
#14
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
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FAMILY PHOTO


HOT SPRINGS DATE

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Illustrations- Takayaki

Chapter I: An Everyday(?) Morning in the Nagumo Household Part 1

Hajime awoke to find that he couldn't move and that breathing was proving a struggle. His thoughts were sluggish as well, likely due to the lack of oxygen.

This isn't good...

Worried, Hajime opened his eyes.

"Mgh?!"

However, all he could see was darkness. He tried to breathe, but something was covering his face. Next, he tried to brush it off with his arms, only to discover that both arms were being held in place by something soft.

His confusion lasted only a second, after which his brain immediately switched into combat mode.

"Mrr..."

But then, he heard a familiar little girl mumbling in her sleep, so he snapped back out of it. Using just the power of his abs, he lifted himself into a half-sitting position. The soft, flabby thing covering his face rolled down, enabling him to finally see again.

"Okay, but why?"

Sleeping peacefully on Hajime's chest was his beloved adopted daughter, Myu. It seemed she'd fallen asleep hugging his face, which was why he'd woken up unable to see or breathe. Her pajamas had come unbuttoned at some point, so her soft stomach had been resting right on top of Hajime's mouth and nose. Hence why he'd had trouble breathing.

Hajime's question hadn't been directed at Myu or her unique sleeping posture, though. Rather, he was confused by the scenery around him. Had anyone else seen it, they would think they'd made it to paradise.

"Mmm? Hajime?"

Clinging to Hajime's right arm was Yue. Normally, she wore one of his T-shirts to bed, but right now she was stark naked. It was the same way she'd slept with Hajime back when they'd first made it to Oscar's hidden house deep within the Great Orcus Labyrinth, with

Hajime's hand wedged between her legs.

"Fwaaah! Is it morning already?"

Hanging off of Hajime's left arm was Shea. She wasn't completely naked, but seeing as she was wearing an unbuttoned dress shirt of Hajime's that left all of her important bits exposed, she may as well have been.

"He he, Mashter...my arse can take no more punishment."

Tio was hugging Hajime's right leg, with her face buried in his crotch. She wriggled her butt as she muttered in her sleep, her yukata completely open and also covering nothing.

"Even you're here, Remia..."

Remia was occupying the open space below Hajime's feet, and she was the only one sleeping in a normal posture. In fact, her pajamas weren't even messed up, though she was clinging to Hajime's shorts with one of her hands. But honestly, that was more cute than annoying.

Actually, the whole situation was more cute than annoying. Hajime was surrounded by beautiful girls. Indeed, every man in the world would be jealous of him if they could see this.

"You know, I did give all of you your own rooms..." Hajime said with a small smile as he watched Yue and Shea slowly wake up. He then turned to look around his room. A good seventy percent of it was occupied by bookshelves filled with books and video games. There was one window that faced south, and the bit of sunlight filtering through the navy blue curtains indicated that the weather was clear.

Next to the window was a desk with an expensive gaming PC. There was a gaming chair by the desk as well. Finally, there were posters of Hajime's favorite anime on the door and lining the walls.

"....."

This was, without a doubt, the same room his parents had kept clean for a full year, believing against all odds that Hajime would one day return to them. After being summoned to a different world, Hajime had gone through quite a bit of hardship, but in the end, he'd succeeded in returning home to his parents.

A little over half a month had passed since the fateful day he'd returned home, and Hajime had gotten into the habit of looking around his room each morning to remind himself that he really

was back.

Hajime felt a gentle touch on his cheek and he looked down to see Yue gently caressing it.

“Don’t worry. You’re really here, Hajime. You made it back at last,” Yue said with a heartwarming smile. Her ruby-red eyes always saw right through him, but he didn’t mind that. As he looked deeply into her eyes, she leaned forward and kissed him softly. He could feel the depths of her kindness and her love for him through just that one kiss alone.

She must have noticed that he’d almost slipped into combat mode a few seconds ago and was trying to be extra reassuring.

“...Yeah, you’re right. I’m home. This is reality.”

Hajime lifted his left arm, which looked just like a regular flesh and blood arm. He then traced his right eye, which had no eye patch covering it, with his fingertips.

As he looked back into Yue’s eyes, he saw his old self reflected in them: a normal high schooler with black hair and two functioning, regular eyes. There was no visible proof of the torture he’d suffered in the depths of that labyrinth or of the superhuman body he’d acquired because of it. No white hair, no prosthetic metal arm, no magical eye made of specialized ore.

As he’d been planning his trip back to Earth from Tortus, he’d worked with Yue and the others to change his appearance back to what he’d looked like before, or at least as close to it as they could manage.

“Are you still not used to being your old self?” Yue asked gently as she ran her hand through Hajime’s hair.



“I guess not, huh?” Hajime replied with a slight smile. His left arm and right eye only looked normal. Underneath the artificial skin, his arm was still a metal prosthetic, and his right eye was still the same Demon Eye he’d fashioned for himself.

If he’d really wanted to, he could have had Kaori restore his old body with restoration magic. The reason he hadn’t was because it was the new, white-haired, one-armed, one-eyed version of him that had fought through all those trials and hardships together with Yue and the others. He didn’t want to throw away that part of himself.

Also, it was simply a matter of practicality to keep all of the powerful weapons he’d grafted onto his body. He wasn’t foolish enough to think he’d never need to fight again. So for both of those reasons, he’d kept his new body and simply camouflaged it to look like his old one.

“I guess it’s not that easy to change gears. Everything that happened back on Tortus is still fresh in my mind.”

“Maybe it’s because you’ve been so busy since getting back?”

“Yeah, that’s definitely a big part of it.”

Unsurprisingly, Hajime had been quite busy over the two weeks since he’d returned to Earth. An entire class of people had mysteriously disappeared all at once and stayed missing for a full year. Naturally, their sudden reappearance had caused quite a stir.

They’d had to explain everything that had happened to the police and various politicians, then go through rigorous physical and mental examinations. Hajime had also had to go through various administrative procedures to obtain permission for Yue and the others to live in Japan, and then they’d had the mass media to deal with. Hajime hadn’t even had a full day to sit down and talk with his parents.

“Thank you, Hajime…” Yue said, once again reading Hajime’s thoughts.

It had been difficult getting Yue and the others to integrate into Japanese society, considering how different their cultures were from Earth’s. Thankfully, Hajime’s classmates (especially a certain young man whose presence was thinner than a shadow and who was now going by the extremely ridiculous nickname Abyssal Lord) had helped him out a lot.

Hajime and his friends had run themselves ragged, even

cutting down on sleep and time they could have spent with their parents to make sure Yue and the others weren't bombarded by journalists, and to ensure they were able to live comfortably in Japan. Naturally, Yue and the others felt bad about that, but there was nothing they could have done.

"Don't worry about it… You guys are all family."

"Mmm… Still, thank you."

Hajime was willing to do anything and everything for the irreplaceable people he'd brought back to Japan. He didn't want them to feel the same fear and unease he had when he'd been summoned to Tortus. After all, to them, Earth was a completely different world.

Of course, Yue and the others were well aware of the great lengths Hajime had gone to for them. It was Hajime himself who didn't realize how much the things he considered a given meant to them, though. That was just the kind of person he was, but it was also why Yue and the others found him so adorable.

Yue stared up at him again, willing him to see just how grateful she was through the look in her eyes. Her beauty was as striking as always, and Hajime ran his fingers through her golden-blonde hair. He then reached down and brushed the tips of her ears, prompting her to smile at him.

"Things will finally settle down a little now, right?"

"Yeah, I've finished most everything that needs to be done. Though there are a couple things that are still just stopgap solutions. There are probably some more things we'll need to take care of down the road."

"It's okay… We've learned a lot too."

Yue grabbed Hajime's hand and pressed it against her cheek. As he watched her expression change slightly, he realized now why they'd all come into his room instead of sleeping in the makeshift rooms he'd made for them.

They'd all been waiting for things to calm down enough that they could feel comfortable begging him to spoil them.

He smiled apologetically at Yue and said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you all feel lonely. I honestly wanted to show you around my hometown a lot sooner than this, but…"

"Don't worry about it. Your mother kept us company while you were busy. Besides…" Yue brought her mouth to Hajime's ear and

whispered, “We have plenty of time now. We’ll be together forever, after all.”

She then playfully bit Hajime’s earlobe.

“Yue.”

“Mmm…Hajime.”

The two of them cupped each other’s cheeks and pressed their foreheads together. Yue stuck her tongue out of her lips, and the two of them kissed again, more passionately this time. Both of them could see the happiness reflected in each other’s eyes, and as they pulled away, they both smiled at each other.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Good morning, Yue.”

“Mmm… Good morning, Hajime.”

Just as the two were about to start kissing again, they were rudely interrupted.

“Jeez! Have you forgotten that we’re here too?!” Shea roared, grabbing Hajime’s face and turning it toward her.

Oh yeah, she woke up at the same time as Yue, didn’t she?

Shea didn’t give Hajime a chance to object before pressing her lips against his and sticking her tongue into his mouth.

Shea’s kisses were far more intense than Yue’s, and she sucked greedily on Hajime’s tongue. After a few seconds, Shea finally pulled away and said, “Pwah, he he he! Good morning, Hajime-san, Yue-san.”

“Mmm… Good morning, Shea.”

“Y-Yeah, morning, Shea.”

Yue took all of this in stride, but Hajime looked a bit conflicted, not only because they were both sticking their lips out at the same time, expectantly waiting for more kisses, but because they now had a new observer.

“Umm, you don’t have to pretend to still be asleep, Remia,” Hajime said, noticing her close her eyes the moment he turned to her. He’d been so focused on Yue that he hadn’t realized she’d awoken.

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t want to disturb you,” Remia replied hurriedly, looking like a child who’d been caught in the middle of a prank. She quickly sat up and straightened out her hair. It was honestly charming how she was always trying to look perfectly presentable.

“Morning, Remia. Were you able to sleep all right down there?”

“Oh, yes. I had more than enough room. And…I feel the most at ease when I’m by your side, Hajime-san.”

She blushed slightly as she said that, then glanced away guiltily. It was clear she was wondering whether or not it was okay to give Hajime a good morning kiss as well. Even if she wasn’t doing it on purpose, every single one of her mannerisms just made her look cuter, so Hajime had to hold himself back from pushing her down right then and there.

“Tio, Myu’s right here, so restrain yourself. If you can’t, I’ll teleport you into the ocean.”

“I-I’m sorry, Master, it was just a joke!”

Tio hurriedly got up as well, making it obvious she, too, had just been pretending to be asleep. She’d been sneakily trying to pull down Hajime’s shorts, but Hajime put a stop to her perverted antics before she could do anything that Myu wasn’t allowed to see. She hadn’t fixed up her yukata before getting up, so her boobs bounced up and down as she sat up, and the full length of her legs was clearly visible.

Normally, any man would find her unbelievably attractive, but the fact that she was panting happily at the prospect of being tossed into the ocean killed any lust that might have been welling up inside Hajime. At the moment, though, he was thankful for how much of a turn-off that was.

Seeing the hopeful look in Tio’s eyes, Hajime kicked her off the bed, and she shouted, “Thank you very much!” as she hit the ground with a thud.

“Mrrr? Daddy?”

“I’m right here. Good morning, Myu.”

At this point, they were all being noisy enough that even Myu woke up. Everyone watched with a smile on their face as she slowly rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

“Mmm… Good morning…”

Myu also puckered her lips, clearly expecting a kiss from Hajime. It was obvious who she’d been influenced by.

“Whoa there,” Hajime said, holding his hand out to stop her. He then glared at Yue and Shea, who guiltily averted their gazes.

“Mrrr? Why’d you stop me?”

“It’s too early for you to be kissing people on the lips, Myu. Besides, I’m your dad.”

“Unacceptable! Shut up and let me kiss you!”

“Myu, where did you learn that kind of language?!”

“From the drama mommy really likes!”

After coming to Earth, Remia had gotten hooked on TV dramas. Yue and the others had been amazed by the wonders of modern civilization as well, but they’d been far more impressed by Hajime’s PC. They’d all ended up becoming computer fans like the rest of the modern youth, but Remia had been far more entranced by the romantic drama she’d caught a glimpse of on TV. Hajime still remembered how her eyes had glittered with excitement as she’d sat down, eyes glued to the TV while everyone else tinkered with his computer.

Incidentally, everyone had a different favorite modern appliance. Yue loved her smartphone’s GPS feature, Shea was all over the pressure cooker, Tio was amazed by the bathroom—specifically, the fact that you could get hot water from the faucets—and Myu was obsessed with video game consoles.

Yue’s expression had truly been something to behold when Kaori had explained that if Hajime had his phone on him, Yue would be able to track his location via GPS no matter where he was.

Incidentally, Kaori’s expression had been the exact opposite of Yue’s when she’d been giving that lecture.

Shea’s and Myu’s favorite modern appliances both matched their respective personalities perfectly. Shea had already started taking over the Nagumo family’s kitchen, while Myu was the person from Tortus who had become the most proficient in using computers, microwaves, and other electronic gadgets in this short time.

As for Tio, well, she had been spending a lot of time in the bathroom and everyone could hear weird moaning noises every now and then, but they were all trying their best not to think too hard about it.

At any rate, after hearing Myu’s answer, Remia covered her face with her hands and apologized profusely for being such a bad influence on her daughter. Hajime gently patted her back to try to calm her down, while Yue turned to Myu and said, “Myu, I’ll give you a good morning kiss instead.”

Not wanting to be part of the group that was being a bad

influence on Myu, Yue pulled her out of Hajime's arms and softly kissed her on the cheek.

Myu let out a tiny squeal of surprise but otherwise didn't protest.

"Here, I'll give you a good morning kiss too. Good morning, Myu!" Shea said, taking Myu from Yue and kissing her on the forehead.

Tio decided she also wanted to join in. "I'd like to be part of this as well. Good morning, Myu."

"I'll be more careful from now on, but you shouldn't say those kinds of things, okay, Myu?" Remia said, taking her daughter back.

"Eek! Everyone keeps kissing me!"

Naturally, Hajime had no compunction about kissing Myu on the forehead, and he did so once everyone else was done with her. That seemed to pacify her for the moment, and she excitedly got out of bed.

It was hard to believe this group of people had been fighting for their lives in a different world just a month prior.

Though Hajime was having a hard time fully changing gears, seeing a scene like this helped drive home the fact that he'd really made it back, and that no harsh trials were waiting for him every time he woke up.

"Hajime, you better get up soon or—"

The familiar yet nostalgic voice of Hajime's mom reached his ears as she walked up the stairs and opened his door before he could warn her not to.

Sumire Nagumo, a woman in her early forties with a stylish bob cut, walked into the room and froze when she saw what was going on in her son's bed—namely, the fact that her son was surrounded by naked and half-naked women.

"Ah." Yue, Shea, Tio, and Remia said at once. They all stared at the woman who was effectively their mother-in-law now.

Honestly, from the way everyone looked, it was hard to tell if they'd had a wild time last night, or if all of these women were just about to have their way with Sumire's son.

Of course, in either case, this situation was extremely awkward. Yue and the others started panicking, worried that Sumire might think they were all shameless women and chase them out of the Nagumo household.

“Mom, it’s not what you think. I can—”

“Ah, grandma! Good morning!” Myu exclaimed, interrupting Hajime’s attempt to explain the situation.

“Oh, good morning, Myu-chan. You’re in a good mood this morning.”

Thanks to Myu’s cheerful greeting, Sumire’s stiff expression turned into a smile, and she turned to Yue and the others.

“Should I come back an hour later, then? Well, with how many of you there are, I guess I should give you two hours. Enjoy.”

“What?!”

Stunned by how understanding Sumire was being, Yue and the others were unable to say anything before she left and closed the door behind her.

“Y-You’re misunderstanding, mother—” Yue shouted far too late, stretching her arm out toward the door.

“Deeeeeeaaaaaar! Our son’s having an orgy in his room! As his mother, how am I supposed to react to this?!” Sumire shouted, running down the stairs.

Shea hurriedly jumped out of bed and said, “I-I’ll go explain things to—”

“What?! I can’t believe my son’s sleeping with his harem this early in the morning! I thought that only happened in visual novels! What is he, a visual novel protagonist?!” Hajime’s father, Shu Nagumo, shouted from the living room.

“Oh, but dear, that means we’re going to have even more grandchildren! Our family’s going to keep on growing!”

“We should go to the temple and buy some charms for all of the girls to pray for their safe deliveries. Actually, Sumire, we should do that right now. Driving to the local temple and back should take us around two hours. That’s enough time, right?”

“Oh, yes, that’s a perfect idea! It’d be awkward if we stuck around, right? I’ll be ready in forty seconds!”

As Hajime’s parents ran around getting ready, Remia covered her face with both hands, her cheeks so red she looked like a tomato.

Yue, Shea, and Tio were blushing in embarrassment as well, but at the same time, they gave Hajime a knowing look.

“Dad, mom...” Hajime shook his head in exasperation.

Hajime, your parents are just like you.

Hajime-san, your parents are just like you.

Master, your parents are just like you.

Yue, Shea, and Tio were all thinking the exact same thing. For his part, Hajime's reaction was surprisingly tame. It was far closer to how his personality had been before the ordeals he'd gone through in Tortus.

"Daddy? What are grandpa and grandma doing?" Myu asked, completely oblivious to the situation at hand.

Never change, Myu. You're the only pure one here... Hajime thought.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it. Mom and dad have always been like that. They go with the flow really easily, but they also say some pretty random things at times." Hajime gently patted Myu on the head, then turned back to Yue and the others. He glared pointedly at them and said, "Put on some clothes, will you?"

It was, after all, their fault his mom had misunderstood things.

"Ah!"

Yue, Shea, and Tio normally slept naked or close to it when they were sleeping in the same bed as Hajime, so they hadn't really given it much thought, but after this incident with Sumire, they were doing some serious self-reflecting.

Hajime was just thankful it wasn't his dad who'd come to wake him up. Had that happened, poor Shu would have likely had his memories of what he'd seen removed by force. Just as Hajime was thinking that, he heard his dad sneeze from the living room.

"What the?! Why do I suddenly feel a chill?!" Shu said.

"I'll go explain things to them, so you all should get dressed, okay?" Hajime said as he handed Myu off to Remia and got out of bed.

"Okay," Yue and the others responded apologetically.

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"Today's breakfast is delicious, Shea-chan, Remia-chan," Sumire said.

"I'm impressed by how quickly you adapted to Earth's food, even though you guys must have completely different spices and ingredients in your home world," Shu added.

After getting dressed, everyone had come down to eat

breakfast together at the dining table. It was honestly a rare occurrence for everyone in the Nagumo household to be around for breakfast. Hajime's parents both worked in creative fields—Sumire was a popular shoujo manga author, while Shu worked at a game development company. They were both extremely passionate about their jobs and hardcore otaku, which meant they were both night owls.

Normally, they never ate breakfast, and honestly, they skipped lunch pretty often too. They mostly subsisted on one big meal each day, that meal being dinner. Both of them were of the opinion that waking up early just to eat was a waste of time. Or rather, they had been of that opinion until Shea and Remia came along.

"He he he, I'm glad you like it. I heard all about Earth food from Hajime-san back when we were in Tortus, and he showed me how to make a few simple Earth dishes, so adapting wasn't too hard," Shea said with a smile, her bunny ears flopping around happily.

"I know everyone lives their lives differently, but you two must have been extremely stressed over the past year, right? Both of you are terribly thin. I know your work keeps you busy, but I'd like it if you at least ate three proper meals a day," Remia continued, in a kind voice. Even though she was younger than Sumire and Shu, both of them were gripped by the sudden urge to call her "mom" anyway.

Shea and Remia had started learning how to cook Earth dishes while Hajime was busy taking care of all the small details that had accompanied their return to Earth. They'd wanted to do what they could to help Hajime and his parents, as well as slowly get used to Japan, and cooking had seemed like a good way to do both.

It helped that both of them were good cooks already, so all they needed to do was learn how to use new ingredients and follow new recipes. Under normal circumstances, Sumire and Shu would never have woken up early to eat breakfast, but after hearing that two of their daughters-in-law were making homemade food for their sake, they'd immediately started setting alarms.

"If I don't eat a home-cooked meal made with love, how can I call myself a manga author?!" Sumire had said.

"There's no way I'd miss out on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!" Shu had shouted. Eating breakfast had nothing to do

with whether you drew manga or not, and since Shea and Remia were cooking every day it was hardly a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but either way, both of them had jumped at the chance to live out a common anime trope. They would have eaten anything their cute daughters-in-law cooked for them, even if it made them sick.

At any rate, a week had passed since then. Eating breakfast together as a family had become customary now.

“Hajime, you really brought back some wonderful wives. If you do anything to make them cry, I’m going to draw an NTR doujin with you in it and put it out at Comiket, so you better be careful,” Sumire said.

“Yeah, you better not ever leave them…or else…my revenge will be swift and merciless.”

“You guys are starting to scare me.”



Having been fed breakfast, lunch, and dinner for a whole week by Shea and Remia, Shu and Sumire were completely smitten with both of them.

Meanwhile, Shea and Remia blushed happily as Hajime's parents showered them with praise.

"Grandma, grandpa, what about Myu? Will Myu be a good wife someday?"

"Hmm, I must say I'm curious about your evaluation of me as well. I cannot cook like Shea or Remia, nor am I contributing to the family finances in any way. You could even say I'm a good-for-nothing freeloader."

Myu leaned excitedly out over the table, while Tio cocked her head to one side and considered her position in the household.

Over the past two weeks, Yue and the others had avoided going outside as much as possible. Journalists were crawling all over the place, hoping to ambush any one of them for an interview. Of course, they could have just used magic to mask their presence, made themselves invisible if they were spotted, or even have just teleported away. But Yue and the others weren't that interested in going outside in the first place, so they decided it wasn't worth the trouble. Or rather, they didn't want to go off and have fun while Hajime was pushing himself so hard, especially because they wanted Hajime himself to guide them around his hometown.

As a result, Tio was, as she had just said, a good-for-nothing freeloader.

"That's not true at all!" Sumire and Shu shouted in perfect sync. Seeing how often the two of them agreed with each other, Tio and the others had begun to realize that Hajime's parents were quite alike. On top of that, they clearly loved each other, so they made for a wonderful couple.

"You're a great wife too, Tio-chan! A comic relief character like you is the perfect—I mean, you're a kind and beautiful daughter-in-law! I'm so glad you joined the family!" Sumire exclaimed.

"Did you just say I'm comedic relief, mother?! I—"

"That's right, Tio-san! Don't put yourself down like that! A walking joke like—I mean, a wonderful wife like you is wasted on our son!" Shu added.

"You too, father?!"

It seemed Sumire and Shu both loved Tio, but as a comedian

rather than as wife material for their son. In a way, that was a fitting evaluation for a useless dragon like Tio.

"……"

Just then, Sumire looked over and saw Yue shooting surreptitious glances her way. She was trying to hide her expression by sipping on her tea, but Sumire could easily tell what she was thinking. She smiled warmly at Yue and their eyes met.

Yue gave a small nod and Sumire said, "Heh heh, of course you're the perfect wife as well, Yue-chan."

"Oh, umm…thank you, mother…"

Yue blushed and looked away, embarrassed. It was rare to see her acting so meek. Normally, she was surrounded by an aura of confidence.

"Does my mom still make you nervous, Yue?" Hajime asked.

"I-I'm not nervous," Yue protested.

"Everyone else has gotten pretty comfortable with your parents, Hajime-san, but…" Shea said, trailing off.

"It seems to me that you're thinking too hard about how you should be acting as a wife and a daughter-in-law. But I promise you, it's nothing you need to worry about," Sumire said gently.

"A-Ah…I-I'm sorry."

Yue covered her face with her hands. It was rare to see her this flustered, so Shea and the others smiled gently at her—though, in Shea's case, she looked a little turned on as well.

Normally, Yue proudly declared that she was Hajime's first wife, but it was precisely because she was so attached to that position that she was extra nervous around Hajime's parents. She absolutely didn't want them to hate her, and she wanted them to truly think from the bottom of their hearts that she was the best life partner their son could ever hope for. As a result, she often got too worked up around them.

"It's okay. You can relax. No matter what anyone says, you're the perfect wife, Yue-chan. We're both very glad to have you, isn't that right, dear?"

"That's right. The more we hear about what happened in that other world, the happier we are that Hajime met someone like you. Thank you so much for staying by his side through everything."

Both of them were deeply grateful to Yue. There was no telling

what might have happened to Hajime if not for her. Even if he might have survived either way, his soul could very well have withered and died down there in the labyrinth without Yue.

Unfortunately, their heartfelt gratitude just made Yue feel even more flustered.

“I-I just…did what I wanted, so it’s not like I deserve to be thanked for it…”

Hajime grinned as he watched Yue try to downplay her accomplishments. Meanwhile, Shea looked like she might push Yue down right then and there.

“Besides, it seems like our son can’t live without you anymore,” Shu said with a grin.

“So please take care of Hajime for us, okay, Yue-chan?” Sumire added.

“Oh, yes, of course!” Yue nodded emphatically, her exaggerated actions making her look unbelievably cute. They also made her look younger than she usually did.

“Hey, Yue, is it just me or have you been acting more like a kid since coming here?”

“Oh, I was thinking that too! Whenever mom’s around, Yue-san starts acting childish, doesn’t she?! It’s sooo cute!” Shea exclaimed, glad to have found a fellow moe Yue appreciator in Hajime.

Everyone turned to Yue, who blushed even harder and said, “Th-That’s because mother and father are both so kind. They treat me like their real daughter and…while Uncle Dien taught me what having a father is like, I never really knew what it felt like to have a mother…”

Yue had been a blessed child since birth, so her parents had treated her more as an object of worship than their daughter. Her uncle had been a surrogate father to her, but Yue had grown up without really knowing a mother’s love. Thus, though Yue had only spent a short time with Sumire, her kindness had truly touched Yue’s heart.

Another big reason Yue was so nervous around Sumire and Shu was because she wasn’t sure how to express how happy she felt that they treated her like their real daughter.

“Aaaaaah, you’re just so cute!”

“Mmm?! Mother?!”

Unable to hold back any longer, Sumire leaped out of her chair

and went over to hug Yue. Yue was just too dang cute.

“M-Mother, that’s a little too tight. Plus, everyone’s watching…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, no one minds!”

“Whoa?!”

Sumire suddenly lifted Yue into a princess carry and took her over to the living room sofa. Though Yue was surprised, it was clear from the look on her face that she was happy as well.

“They grow up so fast,” Shu said, wiping a tear out of the corner of his eye.

“Are you seriously crying, dad?”

“She’s just so damn cute, okay?!”

Frankly, Hajime agreed with his dad; he just wanted to tease him.

Shea chuckled as well, both at Yue and at Hajime and his parents’ overzealous reactions.

“Truthfully, I was pretty surprised when you first brought Yue-chan and the others home,” Shu said, looking off into the distance. “Who would have thought you were summoned to another world just like in one of the games I’ve made? And there, you obtained a real harem for yourself. Or Rarem for short.”

“Stop trying to make Rarem happen. It’s not going to happen. But yeah, I was worried about how you and mom were going to react, but in the end, it went just as I expected.”

Hajime also thought back to that fateful day a few weeks ago…

Chapter II: An Everyday(?) Morning in the Nagumo Household Part 2

“I’m home, dad, mom.”

“Welcome back, Hajime.”

That night, when Hajime had returned home, Sumire and Shu had hugged him as tightly as possible, confirming that he was real and truly standing outside their door. Then, after a few seconds, they’d ushered him inside…mostly because they’d noticed the lady next door peering at them through her curtains.

Hajime was acquainted with this particular neighbor, and he’d been unsure whether or not he should bow to her, but the problem was that he’d been missing for about a year now. He didn’t want to cause a stir, so he’d dutifully followed his parents inside to the safety of their home.

More than anything, though, he wanted to spend some time with his parents now that they’d finally been reunited. Besides, he missed his old house. He’d only been gone for a year, but it was a year that had felt like a lifetime.

As he’d walked past the foyer, he’d gently traced his hand across the stains in the old wallpaper. The familiar smells of home made him tear up, and it took everything he had not to break down crying.

“Come on, what’re you just standing there for? Don’t tell me you forgot where the living room is.”

“Of course I haven’t, dad.”

Hajime couldn’t help but smile at his dad’s lighthearted jest.

Sumire was still too overcome by emotion to say anything, but normally both Hajime’s mom and dad were constantly cracking jokes or making references to common otaku media tropes. They looked much thinner and older than Hajime remembered but were otherwise the same.

Hajime was so unbelievably happy to see them again that he felt himself choking up a little as he made his way to the living room.

“I-Is all this…?” Hajime gasped as he saw all of the newspaper

clippings on the dining table, as well as the missing children flyers. He caught a glimpse of the webpages open on both of his parents' laptops as well, and he could immediately tell that they had never given up, not even for a minute. He could imagine just how painful it must have been for them to keep on searching.

"We tried everything we could over this past year. But in the end, we weren't able to find a single clue as to where you'd gone. Even the police couldn't do anything. Hajime…where did you…where did all of you…go?" Shu asked, gently closing his laptop. Various emotions flitted across his face, and Hajime could tell he was a little nervous.

"Also…what happened that day you went missing, Hajime?" Sumire asked, wiping away her tears.

They'd disappeared in broad daylight, but it had just been Hajime's class that had vanished. No one knew how it had happened or even *what* had happened. Sumire looked straight at her son, determined to hear the whole truth. She wanted to know everything.

"Well…the answer to that is simple, but also not that simple. There's a lot I've gotta tell you guys."

Hajime's voice was far rougher than the mild-mannered boy that Sumire and Shu remembered, and they both waited with bated breath to hear his story. They could tell just from the sound of his voice that he'd been through a lot.

"I see… Then let me clean up this table so we can talk. Also, give me a second to make some café au lait for you."

"Thanks, mom."

"He he, you sound all grown up now."

"You really do. Come on, don't just stand there, sit down. Good, you still remember what your usual seat is."

Shu smiled as he watched Hajime take the seat closest to the living room door. That alone helped drive home that it was really his son who'd come back.

Once Sumire had made Hajime's favorite, a slightly bitter café au lait, and Shu had finished clearing away the dining table, Hajime started telling them everything that had happened.

Too much had happened for him to say it all in one go, so he stuck to the most pertinent points to begin with. Even that took so long that dawn was breaking by the time he was done.

“And that’s more or less everything that happened,” Hajime said, finishing his tenth cup of café au lait.

Sumire and Shu both let out long sighs and slumped into their chairs. Shu rubbed his temples while Sumire looked down at Hajime’s empty cup, unsure of what to say.

“Is it too crazy to believe?” Hajime asked with a sad smile. Honestly, he was grateful that they hadn’t constantly interrupted him to ask questions or stopped him halfway and told him to stop making things up. He knew how ridiculous his story must have sounded.

Sumire and Shu exchanged glances, then, choosing his words carefully, Shu said, “Well, yeah. You know we’ve both seen and written stories like that all the time for work, so we’re familiar with the idea, but you’re saying all this happened…for real…”

“It’s hard to take in all at once,” Sumire added bluntly.

“But considering how strange the circumstances surrounding that mass disappearance were…I believe it’s possible. Besides, you have no reason to lie to us. What I’m most worried about is that…”

“Someone’s forcing you to tell this story. Or that you’ve somehow been convinced that all of this is true when it’s not.”

“Ha ha, those are the most realistic explanations. If I were you two, I’d be thinking the exact same thing.”

It was far more realistic to assume that Hajime and his class had been brainwashed or implanted with false memories somehow. In other words, it wasn’t that Shu and Sumire mistrusted their son, they were worried he needed medical attention of some kind.

“Dad, mom, I can definitively prove to you that all of that really happened. But first, assuming that I’m telling the truth, I need to ask you something important.”

Hajime took a deep breath, and his parents waited patiently for him to continue. This was one thing he absolutely needed to be sure of. Back in the Frost Caverns, his clone had pointed out his deepest fears…and while he’d put off answering back then, it was time to finally confront them.

“What do you think about the things I’ve done? How do you feel about me now?”

Hajime was prepared for them to be disappointed in him, or even to hate him, but though he’d mentally steeled himself, he

knew it would hurt if they were revolted by him. In fact, he'd probably run out of the house and go cry in Yue's arms.

To his surprise, though, Shu and Sumire just gave him an odd smile.

"You know, Hajime, neither me nor Sumire are saints."

"Huh?"

His parents got up from their seats and walked over to him.

"We care way more about our son's safety than any people he might have killed. Maybe that's not the right stance to take, but that's just how parents are. You don't need to look so nervous... Do you really think we'd disown you? Don't be silly," Sumire said, patting Hajime's head.

"But mom...I may have only done it because I had to, but I still killed people without hesitation. I've changed. Can you really accept a son who doesn't feel any remorse when they kill another person?" he asked reflexively. It wasn't like him to ask leading questions like this just to get reassuring answers. Still, even Hajime had times when he wanted reassurance, especially from his parents.

Shu sighed and ruffled his hair.

"There's no way we wouldn't accept you. Sorry, but it's impossible to quit being a member of the Nagumo family. No matter what happens, even if you want to cut ties with us, you're still going to be our son, and that's final."

"Dad..."

"You might be able to escape from the Demon Lord, but there's no escaping your old man!"

"Did you really have to bring out a reference now of all times?"

Regardless, Hajime could tell his dad's feelings were sincere.

"Do you regret what you've done, Hajime?" Sumire asked, sitting down next to him. Hajime shook his head without hesitation.

"No, not at all. I don't think what I did was wrong either. I chose the path I did fully prepared for the consequences."

Hajime knew that if he hadn't gone that far, he might have lost everything. Though he'd constantly been getting stronger, the more people he grew to care about, the more desperate he became to protect them all. His harsh experiences in the abyss had taught him that hesitation and compassion were your worst

enemies on the battlefield.

Sumire's expression softened a little, and she asked, "And will you continue killing people now that you've come home?"

"No...definitely not. I'm done with killing, mom. When I started on my journey to get home, I decided I would kill anyone who stood in my way, but now that journey's over. I know I need to change the way I do things...though, I don't intend on becoming a pure pacifist either."

"I see. Then there's no problem, is there? Even if you don't feel any revulsion toward killing other people, you haven't lost your emotions or your sense of reason, so there's nothing to worry about. Besides, if it looks like you're about to go down the wrong path, I'll just scold you and bring you back."

Hajime was Sumire's son, and she would gladly take responsibility for anything and everything that he might have done or would do.

That promise meant the world to Hajime. He knew that if his parents actually saw him kill someone before their eyes, they'd be shaken. They probably wouldn't unhesitatingly offer words of reassurance like they had just now. But he knew now that they wouldn't abandon him, no matter what. And honestly, that was more than enough.

"I see..."

Hajime let out a long breath he didn't even know he'd been holding, and the tension drained from his shoulders. At long last, the fear he'd been carrying deep in his heart had been dispelled.

Sumire and Shu watched on quietly as Hajime closed his eyes and sorted out his feelings. In this moment they knew that their son had truly come home in both body and soul.

"Thank you, dad, mom," Hajime said after a few minutes, opening his eyes.

They just nodded in response. No words were necessary.

"All right, then, let's get back to proving what I said was true."

"O-Okay," Shu said, taken aback by the sudden change in topic.

"You sure switched gears quickly!" Sumire exclaimed.

But of course, both of them could tell he was also changing the subject to hide his embarrassment, so they just smiled and nodded.

"Okay, what's this definitive proof you have for us?" Shu asked,

his expression doubtful. He was ninety percent sure there was no way Hajime's story was true.

"So, uhhh…do you guys remember that time we wrote down all the things we'd want to see and do if we ever got isekaied?"

"Hmm? Yeah. Pretty sure we did that more than once, with a bunch of different common tropes."

"Yeah, like what we'd do if we found ourselves in a zombie apocalypse, or if there was a terrorist threat in the city and stuff. It's the kind of thing all otaku love daydreaming about."

Indeed, Hajime and his parents had discussed over a dozen times what he'd like to see in another world if he ever got sent to one. Because everyone in the Nagumo family was an otaku, it was a common topic.

Shu and Sumire shot Hajime a puzzled look, unsure of why he was bringing that up now.

Blushing a little, Hajime said, "Remember how you always said, 'If you're a real man, you'll master swordsmanship and magic, defeat the Demon Lord, and gather a harem of cute girls!' dad?"

"It's a cliché, sure, but a good one. But every time I said that, you always responded, 'I don't have what it takes to defeat the Demon Lord, but I guess I'd give it my all to try to at least get back home. And if I met anyone I grew to care about, I'd try to bring them back too.' You really should have been dreaming bigger."

"Sorry I'm not as much of a man as you…but, well, I defeated the Demon Lord *and* an evil god with my harem, so I guess I fulfilled your dreams and then some."

"Hajime…umm, you aren't about to say you want to introduce us to all the girlfriends you picked up along the way, are you? I thought those were all imaginary."

"Well, they're real."

Shu and Sumire exchanged glances, unsure of how to respond.

"Hold on a second, dear. What if they're the ones who implanted these false memories into Hajime's head?" Sumire asked, her expression suddenly turning grim.

"Whoa, smart thinking, Sumire. I can't believe your brain's still working this well after an all-nighter!"

"That has to be it! Hajime was grinning way too much every single time he mentioned them! They must have seduced our poor son! I bet they'll ask us to buy some sacred vase for a million

dollars in return for fixing his memories!" A hint of rage began to enter Sumire's voice.

"Nope, the all-nighter fried your brain after all!" Shu exclaimed.

Hajime nearly burst out laughing at the insinuation that Yue and the others were scammers, but he held it in and looked off at a point in the living room that seemed to have nothing there.

"Yue, can you hear me?"

"H-Hey, Sumire! He's started talking to empty air! He really did make up imaginary girlfriends in his head! As his father, what should I do?!"

"Calm down, dear. Wait…no, we were too careless. What if they wiretapped Hajime?! If those scam salesgirls really exist, then maybe they're coming here right now!"

"What?! How dare you make our son take part in your scams, you monsters?! Just you wait! I'm going to haggle you all down into bankruptcy!"

Now Shu had completely lost his composure as well, so there was no one to stop Sumire's fantasies.

In fairness to them, though, Hajime had suddenly started talking to empty space. He knew it was pointless to try and calm them down now, so he just kept talking to Yue.

"Yeah, everything's fine. I want to introduce all of you. Yeah, just open a portal and come straight here. Teleport…about one meter east of my position."

At present, Yue and the others were waiting on the roof of Hajime's school. Those were the coordinates Hajime had set for the portal he'd created that had taken them from Tortus back to Earth. It was the place he could remember the most vividly outside of his own house, and the door leading up to it was usually locked, so it was unlikely they'd run into anyone there.

When they'd made it back, everyone had been overcome by emotion and lifted Hajime into the air to celebrate. Shizuku had had to yell at them to quiet down so they didn't attract attention, and after a bit, everyone had run home at Olympic sprinter speeds.

Yue and the others had suggested staying behind until Hajime's reunion was finished, since they hadn't wanted to get in the way. But of course, Shu and Sumire didn't know any of that, and they were starting to seriously consider admitting their son to a

psychiatric hospital with tears in their eyes.

Seconds later, though, their concern turned to surprise.

"It's okay, Hajime. I know a good doctor—Huh?"

"Found it, dear. This is the best hospital for—Huh?"

The space to the right of Hajime began to twist and warp, and a whirlpool of golden light suddenly appeared in the space between the living room and dining room. Shu's and Sumire's jaws dropped open, and their phones slipped from their slack fingers. The whirlpool of golden light slowly began to fade, revealing an oval-shaped portal. On the other side of that portal was a location that was quite familiar to both Hajime and his parents. It was his classroom in school.

"I-I-I-Is that the Anywhere Door?!" Shu shouted.

"H-Huh? What? What's happening?" Sumire exclaimed. Both of them leaped to their feet, knocking their chairs over.

A second later, a beautiful young girl poked her head out of the portal. She had luscious golden-blonde hair, ruby red eyes, and porcelain-white skin that made her look like a bisque doll. Shu and Sumire stiffened, their minds struggling to comprehend what they were seeing.

As Yue glanced around the Nagumo abode's living room, she spotted Hajime's parents and smiled warmly at them. It was such a dazzling smile that Sumire gasped, and Shu nearly fainted. Yue then turned toward Hajime, silently asking with her eyes if it was okay for her to come in.

Hajime got to his feet and held his hand out toward her.

"Welcome to the Nagumo family home. Come on in."

"Mmm..."

Yue hesitantly stepped through the portal. She kept her back ramrod straight and her hands clasped demurely in front of her. It was clear she was nervous. For her, the first meeting with Hajime's parents was one of the most important moments of her life.

Hajime walked over to stand beside her and smiled playfully at his parents. He'd wanted to surprise them, and he had.

"Dad, mom, this is Yue...the most important person in the world to me. Incidentally, she's a vampire *and* a former princess."

"Th-That's so many tropes at once!"

Even when they were completely flabbergasted, Shu's and Sumire's brains still worked on otaku logic. Though they hadn't

fully grasped the situation, their minds reflexively formed retorts.

They're definitely Hajime's parents, Yue thought with a small smile. That helped ease some of her nervousness, and she lifted the hem of her skirt slightly and curtsied to Sumire and Shu.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, mother, father. My name is Yue. I'm overjoyed to finally be able to meet you. I hope we can get along."

"Huh? O-Oh, well to meet you too. That's a very formal, polite introduction," Shu stammered.

"A-A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Sumire replied.

Both of them were so dumbfounded by the sudden appearance of Hajime's first girlfriend that they were tripping over their words. They both bowed over and over, and while Hajime did feel like he might be going a little overboard doing things this way, he nevertheless called the others in without hesitation.

"Shea, you can come in too!"

"Okay! Hi, mom, hi, dad! I'm Shea! Nice to meet you!"

"Now we've got a bunny girl?!" Shu and Sumire shouted in unison as Shea hopped through the portal.

Nice reaction! I knew I could count on Hajime-san's parents to notice all the right things! Shea thought with a smile.

Indeed, Shu and Sumire were staring intently at Shea's bunny ears. Their eyes had the same longing in them that Hajime's did when he lost himself in Shea's ears.

"Tio, you can come in too."

"Splendid. Well met, mother, father. I am Master's sex slave, the dragonman Tio Klarus. I look forward to getting to know you."

"Sex slave?!" Shu and Sumire shouted, their eyes nearly popping out of their skulls as Tio spread her dragon wings.

They staggered and fell back into their seats, their legs no longer capable of holding them upright.

Of course, Hajime didn't stop there.

"Remia, Myu, come on in."

"Coming, dear. Hello, my name is Remia. Thank you for inviting me and my daughter into your home," Remia said with a graceful bow.

"U-Umm...I'm daddy's daughter, Myu! Hi, grandma, hi, grandpa!"

"G-Grandpa?!"

"Y-You have a daughter?!"

This was the greatest shock yet. Not only did Hajime have half a dozen girlfriends, but it seemed he had a daughter too. Shu and Sumire were grandparents now. Both of them turned to Hajime, silently demanding an explanation.

Hajime smiled and said, “They all proposed to me. As you can probably see, Myu isn’t related to me by blood, but I’ve decided to adopt her, so she’s your granddaughter now. Be nice to her, okay?”

“Yeah, that doesn’t explain anything!”

“Also, if you recall from my story, there are four other girls. I’ll introduce them all later.”

“I can’t believe you really made a harem!” the two of them shouted in unison again. Despite saying Hajime hadn’t explained anything, they had more or less grasped exactly what was going on.

Now that they knew Hajime’s story about Tortus was real, they understood that Hajime had discovered he had some cheat superpowers in the isekai and created a harem before coming back home.

Of course, that didn’t make this any less shocking.

“Wait, hold on, Sumire. There’s no way girls this cute can be real! I bet they’re all CG!” Shu shouted, still in denial.

“Hajime, I understand wanting to marry your waifu, I really do, but you have to bring home real girls someday or you’ll become an incel!” Sumire yelled.

Both of them were panicking at these sudden developments but Myu mistook their confusion as rejection and asked in a sad voice, “Grandpa, grandma…should I not be here?”

That got both of them to immediately do a one-eighty.

“Hello, Myu-chan. I’m your grandpa! Of course you’re welcome here!”

“Hello, Myu-chan. I’m your grandma! This is your house, don’t worry!”

Their reactions were just like Hajime’s, and you could really tell he took after them in many ways.

Once they calmed down a little more, Shu and Sumire started peppering Yue and the others with questions, their otaku souls burning with curiosity. Yue patiently answered all of their questions and even recreated scenes of the past for them with restoration magic. They gasped in awe at the climactic flights,

blushed at all the romantic moments, and bit their nails with worry every single time Hajime was in a dire predicament.

Finally, once Yue had finished telling them everything, Shu shouted loudly enough to wake the neighbors, “Hellllll yeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! My son actually became a real isekai protagonist! Thank you, based god!”

“Kyaaaaaa, really?! My son really said that?! No wonder everyone calls him the Demon Lord now! I’m so happy!” Sumire exclaimed.

