hajime and Yue's reunion. About how absolute their trust was in each other. Despite Yue's goblin form, Hajime had instantly realized who she was. Yue, too, had possessed absolute faith that Hajime would stop Kouki from killing her. Honestly, he'd been a little jealous of their unwavering devotion to each other.

It was that jealousy that drove Kouki to his final decision. After all, he had comrades he trusted too. This was his chance to prove his bonds were just as strong as Hajime's.

"Alright, I'm counting on you guys!"

"Yep, just leave it to us. Ryutarou, Suzu, tighten your defenses!"

"Roger!"

"You got it!"

Kouki raised his sword high and stopped moving. As he was concentrating solely on casting Divine Wrath, he was defenseless. The Treant wasn't going to let such an opportunity pass. It shot branches at Kouki from both sides, while raining a torrent of leaves from above and firing a barrage of nuts from the front.

"Reject all malice and let this be a holy ground that denies thine enemies passage! Hallowed Ground!" Suzu had been ready for the attack, and she pulled out her strongest barrier to defend against it. Cracks appeared in the dome as it weathered the Treant's initial barrage.

"Mrrrrrrrrgh!"

The continuous assault eventually proved too much for Suzu's Hallowed

Ground, and it shattered. Suzu was thrown backward from the impact, and Shizuku and Ryutarou rushed in to fill the gap.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Uoooooooooh!”

With spirited cries, the two of them unleashed every technique at their disposal. But even their best wasn't enough to let them survive unscathed, and the two of them were quickly covered in deep cuts. Blood spurted from their bodies and dyed the ground red.

“Holy Blessing.” Kaori cast a single spell, and Shizuku's and Ryutarou's wounds vanished instantly.

Holy Blessing was an intermediate-class spell, but with Kaori's ungodly mana reserves, she could easily power it up to an advanced-class spell. Her healing spells worked so fast that it was like they were rewinding time. Even factoring in the increase in power being in Noint's body gave her, Kaori was an unbelievably skilled healer.

Suzu once again cast Hallowed Ground, buying the party another few seconds. Shizuku and Ryutarou regrouped, ready to fend off the next assault. The cycle of Suzu erecting a barrier, it shattering, Shizuku and Ryutarou guarding for a few seconds, Kaori healing them, then Suzu recasting her barrier repeated three times.

By now, Kouki had nearly finished casting. A massive amount of mana was concentrated within his sword, which was glowing brighter than the sun. He tightened his grip on the hilt and sucked in a deep breath.

“Alright everyone, let's do this! Divine Wrath!” After saying that, he swung his sword down, unleashing his most powerful attack. A dazzling shockwave of mana ripped across the ground, obliterating any leaves, branches, and nuts in its wake. It then slammed into the Treant's main body in an explosion of light.

“We did it!” Kouki yelled jubilantly.

Hajime, who was waiting safely in the rear, muttered, “Ah, that's a death flag...” and Kouki had stepped right on it. The light faded and the dust cleared, revealing a wounded but still very much alive Treant.

“You’re... kidding me...” Kouki gasped, dumbfounded. He wasn’t the only one surprised. Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou were just as shocked. Until now, there was nothing Kouki’s ultimate attack hadn’t been able to kill.

Divine Wrath was the most powerful offensive spell in existence, the hero’s trump card. When he’d just arrived in Tortus and been low-leveled, it might have been possible for something to withstand Kouki’s Divine Wrath, but not after he’d gotten so much training in.

And yet, the Treant remained undaunted. Sure, it had been damaged a fair amount, but those wounds only made it more ferocious. This whole time, Kouki had believed himself capable of clearing a labyrinth. He’d been certain he’d be fine. After all, Hajime had done it. To Kouki, it seemed impossible for there to be something Hajime could do that he couldn’t. However now, he was forced to face reality. Even his most powerful ability had failed to bring down a labyrinth monster.

No, this can’t be real. There has to be some kind of mistake! Kouki shook his head in denial. Just then, Shizuku shouted to gain his attention.

“Kouki, look! You didn’t land a direct hit!”

“Huh?” Kouki followed Shizuku’s gaze and saw a mountain of wooden splinters and tree trunks. It appeared the Treant had used a bunch of trees as a shield to guard against Kouki’s Divine Wrath.

Where on earth did it get all those trees from? There wasn’t anything right before I attacked... Kouki’s question was answered seconds later by the Treant. The monster glowed with a faint light, and seconds later trees started sprouting from its roots.

“Th-This is its special magic!?” Suzu gasped. Her guess was spot-on. The Treant’s special magic was “Regrowth.” It allowed it to sprout as many trees as it pleased, and control them freely.

“O-Oh no! Let this be a— Hallowed Ground!” Suzu quickly realized her full chant wouldn’t make it in time, and shortened it. A shimmering dome of light surrounded the party just as a flood of attacks came in.

Sharpened branches and roots slammed into the barrier one after another.

This time the attacks weren't coming just from the Treant, but also from the trees it had created. Branches filled the air, blotting out the sky. The barrage was so thick Suzu and the others couldn't even see the Treant anymore. A makeshift Hallowed Ground had no chance of withstanding such an attack. Cracks had already started to appear all over the barrier, and it would shatter in another few seconds. And this time, it seemed unlikely that Kouki and the others would be able to hold out long enough for her to cast it again. Kouki himself knew it was far too optimistic to think they could.

"I can't... hold on any longer..." Suzu grit her teeth as her mana drained away at an alarming rate. Watching her struggle to hold on snapped Kouki back to his senses. In a way, he was relieved. It wasn't that his trump card was ineffective, it had just been blocked. But regardless, the fact that it had meant that Suzu was now suffering.

Kouki banished the worries and hesitation he'd felt until now. And prepared to use his second trump card, Limit Break. Using up two of his trump cards this early in the labyrinth wasn't a wise move, but Kouki realized he'd been naive in thinking he could survive without them. Before he could activate the skill though, Kaori intervened.

"Transient Infinity!"

Transient Infinity was a restoration spell that maintained a person or object in its original state for as long as the caster supplied mana. Silver light enveloped Suzu's cracked Hallowed Ground, returning it to the pristine condition it had been in upon being cast. No matter how much the Treant hammered on the barrier, it was unable to put even a dent on it. Any damage dealt was instantly reverted thanks to Kaori's spell.

"Whoa, thanks Kaori!" Suzu glanced over her shoulder, and Kaori saw the tears in her eyes.

She must have been really scared. Or maybe she's just really relieved now. Kaori smiled at her and nodded reassuringly. Kouki and the others relaxed a little as well and turned back to see how Hajime was doing.

Like the three of them, Hajime and his party were also surrounded by an army of trees, but they were having no trouble whatsoever dealing with the

onslaught of wood and leaves. Hajime had deployed four of his Cross Bits, and they'd formed a pyramid-shaped barrier around everyone. Since the barrier was made of spatial magic, it was nigh impossible to penetrate. Not even the Treant's strongest attacks could crack it. He'd created an impenetrable fortress for himself.

"Looks like they're at their limit. I thought they'd be able to do a bit better, but..." Hajime muttered to himself as he gauged the expressions on Kouki and the others' faces.

"Hmm, if that hero guy used Limit Break, won't they be able to manage somehow?"

"Maybe. If he uses that powered-up version of it, definitely. But the recoil that comes afterward will be a problem... Even healing magic can't do much for the exhaustion that comes with using Limit Break."

"Mmm... Restoration magic should be able to, though."

At Yue's words, Kaori bit her lip.

"I'd like to preserve my mana as much as possible. Restoration magic takes up a lot, and I'm the only one capable of using it right now, so... This is still just the beginning of the labyrinth, so there's no telling what's waiting for us further down, and I already used up one of my spells..."

"Indeed. In that case, I suppose you should take care of things before that boy attempts to use Limit Break."

Hajime was a little worried that Kouki and the others wouldn't be recognized as people who'd contributed to conquering the dungeon if he kept helping them like this. And if they weren't able to obtain ancient magic, then he wouldn't be able to use them as pawns for the upcoming battle against the Noint army.

That was why he'd wanted Kouki and the others to handle this monster, so they'd have proof of their contribution. However, Kaori definitely had a point. There was no telling what was waiting for them further down, so wasting more mana than necessary was not a wise decision. Sure, he did have a stock of jewelry charged with mana still, but Yue and Tio weren't in fighting condition,

and Hajime had no idea when they 'd be back to normal.

To make matters worse, their equipment had been taken from them as well. If they got too cocky, Hajime didn't doubt they'd find the tables turned on them.

"Master, I can more or less guess what your worries are, but I think you needn't concern yourself so much with whether or not they achieve any results in battle."

"Hm? Why not? Does it have something to do with the theme of this labyrinth?" Hajime tilted his head, and Tio nodded. She might have been an incorrigible pervert, but her vast wisdom and intellect meant her words were worth heeding. Though it didn't change the fact that she was a pervert.

"Correct. This is merely conjecture, but I believe Haltina's labyrinth is meant to test our bonds."

"Our bonds, huh...? Come to think of it, the stone epitaph at the entrance said something like that too."

"Precisely. Those words referred not only to forging a bond with beastmen and having them guide us here but also to the fact that our bonds would be tested within this labyrinth. Discerning which of our comrades were fake, finding and accepting those who were transformed, all of this is testing our bonds. Testing whether we will protect our powerless partners, or leave them to die."

"I see... If that really is the goal of this labyrinth, then all of these trials would make sense. And... Amanogawa's already accepted Sakagami and fought together with him. Hell, he even entrusted his life to him back there. Since they've already proven all that, it shouldn't be a problem if I finish everything else off from here on, huh. As long as Amanogawa and the others keep overcoming the trials that test their bonds, anyway."

"That is what I suspect. But remember, this is still conjecture."

Conjecture it may have been, but it was backed up by a good deal of evidence. If Tio was right, then this labyrinth, which wasn't interested in testing its challengers' martial prowess, was probably the most fitting one to have

brought Kouki and the others along for.

Hajime mulled over Tio's words one more time and glanced over at the giant Treant. Its attacks had grown even more ferocious, so it was getting irritated that it couldn't break through Suzu's Hallowed Ground or Hajime's spatial barrier. There were so many leaves and branches flying around that Hajime could barely see in front of him. At that, Hajime made his decision.

"Taniguchi, I'm gonna blow everything away. If you don't want to die, keep your barrier up no matter what."

"Say what?" Cold sweat poured down Suzu's back as she digested Hajime's warning. Kouki and the others looked curiously over at Suzu. And a second later, their jaws fell open in shock.

Hajime had taken out his specially crafted chakram and was controlling them with the spirit stone ring on his finger. His chakrams tore through the storm of trees and branches, shredding everything in their path. There were more than twenty of them whirling through the air. A few of them flew above the trees and started spraying a black liquid down on them.

The black liquid was, of course, the same flamrock tar that burned at 3000 degrees Celsius. He was transporting it from his Treasure Trove via the spatial gates he'd attached to his chakrams.

Shea, who'd realized what Hajime was planning, balked.

"Whoa..." she muttered as she looked over at Hajime. After all, while Hajime's method was the most effective way of wiping out the forest of trees that had sprouted in front of them, it was also quite extreme.

Hajime, however, ignored her chastising gaze and threw a tiny ember through one of the chakrams next to him.

The forest was bathed in flames for a second time. The Treant ignored the flames and continued its assault, but it wasn't able to last very long in the hellfire Hajime had drowned it in. Though it had no mouth, the party could have sworn they heard a scream as the flames burnt it to a crisp. The updraft caused by the heat made the flames condense into a whirling tornado which burned so hot it liquified everything it touched.

Hajime really had created a hell on earth. If Suzu or the others stepped even one foot outside her Hallowed Ground, they'd be scorched so thoroughly not even ashes would remain.

But while the tar burned hot, it didn't burn for long. Within fifteen minutes, Hajime's flames had exhausted themselves. Because the Treant and its trees had thrashed about in their final moments, the fire had spread to the regular trees in the forest too, but Kaori's timely water spells had prevented the entire forest from burning down. As Kaori was the only mage in Hajime's party still capable of combat, she was being run pretty ragged.

"We've already met up with Yue and the others, you could have just let the whole forest burn, you know...?"

"Hajime-kun. It's not right to destroy everything around you just because you can."

"Wherever Hajime-san goes, destruction is sure to follow... If my dad had seen this, he'd probably start thinking up another new nickname for you right about now."

Unable to meet Kaori and Shea's gazes, Hajime looked away awkwardly. Honestly, he didn't care even if he burned the labyrinth to the ground, but when even Shea gave him that look, he felt a little guilty.

However, Yue, who was with Hajime on everything, and Tio, who preferred her master to be a merciless monster, seemed to agree with his declaration that destroying the labyrinth was no big deal. For the moment, opinions within Hajime's party were split evenly.

"That just now was... No, forget it. I've already seen rocket launchers and cluster bombs, so I shouldn't be surprised at this point. This is normal for Nagumo-kun. I need to get it together..."

"Don't worry, Shizushizu. I totally get what you're feeling, but you'll get used to how crazy everything is eventually... I hope. Anyway, it'll be alright."

Suzu and Shizuku stared at each other with dead eyes. They'd just witnessed a crimson inferno up close and personal, and it had done a number on their mental state. Ogre Ryutarou looked worriedly over at the two of them, but he

couldn't find any words to say. After all, even he'd broken out in a cold sweat seeing flames inches from his face.

A short distance away, Kouki glared at Hajime and bit his lip. Even his strongest attack hadn't been able to defeat the Treant, yet Hajime had taken care of it like it was nothing. He'd come here to shorten the gap between him and Hajime, but he was beginning to worry if he'd even be able to obtain the ancient magic if Hajime ended up saving them from everything. After a while, Kouki shook his head in an attempt to dispel such negative thoughts, then whirled around in a panic when he heard a creaking noise behind him.

"Is it regenerating?" Just as Kouki said that the scorched ground began to shake, and a tree sprouted from the earth. It grew at a prodigious rate, and in seconds it was the size of the Treant Hajime had just burned. It really had regenerated.

Kouki and the others instantly drew their weapons, but the restored Treant didn't attack. Instead, its bark started to split open, similar to how the Grand Tree had when it had first let them inside.

"I figured this was the mid-boss, but I didn't think it'd also be the door to the next stage." Hajime nodded to himself and strode confidently into the opening made by Treant. Yue and the others followed suit. Then, Kouki and his group sheathed their weapons and hurried after them.

The inside of this tree looked as unassuming as the last. However, the moment they all entered, the bark closed in around them and the area around their feet began to glow.

"Guess we're getting teleported again..."

Hajime hugged Yue and Tio close, noting that this magic circle looked almost identical to the previous one. Chances were, if the magic circle wanted to separate the party, hugging the two goblins wouldn't do much. But still, he figured it was better than doing nothing.

Since neither of them was capable of fighting in their current state, even a weak monster could kill them easily. Even if there was a slim chance of this doing anything, Hajime still felt compelled to do *something* at the very least. He couldn't afford to let either of them die.

“Hajime...”

“M-Master... if you’re this kind to me, I won’t know how to respond.”

The two of them had picked up on Hajime’s worry, and they smiled happily. Though they were still goblins, anyone would have been able to tell those smiles were ones of joy. And for once, Tio seemed embarrassed. Shea and Kaori tried to throw themselves at Hajime too, but they were a moment too late. Just before their arms reached him, the light swallowed the party.

Chirp, chirp, chirp. The soft chirping of birds, along with the sunlight filtering through the curtains, heralded the arrival of dawn. Annoyed, the resident of the room grabbed his pillow and covered his head with it. However, there was a demon in this room that wouldn’t let him sleep.

Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep! A loud ringing noise assailed the ears of the boy attempting to sleep.

“Ugh...” The boy tried to dive further into his fortress of bedsheets and pillows, but ignoring the demon’s wail proved to be impossible. He reluctantly stretched an arm out and started indiscriminately slapping the desk next to his bed. He’d had a little over a decade’s worth of experience quelling this demon, so on the third try he was able to bash it on the head, silencing it. But while he was well-versed in demon busting, it didn’t change the fact it took a lot out of him. The boy’s arm flopped, drained of all strength. He then sluggishly returned to his fortress, and stopped moving. A second later, he was woken once more.

“Hajime! Wake uuuuuup! No sleeping in, get up!”

He heard a familiar voice, his mother’s, calling him from downstairs. Half-awake, Hajime processed his mother’s words and decided to resist to the last. He pulled his covers over him and tightened the defenses of his fortress.

“Guess he’s not listening. Can you go get him for me? Sorry I have to ask you every day.”

“Ah...”

Hajime’s mom spoke loudly, to make sure he could hear her. Considering who she was probably talking to, regardless of how badly she wanted Hajime up, he

had no intention of leaving his bed. After all, being woken by the person Hajime's mom had enlisted was one of the few joys of his daily life. There was a sharp rap on his door. Hajime didn't respond, but the person on the other side seemed to have been expecting that and opened the door. They tiptoed over to where Hajime was sleeping and poked his curled-up body.

"Wake up, Hajime..."

"....."

Still no response. Though he was only partially conscious, Hajime wanted to hear this beautiful girl's voice for a while longer.

"If you don't wake up..."

"....."

The girl caressed his back. The soft sensation caused Hajime to involuntarily smile.

"I'll have to rape you."

"Okay I'm getting up, so please don't say such dangerous things this early in the morning."

Chills ran down Hajime's spine, and he quickly jumped out of bed. A tuft of his black hair stood on end, and his brown-black eyes struggled to focus. Standing in front of him was a blonde-haired crimson-eyed beauty. She smiled seductively and licked her lips. At the sight, Hajime grimaced and spoke up.

"Morning, Yue."

"Mmm... Morning, Hajime."

Hajime stretched, glad that he was able to see his girlfriend first thing in the morning. His parents both teased him as he went down for breakfast, after which he left for school together with Yue.

Hajime stifled a yawn as he walked down the familiar path to school, and Yue looked up at him curiously.

Every one of her gestures is just so cute! Yue's looks captivated everyone they passed by as well, and plenty of people accidentally walked into poles or fell

into ditches because they were staring at her. Yue remained oblivious to the carnage she was causing, though. She dashed ahead of Hajime and whirled around to face him. Since she was wearing a standard school uniform, her skirt flew up a little as she did so. Her golden-blond hair shone in the sunlight and gave off a faint smell of shampoo. She continued walking backward in step with Hajime and scrutinized his expression.

“Did you stay up late again?”

“Yeah, I got a little too engrossed in the work dad gave me. By the time I realized it, the sun was starting to rise.”

“It’s good that you’re passionate about your hobbies, but don’t overdo it. You need to take care of your body.”

“Yeah, I will.”

The two were just having a normal conversation, but it looked like they were flirting. Hajime and Yue had been dating for a while, but the flames of their passion hadn’t dimmed in the slightest. At the beginning, Yue had been so enamored with Hajime that she’d forcefully convinced his parents to let her homestay with them.

That had caused quite the uproar among the people who knew him. Especially since Hajime was a hardcore otaku who spent most of his time playing games or helping his dad make games. He was the last person anyone had expected to land a beautiful girlfriend. Hajime’s mother had worried he had somehow mastered the art of hypnosis and tricked Yue into being his girlfriend, while his father assumed he’d somehow manifested the power to make his waifu real. And when Yue had transferred into Hajime’s school and announced that she was Hajime’s girlfriend, the whole school had started talking about it.

Afterward, Hajime had been forced to deal with the hordes of jealous guys who’d hounded him day and night. Yue’d had her own share of problems, and was called out by the school’s girls day after day. Finally, after a few months, things had reached the point where they were calming down. The reason Hajime could walk to school so leisurely now was because he’d braved such a storm of trials. Hajime stared at Yue’s glistening golden hair and thought back to how he’d first met her.

He'd chanced upon her getting assaulted by a mugger, and after a vicious struggle had successfully managed to fight him off and save Yue. As thanks, she'd kissed him on the neck. Even now, he could clearly remember the sensation of that kiss. After that, they'd started dating.

Honestly, I'm kind of surprised an otaku like me managed to beat up a mugger in the first place. I guess humans really do display amazing feats of strength when they're desperate. He smiled to himself. That really had been reckless. But as he sifted through his memories, he realized something was off.

Wait, come to think of it, where was that place I first met Yue anyway? And why was I there? Yue was obviously a foreigner, and the fact that she was homestayng at Hajime's house meant she must have come from a different country. Hajime also vaguely remembered first meeting Yue in a foreign country. But he couldn't for the life of him remember which country that was. Once he realized that, a bunch of other contradictory elements started popping up in his memories. The more he questioned his present situation, the more he felt as though something wasn't right.

"Hajime!"

"Whoa. What's up? Why'd you suddenly yell like that?"

He was shocked out of his musings by Yue's uncharacteristically loud voice. Upon returning to reality, Hajime noticed Yue was staring intently at him.

"I kept calling your name, but you ignored me..."

"Wait, really!? I'm so sorry! I was just lost in thought..."

Yue huffed and looked away. It seemed his indifference had really hurt her. He tried to comfort her as best he could, his earlier doubts completely forgotten.

—Fall into bliss. Look only at me—

Yue's whisper was so quiet it didn't reach Hajime's ears. He smiled gently at her, glad she was at his side.

They reached school without incident and as Hajime was putting on his school slippers, he felt something soft touch his back. Someone was hugging him from

behind. No, not just someone. Hajime knew instantly who it was just from the sensation. It could only be her.

“Hajime-saaan! Yue-saaan! Good morning!”

“Mmm... Morning, Shea.”

“Sh-Shea-san! How many times do I have to tell you not to hug him!? Get off already!”

“Don’t be like that! How cruel do you have to be to steal my only happiness away from me!? You better make up for it by marrying me!”

“How on earth are those two related!? Anyway, get off him! Look, Yue’s eyes have already glazed over! She’s glaring at me too now!”

Hajime didn’t let the joy he felt at being smothered by Shea’s breasts show on his face, and he silently pushed her away. Shea was an exchange student who’d transferred into Hajime’s class some time back. The reason she was so attached to him was because a while back he’d also saved her and her family from a gang of muggers. Though she looked like a mature beauty, her trademark hairband and innocent smile made her appear childlike. Still, she had enough admirers to have her own dedicated fan club. If Hajime was honest with himself, he didn’t hate all the attention Shea gave him. He was a guy, after all. If he’d met Shea first, she might have been his girlfriend right now instead of Yue. However, there was no point in thinking about such what-if scenarios. As it was, Shea’s assertiveness was a problem for Hajime, since he already had Yue. Hajime racked his brains, trying to figure out why his memories weren’t matching up with Shea’s current appearance. But before he could arrive at an answer, Shea and Yue wrapped themselves around his arms. *Seriously though, what kind of cliched set-up is this? I just coincidentally happen to save two different girls from muggers, and they just happen to both fall in love with me? Wait a second. Did Shea always wear a headband like that? I thought she was supposed to have...* Hajime racked his brains, trying to figure out why his memories weren’t matching up with Shea’s current appearance. But before he could arrive at an answer, Shea and Yue wrapped themselves around his arms.

“Why do you look so confused? We need to hurry, or we’ll be late for class.”

“Mmm... I don’t want to be lectured by the teacher again.”

They pressed their breasts against him, and Hajime's thoughts were overwritten. Unable to resist, Hajime was dragged off to class by the two of them.

Class? Teacher? Why does this all sound so strange? Everything they're saying makes sense... right? I guess the weird thing is they're the ones saying it? Their conversation was a perfectly standard one, but Hajime couldn't help but feel uneasy.

The moment Hajime entered the classroom he was met by the jealous glares of all the guys in the class. Thanks to Yue's intervention, they were no longer bullying him directly, but those gazes still hurt.

Is it just me or does this all feel a little... nostalgic? But why on earth should it feel nostalgic? Hajime couldn't fathom why his normal, everyday life felt so off. Confused, he took his seat. The moment he sat down, another girl, one of his classmates, came bounding over to him.

"Good morning, Hajime-kun! You barely made it on time today too. I think you should at least make an effort to come earlier."

"....."

Kaori Shirasaki, a girl who's looks rivaled Yue and Shea's, looked down at Hajime. Before Yue and Shea's arrival, she'd been the undisputed most popular girl in school. And for some reason, she too had a crush on Hajime. She'd actually been infatuated with him for quite some time, but Hajime hadn't realized it until just recently. Back then he'd always brushed her off with a troubled smile, but now things were different. *Why does it feel like... I've heard that line before... Dammit, what's going on? Why does all this feel so freaking nostalgic? I've been doing this every day for a while now, there shouldn't be anything nostalgic about it.*

"Hajime-kun... why are you ignoring me? Did I do something to make you mad?" Her voice trembled a little, and Hajime looked up to see her almost in tears.

Realizing he'd been ignoring her for almost a minute, he hurriedly replied.

"Oh no, that's not it. I'm really sorry, I just got lost in thought. Morning,

Shirasaki-san.”

“Oh, thank goodness that was all. Anyway, Hajime-kun, how many times do I have to tell you to just call me Kaori?”

She puffed out her cheeks in mock anger. The gesture was so cute that quite a few of the spectating boys got nosebleeds. Naturally, the fact that Kaori’s gestures were directed toward Hajime also fanned the flames of their jealousy.

“But Shirasaki-san, I...”

“Kaori. Call me Kaori.”

“But...”

“Ka-o-ri.”

“U-Umm, K-Kao...” Overwhelmed, Hajime finally started to give in. But before he could finish saying Kaori’s name, Yue came to his rescue.

“...Stop bothering Hajime.” She stepped protectively in front of Hajime and put her hands on her hips. In return, Kaori got into a fighting stance. Yue did the same and crouched low.

“Of course you’d get in the way, Yue. Good morning, I guess.”

“Mmm... Good morning, Kaori. I guess.”

They spat out their morning greetings as though it physically pained them to do so. The surrounding temperature dropped to absolute zero as the two officially recognized love rivals stared each other down. Despite how it seemed, the two didn’t hate each other. If anything, they were more like best friends who fought a lot. Hajime found it strange how they seemed enjoy each other’s company despite how often they quarreled.

Before they could start fighting in earnest though, the bell rang and the teacher walked into the classroom. Yue and Kaori gave each other one final glare before reluctantly returning to their seats. First period was English, taught by Tio. She was a beautiful teacher, who, like seemingly every other pretty woman, was enamored with Hajime. She’d often tease him or sexually harass him during class. Today too, she shot Hajime a flirtatious glance as she walked into the room.

“Tch... Someone fire her already.”

“Huh!? Haaah... Haaah...”

At this point, the whole class knew about her deviant sexual tendencies. Even Hajime, who was normally a mild-mannered individual, couldn't help but be compelled to insult Tio.

Huh? How come everything else feels weird, but this feels normal? The strange disconnect Hajime had been feeling until now vanished. This particular scene just seemed to fit so perfectly. Throughout the rest of the day, Hajime was struck by a few other things that seemed out of place, but also experienced moments where everything seemed to fit together. It felt like someone inside his mind was yelling something at him, but the words were a little too faint to make out.

After school, Hajime, Yue, and Shea went to visit a nearby kindergarten. They were there to pick up Myu, their neighbor Remia's daughter. Remia was a single mom, and work often kept her busy, so Hajime occasionally went to pick up Myu in her stead. Because Remia had known Hajime for a while, she trusted him to not only pick up Myu, but also to look after her until she got home from work. Myu saw them the moment they arrived and tottered over.

“Ah, it's Da— Onii-chan! And Shea-oneechan and Yue-oneechan!”

A beaming smile split her face. Hajime smiled back and caught Myu in his arms.

“Myu, how many times do I have to tell you jumping like that is dangerous? Also, you were about to call me Daddy again weren't you? I told you not to call me that.”

Cold sweat poured down Hajime's back as he scolded Myu. Since Myu's father had died before she was born, she'd taken to calling Hajime--the only older boy to spend this much time with her--Daddy. However, that nickname was likely to cause misunderstandings. Remia was still a young widow and considered quite the beauty by most of their neighbors. If her daughter started calling another man Daddy, well it wasn't hard to see how that would be interpreted. Unsavory rumors would start to spread.

In fact, Myu had already slipped up once in front of the kindergarten teachers. That alone had caused a huge uproar. Fortunately, it appeared Remia had resolved the misunderstanding before things got out of hand. But if Myu called Hajime Daddy in the middle of the street, well, his social life was finished. So his concern was understandable.

Though for some reason, the looks Myu's teachers had been giving Hajime recently made him worry Remia might actually be up to something. He tried not to think too much about it, grabbed Myu's hand, and started walking home. He watched with an awkward smile as Yue and Shea tried to convince Myu to call them Mommy. As he gazed at the setting sun, he felt a sense of contentment wash over him. The disconnect he'd felt earlier this morning had all but vanished.

"Hey D... Onii-chan! Are you listening to me?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. I spaced out there for a second."

By way of apology, Hajime scooped Myu up into his arms. That was enough to assuage her anger, but Myu pretended to still be mad in order to make Hajime hold her for longer. Her cute antics stamped out the last of the discomfort Hajime had been feeling. Yue and Shea smiled at him, but then Shea suddenly closed her eyes and questioned him.

"Hmm? Hajime-san, did you hear that?"

"Wha? Did something happen?" Shea's hearing was better than most people, so Hajime didn't doubt that she might have picked up on something. Hajime strained his ears, and he was able to faintly make out the sound of one girl and a group of guys arguing with each other. The group exchanged glances, then ran off toward the alley the sound was coming from.

"Wow, this is cliched..."

"...No enemy of women shall go unpunished."

As expected, a group of guys were heckling a lone girl. Hajime looked down at Myu and considered his options. The enemy wasn't terribly strong. Judging by their posture, they were garden-variety thugs. Even if they'd been armed, they wouldn't be much of a match for Hajime, Yue, or Shea.

While Hajime was still analyzing the situation, Shea walked up to the group of guys. Noticing that someone was approaching, the guys turned around. Upon spotting Shea's gorgeous figure, their surprised expressions transformed into vulgar grins. They obviously thought Shea would be an easy mark.

Huh? Driven on by a dark impulse to kill, Hajime reached towards his right thigh. Before he could do anything though, Shea wedged herself in between the group of guys. From there, it was a slaughter. She struck down the thugs with a superb display of martial skill.

Oh yeah, how could I forget. Shea can handle guys like these no problem. Now that he thought about it, it made sense for Shea to be that strong. There was nothing strange about it. That was just how she was. It was exactly as Hajime remembered.

Shea exchanged a few words with the terrified girl she'd just saved, then returned to Hajime's side. As she passed by Yue, she gave her a high-five.

"You're so cool, Shea-oneechan!"

"Fufufu. Praise me more. Don't worry Myu, when you get bigger I'll teach you how to fight just like me."

"Mmm... I have a lot to teach you too, Myu."

Just don't teach her anything weird. Hajime thought to himself as he watched Myu jump up and down. With that incident settled, the group once again headed towards home. The disconnect that had vanished before returned as Hajime realized there was something strange about his earlier actions.

What was I trying to do with my right hand back there? It felt like I was searching for something... Just then, he realized something else. He'd analyzed the situation like a hardened warrior. Shaken, he looked down at his hands.

"...ake... up..."

In the distance, he heard a faint voice that sounded similar to yet different from his own.

That night. Hajime had already finished eating dinner and taking his bath and

was now lying in his bed. He'd been so lost in thought the whole time that he hadn't even remembered to dry his hair properly. The sense that something was wrong kept growing stronger. Though it was extremely faint, he was almost certain he could hear a voice calling out to him. It struck something deep down inside him, something primal. The voice was one of denial. It was screaming at him to reject this seemingly happy life.

"Just what am I unsatisfied with, anyway?"

As he scratched his head in annoyance, he heard a knock on his door.

"...Hajime?"

"Is that you, Yue? Come in."

After a brief pause, Yue opened the door and walked inside. All she had on was a negligee. Her silky, pale skin was on full display. As she crawled onto Hajime's bed, she noticed his hair was still wet and she poked him in mild rebuke. He reluctantly got into a sitting position, and she started drying his hair.

"Mmm... All dry. If you sleep with your hair wet, you'll catch a cold."

"Yeah, you've got a point. Thanks, Yue."

"Mmm..."

Yue hugged Hajime from behind and started rubbing her face against the back of his neck, like a spoiled cat. She then pushed her hands inside Hajime's shirt and started caressing his chest. Hajime let himself sink into bliss. Or at least, he tried to. For some reason, Yue's actions only made his sense of unease grow. He couldn't understand why he was feeling like this, and it made him frustrated.

I have a fulfilling life and a girlfriend who's completely devoted to me. There's nothing more I could hope to ask for. So who is it inside of me... that keeps yelling at me to reject reality!?

He tried to focus on Yue and banish the unease welling up within him. As if sensing his discomfort, Yue leaned close and whispered into his ear.

"...It's alright. You don't have to worry about anything. I'll make sure you're happy, Hajime."

"Yue..."

“So focus only on me. It’s okay, I’ll always be here by your side. I’ll always be everything you want.”

“.....” Hajime slowly started to nod off. *If only I could fall asleep just like this. Then I wouldn’t have to think about anything. I mean, I have Yue right here with me. There can’t be anything more important than that... can there? As long as I have her, I don’t need anything else. Even if I lost everything else... I’d still have my ideal girlfriend with me. That’s all I need to...*

Hajime let his thoughts trail off, and relaxed his body. He entrusted himself to the warmth of Yue’s body and let the sweet fog of sleep blanket his mind. But just before he fell fully asleep—

“As long as we watch each other’s backs, we’ll be stronger than anyone. We’ll beat down anyone who stands against us and bust our way out of this shitty world.”

Someone screamed those words inside his head. Hajime drove off the fog of sleep, and his eyes snapped open.

“Well, how about coming with me then?”

He heard his own voice again. It sounded different from his current voice, but it was undoubtedly his. Memories rose one after another to the surface of his mind.

I remember now. That was what I told Yue way back when in the bottom of the abyss. When I asked her if she wanted to come back to my world with me. Scenes of a world that wasn’t earth flashed through his head.

It was then that Hajime remembered Yue’s smile. The smile she’d shown him when he’d offered to take her with him. That was the first time he’d seen Yue, who was normally expressionless, smile so genuinely. It had been like watching a sunflower bloom. Thinking back on it now, Hajime realized it was then that he’d fallen for her. After that, they’d fought through numerous life-and-death situations and stepped foot on Tortus’ surface once more. There they’d sworn to protect each other, find a way home, and beat down anything that stood in their path.

It had been almost instinctual. Just as Hajime had been about to surrender

himself to this dream, he'd remembered the oath he'd made. Hajime shook off the illusion that looked like Yue and rose to his feet.

A perfect girlfriend? A perfect world? Just how stupid can I get!? Hajime rubbed his eyes and ground his teeth together. He couldn't forgive himself for being so weak, for nearly succumbing to this false happiness.

Pathetic. I feel like throwing up. How could I forget the promise I made? He slapped his cheeks as hard as he could, both to punish himself and to clear his head.

The sound reverberated throughout the room, startling Yue. She hurriedly got to her feet and grabbed Hajime's hand. However, he coldly shook her off. Yue brought her hand back to her chest, looking forlorn.

"Don't fuck with me..." Hajime muttered angrily as he glared at the illusory Yue Haltina's labyrinth had no doubt created.

"Hajime, what's wrong?"

Hajime looked nothing like the docile boy he had a few moments ago. He ignored Yue's question and let out some rather heartfelt words.

"Hey, Yue. You're the most important thing in the world to me. As long as I have you, I don't need anything else."

"...Hearing that makes me so happy, Hajime." Yue was initially taken aback, but then she smiled happily. But despite his words, Hajime's gaze was as cold as ice.

"So if I told you to throw away everything else for me, would you?"

After a moment's hesitation, Yue nodded.

"...If that's what you wanted."

"Even if that everything else included Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Myu?"

"...If that's what you wanted."

Yue agreed to anything Hajime asked as if she were trying to become his ideal partner. However, her responses only served to anger Hajime.

"I can't believe something like this managed to trick me..." he muttered to

himself. He then looked up at Yue and spat out words dripping with venom.

“Fine. I get it already, goddammit.” The moment Hajime was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Yue in front of him was a fake, his appearance changed. His black hair turned white, an eye patch covered one eye, and his left arm was replaced by a mechanical one.

“Tch... I totally fell for that one. This is why you can’t ever let your guard down in a labyrinth. Looks like Haltina was just as much of an asshole as the rest of the Liberators.”

The fake Yue once again stretched out a hand to Hajime as he cursed to himself.

“...Please stay here. You’ll be happy if you do.”

“Shut up, you damn fake. Don’t you dare say my name again.”

“Why? I’m Yue, your girlfriend. Your ideal girlfriend, Hajime. What’s there to be unhappy about?”

“Everything, you moron. If I wanted an obedient girlfriend who did everything I asked, I’d get a doll. But unfortunately for you, I’m not really into those,” Hajime spat. He then tuned Yue out as he searched for a way out of this illusory space.

“You’re wrong. I’m not just a doll. I have the same personality as the real Yue. I’m just also the ideal Yue that you desire. So stay here. Anything and everything you could wish for is here. And I’ll always be by your side.”

So this world’s not just your normal fake, huh? Both the people and the world were based on Hajime’s memories, which had been read by the first magic circle that had teleported them. On top of that, everything here was simulated to be the ideal what-if scenario that the labyrinth believed the challenger desired. Considering all the suffering Hajime had been through in the abyss, and the challenges that he still needed to overcome to make it back home, it wasn’t wrong to say a world like this where he could spend his days with Yue and the others in peace was in many ways ideal. However, it wasn’t the world Hajime wanted.

“You’re hopeless. It’s kind of pathetic how off the mark you are.”

Red sparks flew off of Hajime's body as he said that. His mana spread to every corner of this fake world, painting everything crimson. Since this was a trial, he reasoned that once he cleared it he'd be thrown out of the illusion automatically. And while he'd more or less guessed what the clear conditions were, this particular trial had pissed him off enough that he'd rather smash through it by force.

"Why don't you want to stay?" Yue asked, confused. Seconds later though, the emotion vanished from her expression. Now she truly did resemble a doll. Hajime continued pouring mana into his surroundings as he glared angrily at Yue.

"That's simple. Compared to the real Yue, you're worthless. There's nothing in the world I want more than the real Yue!" Hajime growled through gritted teeth. The vast amount of mana he was expending was taking its toll on his body. However, it was taking an even greater toll on the world around him. Cracks had already started to form inside the illusion. Hajime then activated Limit Break and squeezed out all of his remaining mana at once.

"That goes for everyone else, too. They're all a bunch of troublemakers who never listen to what I say. Sure, maybe they're not 'ideal' comrades, but I am who I am because of them. I only made it this far because they were by my side. Your 'ideal' fakes could never hold a candle to them!"

The illusion groaned under the weight of Hajime's mana, which had covered it so thoroughly the entire world seemed red. And finally... it shattered. Shards of the illusion rained down all around Hajime, pieces of broken glass falling from the heavens. They glinted in the light like diamonds.

As the constructed world began to fade, the fake Yue smiled quietly at Hajime. It was the illusion's final flare of light before the darkness swallowed it forever. That smile wasn't the kind of smile Yue would ever make. It belonged to someone else entirely. Hajime had a guess as to whose smile that was, but his consciousness was fading rapidly and he lacked the energy to think any further.

"You pass. There's no value in a world that's always as you want it. And there's no meaning in happiness you didn't earn. Even if it's painful, even if you

feel like you can't bear it at times, it's only through overcoming harsh realities one after another that you will achieve true happiness. Never forget that."

The voice that spoke to him sounded nothing like Yue's. Hajime couldn't even tell if it belonged to a guy or a girl. However, he could feel an unbelievable amount of warmth from it. Just before he lost consciousness, Hajime retorted.

"Hah, I don't need you to tell me that. ...But I'll keep it in mind, I guess."

Though Hajime's sight had already clouded over, it seemed to him that the person he was talking to smiled at that.

Chapter III: Grab Hold of Hope

Hajime felt something cold and hard digging into his back. The unpleasant sensation jolted Hajime's hazy consciousness awake.

"...Where..."

Hajime shook his head, got to his feet, and examined his surroundings. The room he was in was pitch-black, but as he had the Night Vision skill, that was no impediment to him. A cursory glance told him he was inside the trunk of a tree, but one that was about twice as large as the one they'd entered after the Treant battle. There was one other significant difference between this trunk and the other. This trunk wasn't empty. Rectangular objects had been placed at regularly spaced intervals along the circumference of the trunk. Each one was large enough to fit a person inside it.

They're like coffins. From the looks of it, Hajime had awoken from within one of the aforementioned coffins. Aside from that, the room was empty. There didn't appear to be any exits either. Hajime examined the coffins to either side of him, then dashed over to the one on the right.

"This... looks like amber."

Lying inside the coffin was Yue. Not Yue in her transfigured goblin state, but the old, original Yue. She was suspended in some kind of strange, yellowish-brown semi-solid. As Hajime had said, the strange substance resembled the kind of amber people often found preserved fossils in. At first, Hajime had worried she might have been dead, but then his Sense Presence had picked up on Yue's heartbeat. Furthermore, this Yue didn't appear to be a fake. This was without a doubt, the real Yue.

There were a total of nine amber coffins in the tree trunk. Hajime checked each one in turn, and as he'd expected he found the rest of his party encased inside them.

I guess we were all teleported directly into them after the fight with the

Treant. Hajime thought back to the illusion he'd been trapped in until just now. That dream had been like a Venus flytrap. Had he let himself be lured too deep inside, he would never have escaped. Chances were, everyone else was seeing similar visions. If they managed to escape from that world of sweet illusions, they'd likely break free of the amber as he had. At the very least, that was the conclusion Hajime came to after examining the coffins.

"Well, at least Yue and Tio are back in their original bodies. All that's left is to see if they can make it back on their own or not... though I guess there's no need to worry on that front."

As far as Hajime could tell, everyone had been returned to their original forms the moment the party had cleared the floor the Treant was guarding. Hajime sat down on the edge of Yue's coffin and reached out toward her. Naturally, the amber prevented him from touching her, but he still caressed the area above her face.

"Hurry up and return to me, Yue. It's been ages since I heard your real voice..."

Hajime toyed with the idea of smashing the amber, but even if that released Yue from her illusion, it would likely result in them failing the trial and thus failing to clear the labyrinth.

"...But you know, Yue looked damn good in a school uniform. Shea too... I'm amazed dream me was able to keep his composure with those two around. I should ask them to wear them when we get back to Japan."

Just then, Yue's amber began to glow. Hajime took his hand off it and put some distance between himself and the coffin. Before long the light faded and the amber started melting away. The liquified amber vanished into the sides of the coffin as if being absorbed by them. In less than five minutes, it was all gone.

After confirming that Yue was still breathing, the last of Hajime's worries disappeared and he gently lifted her up. He didn't want to leave her lying there in the cold. And more importantly, he just wanted an excuse to hug her. As he brushed the hair out of her face, Yue's eyes slowly blinked open.

"Welcome back, Yue. How're you feeling?"

“Mmm... Hajime?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

Yue still seemed a little dazed, but her gaze didn’t stray from Hajime. Even after she was fully alert, she continued observing him carefully.

“Are you the real Hajime?”

“I can probably guess why you’re asking that, but... it’s better if you decide that for yourself. Do I look like the real Hajime or a fake?”

From her reaction, Hajime had no doubt that a fake version of him had appeared in Yue’s illusion. It made him happy to know that he was part of Yue’s ideal world.

“Just so you know, I’m certain the Yue in my arms right now is the real Yue.”

Yue blinked in confusion a few times, then smiled faintly as she realized what Hajime was trying to say. Like Hajime, she was happy to know that she had been part of his ideal world. Her expression softened and she questioned his resolve.

“How can you be sure?” Yue already knew the answer, but she asked anyway. It was important that she heard it from Hajime’s mouth.

Hajime understood that as well, so he shrugged his shoulders and replied.

“Because I don’t sense anything off about you. Something deep inside my souls telling me that the Yue in front of me right now is the one who’s special to me.”

“Fufu... I feel the same way about you, Hajime. I can tell you’re the real one. Sorry, I asked such a pointless question.”

“It’s fine, you just woke up after all.”

Hajime shrugged his shoulders, and Yue wrapped her arms around his neck. He hugged her back and squeezed her tight. *Cough!*

“How was the me in your illusion?”

“You looked great in my school uniform.”

That hadn’t been the response Yue was expecting, but she chuckled

regardless. It was funny how easy Hajime's mind was to read.

"Mmm... I'll wear it for you sometime, then."

"I'll be looking forward to it. How about you, how was your illusion?"

Cough! Cough!

Yue buried her face in Hajime's neck and kissed it over and over.

"...You looked great sitting on the throne in royal robes."

"Sorry, I'd be willing to wear royal robes for you, but I don't think I'll ever sit on a throne. Actually, why the heck was I even on a throne?"

"Because I was the queen. And we already had 11 children."

"What the heck kind of fantasy was that!? And why the hell's our family so big!? Are you planning to make a soccer team out of just our kids!?" Hajime so so shocked he pulled Yue off him and stared at her.

Yue licked her lips seductively in place of a reply. Hajime's heart skipped a beat and his ironclad confidence in his ability to keep his cool no matter the situation wavered a little.

"Fufu, look forward to it..."

"...Hah, I guess I'm no match for you, after all, Yue."

Cough! Cough! Cough!!!

Hajime threw up his hands in defeat, and Yue smiled playfully in response. *Now this is the Yue I remember.* Hajime wrapped his arms behind Yue and hugged her tight. Yue was longing for the same thing he was, so she obediently closed her eyes and lifted her chin. Hajime was captivated by her soft, rosy cheeks, bewitching lips, and the tiny tongue that occasionally darted out between them.

The two of them leaned into each other, their lips drawing closer and closer. Just before they touched, however, the two of them were interrupted.

Ack! Cough! Cough! Hic! Ack! Cough!

"Huh?"

“Hm?”

They thought they’d just been imagining the coughing they’d been hearing, but it seemed not. Unable to ignore it any longer, the two exchanged glances and, after a brief pause, turned toward the source of the sound. Standing there was none other than Shea.

“Look, I know, I know, you don’t want me around anyway. Even though I worked so hard to come back to reality... this is what I’ve returned to. Ugh... I even tried to remind you guys I was here by coughing... But you... just ignored me... Reality is just too cruel.”

Her bunny ears were drooping, and she was sobbing uncontrollably. Hajime couldn’t help but pity her a little. It appeared Shea had awoken not long after Yue, but as the two of them had had eyes only for each other, so they hadn’t noticed her. Truly, it was a shame.

Shea tottered over to a corner of the room, sat down cradling her knees, and sulked. However, Hajime didn’t miss the suggestive glances she occasionally threw his way.

Whatever the case, it had been cruel of them to ignore Shea right after she’d completed her ordeal and shattered her illusion. And so, Hajime and Yue smiled wryly to each other and went to comfort Shea. After a few minutes of fondling her ears, her tiny tail was wagging with excitement. As Hajime caressed her soft fur, he spouted words of comfort.

“Yep, a Shea without bunny ears just isn’t any good. Shea’s only Shea because she has those. In fact, without them, she wouldn’t be Shea. The ears are Shea’s true essence.”

“Umm, I have no idea what you’re trying to say, but I’m more than just my rabbit ears. Though you’re obsessing them even more than usual today, Hajime-san. Did something happen inside your illusion?”

“Yeah, dream you didn’t have any bunny ears. You were just a boring Shea.”

“Mmm... does that even still count as Shea?”

“Excuse me Yue-san. While I admit my ears are my trademark, I’m still me without them.”

A chill ran down Shea's spine. *They don't really care more about my ears than me, do they?* Hajime then asked her what kind of illusion she'd been shown, and Shea explained that she'd been living in a world where all of her family, even the ones the empire had killed, were alive and well. Even her friend Mona, who'd died when she was young, had been there. On top of that Hajime and Yue had been with her as well. She'd spent her days living happily in the sea of trees with everyone.

Incidentally, Yue's illusion had been one where she hadn't been betrayed and her nation still stood. On top of that, Shea, Kaori, and Tio were all her friends while Hajime was her husband, and as she'd mentioned before, they had 11 kids.

"As for me, I'd never been summoned to this world and was living my life peacefully with Yue and Shea in Japan. I guess the labyrinth wanted to show me a world where I didn't have to suffer through Orcus' labyrinth, but still had all the happiness I'd found along the way."

"I see... That definitely sounds like an ideal world."

"...How did you break your illusion, Shea?"

Shea grinned at that question and replied.

"Well, I couldn't just deny who I am, not that I wanted to anyway, so I just told Haltina 'How dare you use my family to manipulate me, you cheating monster!' and started smashing everything."

"I see..." Yue nodded in understanding. Hajime smiled and nodded as well. In her illusion, Shea had likely been the same weak girl she'd been before meeting Hajime and Yue. That was probably what she hadn't been able to accept.

"Since I met you guys before the empire found us in my illusion, we all started living together without having to fight anyone. So I spent all my time being protected by you two. But you know, I think deep down I knew there was no way I'd really be allowed to stay with you guys if I was that weak. I mean, it was nice that Hajime-san said he'd protect me, and I was happy when Yue-san said she'd take care of everything... It really felt good letting myself get spoiled. But the more time I spent like that, the more it started to feel wrong somehow... and before I knew it, I'd decided to fight for myself. Together with all of you."

“So that’s how you got back...”

“That’s right! I want to keep fighting together with you two, Hajime-san, Yue-san. Even if it means I have to go through even more painful things in the future.”

She’s become a lot tougher now... Hajime thought to himself.

When they’d first met, she’d just been a worthless loser of a rabbit, but now she’d changed completely. And the impetus for her change had been her desire to stand together with Hajime and Yue. That, and her love for Hajime specifically. Though Hajime didn’t feel the same about Shea as he did about Yue, he couldn’t deny that he felt *something* for her. He wrapped his arms around Shea’s head and hugged her close. Yue, who’d already guessed Hajime’s feelings, smiled kindly.

“U-Umm, Hajime-san?”

“What’re you getting all flustered for...? Welcome back, Shea. You did good.”

“Ah... Thank you!” Shea grinned. Though Hajime hadn’t said it, he’d clearly been implying that she belonged with them. Her smile was so pure and full of happiness that Hajime couldn’t help but be charmed by it.

The trio huddled together in a group hug and continued talking about their respective illusions. After a few minutes, another one of the amber coffins began to glow. Another one of their comrades had broken free of the prison of temptation and returned to reality.

“I’m pretty sure that coffin had...” Yue increased the intensity of her magical light, illuminating the figure breaking free of its amber cage. And after a few more seconds—

“Pathetic! Master would never punish me in such a lukewarm manner! If you wish to mimic him, you must do better than that!”

“.....”

Naturally, the person shaking her fist in the air was none other than Tio. That outburst had been enough to give Hajime and the others a decent idea of what kind of illusion Tio had been seeing, and they all glared coldly at her. Hajime’s

gaze, in particular, was colder than the Siberian tundra. *I don't even want to imagine what kind of things I was doing in her dream.*

Upon realizing she was being watched, Tio shivered with excitement. She turned around, her expression ecstatic. When she realized who it was staring at her, her smile grew wider. She locked eyes with Hajime and ran over to him like a puppy dashing toward her owner.

“Masteeeeeeeeer, I have returned! Praise meee!” She tried to knock down Hajime the same way she had back when she'd been a goblin. Naturally, Hajime responded with a rubber bullet from Donner.

“Awah!?” There was a loud bang, and Tio flipped backward through the air. She landed headfirst into the ground and groaned in rapture. Hajime's next course of action was to step on her. It was the only way he could stop her from writhing in such a creepy manner.

“Damn perverted dragon. What the hell did you make me do in your illusion?”

“Nhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah this is what I longed for! Oh, to be shot and stepped on the moment I return to reality! To be gazed at as if I'm nothing more than trash! A fake could never hope to grant me such exquisite pleasure! This is the Master I know and love!”

“Die, you damn pervert.”

“Abababaaba!”

Unable to listen to another word, Hajime jolted Tio with a surprisingly powerful Lightning Field. She arched her back, spasmed for a few seconds, then fell to the ground. White smoke rose from her limp body. Her expression was so disgusting that it couldn't be described without needing to be censored. That being said, she certainly looked happy. Of course, her happiness only made Hajime angrier.

“Ahaha... I guess even the creator of a labyrinth couldn't understand Tio-san's fetishes. Haltina tried to create a pervert's ideal world, but in the end, Tio-san escaped because it wasn't good enough.”

“Haltina, you have my respect.” Yue stood up straight and saluted. Hajime could have sworn he saw a vision of Haltina salute back with tears in their eyes.

“It truly is a blessing to be able to enjoy Master’s rewards. The real Master is truly peerless.” Tio bounced back from Hajime’s attack looking no worse for the wear. Annoyed, Hajime took aim with Donner to put another bullet in her, but then stopped.

“.....” He narrowed his eyes and scrutinized Tio’s expression.

“Hmm? What seems to be the matter, Master? Have you finally fallen for my beauty? Nufufu.”

Tio flashed him a winsome smile, and Hajime breathed a prolonged sigh. He stepped in close and patted Tio on the head. She looked at him blankly as he did that, so he spoke his mind.

“If you want me to fall for you, don’t force yourself to smile. Even your usual perverted expression is better than that. Anyway... welcome back, Tio.”

Tio’s eyes went wide in surprise, and she blinked a few times before covering her eyes and blushing in embarrassment.



“Mmm, thank you, Master,” she muttered. It was then that Yue and Shea noticed what Hajime had already puzzled out. Out of everyone here, Tio was the one who’d lived the longest. As one of the near-extinct dragon tribe, she’d seen the most horrors and experienced the most suffering. She undoubtedly had more regrets than the others. Considering all she had lost, the illusion the labyrinth had shown her must have been far more wonderful than anything it could have shown Hajime or the others. It would have been a veritable treasure trove, filled with all the people and things she’d lost over the centuries.

That was likely the reason why it had taken her longer to wake up than the others too. However, she’d tried to act normal in an attempt to cover up the feelings she’d bottled inside. It was only thanks to Hajime’s sharp perception that he’d noticed something was off.

“Welcome back, Tio-san.”

“Mmm... I’m glad you’re back, Tio.”

“Shea, Yue... Thank you.” Hajime and the others smiled at Tio’s bashful response, which made her blush even harder.

A short while later, another one of the amber coffins began to glow. It appeared the next person to escape the world of illusions would be Kaori. Hajime and the others rushed over as she gasped for breath and opened her eyes. When she spotted her friends standing around her, she breathed a sigh of relief. However, when her eyes met Hajime’s, she blushed bright red and backpedaled all the way to the wall. This was the first time she’d ever backed away from Hajime, and he was somewhat confused. He turned to Yue and the others, hoping they might have an explanation. Worried about what they might say, Kaori hurriedly tried to explain her odd behavior.

“Ah, u-um, it’s not what you think, Hajime-kun! I just, uh... Anyway, it’s nothing really! I’m not trying to avoid you or anything!”

“I don’t really mind... Something must’ve happened in your illusion to make you act like that, right? What the heck did you see in there?”

“Huh? Um, I...” Kaori’s blush spread all the way up her face, and she trailed off. With a garbled groan, she squatted down on the ground and cradled her

head. She couldn't bring herself to meet Hajime's gaze.

The other girls were more or less able to guess what kind of illusion Kaori had been based on her reaction. Tio grinned and said "Oho..." while Shea blushed and muttered "So bold, Kaori-san..." while looking away. Yue, on the other hand, pulled no punches.

"Kaori, you pervert." She glared coldly down at Kaori, who twitched and hurriedly tried to deny it.

"I-I am not! D-Don't just accuse me like that!"

"Then what kind of dream were you in?"

"W-Well... I-I was just living an ordinary everyday life."

"I see... An ordinary everyday life where you seduced Hajime every night."

"I did not! I might have pushed him down at first, but after that, it was Hajime-kun who... Ah!"

"You're too dangerous to be allowed near Hajime anymore."

"Th-That's not true! Hajime-kun, don't listen to her, okay? I'd never do anything like that to you."

"Yeah yeah, I know, don't worry."

"Ugh..."

It seemed Kaori had done quite a few naughty things with the Hajime in her illusion. Apparently, Kaori had shaken Hajime off and escaped just before they'd gone all the way, but she still seemed to be regretting that choice a little. The entire time she was explaining her dream, she shot covert glances at Hajime to judge his reaction. That only made Yue want to tease her more, and she whispered something into Kaori's ear that caused her to cover her face in embarrassment again. Yue was like a cat, toying with her food before she went in for the kill. And Kaori was the poor mouse caught in her clutches.

"Anyway, looks like all of us managed to escape safely."

"Yep. What are we going to do about the hero and his friends?" Shea asked as she glanced over at the remaining amber coffins.

“Let me think... Worst case, we can always break them out, but for now, let’s wait and see if they can break out with their own strength. If they can’t, then there was no point bringing them here in the first place.”

“How long should we wait?”

“However long it takes for me to eat and rest up, I guess? I could have broken out of the illusion the normal way, but I got kinda pissed and used all my mana to smash it by force, so I need to rest for a little bit anyway.”

“Why do you always do things like this?” Shea said with a sigh.

Hajime never thought he’d see the day he’d be lectured by Shea of all people.

“I know I know, it was dumb. I’ve been letting this labyrinth rile me up way too easily.”

“Yep. But well, I can see why you’d be mad, since it keeps using Yue-san as bait...”

“That’s not a good enough excuse. If I keep letting this stuff get to me, it’ll turn into a weakness that can be exploited. It’s gonna be hard, but I’ll try and learn how to keep my cool in here.”

Hajime’s resolve truly was admirable, and Shea watched him with admiration. Then, after a quick glance over at Yue, who was still bullying Kaori while Tio watched on, she leaned in close to Hajime and whispered something.

“Umm, Hajime-san?”

“Yeah?”

“If I ended up like Yue-san had... would you have gotten mad on my behalf, too?”

She then looked away, embarrassed, though her ears were still pointed in Hajime’s direction. Even if he wouldn’t get as mad about her fake being used to manipulate him as he would if it were Yue, she still wanted to believe it would at least upset him. Hajime thought about giving a noncommittal answer, but after seeing the faint glimmer of hope in Shea’s eyes he scratched his cheek awkwardly and decided to speak honestly this time.

“The reason I felt like shattering that shitty illusion wasn’t just because of Yue.

You were in my dream as well. And well... I didn't want any Shea except for the one sitting in front of me."

"Ah... Ehehe, I see." Shea smiled, and her tail and ears began wagging back and forth. Her reaction was so cute that Hajime reflexively started fondling her again.

Afterward, Kaori came crying to Hajime when she couldn't take Yue's bullying anymore, and Shea disentangled herself from him to comfort her. Meanwhile, Yue puffed her chest out proudly and Tio... Well, Tio's reaction wasn't important. Regardless, the five of them continued horsing around while they ate, and before they knew it three hours had passed. However, none of the hero's party had awoken.

"Guess it's about time..."

"Mmm... Yeah."

"I guess that's that. It's not like we can keep waiting forever."

Hajime looked at the coffins, considering how best to forcibly remove Kouki and the others from them. Yue and Shea both seemed to agree that there was no point in waiting any longer too. However, Kaori didn't.

"Can... Can we wait just a little bit longer? I'm sure Shizuku-chan won't let something like this beat her..."

Kaori understood best just how desperately Shizuku and the others wanted to clear this labyrinth and obtain ancient magic of their own. After all, having even one would help them tremendously in gathering the others. Also, Kaori personally wanted Shizuku and the others to get stronger because she believed they'd help in finding a way back home.

For his part, Hajime wanted them to grow stronger as well, in preparation for the battles to come, so he shrugged his shoulders and agreed to Kaori's plea. Kaori smiled and attempted to hug him, only to be blocked by Yue. While the two of them were grappling with each other, one of the coffins started to glow.

"That one's... Shizuku-chan!"

"I figured Yaegashi would be the fastest."

“Indeed, Shizuku has a good head on her shoulders. It does not surprise me that she discovered the illusion first.”

Kaori forgot her previous quarrel and dashed over to Shizuku’s coffin. Shizuku groaned and opened her eyes, and Kaori helped her into a sitting position.

“This place is... Kaori?”

“It’s me, Shizuku-chan. Welcome back.”

“So I made it back to reality. Phew... That was tiring...”

Shizuku sighed and shook her head. She then smiled at Kaori and muttered, “Thanks.” Seeing that she’d awoken, Hajime and the others walked over as well.

“You sure took your sweet time. Still, I’m glad you made it.”

“Huh? Oh, N-Nagumo-kun... Y-Yeah. It was tough, but I managed somehow.” For some reason, Shizuku started stuttering when she talked to Hajime.

Yue and the others stared suspiciously at her, since the reaction was definitely odd. Shizuku coughed a few times to hide her strange behavior and examined her surroundings. However, she couldn’t hide the faint blush that had appeared on her cheeks.

“...So Kouki and the others are still inside?”

“Yep. We got out a few hours ago, but you’re the only one who’s escaped since then, Shizuku-chan.”

“I see. It certainly was a grueling trial. Sorry I made you guys wait so long.”

“Don’t worry about it, Shizuku-san. If anything, you should be glad you made it through. Also, if you don’t mind, there’s something I want to ask you...”

“Thank you, Shea. And feel free.”

Shizuku felt a sliver of dread from Shea’s tone, but she tried her best to remain calm. However, the one who ended up asking was not Shea, but Yue.

“.....”

“Wh-What is it?”

“.....”

“Um, I won’t know what you want if you just stare at me like that, Yue.”

Yue was standing right next to Shizuku and staring intently at her. She neither moved nor blinked nor showed any kind of expression. She just stood there and stared. There was something intimidating about being stared at silently from point-blank like that. Despite Yue’s beauty, Shizuku couldn’t help but feel a little terrified.

Shizuku tried to avoid Yue’s gaze, but it bored into her whether she met it or not. Finally, Yue asked the question on everyone’s mind.

“Shizuku... what kind of dream did you see?”

“Huh? It was a totally normal one. I was just living my everyday life like a normal girl.”

“Normal? Who else was in it?”

“Everyone. Everyone I know anyway.”

“I see...”

Shizuku met Yue’s gaze as she said that. Her voice neither wavered nor trembled. However, her vague reply made it clear that she didn’t want to go into details about the contents of her dream. Yue and the others understood that, so they decided not to press her any further for now. Shizuku breathed a sigh of relief as she realized Yue was backing off.

The party then brought Shizuku over to the center of the room, where they’d prepared some tea. Tired as she was, Shizuku was grateful for the break. As she sat down, she muttered to herself.

“I can’t believe I was a princess. And of all the people, the prince had to be...”

Few people heard her quiet grumbling.

A few hours later, Shizuku had fully recovered. None of her remaining party members had escaped from their coffins, so Hajime decided it was time to finally break them out by force. They couldn’t afford to delay their progress any further. Either Hajime or Yue could have easily smashed the amber, but they decided to leave it in the hands of the person most suited for it.

“Alright Kaori, we’re counting on you. Just make sure you don’t accidentally

disintegrate their bodies too.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. If I’m not in the middle of a fight, I can control the power perfectly.”

Kaori placed her hands on the amber and started pouring her mana into it. Her silver mana glinted like moonlight inside the dim tree trunk.

“Disintegrate.”

Kaori had no need to say anything to cast her spell, but she did anyway to help her focus. The amber didn’t melt like it had for the others, but instead withered away and dispersed as it was broken down into particles too small to see. It took only a few minutes to disintegrate the amber surrounding Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu. Worried that the unorthodox method of freeing them might have affected their bodies somehow, Kaori ran a diagnosis on them, but it appeared they were in perfect health.

“...Huh? Kaori? Shizuku? Where am I? I thought the two of you were...”

“Huh? Where is this? I thought I was...”

“Huh? No, Eri, don’t...”

Before long, the three of them woke up from their respective dreams. As they hadn’t realized they were in the middle of an illusion, they were confused by the sudden change in scenery.

Suzu’s hand was stretched out toward the ceiling, and it was obvious from her words what it was she was trying to grab onto. She must have been dreaming about Eri. Considering how much Eri’s betrayal had hurt Suzu, it was hardly surprising that she hadn’t been able to break free from her dream.

Shizuku and Kaori watched Suzu with pained expressions on their faces. Suzu was always the one who acted the most cheerful out of everyone, but that betrayal had left deep scars on her heart. Scars that hadn’t fully healed yet.

“Are the three of you alright?”

“Suzu-chan...”

Finally, the three of them started to realize that what they’d been seeing until just now was an illusion. Each of them had a different reaction to that

knowledge. Ryutarou looked a little depressed, but then scratched his head awkwardly and spoke wistfully.

“Well, I guess that’s just how it is.”

Kouki, on the other hand, looked darkly at the ground and balled his trembling hands into fists. Suzu tried to play it off with a smile, but everyone could tell her smile was hollow. Unable to bear seeing it any longer, Kaori and Shizuku hugged Suzu tight.

However, it appeared the labyrinth wasn’t going to give them time to come to terms with their feelings. Another magic circle began to glow underneath their feet. It appeared once all members broke free of their amber coffins, the challengers were sent on to the next stage.

“Amanogawa, Taniguchi. There’s no time to reflect on your visions. If you don’t pull yourselves together, the things you desire will fall forever out of your reach.”

“Ah... You don’t need to tell me twice.”

Y-Yeah, you’re right!”

There was a blinding flash, and Hajime and the others were once again teleported.

The party found themselves once more in a sea of trees. Unlike before though, they could see the ceiling and had a clear guidepost for where they were meant to go. From what Hajime could tell, this space was similar to the forest he’d encountered in the Great Orcus Labyrinth and was situated in an enclosed, underground space. While most of the trees were of uniform size, there was one further in that was much larger than the rest. If this room followed the same pattern as the others, that was where their next teleportation circle was.

“Looks like we all made it together this time,” Hajime said as he looked over the party. He’d been worried they’d get hit with more fakes, but it appeared that had been a needless concern.

“Hajime, are there any fakes?”

“Nope, everyone’s real. At least, that’s what my eye and my instincts tell me.”

“If you think we’re fine, then we’re definitely fine Hajime-san.”

Shea and the others relaxed visibly. The party then set off through the dense jungle toward the large tree in the distance. Hajime glanced back to make sure everyone was still with him and noticed Kouki and Suzu both had dark expressions still. Hajime could understand why Suzu still wasn’t over her dream. Going from an illusion where your best friend was still with you into a reality where she’d betrayed and nearly killed you was about as traumatic as it got. The dream had likely reopened the emotional wounds that had barely begun to heal.

That still left Kouki, however. Hajime had no idea what he’d seen, but judging by Kouki’s sunken eyes, and the neutral expression he was struggling to keep, it must have left quite the negative impression on him. That, or he was frustrated at failing to overcome yet another trial. But while Hajime did sympathize, this was a labyrinth. A murderous maze where the party could be thrown into a life-threatening situation at any moment. If Suzu and Kouki kept carrying that emotional baggage with them, they wouldn’t last long.

“Amanogawa, Taniguchi. Are you guys really serious about tackling this labyrinth?”

“Wha!? O-Of course we are!”

“Huh? Y-Yeah, I am!”

Hajime’s sharp glare pierced through the both of them. Ryutarou seethed at Hajime’s caustic words, but before he could come to his friends’ defense, Hajime continued.

“This is a labyrinth. Death lurks around every corner. We might be thrown into hell at any second. If you can’t focus anymore, you may as well give up here. Otherwise, you’ll die.”

“W-Wait, I...”

“Regardless of your reasons, the fact of the matter was that you couldn’t clear the last trial. At the very least, you need the determination to pass all the others if you want to survive. And I don’t see that determination from either of

you. If your will's been broken, then you're worth less than dead weight."

"....."

"I'm not sure if I can or not, but I'll try to open a portal back to the surface from here. If I can't, I can create a barrier around you guys to keep you safe until we return. So decide, here and now. Are you willing to do this, or not? I won't let anyone with halfhearted feelings continue on with us."

Silence followed Hajime's speech. Kouki grit his teeth in an attempt to hold in his rage. He wasn't angry at Hajime, but at himself for being so weak. He'd unconsciously felt a sense of safety, knowing that even if he was distracted Hajime and the others would be able to clean up anything that came their way.

The whole reason he was here was because he didn't agree with Hajime's methods or his morals, and he wanted the strength to prove that Hajime was mistaken. And yet, after forcing his way into Hajime's party, here he was relying on him. He wanted to punch himself. But if he let himself get carried away by his anger, he'd just be proving to Hajime that he didn't have the mettle to keep going. Kouki took in a few deep breaths, letting his anger and impatience dissipate, then slapped his cheeks.

"Nagumo. I'm fine now. I can keep going!"

The light had returned to his eyes. Hajime gave Kouki a small nod, then turned to Suzu. Suzu started trembling, but then she too slapped her cheeks and renewed her resolve.

"I'll go too. I'm not done yet!"

"I see. Good. Remember to stay focused."

That was all Hajime said before turning around and resuming his trek. Ryutarou stepped up behind Kouki and gave him a slap on the back.

"Ow!" Kouki exclaimed, then gave his best friend a rueful smile. Kaori and the others encouraged Suzu in a similar fashion, and she gave them a slightly less forced smile. The party advanced in a straight line toward the giant tree. The forest was deathly silent. Not only was the sound of insects absent, but there wasn't even any wind to rustle the leaves. The surrounding silence made the noise of Hajime and the others' advance even more pronounced.

“Hmmm... There’s something ominous in the air.”

“Yeah... It’s like when we were ambushed in Orcus.”

“You’re right... but I can’t sense any monsters anywhere.”

Tio raised her eyebrows suspiciously, while Kaori and Shizuku thought back to the time Cattleya had ambushed them in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

“I’ve sent my Arachnae up ahead to scout, but they didn’t find anything either. I doubt we’ll get through this forest without anything happening, but...”

Hajime was referring to his multipurpose spider-shaped golems.

“...Hm? Rain?”

“You’re right, it has started raining.”

Kouki scrunched up his face and looked up at the sky. Suzu held out her hand and nodded in agreement. A second later, chills ran down their spine as they realized what they’d just said. There was no way it could be raining inside a tree.

“Tch, Yue!”

“Okay... Hallowed Ground.”

Realizing what was going on, Hajime called out to Yue. Without a moment’s delay, Yue deployed a barrier. A second later, a heavy downpour hit them. Yue’s Hallowed Ground had come up just in time to keep the rain off them. However, no one looked relieved. In fact, they now looked more worried than before.

Considering what was happening outside, it was only natural. The liquid sliding down Yue’s Hallowed Ground was most definitely *not* rainwater. It was either poison or some kind of strange new monster.

It was Shizuku who noticed first.

“Nagumo-kun, look.”

Despite her strained voice, she was still calm enough to analyze the situation. And what she saw was some strange opaque milky liquid oozing out of the trees, the foliage, and the ground.

“Are those slimes? Damn. Not only are they masking their presence, but I also

can't even see them with my Demon Eye. Just what kind of concealment magic are they using?"

"Nagumo, they're at our feet!"

Hajime mentally clicked his tongue, then looked down to see the slimes sprouting from the ground directly underneath them. As Hallowed Ground formed a fully spherical barrier, it prevented the white slimes from burrowing through from underground, but it couldn't protect against creatures that were in the part of the soil it encompassed. The few slimes that had sprouted within Yue's barrier attacked the party.

"Kyaaa! You little... Disintegrate!"

Kaori hurriedly attempted to obliterate the slime that was crawling up her leg. The slime burst into tiny white particles and crumbled away. Slimes tended to attack by engulfing their target and dissolving them, as it was the best way to make use of their high physical resistance. But it appeared Kaori had managed to get rid of it before it could do anything.

"Raaaaaah! Get off me!" Ryutarou slammed a fist into the slime trying to swallow him from behind. His gauntlet artifact sent ripples through the slime's body, and it burst apart.

"Hey, Ryutarou, stop! Don't send their pieces flying over here!"

"You muscle-headed moron! Don't use your full strength against them!"

"Huh? Oh, my bad!"

"Bleh, I'm all sticky. This stuff's disgusting."

Kouki and Shizuku protested hotly against Ryutarou's hasty actions, while Suzu examined the white goop covering her.

"Seriously dude, you gotta stop doing this. Are you alright Shizu—"

"Yes, I'm just fine, Kouki. At least these things die pretty easily... Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh no, it's nothing! Nothing at all!"

"Huh?"

For labyrinth monsters, these white slimes were quite weak. Shizuku kept her guard up in case they had another trick up their sleeve as she gave Kouki a puzzled look. Kouki averted his gaze, doing his best not to look at Shizuku. Not only that, he was avoiding looking at Suzu as well. Even though there were slimes popping up from everywhere, he kept his gaze focused firmly ahead. Shizuku grew even more curious about Kouki's strange behavior, but she put in the back of her mind for now and focused on eliminating the slimes with her katana's special skill, Thunder Blossom.

The reason for Kouki's strange behavior lay in the milky-white composition of the slimes. More specifically, the fact that both Shizuku and Suzu had been splattered with their dead bodies. It wasn't hard to imagine what being drenched in milky-white liquid looked like from a guy's perspective. Though it appeared neither Shizuku or Suzu had noticed that yet. Naturally, Yue and the others weren't spared from the deluge of white either.

As Yue was using fire magic to burn away the slimes their corpses weren't splashing onto her, but she'd been hit by a little bit of the initial deluge, and sticky white liquid dripped down her cheeks and neck. Shea, on the other hand, had used Drucken's shockwave to blow away the first wave of slimes, landing her in the same situation as Ryutarou. She was splattered with the white liquid of the monsters she'd killed.

Tio had had it even worse though. She'd been hit by most of the splatter of Shea's first few kills and was completely drenched. Shea hadn't aimed for Tio or anything like that, Tio had just been unlucky enough to be standing in the wrong spot. She resembled one of those variety show contestants who'd had a pie thrown in their face. Her black hair and kimono were slathered in sticky white liquid. It was hard to look at her and not be aroused.

Kaori, however, had come out relatively untouched. Thanks to her disintegration abilities, she didn't need to worry about the slimes she defeated splattering her. However, traces of the slime who'd first caught onto her leg were still there, so she wasn't in that much better shape than the others.

Hajime had opted to surround his entire body with Lightning Field, making him more or less invincible against the slimes. As he electrocuted wave after wave, he considered poking out Kouki and Ryutarou's eyes again so that they

wouldn't accidentally see Yue or the others in compromising poses. But while the slimes appeared weak, there was no telling what might happen inside a labyrinth. Hajime didn't particularly want to leave two party members vulnerable by robbing them of their sight.

Besides, if they end up seeing something, I can always just beat the memories out of them later. Kouki shuddered. He instinctively sensed the threat Hajime posed and did his best not to look in Yue and the others' direction.

Soon enough, the party had wiped out the few slimes who'd made their way into the barrier. After making sure there were no enemies left inside, Hajime turned his attention to the wriggling mass outside. He sent his Cross Bits and chakrams out of the barrier and started mowing down slimes.

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

From the visual feed his Cross Bits sent back to his Demon Eye, Hajime could tell there was an enormous amount of slimes waiting outside the barrier. To make matters worse, more were still raining down from the sky. The forest was buried under a sea of milky-white slimes. Had Yue not been able to put up a barrier as fast as she had, the party might have been overrun by the sheer number of them.

"Yue, reinforce the barrier. I'm gonna blow everything up at once."

"Okay... Leave it to me."

Hajime sent all seven of his Cross Bits and all seven of his chakram up into the sky.

"Are you fucking serious!? You're going to bring that hellfire back!?"

"Not this again..."

"Ugh, if it wasn't for Kaorin's restoration magic, my barrier would have been destroyed back then. I thought we were all done for. Honestly, I was more scared of Nagumo-kun than the enemy!"

Ryutarou trembled in fear while Shizuku's eyes glazed over. Suzu teared up, as memories of Hajime's traumatizing attack came back to her. Kouki looked silently up at the sky. He was more worried about being blinded right now than

anything. Unfortunately for Ryutarou, he'd already made the mistake of looking. While Hajime was currently busy dealing with the slimes, he made a mental note to put Ryutarou through his special memory-erasure course later.

"Kaori, use your disintegration to get rid of all the slime goop on you guys. It doesn't look pretty," Hajime sent to Kaori via telepathy.

How come he only sent that to me? And why telepathy? Kaori tilted her head, but in the next second she realized what Hajime had meant by "it doesn't look pretty." She looked down at herself and blushed. "Yeah, this isn't..." she muttered. The reason Hajime had used telepathy was out of consideration for Shizuku and the others, who still hadn't noticed. It'd be embarrassing if a guy pointed it out to them.

"Th-Thank you, Hajime-kun. I'll clean us up right away. Also, please don't hurt Ryutarou-kun too much."

"...I'll think about it."

Kaori had already guessed what Hajime was thinking of doing to Ryutarou. She smiled ruefully at his response and swiftly dissolved the sticky liquid clinging to everyone. Hajime returned his attention to the feed from the sky that his Cross Bits were sending him.

How long is this slime rain going to go on for? Is there an infinite amount stored up there? In that case, I'll have to do something about the ceiling first. He glanced down at the rising tide of slimes and decided to push his chakrams even faster toward the ceiling. The rotating chakrams sliced through the slimes falling in their path and lodged themselves into the ceiling. Half-sunk into the bedrock as they were, the chakrams resembled mini-arches. It just so happened that the inside of those arches were portals that Hajime could control at will.

Hajime then took a few spare charkam and a lot of Arachnae out of his Treasure Trove. Shizuku, Suzu, and Kaori froze when they saw a swarm of mechanical spiders appear in mid-air. Hajime paid no attention to their discomfort and dropped them through the chakrams. They reappeared through the portals on the ceiling, and started scuttling around in all directions. Since they weren't combat-oriented, Hajime could control up to 100 of them at once. The swarm of spiders glowed red as they scuttled across the ceiling, and Hajime

activated his Transmutation through each of them. Hajime's goal was to seal up all the cracks the slimes were dripping down through. His plan worked. With every crack he sealed, the deluge of slimes slowed.

"Alright, that's the ceiling dealt with. Now we just have to get rid of the slimes on the ground... I guess I'll have to burn everything down again."

Hajime sounded more like a terrorist than a Synergist, and Kouki's expression cramped up. Hajime ignored him and manipulated his chakram to dislodge themselves from the ceiling and circle above the sea of slimes. Then, like before, he started teleporting vast quantities of taur through them.

"This is what you get for spraying that disgusting goop over Yue and the others."

It felt as if these slimes had been purposely designed white by Haltina in order to create a situation like the one that had just happened.

This liberator sure likes to mess with people. She reminds me of the one in Reisen Gorge. Haltina's little prank had gone too far though, and now Hajime was pissed. While he didn't let his anger show, it was clearly boiling beneath the surface. His resolve to overcome his temper seemed to already be forgotten.

"He's turning into a devil, Shizushizu! I'm scaaaared!"

Suzu hugged Shizuku, terrified. Like a protective mother, Shizuku gently patted Suzu on the back.

"Holy shit, Kouki. That guy's totally gonna get arrested one day."

"What a coincidence, Ryutarou. I was thinking the same thing. He'll probably show up on the news one day."

Considering Hajime was about to scorch an entire forest with a smile, Kouki and Ryutarou were justified in thinking he'd end up a terrorist. In a sense, he was actually more terrifying than a terrorist. Hajime's smile twitched a little as he heard Ryutarou's assessment.

Do I really look that evil? He didn't really care that much about Ryutarou or Kouki's opinions of him, but he was worried he might have creeped out Yue and the others too. And so, he glanced back at Yue.

“...Hm? I prefer you like this.” As always, Yue could tell what Hajime was thinking without him having to say a word. And after hearing his beloved Yue’s opinion, Hajime’s evil grin grew eviller.

“You’re amazing Yue-san. Even now you keep finding ways to make Hajime-san like you more. And so naturally too. I didn’t think that was possible. But I won’t lose to you! Even when you’re acting like a brute and evil incarnate, you’re cool, Hajime-san!” Spurred on by Shea’s cheering, Tio and Kaori also voiced their support for Terrorist Hajime.

“Will you all please shut up?”

Hajime glared at the lot of them. Then with a sigh, he returned his attention to the task at hand. It didn’t take long for a layer of black to cover the sea of white.

“This should be enough.”

Hajime grinned, and the counterattack-cum-elimination began. A series of explosions rocked the forest, and the earth shook so hard they could feel it through the barrier. The very air trembled as Hajime rained down a barrage of bombs from his Cross Bits.

These particular bombs were basically napalm bombs. Hajime had filled them with yet more taur, and as they landed in the sea of slimes, they burst apart, spraying 3000-degree flames everywhere. In contrast to the earlier white rain that had poured down, now there was a rain of black as Hajime sent more taur down into the burning conflagration. The mass of slimes writhed and squirmed, but all they succeeded in doing was sucking the taur further inside the blob. That helped spread the napalm’s flames even further. In seconds, the sea of slimes had turned into a sea of flames. The conflagration licked at the nearby trees, threatening to set the whole forest alight. The crimson tide was like a physical manifestation of Hajime’s anger, and it charred everything it touched. Soil transformed into lava, and the air itself burned away. Kouki and the others swore they heard the slimes screaming in pain as they were scorched to cinders.

Outside the barrier, a veritable hell awaited. A hell of fire and screams. Eventually, even the slimes crowding around Yue’s barrier started to burn. The

view of hell became visible to Kouki and the others who didn't have remote viewing tools. They all watched with haggard expressions as the world burned away. Finally, the flames withered away. The ground had been turned into a sea of bubbling lava, the trees and plants burned to ash. Smoke blanketed the forest's remains.

"That was a good blaze." Hajime looked proudly at his handiwork. In response, Yue smiled faintly at him and asked a question.

"Can I drop my barrier now?"

"Hold on just a bit longer. Let me make sure none of the slimes burrowed underground."

The spiritstone ring on Hajime's finger began to glow. Countless black objects dropped from the ceiling, thin threads trailing behind them. Hajime's Arachnae.

"Kyaaa!?" Shizuku squealed as the numerous mechanical spiders hit the ground. No one had expected such a cute scream to come out of Shizuku's mouth, but they were tactful enough to ignore it. Though they couldn't suppress their faint grins as Shizuku blushed in embarrassment. Hajime set his Arachnae to transmuting the ground on their path to the large tree. He closed his eyes in concentration and spoke.

"It'll take some time to transmute the whole path. We still don't know how many of those slimes are left. Even if it takes more time, it'll be more convenient to secure our route than stop and kill them each time they pop up. I know it's a pain, but please keep the barrier up until I'm done, Yue."

"Okay..."

Realizing they were safe for now, Kouki and the others relaxed. Thanks to Kaori, everyone had been cleaned of slime goop as well. Unfortunately, though, Ryutarou's fate remained unchanged.

"Rest while you have the chance," Hajime said, then sat cross-legged on the ground. Transmuting the area around their path was going to take time. And while Hajime wasn't physically exhausted yet, it was a rule of thumb among adventurers to rest when the opportunity presented itself. The rest of the party followed suit, resting as best as they could.

Some time later, the glowing barrier around them faded away. Hajime then felt something soft lean against his back. He turned around, confused, and found Yue hugging him. Just as he was about to ask why she'd suddenly dispelled her barrier—

“Haaah... Haaah... Hajime I feel... strange... I need you.”

“Hey, Yue. This isn't the time for... Yue? What's wrong?”

Yue's breathing was ragged, and her eyes were brimming with desire. Had this been night and the two of them safely tucked in bed Hajime wouldn't have minded, but this was hardly the time. Nor could he imagine Yue getting this aroused in the middle of a labyrinth. Something was wrong with her.

Hajime's expression grew serious, and he pulled Yue off him. His touch alone was enough to send shivers down Yue's spine, and her whole body flushed with heat. Unable to control herself, Yue tried to press herself against Hajime. Still unsure of what had happened, he held her at arm's length and tried to discern what was wrong. Just then though, a shadow fell over him. He looked up and saw Shea.

“Hajime-san... I... I can't... Haaah... Haaah...”

“You too, Shea?”

“Haaah... Haaah, I think there's something wrong with me, Hajime-san.”

“Wait, hold up.”

Shea ignored Hajime and wrapped herself around his right arm. She held it between her cleavage and thighs, making it impossible for him to escape. Even her bunny ears wrapped around his neck. Like Yue, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes blurry with desire. She rarely acted this sexy, and Hajime nearly found himself overwhelmed. Whatever had happened to Yue, had happened to Shea too.

“Wait... don't tell me...” A possible cause sprung to mind. And if his guess was right, it wasn't just Yue and Shea who'd been affected. Alarmed, he looked over the rest of his comrades. As he'd feared, Kaori and the rest were suffering from the same symptoms as Yue and Shea.

“Hajime-kun, I—” Kaori crawled over to Hajime and looked up at him with pleading eyes. Tio, on the other hand, was just sitting there spacing out. However she didn’t respond to Hajime’s calls, so he assumed the worst. Even Kouki and the rest weren’t exempt from the strange transformation.

“U-Ugh... What is this?”

“Uwaaah...” Suzu crouched down and hugged her knees, while Ryutarou had a vacant look to him. Kouki, however, watched Shizuku with bloodshot eyes. He then suddenly got to his feet and reached out to her.

“Fufufu... Like hell I’ll lose here.”

Shizuku alone appeared to have any control left. After writhing for a few seconds, she bit her lip so hard she drew blood. Then, she used the pain to anchor her consciousness and sat down with her back ramrod straight. And after that, she closed her eyes, as if concentrating on something.

Hajime guessed she was attempting to meditate. That, or she knew some special Yaegashi-style focusing technique. Whatever it was it appeared to be working, as her blush receded and she regained her composure.

However, she also seemed to be having a difficult time maintaining that state. Even the slightest lapse in concentration seemed like it would cause her to relapse. Because of that, she didn’t notice Kouki reaching out to her. He continued muttering her name in a deranged manner as he staggered forward. At the same time, Ryutarou started toward Suzu, who was still kneeling and holding her head.

“Goddammit... So this is what those slimes were for.”

Hajime pulled three bolas out of his Treasure Trove, then flung them all with a quick snap of his wrist. Each found its mark, and Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu were all immobilized. The bolas’ weights pulsed red and the spatial magic stored in them fixed them in place. After struggling fruitlessly for a few seconds, Kouki and Ryutarou once again stretched their hands out, looking for anyone to grab onto. Meanwhile, Suzu gazed at Shizuku with unrestrained lust. Fortunately, Hajime’s bolas were powerful enough to have even restrained one of God’s Apostles for a few seconds. A group of half-insane students had no hope of breaking free.

For the present, Hajime had prevented them from doing something they would later regret. Hajime tried to think of a way out of this situation while he kept Kaori from climbing any further up his left arm, Shea from climbing any further up his right arm, and Yue from sucking the blood out of his neck. While he was racking his brains, Tio suddenly called out to him

“Master, are you alright? It appears those monsters’ fluids contained a powerful aphrodisiac.”

Not only was Tio’s expression normal, her gait was measured and even. More importantly, she was processing their current situation.

Is this really Tio? Hajime thought to himself. Regardless of whether Tio realized what Hajime was thinking or not, she continued her explanation.

“The pleasure delivered by the aphrodisiac is so extreme that it has rendered everyone incapable of using magic. Furthermore, the more time passes, the stronger its effects will become. Worst of all though, the aphrodisiac doesn’t affect one’s body, but one’s mind. In fact, it would be more accurate to call whatever special magic these monsters had a form of hypnosis than an aphrodisiac. There are creatures capable of such feats.”

Tio’s observations were perceptive and well-reasoned. Upon seeing such a level-headed Tio, Hajime thought,

Yeah, there’s no way this is Tio.

“The reason you were likely spared the hypnosis’ effects was because after the first few drops of rain hit you, you activated Lightning Field to keep any and all bits of slime off of you. The few drops that did make contact with your skin were not concentrated enough to pierce your natural defenses.”

“I-I see?”

“Indeed, this would be our only silver lining. That being said, this trial has still proven itself quite arduous. It is hard to imagine any normal challenger escaping from that mass of slimes completely untouched. And if the battle dragged on, said challengers would find themselves eliminated. Even if they were able to overcome the deluge of slimes, they would still end up driven to intercourse by the effects of slimes’ hypnosis.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right...”

“I imagine that was this part of the trial’s aim. Whether you can overcome your desires and press onwards with your comrades... Or perhaps it was to test whether you and your comrades could maintain trust with each other even after committing unsavory acts... Regardless of which it may be, this labyrinth’s Liberator is quite the troublesome one.”

“Uh, Tio.”

“Mmm? What is it, Master?”

While all of Tio’s points made sense, there was one thing that didn’t. Hajime looked from Yue and the others, who were still trying to fling themselves at him, to Tio, who appeared perfectly calm.

“I understand everything you said, and your hypothesis makes sense. I pretty much agree with all your points. There’s just one thing I don’t understand. How come you’re fine? I’m pretty sure you’re the one who got the most soaked out of all of us. You practically looked like an actress on a JAV cover.”

“I did indeed. In fact, the hypnosis is affecting me even now. It’s because of the pleasure coursing through my body that I still cannot properly use my magic. Do not underestimate me though, Master. Who do you think I am?”

“Tio...”

Hajime’s eyes widened in surprise as Tio puffed her chest out proudly. He couldn’t help but be impressed. She was able to maintain her sanity through such a crippling onslaught of pleasure. It was times like these that he was reminded that despite her extremely perverted nature, she was a wise dragon who’d lived for centuries. A paltry toxin like this was nothing for someone of—

“I am your servant and your servant alone, Master! Such tepid pleasure cannot hope to compare to the exquisite pain which you grace me with on a daily basis! Please do not think of me as some loose woman who’ll let any old sadist slap her arse!”

“Oh.” Hajime’s expression changed in an instant as Tio shot a fist into the air and declared her undying loyalty. He once again gazed at her like she was trash, which made Tio blush and shiver in excitement.

“I guess I should have expected as much from you, Tio-san. Or perhaps I should call you Clarence-san. You really are something else. Now I’d like it if you didn’t get any closer.”

“M-Master’s being polite!? And calling me by my last name!? I can’t believe you would act so distant toward me now of all times! Haaah... Haaah... Th-This is not good. I can feel myself giving in to the pleasure...”

Though she’d been fine until now, Tio suddenly started slipping. She fell to all fours and struggled to retain her sanity. Hajime turned to Yue, Shea, and Kaori, and pointedly ignored Tio.

He gave them a look of absolute confidence and spoke his mind.

“Yue, Shea, Kaori. There’s no way you guys actually got done in by these weakling monsters. You’ve all managed to keep your sanity, haven’t you?”

Still flushed and panting, the three of them looked up at Hajime with clear eyes and said simultaneously, “Mmm... Of course.”

“Ugh. Of course I have.”

“Th-That’s right! Haaah... Haaah, I’m just fine!”