Both of them patted Hajime heartily on the back while he buried his face in his hands, blushing to the tips of his ears.

“Mmm… I’m glad your parents are just as weird as you, Hajime,” Yue said with a grin.

“Yeah, I can tell how you ended up the way you did now, Hajime-san!” Shea added.

“I should have known your parents wouldn’t be normal, Master!” Tio continued.

“Ufu fu fu, you really do take after them, Hajime-san,” Remia stated.

“Yeah, daddy and grandpa and grandma are all super nice!” Myu exclaimed.

Upon hearing that, Hajime looked up and glared at everyone.

“Don’t lump me in with them,” he said in a flat voice.

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After everyone finished drinking their morning tea, Shea and Remia went back into the kitchen to clean the dishes while Tio sat Myu on her lap and started braiding her hair into pigtails. Yue and Sumire were still sitting on the sofa, chatting.

It was a nice, lazy morning. The first morning that Hajime had been able to take it easy after returning to Earth, in fact. He smiled to himself as he reminisced about his reunion with his parents and how shocked they’d been when he’d introduced Yue and the others.

“Hajime, you’ll be able to relax for a while now, right?” Shu asked, turning to him with a smile. He was glad his son was finally free from the stresses of dealing with the public. He’d been looking forward to a morning like this where everyone could just

sit back and chill for a while.

Gone were the days steeped in despair where Sumire and Shu had gone to sleep each night worrying about where their son was and what had happened to him. There was no greater happiness than the time they had together now.

"Yeah, things are settling down now, dad. Notice how we haven't been getting any reporters knocking on our door today?"

"Yeah. I'm honestly amazed at how quickly they stopped. No one's asking me questions at work either," Shu said with a relieved sigh.

But then, Sumire turned over to him from the couch and said, "Hajime, what exactly did you do? This is clearly unnatural. All of the magazines reporting on you 'Returners' are being pulled from store shelves, and all the articles and videos and pictures that were floating around on the internet are getting deleted one by one. Even the internet trolls have quieted down."

"Returners" was the name that the mass media had given to Hajime and the others.

Yue got up on her knees and poked her head over the couch to look at Hajime as well.

Come to think of it, I never actually explained what I did.

Hajime cleared his throat and said, "Well, to put it simply, I spread magic that messes with people's perception across the world through the internet and TV."

"You what now?" Sumire and Shu asked in unison.

An evil grin spread across Hajime's face and he replied, "Remember the fake story I made up to tell the reporters?"

"I mean, obviously. We had to tell it to people too or journalists would start to get suspicious," Shu said.

"The story about how you were kidnapped by some foreign cult and they tried to brainwash you into joining them, right? Oh, and that they used drugs and hypnosis on you, so your memories are hazy."

Considering that the church in Tortus had basically been a cult and had tried to convince all the students to fight for them, it wasn't a complete lie. This was Hajime's specialty, coming up with a believable story that wasn't truly a lie but was still far from the truth.

Hajime and his parents had shared the fake story with the

families of the other missing students so that everyone would present the same version of events to reporters. He'd already discussed it with his classmates back when they'd been in Tortus, and everyone had been on board. Of course, all of the kids had told their parents the truth and showed them their magic, but the rest of the world only knew the fake story that Hajime had devised.

"We didn't know how exactly the news had spread about our disappearance while we were gone, but we all knew we'd be questioned upon our return for sure."

Hajime had also considered asking everyone to tell the truth and have the police and other government agencies simply think they were deluded kids. That would make it easier for them to all get therapy, and there were definitely kids who needed it. However, that would also mean that as long as they kept claiming they'd gone to another world and learned magic, people would think they still needed mental help. It would have been a bad strategy in the long term. Plus, things would get even more complicated if they actually proved the existence of Tortus and magic. Hajime absolutely did not want the world to know about his experiences or his powers. His parents wholeheartedly agreed with him on that, as did his classmates and their families.

The governments of the world would all get involved if they went and actually proved that there was another world they could travel to, and no one wanted that. Everyone had fought tooth and nail to get back to their old peaceful lives, so there was no way anyone was going to give that up for fame or clout. They all decided to keep their magic and the existence of Tortus a secret.

"It's a good story because it's just barely believable while still feeling unrealistic, which matches the unnatural nature of our disappearances. Of course, there are still plenty of people who might not be convinced, which was why I used magic to further convince everyone that our story was the truth."

Most importantly, Hajime wanted everyone to think that his and the other students' memories of events were hazy and unreliable. That way, they could get by just saying that some group they didn't recall too well had attacked the cult, and before they knew it they'd been sent back home. Everyone would assume that this mysterious group that had attacked the cult had rescued the kids.

Furthermore, since everyone's memories were supposed to be hazy, there wouldn't be any issue if there were minor inconsistencies with the way they told their stories. Hajime had also inserted some Artifacts into major newsrooms and police stations to make it easier for people to believe what the kids were telling them.

"Hmm, and that's why my name here is Yue Avatarl, right?"

"Yep. I figured using your old last name would be better than making up a new one."

"I would have preferred Nagumo. I'm your wife, after all."

"You can get it changed when we get legally married, okay? And you can keep your old last name as your middle name if you want."

"Mmm... I can't wait."

Though Hajime couldn't see Yue's legs, he was certain she was happily swinging them back and forth as she said that. Mostly because his mom had pulled out her phone and was surreptitiously snapping photos of Yue. While he understood why his mom would be obsessed with Yue, it still wasn't good to sneak photos of people without asking.

Tio looked up from Myu's hair and asked, "The story for us is that we were all born in Japan and have...birth certificates, you said it was? Regardless, we were raised together in a very isolated facility, which is why there are no public records of us, correct?"

"Oh, and that facility had connections to the cult that kidnapped all of you, right? It was made to raise promising kids and brainwash them into being obedient cult members or whatever," Shea added, poking her face out from the kitchen. Hajime nodded, so she went back to washing the dishes.

"Yeah, something like that. I didn't want to risk trying to forge foreign birth certificates, so this was the easiest story to use."

"I feel bad for the government official you mind controlled to make those birth certificates... You're sure there won't be any side effects on him, right?" Sumire asked, glaring sharply at her son.

In order to get birth certificates for Yue and the others, Hajime had had no choice but to use magic on one of the officials who worked at a local government office. It was far better to get real documents than to try and forge his own, after all.

"Yeah, I used a special Artifact that Yue helped me make. Don't

worry, mom, it didn't hurt him at all. In fact, as thanks, we used restoration magic on him to cure all of his chronic diseases."

"Really? Well, in that case..."

"We even healed all of his coworkers. Right now, everyone in that office is the healthiest they've ever been. It's actually caused a stir among all their friends, but it hasn't made national news because everyone's still preoccupied with us."

"Wait, you didn't just cast this magic on one or two people?!"

"Kaori's the one who came up with the idea, and at the time we were too busy to cast pinpoint magic, so she just used restoration magic on the whole building. Now the locals are calling the place a sacred site that cures diabetes."

"I'm glad they're superstitious enough to just take this in stride."

At any rate, according to Hajime's story, Yue and the others had been sent to the cult headquarters right when the mysterious group had attacked them, which was why they'd been sent back to Japan with Hajime and the others. But since the facility they'd been raised in was gone now and they had no known relatives, they were staying with the Nagumo family because they trusted Hajime.

The other reason Hajime hadn't wanted to give them foreign birth certificates was because it would have made it that much harder for them to remain in Japan. He'd needed the whole isolated facility setting because even if he could forge Yue and the others' records, he didn't want to mess with people's memories and make them believe everyone had lived here the whole time.

That being said, the world wasn't so simple that making up a fake cult to push the blame on and using magic to make everyone believe that was enough to solve all of the issues their sudden return had caused.

Unsurprisingly, they'd been the most talked about thing on the net since their miraculous return. People were making up all sorts of wild theories as the real explanation for what had happened, and of course, others were taking these rumors as ironclad facts and spreading them all over. If they'd just been outlandish rumors that looped back around to being true like "Those kids were definitely isekaied," Hajime wouldn't have minded. Unfortunately, the internet was a truly cursed place. People loved nothing more than being mad, and if there was nothing to be mad about, they

made up things to be mad about.

“It was so annoying how people kept flocking to our door like flies. They were all so rude too,” Yue muttered angrily.

“Thank you for protecting our house while I was gone, Yue.”

Indeed, the horde of reporters that had been crowding around everyone’s houses had been quite a nuisance. What was worse was reporters had even gone to their school and the houses of distant relatives of the kids living out in the countryside or close family friends and neighbors.

Of course, there were reputable journalists as well who were kind enough to call and try to schedule appointments, but either way, their numbers were just too great. No matter how polite they were, getting hundreds of calls a day from different people got exhausting. Every single news channel was running stories about their miraculous return, including some foreign ones.

“They say rumors never last long, so I figured just using a bit of light suggestion magic and giving everyone Artifacts that hide their presence would be enough, but…”

The power of the modern information age meant that even with Hajime and the others out of the public eye, people were still finding “evidence” to corroborate whatever stories they wanted to believe. The police had fully bought Hajime’s fake story and released an official statement, but even that hadn’t stopped the internet mob.

“Hatayama-sensei—Whoops, I guess I should call her Ai-chan now that she’s part of your harem. Anyway, Ai-chan had it the worst of all… How’s she holding up now?” Shu asked gently, his voice full of concern.

Indeed, Hajime had already brought Kaori, Shizuku, and Aiko home to let his parents know they were his girlfriends as well. It had been quite a shock when the first words out of Aiko’s mouth had been “I’m sorry, I’m a failure of a teacher. I laid a hand on your son despite being an educator.”

She’d then dropped to her knees and started pleading for forgiveness.

Everyone in Hajime’s family was of the belief that if ever there was a problem, the ideal solution was simply to drop to one’s knees and apologize profusely. As a result, Hajime, Shu, and Sumire were all masters of the overly profuse apology, and even to

them, Aiko's sincere apology had impressed them.

Of course, as die-hard otaku, Sumire and Shu were both big fans of student-teacher relationships, so they gladly welcomed Aiko into the family.

Thus, naturally, Shu's concern for Aiko was genuine.

"She takes her job a little too seriously, I think. I respect her for wanting to take the brunt of the public's curiosity and protect all of you, but..."

Aiko was an adult. The only adult who'd been a part of the kidnapped group, in fact. On top of that, she was a teacher, so it was her job to protect her students. As a result, she'd been given the most attention of all and had to bear the brunt of the public's malice.

Both the police and her bosses had called her in day after day to grill her on the details of what had happened, and the rest of society had been extremely cruel to her as well. The net had put her on full blast for "failing her duty as a teacher."

"Mrrr, why does everyone think Aiko-oneechan is a bad person? They're all dum-dums," Myu said, shaking her head angrily, her freshly braided pigtails swinging from side to side.

"Ha ha, that they are," Tio replied, patting Myu's head to calm her down a little. She then turned to Yue and the others and said in a sad voice, "Myu's absolutely right...but the world wants a scapegoat to direct their anger at."

Sumire folded her arms and nodded in agreement.

Why Hajime's class? How had the school allowed it to happen in broad daylight? How had no one noticed so many kids being kidnapped all at once? How had no one tracked down the culprits? What about the students who hadn't returned? There were no satisfactory answers to those questions, so the public had looked for someone they could feel justified in venting their anger on...someone they could blame for letting this come to pass. Aiko simply happened to make a convenient target.

"This wouldn't have happened if Aiko had been a more reliable teacher." "Why didn't she bring the kids back home sooner?" "How come she wasn't able to broadcast her location to anyone for a whole year?"

Those were the kinds of things people had started saying. Most of them didn't even really care about the safety of the students; all

that was driving them was malice.

"I'm glad she didn't quit her job," Sumire said softly.

"There's no way I was going to let that happen," Hajime said, frowning angrily.

Despite the constant bashing both in person and on the internet, Aiko had remained strong. A normal person would have crumbled under that much criticism, but Aiko had survived numerous deadly battlefields back in Tortus, so she was made of much sterner stuff. Of course, things had still been tough for her. Luckily, Hajime had been there to support her, both emotionally and with spirit magic.

In truth, Aiko had been fully prepared to be fired from her job when she'd willingly stepped into the scapegoat role to protect her students. Maybe after things settled down and the public forgot all about this event, she might be able to find a small rural school somewhere no one knew her and resume teaching, but she'd been certain she wouldn't be able to continue teaching at her current school. After all, Hajime and the others weren't the only class she taught. There were other students in her school that she cared about just as much, and she didn't want to cause them or her coworkers any trouble.

Indeed, she'd been ready to quit if her boss hadn't fired her, just so that peace could return to her beloved students a little bit faster. Despite everything that had happened, Aiko was still committed to her students above all else.

"I did the same thing I did to make everyone believe our fake story to make sure she could keep teaching."

"That whole disseminating magic through the internet and TV thing? What exactly did you do?"

"Brainwash the world, basically."

"You what?!"

Shu and Sumire both covered their ears with their hands, unable to believe what Hajime had just said. Meanwhile, Yue and Tio just laughed.

"So, I had Yue use her Divine Edict. It's a special kind of magic that can influence people's souls."

That was the same spell Ehitruje had used to decimate Hajime the first time they'd fought. But after he'd possessed Yue's body, she'd stolen his own signature move, as well as all of the other

magic he'd developed, so she was capable of using it herself.

Indeed, the reason everyone from Tortus had no trouble understanding people in Japan was because Yue had imprinted Language Comprehension onto everyone's souls.

Yue gave everyone a peace sign as Hajime said that. The gesture was so cute that Sumire started snapping pictures of her again. This time, Yue turned to the camera and winked, so she was clearly leaning into this rather than being put off by it.

Thank you for your fanservice! Sumire thought, pumping her fist as she kept on tapping her smartphone.

Meanwhile, Shu nodded at Hajime, asking for further clarification. His wife had been completely captivated by Yue, but he still wanted to know the rest of the story.

"Ahem! Anyway, I created Artifacts that could transmit Yue's Divine Edict over regular radio waves, then stuck them to radio towers all over the country."

He'd had his classmates help with this endeavor, and they'd all been busy running around the country for the past few days. Of course, they'd gladly agreed to help when they'd learned it was to help their beloved Aiko-sensei.

A certain Abyss Lord had accomplished a great deal, easily sneaking into TV stations and some very highly guarded locations without anyone noticing his presence. At this point, he was probably the most knowledgeable person in the world about industrial espionage. He'd also put his own voice recordings into the Artifacts he'd set, so there were times when you might hear "Bwa ha ha ha ha! The Demon Lord's right-hand man has emerged from the darkness to conquer you all!" on multiple TV stations at once, or when someone opened certain webpages. The most famous Demon Lord in Japan was, of course, Oda Nobunaga, so people were starting to think his ghost was haunting the airwaves or something.

"Anyway, just watching TV or listening to the radio will get you imprinted with Yue's Divine Edict and make you start to think that everyone, including Aiko, was a victim and that it's the cult that kidnapped us that's truly to blame."

"Whoa…"

"I also uploaded a video titled 'Emergency Broadcast!' that I had Aiko show up in. The actual contents of the video aren't really

important, but I made it easy to show up on video sites' front pages and anyone who watches it will also have Yue's Divine Edict imprinted on them."

Hajime had made use of his and Aiko's Language Comprehension ability to upload the same video in every major language, so now everyone on the internet was discussing how Aiko seemed to know over a hundred languages.

Everyone who saw the video also became subconsciously sympathetic toward Aiko and the other students and lost interest in flaming any of them.

"Truly, magic and the internet are the most powerful combination in the world. Heh heh heh," Hajime said with an evil chuckle. Sumire and Shu both stared at him, their expressions stiffening.

"Oh, come on, don't give me those looks. This is the world's fault for turning my teacher into a punching bag and trying to make her out to be the bad guy. They're just getting what they deserve."

It wasn't as if Hajime's plans were bringing anyone misfortune either. If anything, he'd made sure not to make anyone unhappy. He was quite proud of how considerate he'd been, all things considered. As a result, he didn't feel the least bit of guilt about mentally manipulating the entire world. In fact, he figured everyone should be thanking him, even though what he'd done was something truly befitting an evil Demon Lord.

"Father, mother, please forgive him. He's just doing this to protect all of us!" Yue said, desperately trying to defend her future husband.

"Y-Yeah, you're right. Ai-chan definitely didn't deserve the flaming she was getting online either," Shu said.

"The other parents also told me they were grateful they stopped being hounded by the press."

Of course, everyone else had also assumed Hajime had done something outrageous to make it happen, so it did sting at their conscience a little.

Still, thanks to this and all the other measures Hajime had taken, they'd all be able to return to their normal lives fairly quickly. Of course, they'd have to figure out how to catch up to the school curriculum and make up for all the time they'd missed, but

they were working through those problems one at a time. From the looks of it, they'd be starting special remedial classes in December, which was a month and a half out. It was the schedule the school administration had come up with to appease the calls of the public to let the kids return to their normal lives as soon as possible.

December was a good time to test how well everyone would be able to reintegrate because regular school would be out for winter break. Until then, everyone was free to recuperate at home, or in Hajime's case, finally enjoy some free time.

"Now then, that's enough lounging around. It's time to get to work," Hajime said, stretching his arms out and getting to his feet. He already knew exactly how he was going to be spending his free time.

Myu's eyes started to sparkle and she leaned out over the table.

"Are you going to make rooms now?! Am I going to get my own room?!"

"Huh? I'm making my own room."

"Our room?!"

"No, just my room."

Myu puffed out her cheeks, pouting.

"Hajime, give me a room next to yours. One with a door connecting them both. Actually, no, I don't need a door. Just make a single room for the two of us."

"I already told you that you can have my old room on the second floor."

"Master, please make sure your bedroom is large enough to fit a king-sized bed, as well as some iron bars, a cattle prod, and—"

"I'm not going to let you turn our basement into a BDSM dungeon, you pervert."

"Hajime-san, I want a fighting ring! And a room with tatami mats! I've been impressed by the various forms of martial arts they have on Earth! I plan on watching YouTube videos to learn them all!"

"And I already told you, you and Tio can have mom and dad's study on the second—"

"Umm, Hajime-san? Can I have a soundproofed room with an ultra-wide TV?"

"Remia...don't tell me you want a theater room just to watch

your morning dramas? Stop blushing. I'm not gonna do it."

"Hajime, your dad would really like it if—"

"Shut up!"

Everyone started making requests at once, overwhelming Hajime. This was all because he had said he would start expanding the house.

The Nagumo house was decently large, especially for a family of three. Sumire and Shu both had decent wages, so they'd splurged on a home that could accommodate both of their working spaces and their hobbies.

The house had five rooms. The master bedroom on the ground floor belonged to Sumire and Shu, while the second floor held Hajime's room, Sumire's library, Shu's study, and a display room for everyone's otaku merch. But now, the house suddenly had five new family members.

Hajime had stored everything in Sumire's library, Shu's study, and the display room in his Treasure Trove and converted them into temporary bedrooms.

Yue and Shea were sleeping in one, while Tio, Remia, and Myu slept in the other. The third room had become a guest room, since Shizuku and Kaori came to sleep over so often.

"Come now, Hajime, if you're going to make a man cave for yourself in the basement, there's no way we're going to miss out on the fun. I thought you loved your parents? Won't you make some rooms for us as well?" Sumire asked, crying fake tears.

"Hajime's horrible, isn't he, mother?" Yue said, egging her on.

"Look, I'm already ignoring building codes and zoning laws to make a room for myself in the basement. Why do you all want basement rooms too?"

The reason Hajime was making a room at all was mostly so that everyone wasn't so cramped on the second floor. He'd actually planned out his basement room ahead of time, so he'd wanted to spend today making it. He thought Yue and the others would have preferred aboveground rooms to get sunlight during the day, which meant he'd planned to make a new study, library, and display room in the basement to put all the stuff he'd moved out back. As a result, he was already planning on having two floors of basement space.

"Sorry, but you're not fooling your old man that easily. I know

you. You're going to make a bunch of hidden passageways and secret alcoves, aren't you?"

Hajime looked away guiltily. Shu was right on the money. He was planning on making a transmutation workshop so he could more easily make the things he wanted to when he had the time.

"I know how much you love rooms hidden behind trick bookcases and special meeting rooms! If you're going to make all of those, then you should make the rooms we want too!"

"Come on, dad, you're a grown man."

"I'd really like to experience elegant baths, like the ones in Thermae Romae. If you don't make a luxurious bathroom for me, I'm going to write NTR doujin starring you and sell them at Comiket!"

"What kind of mother are you?!"

For better or worse, everyone in the Nagumo household was quite serious about their hobbies. Sumire and Shu weren't going to give up on their passions just because they were childish.

Naturally, neither were Yue or the others. Seeing everyone staring expectantly at him, Hajime let out a long sigh. But in the end, he, too, was a son of the Nagumo household.

"Well, I guess it won't bother anyone no matter how big we make the underground space. Fine, I'll make a huge basement filled with all the rooms you guys could ever want!"

"Yaaaaaaaaay!" Yue, Shea, Tio, Myu, and even Remia let out hearty cheers and threw their hands into the air.

In truth, though, they were more happy for Hajime and his parents than themselves.

"I knew you wouldn't abandon us, son! Here, I've already got the blueprints for what I want!" Shu said, thrusting a paper into Hajime's hands.

"Look at this perfectly designed floor plan. I've even laid out the corridors so that any new visitors will be shocked by how weird our house is!" Sumire exclaimed, pulling up floor plans on her smartphone.

"Dad, mom...you guys really have good taste. This is perfect!"

"Oh, you're too kind!"

Sumire and Shu hugged Hajime, who started grinning in anticipation.

He'd never smiled this innocently back when he'd been in

Tortus. Yue and the others were truly glad to see him like this now. At the same time, they understood now that Hajime's days had been filled with this kind of joy before he'd been summoned and why he'd so desperately wanted to come back. They could also tell that Sumire and Shu had searched tirelessly for him every day since he'd disappeared.

It made sense now why Hajime had not only been trying to get back, but get back as soon as possible. He'd wanted to put his parents at ease, and he'd wanted his old life back.

"Hmm? What are you guys waiting for? Come on, don't you all want your new rooms?" Hajime asked, turning back to Yue and the others. They were all standing in the living room, smiling gently at him. "Don't just stand there, guys," he said, waving them over.

Yue and the others exchanged glances, nodded, and all started running over to Hajime.

"Mmm…coming!"

"This is going to be so much fun!" Shea shouted.

"Heh, to think this would be our first big undertaking together as a family!" Tio said.

"Grandpa, I wanna see the blueprints too!" Myu exclaimed.

"My my, don't run too fast now, Myu, or you'll trip," Remia said with a warm smile.

Chapter III: The Nagumos' Day Off

Unsurprisingly, Shu and Sumire got extremely excited upon seeing how easily Hajime was able to modify their house with his transmutation—the same magic that had once killed a god. Their praise made Hajime get a little carried away, and since Yue and the others didn't know what was normal and what wasn't for the average Japanese house, they didn't bother to stop him.

By the time he was done, Hajime had five entire stories' worth of rooms, and the whole structure was more than twice the size of the entire plot of land the Nagumo house sat on. The basement rooms were all accessible via a teleporter, so Hajime had built them over fifty meters deep underground, ensuring they wouldn't get in the way of municipal pipelines or the sewer system or anything.

All in all, Hajime had made his new bedroom, a workshop for himself, another workshop for his parents, a training room (complete with a shooting range), an arcade, a theater room, a freely modifiable nuclear shelter (made near the end of his building spree when he hadn't been in his right mind again quite yet), a new display room for everyone's otaku goods, and a fully stocked library.

None of their neighbors knew that literally overnight, a huge number of rooms had been built under their houses.

The morning after all that illegal construction was completed, Hajime looked over his handiwork and said, "Maybe I went a bit overboard..."

He then sat down on the living room sofa and stared at a display of all the rooms he'd created.

"And in the end, I'm still just using my old room..."

Indeed, after a long discussion, Hajime had ended up sticking to his old room on the second floor. Yue and the others had been insistent that if Hajime was going to move underground, they would all sleep down there with him. And if they went through with that, all of the second-floor rooms would go completely unused, defeating the initial purpose of Hajime's construction

project.

“He he, that shouldn’t be a problem, should it?” Remia asked with a smile, walking into the living room.

“Don’t you want to be in the room next to us, daddy?” Myu asked, walking in behind her mother. She then jumped onto Hajime’s lap and pouted up at him.

Hajime poked her puffy cheeks and shook his head.

“Nah, I was honestly kind of attached to my old room, so I’m happy with this arrangement. Besides, that makes my basement room that much cooler, since I won’t be using it all the time.”

“Glad to hear it. I was worried we were being too pushy when we asked you to stay upstairs.”

“I’m fine with this, but are you guys sure you don’t mind? You, Tio, and Myu all have to share a room now.”

Naturally, the other room was occupied by Yue and Shea. Remia sat down right next to Hajime and shook her head.

“I don’t mind in the slightest. If anything, I’m glad to be sharing a room with Tio-san. We often talk late into the night about all sorts of things and it would be a shame if I could no longer do that… Heh heh heh,” Remia said with an almost childish smile. It was clear she didn’t mind sharing a space with Tio at all.

“It’s fun sleeping with mommy one night and Yue-oneechan and Shea-oneechan the next!” Myu exclaimed.

“I see. Well, as long as everyone’s happy with this, it’s fine, I guess.”

It seemed everyone was more than happy to share rooms.

“Don’t you get lonely sleeping alone, daddy?” Myu asked suddenly, pointing out the fact that only Hajime had a room to himself. It was an innocent enough question, but it still hurt to be asked that.

“Well, you see, Myu, boys have times when they want to be alone,” Remia replied before Hajime could respond.

“Really?” Myu asked as Hajime shot Remia a confused look.

“That’s right. You see, daddy has a lot of hobbies, and sometimes he wants to be alone so he can enjoy them,” Remia explained.

“Why alone? How come Myu can’t be with him?”

Wait, that’s not true!

However, before Hajime could say anything, Remia plowed

ahead and said, “You just can’t. You’re not old enough yet. You see, in this world, there are age ratings for some things, and children can’t look at R-18 material.”

“What?!” Hajime exclaimed, jumping in his seat and losing his mind.

How does Remia know the word R-18?! Has she seen my collection?! But how?! When?!

“Mrr! So I can’t see them yet? What about you, mommy? Or everyone else? Can they be there with daddy?”

“Ufu fu, we certainly can. But only if he wants us to, isn’t that right?” Remia stated, shooting Hajime a playful wink. Myu turned to Hajime as well and gasped when she saw him.

“D-Daddy, what’s wrong?!”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“You’re sweating a bunch!”

“Ha ha, you must be imagining things. Don’t worry, I’m just fine.”

“You don’t sound fine!” Myu exclaimed as she pulled out a handkerchief and started dabbing at Hajime’s sweat-streaked forehead.

“My, oh my,” Remia said with a knowing smile. “I’m sorry for snooping, Hajime-san, but while you were busy, your mother showed me all of your ‘doujinshi’ and ‘visual novels.’”

“Mooooooooom! Get your butt up here! How do you even know where I hid all my VNs?! Depending on your answer, I may have to disown you!”

“P-Please don’t blame her, Hajime-san! We’re the ones who kept on begging her to tell us what our husband’s fetishes are!”

“You talked about *what* while I was gone?! Is that the kind of thing you normally ask your mother-in-law?! Do you have any idea how embarrassing that is for me?!”

Hajime jumped to his feet, still holding Myu in his arms. His face was beet-red, which was unusual for him.

Myu stared intently at him, enjoying seeing this rare side of him. At the same time, she realized she had to find whatever it was that her daddy was so desperate to hide from her. It was clear from her expression that she had some wicked thoughts cooking in her brain, but Hajime was too shaken to notice.

“Ha ha ha ha, sorry we looked through your room without

permission, Hajime-san," Shea said, walking into the living room.

"My apologies, but we were dying to learn more about what kind of person you were before you were summoned to Tortus, master. Surely you can forgive us for this one indiscretion?" Tio said, following Shea inside.

"Mmm... Sorry, Hajime. I didn't want Kaori to be able to keep saying she knew more about the kind of person you were before you came to Tortus, so I had to learn everything I could about you," Yue said, also walking in.

After hearing the sincerity in Yue's voice, Hajime deflated and sat back down.

"You guys really are a handful," he said with a long sigh.

"Oh, also..." Yue said, trailing off.

"Wait, there's more?!" Hajime asked, suddenly on guard again.

In an apologetic voice, Yue said, "Father showed us your family album."

"Oh, that's it? That's not that big a deal..."

"You were really cute even when you were a baby, Hajime. And seeing you play around in the bath as a toddler was...adorable."

"Hang on, what are you insinuating here?!"

"You looked totally different from how you do now... You were so cute that I could have just eaten you right up... Well, I suppose I did end up doing that once you were all grown up."

"Hey, no dirty talk when Myu's around, you perverted vampire!"

"Father gave me copies of all the best pictures. I'll treasure them forever."

"Get rid of them right now!"

It was one thing to want to know everything about him, but it was quite another to be lusting after his toddler body. There were some things even Hajime couldn't let slide.

To his dismay, it seemed Yue wasn't the only one who'd found young Hajime delectable. Shea and the others were blushing as well.

"Incidentally, master, I'll gladly perform any of the acts in your doujinshi for you at any time if you so—"

"Stop right there or I'm bringing white-haired Hajime back," Hajime cut in with a threatening voice. He was, of course, referring to his true appearance, which he'd come to dub combat mode. The only thing stopping him from balling his hands into fists was the

fact that he was using them to cover Myu's ears right now.

Sensing that they'd gone too far, Remia and the others all bowed their heads and apologized. They all glanced pleadingly up at Hajime, hoping they'd be forgiven.

In truth, Hajime felt a bit guilty for hanging on to his collection even though he had so many wives now, so he was at a loss for what to say.

"Ummm, oh! I know!" Myu shouted suddenly. She didn't know exactly what was going on, but she could tell things had gotten awkward, so she jumped out of Hajime's arms and spread her arms wide in front of him.

"Daddy, how do my new clothes look? Are they cute?"

She did a little twirl, showing off her frilly white blouse and checkered skirt.

Hajime and the others exchanged looks, then sighed at each other. They'd really messed up if they needed Myu to try to lighten the mood.

"Yeah, they're super cute," Hajime replied, smiling at his adopted daughter. "I'm sure you asked your mom to help, but you still picked the ones you liked best, right? You've got good taste, Myu."

Hajime then glanced over at Yue and the others. Yue was wearing a white hoodie, Shea was in a long-sleeved shirt and shorts, and Tio was wearing a light sweater and a long skirt. Remia was wearing a checkered skirt just like Myu's, which went down to her knees, and a similar white blouse.

They were all outfits Sumire had recommended. She'd taken the season and current fashion trends into account when ordering the outfits online.

"I know you guys have been wearing Earth clothes for a few days now, but...it still gets me every time. You all look so great."

There were similar types of outfits in Tortus, so it wasn't as if they were wearing something particularly novel, but Hajime was still moved every single time he saw them in casual wear.

"I can tell you guys dressed yourself up even more than usual today too. You all look sharp."

Yue and the others all blushed slightly upon hearing that, smiling.

"You look wonderful too, Hajime," Yue responded.

“You think so? I don’t usually wear a suit jacket, so it still feels off to me.”

Hajime was wearing a pretty simple outfit, a regular button-up shirt with a suit jacket over it, but it seemed Yue and the others found it quite charming.

Hajime looked down at himself, frowning.

“This is going to be our first date on Earth, after all. Well, I’ll just be showing you guys around town, but still, I don’t want to look lame when you guys went to all the effort of dressing up. I’m not sure if I did a good enough job, but if you all like it, then I guess it’s fine.”

Indeed, Hajime had set aside all of today to show Yue and the others around town, which was why everyone was dolled up more than usual.

“Hm? Did someone say you looked lame, Hajime? Give me their names and I’ll crush their balls,” Yue declared.

“Calm down. No one said I look lame. Also, remember what I told you? The law is the ultimate authority in Japan. You can’t just go around maiming people willy-nilly.”

“You don’t have to worry about looking lame around us. If anything, we’re worried we’re going to make you look lame,” Shea said.

“We did research as much of this world as we could on the internet, but I know from experience that reality rarely matches one’s expectations,” Tio muttered.

“Hajime-san, I’m sorry in advance if we cause any trouble for you while we’re outside,” Remia said.

“I’ll do my best to act normal!” Myu exclaimed. Yue and the others were already beautiful enough to turn heads, but now that they’d put in the effort to look fashionable, they were drop-dead gorgeous. Even Hajime’s pulse was racing just looking at them. Honestly, he was more worried that their beauty would cause problems than their lack of Earth knowledge.

There was no point in saying that, though, so Hajime simply shrugged. “Don’t worry, you guys will do just fine. Besides, Japan has all sorts of people in it. I’m sorry if I said anything to make you guys nervous, but you don’t need to try extra hard or anything. This is your first time exploring a Japanese city, so just have fun,” Hajime said with a reassuring smile, making Yue and the others

relax a little.

“By the way, is Kaori-san not going to be able to make it?” Shea asked.

“No, Kaori and Shizuku both have plans with their families today, unfortunately.”

Now that things had calmed down, all of Hajime’s classmates were able to move about more freely. As a result, most of them were going to visit extended family and let them know they were okay before school started up again.

“What about Aiko-oneechan?” Myu asked.

“She’s just busy with work. There’s a bunch she has to prepare for next month.”

“Oh,” Myu said, looking disappointed. Hajime gently patted her head, making sure not to accidentally mess up her hair. Just then, Sumire came up from the basement.

“You’re about to head out, right, Hajime? Before you go, could you make some adjustments to the wall dimensions for—”

Hajime smiled at his mother, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Mom, I heard that you showed the contents of my room to Yue and the others.”

Yue and the others blanched. They’d been the ones who’d begged Sumire, so they didn’t want her to take the blame for their actions. However, before they could say anything, Sumire frowned and replied, “Hmph, I’ll apologize for going through your room without permission. But you know, Hajime, I can’t say I approve of hanging on to your collection now that you have so many beautiful wives you could be spending time with instead.”

“Rgh!”

Hajime hadn’t been expecting that retort, so he was too taken aback to say anything. Yue and the others stared at Sumire in surprise, amazed at how easily she’d cowed her son.

“L-Look, I was thinking about selling everything. I’ve just been so busy that I couldn’t find the time.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure.”

“Anyway, how did you even know where they were all hidden?!”

“Because I’m your mother.”

“Ngh!”

Before Sumire, even the Demon Lord who’d killed god was a regular boy unable to talk back to his mother. Yue and the others’

respect for Sumire grew immensely.

“If anything, you should be thanking me.”

“What do you mean by that, mom?!”

“Be grateful that I didn’t show them…your D drive.”

“Asdkfgsjdagflkjkagsh?!”

Hajime staggered backward in shock. He’d fought fearlessly against any foe who stood against him, no matter how powerful, but against his mother, he had no choice but to retreat. Sumire covered half of her face with one hand, fingers splayed out in an embarrassingly chuuni pose, and grinned triumphantly at her son. At this point, Yue and the others were overawed.

Cold sweat poured down Hajime’s back as he desperately looked for a way out. No one had ever cornered him this badly before.

“My cute daughters-in-law begged me to show them everything, but I held firm and protected your final line of defense. I did it all for you, my son.”

“M-Mom…”

“But I’m warning you, Yue-chan and the others are quite sharp. Eventually, they’ll discover your most closely guarded secret, so you better make up your mind about whether you’re going to delete it or let them learn all about it.”

“…I see. You’re right, mom.”

Yue and the others didn’t know what Sumire was talking about, but they knew that she’d won her argument with Hajime. This was the first time they’d seen anyone ever get the better of Hajime in a battle of wits.

“U-Umm, Hajime? Mother? What exactly is a D Drive and why —?”

“You wanted me to fix the walls, right, mom? Leave it to me!” Hajime shouted, cutting Yue off.

“Thank you, my dear son! Once that’s done, you can go enjoy your date!”

Hajime and Sumire returned to the basement, completely ignoring Yue’s question.

In this, at least, Sumire was completely on Hajime’s side. After all, she, too, was an otaku. Still, the fact that this D drive was something that not even Hajime’s mother was willing to divulge only made Yue all the more curious.

“One day…I’ll get them to teach me all of the Nagumo family’s secrets!” Yue declared, and Shea and the others nodded solemnly.

Just as Sumire had said, Hajime needed to decide quickly whether or not he was going to delete that drive, since Yue and the others would crack the password soon enough.

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The closest station to Hajime’s house was currently experiencing quite a stir. It was a pretty big station with restaurants, convenience stores, and even a bookstore attached to it, so traffic was pretty heavy most days. And right now, everyone at the station was staring over at the ticket booth.

Yue gulped as she looked up.

“Y-You can do it, Yue-oneechan!”

“You’ve got this, Yue. You managed to get your body back from God, so this is nothing!”

Myu and Shea made it sound like she was about to embark on some deadly challenge, but she was just trying to muster the courage to buy a train ticket.

Yue’s expression stiffened as she tightly clutched the money in her hands. She looked up at the station map, then glanced down at the fare prices, then looked at the money in her hand. With how serious her expression was, you’d think she’d be killed for failing this simple task.

Am I…doing this right? Yue thought, glancing back hesitantly at Hajime.

Holy shit, she’s so cuuuuuute! Hajime thought, nodding to himself. At the same time, he was glad he’d decided to start by teaching everyone how to buy tickets.

“Hmm, take a look at this timetable, Remia. I remember reading about this on the internet, but I’m still amazed by how accurate these train locomotives appear to be,” Tio said in a voice filled with awe.

“Yes, indeed. I’ve heard that the schedule is even more complex for the busy stations in the heart of the city. I can’t believe they’re able to maintain such a strict schedule,” Remia said, nodding in admiration.

The people who were at the station were, of course, staring at

Yue and the others. They had been since they'd all arrived and Hajime had started teaching them about how to board the train, both because of how rare it was to see someone confused by the concept of boarding a train and because of how beautiful they all were.

"They've gotta be foreigners, right? Holy shit, they're all so hot…"

"Maybe they're all models? They don't seem to know how to board a train… I wonder where they're from…"

"That blonde girl over there…is a real flesh and blood human, right? She's not a doll, is she?"

Three girls whispered emphatically to each other, their expressions rapt.

Incidentally, Shea was wearing Artifact ear cuffs and Myu and Remia were wearing Artifact earrings to make their nonhuman ears appear human to onlookers. The Artifacts also made Myu's and Remia's hair look emerald blonde instead of emerald green so that they didn't stand out as much as they otherwise would have.

I know I made their effects somewhat weak, but I can't believe Yue and the others are still attracting this much attention through the presence-hiding Artifacts I gave everyone. Maybe I should make them a bit stronger.

Hajime took mental notes on how much he'd need to modify his Artifacts before their next outing.

If he made the effects too strong, people wouldn't notice them, period, which would make going out to eat or shopping or other basic tasks rather difficult. Ideally, he'd be able to find a workable middle ground or a way to dynamically adjust how strong the perception-altering effect was. His craftsman's soul burned passionately as he went through various options in his mind.

Anyway, I guess this means having them all use perception-hiding magic whenever they went outside while I was gone was the right call.

Reporters had been swarming their neighborhood, but thankfully, no one had gotten a good picture of Yue and the others. He'd mostly wanted to keep them hidden so people wouldn't ask too many questions about their identities, but in retrospect, it had also been a good idea to keep their faces off of the internet to avoid everyone swarming them whenever they went out.

“O-Okay, I can do this!” Yue said, taking a tentative step forward. Shea and Myu folded their arms and watched on with bated breath.

For some reason, all of the onlookers held their breath as they watched as well. A few of them even yelled “Good luck!”

Normally, Yue acted quite mature and therefore seemed like an adult despite her small stature, but right now she looked barely older than Myu. Most of the spectators probably thought she was a kid.

With trembling fingers, Yue put the coins into the small slot at the side of the machine. Then, with utmost concentration, she pressed a button on the screen’s display. After a few seconds, a ticket came out of the slot at the bottom.

Yue carefully slid it into her hands, holding it like it was a fragile glass goblet. Then, she turned to Hajime, her hair fluttering in the wind, and said, “I did it!”

She held the ticket up for him to see, a proud smile on her face.

“That was perfect, Yue-oneechan!” Myu said, clapping.

“Heh, I always had faith in you, Yue-san,” Shea said with an almost parental smile.

Swept up by the atmosphere, the station attendant and all the other onlookers started clapping as well.

Noticing that everyone was staring at her, Yue blushed a little and glanced away. But then, she looked back up at the crowd, lifted the hem of her hoodie, and gave them a small curtsy. After that, she turned back to Hajime with a beaming smile and gave him a peace sign.

That gesture was so cute that all of the men watching clutched their hearts and made a HNNNNNNGH noise. Surprisingly, many of the women also got nosebleeds, and the station attendant started crying tears of joy. Of course, these were the reactions of people who’d had their senses dulled by the perception-altering Artifacts. Hajime, who was witnessing this in its full glory, was completely overcome by emotion.

“Oh, Tio-san! Hajime-san’s soul is leaving his body. We have to hurry up and put it back!” Remia shouted.

“Yue-oneechan’s smile sent daddy to heaven!”

“Oh no! Come back to us, master!”

Tio rushed over to Hajime, her hand glowing as she cast spirit

magic on him. She also grabbed at a spot slightly over his head and pushed something back into his mouth.

“Huh?! Whoa, that was close. Thanks for the save, Tio.”

“Anytime, master. I have to say, though, Yue really isn’t showing you any mercy today.”

“Hajime-san, you should steel yourself. Yue-san has been looking forward to today ever since we got to Earth. You’ll be running into many more moments like this one…” Remia said.

“So that’s why Yue’s even cuter than usual… Heh, looks like I’ll need to mentally prepare myself.”

“U-Umm, Hajime? Aren’t you exaggerating a bit too much?” Yue asked, blushing profusely. She started fiddling with the ends of her hair, giving Hajime another cuteness overload.

“Stop it, Yue-oneechan! Daddy’s life points are already at zero!” Myu shouted. As the one who’d spent the most time on the internet, Myu had already started absorbing a lot of popular memes. Her usage of old memes was so cute that Hajime was once again hit with a cuteness bomb. It was incredibly heartwarming to see his daughter becoming an otaku already.

Tio once again used spirit magic on Hajime to keep him tethered to this mortal plane, and this time her hand glowed so brightly that even some of the onlookers noticed.

“Tio, you’re the only one I can rely on now. Please keep my soul safe.”

“O-Of course. I’m not sure you need to be making such a serious expression for a regular date, but understood, master.”

Hajime wiped some sweat off his brow, then urged Shea and the others to purchase their tickets as well.

Upon seeing how casually Hajime was interacting with the girls, the men, and some of the women, started to glare at him with extreme envy evident in their eyes.

Not wanting to start a scene, Hajime hurriedly ushered everyone into the station once they’d bought their tickets. He couldn’t help but smile as he watched Yue and the others being surprised by the automatic gates, though.

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Everyone enjoyed the scenery as it rolled by while they rode the

train into the heart of the city.

When Tio looked at the map of the underground rails and how they connected to the aboveground trains, as well as the directory that showed the layout of the massive underground station, she exclaimed, “This place is even more labyrinthine than the labyrinths!”

Meanwhile, Yue looked on as people used Suica cards or smartphone apps to pass through the ticket barriers, then looked down at her own ticket and muttered, “Tch, so it’s too soon to think I’ve mastered the train station, huh?” with a pained look on her face.

Shea’s eyes sparkled as she spotted the vending machines on every corner, and she said, “I can’t believe you can get water, or any drink you might want, anywhere you go. There’s no place like this in the forest, or even in all of Tortus!”

To Yue and the others, Earth was just as strange and fascinating as Tortus had been for Hajime and his classmates. But while Myu was also looking around excitedly, Remia seemed a bit overwhelmed by just how sprawling the whole place was. Unlike Yue and the others, she hadn’t set foot in any of the labyrinths, so she was completely unprepared for anything of this scale. She tightly clutched the hem of Hajime’s suit jacket but then changed her mind and instead entwined her hand around Hajime’s, blushing slightly.

Everyone’s reactions were unbelievably cute, and tons of people turned to stare at them, not paying attention to where they were walking, resulting in many onlookers smacking right into pillars or walls.

“Man, I can at least respect the people who try to hit on Yue and the others, but I’m gonna have to do something to stop all those people sneaking pictures of everyone. Maybe I’ll design an anticamera Artifact…” Hajime muttered as they walked into a nearby clothes store.

After getting off at the station, they’d gone to the city’s biggest shopping mall. Everywhere they’d walked, they’d attracted a ton of attention, so Hajime found himself having to constantly glare at people to deter them from sneaking pictures of the girls.

“Hajime. Hajime. How does this look?” Yue asked as she threw open the curtains of the changing room she was in and showed

Hajime the sleeveless sweater and long skirt she'd just tried on. The combination was quite powerful, but then she did a little twirl and looked expectantly up at Hajime, which slayed him on the spot.