As expected, the three of them were able to fight back against the pleasure that assailed their senses. Though they had to grit their teeth to do it. Hajime gave each of them a quick look over, then smiled in satisfaction.

“Listen up, this is another one of the labyrinth’s shitty trials. I refuse to believe that you can’t overcome something like this. Look, even Yaegashi and our resident pervert were able to control themselves. Imagine how embarrassing it would be to lose to that perverted dragon.”

At Hajime’s provocative challenge, Yue grimaced and forcibly pulled herself away from him. She then gave him a fearless smile reminiscent of his own.

“Seeing as restoration magic couldn’t fix Yue’s goblinification, I doubt it’ll do anything here either. Besides, it’s not like any of you can use magic right now anyway. However, I still have some Ambrosia left. I bet even Haltina didn’t expect us to have that. I know the slimes’ poison is mental, but Ambrosia’s the legendary cure-all. Do you guys think you need it? If so, it might be worth a

shot.”

There was no telling if it would work or not, and Hajime had scant few vials left. Still, it meant there was a chance they could be freed from this unbearable pleasure hell. Despite that, the three all shook their heads immediately.

“Mmm... I’m fine.”

“I don’t need any.”

“I’m good.”

They were determined to overcome this trial with their own strength.

“That’s what I thought,” Hajime said with a warm smile.

They returned his smile, glad that Hajime had that much faith in them. He put some distance between himself and them, thinking it would be easier for them to resist if he wasn’t around. Contrary to his expectations though, Yue and the others crowded around him again.

“Hajime, hug me.”

“Won’t that make things worse?”

“Absolutely not! There’s no one this world who’d feel worse after being hugged by you, Hajime-san!”

“Shea-san’s right. If anything, it’ll help us calm down... Please.”

Hajime smiled ruefully and wrapped the three of them up in his arms. He scooped Shea in with his right, Kaori with his left, and squished Yue between the two of them. The three of them trembled for a few seconds, then relaxed and slowly calmed their heavy breathing. They closed their eyes, focusing on maintaining their sanity. Soon enough, their temperature returned to normal, and their heartbeat slowed. Hajime closed his eyes and smiled. He then lifted them up slowly, careful not to stimulate them too much. Just then, Tio called out to him.

“Master, could you embrace me as well?”

“Surely you jest, Clarence-san.”

“No... I won’t be able to resist without youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!”

Her anguished scream echoed through the quiet forest.

Some time later. The liquified floor had cooled and hardened, and the smoldering embers had all died out. A single shiny, metallic pathway cut through the barren wasteland that remained. It made a straight line to the giant tree in the distance.

“...Mmm?”

“Huh?”

“Oh?”

Yue, Shea, and Kaori all opened their eyes.

“Hm? Is... it over? Are you guys alright?” Hajime looked worriedly down at the three girls still in his arms.

They all looked at each other, then nodded confidently.

“...Mmm. It looks like we weathered it.”

“Yep! All that pleasure I was feeling is totally gone now.”

“I don’t feel anything anymore... And it looks like the rest of my senses are back to normal.”

Sounds like they’re good. They’d overcome pleasure so overwhelming it could drive normal people insane through willpower alone. Once it passed a certain threshold, pleasure was no different from pain. Hajime could only begin to guess how much the three of them must have suffered. Chances were, it was the hardest trial any of them had faced thus far. He looked proudly down at them and spoke.

“I knew you could do it. Good work, you three. I had faith the whole time, so I wasn’t really worried... but it still must have been tough.”

“Mmm....”

“Ehehe, you’re making me blush.”

“Fufu, thank you, Hajime-kun. It was thanks to your support that I was able to pull through.”

There was no reason for them to keep hugging Hajime any longer, but none of the girls seemed willing to pull away. Instead, they hugged him tighter and looked happily up at him, blushing. The pleading look in their eyes made it clear they wanted to hear more praise. In all honesty, he found it harder to resist their earnest approach than their advances when they were under the influence of the slimes' hypnosis. He'd unconsciously begun to let them go, but now hugged them tighter as well. They stayed like that for a few seconds, until Shizuku awkwardly interrupted them.

"Ahem! Sorry for interrupting, but could you leave the flirting for after we're out of here? Also, you can release Kouki and the others now."

"Hm? Oh yeah, sure Yaegashi. You were pretty amazing too, you know? I guess I should have known a swordsman of your caliber would have no trouble resisting. Was that meditation something you learned at your dojo?"

"I knew you could do it, Shizuku-chan! Even though you don't have the body of a God's Apostle like me, you were still able to resist! That's really amazing!"

Shizuku's irritation faded and she blushed as Hajime and Kaori heaped on the praise. She looked away in embarrassment and muttered something.

"Th-Thank you. My father and grandfather taught me how to still my heart since I was young, so while it was close, I managed to overcome it somehow... Also, did you restrain Kouki and the others to protect me? I wouldn't have been able to do anything while I was focusing on meditating, so thanks for helping me out, Nagumo-kun."

"Don't mention it. Anyway... it looks like Amanogawa and them fainted. They probably couldn't hold out against the pleasure. Yaegashi, I'll prepare a change of clothes and make a changing room for you guys, so wake them up for me. I'll leave explaining everything to you."

"A change of clothes? Changing room...? Oh." Shizuku tilted her head in confusion, but then realized what Hajime was getting at when she looked down at her clothes. Shizuku blushed to the tips of her ears.

A trial of pleasure was terrifying in more ways than one. Though she hadn't moved an inch, Shizuku's clothes were soaked through with sweat. She wasn't the only one either, everyone else was drenched as well. No doubt it was

uncomfortable to be walking around covered in sweat.

Of course, sweat was all it was. There weren't any other liquids mixed in there *at all*. At the very least, that was what Shizuku's silent glare seemed to be implying as she blushed and sat down to cover her lower half. Since anything he said would probably only make it worse, Hajime decided not to meet Shizuku's gaze.

Yue and the others stepped back and sat down as well, looking almost as embarrassed as Shizuku.

"All the clothes I have are made in my size, so they might be a bit too tight for Sakagami... Maybe some of my looser clothes will work, though." As he said that, Hajime pulled out some spare sets of clothes he'd bought in town a while back, and transmuted a covered hut from the earth. A simple but functional changing room. He also disengaged the bolas tying Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu. Without anything to support them, the three of them crumpled to the ground. Shizuku caught Suzu as she fell, but Kouki and Ryutarou had no one to help them so they hit the ground with dull thuds. Considering their sturdiness as the hero and his companion, it was probably fine to leave them be.

"As for Taniguchi... I imagine only Yue's stuff would fit."

"Mmm... I have a few outfits like this, so she can wear one of those." Yue pulled a spare change of clothes from her own Treasure Trove and Hajime looked over at Shea and Kaori. Always the helpful one, Shea stepped forward.

"In that case, Shizuku-san can wear one of my—"

"Please no." Shizuku got on her knees and knelt before Shea.

"What's wrong with my clothes!?" Shea exclaimed, her bunny ears hopping back and forth.

"Nah, I get where Yaegashi's coming from. The only clothes you own are those super revealing ones... Do those even count as clothes?"

"What do you have against my clothes!? Stop laughing at them!"

Even though she was a close-combat fighter, her clothes barely even covered the places they needed to.

“U-Umm, Shizuku-chan? It’s okay, I have some clothes that you might like. I bought them last time we were in the capital because I thought they’d suit you, so please don’t look like you’ve resigned yourself to death.”

“Kaori! My friend! My soulmate!”

She really doesn’t want to wear Shea’s clothes, huh? Hajime had never seen Shizuku look so happy.

“I don’t understand...” Shea muttered, her bunny ears drooping. Naturally, everyone ignored her. Having narrowly avoided wearing an outfit that would have revealed her arms, legs, belly, and most of her chest, Shizuku slapped Kouki and the others awake, then explained to them what had happened and headed to the changing room.

Yue created warm water with magic for them to shower in, and Shizuku sighed in exhaustion as she washed herself down. Hajime kept an eye on their surroundings and recalled his Arachnae while Yue and the others cleaned themselves.

He’d transmuted the ceiling, their surroundings, and their path to the tree, so unless the slimes could teleport he was relatively certain they wouldn’t run into anymore. Furthermore, thanks to the blaze he’d created, their view of the surrounding area was stellar. No other monsters could ambush them, and chances were most of the ones that might have had already been turned to dust by the earlier conflagration. Of course, that didn’t mean Hajime had any intention of lowering his guard.

“Master, please don’t forget about me. I’m the only person you haven’t made a changing room for...”

A timid voice interrupted Hajime’s thoughts. Up until Tio had been writhing in pleasure on the ground. Everyone had known she was there, but as she’d appeared to be enjoying herself, they’d ignored her. Even though she’d been the only one to overcome the trial at first, she’d ended up suffering from it the longest. It was rather sad. And so, Hajime glanced back at Tio.

“Oh, you’re still here, Clarence-san?”

“Ah!? M-Master, how long are you planning to act like that for? It certainly

was a refreshing way of being insulted, but I'm beginning to feel somewhat... left out. Could you please return to speaking to me the way you used to? I much preferred it when you called me Tio."

"What are you talking about, Clarence-san? This is how I always talk to you. Oh, please refrain from getting any closer."

"Ah!? M-Master, I'm deeply sorry! I swear to never get ahead of myself like that ever again! Please, I beg of you, return to normal!"

"...."

It was rare to see Tio beg or cry. She crawled to Hajime's feet and threw herself at them. Hajime watched her with dead eyes. While Tio was still blushing a little, it appeared she really did find being called by her last name painful, as opposed to enjoyable. She wasn't going into a panting fit at least. Hajime had expected her to derive pleasure from this too, but the fact that she didn't meant he finally had a way to truly punish her. He grinned. Tio shivered as she watched the corners of Hajime's mouth rise up.

Am I perhaps doomed to suffer this fate forever? Tio nearly burst into sobs.

"Masteeer. Please... call me Tio."

Hajime rejoiced upon finally discovering a way to truly punish Tio. Seeing her cry before him tickled at Hajime's sadistic urges. For once he was witnessing Tio truly distressed, instead of enjoying her distress. Looking at it objectively, Hajime was quite the pervert himself considering how sadistic he was acting. For better or worse though, he didn't notice it himself.

"If you insist. Look, I already know you're a hopeless pervert, but try to rein it in a little at least... Tio," he added with a shrug.

Tio's eyes sparkled at the mention of her name, and she gave Hajime an innocent, childish smile. That smile was so dazzling, he nearly found himself captivated by it.

Not only was Tio wise and knowledgeable, but she was also perceptive when it came to the feelings of others. Furthermore, she was constantly doing her best to get along with everyone, and never lost her cool. Her combat skills, courage, and decisiveness were nothing to scoff at either. She also had a strong

sense of duty, and impeccable looks. If she hadn't been a raging masochist, she really would have been the perfect woman.

"Seriously, why are you so hopeless?"

Is it my fault after all? Hajime thought sadly to himself. It was, of course. He was the one who'd driven a pile bunker into Tio.

Yeah, I guess I can't really deny this one. Hajime gave Tio a waning smile.

"What's wrong, Master?"

"...It's nothing. Anyway, you go change too."

"Mmm, very well... Though I would not mind if you were to change me yourself, Master. Feel free to clean me up as well, if you wish."

Tio gave Hajime an expectant look as he transmuted another changing room for her.

What happened to reining it in? Hajime pulled a grenade out of his Treasure Trove.

"Is that so? Well in that case, how about I blow all that dirt right off you?"

"Ah!? I-I shall change right away!" Tio shook her head and ran into the changing room.

As he watched the failure of a dragon run off, Hajime was once again reminded that her "condition" was his responsibility. He smiled ruefully to himself and shook his head.

Soon enough, everyone had cleaned themselves up and changed into fresh clothes. As usual, Kouki, Suzu, and even Ryutarou were depressed at their inability to overcome the trial. They hunched forward, as if carrying a basket of stones on their back, and black clouds followed them wherever they went. They remembered everything they'd done under the influence of the hypnosis. Tio had hypothesized that this trial of pleasure was one that was meant to test the bonds between comrades, and Kouki, Suzu, and Ryutarou's reaction seemed to be proof that she was right. Kouki and Ryutarou were unable to meet Shizuku or Suzu's eyes, and kept their distance. Suzu, too, was blushing bright red and hiding behind Shizuku. Shizuku tried to patch things up between her friends, but

she was having a hard time thinking of something to say. Not only had she nearly assaulted her friends, but she'd also revealed her own perverseness. That kind of trauma wasn't easy to recover from. There was no way to address the fact that they'd all nearly sexually assaulted each other without it being awkward. And naturally, Kouki and the others couldn't help but feel guilty about it. Suzu especially. Not only had she nearly assaulted her friends, but she'd also revealed her own pervertedness. That kind of trauma wasn't easy to recover from.

"Suzu, let's just forget all about this. There's nothing you could have done. And the whole incident ended without anyone doing something they'd really regret, so it's better just to never think about it again. I mean everyone has a few skeletons in the closet, right?"

"Shizushizu..."

"Look, even I've done things I'd rather not remember. There was this one time I went to the 18+ corner of a store and got into an argument about the girls on the cover of this one porn game! Just thinking about how the other guys in the store looked at me... is enough to make me depressed..."

Incidentally, the cause of that whole affair had been Kaori. The person Shizuku had been arguing with was also Kaori. After that little incident, the two of them had been banned from the store. Quite a depressing outcome.

Hajime and the others all looked at Kaori.

"Don't look at me..." she whimpered and covered her face in shame.

"Shizushizu, you like porn games?"

"No, I don't! That was just an unfortunate accident."

"...Hahaha. I can't imagine you ever arguing about a porn game, Shizushizu... Kukuku."

"I can't believe you'd laugh at me like that, Suzu..."

Despite her words, Shizuku seemed relieved that Suzu had returned to normal. Shizuku knew normal means of comforting Suzu wouldn't have worked, so she'd reluctantly dug up one of the buried events of her dark past and tried

to share in Suzu's embarrassment. And from the looks of it, her self-sacrifice had paid off splendidly.

Shizuku really was a master at looking after others. She didn't even hesitate to throw herself under the bus in order to make them feel better. Hajime, Yue, Shea, and Tio all applauded Shizuku's admirable efforts. Seeing that Suzu had recovered, Kouki forced himself past his shame and looked up at Hajime.

"Nagumo... Sorry for causing you trouble. And thanks for stopping us."

"Yeah, thanks for the save, Nagumo. You saved our hides."

Ryutarou looked up and thanked Hajime as well.

"Yeah, you better be grateful. Never forget the debts that you owe me. Because you'll be paying them back by being my meat shields when the time comes. You better not try and skip out on me. Because I'll chase you down to the ends of the earth if that's what it takes."

Hajime sounded completely like a yakuza member shaking down a poor debtor. But he was deadly serious. If Kouki or Ryutarou tried to avoid repaying their debts, Hajime really would chase them down to the ends of the earth. He wasn't one to help someone he didn't like for free. Kouki and Ryutarou smiled sadly at each other. They'd been swindled through and through by Hajime. Still, Hajime had saved them from committing a crime they knew they'd regret for the rest of their lives, so even if the debt was large, it had been worth incurring.

"Yaegashi, Taniguchi, what's with the sympathetic looks? You do realize you're in the same boat as them, right?"

"What!?"

Shizuku and Suzu both jumped. Their faces fell, and their expressions matched Kouki and Ryutarou's. They looked at Hajime as if he were a loan shark from hell. The camaraderie they felt at being Hajime's debtors did a good job of wiping away any lingering awkwardness they felt around each other.

The party resumed their journey and made it the rest of the way to the tree without any more attacks from slimes. Like every other large tree they'd seen thus far, this one had an opening leading into its hollow trunk. As usual, once they stepped inside the hollow closed in around them and a magic circle

appeared at their feet. There was a familiar blinding flash of light, and the group was teleported once more.

“Hm? We did teleport, right?”

“Yeah... Hajime, look. There’s an exit.”

The place they’d been taken to was the inside of another tree trunk. It looked identical to the one they’d entered so for a moment Hajime thought they hadn’t teleported at all, but then Yue pointed to the one difference between this tree and their old one. This time, too, everyone had safely been teleported together. Hajime’s Demon Eye didn’t sense any fakes. Meaning whatever was waiting for them lay up ahead. Hajime nodded to his comrades and stepped out of the tree trunk. What he saw shocked him speechless. After a few seconds, he finally found his voice.

“This looks... just like Verbergen.”

Yue nodded in agreement. Outside the tree, there was a single passage. But it was no normal passage. It was a giant tree branch that extended out from the tree they’d just exited. The branch was easily five meters wide. Hajime gazed back and saw the tree’s trunk was wider than he could measure. The fact that they were next to one of its branches meant they had to be a good way up in the air.

Hajime looked around and saw that their branch entwined around various others jutting out from other trees, creating a web of crisscrossing wooden paths. Hajime had described it as the same as Verbergen’s aerial pathways, but Verbergen’s didn’t hold a candle to these. These were much larger, much grander, and much more complex. Their twisting patterns created optical illusions that made the maze of branches appear even more complex than it was.

“I’m... pretty sure we’re still underground, but...”

High above them, a stone ceiling covered the sky. At the very center of this underground space towered a tree so massive it appeared to be a pillar connecting heaven and earth. Its top wasn’t visible, meaning that it rose up above the ceiling. There was only one tree Hajime had seen that was that large.

“Is that the Grand Tree?” Yue muttered.

Shea nodded.

“I believe so. This must be the space directly underneath the Grand Tree.”

“But that means the part we saw on the surface was just...”

Kaori’s voice trembled a little. The vast scale of the Grand Tree had shaken her. Tio scratched her chin and spoke her hypothesis.

“I see... This is undoubtedly Uralt. If there are branches growing down here, then that would mean the tree’s roots lie even further underground. Meaning the part of the tree visible from the surface is little more than the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. To think there were things in this world that could surprise me even now, after all these centuries. I never dreamed the Grand Tree spanned such a distance.”

“H-How big do you think it is in total?” Kouki asked timidly.

No one had an answer. Everyone looked up at the ceiling, overwhelmed by the size of the tree. Though they couldn’t see through the ceiling, they could easily imagine it sprawling ever upward toward the surface. For a few minutes, everyone stood there in awed silence.

The silence was broken when Shea’s bunny ears twitched. She’d picked up on something. Then, she strained her senses, trying to figure out where the sound had come from. She could just barely make out a faint, somewhat unpleasant rustling noise coming from below.

Goosebumps rose on her arms, and she scrunched up her face in annoyance. Her ears and tail stood on end. Confused as to why her body was reacting like this, Shea peeked down over the edge of the branch.

“Hmm, it’s too dark to make out what’s down there... Maybe if I use body strengthening on my eyes, I’ll—”

Shea used body strengthening to improve her eyesight, then froze in place.

“What’d you see, Shea?”

She didn’t respond. The hair on her ears and tail puffed out far more than it ever had before. In fact, her tail now looked twice as large as it normally did.

Like the rest of her, it was also frozen in place.

Wondering what could have gotten her so riled up, Hajime peered over the branch himself. The combination of Night Vision and Farsight allowed him to see the ground below with perfect clarity. But for once, that was a curse, not a blessing. Like Shea, he stiffened up.

“H-Hajime? What did you see?”

“Hajime-kun!?”

“M-Master, are you alright?”

Seeing Hajime get goosebumps made Yue and the others exceedingly worried. Hajime turned around, his neck creaking like a badly-oiled door.

When they saw his expression, even Kouki and the others looked shocked. The arrogant, fearless monster of the abyss had gone white as a sheet. *What on earth did he see?*

Hajime looked at Yue for a few seconds then muttered “Ahhh, I can feel myself being cleansed,” to himself.

“...There’s a devil down there. A real, bonafide devil.”

“Devil?”

Everyone tilted their heads in confusion. Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu all muttered, “Well there’s definitely a devil up here at least,” simultaneously, their gazes piercing through Hajime. Hajime responded by glaring them to tears.

“Umm, Nagumo-kun? By devil... do you mean *that* devil?”

Shizuku spared a glance at Kouki, who was still in tears, before turning to Hajime. The image of the biblical devil flashed across her mind. Hajime picked up on what she was referring to and shook her head.

“No, this devil’s way worse. The devil of hell’s nothing compared to this guy. You’ve all seen this devil before... The black devil that dwells in kitchen corners, I mean...”

Hajime’s description only made Kouki and the others more confused. In response, Hajime pulled out a single Cross Bit and sent it down below. He then

pulled up a small crystal display to show everyone what its sensors picked up on. Yue and the others crowded around, and as soon as the blurry image came into focus—

“Aaah!?”

There were dozens of them. And for each one that was visible, there were likely dozens more. The terrifying devils whose name started with C. They scuttled around the ground, spreading chaos in their wake. From shadow to shadow they crawled, these devils who were sturdier than any other living creature. Whether in Tortus or on earth, these devils possessed the unique magic capable of striking fear into the hearts of all. The bane of mothers and restaurant owners everywhere.

Cockroaches.

Down below, hundreds, no thousands, no millions of them scuttled about. It was a veritable sea of black. They surged and swelled, creating artificial waves in their artificial sea. The sound they made was one only cockroaches ever did.

“H-How could you show that to us...”

“Bleh, there’s so many of theeem.”

The blood drained from Shizuku and Suzu’s faces. And like Hajime, goosebumps had risen on their arms. Kouki and Ryutarou turned away with a groan, struggling not to throw up. Returning to her senses, Shea covered her ears with both hands and squatted down, trembling. Tio was in better shape, but not by much. Kaori, on the other hand, had completely fainted.

“Hajime, burn it all down,” Yue muttered dangerously.

Kaori’s eyes snapped open, and she sat straight up. Apparently, she agreed with Yue this time. Though there was fear in her eyes, it was joined by a burning hatred. She was the most eager to see these monstrosities punished.

“I’m gonna disintegrate them all!” she whispered furiously.

“I think we’d better not. Look at how many there are... What if some of them escape and come up to us?”

“.....”

The thought of countless cockroaches rushing at them chilled them to the bone. Both Yue and Kaori lost any will to fight. Just imagining what could happen had broken them.

“We’ll be fine as long as we don’t fall... I hope. Let’s just keep going and get out of here. If we stick around too long, they might come after us.”

Everyone nodded, suddenly serious. Their expressions were much sterner than usual. The party advanced across the sturdy branches.

Their first checkpoint was a spot in the distance where four branches met to form a large platform. They moved cautiously, afraid that the cockroach swarm would assault them at any turn, but they made it across multiple branches without incident. Soon enough, they’d arrived at their destination. The platform was about the size of a residential park, meaning it was large enough to take a short break on.

“Now then, let’s see what we can find... See anything guys?”

“Mmm... Not really.”

“Nothing here.”

“Nagumo. What if what we’re looking for’s on the other side of the tree?”

As the group discussed where to head next, they were suddenly interrupted by the sound of flapping wings. The sound they’d feared the most. Judging from how loud it was, it wasn’t just a few pairs of wings either.

“Ah!?”

The party’s expressions froze, and they hurried over to the edge of the platform and looked down. As they’d feared, the tidal wave of cockroaches was climbing their way up to them.

“Fuuuuuuck!”

“Mmm!? Draconic Thunder.”

“Get away from meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

“Noooooooooooooooooooo! Disintegrate, disintegrate, disintegrate!”

“Begone, foul creatures! Dragonbreath!”

Everyone's hair stood on end, and they fired off their strongest attacks in a panic. Hajime unleashed a barrage of rockets from his Orkans, Yue summoned her Draconic Thunder, Shea fired off explosive slugs one after another, Kaori sent down a wave of disintegration, and Tio unleashed her malefic breath. Kouki and the others fired off their best long-range attacks as well. Everyone except Shizuku, who looked like she was about to faint.

Fortunately, their overpowered firepower was effective. Countless crimson flowers blossomed in the darkness below, rimmed with crackling electricity. The space in between was filled with pale blue ripples and beams of silver and black. The occasional white flash could be seen as well, bearing down like God's wrath itself. It was a one-sided elimination. The amount of death and destruction Hajime and the others were unleashing was greater than that any army on earth could muster.

Unfortunately, their barrage barely put a dent in the ungodly number of cockroaches. The party's best efforts didn't even slow the black wave's inexorable advance. It was like trying to fight the ocean. The cockroaches flew in perfect formation, fanning out to the right and left to cover any avenues of escape.

"Ugh! L-Let this be a holy ground that d-d-denies thine enemies passage—Hallowed Ground!" Suzu erected a barrier in tears.

The wave of cockroaches flew up above Hajime and the others, then, as if being pulled down by gravity, crashed into them as one solid mass. The party's field of vision was filled with wriggling black bodies. Many of the cockroaches were squished on impact and left disgusting brown streaks as their bodies slid down the barrier. Those that survived crawled all around the barrier's surface, seeking for a way in.

"I-I can't—"

Disgusted beyond reason, Suzu fainted. Kouki rushed over to Suzu and grabbed her as she fell.

"Suzu, don't fall asleep! If you fall asleep it's all over for us!"

That was no exaggeration. If the party was swallowed up by that wave of cockroaches, they would no doubt be utterly broken mentally. No amount of

ancient magic could wipe away the trauma of an event like that.

“Yue, we need a backup barrier.”

“Okay... I won’t let them break this one!” Yue deployed her own Hallowed Ground that overlapped with Suzu’s.

“It’s just one thing after another in this labyrinth...”

“Indeed. I see now why this labyrinth requires challengers to have cleared other ones first. It appears to be much more difficult than the rest.”

Though her expression was stiff, Tio was still able to calmly analyze their situation. Kaori, who was trembling in the back, screamed.

“L-L-Less analyzing and more killing!”

Shizuku turned to Kaori with a heartfelt smile and attempted to calm her best friend down. It was hard to believe she’d fainted just moments before.

“Kaori, don’t worry. Those things are just flecks of black sesame. You know, I really like black sesame pudding and black sesame rice. Black sesame rice with soy sauce is especially delicious.”

“Oh no, Shizuku-chan’s broken down!”

Shizuku’s eyes had indeed glazed over. Realizing they had no choice but to annihilate them all, Hajime rubbed his arms and opened up his Treasure Trove. Before he could pull anything out though, the cockroaches started to pull back. Confused, Hajime watched as they formed a sphere in the mid-air. A few of them split off and created a ring around the giant sphere. More split off and created a second ring around the first. From there, cockroaches started creating lines connecting the two rings to each other at various points. Hajime’s lips twitched as he watched them create geometric shapes within the rings one after another.

“Hey, are you serious...? Are they really making a magic circle?”

This isn’t good. Hajime’s instincts warned him it was dangerous to let the cockroaches finish. Hajime and the others fired an even fiercer barrage at the mass of cockroaches, but those not part of the magic circle threw themselves forward to block the attacks. They were literally meat shields. Hundreds of

thousands of cockroaches dropped dead every second, yet the mass didn't seem to be shrinking at all.

Before long, the cockroaches' magic circle was complete. It spanned 15 meters in diameter and was glowing a dark red. The sphere it surrounded started pulsing, like a massive, disgusting egg about to hatch. The cockroaches on the outer shell of the cockroach egg were pushed outward and fell to their deaths.

And finally, the egg burst...

Finally, the egg burst, revealing a massive, three-meter long, giant cockroach. It didn't look like the regular, oval-shaped cockroaches that were flying around either. No, it looked like some horrifying cross between a human and a cockroach.

Six spiked limbs jutted out from its torso. The limbs themselves were like that of a cockroach's, but the very ends had fingers like they were human hands. Each of those fingers was a razor-sharp blade. The cockroach's head was fitted with two pitch-black eyeballs and powerful mandibles. Three pairs of translucent wings sprouted from its back, and it had a tail near its waist. Considering how intimidating and blasphemous it looked, Hajime guessed that it was this floor's final guardian.

"Gichichichichi!"

It let out a revolting, inhuman scream, and wreathed itself in dark red mana. The cockroaches around it rearranged themselves and started creating another magic circle. It appeared the giant human-shaped one could control the others at will.

More cockroaches flew to the center of the magic circle and started creating multiple spheres. These were smaller than the ones that had created the human-shaped one, but they were still big enough that whatever came out of them would be trouble.

"Tch, like I'll let— Wha!?"

"Mmm!?"

Hajime and Yue made to attack the cockroach swarm, but then stopped when

they felt a vast torrent of mana at their feet. They both looked down, but at a glance, it seemed the platform they were on hadn't changed at all. Hajime activated his Demon Eye and saw that another swarm of cockroaches had created another magic circle underneath the branches.

The other magic circle up in the sky was just a distraction to keep the party's attention away from this one. And it had worked. Hajime only had time to curse before the magic circle beneath them activated. A pillar of dark crimson mana shot up from underneath the branches. It spiraled around them like a tornado, and Hajime was forced to cover his eyes from the intensity of its light. Then, there was a blinding crimson flash, and the entire room was filled with light.

After a few seconds, the light dispersed. Hajime looked down at himself and found he was unhurt.

"What on earth was that? Yue, are you—"

Upon seeing Yue, Hajime stopped mid-sentence, stunned. Was it because he'd been captivated by her, even in the middle of battle? No. The opposite, actually.

He was neither relieved at finding her safe, nor happy to see her. No, he was disgusted. Disgusted to the point that he was filled with hatred. For the first time in his life, Hajime felt that way toward Yue. And from the looks of it, Yue felt the same way. Her mouth was twisted into a faint snarl, and there was murder in her eyes.

"Yue."

"Hajime..."

They both frowned in displeasure at the same time.

"I fucking hate you."

"I wish I could kill you."

Neither of them bothered to hide their disdain. At the same time, they drew their weapons. Hajime pointed Donner at Yue's forehead, while she pointed a hand glowing with pale blue flames at his chest.

Just barely, the two of them managed to stop themselves from firing.

Something in their memories told them this situation was wrong. Had it not been for their instincts, they would likely have tried to kill each other.

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing you two?” Shea interrupted their charged glaring contest with an angry yell. However, it wasn’t because she was trying to stop them from killing each other.

“The hell do you think you’re doing, playing around in the middle of a battle? I’ll murder you worms!” In fact, she seemed more than ready to join in herself. Her eyes held nothing but hatred. She tapped Drucken threateningly against her shoulder. If it wasn’t for the fact that they were in a life-and-death battle in the middle of a labyrinth, she would have attacked them already.

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to, worthless rabbit!”

“I’ll tear your ears off...”

Hajime felt a hatred for Shea nearly as great as his hatred for Yue. It appeared Yue felt the same way, as she was reaching threateningly for Shea’s ears.

However, they were all aware of the fact that they were in the middle of a battlefield. Inside a labyrinth no less. Hajime mentally berated himself for letting his feelings get the better of him and examined his surroundings.

A truly bizarre spectacle was playing out before him. Tio and Kaori were glaring daggers at Yue and Shea. And to his surprise, Hajime found he abhorred the two of them too. So much so that he contemplating assassinating them in the middle of the fight.

There was something incredibly odd going on here. Hajime couldn’t remember ever hating anyone in his party before. In fact, he distinctly remembered coming to trust each of them implicitly after all the trials they’d overcome together. And yet, just recalling those memories filled him with hate. Just as Hajime’s anger was about to boil over, he heard a passionate voice behind him.

“H-Hey, what do you guys think you’re doing!? I won’t let you lay a finger on Nagumo!”

Kouki, of all people, had rushed to Hajime’s defense. Yue and the others glared at him. For whatever reason, Kouki was looking at Hajime with

something akin to worship in his eyes.

Hajime looked away, disgusted. However, he didn't feel any inexplicable hate or love for Kouki. That knowledge helped him calm down a little, and examine his irrational feelings more carefully.

Fortunately, Yue and Suzu's barriers were still active. Otherwise, they would have been swallowed up by the swarm of cockroaches while they were still bickering. But while the group was arguing, the human-shaped cockroach continued to organize the others into spheres and magic circles, creating more miniature versions of itself. While the human-shaped one was horrific because of its exaggerated features, the miniature ones were disgusting to look at because their appearance was a cross between the human-shaped one and normal cockroaches.

They were best categorized as half-human-shaped. And the human-shaped boss was mass-producing them with unbelievable speed. If the human-shaped one was their king, then these half-human-shaped ones were its knights and the tiny regular ones foot soldiers.

Regardless, the primary reason Hajime and the others were able to argue like this at all was that Suzu and Yue's barriers were keeping them safe. However, that might not remain the case once the human-shaped cockroach began attacking in earnest. Hajime forced his hate-filled brain to think, and finally, he realized what the source of everyone's inexplicable feelings was. Going by how everyone was acting, he was certain his guess was correct.

"Looks like that last spell reversed our feelings on everything. And these reversed feelings are as strong as their original counterparts."

"Yeah... It pisses me off that I agree with you... but that seems likely."

Yue nodded with a frown. The other girls all agreed as well, displeasure oozing from every pore.

"I understand now. This trial is a test to see if we can overcome our reversed emotions through the strength of the bonds we've forged, or failing that, continue to place our trust in each other despite our mutual dislike... This is quite the nasty ordeal. Especially since the stronger your bonds are, the greater the hatred you'll feel when those feelings are reversed. Worst of all though..."

Tio trailed off and turned toward the half-human-shaped cockroaches swarming outside the barrier, her face slightly flushed. Hajime and the others followed her gaze and found themselves at a loss for words. Kaori was the first to break the silence.

“They’re beautiful...” she whispered, her eyes glistening.

And therein lay the problem. These black devils that they normally detested more than anything was their enemy. But right now, all Hajime and the others could think about was how lovely they appeared to be. Naturally, they still distinctly remembered trying to eradicate the swarm. But their feelings regarding these monsters had been reversed too. The fact that Hajime felt as if he actually *liked* these cockroaches was proof enough that his theory was correct.

Not only would their coordination be hampered by their mutual hatred for each other, but they would also unconsciously hold back against enemies they’d suddenly come to love. At the very least, that was likely Haltina’s aim. That would explain why they’d picked cockroaches to serve as the challengers’ enemy too; there was no other creature so universally hated. While the party bickered amongst themselves, they would slowly be drowned under a sea of cockroaches or ripped apart by the human-shaped and half-human-shaped elites. For any normal party, this trial would be a death sentence. However, Hajime and his comrades were anything but normal.

“Yeah, they’re beautiful alright. I can’t believe we were trying to so hard to kill these cute things a second ago.”

“I love how they scuttle around on their little wriggly legs. And their shells are so impressive.”

Hajime and Yue smiled as they stared at the massive cockroach boss and the swarm surrounding it. The human-shaped cockroach looked, if anything, even more lovely to their eyes than its underlings. Right now, everyone present felt these creatures were cuter than any puppy or kitten. They could feel a desire to protect the adorable critters welling up within them. Who could possibly harm them when their eyes seemed to be pleading for mercy? And so—

“I could stare at them forever... Alright, time to kill them.”

“Yeah... They really are wonderful... Okay, let’s kill them.”

Hajime took Schlagen, his anti-material rifle, and fired. Yue cast the spatial magic Void Fissure. Two powerful attacks ripped through the swarm of cockroaches. Hajime’s piercing bullet shredded its way through everything in its path, whether that was Yue and Suzu’s barriers, or the thousands of cockroaches and hundreds of half-humanoid cockroaches protecting his target, the human-shaped boss.

“Gah!?” The human-shaped cockroach screamed and retreated. It fled at full-speed, sparing no thoughts for defense. Unfortunately, Hajime’s railgun-accelerated shots traveled too fast to dodge. He unleashed a barrage that devastated the human-shaped cockroach’s left half.

Schlagen’s bullets had so much force behind them that they went through even branches and trees in their path and embedded themselves in the cavern’s walls. A second later, the air blurred and warped. This was no vibration caused by a speeding bullet. No, space itself was shaking.

As Yue’s and Suzu’s barriers disappeared, the cockroaches flooded toward the party. However, no matter what direction they came from, they were instantly murdered and their corpses flung away. Shockwaves of spatial magic battered cockroaches in waves, obliterating the tiny ones, and crushing the half-human-shaped ones beyond recognition.

“Huh? What? What’s happening?”

Suzu looked around, confused. She couldn’t understand why her own comrades had destroyed her barrier, but then she noticed the enemies around her had all been destroyed. There was nothing black in sight, save for Tio’s clothes. Unfortunately, Hajime and Yue had only destroyed the cockroaches around them. There were still countless more climbing up the walls or scuttling around on the floor below. But that didn’t bother Hajime or Yue one bit.

“This is so sad. If only they weren’t our enemies, we wouldn’t have to kill them.”

“Truly, a shame...”

No matter how cute they looked. No matter how lovable they were. No

matter how much they didn't want to kill them. No matter how much they wanted to be their friends. It didn't change the fact that these cockroaches were Hajime and Yue's enemies. And the only thing that awaited their enemies was death. There was no room for sympathy or mercy.

Hajime's eyes glinted with a murderous light and his lips curled up in a fearless smile. On the other hand, Yue's gaze turned as cold as ice. She looked like a true vampire queen.

"Hey, pipsqueak. That big one's mine. Don't get in my way."

"Who do you think you are? That prey is mine. Get in my way and I kill you."

The two glared at each other, then simultaneously turned away with a "Hmph!" Hajime bent his legs in preparation for a jump while Yue floated into the sky. Another tidal wave of black bugs had risen up and was bearing down on the two of them. The human-shaped cockroach was at its center, trying to repair the damage Hajime had caused.

Shea, Kaori, and Tio called out to Hajime. But he wasn't in any mood to listen. The only reply they got was a loud thud as Hajime leaped off the platform of branches. The wooden supports creaked and groaned, and a tiny crater remained at his leaping point.

Hajime had already turned into a speeding bullet by the time Shizuku and Suzu squealed in surprise. The wave of cockroaches rose up to swallow Hajime like one giant, wriggling maw. Hajime responded by wreathing himself in Diamond Skin and Lightning Field, causing him to glow crimson and emit sparks. At the same time, he deployed all seven of his Cross Bits. They whirled around him at high speed, firing their explosive slugs incessantly.

The roar of cannon fire filled Hajime's ears and the slugs punched a series of holes into the great black mass. However, they weren't enough to stop the wave's advance. They didn't need to, though. Any cockroaches that managed to latch on to Hajime were incinerated by his Lightning Field or repelled by his Diamond Skin and the speed of his flight. The wall of cockroaches didn't even slow him down. The ripples of his Aerodynamic platforms resembled the passage of a skipping stone as he shot through the air. The human-shaped cockroach recoiled in surprise and attempted to escape from Hajime's path.

“Man, everything it does is so cute... Oh well. Die.”

Hajime sped through the air faster than the eye could follow and planted a flying kick squarely in the cockroach’s chest. There was a thunderous roar of metal slamming against metal. Then Hajime landed lightly where the human-shaped cockroach had been standing, while the cockroach flew through the air so fast it looked like a blur. Without any means to slow itself down, it slammed painfully into the Grand Tree’s trunk. A second thunderous roar reverberated through the room. Judging from the noise, the Grand Tree’s trunk was far sturdier than any normal plant’s.

Despite that, the human-shaped cockroach was buried deep inside the trunk’s wood. There was a huge crater in its chest where Hajime had hit it, and white fluid leaked from its every orifice. But he wasn’t done yet. He pulled Orkan out of his Treasure Trove and took aim. He may have called it cute and adorable, but Hajime had no mercy for it despite that.

However, this cockroach was still the labyrinth’s final guardian. While it may have relied on underhanded trials to confuse Hajime’s party, it was no slouch when it came to combat. Before Hajime could pull the trigger, it unleashed a discordant shriek.

“Kii!”

A huge shadow loomed over Hajime. Looking up, he saw a group of tiny cockroaches forming a magic circle above him. Before he could react, black mist spewed from the circle. It didn’t stop there. Every tiny cockroach, whether it was part of the circle or not, began emitting the same black mist.

Hajime’s honed senses warned him that coming into contact with that mist would be a death sentence.

“Tch.”

Hajime brought his Cross Bits close and activated his spatial barrier, but there was no telling if it would finish deploying in time. Just then, Hajime heard a loud howl. A jade-green dragon made of wind swallowed up both Hajime and the cockroaches surrounding him.

Yue’s Storm Serpent. The dragon comprised of thousands of blades of wind

held together by a gravity core near its jaw shredded all it came into contact with. At the same time, another dragon comprised of deep blue flames and one wreathed in a storm of electricity bore down from above, obliterating the cockroaches' magic circle.

Her Sapphire Serpent and Draconic Thunder, twin dragons made of fire and gravity and lightning and gravity magic respectfully, had also entered the fray. They were like whales, swallowing up thousands of cockroaches in a single gulp.

However, that wasn't all, as another dragon, this one made of crystal clear ice, headed toward the weakened human-shaped cockroach.

"Kiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

It let out another screech and jumped out of the way right before the ice dragon slammed into the Grand Tree. Ice spread across the tree's trunk, and waves of frost assailed the cockroach.

This was a new composite spell of Yue's, Frost Wurm. Right as the cockroach cleared Yue's Frost Wurm, another one comprised of pure white smoke bore down on it from above.

"Kiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

A horde of small cockroaches surrounded the human-shaped one, creating a sphere-shaped shield. The dragon unleashed a stream of white breath. Any cockroach the breath touched was petrified, turned to white marble. Bereft of the ability to fly, the petrified cockroaches dropped like hailstones.

This was another new composite spell of Yue's, Stone Wyvern. Together, the five spells were known as Yue's five heavenly dragons. Yue observed the carnage with an impassive eye and spoke in a flat voice.

"Did you die?"

Her wind dragon coiled itself around her as she tilted her head. And an angry voice replied from below.

"Just who were you trying to kill back there, huh? It better not have been me."

Hajime used Aerodynamic to jump up to where Yue was floating. His clothes

were in tatters. His barrier had deployed a split-second too late, and the Storm Serpent had chewed them up.

“Heh,” Yue smirked.

“Y-You little bitch. You were totally trying to kill me back there, weren’t you?”

“...It was just a joke. If it was that easy to kill you, someone would have done it ages ago.”

“Hmph, you make it sound like there’s a ton of people who want me dead. Don’t make me shoot you.”

“There’s definitely a ton of people who want you dead. Would you have preferred the lightning dragon?”

Hajime and Yue glared at each other. Regardless of her intentions, Hajime came out of the cockroaches’ mysterious attack safely because Yue had acted under the conviction that Hajime wouldn’t die to an attack of that level.

“It’s your fault for getting in my way. If you’re going to charge in so recklessly, you’re better off retreating.”

“Hah. You’re so full of it. That puny dragon of yours didn’t even scratch that cockroach. You’re the one who should get back.”

The two of them pushed their faces together so closely that their noses touched. The whole time, Yue’s fire and lightning dragons continued to incinerate the cockroaches above them. Her wind dragon’s umbrella of protective wind kept the rain of burnt bugs from falling onto the two of them.

From a distance, they looked like lovers huddling up next to each other to take shelter from a sudden downpour. They must have seemed that way to the human-shaped cockroach as well, since it let out an angry roar, furious that they were ignoring it. At the same time, it beat its six pairs of wings rapidly and shot out of its mostly-petrified shield of small cockroaches.

Its wings let out a strange, high-pitched whirr as it sped through the petrifying beam. Because of its ridiculous speed, it managed to push through with only its extremities petrified. The ice dragon and stone dragon chased after it, determined not to let their prey escape.

“Mmm... It’s fast.”

The dragons were unable to keep up with the cockroach’s inhuman velocity. It flew up toward the ceiling, where it had gathered another group of tiny cockroaches, and vanished into their midst.

A scant few seconds later, the thick mass of tiny cockroaches dispersed, revealing a completely unharmed human-shaped cockroach. There were no traces of the damage Hajime had dealt with Schlagen and his kick, or of the petrification and freezing Yue’s ice and stone dragons had caused.

“Is it absorbing the tiny ones to heal itself?”

“It was made from a group of small ones to begin with, so it makes sense.”

If the human-shaped cockroach could heal itself using its minions, then their situation suddenly grew desperate. Considering how many cockroaches covered the walls and floor, they’d be fighting forever. And thanks to their reversed emotions, their sense of desperation was transformed into admiration.

The human-shaped cockroach roared, signaling the start of the second round, and the beginning of its counterattack.

“Kiiiiiiiiiiii!”

Black smoke spilled from its mouth. It was joined by its surrounding servants, who also started spewing black smoke.

Unconcerned, Hajime shouldered Orkan while Yue unleashed her five dragons at the cockroaches. In response, the black surrounding the cockroaches began to swirl around them in a spiral. The tornado of smoke then raced forward, toward Hajime and Yue.

“Tch.”

“Hmph...”

Trusting their instincts, Hajime and Yue chose to dodge the tornado rather than block it. They leaped in opposite directions, and the black tornado flew past them, right into one of the Grand Tree’s branches.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Hajime muttered.

His eyes narrowed as he watched the branch wither before his eyes. It shriveled up, turned black, and started to crumble away.

“Did it rot?” Yue mumbled to herself, a short distance away.

Her guess was right on the mark. The cockroaches’ black smoke eroded anything it touched. It was one hell of a dangerous weapon.

The human-shaped cockroach screeched again and flew toward Yue. Its tiny servants encircled the pair, preventing them from escaping.

The human-shaped cockroach was probably aiming for Yue first because it felt her dragons were more dangerous than Hajime’s weapons. Yue prepared to intercept the cockroach with her Storm Serpent, but then something unexpected occurred.

“Ah!?”