"Too cute..." one of the female store clerks muttered, overcome by Yue's godlike cuteness.

"You look great, Yue. Long skirts really do suit you. You already bought some pants at the last shop we visited, so you should definitely get a skirt here," Hajime replied.

"Really? Do you prefer skirts, Hajime?"

"Yeah, I like them. But frankly, I like anything you wear, Yue."

"Oh, Hajime..."

"So moe..." the same store clerk muttered, her voice fading as she struggled to remain conscious. Surprisingly, she was able to maintain her business smile even though she was blushing profusely and barely able to stay standing. But then, she suddenly got hit by another cuteness bomb.

"Hajime-saaan! How do I look? I went for a less revealing outfit this time!" Shea said, also pulling her curtains back.

"Hmm, I simply can't get used to Western attire. I feel like I look like a fool in this," Tio said with a frown.

Yue and the others were hogging all the changing rooms, but neither the store clerks nor the other customers seemed to mind. In fact, they seemed to be enjoying the impromptu fashion show they were getting. They stared with rapt attention as the girls tried on different outfits.

Shea was now wearing tight jeans that did indeed cover up more of her skin than her usual outfits, but at the same time, they accentuated her slender legs and extremely tight ass perfectly.

Meanwhile, Tio had put on some loose, flowing pants combined with a shirt that revealed a bit of cleavage and a cardigan that went on top of that.

Everyone's gazes were naturally drawn to her breasts.

"Wooooooooow!" the store clerks and customers exclaimed.

"Great gods above and below, thank you for granting me this blessing today," someone muttered.

Some people had even gathered outside and were staring through the windows. At this point, the store clerks had stopped trying to act professional and were openly ogling Yue and the

others.

"I don't really want other people seeing you in revealing outfits anyway, Shea, so I think this is pretty good. Though, I have no intention of trying to control what you wear. Still, if you like it, you should definitely buy it. You look great!"

"R-Really? Hee hee hee, if you like it, then I guess I better buy it, Hajime-san. He he he he…"

"Tio…you really would be the perfect woman if you could just keep your mouth shut. A stylish outfit like that really accentuates your looks. It's great."

"Must you put a barb in every compliment you give? But still, the perfect woman, you say? Fu fu fu… And this accentuates my looks? I see. In that case, I suppose I'll buy these clothes."

Naturally, the onlookers were shocked to see that these three jaw-dropping beauties seemed to be all over this young man who didn't even appear to be in his twenties yet. The love in Yue's and the others' eyes was clear for all to see.

"D-Does that guy seriously have a harem of smoking hot babes?" one of the onlookers muttered. As unbelievable as it was, that was the only explanation that made any sense.

What exactly is that guy's relationship with those three women?!

"Daddy, we're back!" Myu said, running through the crowd and hugging Hajime.

"Daddy?!" the onlookers screamed in unison, their eyes nearly popping out of their skulls.

Considering the young man's apparent age, it made no sense for him to have a kid already.

"Welcome back, Myu, Remia. Well, I was keeping an eye on you the whole time, so it's not like you were gone from my perspective."

"Thank you for that, dear," Remia replied with a smile.

"She's part of his harem too?!" the onlookers exclaimed. The crowd was big enough now that people were coming just to see what everyone was getting so excited about, making the group even larger.

Also, while Remia and Myu had gone over to the kids section to pick out clothes for Myu, Hajime had sent one of his Arachne golems with them so that he could see what they were doing and communicate telepathically with them. So honestly, it was like he'd

been with them as well.

“Good job paying for everything without my help.”

“I’ve been studying how to use this nation’s currency,” Remia said with a proud smile.

“You panicked pretty hard when someone asked if you and Myu wanted to be models for the store, though,” Hajime said with a playful grin.

Remia blushed and replied, “Y-You don’t have to bring that up! It was so mean of you not to help!”

She lightly punched him on the shoulder.

“Hajime, stop flirting with Remia and ignoring us,” Yue said, pouting.

“Hang on, is it just me or is there a huge crowd now?” Shea asked, glancing over at the onlookers.

“This is…our fault, isn’t it?” Tio muttered. The three of them had changed back into their normal clothes and left the changing rooms. Hajime took all of the clothes from them that they wanted to buy and shrugged as he looked around.

“It’s because you’re all so pretty. Plus, you were basically doing a fashion show by trying on all those different outfits, so of course we attracted attention.”

Hajime scared away people trying to sneak pictures of Yue and the others, or those who tried to hit on them, but he had no desire to intimidate innocent onlookers who just wanted to watch. After all, he needed to return to being a regular Japanese citizen and not the evil Demon Lord he was back in Tortus.

“I’d like to buy all of these, please,” Hajime said, walking up to one of the registers.

“O-Of course… Incidentally, our store is looking for models to—”

“Just ring me up, please,” Hajime said with a business smile.

“Oh, my apologies.”

Seeing how easily he cowed the clerk, the onlookers started to realize Hajime wasn’t just some ordinary guy.

“H-He’s so cool… Just who is he?”

“There are a bunch of people who tried to scout those girls and he sent them all away. Is he the son of some rich CEO or something? He seems so used to this.”

“Nah, just look at how he carries himself. He’s probably the son of a yakuza boss or something. I thought I was gonna die when he

glared at me earlier."

"You really think he's yakuza?"

"Shit, man, if he is, there's no way I'm gonna risk hitting on a yakuza member's girlfriend."

In truth, Hajime was far more dangerous than a regular old yakuza boss. It seemed that his aura helped keep people at bay. He might have reverted to his old appearance, but he still couldn't change how he carried himself so easily.

Hajime himself was disappointed that he couldn't become perfectly normal yet, but a good number of the women watching found his deadly aura quite alluring. It helped that his expression became unbelievably gentle whenever he was hugging his daughter or looking at Yue and the others. He had both an intimidating presence and a fountain of boundless love. As a result, the men found him dangerous, and the women found him charming.

"Mrr, I can tell some women are batting their eyelids at you, Hajime-san," Shea said, frowning.

"He he, it appears we need to be on the lookout for vultures just as much as master is," Tio said with a chuckle.

"Hmph, it's only natural that my husband charms everyone he meets," Yue said, puffing her chest out proudly.

"Daddy's popular?" Myu asked, looking up at Remia.

"Ufu fu, he certainly is. It's because he looks so cool. You think he looks cool too, right, Myu?"

"Yeah!" Myu said happily.

Some of the girls who overheard their conversation blushed a little.

"Well, it's past noon now, so we should get some lunch and then get back to shopping. Let's get out of here before—"

Yue grabbed Hajime's sleeve and tugged on it, interrupting him.

"There's somewhere important we need to go first."

"Hm? Is there something you want to check out? If you'd told me, I would have taken you there first," Hajime responded, cocking his head.

Shea wagged a finger at Hajime and said, "He he he, that would ruin the surprise. You see, this is our present to you, Hajime-san."

"Hm, what are you talking about?"

"Underwear, of course," Tio said.

“Didn’t you guys buy some earlier?”

“We did, but you didn’t pick those out for us. In fact, you refused to set foot in the store.”

“I mean, the other women in there would feel uncomfortable if a dude like me went in. Besides, that let you guys practice paying for stuff.”

“Yes, and we appreciate the lesson. However, dear…” Not caring if others overheard, Remia boldly said, “We haven’t bought any sexy underwear yet.”

“Excuse me?” one of the spectators said, and everyone turned to stare at Hajime.

“Mother did say that every good wife should have a few pairs of sexy underwear to please her husband!” Yue said.

“I really did not want to know mom said that.”

“We already have plenty of pairs from Tort—Ahem, I mean from our overseas vacation, but when we told mother that, she said that wasn’t good enough, and honestly, we agreed.”

“I’m not even sure how to respond to that.”

His mother told them to buy sexy underwear?! What the hell is wrong with that boy’s family?! the onlookers thought, aghast.

“Would you rather we didn’t get any, Hajime?” Yue asked, looking pleadingly up at him.

Hajime immediately replied, “No, I’d love it if you got some,” with a straight face.

The other guys watching muttered, “Yeah, I’d say the same,” but the women gave him cold looks.

Of course, Yue and the others were more than happy to oblige.

“Good…because I’ve already looked up which store has the best reviews. Let’s go.”

“Hold up. Myu’s still too young to go into a store like that. I’ll wait outside with her, so—”

“Oh, come on. There’s no point if you don’t choose, Hajime-san!” Shea said.

“It’ll be good for Myu’s education to learn these things now,” Tio said.

“Tio, shut up! Stop trying to corrup—”

“I wanna learn!” Myu shouted.

“Myu?!”

“When I get older, you’ll need to buy underwear for me too,

right?”

“Hey, do something before they corrupt your daughter,” Hajime said, glaring at Remia. However, Yue and Shea grabbed onto both of his arms and steered him away.

“Come on, Hajime, let’s go.”

“Make sure you pick out some good ones for us!”

Both of them were smiling brightly at him. They had zero intention of letting him escape this time. This was, in fact, the main reason they’d come shopping today. Hajime looked up at the ceiling and let out a long sigh.

“Haaah, fine, fine. Honestly, I’m kind of happy that you want me to pick them out so badly.”

“It’s important to be true to your desires!” Tio said happily.

“Yeah! Be true to your desires!” Myu repeated.

“My, my… Ufu fu.”

Shea and Yue marched Hajime out of the store with Tio, Remia, and Myu following behind them.

The crowd parted before them like the Red Sea. No one wanted to say anything to them because of how determined the girls looked. They watched, dumbfounded, as the girls took Hajime to an adult underwear shop.

“Thank you very much! Please come back again! Also, we still have those fall outfits the girls bought in stock, so if anyone else is interested, please check them out!” the store clerk said, returning the crowd to their senses. It was honestly impressive how she managed to stay professional despite what everyone had just seen. For days afterward, rumors spread about the group of mysterious beauties who’d come to visit this clothing store.

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The sun had long since set by the time Hajime and the others got off the train station closest to home.

Myu had exhausted herself completely and fallen asleep in Hajime’s arms the moment they got on the train. Yue and the others looked quite tired as well. While they’d done far harsher traveling during their time in Tortus, everything they’d seen today had been completely new to them, which had been mentally taxing.

“Hajime, thanks for showing us around today,” Yue said, turning to look up at Hajime.

“You’re welcome. Did you all have fun?”

“Of course!” Shea exclaimed. “I hope Kaori-san can come with us next time.”

“I’m sure Lily is also looking forward to the day she can finally visit Earth. I would love to take her to that giant building shaped like a tree. Seeing skyscrapers spread out in every direction for as far as the eye can see from up on the observation deck up there was truly mesmerizing,” Tio said.

“This world really is full of surprises. Ufu fu, I was excited about every new thing we saw,” Remia said with a smile.

After buying clothes, Hajime had taken everyone to the food court so that they could sample the various cuisine options of Japan, after which they’d spent some more time touring the shopping mall.

During lunch, he’d modified everyone’s Artifacts to increase their perception-altering powers, but even then when Yue and the others had started trying on makeup at the beauty store, they’d once again started attracting attention.

They’d all been impressed by the various home appliances they saw in the hardware stores, as well as the elevators and escalators.

Hajime had also taken them to an accessory shop with the intention of buying one bauble for each of them to commemorate their first date, but they’d all turned to him and given him a confused look. It seemed they’d all assumed that since Hajime could just make trinkets like that for them, there was no need to buy any, which had immensely disappointed the store clerks.

Once they’d finished shopping, Hajime had taken them around to a few famous tourist spots, and then they’d eaten dinner at a proper restaurant.

“Mmm…we had a lot of fun. I really enjoyed exploring your world with you.”

“Glad to hear it.”

To Yue, the most important thing was that she’d been able to explore this place together with Hajime. Of course, the same held true for Shea and the others. They all nodded in agreement, huge smiles spreading across their faces.

“You really splurged for our sake, didn’t you, master?” Tio asked suddenly, prompting Hajime to turn to her in surprise.

She grinned at him, knowing she was right based on his reaction.

“It’s rude to point that out, Tio,” Hajime said sullenly.

“Forgive me, master, but before you were summoned to Tortus, you were a student, correct? Seeing as you didn’t borrow any money from mother or father, I assumed you must have spent a great deal of your savings on us today.”

Normally, Tio acted like a raging pervert, so it was easy to forget just how perceptive she was. She was, of course, completely right. Hajime had grown up spending time helping out at both his mother’s and father’s workplaces, so he’d earned a decent amount of money doing odd jobs. He also didn’t spend much outside of buying video games and books, so he had more savings than most kids his age. Still, just in case, Hajime had also polished some of the jewels he’d picked up in Tortus that also existed on Earth and sold them off to earn some extra cash. And it was a good thing he had, since he’d burned through almost his entire savings on today’s date.

“If you noticed, then how come you kept on asking for more stuff?” Hajime asked.

“Mmm…because you told us we could buy whatever we wanted, Hajime,” Yue said in a matter-of-fact tone. She then rested her head on Hajime’s shoulder. It seemed everyone had realized Hajime was pushing his finances, not just Tio. No wonder they all seemed extra grateful.

“Besides, you wouldn’t want us to hold back on your account, right?” Yue asked.

“Yeah, it just kind of sucks that you saw through me.”

Naturally, Shu and Sumire had offered to give Hajime a bit of extra allowance, but he’d refused. His pride hadn’t allowed it. As a man, he’d wanted to ensure all of his gifts came from his own hard-earned money.

“Not at all! We’re really happy!” Shea said.

“Truly, thank you very much, Hajime-san,” Remia said. The two of them also leaned against Hajime, making it rather difficult for him to keep walking. But he didn’t mind, so he simply smiled happily.

“Then why’d you have to point out that you noticed?” Hajime asked, turning to Tio. Knowing her, she probably had a good reason for it.

“Oh, there was just something I wanted to confirm.”

“What, that my bank account’s been sucked dry?” Hajime said in a teasing voice.

However, Tio turned to Hajime with a serious expression on her face and said, “Didn’t you say before that you’d sell all sorts of trinkets when you made it back to Earth and make a killing? You even mentioned how it would be a waste not to use your transmutation powers after returning home.”

“I’m impressed that you remembered that.”

Indeed, Hajime had made that joke once before when he’d been telling Tio and the others what he’d do when he got back to Earth.

“Knowing you, master, I’m sure you must have considered that option, especially now that you’re out of money.”

Tio gave Hajime a knowing smile, and he shook his head in amazement.

“You really can see right through me.”

Hajime did indeed want enough money to be independent just in case, and to ensure Yue and the others could live comfortably. He had, in fact, spent some time thinking about how he’d improve his finances while preparing the portal to take everyone back to Japan. He’d actually already consulted with his dad about how to go about starting a business and was laying the groundwork.

“So?” Hajime asked, prompting Tio to keep going.

“Yes, well, I was thinking that once you begin your new business, I would like to help out.” Yue, Shea, and Remia listened quietly as Tio looked up at the starry night sky and added, “You, Yue, and Shea will all be starting school again soon, won’t you? I have been wondering what I should do to fill the time while you’re gone.”

Hajime had, of course, told everyone they were free to do whatever they wanted. Tio and Remia could use metamorphosis magic to alter their appearance and go to school with everyone if they so desired, or they could go look for work, if that was what they wanted to do instead. Shu and Sumire had even offered to let them work at their workplaces or to help find them different jobs

if that was what they were looking for.

Tio had considered her options over the past week, and this was what she'd decided she wanted to do.

"I wish to make an honest living in this world. I want to contribute to this society so that I can feel like I'm truly a part of it."

After thinking about it, Tio had realized that this was what she truly wanted.

"I have yet to fully understand the way this world works, so I realize it may be premature for me to want to jump into working life. There's much I'm sure I'll need to learn, but we have the time. Besides, I want to use the knowledge I've accrued over the centuries to..." Tio trailed off, looking back down at Hajime. "To help you, master. We're family, after all, right?"



Hajime stared intently into Tio's eyes while the others watched on silently.

After a long pause, Hajime finally said, "Honestly, I was planning to ask all of you this once the new year started."

He paused there, then sucked in a deep breath and looked over at Yue and the others as well. In a hesitant voice, he continued, "I wanted to know if you all thought you'd feel comfortable living in this world."

In many ways, Japan was a far more restrictive society than the various civilizations of Tortus. Naturally, the culture was very different as well. Hajime had been worried Yue and the others might find it stifling, that they preferred their lives back on Tortus. That was why he'd decided to ask them how they felt about living here again after some time had passed.

"Isn't it a bit too soon to be deciding your path in life? You can take some more time to think about it, you know?" Hajime said in a gentle voice.

After all, Tio's suggestion implied that she was intending to spend the rest of her life here.

"Haaah..." Yue gasped, letting out a long sigh.

"You need to stop putting our desires before your own, Hajime!" she said, pointing her finger at him. Shea and the others nodded in agreement.

"You want to know whether we feel comfortable living here? What a stupid question!"

"Wh-What do you mean, stupid?!"

"Hmph! It's not about whether or not we feel comfortable. We're going to make ourselves comfortable. No matter what obstacles stand in our way, we're going to make it work. You finally made it back home, Hajime, so we're not going anywhere."

Even if Yue and the others found Japan stifling, it wouldn't matter. They'd already decided they were going to stay here with Hajime, in the hometown he'd yearned to return to.

"You know, Hajime-san..." Remia said hesitantly. "I was actually thinking the same thing as Tio-san."

"Which part, exactly?"

"After browsing the internet, looking through the fashion magazines mother gave me, and seeing all the clothes and accessories in the stores we went through today...I was moved by

how varied the fashions of this world are."

"Come to think of it, you were really excited about clothes shopping."

Remia blushed a little, not realizing it had been that obvious to Hajime.

"Anyway, umm...I was thinking it would be nice to be able to turn this inspiration into my job."

"Oh, I see. So you want to be a fashion designer, then?"

"Yes."

It seemed that while Tio was interested in the management side of business, Remia wanted to be a designer. She, too, had been thinking about how she would live her life in Japan.

Hajime looked over at Tio and Remia, taking in their earnest expressions.

"Mrr... I wanna be with daddy forever," Myu muttered in her sleep, squeezing Hajime's neck.

"Hey, that... Well, it doesn't really hurt, but just what kind of dream do you have?"

She was clinging to him quite tightly, as if to make sure he didn't go anywhere.

Hajime smiled, then turned back to Tio and the others.

"All right, all right, I get it. I was worrying for nothing. Maybe I was just trying too hard to get you all to like Japan when I didn't need to be," he said, nodding to everyone.

"Okay then, I guess I'll be counting on both of you to help me with my business."

"Splendid! I can't wait to get started! Remia, the two of us have to do our best to ensure that master's business is a huge success!"

"Naturally! Oh, but we'll be doing what we want to at the same time, of course. Otherwise, Hajime-san will start to worry that he's putting unnecessary burdens on us. Ufu fu..."

Shea frowned while Tio and Remia shook hands.

"But that means you two won't be going to school with us. It's a shame...but I guess you guys are really excited about working. I'm kind of jealous, honestly."

"Mrr... If you work, you lose..." Myu mumbled in her sleep. It seemed she'd picked up that particular internet meme as well.

Hajime and the others exchanged glances, then burst out laughing.

“Oh, it looks like you all had fun. I guess Hajime’s first date was a huge success.”

“Welcome back, everyone! Oh, looks like Myu-chan’s already conked out. Guess I should be a bit quieter.”

Sumire and Shu addressed the group as soon as they got home. The two of them had just gotten out of their car and were taking things out of the trunk. It seemed they’d gone out to buy things to decorate their new rooms with.

“Mother, father, we’re home!” Shea exclaimed.

“You seemed to have bought quite a lot of stuff. Shall I carry those boxes for you? Fear not! Dragonmen are quite strong.”

“Welcome home to you two as well. Is there anything we can help with?” Remia asked with a smile.

The three of them walked over to Hajime’s parents, and just as he was about to as well, he felt Yue tug on his sleeve.

“Hey, Hajime…”

He turned to look at her and found her smiling happily up at him.

“Thank you for giving us such a wonderful place to return home to.”

“Yue…”

She looked over at her family, which was currently carrying boxes of goods into the house, her eyes welling up with emotion. She then turned back to Hajime.

“There’s so much I still want to learn about your world, Hajime. Knowing that we’ll all get to be together and learn about them one by one makes me so happy.”

Hajime felt like a fool for worrying about whether Yue and the others would find life on Earth stifling. Seeing Yue’s happy expression made it clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that they all loved being here.

Normally, Hajime always had a witty quip ready, but right now he was so overcome by emotion that all he could say was, “I see… Yeah, that does sound fun.”

“Hajime? Yue-chan, what are you just standing there for?” Sumire asked, and the two of them turned to her.

She, as well as Shu, Shea, Tio, and Remia were all waiting for the two of them, smiles on their faces.

Hajime and Yue smiled at each other, then turned back to

everyone and said, “We’re home.”

Chapter IV: The Angel's Guardian

A foreign-made sedan cruised down the coastal highway, all of the windows rolled down to let the fresh ocean breeze flow in.

"I always love driving down this highway." the driver, a man in his mid-forties, said. His hair whipped behind him in the wind, and despite his age, he looked quite handsome and young enough to be mistaken as thirty.

This man was Tomoichi Shirasaki, Kaori's father.

"He he, it does feel nice," the woman in the front passenger seat said. She was Kaoruko Shirasaki, Kaori's mother.

The resemblance between the two of them was so strong that it was clear Kaori would look just like her mother when she grew older. Much like Tomoichi, Kaoruko didn't look at all like she was in her forties.

"Y-You think so too, right, Kaori?" Tomoichi asked, glancing at his daughter through the rearview mirror. He'd been looking back at her constantly, much to the chagrin of his wife, who wanted him to focus on the road.

"....." Kaori said nothing in response. She was wearing a white dress under a thick cardigan. With her hands neatly in her lap, she looked like the daughter of some rich family. The way she stared out of the window at the ocean was so picturesque that it belonged in a Hollywood movie. Unfortunately, her expression ruined the otherwise perfect image. It wasn't that she hadn't heard her father, but she was purposely ignoring him. That much was clear from the frown on her face.

Tomoichi cleared his throat and once more tried to catch his daughter's attention.

"I've always wanted a beachfront house. Maybe we should move—"

"Over my dead body," Kaori said, and Tomoichi let out a small groan. Still, he refused to give up.

"Y-You're the one who always complained that you didn't want to go back every time we came here. You'll be able to live closer to Sakura-oneechan too. Don't you think—?"

“If you want to move, then you can do it. I’m staying.”

“That’s too cruel, Kaori!” Tomoichi exclaimed, turning back to Kaori. Naturally, the car started to swerve, and Kaoruko slapped him, forcing him to look back at the road in front of him.

In a stern voice, she said, “Dear?” and Tomoichi immediately apologized. He knew how terrifying his wife’s wrath could be. Much like Kaori, Kaoruko’s rage was a sight to behold.

“Come now, dear, there’s no way Kaori would want to move, especially since Shizuku-chan isn’t going anywhere.”

“Y-You have a point, but…I still think it’s a good idea…” Tomoichi grumbled to himself.

Right now, the Shirasaki family was heading to the house where Tomoichi’s parents and older brother lived. His older brother had a daughter named Sakura, who was four years older than Kaori. She’d always been a very mature girl, and Kaori had always looked up to her like an older sister. As an only child, Kaori had always wanted siblings, and Sakura had been the closest thing to one.

Tch, I thought if I brought up Sakura-chan, I might be able to change Kaori’s mind… Tomoichi thought to himself. He was truly desperate right now. His beloved daughter had miraculously returned to him, only to tell him that she’d fallen in love. Now the mere mention of Hajime’s name soured his mood.

“Besides, Kaori’s never going to leave the city Hajime-kun lives in,” Kaoruko said with a chuckle, knowing that saying Hajime’s name would set Tomoichi off.

“Please don’t, Kaoruko! We finally get to have a proper family gathering, so don’t bring up that miserable brat and ruin the—”

“Dad?” Kaori said in a chilly voice, and Tomoichi shivered. He knew that if he turned around he’d see a demonic mask floating above Kaori’s head. But even so, he couldn’t back down here. His beloved daughter was being deceived by this villainous man (or so he thought) and he had to bring her back to her senses!

“K-Kaori, calm down. I’m sorry, I should have chosen my words more carefully. Still, I think that shitty philanderer shouldn’t—”

“Fine, I’m going home. Bye, dad.”

“Nooo! Listen to me, Kaori! I’m saying this to protect you!”

“You’re insulting people for my sake? I didn’t know you were such a horrible person, dad.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Kaori! I don’t want to say such horrible

things about H-Ha-that guy! I'm grateful to him too!"

"Really?" Kaori said, finally turning to face her father, a dubious look on her face.

"Yes, really. If not for that bast—I mean, that guy, you wouldn't have made it back home, right? And while I still can't believe it, he even…"

"Yep, he saved my life."

After getting back home, Kaori had told Tomoichi and Kaoruko about everything she'd been through in Tortus. Like Hajime's parents, they hadn't believed her at first, but after seeing her use magic, they'd had no choice but to.

With the amount of proof they'd seen, Tomoichi and Kaoruko fully believed that Kaori had been sent to a different world for a whole year. As a result, it had been quite chilling to learn that Kaori had died once, had her soul transferred to a different body, and even had to fight against a god's army. She'd come close to dying for good countless times, so it was only natural that they'd be worried.

"It really is a miracle that you returned to us, and it seems he's the one who brought you all back. I owe him everything."

"Dad…" Kaori mumbled, her expression finally softening. She could tell her dad wasn't lying. Kaoruko nodded along in agreement.

Indeed, the first time both of them had met Hajime, they'd hugged him and professed their heartfelt thanks with tears in their eyes. But even so, Tomoichi couldn't accept that the two of them were in a relationship. Not because he disapproved of the two of them going out, but rather because he disapproved of Hajime's harem.

"But still, how can that bastard cheat on you with all those other women when he already has such a perfect girlfriend, Kaori? He doesn't even feel guilty about it. Instead, he's openly flaunting his harem! Only a scumbag would do that!"

"Forget it. I hate you, dad."

"Gah!"

That was the last thing Tomoichi wanted to hear, so he nearly started coughing up blood. Tears welled up in his eyes, he wailed, "Please don't hate me, Kaori, my beautiful angel!"

"Oh dear, please just accept it already. Kaori had a crush on

Hajime-kun even before they got summoned away. Isn't it wonderful that her love finally bore fruit in the harsh climate of another world?"

"No one told *me* she had a crush on him for that long!"

Indeed, the knowledge that Kaori had become Hajime's girlfriend had been a complete shock to Tomoichi, especially since during the family meeting where all the families of the missing children had gathered together, Hajime had introduced Yue and the others to everyone. He'd explained that he'd only been able to get everyone back with their help, so of course the parents had all been grateful to them. At the same time, they'd side-eyed Hajime when they'd learned that all of these women were Hajime's girlfriends.

Of course, even Tomoichi had been able to figure out Kaori loved Hajime when he saw how her expression changed every time she mentioned him when she'd been telling her parents about everything that had happened in Tortus. That alone had been quite a shock, but he'd been willing to accept Kaori dating Hajime considering all that he'd done to help his daughter.

So naturally, Tomoichi had felt quite betrayed when he'd learned Kaori was just one of Hajime's many girlfriends.

"Besides, that bastard didn't even show me any respect when he said he was going out with you!" Tomoichi exclaimed, his knuckles going white as he gripped the steering wheel as hard as he could.

His anger was understandable, considering how Hajime had completely skipped the obligatory "please let me have your daughter" conversation with Tomoichi. Instead, he'd boldly proclaimed, "Your daughter's mine now. I hope you don't mind, father-in-law."

Of course, he'd only said the truth, which made it all the more galling to Tomoichi. One could hardly have blamed Tomoichi, who'd been profusely thanking Hajime a second ago, for suddenly saying, "All right, you're a dead man," after that.

"He even said he won't break up with any of them! Who does he think he is, saying he's going to marry every single one of you?!"

"Calm down, dear. It's not really that bad. Everyone seems happy with the arrangement. Have you ever seen Kaori look so happy? She seems to get along great with Yue-chan and the

others as well, so what's the problem?"

"Exactly. Well, I still wouldn't say I get along with Yue, but…I don't hate her. And I do respect her. Honestly, I don't mind supporting Hajime-kun together with everyone else… He he he," Kaori said, blushing.

I bet that bastard used some sort of magic to mind control Kaori! That's gotta be it! Tomoichi thought for the hundredth time.

Indeed, that was what he'd initially assumed during the big family meeting, and he'd tried to punch Hajime. However, it had been Kaori herself who'd pinned him down and stopped him.

Meanwhile, Hajime hadn't looked the least bit put off by Tomoichi's wrath. In truth, he'd been fully prepared to be punched because he knew that what he was doing was considered scummy by normal standards, but Tomoichi had mistaken his resolve for condescension, which had only made him angrier. In the end, Kaori had been forced to suplex her dad to knock him out, at which point the whole meeting had adjourned. Afterward, he'd learned that Kaori had already had sex with Hajime too, which had sent him into another fit of rage.

He'd actually planned this impromptu family trip because he'd learned that Hajime was going to be taking everyone, including Kaori, out on a date today and had wanted to get in the way.

Naturally, Kaori's grandparents and her uncle had come running over when they'd learned that she'd miraculously come back, but things had still been chaotic back then, so they hadn't been able to spend too much time together. Everyone was really looking forward to seeing Kaori again today, which was why she'd reluctantly told Hajime that she wouldn't be able to make it to her date.

"It's too late to do anything about it now, but next time make sure you check what my plans are before deciding on trips like this, okay, dad?"

"I will," Tomoichi replied in a low voice, clearly intending to ruin her plans next time as well. Kaori could tell what he was thinking, so her mood grew even darker.

"Hajime-kun didn't even get mad when I said I couldn't come. He told me to enjoy my time with my family…all because he knows how you feel."

"I-I see. I can't believe he's trying to one-up me by acting like the

mature one!" Tomoichi said angrily. Despite his desire to get back in his daughter's good graces, he couldn't help but continue to insult him.

"Give it a rest, you two. We're almost there," Kaoruko said, finding her daughter and husband's spat more entertaining than anything else.

Tomoichi parked the car in front of a large, two-family house. This was the home he'd grown up in, and where his parents and older brother still lived. He was still incensed about the Hajime thing, so his parking was a bit sloppy, but he didn't care. Kaoruko rubbed her temples in exasperation but said nothing.

Kaori wordlessly got out of the car, prompting Tomoichi to hurriedly get out as well. He opened the trunk and said, "Kaori, let me take your stuff—"

"No need; the front door isn't that far. Besides, Hajime-kun would have taken it without even saying anything."

Kaori hefted her luggage out of the trunk and stalked off. Tomoichi dropped to his knees in defeat and started slamming the ground with his fist.

Damn you, Hajimeeeeeeee!

Just then, someone came over from around the backyard and stared at Tomoichi.

"What are you doing, uncle? Please stop; the neighbors are going to think we're weirdos."

Kaori took her hand off the doorbell and turned around to see a beautiful young woman with straight brown hair. She was Sakura Shirasaki, Kaori's cousin. Sakura had a dripping hose in one hand; she'd been in the middle of watering the garden.

"Sakura-oneechan!"

"Hey there, Kaori. I'm glad things seem to have calmed down for you now."

Though Sakura looked like an aloof woman, the gentle smile she flashed Kaori when Kaori ran up to hug her made it obvious the two of them were related.

"Sorry I worried you so much."

"As long as you're alive and well, everything's fine. We'll be able to talk properly now, so you better tell me everything that happened."

"Sure!"

“Also, welcome, auntie. Why don’t you come inside and relax?”

“He he, thank you, Sakura-chan.”

The three women walked into the house, smiling, leaving Tomoichi behind. It was almost enough to make one pity him.

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Kaori and Sakura walked along the beach together, the starry sky twinkling overhead.

“I don’t normally go to concerts, but that one was really fun!” Kaori said.

“Really? I was worried it’d be boring, since it was only local bands playing, so I’m glad you liked it.”

After the warm welcome Sakura and everyone else had given them, Kaori had explained everything that had happened. Once that was done, they’d lazed around for a while, but then Sakura invited Kaori to see a mini-concert that some local bands were putting on at the beach. Sakura had figured Kaori hadn’t been able to leave the house much in the busy week she’d had dealing with the logistics of her return, and Kaori had indeed been grateful for the opportunity to get out of the house.

Sakura breathed a sigh of relief as she saw Kaori’s genuine smile, glad to know inviting Kaori out had been the right idea. But then she looked behind her and her expression stiffened.

“Waaah, Kaori, my dear angel. Please look at me. I’m so sad I’m going to die.”

Tomoichi was trailing behind them. He’d offered to go with them to the concert, since he was worried about sending two girls out alone. However, Kaori had been tired of him butting in every time she tried to talk to Sakura about Hajime and Yue and the others, so she’d refused. Still, he’d cried so much that she’d ultimately relented. That being said, she was ignoring him completely as she chatted with Sakura. It was honestly kind of scary how good she’d gotten at completely ignoring him.

In truth, Sakura understood how Kaori felt. She’d had the same issue with her dad the first time she’d brought home a boyfriend. At the same time, she understood Tomoichi’s misgivings about Kaori’s somewhat irregular relationship.

She didn’t want to take sides, which left her stuck between a

rock and a hard place.

I wish something could happen to just magically fix this rift between them. I'm getting sick of this...

"Huh? You guys were at the concert earlier, weren't you? What a coincidence! Wanna hang out for a bit?"

The heavens must have heard Sakura's prayers and decided to spit on her, since a group of five men suddenly came up and blocked their path.

This is not what I was hoping for...

"Sorry, but we've already got plans," Sakura said in a tired voice.

"How about letting us join in on the fun? The more the merrier, right?"

Sakura could immediately tell these were the type of guys who refused to take no for an answer.

Sakura and Kaori were both extremely beautiful women, so these guys weren't going to give up very easily. Naturally, Tomoichi wasn't going to sit idle while these guys hit on his daughter and niece.

"Could you guys please move out of the way? We all had a good time at the concert, so surely you don't want any trouble," he said, trying to sound reasonable.

"Who the hell's this old fart?"

"I'm her father, and we're on our way home now."

The men burst out laughing and started hurling insults at him. Tomoichi didn't get angry, but neither did he back down.

Seeing his confident attitude pissed the guys off, and one of them raised his fist threateningly.

"Get lost, you creepy old fart. Look, we'll take them home after we have a bit of fun with them."

Another guy reached out toward Kaori's shoulder, so Tomoichi grabbed his hand.

"Don't touch my daughter," he said, in a perfectly even voice. Tomoichi was an architect, which wasn't a very physically demanding job and he didn't go to the gym regularly, so he wasn't particularly well-built. That being said, he was still a grown man, which made the look in his eyes feel quite intimidating.

"Get lost, geezer."

The men found themselves taken aback by the fire in Tomoichi's eyes, but then they grew angry at themselves for being

intimidated and the one with the raised fist punched him.

Tomoichi let out a pained grunt, blood dripping from his split lip. And yet, he continued glaring intently at the men, which caused them to get even angrier. The man tried to punch him again.

“Uncle!” Sakura shouted, taking out her phone to call the police. Upon seeing that, the men turned their attention to Sakura and glared threateningly at her.

“What do you all think you’re doing?” Kaori said in a quiet voice.

Everyone stopped in their tracks, and the man who’d punched Tomoichi suddenly realized that Kaori had stopped his second punch with one hand. They all turned to her, overwhelmed by the ice-cold smile on her face and the fact that she’d stopped a man’s punch with her slender hand.

Her tone completely flat, she said, “What are you doing to my dad, huh?”

“Wh-What’s your problem, girlie? We’re just teaching your dad a lesson, that’s all! He needs to learn not to look down on people!” the man shouted, trying to pull his fist out of Kaori’s grip.

“It’s true that dad needs to learn a lot of lessons. He’s always joking around, he’s too overprotective, he still treats me like a kid, he sulks too often, and he keeps bad-mouthing Hajime-kun.”

“Wh-What the hell?! This girl’s strong!” the guy exclaimed. Even after putting all of his weight behind it, he couldn’t pull his fist out. The other men stared at their companion in confusion. It would have been more believable if he was acting, but it was clear from the panic in his voice that he wasn’t.

Kaori ignored him and continued talking, almost as if she were speaking to herself.

“But you know, he’s a really kind dad too. Even when he’s busy with work, he always finds time to talk to me. And even though he’s bad at fighting, he always tries to protect me. Whenever I try my hardest, he praises me, and whenever I do something wrong, he scolds me.”

Kaori wasn’t even looking at the men anymore. She was looking over at her father.

“I’m sorry, dad. I should have stopped him before he hit you, but I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I reacted late. Thank you for trying to protect me.”

“Kaori…” Tomoichi mumbled. He was so stunned that all he could do was say Kaori’s name. It was shocking how mature his daughter looked. He was forced to accept that she’d long since left the nest…and that realization brought with it a sense of profound loneliness.

Kaori turned back to the men and glared icily at them.

“My dad’s the best dad in the world, so stop making fun of him!”

“Let go already you—Bwagh!”

The man tried to punch Kaori with his free hand, but she sent him flying with a kick before he could.

The other guys watched as their friend sailed through the air and crashed into the sand with a resounding thud. He twitched a few times, but made no move to get back up. They stared at him in stunned silence for a few seconds.

“If you leave now, I’ll let the rest of you go,” Kaori said in a cold voice. The men exchanged uneasy glances. Normally, they would have run away, but she’d hurt their pride. Screaming incoherent insults, they all charged at her.

“I guess no matter what world you’re in, there’s always guys like you out there, huh?” Kaori said with a long sigh. That, more than anything, got to the men.

“We’re gonna fucking kill—!”

There was a loud metallic click and the men stopped in their tracks. They looked down at Kaori’s hands in shock. She’d somehow suddenly brought out two extendable batons, one in each hand. They must have been custom-made, since they were over a meter long. Definitely not the kind of things a regular high school girl carried around.

“K-Kaori, where did you bring those out from?” Sakura asked, looking just as shocked as the men. None of them had any idea that the ring on Kaori’s pinky finger contained a whole host of deadly weapons, including her prized twin claymores.

Hajime had, in fact, made these batons for Kaori—as well as mundane weapons for everyone else—because he’d predicted that something like this might happen.

“That bluff won’t work on—Bwaaagh!”

The baton was made of pure azantium and could shock people as well. Kaori made short work of the hoodlums, teaching them a lesson about pain that they wouldn’t ever forget.

“Isn’t that great, uncle? Kaori’s getting mad on your behalf,” Sakura said.

“Y-Yeah… I can even see the aura she gives off when she’s really mad. It’s clearer than ever,” Tomoichi replied. They both watched as Kaori sent all five of the men flying. Once she was done, she messed with their memories a little using spirit magic, a beaming smile on her face.

Neither Tomoichi nor Sakura asked what exactly she’d done to them, but they could tell from her expression that it was something exceptionally cruel. That night, they both learned that they should never make Kaori truly mad.

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Kaori and Tomoichi took a detour to take a slightly longer route back home, while Sakura headed straight back. She could tell that the two of them wanted to have a long talk, so she made herself scarce.

“Dad, does your lip still hurt?”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine now, Kaori. Magic really is amazing. I know I’ve seen it a bunch now, but it still surprises me each time.”

Kaori smiled gently, then tried to figure out how to phrase what it was she wanted to say. Tomoichi already knew what was going through her mind, so he held back a sigh.

“Kaori, if there’s something you want to say, just say it. I’m the world’s best dad, so I promise I’ll hear you out.”

Kaori blinked in surprise, then smiled again and said, “All righty, then. You know, dad, I realized this earlier, but you’re a lot like Hajime-kun.”

“Hold up, Kaori, there’s a limit to how much I can take, even if I am the world’s best dad. You’re telling me I’m like that cheating harem lord bastard? Is it okay if I take a journey to find myself? I think after a year, maybe I’ll be able to come to terms with what you just said.”

Kaori chuckled at her dad’s reaction and shook her head.

“Ha ha ha, I don’t mean how he is now, but how he used to be.”

“Before you all got summoned away?” Tomoichi asked dubiously, and Kaori nodded, her expression nostalgic.

“Yes. Back then, he wasn’t good at fighting at all, but he still

stood up to people harassing others without hesitation. He was weak but strong."

That was why Kaori had fallen in love with him in the first place. She'd learned from watching her mom that marrying someone like her dad would make her happy. Though, when she said as much to Tomoichi, he wasn't sure whether to be happy to hear that or not.

"I can't believe that guy I met at the family meeting used to be such a meek boy..."

"It's crazy, right? When I first saw him again after he fell off that bridge, I was shocked too. It was like he'd become a completely different person. He'd gone through so much that he'd had no choice but to change."

"Well...I guess if what you all say is true, he really did have it rough."

"He did. But you know, deep down he was still the same Hajime-kun I knew. On a fundamental level, he hadn't changed. That's why there are so many people who love him even now. If he really was a cheating womanizer, do you think there'd be so many people sticking by his side? Besides, I'm not so stupid that I'd pine after a guy like that either."

There was nothing Tomoichi could say to refute that. Groaning, he kicked a rock in frustration.

"Look, I know he's the guy your heart's set on," he finally said after a long pause. "But you know, it's still hard for me to accept this as your father. I want you to marry someone who'll treasure you more than anyone else." Tomoichi let out a long sigh and scratched his head.

Kaori linked her arm around his and said, "Thank you, dad, but I know that even if I won't be the most important person to Hajime-kun, he'll still make me happier than anyone else ever could."

Kaori showed him the ring hanging from the necklace around her neck. This one wasn't a Treasure Trove, it was a simple engagement ring that Hajime had given her. Naturally, Tomoichi frowned distastefully as he looked at it.

"Dad, Hajime-kun's the kind of person who cares about everything and everyone the people he holds dear care about, so no matter how cold you are to him, he's not going to give up trying to make amends with you."

“I guess he is the guy who crawled back up out of hell just to make it back to his family and then killed god to get his girlfriend back.”

“He he, that’s right. He never, ever gives up.”

Yeah, I don’t think I can win in a war of attrition against him.

Tomoichi let out another very long sigh.

“I know our relationship isn’t normal, and I’m sorry I’m making you worry, but…” Kaori trailed off there, looking into her dad’s eyes. “Even if it takes time, I’d like it if you could try to get along with Hajime-kun, dad. I love him, and I want you to love him as well.”

I wish the tide had come in and drowned out my daughter’s words just now. If I could just pretend I never heard that, then this would be so much easier.

Tomoichi glared over at the ocean, unable to maintain eye contact with his daughter. He’d never felt this conflicted before.

For a few moments after that, the two of them walked on in silence as Tomoichi contemplated how to best respond. Finally, he let out the longest sigh of the day yet and his shoulders drooped in surrender.

“As a father who loves his daughter, how can I possibly say no to that?” he muttered in a barely audible voice. He then held out his hand toward Kaori.



“Kaori, could you call him…call Hajime-kun for me?”

“Sure… Thanks, dad.”

Kaori took out her cell phone and dialed Hajime’s number. He picked up immediately and she quickly explained the situation to him. He, of course, gladly agreed to speak to Kaori’s dad. His aura of calm confidence still rubbed Tomoichi the wrong way, but he tried to hold back his distaste. Kaori shook her head in exasperation as she handed the phone over to him.

“It’s me,” Tomoichi said curtly.

“We haven’t spoken since the family meeting. I’m glad I got to talk to you again.”

“Hmph, I would have been happy never hearing your voice ever again!”

“But I thought Kaori called because you wanted to talk to me?”

“Tch, you always have a smart-ass response ready, don’t you? That’s how you seduced my daughter, isn’t it?”

“Not really. If anything, she’s the one who seduced me.”

“Excuse me? Are you saying you actually don’t care that much about Kaori and you’re only going out with her because she insisted?! Is that it, huh?! Who do you think you are, you—?!”

“Dad?” Kaori said in a menacing voice.

“Sorry…”

Hearing Hajime’s voice reflexively put Tomoichi into fight or flight mode. He gave Kaori an apologetic smile, but she continued glaring at him. He could tell that if he didn’t get his act together, she might give him the silent treatment for months.

“Ahem! So, umm…the reason I called…well, it’s just, I’ve been thinking a lot and…look, it’s hard for me to act naturally around my daughter’s boyfriend, okay?”

“As a father myself, I understand completely. If my daughter brought a guy like me home, I’d break all the bones in his body, encase him in concrete, and dump him into the ocean.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, same, totally. I-I’d go that far too, for sure.”

“No, sorry, I suppose that wouldn’t be enough to appease your anger, would it? You probably want to drop a meteor on me, don’t you? It doesn’t matter how much of the world you’d destroy in the process, you want me to disappear that badly, right?”

“…E-Exactly!”

Cold sweat started beading on Tomoichi’s forehead. He hadn’t

known Hajime was this extreme. Suddenly, he was dreading the day Hajime's daughter brought home a boyfriend. Who knew what would happen to Japan then. For a moment, he considered trying to calm Hajime down, but then his pride as a father kicked in and he started competing with him again.