As if it had teleported, the human-shaped cockroach appeared right in front of her. In response, she used gravity magic to fall sideways, dodging the cockroach’s bladed fingers by a hair’s breadth. But despite the successful dodge, blood still spurted from Yue’s shoulder and side. Furthermore, she doubled over and started coughing up blood.

“Wind blades and a shockwave?”

Once again, Yue’s assessment was accurate. Upon closer inspection, she realized that the human-shaped boss was surrounded by a faint white aura. It was whizzing around so fast that it had broken the sound barrier. Its oscillating wings weren’t just to give it speed, but also to allow it to shoot out blades of wind as it passed, and to leave shockwaves in its wake. In the time it took Yue to process all that, the cockroach boss had already closed in for a second assault. Before it could slice at her again though, a missile slammed into it.

“Mmm!?”

“Kiiiiii!?”

There was a loud boom, followed by a massive explosion. Shockwaves of heat rolled over Yue. The human-shaped cockroach spun to the ground below, smoke trailing behind it. Its recently-healed body was covered in cracks and

fissures.

Hajime clicked his tongue.

“Tch, couldn’t finish you off.”

“Who were you trying to kill back there? It wasn’t me, was it?”

Yue floated up behind Hajime and glared angrily at him. Her clothes were singed and covered in soot.

Thanks to her innate regenerative powers, so long as Yue had mana left she could recover from even getting her head chopped off. However, doing so required time and concentration. Meaning she was wide-open while she was regenerating fatal wounds. And since the human-shaped cockroach’s attack would have decapitated her, in a way Hajime’s missile had saved her. Broken bones and burns healed much faster than a missing head.

Of course, Yue was still pretty pissed at Hajime’s attempt to blow her up. Hence why she’d teleported behind Hajime and was now pointing a glowing blue finger at his back. Hajime turned toward her, Orkan still on his shoulder. Then, after a quick glance at her, he turned away.

A vein pulsed in Yue’s forehead, and she growled.

“You bastard. You really were trying to kill me.”

“It was just a joke. If it was that easy to kill you, someone would have done it ages ago.”

“Don’t make it sound like everyone wants to kill me.” Yue’s glare grew sharper, and she debated loosing her lightning dragon on Hajime. Their exchange was a perfect mirror of the time when Yue had tried to off Hajime. Though they were supposed to despise each other, it almost seemed as if they were good friends who happened to fight a lot. Not that anyone was brave enough to point that out.

Their glaring contest was interrupted by another high-pitched whirring. The two responded instantly. Hajime drew Donner and fired a full salvo while Yue unleashed a torrent of azure flames.

Crimson streaks and azure flames crossed each other in mid-air, then whizzed

past Yue and Hajime's faces. The half-humanoid cockroaches sneaking up behind Hajime and Yue were shot down without mercy.

Another wave of black bore down on the pair as they finished off the half-humanoids. This time, the tiny cockroaches were wreathed in the corrosive black smoke. And there were billions of them.

With a flick of Yue's finger, her five dragons coiled themselves around her. Then, true to their name, they flew up toward the heavens.

"Mmm... Roar." Yue snapped her fingers, and the five dragons unleashed their most powerful attacks.

With a thunderous howl, the lightning dragon burst apart, blooming into a radiant electric flower.

With an explosive howl, the fire dragon burst apart, scattering flames of destruction everywhere.

With a stormy howl, the wind dragon burst apart, throwing thousands of razor-sharp wind blades in all directions.

With a rumbling howl, the earth dragon burst apart, coating the cockroaches in white.

With an icy howl, the ice dragon burst apart, sending shockwaves of sub-zero temperatures through the army of cockroaches.

The five dragons' howls scattered the putrid miasma and destroyed most of the cockroaches surrounding the human-shaped one.

"Kiiiiiiii!" It charged Yue, who was still staring at the ceiling. Seemed it had already used its underlings to heal itself again.

However, Yue predicted the attack and canceled her gravity magic, falling safely out of reach. As she fell, Hajime locked on to the boss from the other side.

There was a single loud bang, and five streaks of crimson light shot out of his revolver. He'd aimed for the cockroach's head, heart, stomach, and both shoulders with pinpoint accuracy.

Its figure blurred as the bullets passed harmlessly through it. Hajime had

ended up hitting the cockroach's afterimage. It accelerated even further and flew behind Hajime.

Four arms bore down on him, each covered in blades of wind and the black mist of death.

"Hmph... I knew you'd try that."

Hajime spun Donner around with a flick of his wrist and fired at the enemy behind him. His last remaining bullet punched through the cockroach's shoulder, fouling its aim and causing half of its slashes to miss. Hajime blocked the remaining two arms by twisting to the side and using Orkan as a shield.

The cockroach pushed against Hajime, trying to force its way through. But in seconds, Orkan's surface started to corrode due to the black mist's influence. Before it could wither away entirely, Hajime threw it back into his Treasure Trove.

"Kiiiiiiiiiiii!"

Thrown off-balance by the sudden move, the human-shaped cockroach pitched forward. Hajime pressed Schlagen's muzzle against its flank and fired multiple rounds. He did it all so fast it was hard to tell when he'd even taken Schlagen out of his Treasure Trove.

The monster's shape blurred again, and it retreated at top speed. Despite its inhuman reaction times, it hadn't been able to dodge all the shots, and there was a single hole in its stomach. Hajime spun his revolver's barrel as he reloaded and muttered to himself.

"I guess this is supposed to simulate a battle with one of God's Apostles."

The human-shaped cockroach seemed to be the Liberators' approximation of what a fight with an apostle would be like. Since anyone challenging these labyrinths would eventually find themselves facing real apostles, the Liberators had created a trial where one faced something similar.

The corrosive smoke was similar to an apostle's disintegration. Its near limitless regenerative abilities were similar to their bottomless reserves of mana. Its wind blades were similar to their twin greatswords. And its army of tiny cockroaches was similar to their barrage of feathers. Even its speed rivaled

that of an apostle.

No wonder this labyrinth required you to have cleared four others first.

As far as Hajime could tell, the human-shaped cockroach was a bit weaker than Noint had been, but it still posed quite a threat. Had they fought this monster right after escaping the abyss, Hajime and Yue might have found themselves overwhelmed.

“Bring it on,” Hajime spat as the cockroach sped toward him faster than the speed of sound.

With Yue’s dragons gone, it had determined that Hajime was the greater threat. Recalling his fight with Noint, Hajime chose to backstep out of the cockroach’s way, rather than face it head-on. However, retreating a few meters wasn’t going to be enough to get out of the monster’s way.

From an observer’s point of view, Hajime’s flight might have appeared panicked, but there was a good reason for his actions.

“Kiii!?”

The moment after Hajime pulled back, lances of lightning shot up underneath the spot he’d been standing on. The human-shaped cockroach, who’d just reached that same spot, was struck by the barrage. Two of its arms and four of its wings were ripped to shreds.

The loss of its wings caused its speed to drop, and Hajime took advantage of that opening to bombard it with Donner and Schlag. The cockroach jerked back and forth like a ragdoll as bullets blasted through it.

A second later, it burst apart, like a popped balloon. All that remained now were the tiny regular cockroaches.

“Did we get it?”

“I’m not sure. I definitely destroyed all the mana crystals inside it, but...”

Mana crystals were like the heart of a monster. The human-shaped cockroach had possessed multiple, likely because it was comprised of hundreds of tiny ones. It was because Hajime had shot through all of them that it had dispersed into its component mini-cockroaches again.

However, Hajime didn't let his guard down. He looked up at the ceiling with his Demon Eye, and as he'd feared, he spotted numerous pinpricks of crimson light.

Yue followed his gaze and watched as dozens of new human-shaped cockroaches emerged from the roiling mass. It appeared just beating one cockroach wouldn't be enough to clear this trial.

"Looks like I guessed right."

"Yeah... An army of Kaoris. It's like a nightmare."

While they were meant to be facsimiles of apostles, calling them Kaoris was a bit rude to her. Either way, this proved Hajime's theory. This trial was meant to be a simulation for when labyrinth challengers would eventually need to face Ehit's army.

Once they'd marshaled their forces, all 50 human-shaped cockroaches rushed at Yue and Hajime. and as that happened, two of them looked at each other and snapped at each other.

"Don't get in my way."

"That's my line."

They wrapped themselves in crimson and golden mana respectively, a dangerous glint in their eyes. Then, they greeted the monsters' charge with fearless smiles and lined up side by side. It was hard to believe their feelings really had been reversed.

Let us turn back time to a few minutes ago. Right after Hajime and Yue left to fight the human-shaped cockroach, another wave of black monsters assaulted Shea and the others still on the platform. Suzu hurriedly attempted to put up another barrier, but then hesitated.

"....."

Right now, the cockroaches swarming toward her seemed unbearably cute. They were as irresistible as a litter of kittens coming to play. To shut them out with a barrier would be too cruel. After all, all Suzu wanted was to frolic with

them.

“Hey, Suzu!?” Shizuku screamed.

Shizuku couldn’t stand this girl at the best of times, and now she was trying to shirk her duties? Unacceptable. For a moment, Shizuku debated chopping Suzu’s braids off in punishment, but she knew now wasn’t the time for that.

“Rise up, O furious gale— Purgatory Blaze!”

An instant before the black wave swallowed the group, a blazing tornado rose up to protect them.

The spiral of flames was so large it covered the entire platform they were standing on. Though they were massive in number, the small cockroaches were still just cockroaches. Unable to withstand the whirlwind of fire, they died one after another as the wave tried to crash through and failed.

“Pull yourselves together, girls. Did you forget why you came here? It certainly wasn’t to give yourselves up to the enemy, was it?”

Tio’s words were a huge wake-up call not just for Suzu, but also for Kouki. He started and turned to Tio. She had her hands out in front of her and was glaring sharply at Suzu and the others.

“S-Sorry,” Suzu mumbled.

“Save your apologies. Right now, you need to focus on doing your duty. A Barrier Master’s job is to protect their comrades, is it not?”

“Y-Yes!”

Though Suzu held no particular love for Tio right now, Tio’s words still resonated within her, and she found herself nodding. For some reason, even though she was a hopeless pervert everyone currently hated, no one could ignore the weight behind Tio’s words.

“She’s actually acting like the legendary dragonwoman she’s supposed to be!” Shea exclaimed.

She stared in wonder at Tio.

“Who *are* you!?” Kaori whispered as she brandished her greatsword at Tio.

She looked as if she'd just encountered some incomprehensible creature. At that, Tio's lips twitched as she spoke.

"I-Is there no limit... to your disrespect? Well, I suppose I deserve it considering how I normally act. However, that's not important right now! My spell's nearing it's limit, so the rest of you need to get your act together!"

Though they still couldn't believe how reliable Tio was being, Shea and Kaori both turned their attention to the problem at hand.

A second later, Tio's spiral of flames vanished. Shea and Kaori prepared to intercept another wave of cockroaches, but they found the area around the platform empty.

"Hm? Oh, they went to deal with those two."

Shea looked up, where Hajime and Yue were in the middle of dueling the human-shaped cockroach. Despite the sheer numbers the cockroaches possessed, they couldn't afford to split their forces when it came to fighting those two. Either that or they were unable to take action independent of the human-shaped cockroach's orders now.

Either way, Shea was glad that the cockroaches' attention wasn't focused on them. Neither she nor Kaori were good at handling large numbers at once. Though it irked her to no end that it was thanks to Hajime and Yue that she could take it easy.

But while her burden was lessened, it didn't mean she had no enemies to face. In fact, the stronger enemies had been left to Shea's group. They had to deal with the swarm of half-human-shaped cockroaches, each of which was half the size of the human-shaped one.

There were already 200 of them, and more were spawning every second. Before long, they blotted out Shea's view and she could only catch glimpses of Hajime and Yue's fight. It wouldn't take much more time before even those few gaps were closed up.

"Hey, wait, I don't care how awesome those things look. If we don't fight them here, we're screwed."

Cold sweat poured down Ryutarou's back. However, it seemed he'd managed

to shake off his misgivings about fighting creatures he found cute. He raised his fists and fell into a combat stance.

“What, you’re really gonna fight them!?” Kouki looked at Ryutarou as though his friend were insane.

Irritated by Kouki’s half-assed attitude, Shizuku snarled.

“Kouki, stop spacing out. You heard Nagumo-kun, didn’t you? Our feelings have been reversed. What you’re feeling right now isn’t real. And if we don’t fight here, we’ll die.”

“I-I know, but... Oh yeah, Nagumo’s here! All we have to do is focus on defense, and he’ll handle everything for us!”

Wasn’t the whole reason you came here because you couldn’t stand to rely on him for everything!? Shizuku thought as she glared at Kouki. He winced, but held his ground. After all, he trusted Hajime far more than he did Shizuku. As he was about to argue back, the half-humanoid cockroaches charged the group. Their time limit was up.

There was no more time to think about what to do. The one to kick off their battle was naturally Shea.

“Shaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” She loosed a deafening war cry, channeling all of her negative feelings into this one strike. A large red sphere appeared in the air in front of her, and she smacked it with all of her might. The air itself shook as Drucken sent her kendama flying like a massive cannonball.

Any cockroaches in its path were crushed to a pulp, leaving a huge hole in the cockroaches’ encirclement.

“Stop ignoring me, you little devil!”

It appeared Shea was still mad at Yue and Hajime. She couldn’t stand how they’d just ignored her and went off to battle by themselves. She leaped into the sky, leaving a crater as big as Hajime’s on the platform below. Shooting through the opening she’d made with her kendama, she headed for where Hajime and Yue were fighting. However, the half-human-shaped cockroaches swarmed in from all sides to stop her.

“I don’t have time to play with you guys! Get lost!”

Shea blushed a little as she watched the mass of half-humanoids surround her. But while she was glad for the attention they were giving her, she didn’t hesitate to send their speeding frames flying with a thwack from Drucken. The cockroaches flew around the cavern like pinballs.

As their bodies were sturdier than the mini-cockroaches, they were surprisingly bouncy. The noise they made when Drucken smacked into them was almost comical. Soon enough, the air was filled with whizzing, crushed corpses. And not a single one of them touched Shea.

Even when they tried to surround themselves in corrupting miasma, one strike from Drucken was all it took to obliterate them. The cockroaches then attempted a simultaneous assault from all directions, but found themselves swept aside by Shea’s kendama.

She was tearing through them like a howling gale. No enemy could hope to withstand the combination of her warhammer and kendama.

“Nnnnnngh! I wish I had as much mass destructive power as the others!”

In the end, though, Shea was still a close-combat fighter. While numbers could never truly overwhelm her, neither could she mow them down efficiently. She glanced over and saw Hajime and Yue fighting together even as they fought each other, and puffed her cheeks out in jealousy.

A few cockroaches tried to jump on her while she was distracted, but she just blew them away with a casual roundhouse kick. The two half-humanoid monsters were blown away and joined the hundreds of others bouncing around the room. Kaori watched with unbridled jealousy as Shea blasted her way through the monsters.

“Amazing...” Kaori knew how strong Shea was, but this was the first time she’d seen the bunny girl fight so many enemies up close. She was so engrossed in watching Shea that Kaori forgot to fly off and try to join Hajime and the others herself. Of course, she continued to cut down the cockroaches that attacked her on the platform and mow down others with her silver feathers, so it wasn’t like she’d forgotten to fight.

But this is just... borrowed strength. Kaori's old doubts rose to the surface.

"Did you not make your peace with those feelings in Melusine's ruins?"

"Huh?"

Tio turned back to Kaori as she fired scattered shots of her breath to back up Kouki and the others. Kaori bristled at having been seen through so easily, but before she could protest, Tio continued.

"It matters not how you obtained it, the power in your hands is now yours to wield. Besides, you sacrificed your own body to obtain this strength, don't belittle your own efforts."

Shocked by Tio's words, Kaori showed the merest hint of an opening. A single cockroach took advantage of that opening and flew in from above, but Tio casually shot it down with a wind blade. Her precision and focus were unparalleled.

"Be proud of yourself, Kaori. It is because of your own efforts that you are standing here with us."

"Shut up... I don't need you to tell me that, Tio."

Even though she was supposed to hate Tio, Kaori couldn't help but feel a little grateful. She only lashed out at Tio in a childish attempt to cover her own embarrassment. In order to distract herself from the warmth spreading through her chest, she redoubled her efforts to tear through the wave of cockroaches. A barrage of disintegration feathers tore through the monsters, breaking them apart.

Naturally, Tio saw through those feelings as well and continued with a small smile.

"Shea, too, is special in her own way. You would be better off not trying to compare yourself to her."

Shea certainly was special. She was the only beastman who possessed mana, and even without that, her strength was abnormal. Kaori assumed that was what Tio was referring to, but Tio shook her head.

"No, I'm not referring to her abilities. I mean her fortitude."

“Her fortitude?”

“Yes, her fortitude. Remember, Shea is a rabbit girl. Originally, she had no love for fighting.”

But she knew her wish would never have been granted if she didn’t fight.

“Through all the tears, through all the terror, she continued to press forward. All so that she could stand together with those she loved. While this world seems to have granted Kouki the title of hero...” Tio glanced up at Shea as she said that.

“I believe that neither he nor even Master are worthy of holding that title. If the word hero defines someone who possesses limitless courage, then no one is more deserving of that moniker than Shea Haulia.”

It surprised Kaori that Tio held that much respect for Shea. What surprised her even more though, was that Tio was able to voice such feelings in this situation.

“Hey, Tio. Shouldn’t your feelings be reversed too?”

Even as Tio conversed with Kaori, she continued to back up Kouki, who was still lacking the will to fight, and Ryutarou, who was slowly being overwhelmed. It was amazing how calm she was able to remain. It didn’t seem at all like her emotions had been reversed. Either that or Tio had secretly hated everyone all along.

“Hmph, I care not for you lot. In fact, I can feel displeasure welling up simply from talking to you. But what of it?”

“Huh?”

Tio turned her gaze back to Kaori. Kaori gulped, overwhelmed by the intensity in her eyes. Tio grinned, then turned around and unleashed another storm of breath at an oncoming army of cockroaches.

“Feelings alone... cannot hope to match the 500 years of experiences I’ve lived through.”

Her memories served as her guide, keeping Tio from being swayed by the reversal magic. She had long since grown out of the age where she let herself

get swept along by temporary feelings. No matter what her current feelings were, so long as she retained her memories, Tio Clarence would never let herself be swayed by hate. Inside her, both love and hate, right and wrong, were eclipsed by the weight of her own experiences.

After wiping out another group of cockroaches Tio turned and stated her thoughts clearly.

“Compared to my duty, my feelings are of little importance. While I may despise you at the moment, my memories are telling me that you’re someone I wish to protect.”

Duty, obligation, and honor. Those were what drove Tio onward, and she would never betray that part of herself. And that was also why she wasn’t shaken.

“Kaori, I will protect you. I swear it on my pride as a black dragon, and on my job as a guardian.”

Tio spoke with the authority and dignity of a king. Kaori found herself captivated by the unwavering resolve in her eyes, and her lustrous black hair, fluttering in the breeze. She felt a deep sense of relief wash over her.

“I-I-I don’t need your protection! I can handle myself just fine!”

And so Kaori once again lashed out to hide her embarrassment. Unfortunately, she couldn’t hide the blush spreading up her face. In a way, the scariest part of this feeling-reversal magic was how cool it was making Tio seem.

Chances were, Tio had to suppress her own perversions in order to keep her feelings in check, which was why she seemed even more perceptive than usual. And when Tio wasn’t acting like a masochistic dog, she really was a reliable, cool, older sister.

Having once more found her resolve, Kaori made to leap off the platform and join Shea in her fight. The faster they were able to sweep away these half-human cockroaches and join Hajime and Yue’s battle, the better. Not because she wanted to help them, but because like Shea, she was pissed at them.

However, just before she could leap off, the unspeakable happened...

“Kyaaa!?”

“Ahhh!”

A familiar scream pierced her ears. She turned around, half on instinct, and saw Shizuku sprawled on the ground. It seemed she'd slipped on the fluids of the cockroaches she'd killed. A mistake like that was fatal. Another cockroach raised an arm wreathed in corrosive smoke.

However, Kouki was right next to her. He saw what had happened. Furthermore, Suzu was right behind her. Plus, Tio's breath could easily handle a monster of that caliber.

None of those possibilities even entered Kaori's mind though, and she acted faster than she could think. Before she knew it, she was standing in front of Shizuku, her greatsword held aloft.

“Ah... Kaori...”

“Shizuku-chan...” Even though she hadn't needed to save Shizuku, even though other people were better positioned to do it, Kaori had rushed to her side anyway. She forgot all about her grudge against Hajime and Yue for leaving her behind. Her body moved on instinct, despite the fact that right now, Shizuku was someone she hated as much as Hajime. Before she could even think about what she was doing, she'd acted.

And as she did so, she felt her body grow lighter. The dark feelings that had been weighing her down ever since arriving here vanished. The corners of her lips naturally turned upward into a smile. It wasn't the kind of smile you could show to someone you hate.

“On your feet, Shizuku-chan! This is no time to be resting!”

“Huh? Uh, okay.”

Kaori grabbed Shizuku's hand and pulled her to her feet. Shizuku looked at her in shock, but Kaori had already turned back to engage another group of cockroaches.

“Don't worry Shizuku-chan, I'll protect you.”

“Ah...”

Shizuku thought back to the moment back in the royal palace, when she'd resigned herself to death. But the sword that had been meant to kill her never reached her. Her best friend, Kaori, sacrificed herself in order to save Shizuku. Even though Shizuku had sworn to protect Kaori, when it counted most she was the one who'd been protected. And because of that, her best friend had died. A sharp pain pierced her chest. At the same time, it felt as though some oppressive aura that had been shackling her until now vanished.

Shizuku turned her back to Kaori. Not because she hated her best friend, but because she trusted her. The two girls fought back-to-back, and Shizuku uttered words of gratitude.

"Thank you, Kaori. But don't forget, I've got your back too." She drew her katana in a flash of light, and her blade sliced through a cockroach with pinpoint precision.

"I know!"

A flurry of silver feathers shot forth. At the same time, Kaori's healing magic enveloped the party, healing their wounds, their exhaustion, and restoring their mana.

"Tio, Shizuku-chan and I'll take care of this side! You take care of that one!"

"As you wish!"

Tio reacted instantly, shifting her focus. Her gaze held a newfound respect for Kaori. The group spread themselves out in a triangle, with Tio handling one side, Kaori and Shizuku handling another, and Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu handling the last one. Even now, Kouki still hadn't overcome his aversion to fighting the cockroaches. Ryutarou was trying, but his irritation with his comrades kept getting in his way, dulling his blows. Suzu, on the other hand, was having trouble matching her barrier's positioning to her comrades' sloppy movements.

Fortunately, Kaori, Tio, and Shizuku were able to cover for the three of them. That still left the area above them, but Shea had that covered.

"Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a yell, she unleashed another pale blue shockwave of energy, blowing away the cockroaches descending on Kouki from above. Kaori looked up,

smiling, and yelled.

“Shea!”

“Leave the skies to me!”

She’d given up on joining Hajime and Yue and had decided to assist her comrades down below. As for why, well, the blush on her face and her twitching ears made it obvious. She’d overheard Tio praising her. With her arrival, their offensive power skyrocketed. While there were more of them, the half-humanoid cockroaches were inferior versions of the human-shaped ones. Tio, Shea, and Kaori were more than a match for even an army of them. Such a weak foe couldn’t even be considered a trial.

50 human-shaped cockroaches bore down on Hajime and Yue. This meant they had to fight 50 approximations of an apostle. The monsters all left afterimages in their wake as they charged forward. Once they’d closed the distance a little, they fired out compressed pellets of corrosive smoke. Rather than dodge the fist-size spheres, Hajime pulled a massive black shield out of his Treasure Trove and blocked them head-on. The shield was large enough to cover both him and Yue and they huddled behind it as the hail of black smoke slammed into them.

“You won’t get past me that easily.”

As these smoke balls had been compressed, they possessed more force than the usual smoke clouds released by the human-shaped cockroaches. In seconds, Hajime’s shield had started to erode from the constant barrage. Seeing as he wasn’t moving, the cockroaches rushed forward to swarm him. But just as they reached the pair—

“Asura.”

A wall of immense pressure slammed down on the cockroaches. A sheet of pure gravity was crushing them from above. Looking up, the cockroaches only now realized that Yue was floating high above them. The shimmering portal behind and below Hajime explained how she’d gotten up there when she’d been standing next to Hajime just a second ago. The wave of pressure bore down on Hajime as well, and he let the force carry him downward, toward the

still-open portal. He returned his shield to his Treasure Trove and warped out to safety while the cockroaches continued being pushed toward the ground.

The reason Hajime had chosen not to dodge and had used his shield instead had been to hide the portal from the cockroaches. It had been a strategic move to give them the high ground advantage. Now it was the cockroaches who were below Hajime and Yue. And this time it was Hajime's turn to bombard the cockroaches with attacks.

He brought out 50 Cross Bits and fired a torrent of explosive slugs. The only way he could control so many at once was to activate Riftwalk and focus only on attacking and not maneuvering.

Crimson flowers bloomed in the dark pit below. However, the superpowered cockroaches had more than enough mobility to escape the barrage of hellfire with most of their group intact. That wasn't to say they'd come out completely unscathed though. Seven of the monsters had been knocked out of the air by Hajime's previous barrage. Of the 43 still in fighting condition, quite a few had taken serious injuries.

In retaliation, the remaining cockroaches flew upward in a line, a wall of corrosive smoke deployed in front of them.

"Heavensfall."

Ominous black spheres swirled around Yue like satellites. Their superdense gravity fields absorbed the wall of black smoke, preventing it from reaching its intended targets. Three cockroaches rushed toward Yue, intent on taking out her spheres. At the same time, three streaks of red light shot at Yue. She waved her finger like a conductor's baton, and her spheres bent the trajectory of Hajime's bullets so that they slammed into the three cockroaches instead.

"Fireball."

50 fireballs winked into existence. They glowed pale blue and were all compressed to the size of Hajime's bullets. Yue had taken the strongest fire spell, Azure Blaze, partitioned it, and created her own spell with far more wide-area destructive might. Any normal wizard would have been shocked speechless by such a godlike display of skill. Naturally, Yue had given this new spell the same name as one of the most basic fire spells on purpose.

She snapped her fingers, and all 50 fireballs rushed toward Hajime. He put away his Cross Bits and charged Yue. Then, he used Aerodynamic to bring himself right in front of the barrage of fireballs and unleashed a barrage of chakrams to counter it. Half of them headed for the fireballs while the other half went in a completely different direction.

As planned, the fireballs sped through the chakrams' portals and slammed into the cockroaches flying at Yue from three sides. Two of the cockroaches managed to barely dodge out of the way, but the last one was too close to Yue's gravity field to maneuver properly and ended up taking a direct hit.

Hajime then weaved through the remaining fireballs his chakrams didn't catch, and they barreled into the cockroaches who had been sneaking up on him from behind. He paid no heed to the enemies he shot down and continued charging forward, flying right past Yue and planted a fist into one of the cockroaches still closing in on her. And after that, he activated his artificial arm's oscillation and sent out magical shockwaves from his fist. His punch blew straight through the cockroach's defenses and pulverized it before its smoke could start to rot his arm.

Another cockroach tried to attack him from the left while his arm was still outstretched. Its four arms moved so fast that for a moment it looked like a 100-armed Buddha. Hajime drew Donner with his free right arm and shot at the cockroach from underneath his left. It used its superhuman speed to narrowly roll out of the way. The moment its attack was halted, Hajime turned his attention to the cockroach coming from the right.

Meanwhile, Yue looked down at the cockroach Hajime had left behind, and shot a flurry of golden sparks at it. It was in the middle of attempting a counterattack when the sparks landed on its forehead. A second later there was a deafening boom, and electricity enveloped every inch of the cockroach. The high-voltage blast sent the monster's head flying before it even had a chance to scream. The other monster on Hajime's right was too surprised by the fact that he was ignoring the pincer attack and going straight for it that it failed to dodge Hajime's point-blank barrage in time and was ripped to shreds.

"What happened to your dragons?"

“These enemies are too fast for large attacks. Surely even a moron like you can figure that out.”

Another swarm of cockroaches charged the pair from above. Hajime and Yue dashed off in opposite directions, and the swarm passed harmlessly between them. Yue then held them in place with a gravity sphere, and Hajime shot them all down.

“You’ve already split up your other spells, why not just summon a thousand small dragons instead?”

“Because it’s not efficient. Just how stupid can you get? Do you *want* me to kill you?”

The two of them glared daggers at each other while they effortlessly dispatched the monsters behind them.

“If that’s not efficient, then there’s gotta be some other spell that is, right?”

“So what if there is?”

“Hurry up and use it, then!”

Four sickle-shaped arms bore down on Hajime as he yelled at Yue. He blocked them with Donner, Schlag, and two of his Cross Bits, using Diamond Skin on his weapons to keep them from rotting. Yue then flipped around in midair and shot a fireball through the gap between his legs. The cockroach tried to flee to safety, but Hajime instantly put Schlag in his Treasure Trove and grabbed one of its arms with his prosthetic, holding it in place. It screamed in pain as fireballs incinerated it from head to toe.

Hajime didn’t even bother to watch it die and turned his attention behind him. A few well-placed shots from Donner shot down the cockroach attempting to tackle Yue.

“I’m working on it. It’s not as easy as it sounds.”

Yue scoffed as she flipped back around and entrusted her rear to Hajime. The reason Yue hadn’t used any large-scale spells since defeating the first cockroach was because she’d been focusing her attention on constructing a new one. As she surveyed the battlefield Yue spotted another cockroach constructing

another magic circle a safe distance away. Her mage's instincts were telling her whatever that spell was, it was a bad idea to let the cockroach finish it.

Meanwhile, Hajime had to deal with a flood of cockroaches who were all attacking out of formation. They shot out smoke balls at random, making their attacks difficult to predict.

Yue needed more precision, while Hajime needed more destructive power. The moment they realized that, Yue and Hajime ignored the threat in front of them and swapped places. No signal passed between them, but their movements were so casual, it was like they weren't at all concerned about the enemies at their back.

They both trusted each other to handle the mess they'd left behind. Once they'd completed their turn, they once again pressed their backs against each other and spoke simultaneously.

"Like I'll let you."

"Not happening."

The two of them were in their element now. Every spell possessed a core, and if that core was destroyed, the spell unraveled. Normally that core was invisible, but Hajime's Demon Eye could see it clearly. And so, his bullet flew true, striking down the cockroach's spell's core with pinpoint accuracy.

On the other hand, Yue created another swirling sphere of dark energy. It swirled around her like the others, but this one sucked in all of the nearby cockroaches. This wasn't a Heavensfall, but a Spatial Severance. The cockroaches' attempt to scatter was thwarted, and they were all sucked into Yue's sphere of death.

"Looks like we've only got 30 or so left."

Realizing they were at a disadvantage, the cockroaches put some distance between Yue and Hajime and themselves. They started circling around the pair, seeking an opening. Hajime tapped Donner impatiently against his shoulder and turned to Yue.

"So, Yue, how long's that spell of yours going to take?"

“Mmm... If you can protect me the whole time, Hajime, 20 seconds.”

Hajime grinned as he noted the change in her tone.

“Looks like the spell’s worn off.”

“Yeah... Is it gone for you too?”

“You bet. I don’t hate you now, just think you’re an annoying little brat.”

“How mean... Hic...”

“Hey, what’s with that reaction!?” Hajime had expected her to throw a quip back, so he grew flustered when she started crying. So flustered that he committed one of the cardinal sins of battle and took his eyes off the enemy. But when he turned to her, he found Yue grinning.

“Hehe, you’re getting so worked up.”

“.....”

He hadn’t actually hurt her feelings, she’d just been messing with him. Hajime knew he should be angry, but he couldn’t find it in himself to get mad. The playful, joyous look Yue gave him was too precious. He felt his heart start to pound, but he focused his attention back on the fight at hand.

“Alright I’ll cover you, so get that spell ready.”

“Okay...”

Hajime sighed, irritated at himself for letting Yue lead him around by the nose so easily.

At his signal, Yue closed her eyes, the other action that should normally never be done in a battle. Hajime could tell she was concentrating intensely. Which meant that she’d entrusted her life entirely to him. The last traces of negative emotions still lingering in his mind were washed away. The darkness that had shrouded his heart was swept away, and light took its place.

At the same time, the cockroaches decided on their next plan of attack. A few of them remained at a distance, while the rest rushed Hajime and Yue. Tornadoes and spheres of black smoke shot out of their mandibles, threatening to engulf the pair.

“I won’t let you bastards anywhere near Yue. Limit Break, final derivative skill, Overload.”

A pillar of crimson mana shot out of Hajime, reaching all the way up to the ceiling. For as long as Overload was active, his stats were multiplied by five. Mana surged from his body in waves, sending ripples of power across the room. He’d enhanced the mana unleashed when he activated Overload with shockwave properties, so those ripples held actual might behind them. As they spread out, they blew away the barrage of black smoke.

Even someone with as much mana as Hajime could only keep Overload activated for a limited amount of time. And once that time limit ended, he’d be left so exhausted he could hardly move. However, he wasn’t the least bit worried. After all, his partner had told him twenty seconds was all she needed to finish her spell. Hajime trusted her to end the battle, so he had no reason to think any more than twenty seconds ahead.

All he needed to focus on was protecting Yue until she was ready, which was why he holstered Donner and Schlag, then pulled out two Metzeleis. He held one in each hand, and let the gatling guns rip. Their barrels spun into action, each gun spitting out 12000 bullets a minute. The bullets traveled so fast they looked like spears of crimson light. The remaining cockroaches scattered. Considering their speed, a gatling gun’s imprecise barrage shouldn’t have been too difficult to dodge.

“Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!?”

However, the stream of bullets ricocheted off each other, changing trajectories in mid-air, and accurately striking down the fleeing cockroaches. Hajime had activated Riftwalk in combination with Overload, heightening his senses to unparalleled levels. As he was now, he could snipe even with a gatling gun.

A few of the remaining cockroaches circled behind Hajime, hoping to attack from his blind spot. But even there they were met by 14 of Hajime’s Cross Bits, each firing with perfect accuracy. In front of them lay a storm of bullets, while behind them lay an army of autonomous weapons. Hajime had created a veritable fortress around Yue. None of the cockroaches could hope to get close.

However, that didn't pose too much of a problem to them. After all, the group attacking Hajime and Yue was just a diversion.

Just then, the group that had been hidden safely behind the Grand Tree let out a piercing wail. Countless wings beat along the walls, creating a cacophony so loud not even the roar of Hajime's Metzeleis could drown it out. From the sound of it, the human-shaped cockroaches had summoned forth every cockroach within the labyrinth.

"Of course you'd pull something like this out at the end."

Now that the emotion reversing magic was wearing off, Hajime felt nothing but disgust at the sound of billions of cockroaches rushing forward. His lips twitched, and he muttered, "Is this supposed to be some kind of warning? Like there's as many apostles as there are bugs?"

Before he could think any further, the walls of their subterranean cavern erupted. Or at least, it seemed like they did. The cockroaches clinging to every inch of the walls shot outward, making it seem as though the room itself was shrinking. The mass of cockroaches blotted out the walls, the ceiling, and even the Grand Tree. Hajime couldn't even see Shea and the others, so he had no way of knowing what had happened to them.

From the outside, it appeared as though a massive, writhing, black sphere had trapped Hajime and Yue. They were inside a living cage. Instinctively, Hajime could tell this was a message from the Liberator who'd created this labyrinth.

"Don't fight apostles head-on. Take out their source, or you'll find yourself overwhelmed." That was what the message seemed to be.

"So you're telling me there's some kinda 'source' where all these things are coming from? And that's what I gotta destroy?"

At the very least, that seemed to be the logical conclusion. Haltina appeared to be saying that the only way to win against such numbers and complete this trial was to discover the location of the cockroaches' source and destroy it. However—

"I don't see why I have to play by your rules."

Hajime dashed to Yue's side and hugged her from behind. He then gathered

his Cross Bits around him and created a triple-layered barrier to protect the two of them.

“Just five seconds left.”

An instant later, the cockroach prison contracted around them with a sickening crunch. There were so many cockroaches that combined they were able to exert more pressure than an entire ocean. Even the hardest metal couldn't survive in such harsh conditions. The remaining twenty-odd human-shaped cockroaches watched impassively from outside the cage.

After a few minutes, one of them flew forward. The mini-cockroaches parted to either side, creating a tunnel for the human-shaped one to travel through. It advanced through the tunnel slowly, until finally, it arrived at the center where it had expected to find two crushed people... so what it saw came as a surprise.

“Kiii?” With a confused cry, it drew closer to the pale blue light shining at the end of the tunnel. The light was faint and flickering, like that of a will o' the wisp, yet at the same time as clear as a pure blue sky.

A second later, it instinctively backpedaled away from the light. It ignored its duty as a labyrinth guardian and its murderous impulses as a monster, choosing to flee as fast as it could. Something primal and instinctive inside of it was telling it that blue light was dangerous. Fear swept across the monster in waves. The final bit of the tunnel slid away to reveal Hajime and Yue.

Two of the three barriers Hajime put up had been destroyed. The last remaining one had been compacted by the pressure, and Hajime had been forced to support it with his body to keep it from crushing the two of them. The blood vessels in his eyes had burst, giving them a bloodshot look, and blood dripped from the corners of his mouth. Faint wisps of crimson mana flickered around him, the last traces of his Diamond Skin activation. White smoke jettisoned from his artificial arm, proof that it had taken on a massive burden. Hajime had squeezed out every last ounce of his strength to protect Yue from the cockroaches' assault. The monster of the abyss had succeeded once again.

“...Time's up.”

Nestled safely inside Hajime's arms, with not a scratch on her, Yue opened her eyes.

“Cull.”

That was the lone word she said as her eyes opened. She held her hands close to her chest, as though she were praying. The vivid blue light spilling from the cracks in her fingers pulsed. Invisible waves of power spread outward, striking fear into the hearts of the human-shaped cockroaches. Yue slowly spread out her hands, as if unveiling something fragile. A tiny flame sat in her palms. It twinkled with a deep blue light, a drop of burning sapphire.

It's like she's holding a tiny earth in her hands, Hajime thought to himself. The growing pulses of light certainly did make it seem as though a planet was being born in her hands.



Yue held her hands up, offering her blue jewel to the heavens. Illuminated by the light of her own creation, Yue looked almost divine. Hajime hugged her from behind, and she leaned into his arms.

Finally, the cockroaches returned to their senses. Screaming in panic, they once again ordered their servants to crush Hajime and Yue. Unfortunately, they were too late.

“Divine Purgatory.”

A beautiful yet cruel voice rang out across the room. The next moment, her spell of annihilation took shape. Her blue sphere emitted its strongest pulse yet. It then grew so bright that every inch of the room, from the ceiling to the floor, was bathed in pale blue light. Quiet, calm, merciless ripples spread through the ocean of light, turning the cockroaches surrounding them to ash. In less than a second, all of the small cockroaches had been incinerated.

The human-shaped cockroaches turned to flee, but before they could run even a few paces, the light caught up to them and obliterated them instantly. With the cockroaches gone, Hajime could once again see Shea and the others. As far as he could tell, they were all fine. The light reached their location, cremating all of the half-human-shaped cockroaches as well.

Shea and the others looked around in confusion as their opponents crumbled before their eyes. A second later, they realized how strange it was that they had survived long enough to be confused in the first place. But it wasn't just Shea and the others that the light didn't touch. Neither the Grand Tree nor any of its branches were affected by the obliterating magic either. Only the cockroaches were incinerated. But that only confused Shea and the others more.

The strange and terrifying phenomenon had been caused by another one of Yue's composite spells. Divine Purgatory was a spell that combined fire, gravity, and spirit magic. First, she'd used gravity magic to compress ten instances of the fire spell Azure Blaze into a single point, then she'd used the spirit magic Cull to choose either the only creatures to be affected by her spell, or the only creatures not to be affected by her spell. It was an annihilation spell that worked on a massive scale and spared those Yue saw fit. The rest were incinerated in a wave of merciless, inescapable flames. Yue's strength was

beginning to approach that of an actual god's. The name she'd given to her spell, Divine Purgatory, was quite fitting. Judging by the fact that the human-shaped cockroaches weren't regenerating, Hajime assumed her flames had destroyed whatever source had been powering them as well.

"That's one hell of a spell. I knew I could count on you, Yue."

"Hajime..."

Their voices echoed loudly in the now empty room. Yue staggered, utterly exhausted after using such a large-scale spell. Hajime caught her before she fell, and lifted her gently up in his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gazed into his eyes. As if trying to make completely sure her feelings and his had both returned to normal.

After a short pause, Yue smiled. She'd seen exactly what she'd hoped to reflected in his eyes. At that moment, had Hajime claimed her smile was the cutest in the world, no one would have dared refute him.

"Hajime..." she murmured again, her voice dripping with affection.

"Thanks for the meal."

"Bwah!?"

She started sucking his blood, both to restore her mana and as an expression of love. She was a vampire, after all.

A haggard but unhurt Hajime returned to the platform where the others were waiting, with Yue cheerfully in tow. Shea and Kaori ran up to him the moment he landed.

"Yue-saaaaaan Hajime-saaaaaaaan. Are you alright? Because we're not! Tio-san was so cool a few seconds ago that I think I've been scarred for life!"

"Hajime-kun, Yue! Listen to this! Tio actually seemed like a big sister for once! It was terrifying!"

The first things out of their mouths weren't complaints about how Hajime and Yue were flirting too much, or praise for Yue's new spell, but terror regarding Tio's transformation.

“Y-You two, there’s a limit to how rude you can be... Haaah... Haaah... But alas, your insults feel so good!” Tio twitched in pleasure, like the pervert that she was. From the looks of it, she was back to normal.

“She looks like her usual perverted self to me.”

“Yeah... She’s as pathetic as always.”

Tio crumbled to the ground, her entire body shivering in ecstasy. It appeared her legendary dragon mode had been a product of the emotion reversing magic. It was only under its effects that she’d acted normal. Shea and Kaori would likely never see the creepily cool and scarily reliable Tio ever again. Whether that was a good thing or not, no one knew.

Afterward, Kaori used restoration magic to heal everyone, and they took a short break to eat some rations and catch their breath. None of them broached the topic of how they’d acted under their reversed emotions. A lot of the events were awkward to talk about, and none of them really wanted to remember what had happened anyway.

Right as everyone was starting to feel rested, almost as if the labyrinth had been waiting for them to recover, the part of the Grand Tree near the ceiling began to glow. With a loud creaking noise, a branch started to grow from the glowing section. It extended at a downward slant, heading toward the party’s platform. Once it arrived, it twined itself around the wooden platform and became another path. Then, the wood on its surface undulated and stretched until it turned into a set of stairs.

“I really hope that last trial was the final one,” Hajime said with a rueful smile. The aftereffects of Overload hadn’t disappeared completely yet.

Yue and the others nodded in agreement. Kouki especially was nearing his limits mentally, and he fervently prayed there wouldn’t be any other battles. The party climbed up the flight of stairs and found a familiar hollow greeting them at the top. The magic circle inside was visible this time. Once everyone was inside, it began to glow, and they were teleported once more.

This time, Hajime and the others found themselves inside a garden. The air was fresh, and the sky dazzlingly clear. The garden was about the size of Hajime’s school gym. Canals crisscrossed the neat lawn, crystal clear water

flowing through them. Trees were spaced at regular intervals, each bearing delicious-looking fruit. Inside the ring of trees was a chalk-white building. Hajime and the others had been teleported to one corner of the garden, a short distance from the building. Bridges stretched out in all four directions, and there was a magic circle at their feet.

“Hey, Nagumo, is that it!?” Excited, Kouki pointed toward a tree that was larger than the rest. It towered over the others from the far end of the park. Like the platform they were standing on, it was growing on an island ringed by canals. Near its roots stood a conspicuous stone tablet.

Hajime held out a hand to stop Kouki, and warily examined his surroundings. A quick glance told him that they were at a high elevation. Past the garden, there was only blue sky in all directions. Tio carefully walked over to the edge of their platform and looked down.

“Unbelievable... Master, it appears this is the Grand Tree’s summit.”

At Tio’s words, Hajime and the others crowded around the edge as well. Looking down, they confirmed what Tio had said. Below them stretched out a dense sea of fog. They were obviously high above the Haltina Forest. And the only thing that rose above the forest’s mists was Uralt, the Sacred Tree. However, Hajime pointed out a contradiction in Tio’s reasoning.

“Hold on, this doesn’t make any sense. When we came here in Fernir, we didn’t see anything like this. If the fog’s that far below us, this garden has to be at least 400 meters up. Meaning...”

Hajime trailed off as he noticed another inconsistency. When they’d first seen the Grand Tree from down below, they’d estimated its size meant that the tops of its branches towered over the sea of fog. Yet they’d never once been able to spot it while traversing the sea of trees in Fernir.

“I see. Someone must have used concealment magic on it.”

“Yeah... They could have used spatial magic to bend the light around it, or simply moved the top of the tree to a different plane entirely. Or used high-level spirit magic to interfere with the perception of anyone who looks at it, even...” Yue gave an expert’s opinion on how Haltina had managed to hide the tree.

Dark magic could interfere with people's perceptions as well. But not on this scale. Meaning it was likely Haltina had used some kind of magic from the Age of the Gods to hide the tree. Yue had a few theories, but she couldn't be sure which was correct. Both Yue and Tio shuddered. As expert mages themselves, they knew just how impossible a feat it was to hide something this big so well that no one, not even a master magician, could spot it. The two of them gulped, but no one belittled them for it. The others were just as overwhelmed. The trials they'd faced thus far had been the nastiest, most trying yet, but they'd expected as much from a Liberator. What they hadn't expected, was this Liberator to also have an aesthetic sense.

"I guess this really is the final goal, then."

Hajime and the girls nodded to each other, then walked over to the lithograph. They passed underneath an intricate arch as they crossed the bridge over the canals. As they neared the stone tablet, it began to glow. Bright green mana filled the canals. It appeared the canals themselves were this labyrinth's final magic circle. Motes of green light rose up from the waterways, like thousands of fireflies.

The usual sensation that accompanied having their memories read assailed the party, then Hajime and the girls felt knowledge of this labyrinth's ancient magic forcibly imprinted onto their minds. Though Hajime's group was used to it, the rest weren't. A cute squeal came from someone in Kouki's group as they had their mind probed. Just as Hajime was about to say something about the magic they'd just acquired, the tree behind the lithograph began to squirm. Instantly alert, the party drew their weapons. The tree's bark twisted and warped until it had formed an approximation of a person's face. The face protruded from the trunk until it had formed a full head and shoulders. Once the person, no, *woman's* face was complete, she opened her eyes and spoke up.

"First, allow me to congratulate you on making it this far. I am Lyutillis Haltina. You have done well to complete my trial, along with the trials of the other labyrinths. You have my respect for completing such a difficult gauntlet, and my apologies for forcing you through it."

It appeared the tree was the medium in which Haltina's memories had been

stored. It wasn't too different from the hologram that Oscar Orcus had left behind.

"She looks like a princess..." Kaori muttered. Hajime nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, she sure does."

Lyutillis Haltina had the same refined air and carried herself in the same dignified manner as Liliana. As it was only her head, shoulders, and long straight hair that were protruding from the tree trunk Hajime couldn't be completely sure, but she looked like a beauty. Her long ears tapered to sharp points, denoting that she was an elf.

"However, a trial of this nature was necessary. Since you have completed various other labyrinths, you have likely learned about the tragedies of the past, of our relationship with the gods, and of the tyranny our world currently lives under. It is for that reason that I wanted you to know both the strength that can be derived from unbreakable bonds and the ways in which they can be tested. Moreover, having come this far, I felt it necessary to teach you both the strength of a person's heart, and its fragility. I pray this knowledge will aid you in the trials to come."

Shea and the others listened to Lyutillis' speech with rapt attention. However, Hajime was beginning to grow impatient. It was clear he was tired of the lecture. The only reason he kept silent was because he knew the others were interested.

"I know not for what purpose you sought my magic, evolution magic, for. And now that it is yours, you are free to use it as you please. All I ask is that please, don't allow this power to rule your thoughts. If ever there comes a time you feel yourself drowning in the power you've obtained, cling to the bonds that saw you through these trials."

Hajime started glancing about. He was looking for the proof that they'd conquered this labyrinth. It was obvious he wasn't paying much attention to Lyutillis. Judging by the constant glances he kept giving the lithograph, he was likely planning on pulling the whole thing out soon. As a precaution, Shea grabbed onto his left arm, while Yue took his right and Kaori wrapped her arms around his waist. They silently pleaded with him to wait, calming Hajime down

enough to listen to the rest of the speech.

“The power of my ancient magic, evolution magic, allows you to enhance all other forms of power, no matter how weak. You should already have been granted the knowledge of how to use it. But that’s not where the true worth of this magic lies.”

Hajime’s eyes suddenly shot open. He looked over at Lyutillis, his curiosity piqued. The knowledge they’d been given hadn’t contained anything about evolution magic’s true worth. Realizing that Hajime was interested in Lyutillis’ words, Yue and the others let go of him. Meanwhile, Shizuku glared at him in exasperation.

“As its name suggests, evolution magic causes other power to evolve. Naturally, that includes other ancient magic. Creation magic, gravity magic, spirit magic, transformation magic, spatial magic, and restoration magic... These are all powerful branches of magic that manipulate the fundamental forces that govern this world. If you were to evolve them all and combine them, you would give birth to a magic that surpasses all others. Magic that could truly be considered godlike... Concept magic.”

Someone gulped, the noise echoing loudly in the following silence. Surprise was etched in every inch of Hajime’s face. He thought back to what Miledi Reisen had told him in the Reisen Gorge.

“You’ll need to acquire all the ancient magic the Liberators left behind in order to achieve your goal.” That was what she’d said. And now, Hajime finally understood what she meant.

“Concept magic is exactly what it sounds like. It can bring forth any concept its user can imagine, granting them the powers of a god. However, even if you manage to collect all the ancient magic, mastering concept magic won’t be easy. For concept magic operates not on theory, but on force of will. You will need an unbelievably powerful will to bend this magic to your desires.”

So that’s why we didn’t get any knowledge of that from the magic circle. Hajime raised an eyebrow. After all, “unbelievably powerful will” wasn’t very specific.

“Even with our powers combined, us Liberators were only able to create three

concept magic spells. They served our needs well enough, but... Regardless, as a gift, I shall pass on one of those to you.”

The stone tablet below Lyutillis slid to the side, revealing an object resembling a pocket watch. Hajime bent down and picked it up. The front of the object was covered with translucent glass-like substance and inside sat a single needle. Engraved on the back was Lyutillis Haltina’s crest, indicating that the object also served as their proof that they conquered the labyrinth. As Hajime scrutinized the object, Lyutillis continued her speech.

“That object is called the Compass of Eternal Paths. The concept magic spell its imbued with—” —Points its owner toward whatever they desire.

“Huh!?”

Upon hearing those words, Hajime’s heart started to pound. It felt as though his body was on fire. All sound vanished, and those words repeated themselves over and over inside his head.

“Points its owner toward whatever they desire.” *Does that mean...*

“If you wish for something, the compass will show you where that something may be found. Whether that something is a missing person, a hidden object... or even a different world.”

“Ah—”

The other world Lyutillis was likely referring to was the world of the gods. If it took an unbelievably strong will to create concept magic, there was no doubt what the Liberators had created these spells for. To defeat the gods. Meaning originally, this compass had been made to discover their location. Hajime guessed that Oscar had used his creation magic in conjunction with concept magic to make this compass. However, if this compass was capable of showing the way to the world of the gods, then that meant it was also capable of showing the way back home to Japan.

In his hands... was a guide to the way home. Finally, at long last, he’d found his first real clue. Immeasurable joy filled his heart. He was so happy he couldn’t express it in words. In fact, he didn’t even know what kind of expression to make. His hand trembled. The day he’d been reborn in the abyss, he’d sworn

that he'd return home, no matter what it took.

The sense of elation made events of his long, arduous journey flash through his mind in an instant. *Hold it together. It's not time to celebrate just yet.* Hajime willed the tears welling up in his eyes to dry as he mentally cautioned himself. His mechanical left hand creaked as he balled it into a fist. It wasn't the same hand he'd come to this world with, but he was proud of it. As he looked down at his fake arm, he renewed his resolve. And then, he turned around to find Yue looking gently up at him. She took hold of Hajime's fake hand and entwined her tiny fingers around his own.

"So long as you obtain all the ancient magic and possess an unbreakable will, you will be able to go wherever your heart desires."

Though she couldn't possibly have known Hajime's current feelings, Lyutillis' memory appeared to be smiling as she said that. Finally, she said the customary last words of all the Liberators. But those words, delivered centuries ago from the depths of her heart, reached Hajime.

"I pray that you can live freely, in a world where you may choose your own future. May the path you walk be filled with blessings." Still smiling, Lyutillis disappeared back into the tree.

Here, at the very top of the Grand Tree, Lyutillis had spoken to them through yet another tree that was growing at its summit. Thinking about it, it seemed to Hajime that the entirety of the Grand Tree housed Lyutillis' spirit.

The party fell silent, either too awed by what had just happened to speak, or too busy digesting Lyutillis' words. The only sound was the wind rustling through the leaves.

Finally, Hajime broke the silence. In an even, controlled voice, he turned to Yue and spoke up.

"Just in case... Yue, do you think... you could use spatial magic and evolution magic... to teleport to another world?"

Kouki, Shizuku, Suzu, and Kaori stiffened up as he asked that. Yue didn't answer right away. She knew just how important this question was to Hajime, so she made sure to consider all the possibilities. Using her vast knowledge as

the world's best mage, along with the information she'd just received, she went through thousands of simulations in her head, trying to think of a spell that would do the job. After exhausting all the possibilities, she muttered something dejectedly.

"...I'm sorry."

"I see..."

So it's impossible after all. Then again, if all you needed to get to a different world was evolution magic and spatial magic, the Liberators wouldn't have had such a hard time doing it. Lyutillis had said the Liberators had created three concept magic spells. The first had been the spell the Compass of Eternal Paths was imbued with. Magic that pointed its wielder toward whatever they desired. The remaining two were likely a spell to allow someone to travel between worlds, and a spell to defeat the gods. In other words, unless Hajime reached a level where he could use concept magic, teleporting between worlds would be impossible.

Yue looked down, depressed at failing to meet Hajime's expectations. However, Hajime looked kindly down at her and ran his fingers through her golden-blond hair. Startled by the sensation of his fingers on the back of her neck, Yue looked back up at him.

"Don't look so down. I didn't really think it was gonna be possible anyway. All that means is we've gotta get the last remaining ancient magic, so don't make that face," Hajime said with a smile.

Yue had seen Hajime's smile so many times she could recreate it from memory, but it still managed to make her heart skip a beat. There was something different about this smile. It was gentler, warmer, and deeper than any smile Hajime had ever made before. In fact, it wasn't too different from Lyutillis' smile earlier.

"Yue?"

"... Mmm."

Yue took a few deep breaths to calm her pounding heart. Then, she returned his smile with one as radiant as his. The two of them gazed into each other's

eyes. A second later, Shea, who'd been as captivated by Hajime's smile as Yue, returned to her senses and tried once again to grab Hajime's attention.

"Ahem! Hajime-saaan, Yue-saaan, are you two done flirting? The shortcut leading back down to the forest has shown up, so I think it's about time we get going."

Hajime and Yue turned around at Shea's cheery voice and saw that a new magic circle had appeared in another corner of the garden. Shea was likely right in assuming it was a shortcut back to the ground. Hajime then turned back to Shea and tilted his head in confusion. For whatever reason, Shea, along with Kaori and Tio, was blushing as they looked at him. Before he could ask what was going on though, Kouki interrupted him.

"H-Hey, Nagumo. If what that woman said is true... once you can use that concept magic or whatever..."

"Yeah, we'll be able to go home. Well at the very least, this compass will be able to show us how to get there."

"I see..." Kouki bit his lip, his expression a mixture of hope and frustration. Ryutarou, Suzu, and Shizuku all looked torn between happiness and trepidation as well. It looked they wanted to ask something, but were holding themselves back from doing so. Their worries stemmed from the fact that they still hadn't finished finding a way home, and the only one among them likely to successfully get all seven ancient magic was Hajime and his party.

"U-Umm, Nagumo-kun? Once you find a way back, will you... you know..." Suzu faltered, unable to finish her question. However, Hajime knew what she was trying to ask. The reason she was so hesitant to ask it was because she knew how cold Hajime had been to them when they'd first reunited. It was entirely possible that Hajime would just take his own comrades along when he found a way back and leave everyone else behind.

Normally, Suzu was the bluntest out of all of them, but when it came to important things like this she had a hard time getting the right words out. Regardless of whether that was a character flaw or not, it was still preferable to blindly believing that Hajime would bring them all back with him. At the very least, Hajime found Suzu's question commendable.

“Don’t worry. So long as there are no restrictions like a maximum number of people I can teleport, I’ll take everyone back with me.”

“I-I see. Ehehe... Thanks, Nagumo-kun.”

“Anyway, considering how worried you guys sound... I’m assuming you weren’t granted the ancient magic?”

“Ugh!?” Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu hung their heads in shame. With evolution magic, they would have been able to upgrade all of their stats. Of course, since evolution magic was still ancient magic, it would take an enormous amount of mana to use, and at most, they’d be able to do something like use Limit Break without the exhaustive side effects. Still, it would be enough to let them conquer the first part of the Great Orcus Labyrinth without any trouble at all. In fact, they’d probably be able to make a good amount of headway through the true Orcus Labyrinth as well.

The fact that they didn’t sound at all confident in their ability to handle another labyrinth meant that they hadn’t earned the right to receive Haltina’s magic. Among Kouki’s party though, there was just one person who didn’t seem as worried and was looking away awkwardly while trying to think of something to say.

“Yaegashi... Well, looks like you got the magic at least.”

“Ah...! Umm... yes, it looks like I can use it.”

“C-Can you really, Shizuku!?”

“Seriously!? Nice going, girl!”

“I knew you could do it, Shizushizu! That’s why you’re my waifu!”

She had managed to conquer the trial of pleasure, the illusory ideal world, and even the test of reversed emotions. It was little surprise that she’d been accepted as one who’d cleared the labyrinth. Though her combat contributions had been few, she’d shown that she had the mental fortitude to handle ancient magic.

Suzu was overjoyed for her friend, while Ryutarou seemed equal parts impressed and jealous. Kouki, on the other hand, had a smile on his face as he

praised Shizuku, but he seemed troubled by something, and there was a shadow behind his eyes. Worried, Shizuku kept stealing glances at him.

“At any rate, let’s head back to Verbergen and rest up. I think that cockroach fight traumatized me. I don’t think I’ve ever been in such a mentally draining fight. Plus, I’m still exhausted after using Limit Break... I need Yue to heal me.”

“Fufu... Just leave it to me.”

“Hajime-san, if you want healing, why not use my fluffy bunny ears?”

“Healing’s literally my job, Hajime-kun! Let me take care of you! I’ll do anything and everything you need! And by anything, I mean absolutely anything!”

“Oho, are you really that tired, Master? Very well, I shall be your chair. Feel free to sit on me as much as you please. No matter how my bones ache, I shall endure for your sake.”

Hajime’s expression grew serious, and he glanced at each of his party members in turn. Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Yue. He seemed to be confirming something. And once he was finished, he looked up at the sky, confirming something within himself.

At that, Shea and the others tilted their heads, confused. But after a few seconds, Hajime looked back down and gave them a troubled smile.

“Ah...” Kaori gasped. The smile he was wearing now was one she thought she’d never see again, one she’d almost forgotten. Tears welled up in Kaori’s eyes as old memories resurfaced.

Yue, Shea, and Tio were also surprised, though less so. They were used to seeing Hajime’s fearless, arrogant, and heartless smiles, but they’d never seen a smile like this. Though it was slight, Hajime had changed over the course of his journey. It was hard to describe in words, but it was almost as if he’d grown kinder, while remaining just as sharp and aggressive as before. At least, that was what it seemed like to Yue and the others.

The person he’d been before being summoned to Tortus and the person he’d become after suffering in the abyss had started to fuse together. As he was now, he was equal parts merciless and kind, and oddly enough, Yue and the

others found the combination unbelievably attractive.

“What’s wrong, guys? Don’t we need to hurry back so you can all heal me?” Hajime said, and with that, he turned around and headed for the magic circle.

Kaori rubbed the tears out of her eyes, and Shizuku smiled and laid a hand on her friend’s shoulder. Nostalgia rimmed their pupils. Both of them were glad to see the old, nice Hajime returning.

“Mmm... I understand now.”

“Yue...”

Yue took hold of Kaori’s hand and smiled gently at her. As for what exactly Yue had understood, the others knew without having to ask. It was the reason why Kaori had fallen for Hajime in the first place, back in Japan. Yue and the others only knew Hajime after his transformation, but Kaori had known him before it too. And now that the two Hajime’s had begun to merge, everyone felt as though they were on the same page when it came to understanding him.

“Hey, what are you guys waiting around for?” Hajime asked quizzically as he turned around. He’d already activated the magic circle.

Yue and the others shared a knowing smile, then ran after him. Suzu, Ryutarou, and Shizuku were in high spirits as well, having finally found a way back home.

There was just one among them who had to force himself to look happy. Thus, the group’s adventure within Haltina came to a close. With renewed hope in their hearts, the party returned to Verbergen.



Chapter IV: A Changing Heart

A quiet dawn illuminated the streets of Verbergen. Shortly after the sun crested the horizon though, the cries of birds shattered the silence. Leaves rustled as the other forest creatures began to stir, the sounds mingling together to form a familiar forest symphony. But while the forest's capital was peaceful, a small clearing on its outskirts was not.

"Taaah! Hmph! Haaah!" Each cry was accompanied by the sound of something whistling through the air. A streak of black cut through the mist once, twice, and then a third time. The black streak was a katana being swung down with impeccable discipline and control. Its wielder's movements were polished to the extreme, and her trademark black ponytail swung back and forth in a steady rhythm as she continued her practice swings. Her sharp figure looked mystical in the early dawn light. Her katana danced gracefully through the air, cutting down any leaf unlucky enough to fall in its path. Droplets of sweat glistened on her skin, making it clear that she'd been at this for hours already.

The girl, Shizuku, paid no attention to the hundreds of sliced leaves littering the ground around her. Her attention was focused entirely on maintaining her form and connecting each swing with the next.

"Ah!" Suddenly, her eternal dance faltered. Her arms wobbled, and her swing missed the leaf she'd been aiming for. As the leaf twirled to the ground, Shizuku lost her balance and twirled around herself. Fortunately, she managed to keep herself from falling, but she needed to stick her sheath in the ground to do it. Shizuku smiled bitterly at herself.

"Haaah... Haaah... Ahhh, jeez!" She shook her head in irritation, and her ponytail swung back and forth.

"Calm down. I need to calm myself down." Shizuku fixed the image of a serene spring in her mind and took a few deep breaths. The first thing she'd learned when she'd picked up swordsmanship was how to meditate. She'd used

this method to calm herself down so many times that it had turned into something she did automatically anytime she felt herself losing her cool. However right now, the image of a certain boy kept popping into her mind, ruining her meditative trance.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” With a primal scream, Shizuku swung her katana down in an attempt to smash the face that had appeared in her mind.

No, no, no, this is DEFINITELY not what it seems like! The serene spring vanished from her mind. Her thoughts were a swirling tempest of emotions, and she was having a hard time thinking clearly.

Actually, what does it even seem like!? I’m totally calm, aren’t I? So it shouldn’t seem like anything! She was the furthest thing from calm right now, as evidenced by the fact that she couldn’t string a coherent thought together.

Shizuku had been practicing here since before dawn, and she’d repeated this pattern of getting distracted and forcibly calming herself down only to get distracted again dozens of times now. It seemed as if she’d started practicing to get rid of the something clouding her thoughts rather than that something coincidentally getting in the way of her practice. There was, of course, a good reason for why Shizuku had gotten up in the middle of the night to practice.

After returning from Haltina’s labyrinth the day before, the party had returned to Verbergen to rest. After dinner and a bath, Shizuku had gone to bed like everyone else. But for some reason, she’d found herself unable to sleep. She’d tossed and turned for hours on end until finally, she couldn’t take it anymore. And so, even though it was only 2 o’clock, she’d grabbed her katana and ran off into the night.

The cause of her insomnia was the same boy who’s figure had appeared in her mind and interrupted her meditation earlier.

“Haaah! Taaah! Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Her yells grew wilder, and she swung her sword with abandon. The more she tried not to think about it, the more she found herself dwelling on what had happened in the labyrinth. Specifically, on what had happened when she’d been trapped in the dream world. Her supposed ideal illusion had been so embarrassing that she turned bright red simply thinking about it. She refused to believe that was something

she'd actually desired, but the dream's contents were too shameful for her to talk to anyone about it.

How come he of all people had to be the one to...

"Ryaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" But the thing that nagged at her the most was the final trial. With her emotions reversed, she'd found those disgusting black cockroaches lovable, and that had certainly been traumatic, but that wasn't what truly bothered her. The biggest problem was that she'd found the boy currently on her mind utterly detestable. She'd hated him more than anything else.

Which means that I actually...

"Nooooooooooooooooo! He's just a friend! That's aaaaaaaaaall!" Her strokes were so haphazard they couldn't be called practice swings anymore. Shizuku was acting totally out of character. Her katana groaned in protest as she slashed about wildly.

Normally, this was around the point that Shizuku would attempt to calm herself down again, but she was so flustered that she continued cutting at the image of the arrogantly grinning boy her mind had conjured. The moment she'd cut his illusion down, another one appeared, this time with the same gentle smile he'd had after conquering the labyrinth.

"Dii!"

Incidentally, the Yaegashi-style had no such battle cry. In fact, Shizuku had never once screamed die when fighting before. Shizuku knew her father and grandfather would be ashamed of her if they saw her now, but she was too far gone to care. She ignored their imaginary glares of disapproval and swung with even more force. Her classmates would be shocked if they saw her flailing recklessly like this. She was acting nothing like her usual composed self.

She kept up her practice session for another few hours, occasionally calming herself down for a few minutes, but always getting flustered again in the end. She desperately tried to deny the feelings burgeoning within her, but no matter how hard she pretended they didn't exist, Haltina's trials continued to haunt her.

Eventually, exhaustion dulled her emotions, and she was able to regain a modicum of composure. And after arguing internally with herself for a few minutes, she finally convinced herself that these strange emotions were a product of the trust she'd placed in him when things had gotten dicey in the labyrinth. From now on, she wouldn't lose her cool whenever she thought of him. Everything was back to normal.

"Phew..." With a calm breath, Shizuku returned her katana to its scabbard. She closed her eyes, letting the crisp morning air cool her sweat. Her damp hair clung to her face, making her look more alluring than usual.

Suddenly, a voice from behind interrupted her thoughts.

"You really are diligent."

"Hwhat!?" Her heart nearly leaped out of her chest. That voice was one Shizuku recognized well. Judging by her flustered response, her attempt to act normal around him already failed. She whirled around to see Hajime, the boy who'd been on her mind this whole time, standing behind her. Whether it was because he hadn't wanted to interrupt her training or simply because he wanted to mess with her, he'd kept his presence hidden until now.

"Nagumo-kun. Don't surprise me like that. It's not nice to spy on people either." Shizuku steadied her pounding heart and glared at Hajime, but he was far too amused by her earlier reaction to care.

"Hwhat? Really? Pfft..."

"Ah!"

Hajime tried to hold back laughter as he repeated Shizuku's words. Shizuku's glare grew sharper, but the blush spreading up her face made her hard to take seriously. She seemed to realize that herself and yelled.

"What. Do. You. Want!?"

Hajime chuckled at the anger in her voice. However, he didn't want to tease her too much, so as an apology he pulled a towel out of his Treasure Trove and threw it to Shizuku. It was only after she caught it that Shizuku realized she was still drenched in sweat. She looked away in embarrassment and wiped herself down. Hajime leaned against a nearby tree and answered her question.

“I didn’t really come for anything in particular. I woke up early and thought I’d get some training in. Then, I spotted you while looking for a place to train and came to see what you were doing. From the looks of it, you’ve been at this for a while. I’m impressed you’re training so hard right after that grueling labyrinth run.”

“Th-This is just my normal routine. Also... I couldn’t sleep, so...”

“Well, it was your first labyrinth and all. I don’t blame you for being too excited to sleep.”

“Y-Yeah.” She certainly had been too excited to sleep, but for a completely different reason. She averted her gaze, and Hajime gave her a puzzled look. Shizuku wasn’t acting like her usual self. His gaze flustered her even further, and she started fidgeting uncomfortably. Finally—

“Yaegashi, is something wrong? You’re acting weird. Don’t tell me the labyrinth’s spells still haven’t worn off?”

“Huh? Oh no, I’m fine. Perfectly fine. Never been better.”

“You don’t look fine. You’re acting weird and you’re clearly exhausted...”

“Wh-What do you mean weird? I’m the same as always. Just don’t sneak up behind me again. I’m usually aware of my surroundings, but if I don’t see you, I might end up accidentally cutting you!”

“What are you, some kind of hitman? Well whatever, as long as you’re sure you’re fine.”

She obviously wasn’t, but Hajime wasn’t going to press the issue if she insisted on saying that she was. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he walked up to Shizuku. Flustered, Shizuku held her hands out in front of her in an attempt to keep Hajime away.

“H-Hey! Why’re you getting so close? Stop, wait, I stink of sweat! This is an invasion of personal space! Let’s just calm down and talk this through! Oh, do you want the towel back? Here... Wait, no. I need to wash it first! Stay right there, I’ll give it back later!”

“Are you *sure* you’re okay? I just wanna see your sword for a bit.”

Shizuku backpedaled away from Hajime as if he were some kind of pervert. Even Hajime couldn't help but feel a little hurt at that.

"M-My sword? Why?"

"So I can upgrade it. Now that I can use evolution magic, I figure I can probably make it stronger. But if you'd rather not, I'll leave it alone."

"O-Oh. That's all? Fine, then. You're more than welcome to upgrade it." Shizuku unstrapped her katana and gingerly held it out toward Hajime. It appeared she had no intention of getting any closer than necessary. Since coming to this world, she'd often end up in situations where she was talking to members of the opposite sex while covered in sweat, so Hajime found it odd that she was suddenly keeping her distance now. While he was curious, in the end, he just shrugged it off and said, "Well, whatever."

He took the sword, then stamped the ground with his foot. The transmutation circle inscribed onto his shoe glowed crimson, and a table and chair appeared in front of Hajime. He sat down in the chair and laid the katana on the table. He then started pulling out various ore from his Treasure Trove.

Shizuku watched intently, curious about the crafting process. Hajime felt like it'd be awkward to keep her standing, so he transmuted another chair across where he was sitting, and gestured for Shizuku to take a seat. Fidgeting restlessly, she eased herself into the chair.

"....."

"....."

Neither of them spoke. The only sounds were the chirping of birds, the rustling of leaves, and the dull clattering of metal against metal. The morning's silence had returned to the small clearing. However, the silence didn't feel awkward to Shizuku in the slightest. While she did feel nervous, she felt like Hajime had implicitly given her permission for her to be there by making her a chair. As time passed, her racing heartbeat started to slow.

He's really concentrating... Hajime kept his gaze firmly focused on the blade in front of him. Even an amateur like Shizuku could tell he was focusing intently on his work. Bright crimson mana surged from him, illuminating his dead-serious

rising from her clothes. He looked down at the sword and stroked his chin thoughtfully. And he nodded after a while, satisfied with his handiwork.

“What the heck was that for!?” Shizuku yelled angrily as she slammed her hands down on the table and glowered at Hajime.

“Well, it looked like you’d fallen asleep so I figured I’d wake you up by testing the sword’s new features.”

“I-I can’t believe it, you don’t even feel the slightest bit of remorse, do you?”

Before she could complain any further, Hajime threw the katana at her. Distracted, she fumbled with it for a few seconds before securing it in her arms.

“Originally, I could only enchant ore with one or two spells using creation magic, but after using evolution magic to enhance my transmutation magic and creation magic, I can synthesize a lot more spells into it.”

“And now you’re just ignoring my complaints and explaining what my katana does... Whatever, I don’t even care anymore...” With a sigh, Shizuku eased herself back into the chair and resigned herself to listening to Hajime’s explanation. But now she was certain whatever feelings she might have had for him weren’t real.

“So now your katana’s been enchanted with a few different new spells. First of all, I’ve added gravity magic to it. You can freely control its weight. On top of that, you can draw things toward the sword, or push them away. Also, you can cut gravity with it, but the effect doesn’t last long.”

“That’s... amazing.” Shizuku’s eyes went wide as she looked down at the sword in her hands. But this was just the tip of the iceberg. Hajime continued his explanation, and the more Shizuku heard, the wider her eyes got.

Supposedly, thanks to the spatial magic it had been enchanted with, she could cut through space-time itself. Supposedly, thanks to the restoration magic it had been enchanted with, it could restore itself from any amount of damage. On top of that, it granted its wielder a restorative aura that slowly healed their wounds. Supposedly, thanks to the spirit magic it had been enchanted with, it could cut right through the souls of her enemies. And supposedly, the electric spells it had been previously enchanted with had been upgraded, and a new

function had been added to it that allowed her to send shockwaves out from her slashes.

“.....” Shizuku was speechless. Her sword had reached legendary status, which made her hands tremble as she held it.

“Also, I used the Status Plates as a reference and made it easier to control. Before, you had to activate all the spells it was enchanted with, but now they’re in a permanently activated state so you don’t need a chant to cast any of them.”

Meaning she could activate any of these godlike abilities instantly. Until now, Shizuku had been using one-word incantations to cast her spells, but doing so had greatly reduced their efficacy. But from that point on, she’d be able to activate their abilities just by thinking about them and at full power too.

“Since you’re a swordsman who relies on speed, I figured you’d have a hard time finishing long chants in the middle of battle...” Hajime finished his explanation with that.

Cold sweat poured down Shizuku’s forehead as she examined her improved weapon. At this point, it was far more powerful than even Kouki’s Holy Sword. It wasn’t just an overpowered weapon, it was a totally unbelievable one. This was the kind of weapon nations fought wars over. At the very least, she was certain it was the strongest sword in Tortus.

“I-Is it really alright... for me to have something this amazing?”

“Yeah, hang on to it just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

Hajime looked up at the sky, then nodded to himself. There was a feral gleam in his eyes, as though he were trying to intimidate someone or something residing far above.

“As you heard, once we clear the final labyrinth, the frost caverns in the Schnee Snow Fields, we’ll be able to return back home to Japan. If we can get back just like that it’d be great, but I don’t think it’ll be that easy.”

“You think someone’s going to try to get in our way? The demons, or maybe

those fake gods?”

“Yeah. The hero’s one of Ehit’s favorite pawns, and I don’t think he’ll want to let an irregular like me get away. So, in case a bunch of apostles like Noint show up to stop us, I want you guys to be our meat... Err, I want you guys to be strong enough to help us fight them off. Originally, I’d thought the best way to make you guys that strong was to have you conquer a few labyrinths and get some ancient magic.”

“Is it just me, or did you almost call us meat shields? Hey, do you really think that? Answer honestly now.” A vein pulsed in Shizuku’s forehead as she bore down on Hajime. However, Hajime ignored her and continued his explanation.

“But thanks to the evolution magic we got, I can make even stronger artifacts than before. Even if you guys can’t use ancient magic, I can make you all pretty strong. I’m planning on upgrading all your guys’ weapons so you’re ready for when the apostles attack. If they come while we’re still inside the caverns, you’ll have to handle them all by yourselves, after all. Also, if you guys want to use these weapons to conquer the other labyrinths, I don’t mind.”

“I get what you’re trying to say, but...”

Hajime stood up after saying his piece, planning to leave. However, Shizuku hesitantly called out to him, stopping him in his tracks.

“Does that mean you plan on finishing the rest of your journey with just Kaori and the others, Nagumo-kun?” “Hm? Yeah... What, you wanna come with us?”

“.....” Shizuku didn’t know what to say. She knew she’d asked for the unreasonable when she’d first forced her way into Hajime’s party. And his conditions had been that he’d only help them through a single labyrinth. Plus, she’d seen for herself just how dangerous labyrinths could be. Nor could she deny that she still lacked the strength to challenge them herself. She knew if she went with them, she’d just be a burden. Moreover, once Hajime conquered the final remaining labyrinth, the Frost Caverns, they’d all be able to go home. Hajime had promised he’d take everyone back with him, so Shizuku had no reason to force herself into Hajime’s party any longer.

Unable to provide an answer she could live with, she just silently shook her head. In response, Hajime shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, if it’s just you, Yaegashi, I don’t mind taking you along with us.”

“Wha?” Shizuku looked up at Hajime in shock. She hadn’t expected a response like that. A second later, a deep blush spread up her face and she looked away in embarrassment. After calming her pounding heart, she turned back to Hajime and asked dubiously.

“Why would you...”

“The ancient magic of the Frost Caverns probably lets you create the kind of monsters Freid was using when we fought him. If you have that and evolution magic, you can probably carry Amangoawa’s party all on your own. Between those two ancient magic, you’d probably be strong enough to conquer all the other labyrinths if you wanted, even.”

“Ah, of course. I knew that from the start, obviously.” Hopes dashed, Shizuku answered in a monotone. Though internally, she was berating herself for having hope at all. The blush faded from her cheeks, and she turned to Hajime with a glare. But before she could yell at him, his next words had her blushing again.

“Don’t give me that look. I’m asking you because aside from my comrades, you’re the one I can trust most. If I’m going to leave the other students in someone else’s hands, you’re the most reliable person that comes to mind.”

“Ah!”

Hajime smiled awkwardly at Shizuku. He’d assumed she was glaring at him because she didn’t want to be saddled with more babysitting, so he’d decided to follow up on his previous statement. However, said follow up was too much stimulation for the current Shizuku. She was just happy that someone she trusted trusted her back. She blushed even brighter than before, and Hajime’s smile grew more awkward. He started laying out his tools to practice transmutation some more, but not before spitting out his next thought.

“But I guess I can’t take just you with me, Yaegashi.”

“U-Umm... what do you mean by...” “I mean, look at Amanagoawa. He can’t function without you. Do you honestly think he’ll sit quietly if I take you with me to the Frost Caverns? I doubt he’d bear being separated from you, even for a little bit. Actually, I know he wouldn’t. He’d just throw a tantrum. And I don’t

want to have to deal with that. I'm the one who'll be in trouble if you're not around to take care of troublemakers like him."

"You really are blunt," Shizuku replied with a sigh.

Hajime ignored her and pulled out a few chakrams from his Treasure Trove and set them floating around him. In truth, Shizuku had known she couldn't abandon Kouki and the others too, so she quickly got over her feelings and changed the topic.

"Those are the chakram you can teleport things through, right? What are you going to do with them?"

"They're for practice. I came out here to get some training in, remember? You should go back though, Yaegashi. You look dead on your feet. Get some rest."

Hajime had a point. Shizuku felt ready to collapse any second now. But she couldn't bring herself to leave. So instead, she watched as he brought out thirty chakrams in total and made them revolve around him like satellites. Before she knew it, she'd opened her mouth.

"Can I watch for a while longer?"

"Huh? Well, I don't mind, but don't blame me if you pass out."

"Don't worry, if I start feeling that tired I'll go back."

Hajime shrugged his shoulders, then closed his eyes and drew Donner and Schlag.

Shizuku leaned forward, laid her elbows on the table, and rest her chin on her hands. After a brief pause, Hajime started his training routine.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang! A series of gunshots rang out. Each of his bullets passed through the center of one of his chakrams, which were now whirling around at incredible speeds. The bullets then shot out of the corresponding portals and headed back toward Hajime from a completely different direction and angle.

"Phew."

He turned to the side, dodging the bullets coming from behind by a hair's breadth. At the same time, he manipulated some of his chakrams so that the

bullets he dodged passed right through them, keeping them from leaving his circle. The teleported bullets assailed him once more, again from a new direction. They continued to assault their master until they lost momentum and fell to the ground.

But as Hajime was dodging, he continued to fire more and more bullets into the portals, increasing the number of shots he needed to dodge. He flitted like a leaf through the hail of bullets, using as little movement as necessary to dodge. His dance was much more fluid and graceful than the one Shizuku had performed earlier. It lacked any of the elegance a martial dance passed down through the centuries possessed.

Still, it was practical. His exceedingly practical maneuvers bore the polish that came with thousands of hours of practice. To Shizuku, that kind of practicality had its own beauty. Surrounded by a cyclone of bullets, Hajime weaved and bobbed while using his own weapons to raise the ferocity of the storm. Entranced, Shizuku watched until Hajime suddenly leaped into the air. He hung in the air, using his Aerodynamic to create footholds. Red mana pulsed underneath his feet as he pulled yet more chakrams out of his Treasure Trove and surrounded himself with them. The storm of red streaks sunk into the sphere of chakrams he'd surrounded himself with. The bullets then shot out the other side and raced toward Hajime like a barrage of lasers. He slowly shrunk the ten-meter sphere he'd created around himself, gradually reducing the amount of area he had to work with. And after that, he continued to dodge, at times using his guns' barrels to block. Both arms moved like separate living creatures, as Donner and Schlag defended and attacked in the same fluid motion. Inside the sphere of chakrams rimmed with crimson light was another storm of crimson streaks. Their combined luminance made the sphere above Shizuku look like a blood-red moon.

"It's so pretty..." Every time Shizuku witnessed Hajime's mana, she found herself spellbound. It was for that reason she always let those words unconsciously slip. Though the hail of gunshots shattered the silence that had filled the forest until now, Shizuku found that this cacophony was more soothing than the quiet. Slowly but surely, Shizuku's eyelids began to droop. And before long, she'd drifted off to sleep.

“Mmm... Hm?” Shizuku opened her eyes, letting out that soft groan. Her consciousness was still hazy, and she looked up blankly. Above her was a wooden ceiling. Still only half-awake, it took a moment for her to realize there was something soft supporting her head and back. And as she grew more alert, she heard a familiar voice call out to her.

“Oh, are you finally awake, Shizuku-chan? You slept like a log. It’s already noon.”

“Hm...? Kaori?”

Shizuku turned toward the direction of the voice and found her best friend smiling at her. She was sitting in a chair near the window and had already changed out of her pajamas. Shizuku raised herself into a sitting position and blearily rubbed her eyes, trying to think back to what she’d been doing before she passed out.

“Wait. Why am I in my room...? I was in the forest until... Actually, this isn’t even my room. This is your room, isn’t it, Kaori?”

Everyone in Hajime’s party had been provided their own rooms in Verbergen. The fact that she didn’t recognize the room’s decorations and that Kaori was sitting next to her led her to assume this room was Kaori’s. Kaori blushed a little at how cute confused Shizuku looked and replied.

“Yep, this is my room. Hajime-kun brought you here in the morning. He said you were up all night training. You really shouldn’t do that you know. You just came back from a labyrinth, so you should rest for a little bit at least.”

“U-Umm, yeah, you’re right. Sorry. S-So he’s the one who brought me here? I don’t remember that at all.”

“That’s because you were fast asleep, Shizuku-chan. You must have been really tired.” Kaori wagged a finger at Shizuku as she lectured her, but Shizuku looked away and started fidgeting nervously. With her hair down as it was now, she looked more mature than aloof, though her fidgety posture made her seem cuter than anything.

Shizuku looked down at herself and realized she’d been stripped down to a

single shirt. Had the guys in the class or the girls who looked up to her seen her as she was now, they would likely have gotten nosebleeds big enough to kill them from blood loss. Blushing slightly, Shizuku looked up at Kaori.

“Umm, how exactly did he carry me?”

Despite what Hajime had said, he’d still apparently been considerate enough to carry her back here when she fell asleep. However, that left Shizuku wondering whether he’d carried her princess-style or not. Sadly, reality was a harsh mistress. Kaori’s expression cramped up as she replied.

“W-Well, normally, I guess?”

“...Kaori, what do you mean by ‘normally’?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. I guess you could call it artistic in a way, though.”

“Hold on a second, Kaori. How on earth do you carry a sleeping person artistically?”

Seeing Kaori falter, Shizuku felt a deep sense of foreboding. After a few seconds of waffling, Kaori finally smiled awkwardly and spoke up.

“Well, to put it bluntly... he crucified you and floated you all the way over here.

“C-Crucified?”

Shizuku pressed Kaori for details, which turned out to be a mistake. Apparently, Hajime had decided to use her for his training as well and used stones imbued with gravity magic to pull her arms into a vaguely crucified position. From there, he’d attempted to float her all the way to Kaori’s room without dropping her. According to Kaori, he’d said it had made for good training because balancing a sleeping person softly enough to not wake them up had proven quite a challenge. The reason he’d taken her to Kaori’s room and not Shizuku’s own was because he didn’t know where Shizuku’s room was.

“B-But why crucify me?”

“Probably because if he’d tried to do it in another position and messed up he would have ended up breaking your limbs... I think?”

“What do you mean, ‘you think’...?”

Shizuku's expression cramped up. Anger filled her heart, chasing out the vague joy she'd felt earlier. Kaori's smile grew even more awkward. Incidentally, some of the soldiers who'd been out on patrol early had spotted Shizuku's crucified body as Hajime had brought it into the city. Though they didn't know Hajime had been imitating the death of Jesus Christ, the beastmen had still been captivated by Shizuku's divine form, and quite a few had converted to being her fans. However, some things were better left unsaid, so Kaori kept that information to herself.

Just as Shizuku's anger was about to reach its boiling point, she heard a loud thumping from downstairs.

"Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" a familiar voice yelled out. "Iyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" A girl's cute scream followed.

"Wh-What's going on? It's awfully noisy down there."

"Oh, that's just Shea and Altina-san. They've been fighting or something since morning."

"What do you mean, or something?"

"Well, it's not quite fighting. I'm not sure how to explain it though... You know what, it'd be faster if you see for yourself."

Confused, Shizuku let herself be ushered out of the room and down the stairs. As they went, Kaori summarized the events of the morning for Shizuku. Apparently, Altina had tried to take care of Hajime, but had been stopped by a grinning Shea. However, Altina had refused to back down and had continued making passes at Hajime. Finally, Shea had gotten so fed up she'd hit Altina with her Cobra Twist.

A mere rabbitman had attacked an elder's granddaughter, the princess of the elves, using one of the pro wrestling techniques Hajime had taught her for fun. Before the advent of the Haulia, it would have been unthinkable for a rabbitman to lay a hand on the elven princess. Anyone who tried would have been executed without question.

But now the rabbitmen were feared among the rest of the beastmen as bloodthirsty headhunters. Specifically, it was just the Haulia who were feared,

but at this point, most other beastmen were terrified that any rabbitman they spotted was after their head. The Haulia weren't just feared, either. They were also revered as the heroes who had freed the beastmen slaves within the empire. And Shea was the daughter of those heroes' chief. Among the beastmen's most fearsome race, she was the one known as their most dangerous individual.

That was why no one had stepped in when Shea had hit Altina with a Cobra Twist. Not that anyone could have. Aside from Hajime and his comrades, the only other people who'd been in the dining hall at the time had been a few servers and Altina's maids. Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu had all been holed up in their room, dwelling on their failure to clear Haltina's labyrinth and obtain evolution magic.

Afterward, Shea had thrown the elven princess onto the floor, given her the middle finger, and yelled: "Never show your face here again!" Considering that had been the first time Altina had ever received such crude treatment, it wouldn't have been surprising if she'd broken down then and there. However, the sheltered princess' reaction had been most unexpected.

"Take that, and that, and that! If you want me to stop, then swear to never flirt with Hajime-san again, you long-eared vixen!"

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah! How embarrassiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!"

Altina hadn't backed down. Shizuku watched, dumbfounded, as Shea hit Altina with yet another esoteric pro wrestling move. Kaori's smile grew stiff as she led Shizuku down the last few stairs. Shea had flipped Altina upside-down and was holding her by the legs. She was blushing in embarrassment as her skirt flipped over, revealing her daring panties and shapely legs. Apparently, this particular wrestling move was known as the muscle buster.

"Hmph, you look all innocent and pure, but you sure wear some provocative underwear."

"Mmm... All princesses are secretly perverts of some kind..."

Yue asserted her biased viewpoint. Hajime, who'd looked completely unconcerned with the ruckus until now, spit out the soup he'd been drinking at her comment.

Incidentally, Yue was a former queen, while Tio was the dragonmen's princess. If it turned out that Liliana was a closet pervert as well, then Yue's theory would be all but proven. Hajime fervently hoped that Liliana was as pure as she seemed, for the sake of all other men out there.

After seeing all that, Shizuku finally returned to her senses and asked something with a pained expression on her face.

"A-Are you sure we're allowed to do this? That girl's a princess, isn't she? Look, all of her maids and all of the wait staff are worried too. They can't bear to watch their princess flail around upside-down while revealing her underwear any longer. At this rate, Altina will be too ashamed to ever show her face in Verbergen again..."

"I-I know. Normally, I'd agree with you, but... look at Altina-san's expression."

"H-Huh? Is it just me, or does she look like she's enjoying it?"

Altina's face was flushed, and there was an odd glint in her eyes. At a glance, it appeared like she was lamenting the humiliation she was receiving, but a closer look revealed that there the faintest hint of a smile on her face. In truth, if Altina had found flashing her panties to a crowd of people as shameful as she made it out to seem, she would have long since agreed to Shea's conditions. Depending on how one looked at it, it certainly did seem like she was implicitly begging Shea to continue.

"Tch... Stubborn bitch. Alright, how about this!?"

"Wh-What now... S-Stoooooop! Don't embarrass me in front of everyoooooone!"

Altina didn't even bother attempting to swear never to get close to Hajime again. Tired of her persistence, Shea threw her to the floor in disgust. However, Shea wasn't done yet. She instantly moved on to the next wrestling maneuver. This time she wrapped her legs around Altina's prone figure and lifted her into the air while Shea herself rolled to the ground. This move was known as the Romero Special.

Altina's skirt flipped upward once more, showing off her most private parts. "Stop, pleaseeee!" She begged, no longer sounding like a graceful princess.

However, her voice seemed somehow devoid of expression, and the smile forming on her lips destroyed any credence her words might have held. From her position, Shea couldn't see Altina's expression. So while everyone else could tell Altina was enjoying it and was backing away slowly, Shea still thought she was punishing the elf.

"I see, so this is where the 'or something' part comes in..."

"Yep. I hope I'm wrong... but it looks like Tio's found herself a new comrade."

Kaori gave Altina a pitying look as she said that. Meanwhile, the famed pervert Tio gave Altina a look of boundless kindness and affection. It was the kind of joyful look a master reserved for a particularly dutiful disciple. On the other hand, Hajime and Yue who were sitting across from her grimaced. Altina's joints began to creak as Shea upped the pressure on her hold, and Hajime turned to her with an exasperated.