"Ahem! It seems you understand my feelings very well. But let's put that aside for now. There's one thing I want to ask you."

"Sure."

"You intend to marry all of your girlfriends no matter what, correct?"

"That's right. I know that defies social norms, and I understand why that bothers you, but I have no intention of changing my mind, no matter what happens. I'll dedicate my entire life to earning your approval, if that's what it takes."

"So you're doubling down."

"I hope that one day you'll understand this is my way of showing my sincerity, and my resolve."

Tomoichi gripped Kaori's phone tighter. Indeed, what Hajime was saying was completely over the top. But at the same time, he could tell that he was serious about this.

"I want to punch you so bad right now."

"I'm prepared to be punched as many times as it takes."

"Well, I can't because then my daughter's going to get mad at me! God, why did she ever have to meet you."

Tomoichi came to a halt. They were within eyeshot of the family home, but he could hardly step inside while having this conversation. Plus, there was one other thing he absolutely needed to ask.

"There's no father in the world who doesn't wish for their daughter's happiness."

"I know."

"And right now, my daughter says she's happy. She even looks happier than I've ever seen her."

Tomoichi glanced back at Kaori. She smiled a cuter smile than he'd ever seen and nodded in response. It galled him that he'd never been able to make her smile like that.

"I understand that you're a bastard who wants his harem no matter what, but let me just ask you this. Can you swear to me that you'll keep Kaori this happy for the rest of her life? Can you

promise me that?”

Tomoichi could tell that Hajime’s expression had turned serious, even though he couldn’t see him. The tone of Hajime’s voice alone conveyed the strength of his resolve, and just how seriously he’d taken Tomoichi’s question.

“I already swore to do that when I decided to marry her. I won’t break that promise even if it kills me.”

“……”

Tomoichi looked up at the sky. He wanted to shout “Goddammit all!” so badly, but with a herculean effort, he stifled his emotions for the sake of his daughter.

“In that case…come over for dinner sometime.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll be sure to come.”

Kaori ran over and hugged her dad.

“Thank you so much, dad. I love you!” she said in a small voice. Just hearing that made everything worth it, so Tomoichi was glad he’d sucked up his pride and made up with Hajime. At the same time, though, he felt a profound sense of defeat, knowing that he wouldn’t have had this reconciliation if Hajime hadn’t been so goddamn earnest.

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea, though! This doesn’t mean I approve of you just yet! If you make Kaori cry even once, I’m going to dump you in the Pacific *and* drop a meteor on you!” Tomoichi shouted, suddenly going tsundere.

“Ha ha, now that’s scary. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Kaori chuckled as well, and just as it looked like everything would turn out all right, disaster struck.

“Hajime, how does the sexy underwear you bought for me look?” Yue said, her voice clearly audible from the other side of the phone.

“Hajime-saaan! Look, there are holes everywhere in this thing! Can you even call this underwear?!” Shea exclaimed.

“Tonight is going to be a long night, Master! Let us drown in our own lust!” Tio said.

“You guys seriously had to come in at the worst time possible, didn’t you?! This is why I keep telling you to knock before—!”

The color drained from Tomoichi’s face, and even Kaori’s smile turned hostile. But then, she realized this would make it a hundred times harder for her dad to accept Hajime and she shook her head

in exasperation.

“Hey, pervert,” Tomoichi said in a threatening voice.

“W-Wait, this is all a misunderstanding, Tomoichi-san! Give me a chance to—!”

“Like hell I’m giving you more chances! Yeah, you’re one crazy guy all right. Ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Tomoichi started laughing maniacally…and before Kaori could stop him, he blew up completely.

“I take it all back, you bastard! I’m never letting you have my daughter! Don’t you dare come near her ever again or I’ll drop you into the ocean with a meteor!”

“Wait, I—!”

Tomoichi chucked the phone onto the ground and it snapped in half.

“Hey, that’s my phone!” Kaori shouted, but Tomoichi didn’t even notice. He was too blinded by rage to care. He stomped on the phone over and over, hoping to never hear his hated foe’s voice ever again.

“D-Dad, stop it!”

“I’m never talking to that guy again! Kaori, don’t you dare ever go to meet him! Promise me!”

Naturally, Kaori wasn’t about to make that promise. If anything, she was jealous that Yue and the others had gotten sexy underwear from Hajime and she hadn’t.

Tomoichi read her thoughts from her expression, which made him completely lose it.

“I am never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, EVER approving of him!” he shouted, then took off in the opposite direction, as if running away from home until his daughter gave up on Hajime.

Kaori’s shoulders slumped and she muttered, “Usually, it’s the daughter who runs away when the father’s being stubborn and unreasonable.”

She appreciated how much her dad cared about her, but at the same time, she wished he could just make up with Hajime already. Sighing, she chased after her foolish father, determined to bring him back home.

Needless to say, Hajime had to go to great lengths to get back on speaking terms with Tomoichi. Legends say it was even harder than killing a god.

Chapter V: The Yaegashi Family's Secret

The day before Hajime remodeled the Nagumo household, he was walking stone-faced up to a residential district that sat next to the river. He wasn't in a bad mood per se, but his steps were heavy as he thought about the destination he was heading toward. Though he'd visited this place many times in the past, he knew this visit would bring with it a storm of trouble.

"It was easier to walk into a labyrinth than it is to go here. Well, there's nothing I can do but grit my teeth and bear it."

Smiling stiffly, Hajime slapped his cheeks and strode forward. One way or another, this was a trial he'd have to overcome if he wished to grasp the future he desired.

He navigated his way through the residential district, making his way to a house with a large fence around it. Then, he followed along the edge of the fence until he reached the large wooden double doors that led inside.

The gate was open, revealing a large Japanese-style mansion within the grounds. It had the dignified aura of a place that made one instinctively straighten their back when they stepped inside. The nameplate out front read "Yaegashi." There was also a large sign above the mansion that said "Yaegashi Dojo."

There was a laminated placard that had the map of the entire grounds that neatly showed where the kendo classroom was. Oddly enough, the mere presence of the map made the place seem more inviting.

This was, of course, the house where Shizuku lived. He'd already contacted her family to let them know he was visiting, and they'd told him he was free to come inside. Despite that, Hajime had the strange sense that it would be dangerous to step through those open gates. And so, he instead pressed the intercom button attached to one of the pillars supporting the gates.

"Who is it?" a woman's gentle voice called out almost immediately. It was one he recognized. Hajime had, of course, met Shizuku's family at the big family meeting, but for various reasons, he'd been visiting the Yaegashi house more than anyone else's

place.

The woman who'd answered the doorbell was Kirino Yaegashi, Shizuku's mother.

"It's Hajime Nagumo."

"My, you're right on time, Hajime-san. Come on in. I told you before that you don't need to ring the doorbell, remember?"

"You're supposed to be polite even to people you're close to, right?"

"Fu fu, if you insist."

Hajime had a hard time dealing with Shizuku's mom. Sighing, he stepped onto the manor grounds.

A second later, there was a whooshing noise and Hajime held a hand up in front of his forehead.

"I knew it..." he muttered, looking down at the three spherical objects he'd caught between his fingers. He squeezed on them a little, and they popped, spreading a yellow powder everywhere.

The powder smelled strongly of spice, so Hajime could tell it was tear gas. Had he been a normal person and had those spheres hit him directly, he would have been rolling on the ground in pain.

"We're not in a ninja drama...but I guess in this house I may as well be."

Over the past week or so, Hajime had learned much about the Yaegashi household. If this was their reaction to him telling them he was going to marry Shizuku, then so be it. But while Hajime was willing to accept his fate, he couldn't help but shake his head slightly still. He'd been expecting to get punched, but the Yaegashi family had exceeded all expectations.

Hajime passed through the front entrance and stepped into a spacious inner garden. It wasn't a full-on traditional Japanese garden, but it was still well-maintained. There were cobbled stone paths crisscrossing the garden, lanterns set at slightly irregular intervals, and plenty of big trees. To the left, there was even a small pond. Near the pond was a small building—the Yaegashi Dojo. But since today was a weekend there was no one training inside, so it was ominously quiet.

As Hajime walked past one of the trees, he suddenly sensed an intense bloodlust. He looked up and saw an old man leaping down from a branch, a wooden sword raised high above his head. It was

clear that he intended to cleave Hajime in two with one clean stroke.

"Good afternoon, Shuzou-san," Hajime said, blocking an attack that would have shattered a boulder with just one hand and bowing to the man who'd slashed at him.

The old man with white hair who looked like he was in his mid-eighties was the head instructor of the Yaegashi Dojo, as well as Shizuku's grandfather. This was actually his third visit to the Yaegashi house today, and Shuzou had attacked him the previous two times as well, so he was used to this by now.

Indeed, the reason his footsteps had been so heavy on the way here was because he'd known he'd be attacked again.

"Well met, Hajime-kun. Make yourself at home."

"Thank you very much."

Despite his cordial tone, Shuzou continued to try to overpower Hajime, his wooden sword creaking from the strain. From an outsider's perspective, he probably looked insane.

Shuzou and Hajime locked gazes for a few seconds, after which Shuzou finally relented and withdrew his sword. He then turned on his heel as if nothing had happened and said, "You haven't had lunch yet, right? I'll go prepare it. You can talk with Shizuku until then. She should be in her room."

"Shouldn't I deliver my report first?"

"I told you, make yourself at home. It seems you've been working quite hard the past few days, so you may as well rest."

"Er, uhhh, thank you very—"

The moment Shuzou relaxed his bloodlust, Hajime sensed a new assailant. Hajime instinctively ducked, so the newcomer's perfectly executed roundhouse kick whistled above his head.

Hajime saw the sleeves of the new attacker's hakama flapping out of the corner of his eye and knew that a follow-up axe kick was coming. And so, he cartwheeled to the side to dodge out of the way and turned to face his attacker.

"Yo, Hajime-kun. Glad you made it. Make yourself at home," the man who'd attacked Hajime said.

"Good afternoon, Toramasa-san. Thank you for having me."

Toramasa Yaegashi, Shizuku's father, was a master of the Yaegashi style. He had a claw-shaped scar on his cheek that Hajime wasn't sure he wanted to know where he'd gotten, and

generally looked like your average tough guy.

Toramasa said the same thing Shuzou had, also acting as if he'd just been greeting Hajime instead of trying to kill him.

A second later, a wooden sword came flying at Hajime's face and he whipped his head to the side to dodge. He heard someone click their tongue from behind one of the nearby lanterns. Then, an old man jumped out of the pond and spat a dozen needles out of his mouth at Hajime. Hajime stepped away, but then realized the assault wasn't over and did a backflip as well. A moment later, a young man popped out of the ground, stabbing up at where Hajime had been standing.

"Grr, missed my chance again!" the youngster shouted, covered in dirt and mud.

Hajime smiled slightly as he landed and held up his hand to grab another set of flying weapons. He then struck down another barrage coming from the opposite direction. This time instead of tear gas balls they'd all been arrows. Arrows with blunted, rubber-tipped heads, but arrows nonetheless. Looking up, Hajime saw a number of the students of the Yaegashi Dojo sitting on the rooftop of the main building, bows in hand. There was another group of students on the opposite rooftop as well.

Hajime nodded, then turned back to Toramasa.

"Toramasa-san, is the Yaegashi Dojo secretly a ninja training school?"

He was pretty sure that was the case.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hajime-kun. Shinobi don't exist in the modern era. You've been reading too much manga, and it's messing with your imagination. We can't have Shizuku's husband failing to tell reality from fiction!"

"B-But those techniques..."

"Also, please don't forget that we're not ninjas, we're shinobi. They're not the same."

"You just admitted it, didn't you?!"

The old man who'd leaped out of the pond took off his white dojo clothes, revealing a black ninja suit underneath. Looking down, Hajime realized that some authentic shuriken that probably belonged in a museum had been mixed in with the arrows that had been fired at him. One of the students of the Yaegashi Dojo Naruto ran over to them and collected them before Hajime could

take a closer look. Meanwhile, the people on the roof threw very ninja-esque grappling hooks down and rappelled into the garden.

Hajime turned back to grill Toramasa, but he was long gone. He hadn't made any sound as he'd run away. In fact, Hajime just barely caught a glimpse of him retreating into the main building before he vanished from sight. They were all fast and silent.

Hajime sucked in a deep breath and held back his annoyance.

"Hajime! Welcome!"

Just then, Shizuku's cheerful voice called out to him from the front porch of the main building and he turned to see her waving at him. He raised a hand in greeting and walked over to her. She was wearing a colorful kimono and had put on a little bit of makeup.



It seemed she'd wanted to doll herself up a little for Hajime.

Seeing her made Hajime's annoyance melt away immediately.

"You prefer Western clothes, don't you, Shizuku? Did you wear that kimono just for me?"

"W-Well, I hadn't shown you this one yet, so..."

"I see, thanks. That made all my exhaustion fly away. You look really pretty."

"Oh...thanks."

Shizuku smiled and blushed, and the contrast between her usual cool demeanor and her girlier mannerisms was striking. Hajime smiled—and then suddenly reached into his pocket and pulled out a mini-Donner fitted with a silencer and rapidly fired a series of shots off to his left. There was a series of sparks and metallic clangs as the bullets collided with something. Shizuku jumped a little and looked over to see a series of small bamboo cylinders jutting out from the ground. They were barely visible unless you were focusing intently. It seemed there had still been a few assassins lying in wait.

They must have been communicating secretly with each other while hiding and had fired darts from their blowguns in tandem.

"N-Not you guys again! Get out here right now!" Shizuku shouted, her face reddening in anger. They ignored her and scurried away, the ground barely shifting as they used whatever secret passages they'd dug under the courtyard.

Shizuku trembled with rage and Hajime flashed her a sympathetic smile. However, he still needed to confirm something.

"Hey, Shizuku, are you sure your family isn't descended from ninjas?"

"I don't think so, but..."

Her family had never acted like this before they'd been summoned to Tortus. It had all started after Hajime had begun visiting the Yaegashi house. Since then, she'd learned far too much about the secret passageways within her own house and the various assassination techniques in the Yaegashi Style that she'd never been privy to before. It was honestly more of a shock to her than it was to Hajime.

"Mind asking them for me? You know, maybe try to see if they secretly trained you to be a kunoichi without you realizing it."

"I grilled dad and grandpa a few days ago."

“And what’d they say?”

“That these were all sword techniques, just combined with a bit of acrobatics.”

“So they’re keeping it a secret even from you…”

“I can’t believe my family…” Shizuku muttered with a dead look in her eyes, prompting Hajime to give her another sympathetic look.

Shizuku had thought she’d finally returned to her boring normal life only to discover that everyone in her family except her had been hiding some very abnormal secrets. It seemed no matter what world she was in, Shizuku was destined to suffer.

“Hey, Hajime…please don’t come to hate them because of this,” Shizuku said, hiding her expression with the sleeve of her kimono. The gesture was so cute that Hajime nearly pushed her down right then and there.

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“But from the looks of it, dad and grandpa are going to keep on attacking you like that no matter how many times I tell them to stop…”

“I get how they feel. They probably don’t want to give you away to a guy like me. If I was in their shoes, I’d be shooting me too.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be doing that either.”

Shizuku was, of course, absolutely correct, but Hajime sympathized with Shuzou and Toramasa. So, while their antics annoyed him, he didn’t really hate them.

“If I think about it as a trial that I have to overcome to make you mine, then it honestly feels kind of exciting. I’ll overcome anything in order to marry you.”

“Oh, Hajime…”

Shizuku blushed and hid her face with her sleeves. Unfortunately, she was blushing to the tips of her ears, so she couldn’t hide everything. Hajime wanted to push her arms away and look at her cute expression directly.

“A-Anyway, why don’t you come in and evacuate to my room? It should be safe there.”

“Evacuate is sadly a very fitting term here…”

“Don’t remind me…” Shizuku said with a groan, and Hajime followed her inside.

It would have been nice if they could have chatted about

whatever while walking side by side down the hallway to Shizuku's room, but unfortunately, the halls of the Yaegashi house were riddled with traps. Spears came out from gaps in the walls, there were pit traps and falling ceilings everywhere, Toramasa came out of trick wall hiding spots and attacked Hajime with wooden swords, and Shuzou also leaped out from behind pillars and attacked Hajime with a chain sickle.

Hajime dealt with them all casually and turned to Shizuku with a pitying look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Shizuku…but we have to face reality. Your family is a family of ninjas…and your house is a secret lair."

"I can't believe I didn't know about any of this until last week even though I've lived here my whole life… Hey, grandpa! No chain and sickles! You're ruining the wallpaper with them! Also, that thing's clearly real, isn't it?! Where did you get that from?!"

Shizuku may as well have been yelling at empty air, since by the time they rounded the corner the chain sickle attack from Shuzou was nowhere to be seen. She dropped to her knees in despair.

"Hey, Shizuku, how about we go to the living room instead of your room? It looks like they're getting more and more desperate, since I can block all of their attacks. At this rate, they may accidentally damage your prized stuffed animal collection."

"Ugh… My room should be safe… If they touch anything in there, I'm leaving this house forever! I'm already mad enough that they keep attacking you!" Shizuku shouted, knowing there were people in the walls, ceiling, and the floor listening in. They could tell she was seriously mad now as they all silently retreated.

"Now let's go, Hajime! We can finally spend some time alone!" Shizuku said, squeezing Hajime's arm and leading him to her room.

"Y-Yeah. You must be getting really desperate, huh?"

Hajime had been in Shizuku's room twice before, and as always it was filled to the brim with cute things. Stuffed animals lined the shelves, there was a calendar with pictures of cute cats hanging on the wall, the curtains and sheets were all pink, and the cushions had cute rabbit ear designs on them. It was the girliest a room could possibly be.

Shizuku put down a cute raccoon cushion for Hajime and it let out a cutesy squeal when he sat down on it. If the people in Tortus

saw Hajime sitting down on something like this, they'd probably all burst out laughing, especially the imperial emperor.

"One sec, I'll get us some tea and snacks."

"Nah, don't bother. Also, I don't really want to be alone in this house…"

"Gah… I-It'll be fine! I told them I won't tolerate this anymore and I did thoroughly explore my room to make sure there's no secret—"

Just then, Hajime heard a clunk from the ceiling, and Shizuku's reassurances turned to ashes in her mouth.

"Welcome, Hajime-san. Please, enjoy some snacks," Kirino said, removing one of the ceiling panels and dropping down with a tea tray laden with tea and snacks. The fact that she managed the feat without spilling a drop of tea or a crumb of cake was beyond impressive.

"Mom?! How…? I thought I examined everything…" Shizuku muttered, looking up at the ceiling in despair.

Kirino just smiled and gently set the tray down on the glass table in Shizuku's room. It was clear from her calm, confident demeanor that she was a very strong woman. While she did look pretty, the overwhelming impression Hajime got from her was that she was more *cool* than beautiful.

"H-Hey, mom, you're secretly a kunoichi, aren't you? Don't lie to me now."

Kirino was the one person in Shizuku's family who hadn't suddenly transformed after Hajime's arrival. Or at least, that was what Shizuku had thought, so suddenly seeing her mom drop from the ceiling like a ninja shocked her to her core.

Not you too, mom…

Shizuku stared up at her mother with dead eyes.

"Oh, Shizuku, you really are such a hopeless girl," Kirino said with a small smile.

"I'm sorry, Hajime-san. She got overly excited when she learned you were coming, so I thought I'd lighten the mood with a joke to make sure she doesn't trip over herself. But as you can see, she's serious to a fault, so instead this is the reaction we got. She might be a little boring, but please don't abandon her, Hajime-san."

"Don't worry, her reactions are plenty interesting," Hajime said with a small smile.

“You’re so mean, Hajime…” Shizuku said, turning to Hajime with tears in her eyes. Hajime patted her on the head, and her frown instantly turned into a smile as she leaned against his chest.

“My, I can’t believe you’re not embarrassed to act like that in front of your mother. All right, all right, I’ll leave,” Kirino said with a gentle smile and jumped back up into the ceiling.

As Shizuku watched her mom replace the ceiling panel, her eyes turned dead again as she realized even her room wasn’t safe.

“Well…just think of it as her way of teaching you about this house’s secrets little by little.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I heard after we all went missing, your family was the one that led most of the search parties. From what they seemingly accomplished while you were gone, I had the feeling they weren’t a normal family even before I met them.”

Indeed, the Yaegashi family had spared no effort in their search, and unlike all the other normal families, they’d had access to resources regular civilians couldn’t dream of. Not only that, but they had connections to basically every major organization in the country. They trained the local police officers in martial arts, and indeed the guy who’d jumped out of the pond to attack Hajime was the local police chief. The reason they’d been able to so easily sweep the news of their return under the rug was because he’d also known the truth and had been able to effectively get the rest of the police department to believe his reports.

“I’ve known the police chief since I was little, so I just thought of him as my weird uncle, but I guess he’s a ninja too…”

All of the students of the Yaegashi Dojo were like family to Shizuku, but that was why the realization that they were all trained ninjas came as such a shock and why Shizuku felt so betrayed.

Regardless, the fact remained that most of the students of the Yaegashi Dojo had posts in high places, and they’d helped keep the chaos to a minimum, talking to the neighbors, school administrators, and distant relatives of family members that Hajime hadn’t had time to reach out to. They had also helped him keep the rude journalists, curious onlookers, and crazy conspiracy theorists at bay. This was why Hajime had spent so much time at the Yaegashi house this past week, and indeed the main reason he’d come today was to thank everyone for their help and let them

know things were finally calming down, as well as to decide what they'd do moving forward.

"I guess the event that prompted this wasn't the nicest, but it's a good thing that you're getting to learn more about your family, right?"

"You're right… I'll need to find out why they didn't tell me until now as well. I'm getting tired of learning about these things piecemeal."

Also, why do you keep denying it when it's obvious from your actions that you have ninja training?! Shizuku screamed internally.

She stuffed a tea cake into her mouth to help her calm down and Hajime began to wonder just how Shizuku had managed to remain oblivious to her family's true nature for so long. She wasn't an idiot. In fact, she was more perceptive than most. In which case, it made sense to assume Shuzou and the others had gone to great lengths to hide this from her. The fact that they'd kept it secret even after she'd gotten into high school meant they might have planned on keeping the secret forever.

But why?

Maybe they didn't want her to feel pressured by her family lineage? He thought back to when she'd fought her double in the Frost Caverns. She'd overcome that trial by becoming true to herself. Afterward, he'd heard from her just how overjoyed her family had been at the martial talent she'd exhibited, and the high hopes everyone had had for her. However, that had led to Shizuku suppressing her true desires to try to live up to the image people had of her.

The first time Hajime had visited the Yaegashi house, he'd had an opportunity to speak with Shuzou and the others without Shizuku being present. They'd all asked him about the events in the Frost Caverns. Of course, Shizuku had told them what had happened herself, but they'd wanted to hear it from the perspective of the only other person who'd been there, the person she'd opened her heart to. They'd wanted to know whether or not Shizuku was truly living according to her desires or if this, too, was an act. When Hajime had told them he was certain she wasn't hiding her true self anymore, they'd looked relieved.

"I see… So Shizuku's finally going to be all right."

"Thank you for granting her the opportunity to be who she

wants to be."

"Please look after her from now on, Hajime-kun."

Shuzou, Toramasa, and Kirino had all started crying after that too. They were all truly happy that she'd come to love who she was, rather than the person everyone else expected her to be. Hajime hadn't pressed them for details, but he'd been able to guess quite a bit from that conversation.

They probably regretted ever putting a sword in Shizuku's hands.

It was only natural for parents to be overjoyed by their child's natural talents, and it was also natural for parents to place expectations on their children. It was only after a few years that Kirino and the others had realized they'd taken those feelings too far, and as a result, Shizuku had grown into a precocious young girl who never complained about anything regardless of how she truly felt. That was precisely why Hajime suspected Shuzou and the others had decided to hide the true nature of the Yaegashi family from her, so that she wouldn't be burdened by yet more expectations. The reason they were opening up so slowly now was because they wanted to test the waters and make absolutely certain that revealing the full truth wouldn't pressure her into walking down a path she didn't want.

Of course, this was all speculation, but Hajime was pretty confident in his conclusions. And so, he smiled gently at Shizuku as she stuffed her face full of snacks and said, "They're a troublesome bunch, all right, but I'm sure your family cares deeply about you."

"I know..."

In retrospect, Shizuku might have also come to the conclusion Hajime had regarding her family.

As Shizuku wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, Hajime said, "Anyway, regardless of whether one of my wives becomes a kunoichi in the future—"

"I won't, don't worry."

Right as Hajime opened his mouth to continue, he stopped and started looking around. Shizuku realized what he was probably searching for and a glint of anger entered her eyes as she looked around.

A few seconds later, she also sensed the presences Hajime must have and openly scowled. She was slightly late on the uptake

when it came to sensing her own family members because she was used to being around them so much.

"Even after I told them I'd run away if they did it again…"

"Now, now, relax. Things have finally started calming down, so they probably want to test whether I'm worthy of being your husband."

"No, they're just pouting because none of their techniques work on you, Hajime."

That does seem more likely.

Shuzou and Toramasa were both hardened warriors, so naturally, it stung their pride if someone managed to evade all of their techniques.

"Now even Kirino-san is joining in. Maybe this really is a trial of some sort?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? Mom's in the kitchen right now. She hasn't done anything, has she?"

"She put something in the tea…and in those sweets. Regular poisons don't work on me, but I'm pretty sure it's a paralyzing agent of some kind."

"Mooooooooooom! That's it! If you guys don't cut it out, I'm going to cut you in half!" Shizuku shouted, her voice echoing throughout the whole mansion. She then summoned her trusty black katana and leaped out of her room.

Hajime took the last of the sweets and plopped them straight into his mouth.

"This is much easier to work with than Kaori's dad's reaction, since it's just a test of strength and skill," he muttered.

"All of you, sit down right this instant! I'm going to teach you some manners!" Hajime heard Shizuku shout from a few rooms away.

That was quickly followed by Shuzou screaming, "Bwah?! Shizuku, you've grown even stronger?!"

"Heh, very well, then. Let's see just how much you polished your swordsmanship while you were away in the other world!" Toramasa exclaimed, seemingly still resisting.

There was a loud crash, followed by a disciple shouting, "We need reinforcements urgently! The young miss is going on a rampage!"

Another one yelled, "At her current level of strength, we won't

be able to win just by ganging up on her! Get into the four corners of judgment formation!”

“She’s left the boy’s side! White tiger team, kill him now!”

Hajime waited patiently as numerous people closed in on his location from all sides.

“I guess Earth isn’t all that different from Tortus after all…” he muttered with a sad shake of his head.

Incidentally, when Shizuku went on a family trip to visit extended relatives the day Hajime took Yue and the others out on a date, she called him in the middle of the night, screaming, “Hajime, there are people claiming to be from the Iga clan and the Kouga clan here! They’re all dressed like ninjas too, but they keep saying it’s a fashion statement and that they’re not really ninjas! What do I do?!”

Chapter VI: Aiko-sensei’s Worries

About a month had passed since Hajime and the others had returned from Tortus. It was a cold November afternoon, and Aiko was sitting languidly on her front porch.

“It really hasn’t changed at all,” she said in a lazy voice. She was wearing a blue PE uniform, her legs dangling off the edge of the porch. The uniform had a small tag with her name and class on it, which was how you could tell this was her middle school PE uniform. It was truly saddening, both that she was still wearing her old middle school clothes and that they still fit her. She definitely wouldn’t want to show this side of her to her students, much less her boyfriend.

Fortunately, none of them were around.

“The only thing that’s changed is that mom’s bike finally gave out after twenty years of abuse,” Aiko mumbled, looking out into the familiar yard. There was a small stone fence that had weeds growing out of the cracks, a drying rack, and a rusted steel drum of unknown purpose. Leaning against the wall was a bike with punctured tires and a broken chain. This was the nostalgic backyard Aiko had seen while growing up in her parents’ house. Until just recently, she’d been fighting her way through a battlefield much deadlier than anything she’d faced in Tortus, but now things had finally calmed down enough that she could go visit her parents.

Hajime had forced people to stop flaming her in person and online, and Aiko had already prepared all the teaching materials she’d need for the special class that would be opening in December, so now she was just waiting for the administrators to finish approving everything.

Now that she’d finally secured herself some free time, she’d decided to visit her parents in the countryside. But after a few days of lazing around, Aiko had come to realize she’d been busy for so long that she didn’t even know what to do with her free time.

“I wonder what Hajime-kun’s doing right now…” Aiko muttered absentmindedly, then blushed and covered her face with her

hands as she realized what she'd just said.

Incidentally, she'd been back at her parents' house for three days now, and she'd said those same words dozens of times already.

I'm supposed to be a teacher! And Hajime-kun's my student…though I guess it's too late to be saying that now.

Indeed, at this point, everyone knew Hajime and Aiko were dating. They'd already had sex numerous times as well.

It'd be irresponsible to say I just got carried away in the heat of the moment, and anyway, I know that's not true, but still…

Aiko knew her feelings for Hajime were one hundred percent real. But after the weeks of interviews and spending time preparing the special semester she'd be teaching for all the students who'd been isekaied, she'd been treating Hajime more as a student and less as a boyfriend recently, which had reminded her once again that she was, in fact, his teacher.

I can't believe I slept with one of my students! I should have at least waited until he graduated! Though honestly, I know I wouldn't have been able to wait that long…

She wouldn't have been able to resist the temptations of the devil on her shoulder. The worst part was that she didn't even have an angel on the other shoulder to be the voice of sanity and reason.

He even invited me to come on the first date he's taking Yue and the others to in Japan, but I felt so awkward that I refused…

The last time she'd seen Hajime was when she'd been invited to eat dinner at his house. They'd been in constant contact, but they hadn't met face-to-face since then.

"I bet they're all having fun on their date…" Aiko muttered, grabbing her knees and letting out a long sigh. She was the one who'd turned down the invitation, but she still couldn't help but feel jealous that she wasn't there. She'd become one of those clingy girlfriends who kept claiming that she wanted some space for no real reason.

I'm so lonely…but if word gets out to the public that I'm in a relationship with one of my students, the media would be up in arms again…

Aiko was serious to a fault, so naturally, she wanted to avoid causing trouble for Hajime.

There's such a big age gap between us too…

Aiko had, of course, completely forgotten that the last time she'd mentioned the age gap Yue had given her an earful, since she was far older.

"Hey, Aiko, stop rolling around in the yard. Imagine what the neighbors will say if they see you!"

"Mrr…"

Aiko rolled over onto her back and looked up at the speaker. It was her mother, Akiko Hatayama. She had her hair in a short bob and had a kind, round face. She was also wearing the same apron that Aiko had made for her back in elementary school in home ec. Right now, she had one hand on her hip and was holding a wooden basket in the other. The basket was filled with freshly picked oranges. The Hatayama family ran a fruit farm, so all of those oranges were home-grown.

"Want some?" Akiko asked.

"Yes, please," Aiko replied with a nod. Akiko then sat down next to Aiko and Aiko lazily opened up her mouth like a baby bird begging for food.

Naturally, Akiko scolded her for her bad manners and Aiko reluctantly sat back up. Her students would have been shocked if they saw her acting so spoiled.

Akiko peeled one of the oranges and handed it to Aiko. Aiko eagerly bit into the orange, enjoying the nostalgic tart taste of her family farm. A childish smile spread across her face, and she certainly didn't look like a twenty-six-year-old adult. It was hard to tell if it was thanks to her mana or what, but her skin looked more vibrant and youthful than ever, so she definitely still looked like a teenager.

"You look so happy that it's hard to imagine you were getting blasted by journalists and internet trolls just a few days ago. Though, you also don't look as cool as you did when you were facing them down."

"I could hardly show this uncool side of me to Haji—I mean, my students," Aiko said with a shrug of her shoulders. Of course, Akiko didn't miss what Aiko had nearly let slip.

"Hey, Aiko."

"Haumf…what is it?"

"When are you going to introduce us to Hajime Nagumo-kun?"

“Bwagh?!”

Aiko spit out a mouthful of orange, and Akiko exclaimed, “That’s disgusting!”

“Wh-Why do you ask? There’s no—”

“I mean, he’s the one who brought you back, isn’t he? Of course I’d like to meet him and give him my thanks.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. That makes sense.”

Aiko breathed a very obvious sigh of relief and Akiko shook her head.

You’ve always been terrible at hiding things.

Naturally, Aiko’s parents had taken part in the family meetings where everyone got together to look for their missing kids, so they were well-acquainted with Sumire and Shu. However, because they ran a farm in a rural town, they’d met with the other families a lot less frequently. They’d taken over the lease for Aiko’s apartment and gone over every few weeks to keep it clean, but when Hajime and the others had returned, they’d been at home rather than in the city.

“Why not invite him here? Didn’t you say he can create, what was it again—portals? If he can make those portals to warp people around, then distance shouldn’t matter, right?”

“Well, they’re not that easy to make…and he’s pretty busy right now, so…” Aiko trailed off, avoiding Akiko’s gaze.

Akiko thought back to the day Aiko had come home. It had been quite a shock. A circle of light had suddenly appeared in the living room and Aiko had popped out of it. It seemed Hajime had created a portal on the school rooftop that connected to her family’s house so that she could see them right away.

Of course, Aiko’s mother, father, and grandparents had been flabbergasted by both her sudden reappearance and the way in which she’d appeared. Akiko had merely frozen, but Aiko’s grandfather had choked on his snacks, her grandmother had straight up fainted, and her father had dropped his teacup and spilled steaming hot tea all over his crotch.

Aiko had screamed, “Why did you connect it to my living room?!” to the disappearing portal, but of course she’d gotten no reply.

“In that case, I suppose we should go to him. We’ll follow you to the city when you return home.”

“Wait, really?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem, right? You said things have settled down now, after all.”

“Th-That’s true, but…”

After Aiko had told her family everything that had happened, she’d been forced to return to the city the next day. As the sole adult who’d gone missing during the mass disappearance, she knew it was her responsibility to explain things to the police and the mass media. Her family had begged her to stay, but she’d been resolute in her decision.

Her parents had, of course, worried about her constantly as they watched the internet and the various news outlets bash her constantly, but Aiko continually told them not to come visit her until things settled down. She hadn’t wanted to get them wrapped up in this mess.

Had it looked like Aiko couldn’t handle things, Akiko would have immediately rushed to her aid. But after hearing how resolute Aiko sounded on the phone, and seeing how firmly she held her ground on national television, Akiko realized that wouldn’t be necessary.

Honestly, she was amazed at how strong her daughter had grown. She’d become a model adult…and a model teacher to boot. And so, Akiko had decided to wait until Aiko deemed it safe for everyone to come visit her. In the meantime, she’d protect this home so that Aiko could always have a place to return to. And as a result, she had yet to meet Hajime.

However, after learning that Hajime had saved Aiko’s life, brought her back to them, and had also somehow done something to protect Aiko from the worst of the public’s insults, she was dying to meet him. Not just because he was Aiko’s savior, though. Akiko could clearly tell there was something more going on between her daughter and Hajime, so she wanted to know what.

“Your dad and grandpa really want to meet him too.”

“I know…”

“They said they wanted to meet Aiko’s prince.”

“I—Wait, what?! He’s not my prince! He’s the Demon Lord! That’s what everyone calls Hajime-kun!”

It was obvious from Aiko’s reactions to her mother’s leading

questions what she really thought. Akiko was amazed that this was the same woman who'd steadfastly faced down a sea of reporters without flinching.

"He even messed with the perception of the entire world just for my sake! He's such a troublemaker... I can't believe him!"

As she said that, Aiko smiled softly. It was a smile her family had never seen her make before, and the fact that she was blushing slightly as well made it clear what she thought of Hajime.

"He he he, he even said 'I won't let the ignorant masses drive you away from us.'"

Initially, Aiko had intended to scold him for brainwashing the entire world, but when he'd said that suddenly all the anger had faded away.

Her blush grew brighter as she thought back to the determined expression he'd had when he said that. She didn't even notice that her mom was smiling knowingly at her.

Everyone in the Hatayama family had already figured out what kind of relationship Aiko had with Hajime, as well as why she was so reluctant to introduce him to them. They'd realized on day one when Aiko had told them everything that had happened. Her expression whenever she'd mentioned his name had been so full of love that it would have been harder not to notice. Plus, in the three days she'd been here, they'd spotted her grinning countless times at the ring Hajime had given her, and heard her laughing happily every time she called him. Sometimes she'd just start blushing at the mere thought of him. They also knew the only reason she wasn't bringing him home was because she was worried about what society would think about their relationship.

"I can't believe my daughter's such a pain in the ass," Akiko said with a shake of her head.

"Hmm, did you say something?" Aiko asked absentmindedly.

In truth, Akiko and the others had been worried their daughter would never find a husband. She'd stopped growing in middle school, and as far as they knew, she'd never had a boyfriend. But now it seemed she'd finally found someone she loved, so naturally, they wanted to meet him. They were also getting tired of her wishy-washy attitude with regards to whether or not she'd commit to the relationship regardless of what others said.

"If you keep being so noncommittal, he'll eventually get tired of

you, you know?" Akiko said bluntly.

"What?!" Aiko exclaimed, pressing her hands against her chest.

"Very well, I'll let you choose the timing, but you better introduce us to him soon, lest he start to think we're ungrateful parents."

"Okay..."

"Besides, if he's someone you love, I'm sure we'll all accept him."

"Okay—Wait, what?!"

Aiko finally realized her mother had seen through everything, so she blushed in embarrassment. Akiko was tired of hearing her daughter's excuses, so she changed the subject before Aiko could protest that their relationship wasn't like that.

"By the way, now that you're back, why don't you stay for the harvest festival? You haven't been able to come the last few years, after all. You used to love Old Man Yamashiro's cotton candy, remember?"

"Oh yeah, I guess it's almost that time of year again..."

Her face still red, Aiko gladly jumped onto this new topic.

"I can't believe Yamashiro's still alive..." she muttered.

"Don't be rude."

"He was ninety back when I was in high school, wasn't he?"

"Yep, he's going to be turning a hundred and two this year."

"And he still runs a stall during the festival? Is that a good idea? What if he dies in the middle of making cotton candy?"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to be rude? Besides, he's still in great shape for his age. He even said he could keep going for another thirty years."

"Is he trying to make it into the Guinness Book of World Records?"

As she chatted with her mother, Aiko's thoughts remained on Hajime. She wasn't sure what she wanted her relationship with him to be, or how she should introduce him to her parents. She hoped the festival would at least make for a nice change of pace and perhaps grant her the opportunity to properly organize her thoughts.

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As the sun was beginning to set, Aiko walked down the streets

of the small town she grew up in. She was wearing a light pink yukata and had her purse dangling from one hand.

It was chilly at night this time of year, but she was excited enough about the festival that she didn't mind the cold. She'd even decided to wear a traditional pair of sandals rather than warmer sneakers. They matched her yukata quite nicely, and she looked positively stunning.

"I wonder if he'd think I look pretty," Aiko muttered to herself, her thoughts as centered around Hajime as always. She thought back to everything that had happened in Tortus, of how they'd reunited in that lakeside town when she'd thought he was dead and how he'd saved her life with a kiss.

"Awawawa..."

There was also the time he'd rescued her when she'd been trapped in that tower. Back then, he'd really seemed like a prince charming right out of a fairy tale. That was what had inspired her to do whatever she could to support him, and why she'd gone crying to him after killing so many people.

"Haaah..."

Of course, she'd never forget the words he'd told her in front of that monument either. It was then that she'd realized she could no longer deny her feelings for him.

"Awawawa..."

After she'd survived the final battle, she'd once again been reminded of the fact that no matter how socially taboo it was, she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Even if it was only as one of his many lovers, she still wanted to be with him. Back then, she'd decided that she'd go through any hardship to be with him. And after that, she'd been so eager to win him over that she'd surprised even herself, and in the end, he'd given in and agreed to spend the rest of his life with her.

Aiko pressed a hand to her chest and felt the cold, hard metal of a small ring dangling from a necklace. That ring denoted that she was one of the Demon Lord's wives. She thought back to when she'd been younger and spent countless nights worrying that she might never find someone who'd love her for who she was. She'd been desperate back then, and honestly, she was ashamed of how she'd acted.

"Awawawawa..."

She blushed brightly as she recalled those memories. The fact that she was still worrying this much about whether or not to make her relationship with Hajime public after all they'd been through was truly mind-boggling. It was hardly surprising that her family was sick and tired of her wishy-washy attitude.

Aiko had stirred the world to rebellion, fought nations and the all-powerful church, and even been hailed as a goddess, but when it came to love she was a pathetic little girl.

Just then, someone called out to her.

"Ai, what are you doing?"

"Bwegh?!" Aiko shouted, jumping into the air.

She turned bashfully around and saw a tall young man standing behind her.

"T-Taishi-kun, don't scare me like that..."

"I was just worried, since you were making all sorts of weird faces while walking down the street alone."

The man was Taishi Furukawa, a childhood friend of Aiko's who'd gone to the same elementary, middle, and high school as her. Their houses had been right next to each other too, and his family knew hers well. In middle and high school, Taishi had started keeping his distance from Aiko, but that had just been the awkwardness of puberty. They were both adults now, and close enough that Aiko had told him and his family most of what had happened as well.

Seeing his worried expression, Aiko smiled weakly and said, "I-It's nothing, don't worry. Anyway, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, uh, I dunno if anyone told you, but I'm helping out with the festival. I heard you'd be coming, and I figured being part of the organizing committee would help me keep an eye on things. You know how weirdos always show up on days like this, right?"

Aiko's sudden disappearance had been quite a shock to the Furukawa family as well and they'd taken the news hard. They'd offered to look after the Hatayama farm whenever Aiko's family was away searching for her.

Thinking that Taishi's mother had probably just asked him to check up on her, Aiko's expression softened and she said, "Thanks for looking out for me."

She smiled at Taishi, and he suddenly covered his mouth with one hand and averted his gaze. It was too dark to see, but he was

blushing.

“B-By the way, that yukata looks really good on you,” he said, guiding Aiko down the path to the shrine.

“Thanks,” Aiko said with a friendly smile.

She didn’t really get flustered around Taishi; they’d known each other for too long. If Hajime had complimented her, though, she would have blushed to the tips of her ears. Indeed, she’d just been wondering whether or not he’d think she looked pretty in this yukata.

Aiko didn’t notice Taishi’s shoulders droop slightly, and they kept making small talk as they made their way to the shrine. The sound of the crowd reached them as they neared the entrance.

“Ha ha ha, there sure are a lot of familiar faces here,” Aiko said, basking in the nostalgia. Taishi smiled, glad to see Aiko at the local harvest festival again.

They passed by plenty of people who recognized them, and while most of them were just happy and relieved to see Aiko again, a few of the older ladies poked fun at Aiko and Taishi, insinuating that they were going out. Taishi got flustered every time that happened, but Aiko just said they weren’t dating with a smile any time someone asked. The way she so casually denied it caused Taishi’s face to fall each time.

Some of Aiko’s old classmates who had kids now asked her if she’d found anyone she was interested in marrying, which caused her to get far more flustered. Seeing her reaction, they realized there might really be someone she was into, and their gazes naturally turned to Taishi, since he’d come to the festival with her.

With the exception of the probing questions, Aiko had a delightful time at the festival. Yamashiro’s cotton candy was as delicious as always, and honestly, it was amazing how his skills had only improved as he’d advanced in age. When Aiko had learned that all of the sculptures next to his stall were ones he’d made out of cotton candy, her jaw had dropped open. He’d handed all of them to her without a word too, and while she’d wanted to pay, she’d known this was his way of celebrating her safe return, so she’d gratefully accepted them.

“Is it really okay to eat something this beautiful, though?” Aiko asked as she looked at the cotton candy sculpture.

“It’d be a waste not to,” Taishi replied. The two of them had

gone a short distance away from the center of the festival and were resting on a bench.

There was no one else around, and while Aiko wasn't tired, she let out a long sigh anyway.

"I'm glad we ran into dad along the way. I was able to off-load all the other cotton candy sculptures onto him, so I'll be able to eat them at home whenever I want a snack."

Aiko's father, Souhei Hatayama, was also running a stall at the festival. He was serving candy oranges instead of candy apples, since his farm grew oranges. When they'd met up with Souhei, he'd given Taishi a pitying look, but Aiko hadn't been able to figure out why. She'd decided not to dwell on it, though.

Now that I think about it, if Taishi's supposed to be helping out with the festival, then he shouldn't be hanging out with me all night, right?

"Don't you need to help run the festival, Taishi?"

"Oh, uh, no, they should be fine without me."

Is he nervous or something? He's not talking as much as he normally does. Well, whatever, it's no big deal.

Aiko was having too much fun to care about the change in her friend's behavior. She used to come to this shrine a lot when she lived here. Whenever she'd had an exam or an important life event coming up, she'd always come here to pray. Though she'd only been away for a year, everything seemed so nostalgic.

Aiko had taken her hometown for granted before she'd been whisked away to Tortus. In fact, she'd even felt it was kind of stifling after having moved to the big city, but now she was glad to be home. After her time in Tortus, she'd come to learn that nothing so comforting should be overlooked. She looked down at the festival grounds, her eyes taking it all in.

Taishi stared at her for a few seconds, enraptured, before suddenly coming to his senses and slapping his cheeks. The loud noise caught Aiko's attention and she turned to him.

In a hesitant voice, Taishi asked, "Hey, Ai, why not return home?"

"That's literally what I'm doing right now, isn't it?"

"I mean permanently... Why don't you quit your job and come live here again?"

Aiko stared at him in surprise. Taishi looked into her eyes, his expression serious.

“I saw what they were saying about you on TV. It must have been awful. I know your students aren’t to blame for this, but as long as you’re with them, you might have to deal with society criticizing you again.”

“So what? I’m a teacher. It’s only natural for me to protect my students.”

“You’ve done more than enough for them already. I’m not even saying you need to quit being a teacher, you can get another teaching job here. Besides, even if you think it’s natural for teachers to protect their students, most other teachers wouldn’t go that far for them.”

Taishi had a point. Teachers had their own lives to live as well, after all. From most other teachers’ perspectives, Aiko was a bit too obsessed with her job. But even after being summoned to Tortus, Aiko’s convictions hadn’t changed. There was no way she’d be persuaded to abandon her students now.

“I won’t quit. Unless the school fires me, I’m going to keep teaching there. I want to be there for those kids until they graduate.”

As she said that, Aiko rose to her feet. There was a fierce determination burning in her eyes. It was clear from her expression that she wasn’t interested in discussing this topic any further. However, Taishi hurriedly stepped in front of her to block her way, and his irritation caused him to say something he thought he wouldn’t.

“Is that really why you don’t want to quit?”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t the real reason you want to stay because of your...boyfriend?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?!” Aiko stammered, her determined expression vanishing in an instant. Seeing her so flustered, Taishi smiled a little. However, he had no intention of letting this topic rest.

“You’re the only one who thinks you’re still hiding it, Ai. Everyone in the village knows. While you were gone, you fell in love with one of your students.”

“Asfaslkgjlgs?!”

It was obvious from her reaction that Taishi was spot-on, and that Aiko hadn’t realized everyone had figured it out.

“Come on, you’ve always been terrible at keeping secrets. Of course everyone figured it out.”

“B-But how did you know it was one of my students?”

“I mean, think about it. You don’t want to introduce him to your parents, and the only people you went missing with are your students.”

Aiko cradled her head in her hands upon hearing that. Taishi gave her an exasperated look and said, “You know what people will say if you start publicly dating one of your students, Ai.”

“Ack!”

“That’s why you’re so worried, right? Considering what you went through, it’s hardly surprising that you had a moment of weakness. I don’t blame you for it.”

“Taishi-kun?”

Aiko looked up at Taishi, noticing the change in his tone. He’d stepped even closer to her, so she involuntarily took a step back. And yet, he just took another step forward and said, “Ai, you should end such an impure relationship. Come back home and start your life over from square one. You might be lonely at first, but…I’ll be here by your side.”

“Taishi-kun, what are you…?” Aiko trailed off, realization dawning on her. Dense as she was, even she could recognize the look in Taishi’s eyes. She’d never even imagined Taishi had feelings for her. He’d had another girlfriend back when they’d been in high school, so naturally, she was surprised.

“When you disappeared, I thought I would die from worry. It was then that I realized just how much I care about you.”

“H-Hang on, calm down,” Aiko said, trying to process all of this new information. Taishi’s sudden confession had taken her by surprise.

Unfortunately, he followed up with another cutting insight that only added to her inner turmoil.

“Things aren’t going well with your boyfriend, are they?”

“Gah!”

“It’s not surprising. You’re dating a child, after all. There’s no way he’d be able to make you happy. Meanwhile, I’m a working adult who’s the same age as you. I’m sure things will work out between us.”

Aiko took another step back only to realize that she had her

back to a tree now. She hadn't known she'd taken so many steps back.

Taishi placed his hands on Aiko's shoulders with an earnest look in his eyes. He'd had other girlfriends in the past, but he'd never looked at Aiko like this before. Had he confessed to her before she'd been summoned to Tortus, she might have even accepted. But right now, his confession didn't move her heart in the slightest. After all, her heart was already set on another.

"Hajime-kun..." she muttered softly.

"Ai."

Taishi burned with jealousy. Even though he was right in front of Aiko, she was still thinking about another man. He squeezed her shoulders tighter and tried to draw her in close for a kiss.

Aiko hadn't expected him to resort to force and her head had been full of thoughts of Hajime, so her reaction came a second too late.

"Stop! Help, Hajime-kun!"

Just before Aiko could push Taishi away with more force than would be wise, Hajime suddenly appeared next to them.

"Oh, so this is where you've been, Aiko," he said with a smile.

"Huh?"

"What?"

Taishi and Aiko stared at him in surprise. He was holding Taishi by the collar with one hand and stopping Aiko's hand with the other.

"Wh-What?! Who're you?! What're you doing?!"

"That's my line. Why were you being so forceful with her?" Hajime asked in a low voice. He then tossed Taishi away with so much force that he bounced three times across the stone floor before coming to a stop a good distance away. Taishi coughed violently, struggling to get back onto his feet.

Aiko looked up at Hajime and said, "H-Hajime-kun?"

"In the flesh."

"Wh-What are you doing here?"

"I'm here because you're here."

"That's not really an answer..."

Hajime frowned and said, "It feels like you've been thinking yourself into a corner, so I wanted to have a proper conversation with you."

“I, well, umm…” Aiko mumbled and looked away, ashamed at having been seen through so easily.

Seeing that, Hajime grinned and said, “Besides, I wanted to introduce myself to your family. I knew if I asked you, you’d say no, so…”

“So?”

“I showed up unannounced.”

“Hajime-kun…”

Aiko knew Yue or one of the other girls must have put this idea in Hajime’s head. She could, in fact, imagine any one of them giving Hajime a thumbs-up while telling him this would be a great idea. They were probably all worried about her. And honestly, it made her happy to know that they were thinking about her too.

“So you just teleported over here?” Aiko asked.

“Pretty much. When I used the compass, the image of a festival appeared in my mind and I figured we may as well enjoy whatever festival you’re at together.”

Upon closer inspection, Aiko realized Hajime was also wearing a yukata. He’d changed to match her outfit, which made her happy.

“I do feel bad for showing up all of a sudden, but I guess it’s a good thing that I did.”

As he said that, Hajime’s smile suddenly disappeared and he turned back toward Taishi, who’d finally gotten to his feet.

Aiko remembered how things must have looked a few seconds ago and blushed in embarrassment.

“U-Umm, it’s not what you think! I don’t have that kind of relationship with Taishi-kun! I don’t even like him like that, anyway! Not one bit! There’s no way I’d go out with him!”

“I see…” Taishi muttered, dropping back to his knees. Hajime had been careful not to hurt him too much when he’d tossed him away, but the mental damage of what Aiko had said was severe.

Being rejected so completely by the woman you loved was harsh enough that even Hajime’s expression softened as he looked down at Taishi. That being said, he still wasn’t going to forgive Taishi for forcing himself onto Aiko. He hugged Aiko from behind, and while she looked up at him in surprise, she made no move to pull away.

“I’m pretty sure I know why you’ve been avoiding me recently. I bet you were reminded that we’re student and teacher and started

worrying about what people would think, right? It's a bit late for that, you know?"

"Hwah?!"

I can't believe even Hajime-kun saw right through me. I wasn't able to hide it from anyone…

"If you want, I don't mind waiting until I graduate before we start officially going out. It's important that we discuss these things together, though. If anything, I'm just sad you didn't want to talk about this with me."

"Hajime-kun…I'm sorry. You're totally right."

Aiko looked lovingly up at Hajime and placed a hand on his arm.

"I know how important being a 'proper' teacher is to you. But hey, if you think this is wrong, then you have to lecture me like you did back then."

Hajime was, of course, referring to the time Aiko had told him he needed to change the way he was living his life or he'd end up truly alone. Those words had had a huge impact on Hajime, and they were the main reason he'd been able to return to being the person he once was. It made Aiko happy to know that he treasured those words, so she smiled.

"I hope you haven't forgotten what I told you when I agreed to make you mine."

Naturally, Aiko would never forget what Hajime had said when she'd told him she wanted his love after Ragnarok ended. It was one of the conditions of becoming one of the Demon Lord's wives.

"No matter what happens, I won't let you leave my side."

Once Hajime decided something was important to him, he never let it go. Even if Aiko rejected him, he still wouldn't let her escape. The only people he accepted as his wives were those he was prepared to dedicate the rest of his life to. That was the promise he'd made to himself when he'd decided to accept the love of people other than Yue. No matter what other people said, no matter how they insulted him, he would build a future together with everyone. When all was said and done, there was no escaping the Demon Lord.

"You know I meant what I said, right?" Hajime asked, looking kindly down at Aiko.

"Yes…" she muttered in a soft voice, blushing and nodding.

Satisfied, Hajime smiled and nodded back. Aiko let out a dreamy sigh, but he said nothing more to her and turned his attention back to Taishi.

Taishi had been staring stiffly at Aiko and Hajime's passionate exchange, but upon seeing Hajime turn to him, he frowned and glared back.

"I take it you're one of Ai's students? You're just a kid, so you may not realize this, but you're making things difficult for Ai. The real world is much harsher than you think. You won't be—"

"Thanks for the warning, but if you want to act like a responsible adult, then maybe you should learn to control yourself better first," Hajime said curtly.

Taishi fell silent, unable to say anything in reply. He knew he was in the wrong for trying to force himself onto Aiko.

"But, well, I'll forgive you just this once. Give up on Aiko. If you weren't her childhood friend, I would have sent you to heaven right then and there."

That brought Aiko back to her senses and she started paying attention to the conversation again.

"That's my line. No matter what you say, a student and teacher __"

"Fwah?! Aaah, wait, stop!"

Taishi was interrupted by Hajime suddenly sticking his hand inside Aiko's yukata, which caused Aiko to blush once more.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Taishi screamed.

"What are you doing, Hajime-kun?" Aiko asked at almost the same time. As Hajime withdrew his hand, Aiko hurriedly fixed up her yukata. Ignoring their protests, Hajime showed what he'd pulled out of Aiko's yukata to Taishi.



It was the engagement ring he'd given her.

"Aiko's my wife. Her body and soul belong to me," he said flatly.

"Y-You—"

This was like a scene out of an NTR manga where the childhood friend discovers the girl he likes has been stolen away by the confident evil bastard. Though, unlike in an actual NTR situation, Taishi wasn't actually Aiko's boyfriend. That being said, he was in basically the same position. He glared angrily up at Hajime, looking like he might try to punch him. It seemed he thought he still had a chance to win Aiko back.

"Aiko, get away from that pervert!" he shouted.

He was an adult and Hajime was still a minor. He was a working member of society and Hajime was still a student. As a result, he was under the mistaken impression that he was in the better position here and that Aiko would see that too.

Before Aiko could say anything, Hajime let out a long sigh. Since Taishi was being so stubborn, Hajime would have to show him why it was that everyone called him the Demon Lord.

"Just remember, you brought this on yourself," Hajime said.

"What?" Taishi mumbled, confused.

"You grew up with Aiko. You spent way more time with her than I did. There must have been plenty of chances to tell her how you felt. Am I wrong?"

"Y-Yeah, but..."

"You're the one who chose not to. You had the chance to become the person she wanted to come home for, but you didn't even try to get closer to her, did you?"

Taishi's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He wanted to deny Hajime's words, but he couldn't because Hajime was right.

"You only have yourself to blame for things ending up this way."

Hajime hadn't stolen Aiko away from Taishi. Taishi was the one who hadn't tried to convey his feelings and become someone special to Aiko over all these years. And now, she'd gone somewhere far out of his reach. This had nothing to do with who was an adult and who was a student.

Taishi gritted his teeth and hung his head. He desperately tried to find some kind of retort he could give, but there was nothing.

Aiko looked over at Taishi and realized something. Even though

Hajime had sent him flying, he was completely unhurt. She then remembered that Hajime had stopped her from pushing Taishi away with more force than would have been wise. Even the harsh words he was saying felt like they were being carefully chosen. Not only that, but his cold tone wasn't quite as cold as it had been when someone tried to harm those close to him back in Tortus.

There had been no mercy in the gaze he'd shown his enemies back then, but the look he was giving Taishi was far gentler than expected…and Aiko knew exactly why.

He's holding back because Taishi-kun's my friend…

Aiko sucked in a huge breath. She couldn't just keep relying on Hajime to solve all of her problems. And so, she stepped away from Hajime and looked resolutely over at Taishi.

This was the Aiko who'd faced down the hordes of journalists a few weeks ago. She walked over to Taishi, and Hajime didn't stop her, nor did he ask her why she was walking over to him.

That made Aiko happy, since it meant he trusted her.

"Ai, I…"

"Taishi-kun, I'm sorry, but I can't accept your confession. You're not who I love," Aiko stated resolutely. The determination in her eyes bore a striking resemblance to the look Hajime had when he was set on doing something.

"But you'll just torture yourself over this decision. You're too strait-laced to be able to wholeheartedly accept dating one of your students."

"You're right, that's how I am. But even so, Hajime-kun is the only one I love. I can't change that. I'm not as moral a person as you think, Taishi-kun."

"Ha ha, immoral is definitely the last word I'd use to describe you, Ai," Taishi said with a weak smile. With his hopes so thoroughly dashed, he had no choice but to accept defeat. He glared at Hajime one last time, but Hajime just looked quietly back at him, his expression unchanging. Seeing that Hajime wasn't going to budge either, Taishi simply shook his head in resignation.

Honestly, he's acting a lot more mature than me… Taishi thought, his shoulders slumping.

"Sorry," Taishi said finally and started walking back to the festival.

Hajime walked over to Aiko and said, "Sorry for messing up

your relationship with your friend."

Aiko shook her head and leaned against Hajime's shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. It might take some time, but I'm sure we'll be able to go back to being friends."

"I sure hope so... From the looks of it, he probably won't try anything funny again, but feel free to call for me if he does. Next time, I'll bury him upside-down in this shrine."

"What's with that overly specific punishment you have in mind?" Aiko asked with a small chuckle. She then stepped back and looked Hajime in the eye.

"I'm sorry for making you worry. And thank you for coming to meet me," Aiko said as she bowed politely, prompting Hajime's expression to soften.

"Don't mention it. I told you before, I really like that side of you."

"Huh? Which side?"

"I'm talking about how you always give one hundred percent in everything you do. Sure, that means you end up spinning in circles a lot, but it's proof that you keep thinking through your problems until you come to an answer you feel satisfied with and refuse to compromise on the things that matter to you most."

Indeed, that was what had attracted Hajime to Aiko in the first place, and why he'd chosen to accept her in the end.

"I've been watching you for a long time now...and I hope you never change."

"You're cheating by saying those lines with a straight face."

Aiko blushed and turned her back to Hajime. She then pinched her cheeks, trying to stop herself from smiling.

Hajime really wanted to circle around and take a close look at her expression, but he held himself back. There was something important he'd come here to do, after all.

"Anyway, see you later," he said.

"Oh god, I'm blushing, so...huh? What?"

"I'm going to go see your parents. I still need to introduce myself to them."

"What?!"

Hajime said that so casually that for a moment, Aiko doubted her ears. She then hurriedly turned around and saw that he was dead serious.

"Now that you've made up your mind, there's no reason for me

not to meet them, right?”

“Th-That’s true, but it doesn’t change the fact that I got into a relationship with one of my students!”

It seemed Aiko was still having trouble openly admitting that to her family. But Hajime knew Aiko well enough to understand that it would take her months to sort out her thoughts, and frankly, he didn’t want to wait that long.

“Let me see, your parents’ house is…that way, right? Oh, looks like your dad’s running a stall. It’s pretty close by too. Perfect, I can see what the Hatayama farm’s specialty produce tastes like while I introduce myself.”

“Hey, wait, don’t use your compass for this! And stop ignoring me! What are you planning on telling dad?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? ‘Your daughter’s mine now.’ That’s the normal thing to say, isn’t it?”

“Not phrased like that it isn’t! Are you trying to pick a fight with him?!”

Aiko hugged Hajime from behind and tried to hold him in place, but naturally, she wasn’t strong enough.

“Oh yeah, Aiko. How come you use formal language with me, but you were being totally casual with that guy?”

“Urgh, please let me keep using honorifics with you until you graduate at least! I won’t be able to properly switch back and forth when we’re at school and when we’re meeting in our private time.”

“I guess that would be pretty hard for you.”

“Exactly… Also, please stop changing the subject! I know almost everyone at that festival! If you tell my dad we’re dating now, the whole town will find out!”

“That’s fine. I don’t mind.”

“Well, I do! If you don’t—Oh, don’t just carry me with you!”

Hajime hefted Aiko into his arms and she covered her face, blushing. As he started walking down the stairs, she accepted her fate and gave up on trying to stop him. Instead, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to imagine what everyone was thinking as they watched Hajime carry her through the festival streets in his arms. However, since she was covering her face, she couldn’t cover her ears and she could easily make out what everyone was saying. She trembled in embarrassment as she listened to the familiar voices of her older neighbors…until finally she also heard her

father’s voice.

“A-Aiko?”

Curious, Aiko created a gap between her fingers and snuck a glance at her father. He seemed surprised by Hajime suddenly appearing with Aiko in his arms, but soon enough, he worked out what was going on and smiled gently at her. Her grandfather had a similar reaction, making Aiko turn redder than a tomato.

“P-Please let me go home…” she muttered.

“Now you’re sounding like a kidnapped princess,” Hajime said with a grin. Naturally, though, he didn’t return Aiko to her home, nor was there any brave hero capable of rescuing her from the Demon Lord.

Unsurprisingly, everyone attending the festival came to see Hajime boldly declare to Aiko’s family that he was her boyfriend. Souhei was more than a bit taken aback by Hajime’s overbearing attitude, but he nevertheless thanked him for bringing Aiko back home and invited Hajime to come visit their house. Everyone cheered at that, and Aiko became a local legend in her town.

When Hajime visited their house later, he explained to Aiko’s parents that he was dating multiple women at once and everything else that was going on in the Nagumo household. While they were shocked by the revelations, they were more accepting of the situation than Kaori’s and Shizuku’s fathers had been. Indeed, they were quite happy that Aiko was going to become a part of the Nagumo family. They’d met with Hajime’s parents numerous times when all the families had been searching for their missing children, and they quite liked Sumire and Shu.

Just in case, Hajime had also sweetened the deal by offering to create Artifacts together with Aiko that would improve the soil quality of their farm considerably and allow them to grow the juiciest crops on Earth. When Aiko had seen Hajime shaking her father’s hand after sealing the deal, she’d shook her head in despair, wondering where she’d gone wrong in educating Hajime.

Chapter VII: A Not-So-Normal School Life

On a cold winter morning in the middle of December, a passerby let out a surprised shout as he rode past Hajime and Yue on a bicycle.

“Hajime…are you listening?” Yue asked as she walked beside him, her cheeks puffed out in annoyance.

“Y-Yeah, I am.”

Since Yue was so much shorter than Hajime, she always had to look up at him, and while Hajime had seen her look pleadingly up at him many times now, her expression never failed to make his heart skip a beat. As a result, Hajime stopped thinking about the poor biker who’d been enraptured by her appearance and ran into a telephone pole, and focused his attention back on Yue.

She jogged a few steps in front of him and twirled around to face him. Her golden-blonde hair sparkled in the cold winter sun and her skirt twirled up a little, revealing a tiny thigh gap.

Another passerby let out a surprised squawk as he tripped over the gutter. However, Hajime was so entranced by Yue that he didn’t even notice.

“It’s dangerous to walk backward on the street,” he said.

“Mmm… But this way, we can look at each other while we walk.”

Yue’s expression softened slightly, and she gave him a small smile. That dazzling smile also captivated a nearby delivery driver, and he got so distracted he had to slam the brakes to avoid running into a car parked on the side of the street. The delivery van actually drifted for a bit before grinding to a halt inches from the rear bumper of the car ahead.

“Hajime?” Yue asked, cocking her head at Hajime. He looked like he’d been spacing out, but in truth, he’d been feeling a sense of déjà vu.

After a few seconds, he finally realized why and he muttered, “Oh, that dream finally turned into a reality.”

Upon hearing that, Yue shot him a questioning look. Her expression was so cute that Hajime wanted to hug her right then and there, but he held the desire in. Meanwhile, a schoolgirl

walking past the two of them suddenly crouched down and tried to stem a nosebleed.

"I-I got to see her again today. She truly is an angel!" the girl muttered to herself. She'd started taking this route to school the past few days solely so that she could walk past Yue each day.

"I saw you wearing these clothes and walking to school with me once before," Hajime explained to Yue.

"Hm? I don't remember wearing this uniform before..."

"It wasn't in real life. It's kind of embarrassing to admit, but remember the perfect dreams we all saw in Haltina's labyrinth?"

"Oh... He he. So that's what you saw, huh?"

"Don't laugh," Hajime said, blushing and looking away in embarrassment. He knew it was a bit late to be getting embarrassed over Yue knowing his innermost desires, but he couldn't help it.

Indeed, Hajime had seen Yue do the exact same thing in his ideal world dream back when they'd been making their way through the labyrinth built into the beastmen's sacred tree. Hajime's ideal world had been one where he'd never suffered in that hellish abyss of despair and got to spend his days peacefully with those he loved. That had, of course, included going to school with Yue without having to worry about fighting enemies or finding a way back home. In that dream, she'd been wearing his school's uniform as well: a sky-blue blazer with a red ribbon, a knee-length skirt, and brown loafers.

After having overcome numerous trials in Tortus, that dream of Hajime's had finally become a reality.

"Have you gotten used to school, by the way?" Hajime asked, changing the subject.

Still smiling, Yue nodded.

"Mhm... Everything's new, but it's also really fun...especially when I get to walk to school alone with you."

"I feel like you didn't have to put that much effort into making a schedule for which days each of you gets to walk to school with me, though. Everyone else is taking the train even though you could probably bike there faster if you used some of the shortcuts I know."

"You just don't understand how important it is for us to walk to school with you, Hajime. Everyone agreed to this, so no

complaints.”

“I-I know, but…”

For the first week or so, Yue and Shea had timidly walked to school with Hajime, but once they’d gotten used to school life, they’d colluded with Kaori and Shizuku to work out a schedule where everyone got to walk to school with Hajime alone on different days of the week.

They’d gone through two rotations now, and it seemed this schedule was here to stay. Hajime could see why they all placed so much value in walking to school with just him, since it was rare to get one-on-one time with him because he was always surrounded by so many people. But at the same time, he couldn’t help but think Yue and the others were taking this far more seriously than they needed to.

“Do you not want to be alone with me?” Yue asked.

“That’s not it and you know it,” Hajime replied immediately.

Upon seeing Yue’s pleading expression, everyone on the street tripped, got a nosebleed, or crashed into a telephone pole. This always happened when Hajime was walking to school with Yue. Incidentally, he’d gotten very good at shooting the smartphones of all the people who tried to secretly sneak pictures of her.

Hajime pulled a pair of red-rimmed glasses out of his pocket and put them on Yue. She blinked twice as he did so.

Hajime had already given Yue a perception-altering Artifact that made her less conspicuous, but for whatever reason when it was just the two of them going to school together, it didn’t seem to work well enough. Hence why he’d just given her another Artifact to strengthen the effect.

Unfortunately, Yue looked a hundred times cuter in glasses, which negated any effect the Artifact might have had, so everyone’s reactions grew even more pronounced.

“Hey, Yue, are you secretly using some kind of concept magic that charms everyone around you or something?” Hajime asked, sighing and taking the glasses off of Yue.

“Hm?”

This was the second time he’d tried to make Yue less conspicuous and failed. Despite having unlocked the greatest Synergist skill, Transcendence, he was still incapable of suppressing Yue’s charm. When he’d complained about that to his

mother the other day, Sumire had said, “That’s because she’s with you,” as if that would somehow explain everything.

It can’t really be that simple though, can it? Hajime thought, looking over at Yue. Was she really just looking that much cuter because she was happy to be alone with him?

“What is it?” she asked with a small smile.

You know what, mom’s clearly more perceptive than I am.

After a few more minutes of walking, they reached the train station. Yue dropped back to walking by Hajime’s side and wrapped her arm around his. A pleasant smell reached his nostrils, and he smiled contentedly.

The station attendants glared at him, annoyed that he was flirting with Yue this early in the morning. The students going to their own respective schools looked even angrier, and for a second, it looked like a few might spit at his feet.

“Yue, don’t leave my side,” Hajime said softly.

“Hm? I wasn’t planning on doing that ever for the rest of my life,” Yue said, confused about why Hajime was asking for the obvious.

That’s not exactly what I meant.

Hajime couldn’t tell if Yue hadn’t noticed how everyone around them was reacting or if she just didn’t care. Either way, Hajime at least was keenly aware that they were surrounded by enemies. Their animosity was strong enough that he was having difficulty remaining the mild-mannered Japanese boy he was trying to return to being. It took a considerable amount of effort to keep himself from pulling Donner out of his Treasure Trove.

“I just meant you should stick close because there’s a lot of people around.”

“Mmm… Got it. I’ll stick as close to you as possible.”

“Wait, no, that was a bad choice of words—Well, whatever, I guess it’s fine.”

Yue hugged him tightly enough that it was difficult to walk, but Hajime didn’t mind. In fact, he was enjoying the sensation of feeling Yue so close to him, so he didn’t bother to say anything else. This had already happened every time he’d walked to school with Yue, and every time they got on the train, their car was the most packed so they’d need to stick to each other anyway.

It was mostly guys who crowded whatever train Hajime and Yue

chose to get on, but there were a fair number of girls as well. They all pretended they were looking at their phones, or a book, or something, but Hajime could tell they were sneaking glances at Yue the whole time.

Don't they ever get tired of this? Also, since when were Japanese people this bloodthirsty? I've never sensed so much hostility before. I guess I can't blame them for being mad at me, since I come to school with a different girl each day.

Indeed, many of these onlookers were fans of Shea rather than Yue. He even heard one of them mutter, "I can't believe you're cheating on Shea-chan, you bastard."

Incidentally, the same thing happened whenever Hajime came to school with Kaori or Shizuku.

A normal person would have buckled under the hostility being directed at them from all sides, but Hajime was built differently. While it was mildly annoying, this was nothing compared to the horrors he'd faced in Tortus.

Hajime noticed an older man suddenly making his way over to them, so he wrapped his arms around Yue's waist, pulling her closer and covering her body with his.

In that instant, everyone glared at Hajime.

"He he he... Thanks for protecting me, Hajime," Yue said.

"Hey, Yue, how about we stop taking the train and just walk?" Hajime asked. That way they wouldn't run into any train molesters. Not that he'd ever let any of them even get close to Yue, of course. Still, not taking the train would save him the hassle of fending them off.

"Hmmm..." Yue mumbled, thinking about it for a few seconds. But then, an idea came to her and she raised her finger into the air.

"Everyone, stop paying attention to us," she said in a singsong voice, and invisible ripples of power spread throughout the train car. The eyes of the people glaring at Hajime and Yue suddenly went blank, and a second later, they snapped back to their senses and started shuffling off to empty train cars. They seemed confused about why they'd bothered to enter such a packed car.

"I can't believe you're using your Divine Edict for this. Do you really want to take the train to school that badly?"

"Mmm... There's something romantic about riding the train

together, so we have to do it," Yue said firmly.

"F-Fair enough. I guess I'll strengthen the perception-altering power of those glasses."

"Does it have to be glasses?"

"Yes, it does."

Yue looked ten times better in glasses, so Hajime wanted to make her wear them at all costs.

Seeing his determined expression, Yue burst out laughing. Her laughter momentarily attracted everyone's attention, but she made them forget about her again with another Divine Edict.

It seemed she really was willing to use it for even the most trivial things. As far as Yue was concerned, anything was fair game to use in order to fulfill her desires. And her priorities were quite simple:

Hajime >>>>>> Unsurmountable Wall >>>>>> everything else.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

As Hajime and Yue reached school and started heading toward the shoe lockers, they continued attracting the attention of everyone around them. But now that it was mostly fellow classmates, the attention was a lot less bloodthirsty. When they'd first started going back to school, everyone had hung around Hajime and the others in clumps, curious about the kids that the media was going crazy over. Within the school grounds, Hajime had been reluctant to use perception-altering Artifacts or to use his intimidation to cow his fellow classmates. The last thing he'd wanted was to mess up his school life. Besides, he'd wanted everyone to think that the students who'd finally come back weren't special in any way and had just been caught up in an unfortunate kidnapping.

As expected, young teenagers had short attention spans and their curiosity quickly waned. At this point, none of them got prying questions about what had happened. That being said, it wasn't as if Hajime and the others had stopped attracting attention. It was just a different kind of attention. As Yue opened her shoebox, a deluge of letters spilled out.

"Mrr..."

She frowned as she looked at the pile. Sending love letters was

a pretty retro way of conveying one's feelings in this day and age, but none of Hajime's classmates had any other way of contacting her. They certainly didn't know her phone number or email address. Both of those pieces of information were SSS-tier rarity. No one who knew them was going to tell anyone else, and naturally, Yue wasn't going to tell anyone who just wanted to confess to her either.

It was also impossible for anyone to directly confess to Yue, since she didn't agree to meet up with anyone who asked, and anyone who tried to just walk up to her and confess was met by a glare so cold that they clammed up. And so, no one had successfully managed to convey their feelings to Yue in person.

"Some things never change," Hajime said with a wry smile.

"Mmm... I even put up a note telling people not to bother."

Annoyed, Yue picked up the pile of letters and put them to one side. As she took her indoor shoes out and closed her shoebox, everyone could see the note conspicuously taped to it that said "No love letters!" The note clearly wasn't working, since it seemed everyone was willing to ignore it as long as they all put their letters in together.

As Yue quickly skimmed over the letters, she muttered, "I knew there'd be a few," and took a few of them aside. The rest she shoved into Kaori Shirasaki's shoebox.

"Did you get love letters from girls again?" Hajime asked.

"Mhm..." Yue said with a nod. The letters she'd set aside had all come from girls. Indeed, about thirty percent of the letters she got each day were from girls.

"They're not exactly love letters... Most of them just want to be my friend, or are saying they're fans of mine. I don't care about the people trying to confess their feelings for me when I already have you, Hajime, but I don't want to ignore letters from people who just want to be friends."

"That's probably why you're so popular."

Despite how she looked, Yue was an adult woman. She had an air of maturity that her classmates lacked, and while she was cold to guys who weren't Hajime, she was generally kind to girls. Plus, she was an unparalleled beauty, so it was hardly surprising even girls were falling for her.

While Yue was a bit overwhelmed by her popularity, she didn't

dislike the attention. Hajime smiled at her and opened his own shoebox. There were a few cute pink letters in his box, and Yue's expression darkened.

Indeed, even Hajime was getting love letters. Because Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Shizuku all adored him, the girls were more interested in him than they used to be. Furthermore, he possessed an air of confidence that he hadn't had before, which really excited a certain subset of girls.

"I wonder why any of them think they have a chance when I have you guys…" Hajime muttered.

"Maybe that's exactly why. You already have multiple girlfriends, so they think maybe you'll be okay with one more," Yue explained.

"I see…"

Sighing, Hajime took the letters out and placed them into Kouki Amanogawa's shoebox.

Meanwhile, Yue silently used restoration magic to look into the past and see who'd given Hajime these letters. After a few seconds, she grinned and said, "Hajime…are you sure you don't want to read the top letter?"

"Like the one on the top of the pile? Why?"

Yue took it out and said, "Mmm… You see, it's a love letter from a guy."

"Oh god!"

Hajime snatched the letter out of Yue's hands, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it far into the distance. His pitch put world-class pitchers to shame, and as the letter sailed away, a rather effeminate boy yelled, "Oh, my letter!" and started chasing after it.

"That's so cruel, Hajime… How could you throw away his feelings like that?"

"Sorry, I just did it reflexively. All of those cross-dressers we met in Tortus traumatized me…"

"I'm surprised you haven't realized it, Hajime… You're really popular with some of the guys."

"I mean…if they just want to be friends, I wouldn't mind, but those looks they give me are terrifying. It just brings back memories of Crystabell staring at my ass."

"Crystabell's a good person, though…"

"He traumatized your boyfriend!" Hajime exclaimed. However, Yue just chuckled. Some students stopped to stare at her smiling

face.

While people didn't go out of their way to stare at Yue anymore, if she happened to be doing something exceptionally cute as they were passing by, they still stopped to look.

Hajime swiftly grabbed Yue's hand and rushed over to their classroom. Their classroom was on the top floor, in the very corner of the building. It was a section of the building that had very few other classrooms. Most of the nearby rooms were prep rooms or lab rooms that saw infrequent use. It was the only classroom they could put all the kids who'd come back from Tortus in.

The school didn't want to be branded as a cruel administration that kicked out kids who'd been missing for a year, while the parents and guardians of the children wanted to ensure they could study somewhere free from prying eyes, and naturally, no one wanted everyone to have to transfer to different schools and get split up. As a result, the compromise had been to keep them enrolled in the same school, but to give them a special classroom away from most of the other students.

Naturally, the teacher assigned to watch over their class was Aiko. She hadn't been the homeroom teacher for any class before this, so in a sense, this was a promotion.

"It would have felt weird to be with the other second-years even though we're still second-years too," Hajime muttered, thinking about his situation.

"Hm?" Yue asked, looking up at him.

Hajime had been a second-year a year ago when he'd been summoned to Tortus, and since he hadn't done any studying in that time, he was still a second-year.

It would have been weirder for him to go up a grade without having actually finished the second-year curriculum. But at the same time, it wasn't like he'd gotten held back. He and his classmates were being treated like students who were coming back to school after an extended absence due to illness.

Considering the situation, it was a reasonable course of action, and this way neither the education administration nor the parents would have any reason to complain. Since they weren't being treated as remedial students, Hajime and the others didn't mind this compromise either. Most of them wanted to get back the year of school life that they'd lost, anyway.

But still, there was a bit of consternation over the fact that their friends in other classes were now a year above them, and their old underclassmen were in the same grade as them. Had Hajime really wanted to go up a grade, he could have used Limit Break and focused solely on studying for a few weeks to catch up on the year he'd missed. However, that would mean he'd graduate in less than half a year. The last thing he wanted was to spend less time with the friends he'd made in Tortus before everyone graduated and went their separate ways.

As all that ran through his mind, he finally reached the top floor. Once he started walking down the corridor to his classroom, the number of students in the hall went down dramatically. It felt somewhat lonely to be away from the hustle and bustle of the school. This morning, however, there was someone other than his classmates in the hallway…and they were yelling quite loudly.

"That's…the head teacher, isn't it? And it looks like he's yelling at Aiko."

"Mmm… I wonder what's going on."

The head teacher had such a luscious full head of hair that was so perfect that everyone knew it was a wig. People often called him baldy four-eyes behind his back, and he was far from a popular teacher. It seemed right now he was in the middle of scolding Aiko over something or the other.

Hajime and Yue exchanged glances, then hid their presence and circled around behind the head teacher.

"Are you listening, Hatayama-sensei? It's thanks to our generosity that you still have your position as teacher. Despite that, you've shown no gratitude toward any of us!"

"I-I really am grateful for being given the opportunity to continue teaching here…"

"Then why do you keep blabbing to reporters and telling them things that make our school look bad? It doesn't seem like you're very grateful!"

"I-I'm terribly sorry, but I promise I'm not trying to insult the school; I just…"

"Then why did you tell those journalists that this special classroom is the school being discriminatory?!"

"I never called it discrimination! I just think we should be treating them like all the other students rather than…"

It seemed the head teacher was mad about whatever Aiko had told some reporters.

While Hajime's schemes had made the mass media calm down overall, it didn't mean there weren't any reporters still chasing this story. Freelance reporters in particular were willing to cover this story because they didn't have large news companies behind them putting pressure on them to stop.

Unsurprisingly, most of these reporters showed up without appointments and were unbelievably rude. The reporter who'd approached Aiko had asked leading questions like "Haven't the students been put into a special classroom because they're dangerous?"

Naturally, Aiko hadn't been able to keep quiet after that, and she'd let slip that they would have been going to school normally if not for the administration's decision. The journalist had then leaped on the word "normally" and written an article about how they were being given special treatment and that the school was being discriminatory.

Unsurprisingly, the school had gotten a lot of angry calls from parents. It was the head teacher who always had to deal with these calls, so it was understandable that he was getting angry. But at the same time, Hajime and Yue didn't like seeing Aiko get all this abuse hurled at her when she didn't deserve it.

"That damn baldie. He's just venting his frustrations out on her..." Hajime whispered to Yue.

"Mmm... It's true that we're getting special treatment too..."

Hajime and Yue glared angrily at the head teacher. They snuck even closer to him, at which point Aiko realized they were there.

Hajime mouthed "morning" to her. Aiko glanced over at the head teacher to make sure he was still focused on his lecture, then mouthed "good morning" back to him.

Smiling, Hajime nodded and mouthed, *Should I shoot him for you?* and pulled Donner out of his Treasure Trove.

"No!" Aiko shouted as Hajime took aim at the back of his head.

"Yes, that's exactly right, Hatayama-sensei. Students have a great amount of love and respect for their alma mater, so we should not and cannot do anything that would harm it. Besides—"

Realizing that talking would be a mistake, Aiko instead crossed her arms in an X. It was right after the head teacher had asked,

“Do you think it’s okay for this school’s reputation to be tarnished?” so thankfully, he didn’t find it weird.

Yue pointed her finger at the teacher and whispered, “Don’t worry, Aiko. I won’t hurt him, I’ll just get rid of the last of his hair.”

As she said that, a tiny flame appeared at the tip of her finger. Aiko once again forgot that she was being lectured and shouted, “No, what little’s left will be gone then!”

“That’s exactly right, Hatayama-sensei! We must ensure that what remains of our reputation remains safe! If the people lose faith in our school, then the students will lose their precious alma mater!”

However, it seemed the risk of losing his hair finally warned the head teacher of the impending danger and he turned around.

Hajime and Yue slipped into his blind spot immediately.

Thinking he was just imagining things, the head teacher then turned back to Aiko, and Hajime and Yue returned to their previous positions.

The head teacher glanced at his wristwatch, and decided it was time to start wrapping up this lecture. Aiko had no doubt what he was saying was important and based on the head teacher’s own beliefs, but she was so focused on Hajime and Yue that she wasn’t paying any attention to him.

What are you two doing?! Don’t worry about me, just go into the classroom! Also, wait, why am I even mouthing this to you?! I can just use telepathy!

As Hajime and Yue reached out toward the head teacher’s wig, Aiko’s eyes suddenly turned serious and she glared at them with all the weight of a teacher. It seemed her intent got through, and Hajime and Yue slunk back, chastised.

“We just wanted to help you, Aiko…” Hajime said, switching to telepathy.

“We’re sorry… We thought it’d be funny,” Yue added, also switching to telepathy. It was obvious the two of them were acting, but Aiko was so overwhelmed by the situation that she didn’t realize it and started feeling guilty.

Sensing that they could get her to fold with one more push, Hajime and Yue gave her puppy dog eyes and said, “Do you hate me now, Aiko?”

“I bet you do…”

After hearing that from Hajime and Yue, she wasn't able to maintain her composure.

"That's not true! I love you!"

"Huh? What are you talking about, Hatayama-sensei?"

The head teacher suddenly staggered back, confused. After a second, he cleared his throat and said, "H-Hatayama-sensei, what exactly do you mean by that?"

Incidentally, what he'd said right before Aiko's outburst was, "It seems I need to remind you what it means to be a teacher. I know you're probably sick and tired of hearing my lectures, and you don't like me very much, but…"

Even Hajime and Yue were amazed at how well Aiko's outbursts matched up with what the head teacher was saying.

O-Oh no, I wasn't following the conversation at all… Aiko thought, realizing she was in quite a dilemma. She could hardly tell the head teacher she hadn't been listening. Not just because it would make him mad, but because it might affect her job.

"I mean exactly what I said…" Aiko said, hoping to buy time with that response. Her pleading expression was also quite impactful, and the head teacher started trembling, unsure of how to respond.

"E-Exactly what you said? Hatayama-sensei—er, Hatayama-kun, this is hardly the time or place for jokes."

The head teacher looked away awkwardly. As he did, Hajime and Yue once again slid into his blind spot. Meanwhile, Aiko was still in hot water. Not sure what to make of the head teacher's blushing, Aiko tried to think of a way out of this conversation that didn't lead to her getting fired.

I don't know what he's blushing about, but I need to figure out what he was saying earlier. I know his personality well. He cares more about this school's honor than anything else. That's because he believes schools exist to protect their students, and that they need to remain a sacred place where people can look fondly back on in their later years. That has to be why he was mad about what I told the journalist—oh, I've figured it out! He said I was joking because he thought I don't truly love this school! I just have to prove to him that's not the case!

It took Aiko about two seconds to come to this conclusion.

Completely unaware that their conversation wasn't matching up at all, Aiko sucked in a deep breath and looked resolutely at the

head teacher.

“I’m not joking. I’m burning with love (for this school and my students)! In fact, my love (for this school and my students) is worth more than my life itself!”

“Wh-What?!”

Aiko’s sincerity shone through in her expression, and the head teacher took an involuntary step backward.

“I-I have a wife and kiiiiiiiiiiiids!” he finally shouted, running away as fast as he could. He was in such a panic he didn’t notice Hajime or Yue, nor did he realize that his wig had flown off.

Aiko watched him leave, dumbfounded.

“Aiko, you really are something special. I’ve never seen such a perfect misunderstanding in my life,” Yue said.

“Huh? What?” Aiko asked, confused.

“Umm, Aiko, he probably thinks you just confessed to him. Since you said ‘I love you’ right after he said you probably hate him.”

“Come again?” Aiko asked, blinking at Hajime. A second later, understanding dawned on her and her face paled.

She didn’t have a moment to lose. She picked up the head teacher’s abandoned wig and started running after him.

“W-Waaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiit! It’s a misunderstanding! Also, you forgot your wig! Don’t go back to the staff room or else everyone will find out your secret!”

As Yue watched her cute homeroom teacher run off, she muttered, “Mmm... School really is fun. I see now why you wanted this life back, Hajime.”

“Er, well...”

This wasn’t exactly the peaceful school life Hajime had wished for, but he didn’t want to spoil Yue’s fun, so he didn’t say anything.

The two of them headed down the hall toward their classroom. As they reached the door, they could hear their classmates chatting happily inside. From the sound of it, everyone else was already here.

Hajime slid the door open, and the room fell silent. Finally, after a few seconds, someone laughed.

“Heh!”

“Ha ha ha ha!”

With the exception of a few students, all of Hajime’s classmates

averted their gazes. It looked like they were all trying their best to hold in their laughter.

In the two weeks or so since school had started back up, this had happened basically every day.

“If you’ve got something you wanna say, then say it,” Hajime declared, frowning.

Ryutarou finally turned to him and said, “It’s just so weird seeing you in a uniform, Nagumo!”

At that, Atsushi Tamai, Noboru Aikawa, and Akito Nimura were unable to hold it in any longer and they burst out laughing. Ayako Tsuji, Mao Yoshino, and the other girls started laughing as well.

Most of his classmates were so used to Hajime’s appearance in Tortus that they’d long since forgotten how he’d originally looked. His white hair, eye patch, metal prosthetic arm, and edgy black coat had simply made for too striking a look. That was the Hajime Nagumo they knew, the Demon Lord they feared and respected. Had he just changed his appearance back to what it had been before getting summoned, they wouldn’t be laughing this much. But seeing him in a normal school uniform was just too much. It was surreal seeing the man who’d killed a god going to school like a normal kid. Half a month had passed and everyone still burst into fits of laughter when he entered the room every morning.

Kouki took pity on Hajime and tried to calm his classmates down.

“C-Come on, guys, there’s no need to laugh that much. It’s true that his old cosplay-tier outfit was—”

Hajime interrupted him with a gunshot, and Kouki fell out of his chair with a yelp. Thankfully, Hajime had only fired a rubber bullet. Now that he’d returned to civilized society, he knew it was important to use nonlethal force and to not cause any trouble. He’d developed plenty of “kind bullets” as he called them, which was why Kouki only fell out of his chair instead of having his brains splattered all over the floor. But even with his extremely sturdy Hero’s body, that bullet still hurt.

“Why’d you shoot me?! I was trying to help!” Kouki protested, getting back to his feet.

Hajime ignored him and glared at the rest of his classmates. The look in his eyes very clearly conveyed the words “You want a bullet to the forehead too?”

Everyone fell silent immediately.

“Hajime…control yourself,” Yue said.

“Hajime-san, weren’t you trying to become a model Japanese citizen? Or what, is this part of the manzai comedy routine I’ve heard so much about?”

“Hajime-kun, you’re going to start giving Shea the wrong idea, so put your gun away.”