"Just leave it at that, Shea."

"I can't do that, Hajime-san. I have enough rivals as it is, so I refuse to let an elf princess join that list! Besides, she seems to be gunning for me specifically, so the only way I'll stand a chance is if I strike first!" Shea shifted positions and put Altina under the Boston Crab. She was intent on crushing her potential rival here and now. Overjoyed at being put in another embarrassing pose, Altina screamed in ecstasy. She didn't seem anything like the sheltered princess she was supposed to be. Her maids and servants swooned, shocked at seeing such a scandalous side of their master. And Tio gave Altina a knowing look, which only irked Hajime and Yue more.

"Hajime..." Yue called out to Hajime, her voice oddly gentle. It seemed almost as if she was egging him on. He scratched his cheek awkwardly, then hesitantly nodded at Yue. She nodded back, her mouth a determined slash. Hajime quietly rose to his feet and walked over to Shea, who was pulling on Altina's legs now. He pulled her up by her arms as the crowd watched on, interrupting her wrestling spree.

"Hwoh?" Surprised, Shea let out a small squeal and fell back into Hajime's embrace.

"Ah!" Kaori and, for some reason, Shizuku exclaimed. Hajime ignored the

peanut gallery and brought his face close to Shea's bunny ears as she blinked in shock. "Hey Shea," he whispered, "You keep saying you don't want more rivals, but... do you think of Yue as a rival?"

"Huh? What? Yue-san? Of course not! Maybe I might have when we first met, but definitely not now! Honestly, if Yue-san wasn't by your side, Hajime-san, I'd worry the world was ending. I don't even want to imagine something that horrifying."

"O-Oh... I didn't know you liked her that much..." Hajime's expression froze up a little at the unexpected passion in Shea's voice. Apparently, as far as Shea was concerned, Hajime and Yue being together was a natural law of the universe.

Hajime coughed awkwardly, then looked Shea squarely in the eyes. She gasped as she took in the intensity of his gaze. Hajime picked his next words carefully, aware of the weight behind them.

"In that case, stop worrying about potential rivals. You're so much more important to me than Altina that you two aren't even comparable. Because to me, Shea, you're special."

"H-Hajime-san..." When the word special was whispered into her ear, Shea's entire face went red.

"Awawa," she blabbered, her ears flapping up and down. Her tail wagged back and forth with more vigor than Hajime had ever seen.

Shea had, of course, noticed the slight changes in the way Hajime had been treating her as of late. It was clear that he treasured her more than he used to. In fact, Shea had begun to hold a faint hope her feelings, which she'd expressed since the day they'd first left Haltina, had begun to reach Hajime. That while she might never be special like only Yue was, that she was still more important to Hajime than anyone else. But at the same time, she'd been worried she was wrong. It was for that reason she'd hesitated to burden Hajime and ask him to help her save her family when Cam and the others had been captured by the empire. And it was for that reason she was so afraid of Altina becoming another rival.

But one word from Hajime had blown all those worries away. Her dreams had

finally come true. That being said, she hadn't expected to receive a confession like that in a completely average situation, like the middle of lunch.

Her thoughts ground to a halt, and her expression froze in place. However, her ears and tail continued to wag to and fro, a reflection of her true feelings. The others seemed just as shocked as Shea. Kaori and Shizuku's jaws were hanging wide open. Oddly enough though, Yue and Tio had apparently predicted this. They were both smiling gently at Shea.

Hajime looked down at Shea, troubled. He didn't expect this to be such a shock. In an attempt to lighten the mood, he let out a rather shocking statement.

"Anyway, Shea. I think Altina's more interested in you than she is in me."

"Hweh? Wh-What do you mean? She wants me?"

Hajime patted Shea's back a few times, which finally snapped her out of her stupor. Her mind was still a whirlwind of emotions, but she was curious enough about Hajime's statement to look over at Altina. The elf princess was blushing and covering her face while still watching Hajime and Shea through the gaps between her fingers. The moment Shea's gaze met hers, she jumped. A second later, she started fidgeting bashfully.

"Umm, the reason you keep messing with me is... because you don't like how close I am with Hajime-san, right?"

"N-Not at all! I have no grudge against you, Shea-san! I just want to spend more time doing these kinds of things with you!"

"Uhhh..."

Shea backed away warily. *Don't tell me she's one of them!?* Shea thought, her hair standing on end.

"These kinds of things" almost certainly referred to Shea's pro wrestling torture course. The fact that she wanted to be put into joint locks that showed off her panties could only mean one thing. Shea rounded on the party's resident pervert.

Tio smiled and gave her a thumbs-up, and the sincerity behind that gesture

was overwhelmingly creepy. That alone was enough to prove to Shea that Altina was a pervert. Afraid that she might have awoken a monster, Shea fearfully turned back to Altina and muttered a single word.

“P-Pervert...”

“Y-You have it all wrong! This is a misunderstanding, Shea-san! I simply wish to get along with you!”

“W-With *me*?” Shea asked timidly. She hadn’t expected to hear that. Fidgeting, Altina went into more detail. Apparently, the reason for her interest in Shea was as follows: Altina was effectively Verbergen’s princess. Elves were one of the most influential beastmen races, and Altina was the granddaughter of their elder. Since her childhood, she’d been given special treatment. On top of that, she’d excelled at her studies, and as a result, had turned into a wise and compassionate girl. Due to all this, she’d become respected by all the other elves, which meant that even when she played with children her own age, they always deferred to her. There was no one around her who’d treat her as an equal.

Though everyone around her was kind, the preferential treatment she received made her lonely. Soon enough, she began yearning for the kind of friend who’d speak their mind to her without regard for her status. The reason she’d been so infatuated with Hajime was that, from the start, he had neither looked down on her for being a beastman nor revered her because she was the elven princess. He’d just treated her like everyone else, which had made her jealous of Shea, who always seemed to be by his side.

However, after falling for Cam’s provocations and competing with Shea, she’d been hit with quite the shock. Naturally, almost having her joints dislocated had been a shock, but she’d received a mental one as well. A rabbitman the same age as her was messing around with her without regard for her status. Shea hadn’t hesitated to use harsh words or even physical violence on Altina. And that had made Altina indescribably happy.

It was then that she’d realized how wonderful it would be if she could become friends, no best friends with Shea, who was roughly the same age as her.

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but I haven’t the slightest idea of how to become friends with someone... I just knew that if I tried to get close to Hajime-san, you would pay attention to me, so...”

“What are you, some kind of dog? You should have just asked normally. I would’ve hung out with...”

“A-A dog... You’ll treat me like a dog?”

“Uh... is that really important?”

Shea watched as a happy blush spread across Altina’s face.

“Oh no...” she muttered. Realizing she’d let her true intentions show, Altina hurriedly corrected her posture and wiped the smile off her face. She then got to her feet and hesitantly held a hand out toward Shea.

“Th-Then, if I asked you to be my friend, would you?”

“I don’t know why you’re wording it like a love confession, but... sure, I don’t see why not. Sheesh, you really are a handful.” Shea shook her head in mock exasperation and gripped Altina’s outstretched hand.

Altina beamed. Though things had developed in an unexpected direction, everyone present was glad to see things end well. Especially Altina’s maids.

“Huh?” Shea made to pull her hand back, but then tilted her head when she realized Altina was still gripping it tightly.

“Umm, Altina-san? I kind of want my hand back...”

“Please, just call me Altina. I’ll call you Shea as well. Th-That’s normal between best friends, correct?”

Five seconds after becoming friends, Altina had already upgraded Shea to best friend. *Maybe I made a mistake by agreeing to be her friend. She’s got a dangerous aura around her.* Shea thought to herself, cold sweat pouring down her forehead. Her initial misgivings proved to be correct. Blushing, Altina asked Shea a rather odd question.

“S-So, Shea. What technique will you use on me next?”

“Come again?”

“I want to be humiliated and degraded by you. It’s only by feeling such pain that I can experience your warmth... Since we’re best friends, surely you don’t mind me requesting more, do you? I want you to toy with me more and more.”

Shea forcibly pulled her hand away and backed up all the way to the room’s corner. Her entire face was drenched in sweat.

“S-Since when did we become best friends!? And I knew it, you really are just a pervert!”

“I am not! I simply wish to enjoy the few days I have with you before you leave on your journey!”

“Then why did you ask me to toy with you!? Normally, you’d ask me to play with you, right!?”

Seeing Altina’s confused expression, Shea’s bunny ears stood on end. *Crap, she’s one hell of a masochist.* She turned to Hajime, her eyes pleading for salvation. “You said I was special to you, right? That means you’ll save me, right?” Her expression seemed to say.

Hajime gave her an unbelievably gentle smile and spoke calmly.

“That’s the Shea I know and love. In sickness and in health, you’ll suffer through the same experiences with me.”

“That’s the wrong way to use that line! What happened to that heartfelt confession earlier!?” Tears welled up in Shea’s eyes. She’d wanted to get closer to Hajime, but that hadn’t meant she’d wanted to share these kinds of experiences too. She could do without knowing how it felt to have a perverted masochist following her around. However, it seemed Hajime wasn’t going to help her out of this one. *So much for being special.*

Altina slowly advanced toward Shea, who was cowering against the wall. It was clear from her expectant smile that she wanted Shea to continue what she’d been doing. Even if Shea tried to force her way past, that would just make Altina happy. Strength wouldn’t get her out of this situation. And so, Shea decided to make a tactical retreat.

“I-I can’t stay in the same room as this pervert!”

Shea flung open a nearby window and dashed off with the speed of a fleeing hare. It seemed she intended to hide until things calmed down. However, considering the flags she'd raised there was no guarantee she'd be able to safely escape.

"Aaah! Where are you going, Shea!? Wait for meee!"

Altina climbed out of the same window and chased after Shea. For some reason, her speed got quite a boost when she was running after her new best friend. Shea freaked out when she turned around and saw Altina gaining on her. She activated all of her body strengthening skills and fled at top speed, leaving a huge dust cloud in Verbergen's main streets as she ran. However, Altina was still somehow able to keep up, and before long Shea's screams echoed throughout every corner of the beastmen capital. With the exception of Hajime and a few others, those remaining in the dining hall were too dumbfounded to even comment.

"Hmph... This was such a good chance for Shea, too," Yue muttered to herself. Hajime smiled ruefully and shrugged in response. Their little exchange finally brought one of the other girls back to her senses, and she staggered over to Hajime.

"Hajime-kun... Did you mean what you said? Truly?" The temperature in the room plummeted, and Kaori's usual demon illusion appeared behind her. She swayed back and forth, like a ghost from a horror movie. Furthermore, she cast shadows in all directions, though the room's only light source was above her. The light vanished from her pupils, giving her an extremely intimidating aura. As expected, Kaori had something to say about Hajime's confession to Shea.

"I noticed you were being nicer to Shea than usual, but... she's become special to you? Really? Since when? How did it happen?" Though Kaori's voice was calm, the darkness in her eyes made it clear she was anything but. Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly, searching for the right words. Finally, he met Kaori, and Tio's, gazes and gave them both a serious look. They, in turn, waited patiently for his reply.

"I'm not sure how exactly to say it, but... well, I could tell even a while back that while Shea wasn't as important to me as Yue, I definitely had feelings for

her. And since Yue seems to want this too, I've decided to be more honest with myself about those feelings. It's not like anything special happened or anything."

"D-Does that mean you love Shea too?"

"To be honest... I'm not sure. I feel like love isn't quite the right word. Still, I do know she's important to me."

Hajime wasn't lying, he really wasn't sure how to quantify his feelings for Shea. With Yue, whenever she attempted to seduce him he could feel his heart start to race and a fierce lust well up within him. But he didn't feel any of that with Shea. And so, while his feelings for Yue burned with a red-hot passion, his feelings for Shea were something far more gentle. If he had to encapsulate it somehow, it was that he treasured her.

Ironically enough, it was Yue, the quiet, unassuming girl, he felt a fiery passion for, while Shea, the bright cheery mood maker of the party he felt a soft, gentle affection for. Strange as it was, he felt contrasting things for these two contrasting girls. And whatever those feelings were, he knew they ran deeper than simple love. He just didn't know what words to express them in, which was why he was having so much trouble answering Kaori's question. He knew he was being selfish, wanting to monopolize Shea without even a clear answer of what exactly his feelings were. But at the same time, he couldn't bear the thought of her being with another man.

After hearing Hajime's honest feelings, the room fell silent. Most of the peanut gallery had their mouths full of sweets, while Yue and Tio watched Hajime gently. Shizuku's expression was hard to describe, while Kaori, the one who'd precipitated this, simply spoke words of acknowledgment.

"...I see. Alright, I understand..." Kaori nodded to herself, then, inexplicably, smiled at Hajime. Naturally, she was still jealous. And of course, she hadn't sorted out all of her feelings just yet. But Shea was Kaori's precious friend, a comrade she could entrust her life to. Knowing that her friend's greatest wish had finally come true made her genuinely happy. At her core, Kaori was just that kind of person.

It's not like agonizing over it will do me any good... Kaori thought. She herself

was surprised at how easily she'd accepted Hajime's answer. Hajime, too, was amazed by the fact that Kaori formed such a genuine smile in this situation. However, Kaori had learned back in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine that getting jealous and wallowing in depression would get her nowhere. She already knew that Hajime's feelings for Yue would never change. Her greatest worry had been that Hajime would never think of her as someone more than an important comrade. However, Shea's success had just proven that wasn't the case. Meaning that she still had a chance too.

"Hajime-kun."

"Yeah?"

Kaori grinned, her fearless smile a spitting image of Hajime's own.

"You better prepare yourself."

"...."

Hajime knew perfectly well what she meant, which was precisely why he was so troubled.

"Seriously, you all are too good for me. I don't deserve any of you..."

"Ah...! Fufu." Kaori chuckled, her smile returning to a normal one. At the same time, she felt a wave of nostalgia wash over her. Hajime's troubled expression was similar to the one he'd had right after they'd cleared Haltina's labyrinth. *Thank goodness, the old Hajime-kun really is coming back.*

Kaori's smile grew wider. A second later, though, something smacked right into her forehead with a meaty thwack. The object, a soup-stained piece of bread, slowly slid down Kaori's cheek. Still smiling, Kaori turned toward the direction of the throw. Sitting there was Yue, dipping another piece of bread into her soup to prepare her next projectile.

As usual, she was the culprit. Yue looked up at Kaori and harrumphed. It was obvious from her expression that she didn't think Kaori stood a chance at winning Hajime's heart.

"E-Excuse me, Yue? But what was that for? Mind telling me?" The room's temperature plummeted once more, and Kaori's demon reappeared.

Unconcerned, Yue replied.

“I can allow Shea. But not you, Kaori. Give up and go home.”

She flicked a second piece of bread at Kaori. This one landed right on her eyebrow. Yue had a pretty good throwing arm. Kaori let out a bestial hiss, and leaped onto Yue, knocking her off her chair. The two of them rolled across the ground as they wrestled with each other. “Hmph! Bring it on, bitch.” “Screw you, Yue. I’ll make you eat dust!”

Soon enough, the pair were grappling with each other in earnest. However, a dining hall such as this wasn’t a suitable place for their struggle. The pair rolled toward the wall, floated up into the air, and rolled right out the window Shea had left through earlier. Altina’s maids watched on, dumbfounded.

As always, Yue and Kaori were on the same wavelength. It was hard to tell if they were best friends or worst enemies. At the very least, Yue was the only one who could rile Kaori up, while Yue was the only one who enjoyed tussling with Kaori. Fights like these were an everyday occurrence.

“Now then, Master. Seeing as you’ve finally made Shea your own, why not add another member into your harem and accept my boundless love, which is deeper than the ocean floor and higher than Divine Mountains’ peaks.” Tio pressed her breasts against Hajime and winked at him. She certainly had more than enough sex appeal. All the other men present had popped boners from her provocative display.

However, Hajime remained unaffected.

“Kaori might still have a chance, but you definitely don’t.”

“Ah!? Haaah... Haaah, such a harsh rejection... Truly only you can be this cruel, Master! You know just what I like! Haaah... Haaah, unbelievable!” Tio shivered, then hugged herself and started fidgeting restlessly. Compared to her earlier seduction, the way she looked now should have been far sexier. However, the guys’ boners all withered as they looked at her. Her expression ruined any arousing effects her actions may have had. The servants all backed away, disgusted.

Shizuku, who’d been standing awkwardly by the staircase this whole time,

couldn't help but think about how Hajime had casually let slip that Kaori might eventually be special to him.

In that case, Hajime wouldn't mind adding yet another person to his harem too, right...? Wait, no, what am I thinking!? Who exactly was I hoping that one extra person would be!? It definitely wasn't me, that's for sure! I'm just glad Kaori's finally getting what she wants, that's all!

No one noticed Shizuku's agonizing, as they were too busy being creeped out by Tio. Hajime simply sighed and shook his head, while Shea's screams and the sounds of Kaori and Yue fighting echoed through the city.

Verbergen's morning had started out quiet and peaceful, but now that peace and quiet was nowhere to be seen.

A few hours later, at dusk. The setting sun cast its dying rays through Haltina's trees, giving everything an orange tinge.

"Ugh, that was horrible..."

A tired wail could be heard from a plaza a short distance from the city center. The plaza had a fountain in the center, ringed by chairs carved from tree stumps. Normally, it was full of beastmen looking to relax. Right now though, there were only two people there. Hajime and Shea. Despite all the assistance Hajime, Shea, and Kaori had given Verbergen, the city was still far from fully restored. Most beastmen were busy helping reorganize Verbergen's army, or rebuilding the city's infrastructure, or spending time with their freed friends and family. No one had time to lounge around a plaza. Yue, Tio, Kaori, Kouki, and all the rest were busy either helping the beastmen with their restoration efforts, training or preparing for the upcoming journey.

Exhausted, Shea slumped onto the table in front of her. The reason for her exhaustion was, of course, Altina. "Playing" with her new elven friend had been quite the ordeal. Altina had chased Shea around all day until Ulfric had finally come to collect her. The day had been mentally taxing to the extreme. Ulfric, too, had taken quite a bit of mental damage when he'd seen what his granddaughter had become.

Hajime looked up from his transmutation work and chuckled at Shea. She

raised one of her drooping ears and slapped it down on the table in protest.

“Quit laughing! I was really scared, you know!?”

“Don’t be like that. Shouldn’t you be glad you made a new friend? You should just toy... I mean, play with her.”

“You’re not fooling anyone. Can she really be called my friend if all I do is toy with her? Haaah, now I know how you must feel every time Tio comes begging to you. Like, I don’t mind being this adored, but... it’s just so tiring.”

Her bunny ears drooped again, and Shea deflated as if losing strength. She’d gone from being a worthless rabbit to a noodle rabbit. “You said it,” Hajime said. He knew Tio wasn’t only interested in him because she was a pervert. In her own way, Tio loved Hajime just as much as Shea and Kaori. It was for that reason that the way she chose to display her affection tired Hajime out so much.

Hajime’s smile grew kind, and he reached out to stroke Shea’s bunny ears. Shea twitched a little as his hand brushed against her fur, and she lifted her open ear and rubbed it against the back of Hajime’s hand. Hajime relaxed as his hand was sandwiched between twin tufts of fur. He stroked her ears in silence for a while.

As time passed, the shadows lengthened, plunging the plaza into twilight. Hajime found he liked this quiet, gentle time between evening and night.

Face hidden by her blue hair, which was shimmering in the twilight, Shea quietly whispered a question.

“Hajime-san... About what you said during lunch... Does that mean...”

She trailed off, embarrassed but hopeful. It was obvious what she was trying to ask. Even Hajime wasn’t that dense, after all. And so, he rose from his seat, went over to Shea’s side, and sat down next to her.

Shea twitched, her expression still hidden by her hair. However, Hajime looped his arm around Shea’s back and hugged her tight. At that, she went red as a tomato. Her eyes lit up with desire, and she turned toward Hajime, seeing that his expression was the gentlest he’d ever given her.

“Shea, you said it yourself. The future’s not set in stone. Well, you were right.”

“Ah...”

Those were the words she’d said when she’d first begged Hajime to take her with them on their journey. It was what she’d said when Hajime had told her there was no chance he’d ever return her feelings. It had been both her prediction as a Diviner and a declaration of her resolve.

“Shea. I won’t insult you by asking if your feelings have changed.”

Asking things like “Are you really okay with someone like me?” or “Are you fine with me even though I have Yue?” would just be an affront to Shea’s feelings.

“You’re irreplaceable to me, Shea. I don’t want to hand you over to anyone else.” Those words were selfish to the extreme, but they were also the words Shea had wanted to hear the most.

“Now that you’ve become special to me, I won’t ever let you go. I hope you’re ready.”

“...Yes! Oh yes! After all, I’ve finally become someone special to you, Hajime-san!”

Near the end of their journey, Shea had finally gotten what she’d strived for. An elated smile spread across her face. It was far more dazzling than any of her other smiles. Anyone who’d seen Shea’s smile just then would have been completely smitten, regardless of race or class. And Hajime was no exception. Before he knew it, he’d drawn his face close to hers... and was kissing her on the lips.

“Mmm... Fwaaah...”

Trembling with joy, Shea opened her lips to accept him.

Her breath came in hot gasps, and her body felt light, like a giant ball of cotton candy. Everything seemed so hot for a moment that she worried she might melt.

“Hajime-san...”

The two of them broke apart. Shea looked down bashfully, her normal cheery demeanor subdued. Hajime found that reaction of hers unbelievably adorable. Her charm was the complete opposite of Yue's, but it was just as potent. Shea's pink lips parted, and she stuck her tongue out a little. It was clear from her expression what she wanted. Hajime closed his eyes, rest a hand on Shea's cheek, and kissed her again.

"Whoa, they're actually gonna keep going! O-Out here, in public..."

"H-Hey, Suzu! They'll hear us if you're that loud!"

"You're yelling just as loudly, Shizuku-chan! If you don't quiet down, Hajime-kun'll know we're here!"

"Shut up, all of you. Don't ruin Shea's moment."

A bunch of familiar voices distracted the pair. Shea's bunny ears shot up and she hurriedly pushed Hajime off her, before turning to the direction of the voices. The group of eavesdroppers seemed shocked that Shea had noticed them, as one of them lost their balance and screamed: "Hey, idiot, don't push me!" In a perfectly cliched manner, a figure fell out of one of the flower beds that rimmed the plaza.

Kouki was the first to fall, followed by Ryutarou, Suzu, Shizuku, and finally Kaori. Then, with a sigh, Yue walked out as well. Tio followed behind her, a massive grin on her face. It appeared the rest of the party had wanted to see how things developed between Hajime and Shea. The group clambered to their feet and looked away awkwardly their faces all bright red.

"G-G-G-G-G-Guys!? How long have you been there!?" But Shea was the most flustered of them all.

Shizuku and the others firmly refused to meet Shea's gaze, so Hajime answered for them.

"Probably around the time I started playing with your ears."

"So from the very start! Th-That means they saw... How come you didn't tell me!?" Shea beat her fists against Hajime's torso. There were tears in her eyes for a completely different reason now.

“It’s not like we were doing anything we needed to hide. Besides, the mood was too good to ruin.”

“I-I guess you’re right, but...” Shea trailed off, her bunny ears flapping around in a mixture of happiness and embarrassment.

Tio walked up to Shea, the same shit-eating grin still on her face, and started teasing her.

“So, what are your thoughts? How did Master’s passionate kiss taste? Come now, don’t be shy and tell me all about it. Seeing as you’ve made it this far sooner than us, I believe you owe it to us to give us your impressions at least. Now then— Bwaaah!?” Tio wrapped her arm around Shea’s shoulders and started poking her cheek playfully. A second later, a smack to the back of her head sent her sprawling into the ground. She looked like Frogger after he’d been run over by a car.

“Calm down, you pervert.”

“Yue is the culprit.” Tio scrawled her dying message into the dirt. Apparently, Yue had hit her with an ice bullet from behind. Yue blew an imaginary plume of smoke off her finger, and Shea turned to her.

“Yue-san...”

“Shea...”

Yue stopped making a finger gun and turned to Shea. She spread her arms wide and smiled gently at the bunny girl.

“Come here...”

“Yue-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!” Shea leaped into Yue’s arms and clung to her clothes like a little girl. Yue hugged her best friend back and gently patted her head as if she were comforting her little sister.

“Yue-san, I finally...”

“Mmm... You worked hard.”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah... Yue-san, I love you so much! Don’t ever leave me!” Shea’s heartfelt sobs echoed through the plaza. She knew that, no matter how much Hajime might have liked someone, if Yue had wanted to monopolize

him all for herself he would never even look at another girl. And that was precisely why Shea was so grateful to Yue for watching over her attempts to win Hajime over and even offering advice. In some ways, Yue cared more for Shea than even Hajime did, something Shea was eternally thankful for.



“Is it just me, or are you having a more touching moment with Yue than you did with me?” Hajime grumbled to himself. But no one heard him, and Shea, overcome with emotion, buried her head in Yue’s chest.

The two girls had been trapped in different worlds. One in the abyss, the other in the vast sea of trees. The first friends they’d made after escaping from their respective prisons had been each other. Yue was the older sister and Shea the younger. Yue was the mentor, and Shea the disciple. The bond these two had forged was unbreakable. Those watching all smiled as the two girls snuggled together.

“Tio. We need to be next. Let’s both do our best, okay?”

“Indeed. I eagerly await the day Master comes to punish me of his own accord.”

“You never change, Tio.” Kaori poked Tio’s prone figure, and she looked up, eyes gleaming with hope.

Meanwhile, Kouki and Ryutarou exchanged awkward glances and Shizuku’s gaze flitted between Hajime and Yue, her expression inscrutable. Hajime smiled awkwardly upon hearing Kaori’s declaration and muttered some words softly.

“Just don’t go too far, please.”

Upon hearing that, the two girls’ gazes snapped up to him.

“Ah!”

Kaori’s eyes began to sparkle, while a confident smirk appeared on Tio’s face. The way Hajime had phrased that told them he wasn’t confident he’d be able to resist if they pushed hard enough. And in fact, their assumption wasn’t wrong.

Hajime had no intention of letting anyone Yue didn’t approve of into his harem. But both Kaori and Tio were people Yue had accepted and cared for, though she and Kaori often fought. Hajime, too, cared quite deeply for these two. Since Yue had already approved of both of them, he could no longer say with confidence that he’d be able to deflect their advances. Especially since now that he’d accepted Shea’s confession, he could no longer use the excuse that Yue was the only girlfriend he’d ever have to get them to give up.

Not that any of them gave up before, either... Their unshakable resolve was something Hajime was acquainted with better than anyone. That being said, Hajime's polyamorous mindset was something that would be considered abnormal by normal Japanese standards, so he couldn't help but be a little disappointed at himself.

Seeing that things had calmed down somewhat, Suzu, who'd awkwardly been standing at a distance from everyone else, looked nervously at Hajime. She seemed to be waiting for an opportunity to say something. Noticing her odd behavior, Hajime started speaking.

"So, what'd you peeping toms all come here for? It's too early for dinner still, so there must be something you guys wanted."

"Err, well we met up with Yue and the others mostly by accident, but we actually..." Shizuku trailed off awkwardly and turned to Suzu.

It appeared she had some business with him after all. *Now that's unusual.* Hajime mused. *So she'd been looking for me and just ran into Yue by coincidence?* Her expression a mixture of nervousness and resolve, Suzu walked up to Hajime and screamed.

"Nagumo-kun! Please take me with you to the next labyrinth too. Please!" Suzu bowed her head deeply, conveying the sincerity of her request. Kouki and the others looked at her in shock. Apparently, she hadn't told them what she'd wanted to ask Hajime. Hajime, too, was surprised. He'd expected a request like this to come from Kouki maybe, but not Suzu.

"Suzu, you can't just..."

"Kouki-kun, I'm sorry. But this is my request, so please don't butt in."

The intensity in Suzu's voice made Kouki falter. The negative feelings that had been swirling inside him since the labyrinth trip grew stronger, but he couldn't match the fire in Suzu's gaze. When Shizuku realized Suzu wanted Hajime to take just her and not the whole party, she blinked in amazement.

"Why do you want to come so badly? Even if you don't do anything, I'll still take you all back to Japan. And if you just want to get stronger, the upgraded artifacts I'll be giving you guys should be able to help with that."

“Yeah, I know. But Nagumo-kun...” Suzu faltered, unsure if she should keep going. But then she found her resolve again and continued, “You won’t help Eri, will you?”

“Nakamura, huh? Yeah, not a chance. In fact, if she shows her face in front of me, I might end up killing her instead. She’s the main reason Kaori died.”

Suzu smiled awkwardly when she heard the venom in Hajime’s voice.

“I thought so. But you know, I want to try talking to her one more time. That’s why I need more power. And that’s why I want to try challenging a labyrinth again. Whether I get the ancient magic from it or not... once we’re done there, I’m going to go to the demons’ country.”

“Suzu, you can’t—” Shizuku grabbed Suzu’s shoulder. As Suzu’s friend, Shizuku couldn’t allow her to charge into Garland alone. However, Suzu refused to back down. Overwhelmed by the intensity in Suzu’s gaze, Shizuku reflexively let go of her shoulder.

“I see,” Hajime mused. Regardless of whether Suzu found a way to convince Eri or ended up parting ways with her for good, it’d be easier for her to reach the demon lord’s castle from the Frost Caverns than if she went back to Heiligh and tried to sneak into Garland from there. After all, the location of the Frost Caverns, the Schnee Snow Field, was in the eastern part of the demon continent. Garland was only a stone’s throw away from there.

Suzu knew Hajime would show Eri no mercy, so she had no intention of turning back even if Hajime refused her. She’d make it to Garland with or without his help. Once Hajime conquered the Frost Caverns, he’d start making preparations to go back home. Suzu had no idea how long that would take, but she knew she didn’t have much time. No matter how weak she was, no matter how reckless this plan was, even if she had to do it alone, Suzu was going to get to Eri by the fastest means possible. She turned her gaze back to Hajime and asked desperately, “Also, if... If I can convince Eri to come back with me...I want you to take her to Japan along with everyone else. Please! I’m begging you!”

“.....” Silence followed Suzu’s heartfelt entreaty. Honestly speaking, Hajime was certain if he ever saw Eri’s face again he’d undoubtedly pull the trigger on her. Even now the sight of Kaori’s lifeless body hanging limply in Shizuku’s arms

was burned into his memory. Knowing that Eri had been the cause of her death brought forth such raw hatred that he could barely contain it. He couldn't care less what Suzu did or didn't do with Eri, but he had no intention of helping her help his enemy. As far as Hajime was concerned, Eri Nakamura was an enemy. And the only things enemies got from him was death.

The only reason he didn't refuse Suzu's request outright was because of a certain girl's piercing stare. The same girl Eri had tried to kill... Kaori. Though she hadn't said anything, Hajime knew what she was thinking. And seeing Hajime's hesitation, Kouki also spoke up.

"Nagumo, I'm begging you too. Eri's after me. I need to talk to her too... No, perhaps I'm the one who needs to talk to her the most. And I can't let Suzu go into Garland all on her own. Besides..." Kouki balled his hands into fists, knuckles white. He bit his lip and spat out the source of the negative emotions that had been whirling inside of him.

"I won't let it end like this. If Shizuku was able to obtain ancient magic, then I should be able to too. This time I'll show you I can be useful! As long as we don't have to deal with another set of cowardly traps that mess with your mind, I can do it too! That demon guy was able to conquer this labyrinth, wasn't he? Then there's no way I can't!"

"Kouki..." Shizuku shot him a worried glance. She had successfully received the magic Kouki had failed to obtain. That had been one of the biggest contributing factors to the complex maelstrom of negative emotions he was struggling with, and she knew it. She'd been worried about that ever since they'd returned from Haltina, but in the end, she hadn't known what to say to him. However, seeing her childhood friend's current frenzied state, Shizuku couldn't help but worry.

"Well, you're right about how we can't let Suzu go alone. And I won't be satisfied until I get to sock Eri good. Sorry Nagumo, but I'm gonna have to ask you to take me too!" Always one to look out for his friends, Ryutarou cheerfully asked Hajime to take him along as well.

Shizuku didn't know if he'd timed his entrance on purpose, or if that was just how he was, but she smiled gratefully at him. He'd been able to do what she

couldn't. And so, she turned to Hajime and bowed her head apologetically.

"Nagumo-kun... can you find it in yourself to take us one more time?"

Hajime swept his gaze over each of them. Suzu, who was staring determinedly at him despite the tears streaking down her cheeks, Kouki who looked like he was trying his best to keep his emotions in check, Ryutarou, who was trying to sound more cheerful than he felt, and Shizuku who was trying her best to support her friends. He then turned toward Kaori, who seemed genuinely worried for Suzu. Finally, he heaved a weary sigh and turned to Yue, Shea, and Tio. He gave them a questioning look, and the three of them simply shrugged their shoulders. At the very least, they didn't seem against the idea. And Kaori seemed to look forward to the prospect of traveling with Shizuku and Suzu again. That was why Hajime scratched the back of his head and spoke reluctantly.

"If you bring Nakamura back and she shows even the slightest hint of animosity, I'm killing her on the spot."

"Nagumo-kun! Thank you so much!" Suzu's face lit up, and Shizuku and Kaori breathed sighs of relief.

"I can't tell if I should be glad I've become more merciful, or mad at myself for going soft. It's hard to decide," Hajime muttered to himself.

After they conquered the Frost Caverns, Hajime didn't know how much time it would take to create a concept spell that would take him back home. Considering he was planning on also creating concept magic that would prevent him from ever being forcibly summoned again as well, probably a decently long time. Furthermore, now that he'd obtained evolution magic, he'd grown exponentially stronger. He doubted that Kouki could become an even greater burden than he had been, so he should be able to handle anything the Frost Caverns threw his way. *I guess if I'm trying to come up with excuses for bringing them along, I really have gone soft.*

Seeing Hajime's self-deprecating smile, Yue wrapped her fingers around his.

"It doesn't matter if you've gone soft or not, it doesn't change the fact that you've become stronger."

“Yue.”

“I’ll protect you, and you’ll protect me. As long as we have each other’s backs, we’re stronger than anyone. Isn’t that right?”

Hajime’s eyes went wide. Those were the same words he’d told Yue when they’d left the abyss. Shea and the others chimed in as well, reassuring Hajime.

“That means if we include me, we’re not just the strongest, we’re invincible! At least now that Hajime’s admitted he loves me too, I definitely feel invincible!”

The world’s strongest rabbitman was overflowing with confidence. Her words alone were enough to make people think she was invincible.

“I-I’ll protect you too! Don’t worry, I’ll disintegrate anything that comes close!” Kaori declared her intention to obliterate any problems that might arise. Out of everyone in Hajime’s party, her growth had been the most explosive. She might have even been the most reliable of their group at that point.

“Fear not, for my black scales are here to protect you and everyone else, Master. Fufu, for once I believe Shea isn’t exaggerating. Together, we might just be invincible.”

There wasn’t even a hint of the usual, perverted Tio as she reassured Hajime. Her words carried with them the weight of her unbreakable resolve and centuries of wisdom. A fitting closing line for the party’s guardian. Deep down, she was still a responsible, reliable older sister, so Hajime knew he could trust her to save them when they needed it.

The end of their journey was in sight. There would likely be a few more obstacles getting in their way, and they’d most likely be pitted against the unreasonable unfairness of the world. But after being encouraged by these girls, Hajime truly believed that they could overcome anything. They were invincible, after all. Just then, Hajime remembered something.

“Once we’ve conquered the last labyrinth, I’m going to need to go get Myu too.” He’d promised to take her with him once his journey was over. Besides, he wanted to show his beloved Myu the wonders of his world. The more he thought about it, the more he realized there were a lot of people he needed to

also at least meet before heading home. Cam and the Haulia for one, and probably Tio's family as well.

I wonder how my parents are doing back home? And I wonder what they'll say when I bring home four girlfriends?

"Oh man, our journey's almost over, but now I've got even more things I need to worry about." Hajime smiled. It wasn't his usual fearless smile, but a gentler, more peaceful one. However, he wasn't worried about losing his edge. Because Yue and the others had seen the changes in Hajime, and it made them happier. Their warm, caring gazes were all he needed to keep going. So long as they were by his side, his fangs would never dull.

He looked up at the sky, wondering what the future had in store for him. Though he didn't realize it, he was actually looking forward to it.

Epilogue

The Demon Empire, Garland.

A feral, bestial howl rang out across the parade ground outside the castle. But the creatures standing on the parade grounds were no beasts... No, they were people. There was, however, one strange thing about them.

As this was the demon empire, the people standing there should have been demons. However, these figures all had animal traits, whether they be a goat's horns or tail, or a tiger's fangs or claws, or a snake's narrow, slit-like pupils. And they dashed across the parade grounds much faster than any demon or human was capable of. With a single blow from their fists, armor crunched and swords shattered.

They were obviously beastmen. However, they were doing something no beastmen should have been able to do. Using magic. They had the reflexes and agility of a beastman, and the same ability to use magic that humans and demons possessed. But that wasn't all. While the beastmen were loosing murderous howls as they trained, every single one of them had dead, empty eyes. They lacked the spark that living creatures were supposed to possess, and they appeared to have no will of their own.

"Such pitiful creatures." Freid Bagwa made a disgusted face as he looked down on the beastmen from an adjacent building's terrace. His soft muttering was barely a whisper on the wind, but the person responsible for creating the twisted scene below him heard it clearly.

"Oh, what are you doing here, Freid? Come to see the fruits of my labor?"

Eri Nakamura said from behind him. She was the necromancer responsible for killing Meld and Kondou and decimating Heiligh's knights. Freid turned around to see her leaning against the terrace entrance, an arrogant smile playing about her lips. He hadn't even noticed her walking in.

"Eri, don't interfere with my senses again, or I'll have you tried for treason."

Not that he trusted a turncoat to begin with. Necromancer was a job that required a high level of proficiency in dark magic. In fact, necromancy was the most powerful dark magic spell. And since Eri could use that with ease, she of course had no trouble using other dark magic spells. She was the genius who'd created her own necromancy spell, Spirit Binding, so it was hardly surprising. The spell that allowed her to bind the souls of the deceased to her corpses and grant them a modicum of will was almost as powerful as ancient magic all on its own. Even Freid, general of the demon army and a master of ancient magic himself, hadn't been able to sense her arrival, meaning he'd been completely taken in by the dark magic Eri had used to interfere with his senses. However, Eri waved off his threat and replied to him calmly.

"Now now, don't be so stiff. I'm just a frail little girl." Her grin grew wider.

Freid turned back to the beastmen training below and muttered "Vixen," to himself.

"Do you like my soldiers... the undead beastmen warriors?"

"...I have no complaints regarding their strength."

"Don't look so displeased. They only got this strong because you lent me a hand, you know?"

Freid sighed at the cloying malice in Eri's voice. Still, he couldn't refute her words.

The undead beastmen warriors weren't actually beastmen. Freid had used transformation magic on the corpses of Heiligh's knights and added the traits of monsters to them. After that, Eri had used necromancy to bind their spirits to their bodies and reanimated them as her personal soldiers. They felt no pain, and they didn't fear death. They'd just continue mindlessly fighting until they were destroyed. Freid had been disgusted to learn that even after death their souls were being toyed with, and he pitied the poor creatures. But as much as he despised Eri, he couldn't deny that he'd helped her create these abominations. Eri sniffed dismissively at him and changed the subject.

"Oh yeah, where'd all those apostles go? They were all here last night, but I haven't seen a single one today."

The 500 apostles that had come to serve the demon empire were terrifying enough that they made even Eri's blood run cold. When she'd seen that army of god's personal executioners, Eri had been convinced that betraying the humans had been the correct choice. After all, there was no way anyone could stand against that horde. Humans would be wiped from existence, and that would be the end of it. She doubted even that monster, Hajime, stood a chance.

"They went to greet a guest. We have to gather all of the background actors first."

Eri tilted her head in confusion at Freid's words, but then a second later understanding dawned on her. And so, she grinned maniacally as she spoke.

"I see. Looks like the super fun party's about to begin. I can't wait until we get to see each other again..." Eri's crazed laughter rang out through the courtyard.

Capital of Heiligh.

Yuka was performing at the capital square, as had become customary for her recently. Her knives glinted in the sunlight as they soared through the air. The children gathered around her cheered as she caught them without dropping a one. She even grabbed the objects other people had thrown into the air during her juggling act. With the Divine Mountain at her back, she threw one last knife high up in the air, her standard finisher.

"Hm...? Wait, what's that?"

Yuka looked up to catch her knife and saw something sparkling coming down from the Divine Mountain.

Reisen Labyrinth Entrance

A single silver streak flew high above the gorge. Deep within the labyrinth, a small golem sighed as she watched the outside world using an artifact one of her dearest comrades had left behind.

"Looks like it's finally begun... Does this mean my long journey is at long last nearing its end?"

An image of the girl Miledi Reisen had once been overlaid over her golem. A blonde girl with sky blue eyes looked up at the sky. Her expression was serious, devoid of the normal teasing playfulness it usually had.

The Floating City of Erisen

A young woman walked out onto the pier. She held a basket in her hands and was smiling softly. Men's heads turned as she passed, but she ignored them and called out to her daughter, who was playing in the sea.

"Myuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu! It's time for luuuuuuuuuuuuunch!"

A tiny figure popped her head out of the water and started swimming toward Remia. She swam with such elegance that she seemed made for the water.

"Mama, what's for lunch?"

"I made your favorite... but I could only get fish, not meat. Sorry, Myu."

Myu leaped out of the water, and both mother and daughter sat down on the pier. Remia pulled a few fish skewers out of her basket. Skewers were Myu's favorite food. She didn't care what was on them, as long as it was staked onto a skewer.

The reason she was so fixated on skewers was because that was the food she'd been given when Shea and Hajime had first saved her. Remia watched her cute little daughter bite into a mouthful of fish and took a bite of her own skewer. As the pair was enjoying their lunch, they suddenly heard someone call out to them.

"Huh? What's that? Is that... a person flying through the sky?"

Remia and Myu both looked up. Indeed, flying directly underneath the sun was a beautiful figure with silver wings. And it was looking directly down at Remia and Myu with cold, emotionless eyes.

Extra Chapter: Verbergen's Monthly Magazine

After conquering Haltina's labyrinth, Hajime and the others decided to spend a few days recuperating in the beautiful city of Verbergen. As they were responsible for healing Verbergen's wounded and helping the Haulia free all the slaves within the empire, Verbergen's citizens spared no expense in giving Hajime's group the best reception possible. Thanks to that, the party's days in the beastmen capital were spent in the lap of luxury.

But of course, they couldn't stay there forever. Tomorrow they'd head for the seventh and final labyrinth, the Frost Caverns. The group gathered in a quiet clearing on the outskirts of the city to discuss the details of their departure. They all sat down on nearby stumps, and Hajime started off the meeting.

"Alrighty, so to get to the Frost Caverns we're going to have to go through the Schnee Snow Fields, but that shouldn't be much of a problem since we have Fernir."

"Normally, we'd have to journey through the frozen wastes for months to get there. Really, thank you so much for agreeing to take us with you, Nagumokun."

"Just so you know, Taniguchi. Taking a shortcut means we might end up skipping some important experiences we're supposed to go through to clear the labyrinth. You shouldn't be too happy that you get to breeze through everything."

"Ugh. I'll take that to heart... I promise not to let my guard down in the labyrinth..."

Seeing as she'd failed to clear the previous labyrinth, she couldn't really argue back when Hajime told her she was letting herself get carried away. Especially since she'd forced her way into his party again.

Hajime's piercing gaze passed over Kouki and Ryutarou as well. Both of them grimaced and nodded. Yue, Kaori, and Tio all gave him knowing looks.

“What?” Noticing their gazes, he turned back to them.

“Mmm... It’s nothing.”

“Yep, don’t worry about it.”

“Pay us no mind.”

The three of them shook their heads, but they continued giving him the same knowing look. Hajime looked away uncomfortably, and Shizuku’s gaze flitted between him and Yue. She’d more or less guessed what was going on, though Hajime still seemed in the dark.

Is it just me, or has Nagumo-kun changed a little? He feels less aggressive than before. Like he’s settled down and matured a little, almost. Normally, Hajime’s response to Suzu would have been far harsher, but now he’d shed a lot of his needless antagonism. His heart had begun to soften now that he’d finally found a concrete way back. He was starting to become more human. As Shizuku was musing about the changes he was undergoing, the party’s final member arrived.

“Sorry I’m late, guys. My dumb family was trying to give everyone in Verbergen edgy nicknames, so I had to beat them all up.”

“You did good, Shea.” Hajime smiled and gave Shea a thumbs-up. She returned his smile and his thumbs-up.

Hajime casually scooted to the side, and Shea sat down next to him as if it were the most natural thing in the world. On his right was Yue, and on his left, Shea. Originally. Kaori had been sitting on Hajime’s left, but she hadn’t been able to get a word in edgewise as Hajime had moved away from her and Shea filled the gap.

“Mrrr,” Kaori growled to herself. Noticing her discontent, Shea turned to Kaori and silently asked “Wanna swap?” with her gaze. However, Kaori just smiled and hugged and Shea. Shea smiled back and leaned against the party’s priest.

Shea’s changed quite a bit as well. It’s like she’s gotten more generous, kind of. Or maybe calmer. Either way, the reason is obviously Nagumo-kun. Shizuku’s astute observations said much about her perceptive abilities.