“That’s not even the worst problem here. Also, Kaori, hurry up and heal Kouki. It looks like he’s still in a lot of pain.”

The three students who hadn’t been laughing at Hajime were Shea, Kaori, and Shizuku. They all tried to calm Hajime down, and he shrugged and put his mini-Donner away. As he did so, he surreptitiously checked on Shea’s uniform. If he took his eyes off her, she started shortening the length of her skirt or undoing buttons on her shirt. She was so used to wearing revealing clothing that she now did it unconsciously. Thankfully, it looked like she was wearing her uniform properly today. Her ears were properly hidden by an Artifact as well.

Hajime had made various types of accessories with the same effect for her, and it seemed today she’d picked a hairband. The hairband still had tiny rabbit ears on it, which Shea had demanded Hajime add. Honestly, they were very cute.

Hajime’s expression softened and he greeted everyone with a smile. His classmates warmly returned his greeting. They’d never trusted him this much before they’d all been summoned to Tortus.

As Hajime reached his desk, Shea, Yue, Kaori, and Shizuku all gathered around him. In truth, Kaori and Shizuku had spent a lot of time hanging around Hajime even before they’d been summoned, but now a vampire and a bunny girl had replaced Kouki and Ryutarou as the other two members of the “hangs around Hajime’s desk” group.

“I still can’t get used to this…” Shinji Nakano muttered.

“Tell me about it,” Yoshiki Saitou added.

They shot Kouki and Ryutarou sidelong glances, and the two of them smiled weakly back. It seemed they were also thinking the same thing.

Nana turned to Shinji and Yoshiki and said without any reservation, “Why not go back to bullying him like you used to?”

“You want us to die?”

“Please just forget all about that…” Shinji and Yoshiki shivered in fear.

“Daisuke was the only one who really hated him anyway, so—”

“Shinji, don’t,” Yoshiki said in a cautionary tone.

“Whoops!”

Shinji realized the whole classroom had gone silent and he hurriedly covered his mouth with his hands. There was one thing that could never return to normal. The four students who’d died in Tortus were never coming back. Their four empty seats were a stark reminder of that.

Of course, no one had forgotten their deaths, but also, no one wanted to bring them up if they could help it. The atmosphere grew dark as everyone tried to think of something to say, but couldn’t quite find the words.

“There’s no need to be like that,” Hajime said, confidently breaking the silence.

“It’s not like their deaths are a taboo subject. And if people wanna reminisce about them, I think that’s fine.”

“Er, I mean, yeah, but…”

“Kondou’s one thing, but…I mean, remember what happened when you went to tell the Hiyamas?” Yoshiki asked hesitantly, glancing over at Hajime. There was a surprising amount of concern in his expression. Shinji had the same look on his face.

However, Hajime just scoffed at their consideration.

“Don’t worry. I’m not upset about what happened there,” he said plainly.

“I guess not!” Shinji and Yoshiki said in unison. It was quite something hearing Hajime say that so resolutely while his harem of women was fawning over him. The two of them were, of course, referring to how Aiko and Hajime had gone to tell the families of Daisuke Hiyama, Reichi Kondou, Yukitoshi Shimizu, and Eri Nakamura that their children had died. And since Hajime had played a big part in Hiyama’s and Yukitoshi’s deaths, he’d felt it was irresponsible to leave everything to Aiko.

When Hajime had gone to the Hiyama and Kondou families, Shinji and Yoshiki had come with him. They’d asked to be there as a way of honoring their friends who’d stepped off the proper path.

Hajime had told every family the unvarnished truth, and hidden nothing. He’d even brought along Artifacts to recreate visions of

the past to show them what had happened.

The Kondou and Nakamura families hadn't been a huge issue. Eri's mother hadn't even joined the group of families looking for their children, and if anything, had seemed happy her daughter had disappeared. She'd moved away, in fact, and Hajime had been forced to use the compass to find her location.

When he'd gone to visit Eri's mother, it had actually been tragic. Just the mention of Eri's name had caused her to fly into a rage, so he'd left without telling her the details of her daughter's death.

The Kondou family, on the other hand, had refused to believe Hajime at first. They'd chased Aiko and Hajime out of their house and told them to never come back. But Shinji and Yoshiki had stubbornly kept going back to their dead friend's house, so while Reichi's parents still hadn't sorted out their feelings, it seemed like they were finally starting to accept that their son was dead.

Since Eri, who'd killed Reichi, was already dead and her mother was an insane wreck, they had no one to direct their anger toward. Shinji and Yoshiki were keeping an eye on Reichi's parents just in case, but it seemed they'd be fine eventually.

However, the visits to the Hiyama and Shimizu families hadn't gone as smoothly. Hiyama's parents had declared the visions of the past to be a fabrication, probably because they didn't want to believe their son had truly died, especially in such a gruesome manner. But because they refused to accept that he'd been killed by Hajime, it meant they also refused to accept that Daisuke had betrayed everyone for his own gain. As a result, they raged at Hajime, blaming him for impugning their son's honor and not bringing him back even though he'd taken everyone else with him.

Not even Shinji and Yoshiki had been able to get through to them. In fact, Daisuke's parents had called the two of them traitors as well, claiming they were betraying their friend. After hurling insults at Hajime and Aiko, they'd even tried to physically assault them. Since Aiko believed it was her fault for not being able to properly reform Daisuke, she'd been willing to take their blows, but Hajime refused to see her get hurt for this. And so, he'd used his intimidation at full power against them. Even veteran soldiers ended up shaking in their boots when he did that, so unsurprisingly, Daisuke's parents had collapsed to the ground, trembling in terror.

“Let me just say this,” he’d said, glaring icily at them. “You’re free to believe whatever you want. I don’t regret my actions, though, and I have no intention of apologizing. Also, if you dare to lay a hand on anyone I care about, it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

It didn’t matter to Hajime how much Daisuke’s parents had been hoping for his return. He’d come here to explain the truth and nothing more. That was all he felt he owed them. Ultimately, Daisuke Hiyama had been one of Hajime’s enemies, a twisted man who’d killed someone important to him. The look he gave Daisuke’s parents made that clear to them as well.

Honestly, Hajime didn’t know what the Hiyama family planned to do next. He had no intention of taking back his declaration, though, or having mercy on Daisuke’s parents if they tried to hurt his family. Aiko, Shinji, and Yoshiki were free to keep trying to get through to Daisuke’s parents if they wanted, but Hajime was only keeping an eye on them now to make sure they didn’t try to hurt anyone he cared about.

Incidentally, the visit to the Shimizu family had left a bad taste in everyone’s mouth for a different reason. His parents had only cared about how their son’s death would affect their social standing. They hadn’t seemed the least bit sad that he was dead, but they had been immensely worried about how Yukitoshi’s death would be spoken of among Aiko and the students. The reactions of Yukitoshi’s older and younger brother had been truly striking.

Even if Hajime’s words were a lie and Yukitoshi was secretly alive somewhere, the fact that everyone who’d been summoned with him hated him meant that it would actually be worse for their image if he’d returned. As a result, they’d all begged Hajime and Aiko to promise they’d tell the public that Yukitoshi had died a hero.

Yukitoshi’s parents had even mentioned that it would impact their other sons’ career paths if Yukitoshi was known to be a traitor and agreed with Yukitoshi’s brothers. They’d even tried to get Hajime and Aiko to sign NDAs.

Seeing their reactions, Aiko had completely lost it. It had taken a lot of effort to calm her back down. Hajime had ended up cowing everyone in the Shimizu family with his intimidation as well, but like the Hiyamas, he was still keeping tabs on them.

Suzu Taniguchi, who’d come with Hajime to visit Eri’s mother,

smiled weakly at Hajime's words and said, "Nagumo-kun's right. It should be okay to talk about them at least."

Everyone knew who it was Suzu would want to talk about.

"I'm sorry for what she did to your friend, Nakano-kun, but…"

"It's fine, we don't mind you talking about her. Isn't that right, Yoshiki?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it, Taniguchi. It's not like we've forgiven Nakamura, but…considering what we did to Shirasaki, it's not like we have any right to talk."

They'd failed to notice what Daisuke was up to, so they hadn't been able to stop him from stabbing Kaori. That had left deep scars on Kaori's body, and Shizuku's heart.

However, Kaori and Shizuku simply turned to Yoshiki and Shinji and shook their heads.

"It's fine. We don't mind. It's all over and done with now."

"If anything, it's worse if we act like no one should talk about them. It'll just make the classroom depressing."

With that, the atmosphere inside the classroom finally relaxed.

"By the way, Nagumo-kun, thank you for telling me where the Nakamura family grave is," Suzu said.

"Considering how earnestly you kept asking her mom, I figured you deserved to know. I just used the compass, so it wasn't a big deal. Have you gone there already?"

"Yep."

Eri had met her end in the Sanctuary, in a strange liminal space which had contained only Suzu and Eri. And so, Suzu had come with Hajime in order to tell Eri's mother her last moments, as no one else had seen them. In the end, though, Eri's mother hadn't even bothered to listen. Due to that, Suzu had at least tried to ask her where the location of the Nakamura family grave was to pay her respects, but Eri's mom had stonewalled her there as well.

"It's not Eri's grave, and it's not like I have any of her stuff I could leave as an offering, so it wasn't really a meaningful visit."

"Stupid, if you think it has meaning, then it's meaningful," Ryutarou said, flicking Suzu on the forehead.

"What was that for?!" Suzu shouted, rounding on Ryutarou. But then, she saw he was smiling gently at her and her anger faded.

"If it grants you peace of mind to visit the Nakamura family grave, if you feel like you're closer to Eri when you go there, then

who cares if her body isn't actually buried there? Also, stop running off to places alone. Take me with you next time."

"...It pisses me off how considerate you're trying to be when you're so stupid, Ryutarou."

"Hey!"

Though Suzu looked like she was pouting, most of the girls could tell she was starting to develop feelings for Ryutarou and they all stared avidly at her. Meanwhile, the boys looked like they wanted to spit at Ryutarou's feet.

Just then, the bell rang and Aiko strode into the classroom.

"All right, everyone, take your seats! It's time to start the morning homeroom—hm, what's going on?"

Aiko looked over the classroom, wondering why all the girls were staring at Suzu and all the guys were glaring at Ryutarou.

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Once homeroom was over, first period began and the math teacher, Asada-sensei, walked into the room. He had fox-like eyes and slicked-back hair. He was famous for lecturing students about anything and everything, and often called people into the counseling room. It was to the point where students made jokes about how the counseling room was just his private classroom.

He cast his gaze across the classroom, then narrowed his eyes at Hajime. It was a pretty common occurrence for him to pick on Hajime. It seemed he had it out for him.

"Nagumo, please answer this question."

"Of course, Sensei."

Hajime rose to his feet and started walking to the blackboard. Ryutarou and a few other students signed in relief.

"I believe this is the answer, Sensei."

Shinji suddenly let out a laugh as Hajime finished writing down the answer. Yoshiki, too, started trembling with the effort of holding in his laughter.

"Not again! What's wrong with all of you?!" Asada shouted in exasperation. This had happened every time he called on Hajime, and he couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't help but think that everyone was laughing at him.

"I'm sorry, Sensei. I'll quiet them down," Hajime said

apologetically. That caused Nana and Taeko to burst out laughing, and Yuka bit her hand hard enough to bring tears to her eyes to keep herself from following suit.

In a voice shaking with laughter, Atsushi explained, “I-It’s just so weird to hear Nagumo acting all formal and using honorifics…”

It was weird enough seeing him in a uniform, but this really was too much.

“You’re *supposed* to be respectful to your teachers, you know?!” Asada shouted.

“You’re absolutely right, Sensei. These guys are just idiots. I’m sorry.”

“Oh man, this is just too much!” one of the girls exclaimed, laughing so hard she fell off her chair and started rolling around.

Another girl sadly muttered, “I can’t believe my Demon Lord’s bowing his head to someone.”

Regardless of the reasoning, it seemed none of Hajime’s classmates could bear to see him talking respectfully to someone. The strange part was that they hadn’t seemed to mind when Hajime had acted respectful to the parents of other kids, or when he’d met Tio’s grandfather Adul.

Hopefully, they get used to it eventually…

“Nagumo, do you understand the position you’re in?” Asada asked.

“What do you mean, Sensei?”

“The fact that you and your classmates returned from a mysterious kidnapping incident whose details are still shrouded in mystery. It’s clear a lot happened while you were gone and that you’ve become a sort of leader to all the other students. Can’t you see that if you egg everyone on to make fun of your teachers, it’ll put you in a precarious position?”

Considering they’d already been shunted off to this isolated classroom, Asada was right in saying that things would get worse if they didn’t act like model students.

The students all straightened up and stopped laughing.

“You’re mistaken, Sensei. They’re laughing at me, not you. If I can be perfectly honest, I’m honestly quite grateful to you, Sensei! Please believe me!”

Everyone stared in shock as they witnessed this surreal scene. Of course, Hajime was being one hundred percent honest, but

Asada-sensei took in his classmate's reactions and muttered, "Nagumo, trust is something you have to build."

"It's as you say."

"A person's actions and the way they present themselves says a lot about how trustworthy they are. And from what I've heard, you're in immoral relationships with multiple women at once."

Asada stared at Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Shizuku in turn after saying that.

"I cannot bring myself to trust a frivolous person such as you. Not only that, but you're a bad influence on the well-behaved students around you. Aren't you ashamed of your actions?"

Come on, I'm trying to be a well-behaved student here too... Hajime thought, frowning.

"Hajime, should I mess him up for you?" Yue asked using telepathy. Hajime turned back and saw from the look in her eyes that she was being serious.

"Don't do it. He's one of the ones who's stuck with the school despite everything," he replied.

In truth, after the disappearance a year ago and the students' sudden return a month ago, many teachers at the school had resigned. They'd grown sick of constantly being accosted by journalists, having to deal with angry parents, police interviews, and so on. Teachers weren't saints, and they had their own lives as well. Quite a few had been unable to deal with the pressure and transferred to other schools. And while the head teacher had gone to great lengths to find replacements, neither the replacement teachers nor the few who'd stuck with the school had been willing to teach the special class of returning students. As a result, Hajime truly was grateful to Asada-sensei for willingly taking up the job of teaching math for their class, even if it did seem like he had it out for Hajime for whatever reason.

"Are you listening to me, Nagumo?"

"Yes, Sensei. You're saying illicit sexual relationships are wrong. I agree."

Asada's eyebrows twitched. He then turned to Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Shizuku. It seemed he already knew who Hajime was dating within the school.

Hm? Is it just me or...

Hajime narrowed his eyes as he observed Asada's expression.

Asada had always been a rather strict teacher, but for a second, it had seemed like the look he'd given Yue and the others was straight-up hateful. At any rate, it seemed he was in full lecture mode now and started going on about how Hajime needed to live a more upright life. His classmates realized this was their fault, but even so, they couldn't help but wonder if it was okay for Asada to ignore the actual math lesson and just keep lecturing about morals. Hajime dutifully listened to Asada's lecture, but halfway through, Shea contacted him through telepathy.

"Hajime-san, Hajime-san."

"Hm? What is it, Shea?"

"The truth is, Asada-sensei's come to talk to me a few times outside of class."

"What for?"

"He kept asking about what you got up to while you were gone for a year, and he also told me a lot of stories about you..."

Initially, Hajime thought Asada-sensei was just worried about him because he'd changed so much after coming back. However, Shea had a much better eye for judging people, and her take was quite different.

"I get the feeling that he's trying to give me a bad impression of you."

There was a hint of confusion in Shea's telepathic voice. She wasn't sure about her hunch, and she didn't want to bad-mouth this teacher too much if Hajime was grateful to him. Plus, she didn't want to cause a scene at school and put another teacher in trouble.

"Also, I think he's approached Kaori-san, Shizuku-san, and Yue-san too."

Incidentally, Hajime had given all of his classmates Artifacts that let them use telepathy, and Shea was broadcasting this particular conversation to everyone. Hajime turned to Kaori and the others and they all nodded in agreement. It seemed they, too, felt something was off about Asada-sensei.

Of course, it was true their relationship wasn't one that was socially accepted, so in that sense it was understandable that a teacher would want to lecture them about it. Hajime had figured that was the reason Asada-sensei always looked at him with such hostility too, but it seemed the real reason lay elsewhere.

“Wait, then how come he never calls me to the counseling room?” Hajime asked, confused.

“You’re telling me you wanna go there?!” Ryutarou exclaimed, but everyone ignored him.

Even before he’d been summoned to Tortus, Hajime had often slept in Asada-sensei’s class, so he doubted the teacher had a good impression of him.

But if he’s got a problem with me, shouldn’t he be calling me in for a private chat?

It was clear there was more to Asada-sensei’s hostile attitude toward him than a simple desire to correct Hajime’s moral mishaps. It was possible he was just frustrated he wasn’t getting anywhere by talking to Yue and the others.

“Either way, I should probably have a proper chat with him soon.”

His classmates stared at him in surprise, muttering things like “Wait, you’re not going to just torture him?” and “He’s become so docile…”

“Yue, mind coming with me to his office after school? It shouldn’t be a problem, but if it is, I might need your help…‘convincing’ him.”

“Mmm, leave it to me! I’ll fix everything with my Divine Edict!”

“Never mind; that’s even scarier than torture!”

“He hasn’t turned docile at all!” his classmates exclaimed via telepathy, their expressions looking oddly relieved.

Incidentally, Yue seemed quite ready to control this teacher with magic. The fact that she wasn’t interested in trying to talk things through first proved that she didn’t like him at all.

Naturally, Asada-sensei had no idea this telepathic conversation was going on, so he kept on lecturing.

“Besides, if you don’t show that—”

He droned on all the way until the bell rang.

Yue did, in fact, have to use her Divine Edict on him after school. Hajime wasn’t able to figure out what had happened in his past to make him have such a hardline stance, but it appeared he was staunchly against romance in school. His feelings were so strong that he actually derived pleasure from lecturing students who were dating. That, in and of itself, wasn’t particularly harmful, and since he was doing his job, Hajime didn’t need him to be a

perfect role model on top of that.

Indeed, it seemed Asada-sensei had tried to keep that twisted side of his personality in check before, but seeing Hajime dating multiple students at once had finally caused him to snap. Seeing as telling the students themselves off had accomplished nothing, he'd even been thinking about leaking their immoral relationship to the press to get it to stop.

Hajime's classmates didn't know how exactly the confrontation had gone down, but it was clear it hadn't gone well, since after that Asada-sensei had started teaching his classes normally without lecturing anyone. When students from other classes had asked what had prompted the sudden personality change, he'd just said that he was trying to become a new person. And honestly, that was enough for the students, since they preferred the new Asada-sensei.

At any rate, rewinding the clock back a bit to fourth period, as soon as the end of class bell rang, the English teacher, Sachiko Yanagi (age 45), ran out of the classroom at top speed. Not because Hajime had bullied her or anything, mind you. In fact, everyone had been quite obedient during her class. No one had even laughed at Hajime's use of honorifics or respectful speech, probably because Hajime had threatened to fire a pile bunker up their asses if they laughed at him in the middle of class again. No, the reason Sachiko-sensei had been so distraught lay elsewhere.

"You know, Language Comprehension really is an unfair skill," Noboru said.

"Yeah, I guess that's the one thing we can thank Ehit for," Akito replied with a nod. Thanks to that skill, everyone was able to speak English at a native level. They were all better than Sachiko-sensei herself at English—and every other language on Earth too. As a result, she was quite nervous every time she came to teach this class, and she ran out the moment class was over.

"I'm starting to think it might really be our fault that the teachers are so reluctant to teach our classes..." Shizuku said with a sad sigh.

"Yeah, we have no trouble reading ancient Japanese either... I feel bad for our classics teacher..." Kaori replied.

"I can see how our weirdness might put them off..." Yuka muttered.

“They’re probably wondering how we got better at languages despite not going to school for a year,” Nana said, looking over at the door Sachiko-sensei had run through.

“It’s hard to pretend like we don’t know, though,” Taeko said, furrowing her brow. Everyone was still struggling to assimilate back to everyday life in Japan.

Regardless, now that morning classes were over, it was finally time for lunch break. In the past, there had been quite a few students who went to the cafeteria to buy something, but today everyone brought out a lunch box.

There was the sound of someone running down the hall, and a second later, the door slid open and Aiko walked inside.

“I see you’re going to eat lunch with us in the classroom today too, Ai-chan-sensei,” Yuka said.

“Y-Yes, well…I just felt like it, you know…?” Aiko said, not meeting Yuka’s gaze. She’d been coming to the classroom to eat lunch every day since the new semester had started. Yue was used to it by now and she handed her seat over to Aiko and sat down on Hajime’s lap.

Just then Kentarou Nomura said in a slightly panicked voice, “Sh-Shit, I forgot my lunch box…”

He got to his feet, looking like he’d made some fatal blunder that would cost him his life.

“It’s all good, Kentarou, I’ll give you some of my lunch.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Jugo.”

“Oh, you can have some of mine too, Nomura-kun!”

“Thanks, Tsuji… You make your own lunches, don’t you? It looks delicious.”

“He he he, I hope you like it…”

“You can have some of mine too.”

“Wait, you were here, Kousuke?”

“I’ve been here since morning.”

Relieved, Kentarou sat back down in his chair as Jugo, Ayako, and Kousuke all offered to give him some of their lunches.

Meanwhile, Hajime stared at Kousuke in shock.

Even I failed to notice him?!

He turned to Yue and the others, and they all looked similarly shocked. The Abyss Lord’s stealth skills truly were beyond belief. There was a reason not even Ehit’s apostles had been able to spot

him, and why even Hajime considered him the class's ultimate trump card.

Hajime couldn't believe he'd failed to spot Kousuke until he'd spoken up.

"Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing you yesterday—"

"I was here. We even talked, Nagumo."

"What did you do to my memories?" Hajime asked, stunned.

"I can't believe you forgot. You're making me cry."

Kousuke silently started shedding tears. Hajime's expression froze halfway between surprise and guilt. He considered Kousuke a friend, and the last thing he wanted was to forget that he was talking to him.

"En Doe, you're wearing the presence-boosting Artifact Hajime gave you, right?" Yue asked.

"It's Endou, Yue-san. Please don't make it rhyme with John Doe instead, that'll just make me feel worse."

At that, Yue's expression stiffened as well. She hadn't meant to mispronounce Endou's name. In fact, considering how much he'd helped Hajime out in calming things down after their return to Earth, she considered him to be one of her friends as well.

Wait, I can't even remember his first name now, what's going on? Yue thought, stunned.

"By the way, every time I try to put the Artifact on it flies off. Sorry, Nagumo."

"It takes a lot to overcome Hajime-san's Artifacts. Just what are you doing to them, Abyss Gate?"

"Please use my actual name, Shea-san. I really don't like that nickname."

Kousuke's tone was gentle, but Shea's expression stiffened up anyway. It seemed he really didn't like being called Abyss Gate, or Abyss Lord. But really, trying to remember him really was like staring into the Abyss. Neither the god-slaying Demon Lord, the ultimate vampire princess, or the strongest bunny girl had been able to keep track of him.

No wonder even the apostles were scared of him... Hajime thought with a shiver as he looked at his friend. Everyone else had similar expressions on their faces.

"But you know, if you're going out with Lana-san, Endou-kun, you may as well get used to being called by your nickname.

Everyone in her family's going to be using it for sure."

"Ngh, you've got a point, Shirasaki-san, but..."

Kousuke couldn't argue against that. Incidentally, Lana Haulia was still able to spot Kousuke easily and had no trouble remembering all of her conversations with him. As she was part of the edge-loving Haulia clan, it was, in fact, a plus that Kousuke had such an edgy nickname, but he still wasn't able to fully accept it. At the same time, Kaori was correct, so Kousuke just slumped back to his seat with a sigh and immediately became invisible to everyone unless they focused really hard on him.

Everyone, including Hajime, began to wonder if he really was human.

"Ahem, anyway, Nomura, you should still go to the cafeteria. Even if you get a bit of food from everyone, it won't be enough," Hajime said in an attempt to change the topic. Besides, he felt bad for Kentarou, who was sadly nibbling on what little food his friends had been able to spare. Also, he was getting tired of his classmates' refusal to leave the classroom during lunchtime. At first, he'd thought they just didn't want to be stared at by all the other students, but seeing how deep their reluctance ran, Hajime was beginning to suspect there was more to it.

Hajime stared at Kentarou, who awkwardly looked away and muttered, "I don't wanna leave your side, Nagumo."

"D-Don't say creepy shit like that!"

"W-Wait, it's not what you think!" Kentarou added hurriedly, shaking his hands in denial.

"It's just, if we get summoned somewhere again, it'll be a problem if we're not all together! I don't want to be left behind, and I don't want to be the only one summoned away either! The only safe place during lunchtime is near you, Nagumo!"

Hajime shot Kentarou an exasperated look, but as he gazed around the classroom he noticed that everyone else had the same idea.

"S-Seriously? Wait, is that why you're always coming here for lunch, Aiko?"

"Ha ha ha..."

Upon closer inspection, Hajime realized everyone had hidden combat Artifacts in their clothes and bags just in case something happened and they needed to fight.

“I can’t believe lunch break has turned into a traumatic event for you guys,” Hajime said, and his classmates all smiled awkwardly. None of them wanted to be away from the Demon Lord during the dreaded witching hour—aka lunchtime.

Hajime shook his head in exasperation and let out a long sigh.

“Don’t worry, guys,” he said finally, and everyone turned to look at him.

To their surprise, Hajime was smiling. It was a reassuring smile too, not a sardonic grin or anything.

“If any of you vanish, I’ll be sure to bring you back.”

Kousuke’s and Atsushi’s eyes widened in surprise, Ryutarou grinned and said, “I’ll be counting on ya!” and the other guys all smiled back at Hajime.

“It’s because you’re always like that that I…” Yuka muttered softly, blushing.

“Nya ha ha ha, even my heart skipped a beat at that!” Nana said with a smile.

“You okay, Yuka? Your face is all red.”

Yuka wasn’t the only one, a few of the other girls in the class were blushing too. Some of them were even so surprised that they’d dropped their chopsticks. One of them even muttered, “Haaah… Haaah… I really want to become his pet now…” and started hyperventilating.

Yue and the other others smiled gently at Hajime. Kaoru and Shizuku were especially happy, since his smile right now was just like the old Hajime’s.

“Well, if you get summoned, Amanogawa, you’re on your own,” Hajime suddenly said, folding his arms and looking away awkwardly.

“Can you stop constantly taking your embarrassment out on me?” Kouki asked, glaring at him. He had a surprisingly good understanding of Hajime at this point. Everyone else chuckled as they watched their exchange.

“Hey, Nagumocchi, do you have any plans for Christmas?” Nana suddenly asked. Christmas was only a week away, and it was the perfect chance for her to set her good friend Yuka up with Hajime. Yuka glared at Nana, knowing exactly what she was planning.

“If you don’t, how about we throw a Christmas party?”

“Sorry, but I’ve got plans.”

Oh, figures. You've got Yue-san and the others, after all. But hey, maybe I can still squeeze Yuka into those plans.

Nana turned to Yuka with a grin, and Yuka hurriedly rushed forward and covered Nana's mouth with her hands.

"Ish a good shansh," Nana protested hotly, and Taeko started laughing.

Seeing the three of them fool around, Hajime suddenly remembered something and said,

"Oh, also, I've finally managed to store up a good amount of mana, so I was thinking of calling Lily over to Japan before Christmas."

Oh, Princess Liliana's finally coming?!

Hajime's classmates' eyes started glowing with anticipation.

"I'll probably ask her to stay until after the New Year's at least, and after that, I'll be opening up a portal back to Tortus for a bit, so is there anyone who wants to go back to visit?" Hajime asked, turning to his classmates with a smile. They exchanged knowing glances, and Ryutarou decided to give voice to everyone's answer.

"Sorry, but no one wants to go."

It wasn't that they'd come to hate Tortus, but it had only been two months since everyone had come back home. Even if they hadn't gone through hell back there, no one would want to visit again so soon.

Hajime nodded and said, "Thought so. We finally made it back, so you may as well all enjoy the New Year with your families."

At the same time, though, Hajime could tell everyone was feeling a little sad that they wouldn't be able to see him or Yue and the others over winter break. And so, he decided to ease their worries.

"Don't worry, there's plenty of time until we graduate, and we'll all be together in the same class until then," he said in a reassuring voice. "We can take things slow, you know?"

That did, in fact, help assuage everyone's fears, so they all nodded happily back at him.

Chapter VIII: Reunions at the Closing Ceremony

The closing ceremony for winter break was held on Christmas Eve. Like the rest of the students, the members of the special class were happily discussing their plans for winter break as they exited the auditorium. There hadn't been any real problems with their reintegration into school, and more than a few of them had rekindled their friendships with students from other classes, all of whom were in their third year now.

Shizuku, in particular, was beloved by everyone in the school regardless of grade, and Suzu and Kaori were quite popular as well. Kouki, Ryutarou, and some of the guys who'd been in large clubs like Jugo Nagayama had also started reaching out to acquaintances outside of their class.

Yue and Shea were also rather popular. Even today, they were surrounded by a gaggle of admiring underclassmen girls. They were both sending Hajime covert glances, asking him to save them.

Naturally, Hajime just smiled at them and looked away. Both of their shoulders visibly slumped as they saw they'd been abandoned.

"Why are you abandoning them?"

Hajime turned in the direction of the voice and saw Yuka leaning against a pillar by the exit and twirling a finger through her hair.

"I just want them to make new friends."

"Liar. You don't want to deal with that group of girls, that's all."

Hajime averted his gaze and simultaneously sought to change the topic.

"Sorry that I'm reserving your whole café during one of your busiest seasons."

"It's fine, it's only for today, and tomorrow onward is when we really get busy," Yuka said with a shrug of her shoulders. Stifling a laugh, she added, "Besides, dad was really happy to hear you're coming."

“Seriously?”

“You bet.”

Everyone in Hajime’s class was planning on having a party at the Sonobe family café after school, and it seemed Yuka’s parents were more than happy to lend the whole café out to them. They were grateful to Hajime for bringing their daughter back and to everyone else for fighting together with Yuka.

“Oh, also, umm…if mom or dad say anything weird, just ignore them.”

“Weird how?”

“Y-You know, like those misunderstandings they had at the latest family meeting.”

“Which misunderstandings?”

“You know, all the weird stuff they said to you!”

“Was any of it really that weird?”

“How do you not remember it?!” Yuka blushed as she shouted that, but Hajime continued to look completely clueless. Of course, those who knew him well could tell by the twinkle in his eye that he was just teasing her.

“Heeey, Nagumocchi’s teasing Yukacchi and she’s blushing!” Nana shouted, running over to the two of them.

“I heard you say something about your dad… Are you finally going to confess? Is it finally time for you to join his harem?” Taeko asked with a grin.

“I am not!”

The three of them were loud enough that some of the passersby stopped to stare. Of course, with how much Yue and the others stood out, rumors had already spread across the entire school that Hajime was the harem lord of the returning students. As a result, the guys all glared at Hajime, wondering if he was about to add another girl to his harem, while the girls looked half-repulsed and half-curious.

“Oho, you’ve got a lot of courage, Yuka…”

“Yue-san?! Wait, I—”

“Hm? Is this the moment you were waiting for, Yuka-chan?”

“Kaori?! This is all a misunderstanding!”

Yue and Kaori suddenly appeared behind Yuka, and behind them were Shea and Shizuku. All of the harem members who attended school had now surrounded Yuka. If you included Yuka

and her friends, Hajime was now surrounded by more girls than Yue and Shea had been.

In the distance, one of the guys muttered, “Some guys just get all the luck…”

At the same time, the Shizuku fans who called themselves the Soul Sisters started preparing something that looked rather dangerous.

If Hajime wanted to end this closing ceremony peacefully, he needed to act fast.

“If we’re done talking then let’s get going. If we—”

The surroundings suddenly grew noisy and Hajime trailed off. The source of the commotion seemed to be a crowd at the front gate. Hajime immediately recognized who was at the center of the crowd and he looked up at the sky in despair.

The figure made her way through the crowd and started heading into the school grounds. She was wearing a milky white coat and had blonde hair and striking blue eyes. Though she looked young enough to be a middle schooler, she projected an air of authority that made her seem far more mature. And that made sense, since she was a princess.

Liliana smiled at the people surrounding her and thanked each and every one of them for getting out of her way. They all stared raptly at her, completely entranced. It was clear she was the daughter of some rich noble family, but none of them knew her. But then, she spotted Hajime and her plastered-on smile was replaced by a genuine one.

“Ah.”

In that moment, everyone realized that she’d just been being nice to them. Her real self was clearly reserved for someone else.

Liliana ran over to Hajime, her hair swaying in the wind and her short boots tapping against the ground.

“Hajime-san! He he he, I came to see your school.”

Everyone turned to Hajime and shouted, “You again?!” in unison.



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Two days earlier, the Nagumo family living room was filled with an air of tension and anticipation. Sumire and Shu were wearing party hats and holding party poppers but looked more nervous than one would expect for someone getting ready for a party.

“You don’t need to be so nervous, mother,” Yue said softly.

“Lily-oneechan’s very nice, grandpa,” Myu added.

“Don’t worry. We’re fine,” Sumire and Shu said in unison, still as tense as ever. Their nervousness was understandable, since they were about to meet a princess for the first time in their life and they were just middle-class parents. Plus, what made things even scarier was that even though she was in love with their son, she’d been willing to stay behind even if it meant never seeing Hajime again because she was determined to fulfill her duty as royalty.

Indeed, even now, she was only going to be able to visit for a short while. After the new year rolled around, she’d need to return to take care of official matters. In other words, she wasn’t just a princess in name, she was the real deal.

With Yue, everything had happened so fast that Shu and Sumire hadn’t really paid that much attention to the fact that she was also royalty, but this time things were different.

“Maybe we’re taking this welcoming party too seriously?” Sumire asked her husband softly.

“But if we’re too stiff, then she’ll think we’re not willing to open up to her, Sumire,” Shu replied.

“You’re right, we’re her family now. In which case, the party hats and funny glasses are a must.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

I’m not so sure about that… Yue and the others thought, but they just smiled softly knowing that Sumire and Shu were doing this out of concern for Liliana.

“By the way, is it just me or is Hajime-san running late? The food’s going to get cold at this rate,” Shea said as she looked down at the dining table. She and Remia had worked hard to cook up a feast.

“Fu fu, they’re finally reuniting for the first time in a month, give them some time alone,” Remia said with a smile.

“Indeed. Despite how pure she looks, Lily is quite the passionate woman,” Tio added. She then cast a wave of heat over the table to ensure the food stayed warm. She did not doubt that Liliana was showering Hajime with kisses right about now. They hadn’t met since Hajime had returned to Earth, after all.

Opening portals between worlds took an enormous amount of mana, especially ones large enough to let people through. Hajime had kept a tiny one open as part of an experiment to optimize the process, so he had been sending letters back and forth at least. As a result, Liliana had known ahead of time that he’d be coming to get her today.

Of course, while they had exchanged letters almost daily, that couldn’t even remotely compare to seeing someone in person, which was why Yue and the others were willing to let Hajime have some time alone with her.

“Oh, they’re finally here,” Shea said as the space in the middle of the living room began to warp. There was a glowing spiral that slowly started expanding into a portal.

“Dear, be ready to welcome her!”

“Of course! She’s going to be our daughter-in-law too! We have to be sure to leave a good first impression!”

You probably shouldn’t blow those party poppers when she comes, then… Yue thought, but again she didn’t say anything.

Finally, the portal opened fully and Liliana stepped through, wearing a peach-colored dress and a glittering tiara.

“Welcome to the Nagumo family home!” Sumire and Shu shouted in unison, pulling the strings on the party poppers.

“Hallowed Ground!”

Liliana thought she was under attack and reflexively summoned a barrier. The streams of paper limply fell onto the glowing yellow barrier and slid down it.

After a moment of silence, Sumire and Shu exchanged looks of despair. A second later, Liliana also realized she’d misunderstood what was going on and looked down sadly.

“Huh, what’s wrong?” Hajime asked, stepping through the portal after Liliana.

Seeing that no one else was going to try to change the depressing mood, Yue forced a smile and said, “Th-That was an amazingly quick reaction! What a wonderful barrier!”

Unfortunately, that didn't lighten the mood in the slightest.

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"And that's what happened," Liliana said in a despondent voice, sitting inside a Western-style restaurant. The place's name was Wisteria, and it was the restaurant the Sonobe family ran. The families of the missing children had often come here to hold meetings, and even after everyone had returned, they still gathered here from time to time.

Today, though, the place was reserved for the kids' end-of-semester party, which also doubled as Liliana's welcoming party.

Hajime and the others were all sitting around Liliana. Naturally, Tio, Remia, and Myu had shown up as well, even though they weren't going to school.

"Waaah, I practiced so hard to make sure I'd give off a good first impression, but then I went and cast a barrier the moment I saw them! It's like I was rejecting their hospitality!" Liliana bawled, burying her face in her hands, and Kouki and Ryutarou smiled sadly at her.

Meanwhile, Kaori and Shizuku tried their best to cheer her up.

"I-It's not your fault, Lily! You were just on edge because you've been so busy rebuilding your country!"

"Yeah, there are still leftover monsters from the Sanctuary roaming around Tortus, so it's only natural that you'd always be on your guard!"

"Th-That just goes to show how much you've grown as the supreme commander of the joint mortal armies, isn't that right, Kouki?!" Ryutarou said, also trying to help out.

"E-Exactly! You don't need to feel bad! I bet Nagumo's parents were also impressed by—"

"No, they were completely terrified," Liliana said flatly.

Indeed, after Liliana had cast her barrier, Sumire and Shu had gotten on their knees and apologized, thinking they'd done something rude. Kouki and the others looked away awkwardly, unsure of how to follow up on that.

"Well, they're talking to you normally now, so what's the big deal?" Hajime said, taking a sip of his café au lait.

"First impressions are important! I wanted to make a good

one!”

“I know how you feel…” Yue said, nodding in understanding.

“Same!” Shea added in. All of the other girls nodded in agreement as well.

Well, you one-percenters have already succeeded, so stop complaining! Liliana thought, glaring at Yue and Shea.

“Don’t worry about it, Lily-san! When I first met his parents, I dropped to my knees and apologized!” Aiko said.

“Is that supposed to be comforting to hear?” Liliana asked, confused. The other students stared at Aiko in amazement.

“Oh, that reminds me, even Lana-san was nervous when she first met my parents. She even dropped the chuuni act and spoke to them normally.”

Wait, you were here, Kousuke?! all of the students thought in unison, and tears welled up in his eyes as he saw their shocked expressions.

Incidentally, Liliana wasn’t the only person who’d come from Tortus during this visit. Lana Haulia had come as well to visit Kousuke. Hajime had wanted to reunite them as soon as possible, so he’d invited her to Earth as well.

Not only was Kousuke his friend, but if he was going to marry Lana that would make him sort of like family, and Hajime never abandoned family. She’d waited until Liliana’s introductions had finished before stepping through the portal, and after a perfunctory introduction to Hajime’s parents, she’d run off to Kousuke’s house.

Apparently, everyone in the Endou family had been informed of Lana’s arrival beforehand, so they’d all been nervously waiting for her along with Kousuke. For his part, Kousuke had been worried that his parents wouldn’t approve of a bloodthirsty chuuni girl like Lana. Fortunately, his fears had been unfounded.

Though Lana had greeted Shu and Sumire with the attitude of a yakuza underling meeting her boss’s parents for the first time, she’d desperately been studying how to act normal as well so that she could leave a good first impression on Kousuke’s parents. As a result, she’d given a perfectly normal greeting to the Endou family. Not only that, but she’d eventually slipped back into her old habits halfway through the night. However, Kousuke’s parents had found that endearing as well and hadn’t made fun of her at all.

“I see… So you’re part of the one percent too, Lana-san…” Liliana muttered, feeling betrayed. The fact that Lana seemed to also be getting along with Kousuke’s parents made her feel like she was the only one who’d failed.

“Now, now, your mother-in-law and father-in-law are very accepting people,” Tio said in a soothing voice. “I guarantee you they don’t mind in the slightest that your initial meeting didn’t go as planned, so stop worrying about that and enjoy the party. I mean, just look at how cute your outfit is.”

“Yes, it really is,” Remia added, gently patting Liliana on the shoulder. The princess’s expression finally brightened in response, and she looked down at the long-sleeve dress she was wearing that Sumire had gifted her.

Hajime had worked with Kaori and Shizuku to create some outfits for Liliana, but she’d chosen to wear the one Sumire had given her, probably because she felt bad about how much she’d shocked Hajime’s parents during their first meeting. Her feelings had gotten through to Hajime’s parents, and they were truly grateful to have such a considerate daughter-in-law.

“Yeah, it really is super cute! He he he,” Liliana said, fiddling with the ribbon on her dress. She wasn’t putting on airs like she often had to when she was acting in her official capacity as a princess. Right now, she was just an ordinary girl.

Everyone smiled gently at her, which caused her to blush and awkwardly clear her throat.

“By the way, everyone, thank you for holding such a wonderful welcoming party for me,” she said as she got to her feet and curtsied regally to everyone.

“It’s a relief to know you were all able to reunite with your families. As a representative of the world you saved, thank you so much for all of your help. And—”

Liliana had already thanked everyone for saving Tortus before, but in her mind even thanking them a hundred times wouldn’t be enough. Plus, she was even happier that everyone had wanted to invite her here to Earth.

“I’m truly happy that you invited me here to your homeland!”

Everyone burst out into applause, and a few people cheered her. Pretty much all of the students were friends with Liliana, and some of them had been helped a great deal by her.

“Eloquent as ever. You’re really good at getting people fired up,” Hajime said.

“And who do you think taught me how to do this?” Liliana asked pointedly, poking his cheek. She was touching him a lot more frequently than usual, probably to make up for all the time she’d had to spend away from him.

Some of the kids teased Liliana for being so bold, while a few of the others sighed in disappointment and jealousy.

“Hey, kids, food’s finally ready!”

“Does anyone need refills on their drinks?”

Yuka’s dad, Hiroyuki Sonobe, and Yuka’s mom, Yuri Sonobe walked into the dining area, both hands carrying trays piled high with food. Hiroyuki was a gentle-looking man in glasses, while Yuri was an equally gentle-looking woman with long hair tied back by a hair clip. They were both wearing matching aprons that had the store’s logo on them as they smiled at everyone and started placing down plates of food.

Everyone thanked them profusely, and Aiko also thanked them for letting them reserve the whole restaurant for the day. A few seconds later, Yuka also walked out of the kitchen and slammed a giant plate of food down in front of Hajime.

“Hey, Sonobe, why’re you being so rough with the food?” Hajime asked.

“I-It was a heavy plate, okay?!”

Indeed, there was enough food on the plate to feed a family. But after putting the plate down, Yuka didn’t go back to get more plates. Instead, she just looked away awkwardly.

“Ha ha ha, forgive her, Hajime-kun. She’s probably just nervous because this is the first time she’s wearing the restaurant’s uniform in front of you.”

“What do you think, Hajime-kun? She looks pretty good in it, right?”

“Dad! Mom! Stop!”

Incidentally, the Wisteria restaurant uniform was a white blouse with a wine-red apron and a similarly wine-red chef’s hat. Yuka often helped out at the shop on weekends or when the store was extra busy, so her friends Nana and Taeko were used to seeing her in this uniform. However, this was the first time Hajime was seeing it.

“Wow, you look super cute, Yuka-san!” Shea exclaimed.

“Yeah, super cute! I wanna wear it too!” Myu added.

“R-Really?” Yuka asked, blushing slightly at the praise as she started twirling her hair around her finger. She then glanced over at Hajime.

“I’d like some jasmine tea, please,” Hajime said, holding up his empty cup.

“C-Coming right up. Of course, everything’s free today!” Yuka said, running back into the kitchen.



Oh, come on, that's just cruel, Hajime's classmates thought, glaring at him. He ignored them, though. Hajime had no intention of saying anything suggestive to someone who wasn't one of his girlfriends.

"Oh my, does this mean our poor daughter was dumped?" Yuri said with a sigh.

"She's got a long road ahead of her," Hiroyuki added, looking over at Hajime.

Hajime, of course, ignored them as well. He was honestly confused about why Yuka's parents seemed to like him so much. They knew he was dating multiple women already too. It was almost as if they weren't capable of getting angry. That, or they just unilaterally supported their daughter.

"Mrr, damn you, Yuka... How much did you embellish events when you told your parents about what happened in Tortus?" Yue muttered.

"It probably just came out subconsciously, knowing her. We were the same way, after all," Kaori said with a smile.

"By the way, Hajime-kun, you'll be going out with your family for Christmas, right?" Yuri asked.

"Sort of. Mom and dad won't be with us."

Sumire had suggested they don't join because she hadn't wanted to get in the way of her son's date. However, Yue and the others honestly would have preferred to spend more time with Hajime's parents. And so, as a compromise, Hajime had suggested they all eat dinner together as a family on Christmas Eve.

"I see. That sounds wonderful. Where will you be going?" Hiroyuki asked, skillfully bringing out four more plates of food at the same time.

"A nearby theme park. I haven't taken Myu to one yet."

"My, that's a wonderful idea! I'm sure they'll have set up Christmas decorations to match the season!" Yuri exclaimed. Hajime could see where this was going and he smiled awkwardly. "Do you think you could take one more person with—?"

"Here's your jasmine tea, sir!" Yuka said, running forward and slamming the glass of tea on the table to interrupt her mom.

"This isn't a bar. You don't need to be so violent," Hiroyuki said with a knowing smile. Yuka glared at her parents, blushing to the tips of her ears. From how heavily she was panting, it was clear

she'd sprinted back.

Hiroyuki and Yuri raised their arms in surrender and walked back to the kitchen. But just before they disappeared behind the door, they turned back around and said, "Thanks for looking after our daughter, everyone."

"She has a hard time being honest with herself, but please stay friends with her, okay?"

They then vanished into the kitchen, and an awkward silence fell over the room. Yuka trembled in anger, looking like she was about to run after them and give them a piece of her mind.

"Umm…do you also wanna come, Yuka-oneechan?" Myu asked.

"…N-No thanks! I need to help out with the shop!"

With how long Yuka paused before saying anything, it was clear she really wanted to go. Nana and Atsushi started grinning, but before anyone could tease her, Aiko rose to her feet.

"L-Let's share a toast, everyone! We successfully made it to the end of the semester, and Lily-san has finally joined us as well!"

Everyone raised their glasses, then started digging into the delicious food.

Chapter IX: First Christmas

“Wheee!”

“Wooooooow…”

Myu let out a squeal of childlike glee from her spot atop Hajime’s shoulders while Shea stared up in amazement. Yue, Tio, Kaori, Shizuku, Remia, Aiko, and Liliana’s eyes were all sparkling with excitement as well, even though they didn’t say anything. Though Liliana’s eyes, in particular, were glimmering with more than just excitement.

Normally, Yue and the others were the center of attention no matter how many presence-dampening Artifacts Hajime gave them, but here people just smiled at them as they walked past. That was because right now Hajime and the crew had come to a rather famous theme park. A place of dreams and wonder, a land of whimsy and fantasy.

Plenty of people were wearing animal ear headbands or had put on face paint or plastered their faces with stickers. Quite a few people were in costumes as well, and of course, there were employees dressed up as park mascots everywhere. As a result, Yue and the others’ beauty was just one of many things vying for everyone’s attention.

Music blared from speakers set up at regular intervals, and shrieks of excitement and joy could be heard all over. There were rides everywhere you looked, and naturally, everyone was here with friends, family, or a significant other, so they were too busy to be gawking at other groups, especially since today was Christmas. Everyone was here to have fun and make the most of their time here.

“He he, even you’re looking around like a little kid, Yue.”

“Shut up, idiot Kaori.”

Yue blushed a little as she said that, since she was aware that she was, in fact, staring in wonder at everything.

As he smiled at the two of them, Hajime reached out toward Shea’s face.

“Shea.”

“Yeah? W-Wait, what are you doing?!”

Shea quickly covered her head with her hands as Hajime took off the earcuffs that hid her bunny ears.

“You don’t need to hide your ears here. If anything, this is the one place you can show them off,” Hajime said, patting her very fluffy bunny ears. She stared at him blankly for a second, but then her expression lit up and she let her bunny ears stand straight up.

“Hmm, this place does have a rather fantastical air to it. Remia, you don’t need to hide your ears either.”

“I suppose we did just pass by a mermaid-themed attraction.”

Tio removed Remia’s earrings, while Shizuku smiled at Myu and pointed at her ears as well.

Remia shivered a little as Tio took her earrings off, while Myu happily took out her own. Their hair color changed from emerald-blonde to emerald-green and their finned ears reappeared, making them look very much like mermaids.

In Myu’s case, she looked like a mermaid Santa, since she was wearing a fur-lined red hat and coat, as well as warm white stockings and fur-lined boots. She truly looked adorable. Hajime picked her up off his shoulders and put her on the ground. As she looked confusedly up at him, he pulled out his phone and started taking a ton of pictures. He then put his phone away at lightning speed and placed Myu back on his shoulders as if nothing had happened. Even when he drew Donner and Schlag, his hands didn’t move that fast.

“Master, does that mean I can let my wings out here as—”

“They’ll get in the way, so don’t.”

“You’re so cruel! But thank you!”

Tio started panting as Hajime shot her down immediately. Kaori’s shoulders slumped as she heard that. She’d been looking forward to going apostle mode and turning into an angel for tonight. Yue grinned and poked Kaori in the side.

Incidentally, it wasn’t because the wings were big that Hajime thought they’d get in the way. He mostly meant that they would ruin the fashionable coat Tio was wearing.

“Oh, would you like to wear these instead?” Aiko asked, pulling a headband out of her bag. Judging by the feelers on it, it was supposed to resemble a butterfly.

“I have others, so you can pick whichever one you like.”

“When did you get these, Aiko?”

“They were selling them by the entrance, so I bought a few!”

Aiko pulled out another headband with bear ears on it, put it on, and struck a pose. It seemed she’d been looking forward to this trip more than anyone.

A few passing kids laughed cheerfully at her impression of a bear and Hajime and the others smiled as well. Blushing in embarrassment, Aiko hurriedly removed the headband.

“Sorry, I got carried away. The last time I was at a theme park was during my school field trip. Things were awkward between me and some of my classmates back then, so I didn’t get to enjoy it as much as I wanted. Plus, our school doesn’t even do field trips to amusement parks, so I can’t volunteer to be a chaperone or anything…”

“It’s okay, you can have as much fun as you want. That’s what we’re here for, after all,” Hajime said.

“He he he…”

Aiko was secretly a huge fan of theme parks. She put the bear-ear headband back on and smiled childishly at everyone. Hajime and the others smiled back at her.

“So, what do you guys want to do first?” Hajime asked. Yue and the others spread open the map of the park and started pointing to what they were most interested in. It seemed they’d all done their research. Though one person, in particular, seemed to have something other than fun in mind with her choice.

“I want to go to the gift shop first!” Liliana shouted, her eyes strangely bloodshot.

“Normally, you save that for the end, don’t you?” Hajime asked.

“It’s okay, I don’t want to buy anything!”

“Then what do you want to go there for?!”

“Isn’t it obvious?! Market research!”

“Please don’t use such a boring clinical term in this land of dreams and wonder!” Hajime exclaimed. Yue shot Liliana a quizzical look, and she immediately burst into an explanation.

“I honestly can’t believe it! In the few days I’ve been here, my understanding of the universe has been completely transformed! This world is a veritable treasure trove! The economics of the nations here are on a completely different level, and the cultures are so varied as well! Imagine having the funds to build multiple

facilities of this scale just to provide entertainment to the masses! Just how many visitors does this place get per day?! What do their profit margins look like?! I can scarcely imagine how much money this would bring to our treasury if I opened even a single one of these parks back in Heiligh! Ha ha ha ha ha ha, you're done for, Emperor. I know you've been running around all over to get as many beneficial contracts as you can during this reconstruction period, but we'll crush you culturally and economically in no time! And then—"

"Aiko."

"On it—Soul's Repose!"

Aiko quickly cast spirit magic on Liliana, who had spread her arms wide and was starting to sound like an evil overlord. As the light of Aiko's magic washed over her, Hajime surreptitiously looked up at the sun, hoping the bright weather would hide the magical glow. Liliana slowly lowered her arms, but a feral gleam remained in her eyes. Indeed, nearby parents shooed their kids away from Liliana, worried that she might attack them or something.

"Sorry, I got a little carried away."

"You call that a little? I thought you'd lost your mind," Hajime muttered.

"Sometimes it's okay to forget that you're a princess…" Yue said.

"I-I guess the world of politics is just as fierce as any battlefield, huh?" Shizuku said, and Liliana nodded quietly. Kaori and Remia looked tearfully down at her.

"Lily…I didn't realize you had it so rough… I'm sorry we left you all alone…"

"Oh my, to think you've been forced to deal with such huge issues at such a young age. My condolences…"

"I read on the internet that people call people like Lily-oneechan 'wage slaves.'"

"Master, I think you should start meeting with her more often…or she'll be too far gone."

"I've been trying to find a way to convert electricity into mana to make coming and going more efficient… I think I'll have to speed that research up."

Hajime had known Liliana was burdened with a lot of responsibilities, but he hadn't realized she'd been pushing herself

this hard. She looked like a worn-down corporate wage slave at the tender age of fifteen. Even now, when everyone was looking worriedly at her, Liliana was just watching the flow of people and mentally calculating how she could recreate this amusement park back in Heiligh.

I really need to do something fast or she'll be beyond help...

Hajime looked over at Yue and the others. They nodded resolutely back at him.

"All right, where should we go first?" Hajime asked, trying to pretend as if that diversion had never happened. Yue and the others excitedly started pointing out places they were interested in, doing their best to remind Liliana how to have fun, rather than spend all her time thinking about economics.

May this holy day grant us the strength to save this young girl's soul!

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

An hour later, Liliana was sitting slumped on a bench.

"Attractions where you're at risk of dying shouldn't exist," she said, dropping her head onto Hajime's lap.

Remia also dropped her head onto Hajime's lap from the other side and muttered, "I'm sorry, Hajime-san..."

While Liliana looked defeated, Remia just seemed embarrassed. It was partly because she was resting her head on Hajime's lap in public, and partly because he was gently patting her head.

"No, this is my fault. I was so desperate to bring Lily back to her senses that I focused too much on thrill rides."

"Umm, Hajime-san, I never lost my sanity."

"Then how do you explain your reaction when we stopped by that food stall?"

"I was just amazed at how much they can afford to upcharge people! Even though everyone pays just to get in here, they still—"

"So I failed, huh...?"

"Now, now, there's still time," Remia said with a smile.

Incidentally, Yue had cast healing magic on both of them before leaving so neither of them were feeling sick. However, the marathon of thrill rides had worn both of them out, so they were resting for a bit while Yue and the others took Myu on all the other

rides she wanted to go on.

The reason Hajime was giving Liliana a lap pillow was because he'd seen her shooting jealous glances at other couples who were doing the same thing while they'd been walking around. Remia had also seemed quite interested in a lap pillow, so Hajime had offered to give both of them one, which had proven to be the correct decision.

"Man, all I did was make her twenty centimeters taller, but she looks completely different," Hajime muttered as the spinning teacup ride came to an end and Myu dashed out of the exit and started running toward Hajime. Most of the other people who'd been on the ride looked dizzy, but Myu seemed completely unaffected. Since she was with Yue and the others, it was extremely obvious that she looked much taller than she was supposed to. Thrill rides naturally had height limits, and Myu certainly wasn't tall enough for most of them. Hajime knew Myu would feel left out if she was the only one unable to ride, so he'd used metamorphosis magic to temporarily make her taller.

While that naturally made Myu look older, the effect was at odds with her still childish smile. But even then, it did feel like he was seeing his daughter grow up—even though she hadn't actually grown yet.



“She’s going to grow up a lot faster than you expect. Girls always do,” Remia said with a smile.

“Is that so?” Hajime asked, looking down at her.

“It is. Does it make you happy to see her grow, dear?”

Hajime brushed a strand of hair out of Remia’s eyes and shrugged his shoulders.

“Of course it does… Well, okay, not completely. It does feel a little sad to see her grow up so fast. I wish it’d happen a little slower.”

“My, my. I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because she herself wants to grow up as fast as possible. She wants to be a certain someone’s bride, after all.”

“……”

“Girls who have a husband in mind grow up even faster, you know?”

Just then, Hajime heard Myu yell, “Oh, mama’s getting a lap pillow! I’m so jealous!” and all he could do was chuckle. Remia got off of Hajime’s lap and waved at her daughter.

“Well, doesn’t it make you happy, *dear*?” she asked, glancing over at Hajime. There was no good answer to that question, so Hajime pulled out his ultimate trump card.

“Huh? What’d you say?” he asked, bringing out the cliché but always effective “pretending not to hear” strat. That particular skill was normally reserved for the main character rather than the Demon Lord, but Hajime wasn’t picky about what techniques he used. Unsurprisingly Remia just smiled knowingly.

Meanwhile, Liliana frowned and muttered, “Hang on, have I just become a third wheel?”

It was too awkward to insert herself into this conversation, but at the same time, it was too awkward to get off of Hajime’s lap and do something else.

“Mama, Lily-oneechan, are you two okay now?”

“Yes, seeing your smiling face made me full of energy again,” Remia said, patting her daughter’s head. It felt a little strange, since Myu’s head was twenty centimeters above where it normally was.

Thanks for the save, Myu-chan! Liliana thought, taking the opportunity to sit up and show that she’d fully recovered as well.

“Yep, I’m doing great now too! But I think I’ve had my fill of entrusting my life to contraptions I don’t fully understand.”

“You’re exaggerating, Lily, roller coasters aren’t that bad,” Shizuku said with a shake of her head.

“Don’t worry, Lily. Even if you die, I can just bring you back to life!” Kaori declared with a smile.

“That just makes me even more worried.”

“Should we go on a gentler ride next, Hajime?” Yue asked.

“Ha ha ha, sorry, but I think I’m all roller coastered out as well,” Aiko said with a tired smile. Magic could easily heal motion sickness, but even so, thrill rides were mentally taxing.

“Sounds good. It’s about time we got lunch too, so…”

“Oh, can we go here before lunch?! Please?!” Shea exclaimed, jumping up and down as she pointed to a corner of the map.

“Oh, an escape room? And it’s themed after that one famous ninja movie.”

It wasn’t quite a traditional escape room with puzzles, but rather a more athletic attraction that involved escaping a maze while running from people trying to catch you. It was themed after a famous movie where the protagonist, who’s the descendant of a ninja clan, has to become a spy to save his country.

“Yep! And I was thinking, what if we make it into a contest? Whoever escapes first…” Shea paused there and looked over at Yue and the others, then smiled confidently and said, “gets the right to ride the Ferris wheel alone with you!”

Suddenly, everyone’s eyes lit up.

“Don’t you think it’s unfair to make *this* attraction into a contest? No one can beat you in a battle of speed!”

“It’s perfectly fair, Lily-san. Think about it, this attraction is designed for even children to be able to play. In other words, you’re not required to be super fast. And while it’s not a traditional escape room, there are still some puzzles as well, so there are elements that play to everyone’s strengths.”

It seemed Shea had prepared her counterarguments ahead of time. Liliana couldn’t say anything to that, so she reluctantly fell silent.

“We haven’t decided who’s going to get to ride the Ferris wheel with Hajime-san yet, so this is the perfect way to make an impartial choice.”

The Ferris wheel was, of course, *the* quintessential ride to go on with your lover. Looking down on the land of dreams and wonder together with your beloved from up on high was bound to be a memorable experience.

Before they'd gone to the theme park, Yue and the others hadn't really understood the appeal of a Ferris wheel, but Kaori had given a truly eloquent speech on the romantic nature of the Ferris wheel ride. However, it would take too much time for Hajime to ride with everyone one at a time, so they'd decided just one person would obtain the right to enter the gondola with Hajime.

Honestly, Hajime would have preferred it if they all rode together, but he knew it'd be tactless to say so. Thus, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

"Well, if you all think you don't stand a chance against me even then, I suppose we stake the Ferris wheel ride with Hajime-san on something else."

"You seem confident you'll win..." Yue muttered. "Perhaps it's time I reminded you that you'll never be a match for me."

"Yeah, maybe it's time we taught Shea a lesson. She's been getting too cocky recently," Kaori said, a feral grin spreading across her face.

"It's not a bad proposal, Shea. But I hope you haven't forgotten, the Yaegashi family is—or well it might be—descended from ninjas, you know?"

"Umm, Shizuku-oneechan, is that actually going to help you?" Myu asked, cocking her head to one side.

"Does that mean they still haven't come clean to you?" Aiko asked in an exasperated voice. They were doing a terrible job of hiding the Yaegashi family secret, so she figured they may as well come clean about it to their daughter.

Shizuku awkwardly averted her gaze. Though in truth, she'd seen the movie this attraction was based on numerous times as a kid. In fact, the box set for the entire movie series was sitting at home. Shizuku was an avid fan of ninja fiction, and she'd read a bunch of ninja novels as well. As a result, she'd put that out as her advantage over everyone else, but after Myu's rebuttal, she'd realized that might not actually help her, and she'd suddenly grown embarrassed.

"Sounds good to me. Without a contest like this, we probably

would have ended up simply deciding with rock-paper-scissors," Tio said with a shrug.

They were completely fired up now, and Yue and the others strode resolutely toward the escape room.

Fool! I knew from the start that you had your eyes on this particular attraction, which is why I investigated it ahead of time! You're three hundred years too early to challenge me! Yue thought.

You messed up, Shea. Why were you under the impression that this is my first time coming to this attraction? I've already cleared it twice! Kaori thought.

I'm sorry, everyone, but information is the key to every battle. I'm the only one who knows that they revamped the attraction with a new set of puzzles today. Of course, I used family connections to obtain this information, but all's fair in love and war... Shizuku thought.

We'll have to spend some time waiting in line, right? Maybe I can use spirit magic during that time to project my soul into the room and... No, wait, I'm a teacher! I can't be setting a bad example for my students! But still... Aiko thought.

I can read your thoughts like the back of my hand. Pathetic. The battle starts well before we arrive at the battlefield, youngsters. And I've already decided to give up on this match and lead Myu to victory instead! That way, I'm sure Master will reward me handsomely and... He he he he! Tio thought.

I'll be sure to keep my eyes peeled, all for the sake of gathering more information and improving the economy of my nation, of course! Liliana thought.

Only Myu was unaware of the battle raging within everyone's minds as she excitedly ran to keep up with the others. Her innocence made everyone else's corrupted hearts seem darker than ever by contrast. Hajime couldn't bear to see how low his girlfriends had sunk and looked away in shame.

"You're not going to compete with them, Remia?" he asked, noticing that Remia was hanging back with him.

"I do wish to ride the Ferris wheel with you as well, of course, but I'll let the others have this particular reward. Besides..."

"Besides, what?" Hajime asked. Remia placed a finger over her lips and winked conspiratorially at him.

"It's obvious who's going to win this."

She gave him a cute smile, her eyes twinkling with hidden

wisdom.

Indeed, everything went as she'd predicted.

"I won!" Shea shouted, pumping her fists into the air.

"You damned overpowered rabbit..." Yue grumbled.

"How could this happen...?" Kaori muttered.

"To think our scheming would come back to bite us..." Shizuku said.

"I was able to defeat the devil on my shoulder! I did the proper thing as a teacher! That's victory enough for me..." Aiko said.

"I was so, so close!" Tio wailed. All five of them had dropped to their knees and were pounding their fists against the ground. It was honestly kind of embarrassing to watch for Hajime.

Liliana was just smiling darkly though and she muttered, "He he he, fascinating. If I adjusted the difficulty, this could be transformed from mere amusement to a worldwide competition that attracts the attention of all nations... We could hold a contest once every few years to celebrate and commemorate peace. Regardless of which nation wins, as the host, our Heiligh would reap the most profit. Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

She pulled a notepad out of her pocket and started furiously writing down ideas. Her expression was terrifying. Even Myu was starting to ignore her now.

"That was amazing, Shea-oneechan! I couldn't catch up to you at all!"

"You were amazing too, Myu! You had the second-best time in the world!"

"He he he, it's because I've been spending a lot of time in the training room!"

"Yeah, about that..."

When Hajime had remodeled the Nagumo house, he'd created a training room underground and Myu had been spending a lot of time there learning how to fight. Not because she needed to, of course, but because she looked up to Hajime and the others and wanted to become like them. Furthermore, she knew that there was no telling what life might throw at you, which was why she'd asked Hajime and the others to train her. Her sincerity had immediately won everyone over and they'd readily agreed.

She'd only been training for two months, but she was already stronger, faster, and smarter than most kids even twice her age,

hence why she'd been the second fastest out of the escape room. In fact, she'd moved so fast that Tio hadn't even had a chance to support her from the shadows.

"Hajime-san, Hajime-san, Hajime-san, Hajime-san, I won!" Shea shouted, making a peace sign in front of Hajime.

"You really went all out, huh?" Hajime said with an exasperated sigh. Shea really had pulled out all the stops for this attraction. She'd even used her unique ability to see into the future. It was easy to forget, since Shea was so physically strong, but her actual job was Diviner. She could see a few seconds into the future, and also see how the future would branch out based on the decisions she made. Since this was an escape room meant for kids, most of the riddles were multiple choice rather than ones where you had to fill in an answer.

The mazes weren't all that complicated either. As a result, even a few seconds of future sight was enough to completely trivialize the entire attraction for Shea. Furthermore, she was the most athletic out of everyone. Of course, the physical fitness requirements for this attraction were low enough that regular kids wouldn't have any trouble clearing it, but that didn't change the fact that if you were trying to run through the shortest route in the fastest time, speed was a valuable asset, especially since it let you parkour around the maze and take shortcuts no one else could. Shea's form had been so perfect that it even put Olympic gymnasts to shame. As a result, she'd set a record time that no one else in the world would be able to beat. And on top of that, she was a real beauty, so naturally, she'd gotten a lot of looks as she'd zipped around the room.

Indeed, people were still staring at her even now. To the kids, she was practically a superhero and their eyes were sparkling in admiration.

"I take it you predicted this, Remia?"

"I knew from the start that Shea-san would have an overwhelming advantage, yes," Remia said with a smile. She'd known Shea would be desperate for a Ferris wheel ride with Hajime, which meant she'd go all out. In which case, there was no way anyone else could win. Thus, she'd chosen not to waste her energy on a losing battle.

"Now then, Hajime-san..." Shea said, shedding her coat. It

seemed the exercise had warmed her up enough that she needed to strip off some layers. She was wearing a T-shirt that exposed much of her cleavage underneath, as well as a miniskirt and knee-high socks. She clasped her hands behind her back and looked pleadingly up at Hajime, her bunny ears and tail swinging back and forth.

"You'll give me my reward, right?" she asked in such a cute tone that all of the nearby guys, even some of the elementary school kids, clutched their chests. The guys who had wives or girlfriends got cold looks from their partners, but that didn't stop them. Hajime could only pray that Shea hadn't awoken new fetishes in these guys.

"All right, all right, should we go now, then?"

"Yes, please! I've heard the Ferris wheel is even better at night, but it'll be more crowded then, so let's just go now!"

Smiling brightly, Shea wrapped her arm around Hajime's, pressing her breasts against him. Unsurprisingly, all of the guys started blushing, but some of the girls did too.

At this rate, the whole park would be captivated by Shea. However, some of the people glanced over at Yue and the others, who were still slumped on the ground like losers, and started muttering things like, "Were they all fighting over that boy?" and "Wait, does that mean they're all part of his harem?"

A few of the park attendants smiled threateningly at Hajime.

"Come on, get up, Yue. You too, Kaori. Let's get going."

"I wanted to ride the Ferris wheel with you Hajime..." Yue muttered, glaring angrily at Shea.

Myu stood imposingly in front of Yue and declared, "You lost fair and square, Yue-oneechan, Kaori-oneechan, Shizuku-oneechan, Tio-oneechan! Stop whining!"

"Yes, ma'am," the four of them said in unison. Myu then slapped Liliana to bring her back to her senses and started walking over toward the Ferris wheel.

Somehow, Myu had become the coolest of them all.

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Shea hummed happily to herself as she sat down in the Ferris wheel gondola next to Hajime. She then leaned out past him to

take a look outside the window.

"Shea, wanna swap spots? It'll make it easier to see out the window." Hajime asked. All he could see right now was the side of her face, and her hand kept sliding back and forth along his thigh as she tried to settle into a more comfortable position.

Shea turned back to him and said, "Come on, are you really going to ask that?"

"I mean, all I can see is your face right now, so..."

"You mean all you're looking at is me? How romantic!"

"I meant that literally."

Of course, if Hajime turned all the way to the side, he could see out the window, but Shea was still so close to him that you'd think they were in a packed train rather than a spacious Ferris wheel gondola.

Every single time Shea turned excitedly back to Hajime to point out some new exciting thing she'd seen, their noses practically touched. She really was sticking to him like glue.

"Listen up, Hajime-san, this is actually the perfect place to be sitting."

"And why's that?"

"Because I can see you and the scenery at the same time. Plus, I get to cuddle up with you. It's killing three birds with one stone. There's no way I'm giving up this seat."

I see.

"Well, if you're happy with this, then it's fine with me."

"Ufu fu fu, you're always like that, Hajime-san. You're always too nice to us. Btw, Yue-san and Kaori-san were saying the same thing."

Since when did you pick up internet slang like "btw"?

Hajime wasn't exactly trying to be extra nice, so he scratched his cheek awkwardly. Shea smiled gently at Hajime and kissed him on the cheek. At the same time, she rested her bunny ears on his head, basically wrapping herself around him.

"You went through a lot of effort to set this trip up for us, didn't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hajime said, not meeting Shea's gaze.

She pressed herself against him and said, "Thank you so much. I'm—No, *we're* all extremely happy right now. If you spoil us any

further, we'll just become layabouts so you've gotta stop."

Shea rubbed her ears against Hajime's forehead as she said that. While the main reason she'd wanted to ride the Ferris wheel alone with Hajime was so she could flirt with him, in truth, she'd also wanted an opportunity to thank him in private.



She'd wanted to let him know how she felt during a special moment like this one, where no one else would interrupt them.

Hajime wrapped his arms around Shea's waist, and though they were practically melting into each other already, he pulled her even closer. She settled comfortably onto his lap.

"I see. Glad to hear it. I'm really happy right now too."

"He he he, that's great."

Their gondola reached the apex of its arc, and the jealous stares from the adjacent gondolas fell away. Remia and Myu were probably the only two who were actually enjoying the scenery on this Ferris wheel ride.

Naturally, Shea was planning on making full use of the special privilege she'd won fair and square. Hajime was more than willing as well, and the two shared an intimate moment at the top of the Ferris wheel, the scenery all but forgotten.

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"Did you have a good time on the Ferris wheel?"

That was the first thing Yue and the others asked Hajime and Shea the moment they all got off. Aside from Remia and Myu, they were all glaring at the pair of them. However, Shea just grinned and nodded, rubbing her victory in.

There was only one thing Hajime could do to placate the others. Myu had been kind enough to point out that there was another ride that had a much shorter line, could also be ridden in pairs, and made for the perfect photo op—the merry-go-round. In other words, Hajime was about to ride the merry-go-round nine times in a row.

Unsurprisingly, the ride operators and the other people riding the merry-go-round shot him a lot of stares, but Hajime tried to ignore them and focus solely on satisfying Yue and the others. Afterward, Yue and the others all stared gleefully at the pictures they'd gotten with Hajime, so in the end, it was a worthwhile sacrifice.

Next, they went to the bumper cars, where Yue and Kaori got into a heated battle that nearly ended with them destroying each other's flimsy plastic vehicles. Then, they went into the large maze, where Aiko spotted some other kids who went to their school and

immediately tried to find a place to hide. As a result, she ended up getting so lost that she had to leave through the emergency exit with tears in her eyes. Incidentally, Liliana who went back in to search for her, ended up taking a very long time to come back out. After that, they went into the haunted house, where Remia actually got so scared that she reflexively tried to slap one of the people dressed up as a ghost. Fortunately, Tio stepped in to take the hit, but then she started panting excessively which made everything awkward. Once that was done, they went to the carnival games section where Hajime effortlessly won a giant stuffed animal for Shizuku, who accepted it with a beaming smile.

All in all, they had a great time at the amusement park, and before they knew it, the sun was starting to set.

"Daddy, I wanna ride that one next! The one where the boat goes down with a big splash!"

"All right, all right. That's going to be our last one for the day, though. We need to stop by the gift shop and get some souvenirs before the night parade starts."

Despite running around all day, Myu was still full of energy. She was riding atop Hajime's shoulder and pointing to a water raft ride where you passed through a jungle of monsters before splashing down a steep incline. Since it was the middle of winter, the line for the ride was quite short.

The boat's design was perfectly rugged, with fake rifles attached to the sides with which passengers could ostensibly hunt monsters. Each boat was also quite big, capable of holding up to thirty passengers at once.

Myu jumped off of Hajime's shoulders, grabbed his hand, and started excitedly leading him over to the front of the boat. Yue and the others followed after them, filing into the same row and the row directly behind. As soon as they were all in, Myu settled into Hajime's lap.

"Daddy, is this the kind of Search and Destroy game where you have to shoot every enemy you see?"

"Er, something like that, yeah."

A ride attendant dressed like an explorer gave Myu a shocked look and Hajime looked away awkwardly.

And with that, the final ride of the day began. As soon as all of the other passengers were in, the boat started slowly moving

down the river. The ride attendant dressed like an explorer unslung the rifle on her back and started telling everyone about the dangers of the jungle. She was a skilled actress, and she sold the atmosphere perfectly. The adults were enjoying the performance, while the kids glanced around, scared that something might pop out and eat them.

“Pick up your guns, everyone, and look closely into the trees! If you see anything coming out to attack, you make sure you shoot it before it gets you! Like this!”

She swung her gun to the right and shot at a monster—a red-eyed monkey with four eyes—that leaped out of the trees. It seemed this particular attraction had a laser tag-esque mini-game attached to it. The rifles were all laser guns and the “monsters” all had sensors attached to their heads and torsos.

Most of the parents encouraged their frightened children to be brave and to try shooting. For some reason, Myu didn’t pick up her rifle, though. Instead, she stared intently at the ride attendant lady.

Thinking that Myu was scared, the ride attendant smiled encouragingly at her and said, “Don’t worry! You can do it!”

But of course, Myu wasn’t scared in the slightest.

“Heh,” she chuckled and shrugged her shoulders dismissively.

“What?!”

The attendant was so shocked her smile slipped for a second.

“Myu-chan’s totally looking down on that lady, isn’t she?” Shea muttered quietly.

“Mmm… She’s probably comparing her form to Hajime’s,” Yue replied.

“Oh my, I know I taught her better manners than this…” Remia leaned over to scold Myu, but before she could, Myu picked up her rifle. She spread her legs wide and lowered her center of gravity to compensate for the swaying of the boat. She also made sure to nestle the stock of the rifle in the crook of her shoulder and kept her armpits closed tight. In order to get a better aim, she rested her cheek against the stock of the rifle, but she kept her finger off the trigger for now. Keeping her breathing steady, she made sure her line of sight was in line with the direction the muzzle was pointing.

Everyone, including the other kids, looked at her in surprise. It

was clear she was experienced in the handling of rifles.

"S-So this is what happens when you teach kids how to shoot from a young age!" Kaori exclaimed.

"I thought I was pretty serious about learning the Yaegashi style even as a kid, but…just how hard has Myu-chan been training?" Shizuku muttered.

"She's not going to grow into some kind of superhuman master after learning all the combat techniques of the Nagumo family, is she?" Aiko said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"One! Two! Three!" Myu shouted rhythmically, shooting every target that appeared on her left side the moment it leaped into view. Her reaction time was amazing, and her aim was impeccable. While the laser rifles had no recoil, it was still unbelievable how accurate her shots were when coming from a rocking boat.

"Myu-chan's a terrifying child…" Liliana said, bringing a hand up to her mouth, a shiver running down her spine. Even Hajime was surprised by just how well Myu had absorbed all of his lessons.

Of course, the ride attendant was the most shocked of all. She'd never been more grateful for the fact that the rifles were split between the left and right sides than she was today, since if they weren't, none of the other kids would get to shoot anything.

Just what is with this girl?! She's super cute, but when she's taking aim, her eyes get this hawklike gleam in them! I mean, she's cute like that too, but still!

However, the ride attendant was a consummate professional who didn't let any of her inner thoughts leak out. The smile she'd been taught to keep by her senpais at the theme park wouldn't crack that easily.

"W-Wow, you're really good at this! Would you mind telling me your name, miss?" the attendant asked, kneeling next to Myu.

"Myu! I'm five years old and a dagon."

"I-I see, nice to meet you, Myu-chan! All right, everyone, let's get fired up so we don't get left behind by Myu-chan!"

The attendant really wanted to ask what a "dagon" was supposed to be, but she maintained her professional attitude and got the other kids fired up to take part in the attraction too. Hajime clapped at her performance, both feeling bad that his daughter was making things so difficult for her and impressed by just how professionally she'd handled the whole situation.

As they made their way down the artificial river, the number of targets started to increase. Snakes and piranhas hopped out of the water, and to top things off there was even a school of sharks.

“All right, everyone, things are going to get even more dangerous from here on out! Let’s protect the boat together and —”

“Onee-san, Onee-san!” Myu shouted, trying to catch the ride attendant’s attention.

“Y-Yes?!”

She looked down at Myu, clearly on her guard and ready for anything.

“Do you have any pistols? Revolvers, preferably!”

“I’m sorry, all we have is these rifles—”

“What about a gatling gun, Onee-san?!”

“I’m sorry, we don’t have that either!”

“Onee-san, grenades are best against enemies hiding in the water!”

“We don’t have those either. You’ll have to work together with your mom and dad to shoot them!”

Despite her best efforts, the attendant’s smile started to slip. She couldn’t help but wonder just why this tiny girl was so familiar with various firearms and why she was so bloodthirsty.

This is all your parents’ fault, isn’t it?!

It was because she thought so that she was willing to just foist Myu onto her parents.

Remia bowed apologetically to the attendant before turning to Myu and saying, “Stop, Myu, you’re bothering the lady!”

Meanwhile, Hajime turned to Myu and said, “Myu, it’s important to handle situations with the equipment you have on hand. You can’t always go into battle fully prepared.”

The nearby parents and the attendant immediately understood that Hajime was the bad influence.

Incidentally, there was one other part of Hajime’s personality that had strongly rubbed off onto Myu.

“Everyone, listen up!” Myu shouted, getting to her feet and hefting the rifle onto her shoulder. She put her free hand on her hip and looked down at the other kids. They naturally turned to her, and she started teaching these innocent children about the tactics of war—all out of the goodness of her heart.

“Numbers are everything!” she shouted, making a fist and pumping it up into the air.

“Have your mommies and daddies help you shoot, then you’ll be able to get more of them!”

The parents stared awkwardly at each other, clearly thinking it would be improper for them to also join in. And yet, Myu remained undaunted.

“It’s okay even if you can’t take down enemies on your own!”

She paused there for a second to look each and every person in the eye before smiling fearlessly and saying, “What’s important is to keep up the barrage! Don’t you all want to become heroes?!”

She sat back down and took aim with her rifle as if to demonstrate that she was definitely becoming a hero. She then took aim at the opposite side from where she had been shooting and shot down a bunch of targets on the other kids’ side. She then grinned provocatively at the other children, and suddenly, their eyes started to burn with a newfound fighting spirit.

“I can do it too!” “Yeah, I don’t need any help!”

They started scooting away from their parents, who’d been trying to help adjust their aim and their posture, and started shooting on their own. Some of them even turned to their parents and started begging them to begin shooting too.

“Remia, I’m afraid your daughter’s been completely corrupted by Master,” Tio said with a sigh.

“Dear, I think we need to have a talk about what you’ve been teaching Myu,” Remia said, flashing Hajime a terrifying smile.

“Y-Yeah…” Hajime mumbled and nodded meekly, knowing that this was indeed his fault.

That being said, Myu at least seemed to be enjoying herself.

“But first,” Hajime said, taking out his phone and turning to Yue and the others. They all nodded and immediately took their phones out as well. No words were needed, they all understood.

As one, they started taking pictures of Myu from various angles, determined to leave a permanent record of her heroic figure as she shot down her enemies.

“Maybe I should redo my training from scratch…” the ride attendant muttered, feeling utterly defeated.

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Night had well and truly fallen on the amusement park now, but it was so brightly lit that it felt like midday still. The guests had all congregated around the main street, where Christmas decorations had been set up and Christmas music was blaring through the loudspeakers. The street itself was empty, as it had been cleared out for the parade that was about to start.

"Oh, there they are!" Myu exclaimed, pointing to the end of the street. She was nestled in Hajime's arms and looking excitedly over at the night parade. Since it was Christmas, the park was doing a more extravagant night parade than usual.

"Oh, look, they have us too, mommy!"

"Oh my, you're right. They all look so pretty, don't they, Myu?"

Indeed, there was a float filled with mermaids on it. They were sitting on a bed of beautiful shells and pearls as they smiled and waved at everyone. With each wave, bubbles shot out of their hands, making them seem even more fantastical.

Of course, they were dressed like what people on Earth imagined mermaids to be, which meant they looked like fish from the waist down. At first, Myu and Remia were surprised by that, but they seemed to take it in stride.

In fact, they were so enamored with the designs that next summer they'd ask Hajime to use metamorphosis magic to turn them into Earth mermaids to go explore the ocean. They'd also get spotted by a very surprised diver, but that was a story for another time.

"Look, Myu, there's vampires too. Over there," Yue said, pointing to a different float.

"Oh, hey, they have bunny girls too!" Shea exclaimed.

"Alas, no dragonmen, though. There are regular dragons at least, I suppose. I'll have to be satisfied with that."

"I guess that makes Lily the princess, me the angel, and Shizuku-chan…the swordsman?"

"That angel looks like she's never hurt a fly in her life…that swordsman is old enough to have a full mustache and beard, and I…well, maybe eventually I'll have a figure that full…" Liliana said, trailing off.

"N-Now, now, no need to sweat the little details, Lily," Shizuku said with a strained smile as she watched Liliana pat her own modest chest.

At any rate, everyone was happy to have found some fantasy character that at least roughly represented them.

“Oh, there’s a guy with a gun! He’s just like you, daddy!”

“That looks like a ray gun. I’m pretty sure he’s supposed to be the protagonist of that really popular sci-fi movie,” Hajime said, looking down at Myu who was smiling up at him.

However, some among them couldn’t find anyone they related to.

“I’m sorry, Aiko-oneechan,” Myu said as she searched high and low, unable to find an Aiko-like.

“W-Well, it’s not like teachers are particularly popular, so you won’t find one in a parade like this… Ha ha…”

Aiko tried to play it off like it was nothing, but there were tears welling up in the corner of her eyes as Myu shot her a pitying look.

When around half the floats had passed, Hajime suddenly put Myu down. She looked up at him, confused.

“Sorry, Myu, but I just remembered there’s something I need to do. I’ll be right back, so wait here with mommy and everyone, okay?”

“Okay…”

Myu looked visibly depressed, but she didn’t try to stop him. Seeing how hard she was trying to hold in the desire to tell him not to go was so touching that Hajime reflexively clutched at his heart. But today was Myu and Yue and everyone else’s first Christmas, and he wanted to do something special for them no matter what, which was why he needed to step away for a second.

“Fu fu, good luck, Hajime,” Yue said to Hajime as he walked past. Like Shea, she, and most likely everyone else, had already caught on to the fact that Hajime was preparing something special for tonight. Kaori and the others also smiled knowingly at him and he looked away awkwardly.

“Uhhh, yeah, thanks.”

Blushing slightly, he dashed off through the crowd.

“Don’t worry, Myu, he’ll be right back,” Remia said, patting Myu on the head.

“Mkay!”

Myu cheered up a little and went back to focusing on the parade. But while her eyes still sparkled with excitement, they were dimmer than they had been when Hajime had been around.

“Is daddy going to take much longer?” Myu asked around the time the parade was nearing its end. The final float was in sight, and Myu had been hoping to at least see the end with him.

Just then, the sound of bells rang out through the night. At first, everyone assumed it was part of the parade, but as the bells grew louder, people started looking up in confusion. It sounded like the bells were descending from the sky.

The parade was pretty much over, so more and more people started focusing their attention from the floats to the sky, which was when they finally saw it.

“Oh, it’s Santa!” a kid shouted, pointing up. Seconds later, everyone else started shouting as well.

“Whoa, he’s actually flying!” “How’s he doing that?!” “Are those real reindeer?! No way!” “It looks so much like the real Santa!”

Indeed, flying through the sky was someone who looked very much like the real Santa Claus, bushy white beard and all. He had a sleigh being pulled by reindeer as well and was flying through the sky. At first, people thought it was some kind of acrobatic act being held up with wires, or a projection made with smoke and lights, or some kind of newfangled drone, but this Santa seemed too real to be any of those things. It was impossible to figure out how he was flying so freely through the air too.

Normally, people would have been confused, or perhaps scared by this inexplicable phenomenon. But this was an amusement park, a land of fantasy and wonder. A place that made magic real. As a result, people were more accepting of unexplained phenomena while they were here. The adults stopped worrying about what technology was powering this and decided to enjoy the show for what it was. Before long, people erupted into cheers and shouts of delight.

Of course, the people running the parade and the amusement park staff were just as shocked by the sudden appearance of this Santa as the crowd, since this wasn’t part of their program, but no one thought too deeply about that. The sight of Santa Claus running through the night was simply too magical to worry about.

After doing a few circuits around the amusement park, Santa started spiraling down toward the ground as if sliding along a spiral staircase. Now that the floats had all gone past, the main street was empty, and he alighted onto it. Santa then got off his

sleigh and walked over to a little girl also dressed as Santa—Myu. He knelt in front of her and said, “Merry Christmas, Little Santa.”

His voice was gruff but jolly, as befitting of old Santa Claus. His face was also hidden by the bushy beard and spectacles, and his stomach was quite round. But even then, neither Myu nor any of the girls around him were fooled for a second.

“Daddy, what are you doing?”

Santa Claus froze in place for a second.

How did she figure it out?!

Yue and the others burst out laughing as they saw his reaction.

“I’m not your dad, I’m Santa.”

“But…”

“I’m Santa.”

“Da—”

“I said I’m Santa!”

“Okay.”

Hajime’s voice was so desperate that Myu finally gave in with a nod. She truly was an obedient kid.

Yue and the others were desperately trying to hold in their laughter, and Hajime could see their shoulders shaking. He coughed loudly to try to reset the atmosphere.

“Now then, little lady, you’ve worked really hard this past year. Your mother and your father are very proud of you, since it wasn’t an easy year to weather.”

“Daddy…”

“I’m Santa.”

“Okay.”

Who just snickered? Was that you, Kaori? No, it was you, wasn’t it, Shizuku? I’m going to have words for you later.

Hajime glared at Shizuku, then cleared his throat again and turned back to Myu.

“Because you’ve been such a good girl, Santa has a present for you.”

“A present?” Myu repeated, cocking her head to one side. People had started spilling out into the main street and were now gathering around Hajime and the others. They were curious to see what was going on.

Under everyone’s watchful gaze, Santa Hajime walked back to his sleigh and took a box out of the giant white bag sitting in the

back. It was a very cute box with glittering jewels on the front. For a moment, it seemed like the box itself might be the present, and the crowd gasped in delight. A couple of girls tugged on their parents' sleeves and begged for a box like that.

As Myu took the box, she looked questioningly up at Hajime, wondering if it was okay to open her present now. He nodded solemnly, and she opened the lid. The spectators leaned in expectantly, wondering what would be inside.

"Ah!"

Myu's face lit up with a beaming smile. Everyone assumed it had to be an accessory, or perhaps a cute toy or something, but what Myu pulled out of the box defied their expectations.

"It's Donner and Schlag!"

Indeed, held in her hands were two revolvers.

The spectators looked completely taken aback, while Yue and the others smiled wryly to each other. They'd expected Hajime's present to be something like this.

The crowd started murmuring to each other.

"Is that a model gun?! Is that really something you gift a little girl? And it doesn't even got anything to do with the park!"

"Yeah, if you're gonna go through all this trouble, why not pick a better present?"

Of course, Myu herself was overjoyed.

"I finally got my own pair!"

The peaceful citizens of Japan had no way of knowing that while the revolvers had been slightly customized to fit Myu's tiny hands, they were otherwise very real guns. She'd been asking for her own revolvers ever since she'd started training with Hajime, and now she'd finally gotten them.

"Little lady, their names aren't Donner and Schlag. They're called Donna and Schlak."

"Donna and Schlak?"

"Yep, Donna and Schlak."

It seemed the name distinction was important. Hajime then went back to the present bag and started sifting through it. It seemed Myu would be getting more than one present.

"I also gift you a hoppy hammer, in the hopes that you grow big and strong like a certain overpowered rabbit."

"Hoppy hammer!"

“And to remind you never to end up like a certain worthless dragon, I gift you this *weapon*. Never forget, this whip is a *weapon*.”

“Yaaay, a weapon!”

“And we can’t forget these either. Your very own Muraymasa and…”

“Muraymasa!”

“A Kolatetsu.”

“Kolatetsu!”

Myu was unbelievably excited to have been gifted a full suite of weapons that resembled the prized weapons of her beloved older sisters. All in all, she had a mini warhammer, a white whip with a fancy ribbon attached to it, and a pair of katanas with star-shaped crossguards. She was also gifted a belt to holster her guns and a harness to hold all of her other weapons, as well as a set of enchanted magical jewels dubbed “Yue-oneechan’s love.”