Having her love finally reciprocated had done wonders for Shea's self-confidence. It was as though she'd grown from a girl into a woman in one fell swoop. Her charm had an aura of maturity to it, too.

"Oh yeah, I got this on the way here."

Shea laid out something that looked a lot like a magazine on the table in front of her. She then pulled out a few more of the same volume and stacked them together. "Verbergen Monthly — Volume 1 Re-edited" was written on the front cover in bold letters.

"Hm? Is this what those winged guys were handing out earlier?"

"That's right. The harpies are the ones in charge of spreading the news to everyone in Verbergen. They stopped publishing news when the demons and the empire attacked, but normally they release these once a month. Someone probably came to interview you guys over the past few days, right?"

"Oh yeah, they did. Some girl called Mao asked me a bunch of questions. I think she was the harpy chief or something?"

"Oh yes, she asked me some questions too."

"That was the first time in my life anyone ever interviewed me. It was quite the interesting experience."

While Verbergen had grown more lively with the return of the beastmen's freed comrades, it had still suffered heavy losses. Plenty of soldiers had died during the consecutive battles, and plenty of slaves had died in the empire without ever getting a chance to return home. And it was precisely because so many had come back that those who didn't left even bigger holes in the hearts of their grieving families. It was for that reason that the harpies had decided to resume publication of their monthly magazine. They hoped that lighthearted news articles and funny editorial columns would be able to ease the pain of Verbergen's citizens, even if only by a little.

In commemoration of their grand re-opening, Mao had wanted to interview Hajime and the others to give the first volume some punch. And so, she had gone to each member of the party and asked to interview them. Smiling, Kouki picked up one of the volumes.

“Man, that was nostalgic. Reminded me of the times I got interviewed back in Japan.”

As a good-looking kendo champion, Kouki had often appeared in kendo magazines and the like. He’d also debuted in a few fashion magazines and any other magazine that needed hot guys for its covers. Hajime and Ryutarou didn’t particularly mind his popularity, but if any of the other guys from their class had been present they probably would have clicked their tongues in irritation. Kouki absently flipped through the pages until he spotted a certain headline.

—The Hero Is Actually Gay!? And He’s After Nagumo, No Less!—

“What the hell is this!?”

Kouki threw the magazine to the floor. Everyone else picked up a magazine and flipped to the same article. This was part of what was written within:

—The hero, Kouki Amanogawa, played a major role in helping the Haulia free the slaves the empire had captured. He snuck into the city and created a diversion by acting out a role given to him by Hajime Nagumo. His efforts should certainly be lauded, as it is thanks to him that so many of our brethren were able to return safe and sound. According to this humble reporter’s investigations, a good third of the unmarried girls he freed have attempted to flirt with him in one way or another. Unfortunately, none of their feelings have been answered, but this intrepid reporter discovered that there’s a jaw-dropping reason behind that.

According to my interview with a certain girl, upon her confession, Kouki told her, “I’m sorry, but right now there’s something else on my mind. Until I make Nagumo...” As he said that, Nagumo happened to be passing by, and Kouki was distracted by the sight of his broad back. I’m sure you perceptive readers can already tell what Kouki’s next words would have been. “Until I make Nagumo mine!” of course. The reason Kouki has rejected every woman’s advance until now is because he harbors a deep, burning love for Nagumo. Kouki had gazed so passionately at Nagumo’s back for that very reason, as well. This may be rather presumptuous of me, but I will continue to support Kouki’s love from the shadows—

Yue rose to her feet and glared daggers at Kouki.

“Prepare to die,” she muttered as she readied her Divine Purgatory.

Shea, too, rose to her feet in a hurry.

“Don’t worry! I’ll protect your ass, Hajime-san!” Shea said as she pulled Drucken out and held it aloft.

“Wait! Please wait! It’s all lies! That article is nothing but lies! Surely you two can tell, right Yue-san, Shea-san!? That’s obviously slander made up by the biased views of the reporter!” Kouki desperately tried to clear his name.

“A-Amanogawa, you...”

“Stooooooooop! Don’t give me that look, Nagumo!”

“B-But Kouki-kun. You really do give Hajime-kun these intense stares sometimes...”

“You too, Kaori!? I’m begging you, stop taking things the wrong way! I only look at him like that because I’m trying to show him my resolve! I won’t stop until Nagumo’s *admitted I’m stronger than him* that’s all!”

“Wait, you wanna be on top?”

“Ryutarou, now is *not* the time to be joking around. If you don’t cut it out, I’m gonna send you into next Tuesday.”

It took some time to calm down Yue and Shea, who were glaring at Kouki like a pair of yakuza debt collectors. Shizuku, who’d done most of the calming, slumped in her chair, exhausted.

“Thank you so much, Shizuku,” Kouki bowed his head and said. That was just how scared he’d been of Yue and Shea.

“I’m not sure I want to know what comes next, but should we keep reading, guys?” Hajime looked dubiously down at the magazine in his hands. Shizuku gave him a tired nod.

“I don’t really want to know either, but it’s scarier not knowing what Mao wrote about us.”

“Y-You’re right. I finally made friends with some of the beastmen children. I need to know if there’s something in there that’ll make them hate me...”

And so, the party decided to keep going. They flipped back to the beginning and started reading through more carefully.

—Special Feature! Princess Shea Of The Haulia Clan’s Heart-Throbbing Romance!—

“Princess!? I’m a princess!?” Shea’s bunny ears shot straight up. Hajime grinned ruefully and spoke up.

“The article’s not wrong, technically. The Haulia are an officially allied nation of Verbergen and have the equivalent of a seat on the council. Plus, you guys are heroes. And since you’re the daughter of those heroes’ chief, that basically makes you something like a princess, right?”

“Mmm... Lower your heads, commoners. You stand in the presence of the great Shea-sama!”

“Please stop, Yue-san! You’re going to embarrass me to death!” Shea definitely didn’t have the personality of a princess. Blushing, she hid her face in her hands and looked away.

Hajime and the others snickered as they watched her reaction. Past that point, the article continued with:

—Shea-sama is the daughter of the Haulia’s chief, Cam Haulia. Despite her position, she’s lived a life of hardship and strife. She lost her mother at a young age and later had to flee her home along with her clan in order to survive. But once they left the forest, Shea-sama and her family were chased by the empire all the way to the Reisen Gorge. After numerous scrapes with death, Shea-sama and her family returned to Verbergen, only to be exiled!—

“And you’re one of the elders who voted to exile us out of Verbergen...” Shea glared at the magazine’s pages. Her evil eye was almost as intense as Yue’s. However, right now, Mao was writing from the objective standpoint of Verbergen Monthly’s editor.

—But though the odds were stacked against her, Shea-sama never gave up! After many trials and tribulations, she finally met the love of her life, Nagumo!”

Shea stopped glaring and started blushing.

“I-It’s kind of embarrassing when she puts it like that.”

“Yeah, this kind of stuff really makes you blush.”

Hajime and Shea discovered just how awkward it was to have their story written down by someone else. Yue smiled at the flushed pair, while Kouki turned away awkwardly and Ryutarou clicked his tongue in irritation.

—I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity to interview Princess Shea directly.

Interviewer: When you met Mr. Nagumo for the first time, what was it like? Did you know from the start he was the one for you?

Princess Shea: Actually, I knew he was my fated partner even before I met him! I wasn’t surprised to see him, since it was our destiny to meet. But the first time our eyes met, I felt this huge shock, and then my head went blank, and it felt like I was flying!—

“...Were you referring to the time Hajime electrocuted you with Lightning Field, elbowed you in the face, then threw you at the flock of wyverns?”

“Yue-san, I have to keep up appearances somehow.”

Kouki turned to Hajime in disbelief. Hajime just looked away, pointedly ignoring everyone.

—Interviewer: So does that mean you loved Mr. Nagumo from the moment you met him?

Princess Shea: Nope, not one bit. My whole family was about to be executed, so I was more worried about keeping them alive than what kind of person Hajime-san was.

How cruel fate can be! Right after escaping one crisis, Princess Shea ran headlong into another! Truly the gods have it out for this girl!—

“The reason everyone was about to get executed was because you, Miss Reporter, voted for it. It wasn’t the gods who had it out for me, but you guys!”

“I can’t tell if she’s a dedicated author, or just impudent.”

—Interviewer: In that case, when was it that you first noticed you loved him?

Princess Shea: I think it was when Hajime-san faced the council of elders and said, “Shea’s the love of my life! I won’t forgive you if you try and take her away from me!” Man, that sent shivers down my spine...—

“Hey! I never said anything like that!”

Everyone’s gazes turned to Shea. Cold sweat ran down her forehead, and her bunny ears waved back and forth.

“Sorry... I got a little carried away.”

Shea was still a girl, after all. She wanted to make the story of her first love sound special. Everyone’s expressions turned kind, and Yue followed up with, “He did say ‘I won’t let you take these guys away from me,’ though.”

“I-I’m surprised you still remember that, Yue.”

Yue remembered what he’d said back then almost word for word. This time, everyone’s gazes turned to Hajime.

“O-Oh god... why didn’t I pick a better way to phrase that?” Hajime muttered while covering his reddening face.

—Well, you can see how they formed such a deep bond after that. And so, this is how our Princess Shea splendidly defeated Yue and became Nagumo’s sole girlfriend. It appears Yue has given the couple her blessings as well. I admire her for admitting her defeat in such a gentle manner. I suppose even she realized that there was no way she could win against Princess Shea’s charms. At any rate, my thanks to Princess Shea for regaling us with such a moving tale.—

Yue’s head swiveled toward Shea.

“Shea, what’s the meaning of this?”

“I-I-I-I don’t know! I never said anything like that!”

“...Okay. In that case, I’m going to go kill Mao real quick.”

“Yue, calm down!”

Kaori grabbed Yue’s arms and pinned them behind her back.

“I’ll kill that bitch,” Yue muttered while struggling to break free from Kaori’s

grip.

I guess she bent the truth a little to make the story more relatable for other beastmen... Hajime thought absently to himself.

“Th-This Mao woman seems to have no regard for her life,” said Tio. Everyone nodded in agreement.

—Next, I asked princess Shea if she was worried about the other girls traveling with Nagumo. She didn’t seem to understand the intent behind my question, so I rephrased it. I asked her what she thought of her fellow female companions. Recorded below is her answer, word for word.—

“What!? Word for word!? She said she was going to edit out the embarrassing bits!” Shea exclaimed.

The other girls’ eyes glinted with a dangerous light, and they gazed at their magazines with newfound intensity.

—I love all of them. I love them so much sometimes I think the reason I was born was so that I could meet them.—

“Ugh,” Shea groaned and flopped onto the table in front of her. Her face was beet-red, and she was covering her bunny ears with both hands.

—Yue-san feels like my big sister. She’s the one who taught me how to fight and was my very first friend. I became who I am thanks to her. I won’t forgive anyone who tries to hurt her, even if that someone is Hajime-san.—

A faint blush spread across Yue’s cheeks, and she looked warmly at Shea.

—As for Kaori-san... Actually, when I first met her I thought she was really annoying!—

Kaori jumped up in shock at those words.

“Wait, Shea didn’t like me!?” she yelled.

—I mean, she kept comparing herself to us all the time, and it was a real pain. She should have just, you know, done things with more of a bang. Or like a whoosh.—

Kouki turned to Ryutarou and muttered,

“You know, Shea-san’s thought processes are a lot like yours.”

“Hey, Kouki, what the hell’s that supposed to mean, huh?”

Eyes glued to the page, Kaori ignored both of them.

—But, well, Yue-san really likes her! She’s always teasing Kaori-san every chance she gets! She’s like one of those older schoolkids who’s always bullying someone younger than her because she can’t admit she likes her! Curse you, Kaori-san, stealing my Yue-san for yourself. You already have Shizuku-san, so go flirt with her Instead!—

Kaori glanced over at Yue. Yue turned up her nose and looked away, but Kaori could tell that she was blushing. That caused Kaori to blush as well, and she looked down awkwardly.

“Wait, am I being totally ignored here? Not that I mind, but...” Shizuku muttered to herself.

This must be the loneliness Shea feels.

—Still, you know, she’s probably the person I respect the most now.—

Everyone turned to Shea in surprise. She was still covering her ears and didn’t react.

—When she’d died and been reduced to just a soul, the first thing she asked for was the strength to keep fighting together with us. She even sacrificed her body to get stronger. That was when I realized she’d actually been a really strong girl all along. Unlike me, she’d been jealous of Yue-san, and unlike me, she’d always been worried about how she was weaker than everyone. But she was able to overcome all of those feelings and become the person she is today. I think she’s definitely a way stronger person than I am.—

Kaori’s eyes went wide, and her hands started to tremble as she continued reading.

—So right now, I love her too. And she’s someone I aspire to be like. I won’t let anything ever get Kaori-san down again. I’ll protect her.—

Kaori hugged Shea tight. Shea looked up in surprise, but Kaori didn’t let go.

“You know, this is starting to make me a little jealous.”

“Mmm... Same.”

Yue nodded to Shizuku, and both girls shared a rueful smile.

“Oh, it seems Shea said something about me as well.”

Tio flipped the page, excited.

—Tio-san? Oh, she’s a huge pervert!—

“Why!? Why must you do this to me, Sheaaaaaaaaaaaaa!? All I wished for was some kind words!”

Even though you’re a masochist? Everyone thought simultaneously as they glared at Tio. Tio dropped to all fours and started banging her fist against the ground.

“Umm, Tio-san. There’s more!”

“Truly? Is there hope for me yet?” Tio returned to her seat and picked up the magazine.

—Seriously, who awakens to their fetishes by having a giant stake driven through their ass!? That’s not normal!—

“I was a fool to hope! Shea hates me!” Tio once again fell to the ground and started slamming her fist against it. Suzu, who’d taken a liking to Tio after the battle with the cockroaches, consoled her until she was ready to read on.

—But well, I think Tio-san might be the one who understands us best. Whenever something happens, she’s there with the right advice to give. It’s like she’s always watching over us.—

Tio made an odd noise, and her ears went red.

—She’s actually a really nice person who’s always doing her best to help us. And even though she’s a pervert, she’s actually the most composed out of all of us. I think Hajime-san knows that too, which is why he always relies on her when things start looking bad.—

Eyes sparkling, Tio turned to Hajime.

“Don’t stare at me at like that,” he said, and awkwardly looked away.

—You always feel safe when she’s by your side. Also, please keep this off the

record, but she reminds me a lot of my mom. So, well, I love her too. Ehehe. Oh, but my mom wasn't a huge pervert like she is!—

If only she wasn't a pervert, Tio would be perfect. Disappointed, Yue gave her a scathing glare.

“Seriously... Give me back my respect and admiration.”

“P-Please forgive me...” Tio covered her face and looked away. Not because she was hurt by Yue's words, though. She was just embarrassed, and more than a little happy, at how much Shea praised her.

—By the way, it's Hajime-san's fault that Tio-san became a pervert, so I'm expecting him to take responsibility for that. If he ever throws Tio-san away because she's a pervert, I'm going to send him flying with Drucken.—

Hajime groaned. He looked as though he'd just swallowed a bug.

“Master, you will take responsibility, will you not?” Grinning, Tio turned to him, as did the rest of the party.

After a moment's hesitation, Hajime sighed in resignation and looked Tio in the eyes.

“At the very least, I'd never leave you because you're a pervert. And it's true that I rely on you more than anyone. Ever since you joined the party I've felt a lot safer.”

“O-Oh, I see. As long as you understand...” Tio looked down, struggling to process the waterfall of emotions that had just crashed down on her. Her bashful expression looked nothing like when Hajime was stepping on her, and for once she looked like the peerless beauty she was.

Kouki and Ryutarou gulped, spellbound. Meanwhile, Suzu and Shizuku smiled proudly at her.

Hajime awkwardly cleared his throat to lighten the mood.

“Ahem. Apparently, Shea said some stuff about Amanogawa and the others too. Let's keep reading, guys.”

“What? We're in here too?”

Kouki and Ryutarou back down at their magazines, interested to find out what Shea thought of them.

—Huh? The hero? Hmm. I don't really know him that well. I haven't talked to him or his friend that much. They're just not that interesting to me.—

"I figured as much," Kouki muttered, his eyes glazing over.

"I'm just 'the friend?' Shea-san, please don't tell me you don't remember my name?" Ryutarou muttered, his eyes looking at nothing.

—As for Suzu-san... Whenever she sees me and Yue-san, or Kaori-san and Shizuku-san, she gets this sad look in her eyes.—

Suzu gasped, and Kaori and Shizuku shot her worried looks.

—I mean, I know why she gets that look. That's why I was happy when she asked Hajime-san to take her with us again. Because it means she hasn't given up yet. She still wants to keep on trying. I really like people like her.—

Suzu fidgeted bashfully, while Kouki and Ryutarou slumped onto the table. The difference between Suzu's treatment and theirs had been the final blow.

"And Shizuku-san... Well, it's just a matter of time for her!"

"What!? What's that supposed to mean!?" Shizuku shouted.

Meanwhile, Yue, Kaori, and Tio nodded in agreement.

"Seriously, what's that supposed to mean!?"

No one answered her.

—Shizuku-san looks like she always has it together, but honestly, I feel like she's a bit of a handful. Even though it seems like she's always looking after Kaori-san, it's actually Kaori-san who's looking after her. Whenever I see the two of them together, it doesn't feel like Shizuku-san's babysitting her, but more like she's clinging to her.—

Shizuku looked up, stunned. Her gaze wandered about aimlessly as she tried to process that.

"Well, everyone else already knew you're obsessed with Kaori, Yaegashi," Hajime chuckled. Yue and the others nodded in agreement.

“Ehehe, Don’t worry Shizuku-chan, I love you too,” Kaori said with a smile. In response, Shizuku wrapped her ponytail around her face, pulled her knees up, and buried it between them. *Is that the Yaegashi-style embarrassment guarding stance?* Hajime thought idly. Grinning, Suzu gleefully read the next passage aloud.

—How do I put this... She’s a really cute girl. If we’re all carnivores, then I’d say Shizuku’s the only herbivore.—

Hajime and the others repeated the word “herbivore” to themselves, then nodded in understanding, making Shizuku twitch from behind her ponytail. The party then returned their attention to the magazine. It appeared the special feature on Shea was almost over.

—And that wraps up Princess Shea’s thoughts on her comrades. As expected of Nagumo’s one and only lover, she’s both magnanimous and perceptive. Truly, she stands a level above the other girls. I’m certain our beloved Princess Shea and Nagumo’s love will last forever.—

“She’s really pushing Shea...”

“That won’t save her from my wrath...”

“Yep, I think we need to have a little talk with Mao.”

Reporter Mao’s future was starting to look bleak.

—Before ending the interview, I asked Princess Shea one final question. “What is the most important thing to you?”

Princess Shea: ...The future. I think the most important thing to me is the future. There’s a valuable lesson that I, Shea Haulia the Diviner, learned, and it’s something I want to pass on to all of you. Prophecies aren’t something that come true, they’re something you make come true. As long as you keep working toward the future you desire, you’ll be able to reach it one day. I guarantee it.

There you have it, folks. Princess Shea is the person she is today because she kept working toward the wonderful future she envisioned for herself. As a reporter, I am honored to have interviewed someone as great as Princess Shea. Thank you so much. And that’s all for the Princess Shea special feature.—

For a while, no one said anything. They all just looked kindly down at Shea.

“Ugh... It’s embarrassing how cool I tried to sound at the end there. I got way too into that interview and got totally carried away.”

Shea mentally berated herself for trying to act cool and give the readers life advice at the end.

“Please say something, guys,” Shea muttered, as the silence started to stretch. However, Hajime and the others remained quiet, their gentle gazes feeling like piercing glares to Shea.

“Grrr! It’s not fair if I’m the only one who gets a public execution! Let’s take a look at your guys’ interviews too! I bet they’re just all as embarrassing as the Hero’s!”

“That reminds me, this has been published all across the city, hasn’t it? Hahaha, looks like everyone in Verbergen thinks I’m gay. Hahaha...”

Kouki laughed mirthlessly, his spirit broken. Shea flipped through the magazine while Ryutarou tried to smack his friend back to his senses.

—An Exciting Interview With Cam Haulia, Champion Of All Beastmen!

Cam: My name is Cambanties, dark hunter of the forbidden depths. And I have only one thing to say. Our mighty Boss, Hajime Nagumo, the crimson sovereign of the white night, divine destroyer of—

A single gunshot interrupted the group’s reading. They all jumped and looked up at Hajime.

“Don’t move. Don’t read another word. Move anything, especially your eyes, and I kill you.”

He sounded like a terrorist as he gathered everyone’s magazines, ripped out the offending pages, threw them onto the ground, and incinerated them in 3000-degree flames.

“Now then, let’s keep reading while I kill Cam. What’s wrong, guys? Turn the page while I go find Mao and kill her too.”

It appeared Hajime had some embarrassing moments recorded in this magazine as well. Sadly, he knew it was too late, and that his “legendary” feats

and new nickname had already spread throughout Verbergen. However, Hajime's public execution had caused Shea collateral damage as well, and she flopped onto the table again. She likely wouldn't rise again. Everyone aside from Shea silently turned the page and read.

—The Relationship Between The Chosen--

This article's headline was simple. "Chosen" was the term used by beastmen to refer to people who'd conquered at least one labyrinth, meaning this article was likely about the party as a whole. The fact that this wasn't a special feature showed the difference in treatment Shea received compared to the rest of the party.

—We asked the Chosen, Nagumo, Yue, Kaori-sama, Tio, and Shizuku about their relationship. It's clear from a glance that all of these girls have feelings for Nagumo. But what are their thoughts regarding each other, their rivals?—

Unlike Shea, Hajime and the other girls didn't panic. They were confident that they'd picked their words carefully enough during the interview to not embarrass themselves. However, Kaori did exclaim "How come I'm the only one with a -sama after my name!?" while Shizuku undid her ponytail and shouted, "Hey, doesn't that make it sound like I'm in love with Nagumo-kun, too!?"

Kouki turned to her and spoke in a strained voice.

"They just lumped all the Chosen together. What're you getting so worked up over, Shizuku?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Good point." Shizuku straightened her back while avoiding Kouki's gaze. Kaori found her friend's reaction odd, but she swallowed her words and turned back to the article.

—As we're running out of pages, I'll just summarize how the interviews with them went.—

"What?" Yue and the other girls exclaimed.

—There's not enough space to go into detail about Yue's feelings for Princess Shea. Needless to say, the two care very much for each other. In fact, during the interview, Yue gushed for so long about Shea that I nearly threw up. I must confess, readers, I'm a failure of a writer. I mentioned Yue in the article's

headline, yet I'm not even including her interview. I wish I could hang myself. Unfortunately, I'm a harpy, so it wouldn't even hurt.—

It was hard to tell if Mao was actually regretting her actions or not.

—Moving on, Kaori-sama and Yue's relationship is quite an odd one. When I asked the girls about each other, they gave me a neverending litany of insults. It made the interview drag on longer than it needed to, honestly.—

Yue and Kaori glared at each other, their spirit stands fizzling into existence. Before they could start fighting though, the next few sentences distracted them.

—Despite the harsh insults, both girls' faces lit up when they talked about each other. It's obvious they don't dislike each other. This is just my impression as a reporter, but I believe that Yue enjoys the time she spends with Kaori-sama, while Kaori-sama treasures the relationship she has with Yue. At the very least, when she was talking about Kaori-sama, Yue's expression had the same warmth as when she was talking about Shea. Similarly, Kaori-sama's smile was as gentle as when she talked about Shizuku. While their feelings toward each other may not be the same as their feelings toward Shea or Shizuku, they are at least just as strong.—

“Don't misunderstand... It's not like I like you or anything, Kaori.”

“You're the one misunderstanding here, Yue. It's not like I like you or anything, either.”

The two tsunderes were in perfect sync. Though they both harrumphed and turned away from each other, their cheeks were red.

—Furthermore, I've heard quite a few stories about Kaori-sama from ardent believers of Kaorism. According to one adherent, after watching Yue prank Kaori-sama, he approached Kaori-sama and asked, “Should we sneak into her room at night and get back at her for you?” Supposedly, Kaori-sama flew into a rage upon hearing that and said, “Yue's one of my best friends! If you harm even a hair on her head, I'll disintegrate the lot of you!”—

Kaori slumped onto the table.

“W-We're not really friends or anything. Just rivals,” she muttered.

Yue glanced over at Kaori, her blush growing deeper.

—What was perhaps more surprising though, was when Yue told me that she holds a great amount of respect for Tio, of all people.—

“F-For me?” Tio exclaimed, her eyes wide. It was especially surprising considering Yue had just told off Tio minutes before. Panicking, Yue tried to explain herself, but before she could Hajime read the next few lines aloud.

“When she was talking about Tio, Yue’s expression appeared quite exasperated, but this perceptive reporter spotted hints of respect and admiration as well. Moreover, Yue’s own words confirmed her feelings. Though I doubt she hadn’t intended to let it slip, near the end of our interview Yue muttered “The fact that she never changes is... reassuring.” Unbelievable as it may sound, Yue holds just as much respect for Tio as Princess Shea.—

“D-Don’t misunderstand. It’s not like I respect you or anything, Tio.”

“Fufu, is that so? I see... So you do not respect me at all. But even if you do not, you still find my presence reassuring. Fear not, I will always be by your side.” Tio’s tone was teasing, but there was a hint of happiness in it as well. Fourth to fall, Yue also slumped onto the table, together with Shea and Kaori.

“I don’t see that side of you often, Yue,” Hajime said as he grinned and turned the page.

—Shizuku’s comments were far too serious and boring, so I’ve omitted them from the article.—

“Sorry, I’m too serious and boring to be reported on.”

Shizuku once again wrapped her ponytail around her face. It appeared this was a touchy subject for her.

—Tio was, as everyone else describes her, a huge pervert, But also a reliable, knowledgeable dragonman. Below is one of the exchanges that left the greatest impression on me.

Tio: Hm? If I were to describe Yue and the others in a single word, what would it be? Fufu, were you expecting a cliched response such as ‘my rivals,’ perhaps? My apologies for disappointing you. If I were to pick a single word... it would be

miracles. Every one of my comrades is a miracle. That we were all able to meet each other is a miracle as well. We have a normal boy who crawled his way out of the abyss. A 300-year-old vampire who escaped from an eternal seal. The only rabbitman in generations to be born with mana. A strong-willed priest who made the body of an apostle her own. Who could possibly have imagined such absurd people could exist? Surely not even god predicted this. Everyone's existence, and our chance meetings, are all miracles. Right now, my life is filled with miracles. And nothing could make me happier.—

Tio slumped onto the table.

"I certainly did say that. But in my defense, I let myself get carried away in the heat of the moment," Tio croaked.

Even she was embarrassed at how those words sounded when read aloud by someone else. With this, Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Tio were all slumped on the table, while Shizuku was hiding behind her ponytail. The only party members still standing were Hajime, Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu. And Kouki had been nearly destroyed by the article calling him gay, so in reality, only three people had any HP left.

"What a terrifying magazine. It's managed to kill off my entire party."

"It looks like... there's not much to your section, just like with Shizushizu."

"But unlike Shizuku, Mao asked you some pretty interesting questions, didn't she, Nagumo? And look, it's not like your questions got skipped over."

"Hey, Nagumo... is it just me... or are you used to giving interviews? These answers all sound like a pro's."

"My mom's a really famous shoujo manga author, so she often gets called for interviews and stuff. On top of that, she likes messing with people, so she always gives crazy replies to all the questions. And I'm the one she always ropes into helping her rehearse her answers."

You never know what kind of skills will come in handy.

Suzu turned to the last page of the Chosen article.

"Oh, it looks like she ended the article with Yue-san's interview."

Yue twitched. She desperately thought back to her interview, trying to remember if she'd said anything embarrassing or not. *She's really cute when she's like that*, Hajime thought as he read through the interview.

—Seeing as Princess Shea has officially become one of Nagumo's girlfriends, I asked Yue what she thought about all the girls vying for his affection. Even I, a humble reporter, could tell that her bond with Nagumo has grown since her last visit to Verbergen. And as a fellow beastman, I wanted to make sure she won't be harassing Princess Shea now that she has to share Nagumo's affection.—

"So she knew Yue hadn't backed off, but she wrote all that crap anyway. She really doesn't value her life, huh?"

As Mao was treating Yue like she was the head wife in this article it was clear she had a solid understanding of their relationship. The fact that she pushed Shea anyway for the sake of encouraging fellow beastmen meant she valued her magazine more than her life.

—As an apology to Yue, and as a nice way to round off this article, I have, in the end, decided to include her interview as is.—

"Ah, she totally backpedaled on her earlier decision."

"I can see why. Yue-san's scary when she's mad."

Suzu and Ryutarou could practically hear "Sorry for saying all that stuff, please forgive me," dripping from the words on the page. As most of the party had been downed, Suzu decided to read aloud the words of Hajime's beloved Yue.

—Everything I hold dear was given to me by Hajime. If he hadn't freed me that day, I would likely still be trapped in the dark depths of the abyss.—

Everyone listened silently, hanging on to Suzu's every word.

—He gave me a reason to live. Thanks to him, I met my best friend, a member of the race I admire so much, and a friend I can be myself around. I'm sure that from here on out, I'll keep receiving things from Hajime, which is why I want Hajime to find things important to him as well. Whether they be people, objects, or something else entirely. Once this journey is over, I want to see Hajime smiling in the sunlight, surrounded by tons of people he treasures.—

It was for that reason that Yue had first accepted Shea. She wanted the boy she'd met in the abyss to one day be able to smile in the light.

Absolute silence filled the clearing. Even the insects had stopped chirping. Finally, the silence was broken by the sound of Hajime flopping onto the table. He was red to the tips of his ears. Hearing the vampire princess' heartfelt confession had been too embarrassing to bear. This was the first time anyone saw the monster of the abyss trembling in embarrassment.

"In the end, looks like Nagumo's entire party got KO'd."

"God, that was so sweet it gave me diabetes. I need coffee or something to clear my mouth out. Come on, Kouki, let's get outta here."

"O-Okay... Yeah, that seems like a good idea. Oh, but let's go somewhere quiet, Ryutarou. I don't want anyone in Verbergen to see me with another man."

"Ah, wait! I'll go with you guys! It's too awkward to stay here!"

Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu left the clearing in a hurry. Hajime and the others laid on the table like that for a long time after they left. Hearing their comrades true feelings had left everyone embarrassed beyond belief.

The sun's dappled rays warmed the group's backs as they laid there in a harmonious circle.

The scene was both a miracle and a sign of a bright future to come.

The first issue of the revived Verbergen Monthly turned out to be such a huge hit that Mao had to do multiple prints. Shea's story, in particular, was an inspiration to beastmen everywhere and was eventually republished in Verbergen as a fairy tale. Centuries later, Shea's cinderella-esque love story became a legend.

Afterword

Hey everyone, it's your favorite chuuni lover, Ryo Shirakome. Thank you so much for picking up volume 8 of Arifureta. How'd you like it? I hope you had fun reading it... because it was a tough one to write! Of course, I still had tons of fun writing it, too. Still, writing about love is like walking across the field map while poisoned. You just keep on taking damage as you write one embarrassing scene after another. And this volume had much more romance in it than any other...

Anyway, putting my embarrassment aside, this is the first volume that's had any major changes from the web version. The biggest one being Shea's relationship. But considering the past seven volumes, it just felt too cruel for her wish not to be granted. Though I'm curious what you readers think of it.

Are you happy it finally happened or were you hoping Hajime would stick to just Yue all the way to the end? To be honest, I'm kind of scared to find out.

Speaking of changes, Hajime went through quite the transformation this volume. All the meetings he's had up until now have been slowly influencing him, but finding a way back home was the final catalyst for his massive shift in personality. I'm both extremely curious and extremely terrified to know what you all think of these changes within him as well. But I suppose all changes are like that. They bring with them a mixture of fear and excitement.

Either way, we're finally nearing the home stretch of Arifureta's story. I hope you'll be willing to follow me to the journey's end, changes and all.

It looks like I've got some extra pages left, so let's shamelessly advertise my other works. This volume released at the same time as the third volume of the manga, and the first volume of the spin-off manga. As always, RoGa-sensei's art is absolutely jaw-dropping. And Misaki Mori-sensei's art for the spin-off is quite a treat as well. For a comedy manga, it's perfect. I highly recommend checking them both out.

And now, time for the acknowledgments. Thanks as always to Takayaki-sensei, RoGa-sensei, Misaki Mori-sensei, and Ataru Kamichi-sensei, the

illustrator for the Arifureta Zero manga, for all of their godlike drawings. You bring my works to life. Much thanks to the editors, proofreaders, and publication staff, who are the only reason this book is in your hands right now. Really, thank you all so much.

And lastly, thank you, dear reader, for picking up this book! And thank you to all my fans on Narou. Each and every one of you has my eternal gratitude. May we meet again in the next installment of Arifureta.

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

Arifureta Fairy Tales—Snow White

Once upon a time, there lived an extremely beautiful queen. She had come from the land of dragons to marry King Lundel and was nearly 500 years older than him. The young king had been overjoyed to have such a beautiful older wife, so much so that he'd wept in happiness during the wedding.

Or at least, that was how it had seemed to spectators. In truth, the queen terrified Lundel. When they'd first met, she'd revealed to him all of her fetishes, then gifted him a whip and bondage set as her dowry. Of course, Lundel had been expecting something of that sort when he'd received a letter from the king of dragonmen that had said: "She's too much for us to handle, please just take her."

When she'd arrived in the human kingdom, Lundel and his retainers had seen firsthand just how impossible she was to handle. And so, Lundel had given her a gift of his own. A magic mirror. The main reason he'd chosen that mirror was because he was trying to subtly tell her she needed to take a good hard look at herself and reevaluate her life. However, the queen missed the hint and was delighted to receive the gift. She'd been feeling alienated from the other people in the castle, and she saw this gift as a sign that they were growing closer.

The mirror was said to tell any who used it the absolute truth. The queen was royalty, yes, but she was also a woman. In fact, being royalty only made her more aware of that fact. Thanks to her stunning looks, she was known to the citizens as the most beautiful woman in the land. However, she couldn't help but worry there were other, prettier women out there. And so, she asked the mirror in secret, "M-Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

"....."

Crimson light enveloped the mirror, indicating that it was working. However, the mirror remained silent.

“Hmm? That’s strange. Mirror, I am the fairest in the land, am I not?” The queen asked again, rephrasing her question. From the way it had become more a statement of confirmation, one could tell the queen had a lot of confidence in herself. There was a soft clunk, and the light surrounding the mirror began to fade. After a few moments of silence, the queen attempted to activate the mirror once more.

“Mirror mirror on the wall, I’m the fairest of them all, right?”

The mirror’s light faded again. *They say third time is the charm, do they not?* Stubborn to a fault, the queen tried again.

“Mirror mirror on the wall! Say I am the fairest of them all or—”

“Know your place, pervert.” The mirror gave that curt reply before going dark. Rebuked, the queen curled up in a corner of her room, seemingly depressed. Though her heavy breathing indicated otherwise. After some time, the queen glanced at the mirror, gathered her resolve, and crawled back over to it.

“Mirror mirror, on the wall. In that case, who is the fairest of them all?”

“Tch...” The magic mirror clicked its tongue, and the queen’s face reddened.

“I am the queen! The people praise my beauty far and wide! Who could possibly be fairer than I!?”

“Huh? A queen? Yeah right. Screw you.” The mirror’s disparaging voice echoed through the queen’s chambers. For a magical fantasy tool, it sure sounded a lot like a yakuza. The queen once again began panting in excitement.

After a few seconds of silence, the mirror sighed and said, “The only person fit to be called fairest in all the land is Snow White.”

Snow White? I believe I have heard that name somewhere before. Was she not the famous beauty born in the vampire kingdom some years back?

“Mirror, is snow white truly that beautiful? Do her features truly surpass mine? Look closely. See my luxurious black hair, golden eyes filled with wisdom, and slender limbs which—”

With another clunk, the light faded from the mirror. This time, it didn’t start back up when the queen spoke to it. Curious, the queen started investigating

this mysterious Snow White. She learned that the famed princess had been betrayed by her uncle and fled deep into the forest. Since then, no one had seen her. No one even knew if she was alive or dead. However, after her uncle had chased Snow White out, the vampire empire had crumbled due to a series of disasters.

“Hmm, now this is truly curious. Your Highness, I wish to investigate this forest.”

“Feel free! In fact, take as long as you’d like! Even if your investigation lasts a century, you don’t need to come back!” The young king saw his wife off with a smile, giving his subjects the impression that he was a truly kind and loving soul.

After leaving the capital, the queen realized she needed a disguise. It wouldn’t do for the people to see their ruler wandering about the countryside like a vagabond. That was why she transformed into a dragon and soared through the skies. After all, no one would even think that an imposing black dragon was their queen.

“Look, the queen’s flying somewhere!”

“So she is. What do you want to do for dinner, dear?”

A mother and her child looked up at the sky as the queen flew off. They were acting as if this was a normal occurrence.

After a few days of flying, the queen arrived at the forest Snow White was said to have vanished in.

“I made it this far, but where should I begin my search?” The queen looked around, searching for clues. To an outsider, she looked like a ferocious dragon hunting for prey.

“Mmm? I sense the presence of people.” The queen angled downward and shot toward the center of the forest. As she approached, she spotted a single house. It was surprisingly large, and the land had been cleared for a field next to it. Considering how well-maintained it was, there were likely people living there.

“To think anyone would live here... Hm?”

A figure exited the house's front door. They spotted the queen hovering above them and trotted over the patio to get a better look.

"What a... beautiful girl..." The blonde-haired, crimson-eyed girl who'd stepped out of the house was so pretty the queen gasped. For the first time in her life, the queen was looking at someone more beautiful than her. And the girl's stern glare sent shivers of excitement down the queen's spine.

There's no mistaking it, this must be the fabled Snow White! The queen suddenly felt compelled to tease this beautiful girl a little. The mirror's declaration had spurred her jealousy, and she wanted to knock this girl down a peg.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The queen's roar shook the forest. At the same time, she unleashed a blinding flash of light to make herself seem even more intimidating. The light had no force behind it and was meant more to scare Snow White than anything. The queen figured something like that would be enough for a sheltered little girl who'd never suffered a day in her life. However, it appeared snow white didn't appreciate the queen's "harmless" prank.

"Who do you think you're growling at, mutt?"

"Wha?"

Snow White's voice had come from above the queen. Stunned, the queen looked up. Unbelievable as it was, Snow White was flying without wings! Not only that, but she was wearing black lace panties!

That underwear certainly isn't as pure as white snow! She should change her name to Snow Black! It turned out Snow White was even more of an adult than the queen. While the queen was still recovering from her shock, Snow White stretched her hand out toward her.

"Go back to the ground where you belong."

"Nuwah!? How is this happeniiiiiiiiiiing!?" Unable to withstand the sudden pressure assailing her, the queen plummeted to the ground. She slammed down with an earth-shattering thud and a massive cloud of dust rose up around her.

queen's moans of pleasure echoed throughout the entire forest. Her transformation was canceled, and she returned to human form. The not-dwarves then tied her up bondage style and explained what was going on. Apparently, after fleeing into this forest, Snow White had encountered seven friendly overpowered not-dwarves. Their names were "The Monster of the Abyss," "The Headhunter Rabbit," "God's Apostle," "Hero," "Swordswoman," "Barrier

Master," and "Monk." Thanks to their help, she had been able to survive in the forest, and they were now all living peacefully together.

Furthermore, the magic mirror the queen possessed was actually a magical communication device created by The Monster of the Abyss. He'd lost it some time back, so he'd been surprised when someone had finally activated it months later. However, the person hadn't even introduced themselves and simply asked who the fairest of them all was, so he'd figured it was some kind of prank and turned it off.

After solving the misunderstanding and reconciling their differences, the queen and Snow White were able to become friends. Unwilling to part from her new comrades, the queen returned to the kingdom and asked the young king a favor.

"Your Highness, my deepest apologies, but I wish to live in the forest with The Monster of the Abyss. Could you find it in your heart to—"

"By all means, go ahead! Don't worry about me! In fact, you can have your bondage set back too!" The magnanimous boy king granted the queen's request without a moment's hesitation. However, kindness was not what the queen wished for. When she returned to the forest, the first thing she asked The Monster of the Abyss was rather startling.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

"It sure as hell isn't you, you damn pervert."

His sharp words left the queen panting in ecstasy, and the group lived happily ever after.

The Compass That Points to One's Desires

Three girls stood in front of the imposing gate that served as the entrance to Verbergen. Yue, Tio, and Kaori. They gazed out into the mist that surrounded the city, waiting for someone. Finally, the people they were waiting for appeared from beyond the fog.

“Oh, looks like we made it.”

“You did it! That artifact is amazing, Hajime-san!”

Hajime was holding something shaped like a pocket watch in his hands, while Shea was looking down at it in admiration. Yue and the others crowded around him, and Hajime started explaining the results of his experiment. A few seconds later Shizuku, who happened to be passing by, spotted the group huddled together.

“Oh? Kaori? And Nagumo-kun as well. What are you all doing out here?”

“Ah, Shizuku-chan...” Kaori beckoned to Shizuku with a smile, inviting her to come closer.

“We were experimenting with the Compass of Eternal Paths.”

“That artifact we got from Haltina's labyrinth? Oh, were you trying to see if it can guide you where you want even through the fog?”

“Sharp as always, I see. That's exactly right, Yaegashi. And it turns out it can. I tried going to the Haulia village and back using just the compass, and I didn't get lost even once.”

Meaning that not even the fog, which confused all but beastmen senses, affected the compass. In a way, Hajime had made history by being the first human to navigate the sea of trees on his own.

“Huh. Looks like concept magic is even more amazing than I thought. I guess it makes sense though, considering it's even more difficult to use than ancient magic...”

“Yeah. Anyway, I'm gonna experiment with it some more. I want to see what else you can do with this compass.”

Shizuku nodded in understanding. Since she was already here, she figured she may as well observe Hajime's experiments.

"Now then, according to Haltina, this can help you find things too..." Hajime gave his comrades a look that seemed to say "Any volunteers?" and Yue raised her hand. It appeared she'd lost something. Everyone watched curiously as she took the compass from Hajime and poured some mana into it.

"Where are my panties?"

"You can't just ask that, Yue!" Kaori's instant response showed just how much more in sync the two of them were now. The compass' needle spun a few times, then came to a stop pointing directly at Hajime.

"Huh? Me? Oh yeah..." Hajime fished through his pocket and pulled out a risque pair of panties. Those were undoubtedly Yue's.

"Why? Why do you have her panties!? Why!?" Kaori repeated herself like a broken record. Her eyes glazed over and her demonic stand flared up behind her. On the other hand, Shizuku looked at Hajime like he was some kind of pervert.

"N-Nagumo-kun. Even if she is your girlfriend, that's a little... creepy."

"Hey, Yaegashi. Don't make it sound like I stole her panties or something. She took these off and gave them to me herself."

"That's even worse! Honestly, the misunderstanding would have been better!"

"Why!? Why do you have her freshly worn panties!? Why!?"

Shizuku backed away while Kaori broke down completely. She reached down for her own panties and started taking them off.

"Kaori, I understand your feelings, but believe me, you will come to regret that decision later. Calm down." Fortunately, Tio was there for the assist. Kaori gave up on gifting Hajime her own panties and put them back on.

"Sorry Yue, I totally forgot to give these back to you. They'd get dirty if I just left them on the floor, so I put them in my pocket... Actually, if you thought you'd lost them, why didn't you just ask me?"

“Mmm... I was feeling so good I totally forgot. But now it feels a little breezy so put them on for me.”

Hajime knelt down like it was the most natural thing in the world, and in response, Yue raised one leg like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Alright Yue-san, that’s enough. You can put them on yourself.”

“Hm? But...”

“But?”

“Sh-Shea?”

“Yes?”

“...I’ll put them on myself.”

To everyone’s surprise, Yue caved to Shea’s pressure. Despite her smile, Shea’s gaze was clearly saying “You’re an adult, so you should at least know this isn’t the time or place for this thing.” After officially becoming Hajime’s lover, Shea had grown far more intimidating. Yue shot Shea a nervous glance as she took her panties from Hajime and put them on. She looked like a naughty child who’d just been scolded by her mom.

“Th-This is the first time I’ve ever seen Yue like this...”

“I-Indeed. Shea truly has become invincible.”

Shea’s terrifying gaze swung over to Hajime. The monster of the abyss awkwardly averted his gaze, then cleared his throat and changed the topic.

“Alright, now that we know it can find things as well...”

“You just ran away right there, didn’t you?”

“Yaegashi, shut up. Anyway, we know it can find physical locations and things no problem, but I’m curious how far the compass’ interpretation of a ‘place’ goes.”

Tio gave Hajime a thoughtful look and said, “You wish to know if it can point to an abstract location or concept, do you not?”

“Mmm...” Yue raised her hand again. Kaori gave her a suspicious look, but in the end, the group decided to let her try again. Yue glanced at Kaori and

activated the compass.

“Where’s the stalker?”

“What’s with that question!? I’m not Hajime-kun’s stalker!”

“Umm, Kaori-san? Yue didn’t say anything about whose stalker she was looking for.”

Kaori, who’d immediately assumed Yue was referring to her, looked up in shock. Like before, the compass spun a few times before coming to a halt.

“Huh? It’s not pointing to me?”

“Impossible... who other than Kaori could possibly...”

Yue looked in the direction the compass was pointing and spotted Altina poking her head out from behind the gate’s pillar. She was staring intently at Shea.