Myu wanted to grow up to be strong, so that she could protect the people she loved just like Hajime and her cool older sisters. Next time everyone was in trouble, she wanted to be there to save them, which was why these gifts meant the world to her. She hugged the weapons tight, then handed them over to Remia for safekeeping and looked up at Hajime.

“Da—I mean, Santa-san! Thank you so much! I love you sooooooooo much!”

She ran into his open arms, and he hugged her tight. The crowd was still shocked by the gifts Myu had received, but a lot of the younger boys were staring at the weapons with envy.

It was around this time that the staff finally broke out of their stupor and started heading toward Hajime. He could tell his time as Santa was almost up.

“I also have a present for all of you lovely ladies who worked so hard this year!” he said, turning to Yue and the others.

“Fu fu, you got presents for us too?” Yue asked.

“He was asking us all what we wanted around a week ago, remember?” Shea said with a smile.

“Oh, so that was why. You truly are too kind, Master,” Tio said.

“We got you presents too, but…don’t be disappointed if we just hand them over normally, okay?” Kaori said.

“You really like going all out for these kinds of things, don’t you, Hajime?” Shizuku said with a shake of her head.

“Ha ha ha ha, Hajime-kun really loves his family, doesn’t he…?” Aiko said with a smile.

“Ufu fu, he’s quite a handful, isn’t he?” Remia said with a smile.

“Wait, you mean everyone got presents for each other? Oh no, what should I do? I didn’t bring anything. I didn’t even know there was a holiday like this on Earth…” Lily said, panicking slightly.

Hajime handed presents out to each one of them individually, and they blushed slightly as they took them. Right as he finished, he spotted security guards pushing their way through the crowd, and he knew there was no time left.

Sounding like he was reading off a script, he turned to Myu and said. “Congratulations for being the group that made up this park’s 100 millionth visitor!”

It seemed this was the reason he’d come up with for the special performance. Of course, it was hard for the crowd to believe this was actually part of the park program, so he went one step further and decided to share the joy with everyone and make them worry less about how sanctioned this event had been. He climbed back up into the sleigh and snapped the reins. The reindeer—which were just mechanical golems he’d made—took to the sky once more. As he flew up, Hajime shouted through a loudspeaker, “As a token of the park’s appreciation, take whatever you’d like as a Christmas present, everyone!”

The bottom of the sleigh slid open and a large number of boxes started parachuting down. There were thousands of them, and they’d all been wrapped up nicely into gift boxes. They contained accessories made from jewels and crystals that could be found on Earth for the girls, and keychains and other small trinkets shaped like swords and dragons and so on for the boys.

The crowd started cheering, fully believing this was some kind of event that the park had put on.

Hajime had also spread the presents out over a wide area so people wouldn’t jostle each other and fight over spots, and the crowd quickly dispersed to chase after the falling presents. As he flew away, all the security guards could do was point up at him and stare. Then, before long, the leaving crowd swept them away.

He also teleported a few gifts into the staff room for the park workers he’d caused so much trouble for, then used telepathy to coordinate with Yue and the others and ensure no one got hurt.

As he vanished into the sky, he bellowed out one last, “Merry Christmaaaaaas!”

The guests all clapped and cheered and Hajime looked down to see Myu and the others all waving at him. Smiling, he flew off into the distance before surreptitiously meeting back up with the others.

Unsurprisingly, his stunt was featured on the next morning’s news, and the internet was abuzz with speculation as to how the theme park had pulled off such an amazing show. The park management said it was something they’d only done for that one day, but nevertheless, visitors to the park continued to increase, as did sales in their gift shops. Everyone was impressed by the event they’d coordinated, and of course, they were secretly hoping to see something like that themselves.

Incidentally, the park managers held a meeting where they desperately tried to figure out who that Santa had been, and to either scout him or at the very least buy the rights to whatever technology he’d used to put on that show.

Meanwhile, the Nagumo family watched on as Myu took to her training with newfound zeal and started sleeping with her beloved weapons. Honestly, Hajime began to wonder if he hadn’t somehow gone wrong in raising her.

Is it really all right for my daughter to be like this…?

It wasn’t long before he held a family meeting to discuss how to turn Myu back into a normal girl.

Chapter X: Surviving a Turbulent Year

Winter had fully settled over Japan now and the people on the streets had red noses and ears as they hurriedly walked from one heated building to another. Snow covered the ground and icicles dangled from people's homes. It was just a few hours before the new year. However, Hajime and the others had gone to a place where the cold wouldn't bother them—a famous hot springs resort.

Steam rose from the open-air baths, and the wooden buildings surrounding them were all lit with a warm orange glow. It was mostly families and couples that were walking around the hot springs resort, examining the open-air stalls or relaxing in the baths. Even the people out in the cold were smiling happily. They weren't really feeling the cold, since they were snuggled up with their loved ones and enjoying spending time together. Furthermore, even if they were feeling a little cold, they could always warm back up in the hot springs at any time.

Hajime and Yue walked amid the crowd, examining the stalls.

"Yeah, it looks like my perception-blocking glasses have finally been perfected," Hajime said with a satisfied nod. He was wearing cargo pants and a fluffy mod coat, while Yue was in a black turtleneck sweater, a belt with ribbons on it, and a cream-colored coat.

Somehow, she was taller than usual, her head coming up to above Hajime's shoulder. Her boobs were bigger than usual as well and her legs longer. Her golden-blonde hair fluttered behind her with each step she took, and she would have been capturing everyone's attention if not for the perception-altering glasses.

Today, she was in adult mode, the form that Ehit had preferred when he'd taken over her body, the one that made her look like she was in her mid-twenties. Incidentally, while everyone called it adult mode, there was, in fact, a different name they had for the way her personality shifted when she was in bed with Hajime.

Of course, regardless of which form she was in, she exuded a beauty that transcended personal taste and captivated all who

saw her. Why, it was so enchanting that the people who saw her couldn't help but think she wasn't human. If it wasn't for the fact that she looked so happy and innocent, they'd honestly be afraid of her otherworldliness. Yet right now, there wasn't a single person in the crowd who was bewitched by her siren's beauty.

"Fu fu, you know I can always just cast a perception-altering spell on myself, right?" Yue asked, adjusting her glasses.

"Please don't take away one of the few opportunities I have to put you in glasses," Hajime replied with a perfectly straight face, prompting Yue to burst out laughing. She then rested her head against Hajime's shoulder.

After a consecutive twenty-three defeats, Hajime had finally perfected a pair of Artifact glasses that properly made her hard for others to notice. And naturally, he was exempt from its effects, so Yue's charm was on full display for him to see. As he looked down at her, Yue turned to look up at him and smiled bewitchingly at him.

"Do you really want to monopolize me this badly, Hajime?" she asked in a playful voice, then stood up on tiptoe and nibbled on Hajime's ear.

Instead of answering, Hajime pulled out his phone and took a selfie of the two of them.

"I mean, I do want to, of course," Hajime said, finally answering her question.

Yue blushed and looked away. For a second, her charm broke through the glasses and people turned to look at her, but then the magic kicked in again and they turned away.

"Ahem! Anyway, are you cold or anything? I can pull out an Artifact if you need one."

"Mmm... I'm fine. Besides, winter is supposed to be cold. Let me feel the seasons."

"Can't argue with that."

Hajime wrapped his hand around Yue's and they resumed their walk. Yue stuck both of their hands into Hajime's pocket to help keep them warm.

"Was it okay to leave Shea and the others behind?" Yue asked.

"Well, it's fine to spend some time alone just for a bit before we greet the new year, right?"

"Father seemed to be looking forward to bonding with you in

the hot spring…”

“I’ll go join him once we get back. Honestly, it’s been so long… Maybe I should offer to wash his back.”

As he said that, a playful smile appeared on Hajime’s lips and he added, “Or what, would you rather have gone on a walk with everyone?”

Yue blushed again and she tightened her grip on Hajime’s hand. Hajime squeezed her hand back, and the two of them kept squeezing each other’s hands back and forth for a bit.

Incidentally, Kaori, Shizuku, and Aiko had been unable to join the Nagumo family’s hot springs trip. The Yaegashi family was having their own New Year gathering, while Kaori’s dad Tomoichi had begged her so hard not to go that she’d eventually acquiesced. Aiko, too, was spending the New Year with her family.

For Hajime and the other students, this was their first New Year since returning from Tortus. There were family members they still hadn’t met that they needed to reunite with, and of course, they still wanted to spend time with their families. Thus, the Nagumo family had gone with just the usual members, plus Liliana.

Incidentally, after they’d finished touring the area in the afternoon, Sumire had urged everyone into the hot springs, which was when Hajime and Yue had slipped out.

“I didn’t think you’d kidnap me so forcefully…” Yue muttered.

Indeed, Hajime had basically stolen Yue away. He’d stuck the perception-blocking glasses on her, picked her up, and then used Riftwalk to dash away before anyone could notice. He hadn’t even used magic because he knew Tio would have sensed it.

“You could have just said you wanted to go on a walk with me… No one would have complained.”

“Yeah, but mom and dad would have teased us, and I didn’t wanna deal with that.”

I guess that’s true… Yue thought, nodding.

“Also, it’s been a while since you changed into adult mode, so I wanted you all to myself.”

That was just how charming Yue was in adult mode.

“Should I stay like this forever, then?” Yue asked, looking passionately up at Hajime. Despite how cold it was out, her skin was flushed. She’d gladly stay like this if that was what he wanted.

“Nah, I love the normal you just as much, so you can just swap

freely whenever you want."

"Did you carry me out just so you can make me blush?" Yue asked, lightly slapping him on the shoulder. His words just made her too happy.

Once again, people glanced at Yue for a few seconds as her happiness overpowered the perception-altering Artifact temporarily.

That aside, Shea and the others had, of course, already figured out that Hajime had vanished with Yue. However, they didn't mind letting the two of them be alone every now and then, so they'd decided to prioritize enjoying the hot springs and were currently soaking with Sumire.

"Oh, they're selling hot spring eggs. Do you want one?" Hajime asked as they passed a food stall. People nearby were all enjoying the hot springs classic.

"Hm? Is that like a soft-boiled egg?"

"Not quite. A regular soft-boiled egg still has a solid white, but a hot spring egg is just barely heated so that the whole thing stays liquid-y. They're called hot spring eggs because everyone eats them at the hot springs."

"I wanna try one!" Yue exclaimed immediately. She was exceptionally interested in things considered classic for a situation or a certain time, mostly because she wanted to learn more and more about Hajime's world.

She disentangled herself from Hajime and tottered over to the stall.

"Two hot spring eggs, please."

"Here you go, enjoy—"

The man running the stall froze as he turned to Yue. But it wasn't because the glasses had failed. Instead, they'd fogged up as Yue had been humming to herself and looking through the bowl of eggs, so she'd taken them off for a second to wipe them.

Crap, I forgot to build in an automatic defogger! Hajime inwardly despaired. Unfortunately, it was too late. The few seconds Yue had spent wiping down her glasses had been enough to completely entrance the guy manning the stall. He was standing stock-still with his eyes wide open, as if he'd just seen a goddess.

Sorry, guy, this is my fault... Hajime apologized in his heart, then used a very slight intimidation to bring the shopkeeper back to his

senses. Blushing, he hurriedly got the hot spring eggs ready for Yue. He placed two of them into two cups and handed them over. Yue could have asked the shopkeeper to break them open for her, but it seemed she wanted to do that herself.

Yue and Hajime walked over to the trash cans so they'd be able to throw their trash away immediately, after which Yue attempted to crack open her egg.

"Hrrrgh!"

"What are you making those sounds of exertion for?! It's not that hard!"

Yue's fingers were trembling as she lifted her egg, her expression deadly serious. She was determined not to spill even a little.

I guess this is what happens when you normally just crack your eggs open with a vacuum wave of magic. Shea would be so disappointed if she saw this... Hajime thought with a slight smile.

"Mmm... It's so jiggly," Yue said as she looked down at the inside of the hot spring egg that had plopped into her cup. She then looked pleadingly up at Hajime. It seemed she'd gained some confidence and wanted to break open Hajime's egg as well.

Trembling even more than when she'd opened her egg, she carefully lifted Hajime's. Hajime's smile grew wider as he watched.

"Mmm... I got it all out," Yue stated with a satisfied smile.

"Thanks," Hajime said, accepting the spoon she handed to him.

"It melts in my mouth...and it's so rich."

"Yeah. Despite how cheap they are, it seems like these guys are using some high-quality eggs."

The two of them slurped down their hot spring eggs and tossed away the trash. Smiling, they turned to look at each other. Hajime suddenly chuckled and Yue shot him a questioning look.

"You've got egg on your face," Hajime said with another laugh.

"How embarrassing..."

Blushing, Yue tried to wipe the yolk off, but Hajime's finger reached her first. He swept his index finger across her lips, scooping off the yolk.

Yue let out a soft sigh, then put Hajime's finger in her mouth. Hajime smiled awkwardly, but he let Yue suck on his finger—until she started making really loud slurping noises, anyway.

"Mrr, but your finger's so tasty..."

“Not in public. I don’t want you ruining everyone’s New Year’s Eve by turning into an attention magnet.”

Yue looked around and suddenly realized that everyone had been staring at them. The other pedestrians and stall owners hurriedly looked away as Yue turned toward them.

Not even Hajime’s glasses could stop Yue when she was being that seductive. In fact, many of the families with small children were covering their children’s eyes right now. Also, many men with wives were staring at Yue as well.

“Sorry…” Yue mumbled, bowing her head. Everyone bowed awkwardly back, and Yue hurriedly grabbed Hajime’s hand and dragged him away.

“I guess I got too carried away, since we haven’t gone on a date like this in a while…”

She once again stuck their joined hands into Hajime’s pocket.

“I’m pretty excited myself, so I’m not one to talk.”

As he said that, Hajime looked over to a bridge in the distance.

“Why don’t we start walking over to that bridge? I hear there are going to be fireworks on the river to celebrate the new year, and we’ll probably have a good view of them from that bridge.”

“Okay! Oh, but I want to celebrate the New Year—”

“With everyone, I know.”

Shea and the others would definitely get mad if Hajime left them alone for too long, and he wanted to ring in the new year with everyone too.

“Don’t worry, it’ll only be the two of us until the countdown begins.”

“Then lead the way!”

Hajime and Yue smiled at each other again. They nestled even closer together as they started slowly walking over to the bridge. They stopped by stalls to feed each other local delicacies, took commemorative pictures, and even stopped by the foot baths. When Yue took her tights off for the foot baths and Hajime was utterly captivated by her bare legs, the glasses he’d given Yue cracked and everyone was able to perceive her again. Thankfully, Hajime had built them to last and while they didn’t have an automatic defogger feature, they were self-repairing. After a few seconds, the cracks sealed up and people stopped paying attention to Yue again.

Finally, with only half an hour to go until midnight, Hajime and Yue made it to the old bridge he'd pointed out. Yue leaned into Hajime, looking out over the river. There were plenty of other good spots to see the fireworks from, so while a crowd had gathered, it was pretty evenly scattered about and the bridge they were on wasn't all too packed.

"If it's this empty, then maybe we didn't even need a barrier," Yue said with a guilty look.

"Yeah, now I kinda feel bad for doing this."

Hajime had already told Shea and the others where they were waiting, so in order to ensure there'd be enough space for everyone, he and Yue had erected a barrier that made people want to avoid the area around them. From the looks of it, though, they hadn't needed to bother. Besides, even if it had gotten crowded, they could have just moved to a different spot.

Right now, they were holding hands inside Yue's pocket rather than Hajime's.

"How are you finding life on Earth?" Hajime asked softly. He wasn't worried anymore about whether or not they'd be able to make this new life work, since Yue had already made it clear that they would. He was just genuinely curious about what Yue thought of his home.

In an equally soft voice, Yue replied, "You're here, so it's perfect."

"Er, umm, I'm glad to hear that, but that's not what I was asking."

"He he, just kidding. There's a lot I still don't understand, and parts of your culture are confusing, but...I can tell."

"Tell what?"

"Mmm... Well, that this is where I belong."

Yue and the others had only been on Earth for about three months, but it seemed that had been enough time for her to accept the Nagumo house as her home.

Hajime smiled broadly, then hugged Yue from behind. She leaned even further back against him in return.

"That's great. If there's anything that's stressing you out, just let me know. I'll change the world if I have to."

"When we're changing the world, we have to do it together," Yue said, grinning ferally up at Hajime. The two of them had changed

Tortus already, so they were more than capable of transforming entire worlds. The rest of the world had to hope and pray that it never definitely pissed Yue and Hajime off.

The two of them stood there in silence for a while. After a few minutes, snow started falling from the overcast sky. It was a gentle snowfall, one that fit the peaceful atmosphere on the bridge over the river. The other people waiting for the fireworks were chatting cheerfully with each other, but Hajime and Yue paid them no mind, lost in their own world as they were. If a painter was here, there was no doubt they would desperately try to immortalize the two of them on a canvas. That was just how picturesque they looked, staring into each other's eyes. Just then, though…

Shea and the others finally arrived.

"Yue-saaaaaaaaan! Hajime-saaaaaan!"

"Daddyyyyyy! Yue-oneechaaaaaan!"

Shea and Myu ran up to the two of them, prompting Hajime to smile at Yue.

"Looks like our time alone's up."

"Mmm…"

Hajime and Yue looked up to see and saw his parents, Liliana, Remia, and Tio walking over as well, a bit behind Shea and Myu.

"Look, Hajime. It finally looks like Liliana has relaxed. The hot springs trip finally freed her from the horrors of work."

"You're right. It looks like she's had a great day."

Hajime and Yue smiled in relief as they saw the gentle smile on Liliana's face.

"Finally found you, phantom thief daddy! You're under arrest!" Myu shouted, hugging Hajime as she reached him.

Hajime looked down at her with a smile and asked, "I'm a phantom thief? What did I steal?"

Shea pointed her finger at Hajime like a certain famous detective and replied, "Phantom Thief Demon Lord, you've stolen something very precious to me. My Yue-san!"

"Yue, when did you become Shea's?"

"100,002,000 years ago, I guess?"

"I'm glad you guys are spouting anime references now."

The Nagumo family's otaku hobbies were slowly infecting Yue and the others, though that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"It's rude of you to accuse me of stealing Yue. Did you ever

consider that maybe she wanted to come with me and we slipped out together?" Hajime asked, feigning taking offense, and Yue smiled a little.

However, Shea's next words caused a shiver of fear to run down Hajime's spine.

"Excuse me? You hid your presence, even used presence-altering Artifacts, grabbed Yue, and jumped out the window."

"How do you know all that?" Yue asked, stunned.

"I mean, I watched the whole thing."

In other words, Shea's observational skills had been so strong that she'd seen through Hajime's stealth.

"I was trying to be as fast as possible too…" Hajime muttered.

"You were fast, but not as fast as a rail gun."

No matter how hard Hajime tried to hide his presence, no matter how fast he was, unless he was literally traveling at the speed of a rail gun bullet, Shea would be able to spot him.

"That's terrifying," Hajime said.

"Did you already forget, Hajime? She's the most broken rabbit there is. Before long, she's going to be telling us she's able to see things moving at the speed of light," Yue replied.

"That's even more terrifying."

Hajime looked down, defeated, and Yue gently patted his head.

At this rate, not only will she be able to follow the trajectories of rail gun bullets, but I bet she'll even be able to catch them.

Hajime imagined trying to shoot Shea, only to watch her open her palm and show that she'd caught all of the bullets he'd fired at her, saying, "Did you do something just now?" with a fearless smile.

"Is it just me or are you thinking about something weird, Hajime-san?" Shea asked.

"Mrr, it's not fair that you two left us!" Myu shouted, making Hajime return to his senses.

Hajime scooped her up with his one free arm while Yue smiled apologetically and said to Myu, "Sorry for kidnapping your daddy."

It was at this point that Sumire, Shu, Tio, Remia, and Liliana finally arrived.

"Look, dear, it's our ungrateful son. Just what did you do with our Yue-chan after you kidnapped her, hmm? Hmmmmmm?"

"How could you, Hajime? Who do you care about more, your

wife or your dad?!”

Hajime turned to Yue, the look in his eyes clearly saying, “See, I told you he’d be a pain.”

Yue smiled wryly back at him, but wisely chose not to comment.

“Master, Japan’s hot springs truly are exceptional. I would like to add one to our house.”

“I can make an underground hot springs room, I guess.”

“That won’t do. I need it to be an open-air bath, master.”

“Well, I get how you feel, but…”

It’d be difficult to put an aboveground open-air bath in their dense residential district. While it would be possible to make one and conceal it, it wouldn’t have the atmosphere Tio was looking for unless Hajime made something too grand to hide.

Meanwhile, Yue took a closer look at Liliana, then whispered in Remia’s ear, “Remia, is Liliana all right?”

“She’s been like this ever since we got in the hot springs. She seems happy, so I guess it’s fine?”

“Yue-san, I’ve finally seen the truth.”

She’s definitely not all right.

Yue had been relieved to know she’d been freed from the stresses of work, but it seemed she’d become a little too free.

“Y-You have?”

“Yes. As I got into the hot springs, I had an epiphany. Why am I even working this hard? What does any of it matter? Then, I heard a voice telling me to just go for what I want.”

“Remia, she’s not fine. She’s hallucinating.”

“I think those are just her inner desires manifesting.”

Liliana spread her arms wide and looked up at the sky like a Buddha who’d achieved enlightenment.

“I understand everything now. The heavens have spoken to me, granted me a divine oracle.”

“Tio! I need your help. Get your spirit magic ready!”

“This is what they told me: ‘If you work, you lose.’”

No, that’s just a meme that Myu picked up on the internet!

After seeing what had happened to Liliana at the theme park, Myu had been worried about her and had decided to do her best to help by whispering memes into Liliana’s ears as she slept. Liliana herself had been muttering “I don’t wanna work” in her sleep a lot, so she’d been primed for this kind of manipulation.

Tio hurriedly cast Soul's Repose on her, then Liliana blinked a few times as she regained her senses. After that, she recalled how much work awaited her back home and her shoulders slumped. It seemed no matter what, there was no rest for her.

While everyone tried to cheer Liliana back up, the countdown to the New Year finally started. The crowd began to chant along in unison, and everyone's excitement reached a fever pitch.

Naturally, Hajime and the others joined the chorus of people counting down.

With each number that got called, Myu stood up just a little bit straighter and tried to make her tiny voice just a little bit louder. Shea's invisible bunny ears were also twitching up and down in time with the countdown.

Remia and Tio watched Myu and Shea with a smile, swaying rhythmically with the countdown.

Sumire and Shu watched Hajime and the others from a distance, their arms wrapped around each other.

Finally, the countdown hit zero.

"Happy New Year!" everyone shouted at once. Then, there was a loud bang as the very first wave of fireworks shot up. A second later, they burst, blooming in the night sky.

"Daddy, Happy New Year!" Myu said, bowing like she'd seen people do on TV.

"Happy New Year, Myu."

Hajime smiled and patted her head, impressed that she'd learned the proper etiquette for congratulating someone on the new year.

Myu then hopped off of Hajime's shoulders and bowed to Yue. Yue bowed politely back, then the two of them held hands and walked over to Sumire and Shu.

"Happy New Year, dear," Remia said, sidling up to Hajime.

"Yeah, Happy New Year, Remia. I'm looking forward to the coming year."

"As am I. I'm sure it'll be a busy year, but thank you for looking after us in advance."

"Wait, what's that supposed to mean?"

"My, my, ufu fu."

"Don't just try to ufu fu your way out of this!"

Remia just flashed Hajime a knowing smile and walked off

toward Sumire and Shu.

“She truly is impossible to read. And she’s quite good at reading everyone else. It’s possible that Remia’s the one who’s been giving the most thought to the future out of everyone.”

“Umm, Tio…” Hajime muttered, pointing to the fan in her hands. He had no idea where she’d gotten it from, but it read “Great Job!”

“In truth, I have the same feeling. I suspect that next year will be quite a tumultuous one. But I suppose we all knew our lives would be eventful when we decided to spend them with you, master. You had best steel yourself for the year to come.”

“I’d really rather just have a peaceful year, you know…? But anyway, Happy New Year, Tio.”

“Happy New Year to you as well, master. I’ll work hard for you this year as well, so be sure to punish—ahem, I mean, reward me once more.”

“Why do you even bother correcting yourself at this point?” Hajime asked with a shake of his head as he watched Tio also walk off to where Shu and Sumire were.

“Happy New Year, Hajime-san! Let’s have a lot of fun this year too!” Shea shouted, hugging Hajime from behind. Hajime leaned forward a little to pick her up a few inches off the ground and placed his hands over her own. He then patted them gently, as if caressing a treasure. Shea smiled happily in response.

“I’m really grateful to you, you know? It’s thanks to you that the Nagumo house gets three healthy meals a day. You also do most of the housework for us. Mom and dad are really happy about that as well.”

Hajime looked at Shea, their faces close enough for their lips to touch.

“Thank you so much. I’m glad I get to spend the next year with you.”

“He he he, you can just leave everything to me! I heard rabbits are a symbol of good luck and happiness in this world, so I’ve gotta do my best to bring happiness to everyone!”

Shea kissed Hajime lightly, then ran over to Tio and Yue, who were discussing something with a serious expression on their face. As she left, Liliana stepped forward.

“Hajime-san…”

“Wh-What is it, Lily?”

Liliana looked like a tragic warrior who was about to go out and meet their grisly doom.

“I’ve learned the truth of this world.”

“Uhhh, let me call a medic over.”

“Rome wasn’t built in a day! No work, no pay! Those who don’t work don’t deserve to eat! I’ll keep working until the end of time, as my duty compels me!”

“I’m glad you’re trying to learn more about Earth culture, but please…not like this.”

Hajime could tell that Liliana was depressed now that she’d remembered the duties that awaited her when she returned to Tortus. What Hajime was scared of, though, was that she might force insane work hours on her ministers and advisors as well.

“Well, when all’s said and done, I do respect you for working so hard for the sake of your country. I’ll keep on working to make travel between our worlds easier, so just call me if you ever need anything.”

“Hajime-san…thank you. I’ll be counting on you this year as well! I mean it!”

“O-Of course.”

Liliana grabbed Hajime’s hand and squeezed it tight. Hajime suddenly had a feeling he’d be asked to do quite a lot for Heiligh in the near future. For a moment, he was worried he might have promised too much, but upon seeing Liliana hum happily as she walked over to where Yue and the others were, he decided it was worth it.

Finally, Sumire and Shu walked up to Hajime.

“Happy New Year, Hajime. Any resolutions you have planned for this year?” Sumire asked.

“Happy New Year, mom. I was hoping to just live a peaceful life as a student this year, honestly.”

“Happy New Year, Hajime. By the way, when do you think you’ll be able to introduce us to Shea-chan’s and Tio’s families? I want to meet the people who helped you out in Tortus. Gotta give them my thanks as your dad, you know?”

Though they were both trying to act normal, Hajime could tell they were trying to hide their excitement. There was something else they weren’t saying.

“Okay, be honest, what is it you really want?”

“We wanna visit that fantasy world too! Take us there, son!” they shouted, their feigned aura of dignity vanishing immediately. It looked like they were about to cry. As hardcore otaku, it was only natural that they’d want to visit other worlds now that they knew there was a way to travel between them. Though of course, they did also want to meet Cam and Adul as well.

“All right, all right, I’ll plan a trip.”

“You better! If you go back on your word, we’re kicking you out of the house!” Shu shouted, but then he and Sumire walked away so that Yue could step forward. She was the last person who needed to give Hajime his New Year greetings.

“Happy New Year, Hajime,” she said with a smile.

“Happy New Year, Yue.”

Yue walked next to Hajime and took his hand, but she said nothing more. She just looked quietly and thoughtfully up into his eyes.

Hajime could almost see that the events of the past reflected in her ruby-red eyes as he sensed her reminisce. He waited quietly for her to finish, listening to the boom of the fireworks and the cheers of the people around them in the meantime.

Finally, after a few minutes, Yue started speaking in a soft voice that carried surprisingly far for how quiet it was.

“It’s strange…”

“What is?” Hajime asked in an equally soft voice.

She rested her head on his shoulder and said, “We started our journey with just the two of us down in the depths of the abyss, determined to fight the whole world if we had to, but before we knew it we were surrounded by people we care about, and now we’re greeting the new year in a completely different world while fireworks light up the sky.”

“True.”

“Objectively, I’ve spent far more of my life suffering than being happy. It’s only been a short while since I was saved by you, met everyone else, and learned that my uncle never really betrayed me. Compared to the centuries I spent trapped, that time is like the blink of an eye.”

“……”

“But right now, it feels like those centuries are what passed in

the blink of an eye, like they were just a bad nightmare. It feels like I've been with you since forever, surrounded by happiness."

Another firework burst, illuminating the side of Yue's face. She looked at once like a sage who'd lived a million lifetimes and an innocent young girl.

Hajime hugged Yue…and she buried her face in his neck. The glasses got in the way, so she chuckled to herself and took them off. Though, even if that meant people in the crowd could see her now, no one would dare interrupt them.

"The world is cruel, unfair, and hostile…but every now and again, it's kind enough to reward those who keep trying. After meeting you, that's what I've come to believe," Yue said.

"Yeah…I think you're right. If you keep struggling no matter what hardships you face, then eventually, you'll make it to a place like this."

"Mmm…"

Yue playfully bit Hajime's neck, then looked up at him. He gently kissed her forehead in response, so Yue smiled happily. They hugged once more, then Yue looked over at Shea and the others from over Hajime's shoulder. Shea gave her a thumbs up, while Liliana just shook her head in exasperation. Sumire and Shu smiled warmly at her, while Tio and Remia both shot her playful winks. Their expressions were all filled with love.

Yue let go of Hajime and took a step back so that she could look up at him while also looking at everyone else who'd helped bring her to this wonderful place. Then, with a beaming smile, she said, "Thank you so much. Let's have a wonderful year."

At that exact moment another firework exploded, lighting up the night sky.

Chapter XI: Greeting the New Year with a New Family

The sky was clear on the third of January and the sun shone brightly down on everyone.

“Smack! Smack! Flatten it good! Flatten it to make it tasty!”

“Smack! Smack! Flatten it good! Flatten it to make it tasty!”

In the backyard of the Nagumo house, Shea and Myu were pounding away on a large vintage mochi mortar that Shu had managed to procure from somewhere. Shea’s rabbit ears flopped back and forth each time she brought the hammer down, as did the bunny ears on the hairband Myu was wearing each time she brought her hammer down. The two of them looked like sisters as they pounded away. A steaming ball of mochi sat inside the mortar they were smacking.

The two of them were taking part in the traditional New Year’s event of pounding mochi.

“C-Calm down, you two! It’s good that you’re in sync, but you’re going too fast. Look at all the times you’ve hit my poor hands!” Tio exclaimed, holding her hands out in front of the two of them with a pained expression on her face. She was in charge of flipping the mochi between hammer swings. However, seeing as there was a hint of excitement in her expression as well, she was probably enjoying getting pounded.

“Don’t just stand there, Tio-san, hurry up and flip the mochi again!” Shea said, ignoring Tio’s protests.

“Yeah! Time is of the essence when it comes to mochi pounding! No dawdling, Tio-oneechan!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Surprised by how forceful Myu sounded, Tio hurriedly stuck her hands into the mochi ball once again.

“Flatten it!”

“Ah! Shea, you’re aiming for me on purpose, aren’t—?!”

“Flatten it!”

“Ack! Myu?! Why are you attacking me too?!”

Shea and Myu kept swinging their hammers one after another,

expertly aiming for Tio's hands each time. Both the mochi and Tio's hands were being flattened into a nice, even circle. Tio's screams of pain and pleasure could be heard between Myu and Shea's rhythmical singing.

"Shea really looks at home pounding mochi. And Myu looks really cute in bunny ears!" Shu said, sipping tea on the porch.

"Definitely. If it wasn't for the pervert getting off to having her hands pounded, I'd want to take a video of this," Hajime replied, taking a sip of his own tea.

Incidentally, there was no real reason Shea and Myu were going after Tio's hands. They just knew she'd enjoy it, so they were kind enough to reward her. They were, after all, bunnies that brought happiness and fortune to people. And honestly, Tio was also going out of her way to put her hands somewhere that made them easy to hit. Her expression wasn't one that could be aired on PG TV.

Meanwhile, in another corner of the yard, Yue and Kaori were playing Japanese badminton, another New Year's staple event.

"Hey! You just used gravity magic on the shuttlecock, didn't you, Yue?! That's cheating!"

"Where's your proof? Besides, dual-wielding rackets is cheating too."

It seemed like their game was getting quite heated...to the point where it wasn't really something you could call badminton anymore.

"There's no rule that bans dual-wielding rackets, but magic's definitely not allowed!"

"Rules are something you enforce with strength! Without strength, rules hold no meaning!"

"That's not a good philosophy to have! Don't sound so proud of yourself!"

Kaori served, sending her shuttlecock flying with such speed that a regular human wouldn't be able to react. Though, even if they had, the angle she'd sent it flying was so perfect that they'd struggle to reach it in time. However, it slowed down considerably as it reached Yue, almost as if the world were suddenly moving in slow motion.

"You've entered my territory. Let's see if you can withstand my snake shot!"

"Stop using gravity magic! Fine, I won't hold back either, then!

Take this, Lightning Shot!”

Yue was using gravity magic to power up her shots, while it seemed Kaori was now using restoration magic to compress the passage of time for the shuttlecock and speed it up considerably.

There was a flash of light as the shuttlecock flew past Yue’s hair, then Kaori smiled triumphantly. But of course, Yue wasn’t about to let herself get beaten that easily.

“I have no blind spots!”

“Okay, using Heavenstep is definitely cheating!”

Heavenstep was Yue’s special ability that let her warp without using spatial magic to create a portal. Yue managed to send the shuttlecock back over the net, but Kaori jumped up high and smashed the shuttlecock back over to Yue’s side like a pouncing eagle. At the same time, she used Binding Chains of Light to hold Yue in place.

“Hmph! As if that can stop me! Lightning Dragon Shot!”

Yue had discovered the truth that players of badminton past had failed to realize. The racket was just a decoration. She summoned a mini lightning dragon and had it eat the shuttlecock. It then made a U-turn and started flying over to Kaori’s side. After that, it let out a mighty roar, and the sound of thunder reverberated throughout the backyard even though the sky was clear.

“You’re underestimating me again! Disintegration Shot!”

A silver beam shot out of Kaori’s paddle, obliterating the lightning dragon. There was no longer a need to distinguish Kaori from other apostles, so her disintegration beams had gone back to being silver instead of black. Of course, the beam also disintegrated the shuttlecock. And so Kaori spread her wings wide and created a new shuttlecock—one that would disintegrate anything it touched—and launched it back.

At this point, the two of them were just having a magic duel. After a few more exchanges, they even tossed their paddles aside and started directly blasting each other with magic. Both of them were moving too fast for anyone to see, but everyone could occasionally hear Yue shout, “Kaori, you moron!” and Kaori shout, “Yue, you idiot!”

“The two of them really are good friends, huh?” Shu said with a smile.

“They do say you have to be close to someone to be able to fight with them. You know sometimes they just go out together to go shopping or eat food and stuff,” Hajime replied. At this point, he’d just come to accept that fighting was how the two of them communicated best.

Incidentally, while there were occasional flashes and explosions, Hajime had erected a barrier around the house with an Artifact so that none of the neighbors noticed.

As father and son enjoyed their tea on the porch, they heard Sumire and Liliana from inside the living room.

“Ha ha ha, looks like my mercenary troop succeeded in its surprise attack! I get thrice the reward from this plunder event!”

“H-How do you keep getting so lucky, mom? I’ve lost my house even though I’m a princess…”

“Poor Lily-san. You got to start as a princess and things are still this bad for you.”

“Meanwhile, Remia-san’s succeeding way more than she should, considering she started as a merchant. Since when did you get even more money than me?”

“Oh my, it looks like I’ve had another child. And they’re twins this time. I guess this means all of you need to give me celebratory gifts. Ufu fu.”

Sumire, Liliana, Aiko, Shizuku, and Remia were all playing a variant of the Life board game. It was one of the gifts Hajime had given Liliana to take back home.

He had, in fact, made a bunch of board games that he’d given her. They were all takes on classic Earth board games that had been modified to be a cultural fit for Tortus. He was actually planning on testing to see how well they’d sell in Tortus, using his merchant connections. If they sold well, he was planning on making Artifact-tier board games that no one else could craft and open up another side business selling games. It was one of the many business opportunities he’d come up with to support his family. Liliana and More, the merchant he’d be working with, would be making a lot of money as the middlemen selling his games so they’d win out as well.

Indeed, Hajime and Liliana had been laughing gleefully last night as they ironed out the details of this plan. It had been quite something, seeing the Demon Lord and a princess laughing

maniacally.

At any rate, Liliana had ended up the destitute princess of a fallen kingdom, and after being forced to do hard labor had destroyed her body and had to pay steep medical fees. She'd also been swindled out of her house, and because she had to give Remia gifts for having twins, she was now in debt.

Remia smiled happily as she took Liliana's lifeblood, happily giving birth to her ninth and tenth children. It was honestly kind of terrifying.

"You think we're going to end up with a lot of grandkids?" Sumire asked Shizuku and Aiko with a knowing smile. Though they had their backs to Hajime, he could tell they were blushing, especially since they shot glances back at him when they thought he wasn't looking.

Shu grinned at him as well, while Hajime simply pretended he hadn't heard anything.

In an attempt to avert her eyes from how badly the game was going, Liliana turned to Sumire and asked, "Now that you mention it, how did you two meet?"

"Oh, that certainly came out of nowhere. What brought on that question, Lily-chan?"

"I was just curious. As a princess, I don't really get to meet potential suitors the way commoners do. Even my meeting with Hajime-san was rather unorthodox."

Sumire nodded in understanding. She could see how someone born into special circumstances would be curious about how normal people met their romantic partners. She looked off into the distance, reminiscing fondly about her meeting with Shu. She then looked over at Liliana and the others and started recounting her tale.

"I met Shu on New Year's Day, at a shrine. It was freezing cold, and both me and Shu had snuck into the shrine in cosplay. I was in a shrine maiden's outfit, while Shu was dressed like a priest."

"Forget it, that doesn't sound normal at all!" Liliana shouted. Remia, Shizuku, and Aiko all looked surprised as well. Shu's ears perked up as he heard that and Hajime just shook his head in exasperation.

"I was really surprised when I saw Shu. That shrine had been featured in an anime I really liked, so I really wanted to play out

being a shrine maiden there. That was why I snuck in while cosplaying, and while I was pretending to be a guide, I saw a priest who looked to be around the same age as me. We were in high school, by the way, so he looked way too young to be a real priest. But he was leaning against a nearby pillar, trying to look as priest-like as possible. Unfortunately, the actual head priest found him and took him to the office."

"This is the craziest story of two people meeting that I've ever heard," Liliana said, cradling her head in her hands. She looked over at Remia and the others, hoping they'd interject to save her, but they just all looked away.

Meanwhile, the mochi-pounding squad and the badminton-playing squad had stopped what they were doing so they could listen to the story as well. And at the same time, it looked like Shu wanted to run away as fast as possible.

"Anyway, after that they did a roll call for everyone in the shrine and I got exposed as well, so the two of us got on all fours and apologized profusely to the shrine staff. We figured we'd get off without being punished if we just looked as sincerely sorry as possible."

In the end, it all came back to the almighty Nagumo family apology. It truly did run in the family. In a sense, though, it was fate that two people with such similar hobbies and a tendency to give overblown apologies would meet in such a manner.

"There was just one problem, though. Our cosplay was so perfect that we weren't allowed to just leave."

"Excuse me, what?" Remia shouted.

"I'm glad you asked, Remia-chan!" Sumire said, getting more and more into her storytelling persona.

"So what exactly do you mean by your cosplay being too good?"

"Well, you see, our outfits looked so realistic that they thought we'd stolen them."

Of course they hadn't. They were just that hardcore about their hobbies. Apparently, after a heated argument where the staff kept accusing them Shu had finally said, "This isn't even a priest's outfit! It may look like one, but it's what I wear all the time! Got a problem with my fashion sense?!"

He'd gotten so pissed that he'd try to play it off that he hadn't snuck in at all and was just a guy who wore this on the regular.

“When I heard that I started laughing…and that was when I decided I should probably marry this guy.”

“How did *that* make you want to marry him?!” everyone shouted at once. Yue and the others had all gathered around Sumire to hear the story now as well.

Meanwhile, Shu covered his face with his hands and started rolling around on the ground in pain. He was so embarrassed to have his daughter-in-laws hear this story.

“Anyway, he accepted my confession, then we got married later. What do you think? Pretty normal compared to how you met our son, right, Lily-chan?”

“Definitely not!” everyone shouted in unison. While Sumire and Shu’s meeting might not have been as dramatic, it was definitely just as special, if not more. At the same time, though, Yue and the others found the story oddly fitting. It only made sense for someone like Hajime to have been raised by parents like them. They all turned to look at him.

“Don’t give me that look. I’m not as crazy as mom and dad,” Hajime stated flatly. Everyone nodded with knowing smiles on their faces.

Yeah, yeah, whatever you say.

Hajime folded his arms across his chest and frowned, looking like he was unable to understand why everyone thought he wasn’t normal.

“Anyway, it looks like Yue and Kaori have finally calmed down, and the sun’s in the perfect spot, so how about we take a family picture?” Sumire asked.

“Oooh, that sounds like a good idea! I’ll go get the camera!” Shu replied, desperate to leave the scene. He ran into the house and started rummaging through the closet.

In the meantime, everyone walked out into the yard, cleaned up the mortar and pestle, stored the mochi somewhere cool to let it sit, and started lining up for the picture. The girls fiddled with their hair a bit to make it perfect before Shu finally returned with the camera.

The Nagumo family stood in front of their front gate with Hajime in the center. Yue and the others looked a bit nervous, while Sumire, who was standing on the far end, laughed.

“Now, now, no need to be so stiff! Smile! It’s our first family

picture, so we've gotta make it a good one, guys!"

Indeed, this would be the first family picture with everyone in it since Hajime had returned from Tortus and tripled the family's size. Hajime had suggested taking one to hang up in the living room.

Shu set up a tripod, placed the camera on it, and then smiled at everyone to show them how they should smile.

"Everyone ready?! I'm setting the timer for ten seconds! Here goes!"

Shu pressed the button and ran over to Sumire so that he, too, would be in the picture. Sumire wrapped her arm around him and hugged him close like it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

Hajime and Yue exchanged glances, and Yue's nervousness vanished.

"Mmm, everyone smile like you normally do," Yue said.

"Yeah, I know you guys can do it," Hajime said.

Shea and the others relaxed as well, and as the countdown hit zero, everyone was smiling normally. There was a loud click and everyone pulled out their phones to see how the picture had come out. Shu had programmed the camera to send the picture to everyone once it had been taken.

"Fu fu, I love it. I'll treasure it forever," Yue said happily. It was indeed a wonderful picture worthy of being called a treasure.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this afterstory volume of *Arifureta*.

Hello, everyone, it's the chuuni lover Ryo Shirakome here.

It's been two years since I finished writing the conclusion to the main story. Quite a long time since we last met, for those of you who follow the light novel adaptation.

For those of you who were waiting for the afterstories to get published, I'm sorry it took so long! But thankfully, I was able to get this out in time to match the airing of the third season of the anime.

This release is all thanks to you guys for supporting *Arifureta* so much. Thank you all so very, very much!

Now then, I imagine some of you are already aware of this, but there are a lot more afterstories on narou for *Arifureta*. They're not quite as focused as this volume was, since I just write what I feel like when I feel like it. I throw out a bunch of foreshadowing that I'm not sure I'll actually do anything with, explore random side plots that interest me, and honestly, I don't even do a good job of keeping the chronology straight! Hooray! At any rate, that's the kind of mindset I had going in when I first started writing the afterstories.

Of course, for this published volume I had to actually get the chronology straight and make sure there weren't any plot holes or contradictions. As a result, it ended up a lot more emotional and lovey-dovey than the web version of the afterstories. There's a bunch of new stuff I wrote for this too.

Honestly, there's a lot more I wanted to write, and more characters I wanted to introduce, but...since this is the very first afterstory volume, I figured I should focus on the Nagumo family. And once I settled on what I was focusing on, I suddenly wrote a whole bunch more stuff for them. For those who want to see the new worlds and characters I introduce, as well as what happens to Hajime and the others after this, check out the webnovel! It's got a very different vibe than the main story, and of course, there's a lot

more focus on modern-day Earth there. Also, as I mentioned, the third season of the anime is airing. I hope you all check it out!

Last, but certainly not least, we have the acknowledgments.

Of course, I'm truly grateful to all of my readers, but also to Takayaki-sensei, RoGa-sensei, my editors, proofreaders, and everyone else who made this book possible.

I don't know if we'll meet again in another afterword, but hopefully we do!

Ryo Shirakome









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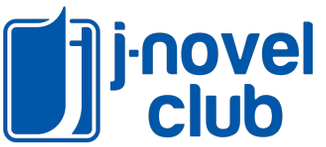
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by Ryo Shirakome

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