“Hiii!? Altina!? What are you doing here!?”

Happy she’d finally been noticed, Altina sprinted over to Shea and grabbed her arm. Shea’s ears flattened around her as the elven princess gave her a beaming smile.

“I was looking for you, Shea. I want you to toy with me some more.”

The fur on Shea’s tail and ears stood on end at Altina’s suggestive phrasing.

“I see. If multiple things fulfill the conditions set out by the user, the compass will pick the one that fits best.”

“Hajime-kun!? I swear I’m not a stalker, so please don’t treat me like one!”
Hajime ignored Shea’s plight and Kaori’s insistence that she wasn’t a stalker, and handed the compass to Altina.

“Perfect timing. Let’s see if someone who doesn’t have any mana can use the compass if it’s already active. Altina, tell the compass something you want it to find for you.”

Altina tilted her head quizzically, but did as she was told. After thinking for a few seconds she spoke up.

“My future, I guess?”

The needle spun a few times and stopped in the direction of Tio.

“This compass... is so accurate that it’s scary.”

“Mmm...The Liberators must have been monsters too if they could make something like this.”

Tio was certainly a pioneer of perversion and in that sense Altina’s senior. According to the compass, Altina would one day walk down the path of masochism and eventually fall as far as the woman before her. While Altina herself didn’t fully understand the details, she did seem to vaguely realize that Tio was the role model she needed to aspire to. Altina glanced bashfully at the legendary black dragon and uttered a single bashful word.

“Tio...onee-sama?”

“I’m uncertain how I should feel about this...”

Hajime left Altina and Tio to their own devices and turned to the rest of his comrades.

“Anyone else got any interesting questions?”

The others lapsed into thought.

“How about...” Shizuku muttered quietly, and Hajime snuck the compass into the palm of her hand.

“How about asking who the most important person to us is? We might end up with some surprising answers.” Shizuku’s eyes went wide in surprise as the needle started to spin.

“Hey, how come it’s—” The needle came to a stop on Shizuku’s black katana.

“I see. So you’re a high school girl who loves swords, huh? Nice.”

“You’re purposely phrasing it in a way to cause misunderstandings, aren’t you!? This just happens to be a partner I can entrust my life to!”

The girls gave Shizuku pitying looks. She claimed it was important because it was her fighting partner, but it was entirely possible she treasured it so much because it was a gift from a certain someone.

“Oooh, I got one! What about our innocence? Can we ask the compass where

it went?”

Considering how omnipotent this compass was, it was possible it might even be able to answer that. The moment Hajime thought that, the needle began to spin. It appeared Shea had activated it. When it finally came to a stop, the entire party looked curiously in the direction the needle was pointing.

“Hiii!? What do you want with me!?”

The compass was pointing toward a young bunny girl about the same age as Shea. Judging by the basket in her hands, she was on her way back from picking fruits and flowers. Her ears flattened behind her; she was clearly terrified of Hajime and the others.

“Umm, are you—”

“Hiii!? I recognize that hair color! You’re the headhunter Haulia princess, aren’t you! I’m sorry, please don’t kill me! I’ll do anything, just let me go!”

“Wha?” Shea stared blankly at the bunny girl cowering before her. She was exuding this “don’t bully me aura,” which honestly made Hajime and the others want to bully her more.

“A gentle and peaceful bunny girl who avoids conflict... I see.” Hajime nodded to himself and glanced over at Shea. She didn’t seem all that happy at being treated like a monster by a girl her own age. Though she was annoyed more at herself than anything, she took it out on the other girl.

“Y-You weakling! And you have the gall to call yourself a rabbitman!? Don’t cower before your own people, you maggot!”

“Hiii!? Please don’t get angry! Forgive meeeeeee!”

The bunny girl scampered away like a hare.

“Get back here, you pansy! I’ll teach you what it means to be a rabbitman of Haltina!” Shea chased after the other bunny girl, acting much like Sergeant Hajime had months ago.

Hajime looked down at the compass in his hands and muttered, “Looks like this really can find everything.” He couldn’t help but be impressed by the Liberators’ godlike creation.

Forbidden Evolution Magic

“Oh yeah, how are you guys making use of evolution magic?” Hajime casually asked Yue and the others as he tinkered with a mysterious chunk of ore. He was sitting in the restaurant underneath their inn and sipping some Verbergen-style coffee as he worked. There was still a lot he needed to test when it came to evolution magic. Yue, Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Shizuku were all together with him for once, so he figured it was a good opportunity to ask. The girls all pondered his question. However, Yue was the first to answer.

“Mmm, I’m still getting used to it, so all I can do is double the power of my spells. Still, I have some ideas I want to test. I can use it to make more complex compound spells so maybe... give my dragons restoration magic so they revive infinitely?”

“That’d be scary to fight against.”

Yue’s dragons were terrifying enough as they were, but if she managed to give them the ability to regenerate automatically, then they’d become the stuff of nightmares. Shea and the others were still practicing with it too, so none of them had come up with any innovative ideas just yet. Hajime’s expression turned pensive and he questioned them.

“Remember what Haltina said? Evolution magic can enhance all forms of power. The knowledge we got from the magic circle just showed us how to enhance the more obvious forms of power like physical abilities or magic.”

“I see. You mean to say the definition of power is broader than that? Do you believe there are other things evolution magic has the power to enhance?”

“Yeah, basically. Though I guess we have to get good at enhancing the more obvious forms of power before we start thinking about more complex ideas.” However, Hajime’s inventor’s spirit wasn’t willing to let the matter rest. It was in his nature to try and find exploits for everything he got his hands on. Shea and the others were just as curious, and they too started thinking about how else they could apply evolution magic. After a few minutes, Yue nodded to herself and shot to her feet.

“My love for Hajime is as strong as it gets.”

“Where the heck did that come from, Yue? Did you hit your head somewhere?”

Yue replied to Kaori’s taunt by shooting a sphere of wind at her, but Kaori easily dodged it.

“But what if I could evolve it further? They say it’s the power of love that forges bonds, so isn’t that a power that can be enhanced with evolution magic?”

“Wow. You’re just going to continue the conversation like nothing happened, huh, Yue-san?”

“Kaori’s listening like nothing happened too. Even though she moved so fast I could see afterimages... You’ve really grown strong Kaori...”

The two girls had fought so often they’d polished their skills against each other. Shea and Shizuku gazed at their respective best friends with awe. In a way, Shea and Shizuku were in sync as well.

“I-I must say, that does sound like an intriguing experiment. If evolution magic can be used on emotions as well, there’s an endless amount of possibilities.”

“Yue, you sure you want to try it? I feel like you should get some more practice with evolution magic in first.”

“Mmm, I’ll be fine... If it goes wrong, Kaori can always heal me with restoration magic.”

Kaori gave Yue a confident nod, and Yue nodded back.

“Let’s try it... Make me love Hajime even more, moe moe kyun!”

A vampire from parallel world acting like a maid cafe waitress was about as surreal a sight as it got. Yue made a heart with her hands and moved it around in a circle. Finally, as the spell came to an end, she winked. She really had the choreography down perfectly. Kaori and Shizuku both gave Hajime accusing glares, and he looked away awkwardly. In an attempt to change the topic, he turned toward Yue and asked her about her condition.

“Yue, how do you feel? Is anything different?”

As Yue looked over at Hajime, her eyes glazed over.

“Divine Shackles!” She used one of Kaori’s favorite spells to bind to Hajime in place.

“Huh!? Hey, Yue, what are you—”

Everyone blinked in surprise. They watched as Yue then pulled a necklace out of her Treasure Trove. Timidly, Shea piped in to question her.

“Y-Yue-san? I don’t know why you have a Necklace of Vows on you, but what are you planning on doing with it?”

Yue’s head swiveled around like a doll. Her unnatural movements combined with her empty eyes made her appear terrifying.

“I was wondering how I could make sure I would be with Hajime forever.”

Cold sweat poured down Hajime’s forehead. He had a bad feeling about where this was going.

“Then, I realized it was simple. I just have to bind him so he can never leave.”

“Someone stop Yue! Kaori, use your restoration magic, please!”

“Uwaaaaaah, Yue, come back to your senses!” Kaori cast restoration magic faster than she ever had in her life. Silver light rained down on Yue.

“Are you... trying to get in my way?”

However, it had no effect.

“Why isn’t it working!?” Kaori screamed.

Yue turned to Kaori and cast Divine Shackles on her as well. They tied her up in perfect bondage art fashion, and Shizuku and Kaori were left wondering where she’d learned that technique.

“Y-Yue! What are you doing!? Let me go!”

“Don’t worry, Kaori... I won’t leave you alone.”

“Huh?”

“We’ll be together forever too. Foreveeeeeer. I won’t ever let you run away.”

“Hiiiiiiii! Someone, save meeeeeee!”

Yue then turned to the rest of her comrades. Her eyes were still glazed over,

but her lips had curled up into an ecstatic smile.

“Shea, Tio... even you Shizuku, if you want. We’ll all be together forever. Fufufu...”

Shea, Tio, and Shizuku, who incidentally did *not* want this, shivered. Yue had completely transformed into a yandere.

“What are you all standing around for, Shea, Tio, Yaegashi! Hurry up and stop Yue!”

The remaining three girls snapped back to their senses and jumped Yue. However, Yue was even stronger than before now that her emotions had been unleashed. She repelled the three girls with ease. Still, they had managed to buy enough time for Hajime and Kaori to escape their bonds. The two of them joined the fight, and together they were able to restrain Yue. After a while, the evolution magic wore off, and the light returned to Yue’s eyes. She looked down and saw Kaori’s chains wrapped around her.

“I-It’s not what you think. I just enhanced my passion a little too much.”

For the first time in living memory, the party saw Yue trying to explain herself.

“Tio, explain what happened, please.”

“Understood. I believe that since Yue’s love for Master was already so high that when she enhanced it, it caused her feelings to spiral out of control. In other words, these are desires she harbors, but normally manages to hold back.”

“Mmm!? Objection!”

Everyone ignored Yue’s objection.

“Hajime-san, what do you think of this revelation?” Shea held an imaginary mic up to Hajime.

“Her love might be a little too deep, but I’m okay with it.”

It appeared Hajime was willing to accept even a yandere Yue. The vampire princess blushed. Kaori was used to these little scenes of flirting at this point, so she didn’t even comment. There was something that was bugging her, however.

“How come she wanted to tie all of us up too, though?”

“Well, to put it simply... This is rather embarrassing to say, but... it appears Yue loves us all so much she wants to be with us forever.”

Kaori had more or less guessed that was the case, but hearing it said outright was definitely embarrassing.

“I-Is that so...” Kaori muttered and turned away, her cheeks red.

“Oh, Yue-san...” Shea said with a smile, her bunny ears flopping back and forth.

“W-Wait, does that include me, then?” Shizuku pointed to herself in shock and said.

“Well, she did ask whether you wanted to, so I suppose she’s not quite as infatuated with you just yet, but... I suppose she likes you enough to want you as well if you’re willing.”

“I-I see...” Shizuku wasn’t sure if she should be happy Yue liked her or terrified. Either way, everyone now knew Yue loved them so much she wished she could lock them up and make them hers forever using spirit binding artifacts.

Hajime and the others exchanged glances. They then undid Yue’s restraints and gave her an almost pitying look.

“Just kill me now...”

Her freedom restored, Yue squatted down and hid her face between her legs. It was both an unbelievably cute and unbelievably rare sight.

Afterward, Kaori got curious enough to try enhancing her own emotions. She, too, became a rather extreme person, but in the opposite direction.

“I don’t mind at all. Hajime-kun, you can love everyone. Yue, Shea, in fact, even the whole world should be loved by you. After all, we’re all just one big, happy family. The world is a beautiful place, so why should any of us be fighting?”

Under the influence of evolution magic, Kaori had evolved into a saint that forgave all. Her divine radiance was so dazzling, Hajime started to become

convinced the body of an apostle suited her more than her own. At any rate, both Kaori and Yue were girls who had extreme personalities even without evolution magic, so it was no surprise evolution magic tipped them over the edge. After those particular incidents, Hajime and the others all agreed that evolution magic should never be used on emotions.

April Fools'

"And that's how it became a custom to tell lies and play jokes on the first of April. They call the holiday April Fools'."

"I see..."

Hajime and the others were still recuperating after their ordeal in Haltina's labyrinth. Thanks to the Compass of Eternal Paths' ability to guide anyone through Haltina's disorienting fog, Hajime had been able to go on a date in the forest with Yue. As the pair had been exploring, they'd discovered a tree with vivid pink flowers. The flowers had reminded Hajime of the spring cherry blossoms back in Japan, and he'd started telling Yue about all the spring customs that existed on earth. Yue had listened with rapt attention, interested in knowing anything and everything about Hajime's homeland.

"...But for Verbergen, this is the start of the new year."

"Oh yeah, you're right. Ulfric said something about how this new year was the best in living memory because it was the one where everyone was reunited with their freed friends and family."

In Japan, too, spring marked the start of new beginnings. In that sense, one could consider that Verbergen was currently celebrating the start of April.

"Hmm..." Yue put a hand on her chin, striking a pose reminiscent of the thinking emoji. Hajime gave her a quizzical look, but her only reply was a playful smile. After returning from their date, the two split up. Hajime went back to practice transmuting some more, while Yue went to go find Kaori.

"Mmm... Oh, there you are." Yue found Kaori talking to a group of elderly beastmen. She was curing their aches and pains with a combination of healing and restoration magic. Every time she did little charity events like this, the

number of people worshiping her grew. Yue grinned wickedly and then worked her facial muscles to transform that wicked grin into a smile of pure joy. By the time she was done, she looked over the moon. In fact, she wouldn't have looked out of place skipping merrily through a meadow. Making sure to keep her smile perfect, Yue passed in front of Kaori.

“Huh? Yue? D-Did something happen? You look way happier than usual.”

I've got you now, Kaori! Yue purposely took a moment to react, then blushed as if she was embarrassed at being seen so happy. Considering how skilled her acting was, she could probably join a filming company back on earth. Kaori walked over to Yue, a little wary. The old beastmen also gave Yue somewhat suspicious looks. Yue's normal lack of expression was famous throughout Verbergen.

“Mmm? Oh, it's nothing. Fufufu.” The way Yue phrased it made it clear there was something. Her smile grew wider.

I wonder what kind of reaction Kaori will have. I can't wait to find out! In a way, Yue was more obsessed with Kaori than she was with Hajime.

“Oh come on, it's obvious something's made you happy! Tell me!”

Don't keep teasing us like this! Kaori's smile seemed to say. At that moment, Yue was certain. This was the best acting she'd ever pull off in her life. Yue's motivation and focus rose, and she said,

“I'm pregnant!”

“.....Huh?” Kaori left an even longer pause between her words than Yue usually did. Her smile froze in place and she tilted her head in confusion.

“I'm pregnant with Hajime's baby!”

“Oh, I see. You're pregnant. It all makes sense now.” Kaori nodded up and down like a broken doll. After a few seconds, she finally processed Yue's words.

“Whaaat!?” Her scream resounded throughout all Verbergen. Yue pumped her fist behind her, making sure Kaori couldn't see her celebrating her victory. She never tired of seeing Kaori's overblown reactions.

“Baby? What’s a baby!? Wait, I know what a baby is! It’s a baby! What should we do, Yue!? Oh, I guess congratulations! Hahahahaha!”

Seeing Kaori fall into a panic spurred Yue even further. This was the perfect moment for the final blow. Later, Yue would come to regret not quitting while she was ahead.

“Thank you, Kaori. And goodbye.”

“Huh?”

“Now that I’m pregnant, I can’t allow you near Hajime anymore. He already accepted Shea, so she can stay, but you’ll have to go. Thank you for all your help until now.”

“.....”

“Don’t worry, I’ll become happy enough for the both of us!”

“.....”

“Oh, also, Hajime will come back with your original body later. Isn’t that great, Kaori? You can go back to being you!”

Naturally, the implication here was that Kaori could never become Hajime’s lover now. *I wonder how she’ll react to that.*

“CoNgrAtulAtionS YuE. I hOpE YouR bAbY iS HeaLThy. I’lL Do mY bEsT toO.”

“...Mmm?”

Kaori gave Yue an unbelievably gentle smile and hugged her.

Wait, this isn’t what I was expecting. But before Yue could voice her doubts, Kaori once again said in her robotic voice,

“TaRgEt HaJiMe-KuN. ObJeCtiVe, cOmPlEtE tHe MisSioN. KaoRi ShiRasaKi, HeAdiNg OuT.”

“Huh? W-Wait, this is just A-April—” Yue tried to explain she was just doing an April Fools’ joke, but Kaori had already dashed off. She ran faster than the wind, intent on completing her objective. A second later, there was a thunderous roar in the distance. It appeared Yue had pushed Kaori a little too far.

“Th-This might be a problem.” Stuttering for the first time in what might have been ever, Yue hurried over to where the explosion had happened. Panicked as she was, she didn’t notice the person trailing after her.

“This is a huge scoop! My pride as an editor demands I find out more!” Editor Mao followed Yue to Verbergen’s central plaza.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahn! Hajime-kun, you idiot! Congratulations!”

“What the heck are you on about!? Whoa, stop, that’s dangerous! Quit disintegrating things! Are you trying to kill me!?”

Hundreds of Divine Shackles floated around Kaori like the snakes in Medusa’s hair. On top of that, she was swinging wildly with both her greatswords and firing disintegration feathers everywhere. Though she was crying, her dead eyes, merciless attacks, and demonic stand floating behind her told Hajime she’d lost it. She was going berserk.

Honestly, I’m the one who wants to cry here! Hajime thought to himself. He still had no idea what was going on. Despite the fact that Kaori was attacking him, she kept congratulating him as well. Though every congratulation was punctuated with a “Just stay right there, Hajime-kun! It’ll all be over soon! Just let me knock you out and it’ll all be over!”

“What the hell’s gotten into you!?” However, no matter what Hajime said, Kaori refused to explain.

“Please try and understand, Hajime-kun! This is my only hope now!”

“Your only hope for what!? You’ve gotta explain or I won’t know what’s going on, Kaori! Wait, did you just use evolution magic too!? You’re moving as well as Noint was when she got serious!”

Berserk mode Kaori was moving so fast she left afterimages behind her. It was entirely possible Verbergen would be the site of The Monster of the Abyss vs. God’s Apostle round 2. Naturally, Haltina’s capital was suffering the shockwaves of their battle. Shea, Tio, Kouki’s group, and even Ulfric and the other elders all rushed out to see what the commotion was.

“Hey Kaori, what are you doing!?”

“Kaori-saaaaaan. I don’t know what you’re fighting about, but you need to calm down!”

Shizuku and Shea called out to her. She did appear to have heard them, but her response was a desperate,

“I can’t calm down! This is my only hope! Unless I force Hajime-kun’s hand, it’s all over for me! I need to get pregnant, just like Yue did!”

“WHAT!?”

Everyone, including Hajime, exclaimed in surprise. In fact, Hajime was more surprised than anyone by this bombshell revelation. Just then, Yue burst onto the scene. She’d finally caught up. Hajime turned to her and gave her a questioning look. Sweating profusely, Yue smiled awkwardly back at him. That was all Hajime needed to know what must have happened.

Just do something about Kaori! Hajime mouthed silently, and Yue nodded in affirmation.

“Extra, extra, read all about it! One of the Chosen, Hajime Nagumo, has become a father! It appears he has gotten Yue pregnant! Does this mean he plans to abandon Kaori-sama!? And how will Kaori-sama’s relationship with him develop from here!?” Mao flew high overhead, dropping freshly printed newspapers left and right. Like any true reporter, she’d gotten her article finished while the news was still fresh. The citizens of Verbergen were in an uproar. Some were even screaming “Nagumo-dono, please bless Kaori-sama with a child too!” Those were likely her most fervent followers. Hajime turned desperately to Yue and pleaded for help.

“Hurry up and do something about this!”

Yue nodded and responded in turn.

“U-Umm, Kaori? I-It’s a misunderstanding. The truth is—”

“Huh? The truth is... what? Don’t tell me everything was a lie? That you told such a tasteless joke to me of all people?” Kaori turned toward Yue with a smile as she said that.

Surely you wouldn’t say something like that to me despite knowing how I feel.

I know we fight a lot, but I know you're someone I can trust. And someone I can trust would never do that, right? her accusatory glare seemed to say.

Sweat was cascading down Yue's forehead in a waterfall now. She looked around helplessly.

"Th-The truth is... Hajime will g-give you a child soon too, Kaori..." Yue passed the buck onto Hajime. Kaori turned back to him, both swords still at the ready. It was obvious she'd really kill him if he was lying. Meanwhile, Shea and the others all yelled at her.

"What's the meaning of this!?"

"Yueeeeeee, I can't believe you of all people would betray me like this!" Yue couldn't bring herself to meet Hajime's gaze as he snapped at her.

Afterward, Hajime was forced to use Overload to restrain Kaori long enough to finally solve the whole misunderstanding. For a few days following

the incident, Yue was forced to sit outside Verbergen's main gate holding up a sign saying "I'm a naughty vampire." She swore to never pull a prank like that again.

Arifureta Academy –Entrance Ceremony–

The magic academy held its entrance ceremony one fine spring morning. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom, coloring the campus a vivid shade of pink. As the academy covered grades from kindergarten to college, it held the entrance ceremonies for all the new elementary, middle school, high school, and college students all at once. It was a huge event, attended not only by the parents of the new students, but by currently enrolled students, and even other guests like friends and distant relatives.

None of the school's buildings were large enough to house such a huge event, so the entrance ceremony was held in the academy's massive courtyard. The new students, especially the newly admitted elementary school students, looked around nervously. Their innocence was cute enough to make any onlooker smile.

Meanwhile, the currently enrolled students, especially those who were sitting

next to Chairman Tio, Professor Yue, or the problem children Shea and Kaori, were trembling in fear. It looked as though they were sitting next to bombs that might go off at any moment.

For the moment, all four problematic girls were sitting quietly, but there was no telling how long that would last. If anything, their demure expressions seemed to be the calm before the storm. In truth, however, Student Council President Shizuku had entrusted her most trusted public morals committee members to keep a careful eye on the four problem children. She was prepared to use force to make sure this lovely spring day didn't turn into a bloodbath. Honestly, Shizuku would have preferred all four of them to be expelled from school, but as they were the strongest fighters in the world, the school couldn't afford to do that. And so, as much as it pained her, she had to deal with them.

Aiko, the teacher who'd been chosen to head the entrance ceremony, walked up to the podium. Her face was pale, she was sweating profusely, and she appeared to be nursing a stomachache. Incidentally, a certain professor and chairman had tried to re-enroll as students this year, which was why the usual head of the entrance ceremony had resigned and Aiko was chosen to take his place.

"Uh, let's begin with some words from the elementary division representative. Myu-san, if you'd please."

Although she was about to faint, Aiko put on a strong front for the incoming elementary school representative, Myu. Her bravery moved the student body to tears. Thanks to Aiko's stellar introduction, Myu's nervousness receded somewhat as she tottered up to the podium. Her cute way of walking helped ease the tension among the students.

There were a few flashes from the enrolled students' section and parents section. They were coming from an artifact that allowed people to record moments in time, which was called a camera. They were a new invention from a company called Southcloud, which had expanded its inventory and scope greatly in the past few months. However, as they were a newly developed artifact, they were quite expensive. Just who on earth had the money to use on those?

With the mystery of the camera flashes left unsolved, Myu began her opening speech. She stumbled over her words here and there, but it was an admirable performance from such a small girl. As her speech went on, the students began to relax more and more. Myu had been the perfect choice for the elementary class representative. Her cute mannerisms were enough to calm even the ticking time bombs that were this academy's four problem children. The gathered parents and children all listened with admiration to Myu's speech. Once she finished, the audience gave her a huge round of applause. At the same time, a few more flashes captured her big moment. The student body breathed a collective sigh of relief, unaware of who was taking those pictures, or why. Myu, too, heaved a sigh of relief, then looked over at the student who'd been taking pictures of her. Her face lit up and her eyes began to sparkle.

"Ah, Daddy! Myu did it!" She waved to Hajime, the cutest little smile on her face. However, everyone was too concerned with the sudden aura of dread surrounding the four time bombs to pay attention to her smile.

"O-Oh my! Myu, you're supposed to call him Hajime-oniichan, not Daddy!" Myu's mother, Remia, exclaimed from the parents' section. Everyone's gazes turned to her.

"Mmmrgh. But Daddy's Daddy..." Everyone then turned to Myu.

"Mommy, do you not want Daddy to be my Daddy?" Gazes returned to Remia.

"Huh? I-I wouldn't say that. But that's not the point here."

"So you're okay with it? Then he's Daddy."

"O-Oh my... Th-This is quite troubling."

The spectator's gazes kept on swinging back and forth from Remia to Myu like they were watching a tennis match. The frigid aura of dread being emitted by the four problem children grew stronger.

"Ai-chan-sensei!" Shizuku hurriedly called out to Aiko.

"Understood!" Aiko happened to be the adviser for the student council, so she picked up on Shizuku's intent right away.

“Myu-chan, that was a wonderful speech! Now, why don’t you go back to your friends and—”

“Daddy! Mommy says it’s okay if you’re my Daddy!”

Unfortunately, Myu had been raised by one of the most headstrong people alive. And his fearless, bold nature had rubbed off on her. The students all turned to Daddy Hajime.

“Wh-What the heck’s with this development?”

Cold sweat poured down Hajime’s forehead; a rare occurrence. Normally, the only time he was ever flustered or at a loss for words was when Yue was seducing him. But while he couldn’t ever shoot down Remia in front of Myu, the fact that he didn’t made a certain group of four think that maybe he wasn’t so averse to the idea of marrying her. It also, unfortunately, caused Remia to think the same, and she flushed with embarrassment.

The new students all cheered. They hadn’t expected to see such a heartwarming development on their first day. To think that one of their fellow students would hook up with a widow at such a public event. Many of the new transfer students were thinking they’d made the right choice in coming here.

On the other hand, the current students, who knew what this portended, screamed in terror. They hadn’t expected a development this terrifying. And because they knew the situation, they also knew that the final countdown for the four time bombs had begun. Most of them were wishing they’d just skipped the entrance ceremony.

“You’ve got guts, Remia. Do you have any last words?”

Dark clouds formed above the school. Lightning forked and crackled, threatening to destroy the campus.

“Remia... I always feared I would need to deal with you, but I never expected that day to come so soon.”

A black dragon suddenly appeared in the wide courtyard. The ferocious wind she whipped up sent the entrance ceremony decorations flying.

“You’ve done it now, Remia-saaaaaaaaaan. I can’t believe you’d try and make a

move on Hajime-san here of all places!”

The shockwaves coming from Shea’s kendama forced the students out of their chairs and onto the ground.

“Remia-san, are you prepared to face the consequences of your actions? I promise it only hurts at first.”

A demonic stand appeared behind Kaori, and a wind colder than a Siberian blizzard blew around her. Countless chains snaked up from the ground, coiling themselves around her.

“Public morals committee, you’re up! Eliminate those problem children! You have my permission as student council president to use lethal force!”

“Sh-Shiizushizu, isn’t that going a little too far?”

“Go, go, go! Now’s your only chance to assassinate them!”

“Sh-Shizuku, calm down!”

Shizuku barked out orders like a special forces commander.

“Tch, I can’t believe we really got the order... I guess we’ve got no choice. Men, fight like your lives depend on it! The peace of our academy rests on our shoulders! Follow me!”

“Captain Yuka... You heard the captain, maggots! Don’t you dare turn your backs on the enemy!”

“Show the new students the pride of the public morals committee!”

The brave members of the public morals committee charged Yue and the others. However, they never stood a chance.

“Aaaaaah! Captain Yuka and Vice-Captain Kousuke have already been sent flying!”

“Dammit, the public morals committee can’t hold those girls down! Oh no, Prince Lundel’s been swallowed up by a lightning dragon!”

“Hey, isn’t that Ulfric-sama being squeezed to death by Kaori’s chains!?”

“And Altina-sama’s being beaten down!”

“Dammit... Are we powerless after all!?”

It was written down in student council history that the public morals committee fought to the last man.

“Ngh, now that it’s come to this there’s only one option! Nagumo-kun, take Remia-san and run! Flee to the ends of the earth if you have to!”

“Ah, looks like that is the best option.”

Seeing the chaos enveloping the courtyard, Hajime nodded in agreement. He grabbed Myu off the altar and hurried to Remia’s side.

“Oh my, Hajime-san!?” Remia blushed as Hajime carried her princess-style out of the academy. Myu, on the other hand, cheered happily. Both mother and daughter seemed wholly unconcerned with the carnage occurring around them.

“Aaah, Hajime-kun’s running away with Remia-san!”

“Mmm? I won’t let you escape, Hajime.”

“I’m so jealous! I can’t believe Remia-san gets the bridal carry! Get back here youuuuuuu!”

“Kuku, did you truly think you could escape from my clutches, Master!?”

The academy’s frightening four ran through the main gate and chased after Hajime. They left behind a scene of utter devastation. The public morals committee and many of the guests had been left nearly dead, while the current students had sacrificed themselves to protect their new classmates. Shizuku sighed as she heard the roars of thunder and shockwaves of power grow distant. She then clapped her hands and made a declaration.

“Now then, let’s continue the entrance ceremony!”

However, everyone present retorted simultaneously.

“There’s no way we can keep going!”

Shizuku had feared all the new students would cancel their enrollment after that incident, but they didn’t. In fact, after seeing how desperately the student council and student body had worked to protect them, they’d been even more

motivated to study there. Overall, the entrance ceremony turned out to be a huge success.

I Can't Keep Working as an Elder in This Exploitative Nation

A strange silence filled Ulfric's room. Hajime and Shea, who'd been called there by him, exchanged confused glances. What in the world had created such a heavy atmosphere?

"Hey, Ulfric, what's going on here? Kind of looks like you finally got fed up with all the overtime one of those terrible tech companies was forcing onto you."

"Are you okay? You look like you've lost sight of your future or something."

Ulfric was Verbergen's oldest elder and the one in charge of heading the council. The fact that he'd called for just Hajime and Shea meant whatever business he had, it was likely serious. Seeing his exhaustion, both Hajime and Shea gave him uncharacteristically worried looks. However, he responded to their worry with a Yue-level glare.

"Are you two trying to make fun of me?"

Shea and Hajime tilted their heads in confusion. Judging from their reaction, Ulfric realized they really weren't aware of what they were doing. He heaved a long sigh, then eventually continued.

"Shea-dono. Would you like to take my place as elder?"

"Come again?" Shea gave him a puzzled look. But then she guessed his intentions and her bunny ears shot up.

"You're thinking something crafty again, aren't you!? Since my dad refused your offer, you're trying to get me to join the elder's council instead to make the Haulia part of Verbergen, aren't you!? I'm won't fall for your tricks, old man!" Shea's ears waved back and forth angrily as she chewed him out.

"Ah well, I suspected as much," Ulfric muttered.

Seeing his despondent gaze, Hajime chimed in.

“Ulfric, surely you know Shea would never accept that offer. Really, what happened to make you so depressed?” Hajime’s words calmed Shea down, and she once more gave Ulfric a worried look. The old elf heaved another long, weary sigh and replied.

“I wish I could retire...”

Hajime and Shea exchanged glances. *Why doesn’t he then?* they wondered.

“Why don’t you just retire, then?”

“Yeah, why not?”

They said what they were thinking outright. The emotion vanished from Ulfric’s face and he got to his feet. He walked over to his windows, opened them, and beckoned for Hajime and Shea to come take a look. Confused, the two of them joined him at the windowsill and looked outside. Ulfric silently pointed to a corner of the city.

“Those people right there are our elders.”

Hajime and Shea looked down to see a truly bizarre sight.

“All hail Kaori-sama, our great goddess!”

“Oooh, she looks stunning today too! Ah, she glanced at me! She smiled at me!”

“Huh!? Are you daft!? She smiled at *me*! How can you not tell, Guze!?”

“Pah, tigermen never learn, do they!? Ah, Kaori-sama’s flying off somewhere! We must give chase!”

“Oh, you’re right! Everyone, follow after me! We can’t allow even the slightest possibility of harm come to Kaori-sama! On our pride as the Kaori-sama defense squad, we’ll defend her from the shadows!”

The group of dwarves and tigermen raced off into the forest. Both squads were led by their race’s respective elders. Hajime could hear Kaori scream “Get away from meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee” in the distance, but her words only served to spur her “defense squad” on further.

“.....”

“.....”

Hajime and Shea fell silent.

“There’s another one of our elders...” Ulfric pointed in a different direction.

“Fufufu. On my pride as a reporter, I will discover at least one scandal you’re involved in, Yue! For the sake of all beastmen morale, I need Princess Shea to be Nagumo’s one and only lover. And for that, you must disappear!”

The harpy elder Mao had fashioned a camouflage suit made of leaves and branches for herself. On top of that, she’d painted her face green to help her blend in. The chief editor of Verbergen Monthly crawled across the ground, following Yue from a safe distance.

Why doesn’t she just fly? Hajime thought idly to himself. Just then, Yue turned around with an irritated frown on her face. She raised one of her arms and reversed Mao’s gravity.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Chief Editor Mao screamed as she was sent hurtling into the air.

“And that over there is my successor.”

Hajime and Shea hesitantly turned toward the new direction Ulfric pointed at.

“P-Princess? What exactly is that?”

“Oh, this? It’s a choker. After seeing the one Shea’s always wearing, I felt like getting one of my own. Since we’re best friends, we need to have matching accessories. I’m trying to find Shea so she can put it on for me!”

“There’s a lot wrong with what you just said, but let me tell you, Princess, that’s not a choker. That’s a slave collar.”

“We’re best friends!”

“Princess, please at least try to make conversation! It sounds like you’re implying it’s okay because you’re best friends, but honestly that’s even more terrifying! I’m starting to fear you’re going crazy!”

“I wonder where Shea went. I absolutely must get Shea to put this collar... I mean, choker on me. Considering her strength, she might accidentally end up

choking me while she does it... Haaah... Haaah..."

"Someone, anyone, call Kaori-sama over! The princess is suffering from a horrible disease! We need Kaori-sama to restore her mind!"

Hajime and Shea averted their gazes. They couldn't bear to face reality. Verbergen was on the verge of internal collapse, and most of it was Hajime and the others' fault, whether directly or indirectly.

"So you think I should just retire?" Ulfric stared at Hajime and Shea with dead eyes. Cold sweat poured down Hajime's forehead.

"Wait, it's not over yet. There's still the foxman elder! The elder's council isn't done for yet!"

"Lua attempted to run an espionage campaign against the Haulia and was caught spying on their missions. As retribution, Cam shaved all of Lua's hair, turning him into a shut-in who hasn't left his house since."

Shea covered her face with both hands and squatted down in shame. Even if it hadn't been intentional, the Haulia had turned Ulfric's granddaughter into a pervert, and the foxman elder into a NEET. Shea couldn't bring herself to meet Ulfric's eyes. Even Hajime was starting to feel a little guilty. He looked around awkwardly, trying to find some way of encouraging Ulfric. Before he could though, Ulfric quietly continued.

"I am the eldest after all..."

Yep. Hajime and Shea nodded.

"And I certainly am getting on in years..."

Yep. Hajime and Shea nodded.

"Perhaps I really should retire..."

You probably won't be able to. Hajime and Shea shook their heads. If Ulfric stepped down, Verbergen would almost certainly collapse. The old elf turned once more to Shea.

"Shea-dono. You're both a respected beastman and the princess of the Haulia clan. No one would object you to taking my place as elder. Besides, even if they did you could use that hammer of yours to quell any dissent. In fact, I'm

beginning to think the elder's council would be better off if you were the only elder in it. A dictatorship seems more appealing than a council right now."

"U-Umm, Ulfric-san?" Shea didn't like the direction Ulfric's thoughts were going. Ulfric turned to Shea with the ground-down expression of an underpaid, overworked employee stuck working for a terrible company. Then, he spread his arms wide and declared something.

"Shea-dono, I grant all of Verbergen to you!"

"Who do you think you are, the demon lord?"

Ulfric ignored Hajime's retort. And before Shea could even reply, they were interrupted.

"Ulfric! Are you here!? I was thinking we need to erect a statue of Kaori-sama in the city's central plaza! Can you pull up a budget for it!?"

"We'll need a cathedral too! That way we can hold weekly prayer sessions! Please give us some money for this project! Also, we'd like to make this an official city-wide announcement! Things are going to get busy pretty soon here!"

"Grandfather, I've been giving it some thought, and I wish to join Shea in her travels! Please give me permission to leave the city!"

"Ulfric-sama! My harpies alone can't cover all of Verbergen's scoops! Do you know where Lua and the other foxmen are? I'm thinking of enlisting their help!"

"Hey, Ulfric. One of your elders tried to spy on us. How exactly are you planning on making this up to us, huh? You looking down on the Haulia or something?"

All of the elders, Altina, and even Cam piled into Ulfric's room. They had only come to petition for something, or to ask for something, or to threaten him, too... Ulfric gave Shea a pleading look. However, both her and Hajime already had one foot out the window. They gave him one last pitying glance, like herders selling their favorite lamb to the slaughter, then leaped out of the window.

"Perhaps this is as far as I go. I certainly can't see a tomorrow anymore..."

Ulfric sighed yet again as he looked over at the swarm of people begging him for money or favors.

The next morning, Ulfric received a large shipment of energy drinks. The cans had illustrations of a certain white-haired individual and a certain bunny girl on them.

Daughter Deficiency Syndrome

Hajime had gotten so into his transmutation practice that he didn't realize how much time had passed. And he hadn't just stayed up late, either. No, he'd worked all the way through to the next day's noon. Since he'd been practicing evolution magic in a quiet corner near the edge of Verbergen, no one else had come by. Tired as he was, for a moment he thought he'd time warped. Realizing he was too exhausted to even think properly, Hajime packed up his ore and started trudging back to his inn.

"Still, Yue or someone could have come to get me... Well, I guess they were trying to be considerate..." Hajime vaguely recalled his party members coming to check up on him some time ago. He'd been so focused on his work that their presence had barely registered, and they'd probably thought it best not to disturb him. It had been a bad habit of his back on earth to get so absorbed into something that he stayed up all night engrossed in it.

And it looks like even after coming here, I haven't been able to kick that habit. Hajime scratched his cheek and shook his head. The thought of getting to sleep on a soft bed spurred him forward, and he hastened his steps. As he passed by a side street, the sound of children playing reached his ears.

"Sounds like they're playing tag?"

He took a slight detour to get a better look, and indeed, a group of beastmen children was running around playing tag. They were playing in a small park that had been made by joining the branches of a few trees of similar height. They were all of different races, but that didn't seem to bother any of them. Hajime stood where he was and watched the children play for a while.

"I wonder how Myu's doing..." Hajime thought back to the young dagon girl

who he'd become the temporary guardian of. The children playing the park were roughly the same age as Myu, maybe a little older. Seeing their smiling faces brought back memories of the fun times he'd had with Myu. Suddenly, he was gripped with the irrational fear that Myu might have forgotten all about him. Or that she wouldn't want to go visit earth with him when he returned to pick her up.

What if she hates me because I abandoned her for so long!? Hajime was suffering from the disease all fathers contracted at some point in their lives, daughter deficiency syndrome.

Hajime was so engrossed in worrying about Myu that it took him a while to notice there was someone nearby. He turned around and saw a pair of cute rabbit ears poking out from behind a nearby tree. Their owner was hidden by the tree trunk. He stared at the tree for a few minutes, and finally, the owner of the bunny ears poked her head out from behind the tree. Her eyes met Hajime's, and she stiffened immediately. From the looks of it, she was the same age as Myu, too; 4, maybe 5 years old at most. Her navy blue hair was woven into braids that ended a little above her shoulder. Hajime and the girl stared at each other for a few seconds. She looked nervous, as if moving or speaking would get her killed. However, they couldn't just stand there forever, so Hajime decided to break the silence.

"What is it?"

"Ah!" The girl jumped and glanced to either side, looking for salvation. Finding none, she sniffled, tears welling up in her eyes. Hajime smiled wryly, leaned against a nearby tree, and sat down. He relaxed his body and went back to watching the children playing tag. Seeing him lounging around like that, the girl gradually grew less nervous. She inched a few steps closer, her eyes full of curiosity. And after that, she fidgeted, clearly wanting to ask something but still too nervous too. Hajime didn't blame her. She was a member of the timidest race, and a girl to boot. Had it been an adult approaching him, Hajime would likely have shot them with a few rubber bullets. However, he had a soft spot for children. And so, he smiled at the girl and spoke to her.

"Have you ever met a dagon?"

The girl twitched and glanced around again. After making sure Hajime wasn't talking to anyone else, she shook her head.

"They live far out to the west. If you tried to walk there, it would take you a year just to reach the area. But you know, the city they live on is built on this island floating out in the sea."

"The sea?" The girl took a few steps closer and tilted her head.

"Let' see... I guess you could say the sea is one reallllly big puddle. It's so big you can't see the other side, and the water goes even deeper than these trees are tall."

The young girl's ears and tails perked up. Her eyes glittered with curiosity, and her nervousness all but vanished. She sat down next to Hajime and tilted her ears toward him.

"I have a dagon daughter who's about the same age as you."

"Huh" She looked up at him in confusion. She'd never heard of a human father having a beastman daughter before. Still, it was because she'd never heard of such a thing that she was curious about it.

"You're a human, but you have a beastman daughter? Is it because you're a prince?"

"What do you mean by prince?"

Apparently, the young girl's parents had told her about the relationship between him and Shea. Her parents had, of course, read all about the blossoming romance between a rabbitman and a human in Mao's Verbergen Monthly. And since the magazine had described Shea as a princess, the boy who'd rescued her and then become her must have been a prince. Or at least, that was the little girl's reasoning.

"Man, I get why Shea felt so embarrassed when the magazine called her a princess. This is pretty awkward..."

"You're not a prince?" The girl tilted her head quizzically.

"Yeah, I'm not a prince."

"Does that mean you're not Princess Shea's boyfriend?"

“Nah, I am.”

Seeing her growing confusion, Hajime reached out and ruffled her bunny ears. The girl stiffened up for a second, but when she realized how gentle Hajime’s touch was she relaxed.

“Whether she’s got bunny ears, or whether I’m human or not doesn’t matter at all.”

“It doesn’t? But Princess Shea has bunny ears?”

“She’s got the tail too. But I like them.”

The young girl looked away and tried to process what Hajime had just said. After a while, she turned back to him with a smile. Then, she clambered into his lap and leaned against him. Hajime was surprised at first, but then he smiled back.

Come to think of it, Myu really liked sitting on my lap too. He patted the girl’s head just like he used to with Myu, and the young girl’s ears flopped back and forth.

“Tell me more about your daughter. I wanna know.”

“Let’s see here. Well her name’s Myu—” Hajime told the curious girl all about how he’d first met Myu, and all the adventures he’d had since. As he talked, the other kids also came over, more interested in hearing his stories, and about himself, than playing tag. Before long, his lap was filled with a strong-willed tigerman girl and a young wolfboy, while a young harpy girl perched on his head. He played with them all, never once losing the gentle smile he’d first shown the girl earlier.

“Come on, guys, don’t scramble around so much. Hey, don’t pull her ears, you brat! You gotta treat bunny ears more gently than that! If you’re naughty, I won’t give you any candy!”

Hajime consoled the girl who was crying after having her bunny ears pulled by the wolfboy. In an attempt to attract everyone’s attention, he pulled some sweets out of his Treasure Trove. It worked like a charm, and the children all focused their attention on the candy.

“Don’t fight, guys. You each get one.” Hajime passed out the candy, and the children quieted down instantly.

Looks like kids everywhere calm down once you give them food, huh? As he’d expected, the bunny girl got her candy stolen and came crying back to him. Sighing, Hajime took another candy out and held it out to her. The girl grinned and bit down on it without hesitation. Hajime then poked the wolfboy who’d stolen her original candy on the forehead, grabbed him, and started tickling him as punishment.

“Ahahahaha stoop!” he squealed. But Hajime kept going, and soon enough the girl joined in. The other kids all followed after her, and for a few minutes, the wolfboy was thrown into tickling hell. Before long, the children were clambering all over him again.

Hajime transmuted a few old-school toys like yo-yos and tops for them, which the kids played around with while he told them more stories of his adventures. Eventually, the children tired themselves out, and they fell asleep on his lap or his shoulders or his head. The girl he’d initially talked to was nestled snugly inside his arms as she slept.

“I really need to hurry back to Myu’s side...” The girl’s sleeping face reminded Hajime of Myu’s. He agonized for a while over whether or not Myu hated him now, and before he knew it, he too had fallen asleep with the kids.

Around ten minutes later—

“S-So precious...”

“Yue-san, you’ve got a nosebleed!”

Yue had been walking by when she’d spotted Hajime surrounded by a group of sleeping children. The sight had been so endearing that she’d gotten a nosebleed.

“Shea, look at that little girl in Hajime’s arms. Isn’t that the future waiting for you?”

“Wha!? You mean that one day, Hajime-san will be hugging our child like—
Bwah!”

Shea got a nosebleed to match Yue's, and the pair continued to silently watch him nap. When Kaori and Tio found him... Well, their reactions were similar.

"Hajime-kun surrounded by children? Priceless!"

"So this is what utopia looks like, Master..."

When the children's parents finally came to pick them up, they found their kids sleeping together with Hajime, while a group of four girls was in a puddle of their own blood a short distance away.

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Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest Vol. 8

by Ryo Shirakome

Translated by Ningen Edited by DxS

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